

‘What ish my nation?’: Towards a Negative Definition of Identity

‘*What ish my nation?*’: Towards a Negative Definition of Identity’, in *Minerva* Volume 2 1998
<http://www.ul.ie/~philos/vol2/negation.html>

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5 keywords

Derrida, justice, Enlightenment, politics, responsibility

Abstract

This chapter examines Derrida’s distinction between law and justice, looking at the heritage of Pascal and Montaigne and examining issues of ethical and political responsibility in the process, taking some examples from contemporary American political discourse

There is hardly a more quoted line from Shakespeare in the overall context of Irish Studies than the above question from *Henry V*. Given the agonies of identity that have plagued Irish social and cultural history, it assumes the status of what Pruffrock might term an ‘overwhelming question’ (Eliot 1963, 13). It is certainly of overwhelming importance in the context of the ongoing violence and tension between the two communities in Northern Ireland, as well as in the context of the often vexed relationship between Ireland and Britain. Therefore, this question, and its putative answers, must be studied in some detail if one is to come to any reasonable *modus operandi* regarding the search for some form of answer.¹

The context of this question is a fictive one, the final part of Shakespeare’s second tetralogy *Henry V*, where the Welsh captain, Fluellen, is criticizing MacMorris’s mining techniques. Qualifying his

anticipated questioning of MacMorris's mining techniques with 'I think, look you, under your correction' he only gets as far as saying that 'there is not many of your nation –' (123) before he is interrupted by the violent *non sequitur* wherein is uttered the famous question of identity.

Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a basterd, and a knave, and a rascal. What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation? (Shakespeare 1965, II, ii, 124-126)

A possible reason for this interchange can be drawn from the historical context. In 1599, Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton had gone with the Earl of Essex's expedition against Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, to attempt to put down the Tyrone rebellion. *Henry V* was probably written after the expedition set out in April 1599 and before its ignominious return in the autumn of that year (Cairns and Richards 1988, 9).² Hence, the attitudes to Irishness in this text would have been coloured by the feelings of national pride engendered by the martial expedition, allied to feelings of personal loyalty and gratitude, on Shakespeare's part, to the Earl of Southampton. This attitude to Ireland, in the reality of the time, is fused with the fictive time of *Henry V* in the play's prologue, where history and fiction are joined in a symmetrical equation, an equation which provides answers to MacMorris's question, and to the matter of his answer to that question. Thus, there is a binary temporal perspective at work in this definition of Ireland: that of the imaginary time of King Henry V and the French wars which is seen through the perspective of Queen Elizabeth's time and the Irish wars. Declan Kiberd has made the point that Ireland, as specific identity, can be seen as the creation of English rulers at a specific moment in English history (Kiberd 1985, 5), and the categorization of Irishness as 'a villain, and a basterd, and a knave, and a rascal' is a *locus classicus* of seeing the other in terms less favourable than the self, and as such, providing a differentiated place upon which the edifice of colonial identity can be constructed.³

Shakespeare voices these criteria of identity through the persona of MacMorris, and the epistemological thrust of these categories needs to be analyzed, as it provides an interesting example of what one might term 'essentialist' identity. For Shakespeare, Irish identity is based on four central categories, which radiate through the Irish character in the play. These characteristics enunciate a position of fixity, an element which Homi Bhabha sees as a central feature of colonial discourse (Bhabha 1994, 66).⁴ This fixity is one aspect of a common epistemological constitution of issues of identity, with the essential national, ethnic or racial characteristics seen as fixed, trans-historical, and generally applicable.

I would suggest that Bhabha is correct in adverting to the 'position of fixity', but incorrect in seeing such ascription as confined to colonial and imperial discourse. I would argue that such attempts to 'fix' an identity are central to the commodificatory tendencies of capitalism and society. Shakespeare, in the above example, is attempting to commodify Irish identity so that its contemporary consumption by an English army will seem to be right and just. The MacMorris references are ideologically slanted so as to objectify Irishness which is commodified through a process of reification which abstracts four 'intrinsic qualities' which are then placed as a synecdoche of that Irishness. Adorno sees such a process of objectification as a 'dehumanization' which validates what Baudrillard terms 'consummativity' (Baudrillard: 1971; 83) a step which Adorno sees as seminal to the process of eschewing the 'use-value' of commodities in favour of their 'exchange value', a process which he sees as prevalent but wrong (Adorno: 1973; 264). Once Irishness has been commodified, pejoratively in terms of MacMorris's own statement, then the English consumption of this backward and unpleasant culture may proceed apace. I would argue that one of the most important political tasks facing critical thinking is the attempt to dismantle such commodificatory notions of identity, and I hope to demonstrate that literature, as well as being constitutive of such notions of identity, can also be made into a formidable form of immanent critique which will dislodge such notions by suggesting a negative definition of identity, and in keeping with the

opening example, Irish identity will be the chosen ground of this debate. Unlike Bhabha and Kiberd, however, I would argue that nations themselves promote such positions of fixity, and a classic example of this process was the Gaelic revival in Ireland at the turn of the century.

The 'Irish literary revival' is often used as an umbrella term to include the Gaelic revival, referring to the revival of an interest in the Irish language; the Celtic revival, referring to an interest in all things Celtic, and the literary revival, referring to an interest in creating a literature that would, in some way, culturally validate a separate Irish identity. There is a quasi-organic imperative associated with the term, and this imperative was best summarized by D. P. Moran, a journalist who had written for Patrick Pearse's *An Claidheamh Soluis* and for *New Ireland Review* before founding *The Leader*, a paper which became the voice of Irish nationalism. Moran saw the essential element in any revivalist project as 'the Gael', and he went on to say that the Gael 'must be the element that absorbs' (Moran: 1905; 37). In other words, the Gael was the *terminus ad quo* from which Irish identity needed to define itself; the Gael became the unmoved mover whose traits and characteristics would control the play of Irishness in the ongoing process of identificatory definition. Here, as Emmanuel Levinas puts it, the opposition of the same and the other leads, inexorably, to 'the triumph of the same' (Levinas: 1996; 16), a process which seems to have been part of the nationalist agenda, and which can be seen as analogous in methodology to Shakespeare's depiction of Irishness, albeit from an opposite ideological perspective.

Thus, in a different answer to MacMorris's question, Moran noted that 'the Irish nation is *de facto* a Catholic nation' (*Leader*: 1901: July 27th). Moran was setting out the commodification of Irishness from a different political, but similar ideological perspective to that of Shakespeare. Moran could see little wrong with stating that the 'real connecting link between us and the real Ireland is the Gaelic tongue' (Boyce: 1995; 243).

Here, Irishness is commodified, but in terms of a different brandname. For the essential qualities of knave, rascal, bastard [*sic*] and villain, one can now read Gaelic, Catholic and nationalist. Both sets of formulae attempt a reification of alterity and development in terms of sameness and stasis. Both attempt to commodify identity in a manner analogous to that of exchange versus use-value. The fetishism that Marx and Lukács see as seminal to capitalism is at work in the area of identity here. In Shakespeare's formulation, to be Irish is to become an object which is associated with pejorative and unpleasant qualities. Such qualities become 'supra-historical entities' (Lukács: 1971; 14) which attempt to erase the mediatory and fluid processes of history. This reified identity is precisely the same process that is at work in the Gaelic revival, where different qualities become the commodities that are associated with Irishness, to the exclusion of all others, and in defiance of the passage of time or historical circumstances. The differences of attitude, political and religious affiliation, class and culture are annealed in this reified, selective paradigm of identity. To what Lukács terms 'the reified consciousness' (Lukács: 1971; 200), issues of identity become aspects of a commodificatory process which freezes development and interaction and in fact, sets up a recurrence of communal and national 'sameness' which brooks no contact with other cultures. As Adorno has put it, 'identity is the primal form of ideology' (Adorno: 1973; 148), and the ideological thrust of such thinking tended to alienate all those who did not share this Gaelic, Catholic view of Irishness.

Ethically, such a denial of alterity can only lead to political intransigence, as such binary oppositional politics leads, ultimately, to sectarian strife. Language and culture are the ideal for some form of *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation) which can offer a negative definition of identity as an answer to such essentialist formulations. Only by putting both cultural and political positions in some form of confrontational dialogue where they would be in Habermasian terms on an equal footing

(*gleichberechtigt*), could there be any hope of avoiding increased sectarian tension. A 'real Ireland' defined in terms of Moran's notion of the Gaelic 'self' would have little attraction for those who were not part of that 'self' as they would be, by definition, alien.

I would suggest, however, that there is an alternative definition of identity which will subvert the ontological certainties of such foundationalist positions: in the words of Adorno 'dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things' (Adorno: 1973; 11). The writings of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Theodore Adorno and Mikhail Bakhtin will be adduced to reinforce this argument. Given the importance of 'place' in definitions of culture and identity, this paper will suggest that the ultimate site of a negative Irish identity is, in the words of Derrida, a 'non-site' (*non-lieu*) (Derrida 1981, 159) which is both beyond the influences of essentialist identity and at the same time close enough to them to engage with, and redefine the parameters of, its assumptions. In this context, I also hope to demonstrate that there is an ethic of identity which can be seen as a protreptic discourse wherein the different aspects of identity engage in a dialogue, or *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation) which can offer a negative definition of identity as an answer to essentialist formulations. The inclusion of alterity as part of a dialogue which is constitutive of a new form of that identity, is a seminal part of such a project, and here I would agree with Adorno in this respect when he notes that 'art is the negative knowledge of the actual world' (Adorno: 1977; 160). The infusion of a Norse strain of Irishness in Seamus Heaney's *North* or the Greek *parergon* that surrounds *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, with Stephen Dedalus being seen in terms of Daedalus and Icarus, and *Ulysses* as a modern analogue of the *Odyssey*, underlines this point. The same point could be made about the increasing frequency of the imagery of the European renaissance in the poetry of W. B. Yeats.

I would suggest that this process of negative identity is akin to Theodore Adorno's negative dialectics in the following way. Adorno's use of negative dialectics entailed the critique of reason by reason; of instrumental reason by a more generous type of reason. The negative aspect of his theory meant that what is being done is a process of immanent, self-reflexive critique of the genre within which the critique itself is situated, or as Adorno himself put it, a process using 'the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity' (Adorno 1973, xx). For Adorno, a critique of the Enlightenment does not mean a wholesale renunciation of the secular and emancipatory thrust of the project, rather does it entail what Christopher Norris terms a 'scrupulous care to conserve the critical resources of enlightened reason even while denouncing its perversion into forms of inhuman (unreflective) means-end rationality' (Norris 1994, 101).

In an analogous sense, literature-as-critique can offer possibly the best critique of a literature-as-mythopoeia by prising open the contradictions inherent in the totalizing drive of that myth-making project, and by unravelling the constructs that pass for axioms and essences in such mythic discourse. As Adorno and Horkheimer point out, 'myths signify self-repetitive nature, which is the core of the symbolic' and these myths are created through a language which, according to the 'doctrine of the priests' was symbolic in the sense that 'sign and image were one'. Such a trope of sameness and repetition can be seen as persuasive of an essentialism; indeed, 'inexhaustibility, unending renewal and the permanence of the signifieds are not mere attributes of all symbols, but their essential content' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, 17); something that has been traced through the cited examples from Shakespeare and the Irish Literary Revival. Perhaps literature, in its form as negative critique, is the best generic form through which to criticize such a discourse, as it has both the immanence to comprehend the style and substance of the mythopoeic writing, and at the same time, the distance, or transcendence (used here as a purely regulative notion), from which to offer that critique. In this sense, the writings of Joyce and Heaney are

seen as examples of what Adorno will term 'dialectical criticism', a concept which will be more fully explored in terms of Emmanuel Levinas's notion of poetry as critique.⁵

Epistemologically, the knowledge that literature conveys or professes is necessarily negative. The *lebenswelt* of a literary work has no real positive referent in the 'real' world, and hence, only exists negatively, in that it offers a 'lifeworld' that does not as yet exist, but that could, or should in a more enlightened world. As Norris has summarized, a negative knowledge, as epitomized in immanent critique, functions in terms of attempting to redeem those moments of authentic truth in art which correspond to 'nothing real in our present, distorted, and indigent condition, but which nonetheless possess a power of revealing what truth might be if things were otherwise' (Norris 1988, 149). This point has been further underlined in the writings of Paul de Man, as he observes that it is not '*a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language' (de Man 1986, 11). Hence, literature, as negative epistemology, is ideally placed to proffer a critique of other aspects of literature, and of literary uses of language. It can be both creative of, and critical of, the use or misuse of myth and language as offering transcendental significations of identity as sameness and presence. As part of the process of suggesting myths and legends which stress the purity of the tribe and race, literature is perfectly placed to offer a cultural critique of such notions, in terms of what Adorno has termed a dialectical criticism.

This contradictory position, of being part of a culture while at the same time attempting to offer a critique of the ideology of that culture, is discussed by Adorno, in his essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society'.⁶ For Adorno, cultural criticism was by definition a problematic enterprise: the cultural critic 'is not happy with civilization, to which alone he owes his discontent' (Adorno 1981, 19). The two subject positions from which criticism may be offered are seen by Adorno as immanent and transcendent, and both

positions are fraught with difficulty. The immanent critic participates in the culture: he or she is shot-through with the ideologies and attitudes of that culture and hence has little chance of making any real objective statements about this position of 'total immanence' (Adorno 1981, 26) and therefore is doomed to repeat the errors of the culture. The transcendent critic, on the other hand, 'aims at a totality' and assumes 'an Archimedian position above culture and the blindness of society'. However, such a position, 'outside the sway of existing society' is 'fictitious' (Adorno 1981, 31), and ultimately as monological as that of a position within ideology. Adorno's answer to this dilemma is the notion of 'dialectical criticism', which takes up a position in culture and not in culture at the same time. It is a position which takes full account of the resistances and difficulties that theory, politics, literature and other constituents of society cause in seemingly monadic systems and structurations. As Adorno puts it: the dialectical method must relate the knowledge of society as a totality 'and the mind's involvement in it to the claim inherent in the specific content of the object that it be apprehended as such' (Adorno 1981, 33). In this sense, the position of transcendence is achieved dialectically by looking at a microcosmic part of a totality, and by then relating that to the macrocosm. The knowledge achieved is negative, and parallels Paul de Man's comments on the materiality of the letter which stubbornly resists aesthetic totalizations; he notes that in Kant as well as in Hegel, it is the 'prosaic materiality of the letter' that ensures that 'no degree of obfuscation or ideology can transform this materiality into the phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgement' (de Man 1996, 90). Hence, the blurring of distinctions between word and world, a blurring which is constitutive of ideology, is both constructed, and deconstructed, by literature.

The hypostasization of language and thing, of word and world is one of the untruths that literary language is capable of promulgating, and therefore it is one of the areas which literature-as-critique must interrogate most rigorously. As Adorno and Horkheimer have put it, the separation of 'sign and image is irremediable' and should they ever become 'hypostasized' then 'each of the two isolated principles tends

towards the destruction of truth' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, 18). Perhaps the most telling political use of this trope of hypostasization is that of the myth of identity, and Adorno begins his *Negative Dialectics* with this very subject. He makes the point that the notion of identity is central to all previous philosophical projects to 'think is to identify'; however, the difficulty here is that heterogeneity can be the loser in such an epistemology. This means that our view of contradiction can often be defined by the difference of the other from our own perspective on identity, with contradiction becoming 'nonidentity under the aspect of identity', with the thought of unity becoming the measure of heterogeneity' (Adorno 1973, 5). Adorno goes on to make the point that his dialectical philosophy is 'the consistent sense of nonidentity' (Adorno 1973, 5), meaning that the place of the other, of heterogeneity, will be structured differently. His point is that the other, what is different will always appear divergent or dissonant as long as our structures of consciousness strive for unity: as long as its demand for totality will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it' (Adorno 1973, 5-6). Hence, the necessity for a negative definition, a sort of non-identity, as a position from which all essentialist creeds can be adjudicated. Just as literature, in terms of language, literary symbols, and metaphors, helps to create the endless recurrences of mythic discourse, so it can reflect on this process and open up new possibilities within them; as Adorno puts it: negative dialectics is a critical reflection upon its own context (Adorno 1973, 141). Hence, Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* will write from a position within the culture of Irishness, and yet he achieves a quasi-transcendent perspective in a number of ways. Firstly, he has moved to the continent, and so, is writing about Ireland from outside, a position analogous to that of Daedalus as he flew above the Cretan maze. Secondly, in this text, he is using a language which disseminates and deconstructs any pretensions to monological identity of the language, the culture or the subject.

In the persona of Stephen, Joyce achieves the dialectical aim of Adorno's ideal of social criticism. He is Irish, but bent on turning away from a narrow centripetal definition of Irishness. His emigration will give

him that dialectical perspective that the original Daedalus achieved through flight, on Irish identity, and what he terms the ‘uncreated conscience’ of his race. Literature is that genre which allows for such an intellectual scattering from the centre. Literature is also the genre where ghostly presences can make an appearance without being subject to the rationalisations of science. In Chapter Four, just after he has been asked to join the priesthood, and just before his epiphany on the strand, Stephen hears his name called out – ‘Stephanos Dedalos! Bous Stephanoumenos! Bous Stephaneforos!’:

Their banter was not new to him and now it flattered his mild proud sovereignty. Now, as never before, his strange name seemed to him a prophecy. So timeless seemed the grey warm air, so fluid and impersonal his own mood, that all ages were as one to him. A moment before the ghost of the ancient kingdom of the Danes had looked forth through the vesture of the hazewrapped City. Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, a hawk-like man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being? (Joyce: 1993; 149)

Here, it is a ghostly figure of the Danish past of Ireland who leads Stephen, with his ‘strange name’ to his own destiny. This ghostly Dane, himself an emigrant, points towards the plurality of Ireland's history, as the Danes can be seen as among the first foreign invaders of Ireland. This ghostly figure points towards the centrifugal future, in terms of what Stephen can become; it embodies in itself the necessary difference from the self that is the teleology of negative Irishness, as well as giving voice to the alterity that makes up what is now Irishness.

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Ghosts can also symbolize a presence beyond that which is, they may orient themselves towards the non-material past, as well as the material; in short, such spectres resist commodification and reification. So, the centripetal vision of Irish Ireland is haunted by the spectre of other enunciations of Irish identity. Surely what Stephen sees, towards the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, are ghosts. On April 16th, Stephen's entry speaks of the 'spell of arms and voices...the white arms of roads...the black arms of tall ships'. These voices call to him: 'Come.' They also tell him that they are his 'kinsmen' (Joyce: 1993; 218). Here, emigration is symbolised as almost a dematerialization of the body, as a preparation for the flight of the soul.

Here Joyce uses ghostly imagery to illustrate a different type of Irish identity, an identity that is shaped by negative spectralizations of the future. Literature, despite many vexed questions regarding its ontological and epistemological status, is that genre wherein ideas, thoughts, fictions may be given voice. In this sense, as well as being capable of creating the *Vorurteil* of centralization and aesthetic unity, it can also create a notion of an emancipatory notion of identity as a changing construct which refutes the essentialist centripetal drive, and instead allows for a pluralist notion of Irishness.

Stephen's ghosts are figures of possibility, they call him to a new vantage point which will allow him to define the 'uncreated conscience' of his race. Derrida's discussion what he terms *hauntology*, in answer to his question: '[w]hat is a ghost?' (Derrida: 1994; 10), demonstrates a similar spectral dimension of identity. In this book, he discusses the spectrality of many areas of meaning, seeing ghostly hauntings as traces of possible meanings. One might compare his *hauntology* to the paradigmatic chains which hover (haunt) the linearity of the syntagmatic chain. But Derrida makes one important distinction, in that he sees spectrality and time as closely connected. He makes the point, speaking both of the ghost in *Hamlet* and the ghost that haunts Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (where the first noun is 'specter'), that: '[a]t

bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come, or come back' (Derrida: 1994; 39). Derrida's spectrality involves acknowledging the other that haunts the self; it involves acknowledging the possibility that the 'h' in *hauntology* is a hovering presence over the certainties of ontology.

Thus, the definition of identity that is valorized by emigration is a scattering of the old notions of transcendental centrality. These notions are haunted by different arms and voices (and we note the disembodied plurality of these manifestations) which call attention to new forms of Irishness. The old identificatory certainties which decreed that to be Irish was to be Catholic, Gaelic, nationalist never attempted to question this received ontology. Derrida, on the other hand, sees all discussions of ontology, of the nature of the being of anything, as imbricated in a *hauntology* of attendant traces, differences, disseminations. The political implication of this is that such *hauntologies* allow for the introduction of the other, of other voices, other identities and other epistemological positions. Richard Beardsworth, discussing Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, observes that, for Hegel, 'the ghost is the other recognized as the violation of oneself' (Beardsworth: 1996; 83), and in Joyce's epistemology of emigration, there is room for such spectral others, and they allow an openness to different forms of alterity. Thus, Joyce espouses a perspective on identity which in Bakhtinian terms, is heteroglossic in that different voices and different languages are allowed to interact and achieve some kind of dynamic interaction, or dialogization (Bakhtin 1981, 263).⁷ Joyce creates a constellation of Irishness which, by constantly changing, and by being open to alterity refuses the strictures of commodification and reification.

Derrida's notion of *hauntology*, which involves acknowledging the other that haunts the self, as well as the possibility that the 'h' in *hauntology* is a hovering, spectral presence which pluralizes the certainties of

ontology is a paradigm of this constellatory epistemology. This ongoing process of intertextual imbrication, of haunting of self by the other, provides a coherent thematic commentary on Joyce's work, which is, in many ways, predicated on an imbrication of the Irish with the European, an imbrication which proffers a constellatory negative definition of Ireland in terms of a European 'other' which is seldom adduced into Irish cultural nationalism.

This call towards Europe is at its strongest at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. (Joyce; 1993; 218)

Here, Stephen is espousing emigration as an epistemological perspective through which a negative sense of Irish identity can be created. By achieving a perspective that is outside the culture, he hopes to achieve a twofold aim: to distance himself from the 'nets' of 'nationality, language, religion' (Joyce: 1993; 177), and to give a voice to those aspects of his identity which are open to alterity. In this sense, he is distinguishing between 'an airtight, impermeable, homogeneous, self-identical identity' and a 'porous and heterogeneous identity that differs with itself' (Caputo: 1977; 114).⁸ Interestingly, he equates the 'nets' with being born in Ireland: '[w]hen the soul of a man is *born in this country...*'[my italics] (Joyce: 1993; 177), and would seem to be attempting to transform the fixed categories of identity through the experience of another culture. Stephen, in attempting to define some sense of Irish identity, feels that he can only achieve this by moving away from the fixed centrality of the Irishness of the revival, and instead, to attempt to create a *hauntological*, plural view of Irishness, which contrasts sharply with that of Davin,

as his espousal of emigration symbolises. He is attempting to define the culture of Irishness in a way which is 'to be not identical to itself' but rather to be 'different with itself' (Derrida: 1992b; 9), in short, to define Irishness *otherwise*.

In this context, and in the context of Adorno's dialectical criticism, the verbal construction of the *credo* 'I will fly by those nets' is ambiguous. 'By' can mean around or past, indicating a desire for the avoidance of the entrapping nets. However, 'by' can also mean 'by means of' or 'using as an aid', and in this sense, the term implies a dependence on, or an attachment to such essentialist notions. I would suggest that the dialectical interaction of these two meanings acts as a metaphor for the Joycean concept of identity. Bypassing the nets still involves taking them into consideration, just as the moving shadow of the sundial is still dependent upon the static pointer of the *gnomon*. Similarly, making use of the nets to achieve something beyond them also involves a dialectical progression. So, in both cases, the nets can never be totally destroyed or done away with; their function is to provide some limits in terms of self identity, but also to allow for the opening to alterity that is so necessary in the Joycean project. To be inside these nets is to be delimited by past concepts of nationality, language and religion. To bypass them, or to use them to move on, is to be open to a future that will, while taking on board some of the baggage of the past, travel to new destinations, redefining itself in the process.

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¹ An interesting sub-theme of this issue is the popularity of this Shakespearean quotation in discussions pertaining to Ireland and to Irish studies. Perhaps the vexed nature of the nationhood of Ireland from a political and theoretical perspective gives a continuing currency to this famous piece of writing. I am referring to the anomalies of geographical integrity versus political bifurcation; *de jure* constitutional claims by the Republic of Ireland on the territory of the whole island versus *de facto* acceptance of the state of Northern Ireland; the inauguration, in November 1997, of a Northern Irish President of the Irish Republic, and the vexed theoretical question regarding the post-colonial status of Ireland.

² For an interesting discussion of the Henriad as a Tudor wish-fulfilment positing an equally successful conclusion of the Irish problem to that of the French one, see Philip Edwards, *Threshold of a Nation*, pages 74-86.

³ While use is made here of Kiberd's terminology from *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, I would have to enter a serious caveat about the conclusions he draws about the nature of Irish socio-cultural experience, and postcolonial theory. It seems to me that many of the arguments are reductive, and I would agree broadly with Bruce Stewart's critique of this book, *Irish Studies Review*, 6, 1, April 1988, pp.5-16, and that of David Krause in *The Irish University Review*, Autumn/Winter 1997, pages 236-244.

⁴ Bhabha's essay 'The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism' (Bhabha: 1994; 66-84) provides a seminal account of the fixity of identificative categories in colonial discourse.

⁵ For a full discussion on Levinas's debt to Michel Leiris, see his essay *The Transcendence of Words* in *The Levinas Reader*, pages 144-149, originally published in *Les Temps Modernes*, (1949), pages 1090-1095.

⁶ My discussion of Adorno has been influenced by Robert Young's *Torn Halves: Political conflict in literary and cultural theory*. This is an excellent and wide-ranging study of the contemporary theoretical *milieu*, and is comprehensive in scope.

⁷ For Bakhtin, according to Emerson and Holquist, a language or culture undergoes 'dialogization' when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things (Bakhtin: 1981; 427). Here, I would enter a caveat about Bakhtin's epistemological and ethical positions in that relativism seems to be the other side of monological authoritarianism. In this study, while eschewing any form of monological essentialism, and indeed offering

such notions to critique, I will also interrogate relativist notions of identity, which see identity in terms of what is currently good in the way of belief. The dangers of such a position are as grave as that of essentialism: if the latter leads towards the barbarities of ethnic cleansing, then the former can lead to acquiescence in state-sponsored atrocities.

⁸ This book involves a roundtable discussion between Jacques Derrida and Walter Brogan, Thomas Busch, Denis Schmidt and John D. Caputo, from the University of Villanova philosophy department. I have cited this text in two different ways. The text of the interview itself, pages 3-28, is cited as Derrida: 1977b, while the commentary which follows, pages 31-200 are cited as Caputo: 1977.