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Introduction: remapping Irish modernism

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I

One of the strangest developments in recent Irish cultural criticism has been the proposition that contemporary Irish fiction has reconnected with the spirit of modernism from a century ago. In an *Irish Independent* review of Eimear McBride's *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016), the critic J.P. O'Malley claimed that the author "revives Irish modernism":

McBride is a daring writer who is not afraid to mess with language, displaying its malleability, randomness and irregular rhythms in equal measure. Words and phrases often go back to front and scenes are pieced together almost like an impressionist painting through fragments, hazy images and a blur of uncertainty ... McBride has a rare gift as a writer: she combines high modernism, page-turning plot and melodrama into a narrative that will appeal to mainstream audiences and fans of literary *avant garde* (September 11, 2016).

There's a similar assessment in a *New Statesman* review entitled "Bedad he Revives: Why *Solar Bones* is a Resurrection for Irish Modernism" (4 July 2016), in which Stephanie Boland offers this assessment of the tradition within which writers like McBride and Mike McCormack are working:

It has become something of a truism recently to note the resurgence of the experimental Irish novel. Not without justification: if Ireland's twentieth-century literary output is often feted as one which inaugurated a new strain of literary modernism, of which James Joyce's *Ulysses* is the most cited example, closely followed by Samuel Beckett and, increasingly, Flann O'Brien, then recent novels like Eimear McBride's acclaimed *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, markedly influenced by her reading of Joyce, have been widely seen as marking a return to (radical) form. Though it's tiresome to invoke the same ghosts, the style of *Solar Bones* ... invites familiar comparisons. Written in a single, sparsely-punctuated stream of consciousness flow broken only by line breaks – and those unexpectedly placed – McCormack's writing is the latest in a growing canon of literature which draws self-consciously on an Irish modernist heritage to tackle contemporary concerns.

These responses run counter in some respects to Joe Cleary's claim in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (2014) that "[modernism] today is part of a receding history."¹ They also (in the way of reviews) invoke a lowest-common-denominator version of a discourse that was multifarious in its own time, and has been subject to multitudinous critical and theoretical inflections in the century and more since its first impingement on the international critical imagination.

Nevertheless, it's interesting to consider what a resurgence of "Irish modernism" might portend for an understanding of post-crash Irish culture. However problematic such estimations might be (and they *are* deeply problematic), they do at least have the merit of invoking a continuing debate regarding the provenance, the identity, and the continuing fate of "Irish modernism". This debate, from our perspective, comes into focus in relation to three key issues:

- i) how the relationship between formalist definitions of Irish modernism and their political / ideological corollaries is conceived in the critical / theoretical discourses which attend the field;
- ii) which version or versions of modernism tend to dominate in discussions of its Irish career, and which practices, perspectives, persons, fields or individual texts are, for whatever reason, overlooked, marginalised or denied entry to the debate;
- iii) how is a regenerated Irish modernist studies being managed in relation to a range of institutional and socio-political agendas.

II

It would seem that every period in history has considered itself "modern" in relation to its own past – or at least its own perception of its own past. The nineteenth century witnessed "take-off" in a range of salient discourses, however, which together led to the emergence of modernism as a kind of cultural ghost haunting the present.² The version of modernity glimpsed by Baudelaire on the streets of mid-century Paris took hold of the European imagination, where it cross-pollinated with various developing assaults on established knowledge – biology (Darwin), morality (Nietzsche), psychology (Freud), politics (Marx), art (Wagner), physics (Einstein), perception (Bergson), consciousness (Husserl), and so on. Each of these connected in a range of ways to the overarching category of "identity", and it was this fundamental and powerful assault upon identity – upon the very possibility of subjectivity in the modern world – that came to exercise the energy of the various cultural elites of the various nation-states.

This is the story of modernism that has held sway in the academy and the cultural-critical institutions since the first half of the twentieth century. It is a story powerful enough to account for wide discrepancies in expression and experience – from Picasso to Pollock, Mann to Nabakov, Schoenberg to Cage. It's a story capable of being inflected in terms of politics (the rise of authoritarianism), technology (the advent of Fordism), society (the rise of urbanism), ideology (the eclipse of religion), and geography (the postulation of different "worlds" within our one world). It's a story encompassing a history of the "affected" modern subject, from Georg Simmel's *blasé* metropolitan to the "disenchantment" of Max Weber, from the *ennui* of Joris-Karl Huysmans to the passion of D.H. Lawrence. It's a story of an attempt to effect a revolutionary break from the past while at the same time (as this list of white European men shows) servicing a raft of largely unexamined (gender and racial) privileges. And it's a story that continues to impact upon how we in the present attempt to make sense of the world, and the world of ideas, inherited from the immediately preceding generations.

III

So far, so familiar; and it's as one interesting chapter of this familiar story that Irish modernism has usually featured. Wilde and Moore initiate it; Yeats, Joyce and Beckett

embody different energies or impulses within it; various minor figures (O’Casey, O’Brien, Behan) engage with it without fully committing or fully understanding the stakes. The Irish chapter, moreover, has a specific political inflection, born of its status as a long-unsettled colony, which accounts in some respects for its amenability (or at least its similarity) to international modernism. At the same time, that colonial status gave rise to an alternative cultural tradition – one based on the exclusive practices and experiences of a downtrodden but deserving folk. These cultural streams ran parallel for the century or so after the Great Hunger of the 1840s, occasionally at odds, occasionally overlapping, occasionally believing (or wishing, or hoping) that the other didn’t exist.

In his book *The Ordnance Survey and Modern Irish Literature* (2016), Cólín Parsons has brilliantly tracked a connection between the Survey’s “complex and multivalent representation of the Irish landscape”² and certain recurring impulses (relating to archive, scale, and formal abstraction) within Irish modernism. “In the sphere of literature,” as he succinctly puts it,

responses and challenges to the Survey and its mode of cartographic representation enliven and invigorate Irish writing as subsequent generations of writers grappled with the challenges of representing the geography of an island undergoing rapid and shocking change.³

The people of nineteenth-century Ireland “lived in a world which was no longer coterminous with itself,”⁴ and it was out of the clash between the forces (political and technological) precipitating this change and the practices looking to understand and represent it that Irish modernism was born.

An analogy: the British engineers who surveyed Ireland during the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century relied in large part on a system known as triangulation in order to develop what they regarded as accurate, six-inch-to-the-mile maps of the country. Triangulation enabled surveyors to make precise calculations in terms of distance, size, terrain and perspective. This in turn enabled the bureaucratic imagination to subject the land to abstract thought, with reference to effects such as borders, scales, place names, and all the other effects noted by Parsons. As Brian Friel dramatised so devastatingly in *Translations*, however, triangulation is limited inasmuch as its alleged scientific “precision” is at odds with the attitude of those who regularly traverse the landscape, and who work within a tradition of usage and nomenclature which cannot be encapsulated in terms of size, scale, distance, terrain or perspective.

The map of modern Irish literature has been consistently orientated in relation to three cardinal points: Yeats, Joyce and Beckett.⁵ With those in place, everything else in the field seems to come into focus in terms of size, scale, distance, terrain and perspective. The critical imagination also requires its borders and its names, its topography and its routes, if it is to understand *where* certain things are and *how* certain things relate to others. This is nothing new: critical practice has always connoted the constant remapping of a cultural terrain in relation to the new perspectives generated by new critical technologies – different methodologies and theories which enable us to see the cultural terrain differently, and to develop a new understanding of how it was used and what it meant to those who used it.

It is just such a remapping that we are advocating in relation to the cultural terrain of Irish modernism. Of course, it’s impossible simply to reject the received map, or the triangulated technology which has generated it. We need to get from “here” to “there”, and we need common terms of reference in order to be able to negotiate the terrain as we find it. Yeats, Joyce and Beckett are likely to remain the co-ordinates that we use to orientate ourselves and to plot meaningful journeys across the landscape of modern Irish culture.

There is, however, the sense of a lived experience of modernism, familiar to all those who have studied the field, that the standard map simply cannot encompass. The proposition demands extensive study; but as a working hypothesis, it's our sense that critical engagements with "Irish modernism" have worked to exclude a wide range of practices and experiences which are, in their own ways, just as locked in to modernity, and which could, with proper attention, help to re-adjust the definition of modernism itself as well as the social and political contexts within which modernism emerges as a cultural discourse. To be clear: we're not talking simply about *modernity* or *modernisation* – the conviction that "we" in the present (any given moment between, say, 1870 and 1980) are *modern* in relation to a past from which we have – happily or unhappily, thankfully or regretfully – emerged. We're referring rather to a particular kind of cultural response – self-conscious, impressionistic, experimental – to an experience of modernity that, because of its quasi-revolutionary nature vis-à-vis the immediately preceding era, impressed itself upon the entire terrain of modern Irish life. The modernist note is sounded in Doolin as well as Dublin, Portlaoise as well as Paris; we should learn to listen to it.

IV

Each contribution to this special edition of the *Irish Studies Review* attempts to relate a particular practice or field of cultural practice (aesthetics, theatre, art music, design, Irish literature, proletarian writing, photography) to an abstract political formation undergoing rapid and fundamental change. The texts and practices so engaged have traditionally existed on the margins of Irish critical debate. The voices encountered here struggled to find expression in a polity which, in the early years of the post-1922 dispensation, had embraced cultural and moral authoritarianism in response to a crisis of authority. At the same time, they have not as a rule been incorporated within the "map" of Irish modernism that was conceived, "triangulated" and executed in the image of a particular experience of modernity, and that is itself the product of an aesthetic imagination structured in response to certain archival, methodological and theoretical discourses.

Accounts of Irish modernism have tended to emphasise its basis in social and political discourse – or at least, certain kinds of social and political discourse. As already alluded to, the construction of a stand-off between modernist and nationalist / republican tendencies was once a staple of Irish cultural criticism, until it too became the subject of revisionist and anti-revisionist attention. What this contest tends to overlook, downplay or completely ignore is what Tom Walker (quoting Terry Eagleton) describes as "the ideology of the aesthetic" – an established tradition of aesthetic discourse in which agents of various type and function (practitioners, academics, public sphere commentators, etc.) reflect self-consciously on the relationship between art, society and politics. In "The culture of art in 1880s Ireland and the genealogy of Irish modernism" Walker considers the ways in which, and the extent *to* which, "the political" was incorporated within the discourse of Irish art during the decades preceding the supposed advent of modernism.

Shoot forward a century: if "modernism" is geographically determined (in terms of the diverse global locations wherein it is engaged), it's also subject to various overlapping temporalities. In "A *Sense of Ireland*: reflecting and refracting modernity in Irish culture", Linda King examines a key cultural artefact dating from a period long after the official demise of (Irish) modernism. *A Sense of Ireland* was the catalogue for an arts festival of the same name which ran in London in the early months of 1980s. Its socio-political contexts were complex and acute: war in Northern Ireland, suspicion and stereotype in the UK, and continuing economic under-achievement in the Republic. King considers these contexts in relation to an Irish design tradition which, although lagging (for clear structural reasons)

behind its European and American counterparts, produced a text which spoke clearly to some of the conceptual and formal discourses of ‘classic’ design modernism.

In “‘Éistear le mo ghlór!’ Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille* and postcolonial modernism”, Eoin Byrne approaches Ó Cadhain’s novel in relation to minority postcolonial literatures and the failure of the Irish state to nurture Irish language writing. A modernist text that is complicated by its triply liminal status, *Cré na Cille* was composed in Irish, set in the geographical periphery of Europe that is the rural west of Ireland, and written by a cultural dissident who had also been a political prisoner. Byrne broaches the little-known pathways of Irish language modernism as evidenced by a highly experimental prose which drew on a Gaelic tradition of “*de-a-caint*”, or verbal flaunting, rooted in everyday Irish diction. *Cré na Cille* stands in Byrne’s discourse as a highly self-reflexive text similar to, but different in certain key respects from, a tradition of subversive postcolonial fiction more commonly associated (in an Irish context) with the work of Flann O’Brien.

Mark Fitzgerald’s “A belated arrival: the delayed acceptance of musical modernity in Irish composition” argues that musical modernism developed in Ireland at a much later date than its literary equivalents, and then only in a partial and more self-conscious sense. Inhibited by the state’s lack of commitment to the medium, Irish art music suffered as composers achieved limited exposure to European currents. Denied access to live performance and discouraged by hostile attitudes towards avant-gardism, these artists found themselves working within an ever-diminishing sphere that was characterised by a combination of institutional conservatism, technical inadequacy and general socio-economic stagnation. The seeds of change were sown with the inauguration of the Dublin Festival of Twentieth-Century Music in 1969 which throughout the following decades introduced new generations to the European musical heritage (most tellingly, the revolutionary approaches of the modernist period) in ways that had not been attempted before. Fitzgerald suggests that the festival initiated a radical if late form of modernism that continues to engage with vibrant forms of non-western, electronic and popular music.

In “Photographic modernism on the margins: William Harding, *The Camera* and the Irish salons of photography, 1927 to 1939,” Orla Fitzpatrick considers the slow internationalisation of Irish photography in the immediate post-revolutionary period. She argues that a conservative “pictorialist” style, emphasising traditional and rural themes, became the signature style of Irish photography during this period. Pictorialism was linked to a Victorian aesthetic, whereas urban themes executed using more experimental methods were criticised as inauthentic and counter-national. Despite these tensions, some photographers did in fact engage with the experimentalism that was developing in Germany and the United States. Ironically, the distrust of images of modernity that was so often expressed in Irish photographic journals ignored the practices that made pictorialism possible – technologies and techniques that were in themselves deeply symptomatic of the ongoing modernisation of Irish society.

Deaglán Ó Donghaile’s “Modernism, class and colonialism in Robert Noonan’s *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*” situates the Dublin-born writer’s novel in relation to the marginalised experience of migrant Irish labour and the dispossession of the English working class. Reading the text against the background of Noonan’s involvement in trade unionism and his pro-Boer activity in South Africa, Ó Donghaile interprets it as a work that reflects the disrupted and uncertain existence of contemporary working-class life. When Frank Owen (the nearest the novel has to a central “protagonist”) invokes the example of the Great Hunger in Ireland to illustrate the bourgeoisie’s drive to “exterminate” surplus workers through starvation, Noonan exposes the colonial origins of contemporary capitalist practice. Noonan’s novel was in essence a polemic, warning English workers that capital recognised no borders unless it was those pertaining to property and resources, and that the model of colonial

violence tested in Ireland over an extended period would come in time to inform British class war during the twentieth century.

In “‘Unthreatening in the provincial Irish air’: Ireland’s modernist theatre,” Shaun Richards broaches the treacherous waters of twentieth-century Irish theatrical history. The Abbey’s hegemony has long been a staple of Irish theatrical discourse; less well engaged are the various practices and perspectives that emerged during the first four decades of the century to challenge that hegemony. Despite the apparent desire of many theatre-makers to emulate European experimental forms and practices, a modernist drama worthy of the name struggled to emerge in post-revolutionary Ireland – stymied at every turn by an unsympathetic state, an uninterested public, and a state-funded theatre that remained dedicated to the principles of peasant realism. Richards re-assesses the emergence and role of the Gate Theatre, and looks to a forgotten publication entitled *Plays of Changing Ireland* from 1936 for evidence of an alternative sensibility in contemporary Irish theatre practice.

V

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Notes

1. Cleary, *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, 1.
2. The critical response to the field has by and large been an excavation of the links between modernity, modernisation and modernism. For a brilliant analysis of the Irish context see Gibbons, *Joyce’s Ghosts*.
3. Parsons, *The Ordnance Survey*, 4.
4. *Ibid.*, 2.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. Joe Cleary does so in the second sentence of *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, before going on to suggest that the status of these three writers may

“have ultimately contributed to an attenuated conception of the history and achievements of Irish modernism more broadly” (2014, 1).

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