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# The Politics of Landscape and Region in Nineteenth-Century Poetry

SEÁN RYDER

'Regionalism' is never politically innocent. To speak of a region is to signify a physical space; but such spaces always have political, ideological and cultural meanings, which can vary according to circumstance, for the concept of 'region' is itself a politically ambivalent one. On the one hand, to identify a region is to define an entity which is distinct, different from other regions as well as being different from some larger identity, such as a nation or an empire. For this reason a celebration of the 'regional' may seem a form of resistance, a counterweight to cultural homogenization. On the other hand, such possibilities are circumscribed by the fact that all regions are by definition regions of something – be it an empire, a state, or a nation. They are incomplete in themselves. Thus while regionalism can be used strategically to assert cultural difference, it may also be turned around and used to rationalize relationships of political or cultural dependence. A region, after all, is easily converted into the political unit of the 'province', which can come to seem as if it 'naturally' belongs within a larger identity, even though that larger identity itself may be quite recent and artificial. It is striking, for example, that modern imperial cultures, from the British Empire, to the United States, to the USSR, have deliberately fostered a certain kind of cultural regionalism within the state, in which regional differences are tolerated and even encouraged, provided that consciousness of racial or cultural difference does not erupt into demands for political independence, or that one region does not break the pluralist contract and attempt to impose its values on another. Regionalism admits to cultural differences within the state, but leaves the territorial and legal claims of the state intact. In an imperial context, there is inevitably a hierarchical structure to such regionalism: an asymmetrical relation is constructed between an imperial centre and a peripheral region, whose culture is at best pristine, innocent, refreshing, exotic, and at worst backward, barbaric, primitive or degraded. In both cases the regional culture is somehow deviant from the metropolitan norm.

Some of the tension between these contrary faces of regionalism is visible in nineteenth-century Irish poetry, especially as it relates to the representation of landscape and of history. A positive sense of Ireland as a distinctive 'region' characterizes the work of Samuel Ferguson, and later the work of W.B. Yeats, though in different ways. By contrast, the idea of Ireland as a region is treated with hostility by the Young Ireland balladeers, for whom the 'regional' is equivalent to the

politically and culturally 'provincial', far from being independent or equal. Thomas Davis thus complains that Ireland 'has been for centuries either in part or altogether a province', and elsewhere looks forward to the day that 'Ireland, long a province, be a Nation once again'.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the Young Irelanders not only critique Ireland's regional status within the British Empire, but also discourage regionalist attitudes within the nation itself, since an emphasis on regional differences within Ireland appears to threaten the consolidation of national identity. In fact it is useful to distinguish an 'imperialist regionalism' in which Ireland is seen to be a region of a United Kingdom or British Empire, and an 'internal regionalism' in which Ireland itself is seen to be composed of regions. The nationalist rejection of imperialist regionalism was accompanied by an equal suspicion of internal regionalism, since the establishment of national identity seems to demand allegiance to a transcendent entity known as the nation, the nation now filling the over-arching role held by the empire in the former model. The nation is thus threatened from without, in the shape of British imperial ambition, and from within, in the shape of conflicting regional loyalties.

Attitudes towards the 'regional' are often registered in individual poems by the degree to which the Irish landscape is historicized. As a general rule, those poets who regionalize the Irish landscape tend simultaneously to de-historicize it, creating versions of the mythic or the pastoral which depend upon a purified landscape, devoid of 'real history'. Politically, the ahistorical and depoliticized landscapes of Ferguson sit easily with a unionist politics, since to focus on Irish history would mean focusing on a history of division, violence, and conquest – and ultimately to highlight the arbitrary, violent origins of Ireland's 'regionalization' within the British state. By contrast, those who, like Davis, perceive the Irish landscape to be inescapably scored with historical signs, cannot sustain such visions; for them the landscape is a necessary reminder of the violent effects of colonial and imperial history, as well as providing evidence of the unbroken thread of Ireland's nationality.

These are not, of course, the only ways in which landscape functions in the nineteenth century. Some of James Clarence Mangan's work offers critical perspectives on both Ferguson and Davis: against the former it offers resolutely anti-pastoral landscapes, while against the latter it offers a challenge to the notion that landscape can transparently 'reveal' national identity. In the emigrant ballads of the mid-century, too, we find somewhat different landscapes; in such songs the specific local landscape being celebrated serves chiefly as a sign of loss and of nostalgia, defined less by its difference to other Irish locales, or to Britain, than by its difference to the 'new world' of exile and alienation. When we come to Yeats a generation later, we find Ferguson's regionalism being borrowed but

<sup>1</sup> 'Irish Antiquities' in *Thomas Davis: Selections from his Prose and Poetry*, introd. T.W. Rolleston (Dublin, n.d.), p. 100; 'A Nation Once Again' in *Spirit of the Nation*, deluxe ed. (Dublin, 1845), p. 274.

transformed, so that Ireland's landscape again represents a kind of de-historicized region, yet one defined not merely by its traditional difference from Britain, or England, but by its challenge to the advance of modernity. These changes have to do not only with political ideology, but also with the various writers' responses to the changing material conditions of Ireland in the nineteenth century: the experiences of cultural revival, failed rebellion, famine, mass emigration, land agitation and Ireland's complex relationship to Victorian imperial culture.

I

A kind of cultural regionalism is a feature of some of the important fiction produced by the unionist ascendancy in the early years of the century. In such works Ireland is regional in both a physical sense and a cultural sense; in fact in a novel like Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), the wild exotic landscape of the west of Ireland reflects a Gaelic society which is also wild and exotic. This literature may celebrate the values and historical distinctiveness of Gaelic culture, but it does so in order to rationalize the co-option of that landscape and culture as a 'region' within the larger United Kingdom. Like the arguments of Matthew Arnold later in the century, these novels ask that Ireland's regional distinctiveness be preserved rather than destroyed, in the hope that a kind of useful synthesis between the imaginative, feminized, passionate Celt and the industrious, masculine but prosaic Englishman might take place. Ultimately, of course, such a 'marriage' is intended to reinforce the strength of empire, not to challenge it, and Ireland's cultural difference to England is not understood to imply the need for political independence.

Samuel Ferguson's pastoral landscapes, based on his translation of Gaelic songs, provide poetic equivalents of this discourse. In 'The Fair Hills of Ireland' he depicts an idealized landscape where culture is politically neutralized by being abstracted into the vaguely 'holy' or 'hospitable', or else entirely overshadowed by nature itself:

A plenteous place is Ireland for hospitable cheer,  
Uileacan dubh O!  
Where the wholesome fruit is bursting from the yellow barley ear;  
Uileacan dubh O!  
There is honey in the trees where her misty vales expand,  
And her forest paths, in summer, are by falling waters fann'd,  
There is dew at high noontide there, and springs i'the yellow sand,  
On the fair hills of holy Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 'Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy, No. 4' in *Dublin University Magazine*, November 1834, p. 542.

Many of the details in this song are faithful translations of details in the Gaelic original (it is a reworking of an eighteenth-century exile's lament found in Hardiman's *Irish Minstrelsy*). But Ferguson's peculiar contribution is to align such pastoral visions with a Protestant ascendancy politics, often at the expense of the political import of the original. In the case of this poem, for instance, the speaker of the Gaelic original is a native exile hoping to return, while in Ferguson's translation he becomes more ambiguously a 'captain who comes sailing across the Irish sea' – a category which covers an Elizabethan planter or Cromwellian adventurer more easily than a Catholic exile. This political re-imagining is reinforced through Ferguson's prose commentaries, especially those found in his four-part review of *Irish Minstrelsy* in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1834. Here Ferguson argues that Ireland's fertile and bountiful landscape ought to be a ground of reconciliation among the divided sects and traditions of the island. Addressing those 'fair hills of holy Ireland' he argues that it was 'for love of you that we [the Anglo-Irish ascendancy] contended, for possession and enjoyment of you that we trampled down our rivals on your bosom'.<sup>3</sup> Thus Ireland is a place where 'nature' is more fundamental than history, and whose resources should unproblematically be available to all, regardless of cultural, political or religious identity. By employing the conventional gendered metaphors of imperialist conquest and possession, Ferguson manages to reduce the political struggle over that landscape to a 'natural' (that is, patriarchal) sexual rivalry between jealous males. Not only is history converted to nature in this rhetoric, but historiography itself becomes pointless, since historical explanation is reducible to a seemingly irrational and ahistorical force, analogous to the male sex-drive.

On those occasions when Ferguson does actually acknowledge the material facts of history, he re-asserts the primacy of landscape over the apparently ephemeral struggles which have 'disfigured' that landscape from time to time, however bloody or traumatic they may have been. As he gazes over an unspecified Irish valley, 'as fair ... as ever yielded its increase to the hand of man', he imagines it as the setting for historical acts of both barbarism and heroism. He describes dramatic scenes from a series of historical periods: the 1798 rebellion, the Williamite wars, the wars of the 1640s, the Elizabethan wars, all the way back to the first Celtic invasion. But like the beautiful valley itself, these historical events remain impressionistic and generalized in Ferguson's description, as if to project them out of history and into the more amenable realm of myth. The historical causes of these events, their specific consequences, and even the actual location of its landscape are obscure. Here in the realm of myth one can speak more convincingly of the 'sad necessity' of Ireland's violent history, and contrast it with the benevolence of love and nature, which is associated with the landscape itself and which transcends such petty divisions. The mythic per-

<sup>3</sup> 'Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy, No. 1' in *Dublin University Magazine*, April 1834, p. 456.

spective also allows Ferguson to imply that the responsibility for acts of violence is equally distributed among all combatants, whether invader or native, Protestant, Catholic or Dissenter, English or Gaelic. Rather than pursue the messy and unsettling business of untangling the specific injustices and retributions of Ireland's history, Ferguson wishes to direct us 'underneath' the unstable surface of the landscape, with its burning cottages and glinting spears, to the unchanging natural landscape which he associates with human love, sex and generation, as if these are themselves forces with no historical or ideological baggage. In fact, like Yeats after him, the prospect of a truly historicized and politicized landscape is likely to provoke sectarian alarm instead of romantic meditation. Later in his review of Hardiman, for instance, when Ferguson speaks of contemporary Irish politics, the Irish landscape begins to look positively dangerous: 'We now begin to discern the boys in the distance, looking grim enough, no doubt, and some of them still bouncing on the sod and roaring for the face of an Orangeman'.<sup>4</sup>

Seeking reconciliation among the various contenders for Ireland's fair hills, but committed to the interests of his class, Ferguson finds himself in these early works rationalizing imperial rule in Ireland. For him, the political state must be based upon the moral qualities of its people – not just the physical or cultural landscape:

What constitutes a state? Neither power-loom nor steam-coach. Cover the surface of a country with factories as thick as the cabins of its peasantry – reticulate it with railroads, numerous as its lanes and by-paths – lock up every rivulet, till it becomes a navigable canal – convert each promontory of its coast into a pier, and each reef of its sunken rocks into a breakwater; yet if the men be cowards, and the women wantons, it were better a desert. On the other hand, people that desert with bold men and chaste women, and you have the elements of a nation.<sup>5</sup>

Although this argument does not actually equate the natural landscape with the fount of human morality, it does employ the concepts of nature and human virtue in similar ways: both are structurally distinguished from the ephemeral cultural-historical 'surface' of the landscape. Thus in spite of the historical degradations of the violence of conquest and the 'tyranny of a debasing priestcraft', the Irish people's moral virtue seems to have persisted, much like the Irish spring landscape. And it is to be hoped that the same virtue will preserve Ireland from the worst effects of modernization and industrialization when these things arrive, as they must. Ferguson goes on to perform a typical sleight-of-hand by arguing that the sustenance of such virtue depends upon the guiding hand of

<sup>4</sup> 'Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy, No. 4', p. 524. <sup>5</sup> 'Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy, No. 3' in *Dublin University Magazine*, October 1834, p. 447.

(Protestant) liberal enlightenment, and therefore requires the civilizing presence of the ascendancy, as if the historically-saturated discourses of enlightenment and civility were themselves apolitical and natural. Eventually, under these conditions, Ireland 'must rise into importance, perhaps as an emulator, perhaps as an equal, perhaps as a superior to the other members of our imperial confederacy'.<sup>6</sup> The crucial point here, of course, is that membership of that confederacy is not in question. Empire is conceived not as a threat to Irish identity, but as a safeguard against 'the thralldom of superstition', and as a guarantee of civil order. Rather than being part of the problem of Irish history – a view which historical research might suggest – the empire is seen as an antidote to the nightmare of Irish history; it protects the 'natural' virtue of the Irish against history's more chaotic and violent forces. Thus it is that Ferguson's vision of a depoliticized Irish landscape, structurally analogous to the natural purity and virtue of the Irish people, can be pressed into service to justify Ireland's 'regional' status within a transcendent British Empire.

## II

Not surprisingly, the advocacy of Ireland's role as a distinctive region within the British Empire is not a feature of the Young Ireland nationalist poetry. The rhetorical stress in the nationalist verse of the 1840s is always on the self-sufficiency of Irish identity. While nationalists argued that Ireland ought indeed to learn from other nations, and ought to be culturally linked to other nations, it should never be politically dependent upon them. It has its own history, its own cultural and physical integrity, its own industrial resources; it ought to have its own metropolitan capital and institutions.

Along with this rejection of provincialism *vis-à-vis* the British Empire, there is a sustained attempt to discourage provincialism or regionalism within Ireland itself. In those nationalist poems which refer to actual locations in Ireland, the specific characteristics of a landscape – those that differentiate one place from another – are less significant than a landscape's metonymic representation of a broader, national history and identity. Often in Young Ireland's historiography, the greatest obstacle to the resurgence of national pride and national institutions is not British imperialism, but rather the deep divisions within Irish society itself, many of which, of course, have been caused or exacerbated by imperialism. The project of Young Ireland was, accordingly, to produce and maintain a new cultural unity which would transcend differences of religion, of class, of genealogy, and indeed of regional identity.

In tracing the negative effects of internal regionalism, Thomas Davis examines the Gaelic clan system, where, he argues, exaggerated duty to one's local

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

chieftain tends to inhibit the development of a national consciousness. Davis works out the aesthetic implications of this in an essay entitled 'The Songs of Ireland', which shows the crucial role Young Ireland assigned to the production of a canon of newly-made 'national' ballads to replace the divisive literature of provincialized Ireland:

There is one want, however, in all the Irish songs – it is of strictly national lyrics. They [the old Gaelic songs] are national in form and colour but clannish in opinion. In fact, from Brian's death, there was no thought of an Irish nation, save when some great event, like Aodh O'Neill's march to Munster, or Owen Roe's victory at Beinnburb, flashed and vanished. These songs celebrate M'Carthy or O'More, O'Connor or O'Neill, – *his* prowess, *his* following, *his* hospitality; but they cry down his Irish or 'more than Irish' neighbours as fiercely as they do the foreign oppressor ... even in the seventeenth century, when the footing of the Norman and Saxon in Ireland was as sure as that of the once invading Milesians themselves, we find the cry purely to the older Irish races, and the bounds of the nation made, not by the island, but by genealogy.<sup>7</sup>

Yet because the Young Irelanders wished to stress the historical continuity of Irish national identity, they could not simply jettison the Gaelic tradition. Davis, more than most, believed in the possibility of reconciling the Gaelic tradition (especially the Irish language) with the modernization Ireland required to become a self-sufficient nation. Later in the same essay, he envisions an Irish utopia which manages to resolve divisions between various oppositional forces: regional identities, the English and Irish languages, natives and settlers, modernity and tradition:

For the present nothing better can be done than to paraphrase the *Songs of the Nation* into racy and musical Irish; though a time may come when someone born amid the Irish tongue, bred amid Gaelic associations, instructed in the state of modern Ireland, and filled with passion and prophecy, shall sing the union and destiny of all the races settled on Irish ground, till the vales of Munster and the cliffs of Connaught ring with the words of Nationality.<sup>8</sup>

It could be argued that the challenge to this yet-to-be made 'national' literature came not merely from the aristocratic Gaelic poetic tradition, which essentially came to an end in the eighteenth century, but also from the local and regional character of the Gaelic popular tradition, which continued well into the nineteenth century. Gaelic popular songs were freely adapted as they

7 'The Songs of Ireland' in *Thomas Davis: Selections*, p. 226. 8 *Ibid.*

travelled round the country, often altered to allude to local events, or given regional variations (the famous 'Róisín Dubh', for instance, does not exist in a single definitive version, but rather in differing Munster and Connaught renditions). When particular locations are the subject of songs, they are often aspects of fiercely parochial rivalries which even take the form of song contests between one area and another.<sup>9</sup> There is a significant difference between this fluid – chiefly oral – Gaelic tradition, and the new balladry of Young Ireland, which is self-consciously national, and has the standardising, homogenizing fixity of print culture. Where Gaelic songs tended to change as they travelled, influenced by regional differences, the Young Ireland ballads of the *Nation* newspaper circulated in singular, 'national' versions not to be tampered with. In fact, because much of the *Nation's* reportage consisted of stories reprinted directly from provincial newspapers, the paper itself becomes an instrument for drawing the local or regional into a kind of over-arching, national narrative. It functioned as a kind of de-regionalizer of information of all sorts.

The actual content of the Young Ireland ballads continually subordinates regional or provincial identity to the national one, just as it advocates that creeds and classes must forget their differences in the interest of mutual allegiance to the nation. The need for geographical unity in the service of the nation is signalled in passages like this, from M.J. Barry's 'The Gael and the Green':

When opposite creeds come together—  
How mingle North, South, East, and West;  
Yet, who minds the difference a feather?—  
Each strives to love Erin the best;<sup>10</sup>

or typified in this couplet by Davis himself:

From Shannon to Bann, and from Liffey to Lee,  
The country is rising for Libertie.<sup>11</sup>

When Young Ireland poets do celebrate particular regions of Ireland, as in Davis's poems on Tipperary, or Charles Gavan Duffy's paean to Innisowen, the unique and local features of such places are less important than their inhabitants' ability to display *national* qualities of courage, endurance, passion or beauty. Davis's men of Tipperary vow 'never more we'll lift a hand ... except in war for Native Land',<sup>12</sup> while Duffy's ghostly warriors of Innisowen 'await but the word to give Erin her own'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Brendan Madagáin, 'Functions of Irish Song in the Nineteenth Century' in *Béaloides*, liii (1985), pp 130–216. <sup>10</sup> 'The Gael and the Green' in *Spirit of the Nation*, p. 43. <sup>11</sup> 'A Rally for Ireland' in *Nation*, 17 June 1843, p. 570. <sup>12</sup> 'The Men of Tipperary' in *Nation*, 5 November 1842, p. 57. <sup>13</sup> 'Innis-Eoghain' in *Spirit of the Nation*, pp 110–11.

Thus, like Samuel Ferguson, the Young Ireland poets locate the value of the Irish people in their moral virtue. They also occasionally imagine the Irish landscape as a 'common ground' in the spirit of Ferguson's fair hills. Nationalists like John O'Hagan ask: 'And are not all our ties the same— / One sod beneath—one blue sky o'er us?'<sup>14</sup> while J. de Jean Frazer offers a reconciliatory poem to commemorate the Twelfth of July:

How in one heav'nly breeze and beam  
Both flower and stem are glowing.  
The same good soil sustaining both,  
Makes both united flourish.<sup>15</sup>

But unlike Ferguson, it is more common in nationalist verse to view the Irish landscape as an inescapably historicized one. Young Ireland's poetic descriptions of place are littered with references to the material traces of actual history, such as ruins, monuments and pillar towers. Even when writing about wild depopulated landscapes like Gougane Barra, the natural landscape is seen to be inseparable from the crucial events, especially martial ones, which have shaped Irish history:

How often when the summer sun rested on Clara,  
And lit the dark heath on the hills of Ivera,  
Have I sought thee, sweet spot, from my home by the ocean,  
And trod all thy wilds with a Minstrel's devotion,  
And thought of thy bards, when assembling together,  
In the cleft of thy rocks, or the depth of thy heather;  
They fled from the Saxon's dark bondage and slaughter,  
And waked their last song by the rush of thy water.<sup>16</sup>

These poets do not separate the natural landscape from the historical one. There is no pastoral valley beneath history's vicissitudes in which all divisions and grievances can be forgotten in the name of love. Instead, their relentlessly historical imagination would suggest that reconciliation can only be achieved through active knowing and remembering, constantly retrieving and debating the events of the past, and using this knowledge as a basis for building a national future. Dismissing the pastoral, Davis advises that 'we want a landscape of passions and deeds, not wind and sun and tree'.<sup>17</sup>

Occasionally Davis envisions the landscape not as the venue of past historical action, but as a promising site for 'passions and deeds' of the present and

<sup>14</sup> 'The Irish Catholic to his Protestant Brother' in *Nation*, 24 December 1842, p. 169. <sup>15</sup> 'Song for July 12th, 1843' in *Nation*, 8 July 1843, p. 618. <sup>16</sup> J.J. Callanan, 'Gougane Barra' in Charles Gavan Duffy (ed.), *Ballad Poetry of Ireland* (Dublin, 1866), p. 183. <sup>17</sup> 'The Library

future. It is something to be utilized. Just as Ferguson imagines an Ireland of progressive industry under the beneficent eye of empire, Davis looks forward to a materially prosperous Ireland based on efficient use of the country's natural resources. But where Ferguson still emphasizes the transience of human culture, and valorizes the purer landscape underneath, Davis scratches the surface of that landscape and finds coal and turf – that is, materials for economic exploitation: 'Arigna must be pierced with shafts, and Bonmahon flaming with smelting-houses. Our bogs must become turf-factories, where fuel will be husbanded, and prepared for the smelting-house.'<sup>18</sup> The closest Davis comes to a celebration of the Irish 'landscape-in-itself' is in his article on 'Irish Scenery'. Here he exhorts the Irish upper classes to spend their holidays in Ireland rather than abroad. But this tourism is not purely romantic; it has utilitarian purposes. It would ensure that Irish wealth is spent within Ireland itself, and would also enable the ruling classes to acquaint themselves better with their own country, thereby getting their political loyalties in order. Ireland can offer scenery equal to any nation in Europe, Davis argues, from the lakes of Killarney to the cliffs of Slieve League. Mount Blanc has nothing on Kerry's 'Carn Tual', and the river Blackwater rivals the Danube for a cruise.<sup>19</sup> Thus even the sublime and beautiful have explicit material and political utility in Davis's version of landscape.

Davis's distinctive approach to landscape is further illustrated by his appeal to cartography. Maps are intended to be precise and scientific ways of representing landscape; they are intended to correct the distortions of myth and imagination. Davis values them for the accurate information they provide to the prospective national poet:

Topography is also essential to a ballad, or to any Historian. This is not only necessary to save a writer from ... gross blunder ... but to give accuracy and force to both general references and local description. Ireland must be known to her Ballad Historians, not by flat, but by shaded maps, and topographical and scenic descriptions; not by maps of today only, but by maps (such as Ortelius and the maps in the State Papers) of Ireland in time past.<sup>20</sup>

Maps serve nationalism in two ways: they provide accurate physical information about the country (especially important in a context where national self-knowledge has been discouraged), and they overcome the limited perspective of the individual or regional subject. They literally make the entire nation visible, albeit in abstract form. Like the *Nation* newspaper, the Irish Ordnance Survey recognized the unique and particular features of each part of the country, but

of Ireland' in *Thomas Davis: Selections*, p. 248. 18 'Foreign Travel' in *ibid.*, p. 242. 19 'Irish Scenery' in *ibid.*, pp 202–3. 20 'A Ballad History of Ireland' in *ibid.*, p. 223.

organized such information within a standardizing discourse – that is, it imposed a standard and transcendent way of perceiving and defining and naming the landscape. Davis wishes to ‘nationalize’ this transcendent perspective; but there is some irony in the fact that the great nineteenth-century mapmaking projects, like Ireland’s Ordnance Survey, the French *cadastre*, or Heslar’s survey of the United States, originated in the nation-building projects of imperial countries. They enhanced the state’s ability to police the landscape, to control movement of people and goods, and they also enabled the smooth operation of a capitalist economy by fixing boundaries for property exchange. Davis thus appears to be employing the discourse and technology of imperialist modernity *against* imperialism – something which prefigures the de-colonizing strategies of twentieth-century anti-imperialist movements, but which also ties imperialist and nationalist discourses into a curious kind of mirroring relationship.

In any case, knowledge of the landscape in this abstract, cartographically accurate form is never entirely sufficient for Davis. Later in his essay on ballad history he insists that abstract intellectual knowledge must be supplemented by immediate and physical experience of the object under study, arguing that in the end the Irish landscape

must be known by the *eye*. A man who has not raced on our hills, panted on our mountains, waded our rivers in drought and flood, pierced our passes, skirted our coast, noted our old towns, and learned the shape and colour of ground and tree and sky, is not a master of all a Balladist’s art.

This is closer to Ferguson’s valorization of the physical landscape-in-itself. Ireland’s landscape is generalized and internally de-regionalized. But Davis avoids the kind of sentimental or romantic experience which such encounters represent for Ferguson, and insists on rendering the landscape as a source of positive knowledge – it is not so much a bounty to be competed for, or a site of natural regeneration, but a kind of vast textbook to be studied with the eye.

III

The landscapes of James Clarence Mangan have more complicated features which tend to challenge the assumptions of both Ferguson and Davis. Twelve years after Ferguson’s review of Hardiman, Mangan published the poem ‘Siberia’, in which the Irish landscape is allegorized into the very opposite of pastoral vision:

In Siberia’s wastes  
Are sands and rocks.  
Nothing blooms of green or soft,

But the snowpeaks rise aloft  
And the gaunt ice-blocks.

And the exile there  
Is one with those;  
They are part, and he is part,  
For the sands are in his heart,  
And the killing snows.<sup>21</sup>

Strip away history from the landscape in Ferguson, and you are left with pristine nature; strip it away in Mangan's poem and you are left with a terrifying blankness, linked to political failure and to the poet's own psychological paralysis. By the time Mangan wrote this poem in 1846, famine was in progress, and the optimistic faith in the benefits of union with Westminster had begun to waver even with Union apologists like Ferguson himself (who would come out on the side of Repeal in 1848). Indeed Mangan's poem is just the most extreme example of the desolation of nature and landscape portrayed in a great many poems of the late 1840s.

If the Famine could be said to severely question the advantages of Ireland's political and economic union with Britain, it could also be said to mock the nationalist project of creating internal cultural unity, by creating its own perverse, catastrophic levelling through mass suffering and death. In such conditions, appeals to the resurgence of the national spirit and the power of education tend to sound hollow. Davis's positivist faith in the possibility of apprehending the national through accurate knowledge of the landscape also seems less convincing, unless one is willing to concede that Ireland's nationality is dead or ruined. Mangan, in spite of his status as 'national poet' among the Young Irelanders, regularly subverts the assumptions of positivism. His poem 'The Lovely Land', for instance, explicitly demonstrates the difficulties of establishing 'accuracy' in the representation of landscape, and of distinguishing the objective from the subjective. The poet speculates that the painting in front of him must represent either the Italy of Veronese or the France of Poussin, and only belatedly recognizes that in fact it is one of Maclise's Irish landscapes, complete with pillar tower:

Shame to me, my own, my sire-land,  
Not to know thy soil and skies!  
Shame, that through Maclise's eyes  
I first see thee, IRELAND!<sup>22</sup>

The shame here is directed at the poet's failure to read correctly, but also at the fact that it is only through a *representation* of Ireland that the poet recognizes his

21 'Siberia' in *Nation*, 18 April 1846, p. 425. 22 'The Lovely Land' in *Nation*, 18 July 1846, p. 633.

nation at all: it is as if the poet has taken Davis's advice on the need for abstract and representational knowledge, but has failed to supplement it with sufficient 'panting on the hills'. Yet clearly there must be a problem with representation itself, if it is so uncertain a source of 'truth'. It is not merely that such information may be incomplete, as Davis envisaged, but that it may seriously mislead: representation can always be a form of misrepresentation.

One other landscape poem by Mangan is worth considering here. 'The Dawning of the Day', which he alleges is a translation from O'Doran but in fact is an original composition, opens with the idealized landscape of 'a balmy summer morning', with blackbird and cuckoo singing, bees buzzing, and fish dazzling in the sea. By some fairy 'witcherie' the scene is suddenly transformed, so that the poet beholds a shore 'haunted by hosts brightly clad' who fight and vanish, to be replaced by 'Eden spread around'. The poem might have ended on this Fergusonian note, but instead the vision abruptly vanishes, leaving a Siberia-like landscape of desolation: 'black rocks and billows looming / In the dim chill Dawn of Day!'<sup>23</sup> The poem appears transitional, having one foot in the Gaelic pastoral love-poem which attracted Ferguson, and another foot in the Yeatsian supernaturalized landscape with its disturbing otherworldly encounters. Unlike Yeats, though, Mangan's melancholic scepticism makes him unsure X as to whether his visions have any objective validity, or are merely the products of his own diseased imagination. As with Ferguson, history is mythic, unspecific; but rather than being superficial it is shown to be buried deep within the landscape or in the poet's psyche (the effect is the same). It is always threatening to erupt into the present, with unsettling and disorienting consequences.

Another category of poetry which falls neither into Ferguson's nor Davis's model is the English-language emigrant ballad, particularly of the type written after the Famine. This is a genre which at first glance might seem more related to the local Gaelic song tradition than to Young Ireland nationalist poetry, since these ballads usually celebrate very particular places or regions, often cataloguing the names and features of the locale in great detail. The ninth stanza of Allingham's seminal 'The Winding Banks of Erne, or, An Emigrant's Adieu to Ballyshannon', for example, takes the reader on a stroll through the town:

Now measure from the Commons down to each end of the Purt,  
Round the Abbey, Moy, and Knather, – I wish no one any hurt;  
The Main Street, Back Street, College Lane, the Mall and Portnasun,  
If any foes of mine are there, I pardon every one.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> 'The Dawning of the Day' in *Nation*, 12 June 1847, p. 571. <sup>24</sup> Seamus Deane (ed.), *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. ii, (Derry, 1991), p. 66. See also Leon Litvack, 'The psychology of song; the theology of hymn: songs and hymns of the Irish migration' in Patrick O'Sullivan (ed.), *Religion and Identity, The Irish World-Wide: History, Heritage, Identity*, vol. 5 (Leicester, 1996), pp 70–89.

And this is just one of ten similar stanzas. But it is important to recognize that the landscape of 'home' in these poems tends to differentiate itself not from other Irish places, but from the cityscapes or strange environments of the New World. In this respect, Galway Bay is really little different from Bantry Bay or Ballyshannon, for that matter; all are in the end signifiers for a structural concept of 'home' which has more to do with asserting an identity amid alien surroundings than it does with privileging one part of Ireland over another.

When we pursue the notions of region and landscape as far as the early Yeats, other important changes have occurred. As with Mangan, the blazing nationalist optimism of Davis was no longer possible in a radically altered post-Famine culture. The simple pastoral visions of Ferguson must also have seemed naïve and hollow in the later part of the century, not least because the 'land question' had taken an especially material and politicized form from the 1870s onwards. Yeats does take up Ferguson's de-historicizing style, and his interest in Celtic prehistory, but he creates a much more highly supernaturalized landscape, where physical features are only a mask for a more powerful reality in and beneath the land: the Celtic faery world, or some abstract spiritual realm. This has partly been foreshadowed by the *Aisling* poetry of the Gaelic tradition, in which the supernatural in the form of a Celtic goddess, like Eire or Banba, emerges from the landscape to become visible to the poet. But where in the *Aisling* the supernatural is often interpreted as a symbol for the nation, in Yeats even Celtic spirits are hardly reducible to conventional political symbols.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the *Aisling* poet is normally drawn into dialogue with the supernatural vision, and is encouraged to take action as a result of his encounter; in Yeats the poet is only an observer of the disturbing and inexplicable, who may be emotionally or intellectually changed by the encounter but is not directed towards political action. This difference reflects an altered relationship to the supernatural, as well as a differing conception of the function of poetry – a shift from a poetry of exhortation to a poetry of contemplation.

In terms of regionalism and landscape, Yeats follows Davis and Ferguson in his relative disrespect for the local and particular. His early landscapes make use of Sligo placenames; but it is not Sligo's specificity which is ultimately important. Yeats's landscape is really a symbolic one which represents generalized qualities of tradition, natural beauty and supernatural possibility. Its deepest meaning lies in its otherness to modernity, to the urban, and to rational materialism. So it is also with Irish history. Even though he shares Davis's view that Ireland is properly a nation rather than a region, his anti-modern stance means that Yeats must reject Davis's positivist view of history:

<sup>25</sup> In cases where they are used as political symbols, as in the case of Cuchullain, it is significant that the celebrated figure is masculine, and thus an 'ego-ideal' for the male nationalist, rather than a woman who goads him into action on her behalf, as is the case in the *Aisling*.

It is not needful that [the people] should understand [the imaginative periods of Irish history] ... with scholars' accuracy, but that they should know them with the heart, so as not to be repelled by what is strange and outre in poems or plays or stories taken therefrom. The most imaginative of all our periods was the heroic age and the last few centuries that followed it and preceded the Norman Invasion – a time of vast and mysterious shadows, like the clouds heaped round a sun rising from the sea.<sup>26</sup>

This seems a refutation of Davis's programme for scholarly learning and field observation, but it is also a rejection of the shallow sentimentalism of Ferguson. History here is transformed into mystery, with Yeats rejecting positivism in favour of more imaginative and emotional 'truth'. Politically speaking, the strategy here is not necessarily an abandonment of nationalism. What we have in the contrast between Davis and Yeats is really an alternation between two different strategies of anti-imperial struggle. Davis embraced certain ideals of positivism and scientific modernity in order to combat imperialism on its own ground, as it were, while Yeats heroicizes the anti-modern, anti-intellectual and anti-bourgeois in order to suggest a radical alternative to the capitalist, rationalist modernity which characterizes Western imperialism. Where Davis is thinking of a political and material nation, Yeats is thinking of Ireland in a much more mythic way, though his mythology is far more dangerous and more radical than Ferguson's.

At the same time, the limits to Yeats's radicalism are exposed when we contextualize the de-historicized landscapes of poems like 'The Stolen Child', 'The Hosting of the Sidhe', 'The Valley of the Black Pig', 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' or 'The Fisherman'. In these poems the mythologized landscape – however revolutionary in aesthetic or philosophical terms – is curiously timeless at the very moment that the Irish landscape is undergoing some of its most profound historical transformations, including the Land War, and the gradual replacement of landlordism by peasant proprietorship through the Land Acts of 1881, 1885, 1891 and 1903. Questions of material struggle over the possession of the landscape are entirely bypassed in Yeats's aesthetics, even when distanced by several hundred years of history. When Yeats does allow for the necessity or validity of violent struggle, it is only when such violence can be clearly construed as heroic and tragic – the violence, say, of a pre-historic Ulster saga rather than the violence of nineteenth-century peasant insurgency.

Returning to the concept of Ireland's regional identity, we find that Yeats has re-worked the idea of regionalism within his own complex concerns, which are not identical to those of either Ferguson or Davis. In a letter to Robert

<sup>26</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Letters to the New Island*, ed. George Bornstein and Hugh Witemeyer (New York, 1989), pp 32-3.

Bridges in 1901, Yeats remarked that 'the chief work of my life [is] ... the giving life ... to a romantic region, a sort of enchanted wood'<sup>27</sup> – which suggests that for Yeats Ireland can be understood as a region, not of a material political state, but of a transcendent cultural realm which has unhappily been dominated by reason and intellect. To think of Ireland as a 'region' is thus no longer to imagine it as the picturesque garden of the empire, as it was for Ferguson, nor simply to envisage it as the negatively 'provincial', as it was for Davis, but rather to identify it as a deeply-rooted pocket of spiritual resistance to modernity. There is a politics here, but it is a politics of what Yeats called 'the revolt of soul against intellect',<sup>28</sup> and while it is tangentially related to the conventional politics of Irish nationalism, it has also re-directed such politics into the realm of metaphysics.

<sup>27</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Collected Letters*, vol. iii, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford, 1994), p. 91. <sup>28</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Collected Letters*, vol. i, ed. John Kelly & Eric Domville (Oxford, 1986), p. 303.