

Böss, Michael, and Eamon Maher (eds.).
*Engaging Modernity:
Readings of Irish Politics, Culture, and Literature at the Turn
of the Century.* Dublin: Veritas, 2003

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The theorisation of 'Oireland' continues apace. In literary and cultural criticism over the past 25 years or so, 'the ould country' has been re-read, re-thought, re-imagined, re-invented, post-colonialised, deconstructed and post-modernised many times over. In these critical exercises, the concept of modernity is often explicitly or implicitly deployed as both litmus paper and analytical coagulant. As always, Yeats managed to distil the national dilemma in a memorable phrase or sentence: "We Irish, born into that ancient sect / But thrown upon this filthy modern tide. ..." Yeats may refer to himself as "Irish," but his own complex and hyphenated Anglo-Irish identity was for ever in competition with the Irish-Irish sect, and the progress and fate of this confrontation is intimately interwoven with the history of early modernity at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The vexed question of an Irish identity and the conflict between tradition and modernity dominated much of Irish criticism during the 20th century.

The overall historical perspective adopted by this book includes both early and late modernity, but the focus is on developments in the Irish Republic in the second half of the last century. The publisher's blurb on the back cover refers to "a major paradigm shift," where "we have travelled from being a rural-based, religious, traditional, insular country, to a secular, highly prosperous economic hi-tech centre." Inside, Tom Inglis, in a first-rate article dealing with the role of the Catholic Church, makes the same point: "[Ireland] underwent rapid social change during the last half of the twentieth century, changing from a predominantly pre-modern rural society in 1951, to a predominantly modern, urban, industrial society by the end of the century." If these rubrics inadvertently manage only to suggest the separate ideas of departure and destination, and a journey from

one extreme to the other, the introduction and the articles in this book soon make clear that the real drama of this story resides somewhere in between. It is to the great credit of this collection of articles that it finds its voice in the ambiguous in-betweenness of various intermediate positions in betwixt these extremes. Ireland seems to have travelled more quickly and a longer distance through modernity than many other western countries, which makes the exploration of this experience an urgent and exciting project.

These articles originated as papers read at a conference held the University of Aarhus in 2001 under the aegis of The European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies. It may be that the original conference had a fair number of 'political' contributions, but in this collection there is much less of Irish politics and culture than there is of literature. The majority of the contributors give literature as their specialisms, and their articles cover a wide variety of disparate subjects and writers from the modern period of Irish literature. This places the onus on the introduction to undertake the task of moulding a framework that can hold the separate parts together. By and large, it is quite successful in doing this. The reader is introduced to the major issues in Irish modernity at the turn of the century from a mainly sociological point of view, and the editors set the terms of reference for the undertaking. They "have asked the contributors to keep the main theme of the book in mind in their analyses and discussions," but the degree to which this has been done varies considerably. To some extent, this is inevitable, and need not detract from the book's overall ambition. The chapter headings ("I: Taking Stock, II: Religion, Morality and the Modern State, III: Re-imagining Nation and History, and IV: Exploring Selves") reveal the major concerns of the project, even though some articles seem to stray further from its central aim than others. There is some tension between the socio-political-economic preoccupations of the introduction and the early parts on the one hand, and the literary essays on the other, but, in general, the whole book very competently reflects the cut and thrust of current debate in Irish studies.

The introduction surveys the scene from a largely sociological perspective. At times the editors rely rather heavily on specialist sources theorising the concept of modernity in general, but, at the same time, the immediate critical context of Irish studies is always kept within easy reach. The European perspective is emphasised, and the editors claim that the fact that the conference was held in Denmark and that many of the

contributors were not Irish “added a dimension of objectivity and distance to the essays which enhances their relevance.” The point about “objectivity” may be a moot one, but if it serves to highlight the question of critical authority in Irish studies, it is well worth making. At times, international conferences in Irish studies have in the past seemed to privilege an Irish or Irish-American outlook.

Europe may be a vital testing ground for Irish modernity. But whereas, in modern times, most Irish people have known what Britain and America stood for, Europe was always a strangely face-less entity, devoid of emotion and never giving rise to the strong responses generated by the other two. That fact that Europe was not Britain may have stood it in good stead in Irish eyes, but the close historical relationship between Europe and Ireland in pre-modern times had been largely forgotten. In Brian Friel’s *Translations*, set in 1833, Hugh’s glorious put-down of the forces of the British Empire (in the person of Yolland), “[w]e tend to overlook your island,” may reflect an earlier stage in the historical relationship between Europe and Ireland, but it held little real relevance for most Irish people during first three quarters of the 20th century. In the mid- to late seventies the EU first became the milch cow that bought Irish farmers their new Mercedes cars, and later, through Erasmus and Socrates (two good European names), mobility in Europe became a reality for Irish students. Gradually, Irish thought processes began to bypass Britain, and today Europe is closer to Ireland than ever before. This, however, does not mean that the Irish know what Europe is. The historian J. J. Lee takes a remark made by the Irish Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) Mary Harney (that Ireland was “spiritually closer to Boston than Berlin”) as point of departure for an interesting exploration of Irish images of Europe. He finds them vague and confused, and argues that “[i]t is high time that the study of Irish images of the rest of the world began to be subjected to systematic scholarly analysis. ‘Europe’ is the most daunting challenge of all in that respect, particularly as so many Irish images are inescapably intertwined with Irish images of England.” England/Britain cannot be eradicated from the national Irish folk memory, but through a better understanding of Europe may come a more positive and less haunted understanding of England/Britain.

Dermot Bolger’s novel *The Journey Home* has become a central text in contemporary Irish literature, and, whatever its purely literary merits, it has succeeded in repelling or attracting Irish readers according to where they stand in the revisionist debate. In Bolger’s Irish eyes, Europe is now

threatening to become the new bogeyman of modernity, as bad an influence as England/Britain used to be. Michael Böss tries diplomatically to mediate between two contrasting Irish responses to Bolger by arguing that his early novels require a more impartial reaction, one that sees them as representing “a critical engagement with modernity through a literary appropriation of alternative fragments of an imagined past.” This is a good example of the kind of input that a more European and less confrontational approach might have in Irish studies criticism. Europe also looms large in Elke D’hoker’s treatment of intertextuality in John Banville’s work, “The German Connection: John Banville versus R.M. Rilke,” and (less largely) in an article by Elisabeth Delattre on Derek Mahon, “From the cold interiors of northern Europe’: The Poetry of Derek Mahon – Content, Intertext.” In a sense, it is also Europe which has the last word in this book, in the form of an intriguing article by Eugene O’Brien on “Derrida, Heaney, Yeats and the Hauntological Re-definition of Irishness.” O’Brien uses Derridean terminology to measure the level of Irishness in the two most important Irish poets in the 20th century. The national identity/identities of Yeats and Heaney, he argues, could be seen as more complex, more hybrid, more displaced, more pluralist, inclusive and diversified (more European?) than is sometimes suggested in the binarity of an essentialistic British-Irish context. Contemporary poetry is also covered by an article on Richard Murphy’s historical poem *The Battle of Aughrim* (by Bernard Escarbelt), and Eiléan Ni Chulleanáin’s relationship with her readers on the issue of “disclosure” is examined by Lucy Collins.

If there is a problem with Europe here, it might be to do with James Joyce, and his almost total absence from this book (he is mentioned once or twice). In *Engaging Modernity* Yeats is the man, but whatever Derrida’s ghostly theories may unearth, he is, in the generality of things, perceived as a poet firmly rooted in the rural west of Ireland. Joyce, on the other hand, is associated with the city of Dublin and with continental Europe, and it would have been interesting to see both his Irishness and his European credentials tested as part of this book’s engagement with modernity.

Early modernity is (again) represented by Yeats in Derek Hand’s “After the Big House’: W.B. Yeats’s *Purgatory*: All things Must Pass,” an essay which is very much in the same conciliatory mould as many of the others. To Hand, *Purgatory* illustrates Yeats’s post-nationalist phase, when he had become disillusioned first with Irish nationalism and then with his own alternative sense of identity in the Anglo-Irish tradition. Yeats was now ready for a less narrow definition of nationhood.

The work of the late Victorian novelist and poet Emily Lawless is a contested space in Irish lit crit. Yeats published some unkind words about her, but he also listed two of her novels among the best Irish books. When Ann Owens Weekes published *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* in 1990, Lawless's work was excluded "because of its sentimentality and sensationalism." From such critical contradictions and controversies Heidi Hansson composes "Writing the Interspace; Emily Lawless's Geographical Imagination," an essay which charts Lawless's fictional response to the Land War at the end of the 19th century. Hansson successfully denationalises the idea of the land and sees the intense relationship between the individual and the landscape in Lawless's novels as an exemplary and idealistic alternative to national boundaries and property rights. It is a solid, engaging and accomplished piece of writing. It is, therefore, a little disappointing to find that the argument is partly couched in more limiting and restrictive terms. Lawless, Hansson argues "conveys a particularly feminine, if not explicitly feminist, sense of nature." This is immediately contradicted in the claim that Lawless "demonstrates how an indecipherable landscape can function to shape an identity beyond class, gender and race distinctions." The fact is also that Heaney's work, as Eugene O'Brien suggested in his contribution (see above), has gone through a process of dissemination and internationalisation in terms of its attitudes to identity and the land, and Heaney has become, in Fintan O'Toole's expression, 'a poet beyond borders,' where the issue of the land has entered a postnationalist and more universal stage.

The issue of religion and secularisation plays a major role in any discussion about Irish modernity. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theories about social and religious fields and capital, Tom Inglis gives an account of the relationship between the Irish and their Catholic Church, historically and today. It should be read by anyone interested in the subject for its concise completeness and graphic clarity ("Catholics moved from seeing themselves as sinners to questioning the sin"). Catherine Maignant examines the effect of secularisation on individual belief systems and the potential end of the Irish Church. Spirituality, she concludes, will survive in other shapes and forms (pantheism, veneration of Mother Earth, neo-pagan beliefs and practices, or in André Malraux's mystical ideas about a "*réenchantement du monde*"), and it may, in any case, be too early to write off the Catholic Church. The impression of change and flux in the field of religion in contemporary Ireland is counterbalanced by Eamon Maher's "cursory glance" at the way

Catholicism is portrayed in John McGahern's work. Maher finds McGahern's treatment "balanced and fair," and the article may serve as a reminder of the role that the church traditionally played in Ireland, but the argument feels a little slight compared with the verve and vigour of some of the other articles.

Clare Wallace's essay on "Versions and Reversions: the New Old Story and Contemporary Irish Drama" is a little short to do full justice to the scope and variety of Irish drama today but does manage to give a taste of some current concerns. Not surprisingly, "[t]he theatrical phenomenon that is Martin McDonagh" gets an essay to himself (by Michal Lachman). It deals, notionally, with the theme of "Happy and in Exile?" in his 'Leenane Trilogy,' but is more of an effort to come to terms with the nature of McDonagh's theatre and his place in the tradition of contemporary Irish drama. The novelty and distinctiveness of McDonagh's theatre is undeniable, and it will be interesting to see what happens if/when the novelty wears off. Synge and Quentin Tarantino are often mentioned when discussing McDonagh's work. Synge is now one of the classic Irish dramatists. Tarantino's place in film history at the moment is a little more uncertain.

At times the copy editing in *Engaging Modernity* seems a little uneven ("national or even continental boarders [sic]," page 199), and the book has no index, which is a major shortcoming in an academic work. Some articles feel a little peripheral to the main concerns of the book, but are, in themselves, good examples of current interests in Irish studies and deal with important contemporary writers. Although they are not openly referred to in *Engaging Modernity*, the memory of Daniel Corkery's three classic criteria of Irishness, nationalism, land and religion, which he posited in 1931 as a contrast to the English national being, still haunt any discussion about Irish history and culture. Ireland has moved on since then, and these concepts have taken on new and different meanings under pressure from modernity and from modernism/postmodernism. For anyone interested in the progress of the Irish journey through modernity, this book will make an excellent guide.

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