Enr'acte: Modernism, History, and Ireland

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Abstract and Keywords
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It is a cramped little state with no foreign policy, Save to be thought inoffensive. The grammar of the language Has never been fathomed ...

(Richard Wilbur)¹
The history of Marxist approaches to culture in recent years has seen a marked reluctance to endorse any single or universal theoretical perspective on the relation between literature and society, and this is indeed but a specific example of the re-examination of the much-abused model of base/superstructure which had dominated official pronouncements in this area.2 The new interest in the work of the Frankfurt school, and that of Walter Benjamin, has provided a more penetrating and sophisticated account of the problem of historical necessity, and of the relationship of continuity to radical change.3 Benjamin, in particular, stresses in ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ that ‘thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.’4 For a historical materialist such as Benjamin it follows that the same is true of history itself. Far from constituting an uninterrupted flow of events, history for him is conceptualized as specific and concrete movements, and discontinuities between these provide the opportunities for revolutionary intervention. The classic instance of such an opportunity is the year 1848.

Nineteenth-century Irish history—within the context of the United Kingdom—appears to break neatly into two such movements, with the Famine of the 1840s and its attendant political aspects acting as a demarcation line between the old and the new. Language change, emigration, and so forth are indicators of the contrast. Yet the younger Irish historians today are busy arguing for a recognition of the modernization of Irish society even before the Famine.5 While this argument is ostensibly directed against an older, nationalist view that nothing flourished under the foreign yoke, it should be noted that the new historiography also serves to conceal the ‘arrest’ of history which Benjamin for one would require. Literary modernism, which follows so promptly in Ireland upon the heels of those modernizing developments documented by the historians, acts with a similar masking effect upon our engagement with the past. Yet it is characteristic of literature (and other forms of cultural production also) that, when subjected to a thorough critique, it yields up both its own strategies and the past it seeks to represent. In Ireland, where literature is preeminent among forms of cultural production and where literature has been long attuned to a so-called national psyche, the demarcation lines and discontinuities can be conveniently traced in psycho-logical terms.
One of the central experiences of Anglo-Irish literature is embarrassment. In narrative terms this may be traced in fictions of shame such as Castle Rackrent, Uncle Silas or, later, Somerville and Ross's Big House of Inver. As one advances through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, sectarianism translated into quasi-racial terms, provides a vocabulary for this theme. But, in a more basic sense, embarrassment characterizes that advance itself—embarrassment at the nearness of Yeats to Aubrey de Vere or William Larminie. So great a poet, so merely competent his precursors. Whether one focuses on Yeats or Joyce, poetry or prose or drama, the sequential history of Anglo-Irish literature reproduces these embarrassing antecedents. George Moore, in whom competence and greatness compete for attention, made such frissons the material of Hail and Farewell—‘dear Edward’ Martyn, with his sublime folly, is truly a central idol in the Anglo-Irish pantheon. But for Yeats and Joyce a history of embarrassment became a matter of artistic pride, the pride of heroic overcoming in Yeats, of devious transfiguration in Joyce. This is not to deny the persistence of a problematic history in the work of both authors, but rather to emphasize the manner in which the two, considered as a binary and mutually dependent cultural production, confront the totality of history.

Taking up, say, McHugh and Harmon’s Short History of Anglo-Irish Literature from its Origins to the Present Day, one encounters a sequence of discontinuities—the ‘older civilization and its literature’ (in Gaelic) ... ‘the Irish Literary Revival’ (in English) ... ‘Contemporary Writing’ (in English) ... When literary history accepts chronology as its model, unspoken and unanswered questions necessarily proliferate. Eighteenth-century antiquarianism, vigorously employed to bridge some of these discontinuities—is it not as much a German or British phenomenon as a ‘Celtic’ one? And beyond this particular issue, perhaps the most accessible general assumption is the unchallenged nationalism of such chronologies. Yet in noting the dislocation of Yeats and Joyce from Irish chronology we are really acknowledging their place in European modernism. To move from a discussion of Charles Lever to the work of Joyce, or from a discussion of early Irish lyrics to the poetry of Yeats, is to cross seismic lines of demarcation.
Modernism—the term is misleadingly unified. While it has its eighteenth-century usage, 'modernism' is decisively altered by the controversy within Catholicism which led in 1907 to *Pascendi gregis*, Pope Pius X's encyclical 'de modernistarum doctrinis'. Modernism, here, is a mode of theological inquiry according to which the Bible and the doctrines of the Church are examined in the light of modern thought. Far from being a unified philosophy or even a single attitude, modernism challenged such unities in a spirit of inquiry and disclosure. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were not so much advocates of modernist approaches as they were channels through which the historical moment of modernism was variously defined. The eclipse of the human individual as conscious and self-regulating shaper of his existence was a common element among these contending reinterpretations of human society. Literary modernism, it need hardly be remarked, manifested itself in different ways in Germany, Austro-Hungary, Italy, Britain, and America, and this largely in relation to the differing forms of individual consciousness in these societies.

Yeats and Joyce are exemplary in this multifarious context in that each denies his inherited orthodoxy and strives to re-create a specifically literary heterodoxy. But the orthodoxy they had lost was itself radically fractured, and fractured in a manner increasingly articulated as a sectarian sociology. A disproportionately large Irish contribution to English-language modernism is central to the elaboration in the nineteenth century of Protestant Ascendancy as ideology. In addition to the imperfect schism achieved by Yeats and Joyce in their rejection of (an already shattered) orthodoxy, it is worth noting that both were sons of men who had in their generation distanced themselves from the conventions and loyalties of their churches. Yeats and Joyce are not primary rebels in any simplistic Oedipal pattern, and when we come to study the father/son bond in Yeats's drama this factor should be recollected.
To return to broader matters, the comparison with English modernism is illuminating. Recognizing that Henry James, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound remain essentially American figures (at least up to the moment of Christian conversion in (p.243) Eliot’s case), and recognizing that Conrad cannot be domesticated without great difficulty, and that E. M. Forster and Ford Madox Ford were never really modernist in their practice (whatever their sensibility)—recognizing all that, we are left with D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf as English modernists. Now, the important point relates not to their marginal or exposed position within the dominant British system (Lawrence as border-line lower middle-class, Woolf as woman) but rather to the contrasting literary histories into which English and Irish modernists might be placed. Lawrence had Hardy and Dickens to look back to; and beyond that, Blake and even Milton provided lines of legitimate descent. Virginia Woolf could cite Jane Austen, in addition to her own family network. They had, in other words, various means of disguising their exposed position even if these did not soothe the wounds inflicted upon them by the bourgeois suburbia of Edwardian Britain. In contrast, Yeats and Joyce found the drafting of a literary pedigree highly taxing. Joyce, in his early days, acknowledged debts to Defoe and Blake, but his place in English literature can scarcely be defined in terms of lineage.7 Yeats, it is true, came to a striking statement of the complexities of ‘lineage’ seen as the symbol of literary tradition:

The ‘Irishry’ have preserved their ancient ‘deposit’ through wars which, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, became wars of extermination. No people, Lecky said at the opening of his Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, have undergone greater persecution. Nor did that persecution altogether cease up to our own day. No people hate as we do in whom that past is always alive. There are moments when hatred poisons my life and I accuse my self of effeminacy because I have not given it adequate expression. It is not enough to have put it into the mouth of a rambling peasant poet:

You ask what I have found and far and wide I go,

Nothing but Cromwell’s house and Cromwell’s murderous crew,
The lovers and the dancers are beaten into the clay,

(p.244) And the tall men and the swordsmen and the horsemen where are they?

And there is an old beggar wandering in his pride

His fathers served their fathers before Christ was crucified.

\textit{O what of that, O what of that}

\textit{What is there left to say?}

Then I remind myself that though mine is the first English marriage I know of in the direct line, all my family names are English, and that I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak, and write, that everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate.\(^8\)

The manner in which Yeats advances from the notion of a historical memory to details of his own family tree, and from that to a literary tradition incorporating Shakespeare and Blake is a graph of specific conceptual shifts in the background to Anglo-Irish literature and its emergent definition. The romantic organicism of the first stage (history to pedigree) is followed by the elaboration of a sequential literary chronology of the classic nineteenth-century kind, and this finally elevated in the passionate, Yeatsian antinomy of love and hate. The interpolated verse from ‘The Curse of CromwelP contributes far more than a mere illustration of hatred, or reason for hatred: being a imaginary translation from Gaelic it reflects with venom upon its own linguistic status as English. Moreover, the title of the poem also enacts a drastic transference—the dramatic speech which follows is \textit{not} the curse but the words of one who is victim of Cromwell’s curse. In all this we see the degree to which Yeats's employment of his own verse adds complexity to what is on the surface a casual commentary on the relation between art and history. The pseudo-translation, which is victim to its own title, encapsulates Yeats's own entanglement in the history he aspires to summarize.
While Yeats became increasingly articulate on the topic of his own relation to Ireland as he advanced in years, Joyce's comments on such matters nearly all date from his apprenticeship as an author. Yet even a passage from 'Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages' (1907) can establish Joyce's antithetical relation to Yeats:

to exclude from the present nation all who are descended from foreign families would be impossible, and to deny the name of patriot to all those who are not of Irish stock would be to deny it to almost all the heroes of the modern movement—Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, Theobald Wolfe Tone and Napper Tandy, leaders of the uprising of 1798, Thomas Davis and John Mitchel, leaders of the Young Ireland movement, Isaac Butt, Joseph Biggar, the inventor of parliamentary obstructionism, many of the anticlerical Fenians, and finally, Charles Stewart Parnell.

In due course these names will undergo different metamorphoses in Yeats's poetry (e.g. 'September 1913') and in Finnegans Wake. But whereas Yeats's citations are predominantly liturgical in form or intention, Joyce's historical allusions from 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room', the 'Cyclops' episode of Ulysses, to the Wake itself deliberately act upon the reader to demand of him that he relate once again the elements of his knowledge. This courteous insistence on the reader's active participation in the work of art generates a serene absence of kinetic anxiety in the prose—nothing is at risk in Joyce's prose. In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man the famous disquisition on 'funnel' and 'tundish' shows Joyce's fictional representative calmly acknowledging—in English—that the language belonged to the English Dean of Studies before it belonged to the Irish undergraduate. If this repeats the Yeatsian concern with the chronology of Irish history and the place of language (p.246) displacement in that chronology, Joyce's fiction takes us further in highlighting some of the crucial strategies of Anglo-Irish modernism—its recourse to a 'primitive past' and a primitive hinterland, its invention of dependence on a vestigial, other culture in the west. In this, as in many other respects, Joyce appears as a critical modernist, embodying in his own work a critique of the larger movement within which that work takes on its local significance.
This sense of modern embarrassment in the face of a nobler past is closely linked to Ireland’s closely administered ability to give evidence of a primitive wr-culture within the United Kingdom. The Scottish clearances had too thoroughly affected the Gaels of North Briton, while the perseverance of the Welsh language was linked to ‘progressive’ features such as mining and Methodism. Only in Ireland did the demo graphic and economic developments of the nineteenth century permit the recognition of an endangered (and hence valorized) older culture open to aesthetic rather than industrial investment and exploitation. The Famine, far from paralleling the clearances, had the effect of rendering Irish linguistic change traumatic, and that will be shown to have immense repercussions within Joyce’s prose. (‘Uneven development’ provides a classic Marxist account of the Irish question, and much could be said along these lines in relation to the economics of the United Kingdom: the transference of this dynamic into the cultural arena has been neglected however.) In relation to development and retardation, Ireland exemplified at many levels the identity of opposites, the paradox of the ‘disunited kingdom’, the sociology of Protestant Ascendancy. Pursuing an exhaustive account of the political unconscious in Conrad and others, Fredric Jameson has pointed to an uneven development, a non-synchronous overlap in Conrad’s own values and experience (feudal Poland, capitalist England); and a reading of *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Nostromo* (fictions of colonial and imperial activity *par excellence*) would acknowledge that overlap. Where Conrad is a special case, a unique biographical dossier, the Anglo-Irish modernists constitute a socially extensive and interrelated structure of cultural productions emanating from a far more central and crucial overlap within the terms of the most advanced capitalist and imperialist economy on the globe. In its very incompleteness, its inability to clothe the fissures in its ideological claims, Protestant Ascendancy is both the political and the unconscious element in this uneven development within the United Kingdom in the period leading up to High Capitalism’s crisis in 1914–18, the period of modernist efflorescence.

From these preliminary remarks about the two great Anglo-Irish modernists upon which this inquiry soon will concentrate, it is possible to proceed to consider the altering shapes of historical experience involved in the shift from the
generation of Maria Edgeworth to that of Joyce. A brief, comprehensive account of the shift could be summarized in tracing the changes in British capitalism from the era of the Napoleonic wars to that of J. M. Keynes, Earl Haig, Lenin, and Hitler. More locally, it seems of course that we are in touch with a concrete social reality when we watch John Giffard and his associates coin 'Protestant Ascendancy', or when we note Maria Edgeworth's use of her family history in the details of *Castle Rackrent* and *The Absentee*. There is a loss of this accessibility as the nineteenth century advances, and this despite the well-known attention of Yeats to the doings of his contemporaries, the well-known attention of Joyce to the minutiae of his native environment. What has really altered of course, in this question of accessibility, is the relation between the individual participant in the historical process and the possibility of articulating an account of this participation. The framework of the Protestant Ascendancy debates—whether in the Irish parliament or the Common Council of Dublin Corporation—is the third-person report, the seemingly olympian record of utterances and observations categorically distinct from those who utter and from those who hear and read. That epistemology is central to Maria Edgeworth's lifelong notion of fiction and fictional narrative—with the crucial exceptions of the narrator in *Castle Rackrent* and the final chapter of *The Absentee*. It is central but threatened, and the recourse to nomenclature in (p.248) the latter novel is a recognition of the complex interactions between different levels of narration—contemporary or historical, ethical or analytical—and between different areas of reception, British, Irish, enlightened rationality, romantic mythologizing, etc. In mid-century, the work of literature which succeeds in establishing a critical dialectic of art and reality does so by means of a highly organized reflexivity (*Uncle Silas*) in which seemingly casual allusion (Chateaubriand, Courtenay, etc.) colludes with absent characterization. The striking instances of a 'concrete social reality' in Le Fanu's fiction are precisely those details which do not appear, those references which either float like unanchored ectoplasm away from their contexts or which are suppressed and denied. Those who cleave to the theory that history tells us what actually happened are hampered by such theory when the crucial questions revolve round the issue of what palpably does not happen. And, as will become clear shortly, the first emergence of a coherent Anglo-Irish literature comes with the binary
opposition of Yeats/Joyce in which the one body of work opposes or qualifies the other. Protestant Catholic, therefore, is not simply a question of what happened in history, it is an aspect of generic form, of the deployment of novel and lyric to the distinctive poles of a sociology in which religious sect rather than class is increasingly invoked.

It is possible now to explain certain omissions from *Ascendancy and Tradition*. First, we are not dealing with ‘Joyce's attitude to history’, which was, as it happens, fairly conventional. We are instead concerned to distinguish between the rival forms of history encountered by, and in, Yeats and Joyce. (Given this preference, there's an inevitable avoidance of sequence in the modernist chapters—in no important sense does Joyce come after Yeats.) Certainly, Wilde and Synge offer an opportunity to relate comedy and tragedy to specific political perspectives: certainly Moore and Shaw provide similar opportunities to extend the discussion. The omission of these figures, however, does not alter the discussion: instead it concentrates it upon central issues—literary history, the Irish contribution to modernism, the relation between the Emerald Isle and the Continent of (p. 249) Europe. On the question of omissions, of course, the possibilities are limitless. Memoirs of the Protestant Ascendancy, from Wynne's *An Irishman and his Family* (1937) to T. R. Henn's *Five Arches: A Sketch for an Autobiography* (1980) offer abundant evidence of the conceptual merger (conspiracy?) between a late nineteenth-century rural bourgeoisie and its hypothetical eighteenth-century forebears to produce another endangered aristocracy awaiting its laureate. Together with Shaw's sporadic autobiographical writings and Elizabeth Bowen’s gravely impressive *Bowenscourt*, these might provide a further argument concerning the moments of transition from encumbered estate to flourishing tradition. Here, we shall concentrate on the concept of tradition itself, its ambiguous place in modernist apologetics, and the construction of Yeats's particular tradition of Irish Augustanism.
If the perception of history changes between 1800 and 1900, and with it the possibility of literary history, so Ireland alters in a variety of complex ways. Too much has been made of its ‘generally remarked upon lack of a capitalist bourgeoisie’. The growth of industry in Belfast and the Lagan valley is only one aspect of a neglected development in nineteenth-century Ireland. The musician Robert Stewart, in bringing concert music from Dublin to ‘Flaxopolis’, underlined in his memoirs the practice of distinguishing between industrial and (agri)cultural Ireland. According to this neglectful but widespread view, the agricultural and the cultural are virtually synonymous—industry being relegated to the subconscious zone generally reserved for the poor and uncivilized. This disdain of industry, however, is but a further identifying feature of an essentially bourgeois society in which profit and residence are separated in the growth of suburbia, and production and the superstructures of society are held apart. The significant characteristic of Irish industrialism is not its alleged non-existence, or its limited scale, but its essentially nineteenth-century structures. Unlike British industry, Irish industry is primarily post-Union in its origins and organization. In Joyce's fiction, the particular concentration of the Dublin employers in the areas of mass consumption and communications is shown to striking effect.11
The over-simplified identification of industry with capitalist advance and of agriculture with an underdeveloped economy dogs Marxist commentary on Ireland as surely as the nineteenth-century denial of industrial activity itself. Birmingham and Ballyporeen existed together within the economy of the United Kingdom: and if Birmingham displayed industrial advance, Ballyporeen saw alterations in landownership which were deliberately limited to the smaller island. From the 1850s onwards, the reform of the Irish landlord system posed a threat to landed estate which British spokesmen for property in great masses of accumulation were not slow to resist. And in the west of Ireland, the establishment of the Congested Districts Board introduced a degree of state participation in the local economy without parallel elsewhere in the Kingdom. Synge’s Aran Islands, for example, had a fishing industry using large trawlers from the east coast and linked directly to the London markets. As in Conrad’s non-metropolitan world, it is the transitional status of ‘the west of Ireland’, the tangible insecurity of its vestigial precapitalist social relations, already shot through with practices deriving from the metropolis and the developed world, which is significant. One might say that for the full operation of industrial capitalism in the United Kingdom, it was necessary for one sector of its society to be non-industrialized, and only subliminally capitalized. It was Ireland’s historic destiny to fulfil this aesthetic function.

The Ireland of C. S. Parnell and Michael Davitt, of the Land War and the Home Rule campaign, was not the abject primitive outback occasionally advanced for propagandist purposes. It had a sizeable industrial sector, and an extensive middle class—though both were hidden in part by the heavy tapestry of Protestant Ascendancy ideologies. The social composition of the Land League was petit-bourgeois rather than peasant-based, and the very terminology of Home Rule loudly proclaimed a domestic metaphor in keeping with bourgeois attitudes. Moreover, the labour movement had active links with Scotland, with the English ports and great cities. In America, the experience of Fenian exiles and other emigrants was—unlike the Germans of the mid-west for example—primarily urban and industrial. Ireland indeed had its place in the industrialized world, but it was a place conditioned in the consciousness of native and outsider alike by the contradictions of its role as a metropolitan colony.
Spectral facticity and abstract consciousness, these are one set of poles between which these contradictions may be detected in the cultural sphere. Such terms are unfamiliar, but the social realities which lie behind them have been with us for over a century. The nineteenth-century preoccupation with fact—cf. Mr Gradgrind, Burke's *Peerage*, positivism—had its obverse, phantom side in corporal punishment, the silverspoon novel, theosophy: in this it displays its pervasive and systematic operations in the factory system and in philosophy. The experience of facticity with spectral intensity, and the increased abstraction of the individual consciousness, are both functions of reification, the process whereby relations between people take on the character of a ‘thing’.\(^\text{13}\) Whether one looks to Marx's analysis in *Das Kapital* or to the style of Dickens or Tennyson, the revelation of ‘thingyness’ in human relations is a familiar Victorian theme. While positivism held sway in crucial areas of intellectual debate—history, theory of knowledge etc. —in much of the developed world, and with it its valorization of ‘fact’ abstract consciousness had its concentrations in certain metropolitan colonies where the double-vision of a society which is at once other-than and identical-with its mother (p.252) culture requires a phantom objectivity so seemingly all-embracing and absolute as to exclude evidence of its duality. Ireland, Algeria, Hungary at different historical moments and in differing political circumstances exemplify this cultural condition.
The entire conjunction of High Capitalism in its imperial phase, Ireland in its complex social development within the leading capitalist economy, literature in Ireland shifting qualitatively from the provincial margins to the centre of Anglophone culture, the entire conjunction gives rise to concepts and questions rarely aired in literary criticism of the Revival. After so many pages hunting historical allusion amid the tasteless productions of minor authors, or exploring dark metaphors in obscure political pronouncements, may we not now relax into the familiar attitudes of Practical Criticism applied to familiar texts by undisputed genius? Having sketched the background can we not now sit upon the verandah of our culture and contemplate equally dislocated, autonomous poems and stories? Much could be written on the violence implicit in such contemplation, its violation of relation and reflection, its self-mutilating projections. And the truth is that Practical Criticism—as distinct from close reading within a larger interpretive strategy—is the logical extension of that epistemology by which text is taken as an unchanging object of contemplation. If Leavis is introduced to counter the sterility of Practical Criticism in its postwar seminar, we should recall Leavis's own historically significant impatience with Joyce and the striking inability of Leavisite critics to come to terms with the Irish modernists. It is too late to reintegrate Yeats and Joyce to the curriculum of English letters, except in the most obscurantist denial of the European context in which the academic discipline itself might be ultimately judged. It is with Joyce that we can look for the first comprehensive attempt to ‘write through’ the historical experience of modernism, with a critical dimension which will subsequently inform our several approaches to the poetry and drama of Yeats.

Notes:


(2) The British discussion of the base/superstructure metaphor, while it has been invigorated recently by the work of Raymond Williams, was effectively initiated by E. P. Thompson in ‘Socialist Humanism’, *New Reasoner* (1957), vol. 1.


(7) For treatment of this question of Joyce's place in English literature see the contributions of Philip Brockbank (pp. 166–84) and Timothy Webb (pp. 30–55), in W. J. Mc Cormack and Alistair Stead, edd. *James Joyce and Modern Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).


