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Against Irish Modernism: Towards an Analysis of Experimental Irish Poetry

This essay rewrites the history of Irish poetic experiment away from modernism, or at least from contemporary industry-driven senses of the term which have multiplied to the point of its overuse as a catch-all category.¹ It is divided into two parts. The first part of the essay focuses on questions of literary history, defining some of the key trends of literary production and reception in Ireland during the 1920s and 30s. By surveying the negative impact of religion and censorship on literary development within the Irish Free State (1922–1937), the essay challenges the concept of Ireland as a place of widespread modernist assertion. The second part of the essay steers the discussion towards an ‘avant-garde’ trio of Irish writers, offering an extended and detailed characterisation of their poetry. It traces the emergence of an experimental Irish poetry with a selection of examples taken from Denis Devlin’s *Intercessions* (1937), Thomas McGreevy’s *Poems* (1934) and Samuel Beckett’s *Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935), showing how poetic experiments of the 1930s challenge the lyric as a verse form after Irish independence.²

Inspecting the term ‘Irish modernism’, which has been increasingly deployed by literature departments and academies as part of the wider phenomenon of international modernism and postmodernity over the past two decades, raises a number of problems. The first of these arises from the number of Irish writers who decided not to engage fully with modernist experiments in literature; the second from the reception of international modernism by native, continental, and Anglo-American critics who have noted a general apathy in Ireland to the energies of modernist texts. The city of Dublin is rarely mentioned in James MacFarlane and Malcolm Bradbury’s classic 1978 study *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930*, and attracts little coverage in Michael Levenson’s *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* which, revised in 2011, is a standard introduction to the field.³ Nor is it

discussed as part of the various aesthetic and cultural fields that Christopher Butler explores in *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction*.⁴ Terence Brown, a critic with whom I engage frequently here, has been especially critical of the subject in a 1995 essay entitled 'Ireland, Modernism and the 1930s', which features as one of a number of essays compiled in *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism*.⁵

In that essay, Brown cites Thomas McGreevy's 1931 monograph on T.S. Eliot (the first to be published on the American poet) as 'the most persuasive evidence that Ireland and modernism, were, at this time, antithetical congeries of feeling'.⁶ Engaging with what he sees as a protective stance taken up by the Irish poet, Brown finds in McGreevy's study an example of 'that endemic Dublin state of feeling [in which] the dangerous implications for the Christian world-view of the major modernist texts can be rendered anodyne in an oddly Olympian conception of tradition which may be the symptom of a certain self-protective provincialism of mind before the arresting challenge of true and threatening originality'.⁷ For Brown, McGreevy's Catholic reading of Eliot rests upon an unalterable structure of canonical approval 'in which the devout reader may find nothing is at variance with the "strictest Christianity"', so that such disruptions as may be registered by modernist experiment can be swiftly absorbed and co-opted.⁸ Brown attributes this religious anxiety, or '*nostalgie du divin*', to the dilution of modernist energies and to the failure of Irish writers at the time to apprehend any really disturbing originality of form.

The emphasis that Brown places on Christianity as part of Ireland's cultural inheritance advances the view that dissent from religious institutions, creeds, and rituals was necessary to modernism. Seamus Deane has developed this view in a series of four lectures entitled 'Religion, Liberalism and Modernism in Europe and Ireland, 1830–1970' in which he advocates that 'Modernism's ruptures with tradition were predominantly ruptures with religious beliefs, claims, and practices'.⁹ 'It is largely ignored', Deane argues, 'how important religious issues and confrontation between church and state were in the development of liberalism and in the new idolatries of the state which mark the first appearance of modernism as an ideology'.¹⁰ Widening the field of reference from Dublin to mainland Europe, Deane proposes that the history of the Vatican, the Syllabus of Errors (1864), the Declaration of Infallibility (1870), and the reactions against these ecclesiastical forces are critical moments in the first phases of modernist assertion. For both of these literary critics – Brown and Deane – the strengthening of Ireland's religious authority after independence explains the general reluctance of Irish writers to engage with modernist ideas.

During the 1930s, the power of the Catholic Church became increasingly visible within Ireland's government policy. The Thirty-First International Eucharistic Congress, which was held in Dublin in June 1932, resulted in an unprecedented display of partnership between Rome and the new nation, marking fifteen-hundred years of Christianity on the island. Three years before the Eucharistic Congress, the Irish Free State had set up an Academy of Christian Art, which was spearheaded by Count Plunkett, a former director of the National Museum and an ex-Minister for the Fine Arts.¹¹ Though the collusion of ecclesiastical and temporal authorities was often challenged by Irish writers (and, in some cases, used enterprisingly to their advantage), it appears to have been largely uninhibited by the kind of critical reflection that was necessary for modernism to be more seriously pursued and developed. 'Irish artists', S.B. Kennedy remarks unequivocally in a reference book designed to accompany a Dublin exhibition entitled *Irish Art and Modernism: 1880–1950*, 'merely reacted to Modernism; they did not help to shape its development'.¹²

The difficulty that Kennedy encounters when attempting to find evidence of a ruling engagement with modernist ideas reveals much about the incomplete reception of the movement in Ireland. Kennedy's awareness of painters reacting to rather than shaping modernism can be extended to a number of short-story writers who decided not to engage fully with modernist experiments in literature. Two such examples are Seán Ó Faoláin and Frank O'Connor, both of whom had their work published in modernist magazines like *The Dial*, though their extensive treatment of the short-story genre reveals no consistent adoption of modernist ideas.¹³ As Terence Brown has noted in reference to literary production of the decades that followed on from Joyce's 1914 collection *Dubliners*, 'a debilitating air of anachronism' hangs over the predominance of the short story during the 1920s and 30s.¹⁴

Perhaps the strongest evidence of what the cultural mainstream in Ireland had come to represent at this time is to be found in the dramaturgy of the Abbey Theatre. After receiving its first official subsidy from the Free State in 1925, the venue became the first state-subsidised playhouse in Europe, otherwise known as the National Theatre of Ireland (*Amharclann Náisiúnta na hÉireann*). This was an arena in which the previous concerns of the Irish Revival continued to express themselves in romance, folklore, heroic narrative, and in highly-politicised renditions of rural life. Thomas Cornelius Murray's theatrical studies of the peasant class in *Birthingright* (1910), *Maurice Harte* (1912), and *Autumn Fire* (1924) had made this an attractive subject for the national drama, the recurrent success of which would become known as 'the peasant treadmill'.¹⁵ By highlighting the influence of

folklorism as opposed to modernism, I do not mean to ignore the production of more innovative drama during this period. George Bernard Shaw was the most frequently produced Abbey dramatist from 1916 to 1935. An Irish translation of Leo Tolstoy's *Falsely True* [*Fíoraon le Fiarán*] was staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1925. As the years progressed, however, the overall predominance of peasant themes on the national stage began to reflect the hardening of ideological positions. On 5 October 1930, Samuel Beckett wrote to Thomas McGreevy comparing Eileen Crowe's performance as Dervorgilla in Lady Gregory's play of that name to 'Frau Lot petrified into a symbolic condemnation of free trade', noting how the abducted wife of Tiernán O'Rourke had been recast as passive justification for the nation's increasingly isolationist social and economic policy.¹⁶

The vested political interests that now attached themselves to the national drama were by no means representative of the original force with which the Irish Revival had been conceived by Irish poets, the seeds of which lie, as Roy Foster has shown, in 'the literary societies of the mid 1880s, when the Young Ireland ethos was revived'.¹⁷ While the Irish Revival had provided an important framework for radical politics within the oral tradition of song, the movement appears to have lost its force once it moved away from nationalist ballads towards stage melodramas.¹⁸ What I want to emphasise, here, is the translation, and containment, of an earlier vernacular tradition onto the stage during the 1930s, which echoed a strong sense of nostalgia in a country where the Anglo-Irish gentry had been superseded by the Catholic bourgeoisie; where the imaginative intimacy of revolution had been replaced by the Free State; and where the impact of new technologies had been weakened by the new regime's idealisation of peasant and rural life. The state of affairs for Irish writers at this time seems back to front when compared to the socialist politics of their English contemporaries. As James Mays states in his introduction to Denis Devlin's *Collected Poems*:

The choice for writers like Beckett and Coffey was . . . not between Yeats and Marx but between Yeats and Joyce, not whether to join the Communist Party but whether or not to leave the country, not between art and life but between two different kinds of art, each of which contains implications about the way to live. The dilemma of the Irish writer seems at face value more literary and arcane than the choices insisted upon by Christopher Caldwell and Anthony Blunt in the pages of *Left Review*, or explored by Lionel Trilling in *The Middle of the Journey*, but it is not at all.¹⁹

Though we may object to the exclusionary intensity of the 'choices' that Mays outlines, the description of these loyalties from an Anglophone perspective is useful for charting the very different balance of culture and politics in the Irish context. If a utopian spirit remained imperative for a don turned Soviet spy of the *Left Review*, the issues of the 1930s appeared for Irish writers in a rear-view mirror, largely unchanged by national liberation, and positively oppressed by the constraints that had accompanied popular revolution. A tendency to drift into satire became all too common among Irish writers compelled to react against the demands of an increasingly regimented civilisation.

Division and constraint in the public sphere only stiffened following the passing of the Censorship of Publications Act in 1929, which effectively split apart the artistic intelligentsia from the state's 'protection' of the people. The acceptance of this bill by the Free State government and the lack of dissent surrounding its imposition is perhaps the most important event concerning Ireland's cultural production at this time. Even before the attempt to broaden the interpretation of obscenity in existing legislature had been brought before the Oireachtas (the Free State's legislative body) in the summer of 1928, a level of unofficial assent to censorship from the publishing industry meant that the leaders of literary periodicals had to twice face down strikes from printers who refused to work on the contents of modernist texts. Seumas O'Sullivan decided to reject an essay by 'Con' Leventhal on James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) after the Dollard Printinghouse had threatened strike action, and the editors of the short-lived magazine *To-Morrow* had to turn to a printing house in Manchester after Irish printers refused to work on Lennox Robinson's 'The Madonna of Slieve Dun' (1924) and an anonymous essay by W.B. Yeats that ridiculed contemporary bishops.

Further examples of the way in which the censorship act was popularly and imaginatively reinforced are contained in Brendan Behan's 'Letters from Ireland', which were published by the Parisian magazine that Sindbad Vail edited, *Points*. Referring to the outlook of one prudish bookseller, Behan acknowledges to the Parisian editor that

I got a Penguin *Plato's Symposium*. With difficulty: The Censorship can hardly get after him at this time of day, but as one bookman (saving your presence) said to me: 'We saw a slight run on it, and the same sort of people looking for it, so we just took it out of circulation ourselves. After all, we don't have to be made decent minded by Act of the Dáil. We have our own way of detecting smut, no matter how ancient.'²⁰

Looking back on the Free State's rule from the 1970s, the civil servant and writer Mervyn Wall perceived that the state coordination of the 'masses' had been deep and effective and that its censorious legislature had been imposed 'with the will of the entire people' – an observation that is corroborated by other writers who lived through the 1930s.²¹ What is most disturbing about these testimonial accounts of the period is the disappearance of a middle audience between the Free State and the general public. Even the Oireachtas festival (an event that now found an unfortunate namesake in the Free State's legislative body), which had been operating since 1897 as Ireland's first annual festival for the literary and performing arts, was cancelled from 1924 to 1939 due to a lack of public interest.

A more complex example of the impact of censorship on literary development can be discerned from within organisations that sought to capitalise on the restrictive nature of the Free State government. As Lauren Arrington has shown from financial records, government correspondence and minutes from Directors meetings, even the Abbey Theatre, which is usually exempt from accounts of restrictive control during this period, was engaged in strategies of self-constraint that manipulated attempts by government officials to interfere directly in its programme.²² Though the impact of censorship in this instance evidently exceeds in its complexity the ruling of the censors themselves, my purpose here is simply to illustrate the drastic change that it effected on Ireland's cultural situation. Francis Hackett, whose *The Green Lion* (1936) was banned on grounds of indecency, had maintained prior to the revolution that national independence would not equate to a transfer to papal authority – a situation that had been predicted by unionist counterparts in the north. Two decades later, however, in an article entitled 'A Muzzle Made in Ireland', Hackett argues in a parting shot before leaving for Denmark that 'the Catholic Church is giving the lie to every nationalist who, like myself, insisted day in and day out that Home Rule would not mean Rome Rule. Home Rule, through the action of the Censorship, does mean Rome Rule'.²³

So far I have argued that the formal and social direction of Ireland's cultural mainstream, which favoured Catholic canons, heroic mythology and conservative treatments of rural life, remained generally impervious to modernist influences. Yet it is debatable whether the Irish literary scene in the 1930s was any *less* modernist than that of Britain or even the USA, both of which saw, from the perspective of formal experiment, a resurgence of traditional styles. In 1930s Britain, the emergence of W.H. Auden and Graham Greene after Eliot signalled a return to more conventional techniques of

versification and narration; and in 1930s America, the themes and forms of the naturalist novel, particularly in the aftermath of the Great Depression, found arguably their greatest practitioners in John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck. A wider international context for censorship can also be traced from the beginning of the era of the Motion Picture Production Code in Hollywood. On both sides of the Atlantic, the Catholic Church regulated cultural production and appeals to patriotism by merging its public identity with secular and civic institutions. The overall propensity towards naturalistic modes in Britain and America at this time might point to Ireland being seen less as an outlier detached from global movements than as part of a broader, international reaction against modernism. So there is something altogether more complicated about Irish culture post-1922 than an account of the restrictive forces of religion, provincialism, and censorship can imply. And of course a number of key experimental writers still emerged during the 1930s – Kate O’Brien and Elizabeth Bowen among them – whose aesthetic self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness question the strength of any connection that can be drawn between the official cultural climate in Ireland and the work of Irish writers.

In ‘Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde’, which introduces the 1984 edition of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Jochen Schulte-Sasse argues that the subversive intent of avant-garde work is socially as well as technically oppositional. ‘Modernism’, Schulte-Sasse disputes, ‘may be understandable as an attack on traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalised commerce with art’.²⁴ Schulte-Sasse’s distinction may be usefully employed to reflect upon the separate existence of an avant-garde circle in Ireland after 1922 where modernism did not emerge on a large or consistent scale as a result of the Free State’s ideological commitment to a rural and folk aesthetic. The radicalism of the avant-garde position rests upon the expectation of having to take sides: often (but not always) in opposition to a middle-class audience, government ideology, utilitarian preference, or mainstream of traditional art. By applying the concept of the ‘avant-garde’ to three Irish poets of the 1930s – Denis Devlin, Samuel Beckett, and Thomas McGreevy – I am therefore referring to a formula that is both socially and technically antagonistic.²⁵ The history of the concept is helpful in two senses: first, for considering the national culture from which these poets had become alienated; and second, for explaining the centrality of Paris to their work. In the following section, I offer an extended and detailed characterisation of their poetry.

INTERCESSIONS, ECHO'S BONES AND POEMS

Along with Denis Devlin's *Intercessions* (1937), Samuel Beckett's *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935) and Thomas McGreevy's *Poems* (1934) represent some of the most innovative attempts by Irish poets of the 1930s to dismantle existing mythological archetypes and to divest them of their idealist accretions. A reading of poems from these collections will highlight their different approaches to lyric. As Devlin writes in 'Now':

Hail to the Holy Adjective!
Three-score and ten.
 What's beauty, truth, life, love, what's me?
Can we get there?
 Don't know, don't know, don't know.
By candle-light?
 Pull down that gilded rubbish. We
Candle-light.
 In metaphysic, apotheo –
How many miles is it?
 – sise Adjective. Hail Sitwell. We
How many?
 Feed on our own decrease.²⁶

Highly-respected ideas about the self, language, and national belonging, together with the metaphysical beliefs that underpin them, are here subjected to poetic revision. The 'I' no longer suffices as the marker of a centralising or utopian force. Even the stability of the subject that would give voice to the lyric is questioned: 'what's me?' In the Romantic period, the lyric had answered to the conception of the national landscape as fulfilment, the idea of the world as an extension of the self's desires, and the location of the 'I' / 'eye' as the demonstrative source of origin. For the poet operating comfortably within this tradition, the outer world is recovered by a contemplative attitude that sustains both the position of the speaking subject and its desires, mirroring them perfectly as the absolute locus of visionary experience. In 'Now', the demands of national revolution have irrevocably altered the landscape of lyric poetry. The association of national fulfilment with song clearly belongs to an outstripped poetic tradition.

For a new generation looking back at the recent literary past, Devlin, Beckett, and McGreevy's approaches to the lyric bear all the hallmarks usually associated with the avant-garde: the problem of disintegrating subjectivity in modernity; the absence of unity between the self and the social world; and a self-conscious pastiche of literary form. However, the manner in which they introduce political tensions to the

lyric is complex and is not simply motivated by an impulse towards satire. The inclusion of self-interrogative fragments as a central feature of their verse raises more basic questions about a political relationship with society that is no longer available. Especially revealing of the extent to which Devlin's poetry is unable to engage directly with political issues is his decision not to publish the poem 'Transition: To a Violent Communist', which could have easily been addressed to his college contemporary, Charles Donnelly, who died two years later in the Spanish Civil War, aged just twenty-two. Devlin's euphemistically renamed 'Bacchanal', originally entitled 'News of Revolution', anticipates the march of future citizens through a series of jumbling and discordant registers:

Forerunners run naked as sharks through water,
 nose to their prey, have message by heart
 Only envy learnt in feeding the shutfist pistoned
 right machines
 Canaille, canaille, what red horizons of anger
 for humbled lives lie
 Tumbled up in the old times, the long-ferment-
 ing now, canaille!²⁷

Without developing any single image, the passage proceeds through indented lines of deferral that lend a mocking sense of repetition to the word 'canaille' (a French word for 'riff-raff' or 'rabble': from the Italian *canaglia*, 'pack of dogs'). The loss of spatial and temporal coordinates in this dystopian future allows for a mixture of post and pre-revolutionary perspectives that the poem refuses to distil from the appetites of raw, angular, and malignant figures dispossessed of their conscious history. Passive constructions, dangling modifiers and unpredictable line breaks undermine any prospect of resolution at the level of the poetic form.

Devlin was often conflicted about whether or not to publish his poems because of the position he held within the Department of External Affairs.²⁸ As he writes to McGreevy after he had sent him 'Bacchanal' on 22 January 1937: 'I'm not risking my job lightly especially as I have other responsibilities besides myself, but I must publish it'.²⁹ The powerlessness of poetry to effect political change emerges as its own theme in a number of Devlin's poems. One of the most sublime examples of failed agitprop in *Intercessions* is that of 'Daphne Stillorgan', a poem very much written from the perspective of a diplomat. Here, the speaker anticipates the disturbance of a calm pastoral scene, voicing the expectation that the inert locale of a Dublin suburb will soon be blast apart by the

mobilisation of international forces, for which the approaching train in the poem provides an allegory of 'Emergency' Ireland amid the advance of Nazi Germany. The far-off trampling and humid pounding of the train in the lyric antagonises the complacent harmonies of the pastoral mode. Heard along the rails (and here Devlin emphasises the spatial dynamics of the poem as a verbal icon), the sound of the train's approach is likened to the 'thud / Of thousand pink-soled apes, no humorous family god // Southward, storm / Smashes the flimsy sky.'³⁰

The poem weaves in and out of mythic and futurist modes of recognition, playing on the slow confusion of the passengers on the platform to comprehend the deafening apocalypse that is heralded by the train's oncoming:

Scared faces lifted up,
Is the menace bestial or a brusque pleiad
Of gods of fire vagabond?
Quick, just in time, quick, just in time; ah!
Trees in light dryad dresses.³¹

The punctual arrival of the locomotive is marked by its rapid assimilation back into the woodland place spirit of the nymph and faun. The train is distinguished not by its shock tactics but by its failure to unsettle the sleepy indolence of the modest country station. Without alarming the native scene, the sound of the train's arrival signals ('ah!') a return to the anthropomorphosis of the parish pump. The questionable return of the Arcadian imagination ('Trees in light dryad dresses') for which the nymph Daphne serves as an obviously eroticised counterpart is undercut by the final stanza, and the image of the station suddenly evaporates – 'Birds (O unreal whitewashed station!) / Compose no more that invisible architecture' – which brings the poem to a sharp ending on that impulse to de-create.³²

While Devlin's 'Death and Her Beasts, Ignoble Beasts' enters the birds of prey and the birds of song into accretive juxtaposition, the first poem of Beckett's 1935 collection of verse (though the last to be written) is more emphatic in its departure from the airs of Irish melody and is provocatively entitled 'The Vulture'. As is evident from Beckett's annotated copy of the collection, 'The Vulture' is based on the first five lines of Goethe's *Harzreise im Winter* (1777):

Dem Geier gleich,
Der auf schweren Morgenwolken
Mit sanftem Fittich ruhend
Nach Beute schaut,
Schwebe mein Leid.

As a vulture would,
 That on heavy clouds of morning
 With gentle wings reposing
 Seeks for his prey –
 Hover, my song.³³

The opening poem in *Echo's Bones* counters the restorative utterance of the original source by employing death as a metaphor for artistic creation. A disembodied 'skull shell of sky and earth' offsets the transcendent subject of the lyric.³⁴ Hovering above in the title, 'The Vulture' is desperate to insert itself into the main textual body, but is denied by a present participle on two separate occasions: 'dragging. . . // stooping. . .'.³⁵ The predator waits in spite of these deferrals for the 'tissue' to break down before it can finally enter the carcass, just as the reader waits impatiently for a main verb that is indefinitely withheld, and eventually replaced, by the noun 'offal', meaning rubbish.³⁶ 'The Vulture' approaches alone in the accusative, unable to enter into the poem until the very last word.

Where the speaker in *Intercessions* vacillates unpredictably and is continuously invested in outward phenomena (McGreevy even compares Devlin to Saint Francis in his review of the collection), in *Echo's Bones* the verse is much more sharply divided between perceiving subjects and perceived objects.³⁷ A sense of repressed utterance, sexual impotence and failed interpersonal exchange is registered with extreme irony throughout Beckett's experiment with the lyric. In 'Alba', the pronominal address is suspended indefinitely to frustrate a sense of impending arrival ('before morning you shall be here').³⁸ The failure of the speaker to unite in this poem with the second person frustrates the erotic desires of the self, bringing them back to the point of origin: 'only I and then the sheet / and bulk dead'.³⁹ Beckett uses the lyric to characterise an empty awakening across the embroidered patterns of an absent lover's nightdress.

'Alba' first appeared in 1931 in the October-December edition of Seumas O'Sullivan's *Dublin Magazine*. The poem 'Da Tagte Es' ('The Dawn Comes') was also submitted to O'Sullivan's magazine, but was not included in any edition.⁴⁰ Here, 'the sheet astream in your hand' is transposed from an autoerotic wipe into a handkerchief being waved from a death ship.⁴¹ The title of the poem is adapted from the early medieval German poet Walther von der Vogelweide's 'Nemt, frowe, disen kranz' (c.893) ('Take, lady, this wreath') and more specifically from a moment of disillusionment towards the end of that poem where the poet's awakening from the raptures of love suddenly transforms the meditation: 'dô taget ez und nuos ich

wachen'.⁴² 'Da Tagte Es' shifts der Vogelweide's words into the present continuous, enabling this brief four-line poem to recast the manner of awakening latent in the original source as a prophetic sign or symbol for the enforced separation through death of a father and son ('the glass unclouded above your eyes').⁴³

Throughout *Echo's Bones*, Beckett undermines any strategy of personal deliverance that the speaker might derive from the natural world. At the beginning of 'Serena II', a number of Irish locations (the Pins, Clew Bay, and Croagh Patrick) are recast in a twilight setting that resembles the convulsions of an ageing female dog.⁴⁴ In another evening song that Beckett sent to McGreevy, entitled 'Serena III', the division of the speaker from the natural world falls back upon a landscape of sexual insistence free from mythological archetypes: a 'brand-new carnation' of 'mmae', 'Butt Bridge' and 'cock up thy moon'.⁴⁵ In 'Sanies II', a poem in which a voluptuous Barfrau enchants her local audience, the lyrical act of apostrophe is again reversed as a form of sexual pleading or broken supplication: 'I break down quite in a titter of despite / hark'.⁴⁶ Even the line-breaks of this poem are characterised as extorted utterance, the deliverance of which is synchronised with the flagellant strikes of Madame de la Motte's 'cavaletto supplejacks'.⁴⁷

So far we have seen how Beckett estranges the subject from the object of utterance ('dragging... // stooping... // mocked...'), places the self at the centre of the poem, and redirects the perception of external phenomena towards the inward pursuit of a deeper sexual need. The threshold conditions of this strategy repeatedly deny the culminating visions that the lyric once featured. While Beckett recasts dawn and evening songs based on Provençal genres, McGreevy admits live historical pressures into his verse as *faits sociaux* of Ireland's political turmoil. These pressures are often appended to his poems with an exact date and location. 'Crón Tráth na nDéithe', which is postmarked *Easter Saturday, 1923* (seven years on from the day that the leaders of the Easter Rising had surrendered), is one of the few poems to have been written about the Irish Civil War (1922–23). The Irish title of the poem is an approximation of 'Gotterdammerung' ['Twilight of the Gods']. Susan Schreibman has noted that 'Cróntráth' ('dark time'), which is usually one word, may have been separated by McGreevy in order to emphasise the 'dark' element.

When the Custom House took fire⁴⁸
 Hope slipped off her green petticoat
 The Four Courts went up in a spasm
 Moses felt for hope

Folge mir Frau
Come up to Valhalla
To *Gile na gile*
The brightness of brightness
Towering in the sky over Dublin



The dark sloblands below in their glory
Wet glory
Dark night has come down on us, mother
And we
Do not look for a star
Or Valhalla

Our Siegfried was doped by the Gibichungs⁴⁹

Surveying the wreckage from which a new nation has arisen, the speaker questions what has survived and what has perished. *Folge mir Frau* (literally, 'follow me wife') is taken from the final scene of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, where Wotan invites Fricka to 'Come up to Valhalla' (the home of the gods). As we follow this ambition to the Irish '*gile na gile*' ('Brightness of brightness') that Beckett celebrates in his 1934 review in terms of a moment of 'pure perception', the reader is interrupted by what is really 'towering in the sky', which is the smoke rising from the Four Courts, a building that had been occupied by republicans opposed to the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty.⁵⁰ With the visual citation of Wotan's motif, the poem extends Wotan's invitation to mark the event that started the Irish Civil War.

Rhyme and melody are omitted from the lyric the better to prise apart the association of national fulfilment with song, which is essential to the conceit that is set up between Wotan's fortress and the newly-founded Irish Free State. 'Wet glory' is a surprising, orgiastic image. The passage is strangely disconcerting in the manner in which it deploys the standard images of female virtue to undercut the idea of a heroic struggle, with the apostrophes to wives, goddesses, and the vacant appeal to 'mother' forestalled until the end of the following line. What is generated, here, is an idea of political fulfilment that is predicated on Ireland's ability to rise out of mythological identification

and her simultaneous inability to rise out of it. The reiteration of 'glory' as 'wet glory' on this 'Dark night' continues the image of the fertility goddess that inhibits the historicity of self and world, echoing an earlier, more devious allusion to Robert Browning's 'Love Among The Ruins' (1855).⁵¹ Though the passage subverts the idea of a romantic national heritage, the speaker is still determined to ask questions about where the people might be found and how to restore them to their usurped nationhood ('our Siegfried was doped by the Gibichungs').

As I have attempted to read from specific moments at which the lyrical voice falters, an impassable tension is maintained in all three collections of experimental verse between the need for detachment and the need for fulfilment. In *Intercessions*, the speaker vacillates unpredictably between a sense of resistance and attraction to the social world that it cannot easily overcome. Strict abstinence and baroque opulence figure as two accretive registers of this linguistic protest. In *Echo's Bones*, by contrast, the 'I' is split off entirely from the world in which it exists in order to produce a (deviant) poetic persona. In *Poems*, the speaker uses a sense of division from the social world to imply a change in the way that the national landscape is rooted – to 'Set free, set free without fear' as McGreevy translates from Jorge Guillén's poem, 'La salida'.⁵²

Beckett's review of Devlin's *Intercessions*, which was published in the Parisian journal *transition* six months after McGreevy's review of the same collection, offers insight into the kind of artistic freedom demanded by the avant-garde:

Art has always been this – pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric – whatever else it may have been obliged by the 'social reality' to appear, but never more freely so than now, when social reality (*pace* ex-comrade Radek) has severed the connexion.⁵³

Beckett refers to the international Communist leader, Karl Radek, who at the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress had dismissed James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) on account of its 'private language'.⁵⁴ The traditional Marxist explanation for the 'decadence' of *Ulysses* was that the truth of social life had become irreconcilable with the aesthetic quality of individual expression. Beckett's contention, in placing the 'social reality' in quotation marks, of art's diminishing obligation to appear as anything other than the irreducible complex in which we find ourselves foregrounds the impossible allegiance being made to such external standards. The freedom to present material irrespective of the demands of a particular public, tradition, or social structure is bound

up with his understanding of art's capacity to inquire, remake, and even emancipate the expressive act from ideological pressures ('whatever else it may have been obliged by the "social reality" to appear'). In the context of Irish censorship, Beckett's defence of a pure interrogative art bears comparison with Erich Heller's thesis in *The Disinherited Mind* that the modern artist had been left outside of his / her immediate environment due to a peculiar contraction in the circumference of the real.⁵⁵ Here 'social reality' can provide no ulterior motive for art to adhere to, explain, or dissect (as Beckett is only too happy to admit in response to Radek). Rather what is being advanced in this passage is an idea of creative expression that cannot be absorbed by rational use or justification, either as a conscious aim of the poet (who may be unaware of what she or he is communicating) or as an explanation for what his / her 'art' might mean once it has been completed.

NOTES

1. Over the past three decades, scholars and students of modernism have been asked to cover ever more territory both geographically and historically through the rise of international associations that promote Modernist Studies. However, as this essay will show, the permeation of modernism in Irish culture is highly uneven and largely refuted by an empirical overview of its cultural climate during the 1920s and 30s. As a movement of international influence across all of the creative arts during the early twentieth century, 'modernism' indicates a close exploration of the workings of individual consciousness, a distrust of transcendental values and essences, and the abandonment of ornamental features.
2. My thanks to Emma Cheshire, Svetlana Shadrina and Linda Nicol for permission to quote from the Faber & Faber and Cambridge University Press editions of Samuel Beckett's collected poems and letters, which are reproduced here by the kind permission of the Estate of Samuel Beckett c/o Rosica Colin Limited, London. I am especially grateful to Robert Ryan and Margaret Farrington, co-executors of the Estate of Thomas McGreevy, for permission to quote from Thomas McGreevy's *Poems* (1934) and letters. Neither the Irish Writers Centre nor the Irish Copyright Licensing Agency have been able to provide me with any information about the copyright situation concerning the Estate of Denis Devlin, and I have been advised to forge ahead having shown due diligence on the recommendation of James Mays (the editor of *Collected Poems by Denis Devlin* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1989), hereafter referred to as *CPDD*). On his return to Ireland in 1941, McGreevy changed his surname to 'MacGreevy', inserting the Gaelic prefix 'Mac' before his anglicised surname (as Ernie O'Malley had added the 'O' in front of 'Malley'). This essay adopts the earlier spelling of his name for consistency. 'McGreevy' is the name used officially for purposes of registration, the name under which *Poems* (1934) was first published, and the name of address used by his European contemporaries.
3. See James MacFarlane and Malcolm Bradbury's *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1978) and Michael Levenson's *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2011).
4. See Christopher Butler's *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

5. See Terence Brown's 'Ireland, Modernism and the 1930s', in *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.88–103.
6. Brown, p.91.
7. Brown, p.93.
8. Brown, p.92. McGreevy's Catholic reading of T.S. Eliot is arguably more complicated than Brown suggests. He was in fact critical of the devotional turn that Eliot's later work had taken after *The Waste Land* (1922) and disliked 'The Hollow Men' (1925) because of its over-literal use of prayer. See McGreevy, *T.S. Eliot: A Study* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p.59.
9. Seamus Deane charted this proposition in a series of four lectures entitled 'Religion, Liberalism and Modernism in Europe and Ireland, 1830–1970', which were given at the Notre-Dame Institute (O'Connell House) during June–July 2011.
10. Deane, *ibid.*
11. See S. Bhreathneach-Lynch, 'The Academy of Christian Art (1929–1946): An Aspect of Catholic Cultural Life in Newly Independent Ireland', *Éire-Ireland* (Autumn-Winter 1996), pp.3–4.
12. S.B. Kennedy, *Irish Art and Modernism: 1880–1950* (Belfast: Queens University, 1991), p.209.
13. See the August and March 1929 editions of *The Dial* (79.2, and 86.3, respectively), which feature ÓFaoláin's 'The Wild Goat's Kid' (137–143) and O'Connor's 'The Song of Liadain' (189–190).
14. Brown, 'Ireland, Modernism and the 1930s', p.99.
15. Despite the Abbey Theatre's preoccupation with peasant themes, genuine exceptions to the national drama were developed on rival stages. The Dublin Drama League (1919–29), directed by Lennox Robinson and chaired by W.B. Yeats, remained very much a place apart from the official taste of Irish culture during this period, promoting a number of European plays that exhibited surrealist, expressionist, and modernist influences. Though its activities stopped after the 1929 season, the League was temporarily revived by Robinson, George Yeats, and Olive Craig during the 1930s to produce 'uncommercial' plays on Sundays. So unsuited, however, did the organisation prove to Dublin's reactionary climate that its creators found themselves actively opposing plays that they had, in effect, promoted: first in the case of Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* (1928) and then four months later with Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says No!* (1928). See W.B. Yeats's letter of rejection to O'Casey: 20/04/1928; *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Electronic edition, Unpublished Letters (1905–1939)* <http://www.nlx.com/collections/130>; and Johnston's second (and finally rejected) typescript draft of *Shadowdance*, later called *The Old Lady Says No!*, with holograph corrections by W.B. Yeats and others, in the Denis Johnston archive at the University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections.
16. Beckett to McGreevy: 05/10/1930; *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Vol 1, 1929–1940*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.50. Hereafter referred to as *TLSB*.
17. See R.F. Foster, *Words Alone: Yeats and his Inheritances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.143. A 'Great Irish Revival Number' had been featured in the January 1886 edition of the *Irish Fireside*, a popular Irish weekly edited by Rose Kavanagh.
18. For further exposition of the same argument, see Emer Nolan's 'Modernism and the Irish Revival', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, ed. by Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.157–172; and Lionel Pilkington's 'Cumann nGaedal and the Abbey Theatre, 1922–1932', in *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (London: Routledge 2001), pp.86–111.
19. J.C.C. Mays, 'Introduction', *CPDD*, p.24.
20. Brendan Behan to Sindbad Vail, *Points* 15 (Autumn 1952), p.71.

21. See 'Michael Smith Asks Mervyn Wall Some Questions About the Thirties', in *The Lace Curtain*, 4 (Summer 1971), pp.77–86, for a personal account of Irish public opinion and discourse at this time. For book-length studies on the topic, see Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Dublin: Scepter Books, 1968), and Julia Carlson, ed., *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1990). For a revisionist account that inverts rather than reassesses dominant stereotypes about Ireland's cultural isolationism at this time, see Brian Fallon's *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930–1960* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998). Though Fallon does not dispute the existence of restricting forces, he argues that other cultural factors, such as the failure to revive the Irish language, exceeded the negative impact of censorship.
22. See Lauren Arrington, "'We have no gift to set a statesman right": Representation, Reform, Subsidy, and Censorship', *W.B. Yeats, the Abbey Theatre, Censorship, and the Irish State: Adding the Half-pence to the Pence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.1–14.
23. Francis Hackett, 'A Muzzle Made in Ireland', *Dublin Magazine* (new series) 11.4 (October-December 1936), p.16. The experiences that Hackett's Danish wife recounts in her *Irish Diaries* reveal much about the extent of Vatican control over Irish affairs. Her journal was published posthumously in Dublin in 1994. See Signe Toksvig's *Irish Diaries* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1994).
24. See Jochen Schulte-Sasse, 'Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde', in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; first published 1974), pp.vii-lv (p.xv).
25. A similar distinction to that being made here has been used by Alex Davis in *A Broken Line: Denis Devlin and Irish Poetic Modernism* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), *passim*, to indicate a tangential relationship between 1930s Irish poets and various avant-garde movements across continental Europe. Tim Armstrong also employs the concept of an 'avant-garde', specifically in relation to Thomas McGreevy, but also with regards to Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, in 'Muting the Klaxon: Poetry, History and Irish Modernism' (see Alex Davis and Patricia Coughlan, eds, *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp.43–74). No social or technical connection is being suggested here between these 1930s poets and the existing Irish avant-garde – which includes David Lloyd, Maurice Scully, Randolph Healy, and Catherine Walsh – though their importance to contemporary Irish poetry has often been discussed retrospectively in such terms.
26. *CPDD*, p.104.
27. *CPDD*, p.65.
28. Devlin acted as a foreign diplomat in Paris before he was made the Irish Ambassador to Italy.
29. Devlin to McGreevy: 15/02/1937; TCD MS 8112/12.
30. *CPDD*, p.62.
31. *CPDD*, p.62.
32. Like the oncoming train in 'Daphne Stillorgan', the deconstruction of pastoral is vital to the disruptive homecoming of Beckett's 'Sanies I' in which the poet-cyclist loops about the coastal towns and villages north of Dublin leaving a trail of mud in its wake: 'a Wild Woodbine / cinched to death in a filthy slicker'. However, once again, the expected disturbance of a calm pastoral scene fails to remove these animal spirits from the lyric: 'distraught half-crooked courting the sneers of these fauns these / smart nymphs / clipped like a pederast as to one trouser-end'. *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Sean Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), p.13. Hereafter referred to as *CPSB*.
33. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Poems of Goethe*, trans. Edwin H. Zeydel (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1957), p.33. For Beckett's engagement with

- Goethe, especially his transcriptions from Goethe's autobiography and *Faust*, see Mark Nixon, *The German Diaries, 1936–37* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp.65–74.
34. *CPSB*, p.5.
 35. *CPSB*, p.5.
 36. 'Offal' may be a pun on Offaly, a county located in the very centre of Ireland.
 37. McGreevy, 'New Dublin Poetry', *Ireland To-Day* (October 1937), 81–82 (p.81).
 38. *CPSB*, p.10.
 39. *CPSB*, p.10.
 40. Beckett to McGreevy: 26/04/1935; TCD MS 10402: 'the *Dublin Magazine* is out, but my poem not in'. The June 1936 number of *transition* opens with a section entitled 'Vertigral', which places three of the poems that had appeared earlier in *Echo's Bones* ('Dortmunder', 'Malacoda' and 'Enueg II') after James Agee's 'Lyric' and 'A Song'. See *transition 24: a quarterly review* (June 1936), 7–38. All of the poems that feature in this section experiment with dawn and evening settings.
 41. *CPSB*, pp.10, 22.
 42. 'then dawn came and I had to waken' [translation mine; italics added].
 43. *CPSB*, p.22.
 44. 'Serena II', Enc. Beckett to McGreevy: 03/11/1932; TCD MS 10402/35.
 45. 'Serena III', Enc. Beckett to McGreevy: 09/10/1933; TCD MS 10402/55.
 46. *CPSB*, p.14.
 47. *CPSB*, p.15.
 48. The Custom House was burnt down by the IRA on 25 May 1921 during the Anglo-Irish War of Independence.
 49. *Collected Poems of Thomas MacGreevy: An Annotated Edition*, ed. by Susan Schreibman (Dublin: Anna Livia, 1991), pp.19–20. Hereafter referred to as *CPTM*.
 50. See Beckett's 'Humanistic Quietism', *Dublin Magazine* (July–September 1934), pp.79–80. While Beckett was right to centre his review on the importance of this speculative moment, the manner in which he did so has slanted the reception of McGreevy's *Poems*. His selective treatment of McGreevy's asceticism denies the social and political force of his poetry and the very real conceptual obstacles with which it grapples. Beckett makes no attempt to select from a broad range of poetic material, but extracts textual samples from four of the most personal religious passages in McGreevy's writing (the quotations from 'Gloria de Carlos V' and 'Seventh Gift of the Holy Ghost' being particularly apposite for his purposes). There is little evidence to support the view that other writers fell in line with the scope of Beckett's analysis, or even proceeded from the same assumptions.
 51. *CPTM*, p.17.
 52. *CPTM*, p.80.
 53. Beckett, 'Commentaries: Denis Devlin', *transition 27* (April–May 1938), 289–294 (p.289). Denis Devlin had originally asked Beckett to review his collection of poems for *Ireland To-Day*, but it was McGreevy who wrote the review. See Beckett to McGreevy (04/09/1937): 'I would much rather you did the Intercessions for Ireland To-day than I did' *TLSB*, p.530. McGreevy had previously commented on the typescript of *Intercessions*, which Devlin had presented to him for advice on revisions. See Devlin to McGreevy: 22/01/1937 TCD MS 8112/11 and 15/02/1937 TCD MS 8112/2.
 54. See Karl Radek, 'James Joyce or Socialist Realism?' (August 1934), delivered to the Soviet Writers Congress, *Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art*, pp.151–154. Together with the Bolshevik, Dmitriy Manuilsky, Radek had attempted to stage a second German revolution in October 1923 before Lenin died.
 55. Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1952).