

Modernism, Tradition and Modernity in Irish Fiction: James Joyce

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JOYCE'S EARLY readers would preclude his identification with modernism by dwelling on the author's *novelty*, his *modern* style or on his *modernity*. His evaluation as a *modernist*, quite naturally, came later. When John Quinn speaks about Joyce's "new style" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he does it with a mind of exploring Joyce's "complete realism and great sincerity."¹ Several other reports on Joyce's "modern" writing would be culled from reviews and comments on *Ulysses* later on. These elaborate on Joyce's "strange modernity" as an unfamiliar and often unsettling reality depicted in the 1922 novel:

*Ulysses cannot be termed pornographic. One might as well label the Venus de Milo indecent, and just as that piece of sculpture has been the urge to centuries of artists, so Ulysses, with its strange modernity, will carry away young writers on its irrepressible tide.*²

The "Irish comment" that established a connection between the writer and modern painters, also reads the novel as a reflection of "all the strivings of the modern world,"³ thus alluding to the modernity of both form and content. This view of the "modern world" is mirrored in the local modernity of Irish life, as the "Irish opinion" of 1923 leads us to let us believe; this local "transportation" of modern meaning is essential in understanding this parallaxic effect that Joycean fiction has on its readers. For the international readers, it is the global significance of Ireland that *is* at stake; for its Irish audience, it is the global imprint on the regional and the local that matters, Joyce being seen as a product of Irish modern "times:"

*For us in Ireland Mr. Joyce's significance lies in this, that he is the first man of literary genius, expressing himself in perfect freedom, that Catholic Ireland has produced in modern times.*⁴

In equating "modern" with "contemporary" in a temporal perspective, Stephen Gwynn defines Joyce as "the outstanding figure" of "modern Irish literature."⁵ Interestingly enough, the "outstanding" position that Joyce is allotted could be read as both remarkable *within* a referential system and *outside* it. It is precisely on this double-laden semantic value of the word that Joyce's modern(ism)/(ity) should be investigated. Being at

the same time *inside* and *outside* the field means participating in the process of tradition exploration with a mind to revolutionize, not in the sense of revolt, but revolving around and beyond its boundaries. One of the few addresses to Joyce's *modernism* comes from Laurence K. Emery, the same Irish commentator who associated Joyce with the Dadaists.⁶ What the critic labels as modernist are Joyce's alleged effects of perspective distortion that resemble Cubism. Distortions are compositional strategies of coincidental similarity, in the case of Joyce, and not so much artistic affiliations to one trend or another. Experimenting with various conceptual labels, Carola Giedion-Welcker herself abandons the project of including Joyce in an aesthetic category, towards the end of a lengthy demonstration of Joyce's complete (in)adequacy to modern (because contemporary) prospects. After thoroughly analysing Joyce's fictional treatment of various tropes (wandering, temporality), characters, stylistic devices (fragmentarism), she advances the perspective of Joyce's connection to other fields of reference (psychology, physics, technology). Hence, the interaction between different registers, which results in a dynamic prose that bears the signs of multi-dimensional temporality:

*(...) while the irrational world of fantasy is dominating, Joyce interfuses his poetic work with an exact, technically mathematical framework, and X-rays his world with a scientific coldness and sharpness. A synthesis of art and technique.*⁷

Against this composite framework, Joyce's modernism again stands out as both content and form, as both the transfiguration of a *modern* Ireland (with its metropolitan type-writers, gramophones, advertisements and trams) and a *modern* perspective on it, since it is mainly by the interpenetration of art and technology that the second effect is best achieved:

*Technology helps change not only the world but also the perception of the world. This is partly why the image of the machine enters modernism together with problems of intelligibility. (...) The dialectic of the new and the old has been exhausted, suspended in favor of a now that continually reinvents itself.*⁸

When Welcker concludes that "the last saving formula for Joyce has not been found,"⁹ she borders on Connor's temporal translation of modernism as the future perfect tense covering the possibilities of a hypothetical future (yet already past) project. That the future temporal dimension is more suitable for assessing Joyce's modernist fiction has also been sustained by Colin MacCabe's theory on Joyce's later (ideal) audience, since "[m]odernism has also often been understood to imply a later and 'better' audience, whose shortcomings can be highlighted and corrected, one which would in time learn to read the canonical artifact."¹⁰

Joyce's preclusive artistic dimension has been the reason for interpreting him at either the border of various aesthetics or beyond them, transgressing and defying labels and inclusive judgments; therefore, criticism has often been the space of canonic enthusiasms on Joyce's being our "contemporary," a classic that precedes and predetermines future audiences and their readings. A hearty foreshadowing of Joyce as both before and beyond

(because ever “contemporary”) the present tense represents another stage in the critical evaluation of modernism as extending beyond its conventional expiry date. It is the task of these critics to oppose an understanding of Joyce as postmodernist, since modernism is comfortable enough to accommodate the writer’s work. Hence, the conclusion that “there are many kinds of modernism”¹¹ and that Joyce’s modernism should be discussed in its plurality as *modernisms*. There are two different views on the matter of the justification of the proliferation of *modernisms*; there is the theory of the *transvaluation of all values*¹² as a logical continuation of the changing rhythms announced towards the end of the 19th century in the arts and the canon. Then, there is the theory of a reactionary, *counter-ideological*¹³ reading of modernism as itself setting against previous values. The first has to do with an overall cultural overview of the context, while the second also advances the socio-political factors. The first dwells on a whole symptomatology of modernism, not only by didactically pointing out its precursors, but also by diagnosing its “state of mind” and tonality. As a precursor initiating the transvaluation of values, Nietzsche’s name occupies the front page in the history of modernism, mainly since: “Joyce thought of himself as a Nietzschean in 1904, when as ‘James Overman’ he was all for neopaganism, licentiousness, and pitilessness.”¹⁴

Christopher Butler also summarizes the modernist traits that are philosophically grounded in Nietzsche’s system and find a fruitful terrain in Joyce’s prose: “Its symptoms were pragmatism, pluralism, and the most typical of modernist strategies, a skeptical irony.”¹⁵ Besides Nietzschean nihilism and the stylistic use of scepticism, the uncertainty principle also engages in the overall description of modernist characteristics. In doubting the reality he transposes, the writer unsettles the narrative of his fiction by constantly interrogating its premises:

*Uncertainty, or the tendency towards reconsideration and qualification, affects also the logic of narrative explanation, to the point even of unsettling the prevailing generic concept of fiction.*¹⁶

Thus, the “semantic of modernism” will focus on a gradual distribution of the positions assumed by the individual consciousness to the world he observes, involving the participatory filter of nihilism, scepticism and uncertainty:

*The structure of the Modernist semantic universe can be visualized as consisting of several concentric circles, of which the first one, closest to the centre, comprises the semantic field of awareness or consciousness (...). The second circle encloses the semantic field of detachment, accommodating such words as ‘departure,’ ‘depersonalisation’ (...). The third circle contains the semantic field of observation or perception, having such words as ‘observation,’ ‘perception,’ ‘view,’ ‘window.’*¹⁷

It is mostly within the first and the second circle of distancing that we can read Maurice Beebe’s identification of the four features distinguishing modernism, as a combination of “formalism and aesthetic autonomy,” “detachment and noncommitment,” “the use of myth” and “reflexivism.”¹⁸ All of these would be recycled in Richard Lehan’s inclu-

sive definition of modernism and in its clear delimitation of symptoms from other systems; thus, he would bring together both the artist's position *to* the reality described (be it detached, ironic, skeptical or at times nostalgic), and his translation of it in art forms:

*Joyce more than any other novelist helped bring literary modernism into being. The turn toward symbolic myth, cyclical history, primitive awareness, organic reality, and an aesthetic sensibility resulted in a shared belief of what a literary text should include. Inseparable from modernism were the twin beliefs in the power of human consciousness (often defined in Bergsonian terms) to illuminate reality and to find in nature and natural process the meaning, symbolic and literal, that explains the nature of human existence.*¹⁹

As for the second counter-ideological theory of modernism, there is always a rhetorical opposition between modernism and systems that can be read either aesthetically or socio-politically. The second option envisages modernism as most visibly practised at the level of a generational 'gap' or conflict, whereby the clash between the 'old' and the 'new' is brought to light again. Hence, the configuration of an "oppositional culture that presented a counter-history for modernity."²⁰ Michael Levenson's concluding remarks on Joyce's encompassing, encyclopaedic modernism invite at reconsidering Joyce's development of style and aesthetic as a parallel to the political picture of Europe at the time and after the war.²¹ Levenson's study has the merits of offering a report on the dynamics between the various spheres of life and art and, mostly, of showing how different aesthetics develop from within an opposition to each other. Aesthetic comparisons²² are often invoked when defining modernism by an "either...or" or simply "against" rapport; modernism and/or realism, modernism and/or tradition, modernism and/or history, modernism and/or politics. Christopher Butler takes Joyce's modernist scepticism as a cause of his realist depiction of life in *Dubliners* with all its "scrupulous meanness" and "attachment to fact."²³ In pointing the technical source of Joyce's modernist experimentalism, he opposes Joyce to the avant-garde,²⁴ but is careful to attribute the writer a sense of tradition: "He thus vastly extended the experimental repertoire available to the novelist; and also, paradoxically enough, influenced the general movement of the nineteen twenties back towards a conservative neo-classicism."²⁵

At the level of narrative, modernism opposes realism in the unsettling effect that "uncertainty" had on the linguistic structure in general. That is why there is a binary view on realist narrative as comprising "an epic world, by means of a comprehensive, encircling, and inclusive narrative," and the modernist projection of a "less self-assured (...) aware of the provisional hypothetical nature of his views" type of narrator.²⁶

A more trenchant opposition is that between modernism and tradition, a binary pair that conventionally translates in the opposition between "tradition" and the "modern." Such a view is shared by Astradur Eysteinnsson, who claims that "[m]odernism signals a dialectical opposition to what is not functionally *modern*, namely *tradition*."²⁷ We have already seen that a clear separation and mutual isolation between the two would be to deny culture its natural organic structure; therefore, such a claim could be con-

tradicted by pointing to Joyce's own modernism, one that is both experimental and neo-classical, innovative and traditional. The threefold comparison of the modern/modernist/contemporary elements complicates the simply binary view on clearly cut oppositions. Joyce's labelling as *modernist* stands between his contemporary and his modern condition. If the "contemporary" is related to the temporal justification, the "modern" element outlives the former's limitations:

*In the past hundred years we have had a special kind of literature. We call it modern and distinguish it from the merely contemporary; for where the contemporary refers to time, the modern refers to sensibility and style, and where the contemporary is a term of neutral reference, the modern is a term of critical placement and judgment. Modernist literature seems now to be coming to an end (...)*²⁸

Canonicity and the fidelity to the past (mythical or not) extract modern artists from the confines of their presentness and project them in the larger, surviving sphere of the modern. That is why "the Contemporary writer (...) is not very interested in artistic innovation. He is positively involved with the world he lives in, is a serious commentator on it and is inclined to activist and progressive social attitudes. (...) If Eliot and Pound and Joyce and Lawrence offer clear, though sometimes conflicting, versions of the Modern, the Contemporary can be represented by Shaw and Wells and Galsworthy and the Georgian poets."²⁹ The present-ness of modernism is yet another means of abstraction from tradition, and in this, view an oppositional meaning of modernism is implied, mainly because:

*(...) in view of a more radical and elementary meaning of modern, which, as a word, derives from 'hodie,' meaning 'these times,' or more accurately, 'recent times,' here the 'ism' attached to 'modern' may represent the sense of a particular moment of history, an instant defined by a sense of itself as separate, all in all of residence in a present made intenser by virtue of its self-conscious difference from what went before.*³⁰

Aesthetic differences also account for the classic objection of modernist elitism to "lower," more popular art forms. A critique of modernist elitism stems from the conviction that elitism cuts the ties to tradition, therefore isolating the text in a non-referential sphere.³¹ As a solution for overcoming the proliferation of this perspective, a plural conception on modernism is again advanced: "(...) Marjorie Perloff has taken the final step in this process by suggesting that we simply abandon the unitary notion of modernism in favor of an irreducible variety of "modernisms."³² This view approaches Levinas's critique of modernist esthetics not in its elitism as such, but in its "academic" claims separating art from life (and in the artist's being "responsible only to the work of art."³³ There is a similar insistence on the futility of isolating art work from a reality that it "disincarnates" in the form of an "image," and, moreover, on the recuperative role of the reader as an agent of humanist retribution of art, as: "[c]riticism (...) 'integrates the inhuman work of the artist back into the human world,' bringing the reader back to the 'true homeland of the mind.'³⁴

Opposing modernism to history seems to be the message of Stephen's understanding of it as a "nightmare," a trope that Robert Spoo associates with a modernist desire "to break through received textualizations of the past."³⁵ Yet, the Nietzschean reading of history³⁶ permeates Joyce's work to a point when his fiction cannot be separated from the trope; criticism generally accentuates Joyce's "obsession" with the subject, especially in the passages referring to Stephen. It is, nonetheless, worth noting that while Stephen repeatedly echoes the burden of history and tradition that he will not "serve," he also occasionally counteracts this vision by offering an equivalent perception of history as opening possibilities for the future:

His obsessive fear of the past is partly balanced, however, by a different strain of thought about history. If past events limit the present and the future, they also, as acts of will, liberate possibilities into the world of fact. Stephen ponders this dual aspect of history in Aristotelian terms:

*'Had Pyrrhus not fallen by a bedlam's hand in Argos or Julius Caesar not been killed to death. They are not to be thought away. Time has branded them and fettered they are lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities they have ousted. But can those have been possible seeing that they never were? Or was that only possible which came to pass? Weave, weaver of the wind!'*³⁷

It necessarily follows that the notions of *history* and *tradition* in the context of Irish studies need further examination, especially on their organic mutability, with tradition being placed alongside innovation, and with history³⁸ facing its *transvaluation* in Nietzschean fashion. Thus, "[t]he duality of the Irish experience emerges as a continuous negotiation between 'tradition' that is in itself contradictory, given the various interpretations of the past, and innovation, which is defined against the background of the historical dimension."³⁹ Modernism is once again caught in the dual opposition of tradition and modernity, the configuration of which incorporates the narratives of both past and present, since:

*'Tradition' itself being multi-vocal, the transition from tradition to modernism and modernity is marked by a modernism that can be located in the very tradition it seeks to subvert and re-interpret, developing two distinct, but simultaneously related narratives projecting a third plane with a wholly new meaning (told by past and by present).*⁴⁰

With this in view, we can now understand what is implied by Joyce's early readers' instinctual claim that the writer was "ahead" of them, and also by more recent critics, who, following Richard Ellmann's tradition, would add that "Joyce is always already ahead of us, just as he was ahead of Pound, Eliot, Woolf, and Forster."⁴¹ In Christine van Boheemen's definition of *modernity* by comparison and contrast to *modernism*, the former is an interrogation of the "problems and limits of representation"⁴² that historically spans from "*Frankenstein* to *Finnegans Wake*." In opening discourse to plural means of representation, Joyce shares in the many values of modernity, which, through the "impulse to progress," lead to more important consequences such as "pluralism and

democracy.”⁴³ Joyce’s *Irish modernity*, on the other hand, takes as its primary goal the representation of the “historically specific lived experience of twentieth century culture on the social, psychological and economic level”⁴⁴ at both an individual level (“new styles of self-presentation, new attitudes toward crowds and urban spaces, new definitions of public and private spaces”) and an aesthetic translation of it—*modernism*.



Notes

1. Robert H. Deming (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, 2 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 105.
2. Deming, *Critical Heritage*, 293.
3. Deming, *Critical Heritage*, 293.
4. Deming, *Critical Heritage*, 299.
5. Deming, *Critical Heritage*, 299.
6. “The relationship of Joyce to modernism is a vast subject which I have only barely touched here, but which holds great scope for the critic. He has in him points of similarity with the painter Picasso: the early follower of tradition breaking into new modes and expressing life from a new angle with a changed vision.” - Deming, *Critical Heritage*, 294.
7. Deming, *Critical Heritage*, 443.
8. Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism. Technology, Perception and Aesthetics* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 189-91.
9. Deming, *Critical Heritage*, 443.
10. John Nash, *James Joyce and the Act of Reception. Reading, Ireland, Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6.
11. Derek Attridge (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 259.
12. Modernism regarded as an exploration of the freedoms brought about by the contributions of Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud, Einstein, Croce or Weber, whose “ideas contested in a dramatic manner the beliefs of the older generation.”—Attridge (ed.), *Companion to James Joyce*, 259.
13. “It is first of all worth remembering that before it was a movement of difficult formal experiment, modernism was a challenge in the realm of ideas, a counter-ideology.”—Levenson in McCourt, John (ed.), *James Joyce in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 2009), 262.
14. Attridge (ed.), *Companion to James Joyce*, 259-60.
15. Attridge (ed.), *Companion to James Joyce*, 260.
16. Douwe Fokkema, Elrud Ibsch, *Modernist Conjectures. A Mainstream in European Literature 1919-1940* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1987), 35.
17. Fokkema, Ibsch, *Modernist Conjectures*, 43.
18. Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 10.
19. Richard Lehan in Rainer Emig (ed.), *Ulysses: James Joyce* (Palgrave, Macmillan, 2004), 38-9.
20. Michael Levenson in McCourt, *Joyce in Context*, 263.
21. “In the face of evident global emergency—the crisis of economic depression and the imminence of a second World War, but also the new absorptive powers of a culture that had once been threatened by modernist disruption—the boundary between art and politics, never fixed or secure, grew even weaker. Levenson in McCourt, *Joyce in Context*, 273.

22. "Joyce's work thus has to be placed within the modernist tradition by critical comparison rather than through the study of its direct influence."—C. Butler in Attridge (ed.), *Companion to James Joyce*, 269.
23. Attridge (ed.), *Companion to James Joyce*, 260.
24. "Joyce thus enters the experimental mainstream of modernism by an extraordinary display of technique, and not by any anterior commitment to some avant-garde doctrine." - C. Butler in Attridge (ed.), *Companion to James Joyce*, 266.
25. C. Butler in Attridge (ed.), *Companion to James Joyce*, 266.
26. Fokkema, Ibsch, *Modernist Conjectures*, 34.
27. Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism*, 8.
28. Tim Middleton (ed.), *Modernism. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol II, vol. IV (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), 208.
29. Bergonzi in Middleton (ed.), *Modernism*, 256.
30. Marianne Thormählen (ed.), *Rethinking Modernism* (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003), 10.
31. "But major problems arise when (...) reducing literary modernism to an ahistorical, elitist formalism and ignoring its complex reinscriptions of the past, its appropriations of popular culture, and the referential aims of its putatively nonreferential aesthetic."—Witemeyer, Hugh *The Future of Modernism* (The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 13.
32. Witemeyer, *Future of Modernism*, 19.
33. Thormählen (ed.), *Rethinking Modernism*, 56.
34. Thormählen (ed.), *Rethinking Modernism*, 56.
35. Robert Spoo, *James Joyce and the Language of History* (NY & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 34.
36. "It is matter for wonder: the moment, that is here and gone, that was nothing before and nothing after, returns like a spectre to trouble the quiet of a later moment"—F. Nietzsche qtd. in Spoo, *Joyce and Language of History*, 19.
37. Harold Bloom (ed.), *James Joyce* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 24.
38. The historical component becomes a key-element in the identification of Joycean fiction's aesthetic mobility, from its realist forms of *Dubliners* to its high modernist *Ulysses*. For the former category, history is moulded in narrative form, whereas modernism radically challenges the historicist dominant: "'Realism' in fiction, prior to *Ulysses*, was embodied in a 'narrative model of history' (as history and fiction share common narrative strategies). With *Ulysses*, modernism raised against the 'historicist' type of domination and the 'historicist' mode of understanding which had developed since the late 18th century."—Sanda Berce, *Modernity in Contemporary English Fiction* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2002), 55-6.
39. Sanda Berce, *Hot Spots. Essays in British and Irish Literature* (Cluj-Napoca, Limes, 2008), 127.
40. Berce, *Hotspots*, 127.
41. Christine van Bohemeen in "European Joyce Studies" (general editor: Fritz Senn, associate editor: Christine van Boheemen), no.1, *Joyce, Modernity, and Its Mediation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989), 3.
42. Van Bohemeen, *Joyce, Modernity and Its Mediation*, 5.
43. Berce, *Modernity*, 25.
44. Garry Leonard in "European Joyce Studies" (general editor: Fritz Senn, associate editor: Christine van Boheemen), no. 11, *James Joyce and the Fabrication of an Irish Identity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 45.

Abstract

Modernism, Tradition and Modernity in Irish Fiction: James Joyce

The present article rereads James Joyce's modernism against the backdrop of the Irish transition from tradition to modernity, thus pinpointing some of the difficulties in the critical discourse of the first half of the 20th century to label Joyce's fiction. Joyce's modernism is an expression of the limits of representation of an Irish modernity caught between the fidelity to tradition and the need for innovation.

Keywords

modernism, modernity, tradition, Irish modernity.