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W. B. Yeats and Modernist Poetry

I

Widely acclaimed as a major modernist and a foundational Irish-national poet, W. B. Yeats is essential to any discussion of Irish-modernist poetry. However, among the major Irish modernists – Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett – only Joyce's modernism is uncontroversial, not least for generational reasons. Yeats was born twenty years before and Beckett twenty years after most of the acclaimed high modernists, who, like Joyce, were born in the 1880s. A Victorian and self-professed “last Romantic” as well as a modernist, Yeats upsets the supposition that modernism constitutes a radical departure from what precedes it. Yeats's publishing career corresponds exactly with the c.1890–1939 periodization of modernism: Oscar Wilde favorably reviewed Yeats's *The Wanderings of Oisín* in 1889, and – at Yeats's request – “Under Ben Bulbin” was published in Irish newspapers after his death in 1939. Although Beckett is less known for his poetry than for his prose and plays, his poems in English and French extend from the prize-winning “Whoroscope” (1930) to “Comment Dire” (1989), so that their joint poetic production spans a century. Sanctioned by the expansionist trend of new modernist studies, many critics treat “modernism” as covering the long twentieth century, or as radical aesthetic responses to modernity from roughly Charles Baudelaire to the present. This essay adopts that longer perspective, but concentrates on the 1930s–1950s period, between the heyday of 1920s high modernism and the second efflorescence of Irish poetry in the late 1960s.

The 1930s–1950s post-independence period is at the heart of an ongoing canonical debate about the application of the “Irish modernist” rubric to an experimental strand of Irish poetry. “Modernist” has been deployed to distinguish a group of Paris-based expatriates from other Irish poets of the 1930s and to authorize a genealogy of “true” modernists by retroactively linking a Paris coterie – primarily Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, along with

Thomas MacGreevy and Blanaid Salkeld and, above all, the by-then lionized Beckett – to the experimental poetics envisioned by the poet-editors of the New Writers Press, Michael Smith and Trevor Joyce. In an oblique yet cunning stratagem to endow the nascent avant-garde group with Beckett's imprimatur, Smith and Coffey reprinted a little known essay by Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry" (1934) in the New Writers' journal, *The Lace Curtain* (No. 4, 1971), to endorse their agenda for innovation.¹ Beckett's essay praises Devlin and Coffey as "without question the most interesting of the younger generation of Irish poets" because they comprehend "the rupture of the lines of communication" and "the breakdown of the object" in salutary contrast to the "flight from self-awareness" evinced by "our leading twilighters" whose (insular) Irish residency and themes consign them to "antiquarian" status.² The revisionist version of Irish modernist poetry was recognized, with reservations, by Alex Davis and Patricia Coughlan's 1995 essay collection, *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s*, and, because it dovetails with a longstanding alignment of modernism with cosmopolitanism and Ireland with traditionalism, it became a critical orthodoxy.³

All literary genealogies and canons highlight some and occlude other aspects of the field in question, but this problem is exacerbated by the valorizing valence of "modernist," which functions here and elsewhere as a desirable and resilient "brand" of literary distinction. "Irish" and "modernist" are opposed where the latter is assumed to mean "international," although the symbiosis between them has boosted the mutual stature of both since the postwar expansion of Anglo-American liberal arts education. The tension between "Irish" and "modernist" can be seen in how critics often downplay the nationality of eminent "international" modernists. Thus Joyce's unmistakably Irish avant gardism is commonly attributed to his émigré status, whereas the epithet "Beckettian" is a byword for a condition of alienated postnational modernity. Furthermore, Joyce, Beckett, and their advocates tend to emphasize their ultramodernism to widen the gulf separating them from Yeats and their revivalist precursors. "Recent Irish Poetry" draws on the polarizing rhetoric of modernist manifestoes to rally an enlightened déraciné Irish vanguard against its derogated antithesis, a retrograde neo-Yeatsian cultural nationalism and revivalism. The polemic denounces neo-Yeatsian bards without quite distinguishing their host from the "antiquarian" stigma assigned to his pullulating fleas, while the "leading Twilighters" tag elides the vibrant mixed registers of the Yeatsian oeuvre, including the formidable late poetry.

The "national"/"international" dichotomy disregards the finest Irish modernist poet of the decade after Yeats, Louis MacNeice. Coughlan and Davis omit MacNeice "because, despite his poetry's complex negotiations

with his Irish background” his career unfolded largely “within English cultural problematics,” leaving it open to conjecture whether his exclusion from both the Paris-centered modernists and the Free State-oriented nationalist camps is attributable to his affiliation to Northern Ireland or to the English Macspanday poets.⁴ Although Beckett finds “much in Mrs. Blanaid Salkeld’s *Hello Eternity* (1933) that is personal and moving,” Coughlan and Davis concede that she and others “are inevitably squeezed out of the binary accounts (whether Revivalist/modernist or Northern/Free-State-based)” of Irish literary history.⁵ Moreover, the partisan binary elides the differences within both factions and effaces their commonalities.

The polemical binary needs to be replaced with a more temperate and nuanced critical analysis, one that entails reappraising Yeats’s relationship to a set of values that appear to spurn him. I first explore the enduring yet controversial symbolic influence of the bardic Yeats-persona on Yeats’s reception, and on the enhanced international profile of Irish poetry and literature. The next section examines how a range of mid-century poets turn to Joyce and T. S. Eliot to negotiate the moral, cultural, and political prescriptivism of the Catholic Church and Orange Order in a partitioned Ireland. Finally, I explore how women’s marginalization from Irish public and literary spheres and the masculinist bias of literary canonization obscured the work of mid-century Irish women poets and spurred the efflorescence of feminist poetry and critique in the early 1970s.

II

Yeats harnessed the combined symbolic capital of the modernist institution of “major author” and the Irish institution of “national poet” to secure international and national recognition for his role as a nation-builder and to buffer his creative autonomy against partisan pressures. A sacral aura surrounds the “great” modernist opus or writer, and the major high modernists – Eliot, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Yeats, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound – form a loose clerisy of canon-makers whose *ex cathedra* judgments (Beckett’s pun) make them gatekeepers to literary acclaim. The “first principle” of Yeats’s poetics was to render the poet-persona “part of his own phantasmagoria” and to transform the phantasmagoric Yeats-in-the-oeuvre (persona and style) into “something intended, complete” over the course of his career.⁶ Yeats and Joyce alike conceived the task facing them as writers and the task confronting the colony and as-yet-unconstituted Irish nation as symbiotic inaugural acts of “forg[ing] in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.”⁷ Although their self-canonizing modes of remaking their bicultural colonial heritage are strikingly different, they both embed an

autobiographical writer-persona in localized Irish settings peopled with historical and fictional personages, and envisage their recursive refashionings of the national bard and Dubliner personae as a decolonizing literary praxis. Their combined endeavor made Irish topography, legend, history, and vernacular Irish-English part of the Anglophone literary imagination, and Irish poets benefit from, but are also potentially constrained by, the market niche created by the “Irish” brand.

In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), which first applied the “modernist” rubric to the period, Laura Riding and Robert Graves place Yeats among those with “neither the courage nor the capacity to go the whole way with modernism.”⁸ Yet because modernism lies in its “independence,” “intelligent ease,” and the enlargement of “the limits of reference, diction, and construction in poetry,” and “the best poets ... can be called modernist if only because they are good, and because what is good always seems advanced,” the 1923 Nobel Laureate nevertheless makes the grade.⁹ Neither this nor Beckett’s criticism would have ruffled Yeats. He habitually invokes modernity to lament its depredations, theatricalizes his poet-persona as a revenant from a bygone age, and would rather serve as modernist “antitype” than prototype. A curmudgeon who fulminates against “modern heterogeneity” as he stands observing “discordant architecture, all those electric signs” on O’Connell Bridge, he once astounded Woolf by declaring that it would take thirty generations of associative accretions before the steamroller could replace the spade as a fit symbol for poetry.¹⁰ An archaic modernist, innovative traditionalist, and populist elitist, Yeats’s relish for adversarial stances is a rare unequivocal modernist trait. A contrarian in both the colloquial and Blakean senses of the word, Yeats maintains that “[w]e make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” by struggling “to the death” with a series of masks and daimonic muses to create a “contrapuntal” verse that combines past and present into “a vivid speech that has no laws except that it must not exorcise the ghostly voice.”¹¹

Yeats first “found [his Irish] theme” when introduced by John O’Leary to the Young Ireland poets’ mode of “speak[ing] out of a people to a people ... behind [whom] stretched the generations.”¹² The Yeats-persona discourses with an apostrophized Irish people in the communal mode of the Young Ireland poets and of Walt Whitman’s performative constitution of a national poem in *Leaves of Grass* (1855–92), and at the same time conveys the oracular aura of a druidic Gaelic *file* (poet-seer). He made the Sligo locale of his childhood legendary by transposing local orature¹³ into literature in *The Celtic Twilight* (1893). Yeats contends that the disjunctive transposition of peasant idiom into print renders the inflections of passionate

utterance audible on the page because the confrontation between “the old world that sang and listened” and the “world that reads and writes” is an ever-present “antagonism” in Irish imagination and intellect.¹⁴ Translating between spoken and literary idioms was Yeats’s primary means of developing a “contrapuntal” Irish-English literary vernacular, which blends “the ghostly voice(s)” of vestigial Gaelic syntax, song-meters, and vehement Irish speech into the measured cadences of canonical English verse.¹⁵

Adept at cultivating multiple overlapping audiences, each aware of its coexistence among others, Yeats understood the need to harness established forums and traditions to underwrite and amplify his hieratic authority. He realized early that “if Ireland would not read literature it might listen to it, for politics and the Church had created listeners[;] [he] wanted a Theatre – [he] had wanted it for years,” and fine-tuning acoustic intimacy between poet and audience was crucial to his literary praxis.¹⁶ The ideal of a theater for mediating the vatic authority of resonant symbolism became increasingly pressing when Yeats realized the necessity to translate and retell Irish myth and legend in an English “with an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style” to establish a parallel “de-Anglicizing” platform to the Gaelic revival.¹⁷ The deliberate fashioning of a hybrid English on the Abbey stage was crucial to the formation of Synthetic Scots, Northumbrian English, and African-American vernacular Englishes, as was attested, respectively, by modernists Hugh MacDiarmid, Basil Bunting, James Weldon Johnson, and Sterling Brown.

The *topos* of the Yeats-persona in colloquy with his Irish-national audience simultaneously creates a forum for perpetuating his symbolic afterlife in the Irish imaginary and relays the scene of bardic rapport to an international readership. The hyperbolic performance of the bardic Yeats-persona in “The Tower” (1928) and “Under Ben Bulben” (1939) dictating his “will” and orchestrating his posterity to a summonsed Irish assembly, comprised of ancestral, unborn, local, and diasporic auditors, provides such a platform. The Yeats-in-the-tower persona displays the aristocratic hauteur of a hereditary bardic caste and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy as he formally bequeaths the bardic mantle to the “young upstanding men” who succeed him. No Oedipal upstart shall usurp such assured supremacy.

W. H. Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” honors and dethrones the apostrophized dead poet by restating the exhortational trimeters of “Under Ben Bulben[‘s]” in his own words: “With your unconstraining voice / Still persuade us to rejoice.”¹⁸ The elegy’s double-voiced praise-abuse conveys mixed messages about Yeats’s influence and the influence of poetry as such, including the reassuring assertion that “[t]he words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living” and the blunt refutation of the oeuvre’s

implicit counter-assertion: “For poetry makes nothing happen.” MacNeice, whose modernist verse embraces the discordancy of urban modernity and the “incorrigibly plural” heterogeneity “of things being various” relates to Auden’s skeptical estrangement.¹⁹ In his monograph, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, MacNeice recalls that when he first read *The Tower* (1928) as an Eliot-obsessed young poet, it seemed “frigid, unsympathetic” and “mannered,” whereas he now finds similar “mannerism” in Eliot.²⁰ Yeats eludes easy categorization, MacNeice astutely observes, because he is “peculiar – almost, indeed, self-contradictory – in that he fuse[s] Symbolist doctrine with nationalist doctrine.”²¹

“To Ireland in the Coming Times” (1892) restates in verse Yeats’s defense against O’Leary that his study of “magic” is essential to “what [he] believe[s] to be a greater renaissance – the revolt of the soul against the intellect – now beginning in the world.”²² The “red-rose-bordered hem / Of her” blends Rosicrucian symbolism and the Dark Rosaleen, a sovereignty muse of the Jacobite *aisling*, to represent archaic poetic wisdom. Yeats mounts a meta-metrical argument that the poet’s ability to plumb “the deep” of “unmeasured mind” (the *Anima Mundi* / Great Memory evoked by symbols) shall distinguish his “rhymes” over those of his Irish precursors:

*Nor may I less be counted one
With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,
Because, to him who ponders well,
My rhymes more than their rhyming tell
Of things discovered in the deep,
Where only body’s laid asleep.*²³

Anima Mundi is often imagined as a store of visual images and symbols, but the sonorous dimension of Great Memory also matters. Evocative intonational cadences and resonant timbres or idioms arouse a responsive communal chord among those who experience a similar attunement. Even at its most vestigial, a reflex spark of familiarity enkindles a sense of belonging among those who harken to the bard’s register. “The Symbolism of Poetry” (1900) and “Per Amica Silentia Lunae” (1917) theorize how the “indefinable yet precise emotions,” “moods,” or “daimons” evoked by harmonious relations of sounds, colors, and forms prolong “that moment of creation” through rhythm “hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety” so that “the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.”²⁴ Rhythm, rhyme, and symbol – the heightened formal elements of verse – stimulate the reverie-like state in which individual and collective memory coalesce and reconfigure the subliminal receptivity that orients aisthesis. It is at this subliminal “gut” level of aesthetic

receptivity that the living modify the poet's words, and the makers of symbolic art (*poietes*) "are continually making and unmaking mankind."²⁵ Such vatic utterance posits a mode of address apt to a place of public assembly.

The conception of the poet as a public bard making common cause with "the people" (construed by their poet as a nation in the oeuvre) and a vatic Symbolist *enchante* readers/listeners into receptivity, categorically rejects the dominant Anglo-American supposition that the efficacy of poetry has diminished. The positioning of the bardic Yeats-persona in the twilight mists of the Celtic fringe at the farthest remove from the metropolitan hubs of modernism exaggerates the poet's archaized peripherality, but the poet's belief that "the supernatural can at any moment create new myths" inures him to modernist pessimism about poetry's futurity.²⁶ Yeats exerts strong influence on cultures where orature commingles with literature, and thus his oracular modes of address, apocalyptic imagery, and use of traditional lyric are emulated, even as early as the 1930s, by such poets as Gladys Casely Hayford (Sierra Leone) and Herbert Dhlomo (South Africa). Yeats's influence on twentieth-century postcolonial poetics, despite his neocolonialist and antidemocratic proclivities, derives from a resonating symbolism and a "tradition"-sanctioned belief that poetry can foster collaborative political action. The tone of aggrieved entitlement that laces Yeats's declarations on behalf of "we Irish" blends aristocratic *noblesse oblige* and the pride of a bardic elite with the indignant riposte of a downtrodden people. The precedent of Yeatsian bardic authority exemplifies how writers can combine international literary eminence with the oppositional iconoclasm and novelty of hitherto lesser-known traditions to secure "major" status for minority literatures.

III

The role of community and creed in an era of secularization is a recurrent topic of modernist debate. Poetry was frequently posited as a secular surrogate for abandoned or shattered religious faiths. Whereas some poets turned to theosophy, Eastern religions, and alternative spirituality, others viewed orthodox Christianity as a repository of common allusion, resonant symbolism, and ritual. Yeats's pursuit of "magic" and theosophy to counteract his father's agnosticism held little pertinence for Irish writers immersed in Christianity. Joyce's anatomy of the combined effects of Catholicism, nationalism, and colonialism on the moral and aesthetic development of the (male) artist in *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* (1916) was embraced, by contrast, as a personal *Bildung* of their own religious, moral, and civic conflicts by many Irish Catholics. Eliot's conversion to Catholicism conferred

modernist legitimacy on traditional religious practices, and the exploration of ritual in his verse-plays and liturgical cadences such as those in "Ash Wednesday" drew on a resonant prosodic memory for churchgoers.

Questions of community and creed were greatly complicated for Irish modernists by Ireland's long history as a theater of conflict between Reformation Europe, the British Empire, and native resistance. The conflict intensified in Victorian Ireland as a result of the "devotional revolution," the post-Famine shift from vernacular to the Rome-regulated Catholicism that brought about a massive increase in religious vocations, church-building, and attendance at the newly instituted Tridentine Latin mass. The Catholic hierarchy strove to reinforce the coupling of "Irishness" and "Catholicism" in the public mind, and assumed control over education, social welfare, and the regulation of marriage, sexuality, and family.²⁷ The concerted effort to consolidate Catholic hegemony provoked a Unionist backlash against Home Rule as Rome Rule. The clashing valences of "1916" in Unionist and Nationalist cultural memory – the enormous sacrifice of loyalist Ulstermen's lives at the Somme on the one hand, and the Easter Rising with its iconography of a Cuchulain-Christ redeemer and a mariolatrous Mother Ireland on the other – sowed opposing myths of foundational blood-sacrifice that contributed to transforming Orange-Unionist and Catholic-nationalist politics into warring "creeds" and ethno-religious factionalism that were institutionalized by the sectarian partitioning of Ireland in 1922.

For MacNeice, "the rector's son, born to the Anglican order, / Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor," the sectarian border compounds the alienation of growing up in a segregated community ("Carrickfergus" (1937). In "The Glens" (1942), John Hewitt wishes without optimism that the "tally" of Irish Catholics' "savage history of wrong" could be redressed.²⁸ He checks the conciliatory impulse with a reminder of his irremediable difference from them, "Not these my people, of a vainer faith / and a more violent lineage," and his fear of coerced conformism: "I fear their creed as we have always feared / the lifted hand against unfettered thought." In this account, northern Protestants imagine that Catholics – despite their alienation from property and thralldom to their creed – enjoy, unlike them, an inalienable sense of "rootedness" and belonging to community.

Patrick Kavanagh, a Catholic small farmer on the southern side of partitioned Ulster, conforms to the image of indigenous poet. Kavanagh practices a bardic tradition of praises and dispraises, but he strongly dissents from nationalist ideology and detests Yeatsian and revivalist idealizations of the self-sufficient peasant. His caustic persona as a satirist is counterbalanced by a religious sense of the miraculous and the numinous, "Wherever life pours ordinary plenty" ("Advent"), in celebratory epiphanies such as the Canal

Bank sonnets.²⁹ The satiric title of “The Great Hunger” (1942) excoriates the repressive legacy of the devotional revolution. Its opening line, “Clay is the word and clay is the flesh,” evokes the tactile earthiness of protagonist Patrick Maguire’s “sensuous groping fingers” gathering potatoes and planting seeds while also recalling liturgical refrains of death and incarnation.³⁰ Like many rural bachelors of the era, Maguire “made a field his bride.”³¹ A vignette of Maguire in his mid-thirties augurs a bleak future that exposes the wanton denial underwriting romantic portrayals of a carefree peasantry:

Sitting on a wooden gate,
Sitting on a wooden gate,
Sitting on a wooden gate
He rode in day-dream cars.
He locked his body with his knees
When the gate swung too much in the breeze.
But while he caught high ecstasies
Life slipped between the bars.³²

Maguire disavows his hunger for emotional and sexual intimacy until it is too late. Destitute of affection, the aged bachelor garners some compensatory comfort from his respectability as a church usher.

The psychological toll of Catholic guilt and shame is a recurrent theme for Austin Clarke. “Ancient Lights” recounts a childhood confession when he was manipulated by the priest’s insinuations into confessing “immodest” touch before he had any concept of what that might mean.³³ The confessor’s prurience produces the boy’s guilty sense of innate bodily sinfulness. The striking dissonance in Clarke’s poetry between clear-sighted satire and lacerating self-recrimination is symptomatic of a pervasive internalized guilt and shame, whose psychocultural toll has really only come into focus since the 1990s, when public trust in the institutional apparatus of the Catholic Church imploded as a result of sex-abuse scandals and the 1998 Belfast Agreement created a political framework for easing North/South sectarian tensions.

Independence brought an upsurge of translation activity, both for international diplomacy and for promoting Gaelic literature. Translation offered Clarke a vehicle for gaining critical distance, and he ironizes the contemporary Church’s erotophobia by juxtaposing it with life-affirming romances from medieval monastic Ireland. Clarke’s prosodic experiment as a poet-translator – he subordinates semantic equivalence to preserving the assonantal patterning of Gaelic verse-forms – was censured by Irish modernists, and Beckett’s unaccountable personal antipathy toward Clarke has made him a primary target of the “antiquarian” stigma.³⁴ The categorical cosmopolitan/nationalist divide has precluded the pairing of Devlin and

Clarke for critical consideration, although they share a deep affinity for intricate verbal patterning and both invoke medieval Irish monasticism to bracket Jansenist Irish Catholicism as aberrant. Paris offered Devlin and Coffey access to an intellectual Catholic tradition that was conspicuously absent from top-down Tridentine Catholicism, which helped to relativize devotional Irish Catholicism. Working between languages and writing English in a Francophone milieu gave them an enabling sense of linguistic estrangement that accentuated the kinship between composing and translating poetry. Coffey translated Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Éluard, Devlin translated Saint John Perse, and they collaborated on an unfinished project of translating the French Symbolists into Irish.

Kavanagh and Devlin turn to the pilgrimage at St. Patrick's Purgatory, Lough Derg, to set penitential Irish Catholicism in a comparative European context. Lough Derg's rich literary and religious intertextuality extends back to the middle ages, when Dante's *Commedia* was influenced by legends about knights' extreme ordeals in an island cave there, which was believed to be an entrance to purgatory.³⁵ The Lough Derg pilgrimage ritualizes self-mortification: circuiting barefoot around stone-bed "stations" over a three-day fast, itself beginning with a thirty-six hour vigil, pilgrims recite "a hundred decades / Of rosaries until they hardly kn[o]w what words mean," and intone "I renounce the World, the Flesh, and the Devil" at regular intervals.³⁶ Devlin's "Lough Derg" (1946) approaches the penitential site from "mullioned Europe shattered," acutely aware that the neutrality of the Free State he serves as a diplomat isolates it from its own European past.³⁷ The final stanza of Kavanagh's "Lough Derg" (1942) likewise signs off on "June nineteen-forty-two / When the Germans were fighting outside Rostov," so that the island pilgrimage serves ambiguously both as atonement for Ireland's self-sequestration and as a means of ironizing the pettiness of the pilgrims' private intercessionary pleas against the enormity of Europe's travails.³⁸ A dense palimpsest of intertexts, Devlin's "Lough Derg" reads as if successive versions were repeatedly reworked so as to open up additional semantic resonance. Readers pause on his epithet for contemporary Irish missionaries, "doughed in dogma," for example, as aural and graphemic tacks of association slide the "dog" in "dogma" back to "dough" to connote doctrinal kneading into lumpish pliancy.³⁹

The centrality of shared allusive domains and of coterie to avant-garde and minority literary formations can be seen at play in two later adaptations of the "Lough Derg" intertext. Seamus Heaney's "Station Island" (1984) plumbs the religious and literary dimensions of the "confession" genre to compose a self-canonizing poetic autobiography in the Irish-modernist mode. Heaney develops Kavanagh's poet-pilgrim persona, Yeats's colloquys

with shades, and the architectonics of Eliot's *Four Quartets* into the poet-speaker's purgatorial circuitings, which conclude by Joyce's shade enjoining him to quit "doing the decent thing."⁴⁰ The liminal lake-isle sanctuary on the southern side of partitioned Ulster emblemizes the sundering of Northern Catholics from the "local" pilgrimage site and the minority-poet-spokesperson's ambivalence about his "[e]scape from the massacre" by migrating to the South.⁴¹

Beckett adapts Devlin's Biblical allusion in "Lough Derg" that depicts God as a sadistic trifler – "Europe that humanized the sacred bane / Of God's chance who yet laughed in his mind / And balanced thief and saint: were they this kind?" – into a structural "key" for *Waiting for Godot*. The motifs of salvation, damnation, death, and vigilant waiting retain a religious residue in *Godot*, despite Beckett's nihilistic deployment of the hermeneutic crux. It is intriguing to imagine the theological discussion and banter that arose out of Joyce and Beckett's abandoned, though psychoculturally resonant, Catholicism and Protestantism on the one hand, and Devlin, Coffey, and MacGreevy's observant Catholicism on the other.

Beckett's poetry is composed in an anti-lyrical, minimalist, and meta-linguistic idiom in the zone of recursive play between poem and poetics, English and French. The speaker of "Comment Dire" / "What is the Word" (1989) stutters like a struggling language-learner or an aphasic subsiding into wordless oblivion. The French solecisms wryly imply that the poet-translator has not quite mastered his adopted vernacular, while the emphasis on the French-derived "folly" in the original calls attention to English's dependence on loanwords. The contrast between the clever allusions and gleeful Joycean word-play in "Whoroscope" (1930) and the spare French lyrics in *Poèmes 1937–1939* suggests that Beckett's switch to French "sans style" was perhaps made to escape the loquacious and connotative excess (for him) of Irish varieties of English. Theater was as crucial for Beckett as it had been for Yeats. The plays dramatize human dependence on auditors to corroborate existence. The later prose is increasingly punctuated by pauses for auditory feedback and hesitant silence. Beckett's prose paradoxically conveys the acoustic sonority and lyricism spurned by his poems to create the bardic ambiance of the overheard voice in *Company* "[m]urmuring now and then, Yes I remember."⁴²

Overt textuality also characterizes Coffey's poetry, a philosopher whose foregrounding of the word may derive from the dissertation on Thomas Aquinas he wrote under Jacques Maritain. Coffey's term for his Pablo Neruda translations – "rendering" – takes translation to be a dedicated act of "reading" that requires one to *rend*, to tear apart, the original to *render* a version that conveys some sense of the whole. His astringent syntax and

avoidance of punctuation uses the white space of the page to set each word apart. An infinitesimal pause after each word inflects the meter, a rending to indicate the imperceptible interval “between now no longer and not yet now.”⁴³ The representation of Devlin’s untimely death in Coffey’s “Advent” (1975) as an “act of vanishment” smoothes the harshness of “vanquish” and “banish” without effacing it to prepare for the recognition of “vehement” finality:

to where eye cannot enter when no sound returns not
a silence nothingness
more vehement than our whole knowing how it was here⁴⁴

The verse invites readers to undertake the rending/rendering task of the translator by actively recreating the poem as a torn body of sound.

Coffey’s poetry blossomed in the 1970s, when he became a bridge between the Beckett circle of the 1930s and the New Writers poets who set themselves against the Yeats-Heaney poetry establishment, not least by reprinting Beckett’s “Recent Irish Poetry.” Coffey’s participation in both coteries gave him an invigorating circle of first readers and association with both groups’ profiles, two advantageous footholds in the institutions of modernist and Irish letters that eluded mid-century women poets.

IV

The patriarchal ideology of the Catholic-Nationalist South and Protestant-Unionist North subordinated women to the role of family nurturer and marginalized their cultural and political agency from the public sphere. The bardic genealogy invoked by Yeats in “To Ireland” likewise precludes women’s right to become “True brother of a company / That sang, to sweeten Ireland’s wrong.” Masculinist bias also permeates modernism. Insecurity about the ascendancy of women writers and popular imputations of poetry’s effeminacy lent a resurgent machismo to becoming a “major” modernist or producing a modern epic, as indicated by Joyce’s jubilant remark that *The Waste Land* “ends the idea of poetry for ladies.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, women poets published during the 1930s and 1940s – including Salkeld, Mary Devenport O’Neill, Rhoda Coghill, Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Sheila Wingfield, and Freda Laughton – enjoyed neither their precursors’ optimism that the coeval suffragist and cultural-nationalist movements would bring about social change, nor their successors’ access to second-wave feminist critique and transnational civil rights movements. Their poetry disappeared from public consciousness until recuperative feminist research republished a selection in the 2002 *Field Day Anthology of Women’s Writing and Traditions*,

and their out-of-print verse was known only to a handful of scholars before the 2012 publication of Lucy Collins's critical anthology, *Poetry by Women in Ireland 1870–1970*.⁴⁶ Archival research into this “missing” generation reveals a consistent pattern: the poets were more often marginalized from journals and contemporary anthologies, disproportionately omitted from subsequently updated anthologies, and subjected to more sexist reviews than were their pre-independence female precursors.⁴⁷

Several poets turned to mythic personae and the dramatic monologue as a vehicle for sidestepping the gender bias that associates the first-person lyric “I” with a “he” bolstered by “not-she” status and for a deflected exploration of transformational lyric subjectivity. Yeats's tactic of harnessing the vituperative energy and transgressive sexual morality of the Crazy-Jane persona against Church-State sanctimony offers contrastive ground for interpreting their strategies of indirection. Katherine Arnold Price spent three decades revising “Curithir and Liadain” (1925, 1957), a retelling of Kuno Meyer's translation of a ninth-century romance between monastic poet-lovers. Price develops the dialogical device of direct self-disclosure in the original to explore Liadain's interpretation of her chequered relationship with Curithir. The restless self-analysis of the nun-lover-poet persona approaches the sexuality of single women from different vantages than the privations of Kavanagh's Maguire. Price's generation included college-educated women who chose professional over domestic lives; women who shunned the role of deferential wife and self-sacrificing mother; nuns; women widowed by the European wars, and women whose access to contraception bestowed sexual freedoms long enjoyed by men. In a philosophic idiom redolent of Marianne Moore's “Marriage” (1923), Price's speaker chafes against convention and the regulation of sexual relationships:

Must the private spirit live by something public,
Something shared, made valid by common acceptance?
None could come nearer than Curithir; but he went away.

I wanted to move always further into pure being.⁴⁸

Price's Liadain owns her grief and emotional vulnerability, and prevails to “put a scansion even on disaster.”

Máire Mhac an tSaoi's choice of Irish as a literary vernacular paradoxically preserved her public visibility in Ireland where she features on school curricula. She adopts “Máire Ní Ógáin” – like “Crazy Jane,” a moniker for a foolish or loose woman – to stage an elaborate confessional performance in “Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin” (“Mary Hogan's Quatrains,” 1956).⁴⁹ Writing for a small readership of Irish readers, a community whose members tend to know one another's affairs, she conveys what is probably an

open secret in a forthright yet coy “don’t ask, don’t tell” performance. The “Máire Ní Ógáin” persona simultaneously exploits and satirizes the kind of public complicity that refrains from acknowledging what it wishes to suppress.

Salkeld’s “Arachne” (1955) launches a metapoetic spin on the feminized crafts of weaving and provisioning. The Arachnean dance of dispersal and realignment sketches and dodges entrapment by rupturing the sonnet form with off-course tacking and line-casting:

Let them fly. So long as she keeps her stand.
Mere radii – (centrifugal, her force) –
Puffed by her fiery breath off – they course

The closing couplet shows the speaker poised within a “still centre,” though in a repose that acknowledges an unsatiated appetite for a predatory kill:

She could wish centripetal force, though ... to suck
One late fugitive ... into her still centre.⁵⁰

Much of the middle-generation women’s verse in Collins’s anthology bears the hallmarks of modernism, including ruptured syntax, conceptual diction, erudite allusion, and ironic juxtaposition. Their subversive irony and indirection often fell on deaf ears, however. Thus an otherwise laudatory review of Salkeld’s *Hello Eternity!* (1933) regrets the misleading impression created by the “bold impudence” of the title.⁵¹

Women’s limited access to the bardic or priestly authorities so commonly associated with the Irish male poetic persona lay behind the sixteen-year-old Medbh McGuckian’s decision, made at a reading by Heaney in 1966, that becoming a poet would be “the second best thing to becoming a priest.”⁵² In the early 1970s she joined Ciaran Carson and Paul Muldoon in a writer’s group with Heaney and they remain a vital primary audience for her. Around the same time, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill joined a group of Cork university poets who challenged conservative revivalists by creolizing Gaelic poetry with 1960s counter-cultural argot. They activated an untapped audience of passive bilinguals by widely distributing their journal, *Innti*, and holding agitprop readings in city pubs. The transformation of newspapers’ “women’s pages” into organs of feminist consciousness-raising and the founding of the Irish Women’s Movement in 1970 inspired poets to play their part *qua* poets by attempting to undo the patriarchal conditioning of language and literary conventions.

The masculinist bias of the Irish bardic poem has received sustained feminist critique since the 1980s, most notably by Eavan Boland in her 1987 manifesto-poem “Mise Eire” (“I am Ireland”) and critical prose.⁵³ “Mise

Eire” contests Patrick Pearse and Yeats’s appropriation of Eire’s archaic matriarchal prerogative to authorize leaders and poets. Boland invokes her representative experience as a suburban mother to sanction her bardic prerogative to speak on behalf of the nation’s silenced women. Ní Dhomhnaill also seizes bardic authority, but because her poetic tradition is steeped in the patriarchal *aisling* genre – then the object of radical feminist critique – she does so through a Jungian exploration of the dark vertiginous energy of the *cailleach*/sovereignty goddess in *Feis* (1991), arguably the most ambitious major opus in twentieth-century Irish-language poetry. McGuckian emerged “in some degree a priest” from a harrowing experience of parturition and post-partum psychosis, filled with hallucinations of the Virgin Mary, which culminated with the revelation “that birth, death, and orgasm were all exactly the same sensation,” a bodily knowledge she makes the invincible ground of her poetic authority.⁵⁴ These feminist revisions of the bardic poem strive to unleash the “muse energy” (McGuckian and Ní Dhomhnaill’s term) enshrined behind an obfuscating veneration of motherhood, and claim that maternity and poetic authority are mutually empowering, not incompatible or conflicting. They locate the priestly vatic function within the fecundity of the female body, and demand and secure access to the kinds of public hearing afforded by the pulpit, the hustings, and the literary canon.

V

Defining features of Irish modernist verse include commitments to radical linguistic and generic experiment and engagement with public issues. Yeats’s youthful dream of a theater to congregate an audience of listeners was realized not only through the Abbey, but also by developing a form of bardic authority that combined an abrasively political poetry with the Symbolist “magic” of visual and aural evocation. His engagement in public debate through poetry and political advocacy secured acceptance for the neo-bardic role of poet as public intellectual, and was an influential counterexample to strands of modernism that divorced poetry from political engagement or ceded the general public to popular genres. Yeats’s Symbolist theory of aesthetic receptivity sets a high premium on the acoustic and dialogical dimension of literature, an emphasis retained and developed in new directions by Joyce and Beckett, whose prose is widely acclaimed as “lyrical.” By attending to the acoustic dimension of their work, I hope to have shown how the distinctly Irish-modernist achievement of “the bardic,” broadly conceived, imparts and fosters a habit of attentive listening across the range of genres.

The generation that came after Yeats hewed closer to the examples of Joyce and Eliot, though they also drew heavily on the bardic mode of satire

to critique and castigate post-revolutionary stagnation, censorship, and repression. They explored the resilient hold of religious tradition on inspiring and inhibiting the psyche while dealing with how the sectarian partitioning of Ireland had revived post-Reformation struggles for institutional hegemony in ways that isolated Ireland from secular European modernity. The institution of “the bard” in the Irish-language and neo-modernist tradition is a bastion of male exclusivity, making it a valuable trope for shoring up “traditional” male privilege when gender roles were being transformed by feminist activism and modernizing forces. Despite the setbacks to mid-century women’s creative agency, their poetry displays buoyant pleasure in the refuge afforded by poetry for exploring subjective interiority, even as they exploit formal means to question their confinement. They were not prolific, and their near-erasure from the literary canon created an absence for their successors that stimulated a concerted creative and critical effort to redress the material and psychological barriers that discourage women from seeking, and realizing, their full poetic authority.

NOTES

- 1 See Trevor Joyce, “New Writers’ Press: The History of a Project,” *Modernism and Ireland: the Poetry of the 1930s*, Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis, eds. (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 276–306; 296. The poets have since regrouped around Cork’s annual SoundEye poetry festival.
- 2 Samuel Beckett, “Recent Irish Poetry,” Ruby Cohn, ed. *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 70–1.
- 3 Coughlan and Davis, *Modernism and Ireland*, 11.
- 4 Coughlan and Davis, *Modernism and Ireland*, 11.
- 5 Beckett, *Disjecta*, 74; Coughlan and Davis, *Modernism and Ireland*, 10.
- 6 W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 509.
- 7 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Seamus Deane, ed. (New York: Penguin, 1992), 276.
- 8 Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: William Heineman, 1927), 176.
- 9 Riding and Graves, *A Survey*, 178–80.
- 10 Yeats, *Essays*, 526; Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3 (1925–1930), Anne Olivier Bell, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 330.
- 11 W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 331; Yeats, *Essays*, 524.
- 12 Yeats, *Essays*, 510.
- 13 “Orature,” used to avoid the literocentric bias of “oral literature,” refers to orally transmitted legend, lore, and traditions.
- 14 W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 205–6.
- 15 Yeats, *Essays*, 524.
- 16 W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 396.

- 17 See Yeats's letter to *United Ireland* (1892), *Uncollected Prose* vol. I, John P. Frayne, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 255–6.
- 18 W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, Edward Mendelson, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 83.
- 19 Louis MacNeice, "Snow," in *Selected Poems*, Michael Longley, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 23.
- 20 Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 135.
- 21 MacNeice, *Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, 32.
- 22 *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, Allan Wade, ed. (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), 211 (July 23, 1892).
- 23 W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, Daniel Albright, ed. (London: Everyman, 1990), 45.
- 24 Yeats, *Essays*, "Symbolism," 159.
- 25 Yeats, "Symbolism," 157.
- 26 Yeats, *Essays*, 185.
- 27 See Kevin Whelan, "The Cultural Effects of the Famine," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 137–54.
- 28 *The Selected John Hewitt*, Alan Warner, ed. (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1981), 54.
- 29 Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, Peter Kavanagh, ed. (Newbridge, Co. Kildare: Goldsmith Press, 1972), 125.
- 30 Kavanagh, *Poems*, 79, 85.
- 31 Kavanagh, *Poems*, 81.
- 32 Kavanagh, *Poems*, 91.
- 33 Austin Clarke, *Selected Poems*, Hugh Maxton, ed. (Dublin: Lilliput, 1991), 84.
- 34 See W. J. Mc Cormack, "Austin Clarke: The Poet as Scapegoat of Modernism," Coughlan and Davis, *Modernism and Ireland*, 75–102.
- 35 See Peggy O'Brien, *Writing Lough Derg: From William Carleton to Seamus Heaney* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 73.
- 36 Kavanagh, *Poems*, 110, 107.
- 37 Denis Devlin, *Collected Poems of Denis Devlin*, J. C. C. Mays, ed. (Dublin: Dedalus, 1989), 123.
- 38 Kavanagh, *Poems*, 123.
- 39 Devlin, *Poems*, 134.
- 40 Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 93.
- 41 See "Exposure," *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 73.
- 42 Samuel Beckett, *Company* (New York: Grove Press, 1980), 16.
- 43 Brian Coffey, *Poems and Versions 1929–1990* (Dublin: Dedalus, 1991), 140.
- 44 Coffey, *Poems*, 144.
- 45 Quoted in Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 174.
- 46 *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, vol. V, Angela Bourke, et al., eds. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002); Lucy Collins, ed. *Poetry by Women in Ireland: A Critical Anthology 1870–1970* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).
- 47 Anne Mulhall, "The well-known, old, but still unbeaten track': Women Poets and Irish Periodical Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century," *Irish University*

- Review* 42, 1 (2012), 32–52; 42. See Mulhall's citations for related scholarship by Kathy D'Arcy, Anne Fogarty, Susan Schreibman, and Moynagh Sullivan.
- 48 Bourke, *Field Day Anthology*, 1027.
- 49 Máire Mhac an tSaoi, *An Paróiste Míorúilteach: Rogha Dánta / The Miraculous Parish: Selected Poems*, Louis de Paor, ed. (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2011), 88–96.
- 50 Blanaid Salkeld, *Experiment in Error* (Aldington, Kent: The Hand and Flower Press, 1955), 4.
- 51 Mulhall, "Women Poets," 42.
- 52 "Comhrá: A conversation between Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, edited, with a foreword and afterword, by Laura O'Connor," *The Southern Review: Special Issue on Irish Poetry* 13, 3 (1995), 581–614; 592.
- 53 Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 128–9.
- 54 McGuckian, *Comhrá*, 596.