

Report

Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities

Vienna Centre for Irish Studies, 29 September–1 October 2016

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Much like the formidable *Kaiserschmarrn* (Emperor's Mess) – a shredded pancake liberally heaped with icing sugar and plum compote, and the staple diet of more than one delegate by the conference's end – *Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities* offered an embarrassment of riches destined to linger long on the palate. Hosted by the Vienna Centre for Irish Studies and the University of Vienna's Department of English and American Studies, and generously supported by the Irish Embassy in Vienna, the conference venue was at once agreeable and fitting. A cosmopolitan hub of modernist thought, amid whose cafés Freud, Jung, Adler, Wittgenstein, Trotsky, Schiele, Klimt, and Zweig rubbed shoulders and exchanged ideas, Vienna provided the ideal setting for an event intended to triangulate the cultural, geographical, and theoretical coordinates of a famously 'exilic' branch of 20th-century culture.

Taking as its impetus the publication of the *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (2014), and the increasingly canonical status such a volume reflects, the conference sought both to consolidate and interrogate the historicising and Hibernicising turn which has taken place in Irish and modernist studies over the last two decades. Where once Ireland and modernism were taken to constitute mutually exclusive terms, the work of scholars such as Declan Kiberd, Marjorie Howes, and Andrew Gibson has destabilised the centre/periphery model of Anglo-European culture in the first decades of the 20th century to emphasise 'not only the importance of modernism to Ireland, but also of Ireland to modernism'.¹ While the impact of this work has been both salutary and far-reaching, the conference was intended to acknowledge, in the words of co-organiser Paul Fagan (*Salzburg University/University of Vienna*), that the time has come to cease incessantly heralding the arrival of a new field and to begin instead a conversation that probes that field's boundaries, coordinates, and key texts for blind-spots and untapped possibilities. The conversation these remarks inaugurated was as wide-ranging and invigorating as anyone present could have hoped.

Given the conference's stated aims, questions of canon-formation – and the gendered and sexual make-up of that canon – were a frequent topic of discussion. In the conference's first keynote, Patricia Coughlan (*University College Cork*) addressed these issues head-on, arguing forcefully and unapologetically for Elizabeth Bowen's status as a full-blooded, canonical modernist. In Coughlan's opinion, even had Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett never put pen to paper, Ireland would have still borne witness to a remarkable flourishing of modernism and spawned a body of writing at the centre of which Bowen's work would sit. Coughlan's keynote offered a rousing invitation to cease presenting Bowen as a writer permanently 'caught in the process of acceptance into the canon of Irish modernism,' and instead to engage with the nuance, insight, and diversity of her work. Conference co-organiser John Greaney (*University College Dublin*) ably responded to Coughlan's challenge in a paper which examined Bowen's efforts to generate a prose style sufficient to the traumatic history of post-Independence Ireland. Lucy Collins (*University College Dublin*), in a rich and wide-ranging keynote, bore out Coughlan's argument for the quality of a Joyce-less canon of Irish modernism by providing an overview of a generation of female Irish poets who have been largely omitted from the traditional historiography of the revival and modernism. Through a discussion of the work of Blanaid Salkeld, Rhoda Coghill, and Sheila Wingfield, Collins put pressure on the notion of the 'marginalised' woman poet and asked how best to integrate such figures into the canon of Irish modernism. Collins suggested that simply to insert them into the extant chronology of 20th-century Irish writing would leave unaddressed the question of how and why they had been sidelined to begin with, and that a fuller account was required of the processes by which these poets were overlooked in the formation of the canon of Irish modernism. Quite aside from the valuable insights Collins's commentary provided on the issues of gender and chronology that bedevil discussions of canonicity, her keynote was revelatory simply in presenting its audience with a body of often startlingly beautiful verse, which I for one had never encountered.

A recurrent and revelatory strand of the conference consisted of papers which highlighted the diversity of genres with which Irish modernists experimented. Eye-opening in this regard was a paper on the cartoons of Jack B. Yeats by Michael Connerty (*Central St Martins, UAL*), in which Irish modernism's contribution to the world of superheroes and comic books became clear. A veritable turn-of-the-century Stan Lee, Yeats contributed a diverse and amusing array of characters to publications such as Alfred Harmsworth's *Comic Cuts*, including Dickie the Birdman, a cigar-smoking caped-crusader influenced by Yeats's fascination with circus performers, the fantastically surreal Who-Did-It, a constantly malfunctioning pseudo-automaton, and Chubb Lock Homes, a bumbling investigator never to be found far from his loyal

sidekick, Shirk, the Dog Detective. Connerty's paper argued that this virtually undocumented side of Yeats's output renders possible a renewed consideration of his engagement with and response to British imperialism, with figures such as the 'educated,' 'civilised,' but easily angered monkey, Lickety Switch, resonating strikingly with Hibernophobic caricatures such as John Tenniel's 'The Irish Frankenstein.' Another delightful oddity was a paper by Michael McAteer (*Pázmány University, Budapest*) on Standish James O'Grady's *The Queen of the World, or Under the Tyranny* (1899), a surreal tale in which a young Irishman named de Lacy is transported to 22nd-century Argentina, where he learns that the Chinese have conquered the world with the aid of flying-machines and disintegrating rays. Joining forces with a revolutionary movement, led from an Underground Keep in Antarctica by the exiled English monarch King Arthur, de Lacy helps to defeat the Chinese and establish a Pax Aeronautica before being returned to the present to write his story. McAteer's refreshingly direct response to O'Grady's text—'What in the name of God are we to do with this?'—raises genuine questions about how well-equipped the established historiography of the revival and modernism in Ireland is to accommodate or respond meaningfully to works whose occult and mythic elements are fused with an interest in contemporary science. This pointedly (if, often, hilariously) 'modern' piece of speculative science fiction by one of Ireland's most famous antiquarians, puts productive pressure on the always unstable boundary between modernism and the revival.

Similar pressure was exerted by Ronan Crowley (*University of Passau*) in his paper on the revival *roman à clef*, which, in his own pithy summary, set out to prove that such a distinction never existed. Crowley's paper traced a genealogy of texts in which the revival is itself 'exploited' as subject matter, establishing a striking continuity between monuments of Irish modernism such as *Ulysses* (1922), canonical outliers such as George Moore's *Hail and Farewell* (1911), and overlooked works such as Ernie O'Malley's *On Another Man's Wound* (1936), to disrupt any neat either-or distinction between revivalists and modernists. Crowley's paper must also be commended for bequeathing to Irish cultural criticism two astonishing new genres: the 'Culchie *Künstlerroman*' and 'Hiberno-Blaxploitation'. We eagerly await his forthcoming production of *Playboy of the Upper West Side*, starring Samuel L. Jackson as Crystal Mahony. Honourable mention in this regard must also go to James Alexander Fraser (*University of Exeter*) for his coinage, the 'exegetical Goldilocks zone' – terrain firmly occupied by his enlightening paper on Joyce's strategies of 'heroic retreat' and his recently published monograph, *Joyce and Betrayal* (2016).

While understandably weighted towards discussions of literary texts, a number of papers engaged with the formal range of Irish modernism. Fionna Barber (*Manchester School of Art*) opened her account of Surrealism in Ireland with an atlas

published in a 1929 special issue of the Belgian journal *Variétés* in which a surreally inflated 'Irlande' dwarfs an ironically minute 'Grande Bretagne.' As this map suggests, and Barber's paper demonstrated, Irish culture was held in particularly high esteem by European Surrealists, with André Breton producing a taxonomy of recommended reading in 1930 in which Swift, Berkeley, and Synge figure prominently. Having established these cultural cross-currents, Barber then traced their impact in the work of Leonora Carrington, a Mexican surrealist born to an English father and Irish mother, who regularly drew upon Celtic sources in works such as *Sidhe, The White People of Tutha d' Danaan* (1954). As in the case of Collins's keynote, these paintings offered a striking opportunity to see Irish modernism anew, through images in which a recognisably Irish setting is rendered in a disorienting modern manner. Meanwhile, Michelle Witen (*University of Basel*) addressed what she perceived to be a significant gap in the *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*: the influence of musical forms on Irish authors. Focusing on the 'Sirens' episode of *Ulysses*, Witen surveyed the rich 19th-century history that informed Joyce's choice of the *fuga per canonem* as the only way of 'describ[ing] the seductions of music beyond which *Ulysses* travels,' and the broader fugal structure of the novel.²

Several papers productively engaged with the institutional frameworks which supported and facilitated the emergence of modernism in Ireland. In his paper on the Gate Theatre, Des Lally (*NUI, Galway*) offered a revelatory account of the aesthetics, dramaturgy, and programme of a venue singularly alive to the currents of European modernism, one too often eclipsed in accounts of the cultural life of early-20th-century Dublin by the more famous Abbey Theatre. Lally sensitively explored the ways in which the theatre's co-founder, Micheál MacLiammóir, experienced a creative and sexual awakening on seeing Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky perform, and the influence this was to exert on his aesthetic practice and the Gate 'brand.' In Lally's reading, the Gate emerges as both a sanctuary and an incubator for a queer culture in Dublin which has largely been overlooked in Irish historiography and criticism. Deftly combining production history, ephemera, and personal testimony, Lally's paper perfectly reflected the conference's broader commitment to queering the canon of Irish modernism and challenging the assumptions that have governed its formation. Other papers addressed the criticism which served to codify and consolidate this canon, lending substantial academic credence and cultural cachet to the work of Irish modernists. Joseph Brooker (*Birkbeck College, University of London*) presented a fittingly intensive close reading of the Joycean criticism of Hugh Kenner and Fritz Senn, highlighting the ways in which Joyce's aesthetic permeated the prose style of both authors.

Of particular interest to those in the present parish were the papers of Paul Fagan, Barbara Szot (*Palacký University*), and Tamara Radak (*University of Vienna*), which addressed the protean character of Brian O'Nolan's work through a variety of lenses. Fagan's paper wittily and economically traced the rich tradition of the 'hoax' in Irish writing, from the notorious 'Prout Papers' to Beckett's 1930 paper on 'Concentrism' and the conclusion of *Molloy* (1951). In a paper subtitled 'B.S.: I Love You,' Fagan noted the ways in which O'Nolan, particularly in his journalism, regularly deployed the common hoax trope of falsely advertising the death of a foe to ensure that they live in infamy in one's work. A particularly amusing and absurd example in this regard was O'Nolan's claim that the poet Patrick Kavanagh was not only dead, but that his purported existence had been, in fact, a hoax to begin with. As Fagan's paper ably demonstrated, O'Nolan's work offers an invaluable test case for the importance of the hoax to Irish writing and to modernism more broadly. Szot's paper mapped the importance of spatiality for the poetics of O'Nolan's work, calling on diverse examples from the strange spatial organisation of the Red Swan Hotel (in which, we are informed, 'There is a cowboy in Room 13 and Mr McCool, a hero of legendary Ireland, is on the floor above. The cellar is full of leprechauns'³) to the fantastic view from Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa's house of the three Gaeltacht regions and the Cat Mara. Tracing the subtle distinctions between these fantastic spaces, Szot detailed how spatiality functions in O'Nolan's writing: simultaneously as an intertextual, metafictional, metaphorical, and focalising literary device. Radak touched upon some of these themes in her exploration of gaps and '(incom)possibilities' in *The Third Policeman* and stressed the novel's consistent resistance to closure, even down to its (inconclusive) concluding punctuation: a question mark. For Radak, the experience of reading *The Third Policeman* is, in a very real sense, interminable. *The Third Policeman* thus occupies what Todorov identified in his account of the 'fantastic' as the moment of 'hesitation' between belief and disbelief (and, generically, the 'uncanny' and the 'marvelous'), requiring of its audience non-linear reading strategies comparable to those needed for hypertext.⁴

Given the emphasis the conference title laid on 'gaps,' and its mission of providing a snapshot of contemporary work in Irish studies, it is worth briefly noting the sorts of scholarship the immensely varied conference did not showcase. Conspicuous by his absence was W. B. Yeats, who featured as a historical personage in a handful of papers, but whose work went virtually undiscussed for the conference's duration. One is prompted to wonder to what extent Roy Foster's intimidatingly comprehensive biographies have rendered redundant, or have discouraged scholars from attempting, the sort of archival work on Yeats that has been seen in the fields of Joyce and Beckett studies. The existence or non-existence of a 'middle-brow' Irish

modernism also went largely undiscussed or surfaced only in the question and answers sessions which followed papers, with Patricia Coughlan noting over lunch the curious fusion in Kate O'Brien's work of unequivocally modernist subject matter and an often clunkily conventional style. Aside from Tobias Harris's paper on Irish literary periodicals in the 1920s, little attention was paid to the material conditions under which Irish modernist texts were produced and circulated. While extensive work has been undertaken, largely from a genetic standpoint, to reconstruct the textual evolution of the works of Joyce and Beckett, there appears to remain much to be gained in approaching Irish modernism from the perspective of book history. To betray briefly my own methodological biases, I believe that another under-represented area of research, both at the conference and in Irish studies at large, is the relationship between Irish modernism and medical science. Ultimately, even the notion of 'gaps' in the Irish modernist canon was itself scrutinised when Joseph Brooker, in a lively concluding roundtable, asked whether that canon had not in fact become too saturated and diffuse, and whether the term 'Irish modernism' risked losing any critical value through its seemingly endless extension.

No account of the conference would be complete without an acknowledgement of the vibrant role social media played in cataloguing its achievements and extending the conversations it began. Seldom has an academic event been so well served on Twitter, with #IrishMods2016 not only providing an exhaustive and incisive precis of every paper given, but also taking on a surreal life of its own in parallel to the conference proper. The most enduring and fittingly Mylesian creation to spring from this maelstrom of meme-making was #Thwartchron, a time-bending robot whose antagonistic relationship to linear temporality has allowed him to live on long after the proceedings. Another source of amusement (and heated debate) was a competition to assess the aesthetic merits of each presentation. A masterclass in this regard was Ronan Crowley's PowerPoint, which featured not only impeccable font work, but also a game-changing slide of scrolling text. As one of the more prolific live-tweeters at the conference, I must acknowledge a degree of self-interest in making the following assertion, but the depth of engagement and the quality of commentary on the Twitter feed in Vienna underscored social media as valuable adjuncts to the traditional conference format. Paul Fagan, Tamara Radak, Michelle Witen, James Fraser, and Daniel Curran are to be commended for providing a frankly heroic level of coverage, extending the reach of the conference to scholars across the globe (and to a range of increasingly esoteric Twitter-bots). While handing out plaudits, I must also applaud Paul Fagan for the conference's innovative structure, which combined 10 a.m. starts with two-hour lunches, in what all present hope will be a format adopted throughout the academy.

The conference opened and concluded with tributes to the Centre's founder, Professor Werner Huber, who passed away unexpectedly in 2016. A tireless advocate of Irish studies, and a prolific commentator on and supporter of Irish culture, Huber's work consistently attended to overlooked and 'peripheral' figures within Irish modernism. I can think of no more suitable testament to his legacy than the vibrant, challenging, and stimulating conference to which the centre he founded played host, and can only hope that it is the first of many such events.

Notes & references

¹ Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe, 'Introduction: Ireland and Modernism,' in *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics*, eds. Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 1.

² *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. 1, ed. Stuart Gilbert (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 129.

³ Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 31.

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25. For Todorov the 'fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event' (*ibid.*).