Hibernian Evanescence: Globalisation, Identity and the Virtual Shamrock

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Having rejected the autarkic economic policies of earlier decades and embraced both the EU and an industrial relations model based on "social partnership" and consensus, the Republic of Ireland has become one of the most open economies in the world, as well as one of the world's richest countries per head of population. At the same time, it is becoming tied ever more closely to a (still) social-democratic Europe, which is sometimes seen by the Left as a buffer against domination by an Anglo-US neo-liberal ethos. Irish post-nationalists regard Europe favourably as offering a means of escape from the binary either/or, British/Irish mindset that has beset the Irish consciousness for centuries. The adoption of this socio-political modality has inevitable consequences for debates surrounding, and notions of, Irish identity (-ies) in recent years. The interrogation of "the nation" has been one of the primary exercises in Irish political and cultural studies, among which the exertions of postcolonial Irish studies can be counted. In this essay, my aim is to address some of the issues that pertain to Ireland's current status as economic power; the demographic consequences of this economic prowess; how postcolonial theory has been refracted through the Irish experience in an effort to complicate essential versions of Irish identity; and to introduce the burgeoning, if not ascendant, discourses of hyper-identity to the field of Irish cultural studies.

As I stated in my introductory comments, there have been fundamental upheavals in the fabric and operations of Irish society on foot of its successful embrace of the tenets of liberal modernisation. The combination of neo-liberalism, cheap air fares, and the EU means that it has become increasingly difficult to navigate around Dublin without some knowledge of Polish. The cause was the liberal (social and economic) immigration model that favoured the free movement of labour. Labour-mobility and consequent laissez-faire immigration policies facilitate the priority of capitalism to keep wages under control, which can conveniently be presented as a socially liberal policy of embracing multiculturalism. The consequence has been the immigration of large numbers of eastern European workers. The phenomenon of immigration has caused embarrassment for Irish Leftists who on the one hand did not want to be seen as anti-immigrant, and on the other did not want Irish wage levels to fall as a consequence of the influx of cheap labour from abroad. In recent times, even Leftists have been talking seriously about curbing immigration in an effort to protect working class jobs—and, no doubt,

votes. Consequently, a major fault line in Left-liberal ideology (the contradiction between the priority of multiculturalism on the one hand and the priority of protecting workers' living standards on the other) has become painfully evident to people who have been active in Irish politics and trade unionism in recent years. At the same time, basic manufacturing industry has been draining away from Ireland under pressure from low-wage economies elsewhere in the world. This has taken place within the general framework of economic globalisation, with its concomitant features of exploitation of Third World workers and resource-depletion, as a result of the hitherto cheap oil that has facilitated international trade. While many of the cultural and social aspects of globalisation are acceptable to Left-liberal opinion, the economic aspects are much more problematic. Additionally, while national boundaries have been steadily eroded within the EU, the external barriers to immigration into the EU are going up.

While Ireland's economy boomed, the core states of the EU—Germany, France and Italy—had long been in the economic doldrums (though the German economy has looked healthier in recent times). At the same time, the drawbacks of the Anglo-American economic model are evident in Ireland's Third World health service (at least for poor people—the better-off can avail of private hospitals and insurance). The ideology of low taxation, driven by the neo-liberal Progressive Democrats and now accepted by virtually all political actors in the Republic including the Labour Party and Sinn Fein, has meant a chronic shortfall in financial support for the health services, a problem exacerbated by the privileged position of hospital consultants in the Republic. In recent years, there has been glaring economic inequality with an alleged "race to the bottom" in terms of wages, in the struggle by younger people to get on the housing ladder, and in the erosion of the Irish environment by a new wealth with more money than taste. Few Irish people, however, want to go back to the nightmare days of the eighties with massive unemployment and national indebtedness. Most sides concede—rightly or wrongly—that the maintenance of a regime of low taxation, particularly of corporations, is a pre-requisite for keeping that nightmare at bay. The most tiresome moniker attached to this re-configured Ireland is that of a "Celtic Tiger" economy. The term is a double anachronism, since not only is the tiger an alien species but the rather vague term "Celtic" is doubly so when applied to the Irish. For both Germans and Americans, plugging into "Irish" and "Celtic" culture has long been a "safe" way of re-finding archaic European values, largely untainted by colonialism and fascism. But the word "Celtic" is hotly contested, and even more so in its application to Ireland. It seems to be more of a cultural and linguistic catch-all term than one with any precise meaning in terms of ethnicity. Nietzsche, like Caesar before him, regarded the Celts as a blond race, using the fair-haired Gaelic hero Fin-Gal to substantiate his "Aryan," proto-Nazi theorising (16). On the other hand, Rolleston (preface, n.p.) believed that the "Celtic" areas of England may be defined by their "relative negrescence." (The Celts were thus both fundamentally blond and fundamentally dark…) Outside of this bizarre dichotomy, a recurrent

theme of Bob Quinn's book *The Irish Atlantean* is that Ireland, far from being a "Celtic" stronghold as traditionally believed, was a kind of ethnic traffic island in pre-modern times (Quinn). Recent DNA research in Ireland traces the ethnic origins of many Irish people to pre-Celtic times (Hill et al.; Battle; see also James). Whether or not Ireland used to be a traffic island, it certainly seems as if it is becoming one today—at least until the cheap oil runs out.

In debates about Ireland's role in Europe, nationalism—rejecting both US neo-liberalism and EU political control—has sometimes been offered as a panacea against the erosion of Ireland's economic, social and cultural values by globalisation. In the terms of Michael Mays: "Where the Enlightenment concept of citizenship was seen to be a right conferred by birth and almost preternaturally linked to the related concepts of nationhood and powers derived from the state, globalisation, in multiplying and overlaying the centres of power, legitimacy, and allegiance which the nation-state once monopolised, diffuses the more rigid forms of self-identity conveyed by nationality" (6). In an Irish context, the term "nationalism" is applied here to the nationalism of Sinn Fein, the EU-sceptical National Platform which campaigned against closer integration of Ireland into the EU, and some elements of the Green Party, rather than to the ostensibly "nationalist" Fianna Fail. Fianna Fail, which at the time of writing is in a coalition government with the Greens and the Progressive Democrats, has the genius of appearing to combine nationalist, Leftist, pro-business, pro-US and ecological aspirations in a catch-all political melange—regarding itself more as a national movement than as a political party. It is consequently capable of appearing to be, simultaneously, both critical and supportive of multi-national capital and the policies of the US administration. This is no mean achievement in political terms, though it has been embarrassing for their coalition partners the Greens, who have—against their gut instincts and previous policies—had to make the best of Fianna Fail's support for the controversial Shell Oil pipeline in Co. Mayo and the US use of Shannon Airport as a military stopover on the way to Iraq. "Nationalism" in Ireland, then, extends all the way from "pure" nationalism of the traditional Sinn Fein type to the watered-down, pragmatic "nationalism" that has been largely characteristic of Fianna Fail, at least in its modern incarnation.

While Irish nationalists (for example Sinn Fein) have in the past bizarrely shared an EU-sceptical position with UK conservatives, the booming Catholic South co-exists—in direct defiance of Weberian (and Unionist) stereotypes—with the economically-stagnant Protestant North. Of course, Ireland has always been mired in contradiction. Republicanism was originally Protestant and secular in inspiration, while monarchy—to which Northern loyalists profess undying devotion—is an institution with originally Catholic roots. Irish Catholics were royalists in the seventeenth century, in contrast to the plebeian Cromwellians. The Tory party—piquantly—derives its name from an Irish word meaning "robber," which referred originally to dispossessed seventeenth-century Irishmen and later to "any armed Irish papist or royalist" (Webster). The aristocratic element within the

Irish Catholic resistance to English rule has long been forgotten and repressed. Catholic nationalism and secular republicanism have been forced together in Ireland and the contradictions occluded (in similar, though opposite, fashion to the repression of the links that existed between Ulster Presbyterianism and Irish republicanism around the time of the French Revolution). Northern Protestant "Unionists" look warily over their shoulder at an increasingly independent-minded Scotland (their country of ancestry, in large part) where a Gaelic revival is in full swing, evoking the Scottish Jacobite tradition. Scots Gaelic is a close relative of the Irish language, the latter traditionally—though not exclusively—associated with Irish Catholic aspirations.

Institutional "nationalists" in the Republic pay lip-service to a United Ireland that they may indeed truly want, but, like St. Augustine with regard to heaven, not yet. (The loss of London subventions to the North in a post-United Ireland would seriously undermine the Irish economy, and an inevitable rationalisation would make many civil servants on both sides of the border redundant.) Others in Ireland have reacted to three decades of violence by a rejection of nationalism in favour of the model of Boston, Brussels, an EU-based "Europe of the regions" or, in the case of some Greens, a post-nationalist bio-regionalism.

The above observations—specifically the tension between national and international concerns—raise fundamental questions regarding Irish history, ethnicity, identity, and nationality. Specifically, they raise issues regarding the role of the state in the twenty-first century, and particularly the role of the concept of the state in conceptualising Ireland. Everard argues that the state "would need to be conceived as a disaggregated form, existing as a function of its differences and dispersions, rather than as the rational, unified originary actor of modernist realist discourses" (5). In postmodernist terms deriving from Foucault, Everard treats states as "discourse formations," as "sets of relations between those things and statements that serve to describe or invoke a state" (8). Like the Internet, states are for him, in terms derived from William Gibson, a "consensual hallucination" (22). However, he believes that the state is here to stay, because it is intimately related to the issues of identity and security, specifically the monopoly on force (44). States in his terms "offer the last line of defence for the individual" (93). Individuals derive part of their identity from the structure of the state (113). The state in his terms is a legal fiction, albeit an important one (152). While Everard concedes to one of the traditional "realist" definitions of the state (originally derived from Weber), his argument is at base a postmodern one, calling in question the notion of the state as some kind of purposive creative agent. While there is no space here to open up the larger realist-postmodernist issue, the analysis of Everard is cited as providing a suggestive means of conceptualising the state—though this is not necessarily at the expense of Marx-influenced notions of the state as representing or embodying the interests of capital (which in the contemporary world it clearly does to a great extent). Everard's analysis parallels the conceptual unclarities of the nation, which have

been particularly fraught in respect of Ireland. (Is the Irish nation to be conceptualised in terms of ethnicity, language, culture or now—with the phenomenon of immigration—residency?) Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an "imagined political community…. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (5-6, emphasis in original). In the context of recent controversies in regard to the status of immigrants in Ireland, these theoretical issues take on a new urgency.

Postcolonial theory problematises nationalist stereotypes concerning Ireland, and has contributed to the ongoing disintegration of national certainties. Colin Graham cites Fanon's progression from colonisation through resurgence to nationalism to liberation to the nation, while noting the critique of postcolonial nationalism, in particular in the context of India by the Subaltern Studies group, which sees the postcolonial nation of India as the ideological production of British rule (83). Graham argues that: "The very idea of nationality which was used by decolonising peoples to coalesce themselves into a coherent political force was itself transferred to the colonies by imperialist ideology….This ideology was adopted and turned back unto the coloniser by the colonised in order to conceptually justify their own anti-colonial struggle. The result is a postcolonial world of nation states which structurally and practically imitate western nations" (83-84). This argument is particularly suggestive in the Irish context, with the replication, post-revolution, of British structures and ideologies in Ireland. Citing Fanon's notion of the reclamation of authenticity as part of the bringing of a national history into existence (Fanon 26), Graham argues that: "If authenticity is a tool for the justification of colonialism then, like (and as part of) the nation, it must be turned to face the coloniser" (141). Graham notes the "contradiction and multiplicity" in the tropes of Irish authenticities: "Is the predominant anti-colonial Irish authenticity of the de Valerean or Yeatsian version, for example? Folkish or rural? Irish Irish, Anglo-Irish or global Irish?" (141). The fact that authenticity has persisted in Irish culture should be understood, Graham believes, as involving a wish for validation—the persistence is rooted in the fact that colonialism deprived the colonised of its claims to authenticity. Irish "authenticities" can be construed as anti-colonialist, yet layered and problematic in terms of objectivity (150). In the context of the deconstruction of a TV ad entitled "Ireland," Graham describes it as "not an entire rejection of authenticity but an ironic acknowledgement of its persistence in Irish culture" (150). Vincent Cheng, likewise, argues that "the specific culture of a late-colonial Ireland might be theorized indeed as a mongrel culture—even a culture of imposture, adulteration, and inauthenticity: modern and diverse in its variety and complexity—rather than primitive, premodern and ineluctably other by virtue of a narrowly defined, authentic otherness" (45). Nationalism, then, has been the ideological terrain where colonialism and anti-colonialism have battled. In the context of the writings of Seamus

Deane, Graham notes the lack of a significant position to replace the certainties offered by nationalism (85). Graham argues that contemporary postcoloniality has the potential ability to destroy nationalism's self-image (perhaps in terms of a commitment to groups oppressed by nationalism). In the context of revisionism's critique of Irish nationalism, he also notes the possibilities of a cross-fertilization between revisionism and postcolonialism in terms of a common critique of anti-colonial nationalism.

Conceptualisations of Ireland have become increasingly slippery as they have, under the combined pressure of political turmoil in the North and theoretical analysis, evaded geographical, ethnic, political, ideological and linguistic boundaries and definitions. In the terms of Fintan O'Toole: "While the place itself persists, the map, the visual and ideological convention that allows us to call that place 'Ireland' has been slipping away. Its coordinates, its longitudes and latitudes, refuse to hold their shape" (2, qtd. in Graham 2). Such conceptualisations are further called in question by the Internet, which hastens the evanescence of any fixed notion of Ireland. If, in Anderson's terms, print-capitalism with its tendency to linguistic unification is fundamental to the nation-state (37-46), Internet-capitalism may force the dissolution of the nation-state, at least as it is presently known. The Internet combines decentralisation, immediate access to a mass audience, the overcoming of spatial limitations, and the dematerialisation of culture. When you exchange personal details with someone you have just met, it is often more important to know what particular address on the Internet (or number on the mobile phone network) the other person has than their physical address, which in many cases is likely to change sooner than the virtual one. The combination of Internet booking and cheap travel means that it is easier—and possibly quicker—to travel from Dublin to Eastern Europe than to Kerry or Donegal.

A search through "Irish Sites" on the Internet quickly turns up a site offering property in Budapest—buying such property is, it seems, a particularly Irish thing to want to do. (If you can't afford to buy a Hungarian apartment, you could at least settle for "aesthetic dentistry" in Hungary for a fraction of its cost in Ireland.) On the theological plane, "Eirepsychics.com" competes for customers with an Irish Christian dating service. Though there is—comfortingly—an "Irish-only" search engine called Shamrock and you can download Irish fonts for your PC, it comes as a slight shock to realise that the popular Ireland Online site is part of BT. But on the other hand, in the "real," non-virtual world, Irish investors are buying up large chunks of UK property, to compensate perhaps for the takeover of Irish main streets by the UK chain stores. While "Irishness" migrates to the virtual, the virtual further undermines the notion of "Irishness" itself. Internet debates about issues like Northern Ireland and the Iraq war heighten the disjuncture between "Irish" sentiment in the US and in Ireland, while at the same time people living in Ireland, and those of Irish origin abroad, discover long-lost relatives through Internet searches and e-mail. The Internet simultaneously highlights the instabilities in

the notion of "Irishness" as a culturally and politically unifying term, while hastening, through cyber-globalisation, both its dissolution and its migration to new forms. The Internet, indeed, intensifies the questioning of the notion of a specifically "national" culture. Hypertext re-emphasises the postmodern "death of the subject" expressed in dystopian terms by Mark Slouka (5-58) as "springtime for schizophrenia." Since you can be anyone you like on the Web, the opportunities for the development of split and multiple identities seem to open up like a cultural abyss. With the possibilities for masquerade offered by the Internet, the question of subjectivity, and specifically of national identity, takes on a new centrality.

The relationship of the decentred Irish subject to the decentring of subjectivity in modern culture has already been noted in the literature on the question of Irish identity. Kevin Whelan asks why Ireland produced so many modernist writers and England so few:

> An Irish answer to this question might begin by claiming that the nameless decentred subject of modernism is very like the colonial subject. The colonial encounter in Ireland has already created a sense of history out of synchronicity, and a hollowed-out identity….The Irish were already linguistically estranged, between two languages culturally adrift. The modernist viewed language as an object to be attacked from outside, an externalised monolith to be sculpted by the artist, with his heightened awareness of language. Such a viewpoint is more readily available to those who are already aware of the instability of language… (98)

Whelan writes that "Irish literature is always a minor literature, because it is a colonial literature—disempowered by the canonical forms of the colonizer's discourse, re-empowered by the experimental quest for alternatives to it. Irish literature seeks to rewrite its marginality as a new centrality, as its precociously decentred colonial subject becomes the classic modern subject" (99). One might also add the influence of Hiberno-English, the result of the grafting of English unto the Irish language over the last few centuries. The influence of Irish grammar, vocabulary and turns of phrase on Irish writers—even those, like Wilde and Yeats, with little direct knowledge of the language—adds a new vibrancy to English—itself originally an admixture of Anglo-Saxon and Norman French. Perhaps, though here we are necessarily in the realm of speculation, Irish writing in English invokes the ghost of the original "Celtic" language that English supplanted—and perhaps to some extent absorbed—on the British mainland. (The term "British" itself, of course, has a Celtic reference, though many Irish people object to the geographical description of Ireland as part of the "British Isles.") Linguistic stability is an illusion, just as much as its counterparts in terms of ethnicity, nationality and the state. It has been noted that the writings of James Joyce—specifically *Finnegans Wake* with its copious internal and external "links"—themselves anticipated contemporary cybernetic developments (Heim 31). Furthermore, new forms of Internet cinema, in the terms ("digital shanachies") of Nora Barry (102-105) recall ancient traditions of Irish fireside storytelling (O'Brien 118-119). As

Luke Gibbons suggests, "Irish culture experienced modernity before its time" (6, qtd. in Cheng 44).

The Internet, with its capacity to break down spatial and temporal barriers, involves the virtualisation and dematerialisation of culture. There is an erosion of the distinction between creator and consumer, between reader and author (Snyder 79). Hypertext re-emphasises the postmodern "death of the subject" (Gaggi 115). The notion of a coherent individual identity, already problematised by postmodernism, is further called in question by the possibilities opened up by the Internet for online role-playing, where traditional markers of identity such as age, race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality can be occluded. Digital developments facilitate both creative input and viewer-audience involvement over a geographically-dispersed area. (An example is Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia which anyone with an Internet connection can access, and indeed edit.) The distinction between creative input and (passive) experience becomes increasingly eroded. As Mark Poster argues: "The change in the material form of culture from analogue to digital in principle enables information to bypass existing, national relations of force…The Internet is becoming a paranational culture that combines global connectivity with local specificity…" (105). In a passage that subverts nationalist categories, Poster further remarks that:

> The Internet enables the exchange of images, sounds and text across national borders, as if those borders did not exist as political units….It forges links between individuals and groups of different, even antagonistic, nationalities. It produces the effect of global connectivity or planetary relations. It erases the distances of space and time in an unprecedented manner. It enables every receiver of a message to produce a message, every individual to disseminate messages to a mass. But it achieves these transparently instrumental effects at a tremendous cost of cultural dislocation and innovation. (125)

The situation described by Poster both parallels the economic and cultural transformation of Ireland and is intimately involved in it, insofar as the Internet has become an inextricable part of life over the last couple of decades. Michael Cronin points out what he calls the "*chrono-politicisation* of Ireland" (55): Ireland's small size has enabled it, with other small nations, to offer speedy delivery of information-rich and design-rich goods and services in the network-based economy, to the extent that Ireland is now the world centre for translation of computer materials, and is outperformed only by the US in the size of its software exports (56-57). However, the view of writers like Poster that the Internet is reinventing the entire public sphere in the postmodern era has been challenged in terms of the fragmentary nature of the interventions that have become possible; the fact that mediated communications are only part of our experience of public space; the major deficiencies of access to cyberspace, deficiencies which are exacerbated by the ongoing dynamic of "upgrade culture"—one's capability is always lagging behind the possible; the exigencies of "RL" or real life are never left behind on the Web and may indeed by reinforced in terms of stereotypes; and hacking, cyber-intrusion, viral contamination and surveillance subvert

the safety of cyberspace (Lister et al. 178-181; see also Danet). In fact it has been argued that the web, with the dominance of "clicking" and selection over writing per se, has actually diminished the interactive capabilities of the Internet, increasing the phenomenon of mediation and reducing the capabilities of transformation (Lister et al. 182). Furthermore, there may be aspects of "real life" that cannot be replicated by cyberspace and may be lost in the ongoing transformation to a virtual life. Michael Heim argues that technology frequently takes away with one hand what it gives with another, eliminating one-to-one interdependence between people and disrupting the networks of personal association (100). In his terms, cyberspace intensifies body/mind dualism: "The surrogate life in cyberspace makes flesh feel like a prison, a fall from grace, a descent into a dark confusing reality" (102). N. Katherine Hayles criticises "visionaries" of cyberspace for the escapism engendered regarding "real world" problems: "If we can live in computers, why worry about air pollution or protein-based viruses?" (3).

The contradictions of the Internet are manifold, particularly in regard to its apparent tendencies both to strengthen and undermine national cultures. On the one hand, it offers a haven for marginalized cultures and languages. You can "Google" in Irish and access Irish fonts in the traditional script. On the other hand, the Internet hastens the dominance of English not only over threatened languages like Irish but over "mainstream" languages like German and French as well. Poster notes that 80% of Web sites were in English at the time of writing, versus 2% in French (117). The argument is already lost as to which language should be the lingua franca in Europe—it is English (partly facilitated by Anglo-American domination of the mass media, and partly by the relative simplicity of its grammar). The growing hegemony of the English language—hastened greatly by the Internet—threatens the integrity not only of small nations like Ireland (if it were not already threatened enough) but of larger European nations as well, insofar as language is strongly intertwined with notions of national identity. Nation states try to maintain control in the face of creeping cyber-globalisation by stepping up surveillance, as in the US in the wake of 9/11, or in Ireland with the controversial Data Retention legislation of the previous Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat government. The Internet has engendered on the one hand the anarchy of unchecked sexual offerings for every taste imaginable, and on the other hand a return to state censorship that might have been difficult to foresee some decades ago—particularly in Ireland where literary censorship, associated with the worst excesses of ecclesiastical dominance, had been widely reviled (see Rockett). This is a general issue in First World countries. Bizarrely, people have been held legally responsible for the content of sites to which they link their web pages; and the police, in the interests of multi-billion corporations, invade children's bedrooms to prosecute them—or their parents—for possession of "illegal" downloaded music. Zamyatin's novel *We* (1993), the story of a vast city made of glass, offers a dystopian literary anticipation of a culture where privacy has become a rapidly-

disappearing phenomenon. ID cards have been on the agenda in Britain—and have consequently been discussed in Ireland—as a result of acts of terrorism facilitated by Internet and mobile phone technology, as well as the widespread phenomenon of identity theft. The nation state responds to the challenges of technology with enhanced paranoia, even as that technology threatens it with dissolution into the ether of cyberspace.

According to George Yudice, what is going on with the current technological developments is a process of "transculturation," defined as "a dynamic whereby different cultural matrices impact reciprocally—though not from equal positions—on each other, not to produce a single syncretic culture but rather a heterogeneous ensemble" (209, qtd. in Poster 49). In on-line communities there is reciprocal self-invention, and mutual interpellation through invention: "Unlike earlier forms of mediated communication, digital authorship is about the performance of self-constitution" (Poster 75). The Internet is a many-to-many, low-cost, decentralised, mutual and reciprocal interactive system (Poster 104). Poster posits the notions of "glocalisation" and "virtual ethnicity" (16), concepts which have obvious relevance in terms of the theoretical problematisation of issues of Irish national identity. Providing instant transnational contact, the Internet dislocates communication from national posts, from relations based on space and territory, and inserts the subject into a networked information system: "The result is a more completely post-modern subject or, better, a self that is no longer a subject since it no longer subtends the world as if from outside but operates within a machine apparatus as a point in a circuit" (16). The citizen-subject vanishes into the communicative network (114). In Virilio's terms, information creates a virtual reality that takes the place of the "geography of nations" (106, qtd. in Poster 115). Poster writes that: "A digital message…travels autonomously to its destination without regard to instituted points of control. In these ways digital culture becomes detached from the powers of the nation, moving globally at the speed of light…in an unregulated sphere of communication" (105). Poster's position, noting the undermining of subjectivity and traditional concepts of nationhood, parallels the influence of postcolonial studies in its challenge to these categories—including, in an Irish context, the challenge to the tired "tradition/modernity" dialogue. Cleary (92) notes the "sclerotic dichotomy" of tradition/modernity in regard to Ireland, a dichotomy invoked (in favour of modernity) by both social liberals and economic neo-liberals. In Cleary's terms, the discourse of modernisation is a version of the nineteenth-century ideology of progress, with its hidden side of imperialism and domination (92). Just as the ideology of modernisation occludes the negative side of progress with its hidden oppressions, it seems simultaneously blind to where modernisation is ultimately leading—to the undermining of the nation-state itself. Both postcolonial theory and the Internet (together with the theoretical analysis applied to the latter) potentially undermine the connected notions of subjectivity and nationhood: the subject dissolves into an inter-connected network which transcends national boundaries.

The Internet "is becoming a paranational culture that combines global connectivity with local specificity, a "glocal" phenomenon that seems to resist national political agendas and to befuddle national political leaderships" (Poster 105). Poster regards the Internet as an "underdetermined object that constitutes the self in configurations that are outside those of the modern and late modern subject" (19). This parallels the questioning of the liberal humanist notion of subjectivity in postcolonial theory, particularly as the latter has been influenced by the writings of Foucault (Edward Said) and Althusser (David Lloyd). For Lloyd, the assumption of the state is that its legitimacy is derived from the "formal equivalence of individuals who are posited prior to any material conditions of existence" (230). The public sphere is constituted around the "formal abstract subject," a constitution that undermines the ability of minorities to be constituted as generic subjects rather than individual ones (234). The challenge of the Internet to the notion of subjectivity (which theoretically finds its source in similar postmodernist writings to those that have influenced postcolonialism) intensifies the challenge to the state itself in the era of economic, social, political, cultural and technological globalisation. The current paranoia about immigrants in Ireland—simultaneously seen as a resource to be exploited and as a (socio)-economic threat—may have its roots in a (conscious or unconscious) realisation of the extent to which the parameters of the state itself are under threat in the era of globalisation

In parallel with the dissolution of traditional, geographically-based notions of national identity in an Irish context (the emphasis on culture rather than ethnicity, recent proposals to re-connect with the Irish diaspora in the US and elsewhere, the ongoing controversies about immigration), Poster coins the term "virtual ethnicity." He raises the issue of a new kind of "planetary culture" that exists side-by-side with existing ones in the electronic communicative space. Poster believes that globalisation may suggest a "noosphere" in the terms of Teilhard de Chardin, a culture that escapes from the surface of the globe, interpellating human beings with the power of traditions and political hierarchies. Internet ethnicity, he argues, may be an alternative to such binaries as particularism/universalism and parochialism/cosmopolitanism, thus transgressing essentialism of every kind (180). He points out that, with the Internet, issues of authorship, canons, and authority itself are put into suspension and reconfigured (125-126).

Poster suggests, however, that "[i]f cyberspace offers the possibility of a new universalism, this emerges in a transnational ocean that is rife with the sharklike predators of the great corporations whose frenzied, voracious feeding upon workers of all colors and conditions is curbed only by the nation-state" (127). This is the downside of "freedom" from state control and of the weakening and potential undermining of the state. In the terms of Victor Merriman, "Independent Ireland had turned finally away from nationalism's utopian project of decolonisation toward a new destination: the counter-utopia of globalised capital" (489). Merriman argues that neo-

colonial elites in the Republic have endeavoured to neuter civil society (497).

In the context of contemporary Ireland, globalisation and EU supra-nationalism function, with the veneer of liberal, cosmopolitan post-nationalism, as a potential means of keeping wages down for workers through the import of low-cost, easily-exploitable workers from Eastern Europe. Conveniently, this hobbles the Left which does not want to be seen as anti-immigration, and is thus tied up in a contradiction between its economic and social values. One answer to this question would be an intensified attempt by trade unions to organise among immigrant workers, which the unions have indeed begun under the threat of becoming irrelevant in the globalised Irish economy. (Simultaneously, the unions are organising to counter the attempt by neo-liberalism to commercialise education at all levels.) However, the availability of a seemingly inexhaustible resource of workers from low-wage, low-cost economies in the East makes this an uphill task. A further downside of globalisation is its environmental cost, since the expansion of trade is dependant on finite (and polluting) fossil fuels—another dilemma for the Greens involved in a neo-liberal government. Globalisation for Ireland is still something that has not received its adequate share of public debate: simultaneously economically beneficial, socially and environmentally problematic, and culturally challenging.

In terms of postcolonial discourse, analysis of cyber-culture potentially hastens the breakdown of the various versions of nationalism, post-nationalism and revisionism. Hitherto, the cultural trajectory in Ireland has been from a sense of national inferiority vis-à-vis the colonising power (Britain) to an emancipation from this dualism in terms of finding a cultural home among equals in Europe, to a potential breakdown of the concept of national identity itself, of which globalised and multi-cultural Ireland is in many ways the vanguard. Cyber-culture accelerates the dissolution of traditional notions of subjectivity and ethnicity, offering in their place an expanded concept of the virtual which, in turn, highlights the constructed nature of the social and national "realities" that the virtual is set against. In this context, Poster describes his subscription to a listserve called "Cyberjew," which explicitly raises question of ethnicity: for example, a participant questions the authenticity of a "cyber seder." Poster notes the hypothesis raised by participants that the Internet may be a new stage in Jewish history and a facilitator of planetary community, rather than a "dissolvent of ethnicity" (167). Similar questions might be raised about Irish community, identity, and ethnicity. The Internet highlights the contradictions already apparent in the traditional notion of national identities, to the degree that they are pulled apart and perhaps re-assembled—this is particularly relevant in the case of Ireland with its large diaspora. As community, identity, and ethnicity migrate to the virtual, they will inevitably mutate to new and unexpected forms, though no doubt retaining some of their previous elements.

Poster's notion of the intensification of the sense of virtualisation through the Internet is suggestive in that it both parallels postcolonial analyses of Ireland and potentially intensifies them. We may with cybernetic developments be facing the prospect of the (further) virtualisation of the concept of Irishness, thus hastening the dissolution of traditional analyses, together with the breakdown of established notions of subjectivity and ethnicity. This in turn highlights the constructed nature of social and national "realities," including that of "Irishness" itself. The challenge, it could be argued, is to retain whatever is positive in the concept of Irishness—such values as humour, creativity, imaginative compassion, an easy-going tolerance for eccentricity, a suspicion of conformity and a refusal to take banality seriously—as the "Irish" migrates to the global and virtual. Thus, perhaps everyone will in a sense eventually become Irish, in one way or another, and in another way nobody will be Irish any more, if they ever were. And that is perhaps a very Irish kind of situation to end up with.

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