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Racializing the Irish: The discursive production of race and nation by the Young Ireland movement

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Racializing the Irish: The discursive production of race and nation by the Young Ireland movement

This essay will analyze the ways in which definitions of race in nineteenth-century Ireland were not only, nor simply set by British colonizers, but rather were produced and determined by Irish people themselves. This long history of Irish engagement with concepts of race shaped how the Young Ireland movement understood how the Irish nation was (racially) constituted. Additionally, the multi-racial history of the Irish nation inflected Young Ireland's understanding of how history structured the construction of an Irish nationality. This paper then will show how the Young Irelanders understood race and, more particularly, how they recognized themselves as racialized subjects. Their own adoption of a racialized Irishness was important to their vision for Ireland's revolutionary future. Placing race centrally within the writings of Young Ireland, highlighting its essential role in an historical account of Irish nationality, this essay will thereby cast new light on the difficulties inherent in Young Ireland's nationalist project. In particular, it will underscore the anxieties experienced by Young Ireland about the potential impossibility of the nationalist project with reference to its production and experience of racialized but ambiguous subject positions.

Key words: Ireland, race, nineteenth century, nationalism

Introduction

Although in the contemporary world race is primarily approached through the politics of skin colour, theorist of racial capitalism Cedric Robinson repeatedly turned to the Irish experience as a touchstone to develop his analysis. When asked about this he stated,

> Some of you are interested in why I pursued the Irish in Black Marxism as well as in the latest work, Forgeries of Memory and Meaning. In part I'm trying to give a great deal of our audience a purchase point. There's no possibility of really telling a Black story without telling other people's stories.… The Irish and the Irish Americans are, to a certain degree, opportunistic subjects. Opportunistic in the sense that a lot of their history is coincident with Blackness… Coincident with Blackness. (Robinson and Robinson 2017, 7)

This idea of the Irish experience being "coincident with Blackness" is a key one when trying to elucidate those technologies of racialisation and ideologies of race that saturate Irish nationalist discourse in the middle of the nineteenth century. It allows us to build on the insights of Robinson and others in North America, as well as postcolonial theory originating in the Indian subcontinent, to excavate the discursive strategies at work in Young Ireland, exposing their complicities with and subversions of narratives of racialised domination. This coincidence with Blackness helps us understand too the formal qualities of race as a social construct. It is, following Stuart Hall, an empty signifier into which an entire range of properties can be filled (skin colour, psychology, physiology, speech, culture, desires, intellectual abilities) (Hall [1997] 2021). It is to the formal qualities of race that Robinson is referring but nevertheless they still inhabit a community of type. The experience of racialisation is filled by concrete particularities that are historically mediated; each of the modes that signify race must be

understood in their historical context. This is not to say that race is not itself a historical category, rather it is a concrete historical form that, according to Robinson, emerges conterminously with capitalism, thereby indelibly marking the latter (Robinson [1983] 2000, 2). The precise modes of racialisation that are deployed and experienced however remain indeterminate, and encompass a wide range of experiences. Correlatively, for us to talk meaningfully about race at all forces us to think through a conceptual lens that opens rather than closes the possibilities inherent in any comparative endeavour. Thus, for Robinson, the point is that,

> I want you to understand that the Irish were negatively racialized, even before the Africans, in the European imagination. We were simply a lob to occupy a category already established. And given the irony that is history, it became the impression that the category had always been ours, always been ours, exclusively. That simply isn't how human affairs have been conducted. (Robinson and Robinson 2017, 7)

It may seem today to some that the Irish have always occupied that position that they hold today – that of a maturing European success story but this is far from the case. Rather, such teleological narratives reinscribe a highly racialized discourse of progress; this discourse of progress only maintains its salience through a permanent occlusion of the technologies of racialisation that form the very basis of its existence.

The question of being subject to what Robinson terms 'negative racialization' does not tell the full story. To do that, we must turn to how the Irish understood themselves within wider racial parameters. That is not to say that race itself is solely the result of a process of "social control" (Allen, [1994] 2021, 52-3). It behoves us to uncover, as Robinson did with the Black radical tradition, the modes through which race could be understood to occupy a formative position in the emergence of a specifically, but not universally, anti-colonial nationalism in the mid-

nineteenth century. Indeed, the problem for scholars of Irish history and culture rests precisely on the political ambiguity produced by the distinctly uneven radicality of Irish nationalism in its diverse modes. The task then is to treat race in the Irish context with due consideration of the permeability of racial boundaries for certain sections of the Irish (most notably in their ability to "become white" in North America) in contradistinction to the heightened rigidity encountered by African-Americans and other Black subjects of colonial domination. Indeed, for leading scholar of Whiteness, Steve Garner,

> Ireland's history, far from being deracialized and exceptional, is actually exceptional in the opposite sense in that it provides a more complex and nuanced way of understanding the evolution of the concept of "race" through racialization. By understanding the experiences of Ireland, we avoid being sidetracked by color as the only possible locus of whatever "race" means in a given time or place. (Garner 2009, 52-53)

The interaction of racial discourse with nationalist aspirations in Ireland is clear if we pay attention to the Young Ireland movement. The Young Ireland movement emerged around the *Nation* newspaper (1842-48) as an articulate and increasingly radical offshoot of Daniel O'Connell's campaign for the Repeal of the 1800 Act of Union, which abolished the Protestant Parliament in Dublin. Hugely influential over later Irish nationalists (especially Griffith and Pearse), they are often contradictorily characterised as having introduced an atavistic romantic strain of nationalism into Ireland or having been promoters of a non-sectarian inclusive vision of Ireland and Irishness. However, much writing on Young Ireland, often in historical or literary surveys of nineteenth century Irish society, has taken the form of (often cursory) references to their 'romanticism' and the abject failure of the co-called 'The Battle of Widow McCormack's cabbage plot' in 1848. The reputation of Young Ireland has certainly been tarnished by the strident support lent by Young Ireland leader John Mitchel to slavery and the

American Confederacy during the US Civil War - a position that put Mitchel and other Young Irelanders at odds with the staunch emancipationist and leader of the Repeal Association Daniel O'Connell (Gleeson, 2016). However, the discursive underpinning Young Ireland's positions on questions of race and imperialism have been less examined.[1] By focusing forensically on their work published in the *Nation* newspaper, a clearer picture emerges of the complexities and nuances of the racial politics of mid-nineteenth century Ireland and how that helps to form a strident and popular mode of Irish nationalism.

The *Nation*

Even before the Young Ireland weekly *Nation* began publication in the autumn of 1842, a stir had been created by the publication of a prospectus, a statement of intent by the rising stars of the Repeal movement. This prospectus, as well as an article written by Thomas Davis for the Vindicator, contained "the first comprehensive expressions of a national policy printed in Ireland" (Duffy 1884, 195). The stated intent of the new "Dublin Weekly Journal" was "to direct the popular mind and the sympathies of educated men of all parties to the great end of Nationality" (Duffy 1884, 143). Perhaps surprisingly, Wolfe Tone and the politics of 1798 do not occur as much as one may have expected in such an explicitly anti-sectarian endeavour as the *Nation* assuredly was (Ryder 2001, 136, 139-42). Rather it is the Cromwellian/Milesian distinction (between the descendants of the beneficiaries of Oliver's Cromwell's mass expropriation of the land in the mid-seventeenth century acting as a synecdoche for English colonists more generally, and those descended from Míl, mythical progenitor of the Gaels, respectively) that retains more rhetorical force for the movement as it attempted to understand the state of Ireland through a mid-nineteenth century lens in which the discursive constructions of race played an increasingly important role. As we will see, the vacillation between rejection and embrace of a racialized discourse of nationhood underpins the ideological tensions and ambiguities in the Young Ireland project.

The historiographical approach adopted by Young Ireland in their articulation of Irish nationhood was deeply important to their vision of nationality. They self-consciously emulated and drew upon historians such as Augustin Thierry. Thierry's works on Ireland exercised a huge influence on the Young Ireland movement (Quinn 2015, 38-9). Thierry may be seen to be engaging in, what Michael Foucault described as, "race war" (Foucault [1997] 2003, 60). Adopting this Foucauldian perspective will shed much needed light on the precise role played by ideas of race within the political thought of the Young Ireland movement. Particular attention will be played to the work of Thomas Davis and (the lesser known, but nevertheless important) John Blake Dillon. Part of the difficulty with the Young Ireland project can be seen to lie within this form of engagement with race that, while managing to challenge imperialism, can also result in the reproduction of racist stereotypes that reinforce colonial domination. This is manifested in the exclusory tendency inherent within the instrumentalization of race within the work of nation building. And, in framing the nation through a racialized discourse, Young Ireland inevitably becomes bound to this exclusory logic even in its attempt to overcome it.

In explicating the notion of the race war, Michel Foucault has pointed out, "When Guizot, Augustin Thierry, and Thiers – and Michelet too – write history, they take as their starting point a relationship of force, a relationship of struggle, and it takes a form that had already been recognized in the eighteenth century: a war, a battle, an invasion, or a conquest" ([1997] 2003, 226). This struggle is constituted between two different races, different societies. This struggle is made clear by Augustin Thierry, for whom the existence of socio-economic contention is rooted in this distinction,

> The higher and lower classes who, at the present day, keep so distrustful an eye upon one another, or actually struggle for systems of ideas and of government, are in many countries the lineal representatives of the peoples conquering and the peoples

> conquered of an anterior époque… the race of the invaders, when it ceased to be a separate nation, remained a privileged class. (Thierry 1856, vol. I, xix)

However, the victorious incorporation of varying races into a single state ought to resolve these conflicts, if only through containing them. So, for Thierry, the French Revolution marks the "completion" of thirteen hundred years of contest between victors and vanquished (Foucault [1997] 2003, 233-4). The problem for Ireland, however, is the failure of this process: the lack of unity, discursively understood as a product of history, in the present. In the chapter "The Native Irish and the Anglo-Norman Irish" in Volume II of his *Norman Conquest*, Thierry highlights the problem thus:

> The conquest of Ireland by the Anglo-Normans is perhaps the only conquest where, after the first disasters, the slow and imperceptible course of events has not brought about the gradual amelioration in the state of the conquered people. Without having ever enfranchised themselves from foreign domination, the descendants of the Anglo-Saxons have still made great progress in prosperity and civilization. But the native Irish, though apparently placed in a similar position, have been constantly declining in the last five centuries… (1856, 319-20)

The normal mode of integration and miscegenation that is created by the "high degree of territorial unity" of states and "the habit of living under one same government," which in turn give rise to "an entire community of manners, language, and patriotism," are absent in the Irish case (Thierry 1856, vol. I, xvii). In an echo of Wolfe Tone, Thierry places the blame for this defective development squarely on England:

> This singular and mournful destiny, which weighs almost as equally on the old and on the new inhabitants of Erin, has for its cause the vicinity of England, and the influence

> which her government has exercised ever since the conquest, over the internal affairs of that island. This influence has always manifested itself at a time and in a manner to disturb the course of amicable relations which time and the custom of living together were tending to establish between the Anglo-Irish and the Irish by race. The intervention of the kings of England, whatever its ostensible aim, has always had the effect of keeping up the primitive separation and hostility. (1856, vol. II, 32)

This passage makes clear the appeal that Thierry's historiography had for the Young Irelanders. Such a schema provides a taxonomy for understanding the reality of racial, cultural and political difference within the population of Ireland ("the Anglo-Irish and the Irish by race"). The appeal to race as an organizing principle allows "the keeping up [of] the primitive separation and hostility" to be justified historically at the same time as asserting that it has outlived its natural life. The Ireland of the nineteenth century was understood as being retarded by English interference that had been formalized by the 1800 Act of Union; with repeal of this Act, the cause for internal dissension would be annulled,[2] and the possibility of Ireland's accession to modernity through "Statist totalization" would be realized (Foucault [1997] 2003, 233). Such a "Statist totalization" would mean the incorporation into the state of previously disparate elements whose fractious relationships could be properly mediated. Within this paradigm, for such a state to come into existence, the nation must *become* the state, and in so doing overcome the dualism of victors and vanquished. The "functional totality of the nation" must become the "real universality of the State" (Foucault [1997] 2003, 227). The problem however is the means by which this can be done. For Thierry, the French Revolution is the final step in centuries of progress toward "one free and sovereign nation" (Foucault [1997] 2003, 236). The bloody revolution had already been completed in France, but it had not in Ireland. Thierry was neither condemning nor approbating the Revolution; rather, he was simply positing it as a necessary end to the conflict engendered by the history of conquest.

Histori(ograph)cal Affinities

The reality facing Young Ireland differed hugely from the teleological unity of the state that Thierry could identify in France, where the state was able to claim then mantle of the natiom: the frictions resulting from conquest in Ireland were still alive in both so-called agrarian outrages and the agitation for repeal of the Act of Union; racialized tensions still dominated the scene. Thomas Davis explicitly stated in "Land for the People" that, "The landlord must be reformed or removed" and, "God gave the land to the People. Conquest took it from them. Let justice restore it" (*Nation*, 24 December, 1842). Already in October 1842, the *Nation*'s account of the Repeal Association meeting in the Dublin Corn Exchange contained arguments regarding the use of force, with Repeal Association Secretary Tom Steele saying that there would be two ways to free the country: O'Connell's "bloodless, moral agitation" and "the appeal to arms which Plunket, Bushe and Saurin said would be justifiable to adopt when the opportunity would arise" (*Nation*, 22 October, 1842).[3] The possibility of violent revolution again arose two weeks later in the same context, with O'Connell stating that unless Repeal is granted peaceably it would precipitate the total separation of Britain and Ireland by blood (*Nation*, 5 November, 1842). The spectre of violence was constantly raised at this time as being a quasi-organic reaction by the Irish masses to Britain's failure to deliver just economic and political reform. This matter eventually caused a split in nationalism at the end of 1846 when the Young Ireland faction walked out of the Repeal Association due to O'Connell's absolute refusal to countenance the justice of any violent action in defence of Irish national interests (Ryder 2001, 139).

The attempt to overcome these frictions and tensions evident in Ireland relied on a post-sectarianism which seemed imminent (or at least possible) to the generation who emerged in the aftermath of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. According to Thomas Davis, "Emancipation is beginning to do its work. The Irish Catholic has nigh forgotten that he was a helot, and the

Protestant that he was a tyrant. Ceasing to hate each other, both cast around to find those who impoverish and dishonour them… mutual wants and common wrongs are bringing us together" (*Nation*, 24 December, 1842).

Such an outcome would nevertheless be illusory. This ambiguity in the status of the nation as a notion or principle that could dispel conflicts of old (which is present in Thierry) had not achieved the desired result in Ireland, thus an exclusory logic re-emerges despite protestations of national unity in the racialized fissures that are supposed to have been overcome. As Luke Gibbons has noted, "The past can be eulogized when it is truly dead and gone and when even revolution leads to social stability, but these comforting sentiments were not so easily transferrable to a country such as Ireland in which history was still a matter of unfinished business" (Gibbons 1996, 157).[4] So, the Young Ireland project had to posit the nation as somehow completed (in order to avoid the bloodshed necessitated by revolution), whilst nevertheless relying on the fundamental antagonisms provided by the facts of conquest to pursue their goal of an independent nation.

Leading Young Irelander, John Blake Dillon's understanding of the relationship between race, class and aristocracy is explicated in an issue of the *Nation* in which he took a lead role in writing the editorials (McGrath 1949). What we have through several articles (*viz.* 'Prospects for England', 'Morality of Our masters', and 'Landlord and Tenant' (*Nation*, 19 November, 1842) is the presentation of a distinctive popular perspective that draws on the antagonisms of race as developed by Thierry, one that is nuanced by an understanding of class and anti-imperialism. The first of these articles opens with a reference to Thierry's *Norman Conquest* by tracing the present-day aristocracy directly to the "Norman robbers" of "[William] the Conqueror." Dillon proceeds with a prophecy of doom for the imperial project in a way that excises the English popular classes from complicity with empire to such an extent that they

would in fact benefit from its imminent demise: “England, that supremacy of thine – not less fatal to thy own debased and overburthened People, than to those upon whom its withering shadow has fallen – is at length drawing towards its end” (Nation, 19 November, 1842).

The weaknesses of England (such as the war against Afghanistan and economic rivalries with the United States and France) do not affect the popular classes but only “that plundering aristocracy which torments and tyrannizes” them. The “People of England” are said to “share in our sufferings” inasmuch as both the Irish and English peoples are degraded by the aristocratic system that is intimately linked to imperialist designs (Nation, 19 November, 1842). Similarly, in Ireland, even the granting of Emancipation and Reform are irrelevant, coming as they do from a rotten system rooted in the evil of aristocracy. Thus, “[t]he People of Ireland have got nothing – they have been invariably overlooked and trampled down in the strife of contending parties” (*Nation*, 19 November, 1842). What we have here is an opposition emerging between “the People” on one hand and the aristocracy on the other. This opposition, as in Thierry, is resolved through the *deus ex machina* of the nation as the necessary organising concept that mediates the two terms to bring an end to the age-old conflict. Thus, the nation is posited as the central category on both a political and a moral level.

One can see this in the articulation of increasingly internationalist concerns in early 1843.[5] This involves a universalization of Thierry’s “race war” and the necessity of its resolution in the victory of the national (popular) forces, presumably in the form of a democratic state dictated by local conditions. The question remains however about who, in fact, constitutes the “People” in this rubric. And here Dillon again turns to what will become one of the dominant features of Irish nationalist discourse over the coming century: the small farmer as embodiment of the nation. Writing under the *nom de plume* of *Agricola* (*lit*. farmer), Dillon again chastises the nationless Connaught landlord (cypher for the entire system of British rule in Ireland) in

defence of the small farmer (*Nation*, 19 November, 1842). The importance of the aristocracy and land in Dillon's view can be seen in his fundamental argument for independence:

> We wish for a Domestic and Democratic Government, chiefly because we expect that such a Government would cut down the powers and privileges of this [land-owning aristocratic] class and bring about its total abolition as soon as it could be effected with safety. For to this final result it assuredly must come; whether by a bloody revolution as in France, or by a peaceful course of legislation as in Prussia… (*Nation*, 19 November, 1842)[6]

The importance of Thierry for thinking about Ireland can be further seen in the 26 November 1842 issue, in which Thomas Davis wrote an article praising him as the greatest living historian. Of Thierry, Davis said,

> [His] only fault – a too exclusive notice of the distinctions arising from race, and occasionally attributing to alienage in blood difference arising from legal or personal incidents[….]However closely we study our history, when we come to deal politics, we must sink distinction of blood as well as sect. The Milesian, the Norman, the Dane, the Welshman, the Scotchman, and the Saxon, naturalised here, must combine, regardless of their blood – the Strongbownian must sit with the Ulster Scot, and him whose ancestor came from Tyre or Spain, must confide in and work with the Cromwellian and the Williamite. This is as much needed as the mixture of Protestant and Catholic. If a union of all Irish-born men ever be accomplished, Ireland will have the greatest and most varied materials for an illustrious nationality, and for a tolerant and flexible character in literature, manners, religion, and life, of any nation on earth. (*Nation*, 26 November, 1842)

Davis criticizes Thierry for his over-emphasis on race as an organizing principle for the analysis and practice of politics. He then suggests a concordance between the anti-national disposition of "traitors" and the racialized politics that has been perpetuated by "wrath in the people and cunning in the rulers". This does not undermine Davis' preoccupation with racial categories however; as we can see in his recounting of the different races that must be unified in order to achieve greatness for Ireland. He implies that national boundaries are all important and even have a moral aspect in that they "*should* separate men of different countries."[7] It is only through the nation that "greatness of soul or glory in action" can be achieved; it is, indeed, "essential to a great people." On the other hand, race has been maintained only through the sacrifice of nationality and is therefore to be overcome. The dialectical negation (*aufhebung*) of races as they have hitherto existed becomes the *sine qua non* of Irish nationality. But the failure of such unity perpetually runs the risk of the nation appearing as a fundamentally exclusory category incapable of realising its own promise of inclusion.

However, in writing this, Davis (like Thierry, as noted above) implies that Ireland is in fact an exception to the supersession of historically mediated racial difference in the national state, whilst still maintaining the idea of a schism running through society (between national and counter-national, even nationless, forces). This adaptation of Thierry's theory can be seen to indicate the much-vaunted desire for a non-sectarian national identity to emerge in the 1840s, but it also highlights the very real divisions that continued to exist in Davis' day. Moreover, it demonstrates the difficulties of overcoming such divisions while at the same time accepting Thierry's schema of a society being structured by an indelible conflict engendered by opposing races leading to the victory of the nation-people. In this context we can better understand Dillon's emphasis on the social basis of the nation. For here the conflict is flourishing, but it takes the form of an opposition between nationality on the one hand and a vacant universalism on the other. Concretely, this is embodied in the objective conflict between the interests of the

landlords and the tenants. However, it is impossible to escape the inevitably racialized undertones in this conflict, with the Cromwellian landlords on the one side and Milesian peasants on the other. In the final analysis, the sympathy of Young Ireland will be on the side of the peasants. Nevertheless, this would not prevent their appeals to landlords to join the Irish nation, which reached its zenith in the coronation of William Smith O'Brien, Protestant landlord and descendent of putative proto-nationalist Brian Boru, as figurehead of the Young Ireland movement in the period preceding the 1848 rebellion. Thus, the contradiction of trying to overcome racial taxonomies through national appeals re-emerges in the concrete application of Thierry to the Irish situation. The struggle for the state cannot be avoided and its basis in the national idea persistently opens up the possibility of the national itself becoming the banner of a certain faction – something Young Ireland both did not want and worked to avoid, but a possibility which nevertheless could not be suppressed.

Becoming Irish, or, Historicity and Difference

The response of Young Ireland to this situation was an attempt to unfix these racial categories through a re-articulation of them within a radically open nationality; it is the supposed multiplicity of racial heritages that laid the ground for their nationalism. It is this openness that allows for a discussion of race in the Irish context which refuses imperial attempts to fix colonial subjectivities within an essentialist discourse of superiority. The central problem for Young Ireland is characterized by the necessary but apparently impossible untangling of nationality from the discourse of race. In an 1844 poem, Thomas Davis praises the decidedly aristocratic Fitzgerald clan who had come to Ireland with the first wave of (Norman) colonization.

> These Geraldines! these Geraldines! – not long our air they breathed;
>
> Not long they fed on venison, in Irish water seethed;

Not often had their children been by Irish mothers nursed;

When from their full and genial hearts an Irish feeling burst! (Davis [1844] 1914, 307)[8]

Now, we can see clearly that Davis is here describing a process of *becoming* Irish. The material of Ireland acts as the catalyst for the production of national feeling and so transfigures the nature of the racially differentiated others, who are characterized by a distinctive comportment from the moment of their arrival in Ireland:

The Geraldines ! the Gerladines! – 'tis true, in Strongbow's van,

By lawless force, as conquerors, their Irish reign began;

And, oh! through many a dark campaign they proved their prowess stern,

In Leinster's plains and Munster's vales on king and chief and kerne;

But noble was the cheer within the walls so rudely won,

And generous was the steel-gloved hand that had such slaughter done;

How gay their laugh, how proud their mien, you'd ask no herald's sign –

Among a thousand you had known the princely Geraldine. (Davis [1844] 1914, 307)

From this verse we can see that the Geraldines are recognized as having a particular set of characteristics ("mien") that distinguish them. Furthermore, their actions are characterized by violence and lawlessness. Their arrival is seen as bad for Ireland ("dark campaigns"), and they themselves are of a distinct type. Nevertheless, they still retain the ability to become Irish, in spite of their brutal treatment of the native inhabitants. This shows the necessarily unstable

status of race as signifier in Davis' discourse. Race can potentially be overcome through the appeal to nationality, but that nationality itself is still racialized. Indeed, this problematic is highlighted by Davis's use of the *nom de plume* "Celt," which bears within it both an indication of Davis's Welsh heritage and the imputed Celticness of the Irish nation. Through this pseudonym, Davis is laying claim to, rather than rejecting, the stereotypical qualities of the "Celt" by reframing them as positive virtues: the impractical Celt becomes a visionary, hot-headedness becomes passion, garrulousness an expression of sociality, excessive sentimentality a sign of deep-seated humanity, and so on.

This is further borne out by another of Davis' poems entitled "Celts and Saxons." (Davis [1844] 1914, 355).[9] In this poem, Davis attempts to give lie to the belief that the racial signifiers "Saxon" and "Celt" were, of necessity, opposed to each other. Rather, that opposition was to be condemned to the past by the subsumption of racial categories under the principle of nationality. Thus, the racialized schisms caused by conquest would be overcome. He describes the waves of invaders that came to Ireland both historical and mythological.

As Nubian rocks, and Ethiop sand

Long drifting down the Nile,

Built up old Egypt's fertile land

For many a hundred mile,

So Pagan clans to Ireland came,

And clans of Christendom,

Yet joined their wisdom and their fame

To build a nation from.

Here came the brown Phoenician,[10]

The man of trade and toil –

Here came the proud Milesian,

A hungering for the spoil;

And the Firbolg and the Cymry,

And the hard enduring Dane,

And the iron Lords of Normandy,

With the Saxons in their train. (Davis [1844] 1914, 355)

Davis is here identifying the characteristics of an emergent Irish nation with its constituent races (the trading Phoenician, for example). This is done so that Davis can insist on racial rather than religious difference being the bedrock of Irish society, and in so doing, he can adopt a racial, rather than religious identity for Ireland. The point is that although the Young Irelanders may indeed have identified themselves with the racial characteristics of the "Celt" (and so subverted and appropriated the derogatory stereotypes that were then in circulation), they nevertheless appreciated the implicit fluidity of race as a principle, and the process of *becoming* in relation to Irishness.[11] In this way the racial content of the idea of Ireland could rest both on the identity of the Celt (through its very lack of fixity caused by the appropriation and subversion of contemporary stereotypes), whilst at the same time function as a space that could

include *other* races (*in spite of* their apparent fixity) through material engagement with Ireland itself (as with the Geraldines).

This implies a paradoxical overcoming of the idea of racial difference in the Irish context through the discourse of race itself; the concept of race is, for Young Ireland, fluid in spite of the necessary fixing that is an intrinsic part of discursive racialization. As postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has written, "The [racial] stereotype impedes the circulation and articulation of the signifier of 'race' as anything other than its fixity as racism" (Bhabha 1994, 75). He then goes on to say that the process of colonial subjectification impedes, if not prevents, "that form of negation which gives access to the recognition of difference." However, he adds, "It is that possibility of difference and circulation which would liberate the signifier of skin/culture from the fixations of racial typology, the analytics of blood, ideologies of racial or cultural dominance or degeneration" (Bhabha 1994, 75).

The attempt of Young Ireland to do exactly that, to liberate difference, is however rooted in their insistence on the principle of nationality as means to liberation; the spirit of freedom is precisely that of nationality.[12] This nationality is however already racialized, and the colonial stereotype remains, and Young Ireland turns to a racially constructed past. For Ireland to come into existence, its identity must be sought in the different racial identities in the past that are themselves written into the present and future Ireland that is coming-to-be; Ireland's history of conquest, invasion, and dispossession, and the processes of racialization that accompanied it could only be overcome through the building up of a new Irish nation rooted in the past.

In order to articulate a fundamentally new vision of Irishness, Young Ireland had to engage with the past in a way that would make this new Ireland possible. This engagement inevitably took the form of a narrative that described the history of Ireland in terms of race. As mentioned above, following the French historians who came to prominence around the 1830 revolution,

history was understood as being constituted by a racial contest that was to be finalized in the modern state. But, for Young Ireland, race operated in such a way as to sustain diversity inside the nation. Race and history, therefore, operate as the means through which it becomes possible for Young Ireland to articulate their particular form of nationalism, one that sought national unity as well as accession to the benefits of citizenship that were implicit in this form of national desiring.

The contrast between Daniel O'Connell and Young Ireland is instructive in this regard. In contrast to Young Ireland's vision of Ireland as a product of a history described in terms of race, and the overcoming of race as the moment of the coming-to-be of the nation, O'Connell took a much more self-consciously liberal approach. This can be seen in his ambivalence towards (if not downright rejection of) the Irish language and in his own profession of "Benthamism" (Ó Tuathaigh, 1974; Crimmins 1997). That rejection of Benthamism was to be a recurrent *motif* in the *Nation* indicates the extent to which the political philosophy of Young Ireland differed to that of O'Connell. O'Connell had even written to Jeremy Bentham to declare himself a publicly "avowed Benthamite." As Oliver MacDonagh has pointed out,

> The great bifurcation [in O'Connell's day] was between the universal, rational and atomistic strain which he represented, and the strain which emphasised the race rather than the person, the group rather than the individual, and instinct and emotion against reason… It is an oversimplification perhaps, but basically correct, to see the conflict between O'Connell and the more ardent element of Young Ireland as a conflict between these two forms of radicalism. (MacDonagh 1983, 166)

This dichotomy can be also seen in their contrasting attitudes to racial emancipation and anti-imperial nationalism more generally (Lynch 2007). O'Connell's life-long opposition to slavery was predicated on a universalist conception of right; for slavery to be wrong in Ireland, it must

also be wrong everywhere, and the struggle for the abolition of slavery in America was a struggle for liberty in its universal, general aspect. In contrast to this, many in the Young Ireland movement felt that the struggle for abolition was separate from the struggle for the freedom of Ireland. Part of this was due to a practical (if pusillanimous) consideration, that energies that should be active on the side of Repeal in Ireland were being expended in a contest on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. In addition to this was the fear that such agitations on the part of O'Connell and other Repealers could alienate Irish-American support in the slave-owning South. Thomas Davis made his own opinion clear when he stated, "I condemn slavery as much as it is possible to condemn it… but I am not prepared to condemn the American to the extent to which my illustrious friend [O'Connell] goes" (Kinealy 2009, 122).

The reason for these differences is not incidental. It lies in a fundamentally different world-view, one that is bound up with how the nation has been (indeed must be) constituted through the particularities of race in order for it to fulfil the potentiality of freedom. This freedom must be won by those who are themselves enslaved. Repeatedly, the *Nation* warns of the danger of relying on allies to deliver freedom, so for O'Connell to campaign for the abolition of slavery in America whilst Young Ireland considered their own country to be enslaved (in a figurative if not literal sense), was based on a misapprehension of the nature of freedom. This idea of freedom was, for Young Ireland, bound to the national idea. The universality of O'Connell's conception of freedom struck Young Ireland as smacking of the same false universality that was characteristic of what appeared to them to be the most English of ideologies – industrial capitalism.

In a sense, then, the universalism that was espoused by O'Connell was seen by Young Ireland as correlative with the spiritual death that is bound up with the industrialist impulse and its urge to quantify everything, thus enabling universal comparison. Against O'Connell's liberal

conception of freedom, Young Ireland set up the nation as the fundamental building block of freedom itself. Freedom is something possessed by a people belonging to a nation. And, as we have seen, the nation is deeply imbricated in the idea of race. Following from the "organicism" that can be detected in early nineteenth century German conceptions of nationality, there is a strong aspect of cultivation (*bildung*) of tradition that is required to attain the "true" freedom of nationality (Cheah 2003).

In propounding the principle of nationality, there is a constant, indeed wilful slippage, in the concept of race. This becoming and internalization of difference is well captured by a review of the 1845 *Ballad Poetry of Ireland,* which stated that nationality "must contain and represent the races of Ireland" (*Nation*, 2 August, 1845). As has been demonstrated above, Young Ireland's understanding of race is embedded within the historicity of the nation itself, as history (following Thierry and Foucault) is understood in terms of racialized conflict. Thus, difference becomes internal to the nation's understanding of itself as a result of an historical process of becoming; rather than historicity and difference being ignored by Young Ireland, they are construed as the very ground of nationality.

The problematic relationship between gender and subjectivity in the context of race becomes particularly pertinent when looking at the examples from the *Nation* in which the authors took a very clear and definite position on the genderedness of the nation, *viz*. in the various anti-colonial struggles that were taking place in the 1840s. Through these we see the ambiguous role that gender plays in this mode of articulation of nationhood. Central amongst these examples of anti-imperial struggle commented upon by Young Ireland was the British invasion of Afghanistan in 1842, in response to which Thomas Davis wrote, "Alas, and woe and mourning! Tyranny has conquered – crime has triumphed. The patriot and the true are vanquished or dead." (*Nation* 26 November, 1842). He continued, "Spirit of liberty… in pity

give thy balm to our suffering brethren in Asia" (*Nation* 26 November, 1842). Such a stark identification with the Afghans is predicated on their perceived accession to nationality:

> If the Afghans are led by this, their great misfortune to a self-sacrificing Union, and firm faith in nationality and freedom, they shall resume their high estate. For great is the strength of a young nation when it becomes an organised and completed being, and God has breathed into its nostrils the breath of life, and given it a reasonable and passionate soul. (*Nation* 26 November, 1842)

This contrasts with the editorial in the same issue, which excoriates China for its perceived weakness:

> The villainy of England may excite our anger, but we cannot much pity the Chinese, we despise them so much. Had they shown signs of manhood we would honor them and grieve for them. Brave men, lavish of blood, and fierce in fight for native land, have our sympathy in triumph or defeat; but for the poltroon and the imbecile, let him take care of himself. Let him sink unless he has the spirit to swim. (*Nation* 26 November, 1842)

Through the construction of the image of China as a woman ("Poor China – big, feeble, bed-ridden old woman"), the Chinese become subject to the feminizing racial discourse to which the Irish were also subject (Ryder 1995). Thus, by engaging in such racializing discourses necessary for the articulation of nationality, there emerges a trenchant particularism that refuses any presupposition of universal values. This is the crux of the Young Ireland critique of O'Connell's position on slavery. This refusal of universality functions in a two-fold manner. On the one hand, it refuses any essentialist fixing of the colonized by colonial discourse through constant and avowed slippage in the articulation of race. On the other hand, it effectively

prevents the expression of a blanket sympathy for all oppressed nationalities and races by subjecting those 'others' to essentialist constructions of their identities, submerging them under the old colonial themes of femininity and unfitness for freedom. Thus, in the moment when it appears that the racial stereotype has been vanquished by the resolute opening of nationality to the oppressed, the colonial stereotype re-asserts itself.

Conclusion

The profound interconnectedness of thinking about history and race in the Young Ireland movement is most clearly seen when dealing with the influence of Augustin Thierry. Thierry's historiography is informed by a conception of history as the antagonistic struggle between competing races that is resolved in the unity provided by the state as embodiment of the nation. The nation functions as the mediator that allows competing claims to be incorporated into the totalizing embrace of the state. In the Irish context, this totalization remains incomplete and the state itself adopts a partisan aspect, reinforcing the division of the (unrealized) nation. For Young Ireland, the challenge then becomes not the disavowal of the racial basis of the nation but its incorporation into a conception of history that can transcend the difficulties of the present that are rooted in the (racial) antagonisms of the past. This is attempted through a strategy of destabilization of the essentialized characteristics associated with various races in order to attain a radical openness able to subsume and incorporate racial diversity into the fabric of the nation. But again, the apparently insurmountable difficulties experienced in the Irish present, especially in the form of land disputes that lay bare the contemporary configuration of Irish society as one grounded in an historic conflict manifested through racial differentiation, ultimately stymie this opening of Irishness to diversity. The limit of this logic is reached at the moment when the nation becomes the necessary, indeed only, form through which freedom can be realized. This becomes the limit of inclusion. Fitness for freedom informed by a teleological understanding of nationhood represents the manoeuvre by which exclusion of alterity still

remains possible in spite of an apparent rejection of fixity. It is this logic that comes to a head when colonial tropes and discursive formations (of femininity, weakness, etc.) re-enter this seemingly emancipatory discourse in the form of essentialized characterisations of those who fail to meet certain standards. Reflecting again on Robinson's analysis of the role of the Irish in global processes of racialization, it can then be said that the racial "category already established" both delimits and creates the ground for emancipatory struggles but remains marked by an inability to overcome the racialised logic that brought it into being (Robinson and Robinson 2017, 7).[13]

Postscript: Racializing the Nation in Contemporary Ireland

If Davis and Young Ireland were concerned with the overcoming of racial difference through incorporation into the nation, the Irish state today has embarked on quite a different project, with the advent of neoliberalism having a profound effect on the relationship between race and nation in contemporary Ireland. Indeed, Ronit Lentin has went so far as to say that the economic boom known as the "Celtic Tiger" marked "the first time the Irish in Ireland became 'white', and Irishness became equated with whiteness precisely when it became increasingly difficult to make this equation." (Lentin 2007, 613). The subsequent abandonment of *jus soli*, which conferred citizenship on all who were born on Irish territory, with the passing of the Twenty-seventh Amendment of the Irish Constitution in 2004 marked a profound shift in the configuration of the racial basis of the state, and by implication, that of the nation.[14] The culmination of a long process that is intimately bound up with the Republic of Ireland's integration into the European Union and global capital flows, this Amendment restricts the right to citizenship of those born in Ireland to those with an Irish parent or those resident for at least three years (this residency requirement excludes time waiting to be granted asylum). The Europeanization (read as whitening) of the Irish state is marked not merely by its subjection to international capital but also in its production of a racial regime to regulate and control bodies

deemed a threat to the biopolitical integrity of the "nation". History reappears through the elevation of *jus sanguinis* as the preferred mode of citizenship, ensuring that descendants of a global diaspora created largely by political and economic subjugation can claim membership of a polity in which they have never set foot, while infant bodies of aberrant parentage can be left effectively stateless. The centrality of race in the articulation of Irish nationality by Young Ireland left them yearning for a nation that could be built upon alterity, whereas today the Irish racial state perfects the biopolitical instruments of hierarchized racial exclusion necessitated by neoliberalism (Lentin 2007).

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[1] But see Dugger (2006); Mackenzie (1997); Swift (2001).

[2] Cf. *The Nation*, 24th December, 1842, 168.

[3] William Conyngham Plunket, (1764–1854), Charles Kendal Bushe, (1767–1843) William Saurin (1757/8–1839). Constitutional opponents of the 1800 Acts of Union.

[4] See also MacDonagh, States of Mind, 1-14.

[5] E.g. 'Ireland and Italy', *The Nation*, 25th February, 1843, 312; 'Our Foreign Friends', *The Nation*, 18th March, 1843, 360.

[6] That the views of John Blake Dillon are in fact representative of Young Ireland is evident in "Answers to Correspondents" in which it is firmly stated that the "fierce democracy" of his first article "is only one in a series in the same spirit" (*Nation*, 22 October, 1842).

[7] Emphasis added.

[8] "The Geraldines" originally appeared in *The Nation* on 13 January 1844, 217.

[9] Originally published in *The Nation* on 13 April 1844, 425.

[10] It is worth noting here the supposedly 'brown' heritage of the Irish such as this acts as signifier of other-ness from the 'white' imperial Anglo-Saxon.

[11] See e.g. Lebow (1976).

[12] Cf. Cheah (2003). See also Molloy (2019).

[13] For a study of those conditions see Allen (1994) and Robinson ([1983] 2000, 36-40)

[14] Although it should be borne in mind that the state in Ireland has always had a fractured relationship with the Ireland due to both the subordinate nature of the Free State (1922-37) to Britain and because of the enduring reality of partition rendering the sovereignty of the state over the entirety of the nation essentially illusory.