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Male Autobiography and Irish Cultural Nationalism: John Mitchel and James Clarence Mangan

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The production and circulation of heroic biography and autobiography has been a feature of cultural nationalism, in Ireland and elsewhere. In its presentation of the lives of national 'heroes,' the genre produces inspirational, idealized versions of national subjectivity, linking the life of the individual with the larger political collective which nationalism aims to establish. It is conventional for such narratives to suggest the absolute identification of the individual with the nation itself—the historical, contingent subject, in other words, appears to achieve authenticity and completion—its heroic realisation—through identification with the transcendent, impersonal entity known as 'the nation,' or 'national destiny.' The hero becomes, literally, the embodiment of the 'spirit' of the nation.

This kind of project, of course, is fraught with contradictions which, in bourgeois nationalism, coincide with the contradictions of bourgeois democratic ideology itself. Personal autonomy and completion—the subject 'I'—must be asserted paradoxically by and through its own erasure and submergence in the destiny of the nation, the collective identity which is supposedly ahistorical and non-contingent. The supposedly self-contained unified subject is in fact a contradictory construction: at once 'autonomous' and 'subjected' (to national, racial, sexual and economic identities). But bourgeois discourse, with its stress on individual integrity works continually to obscure such contradiction, and biographical and autobiographical narratives are examples of this ideological work. At the representational level, they provide coherent, homogenised representations of national identity and subjectivity, which obscure real inconsistencies and contradictions. At the didactic level, they provide models to facilitate the interpellation of subjects as national citizens, and to demonstrate the possibilities for heroism. In the preface to the 1913 edition of John Mitchel's *Jail Journal*, Arthur Griffith identifies the inspirational function of heroic autobiography: "the haughty spirit of a great Irishman though baffled in its own generation may set the feet of our country in the way of triumph in the next." It is the function of autobiography to illustrate the continuity between the ahistorical spiritual entity of the

nation, and its issuance in the concrete activities of the historical individual, and to inspire others to do so.

The circulation of heroic biographical and autobiographical narratives were important to the cultural nationalism of nineteenth-century Ireland. Examples of such autobiography included Wolfe Tone's memoirs (first published in the US by his son in 1826), O'Donovan Rossa's *Prison Life* (1874), John O'Leary's *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism* (1896), and the most influential of all, John Mitchel's *Jail Journal* (1864). Malcolm Brown cites the report of Young Irelander Thomas McNevin on the success of his public readings of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, and his vision of a programme of public readings of biographies of "self-sustained, energetic men" as part of the national cultural project, which also envisaged an infrastructure of some three thousand public Reading Rooms in which such activity could take place. Davis's 'Library of Ireland' project included the dissemination of biographies of Irish nationalist heroes such as *The Life and Times of Aodh O'Neill* (1846), written by none other than John Mitchel, though McNevin's choice of Franklin's *Autobiography* as a model is indicative of the bourgeois nature of the Young Ireland movement, and the "self-sustaining" character of Franklin's American heroism is problematic when one attempts to apply its values to the lives of Irish political leaders, whose lives were motivated by quite different values and beliefs. The actual work of biography and autobiography within the movement showed, usually in spite of itself, the limits and contradictions of such a decidedly bourgeois ideology in anti-colonial struggle.

I would like to make some observations on Mitchel's *Jail Journal* as a classic example of cultural nationalist autobiography. It displays a number of those tropes which make up, in Benedict Anderson's phrase, the symbolic grammar which organises nationalist imaginings and later becomes institutionalised in postcolonial states. What I would like especially to suggest is that this 'grammar' is gendered in very specific ways, ways which make nationality conditional upon masculinity, and deny the possibility of an authentic female subjectivity. It is here that the most disabling limits of this form of nationalism become clear. This gendering, and its socio-political effects, also become obvious when Mitchel's text is compared with an autobiographical fragment by James Clarence Mangan, a figure on the margins of the Young Ireland movement, whom Mitchel knew and about whom he wrote an influential biographical account, but whose writing tends to reject many of the masculinist features of nationalist discourse. Indeed, as David Lloyd has pointed out in his book on *Nationalism and Minor Literature*, Mangan's rhetoric is frequently quite subversive of the

consolidatory identity-thinking of bourgeois cultural nationalism; the kind of thinking which supported bourgeois essentialist discourses on economics and democracy as well as on gender. The most obvious absence from my discussion is women's autobiography; and it is in fact the absence of such writing from the Young Ireland movement which most forcefully draws attention to the entrenchment of patriarchal discourse within cultural nationalism.

The ideological project of nationalist autobiography depended on a certain 'transparency' theory of language; through the text one perceives the 'truth' of an individual's life, which in turn should be a window upon the nature and spirit of the nation itself. The narrative is all the more true for being narrated by the protagonist—Mitchel explains that he "set down all these trifling particulars relating to my usage because I foresee the worthy 'Government' will have occasion to tell official falsehoods on the subject before all is over." Actually, however, autobiography provides no such absolute truths or guarantees. In the course of his own autobiographical exercise Mitchel himself comments on the impossibility of absolute objectivity and transparency in autobiography, noting that objectivity can even be a drawback:

What a book of books an autobiography might be made, if a man were found who would and could tell the whole truth and no more than the truth! But I suppose such a man will never be found. Nobody, surely, believes Mr Gibbon's statement of his own case: and you cannot well tell what to make of Rousseau's. Perhaps Evelyn's diary comes as near to the thing as any of these: but then it is almost entirely objective, not subjective; besides, . . . what he has to tell is not so well worth telling as one could wish. I conclude that the perfect or ideal autobiography no human eye will ever see; because they whose inner life is best worth revealing—whose souls have soared highest and dived deepest—are just they who will never make a confidant of the discerning public . . .

James Clarence Mangan's autobiography offers an even more striking case of a text aware of its own 'constructedness.' Written in 1848 at the request of Mangan's friend C.P. Meehan, it is a brief attempt to account for the alleged moral failure of the poet's life, concentrating on incidents and feelings from the poet's childhood. Mangan, like Mitchel, cites some autobiographical predecessors, categorising them as either those who "have published their autobiographies without revealing themselves" (Godwin and Byron) or others who have "laid bare to the eyes of mankind their own delinquencies without cloak or equivocation" (St Augustine, Rousseau and Lamb). Somewhat typically, Mangan

argues that he is unable and unwilling to follow either model; instead he draws attention away from the notion of verisimilitude and writes of the work in terms of *function*: "My desire is to leave after me a work that may not merely inform but instruct." His life story will be "a beacon to . . . [his readers] to avoid, in their voyage of existence, the rocks and shoals upon which his own peace of soul has undergone shipwreck." The didactic function of the text overrides questions of mere 'objectivity' or the recording of facts, to the degree that Mangan admitted fabricating parts of the story. When Meehan published the autobiographical fragment in the 1883 edition of *Poets and Poetry of Munster*, he included a footnote to one passage concerning the utterly wretched condition of the family dwelling, pointing out that when he had confronted Mangan with the obvious untruth of the depiction, Mangan airily claimed that he had "dreamt it."

In both these writers, then, efficacy rather than literal truth or naive realism is the determining criterion of valuable autobiography. Mitchel refers to another, more personal, aspect to this efficacy; one function of his journal is to

remind me of what I was, and how I came down hither, and so preserve the continuity of my thoughts, or *personal identity*, which, there is sometimes reason to fear, might slip away from me.

Autobiography as agent for the establishment of the unified, autonomous subject: here the genre's function coincides exactly with that of bourgeois nationalism. The anxiety on Mitchel's part here is the fear of disintegration, the fear of contradiction, the fear that identity might not be a matter of 'nature' or national essence but of cultural construction. This is a particular anxiety because confronting it raises disturbing questions for bourgeois essentialist thinking; including the possibility that bourgeois nationalism may merely be a mirroring of bourgeois imperialism—that essentialist categories of nationalism are constructs, and in fact constructs originated in and employed by the discourse of the imperial culture. Yet the passage *does* admit to precisely this 'constructedness'; if identity did *not* need to be constructed, he would scarcely need to work at 'preserving' it. The passage also points to one of the most significant tropes of Irish nationalist autobiography (and one which, like Catholicism, conditioned Joyce in spite of his desires): the trope of exile. It is imprisonment and exile which bring on the identity crisis for Mitchel. In an important passage early in the *Jail Journal* he describes the loss of citizenship he experiences as a 'felon' transported to Bermuda as in fact *necessary* according to the

logic of the colonial situation: "Be it so. I am content. There are no citizens in Ireland; there is no citizenship—no law." By this logic, the natural place for a national subject is *elsewhere*. Full identity is denied to such a person even in Ireland, and it is possible to speak of being an exile in one's own land. Mitchel's narrative works from this premise to construct a linear progression from exile and alienation to liberation; *Jail Journal* begins with Mitchel's transportation from Dublin and ends with his arrival in New York, having escaped from Van Diemen's Land. Defining exile as a condition of nationality means that Mitchel's nationality is never in question, not something he has to learn (though it does suggest that it may be something *created* by the colonial situation), while at the same time progression occurs in the sense that Mitchel's enforced passivity as a prisoner in the initial part of the book is transformed to active defiance through his escape.

This paradigmatic narrative of liberation, though, depends, as do all patriarchal narratives, on a gender inflection which effectively excludes women from such possibilities of liberation, national or otherwise. In the first place, the rhetoric of nationalist struggle is entirely based around patriarchal gendering in which masculinity is associated with strength and activity and femininity exclusively with weakness and passivity. But more than this, the rhetoric occludes the actual *dependence* of the achievement of masculine identity on the denial of that possibility for contemporary women. Mitchel's narrative, for instance, depends on an opposition between the duties of the nationalist hero, who must be prepared to suffer solitude and engage in individual struggle, with the duties of domesticity, associated with women, which demand precisely the opposite tendencies—constant availability, collective thinking, etc.—and offers none of the requisite freedom (time to think alone, freedom to move, and so on). Mitchel confesses at one point in *Jail Journal* that his nationalist activities have made him neglectful of his "domestic duties," which includes the rearing of his two sons, but then goes on to subordinate these duties to work of nationalist struggle—the sacrifice, he believes, was worth it, though he does hope to redeem himself domestically in future. The point, however, is that here the values and duties of domesticity are *opposed* to the values and duties of nationalism. In a culture in which domesticity is so exclusively the realm of women, this sets up a conflict of interest between the sexes, in which the male role is privileged, and furthermore suggests that 'femininity' is, or is potentially, a hindrance to nationalist achievement. This sentiment is confirmed by Mitchel's "confession," that he broke down and wept on his first night on Spike Island. He is anxious about the incident—it is a sign of weakness and

womanhood—so he deals with his anxiety by issuing an aggressively male defiance of any “censor . . . to vilipend [his] manhood therefore.” In fact, by a certain masculinist logic femininity, as revealed in such a temporary breakdown, may be seen to be necessary to the nationalist project, but merely as a means by which the hero’s masculinity may be asserted, a way of confirming him in his insecure manhood. Having wept, Mitchel asserts: “All weakness is past.”

Mitchel here is merely drawing upon a rhetoric which pervaded cultural nationalism. Even sixty years later, Arthur Griffith, in the 1913 preface to *Jail Journal*, defines national heroism in terms of masculinity: “Ireland failed Mitchel because it failed in manhood.” He draws upon the imagery of chivalry in describing

the spectacle of this gallant gentleman in a forlorn land breasting its mighty oppressors—measuring himself singly against an Empire—in no intoxication of vanity or blinded rage but because nobility compelled

He concludes his preface with vehement repetition:

His inimitable “Jail Journal” is the compensation for Ireland recreant to the call of the manliest man who summoned her to action in generations . . . This was a Man.

In figuring his own ideal of national subjectivity elsewhere in *Jail Journal*, Mitchel admits to a “veneration” of the “rural *paterfamilias*,” who “aspires to no lot but labour in his own land, and takes off his hat to no ‘superior’ under God almighty.” This vision also turns out to be a means of ‘male-bonding,’ cementing relationships between Mitchel and other male nationalists—he shares it with John Martin, for instance, writing that “we are of one mind.” A significant equivalence is set up here between the ‘spirit of the nation,’ which is shared by all national subjects and binds them together, and the vision of a patriarchal society consisting of proud ‘manly’ individuals. What is so crucially absent here is any recognition of the actual labour, traditionally performed by women, on which such an economy depends—the domestic labour, the child rearing, cottage industry—labour which is in fact essential to the ideals of patrilineal continuity and economic efficiency. Such labour also gave men freedom—freedom to engage in nationalist activities such as writing, organizing, attending meetings, and so on. Women in fact become *penalised* for the work they do to support heroic male fantasies; such nationalist paterfamilial ideals depend on this work, yet precisely because women perform it they are

not allowed to fulfill the 'authentic' roles of national subjectivity, including the roles of exile, combat, cultural labour, and so on. They cannot be seen as equal subjects. They are also denied access to the central organisational structures of the nationalist movement, remaining at best on the margins, or as emergency 'substitutes' for men who have been imprisoned.

I have remarked that James Clarence Mangan's *Autobiography* in some ways refuses the masculinist discourse conditioning Mitchel's text, though it quite clearly remains a man's text. One of its most interesting subversions is its undermining of precisely the nationalist *paterfamilias* figure beloved by Mitchel. In describing his own father, Mangan describes the betrayal and failure of the *paterfamilias* ideal, and even more importantly appears to locate the source of that failure within the father himself—not as a result of oppression or dispossession. The father's irresponsibility with money, his terrorisation of his children, his incompetence as a provider make him a symbol of failed masculinity. In an important passage in the text, however, Mangan describes how his siblings resisted their father through a strategy precisely similar in principle to Davisite nationalism: through vigorous exercise "morally and physically," and the presentation of a unified front, they were able to present a "successful form of opposition to the tyranny exercised over them." Reading this passage as a projection of colonial anxieties onto the politics of the family, an equivalence is set up between the Irish *paterfamilias* and the colonizing imperial power, mirroring the actual formation of ruling 'native' cliques in the hegemonic phase of colonialism. What is a failure of masculinity is also then a failure of nationality; again the two concepts are in a dependent relationship. Mangan, however, tries to exclude himself from this entire scheme, taking sides with neither father nor siblings—instead he seeks refuge in "books and solitude," a romantic egoism which he calls "moral insanity." The situation is subversive to the degree that it refuses to participate in the circular conflict of imperialist vs nationalist, since both in fact depend upon and perpetuate each other; it attempts to stand outside the binary opposition which structures the colonial condition. It is one more instance of Mangan's 'irresponsibility' (a political/moral one to go along with his irresponsible attitude to the 'truth' as a writer)—a Joycean *non serviam*. But Mangan's rejection of the *paterfamilias* and its associated brand of nationalism (a rejection, by the way, which John Mitchel was so very keen to counteract in his biography of Mangan in 1859) is not quite the radical stance that was badly required. Mangan's romantic individualism still mirrors the masculinist notions of personal autonomy (which

Mangan describes in terms of personal alienation) which is possible only for those who could afford the luxury of 'solitude,' 'independence' and time for books. Where Mangan's *paterfamilias* failed in his responsibilities, Mangan's life was simply an evasion of them, which is practically the same thing—in both cases the demands of the individual are privileged over the demands of the social and collective, and seen as antipathetic to them. It is significant that in his autobiography Mangan expresses sympathy for his suffering mother, but ultimately identifies *against* her, blaming her silence for his being sent out to work by his father to support the family. The domestic world becomes the young Mangan's enemy, a source of distraction and indeed threat to the establishment of a personal identity, just as it is for Mitchel, though with less intensity. Yet the crucial point is that for both men, the domestic labour of women has *enabled* them to establish autonomous identities; enabled their education, enabled the achievement of whatever independence they do have. Failure to acknowledge this is a failure to acknowledge the dehumanizing sexual politics of bourgeois society, and to see relationships between colonial oppression and gender oppression. Mangan's subversions reveal the constructedness of nationalist masculinity, but its blindnesses prevent the articulation of a genuinely liberatory alternative which would encompass both women and men.