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Literature and nationalism

Christopher Ivic

If the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the rise of nationalism as a historical phenomenon, then the serious study of nationalism emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century. At the forefront of such studies were historians and social theorists—namely Hans Kohn, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Hugh Seton-Watson. But perhaps the most significant contribution to the field appeared in the form of Benedict Anderson's groundbreaking 'Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism'. Anderson's work is invaluable precisely because it examines nationality and nationalism as "cultural artefacts" (Anderson 1991: 4), cultural artifacts, moreover, that foster deep attachments. Crucially, Anderson considers the role that print culture, newspapers, and novels played in forging a sense of an imagined political community, and this attention to textual material has had a profound impact on the field of literary studies. If, as Anderson argues, the imagined community is "conceived in language, not in blood" (1991: 145), then it comes as no surprise that literary scholars are keen to explore connections between literature and nationalism. Recent critical attention to the affective, constitutive power of literature—the way in which literature shapes individual and collective identities—owes a great deal to Anderson's work.

While Anderson locates the rise of nationalism in the eighteenth century, when religious modes of thought began to wane, important critical work on literature and nationalism has come from early modernists, who have located the construction and invention of English national identity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The early modern period is significant for two reasons: it marks a concerted effort on the part of England to break from Rome and to declare (and define) itself an empire; and, with the execution of King Charles I in 1649, the English people found themselves redefining their relationship to their land and with their fellow citizens. That English writers sought to forge a sense of Englishness in the Tudor period manifests itself in a range of texts, both literary, such as epic poetry and the original genre of the history play, and nonliterary—chronicle and chorography, for example. The Elizabethan period was very much the golden age of literature and nationalism: "Never before," writes Richard Helgerson, "or since have so many works of such magnitude and such long-lasting effect been devoted to England by the members of a single generation" (Helgerson 1992: 1). Writing in England in the Tudor period was not only a process of self-definition, however; a sense of Englishness also emerged in opposition to other peoples and

cultures—this is particularly true of New World inhabitants and the Irish. Ireland, although technically a kingdom at the time, was very much an English colony, and English discourse on Ireland and the Irish is underpinned by a strong sense of English civil, cultural, racial, and religious superiority. The role that Ireland played in shaping English national identity should not be underestimated, nor should the ability of nationalism and its attendant discourses to take strong hold of writers.

In the wake of Charles I's execution, the national community, no longer a kingdom, came to be imagined by many writers otherwise, namely as "boundary-oriented and horizontal" rather than "centripetal and hierarchical," to borrow Anderson's terms (Anderson 1991: 15). The relaxation of press censorship resulted in a plethora of voices participating in a mid-seventeenth century reimagining of the political nation. At the forefront of this reimagining was the poet and republican polemicist John Milton. What makes Milton such a remarkable figure is his various and conflicted representations of England and Englishness. Writing throughout a signal period of English, indeed British, history, Milton witnessed regicide, republicanism, as well as restoration, and his various articulations of national identity bear witness to the impact of monumental historical change on his political thought. These articulations also bear witness to the other cultural discourses that underpin nationalism in a given historical context; for Milton's nationalism is grounded, variously, in civility, ethnicity, history, language, politics, and religion. Milton's poetry and prose provides a rich example of one writer's engagement with the cultural and historical forces that give rise to English nationalism.

A valuable lesson to learn from recent work on nationalism and literature is the crucial point that literature is rarely in the service of nationalism. Literary texts, to be sure, can be the product of, and productive of, aggressive forms of nationalism; however, they can also serve to contest and interrogate nationalism. It would be irresponsible, for example, to label Milton as ideologically in line with Oliver Cromwell, just as it would be irresponsible and unproductive to dismiss, say, W. B. Yeats as a fascist. As an Anglo-Irish writer, Yeats, with one foot in England and the other firmly planted in Ireland, produced literature that invites a reading attentive to the nuances of his complicated nationalism—a complication informed not only by birth and geography but also by history, philosophy, class, and gender. Nationalist movements are complex and contradictory historical formations. While literary texts are rarely produced independently of historical events, they often provide deep and insightful reflection on them.

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