

*The Time and Narrative of Making History: How Brian Friel Presented Hugh O' Neill as the Leopold Bloom of Historiography**

O tempo e a narrativa de Making History: Como Brian Friel apresentou Hugh O' Neill como o Leopold Bloom da historiografia

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Abstract: *This paper presents Brian Friel's Making History as a dialogical piece that illustrates the historiographical turn of the twentieth century as something close to the narrative that is also present in James Joyce's Ulysses: that is, the polyphony of multiple heroes having their own voices, each with their own importance, and without compromising the author's identity in their own work.*

Keywords: *James Joyce; Brian Friel; Ulysses; Historiography; History; Narrative.*

Resumo: *Este artigo propõe Making History de Brian Friel como uma peça dialógica que ilustra a virada historiográfica do século XX como estando próximo da narrativa, algo que também está presente em Ulysses de James Joyce: ou seja, a polifonia de múltiplos heróis com vozes próprias, cada um com sua própria importância, e sem comprometer a identidade do autor em seu próprio trabalho.*

Palavras-chave: *James Joyce; Brian Friel; Ulysses; Historiografia; História; Narrativa.*

Introduction

In *Making History*, Brian Friel establishes two very specific exchanges between Hugh O' Neill (the Great Hugh, not the Red or Black) and Peter Lombard in which they both talk about the truth, or rather, its representation in O' Neill's history. The first exchange begins with O' Neill asking if Lombard had already begun writing it. Lombard responds by saying that he was just checking events and dates, to eventually arrange "the material" into a shape. And O' Neill asks if he will then interpret what Lombard had gathered,

which the writer then denies, by saying that he will not interpret, but just describe. And how exactly does Brian Friel represent the crises of historiography in *Making History*?

It seems that Peter Lombard thinks about history in an inconclusive manner because that was representative of the historiographic turn that Friel himself had witnessed. Lombard was then characterised as a narrator and critic of history as narrative that does not present itself as narrative. And there is a good chance that these critiques never materially occurred to the real, biological Peter Lombard, but here lies the interesting component of historical narration: the ability to expand upon the historical characters and immortalise them (in a way) through art. “Every writing belongs to the past. The reader travels to the world of the dead. The dead live on the blood of the living” (Schuler 62). This passage by Schuler is an observation of the Hades episode in *Ulysses*, but it works just as well in Friel’s work because, thanks to a narratological perspective on history, we can understand how the biological Peter Lombard lives on as the fictional Peter Lombard thanks to Friel’s efforts to let the past insist in the present.

At the end of the play, Peter Lombard and Hugh O’Neill are once again discussing the representation of truth in history. Lombard had already said that truth is not a concern, and although O’Neill is still focused on that aspect, he seems more preoccupied with the faithful representation of his bad deeds:

And the six years after Kinsale – before the Flight of the Earls – aren’t they going to be recorded? When I lived like a criminal, skulking round the countryside – my countryside! – hiding from the English, from the Upstarts, from the Old English, but most assiduously hiding from my brother Gaels who couldn’t wait to strip me of every blade of grass I ever owned. And then when I could endure that humiliation no longer, I ran away! If these were ‘my people’ then to hell with my people! The Flight of the Earls – you make it sound like a lap of honour. We ran away just as we ran away at Kinsale. We were going to look after our own skins! That’s why we ‘took boat’ from Rathmullan! That’s why the great O’Neill is here – at rest – in Rome. Because we ran away. (Friel, 1989)

This portrayal of Hugh O’Neill is not coincidentally akin to the image of a resentful Irishman: it is the representation of a man that understands his history as one full of holes in narrative and character. The Irish Literary Renaissance of the twentieth century meant looking at the Irish identity under a new perspective, and in the case of James Joyce, it meant creating a character like *Ulysses*’ Leopold Bloom: the soul of a hero soul-transmigrated into a common worker with contemporary flaws and fears. “Brian Friel, in particular, mirrors much of the cultural tension and consciousness as conflict in Yeats’s works, yet in his most

recent plays, he appears to have significantly altered his vision of Ireland, belying his earlier optimism and his purported belief in the ‘indomitable Irishry’ proposed by Yeats.” (J. Farrelly and M. Farrelly 106). In *Making History*, Hugh O’Neill is past the archetypal Irish hero and is as ashamed of his actions (diegetically) as Friel was of Ireland’s acts of Imperialism in the past. Farrelly and Farrelly echo Claire Gleitman’s thesis that Friel’s work in the 90s reflect a postmodern self-reflexivity, in which the reader must “piece together its own perceptions, its own meaning, to understand the characters’ sense of self and the reported relationships that exist between and among them” (111).

Joyce’s reverence to the dead reaches an apex during the Cyclops episode, in which we are reintroduced to the names of several “heroes and heroines of antiquity, such as Cuchulin, Conn of hundred battles, Niall of nine hostages, Brian of Kincora, the ardi Malachi, Art MacMurragh, Shane O’Neill” (Joyce 244) and many others to the point where the listing becomes comical, with names like Napoleon Bonaparte, Benjamin Franklin and Peter The Packer. In such a voluminous casting, however, there is a familiar face for those who may try to find parallels between *Making History* and *Ulysses*, which is Red Hugh O’Donnell (and maybe Shane O’Neill, as a predecessor of Friel’s hero). In a way, there is something about Joyce not acknowledging Hugh O’Neill as an archetypal hero that fits Friel’s potential portrayal. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White inquires about the meaning of thinking historically, and ponders about the unique characteristics of a “historical method of inquiry”. The author dedicates the book to understanding the narrative politics by establishing that, at a surface level, “the work of one historian may be diachronic or processional in nature (stressing the fact of change and transformation in the historical process), while that of another may be synchronic and static in form (stressing the fact of structural continuity)” (White 4), and while this duality in itself is already fundamental to the notion that history can be narrated in different ways with different results, White delves further into this *différance*¹ of verbal structures that permeate history. Adding motifs to historical stories then begin to trace a line of dialogue between narrative and reader. White then discerns stories from chronicles, citing that stories have forms and inaugurations or events, whereas chronicles have no resolutions or events. It should be noted that, in this sense, chronicles are very similar to the novel as a literary genre.

The difference between story and chronicle is further examined by White when he claims that sometimes “the aim of the historian is to explain the past by ‘finding’, ‘identifying’ or ‘uncovering’ the ‘stories’ that lie buried in chronicles” (ibid, ibidem, 6), and that is, to White, what discerns historian from fiction writer: one finds a story, while the other invents one. This notion is then criticised by him, due to a more thorough

examination of what inventing actually means – that is, the meaning of a story is invented as soon as it is told. White says that the death of a king can be a beginning, an end or a transitional event in three different stories, which is a good example of this theory. And in the case of *Making History*, we might see fragments of finding as well as of inventing. And in the case of Peter Lombard, we can also see this, even though the character is diegetically probably not a reader of Hayden White. Lombard, inside the story, is finding a story as well as inventing what needs to be told.

Historical dialogism

Walter Benjamin illustrates some historiographic movements when referring to a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. The image that he conjures is that of an “angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at” (Benjamin 392):

Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm. (ibid, ibidem, 392)

The angel of history is a common representation of the spirit of history, and as a mythic illustration, it serves to let us imagine history as this unimaginable entropy of processes that can never be fully captured. The angel’s impotence, both to apprehend the past and foresee how the future will unfold, is incarnated in humanity, and in the case of *Making History*, painfully visible in Lombard’s character. And while Benjamin unfortunately did not have direct contact with *Ulysses*, as “Benjamin [had] told Bertolt Brecht in November [1930] that he had only heard of Joyce” (Flynn 172), the literary critic was interested in reading other critiques of Joyce’s work due to his interest in the concept of novels with less ordered narratives, and with round characters as opposed to flat characters (the Forster concept to explain characters that are plainly seen versus characters that are sculpted to have internal contradictions). Peter Lombard is, even if thematically a narrator and an incarnation of the angel of history, a character ethically uncondensed. A historian who seems capable of discussing the truth of the collective memory but not of comprehending

it the way his peers (or maybe himself?) demand him to, for he knows they must brace for the storm of progress:

As the subject of this narration of time and history, the angel's image is incompatible with a flat heroic figure. They are not like the mythic Odysseus, whose destiny is written to have a positive or negative ending that redeems his character – the point of history (in Benjamin's description) is that the storm of progress is always pushing its subjects forward, without discrimination between moral values. "The angel of history is stuck, his wings are immobilized, he can't close them to halt his flight. The future to which he is driven is undefined, and the angel's back is toward it." (Handelman 1991)

Lombard's understanding of history echoes the concern of Friel when it comes to representation, for a historical narrative cannot be diminished to a singular, binary notion of truth. The arrangement of events that lead to a narration of history is an area that is full of crises and problems when it comes to definitions. And it may be helpful to look at other areas that discuss this concept with more depth: in Journalism studies, for example, the concept of truth may sound just as obviously *a priori* as its historiographic counterpart, but even then it is often criticised as a positivist approach: "The problem is that the journalist must undertake a choice of context in which to place the facts. And this choice is his own subjective choice. This is an understanding which journalism, like science, has found it very difficult to tackle" (Wien 5). The author also cites the fact that source classification went up through the 1960s, which led to vehement discussions about the definitive nature of classifying those sources. And it is not that the sources were less reliable, but instead that historians, journalists and scientists needed to understand that there was more complexity to memory and narrations: coincidentally or not, the 1960s also had the rise of literary journalism,² a form of journalism that used the stylistics of literature to give more texture to the spoken testimonies of the human sources.

The historiographic turn from a singular perspective to a plural one is further explained through Bakhtin's work, which focuses more on interactions between the utterances that form discourse. The concept of Bakhtinian dialogism is aptly illustrated by Dostoevsky's works (which is why Bakhtin chose him as the scion of his theories on polyphonic novel), such as when *Crime and Punishment's* Raskolnikov overhears a conversation about the old woman that he had considered murdering. And the author explicitly dissects Raskolnikov's thought process, as well as the material conditions that made him have these thoughts: from the conversation itself, to the café's ambience,

and from his previous thoughts to the ethical considerations of his acts. This dialogicity, which stems from an understanding of different relationships between discourses (which are never understandable on their own, but always in constant requirement of previous communicational references to be understood) is key to Bakhtin's theory:

Every thought of Dostoevsky's heroes (the Underground Man, Raskolnikov, Ivan, and others) senses itself to be from the very beginning a rejoinder in an unfinalized dialogue. Such thought is not impelled toward a well-rounded, finalised, systemically monologic whole. It lives a tense life on the borders of someone else's thought, someone else's consciousness. It is oriented toward an event in its own special way and is inseparable from a person. (Bakhtin, 1984)

Bakhtin's notion of polyphony in a novel is, within his other works (and those of Bakhtin's colleagues, such as Voloshinov), a concept used to explain communication theory in other areas. Going back to Brian Friel, it might not be a case in which every thought senses itself as a rejoinder in unfinalized dialogue per se, but it often comes very close. It should be noted, however, that while there are some traces of Bakhtin's dialogism (which is more descriptive of general speech and linguistics), Brian Friel seems less concerned about making every character the owner of their own voice. If Dostoevsky created not voiceless slaves, but *free* people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him, Friel created a plurality of characters that converse about the philosophy of history maintained by the author.

The hypothesis that Bakhtin postulates when talking about what the hero *meant* to Dostoevsky is that the author was not interested in the character as a manifestation of reality nor as a profile of objective features, meant to answer a question. Instead, Dostoevsky was interested in the hero as a *particular point of view on the world and on oneself* (ibid, ibidem, 47).

Still on the issue of utterance, Jacques Rancière argues, in short summary, that the modern lyric revolution revolves around "a specific method of utterance, a way of accompanying one's saying, of deploying it in a perpetual space" (Rancière 12). And he furthers his point by conceptualising this *accompaniment* as an ability of the "I" to coexist with their utterance, that is, a form of the poet to constitute himself and to be like himself. And while that is in some ways similar to the previous forms of writing, it should be noted that this "I" does not relate to a singular character, but to the perspective of the work itself. As such, it's not that Brian Friel's "I" is constituted only in Peter Lombard, nor is that the case with Joyce and Leopold Bloom: it is the case that the entire work is a refraction of

the author in their utterance and speech. In both cases, we see the portrait of a character imbued with the author's *geist* of dialogical critique. Bloom's groundbreaking ethos of a man who is not a bidimensional hero but instead the tridimensional sculpture of a common Dubliner seems like the blueprint for Lombard's character: a historian who understands how kaleidoscopic history can be. And it is not that these characters are merely flawed, but that they represent a different reading of everything, from everyday life to historical interpretation.

It is tempting to also include the *Nestor* episode in this discussion, due to its nature as a microcosm of Stephen Dedalus' thoughts on history itself, as well as the didactic role of the historian-teacher figure. It is a good ground for discussion as well, especially when we consider how biographical Stephen is to Joyce, and how much of Spinoza is burned into him. But when we put things into perspective, Stephen seems like a character who is often *beyond* everyday life – while teaching about the battle of Pyrrhus, his frustration with his students' frustration plays out like an educational problem: History, for Stephen, is an academic matter; for Leopold Bloom³ and Peter Lombard, History is what is being made.

Just like in journalism, a more critical understanding of historical narration needs to take into account the form in which this history is being remade after being made. In the case of Irish history, the relatively new acknowledgment that Ireland acted on imperialism in other colonies is a good example of this critique, not just because it considers their agency within the imperialist system, as “Anglo-Irish military officers were among the most vehement of all proponents and enforcers of British imperialism” (Kenny 94). Kevin Kenny's book *The Irish in the Empire* is very much inspired by this new historiographical turn, by understanding Ireland's position in the English Empire through a new pair of lenses. The 1641 Depositions are another example of this new perspective of history, which illustrates an approach more focused on personal narrative within a complex system than a final testimony:

The story of how Ireland was conquered, colonised, and ruled by its more powerful neighbour—a neighbour that soon came to dominate much of the world—is a familiar one. Less well understood is the extent to which Ireland, simply by virtue of its location and subordination, participated in the affairs of the Empire at large, and how this participation influenced Ireland's national history. Ireland helped populate, govern, and evangelise the Empire, and Irishmen fought and died for the Empire in large numbers. (ibid, ibidem, 121)

Joyce arguably attempted to dissociate from the duality of Irish “innocence” and English propaganda by “depicting himself as entirely isolated from an [image of] Ireland both pietistic and nationalistic, even though that failed to account for the significant nuances and tensions in the relationship between church and nation after the fall of Parnell” (Kanter 392). And while those nuances are subject to a close reading of the text (after all, Leopold Bloom is a decent example of Irish paralysis in a romanesque hero), it is in no way teleological. And Brian Friel’s *Making History* is exemplary in its portrayal of how Ireland’s time is narrated. Going back to Benjamin, both Bloom and O’Neill are presented as characters unsure of their positions in history: Bloom is a portrait of the contemporary man devoid of a singular identity (be it that of a hero, of a Jewish man, of a cuckold or of a Dubliner), sometimes looking back at his past regrets (when talking with Stephen Dedalus in *Eumaeus*) and sometimes trying to look into his utopic desires (Bloomusalem), but never able to gaze into the future; and O’Neill, always regretful of his past, looks to Lombard for guidance into history.

This new approach to historical narrative, less focused on a common-sense definition of truth and more focused on a critique of history itself, is not an invention nor a mere discovery, but indeed a refraction of social changes. Irish history was still being written in 1988, twenty years after The Troubles had begun and ten years before it would ever officially end. To some, the portrayal of the dead was innovative in its respect to the past: “Friel’s drama comes with mastery to the threshold of changes where discourses of inclusion and marginalisation need not exclude or diminish the past, but are bound to reinterpret it through the voices of the dead” (Roche-Tiengo 75). Just like James Joyce before him, Friel treated history as pedagogy, as a narrative legacy that needs to be represented dialogically, inquired, investigated, interrogated.

Conclusion

There are some aesthetic theories that might look at Brian Friel’s *Making History* and make of it an exemplary work of critique against hegemonic notions of historiography. And when we read it as an interdisciplinary bridge between literature and history, there are even more perspectives to read it as something more than fictional non-fiction.

History, and historical writing, requires distance between subject, object and observer. It had always been that historiographical theories focused on the idea that objectivity (and thus, truth) was measured by this distance and enriched by it. Friel’s portrayal of Lombard is a self-fulfilling historical biography in its representation of the long way not always being the only way to write history – the path to historical narrative

might need rocky roads and human guides that we can talk to. The representation of Hugh O' Neill, before *Making History*, was distanced enough from the subject that it made him a hero but also separated the biological man from the biographical one. Friel's work remade him considering his flaws and made him a narrated character to be talked to, within a polyphonic (to an extent) piece from within we can also examine the perspectives of characters like Mabel O' Donnell, Peter Lombard and Red Hugh.

Notes

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¹ We use the term *différance* in a Derridean sense because there is a need to specify the complex relationship between these verbal structures that compose and follow history. That is, an indication of a middle voice, and the play of differences between differences. What White seems to investigate is not just the difference between the speech genres of each historic time, but the conceptual movement of significations that make these genres appear before us as historical narratives.

² We say literary journalism when we actually mean American New Journalism, which is a literary journalism movement propounded by authors such as Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion and Norman Mailer. And while they each had their own stylistic influences and voices, they were part of this movement that is often considered a rebirth of the literary journalism which already existed in practice. Earlier titles from other regions, such as *Os Sertões*, by Euclides da Cunha, had shown some features of what we now consider literary journalism, but New Journalism is often seen as an "officialisation" of the genre.

³ Leopold Bloom as a more patient (albeit clumsy) teacher is an image shown later, when he "teaches" Molly about the meaning of the word *metempsychosis*.

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