**Irish Modernism**

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**Summary**

Although Irish writers were foundational to English-language modernism, Irish Modernism is a new field in literary studies. Embedded imperial frameworks and assumptions about Irish traditionalism have been an obstacle to recognizing Irish Modernism, despite the importance of Irish writing to the development of modernism as a whole. Informed by advances in postcolonial and transnational theory, 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, such as James Joyce; who wrote in languages other than English or Irish, such as Samuel Beckett; or whose political allegiances are at odds with the rise of the separatist nation-state, such as Elizabeth Bowen. Irish Modernism has its genesis in the Irish Revival (c. 1880s-1910s), a popular movement that sought to create a distinctive Irish culture. The little magazines and literary theaters that arose out of the Revival were often aesthetically conservative in themselves but nonetheless became venues for literature that was radical in form. Just as early modernist writing arose out of the Revival, high modernist literature was provoked by a rejection of the Revival’s values. This reaction is exemplified in Yeats’s poetry from *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910), in which he castigates the Irish public for its religious conservatism, and in Joyce’s allusions in *Dubliners* (1914) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) to the sinister that lurks beneath the quotidian in Irish political life. Late modernism, which is typified by a weakening of the tropes of high modernism to make way for a more politically engaged literature, not only includes well known Anglophone writers but also the work of Brian Ó Nualláin/Flann O’Brien and Máirtín Ó Cadhain whose satires were formally and politically radical.

**Keywords:** Irish Modernism, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen, Samuel Beckett

Literary criticism on the topic of Irish Modernism is heavily inflected by historiographical debates about the origins of the modern Irish nation state/s. The island of Ireland is comprised of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, a constituent country of the United Kingdom. The Republic of Ireland is politically stable and was defined, through the policies of its early governments, according to the conventional criteria of romantic nationalism: religion (Catholicism) and language (Gaeilge/Irish). The prevalence of these ideas in the political discourse of the early state was an attempt to mask difference, creating a homogenized national identity to which culture was believed to be an important contributor. Conversely, the complexity of Northern Ireland’s origins means that it remains resistant to the terminology of nation and thereby troubles any definitions of modernism constructed according to geographical borders. The nature of and boundaries between these two states were being negotiated in the same period that Anglo-American High Modernism was at its zenith. Consequently, Irish Modernism has affinities with its Anglo-American counterparts, but it differs in the way that contemporary political turbulence inflected both its subject and style.

One view of modern Irish literature, which has had remarkable longevity despite – or perhaps because of – its simplicity, maintains that the literature is a product of Ireland’s exceptional history. This exceptionality is attributed to “a case of failed or inadequate modernization”, but as Richard Bourke has recently argued, this is a gross oversimplification that is usually part of a narrative of “trauma or victimhood”, which “assume[s] the existence of a continuous national personality”.[[1]](#endnote-1) The diversity of Irish Modernist writers overturns such easy assumptions. Furthermore, as discussed further below, the relationship between modernism and modernization has been a fruitful, and at times problematic, approach to Irish Modernism. Early scholars who sought to explain the stylistic revolutions of modernist writers such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett in the context of such perceived “failure” achieved their aims by exempting these writers from their Irishness. As John McCourt and others have shown, this was also a problem in these writers’ own times. McCourt writes, “some reviewers found it difficult to get beyond Joyce’s background [as “a non-religious Catholic Dubliner of the urban lower middle class”]; for others, like Ezra Pound, it was something that must be surpassed at all costs”.[[2]](#endnote-2) Pound, who was essential to determining Joyce’s place in the modernist canon, read him “as European and ‘modern’ rather than Irish and ‘peasant’”.[[3]](#endnote-3) Irish poetry clearly illustrates how studies of Irish Modernism must transcend national categories. For example, Louis MacNeice’s relationship to Ireland was ambivalent (vacillating between, as Alan Gillis has it, “contempt” and “affiliation”), and he spent most of his career in England.[[4]](#endnote-4) MacNeice’s work contests the easy alliances of religious and political affiliation, of identities that can be clearly delineated by external agencies.

The reclamation of Joyce, Beckett, and other modernists into a body of specifically Irish literature began in the 1990s, with the appearance of monographs such as Emer Nolan’s *James Joyce and Nationalism* (1995), and the publication of what is probably the single most influential survey of Irish literature, Declan Kiberd’s *Inventing Ireland* (1995). Much of this new work was indebted to the biographer Richard Ellmann, whose studies of Joyce, W.B. Yeats, and Oscar Wilde are exhaustive in their detail and concentrate extensively on the Irish context. Kiberd’s Irish story is also directed by the postcolonial turn in literary studies, evinced by *Inventing Ireland*’s publication in the United States as part of Harvard University Press’s series, *Convergences: Inventories of the Present*, under the general editorship of Edward Said. The title of the series is revelatory. The Ireland of the 1990s, preceding the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, had been in a sustained conflict for at least thirty years, a period euphemistically called “The Troubles”. Kiberd’s use of the phrase “occupied Ireland” to refer to the island in the early twentieth century creates a narrative of a continuous history of oppression that provocatively invokes the rhetoric of Irish republicanism and its late twentieth-century proponents. Postcolonial approaches to modern Ireland as a colonized territory are often conflated with an incorrect homogenization of Irish people as Catholic/nationalist or Protestant/Unionist. Kiberd’s perpetuation of the hyphenated term, “Anglo-Irish”, to refer to writers such as Elizabeth Bowen (who considered herself to be Irish, without hyphenation) marginalizes these writers by implicitly suggesting that truly, or wholly, Irish writers are Catholic (e.g. Joyce) or working-class (e.g. Sean O’Casey). This segmentation of Irish writing has the effect of further divorcing Irish and British literature, a distinction that continues to trouble writing about Irish Modernism.

Most theories of Irish Modernism that have been posited to date locate Irish writing in a postcolonial context. This tendency excludes the political realities of Ireland’s historical relationship with Britain. By 1890, the decade in which the Irish Revival gained momentum, Ireland was proportionally over-represented in the British Parliament.[[5]](#endnote-5) (As Richard English notes, this representation was nonetheless unsatisfactory to Irish nationalists under the leader Charles Stuart Parnell, who believed that a devolved government ruled from within Ireland was essential for good governance.) Even so, signifiers of oppression – such as the decline of the Irish language, the Irish Famine of the 1840s, and the impoverishment of the urban working-class – were the results of modernization, which was driven by British imperial governance but also by the Protestant landed-class and the Catholic middle classes, which profited from the imperial relationship. These nuances are not brought to light by the application of a postcolonial framework. Postcolonial readings may also be less illuminating about the degree to which the constant movement of writers across the islands and further afield was essential to their creativity and literary production.

Criticism of other Anglophone literatures has incorporated the transnational turn into postcolonial studies, as in Ann Marie Fallon’s *Global Crusoe: Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Theory and Transnational Asesthetics* (Routledge, 2016). Yet, current theories of Irish Modernism have yet to take into account such a cosmopolitan perspective. Irish Modernist writers were, on the whole, not geographically isolated from the British modernist milieu. Beyond Joyce and Beckett, St John Ervine, Elizabeth Bowen, W.B. Yeats, Thomas MacGreevy, Louis MacNeice, Freda Laughton, Brendan Behan, and Brian Coffey moved back and forth between Ireland and Britain, and often across Europe and beyond. Even so, it is essential to note that their motivations were not uniform. For example, the coteries of London and, later, Oxford and Rapallo, were important to the formation of W.B. Yeats’s aesthetic, whereas Brendan Behan’s motivation for going to England as a teenager was to bomb the Liverpool docks for the Irish Republican Army, and most of his time in the country was spent in prison.

While a firm postcolonial approach still holds sway in many quarters, some of the latest scholarship on Irish Modernism is informed by important historical reappraisals that present a more flexible interpretation. Here, the transnational turn has shifted the concentration away from a restrictive category of Irishness (usually defined by religion, language, or circumstances of birth), allowing for a more diverse corpus of writing to be included within Irish Modernism. This facilitates connections between Irish, British, and other literatures, while allowing distinctly Irish elements to come into view. A landmark publication in this regard is the *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, edited by Joe Cleary, in particular Cleary’s essay, “European, American, and Imperial Conjunctures”, in which he investigates the complex exchanges between “the mainly Protestant Irish émigrés who made their careers in London and the mainly Catholic Irish Americans whose reputations were largely made in the United States”.[[6]](#endnote-6) In the same volume, Louis de Paor discusses the impact of “European, English, and Irish visitors” to the Blasket Islands on the production of the Irish-language autobiographies by Peig Sayers, Tomás Ó Criomhthain, and Muris Ó Súilleabháin, which are not modernist texts, but as de Paor argues, display modernist inflections in their self-reflexivity.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**Irish Modernism’s Relationship to the Irish Revival**

The Irish Revival and literary modernism were long considered to be at odds with one another. In his prescient critique, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Richard Kearney suggested that the “crisis of culture” exemplified by the Revival, when writers and artists attempted to create a distinctly Irish culture, facilitated radical innovations in form. Although this cultural movement was not tied to a particular political program, since it accommodated Unionists, Home Rulers, and separatists, the Revival was important to the organization of political groups and generated the energy that led to the struggle for independence.[[8]](#endnote-8) Kearney uses the terms “revivalist modernism” and “radical modernism” to distinguish between moderate and extreme developments in literary technique. John Wilson Foster, in *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture*, extended Kearney’s argument and went so far as to suggest that the folktales that were collected, translated, and reinvented by writers such as Augusta Gregory and W.B. Yeats exhibit a narrative self-reflexivity that is characteristic of literary modernism.[[9]](#endnote-9) In light of such readings, Kearney’s terminology remains essential for discerning the boundaries of Irish Modernism, so that the term remains useful as a critical category. For example, in her chapter, “Women and Modernism”, for the *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, Anne Fogarty borrows Jane Miller’s term “modernism of content” to describe the stories of Katherine Cecil Thurston.[[10]](#endnote-10) *Max*, Thurston’s novel of 1910, is politically radical in its protagonist’s ambiguous sexuality and the protagonist Max’s “indeterminate” gender identity. While Fogarty argues that female Irish writers in the Edwardian period should be regarded as modernists, Kearney’s “revivalist modernism” provides a bridge between nineteenth-century convention and twentieth-century innovation that seems more accurate for describing texts that occupy a liminal place in the transition between styles and forms.

**Irish Modernism and Modernization in Ireland**

David Lloyd’s *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* interrogates the historicist narrative of modernization that constructs a notion of “progress from the backward to the advanced”.[[11]](#endnote-11) This narrative, he argues, has been used to justify imperial (or, in his terms, “colonial”) conquest and governance, since it “views social and cultural elements that resist modernization as residues of ideas and practices that belong to the past and remain to be overcome”.[[12]](#endnote-12) Lloyd reads *Ulysses* in terms of Joyce’s critique of historicist time (i.e. progress), and the “coevality of Irish times”.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The persistence of multiple temporalities in modernizing Ireland was the concern of modernist writers who were very different to Joyce, such as W.B. Yeats and Elizabeth Bowen, whose work responds to sudden political upheavals brought about by the formation of the nation-state, the Irish Free State (later, the Republic of Ireland). Different again are J.M. Synge and Liam O’Flaherty; Synge’s *The Aran Islands* and O’Flaherty’s *The Black Soul* address the multiple temporalities of the islanders’ encounters with modernizing elements, from modern artifacts, such as the photographic camera, to modernizing influences, such as O’Flaherty’s shell-shocked character of The Stranger who imposes his modern mind on the landscape and the people. (This character, it should be noted, predates Camus’ *L’Etranger* by nearly twenty years.)

Bowen’s novels and short stories are particularly concerned with ruins, visual representations of multiple temporalities, which provide a counterpoint to her critique of modernity. Bowen was born into the Protestant landed class, which was disenfranchised by the democratic impulse of the Irish War for Independence. During the Anglo-Irish War and the subsequent Irish Civil War, the estates of the landed elite were targeted for arson attacks by Irish Republicans. Many families left Ireland, and those that remained slipped into decline, as their political power diminished during the process of state formation and their economic power was weakened. The ‘Big Houses’ of the landed class feature prominently in Bowen’s fiction, where their ruins represent an alternative temporality, a lost time that persists in architectural fragments, outmoded furnishings, and aloof characters. These elements are nonetheless resistant to nostalgia due to Bowen’s subtle criticism of the elite’s responsibility for its own demise. Whereas history offers a continuous narrative of progress, Bowen is concerned with the idea of the past, which elides full comprehension. As Neil Corcoran discusses, Bowen developed a peculiar style of omission in order to signal the political and temporal instability that is her subject.[[14]](#endnote-14) Jed Esty extends this temporal instability to the adolescence of Lois, *The Last September*’s protagonist, reading her “as a brilliantly condensed figure for the broader postcolonial process” and comparing Bowen’s technique to Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* and Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*.[[15]](#endnote-15)

W.B. Yeats’s early poetry, if it is modernist at all, can be read in terms of Kearney’s “revivalist modernism”. Yeats himself rejected the idea that he was a modernist, declaring in his poem “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” that “We were the last romantics”, yet despite this disavowal, moments of perceived cultural crisis provoked changes in his style that are recognizably modernist. Yeats believed that the Irish landed class preserved the virtues that were necessary for a good society and that the decline of the landed elite signaled the degeneration of Irish public life. Yeats’s rejection of the term “modernist” is a reaction against the adjective’s root word; in his aesthetic, the past provided an antidote to modernity. Modernization threatened Yeats’s pastoral vision of the Irish “peasantry” (always a problematic construct, in Irish writing as elsewhere) and created the new middle class that is maligned, among other places, in the image of the “greasy till” in his poem “September 1913”. Ruins, located outside of the modern city, provide links to a past that is not to be overcome but resurrected. Architectural fragments such as crumbling Big Houses and Norman towers, or cultural artifacts such as Sato’s sword (which appears in “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”, and elsewhere) are anchors for the unstable present and spiritual portals that give the poet access to other times that provide an alternative to the present.

Not all Irish Modernist writing responds to modernization in such metaphysical terms. In *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial*, Michael Rubenstein argues that the “terminological lack” for the “progressive networking of the built environment” through projects such as national electrification (projects that were given the name “infrastructure” after Roosevelt’s New Deal) contributed to a degree of mysteriousness about the technological change. Fiction, he suggests, became “a place not so much to fix its meaning as to speculate about it”.[[16]](#endnote-16) Rubenstein reads the “Wandering Rocks” and “Ithaca” episodes of *Ulysses* (focused on the sewer and waterworks, respectively) as Joyce’s comedic “formal solution” to “the tragedy of development”.[[17]](#endnote-17) Conversely, Flann O’Brien’s novel *The Third Policeman* and Denis Johnston’s play *The Moon in the Yellow River* are read as dystopian critiques of public utility. As the historiography continues to complicate the imposition of a standard postcolonial theory onto the Irish state/s, literary criticism is adopting more flexible methodologies. Nevertheless, Rubenstein’s mapping of literary modernisms’ response to technological change in Ireland remains an important departure for understanding Irish Modernism’s formations.

**Irish Modernism’s Linguistic Divide**

In his review of volume three of the *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, Jason Harding revisits George Steiner’s seminal book, *Extraterritorial* (1972), and argues that “Steiner’s attention to a modern multilingualism as a condition of ‘extraterritoriality’ indicates that concepts like ‘modernism’ may be more culture-bound and stubbornly resistant to translation than we think”.[[18]](#endnote-18) This is certainly true in the case of Ireland, with its two distinct yet overlapping literary languages.

Irish-language modernism has been ignored by most scholars of literary modernism, due to few critics having fluency in Irish, the unavailability of translations, and misguided perceptions that the language is itself conservative. Two important exceptions to this trend are Barry McCrea’s recent book *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in 20th-Century Ireland and Europe* (2015) and Louis de Paor’s essay “Irish Language Modernisms” in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*.[[19]](#endnote-19) De Paor translates and analyses, among other things, Patrick Pearse’s stories, poems, and editorials, including an essay in which Pearse stated unequivocally, “‘Traditionalism’ is not essentially Irish [….] The traditional style is not the *Irish* way of singing or declaiming, but the *peasant* way; it is not, and never has been, the possession of the nation at large, but only of a class in the nation [….] Irish literature if it [is] to live and grow, must get into contact on the one hand with its own past and on the other with the mind of contemporary Europe….This is the twentieth century; and no literature can take root in the twentieth century which is not of the twentieth century”.[[20]](#endnote-20) Recovering this work by Pearse enables de Paor to trace a history of Irish-language modernism that begins in the Revival and extends to the middle of the twentieth century.

Flann O’Brien is the pseudonym of Brian O’Nolan, who published in Irish and in English, and as a result has long been regarded as Ireland’s foremost Irish-language novelist. His novels in the English language, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and *The Third Policeman* (1967), have attracted English-language critics’ attention to his Irish-language texts, particularly *An Béal Bocht* (1941), published in English as *The Poor Mouth* in 1973. O’Brien’s primacy has been recently challenged by the translation into English of Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille*, published as *The Dirty Dust* (2015) and *Graveyard Clay* (2016). Liam Mac Con Iomaire, the translator of *Graveyard Clay*, explained the novel’s belated availability to an English-language readership: “It would be like translating ‘Ulysses’ into Irish […] You daren’t put a foot wrong if you are translating Máirtín Ó Cadhain.[[21]](#endnote-21) In an essay in *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing,* Robert Welch describes the tenor of Ó Cadhain’s prose: “while the situation is traditional the method is modern. His fiction is an anthropological searching in words, a reach of the creative imagination into the landscape of feeing, thought and sensation as it unfolds in the minds of his characters”.[[22]](#endnote-22) There is a strong suggestion of Joyce in Welch’s description, and, indeed, *Cré na Cille*’s similarity to Joyce’s oeuvre was the cause of its rejection by his first potential publisher. But there are strong comparisons to Beckett too; as Welch writes, “Beckett’s figures know the hell that the perceptions of others can create for the self, and strive to break free; whereas Ó Cadhain’s characters or voices [in *Cré na Cille*] speak out of that hell itself”.[[23]](#endnote-23) Although Welch refrains from employing the term modernist in his essay, Ó Cadhain’s stylistic innovations and the way that his work confounds romantic “cultural Puritanism” all signal a revolutionary Irish-language modernism. Cleary goes further, suggesting that *Cré na Cille*, Flann O’Brien’s fiction, and even “Kavanagh’s anti-Yeatsian and Eliotesque *The Great Hunger* […] all share with Beckett an aesthetic that stresses grotesque morbidity, defaced or debased form, or an austere gallows humour of failure and abjection [….that] repudiate[s] any redemptive sense of Ireland or Christianity or humanism or the body”.[[24]](#endnote-24) It should be noted that these are also characteristics of late twentieth-century fiction, such as Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* (1992) and may therefore typify particular Irish preoccupations rather than necessarily modernist ones.

**Geographies of Irish Modernism**

In his essay “Irish Language Modernism”, Louis de Paor argues, with regard to Pádraic Ó Conaire’s prose, “That the setting for his stories is often rural rather than urban makes them no less modern in their representation of existential crisis and the oppressive burden of social convention, of human beings shadowed relentless by their own imminent self-destruction”.[[25]](#endnote-25) Due in no small part to *Ulysses*, the City is a major focus for writing about modernism; however, much Irish modernist writing takes a rural setting: Yeats’s Sligo and Galway, Synge and O’Flaherty’s Arran Islands, the provincial setting for Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, Kate O’Brien’s Mellick (a fictional Limerick), and Bowen’s County Cork, to name a few. One reason for this is the issue of temporalities of Irish Modernism discussed above. Rural Ireland is where the tension between tradition and modernity, in forms such as the modernizing Congested Districts Board or the disenfranchisement of the landed elite, came sharply into focus.

Irish Modernist writing developed prior and concurrent to the establishment of the independent Irish nation-state and Northern Ireland and is therefore transnational in the fullest sense; it cannot be restricted to one part of the island, south or north. Ireland, like Great Britain, is an island that is on the one hand at the periphery of Europe and on the other hand fully integrated into European discourses. Patrick Pearse’s conviction that contemporary Europe was more important than any sense of an Irish tradition demonstrates that no matter how different Irish modernist writers were, none were isolationist in their outlook or influences.

**Irish Modernism’s genres and forms**

*The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* might, playfully, be considered the first Irish modernist novel, but if modernism is chronologically restricted to the period from the *fin de siècle* to the middle of the twentieth century, then the Irish modernist novel began with *Ulysses* in 1922. As discussed above in Irish Modernism and the Revival, there were “revivalist modernist” novels published prior to Joyce’s masterpiece. The posthumous publication of Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* (1967) prolongs the chronology, but if the book’s composition – in 1939/1940 – is taken into account, then Irish Modernism’s historical arc is very similar to that of British Modernism, which scholars generally conclude around 1945. If the temporal boundaries of Irish Modernism are stretched to accommodate novels that are stylistically modernist regardless of their date of publication, then Irish Modernism continues to thrive, with the linguistic inventiveness of Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013).

International periodical culture was essential to Irish Modernist poetry and short stories, but there were also important interventions made by “national” magazines, as Frank Shovlin discusses in his chapter “From Revolution to Republic: Magazines, Modernism, and Modernity in Ireland”.[[26]](#endnote-26) *The Klaxon: An Irish International Quarterly* survived for just one issue, in 1924, and was founded as a platform for publishing its editor’s review of *Ulysses*, which had been refused by *Dublin Magazine*.[[27]](#endnote-27) *The Klaxon* and *To-morrow*, which succeeded it, were short-lived, in part, because of their purpose; as Shovlin writes, the list of contributors delineates a group that was “Keen to stress its independence both from conventional Catholic control and from the artistic rules of the past”.[[28]](#endnote-28) Avant-garde writers were stifled and provoked by the Censorship of Publications (1929), and the conservatism of the Irish Free state led some writers to put aside formal experiments and turn their attention to social problems, as Sean O’Faolain did in *The Bell* (1940-1954), which published some modernist poets, such as Freda Laughton, but on the whole maintained a realist, documentary tone.

Recently, critics and theatre historians have turned their attention to Irish modernist theatre, which was a largely unexcavated field due to the dominance of the Abbey Theatre (the Irish National Theatre) in Irish theatre history and the Abbey’s repertoire, particularly in the mid-twentieth century for aesthetically and politically conservative plays. Yet, as Ben Levitas argues, “Irish theatrical experimentation is inevitably bound up with participation in the politics of representation, emerging as it did in a period of national reappraisal and revolution.”[[29]](#endnote-29) As Kearney sees the genesis of Irish Modernism in a “revivalist modernism”, so Levitas locates modernist theatre in the theatricalities of Wilde and Shaw. He goes on to demonstrate how Irish Modernist theatre defies narrow categories and “acts in a broad spectrum of theatricality, ranging from distending adaptations of realism to the avant garde, and from the poetics of symbolism and expressionism, to an awareness of the role of theatre practitioners beyond, the theatre, in the public realm”, as in Synge’s instigation of the riots over his masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907).[[30]](#endnote-30)

The Dublin Drama League, founded in 1919, was organized in reaction to the increasingly narrow focus of the Abbey, and its founders sought to incorporate European modernist drama into “a vision of…national life other than that of cottage and tenement.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Elaine Sisson has noted that the League’s choice of plays was calculated to resonate with contemporary political concerns, but this extended rather than compromised its choice of productions; Eugene O’Neill, Chekhov, Pirandello, Strindberg, and Ernst Toller were among the playwrights whose work was staged. Of these, Eugene O’Neill’s work is particularly notable since it was censored in Britain and the United States. There was no legislative censorship of Irish theatres, although theatres – particularly the Abbey – operated under financial and ideological pressures, and the decision to stage O’Neill was almost certainly intended to annoy cultural conservatives. The Dublin Drama League collaborated with W.B. Yeats and Lennox Robinson, directors of the Abbey, to stage plays in the Abbey’s new space, the Peacock Theatre, which, as Sisson notes, was “painted that most bohemian of 1920s colours, peacock blue.”[[32]](#endnote-32) The Peacock was the first home to the Gate Theatre Studio, under the direction of Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir, who were intent on producing what Edwards described as “the ‘Theatre Theatrical”, a theatre that would draw attention to the artifice of all theatrical forms, including naturalism. This generated further innovations at the Abbey. The influence of this dynamism on Samuel Beckett, who is himself arguably the greatest influence on contemporary drama, can be precisely located in Beckett’s attendance at productions of Yeats’s *Resurrection* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, both produced by the Abbey in August 1934.

Theatrical design also reflects British and Continental modernist influences. Irish playwright Denis Johnston was inspired by the London Gate Theatre’s production of Georg Keiser’s expressionist play, *From Morn to Midnight*, and Johnston collaborated with artist Norah McGuinness to design a set that “exteriorize[d] the psychological interiority of the play”, for a production at the Peacock Theatre.[[33]](#endnote-33) Yet modernist designs were also used for productions on the Abbey’s main stage. Yeats collaborated with designer Edward Gordon Craig for his 1911 production of *The Hour-Glass*, for which Craig designed hinged flats that framed screens through which light was projected to achieve specific effects. Yeats’s techniques underwent another major shift when “symbolic light” was replaced with the symbolism of the mask and the dance, as in the plays that became *Four Plays for Dancers* (1921). Inspired by Ezra Pound’s knowledge of Japanese Noh, these plays reject the convention of the stage (along with other identifiable characteristics of European North America) and in so doing “intrude upon the real”.[[34]](#endnote-34) The fourth wall was transgressed, in a different way, by Brendan Behan, whose agitprop-inspired *The Quare Fellow* (1954) was performed at The Pike theatre in Dublin. *An Giall* (1958, translated as *The Hostage*), performedat the Damer Theatre in Dublin led to important collaborations with Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop in Stratford, London, a theatre known for its pioneering pastiche (as in *Oh What a Lovely War* (1963)), which can be interpreted as an articulation of a Late Modernist aesthetic.

**Irish Modernism or Irish Modernisms?**

Positing a plurality of modernisms has enabled critics of other literatures to expand modernist studies beyond high modernism into ‘low’ forms, or popular cultures, and to describe modernist modes of writing outside of urban contexts. Such a plurality will prove useful to this topic, since only by positing Irish Modernisms will the theories be brought into agreement with modernist authors’ various concepts of self and society. Yet, this solution is not wholly satisfactory. In his book about poetry and Northern Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, *Mistaken Identities*, Peter McDonald writes about the critic’s difficulty in analyzing writing from Northern Ireland, “since it brings to the surface problems and areas of awkwardness more often forgotten or ignored”, such as “the relation between political contention and the literary imagination.” McDonald asks whether criticism can be liberated from “identity” in order to consider “the spaces opened up by different kinds of poetic achievement”[[35]](#endnote-35) These questions are instigated by a postcolonial critique that reveals itself as contradictory, since such an approach is politically republican but imaginatively detaches most of northeast Ulster from “Ireland”.

Can, or should, critics speak of Northern Irish Modernism? To segment Irish Modernism into an infinitely descending set of Matroyshka dolls that would contain various permutations of national, class and/or religious identities would be an unavoidably inaccurate as well as a useless exercise. Again, the recent transnational turn offers new possibilities for approaching the topic. In its historical context, Irish Modernism is not simply *inter*national. Rather, it transcends the boundaries of the ‘nation’, which were literally unfixed during its development. Just as Irish Modernism cannot be partitioned, it cannot be subsumed into a simplistic postcolonial or sectarian model that fails to respect the literature’s own terms. A new formalism may prove vital, since close readings of Irish Modernism’s technical innovations illuminate crosscurrents of exchange as well as its markers of originality.

**Review of the Literature**

*The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) is indispensible for this topic. Megan Quigley’s essay ‘Ireland’ in *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) situates Irish Modernism in the context of nineteenth-century writing, with particular attention to the concerns of primitivism and translation.

Most scholarship on Irish Modernism takes a postcolonial approach. See Mark Quigley, *Postcolonial Irish Writing and the Politics of Modern Literary Form* (Fordham University Press, 2012); Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), and Declan Kiberd’s ‘The City in Irish Culture’ in *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). In *The World Republic of Letters* (Harvard University Press, 2004), Pascale Casanova argues that Irish Modernists sought legitimization in urban, imperial centers. Terence Brown’s essay, ‘Ireland, Modernism and the 1930s’ in *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) is informed by recent turns in historiography and refers to Ireland as a post-imperial rather than a post-colonial state.

Essays by Adrian Frazier, Terence Brown, and Vera Kreilkamp in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) discuss modernist themes in Irish fiction. Yet, Liam O’Flaherty has been given very little critical attention. Hedda Friberg, *An Old Order and a New: the Split World of Liam O’Flaherty’s Novels* (Upssala University Press, 1996) and Brian Donnelly, ‘A Nation Gone Wrong: Liam O’Flaherty’s Vision of Modern Ireland’, *Studies* (Spring 1974) include discussions of modernist aspects of O’Flaherty’s work, but without employing the term modernism. Neil Corcoran’s *Elizabeth Bowen: the Enforced Return* (Oxford University Press, 2004), Maud Ellmann’s *Elizabeth Bowen: the Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), Hermione Lee’s *Elizabeth Bowen* (Vintage, 1999), R.F. Foster’s essay ‘The Irishness of Elizabeth Bowen’ in *Paddy and Mr Punch* (Penguin, 1995), and Jed Esty’s *Unseasonable Youth:* (Oxford University Press, 2012) represent the best criticism on Bowen. For Bowen’s identification as an Irish (rather than Anglo-Irish) author, see Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (London: Penguin, 1977), 165.

The most useful edition of Yeats’s poetry to date is Daniel Albright’s *The Poems* (Everyman, 1990). The body of criticism on Yeats is vast, but the best starting point for themes under discussion here are Calvin Bedient’s *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism’s Love of Motion* (Notre Dame University Press, 2009), James Logenbach’s groundbreaking, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 1988), and Stan Smith’s *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994). For W.B. and George Yeats’s collaborations on the esoteric System, see Margaret Mills Harper’s *Wisdom of Two* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

For a survey of Irish Modernist poetry, see Alex Davis, ‘The Irish modernists and their legacy’ in Matthew Campbell, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2003). Fran Brearton and Edna Longley’s edition, *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and His Legacy* (Carcarnet, 2012) is an excellent introduction to MacNeice’s work and includes essays from some of the most respected critics of twentieth-century poetry. Clair Wills’s *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (Faber, 2008) offers important historical context and textual analysis of MacNeice, Bowen, and other writers’ wartime work. The majority of scholarship on Denis Devlin is also by Alex Davis; see *A Broken Line: Denis Devlin and Irish Poetic Modernism* (University College Dublin Press, 2000). Dónal Moriarty’s *The Art of Brian Coffey* (University College Dublin, 2000) makes the case for Coffey’s appeal to twenty-first-century poets in Ireland. Susan Schribman’s edition of collected essays, *The Life and Work of Thomas MacGreevy: A Critical Reappraisal* (Continuum, 2013) is an excellent introduction. Hugh J. Dawson’s ‘Thomas MacGreevy and Joyce’ in *James Joyce Quarterly* (Spring 1988) suggests that MacGreevy’s view of Joyce may have influenced Beckett’s essay, ‘The Catholic Element in *Work in Progress*’. Seán Kennedy’s ‘Beckett Reviewing MacGreevy: a Reconsideration’ in *Irish University Review* (Autumn-Winter 2005) argues that Beckett did not think that MacGreevy’s poetry was important in terms of the development of a radical poetic. Among the most interesting recent work on Joyce includes Sarah Cole’s reading of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in *At the Violet Hour* (Oxford University Press, 2012), but readers should be cautioned that some of her analysis of other Irish writers, such as Sean O’Casey, is factually inaccurate.

Although it is over thirty years old, Brenna Katz Clarke and Harold Ferrar’s *The Dublin Drama League* (Dolmen, 1979) is the most extensive work on that company. For Yeats’s dance drama, see Michael McAteer, *Yeats and European Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Richard Allen Cave, *Collaborations: Ninette de Valois and William Butler Yeats* (Dance Books, 2011), and chapters in Susan Jones, *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Christopher Fitz-Simon’s *The Boys* (Nick Hern Books, 1994) is a double biography of Mac Liammóir and Edwards, founders of The Gate Theatre in Dublin. Christopher Murray’s biography *Sean O’Casey: Writer at Work* (Gill & Macmillan, 2004) is definitive, and Hugh Hunt’s *Sean O’Casey* (Gill & Macmillan, 1980) provides useful readings of *The Silver Tassie*. Bernard Adams’ *Denis Johnston: A Life* (Lilliput, 2001) is the only recent work on Johnston. For a fuller bibliography of Irish Modernism and particular Irish modernist writers see Lauren Arrington, ‘Irish Modernism’ for *Oxford Bibliographies Online*.

**Further Reading List**

Lauren Arrington, “Irish Modernism,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online*. DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199846719-0069

Lauren Arrington, “Irish Modernism and Its Legacies” in Richard Bourke and Ian McBride, eds. *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby, eds. *Modernism and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

Terence Brown, “Ireland, Modernism and the 1930s,” in *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Brenna Katz Clarke and Harold Ferrar. *The Dublin Drama League, 1918-1941* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1979).

Joe Cleary, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Susan Jones, *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1987).

Edwina Keown and Carol Taafe, eds. *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009).

David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Notre Dame: Field Day, 2008).

Deirdre Mulrooney, *Irish Moves: an Illustrated History of Dance and Physical Theatre in Ireland* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2006).

Mark Quigley, *Postcolonial Irish Writing and the Politics of Modern Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dama Press, 2010).

Elaine Sisson, “A Note on What Happened”, *Kritika Kultura* (Aug 2010): 132-148.

Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: a cultural history of Ireland during the Second World War* (London: Faber, 2007).

**Notes**

1. Richard Bourke, “Introduction,” in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, ed. Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John McCourt, “Genre, place and value: Joyce’s reception, 1904-1941,” in *James Joyce in Context*, ed. John McCourt(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. McCourt, “Genre, place and value”, 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Alan Gillis, *Irish Poetry of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Richard English, *Irish Freedom: a history of nationalism in Ireland* (London: Macmillan, 2007), 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Joe Cleary, “European, American, and Imperial Conjectures” in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Louis de Paor, “Irish Language Modernisms” in *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, 161-173, 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Mullingar: Lilliput, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Anne Fogarty, “” in *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, 147-160. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Notre Dame: Field Day, 2008), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Lloyd, *Irish Times*, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: the Enforced Return* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004) and Neil Corcoran, “Discovery of a Lack: History and Ellipses in Elizabeth Bowen’s ‘The Last September’” (*Irish University Review* 31.2, Autumn-Winter 2001): 315-333. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 6-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Rubenstein, *Public Works*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Jason Harding, “European Avant-Garde Coteries and the Modernist Magazine,” review of *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* volume 3, *modernism/modernity* 22.4 (November 2015): 811. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Barry McCrea, *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in 20th-Century Ireland and Europe* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. De Paor, “Irish Language Modernism”, 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. William Brennan, ‘The Irish Novel That’s So Good People Were Scared to Translate It’, *New Yorker* 17 March 2016. http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-irish-novel-thats-so-good-people-were-scared-to-translate-it [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Robert Welch, *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing* (London: Routledge, 1993), 189. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Welch, *Changing States*, 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Joe Cleary, “European, American, and Imperial Conjunctures”, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Louis de Paor, “Irish Language Modernism”, 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Frank Shovlin, “From Revolution to Republic: Magazines, Modernism, and Modernity in Ireland” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist magazines: Volume I: Britain and Ireland 1880-1955*, ed. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, accessed 1 May 2016, http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199654291.001.0001/acprof-9780199654291-chapter-41#ref\_acprof-9780199654291-chapter-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Shovlin, “From Revolution to Republic*”*, 741. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Shovlin, “From Revolution to Republic”, 743. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ben Levitas, “Modernist Experiments in Irish Theatre” in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 111-127, 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Sisson, “A Note on What Happened,” *Kritika Kultura* 15 (2010): 132-148. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Sisson, “A Note on What Happened,” 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Sisson notes that it is unclear whether McGuiness’s designs were used; see “A Note on What Happened,” 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Levitas, “Modernist Experiments”, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)