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MESSIANISM OR MESSIANICITY: REMEMBERING REVOLUTION AND THE SHAPING OF IRISH NATIONALISM

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'We have thought little about our ancestors, much of our posterity. Are we forever to walk like beasts of prey, over the fields which these ancestors stained with blood?' Here, on 5 December 1791, the policy of the Dublin Society of the United Irishmen was set down in the *Northern Star*. Contrast the temporal perspective of this manifesto with that uttered by P. H. 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 under the rubric of a monological reading of his ancestral past: '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'.¹

My contention in this chapter is that the resurrection of the 'dead generations' in Pearse's rhetoric is a central tenet of the epistemology of Irish nationalism. It is through a highly selective process of remembering, a highly selective grading and sifting of information into ideologically constructed cognitive conduits, that the metaphorical call of these dead generations is constructed. The methodology involved is centripetal in that there is a facing inwards and backwards towards a foundationalist core of the past, a mode of memory which Jacques Derrida has termed 'messianistic'. This paper will demonstrate the difference between Pearse's selective subsumption of aspects of Tone and the United Irishmen into an ideological centripetal construct through which Pearse valorised his own Gaelic, Catholic vision of Irish nationalism, and the actual project of the United Irishmen. This, I would contend, was more messianic, to use Derrida's term, and involved a centrifugal opening, spatially and temporally, to other cultures, to other aspects of Irishness, and to the future.

Theobald Wolfe Tone, a Dublin-born Protestant who was sent to Trinity College to study logic, and who was later called to the Irish bar in

1789, was far from the typical image of a British-hating Irish nationalist. Indeed, one of his early career plans involved the setting up of a British colony in the South Seas, and he went so far as to hand in a copy of his plan for this colony to Number 10 Downing Street (he received no reply from Pitt, the Prime Minister). Tone's aims, in terms of this projected colony, were to 'put a bridle on Spain in time of peace and to annoy her grievously in time of war'. He also planned to serve with his brother in the British East India company at another stage of his career, before returning to Dublin in 1788. His political position was influenced largely by the French Revolution, which, as he wrote later, 'changed in an instant the politics of Ireland' dividing political thinkers from that moment into aristocrats and democrats'. It is important to note that his influences stemmed, not from history, as our opening epigraph makes clear, but from contemporary events and philosophies.

Perhaps the central socio-political influence of the French Revolution was the libertarian and emancipatory thrust of its informing, secular-Enlightenment ethic. The writings of Enlightenment thinkers were disseminated thoroughly throughout different parts of Ireland, especially in the North of Ireland, where they found a ready reading public among Presbyterians. The work of Tom Paine was especially influential, with four Irish newspapers reprinting *The Rights of Man*, a work labelled by Tone as the Koran of Belfast. Enlightenment theories of society and government, embodied in practice by the French Revolution, offered an example of how a seemingly stratified and hierarchical society could be completely changed according to the will of the people. The philosophical foundation of this revolutionary ethic was the total reorganisation of society, through the application of reason.

Indeed, this form of educational improvement was central to the Enlightenment project, specifically Kant's *What is Enlightenment*, where what came to be known as the credo of the Enlightenment, *Sapere Aude* ('Dare to know'), was first enunciated. That most of the sources of this Enlightenment knowledge came from outside Ireland underpins the centrifugal impetus of the United Irishmen. To this end, pamphlets which distilled the writings of Enlightenment thinkers were distributed among the peasants of the north of Ireland between 1795 and 1797 which contained the writings of Godwin, Locke (especially his notion of the implied contract between ruler and ruled), and Paine as well as those of Voltaire and Volney. The selection of writers distributed and read by the United Irishmen makes for an impressive list of liberal thinkers on social and political issues, and further reinforces the claim that their views on identity were necessarily universalist and transformative – their aim

was to broaden the notion of Irishness so that it might be inclusive of the different socio-religious traditions of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. In this respect, their project was focused on the future in terms of transformation, as opposed to defending notions of the past.

In an Irish context, perhaps the most interesting aspect of these Enlightenment ideas and their embodiment in the French Revolution was the non-sectarian and secular character of the movement. Kevin Whelan notes that the Revolution provided the intriguing spectacle for Irish Protestants of French Catholics 'systematically dismantling the *'ancien régime'* equation between popery, despotism and political slavery'.² Hence, for the first time, Catholics and Protestants could find common cause, and achieve political reform through the assertion of this commonality. The United Irishmen's project then, was the achievement of the dismantling of the existing Protestant state, and its replacement with a secular equivalent which was both 'inclusive of Catholics and thoroughly reformed'.³ The temporal orientation here is clearly futuristic, whereas the spatial one is centrifugally directed towards Europe.

To achieve such an objective, Tone needed to allay in Presbyterian doubts about the ability of Catholics to overcome sectarian bigotry and obedience to Rome. It was with this in mind that he wrote his pamphlet *An Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (1791). The main thrust of his argument was that the French Revolution should have demonstrated to all that Catholics were capable of making common cause with a secular movement which was essentially national in character. He made the point that 'Popish bigotry' and obedience to the 'rusty and extinguished thunderbolts of the Vatican' were no more in France, and that by extension, they could be no more in Ireland as well. He went on to state that no serious measure of reform in Ireland could ever be obtained which would not 'comprehensively embrace Irishmen of all denominations'.

The important point about Tone's political transformation, and his polemical writings is that the impetus came from outside Ireland. His notion of Irish identity is centrifugal in direction in that it eschews the normative and given sectarian categories of identification and mutually exclusive aspects of identity. Rather than accepting these given, historical aspects of religious identity, Tone looked at France and America for a model that would enlarge and liberate notions of identity, which were fixed and unchanging, and allow for a broadening of the normative criteria of identity; which would place sectarian divisions to one side and instead embrace the Enlightenment-driven notions of liberty, equality and fraternity. In the ringing terms of Napper Tandy: 'the object of this institution [the United Irishmen] is to make a United Society of the Irish

Nation; to make all Irishmen Citizens, all Citizens Irishmen' (words reported in the *Northern Star* 5 December 1791). The choice of the term 'citizen' is redolent of the French Revolution, as is the sentiment expressed. The thrust of their revolution was transformative and transactional; their aim was to break with the past, and instead, to create new structures wherein the whole notion of Irishness could be altered and opened to notions of alterity and plurality.

However, this emancipatory and reformist definition of Irishness was undermined by the association of the United Irishmen with the Defenders. These were a secret society whose inception was in response to the sectarian attacks on Catholics in the North of Ireland by Protestant groupings called, variously 'the Protestant Boys', 'the Wreckers' but most often 'the Peep o'Day Boys'. The resultant informal mobilisation of Catholics took place in a manner largely similar to that of former agrarian secret societies. However, there was one important difference, the Defenders were formed solely for the defence of Catholics against Protestants, and as such, the very name is a potent signifier of the sectarian and centripetal attitude to identity espoused by this group. It is hardly surprising that sectarian fighting ensued and that after a skirmish in County Armagh in 1795, afterwards known as the Battle of the Diamond, the Orange Order was founded.

In essence then, the Defenders originated from an opposition between Catholics and Protestants, an opposition that was both economic and sectarian. In this sense, they embody the *status quo* of the Irish situation in that their inception was predicated on the religious, economic and para-military differences of the past between Catholics and Protestants. What they were defending was their own religious affiliation and their own set notion of identity. To this end, their societies were bonded in the rhetoric of quasi-religious signifiers in terms of oath and symbol, and their orientation was centripetal in that they looked towards what was already there, and defended it. There was no philosophical input in their scheme of things in terms of redefining notions of Irishness: they 'defended' what they had; they defended notions of 'self' against the 'other' with no room for any middle ground between the two. Their vector of Irish identity was totally at odds with that of the United Irishmen.

On taking into consideration the epistemologies of the United Irishmen and the Defenders, it becomes obvious that there was a central rift between them in terms of goals. Both were oath-bound secret societies which hoped for some form of relief from the contemporary political system, and both were influenced by the events of the French Revolution; but there the similarities ended. The United Irishmen espoused a centrifugal view of

Irishness, a view wherein the past history of religious enmity and internecine strife was to be forgotten, and not used in any way as a foundation on which to build a new Ireland. On the contrary, the past was seen as something to be jettisoned in favour of the future. In this epistemology, Irish identity was something, not given and fixed, but rather to be created and forged in the light of contemporary influences from outside. The influence of the Enlightenment hovers over their writings and their political philosophy. In this sense, their philosophy is messianic in the sense that Derrida uses the term; in *Spectres of Marx* he outlines the implications of a messianism that would work in tandem with the *critical* aspects of Marx. Such a messianism would be ‘messianic’ in so far as it would assume the structure of messianic thought, but it would be ‘a messianism without religion’. This is how he describes it:

The effectivity or actuality of the democratic promise, like that of the communist promise, will always keep within it, and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation [i.e. the relation to the final event or last judgment] to the to-come of an event and of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated.⁴

The crucial difference here is the orientation towards the future and outwards towards a developing sense:

Awaiting without horizon of the wait, awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer, hospitality without reserve, welcoming salutation accorded in advance to the absolute surprise of the *arrivant* from whom or from which one will not ask anything in return and who or which will not be asked to commit to the domestic contracts of any welcoming power (family, state, nation, territory, native soil or blood, language, culture in general, even humanity), *just* opening which renounces any right to property, any right in general, messianic opening to what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be awaited *as such*, or recognized in advance therefore, to the event as the foreigner itself, to her or to him for whom one must leave an empty place, always, in memory of the hope—and this is the very place of spectrality [i.e., ghosts].⁵

Given the emancipatory thrust of the philosophy of the United Irishmen, and the attendant Enlightenment imperative towards secularisation, the connection with an avowedly sectarian organisation like the Defenders could only mean a dilution of one or other position. Which position stood in most danger of such dilution becomes clear with the use of the sectarian threat from the Orange Order as a lever to make the Defenders see the value of a union with the United Irishmen. Indeed, the point was made by

The Nation in 1843 that ‘to the Armagh persecution is the union of Irishmen most exceedingly indebted’, as such acts drove the Defenders into a rapprochement with the United Irishmen. Such was the success of this campaign that by mid 1796, new members in Ulster were being sworn in as Defenders and United Irishmen simultaneously.

This amalgamation was the key to the process of selective remembering of the 1798 rebellion as a plank in a narrow, nationalist litany, as evidenced by the secularisation of Wolfe Tone in the rhetoric of Patrick Pearse. With the large-scale input of the Defenders, it became possible to ‘remember’ 1798 as an Irish Catholic rebellion against the Protestant British forces. This process of mythological appropriation culminated in the rhetorical mutation of the idea of nationalist republicanism into a narrowly defined, *de facto* sectarian creed, where essentialist criteria such as religion and political and cultural traditions were definitive. The United Irishmen became remembered as the precursors of the insurrectionists of Easter 1916, but this memorisation was ideologically motivated and channelled in terms of exactly what was being remembered and what forgotten. The imperative towards contemporary Enlightenment aims was forgotten, as was the secularised notion of Irishness. Instead, 1798 became one more link on the Catholic nationalist rosary beads of revolution and rebellion.

In actuality, Tone had little time for religion, and saw the aim of 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. It is important to realise the transformative epistemology that was at work in this ideal. The very nature of Irishness was to be changed; the divisions of the past, as signified by the religious divisions already noted, were to be subsumed in the present and future by a notion of Irish identity which to this day has not come into being. Crucially, it was the difference between these aims, and the reality of the United Irish/Defender rebellion, that allowed Pearse to co-opt Tone into a Catholic, Gaelic, nationalist vision of Ireland. In an oration given at the grave of Tone, in Bodenstown, County Kildare, in 1913, Pearse ‘remembered’ Tone in the following terms:

We have come to one of the holiest places in Ireland; holier even than the place where Patrick sleeps in Down. 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.⁶

The sacramental rhetoric with which this passage resounds embodies the centripetal notion of remembering that Pearse was setting up; the image chain of ‘holy, holiest faith, gospel, soul, burning flame, communion, baptism, regeneration and cleansing,’ demonstrates clearly the influence of Catholicism on Pearse’s thinking and remembering. That Wolfe Tone, as Conor Cruise O’Brien notes, was a ‘child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment’ whose hope was that Enlightenment rationality would supplant what he regarded as ‘superstitious beliefs’,⁷ does not figure in this speech. Instead, Tone is sacralized by being compared explicitly with Saint Patrick, bringer of the Christian message to Ireland, and implicitly with Christ ‘this man died for us’. The secular imperative of the Enlightenment has been subsumed into a Catholic nationalist *Weltanschauung*; Tone has been ‘remembered’ as a quasi-Defender in Pearse’s pantheon of Irish martyrs, as well as undergoing a posthumous conversion to Catholicism. He is seen as an analogue of the Messiah, a trope which is seminal to Pearse’s ideologically driven remembering of 1798, a remembering which is the origin of his particular definition of Irish nationalism. As he also noted, 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.⁸

Here, we see the vatic voice of Pearse, especially keeping in mind the title of this piece, as he suavely reconciles politics, religion and language in the people of Ireland, the chosen people. Here religious influences cohere, as the ‘chosen people’ trope of the Old Testament combines with the ‘messianistic’ trope of the New Testament. This combination of different faculties is, I would argue, one of the most important influences of essentialist Irish identity. The narrative structure of this passage seeks closure in terms of the passion of Christ. It is by reanimating this passion and death in Ireland that Pearse will proceed, politically and culturally. It is by locating and, if necessary, altering, the past through a selective notion of remembering, that Pearse can point the way towards his redemptive aesthetic.

Pearse anthropomorphoses Ireland through the literary device of *prosopopeia* (giving face), and presents Ireland as an amalgamation of Christ, Catholicism, and Celtism. His commitment to Irish language issues was reinforced by his founding of an all-Irish school, Scoil Éanna, where

a generation of boys were taught the Irish language and culture with Pearse as headmaster. The final item in his redemptive synthesis was the great Irish mythical figure, Cuchulain, the central figure in many of Standish O'Grady's books. For Pearse, Cuchulain would be the personification of all things Irish, and thus would be seen as an exemplar of an idealized Gaelic heroic type of Irishness, towards which all might aspire. Like Tone, it could be said that 'this man died' for his people, and as such, he formed part of Pearse's selective reanimation of the past through messianistic figures.

In the entrance hall of Scoil Éanna, one of the first things to be seen was a large mural of the young Cuchulain taking his weapons; in the same hall, there was also Beatrice Elvery's painting of Christ as a boy, naked to the waist, with arms outstretched in the cruciform position.⁹ This iconic fusion of these two messianistic figures in Pearse's personal pantheon is completed by their location in an all-Irish school. So here we see the essential core of Irish identity being created through imagery. The visual juxtaposition of these two figures in the entrance to the school made the ideology of Scoil Éanna very clear. In 1913, Pearse put this threefold identification into explicit terms:

The story of Cuchulain symbolizes the redemption of man by a sinless God. The curse of primal sin lies upon a people; new and personal sin brings doom to their doors; they are powerless to save themselves; a youth free from the curse, akin with them through his mother but through his father divine, redeems them by his valour; and his own death comes from it. I do not mean that the Táin is a conscious allegory: but there is the story in its essence, and it is like a retelling (or is it a foretelling) of the story of Calvary.¹⁰

This fusion of Cuchulain and Christ (and we note the similarities with the messianistic remembering of Tone), is created by the similarity of their narrative, in other words, through aesthetic criteria. Theirs is a narrative of suffering, death, but ultimate redemption both for their people and for their own posterity. The same scriptural narrative has been extended, by Pearse, to the lives of Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmett, both of whom were seen in this sacrificial light. The final character in this narrative of sacrifice and redemption is, of course, Pearse himself. Given his continued use of aesthetic criteria to create his own 'New Testament' of mystical nationalism, it is fitting that this climactic identification, which is also a prophecy of the act of sacrificial rebellion which Pearse himself will lead, should be voiced in a fictional work. In itself, such an identification points up the dangers of the intersection of the aesthetic and the ideological. In *The*

Singer, the hero, MacDara, sets out to face the foreign enemy with these emblematic words:

One man can free a people as one man redeemed the world. I will take no pike, I will go into battle with bare hands. I will stand up before the Gall as Christ hung naked before men on the tree.¹¹

From the already cited view of the Messiah as the Irish people redeeming themselves, a view stemming from that of individual Irish messianistic figures redeeming their nation, he moves to a personal identification with Christ, in terms of following his path of sacrifice and redemption. The association of the English with those who crucified Christ is also clear.

These quotations demonstrate the potency of remembering in Pearse's project of defining Irish nationalism. His version of memory is religious in mode in that his construction of Irishness is valorised by the past, those 'dead generations' already referred to, and sanctified by a series of messianistic figures which will culminate in Pearse himself. While the historical object of the United Irishmen was the transformation of their society through a combination of education, propaganda and military action, their 'messianistically remembered' object is now seen as part of the mythico-religious trope of blood sacrifice. His whole notion of 'remembering' is predicated on this messianistic cast of thought wherein perceived differences in politics and epistemology are elided through the aesthetic and mythic criteria which create a seamless and teleological narrative.

I have deliberately chosen the adjective 'messianistic' as opposed to 'messianic' to describe the thrust of Pearse's ideologically driven process of remembering. In an interesting discussion of memory, and particularly religious and mythic memory, Jacques Derrida differentiates between these terms. For Derrida, speaking at Villanova University in 1994, 'messianic structure is a universal structure. As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come, that is the opening of experience. Derrida goes on to note that the messianic structure is predicated on a promise, on an expectation that whatever is coming in the future 'has to do with justice'¹², and in terms of this definition, it is clear that the project of Tone and the United Irishmen could be described in terms of such a messianic structure.

In his pamphlet *An Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, Tone argued that for any future Irish government, there must be radical transformation in the Irish body politic. He noted that

‘everywhere but in Ireland Reform is going forward, and levelling ancient abuses into dust. Why are these things so? Because Ireland is struck with a political paralysis that has withered her strength and crushed her spirit: she is not half alive, one side is scarce animated, the other is dead Religious intolerance and political bigotry ... bind the living Protestant to the dead and half corrupted Catholic, and beneath the putrid mass, even the embryo of effort is stifled’. For Tone, the past is clearly not something to be reified, either in its totality or selectively; rather is it something that needs to be transformed, or reformed, into a better future. His project then, was to find a cure for this paralysis through the ‘strength of the people’, a strength which would enable them to seek reform in the future. His final point is a telling one, namely that ‘no Reform is honourable, practicable, efficacious or just which does not include, as a fundamental principle, the extension of elective franchise to the Roman Catholics’. In their seminal declarations and resolutions, the United Irish Society of Belfast, in 1791, declared that the past could no longer be allowed to act as a break on change, or as they put it ‘when antiquity can no longer defend absurd and oppressive forms’. Instead, they, in messianic manner, would look to the future, and to the coming of justice and a sense of ethical fairness by speaking about a ‘cordial union’ among ‘ALL THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND’ [capitals in original], and by adverting to reforms which would be inclusive of ‘Irishmen of every religious persuasion’.

Obviously, this future-orientated politics had as a seminal objective, the annealing of the ‘intestine divisions among Irishmen’ through the equal distribution of the rights of man through all sects and denominations of Irishmen’.¹³ The idea of ‘levelling ancient abuses into dust’ has a messianic ring to it. It speaks of the past only in terms of repudiating its injustices so as to create a better future, and as soon as one is ‘open to the future’, notes Derrida, then notions of ‘justice and peace will have to do with this coming of the other’.¹⁴ These very notions are integral to the ideas of the United Irishmen, and antithetical to the messianistic mindset of Pearse.

As we have seen, Pearse tended to remember the past through particular messianistic figures, Christ, Cuchulain, Tone, Emmett, MacDara and, finally, himself. Derrida has pointed out the dangers implicit in such a notion of remembering. He argues that as soon as the messianic structure is reduced to particular messianisms, as we have outlined above, then one is ‘reducing the universality’ and this has political consequences: ‘then you are accrediting one tradition among others, and the notion of an elected people, of a given literal language, a given fundamentalism’¹⁵ This is precisely the effect of remembering

messianistically: Gaelic, Catholic nationalist Irishness becomes the only Irishness, and selective remembering leads to a teleological reading of history which sees the events of the past as an old testament constantly leading towards the coming into its kingdom of this type of nationalist Irishness.

In the epigraph to this paper, the attitude of the United Irishmen to remembering the past is set out clearly. Here, on December 5th, 1791, the policy of the Dublin Society of the United Irishmen was set down in the *Northern Star*, and espoused a divergent version of Irish identity. Here the vision is focused on the present, the future, and the example of other countries who dealt with similar political problems. Here we see the legacy of the Enlightenment, and of political rationality, and we see a different type of remembering, a remembering which takes on notions of responsibility to the plurality of the past. Pearse spoke of taking up the struggle in the name of the 'dead generations'; he saw himself as the heir to a single seam of historical momentum. However, as Derrida notes in *Spectres of Marx*: 'there is no inheritance without a call to responsibility', and this responsibility is usually a 'critical, selective and filtering reaffirmation' of what has gone before (pp. 91-92). Hence, to remember is to be selective, to be critical, to filter. These 'dead generations' may embody the remembrance of one strand, one selection of memories of Irishness, but there are others, and there may, in the future, be different paradigms of Irishness entirely.

I think that, in the light of these statements of political objectives, the epistemological structure of Tone and the United Irishmen could well be described as 'messianic', in the Derridean sense. As Derrida put it the 'messianic' attitude is one which constitutes:

The historical opening to the future, therefore to experience itself and to its language, expectation, promise, commitment to the event of what is coming, imminence, urgency demand for salvation and for justice beyond law, pledge given to the other inasmuch as he or she is not present, presently present or living.¹⁶

For Tone, as he participated in the formation of the Belfast society of United Irishmen, the orientation of his movement was predicated on such a historical opening to the future. As Napper Tandy had put it, their aim was to change present and future notions of Irishness and citizenship; it was a transformative and open project.

In terms identical to Derrida's definition of the messianic, Tone and Napper Tandy were looking to 'the promise of what is coming', and were describing an orientation towards the future, a future wherein notions of

justice and equality are clear. Their aim was to change a culture where sectarian bigotry, or ‘intestine division’, and what Tandy referred to as a policy of keeping ‘the different sects at variance’ a policy in which they ‘have been too well seconded by our own folly’ would no longer be effective. Importantly, the Irishmen and women whom he saw as inhabiting the Ireland of the future were not, realistically, present in any great numbers. Hence the educational imperative in the United Irish philosophy; to change the future, one must change the present, and to change the present is to change minds and attitudes.

Given these comments, my reasons for describing the United Irish project in terms of the messianic become clear. However, the messianistic trope used by Pearse in his reference to Wolfe Tone is very different in its epistemological orientation. Contrasting messianicity with messianisms, Derrida makes the point that this structure is not limited to ‘what one calls messianisms, that is, Jewish, Christian, or Islamic messianism, to these determinate figures and forms of the Messiah’.¹⁷ Indeed, as we have seen, such an attenuation of the messianic into the messianistic, in the forms of the determinate figures of Pearse’s pantheon, can lead directly to essentialism and fundamentalism. This is precisely what Pearse sets out to do in his Bodenstown address. Tone is seen, not as a ‘prophet of Irish independence’, to quote the subtitle of Marianne Elliot’s recent book, but rather as a static figure who has been ‘dis-membered’ by having his complex emancipatory politics removed, his attitude to religion transformed, and then put back together, ‘re-membered’, in a politically apposite manner as a Gaelic, Catholic nationalist *avant la lettre*.

In pre-Enlightenment manner, it sees truth as revealed to a chosen few, those ‘dead generations’ invoked by Patrick Pearse as he proclaimed a provisional government on the steps of the General Post Office in the centre of Dublin on Easter Monday 1916. As we can see, Pearse personifies Ireland in aesthetic terms, and clearly sees himself and his colleagues as relaying the voice of this personified Ireland: ‘Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom’. This blending of criteria, through the use of *prosopopeia*, allows Pearse to claim a trans-human warrant for his actions, as evidenced in his messianistic captation of Tone’s memory. There is no need to seek a democratic mandate (indeed, the 1916 Rising did not have the widespread support of their own organisation ‘The Irish Volunteers’). The rebellion is predicated on a belief in a mystical entity, ‘Ireland’, and on an aesthetically created sense of communion with the remembered ‘dead generations’ who have gone before. These dead generations, like the ‘ár’ in the IRA slogan, *tiocfaidh ár lá*, are carefully selected. They are generations who have espoused the nationalist ideology, and died in their attempts at rebellion. They are not the hundreds of thousands of Irish who have been in the British army, or the Royal Irish Constabulary, or the various militias that were in existence throughout Ireland.

Just as these alternative versions of Irish identity were to have no place at the pantheon of 1916, the question is begged as to what role is there to be for Unionists in a unified Ireland, the teleological goal of Irish nationalism?

Unless the messianistic remembering of 1798 is opened to the more messianic reality of the aims of the United Irishmen, then the redefinition of Irishness that was so central a part of the project of enlightenment reform in the 1790's will still not have been achieved by the end of the 1990's. What is required is a '*politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations', and such a politics must be constructed in the 'name of *justice*', a principle of 'responsibility beyond all living present'¹⁸ [all italics original]. We began this discussion by discussing the 1791 statement that the United Irishmen had 'thought little about our ancestors, much of our posterity'. It is this messianic focus on the future, on the promise of change, on the possibilities of an ethical accommodation with other traditions, which will of necessity make us change our own, and redefine, in the process the nature of Irish identity. Through such a messianic universal structure we may yet be able to redefine Napper Tandy's terms to the effect that we will be able to create the conditions where we can have all Irishmen and women citizens, and all citizens Irish men and women.

It has been my contention here that such an orientation was part of the defining project of the United Irishmen, and it is by remembering them in this way that we can do justice to their aims and objectives, as well as achieving a necessary redefinition of the terms of nationalism. Etymologically, 'remembering' is cognate with 're-membering', putting back together limbs which have been scattered or broken. To remember the messianic as opposed to the messianistic approach of the United Irishmen, is to 're-member', to remember otherwise, notions of nationalism as they have evolved in Ireland. It is to see the need for redefinitions of creeds and ideologies which, by definition, exclude certain others from any form of participation, and to think 'little about our ancestors, much of our posterity'. I would argue that such a temporal orientation is messianic in the sense in which Derrida sees it as 'a structure of the promise, of the expectation for the future'¹⁹ which has to do with notions of 'justice' for all groups involved. To do justice to the other traditions in our culture is very much at odds with the prevailing philosophy of nationalism in Ireland, and I would argue that this, in part, is due to the priority of messianistic paradigms of remembering, as we saw in the case of Pearse. To remember fully the thrust of the United Irishmen, their centrifugal embracing of other cultures and other theories, even if imperfectly achieved due to the difficulties of their time and circumstance, would be an important step in the necessary process of redefining our notions of nationalism in Ireland in the second millenium.

Notes

1 Quoted in R. Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1990), p. 280.

2 K. Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity 1760-1830* (Cork, University College Cork Press, 1996), p. 100.

- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf (London, Routledge 1994), p. 65.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 P. H. Pearse, *Collected Works of Padraig H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches*, 5 volumes (Dublin, Phoenix, 1917-1922), vol 2, p. 58.
- 7 Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin, Poolbeg, 1994), p. 100.
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