



The Parish Review  
Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies

John Greaney, 'Review of *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* (2019), edited by Kathryn Conrad, C oil n Parsons, and Julie McCormick Weng,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2022): 1-6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.9889>



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## **Review of *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* (2019), edited by Kathryn Conrad, C oil n Parsons, and Julie McCormick Weng**

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*Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* builds on the interdisciplinary turn of the new modernist studies to present coordinates and episodes through which we can perceive the interfaces between Irish modernism and scientific and technological discourses. By these lights, the chapters of this volume compellingly recast Irish modernism as a literary period bracketed by the invention of dynamite and a late modernist investment in astronomical ideas of spacetime. In doing so, *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* tackles some of the definitional cornerstones of Irish modernist discourse to offer new possibilities of narration and organisation for the field.

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*Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* explores the interfaces between Irish modernism and scientific initiatives and networks. With this focus, Kathryn Conrad's, C  il  n Parsons's and Julie McCormick Weng's collection finds in scientific culture and theory an alternative lens through which Irish modernism can be approached and narrated. In doing so, this book identifies a significant gap in Irish modernist studies, one which its contributors explore by drawing upon canonical and less established modernist writers, as well as scientific theorists, including: W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Elizabeth Bowen, and Flann O'Brien; Tom Greer, Emily Lawless, Lennox Robinson, Denis Johnston, and John Banville; as well as Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Ernst Haeckel, Marshall McLuhan, and Erwin Schr  dinger. Mining this critical, cultural, scientific, and technological terrain, the book's core argument is twofold: 1) it demonstrates how literary modernism and modernity serve as apposite lenses for understanding a host of the scientific and technological discourses from the late-nineteenth through the twentieth century; and 2) by establishing a new interface between modernist literature, science, and technology, it provides different coordinates and parameters for considering the relationship between literary modernism and its historical moment.

*Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* thus offers a welcome expansion beyond postcolonial-centred discourses of Irish modernism, though that is not to say that issues of colonialism and empire are elsewhere to its remit. Rather, the volume shows how science and technology in modern Ireland and its related aesthetic cultures are entangled with questions of Ireland's relationship to British imperialism. That is to say: while Irish scientific and technological developments were largely exported for the service of the British Empire, a circumstance which fed a resistance to science at home, science and technology also became a principle route through which postcolonial Ireland could modernise itself and participate in narratives of progress. In this sense, the book offers a new narrative for Irish modernism, while building constructively and critically on the narrative of its institutionalisation.

Foregrounding this connection to British imperialism, the editors' introduction cogently outlines the close and complex relationship between Irish modernism and scientific thought. While Yeats, the editors suggest, argued for an Irish art that veered away from the external world of material life, he remained interested in questions of scientific epistemology throughout his career, a thematic which Katherine Ebury treats in her chapter 'Science, the Occult, and Irish Drama: Ghosts in Yeats and Beckett.' Cuing Ebury, the editors argue that an overemphasised Yeatsian dismissal of material, technological, and scientific concerns has too often become the starting point for definitions of revivalism and Irish modernism. Building critically on Yeats's ambivalence to science, the editors seek to convey a more nuanced sense of the complicated entwinements of Irish modernism with advances in science and technology.

*Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* is divided into five sections: 'Revival Dynamics,' 'Machine Fever,' 'Sounds Modern,' 'Body Trouble,' and 'Strange Experiments.' Engaging such topics across a wide range of cultural and scientific figures, the book explores how Irish writers were imbricated in scientific and technological networks, how these networks impacted modernist attitudes and worldviews, and thus the dialectic of aesthetic and scientific relations. By dint of these lines of exploration, the chapters collected here pursue an account of Irish modernism which is bound up with, and which also looks beyond, colonial history as a deterministic cornerstone of definition for the field of Irish modernist studies.

This line of investigation is convincingly pursued by Julie McCormick Weng in her chapter 'John Eglinton: An Irish Futurist,' wherein Weng argues for Eglinton as a champion for a transgressive literary standard for the Revival. Weng delineates how Eglinton objected to the ways in which influential interventions by Æ (George Russell), W. B. Yeats, Standish O'Grady, and Thomas Davis, had rendered patriotic themes mandatory in Irish aesthetic practice, in turn forcing the Irish artist to 'pledge fealty to Ireland through art' (37). In response, Weng shows how Eglinton, through a futurist model, challenged the assumption that Irish writers were beholden to the production of a patriotic art in the service of Ireland. Eglinton emphasises technology, in response to Yeats, as an exemplary muse and a relevant material category for Irish artistic inspiration. Thus, in a manner similar to Italian Futurist founder, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Eglinton argues for the available creative potential already sounding from technology. Unlike Marinetti's marriage of futurism with fascism, however, Eglinton sought links between futurism and cosmopolitanism. Eglinton's Irish futurism, as Weng describes, sought to override Irish separation and division through an inclusive cosmopolitan aesthetic practice. Weng dubs Eglinton's futurist cosmopolitan agenda as 'cosmomaterialism - an outlook in which modern elements connect people, an outlook that positions technological materials as cosmopolitan ambassadors' (45). To this end, Weng suggests, literatures animated by or featuring machines may 'reinforce human kinship' and bind people 'together through material connections rather than ideological differences' (45). In a deft reading of 'The Dead,' Weng shows how Joyce was in tune with the anticipatory force of Eglinton's argument. Gabriel Conroy's experience of Dublin's ghostly gaslight, which contrasts with the electric lamplight of modernity and enables his empathic relation with his wife's, Gretta's, past, prompts his recognition of Ireland's heterogeneous identity. Joyce thus serves as Eglinton's ideal Irish futurist because he emphasises the pressing concerns of living in an age which is negotiating its ideological and material relationship to the past, present, and future.

While Eglinton and Joyce, amongst others, become proleptic of a modernism that is deeply entwined with scientific and technological discourse, later writers anchor the validity of this line of inquiry for thinking about Irish modernism. In 'The Uncertainty of Late Irish Modernism: Flann O'Brien and Erwin Schrödinger,' Andrew Kalaidjian shows how, from Joyce onwards, the new physics of relativity, probability, and quantum theory became prominent frames of cultural inquiry. Kalaidjian analyses the impact of fields of relativity and quantum physics on understandings of uncertainty in the twentieth century, and, particularly, the ways in which writers associated the uncertainties of private and public life with novel discoveries in cosmic and subatomic sciences. Drawing on a Joycean scepticism concerning the possibility of totalising methods, later modernists, both literary and scientific, contend with the indigence of their hermeneutic tools, particularly in terms of the mind's relation to time. To this end, literary and scientific discourses cross-contaminate one another: Flann O'Brien's characterisation, in *The Dalkey Archive*, of the modernist writer as a sort of mad scientist aligns literary experiment with the speculative efforts of theoretical physics; similarly, Schrödinger calls on the services of artistic traditions when faced with the blind spots of his own scientific discourses and investigations. Pertinently, this approach enables Kalaidjian to mount a critique of received accounts of Irish modernism. Kalaidjian argues that a late modernist investment in uncertainty – exemplified by O'Brien's and Schrödinger's respective pursuits – is deployed to counter the De Valera-inspired cultural homogenisation which Ireland underwent in its post-independence years. As Kalaidjian notes, the nation state metanarrative of Irish modernism offers a 'nice, linear progression' (248) but is troubled by the aesthetic preoccupations of its practitioners. That is to say: an Irish modernism singularly energised by the 1916 Easter Rising limits modernism's potential as a restless and continual reinvigoration of art and culture; and, particularly, such a historically anchored and determined modernism overlooks the continuous epistemological doubt provoked by renewed problems of uncertainty in literary and scientific discourses.

Cóilín Parsons, in 'John Banville, Long Form, and the Time of Late Modernism,' furthers this critique of deterministic historicist accounts of modernism with recourse to John Banville's tetralogy, particularly *Kepler* (1981). Spurred by a recognition of the novel's inability to capture complex durations of time, as well as a disbelief in the authority of modernist form, Banville's late modernism, Parsons argues, is marked by an awareness of the impossibility of comprehending the universe, except by means of the constructed lenses through which its observers hone their gaze. Banville's late modernism thus responds to a narrative of modernity which is engaged with astronomical ideas and scales of spacetime, and is made distinct by an understanding

of time as existing and not just passing. With form becoming a mode through which science and literature merge, the astronomical factor which operates throughout Banville's tetralogy posits, Parsons suggests, 'the continuity and simultaneity of time, not its rupture' (271). In the process, it contrasts with 'on or about' propositions of modernism, à la Virginia Woolf's famous declaration concerning 1910. Simultaneously, Banville's experiment, as it derides ideas of causal correlation between form and history, seems a substantial anachronism by recalling accounts of modernist ahistoricism. For Parsons, however, Banville's ahistoricism is not an apolitical gesture. The combination of Banville's astronomical investments with the 'long form' novel offers a vantage point for pitting ideas of progressive time against theories of the infinity of time, and thus for reconsidering the entire modernist terrain: 'the minute distinctions of the twentieth century come into focus as pressures within a single paradigm rather than paradigm shifts' (269). In such terms, Banville's late modernism scuppers the temporality of lateness, received notions of the time of modernism, and thus a timeline which proceeds from modernism through late modernism to postmodernism. Concurrently, Banville's novel destabilises the place of the nation within the terms of Irish modernism. As Parsons suggests, Banville's tetralogy does not reject nation and history, but fits them within a 'longer time frame, and thus casts a jaded eye on obsessions that seem petty in the face of astronomical or geological time, effecting in the process a rescaling of Irish literature' (279). As per such analysis, as with Weng and Kalaidjian, the interfaces of science and modernism prompt a reconsideration of those tropes which have become dominant in the definition of the field of Irish modernist studies.

Through such interventions, the critical opportunities of science and technology offer correlations with, and deviations from, the state-based emphases in Irish modernist studies, as well as new modes of interrogation which point to the futurity of the field and its demand for ever-renewed reading strategies. The strengths of *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* are thus obvious: Conrad's, Parsons's, and Weng's collection expands Irish modernism beyond its rehearsed remit – historicist, materialist, postcolonial – to reveal a canon in flux, one which is capable of sustaining engagement with, and dialogically informing, different critical lenses and historical phenomena.

If the collection has limitations, they are also its opportunities and provocations. For example, one might remark with surprise upon the inclusion of Simon During's chapter on Elizabeth Bowen, which is without an Irish referent as it wholly situates Bowen in an English context. The chapter reflects on the English thematic of goodness, one very foreign to the repeated obsessions of Irish studies (dislocation, nationhood, revolution). It might thus be argued that During's analysis places us clearly in the

territory of English modernism, and that the inclusion of this chapter jars with a key titular term of this volume: Irish modernism. Here, I am reminded of Joe Cleary's apposite claim in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* that Bowen belongs 'as much to the story of English as to Irish modernism.'<sup>1</sup> Given Bowen's inclusion in this book, we might thus ask: how do we define the limits of these fields, as well as their points of crossover and interaction? The editors refrain from pursuing this line of interrogation, and so this chapter, amongst others (for example, Chris Ackerley's chapter on Beckett's indifference to the great scientific achievements of his time – Mendel, Watson, and Crick – has little to do with Irish matter), is enigmatic within the structural logic of the book. Biography obviously acts as the guiding light for incorporation in such cases; indeed, Lauren Arrington has argued that Irish modernism 'accommodates writers who lived and wrote in and about Ireland, as well as those who were Irish by birth but who lived and worked outside of the country.'<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding, it is bracing to read an English-oriented Bowen, despite her biography, within the context of Irish modernism, a feat which, in many ways, reinforces the metanarrative of the book: considering Irish modernism from the vantage point of science and technology offers points of convergence and divergence to received historiographical accounts of the term. Such inclusions, then, prompt big questions to the field: does Irish modernism still hold as an applicable term if the contextual setting of the aesthetic or critical work in question is not vaguely Irish? If so, does Irish modernism need an Irish referent? If it doesn't need an Irish referent, what other modes of organisation and description can be employed to think anew the term's epistemological remit?

I will finish with a provocative afterthought, one inspired by this collection's organisational logic. In the introduction of a 2019 special issue of *Journal of Modern Literature* entitled 'Joyce, Beckett, Coetzee,' Jean-Michel Rabaté writes that 'the sequence of names heading this issue's thematic clusters – James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and John M. Coetzee – embody an ideal modernist lineage.'<sup>3</sup> Coetzee's inclusion is based on his inheritance of a 'repertoire of literary techniques' and a model of 'literary integrity' from an Irish lineage, particularly via Beckett.<sup>4</sup> If Irish modernism was considered as a canon of literary forms and styles, could we say, in a warped echo of Cleary's statement, that Coetzee belongs as much to its story as to South African modernism? Indeed, Paul Auster might also fit this equation given his deliberate

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Cleary, 'Introduction,' *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Arrington, 'Irish Modernism,' *Oxford Bibliographies*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OBO/9780199846719-0069>.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'Introduction,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 42, no. 4 (2019): 1.

<sup>4</sup> Rabaté, 'Introduction,' 1.

reworking of Beckett in his New York Trilogy. The example of *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism*, both through the critical lens it pursues and its organisational logic, suggests that the canon and theoretical criteria of Irish modernism might still be in its nascent stages, awaiting heretofore unexplored possibilities. Indeed, the question of form, style, and literary technique, if thought radically, might one day see Coetzee and Auster, and even perhaps Laurence Sterne (would Sterne be as regarded today without the events of Joyce and, as Keith Hopper and Neil Murphy argue, Flann O'Brien?),<sup>5</sup> gathered under the umbrella of Irish modernism. And if questions of form, style and technique can enable the accumulation of non-Irish writers within the narrative of Irish modernism, then the critical lenses of science and technology can function in the same way. One such example to this end might be the contemporary French writer, Michel Houellebecq; his infamous second novel, *Les particules élémentaires*, the ending of which is set on the west coast of Ireland, where Houellebecq lived for ten years, describes the atomisation of modern man with recourse to theories of particle physics. Such strange potentialities occur as a residue of the important new work being done in this field, of which *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* is exemplary.

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<sup>5</sup> Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, '10 Books That Would Never Have Been Written Without Flann O'Brien,' *Publishers Weekly* (15 November 2013): <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/tip-sheet/article/60009-10-books-that-wouldn-t-exist-without-flann-o-brien.html>.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at Goethe University Frankfurt.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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