Introduction: Against Definitions

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Abstract and Keywords

The emergence of Anglo-Irish literature lies close to the heart of European romanticism. The Anglo-Irish Renaissance is central to modernist literature in the English language. With these two perspectives in mind, this book tries to describe the functioning of two crucial concepts from personal thoughts on heritage—the sociological formation of Protestant Ascendancy and the Yeatsian elaboration of an Irish literary tradition. This book attempts to deal with Yeats and Joyce as mutually defining figures within the totalities which historical as well as literary critical analysis depends upon. Yet while committed to the whole view of Anglo-Irish literature, the book resists the pressures which would establish the Anglo-Irish ‘thing’ as not just literature but a national literature. The book is not intended to rival the various sequential histories and personal guides to Anglo-Irish literature recently published. This book takes its bearing from the development of the romantic proposition in the 19th century which lent credence to the theory of literature as imitation of reality.

Keywords: Anglo-Irish literature, romanticism, Protestant Ascendancy, Yeatsian, Irish literary tradition, Joyce
The last thing one discovers when writing a work is what
one should put first.

(Blaise Pascal)\(^1\)

The emergence of Anglo-Irish literature lies close to the heart
of European romanticism. The Anglo-Irish Renaissance is
central to modernist literature in the English language. With
these two perspectives in mind I have tried here to describe
the functioning of two crucial concepts in my own cultural
heritage—the sociological formation of ‘Protestant
Ascendancy’, and the Yeatsian elaboration of an Irish literary
‘tradition’.

The task has not been easy. If all the books ever written on the
subject were laid end-to-end in a straight line they would on
the instant curl into the shape of a question-mark. On the one
hand venerable and respectable, on the other a kind of post-
war phenomenon not unconnected to Marshall Aid, Anglo-Irish
literature slips between the categories to defy definition,
indeed perhaps to question the very notion of definition in this
area. The bibliography is exhausting and it grows annually, yet
the subject is as much obscured as clarified by these
additional studies: bright lights cast dark shadows. Every
speculative study of Joyce throws Yeats into isolated relief;
every close analysis of a poem by Yeats is eloquently silent on
the totalities in which the poem may properly be seen; every
account of the Abbey Theatre raises unspoken questions about
the Renaissance and its coolness towards the novel. In
Ascendancy and Tradition I have attempted to deal with Yeats
and Joyce as mutually defining figures within the totalities
which historical as well as literary critical analysis (p.2)
depends upon.\(^2\) Yet while committed to a whole view of Anglo-
Irish literature, a view which acknowledges its social
existence, I resist the pressures which would establish the
Anglo-Irish ‘thing’ as not just a literature but a national
literature—if not indeed a culture or even a civilization.\(^3\) With
such an escalation of dignity comes a concomitant intensity of
feeling, feeling often prescribing rules of exclusion— ‘Robert
Graves (or Samuel Beckett) is not Irish’—or turning into
elegiac celebrations of a dubious past—Yeats as a young boy in
his ‘native’ Sligo.
This tendency to become personal about the subject is not merely a sign of the critic’s individual attachment, it is an indicator of a deeply rooted problem at the centre of the Anglo-Irish phenomenon. ‘The time is coming fast, if it isn't already here, when the question, “Is So-and-So really an Irish writer?” will clear a room in seconds.’ In this manner did Derek Mahon commence an assessment of Louis MacNeice some years ago. The significant feature of this characteristic self-scrutiny is not Mr Mahon’s very proper contempt for the naivety of such inquiries, it is the evidently social occasion on which they arise—clear a room in seconds. For, if Anglo-Irish literature is a difficult animal to classify, it has also long been the subject of wondering conversation, anecdote, and gossip, the locus of an advanced tourism. Here again, the implications are not simply of innocent vulgarity or the barroom availability of a provincial wisdom; in a larger context, the argument in favour of an Anglo-Irish civilization leads towards specific attitudes to sectarian violence in Ulster and its place in the politics of the United Kingdom. Like Shakespeare, Yeats is full of quotations, and too many of them have recently been employed as the titles of novels and improving tracts on Irish sociology. Doubtless, a high proportion of these works have dealt with ‘the Ulster question’, but too often the apt quotation and the beguiling cadence are not employed to do more than confirm a satisfying eccentricity in the topic. Investigating my own cultural heritage (as I suggested at the outset), I have found it more illuminating to see it as part of what Theodor Adorno has termed ‘the culture industry’ than of Celtic-Anglican civilization. Nor is there summer school but singing monuments of its own magnificence.
The literature itself incorporates much conversation and
gossip, the exploits of ward politicians, society belles, ‘what
the butler said to a drunken game-keeper in mid-October’, the
careers of real statesmen, ‘strong men, and thieves, and
deacons’ whose names may be traced in Who’s Who, Stubb’s
*Gazette*, or some similar directory. There is an important
difference to be drawn between Standish O’Grady and
Madame Sosostris as they are rendered in poems by Yeats and
Eliot respectively: to declare them both figures of poetic
mythology is to impose a blanket term on the unique processes
of composition of each poet and, perhaps more damagingly, on
the very different social relations within the United Kingdom
which locate the work of the two writers. It is not enough
simply to remark, as a characteristic of Irish society, that it
abounded in ‘characters’ who required no invention. Such
notions take on a different tone if we reflect that it is only with
this assimilation into art that O’Grady acquires a degree of
coherence. Is not *Toryism and the Tory Democracy* (O’Grady’s
tract of 1886) effectively read through the prism of ‘Beautiful
Lofty Things’ whereby the significance of that conjuncture of
Celticism, contempt for ‘the Protestant Ascendancy’, and
violent rhetoric is refined to ‘high nonsensical (p.4) Words’. In
the Irish experience, art does not exploit reality; it
completes, perhaps concludes it. The dealings between these
hypostasized values, art and reality, are prominent and
complex in Anglo-Irish literature: each is at times evidently
obliged to masquerade as the other. Here indeed is a central
problem which lures the scholar-pilgrim towards Sligo—the
works he has chosen to read and celebrate, while they are
intensely concerned with society and politics, with
conversation and rhetoric, are also deeply secretive, arcane,
and (in some people’s view) wilfully obscure.

The Irish, or the Ulster, experience is a cave-drama of
considerable popularity in recent years, but attempts to define
it strongly resemble attempts to authenticate it. Professor
Denis Donoghue, to whom I shall be indebted continuously in
the pages that follow, illustrates in a penetrating exercise in
defining this experience the attendant risks. There are two
significant moments:
The real trouble in Ireland is that our national experience has been too limited to be true. Since the Plantation of Ulster there has been one story and one story only in Irish feeling: the English, how to get rid of them, or, failing that, to circumvent them, cajole them, twist their tails. Our categories of feeling are therefore flagrantly limited; our history has been at once intense and monotonous. We have had no industrial revolution, no factory acts, no trade union movement: hence the frail basis upon which our Labour Party exists, by contrast with the two major parties which still define themselves in terms of our civil war. A limited history, a correspondingly intimidating mythology, a fractured language, a literature of fits and starts and gestures: no continuity from one age to the next. Irish novelists, the few who survive, feel the anxiety of influence but not the incitement or the challenge of a tradition.  

Denis Donoghue's distinctive skills are not engaged here. That is, the historical summary he offers is not really the product of the mind which elaborated his masterly account of Yeats.  

The assumptions he makes, however, have a representative status. ‘National experience’ indiscriminately labels semifeudalism in pre-plantation Ulster and romantic politics in the nineteenth century, as if the word ‘nation’ had not changed greatly in the intervening centuries. To argue that Ireland had no industrial revolution, it is necessary to ignore Belfast and the Lagan valley, to go no further. To deny factory laws, you deny Belfast and the statute books of the United Kingdom. The truth is that such a view of Irish history is itself a mythology, not simply because it gets specific facts wrong, but because it reads back into the past the truncated success of bourgeois nationalism in twenty-six counties of Ireland, cavalierly ignoring the historical exactitude of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in the nineteenth century, and compensating for the ‘loss’ of Belfast and Ulster by a denial of their previous existence.

The second moment from Professor Donoghue's essay comes near the end of the piece:
It is common to have the experience and miss the meaning. It is my impression that Irish writers sense a rift between experience and meaning, but in reverse: the meaning is premature, already inscribed by a mythology they have no choice but to inherit, and the experience is too narrow to be entirely natural and representative.\(^{10}\)

Here I find the narrowness of the earlier passage entirely enlightened and accepted, and a number of consequences can be noted. The priority of meaning over experience for Irish writing is one way of observing a tendency towards allegory in certain large areas of nineteenth-century fiction. The same proposition might be stated conversely as the tendency towards *abstract* experience in this colonial fiction, a tendency we shall trace in some work by Maria Edgeworth, Sheridan Le Fanu, and—to a lesser extent—Charles Lever.

*Ascendancy and Tradition* is not intended to rival the various sequential histories and personal guides to Anglo-Irish (p.6) literature recently published.\(^{11}\) Basically, what follows takes its bearing from the development of modernism out of the break-up of the romantic proposition in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century realism lent credence to the theory of literature as an imitation of reality. The mass of Irish writing in this period, however, rested upon a confusion of romantic assumption and naïve reportage. Politics, saturated in such assumptions, took its shape from a concern with the past: the past, conceived in terms of expropriation, legitimized a growing obsession with land. Thus, the increasingly bourgeois nature of Irish political activity could yet be presented as the driving home of ancient rights, the reassertion of some Gaelic nobility in revenant form. The novel took the fundamental shape of this view of history and rendered it fabulous.
Historians have a rather different story to tell, indeed they have many stories to tell, not all of them reconcilable one with another. Oliver MacDonagh has indicated a number of important areas in which early nineteenth-century Ireland saw the commencement of an experiment in administration conducted ultimately from Westminster and through Dublin. In local and municipal government, public order (policing), and social welfare Ireland was for much of the century at least formally more advanced than Britain.¹² No doubt the vision of Ireland as a social laboratory might become as cloudy as the nationalist stereotype or the fictional convention. But if we add to MacDonagh's argument some consideration of the complex organization of land purchase and the growth of joint stock company investment later in the century, we begin to see that Ireland was not metaphysically different from the West Country or Wolverhampton.¹³ If this sounds like latter-day historical revisionism, we should note (p.7) how, in 1837, an anonymous critic seeking to define what Anglo-Irish literature might be, lamented the necessity of Irish participation in the changes determined by the more advanced economy of Britain—and this in the columns of the Dublin University Magazine, flagship of that cultural conservatism which nurtured Samuel Ferguson, Isaac Butt, and Sheridan Le Fanu!¹⁴ Unionism which resents Union is not simply a demonstration of Irish incorrigibility; it is, as my first chapter aims to demonstrate, a fundamental romantic dichotomy in the political structure of the United Kingdom between 1801 and 1920. Indeed, in the United Kingdom as modified in 1920 by the Government of Ireland Act, the dichotomy persists with a modernist aura of violence and indifference.¹⁵
If nineteenth-century Ireland is fundamentally relatable to England, and to Britain generally, why is it that in the area of cultural production the relationships are suppressed more often than expressed? The central issue here concerns Ireland's complex role as metropolitan colony within the United Kingdom. In relation to the Empire overseas—the army in India is an instance in point—Ireland was part of the metropolitan 'home country'; in relation to that home economy it was in significant ways itself colonial. Much might be written on that issue in political, social, and economic terms; but in a basically cultural context, answers to the question of suppressed relations between Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom may be gathered under three headings. The first of these is the nationalist mythology of ahistorical uniqueness, a proposition which might have (p.8) achieved validity if the fate of the Irish language in the past one hundred and fifty years had been other than it was. The second emphasizes the distinctive Catholicism of the Irish population within the British Isles—Daniel Corkery is the chief advocate here—and this sectarian difference can only strain belief if it is also employed to isolate Irish culture from Europe.

A third, more specifically literary answer absorbs these two and effectively sets them up as a mutual cancellation—the third answer may be called Yeatsian tradition. Yet while Yeats's theoretical constructions use the bricks and mortar of literary terminology, they serve to house diverse ideological interests. In rather more ad hominem terms, this third answer lies in the extent to which critics of Anglo-Irish literature have derived their historiography from W. B. Yeats. Yeats, of course, was only one of several late nineteenth-century voices who propounded a view of Ireland as more venerable, traditional, and spiritual than degenerate England—though all were perhaps laggard in acknowledging their debt to British exemplars such as Carlyle and Arnold. The proposition that Yeatsian tradition has unacknowledged British debts might be rewritten as a measure of the extent to which Yeats is the concentrated statement—significantly in literary terms—of a dominant historiography rooted in both British and Irish aspects of nineteenth-century experience. The Anglo-Irish Renaissance, the Irish genius for words, is not solely a product of native soil.
Of the figures besides Yeats, Standish James O'Grady is taken here to mediate between this Victorian wisdom and the imminent ‘Cuchullainoid’ mythology of the Renaissance. Beyond anything which might be ascribed to Yeats's influence there lies a further and more pervasive force—the notion that, whatever the stock exchange or the statistics of food production and exports might say, Ireland had a distinctive if not unique social structure, the crowning feature of which was the Protestant Ascendancy. The mysteries of the Protestant Ascendancy, to which J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory, and W. B. Yeats variously adhered, were such that outsiders could do no better than take it on trust. And essential to the viability of this concept was the complementary notion that Ireland had no middle class. In Victorian England, when the aristocracy was adopting bourgeois ways, and the labouring classes were urged to adopt the mores (but not the financial expectations) of their betters, this alleged absence of an Irish middle class effectively silenced a comparative study of Irish and British culture. Moreover, while Irish industrialization and urban development should not be written off as nonexistent, it is still true that in Britain middle-class behaviour was increasingly associated with the life of the towns while Ireland saw itself as a rural community with incidental conurbations.
In the second part of Chapter Two, I analyse at length the emergence of the term ‘Protestant Ascendancy’ in the context of revolutionary alarm in the 1790s. In due course Yeats’s use of it to indicate the governing elite in Ireland from the Williamite Settlement (1697) onwards. This is only one anomalous aspect of Protestant Ascendancy, its being back-dated before the moment of its coinage as a phrase to provide an encapsulated history of the eighteenth century in to to. There is another, even more striking anomaly between the quasi-aristocratic connotations of the Yeatsian usage and the distinctly mercantile and urban surroundings of the phrase’s coinage in the vicinity of the Common Council of Dublin Corporation. Some stages of the evolution of the 1790s neologism into the timeless language of Augustan elitism are provided in the chapter called ‘Mid-Century Perspectives’: this evolution, though important in itself, is less significant than the negotiation between the sociological formation calling itself ‘The Protestant Ascendancy’ and the ideological construction of an eighteenth-century hegemony of the same name. From this contradiction, rather than from any mechanical causality in the families of Yeats and Synge and Lady Gregory, derives the modernist, valorized tradition associated with their names.
Joyce stands apart. Or at least, that is the traditional placing of Joyce vis-a-vis Yeats and the Protestant Ascendancy. Here, (p. 10) an attempt is made to relate Joyce's petit-bourgeois inheritance to the suppression of middle-class evidences in Irish Protestantism. Ironically, some attention to the development of the novel in nineteenth-century Ireland can uncover a fictional prologue to Joyce's great innovations. For example, though the absence of a middle class was accepted tacitly on the western shore of the Irish Sea, in the 1840s (when Anthony Trollope was as productive of novels set in Ireland as Sheridan Le Fanu) the author of The Kellys and the O'Kellys (1848) perceived a more recognizably bourgeois Ireland than any of his Irish contemporaries, Charles Lever included. Later, it is true that Lever (in such a novel as Barrington) did attend to the life of the Irish bourgeoisie but he evidently needed the security of German biedermeier sentiment to feel at ease in his task. Lever, it might be observed in passing, is a proto-modernist at least in his choice of prolonged exile on the Continent. His novel of 1865, Luttrell of Arran, provides us with an early instance of the Irish modernist concern with ‘Celtic’ primitivism. Whereas these Irish novelists of the Victorian period—Le Fanu, Lever, Kickham, Moore, Somerville and Ross—employed structures in which a polarization between castle and cabin characterized their reflection of society, extended analyses of two novels by Maria Edgeworth (who is so much closer in time to the origins of Protestant Ascendancy ideology) show how this polarization is shaken with irony, energized more by desire than achievement.
Irony and desire—these are terms more usually conjoined in discussion of James Joyce's fiction than in, say, an account of that neglected novel, *The Absentee*. But the political function of Protestant Ascendancy in the first decades of the nineteenth century was specifically sectarian—the granting of priority to a sectarian sociology over and above reformist administration and incipient democracy. The sectarian strategy soon articulated rival statements of Irish history which *together* constituted the romantic reformulation of the past. In Joyce we discover manifestly one of these histories, that of the Irish Catholic lower middle classes, urbanized, yet still traumatized by the devastation of the countryside in mid-century. The Joyce we discover will be the inheritor of (p.11) that disaster, the passing of the Irish language which he is so often thought to have discounted. It is with Joyce that we encounter the ironies of tradition in that he therapeutically enacts in his life's work those repressions which otherwise would have remained repressed, untreated, ascendant. For the violence of a bifurcated history has its sexual as well as political register; and Joyce's *œuvre* (for all the celebrated fissures and discontinuities of his individual texts) offers a vision of an ultimate, if historically postponed wholeness. For this reason, Joyce is the only author here whose work is treated in all its major textual forms.
A contrast between Joyce and Yeats is generally understood: a sustained comparison is less often encountered. If Joyce posits a psychic wholeness (qualified by the historical determinants of his time) Yeats offers Unity of Being. The former lies ostensibly in the future, the latter ostensibly in the past. In the case of Yeats, I offer an approach through the medium of a concept central to the poem ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’, the concept of Public Opinion. To this evolution of a concept employed by Yeats in a single poem is added another approach in which the modernist concern with Oedipal conflict conditions the transmission of inherited, ‘traditional’ Gaelic material, conditions indeed the very fibres of poetic and dramatic form. The drama offers particular advantages for this inquiry—the explicitly multivocal form of expression, the accessible fissures between set and dialogue, setting and allusion, et cetera. Yeatsian tradition ought to lead one to ‘The Words upon the Window-Pane’, in which the playwright’s predilection for cultural heroes made Jonathan Swift manifest through a spiritualist medium in latter-day Dublin. It is doubtless true that ‘The Words upon the Window-Pane’ draws Yeats’s Augustan constructs into play with the filthy modern tide, yet in detailing the *late* eighteenth-century origins of Protestant Ascendancy I find ‘Purgatory’ to be the more revealing drama. If, as I argue, ‘Purgatory’ is not only based on what Donald Torchiana has called Yeats’s ‘theory of the symbolic tragedy of the eighteenth century’ but is directly related to that dangerous intersection of modernist aesthetics and totalitarian politics, then an analysis of the play may serve to indicate—however briefly—an area for further inquiry, the place of Protestant Ascendancy ideology in the broader field of European racism.¹⁷
I take Protestant Ascendancy to be the central cultural assumption of Yeats's meditation on his own inheritance. By it he measured the politics of the Irish Free State; by reference to it, he performed in his *Autobiographies* remarkable transformations of his social experience of the nineteenth century; by celebration of it he brought his own life's work into creative relationship with that of Jonathan Swift, George Berkeley, Oliver Goldsmith, and Edmund Burke. In his exhaustive and valuable study of these relationships, Donald Torchiana has paid tribute to T. R. Henn's account of the Anglo-Irish background in *The Lonely Tower*. Henn, however, is more exegete than critic and nothing better illustrates the debt owed to (or distortion traceable to) Yeats's own reading of history: looking at once at the nineteenth century *in toto* and the early 1920s in isolation, Henn saw that everywhere the Big House, with its estates surrounding it, was a centre of hospitality, of county life and society, apt to breed a passionate attachment, so that the attempt to save it from burning or bankruptcy became an obsession (in the nineteen twenties and onwards) when that civilization was passing ... To this society, in the main Protestant, Unionist, and of the 'Ascendancy' in character, the peasantry was linked. The great demesnes had their tenantry, proud, idle, careless, kindly, with a richness of speech and folk-lore that Lady Gregory had been the first to record. The days of *Castle Rackrent* were, in the main, over; the relationship between landlord and tenant varied, but was on the whole a kindly one, and carried a good deal of respect on either side.¹⁸
From the notion of the ‘the Big House’, Henn is led on to evoke idyllic social relations in which matters of estate management, rates of interest, toil itself, do not intrude. It is true that taxes imposed from Westminster are accorded a measure of responsibility for the decline of the estates, but burning and bankruptcy remain magisterially unaccounted for. The idyll existed before the 1920s, and this is a recurrent Anglo-Irish complaint—the Golden Age always existed before some moveable disaster, before the Union, before the Famine, before the Encumbered Estates Court, the Land War, Parnell, the Rising, the Troubles, an accelerating succession of unfortunate falls each one briefly inaugurating some (retrospectively acknowledged) idyll which is itself soon dissolved by the next disaster. Ascendancy is the principal medium by which this fleeting vision of a stable, prelapsarian order is imposed on the insolence of fact and circumstance. Expanding on the theme of ‘Purgatory’, Yeats pointed with approval to Nazi legislation which allowed (certain, Aryan) families to go on living where their ancestors had lived—the background to such approval is not exclusively non-Irish.

But the staccato of mere legislated disaster in Ireland was insufficient for Yeats’s imagination; in place of Land Acts and political demagogues, Yeats saw as the principal barrier to the past the nineteenth century itself, beyond which lay—he was to claim—the Irish Augustan age, ‘that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion’. Much of the material discussed in the succeeding chapters focuses on that barrier, but here we can note briefly a few details of Yeats’s Augustan age. Having escaped from darkness and confusion, it was necessarily fated to end in, return to, some such condition, darkness and confusion, the filthy modern tide—it is important to record this qualification of Yeats’s exemption. The energies of his cyclical history generate a dual perspective: with reference to the eighteenth century Goldsmith is not only presented ‘deliberately sipping at the honey-pot of his mind’, in ‘The Seven Sages’ his serene response to the countryside is also gravely qualified:

Oliver Goldsmith sang what he had seen, roads full of beggars, cattle in the fields, but never saw the trefoil stained with blood, the avenging leaf those fields raised up against it.
This return to violence, breaking down of order into disorder, is the acknowledgement of historical process by which Protestant Ascendancy is born—not among the pastoral beggars—but with avenging leaves and stained trefoils as its symbolic paraphernalia.

Despite this dual function which Goldsmith performs in Yeats’s poem, the eighteenth-century figures of Yeats’s mythology are too often read simply as heroes. One frequently hears that Swift (or Burke, or Yeats himself) is ‘the father of Anglo-Irish literature’, though in truth Walter Scott or Goethe may well have an equally valid claim at times to the title. Biological metaphors of this kind have an insidious effect in that they generate notions of a legitimizing family tree which distinguishes the Anglo-Irish writer from a larger context instead of locating him in it. Swift himself, writing about the Anglo-Scottish Union, drew attention to the absurdities which can arise from a metaphor which has supplanted, instead of moved, reality:

Henceforward let no stateman dare
A kingdom to a ship compare; Lest he should
call our commonweal
A vessel with a double keel.\textsuperscript{21}

Such eighteenth-century sense should be applied drastically to the conceit of stormy love affair or unhappy marriage so often employed of Anglo-Irish relations, from the days of Swift himself to those of Seamus Heaney. Indeed the first step in defining Anglo-Irish literature must be to challenge such dominant metaphors. Once alerted to this unconscious tendency towards organicist assumptions, our critical debate may find it easier to admit that ‘the Anglo-Irish writer’ is a rhetorical shorthand for written texts which, in turn, stand in positive and potent relation to wider cultural structures.
In that wider context Tradition is of course a familiar enough concept. Having denied any crudely causal influence of the Protestant Ascendancy on Yeatsian tradition, I should also make it clear that the idea of tradition I associate with Yeats is not simply that of sanctified continuity. The modernist interest in tradition is self-evidently ironic, and the complexities of that interest may be traced in figures as diverse as T. S. Eliot and Martin Heidegger as well as in the fossil-history of the word’s etymology. Hermeneutics, I should immediately concede, lies well beyond the range of the present inquiry, which will deal with the issue of tradition strictly in its Yeatsian form. This is not to suggest that Yeats’s thought on this topic is of merely local interest, nor to insinuate that it is merely a piece of obfuscating ideology peddling distortions of an otherwise accessible and unsullied past. It is a statement of certain continuities—in the nineteenth century crucially—which Yeats elsewhere denied. And this contradiction between tradition and its material is a further statement of the disjunction between an Irish local literature and the European culture into which it cries out for reinsertion.

We shall have need, therefore, of Eliot’s wry comment that ‘in English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence.’ Now-adays, the Anglo-Irish tradition is cited so often that its existence must be seriously in doubt. However, the notion of Anglo-Irish literature is given an excessive stability by the acceptance of tradition as accumulated and accumulating succession. Just as ascendancy emerges to assert a condition which is longed for protectively rather than possessed confidently, so (Eliot reminds us) tradition is a negative marker in many of its citations. If we think spatially about Anglo-Irish literature as the meeting ground of various directions and forces—Gaelic culture and Celticism, English romanticism and revolutionary alarm, bourgeois compensation and subversive allegory—we should consider tradition historically as the (sometimes contradictory and violent) convergence of readings, not of texts. Tradition as the convergence of readings, tradition as involving a ‘Thou’—in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s terms—is necessarily an active element in literary history. Less abstractly, my second initial epigraph states the proper corollary of this position.
An introduction should not only introduce to the readers the material which follows, it should also advise them of possible difficulties or surprises lying ahead. In this connection two particular problems will arise in the course of the present argument. First the accepted canon of Anglo-Irish literature will be subjected to new pressures, not only by the attention given to relatively unfamiliar books (*The Absentee*, for example) but by the deliberate fracture of the canonical text as such, a fracture embarked upon to release the covert readings within. For the Anglo-Irish enthusiast, both of these tactics may be uncomfortable, while the reader whose primary interest lies in literary history as a methodology may feel the time and space given to individual texts excessive. The first category of reader will lament the absence of George Moore and J. M. Synge and Samuel Beckett, while deploring the presence of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Georg Lukacs. If both parties thought hard about their differences they might find common ground in the striking non-appearance of the great English critics—Leavis, Empson, Williams, and their disciples—who have had so remarkably little to say on the subject of Anglo-Irish literature.
The specifically literary history uncovered here can be summarized as romanticism and its transformation into modernism. The specifically political element of Anglo-Irish history is the Union and its modification after 1921. These are not hermetically separate. Romanticism adopts Union as symbolic, not so much of its transactions as of its aspirations, its desire; and that desire grows among the fragmented ruins of romanticism itself. Indeed, the symbol itself, with its transcendental, numinous harmony of object and meaning, becomes symbolic of the romantic aspiration. Thus, allegory, which Coleridge declared untenable for the English-speaking world, is particularly significant in the detection of those aspirations and desires in the cultural politics of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Allegory lays bare the absences, distances, and differences which constitute the only ground of desire. To speak of ‘desire’ in such a large context is not simply to invoke a particular school of continental philosophy, it is to draw attention to the pervasive language of sexuality which underpins conventionally accepted metaphors for Anglo-Irish relations, Anglo-Irish conflict, from Swift’s ‘Injured Lady’ to Heaney’s ‘Act of Union’. Allegory is not a simple alternative to this violent romanticism: while it stresses division, it is found repeatedly to be a mode through which a series of radically alternative readings of texts suggest themselves. Those readings, of course, will not restrict themselves to the canonical texts per se, or even to literature conceived in symbolic terms; they are necessarily historical, uncompleted. And, in its incompleteness, Ireland itself may be found to be a larger arena than its entrenched defenders had realized.

Notes:


(2) It may help the reader if I point to the concept of totality as employed by Georg Lukacs in History and Class Consciousness, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971),


(9) Some legislation in this area was restricted by region and hence excluded Ireland, but there were specific acts relating to Ireland also. This tendency to legislate for industry on a regional basis was probably more characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century rather than the years 1850–1921.


(14) ‘Past and Present State of Literature in Ireland’, *The Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 9, No. 52 (March 1837), pp. 365–76 *et al* 1848. *The Sociology of Literature*
(15) In a sense this work relates to southern Ireland rather than to all of Ireland in the period after 1921; in this respect, it postpones the issue of relating partition to cultural production. For the background see Liam de Paor, *Divided Ulster* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970); Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State* (London: Pluto Press, 1976); Henry Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1980).


(17) I use ‘racism’ to cover all those ideologies which utilize differences of inheritance or belief to create valorized social categories, usually to the end of obliterating or suppressing class interests and conflicts. Nazism is not only the most obvious example but also possesses an articulate intellectual apologetics, for an analysis of which see George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964; repr. Schocken Books, 1981). For an immediate British context in which the ideology of Irish sectarianism may be read, see Martin Barker, *The New Racism: Conservatives and the Ideology of the Tribe* (London: Junction Books, 1981).


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