

# *Reflections, Misrecognitions, Messianisms and Identifications:* Towards an Epistemology of Irish Nationalism<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: This essay attempts to offer a critique of the mode of knowledge through which nationalism exists, and by which it operates. Placing nationalism within Lacan's concept of the imaginary, it traces the dyadic structure of a people and a place through various examples of Irish nationalist discourse. It also analyses the epistemological structure of nationalism in terms of the creation of a specular image of the *ethnie* which acts as a point of origin, and a telos, of that *ethnie*.*

Etymologically, the word nationalism can be traced from the Old French *nation*, which was a learned borrowing from the Latin *natio, nationis*, meaning "stock" or "race", back to the root term *nasci*, "to be born" (Bernhart 1370). In Roman law, issues of nationality were adjudicated in terms of the *jus sanguinis*, the "law of blood", based on the principle that a person's nation is the same as that of his or her parents, and the *jus soli*, the "law of the soil", based on the principle that a person's nation is that in which he or she was born. What this suggests is that the roots of nationalism lie in racial, territorial, linguistic and ideological homogeneity, a homogeneity expressed and solidified by linguistic, cultural and religious practices, and by the exclusion of any other racial input<sup>2</sup>. In an Irish context, if one lives on the Falls Road, one is a nationalist, if one lives on the Shankill, one is conversely a unionist.

The question here, of course, arises when one attempts to isolate the constitutive factors that make one a nationalist or a unionist. Are such designations merely signified by one's address, or are there other factors which produce these subject positions? What, in other words, are the modalities of knowledge at stake in defining nationalism? The attempts to clarify and define such identities, keeping in mind all the time the etymological derivation of "nationalism", are surely central in any study of this topic. As Katherine Verdery remarked, during the 1980s and 1990s, the scholarly industry built up around the concepts of nation and nationalism became "so vast and so interdisciplinary as to

rival all other contemporary foci of intellectual production.”<sup>3</sup> Paul Treanor has outlined nine academic disciplines which study nationalism and the concept of the nation state: political geography; international relations; political science; cultural anthropology; social psychology; political philosophy; international law; sociology and history (1.5).<sup>4</sup>

Ironically however, despite their number, definitions of nationalism are notoriously vague. For example, Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities*, defines the nation, and by extrapolation, nationalism, as an “imagined political community”. This definition has achieved widespread currency, but its conceptual force would seem to be etiolated by a *caveat* in the next paragraph, where Anderson notes that all communities larger than primordial villages, are “imagined”. Hence, the “imagined community” can hardly be seen to be synchronous with any specific definition of nationalism in itself. Other attempts at defining nationalism are similarly fraught with difficulty.

John A. Hall provides a conspectus of some contemporary notions in his essay “Nationalisms, Classified and Explained”. Drawing on the work of Breuilly, Gellner and Hobsbawm<sup>5</sup>, he offers what he terms an omnibus definition, seeing nationalism as the “primacy of a particular nation” (9). Hall notes that this definition is dependent on a further definition of “nation”, one which he sees as more problematic, going on to cite Gellner’s comment that “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist” (*Thought and Change* 169)<sup>6</sup>. However, these definitions tell us comparatively little about the mode of knowledge that is enunciated through nationalism, its *ordo cognoscendi*. Indeed, the title of the essay suggests that nationalism *qua* nationalism is beyond definition; as Hall puts it, the use of the plural in his title indicates that, for him, “no single, universal theory of nationalism is possible” (8). Of course, if this is true, then one needs to define each “nationalism” separately, and any form of connection between different “nationalisms” collapses: what is left is a relativistic series of definitions, each of which is contextually unique, and which has at best, paratactic relationships with other definitions of nationalism[s].

Gellner, on the other hand, offers a different perspective, briskly defining nationalism on page one of *Nations and Nationalism*:

Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist *sentiment* is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of this principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist *movement* is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind. (1)

While this definition achieves clarity in terms of stressing the emotive dimension of nationalism, it begs the question of the epistemological status of nationalism by taking

“political” and “national” as givens, and by also taking notions of ethnicity as overt and in no need of explication. Later in the same page, he restates his definition by asserting that: “nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones” (1). The problem here is the collapsing of the categories of ethnicity and politics. If ethnicity becomes the dominant factor, then politics can never develop beyond a basic binarism of selfhood and alterity, with alterity being seen as wholly alien, resulting in the predication of all political endeavour on ensuring the sanctity of the *status quo*, as defined by the criteria of ethnicity.

In other words, politics as the practice of allowing people to live together in some form of social structure, becomes attenuated to a self-replicating orthodoxy where notions of the people, of the *Volk*, are the *terminus a quo* from whence all activities are initiated. Interestingly, Gellner utilises affective criteria in his definition, adverting to nationalist “*sentiment*” as involving the “feeling of anger” or the “feeling of satisfaction” aroused by the thwarting or fulfilment of its aims. His ultimate definition of a “nationalist movement” as one which is “actuated” by such sentiment, seems to me to come close to what we might see as important facets of the epistemology of nationalism. These emotive and affective factors are, I would suggest, seminal to the constitution of the nationalist *Weltanschauung*, and also to the imperative which creates the selfhood which I see as central to the functioning of nationalism.

If there is to be a core definition of nationalism *qua* nationalism (*pace* Hall), then surely it must focus on the mode of creation of the ethnic group, or on the methods used in imagining the identity of the community in question, or on the rhetorical and suasive strategies used in terms of creating nationalistic sentiment. In many ways, this “gathering”, what Heidegger has termed *Versammlung*, a notion to which he always grants special privilege, is seminal in terms of how nationalistic discourse operates. As Julia Kristeva remarks: “I don’t know who I am or even if I am, but I belong with my national and religious roots” (2). It is the epistemological nature of this *Zusammengehören*, “belonging together”, that is the subject of my inquiry in this paper. Narrative, both in terms of its enunciation and its audience, is a seminal trope, as it offers a verbal mirror in which the *Versammlung* can be seen, reified and hypostasised.

The modality of these creations or inventions, what Anderson terms “the style in which they are imagined” (6), is crucial if we are to come to any understanding of how nationalism utters and fashions itself. To quote Geoffrey Bennington: “[a]t the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation’s origin” (“Postal politics” 121), and there can be no doubting that this reflexive form of narrative is a seminal constituent of the epistemology of nationalism. Narratives create the myths of nationalism, and these are both protean and similar in that they feature a telling to the self of the self, a telling which, in the process, is performative in that it is creative of that self, at both conscious and unconscious levels.

Such myths of selfhood, or of the *Volk*, are I would suggest, part of the kernel of the nationalist *imaginaire*<sup>8</sup>; indeed narratives can be seen as examples of “the institutional

uses of fiction in nationalist movements” (Brennan 47). Bennington’s focus on narrative allows us to overcome the antinomies already observed in terms of the problematics of defining nationalism. Every culture defines itself through a process of narrative imagination, a re-telling of stories about its own past which reaffirms the ritual unities of the culture in question. For example, Irish people remember the 1916 Easter rebellion as a nodal point in the political and cultural reaffirmation of Irishness *per se*. Around this period, the major political parties, or their precursors, were founded, and the Gaelic, Celtic, Irish and Irish Literary revivals were set in motion. The Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association were set up, and the gradual adequation between the nationalist movement, both political and cultural, and the Catholic church came into being. This period of colonial upheaval – with the almost standard attendant processes of nationalist consciousness-raising, independence movement, armed rebellion, war of independence/liberation and an ensuing civil war – became part of the process of a national *imaginãire*, defining Irishness as it emerged from the colonial shadow of Britain. This whole period, or more correctly, the narrative enculturation of this period, became a nodal point, or *point de capiton* from which particular notions of Irishness were traced.

As Richard Kearney has suggested, such a process of “ideological recollection of sacred foundational acts often serves to integrate and legitimate a social order” (*Imagining* 166). However, he goes on to cite a warning note sounded by Paul Ricoeur, who points out that such a process of reaffirmation can be perverted “into a mystificatory discourse which serves to uncritically vindicate or glorify the established political powers”. Ricoeur’s point is essentially that in such instances the symbols of a community become fixed and fetishised; they serve as lies (29). Ricoeur has noted that imagination can function as two opposite poles. At one pole is the confusion of myth with reality brought about by a “non-critical consciousness” which conflates the two into a societal “given”. At the other end of the axis, where “critical distance is fully conscious of itself”, “imagination is the very instrument of the critique of reality”, because it enables “consciousness to posit something at a distance from the real and thus produce the alterity at the very heart of existence” (*Imagining* 147).<sup>9</sup>

I would argue that the narrative structure of nationalism is clearly allied to Ricoeur’s initial pole, that of the confusion of myth with reality through a “non-critical consciousness.” Such a narrative structure functions mainly at an unconscious level in culture and society, creating structural effects in terms of ethnic and racial stereotypes which function as reflective images of the *ethnie* (an organic community, wherein social, cultural, religious and ideological practices cohere in a synthesis which promotes self-definition) (Smith chapter 6)<sup>10</sup>. Logic, reason and critical thinking allow us to discriminate between the value of stories as fictions, and their constative, truth-telling status. However, by functioning at an unconscious level, through formal and informal apparatuses of communication, narratives and myth create a powerful drive, through which nationalist ideology can be disseminated. They create an imaginary selfhood which is reflected back into society as an ideal form of identity.

The stock example of such a process is Nazi Germany in the 1930s, but there are multifarious examples to be found of the unconscious effect of narratives that are uncritically equated with constative discourse. In an Irish context<sup>11</sup>, perhaps the *locus classicus* of this type of nationalist narrative operating at a pre-critical, unconscious level is Patrick Pearse's rewriting of the history of the United Irish rebellion of 1798. Pearse was a central figure in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a sub-grouping within the Irish Volunteers, who organised a rebellion against the British Government in 1916<sup>12</sup>. In his efforts to create a narrative of nationalist resistance to British rule in Ireland, Pearse specifically set out to "remember" the 1798 rebellion in highly specific terms.

The 1798 rebellion was led by Theobald Wolfe Tone<sup>13</sup>. Tone, a product of the French Enlightenment, had little time for religion, and saw the aim of his organisation, The United Irishmen, as the creation of a country where the terms Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter would be subsumed under the common name of Irishman (O'Brien *Irish Identity* 66). Tone himself, as Marianne Elliott has observed, was a deist, "who disliked institutionalised religion and sectarianism of any hue". More importantly in the present context, she makes the point that based on his writings, he had "no time whatsoever for the romantic Gaelicism that has become part of Irish nationalism" (1). Hence, if Pearse wished to create a seamless narrative wherein Tone was a historical nationalist avatar, and a Pearsean precursor, he would seem to have some factual historical difficulties with which to contend.

His response to these difficulties is a classic *exemplum* of what I have termed nationalist narrative. In an oration given at the grave of Tone, in Bodenstown, County Kildare, in 1913, Pearse enfolded Tone in the following narrative structure:

We have come to one of the holiest places in Ireland; holier even than the place where Patrick sleeps in Down<sup>14</sup>. Patrick brought us life, but this man died for us. He was the greatest of Irish Nationalists... We have come to renew our adhesion to the faith of Tone: to express once more our full acceptance of the gospel of Irish Nationalism which he was the first to formulate in worldly terms. This man's soul was a burning flame, so ardent, so generous, so pure, that to come into communion with it is to come unto a new baptism, into a new regeneration and cleansing. (II, 58)

Here there is no attempt to commemorate the historical Wolfe Tone, the "child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment" whose hope was that Enlightenment rationality would supplant what he regarded as "superstitious beliefs" (Cruise O'Brien 100). Instead, Tone is suavisely captated into Pearse's own vision of Irish history, a vision which will be used to create a nationalist *imaginaire*. It is not accidental that Anderson has noted a "strong affinity" between nationalist and religious imaginings (10). Indeed, he has made the valid point that the dawn of the age of nationalism coincides with the dusk of religious thought (11). Both tend to work with some form of "sacred text". The notion of a sacred text is important here, as the response to such a text is not that of close reading, or of

some form of rational critical engagement; rather is it an acceptance, a belief, and a ready acknowledgement of the “truth” that is revealed by this text, and an attempt to structure identity so as to mirror that truth.

In many ways, the effects of nationalist and religious texts can be seen as allomorphisms of each other, as both can eschew rationality and veridical discourse in order to create a mystical synthesis which transcends such prosaic matters. In an Irish context, and speaking specifically in terms of the Gaelic and Celtic revivals, mysticism was part of the cement that helped to “energise the ideologues of the revival and shape their thoughts” (Jackson 172), and it is this mystical imperative that we see at work in Pearse’s discourse.

His frame of reference is directed at an audience whose unconscious is saturated with Roman Catholic religiosity. The rhetorical device *polyptoton*<sup>15</sup> is used to cement the adequation of Tone with Saint Patrick in the opening line. This adequation transforms Tone from an historical figure, subject to the veridical discourse of history, into a mythico-religious one, comparable to the legendary Saint Patrick, about whom comparatively little is known, apart from his spectacular religious success. The connection between the two, the hinge or *brisure* upon which the whole rhetorical structure turns, is based on this comparison in terms of the holiness of a specific place. This connection is then developed in the contradiction that while Patrick “brought us life”, a phrase which clearly implies religious life, Tone “died for us”. By now, the adequation has done its work, and the unconscious religious background fills in any blanks in the narrative. In Catholic teaching, the notion of sacrifice, the one for the many, is a central tenet. The adequation between Tone and Saint Patrick is now elided and a stronger connection is set up. Given the religious frame of reference (reinforced by the lexical field of the paragraph: “faith”; “gospel”; “soul”; “communion”; “baptism”; “regeneration”; “cleansing”), the notion of someone dying “for us” implies an adequation between Tone and Christ, and at a broader level, between nationalism and religion. In a manner that is paradigmatic of nationalist epistemology, both the narrative, and the image of these heroic figures contribute to the creation of the “us” in question. This *Versammlung* is predicated on the narrative, with its religious and mythical overtones.

A further dimension of this classic example of nationalist narrative is to be found in the anagogical vision of nationalism as a force which ultimately transcends issues of real-world politics and discourse. “Irish Nationalism” (the double capitals are indicative of the status of the term), is seen, not as a political set of principles, nor as a response to historical pressures and circumstances; instead it is seen as a “faith”, a belief-system which, by definition, is not subject to any form of rational or intellectual critique. As a “faith”, nationalism is not required to set out its aims, goals and methodologies; all that is needed is for the people (and Pearse constantly uses the vatic “us”), to give it their “full acceptance”. Tone’s special value, and it is here that the unconscious religious agglomeration of images is used to full effect, is his ability to “formulate” the “gospel of Irish Nationalism” in “worldly terms”. It is as if this nationalist gospel has some form of mystical existence, and requires some form of elite interpreter, some clerisy, to reveal

its truth to “us”. Here one thinks of Ernest Renan’s aphorism that a “nation is a soul, a spiritual principle” (Renan 19), as this is precisely the realm of discourse which Pearse utilises, as it has shaping power over our notions of the present<sup>16</sup>.

In terms of this use of the personal pronoun, first person plural, the relationship between the people, “us”, and this “gospel” is reflexive and mutually constitutive. We become “the people” through our shared allegiance to the narrative in question, at both conscious and unconscious levels. The “adhesion to the faith of Tone” is what creates the notion of the Irish people, or at least those of the people who merit the designation “Irish Nationalists”. Tone, like Saint Patrick and Christ, becomes one more character in this messianistic, nationalist narrative. His rhetorical captation from historical figure into mythico-religious icon has been achieved; communion with him brings about “baptism”, “regeneration” and “cleansing”. Pearse clearly saw, like Renan, that “a heroic past...is the social capital in which one bases a national idea” (Renan 19); however, unlike Renan, he clearly felt that a religious capital would consolidate this investment. This point is explicitly outlined by Pearse later in the same year:

The people itself will perhaps be its own Messiah, the people labouring, scourged, crowned with thorns, agonising and dying, to rise again immortal and impassable. For peoples are divine and are the only thing that can properly be spoken of under figures drawn from the divine *epos*. If we do not believe in the divinity of our people we have had no business, or very little, all these years in the Gaelic League. (II, 91-92)<sup>17</sup>

The significance of such ethno-religious nationalistic adequations has been the subject of much discussion. Hugh Seton-Watson, writing about the influence of Zionism on Israeli politics, makes the point that “religious heritage...directly reinforces national consciousness” (403), and in the case of the above quotation from Pearse, this is very clear<sup>18</sup>.

For Pearse, and we must keep in mind his notion of Tone as the first to formulate in worldly terms the gospel of Irish nationalism, there is something quasi-sacred about the nation. Régis Debray, in an attempt to study the constituent factors of the historical nation-state, has traced, in nationalism, the process whereby “life itself is rendered untouchable or sacred. This sacred character constitutes the real national question” (26). The teleology of Pearse’s rhetorical transformation of the people into their own Messiah is to render them “immortal and impassable”. Nationalistic selfhood creates a people, a *Volk*, which transcends time and death. The religious overtones of this message, allied to strong unconscious influences, combine to create a linguistic and suasive dimension to the epistemology of nationalism which can never be fully examined in any analysis which is not grounded in literary, linguistic, and psychoanalytic techniques. This, I would argue, is why the already discussed definitions will always fail to analyse the workings and imperatives of nationalism. It is only by looking at its modality of expression, and its epistemological status, that we can come to clearer perceptions about its nature.

At no stage in his writing has Pearse offered a scintilla of reasoned argument or evidentiary proof, as to the adequation of Tone and any of the religious figures with whom he is compared. Instead, his rhetoric relies on the unconscious fideism of his largely Catholic audience. Also, by expressing nationalist goals in religious terms, issues of history and politics are removed from the realm of discussion and debate, instead becoming part of a belief system, validated by a circular structure of unconscious associations of faith, transcendence and messianistic phantasies. Evidentiary proof, or persuasion based on reason, is not part of his *raison d'être*; he never aspires towards any constative, truth-telling status. Instead, his discourse functions performatively, creating an unconscious phantasy, and enacting through its narrative, the identificatory associations that make the *Volk* the *Volk*.

I have deliberately chosen the adjective “messianistic” as opposed to “messianic” to describe the thrust of Pearse’s ideologically driven memory process. Jacques Derrida has defined the messianic structure as being predicated on a promise, on an expectation that whatever is coming in the future “has to do with justice” (23). The messianistic, on the other hand is culturally and temporally limited and constrained to the “determinate figures” of “Jewish, Christian, or Islamic messianism”. He goes on:

As soon as you reduce the messianic structure to messianism then you are reducing the universality and this has important political consequences. Then you are accrediting one tradition among others, and a notion of an elected people, of a given literal language, a given fundamentalism. (23)

I would propose that it is precisely this form of messianism that is part of the religious aspect of nationalism in that it selects one tradition, one set of salvific heroes and binds them into a fusion of place, belief and race, a fusion that is, in fact, a phantasy.

I use the term “phantasy” here in its strict psychoanalytic sense, as defined by Anthony Easthope. He has noted that phantasy specifies an “imaginary scene or narrative in which the subject is present”; however the scene is in some way “altered or disguised so that it may fulfil a wish for the subject” (11). In fact, at both the conscious and unconscious levels, phantasy describes the effect of Pearse’s rhetoric, as he attempts to change the perception of Irish history, in order to create a unified narrative and an optative connection between Tone, Pearse himself, the Irish people and the Messiah. The phantasy sets out to fulfil a desire in the structure of the subject through a form of alteration or disguise, and I will suggest that the Lacanian mirror stage and imaginary order are paradigms of this essential structuration of the epistemology of nationalism. Pearse’s messianism can be seen as part of exactly such a structure – through narrative, he creates an image of Irishness towards which he can then aspire.

In *The Question of Irish Identity in the Writings of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce*, I have already traced the messianistic imperative of Pearse’s thought, and adduced a number of quotations to demonstrate that the culmination of this process was



the transformation of Pearse himself into a messianistic figure. In his play *The Singer*, he has his hero, MacDara, make the overt statement that “one man can free a people as one man redeemed the world”, and he goes on to say: “I will stand up before the Gall as Christ hung naked before men on the tree” (1, 44)<sup>19</sup>. Here we see the nationalistic phantasy in action, as the religious trope of death-resurrection is transferred to an Irish political situation through the use of the specific Irish-language signifier “Gall”, meaning “foreigner”, but referring here specifically to the British. MacDara can be seen as a surrogate for Pearse himself, whose own crucifixion would, he hoped, bring a similar salvation for his version of the chosen people.

Keeping this description of phantasy in mind, let us observe Pearse on the steps of the General Post Office in the centre of Dublin on Easter Monday 1916, when he inscribes his act of rebellion against the British under the rubric of a nationalistic, rhetorical reading of Irish history:

Irishmen and Irishwomen: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom. (Dudley Edwards 280)

The imagery here is similar to that of Pearse’s earlier quotations<sup>20</sup>. Through the use of a rhetorical structure largely underpinned by transcendental and personified imagery, Pearse avoids the discourse of reason or of political debate, and instead appeals to the unconscious signification of the powerful images of “God”, the “dead generations” and the notion of Ireland as a mother, calling her children to her flag. The phantasy invoked here is telling. As Easthope has noted, phantasy turns ideas into narratives (11), and the proclamation of a provisional government, while encapsulating a certain social doctrine – universal suffrage, and guarantees of “religious and civil liberty, equal rites and equal opportunities to all its citizens” (Dudley Edwards 281) – is largely premised on a narrative structure which creates and defines selfhood in its own terms. Keeping in mind his notion of the people as their own messiah, it is noteworthy that the proclamation concludes by stressing the sacrificial, and ultimately salvific, nature of this struggle. He concludes:

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline, and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called. (Dudley Edwards 281)

The unconscious, pre-critical element, that I maintain is a central tenet of the epistemology of nationalism, is evident here through close reading. The proclamation seems to come to a logical conclusion. Pearse’s prayer is that the Irish nation must prove itself worthy

of the “august destiny” to which it is called, and this seems to make the act of rebellion almost preordained. Of course, on looking back to the beginning of the proclamation, we find that it is “through us”<sup>21</sup>, namely the splinter group within the Irish Volunteers, who defied their own command structure in order to undertake the Rising, that the personified notion of Ireland initially summoned “her children to her flag” and struck “for her freedom”<sup>22</sup>. Consequently, the seemingly impersonal “august destiny” is, in fact, part of a suasive rhetorical device which exemplifies the circularity and reflexivity of nationalist epistemology. The “we” who are called into service as the children of a personified Ireland, are the very “we” who have personified that notion of Ireland in the first place. In terms of an imaginary scene, which is altered in order to fulfil a wish for the subject, this whole exercise can be described as a *locus classicus* of phantasy, a phantasy which is constitutive in terms of defining the national subjectivity in question. This definition is brought about through the reflection of the “we” in the invoked imagery of sacrifice, defence of motherhood and desire for freedom.

The suasive and rhetorical effect of this process, when repeated, is to allow a linguistic performative to achieve a constative function. Here, myth and reality are fused in a nationalist *imaginaire*, and the mutual reflection of one in the other combines to create a narrative structure which is constitutive of what we might term nationalist identity, given that it reflects a particular type of subjectivity that is deemed to be Irish. No matter how much evidence of Wolfe Tone’s attitude to religion is instantiated in biographies, he is still seen as part of a Catholic, Gaelic, nationalist pantheon, as narrated by Pearse, and it is to his grave in Bodenstown that the Provisional IRA, and Provisional Sinn Féin, have trooped in pilgrimage every year. The fact that their sectarian murder campaign over the past thirty years was the antithesis of everything that Tone stood for, is not seen as any impediment to this process. What Pearse has been attempting is a narrative which will create trans-rational, unconscious, ethnic bonds between the past and the present, and between the image of a certain type of Irishness and the reality. The facts of history are not part of such a discourse; they are only of value in selected instances, and if they reinforce the agenda of the narrative: they are creative of an identification, they are creative of an “us” through a process of continuous reflection, and it is in analysing the epistemological structure of such identification, in both individual and group terms, that the work of Jacques Lacan will be of value to our discussion.

The self, says Lacan, is defined in terms of a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of an image of itself in the mirror, a process which he terms the “mirror stage”. He goes on to outline what he terms the “*méconnaissance*” of the individual self. He pictures a child becoming aware of its own image in a mirror, and goes on to discuss the “jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child” as it aspires to the totality of that image:

This...would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in

the universal, its function as subject. This form would have to be called the Ideal-I, if we wished to incorporate it into our usual register. (*Écrits* 2)

The important point to note about this identification is that the image is ideal, it orients the “agency of the ego” in a “fictional direction”, it is something towards which the ego may aspire, but which it can never attain. It is also an identification that has no place for anything else outside of its scopical field. Lacan’s point here is that the ego is constituted: “by an identification with another whole object, an imaginary projection, an idealisation (‘Ideal-I’) which does not match the child’s feebleness”. It is this “alienated relationship of the self to its own image” that Lacan terms the imaginary order (Sarup 66).

Interestingly, Samuel Weber situates this process in terms of temporality. He makes the point that for Lacan, the future anterior is of seminal importance in his discussion of the construction of identity, as it is through time that such notions are developed. Lacan himself stressed the importance of the future anterior to any discussion of identity:

I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realised in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming. (*Écrits* 86)

Lacan, Weber notes, locates the time of the subject as an “inconclusive futurity of what will-always-already-have-been...a ‘time’ which can never be entirely remembered, since it will never have fully taken place” (9). In other words, in the mirror stage, the identification of the subject with the *imago* sets up a desire for imaginary wholeness in the future, a future towards which the subject strives, but which it can never reach. Hence, Lacan’s vision of the *imago* as an “alienating destination”, which is reached by facing towards a “fictional direction” (*Écrits* 2), wherein the specular image “traps the subject in an illusory ideal of completeness” (Sarup 66). This ongoing process of captation and misrecognition is a performative through which the ego is created and defined, a performative process very similar to that which we observed in Pearse’s nationalistic discourse, where the specular image was comprised of Tone, Saint Patrick, a personified Ireland, and messianistic fantasies, and the ego being reflected through these images was Pearse’s own, and by extension, his version of Irish identity.

What we see in Lacan’s investigation of the mirror stage, then, is that he radically transformed a psychological experiment into a “theory of the imaginary organisation of the human subject” (Roudinesco 143). This stress on the imaginary as a structural ordering of human relationships is important in our discussion of nationalism. It begins in the mirror stage, but continues into all aspects of our lives. Elizabeth Grosz makes the telling point that imaginary relations are dyads, “trapping both participants within a

mutually defining structure” (46). Here, we see a further symphysis between the Lacanian imaginary and the epistemology of nationalism. At a basic level, this reflective captation of the subject by an image is what constitutes the imaginary order. Imaginary relationships are predominated by ambivalent emotions; a desire to become the image in the mirror, and, on realising the futility of this aim, a resultant aggressivity against both the image, and anything which intervenes with, or blocks, the desired identification with that image. The image, as well as being a source of desire, is also, because it is fictional as well as external and can never be fully internalised, a source of hatred. The displacement of this hatred on all that is deemed to be outside this binary specular relationship is a possible explanation of the violence that seems to be inherent in practically all enunciations of nationalist ideology throughout history. Hence, the relationships between the Orange Order, and the act of marching down the Garvaghy Road in Portadown is an imaginary one in the sense that it performatively validates their sense of identity. Analogously, the Provisional Republican movement’s imaginary relationship with the Republican doctrine enunciated by Tone is a further reflection of their selfhood, with Bodenstown functioning as the site of this reflective *Versammlung*.

The importance of the two-dimensionality of this relationship cannot be overstressed: in the nationalist *imaginaire*, a fixed, hypostasised image of the self, be that individual or societal, is held out both as a *terminus ad quem* towards which all identificatory processes should be progressing, and conversely as a *terminus a quo* from which all deviation should be prevented. As Grosz has pointed out, imaginary relationships are mutually defining, and she has used the mother-child example as archetypal of these relationships, a point that would strengthen the force of this paradigm in the context of Irish nationalism given the prevalence of defining Ireland as a mother, or female figure, a process achieving its apotheosis in Pearse’s proclamation of 1916.

Nationalist narratives very often read as coherent and teleological, leading cohesively from past to future. In this sense, Lacan’s notion of the future anterior is important as history, rather than being a record of events of the past, becomes a temporal mirror through which the nationalist *imago* is seen and reinforced: “the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming” (*Écrits* 86). Hence, the suasive captation of Tone into a nationalist selfhood. The fixity of the reflected image of the self becomes the goal of the ego. In the narrative of history, this fixity becomes the *telos*. In a search for such wholeness and unity, as Bhabha notes, the subject assumes a “discrete image which allows it to postulate a series of equivalences, samenesses, identities, between the objects of the surrounding world” (*Culture* 77). The driving force behind these identities is what Bowie terms: “the false fixities of the imaginary order” (Bowie 99). The imaginary order attempts to hypostasise and hypertrophy the specular image of itself, and to block any development of this position of fixity: it is “tirelessly intent upon freezing a subjective process that cannot be frozen” (Bowie 25). So the two-dimensional image of Tone is frozen in Pearse’s nationalist discourse, as is the notion of marching down the Garvaghy Road because “we” have always done so, in an Orange Order context.

Similarly, a specific narrative of a past event can also be used as a position of fixity in this imaginary relationship, as witnessed, in our final example, by the rhetoric of the imaginary that is to be found in the *Green Book*, the training manual of the Provisional IRA. Here, the imaginary identification of a whole people with a minority movement is enacted through the creation of a temporal *point de capiton* which anchors a particular reading of Irish history:

Commitment to the Republican Movement is the firm belief that its struggle both military and political is morally justified, that war is morally justified and that the Army is the direct representatives [*sic*] of the 1918 Dáil Éireann parliament, and that as such they are the legal and lawful government of the Irish Republic, which has the moral right to pass laws for, and claim jurisdiction over, the whole geographical fragment of Ireland...and all of its people regardless of creed or loyalty. (*Long War*, 350)

This is the discourse of nationalism *par excellence*, embodying its imaginary epistemology. Time is frozen in a specular identification with the “Dáil of 1918”, a term which is a *point de capiton* in Irish Republican narrative. All subsequent elections and democratic expressions of will are null and void; they do not correspond to the totalising image and must therefore be destroyed. It is, I would suggest, a *locus classicus* of the epistemology of nationalism, narrating a story of selfhood which is performatively recreating that very selfhood as it progresses. For the Provisional Republican movement, a two-dimensional, hypertrophied, hypostasised, imaginary image of Ireland is the source of their selfhood – anything outside of this scopic field is, by definition, erroneous. Hence, their references to the “Dublin” government, or the “Free State” government or the “26-County” government, as opposed to the “Irish government” (which they see as time-locked in the specular temporal image of the Dáil of 1918). I would contend that such performative misrecognitions, creative as they are of two dimensional images of history and culture, are constitutive of the nationalist *imaginaire*, a fact of which we must remain fully cognisant if we are to subject nationalism to any form of ameliorative critique.

## Notes

- 1 This article is part of a longer work in which I discuss the epistemological structures and status of the discourse of nationalism *per se*. By using the theoretical work of Jacques Lacan, specifically on notions of identification, misrecognition and the imaginary order, I trace the cognitive and linguistic structures that comprise nationalism. This book, provisionally entitled *The Epistemology of Nationalism*, will be published by the Edwin Mellen Press in early 2001, as part of the *Ireland in Theory* series.

- 2 My own focus in this study will be on how such notions of homogeneity are created. In a similar manner, when looking at Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities*, I will be examining exactly how such imaginings are set in motion.
- 3 Interestingly in terms of this point, the four authors whose work has come to dominate the study of nationalism all hail from different disciplines: Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalism*) worked in the philosophy of sociology; Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities*) taught international relations; Anthony Smith (*The Ethnic Origins of Nations*) is a sociologist, while Eric Hobsbawm (*Nations and Nationalism since 1780*) is a social historian.
- 4 As this is an internet publication, I have cited the date and paragraph number in parenthesis, as well as giving the full details of the journal, *Sociological Research Online*, Volume 2, Number 1, and the web address. I have followed the same procedure for all other internet publications referenced in this work.
- 5 Hall provides the following references to these works: Breuilly, chapter 1; Gellner, chapter 1 and Hobsbawm, 9-13 and chapter 1.
- 6 I would not necessarily agree with this, as both terms are mutually dependent, and therefore impossible to separate. I will demonstrate that, etymologically and epistemologically, these terms share a notion of selfhood which is both fabricated, and predicated on a sense of hypostasised sameness (validated by a similar concept of difference), and which is politically and socially regressive as its focal direction is always fixed on the past, and wary of a future which could threaten this sense of selfhood.
- 7 For Heidegger's analysis of identity as a belonging together, see his book *Identity and Difference*.
- 8 This term is used in a specific, theoretical sense. It is part of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theoretical apparatus, as the imaginary order and will form a central plank of this discussion.
- 9 I have taken this quote from Richard Kearney's translation of "L'imagination dans le discours et dans l'action". I can think of no better introduction to the work of Ricoeur than Kearney's *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*. Two of Kearney's other books, *Poetics of Modernity* and *Poetics of Imagination* contain excellent discussions of Ricoeur's work, as well as contextual placements of that work in terms of contemporary critical debate.
- 10 Smith distinguishes between post-eighteenth-century nationalisms and nations, and earlier ethnic communities and ethnic sentiments, which he terms *ethnie*. I would question this temporal differentiation, as to my mind, there has been little epistemological difference to be found in terms of this particular temporal parameter.
- 11 Here, I would cite the *caveat* mentioned by Benedict Anderson in the acknowledgements to *Imagined Communities*, where he notes that his own academic training, specialisation in Southeast Asia, accounts for 'some of the book's biases and choices of examples' (ix). My own academic specialisation is in the area of Irish Studies, so this will, similarly, account for many of my own choices of examples, as well as for some of the biases in the book.
- 12 Perhaps the best available biography of Pearse is by Ruth Dudley Edwards, and is entitled *The Triumph of Failure*.
- 13 Marianne Elliott's *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*, is an excellent biography of Tone, and the monumental *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, compiled by his son William T. W. Tone, and edited by Thomas Bartlett, has been reissued by Lilliput Press.
- 14 This reference is to Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland.
- 15 The repetition of a word with varying grammatical inflections.
- 16 While agreeing with Renan in terms of the spiritual, unconscious dimension of the nation, I would take issue with his view, stated in 1882, that religion was no longer a defining factor in the epistemology of the nation. His point that religion has: "ceased almost entirely to be one of the elements which serve to define the frontiers of peoples" (Renan 18), does not hold true in the case of Ireland, where different religious practices are very much indices of socio-political borders.

- 17 I have quoted this same passage, and discussed it under a different, but related agenda, in my *The Question of Irish Identity in the Writings of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce*, 25-33. In this book, I look at different formulations of Irish identity and at the different Gaelic and Celtic revivals at the turn of the century which are an important aspect of this topic. There is not a specific focus on nationalism *per se*; instead, the notion of identity, both political and cultural, is discussed.
- 18 Seton-Watson's study is a monumental study of nationalism. However, I would take issue with his contention that: "English nationalism never existed" (Seton-Watson 34); as we have seen, it was very much alive and well, certainly in Ireland.
- 19 For a fuller discussion of Pearse's messianistic perspective, albeit discussed in a different context, see my *Question of Irish Identity*, 30-33.
- 20 While the text of the proclamation was agreed in discussion with the other members of the military council, the proclamation itself was 'mainly Pearse's work' (Dudley Edwards 279).
- 21 It is possible that this construction, 'through us', is a conscious or unconscious homage to the Great Doxology for the Mass Liturgy: 'through Him, with Him, in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, Almighty Father, for ever and ever.'
- 22 For a comprehensive bibliography of the 1916 Rising, and issues associated with it, see Dudley Edwards, 363-369.

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