CHAPTER 1

The Celtic muse: anthropology, modernism, and the Celtic Revival

> ETHNOLOGY, n. The science that treats of the various tribes of Man, as robbers, thieves, swindlers, dunces, lunatics, idiots and ethnologists.
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> Ambrose Bierce[1]

Modernism and the Celtic Revival emerged out of the necessity of finding a way to teach W. B. Yeats's *Mythologies*. In pursuing the implications of Yeats's role as a folklorist, I was led to anthropology and its influence on the Celtic Revival as well as to the conclusion that very little critical work had been done in this area. To be sure, critics like Philip Marcus, Mary Helen Thuente, Edward Hirsch, and Deborah Fleming have explored the aesthetic and political implications of folklore, legend, and myth in the production of Revivalist texts; but no one has explored in any extensive way the influence of anthropology on the way Revivalists represented Irish culture and the Irish people. This study attempts just such an exploration, beginning with a consideration of the work of two prominent Anglo-Irish Revivalists, Yeats and John M. Synge, before moving on to consider the Catholic-Irish writer, James Joyce, whose work can be read as a critique of the anthropological assumptions of the Celtic Revival. My contention is that for each of these writers the desire to revive an authentic, indigenous Irish folk culture is the effect of an ethnographic imagination that emerges in the interplay of native cultural aspirations and an array of practices associated with the disciplines of anthropology, ethnography, archaeology, folklore, comparative mythology, and travel writing.

It is my chief contention that the relationship between anthropology and the Celtic Revival is an important feature of modernism as it developed in the Irish context. As Terry Eagleton has recently argued, Ireland is unique among European nations in that "as a whole [it] had not leapt at a bound from tradition to modernity.

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Instead, it presented an exemplary case of what Marxism has dubbed combined and uneven development."[2] On the one hand, this uneven development led to a situation in which modernization occurred in some spheres (parliamentary politics, colonial administration, the arts) but was retarded in others (industry, agriculture, education); but, on the other hand, it also created the conditions for a dynamic modernist artistic culture, especially among Anglo-Irish Revivalists who, because of their own ambiguous social position as members of a dominant ruling class *and* as proponents of nationalist self-determination, were perhaps better able to appreciate the contradictions inherent in a society mutually determined by the tension between what Eagleton calls the archaic and the modern. This may explain the conservative – indeed, at times anti-modern – tenor of much of Revivalist discourse.

Following Perry Anderson's analysis of the relationship between modernity and revolution, Eagleton notes that there are three preconditions for a flourishing modernism:

> The existence of an artistic *ancien régime*, often in societies still under the sway of an aristocracy; the impact upon this traditional culture of breathtakingly new technologies; and the imaginative closeness of social revolution. Modernism springs from the estranging impact of modernizing forces on a still deeply traditionalist order, in a politically unstable context which opens up social hope as well as spiritual anxiety. Traditional culture provides modernism with an adversary, but also lends it some of the terms in which to inflect itself.[3]

For Eagleton, the agonistic relationship between the archaic and the modern creates ideal conditions for the emergence of modernism; and these conditions exist most dramatically not in the metropolitan center, which lacks the key criteria of "breathtakingly new technologies" and social revolution, but on the colonial and decolonial margins: "the 'no-time' and 'no-place' of the disregarded colony, with its fractured history and marginalized space, can become suddenly symbolic of a condition of disinheritance which now seems universal."[4] Irish modernism, then, while it seeks to accommodate new technologies and revolutionary energies, is at the same time very conservative: "If there is a high modernism, there is little or no avant-garde," and this is so because the Anglo-Irish monopolized modernism by translating political dispossession into cultural production. The deracinating effects of land legislation and an increasingly cynical Liberal party that seemed willing to abandon its client ruling

class to its own ineffectuality left the Anglo-Irish feeling acutely their ambivalent position between colonizer and colonized. Eagleton notes that this ''in-betweenness'' was ''a version of the hybrid spirit of the European modernist, caught between diverse cultural codes'' and that the Anglo-Irish Revivalists' recourse to ''the celebrated formalism and aestheticism of the modernists'' was an effective and defiant ''rationalization of their own rootless condition.''[5]

Eagleton's argument that Irish modernism emerged in the estranging contact of modernity with a traditional or archaic culture finds support in a consideration of the role anthropology played in the development of the Celtic Revival's modernist aesthetic of cultural redemption. This aesthetic is one of the most controversial elements of the Celtic Revival, in part because the anthropological authority behind it renders it internally contradictory, at once complicit with and hostile toward a tradition of representation that sought to redeem Irish peasant culture by idealizing or essentializing its ''primitive'' social conditions. This is true especially for writers like Yeats and Synge, whose meditations on Irish culture employ theories of cultural difference and discursive techniques and strategies borrowed from, or analogous to those found in, anthropology. Whereas the English or European modernist might regard anthropology as a way of integrating non-Western sensibilities and perspectives into an essentially Western frame of reference, the Revivalist must contend with the possibility of colluding with a discipline that in significant ways has furthered the interests of imperialism by producing a body of authoritative knowledge about colonized peoples. It is an abiding assumption of this study that an analysis of the role played by anthropology in the Revival may help us to understand the rhetorical and imaginative force of a specifically Irish form of anthropological modernism that seeks to transform indigenous materials into new cultural texts. However, given the uneasy relation of tradition to modernity in colonial Ireland, this task is complicated by the ever-present potential of complicity with the very discourses of nationalism, colonialism, and anthropology that invoke a binomial distinction between the primitive and the civilized in order to argue for the cultural and racial inferiority, political impotence and historical irrelevance of the native Irish people.

At the *fin de siècle*, the Revival was a complex and multifaceted movement, comprising a variety of approaches to the representation of Irish cultural. As Mary Helen Thuente argues, in *The Harp*

Re-strung: The United Irishmen and the Rise of Irish Literary Nationalism, the origins of Revivalism lie in the late-eighteenth-century United Irishmen movement. Another line of development, originating in the Young Irelanders of the 1840s, produced a form of Revivalism associated with the Gaelic League and Irish–Ireland nationalism. This development reaches a culmination in the 1890s with men like Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, Dr. George Sigerson, and Douglas Hyde, whose essays and speeches disseminated an ideology of ''racial'' self-improvement and national education and whose vision of Revivalism had a strong reformist orientation and sought principally to restore a belief in the essential piety and nobility of the Irish people. In a 1892 speech to the Irish Literary Society, Duffy held up the generation of the 1840s as a model for the present:

A group of young men, among the most generous and disinterested in our annals, were busy digging up the buried relics of our history, to enlighten the present by a knowledge of the past, setting up on their pedestals anew the overthrown statues of Irish worthies, assailing wrongs which under long impunity had become unquestioned and even venerable, and warming as with strong wine the heart of the people, by songs of valour and hope; and happily not standing isolated in their pious work, but encouraged and sustained by just such an army of students and sympathizers as I see here to-day.[6]

Hyde and Duffy were quick to point out just how far the Irish people had come from this ''golden age,'' which the famine and penal laws had obscured from the people's memory. ''What writers ought to aim at, who hope to benefit the people,'' Duffy asserts, ''is to fill up the blanks which an imperfect education, and the fever of a tempestuous time, have left in their knowledge, so that their lives might become contented and fruitful.''[7] It is the ''native'' artist's responsibility to rediscover the ''natural'' harmony of Ireland: ''to be wise and successful,'' writes Duffy, ''the proper development of Ireland . . . must harmonize with the nature of the people, and correct it where correction is needful.''[8] The belief in cultural or racial essence, together with a belief in moral and cultural reform, led Hyde, echoing Duffy and Sigerson, to complain that ''[w]e have at last broken the continuity of Irish life'' and that ''the present art products of one of the quickest, most sensitive, and most artistic races on earth are now only distinguished for their hideousness.''[9] These complaints and the general goal of racial self-improvement underscore the extent to which Irish–Ireland nationalists had inter-

nalized anthropological and colonialist assumptions about the Irish
"race."

One of the chief concerns of *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* is to
examine the issues raised above from the perspective of Anglo-Irish
Revivalists like Yeats and Synge, as well as from the perspective of
Joyce, whose critique of Revivalism effectively guaranteed its con-
tinued relevance as a context for Irish artistic production. There has
been a great deal of work on the Revival in the last thirty years or so,
beginning with Phillip Marcus's *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish
Renaissance* and, a little later, Richard Fallis's *The Irish Renaissance.*
These texts are important for establishing the main lines of literary
and historical descent and, in Marcus's case, for placing Yeats at the
center of Revivalist theory and practice. However, as with any
attempt to construct a genealogy, there are dangers of mystification
and misrepresentation. Robert O'Driscoll's characterization of
Revivalism, rooted in Yeats's conception of a "war of spiritual with
natural order" (*SR*, vii), exemplifies a tendency to regard the Revival
as absolutely resistant to Empire. He argues that the "imposition of
an imperialist ideal was rejected by the writers of the Celtic Revival
long before the political and military leaders created a physical body
for the spiritual principles." Further, he maintains that "[t]he Celtic
Revival was deliberately created as a counter-movement to the
materialism of the post-Darwinian age" and that the Revivalists did
not believe "that literature was a criticism of visible life, but that it
was a revelation of an invisible world."[10]

Now, it may be true that the Celtic Revival was anti-imperial in its
general orientation. But the claim that it rejected an imperial ideal is
not always supported by Revivalist practice, especially when that
practice is influenced by anthropology. This is not to say that
Revivalists acted in willful collusion with imperial authorities,
though some nationalists, like D. P. Moran, were fond of making
such accusations. In recent years, books like Seamus Deane's *Celtic
Revivals* and Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* have taken a more
critical approach to Revivalism and its nationalist aspirations,
paying careful attention to the problematic position of the Anglo-
Irish Revivalist in a nationalist movement that often demanded
racial as well as ideological authenticity.[11] Kiberd poses the problem
in terms that underscore its anthropological dimensions:

The plaque which now stands on Shaw's cottage in Dalkey may well in its
inscription speak also for Yeats: "The men of Ireland are mortal and

temporal, but her hills are eternal.'' Behind such an aphorism lies a familiar strategy of the Irish Protestant imagination, estranged from the community, yet anxious to identify itself with the new national sentiment. While Roman Catholic writers of the revival period seemed obsessed with the history of their land, to Protestant artists that history could only be, as Lady Gregory insisted, a painful accusation against their own people; and so they turned to geography in the attempt at patriotization.[12]

The condition of estrangement from a community that issues a ''painful accusation'' against them forced many Anglo-Irish Revivalists into ambivalent positions suggestive of those taken by ethnographers who stand both inside and outside the culture they investigate, striving for a balance between participation and observation. The ''turn to geography'' that Kiberd notes is an attempt to shift the grounds of Irish identity from race to locality and to make a virtue of ambivalence. As Leopold Bloom tells the citizen, in Joyce's *Ulysses*, ''A nation is the same people living in the same place'' (*U*, 331).

Of course, Bloom's notion of national identity does not appease the citizen, and Bloom is left feeling as ambivalent as ever. The same is frequently true of the Anglo-Irish Revivalists who turn to geography – and, I might add, to the folk culture of a people for whom the land is of signal importance – in order to find a ground for national identity or, to use Kiberd's term, ''patriotization.'' Unlike Bloom, however, their considerable social authority makes them vulnerable to the charge of perpetuating certain forms of discursive violence against the Celtic (i.e., Catholic) Irish. This was certainly the charge leveled at Synge during the controversy over *The Playboy of the Western World*, and it was leveled at Yeats as well, whose lack of Irish was often pointed out as evidence of his inability to say anything meaningful about Irish folk culture. The importance of a book like Kiberd's is that it examines this ambivalent position from a perspective informed by postcolonial theory (especially the work of Frantz Fanon) which allows us to understand, at least in part, how it might be understood as a form of resistance. It is my belief that the charge of complicity can properly be weighed and evaluated only when we recognize that the authority of the Revivalists who established the Abbey Theatre, and worked legend and folklore into the fabric of a modern Irish literature, was essentially anthropological. Moreover, I believe it is important to recognize the extent to which this authority governs an ethnographic imagination capable

of transforming complicity with primitivist discourses into more or less critical revisions of the concepts of "tradition" and the "peasant."[13]

It is equally important to recognize that this work of revision was conducted by intellectuals who were not, strictly speaking, "native." Thus the problematic status of the Revivalist as a "native intellectual" makes the Irish situation a difficult one to analyze, for it lies outside the limits of a Manichean opposition that pits native against colonialist and "primitive" peasant against "civilized" participant–observer.[14] Two important facts need to be acknowledged. The first is geographical. Ireland is an "internal" colony, which means it is situated in close proximity to the metropolitan center. This proximity creates problems of administration and social control that are not to be found in other colonies of the Empire. As a result, the standard model of core–periphery interaction, in which the core (i.e., London and the Home Counties) "dominates the periphery politically and . . . exploits it materially,"[15] applies to Ireland in ways that are significantly different from its application in South Asia or Africa. The term "metropolitan colony" best describes the unique position of Ireland in the Empire, since both Ireland and England shared the same language, legal code, urban culture and geopolitical location.

But this proximity ought not to lead us to believe that Ireland somehow suffered less profoundly the violence of imperialism. Indeed, the very lack of discernible racial difference led to an especially pernicious, because discursive, form of violence. Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, in an effort to resolve the problem of racial similarity, posits a Celtic "element" that, though part of the British national character, is nevertheless inferior to a stronger Teutonic one. The burden of assimilation was therefore greater on the Irish than elsewhere in the Empire, in part because assimilation was perceived as natural and inevitable. "Let the Celtic members of this empire consider that they too have to transform themselves," Arnold admonished. "Let them consider that they are inextricably bound up with us."[16] The anthropological modernism of the Revival seeks both to counter and to rewrite a discourse in which, as David Cairns and Shaun Richards argue, "the Irish were racially and culturally located to a subordinate position in the Imperial community through, amongst other elements, [Matthew] Arnold's typifications of 'Celtic' personality as feminine, irrational,

impractical and childlike, and social-darwinist stereotyping of the Irish as inferior racially to the Aryan Anglo Saxons.''[17]

The second important fact is historical. The proximity to the metropolitan center produced two distinct, and distinctly dominant, socio-political groups: the English imperialists and the Anglo-Irish. Historically, the Anglo-Irish, in addition to holding most of the land, served also as regional governors, parliamentary representatives, and managers of major businesses and industries; as a ruling class (and here we might speak of the ''Protestant Ascendancy''), the Anglo-Irish had long provided the political and economic links to England and its representatives in Ireland.[18] A singular situation thus developed in which a relatively small group of non-Irish settlers, over a considerable period of time, transformed itself into something like a native Anglo-Irish class quite different from, say, the Anglo-Indian enclaves of the sub-continental colonies. Herein lies the crux of the problem for the student of the Revival, for, despite their political and economic affiliation, the English and the Anglo-Irish were not always allies; the curious sense of nativity that developed among the Anglo-Irish from the time of the Old English settlements in the early seventeenth century, while frequently manifesting itself in colonialist terms, just as frequently resulted in the fervent adoption of Ireland as a homeland and source of patriotic pride. But the pride and fervor, and most of all the confidence of the men and women who rallied around the United Irishmen in 1798 and later around the Young Irelanders, foundered on sectarianism, which for some revisionist historians was artificially fomented in order to drive a wedge between the Catholic Irish and their Anglo-Irish sympathizers.[19] By the end of the nineteenth century, many of the Anglo-Irish began to feel isolated and marginalized, a condition that Roy Foster attributes to land reform, the inevitability of Home Rule and the rise of both Catholic nationalism and an increasingly powerful and vocal Catholic middle class.[20] It is easy to see why an Anglo-Irish intellectual, isolated equally from the Ascendancy ruling class and from an emergent Catholic nationalism, might feel his or her position as ambivalent. Acutely self-conscious of their marginal status as intellectuals in a colony moving inexorably toward some form of Catholic self-determination, Revivalists like Yeats and Synge were burdened by questions of political and cultural authenticity. And, while Joyce, raised and educated in Catholic institutions, may be less burdened by these questions, he nevertheless faced some of

the same problems of isolation and marginalization, the same sense of being both inside and outside culture, that led Yeats to Sligo and Galway and Synge to the Aran Islands. In part because he lacked the characteristic ambivalence of the déclassé Anglo-Irish intellectuals and in part because he wrote at an exilic remove (both literally and figuratively) from the culture that nevertheless occupied his imagination, Joyce remained aloof from the Revival; he was critical of it but did not repudiate it, and precisely in this way he succeeded in redefining it.

I have suggested above that the ambivalence felt by the Anglo-Irish Revivalists is analogous to that which we find in the ethnographic situation, which is not surprising given the remarkably similar investments in strategies of cultural observation and textual production. If Revivalists courted the possibility of duplicating the anthropological project of creating a ''total'' picture of the Celtic ''race,'' it is because they could not always effectively escape the disciplinary authority of anthropology when they appropriated its techniques of cultural observation and analysis (e.g., collecting and editing folklore, conducting fieldwork, writing up accounts from fieldnotes, and the like that are taught in universities and practiced on academic- or state-sponsored anthropological missions) or when they adopted the model of a unitary or ''sovereign'' subjectivity, presupposed as foundational for the ethnographic participant–observer, as a justification for their own experiential authority. We should not be surprised, then, to discover that the danger of collusion with anthropology was not only unavoidable but to some degree constitutive of their various projects of cultural redemption.

However, while the Celtic Revival is historically coeval with the new metropolitan ''sciences'' of anthropology and ethnography, and though it borrowed some of their characteristic theories and textual practices, it was far less bound up in the institutional structures of power that determined the work of academically trained anthropologists like A. C. Haddon, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and Bronislaw Malinowski, and it had a different relationship with imperial authority. Thus, Revivalists were in a position to resist anthropology's foundational theories of culture and some of its more egregious assumptions about primitive peoples. The contradictions inherent in these assumptions and in the emergent methods of scientific ethnography were either deeply repressed – a gesture that accounts for the ontological and epistemological self-assurance of a discipline that

derived cultural universals from the perspective of a superior race –
or examined only in unofficial contexts, like Malinowski's posthu-
mously published *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. In literary texts
like Yeats's *Celtic Twilight* and Synge's *Aran Islands*, which make use of
anthropological theories of culture and employ ethnographic
methods, the contradictions are readily apparent, indeed they
constitute a signal feature of Revivalist writing about Irish culture.
Because Revivalist writers had no professional stake in the discipline
of anthropology, they were free to exploit the contradictions inherent
to the discipline (which did not itself recognize the existence of such
contradictions); but the absence of a professional stake did not
prevent Revivalists from adopting forms of participant observation
and modes of cultural translation by which native texts and practices
were reproduced for and consumed by a metropolitan audience.
The *un*disciplined use of ethnographic methods and anthropological
theories of culture led to a style of representation that was at once
scientific (or pseudo-scientific) and literary. Thus, conflicting autho-
rities – aesthetic and anthropological – governed a discourse of
cultural redemption that strove both to represent *and* to invent Irish
culture.

As I suggested above, the argument that the Celtic Revival was
complicit in a discourse of primitivism gains some credence when
we consider the historical coincidence of the Revival and modern
anthropology, both emerging almost simultaneously in the late-nine-
teenth century in response to quite different imperial pressures. In
some important ways, Revivalists were engaged in anthropological
work similar to that which was going on in Ireland under the
auspices of British universities and learned societies. *The Celtic
Twilight* and *The Aran Islands* might be regarded as part of a tradition
of anthropological inquiry that had reached a culmination in the
same decade (the 1890s) in which A. C. Haddon, the principal
investigator of the British Association's Ethnographic Survey of the
British Isles, conducted fieldwork in the West of Ireland. For it is
undeniable that, just when legendary and folkloric texts were
becoming available in translation, when scholars and collectors were
beginning to find an audience, when the Royal Academy of Ireland
and the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and
Ireland were turning their attention to the West of Ireland – just at
this time, Anglo-Irish Revivalists emerged with their desire to
redeem an authentic Irish culture that was deemed incapable of self-