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## **Review of *Emergency Writing: Irish Literature, Neutrality, And the Second World War* (2018), by Anna Teekell**

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*Emergency Writing: Irish Literature, Neutrality, And the Second World War* is a landmark of Irish modernist studies because it situates late modernist Irish prose and poetry in their often-forgotten context of the political quandary of Irish Emergency. Teekell shows through sustained close readings how Irish wartime prose and poetry developed syntactical circumlocutions to challenge and occasionally subvert the principle of neutrality adopted by the Irish government during World War II.

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Anna Teekell's *Emergency Writing* is a timely study of wartime Irish literature, a literary period which has received scant scholarly attention so far. Teekell notes that scholarly treatments of Irish literature written during World War II suffer from two principal problems—they either altogether ignore Irish literature written during the war or they dismiss the political context of Ireland that crucially shapes wartime Irish writing. She cites the examples of how the wartime writings of Elizabeth Bowen are treated as British literature or how Beckett's writings are regarded as 'international genius sui generis' and how in both cases such readings lead to the elision of the authors' 'imaginative engagement with Ireland' (Teekell 3). Teekell's work addresses this gap in scholarship and unequivocally locates wartime Irish writing within its often-ignored Irish context. In particular, Teekell examines how the Irish State's policy to remain neutral in World War II impacted wartime Irish writing, and shows how writers responded to the equivocation apparent in the Irish government's decision to term the war an 'Emergency.'

*Emergency Writing* highlights the complexities of neutrality and raises crucial questions such as: '[c]an literature be neutral? Can language function neutrally?' (Teekell 3). Structuring her analysis around these questions, Teekell discusses a range of literary responses to the policy of neutrality, and fleshes out a complex literary effort to subtly circumnavigate or overtly subvert the rhetoric of the Emergency. She further claims that the historical context of the Emergency had a significant impact on the modernist aesthetic of wartime Irish writing, in order to argue that Irish literature produced during the Emergency gave rise to a unique form of Irish late modernism which at once responds to a socio-political crisis and embodies a linguistic crisis in itself (Teekell 3). Teekell's method is to juxtapose close readings of Irish poetry and novels with the analyses of multimedia productions, such as archival materials, contemporary newspaper articles, and Irish political speeches.

Teekell produces a detailed history of the Emergency in 'Chapter 1: The Rhetoric of Irish Neutrality.' She illustrates in detail how Ireland's position of neutrality leads to the censorship of popular news media and the eventual subversion of such censorship policies by contemporary periodicals. As she notes, the aim of the widespread censorship implemented by the De Valera government was to depict 'a balanced and objective picture of war events' which would justify the Irish government's policy of neutrality (Teekell 31). The result of the censorship for the Irish news media was that '[i]n the Irish papers, there were no concentration camps, no massacre at Katyn, no Bataan Death March or Burma Railway, no firebombing of civilian Dresden' (Teekell 31). Teekell demonstrates that resistance to the censorship policies of the period leads to new

forms of late Irish modernism. She extensively analyses Sean O'Faolain's periodical *The Bell* and states that the magazine showcased a late Irish modernism because similar to James Joyce, O'Faolain also wanted to hold a mirror up to show the true postcolonial Ireland and contest the government-approved image of the nation (Teekell 44). In the same vein, she argues that O'Faolain's modernism overlaps with Virginia Woolf's modernist aesthetic: like Woolf, O'Faolain rejects conventional realism and advocates for remaking longstanding literary traditions (Teekell 46).

Teekell convincingly examines the modernist aesthetic of *The Bell* and emphasises the centrality of periodicals for modernism. However, she legitimises O'Faolain's modernism by identifying its overlaps with the aesthetic practices of high modernism (Joyce and Woolf). In using high modernism to validate the modernist aesthetics of O'Faolain, Teekell marks a distinction from the practice of decentring the Eurocentric canon promoted by the New Modernist Studies. Her analysis does not address if/how *The Bell* revises or challenges canonical modernism. But her study renews interest in wartime Irish periodical culture and creates the foundation for further research on modernism in wartime Irish magazines.

Chapter 2, 'Pilgrimage as Poetic Form: Kavanagh and Devlin at Lough Derg,' discusses the politics of neutrality and its impact on Patrick Kavanagh's poetics. Teekell provides a refreshing new reading of Kavanagh's 'Lough Derg' which is usually read by critics as uneven, inconsistent, or indecisive. The chapter provides a new perspective on the indecisiveness of the poem by brilliantly attributing it to the socio-political uncertainty of Emergency Ireland. Teekell's reading draws attention to the fact that the poem is fittingly set in a liminal space—Lough Derg is located on the borders of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and also considered a portal to the afterworld—which reflects the idea of in-betweenness expressed in the poem (Teekell 57). Teekell produces a series of close readings of the poem and convincingly argues that the intrinsic indecisiveness of the poem reflects the 'political indeterminacy' of neutrality of Emergency Ireland (67). She reads Kavanagh's poem in comparison with Denis Devlin's poem of the same title and argues that although Devlin's poem is stylistically different from Kavanagh's, it also expresses a similar uncertainty about neutrality. Teekell analyses Kavanagh and Devlin's rhetoric of neutrality as a revisioning of the form of pilgrimage which instead of leading to enlightenment achieves only a sense of uncertainty. She reads the revisioning of the form of pilgrimage as symptomatic of Kavanagh and Devlin's late modernism. Although she does not distinguish between the high modernist impulse of making new an extant form and how the practice evolves in late modernism, her analysis helpfully illuminates the fact that literary responses to the politics of neutrality were crucial in shaping late Irish modernism.

In Chapter 3, 'The Enemy Within,' Teekell continues exploring the themes of uncertainty and consternation about the Emergency in Irish poetry via a brilliant reading of Louis MacNeice's wartime poems. Focusing on various figures of speech in MacNeice's poetry, she shows how refrains and unexpected repetitions disrupt the duality of war and pastoral setting, and reveals how this disruption ultimately troubles the very foundation of neutrality. Teekell's key insight is that MacNeice finds the act of writing about the war in a poetic medium incommensurate with the actual ravages created by the war. For Teekell, MacNeice's wartime poetry is centred around his 'quarrels with himself about the place of the poet and the unpoetic realities of war' (Teekell 91). She charts how MacNeice's sense of uncertainty evolves through his corpus of wartime poems and claims that in later wartime poems (for example 'The Springboard,' 1944) MacNeice's uncertainty transforms into a foreboding for neutrality expressed through uneven rhyme schemes. Reading MacNeice in comparison to W.B. Yeats, Teekell traces the many ways in which MacNeice revises Yeatsian poetics, commenting that '[t]o refute Yeats, MacNeice must incorporate him' (Teekell 125). This sustained comparison between MacNeice and Yeats creates the foundation for future scholarly explorations about how MacNeice's revisioning of Yeats creates new forms of late modernism.

Teekell continues the discussion of complex doubles and repetitions in Emergency Irish literature in Chapter 4, 'Careful Talk,' but this time her focus shifts from poetry to prose, more specifically Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948). She notes that while Bowen's novel has been largely read as a British Second World War Blitz novel and occasionally as an Irish Big House novel (Teekell 129), its relationship with Irish neutrality remains unexplored (Teekell 129). She then offers a new reading of *The Heat of the Day* by foregrounding the context of Emergency Ireland and drawing a parallel between the novel and Emergency Irish poetry. In a manner comparable to the rhetoric of uncertainty found in Emergency Irish poetry, Bowen weaves ambiguity and equivocation into the linguistic fabric of the work. Teekell attributes Bowen's language of uncertainty to Irish neutrality and convincingly argues that *The Heat of the Day* is not only an instance of British wartime literature, but also a landmark in Emergency Irish literature. While Bowen's syntactical experimentations may be understood in light of the self-reflexivity often identified with modernist prose, in *The Heat of the Day* syntactical ambivalence and rhetorical difficulty are specifically influenced by the scepticism for language that the War and Irish neutrality had helped create (Teekell 128). Teekell notes that Bowen amplifies the wartime distrust for language by constructing an 'espionage-based epistemology' where she 'creates a language of war by encoding distrust in the syntax of the novel' (129). She points out that Bowen's own experiences

as a wartime British spy reporting on Ireland's neutrality contributed to the novel's syntactical ambivalence. In addition to analysing these rhetorical features, Teekell also studies how the dual settings of Ireland and England in Bowen's novel further emphasise the uncertainties coded in the language of Irish neutrality. Ultimately, this chapter offers a refreshingly new reading of how Bowen's self-reflexive late modernist prose is founded on the slippery syntax of the Emergency.

In Chapter 5, 'Unreadable Books, Unspeakable Worlds,' Teekell turns to the works of Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett. She argues that O'Brien and Beckett, similar to Bowen, designed an impenetrable language in their wartime novels and she interprets the unreadability of those works as a direct influence of the Irish Emergency. O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* and Beckett's *Watt*, both of which were published several years after they were drafted, are Teekell's primary objects of study in this chapter. Teekell re-situates the two novels not only in their wartime context but particularly in the socio-political context of the Emergency. She compares O'Brien and Beckett's novels to Máirtín Ó Cadhain's landmark Irish language novel *Cré na Cille* (*Churchyard Clay*) and masterfully argues that all three novels are purposefully located in distinct purgatorial conditions which reflect the Irish Emergency. Teekell further examines that the purgatories depicted in these novels are '*failed purgatories*' (161, italics in original) because the linguistic circumlocutions in the works render language unreadable and thus prevent the possibility of purification. Teekell reads the intentional unreadability of the novels as a subversion of Frank Aiken and Eamon de Valera's agenda of forging language into a neutral medium which would provide unbiased reports on the war (161). For instance, Teekell shows that, like Bowen, O'Brien uses negative syntax for the Narrator in *The Third Policeman* to reveal the gaps in truth that are created by the language adopted by Irish neutrality. She concludes that every instance of reading, writing, and communication in *The Third Policeman* and *Watt* is rendered unreadable and hence constitutes a linguistic failure because these works 'lampoon' the very notion of De Valera's neutral language (202). Teekell claims that the context of Emergency in *The Third Policeman* is suggested in the first place by the novel's rural setting, which echoes the isolation of Emergency Ireland, and, in the second place, by its reference to a dearth of resources which are reminiscent of wartime supply shortages (180). However, she also notes that the novel 'was written mostly in 1939 and completed by February 1940' (179), which means that the novel was written in the very early stages of the Irish Emergency. This leads to the question of how far the unreadability of the novel is caused by the overarching existential ennui emanating from the anticipation of World War II and how much of it is constructed as a response to the Emergency.

One of the principal contributions of Teekell's work is the way in which she foregrounds the importance of the socio-political context of Emergency Ireland behind the formation of the late modernist aesthetic of Irish writing. Her series of brilliant close readings reveal how the modernist techniques of double negatives, repetition, litotes, and syntactical ambivalence in wartime Irish prose and poetry are not mere continuations of a self-reflexive modernist aesthetic; rather, they emerge as a direct response to the language of neutrality adopted by the Irish government during the Emergency. The most significant contribution of Teekell's work to both Irish Studies and Modernist Studies is that she inaugurates a new scholarly methodology of reading the difficulty of modernist texts, linking modernist experimentation with the socio-historical context of the Emergency.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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