

Joyce, the Celtic Revival and Irish Modernism

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While the attempt to recover or revive a traditional native culture was a key element of Irish cultural nationalism since the late eighteenth century, the moment of the so-called Celtic Revival, at around the turn of the twentieth century, remains distinctive and significant for a number of reasons.

In no other period has Ireland produced so many writers of such extraordinary quality. Moreover, the reputations and achievements of W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge are inextricably bound up with the revivalist features of their Irish subject matter, and those of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett are at least in part moulded by their rejection of the aesthetics and politics of the Revival. The contemporary “branding” of the Irish cultural heritage continues to exploit the fame of these literary stars. The works of Yeats, Joyce and Beckett, of course, are all also central to the history of European modernism. Indeed, it could be argued that this unique instance of a modernist movement in a colonial setting presents an important challenge to theorists of modernism: certainly, this literature demands from its

critics a nuanced understanding of modernity in relation to Irish history.

A variety of popular cultural and political movements flourished during the years of the Revival, including Sinn Féin, Irish Ireland, the Irish Literary Theatre (later the Abbey Theatre), the Gaelic League, the Gaelic Athletic Association, and the Co-operative movement. These were crucial to the historical development of twentieth-century Ireland. Yeats's involvement with the Abbey Theatre and with certain key controversies when a number of plays, most significantly Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), were dismissed by enraged nationalist audiences, provides an opportunity to consider some of the ironies and even contradictions inherent in the Revival, and in the conjunction between aesthetic innovation and the project of cultural decolonization.

Yeats wrote in 1900:

I think that our Irish movements have always interested me in part, because I see in them the quarrel of two traditions of life, one old and noble, one new and ignoble. One undying because it satisfies our conscience though it seemed dying and one about to die because it is hateful to our conscience, although it seems triumphant throughout the world. In Ireland wherever the Gaelic tongue is still spoken, and to some little extent where it is not, the people live according to a tradition of life that existed before the world surrendered to the competition of merchants and to the vulgarity that has been founded on it; and we who would keep the Gaelic tongue and Gaelic memories and Gaelic habits of our mind would keep them, as I think, that we may some day spread a tradition of life that would build up neither great wealth nor great poverty, that makes the arts a natural expression of life that permits even common men to understand good art and high thinking and to have the fine manners these things can give. (Yeats 1975, 245)

Yeats's conception of *fin-de-siècle* Ireland as the site of a collision between ancient tradition and commercial civilization is central to his work. It need hardly be stated, though, that his analysis falls short of the complexity of his historical situation, and that modern Ireland did not effectively resist, much less overturn, industrialism or capitalism. Although Yeats does not specifically mention the horror

of the Great Famine (and here his sketch is characteristic of revivalist discourse which frequently veiled such historical trauma), the changes it had brought about were clearly evident by the end of the nineteenth century. For example, who exactly are the “we” on whose behalf Yeats speaks? Irish peasant culture had been decimated (surviving only in a few Western enclaves, memorialised by the Revival in Yeats's Sligo and Synge's Mayo and Aran Islands); the old ruling class, the Anglo-Irish or Ascendancy, had largely lost possession of its estates in the wake of the Land War of the 1880's and the legislation of the subsequent quarter century; and the emerging Catholic bourgeoisie, rural and urban, stood to inherit the Irish earth.

Yeats represents a mainly Anglophone movement for cultural “revival,” spearheaded by the Anglo-Irish at the very moment of their historical eclipse. Ireland had already, by virtue of its colonial history, been incorporated into the imperialist system, and possessed a highly modernised state. Many Irish nationalists demanded unfettered economic development and greater democracy in a style which was anathema to Yeats. For him, a cultured elite would naturally take the lead in the tasks of recording, translating, editing or adapting Irish stories and songs, and of seeing them into print or onto the stage for the first time. Yeats had been deeply impressed by such works as Standish O'Grady's *History of Ireland, Vol One* (1878) and Augusta Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), which depicted an aristocratic and heroic Irish antiquity. All such writing, for Yeats, involved the regeneration of the contemporary artistic imagination, rather than its subordination to any particular political end. The protesters in the Abbey, speaking up for a self-consciously “respectable” Catholic Ireland, evidently did not agree: they could not tolerate images of an Irish woman eloping with a beggar, as in Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1904), or of Mayo peasants lionising a man they believe to be a murderer in *The Playboy*, as authentic expressions of the spirit of the nation.

Obviously, this was more than a quarrel between tradition and modernity. The various forces at work in the Revival have been understood in several ways, then and since. For Yeats, the riots which greeted *The Playboy* were an instance of

"Culture" being howled down by Barbarians. D. P. Moran, self-styled spokesman for "Irish Ireland," dubbed this a "Battle of two Civilisations," in which only one, the native, had both force of numbers and moral right on its side. His phrase has been adopted by historians such as F. S. L. Lyons, considerably more sympathetic to Yeats's view than Moran's. However, during most of the last century, many Irish writers and intellectuals have called down a plague on both houses, in what Terence Brown has described as the movement of "Counter-Revival," encompassing such figures as Seán O'Faoláin and Patrick Kavanagh. From a certain viewpoint (which we might call, in the Irish context, "revisionist"), both the misty, idealistic romanticism of Yeats and the puritanical, narrow-mindedness of his opponents, might equally be seen as symptoms of the failure of the Irish to embrace the liberation of secular modernity. Some more recent commentators have attempted to transcend any simple view of class or sectarian antagonism in the Revival period, or of any straightforward opposition between pro-and anti-modernisers, in order to acknowledge progressive tendencies on all sides which may have been compromised or suppressed during the consolidation of the newly independent Irish nation-state.

These early remarks of Yeats's may also help to illuminate the question of modernity and colonialism. The modern, in colonial conditions, is associated with "foreignness," domination, and violence; it is in no sense naturalised in the course of a long process of economic and social development. It is precisely in such a situation that the culturally "old" appears most intensely valuable, and becomes the object of political contestation. For while it may virtually obliterate traditional culture, such an experience of modernisation also confers an auratic significance on the remnants of the archaic. Yeats and his friends who would keep "Gaelic habits of mind" (even if not themselves "Gael") are engaged in a salvage mission which ideally would transform an entire society—but the political implications of this transformation are ambiguous.

The wider cultural dimension of Yeats's project remind us of his connections with William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement in late Victorian Britain.

His consciousness of the arts more generally should not surprise us, given that his brother, Jack B. Yeats, was Ireland's greatest modern painter, and his sisters, Lily and Lolly, ran the innovative Cuala Press, which produced remarkable books illustrated in neo-Celtic styles. Indeed, the Revival was never a purely literary affair: some of its earlier writers, including George Russell (*Æ*) and George Moore, started out as painters, and this was also something of a Golden Age in Irish craft and design (Fallon 14). Both Yeats (impressed by Morris as a publisher as well as a writer) and later James Joyce (despite his indifference to modernist visual art) shared in the modernist preoccupation with the printed book as aesthetic artefact. However, it is clear that Yeats envisions his ideal society as a clearly stratified and hierarchical one. Although intense critical debate has continued over the question of whether Yeats's politics, especially in his later years, can strictly speaking be described as "fascist," this is probably less important to the reader of the poetry and plays (as no individual literary text could usefully or coherently be so described) than the necessity of acknowledging the deeply anti-democratic tenor of his thought throughout his long career.¹⁾ And if Yeats looks to Ireland as the place where a harmonious neo-feudal society might re-emerge, it is surely problematic that, despite his best efforts to "retrieve" an anti-modernist intellectual Anglo-Irish tradition, no even mildly compelling historical images of such a condition from the recent past could survive scrutiny.²⁾ The Anglo-Irish Ascendancy (whom despite his own middle-class origins Yeats always regarded as his "people") had presided over the destruction, in the sixteenth century, of what was regarded in the popular view as Ireland's only true aristocracy—the old order of chieftains and kings.

It is by now well recognised that while the discourse of nationalism may gather its material from the enclaves of tradition, it generally does so in order to create a version of the colonial state in new cultural dress. It is, therefore, usually entirely committed to the desideratum of "modernity." Yeats's project is sufficiently like that of the nation builders of early twentieth-century Ireland to be acknowledged as their poet (who, as Edward Said puts it, "articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the restorative vision" of a colonised people [265-66]), although he never

shares their view of the modern state. His constant laments about the philistinism of the Catholic middle-class can be comfortably absorbed by that class itself (and indeed recited by its sons and daughters in the classrooms of independent Ireland) while all the time he in fact delivers a radically conservative critique of the society which it has created.

But this is just one of the many ironies that attend W.B. Yeats's great fame and the enduring popular reverence for his work in Ireland. The image of the lovelorn poet of the "Celtic Twilight" period, celebrating the beauty of the Irish landscape and expressing his melancholy and loneliness in words and images borrowed from simple country folk (see "The Stolen Child," "Down by the Salley Gardens," "He hears the Cry of the Sedge") has remained vivid. During the 1890's, he sought to reconcile his devotion to Ireland (and to her nineteenth-century traditions of patriotic verse), with his typically *fin-de-siècle* preoccupations with the occult and the seance:

Nor may I less be counted one
 With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,
 Because, to him who ponders well,
 My rhymes more than their rhyming tell
 Of things discovered in the deep,
 Where only body's laid asleep.
 ("To Ireland in the Coming Times" [Yeats 1983, 50])

Yeats's favouring of simple diction and of the ballad form distinguish his poetry from that of modernist contemporaries such as Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot. But as the decades pass, he grows increasingly alienated from popular political feeling, and from the Irish separatist movement. Yet even as his mysticism and nostalgia for pagan Ireland become elaborated into highly arcane theories concerning universal history (which are comparable to those of his international poetic counterparts), deeply hostile to Christianity, mass society and to any notion of historical amelioration, his best poems remain remarkable for their rhetorical bravado and

their extraordinary “quotability” (see “The Second Coming,” “Leda and the Swan,” “Long-legged Fly”). Yeats at times seemed to regard the new Irish state as the unruly child of the alliance between the Catholic bourgeoisie and a number of radical Anglo-Irish women, including the revolutionary leader Constance Markievicz. This dreadful union was symbolised for him by the disastrous marriage of John MacBride (one of the nationalist martyrs of 1916), and Maud Gonne (whom Yeats loved in vain for most of his life, as every Irish schoolchild knows). This is how Yeats commemorates MacBride's ambiguous achievement:

Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.
 (“Easter 1916” [Yeats 1983, 181])

Ultimately, Yeats offers an ideal of femininity totally opposed to his earlier portrayals of his first love (see “Prayer for my Daughter”), and produces his most suggestive and disturbing writing on feminine sexuality, violence and politics in the wake of his repudiation of Gonne (see “Meditations in Time of Civil War”).³⁾ But again, the spectacle of Yeats as a disillusioned and embittered man, isolated in his tower in Co. Galway or railing in the Senate against the repressiveness of the Free State, sits easily enough with the image of the Romantic artist who was bound, in any case, to be frustrated by politicians and businessmen. And his strategic deployment of “Irishness” continued to be powerfully resonant, no matter how narrow his own ideology. This is from as late as 1938, when Ireland's heroic adventure in decolonisation was apparently well and truly over:

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,
What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,

What calculation, number, measurement, replied?
 We Irish, born into that ancient sect
 But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
 And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,
 Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
 The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.
 ("The Statues" [Yeats 1983, 337])

The poem's analogy between the triumph of ancient Greece over Asia and Ireland's defeat of modern degeneration demonstrates that Yeats's blending of the esoteric and the nationalist had survived, although it was no longer in harmony with any wider cultural movement in his own society.

The analysis of Yeats in relation to Romanticism and modernism illustrates the difficulties presented by any discussion of Irish literature in this period in terms of the established histories of English and indeed European writing. To begin with, we must consider the relationship between the Revival and modernism. Are these entirely antithetical categories, the latter (especially in the Joycean mode) born out a reaction against the former? This judgement would evidently be supported by the fact that Yeats, largely because of his imbrication in nationalist rhetoric, was never regarded as a valued precursor by that minority of later writers who were committed to pursuing modernist experiment: from the point of view of the generation of the 1930's and later, modernism in Ireland certainly began with Joyce, not Yeats (Coughlan and Davis 1). Against this, it must be conceded that very little of the writing associated with the revisionist "Counter-Revival" was at all radical in formal terms, owing far more to the naturalism of Joyce's *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* than to his *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*. Certainly, Yeats attitude towards nineteenth-century English poetry and Romanticism was very different to Pound's or Eliot's, and he was particularly influenced by William Blake and the Victorian critique of industrialism; his views on Celtic spirituality owed a great deal to Matthew Arnold. It is a commonplace to suggest that with *Ulysses*, a work which imitated, parodied and transcended the nineteenth-century novel, a

country which had never produced a major realist novel suddenly leapt to the forefront of twentieth-century fiction. But equally, if we set Yeats's poetry beside the sentimental patriotism of Tom Moore or Thomas Davis, or consider Synge and Sean O'Casey, with their dramatisations of Irish vernacular eloquence within the constrictions of their respective versions of rural and urban Irish society, beside the "stage-Irishism" of Boucicault or even Shaw and Wilde, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that literary development in this period cannot be explained by any nationally-based, evolutionary model of inheritance and innovation. Irish literature abruptly ceased to be a self-consciously colonial branch of English literature, always painfully aware of its minor status and its London-based audience. We are surely obliged to reach for the idea of modernism and its "revolution of the word" to account for this creative explosion. And here, the parallels between English and Irish literary history break down, for the "advanced" metropolitan tradition undergoes no comparable re-making. Perry Anderson and other critics in the Marxist tradition have mapped the phenomenon of aesthetic modernism in relation to "uneven" or "incomplete" development: in part a consequence of grappling with the modern where the memory of what it supplants is fresh. The applicability of this vision of the historical conjuncture between the avant-garde and the archaic to the colonial situation is obvious; but it is also significant, as Terry Eagleton puts it, that the idea of time associated with *nationalism* is more "modernist" than "modern", "at once traumatized and enraptured by the new, mournfully arrested and dynamically open to the future" (280). In this light, the family resemblances between O'Grady, Gregory, Yeats and Joyce become clearer: Terence Brown points out that even the literary forms sponsored by the revivalists, dependent on "the ancient Celtic sagas, on folktale and on the self-conscious interlacing narratives of the story-teller's oral art, as well as on the revelatory capacities of myth" influenced the understanding of textuality itself in Yeats, Joyce and even Beckett (Brown 1995, 34).

Such reminders of the connections between Joyce and the Revival are instructive, not least because Joyce himself is such a savage satirist of the Revival's

idealism and social pretension. Begging *not* to be accounted one of the “mumming company” of Yeats, Synge, Russell and the rest, this is how Joyce explains his own artistic mission:

Thus I relieve their timid arses,
Perform my office of Katharsis.
My scarlet leaves them as white as wool.
Through me they purge a bellyful.
("The Holy Office," [Joyce 1966, 36-7])

He has equal scorn for the earnest Gaelic Leaguers of the Catholic middle-class, which he encounters as a student in University College, Dublin, whom he regards as obsessed with ethnic and sexual purity, and the mystic feminists and vegetarians of the largely Anglo-Irish circles of Yeats and Russell. Leopold Bloom overhears Russell on the streets of Dublin in *Ulysses* solemnly preaching

Of the twoheaded octopus, one of whose heads is the head upon which the
ends of the world have forgotten to come while the other speaks with a
Scotch accent. (*U* 8.520-22)

Comparable parodies of Yeats, Synge and Douglas Hyde are scattered throughout Joyce's works. Some of this hostility can be explained as the resentment of the young, ambitious writer who needs to outdo his contemporaries, just as an anxious Stephen Dedalus tries to dominate the literary debate unfolding in the National Library in Chapter 9 of *Ulysses*. But the image of Joyce as the deflator of revivalist dreams also appears to support a long-established view of this author as a thoroughgoing demythologiser of all forms of nationalist imagining, implacably opposed to “essentialist” identities and the violence they must inevitably bring in their wake.

Joyce's relationship with early twentieth-century Ireland is surely more complex than this, although it is certainly tempting to regard him as the antithesis of Yeats

in every conceivable way—and therefore, like his most celebrated creation, Leopold Bloom, an enthusiastic cosmopolitan, offering an exuberant and optimistic vision of the urban environment, everyday modern life, technology and consumerism. In the first place, we need to understand the difficulty Joyce, as an English-speaking Dubliner, experiences with the concept of authentic “Irishness” which rarely troubles others in this period. Near the end of *A Portrait*, when Stephen confronts the image of an Irish-speaking peasant (who himself speaks in fear and wonder of “the terrible queer creatures at the latter end of the world”[P 274]), we can appreciate Joyce's recognition of alterity, which cannot simply be overcome by any voluntaristic identification with the “people.” Gabriel Conroy has a comparable experience at the end of *Dubliners*, as he contemplates all that divides him from his wife Gretta, who is from the west of Ireland; the story “The Dead,” as a whole, represents an exploration of the process by which “the fragments of the nation” (in Chatterjee's words) are gathered up by the nationalist project. But this does not mean that Joyce is insensitive to the trauma of modernisation, or that he is only interested in depicting Ireland as a “normal” place (Leerssen 230).⁴ Moreover, acting as the “purgative” to the revivalist mystifications of the Irish past, Joyce's up-to-date frankness about biology, sexuality and what Bakhtin calls the “lower bodily stratum,” finds an echo in the very crudeness, chaos and extravagance of the very Gaelic sources which the revivalists so often sanitized. Joyce's grotesque parodies of Gregory's translations of the stories of Cuchulain (in Chapter 12 of *Ulysses*) demonstrate another mode in which the archaic and avant-garde may enter into explosively creative conjunction with one another. Joyce, although his texts have never been as widely known as Yeats's, is perhaps more “popular” in this sense: although Joyce makes no programmatic declarations about seeking to recover the traditional, his experiments with the carnivalesque (especially in *Finnegans Wake*) do appear to suggest that he, too, may be inspired by the idea of an Irishness older and more profound than the repressive Romanized Catholicism of the late nineteenth century.⁵

In the light of this, it might be more accurate to say that *Ulysses* is a book in

which the notion of the emancipatory power of modernity is interrogated, and indeed put under considerable pressure, rather than one in which the modern is uncritically ratified. Bloom is certainly in some respects a Hibernian version of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, the urban pedestrian whose liberated creative vision transforms the art of the modern metropolis.⁶⁾ But he is also a melancholic figure who yearns for a lost idyll of domestic happiness (always mediated through the commodity) —

Happy. Happier then. Snug little room that was with the red wallpaper.
Dockrell's, one and ninepence a dozen. Milly's tubbing night. American soap
I bought: elderflower. Cosy smell of her bathwater. (*U* 8.170-72)

and who dreams of escaping the city altogether for suburban seclusion:

a thatched bungalowshaped 2 storey dwellinghouse of southerly aspect,
surmounted by vane and lightning conductor, connected with the earth, with
porch covered by parasitic plants (ivy or Virginia creeper), halldoor, olive
green, with smart carriage finish and neat doorbrassess ... (*U* 17.1504-08)

This serves to remind us, as Walter Benjamin comments, that the bourgeoisie created not only the phantasmagoric world of the commodity and the modern city environment which corresponds to it, but also the private home as the refuge from emotional overstimulation and alienation (Benjamin 20). And just as pornography and advertising promise consolation to lonely individuals whose stories unfold in the streets, shops, pubs and brothels of Dublin, so too capitalism and nationalism offer an escape from the “Famine, plague and slaughter” (*U* 3.306) of the past. But the city street, as Benjamin puts it, always leads downward, conducting the *flâneur* “into a vanished time into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private”; and for Joyce, too, the “dreamworld” of modern commerce inevitably “reflects back upon the primal past” as it imagines a utopian collective future (Benjamin 4, 416). In this sense, Joyce's forward-looking

modernism, so concerned with consumption and excess, can never entirely be divorced from the supposedly regressive, nostalgic impulses that gave rise to other forms of revivalist writing.

This interweaving of some of the many strands of Joyce's modernist practice may perhaps be illustrated here by reference to just one of the interpolations from "Cyclops" (Chapter 12)—that portion of the text most directly concerning with specifically nationalist imaginings of the future. At this point in the episode, Paddy Dignam, who was consigned to his grave in Glasnevin earlier on the day of 16 June 1904, speaks to his friends in Barney Kiernan's bar:

Interrogated as to whether life there resembled our experience in the flesh he stated that he had heard from more favoured beings now in the spirit that their abodes were equipped with every modern home comfort such as talafana, alavatar, hatakalda, wataklasa and that the highest adepts were steeped in waves of volupcy of the very purest nature. ... It was then queried whether there were any special desires on the part of the defunct and the reply was: *We greet you, friends of earth, who are still in the body. Mind C.K. doesn't pile it on.* It was ascertained that the reference was to Mr Cornelius Kelleher, manager of Messrs H.J. O'Neill's popular funeral establishment, who was responsible for carrying out the funeral arrangements. Before departing he requested that it should be told to his dear son Patsy that the other boot which he had been looking for was at present under the commode in the return room and that the pair should be sent to Cullen's to be soled as the heels were still good. He stated that this had greatly disturbed his peace of mind in the other region and earnestly requested that his desire be made known. Assurances were given that the matter would be attended to and it was intimated that this had given satisfaction. (U 12.351-373)

Obviously, Joyce's immediate target here is a then fashionable Theosophy (of which Yeats was a devotee), which he comically deflates with talk of boots and commodes. We have already had a glimpse into the home life of the unfortunate young Patsy: "The last night pa was boosed he was standing there bawling out for his boots to got out to Tunney's for to boose more and he looked butty and short

in his shirt. Never see him again" (*U* 10.1167-69). But even dreams of Nirvana have been overtaken by images of a domestic paradise (one closed to souls as yet as unrefined as Dignam's), with all those mock-Sanskrit mod. cons. *Ulysses* constantly traces the relationship between all sorts of material and spiritual deprivation, and concomitant fantasies of plenitude and pleasure, in its mapping of the dreamworld of modernity. This is as much the case with the bored and neglected housewife Molly as it is with her husband Leopold and with the xenophobic citizens of Dublin who eventually assault Leopold in the pub. From sexual shame and longing to the ultra-liberated enjoyment of all the "sweets of sin"; from provincial paralysis to self-aggrandising myth-making; from colonial boredom to the making of one little town an everywhere, a cosmopolis: as one of the many popular songs quoted in *Ulysses* puts it, your head it simply swirls. Joyce never simply satirizes or dismisses the inhabitants of Dublin because his entire text is in some regards a larger scale reproduction of their own imaginative and political fantasies. But as *Ulysses* finally achieves publication in 1922, the Anglo-Irish Treaty is about to partition the island, in order to create the Irish Free State and the "statelet" of Northern Ireland. The modernist phase of Irish nationalism, so to speak, was drawing to a close, and Joyce's continuing linguistic experiments (culminating in *Finnegans Wake*) are increasingly remote from any sense of a particular national context or audience.

Ireland's modernism, although precocious by comparison with developments elsewhere, was almost entirely confined to literature. Its influence on later developments in the visual arts, music and architecture was mediated by an intense and protracted anti-modernism, sometimes indistinguishable from anti-revivalism, which was itself pre-eminently literary. There was certainly a return to conventional forms of representation that was at times almost aggressively eager to dispense with the experimentations and heroics of the earlier decades. This reversion is highly visible in the careers of artists such as Seán Keating and Paul Henry in the 1930's. But in literature, naturalism, associated in fiction with O'Faoláin, and with in poetry with Kavanagh, became dominant. It prided itself on its attention to the actual, on

its readiness to emphasise limitation and the absurdity of any pretence to transcend it: this set of attitudes was remarkably appropriate to the Free State's post-revolutionary pursuit of security and authority (Deane 162). Thus modernism in Ireland is not followed by postmodernism (which does not appear until much later) but almost by the reverse—a disenchantment with and dismissal of much that the Revival had inaugurated.

There are of course some exceptions to this general retreat. These would obviously include Samuel Beckett, whose late-modernist preoccupations link him to the era of the Revival, although chronologically he lies outside it,⁷⁾ and Máirtín O Cadhain, whose extraordinary novel *Cré na Cille* was published in 1949. In an extended comparison between Beckett and O Cadhain, Declan Kiberd suggests that O Cadhain's decision to write in Irish is analogous to Beckett's use of French: both were thereby freer to disengage from literary stereotypes of Irishness, while O Cadhain also broke with the revivalist emphasis on the folkloric roots of "authentic" Irish-language writing in his characteristically modernist stylistic practice (574-89). In Beckett, however, scattered echoes of Synge, O'Casey or Yeats seem to commemorate a grander dream of Irishness, and of its challenge to and by the modern world. Those who inhabit the catastrophically reduced conditions of his fiction and drama—Molloy, Malone and the Unnamable of the famous trilogy and the tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, of *Waiting for Godot*, can no longer dream of any such heroic confrontation. They have lapsed back into "blather," an endless verbliness that they long to escape from, to reach the silence that lies beyond it. Their furious energy is an inverted version of the energy that had once had made Irish modernism so dazzling an enterprise. "Beckett's *Ecce Homo* is what human beings have become," as Adorno writes: for the greater the aspiration, the greater the possibility of failure (Adorno 190).

Flann O'Brien's version of counter-revivalism involved a curious inversion of modernism's cosmopolitan ambitions, while retaining many of its experimental formal procedures. O'Brien evidently reacted against the ambitions and the reputation of Joyce, although in his case we can identify the effects of Irish political

introversion, enhanced by neutrality during the Second War. But it was Thomas Kinsella who turned the Joycean achievement to his own purposes in verse, rewriting Joyce in an idiom that owes a good deal to Pound. But Kinsella's poetry has been increasingly erased from public consciousness by the emergence of new work that has forsaken the epic ambitions of modernism, making a virtue of the modesty that disclaimed for art the capacity to repair the destitution of the cultural world. This is represented most importantly by Seamus Heaney, who has regularly acknowledged his indebtedness to Kavanagh, and more recently by the distinctively postmodern Northern Irish poets, Paul Muldoon and Medbh MacGuckian.

One of the more familiar political charges levelled against literary revivalism in Ireland is that it helped to inspire the militaristic, masculinist heroics that led to 1916, and that it also contributed to the grimly patriarchal regime that succeeded in the Irish Free State. While more nuanced and detailed readings of Yeats, as well as of such figures as Patrick Pearse, should by now have served to contextualise and qualify this critique, it might further be argued that the institutionalisation of the great male modernists in itself, regardless of the politics of their literary practice, served to inhibit later writers, and especially women. Simply put, the presentation of Joyce, for example, as the exemplary Irish literary genius may have had oppressive implications for Irish women writers, despite or maybe even because of the fact that he has often been read as alert to women's experiences and concerned to find ways to express their voices. Certainly, most contemporary Irish women's writing, from the south of Ireland at least, has more in common with the naturalism and feminism of the early fiction of Edna O'Brien, for example, than to any revivalist precursors. Nevertheless, recent feminist recovery work, straying well beyond the more familiar names of Augusta Gregory, Elizabeth Bowen and Kate O'Brien, may call into question whether either nationalism or modernism as such were fundamentally disabling affiliations for Irish women writers.⁸⁾

But while most later Irish writers may have forgone the egotistical hubris and uncompromising obscurity of the late Yeats and Joyce, they may also have missed out on their central insight: that Ireland's "backwardness" can offer a privileged

vantage point for the exploration of the modern itself, and one that might be shared by other non-metropolitan cultures: Elleke Boehmer, for example, has suggested that an “expanded picture of a globalized and constellated modernism” might encompass the ways in which “nationalist movements in the empire’s outer regions were inflected through modernist prisms” (175).⁹⁾ Despite their renewed reverence for the local and the regional, counter-revivalists instead often couched their critiques of the constrictiveness of independent Ireland in the much less critical terms of what has come to be known as the ideology of modernisation: suggesting, in other words, that it was the business of the Irish merely to “catch up” with their more enlightened and emancipated neighbours.¹⁰⁾ The simple ambition to become modern is far removed from the complex condition of modernity, most especially when it becomes so eager to abandon, as a hindrance and as a form of excess, those modernist positions that were so hard won and so memorably represented by the generation of Joyce and Yeats.

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Notes

- 1) See O'Brien; Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*.
- 2) Marjorie Howes explores Yeats's conception of Anglo-Irish identity as a “nationality in crisis,” which Yeats repeatedly exposes as no more than a “willful, imaginative response” to the absence of stability. See Howes.
- 3) For recent feminist reassessments of Yeats, see Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry*; Howes, *Yeats's Nations*.
- 4) Against this see, for example, Luke Gibbons' analysis of Joyce's account of the “pathology of post-Famine Ireland,” especially in *Dubliners*, “‘Have you no homes to go to?': Joyce and the politics of pathology,” *Semicolonial Joyce*.
- 5) For the classic account of popular European carnival, see Mikhail Bakhtin.
- 6) See Walter Benjamin's speculations on Baudelaire.
- 7) Fredric Jameson defines “late modernism” or “neo-modernism,” post-1945, as a replay

and repetition of a “high modernist practice,” which has now been codified and taken as a model. See *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, Part II.

- 8) See Antoinette Quinn, “Ireland/Herland: Women and literary nationalism, 1845-1916,” and Gerardine Meaney, “Identity and Opposition: Women's writing, 1890-1960.”
- 9) For the influence of Irish revivalist writing in other regions of the world, see Tracy Mishkin and (in relation to Joyce) Gerald Martin.
- 10) See Conor MacCarthy on the ideology of modernisation in Ireland.

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Abstract

Joyce, the Celtic Revival and Irish Modernism

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This essay analyses the place of modernist writers such as W. B. Yeats and James Joyce in the context of the Irish Revival of the early twentieth century and of Ireland's colonial history. It also examines the legacies of Irish modernism in the twentieth-century Irish writing.

■ **Key words :** cultural nationalism, Celtic revival, literary modernism, Yeatsian vs. Joycean modernist modes.