

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

The audiences for Irish modernism

In W. B. Yeats's final play, *The Death of Cuchulain*, a "very old man looking like something out of mythology" stands alone on "a bare stage of any period."¹ Facing the audience directly, he explains that he has been asked to produce this last in a series of Cuchulain plays "because I am out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the thing is made of" (438). Like Yeats at an Abbey curtain speech, the crotchety old man shares his "guiding principles" (438) with theatregoers, proclaiming that he seeks a small, educated audience of readers for this production – one that will appreciate what he declares to be great art, whether a privately staged Milton masque, indigenous folklore, or Yeats's Ulster Cycle plays. Should the audience number more than one hundred, he fears it will be a self-educated, popular audience composed of "sciolists all, pickpockets and opinionated bitches" (438). In this 1939 prologue, Yeats used this speaker to criticize the masses that inevitably failed to grasp and welcome intellectual and aesthetic innovations. The defensive old man, who praises non-naturalistic drama, dance, and "the music of the beggarman" (439), maintains a combative tone, championing the modernist ideals of aggressive experimentation and the autonomy of the artist.

Shortly before his death, Yeats expressed in *The Death of Cuchulain* a familiar notion of the modernist artist as antipathetic to popular audiences, eager for an elite group of like-minded supporters. Yet prior to writing this play, he evaluated the concept of artistic genius for the preface to a proposed collection of his critical work. In this 1937 essay, which became the preface to *Essays and Introductions*, he asserted, "A poet is justified not by the expression of himself, but by the public he finds or creates; a public made by others ready to his hand if he is a mere popular poet, but a new public, a new form of life, if he is a man of genius."² Here, Yeats suggests that it is not the autonomous expression of the artist that signals extraordinary talent, but rather that artist's ability through his work to attract and consolidate new readers and spectators. Even as he

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Modernism, Drama, & Audience for Irish Spectacle*

lambastes the popular poet, and by association the popular audience, he intimates that it is not enough to engage a learned elite already trained to appreciate great poetry.

Admittedly, Yeats maintained a complicated and contentious relationship with multiple audiences over the course of his long career, but he had ample evidence that his work was well justified under this criterion. He had in fact created a variety of “new publics” as an early proponent of the Irish Literary Revival; a founding member of the Irish Literary Society, the National Literary Society, the Irish Literary Theatre, the Abbey Theatre, and the Dublin Drama League; as the editor of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*; and as an internationally celebrated poet, playwright, cultural critic, lecturer, and politician. While he frequently pontificated on what constitutes great art and artists, in this particular commentary he remarkably defines “genius” as the poet’s ability to create a new audience for his artistic production. Yeats, an acknowledged primogenitor of literary modernism, articulates a standard of judgment contrary to common contemporary understandings of the modernist artist as an individual either hostile toward or indifferent to audiences.

Roughly contemporaneous, these contrary accounts of cultural consumers and their relationship to the artist and his work confirm our perception of Yeats as complex and sometimes inconsistent. But they also signal larger tensions pervading the culture of early twentieth-century Ireland. In this difficult and formally experimental poetic drama, Yeats the playwright and poet gives voice to a cynical disdain for the masses, consistent with the notion that modernism seeks only a limited audience. Yet in the preface to *Essays and Introductions*, Yeats celebrates “a new public, a new form of life” as the key achievement of a great artist. This position suggests his lingering sympathy with the optimism of an Irish revivalism hoping through popular art to inspire a broad national citizenry. I would argue that these seemingly antipathetic perceptions of the audience reveal an important dynamic defining early twentieth-century Irish culture: the interface between the tenets of Irish revivalism and international modernism. The audience – whether defined as “pick-pockets” grabbing carelessly at the unexceptional or “a new form of life” helping to fashion the innovative – provides the contested form through which we can better understand the practices shared by these two movements. By exploring the dynamic relationship between Irish intellectuals and their audiences, we may also come to regard the social form of the audience and its effects on national culture and politics more sympathetically.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The audiences for Irish modernism*

3

MODERNISM AND REVIVALISM

Though they were contemporaneous, the Irish Literary Revival and international modernism appear in scholarship to have little in common beyond Yeats's participation in both. For many years, however, both movements have suffered from sweeping definitions that obscure more nuanced readings of their aesthetics, cultural agendas, and audiences. Provocative scholarship has challenged monolithic definitions of modernism and, more recently, of revivalism. Although positive, this development has replaced the limitations of a neat, forced coherence with a jumble of contested claims making it more difficult to tether local arguments to broader accounts of either movement. This study does not provide another comprehensive account of either movement, but it does gloss briefly the general understandings of modernism and revivalism to clarify why they have frequently been deemed antithetical.

Modernism has conventionally been considered an early twentieth-century reaction against the constraints of nineteenth-century, and more particularly Victorian, culture and society. Familiar slogans such as "make it new" or "épater le bourgeois" long encapsulated the modernist challenge; modernist artists hoped to revise, or even destroy, what they perceived as the stultifying moral and intellectual inheritance of their predecessors through aggressive thematic and formal experimentation. Thematically, modernist literature routinely depicted the psyche of the alienated subject, struggled to capture the decay and isolation of urban life, and was deeply critical of bourgeois norms. Formally, it devised techniques such as stream of consciousness, fragmentation, pastiche, and montage to challenge and disturb audiences. In its search for a new idiom, modernism not only produced innovations in form and content, but also engaged with radical social and psychological theories by the anthropologist James Frazer, the psychologist Sigmund Freud, and the sociologists Georg Simmel and Gustave Le Bon, among others. Considered international in scope, literary modernism counts among its members the Americans Hemingway and Stein, the English Lawrence and Mansfield, the French Proust and Mallarmé, the Italians Marinetti and D'Annunzio, and the Polish Conrad – a list continually amplified by new studies illuminating the national, racial, sexual, ethnic, and political multiplicities among modernisms and avant-gardes.³

Like modernism, revivalism has been defined by a series of overarching, almost sacrosanct, themes and concerns. In what Richard Kirkland has labeled the "classic Revival narrative," revivalism runs

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Modernism, Drama, & Audience for Irish Spectacle*

roughly from the 1890 fall of Parnell to the end of the Anglo-Irish War and publication of *Ulysses* in 1922.⁴ The sundry artists, scholars, politicians, and activists affiliated with the Revival eagerly accumulated and promoted indigenous legend and folklore, seeking in the process to revive ancient customs and the purportedly dying Irish language.⁵ With these materials and motivations, the revivalists hoped to provide Irish citizens a native foundation from which to build a coherent and positive national identity, one based on the timeless world of the spirit, the triumphs of ancient Irish heroes, and an idealized rural peasantry. Revivalism allowed its proponents to represent the Irish as having shared access to an authenticity that marked them as different from and superior to the English, whom they regarded as contaminated by modernity. By identifying with antiquity, the revivalists located Ireland outside of a present day associated with industrial capitalism and imperialism. These creative models of Irishness also countered the negative stereotypes imposed on the island's inhabitants by their English colonizers, stereotypes depicting them as violent, uncultured "wild Irish" or drunken, buffoonish "stage Irish." As with modernist scholarship, recent studies of revivalism have teased out the rich complexities of this movement and demonstrated its formal and thematic innovations, as well as its commitment to creating community.⁶

These thumbnail sketches inevitably erase important subtleties characterizing each movement. Nonetheless, they reveal that categories of difference between revivalism and modernism can be established with little difficulty. Revivalism works to resurrect the past; modernism, to "make it new." Revivalism celebrates a linear trajectory in which the past and its conventions might provide an uninterrupted flow of inspiration for the modern public, while modernism purports to require a complete break from the past or at the very least an innovative refashioning of that past from its fragments. Revivalism lionizes the rural peasantry and the national community; modernism, metropolitanism and the atomized urban flaneur. Revivalism serves as an adjunct of nationalism and privileges native art, while modernism represents itself as staunchly international in scope and supports an intercontinental artistic community. And while revivalism encourages the return to an ancient language, modernism aggressively works to develop a new idiom. The readiness with which these facile oppositions trill off the tongue helps in part to explain why literary critics have appeared to accept the precepts of nationalist rhetoric insisting Ireland was isolated from the influence of modernity and cultural modernism.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The audiences for Irish modernism*

5

Yet parallels between revivalism and modernism, both in their material practices and conceptual tropes, can be identified with similar ease. For instance, crucial to the success of both movements was a lively salon culture, with Lady Gregory's Coole Park and her salon at the Nassau Street Hotel providing an analogue to the Paris salon of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, the London meetings of the Vorticists, or the New York gallery 291. The revivalists created a rich network of oppositional publishers and publication practices, in which the Cuala Press might be compared to Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company, and the Abbey Theatre's occasional publication *Samhain* might be seen to resemble in form and content little magazines like Harold Munro's *Poetry and Drama*. The anti-commercial stage practices of the Dublin Drama League found its precedents in London's Stage Society and America's Provincetown Players. And if the urban topos of London, Paris, Vienna, and New York defined modernism, the colonial capital of Dublin might lay similar claims to importance as a site of influence and anxiety for authors. Thematic links also abound between modernism and revivalism. The flaneur might just as easily be the tinker; primitivism, the obsession with western peasant culture; the modernist caricature of the Victorian, the revivalist straw man of the Stage Irishman. The atomization that modernism blames on industrial life might just as well be attributed to the aftermath of Parnell's fall; the shock and dismay attributed by modernism to the events of the First World War, might similarly apply to the Irish involvement in this war and immediate reactions to the Easter Rising. Both movements invoked and upended long-standing social and cultural norms, many of them consequences of British imperialism's global influence.

Yet even as the relationship between the seemingly oppositional concepts of "tradition" and "modernity" has captivated scholars seeking to explain late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Irish culture, little sustained critical attention has focused on the tension between the aesthetics and ideals of Irish revivalism and international modernism.⁷ The Revival's celebration of the "tradition" of Ireland's mythic past as the antithesis of the "modernity" of an English industrial present, valid or not, has long influenced how literary and cultural critics understand the place of modernity in Ireland – and, more particularly, the relationship between revivalism and international modernism. In 1923, T. S. Eliot claimed that the "mythical method" begun by Yeats and further developed by Joyce in *Ulysses* was to be praised for "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity."⁸ Eliot praised this

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Modernism, Drama, & Audience for Irish Spectacle*

method as a corrective to modern life, as “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.”⁹ Half a century after Eliot’s commentary on the Irish “mythical method,” Hugh Kenner declared English to be the language of international modernism and defined the modernist by his scorn for that same language. Thus, Kenner lumped Irish writers like Yeats, Synge, Joyce, and Beckett among the international modernists, even as he acknowledged that Ireland’s staunch preservation of the past makes the “Irish story . . . more complicated.”¹⁰

The inability to square revivalism and modernism pervaded formalist literary criticism, but it also appears a vexed topic in cultural history and literary analyses with a more historicist bent. In recent years, John Wilson Foster, Terence Brown, Gregory Castle, and Nicholas Andrew Miller have contributed useful accounts of Irish modernism.¹¹ However, these discussions generally sustain the understanding of revivalism and modernism as largely antipathetic, and celebrate a rigid modernist canon that allows entry only to Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett, finding perhaps a space or two for a supporting cast of other male writers like Shaw, Wilde, Synge, and O’Casey. Admittedly, Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett did play a crucial role in promoting internationally a distinctive Irish literature and in demonstrating how concerns seemingly indigenous to Ireland were in fact widespread. But these writers have been frequently represented as aberrations, as peculiar nonconformists who cannily escaped the parochialism of the Revival and sometimes even their Irish identity. When in the late twentieth century, literary scholars turned their attention to the ways in which nationalism and the nation-state influenced modernism, studies of Irish writers by Marjorie Howes, Emer Nolan, Maria Tycmozoko, and John Harrington, among others, insisted otherwise.¹² Yet these studies focused on figures with an ambiguous relationship to revivalism, authors whose affiliation with the continental avant-garde allowed them an escape from the confines of Irish cultural nationalism and provided them – and apparently them alone – a unique critical perspective on the ideals of revivalism.

However, literary history confirms that the most influential proponents of the Irish Literary Revival were in direct contact with the architects of modernist doctrine and their work. During the movement’s earliest years, revivalists eagerly read the work of expatriates like Wilde, who aggressively challenged middle-class mores on topics ranging from class to sexuality, and Shaw, who insistently privileged the role of the individual, while they watched the innovative drama of Ibsen and Maeterlinck

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The audiences for Irish modernism*

7

unfold on stages in London and Dublin. George Moore, in fact, was on the committee for J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre Society, which popularized experimental drama in London. In 1883, Lady Gregory contributed an essay on Portugal to the *Fortnightly Review*, a cultural journal that also published reviews by Roger Fry, anthropological studies by James Frazer, and work by budding modernists like Ezra Pound and May Sinclair. At the century's end, Synge studied in Paris the works of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Nietzsche, and Henry James, as the social activist and suffragist Louie Bennett championed Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*.¹³ Meanwhile, Maud Gonne spent the early years of the Revival in Paris intellectual circles among avant-gardistes like the Futurist Valentine de Saint-Point, as James and Margaret Cousins attended performances of Shaw's *Man and Superman* in London and discovered that "amongst the Theosophists, suffragettes and vegetarians we felt on the terra firma of the present."¹⁴ Soon afterwards, Yeats was aggressively "modernized" by Ezra Pound at Stone Cottage, and John Quinn guided Gregory and Jack B. Yeats through the maze of New York's 1913 Armory Show. Mary and Padraic Colum, who in 1911 helped found the revivalist little magazine *The Irish Review*, led a globetrotting intellectual life shared with the modernist heavyweights Van Wyck Brooks, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, and Elinor Wylie. The links between revivalism and modernism were not forged simply by chance, and armed with pedestrian facts like those listed above, it becomes difficult to imagine a world in which revivalists and modernists regarded themselves as inhabiting opposing camps.

The conceptual and practical overlaps between these two movements and those associated with them suggest that revivalism and modernism are in many ways compatible. As with the binaries of "tradition" and "modernity," there are clear benefits to placing these categories in opposition. In Ireland, revivalism came to signal national pride and a distinctive native culture. It insinuated that Irish culture had maintained its vibrancy despite years of imperial oppression, thereby denying the damage wrought by English occupation. More perniciously, it could rationalize colonial oppression by implying that imperial coercion had fostered a superior indigenous culture. Meanwhile, modernism came to represent a cosmopolitan urbanity committed to disrupting the traditionalist ideals of the nascent Irish state. These oppositions, legitimate or not, have shaped our understanding of both movements in Ireland and have influenced Irish literature. Thus, they must be taken seriously in any study of early twentieth-century Irish culture.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Building on previous scholarship, I propose a new way of thinking about these two movements. Irish revivalism and international modernism, I believe, are two intersecting sets, and the term “Irish modernism” describes the sizeable and significant site of common ground shared by these two movements. In this perspective, Irish modernism can be understood as a subset of practices employed by figures expressly associated by themselves, their peers, or subsequent critics with either revivalism or international modernism. In this model of partially overlapping sets, which I imagine as something resembling intersecting circles, the separate categories of revivalism and modernism remain coherent, but permeable. We could imagine the modernist Joyce or the revivalist Douglas Hyde plucking useful practices from the subset of Irish modernism. As this study will suggest, to delineate any cultural product produced by Irish writers of this period as strictly modernist or revivalist in nature is virtually impossible. Rather, the term Irish modernism suggests that cultural production in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland was rich with overlaps between the seemingly antipathetic ideals espoused by these two movements.

From these commonalities a new focus on the audience emerges that allows us to revise conventional perceptions of how each movement operated in early twentieth-century Ireland. By emphasizing the term “modernism,” I intend to accentuate revivalism’s commitment to thematic innovation and formal experimentation. In its strictest definition, revivalism was a manifestation of Irish cultural nationalism; as such, it sought to produce a body of creative work and a set of native institutions intended primarily to advance the political agenda of independence for Ireland. Revivalism could not chance the consequences of a radical cultural agenda that overtly alienated its consumers, who were imagined principally as citizens needing inspiration and motivation. In contrast, modernism, which was committed first and foremost to aesthetic innovation, sometimes recklessly gambled with its audiences by presenting work calculated to alienate or offend. Irish modernism, respectful of the need for widespread support from Irish citizens, nevertheless consciously challenged its audiences in order to educate them. Mindful of the differences between revivalism and modernism, Irish modernists strategically invoked elements from each movement to inspire their national audiences aesthetically and politically. This approach allows us to locate modernist characteristics in work previously associated strictly with revivalism, and vice versa; it also encourages us to understand and explain the effects of the relationship between these two movements on cultural production and its consumers.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The audiences for Irish modernism*

9

IRISH MODERNISM AND AUDIENCES

Audience behaviors have changed radically over time, but the challenge of describing this social body has remained constant. Since Aristotle asserted in his *Poetics* that the audience determines the power of staged tragedy, scholars and artists alike have labored to define this entity. Even rudimentary definitions admit that this body might be an assembly of courtiers, readers, listeners, viewers, theatregoers, sport fans, or mass media spectators; and that the audience might engage in these activities alone or together; by listening, reading, or viewing; in private or public, informally or formally. Such imprecise explanations burden any theory or history of audiences, but they also permit a provocative exploration of those groups in early twentieth-century Ireland that gathered together to listen, watch, play, argue about, or otherwise participate in the rich cultural offerings set before them. The long-standing and widespread theoretical interest in the audience suggests that it is crucial to our understanding of any cultural product, even if it has not always succeeded at explaining cogently or coherently the audience's role in society and culture. Indeed, the definition of the audience and the relationship of the artist to his or her audiences were hotly debated by revivalists and modernists.

Modernism long defined itself as a cultural movement that either ignored its audiences or held them in contempt. The difficulty of modernist texts was attributed to the movement's efforts to distance itself from mass publics contaminated by popular culture and politics; the ambivalent reception of modernist texts was ascribed to the failure of corrupted audiences to grasp the material; the limited circulation and/or performance of modernist work was heralded as a gesture to include an exclusive cohort of the like-minded. But in truth, the modernist perception of audiences proved ambiguous and contested. A spat between Ezra Pound and Harriet Monroe, two renowned arbiters of high modernism, suggests the nature of this conflict. Monroe posted Whitman's claim that "To have great poets there must be great audiences too" as the motto of the little magazine *Poetry*, only to have Pound retort, "The artist is *not* dependent upon his audience."¹⁵ Monroe's chosen slogan disappeared, and Pound's victory suggests the triumph of the modernist artist who disdains his audience. Audiences, at least in Pound's lexicon, could not be differentiated from the masses or the crowd, the legions of uncritical, small-minded men and women who embraced a culture contaminated.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87299-7 - Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Paige Reynolds

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Yet the conflict between Monroe and Pound demonstrates that modernists were not ignorant of their audiences, nor did they consistently scorn them – even as this anecdote recapitulates the notion that the male artist gives voice to a high culture for elite audiences, and the female benefactor seeks a popular culture for widespread audiences. Whether antagonistic or celebratory, modernists frequently sought to define the publics that read their works, attended their plays, or participated in the events they organized and staged. A casual stroll through the annals of high modernism finds the Italian Futurists in their founding manifesto singing “of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot,”¹⁶ and Eliot praising the popularity of the music hall actress Marie Lloyd among the working classes, claiming she “represented and expressed that part of the English nation which has perhaps the greatest vitality and interest” through “her understanding of the people and sympathy with them.”¹⁷ Modernists thought often of audiences wildly diverse in number, character, and intention: they gather for rituals such as the funeral in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” or the festival in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*; they congregate around disasters such as the suicide in Larsen’s *Passing* or the bombing in Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*; they share in popular culture such as the chorus girl dances in Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*, plays in Toomer’s *Cane*, historical pageants in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, or movies in West’s *The Day of the Locust*.

The widespread fascination with the audience as a collective social form reflected a broader interest among the modernists in community. The modernist commonplace that modern life is characterized by individualism, whether alienated or heroic, was countered by these artists’ interest in the welter of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theories about community formation, many of which were hare-brained or, worse still, malevolent.¹⁸ As critics have demonstrated, these theories relied heavily on a variety of ideals: a nostalgia for myth, ritual, or aristocratic hierarchy; a political model of authoritarian government or socialist collective; local networks and institutions such as salons, little magazines, schools, or the home; or more abstracted, psychic affiliation with identities mainstream or marginal.¹⁹ Yet virtually all of the modernist fantasies of community, especially as they are depicted in modernist scholarship, disappoint. The subversive efforts of these artists to harness the promise of new collective structures, whether political or cultural, in order to renovate modern mass society failed – and failed to such a degree that the unerring disappointment in the response of communities to modernist directives has become almost a cliché.