

INTRODUCTION

The awkward space of Union

Politics is, essentially, a matter of words.
Pierre Bourdieu *In Other Words*

This book came out of thinking about the awkwardness of a particular phrase, the lumbering “United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland,” which names the equally awkward new polity that came into being on 1 January 1801. Oddly enough, neither the phrase nor the reconfigured polity has received a great deal of attention in British Romantic studies despite ongoing interest in the construction of a new national consciousness around the turn of the century, when the imperial nation-state was at once expanding and defending itself. Whereas “Great Britain” and “Britishness” feature prominently in recent work, “United Kingdom” rarely surfaces, in part perhaps because the term refers not to a national identity but to a political unit. It names no “imagined community” (in Benedict Anderson’s influential formulation) to command affection or allegiance, while its cumbersome articulation testifies to its provenance in the musty and dubious sphere of parliamentary legislation.¹ The United Kingdom thus invokes an outmoded and narrow “politics” rather than the more current and capacious notion of “the political” with its ability to yield witty analogies and surprising intimacies across cultural zones. But both the politics and the awkward phrase are worth taking seriously, for “the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland” defines the new state as less a solution than a problem from the start. The very name adumbrates a dilemma: Ireland is at once a part of the kingdom (a political subject) but not a part of Great Britain (not a national subject). Where the names of Scotland and England have been resolved into the larger unity of Great Britain, holding out the possibility of both preserving and assimilating national difference, Ireland stands within the union but outside the unity, ambiguously attached through vague coordination: “and

Cambridge University Press

052181460X - The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland

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Excerpt

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Ireland.” Is it an afterthought? An equivocal supplement? A singular difference? Perhaps even the start of a series?

Such ambiguities of political discourse did, of course, tend to be rapidly clarified in the immediate context of the Union by the power of state violence on the one hand (the “white terror” following the United Irishmen rebellion of 1798, along with the continuing presence of almost 60,000 troops in Ireland) and British wealth and the requirements of its imperial economy on the other. But at the same time the political and discursive energies released by the Act of Union continued to generate instability on both sides of the Irish Sea, as the Union lurched from crisis to crisis over the next one hundred and twenty years. If the 1707 union of England and Scotland, as Clifford Siskin has argued, constituted a historically significant effort to produce a new national whole by articulating rather than erasing difference – Scotland was politically and economically integrated but remained distinct in law, religion, and education – the incorporation of Ireland introduced a difference that disarticulated and scrambled political and cultural energies held together, albeit not without difficulty, in the compound of “Great Britain.”² Unlike the Presbyterians of Scotland, the Catholics of Ireland were granted neither full political integration nor autonomous civil institutions (their own “culture,” as Siskin has it), and this, combined with the bitter history of their relations with England, meant that their entry into the polity served to unbalance rather than to establish British bearings. More radically than Scotland, early nineteenth-century Ireland marks a vulnerability in the British body politic, one of which it was itself acutely aware, so that the question of Ireland draws particular attention to the workings of political consciousness in Romantic-era Britain as much as to that of the political unconscious with which recent criticism has made us perhaps more familiar.³

The literary implications of this consciousness form the subject of this book, which argues that the whole matter of post-Union Ireland bears in significant and insufficiently recognized ways on what Paul Magnuson has called “public Romanticism,” the thick and interwoven realm of publication and publicity that forms the matrix of “public cultural consciousness” in the period. Magnuson emphasizes that in early nineteenth-century Britain this matrix was a wide and loose “public discourse” rather than the more limited eighteenth-century “public sphere” posited by Habermas, and he underscores the degree to which the civic culture of writing and reading in Britain during this period operated in openly rhetorical and combative terms rather than in those of an ideal

rational consensus.⁴ This does not mean that the notion of the public sphere loses either historical or analytic pertinence. Discussion of the Irish question consistently invoked – and manipulated – the authority of reason and the role of consensus stressed by Habermas, while the critical self-understanding of periodicals like the *Edinburgh Review* remained very much tied to Enlightenment models of rationality and discipline. But in the aftermath of the French Revolution and in the context of domestic unrest and foreign war not only was there an acute sense of different “publics” to be addressed but politics had converged with sentiment in new ways, and public debate increasingly become a matter less of discursive reasoning than of performance. In placing Ireland within this public discourse, I want to focus on it as an actor within the domestic literary field and hence to shift the scene of analysis from the imperial stage, which has been garnering most of the attention in the last decade, to a more strictly civic forum.

Ireland is undeniably part of what we now call colonial or imperial Romanticism, and my study owes a great deal to the postcolonial inflection that has brought Ireland a heightened, if still wavering, visibility in English studies of the period. In particular it follows on the important reshaping of Romantic fiction undertaken by Katie Trumpener’s *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire*, which not only gives prominence to Irish genres but recasts literary history in terms of intersecting networks of discourses rather than chronological lines of influence.⁵ And it shares with Mary Jean Corbett’s recent *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790–1870* a conviction that the matter of Ireland played a crucial role, generally overlooked by English studies, in the discursive formation of the imperial English nation in the nineteenth century.⁶ But my interest lies more particularly in the fact that the specificity of Ireland as a problem for the empire in the early decades of the century derived from its incorporation into the British body politic. To put the problem this way – to think about the question of Ireland via civic rather than imperial or colonial discourse – is to highlight the gesture of bringing in rather than the gesture of moving out. To be sure, the imperial nation moves out in order to bring in (e.g., raw materials, capital, profits), but it maintains all the more strenuously a line of demarcation between it and its colonial possessions. The doubleness of Ireland after the formation of the United Kingdom – at once part of the scattered colonial body and of the (ideally) compact domestic body – confounded such demarcations, and placed special pressure on the state in which it was so ambiguously located.

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The point is nicely underlined by Byron in his speech on Ireland to the House of Lords in 1812:

If it must be called an Union, it is the union of the shark with his prey, the spoiler swallows up his victim, and thus they become one and indivisible. Thus has Great Britain swallowed up the parliament, the constitution, the independence of Ireland, and refuses to disgorge even a single privilege, although for the relief of her swollen and distempered body politic.⁷

Voicing a standard critique of the Union, Byron infuses the political figure of incorporation with a literal charge, defining it as a devouring that produces a “swollen and distempered body politic,” which refuses to give itself relief by granting the measures commonly known as Catholic Relief (by 1812 the Catholic question had led to the downfall of two ministries and been raised in parliament on at least five prominent occasions). By conflating the idealized British body politic with the grotesque Irish body of English imaginings, Byron produces the engorged body of a United Kingdom stubbornly feeding the distemper that is destroying it. Even if for most English subjects Ireland continued to be placed outside home space and the Irish remained foreign objects “over there,” it nonetheless was the case, as Byron’s image emphasizes, that Ireland threatened the new body politic as an internal and implusive force. The “sister-kingdom” and “sister-island” (phrases insistently repeated in writing on Ireland) was now part of the body of the nation, but this “sister” strained the body politic and made it ill, proving herself a sister who was somehow not kin. This disconcerting situation – what we might call the reversed uncanny of the stranger-become-family – motivates troubled post-Union genres like the Irish tour, which search for terms in which the United Kingdom might in fact come to mirror what was widely regarded in middle-class public discourse as the more successful union of Scotland and England in Great Britain.

Byron’s speech usefully recalls two further points about the institution of the United Kingdom. First, it underlines how quickly the Union changed its meaning, especially on the whiggish side of the British political spectrum; second, it testifies to the way in which the moment of Union was incomplete from the outset because of the outstanding question of Catholic civil rights. It is often forgotten – indeed, the meaning of the Union itself changed so quickly that the participants themselves seemed to forget – that the most bitter opponents of the measure were the privileged Protestants of the Ascendancy, anxious to maintain their local power base, and the fiercely Protestant Orange order which had come into existence in the turbulence of the late 1790s.⁸ “The Union,”

Kevin Whelan has bluntly stated, “was a devastating defeat for Irish Protestants.”⁹ There was certainly some popular and nationalist opposition in Ireland, but by and large, the measure was supported by reformers on both sides of the Irish Sea and accepted (without much enthusiasm) by most Irish Catholics.

While clearly an English cause in the sense of being a security measure against France precipitated by the 1798 United Irishmen rebellion (which was both ideologically inspired and materially supported by republican France¹⁰), the Union also appeared a more strictly liberal political cause, for it proposed not only to abolish an Irish parliament widely regarded as corrupt but to institute a far-reaching reform of the borough system that would move Ireland far in advance of the British mainland. The Irish “oligarchy” (as journals like the Foxite *Critical Review* liked to call it) was perceived as an obstacle to such reform, and the more liberal English press regularly targeted and vilified members of the Irish Parliament as (in the words of the young Coleridge) a set of “[j]obbers, place-hunters, unconditional hirelings.” To have such a “faction” opposed to the measure of Union, Coleridge declared, “we cannot but consider as a species of presumptive argument in its favour.”¹¹ It is worth recalling such language, for within a few years the Union was increasingly seen by liberal-minded English commentators as a cynical exercise of imperial power (as in Byron), while on the other side of the Irish Sea it was quickly rewritten into a nationalist narrative that turned all opposition to it into a sign of patriotism and political virtue.¹² Benefiting from such recoding, the exclusively Protestant Irish Parliament was soon transformed (to cite a Catholic Irish character in John Banim’s *The Anglo-Irish of the Nineteenth Century*) into “our own parliament.”¹³

The changing meanings of Union had a great deal to do in turn with the second point highlighted by the passage from Byron: the vexed entanglement of the question of Catholic rights with the question of Union. When it was proposed, the Union was generally understood, especially but not only by Catholic Ireland, as a double moment of which political incorporation was simply the first moment, to be followed by the removal of the remaining legal disabilities of Irish Catholics. Coleridge, for example (like most commentators for and against the Act of Union) assumed that emancipation would follow its passage, assuring readers that in an “Imperial Legislature” such civil rights could be “safely conceded, and indefinitely extended.”¹⁴ Although emancipation was never explicitly promised (at least in public), its expectation was explicitly encouraged, so that it attained what Thomas Bartlett calls “the status

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of an union engagement.”¹⁵ This “engagement” remained unfulfilled for almost three decades, and during that period Catholic petitions and Catholic Relief bills were repeatedly rejected. The failure of the British state to grant Catholic relief meant that it lost any residual political authority it may have had with Irish Catholics, and this loss of authority was not only very public but also a trigger for the emergence of alternative forms of authority “out of doors.” It is not that the Irish (whether Catholic like Daniel O’Connell or Protestant like Henry Grattan) gave up on official politics but that the campaign for emancipation simultaneously mobilized forces on unofficial territory. Activating for themselves the properly political power Hannah Arendt has identified with the pledge, Irish agitators banded together to form rival or resistant organizations to act as levers in the official sphere.¹⁶ Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Association of the 1820s (discussed in Chapter 6) is the best-known instance of such banding together in the period, but it had been occurring on a smaller scale, especially among Catholic gentry and merchants, since soon after Union. In the same year that Byron spoke on the Irish question, for example, Irish Catholics from different counties held meetings in which they pledged to vote only for those parliamentary candidates willing to support emancipation. Repeatedly, the British government attempted to snuff out such efforts, invoking or threatening to invoke the 1793 Convention Act which forbade setting up a rival public body to parliament. Suggestively, the granting of emancipation coincided with the spectacular achievement of precisely such a body through the groundbreaking and formidable experiment in mass politics spearheaded by O’Connell in the late 1820s.

From the start, then, the Union was an unstable and incomplete moment – indeed the motif of “incomplete Union” became something of a mantra in the period. Thus cast in terms of lack, it served as an incitement to intervention and discourse, promoting a re-accentuation of established discursive forms (e.g., travel writing, periodical reviews, lyric poetry, memoirs) along with the production of new ones, notably the national tale that is my focus. What largely motivated all this activity was desire to “secure” the Union, a desire predicated on the alarm generated by the incomplete first moment. So Francis Jeffrey and his allies mounted a vigorous emancipation campaign in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review*, urging parallels between the Irish Catholics and the excluded and degraded *roturier* before the French Revolution: “What the Roturier was in France, the Catholic is in Ireland: – and, if his conduct should ultimately be the same, it will not be without a precedent, nor those who

provoke it, without a warning.”¹⁷ A year later his colleague Sydney Smith (indefatigable campaigner for emancipation) put it more directly, declaring that it was “by no means improbable, that the country may be, ere long, placed in a situation where its safety or ruin will depend upon its conduct towards Catholics.”¹⁸ The alarmist language of such statements is more than simply a rhetorical tactic in the emancipation debate; it points to a sense of the volatility of the political space whose bounds were threatened by the “leftover” of Catholic claims. What threatened in Ireland at this point, however, was never revolution, despite spurts of militancy such as Robert Emmet’s rising of 1803. The real risk implicit in the Union was not that the Irish masses would take to violence but that they would begin to understand themselves as a public and hence take to politics.

The potential emergence of a new public is what was at stake in the long frustrated campaign for emancipation, a campaign that might otherwise seem to have been much ado about rather little. It is not that there was massive British interest in the Catholic question – the *Monthly Review* commented in 1812 that Irish affairs generally drew “the thinnest houses” in parliament – although there was a continuing marked interest at the highest official levels.¹⁹ It is rather that a constitutional measure making a difference to only a few privileged persons generated such strong response (both for and against) and – even more – succeeded in mobilizing the Irish masses within so short a period of time. Catholic emancipation basically meant only the right to sit in parliament, along with access to the most senior political and judicial offices, so that radicals and conservatives alike often dismissed the constitutional matter as “mere politics,” an irrelevant formal concern and distraction from real, material evils. But such criticisms, James MacIntosh argued in the *Edinburgh Review*, missed the point. To dismiss the emancipation question as “the repeal of a few remaining disabilities” was to overlook that the exclusion of Irish Catholics from full constitutional privileges was (as he put it) “a fact of a very peculiar nature.” Unlike similar religious exclusions by dominant sects in other countries brought in to ensure a “monopoly of profit and power,” the exclusion of Irish Catholics, MacIntosh explained, was “not directed against a sect – it was directed against a nation. It was the proscription of a people, under the name of a religion.” The exclusionary laws were promulgated by a “conquering colony” against a “conquered nation,” and no matter the specific names they used for those excluded (Irish, Papists, Rebels), their target was always the “same body of men.”²⁰ Such reiteration had inevitably produced a powerfully negative climate of

hatred, fear, and contempt, and it was this amorphous and emotive level of “discontent” that had to be addressed if the Union was to hold.

MacIntosh’s point is not just that under the conditions of colonization the law partakes of the original violence of conquest but that because it does so, it achieves a peculiarly affective and representative power. There is always more at stake than seems to be the case, so that when it comes to law (or, for that matter, to politics), the situation tends always to exceed both the text and the standard parameters of interpretation. Specific laws are immediately generalized, for both sides read the law as a doubled synecdoche: a particular law implies the entire polity from which it emerges; particular exclusions imply the whole social body even as they name only a part.²¹ Through this slippage from part to whole and back again, the law gains its affective power, especially in relation to the subjected group, for every subject therein feels “named” in the law and hence insulted or degraded by it. This is why those not directly affected by laws nonetheless become heavily invested in them, a point made by Francis Jeffrey in accounting for the puzzling fact that so many Irish felt so strongly about legal exclusions which made a difference to only a few: “the sense of injustice and partiality communicated itself to the whole body.” It is this phenomenon, he says, that accounts for general Catholic “disaffection” and for “that impatience for the removal of their remaining badges of inferiority, which has sometimes appeared more turbulent than the object could justify.”²² In appearing “more turbulent than the object could justify,” Irish response testifies to the troubling asymmetries of signification and interpretation on Irish ground. British public discourse generally located the whole question of representation in relation to Ireland (whether political, legal, or literary) in a slippery realm where the conventional relations governing signs and their interpretation gave way. Irish terrain was perceived as equivocal and conflictual, and on such terrain, as the editors of a recent volume on nineteenth-century Ireland have noted, ideology was “unable to ‘naturalize’ itself.”²³ When it came to Ireland, that is, very little could go without saying.

The matter of saying (directed words rather than transparent truths) is very much to my point. To think about Ireland via the question of incomplete Union is to think about words that draw attention to themselves as performative instead of effacing themselves in the act of signification: words that *do* something (to recall J. L. Austin’s famous title). It is thus to move into the foreground a sense of language and public discourse as a mobile scene of agitation and agency (rather than impersonal system and containment) and hence to understand a cultural field in terms of friction

as much as analogy or homology. As political topos, early nineteenth-century Ireland marks the intersection of different discursive spheres: the official realm of high politics; the semi-official realm of public discourse (many of whose writers were not infrequently also participants in the official political realm); and the unofficial realm of “out of doors” pamphlets, speeches, caricatures, assemblies, and so on. At a certain level of historical analysis the differentiations of this field may dissolve, absorbed into the larger unity of bourgeois culture or imperialism or patriarchal law, and there are good analytic reasons for performing this kind of positive reduction. But it is equally important to recall the particular discursive processes and practices that shape the specificity of topics and the making of publics within a cultural or political field. At this level, the pragmatics of language move into sharp relief; at the same time so does a more dynamic notion of culture as encounter, often of an abrasive kind. More precisely, the discourse on Ireland helps to underline that if, as Bourdieu argues, politics is basically a struggle over access to the symbolic power of constitutive naming, the authority of political words to name depends in a fundamental way on the fact that they are in the first instance modes of address, activators of an interlocutory encounter in which the lines of influence may move in uncertain directions.²⁴

Percy Shelley’s early foray into the question of Ireland helps to make the case. In February 1812, nineteen-year-old Percy and his even younger wife, Harriet, landed in Dublin to print and distribute copies of a pamphlet (written by Percy in England the previous month) in which he addressed Irish Catholics, and presented Catholic emancipation and repeal of the Union as “rational means of remedy” for the evils of their state. Cast in the imperative mood (“O Irishmen, REFORM YOURSELVES”), the pamphlet spends most of its time urging the importance of politics (discussion, assembly, union) and discouraging revolutionary violence: “Think, read, and talk . . . disclaim all manner of alliance with violence, meet together if you will, but do not meet in a mob.”²⁵ To this text, Shelley appended a present-tense Postscript, in which he announces that having now been in Dublin for a week, he has made himself “more accurately acquainted with the state of the public mind on those great topics of grievances which induced me to select Ireland as a theatre, the widest and fairest, for the operations of the determined friend of religious and political freedom.”²⁶ The result of these observations on the spot has been a conviction of the need for an association to obtain emancipation and repeal, and so he writes another pamphlet directed to very different readers, the young men of Dublin College.²⁷ This pamphlet

Cambridge University Press

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drops the imperative mood, replacing it with a more philosophical tone (gentleman-to-gentleman), but makes essentially the same political point. In the event, neither class of reader was impressed; Shelley's pamphlets were massively ignored (nor was his attempt at oral address to an assembly of middle-class Catholics any more successful). Urged by Godwin, he withdrew both texts and, in short order, himself from Ireland as well.

My point is not that Shelley's words lacked authority in Dublin nor that he, like many other civic-minded English visitors of the period, arrived in the country with ideas for its improvement firmly in tow, a prescriptive text already written. What makes the Shelley incident particularly telling is that even so limited an encounter with the subject of his discourse occasioned a new text and a change of genre. Shelley altered neither his political model nor his basic approach to the question of Ireland. On the contrary. But he did alter his perception of the problem, and registered this shift, notably, as a change in his sense of his addressee. "These were the persons to whom in my fancy I had addressed myself," he writes from Dublin, referring to the urban poor of Ireland; "how quickly were my views on this subject changed! yet how deeply has this very change rooted the conviction on which I came hither."²⁸ Contact with the Irish has reinforced his political stand, but it has also dispelled his "fancy" about becoming Tom Paine in Ireland; more particularly, it has dispelled his a priori understanding of what constitutes the proper genre of intervention.²⁹ Shelley shifts from the genre of address – "An Address, To the Irish People" – to that of the proposal – "Proposals For an Association of Those Philanthropists, etc." – directing himself to a different audience and hence framing the question of Ireland in a quite different way.

Even as public discourse enacts the systemic and regulative functions with which we have become familiar (words as symptomatic effects), it at the same time operates more dynamically as the making of utterances (words as intersubjective events). The matter of utterance is crucial to an understanding of public discourse and its literary genres not only because, as Mikhail Bakhtin insists, "[u]tterances are not indifferent to one another" but because they pivot on the situation of the enunciation. What Bakhtin observes about speech genres applies equally to the public genres of print culture: "Each speech genre in each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee, and this defines it as a genre."³⁰ Especially in those genres that Paul Magnuson has termed "genres of public utterance," sites of enunciation and modes of address move directly into the foreground.³¹ The pamphlet debate preceding Union, for instance, featured countless titles such as "An