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Countering the Hegemony of the Irish National Canon:
The Modernist Rhetoric of Seán O’Faoláin (1938-50)¹

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Abstract
The telling and re-telling of national history has long been recognised in studies of nationalism as one of its key legitimizing and mobilizing strategies. In this article I illustrate how a rhetorical approach can effectively explore this dynamic and emotive dimension of nationalist ideology by examining the rhetorical strategies in the Irish liberal intellectual, Seán O’Faoláin’s, attempts to reconstitute the popular canon of Irish history in the 1930s and 1940s. More specifically, I show that contrary to depictions of O’Faoláin as a European liberal who employed rational argument to undermine and encourage the rejection of Irish nationalism and its emphasis on rhetorical narratives of the past, O’Faoláin’s challenge to the Irish national canon reveals that he himself mobilised historical narrative to promote his own modernist version of Irish liberal nationalism and demonstrated in the process that he was one of the most skilful rhetors of his day.
Introduction: Rhetoric, Nationalism and Seán O'Faoláin

While recent studies of nationalism show increasing evidence of the impact of developments in ideological analysis through the now common deployment of the concept of discourse (Anderson 1991; Bhabha (ed.) 1990; Brubaker 1996; Calhoun 1997), there has been relatively little engagement to date with the most immediate advances in ideological studies around the rejuvenation of the study of rhetoric (Laclau, 2005; Skinner, 1996). In this article I hope to demonstrate that the analysis of nationalist ideology has much to gain from the rhetorical tradition by way of exploring the nature of Seán O’Faoláin’s liberal nationalist challenge to the dominant account of Irish national history (the canon) in the 1930s and 1940s within a theoretical framework informed by rhetoric.

This of course immediately raises the question of what rhetorical analysis can offer to the study of nationalism. My contention is that the strength of rhetoric resides not only in its sensitivity to context and conflict, but above all, in its ability to explore the dynamic and affective dimension of nationalist ideology. The (re-)constructed and malleable quality of nationalism is of course now commonplace in the literature on nationalism (Anderson 1991; Bhabha (ed.) 1990; Brubaker 1996; Calhoun 1997; Smith 2001), and rhetoric as I will soon demonstrate offers precisely the tools to explore the shifting ideological patterns of specific nationalisms. Similarly, rhetoric with its focus on persuasion and pathos helps us to explain the emotional pull of nationalist ideology. This again has become increasingly noted in the literature with Anthony Smith, in particular, now
defining the nation as a form of ‘politicized mass culture …which seeks to mobilize the citizens to love their nation, observe its laws and defend their homeland.’ Nationalism, indeed, for this scholar, is ‘more akin to ‘political religion’ than to political ideology’ with its ‘glorious dead’ and ‘sacred communion of citizens’ (Smith 2001: 35).

As Smith’s comments suggest, it is history that often provides the most fertile ground for building and sustaining sentimental ties between the people and the nation, and this is one area in particular where a rhetorical analysis can prove rewarding. However, since rhetoric has most frequently been identified with right-wing nationalism and fascism, in this article I have deliberately opted to fix my attention on a liberal nationalist in an effort to suggest a wider applicability of the categories of rhetoric to nationalist ideology. In so doing, I hope not only to make a modest contribution to debates on the study of nationalist ideology, but also, to engage with existing interpretations of Seán O’Faoláin’s critique of nationalist Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s. On the one hand, O’Faoláin’s admirers have over-estimated his anti-nationalism and his reliance on the rational and scientific discourse of Enlightenment liberalism in his battle against the ‘obscurantism and narrow-minded nationalism’ (Bonaccorso 1987: 43-44) of ‘the rabblement and the Philistines’ (Doyle 1968: 123-124; see also, Harmon 1994: 138-142; O’Ferrall, 1995).² To these can be added the considerable number of modern Irish historians who appear to reach naturally for O’Faoláin’s testimony on the stated or implied basis that his status as a ‘reformed nationalist’ or realistic and judicious liberal intellectual validates his evidence (English, 2006: 340; Fanning, 1983: 143; McMahon, 1984: 16; Patterson, 2006: 62-63; Ryle Dwyer, 1980: 136-137; Whyte, 1980: 35). On the other hand, O’Faoláin’s
critics - who too overlook his nationalism – have overstated his abandonment of the Irish past, explained in terms of ‘postcolonial servility’ (Kearney 1984: 36) and a desire to bring Ireland into the mainstream of European liberalism (Kiberd 1996: 560). In what follows I intend to challenge this general tendency to caste O’Faoláin in the ideological mould of a European liberal intellectual who deployed rational and pragmatic critique to liberate his countrymen from their burdensome history and ‘to cast off the sleep-walking dreams that nationalistic rhetoric and ideology induced,’ as another of his admirers has so tellingly put it (Brown, 1985: 155-159). As this paper will reveal, O’Faoláin not only mobilised the past himself as a means of challenging the hegemony of the canon and promoting his own modernist version of Irish liberal nationalism, but also, his writings in this cause demonstrate only too clearly that he was one of the most gifted rhetors of his day.

**Mapping the Context: Post-colonial ‘Neutral’ Ireland and the Canon**

Grasping the rhetorical content of O’Faoláin’s counter-canon will, however, firstly require some historical and intellectual context to identify to whom O’Faoláin was addressing his arguments and what exactly he was doing by constructing his modernist account of Irish history in his particular manner (Skinner, 2002: 114-117). I therefore intend to begin by offering some general historical background on the evolution of Irish nationalism from independence in 1922 up until the late 1930s when O’Faoláin emerged as a critic of the nationalist status quo. This will be followed by a short assessment of the direction of the Fianna Fáil Government’s programme in the 1930s; an exposition of the
development of the ‘canon’ of Irish history in this context; and finally, a brief account of
the main thrust of O’Faoláin’s modernist critique of the Fianna Fáil Party in the late
1930s and 1940s.

As is well-known, the first two decades of Irish independence (1922) were dominated by
the residual antagonisms over British rule and its violent end in a War of Independence
(1919-21) and Civil War (1922-1923) which split the nation over the terms of the Anglo-
Irish Treaty (December 1921). While Sinn Féin had been demanding a thirty-two county
independent republic, the Treaty fell well short of that mark partitioning the island and
granting only dominion status to the 26 liberated counties (the Irish Free State). A
British-supported Treatyite faction (Cumann na nGaedheal and Fine Gael after 1933)
soon emerged which defeated an Anti-Treatyite faction (Sinn Féin and mainly Fianna
Fáil after 1926) in the Civil War, with the latter then opting to continue the struggle
politically to achieve a greater measure of independence (Keogh, 1994: 1-63). This
atmosphere of ‘tainted’ independence coupled with stringent policies of economic
conservatism, however, soon convinced Irish voters that they had been sold short by both
the former imperial power and the ‘corrupt’ Free State regime, and Fianna Fáil took
power in 1932 on a programme to achieve the remaining goals of ‘the Republic’
(MacDonagh, 1977: 109).

It is widely recognized that the Party had considerable success in realising this
programme in its early years in power. The primary republican aim - defined by its
leader Eamon de Valera in 1926 as ‘securing the political independence of a United
Ireland as a Republic’ (Fanning, 1983: 96) - was effectively pursued by ‘de-Treatying’ the Free State Constitution and extending Ireland’s sovereignty through the abolition of the Oath of Allegiance to the British Crown (1933), disempowering and then abolishing the office of Governor-General (1933-1936), and finally, by introducing a new Constitution in 1937 which made the twenty-six county State a Republic in all but name (Lyons, 1985: 511-520). Little, however, was achieved on partition (O’Halloran, 1987). In socio-economic policy the Party also moved initially to fulfil some of the promise of the 1916 Proclamation ‘to treat all of the nation’s children equally’ by introducing a series of policies that benefited the worst-off in Irish society including the breaking up of large estates to provide land for small-holders, the introduction of unemployment benefit, increases in old age pensions (Dunphy, 1995: 96,152,177; Ferriter, 2004: 360) and an extensive state-aided scheme to provide houses for the poor (O’Gráda, 1994: 440). By the late 1930s, however, whatever early radicalism Fianna Fáil had brought to Irish politics had run its course (Lee, 1989: 271). Indeed, the coming war left little opportunity for any radical initiatives in social or economic policy as survival rather than development became the order of the day. What is more, the Irish State’s option to remain neutral in the Second World War effectively scuppered any hope of the British being persuaded to facilitate any move on the last ‘national’ objective of ending partition.

Although neutrality was presented as the ultimate proof of the Irish State’s sovereignty and therefore worthy of the economic hardship and isolation that it brought, by the late 1930s Fianna Fáil’s lack of progress on partition and economic development was forcing the Party to rely increasingly on cultural politics to maintain and consolidate its support
base. This primarily involved promoting the shared Gaelic and Catholic traditions of the large majority of the people and emphasizing their common allegiance to an *historic* nation declared to be firmly established. Most importantly, Fianna Fáil hegemony now required that the bitterness of the Civil War should finally come to a head, and it was in this context that an earlier more unified version of the Irish national canon proved beneficial and began to suffuse both the pages of the Party’s press organ – the *Irish Press* – and the speeches of its leading politicians.³

According to this renewed canon of Irish history, the nation had a long and glorious past including a Golden Age of Gaelic and Christian civilization between the sixth and eighth centuries – ‘a time when Irish nationality was completely untrammelled’ - when its monasteries were the envy of all Europe for their scholarship and missionary work (De Blacam, 1934: 36). The peace of this pre-colonial world was broken by the arrival of ‘English’ invaders from the twelfth century onwards; the beginning and cause of all of Ireland’s subsequent woes as a medley of uprising and suppression was set in motion between British imperialism and Irish nationalism until the nation – still predominantly Gaelic and clinging to its ‘Old Faith’ (i.e. Catholicism) – regained in great measure its independence in the early twentieth century. An *Irish Press* editorial in 1937 announcing the publication of one of the canon’s key texts of the period - Dorothy MacArdle’s *Irish Republic* - gives us some idea of the renewed taste for it. ‘The *Irish Republic*’, it declared:
…brings to mind the sad, the chequered, the blood-stained, albeit the glorious history of our land, and it recalls the splendid qualities and characteristics which have enabled and inspired the Celtic race to struggle and to wrestle against oppression, to break one link after another in the chain of serfdom which was meant to crush out their separate existence, to win back lost rights, alienated lands, forfeited national independence (*Irish Press* 17 March 1937).

It was the Taoiseach (prime minister) Eamon de Valera himself who provided the foreword to MacArdle’s book and the measure of its canonical status was made patently obvious by the fanfare with which it was welcomed in the *Irish Press*, including a full page advert which showed a large portrait of de Valera under which read the caption: ‘Every Irishman must read the *Irish Republic*’ (*Irish Press* 27 March 1937).

The *Irish Republic* was in fact a history of the War of Independence (1919-21) and it was particularly these events such as the Revolt of Hugh O’Neill (1594-1603), the United Irish Rebellion (1798), the Young Irelanders’ Revolt (1848), the Fenian Uprisings (1860s) and the Land Wars (1870-90) around which both Treatyites and Anti-Treatyites could unite as joint legatees of the republican tradition that Fianna Fáil and the *Irish Press* now prioritized in the national canon. Also privileged was the common heritage that both sides shared in the suppressed Catholic and Gaelic traditions. In 1935 Eamon de Valera uttered the words that at one time would have seemed inconceivable for any Irish republican – with its long line of Protestant patriots – that Ireland had been for fifteen hundred years ‘a Catholic nation’ and ‘remains a Catholic nation’ (Murray, 2000: 87).
289-290), and in the pages of the Irish Press in the late 1930s Catholic intellectuals such as Aodh de Blacam and Francis MacManus continually reminded their readers of their shared Christian, though especially Catholic heritage.

The Gaelic past too was accorded a similar status. Defending the Constitution’s designation of the Irish language as the ‘national language’ in the Dáil, De Valera thus declared:

…our language was spoken until little over 100 years ago generally by our people. The English language was the language of those who came as invaders. …It must be obvious that the Irish language is the national language, and we have Irish as the first official language (Dáil Debates 25 May 1937).

But effective as these articulations of the canon no doubt were, it is obvious from the pages of the Irish Press in this period that Fianna Fáil intellectuals believed that there was nothing more likely to unite the nation - and particularly former Treatyites and Anti-Treatyites - than the act of remembering and commemorating the 1916 Rebellion. The Rebellion had of course been the event that drew the nation together under the banner of Sinn Féin before the Civil War, and was regarded by all as the key episode that signalled the beginning of the end of British rule in Ireland. In 1937 the Irish Press followed the lead of Fianna Fail Minister, Seán T. O’Kelly, in demanding from the nation’s historians a patriotic account of Easter Week. According to the editor, this would require ‘a spirit in thorough sympathy with the aims and objects of the heroes and martyrs who thought no
personal sacrifice too great if the freedom of the country was won and if its souls were rescued from an ignoble thraldom’ (*Irish Press* 24 April 1937). A year later the paper declared ‘The significance of Easter Week only grows and deepens with the passage of time’ and ‘It is now universally recognised to be one of the greatest events in Irish history’ (*Irish Press* 18 April 1938). Elevating, recalling and recounting Easter 1916 was clearly intended as a galvanising symbolic act and it was frequently accompanied by triumphant assertions of its accomplishments. Thus an editorial of April 1939 insisted that the sacrifices of those ‘men of gentle instincts and high ideals’ has already delivered in the 26 counties ‘a native legislature, freely and democratically elected by the people’ that ‘holds absolute control’ while expressing confidence that the remaining national objectives would too be achieved (*Irish Press* 10 April 1939).

It was in the context of this attempt to readapt the equilibrium of Fianna Fáil’s ideological strategy to Irish neutrality, economic hardship, a lack of movement on partition and the need to incorporate former Treatyites that elements within Fianna Fail’s traditional support base began to turn against the Party. Just as Fianna Fáil had accused Treatyites of abandoning ‘the Republic’ in the 1920s, so in turn minority left-wing and liberal dissidents emerged in the late 1930s to level the same indictment at Fianna Fáil. Seán O’Faoláin, who had himself fought alongside the Anti-Treatyites in the Civil War and even published a biography of De Valera in 1933 that bordered on hagiography (O’Faoláin, 1933), led this charge for most of the late 1930s and the 1940s. His critique was mainly conducted in his published writings and through the editorial columns of *The Bell*; a journal that he founded with the left-wing republican Peadar O’Donnell in 1940.
While O’Donnell ensured that The Bell’s readers were frequently reminded of the failure of ‘De Valera’s Ireland’ to deliver the socio-economic gains that ‘the Republic’ had promised, O’Faoláin as editor concentrated mainly on Fianna Fáil’s cultural politics, using the journal’s main platform to condemn what he saw as its efforts to create a narrow-minded uncritical and undemocratic atmosphere of deference and subservience to the regime among the Irish people (Arndt 2001; Brown, 1985: 196, 204-206). The renewed reverence and emphasis on the canon was of course recognized by O’Faoláin as an integral part of this strategy, and in the late 1930s and 1940s he set about deploying his formidable rhetorical skills in an attempt to undermine this powerful ideological pillar of the Fianna Fáil regime.

The Thwarting of ‘Modern Ireland’: Emplotment, Paradiastole and Inventio

It is precisely in such dynamic contests over the key legitimizing foundation of the nation centred on its history that the theory of rhetoric can provide useful analytical tools in the study of nationalist ideology. To begin with, it is well to remind ourselves just what is involved in any attempt to construct an historical narrative. According to Hayden White:

…the historian faces a veritable chaos of events already constituted, out of which he must choose the elements of the story he would tell. He makes his story by including some events and excluding others, by stressing some and subordinating others. This process of exclusion, stress, and subordination is carried out in the
interest of constituting a story of a particular kind. That is to say, he “emplots” his story (White 1975: 6).

It is of course well-recognised that the emergence and maintenance of any specific nationalism is very much dependent on this process that legitimizes it in the present by plotting its history as a story of the nation and thereby reminding its adherents of the bonds of their shared past and common ancestry. What is less appreciated, however, is its very vulnerability to counter-hegemonic strategies which re-plot the national chronicle, thereby undermining the existing canon. In order for the latter to be successful, it is evidently necessary to respect the boundaries of the already given, memory and recent experience, for no completely novel narrative of national history is likely to prove convincing.

The classical rhetoricians were indeed acutely aware of this, and as Quentin Skinner has pointed out, they referred to this rhetorical act of re-constituting by re-telling as the technique of paradiastole; a practice that involved re-describing actions and states in a manner which did not challenge the ‘accepted facts’ but sought nonetheless to give them a new ‘quality,’ ‘value’ and ‘character.’ Like White’s emplotment, mitigation and amplification were key aspects of this act of re-evaluation in redescription (Skinner 1996: 142) and paradiastole was in this respect closely related to one of the most central techniques of classical rhetoric: the art of inventio. Despite its contemporary connotations, invenire did not imply pure invention, but rather, an ingenious ability to
find the arguments (*loci communes*) that more often than not were already popularly accepted and could, as Cicero put it, ‘be transferred to many cases’ (Cicero 2006: 209).

It was Seán O’Faoláin’s good fortune to have mastered these rhetorical techniques of emplotment through his creative fiction before he began to challenge the nationalist canon in late 1930s Ireland. And there is no doubt that O’Faoláin plotted his counter-canonical story so that it would add up to ‘a story of a particular kind’ as White so succinctly puts it. The organizational principle of O’Faoláin’s grand plot of the nation took the form of an ascent to ‘modernization’ (the *progressive* process of democratization, secularization and the spread of individual freedom and greater, if not absolute, material equality), but crucially, a modernization that was ultimately *blocked* by the emergence of a conservative and traditionalist middle-class in post-revolutionary Ireland. In keeping with the convention of *paradiastolic* redescription, O’Faoláin did not contest the great and sacred events of the nationalist canon, but instead, reconstituted them by giving their proceedings a new character and value that identified them with modernization. This of course demanded considerable powers of *inventio* on his part and in the remainder of this section I will explore four key paradiastolic *moves* in O’Faoláin’s counter-canonical story that highlights his rhetorical ingenuity in the art of emplotment.

O’Faoláin began by undermining the ‘inaugural motif’ (White, 1975: 5) of the canon’s plot by re-constituting the fall of Gaelic Ireland as the *death* of Gaelic Ireland. While he did not deny that the Gaelic order had its Golden Age (O’Faoláin, 1947a: 39), he nevertheless maintained that the defeat of the Gaelic Lords at Kinsale in 1601 was
terminal; ‘forever a parting of the ways, a scission with everything that had gone before, an ending as absolute as death’ (O’Faoláin, 1942b: 329-330). It was not, however, that ‘fall’ simply became ‘death,’ it was more a matter of *extenuating* the imperialist involvement in this demise and *amplifying* the blame to be apportioned to the ‘effete’ and ‘primitive’ Gaelic aristocracy that had failed to prepare itself for a world of centralized and powerful nation-states. In O’Faoláin’s counter-canon, Gaelic civilization therefore stands accused of containing the seeds of its own destruction in the ‘pathetic inadequacy’ of its ‘racial mind’ (O’Faoláin, 1942b: 354) and its debilitating romanticism and parochialism that rendered it incapable of survival in a new modern age (O’Faoláin, 1947a: 24, 31-41).

After such a devastating fall O’Faoláin was of course acutely aware that convention demanded an equally spectacular resurgence. This was achieved by transforming ‘the Gaelic national revival’ into ‘the democratic resurrection under Tone and O’Connell’ (O’Faoláin, 1943a: 1). The ‘modern nation’ was thus born conterminously with ‘democracy’ in O’Faoláin’s account of national history, and indeed, he claimed that its birth actually depended on the demise of the ‘abortive’ Gaelic civilization with its ‘aristocratic’ and ‘traditional’ ethos, totally inimical to modernity and democracy. The main targets of O’Faoláin’s argument here were Fianna Fáil intellectuals such as Daniel Corkery and Aodh de Blacam, who insisted that the continuity in the Gaelic tradition had been secured through the long eighteenth century when colonial suppression was at its height through the efforts of the Gaelic poets and their patrons (‘the hidden Ireland’) who kept the Gaelic nation alive in the minds and hearts of the common people (Corkery,
O’Faoláin, by contrast, maintained that the Irish nation had only been born when Wolfe Tone decided to place his trust in ‘the men of no property,’ and moreover, that those who had originally led the nation were not the descendants of Gaels but minority members of the Anglo-Irish gentry and Ulster Presbyterians. ‘The combination of what one must call a controlled Anglo-Irish intelligence and a passionate sense of injustice among the native Irish,’ O’Faoláin claimed, ‘…is the formula of modern Irish nationalism’ (O’Faoláin, 1946: 101). Although republicans in Fianna Fáil had long recognised the contribution of Protestants to the struggle for independence, O’Faoláin was here deliberately amplifying the plural strains in the inception of Irish nationalism as a counterblast to Fianna Fáil’s increasing emphasis on the Gaelic tradition. What therefore emerged was a redescription of the ‘come-back’ which discredited ‘Gaeldom’ and privileged the modernizing processes of democracy and pluralism.

Having diminished the role of ‘Gaelic Ireland,’ it is no surprise that Catholicism suffered a similar fate too. Once again this was ingeniously handled. For O’Faoláin followed the canon’s portrayal of the nineteenth century as a period marked by the ‘come-back’ of the dispossessed Catholics (O’Faoláin, 1943b: 184), and indeed, even acknowledged that Counter-Reformation Catholicism had provided a useful source of energy and bitterness – a ‘delphic nationalism’ - to drive forward the development of the modern democratic nation (O’Faoláin 1938: 38). What changed in his account of the nineteenth century ‘come-back’ was rather his amplification of the ambiguity, if not collaboration, of the Catholic Hierarchy with the British State in Ireland, exemplified by its unpatriotic
denunciations of revolutionary republicanism all through the century. (O’Faoláin, 1947b: 20). O’Faoláin, like many of his former allies in Fianna Fáil who fought on the Anti-Treatyite side, had in fact been refused the sacraments during the Civil War and denounced from the pulpit as ‘riff-raff, scum, looters and murderers’ (Harmon, 1994: 56). If some Fianna Fáil intellectuals might well have expressed similar views as O’Faoláin in the 1920s about the Hierarchy’s dubious historical commitment to ‘the nation,’ by the 1930s such attitudes had been firmly locked away from public gaze by Fianna Fáil as the Party sought wider respectability. In retelling the nation’s history in this manner O’Faoláin therefore aimed not only to diminish the record of the Church’s past, but also, to question the privileged place that it was being accorded in the Ireland of his own day.

Finally, and most importantly, O’Faoláin’s last paradiastolic move reconstituted the Irish Revolution (1916-21) as a phase in Irish history when the ascent of the modern nation was ruthlessly thwarted. While Treatyites and Anti-Treatyites had come to regard the revolutionary period as a victory, O’Faoláin now claimed that it had been ultimately a failure, and again he refused to lay the blame at the door of British imperialism focusing instead on home-grown treachery. Here, O’Faoláin was far from original either, since Fianna Fáil intellectuals who had viewed the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty as ‘a betrayal of the Republic’ had been disseminating a similar story for most of the 1920s, as did radical left-wing republicans in the mid 1930s in reaction to Fianna Fail’s increasingly cosy relations with ‘Irish capitalism’ (English, 1994: 223-228). The ingenuity in O’Faoláin’s story lay in its reconstitution of ‘the betrayal of the Republic’ as the failure of the revolutionary period to bring the modern nation or republic that had been promised. ‘The
final stage of the Revolution around 1922’ therefore ‘became – and is to this day – a middle-class *putsch*,’ O’Faolain fulminated, and Fianna Fáil – just like their predecessors – were accused of failing to deliver the material advantages that the urban poor had been led to expect would come with independence (O’Faoláin, 1943b: 187-192). What emerges then from this examination of the main para-diastolic moves in O’Faolán’s counter-canon is a story of modernity thwarted, and it is now time to look closer at this narrative performance and make good on my earlier claim that a rhetorical approach can indeed supply the tools to investigate the emotive quality of nationalist ideology, especially with relation to its constitution and re-constitution through national history.

The ‘Realist’ and ‘Cultural Historian’: Establishing Ethos

According to classical sources a skilful rhetor had first to find his arguments and then to amplify them with *pathos*. One of the first necessities in this process was to devise a way of *establishing ethos*. This did not concern the arguments as such, but rather, manipulating the audience’s *attitude* to the speaker or author to nurture feelings of benevolence and a willingness to believe. The main techniques identified by the rhetoricians to manufacture ethos in this way were: making oneself out to be important and praiseworthy; promising to speak of serious and grave issues; ingratiating oneself with the audience; and giving the impression of impartiality. Importantly, the latter was often tempered by the greater need to make the enemy seem foolish and unreliable - if not hated (Skinner, 1996: 127-133). What all shared in common, however, was that they worked on the *emotions* of the audience to manufacture a *sympathetic* hearing.
Seán O’Faoláin’s modernist alternative to the Irish national canon shows that he was no stranger to the necessity of establishing ethos. In his early editorials at *The Bell*, O’Faoláin quickly set out to foster a reputation for the journal and its editor as *objective* and *impartial* by associating it closely with ‘realism’ and ‘inclusivity.’ The journal’s first editorial thus declared that ‘It is Truth primarily, rather than Art, which interests *The Bell*, and especially the truth of the realist which will become its trade mark’ (O’Faoláin, 1940b: 7). This was soon followed by declarations of a determination to ‘have the facts’ and to conduct a realistic analysis of Irish life that was ‘detachedly clinical,’ ‘disinterested’ and ‘impartial’ (O’Faoláin, 1942c: 2). *The Bell*’s ‘absolute impartiality,’ moreover, dictated that the journal would have no policy (O’Faoláin, 1940b: 8) which was somewhat surprising given O’Faoláin’s relentless critique of Fianna Fáil cultural policy in this period.

It was no coincidence, however, that O’Faoláin opted to establish ethos in this manner for the late 1930s saw the emergence in Ireland of scientific approaches to society and history, and indeed, *The Bell* published many pioneering articles in these fields (Brown 1985: 204-205). 1938 in fact witnessed the launch of the first Irish journal of historiography (*Irish Historical Studies*) whose stated aim was to revise the myths of popular nationalism. O’Faoláin immediately set out to ally his work with this project in an effort to elevate its status and discredit the canon. While the editors of *IHS* spoke of a commitment to ‘historical revisions’ of ‘accepted views’ ‘in the light of new facts’ (Edwards and Moody, 1938-1939: 2), O’Faoláin was a lot less diplomatic in his
approach. An editorial in *The Bell* thus accused De Blacam and Corkery of deliberately ignoring the plural origins of the nation and attempting to reduce Irish history to the history of ‘the Gael,’ ‘the priest’ and ‘the peasant’ (O’Faoláin, 1942a: 78-81). In *The Story of the Irish People* in 1949, O’Faoláin went even further adopting the poise of ‘the cultural historian’ and lamenting the fact that whereas his English counterparts were fortunate in possessing sound social histories to assist in their work, he could have recourse to no such reliable sources in Ireland since ‘All our histories are nationalist, patriotic, political, sentimental’ (O’Faoláin, 1949: 5-6). The beauty of this creative effort at establishing ethos was that it not only elevated his status in the eyes of his readers but also undermined the canon as unreliable and partisan. If we are to understand the full rhetorical challenge of O’Faoláin’s re-description and attempt to re-constitute popular national history in mid-twentieth century Ireland, however, we must move beyond classical rhetoric to more modern approaches to the rhetoric of narrative.

**Modernist Heroes and Traditionalist Villains: Characterization and Commentary**

According to Wayne Booth, two of the most effective means for writers of narrative to persuade and move their audiences to see things their way is through the rhetoric of characterization and commentary. In the case of the former, Booth identifies a whole host of ways in which writers of fiction employ rhetoric in narration – control of inside views, distancing and manipulation of scenes - to direct their readers in their estimations and emotional attitudes to characters (Booth, 1991). ‘If we look closely at our responses to most great novels,’ he argues, ‘we discover that we feel a strong concern for the
characters as people; we care about their good and bad fortune’ and ‘we are made to admire or detest, to love or hate, or simply to approve or disapprove of at least one central character’ (Booth, 1991: 129-130). For Booth this is not simply a question of plot, but of controlling our emotional and moral involvement by ‘centering our interest, sympathy, or affection on one character’ which ‘inevitably excludes from our interest, sympathy, or affection some other character’ (Booth, 1991: 79). Moreover, the skilful and timely use of well-placed factual and evaluative commentary will allow the author to further manipulate his characters and as Booth puts it ‘bring all his powers to bear on the problem of making the reader see what they really are’ (Booth, 1991: 116).

Character construction and the skilful use of commentary were without doubt two of the most important rhetorical devices that Seán O’Faoláin employed in his redescription of the canon as modernity thwarted. In fact, in the 1930s and 1940s O’Faoláin wrote a series of historical biographies with an overtly political message in which the canon was consistently undermined through recourse to these very techniques. A considerable degree of *inventio* was again in evidence, as O’Faoláin selected and converted some of the best-known nationalist icons into modernist heroes by building up and amplifying considerably any historical evidence that reinforced their ‘modernist’ credentials. O’Faoláin supplied too his fair share of villains which were no longer foreign imperialists and their Irish collaborators, but rather, opponents of modernization who he deftly presented as corrupt and undemocratic ‘traditionalists.’ In what follows, I examine four of the principle cases where these rhetorical techniques related to characterization and
commentary were in evidence in O’Faoláin’s work, focusing specifically on his treatment of Hugh O’Neill, the Gaelic Bards, Daniel O’Connell and Eamon De Valera.

O’Faoláin’s (1942b) biography of one of the last Gaelic chieftains, Hugh O’Neill (The Great O’Neill) offers a good example of his ability to take a hero of the canon and turn him into a champion of modernization. Hugh O’Neill had won a number of significant victories against the Elizabethan armies in the late 1500s in Ireland before eventually being defeated at Kinsale in 1601 after an ill-fated expedition from his Ulster stronghold to meet up with a Spanish expeditionary force that had come to his aid (Morgan, 1999). Given his early successes and his Gaelic pedigree, O’Neill was of course one of the most treasured heroes of the canon. But, O’Faoláin, making much of evidence that O’Neill was fostered out by his ambitious family to the beau ideal of the English Renaissance, Sir Phillip Sidney, for 8 years that had ‘left their mark’ (O’Faoláin, 1942b: 48-56), succeeded in converting O’Neill into Ireland’s first - but ultimately frustrated - ‘modernizer.’ In fact, his biography ingeniously played up the tragic and romantic dimension of O’Neill’s rise and fall that was typical of the canon, while advancing his plot of an ‘aborted Gaelic civilization’ by attributing O’Neill’s demise and failure – not to the armies of Elizabeth – but to the backward nature of Gaelic Ireland. At every turn in this tragedy O’Faoláin intervenes to portray O’Neill as the frustrated modernizer. Thus the account of the debacle at Kinsale is followed with a scene of the Gaelic chieftains gathering in council to discuss their fate, suitably manipulated to exonerate O’Neill from all culpability. Indeed, no sooner had the defeated Gaels taken their place at the table in this scene than O’Faoláin was interjecting to exclaim:
It was not his fault. He was the accuser, not the defendant, at that council table. He was a modern man who had tried to bear up the rotting edifice of antiquity, and had fallen under its weight (O’Faoláin, 1942b: 336).

Thus, Hugh O’Neill, ‘Gaelic chieftain,’ is transformed into a tragic modernizer who had ‘stood for something that began to look like an emergent nation’ (O’Faoláin, 1942b: 251) but failed because of the archaic state of Gaelic civilization.

If this combination of characterization and commentary had the effect of reconstituting a hero of the canon into a sympathetic ‘modernizer,’ O’Faoláin’s portrayal of the ‘Gaelic bards’ of the early modern period had the opposite effect. As we have seen, Fianna Fáil intellectuals such as Daniel Corkery and Aodh de Blacam attached great importance to the Gaelic poets of eighteenth century Ireland who they claimed had kept the Gaelic nation alive in the minds and hearts of the people in a ‘hidden Ireland’ outside the colonial settlements. O’Faoláin now set out to undermine this crucial link in the canon’s chain of continuity by presenting its bardic heroes such as Egan O’Rahilly and Dáithí O’Bruadair as the residues and lackeys of a decrepit aristocratic order. Far from being ‘poets of the people,’ these bards he argued ‘think solely in terms of their own narrow class, have no conception of the hopeless condition of the mass of the people, and have no message for them’ (O’Faoláin, 1938: 24). Indeed, O’Faoláin insisted that O’Bruadair - like O’Rahilly - ‘despises the people’ as is clear from their references to them as ‘children of serfs’ and ‘boors’ (O’Faoláin, 1938: 20). Summing up their historical
contribution in a devastating piece of evaluative commentary, O’Faoláin opined that ‘There is but small respect due to the end of the old order of Gaeldom’; a ‘disjecta membra’ of ‘an effete traditionalism’ in his stern estimation (O’Faoláin, 1938: 21).

Characterization of the Gaelic bards as traditionalist villains of course allowed O’Faoláin to amplify more forcefully the modernizing credentials of his heroes of the ‘democratic era’: Theobald Wolfe Tone and Daniel O’Connell. While Tone, like O’Neill, represented the straight-forward reconstitution of a ‘republican’ hero as ‘a modernizer’ in O’Faoláin’s writings (O’Faoláin, 1946), the case of O’Connell was somewhat more complex. It was well-known that this leader of Irish ‘constitutional nationalism’ for most of the early 19th century had rejected ‘Irish republicanism’ which left the adherents of the canon with a somewhat ambivalent attitude to his role in Irish history. Indeed, his legacy was especially dubious for Fianna Fáil intellectuals with strong Gaelicist sympathies, for O’Connell - born a native Irish speaker – had recommended the abandonment of the Irish language for the purely utilitarian gains that came with speaking English. This ‘rational,’ ‘realist’ and ‘utilitarian’ aspect of O’Connell’s personality - in addition to the fact that he had been educated on the continent and trained as a lawyer in England - once again gave O’Faoláin more than enough material to work his powers of inventio. O’Connell was thus reconstituted from a nationalist of dubious credentials to the virtual founder of the ‘democratic Irish nation.’ The title of O’Faoláin’s 1938 biography of O’Connell speaks for itself: King of the Beggars: A Life of Daniel O’Connell, the Irish Liberator, in a Study of the Rise of the Modern Irish Democracy. In this work we are presented with a picture of O’Connell who unlike the bards was a ‘Kerry peasant’ and naturally ‘one of the
people’ (O’Faoláin, 1938: 21) which gave him a particularly lucid and ‘realistic’ attitude to their positive attributes and their weaknesses – not least their debilitating tendency for romantic idealistic illusions of the Gaelic past. ‘O’Connell,’ we are thus informed, ‘abandoned the picturesquerie, the outer trappings of Gaeldom’ and set out to emancipate his people ‘as much from their own outdated loyalties as from the unwilling loyalties forced on them by their English masters’ (O’Faoláin, 1938: 29). In a key passage of evaluative commentary O’Faoláin declared:

Here was a man of the people accepting the oneness of Ireland, inside the historical fact of conquest and invasion because to his realistic and pragmatic mind the mingled strain in Irish life was something that, accepted could create a new nation. It was the appeal of the first national leader, since the fall of the Gaelic state, to the remnants of its fall, to build freedom on Conquest (O’Faoláin, 1938:105).

While commentary of this nature was a key feature of the rhetorical strategy of King of the Beggars, a more interesting device in this work was the manner in which its author sought to draw his audience into an emotional alliance with the main protagonist. A proximity to O’Connell’s emotional life is in fact reinforced through vivid and friendly portraits of his physical characteristics; ‘his bulk, his massive body, the magnificent head, handsome face, flash of eye, the roar and vigour of the lungs’ (O’Faoláin, 1938: 137). All of course assisting the writer’s efforts to bring O’Connell to life, and lure readers into seeing this maligned hero as Ireland’s greatest ‘modernizer’ and ‘democrat.’
If O’Connell emerges as the modernist hero *par excellence* in O’Faoláin’s writings, it was Eamon De Valera’s fate to play the role of the exemplary villain of reactionary *traditional* Ireland. In his 1939 biography of the then Taoiseach, O’Faoláin accordingly painted a gloomy picture of the Fianna Fáil leader. Indeed, his only positive quality was his ‘dignity’ (O’Faoláin, 1939: 40) which pales into insignificance as we are informed that this once ‘admired, even revered’ leader turned out to be ‘vulgar,’ ‘commonplace,’ ‘exceedingly dull’ (O’Faoláin, 1939: 19); to have ‘a lack of humanity’ (O’Faoláin, 1939: 24-25); and ‘a semi-theological …mind’ (O’Faoláin, 1939: 49). In contrast to O’Connell, De Valera, moreover, is held firmly at arms length from the reader. Indeed, any possibility of feeling with him is emphatically eliminated since this was a man ‘who never mixed with his equals’ and maintained ‘All his life long….that chasm between him and his fellows’ (O’Faoláin, 1939: 53). This characterisation of de Valera as a cold and inhuman traditionalist stood in stark contrast to Tone’s and O’Connell’s ‘humanity’ and formed a useful prelude for convincing the reader to share fully in O’Faoláin’s unsympathetic assessment of his legacy. A legacy, according to O’Faoláin, which was marked by the consolidation of a new middle-class and a ‘puritanical’ and ‘narrow-minded’ Catholic Church (O’Faoláin, 1939: 167-169); ‘a dreary Eden’ in which loyal austere patriots would have “milk or light beer for breakfast instead of tea”’ (O’Faoláin, 1939: 180). Ireland, it seemed, would have to await the demise of this traditionalist who drew his sustenance from ‘pointing backwards to that past …on which a modern progressive people can hardly be expected to feed perpetually’ (O’Faoláin, 1939: 181). As the reader no doubt will have gathered by now, the above was not just a question of characterisation and commentary. For to describe De Valera’s Ireland as a ‘dreary Eden’
was of course to deploy what the classical rhetoricians regarded as the most powerful tool of rhetoric – *elocutio* – to which I now turn.

**Amplifying Modernity and Ridiculing the Canon: Figures and Tropes**

According to the classical theorists of rhetoric, acquiring an effective *elocutio* or *style* could involve training to speak and write with clearness and lucidity, but by far its most important dimension was *ornatus* - or ‘ornamenting our utterances’ with the tropes and figures of speech in order to recast, illuminate and amplify arguments. *Ornatus* too is particularly important in the context of my earlier insistence on the need to capture the *affective* and *dynamic* dimension of nationalist ideology since it is precisely such tools which prove most useful in instituting paradiastolic shifts in a nation’s identity. Quintillian in particular recognized that ‘To arm and equip ourselves with any of these ‘ornaments’ is to increase the *vis* or emotional power of our utterances’ (Skinner, 1996: 48-51). Moreover, he maintained that the skilful deployment of tropes and figures could convert audiences into spectators which would reap valuable rewards since if ‘the audience comes to ‘see’ what we are trying to describe’ it will be ‘roused to accept and endorse our vision of events’ (Skinner, 1996: 181-183). It will come as no surprise that O’Faoláin once again proved extraordinarily adept in the use of such rhetorical devices. In what follows in this last section of the article I show how he used tropes and figures to amplify his modernist arguments; to undermine the case of the canon; and finally to subject the canon to ridicule and scorn.
The amplification of O'Faoláin’s counter-canon was in effect manipulated throughout with a whole *army* of tropes and figures. Indeed, reliance on these resources began with the establishment of ethos which O'Faoláin intensified by associating his discourse with light and clarity through the skilful use of appropriate metaphors. The major aim of *The Bell* was accordingly described by O’Faoláin in one of its first editorials as to ‘see clearly - *voir clair* – to have the facts and understand the picture’ about Ireland (O’Faoláin, 1940a: 6). In a more popular vein, *The Bell* claimed to be clearing away ‘the briars and brambles’ of traditionalism to arrive at a ‘vivid awareness …of what we are becoming.’

Schemes too were deployed to emphasize the inclusive nature of *The Bell’s* ethos with its very first editorial making expert use of apostrophe – addressing one’s audience directly - to announce to its readers ‘Whoever you are, then, O reader, Gentile or Jew, Protestant or Catholic, priest or layman, Big House or Small House – *The Bell* is yours’ (O’Faoláin, 1940b: 8-9).

Tropes and similes were also employed to ornate O’Faoláin’s main paradiastolic moves of emplotment and characterization, ‘holding forth’ his arguments as in the following dramatic similes used to highlight the irreversible decline of Gaelic Ireland:

Limb by limb she began to rot…she was like a body dragging itself about with one half already dead. That dead half was her past, alive only in the memory, and slowly rotting even there. (O’Faoláin, 1938: 12)
History might there have taken up its pen and written *Finis* to a race (O’Faoláin, 1946: 99).

Similarly, Wolfe Tone’s introduction of modern republican and liberal thought into Ireland at the end of the 18th century was captured in the following spatial and illuminating metaphor figured in hyperbole:

Wolfe Tone flings open the doors of the modern world like a thunderclap (O’Faoláin, 1946: 100).

Nothing is spared either in ornating O’Connell’s modernism and his rejection of Gaelic Ireland as this example of the figure of apostrophe makes clear with O’Connell - and by extension his biographer – imploring his people:

“Start afresh. Modernize” (O’Faoláin, 1944b: 188)

Indeed, throughout the whole discussion of the interminable decline of Gaelic Ireland and the rise of modern Ireland a kind of antithesis between metaphors of death and darkness (Gaelic Ireland) and vitality and light (modern Ireland) is discernible in O’Faoláin’s writings. Dáithí O’Bruadair’s verse is thus described as a typical instance of the poet ‘garnering in the past’ having smelt ‘the decay’ and ‘the darkness’ while Tone is the people’s ‘torch’ and ‘lover’ and O’Connell ‘the epitome of all their pride, passion, surge and hope – their very essence’ (O’Faoláin 1938: 138.).
The Catholic Church was similarly identified with the darkness through metaphor, but it was rather its dubious national credentials that O’Faoláin preferred to dwell on, using hyperbole to declare Maynooth ‘loyal beyond suspicion’ to the British State (O’Faoláin, 1947b: 8) and the figures of meiosis – ‘ironical understatement’ (Skinner, 1996: 209) – and enumeration to amplify the prolongation of its loyalist credentials:

...the priest [i.e. the Church] was slow to support O’Connell. He was slow to support the Home Rule Movement. ...He was slow to support the Sinn Féin movement’ (O’Faoláin, 1947b: 20).

Implied here was of course an ironic swipe at the canon’s more sympathetic account of the Catholic Church’s role in the national revival and it is precisely this use of irony that merits closer attention.

Hayden White has argued that histories prefigured in this ‘ironic mode’ are in fact often satirical in their choice of emplotment which gives them an ‘intrinsically sophisticated and realistic’ character since they ‘appear to signal the ascent of thought in a given area of inquiry to a level of self-consciousness on which a genuinely “enlightened” - that is to say, self-critical conceptualization of the world and its processes has become possible’ (White, 1975: 8-9, 34-38). O’Faoláin was acutely aware of this and although blind to – or forgiving of – his own romantic moves, he deployed irony and satire copiously to undermine the romantic ‘myths’ of the canon. He therefore scoffed at the canon’s
reduction of Hugh O’Neill - ‘an important European figure, known and admired by every general on the continent’ - to the level of ‘a local patriot’ and ‘fine guerrilla chief’ (O’Faoláin, 1942b: 263, 355-356), and poured scorn on the canon’s elevation of the republican tradition in mid-nineteenth century Ireland at the expense of O’Connell. He in fact sardonically claimed that the Young Irelanders and Fenians were nothing more that irrational dreamers who had simply a ‘craving to be ‘different’ to ‘separate’; with ‘no more idea of what they meant by that – in terms of life, of human beings, of social order – than the kids who used to chant at school in my young days ‘A Nation Once Again’ (O’Faoláin, 1944b: 188-189.)

As this last pronouncement reveals, satire and irony are of course close bedfellows of derisive humour; a powerful tool in the battle of words for the classical rhetoricians. Quintillian even maintained that ‘the use of humour, together with the ability to inspire pity, are undoubtedly the two means of stirring the emotion that have the greatest impact of all.’ For this master of rhetoric derision was primarily about ‘glorying’ over one’s enemies, who are presented ‘by comparison with ourselves’ to be ‘suffering from some contemptible weakness or infirmity’ (Skinner, 1996: 198, 201). This was a rhetorical tool which O’Faoláin again revelled in.

Indeed, he used the columns of The Bell to launch an all-out campaign of mockery against the canon and its teaching in the Irish education system. The ‘ridiculing figure’ of tapinosis - ‘deliberately inappropriate and undignified terminology to belittle what we are talking about’ (Skinner 1996: 422) – was a favourite weapon here. In a series of
editorials at *The Bell* he thus described the history being taught in schools as ‘complete fairy-tale …based on a fanciful Celtophilism’ (O’Faoláin, 1943b: 189), ‘pointless records of glorified skirmishes’ (O’Faoláin, 1944a: 191) and finally, ‘a pack of lies’ (O’Faoláin, 1944b: 186). But his most derisive tirades were reserved unsurprisingly for Eamon De Valera and those who extolled his historical achievements. When the *Irish Press* literary editor, M.J. MacManus, wrote a sympathetic biography of De Valera in 1944 (MacManus, 1944), O’Faoláin was quick on the offensive, producing an editorial review at *The Bell* which branded MacManus an ‘official apologist’ and did its best to reduce his book and De Valera’s role in recent Irish history to slapstick. Indeed, according to O’Faoláin, the only suitable way of approaching De Valera was through the genre of ‘comic satire’ (O’Faoláin, 1945: 1-2), and he certainly lived up to his own advice in this review. The figure of *tapinosis* was again his preferred weapon to attack De Valera’s historical record describing the then Taoiseach’s opposition to the Treaty in 1922 as ‘finicky constitutional pother’ and ‘pure scholastic blether.’ His refusal to recognise the suspension of the Second Dáil was similarly figured as ‘playing make-believe at governing’ and ‘pretending to be the President of the Irish Republic.’ And finally, his justifications for the u-turn on the Oath of Allegiance were disparagingly reduced to ‘pretence by means of ingenious argufying that he never did what everybody knows he did’ (O’Faoláin, 1945: 1-6). But O’Faoláin’s most ambitious metaphors were again directed at De Valera’s traditionalism and his supposed refusal to embrace the modernization of his country. Indeed, in this review O’Faoláin produced one of the most colourful examples of his ability to employ tropes and figures to mock and deride, capturing perfectly the sense of stagnation, constraint and blockage that he associated
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with ‘De Valera’s Ireland.’ The Fianna Fáil leader, he declared, had decided to ‘hitch his star to a Croom milk-wagon’ and expected everyone else in Ireland ‘to crowd into it contentedly’ (O’Faoláin, 1945: 13).

Conclusion

While we cannot of course be certain to what extent such rhetorical dexterity succeeded in moving Irish audiences in the 1930s and 1940s, what we can be sure of is that O’Faoláin was among the first in twentieth century Ireland to realise how closely the legitimizing strategy of Irish nationalism was bound up with history. My concern here has been to demonstrate that O’Faoláin’s crusade against Fianna Fáil nationalism depended above all on a rhetorical reconfiguration of popular Irish history and not a rational campaign to encourage the abandonment of the past, tout court, as has sometimes been suggested. In addition, I have shown that O’Faoláin’s attack and attempted reconstitution of the hegemonic canon of Irish history was by no means a rejection of nationalism, but rather, an effort to articulate a new vision of the Irish nation that was compatible with processes of modernity which he believed would ultimately be beneficial to Ireland.

More generally, I have sought to demonstrate how a rhetorical approach to nationalism can aid us to comprehend the dynamic and emotive character of nationalist ideology, and especially, the construction and re-construction of nationalist history which remains one of the most potent legitimizing strategies of nationalism today. I am of course far from
the first to highlight these characteristics of nationalism and in concluding this article it seems appropriate to indicate some of the key points of intersection and contrast between this rhetorical reading of nationalism and other similar approaches. Firstly, the focus here on the emotive power of nationalist symbols and especially those that have an enduring historical appeal clearly has much in common with the ethno-symbolism of Anthony Smith and others (Smith, 2001; Hutchinson, 2000). However, in contrast to ethno-symbolism what a rhetorical approach foregrounds above all – and what O’Faoláin’s counter-canon in particular illustrates - is the inherent contestability of such resources and the ability of nationalists to consistently renew their symbolic orders either to challenge or defend prevailing nationalist hegemonies. While ethno-symbolism has certainly recognised the malleability of nationalist symbolism it has been less concerned to explain this in the context of contestation as the above has attempted.

Secondly, there is undoubtedly a certain resonance between the rhetorical approach adopted here which is keen to insist on the wider historical conditions of the constitution and reconstitution of nationalist ideology and Rogers Brubaker’s suggestion that we should understand ‘nationness as an event, as something that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops’ (Brubaker, 1996: 19). Brubaker is, however, inclined to focus his attention on events of such a formidable magnitude that they induce a fundamental crisis or dislocation of identity – the fall of multi-ethnic states and the collapse of the Eastern European bloc are his key examples – which facilitates the emergence, ‘reframing’ and crystallization of state, homeland and minority nationalisms that become ‘institutionalized’ or ‘reified’ (Brubaker, 1996: 3, 15-16). By contrast, the approach
adopted here regards transformations of identity on this scale as the exception rather than the rule, and treats the notion of a crystallization or reification of nationalist discourse sceptically in favour of a greater dynamism. In fact, while Brubaker’s ‘eventful approach’ would appear to show how emerging nationalisms can successfully exploit fundamental historical change such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rhetorical approach adopted here is much more inclined to fix its attention on the adaptive capacity of existing nationalisms as they mutate and reconfigure the ideological world in response to the more normal course of events, which nevertheless continually present opportunities for contestation of the prevailing orthodoxies as O’Faoláin’s attack on the canon clearly demonstrates.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that I am by no means the first to describe the ideological world of nationalism in terms of rhetoric. Craig Calhoun in particular has also had significant recourse to the notion of ‘the rhetoric of nation’ (Calhoun, 1997: 4-5). Calhoun, however, drawing on the contemporary poststructuralist theory of Michel Foucault, has treated rhetoric at a much more general level as a cultural language which ‘leads people throughout the world to think and frame their aspirations in terms of the idea of nation and national identity’ (Calhoun, 1997: 6). While there is obviously significant overlap between this approach and that of Calhoun - especially with regard to the key mediating role of language in structuring the ideological world - it should be clear nonetheless to the reader that there are significant differences too. Most importantly, as the above has demonstrated, a rhetorical approach to nationalism from my perspective demands a much greater attention to the specific techniques and strategies of dialogical
persuasion that Calhoun does not really broach. Indeed, to treat nationalist ideology from the rhetorical perspective offered here is in fact to highlight its configuration and reconfiguration through argument which of course is to assume a context and an opposition. It seems to me at least that one of the most significant gaps in the study of nationalism today is the failure to recognise that nations too have their fair share of dissidence and contestation created from within by numerous O’Faoláins who may not succeed in becoming leading figures in a newly reconstituted nationalist hegemony, but nevertheless through the skilful use of appropriate rhetoric often affect the ongoing dynamics of the dominant ideology.

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2 Fergus O’Ferrall highlights not only O’Faoláin’s ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘liberal’ credentials which led him ‘to dismiss romantic nationalism’, but also, his re-conversion to ‘European’ as opposed to ‘Irish’ Catholicism towards the end of the 1940s (O’Ferrall, 1995: 100-102).

3 Much of what follows in this section is based on research carried out on the ideological strategy of Fianna Fáil and the *Irish Press* in 1930s Ireland.

4 The political importance of commemorating the Rising has become increasingly noted by Irish historians (Daly and O’Callaghan, 2007).

5 O’Faoláin was and is best remembered as a writer of creative fiction in Ireland.

6 Croom is a small town in Limerick near where Eamon De Valera was raised.