

ISSN 1753-2396 (Print)
ISSN 2753-328X (Online)

Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Articles

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Volume 7, Issue 1
Pp: 75-104
2013
Published on: 1st Jan 2013
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ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

‘Shameful Literary Traditions’: Daniel Corkery and the Literary Reputation of Francis Sylvester Mahony

Fergus Dunne

In 1866, during the final weeks of his life, Francis Sylvester Mahony (1804–66), the Cork-born wit, essayist, and journalist, destroyed all that remained of his personal papers and correspondence—an action which, in the words of one literary historian, ‘all interested in his memory must ever deeply regret’.¹ As a close friend of William Makepeace Thackeray and Robert Browning, and a former colleague of Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle, he might well have secured a permanent place in Victorian literary history on the basis of his correspondence alone. An apparent desire for posthumous obscurity, however, was not inconsistent with the shifting authorial identities of a writer who signed his work variously as ‘Frank Mahony’, ‘Francis O’Mahony’ (or ‘O’Mahonai’), ‘F.M.’, ‘Father Prout’, ‘Frank Cresswell’, ‘Oliver Yorke’, ‘Teddy O’Driscoll’ (or ‘O’Dryscull’), ‘Rory O’Dryscull’, ‘Don Savonarola’, ‘The Bookseller’s Hack in Ordinary’, ‘An Eminent Hand’, and ‘The Paris Correspondent’. Mahony is mainly remembered today as the poet of the popular ballad, ‘The Bells of Shandon’, and as the author of the satiric ‘Prout Papers’, a series of scholarly essays contributed to the conservative London periodical *Fraser’s Magazine* in the mid-1830s. Later collected in book form as *The Reliques of Father Prout* (1836), Mahony’s essays presented an idiosyncratic mix of cosmopolitan and peripheral Irish perspectives, providing a complexly ironic commentary on the historical divisions and political discord of contemporary Ireland. Assuming the semi-autobiographical persona of ‘Father Prout’, the learned (if eccentric) parish priest of Watergrasshill, County Cork, Mahony combined polemical attacks on the Irish nationalist leader, Daniel O’Connell (1775–1847) with classical exegesis, mock-antiquarian debate, parodic reworkings of popular Anglo-Irish balladry, and accomplished translations from modern and ancient languages. His pretended discovery of foreign-language originals for Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* (in fact, his own historically recontextualised translations) presented an unorthodox exploration of the difficulties of textual reinterpretation in a fraught political context. The alternating

¹ George O’Neill, ‘Father Prout’, *Journal of the Ivernian Society*, 3 (1910), 24.

emphasis in the ‘Prout Papers’ on classical order and colonial variety, formal conservatism and subversive metafictional comment, literary originality and an anti-Romantic ‘imitative’ or translational ‘inauthenticity’, registered Mahony’s self-conscious refusal of a putative literary synthesis between the metropolitan and peripheral aspects of his work. Yet, seen as a whole, the ‘Prout Papers’ succeeded in imaginatively combining opposing literary perspectives, holding the contrasting poles of his aesthetic in ironic tension with one another.

While this sometimes imbued his writings with a characteristic tonal instability, it also reproduced the ambiguity and confusion of a context not easily reducible to literary coherence. As both a ‘progressive Tory’ and Catholic unionist author, Mahony created in ‘Father Prout’ a polyglot character whose ‘multilateral’ soul and ‘multifarious’ talk were not readily amenable to conventional literary categories.² If literary reception partly concerns itself with rediscovering the particular question to which a text is the answer, Mahony’s ironic writings—described by the fictional Fraserian editor, Oliver Yorke (also Mahony), as ‘complete, as far as it goes’—generate many questions about colonial Irish authorship but provide few concrete answers.³ Interpretation, then, assumes a central role in these anti-Romantic essays, with the modern Irish author ironically reconceived by Mahony as a humble translator of literary precedent. Faced with the interpretative challenge that Mahony sets down for readers of his self-reflexive writings, literary historians are asked to somehow adequately account for an author whose scholarly yet topical, intertextual essays defy easy categorisation, and who explicitly sets out to subvert the notion of canonical authorship. The present article will attempt to re-examine the simplification and distortion of Mahony’s work, with particular reference to the politicised reshaping of his reputation by Daniel Corkery and others in the post-independence period. The steady downgrading in his literary status, from nineteenth-century popular renown and critical respectability to the relative obscurity of more recent times, will be reassessed in relation to the predominance of certain essentialist nationalist paradigms in standard studies of nineteenth-century Irish literature. Reception theory will be used to offer a more sensitive reading of Mahony’s multilayered prose, and to help re-evaluate the close dialogue his texts maintained with the context from which they emerged.

One might begin by looking at the high reputation that the ‘Prout Papers’ enjoyed in the mid to late nineteenth century. Mahony’s ‘peculiar *mixture*

² Francis Mahony, *The Reliques of Father Prout* (London, 1860), iv.

³ *Ibid.*, ix.

of ... toryism, classicism, sarcasm, and punch' helped to establish and secure his initial reputation amongst the metropolitan reading public of 1830s London.⁴ However, in a private letter of 1856 to the publisher Richard Bentley, Mahony complained that the first edition of *The Reliques of Father Prout* (1836) had 'slept' in commercial neglect for two decades.⁵ This was at least partly attributable to the restricted availability of his prose writings due to his own snobbish refusal to reissue his 'essentially scholarly' tome in a 'cheap series' format.⁶ Yet, notwithstanding his apparent distaste for the spread of popular literacy, he later chose to reissue an expanded collection of his Prout essays with Henry G. Bohn, a publisher known for providing accessible classical translations to a non-classically educated audience.⁷ Republished during the golden age of nineteenth-century classical scholarship, the revised and enlarged edition of *The Reliques of Father Prout* (1860) found a new audience for Mahony's prose, and was reprinted at least sixteen times in London and New York up to 1909. The republication of his periodical essays was accompanied by a concomitant rise in his critical fortunes. Writing in 1866, James Hannay asserted (with perhaps a touch of exaggeration) that the name of 'Father Prout' was still a 'household word' in the 'literary world of the metropolis' at the time of Mahony's death.⁸ A large 818-page anthology of Irish verse, *The Poets and Poetry of Ireland*, published in New York in 1868, devoted seventy-five pages to the poems and translations of Mahony.⁹ Less than a decade later, William Bates could confidently declare that Mahony's Prout writings 'have now taken a high and permanent place among the general literature of our time'.¹⁰ The posthumous appearance of *The Final Reliques of Father Prout* (1876) and *The Works of Father Prout* (1881), both of which were published in London, attest to the ongoing metropolitan interest in Mahony's work. By the

⁴ James Hannay, 'Father Prout', *The Universal Review* (February 1860), 252.

⁵ Francis Mahony, 'Original and "Photostat" Copies of Letters by Rev. Francis Mahony', National Library of Ireland, Ms. 5059, fol. 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See André Lefevere, 'Translation Practice(s) and the Circulation of Cultural Capital: Some Aeneids in English' in Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (eds), *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* (n.p., 1998), 54.

⁸ James Hannay, 'Recent Humorists: Aytoun, Peacock, Prout', *North British Review*, 45 (September 1866), 76.

⁹ See *The Poets and Poetry of Ireland: With Numerous Notes* by J. Hardiman, M.R. I. A., Samuel Lover, and D. F. McCarthy, *Professor of Poetry, University of Ireland* (New York, 1868).

¹⁰ William Bates (ed.), *A Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters (1830–38), Drawn by the Late Daniel Maclise, R.A. and Accompanied by Notices Chiefly by the Late William Maginn, LL. D.* (London, 1873), 96.

early 1880s, there had been a minor revival of interest in his writings, with three recently published or reprinted editions of his prose and journalism in circulation. (William Bates, in his capacity as editor of *A Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters* [1873], a collection of caricatures and potted biographies taken from *Fraser's Magazine*, added a lengthy biographical portrait of Mahony to the expanded 1883 edition of the text.) Charles A. Read, editor of the influential multi-volume anthology, *The Cabinet of Irish Literature* (originally published between 1879 and 1884, but reprinted four times at the turn of the last century), lauded him as an 'inimitable Irish genius' entitled 'to a place among the great masters of comedy'.¹¹ As late as 1892, the Irish-American critic, D.O. Crowley, could argue (again with some exaggeration): 'There are, indeed, few pseudonyms in the broad extent of English literature that have attained greater celebrity than that of "Father Prout", the classic sage of Watergrasshill, near Blarney.'¹²

How, then, to account for the rapid decline in Mahony's reputation in the early twentieth century? Aside from the superior quality of Mahony's satiric, hyperliterate prose, the 'Prout Papers' were valued in a nineteenth-century British context for their skilful interleaving of the national and cosmopolitan components of his aesthetic, and for their surefooted negotiation of the traditional gap between the classical and the contemporary. One might briefly cite the pro-Union assessment of Mahony's writings which the Tory editor, critic and magazinist, James Hannay (1827–73) contributed to the liberal Scottish periodical, the *North British Review*, shortly after the author's death in 1866. Hannay characterises his friend's literary oeuvre as the work of a brilliant 'minor' author, who enjoyed his 'chief reputation among the cultivated classes'.¹³ Respected in London literary circles and 'loved and honoured by his own countrymen', Mahony manages to combine the distinctive national traits of an Irish writer with the classical cosmopolitanism of a sixteenth-century man of letters.¹⁴ For Hannay (a Scottish-born critic), he thus represents an ideal of the 'British' author who aesthetically reconciles the competing needs of 'national individualism' and national 'intercommunion'. It is important to recall here that Mahony's classicism was, in some respects, a patrician response to the

¹¹ Charles A. Read (ed.), *The Cabinet of Irish Literature: Selections from the Works of the Chief Poets, Orators, and Prose Writers of Ireland* (4 vols, 1879; new edition, New York, 1903), III, 48, 49.

¹² Rev. D.O. Crowley, *Irish Poets and Novelists* (1892; third edition, San Francisco, 1893), 397.

¹³ James Hannay, 'Recent Humorists', 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

rise of Romantic nationalism, a transnational and transhistorical alternative to the counter-Enlightenment emphasis on cultural specificity. Yet while broadly 'faithful' to the spirit of ancient literature, his Hibernicised (if anti-Romantic) reworkings of classical learning were also a serio-comic recognition of the fact that interpretation always takes place in history. If, in Mahony's case, this necessarily involved a semi-ironic reconciliation of ancient Rome and 1830s Cork, it also signalled the vulnerability of Mahony's work to changing historical circumstances. The critical fate of the 'Prout Papers'—out of print since 1909, and the subject of only one major critical study in the twentieth century—is linked to the declining influence of classical education, and the subsequent marginalisation of classical communities of interpretation. It reflects, too, the rise of the Home Rule and nationalist movements in Ireland, and an increasingly exclusivist focus on national themes in Irish literary criticism. Not easily categorised in terms of genre, content or even political tenor, Mahony's post-Romantic, pre-Victorian periodical writings were most often positioned in relation to their classicism and perceived 'Irishness'—two central and recurrent tropes of the 'Prout Papers' that would alter in meaning and significance in the twentieth century. Though representative of nineteenth-century metropolitan attitudes to the 'Prout Papers', Hannay's review, focused as it was on Mahony's aesthetic evasion of the dual threats of 'provincialism' and 'excessive centralization', ran the risk of overemphasising his cosmopolitan classical sensibility while also underestimating the political pressures attendant upon figuratively representing the disparities between Irish and British conditions.¹⁵ The term 'North Britain' was a phrase given new currency by contributors to the *Edinburgh Review*, a periodical lauded by the *North British Review* for having "laid the foundation of an empire", and which played an important role in developing a general theory of British nationalism.¹⁶ In contrast to nineteenth-century Ireland, civil society and religiosity—the two cornerstones of nineteenth-century Scottish identity, according to Graeme Morton—were not compromised by participation in the British nation-state.¹⁷ The defining nineteenth-century Scottish policy of 'unionist nationalism' was premised on the widely-held belief that Scottish interests were best served

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Quoted in Linda E. Connors and Mary Lu MacDonald, *National Identity in Great Britain and British North America, 1815–1851: The Role of Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (Surrey, 2011), 142. See also Mark Schoenfield, *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity: The 'Literary Lower Empire'* (New York, 2009), 202.

¹⁷ See Graeme Morton, 'Identity Out of Place' in Trevor Griffiths and Graeme Morton (eds), *A History of Everyday Life in Scotland, 1800 to 1900* (Edinburgh, 2010), 259.

by the preservation of the union and the promotion of empire.¹⁸ One might argue, therefore, that as a conservative Scottish journalist writing for a liberal Scottish (or ‘North British’) periodical, Hannay was not well positioned to offer an incisive examination of the Irish separatist considerations that would ultimately prove crucial in defining Mahony’s literary reception.

For present purposes, then, the question can be narrowed to the ideological aspects of Mahony’s reception, and to whether, first, Mahony’s Catholic unionist prose—with its forceful and defining anti-O’Connellite rejection of the proposed repeal of the Act of Union—was politically problematic for contemporary and posthumous nineteenth-century commentators? Significantly, Mahony was invited in the 1840s to contribute to the newly-launched *Nation* newspaper, the main organ of the liberal nationalist Young Ireland movement. When the *Nation* was attacked by O’Connell in 1843 for ‘praising writers not entitled to be praised’, Thomas Davis (1814–45), leading journalist and guiding spirit of the *Nation*, reiterated the newspaper’s policy of non-sectarian inclusiveness, praising Mahony’s candid evaluation of the Irish Catholic clergy, his defence of his old Jesuit instructors in the Prout essay, ‘Literature and the Jesuits’, and his groundbreaking introduction of obscure Catholic authors to a Tory Protestant audience.¹⁹ Davis concludes unequivocally that his fellow ‘countrymen may fairly be proud of him without evincing any want of taste or patriotism’.²⁰ Certainly, Mahony’s Tory patrician rejection of O’Connellite popular politics was readily amenable to the ecumenical but elitist and Protestant-dominated cultural nationalism of Young Ireland—a pointed reminder of the deep-seated divisions within Irish nationalist thought even at this early stage in its development.

But even leaving aside the complexities of contemporary Irish nationalism, his nineteenth-century critics and biographers, most of whom wrote in a similar vein to James Hannay, were focussed, in the main, on describing the aesthetic merits of his literary achievement rather than exploring the precise nature of his political allegiances. The Catholic barrister, Charles Kent, one of Mahony’s earliest biographers, unreservedly condemned his ‘revolting’ anti-O’Connellite lyric, ‘The Lay of Lazarus’:²¹

¹⁸ See Graeme Morton, *Unionist Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland, 1830–1860* (East Lothian, 1999).

¹⁹ Charles Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland: A Fragment of Irish History, 1840–50* (London, 1880), 169.

²⁰ Thomas Davis, ‘Irish Writers’, *Nation*, 25 February 1843, 313.

²¹ Francis Mahony, *The Works of Father Prout*, Charles Kent (ed.) (London, 1881), xxv.

Hark, hark, to the begging-box shaking!
For whom is this alms-money making?
For DAN; who is cramming his wallet, while famine,
Sets the heart of the peasant a-quaking...
The land is all blighted with famine,
Yet still doth *he* crave—and, like ghoul at a grave,
Racks rottenness, rooting for Mammon!²²

Yet, despite Kent's evident unease at this highly provocative depiction of O'Connell as a thief rifling a Famine corpse for the Catholic rent, he did not infer a general lack of patriotic feeling in Mahony's work from this particular stance. Writing in the same decade as Kent, the Irish ballad collector, Charles MacCarthy Collins remarked in his *Celtic Irish Songs and Song-Writers* (1885) that 'notwithstanding his unreverend life, notwithstanding his contempt for O'Connell, he was regarded with affection by his countrymen'.²³ Archbishop John MacHale, famed ecclesiastical supporter and facilitator of O'Connellite Catholic nationalism, summarised nineteenth-century attitudes to Mahony in his pithy observation that 'the Irishman who wrote Father Prout's papers was an honour to his country'.²⁴

Even following the post-Parnellite resurgence of Irish cultural nationalism, and the emergence of the Gaelic League (1893) and the Irish Literary Theatre (1899) as important pre-independence national institutions, Mahony could still find a sympathetic audience for his work. This can be seen most strikingly in the largely appreciative portrait of the 'Prout Papers' that appeared in the newly-founded *United Irishman* newspaper (1899–1906), edited by the writer and activist, Arthur Griffith (1872–1922), later founder of the radical nationalist party, *Sinn Féin*.²⁵ For a time 'the most important organ of the Irish nationalist movement', the *United Irishman* played a significant early role in the Irish literary revival, providing a practical, analytical component to the aesthetic project of cultural nationalism.²⁶ Eminent early contributors included W.B. Yeats, John Eglinton, 'AE', and George Moore. The newspaper's anti-British emphasis

²² Francis Mahony, *Facts and Figures from Italy* (London, 1847), 17–18.

²³ Charles MacCarthy Collins, *Celtic Irish Songs and Song-Writers: A Selection* (London, 1885), 91.

²⁴ Mahony, *Works*, xxxii.

²⁵ See Virginia E. Glandon, *Arthur Griffith and the Advanced-Nationalist Press: Ireland, 1900–1922* (New York, 1985).

²⁶ Robert Hogan (ed.), *Dictionary of Irish Literature: Revised and Expanded* (2 vols, Westport, Connecticut, 1996), I, 503.

on the need for ‘economic self-help’, industrialisation and rural development was complemented by its efforts both to promote and offer insightful political commentary on the new Irish literature.²⁷ In a series featuring patriotic Irish writers entitled ‘The Man of the Week’, the anonymous *United Irishman* reviewer notes the anti-nationalist nature of Mahony’s ‘political leanings’, and his antipathy to O’Connell.²⁸ Yet although regretting that Mahony’s ‘pen was sometimes unjust’, he ‘can forgive this weakness in recalling his great intellectuality and the proud position he held in an era of intellectual giants’.²⁹ He remarks favourably, too, on Mahony’s ‘warm’ admiration for Thomas Davis, praises his humorous critique of the patriotic poet and balladeer, Thomas Moore (‘our national bard’), and reprints his translation of ‘The Three-Coloured Flag (A Prosecuted Song)’ by the French republican poet, Jean-Pierre de Béranger.³⁰ This latter point is particularly noteworthy given that the paper’s articulation of a ‘revivified separatist faith’ drew upon and commemorated the ecumenical Irish republican ideals of the 1798 Rebellion.³¹ Indeed, Mahony’s emphasis on religious ecumenism, economic patriotism, and anti-O’Connellite polemic overlapped with Griffithite pleas for religious tolerance and economic self-determination, as well as his suspicion of parliamentary politics, British Liberalism, and nineteenth-century Irish bourgeois nationalism (as exemplified in the figures of O’Connell and Moore). As was the case with Young Ireland, Mahony’s progressive Tory writings were reviewed impartially by the *United Irishman*, in a manner sensitive to the historical subtleties and contradictions of his decentred metropolitan aesthetic. Read carefully and selectively, Mahony’s Catholic unionist writings could be accommodated to Griffith’s distinctive brand of committed, though inclusive and non-violent, nationalism, and thus mined profitably for the future-oriented project of Irish separatism.

Amid the ideological confusion and political polarisation of early twentieth-century Ireland, however, the rapprochement between cultural revivalism and Griffithite civic republicanism would prove short-lived. Tensions became apparent when Griffith vigorously criticised J.M. Synge’s sexualised depiction of Irish womanhood in *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), and were later

²⁷ Matthew Kelly, ‘Essentialist Agendas: The Irish Literary Revival’, *Irish Review*, 33 (2005), 125.

²⁸ ‘The Man of the Week’, *United Irishman: A National Weekly Review*, 13 May 1899.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Matthew Kelly, ‘The End of Parnellism and the Ideological Dilemmas of Sinn Féin’ in D. George Boyce and Alan O’Day (eds), *Ireland in Transition, 1867–1921* (London, 2004), 145.

compounded when he attacked Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) for its allegedly inauthentic, retrograde, and morally dubious delineation of national character.³² Behind this was a culturo-political dispute about what constituted a properly national literature. Sophisticated revivalist reworkings of a reenergised national spirit provoked intense debate on the need to balance literary cosmopolitanism with a home-grown nationalist aesthetic. (Despite—or, perhaps, because of—the political values extolled in his work, Mahony was rarely seen as a cosmopolitan European writer in this context, even though, ironically enough, literary cosmopolitanism enjoyed a vogue in the early twentieth century as a kind of counter-discourse to the revival.³³) Griffith's increasingly intolerant stance towards what he saw as negative and unrepresentative revivalist portrayals of the Catholic peasantry embodied an emerging conviction that literary endeavour had to subserve the nationalist cause.

Equally significant was a further split within nationalist thought between Griffith's Davisite ecumenical separatism and the ethnic essentialism of the Irish-Ireland movement. Griffith's comparatively moderate Irish exclusivism found fuller expression in the vitriolic journalism of D.P. Moran (1869–1936), pugnacious editor of *The Leader* newspaper (est. 1900), and author of polemical works such as *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* (1905). Inspired by the linguistic nationalism—though not the ethnic inclusiveness—of the Gaelic League, Moran forcefully rejected the forward-looking cultural nationalism of Griffith and the revivalists. Instead, making telling use of his command of sectarian abuse and political invective, he aggressively promoted the need for an exclusively Gaelic Catholic Ireland. As Patrick Maume observes, Moran 'spoke for [urban] Catholic professionals and small businessmen forcing their way into economic sectors dominated by Protestant and Unionist patronage networks'.³⁴ Rejecting the Protestant Irish population as 'resident aliens', Moran urged that the authentic 'Gaels' of a '*de facto*... Catholic nation' reconnect with their native inheritance.³⁵ What Moran termed the 'battle for two civilisations'—which reached its cultural zenith with the *Playboy* controversy—was predicated on Irish-Ireland's Romanticisation of the Irish peasantry—a process that deflected attention away from the role that

³² See Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork, 1996), 207–21.

³³ See John Eglinton, 'The De-Davisisation of Irish Literature', *Bards and Saints* (Dublin, 1906), 36–43.

³⁴ Patrick Maume, *D.P. Moran* (Dundalk, 1995), 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 22; quoted in R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London, 1989), 454.

an urban-based, Catholic middle class played in the campaign for political independence. (Though both *The Leader* and *United Irishmen* promulgated a purist vision of peasant Ireland, they were both predominantly white-collar Dublin newspapers with a limited national readership, their focus on nationalist interests at odds with the Home Rule emphasis of the mainstream press.) In the pungent rhetoric of Irish-Ireland, the Gaelic-speaking peasant of the rural west came to symbolise a persecuted yet defiant and unbowed native culture—one now being appropriated by revivalist members of the very same Ascendancy ruling class which, it was argued, had once orchestrated its oppression. Notwithstanding his own anti-Semitism, Griffith condemned Moran's *Leader* for its clericalist appeal to the 'lowest, basest and meanest passion in man—religious bigotry';³⁶ nonetheless, it was the Irish-Ireland contribution to this intranationalist debate—the potent rejection of the 'sham' 'all-creeds-and-classes' school of Davisite nationalism—that would ultimately produce a negative reassessment of Mahony's Tory writings.³⁷

With the increased emphasis on ethnic essentialism, and the pan-nationalist focus on the need to create and define a distinctively Irish literary canon which addressed national issues in a national literature, a new note of censure and disapprobation—centred on notions of cultural disparagement and 'stage-Irishness'—now entered the critical historiography. In his *Nova Hibernia* (1914), for example, the Cork-born journalist, magazinist, and literary historian Michael Monahan (1865–1933) celebrates the 'Celtic Renaissance', a 'rebirth of genius and spirituality' that forced 'critics, so long hostile or merely contemptuous ... [into] considering us more seriously'.³⁸ But he is careful to qualify his mainly positive appraisal of Mahony's career by criticising the 'Lay of Lazarus' for 'adding to his country's shame'.³⁹ Indeed, Mahony's attempt to traduce the reputation of O'Connell demonstrates that 'his sympathies were not with a majority of his own countrymen'; nor, in a remark that reveals the immediate relevance of Mahony's controversial views, were they in accord with a mid-nineteenth-century Ireland 'struggling along in the old way (which has not yet been entirely changed for a better)'.⁴⁰ The Irish Jesuit critic, George O'Neill (1863–1947), first professor of English language and philosophy at the National University of Ireland, also declares Mahony to have been

³⁶ Quoted in Brian Maye, *Arthur Griffith* (Dublin, 1997), 159.

³⁷ Maume, *D.P. Moran*, 8.

³⁸ Michael Monahan, *Nova Hibernia: Irish Poets and Dramatists of Today and Yesterday* (New York, 1914), 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

but ‘imperfectly’ Irish in his ‘sympathies’.⁴¹ For O’Neill, Mahony’s ‘violent Toryism’ manifested itself in his vilification of those who were, in O’Neill’s analysis, ‘the only possible Irish leaders’:

With such political views we are not surprised to find associated some lack of that sense of national dignity and self-respect the growth of which has been a cheering phenomenon of our recent history. He is ready to make fun of all things Irish (including himself) for the delectation of an outside world—of a world already too prompt to take us at the jester’s valuation.⁴²

There is a direct connection, in other words, between Mahony’s conservative repudiation of O’Connellite nationalism and his purported desire to present an anachronistic, unpatriotic version of Irish identity to an English audience. He was, quite simply, a ‘professional jester’, whom O’Neill groups alongside his one-time editor, William Maginn, regretting that two such gifted writers came to prominence in a stage-Irish milieu.⁴³ (Writing in the same period, the moderate nationalist author, Stephen Gwynn [1864–1950], also blithely dismissed what he termed the pedantic ‘polyglot jesting of Father Prout’ in a throwaway reference to Mahony’s complex, translation-based satire, ‘The Rogueries of Thomas Moore’.⁴⁴) In remarks that presage the imminent decline in Mahony’s reputation, the ‘Prout Papers’ are deemed by O’Neill to be representative of ‘something we have just got away from, and consequently, are least likely to study with sympathy’.⁴⁵

Yet one could argue that as the arbiters of a ‘canonical’ Irish literature attempted to discredit what was, for them, an outmoded and inauthentic understanding of national character, Mahony’s work took on a new significance, and, in some respects, began to grow in importance. One might invoke here the concept of a literary *nachleben* (or afterlife) which foregrounds the process by which a given author’s works are ‘forever being re-created, *appropriated* in the name of conflicting political and aesthetic ideologies’.⁴⁶ Hans Robert Jauss links the lifespan of a literary text to its ongoing ability to elicit a response in

⁴¹ George O’Neill, ‘Father Prout’, 20.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 20, 20–1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁴ Stephen Gwynn, *Thomas Moore* (London, 1905), 25.

⁴⁵ O’Neill, ‘Father Prout’, 3.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730–1830* (Oxford, 1989), 2.

“readers who again appropriate the past work or authors who want to imitate, outdo, or refute it”⁴⁷. The question, as phrased by Edward Said, is ‘why a text enjoy[s] currency at one time, recurrency at others, oblivion at others?’⁴⁸ In Mahony’s case, the answer can be directly linked to the literary criticism of Daniel Corkery (1878–1964). The publication in 1931 of his highly influential study, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*—described by Seamus Deane as ‘a founding act of literary and political criticism for the newly emergent Free State’—helped secure a minor (and predominantly negative) *nachleben* for Mahony’s writings.⁴⁹ Corkery had been an important contributor to Moran’s *Leader*, and he would become the most articulate proponent of the Irish-Ireland project of cultural decolonisation. As one of a generation of young Irish intellectuals inspired by both the Irish-language activism of the Gaelic League and the religious isolationism of the Catholic Church, he was closely affiliated with the Catholic nationalist élite that defined the narrow ethos of post-independence Ireland. In *The Hidden Ireland* (1925), Corkery’s landmark survey of the Irish-language poetry of eighteenth-century Munster, he had written with a novelist’s flair of a re-emergent Gaelic Catholic culture, giving critical currency to the titular concept of an historically occluded peasant tradition which, he claimed, had remained intact and untainted through centuries of British oppression. *The Hidden Ireland* was later criticised by revisionist historians for its perceived lack of historical rigour and its obfuscation of class difference; but the enduring appeal of Corkery’s thesis lay, nonetheless, in its indisputable ‘rhetorical power’, and its imaginative engagement with Irish-language poetic sources.⁵⁰ It succeeded in the difficult task of establishing a two-way dialogue with the native literary canon, demanding, first, that the modern Irish reader experience the strangeness of a lost Gaelic inheritance by establishing a “living” link with the past’, so placing ‘the relationship between reader and read in the foreground of its project’.⁵¹ But, equally importantly, it allowed the Gaelic past of the Penal Law era to re-inhabit the present of post-independence Ireland. Published in the period immediately after the establishment of the Free State, *The Hidden Ireland* helped establish a tendentious Irish-Ireland view of national

⁴⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London, 1984), 150.

⁴⁹ Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford, 1997), 151.

⁵⁰ See L. M. Cullen, *The Hidden Ireland: Reassessment of a Concept* (Dublin, 1988), 25; and Patrick Walsh, ‘Daniel Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland* and Revisionism’, *New Hibernia Review*, 5 (2001), 42.

⁵¹ Walsh, ‘Daniel Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland* and Revisionism’, 39.

history as an 'educational orthodoxy', resurrecting the past in what might be described as the new cultural dispensation established by an official nationalist monoculture.⁵² In one sense, *The Hidden Ireland* represented a positive harnessing of the national energies unleashed by the Irish Literary Renaissance; however, its attempt to create a shared community of interpretation involved an exclusionary challenge to the 'Ascendancy' model of national history. From a literary standpoint, this largely negative project was taken up in earnest in *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, where a desire to re-create a distinctively Irish voice in an English-language setting saw Corkery comprehensively reject the metropolitan literary 'moulds' of nineteenth-century Ireland.

In what, essentially, was an ambitious attempt to impose a new set of standards on the study of Irish literature in the Free State, Corkery set about re-examining the work of the most prominent Irish authors of the preceding two centuries, and asking whether their writings were still relevant to a modern Catholic nationalist Ireland. In the controversial opening chapter, Mahony (or 'Prout', as Corkery, significantly enough, chooses to refer to him) is cited as one of the leading exponents of a colonial Irish literature produced by expatriate authors for an English readership. (Corkery had himself authored a number of well-received plays and novels—several of which were published in both Dublin and London—and was well acquainted with the difficulties of finding a home-grown audience for a native Irish literature.) For Corkery, the 'colonial' school of writing exhibits a quaint, exotic form of Irishness before 'alien eyes', instead of endeavouring to address an Irish readership.⁵³ Fashioned by the writers of an alien Ascendancy class, the 'moulds' of Anglo-Irish literature did 'not willingly receive the facts of Irish life'.⁵⁴ The efforts of colonial authors, moreover, to accommodate the prejudices and preconceptions of a non-native audience meant that they failed 'to canalize some share of Irish consciousness so that that consciousness would the better know itself'.⁵⁵ Unlike the canonical literature of other nations, Anglo-Irish literature was not, therefore, 'written primarily for its own people'.⁵⁶ The related phenomenon of the emigration (or 'expatriation') of Irish authors who sought a foreign market for their literary wares is represented as 'a chronic disease from Goldsmith's time, Steele's time, Sheridan's time, Burke's time, Moore's time, Prout's time, Wilde's time, to

⁵² Ibid., 27.

⁵³ Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork, 1931), 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid., ix.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2.

our own time of Shaw, Joyce, and Moore'.⁵⁷ Corkery is careful to distinguish between a genuine Anglo-Irish literature—one which, as in the case of Synge and the dramatists of the Abbey theatre, tried 'to express Ireland to itself'—and a colonial literature that exists only by 'English suffrage'.⁵⁸ This latter form of Irish writing represented for Corkery an ignoble, unpatriotic surrender to the demands of the metropolitan British marketplace. Indeed, Mahony is portrayed as part of 'the shameful literary tradition of ... Prout, Maginn, Lever, [and] Lover', writers who are here categorised as members of an Ascendancy class which had only a distant knowledge of the Irish peasantry.⁵⁹ The intellectual brilliance of the 'colonial' author marked their alienation from the 'emotional background' of their compatriots, their cosmopolitan indifference allowing them to trade in 'insolence, cynicism, recklessness, and hardness'.⁶⁰ It was this remote, elevated perspective on his fellow countrymen that allowed Mahony to laugh "with foreign jaws" at the 100 per cent. type of Irishman', even if, Corkery argues, his alleged eagerness to meet the demands of a foreign literary market concealed the 'secret sorrow' of the 'jester'—namely, his 'desertion of the land that most required ... [his] services'.⁶¹

Corkery's analysis, then, picks up on and develops the three main tropes that attached to Mahony's name in the early twentieth century. The depiction of his writings as frivolous yet shameful, emotionally uninvolved and lacking in national sympathy saw him become the linking figure in Corkery's study between two distinct groups of expatriate and stage-Irish authors—a writer who exemplified Corkery's central hypothesis that literary expatriation necessarily involved pandering to outside interests. Significantly, Mahony had never before (nor has he since) formed part of such a select group of Irish authors, his brief ascension into the category of major authorship representing a final flowering of his critical reputation before his definitive relegation to the second rank. Any refutation of Corkery's thesis would need, first, to address the notion that Mahony 'deserted' or was even insufficiently attentive to the plight of his native land. Mahony and Maginn, we are told, are amongst 'those who most summarily dismissed the claims of their own people'.⁶² But even the most cursory knowledge of Mahony's biography might lead one to query his alleged emotional detachment from a people he had voluntarily

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11, 10.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17, 19.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 18.

ministered to in the Cork Foundling and Fever Hospitals, and for whom he had risked his life during a cholera epidemic. More pertinently, perhaps, his Prout writings provided him with a forum for his acidulous criticisms of a corrupt system of landlordism (only noticed, he argues, because of 'Rockite' agrarian terrorism), as well as his anti-Connellite rage at the refusal of the Liberator to endorse poor law relief for the starving Irish populace, and his consistent support for municipal political reform. The ironic humour of his Prout essays was less a question of an auto-exotic 'laughing with foreign jaws' at the Irish peasant than of satirising the particular version of national identity endorsed by O'Connell and his peasant followers (a subtlety more likely to be lost on someone who does not carefully distinguish between Mahony and the fictional 'Father Prout'). In both the prose and illustrated content of the 'Prout Papers', the reality of Irish poverty was a constant and pressing theme, belying the notion that Mahony casually renounced his homeland to become one of the literary 'servant[s] of the English people'.⁶³ Writing as Father Prout, Mahony also endorsed the need to develop native Irish industry; indeed, the Irish protectionist stance he adopted in the 'Prout Papers' represented a provocative updating of Swiftian economic patriotism against the backdrop of 1830s O'Connellite nationalism (a position, one might note, which was at odds with his overall defence of the British imperialist project).⁶⁴ His rejection of the O'Connellite Repeal movement, and his later newspaper tirades against Fenianism, were founded on the genuine (if later unpopular) conviction that Catholic Ireland would fare better within the parameters of the Union. (Recent research by Jennifer Ridden on the active participation of Irish Catholics in the British imperial project illustrates the complex of loyalties at stake here.⁶⁵) Far from exhibiting contempt for his native land, Mahony was attempting to convey the opinions of an alternative Catholic unionist Ireland—opinions that would prove anathema to twentieth-century advocates of the Irish-Ireland movement. What is at issue, then, is not an absence of national feeling but rather the biased assumption that his Catholic unionism was incompatible with the promotion of Irish interests.

One might also query Corkery's rejection of the formal conservatism he ascribes to the 'Prout Papers'. Corkery's cultural protectionism is in contrast

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁴ See Terry Eagleton, *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork, 1998), 196.

⁶⁵ Jennifer Ridden, 'Britishness as an Imperial and Diasporic Identity: Irish Elite Perspectives, c. 1820–70s' in Peter Gray (ed.), *Victoria's Ireland?: Irishness and Britishness, 1837–1901* (Dublin, 2004), 88–105.

to the French- and Italian-educated Mahony's support for intellectual 'free trade', which he endorses as vigorously as he opposed its economic equivalent. According to Corkery, 'Ascendancy' writers like Mahony were forced to work within 'an unnatural because unnative mould'.⁶⁶ But for Mahony, the Union between Ireland and Great Britain was a two-way process—one that could mean the Hibernicisation of British culture as well as the Anglicisation of Gaelic traditions. In 'The Songs of France', for example, Mahony accords French literary precursors to a series of major British authors whose writings, Prout claims, 'betray the... working of this [Gallic] foreign essence, mixed up with the crude material of Saxon growth'.⁶⁷ He thus comically reverses and sets in relief conventional cultural hierarchies by establishing a derivative relationship between a native 'Saxon' literature and the traditions of a more powerful neighbour. Yet this is also intended to convey an ironised, peripheral perspective on British-Irish cultural relations. By also placing a substantial number of Irish authors at the heart of the metropolitan canon, he seeks to demonstrate the unacknowledged influence of Irish writing on the formation of the British tradition—a tradition already relativised in the same essay by its depiction as posterior to the French literary canon. Corkery, by contrast, assumes that there can only be an uneven, unilateral relationship between the colonial author and the all-powerful imperial centre. This is to see writers such as Mahony and his editor Maginn—who were the driving force behind the controversial, London-based *Fraser's Magazine* for much of the 1830s—as largely impotent figures who obsequiously courted popularity and unquestioningly fulfilled the demands of the literary marketplace. It altogether ignores the deliberate challenge that their idiosyncratic, disputatious writings presented to a contemporary British readership. Politically unorthodox (or even 'rebellious') and frequently scandalous, *Fraser's* was a publication noted for its comic exploitation of the troubling gap between received generic convention and a recalcitrant peripheral reality.⁶⁸ Dominated by the Cork Fraserian's questioning, 'decentred' attitude to metropolitan cliché, it gained an enviable reputation for its commitment to the publication of innovative British and European prose. In certain respects, Mahony's satiric, peripheral reappraisal of the

⁶⁶ Corkery, *Synge*, 15.

⁶⁷ Mahony, *The Reliques of Father Prout*, 237.

⁶⁸ See Rebecca Edwards Newman, "'Prosecuting the Onus Criminus': Early Criticism of the Novel in *Fraser's Magazine*", *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 35 (2002), 403; and Patrick Leary, '*Fraser's Magazine* and the Literary Life, 1830–47', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 27 (1994), 107, 110–12.

dominant 'moulds' and established conventions of the literary centre could appear a good deal more patriotic than Corkery's almost deferential attitude to the established canonical literature of Britain. It was, one could argue, Mahony's cosmopolitan willingness to comically re-read Anglo-Irish literary relations, capitalising on the misapplication of British literary convention to Irish circumstances—rather than Corkery's cultural essentialism—that provided the more sensitive response to the 'flux and uncertainty' of Irish national consciousness.⁶⁹

But if Corkery's caricatured portrait of 'Father Prout' was a crudely reductive attempt to redefine a mercurial, 'multilateral' figure, then so too was his monocultural vision of Free State literature an attempt to impose a politically-interested interpretation of the literary past on a hybrid, multilayered and transnational tradition. Faced with the dual task of not only formulating new canonical standards, but also distinguishing them from the long-established literary traditions of the dominant neighbouring island, Corkery had difficulty in positively delineating his own contrasting concept of an authentically Irish literature. Importantly, individual literary talent (along with the Joycean celebration of self over society) would now take second place to an author's ability to express the collective national 'reality' of Irish life:⁷⁰

The three great forces which, working for long in the Irish national being, have made it so different from the English national being, are: (1) The Religious Consciousness of the People; (2) Irish Nationalism; and (3) the Land.⁷¹

If Irish writing were to emulate the 'normal', canonical status of British literature, it would have to enshrine these three core elements at the centre of a mainstream literary tradition.⁷² The key canonical factors adduced by Corkery, however, served to underline the historical dimensions of his essentialist rhetoric, begging the question of the extent to which his historically contingent formulation of 'normal' standards shaped his view of Irish race consciousness. Furthermore, the fact that Corkery's own model of a national literature was focussed on the need to imbue Irish writing with the same normative status

⁶⁹ Corkery, *Synge*, 14.

⁷⁰ See John Wilson Foster, 'The Irish Renaissance, 1890–1940: Prose in English' in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2 vols, Cambridge, 2006), II, 149–50.

⁷¹ Corkery, *Synge*, 19.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 3.

he attributed to British literature—the word ‘normal’ recurs throughout the introductory chapter—went some way towards explaining the dualistic nature of his arguments, and his (at times) contradictory efforts to create an authentically Irish literature by close reference to previous British paradigms. For Declan Kiberd, this ‘represented a final surrender to colonialist modes of thought’—that is, an unconscious post-independence replication of colonial paradigms.⁷³ Corkery’s criticism, in short, was in danger of becoming part of the very tradition he himself had vigorously condemned in his prospectus for a new Irish writing.

Nonetheless, Kiberd’s suggestive description of Corkery as Ireland’s earliest approximation to a ‘post-colonial critic’ is apt and justified, notwithstanding the pervasive suspicion of cultural hybridity that characterises much of his cultural (if not his literary) writings.⁷⁴ Though often dismissed as a ‘cultural commissar’, who was ‘insular, racist and parochial’, Corkery focussed critical attention on such key issues as bilingualism, cultural decenteredness and the psychologically ‘fractured’ nature of colonial identity.⁷⁵ His oft-quoted description of ‘national consciousness’ as ‘a quaking sod. It gives no footing. It is not English, nor Irish, nor Anglo-Irish’ provided a pithy diagnosis of the post-colonial Irish condition.⁷⁶ If, surprisingly, Mahony and Corkery are in broad agreement about the ‘in-between’ status of Irish culture, its aforementioned ‘flux and uncertainty’, they differ radically in their critical response to this context—a result, in part, of differing interpretative strategies. Corkery’s vision of Gaelic Ireland drew on ‘the Romantic tradition of cultural criticism, which posited an organic society based on timelessly valid human values in the past in order to criticise the shortcomings of contemporary society’.⁷⁷ But, as Conor Carville notes, the synchronic notion of an organic Irish society is replaced in Corkery’s discussion of the ‘three forces’ by ‘a diachronic notion of the impact of climate, tradition, ideology and economics’.⁷⁸ Carville further observes that Corkery is fearful of the fact that ‘an essentialised Irish consciousness [must be sent] to a site situated somewhere in the English language’, thus exposing Irish culture to

⁷³ Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge, 2005), 184.

⁷⁴ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London, 1995), 272; Daniel Corkery, *The Stones and Other Stories*, Paul Delaney (ed.) (Cork, 2003), 9.

⁷⁵ Heather Laird, *Daniel Corkery’s Cultural Criticism: Selected Writings* (Cork, 2012), ix.

⁷⁶ Corkery, *Synge*, 14.

⁷⁷ Patrick Maume, ‘*Life that is Exile: Daniel Corkery and the Search for Irish Ireland*’ (Belfast, 1993), viii.

⁷⁸ Conor Carville, ‘Becoming Minor: Daniel Corkery and the Expatriated Nation’, *Irish Studies Review*, 6 (1998), 144.

an ‘expatriate’ loss of original meaning and authorial intention.⁷⁹ Importantly, for the ‘Hidden Ireland’ to re-emerge, Gaelic Ireland must be re-read through the intermediary medium of English. Again, the question of interpretation is key here: for Corkery, reading is an act of imaginative identification with a stable, enduring and authentic Ireland, which is in contrast to the emotional sterility he detects in expatriated authors such as Mahony. Ireland, in effect, becomes a text that must be read faithfully in accordance with the values of an essential Gaelic order, a process that sees Corkery encouraging an ‘unreal revivalism’ of a context which, in real historical terms, ceased to exist at the end of the eighteenth century.⁸⁰

One might briefly invoke here the work of Wolfgang Iser, who like Corkery prioritises the concrete experience of reading as ‘an interaction between text and reader, [which makes it] “an effect to be experienced”’, or a reader-centred process that is in contrast to the traditional emphasis on the text as an “object to be defined”’.⁸¹ Iser characterises the text as providing a skeleton of objective, pre-formulated meaning which is then actualised or concretised in the ‘indeterminate’, subjective interpretations of individual readers. The aesthetic object is neither the pre-given text nor its various historical interpretations but a product of the interaction between the two. In Corkery’s work, too, we are presented with the notion of ‘nationality’ as a pre-given text or state of being, but one which must, nevertheless, be supplemented by an act of historical interpretation that calls upon a performative (English-language) ‘nationalist’ identity. (The slippage between the terms ‘nationality’ and ‘nationalism’ in *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* is an index of the internal tensions of Corkery’s argument.)⁸² As Stanley Fish has famously argued, however, the Iserian model proves unsustainable in practice due to the impossibility of fixing the role of interpretation in its idealised reconciliation of objective text and subjective reader. The ‘determinate’, pre-given text, according to Fish, is always subject to some form of framing interpretation by the reader, thus undermining its supposedly independent status. If, as Fish argues, the act of reading is invariably governed by a prior set of indeterminate assumptions on the part

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ See Tom Garvin, ‘Revolution? Revolutions are what Happens to Wheels—The Phenomenon of Revolution, Irish Style’ in Joost Augusteijn (ed.), *The Irish Revolution, 1913–1923* (London, 2002), 229.

⁸¹ See Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1984), 83; see also Patrick Walsh, ‘Daniel Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland* and Revisionism’, 40–3.

⁸² See Paul Delaney, “‘A Lack of Invention’: Corkery, Criticism and Minor Fatigue”, *Irish Review*, 33 (2005), 105.

of individual interpreters, then Iser's insistence on the guiding objectivity of the text is fatally compromised, as is the determinate/indeterminate distinction upon which his theory depends.⁸³ This Fishian emphasis on interpretative subjectivism accords with the ironic 'translational' aesthetic of Mahony's writings, particularly his politicised, anti-Romantic reworkings of Moore's nationalist poetry, which might also be applied to the Romantic underpinnings of Corkery's cultural criticism. As evidenced in his satires on Irish antiquarianism, Mahony is deeply suspicious of the whole project of cultural revival, and consistently rejects the notion that an essential Irishness can be transmitted intact and unchanged across time and between languages. His mocking critique of Moore's nationalism deliberately multiplies and antedates the linguistic and historical contexts of Moore's English-language *Melodies*:

[H]e who can execute a clever forgery, and make it pass current, is almost as well off as the capitalist who can draw a substantial check on the bank of sterling genius: so, to give the devil his due, I must acknowledge that in terseness, point, pathos, and elegance, Moore's translations of these French and Latin trifles are very near as good as the primary compositions themselves.⁸⁴

In other words, Mahony comically distorts what is presented as uniquely Irish by introducing a radical indeterminateness into the project of forging a national literature. Mahony, in effect, denies the possibility of an ahistorical (or 'phenomenological') model of reading in his satiric translations by undermining the objective stability of Ireland as a site of interpretation. His focus on the indeterminate, subjective pole of the reader-text interaction presents Gaelic Ireland as an interpretative construct, subject to infinite historical revision. But this is precisely the fear that lies at the heart of Corkery's canon-making project—namely, that all Anglo-Irish literature is translational and indeterminate, divorced from the guiding spirit of an organic Gaelic Ireland. (After the publication of *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, Corkery, in a move that perhaps represented the logical conclusion of Gaelic League revivalism, went so far as to propose the excision of all writing in English from the Irish literary canon.) Corkery conceives of a canonical Free State literature as a

⁸³ See Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Oxford, 1989), 68–86.

⁸⁴ Mahony, *The Reliques of Father Prout*, 151.

kind of culturo-linguistic border that might guard against the re-colonisation of Irish literature by English-language interpretation; Mahony, on the other hand, ironises any direct act of identification with the past, exploiting the hyphenated status of 'Anglo-Irish' literature by underscoring the inability of the porous linguistic borders of literary nationalism to offer an exclusive temporal, historical or even national 'footing'.

According to Patrick Maume, Corkery, having fully embraced the revolutionary fervour of the early twentieth century, 'never entirely recovered from the shock of the Civil War and the Republican defeat';⁸⁵ arguably, his critical writings on Synge are symbolic of a more general movement away from the initial idealism of a pre-independence Romantic nationalism to a lingering post-independence bitterness about unchanged material circumstances and unfulfilled cultural expectations. Yet, while Corkery's 1931 study may be viewed as the product of a particular juncture in Irish history, it has, nonetheless, exerted a lasting influence on Mahony's literary legacy, as can be seen, for example, in Ethel Mannin's *Two Studies in Integrity* (1954), the only substantive biography of Mahony to appear in the twentieth century. A noted author, feminist and socialist, Mannin (1900–84) provided a valuable synthesis of the available critical and biographical literature, endeavouring conscientiously to resolve 'various conflicting statements... [and to sort] opinions and undocumented assertions from established—or establishable—facts'.⁸⁶ Her even-handed, comprehensive study of Mahony's life and work is enriched by a novelist's sensitivity to the idiosyncrasies of character, and succeeds in presenting a much more nuanced, ambivalent account of Mahony's literary career than Corkery's hostile re-evaluation. As a lifelong left-wing sympathiser, she picks up on Mahony's criticisms of O'Connell's supposed exploitation of the peasantry, and his insistence in the 'Prout Papers' on the need to 'plead in the poor man's defence' for the introduction of an Irish poor law.⁸⁷ But even so, she still considers Mahony to have been a 'bad Irishman ... nationalistically speaking'.⁸⁸ An English-born author commenting on Anglo-Irish cultural relations, she defers to the judgement of O'Neill and Corkery on the question of his alleged lack of patriotism. Directly citing the 'very penetrating treatise' of 'Professor Corkery', she condemns Mahony for belonging to a stage-Irish

⁸⁵ Patrick Maume, 'Life that is Exile', viii.

⁸⁶ Ethel Mannin, *Two Studies in Integrity: Gerald Griffin and the Rev. Francis Mahony (Father Prout)* (London, 1954), 14.

⁸⁷ Mahony, *The Reliques of Father Prout*, 286.

⁸⁸ Mannin, *Two Studies*, 174.

school of writing that ‘invariably caricatures national character’ and completely misses “‘the secret things in the nation’s soul’”—a likely allusion to Corkery’s concept of a ‘Hidden Ireland’.⁸⁹ In what is a generally sympathetic portrait, Mannin is willing to allow (*contra* Corkery) that ‘he had Ireland in his heart’; but by endorsing Corkery’s partisan thesis she conspicuously fails to challenge received critical opinion.⁹⁰ Her analysis represents, in effect, a restatement of the established Irish-Ireland position, which, in emphasising his supposed membership of a stage-Irish literary generation, limits any attempt to directly engage with his texts and contexts.

With the dearth of critical attention to Mahony’s work in the late twentieth century, the next significant milestone in his critical reception was the publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), which also betrays the abiding influence of Corkery’s analysis. This major collection, which self-consciously set out to interrogate issues of Irish literary canonicity, and to argue “‘against an essentialist version of Irish nationalism’”, included a number of Mahony’s poems and songs.⁹¹ Its general editor, Seamus Deane, had in an earlier synoptic work, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (1986), listed the publication date of *The Reliques* as 1859 instead of 1836 (or even 1860, the year in which the second edition appeared), referred to its author as ‘Sylvester Mahony’, and mistakenly credited him as the person who ‘invented the fame of the Blarney Stone’.⁹² This lack of attention to detail is also evident in the framing commentaries of *The Field Day Anthology*. In his general remarks in the section entitled ‘Poetry 1800–1900’, Deane once more positions Mahony in relation to ‘an audience to which . . . [the] press deferred in matters of taste and opinion’.⁹³ Deane distinguishes between the different expectations imposed on early nineteenth-century contributors to the British and Irish periodical presses, numbering Mahony amongst those compelled to present what ‘was widely considered to be properly poetical or politically acceptable’ to a metropolitan audience.⁹⁴ He, and his fellow Irish magazinists, created stock characters, who were ‘witty, sentimental, enthusiastic, impervious to practical

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁹¹ Quoted in Helen Thompson, ‘*Field Day*, Politics and Irish Writing’ in Helen Thompson (ed.), *The Current Debate about the Irish Literary Canon: Essays Reassessing The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Lewiston, 2006), 11.

⁹² Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London, 1986), 114.

⁹³ Seamus Deane, ‘Poetry and Song, 1800–1890’ in Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (3 vols, Derry, 1991), II, 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

considerations and much inclined to drinking and wastefulness'.⁹⁵ This he terms 'instant antiquarianism', or 'the discovery of the age-old patterns of Irish folk-life miraculously preserved in the amber of poverty and illiteracy'.⁹⁶ These essentialised characteristics—exemplified in source works such as *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825) by Mahony's friend, the Protestant unionist antiquarian, Thomas Crofton Croker (1798–1854)—were, he asserts, actively adopted and developed by writers who wished to capitalise on the 'historicized version of the Irish national character' popularized in post-Union Irish fiction.⁹⁷

Significantly, Mahony is portrayed as one of a multitude of Irish authors remembered for only a single lyric, translation or ballad (in his case, 'The Bells of Shandon'). But this fails to account for the healthy publication history that *The Reliques* enjoyed until the early twentieth century, and (as outlined above) the influence and creative latitude Mahony had as a contributor to and later editor of *Fraser's Magazine*. It is also questionable if 'The Bells of Shandon', an intricate song perfectly poised between nationalist eulogy and nationalist parody, necessarily fits the conventional notion of what was 'politically acceptable' or indeed 'properly poetical' ('I've heard bells tolling / Old 'Adrian's Mole' in, / Their thunder rolling / From the Vatican... / But thy sounds were sweeter / Than the dome of Peter / Flings o'er the Tiber, / Pealing solemnly').⁹⁸ One might note, first, that the Prout character is portrayed as neither drunken, wasteful nor impractical. While Croker was anxious to record the 'timeless' verities of Irish peasant existence—a traditional way of life that began to alter irrevocably in the early nineteenth century—Mahony, far from drawing on 'archetypal' national traits, was commenting directly on a period in the mid-1830s when the Catholic masses had emerged as a formidable political force. The peasantry, of which there is, one should remember, comparatively little mention in the 'Prout Papers', are seen either as the ignorant, deluded supporters of O'Connell or as the victims of a corrupt system of social organisation. In other words, they are almost always situated in relation to the concrete socio-political reality of 1830s Ireland (rather than spoken of in terms of certain 'innate', stage-Irish qualities they supposedly possess). Furthermore, the 'wit' and 'enthusiasm' of Mahony's essays often centres on the celebration of the literature and learning of the ancient world

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Mahony, *The Reliques of Father Prout*, 159.

or, alternatively, as a parody of the more fanciful speculations of antiquarian enthusiasts. Indeed, Mahony's mocking attitude to antiquarian formulations of Irish identity—brilliantly satirised in 'The Watergrasshill Carousel' and 'The Rogueries of Thomas Moore'—made it highly unlikely that he would subscribe to the so-called 'instant antiquarianism' of Croker's researches. Even if one extends the definition of stage-Irishness to include what Deane has elsewhere termed Prout's 'humourous pedantry and designedly overblown eloquence', few other alleged examples of such writing could be described as 'serious and considerable as works of scholarship and literary criticism', as certain Prout essays have been characterised by the classical historian, W.B. Stanford.⁹⁹

With its focus on the politics of representation, the *Field Day Anthology* 'is intended to be a self-conscious construct which interrogates its own practices and avoids privileging one point of view'.¹⁰⁰ While denying, however, that the anthology constitutes an Irish literary canon, and thus bracketing out his own views on the link between language, politics, and identity formation, Deane demonstrates in his analysis of Mahony's work an indebtedness to a nationalist politics which has its 'historical roots in the Irish Revival'.¹⁰¹ Deane criticises both the homogenising character of nineteenth-century bourgeois nationalist discourse and its attempt to create a homologous relationship with the metropolitan centre from which it apparently wished to distinguish itself. Yet he himself offers a homogenous view of nineteenth-century periodical culture that not only recalls Corkery's exclusivist nationalism but also rehearses his 'normative', metropolitan-focussed assessment of the 'Prout Papers'. Here, once again, is the allegation that Mahony set out to present a quaint, condescending version of Irish identity, a variation on Corkery's tendentious portrait of an essentially powerless literary grouping, which obsequiously fulfilled metropolitan expectations. (Significantly, Mahony is referred to as an 'expatriate' Irish author in *A Short History of Irish Literature*.¹⁰²) Here, too, is the familiar emphasis on British-Irish literary relations, and the guiding assumption that literature is necessarily focussed on the portrayal of the national. Ironically, when applied to the 'Prout Papers', Deane's anti-essentialist reinterpretation of the canon becomes indistinguishable from the essentialist Irish-Ireland rejection of Mahony. Though apparently committed

⁹⁹ Deane, *A Short History*, 114; W.B. Stanford, *Ireland and the Classical Tradition* (Dublin, 1976), 175.

¹⁰⁰ Thompson, 'Field Day, Politics and Irish Writing', 12.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰² Deane, *A Short History*, 114.

to a more inclusive and self-questioning nationalism, it says nothing of the ‘internal’ critique that Mahony, the Irish Catholic insider, provided of the key figures attached to an incipient popular Catholic nationalism (O’Connell) or its cultural nationalist equivalent (Thomas Moore). Nor does it attempt to re-imagine Mahony’s place within the accepted canon of Irish literature, thus failing to fulfil a key promise of the entire *Field Day* project: that of providing “a means of accessing the creative possibility of a future promised in the past”¹⁰³.

Pursuing this “radical backward look” will enable a different kind of reception for Mahony’s work to emerge—one already hinted at in valuable 1990s studies by Joep Leerssen and Terry Eagleton, which manage to skilfully combine close textual reading with a greater awareness of and sensitivity to historical context.¹⁰⁴ Thinking beyond the reception history of the ‘Prout Papers’ described above, the future critical fate of his work might be best determined by close reference to the literary reception envisaged in his original writings. Importantly, one of the very first critics to assess the merits of *The Reliques of Father Prout*, and to point out the difficulties of pinning down the author’s precise intentions was, appropriately enough, Mahony himself. His eleven-page anonymous review appeared in *Fraser’s Magazine* for March 1836. In this ‘serio-comic self-examination’, Mahony speaks of ‘a certain supplementary process which ... [Prout’s] compositions are probably doomed to undergo on issuing from our hands’—that is, the conflicting interpretations and analyses of ‘such people as reviewers’.¹⁰⁵ He goes on to describe a related fear—‘technically called *criticophobia*’—experienced by ‘great author[s]’ who felt apprehensive about the ‘strange liberties which folks were likely to take with their writings’.¹⁰⁶ Picking up on this theme in the brief preface to the first edition of *The Reliques of Father Prout*, Mahony (in the guise of fictional general editor ‘Oliver Yorke’) opens with the ironic statement: ‘It is much to be regretted that our Author should be no longer in the land of the living, to furnish a general Preamble, explanatory of the scope and tendency of his multifarious writings.’¹⁰⁷ In other words, Mahony purports to regret the absence of any

¹⁰³ Shaun Richards quoted in Eóin Flannery, *Ireland and Postcolonial Studies: Theory, Discourse, Utopia*. (Hampshire, 2009), 22.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* See Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination*, 123–5; and Eagleton, *Crazy John and the Bishop*, 190–9.

¹⁰⁵ Charles Kent’s description. See Mahony, *Works*, 363, 369. (This piece was first collected in Kent’s 1881 edition.)

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 370.

¹⁰⁷ Mahony, *Reliques of Father Prout*, ix.

overarching explanation of Prout's writings, 'having learned from Epictetus that every sublunary thing has two handles, and from experience that mankind are prone to take hold of the wrong one'.¹⁰⁸ But this is largely due to Mahony's own deliberate evasiveness—the frequent absence of a definitive interpretative 'handle'—and the evident pleasure he takes in misdirecting his less attentive or well-informed readers. Despite his professed 'criticophobia', it is clear that 'Prout's translative and hermeneutic labours' require a corollary effort on the part of his readers and interpreters.¹⁰⁹

The 'Reliques', as the name suggests, are presented here as a semi-ironic sacred text—a parody of the British Romantic privileging of literary originality, which ironises the interpretative process for those who, like Mahony, must face "the ungentle" practitioners' of literary criticism.¹¹⁰ For Mahony, as for other Fraserians, 'literature' is a product of 'the collective activity of authorship, publishing, reading, and reviewing'—the established process through which an 'Author' comes to be affirmed as a recognised member of the literary economy.¹¹¹ Accordingly, if instead of 'true', unquestioning 'votaries', Prout's venerable work must be 'handled by the uninitiated and the profane', then it requires some form of protection from the 'rude manipulation' of critics and reviewers.¹¹² Just as Mahony, the anonymous Fraserian reviewer, purports to regret the absence of Father Prout, who, he claims, might help clarify what, in reality, he himself had written, so too is irony and ambiguity seen as a means of distancing the writer from the critical "mangling" of those who wash his 'soiled linen'.¹¹³ Neither the author 'Mahony' nor his putative original intentions are readily available to the reader of the 'Prout Papers'. Instead, he/she is confronted with the digressive allusiveness of his essays, their abrupt shifts in tone and frequent subversion of literary precedent, along with their playful use of language, which consistently foregrounds translation and critical reinterpretation. The pervading sense in the 'Prout Papers' of the transience of linguistic meaning can have the effect of making it difficult for the reader to establish where they stand in relation to the author. (Mahony's calculated ambiguity provides an alternative gloss on Corkery's 'quaking sod' metaphor.)

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Mahony, *Works*, 368.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 371.

¹¹¹ See Carol A. Bock, 'Authorship, the Brontës, and *Fraser's Magazine*: "Coming Forward" as an Author in Early Victorian England', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29 (2001), 247.

¹¹² Mahony, *Works*, 370.

¹¹³ Ibid., 369.

Seen in this way, the comments contained in his ironic self-critique present a direct challenge to those charged with the difficult task of offering a coherent explanation of the 'Prout Papers'. In short, if the precise nature of Mahony's work remains unclear, or at least undecidable, then the absolute rejection (as well as the outright appropriation) of his writings becomes problematic, as does the efforts of critics to situate Mahony's position in Irish literary history.

Mahony's work, then, needs not only to be freed from a progressivist nationalist metanarrative, but also from the presumption of canonical certainty that underwrites such interpretations. This is less a question of denying the validity of the nationalist reading than of rejecting its exclusion of other possible interpretations. The rephrased quotation cited above from Epictetus's *Enchiridion* ('Not things, but opinions about things, trouble men') underscored, for Mahony's prospective readers, the troubling gap between textual objectivity and subjective interpretation. It was, as well, an unsourced allusion to the title quotation of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67), indicating Mahony's own affiliation to an Irish metafictional tradition that also included Prout's supposed father, Jonathan Swift. Traditional intentionalist interpretations, focussed to varying degrees on whether Mahony was a good or bad Irishman 'nationalistically speaking', fail to account fully for an author who, though seemingly hidden and removed from his readership through various textual identities ('Father Prout', 'Oliver Yorke', the anonymous Fraserian reviewer), is, in fact, also a constant presence in essays where his subtle use of irony requires the reader to repeatedly consider the similarities and differences between author and fictional character. His characterisation of the 'Prout Papers' as literary 'reliques' is a comic recognition of the possibility that the text can outlive its author's intentions; but it serves, too, as a reiteration of the Swiftian suspicion of language as a vehicle for communicating restrictive meaning. While the term 'author' may suggest a certain fixity of identity, Mahony's self-review, which centres on an explicitly 'multilateral' persona who may or may not reflect the writer's own opinions, clearly implies a element of authorial self-division. By satirically re-examining his own writings, and implicitly drawing his 'real' historical self into the fictionality of the text, Mahony ironically bridges the divide between objective text and subjective interpretation. His paratextual self-review manoeuvres the afterlife of the text towards a form of 'criticism of criticism'—a move representative of Mahony's overall translational aesthetic, in which reading and interpretation come to assume a key role in resituating the literary past in relation to a modern receiving culture.

Mahony's complication of the interpretative process also has political implications. Robert Jauss stresses the defamiliarising function of literature, which serves to objectify the existing 'horizon of expectations' prevalent within a given culture in regard to generic norms, relationships to familiar literary works, and the opposition between fiction and reality—all key aspects of Mahony's achievement in the 'Prout Papers'.¹¹⁴ For both Jauss and Mahony, negation of audience expectation is an important measure of the aesthetic value of the work. One might cite, for example, the aforementioned Prout essay, 'Literature and the Jesuits', in which Mahony asks his Tory Protestant audience to temporarily suspend sectarian judgement of the Jesuit order while presented with a sympathetic reading of an alien and potentially hostile Catholic literature—the product, Father Prout grandly claims, of 'the most learned, and by far the most distinguished literary corporation that ever arose in the world'.¹¹⁵ Wolfgang Iser pushes this emphasis on negativity further by stressing the non-mimetic role of literature.¹¹⁶ For him, the objectification of reality in a literary text reorganises social, cultural and literary norms, removing them from their usual context, so allowing the reader to reassess their merits.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, this is merely a prelude to the 'negative', non-formulated interpretation of that reality which is supplied by its readers. "Negativity" enables the reader to recognise and disengage from their previously held prejudices, moving beyond existing literary norms to seek out the as yet unconcretised meaning that inheres in the text. Without this capacity to accommodate innovative interpretation, the text, in Iser's view, has negligible literary value.

Arguably, the 'Prout Papers' also present an alien Irish environment to their British Protestant readership, but one which Mahony's audience, as co-partners in the political union between Britain and Ireland, are asked to interpret and understand. Iser conceives of literary negativity as "the nonformulation of the not-yet-comprehended", or as 'the structure that enables the reader to transcend the world in order "to formulate the cause underlying the question of the world."' ¹¹⁸ As such, it demands openness to difference and an ability to assimilate alien viewpoints. If the question to which the 'Prout Papers' is the comic answer is the unrepresentable flux of Irish circumstances, then the burden of interpreting the notably unreliable

¹¹⁴ See Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Brighton, 1982), 24.

¹¹⁵ Mahony, *The Reliques of Father Prout*, 173.

¹¹⁶ See Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 73.

¹¹⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, 1978), 74.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Holub, *Reception Theory*, 96.

narrator, 'Father Prout', and the fractious political context upon which he comments, falls on the contemporary British reader. Viewed within the terms of Iser's system, the metropolitan reader is asked to fill in the 'gaps' and 'blanks' in the text, and to confront and partly assimilate the 'otherness' of Ireland.¹¹⁹ However, it is precisely the instability of the 'Proulean' narrative voice, and the 'indeterminate', non-representational character of much of the 'Prout Papers', which simultaneously demands and problematises any putative act of imaginative identification with Irish circumstances. Prout's first-person narrative offers both the modern and contemporary reader a window onto the politico-historical complexity of the context; but this also requires them to view through Prout's eyes 'the rancour of polemics and the horrors of religious controversy, embittering all the relations of society around me', thus compelling them to recognise the difficulty of explaining Ireland or subjecting it to a single interpretative perspective.¹²⁰ Like Ireland, or the 'Irish question', the text confronts its audience with interpretative difficulty, deliberately and self-consciously refusing to provide a secure narrative footing for its readership. At its most extreme, this dramatically refocuses the audience's attention on the issue of textual indeterminacy, pointing up the limits of representation and interpretation, and the failure of Irish literature aesthetically to resolve or 'transcend' the historical contingency of political division.

For Walter Benjamin, works of art incorporate their pre-history and their after-history—'an after-history in virtue of which their pre-history, too, can be seen to undergo constant change'.¹²¹ Those attempting to apply a 'radical backward look' to the 'Prout Papers', a work abounding in tags, allusions, quotations, and learned references, need to fuse a modern 'horizon of expectations' with that of the interstitial post-Romantic, pre-Victorian period in which these essays were composed. Themselves works of interpretation, Mahony's Prout essays call out for an active posterity. The Jaussian concept of a 'chain of receptions' underlines the collective, ongoing, and 'intersubjective' unfolding of meaning through successive interpretations (as opposed to an historical positivist focus on the 'thing-in-itself'). Viewed in this way, the secondary criticism can be re-examined in light of the original texts and contexts, their cultural antecedents, and a modern horizon of expectations, allowing multiple perspectives to be considered. While this may, in historical

¹¹⁹ See Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* (London 1987), 146–7.

¹²⁰ Mahony, *Works*, 280.

¹²¹ Quoted in Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions*, 4.

terms, shackle the text to its secondary criticism, a significant issue when one considers the longevity of the Irish-Ireland reading of his work, it still reduces the possibility of individual subjective misinterpretation and (true to the spirit of the 'Prout Papers') leaves room for new readings to develop and emerge—in this instance, one more sensitive to the metafictional tradition suggested by Mahony himself. New readings must also take account of the perspectivist epistemology of the 'Prout Papers'—its characteristic mix of ancient and modern, regional and metropolitan, provincial and cosmopolitan—and with it Mahony's notion of the 'fallible reader', who in expressly identifying with or explicitly rejecting aspects of the Prout character risks becoming one more object of the author's satire.