

When Was the Nation? Golden Ages and Identities

Golden Age and Primal Catastrophe

The nostalgia for a lost Golden Age (identified by Anthony Smith¹) is by now a well-established trope in the typology and history of many national movements. A present-day state of submission is contrasted with a period in the prelapsarian past when the nation was happily united and flourished in untrammelled sovereignty or self-determination. The pattern can be seen across Europe, from Ireland to Greece. The Greek national movement aimed to cast off a centuries-long ‘Turkish Yoke’ and to return to the glories of Byzantine or Hellenic times.² Ireland, a subaltern part of the United Kingdom under the Act of Union of 1801, began to hark back nostalgically to a medieval, Gaelic, pre-Conquest past. In 1808, the poet Tom Moore wrote his paradigmatic ‘Let Erin Remember’:

Let Erin remember the days of old, / Ere her faithless sons betrayed
her; When Malachi wore the collar of gold, / Which he won from her
proud invader; When her kings, with standard of green unfurled, /
Led the Red-Branch Knights to danger; — Ere the emerald gem of
the western world / Was set in the crown of a stranger.³

1. Anthony Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

2. William St Clair, *That Greece Might Still Be Free* (Oxford University Press, 1972).

3. Clare O’Halloran, *Golden ages and barbarous nations: Antiquarian debate on the Celtic past in Ireland, c. 1750-1800* (Cork University Press, 2004); Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and imagination: Patterns in the literary and historical representation of Ireland in the nineteenth century* (Cork University Press, 1996).

The concomitant of the Golden Age trope is the awareness of traumatic catastrophes in the nation's history which destroyed this erstwhile liberty: the Golden Age is a time *Before*. Many national movements therefore involve a trauma-driven cultivation of the dark end-point of the nation's Golden Age, something we may call the Primal Catastrophe. The narrative archetype for this may be the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. For the Jews, the destruction of the Temple (Jerusalem, 70AD) marks the beginning of a millennial diaspora and persecution. The defeat at Kosovo (1389) is the Primal Catastrophe in Serbian historical awareness, the fall of Constantinople (1453) similarly so for the Greeks, the Battle of Mohács (1526) for Hungary. Such events become cultural markers which are thematized again and again in the nationalistically-inspired art of the nineteenth century: history paintings, tragedies, historical novels, dramatic poems.

Do these Primal Catastrophes, when seen in a European-comparative conspectus, indicate a chronological distribution? The question is important, since (as I will argue below) they also, in forming the *terminus ante quem* of a Golden Age, situate that Golden Age historically, with an obvious mentality-historical impact on the nation's historicist self-image: the Jews situate their fundamental identity in biblical times, the Greeks in Classical/Byzantine times, the Hungarians in chivalric-feudal times.

The chronology is, however, complex in many cases. With some nationalities, there may be an iteration of catastrophic losses of sovereignty. Thus, in Ireland, the date of the landing of English barons in 1179 marks the first in a series, and iterations of that primal catastrophe occurred in 1603 (the defeat of the last sovereign Gaelic clan chiefs) and 1798-1801 (an abortive rebellion followed by the Act of Union). Each later event is further burdened by the sense that it reduplicates the earlier moment of tragic defeat. An equally striking case is that of Scotland: the capture and execution of 'Braveheart' William Wallace in 1305 being a primal case, the defeat of the Jacobite rebels at the Battle of Culloden in 1745 an iteration. Both cases share, as a common feature, the defeat of a Scottish alliance of feudal lords and Highland clansmen against English suzerainty.

The 1745 defeat was to have especially resonant effects on Romantic Nationalism throughout Europe. It formed the theme of the century's prototypical historical novel: *Waverley*, by Walter Scott (1814). As Scott's first attempt at the genre of the historical novel, *Waverley* may safely be considered the most influential text for literary historicism in the Romantic period, with wide-ranging repercussions throughout Europe.⁴

Interestingly, the design of *Waverley* was not nationalistic, and in any case far less so than its many imitations or epigons elsewhere. While Scott evoked the doomed gallantry of the Jacobites and Clan chiefs with obvious sympathy, he also saw that their cause was not a viable one — driven, as he realized, by unrealistic and outdated visions of chivalry and the state. The protagonist of *Waverley*, an impressionable and romantically-minded, slightly quixotic young man, is briefly beguiled by the panache and allure of the Jacobite rebels and their cause; but his eventual survival and coming-of-age involves a realization that reality is different from his adolescent dreams, and that pragmatically the way towards the future lies in sensible conciliation rather than passionate rebellion.

This makes *Waverley* a very modern novel, and chimes with Scott's own (pragmatic, Conservative) political outlook. Scott was (should we use that modern distinction) a regionalist rather than a nationalist; he did not advocate a return to Scottish independence, but sought to vouchsafe an acknowledgement and accommodation of Scottish memories and particularisms within a British monarchy.

However, that is not how his historical novels were read and imitated elsewhere. The historical tales of Scott's imitators in Flanders (Hendrik Conscience), Poland (Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Trilogy*) and elsewhere, were epic rather than novelistic, ending on a note, not of pragmatic insight, but of heroic defiance and life-and-death struggle. Even within Scotland itself, the successors to Walter Scott evoked the Scottish past and separate culture with more intransigence: Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889) is a popular ex-

4. Murray Pittock (ed.), *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2007); Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories. The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Cornell University Press, 2001); Id., *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the move* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

ample, and, of course, the Mel Gibson film *Braveheart*, which evokes the epic heroism of William Wallace in an overtly anti-English, separatist mode. (A huge monument to Wallace had been built at Stirling in 1869.)

The evocation of the Primal Catastrophe is, in fact as dominant a trope in 19th-century historicist nationalism as the triumphalist celebration of the nation's moments of glory. Both the catastrophe and the triumph can offer inspiration for the present: in Hungarian historical consciousness, the defeat of Mohács is counterbalanced by the reconquest of Buda in 1686. In Polish history, the glory of the 1410 victory over the Teutonic Order at Grünwald, and Jan Sobieski lifting the Siege of Vienna in 1683, is counterbalanced by the trauma of the Partitions. Ernest Renan, in his classic *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* of 1882 already saw that tragedy and triumph work hand in hand in inspiring a national sense of common purpose:

Dans le passé, un héritage de gloire et de regrets à partager, dans l'avenir un même programme à réaliser ; avoir souffert, joui, espéré ensemble, voilà ce qui vaut mieux que des douanes communes et des frontières conformes aux idées stratégiques ; voilà ce que l'on comprend malgré les diversités de race et de langue. Je disais tout à l'heure : « avoir souffert ensemble » ; oui, la souffrance en commun unit plus que la joie. En fait de souvenirs nationaux, les deuils valent mieux que les triomphes, car ils imposent des devoirs, ils commandent l'effort en commun.

The implications for understanding Catalan historicism are obvious, and I will turn to this later on. Initially, however, we need to establish, beyond Renan's moral generalization, the historical usefulness in chronologically pinpointing these historicist moments of inspiration. In particular, a comparative-chronological analysis of Primal Catastrophes allows us, more than the celebrated triumphs, to specify *termini ad quem* for the Golden Ages that they terminate, and thus to locate those Golden Ages themselves in the chronology of Romantic historicism. That chronology has some importance, as I shall try to argue in the following pages, for the types of self-identification at work in the nationalist agenda, the sort of identity that 19th-century national movements were trying to recapture from the here and now.

The past as epic, romance, and novel

The genre-poetical distinction between epic and novelistic modes of historical narratives after Scott is of some importance for our attempts at a periodization. In the course of the nineteenth century, a general correlation between historical periods and narrative/poetic genres emerged, from epic via romance to the novel. In this periodization, epic counted as the most archaic, set in (or evoking) the time of the nation's tribal origins and centered on warriors and their pagan-heroic ethos; followed by romance, set in the medieval times of feudal lordships and centered on knights and noblemen and their chivalric ethos; the novel, finally, was linked to the modern or contemporary period with their urban-centered social life and centered on bourgeois or middle-class protagonists with their ethos of civic and moral virtue.

It is small wonder, then, that the 'historical novel' as in Scott's *Waverley* could lead to misunderstandings among Scott's epigons. Far more popular than *Waverley*, accordingly, was Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820), set in chivalric times and accordingly called a 'romance' by Scott himself. Scott himself theorized these genre distinctions in an article on 'Romance' that he wrote for the 1824 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

There is, of course, a fundamental historical distance between the nineteenth-century readership and the subject-matter of what they liked to read about. Nineteenth-century literature is characterized by the fact that its readers and conventions were becoming overwhelmingly middle-class; before the rise of the Realist novel, however, its topic tended to provide these middle-class readers with decidedly non-bourgeois thrills, involving bandits, outlaws, and distant historical periods described in all their exoticism and *couleur locale*.

This fundamental tension and, indeed, anachronism, in mediating historicist frames to modern-day, middle-class audiences resulted in what I call 'historicist bloat'. The fact that ancient themes are mediated in the conventions of bourgeois taste means that their artistic treatment will necessarily gravitate towards melodramatic exaggeration and overstatement.⁵ Among the stylistic features of romantic

5. In the visual arts, the repertoire of gestures and models is derived from academicism as codified in the preceding century on biblical or classical themes

historicism we accordingly encounter the pathos of the scenes depicted, the ambitious, often bombastic scope of the novels, paintings, monumental statues and operas, the melodramatic reliance on shrill contrasts between heightened primary emotions (joy and despair, fortitude and tenderness, good and evil, innocence and persecution). All these elements, which render 19th-century historicism so outdated and kitschy to later audiences, result from the project to render archaic sublimity within the conventions of 19th-century bourgeois modernity. The acme of this historicist bloat is, of course, Wagner, precursor of the modern IMAX, 3D, Dolby-sound, total-immersion experience. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* attempts, by means of total, multimedia immersion, to drown out the audience's lingering sense of anachronism and historical distance.

The conflict-ridden transition from older aristocratic values to modern bourgeois ones had dominated European culture between 1750 and 1850 and dates back to the beginning of the Enlightenment. Its central crux is summarized in the motto of the French *Légion d'honneur*: 'Honneur et Patrie' — a conceptual pairing which was brilliantly analysed by the historian Lucien Febvre in his lecture series at the Collège de France, 1945-47. 'Honneur' refers to an essentially aristocratic ethical code, fixed on fealty to the liege-lord or monarch and upholding the superiority of high-minded conduct (*noblesse oblige*); 'patrie' refers to a civic moral code of *amor patriae*, the Patriotic and republican, bourgeois commitment to being a responsible, trustworthy and useful member of society. Aristocratic honour and civic virtue clashed as opposing values throughout the eighteenth century, culminating in the French Revolution. Napoleon's pairing of the two as the motto of a 'legion of honour' awarded for merit (1802) was an attempt to transcend the polarity.⁶

In literary evocations, the genre of romance, with its courtly roots and settings, was the natural ambiance for the evocations of noble knights and their code of chivalry: from Sir Lancelot and Lohengrin

(which remain popular, alongside the new taste for the national-vernacular past).

6. Marleen Wessel, '«Honneur ou Patrie?» Lucien Febvre et la question du sentiment national', *Genèses* 25 (1996): 128-42; Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* (Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Id., *Spiegelpaleis Europa* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2011).

to Tirant lo Blanc. Fittingly, Cervantes's *Don Quijote*, with its sarcastic exposure of the gap between chivalric ideals and real life, marks the transition from the lingering vestiges of the Middle Ages towards modernity and from the outworn genre of the romance to the social and psychological realism of the novel.

Meanwhile, a more archaic ethos was coming to literary notice with the retrieval and edition of ancient epics such as the *Nibelungenlied* and *Beowulf*: these revolved around the ethos of the warrior's heroic and even violent, dauntless prowess. These texts were more archaic than chivalric romances; rather than individual texts penned by named authors (Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Martorell), they are anonymous, collective, their authorship buried in the depths of time and in the collective culture of the nation-at-large. Also, their protagonists are rough-hewn, primitive, violent, not yet the refined and self-disciplined knights of courtly chivalry.⁷

This means, that, in literary historicism, the 19th century nation looking back into its past and taking inspiration from its Golden Ages, triumphs and catastrophes, could pick and choose between various ethical regimes and profiles. We may schematize this as follows:⁸

<i>period</i>	<i>genre/register</i>	<i>moral ethos</i>	<i>setting</i>
tribal	epic	heroic warrior	open country
feudal	romance	chivalric knight	court/castle
municipal	novel / melodrama	upright citizen	city

The examples will easily come to mind. Arminius, Beowulf, Vercingetorix, Siegfried etc. all fit the tribal/epic stratum; Ivanhoe, Henry V, Emperor Barbarossa and Jeanne d'Arc are fictional or his-

7. Jacob Grimm reflected on the historicist meaning of the three classical genres of poetry (Epic, Dramatic and Lyric) in a lecture 'Über das finnische Epos' read before the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1845. See my own 'Literary Historicism: Romanticism, Philologists, and the Presence of the Past', *Modern Language Quarterly* 65.2 (2003): 221-243, and 'Oral epic: The nation finds a voice', in *Folklore and nationalism during the long nineteenth century*, ed. T. Baycroft & D. Hopkin (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 11-26.

8. I omit the biblical and classical historical references used in the historicist frames for Jewish, Greek or Christian-religious identity. (A sense of national identity based on classical Rome is rare before Mussolini.)

torical heroes associated with the feudal/courtly stratum; and the civic heroes of Europe's free municipalities are evoked through the third stratum.

While romantic historicists could pick and choose from this topological shopping mall with its three main aisles, it is obvious that some periods are better suited to certain nationalities than others. Thus, while the scheme offers nothing more than a heuristic aid,⁹ it helps us to see how the *imaginaire* of romantic-national historicism may differ in different parts of Europe, with pagan primitivism celebrated in Finland and Latvia, 16th/17th-century urban mercantilism and Protestantism in Holland.¹⁰

Conversely, the celebration of a national chivalry is extremely important for those parts of Europe which we can call the 'Lost Crowns': erstwhile sovereign lordships or realms which in the course of their history were demoted to subaltern provinces: Scotland, Hungary, Poland, Bohemia; and, indeed and finally, Catalonia.

Implications for Catalan historicism

Romantic historicism affected the emerging Catalan national movement as much as it did the rest of Europe. Elsewhere I have indicated the extent to which the formula of the troubadour and the Floral Games offered a historicist template which allowed for a joint celebration of municipal city culture and the courtly love ethos of feudal medievalism.¹¹ Romantic/historicist poets saw themselves fre-

9. For one thing, it shows up the crossovers and borderline cases as much as the type-conformity. Thus, civic heroes who are obviously points of admiration and identification for modern-day middle-class urban audiences are often the leaders of pre-modern, medieval free cities: Cola di Rienzi in Rome, Artevelde in Ghent, Breydel & De Coninck in Bruges.

10. On Finland: Derek Fewster, *Visions of past glory: Nationalism and the construction of early Finnish history* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2006). On Latvia: Toms Ēncis, *A disciplinary history of Latvian mythology* (University of Tartu Press, 2012). On Holland and Flanders: Joep Leerssen, *De bronnen van het vaderland* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2011).

11. 'The nation and the city: Urban festivals and Cultural Mobilization', *Nations and Nationalism*, 21.1 (2015): forthcoming. In that article, I refer to some of the literary-historical studies on the *Renaixença* on which I gratefully draw, also

quently as modern-day bards (e.g. Thomas Moore's 'Oh Blame not the Bard'), minstrels (e.g. Walter Scott's 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel') or troubadours (Rubió, Bofarull), wrote poetry in the matching style (the ballad), and did so in tandem with the philological recuperation of medieval literary remains (e.g. Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish border* alongside his *The lay of the last minstrel*).

I say nothing new when I point out that in the Catalan cultural-nationalist movement, the early phase of the *Renaixença* is nostalgically preoccupied with the evocation of a medieval, feudal past: the County of Barcelona and the Crown of Aragon. There is, to be sure, an earlier epic-heroic theme (Otger Cataló, e.g. in Lorenzale's painting) but it remains isolated; much more pronounced, both as poetic topics and as topics for history paintings, are feudal-chivalric, high-medievalist themes like the origin of the four red stripes of the Catalan escutcheon, Roger de Flor, Count Berenguer III (Fortuny's painting), Gualtero de Monsonís (Manent's opera based on Cortada's tale). The Primal Catastrophe which is signalled as the (beginning of the) end of this medieval-chivalric Catalan flourishing is the Compromise of Casp, thematized in the first historical novel in Catalan, *L'orfeneta de Menargues o Catalunya agonitzant* (1862).

Meanwhile, however, an alternative self-image was developing for Catalan intellectuals, less predicated on medievalist nostalgia and more oriented towards the developing modernity of Barcelona as an urban centre. This municipal modernity evoked a very different Primal Catastrophe: the siege and fall of the city in 1714. The historicist commemoration of the *Diada* of the City's Fall, 11 September, arises in the 19th century as the fashion for medievalism and neo-Gothicism wanes. A very early thematization is Juan Illas's *Enrique y Mercedes: Novela histórica del sitio de Barcelona*, which appeared in 1840; but the commemorative cult took off in the 1870s. Mateu Bruguera's *Historia del memorable sitio de Barcelona* appeared in 1871 and thematized the event in the terms that have remained dominant until now (even in the strident novel *Victus* by Albert Sánchez Pinyol, 2012): as the loss of the civic freedoms, the snuffing out of mercantile progres-

for the present purpose, by my Catalan colleagues, including Josep M. Domingo and Magí Sunyer, and the other Catalan contributors to the *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* (www.spinnet.eu, in progress).

sivism and the abolitions of self-government in the Catalan lands, now oppressed under a dour, nobility-dominated, absolutist and centralist Spanish monarchy. In contrast with the dour conservatism of Spanish autocratic rule, Barcelona was seen as the city of the Council of Hundred, as a forward-looking city-republic given to commerce and enterprise. This historicist idealization obviously reflects the ideals and aspirations, indeed the self-image, of liberal Catalan regionalists and nationalists of the later 19th century, who aimed to attach Barcelona and its surrounding country to European progress rather than to Spanish stagnation; and in the 20th century, that view was to be confirmed by another iteration of the Primal Catastrophe: the ruinous defeat of 1939; Franco becoming a modernist-dictatorial reincarnation of Felipe V.

The case of Catalonia shows how at different moments different periods of the national past can be activated as a 'Golden Age' for the historical imagination, each with a different thematic, artistic and ideological message for the present. The case, which I only outline here, deserves further study, for three reasons. To begin with, it shows how nations are made and unmade by changing or 'retrofitting' their past — i.e. by choosing to appropriate certain portions rather than others from the past and investing them with national, identitarian significance. What is more, the case also illustrates that in nationalist consciousness-raising there may be successive artistic and historicist 'fashions' for different historical periods, and that the shifts in these fashions signify shifts in contemporary ideological preferences, mainly in nationalism's fundamental ambivalence between nostalgia and reform. Thirdly, the case highlights the complex dynamics, which is only beginning to be explored, between 19th-century nation-building and the still-active legacy of early-modern city culture.