

Celticism: Between Race and Nation

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'What', asked Douglas Hyde in 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' (1892), 'lies at the back of the sentiments of nationality with which the Irish millions seem so strongly leavened?' The answer, he declares, is racial memory:

I believe that what is largely behind it is the half unconscious feeling that the race which at one time held possession of more than half Europe ... is now – almost extirpated and absorbed elsewhere – making its last stand for independence in this island of Ireland; and do what they may the race of today cannot wholly divest itself from the mantle of its own past.¹

A passage like this forces us to interrogate the relationship between nationalism and racialism on this island. This is, after all, the man who became the first President of Ireland, a moderate when compared, for instance, with Arthur Griffith, Vice-President of Sinn Féin in the first Dáil, who wrote in 1913 that no Irishman needed an excuse for 'declining to hold the negro his peer in right'.²

To raise the issue of race in such a context is to ask awkward questions, liable to expose the person who asks them to charges of being a revisionist heretic of the worst kind. When they have been raised (and it has not been often), it has usually been with the proviso that, as Luke Gibbons puts it in his essay 'Race against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History', 'not all the concepts of Irishness which emerged under the aegis of cultural nationalism were dependent on racial modes of identity',³ although he admits that those which

1 Douglas Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. ii, ed. Seamus Deane (Derry, 1991), pp. 528–29.

2 Arthur Griffith, 'Preface to the 1913 Edition' in *Jail Journal* by John Mitchel, ed. Thomas Flanagan (Dublin, 1982), p. 370.

3 Luke Gibbons, 'Race Against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History' in *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996), p. 156. Gibbons points particularly to George Sigerson as a proponent of a non-racial version of Irish identity. I would maintain that Sigerson is in fact working very firmly within a racialist tradition, but is also registering its 'excess', as when he writes: 'It has been too much the custom to speak of the Irish as altogether Celts, and then to construct the usual theory. Even in the days of the native chiefs there were Norse and Anglo-Saxon settlers amicably established in various parts of Ireland. Then, again, the Danes forced themselves upon its ports, and surely

did find in it a powerful corrective to the discontinuous narrative of Irish history. While it is certainly the case that any sort of axiomatic linking of nationalism and racialism is too crude, it is equally misleading to suggest that race is somehow a disposable accessory in nationalist discourse. To do so is to establish a model in which, as Etienne Balibar puts it, 'the core of meaning contrasts a "normal" ideology and politics (nationalism) with an "excessive" ideology and behaviour (racism), either to oppose the two or to offer the one as the truth of the other.'⁴

In order to avoid either a simplistic linking or an equally simplistic dissociation of racism and nationalism, we need to turn to the concept of 'excess', which Balibar argues needs to be developed further if we are to do other than provide the relationship between nationalism and racism with alibis. 'Racism', Balibar argues is not an 'expression of nationalism'. Nor is it a 'perversion' of nationalism, 'for there is no pure essence of nationalism'. Instead, he maintains, it is:

... a *supplement of nationalism* or more precisely a *supplement internal to nationalism*, always in excess of it, but always indispensable to its constitution and yet always still insufficient to achieve its project.⁵

Since this idea is the key to my argument here, it is worth saying a few words about the 'supplement' and 'supplementarity'. The terms direct us, of course, toward Jacques Derrida, particularly those passages in *Of Grammatology* which deal with language and Nature in Rousseau. For Derrida, writing in Rousseau's texts appears as a 'supplement' to Nature, which is to say, it supplants or replaces Nature, thereby indicating that Nature is not present; at the same time, it is in excess of nature, 'adding itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude'.⁶ In short, if we can paraphrase Derrida, (never an easy or a wise thing to do), the supplement is never enough, for it can never fully supplant the imagined plenitude of full presence; and yet it is always too much, in excess of its object. The supplement is both impoverished and exorbitant.

Keeping in mind Balibar's insistence that the racial supplement is 'internal to nationalism' (whereas Derrida insists upon its exteriority), we might begin

bequeathed some portion of their characteristics to the inhabitants, after they had lost sovereign rule' (George Sigerson, *Modern Ireland* [Dublin, 1868], vol. ii, p. 240). Indeed, the praise here for a hearty racial mix is very similar to the argument put forward by Comte Arthur de Gobineau in his *Essay on the Inequality of the Races*.

4 Etienne Balibar, 'Racism and Nationalism' in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London, 1991), p. 46.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

6 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 144-5.

to understand race as that which reminds us of the absence on which an aspiration to nationhood is founded in a colonial situation. 'The bulk of the Irish race really lived in closest contact with the traditions of the past and national life of nearly eighteen hundred years', writes Hyde, 'until the beginning of this [the nineteenth] century'.⁷ The 'national life', which for Hyde is the true life of 'the bulk of the Irish race', has existed for almost two millennia (thus, not insignificantly, making the origin of the 'Irish race' coincide exactly with the birth of Christ). Its continued existence is the justification for the founding of the nation state. At the same time, however, the absence of the 'national life' provides the occasion for Hyde's lecture. To put it more simply, the logic of such an argument is that the nation is and always has been, and the nationalist will do everything possible to bring it into existence.

The absence on which his project is founded resurfaces when Hyde claims that in the nineteenth century, the 'Irish race' 'lost all that they had – language, traditions, music, genius, and ideas. Just when we should be starting to build up anew the Irish race and the Gaelic nation ... we find ourselves despoiled of the bricks of nationality'.⁸ Who is speaking here? The 'Irish race' and 'the Gaelic nation' (again, they are synonymous terms here) are both absent, in so far as they need to be 'built up anew'. Like Didi and Gogo in *Waiting for Godot*, each gives the other the impression that they exist; which is to say, race and nation are written in Hyde's text in a relation of supplementarity, neither providing a firm basis for the other's existence, but each necessary to the other. Hence, Hyde is forced to formulate a metonymic figure for this unstable relation – 'language, music, genius, ideas' – of which the most privileged term is 'language'.

By inserting 'language' between 'race' and 'nation', Hyde is working within one of the most important, and one of the most contested, aspects of nineteenth-century race theory. For instance, James Cowles Prichard, an influential early ethnologist, wrote in 1831:

... among the investigations which belong exclusively to our own species [is] an analysis of languages. ... This resource, if properly applied, will furnish great and indispensable assistance in many particular inquiries relating to the history and affinity of nations.⁹

Prichard wrote those words in a book entitled *The Eastern Origins of the Celtic Nations Proved by Comparison of Their Dialects with Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Teutonic Languages: Forming a Supplement to Researches into the Physical History of*

7 Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', p. 530.

8 Ibid.

9 James Cowles Prichard, *The Eastern Origins of the Celtic Nations, [etc.]* (London, 1831), p.

Mankind. Prichard's study of the 'Celtic nations' was, as the subtitle suggests, a part of a larger project, *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*. The 'Celtic nations' find themselves treated as a 'supplement' to the rest of mankind because, unlike the rest of humanity, which could be adequately differentiated along physiological lines, Prichard found that when he encountered the 'Celtic race' the criteria of difference he had been able to use elsewhere did not quite work, and he needed to turn towards language. In Prichard's *Eastern Origins of the Celtic Nations*, as in Hyde's speech sixty years later, the terms 'nation', 'race' and 'language' have a habit of sliding into one another as if they were synonymous. At the most basic level, this is because nationalism, comparative ethnology, and comparative philology are all developing along roughly similar trajectories at the same time, emerging from their roots in the Enlightenment to proliferate in all of their nineteenth-century effusiveness. Moreover, Prichard's *Eastern Origin of the Celtic Nations* appears just at the moment when comparative philology is beginning to establish itself as a master discourse. While the technique of, as he puts it, comparing 'respective vocabularies or stocks of primitive words or roots, and secondly, the peculiarities and coincidences in their grammatical structure',¹⁰ in order to establish the relation between two languages may sound arcane enough to be innocent, with the work in the 1830s and 1840s of the first generation of modern comparative philologists – such as Franz Bopp, J. Kaspar Zeuss and Hermann Ebel – philology was beginning to offer race theory what looked like a stable and coherent system of classification.

'We must therefore infer', writes Prichard of the consequences of comparing linguistic roots, 'that the nations to whom these languages belonged emigrated from the same quarter',¹¹ and thus shared the same gene pool – thereby making for Prichard the link between language and bodies. In so doing, he brings together two discursive fields in what was to become one of the century's most powerful and unstable constellations. While only a handful of comparative philologists could claim to understand the details of the monumental works of figures such as Bopp and Zeuss, the basic structures of difference and relation linking the languages of the world were quickly assimilated by the more accessible writings of ethnographers, so that by the time Josiah C. Nott and G.R. Glidden produced *Types of Mankind* in 1854, the volume contained parallel charts showing the various linguistic groups of humanity, collated with charts showing physical types, making clear for the general reader the identity of the two means of classification. 'Philology', as Matthew Arnold puts it in his *Study of Celtic Literature* in 1867, 'carries us towards ideas of affinity of race which are new to us'.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹² Matthew Arnold, *The Study of Celtic Literature* (London, 1910 [1867]), p. 72.

As these two competing notions of race – race as physical difference and race as linguistic difference – came together, there was a proliferation of race theory. ‘Discussions upon race are interminable’, writes Ernest Renan in the early 1860s, ‘because the word “race” is taken by philological historians and by physiological historians in two totally different senses’.¹³ Renan’s use of the word ‘interminable’ here should be taken literally; it can not be terminated. It is in a constant state of play, because it is the function of a gap between two different discursive fields. And yet, at the same time, physiological racialism and linguistic racialism required each other. If this was true as a general principle, it was particularly true when race theory turned its gaze from the more general fourfold division of the world into black, yellow, white and red races, to internal differences within the ‘white race’. Hence, Hyde and other Irish nationalists who sought in race theory some form of stability were in fact locating their project at one of the most unstable fissures in an unstable structure.

We see this fissure opening up, for instance, in the work of one of the most widely read English theorists of race in the latter part of the nineteenth century, John Beddoe. In a paper read before the Anthropological Society of London on 14 June 1870, entitled *The Kelts of Ireland*, Beddoe presented the results of his attempts to apply his ‘Index of Nigrescence’ to Ireland. The ‘Index’ was a method for charting racial difference based on hair type. Beddoe’s research methodology involved walking purposefully around a particular region looking at the inhabitants’ hair colour, and then, once he had a big enough sample, ‘subtracting the red hair from the dark brown *plus* twice the black hair’¹⁴ to produce a percentile figure for the area.

Where Beddoe’s method had produced fairly regular results in Egypt, for instance, his ‘Nigrescence’ map of Ireland showed no perceptible pattern whatsoever. His conclusions are thus less than resounding:

My ideas respecting the physical history of the Keltic race, are, as follows: Whether the original clan or sept which broke away from the Aryan race in Central Asia, carrying with it the parent language of the Keltic tongues, was dark or fair, I do not pretend to know; but ... its descendants [were] variously crossed with those of the people they had conquered or intermixed with on the way. ... Ireland, having been peopled mainly by successive strata of grey-eyed, brown or darkish haired Gaelic Kelts, more or less mixed probably with Kumric Kelts, Iberians, Ligurians and Finns or other aborigines, was invaded by the fair Northmen.¹⁵

13 Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’ in *The Poetry of the Celtic Races and Other Studies*, trans. W.G. Hutchison (London, n.d.), p. 73.

14 John Beddoe, *The Kelts of Ireland* (London, 1870), p. 4.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

There is not much in the way of racial purity here, with everyone from Iberians to Finns adding their drop of blood to the Celtic cocktail. What is worth noting, however, is that while Beddoe is attempting to work with race as a purely physiological phenomenon, he can only identify what he calls 'the original clan or sept which broke away from the Aryan race' in terms of its language, 'the parent language of the Keltic tongues'. What that original 'Celtic' race looked like ('fair or dark'), it is impossible to say; their language, however, is a different matter. In short, instead of physiology providing the material basis for discerning racial difference, with language as its cultural overlay (or, we might say, physiology providing the signified to the signifier of language), the situation here is reversed. From the point of view of a physiological ethnologist, it is language which is the stable term, and physiology which is arbitrary and shifting.

However, from the philological point of view, the opposite was the case. In spite of the work of Bopp and Zeuss, the philologist and geologist (and later President of Queen's College Cork), William K. Sullivan would write in 1859 of the absence of an agreed methodology in ethnology of language, turning for his point of reference to zoology. 'If a naturalist included the ox and the goat in the same genus', he writes despairingly, 'because they had eyes, were covered with hair, had four legs, a tail, and generally two horns, he would not depart more from the principles of a true natural classification than do many ethnologists in their classification of languages'.¹⁶ In an effort to introduce a 'true natural' basis for the classification of linguistic races into the Irish debate, Sullivan promoted the work of Zeuss in a series of articles written in the late 1850s, and translated one of the leading German comparative philologists whose work seemed to fix the place of the Celtic once and for all, Hermann Ebel.

Ebel concludes, in accordance with what was a growing consensus, that the Celtic languages belong precisely in the centre of an Indo-European line, 'with the Italic on one side and the German on the other, and through both with other already established twigs of the European bough'.¹⁷ Philological work like Ebel's which placed the Celtic races in the centre of the Indo-European line looked like it was going to provide some kind of stability for race theory as it had a bearing on Ireland. This was certainly the case with John Beddoe, who found that after several weeks spent counting heads in Ireland, the only thing he could say for sure about the 'Kelts of Ireland' was that they were Indo-European, or Aryan. However, as Beddoe's comments suggest, placing the

16 William K. Sullivan, 'On the Influence which the Physical Geography, the Animal and Vegetable Productions, etc. of Different Regions, Exert upon the Languages, Mythology, and Early Literature of Mankind, with Reference to Its Employment as a Test of Ethnological Hypothesis', *Atlantis*, ii (January 1859), p. 147.

17 Hermann Ebel, 'The Position of the Celtic', trans. William K. Sullivan, *Atlantis*, iv (January, 1864), p. 339.

Celts so firmly in the middle of the Aryan family tree also meant that a Celtic heritage ceased to be a purely Irish possession. For instance, the Swiss ethnologist and race theorist, Adolphe Pictet, author of the two-volume *Indo-European Origins, or the Primitive Aryas. An Essay in Linguistic Palaeontology* of 1859, was a vociferous proponent of the idea that the Celts were Aryans, part of the 'race destined by Providence some day to dominate the entire globe'.¹⁸ Pictet's Celtophilia was not, however, the product of any great love of Ireland; instead, in the Celts of the 'La Tène' civilization based at Lake Neuchâtel during the late Iron Age, Pictet found an Aryan genealogy and lineage for his own culture. A similar impulse can be detected both in the work of the German Celticists, such as Bopp, Zeuss and Ebel, with relation to the Celtic Iron Age 'Hallstatt' culture, and in the later generation of French comparative philologists, including Henri Martin, d'Arbois Jubainville and Camille Jullian, who in turn influenced more mainstream French historians, most notably Michelet. Indeed, when Matthew Arnold claimed that English poetry owes its 'style', 'melancholy' and 'natural magic' to 'the Celtic part in us',¹⁹ he was simply adopting a strategy which had already been deployed throughout Continental Europe.

In other words, while establishing the Celtic race as one of the key members of the Aryan family made it possible for Hyde, for instance, to speak of the Celts as 'the race which at one time held possession of more than half Europe',²⁰ it also means that George Sigerson, in his influential introductory essay to *Bards of the Gael and Gall*, will write that early Irish literature 'enables us to gain some glimpse into the homes of other nations – Teutons as well as Celts – whose lamps were extinguished'.²¹ On a similar note, Hyde concludes 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', with a list of what he calls 'dispassionate foreigners' – Zeuss, de Jubainville, Heinrich Zimmer, Kuno Meyer, Ernest Windsich, and Graziado Ascoli – whose view of the 'Gaelic nation', he claims, encompasses issues of 'greater importance than whether Mr Redmond or Mr MacCarthy lead the largest wing of the Irish party for the moment, or Mr So-and-So succeed with his election petition.'²² Placed in its Indo-European context, Hyde's Gaelic nation spills over and exceeds the geographical unit of Ireland. The spatial and temporal sweep of the Celtic race, properly understood, makes the business of real politics in Ireland mundane, parochial, diminished. 'In vain', writes Joseph Dunne of Ireland in 1916, 'do we look elsewhere for similar literary records to take us back to one of the earliest stages of

18 Adolphe Pictet, *Indo-European Origins, or The Primitive Aryas. An Essay in Linguistic Palaeontology*, 2nd ed., (London, 1877), p. 8. Cited in Jacques Barzun, *Race: A Study in Modern Superstition* (London, 1938), p. 38.

19 Arnold, *The Study of Celtic Literature*, p. 113.

20 Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', p. 528.

21 George Sigerson, *Bards of the Gael and Gall* (Dublin, [1897]), p. 22.

22 Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', pp. 532-3.

Aryan culture, coeval in some respects with that of the Heroic age, and in some details even with the civilization of the original inhabitants of western Europe'.²³ A Celtic racial heritage, rather than being a unique feature of Irish difference, turns out to be something that Ireland shares with most of western Europe – including, of course, the coloniser, England.

Let me conclude, then, by reiterating that racialism as an ideology functions as a 'supplement' to nationalism. It is not simply the case that race provides the missing stability that a colonial nationalism lacks in terms of a continuous history. Race may appear to offer continuity; however, as Derrida writes of the supplement, 'it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness'.²⁴ 'The excess it [racialism] represents in relation to nationalism', writes Etienne Balibar, 'and therefore the supplement it brings to it, tends both to universalize it, to correct its lack of universality, and to particularize it, to correct its lack of specificity':

In other words, racism actually adds to the ambiguous nature of nationalism, which means that, through racism, nationalism engages in a 'headlong flight forward', a metamorphosis of its material contradictions into ideal contradictions.²⁵

Theories of race – and in particular theories of a Celtic race – were being developed simultaneously in a parallel series of discourses (comparative philology, ethnology, anthropology, biology) which were in themselves in the process of drawing up their own narratives throughout the nineteenth century. Philological race theory depended upon physiological race theory, while at the same time physiology relied upon philology; each part used the other as an alibi. The net result was a system without a centre, in which the boundaries would stretch if pushed at any point – and pushed they were, thereby producing a monstrous proliferation of texts. By the end of the nineteenth century, the field of race theory as a whole was vast, and Celticism one of its most extensive parts. Indeed, racialism was capable of subsuming theories of the nation-state which were being formulated in this island, and thus constituted a threat to the stability of the national unit, while at the same time helping to make possible the state's existence. Running the trace of this racial supplement in the genealogy of Irish nationalism thus emerges as an urgent project in any attempt to salvage nationalism's emancipatory potential for the future.

23 Joseph Dunne, *The Study of Celtic* (Dublin, 1916), pp. 5, 7.

24 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 145.

25 Balibar, 'Racism and Nationalism', p. 54.