

'Grimmige Zeiten': The Influence of Lessing, Herder and the Grimm Brothers on the Nationalism of the Young Irish

EVA STÖTER

'I speak French to my generals, Italian to my sweetheart, Hungarian to my groom and German to my horse' said Frederick the Great – according to John Mitchel, who quotes him in *The Nation* of 9 August 1845, adding:

He, the most potent soul of Germany, in his time thought his fatherland could not too soon forget its own speech, and learn that of the Gaul; and, now, that man is hardly to be found on the Right of the Rhine, who does not boast the supremacy of his German literature over every other, and there are few elsewhere who will not concede its equality.¹

The purpose of this essay is to explore how the changes in German cultural thought, brought about by Herder, Lessing and the Grimm brothers, influenced the nationalism of the Young Irish, in particular Thomas Davis.

Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) was born in Prussia and studied theology in Königsberg where he attended Immanuel Kant's lectures on geography. The way in which Kant connected climatic and physiological factors with human society considerably influenced Herder's thinking and found its expression in works such as his essay 'Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit' ('Philosophy of the History of Mankind') in which he explores humankind's attachment to the soil, and the impact climatic factors might have on a community and its way of living. During his extensive travels around Europe Herder met some of the most eminent figures of his time. In 1770, for example, he met Lessing in Hamburg, an encounter which led to the termination of Herder's engagement as a private tutor. Herder stayed in Strasbourg where he met Goethe, with whom he began a friendship that lasted almost a lifetime. Patrick O'Neill was later to call Herder the 'high priest' of the German Ossianic cult, as Herder enthusiastically tried to prove the authenticity of Macpherson's poems, motivating him to read old Scottish and Irish texts, and to study Gaelic in order to translate the Ossianic 'original'.²

1 *The Nation*, iii, no. 148, 9 August 1845, p. 715.

2 P. O'Neill, 'Ossian's Return: The German Factor in the Irish Literary Revival' in W.

According to Herder there exists an inherent essence which is the drive behind human development and which controls birth, creation and death. He claims that 'genetic power is the mother of all the forms upon earth',³ and politicises this idea by claiming that 'man has never existed without political organisation. It is as natural to him as his origin'.⁴ In other words, the pure state of nature is already a political one even without human activity. 'The most natural state is a community with its own national character',⁵ proclaims Herder, a state is something organic and natural as long as no 'patched up fragile conceptions known as state-machines'⁶ are imposed upon it. Two doctrines naturally evolve from this philosophy – doctrines that also had a crucial impact on nineteenth-century nationalism. Firstly is the conviction that self-determination and independence are indispensable for the development of a country, and secondly is the conviction that there exists such a thing as a spirit (*Volksgeist*) and character of a nation. This character is common, according to Herder, to all people who share the same cultural heritage, and it can be developed with the help of the proper education. The individual is to be addressed as a single human being, as a part of one national unity and as a representative of humankind. However, the thought of independence and self-determination was less than pleasing to German aristocratic society. Herder had to establish a solid foundation for his theories, which he claimed to find in the works of one of his most eminent predecessors, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and in the most unshakeable touchstone of Western culture – the Bible.

Lessing (1729–81) was a central figure in the German Enlightenment and is probably best known for his very impressive play *Nathan der Weise* ('Nathan the Sage') – a piece advocating religious tolerance and generosity in times of savage prejudices against the Jewish community in Germany. Lessing asserts in his work *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* ('The Education of Mankind') that humanity can reach its fulfilment through the education of both the head and the heart. He sets education and revelation as co-termini, and argues that God set up one *Volk* (that of Israel) as a role model for man. For this reason the 'barbaric' folk of Israel were given Moses as a teacher, who had the task of educating them and leading them from childhood to adulthood – a process which ideally should have culminated in a condition where people perform good deeds for goodness' sake and not for fear of punishment. In this Herder found a useful reference to a community which – through freedom and proper

Zach and H. Kosok (eds), *Literary Interrelations 2: Comparison and the World* (Tubingen, 1987), pp. 207–20; Goethe also translated passages of Macpherson's opus.

3 J.G. von Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (Chicago, n.d.), p. 22.

4 Herder in F.M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Nationalism* (Oxford, 1965), p. 55.

5 Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought*, p. 59.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

teaching – finally arrived at its goal of becoming a self-determined nation, respected by all other members of the human family. ‘Law should rule and not the Legislator,’ proclaims Herder, ‘a free nation should freely accept and honour it; the invisible, reasonable and benevolent forces should guide us, and chains should not enslave us: this was the idea of Moses’.⁷

In an 1845 edition of Thomas Davis’s *National and Historical Ballads*, similar imagery to Herder’s and Lessing’s is used in order to describe Davis’s role in Irish politics and literature. ‘Novalis used to lament bitterly the severance of poetry from philosophy, and surely not without abundant cause’ asserts the editor in the preface, and continues by saying that the divorce of poetry from life and action was even more deplorable. A man of action such as Solon was, in the author’s words, ‘a poet, as well as a statesman and sage’, just as Moses and David were poets, ‘as well as prophets and kings’.⁸ Thomas Davis was one of these men who combined the poet and the prophet with the statesman and the teacher. The religious leader Moses was thus transformed into a national spokesperson.

Davis himself used this literary ‘secularization’ of religious motives quite frequently in his speeches. In his famous address before the College Historical Society of Trinity College in 1840, Davis very skilfully combines Biblical images with political issues. He repeatedly employs the image of a chosen people and – ultimately – regards political independence as a kind of spiritual resurrection. He says about the Irish nation:

I have thought I saw her spirit dwelling ... rising ... and thought that God had made her purpose firm and her heart just; and I know that if He had, small though she were, His angels would have charge over her ‘lest at any time she dash her foot against a stone’.⁹

Obviously, nothing can happen to a ‘spirited’ *Volk* with a purpose, and once a nation finds its destiny, celestial help is going to follow. It is indirectly suggested here that the nation’s leaders are capable of guiding their people on the way to independence, like Moses who brought his chosen folk to the fulfilment of their destiny. ‘Christianity’ is replaced by ‘Nation’, and the Bible replaced by a national literature. The term ‘spirit’ gradually loses its religious meaning and is instead defined in terms of cultural heritage and social bonds.

The combined forces of a secular nationalistic ‘religion’, and the idea of nations as naturally-grown units, enabled the Young Irelanders to create a new definition of progress which was geared especially towards the political and

7 Ibid., p. 65.

8 Thomas Davis, *National and Historical Ballads, Songs and Poems by Thomas Davis*, ed. T.W. Rolleston (Dublin, 1846), p. 17.

9 Thomas Davis, *Prose Writings*, ed. T.W. Rolleston (London, 1889), p. 41.

religious situation in Ireland. Progress was no longer something that was defined in relation to English industrialism and the modernization of society, but took on the form of a spiritual process. A nation could progress spiritually without the latest technology, without the influence of a foreign government, and without losing its traditions. This spiritual growth, however, would have to be catalysed through education. Not surprisingly, Davis calls education 'the apostle of progress',¹⁰ and declares that the right type of knowledge functions as an almost divine tool for the betterment of humanity. Exactly what kind of education Davis had in mind becomes apparent right from the start of his speech when he asserts to his audience: 'The power of self-education, self-conduct, is yours: "Think wrongly if you will but think for yourselves"'.¹¹ What is demanded here is an independence from structures and a maturity of thought. The second part of this sentence – 'think wrongly if you will but think for yourselves' – is taken directly from Lessing, as acknowledged by the editor of the 1889 edition of Davis's work, T.W. Rolleston, who was an expert on Lessing. Patrick O'Neill points to another literary borrowing made by Davis, this time from Herder: 'Calling for the revival of the Irish language,' O'Neill writes, 'he [Davis] pointed to Germany's success in stopping "the incipient creeping progress of French" for "no sooner had she succeeded than her genius, which had tossed in a hot trance, sprang up fresh and triumphant"'.¹² Davis's use of this particular quotation has a very political resonance, considering the fact that in 1840, France – and in particular Adolphe Thiers – had demanded vast regions on the Rhine, demands which led to widespread demonstrations in Germany, including the singing and writing of anti-French national songs and ballads. Transferred into an Irish context, this allusion suggests that the Irish should resist the encroachment of English culture.

Davis pushes things even further when he assures the students of Trinity College that continental philosophy, which, in his words, 'proclaims the unlimited right and innocence of free inquiry and self-government of mind',¹³ was moving among them. Later Davis would ask whether the men he addresses are 'like the young men of Germany; as students, laborious; as thinkers, profound and acute'.¹⁴ If Davis subsequently claims that universities are unfit to develop the real powers of the 'head or heart',¹⁵ he echoes Herder's reflection that it is not an intellectual training that is most needed in order to secure proper progress of mankind but, as Herder phrases it, an 'education of the heart'¹⁶

10 Ibid., p. 42.

11 Ibid., p. 2.

12 O'Neill, 'Ossian's Return', p. 219.

13 Davis, *Prose Writings*, p. 41.

14 Ibid., p. 2.

15 Ibid., p. 21.

16 R.T. Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley, 1969), p. 287.

which would improve the understanding of human nature itself. This clash between the sensitive heart and the state-imposed mechanical structuring of data leads to the ultimate battle between, what he calls, the Irish 'mind-chieftains' and Trinity College. When Davis exclaims 'Look back on those who have been the mind-chieftains in the civil strife of Ireland – Swift, Lucas, Grattan'¹⁷ the term 'mind' seems to function as a vehicle for cultural transmission, while 'chieftain' represents the notion of tribal community, which was also one of Herder's main points. For Herder and Davis respectively, it was language and education that qualified social heritage to be 'transmittable' from one generation to the next. On the other side of Davis's education scale lies Trinity College; that seems – thanks to his new ideas on pedagogy – 'to have lost the office for which it was so long and so well paid – of preventing the education of the Irish', as Davis so poignantly remarks in his 'historical' speech.¹⁸ This idea about a more practical education, the demand for deeds instead of words, reflects Lessing's belief that Christ was one of the first practical teachers. 'Christianity ... is justified not by arguments about its letter but by the living demonstration of its spirit', asserts Lessing,¹⁹ and traces of this philosophy can be found in both Herder's and Davis's theories.

However, in his later and even more politically radical essays, Davis explicitly mentions Prussia as a 'model' after which Irish education could be shaped. Herder's conviction that a nation could survive the collapse of its governmental organisations as long as it maintained its distinctive linguistic and cultural knowledge is echoed in various passages of Davis's work. As Davis says,

if Ireland had all the elements of a nation, she might, and surely would, at once assume the forms of one, and proclaim her independence. Wherein does she now differ from Prussia? ... Why can Prussia wave her flag among the proudest in Europe, while Ireland is a farm? ... The difference is in knowledge.²⁰

A nation, in other words, starts to be perceived as something that exists more in peoples' heads than in state structures; an inherent part of humanity, not a cultural construct. As Elie Kedourie puts it in his book, *Nationalism*, 'it is very often truer to say that national identity is the creation of a nationalistic doctrine than that nationalistic doctrine is the emotion or expression of national identity'.²¹

17 Davis, *Prose Writings*, p. 6.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Clark, *Herder*, p. 276.

20 Thomas Davis, *Essays Literary and Historical*, ed. D.J. O'Donoghue (Dundalk, 1914), p. 225.

21 E. Kedourie, *Nationalism*, (Oxford, 1993 [1960]), p. 141.

Before long nationalistic discourse was absorbed into mainstream European politics, and Herder's most valuable idea – that of tolerance between 'naturally' developed nations – evaporated into meaningless slogans. Even the realm of the fairies was used as an instrument for political propaganda. Herder's collection of folk tales, for example, was taken as an insult by the authorities as, for the first time, the knowledge of the 'primitive' people was to constitute a crucial part of the essence of a whole nation. Once more, Herder strove to justify his ideas and daringly proclaimed that Solomon's 'Song of Songs' was, in fact, nothing other than a collection of folk songs (justifying his belief that such lore contains wisdom). In 1773, Herder had collected numerous English and German folk-ballads whose publication was delayed. When the final collection appeared in 1778 with ballads from English and German it also contained material from Estonian, Lithuanian, Greenlandic, Inuit and Greek poetry, as well as original poems by Goethe and Herder. Gavan Duffy later used this literary model of combining the old with the new in his collection of national ballads; including old Irish tales as well as some of Davis's works so as to assure the reader that the 'spirit of the folk' remained among them and could still be passed on by men of exceptional talent and dedication. Ballads and folk tales were soon to be considered as vehicles for the transmission of the cultural essence of a people. The entire field of comparative studies, including the area of comparative linguistics, became increasingly important during the nineteenth century as a means to study parallels and differences between various nations. A complete system was set up which could allegedly prove whether or not two nations were related. This new-found interest in comparative studies manifests itself in another significant nineteenth-century Irish-German connection, that between the brothers Grimm and the Irish 'man of the fairies', the Cork born antiquarian and folktale collector Thomas Crofton Croker.

Both Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) Grimm were influential philologists and folklorists. Both had studied law in Marburg and were dismissed from their respective lecturing jobs at the University of Göttingen due to their participation in the demonstrations of *die Göttinger Sieben* (The Göttinger Seven), a group of intellectuals who protested against various aspects of Metternich's politics, in particular his censorship laws. The brothers wrote several distinguished works. For example, in his *Deutsche Grammatik* (German Grammar) Jacob Grimm described the fundamental laws of the German language, and developed the theory that the thorough exploration of language gives an insight into the relationship between different peoples. The Grimm Brothers' collection of German fairy tales (*Kinder und Hausmärchen*) contributed further to the notion that comparative studies deepen the understanding of what is characteristic for one people and their relationship to others. The work of most importance in the context of this paper is their German dictionary (*Deutsches Wörterbuch*), which was published in 1854, and skilfully combined the

central issues of religion, nation and literature. Jacob Grimm declares in the preface that thanks to the great poets of Germany, who displayed the *Sprachgewalt* (power of the language) to the people, German cultural heritage survived all 'fiendish subjugation' – a remark which is strikingly similar to Herder's 'stopping of the incipient creeping process of French', which Davis had used in his address. Obviously, the Grimms saw the dictionary not only as a reference work which would contribute to the manifestation of a new nation, but also as a bulwark against foreign influences who were 'infiltrating' the fatherland, invited into the country by francophile aristocrats and German bureaucracy rather than the 'ordinary' people.²² In a remark about the 1848 revolution in Germany and its failure, Grimm claims that it was this uprising that evoked in the people the desire for ideas which, as he phrases it, 'unite and not divide Germany',²³ and that German language, history and literature is now, even a short time later, all the more highly valued. As with Mitchel in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, the Grimm brothers declared the need for a national literature which would include folk tales and ballads. Jacob Grimm believed that the establishment of linguistic science was a lucky coincidence which added to the overall aim of creating a national consciousness, although the publication of this book of words would have, according to him, never been possible without the help of the common people – the *Volk*.

In an article published in 1946, John Hennig describes Jacob Grimm as 'one of the first on the continent to demand the linking of the book study of Celtic languages with the study of the living tradition of Gaelic'²⁴ – a combination of linguistic science and literature which encouraged fairytale collections to be regarded as character studies of a folk. The Irish folklorist, T. Crofton Croker, adapted this system of comparing the national characters of people through studying their respective folklores, as is revealed by his correspondence of 1826–28 with Wilhelm Grimm. In one letter Croker addresses Grimm as follows:

The collection of Welsh legends which appears in this volume will, I doubt not, prove acceptable to you, as from their similarity with those current in other countries, they afford an additional proof that the Fairy creed must have been a completed and connected system. I have taken some pains to seek after stories of the elves in England; but I find that the belief has nearly disappeared, and in another century no traces of English fairies will remain, except those which exist in the works of Shakespeare, Herrick, Drayton and Bishop Corbet.²⁵

22 J. and W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Munich, 1984 [1854]), Band 1, p. xxviii.

23 *Ibid.*, p. vii.

24 J. Hennig, 'The Brothers Grimm and T.C. Croker' in *Modern Language Review*, xli (1946), p. 50.

25 T.C. Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (New York, 1971 [1825–8]), Part 2, p. v.

With this comparative-system, Wilhelm Grimm was able to establish that the Irish, in his experience (which was purely derived from books) drank too much, were slightly dull, but also cunning; whereas Croker was able to suggest that the English were an inferior race due to their lack of leprechauns.²⁶ Fortunately, the Germans had their *Kobolde* (goblins), which were regarded as equally respectable as their Irish counterparts.

Nevertheless, Croker, as a progressive person, deeply lamented that superstitions should exist in his country and remarked that his aim had been 'to bring the twilight tales of the peasantry before the view of the philosopher' which may be a noble but rather vague undertaking. One of the Corkman's greatest fears was that superstitions should 'retard the progress of civilisation',²⁷ which caused him to copy a newspaper article of July 1826 reporting that an Irish mother had killed her infant as she had thought it to be a fairy child.²⁸ Thus it is suggested that the transmission of cultural heritage is only a good thing if it does not block the coming of a new age. On the other hand, the traumatic experience of a society undergoing change can be softened by tradition – a device which Thomas Davis himself used for his type of nationalism.

I shall end by quoting Walter Rix, who identifies the more emotional links between Germany and Ireland. He claims, for example, that Jacobsen developed his idea of a German national anthem against the background of Thomas Moore's songs, 'feeling that Germany and Ireland were in the same position'. He recites Paul Heyse's poem 'Die Pfälzer in Irland', and finally quotes a poem by Friedrich Engels' friend Georg Weerth which might be taken as an indication of the emotional closeness between the two countries (but which is hopefully not representative of the quality of Irish-German cultural relations). It goes:

One did not understand the other –
 But they shook hands like a brother
 And became comrades in joy and woe –
 For poor devils were the two.²⁹

26 Hennig, 'Brothers Grimm', p. 45.

27 Croker, *Fairy Legends*, p.vii.

28 Ibid.

29 W.T. Rix, 'Ireland as a Source', in W. Zach and H. Kosok (eds), *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World, vol. 1: Reception & Translation* (Tübingen, 1987), p. 31.