INTRODUCTION

All history is local: modernism and the question of memory in a global Ireland

> To give an accurate description of what has never occurred is . . . the proper occupation of the historian.
>
> Oscar Wilde
> *The Critic as Artist*

It may no longer be possible to speak and write of "Ireland." Amid the vast cultural and economic shifts of the last decade, the Irish Republic has emerged as something unfamiliar: an international economic power asserting its political will on the European continent, marketing its own culture through a powerful indigenous film and media industry, and staking its claim to a high-tech manufacturing future powered by multinational corporate investment. It makes far more sense to speak now of a "global Ireland" as the country has become, for the first time in its history, a destination of choice not only for tourists but for job-seekers, investors, and international businesses selling everything from microchips to ketchup. The old familiar touchstones of Irish experience and identity have come to seem oddly dislocated in this context. It is not simply that "Kerry Gold" and other registered trademarks have displaced St. Patrick, shamrocks, and the color green as authentic signifiers of Irishness. After centuries spent in embattled pursuit of independence in its many elusive forms – economic prosperity, political autonomy, religious and geographic unification, historical atonement – Irish culture has quite suddenly begun to shed its identification with struggle as its principal and defining characteristic.

Observers weary of wandering the barbed and tangled thickets of the country's long colonial and post-colonial past have, quite logically, leapt at the chance finally to announce that at long last Ireland is coming into its own. Witness *Irish Times* journalist Fintan O'Toole's assertion that in the mid-1990s, "arguably for the first time in recorded Irish history, it became possible to understand the Republic of Ireland without reference to Britain. It was no longer possible to blame British colonialism,

the nightmare of a benighted past, for the country's problems. It was no longer possible to envisage Irishness as merely the other side of Britishness."[1] For O'Toole, the actuality of Ireland's economic independence effects, de facto, a significant and measurable degree of autonomy in the political sphere. As an emerging economic power, Ireland loses the yoke of British oppression (along with the ability to blame Britain for its troubles), and shoulders responsibility for its own new global self-conception. England, for its part, is reduced to "an inconsequential and edgy presence on the margins" (O'Toole, *Ex-Isle*, 12) as Irishness, given sufficient economic clout, can now finally begin positively to define itself in its own terms. No longer, O'Toole asserts, in the shadow of its historically more powerful and richer neighbor, Ireland has ceased, in an imaginative sense, "to be an island off Britain. After centuries of sending its people into exile, it [has become] itself an ex-isle" (O'Toole, *Ex-Isle*, 11).

O'Toole's island-no-longer metaphor registers the magnitude of contemporary Ireland's imaginative removal from Britain in geographic terms. At the same time, the "ex" of "ex-isle" places the greatest emphasis on Ireland's historical removal from its own former self, and thus reopens what is in fact a quite familiar, age-old rift in Irish identity, that between the past and the present. In the rush to claim the present as that time in which the true voice of Irishness may finally speak, the past becomes a distinct and contrary position, that time of Ireland's sacred but benighted struggle. Proclaiming Ireland's new existence as an "ex-isle" betrays a hope that if economic independence has not fully succeeded in healing partition's legacy of violence, it has secured for contemporary Ireland something even greater: independence from its own past.[2]

O'Toole is well aware, of course, of the irony implicit in the notion that Ireland might ever by "no longer" what it was. The country's long history of cultural, political, economic, and legal subjugation at the hands of Britain has produced the past as the only territory to which the Irish could reasonably lay claim. Thus, in Ireland the effort to know history has frequently aligned itself with a discourse of political essentialism in which it is not the past but Irishness itself that hangs in the balance. What has seemed indisputable to observers of modern Irish culture and politics is that in Ireland's case the past has been all too insistent, all too present an influence. In his classic investigation of Irish historical imagining, *States of Mind*, Oliver MacDonagh comments wryly on British Prime Minister Lloyd George's discovery that "while the English do not remember any history, the Irish forget none." After meeting with Eamon de Valera on

July 14, 1921 to negotiate a peace treaty between Ireland and Great Britain, Lloyd George reportedly said, "I listened to a long lecture on the wrong done to Ireland . . . [by] Cromwell, and when[ever] I tried to bring him [de Valera] to the present day, back he went to Cromwell again."[3]

"To remember everything," suggests Hugh, the polyglot hedge-school master in Brian Friel's play, *Translations*, "is a form of madness," and many observers have seen fit to locate Ireland's defining cultural pathology in the notoriously long memory of its people.[4] As David Lloyd has recently remarked, "We Irish have often enough been accused of indulging an obsession with the past."[5] From a certain point of view, the charge may seem true enough: while conventional wisdom holds that "those who do not know the past are destined to repeat it," in Ireland's case, knowing history has seemed to ensure nothing so well as the continuation of age-old patterns of violent rebellion, internal betrayal, and political failure. From one failed rebellion at Kinsale in 1603 to another at Dublin Castle in 1641, to yet another in Wexford in 1798, to still another in Dublin in the spring of 1916, so much of Irish history has seemed to unspool according to some fatally deterministic law of sameness – and defeat.

In fact, the impression of repetition in Irish history is less an indicator of actual historical patterns than of the dominance of a preferred narrative in which the future continuously holds the promise of newness. The story of Ireland, suggests Roy Foster (borrowing a phrase from Michel de Certeau), is conventionally "linked to the expectation that something alien to the present will or must occur" – that a future departure from the pattern will finally allow Ireland to "come into its own." In these terms, O'Toole's characterization of Ireland as an "ex-isle" participates in what Foster has argued is in fact a venerable Irish historiographical tradition, the search for Irish history's proper ending.[6] The importance within this tradition of specifying, even speculatively, a future moment in which the past will be left behind suggests that what has always been at stake in the telling of Ireland's "story" is nothing less than the country's modernity. In conventional usage, after all, to be "modern" is to be current, up-to-date, forward-looking: in a word, *new*. Indeed, "modernity" seems to imply a certain distance from the past as its defining condition. As David Lloyd eloquently puts it:

> The accusation [of Irish historical obsession] is usually made in the name of a modernity defined not so much by the erasure of the past as by the discrimination of those elements of the past which can be incorporated in a progressive narrative from those which must be relegated to the meaningless detritus of history.

> But, as [Walter] Benjamin well understood, such "historicism" entails a drastic reduction of the field of possibilities for the sake of a singular verisimilitude called "progress" and "development." To capitulate to such historicism, rather than continually opening the historical narrative to undeveloped possibilities, is to accept the reductive logic of domination. (Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, 10)

In other words, the potential risk in characterizing contemporary Ireland's new birth as a nation – its modernity – as a departure from historical pattern is not that the past will be forgotten, but that it will be relativized. In the new Ireland, history's once blinding insistence in the present is dimmed by the floodlights of real economic power. Phrases like "Ireland for the Irish" and *Sinn Féin*, *Sinn Féin Amhain* [Ourselves, Ourselves Alone] continue to resonate, but do so in an unaccustomed, apolitical register. The past, so long an instrument of cultural confinement is at last de-barbed and placed, unthreatening, like a sort of cultural trophy or curiosity on the shelf of history. Here is the actual flip-side of historical obsession: not denial of the past, but disinterested reverence for it; not a fearful sense that history might be ignored, but a relieved one that it has been at long last safely discontinued.

My point here is not to claim that economic opportunity is somehow on balance a liability for Ireland, or that participation in global trade compromises the authenticity of its culture. Even less is it to complain, along the lines of the old joke, that in Ireland nostalgia is not what it used to be. What is important is to recognize to what extent optimism about Ireland's financial independence affirms disconnection from the past as both an instrument and, indeed, a desired outcome of Ireland's contemporary autonomy. O'Toole's formulation releases Ireland from its political dependencies only to reassert its modernity in opposition to what it once was. When in the name of historical progress and development Ireland is reconfigured as an "ex-isle" belatedly cut off from its own past, history is promptly reconfirmed as the perpetual nightmare from which Ireland is trying to awake.

MODERNISM AND THE EXILE OF MEMORY

In a curious way, Ireland's current effort at re-imagining itself parallels its political and cultural transformation in the early decades of the twentieth century. Then, as now, the struggle to become modern linked the definition and achievement of Irish independence to a separation, or moving on, from the past. During the thirty years between Parnell's

death in 1891 and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, the romantic values of the late nineteenth-century Irish literary and cultural renaissance provided a convenient foil for a twentieth-century Ireland striving to claim its independence as a modern state. At the same time, the loss of Parnell's coalition-building abilities as a political leader led, as has often been noted, to a return to factionalism and violent methods for political change, leading up to the Easter Rising in 1916 and its aftermath, the War of Independence.[7] At both ends of the twentieth century, modern Ireland's collective task has been not simply to rethink the terms and conditions of Irishness, but to reconfigure their relation to a past that, despite being finished, refuses to be left behind. Ireland's struggle to become modern expresses what is, at its root, a crisis of historical imagination.

It was the transformation not of Irishness, but of Irish historical imagination that T. S. Eliot cited in what has become a seminal statement on "modernism" in the aesthetic sphere. In his famous review of *Ulysses*, Eliot accorded the newness of Joyce's writing "the importance of a scientific discovery," and placed its significance on a level with Einstein's theory of relativity.[8] Joyce's use of the "mythic method," a technique Eliot said originated in the work of another Irishman, William Butler Yeats, had fundamentally transformed the landscape of literature, and the way we read, for all time. Eliot's assessment of the mythic method went well beyond the description of a formally innovative technique to link modernism as such specifically to the project of remembering differently. The mythic method, Eliot suggested, consists in a kind of radical affirmation of the past's currency in the imaginative description of present experience: "In manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," Eliot wrote, "Mr. Joyce is pursuing . . . [what] is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot, "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," 177). Joyce, Eliot insisted, found and transformed his "living material" by opening it to a vibrant and insistent past, the "modernity" of Homer's *Odyssey* read as a structural foil for middle-class life in early twentieth-century Dublin. In a similar way, the "newness" of Yeats's writing affirmed the radical currency or "modernity" of Irish myth. In their use of this method, literary art was transformed; the novel revealed itself as a dead form and was at the same time reborn, phoenix-like, in its modernity as *novel* once more.

Despite his description of the "mythic method" as a technique arising out of a deep appreciation for the past's perpetual currency, Eliot's emphasis on Joyce and Yeats as formal innovators gave rise to a powerful and enduring critical misprision regarding both the condition of modernity as such and, especially, its articulations through aesthetic discourses of modernism. Within certain strains of literary and cultural criticism, "modernism" has come to be synonymous with a willful, even adolescent, ignorance of historical continuity in the pursuit of formal and stylistic innovation for its own sake. If the expression of modernity seems to require new languages and forms, it has also come to imply a problematic process of self-fashioning based on disconnection from the past.

Traditionally, this view of modernism is linked with the historical emergence of the New Criticism in the 1930s and 1940s. Certainly, the New Critical assertion that the literary work is an autonomous object, distinct from its determination both by authorial intention and by context, rhymes well with the assessment of modernism as a project of "making it new" always at the past's expense.[9] Moreover, this view is articulated most clearly in work by the direct heirs to the New Critical tradition, American scholars such as Irving Howe who, writing in the 1960s, argued that "the modernist sensibility posits a blockage, if not an end, to history . . . A frightening discontinuity between the traditional past and the shaken present."[10] Such assertions depend for their force on a largely imposed and artificial view of modernism as a discrete movement or period; in other words, on the monolithic unity of a "modernist sensibility."

My goal in proposing a reassessment of modernism here is not to cross swords with the historically distant proponents of a critical tradition the limitations of which have long since emerged. What I wish to point out is that the framing of modernism in its distinction from the past forms a key part of a larger critical strategy, one that is accepted across otherwise conflicting spheres of ideological, political, and intellectual preference. The notion of a modernist "sensibility" persists, for instance, in some of the structuralism and post-structuralism of the 1970s and 1980s, a period when Paul de Man could write of the defining modernist desire "to wipe out whatever came earlier."[11] Similarly, amid the various "returns" to context and history advocated by post-colonial and cultural critics in the 1990s, the characterization of modernism as a hopelessly dated movement founded on a willed condition of historical disconnection has gained its widest acceptance.[12] In a very different context, and with different implications, the same view informs the linking of modernist aesthetics with fascism, a critical tradition that spans all of these decades,

from Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* in the mid-1960s to Charles Ferrall's recent book, *Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics*.[13]

In much of twentieth-century critical discourse, the expression of modernity and "newness" in the aesthetic or cultural spheres has become linked to an alleged "denial" of – or at the very least, separateness from – history. At the same time, it is a more or less established fact that the canonical milestones of modernist aesthetics everywhere belie this critique and its simplistic pairing of innovation with historical disconnection. Eliot's own pastiche of textual fragments in *The Waste Land*, for example, certainly embodies a new approach to epic form. That formal novelty, however, is rooted not in the denial of previous forms, but in an acknowledgment of the past's continued insistence in the present. As the poet put it in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the one thing indispensable to the true artist of contemporaneity is a profound "historical sense," a "perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."[14] Eliot's contention is convincingly borne out by the very artists literary criticism has canonized as definitively "modernist." From Joyce to Yeats to Conrad, from Barnes to Stein to Woolf, what unites the extraordinary diversity of modernist writing is the vitality (or as Marjorie Perloff has put it, the *eros*) with which its creators handle history.[15] In light of such work, modernism's alleged "denial" of history appears to be something of a critical shibboleth, a charge that has served the purposes of some professional critics but holds up only as long as the works themselves are selectively ignored.

What the traditional critique of modernism and the assessment of Ireland's modernity have both managed to bypass is precisely the question of memory. Exiled from their examination of "newness" is modernity's ongoing formal and cultural expression through individual and collective acts of historical imagination. Such acts of remembering constitute what is in fact modernity's – and modernism's – proper and defining praxis. "Modernism," in these terms, is not a monolithic or unified aesthetic strategy for denying the past, but rather the expression of every present culture's material experience of the past's insistence. What modernism leaves behind are strategies for engaging the past that render history factually dead; what modernism in all periods and forms "makes new" is nothing other than memory – the active, variable, ambivalent process that continuously opens up the narrative of history to new possibilities of vitality and relevance.

Put a different way, what I am suggesting is that modernism as such consists in the dynamic reconfiguration of the present's relationship with

the past, and that in that reconfiguration memory itself operates as a process not of the past's recovery exclusively, but also of self-fashioning in the present. Insofar as modernism articulates a new fashioning of self, it relies on a dynamic and varied practice of memory as the mechanism by which we not only know the past, but in that knowing also construct ourselves as stable subjects.

Here it becomes possible to formulate a powerful and far-reaching distinction between the aims and implications of "history," on one hand, and "memory," on the other. In its conventional conception, the historian's task consists in bringing to light what definitively occurred, explaining causes and effects and, in general, giving the past the narrative form in which it can be known: "history." The narrator of such a discourse, the historian or rememberer, is quite clearly one conceived primarily, even exclusively, in his or her capacity to know. While disposing the past for knowledge is the announced goal of historical inquiry, its effect is the production – and more or less constant reproduction – of human beings as knowers of the past. Indeed, history so conceived is meaningless unless human beings are presumed exclusively as rational subjects whose stability is commensurate with their capacity to know.

Memory's goal, on the other hand, is never a comprehensive and final knowledge of the past or its preservation, but a process of continuous renegotiation of selfhood in relation to that past. In acts of memory, forgetting must be acknowledged as an instrumental aspect of remembering rather than its opposite; gaps make their positive contribution to the forms and images and stories through which the past "occurs" to the present. Indeed, memory in general is a process directed not primarily toward grasping an accurate or adequate knowledge of the past – what really "occurred" then – but toward allowing to occur now precisely those pasts, those histories, that have never occurred to the historical imagination of the present. As Oscar Wilde insisted, "To give an accurate description of what has never occurred is . . . the proper occupation" of those who remember.

IRELAND'S EX-CENTRIC DISCOURSES OF MEMORY

Approaching modernism as a varied and variable discourse of memory places criticism's primary investigative emphasis on an activity of remembering as it is carried out under material and historical conditions by human beings in the present. Such an approach represents a significant displacement of critical attention away from the easy distinction between an unfolding present and a factual, completed past, and

thus from modernity itself as a state or condition of radical historical disconnection. Reconfiguring modernism's relationship with memory in this way returns us to the site of the past's only real actuality in the present, that of its localization in the memory-work of human beings who remember – and forget. Modernity consists in nothing other than this continuous renegotiation of memory, the material and vital activity in which all history, even that of a "global Ireland," becomes particular, specific, and actual. In memory – to paraphrase a famous Irish-American, Tip O'Neill – all history is local.

Highlighting the role of the human subject in forging Ireland's relationship to its past underscores the difficulty of the question of Irish autonomy and independence with which I began. In a modernity centered on newness, where does it become possible to locate anything that might be called an authentic discourse of Irish memory? In a global culture that relativizes traditional signifiers of Irishness, where might we locate Ireland's "own" discourses, its newly established languages of cultural authenticity? The post-colonial critique of Irish culture has produced a rich and complex consideration of such discourses, centering on a recognition that as a nation Ireland has been defined from the "outside" for most of its existence.[16] The work of American Joyce scholar Vince Cheng, to cite one prominent example, responds to a common recognition of the critical tendency to situate Ireland, throughout its history, in relation to England, America, continental Europe, and a host of other "Others." In such a perspective, Irish experience needs to be released from observation from without; its authentic discourses of self need to be heard from and spoken to "on their own terms." As Cheng puts it, "*who* gets to speak for Irishness?"[17]

My difficulty with such approaches is that they frequently preserve by clandestine means the power of the "Other" to frame Irish authenticities.[18] That is, they see themselves as framing a theory or a practice that will somehow "allow" the heretofore silent voices of indigenous experience to speak their own truth. Irishness, it is hoped, can then begin positively to define itself in its own terms – the terms of "Irishness." The not-so-hidden tautology here signals an ironic return to the familiar, repetitive process of an Irish history centered, self-consciously, on isolation and opposition in the articulation of its "own" voice: "Ireland for the Irish" and *Sinn Féin*, *Sinn Féin Amhain*.[19]

The emergence of a "global Ireland" suggests the possibility of locating Irish authenticity differently. After centuries of poverty, it is indeed striking that Ireland should attain, relatively suddenly, a significant degree of real economic independence. O'Toole's point in formulating

contemporary Ireland's status as an "ex-isle," however, is not simply that Ireland is wealthy, but that wealth has become one of the actual historical conditions of "Irishness" in the contemporary world. Capital, and the international commerce that is creating it, has become, of all things, an authentic discourse of Irishness. In this case, coming into its "own" has meant for Ireland a wholesale redefinition of the terms of its identity and a de-centering of traditionally privileged centers of Irishness. Globalization is routing the process of Irish self-fashioning through vocabularies of culture and experience that have traditionally been defined as non-Irish. The customary distinctions between what is external and internal to Irish experience and culture are becoming blurred. As Irishness speaks increasingly in and through "Other" discourses, Irish identity is becoming itself profoundly "ex-centric."

Of course, the instant we credit a contemporary process of globalization for producing this de-centering or ex-centering of Irish identity, we remember that Irish culture has always been "global" in precisely this sense. Historically, *Sinn Féin*, *Sinn Féin Amhain* is a politically pedigreed rallying cry for Irish nationalists, but it belies the myriad ways Irish experience can be, and indeed has always been, articulated through discourses that do not issue exclusively from privileged centers of Irish cultural authenticity; as a phrase qualifying a putatively authentic discourse of Irishness, "Ourselves Alone" has always ignored the specific complexities both of foreign determinants within Irish culture and of Irish influences on the rest of the world.[20] Every culture uses languages and discourses that it has inherited, adopted, purchased, or borrowed. With respect to those discourses, none of us thinks and acts within his or her "own" culture from a position of mastery or authenticity. Indeed, the very notion of one's "own" discourse is a political and cultural ideal, but seldom if ever a practical reality: "And haven't you your own language to keep in touch with – Irish?" asks the nationalist Molly Ivors in Joyce's "The Dead." "Well," replies Gabriel, "if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language."[21]

The "exogamy" of Irish culture is one of Brien Friel's principal themes in *Translations*. The play's central dramatic action concerns the nineteenth-century British Ordnance Survey which, while mapping Ireland for taxation purposes, anglicized Irish place names in order to "standardize" them: "What the hell," one character comments. "It's only a name. It's the same me isn't it?" (Friel, *Translations*, 38). Through Jimmy Jack Cassie's final, cautionary speech to Maire, who is in love with the British Lieutenant Yolland, Friel acknowledges the danger in crossing cultural boundaries: "Do you know the Greek word *endogamein*?