

## CHAPTER 9

# IRISH MODERNISM *and* ITS LEGACIES

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THE IRISH REVIVAL LAID THE foundations for the emergence of a simultaneously local and cosmopolitan literature that emerged during the formation of the modern Irish nation-state and in its aftermath. Partitioned, nominally free but not completely independent, the question of what Ireland was, and who the Irish were, was as politically charged as ever. Writers developed new, often abstract, forms of expression as a means of responding to political and cultural instability. The most recent scholarship on Irish Modernism has addressed the collaboration of writers and other artists and emphasizes the interrelationship of literature with the visual and plastic arts.<sup>1</sup> This chapter focuses exclusively on literary Modernism, which includes a range of techniques and movements, from impressionism to expressionism, symbolism to surrealism. In their classic study, *Modernism: a Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930*, Bradbury and MacFarlane argue that “the Modernist writer is not simply the artist set free, but the artist under specific, apparently historical strain.”<sup>2</sup> Locating that particular historical strain is essential to understanding the way that Irish Modernism operates. In the *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2010), Ireland is never considered in its own right but is mentioned alongside “postcolonial nations,” including Jamaica, “Trinidad, Africa [*sic*], and India.”<sup>3</sup> Such arguments ignore the complex historical relationship between Britain and Ireland, which is most accurately considered in imperial and not in colonial terms. A more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Ireland and the British Empire allows stylistic affinities between Irish writers with very different politics to surface; similarities between Irish and British writers also come into view. Such an approach illustrates how Irish Modernism is distinct from and interrelated to transnational literary Modernism.

Among the Irish Revival's most important innovations was the creation of cultural activities and literary forms in which the nation, as it was aesthetically rendered, could accommodate divergent and even antagonistic attitudes to politics and class. The Abbey Theatre is exemplary in this regard. The theater's first directors, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn, asserted in their manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre a "freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England" and their ambition to carry out "a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us."<sup>4</sup> Yet from the beginning of the enterprise, there was a tension between high culture and popular will. This could be sublimated for periods of time, but it surfaced in important flashpoints, such as the famous riots over J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907, which W. B. Yeats believed were symptomatic of narrow-minded cultural nationalism. Yeats's growing disenchantment with the legacies of the Revival precipitated a shift in his poetic style, beginning with *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910). This disillusionment increased over the next decade, culminating in a sense of alienation from Irish political and cultural life, as the new Irish Free State enshrined conservative Catholic orthodoxy in its policies.

Other Modernists experienced a similar sense of alienation and disillusionment with the culture and politics of the Irish state, and many were driven abroad by a sense of claustrophobia. For the most part, Yeats remained in Ireland throughout his life, although he stayed intermittently in England and Italy, and the relationships that he formed abroad with musicians, dancers, designers, and fellow poets were essential to his changing style. James Joyce and Samuel Beckett are Ireland's most famous literary émigrés, but avant-garde networks in London and Paris were equally important to the work of the poet Thomas MacGreevy; the novelist Liam O'Flaherty; and, of course, the novelist and short-story writer Elizabeth Bowen, who is more often considered to be a British author than an Irish one. Writers who remained in Ireland developed cryptic and even parodic experiments in subject and form, which reached their zenith in the plays of Denis Johnston and the novels of Flann O'Brien.

Scholars generally regard a focus on the city as a characteristic of Modernist writing. This concentration was shaped, in part, by Joyce, whose *Dubliners* (1914) and *Ulysses* (1922) transformed the cityscape into palimpsests of meaning, layering private and public histories in a new epic form. Yet the city as a defining characteristic of Modernism is problematic when considering other Irish experimental writing of the 1910s and 1920s, in which rural landscapes are prevalent. Apart from the eruption in Dublin of the 1916 Easter Rising, it was in the Irish countryside that sudden cultural change was most keenly felt. The concentrated wealth and power of the landed estates was destabilized; the Anglo-Irish and the Irish Civil Wars fractured the countryside, and modernization brought stark changes to the vast pre-industrial landscape.<sup>5</sup> As will be shown, Yeats and Bowen both responded through their literature to the destabilization of the Anglo-Irish class

and consequent questions of identity. Yeats moved further into abstraction, using images and archetypes to encode his political philosophies and to impose a sense of order on the disturbed landscape of the west of Ireland. O'Flaherty, who at first glance appears to be the antithesis of Yeats and Bowen, uses landscape similarly in his most experimental novel, *The Black Soul* (1924).

*The Black Soul* interrogates the gap between modernity and the lives of the Irish peasantry. The novel is set on the island of Inverara, a fictional representation of Inis Mór in the Aran Islands, where O'Flaherty was born and brought up. His protagonist, The Stranger (a phrase that is the vernacular for a visitor to the islands as well as an anticipation of Camus's *L'Étranger*) has traveled to the island to seek answers to the existential questions that have been provoked by his experience of war on the Western Front. The psychological trauma of the returning soldier, also explored in such British Modernist fiction as Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), is doubly suppressed in the Irish subject because of the hostility and outright aggression that many returning Irish soldiers faced. O'Flaherty's outcast Stranger attempts to repress his experience of the war, but—in an important rejection of the Revivalist pastoral—O'Flaherty uses the rural landscape to evoke the traumatic event:

He listened for a full minute, breathing gently, perfectly motionless. In that minute he felt that he was a pure soul being judged by wicked demons. Then his mouth gaped as the picture of the night he was buried by a shell in France flashed before his mind. A cormorant called dismally passing over the house. He listened to the swishing wings. . . . He gasped and his eyeballs started. As he ran headlong forward, fantastic visions crowded into his mind. He saw millions of dying men, worlds falling to pieces, continents being hurled into the air, while he himself wandered among the chaos, the only living atom in the wrecked universe.<sup>6</sup>

O'Flaherty's imagery here is very similar to Woolf's description in *Mrs Dalloway* of the shell-shocked Septimus Smith, who believes that an airplane, benignly advertising toffee in the sky above central London, is attempting to communicate with him: "The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern."<sup>7</sup> The similarity in O'Flaherty and Woolf's evocation of the trauma of aerial bombardment illustrates the way that Modernist style connects writers across national boundaries and vastly different politics.

Other novels by O'Flaherty are in the realist mode, but the *Black Soul* is existentialist, Modernist, and explicitly Irish. The Stranger seeks solace from the horrors of modernity by escaping to the furthest reaches of the west to live among people whom he expects to find uncorrupted, in accordance with the Revivalist aesthetic. However, he soon learns that Inverara's inhabitants are afflicted by the same corruption, self-interest, and violence that degrade "civilization."<sup>8</sup> His attitude toward the peasants changes, as he disparages them for their ignorance and

backwardness: “like all peasants and rustics and small townspeople, [they] loved the sensation of somebody in their village being dead or sick or murdered or accused of murder or gone mad. They did not read newspapers.”<sup>9</sup> He perceives the peasants as having an “ape likeness,” with “weak minds” and “strong bodies [that] were like crippled machines without a motive power. They were like wild beasts in a cage.”<sup>10</sup> A strong critique of Revivalist primitivism colors the Stranger’s perceptions, but his mentality is most fully explained in the context of O’Flaherty’s Marxism.<sup>11</sup>

O’Flaherty fought as a republican in the Irish Civil War, was a founding member of the Communist Party of Ireland, and later traveled to Russia so that he could write about Bolshevism firsthand.<sup>12</sup> His representation of the peasantry in the *Black Soul* reflects his commitment to Marxist industrial progress. In the section of the novel titled “Summer,” the Stranger finds in the brutality of nature a model for regenerating a civilization that has become “a cursed quagmire that sucked everything good into its bosom.”<sup>13</sup> Standing by a tide pool, the Stranger watches a starfish attack a periwinkle, “slow and calculated as that of hired labourers working in a State factory.”<sup>14</sup> The strange juxtaposition provides a model from nature for industrialization and collective action. The war has provoked a deep disillusionment, but collectivity provides at last a sense of progress: “Men, starfish, crabs, motion without purpose. But it is motion.”<sup>15</sup> The novel ends without a resolution to the Stranger’s existential crisis. Nevertheless, in the closing scene, he flees Inverara with Little Mary, a “civilized savage” who is ultimately rejected by her fellow islanders. The pair leaves—not on a traditional boat, a currach—but on a “yacht”: a word that O’Flaherty uses twice at the novel’s close, reinforcing a return to modernity and a rejection of the island and its backward present.

Protestant unionist Elizabeth Bowen’s politics are antagonistic to Liam O’Flaherty’s worldview, yet both writers use the Irish landscape to express the unspeakable or the unacknowledged, and both are also concerned with a perceived crisis of civilization and the questions of identity that are common themes of Modernist literature. Bowen’s *The Last September* (1929) was her first novel to be set exclusively in Ireland, but the country is also important to her other most accomplished work, particularly *The House in Paris* (1935) and *The Heat of the Day* (1948). In those later novels, Ireland is a place that her characters go to escape—but when there, they never feel quite settled. *The Last September* is set in 1920 and deals with the rapid historical change that followed the Better Government of Ireland Act, which led to the suspension of judicial process, the introduction of martial law, and a guerilla war. County Cork, hotbed of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), is the location of her own ancestral house Bowen’s Court and is the setting of the novel and its fictional Big House, Danielstown. Throughout the novel, violence seeps through the surrounding landscape, leading to the ultimate destruction of the house. Although most of the action is indirect, there is an

important reference to an actual historical killing in December 1920, when a group of British Auxiliary soldiers opened fire on civilians in Cork city center, set fire to several buildings, and shot two IRA men in their beds. The event surfaces in the novel when Laurence, a visitor to Danielstown, and Gerald, an Englishman and junior officer in the British army, discuss the killing of a local man, Peter Connor, who has been shot by British soldiers in his own house. The patriarch of Danielstown, Sir Richard, is flustered by the news, but he only replies blithely: “His mother is dying. However, I suppose you must do your duty. We must remember to send up now and inquire for Mrs Michael Connor. We’ll send some grapes.”<sup>16</sup>

Bowen writes from the perspective of the Anglo-Irish landed class, but she makes clear in *The Last September* that this is not personal “opinion” but a collective “point of view.”<sup>17</sup> The epigraph to the novel is from *Time Regained*, Proust’s seventh volume of *In Search of Lost Time*: “They suffer, but their sufferings, like the sufferings of virgins and lazy people...” She leaves the sentence unfinished, but the ellipsis alludes to the conclusion of Proust’s statement: “are of a kind that fecundity or work would cure.” Bowen’s indictment of the failures of the Ascendancy is oblique, as indicated by the epigraph and by the way that the most important political questions in the novel are raised by Lois, an adolescent and orphan living at Danielstown. She asks, for example, “What is it exactly ... that they mean by freedom?”<sup>18</sup> Yet Lois can only approach the idea of Ireland indirectly: “She could not conceive of her country emotionally: it was a way of living, an abstract of several landscapes, or an oblique frayed island, moored at the north but with an air of being detached and washed out west from the British coast.”<sup>19</sup>

In *The Last September*, the landlords perceive Ireland to be anchored by the solidity of Ulster unionism, in contrast to the instability that they believe has been instigated by republican violence in the south. In *The House in Paris*, which is set ambiguously some time after the First World War, the whole country is perceived as unmoored; to the Michaelis family, “Florence had seemed less distant... ‘Abroad’ was inside their compass.”<sup>20</sup> For that family, Ireland is neither home nor abroad. The place is marked by absence and paralysis. Nature is inert—“Cork consumes its own sound: the haze remained quite silent”—and so are the people: “Aunt Violet ... [was] becoming each year more like an ageless primitive angel.”<sup>21</sup> It is a place outside of time: “All the ticking clocks did little to time here.”<sup>22</sup>

In *The House in Paris*, Aunt Violet and her husband, Colonel Bent, attempt to recreate in the Protestant enclave of Rushbrook the identity that they lost when their Big House was burned “in the troubles,” a euphemism that allows the Bents to avoid the reality of historical and political change.<sup>23</sup> The Bents’ newfound sense of security lacks foundation and, as Bowen suggests, is rooted in an imaginary past: “The nineteenth-century calm hanging over the colony makes the rest of Ireland a frantic or lonely dream.”<sup>24</sup> The history of nineteenth-century Ireland



with its violent land agitations and campaigns for parliamentary reform was anything but calm. Yet this history is available only to readers who are already historically informed, because Bowen refrains from directly pointing out the fallacies in the Bents' perceptions. The overriding atmosphere of repression is reinforced by Bowen's description of the Bents' new "place" as "unstrange," a neologism that hints at the Freudian *unheimlich*, the basis for the psychoanalytic uncanny: "this unstrange place was never to lose for Karen [the Bents' niece] a troubling strangeness, a disturbing repose. Marshes threaded with water, pale tufts of pampas, grey bridges, a broken tower lie for some flat miles between here and Cork."<sup>25</sup> The image of the marsh, neither solid ground nor waterway, underlines the Bents' untenable position.

In *The Heat of the Day*, set during the London Blitz, neutral Ireland and the question of what to do with the "white elephant" of the ancestral house, Mount Morris, provide an interlude to the war.<sup>26</sup> Roderick, who inherits Mount Morris and travels from London to see it, perceives that "by geographically standing outside war it appeared also to be standing outside the present," an observation that applies equally to the house and to the country.<sup>27</sup> To his mind, the house presents "an historic future."<sup>28</sup> However, this future is impeded by the perspective of his relatives who live in Ireland and are unable or unwilling to acknowledge the historical realities that led to their class's disenfranchisement. Cousin Nettie, to whom Roderick feels obligated to offer the house, psychologically transfers her traumatic experience of the end of the Ascendancy onto a failed romantic relationship, and these feelings are in turn imposed onto the landscape. Her psychological repression ultimately manifests itself in the supernatural: "Nature hated us; that was a most dangerous position to build a house in—once the fields noticed me with him, the harvests began failing, so I took to going nowhere but up and downstairs, till I met my own ghost."<sup>29</sup> She adds, there was "nothing to be frightened of in the garden," but even that cultivated, controlled space "has all run wild now, I dare say."<sup>30</sup>

Bowen uses the themes of instability and fragmentation that are common to Modernism generally to give voice to specifically Irish concerns. Because of her social class, her work as a British agent in the neutral south of Ireland during the Second World War, and the English settings of most of her other novels, critics have been reluctant to claim Bowen as a wholly Irish writer. Yet she proclaimed without qualification, "I regard myself as an Irish novelist. As long as I can remember I've been extremely conscious of being Irish—even when I was writing about very un-Irish things such as suburban life in Paris or the English seaside."<sup>31</sup> A close reading of Bowen's work illustrates her deep concerns with the ethics of the Anglo-Irish attitude to Ireland, which is closely related to her ideas about the ethics of the novel as a form. Bowen rejected what she regarded as the author's "preassumption" of a particular morality, and instead she demands

that readers excavate the “poetic truth” from her texts.<sup>32</sup> In *The Heat of the Day*, Stella asks,

Whatever has been buried, surely, corrupts? Nothing keeps innocence innocent but daylight. . . . Dug up again after years and laid on the mat, it’s inconvenient, shocking—apart from anything else there’s no place left in life for it any more. To dig up somebody else’s truth for them would seem to me to be sheer malignancy; to dig up one’s own, madness.<sup>33</sup>

Truths can be told, Bowen suggests, but only indirectly. *The Last September* ends with an epiphany, as the flames of the burning Danielstown light up the night. It is this destruction that enables the Naylor to see briefly and “too distinctly.”<sup>34</sup>

Yeats’s attitude to the Anglo-Irish class is far less nuanced in his writing than in Bowen’s. Yeats shared T. S. Eliot’s and Ezra Pound’s elite attitudes to class and tradition, and his poetry exhibits a similar tendency in form: the use of Classical references (many of which are intended to be inaccessible to the general reader), shifting personae, and a rejection of the conventional uses of rhyme and meter. In his earliest work, which was foundational to the Irish Revival, Yeats used characters and stories from Irish folklore to represent a heroic past on which he believed the Ireland of the present day should be modeled. He hoped that by representing to urban audiences and readers the virtues that he believed were preserved in the peasantry, Irish people could recover a unique national identity. This belief worked in tandem with his early experiments in the occult. For example, in “A Dramatic Poem,” which was dedicated to Lady Gregory and served as his preface to the verse play *The Shadowy Waters* (1906), he enumerates the “seven woods of Coole,” from Kyle-dortha to “Dim Pairc-na-tarave, where enchanted eyes / Have seen immortal, mild, proud shadows walk.” He continues, “I had not eyes like those enchanted eyes,” but he is nevertheless enchanted in his dreams, where the images he has “woven” move among elemental powers.<sup>35</sup> Yeats believed that his poetry could be a medium for enchantment, and he collaborated with the actress and musician Florence Farr to develop methods of rhythmic recitation that would heighten his poetry’s magical qualities. This is important for understanding the extent of Yeats’s disenchantment with the beliefs he held so strongly in the 1890s and in the first decade of the new century.

The *Playboy* riots were a catalyst for Yeats’s political and artistic disenchantment, as the audience’s rejection of Synge’s drama was also a rebellion against Yeats’s and Gregory’s authority as directors of the Abbey Theatre and as shapers of Irish cultural identity. Several poems in *The Green Helmet* (1910) reflect Yeats’s anxieties about the destabilization of Anglo-Irish power. “At the Abbey Theatre” asks “Craoibhin Aoiibhin” (the pen name of the founder of the Gaelic League, Douglas Hyde) to explain how to “bridle” the fickle crowd “That turns and changes like his draughty seas?” The irony of the question is reinforced by the concluding couplet, “Or is there none, most popular of men, / But when they mock us, that we

mock again?" Yeats's attitude to the Abbey's insurgent audiences is expressed most directly in "On Those that Hated the *Playboy of the Western World*, 1907" from *Responsibilities* (1914). There, John Synge is figured as Don Juan whose poetic prowess—always related in Yeats's imagination to sexual power—overrides the emasculated crowd.

Out of Yeats's individual sense of alienation from the course of Irish history emerged his conviction that Irish society was detaching itself from a great tradition. He believed that this tradition had been preserved through the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, which was symbolized by the image of the Big House. "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation" from the *Green Helmet* introduces the house as the nest of inherited wisdom, "the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow / Where wings have memory of wings." This theme comes to the fore in the titular poem of *The Tower* (1928) and in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" from the same volume. During the 1910s and 1920s, Yeats's poetic forms became increasingly fragmented. The long poems in *The Tower* are composed of shorter movements, which reflect the fracture of the structure of society that is their subject. The first movement of "Meditations in Time of Civil War," "Ancestral Houses," opens with images of abundant nature, but as in Bowen, this is not celebrated but instead used to express a threatening wildness. Rejecting the "levelled lawns and gravelled ways" that now seem tainted with violence and bitterness, the poet imagines a new beginning in the next movement, "My House," where "an ancient tower" rises up out of "An acre of stony ground." The only ornaments to adorn "My Table," the subject of the third movement, are the tools for writing and an ancient Japanese sword, which is an emblem in this poem and elsewhere in Yeats's work of a changeless tradition that is passed from one generation to the next. In the final line of that movement, the scream of Juno's peacock heralds anxieties about "My Descendants" (the fourth movement), whom the poet worries are at risk of "natural declension of the soul," involvement in politics, or miscegenation. Through the images of the peacock and the owl, symbols of governance and wisdom, the poet sets the scene for the appearance of political figures in the fifth movement, "The Road at My Door." Here Yeats uses the pejorative word "irregular," rather than "republican," to describe the first soldier who arrives: "A heavily-built Falstaffian man." However, the poet is not wholly confident in the Free State's "brown Lieutenant and his men," who next appear and are described as only "Half dressed in national uniform." The poem returns to nature in the following movement, "The Stare's Nest by My Window," but the scene is unstable: "My wall is loosening. . . . somewhere / A man is killed, or a house burned, / Yet no clear fact to be discerned." The final movement, "I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness," ascends into phantasmagoria with clouds like "white glimmering fragments," self-obliterating images of war, rage, and vengeance. "Meditations in Time of Civil War" concludes with a retreat into the tower, where the poet weighs briefly the possibility of a life dedicated to



action against a life of contemplation, and he concludes that his mind is best satisfied with “abstract joy.”

Yeats’s disenchantment with public life is closely related to his disenchantment with the creative act, which is the theme of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” in *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939). As early as the *Green Helmet*, in “The Fascination of What’s Difficult,” Yeats expresses frustration with work that has merely “dried the sap out of my veins, and rent / Spontaneous joy and natural content / Out of my heart.” Rather than the noble Pegasus that was imagined by the founders of the Abbey, the theater is figured as a carthorse “under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt / As though it dragged road metal.” The harsh, modern image grates against the romantic Ireland that Yeats laments in “September 1913” is “dead and gone.” Yeats sought refuge from his disappointments in spiritualism and took instruction from his communicators from the other world, many of whom appear as the voices of his poems; the volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1923) is named for one of these otherworldly personae. However, the “abstract joy” that he hoped to find in the occult was elusive, and at the end of his life, the question of his legacy, which had concerned him throughout his career, began to weigh more heavily. In “Are You Content” from *New Poems* (1938), he calls on his ancestors to judge his achievements: “Have I, that put into words, / Spoilt what old loins have sent?”

The class politics that are so strongly associated with Yeats’s middle and late work do not define Irish Modernist poetics. Throughout his career, Louis MacNeice was in dialogue with Yeats, from his study *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1941) to his posthumous collection *The Burning Perch* (1963). In “Budgie” from that volume, MacNeice responds to Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli” from *Last Poems* through the image of a budgerigar, twittering in his cage, self-obsessed—“I twitter Am”—while “the human / Race recedes and dwindles.”<sup>36</sup> The line break disrupting “human” and “race” reinforces MacNeice’s democratic poetic voice against Yeats’s abstracted and aristocratic tone.<sup>37</sup> Another line of Yeatsian influence extends through the Modernist poetry of Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, whose *Poems* (1930) is indebted to Yeats for its forms but which takes leave of him in important ways. Devlin and Coffey were both Catholics, so the spiritual elements of their poetry have more precise and more public meanings than the obscure private codes in Yeats’s work. Coffey’s “The Eternal Thought” uses the dialectical formation of Yeats’s “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” but the self in Coffey’s poem is a “body,” a “machine giv’n to me / for the service of God.”<sup>38</sup> Devlin is generally considered to be a superior poet to Coffey; in contrast to the overt statements of “The Eternal Thought,” Devlin’s “O Paltry Melancholy” combines Catholic, classical, and Irish mythologies in a way that equally echoes and subverts Yeats. Robert Graves, who with Laura Riding published the influential *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), described Devlin’s work in *Poems* as indicative of a “natural intelli-

gence,” and he hoped that Devlin “would unrelate [himself] further.”<sup>39</sup> In his account of Graves’s statement, Coffey suggests that Graves’s attitude of “I-distrust-and-dislike-the-Irish” was what compelled him to urge Devlin toward abstraction. Devlin resisted this advice and instead works, in Coffey’s summation, “at the level of things deindividualised.”<sup>40</sup>

Apart from Yeats and Joyce, the most important influence on Irish Modernism was Thomas MacGreevy. A close friend of Beckett and Joyce, MacGreevy was important to transatlantic Modernism and corresponded with major figures, including T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Richard Aldington. Although he is best known for his criticism, MacGreevy was also an important poet, if not a prolific one. His single volume, *Poems* (1934) distinguished him as “a modern” whose work was praised for its “revolutionary intensity.”<sup>41</sup> MacGreevy fought at the Somme, but this was just one of the cataclysmic events that provoked his response to what Beckett described as the “rupture of the lines of communication.”<sup>42</sup> Wars in Ireland and wars abroad are evoked with a similar diction. The “wheeling stars” of the short poem “Nocturne,” which is dedicated to Geoffrey England Taylor, second lieutenant RFA, who “Died of Wounds,” resonate with the “withering world” of the poem “Autumn, 1922” about the Irish Civil War. His long poem “Crón Tráth na nDéithe,” an Irish phrase that is equivalent to the German *Götterdämmerung*, lurches from “Nineteen–sixteen perhaps / Or fierce, frightened Black-and-Tans / Like matadors!” through the “Rain, rain” to “Remember Belgium! / You cannot pick up the / Pieces / But, oh, Phoenicians, who on blood-red seas / Came sailing.” The image of the Phoenician sailor underscores the poem’s similarity to “The Waste Land” and illustrates how neither MacGreevy nor Irish Modernism can be sequestered from their international contexts.

MacGreevy moved to Paris in 1927, where he was Beckett’s predecessor at the *École Normale Supérieure*, work that enabled him to move in the vibrant expatriate circles in the city, including the coteries of important patrons, such as Richard Aldington and Nancy Cunard. MacGreevy soon became part of Joyce’s inner circle. He read to him and assisted with the research for *Work in Progress*, the future *Finnegans Wake*. When Beckett arrived to take MacGreevy’s place at the *École*, MacGreevy introduced him to Joyce, initiating a relationship that is crucial to Irish Modernism and to the history of literature in English. Although Joyce and Beckett both chose to live the rest of their lives outside of Ireland and are often considered as part of an international avant-garde, their work is nonetheless a reaction to the Irish Revival.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen struggles against the “nets” of “nationality, language, religion,” which he feels are the means by which Ireland attempts to hold the soul “back from flight.”<sup>43</sup> The word “tundish”—which Stephen uses to refer to the object that the Jesuit dean, an Englishman, calls a “funnel”—is the occasion for Joyce’s deep and ironic critique of the relationship of language

to identity. The dean marvels, “That is a most interesting word. I must look that word up. Upon my word I must.” His teacher’s response makes Stephen feel a stranger in his own country and provokes a sense of dejection:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.<sup>44</sup>

In an unexpected turn, Stephen learns near the novel’s close that “tundish” is “English and good old blunt English too.” The discovery liberates him from scholastic, religious, and cultural authority: “What did he come here for to teach us his own language or to learn it from us? Damn him one way or another!” Stephen is transformed, free to sally forth, “to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.”<sup>45</sup>

Beckett described Joyce’s work as a “heroic achievement” but said, “I realized that I couldn’t go down that same road.”<sup>46</sup> In his essay, “Recent Irish Poetry” (1934), Beckett criticized writers’ failure to respond to the “thing that happened.” Other Modernists, like MacGreevy, wrote in response to identifiable cataclysmic events, but Beckett leaves the actual historical “thing” unspecified and instead describes it as “the breakdown of the object, whether historical, mythical, or spook.” He makes it clear that this problem is not “peculiar to Ireland or anywhere else,” but it is particularly evident in the work of writers who continued to prop up Irish Revivalism. He specifically indicted Austin Clarke, whom he sarcastically praised for his consummate command of “The fully licensed stock-in-trade from Aisling to Red Branch Bundling.”<sup>47</sup> Clarke is also satirized in Beckett’s novel *Murphy* (1935) in the thinly veiled guise of Austin Ticklepenny, whose poetry is lampooned:

as free as a canary in the fifth foot (a cruel sacrifice for Ticklepenny hiccupped in end rimes) and at the caesura as hard and fast as his own divine flatus and otherwise bulging with as many minor beauties from the gaelic prosodoturfy as could be sucked out of a mug of Beamish’s porter.<sup>48</sup>

*Murphy* is a goodbye to the Revival and all that; at the end, Murphy hopes that his ashes will be flushed down the toilet of the Abbey Theatre.

Whereas Joyce’s experiments soared to greater and greater linguistic feats in the attempt to know and to communicate as much as possible, Beckett was concerned with the impossibilities of knowing and communicating. As early as his 1931 essay *Proust*, he articulated the linguistic problem:

There is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication. Even on the rare occasions when word and gesture happened to be valid ex-

pressions of personality, they lose their significance on the passage through the cataract of the personality that is opposed to them. . . . The only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent.<sup>49</sup>

This is the trajectory of the trilogy, *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953), in which the unstable self that is the subject of Modernist writing dissolves entirely. The dissolution of the “I,” Beckett’s interest in the philosophy of language, and his move toward nonverbal expression in the theater lend his work to post-Modernist and post-structuralist modes of academic enquiry. However, Beckett’s earlier work—such as his poem *Whoroscope* (written in response to a competition sponsored by Nancy Cunard), and his novel *Murphy*—is clearly Modernist in subject, in style, and in the contexts out of which it arose.

Beckett redefined twentieth-century theater with *Waiting for Godot* (1953), but there was also important—and often critically overlooked—experimental theater happening in Ireland in the 1920s. Although the founders of the Abbey Theatre had imagined bringing the best of European drama to the Dublin stage, the theater was limited in its repertoire because of financial pressures and its status as the national theater, with its burden of formulaic and remarkably popular peasant plays. In 1918, with financial support from the poet and novelist James Stephens and the literary historian Ernest Boyd, W. B. Yeats and Lennox Robinson organized the Dublin Drama League, which—unsubsidized and unambiguously avant-garde—would have far greater artistic freedom than the Abbey. Several actors from the Abbey company were involved, including Arthur Shields, whom Yeats and Robinson encouraged to explore expressionist techniques. Yeats also used the League to stage some of his own work; the dance plays *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *The Cat and the Moon* were performed as a double bill in 1924. The young Modernist painter Norah McGuinness designed the costumes and masks for that production, and she danced the role of Fand in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*.<sup>50</sup> Working with McGuinness, who was good but was nonetheless an amateur, prompted Yeats to pursue a collaboration with Ninette de Valois, a professional with whom he established the Abbey School of Ballet at the new Peacock Theatre, which was designated as a permanent space for the Abbey’s more experimental productions.

The Dublin Drama League, not restricted to Irish drama, staged avant-garde work by Ernst Toller and Eugene O’Neill, and there is evidence that Sean O’Casey attended those productions.<sup>51</sup> The influence of Modernist expressionist drama on O’Casey’s theater is clear in his play *The Silver Tassie* (1928). The play opens in the central room of an urban family home, a setting that would be familiar to audiences of his Dublin Trilogy: *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). The content of the first act would be equally familiar, as O’Casey mocks the religious and political pieties that compel a family to send their son to fight in the First World War. A change in style is evident near the end of the first act, when O’Casey’s stage directions instruct the

characters Simon, Sylvester, and Susie to speak together “You must go back,” and the Voices of the Crowd Outside to echo “They must go back!”<sup>52</sup> This signals the play’s departure from a naturalistic mode, which is wholly broken in the second act. Set “in the war zone,” this scene is described as a “jagged and lacerated ruin of what was once a monastery. At back a lost wall and window are indicated by an arched piece of broken coping pointing from the left to the right, and a similar piece of masonry pointing from the right to the left.”<sup>53</sup> This formation gives the impression of a broken proscenium, behind which are the trenches. The characters are therefore pushed out into the no-man’s-land between the proscenium arch and the audience. On one side of the stage hangs a broken crucifix, damaged by an exploded shell, and “almost opposite” is a gun-wheel to which the character Barney has been tied in punishment. In the center, “where the span of the arch should be,” is the “shape of a big howitzer gun.” O’Casey’s use of the word “shape” is another marker of anti-naturalistic theater—a far cry from the spinning wheel and pampooties that Synge sourced from the Aran Islands for the Abbey’s production of *Riders to the Sea* (1904). O’Casey’s setting, his use of chanting and song, the stylized movements described in the stage directions of the second act, and his symbolic use of color throughout the play situate the *Tassie* in the expressionistic Modernist theatre. Ironically, O’Casey’s innovations in the *Tassie* were prompted by Yeats and Robinson’s Dublin Drama League, but Yeats rejected the play for the Abbey, because he failed to understand O’Casey’s technique.<sup>54</sup>

The Dublin Drama League was also important to the work of Denis Johnston, who made Irish theater history when his play *Shadowdance* was rejected by the Abbey Theatre, prompting him to give it the new, acerbic title *The Old Lady Says No!* Johnston uses similar techniques to O’Casey’s *Tassie*: vignettes, verse, and dance; however, Johnston denied that he had written an expressionist play and preferred the term “experimental,” probably an attempt at preventing the establishment of rigid generic categories that would inhibit innovation. In *Shadowdance/ The Old Lady Says No!* Johnston stages a pastiche of Irish heroes in a heavy-handed critique of the Revival. At the beginning of the play, an actor (the Speaker) who is playing the role of Robert Emmet on the night of Emmet’s arrest receives a blow to the head and wakes up believing that he *is* Emmet. The Speaker/Emmet is taken on a tour of 1920s Dublin, where he meets Cathleen ni Houlihan (now hawking flowers on the street), historical figures, and abstract shadows who have come “to dance at a wake.” Johnston’s attack offended Yeats, mostly because Yeats believed that the eighteenth century represented the height of Anglo-Irish power and was a model for the modern nation. On reading the script, Yeats commented, “rubbish. ‘cynicism’ was a worn out commonplace thirty years ago.”<sup>55</sup> Rejected by the Abbey, *The Old Lady Says No!* (1932) was staged instead by the newly formed Gate Theatre, a permanent company that was inspired by the Dublin Drama League to dedicate itself to producing experimental drama. The Dublin Drama League, the Peacock Theatre, and the Gate Theatre offer counter-histories to a narrative of



Irish drama that focuses on the Abbey, and taken together they provide a dynamic picture of Irish Modernist theater that is in dialogue with the Continental avant-garde and the experimental theaters of the United States.<sup>56</sup>

Another burgeoning area of research in Irish Modernism is Irish-language literature. The popularity of Flann O'Brien's novels in English, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and *The Third Policeman* (published posthumously in 1967), means that he is one of the few Irish-language Modernists to receive widespread critical attention. His novel *An Béal Bocht* (1941), published in English as *The Poor Mouth* (1961), satirizes Irish autobiographies of poverty and hardship, exemplified in the work of Tomás Ó Criomhtháin, Peig Sayers, and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, which helped to create a post-Revival mythology of an authentic anti-modern national identity. Other important Irish-language Modernists, including Máirtín Ó Cadhain, Breandán Ó Doibhlin, and Eoighan Ó Tuairisc, are only beginning to be considered alongside Anglophone Irish Modernists.<sup>57</sup> As in Anglophone Irish writing, the tensions between avant-garde internationalism and local contexts are still being negotiated. In his recent essay, Louis de Paor argues that the similarities between Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* (1949) and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) that have been noted must also take into account the way that Ó Cadhain "owes as much to the verbal jousting that is a characteristic feature of Gaeltacht culture as it does to avant-garde experimentalism."<sup>58</sup>

The study of Irish Modernism has much to contribute to an understanding of the forms and networks of transnational Modernism, but the terms of inclusion must be carefully scrutinized. As Pamela Caughie cautions in her introduction to *Disciplining Modernisms*, modernity as a philosophical concept is generally dated from the seventeenth century; modernity for historians generally commences in the nineteenth century, and for literary scholars, Modernism is separate from modernity and denotes an experimental style that reacts against conventional forms.<sup>59</sup> If these terms are not carefully defined, then Modernism becomes a useless aesthetic category and is synonymous with the modern. The writers surveyed here responded to a perceived crisis in culture through literature that exhibits the stylistic qualities of instability, contingency, and fracture. This survey is by no means exhaustive, yet by adhering strictly to this stylistic criterion, several important points are illustrated. First, not all Irish literature written after the Revival was Modernist. This is not to disparage Irish writing but instead is a comment on the variety and richness of the literature of the period. Sean O'Faolain could simultaneously publish realist novels and edit the little magazine *The Bell*, in which radically avant-garde work by the poet Freda Laughton, the novelists Elizabeth Bowen and Flann O'Brien, and painter and playwright Jack B. Yeats appeared. While Denis Johnston was being staged at the Gate Theatre, Modernist dance drama was performed in the Peacock, and realist plays set in rural Ireland were on the Abbey's main stage. Just as Irish literary histories have focused on describing a national literature that took realism and naturalism as its dominant

modes, Ireland's history must not be rewritten to define Lady Gregory's plays or the novels of Katherine Cecil Thurston as Modernist, if the integrity and usefulness of Modernism as an aesthetic category is to be preserved.<sup>60</sup> This survey also illustrates the stylistic affinities among writers who held radically different political views. The imposition of such categories as Anglo-Irish Modernism, or the assertion that the Anglo-Irish monopolized Ireland's Modernism, elides these similarities and inhibits the inclusion of Irish Modernism in a transnational literary movement.<sup>61</sup> From the Irish Revival through the early years of the new state, Ireland underwent wars, class conflict, partition, and modernization, and it was these historical changes that provoked the sense of crisis and fracture to which Irish Modernism gives voice.

#### FURTHER READING

The most comprehensive survey to date is *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, edited by Joe Cleary. Essays by Rónán McDonald on "The Irish Revival and Modernism" and Ben Levitas on "Modernist Experiments in Irish Theatre" are particularly useful. *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism* (Cambridge, 2011) is important for context. For post-colonial approaches, see Mark Quigley, *Postcolonial Irish Writing and the Politics of Modern Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012) and Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010). For a post-imperial approach, see Terence Brown's "Ireland, Modernism and the 1930s" in *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Essays by Adrian Frazier, Terence Brown, and Vera Kreilkamp in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) discuss Modernist themes in Irish fiction. For a study of Irish Modernists during the Second World War, including MacNeice and Bowen, see Clair Wills *That Neutral Island* (London: Faber, 2007). For a full bibliography of Irish Modernism and particular Irish Modernist writers, see my entry, "Irish Modernism" for *Oxford Bibliographies Online*.

#### NOTES

1. Joe Cleary (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
2. Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane (eds.), *Modernism: a Guide to European Literature 1890–1930* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 26.
3. Eric Bulson, "Little Magazines, World Form," in Mark Wollaeger (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 267–287, 269.
4. Lady Augusta Persse Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), p. 10.

5. For Irish Modernism arising out of “uneven” development, see Joe Cleary, “Toward a Materialist-Formalist History of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature,” *Boundary 2*: 31 (2004), pp. 207–241.
6. Liam O’Flaherty, *The Black Soul* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1981 [1924]), pp. 46–47.
7. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Hogarth, 1929 [1925]), pp. 34–36.
8. O’Flaherty, *Black Soul*, p. 136.
9. O’Flaherty, *Black Soul*, p. 87.
10. O’Flaherty, *Black Soul*, pp. 220–228.
11. For primitivism, see Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004).
12. Liam O’Flaherty, *I Went to Russia* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931).
13. O’Flaherty, *Black Soul*, p. 52.
14. O’Flaherty, *Black Soul*, p. 190.
15. O’Flaherty, *Black Soul*, p. 191.
16. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Vintage, 1998 [1929]), p. 91.
17. Bowen, *Last September*, p. 92.
18. Bowen, *Last September*, p. 62.
19. Bowen, *Last September*, p. 34.
20. Elizabeth Bowen, *The House in Paris* (London: Vintage, 1998 [1935]), p. 76.
21. Bowen, *House in Paris*, pp. 72, 75.
22. Bowen, *House in Paris*, p. 81.
23. Bowen, *House in Paris*, p. 75.
24. Bowen, *House in Paris*, p. 75.
25. Bowen, *House in Paris*, p. 76.
26. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London: Vintage, 1998 [1948]), p. 82.
27. Bowen, *Heat of the Day*, p. 50.
28. Bowen, *Heat of the Day*, p. 50.
29. Bowen, *Heat of the Day*, p. 217.
30. Bowen, *Heat of the Day*, p. 217.
31. Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 165.
32. Elizabeth Bowen, “Notes on Writing a Novel,” in Hermione Lee (ed.), *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Virago, 1999), pp. 35–48.
33. Bowen, *Heat of the Day*, p. 229.
34. Bowen, *Last September*, p. 206.
35. All lines from Yeats’s poetry are quoted as they appear in W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, edited by Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1992).
36. Tom Walker, “MacNeice’s Byzantium: the Ghosts of Yeats and Eliot in *The Burning Perch*,” *Review of English Studies* 62: 257 (November 2011), pp. 785–804, 788–789.
37. Walker, “MacNeice’s Byzantium”; and Peter MacDonald, “Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility,” in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 59–75, 60.
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40. *Ibid.*
41. Susan Schreibman, *Collected Poems of Thomas MacGreevy: An Annotated Edition* (Dublin: Anna Livia, 1991), p. xx.
42. Tim Armstrong, “Muting the Klaxon: Poetry, History and Irish Modernism,” in Alex Davis and Patricia Coughlan (eds.), *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp. 43–74, 52.
43. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1985 [1916]), p. 203.
44. Joyce, *Portrait*, pp. 188–189.

45. Joyce, *Portrait*, pp. 251, 253.
46. James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 105.
47. Samuel Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry," in Ruby Cohn (ed.), *Disjecta: Miscellaenous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: Calder, 1983), pp. 70–76, 72–73.
48. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Pan Books, 1973 [1935]), p. 53.
49. Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: Calder, 1987 [1931]), pp. 64–65.
50. Richard Allen Cave, *Collaborations: Ninette de Valois and William Butler Yeats* (Alton: Dance Books, 2011), pp. 4–5. Louis Le Brocquy also designed scenery for the League's early productions.
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52. Sean O'Casey, *The Silver Tassie: A Tragicomedy in Four Acts* (London: Macmillan, 1928), p. 37.
53. O'Casey, *Silver Tassie*, p. 41.
54. Carol Kleiman, *Sean O'Casey's Bridge of Vision* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1982), pp. 8–14.
55. TS (copy of original in library of University of Victoria, BC, Canada), *Shadowdance*, Ur. B, second script (as finally rejected), annotations by Yeats, TCD MS 10066/2/4.
56. Elaine Sisson, "'A Note on What Happened': Experimental Influences on the Irish Stage: 1919–1929," *Kritika Kultura* 15 (2010), pp. 132–148.
57. Mark Quigley, *Empire's Wake: Postcolonial Irish Writing and Modern Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) and Louis de Paor, "Irish Language Modernisms," in Cleary (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, pp. 161–173.
58. De Paor, "Irish Language Modernisms," p. 168.
59. Pamela L. Caughie (ed.), *Disciplining Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).
60. For this interpretation, see Anne Forgarty, "Women and Modernism," in Cleary (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, pp. 147–160; similarly, Cleary's construction "women's Modernism" must be interrogated.
61. For the argument that the Anglo-Irish "monopolized" Irish Modernism, see Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 299–300.