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**Review of *Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities*, edited by Paul Fagan, John Greaney and Tamara Radak. London: Bloomsbury, 2021. 280 pp. Hardback, £85.00**

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*Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities* is a thought-provoking and field-expanding intervention in Irish modernist studies and one which will prove hugely profitable to students and scholars alike. The collection's inclusion of a variety of theoretical conceptions of the body and other media like comics offers perspectives that expand the field of Irish modernism.

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The New Modernist embrace of questions surrounding the definition, locality, time span, modes of writing, and writers that are included in the term 'modernist' has opened the field, expanding modernist studies vertically to include overlooked forms such as popular, travel, ethnic and other forms, as well as spatially, to include in writers from other nations, along with fields such as technology and economics.<sup>1</sup> The new collection, *Irish Modernisms*, takes up the questions raised by these shifting coordinates and uses them to reconsider the parameters of Irish studies, which as the editors state in the brief introduction, have been determined by historicist and postcolonial approaches and focused on a narrow canon of mostly male authors. This a welcome intervention in Irish modernist studies and one that will undoubtedly inspire further scholarship and debate.

The introduction to *Irish Modernisms* brings these questions of modernist definition to the fore and applies them to a specifically Irish context: What is/was Irish modernism? Where was Irish modernism? Whose modernism was it? These queries seem to be meant more as points for interrogation than questions requiring answers, allowing the chapters to speak for themselves while contributing towards the larger goal of 'establishing new possibilities of inquiry' (5) and rethinking and expanding Irish modernism 'by testing its responsiveness to contemporary theory beyond postcolonial and Irish studies approaches' (5). *Irish Modernisms* thus provides an intriguing line of critical inquiry (though one that is not entirely divorced from Irish studies or postcolonial theory), and its presentation of overlooked modernist writers such as Hannah Berman, Ethel Colburn Mayne, Mary Devenport O'Neill, and Jane Barlow, among others, opens the field to new avenues for research.

The volume is divided into three thematically related sections: Part One, 'Contested Canons: Testing the limits of Irish modernism'; Part Two, 'Corporeal texts, discursive bodies: Biopolitical Irish modernisms'; and Part Three, 'Minor/major modes: Intermedial Irish modernisms.' This organizational pattern creates a through line that connects the chapters, and each section is prefaced with a short interjection by the editors, explaining the rationale behind this structure. Thus, the introduction to the section 'Corporeal Texts, Discursive Bodies', for instance, explains that the 'test cases' of writers like Emily Lawless, Forrest Reid, and Pamela Plunkett 'provide gaps for interrogation' and 'allow contributors to reframe anew the representation of the body in more canonical texts by Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge, Joyce, Bowen,

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<sup>1</sup> See Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, 'The New Modernist Studies,' *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 737-48. In this foundational article Mao and Walkowitz describe the expansion of modernist studies temporally to include a wider time period; spatially to include texts from other non-European parts of the world; and vertically to include texts formally seen as non-canonical and which blur the boundaries between high and low art.

MacGreevy and Beckett' (82). While this is a laudable intention, more could be done in the introduction to explain how these less canonical figures can be used to expand or reevaluate Irish modernism rather than using them to reframe canonical texts. Additionally, the organizing principle of putting the chapters on the less canonical figures at the beginning of the collection risks cordoning these off, dealing with them separately rather than integrating them into a more inclusive narrative of Irish modernism. Writers such as Emily Lawless and Forrest Reid who are described as 'test cases' are not discussed at length in any chapters and are only briefly mentioned in a list of non-heterosexual writers. One of the strengths of *Irish Modernisms* is the way it puts canonical authors in dialogue with less critically studied figures, but it is perhaps worth noting that the dominance of the literary trinity of Beckett, Joyce and Yeats, and other male writers like Synge remains, despite efforts to move away from or complicate this model, raising larger questions about what constitutes the canon of Irish writing. Nevertheless, the collection draws attention to these limits of Irish modernist study in ways that encourage readers to see these literary works anew.

Section One, 'Contested Canons,' features chapters that cover an array of critically underrepresented modernist writers. Beginning with recent scholarly debates, John Brannigan's chapter focuses on the work of Hannah Berman, 'as a distinctive exemplar of intersecting modernisms, as an Irish Jewish writer whose major publications coincided with the rise to prominence of Joyce and Irish modernism, but whose significance lies in her interventions of a Yiddish folk tradition in English' (16). Expanding the purview of Irish modernism even further, Elke D'hoker's excellent chapter reintroduces readers to Ethel Colburn Mayne, a forgotten Irish modernist who, D'hoker argues, deserves the epithet of New Woman writer for her role as co-editor and contributor to *The Yellow Book* and who should be studied as a modernist because of commitment to artistic experimentation and feminist concerns with behavior and the body. Lucy Collins builds on the project of reclaiming Irish woman modernists in her exceptional chapter on melancholy modernism and the loss of the female poet, in which she discusses four women poets writing between 1930 and 1950: Mary Devenport O'Neill, Sheila Wingfield, Freda Laughton and Rhona Coghill. Collins argues that these poets extend our 'understanding of the individual human subject in important ways' and she identifies melancholia as the dominant strand in the work of these poets, linking the emotional life of the individual to larger social forces. Maureen O'Connor's richly suggestive chapter on death and the nonhuman in Elizabeth Bowen's fiction focuses on the dissolution of bodily boundaries and 'textual moments that reveal the body as object and as abject' (58). In its focus on the experience of the human and nonhuman this chapter is better suited to Part Two, 'Corporeal texts, discursive bodies,' rather than

Part One, which is focused on testing the limits of the canon, especially considering that Bowen is by now a canonical figure of Irish modernism. Additionally, the introduction to Part Two refers to the 'material experience of the human and nonhuman body' (82), which is itself the subject of O'Connor's chapter. However, these organizational issues do little to detract from the overall rigor of the collection and are understandable given the space constraints and necessity of balancing the sections. Section One closes with Eoin Byrne's insightful chapter on Beckett and Ó Cadhain, which argues for a more multilingual approach to Irish modernism, one that provides an impetus for formal and linguistic experimentation.

The second part of the collection, 'Corporeal texts, discursive bodies: Biopolitical Irish modernisms' is the longest of the three parts, featuring six chapters that cover a range of approaches to the body from epidemiology, queer theory, the rhetoric of health, to the death penalty, prostitution, and blindness and the cinema. Despite the fascinating theoretical approaches offered by these chapters, they still rely on canonical figures and the focus is largely historicist, with events like the 1916 Rising and questions of nationalism and citizenship taking center stage. These historicist and canonical focuses raise questions about how these chapters 'push beyond the main figures of the field to overlooked authors and texts' (82) as the introduction claims. Nevertheless, these chapters are impressive in their interrogation of Irish modernism's tendency to overlook the embodied and material experiences of individuals and in their focus on the complex functions of biopower to provide new insight into the Irish experience of modernity. In his stimulating opening chapter, Barry Sheils approaches the study of skin through the frame of psychoanalysis, considering the ways that blushing functions as a literary sign, directing readers towards affective moments when 'the boundary between 'real' life and fiction becomes uncertain' (99). Seán Hewitt's chapter eloquently examines the Revival through a queer framework, positioning queerness as a key feature in the development of Irish literary modernism. Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston's examination of the rhetoric of health in Synge and Yeats exposes the ways that evolutionary theories of eugenics and degeneration have been combined for political ends, brilliantly illuminating the prominent role these early medical theories played in the foundational myths of the Revival and elucidating how the social history and medical science can 'facilitate a reconsideration of the relationship between Irish modernism and cultural nationalism' (117). Katherine Ebury's powerful chapter on sex, gender, and the death penalty in Joyce, Yeats, and the 1916 generation uses Derrida's late work on the death penalty to understand how postcolonial readings of the psychic and sexual effects of the 1916 Rising complicate understandings of Irish modernism. Ebury's extension of the period to include the long nineteenth century invites a

reconsideration of that ways that Irish modernists used the past to provoke action in their own cultural moment. Laura Lovejoy's equally fascinating chapter examines the prostitute as a figure associated with moral menace, but also with subversive potential, arguing that Liam O'Flaherty should be included in the constellation of Irish modernism because of the way he uses prostitutes in his fiction to critique the sexual politics of the Free State. In her ambitious final chapter, Cleo Hanaway-Oakley returns readers to familiar territory – the relationship between Joyce and Beckett – using biographical details of these authors' troubled vision and their allusions to blind Irish bards and Irish philosophy to argue for an expanded conception of Irish modernism that considers Irish storytelling traditions, modern global technologies and 'the often politicized, aestheticized and/or metaphorized fleshy bodies of individual authors' (153), pointing to the various ways that these literary portrayals use sensory stimuli to interrogate the relationship between the local and the global.

Perhaps the most cohesive section of the collection, 'Minor/major modes: intermedial Irish modernisms', interrogates multimodal aspects of modernist composition, expanding the Irish modernist study beyond the 'organizing canonical figures and critical dualisms of the field' (169). The ensuing chapters focus on letters, anti-science genre fiction, comic strips, visual art, and newspapers. Maebh Long's chapter on Irish modernist letters in particular offers scholars an alternative practice that uses weak theory to decenter the letter-writer and reconceptualizes letter writing as an exchange that is mediated through a network of post offices. Jack Fennell interrogates the relationship between English and Irish languages through their anti-scientific attitudes, suggesting that these anti-modern texts were more philosophically complex than previously assumed. Taking the critically under-discussed comic strips of Jack B. Yeats as his focus, Michael Connerty's compelling examination of the relationship between Yeats's comic publications and Victorian/Edwardian humor periodicals shifts the geographical and cultural coordinates of Irish modernism. Daniel Curran's interpretation of Thomas MacGreevy's poetic modernism situates MacGreevy as 'the premier Irish modernist poet of the Great War' (170) and considers the influence of the continental visual arts movement on his work. Finally, Catherine Flynn's examination of Brian O'Nolan's role as a newspaperman will be of special interest to readers of this journal and is notable for its consideration of the newspaper column as integral rather than detrimental to modernism. In its fruitful examination of multimodal modernist texts, this section opens the field to a variety of textual possibilities and points of connection.

*Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities* is a thought-provoking and field-expanding intervention in Irish modernist studies and one which will prove hugely

profitable to students and scholars alike. Certainly, the chapters on Hannah Berman, Ethel Colburn Mayne, Freda Laughton and Mary Devenport O'Neill will inspire further work on these figures. The collection's inclusion of a variety of theoretical conceptions of the body and other media like comics, offers perspectives that expand Irish modernist studies. Rather than being at odds with postcolonial studies or historicist approaches to literature *Irish Modernisms* would be best read as building on much of this work, and indeed should be seen as enriching a now dominant strand of Irish studies.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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