Irish Modernism in an International Frame: Thomas MacGreevy, Seán O’Faoláin and Samuel Beckett in the 1930s

by
Rhiannon Sarah Moss

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Abstract

In 1930s Ireland, modernist writing developed at a conjuncture of national and international influences. The second generation of Irish modernism responded to national culture in the context of international debates about literary form. The purpose of this thesis is to present a nuanced understanding of the relationship between Irish and European literary discourse in the work of Thomas MacGreevy, Seán O’Faoláin and Samuel Beckett: three writers who formulated Irish writing within a self-consciously international frame.

Drawing on recent critical approaches to modern Irish writing and on contemporary theories of modernism, this thesis argues that Irish writing in the 1930s reflected many of the debates and tensions in international modernism. In the first decades of independence, attitudes to literary form, to cultural nationalism, and to the role of the writer in the public sphere were being reshaped. These attitudes formed the basis of alternative formulations of Irish modernism. The three writers considered here approached the relationship between Ireland and Europe from different perspectives, and figured the possibilities of international influence on national literary culture in diverse ways. Consideration of the national and international networks of influence underlying the aesthetic projects of MacGreevy, O’Faoláin and Beckett illuminates their 1930s writing, and has broader implications for the understanding of Irish literary culture.

The first chapter argues that MacGreevy’s critical writing formulated a national version of conservative modernism. MacGreevy combined Catholic and republican attitudes with a high modernist approach to the role of art in mass democracy. The second chapter focuses on O’Faoláin’s realist aesthetic in relation to contemporary debates about modernism and realism. O’Faoláin’s attitude to national culture developed from a conflict between artistic integrity and social responsibility which reflected tensions in both national and international literary discourse. The third chapter contextualises Beckett’s 1930s fiction in the avant gardist elements of Irish literary culture, and argues that his aesthetic developed as a specifically national manifestation of late modernism.
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Introduction

Modernist writing in 1930s Ireland has been the subject of much recent critical interest. Implicit in the debate about the significance of modernism in Irish culture is the extent to which Irish writing was related to contemporary developments in international literary discourse. The pressures of cultural nationalism in the decades following independence have been seen to have isolated Ireland from the debates surrounding aesthetics and politics which shaped 1930s writing in Britain and Europe. I contend that Irish writing in the 1930s developed in relation to both national and international frames of reference. The tensions, perspectives, and preoccupations which dominated plural formulations of modernism internationally operated distinctively in the context of Irish literary culture.

The three writers considered here developed alternative conceptions of literary form in relation to national culture and to international aesthetic discourse. Thomas MacGreevy, Seán O’Faoláin and Samuel Beckett understood national culture in conscious relation to Europe. Their diverse expressions of the nature of Irish literary culture reflected international debates about aesthetic autonomy and literary responsibility. The aesthetic projects of all three represent the ways in which Irish writing engaged with developments in literary culture internationally. Analysis of their 1930s careers reveals the range of interactions between Ireland and Europe, and renders more complex the nature of a national culture often defined by its isolation.

Irish writing in the 1930s is often studied in relation to a conservative, repressive national culture. Joe Cleary has described the “iconic version of what is now called ‘de Valera’s Ireland’,” in which the whole post-independence epoch before the Lemassian turn has become practically a byword for a soul-killing Catholic nationalist traditionalism and in the parlance of much contemporary cultural debate ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ now serves as a reflex shorthand for everything from
economic austerity to sexual Puritanism, from cultural philistinism to the abuse of women and children.¹

In literary terms, disillusionment with the conservative state which succeeded independence, the consolidation of the social power of the Church, puritanical morality and increasing distance between literary discourse and public attitudes have been seen to create an environment uniquely hostile to any literary engagement which did not confirm to dominant narratives of cultural nationalism. Such an environment has been seen to have distorted literary culture, resulting in a limited range of options available to the Irish writer.

The conservative, insular nature of independent Ireland has been a defining narrative of cultural development between the wars. Alternatives to backward-looking cultural nationalism have been recognised in the work of various writers. However, Ireland’s cultural sphere is frequently defined by division. Not only is Irish public discourse seen as hostile to any but the most conservative representations of national culture, but those writers who formulated alternative cultural programmes are also divided into two separate strands.

Realism has been discussed as the primary oppositional discourse in Irish writing, in which writers engaged with national culture used naturalistic portrayals of Irish society to challenge the distortions of repressive cultural nationalism. Realism was a dominant strand of Irish literary culture, but its critique of ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ is itself usually considered as formally conservative, if not reactionary, and isolated from international literary discourse. While the congruencies between modernism and nationalism in the Revival period have received increasing critical recognition, Irish modernist writers in the 1930s have been defined by their alienation from national culture. Modernist poets have been seen as turning to Europe as an alternative to Ireland, and to the exploration of subjectivity as an alternative to social engagement.

These lines of division encompass various dimensions of Irish literary culture in the 1930s. Consideration of Irish writing in the light of critical enquiries into international modernism allows a more complex picture to emerge. Modernism, in Ireland as elsewhere, was not a homogenous discourse. The varieties of modernism which developed in 1930s Ireland represented a range of perspectives on the relationship between art and national culture. These could interact and overlap with the attitudes and ambitions of forms of literary realism. In 1930s Europe, theories of realism were being redefined, and the question of how literature could represent and influence social and cultural formations was a pressing concern in international literary debates. These debates are relevant for a reassessment of Irish writing.

The 1930s writing of MacGreevy, O’Faoláin and Beckett represented alternative forms of engagement with national culture in the context of international literary discourse. Investigation of their aesthetic projects – represented in critical and cultural writing as well as in their fiction and poetry – suggests their affinities with different perspectives on literary form.

MacGreevy’s modernism has been viewed since the decade itself as complicating the opposition between internationalism and nationalism. His aesthetic engaged with republican history and contemporary society as well as with the Catholic Continent and with Anglo-American modernism. MacGreevy’s critical writing reveals the extent to which he integrated these perspectives into a formulation of national culture. His attitude to political and cultural modernity showed anxiety about mass culture and democracy, and his attempt to describe the ability of art to provide a compensatory order resembled 1930s developments in high modernist discourse.

O’Faoláin too was preoccupied with the role of the writer in the modern state. His rejection of modernist form developed from a commitment to social engagement, which he believed was enabled by realism. The tensions between aesthetic
autonomy and national commitment in his formulation of realism can productively be considered in related to discussions of literary form in Britain and the Continent.

Beckett also formed his aesthetic in response to the reassessments of literary modernism which characterised writing in the 1930s. His deconstruction of the relationship between art and society, developed in the context of Irish culture, explored the problems of communication and influence which preoccupied MacGreevy and O’Faoláin. Beckett’s writing represented a version of literary discourse which questioned the assumptions of both modernism and cultural nationalism; his late modernist fiction developed from the complexity of relationships between national and international culture influences in the formation of independent Irish culture.

Investigation of these three writers reveals not only the complexities and convergences in their own work, but has broader implications for understanding of Irish literary culture in the 1930s. Insularity, suspicion of international influence, and hostility to aesthetic innovation certainly characterised much cultural discourse in the period. However, writers who challenged these manifestations of cultural nationalism did not operate in isolation. In journals and periodicals, and in the establishment of cultural institutions, multiple formulations of national culture were developed. Some of these defined Irish culture in isolation from international influence. Daniel Corkery’s cultural programme is the best known of these, and Corkery formed a significant point of opposition for both MacGreevy and O’Faoláin. Others, however, imagined the development of independent Irish culture in relation to international influences and connections. By considering Irish modernism in relation to a nuanced picture of national culture, divisions between nationalism and internationalism, and between modernism and realism, appear less clear cut. The complexity and fluidity of networks of literary discourse becomes apparent.
The divisions in Irish literary culture have been formulated along various lines. F.S.L. Lyons contextualised the decline of Anglo-Irish cultural influence through the 1920s and 1930s alongside the growing strength of Catholic and nationalist discourse. A desire for cultural autonomy combined with hostility to the liberalism and materialism seen as characterising English democracy. The result, in this narrative, was a dominant insularity, which stifled artistic as well as social freedoms. Anglo-Irish writers, typified for Lyons by W.B. Yeats, who had attempted to ‘fuse’ English and Gaelic or Catholic cultures, were increasingly marginalised. Lyons described their role as adopted by a younger generation of Irish writers, among whom he named Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Faoláin, who replaced “revolutionary romanticism” with “deeply disenchanted realism.”

Terence Brown has described the climate of the 1930s as dominated by a drive to “achiev[e] and maintain[n] as much self-sufficient Irish independence.” As well as defining the economic and diplomatic policies of de Valera’s government, Brown outlines the consequences of such emphasis on self-sufficiency on Irish culture. Increasingly through the 1920s and 1930s, backward-looking, conservative insularity is seen to dominate both official and popular attitudes to literature and other arts. Brown refers to Daniel Corkery as the “principal ideologue” of the nationalist agenda. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Brown describes Corkery growing in influence as he became “increasingly polemical and dogmatic” in his promotion of the ‘normal’ concerns of the Irish writer: Catholicism, nationalism and ruralism.

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2 Lyons described the period between W.B. Yeats’ resignation as a senator in 1928 and the constitution of 1937 as the period of Anglo-Ireland’s replacement by Gaelic and Catholic culture (which are elided in Lyons’ argument) (Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890-1939 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp.166-67). Elsewhere, Lyons has depicted the growing conservatism in the 1930s with a roll-call of key developments, including the publication of Corkery’s Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature in 1931, de Valera’s 1932 election, the 1933 tax on foreign newspapers, the prohibition of contraceptives in 1935 and the 1937 constitution (‘Yeats and the Anglo-Irish Twilight’ in Oliver MacDonagh, et al. (ed.) Irish Culture and Nationalism, 1750-1950 (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp.212-38, p.230).
3 Ibid., p.170.
Brown, like Lyons, identifies literary realism as the main form of critique of conservative nationalist ideology. Among a frequently invoked group of Irish realist writers including Frank O’Connor, Liam O’Flaherty, Patrick Kavanagh and others, Brown describes O’Faoláin as representative of this oppositional discourse. As well as the critical and journalistic writing in which O’Faoláin theorised the state of Irish culture, his fiction and in particular his short stories are typically understood as a response to the limitations placed on the individual in general and the writer in particular by the moral and cultural repressions of state and public opinion. Brown groups O’Faoláin with Frank O’Connor and Mary Lavin as writers whose short stories dramatised “moments of fulfilment [...] wrested from an unyielding oppression.”

In his introduction to the Field Day Anthology’s selection of writing from the period, Brown summarises the writing of the 1930s – and of the following three decades – as defined by ‘provincialism and censorship’. Prose writing of the period is seen as dominated by realism and reflecting a lack of interest in international culture or formal experimentation, in favour of a focus on “provincial issues of personal morality and national identity.”

O’Faoláin’s biographer Maurice Harmon has similarly defined the literary of the 1930s as dominated by realist disenchantment. The generation of writers born around 1900, he argues, “raised on the excitement of resurgence, and stimulated by the promise of achievements to come once freedom was won, suffered the disillusion of national division.” Harmon summarises the society facing these writers as uniformly hostile, and defines their careers by a response to a “native, uncultivated Catholic middle class, [...] a locally unsophisticated Catholic Church [and] a chauvinist and isolationist mentality” encouraged by de Valera in politics.

(Cork: Cork University Press, 1931), Corkery detailed his argument that “normal and national are synonymous in literary criticism,” and that religion, nationalism and the land were central to Irish identity (p.3).


Such a climate, Harmon argues, was not only hostile to aesthetic experimentation but to literary production all together:

Conditions in post-revolutionary Ireland were so uncongenial for the writer that it is remarkable not so much that there was a decline in the quality and the volume of literary output, but that any literature was written at all. 8

Harmon’s analysis of O’Faoláin’s career, and his pessimism about the nature of Irish society in the 1930s, closely follows O’Faoláin’s own narrative of his creative struggles in the period after his return from the United States in 1933. 9

O’Faoláin’s influence on later critical readings is typical – narratives of Irish literary culture draw to a significant extend on the analyses of contemporary writers themselves. In particular, in both their 1930s writing, and, significantly, their later discussions of the period, O’Connor and O’Faoláin critiqued the repressions of de Valera’s Ireland. Both, for example, retrospectively described the short story as the form most suitable for the stratified, divided nature of Irish society. 10 Both described the alienation felt by writers from what another disillusioned contemporary, Francis Stuart, called the “ultra-conservative Catholic state.” 11

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8 Maurice Harmon, ‘The Era of Inhibitions: Irish Literature 1920-60’ in Irish Writers and Society at Large (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), pp.31-41, p.32, p.33, p.31. Harmon’s Seán O’Faoláin: A Life (London: Constable, 1994), is similarly pessimistic about the nature of Irish society in the 1930s, and closely follows O’Faoláin’s own narrative of his creative struggles in the period after his return from the United States in 1933.

9 Maurice Harmon, Seán O’Faoláin: A Life (London: Constable, 1994). Harmon for example echoes O’Faoláin’s analysis of his struggle to fit “his conception of the novel as a reflection of a multi-layered, complex society” with “the Irish situation of a one-class, lower middle-class, Catholic, non-intellectual society” (p.126).

10 Influential texts include O’Connor’s The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Irish Short Story (London: Macmillan, 1963), and O’Faoláin’s The Irish Short Story (London: Collins, 1948). O’Faoláin’s diagnosis of Irish society as incapable of supporting the realist novel is used by Terry Eagleton (Heathcliffe and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture (London: Verso, 1995), pp.147-50) in his analysis of the failure of 1930s Ireland to develop a native tradition in the realist novel. Cleary describes O’Faoláin’s analysis of this failure, in various articles and in The Irish (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947; repr. 1980), and is one of the few critics to dissect O’Faoláin’s own critical understanding of the relationship between writing and society (Cleary, pp.146-49).

11 Francis Stuart, ‘Literature and Politics’ in Crane Bag 1.1 (1977), repr. in The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (1977-1981) (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982), pp.77-80, p.78. Stuart outlines a typical summary of the choices available to those Irish writers “who were obsessed by glimpses of other realities (as distinct from those merely content to comment on the local scene) [and] were denounced by both ‘elected representatives’ and groups of zealous clergy. These became more and more alienated and either left the country, like Beckett and one or two others, or became what, elsewhere, were known as ‘inner exiles’” (p.78).
1967, O’Connor’s ‘Survey of Irish Literature’ evoked a vivid picture of ‘de Valera’s Ireland’, where “the intellectual darkness was almost palpable”:

You will find, I believe, that the year 1940 is the crucial year for any study of modern Irish literature. By that time Mr. De Valera’s government had complete control inside the country, and nothing whatsoever to fear from liberal opinion abroad.\(^\text{12}\)

The identification of 1940, when Ireland’s isolation from Europe had been manifested in neutrality, as the culmination of the cultural project of the 1930s is significant. Analysis of the 1930s has inevitably been influenced, in the retrospective view of contemporary writers and in later critical assessments, by the trajectory of Irish culture in the 1940s and after.

Literary censorship has often been seen as exemplifying the repressiveness of national culture. The operation of the censorship has also been viewed in the context of its harshness, increasingly anachronistic in international terms, in the decades following the Second World War.\(^\text{13}\) In the 1930s, Irish censorship was not exceptionally harsh in an international context.\(^\text{14}\) What was exceptional about the


\(^{13}\) Following the Seánad debate in 1942, public criticism of the censorship became more vocal. The establishment of an appeal board in 1946 did not quell criticism of the operation and effects of censorship policy, which if anything became increasingly harsh (the highest number of publications banned, 1034, was in 1954). The Irish Association of Civil Liberty, founded in 1948, and of which O’Faoláin was president in 1957, mounted an increasingly effective campaign against censorship which finally led to the 1967 establishment of a twenty-year limitation on bans. See Michael Adams, *Censorship: the Irish experience* (Dublin: Sceptre Books, 1968), pp.83-85, 140-53, and Brown (2004), pp.185-86, 222-24, 283-84. Donal Ó Drisceoil has discussed the effect of press censorship in the Emergency, and the relative conservatism of the Censorship in the 1950s, as confirming the impact of Irish literary censorship (see *Censorship in Ireland 1939-1945: Neutrality, Politics and Society* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), and “The best banned in the land”: Censorship and Irish Writing since 1950’ in *Yearbook of English Studies* 35 (2005), pp.146-60).

\(^{14}\) Following the 1923 Geneva Convention for the Suppression of the Circulation and Traffic of Obscene Publications, “moral legislation” of the type of the Censorship Act was “not uncommon” internationally (‘Introduction’ to *Banned in Ireland: censorship and the Irish writer*, ed. Julia Carson (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.1-18, p.4). Carson describes the operation of Irish censorship from its inception as distinguished from Britain because of its ability to ban publication, rather than relying on the prosecution of already published material, and the unusual secrecy in which the Censorship Board could operate. While noting literary opposition to censorship while the Act was being prepared, notably in the *Irish Statesman*, Adams notes the “somewhat meagre” levels of comment and complaint on the issue its first decade, in both “the Oireachtas itself, and [in] public opinion as expressed in newspapers, professional journals, magazines and so forth” (Adams, p.64). Brown also records the sense in 1929 that the Act “had turned out rather better than expected” (Brown (2004), p.65).
Irish censorship was its nationalist dimensions, which impacted on Irish writers in both practical and ideological terms. As well as making a national market, and a national income, extremely difficult for those literary writers deemed obscene, censorship has been understood as enforcing a limited and puritanical version of national self perception. Julia Carson juxtaposes the important public role of Irish art in the independence movement with the situation in the late 1920s and 1930s, when “the Irish Free State was a nation intent on purifying itself, and its people were deeply suspicious of artists and intellectuals.”\(^\text{15}\) The effect of the Censorship Act, giving “a licence to Irish Grundyism which had its censorious way in literary matters for almost four decades of Irish independence,” is central to Brown’s narrative of the cultural repression of Ireland in the 1930s and after.\(^\text{16}\)

In this narrative of Irish culture, realism is seen as the primary form of literary response to repressive cultural nationalism. Ireland in the 1930s, it is suggested, was not only uncongenial for the writer, but entirely inhospitable for the modernist writer. The incompatibility seen between modernism and nationalism in the 1930s is in contrast to recent critical perspectives on the Revival. As Paige Reynolds has described, many critics have seen Irish national art in the first decades of the twentieth century as antithetical to modernism, “accept[ing] the precepts of nationalist rhetoric insisting Ireland was isolated from the influence of modernity and cultural modernism.”\(^\text{17}\) However, increasing acknowledgement of the diverse forms of modernism, and of the relationship between modernism and the nation

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\(^{15}\) Carson, p.8.


state, has led to growing consideration of the Revival in modernist terms. Reynolds' study of theatre in the period, for example, draws on the relationship between art and audience to consider nationalist spectacle in modernist terms. Terry Eagleton and Joe Cleary have also noted the convergence between aspects of modernism and nationalism in the Revival era. Alex Davis and Lee Jenkins have described the congruencies between early modernism and nationalism in Irish poetry, drawing on recent critical discussion of the "plural bases of poetic modernism," and challenging previous conceptions of modernism as an "international, urban and yet placeless, phenomenon."

Critical discussion of the relationship between modernism and nationalism has tended to focus, however, on the Revival and the period immediately following independence. The later 1920s and the 1930s have largely been seen as a period in which such congruencies withered. J.C.C. Mays, for example, describes the "beginnings of Irish modernism" as "not renewed in the next generation after 1910," Eagleton's discussion of Ireland's "peculiarly mandarin modernism" focuses on the period before independence; Cleary, while describing the longevity of literary modernism, sees it from the late 1920s increasingly achieved not only in the geographical distance of European self-exile, but also at an increasing emotional distance from the transformative social movements and stimuli that had provided its initial momentum in the first instance.

Cleary describes naturalism as "the major domestic counter-Revival aesthetic," including in this aesthetic Beckett's novels along with those of Flann O'Brien.

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18 Peter Nicholls' Modernisms, which challenges the "monolithic ideological formation" of modernism by describing the multiple strands of modernist discourse and exploring the "interactions between politics and literary style" in varieties of modernism, has been the most influential text in discussions of the plurality of modernism (Modernisms: A Literary Guide (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p.vii).
19 See Eagleton, pp.297-301, and Cleary, pp.89-91.
20 Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins, 'Locating modernisms: an overview' in Davis and Jenkins (eds), Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.3-29, p.3.
22 Eagleton, p.299.
23 Cleary, p.94.
24 Ibid., p.141.
Davis and Jenkins also describe the modernist dimensions of cultural nationalism “ossifying” in the 1930s, to the extent that the avant-garde’s deconstructive response to high modernism, as evinced elsewhere in Europe, does not occur in Ireland. Rather, a powerfully realist dismantling of Revivalist and Irish Ireland idealisations of a nation takes place, of which Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* stands as the poetic counterpart to the fictions of Seán Ó Faoláin and Frank O’Connor.25

Modernist engagement with cultural nationalism, whether constructive or oppositional, is seen in these readings as absent from 1930s Ireland.

The modernist poets of the 1930s have thus been seen as largely disengaged from national culture. The existence of a younger generation of Irish modernists working in the 1930s, distinct from although inevitably influenced by the canonical modernism of Yeats and Joyce, has been recognised at least since the work of the *Lace Curtain* and the New Writers’ Press in the late 1960s and early 1970s.26 Thomas MacGreevy, Samuel Beckett, Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey and George Reavey are frequently grouped together as representatives of Irish modernist poetry in the 1930s. The *Field Day Anthology* placed these poets alongside the realist counter-Revival, but Brown’s introduction connected them through their alienation from national culture, and their concern “to bear witness more to crises of individual consciousness, metaphysically conceived, than to collective distress.”27 The emphasis on these poets’ distance from the ‘collective’ concerns of national identity is typical. Declan Kiberd has summarised the “modernist minority” as taking


26 The New Writers’ Press published MacGreevy’s *Collected Poems*, introduced with Beckett’s, and Coffey’s *Selected Poems*, immediately following the publication by the *Irish University Review of Denis Devlin’s Collected Poems*. As well as recovering this work, the Press’ ambition was to publish new work by young Irish poets, who would “belong to no school, movement, club or clique. They are all serious poets that is, human beings for whom writing poetry is, morally, a profoundly central activity” (Michael Smith, ‘Introduction to New Irish Poets’ (1967), quoted in Trevor Joyce, ‘New Writers’ Press: The History of a Project’ in Coughlan and Davis, pp.276-306, p.277). The focus on artistic autonomy influenced perceptions of the earlier generation of poets championed by the Press.

“self-perception as the only question worth pursuing,” with the “inevitable result of exile,”28 Gerald Dawe provides another example of such readings, characterising these poets as sharing an “uncompromising belief in artistic self-sufficiency” and aesthetic isolation.29

Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis, in their introduction to a collection of essays which demonstrated the range of recent critical interest in these poets, also defined them through their international perspective and alienation from Ireland. Inspired by European and Anglo-American modernism and “the anti-realist and internationalist writing of Joyce,” the second generation of Irish modernism is described as turning to Paris over Ireland.

All except Reavey were more or less self-exiled by their common dissatisfaction with the narrow, anti-intellectual culture of the new Irish state and with what they felt to be its coercively nationalist, ruralist and bigoted ideology, and by their rejection both of Yeats as poetic ancestor-figure and of the latter-day Irish Yeatsian poets.30

The essays contained in Coughlan and Davis’ collection present a range of perspectives on these poets, who the editors themselves note should not be considered “a ‘group’ in the sense of sharing a strongly unified or codified poetic.”31 In particular, they stress the “divergences [...] in their respective views on the relationship between poet and nation or, in more general terms, poetry and the cultural sphere as a whole.”32 This point is repeated by Davis in his study of Devlin’s poetic modernism, which, alongside the work of Mays, has contributed significantly to understanding of Devlin’s attitude to the relationship between aesthetics and social commitment.33

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30 Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis, Introduction to Coughlan and Davis (eds), Modernism in Ireland, pp.1-23, p.1.
31 Ibid., p.3.
32 Ibid., p.15.
33 Alex Davis, A Broken Line: Denis Devlin and Irish Poetic Modernism (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), p.17. Davis follows Mays’ argument that Devlin did not define himself through opposition to the Revival (see Mays, Collected Poems of Denis Devlin, p.25). Davis also contextualises Devlin’s career in the later expressions of high modernism, and argues that a recognition of the plurality of modernism in Ireland is vital.
Although valuable in deepening critical understanding of Irish modernism, the recent attention paid to the 1930s poets has tended to continue to portray a divided literary culture. Modernism, detached from cultural nationalism and from the Irish public sphere, is seen as instead turning to internationalism and the exploration of individual subjectivity. Realism is understood as the primary literary attempt to formulate an alternative vision of national culture and the role of the writer within it. The resonances between realist and modernist writing in the period are generally ignored. In terms of literary culture in the 1930s, the opposition between realism and modernism was not as straightforward as critical discussion suggests. Presentation of a more nuanced picture of 1930s writing requires recognition both of the diversity of modernist impulses, and of the extent to which realism could share the pressures and preoccupations of modernism.

Literary form and international influence were negotiated by the writers discussed here in distinctive ways. The purpose of this thesis is to present a nuanced picture of literary response to the 1930s through analysis of the contemporary writing of three figures: Thomas MacGreevy, Seán O’Faoláin and Samuel Beckett. I do not intend to attempt a comprehensive reassessment of Irish culture in relation to economic, social and political forces. Rather, detailed examination of the critical and cultural writing of these three figures, including investigation of archival material and consideration of the intellectual networks in which each worked, reveals the extent to which each negotiated national culture within an international frame.

The critical reputations of all three figures have been influenced by the trajectories of their later careers. The long break in MacGreevy’s publication of poetry after 1934, and his return to Ireland in 1941, may be seen as emblematic of the contradictions in his cultural project – if modernism and nationalism are seen as incompatible in 1930s Ireland, the virtual end of MacGreevy’s career as a poet when he joined the Irish cultural establishment confirms the unsustainability of his
aesthetic project. Similarly, O’Faoláin’s claims in the 1940s and after of the unsuitability of Irish society for the novel were an influential verdict on his own 1930s career as a novelist. For O’Faoláin in particular, Irish neutrality in the Second World War appeared to confirm his sense of the insularity and isolation of Irish culture. The war also triggered Beckett’s decisive expatriation from Ireland; his famous preference for “France in war to Ireland in peace” suggests a final break following a decade of increasing alienation from Ireland.  

The retrospective judgements of each of these writers have coloured interpretations of their earlier work. It is my intention here to consider that work on its own terms. In the 1930s, MacGreevy, O’Faoláin and Beckett all engaged with Irish culture in the development of their distinctive aesthetic projects. They were also, however, self-consciously responding to currents in international literary discourse. Deeper understanding of the variety of ways in which Irish writing was informed by debates within international modernism allows a more nuanced picture of Irish literary culture in the 1930s.

The combination of national and modernist impulses in Thomas MacGreevy’s writing has been the focus of much critical interest. Usually discussed among the experimental poets seen as turning from Ireland to the Continent, he is often seen as a borderline figure in Irish literary history. Various critics have approached the combination of modernist form and explicitly national subject material in his poetry. MacGreevy’s career has been until recently defined as much by his failures as by his achievements, however. The long break in his publication of poetry around the time of his return to Ireland in 1941, and the shift in his critical focus from

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35 Beckett’s description of MacGreevy as an “independent,” between the “antiquarians” and “others,” was an early and influential example of this placing (‘Recent Irish Poetry’, The Bookman, August 1934 (under the pseudonym Andrew Belis). In Ruby Cohn (ed.), Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment (London: John Calder, 2001), pp.70-76). Lee Jenkins has discussed the role of Beckett’s judgement in shaping critical perceptions of MacGreevy (‘Thomas McGreevy and the Pressure of Reality’ in The Wallace Stevens Journal 18.2 (Fall 1994), pp.146-56).
modernist to Irish subjects have been taken to represent the unsustainability of a modernist project in Ireland.\textsuperscript{36}

These readings are based on the sense that not only was Irish culture hostile to modernist writing, but that modernist aesthetics were incompatible with national engagement. However, MacGreevy’s writing in the early 1930s, poetic and critical, does not support a reading of his career as compartmentalised between modernist and nationalist stages. MacGreevy’s formulation of modernism from the beginning of his career was inseparable from his nationalism and his Catholicism. His critical conception of literature and culture developed from a conception of modernism, Irish nationalism and Catholicism as complementary, not contradictory. Asking ‘how is MacGreevy a modernist?’ J.C.C. Mays has recognised MacGreevy’s “special place in the Irish tradition because he is a modernist,” and his status as a “special kind of modernist because he was Irish.”\textsuperscript{37} As Mays describes, MacGreevy’s aesthetic was formed from a combination of republicanism, Catholicism and nationalism. Central to this combination was MacGreevy’s sense of Ireland’s place within Europe, and his commitment to the influence of the European tradition on Irish culture. As Mays convincingly argues, MacGreevy was no less a nationalist because of his internationalism.\textsuperscript{38}

However, a focus on MacGreevy’s special status as an Irish modernist risks the neglect of how he understood modernism. An understanding of how he incorporated his national and Catholic perspective with his modernist aesthetic

\textsuperscript{36} Gerald Dawe’s discussion of MacGreevy reflects this view - Dawe places MacGreevy as the “linkman” among the 1930s modernists, and while he recognises that the financial and other pressures under which MacGreevy worked were not unique, he describes his career as a modernist poet as incompatible with engagement with Irish public culture (\textit{False Faces: Poetry, Politics Place} (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1994), pp.23-25). Susan Schreibman describes a divide between modernism and Revivalism in 1930s Ireland as contributing to MacGreevy’s limited poetic output after 1934, as it resulted in a lack of critical and economic support for MacGreevy’s writing (Introduction to \textit{Collected Poems of Thomas MacGreevy} (Dublin: Anna Livia Press, 1991), pp.xxxii-xxxvi). Anthony Cronin has also defined MacGreevy as a “returned exile” whose literary career was stymied by his return to Ireland (\textit{Heritage Now: Irish Literature in the English Language} (Dingle, Co. Kerry: Brandon, 1982), p.159).

\textsuperscript{37} J.C.C. Mays, ‘How is MacGreevy a Modernist?’ in Coughlan and Davis (eds), \textit{Modernism and Ireland}, pp.103-28, pp.107-08.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p.111.
requires analysis of how he saw modernism as a literary discourse, and his conception of the role of modernist art in the modern world. Detailed analysis of MacGreevy’s critical writing in the 1930s, including unpublished archival material as well as his better known monographs on T.S. Eliot, Richard Aldington and Jack B. Yeats, reveals the extent to which MacGreevy worked in relation to international examinations of the nature of modern society and the purpose of art and culture.

In order to understand MacGreevy’s modernism, it is necessary to understand his cultural nationalism. He viewed Irish culture as part of a European, Catholic tradition. As Mays has pointed out, MacGreevy saw European influence as an alternative to insular, parochial cultural nationalism. What has been less recognised, however, is the emphasis MacGreevy placed on Anglicisation as the source of Ireland’s ‘cultural dilemma’. MacGreevy consistently described elements of national and Catholic discourse which did not support his ideal of the cultivated European tradition as the result of England’s continued influence over Irish culture.

It was in this context that MacGreevy’s nationalism intersected with his version of modernism. His interpretation of English influence demonstrated his hostility to the

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39 MacGreevy’s prolific output of reviews and articles, and the huge amount of correspondence contained in his archive, provide a fertile resource for this examination. Schreibman’s collection of much of MacGreevy’s published criticism at www.macgreevy.org has made much of this material much more accessible. However, MacGreevy’s criticism has received relatively little attention, and this has been largely confined to his contributions to Chatto & Windus’ series of Dolphin monographs. Four analyses of MacGreevy’s critical writing have been particularly influential in my interpretation. Seán Kennedy has discussed MacGreevy’s criticism in relation to Beckett. His verdict is largely negative, emphasising the sectarianism evident in MacGreevy’s Catholic aesthetic and suggesting the Beckett was more ambiguous about MacGreevy’s writing than is usually recognised (“The Artist Who Stakes His Being is from Nowhere”: Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy on the Art of Jack B Yeats’ in Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui 14 (2004), pp.61-74 and ‘Beckett Reviewing MacGreevy: A Reconsideration’ in Irish University Review 35:2 (Autumn/Winter 2005), pp.273-87). James Matthew Wilson presents MacGreevy’s reading of Eliot in a much more sympathetic light (‘Thomas MacGreevy reads T.S. Eliot and Jack B. Yeats’ in Yeats Eliot Review 23 (Fall 2006), pp.14-26). David Lloyd has offered an alternative perspective on MacGreevy’s analysis of Jack Yeats, placing his interpretation in a tradition of Irish cultural nationalism (‘Republics of Difference: Yeats, MacGreevy, Beckett’ in Field Day Review 1 (2005), pp.43-69). Tim Armstrong’s discussion of MacGreevy’s career is particularly relevant for my project in his consideration of the politics of MacGreevy’s aesthetic in relation to T.S. Eliot (‘Muting the Klaxon: Poetry, History and Irish Modernism’ in Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s, ed. Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp.43-74).

effects of mass culture which he connected to English liberal democracy. He expressed disdain for bourgeois tastes, anxiety about the social and cultural consequences of democracy, and a desire for an authoritative cultural elite which could mitigate the dangers of materialism and social alienation. These attitudes reflected the concerns and preoccupations of high modernist responses to the social and political situation of 1930s Europe.

Since Andreas Huyssen defined modernism in opposition to mass culture, modernist attitudes to democracy have been the subject of much critical debate. Huyssen’s polarised view has been challenged by various critics, who have emphasised both the complexity and the variety of modernist responses to mass culture. Among these responses, those writers associated with canonical high modernism have been described as attempting in the 1930s to formulate a social and political programme which could support their sense of the potential of art to order the world. The writers most important for MacGreevy’s understanding of modernism were those who combined anxiety about democracy and mass culture with a conception of the ability of culture to provide a compensatory order in response to social and political disorder.

The 1930s manifestations of high modernism provide a productive new context for MacGreevy’s modernism. While critical interpretations have emphasised the necessity of differentiating the work of Beckett, Devlin, Coffey and MacGreevy, they are almost always grouped as representatives of Irish poetic modernism in the

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42 Michael North’s analysis of *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) is used throughout my interpretation of MacGreevy. Rachel Potter’s contextualisation of modernist responses to democratic culture, while focusing on the period 1900 to 1930, has also been useful in my discussion of the international context of MacGreevy’s career (*Modernism and Democracy: Literary Culture 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)).
43 Eliot, Aldington, W.B. Yeats provide my primary points of comparison with MacGreevy. Joyce was an equally important figure in MacGreevy’s career; however, Joyce’s aesthetic was less complementary to MacGreevy’s cultural project.
1930s. MacGreevy had less in common with, for example, Beckett’s late modernist aesthetic than he did with the generation of Anglo-American modernists to whom he was closer in age. T.S. Eliot’s conservative, Catholic modernism of the 1930s was the version of modernist discourse closest to MacGreevy’s own. For MacGreevy, Eliot’s poetry demonstrated the possibility of a Catholic aesthetic to express and influence modern culture. MacGreevy was suspicious of Eliot’s expression of political commitment, as he was of W.B. Yeats’ involvement in Irish politics. However, Eliot’s sense of the dangers of mass democracy and the role of culture and tradition in establishing social order had affinities with MacGreevy’s perception of modernity in both national and international terms.

MacGreevy’s conviction that Catholicism could mitigate the ills of modern materialism connected high modernist responses to the social and political crises of 1930s Europe with Catholic social thought in Ireland. Recent critical interpretations have challenged the idea of Catholic discourse in the 1930s as monolithic, insular and xenophobic. The more self-consciously intellectual organs of Catholic thought – in particular the journals Studies and the Irish Monthly – manifested a conception of Ireland’s place in Catholic Europe which echoed MacGreevy’s own. These journals frequently referred to the Catholic Continent as the natural context for an independent Ireland, and attempted to establish Catholicism as the basis of social and culture renewal. The connections between MacGreevy’s cultural programme, contemporary modernist discourse, and the cultural attitudes of the intellectual Catholic press in Ireland provide an illuminating network for his version of modernism. MacGreevy’s writing in the 1930s developed a specifically Irish form of modernism; its nuances can only be understood in an international as well as a national context.

While critics such as Alex Davis reject the grouping of these poets as “coherent avant-garde,” MacGreevy, Devlin, Coffey and Beckett are the constant in discussions of Irish poetic modernism (Davis (2000), p.17). Clair Wills’ discussion of Catholic social thought has illuminated these elements (That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland during the Second World War (London: Faber, 2007), pp.344-382). Susannah Riordan has presented a nuanced analysis of the Catholic press (‘The Unpopular Front: Catholic Revival and Irish Cultural Identity, 1932-48’ in Mike Cronin and John M. Regan (eds), Ireland: The Politics of Independence, 1922-49 (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp.98-120.)
The context of international literary debates about politics and aesthetics is also productive for consideration of Seán O’Faoláin’s writing in the 1930s. O’Faoláin has often been interpreted as representative of an enlightened republican, disillusioned with the conservative and insular ‘de Valera’s Ireland’. While MacGreevy’s related sense of disillusionment with republican ideals was developed in connection to modernist literary discourse, O’Faoláin saw realism as the literary mode capable of bringing about a new understanding of Irish culture. He is usually considered as a point of opposition to Irish modernism in the period. However, while O’Faoláin rejected the possibility of modernist form – which he considered a version of naturalism – he did so in terms which were not as isolated from international literary discourse as critical readings have suggested. He advocated ‘intellectual realism’ as capable of representing the ‘totality’ of social reality and the individual’s experience within it; his conception of realism had affinities with contemporary critiques of modernism from the left in Britain and Europe.

In this context, O’Faoláin’s response to the pressures facing the Irish writer can be considered as a national manifestation of international literary concerns. Anxiety about the role of the writer in society was not a uniquely Irish preoccupation, and O’Faoláin’s later pessimism about the potential of national culture in the 1930s should not be accepted without question. In the 1930s O’Faoláin was engaged in an attempt to develop and promote an alternative version of national culture, in terms of the role of the public intellectual and the formation of the realist novel as part of a new generation of Irish writing. In this project, tensions were manifest between O’Faoláin’s sense of the role of culture in mass democracy, and the ability of literary form to express and transform national society. These tensions can be understood

46 When O’Faoláin is named, usually alongside O’Connor, in discussions of 1930s modernism, it is almost invariably as a representative of the realist dominant of Irish writing, developed in isolation from literary modernism internationally and responding to Joyce as a realist. W.J. McCormack describes O’Faoláin’s and Frank O’Connor’s “body of fiction where Romanticism and disillusion sustained a dialogue” in contrast to the manifestestions of Irish modernism which challenged “the agreed order of things” (“Austin Clarke: The Poet as Scapegoat of Modernism” in Coughlan and Davis (eds), pp.75-102, p.77. J.C.C. Mays names O’Connor and O’Faoláin as representative of the “strongly mimetic, anti-modernist element” in 1930s writings (Mays (1989), p.24).
in relation to contemporary debates internationally about modernism and realism in modern society.

O’Faoláin’s sense of Ireland’s place within Europe is often discussed with reference to his editorship of the *Bell* in the 1940s. In the journal, O’Faoláin attempted to ‘open the windows’ of Irish society in a period in which Ireland’s isolation from Europe seemed confirmed by neutrality.⁴⁷ O’Faoláin had been working on a related project through the 1930s, in his many polemical interventions in literary and cultural discourse in Irish and international journals, and in his close involvement with *Ireland To-Day*. O’Faoláin’s critical and journalistic writing in the 1930s bears further investigation, as does the *Ireland To-Day* project. The journal was in some ways a precursor to the *Bell*. It was an attempt to create a space for documentary examination of contemporary Irish society and a platform for new writing. Its discussion of foreign affairs showed conviction in the relevance for Ireland of European politics. As Frank Shovlin has described, *Ireland To-Day* was a platform for a remarkably diverse range of political views, including support for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War unusual in Irish public discourse.⁴⁸

This summary, however, holds together many complex dimensions of public culture. The correspondence of *Ireland To-Day*’s editor, Jim O’Donovan, with O’Faoláin and others, reveals a combination of conflicting motivations which allows a re-evaluation of the journal’s ambitions and its difficulties. The conflict between O’Donovan and O’Faoláin over the ideological thrust of *Ireland To-Day* developed from O’Faoláin’s commitment to challenging the version of cultural nationalism he saw dominating political and popular attitudes. O’Faoláin imagined a role for the public intellectual which could both express and transform the cultural life of the nation. The tensions in this project resulted from his divided attitudes to status of

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⁴⁷ Brown (2004), pp.192-93. Clair Wills has described the *Bell* in the context of neutrality, and highlights the tensions in O’Faoláin’s idea of Europe in this period (Wills, pp.290-95). Frank Shovlin’s account of the *Bell* is definitive; Shovlin also points out the conflict between O’Faoláin’s literary and his social impulses (*The Irish Literary Periodical 1923 – 1958* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp.96-130).

⁴⁸ Shovlin, p.95. Shovlin notes that many of the writers who appeared in *Ireland To-Day* were involved in the *Bell*. 
culture in the democratic state. Throughout his cultural and historical writing, O’Faoláin combined democratic republicanism in his political views with an elitist conception of the artist. He idealised a version of the Irish public, but distrusted mass culture. He demanded a realist engagement with social reality while arguing for the autonomy of the artist. 49

Like MacGreevy’s, O’Faoláin’s negotiation reflected contemporary literary discourse. While MacGreevy’s writing developed in relation to high modernist responses to the 1930s, O’Faoláin can be more usefully considered in the context of international debates about realism. O’Faoláin had no sympathy with the socialism which was typically the ideological basis of the rejection of modernism. His individualist liberalism and hostility to state control in individual life was related to a reactionary response to the movement, in the 1930s, from liberal democracy to mass democracy, and he considered both fascism and communism as materialist mass movements. 50 However, he despaired at the loss of a totalising ethical base which he understood as necessary for literary engagement with society. His attempt to imagine such a base in his 1930s writing had elements in common with socialist realism. In this regard O’Faoláin’s rejection of modernism was less a product of his obliviousness to modernism’s challenge to realism, as Terence Brown suggests, than a response to this challenge. 51

The most obvious point of connection in this regard was with the left-wing English writers grouped as the ‘Auden generation’, although Auden and Spender are a less

49 The conflict between idealism and realism in O’Faoláin’s writing is the basis of Marie Arndt’s convincing interpretation (A Critical Study of Seán O’Faolain’s Life and Work (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001)). Julia O’Faoláin has also described her father’s dual commitment to aesthetic freedom and social belonging, and emphasises his own awareness of the conflict between his cultural and political attitudes (‘The Irishman Who Stayed’ in Donatella Abbate Badin et. al. (eds), Seán O’Faoláin: A Centenary Celebration (Turin: Trauben, 2001), pp.21-34).

50 The 1930s context of mass democracy is described by Rachel Potter (Potter, p.5). Michael North describes T.S. Eliot’s “lumping [of fascism] together with communism as simply another of the byproducts of the degradation of capitalism” (North, p.118); in this regard, while O’Faoláin rejected modernist aesthetics as a response to the political situation of the 1930s, he was similar to the version of high modernist thought shared by MacGreevy and Eliot.

productive point of comparison for O’Faoláin than Louis MacNeice. The Bell was in part modelled on British periodicals which saw the presentation of social reality as a necessary role of culture; O’Faoláin saw Cyril Connolly’s Horizon as the Bell’s peer and rival. Before the Bell, O’Faoláin’s approach to literary form and the social responsibility of the writer had also developed parallel with the turn to realism among British writers.

Joe Cleary is one of the few critics to consider Irish writing in the 1930s in relation to this context, specifically with regard to György Lukács’ theory of realism. As Cleary describes, in opposition to the “left-modernist” position that realism was incapable of expressing more than the “surface texture of reality,” Lukács advocated the ability of realism to penetrate the structures underlying objective reality and express the complex social relations governing experience. Cleary relates Lukács’ conception of objective realism to O’Faoláin’s aesthetic project, but considers the “terminology and the essential conception of his art [...] inherently naturalistic,” despite O’Faoláin’s critical rejection of naturalism. While O’Faoláin’s critical terminology could be vague, his formulation of realism and naturalism are revealing. His critical programme was based on a belief, in Lukács’ terms, in the ability of ‘intellectual realism’ to express a “totality of objects,” in which subjective experience was related to objective reality. O’Faoláin’s 1930s novels attempted to develop the realist novel as a national literary form. His judgement of the failure

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52 Samuel Hynes’ title is still influential, although critics like Valentine Cunningham have described British writing in the 1930s as much more diverse than perceptions of W.H. Auden’s monolithic influence suggest (Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation: literature and politics in England in the 1930s (London: Bodley Head, 1976; repr. London: Pimlico, 1992); Valentine Cunningham, British Writers of the Thirties (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)).

53 Heather Bryant Jordan has discussed the relationship between the Bell and Horizon, including O’Faoláin’s competitive response to Horizon’s 1942 ‘Irish Number’ (“A Particular Flair, A Hound’s Nose, A Keen Scent”: Seán O’Faolain’s editorship of The Bell in Éire-Ireland 29.4 (Winter 1994), pp.149-60). Michael Sheldon’s account of Connolly and the Horizon project suggests several points of comparison with O’Faoláin and the Bell – both in the wartime context of the journals and in Connolly’s struggle with literary form (Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of Horizon (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989)).


55 Cleary, p.147.

of this project reflected the tensions between his political and his cultural ideologies.

The cultural projects of both MacGreevy and O’Faoláin are elucidated by considering them in relation to international literary discourse. Their approaches to Irish literary culture were not conducted in a vacuum. That Beckett’s writing in the 1930s was developed in the context of international modernism is not disputed. The relevance of the Irish context for this work has not always been recognised, however. As Cleary notes, Beckett is the most famous of this generation of Irish writers, “now increasingly recognised as a pivotal figure in a wider international transition from a modernist to a postmodernist conjuncture,” but he is also “often viewed as the least ‘Irish’ of the Irish modernists.”

The work which most obviously focuses on Irish material, his fiction between *Dream of Fair to middling Women* and *Watt*, has also traditionally been overshadowed by his post-war writing. In the ‘transition’ between modernism and postmodernism to which Cleary refers, Beckett’s 1930s fiction has been seen as “derivative modernist work,” and his satirical mockery of Irish culture as representative of his increasing alienation from Ireland.

However, critical assessments have re-evaluated Beckett’s 1930s writing as definitive of late modernism, and as related to Irish society. What has been less

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57 Cleary, p.155.


59 With Bouchard, Tyrus Miller’s definition of late modernism is adopted in my discussion of Beckett (*Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)). In Miller’s definition, late modernism is defined by the questioning or
recognised is the extent to which Beckett’s late modernist destabilisation of aesthetic order was developed as a response to Irish literary culture. Discussions of Irish poetic modernism have included Beckett’s poetry; in readings such as those of Alex Davis and Patricia Coughlan, Beckett’s questioning of the stability of the poetic object and of the possibilities of literary communication is considered in relation to the context of Irish modernism. John Harrington’s work on Beckett’s fiction has convincingly established the extent to which Beckett drew on Irish cultural and literary discourse in the development of his fiction. Alongside these considerations of the national context of his early career, Beckett’s writing has been central in critical explorations of the nature of late modernism. Connecting these approaches to Beckett’s fiction reveals the development of his aesthetic in response to Irish literary culture.

The satire of Dublin culture in Beckett’s 1930s fiction was that of an insider. Beckett was associated with a self-consciously intellectual and internationalist group in Dublin society, represented in various forms in Trinity salons, the Dublin Magazine and the Gate Theatre. These groups formed the Irish environment of the modernist poets, including Beckett, who moved between Dublin, London and Europe. Beckett’s intimacy with these groups is evident in his correspondence and his critical writing, and they also formed a significant influence on his fiction. The combination of national and international influences and ideologies characterised these groups, who often conceived of themselves as an avant garde. Beckett’s

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refutation of the possibility of aesthetic order – Miller uses Beckett as a representative of his definition. David Weisburg’s Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000) largely complements Miller’s reading. As with Bouchard, however, these critics tend to view the national dimensions as secondary in Beckett’s deconstruction of fictionality.


61 Harrington’s The Irish Beckett is the most comprehensive account of Beckett’s engagement with Irish literary culture. His discussion of Beckett’s response to cultural nationalism in relation to Murphy is particularly significant for my approach. Lois Gordon’s The World of Samuel Beckett (New Haven and London, 1996: Yale University Press) is also an invaluable discussion of Beckett’s literary connections in both Dublin and Europe.

62 The term appeared often in Motley, the Gate Theatre’s magazine, and the Gate and its associated coterie conceived of themselves as the vanguard of a reinvention of Irish culture. The theatre was
earliest fiction – *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks than Kicks* – satirised the pretensions of Dublin’s ‘intelligentsia’. He portrayed a coterie, obsessed with the incorporation of experimental and elite European influence into Irish culture.

Beckett’s own 1930s career evolved in the context of this coterie, as its self-conscious narrative form suggested. The self-referentiality of his fiction, and the tendencies of his narrators to implicate themselves in their own satire, were characteristically late modernist. Beckett’s metafictional strategies developed from the conjunction of post-Revival Irish culture and the development of modernism in Europe. The reaction of Beckett and his contemporaries to the previous generation of Irish cultural Revival was comparable to responses to European responses to high modernism. Beckett’s deconstruction of subjectivity and narrative is a central subject of critical formations of late modernism, but the extent to which his aesthetic developed in relation to Irish culture has been underestimated. Irish modernist writers in the 1930s interrogated the narratives of national culture which had become institutionalised by the second decade of independence. Poetry has been the focus of critical enquiry into the second generation of Irish modernism, but it was also manifest in Beckett’s fiction, and in the theatrical project of the Gate.

The Gate was conceived as a new kind of national theatre in which national and international cultural influences were combined. Its ‘little magazine’, *Motley*, attempted to promote the Gate as a theatre both Irish and international, and both not avant garde in the terms of Peter Bürger’s influential formulation - this was no sustained combination of political and aesthetic radicalism (Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). Beckett’s fiction, and intermittently the Gate’s project, demonstrated the impulse to interrogate (rather than dismantle) the boundary between art and life, and the institutionalisation of aesthetics. The term ‘avant garde’ is used here to refer to these elements of these cultural projects, as well as reflecting their own self-conception.

63 The question of the social function of modernism dominated literary discourse in the 1930s. In Britain, Auden and Spender emphasised the impulse to “immerse themselves in ‘the destructive element’” (Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p.278), and formulated alternative aesthetic projects which prioritised the social responsibilities of the writer. Late modernism, in critical formulations, challenged the inherited modernist conception of language as “capable of providing order and finality to the contradictory and open-ended dimensions of life” (Bouchard, p.1).
committed to aesthetic autonomy and experimentation and anxious to engage with national cultural life. Exploration of this magazine reveals the tensions in this combination of impulses, and the extent to which they were evident from the Gate’s inception. Dublin’s ‘avant garde’ conceived themselves as an intellectual elite, but they also aspired to a role in national culture, requiring a wider audience and a relationship with popular cultural discourse. In the tension between these ambitions, the Gate project was another version of the negotiation between modernism and national culture.

The gap between the ambitions and the impact of Ireland’s avant garde was the target of Beckett’s late modernist satire. He portrayed a social group – directly connected to the Gate through his fictionalisation of Mary Manning – that combined elitism with a claim to be performing to the nation. Beckett’s puncturing of these pretensions was the basis of his better known satires of cultural nationalism in *Murphy*.

The relationship between the formal deconstructions of Beckett’s fiction and the cultural discourse of the Gate is evident in the ironic self-awareness which recurred in the work of his contemporaries. As well as Motley’s constant examination of its own role alongside the Gate, the dramatic work of two of its insiders can helpfully be placed alongside Beckett. The presentation of a coterie, the ironic self-regard, and the artificiality of cultural narratives, and the desire to form Ireland in relation to international culture feature in the plays of Manning and Denis Johnston for the Gate. While Beckett did not aspire to a role in public culture, his exploration of the tensions in such aspirations was central to his aesthetic. His 1930s fiction developed from a self-consciously national literary project illuminated by the international context of late modernism.

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64 My interpretation of Beckett’s late modernist satire draws on the definitions suggested by Alan Wilde. His essay on ‘The Epistemology of Late Modernism’ distinguished between the ‘disjunctive’ irony of modernism, in which art could order the fragmentary nature of experience, and the ‘suspensive’ irony of postmodernism, in which the fragmentation of reality is celebrated. Wilde positions late modernism at a transitional point between the two. See *Horizons of Assent* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1981).
A complete picture of the versions of modern Irish literature developed by MacGreevy, O’Faoláin and Beckett entails a new perspective on the literary culture of contemporary Ireland. Various points of connection between their writing are apparent. At one level, these are the predictable encounters of writers working within a shared literary culture. Less obviously, thematic correspondences and contrasts emerge too from the consideration of their work in the context of international literary culture.

All three of the writers discussed here formulated a version of their literary programmes in 1934. The most famous of these is Beckett’s ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, an essay which has been remarkably amenable to critical analyses of Irish modernism. Beckett’s categorisation of Irish poetry – divided into the ‘antiquarians’ and the ‘others’ – was a shorthand for a complex network of oppositions. His ‘others’ included an ambiguous positioning of MacGreevy as an ‘independent’; the status is suggestive of the alternative aesthetic conceptions evident in MacGreevy’s critical writing. O’Faoláin too appeared among the ‘others’, in a cursory reference alongside writers better known as novelists. Analysis of prose writing as well as poetic modernism shows the diversity of responses to the central division of Beckett’s analysis – the ‘rupture of the lines of communication’ between subject and object.

Less well-known essays by O’Faoláin and MacGreevy, also produced in 1934, offer alternative perspectives on the position of the Irish writer and the nature of contemporary literary culture. In a 1934 lecture, MacGreevy outlined the ‘dilemma’

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65 Beckett’s friendship with MacGreevy, formed in Paris after their meeting in 1928, is well known; the letters from Beckett contained in MacGreevy’s archive at Trinity College Dublin have been an invaluable resource for Beckett scholarship. Beckett’s encounters with O’Faoláin, often dubbed ‘All Forlorn’, appeared in his letters at various points through the 1930s (see The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940, eds Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). MacGreevy contributed to Ireland To-Day, and was invited by O’Faoláin to become involved with the Bell (TCD MS 8118/138, SOF to TM, 25 September 1942).

66 “Mr Francis Stuart is of course best known as a novelist, but he writes verse [...] So I am sure do Mr Frank O’Connor and Mr Seán O’Faoláin – also best known as novelists of course” (‘Recent Irish Poetry’, p.75).
of Irish culture as a choice between international influences. Anglicisation, associated by MacGreevy with the philistinism and conservatism of mass culture, could be counteracted in MacGreevy’s reading by the influence of the Catholic Continent. The opposition forms a productive starting point for consideration of the attitudes to international influence and to the role of the writer in society evident in MacGreevy’s modernist aesthetic.

O’Faoláin’s 1934 manifesto for modern Irish writing called for ‘The Emancipation of the Irish Writer’ from social responsibilities. However, O’Faoláin’s individualist rhetoric was combined with a conviction that literature had a responsibility to represent national life, and that such representation could transform national culture. The contradictions in O’Faoláin’s approach to the dual commitment of the writer were evident in his formulation of modern Irish realism. His career in the 1930s was shaped by these tensions. Like the alternative cultural programmes of Beckett and MacGreevy, O’Faoláin’s article combined formal and national conceptions that cannot be orientated to a single set of parameters. The intricacy of literary connections to international culture emerges from the unearthing of a range of archival and journalistic material.

Throughout this thesis, a focus on the cultural criticism of MacGreevy, O’Faoláin and Beckett reveals the extent of their engagement with cultural networks in Ireland. Without arguing for the existence of a vibrant avant garde or a dynamic relationship between modernism and public culture, analysis of this engagement enables insight into broader currents in Irish intellectual culture and their relationship with European concerns in the 1930s. Irish writing of the period was both influenced by contemporary thought internationally, and developed along lines which were reflected in international discourse. National discussions of the social responsibility of the writer, the role of the intellectual in the public sphere, and the potential values and implications of literary form, resonated with contemporary debates taking place in Britain and in continental Europe. Irish

67 ‘The Cultural Dilemma for Irishmen, Nationalism or Provincialism’ (TCD MS 8003/8-9a).
writers operated in a unique national situation, but they also worked in an international context. The historical crises of the 1930s made debates about the responsibilities of the writer particularly urgent. Anxieties about the role of literature in an increasingly turbulent Europe were combined with anxiety of influence, of which literary traditions could be worked with or worked against. Similar anxieties resonated with Irish writers, working with literary tradition in which the public role of art and the issue of national identity were uniquely constructed. Analysis of the relationship between national and international engagement in Irish writing reveals a complex network of intersections and interactions.
1. Thomas MacGreevy: Modernism, Catholicism and Nationalism

Since Beckett placed him between the ‘antiquarians’ and the ‘others’ in ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, Thomas MacGreevy has been located at the intersection of Irish modernism in the 1930s. The terms of Beckett’s analysis are well known. He distinguished between those who were and were not aware of “the new thing that has happened [...] rupture in the lines of communication” between subject and object. Beckett’s “rough principle of individuation” was the extent to which poets recognised the instability of perception and expression in aesthetic form. He formulated this position as international, “not peculiar to Ireland or anywhere else,” but “especially acute in Ireland, thanks to the techniques of our leading twilighters.” The essay focused on the Irish specificity of an international situation.

In Ireland, Beckett wrote, the tropes of the Revival had become ‘antiquated’. Cultural nationalism was based on faith in the stable relationship between subject and object in narratives of self-definition, “delivering with the altitudinous complacency of the Victorian Gael the Ossianic goods.” Beckett promoted the new generation of Irish poets, the ‘others’ who recognised the instability of the object and the subject.

Beckett located MacGreevy between the two poles of his analysis. Notably, he did not mention the national concerns of MacGreevy’s poetry as the basis of his position as an ‘independent’. Beckett defined MacGreevy’s poetic as “intermediate

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1 MacGreevy varied the spelling of his name; the earliest and later publications use ‘MacGreevy’, but most of his writing in the early 1930s was published as ‘McGreevy’. Here, the former, is adopted throughout.
2 Beckett described the ‘rupture’ as the “breakdown of the object,” then noted that some might amend this to the “breakdown of the subject” (‘Recent Irish Poetry’, The Bookman, August 1934 (with the pseudonym Andrew Belis). In Ruby Cohn (ed.), Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment (London: John Calder, 2001), pp.70-76, p.70). As Patricia Coughlan points out, this “rhetorical scorn [...] insists on the processual qualities of both self and world” (“‘The Poetry is Another Pair of Sleeves”: Beckett, Ireland and Modernist Lyric Poetry’ in Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis (eds), Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp.173-208, p.179.
3 John Pilling has noticed Beckett’s neglect of MacGreevy’s nationalism (Before Beckett Before Godot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.121). In addition, Alex Davis points out that in his quotation of MacGreevy’s ‘Nocturne’, Beckett removed the poem’s dedication to a soldier killed in the First World War. The political implications of MacGreevy’s evocation of solitary labour were thus
between the [younger antiquarians] and the poor fish,” because he combined a belief in the accessibility of the object with attention to the process through which it is communicated; it was in the latter, the awareness that “it is the act and not the object of perception that matters,” that Beckett located the value of MacGreevy’s verse.  

In the terms of ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, MacGreevy’s intermediate status was based on epistemology, the possibilities of perception. As well as the opposed extremes of antiquarianism and other, Beckett suggested another pairing in modern aesthetics. He subdivided possible aesthetic responses to the “space that intervenes between him and the world of objects”: the artist may “state” the space, or may “celebrate the cold comforts of apperception.” Beckett did not elaborate these alternatives, but the distinction suggests differentiation between high modernist and late modernist epistemological dominants. That MacGreevy may be associated with

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5 Ibid., p.70.  
6 In this differentiation, I am drawing upon Brian McHale’s definitions of modernist and postmodernist fiction. McHale argues that “the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as […] How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” Other typical modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on.” (Brian McHale, Postmodernist Fiction (London: Routledge, 1987), p.9). McHale does not discuss the category of late modernism, arguing that the shift in dominant from the epistemological to the ontological represents a shift from modernism to postmodernism (and using Beckett’s Trilogy to exemplify this shift). Tyrus Miller and others have posited late modernism as a transitional stage between high- and postmodernism, arguing that late modernist texts
the former was implied by Beckett’s identification of Jack B. Yeats’ art and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as “notable statements of this kind.” Both were MacGreevy’s critical subjects.\(^7\)

High modernism, in particular modernist responses to the social and political pressures of the 1930s, provides an illuminating framework for MacGreevy’s contemporary career. Although Beckett did not explicitly address MacGreevy’s political attitudes, critical analyses of his writing have tended to stress MacGreevy’s nationalism as the basis of his distinction from the ‘others’, the Irish modernist poets of the 1930s with whom he is usually grouped. While recent critics have emphasised the differences between these poets, and the unsuitability of classifying them as a coherent avant garde, MacGreevy has generally been considered in relation to the younger poets identified by Beckett as the “nucleus of a living poetic in Ireland.”\(^8\) However, Beckett distinguished MacGreevy from these poets, among whom Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin were named “without question the most interesting.”

With Beckett’s distinction in mind, the assumptions, emphases, and tensions in MacGreevy’s aesthetic can more usefully be considered as a development of high modernism than a late modernist destabilisation. MacGreevy’s criticism focused on the older generation of Anglo-American and Anglo-Irish modernists in relation to the European tradition. It revealed an understanding of modern art which combined modernist aesthetics with cultural nationalism and Catholicism.

Examination of MacGreevy’s career in the framework of his own critical and cultural responded to modernism’s epistemological framework while rejecting the possibility of an aesthetic order compensating for the fragmentation of experience (Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)). Here, it is notable that Beckett’s ‘rupture in the lines of communication’ was a modernist interrogation of knowability. ‘Stating’ the gap between perception and expression suggests a high modernist aesthetic framework, while ‘celebrating’ the gap is related to a late modernist rejection of aesthetic ordering in favour of deconstructing the possibilities of communication.

\(^7\) *Thomas Stearns Eliot* had been published three years previously in 1931. His monograph on Jack Yeats was not published until 1945, but had been begun in 1933 (Schreibman, p.xvii).

\(^8\) ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, p.75, p.76. Alex Davis warns against seeing Coffey, Devlin, Beckett and “the slightly older figure of MacGreevy,” as forming a coherent avant-garde movement of any kind” (Davis (2000), p.17). The bracketing of the ‘slightly older’ MacGreevy implies Davis’ sense of his borderline status.
formulations reveals the extent to which his internationalism and his modernism were inseparable from nationalism and religion.

Critical assessments have tended to see MacGreevy’s career as a struggle to reconcile conflicting impulses. His permanent return to Ireland in 1941, after a decade spent largely in London and Paris, the drastic reduction in his poetic output after the 1934 Poems, and the shift in his main forum of publication from European literary journals to Irish Catholic publications may all seem to represent his failure to sustain an Irish poetic modernism. Bruce Arnold’s extreme version of this view presents MacGreevy’s as a “curiously compartmentalised life”:

Each phase was put into a compartment; when it was over, MacGreevy moved on, and in the process he closed off the past. This was crucially the case in respect of MacGreevy the modernist writer and poet. When he became director of the National Gallery of Ireland he became conservative and something of a snob. George Yeats used to say that he ‘lived by the Almanach de Gotha’.9

More sympathetic portrayals have also emphasised the trajectory of MacGreevy’s career as representative of Ireland’s inhospitality to modernism. Anthony Cronin praises MacGreevy’s “perfectly modulated free verse” and describes his importance as a transitional figure, “the first specifically and consciously modern Irish poet.”10 Irish literary culture was to blame for MacGreevy ‘falling silent’ after 1934, he argues. Although the phrase ignores MacGreevy’s continued critical output, Cronin describes MacGreevy’s poetic ability as marginalised by the ‘antiquarians’, and his “position in Dublin [as] the ambiguous one of the returned exile.”11

Susan Schreibman also explains MacGreevy’s career in terms of “a continuing struggle between writers coming under the sway of modernism [...] and those who were still rewriting Revival themes.” Public indifference and the difficulty of making a living from writing contributed to his small poetic output after 1934, she

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11 Ibid., p.159.
suggests.\textsuperscript{12} MacGreevy was not alone among experimental writers in Ireland or elsewhere in facing these pressures, as Gerald Dawe has noted. Dawe places MacGreevy as the “linkman” among the 1930s modernists, who turned from the “‘Victorian gaeldom’ of Yeats’ revivalism – by the late 1920s in a state of terminal decline – towards Paris and the hub of continental experimentalism.”\textsuperscript{13} This repeats the opposition between internationalism and nationalism in the climate of the 1930s.

MacGreevy did not continue his poetic career when he became established in Irish public life. However, this does not reflect a ‘compartmentalised’ career, in which modernism was replaced by cultural nationalism.\textsuperscript{14} While MacGreevy may, as Cronin suggests, have found the combination of roles difficult, they were not incompatible in his own critical and poetic aesthetic. Other critics have noted the extent to which MacGreevy’s modernism from the beginning was shaped by his nationalism and his Catholicism. As a critic and as a poet, MacGreevy combined the three perspectives. Stan Smith characterises MacGreevy’s poetry through its combination of “cosmopolitan” form and “traditional, strangely anachronistic content.” Smith’s reading is sensitive to the tensions in MacGreevy’s poetic exploration of historical and political juxtapositions. His description of MacGreevy’s desire for “liberation” from “an oppressive history,” however, portrays his poetry in paralysed alienation from both past and present:

Caught in a stalemate in which neither the imagined world of 1916 nor a more prosaic, truncated ‘reality’ could be consolidated, built upon, the poet was transfixed in the hapless instant between two times.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Schreibman, pp.xxxii-xxxvi.
\textsuperscript{13} Dawe, pp.23-25.
\textsuperscript{14} The role of Director of the National Gallery, to which MacGreevy was appointed in 1950, was a confirmation of his increased standing in Irish culture. However, it is significant that MacGreevy first applied for the post, with the support of W.B. Yeats, in 1927 (TCD MS 8104/53a, WBY to TM, March 1927).
\textsuperscript{15} Stan Smith, \textit{Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity: Ireland Between Fantasy and History} (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), p.43, p.49. Alex Davis’ analysis of MacGreevy describes the tension between the “obliquity of [his] allusions to contemporary events” and the “urgency and intensity of their presence,” and similarly emphasises MacGreevy’s frustration in the combination of nationalist and modernist impulses (Davis (2000), p.21.).
In this portrayal, idealist nationalism is opposed to a pessimistic response to modernity. The combination of nationalist and modernist impulses in MacGreevy's poetry is seen to lead to stasis.

J.C.C. Mays has presented MacGreevy's aesthetic in terms which undermines the opposition between nationalism and international modernism. MacGreevy, Mays argues, combined "nationalist and modernist themes" to write poetry which could be "Irish and European in a way that compromises neither."16 Mays opposes MacGreevy's "idea of the Irish mind" to the "kind of cultural nationalism regularly condemned by Conor Cruise O'Brien," describing his positioning of Ireland in a European tradition and his rejection of place as the definitive characteristic of national writing.17 He also places MacGreevy's understanding of national art in opposition to "the Irish line" of the "realist short stories and Bildungsroman of O'Connor, O'Flaherty and O'Faoláin" and the "verse satire of Clarke, Kavanagh and Kinsella."18 These oppositions underestimate the complexity of MacGreevy's cultural nationalism, formulated in his critical writing.

 Critics who have examined MacGreevy's cultural criticism have noticed its conservatism. Terence Brown calls his study of Eliot "a very odd performance indeed," a "literal-minded account" which praises The Waste Land for its "worthy Christian conclusions." Brown considers the text representative of "that endemic Dublin state of feeling" in which the dangerous implications for the Christian world-view of the major modernist texts can be rendered anodyne in an oddly Olympian conception of tradition which may in fact be the symptom of a certain

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16 J.C.C. Mays, 'How is MacGreevy a Modernist?' in Coughlan and Davis (eds), Modernism and Ireland, pp.103-28, p.111.
17 Ibid., p.111. In an earlier article, Mays had described MacGreevy's formulation of cultural nationalism "against the dominant model" which "linked Irishness with place, and assumed literature should be mimetic." The "alternative, which is no less nationalistic, linked Irishness with an attitude towards the European traditions in all the arts. It was consciously open to experimental techniques, less interested in realism; it looked more to the Joyce of Ulysses (as a book, not just as local history) and Finnegans Wake than of Dubliners and Portrait" ('Young Beckett's Irish Roots', in Irish University Review 14.1 (1984), pp.18-33, p.27-28).
self-protective provincialism of mind before the arresting challenge of
true and threatening originality.  

Seán Kennedy does not consider the same text as representative of Dublin
provincialism (it was, after all, written in Paris and published in London), but also
remarks on the Catholic principles of MacGreevy's criticism, which, he argues,
"operate on a crude sectarianism [...] Often, MacGreevy uses faith as the basis of a
simplistic sociology of knowledge."  

In these readings, MacGreevy's poetic experimentalism was itself opposed to his
critical conservatism, based in Brown's terms on his Irish frame of reference and in
Kennedy's on his Catholicism. Both view MacGreevy's modernism as belied by his
criticism, but they do so in relation to an understanding of modernism as culturally
as well as aesthetically radical. The writers with whom MacGreevy can be most
productively compared, however, were in the 1930s associated with cultural and
political positions closer to MacGreevy's Catholic cultural nationalism than to the
radical progressiveness of the avant garde.  

As Mays argues, MacGreevy was no
less nationalist for his emphasis on the role of Europe in modern Irish culture. In
addition, he was no less modernist for his conservative cultural nationalism.

David Lloyd's analysis of MacGreevy's cultural nationalism, in relation to
MacGreevy's work on Jack B. Yeats, is helpful in his understanding of MacGreevy in
a tradition of nationalist aesthetics which imagines the individual artist both

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19 Terence Brown, 'Ireland, Modernism and the 1930s' in Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis (eds),
Modernism and Ireland, pp.24-42, pp.28-29.
20 Kennedy, p.279.
21 As well as Eliot, MacGreevy's aesthetic was developed in relation Richard Aldington, Jack B. Yeats
and W.B. Yeats and Joyce. MacGreevy's modernism was closer to that described by Coughlan as
defined by "its moment of composition, its claims to hegemony and self-constitution as a new
master-narrative," than "its equally characteristic and constitutive moment of decomposition and
radical disjunction from a totalizing aesthetic." As Coughlan goes on, this is "Eliot's modernism
rather than Joyce's" (Coughlan, p.179). Although MacGreevy was closer to Joyce in personal terms, I
argue that his modernism was more akin to Eliot's.
Coughlan makes this point with reference to Douglas MacMillan's description of Beckett's
opposition to the "mythopoeic" aspects of modernism (Douglas MacMillan, 'Echo's Bones: Starting
Points for Beckett' in Edourd Morot-Sir et. al. (eds), Samuel Beckett: The Art of Rhetoric (Chapel Hill:
University of North Carolina Press, 1976), pp.165-66). The different modernisms of MacGreevy and
Beckett were a dimension of Beckett's own recognition of MacGreevy as 'independent' in 'Recent
Irish Poetry.'
representing and creating the national community. Throughout MacGreevy’s critical writing, in articles on Irish art in history as well as his better known discussions of modernists, a sense of national art which harmonises the individual and the community is evident. Examination of his formulation of the relationship between the artist and society reveals his attempts to balance both individual aesthetic autonomy and commitment to the national and spiritual community. His negotiation of the tensions between aestheticism and social responsibility was formed in the context of cultural nationalism. It was also developed in relation to the attempts of modernist writers in the late 1920s and 1930s to describe the relationship between individual and society. In MacGreevy’s terms, nationalism and modernism were complementary, not contradictory.

Tim Armstrong has recognised the reconciliation of both discourses in MacGreevy’s 1930s writing, and has considered his critical project in relation to the development of modernism internationally. These contexts demonstrate that “MacGreevy did have a confidently-promulgated programme for an Irish, Catholic, modernism, connected to a wider European modernism, and registered by an allegiance to Eliot and Joyce.” Armstrong describes MacGreevy’s development in relation to that of Eliot; moving from elitism in the early 1920s to a defence of bourgeois art in the early 1930s, he parallels MacGreevy’s cultural writing with the increasing inclusivity of Eliot’s contemporary work. MacGreevy’s search for a “middle way between disengagement and popularism, abstraction and ‘reality’, high and mass culture” is made possible, Armstrong argues, by the “collectivity of the Catholic tradition.”

As Armstrong argues, Catholicism allowed MacGreevy to formulate an inclusive aesthetic. It is evident in MacGreevy’s critical writing, however, that the inclusivity of Catholic collectivity was combined with distrust of liberal democracy. MacGreevy’s attitude to the role of the artist in mass culture has not been a focus of critical enquiry; those critics who have addressed his criticism tend to see him

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23 Tim Armstrong, ‘Muting the Klaxon: Poetry, History and Irish Modernism’ in Coughlan and Davis (eds), Modernism and Ireland, pp.43-74, p.47, p.49.
lacking anxiety about this role. Armstrong describes MacGreevy’s critical writing as an “attempt to formulate an aesthetic which would avoid the contempt for the masses within [W.B.] Yeats’ work.” In MacGreevy’s “inclusive and explicitly Catholic aesthetic,” Armstrong highlights MacGreevy’s defence of “a specifically bourgeois art.”

James Matthew Wilson, who convincingly explains the Catholic basis of MacGreevy’s criticism in relation to Maritain, similarly describes MacGreevy lacking “the anxieties over cultivation and mass culture that sometimes underwrite Eliot’s prose.” The elitism which Armstrong locates in MacGreevy’s early writing was mediated through the 1930s by an increasing emphasis on a Catholic community, but throughout his writing a distrust of democracy and disdain for bourgeois culture remained evident. MacGreevy reconciled these tensions with his hostility to authoritarianism through a combination of republican and Catholic attitudes. He associated the perceived dilemmas of modern culture with Anglicisation and Protestantism.

Interpretations of modernist aesthetics have been shaped by a sense of modernism’s antagonism to liberal democracy and mass culture. Andreas Huyssen’s After the Great Divide has been a central text in this field, defining modernism as opposed to “consuming and engulfing mass culture,” and rejecting the mass market in favour of a cultivated elite. Various critics have since challenged the rigidity of Huyssen’s opposition, highlighting the extent of modernist engagement with mass culture, and questioning the monolithic nature of high modernism. Anxieties about the role of culture in modern mass democracy remain central, however, to analyses of modernism.

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24 Armstrong, p.48.
27 The plurality of modernisms has been explored by Peter Nicholls in Modernisms: A Literary Guide (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995). Tim Armstrong disputes the characterisation of modernism in opposition to “two associated hate objects: women and the sentimental mass culture they are said to passively consume” (Modernism: A Cultural History (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p.42), pointing out the diversity of responses to mass culture. Mark Morrisson has influential argued for the extent of modernist adoption of mass market techniques, (The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920 (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000)), as
Irish modernism has rarely been considered in the context of international literary responses to mass culture in the 1930s. Where manifestations of modernism have been seen to engage with national culture, their conservatism is connected to a Dublin atmosphere of stultifying provincialism. Terry Eagleton has argued that Ireland was particularly suited to the development of modernism, and that revolutionary nationalism was ideologically related to the radical yet reactionary modernism of Yeats and Eliot:

If modernism is among other things a last-ditch resistance to mass commodity culture, Irish nationalism would set its own ancient spirit of aristocracy against the dismally standardized society on its doorstep, and so act out in its own way the radical conservatism of so much modernist art.29

Eagleton’s reading is primarily in relation to the modernism of the Anglo-Irish Revival, however. After independence, the political and cultural energies of Irish modernism are seen to harmonise in a complacent society of the lower middle class. Joe Cleary challenges Eagleton’s verdict of the ‘overwhelmingly conservative tenor’ of Irish modernism, arguing that after independence Irish literary modernism lacked the hostility to modernity which characterised the ‘archaic’ modernism of the Revival. Synge and Yeats, he argues, “denigrat[ed] the modern [...] in keeping with a great deal of early or pre-World War I European modernism when a strong sense of aristocratic disdain for the new society emerging out of the collapse of the old order was still decisive.” However, Cleary describes *Ulysses* as shifting Irish

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28 Rachel Potter describes the “notorious [...] hostility to democracy and liberalism” of Anglo-American modernism, and explores attitudes to democracy in the 1920s and 1930s. As well as highlighting the gendered nature of these responses in both modernist texts and critical responses, Potter emphasises the changing context which modernist attitudes were formed. Pre-First World War liberal democracy was in the 1930s “seen to be in crisis, unable to deal with the new kind of political pressures of 1930s Europe” (*Modernism and Democracy: Literary Culture 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.1, p.5).

modernism "decisively towards the 'modern' rather than the 'archaic' end of the spectrum, marking a decisive break with earlier literary modernisms."^{30}

These readings do not allow a space for MacGreevy's formulation of modernism. His critical writing in the 1930s developed a response to mass culture in Ireland and in Europe which incorporated nationalist and Catholic ideology. His writing reflected the cultural discourse of contemporary conservative modernism in a consciously national context. By conceiving liberal democracy and bourgeois cultural tastes as the product of Anglicisation, his aesthetic was related to the "peculiarly mandarin modernism" of the Revival.^{31} For MacGreevy, however, Catholicism provided the overarching structure of his aesthetic.

By figuring Catholicism as the basis of a cultural corrective to the materialism of modern society, MacGreevy's aesthetic programme reflected a strain of Catholic social discourse in Ireland. Catholic social thought which emphasised Ireland's connection with the Continent, and attempted to develop a form of social organisation which would replace the divided and materialist liberal state, has received recent critical attention.^{32} Conservative and reactionary, the intellectual Catholic press represented a version of the "anti-modern politics" which contextualised various formulations of modernism internationally.^{33} It is necessarily included in a nuanced picture of the Irish culture in which MacGreevy's modernism developed. While Catholic discourse was almost universally hostile to experimental

^{30} Joe Cleary, Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland (Dublin: Field Day, 2007), pp.92-93.
^{32} Clair Wills' analysis of Catholic social thought in the 1930s describes the range of its political manifestations. These included enthusiasm for Ireland's role within Catholic Europe as well as xenophobic elements more usually associated with de Valera's Ireland (That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland during the Second World War (London: Faber, 2007), pp.344-69. Susannah Riordan has also challenged views of uniform intellectual stagnancy in 1930s Ireland through an investigation of the Catholic press ('The Unpopular Front: Catholic Revival and Irish Cultural Identity, 1932-48' in Mike Cronin and John M. Regan (eds), Ireland: The Politics of Independence, 1922-49(London: Macmillan, 2000), pp.98-120.
^{33} Armstrong (2005), pp.78-84, discusses this background to international modernism.
literary form, it provided an Irish background to MacGreevy’s formation of a Catholic modernist aesthetic.

MacGreevy’s modernism can be re-evaluated in relation to national and international contexts. His ‘independence’ from his poetic contemporaries in Ireland was based on his affinities with high modernist discourse internationally. His criticism reveals his integration of this discourse with nationalism and Catholicism. He developed a form of cultural republicanism which emphasised the Catholic Continent as the alternative to Anglicisation, and his attitudes to both created his distinctive version of Irish modernism.
1.1 MacGreevy’s ‘cultural republic’: Ireland and Europe

MacGreevy’s writing in the 1930s evoked the compatibility of international modernism with contemporary Irish culture. Its difference from Beckett’s is represented by a paper, produced like ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ in 1934, in which MacGreevy formulated an alternative manifesto for Irish writing. The unpublished lecture, ‘The Cultural Dilemma for Irishmen, Nationalism or Provincialism’, encapsulated the central conceptions which formed MacGreevy’s cultural nationalism. The title of the paper is revealing – MacGreevy formulated the Irish dilemma as the continued dominance of English cultural influence in Ireland. The nationalist solution was to turn to Europe.

MacGreevy defined his cultural nationalism through internationalism, and formulated the choice available to Ireland as either an embrace of European culture or a provincial state of cultural domination by England. For MacGreevy the choice was not between isolation from and engagement with the wider world, but between opposed international cultural influences:

the only way to shake off our London Irishness, the way to become culturally republican instead of culturally provincial, is not to try and turn in on ourselves completed – that cannot be done for the English influence is strong and is going to remain strong for a long time yet – but while studying our own culture to try and steep ourselves as much as we can in other than English modern cultures and more particularly in the culture of those countries that, like ourselves, are Catholic by tradition, France and Spain, Italy and Austria.

MacGreevy’s turn to Europe was based on his understanding of the tradition and history of Irish civilisation, on a deep hostility to England, and on an ideal of the cultural bonds of Catholicism. The 1934 lecture wove together these three strands together. MacGreevy did not conceive of Irish culture in terms of isolation; international influence was inevitable. Europe offered an alternative to a provincial

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34 TCD MS 8003/8-9a. The lecture was delivered in November 1934, to the NUI Club in London. Two TS versions exist of the lecture in annotated form, prepared by MacGreevy for submission to Ireland To-Day in 1937. It did not appear in the journal. Amendments have been incorporated into the text.
relationship to England, and MacGreevy described this in spiritual terms: "only Europe that can save the soul of Ireland." 35

When MacGreevy submitted his manifesto for national culture to Ireland To-Day three years later, the amended title suggested the basis for his internationalist nationalism: ‘A Cultural Irish Republic’. His argument was republican, as he argued that Ireland’s political independence had not yet resulted in cultural independence. The lecture opened with a vivid reminder of England’s imperialist history, the “twenty years since guns began to be let off on the continent of Europe for the purpose of deciding whether England was to retain her supremacy on the seas,” and the “eighteen years since guns began to be let off in Ireland for the purpose of setting up an independent Irish republic.” He described both endeavours as failures; “England’s world supremacy is gone” and “there is no Irish republic.”

In MacGreevy’s pairing, England’s victory in the First World War still resulted in a failure of its initial aims, as the successful independence of Ireland failed in the establishment of a republic. MacGreevy categorised politics as inseparable from war, as “the guns, and the politicians beside the guns, have failed in Ireland as they failed outside Ireland.” England’s domination and influence would prevent the fulfilment of political republicanism, and “[t]here will be no independent Irish republic in our time.” MacGreevy’s disillusionment with the development of political republicanism in the 1920s and early 1930s combined with a sense of the First World War as another demonstration of the failure of democracy. The achievement of independence was dismissed as a “change in regime” with few practical results. In the 1930s he attempted to define his republicanism and his

35 MacGreevy said this in response to Francis Stuart’s suggestion “[i]n his novel Pigeon Irish [...] that Ireland may yet save the soul of Europe.” Stuart’s novel imagined an Irish Republic which could preserve spirituality in another European war, and while his mystical Catholicism seems comparable to MacGreevy’s Catholic republicanism, MacGreevy objected to its ‘vanity’. He wrote to George Yeats in 1932, in relation to his own difficulties with a planned novel as well as to Pigeon Irish, that “I hated Harry Stuart’s novel, that Dorothy Macardle kind of Catholicism in it is so contemptible. But he took my disapproval like a charitable Catholic instead of merely a faithful one. He’s writing very well I think but it is a monstrous crime for any Irishman to flatter Irish vanity at a time like this. Save Europe’s soul indeed. If we could find a soul for ourselves to begin with we might be able to consider ourselves fit to associate with other European countries.” TM to GY (copy), 10 May 1932 (TCD MS 8104/71b).
opposition to the current Irish state in purely cultural terms. His ‘cultural republic’ was an attempt to establish the autonomy and inclusivity he saw lacking in the political republic.

That MacGreevy returned to his manifesto after several years, attempting to place it before the audience of Ireland To-Day, reflected the centrality of these ideas to his cultural project. His introductory note showed some optimism as he described the paper as having “dated somewhat” in the intervening three years. Between 1934 and 1937 there was, he said,

an indication that we are, in spite of all the obstacles, making some progress in the direction of cultural autonomy. It is very much to be hoped that we are for the more culturally autonomous we become the more we shall have to give to the world.36

The justification of cultural autonomy as enabling interaction with the world showed the nationalist basis of MacGreevy’s internationalism.

MacGreevy’s emphasis on cultural autonomy from England was related to his suspicion of English liberal democracy. MacGreevy did not mention the political systems in the countries he specified as culturally connected to Ireland, “like ourselves, [...] Catholic by tradition” – France, Spain, Italy and Austria. However, the selection suggested MacGreevy’s interest in alternatives to the liberal democratic state. The turn to the Continent which MacGreevy advocated was not only a turn away from insularity and provincialism, but also from English democracy. MacGreevy tried to dismiss the relevance of political systems for his ‘cultural republic’. “Politics are of little more importance than traffic regulations,” he claimed, reflecting reluctance throughout his critical writing to define the political

36TCD MS 8003/9-9a. MacGreevy sent the paper to Ireland To-Day in 1937. His only contributions published in the magazine were a discussion of the Irish National Gallery in December 1936, and reviews of Devlin’s Intercessions and Mary Carbery’s The Farm by Lough Gur, in the October and November issues respectively. Schreibman suggests that he did not contribute more because Ireland To-Day did not pay its contributors (‘Ireland To-Day: Introductory Essay’, www.macgreevy.org). ‘Apropos of the National Gallery’ was another expression of the concerns of ‘A Cultural Irish Republic’ – he advocated the Continent and France in particular as the alternatives to monolithic English influence; he praised Anglo-Irish cultural achievements, but blamed them for the “mid-Victorian provincialism of our press and our cultural institutions,” and he described the need for the National Gallery to educate public taste (‘Apropos of the National Gallery’ in Ireland To-Day 1.11 (December 1936), pp.52-57).
implications of his cultural attitudes. MacGreevy’s position here is comparable to those described by Seamus Deane as the result of the “ideologically invertebrate” state of nationalism after the War of Independence. Political ideology was replaced, Deane has argued, by “a whole series of ideologies of writing – those of Joyce, Beckett, Francis Stuart, Patrick Kavanagh and others – in which politics is regarded as a threat to artistic integrity.” This attitude is evident in much of MacGreevy’s critical writing. It was not combined, however, with a “doctrinaire aesthetic of privacy, insulation, isolation and exile.” 37 MacGreevy retained an ideological commitment to artistic engagement with society in national terms. He conceived the public role of art as only possible, however, through an elevation of the cultural sphere. While he attempted to dismiss the political implications of his ‘cultural republicanism’, suspicion of bourgeois values and democratisation of culture underlay his condemnation of Anglicisation.

MacGreevy’s anger in ‘The Cultural Dilemma’ was primarily directed at the ‘London Irish’. In his terms, these were Ireland’s middle class, whom he saw adopting sentimentalism, anti-intellectualism and moral Puritanism from England. 38 The qualities which MacGreevy described as ‘London Irish’ were associated explicitly with materialism and anti-intellectualism, and implicitly with democratic mass culture. London was “a merely plutocratic city which did not even have a university until a couple of generations ago”; Irish stamps and banknotes conformed to sentimental English tastes; official conservatism from licensing laws to literary censorship reflected the hypocritical morality of the English middle class; the housing built for the lower-middle class officials he disdained, “suburban villas and bungalows,” were “slavishly imitating English building.” The European alternative to Anglication was in MacGreevy’s terms an alternative to the democratisation of Irish culture. His cultural republicanism required a cultural elite. In this sense,

38 MacGreevy specified the civil servants and journalists, particularly those who had worked in London before independence, as typical importers of English taste. In a crossed out phrase in this heavily annotated passage, MacGreevy acknowledged his own period in the British civil service (“I went into it myself and got out of it”), but did not refer to London journalism as his own main source of income.
MacGreevy’s understanding of modernism was aligned with his cultural nationalism.

MacGreevy’s formulation of national art resembled the form of Irish cultural nationalism described by David Lloyd,

preoccupied throughout its history with the possibility of producing a national genius who would at once speak for and forge a national identity. The national genius is to represent the nation in the double sense of depicting and embodying its spirit — or genius — as it is manifested in the changing forms of national life and history.  

In this formulation, national art may be democratic, representative of national life. It also implies the status of cultural leadership. The ‘national genius’ is conceived as ‘forging’ national identity, and both speaks for national culture and creates it. The tension in MacGreevy’s version of cultural nationalism resulted from the conflict between the representative and the directive roles of national art. He attempted to resolve this conflict by attributing the aspects of modern Ireland which appeared to threaten the status of the artist to Anglicisation. In this formulation, European influence was seen to develop the Irish national genius.

MacGreevy specifically challenged Daniel Corkery as a representative of the insular cultural nationalism he saw dominating modern Ireland, protesting against Corkery’s claim that a ‘normal’ national literature could not be written by those orientated towards abroad. Corkery had in fact named MacGreevy among the “tribe of Anglo-Irish literary men” whose writing, in material and treatment, was “to a greater or lesser extent imposed on him by alien considerations.”


40 Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature: A Study* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1931), pp.4-5. Corkery was seen by contemporaries as well as later critics as representative of the ‘Irish Ireland’ cultural episteme which dominated the late 1920s and 1930s (see for example Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2001* (London: Fontana, 1981; rev. London: HarperCollins, 2004), pp.53-57). Foucault’s concept of the episteme, a version of the ‘world-view’ which enables understanding of the world, but also limits this understanding, is concerned by Marcus Kornprobst in an Irish context. Kornprobst describes the invention of a colonial episteme, which celebrated an “ancient and homogenous nation that was radically different from Britain,” a description which relies on Corkery (‘Epistemes, nation-builders and national identity: the re-construction of Irishness’ in *Nations and Nationalism* 2.3 (July 2005), pp.403-21, p.411. Sean O’Faoláin’s cultural writing in the 1930s was also often directly formed in opposition to Corkery, in a much more thorough interrogation of Corkery’s definition of national identity than MacGreevy’s.
did not challenge Corkery’s idea of national literature, but disputed his claim that it could only be produced by writers ‘rooted’ in the nation. He rejected the idea of expatriation as deracination, and sketched a tradition of writers, including Dante, Descartes and Ibsen, who produced ‘national art’ while living outside their native countries. MacGreevy based his understanding of national writing on a belief in an essential national genius. He argued however that this genius could, and sometimes must, be developed through contact with the geniuses of related nations.

Professor Corkery names me as a wild goose with the rest, so I may perhaps [...] suggest to him that it is not only in Cork, or even in Ireland, that Irishness may be developed; that I did not, of necessity, become less Irish during the years I spent eating the not invariably sweet bread and climbing the sometimes quite bitter stairs – those to the seventh floor of a Latin Quarter hotel for instance – on the mainland of Europe.41

MacGreevy justified his experience of French culture in nationalist terms, as a development of his ‘Irishness’. His later reminiscences of his time in France idealised the country as a centre of Catholic tradition, and emphasised his engagement with the French culture and society. In an autobiographical fragment written after 1950, MacGreevy explained his move to France as a search for a ‘living culture’. His move to France in 1927 was partly through desire to know the great galleries of Europe,

But that was not all. His reading and research made him realise that it was in the Latin countries that the great traditions in the arts had been preserved. Through the English language, English cultural traditions dominated in Ireland, which, since the Famine, had all but lost its own language, and in which, consequently, it was difficult to be anything but an English provincial. He must, if he could, try to get inside the skin of some other living culture which would be more in the true, the metropolitan tradition of Europe than the British. France as a Latin country he already knew was obviously indicated.42

The reasoning combined intellectual aspiration and nationalism, and presented France as attractive for its Catholicism and its centrality in the ‘metropolitan

41 ‘The Cultural Dilemma’. In his amendments MacGreevy removed the description of his period in France as “voluntary exile.”
42 TCD MS 8053/1. The typescript begins with a description of MacGreevy as Director of the National Gallery, Dublin, a post to which he was appointed in 1950.
tradition’ of Europe, not its republicanism. Experience ‘inside the skin’ of French culture was justified in order to avoid English ‘provincialism’.

While MacGreevy emphasised his engagement with the breadth of French society, his time in Paris between 1927 and 1933 was spent among largely expatriate intellectual groups. As lecteur at the École Normale – a position for which he had been recommended by T.S. Eliot – he was part of an institution of the intellectual elite, which “consider[ed] itself very superior indeed.” From this position and his connections with writers in London and Dublin, MacGreevy soon also became associated with the group of writers and artists surrounding Joyce. Samuel Putnam recorded MacGreevy along with Beckett, George Reavey and others, among the group of Dublin intellectuals, “friends and admirers of Joyce,” who associated with the transition group. MacGreevy published in transition and Putnam’s New Review, was secretary of the English edition of the fine art journal Formes, and published monographs on the Anglo-American modernists Eliot and Richard Aldington with Chatto & Windus.

transition was the most famous of the many little magazines written by and for the intellectual avant garde centred on Paris. Noel Riley Fitch records its “immediate and controversial success” on its launch in April 1927, shortly after MacGreevy’s arrival in Paris. transition soon achieved a fame beyond its readership, frequently being the focus of satire at expatriate extremism and pretension. Its reputation, in the terms of its sometime subtitle, was as ‘An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment’ – dedicated to “uncover[ing] the most innovative work being undertaken by writers of all nations, a magazine that sought to present an

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43 Ruby Cohn, in Disjecta, p.169. A copy of Eliot’s letter of recommendation, 21 January 1927, is in MacGreevy’s archived correspondence (TCD MS 8113/26a).
44 Paris Was Our Mistress: Memoirs of a Lost and Found Generation (New York: Viking, 1947), p.97. The title suggests the reputation of inter-war Paris in the post-war period roughly contemporary with MacGreevy’s autobiographical recollections, which may have contributed to his eagerness to disassociate himself from the city’s avant garde.
encyclopaedic cross-section of that material to anyone who was still largely indifferent to the innovations of modern art.\textsuperscript{46}

Anarchism, radicalism and an aestheticist concentration on the subjective ran through the discussions which filled the magazine, in particular the frequent manifestoes and editorials of its editor Eugene Jolas. Such concerns may appear antithetical to MacGreevy's nationalism, and his insistence on the priority of community over the individual artist. The 1932 'Poetry is Vertical' manifesto of which he was a signatory (along with Beckett) began

\begin{quote}
In a world ruled by the hypnosis of positivism, we proclaim the autonomy of the poetic vision, the hegemony of the inner life over the outer life.
\end{quote}

It further stated a dedication to artistic autonomy and a disdainful detachment from the political and social world

\begin{quote}
We believe that the orphic forces should be guarded from deterioration, no matter what social system ultimately is triumphant.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

MacGreevy's endorsement of these principles did not fit easily with the commitment to a cultural republic presented two years later.

Elements of the manifesto could be interpreted, however, as reflecting a sense of collectivity and order possibly through aesthetics. It ended with an endorsement of the possibility of art achieving a community through the connection of subjectivities.

\begin{quote}
Poetry builds a nexus between the 'I' and the 'you' by leading the emotions of the sunken, telluric depths upward toward the illumination of a collective reality and a totalistic universe.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
The synthesis of a true collectivism is made possible by a community of spirits who aim at the construction of a new mythological reality.
\end{quote}

In transition, the role played by poetry in the creation of social unity was a constant companion to the insistence on aesthetic autonomy. This dual preoccupation was


\textsuperscript{47} 'Poetry is Vertical' in transition 21 (March 1932), p.11.
much more complimentary to MacGreevy's cultural republicanism than transition's more famous expatriate aesthetic radicalism suggests.

transition's determined internationalism, which combined a focus on European intellectual movements with a market in England and America, did not inevitably involve a rejection of the nation. It frequently organised discussion of movements distinguished by their national context, and intermittently organised into sections by country. This organisation reflected that of Putnam's contemporary European Caravan project, to which MacGreevy contributed both poetry and translations. This 'Anthology of the New Spirit in Literature' suggested both an international movement unified by modern 'spirit', but made of distinctively national components.

In the "vatic and religiose" language of Jolas' manifestoes, the social purpose of his 'revolution of the word' is unclear. He claimed his aim to be "the undermining of the present social structure," but his conception of what might take its place was

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49 The description is Valentine Cunningham's (British Writers of the Thirties (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.4). Jolas' emphasis on the failings of modern materialism and the mystical transcendence of the individual were evidently amenable to fascism, as contemporaries pointed out. Cunningham mentions one of various attacks on transition's politics, from both left and right, as he quotes G.A. Hunt's identification of "a strong near-Fascist flavour about Jolas' julep" (in the Left Review (July 1935), quoted Cunningham, p.5). The implications of Jolas' emphasis on quasi-mystical social unity were evident to Putnam, whose New Review advertised its affiliation to no particular group partly in opposition to transition. Harold Salamson, while a signatory to 'Revolution of the Word', similarly used Tambour to "separate himself from what people saw as the social ramifications of Jolas's ideas" (Monk, p.67).

Monk also points out that Jolas, who permanently returned to the U.S. late in 1937, "made arrangements to publish a "Tenth Anniversary" number of transition, abandoning his own apolitical nature to make this final collection of international material a defiant stand against fascism" (Monk, p.69). transition was also accused of communist leanings, and Jolas seemed more sensitive to these. In his autobiography he recalled Wyndham Lewis as a particular opponent, who repeatedly attacked transition as surrealist and communist in The Enemy (Eugene Jolas (eds Andreas Kramer and Rainer Rumbold), Man From Babel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p.161). MacGreevy may have been responding to the feud in his comments on Lewis in Richard Aldington. There, following a furious condemnation of the senseless deaths of the First World War, he regretted that Lewis did not use his talents as a pamphleteer to examine political corruption. Then "one would be more prepared to consider him seriously than when he wastes the abilities he has on unsignifying aesthetes of Bloomsbury and Montparnasse, mere whipping of dead asses, and defending the neo-Kaiserism of Adolf Hitler" (Richard Aldington: An Englishman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p.51). The comments are representative of MacGreevy's loathing of the imperialism he saw endemic in all contemporary political systems.
undefined. He instead repeatedly proclaimed the potential of modern art to challenge the “bankruptcy of spirit” in the modern world, where Collective materialism seems triumphant, the notion of man in relation to the totality of the real is thoroughly vague, literary exhibitionism and senile aestheticism lingering in ideals of the past, are the order of the day.50

Like MacGreevy’s focus on a cultural republic, Jolas formulated social issues as aesthetic ones. The “problem of the spirit in relation to the external world” can be addressed, he said through aesthetic revolution, in which the artist would spiritually enrich materialistic modernity by uniting the individual and the universal, becoming a new type of man – not a collective being, but a universal being, a harmonious being, synthesizing in himself the impulse of the spirit and the social sense of the twentieth century [...] he alone can bring the ‘I’ in relation with the cosmos.51

Jolas’ own ‘literary exhibitionism’ was directed towards this quasi-mystical goal. transition’s rhetoric posited aesthetic experimentation as capable of transforming modern society. MacGreevy adopted this rhetoric into a nationalist interpretation of the materialism and alienation of modern Europe.

MacGreevy’s use of the ideas found in transition was evident in his poetry, including that published in the magazine.52 These poems balance emphasis on the “autonomy of aesthetic vision” with a sense of “collective reality” in religious and national terms.53 In the early 1930s, his poetic output was matched by his critical dissections of the ‘disasters overtaking the world,’ and literary responses to them.54 His critical writing on Richard Aldington, Joyce, Eliot, and W.B. and Jack B. Yeats, represented his perception of contemporary writing: he examined the writer’s role...
as social critic, the position of the modern Irish artist, and the role of the Catholic writer as a contributor to social reform. His criticism was defined by the combination of cultural nationalism and modernist aesthetic theory which preoccupied MacGreevy’s 1930s career.
1.2 Richard Aldington: Anglicisation and mass culture

In MacGreevy's criticism of Anglo-American modernism, anxieties about cultural authority and mass democracy were interpreted in an Irish nationalist context. The perceived problems of materialism and alienation which concerned Jolas and others were understood by MacGreevy as a consequence of English cultural and political influence spread through imperialism. The malign hypocrisy and complacency diagnosed by Aldington and Eliot in English liberal democracy complemented MacGreevy's belief in the distorting dominance of Anglicisation in Irish culture.

*Richard Aldington: An Englishman* was the second of MacGreevy's contributions to the Dolphin series, published in September 1931 (*Thomas Stearns Eliot* had appeared in January). *Richard Aldington* most clearly expressed MacGreevy's sense of the failures of liberal democracy, and it is helpful to consider it first to elucidate MacGreevy's formulation of Catholic modernism in relation to Eliot. The connection between MacGreevy's cultural republicanism and the right-wing disdain for mass culture expressed by Aldington can be understood through their shared hostility to English culture. His study of Aldington's work emphasised this attitude, from its furious opening description of the effects of the First World War, which as in 'The Cultural Dilemma' MacGreevy saw as the climax of murderous imperialism, to its closing hope that the brutal and hypocritical values of modernity will be overthrown, bringing "a new England – and perhaps also a very old, beautiful England, an England with which even Irishmen may be friends." As this Counter-Reformation sentiment suggests, the text was relentless in its condemnation of Protestant England. MacGreevy's choice of Aldington as an acute and perceptive critic of English culture, however, demonstrated that his hostility towards England

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55 Potter, pp.5-7, outlines the development of these pressures after the First World War. The increased role of the state in individual life, the replacement of individualistic liberalism with 'collective liberalism', and the increasing influence of popular culture all appeared to contribute to a growing threat of social disintegration, to which writers responded from a range of political perspectives.

56 *Richard Aldington*, p.73.
was a point of connection with, not alienation from, aspects of contemporary modernist thought.

Aldington’s pre-war imagism had been associated with anxiety about mass culture. Between 1914 and 1917 he edited the *Egotist*, a journal to which Pound and others contributed “recipes for supremacy,” shaped, according to John Carey, under the “pressure of mass culture.”\(^5^7\) Carey’s analyses of the fascistic principles underlying modernism is controversial, characterising modernism as implicitly linked to fascism. Michael North’s more nuanced analysis explores the modernist attempt to resolve the “modern conflict of individual and community [...] by insisting that the collective is most truly present in certain individuals,” a resolution which reached its most “extreme realization” in Pound’s embrace of fascism. Pound’s “spectacular example” was not the only route for writers sharing his language of individualism and collectivism, and it was not MacGreevy’s.\(^5^8\) In the early 1930s, however, he was associated with the aspects of modernist writing which reflected the contradictions of fascism, not only through his acquaintance with Aldington and others but through his interpretation of them.

MacGreevy’s record of Aldington’s involvement with the Imagists recognised their social views, and described them largely with approval. They were “aesthetes...*avant-garde,*” and “despised politics and the civil service and the middle classes with the same easy grace” of the aesthetes of the 1890s. The ‘despised’ groups are notably the same condemned by MacGreevy as the ‘London Irish’ threat to a cultural republic. MacGreevy echoed the revolutionary tone of transition as he praised the young Aldington’s recognition of the “dreary decadence into which the great tradition had fallen.” Since the French Revolution, the ‘great tradition’

\[\text{though it had fallen into the hands of the bourgeoisie, had still been alive, that the bourgeoisie had had to master it before it could reject it. And [Aldington] knew too that that mastery had been achieved and that}\]

\(^{5^7}\) Carey, p.72.
that rejection had taken place; that already in Henri de Regnier and Anatole France the tradition was threadbare, that revolutionary ideals had, at long last, taken possession of the aesthetic, had impregnated it and made it fruitful, and that the greatest art of the future, much more than the art of the nineteenth century, would be the expression of revolutionary humanity, stopping now to reflect on itself, expressing itself fully and completely. And he knew that much of that expression would inevitably be discordant.59

Tim Armstrong describes this passage as a defence of “a specifically bourgeois art against modernist writers who reject it.”60 However, MacGreevy’s narrative was contorted, and reflected his reluctance to define the social implications of his aesthetic. While in his praise of Aldington he rejected the confinement of the fin de siècle salon, his admiration was based on Aldington’s critique of bourgeois values, the “class-consciousness and materialism” of England.61 MacGreevy defined Aldington as capable of ‘revolutionising’ English art because he recognised the decrepitude of its values. He demanded radical art which could engage with and transform society. His formulation of modern art in England reflected the tension between representation and transformation in his cultural republicanism.

MacGreevy described Aldington’s growing importance as a writer through his increasing engagement with the failings of mass culture. In MacGreevy’s argument, Aldington had been forced to recognise the “discordant realities” of his culture through his experience of the First World War. Aldington, like MacGreevy, had served in France between 1916 and 1918, and they shared the conviction that the war had exposed the brutality underlying modern political systems.62 After the war Aldington had turned from poetry to angry, often vicious prose in which the complacency and hypocrisy of English society before and after the war were

60 Armstrong, p.49.
61 Richard Aldington, p.18.
62 The common experience evidently encouraged the friendship between MacGreevy and Aldington, which although interrupted by Aldington’s move to the U.S. in 1939 lasted until Aldington’s death. Aldington remarked on the “real affection for you and me” shown by their mutual friend, A.S. Frere of Heinemann’s: “If we got nothing else out of the bloody War, we at least got the affection of men like Frere and Charles [Prentice, of Chatto & Windus]” (RA to TM, 13 September 1930, TCD MS 8107/17). Aldington often used military metaphors in his correspondence – discussing the forthcoming publication of Soft Answers, for example, he wrote “The divisions must be re-fitted for the next assault. The little battalion raid of Nobody’s Daughter is launched” (RA to TM, 23 May 1931, TCD MS 8107/44).
assaulted. In *Death of A Hero* (1929), the ‘hero’ is oppressed by both the Victorian morality of his parents and the pretentious faux-radicalism of the London avant garde, before his destruction and suicide in the trenches. MacGreevy described the novel, in which an expression of social reality was combined with Imagist focus on subjective experience, as powerful demonstration of the artist’s role in the world.

He framed this role as superseding that of politicians, granting the writer – and in particular the writer who had experienced the war directly – a spiritual authority beyond that of the ‘traffic regulations’ of politics. He described those who fought in supernatural terms: “If you have been placed suddenly on the other side of the grave and left there for months and years you do not forget it.” The artist’s role was the ‘sincere’ expression of this experience, impossible for politicians: “In the arts, which are the imaginative expression of fundamental things, sincerity is, on the other hand, not only possible, but essential.”

He did not, however, advocate mimetic realism as the form this expression could take. The increased relevance of Aldington’s art, along with that of the French painter Jean Lurçat, was for MacGreevy due to

> [t]he effect of the war [...] to bring their work closer to objective reality, but I do not think there is any immediate danger of their returning to the undiscriminating realism of the nineteenth century, because in the first place their technical point of departure is not realistic, and in the second place the principle reality that has been impelling them to expression is so vast and so terrible to look back on, that, grasping its full tragic significance as they slowly and sensitively and thoughtfully have done, they cannot, in the nature of things, fall into the mere pathetic of, say, Monet or Zola.

MacGreevy thus defined the rejection of realism as necessary, not as a retreat from external and social reality, but necessary to express the transcendental nature of the collective experience of modernity. The experience of war made, MacGreevy argued, social engagement necessary – “[N]o poet who went through the war” could retreat to the “Mallermean ivory tower” of aesthetic detachment. In terms which echoed his 1927 poem ‘De Civitate Hominum’, MacGreevy described the

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63 *Richard Aldington*, p.6, p.7.
64 Ibid., p.32.
65 Ibid., p.30.
experience of the ‘vast and terrible reality’ of war compelling artists to engage with collective experience:

Eliot was painting verbal natures mortes. Joyce and Picasso were, it goes without saying, men of much greater range than Eliot, but to men haunted by the necessity of expressing the always living realities and consequences of the war, much of what they were expressing could not, however, seem of much more importance than natures mortes. Aldington and Lurçat wanted, in the end, to paint only natures vivantes.66

In the terms that were to become explicit in MacGreevy’s later criticism, a combination of the subjective and the objective was conceived as a route to expression of the total reality experienced by the individual and the collective.

In a 1943 discussion of surrealism, MacGreevy suggested that artists were ‘warning’ of the ‘disasters overtaking the world’.67 In the early 1930s, he retained a hope that

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66 Richard Aldington, p.31. The dig at Eliot, as possessing less ‘range’ than Joyce and Picasso, was included at Aldington’s suggestion. Aldington queried the original bracketing of Eliot and Picasso, and suggested Joyce as a better example (RA to TM, 9 June 1931, TCD MS 8107/48). Aldington had by this point become alienated from Eliot, and publication of his cruel satire of Eliot as “Jeremy Pratt Sybba, afterwards Father Cibber, O.S.B.”, was a frequent topic of his letters to MacGreevy later in 1931 (‘Stepping Heavenward: A Record’, in Soft Answers (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), pp.235-95, p.235). The story was originally published as a novella in 1931. Aldington discussed the potential offence caused to Eliot in a letter dated 30 November 1931, for example (TCD MS 8107/59).

In ‘De Civitate Hominum’, the term ‘nature morte’ appears alongside with the introduction of the speaker’s voice.

It is very cold
And, what with my sensations
And my spick and span subaltern’s uniform,
I might be the famous brass monkey,
The nature morte accessory.

Morte...!
’Tis still life that lives,
Not quick life –
(Schreibman, Collected Poems, pp.2-3)

The poet appears as a background ‘accessory’, paralysed by the unfolding spectacle of an airman’s death, which kills his ‘quick life’ while the speaker’s ‘still life’ remains. MacGreevy’s criticism extolled the ability of soldier-artists to express the living spirit of experience. His poetry shows his anxiety about this ability, as the poet is repeatedly figured as a static spectator unable to act.

67 “In the years before 1939 the alarming work of the Surrealist painters, many of whom were still relatively young men, constituted something in the nature of a warning of the disasters that were overtaking the world. Small wonder that they offered homage to the genius of Hieronymus Bosch, who filled a somewhat similar role when the medieval world was breaking up at the end of the fifteenth century” (‘Pictures in the National Gallery’ in The Capuchin Annual (1943), pp.386-443, p.434). The phrase echoed MacGreevy’s poem ‘Homage to Hieronymus Bosch’, which used surrealists techniques to dramatise the brutality of English imperialism (Schreibman (ed.), Collected Poems (pp.11-13)).
these warnings could have an effect. He highlighted the transformatory potential of Aldington’s attack on modern England:

A capacity for self-criticism in any country is a sign of strength, and when I see England growing intelligently self-critical in a passage such as that [in Death of A Hero], I, as an Irishman, wonder whether my own country has even yet seen the worst of its misadventures with its more powerful neighbour.

In the implied criticism of Ireland’s lack of ‘intelligent self-criticism’ of Aldington’s sort, MacGreevy suggested that Ireland suffered from the same decadence and hypocrisy which Aldington detested in England. He immediately went on to emphasise that, if this was the case, it was the influence of England that made it so:

In connection I may remark that though I may, myself, criticise my own countrymen (and I am only too well aware that we have even more than our share of a conquered people’s vices – excessive hatred in political matters, for instance, and some of our cheaper Catholic papers are a loathsome denial of everything that is represented by the words ‘Christian charity’), when an Englishman like Richard Aldington takes it on himself to criticise us for our excessive nationalism (as he has done), he must be told that, until his own countrymen have got rid of their excessive imperialism we simply are not free to consider what any Englishman has to say of us [...] British imperialism has to leave us Irish alone, before we can cease to be, at least defensively, nationalist.68

The passage reveals MacGreevy’s adaptation of anxieties about modernity, which he shared with contemporaries like Aldington. He believed that the perceived blights of philistinism and artistic repression, which Aldington portrayed as the product of mass democracy, were present in Ireland. He also saw Irish politics as afflicted with ideological violence, embodied in the First World War as well as the Irish Civil War. He unfailingly attributed these problems to Anglicisation.

MacGreevy addressed aspects of Irish culture which appeared to oppose his ideal of the cultural republic by conceiving them as not Irish, and above all not Catholic. Censorship, intolerance, puritan morality and other inhibitions of artistic freedom were for MacGreevy antithetical to Irishness and Catholicism. MacGreevy’s modernist writing, his engagement with the Continent and his rejection of

68 Richard Aldinton, pp.52-53.
conservative social policy have aligned him in critical history with opponents to the nationalist, Catholic state of the 1930s. MacGreevy's oppositional stance developed from republican nationalism and from Catholicism, as he believed that the social and cultural policies of 1930s Ireland, which "in de Valera's view [were] Catholic as well as Gaelic," were neither.69

The elements of Irish culture which MacGreevy opposed were, in his understanding, the result of English bourgeois Puritanism. His conception was highly compatible with Aldington's and others' condemnation of similar features in English society. In MacGreevy's adoption of this discourse, there were points of connection with far-right ideology. Aldington certainly adopted this in his critique, so admired by MacGreevy, of modern England. Death of A Hero contained, for example, an only half-ironic argument for eugenics in the mouth of its hero.70 Soft Answers, the 1931 collection of stories which Aldington frequently discussed with MacGreevy, was an extended diagnosis of the decadence of post-war society and an implicit call for its cleansing. 'Now She Lies There', for example, was a sadistic and ironic 'elegy' for Constance, a representative of empty corruption, whose hedonism is shadowed by the war which preceded it.

The early post-War world seemed to have been made for Constance. If she had made a Faustian compact with the devil she could not have been given a fairer run for her money on the road to damnation [...] To the sound of ten thousand jazz bands, with the ominous tom-tom undertone beating on the nerves, those sinister years shuffled and shimmied their dance of death. When evening twilight sank with heart-shaking sadness over the million silent graves, already the taxis and cars crowded the streets, hurrying to restaurants and parties; all night the restless feet slid and stamped, and the niggers grinned over the drums, and the joyless rejoiced without joy; and at dawn, when the wind breathed an immense sigh over the cross-marred desolate fields, the feet still stamped, and voices still shouted for more drink, and paler cheeks more plainly showed the smears of reddened lips. A happy time. You could almost hear the rattle of the bones in this macabre pageant, dulling thought and feeling like a villainous drug, which always had to be renewed in larger and

70 "I believe that if people have the necessary knowledge and we get rid of the taboo, they will for their own sakes come to breed more eugenically [...] Of course, it isn't possible to have such concerted action all over the world. For one thing, it wouldn't be politic to announce it, because the unscrupulous governments will always go to any extent of force and fraud to sustain their infamous regimes..." (Death of A Hero (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929; repr. in unexpurgated edition London: Hogarth, 1984), pp.158-60).
longer doses. Constance danced with the weariest, and out-laughed the most broken-hearted.\footnote{‘Now She Lies There’ in \textit{Soft Answers}, pp.60-122, p.91.}

Such passages appeared to resonate with MacGreevy’s fury at “the numbers of such natural, kindly, and peaceable men who were murdered – it is the only word to use – in the war.”\footnote{Richard Aldington, pp.49-50.}

MacGreevy largely evaded the racist and misogynist disgust evident in Aldington’s writing. A rare example otherwise was an early (probably 1923) essay, ‘England My England’, where MacGreevy adopted rhetoric reminiscent of Aldington’s sneering at “free thought.”\footnote{Aldington wrote to MacGreevy on a visit to Florence, “I reflected with some annoyance that dogma built cathedrals, while free thought produces the suburbs of Paris. Between these two ruins there is a whole new world to build” (12 February 1931, TCD MS 8107/66).}

Describing his youthful membership of the Fabian Society, MacGreevy recalled attending a lecture:

\begin{quote}
I saw all the palefaces who were going to establish the earthly paradise and I did not go again. I became the pharisee and the publican of the Bible all in one. I said to myself sincerely, “God have mercy on me as a sinner,” and “Thank Heaven that I am not as these inhuman virtuous English ones. In all such societies one finds the childless, the unmarried, the unloved, the unloving, effeminate men who had not the courage of their effeminacy, theosophically married to masculine women who had not the courage of their masculinity, all of them except the young and stupid suffering from baulked disposition, from their fear of the temperaments that God gave them, and all of them for want of a personal emotional outlet anxious to interfere as much as possible in the affairs of their fellow creatures.\footnote{‘England My England’ TCD MS 8008/7. The date of the essay is unclear, although MacGreevy’s note referring to a newspaper article of 29 September 1923 suggests composition in that year. MacGreevy’s handwritten annotations, including a change of title from ‘Oh, What a Happy Land is England’, have been incorporated.}
\end{quote}

MacGreevy’s comments suggested his discomfort with aspects of liberal democratic socialism, in particular relating to gender roles. His anger in this essay was largely directly, however, towards what he saw as unnecessary intervention in individual morality. He saw such meddling as increasingly present in Irish life – licensing and gambling laws were specifically mentioned\footnote{These targets again echoed the 1930s attitudes of Francis Stuart. As Clair Wills has described, Stuart’s disillusionment with the spiritual bankruptcy he perceived in democracy led to far-right} – but was determined to assert it as an English influence, not a Catholic one.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[71]‘Now She Lies There’ in \textit{Soft Answers}, pp.60-122, p.91.
\item[72]Richard Aldington, pp.49-50.
\item[73]Aldington wrote to MacGreevy on a visit to Florence, “I reflected with some annoyance that dogma built cathedrals, while free thought produces the suburbs of Paris. Between these two ruins there is a whole new world to build” (12 February 1931, TCD MS 8107/66).
\item[74]‘England My England’ TCD MS 8008/7. The date of the essay is unclear, although MacGreevy’s note referring to a newspaper article of 29 September 1923 suggests composition in that year. MacGreevy’s handwritten annotations, including a change of title from ‘Oh, What a Happy Land is England’, have been incorporated.
\item[75]These targets again echoed the 1930s attitudes of Francis Stuart. As Clair Wills has described, Stuart’s disillusionment with the spiritual bankruptcy he perceived in democracy led to far-right
\end{footnotes}
We, here in Ireland have been called priest-ridden by the English, but, tyrannical as priests have been and sometimes still are, the ordinary man in Ireland has not suffered more from their tyranny than the ordinary man in England has from Webbery and Saleebianism and goody-goody Puritanism. We are not, however, without our supply of secular meddlers. They grow more and more insistent and we have to beware of them. They are just like their English and American sisters and brethren. They are 'sociologists' not politicians, they call themselves vaguely internationalists, which means their minds cannot rise beyond the kind of parochialism that centres round the curate and the sewing-bee, a parochialism that they want to see established in China and in Central Africa – as it has been in England and as it is in the United States – and as it must not be in Ireland. But they are here. In public life, in social life, in club life, we have the interfering spinsters, the meddling widows, the prosy men; hypocrites, kill-joys, busybodies, nosey parkers who have nothing worth doing to do and who, not having the courage or the desire to accept the inevitable corruptness of public bodies and to fight it, do all they can to prevent the ordinary peace-loving man from getting a drink where he wants or his wife from getting her fortune told.

This passage was written early in his career. His disdain for middle class morality was naive; defending the liberty of the 'ordinary peace-loving man,' he complained about the 'Trade Unionist' belief that "the world will somehow do better when the working classes have descended from the moral freedom of poverty to the vulgarity of Rathmines and Leeson Park." His attitudes matured through the 1920s and 1930s, and he mitigated the 'reactionary radical' posture of this early essay. However, his hostility to interference in individual liberty remained, and resembled that which often featured in Irish novels of the period. MacGreevy's primary emphasis became the conviction that hypocritical moral oppression came from extremism, and Stuart's "self dramatisation" equated gambling with freedom from social convention (That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland during the Second World War (London: Faber, 2007), pp.370-71).

76 From Brinsley MacNamara's The Valley of the Squinting Windows (Dublin & London: Maunsel, 1918), the distorting effect of community scrutiny of morality was a frequent topic of fiction in independent Ireland. It was a frequent reference point for O'Faolain, whose 1936 novel Bird Alone narrated the social exclusion consequent on transgression of sexual morality (Bird Alone (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936)). Frank O'Connor's Dutch Interior included a similar plotline: the subplot involving Eileen's attempt to escape from social stigma emphasised the repressiveness of small town life, in which her mother is described as "foreign" because from another town by gossips who "fluttered from house to house in uncertain flight like bats at twilight" (Dutch Interior (London: Macmillan, 1940), p.109). Una Troy's novels also centred on the consequences of social transgression. These included extramarital pregnancy, financial irresponsibility, and the more amorphous rules of gentility; in both Mount Prospect (London: Methuen, 1936) and Dead Star's Light (London: Methuen, 1938), the prurience of local morality is represented by the cover-up of a car crash. All these novels portrayed poverty as a perpetual threat alongside social censure, and were rather less idealistic about the "moral freedom" of poverty than MacGreevy's early essay.
English puritanism, a form of moral imperialism, and was antithetical to Catholicism.

MacGreevy's point of departure for 'England my England' showed that his perspective on 'goody-goody Puritanism' was influenced by responses to modernity in Britain. He praised Clive Bell's *On British Freedom* (1923) for "draw[ing] attention to the unnecessary limitations on freedom of the individual that so called humanitarian measures too often impose." Bell's later work on *Civilisation* (1928) is used by Carey to demonstrate the political implications of such thought. Bell defended individual freedom as a priority in order to preserve a cultural elite, capable of civilising society.

There is absolutely no reason, according to Bell, why tyrannical and despotic regimes should not be perfectly civilised. 'To discredit a civilisation it is not enough to show that it is based on slavery and injustice; you must show that liberty and justice would produce something better.' 'Better', in this context, means, we note, more adapted to supporting people like Bell. Liberty and justice are not good in themselves.  

MacGreevy shared a related conception of the elevated role of the artistic and cultural elite. He avoided any attempt to formulate what social structure could best support such an elite by, largely, confining his writing to discussion of cultural and artistic matters conceived as elevated from the problems of 'traffic regulations.' His early essay in praise of Bell shows, however, that his thought could be closer to the right-wing implications of high modernist discourse than the liberal republicanism with which he is more often associated.

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77 Carey, p.81.
78 An undated lecture on 'Literary Criticism' contained further evidence of MacGreevy's relation to thought like that of Bell. He complained about the trend in criticism which "has led in our own time to the introduction of religious and political criteria, to the two most obvious manifestations of la littérature engagée," (the Catholic basis of most of MacGreevy's criticism was apparently excluded from this trend). Naming Marxism as "the worst example of the evils," MacGreevy sketched a version of the critic, referring to Arnold and Eliot, as possessing an innate superiority and a specific social role. "The critic does not need a formal philosophy. He needs a wise and generous conception of man's nature and destiny. It is of the essence of beliefs that they can't be applied dogmatically, that they 'open up the widest horizons' instead of systematically reducing visibility. They can't be external to the work of art. They should be so completely absorbed that they are part of the critic's psychological make-up and diffuse a wisdom which illuminates his individual judgements and enables him to turn literary criticism into a criticism of the human situation [...] The critic must clearly be a man of judgement who is capable of recognising 'the best that is known and thought in
In addition to his reluctance to engage in political positioning, however, MacGreevy was too suspicious of authoritarianism to extend his veneration of the Catholic Continent to a belief in its political manifestations. As his comment on Hitler’s ‘neo-Kaiserism’ suggested, he rejected the rhetoric of fascism as a manifestation of imperialism. MacGreevy condemned what he saw as such manifestations in the same terms as he condemned authoritarian nationalism. In the passage in Richard Aldington where MacGreevy described the violence of Irish political nationalism as a response to violent imperialism suggested, he paired both ideologies as mirror-images. The pairing recurred through MacGreevy’s writing – in a 1934 Criterion review of a biography of Ernest Psichari, he described its subject as

not only a nationalist but an imperialist. Why is Catholicism in England and France becoming identified with those two dubious isms? The second is never excusable, the first only when defending a people against the depredations of imperialists.

Violent nationalism – which for MacGreevy included interference in individual rights - was for him the product of violent imperialism.

MacGreevy’s poetry also equated English imperialism in the First World War with the legacy of English colonisation of Ireland. ‘Crón Tráth na nDéithe’ used techniques of fragmentation and allusion clearly influenced by Eliot to layer these perspectives on contemporary Dublin. A destroyed building could be the result of Irish rebellion or English reaction, and both echo the imperialist destruction of the World War:

the world,’ and it must be his aim to make his readers share his recognition. It is not enough to write good studies of individual writers. He must see European literature as a whole and must be able to assign individual writers to their proper place in the hierarchy. One of his most important tasks is evidently the revaluation and reinterpretation of writers of the past for his own time. It is in this sense that he becomes, in Gourmont’s words, ‘a creator of values’ (TCD MS 8008/9). This definition assumed an aristocratic conception of the critic as well as the artist.

Richard Aldington, p.51.

Review of Ernest Psichari, Mon frère, by Henriette Psichari in Criterion (April 1934), pp.523-25. The review contained several of MacGreevy’s critical preoccupations; as the quotation suggests, he was concerned to disassociate Psichari’s acceptance of ‘those two dubious isms’ from his conversion to Catholicism (“The besetting sin of converts is religious priggishness and they ought to be warned against it”), and to define the latter and not the former as “the splendour of the French tradition of the French mind.”
A rotting tooth
in the rotting head of
An Iberian gentleman failure!

Nineteen-sixteen perhaps,
Or fierce, frightened Black-and Tans
Like matadors!

Rain, rain...

Wrecks wetly mouldering under rain,
Everywhere.
Remember Belgium!
You cannot pick up the
Pieces.

As Schreibman notes, the *transition* version of the poem specified St Dominic as the 'Iberian gentleman failure.' The amendment to the version included in *Poems* made the reference less specific, and Schreibman suggests the line could simultaneously refer to de Valera. The ambiguity complicates the portrayal of the 'failure' of modern Ireland, in which the materialist, newly-bourgeois establishment of de Valera's state is depicted as continuing England's betrayal of the nation.

But, oh, Phoenicians, who on blood-red seas
Come sailing to the Galerie des Glaces
And you, gombeenmen
On blue hills of office.

*No man hath greater lunacy than this.*

Mays' dismissal of 'Crón Tráth na nDéithe' as "unrelieved satire" underestimates the complexity of MacGreevy's use of modernist form to express his conception of Irishness. The poem was "obvious[ly] in debt to Eliot," and MacGreevy's use of *The Waste Land* was made more explicit by the allusion to Wagner in the 1934 title. The poem was not however a straightforward satire of Irish culture in comparison to European. MacGreevy adapted Eliot's *Unreal City* into an 'unfaithful'...
one, in which a history of colonial violence was continuing in a nationalist
reflection. The poem’s incorporation of Catholic as well as imperialist history
suggested MacGreevy’s conception of the cultural tradition which could shore up
its ruins. To do so involved for him expression of the fragmentation of European
culture in a specifically Irish context, where the threats of modern alienation could
be figured as the continuation of English influence:

Britannia indeed is not gone
But the red, red rose
Withers into its mossy coat.

The ‘Free State’ was implicated in the continued betrayal of national identity,
despite the promise of the “extra-real brightness / Of political absolution.”

MacGreevy’s continued revision of ‘Crón Tráth na nDéithe’ between 1925 and 1934
suggest his understanding of the confirmation of betrayal in de Valera’s Ireland. In a
rare article directly addressing one of the crises besetting international politics in
the 1930s, MacGreevy accused de Valera of reproducing imperialism in a distorted
version of republicanism. The trigger for the apparently unpublished ‘Strong and
able government versus good government’ was de Valera’s recognition of
Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia. De Valera’s acceptance of “Italian Black and
Tannery” showed, MacGreevy argued, acceptance of the same influences which
caused him to repress minorities in Ireland.

Majority government does not imply the right to trample on minorities.
That seems so obviously true as to sound platitudinous. But, platitude
though it be, our sainted Eamonn has conveniently forgotten it as, in his
frantic craving for power, he has forgotten so many other virtues, and as
he will, if he be allowed to go on as he has for so long been allowed to go
on, just as conveniently forget others.\(^85\)

MacGreevy went on to pair de Valera with Chamberlain as both increased their
authority through stealth, while Mussolini and Hitler gained it through force. He
then vigorously defended the rights of minorities, including religious free thinkers,

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\(^{85}\) TCD MS 8003/10.
against political oppression, and an attack on the Irish establishment including the Catholic hierarchy for allowing the ‘trampling’ of minorities.  

The paper demonstrated MacGreevy’s hostility to fascism as a manifestation of imperialism. Unlike Francis Stuart, his disillusionment with democracy was combined with hostility to coercion which prevented his endorsement of far right politics. He evaded this problem by separating the cultural sphere from the political, and professing a disdain for political discourse. He consequently ignored or dismissed the attempts of contemporaries to imagine social or political solutions to the tensions and crises of modernity, even when his attitudes were potentially sympathetic to their implications. He scorned Pound as “not so much a poet manqué as a professor manqué,” for his ‘professorial’ condescension towards tradition. He was sceptical about Eliot’s interest in what Eliot termed the “digestible” fascism of Charles Maurras. MacGreevy, while expressing ambiguous respect for Maurras’ “sincere passion for Greek ideals in their vulgarised Roman

86 MacGreevy’s depiction of de Valera as complicit with fascism suggests his position in the 1930s as comparable to Kate O’Brien’s. O’Brien similarly saw a civilised tradition of European Catholicism as a potentially enriching influence on Ireland. This (not the brief mention of homosexuality for which it was notoriously banned) was the central topic of The Land of Spices (1941), which portrayed the encounter of a European-educated English nun with the less cultivated manifestations of Irish Catholicism. Pray for the Wanderer (1938) was an extended and highly wrought lament for the destruction of European civilisation through authoritarianism, imperialism, “bankrupt notion,” and “nationalisms foaming at the mouth.” O’Brien portrayed Ireland as threatened less by its isolation from the Continent – at points, as in MacGreevy’s 1945 postscript to Jack B Yeats, this is figured as a source of hope – but by its own manifestations of European threats: “[H]ere […] this pretty scene of ease and natural hope, this sample of continuity. In a dictator’s country, too. But a more subtle dictator than most – though he also, given time, might have the minds of his people in chains. He did not bring materialism out for public adoration, but materialistic justice controlled by a dangerous moral philosophy, the new Calvinism of the Roman Catholic. That was his rod, his particular bunch of fasces” (Pray for the Wanderer (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1938), pp.43-44). The portrayal of de Valera as a ‘subtle dictator’, the disdain for the hypocritical moral repressions of small-town Ireland, and the identification of Puritanism in Irish Catholicism are closely related to MacGreevy’s 1930s diagnosis of Ireland.

87 Eliot, p.15.

88 In 1928, Eliot rejected the authoritarianism of fascism but admired Maurras and the Action Francaise, itself “crypto- or proto- fascist.” He wrote, “I am all the more suspicious of fascism as a panacea because I fail to find in it any important element, beyond the comfortable feeling that we will all be benevolently ordered about, which was not already in existence. Most of the concepts which might have attracted me in fascism I seem already to have found, in a more digestible form, in the work of Charles Maurras. I say more digestible form, because I think they have a closer applicability to England” (Criterion (December 1928), p.288). Eliot in 1957 wrote to the TLS denying that he ever approved of fascism, and that this piece could be inferred as such. See Cairns Craig, Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry: Richest to the Richest (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p.7.
forms,” associated his royalism with an idealised imperialism – “Unfortunately, Monsieur Maurras does not discriminate. He is for a prince at any price.”

For MacGreevy, all arguments about political systems were secondary to his priorities – the exposure of imperialism, and the preservation of the autonomy of the cultural sphere. In the issue of literary censorship, these problems overlapped. He saw Irish censorship policy as a condensation of the threats to the Irish ‘cultural republic’ – it was a manifestation of the influence of Anglicised, Puritan and bourgeois morality on Ireland’s Catholic ‘national genius’, and it represented political interference in the autonomous, elevated place of culture. MacGreevy’s article in opposition to the Censorship Bill was not published, but encapsulated these concerns. Titled ‘Molière and the Censorship’, it began with a history of the banning and the revival of Molière’s Tartuffe. MacGreevy noted that the play was “still bowdlerized by moral England where the improper newspapers come from” – his argument against literary censorship was based on the hypocrisy of prudishly banning the handling of sex, even in a moral framework, while accepting both violence and crudity. MacGreevy recounted a conversation with a woman in Dublin:

I remember discussing The Shadow of the Glen with a woman in Dublin. She was denouncing Synge for writing plays with sex interest. To my remark that all serious plays are about the struggle between good and evil in some form or other she had replied that she would not have them about sex, “not at any price.” “But you would have them about murder?” I asked. “Oh yes,” she answered, “murder is clean.”

This comment became emblematic for MacGreevy of the bourgeois, hypocritical basis of Puritan morality. He returned to it again and again in the many drafts of his

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89 Eliot, p.66. MacGreevy went on to quote an “extraordinarily romantic, school-girlish passage” of Maurras’ admiration for Wilhelm II. For MacGreevy, such romantic admiration ignored that the emperor did much “to bring about a war which has left millions of unoffending men and boys rotting in the ground before their time, and of which the principle political results were the mere transference of the challenge to English naval power from the east of the North Sea to the west of the Atlantic, the extension of the challenge to French civilisation – and when all is said and done, it is still the nearest thing to civilisation which survives in the world – from Central to Southern Europe, and the change from relatively few Czarist massacres to numerically enormous Bolshevik massacres” (Eliot, p.67). Again, political systems were irrelevant for MacGreevy in comparison to the imperialist, useless and unspeakably terrible War.

90 TCD MS 8003/2. The article is undated, but MacGreevy’s correspondence shows it to have been composed in 1928 as a contribution to literary opposition to the Censorship Bill.
never published novel. He set the scene at a party attended by his narrator, a new student at Trinity in 1916. The woman was ‘Mrs Houlihan’, a violent, xenophobic nationalist. In the novel, as well as her hypocrisy, her understanding was portrayed as Anglicised and bourgeois, despite its apparent nationalism. Again these aspects were encapsulated in the MacGreevy’s revealing idea of the ‘London Irish’.

Gantillon tells her

“Well, since we are to tell the truth as we see it – may I say you seem to me to be a very Anglicised women. I don’t suggest that you are one of the Cockney Irish. But the way you talk of Paris suggests that you see it – have you ever seen it? – with the eyes of an English lower middle class Puritan.”

The term shows MacGreevy’s conception of the issue of censorship in terms of both class and religion. Similarly, in ‘Molière and the Censorship’ MacGreevy’s main argument was that censorship was based on ‘English lower middle class Puritanism’, not Catholicism. He associated the former with materialistic mass culture, the latter with civilised, European intellectualism.

In its article form, MacGreevy recounted the woman’s “calmly heretical” preference of violence over sex. “She was no embittered spinster. She was married and had children. She was a practising Catholic.”

[I]t is mostly such minds that have investigated and most vociferously advocated the Censorship Bill, morbidly puritanical minds that will yet attack others and attribute evil motives to others without a suspicion that they may themselves be sinning against the greatest of the virtues.

MacGreevy formulated his opposition to censorship as a Catholic, portraying its interference with the moral judgements of others as essentially Puritan. In doing so, he defined Catholicism as complementary to modernist cultural discourse. He

91 TCD MS 8039/26. The novel, at one point titled Neither Will I (TCD MS 8092/50, Charles Prentice to TM, 3 August 1931), was repeatedly drafted and redrafted by MacGreevy through the early 1930s. Recurring scenes include the encounter with Mrs. Houlihan, representative of the ‘London Irish’, the narrator’s friendship with the ex-British Army officer Gantillon, and the salon of the intellectual Aunt Vanessa, who resembles the Vanessa of ‘The Other Dublin’ (Collected Poems, pp.26-27). Both the narrator Maurice, and Gantillon were partially autobiographical, and MacGreevy’s difficulty in establishing a narratorial voice is evident. Most drafts are in the first person, while one (TCD MS 8044) is in the third. In 1931 he was considering the “epistolary form” (Prentice advised him against it (TCD MS 8092/50, CP to TM, 3 August 1931), and he told George Yeats in 1932 that he had “naturally discovered the most difficult way of telling” (TCD MS 8104/71b, TM to GY (copy), 10 May 1932).
contacted both Pound and Eliot in his attempts to publish this article, and in his correspondence with them he emphasised the affinity between his Catholic, culturally nationalist perspective and those of his modernist contemporaries. To Eliot, MacGreevy wrote that he had written ‘Moliére and the censors’ for the Irish Statesman – a primary organ of intellectual opposition to the Censorship Bill – but that its publication had been postponed.

Russell thinks articles by Shaw and such people are important, but it doesn’t matter a ha’porth with our inquisitors what an avowedly hostile heretic like Shaw says. What a business it is!\(^{92}\)

MacGreevy’s belief that Catholic opposition to the Censorship Bill would bear more weight than ‘heretic’ opinion was echoed by Pound, whose only correspondence with MacGreevy was on this issue. MacGreevy attempted to enlist Pound’s help in publicising national opposition to the Bill. Pound’s response showed their shared ground – he described Irish censorship not as a uniquely repressive manifestation of the exceptionalism of Irish cultural policy, but as bringing Ireland in line with the worst of decadent, philistine modernity:

The new censorship bill will undoubtedly place Ireland beneath the eternal dunghill, and reduce her to the level of the USA, a land apparently void of human life, and pullulating each year more opulently with sons of bitches, and maggots hitherto unknown to ontology.\(^{93}\)

Pound’s next letter confirmed MacGreevy’s overtly Catholic perspective on the issue as an advantage in, not a contradiction for, the campaign for intellectual privilege to combat the ‘eternal dunghill’ of modern mass culture. While protesting that “Itz not strictly my business to save Oireland from itself,” Pound saw MacGreevy’s perspective as offering a slim hope against philistinism:

For example, living in remains of civilisation one might see a catholic revival, or at least augmentation. ALL the people with any measure of civilisation, or wanting any, MIGHT coalesce against Babbit, against barbarism, as at the end of the Roman empire. But every time any intelligent non-catholic develops any such pipe dream, some damn fool in Armagh (usually a bishop’s pimp) comes out with a super-Arkansas manifestation of obscurantism.\(^{94}\)

\(^{92}\) TM to TSE (copy), undated [1928], TCD MS 8113/49.
\(^{93}\) EP to TM, 29 October [1928], TCD MS 8118/148.
\(^{94}\) EP to TM, 11 December [1928], TCD MS 8118/149.
MacGreevy’s opposition to the Censorship demonstrated his understanding of contemporary Irish culture and the artist’s role within it. He considered the repressive aspects of official moral legislation as puritan, and influenced by English middle class philistinism and imperialist violence. He thought Europe a potential corrective to this influence, both in the tradition of Continental culture and in international modernism’s critique of modernity. Connecting both was Catholicism, the centre of MacGreevy’s aesthetic and of his interpretation of the modern world.
1.3. James Joyce and T.S. Eliot: Modernism and Catholicism

The terms of MacGreevy's criticism and his poetry were those of Catholicism. In place of political and social positioning of his cultural approach, MacGreevy defined his aesthetic as Catholic throughout his critical writing. This could result in crude attempts to find biographical as well as aesthetic evidence for Catholic feeling in the writers he admired. While acknowledging that both W.B. and Jack B. Yeats were by birth Protestant, he stressed that neither were members of an organised church, and that W.B. enjoyed conversations with Catholic clergy and was generally sympathetic to Catholicism. In another late piece, MacGreevy attempted to suggest similar sympathies in Aldington:

In theory Richard was basically the English free-lance Protestant anti-clerical that Irishmen take for granted. But he was not a Greek and Latin and Italian and French scholar for nothing so a priori he had some knowledge of the part played by the Church in the history of European civilisation. I was to discover in a little while that it was more than knowledge. For instance – he revered the memory of his father, who had recently died, and who, in his later years, had become a devout convert to Catholicism.

MacGreevy went on to recall Aldington's donation of his late father's suit to a valet at the Ecole Normale, with a request that he wear it to Mass, as further evidence of Aldington's connection to Catholicism. That he implied Aldington's Catholic sympathies showed the extent of the sectarian basis of MacGreevy's aesthetics, evident in his classification of art as Protestant or Catholic in his earliest critical work. Catholicism for MacGreevy offered the only possible reconciliation of the individual and the community. He classified those writers who he saw expressing this reconciliation as instinctively sympathetic to Catholicism.

James Matthew Wilson has convincingly established the centrality of neo-Thomist aesthetic principles in MacGreevy's reading of modernism. In Maritain's terms, 'reproduction', the depiction of "empirical details [...] at the expense of totality," was inferior to 'representation', art which expresses

95 'W.B. Yeats – A Generation Later', pp.7-8.
96 'Richard Aldington as a friend'.
the essences of human beings in their universal or absolute relations, which is for MacGreevy the true vocation of the artist. Catholicism made possible just such representation. Modernist aesthetics, as Eliot's *Waste Land* had staggeringly demonstrated, was premised upon an insatiable ambition to admit all facets of experience, all manner of text, into the artwork. And so, MacGreevy's critical task was simply to imply that modernist ambitions could only be fulfilled by Catholicism's representational capabilities.  

Wilson absolves MacGreevy from sectarianism, arguing that his conception of "Catholic universality" was imagined as transcending religious divisions. However, the uniform disdain with which MacGreevy addressed 'Protestant subjectivity', and his critical intention to "foreground the avarice and hortus siccus of Protestant culture and to recommend, as a necessary alternative, the more universal and charitable richness of Roman Catholicism," suggests that transcendent universality was only tenable in MacGreevy's own terms.

MacGreevy's criticism was dominated by the language of religious transcendence. This led him into some awkward attempts to justify the Catholic sympathies of writers he admired. He found it easier to integrate Joyce and Eliot to his aesthetic programme. In his reading of both writers, MacGreevy explicitly defined modernism not just as compatible with Catholicism, but as intrinsically Catholic. His critique expressed the social as well as the aesthetic concerns which he shared with both modernist and Irish Catholic contemporary discourse.

The social and political implications of MacGreevy's Catholic modernism were evident in his treatment of both Joyce and Eliot. As an Irish Catholic writer forming the centre of MacGreevy's circle in Paris, Joyce was inevitably influential in MacGreevy's formulation of modernism. MacGreevy's essay on *Work in Progress* described the novel in terms which fitted the *transition* criteria of art developing from the "economic and social age in which it is produced" and the "individual impulse" to "synthesize the emotions of humanity in a symphonic whole." Yet it was also compatible with the Maritainian imperative of art, where objective reality

97 Wilson, p.17.
98 Ibid., p.17.
is "the means through which the secret meanings caught by creative intuition are available to the world."  

'A Note on Work in Progress', more explicitly titled 'The Catholic Element in Work in Progress' on its inclusion in the collection of explicatory essays on Joyce's work, described the novel as a form of realism which united subject and object.

MacGreevy emphasised the order and unity of the work, in which each section was "so admirably realized and so related to every other chapter and passage." He described the difficulty of Joyce's language as necessary to give "beauty and fitness to his new work," and insisted that it was "not a reaction from realism but the carrying on of realism to the point where realism breaks down of its own volition into fantasy." The breakdown of realism was not, he emphasised, a turn to chaos and nihilism, but a transcendental union of subjective and objective experience.

Above all, MacGreevy placed Joyce's work in a Catholic tradition. Joyce's work was new, but only because it revived the tradition neglected by modern writing:

> The splendour of order, to use Saint Thomas's phrase, has not been the dominating characteristic of modern English prose and it is partly because the quality was demonstrated in the majestic movement of Ulysses that the book marked a literary revolution.  

MacGreevy justified the revolutionary newness of Ulysses in terms of its orthodoxy. His 'radical reactionary' reading adapted Eliot's praise for Ulysses, which similarly reconciled apparent contradictions; Ulysses both "sens[ed] the changed conditions...

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102 'A Note on Work in Progress', p.217. MacGreevy's Catholic reading of Joyce was apparent in a short 1927 review of a Spanish translation of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. He praised the introduction to the translation as "not only the best that could be imagined for readers in Catholic countries, it also – and the two things are not unconnected – has claims to being the best estimate of the significance of Joyce that has appeared in any language so far [...] Joyce is no doubt Thomist en al italo, and understanding of his aesthetic, as of everything about his work, depends so much on the reader's knowledge of and sympathy with Roman Catholic tradition, that it becomes more evident as time passes that its effects must be greatest in Catholic countries" (Review of El Artista Adolescente. Novela de James Joyce. Traducción de Alfonso Donado' in the Criterion (January 1927), p.158.
of a new age,” and was “classical in tendency [...] manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity.”

Certainly influenced by Eliot, MacGreevy defined Joyce as “a traditionalist, a classicist. That is why he is regarded as a revolutionary.”

MacGreevy’s version of the classical tradition into which he placed Joyce was explicitly Catholic. Much of his essay was spent attacking criticisms of Joyce’s Catholicism from “the temporary Romanizers,” MacGreevy’s dismissive term for the “enthusiastic converts who discover the surface beauties of Catholicism at the older universities.” He placed Ulysses within a classical tradition appropriated into a Catholic tradition:

For Ulysses is an inferno. As Homer sent his Ulysses wandering through an inferno of Greek mythology and Virgil his Aeneas through one of Roman mythology so Dante himself voyaged through the inferno of the Mediaeval Christian imagination, so the hero of Mr. Joyce’s last book wandered through the inferno of modern subjectivity. And because Mr. Joyce is a great realist it is the most real of all and at the same time as terrible and pitiful an inferno as any of the others.

MacGreevy framed Joyce’s career as a spiritual progression, in which the hell of Modernity progressed to the “purgatorial” Work in Progress. In a contemporary reading of Maritain, Catholicism was defined as “standing essentially for a universal order in which every good and every truth of the natural or the social order can find a place.”

MacGreevy’s praise for Joyce was based on his representation, in Maritain’s sense, of universal order. He admired Joyce as a realist in the sense that his work incorporated ‘every good and every truth’ of modern experience. He hoped that the objective ‘truth’ of Ulysses and the transition of Work in Progress would be followed by “the law of grace triumphant and a modern Paradiso.”

104 ‘A Note on Work in Progress’, p.217.
106 ‘A Note on Work in Progress’, p.218.
MacGreevy’s reading of Joyce was based both on Catholic aesthetics, and on Eliot’s modernist critique. His defence of Joyce’s Catholic orthodoxy evolved from Eliot’s 1923 rejection of the idea of Joyce as a “prophet of chaos.” Eliot’s definition of the ‘mythic method,’ “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,” was, probably consciously, echoed in MacGreevy’s definition of the Catholic method ordering the “inferno of modern subjectivity.” It is a critical truism that Eliot’s reading of Joyce, and his definition of the mythic method, was a more accurate representation of *The Waste Land* than it was of *Ulysses*. MacGreevy’s close adherence to Eliot’s terms in his understanding of Joyce suggested that, despite Joyce’s Irishness, MacGreevy was more in sympathy with Eliot.108

In response to Seán O’Faoláin’s criticism of *Work in Progress*, MacGreevy wrote that “[t]o me, personally, he seems the most suggestive figure in the history of European civilisation since Leonardo da Vinci.”109 However, MacGreevy also recorded his “mixed” feelings about Joyce. ‘The Dead’ he found “very moving and beautiful,” but he distinguished it from the rest of Joyce’s work as less of a “Dublin story.”

The woman in it came from Galway, from the Ireland outside of Dublin – the Ireland which I belonged to, which Joyce could feel but did not know. Once he said to me something like, “This Ireland that you talk about is strange territory so far as I am concerned. Thirty miles from Dublin and I am lost.” Nora was more my own kind of Irish.110

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107 *Ulysses, Order, and Myth*, p.268.
108 The *transition* essay, heavily influenced by Eliot, was MacGreevy’s only substantial critical work on Joyce. The possibility of another Dolphin monograph, on Joyce, was discussed between MacGreevy and Aldington. Even then, Aldington thought MacGreevy suitable because, unlike Beckett, he “was not too much of a disciple [...] It is a difficult subject, which needs a more mature mind” (TCD MS 8107/31, RA to TM, 30 January 1931).

MacGreevy’s poem ‘For an Irish Book, 1929’ (*transition* 18, Fall 1929; Schreibman, p.61), while evocatively praising Joyce’s sensitivity and fruitfulness in Biblical terms (see Schreibman, p.159), also seemed in its emphasis on the “strong root,” “manured with a dung of English literature / And a slag of Catholic theology,” to appreciate Joyce in Eliot’s terms.

110 TCD MS 8114/16, TM to ‘Mr O’Connor’, undated. These recollections are quoted extensively in Hugh J. Dawson, ‘Thomas MacGreevy and Joyce’ in *James Joyce Quarterly* 25.3 (Spring 1988), pp.305-21.
In the context of MacGreevy's veneration of Jack B. Yeats as 'the first national artist'\textsuperscript{111} through his absorption of the life of the rural people, MacGreevy's disassociation of Dublin from 'my own kind of Irish' suggested the suspicion of metropolitanism which again connected his cultural nationalism with that of Corkery.\textsuperscript{112}

‘Crón Tráth na nDéithe’ evoked MacGreevy's sense of Dublin as distinct from Ireland, and as perhaps irredeemably corrupted by colonialism:

\begin{quote}
It's but Kathleen
Or Molly –
Kathleen is so seldom in Dublin
And besides, she's no harlot –
Yes, it's Molly,
Sweet Molly,
Giving herself to green soldiers.\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

The “blaze of prayer” which could “obliterat[e] the squalid elements of civil war” transcended the city and turned, as in ‘Homage to Hieronymus Bosch’, “westwards.”\textsuperscript{114} Joyce was too associated with urban modernity for MacGreevy to fully incorporate him into his sense of the Irish national genius. Eliot, however, was much more compatible with his emphasis on the rural, the traditional, and the spiritual. As his significant influence on ‘Crón Tráth na nDéithe’ showed, he was a more important aesthetic model for MacGreevy than was Joyce. The political and social implications of MacGreevy's formulation of cultural nationalism were also highly compatible with, if not shaped by, Eliot.

\textsuperscript{112} In addition to the “recalcitrant republicanism” which for Lloyd differentiated MacGreevy from Corkery (Lloyd, 2005, p.49n.), a central difference between their two conceptions of Irish culture was MacGreevy's prioritisation of Catholicism over nationalism. Wilson argues convincingly that Corkery's “defining trinity of Irish identity,” “ruralism and Catholicism stitched to the flag of nationalism,” was for MacGreevy misguided: “While MacGreevy had evident sympathy with all three, he insisted that mankind's final cause lay well beyond the political in the eschatological, and that, therefore, to subordinate Catholicism as a facet of Irish identity was a serious intellectual and moral error” (Wilson, p.15).
\textsuperscript{113} Schreibman, \textit{Collected Poems}, p.17.
MacGreevy’s 1931 monograph on Eliot was his most sustained formulation of the Catholicism of modernist writing. It was based, in a more detailed version of his discussion of Joyce, on the idea of the poet’s career as a progression from Inferno to Paradiso. In his understanding of Eliot’s career as a Dantean spiritual journey, MacGreevy was an early proponent of a narrative that was to become influential, supported by the Four Quartets, of Eliot’s poetic career. MacGreevy described Eliot progressing from the sterility of his New England background, which could only nurture satire: “believing in nothing he achieves nothing that can be considered as poetry. This puerile and tittering scepticism could not but be poetically sterile.”
Eliot’s immersion in the European mind was portrayed as a transcendence of his background. MacGreevy’s reading of The Waste Land as an extended exercise in Christian symbolism culminated in his highest endorsement of the poem as “practically beyond mere literary criticism, and to criticise the religious and moral attitude expressed in it would be to criticise the strictest Christianity.”

MacGreevy’s description of the Eliot’s New England background expressed disdain towards mass democracy and towards bourgeois tastes. He defined Eliot as a product of the ‘New England mind’, which he suggested bore the same relation to the rest of America as the bourgeois did to the masses in England.
America itself is not so much a country as a mass meeting. Its only unity is a tendency towards the ideas, the culture, the civilisation of those Americans who do not go to the meeting, the New Englanders.

MacGreevy granted the New England mind, the “classes,” a superior position to the “masses,” but his summary of it is almost as dismissive. Refusing to apologise for his

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116 Eliot, p.11.
117 Ibid., p.56.
essentialist view of national cultures, or geniuses, he described the New England mind as shaped by bourgeois morality.

The New England mind at its best seems to be sensitive, fastidious, cultivated, dignified; but realist, witty rather than humorous, sentimental rather than imaginative, conventional, rather priggish. Its values are social rather than human. And rather more than the masses in America, it is tenaciously Protestant. It is, in fact, the well-bred maiden aunt of the United States.

Sentimental, conventional and Protestant, MacGreevy attributed to New England the characteristics of the genteel middle class. Eliot’s early verse, composed before he ‘transcended’ this background, is praised by MacGreevy only as satire of its “spiritual bankruptcy.”

MacGreevy’s portrayed Eliot’s background in terms which suggested the political implications of his aesthetic. He rejected, however, Eliot’s explicit connection of poetry to political ideology, or ‘isms’ of any kind. Rather than challenging Eliot’s royalism on republican grounds, he described any such commitment as undermining the higher ends of art: “To be a royalist or a republican is to be more worried about the means than the end.” The ‘end’ was the creation of a society structured on the supremacy of cultural production; in Eliot’s terms, “making the modern world possible for art.” It was implicit in MacGreevy’s sketch of the successes and disasters of monarchies and republics, which judged both on their cultural achievements. “It is not a question of ‘isms’ at all,” he continued,

It is a question of whether the head of a state, pope, king, or president knows what good government means, and understand what exactly his own position counts for in helping to ensure good government in any given set of circumstances.

What MacGreevy understood as ‘good government’ in this evasive formulation might be suggested in his repetition of the phrase years later, in his condemnation

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119 “[T]hough racial origins always count for something, I do not think it is wrong to assume a tendency towards a unity of culture in [racially diverse] America. (Ethnologists tend more and more to classify human beings by cultures rather than races.)” (Eliot, p.5).
120 Eliot, p.4.
121 Eliot, p.6.
122 Ibid., p.65.
124 Eliot, p.65.
of 'Italian Black-and-Tannery' and his defence of minority rights and individual freedom. His implied definition of government as the protector of 'God-given rights' also suggested his belief in a spiritual elite as the leaders of cultural republicanism.

Throughout MacGreevy's criticism and his poetry, he maintained a faith in the social role of art. In his emphasis on artistic aloofness from political activity, he was not describing withdrawal from the world. His conception of the crisis of modernity and of art's role in its salvation was clear in his rejection of the "Mallarmean ivory tower. No poet who went through the war could go back to that."\textsuperscript{125} His faith in modernism was based on its ability to transform the world it represented. He praised Aldington for his acutely accurate portrayal of the failings of modern England, and suggested that such critiques could lead to its transformation. Eliot's Catholicism gave his poetry an even higher calling, as he could not only negotiate between the subjective and the objective, but could, in MacGreevy's terms, unite both in higher 'truth and order'.

MacGreevy's own poetry often explored the difficulty of the poet's role of representation, expressing material reality though individual subjectivity. The sensitivity of his poetry to the anxiety of the spectator and the speaker reflected the tensions in his understanding of the role of art. In this respect his career can be understood in Eliot's terms -- the "double-faced role" of the poet/critic was justified because "in one's prose reflections may be legitimately occupied with ideas, whereas in the writing of verse own can only deal with actuality."\textsuperscript{126} In both his own writing and his criticism of others, MacGreevy understood reconciliation of these tensions as possible only through divinity, of which history and nationality was a lesser part. He understood the 'inferno of modern subjectivity' in metaphysical terms, and glossed Eliot's portrayal of the fragmentary nature of experience with Augustine, not Bradley.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{125} Richard Aldington, p.30.
\textsuperscript{126} Eliot, After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy. The Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, 1933 (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p.29. Eliot was repeating the dilemma phrased in 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth': "It is much easier to be a classicist in literary criticism than in creative art -- because in criticism you are responsible only for what you want, and in creation you are responsible for what you can do with material which you must simply accept" (p.270).
\textsuperscript{127} 'The idea of our being, each one of us, in a prison, isolated from the rest, Mr. Eliot substantiates with a dull passage from F.H. Bradley's Appearance and Reality. I think it was St Augustine who expressed it most perfectly, at any rate most succinctly: 'The soul of another is dark.' The darkness, incidentally, is only the defect of a quality. For it is out isolation from each other that is our personal contact with, our personal understanding of, God" (Eliot, pp.54-55).
Moments of transcendence in MacGreevy's poetry are achieved through a glimpse of the divine, the "isolation [that] is itself the breath of the Kingdom of God that is in one of us." MacGreevy’s critical conception of the purpose of art was not just to express this aspect of individual subjectivity, but to affect the objective world.

Ambition for power and money have brought ruin on Europe, and it is no more the isms and platitudes of professors and publicists than it is the slogans of Yankee plutocracy that can give it back what it has lost.

What could restore the European tradition, he hoped, was "another Waste Land[.]" A waste land blossoming as the rose this time[.]" MacGreevy's summary of the world that the modern artist faced revealed the social implications of his aesthetics. He saw imperialism and materialism as the root of Europe’s ‘ruin’, and art as its potential redemption. He claimed that political systems were irrelevant except insofar as they nurtured the cultural – his cultural republic was not dependent on the ‘traffic regulations’ of social and economic organisation.

Distrust of mass democracy, however, underlay his diagnosis of the crisis of modernity. His disdain for America’s ‘mass meeting’ and his narrative of Eliot’s transcendence of his background demonstrated his conception of Catholicism as an antidote to bourgeois liberal democracy.

Mr. Eliot’s verse has purified itself of merely social elements as he has moved towards Catholicism, even the bastard, schismatic and provincial if genteel kind of Catholicism that, for the time being at any rate, he has, somewhat New Englishly, stopped at. [...]To be an Anglo-Catholic, to try to compromise between John Bullishness, or Uncle Sammishness, and Catholicism is almost to try to reconcile between Mammon and God. [...] When Elizabeth Tudor proclaimed that the Bishop of Rome had no jurisdiction in her realm, she really only launched her country on an epoch of Mammon worship – there is no compromise between absolute acceptance and absolute rejection of the Church Militant. The disastrous results of her secession are only too tragically visible to even the simplest ex-serviceman today, for he has been deserted by Mammon and he has little spiritual comfort to find outside of his own heart – where having been, like all Protestants, brought up on the Old Testament rather than the New, he has not been taught to look for it.

At this point MacGreevy referred to Death of a Hero as an examination of the breakdown of modern England, confirming the political aspects of his aesthetic. His
scorn for Anglo-Catholicism, 'provincial if genteel', reflected his elitist rejection of bourgeois culture. As throughout his writing, these feelings were formulated as nationalist – in his loathing of Anglicisation through the influence of 'London Irish' – and as sectarian – in his classification of Protestantism in art as sentimental, vulgar, and centred on the rights of the individual. His views were compatible with Eliot's, in political and social as well as poetic and religious terms.

Despite the connections between MacGreevy's and W.B. Yeats' cultural nationalism, the trajectory of MacGreevy's political thought was most closely reflected in that of Eliot. Although MacGreevy criticised the "professorial and rather snobbish [...] kind of dullness" of the Criterion, to which he contributed many reviews before and after his time in Paris, he also called it the best of the English reviews. His criticism was based on the journal's combination of political, academic and cultural writing rather than particular disagreement with the "classical, reactionary and revolutionary" ideology which Eliot claimed for the Criterion. The rejection of the "eclectic, tolerant and democratic," and the disdain for "suburban democracy," expressed by Eliot combined with MacGreevy's postcolonial scorn for English society to shape his understanding of modernity.

The right-wing, even authoritarian, conservatism underlying this understanding was evident in the lectures given by Eliot two years after MacGreevy's monograph. In his portrayal of a society "worm-eaten with Liberalism," Eliot sketched a programme of cultural and social orthodoxy and tradition amenable to MacGreevy's cultural nationalism. He emphasised tradition as organic, based on

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130 Eliot, p.61.
132 After Strange Gods, p.13. Eliot developed the definition of 'tradition' from 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919-20), which included the note that "Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind," in a direction even more compatible with cultural nationalism ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" in Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1932; rev. and enlarged 1934 and 1951), pp.13-22, p.13). Tradition was "not solely, or even primarily, the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs; these beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of the formation of a tradition. What I mean by tradition involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represents the blood kinship of 'the same people living in the same place.'" It was in
quasi-mystical communities and evolving rather than fixed. What Eliot termed ‘orthodoxy’ in art, based on “the inherited wisdom of the race,” and constituted through a harmonious whole of individual parts, echoed MacGreevy’s conception of the ‘national genius’ drawn from a tradition of cultural nationalism.133

North describes After Strange Gods, “that notorious battle-cry against the unorthodox,” as “announc[ing] what had been implicit in [Eliot’s] work for a long time.” The ideas within were based on a “distress [...] over the liberal divorce of individual and race” which led Pound to fascism.134 Eliot instead developed a form of Christian conservatism in The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture, which themselves “end in failure, with mystification on one hand and authoritarianism on the other.”135 North concludes that Eliot was disinclined towards an affiliation with fascism for various reasons – as well as failing to reconcile his paradoxical desire for greater local autonomy combined with the centralised spiritual authority of monarchy, as a mass movement he viewed it along with communism as a “byproduct of the degradation of capitalism.”136 The closest Eliot came to a sustained practical political programme was in his idea, formulated in the 1945 ‘The Man of Letters and the Future of Europe’, of the role of the ‘man of letters’ in reconciling individual identity and communal unity.137

By viewing the trajectory of MacGreevy’s career in the context of his critical and ideological affinities with Eliot, his movement to the Capuchin Annual seems as much the product of his engagement with modernist discourse as of his

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133 Eliot’s comments on the “decay of Protestantism [...] that makes much of our writing seem provincial and crude in the major intellectual centres of Europe” (ASG, p.38) were reminiscent of MacGreevy’s aesthetic. Also, in what may have been influenced by criticisms like MacGreevy’s, Eliot admitted his commitment to ‘isms’ was “injudicious [...] I now see the danger of suggesting to outsiders that the Faith is a political principle or a literary fashion, and the sum of all a dramatic posture” (ASG, p.28).
134 North, p.74.
135 Ibid., p.117.
136 Ibid., pp.118-19.
137 Ibid., p.111.
commitment to Catholicism and cultural nationalism. Wilson acknowledges that MacGreevy’s public role at the National Gallery on his return to Ireland resembled Eliot’s own ambitions for an intelligent popular audience, but MacGreevy seems to have lacked the anxieties over cultivation and mass culture that sometimes underwrites Eliot’s prose on such matters.¹³⁸

MacGreevy’s pre-WW2 writing did express such anxieties, however, framed as hostility to Anglicisation. His relationship with international modernism developed his republican disillusionment in combination with distrust of liberal democracy and bourgeois materialism, and shaped his conception of internationally-engaged, Catholic culture as the best hope to ‘save the soul of Ireland.’

By turning to Catholicism as an alternative to materialist social ideologies of both right and left, MacGreevy’s writing in the 1930s had affinities with counter-Reformation thought in Ireland. In 1945, Conor Cruise O’Brien described the manifestations of this thought in the intellectual Catholic press. Rather than insularity and isolation from Europe, he described Catholic social discourse advocating Ireland’s special place in Europe:

In this context Ireland’s importance is clear; she contains the principle deposits of faith from which the great powers may be influenced towards Catholicism, or at least away from Materialism.¹³⁹

O’Brien stressed that this discourse did not reflect popular Irish Catholic opinion, but should be thought of as “weapons in a world battle, the latest phase of the counter-reformation.” They represented however a sustained attempt to develop Catholic social and cultural thought in relation to the Continent.

Journals such as Studies, the Irish Monthly, and the more populist Irish Rosary frequently discussed the possibilities offered by independence for literary and cultural redefinition on Catholic principles. Although inherently conservative, these publications combined attacks on immorality and materialism in modern culture with more optimistic consideration of Catholic alternatives. Susannah Riordan

¹³⁸ Wilson, p.22.
argues that Catholic discourse in the 1930s represented an aspect of Irish intellectual life neglected by critical definitions of the stagnancy of Irish culture. In the early part of the decade in particular, anxiety about modernity was combined with optimism at the possibilities for Catholic social and cultural intervention. Catholic literature was frequently considered, Riordan notes, as a potential manifestation of these possibilities:

The main target of the Catholic critics was literary realism, which they portrayed as the product of social materialism with all its intellectual errors. Their main aims were the development of an alternative literature which reflected Catholic spirituality in a way that was both authentic and artistically excellent, and the creation of a reading public which demanded such literature.¹⁴⁰

Frequently invoking neo-Thomism and Maritain, contributors to Catholic journals attempted to formulate a literature in which man’s ‘fullness of being’ could be expressed. This required representation of the material world and the perspective of the individual, but above all both should be placed in the context of a larger spiritual order.¹⁴¹

Literary criticism in these journals often featured definition of the European tradition as Catholic, in terms similar to MacGreevy’s. In the Irish Monthly, for example, Patrick Walshe described all great art, including the ‘Ancient Classics’ as Catholic in spirit:


¹⁴¹As Riordan notes, the main objections to modern writing in these journal criticised the materialism of realism, which neglected the higher purpose of art in favour of its ‘brute’ realities. Such discussions often occurred in the context of censorship policy. Xenophobia, sensationalism and moral fury did feature in discussions of censorship, as did encouragement of the kind of moral policing of neighbours often evoked in descriptions of the repressiveness of the decade. The Irish Rosary’s editorials often decried the corruptive effects of immoral writing, focusing mainly on the popular press.

Censorship was also often discussed in a more restrained and thoughtful way, however, in attempts to justify it in moral, social and cultural terms. ‘Immoral’ literature was seen not just as corrupting, but as failing in art’s responsibility to express and encourage ‘fullness of being.’ Patrick J. Gannon, for example, used this Thomist term to defend censorship despite its inhibition of individual liberty. “Art and literature are achievements of the spirit, not of the body or senses. They feed and sustain the soul in its eternal conflict with brute matter, whether within or without. They must spiritualise us, or they are renegades from their allegiance; false to their primary loyalty” ('Literature and Censorship’ in the Irish Monthly 65.3 (March 1937), pp.434-47, p.439).
Behind all the noble efforts of man there is always some great ideal, some vivifying principle or some heaven sent inspiration. In the finest architecture of Europe, in the works which for centuries have been the glory of the Continent, the spirit of the Catholic Church has in some measure found embodiment.

Like MacGreevy, Walshe identified the Catholic Continent as a cultural ideal. He did not share MacGreevy’s reluctance to recognise the traditional English canon as sharing this ideal - Walter Scott and Shakespeare too were described as possessing a “fundamental Catholic philosophy.” Walshe based his argument on the representational qualities of great art, including both the material and the spiritual:

Indeed, if Literature faithfully represents life, civilised life, it cannot fail to mirror great Christian or Catholic principles. True honest human life always to some extent reflected those principles [...] Worthy literature, then, representing as it does genuine human life, is inevitably instinct with the spirit of truth and order.142

The principles of ‘truth and order’ on which Walshe based his argument were representative of literary discussion in the more self-consciously intellectual Catholic periodicals of the 1930s.

The ‘spirit of truth and order’ of Catholic aesthetics developed from a conception of aesthetics and culture with affinities to MacGreevy’s. The discussion in the Catholic press, however, was characterised by hostility to experimental form and an equation of modernism with naturalism: both were viewed as “neo-paganism,” the product of disillusioned materialism that “greet[s] the future with a yawn.”143 There was little evidence of nationalist rejection of international influence. The bonds of Catholicism superseded national communities, and there was great enthusiasm for the development of Catholic writing in France and England. W.B. Yeats, whose Anglo-Irish and Protestant background excluded him from a role in the creation of a new Catholic literature, was ignored. So too were Joyce and Eliot, despite Joyce’s

142 Patrick Walshe, ‘Catholicism Influencing English Literature’ in Irish Monthly 60.10 (October 1932), pp.636-42, pp.636-37.
Catholic background and Eliot’s place in the “stampede” of converts greeted with excitement by the *Monthly*.144

The attitude to literary form evident in the Catholic press reflected the opposition between modernism and Catholicism which has been reproduced in critical discussions of 1930s Ireland. However, in their attempts to imagine alternative forms of social organisation liberal democracy, blamed for alienation and materialism endemic in modernity, these journals were compatible with MacGreevy’s modernism. Catholic social discourse in Ireland was preoccupied with alternatives to liberal democracy, and the possible organisation of Irish society on Catholic principles. Literary discussion in the intellectual Catholic press often featured neo-Thomist principles related to MacGreevy’s own; the interest in corporatism and Catholic Action which, inspired by the 1931 papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, dominated social thought similarly reflected an understanding of modernity not as distant as it might appear from MacGreevy’s version of modernist attitudes to society.

Aodh de Blacam, a frequent contributor to social discussions in the Catholic press, diagnosed the evils of modern England in a manner reminiscent of MacGreevy’s more vehement writing on the subject. In an article on the status of Catholicism in England, he speculated that “the prodigious spread of new paganism since the World War has carried the English public so far that the Catholic body has become, as it were, isolated.” He condemned the effect of suburbia on community and morality; and described the experience of the Irish visitor faced with the speed of modernity:

[He] looks at the swarms, following their giddy pleasure with never a thought for grave earthly things, to say nothing of the spiritual, and he wonders if we are not about the witness a cataclysm like the terrific *debacle* of the ancient world.

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144 Sherren, ‘Log of a Literary Man’ in the *Irish Monthly* 59.2 (February 1931), pp. 75-80, p.79. G.K. Chesterton in particular was frequently invoked as a model of Catholic, nationalist writing, and was often seen as a model of literature which “cried out against the desolation of a pessimistic, scientific world, calling on men to turn to Christianity and to happiness” (John Hayes SJ, ‘Poetry of G.K. Chesterton, I’ in the *Irish Monthly* 59.1 (January 1931), pp.52-65, p.53).
Horror at the ‘swarms’ of mass culture, an anxiety apparent in right wing modernist writing,\textsuperscript{145} dominated de Blacam’s attitude to modern England and his fears for modern Ireland:

\begin{quote}
God help the world! – this is no exaggeration of the present state of uprooted, transplanted urban masses. What wonder the Catholics, looking out on the pandemonium of noise, movement, sensation, sentiment, artificiality, unrest, discontent, tend to retire into themselves?\textsuperscript{146}
\end{quote}

England may be beyond redemption, but there was much hope that independent, Catholic Ireland was not.

\textit{Quadragemiso Anno}, and the earlier \textit{Rerum Novarum} on which it built, was the basis of imagined solutions to the crisis of modernity seen blighting England and threatening Ireland. As Wills describes,

\begin{quote}
[These papal documents were intended as blueprints for taming the harshness of the capitalist system, and so forestalling the threat of socialism and communism. They called for a widening of social participation, based on broader and more generous notions of equality. Representation in terms of vocational groupings was to minimise state control, and encourage harmonious relations between classes. National life would be organised on a spiritual rather than a material code. These ideas were interpreted in some quarters as a rebuff to the liberal political tradition, and the parliamentary system as a whole.\textsuperscript{147}]
\end{quote}

These principles were the basis of Catholic social discussion in 1930s journals. They emphasised the possible reconciliation of individual liberty and harmonious community, and the rejection of materialist values and worldly authority in favour of the unity and hierarchy of the Church.

“The social doctrine of the Church [...] makes for a perfect harmony between respect of personal liberty and the hierarchical and authoritative organisation of society,” wrote a 1938 contributor to the \textit{Irish Monthly}, on ‘French Catholicism To-

\textsuperscript{145} Carey comprehensively details the “dismay” at mass democracy he identifies in many aspects of modernism (pp.3-22).
\textsuperscript{146} Aodh de Blacam, ‘England To-Day – Catholicism on the Defensive’ in the \textit{Irish Rosary} 40.1 (January 1936), pp.16-23, p.20, 23, 22.
\textsuperscript{147} Wills, p.346.
day. "Italy is the home of Catholic Action," stated another, as part of the Catholic Action series which ran in the journal in the early 1930s, imagining Mussolini’s state as organised exactly on papal ideals, drawing together existing institutions to allow individual freedom as well as united action: “These two thoughts, individual liberty and submission to ecclesiastical authority, run right through all the Papal announcements on Catholic Action." As the topics of these articles suggest, journals like the Irish Monthly adopted an extremely open attitude to international influence of a certain kind – France was admired, but was suspected of sympathy to socialism, particularly after the period of Popular Front government from 1936. The most often invoked models for Catholic social programmes in Ireland were right-wing authoritarian regimes – Austria, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

MacGreevy’s invocation of these countries in 1934, as “those countries that, like ourselves, are Catholic by tradition” and provide “the only way to shake off our London Irishness,” suggests his context in contemporary Catholic discourse long before his involvement with the Capuchin Annual. Throughout the 1930s, MacGreevy’s disdain for established political systems, scathing attitude to mass culture and appeal to Catholicism as the supreme unifying cultural force – to the extent that national identity was superseded by religious identity – were compatible with contemporary Catholic social discourse. His version of Eliot’s call for the cultural leadership of an elite resembled the frequent calls in Catholic journals for “the education of the social sense along strong religious and Catholic lines,” and the nurturing of a national, Catholic culture to counteract English influence.

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150 These dominated international coverage of Catholic Action in the Monthly’s series, and were specifically invoked, for example in M.G.S. Sewells, ‘Catholic and Communist Social Ideals’ in the Irish Rosary 41.1 (January 1937), pp.54-60. The Rosary featured with particular frequency condemnation of communism and support for Franco during the Spanish Civil War.
151 ‘The Cultural Dilemma’.
152 R.S. Devane, ‘A Catholic Social Programme: The Basis and Hope of National Unity’ in the Irish Monthly 64 (January-June 1936), pp.17-24, p.17. Devane called for the education of the Irish people "by a small educated body of Catholic lay folk, who have steeped themselves in the Catholic philosophy of life and who have burned the midnight oil studying the papal encyclicals of Leo XIII"
MacGreevy’s praise, in 1934, for Pius XI as a historian showed his sympathy with Catholic social thought; in a review appearing in the *Criterion* which could easily have appeared in the *Irish Monthly*, he described the Pope’s social attitudes as a defence against tyranny. The papal *Essays on History* were intended, MacGreevy wrote, “to reaffirm the simple values that cynical tyranny is always trying to overthrow.”

Pope Pius was born an Austrian subject in that Italia irredenta which the raffish mob of politicians who fore-gathered at Versailles in 1919 used as an excuse to establish an Austria irredenta that would provide them and their successors with other occasions to hold dancing congresses. It is little wonder therefore that the young Achille Rtti should have grown up with a passion for that liberty which is based on social justice and individual self-discipline, and that he should rejoice in Milan’s great tradition of resistance to the tyranny of emperors and princes all through the later Roman and earlier medieval periods.153

MacGreevy echoed Catholic discourse of ‘social justice and individual self-discipline’, but placed these values in opposition to tyranny and imperialism, against the inevitable background of the First World War. He was sympathetic to the elements of Catholic social thought, “harmonised” with right-wing Catholic Europe, that could become “simply sectarian and authoritarian – an excuse for denouncing the current form of government as British, pagan, and the ally of Mammon.”154 His writing sometimes showed these elements. However, MacGreevy’s constant resistance to authoritarianism, imperialism and intolerance, as well as his pacifism, prevented his seduction by fascism even to the extent of

\[\text{and Pius XI, and also in striving to learn from the experiments and even mistakes of Catholics in other countries} (\text{pp.18-19}). \text{As well as resembling the ambitions of the Capuchin Annual group, Devane’s programme suggested the social role later imagined by Eliot for “the more conscious, more spiritually and intellectually developed,” who would “influence and be influenced by each other, and collectively ... form the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation” (The Idea of a Christian Society (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), p.34, quoted by North, pp.115-16). The anti-English aspects of demands for Catholic cultural leadership were expressed by Louis J. Walsh, in an angry critique of the quality of Irish intellectual life, and a demand for Culture Clubs run by the clergy or suitable laymen. His attack on “cheap and stupid English novels” and newspapers typified attitudes to the English popular press in Catholic journals, and echoed MacGreevy’s earlier scathing comment on “moral England where the improper newspapers come from” (Louis J. Walsh, ‘Not an Island of Scholars!’ in the Irish Rosary 41.1 (January 1937), pp.22-27, p.23; MacGreevy, ‘Moliere and the Censorship’, excised sentence). 155 Review of *Essays on History* by H.H. Pope Pius XI, trans. Edward Bullough, in the *Criterion* (July 1934), pp.708-09. 154 Wills, p.346.}
Yeats, and much less than Pound or Francis Stuart. He instead established himself in the public role in Irish culture which he had imagined since the late 1920s, and through the Capuchin Annual in the "more benign version of Irish Catholicism links with Europe" which was "an intellectually cogent alternative to the liberal Europe championed by The Bell."\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p.354. The connection between MacGreevy and O'Faoláin in the 1940s is suggested by their correspondence. In 1942 O'Faoláin asked for MacGreevy's help with a planned 'French Number' of the Bell. O'Faoláin suggested writers including Maritain as possible subjects. As Donal Ó Drisceoil has documented, neutrality required careful handling of international subjects to avoid censorship (Censorship in Ireland 1939 – 1945: Neutrality, Politics and Society (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996) – O'Faoláin pointed out that "There could be nothing topical or political, and the general line is 'to reflect the mind and traditions of France’" (TCD MS 8118/138, SOF to TM, 25 September 1942).
1.4. W.B Yeats and Jack B. Yeats: Modernism and cultural nationalism

The centrality of Catholicism to MacGreevy's aesthetic and cultural understanding allowed him to negotiate the tensions between individual and community, which preoccupied his modernist contemporaries and for some led to a greater or lesser acceptance of fascism. MacGreevy understood these tensions in the context of cultural nationalism as well as international modernism; his formulation of cultural republicanism in this sense bears comparison to W.B. Yeats. While J.C.C. Mays has described MacGreevy's cultural position in opposition to W.B. Yeats, MacGreevy's writing on Yeats shows less a "deprecat[ion]" of his example than an attempt to co-opt Yeats into his idea of the Irish 'national genius'. MacGreevy's writing on Yeats showed his integration of conservative modernism with cultural nationalism.

Michael North outlines the political context of Yeats' aesthetic in terms of both nationality and modernity. Independent Ireland had to decide, North says, "between being a liberal state, with a citizenship based on abstract national right, and a nation, with a citizenship based on historical and cultural identity." The cultural nationalism of Yeats, and of MacGreevy, tended towards the nation's stress on community and unity, but preserved a republican sense of individual rights and freedoms based on the liberal state. North describes Yeats' own understanding of "this tension in Irish nationalism" in the context of international political ideologies:

Late in his life, Yeats was to trace both fascism and communism back to Hegel's attempts to resolve the liberal contradiction between right and duty, individual and community. To understand his own place as an individual in any community, English or Irish, to understand the position of his hereditary class, the Anglo-Irish, in Ireland, to understand the relationship between poetry as an aesthetic act and politics as a series of practical acts, Yeats had to puzzle out the philosophical questions both fascism and communism tried to answer.

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156 Mays (1984), p.27.
157 North, p.22. Yeats' association with fascism has been discussed by Elizabeth Cullingford (Yeats, Ireland and Fascism (London: Macmillan, 1981)) and R.F. Foster, W.B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.466-495). North's reading is particularly relevant for MacGreevy because of his analysis of Yeats' cultural nationalism in relation to both modernist aesthetics and his association with the far right.
Yeats’ route through this puzzle involved a conception of Irishness as a spiritual community, associated with Celtic romanticism in opposition to rational materialism. Yeats rejected liberalism in both nationalist terms, “as the system that ruined England and threatened Ireland,” and in terms associated with international disillusionment with mass democracy. Its replacement was conceived through an essentialist understanding of national identity:

The revolt of the soul against intellect, of the German Romantics against the Enlightenment, appears here as the revolt of individual historical nations against a doctrine that would make all nations the same by making all individuals equal. Nationalism of this kind bases its claims on the belief that humanity is naturally divided into unique communities, all of whose distinguishing characteristics are ultimately derived from a common essence.\(^{158}\)

MacGreevy’s nationalism was compatible with Yeats’. He repeatedly described England as the source of Puritan, materialist mass culture. In addition he conceived the artistic genius evolving from the ‘national genius’, allowing him to figure the artist as both elevated above and representative of the national community. Such thinking recurred through MacGreevy’s writing. In 1923 he wrote of Ireland’s “consistently artistic, unmorallising, ungenteeel genius,” surviving despite “Anglo-Irish provincialism” and the influence of England’s artists, “moralising snobs.”\(^{159}\)

Near the end of his life, he imagined Yeats’ satisfaction at seeing his divided countrymen re-uniting for the purpose of declaring Irish neutrality in regard to the second great war. Partition or no Partition, neutrality was a clinching re-affirmation of the Irish nationhood in which he believed and for the recognition of which he had helped to fight all his life long. He accepted the idea that a distinctive cultural heritage implies distinctive nationhood.\(^{160}\)

MacGreevy’s obvious difference from Yeats in his approach to Irish cultural nationalism was his Catholicism. North defines Yeats’ handling of ideas of national unity through his Anglo-Irishness, the “increasingly difficult” need for him to argue

\(^{158}\text{North, p.29.}\)
that “on one hand Ireland was spiritually distinct, most especially from England, and [...] on the other that it could accommodate English elements without substantial alteration.”^161\footnote{North, p.31.} MacGreevy was not under the same pressure to “define the Irish house in such a way as to include elements clearly at odds with its historical character, Protestant elements at odds with a Catholic majority, English elements at odds with a Celtic tradition.”^162\footnote{North, p.51.} MacGreevy was able to explain elements of Ireland’s Catholic state antagonistic to his beliefs as essentially non-Catholic, the result of Anglicisation. He mirrored the sense of a minority elite underlying Yeats’ understanding of the role of the Anglo-Irish, but associated this the elite with civilised, intellectual Catholicism in contact with the Continent. He did, however, have to explain how the Anglo-Irish were so represented in historical and modern Irish art. He did so by effectively splitting Anglo-Irishness into the ‘provincial’, directed towards England, and those who had been absorbed into the Irish ‘national genius.’

Both W.B. Yeats and Jack B. Yeats were for MacGreevy examples of the possibility of artists from Anglo-Irish backgrounds expressing the Irish ‘national genius’. His writing on W.B. Yeats began from the position that Yeats’ had freed himself from English influence. In ‘Mr W.B. Yeats as a Dramatist’ (1929), he described Yeats’ great difficulty as “that he had the vulgarity of the nineteenth century as his sole background,” and his great achievement as overcoming that difficulty.^163\footnote{‘Mr. W.B. Yeats as a Dramatist’ in \\textit{Revue Anglo-Americaine} (October 1929), pp.19-36, p.19.} Much of the article was an attack on English literature, and in particular the influence on both drama and fiction of Shakespeare’s “mixture of sublime lyricism and ridiculous clowning.”^164\footnote{Ibid., p.20.} Yeats was distinguished from this ‘vulgarity’. His absorption in Irishness turned him to classicism. The terms in which MacGreevy described this achievement showed it also as a turn to elitism.

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^161\footnote{North, p.31.} ^162\footnote{North, p.51.} ^163\footnote{‘Mr. W.B. Yeats as a Dramatist’ in \\textit{Revue Anglo-Americaine} (October 1929), pp.19-36, p.19.} ^164\footnote{Ibid., p.20.} Shakespeare was a particular dislike of MacGreevy’s, and he often invoked him as the great figure of “Protestant subjectivism,” sentimental, individualist and lacking the supreme Catholic virtue of ‘humility’ (review of \\textit{André Gide: Sa vie, son œuvre} by Par Léon Pierre-Quint, in \\textit{Criterion} (July 1934), pp.707-08).
MacGreevy’s preference for ‘classicism’ above the “bourgeois” ‘sublime ridiculous’ was associated with disdain for the ‘sentimental’ tastes of mass culture. He could easily condemn these tastes in England; he had to justify them in Ireland.¹⁶⁵ He explained the lack of popular audiences for Yeats’ plays through the Anglicisation of Irish culture. Yeats therefore not only had “the greatest English tradition against him,” but “an Irish public that accepted that English tradition against him also.”¹⁶⁶ MacGreevy was thus in the position of defining Yeats’ Irishness through his lack of popularity in Ireland. He did so by describing Irish ‘vulgarity’ as English:

the public has patronised many plays, and many of them English what is more, that were more definitely objectionable from the Catholic point of view. It is not perhaps the public’s own fault at all. In the theatre of Ireland we have no tradition except the Shakespearean tradition in which poetry has to be eked out by vulgar clowning. And there is no vulgar clowning in Mr. Yeats’s plays. However it be, a Yeats play to-day empties the Abbey Theatre as a speech by Edmund Burke emptied the English House of Commons a century and a half ago. But Burke was a great orator [...] And similarly, though the vulgar preferred the sublime-ridiculous mixtures of Mr. Sean O’Casey and drove Mr. Yeats out of the theatre, they have not, in the estimation of discriminating people, lessened his greatness as a dramatist in the slightest. I am convinced that adequately translated and presented, his plays for the ordinary theatre would appeal to a cultivated public in a country which has a tradition in the matter of poetic drama. The only country which has such a tradition is, of course, France.¹⁶⁷

As well as the justification of MacGreevy’s cultural nationalism, his understanding of Yeats emphasised the necessity of intellectual elitism. He praised Yeats’ discovery, “through Ernest Fenellosa and Ezra Pound,” of Noh theatre:

he realised that in the Noh form, modified to suit his own purposes, he could write plays that it would please a few cultivated people to play in

¹⁶⁵ ‘Yeats as Dramatist’, p.20.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p.21.
¹⁶⁷ Ibid., pp.26-27. MacGreevy’s dislike for O’Casey was based on his socialism, and perhaps his Protestantism, as well as his technique. In a 1927 review, MacGreevy elided both influences as “excessive humanitarianism”: “The humanitarian red herring which has obtruded itself into all Protestant literature since Tolstoy with such persistence as to defeat its own ends was trailed across the stage almost as gratuitously [in The Shadow of a Gunman] as if Mr. O’Casey had been a Russian instead of an Irishman.” MacGreevy noted some progress in O’Casey’s work since he came “under the influence of Mr. Yeats,” and praised him in The Plough and the Stars for “handl[ing] his material like an artist,” although “[t]he doctrinaire humanitarianism has become doctrinaire irony, the love-making is so naive as to make the spectator and even the reader embarrassed.” MacGreevy perceived O’Casey’s social critique as the same ‘meddling’ as that of the Fabians – both reflected his hostility to an emphasis on art’s social responsibility. (Review of Two Plays: Juno and the Paycock: The Shadow of a Gunman and The Plough and the Stars: A Tragedy in Four Acts by Sean O’Casey, in The Monthly Criterion (May 1927), p.275).
their drawingrooms for their own and their friends’ pleasure, that he need no longer think of the indifferent public.\textsuperscript{168}

While hoping for the de-Anglicisation and consequent civilisation of Irish public taste, MacGreevy did not consider this process an appropriate active goal for the artist. Appreciation by ‘a few cultivated people’ became the badge of artistic genius in modern society corrupted through England by the ‘vulgarity’ of mass culture.

Through his equation of popular culture with English culture, MacGreevy combined cultural nationalism with cultural elitism. He endorsed Yeats’ idea of the intellectual aristocrat, “a paradoxical figure whereby a part distinguished from the whole came to represent the whole,” formulated by MacGreevy as “that true aristocracy [Yeats] has dreamed of all his life, and for whom everything he has written is intended, the aristocracy of the intelligence that is drawn from all classes.”\textsuperscript{169} The attempt to distinguish the intellectual aristocrat from the feudal showed MacGreevy’s concern to incorporate Anglo-Irish modernism into the Irish national genius. W.B. Yeats’ later concentration on the Ascendency strained this concern.\textsuperscript{170} For MacGreevy, Jack B. Yeats provided a less problematic representative of modernist, Anglo-Irish expression of the Irish national genius.

MacGreevy’s admiration for Jack Yeats was evident in his earliest critical writing. In 1922, MacGreevy described him as a foundational figure in the formation of a “genuinely Irish school of painters,” free from Anglicised provincialism. He based Yeats’ status as on his subject material – the west of Ireland:

\textsuperscript{168} ‘Yeats as Dramatist’, p.28.
\textsuperscript{169} North, p.70; ‘Yeats as Dramatist, p.29. MacGreevy’s ideal of an intellectual elite was repeated in ‘Apropos of the National Gallery’ (\textit{Ireland To-Day} 1.11 (December 1936), pp.52-57), where he praised the Gallery’s value “not for classes or masses, but for those persons of all classes who are ready and apt to derive intellectual profit from pictorial art.”
\textsuperscript{170} MacGreevy explained Yeats’ interest in Swift, Berkeley and Burke after Irish independence as an attempt to persuade the ‘ascendancy’ to “play a constructive part” in “the ultimate realisation of the unified and cultural Ireland of W.B.’s dreams. There is little evidence to show what influence his famous lecture has had on the ascendancy, or how far any of its members has moved towards giving his or her first allegiance to Ireland” (‘W.B. Yeats – A Generation Later’, p.9). In 1965, MacGreevy may have been attempting to absolve Yeats of fascist tendencies – he described him as a political innocent, to whom reaction was an orderly counterforce to revolution, and who in the 1920s was interested in Anglo-Irish philosophy as “reactionary but not selfish” (pp.12-13). In 1932, his suspicion of ‘Words upon the Window-Pane’ was evident in an exchange of correspondence with Yeats (TCD MS 8104/71a and 71b).
He left Dublin drawing-rooms, and went to Kerry, and to Galway, and looked around him. And he saw the giants of the West in boats and dances; he saw their small boys playing marbles and riding donkeys and sitting in circuses; and he was so thrilled by what he saw that he had to make pictures out of it. And now, instead of lagging behind those of his contemporaries who followed the English tradition, he has come to be recognised, in the estimation of all serious critics, as the first truly Irish painter.\(^{171}\)

In this 1922 article, MacGreevy’s praise of Irish painting “embrac[ing] our national life in its scope” seems very close to Corkery’s revival of The Hidden Ireland, published two years later. MacGreevy had in 1919 published an enthusiastic appreciation of ‘Daniel Corkery – Dramatist’. While noting, in the Irish Statesman, that “[h]e makes artistic mistakes, and some of us do not always agree with his ethics,” MacGreevy praised Corkery’s representation of Cork, “the city of every day life,” in opposition to “the city of symbols and dreams, the city of Yeats and Synge and Shaw,” and his “beautiful” rendition of slums:

> Really these Corkery poor people are delightful. And they are all true, and they are Irish – more Irish perhaps than the creations of Mr. Robinson, who for all his success with the “Whiteheaded Boy” is at his finest as the interpreter of a less primitive civilisation than that of our Irish poor.\(^{172}\)

MacGreevy’s early endorsement of the romantic representation of non-metropolitan life, and his argument that it was in such portrayal of “our national life” that the Irish national genius could be discovered, placed him in much more sympathy with Corkery’s cultural nationalism than his later association with Corkery’s ‘wild geese’ would suggest.\(^{173}\)

MacGreevy’s attempt to establish both W.B. and Jack B. Yeats as artists of Irish national genius through their absorption of national tradition suggested an extension of Corkery’s category of national writing, rather than a challenge to its terms. MacGreevy began Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and an Interpretation with a definition of the artist’s importance – “‘he paints the Ireland that matters’” – described by Seán Kennedy as barely distinguishable from Corkery’s understanding of national art. Kennedy argues that MacGreevy’s interpretation of Yeats was based

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\(^{173}\) ‘Painting in Modern Ireland’. 
on a cultural nationalism not dissimilar from Corkery's. As well as his more inclusive attitude to international influences on Irishness, however, MacGreevy combined his nationalism with a version of modernist rhetoric.

MacGreevy described Jack B. Yeats as instinctively connected to the Irish national genius despite his Anglo-Irish background. The people of Ireland drew him, an Anglo-Irishman by origin, to themselves and held him so that he came to identify himself with them, found himself in them and in all his painting years has scarcely ever gone outside their lives for the subject matter of his pictures.

MacGreevy emphasised the "petit peuple" subjects of Yeats' paintings, as evidence of his evolution from and representation of "the whole life of the nation." He described Yeats as the first genuine artist [...] who so identified himself with the people of Ireland as to be able to give true and good and beautiful artistic expression to the life they lived, and to that sense of themselves as the Irish nation [...]

MacGreevy's terms established the national artist as perfectly expressing both individual and communal experience, "the consummate expression of the spirit of his own nation at one of the supreme points in its evolution." Lloyd suggests that MacGreevy's reading may itself be the consummate expression of a cultural nationalist aesthetic. Intrinsic to this aesthetic, which in Ireland dates back at least to

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174 "The Artist Who Stakes His Being is from Nowhere": Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy on the Art of Jack B Yeats' in Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui 14 (2004), pp.61-74. David Lloyd has responded to Kennedy's reading with a complaint that he "collapses this crucial distinction between the official nationalism expressed in the Free State and the more recalcitrant republicanism espoused by MacGreevy and, it appears, Yeats. He also collapses both Yeats and MacGreevy with the views of Daniel Corkery which a reading of MacGreevy's texts or Yeats's paintings does not really sustain" ('Republics of Difference: Yeats, MacGreevy, Beckett' in Field Day Review 1 (2005), pp.43-69, p.49n.). Both comments are valid; MacGreevy's interpretation of Yeats emphasised his republicanism and disaffiliated him from "the present order" in "a more or less proleptic relation to the nation he represents" (Lloyd, p.49), and this oppositional relationship was conceived against the exclusive cultural nationalism of Corkery. However, while MacGreevy's formulation of cultural republicanism was explicitly distinct from Corkery's, his conception of national art representing 'the Ireland that matters' was related to conservative cultural nationalism as well as to modernist ideas of the role of the artist.

175 Jack B. Yeats, p.5.
176 Ibid., p.10.
the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s, is the conception of both the artwork and the artist as representative.\textsuperscript{177}

It was also a formulation of the attempted resolution of “the modern conflict of individual and community” which North describes as the central concern of the modernists Yeats, Eliot and Pound, leading to an “insist[ence] that the collective is most truly present in certain individuals.”\textsuperscript{178} Lloyd similarly connects MacGreevy’s reading to the Romantic philosophy North finds in Yeats, which emphasised the “transformative capacity of imagination [to redeem] a damaged nation.” Imaginative representation allowed a “transformative elevation of the particular to the universal that is a return of the nation to its essential self.”\textsuperscript{179}

Yeats’ form was idealised by MacGreevy as an imaginative, transformative representation allowing the ‘elevation of the particular to the universal’. In terms reminiscent of ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, he distinguished the ‘subjective’ from the ‘objective’. Unlike Beckett, however, he saw aesthetic representation as capable of uniting subject with object. He described the ‘tendencies’ of modern writing as directed towards two ends:

\begin{quote}
The first tendency is to use such liberty as has been achieved to attain the greater abundance of individual life, a subjective tendency. The second is to insist on the need for a definite solution of Ireland’s political and, more particularly, social problems, which is a more objective tendency.\textsuperscript{180}
\end{quote}

MacGreevy attributed Yeats’ genius to his combination of both subjective and objective tendencies. His loose definition of the ‘subjective tendency’ suggested an emphasis on individualism and the “programmatic distance from political, economic and social concerns” of Huysen’s definition of modernism.\textsuperscript{181} MacGreevy however valued this tendency in combination with the ‘objective’, the social world.

In the life of Ireland fact and poetry had parted company. Jack Yeats’s work became a passionate recall to poetry – to the splendour of essential truth […] In the treatment of objective reality, a drastic selective sense comes into play and form is deferred to only in so far as it is congenial to a much more self-consciously fastidious artistic temperament of old. The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{177} Lloyd, p.45.
\item \textsuperscript{178} North, p.155, 156.
\item \textsuperscript{179} Lloyd, p.45.
\item \textsuperscript{180} Jack B Yeats, p.26.
\item \textsuperscript{181} Huysen, p.vii.
\end{itemize}
balance between observation and imagination has, in fact, altered. The artist particularises less, generalises more. At times he will make some quite humble scene look positively apocalyptic.¹⁸²

As his ‘independent’ status in Beckett’s ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ suggested, MacGreevy perceived the instability of representation but argued that through the concept of the national genius the gap between subject and object could be closed. MacGreevy presented the subjective artistic imagination as valuable not on its own, but in combination with representation of objective, communal reality. In his terms, the combination allowed the artist to achieve a greater whole in which “[c]onflict between subject and object, part and whole, freedom and history, right and duty” was, idealistically resolved.¹⁸³

Jack Yeats for MacGreevy represented the ideal reconciliation of these conflicts. Even in this text, however, resolution is only temporary. As MacGreevy’s post-war postscript showed, reality could not be so easily contained.¹⁸⁴ In the main text, MacGreevy’s definition of the ‘objective tendency’ was cursory, suggesting his discomfort with the role of art in providing a ‘solution’ to political and social problems. He retained his hostility to what he called ‘humanitarianism’ and ‘sociologism’, in effect his terms for socialism, and saw art of the ‘objective tendency’ as suspiciously related to the ‘worst example of the evils’:

the people who represent it belong to every political party and yet pay homage to the sociologist James Connolly, as well as to the nationalist, Padraic Pearse – both of whom were executed in 1916 – is probably significant. For the time being one cannot say much more than that it

¹⁸³ North, p.72.
¹⁸⁴ MacGreevy added a 1945 postscript to Jack B Yeats, in which he described Yeats’ Tinkers Encampment – The Blood of Abel in terms suggesting his hope that Ireland’s neutrality had preserved its potential role of salvation in the post-war world (p.36). In contrast to his statement in 1934, by the mid 1940s MacGreevy was evidently more sympathetic to the view that Ireland may save the soul of Europe. He evidently shared the sense of “Catholic Ireland’s special vocation” which justified neutrality (Wills, p.344). In ‘The Historical Background’, MacGreevy’s record of Ireland’s aloofness from “the barbarian invasions and their later consequences [which made] a shambles of western Europe” in the early mediaeval period may be slanted by contemporary isolation from the troubles of western Europe. More directly, Wills records the “wry” tone in a note sent to the Irish Times as the extent of Nazi atrocities were revealed as evidence of his belief in “the value of a ‘neutral’ perspective on the war” (Wills, p.411).
fulfils the perennial need to check up on authority’s liability to use it to abuse its privileges. 185

MacGreevy detested political intervention in the cultural sphere, and saw artistic intervention in social and political problems as unworthy of the transcendental nature of art. He evaded consideration of the social implications of his cultural nationalism by deeming such problems below the concerns of the artist. He disapproved of the political interventions of W.B. Yeats and Eliot not because of their ideological aspects, but as unworthy of their attention.

Late in life, he attempted to excuse Yeats from serious interest in fascism. He recalled that in 1923 or 24, Yeats told him

he believed that Mussolini represented the rise of the individual man as against what he considered the anti-human party machine. I was more distrustful about ‘Il Duce’ but I did not know enough then to answer that Mussolini was believed to be in the hands of an economically, and therefore politically, powerful group of men in Italy. 186

Even at this point, MacGreevy described his ‘distrust’ of Mussolini as based on Mussolini’s failure to represent individualism over materialism, not the principle itself. Similarly, MacGreevy’s opposition to Yeats’ place in the Senate was based not on his activity there (where “he managed to combine ringing defences of individual rights with disdain for the democratic system founded on those rights”), but that he became actively involved with politics at all. 187

186 ‘W.B. Yeats – A Generation Later’, p.9. MacGreevy did not comment directly on Yeats’ involvement with the Blueshirts or his association with fascism in the 1930s.
187 North, p.63. MacGreevy’s perception of Yeats’ involvement in the Senate may have been influenced by that of George Yeats. In 1926, she wrote to MacGreevy about “trying to get Willy to leave the Senate after the education Bill is through – he is always full of verse that never gets written [...] He talked to Lady G about it and she said she thought he ought to remain in ‘to keep a worse man out’. That’s how your enlightened country looks on poets... He becomes more and more wrapped up in matters that are purely Irish and therefore insular and provincial. I have been reading nothing but poetry just lately (not his!) and it has made me realise how dammably national he is becoming. Nationality throws out personality and there’s nothing in his verse worth preserving but the personal. All the pseudo-mystico-intellecto-nationalistic stuff of the last fifteen years isn’t worth a trouser-button, or rather as a trouser-button is most necessary article one might say a pillowcase button! As long as there was any gesture in it, as long as there was a war on and so on and so on, it was worth it, but really now to spend hours listening to rubbish in and out of the Senate and going to committees and being visited by fishermen’s associations, and Freddie Ryans and nincompoops and miaows and bow-bows of all sorts mongrels mostly is a bit too much” (GY to TM, 5 January 1926, TCD MS 8104/34). George Yeats’ irritated perspective differed greatly from MacGreevy’s idea of the relationship between the ‘national’ and the ‘personal’. However, her aloof dismissal of Yeats’
MacGreevy’s feelings about Yeats’ political activity were suggested by the poem ‘Homage to Louis IX’, first printed in the 1934 *Poems*. Schreibman has identified the poem’s manuscript title as ‘Spirit of Saint Louis’, making the poem’s connection between “Louis IX, [Charles] Lindbergh and W.B. Yeats [...] all men of contemplation who became ‘men of action’ because the times demanded it.”188 The poem questions the commitments involved in such decisions. The pilot’s experience is portrayed as sublime, but transitory, shadowed by death. The “young man” who

Moved, walking, through heaven,
Passing silver star
After silver star,
Clustered silver stars,
And gold suns,
Is sleeping now
On dark earth again.189

The violence of the airman’s “fearful death” in ‘De Civitate Hominum’ is absent, but death as the boundary of the City of Men remains. The Augustine connection is confirmed by the poem’s movement into quotations from *Confessions* – the pilot’s glimpse of heaven is less even than that available to the poet. The ‘too late’ knowledge of both leads to Yeats; his use of the same quotation as epigraph to *The Rose* in 1893 is replaced by his new role:

W. B., turned man of action said: ‘McGreevy,
‘It is very hard to like men of action.’

In sleep do they meet Thee face to face?

The ‘turn’ is ironised, but the uncertainty that dominates the poem makes the final question seem genuine. The use of MacGreevy’s own name refers to his own role as poet in comparison with these ‘men of action’. In the first stanza, the speaker now identified firmly with the poet is similarly questioned. His papers are blown “purposelessly” by the wind in a “chaste bacchanale,” like the “harmless symbolisms” of branches. His version of action is questioned along with the

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188 Schreibman, *Collected Poems*, p.150. The reference marks the poem’s composition as 1927, towards the end of Yeats’ time in the Senate, at the earliest.

mechanical and political action of others. They are all secondary to the transcendental encounter.

In his criticism of W.B. Yeats and Jack Yeats, MacGreevy demonstrated the centrality of cultural nationalism to his conception of modernism. He desired a cultural republic in which the autonomy of the individual artist was combined with the representation of the national community. Catholic aesthetics were the basis of his conceived reconciliation between the individual and society. In his formulation of national art, MacGreevy developed a quasi-spiritual idea of the national genius which prioritised the importance of the individual artist in the representation and transformation of the nation. Both strands of his aesthetic negotiated the tension between individual autonomy and social responsibility.

While MacGreevy tried to deny the political implications of his aesthetic, his figuring of the nature of modern society in Ireland and Europe expressed anxiety about the cultural implications of mass democracy. This anxiety combined republican hostility to England, elements of Catholic social thought, and suspicion of mass culture found in elements of modernist discourse. In his critical writing, MacGreevy posited modernist aesthetics as a development of the European tradition, capable of restoring harmony between individual liberty and social order.

MacGreevy suggested the necessary cultivation of a space for this aesthetic in national culture, primarily through an encouragement of the connections between Ireland and Catholic Europe. However, despite the correspondences between MacGreevy’s thought and Catholic literary and social theory in Ireland, his aesthetic did not find a substantial place in Irish public culture in the 1930s. The tensions in the combination of commitment to aesthetic autonomy with desire for public influence were evident in MacGreevy’s writing. They were central to O’Faoláin’s contemporary career. O’Faoláin’s attitude to contemporary Irish culture in some ways resembled MacGreevy’s; he too expressed disillusionment with the development of Irish independence, defined himself in opposition to Corkery’s cultural nationalism, and considered cultural autonomy contingent on international
engagement. More than MacGreevy, however, O’Faoláin was preoccupied with the public role of the intellectual in national culture, and this preoccupation formed the basis of his realist aesthetic.
2. Seán O’Faoláin: Realism and the Public Intellectual

In 1934, Seán O’Faoláin¹ published a manifesto for the development of modern Irish writing for the American audience of the *Yale Review*. As its title, ‘The Emancipation of Irish Writers’, announced, the article was an impassioned plea for the liberation of Irish writers from national and political demands.² In a series of bold and sometimes overwrought declarations, O’Faoláin argued for a new age of Irish writing which would celebrate the artist’s need for complete aesthetic and moral freedom, including the freedom from national and ethical responsibilities. In many ways the article can be read as an aestheticist manifesto. From the first page, however, where O’Faoláin stated that “Here in Ireland more than anywhere else one needs to remember that the writer is an amoral person half his days,” his programme was deeply divided. If half resolved to the ‘amorality’ of literature, it was also half committed to the determinedly national nature of Irish writing.

O’Faoláin’s article was published in the same year as Beckett’s ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, as well as MacGreevy’s formulation of Ireland’s ‘Cultural Dilemma.’ ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ is often discussed as a sign of radical disillusionment with the development of post-revolutionary writing in Ireland, and an “Irish modernist manifesto.”³ It has rarely been considered alongside the contemporary writing of O’Faoláin, whose writing is usually seen as representative of disillusioned republicanism concerned with a straightforward, naturalist representation of the repressed and repressive reality of contemporary Ireland.⁴ MacGreevy’s unpublished lecture was a version of

¹ In his analysis of O’Faoláin’s autobiographical writing, Frank Shovlin discusses the multiple spellings of his name used by O’Faoláin, and by others, through his career. Following Shovlin, I will use the above spelling throughout – although technically incorrect in its mixture of Irish and English orthography, it was the version generally favoured by O’Faoláin. See Frank Shovlin, ‘The Struggle for Form: Seán O’Faoláin’s Autobiographies’ in *Yearbook of English Studies* 35 (2005), pp.161-70, pp.162-63.
⁴ Terence Brown’s description of O’Faoláin as “a highly representative figure, as ex-IRA man, language enthusiast and caustic post-revolutionary social critic,” and of his work as centring on “[s]elf-obsessed young men [coming] of age again and again in a depressed Irish environment,” is typical. ‘Ireland, Modernism and the 1930s’ in Coughlan and Davis (eds), pp.25-42, p.37.
cultural republicanism which advocated Catholic Europe as the alternative to Anglicisation, and MacGreevy’s critical writing connected this programme with Anglo-American high modernism. All three ‘manifestos’ revealed a desire to redefine literary form and the role of the artist, in the context of the development of independent Ireland and of debates throughout Europe about the function of art in the changing nation state.

Like Beckett and MacGreevy, O’Faoláin’s manifesto for the Irish writer was connected to both national and international concerns about the relationship between art and the world. Recognition of this dual frame requires re-thinking of common critical assumptions. O’Faoláin is often viewed as representative of an isolated oppositional perspective in the 1930s. Against the conservative, insular form of cultural nationalism which dominated official discourse, O’Faoláin, along with Frank O’Connor, is seen to represent a liberal perspective, open to Ireland’s role in the world as a modern republic. This opposition neglects the extent to which Catholic discourse in the 1930s was open to international influence. O’Faoláin’s position was unique less because of his willingness to consider Ireland as part of Europe, than because of his conception of the nature of modern Ireland.

However, O’Faoláin’s formulation of national literature was not itself straightforward. His attitude to the role of the writer in the public sphere was fraught. He combined a belief in the autonomy of art with a commitment to its social role. He argued that literature should engage with the social life of the nation, but also that the aesthetic took primacy over political concerns. He was a democratic republican, but considered a cultural elite necessary for national writing. In all these contradictions, O’Faoláin’s career reflected contemporary debate about the role of art internationally, as well as being shaped by the particular tensions in Irish national culture.

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5 ‘The Cultural Dilemma for Irishmen, Nationalism or Provincialism’ (TCD MS 8003/8-9a).
O'Faoláin's critique of Irish culture in the 1930s is well known. Developments in Irish politics in the 1920s and 1930s seemed to deepen the disillusionment felt by liberal republicans such as O'Faoláin after the bitterness of the civil war. Maurice Harmon's narrative of Irish writing in this period emphasises this "disillusion of national division" felt by those of O'Faoláin's generation, commenting that "[c]onditions in post-revolutionary Ireland were so uncongenial for the writer that it is remarkable, not so much that there was a decline in the quality and the volume of literary output, but that any literature was written at all." Cumann na nGaedheal had threatened that the election of de Valera's Fianna Fáil in 1932, cemented by the winning of a majority in 1933, would lead to chaos. In fact, as J.J. Lee discusses, de Valera proceeded carefully, handling political conflict with delicacy and capturing the support of the Church. The abolition of the oath of allegiance and the suspension of the Public Safety act were accompanied by policies of economic protectionism, triggering a duties war with Britain from 1932 to 1934. These policies were, as Brown points out, part of a "prevailing ethos" cultivating cultural as well as economic "self-sufficient Irish independence" and "national distinctiveness."

Part of O'Faoláin's call for emancipation was from the expectations this programme placed on the Irish writer. His 1934 article critiqued the expectation that Irish writing had a responsibility to discuss national concerns in a sympathetic light. This for O'Faoláin ignored the privilege of the artist to rise above political concerns, and much of the article is concerned with the justification of the aestheticist statement that "It is clearly the wise thing to look after beauty and let truth look after herself." Following his "gusto," the artist may choose whatever subject matter he desires, and "may as well write about Arabia as about the Blasket Islands."

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6 'The Era of Inhibitions: Irish Literature 1920-60' in Irish Writers and Society at Large (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), pp.31-41, p.31, 32.
O’Faoláin’s assumption, however, was that the Irish writer would select Irish subjects. His primary objection was to the belief that these subjects should be portrayed sympathetically rather than truthfully. “[N]obody can ask a writer to interpret Irish life sympathetically if the writer does not want to.” The ‘amorality’ of art demanded no politically useful portrayal of the nation either to itself or to the world. Instead, in an evocative image, O’Faoláin described the detached liberation of the artist:

The pure creative genius at work ignores morals, politics, time, the social order, place, even people. In that surge and flight of spirit the mind of the artist soars out of all the bonds that have commonly held it in – soars blindly from the wrist of the world in utter freedom.

This image of the soaring hawk, the bird alone, defined O’Faoláin’s ideal of the emancipated artist, in a suggestive reference to Stephen Dedalus flying by the nets of nationality, language and religion. O’Faoláin placed the ‘creative genius’ in a tradition of literary emancipation.

However, O’Faoláin described the writer’s role in divided terms. The breaks he perceived were not just between the pre and post revolutionary moment, but within his understanding of the role of the contemporary writer. As well as his qualification that the writer’s amorality should be confined to “half his days,” he argues that “[t]he dual nature of the artist must never be forgotten,” as he struggles to “present a more or less recognizable reflection of reality” while also maintaining that “all reference to society is entirely by the way, incidental, and irrelevant.” This problem, of how to relate to social reality, with its concurrent implication of social responsibility, while also remaining true to the image of the essentially free and detached artist, was central not just to the tensions in this article but throughout O’Faoláin’s creative and critical career.

This debate was played out not only in the context of post-revolutionary disillusionment, but in the negotiation of liberalism in the redefined role of the state after the First World War. The challenge to nineteenth century liberal values posed
by increased state intervention in private life demanded by the world war, and heightened in the 1930s by the rise of totalitarianism and the government interventionism demanded by global recession, was crucial to contemporary debates throughout Europe about the social responsibility of the writer. O’Faoláin was engaged in a version of these debates. Rachel Potter has highlighted the “radical[1] alter[ation of] the relationship between the individual and the state” which provided the backdrop to these debates. In the 1920s with the examples of authoritarian mass politics in Italy and communism in Russia, debates about liberalism and democracy shifted ground. The European example suggested that liberal ideals such as the primacy of individual freedom might be redundant in the context of the new totalitarian democracies of post-war politics. The crisis became far more acutely felt in the 1930s, when the totalitarian states of Europe forced politicians and writers to engage with the prospect of the disintegration of basic liberal beliefs altogether.  

It was as part of this context, and not in isolation from it, that the drive for economic and cultural self-sufficiency in Ireland took place. It was also the context in which O’Faoláin’s responded to the pressures on the Irish writer. 

The consolidation of Fianna Fáil’s 1932 and 1933 electoral victories in the years preceding O’Faoláin’s article had led to public disorder, although on a smaller scale than that predicted by opponents. The Army Comrades Association had in 1933 adopted the blue shirt and the straight arm salute. The Blueshirts were “effectively crushed” by de Valera by 1934, and their fascist postures may have been “ideologically ill-fitting continental garb.” They represented a national manifestation of the extremism developing internationally, however, and against this background of home-grown fascism O’Faoláin’s ambiguous attitude to the ‘mass’ reflected contemporary anxieties about the development of mass movements in politics.  

12 Lee, pp.180-81.
Further, the "commonplace" argument that "in British and American nineteenth century individualist liberalism was supplanted by a new kind of collective liberalism in the early twentieth century" has resonance for O'Faoláin's formulation of the relationship between writer and nation. De Valera's economic programme was accompanied by a range of social policies which increased state intervention in private life. For O'Faoláin, and many other writers, the most significant of these was the operation of the Censorship Act, introduced by Cosgrave in 1929 but fully supported by the new government. O'Faoláin's famous campaigns against censorship did not develop fully until the early 1940s, when wartime measures made state intervention in private life acute. Yet O'Faoláin's defence of literary and intellectual freedom in the 1940s was not libertarian, but developed from his conception of the role of the writer shaped in the preceding decade.

More generally, policies such as the National Health Insurance Act of 1933 and the Housing Act of 1932 represented a basic shift in the relationship between the individual and the state. O'Faoláin's response to the social and cultural programme of de Valera's Ireland should therefore be understood not only in terms of his rebellion against insularity and conservatism in nationalism, but as part of a broader...
attempt by liberal intellectuals to define the role of the writer in an age of mass democracy.\textsuperscript{16}

O’Faoláin’s attempts to reconcile individualism with social responsibility in the 1930s were bound up with his contradictory attitude to mass democracy and culture, provoked by the developing strategies of de Valera and in tune with the contemporary anxieties of writers and intellectuals described by Potter. In ‘The Emancipation of Irish Writers’, they were signalled in another internal division, between ‘the mob’ and ‘the common man.’ In many ways the essay was a plea for the individual freedom of the artist and for the special position of the intellectual elite. The image of the artist as a hawk who must soar in “utter freedom” from the “wrist of the world” was loaded in both national and political terms.

As well as referring to a Joycean plea for artistic autonomy, Valentine Cunningham describes the “characteristic concatenations of ‘30s motifs and emblems – airmen, mountaineers, mountains, eagles, leaders, aerialism, and so on”\textsuperscript{17} as dominant in British writing of the period. Such images were politically loaded as a conception of the elite, isolated and superior artist. O’Faoláin’s alignment with this conception of the relationship between the artist and the general population is further reinforced by his expansion of the current situation by which “the integrity of the Irish artist is impaired.” It is, he suggests,

because we have been too caught up by the emotion of the mob. It is another day of the rabblement. What has the mob to do with us that we should weep for them? Yet into our books they creep, so many types of the life that harasses us, and there we waste our spirit on them as one might belabor a furze bush to expel one’s rage. Our work is with life struggling outward to freedom in the individual soul. Our comradeship is with the man and woman who have not been maddened by opinion that grows like a fungus in the mind.

\textsuperscript{16} The combination of rhetoric of self-sufficiency with the creation of a state-controlled society on the model of Britain was brilliantly skewered a decade later by Brian O’Nolan, in his guise as Myles na gCopaleen. See Steven Curran, “Could Paddy leave off from copying just for five minutes?”: Brian O’Nolan and Eire’s Beveridge Plan’ in \textit{Irish University Review} 31.2 (Autumn/Winter 2001), pp.353-75.

With its imagery of a creeping, undifferentiated organic mass that threatens to overwhelm the individual soul, this passage easily fits into a depiction of the paranoid elitism of modernist “hostility to democracy and liberalism.”

O'Faoláin’s position was not so straightforward, however. His ‘mob’ was preoccupied by political and national concerns at the expense of the purely literary. It was also distinguished from the ‘common man’; he described the political pressure which threatens the artist in terms which potentially contradicted his disdain for the ‘mob’. Popular culture was being distorted, he suggested, by a cultural elite, represented above all by Daniel Corkery, whose critical demands are a “pretense[sic] to the spontaneity of a national sentiment, when one knows that they are in fact merely catchwords repeated from the papers and periodicals, debating societies and political clubs of the bourgeois intelligentsia.”

This rhetoric of class consciousness signifies a desire to separate the baying of the ‘mob’ from the reality of national life, and confining it to an artificial expression of national sentiment. This is evident again at the end of the 1934 article, where O'Faoláin’s advice to the Irish writer is to “bury himself away among the simple common people, in whose hearts the bitterness of politicians and propagandists has not killed the fraternal warmth of life.” O'Faoláin’s disdain for the ‘mob’ is combined with idealism about the humanity and truthfulness of the ‘simple common man.’

O'Faoláin’s thought exhibited a complex and shifting opposition between political democratic republicanism, and aesthetic elitism. This was evident in his attitude to mass culture and popular tastes. On one hand, he demanded recognition of the realities of everyday Irish life. He rejected the idealisation of the peasant and the

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18 Potter, p.1.
19 Distinction between the uncivilised mass and the idealised peasant is identified by both Cunningham and John Carey as a recurring feature in British 1930s writing. The “widespread intellectual cult of the peasant” is identified by Carey as the flipside of the threatening mob in the imaginary construction of mass culture (John Carey, The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939 (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) pp.23-45, p.36). Cunningham describes ruralism as a response to anxieties about mass production and mass culture from both left and right (Cunningham, pp.228-40, pp266-79).
conception of the artist as a natural aristocrat. He also, however, despaired at the failure of “this modern Anglo-Ireland,” “the descendents [...] of the rags and tatters who rose with O’Connell to win under Mick Collins,” to support national art in his terms. He described the fraught attitude of the realist writer to the “Irish public, ungrateful as well as graceless, self-satisfied and aggressive in its priggishness,” as a “repulsion-attraction complex.” ‘Rooted’ in his own people, O’Faoláín argued, the Irish writer also despairs at them. O’Faoláín’s critical and cultural writing in the 1930s was driven by his desire to overcome this opposition by creating a public space for the intellectual realism he considered necessary for national art.

O’Faoláín insisted that literature should be based on realist rationality. It developed, he argued in ‘The Emancipation of Irish Writers’, from the “stone pillar of hard fact.” Despite his rejection of the “gardens of fantasy” of idealistic nationalism, however, his own language was often romantic and emotional. In order to combine the truth of detached intellectual enquiry with the beauty he described as art’s first purpose he romanticised the ‘truth’ of national life. He wanted modern literature to develop along “the pattern of the idealized racial mind,” a phrase which clearly indicates the elements of essentialism about the Irish national character which recurred in his thought. He described the Irish mind as possessing “almost a mystical quality [which] has always given Irish art its natural magic.” The combination of Celtic and Saxon in the modern Irish mind promises “some strange loveliness, some forms of beauty never seen before.” This was not the language of cool intellectual detachment, but reflected O’Faoláín’s own romantic conception of cultural nationalism.

The entangled juxtaposition of impulses that ran through O’Faoláín’s 1934 manifesto suggests the intellectual tensions that run through his work. At her

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20 ‘Commentary on the Foregoing’ in Ireland To-Day 1.5 (October 1936), p.32.
21 ‘Provincialism and Literature’ in Motley 1.3 (August 1932), pp.3-4, p.4.
22 The dichotomy between realism and idealism in O’Faoláín’s attitude to Ireland forms the basis of Marie Arndt’s stimulating analysis of his career. His “view of the Irish,” she says, “reveals signs of idealism, which confused his aspiration to rationality [...] the complexity of his discourse often evolves from this dichotomy” (A Critical Study of Seán O’Faoláín’s Life and Work (New York, Ontario, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), p.33).
father’s centenary celebration, Julia O’Faoláin emphasised his own awareness of these contradictions:

he puzzled endlessly about his own motives and aspirations – and here I contest the notion of him as Janus-Johnny, for his whole body of writing has an essential unity in that it constitutes an exercise in self-scrutiny in the French tradition.²³

This is a useful point as it highlights O’Faoláin’s understanding of the tensions in his own cultural criticism, and the productivity of his own constant re-evaluation of them. It does however suggest self-absorption and isolation in O’Faoláin’s negotiation of contradictory impulses in his aesthetic. This underplays the extent to which these tensions connected to the dominant debates taking place in contemporary cultural discourse, both in Ireland and in international debates about the relationship between writing and the world. In his call for the emancipation of the Irish writer, O’Faoláin criticised the “modern Irish reader, from whose mind things nationalistic and political are inseparable” for “asking what he is not entitled to ask of literature.” What exactly might be asked of a national literature in the modern world was the question which dominated O’Faoláin’s writing.

2.1 Realism and national culture

Maurice Harmon has described W.B. Yeats as O’Faoláin’s model for the nationally engaged writer, and the basis of his ambition to become an “intellectual leader of the following generation.” Harmon emphasises, however, that O’Faoláin defined himself against Yeats’ influence, “assert[ing] his individuality, and the different requirement and claims of his generation, through a conscious rejection of the Yeatsian way of addressing modern Ireland.” Unlike MacGreevy, O’Faoláin was not suspicious of Yeats’ adoption of an active role in the political and cultural development of independent Ireland. He was, however, increasingly sceptical of Yeats’ attitude to the modern nation.

Harmon describes O’Faoláin’s “inclusive and generous sense of society,” a democratic, realist impulse which led to his rejection of aristocratic, romantic nationalism. He quotes O’Faoláin’s description of Yeats, in a 1953 letter to Richard Ellman,

[bringing] his pre-Raphaelitism trailing about his feet ‘like a falling-down nightshirt’ to the end of his days. [...] He could never reconcile the images with the facts of life, or, in other words, ‘the rather precious 1890-ish idealized manière de voir with the common reality that became more and more common as the century wore on.’

Harmon’s portrayal of O’Faoláin accurately represents his sense of objective realism, opposed to the romanticism permissible in Yeats’ older generation. He underestimates, however, the extent to which O’Faoláin was conflicted in his sense of the role of the ‘intellectual leader’, and his own anxiety about the ‘more and more common’ Irish public.

O’Faoláin’s response to Yeats was developed in the context of international debates about the role of the writer in society. The politics of literary form were the subject of debate in Britain, and defined the writing of those writers commonly termed the ‘Auden generation’. Samuel Hynes’ study of this group – including Cecil Day Lewis,  

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25 Ibid., p.256.
Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice and Christopher Isherwood – has been influential in establishing the paradigm of 1930s British poetry, but as Peter MacDonald has argued these writers saw their own significance in analysing “the relations between the writer and society, the individual and history, art and commitment.”\(^{26}\) These relations were the central concern of O’Faoláin’s 1930s writing. The ‘Auden generation’ itself comprised a range of political and aesthetic perspectives, but were largely connected by a focus on the relationship between the individual artist and political commitment. Self-aware negotiation of the status of the individual in an era of mass politics were increasingly “seen to be guarantees of the integrity of the artist when faced by the anti-individualist demands of political dogma.”\(^{27}\) O’Faoláin’s call for the ‘emancipation of the Irish writer’ was a plea for artistic integrity and autonomy, but was combined with a commitment to the effective role of art in national society.

O’Faoláin’s analysis was most apparently connected to the ‘Auden generation’ in Britain through his approach to Yeats, and it is significant that his article for the ‘Irish Number’ of *Horizon* was on ‘Yeats and the Younger Generation’.\(^{28}\) Spender’s *The Destructive Element* (1935) had included discussion of ‘Yeats as a Realist’, and in both *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (1938) and *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (1941), MacNeice defined himself and his contemporaries in relation to Yeats.\(^{29}\) Both tried, in opposition to Yeats, to describe the relationship between poetic autonomy and social reality. O’Faoláin’s polemic attacked what he saw as Yeats’ idiosyncratic attempt to unite individualism and political commitment through a


\(^{27}\) McDonald, p.75.

\(^{28}\) *Horizon* was founded by Cyril Connolly in 1939, with Spender as associate editor and funding from Peter Watson (Michael Sheldon, *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of Horizon* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), pp.2-5, pp.31-32).

cult of personality. He described this idea as “appalling in its self-consciousness, in its power to deceive and mislead him,” and said

His political ideas followed suit. They were incubated in self-defence. All his pretensions to be part of the great Anglo-Irish lineage arose from this [...] His indifference to the common people; his Fascist tendency; his dandyism; his fastidiousness [...] were part of that self-conscious role arising from a constitutional weakness.30

This ‘constitutional weakness’ was in O’Faoláin’s terms an “inability to become part of common life.” Yeats could not be a model for the ‘younger generation’ of poets who wanted to retain individual autonomy with a role in national culture.

O’Faoláin described the ambitions of the ‘younger generation’ in terms which reflected his ambiguous attitude to Irish popular culture. Engagement with ‘common life’ was necessary, he said, but he attributed the difficulty of the Irish writer to the nature of independent society. The Censorship represented the lack of support for his version of national literature, although like MacGreevy, O’Faoláin described censorship as the result of puritan tastes which dominated mass culture:

behind the censorship lay the general asceticism, or Puritanism, or Jansenism of a quite uncultivated popular feeling [...] So, on the one hand the younger writers had their deep-rooted love of their own people, and on the other their deep-rooted longing for intellectual detachment, independence of thought, converse with the world, varieties of opinion, the whole search for what men call Truth. Their problem was to find some synthesis between the gifts of their race, and their own personal integrity, and that had to be, has to be, arrived at objectively; conceived almost in social terms, since they are chiefly novelists, dramatists, fashioning a criticism of life out of their own observation of man in relation to society.31

Again, O’Faoláin outlined a divide in the writer’s responsibilities, committed both to emancipated autonomy and to social engagement. His analysis of Irish culture was based on a formulation of political aesthetics dominating British literary debates.32

31 Ibid., p.50.
32 Frank O’Connor’s contribution to the same issue of Horizon made the connect explicit. In terms similar to Spender’s 1935 conclusion to The Destructive Element, he outlined the choices available to the Irish writer. Spender had identified “escape” from society, acceptance of the fragmentation of civilisation and immersion in “the destructive element,” or commitment to social revolution as the alternative aspects of the “political-moral” tendency in contemporary writing (Spender, pp.278-79). O’Connor suggested a simpler choice, between the “ivory tower” of absorption in the “private world,” and the “public platform [...] the way Spender, Day Lewis and Auden took in England.” He
In 1942, O’Faoláin attempted to describe an aesthetic which could contain both individual and social responsibilities. His commitment to national art was evident in his romantic sense of the writer’s “love” for his people, a version of the national genius. He was hostile, however, to public attitudes to literature and culture, which he described as the result of an “uncultivated” popular taste. The writer’s role was to ‘cultivate’ the public through intellectual leadership, and O’Faoláin insisted that social realism was the only form that could achieve this cultivation. Through the preceding decade, O’Faoláin had been attempting to establish a role in national culture.

Arguing that O’Faoláin’s critical sense was restricted, Cleary points out the absence of reference to “wider contemporary international debates about realism or modernism” in his writing.33 O’Faoláin rarely developed comparison of the Irish situation with Britain or the Continent, although his criticism focused on related tensions between the individual writer and society. O’Faoláin’s attention was directed to the analysis of these tensions in a national context. His critical work was frequently addressed to what he saw as the distortion of national culture in Daniel Corkery’s cultural programme.34 Corkery represented for O’Faoláin a form of cultural nationalism which shaped his perception of the role of the artist in the nation, but against which he increasingly needed to define himself. The main point of contention in the 1934 article was the crucial independence of the artist from political and social responsibilities, which he demanded as essential to the artist’s role in cultural leadership. He portrayed Corkery as the representation of these ‘forces’, from which the Irish writer needed to be emancipated.

said that Ireland had seen no “corresponding movement,” and although he mentioned the Bell as a possible manifestation he complained about its refusal “to recognize the war – it is an old dispute between myself and the editor” (‘The Future of Irish Literature’ in Horizon 5.25 (January 1942), pp.55-63, p.62).

33 Cleary, p.148.

34 Corkery was a significant influence, with Frank O’Connor, on O’Faoláin’s republicanism, including involvement with the Gaelic League and the IRA. Corkery encouraged O’Faoláin’s interest in the language movement, and in Russian literature as a model for Irish realism. O’Faoláin was increasingly alienated from the insistence on rejecting English literature and culture, however. His opposition to Corkery evolved from shared cultural ideas and attitudes (see Harmon, Sean O’Faolain: A Life (London: Constable, 1994), and Arndt (2001)).
In 'The Emancipation of Irish Writers', O’Faoláin accused Corkery of failing to recognise the crucial break of 1916. In his conclusion that “the three forces working on the Irish consciousness, Land, Religion, and Nationalism, have been inadequately treated in Irish literature,” O’Faoláin saw Corkery applying the standards of the period before independence to the literature of post independence. He was guilty, in O’Faoláin’s terms, of neglecting the primacy of the aesthetic: “he has not gone to literature to see what it does speak of. He goes rather to politics and sociology to see what it might speak of.”35 O’Faoláin here argued that land, nation and religion were like any other material to the writer (unless, he dismisses, they are “like Mr H.G. Wells, interested less in human beings than in social processes”) – they are “merely a cause which might produce certain effects, a certain atmosphere, certain situations.” Here O’Faoláin aligned himself with an aestheticist doctrine of art as detached, apolitical, and observing contemporary society only in so far as it might provide material for artistic exploration.

However, he was clearly not comfortable in this position, and implicit throughout this piece was the belief that land, nation and religion were prioritised in the artistic consciousness. While the piece was internationalist in its constant reference to artistic models throughout European writing, it never questioned nationality as defining the writer. Defending the new generation of Irish prose writers, in which he included himself, against Corkery’s charge that they neglect national themes, O’Faoláin did not appeal to the supreme detachment of the artist. He defended the truthful representation of Irish realities – realism had “touched the national consciousness on the raw.”

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35 O’Faoláin’s opposition to Corkery can at this point be differentiated from Thomas MacGreevy’s. Both O’Faoláin and MacGreevy disputed Corkery’s insistence on the national audience as the definition of national art. MacGreevy, as James Matthew Wilson has argued, had “evident sympathy with all three” of Corkery’s promotion of “ruralism and Catholicism, stitched to the flag of nationalism, as the defining trinity of Irish identity” (‘Thomas MacGreevy reads T.S. Eliot and Jack B. Yeats’ in Yeats Eliot Review 23 (Fall 2006), pp.14-26, p.15). MacGreevy considered Catholicism as primary over all other ideological commitments, however, and so figured the European Catholic tradition as central to Irish national culture. O’Faoláin too shared the idea of the land and the Catholic church as central to Irish national identity, but in his aestheticist mode he objected to the subordination of art to national or religious ideology.
Despite O’Faoláin’s aestheticist rhetoric, his stated commitment to beauty over truth, he valued writing as expressing a decidedly national truth. He described the experience of seeing Lennox Robinson’s *The Patriot* as “a complete revelation,” not for purely aesthetic reasons but because it was “relevant in every way to contemporary life” – because of its recognisable subject matter it elevated for him the everyday experience of his own life.  

This experience retained its significance throughout his life and was clearly central to his theorising of the role of literature. He described it again in his autobiography, *Vive Moi!*, first published thirty years later. There he recalled his “astonishment never before or since equalled” at seeing the details of his own life used as material for art. Despite his attack on the insistence that art should deal with society, O’Faoláin valued writing for its basis in social reality, and its potential impact on that reality.

These tensions encapsulated the productive divisions of O’Faoláin’s career. They were the basis of his fraught relationship with Corkery’s conservative cultural nationalism. This relationship was one O’Faoláin attempted to formulate throughout his most significant critical writing in the 1930s, which often addressed, directly and indirectly, Corkery’s cultural project. His hostility to cultural nationalism of the Corkery type has also been definitive in O’Faoláin’s critical reception, but the

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36 ‘The Emancipation of Irish Writers’, p.494. O’Faoláin recalled seeing the 1912 play during “one of those priceless visits the Abbey Theatre used to pay to Cork.”


38 Ibid., p.87.

39 Through the 1930s O’Faoláin used history and biography to formulate his version of Irish culture. His 1933 biography of de Valera was idealistic and complimentary, while his reworking of the text in 1939 was much more critical, representing his increasing disillusionment with the development of de Valera’s Ireland along the lines advocated by Corkery. In 1934, he published a biography of Constance Markievicz, which emphasised the idealism of republicanism in an “objectification of the Irish political romanticism which swept him up in his youth” (Richard Bonaccorso, *Sean O’Faoláin’s Irish Vision* (Albany, N.Y.: State of New York University Press, 1987), p.23). Both biographies expressed his increasingly analytical approach to political ideology, and his 1938 biography of Daniel O’Connell began the expansion of this process to historiography.
nuances of his argument are far from straightforward. His opposition to the type of cultural nationalism he sees in Corkery does not mean he was not a cultural nationalist. The interest of O'Faoláin's position, which he was constantly and self consciously examining and moderating as these series of article show, lies in his attempt to unite the social responsibility of literature with the individualist autonomy of the artist. The British and European debates with which O'Faoláin's project connected dominantly emerged from the left. However, while in political terms O'Faoláin repeatedly advocated democratic over aristocratic attitudes to society, he was hostile to socialism. His conception of the necessity for a 'cultivated' public reflected hostility to mass culture, which he described as the domination of bourgeois philistinism over his idealised conception of the common man. O'Faoláin's arguments about 1930s Ireland, as well as being consciously and deliberately national, thus connect with the negotiation between aesthetic freedom and political responsibility pressing throughout Europe.

Two years after his call for the 'emancipation of Irish writers', O'Faoláin published a direct critique of Corkery's vision of modern Irish culture. He directly targeted Corkery as typifying a dominant strain of cultural nationalism, complicit with the state. Corkery was "representative of a tendency not uncommon in Ireland – among the general public – an indication of a great deal in modern Irish life and criticism," and notes that he "influence[s] our political evangels considerably." What he detested in this tendency, however, was not its nationalism, but its misguided and counterproductive presentation of the nation's past and its future. Rather than being patriotic, O'Faoláin maintained, the refusal to face the realities of nation life was a form of shame.

O'Faoláin presented his argument as a consideration of Corkery's whole career, both literary and critical, and portrayed it as representative of a general movement of national feeling between 1917 and the 1930s. He was ostensibly complimentary

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40 Most obviously from the establishment of socialist realism as the official doctrine of the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, but also in the more ambiguous social attitudes of writers like MacNeice (Cunningham, pp.4-5, p.299).
about Corkery’s early plays and prose fiction, although his praise is constantly undercut by reservations that come to appear more damning than open dislike. Corkery’s early plays he describes as typical of the Anglo-Irish Revival, being romantic, slightly mannered and literary. He was more positive about the 1917 novel The Threshold of Quiet, “delicate, brooding, sensitive, tragic […] It is, without question, a lovely novel, and for many even a perfect novel.”

Despite his praise, O’Faoláin emphasised the weakness of Corkery’s writing in loaded terms. The Threshold of Quiet was “feminine” in its sweetness, “almost too-sweet” – O’Faoláin associated its concentration on the local with a kind of insipid delicacy, a ‘feminine’ note which could not survive the “acknowledgement of the validity of other worlds.” Corkery’s “tall, big, broad, glum” heroes were “a feminine ideal of masculinity.” Listing several examples of these heroes, O’Faoláin made them appear as a fetishised parade of homoerotic masculinity, their “giganticism” an attempted rebellion against feminine lyricism which only results in distorted inversion: “Seeking after strength is a confession of weakness when the search produces a conventional idealisation that only impresses one with a sense of somebody blowing up a balloon.”

‘Conventional idealisation’ was a key part of O’Faoláin’s portrayal of Corkery’s work, both literary and critical. He associated it, rather than with native nationalism, with exactly the Anglo-American literary influence Corkery would reject – in O’Faoláin’s description, Corkery’s heroes were “the type of the strong, silent Englishman,” and the rules which his idealisation followed were those of the “conventional Brutalist literature of the present day in America and England.” O’Faoláin described Corkery’s writing as failing as national literature not because it was too parochial, but because it adopted conventional stereotypes from English writing to present a distorted and self-deceiving version of the realities of Irish life. So, while he acknowledged The Threshold of Quiet as a significant early example of the modern Irish novel, it could not inspire the national feeling that young men of O’Faoláin’s generation desired:

What we wanted was a novel like this, come out of truly popular life, that would do for popular life what the Eliots and Hardys had already done for
When I say we, I suppose I mean youngsters like O'Connor and O'Flaherty and myself, who hoped one day to be novelists. Unhappily the very perfection, and the controlled 'middle-aged' quality of Corkery's novel, and above all, its limited scope, prevented its possible effect. Young men are rebellious – and it was the time of rebellions – and they are ambitious. In a phrase of O'Flaherty's, in a letter to me, we wanted to "bite off mountains with our teeth." There was not enough fire in this book to light any torch. We were far more excited, though horrified, by Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: we felt much nearer to The Brothers Karamazov, to Torrents of Spring even, to The Death of Ivan Ilyitch, than to The Threshold of Quiet.

Corkery's "lyric, romantic, idea of revolution and revolutionaries" was opposed by O'Faoláin to 'truly popular life'.

The ambiguous terms, 'lyric', 'romantic' and 'feminine', which dominated O'Faoláin's discussion of Corkery's fiction became explicitly politicised in his portrayal of Corkery's cultural histories. He discussed both The Hidden Ireland and Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature as manifestations of the distorted version of nationalism which was anathema to the realities of the modern nation. Rather than expressing these realities, after Corkery wrote

with a preconceived approach that tended to falsify all he wrote [...] he began to idealise what he had observed from a distance, and worst of all, to idealise it according to a certain set of a priori ideas about life and literature which were wandering around Ireland at the time [emphasis added]

O'Faoláin summarised Corkery's argument to emphasise the falsification and idealisation he sees it as defining. It is "elusive [...] vague and sometimes quite meaningless [...] suggestive but unprecise[sic]," and O'Faoláin carefully selects passages which build to a portrayal of Corkery as dangerous as well as deluded.

In 'Daniel Corkery', O'Faoláin rehearsed arguments which reappeared in King of the Beggars (1938). The 'proem' of his biography of O'Connell explicitly challenged Corkery's portrayal of eighteenth century culture in The Hidden Ireland. The terms of O'Faoláin's narrative of that culture were shared with his critique of Corkery's writing; O'Faoláin's history was also a commentary on contemporary cultural

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42 'DC', p.52.
43 'DC', p.53.
nationalism. In both, O'Faoláin positioned himself as a democrat. He opposed insistence on engagement with the objective realities of popular life with the 'aristocratic' contempt for the 'common man' revealed by Corkery's veneration of bardic culture in the eighteenth century and his fantasy of national culture in the twentieth. The terms of O'Faoláin's presentation of the relationship between the artist and the people, however, revealed his complex and divided attitude to the writer's role.

O'Faoláin vividly evoked the state of Ireland after 1691:

Limb by limb she began to rot [...] like a body dragging itself about with one half already dead. [Ireland after Limerick] reminds one of an operating theatre where the body lies swathed in red-stained bandages, and the surgeon almost lies down on the victim to hear the heart say 'I will,' or 'I surrender.'

The imagery of death and decay was combined with a damning depiction of cultural response to the near-terminal crisis of Irish national life. In a deliberate contradiction of the narrative of Irish culture in the eighteenth century, O'Faoláin largely condemned the poets of this period as out of touch, with a contempt for the common people of Ireland and a willingness to pander to any potential patron, regardless of political allegiance. The earliest poet he discussed, David O'Bruadair, earned some praise, as a figure representing the muddled but still unified society of the seventeenth century, which “did manage, however ambiguously, and in whatever makeshift way, to keep the old order alive.”

Rather than seeing O'Bruadair and his heirs in the bardic tradition of continuing to keep this old order alive through the suffering of the following century, as Corkery argued in *The Hidden Ireland*, O'Faoláin described them as deluded remnants attempting to cling to and recreate a lost past. In an ostentatiously erudite analysis of a range of poems by O'Bruadair and the later Egan O'Rahilly and Pierce MacGhearailt, O'Faoláin emphasised their snobbish disgust for the common people,

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fantasies of wealth in denial of their surrounding poverty. The terms in his attack on MacGhearailt are typical:

Had these snobs even clung absolutely to their delusion of grandeur their intransigence, but [that same MacGhearailt] writes a pandering poem to one Squire Freeman, which ends with the flattery of a pimp and the folly of a slave.\textsuperscript{45}

Delusion, snobbery and flattery are portrayed as the dominant characteristics of the Gaelic poets of the eighteenth century, those recently held up as proof of the survival of ancient Irish civilisation.

O'Faoláin made clear that the provision of aesthetic pleasure was not sufficient poetic response to a time of crisis. In his attack on bardic culture, O'Faoláin was making a case for the political responsibility of the poet to the people. While he was in no doubt that the Gaelic poets failed in this responsibility, he seemed in some discomfort about the justice of his demands. He repeatedly stated that he was limiting himself to the political context of this poetry and not its literary merit, implying that there was another set of criteria by which they may be judged. This allowed him to avoid dealing here with the problem of aesthetic versus national commitment – instead he made gesture of deferral to Corkery in the question of literary merit, a get out clause which allowed him to avoid contradicting his belief, so vigorously expressed in 'The Emancipation of Irish Writers,' that the aesthetic is above the political.

O'Faoláin emphatically condemned the culture Corkery had sought to glorify – "the Gaelic order was undemocratic, unrealistic, and nostalgic" – and then ostensibly recommended Corkery's interpretation as a 'literary' judgement:

To annotate this particular kind of trepanning, however (which concerns itself only with the political aspect of things), the reader, should, in justice, not fail to go to that other book I have already mentioned, \textit{The Hidden Ireland}. It sins from over-softness, and from romanticism, as this survey sins, perhaps, from harshness, or impatience, due to a deliberate insistence on political realism.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{King of the Beggars}, p.34.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{King of the Beggars}, p.36.
In a masterful example of double handedness, O’Faoláin aligned Corkery’s criticism with exactly the qualities he had eviscerated in its subject. The contrast, between the soft romanticism of Corkery and his poets, and the hard realism of O’Faoláin and his heroic subject O’Connell, indicated the method by which O’Faoláin reconciled the tensions in his aesthetic and political stance: the claim published four years earlier that the artist must be ‘amoral half his days’ with the condemnation of the Gaelic poets for failing in their moral responsibility to their people.

As seen in the earlier article, and in most of his writing, O’Faoláin defined characteristics of hardness, honesty and purity with the “intellectual realism” which has the highest literary value. Here he further defined ‘intellectual realism’ as democratic, as opposed to the aristocratic romanticism of the poetry. By speaking truthfully, he inferred, the realist writer would naturally speak to the people, and so would enable the people to awaken to social realities and then to political action. This was the highest role of art for O’Faoláin, in terms of both literary and political value. The alternative had only what he described in extremely disapproving terms as the value of distraction – Corkery’s book, he said, paid tribute to the “real and (from the O’Connell point of view) only value of these old traditions – their literary power to distract the hovels from their misery, and to keep, at whatever cost of illusion, their native pride alive.”

Even at this point, O’Faoláin felt the need to qualify his argument – it was from the ‘O’Connell point of view’ and this is not wholly his own. The energy and conviction with which O’Faoláin indicted the eighteenth century poets, however, showed his desire to believe in the value of literature in its capacity to motivate social and political change. This required a direct and honest relationship with a “popular audience” – their rejection of this relationship was why he called the Gaelic poets “semi-popular.” He damned poets such as O’Rahilly for their rejection of the ‘peasant’, and describes two possible explanations:

It means either that these semi-popular poets had nothing to say to the people that was related to their real political and social condition; or else it
means that the people were themselves living in a conventional attitude of
mind, asked for and desired no realistic songs, had no wish for a faithful
image of their appalling conditions — were, in one word, sleep-walking.47

O’Faoláin then drew back from this to assert that it was probable the people never
“heard these conventional poets reciting their conventional poems,” but the
suspicion that the people may themselves bear responsibility for the poets’ failure
to speak to them remained an undercurrent throughout the piece. O’Faoláin
worked hard to blame the poets for their abdication of political responsibility, but
this blame was only potent because of the underlying belief that the artist has a
natural role to lead, or drive, people incapable of seeing reality for themselves. He
was full of fury at the contempt and disgust for the common people that he saw in
their contemporary poetry, but there was at least an element of disdain in
O’Faoláin’s own portrayal of the common man willingly swallowing illusion and
deception.

O’Faoláin’s ambiguous attitude to popular culture, and his need to differentiate
between the common man and the mass, was apparent in his interpretation of
O’Connell’s own attitudes — among the epigraphs with which O’Faoláin opened the
text is a quote from a letter of O’Connell’s, bemoaning the “species of animals with
which I had to carry on my warfare with the common enemy. It is crawling slaves
like them that prevent our being a nation.” O’Faoláin depicted O’Connell’s heroism
in his recognition of the grim realities of his time, in the character of his people as
well as in their oppression, and his determination to transform them despite
themselves. Quoting O’Rahilly’s flattery of the English aristocracy, O’Faoláin
combined his own exasperation with O’Connell’s:

We throw up our hands. It is only too plain that if this man were indeed a
poet of the people, then the people were well called by their saviour
O’Connell — “crawling slaves.” [...] That is something so necessary to know (if
we are to understand O’Connell’s politics) that it is as well to enlarge it by
saying that in emancipating his people O’Connell had to emancipate them
as much from their own outdated loyalties as from the unwilling loyalties
forced on them by their English masters. Had he not done so he would
never have released their natural energies. Hypnotized by the Past, yet
never fed by it, hypnotized first and then abandoned, they would have been

47 King of the Beggars, p.24.
such easy prey for the colonists that there is no saying how far – however slowly and unconsciously – they would have gone towards absolute acquiescence in their own extermination as a distinct people. Having no political sense, no absolute sense of themselves as a nation, they might have become, but for him, like the Welsh and Scots, picturesque appendages of England. O'Connell abandoned the picturesquerie, the outer trappings of Gaeldom. He held and developed the distinctive mind.48

The passage was typical in its distinction between the romanticised surface and the somehow innate nobility of the ‘distinctive mind’. Strong leadership, O'Faoláin implied, was necessary to remind the people of themselves. The national genius becomes not just representative of the reality of national life, but its creator.

Commitment to the potential for popular cultural revival, combined with exasperation at popular resistance to being reawakened, can be seen throughout O'Faoláin’s attitude to modern Ireland. This historical narrative directly addressed the contemporary situation. After his attempt at cultural leadership with the Bell, and his disillusionment of the 1950s and beyond, O'Faoláin may be seen to despair at the possibility of this kind of agency in the modern nation. In 1938, however, he was still committed to the possibility of a transformation of the culture of modern Ireland along the lines of the political awakening brought about by O'Connell. His diagnosis of the poetry of the eighteenth century had clearly signposted relevance for the literature of the 1930s. O'Faoláin saw the denial of reality in the Gaelic poets persisting in the present. He noted, for example, that the MacGhearailt poem mentioned above was still taught in Irish schools, “so persistent is its somnambulism.” Later, he footnoted a “specime[n] of the nostalgia-fantasy complex” in a bathetic description of a chieftain’s feast held in a marquee inside the ruins of its host’s castle, in a book published in 1911.

O'Faoláin was not arguing that the Gaelic bards of the eighteenth century still existed, but he was laying out a contemporary cultural battleground based on the same lines as the division between O'Connell’s realism and bardic fantasy in the past. As noted above, he condemned Corkery for the same failings as the ‘Gaelic

48 King of the Beggars, pp.22-29.
order' – "undemocratic, unrealistic, and nostalgic" – against which he placed his own hard unsentimental realism. He drew in Frank O'Connor on his own side, attributing to his essay on *Democracy and the Gaelic Tradition* elaboration of the distinction between 'picturesque trappings' and 'distinctive mind':

> It was Frank O'Connor who first pointed out that the trappings belong to an effete, aristocratic order, and that the distinctive mind was the mind of a popular democracy that began to raise its head in Ireland, for the first time, in the eighteenth century. In his essay [...] [O'Connor writes] 'into it goes the whole thwarted genius of the Irish people, the genius which has as yet grown to nothing like its full height [...] O'Bruadhir is enveloped in deception, while the soldier goes straight for actuality, the thing poor Irishmen and Irish women, slinking away to the English towns, had for generations been seeking.'

Using O'Connor, O'Faoláin layed out the divisions of contemporary culture – democracy, actuality and realism against aristocracy, deception and romanticism. In his justification for using poetry as a basis for political history, O'Faoláin explained that the literature of the eighteenth century was by its nature public, "if not popular":

> It was written by men who regarded themselves as part of a traditional institution, and they wrote not for private joy so much as public entertainment and instruction. They felt themselves as men who expressed the national and political mind. They have no modern equivalents.

O'Faoláin knew that the literature of the modern world was very different – his sensitivity about the private nature of modern art was reflected in his uncomfortable distinction between political and literary values. He felt too, however, that there was a role in the modern world for public expression of the national mind, with the simultaneous and perhaps contradictory aim of transforming that mind. His work with *Ireland To-Day* was a preamble to his major attempt to formulate such a public space in the *Bell*, and as such, he could not tolerate working for a platform that represented the 'nostalgia fantasy' perspective against which he defined himself.

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49 *King of the Beggars*, pp.29-30.
50 *King of the Beggars*, p.21.
2.2 Ireland To-Day: The role of the public intellectual

Frank Shovlin’s definitive account of literary periodicals in Ireland focuses on the two main publications of the 1930s, which shaped both O’Faoláin’s involvement in the Irish public sphere and formed the major predecessors to The Bell – the Dublin Magazine and Ireland To-Day. Of these, Ireland To-Day is the more significant, both because of the extent of O’Faoláin’s involvement and because of the similarities between the project of this periodical and O’Faoláin’s own later effort to create a literary journal which could shape the Irish public sphere. While Shovlin underestimates both the political awareness of the Dublin Magazine and its interest in the theory and practice of modernism in the 1930s, his judgement of Seumas O’Sullivan’s publication as apolitical and self-consciously addressed to an intellectual elite, its “identification with a refined Georgian metropolitanism”\(^{51}\) is probably close to O’Faoláin’s own.\(^{52}\) While O’Faoláin published in the journal – notably as part of the ‘controversy’ over Corkery’s Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature in 1936 – his involvement was limited and he largely remained largely uninterested in the potential harmonies between O’Sullivan’s cultural project and his own.

The case of Ireland To-Day is very different. While often mentioned as a cultural anomaly in the typical picture of Ireland in the 1930s, little attention has been paid to the magazine’s complex ambitions, to the extent of O’Faoláin’s involvement, and to the goals and tensions in his own thought revealed by this involvement and its termination. Terence Brown’s treatment is typical:

For a brief period in 1936-38 the periodical Ireland Today gave a platform to [...] intellectuals and critics whose concerns were European as well as Irish. The journal was one of the very few places in Ireland where support for the republican cause in Spain had any overt expression. Indeed, it was popular opposition to its stand on this issue that led to its demise in 1938. The journal, as well as reporting on political developments in European countries in vigorously antifascist terms, attended to developments in European cinema, sought to publish intellectual Catholic commentary on

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\(^{52}\) O’Faoláin described it “exploiting the old Anglo Irish reputation. They must be made to realise that we [Ireland To-Day] are the high-water mark of the new Ireland, and we must, in brief, cut out all competitors at their own game.” NLI MS 21987/1, SOF to JOD, 3 August 1936.
social and cultural policies in the Free State and in Europe, and sought out new writing.⁵³

This is true in various ways – in relation to Owen Sheehy Skeffington’s ‘Foreign Commentaries’, for example, but also oversimplifies the publication. As Shovlin makes clear, it is a common misconception that Church or popular pressure forced the journal’s closure – in fact, it was the financial problems common to many magazines of this type all over Europe,⁵⁴ as well as possibly editorial exhaustion.

More fundamentally, such a description underplays the different strands which combined in Ireland To-Day. Far from being resolutely antifascist, for example, its pages were full of debates about the merits of the socioeconomic systems of Italy and Germany, and their possible manifestations in Ireland. Its European outlook was combined with an “at times almost comic concern with self-sufficiency”⁵⁵ in tune with de Valera’s contemporary emphasis on economic nationalism. And while it included some ‘new writing’, the tensions involved with the combination of literature and politics simultaneously drove and hindered the journal’s cultural project. O’Faoláin’s attitude to these combinations and contradictions showed his determination in the 1930s to adopt the role of a public intellectual, and the challenges he faced in formulating this role.

Ireland To-Day was founded, edited and managed by Jim O’Donovan, a former high ranking IRA volunteer and an employee of the Electricity Supply Board. Partly because of this state employment, but also apparently because of his image of the journal as a forum rather than an individual crusade, O'Donovan did not publicise his role. He is not named as editor in the publication, and generally used pseudonyms for his contributions – these included LJ and Laurence J Ross and Thomas Fitzgerald.⁵⁶ This resulted in general uncertainty about who was behind Ireland To-

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⁵⁴ Shovlin, p.91.
⁵⁵ Shovlin, p.87.
⁵⁶ Shovlin, p.68ff.
Day at the time, and the confusion persisted until Shovlin’s authoritative account of O’Donovan’s role.

O’Faoláin’s later prominence has led to his frequent association with the editorship of *Ireland To-Day*, but his actual relationship with O’Donovan’s project was both close and fraught. He was Books Editor from the beginning of the magazine in June 1936, from an apparently only ‘slight’ acquaintance with O’Donovan, but from the start complained about the uncertain direction and purpose of the journal, and after various complaints resigned in October of the same year (while offering to continue providing reviews). Shovlin describes the cause of his resignation as being disagreement over “ideological and aesthetic thrust.” This phrase summarises a complex conflict between political and cultural aims. Analysis of O’Faoláin’s several lengthy and agitated letters to O’Donovan, in the light of the content of *Ireland To-Day* and the various other responses O’Donovan received, is revealing about both the nature of the journal’s project in the contemporary climate, and O’Faoláin’s specific ambitions and objections, which develop the same tensions seen in his creative work.

*Ireland To-Day* began with the kind of grand statement reminiscent of O’Faoláin, in the first of O’Donovan’s unsigned editorials:

Greatly daring, we rise from the smouldering ashes to which so many of our predecessors have fallen – so facile the descent and so swift often the transition from creation to cremation. But hope, like labour, conquers all things. Our national and cultural objectives as they unfold will be our vindication [...].

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57 In his disillusionment with the journal, O’Faoláin wrote to O’Donovan that he was “sick of telling people that I DO NOT edit the paper.” O’Donovan kept a cutting from the *Irishman’s Diary* in the *Irish Times* of 23 May 1939, which notes that Edward Sheehy is best known as “editor of the regrettably deceased *Ireland To-Day*” — a phrase he had underlined with an exclamation in the margin (NLI MS 21987/1). The editors of Beckett’s letters attribute the editorship to Frank O’Connor (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940* eds Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.344).

58 NLI MS 21987/1, SOF to JOD, 3 August 1936.

59 Shovlin, p.72.

Together with the cover image of a phoenix rising from the flames, such rhetoric seems to clearly signal the publication as the revival of left wing republicanism, which had fallen into disarray following the failure of the short lived Republican Congress of 1934. These bold statements did not continue, however. Concerned with retaining anonymity and detachment, the editorial after the first few issues becomes much more a review of current political issues and issues discussed in the journal – while retaining a political focus it does not obviously flag its political perspective.

The result of this editorial reticence was that the first pages of the journal were dominated by the ‘Foreign Commentaries’, which appeared as de facto editorials. These most accurately demonstrate the socialist internationalism described by Brown, particularly in those written by Owen Sheehy Skeffington up to March 1937, but also in those of his successors Michael O’Neill-King and John Lucy. They were dominated by a close interest in the domestic political experiments taking place over contemporary Europe, strongly support the Blum government in France and the republican cause in Spain and exercise a vigorous anti-fascism and anti-imperialism. In the absence of general knowledge of the political affiliations of the editor, the ‘Foreign Commentaries’ more than anything else have led to the characterisation of Ireland To-Day as a journal of the radical left.

Such a description is not accurate for the rest of the publication. It was rather remarkable for the variety of political perspectives represented within. O’Donovan saw his periodical not as a journal for the left, but as a forum for the interchange of social and economic ideas from throughout the ideological spectrum. The September 1936 issue was a special symposium on Spain, and O’Donovan’s editorial emphasised that as such it contains a range of viewpoints – he even lamented that the majority of articles support the republican government, while noting that this bias was countered by the support for the Nationalists in some of the daily newspapers. Thus Sheehy Skeffington described fascism as “simply the resort to

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61 Shovlin, p.68.
force by the capitalist powers in any country where the workers are beginning to
demand a change from the capitalist regime,"62 while later in the issue B.B. Waters
promoted a self-consciously Catholic response to current economic disorder, the
establishment of conservative and nationalist national credit system in line with the
ideas in the papal encyclical Quaægesimo Anno.63

Such attempted breadth inevitably caused problems, as contradictory articles
appeared next to each other. As O’Donovan’s introduction to the Spain symposium
suggests, the prominence of Sheehy Skeffington’s radical socialist republicanism
created an image which made recruitment of contributors from the right sometimes
problematic. This difficulty is encapsulated in an exchange of correspondence
contained in O’Donovan’s archive.64 O’Donovan’s papers in the National Library of
Ireland include much correspondence relating to Ireland To-Day. His discussions
with O’Faoláin and others about his ambitions for the journal support the revision of
critical assumptions about both O’Faoláin’s involvement, and the place of Ireland
To-Day in 1930s culture.

In December 1936 O’Donovan went to a great deal of effort to persuade a right
wing commentator and broadcaster Donal O’Sullivan to contribute a regular
discussion of foreign affairs, to be placed alongside Sheehy Skeffington’s in what he
originally described as an attempt to ‘correct the bias.’ O’Sullivan refused, because
of the gulf between Sheehy Skeffington’s views and his own. O’Donovan wrote again
in an attempt to change his mind, and O’Sullivan again refused. The arguments put
forward by both men casts light on O’Donovan’s ambitions and the problems he
faced. O’Donovan hoped Ireland To-Day could bridge the divides in Irish cultural
discourse, and provide a forum for the productive exchange of ideas from left and
right. His contributors, however, desired a coherent ideological position in the
journal. O’Donovan debated the tension between polemicism and range in his
exchange with O’Sullivan.

62 ‘A Foreign Commentary’ in Ireland To-Day 1.4 (September 1936), pp.4-8, p.5.
64 NLI MS 21987/1, 4 December to 8 December 1936.
O'Sullivan's initial refusal took issue with O'Donovan's suggestion that he could 'correct the bias' of the magazine – he had no strong bias, he claimed, being an admirer of free democracy and disliking dictatorships of both right and left. Sheehy Skeffington's position, he implied, was extremist and could only be countered by an opposed extremist. He did not however dispute the validity of publishing Sheehy Skeffington, although he cancelled his own subscription after the first issue because of his dislike of it – in "any European country where the freedom of the Press is still a reality" readers may choose what to read, but "A man whose views are Right or Moderate does not buy a journal d’opinion which is of the Left, and vice versa." This again indicates the influence of Sheehy Skeffington in the perception of Ireland To-Day, particularly in the absence of a strong editorial position, as well as summarising the problems O'Donovan faced in attempting to establish a journal which could include and attract both left and right.

In this connection, O'Sullivan went on to question O'Donovan's desire to 'correct the bias' at all. Two commentaries from such different perspectives presented next to each other, he argued, would contradict and undermine each other, and such a policy would be unfair to both, and neither "usual" nor "desirable." He suggested that O'Donovan be happy with having a strong ideological position – "A monthly like yours ought to have a definite viewpoint in Foreign Affairs, and those who agree with that viewpoint will buy it."

O'Donovan's response shows that such an argument cut to the heart of his hopes for Ireland To-Day. Firstly he argued that O'Sullivan should not let Sheehy Skeffington influence his view of the whole publication (as the critical history of Ireland To-Day has shown, O'Sullivan was not the only one to do this). He described why he wants O'Sullivan's commentary so badly, in a convoluted argument which shows both his passion in representing a breadth of perspective, and the difficulties

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65 He promised to respect O'Donovan's confidence that contributors currently cannot be paid, and assures him that this is not the reason for his refusal. This might however explain some of O'Donovan's difficulty in attracting the range of content he desired, as well as showing the tenuous financial position of the publication from the start.
he has defining it. He regretted the phrase ‘correct the bias’ and instead asked for
two “independent commentaries.” He then attempted to explain why O’Sullivan’s
moderate conservatism would be appropriate. While Sheehy Skeffington’s bias he
admitted “for the sake of argument to be obvious,” he proposed another which may
not be the right wing equivalent, but could be
so neutral as to appear without bias, but as things are, his bias could be
analysed as a rigorous holding to the middle way, attained by a conscious
effort corrective of any perceived bias towards Right or Left as occasion
arose, because of his over-riding decision that under no circumstances must
he show partisanship towards either Right or Left, both of which are
distasteful to him.
O’Donovan was trying to replace the ‘obvious’ bias of Sheehy Skeffington in its
prominent position with a ‘consciously’ neutral discussion of foreign affairs, which
could then be followed by a perspective from the left. The knots he tied himself into
in attempting to explain how he imagined this, however, show the problem he faced
throughout his editorship – is neutrality a bias that can be strongly held, or
something that can be obtained through hosting a range of viewpoints?

O’Donovan’s persuasion of O’Sullivan shows the difficulties he faced in thinking
through the practice of his ideological aims. He was more eloquent, however, when
describing these aims themselves. He attempted to counter O’Sullivan’s argument
that with a free press there is room for journals of both the left and the right by
appealing to recognition of the specifically Irish situation:

What you say as to a Right never supporting a Left journal is generally true,
but in this country there is no such richness of choice and I plead that as the
one, the only cultural monthly in the whole of Ireland, it merits the support
of Left, Right and Centre.

He imagined Ireland To-Day operating in an environment which is both distinctively
Irish and related to the wider world, and described its aims in political terms in
language reminiscent of O’Faoláin’s demands of art. The presentation of conflicting
views on European politics, “both essentially Irish viewpoints though differing,”
might enable the intelligent reader get at the “objective truth. And this lies at the
other end of all our pursuits and aims.”
The debate between O'Donovan and O'Sullivan shows the extent to which *Ireland To-Day* was developed in the frame of international politics. Its ideological thrust, the pursuit of 'objective truth', was formed in response to European as well as Irish issues. O'Donovan's attempt to present a range of viewpoints struggled against the divides in political discourse internationally; the divided public sphere he perceived in Ireland was not a unique situation.

O'Faoláin's engagement with the *Ireland To-Day* project was part of his attempt to shape a modern response to the pressures on the writer nationally and internationally. His concerns about the misrepresentation of Irish life, and the distortion of social reality in nationalist ideology, were developed in relation to his sense of Ireland's place in Europe. Like other contributors to the journal, he saw the dilemma of the relationship between the writer and society as part of an international cultural crisis.

It is necessary not to allow shared terminology to elide political conflicts. 'Materialism' for Sheehy Skeffington, for example, meant capitalism, while for right wing Catholic thinkers like Michael Tierney communism was the embodiment of modern spiritual bankruptcy.\(^66\) Despite these opposed understanding of political ideologies, however, the majority of articles in *Ireland To-Day* phrased the problems of modern culture in related terms: modern Europe was suffering from a breakdown of the relationship between the individual and the state as a result of unjust economic systems which emphasise the material. This crisis should be countered by a new form of national and economic organisation which would fulfil the individual and strengthen the nation through a spiritual and idealistic basis.

For example in January 1938, John Lucy's 'Foreign Commentary' described 'materialism' as the driving force behind the breakdown in international relations,

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\(^66\) The Spanish Civil War made the divisions between these positions acute, and finally unsustainable. Sheehy Skeffington's resignation in 1937, for example, was apparently triggered by the controversy caused by his invitation to a Basque Catholic priest, who came to Ireland to present the Basque Catholics' suffering under Franco (see Shovlin, pp.85-86).
and praised Ireland and Portugal as the only nations with more virtuous and valuable systems:

Fascism, Communism, Imperialism thinly disguised as democracy, and every other ‘ism’ that divides and weakens nations and denies a decent living to one group so that any other group may benefit unduly, can all be classified as rank materialism [...] there are only two nations in Europe to-day holding to the true ethic, two small countries – Ireland and Portugal. Neither of us wishes to interfere with any other people. We see man greater than any lesser material attribute of wealth or power, and we retain old values that remain the very essence of Civilisation [...] [Portugal’s] lesson to Ireland is the example of internal unity, and one central loyalty, as the first simple essentials to progress. In many ways she is akin to us, holding tightly to normality on the fringe of a chaotic Europe.67

Lucy combined a conservative dislike of extremism with a perception of a radical role for the spiritually rich Catholic nations of Ireland and Portugal. The idea that this higher moral virtue can be converted into political and economic benefit was repeated by several other contributors in this issue alone. Louie Bennett praised Hitler’s Germany as an example of motivation and unity of the population inspired by non-commercial incentives, but saw fascism as unsustainable because it retained material profit as the highest motive – this could in Ireland be replaced by religion. 68 T. Kennedy addressed similar issues in relation to Ireland’s economic system, proposing that the unjust banking system be replaced by a form of communal ownership that would adopt the egalitarianism of communism within a faith-based united society.69

With their characterisation of Ireland as a spiritual nation capable of influencing a troubled Europe, the promotion of a radical transformation of the economic system

69 T. Kennedy, ‘A Just Money System’, ibid., pp.27-34. An extreme version of the convergence between nationalism and fascism, conceived from a republican rather than a Catholic perspective, was Maud Gonne MacBride’s ‘Letter of the Month’ in Ireland To-Day’s final issue. Gonne MacBride claimed that the current state of Europe was due to an alliance of English imperialism and Jewish conspiracy controlling the world through the banking system. She suggested that in order to resist this domination, Ireland should “have the courage to look at the good points where the two contrary systems [fascism and communism] agree” – she lists a planned economy, state control of the money system, restrictions on emigration and protection of the family. Gonne MacBride’s attempt to ally this fascistic programme with the original aims of Irish republicanism, extreme though it was, suggested the extent to which European crises could be coopted to a version of a republican agenda (Maud Gonne MacBride, ‘Letter of the Month: Fascism, Communism and Ireland’ in Ireland To-Day 3.3 (March 1938), pp.241-44).
on communal or corporatist lines, their praise of Salazar’s Portugal combined with a
desire for authoritarianism tempered by faith, these pieces were typical products of
Catholic thought in this period. They can easily be imagined appearing the right wing
Catholic publications such as the *Irish Monthly* or *Studies. Ireland To-Day* was not
distinguished, then, as a lonely antifascist voice in an insular right wing culture. It
was more open to left wing perspectives than these publications were, but the
unifying factor in these analyses is a desire to replace materialism with spirituality.

The sense of crisis and breakdown throughout Europe at this time tended to be
understood by Catholic thinkers in Ireland as the result of a division between
spirituality and materialism rather than between right and left. Often, the shared
features of communist and fascist regimes seen in Europe – authoritarian government, state intervention in the economy, the promotion of a unifying
national destiny – were described as potentially beneficial for Ireland if driven by a
version of Catholic or republican thought.

O’Faoláin’s sense of the connections between extremism in Europe and Ireland’s
cultural dilemma was different. He compared the ideological distortions of
dominant versions of cultural nationalism to mass political movements
internationally. Both, he suggested, relied on the bigotry and homogeneity of the
mass. He described Corkery’s conception of Irish culture as relying on the same
irrational mob mentality. In the *Dublin Magazine* article, he referred to Corkery’s
complaint in *The Hidden Ireland* that the Anglo-Irish writers of the Revival could not
represent the Irish crowd. O’Faoláin described Corkery’s statement that “[t]he
writers in a normal country are at one with what they write of” as exhibiting the
intolerance of political extremism:

> To those who have accepted Anglo-Irish literature as literature, this will sound painful. To those who approach it as the expression of a high-hearted Nationalism, it will be (and was) a trumpet call. With a little alteration it would equally well trumpet encouragement to all Nazis, Fascists, Communists, and every other type of exclusivist for whom the test of literature is a political, racial or religious test. All a Nazi need do, to make that passage personally gratifying, is to put for “Yeats, AE, Stephens,
etc.” – Ludwig, Feuchtwanger, Toller, etc., with 100 per cent Teuton in his mind and a meeting at the Munich Spielplatz instead of Thurles.70

Like many of the contributors to Ireland To-Day and to the Catholic press, O’Faoláin characterised extreme political regimes from the right and left together as the rule of the mass. He rejected such ideological constructions as creating a homogenous and intolerant culture. His frustration, however, as was evident in his involvement with Ireland To-Day, resulted from the failure of his democratic conception of Irish society and culture to challenge the distorted cultural nationalism exemplified, for him, by Corkery.

O’Faoláin’s anger at O’Donovan’s policy was directed not at the political, but at the cultural content of the journal.71 This complaint was evident from the beginning of their correspondence, and became more strident as it progressed. His first letter recorded his feeling of being, “in a sense, out of it. I am still quite vague as to who runs the magazine, what it wants to do, how far it is Left propaganda, how far it is an open forum, what its picture of the ideal Ireland is, etc., etc.” He soon emphasised his view of the first few issues as “evasive, general, abstract and untropical,” and that the lack of clear editorial direction and clarity is something he could not tolerate:

So, there is no policy, no standpoint, no firmness. I do not advocate a cut and dried attitude. I do believe in trashing things out, but not like a debating society – rather like a Shadow Cabinet of a Forward Party formulating its position. Everyone knew, for example, where AE stood in the Statesman, and he gathered about him men who would roughly apply his position – with liberality of disagreement on detail – to current events which

70 ‘Daniel Corkery’, p.54.
71 Of course, as a writer and as Books Editor, this was O’Faoláin’s main area of concern. But it is noticeable in his comments to O’Donovan how little he discussed the political content that dominated journal. Far from supporting a left wing programme, he was ambiguous about Sheehy Skeffington’s socialist bias. What he did praise him for was his obvious stance, “good and forceful as always, agree or disagree” (NLI MS 21987, SOF to JOD, 2 October 1936). Consistent in his opposition to socialism, it is notable that he complimented Sheehy Skeffington for his rhetorical clarity, not his ideological position. He in fact expressed his initial wary expectation of O’Donovan’s strong socialism – he “fear[ed] that you might have too decided views. It rather appears that you haven’t (Thank God)” (NLI MS 21987, SOF to JOD, 6 August 1936). Next to this O’Faoláin inserted in pen “or haven’t (More’s the pity).” The insertion shows his wariness of the left wing perspective seen in Sheehy Skeffington and expected in O’Donovan, but his simultaneous conviction that the editorial position required ideological force.
72 NLI MS 21987, SOF to JOD, 3 August 1936.
challenged examination. I say IRELAND TO-DAY is funk that challenge and expressing mild, yearning murmurs. If that goes on – I drop out. 73

The comparison with a ‘Shadow Cabinet or Forward Party’ demonstrated O’Faoláin’s understanding of culture in political terms, and vice versa. Despite his comments on socialist bias and left propaganda, his analysis of Ireland To-Day’s failings was in terms of its attitude to the history and development of Irish culture.

He made, for example, a similar complaint to O’Sullivan’s – that it was unfair and ridiculous to place contradictory viewpoints next to each other. Rather than being in relation to foreign or domestic affairs, however, his complaint was about the valuation of national culture – “Gerald Murphy talks of the culture of the Blaskets and I say, in another review, that there is no culture in the Blaskets,” Malone apologises for Somerville and Ross, while “[I am] all out for them.” 74 The selection of these areas of dispute – the culture of the West and the importance of Anglo-Irish literature – summarised two of the most important problems in O’Faoláin’s analysis of Irish literary culture at this time, and highlight the precise areas on which he was so angry that O’Donovan will not stake out a clear position.

O’Faoláin’s detailed discussion of his objections represented his understanding of the divisions and conflicts in contemporary Ireland. At first he phrased his opposition to many of the contributors in terms of preferring a new generation to an older: “Devane, etc., and other estimable, and even to us well-worth-while people, ought to be considered on the lines of ‘Can we make a name for these men?’” 75 O’Faoláin was hugely enthusiastic about the idea of Ireland To-Day as a product of a new and transforming nation, both chronicling and driving the changes

73 NLI MS 21987, SOF to JOD, 6 August 1936.
74 Ibid. O’Faoláin was referring to Dr. James Devane, brother of the Catholic social thinker Rev. R.S. Devane. Described in the ‘Notes on Our Contributors’ in the first Ireland To-Day, which contains his article on ‘Four Irish Myths’ of cultural heritage, Dr. James Devane was a “dermatologist, who, since his return from India, has invaded Irish letters and has vied with his Jesuit brother in enriching the controversial pages of Irish journalism.” He wrote several pieces for Ireland To-Day and other publications, including the Irish Rosary, to which he contributed a regular ‘Philosophy of Irish Society’ from July 1938.
75 NLI MS 21987, SOF to JOD, 3 August 1936.
he hoped for in modern Irish culture – in the margin of this first letter he has scribbled the note “Motto – Not Ireland To-Day but Ireland To-Morrow.”

While an enthusiasm for a project of this kind remained through O’Faoláin’s letters, his faith that Ireland To-Day could drive the Ireland of tomorrow quickly turned to disillusionment. O’Faoláin envisaged the Ireland of tomorrow in terms of a specific cultural programme. With the argument of the Proem to King of the Beggars in mind, the debate between O’Faoláin and Corkery and his supporters – notably James Devane – that played out in various publications in 1936 can be more clearly understood. It was this debate, much more than any concerns about the presentation of economic or international affairs, that defined O’Faoláin’s relationship with Ireland To-Day, and his published rejoinder to Devane and the more spontaneous response seen in his correspondence with O’Donovan are revealing about O’Faoláin’s formulation of his role as a public intellectual in modern Ireland. By charting O’Faoláin’s various provocative and defensive statements through this debate, it is possible to see his development from ambiguous defence of artistic detachment to the decidedly public figure – aspiring to ‘express the national and political mind’ – of The Bell.

The 1936 ‘controversy’ (although O’Faoláin denied it the name) was a manifestation of the divisions in contemporary cultural thought. It ostensibly represented a polarisation of views into conservative proponents of isolation, and the liberal, internationally minded minority who were increasingly excluded from the cultural policies of de Valera’s Ireland. Closer examination of the published debate and O’Faoláin’s private response to it in his letters to O’Donovan, however, reveal that this was not quite so straightforward. Firstly, O’Faoláin’s background was close to Corkery’s, and while he certainly came to define himself in opposition to his former teacher their assumptions and beliefs remained very similar. The ‘controversy’ was less a debate between polar opposites than an expression of the

76 SOF to JOD, 2 October 1936.
tensions that developed in one school of thought. Its bitterness was that of an internecine dispute rather than an ideological war.

Secondly, as a result of this open debate, O'Faoláin was characterised as 'cosmopolitan', rejecting the importance of national art. In his response he sometimes found himself pushed into defending a position that was not fully his own. Despite his defence of realism, however grim, in the presentation of Ireland, and his opposition to censorship as operated by the Censorship Board at the time, O'Faoláin was not a libertarian defender of freedom of speech. The argument between O'Faoláin and Corkery and Devane was based for O'Faoláin on his formulation of the conflict between 'actuality' and 'deception', and for his opponents on the role of the outside world in the development of modern Irish culture. The partial mismatch between these foundations for debate was what allowed the possibility of misinterpretation, both in each 'sides' understanding of the other's position and in later narratives of O'Faoláin's relationship with the Catholic nationalism which dominated official cultural attitudes.

The series of articles was triggered by two of O'Faoláin's provocative essays, which began to appear with increased frequency in the mid 1930s as he became more preoccupied with the national status of writing after his return from London in 1933.77 Devane's article, 'Is an Irish Culture Possible?', described Ireland at a crossroads between two alternative routes for the development of national culture – Corkery's and O'Faoláin's.78 The opposition suggested that the article was a response to O'Faoláin's 'Daniel Corkery', in the Dublin Magazine, as Shovlin says.79 However, Devane specified another of O'Faoláin's essays as his point of departure: 'The Modern Novel: A Catholic Point of View', which had appeared in the Virginia Quarterly in 1935.80 This article examined the alleged failure of the Catholic novel to

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77 Vive Moil, p.274.
78 James Devane, 'Is an Irish Culture Possible?' in Ireland To-Day 1.5 (October 1936), pp.21-31.
79 Shovlin, p.77.
80 Devane began by saying he had "recently heard Mr. O Faoláin read a paper on the "Difficulties of the Irish Novelist," or "Difficulties of the Irish Catholic Novelist." I forget which was the title of the lecture."O'Faoláin's correspondence with O'Donovan confirms the Virginia Quarterly article as a version of this lecture, delivered at the Abbey. O'Faoláin claimed that Devane could not have read
establish credibility in the modern world or to progress beyond nineteenth century naturalism, and Devane largely agreed with O'Faoláin on this point. He described the alternatives available to develop Irish literature in terms which revealed his sense of Irish culture occupying a special position in an international frame of reference. Reminiscent of MacGreevy's 'Cultural Dilemma', Devane posited the "great classic tradition and the common European life" as the alternative to "a mechanised, material British civilisation." His argument reflected anxiety about the homogenising effect of mass culture, "the flat-faced modern society in where everyone wears the same dress, thinks the same thoughts."82

Devane saw both O'Faoláin and Corkery as recognising this dilemma. His presentation of their alternative solutions, however, opposed traditional nationalism to deracinated internationalism. Despite his praise of the 'European tradition,' he saw O'Faoláin's reference to modern European art as a rejection of traditional norms both national and international:

When Mr Corkery says that Ireland to-day should go back to the eighteenth century, back to the submerged Irish, who in that century lived a pariah life in a ghetto, sundered from English culture and tradition, sundered from the main stream of European culture and tradition; when he says that Ireland to-day should sever itself from Europe and spin out of its own entrails and the indigenous memories of Gaelic civilisation a literature and an art of her own, he is wrong. But he is much less wrong than Mr O Faoláin, who says we are beginning Irish life afresh in this twentieth century. We are on an island which rose from the seas overnight, and we must guide our new course by a compass marked with all kind of strange names: Gide, Lawrence, Zola, and a hundred others. Some culture conceivably could arise from a pure national and insular tradition; no culture will arise from a cosmopolitanism that lowers in the scale of values the local, the national.

the published article at the time of writing his response, although, he said, it had been reprinted in the Criterion and the French MOIS [NLI MS 21987, SOF to JOD, 24 July [1936]]. Devane may have revised his article in response to O'Faoláin's direct discussion of Corkery in the April-June Dublin Magazine. While it did not appear until October, O'Donovan had given O'Faoláin a copy of the article, apparently at this point called 'Whither?', several months earlier. August's Ireland To-Day also trailed Devane "on the Gaelic Culture Controversy" as appearing in a coming issue.

81 "There is no Irish novel, or to be precise the Irish novel is in the embryonic state. There is no Irish novel because there is no Irish society, there is no Irish nation" (Devane, pp.21-22).
82 Ibid., p.23, p.25.
Devane portrayed O’Faoláin as a detached, Europeanised aesthete. O’Faoláin was clearly aware of the tensions between his aestheticism and his nationalism, and these tensions supplied the dynamism of his criticism. He tended, however, to try to defend both positions simultaneously, in varying proportions from piece to piece, rather than directly address their potential incompatibility. ‘The Modern Novel: A Catholic Point of View’ had at least partly been written for an international audience, although its delivery at the Abbey showed O’Faoláin’s deliberate intervention in Irish culture. The article’s international direction and literary, rather than culture focus, allowed Devane to selectively sample and misrepresent O’Faoláin’s cultural programme.

Devane’s representation of O’Faoláin conceals the significant overlapping of their positions. While they are obviously deeply divided on the heritage on which Irish culture should draw, many of Devane’s statements on the state of modern Ireland are reminiscent of O’Faoláin’s own. Significantly, one of the things on which they seemed to agree was the assumption that culture is the product of a ‘leisured class,’ drawing from but hierarchically above the mass of society.

In his defence of ‘the people’ against the Gaelic aristocracy, O’Faoláin appeared as a committed democrat. However, as was evident in his dislike for the ‘mob’, apparently distinct from the ‘people’, he was temperamentally sympathetic to the idea of culture governed by an elite intelligentsia. This sympathy was often expressed in his defence of individualism. The distinction between a ‘rich’ society of individuals and the homogenous mob of modern democracy, a trope shared by high modernism and Catholic social discourse, was exactly what Devane used when he condemned O’Faoláin’s programme as leading to “a flat level of one-coloured cosmopolitanism” and “a mechanised, material British civilisation.” Why British

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83 Devane argued that an “Irish society capable of forming its own canons of judgement, capable of forming its own cultural press, and its own reading public” needed to be created in order to support the Irish novel. He judged that this was best achieved by “a great central university founded on the classical tradition; a sympathetic enlightened government; a new intelligentsia and leisured class in harmony with Ireland and Irish sentiment” (Devane, p.31). O’Faoláin had described Ireland To-Day’s role as “finding the future intelligentsia of the new Ireland” (SOF to JOD, 3 August 1936, NLI MS 21987/11).
civilisation was the threat posed by O'Faoláin's interest in "Zola, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Balzac, Defoe, Maupassant" was not made clear. However, the phrase demonstrated Devane's view of all modern international influences as connected with mass culture and imperialism. O'Faoláin never shared this kind of universal hostility, but hatred of mechanical, material 'flatness' was often, and increasingly, seen in his own criticism. Devane's terms were similar to O'Faoláin's contempt for the "conventional Brutalist literature of the present day in America and England."  

However, given Devane's presentation of a radical polarisation of views, it is understandable that O'Faoláin did not respond with an elaboration of their common ground. His reply to O'Donovan on first reading the article was furious:

> It is abominable. It is really porridge. It makes one feel – Whither? – indeed, but in relation to the magazine. Have we got a policy or not? A blow on one side of the swing one month and another on the other another month – what is this but exactly that rippling of the still pond you spoke of in your first editorial?  

O'Faoláin's point, in these cultural divisions, was close to Donal O'Sullivan's in terms of perspectives on foreign affairs – why is O'Donovan committed to presenting both sides of the case instead of choosing a direction and following it? O'Faoláin went on to claim, however, that it was the quality of Devane's article and not its content that he so objected to:

> It isn't that I disagree with the article's views – that is of no importance – it's the standard of the article, its mental mush, and the fact that the same magazine cannot print O'Connor and me and this low-water mark of... The point is, my dear O'D, if Corkery, who would agree largely with Devane, saw that article he would moan out, "Oh God, save us from our friends!"  

Given that the article was in the main an attempt to demolish O'Faoláin's own position, his claim that he does not care about its content is unconvincing. Rather than being an attempt to mislead on this point, however, O'Faoláin's remark was more a sign of his belief that Devane's argument was based on such a deluded conception of Ireland's past and future that it was inevitably expressed as vague and sloppy 'mental mush.'

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84 'Daniel Corkery', p.57.
85 SOF to JOD, 24 July [1936] (NLI MS 21987).
86 Ibid.
The central opposition in contemporary culture was for O’Faoláin between realism and deception. The importance of accurate representation was the main argument in O’Faoláin’s printed response to Devane’s article (a right of reply he demanded if O’Donovan chose to go ahead with printing it). He described Devane, like Corkery and Michael Tierney, as ignoring the “actuality of the Ireland in which we live – fearing to see what is before their eyes to see, wishful to cover is over and gild it over.”87 Against these he listed the “novelists and dramatists and poets” who see, and express, the “essential truth” of the nation. O’Faoláin refuted Devane’s accusation that he and other modern writers ignore the nation in favour of Europe by turning around the charge of anti-nationalism. The cultural policies implemented by insular nationalism – “The Gaelic Revival, the new Puritanism, the yarn of the ‘Hidden’ Ireland, the Censorship, the howls about a ‘National’ literature, the mental tariff on Joyce and Yeats, the attempt to prevent the Abbey from playing Synge in America” – were driven by shame at the reality of the nation:

They live in a fog of fear – utterly confused by their efforts to find a ‘noble’ ancestry. They are simply ashamed of the cabins and the lanes, out of which we have all come.

O’Faoláin’s response was not a defence of the amorality of art, or the international cosmopolitanism of modernity. He defended himself, and other artists accused of such, as nationalists. His fury at Devane’s argument was not because it proposed a ‘socialisation of art’, but because for him it refused to recognise the realities of the society their art draws on:

They hate the truth because they have no enough personal courage to be what we all are – the descendants, English-speaking, in European dress, affected by European thought, part of the European economy, of the rags and tatters who rose with O’Connell to win under Mick Collins – in a word, this modern Anglo-Ireland.

O’Faoláin defined Ireland as part of Europe and part of modernity. Art based on a fantasy of national life failed as national art, the purpose of which was “to create something real on the basis of reality.”

87 O’Faoláin, ‘Commentary on the Forgoing’ in Ireland To-Day 1.5 (October 1936), p.32.
It was the dispute between reality and deception, as O’Faoláin perceived it, on which he demanded Ireland To-Day take a stand. That O’Donovan would not do so to his satisfaction drove O’Faoláin to resign. His resignation was drawn out and reluctant. After several complaints that he would leave if there were no changes, and several impassioned pleas that O’Donovan listen to him, O’Faoláin finally resigned after the publication of the Devane article in October. Even in his letter of resignation, he offered to remain if O’Donovan delegated responsibility to an editorial board, which he hoped would firm up the policy of the journal. The names O’Faoláin suggested came from a variety of perspectives, including Austin Clarke, Sheehy Skeffington and Michael Tierney. O’Faoláin had named Tierney as one of the allies of Devane and Corkery but whose articles he had praised as learned and decisive.  

O’Faoláin explained the selection as offering “a true cross-section of Ireland as it is to-day,” a phrase which could be from an editorial of Ireland To-Day or the Bell. He argued that this range of views had to be ‘true’, honest and without the “confusion of ideas” he saw emerging from perceptions of the nation distorted by cultural ideology. O’Donovan’s insistence on balance meant Ireland To-Day could not take the form O’Faoláin desired. Already he was thinking of setting up his own magazine, and suggested to O’Donovan that he would do so after the end of 1936. In his final letter to O’Donovan before a card commiserating him on the end of the publication in 1938, O’Faoláin described his goal:

88 O’Faoláin associated Tierney with the misguided cultural nationalism which venerated ideals of the past rather than realities of the present. However, O’Faoláin’s sympathy with Tierney’s combination of social conservatism and individualist liberalism was evident following the Senate censorship debates in late 1942. Tierney was one of the supporters of Sir John Keane’s critical motion against the Censorship Board. O’Faoláin’s discussion in the Bell noted the debate, taking place at the same time, on the School Attendance Bill, which Tierney also opposed. He approvingly quoted Tierney’s speech, which saw the Bill as an erosion of civil liberties and a dangerous step towards totalitarianism. O’Faoláin described the threat as ‘State-ism’, “a typical totalitarian lust for absolute State control over the individual” (‘The Senate and Censorship’ in the Bell 5.4 (January 1943), pp.247-52, p.251).
89 SOF to JOD, 2 October 1936.
90 SOF to JOD, 25 October 1936.
It needs people – there being so few – who will awaken the others who are in a kind of sleep – it needs a kind of Cuchulainn to hold the fort while Ulster sleeps.91

This awakening was what he attempted with the *Bell*. His failure, in his own terms, to drive a transformation of Irish culture resulted in disillusionment, which coloured both his and later critics’ perceptions of his career, and in a breakdown of the already tense relationship in his writing between art and society.

The tensions revealed in O’Faoláin’s attempt to take a role as a public intellectual were evident in his creative writing and his literary criticism, and connect his perspective on Irish culture to more general concerns about the role of the intellectual. His involvement with *Ireland To-Day* demonstrated his difficulty in finding a public platform for the sustained and coherent presentation of his version of national culture. He attempted to establish such a platform himself in the 1940s with the *Bell*. The *Bell* was itself figured as an Irish version of British journals which combined documentary and literary impulses – *Horizon* in particular was both a model and a rival.92 O’Faoláin’s editorship of the *Bell* coincided with the end of his

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91 Ibid.
92 In addition to Shovlin’s authoritative discussion, the *Bell* is described by Terence Brown as a “vital organ of empirical, humanistic self-consciousness” in its commitment to ‘opening the windows’ of Irish society (Brown (2004), pp.187-93, p.193). While the xenophobic and insular elements of Irish cultural nationalism and the specific context of Ireland’s neutrality placed the *Bell* in a unique position, critics have also recognised the affinities between O’Faoláin’s project in the *Bell* and contemporary publications in Britain. Clair Wills describes the journal’s context in the Emergency, when its partial purpose as a “remedy of isolation [...] at the very moment when Irish culture was felt to be at its most insular” was most acute. Wills points out O’Faoláin’s relationship in the 1930s with London periodicals, and names John Lehmann’s *New Writing* and Cyril Connolly’s *Horizon* as particular models (*That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland during the Second World War* (London: Faber, 2007), pp.290-95, p.291). Heather Bryant Jordan has also emphasised *Horizon* as the *BeWs* “most obvious rival [...] This other journal born of wartime fears about the starvation of culture became a continuing and oftentimes vexing benchmark for O’Faoláin.” Bryant also discusses the combination, and possible conflict, between realism and idealism in the *Bell*’s project. There was an “implicit and enduring tension” between the *Bell*’s commitment to creative writing, and its documentary impulse to focus on the realities of contemporary life (“’A Particular Flair, A Hound’s Nose, A Keen Scent’: Sean O’Faoláin’s editorship of *The Bell* in Éire-Ireland” 29.4 (Winter 1994), pp.149-60, p.156, pp.152-53). As Shovlin describes, Vivian Mercier and Conor Cruise O’Brien critiqued this tension in the *Bell* itself. Mercier also emphasised the extent of O’Faoláin’s editorial control, and his involvement with every article. The comment echoed O’Faoláin’s view that O’Donovan should not try to run *Ireland To-Day* singlehandedly (SOF to JOD, 3 August 1936, NLI MS 21987/11). Mercier’s comments suggested not just the exhausting nature of this involvement, but the extent of O’Faoláin’s ideological control over the magazine – the opposite of O’Faoláin’s view of *Ireland To-Day* (Shovlin, p.110; Mercier’s article was the next in the ‘Fourth Estate’ series after
career of a novelist (with the exception of the much later fable *And Again*? (1979)).

His later verdict was that Irish society was incapable of providing material for the novel. In the 1930s, however, O'Faoláin engaged in a sustained and self-conscious attempt to formulate the Irish realist novel, and to write fiction which could fulfil his cultural ambitions.

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Conor Cruise O’Brien’s discussion of the Catholic press (‘The Fourth Estate: VI – Verdict on *The Bell*’ in the *Bell* 10.2 (May 1945)). O’Brien’s ‘A Rider to the Verdict’ followed, parodying the type of articles which the *Bell* typically featured).
2.3 The realist novel

While O’Faoláin is often evoked as a key figure in the narrative of twentieth century Irish literary culture, his creative writing, in particular his novels, have received surprisingly little attention. His short stories are more frequently discussed, along with those of Frank O’Connor, as a form peculiarly suitable for a depressed and repressive nation, “where intimacies, moments of personal fulfilment, seem wrested from an unyielding oppression [...] register[ing] a social reality that flew in the face of nationalistic self-congratulation.”93

In retrospect, O’Faoláin and O’Connor both considered Irish culture as unable to sustain the novel, and as more suitable for the short story. O’Connor’s famous definition of the form as fitting for ‘submerged population groups’ combined O’Faoláin’s focus on the individual with a comment on the fragmented nature of Irish society in which the ‘hidden Ireland’ was not only the Irish speaking culture but the urban modern subject.94 Terence Brown has summarised O’Connor’s ‘submerged populations’ as “petit-bourgeois individuals [...] submerged in a sea of modernity, express private feeling in short pieces that achieve poignant even lyrical moments of self-definition for their protagonists.”95 Brown compares O’Connor’s understanding of the form with O’Faoláin’s suggestion that Irish life was too simple to form a basis for extended fiction, possessing a “quite unperplexed and uninquisitive communal mind.”96

O’Faoláin’s verdict has influenced the understanding of Irish literary culture in the 1930s as well as on his own reputation. He is generally understood as failing as a novelist because of the repressive, narrow nature of contemporary Irish society. Joe Cleary summarises his reputation

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as a cultural critic rather than as a literary writer [...] By his own account and that of a wider critical consensus, O’Faolain is now chiefly remembered as a frustrated novelist whose best work was (like that of so many of the counter-Revival realists of this period) accomplished in the short-story form.97

As Cleary implies, O’Faoláin the ‘frustrated novelist’ is emblematic of more widespread frustration. Terry Eagleton’s verdict on the Anglo-Irish novel resembles O’Faoláin’s own. “Realism aspires to a unity of subject and object, of the psychological and the social,” Eagleton has argued, but, these in Ireland tend to split into separate genres, with the naturalism of a Carleton or Lever aligned against the exotic fantasies of so-called Protestant Gothic. If the novel form belongs with bourgeois individualism, then it is hardly surprising that it flourishes less robustly in pre-industrial Catholic Ireland than in liberal Protestant Britain; and if, as Henry James believed, it is nurtured by a richly intricate texture of social manners, its lower profile in one of Europe’s poorest nations is only to be expected. Sean O’Faolain was much taken by James’s claim that the novel requires a ‘complex social machinery’, and oppressed by his own sense of Ireland as a “thin” society, stuff for the anthropologist rather than the man of letters’, turned from realist fiction to the short story.98

Both Cleary and Eagleton largely follow O’Faoláin’s version of Irish culture. As well as being developed retrospectively, however, O’Faoláin’s judgement itself bears examination. He too described Irish culture as divided, and attributed to its division the impossibility of the Irish novel:

[A]s for an Irish novel? If we are using the word generically – the French novel, the Russian novel, the English Novel – it was inconceivable in a population cloven in two as irreconcilably as the white landowners and black slaves of the American south before 1865. Even today – I am writing these pages in 1984 – there is no such genre as the Irish novel.99

O’Faoláin’s relationship with Corkery and his experience with Ireland To-Day reflected a division between Catholic nationalism and enlightened republicanism. O’Faoláin defined his opposition to Corkery on cultural equivalents of political

99 Vive Moil, p.300.
division, in which Corkery’s romantic, aristocratic ‘Hidden Ireland’ was opposed to O’Faoláin’s realistic, democratic ‘modern Anglo-Ireland’.

In his retrospective analysis, O’Faoláin described the two halves into which Ireland was ‘cloven’ in terms which conflated the political, the cultural and the social. He explained *Come Back to Erin* (1940) as

>a novel about such clashing differences in Irish life as nationalism and self-interest, loyalty to the hearth and the lure of liberty abroad, the snobbery of the cautious middle classes and the conviviality of the garrulous pubs, and above all, the conflict that absorbed countless young Irish people during the 1930s, struggling, despite their inherited peasant Puritanism, to celebrate in love’s total joy.*

His description of the ‘conflict’ of the 1930s evoked a continued civil war. Here nationalism was clearly identified with ‘snobbish’ middle class Puritanism, the ‘bourgeois’ fantasy of Corkery. Its opposite was more complex, however, as O’Faoláin combined popular life, the ‘garrulous pubs,’ with individualism and a desire for liberty. Democratic, republican realism was elided with individualistic freedom. Implicit in O’Faoláin’s much later recollection of the period was the tense combination of aesthetic emancipation and national responsibility with which, in the 1930s, he opposed dominant cultural nationalism.

In the 1930s, O’Faoláin was negotiating his own version of the relationship between the individual and the community. Later, he saw himself as having failed. He attributed his failure to the divided state of Irish cultural life; he also, however, acknowledged the division within his own thought. In the 1949 article referred to by Brown, ‘The Dilemma of Irish Letters’, O’Faoláin attacked the aspects of Irish life which, he argued, made the novel impossible. He also sketched the conflict within his own attitude in a rare acknowledgement of the conflict between politics and aesthetics which shaped his career.

‘The Dilemma of Irish Letters’, as Brown and Eagleton describe, used Henry James’ essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne to explain the “moribund” state of Irish writing; Irish

100 Ibid., p.298.
society lacked the complex cultural and intellectual network necessary for the novel. The ‘thinness’ O’Faoláin described was not a lack of economic or even social diversity; it was a collapse of the public role of the intellectual. His point of comparison was 1915. Then, “the poets had helped to inspire the Rising,” and the direct role of literature on society was to continue for the next decade.  

O’Faoláin’s “obvious illustration” of the weakening of this role was the Censorship Act, which for him exemplified the ‘division’ of the writer from the public. The example reveals O’Faoláin’s fundamental objection to literary censorship. As his Bell editorials made clear, he did not object on principle to the intervention in individual liberty, but to censorship’s contamination of the relationship between the writer and the nation.

The centrality of this relationship, the “feeling that any writer anywhere, including Ireland, might have towards his environment,” was evident in O’Faoláin’s use of James. He quoted at length from James’ diagnosis of the lack of “a complex social machinery” in 1850s America, and emphasised that James “summed up those circumstances in New England under the word provincialism.” The postcolonial context for O’Faoláin’s argument was implicit, but did not develop the

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102 It was not until the Bell in the 1940s that O’Faoláin became preoccupied with censorship as an emblem of Ireland’s cultural separation from Europe. Even then, he did not oppose all literary censorship on principle, but rather disputed the terms of the censorship’s operation. Adams describes his “liberal-orthodox” as a considered approach necessary to be taken seriously (Adams, p.82). It was apparent in O’Faoláin’s writing on the issue in the Bell that he objected to the artificiality of the standards of ‘normality’ imposed by the Censorship Board. “In theory the thing is sound. (We are all in favour of the Censorship in theory and in principle). It is Nationalist by definition. It was imposed on us ‘democratically’. In practice it has become a silly, shameful joke” (‘Editorial: Attitudes’ in the Bell 2.6 (September 1941), pp.5-12, p.11). O’Faoláin often pointed out that the Irish censorship was not unique (see for example ‘Editorial: 1916 – 1941: Tradition and Creation’ in the Bell 2.1 (April 1941) pp.5-11, where O’Faoláin listed examples of censorship in England and France). He saw it, however, as too influenced by the attitudes of the “cheap, urbanised middle-class.” In an echo of MacGreevy’s condemnation of censorship as a manifestation of Anglicised Puritanism, he described this class ‘invaded’ by the “refainement’ which flourishes in the purlieus of Putney [...] even our Gaels are all going villa-ish, hastening as fast as they can to Rathmines and Killiney” (‘Editorial: Our Nasty Novelists’ in the Bell 2.5 (August 1941), pp.5-12, p.12).

consequences of English colonisation and continued Anglicisation.\textsuperscript{104} He instead used the term 'provincialism' to explain the isolated status of the writer in Ireland.

O’Faoláin explained the failure of the writer’s public role as a consequence of Ireland’s social organisation, which he described in revealing terms:

\begin{quote}
[In Ireland today [...] the stratified, and fairly complex social life which a writer of 1915, say could have known in Dublin has given way to a far more simple and uncomplex, a much “thinner” social life. The life now known, or knowable, to any modern Irish writer is either the traditional, entirely simple life of the farm (simple, intellectually speaking); or the groping, ambiguous, rather artless urban life of these same farmers’ sons and daughters who have, this last twenty-five years, been taking over the towns and cities from the Anglo-Irish. They have done it, so to speak, by rule of thumb, empirically, with little skill. Their convictions are embryonic; their social patterns are indistinct. True, the “whole of life” remains. But at what level of intelligence and sensibility? True, we do possess many of the things James missed in Hawthorne’s America; but they are largely inherited by us, not made by us. They are not marks or measurements of us. Their quondam significance, of that order, is lost in a general jelly-like mass of friendly egalitarianism which is as comfortable as it is indeterminate and where hammered-out convictions and ideas are so few or so elementary as to suggest a quite unperplexed and uninquisitive communal mind.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

O’Faoláin no longer idealised the ‘common man,’ or juxtaposed the popular with the aristocratic. His judgement of Irish society was now defined by an elitist disdain for bourgeois mass culture. The ‘mob’ he saw in 1934 had now achieved dominance, and the ‘fungus of the mind’ had grown into a ‘jelly-like mass.’

O’Faoláin’s language throughout the article was that of disgust and disdain, the intellectual examining the masses. He despaired at the Irish lack of cultivation, compared to a baby “too ugly to be photographed.” The Gresham did not correspond to Claridges, but to “the Garden of Eden. Except that they are all dressed [...] they have certainly not eaten at the apple of knowledge.” Most of all, he lamented the failure of public taste – “values are not established and codified” and the public “sit up at the thriller-stuff.”\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{104} O’Faoláin’s avoidance of the colonial dimensions of his argument, unlike his earlier article in \textit{Motley}, may have been due to the article’s context in an English Jesuit publication.

\textsuperscript{105} ‘The Dilemma of Irish Letters’, p.373.

\textsuperscript{106} ‘The Dilemma of Irish Letters’, p.378.
O'Faoláin was aware of the political implications of his despair at an uncultivated public. While most of his writing, before and after this article, attempted to combine the aesthetic and the social, he here recognised their split within his own attitudes. Modern Ireland, he wrote, required him to separate his political beliefs from his cultural. In 1949, he judged that democracy did not allow the two to combine in the role of the public intellectual. O'Faoláin described the unpredicted result of republicanism:

in theory, we struggled up to 1922, for Liberty; in practice, as we now see, Liberty was a very secondary goal. Liberty is an English ideal; it is expressed in terms of personal rights, often hard won, usually embodied in class and convention [...] In republican countries, like France, America or Ireland (or must I add “Southern” to Ireland?) this idea of Liberty is constantly struggling with the idea of Equality, and so far as I can observe from the course of events in modern Ireland, If there were a toss-up between the two ideas Equality would always be much more likely to win.\(^{107}\)

As a republican, O'Faoláin endorsed the choice of equality over liberty. As an artist, he rejected it.

From the point of view of the *homme moyen sensuel* this may, or may not, according to his taste or upbringing, sound delightful. In many ways it *is* delightful. (I find it so.) But from the point of view of the novelist it is a total disaster.\(^{108}\)

O'Faoláin explained the ‘disaster’ as the replacement of “closely organised and stratified society” with “amorphous crowds,” which did not supply the novelist with the necessary “clashes” of personalities and perspectives. His terminology throughout ‘The Dilemma of Irish Letters’ showed another aspect of his dilemma. The emphasis on artistic autonomy combined with social responsibility in O'Faoláin’s 1930s critical writing demanded an elevated position of cultural leadership. O'Faoláin saw national culture as subjecting the artistic to the political, denying the special position of the writer.

In 1949, O'Faoláin saw “realism as a technique for dealing with such material [...] at a dead end.” He reached this verdict from his own experience, but it was

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\(^{107}\) Ibid., p.374.

\(^{108}\) Ibid., p.374.
retrospectively applied. In the 1930s, O’Faoláin was not only optimistic about his role in the public sphere of journalism. He was attempting to develop a form of realism which could express and influence national life. He had not given up on the Irish novel. In his trilogy of A Nest of Simple Folk (1934), Bird Alone (1936) and Come Back to Erin (1940), he attempted to develop a form of realism which could fulfil his ambitions for national literature and establish the role of the modern Irish writer.

The extent of O’Faoláin’s consideration about the form a national literature could take it often underestimated. He is usually described as orientated towards straightforward documentary realism, interchangeable with naturalism. In this narrative the Bell, with its emphasis on the reflection of real national life, developed from O’Faoláin’s failure to achieve mimesis in fictional form and his despair at the ‘nostalgia fantasy’ permeating national culture. In fact, during the 1930s and beyond O’Faoláin repeatedly theorised on the nature of realism and the understanding of literature and society which underlies it. Frank Shovlin’s comparison of O’Faoláin’s autobiographies – Shovlin insists on the plural – as they appeared in 1964 and in 1993 is one of the few critical studies to emphasis the “obsession with form which lies at the heart of O’Faoláin’s career as a writer.” In the final pages of the original autobiography, which unlike the later version ends with the 1930s, his obsession led to an almost despairing cry – “Form! I kept on saying the word to myself, striking the table as I worked; this chaos of life must be reduced, somehow, to form!”

O’Faoláin’s desperate preoccupation with form, remembered decades later, shows his desire not just to represent the realities of Irish life in content, but to explore the nature of representation itself. His attention to the question of form belies attitudes to realism as formally transparent. Astradur Eysteinsson discusses the view, expressed by Fredric Jameson, that frequently, “realism has served as the ‘straw man’ designating whatever modernism is not.” Eysteinsson raises the problem of realism in the context of the 1938 Das Wort debate about expressionism, in which

109 ‘The Struggle for Form’, p. 166, p.170. The quotation is from the first edition of Vive Moi!, published in the US in 1964 and in London the following year. As Shovlin notes, the revised autobiography “drops this frantic quest for order for a more resigned acceptance.”
“the question of the perspective involved in rendering reality” was central. 110 The debate, led by Ernst Bloch’s championing of expressionism against György Lukács’ demand for the realist representation of objective reality, focused on the implications of the formal representation of reality as crucial in determining the political implications of aesthetics in modern world. It is in the context of such debates, contemporaneous with O’Faoláin’s attempts to formulate realism as a modern national literature, that his ‘obsession with form’ can usefully be understood.

A specific point of connection between these discourses is O’Faoláin’s promotion of a form of ‘intellectual realism’ – a term he used at various points for his ideal formal approach to the novel – over ‘naturalism’. It was in opposition to naturalism that O’Faoláin came closest to defining his preferred intellectual realism. Despite this, his writing is often seen as naturalistic. Cleary defines his work as naturalist, although he is also one of the few critics to note O’Faoláin’s own rejection of the term. For Cleary, O’Faoláin’s “terminology and the essential conception of the function of art are still inherently naturalistic” even though in “the restricted economy of O’Faolain’s cultural criticism, the term ‘naturalism’ is itself a negative one.” Cleary argues that this is because for O’Faoláin it denotes “conventionally enough, a diminished, doggedly descriptive realism.”111

O’Faoláin was in fact more specific about his definition of naturalism, and his rejection of it. His formulation reflected Lukács’ distinction between ‘objective realism’ and naturalism in The Historical Novel and afterwards. Despite the ideological gulf between both theorists, they shared an understanding of the function of realist literature as representing a unified if diverse society, in which individuals may be seen as conflicting with social forces but are still part of this whole. Lukács argued that in naturalist writing, an emphasis on documentary description overwhelmed the “totality of objects” created by “the older epic

111 Cleary, p.147.
writers.” In the minute observation of naturalism, “these objects have nothing to do with the inner life of the characters.” Because of a lack of connection between “the outside world and the psychology of the principle characters […] the human motives do not spring organically out of a concrete social-historical basis [but] only confuse the total picture still further, reduce still further the social reality of the entire story.”112 Lukács classified naturalism as part of the dislocation of objective realism enacted by modernism,113 and a symptom of the regressive trends of bourgeois capitalism.

O’Faoláin’s critique of naturalism was based on a related understanding of such anti-realist forms as resulting from a decline in a shared understanding of the relationship between the individual and the social order. Rather than seeing this as a product of capitalism, he formulated the decline in terms of ethics. The starting point of ‘The Modern Novel: A Catholic Point of View’, the 1935 paper which triggered James Devane’s attack, was that the main feature of “the last sixty years or so” had been “the disappearance from the novel of the ethic which until then informed it,” a disappearance embodied in the rise of naturalism, and the primary problem of the modern novelist was “his task to replace the vanished ethic of the older novel” by finding a new form of realism.114

This idea of a “break” occurring at some point in the second half of the nineteenth century was central to O’Faoláin’s conception of the history of the novel, and remained the basic argument of his analysis of Anglo-American modernist novels in The Vanishing Hero twenty years later. He evaded the question of what caused the undermining of traditional values in the move from realism to naturalism, which “need not concern us.” In The Vanishing Hero, he stated that to explain this “gradual disintegration” he “should have to write a whole separate book in the decline of

morals in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{115} Its effect were clear however – naturalism was for him both sentimental and the product of “a passive indifference to moral questions.” In ‘The Emancipation of Irish Writers’ O’Faoláin had ambiguously defended the writer’s right to be ‘amoral half his days’. Here he condemned moral indifference, and described the fragmentation of a moral order as resulting in either shallow and baseless “humanitarianism” or satire as the product of “humanitarianism disappointed in humanity.” He described the end point of this progression as “the sad fatalism of a man like Hardy, or the preoccupation with social tendencies of a man like Wells, the pessimist and the optimist of the new humanism.”\textsuperscript{116}

O’Faoláin prefigured his argument in ‘The Modern Novel’ by stating that the complex and coherent societies of great realism were gone forever. He still, however, was committed to the idea of the novel evolving from an ethical basis. In a reminder of contemporary attitudes to both communism and Catholicism as a response to capitalist materialism, he suggested both as potential ethical systems for the novel.

They are neither of them capable of writing of as wide an audience or for so wide an audience as their predecessors, because they are limited by the common acceptance of their own beliefs. But they are something and they are worth considering.

This mention of communism suggests O’Faoláin’s sense of the left wing discussions of realism in Britain and Europe. Despite his hostility to socialism as a political ideology, O’Faoláin’s understanding of high realism as proceeding from a perception of a shared objective reality, an ‘ethical base’, was akin to Lukács’ version of realism. Both saw the “goal” of realism to “penetrate the laws governing

\textsuperscript{116} O’Faoláin’s use of the term ‘humanitarianism’ echoed MacGreevy’s (Review of Two Plays: Juno and the Paycock: The Shadow of a Gunman and The Plough and the Stars: A Tragedy in Four Acts by Sean O’Casey, in The Monthly Criterion (May 1927), p.275}. Both used the term to refer broadly to socialism, portrayed as interfering in individual liberty and prioritising social concerns over aesthetic integrity.
objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society."\(^{117}\)

Central to both O’Faoláin’s and Lukács’ projects was a belief that through such examination society can not only be seen in its true form, but can also be transformed. Sascha Bru underlines the belief in Lukács’ thought that theory and practice, knowing society and changing it, are essentially two peas in a pod. Subjects produce society through culture, Lukács contended, and culture structures society in a “totality,” a dynamic and contradictory system of values, ideas, and objects. Since this structure is man-made, the subject, the human being, should also be able to consciously master it, Lukács believed, and this ability, in turn, implies the promise of changing it.\(^{118}\)

O’Faoláin was also committed to literature as capable of both understanding the world and leading to its transformation. If this is understood to underlie his dual commitment to aesthetic autonomy and to the vital role of literature in shaping Ireland’s national development, the sometimes contradictory nature of his attitude to cultural nationalism becomes clearer. This was how, in his analysis of Corkery, his call for the emancipation of the Irish artist, and his formulation of ‘intellectual realism’, O’Faoláin was able to defend the freedom of the writer from public concerns while simultaneously stressing the necessity of national art.

O’Faoláin’s attitude to Irish society was dominated by his sense of a lack of ‘totality’. The 1937 story ‘A Broken World’ centred on this absence, portraying a divide between the remnants of the ‘cultivated’ Anglo-Irish and the material and spiritual poverty of rural Ireland. The story portrays a highly symbolic encounter between an artistic narrator, a priest, and a passive and ignorant farmer. The priest diagnoses the failure of synthesis between the civilised classes and the impoverished ‘common man’, in a narrative of a journey between parishes:

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\(^{117}\) ‘Realism in the Balance’, p.40.

'I came back from my voyage of exploration, most refreshed. Much improved in spirits. You see, I had extended the pattern of life of my own poor parish. I saw how, how—I mean, how the whole thing had worked, hung together, made up a real unity. It was like putting two halves of a broken plate together [...] That parish and my parish made up a world, as neither did by itself, rich and poor, culture and...’

‘But,’ I cried angrily, ‘where’s your moral unity? Your common thought? It’s absurd.’

‘Oh, yes! I realised that before I even got home [...] it was two halves of a world...’

The farmer was looking at us both with dull, stupid eyes. He had lost the thread of the talk.

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ I agreed, just as lightly. ‘But now that the gentry are gone, won’t the people, the mountainy people, and so on, begin to make a complete world of their own?’

He shook his head. The farmer listened again.

‘I refuse to believe they won’t.’

The narrator challenges the priest’s resignation, searching for an “image of life that would fire and fuse of all” in the possibility of cultural union. However, the story ends with a pessimistic echo of ‘The Dead’, in which the potential for unity is frozen in a “perpetual dawn.”

In ‘A Broken World’, the priest is embittered by the hostile and ignorant people of his impoverished parish. As the characterisation suggests, Catholicism had significant traction in O’Faoláin’s aesthetic. He conceived of the ethical and spiritual basis of Catholicism as capable of providing ‘moral unity’. Like MacGreevy, O’Faoláin despaired of “Puritan Catholicism,” although he did not share MacGreevy’s consistent attribution of the puritanical and repressive aspects of Irish Catholicism to Anglicisation. As Arndt has argued, O’Faoláin’s critique of the operations of the Church did not make him anti-Catholic – his “intellectual aspiration is at the root of his ambivalent relationship with the Irish Catholic Hierarchy.”

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120 Ibid., p.179.
illiberal philistinism and xenophobia which denied the role of the realist writer in an intellectual elite.\textsuperscript{122}

O'Faoláin perceived the puritanical and hypocritical morality of the Church preventing the realist portrayal of the social world necessary for his conception of national art. This was the basis of his ambiguous attitude to the Catholic novel in the 1935 essay. There, O'Faoláin described Catholicism as capable of providing a version of the ethical base, or 'moral unity', that he complained was absent in contemporary realism internationally. The Catholic writer could "see human actions as part of a cosmic drama [which] restores at once to human action a significance it lost in the novel of the 'eighties." However, O'Faoláin described reluctance to acknowledge the totality of human life as central flaw in contemporary Catholic novels (he was vague about his precise subjects). He criticised them in the same terms as his condemnation of Corkery, attacking their distortion of reality through an adherence to bourgeois morality:

\begin{quote}
[I]n the Catholic novelists one knows, there is, so far, little or no improvement on unethical naturalism as we now know it. I find in all of them a painful self-consciousness, as if they could not forget that they were Catholics, a timidity evident in their fear of the senses, a priggishness and a solemnity which has nothing to do with religion and for which there is no excuse, a lack of humour, and a tendency to underwrite about the emotions as if they feared to raise a storm they could not ride, and as by way of recompense for this slowness of the drama an overly-lyrical quality that verges on the sentimental and the neurotic.\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

O'Faoláin's novels were an attempt to develop a literary form which could provide 'moral unity' to Irish society. His self-defined failure as a novelist developed from his inability to develop this theoretical understanding of intellectual realism into sustained creative practice. His novels attempted to depict the 'totality of objects' in a society developing a Catholic, nationalist ethical base, in which the individual

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{122} His portrayal of priests, characters which recur throughout his 1930s fiction, was generally sympathetic. He condemned the philistinism of moral campaigns, which, like that in 'The Old Master', prevented the cultivation of public tastes by using religion to condemn international cultural influences (in A Purse of Coppers, op. cit.).\textsuperscript{123} 'The Modern Novel: A Catholic Point of View', p.345.}
may be in conflict with certain social forces without losing connection with them. The novel that comes closest to success in these terms is *Bird Alone*, published in 1936 just after O'Faoláin's most developed attempts to formulate his attitudes to realism.

While *A Nest of Simple Folk* is a transgenerational historical family narrative, and *Come Back to Erin* a contemporary family drama, *Bird Alone* focused almost exclusively on one individual's negotiation between various social forces. It was the most obvious attempt at a successful form of realism in Lukácsian terms, summarised by Eysteinsson as "a mode of writing in which the subject 'comes to terms with' the object, where the individual 'makes sense' of a society in which there is a basis of common understanding." In *Bird Alone*, the narrator Corney Crone is driven by a desire to 'come to terms' with the competing demands placed upon him. Generally the novel has been seen as a depiction of the impossibility of this desire, and the incompatibility of uncompromised individual autonomy with the intrusive and repressive demands of his community. Maurice Harmon's reading of the novel, for example, presents Crone as a stay-at-home Stephen Dedalus, who fails to fly free of the nets of language, religion, and nation, and so is condemned to remain an isolated misfit in a paralysed society.

In part *Bird Alone* encourages this pessimistic reading, with Crone's final social exclusion presenting him as a victim of stifling provincial conservatism. The portrayal of the individual's relationship with his society is not so straightforward, however. As in O'Faoláin's contemporary short stories, the emphasis on individual experience in *Bird Alone* is combined with an equally weighted sense of the ties of community and social and cultural demands – however repressive, social forces need to be 'made sense' of, not simply flown away from. This is apparent in Crone's ambiguous ending. He can neither detach himself from his society nor return to it.

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124 Eysteinsson, p.195.
In his discussion of O’Faoláin as a Catholic novelist, Conor Cruise O’Brien praises the ambiguity of this ending. A conventional Catholic novel would, he says, have Crone finally returning to his spiritual community with an act of faith. That O’Faoláin refuses this moves the novel to “a much higher plane than that of edification: the level of truth [...] Bird Alone is about human faith, which is harder than fiction.”

O’Brien describes O’Faoláin’s work in terms of an international development of the Catholic novel, including Grahame Greene and Evelyn Waugh in England. Under the pressure of modernity, his analysis of Catholic novelists emphasises their diverse attempts to reconcile demands of individuality, materiality and spirituality. In this context, O’Brien describes O’Faoláin’s development of a kind of ‘parnellism’, ethical rather than political, “a firm connection between the separate ideas of national, spiritual and sexual emancipation.”

He follows closely the terms laid out by O’Faoláin in his ‘Catholic point of view’ – both recognise the necessity of renegotiating the relationship between the individual and the social, and place the Catholic novel as a specific response to modernity.

O’Brien’s sensitive reading emphasises the success in Bird Alone. However, O’Faoláin himself emphasised its failure. The novel is extremely unbalanced in its representation of both Crone and his community, and this at least in part can be attributed to O’Faoláin’s apparent uncertainty about the degree to which he wanted to embed the tragic destruction of an individual within a wider social narrative. This resulted in the uneven texture of the novel, which moves between the lyrical reflection and recollection of the narrator, a family saga plot on the downfall of the Crone family through economic speculation, the political and historical narrative of the 1890s, and the various emblematic fates of other individuals. The broader thematic concerns of the early part of the novel sit uneasily with the half expressionistic, half melodramatic climax of Elsie’s pregnancy which dominates the final part of the novel.

127 Ibid., p.103.
The various other individualised characters are also not embedded successfully into the texture of the novel. The story of Christy Tinsley, who is driven to involvement in violent political rebellion by the death of Parnell, then imprisoned in London following the accidental injury of a policeman, is one of the most powerful and affecting. However, its effectiveness is inhibited by a confusion about Christy’s role. While he is introduced as a symbol of the destruction of the individual by wider historical forces, his final fate when released from prison as a pitiful local curiosity driven half-mad by his imprisonment seems mainly to work as an even more pitiful parallel with Crone’s individual isolation. An even more unsatisfactory appearance is that of Virginia, Crone’s aunt, who appears vividly from London and plays a pivotal role in the financial crisis of his family, but who soon disappears again with her story only half understood, while the momentum which appears to be building to a family crisis dissipates.

These weaknesses are signs of O’Faoláin’s failure to integrate his cast of characters into either a larger narrative or acute social realism, and to combine either with the central individual tragedy. This was O’Faoláin’s own later perception. While in his autobiography he dismissed *A Nest of Simple Folk* quite easily as a “bulky family chronicle,”128 he was still anxious about the problems and tensions within *Bird Alone*. He stated his purpose in that novel as being “nothing less than sin and salvation in an Irish setting,” but described his editor at Jonathan Cape, Edward Garnett, as “lik[ing] his heroic characters too much to have time for this sort of subjectivity,” and pushing him to strengthen the social reality – he “told me I should see myself as the Balzac of Ireland (no less).” Looking back, O’Faoláin concluded that they were both wrong; the background in the novel was overdone and romantic. His later desire was to cut out the social realism altogether and concentrate on the symbolic and poetic, the tortured interiority of Corney Crone.129

O’Faoláin’s own judgement on his work from a very different perspective several decades on should of course not be taken as objective truths. But his account

128 *Vive Moi!* p.258.
129 Ibid., pp.258-59.
suggests two very different models of a successful novel – the Balzacian evocation of a complete social reality, and the impressionistic exploration of an individual consciousness. Later in life, O’Faoláin regretted that he didn’t come down firmly on the side of the latter, but in the 1930s he was still resolved, as in ‘The Emancipation of Irish Writers’, to negotiate a reconciliation between them both. This tension is embedded into the novel itself. Crone’s wrestling with his own nature and aesthetic judgements offer a kind of commentary on the issues O’Faoláin was dealing with in his composition. He recognises in his infatuation with Elsie, for example, that he is aestheticising her and replacing her individuality with his own projection:

Her curls under her father’s old hat became the curls of all the women in the world: her waist was the waist of a statue: she was losing her identity for me already, merged into myself. But that is the misfortune of my nature, that all things end by becoming me until, now, nothing exists that is not me.130

That the entire society of the novel, with its various diverse individuals, become incorporated into Crone’s psychic drama is precisely one of the formal characteristics of the novel.

The novel is peppered with Crone’s debates about the relationship between the individual and others, and this is placed in specifically aesthetic terms in his encounter with the painter Stella. She is another curiously insubstantial character, briefly appearing to function simultaneously as an example of an emancipated woman, a potential escape route for Crone, and, most crudely, as an opportunity for him to discuss modern art.131 At their first encounter, he criticises her painting of the beach for excluding the roundabouts and lights of the promenade. “Ah!” she says, “I see. You want a typical picture. One that catches the essential spirit of the place, not a bit of the place.”132 Stella seems impressed by Crone’s preference for a unified whole over a particular essence, but as their conversation shifts he begins to

131 The particularly noticeable flimsiness of female characters, including the ‘heroine’ Elsie, is a recurrent feature, and may be a weakness O’Faoláin was aware of himself. In Come Back to Erin, in a rare authorial intervention, the narrator draws back from attempting to understand Josephine – “to try to penetrate to the thoughts of such a girl at such a time is impossible.” This occurs when she is reading Balzac. (Come Back to Erin (London: Jonathan Cape, 1940), p.294).
132 Bird Alone, p.207.
argue for the lovely poetry of landscapes without people. She prefers the beauty
found in people:

‘I love Degas, that’s why I can’t paint dead things. A dead strand, a dead
sea...? No!’
‘But the sea and the shore are lovely,’ I protested.
‘The children I painted last week, and the old fishermen, were more lovely
[...] There’s a spark of soul in everybody. A music. And, my dear child, I have
seen it, heard it. Even in these old topers.’
‘I prefer the sand and the shore,’ I said obstinately.
‘Yes, yes. It’s lovely, but so are my old men.’
‘Lovely?’
‘Yes. Lovely.’
I looked my disbelief.
‘Isn’t he like that?’ she pointed at a picture.
‘Of course he is,’ I agreed. ‘The old toper. You can see him. His crafty eyes.
His red nose. But not lovely. And if you like lovely things as I do – why paint
these common people? Not when I can have the sand and the shore and the
sea.’

As a disciple of Degas, symbolic of a modern art yet to arrive in Ireland, Stella may
appear to have the aesthetic authority here, and her love of the beauty of the
‘simple common man’ may contrast favourable with Crone’s preference for cold,
empty landscape. O’Faoláin complicates their opposition further, however, when
Stella glimpses an old man on the sand dunes.

With a passion of trembling she gripped my arm.
‘That bundle of rags there!’ she gasped. ‘That lump of rock! I can almost see
the lichen on him.’

Stella may see loveliness in ‘common people’, but it is suggested that she can only
do so by dehumanising them, turning them into nothing more than ‘the sand and
the shore and the sea’. Earlier she has described her problem in painting the local
children: ‘“I had to keep my distance, I admit. They were hardly clean. But they were
lovely.”’ Beauty comes from denying the material reality and poverty of the
‘common people’, and so she may be indulging in the same ‘garden of fantasy’ and
denial of social reality as Corkery’s ‘nostalgia fantasy’. O’Faoláin dramatises the

133 Bird Alone, pp.209-10.
134 Bird Alone, p.211. The description was echoed in ‘A Broken World’, where the “dull” farmer is
perceived as “no more human than a rock” (p.172).
135 Bird Alone, p.209.
problem of the idealised 'common man' faced with reality. He implicates modern art in the process of fantasy and distortion.

There is no clear resolution to the aesthetic dilemmas Crone perceives, nor to O'Faoláin's own. *Bird Alone* was a sustained and self-conscious attempt to write a novel which could both represent the reality of a particular stratum of Irish society, and could evoke the subjective individual consciousness of one young man dealing with the universal themes of 'sin and salvation'. It was a working through but not a working out of the tensions evident in the article published two years before. The novel's 'failure' may be paralleled with Crone's own — exiled from family and society into a fully fledged "Bird Alone," he becomes known to the local people as "‘Third Person,'" his subjectivity denied, as if in a deliberate joke at O'Faoláin's own verdict on the failure of his novel to become the lyrical meditation on the individual that he partly desired.

O'Faoláin returned once more to his attempt to formulate a modern Irish novel in *Come Back to Erin*, in many ways more objectively an artistic failure. It appeared as saga of modern Ireland, but O'Faoláin seems uncomfortable with its shifting third person perspective and there is little coherence in its disjointed and somewhat turgid narrative. O'Faoláin's own verdict on it was damning, as he describes it as suffering from "such a realistic melodramatic treatment as to reduce the whole thing to fustian."137

By the time of its publication four years after *Bird Alone*, O'Faoláin was much more pessimistic about the future of Irish culture and the possibility of the emancipation of its artists. Reasons for this include the censorship of *Bird Alone* and O'Faoláin's sense of Ireland's increasing isolation from the rest of Europe. One aspect of this pessimism was apparent in a thematic link between the two novels. O'Faoláin's desire for the formulation of a modern national literature was expressed in a feeling that Ireland needs to be 'written in', to acquire its own literary landscape in the

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137 *Vive Moi!*, p. 297.
geography of European culture. *Bird Alone* is full of allusions to great English and European writing, and a familiarity with this culture provides a way of comprehending and enlarging experience. Crone for example gains comfort in his enforced separation from Elsie by reading of “all the unfortunate lovers of the world,” in particular Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde.*

The most literary character in *Bird Alone,* however, is Crone’s grandfather Phillip Crone, the embittered Parnellite reduced to occupying his son’s attic. As well as often quoting Shakespeare, he is also Crone’s main source of literary education, and is both erudite and passionate in his understanding. His most distinctive characteristic is his adoption of what he reads into an Irish context. When Crone reads *Gulliver’s Travels* for the first time for himself, he notices that his grandfather has renamed all the characters “names like Paddy and Shawn and they all lived in Skibbereen, so that it came as a surprise to me to find that the story had nothing to do with Cork or Ireland.”

More potently, the grandfather is associated from the start with Faust, which he narrates to the children and has written his own Cork-set version of, handwritten in a notebook headed “*Philippo Croneo, The Red Houseo, Gilabbeyo, Corkis, Je souffre tant, O Jésus.*” While there is an element of the ridiculous in the old man’s pretensions, he is a sympathetic and dignified character, and his connection with European culture works to enlarge and ennoble his own and others’ understanding of his torments. His character is defined in the earlier episode where he refuses to declare his dead comrade Arty Tinsley a Catholic so he can be buried in the Catholic cemetery, through an adherence to his own and his friend’s choice of Fenianism over the disapproval of the Church, and is instead forced to take Tinsley’s body to the university dissecting-rooms. The young Crone begins to understand the tragic magnitude of his situation as loyal to a betrayed political ideal, as “I thought I saw in his face and look the damned look of another Faust.”

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138 *Bird Alone,* p.163.
139 *Bird Alone,* p.33.
140 *Bird Alone,* p.19.
Phillip Crone gains in stature and dignity from his association with European literature, and while his own idealism is thwarted in its attempt to assert Irish culture and nationalism the strength of his character means a possibility of this cultural enlargement remains. The portrayal is very different in *Come Back to Erin*, where the most prominent reader is a much more pathetic figure. Michael Hannafey, the first character to appear, is a hesitant and lonely figure, a Corney Crone without the nobility. There is no possibility of flight for him – his shoulders are “folded like wings about his chest,” and his “dragging leg, as if too diffident to walk boldly under him” and “his way of sidling through the Saturday evening crowds, all totalled two words – a compressed life.” His obsession is French realism, Maupassant and Balzac, but rather than enlarget his own experience this reading is just a ‘garden of fantasy’ into which he can escape, with dreams of Maupassant’s “narrow, but noble streets of Paris.”

While he might agree with the drunken tramp who, seeing his reading, declares with “lewd secretiveness” that there ought “‘to be a Maupassant in this little city of ours,’” Hannafey has even less chance than Crone, who at least has an interest in and access to modern art, of fulfilling this role. *Come Back to Erin* is set in 1936, but Hannafey’s education stops with the nineteenth century. While O’Faoláin is sympathetic in *Bird Alone* to both Corney Crone’s and his grandfather’s ability to draw on European cultural tradition, Hannafey’s narrow and outdated area of reference is condemned:

> His reading was like that of most provincials, bought not borrowed, and therefore only what lasted long enough to go into cheap editions – semi-classics. He read the kind of book that always leaves his kind of reader years out of touch with their own times. School-girls in such places probably still read *Infelice*, and *The Garden of Allah*. By the time they discover later writers they too will have ceased to be modern.

Rather than opening up possibilities, the European culture accessible by a lower middle class provincial like Hannafey can only be outdated, increasing his isolation

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141 *Come Back to Erin*, p.9.
142 *Come Back to Erin*, p.13.
143 *Come Back to Erin*, p.288.
from the modern world. This effect is emphasised by his geographical immobility. He claims to have finally saved enough to visit Paris for a week, and proudly shows his travel books to Josephine. She asks if he liked anything best:

**No! Nothing was better than anything else! Unless walking the quays by the bookstalls? Or sitting in the gardens? Feeling a cultured civilisation all about you? Once he had seen a workman in a bus reading Maupassant. Really, in a way, that was the highpoint of the whole thing! To see a common workman reading Maupassant! And then, of course, the cafés, on the open pavement, with people drinking and talking for hours. And there he looked out miserably into Cork at the line of closed shops, inhospitable as a wall.**

Hannafey’s idealised ‘cultured civilisation’ is one of openness, public discourse and sophisticated education extending through all levels of society. Regardless of whether this is possible in ‘closed’, ‘inhospitable’ Cork, it is however revealed to be literally a fantasy. Hannafey has never been to Paris. The question is raised, then, not just about the failure of Irish society to develop to this level, or the possibility of an Irish Balzac, but whether this rich, complex and open literary culture is possible at all.

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144 Come Back to Erin, p.300.
2.4 O’Faoláin and modernism

In Louis MacNeice’s 1941 discussion of W.B. Yeats, he formulated the politics of Yeats’ aesthetic in terms which illuminate O’Faoláin’s career. Yeats believed in a hierarchical society which preserved the elite role of the artist alongside a feudal social structure, MacNeice said. Yeats rejected the “drab uniformity” which he saw as the inevitable result of socialism, and believed that democracy led to a culture bereft of standards and tastes. He prioritised individual freedom, but “he never made the idea of freedom contingent on democracy.”

O’Faoláin’s cultural criticism expressed similar hostility to the “jelly-like mass of friendly egalitarianism” which produced a flat and uniform culture. As he recognised, however, his cultural ideology was opposed to his political beliefs: his commitment to democracy led to his condemnation of Yeats’ aristocratic conception of social organisation, while his disdain for mass cultural tastes was the basis of his elitist conception of the role of the artist in national culture. His political principles were always closer to nineteenth century liberalism than to the mass democracy he saw established in Ireland in the 1930s, with its accompanying ‘State-ism’ and intervention in individual liberty. He saw the role of the public intellectual as a corrective to the influence of mass culture, cultivating the ‘standards and tastes’ of a civilised nation.

In the 1930s, O’Faoláin attempted to develop the realist novel as part of his commitment to the development of national literary culture. He believed that intellectual realism was the only literary form which could engage with the social world, and which consequently could transform it. He could not conceive of modernism as capable of transforming the reader’s place in society – his affinities

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145 MacNeice (1941), p.103, p.133.
148 These were the terms of his Bell editorial ‘Standards and Tastes’ (in the Bell 4.3 (June 1942), pp.5-11). O’Faoláin complained of the “elementary instinctive condition” of national “Tastes and Standards,” and attacked literary censorship for the imposition of artificial “native instincts.” The cultivation of national tastes was not the role of the state, O’Faoláin suggested, but of the artist.
were with Lukács and not with Adorno. He never accepted MacNeice’s recognition that “the daylight of ‘realism’ is itself largely a fiction,” which MacNeice described as crucial to his appreciation of Yeats. O’Faoláin understood realism as the intelligible expression of the individual’s relationship with the social world. His attitude to modernism was evident in his critique of Joyce’s increasing unintelligibility – the ‘rupture in the lines of communication’ expressed by modernism prevented the engagement with a public audience which O’Faoláin considered crucial.

O’Faoláin could not see the potential of formal experimentation to allow exactly the kind of synthesis between the internal and external, the material and the spiritual, which he desired in the modern novel. He described modernism as extreme naturalism, lacking the ethical basis of realism. For him these writers’ concern was to go deeper into the ‘psychological novel,’ which rather than being an innovation in technique was just an excessive and esoteric version of naturalism. This is clear in The Vanishing Hero, which discusses Joyce and Woolf together in its final chapter. O’Faoláin explained that he put these writers together in order to question whether “any literature can be in health and vigour without some form of

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149 Adorno’s promotion of modernism as capable of expressing social experience is discussed in comparison to Lukács by Sachsa Bru (pp.110-12), and in detail in Eugene Lunn’s authoritative Marxism and Modernism: A Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno (Berkely: University of California Press, 1982).
150 MacNeice (1941), p.135.
151 O’Faoláin is discussed by Brown along with O’Connor as “antagonistic to literary experimentalism” (Brown (1995), p.25). O’Connor’s attitude to Joyce was comparable to O’Faoláin’s. He critiqued the lack of “emotional and intellectual values” in Dubliners, and saw the problems in Joyce’s fiction culminating in the “colossal failure” of Finnegans Wake, showing “a mind turning in on itself and not caring any longer for the business of communication.” O’Connor went on, however, to describe his revelation that Joyce’s writing exposed the disintegration of the “framework of life, the tensions of thought, morality and emotion that hold civilisation together [...] Those who destroy the false tensions are the saints and heroes of our time” (‘James Joyce: A Post-Mortem’ in the Bell 5.5 (February 1943), pp.363-75). The passage suggests a sense of the relationship between modernism writing and society, largely absent in O’Faoláin’s criticism.
152 He described Joyce as a naturalist, for example, in ‘The Emancipation of Irish Writers’, p.501.
153 While avoiding the term modernism, O’Faoláin’s analysis of ‘the novelists of the twenties’ is at least a partial evaluation of the modernist novel. It also includes sections on Huxley, Waugh, Greene, Faulkner, Hemingway and Bowen. It may be seen as a belated attempt to deal with the developments of the novel in the 20s and 30s which his contemporary criticism noticeably failed to do.
He stressed that faith was not necessarily religious, but continued to argue that an ethical base was necessary.

In a highly gendered analysis of Woolf, O’Faoláin concluded that despite her correct understanding that the purpose of art is not “photographic or naturalistic reproduction,” she failed to realise the essential and transformative relationship between the internal and the external. In attempting to isolate the self, she achieved only a narcissistic immersion in the superficial ripples of the self caused by a parade of detached external impressions – “she did not change her experience at all, but [...] she did record and reproduce most delicately, yet quite naturalistically the externals of life.” Woolf’s rejection of the significance of “associations [...] accepted traditions [...] the forms of society” meant her attempt to ‘penetrate’ the relationship between ‘Subject’ and ‘Object’ resulted only in isolated and shallow self reflection. O’Faoláin saw modernist fiction as a particularly indulgent and useless form of naturalism, where what is being faithfully reproduces is the most superficial reflection of the self.

O’Faoláin was more sympathetic towards Joyce, acknowledging that he aimed for “total detachment,” which is impossible. He explained Ulysses, however, as basically an elaborate trick in which Joyce used the false objectivity of naturalism to fool the reader into accepting an (autobiographical) immersion in Stephen’s subjectivity which is ultimately just as superficial and materialistic as Woolf’s:

Joyce employed three devices to give us the illusion of detachment, of objectivity. (1) He built up a realistic background by the use of a meticulously accurate naturalistic detail. (2) He used this naturalistic realism to persuade us that he was quite detached intellectually from Stephen

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154 VH, p.193.
155 VH, p.199.
156 In the fusion of subject and object is “a co-penetrative process like to the sexual act, sometimes spoken of as the “knowing” a woman” (198) while if a man does not immerse himself in literary experience “he will experience not a perfect union but an incomplete union terribly close to auto-eroticism” (206). Woolf’s capacity for such penetrative possession are sadly somewhat limited, although she might hope to be possessed, in those “blessed moments, a great many, when she did humbly bed with common things and forgetting herself in their arms reveal herself as well as them” (203).
157 VH, p.200. O’Faoláin’s figure for Woolf is the feminised Narcissa.
158 VH, p.207.
Dedalus [...] (3) He then boldly employed the subjective method to cast the spell of Stephen's personality over us, and he did it so well that it is with the greatest difficulty that we withhold from him an entirely uncritical sympathy.159

O'Faoláin's description of the 'subjective method' expressed qualified admiration for Joyce's aesthetic achievement. He saw the modernist novel, however, as incapable of expanding beyond the naturalistic expression of isolated subjectivity.

O'Faoláin's ideal of national literature required writing accessible to a wide audience. His emphasis on ethics and morality in the need for a new national literature makes clear his rejection of the aestheticist faith in art for art's sake, and his conviction that literature had a role to play in the transformation of Irish society. Only intellectual realism, for O'Faoláin, could represent the 'totality' of national society, and only literature intelligible to the public could influence national culture. O'Faoláin's ideal was expressed in Michael Hannafey's fantasy of Paris, where a 'workman' could be seen reading Maupassant on a bus. Such a "cultivated civilisation" was O'Faoláin's ambition in Ireland, and his 1930s fiction was self-consciously conceived as Irish intellectual realism comparable to the novels of nineteenth century Europe.160

O'Faoláin's increasing disillusionment with the possibilities of the Irish novel resulted from his failure to reconcile his idealist conception of national art with his commitment to realism. The 'mob' he described as governed by bourgeois and puritanical ideology did not fit with his idealised version of the 'common man'. The Censorship represented for him the repression of the cultivating role of the intellectual. After Come Back to Erin, O'Faoláin ceased his attempt to develop the realist novel, instead splitting his writing between social and aesthetic responsibilities. Through the Second World War, he tried with the Bell to direct

159 VH, p209. In the Bell, O'Faoláin had criticised Ulysses with other modern novels for sacrificing the complex society for "a personal preoccupation, almost psychopathic, as in that vast tumour of Proust's, that suggests the exclusive experience of one man, rather than the inclusive experience of men." He consistently saw the modernist novel as representing self-absorption, and incapable of engaging with the objective world ('The Greatest War Novel' in the Bell 5.4 (January 1943), pp.290-99, p.290).

160 Come Back to Erin, p.300.
national cultural discourse. His creative writing was focused on the short story, a form which he described as allowing the exercise of individualist aesthetics without social demands.  

O'Faoláin's writing formulated the pressures of Irish national culture in terms which reflected the debates about realism and the social responsibilities of the writer in Britain and Europe. For O'Faoláin, realism was the only literary form which could express and transform the world, confirming the public role of the writer. However, as his affinities with international literary discourse suggest, modernism and experimental form were also the subject of interrogation and redefinition in the 1930s. In Ireland, O'Faoláin's career was parallel with the reinvention of Irish modernism in terms which reflected the preoccupations which shaped O'Faoláin's realism. O'Faoláin and Beckett diverged in their attitudes to aesthetic form, but their alternate perspectives both evolved from points of intersection between Irish culture and developments in international literary discourse.

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161 The Irish Short Story (London: Collins, 1948). O'Faoláin's short stories themselves developed from the social and political preoccupations of Midsummer Night Madness (1932), which focused on a coherent set of episodes around the War of Independence and the Civil War. His later stories increasingly focused on moments of revelation, which ironically resembled the modernist short story practised in Ireland by Mary Lavin (herself influenced by Woolf. Lavin's 1943 collection Tales from Bective Bridge (London: Michael Joseph, 1943) frequently employed colour and natural symbolism to evoke crucial transformations in perspective — the "bright gold rings of dung" in 'Lilacs', for example, and the moment of understanding experienced by the title character of 'Miss Holland', represented by the transformation of a dress from "brilliant green" to "the sickly green of frog's spawn." However, Lavin's frequent use of the grotesque and surreal, in this collection and in the later The Becker Wives (London: Michael Joseph, 1946), distinguished her interest in formal experimentation from the more formally conservative stories of O'Faoláin.
3. Samuel Beckett and the Irish avant garde

Traditional assessments of modernism have emphasised its internationalism, its roots in geographical mobility and fluid conception of national boundaries. More recently, however, the relationship between modernism and national specificities, and the common intellectual strands in modernism and nationalism, have been established. Perry Anderson’s influential essay ‘Modernity and Revolution’ attempted to account for the uneven development of modernism throughout Europe by positing a ‘conjunctural’ explanation for its evolution, based on three important temporal elements: the formal academism of the arts in societies still dominated by the aristocracy; the “still incipient, hence essentially novel, emergence within these societies of the key technologies of the second industrial revolution”; and “the imaginative proximity of social revolution.” ¹ This explanation bases the development of modernist literary culture firmly within a national context.

Drawing on this essay, Terry Eagleton has been among a number of critics to note the relevance of these ‘conjunctures’ for Irish literary culture before independence. In this narrative, the Irish Literary Revival is understood as one of various versions of modernism, reactions to modernity, developing through Europe, all particularly engaged with their national context. He argues that the overt nationalism of the Revival was due to Ireland’s historically specific situation, but was also a response to modernity comparable to that of international modernisms:

Irish nationalism takes root in a still traditionalist landowning order, which provides it with a political target; but the Revival, with its distinctively aristocratic cast, will turn some of those cultural forms against the detested modernity of the merchant and the clerk. And this artistic experiment, for all its elitist tone, is part of a broader revolutionary current, that of political nationalism itself. ²

Similarly, and also drawing on Anderson’s formulation, Joe Cleary discusses the Revival in the context of European modernism. While “its folkish idiom and its nationalistic tones” may seem alien from the usual view of modernism as “brashly iconoclastic and cosmopolitan or internationalist literature,” Cleary argues that these preoccupations were far from unique to Irish modernism. As part of an argument about the importance of stressing the national distinctiveness of various forms of modernism, Cleary perceives the Revival as producing a modernist literature in tune with developments in contemporary Europe and composed from distinctively national materials.

Alex Davis and Lee Jenkins also follow this line of critical enquiry to emphasis the national specificities of the many versions of modernism, contrary to the “critical given” of modernism as “an international, urban and yet placeless, phenomenon.” In these readings, the pressures and dynamics of pre-revolutionary Ireland encouraged rather than hindered the development of experimental literary aesthetics and the complex relationship to modernity characteristic of modernism.

All these readings, however, concentrate on the period before independence, contemporary with early international modernism. In Ireland, the inter-war period, and in particular the 1930s, is seen to diverge from international trends in the development of late modernism and the avant garde. The relative lack of an industrial revolution and the distinctively aristocratic and nostalgic character of the Revival are seen by Eagleton as resulting in an Irish modernism with an overwhelmingly conservative tenor. If there is a high modernism in Ireland, there is little or no avant garde – little of that iconoclastic experiment which seeks to revolutionize the very conception of art itself, along with its relations to political society. There could be no exhilarating encounter between art and technology in such an industrially backward nation.

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5 Eagleton, p.299.
Davis and Jenkins follow this explanation of “the absence of an Irish avant-garde. Elsewhere, agrarian economies convulsively transformed by industrial development produced avant-garde artistic experimentation wedded to national self-awareness.”

This perceived absence of an Irish avant garde, understood as a radical and oppositional formulation of aesthetics, has a particular impact on the understanding of the 1930s. The period of reaction and conservatism following the revolutionary moment, the ossification of the Revival and Europe-wide challenges to the assumptions of high modernism, together with the ageing or exile of major figures in Irish writing, contribute to a view of the increasing embitterment and obsolescence of Irish modernism, lacking an avant garde to continue to reconfigure the relationship between art and nation.

Cleary offers a more nuanced perspective, noting the “intellectual radicalism that drives the successive bearers of Irish modernism” through Joyce, O’Casey, Flann O’Brien and Beckett, but also emphasising their alienation from Irish society. In narratives of Irish modernism, Beckett is invoked, but usually considered as an exception and an exile. In a discussion of de Valera’s Ireland, a “socially conservative state that defined Irish identity not so much in Gaelic as in Catholic terms,” Cleary emphasises the alienation felt by writers from a variety of backgrounds:

For the major modernists – Joyce, Beckett and O’Casey – artistic alienation from the ‘Irish Ireland’ ideal adopted by the new state was accentuated by the physical distance of self-chosen exile in Europe.

The alternative to geographical relocation is described as the “internal exile” of republicans disillusioned with the bourgeois complacency of the new state, and demonstrated in the satire of O’Brien, Patrick Kavanagh and others who “exploited

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6 Davis and Jenkins, p.5.
7 Cleary (2007), pp.93-94.
8 Joe Cleary, Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.72-73.
and excoriated the gap between idealised images of Ireland cultivated by official state culture and the mundane realities of the new society.”

Davis and Jenkins share the perception that in 1930s Ireland, satirical realism took the oppositional place occupied elsewhere by the avant garde. Charting the critique of cultural nationalism from ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ through to the *Lace Curtain* in the 1970s, they argue that despite the modernist aspects of the Revival, by the 1930s its heritage had become antithetical to oppositional modernist aesthetics and therefore stifled the development of an avant garde.

Beckett is right to see [in ‘Recent Irish Poetry’] that its tropes ran the risk of ossifying into lifeless conventions, to the extent that the avant-garde’s deconstructive response to high modernism, as evinced elsewhere in Europe, does not occur in Ireland. Rather, a powerfully realist dismantling of Revivalist and Irish Ireland idealisations of a nation takes place, of which Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* stands as the poetic counterpart to the fictions of Seán Ó Faoláin and Frank O’Connor.

In this narrative, the oppositional space is occupied by realism, and writers such as Beckett have limited potential for the formulation of experimental aesthetics. While recognising the existence of a distinctive modernist discourse in the 1930s, critics still tend to see Beckett and his contemporaries as driven to Europe. This is Davis’ conclusion in a separate article:

An indigenous modernist aesthetics is, if not absent, a fitful presence in the literary landscape of Ireland in the inter-war years; with the notable exception of Flann O’Brien, Irish writers drawn to experimental modes of writing gravitated in the early 1930s to London and continental Europe, specifically Paris.

Such a reading ignores, however, the extent to which Beckett’s early work was conceived as part of a self-consciously experimental strain in modernism of the 1930s, which attempted to develop a radical modernist aesthetic engaged with national concerns while also adopting the formal techniques associated with international late modernism.

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9 Cleary (2002), p.73.
10 Davis and Jenkins, p.25.
11 Alex Davis, ‘Reactions from their burg: Irish modernist poetics of the 1930s’, in Davis and Jenkins (eds), pp.135-55, p.141.
Critical discussions of Ireland in the 1930s tend to see the absence of a coherent and radical avant garde as representative of a lack of indigenous modernism. Theoretical distinctions between avant gardism and modernism suggest that the terms are not interchangeable, and indeed that the combination of aesthetic and political radicalism that characterised the avant garde had by the 1930s diminished throughout Europe. Peter Bürger influentially defined the avant garde as attempting to integrate art and life, defined as “an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution.”

In Bürger’s narrative, the avant garde’s combination of experimental aesthetics and revolutionary politics divided after the First World War. Socialist realism became associated with the political revolutionary impulse, while experimental aesthetics were increasingly connected to reactionary politics in high modernism. As Tim Armstrong has pointed out, this narrative neglects the extent to which “[e]lements of the European avant-garde, for example Surrealism, continued to unite political and aesthetic radicalism.” It suggests, however, that the lack of a sustained engagement between experimental aesthetics and radical politics in 1930s Ireland was connected to an international context in which the relationship between politics and aesthetics was evolving.

In 1930s Ireland, those who defined themselves as an avant garde, as the Gate Theatre did in its various publications, did not exhibit either the political radicalism or the commitment to the deinstitutionalisation of art associated with the ‘true’ avant garde. They did, however, explore the relationship between politics and

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13 See David Weir, Anarchy and Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), p.160. Weir is one of various critics to complicate this narrative by suggesting the radical or anarchical qualities of high modernism.
15 Terence Brown notices the Gate’s fondness for the idea of the avant garde and its self conscious modernity, but considers such rhetoric as belied by the “style for style’s sake” ethos of the theatre (Brown, ‘Ireland, Modernism and the 1930s’ in Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis (eds), Modernism
aesthetics, the status of cultural institutions in the public sphere, and the possibilities of radical formal experimentation. In its publications and its performances, the Gate exhibited aspects of the deconstructive and oppositional impulses associated with avant garde, while also retaining a sense of aesthetic elitism associated with high modernism. This combination was a central target of Beckett's satire of Dublin culture. His own fiction adopted formal strategies of disruption and interrogation which developed in response to cultural nationalism and to high modernism. His 1930s writing interrogated an element of Irish literary culture which adopted some of the features of avant garde. The tensions and failings of this 'Irish avant garde' reflected the fraught attitude to political aesthetics characteristic of late modernism.

The existence of a form of modernist writing, sometimes called an avant garde, in 1930s Ireland has received critical recognition. The group of Irish poets of the early 1930s recognised by Alex Davis and others as constituting a 'fitfully present' avant garde have however been defined as such through their international, not their Irish, influences: their "highly self-conscious awareness" of "the innovative poetics of European and Anglo-American modernism." Since the Lace Curtain and the New Writers' Press, this grouping of Irish poets has been recognised as consciously sharing techniques and preoccupations of modernist movements in London, Paris and elsewhere. Patricia Coughlan and Alex develop the New Writers' 'corrected history' of the 1930s, which raised the profile of those writers who "dispensed with a ruralist ethos [...] in order to concentrate on broader ontological and epistemological issues." As they note, this position itself offers a rather simplistic

and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995, pp.24-42), p.27. Without overstating either the Gate's radicalism or its influence, it is worth considering its self-conscious approach to its own role, evident in its various publications, as a version of late modernism in which the idea of the avant garde was itself interrogated.

16 Davis, pp.137-38. Davis identifies these as Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin and Thomas MacGreevy, as well as Beckett, and quotes Austin Clarke's memories of this group, also including Lyle Donaghy, Donagh MacDonagh and Valentine [sic] Iremonger "gather[ing] in the tea-room above the St Stephen's Green Cinema ... They were all in revolt against the Irish Revival and were enthusiastic followers of T.S. Eliot." See Clarke, 'The Thirties' in Gregory A Schirmer (ed), Reviews and Essays of Austin Clarke (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), pp.173-78, p.175.

division between dominant uniformity and avant garde radicalism. Interactions between the international influence of late modernism and the specific national situations of the members of this group are a productive subject of critical investigation.

Critical attention has, however, tended to focus on poetry alone. The identification of an active group of experimental and self consciously modernist poets has meant that poetic discourse is viewed in isolation. Beckett’s poetry in this period, represented by the 1935 collection *Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates*, is viewed in isolation from his contemporary novels, and largely from his critical writing. The major exception is ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, often used as a manifesto for the rejection of the Revival and desire to develop a new modernist poetics.

This has meant that despite continuing critical reassessments of the elements of modernist and avant garde discourse in Irish writing of the 1930s, Beckett’s prose of the period continues to be seen as the isolated experimentation of a spiritual and increasingly geographical exile. This is despite increasing critical mining of the overtly national subject matter in the 1930s novels, notably in John P. Harrington’s *The Irish Beckett*. In this work Harrington challenged the critical tradition which viewed Beckett as the ultimate writer of exile, “whose salience is the construction of elevating artistic images out of elemental and so universal materials.” Harrington considers in depth the Irish source materials of Beckett’s writing, particularly the early novels up to and including *Watt*. In this Harrington develops the importance of Irishness in Beckett’s work from the almost coincidental provision of material.

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18 Cleary is a notable exception to this attitude, as he considers the 1930s novels as part of the dominance of naturalism in this period. His argument that Beckett’s works “achieve their distinct identity by pushing naturalist conventions to the point where that mode begins to capsize on itself” is illuminating in its contextualisation of the works in relation to national literary culture rather than in isolation. The awkwardness of explaining the novels in terms of naturalism, however, suggests that an alternative formulation of this culture might add to this explanation. See Cleary (2007), pp.155-56.


20 In *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), for example, Lawrence Harvey described the use of an Irish setting in Beckett’s poetry. In earlier criticism, including Raymond Federman’s influential *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett’s Early Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), these works tended to be viewed mainly as
While Harrington emphasises Beckett's engagement with national concerns, he does not attempt to relate this to the ambitions and preoccupations driving experimental and avant garde writing in Ireland and elsewhere. Other analyses have also considered Beckett's national specificities separately from, if not as antithetical to, his involvement in developments in modernism in Europe. Norma Bouchard's discussion of the 1930s novels makes a convincing case for their context in European experimental prose, and their utilisation and development of the evolving formal strategies of the avant garde. Bouchard argues that experimental prose writers of the 1930s rejected the faith of the high modernists in the containing power of language, and that "Beckett's fictions of the 1930s, like those of Céline and Gadda, not only displace modernist ideals of emancipation from experience but, in both content and style, promote a narrative of irreducible plurality of signifieds and signifiers tending toward the horizon of post-modernity." While noting his championing of the "new generation of Irish poets, painters, and playwrights, who exhibit distrust of and irony toward the metaphysical Word," she does not detail the relationship between this generation and specific context of Ireland in the 1930s.  

The relationship between Beckett's development in Ireland and his engagement with experiments and movements in European modernism is crucial for an understanding of his work in the 1930s. This is as true for his fiction as for his poetry. As Harrington and others have shown, Beckett's writing from Dream of Fair to Middling Women to Watt was deeply engaged with national culture. Its formal techniques and preoccupations also evolved from a concern with the exploration of relationships between representation and reality. In his response to national literary culture, Beckett developed a form of Irish late modernism.

The examination and complication of the relationship between art and society was characteristic of late modernism in the inter-war period, including the experimental derivative and underwhelming experiments, mined mainly for potential illumination of Beckett's later career. See Norma Bouchard, Céline, Gadda, Beckett: Experimental Writing of the 1930s (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), pp.123-30, for a discussion of this tradition.

21 Bouchard, p.11, p.133.
avant garde centred on Paris. The status of aesthetic representation in the social world also held a special relevance in the context of 1930s Ireland. In a post-revolutionary state increasingly dominated by conservative cultural agendas, the institutionalisation of art and the formulation of narratives of national self-definition were both central and fraught, and were vigorously contested by the generation after the Revival. The ongoing definition of independent Ireland also heightened the sense of interaction between nation and world characteristic of modernism. Jennifer Birkett and Stan Smith highlight the plurality and fluidity of this process:

If we are to speak of modernisms, as Peter Nicholls has rightly proposed, then we must also speak of Europes, in the plural. Individual modernist writers engaged in an active dialogue with a differentiated Europe which was neither a monolithic unity not a mere disparate congress of autonomous nation states.²²

This dialogue took on particular resonance in the exploration of independent Irish national identity.

Birkett and Smith’s argument is based on a useful definition of modernism put forward by Erin G Carlston, who suggests that modernism expressed

a close engagement with questions emerging from nineteenth-century discourses about individual and social bodies: questions not only about sexuality but also about the definition of the nation, the significance of racial difference, and the meaning of individuality and subjectivity in an age of mass culture.²³

In this formulation, the central concerns of modernism, and particularly the reassessment of these questions in the 1930s, were extremely relevant to those faced by Irish writers. In the range of specific national situations which lay behind the plural European modernisms, Ireland’s position was less hospitable than others to the development of an indigenous avant garde. Cleary describes the “vagaries of Ireland’s colonial history, including the peculiar alignment of industrialisation with Britain,” that meant that modernity “could not be conductor or lightning rod for a modernist cultural efflorescence of the kind that issued from other European

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industrial enclaves also encased within largely agrarian societies." Additionally, in the inter-war period, the cultural institutions against which the avant garde positioned itself were themselves in the process of formation. This meant that radical aesthetic experimentation occupied a different and perhaps more limited space than elsewhere in Europe. The drives and preoccupations which characterised these late modernist avant gardes did exist in various forms in Dublin, however. It was in negotiation between these forces and developments abroad, in Paris and London most of all, that Beckett's 1930s aesthetic was formed.

Beckett's fiction in the 1930s combined the specific discourses of cultural nationalism in Ireland with the deconstruction of narrative order characteristic of late modernist fiction. Specifically, his earliest fiction interrogated the construction of an Irish avant garde. He satirised the contradictions evident in a self-conscious elite who aimed to incorporate progressive aesthetic and political rhetoric with a role in a conservative national culture. Beckett's critique of Dublin's 'intelligentsia' was that of an insider. While mocking the postures of the Irish avant garde, the formal strategies of his writing implicated his own fictions among the narratives of self-definition which competed in 1930s Ireland. Self-conscious awareness of narrative and cultural positioning characterised not only Beckett's fiction, but the work of his contemporaries. The Gate Theatre represented an alternative version of Irish late modernism closely related to Beckett's own. Examination of the Theatre's publications, in particular the journal *Motley*, and of some of the new writing it staged, reveals the extent to which Beckett's fiction was informed by an Irish avant garde. Both Beckett's writing and that of his contemporaries represented a national formulation of the international development of modernism.

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3.1 Modernist fiction and national identity

In Valentine Cunningham’s assessment of British writing in the 1930s, one of the key characteristics he identifies is restlessness. He describes the preoccupation of many writers with a sense of the marginal and limited experience offered by Britain.25 A recurring theme in British writing of this period, especially among the generation following the high modernists, was that “[i]mportance, creative innovativeness, the centres of art and politics [were] sited away from Britain.”26 For many this feeling was manifested in frequent travel throughout the decade, often to “the cultural novelties and releasing excitements” of the great cities of Europe. Paris especially remained a favoured destination of those wishing to expand their horizons beyond the tired gentility of Britain. Cunningham notes the dimming of Parisian lustre after the 1920s, however, and the “place to be” was the perceived decadence and progressiveness of Germany.27

Unsettled relocation recurred in 1930s fiction. The exhilaration and excitement of new experience and discovery was partnered with insecurity, dislocation and disillusion. Among numerous illustrations of these characteristic anxieties, Cunningham notes Elizabeth Bowen’s vivid evocation of the mobile and unsettled state of mind. In The Death of the Heart the phrase ‘skidding about’ typifies the sense of “the whole civilized world agog with unsettledness, all its bourgeois occupants condemned to reel through a cinematic blur of unsettling experiences.”28 Bowen’s frequent movement between Ireland and London provided a particular national dimension to this characteristic of 1930s writing.

It is not surprising that Irish writers should share the restless and unsettled sense expressed in contemporary British writing. As with Bowen, this could be focused

25 Cunningham’s comprehensive examination of this theme includes discussion of Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNeice and others part of the loosely defined ‘Auden generation’, as well as both older and younger writers. See British Writers of the Thirties (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.341-76.
26 Cunningham, p.341.
27 Ibid., p.345, 347.
28 Ibid., p.359.
around a dual Anglo-Irish heritage, leading to shuttling between London and Ireland. It was also true of writers from a range of backgrounds, however, and not restricted to the Protestant middle class. The group of younger poets frequently seen as representing an alternative Irish modernism, dominantly urban middle class but from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds and often rooted in the professional bourgeois rather than Anglo-Irish gentry, as was the case with Beckett, are often characterised by geographical mobility.²⁹

Unlike the writers discussed by Cunningham, viewed as forming a major part of British culture in the period, the movements of Irish writers are almost always seen as flight from Irish literary culture, not as forming part of it. Particular issues did make Ireland unusually difficult for writers, especially those concerned with self-conscious experimentation. The paucity of publishing outlets, including few literary magazines compared to larger capitals, the small potential market for experimental literature, and the pressures of censorship, all contributed economic as well as social drives for the writer to relocate. This is reflected in the frequent discussion of the possibilities of employment in Beckett and MacGreevy’s correspondence.³⁰

Through size alone, Dublin could only offer more limited possibilities for economic self sufficiency than London or Paris.

Anti-censorship campaigners, notably Séan O’Faoláin, frequently stressed the stifling effects of censorship, with social pressure and cultural conservatism as well as

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²⁹ See for example J.C.C. Mays’ summary of this group of writers, which includes Beckett, Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, as well as Charles Donnolly, Niall Montgomery, George Reavey, Brian O’Nolan and MacGreevy. He describes them as “[t]hose who differently looked to Joyce as an exemplary figure” and “found little support. They mostly went abroad, and their recognition at home was delayed until the nineteen-sixties” (Introduction to Collected Poems of Denis Devlin, ed. Mays (Dublin: Dedalus, 1989), p.23. That Mays includes the decidedly Dublin-based O’Nolan in this list suggests the difficulty in defining these writers through their ‘exile’.

³⁰ As well as constant discussion of potential publication opportunities, Beckett was preoccupied throughout the early 1930s with job applications — he considered teaching in both Milan and Manchester in January 1933 for example, and later that year he unsuccessfully applied to the National Gallery in London (Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (eds), The Letters of Samuel Beckett I: 1929-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.147-48). Under even more financial pressure, MacGreevy’s correspondence with Richard Aldington, TS Eliot and Charles Prentice, as well as with Beckett, suggests that the search for income and employment defined his life throughout the 1930s, and included consideration of work in Ireland (for the Irish Press in 1932, for example) as well as London and Paris (SB to TM, 8 October 1932, Letters p.127).
publishing limitations contributing to the inhospitality of the Irish literary scene.³¹

The publication of material officially deemed obscene could of course lead to stigma and resentment. Frank O’Connor’s letter in the Irish Times in response to the banning of O’Faoláin’s 1936 Bird Alone highlighted this effect:

> There is not an indecent line in it [Bird Alone]. Yet O’Faoláin is paraded before the public view as a common pornographer in company with the authors of Women Had to Do It and A Lover Would be Nice. His property is confiscated and the law allows him no defence or appeal... By adopting the profession of literature, O’Faoláin has put himself outside the pale of decent society and shown himself unworthy of our great Gaelic heritage of intolerance and indecency.³²

It is worth noting, however, that although censorship undoubtedly contributed to a sense of ‘intolerance and indecency’ in Irish literary culture, and although many writers expressed ethical and intellectual opposition to the policy, the direct effect on some groups of writers was less devastating. There is evidence that for Beckett and his peers, to be officially deemed obscene was something of a badge of honour. Writing to MacGreevy in 1931 about the publication of the poem ‘Alba’ in the Dublin Magazine, Beckett mocked the lengths which might be gone to in order to discover obscenity:

> I was told he and his committee had examined it horizontally, longitudinally and diagonally for fear of an obscene anagram! So now I know why he wouldn’t publish ‘the lips of her desire were grey’.³³

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³¹ O’Faoláin’s campaign against the operation of Irish censorship (although not against censorship in principle) in the Bell and after, has influenced much critical discussion of the policy’s pernicious effects. Michael Adams’ detailed analysis of responses to censorship does however note that after the flurry of comment surrounding the preparation of the 1929 Act, censorship was not a prominent issue in the 1930s, and opposition to the policy did not become common until the 1940s. Then, the Bell led a debate, which appeared in the Senate and the press, on the Act’s effects on books and literary culture, and highlighted the increasing anachronism of Irish censorship internationally. See Adams, Censorship: the Irish experience (Dublin: Sceptre Books, 1968), p.67, p.82, p.96-97.

³² Irish Times, 21 September 1936, quoted in Adams, pp.74-75. Bird Alone was the only book whose banning was appealed under the terms of the 1929 Act, but remained banned until 1947. Adams comments that while the controversy lasted several weeks and led to calls for an appeals board, this was an isolated case in a period when liberals generally remained silent on the issue of censorship (p.75).

³³ SB to TM, 9 October 1931, TCD MS 10402/20. The line is from the poem published as ‘Yoke of Liberty’ in The European Caravan. James Knowlson records Beckett’s belief that the poem was rejected because of O’Sullivan’s assumption that the quoted line referred to “the woman’s genitalia” (Damned to Fame (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p.135). Rather than marginalising Beckett from Irish literary culture, his experience of official and unofficial censorship confirmed his membership of an existing literary group. In 1937, Beckett was branded a “bawd and blasphemer from Paris” during the trial of Oliver St. John Gogarty for libel against Beckett’s uncle Henry Sinclair. While demonstrating the attitudes of aspects of officialdom to literary avant gardism, the incident showed Beckett’s involvement in the intimacies of Dublin literary culture. As Harrington describes it,
The following year, Beckett again recounted in a humorous, not resentful, tone his emerging reputation for obscenity, when he told MacGreevy that both Seumas O'Sullivan and Percy Ussher had heard that "I had been writing a book of unparalleled obscenity. But he [Ussher] meant it as a compliment."  

This ridiculing of censorship, and evident awareness of the prestige of falling victim to it, pervaded Beckett’s comments on the issue. In his 1935 article on ‘Censorship in the Saorstat’ he mocked the policy and highlighted the impossibility of its aspirations, with a characteristic emphasis on the gap between reality and the preferred narrative of national self definition:

> to amateurs of morbid sociology this measure may appeal as a curiosity of panic legislation, the painful tension between life and thought finding issue in a constitutional belch, the much reading that is a weariness exercised in 21 sections. Sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter suit well together. Paradise peopled with virgins and the earth with decorticated multiparas.

As with many of Beckett’s comments on censorship, and in line with Adams’ analysis of literary responses in the period, Beckett focused on the Censorship Act’s attempt to control the dissemination of material on contraception and sex education. He did go on to list the famous literary authors featuring on the register of banned books, and finally mentioned his own registration number, with mock-pompous recognition of the brandishing of such as a sign of progressive credibility.

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"Beckett’s role was not as a passive victim profoundly alienated from Ireland [...] but as new player in a long-running local game" (Harrington, p.85).

34 SB to TM, August 1932, TCD MS 10402/31. The attitude to censorship of Beckett and his circle demonstrates the difference in his position from that of a writer such as O’Faoláin. Like many of his contemporaries in Ireland and abroad, Beckett had no aspirations to a popular market. Writing for a self-consciously intellectual elite, censorship could be considered in frivolous terms. The writers on whom its impact was more significant were those, like O’Faoláin, hoping to influence national culture by engaging a broad readership.

35 ‘Censorship in the Saorstat’ in Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment, Ruby Cohn (ed.), (London: John Calder, 2001), pp.84-88, p.87. The article was commissioned by The Bookman in 1935, but was not published.

36 "My own registered number is 465, number four hundred and sixty-five, if I may presume to say so" (Ibid., p.88).

Beckett’s satirical opposition to Irish moral legislation, based on the policy’s ideology more than its effects, was evident in the 1929 ‘Che Sciagura’. The article satirised the Censorship Act by elaborating the multiplicity of routes in and out of Ireland, mocking ideological attempts to ‘sterilise’ national culture (‘Che Sciagura’ in T.C.D.: A College Miscellany (14 November 1929), p.42). Both satires were incorporated into Watt. The account of Louit, which dismantles the academic
Apart from the specific national dimensions of the problems of publication and censorship experienced by experimental writers everywhere, Irish modernism in the 1930s experienced and expressed other pressures and drives. These are succinctly summarised by Mays:

In particular, unlike their American and English counterparts, Irish writers of the nineteen-thirties lived in a society where a political revolution on behalf of democracy and self-determination had actually happened within their lifetimes. Irish modernism had begun in the eighteen-nineties, a generation earlier than in America and England, and the relation between art and life, which caused anguish to writers as different as Oppen and Stephen Spender, had already been confronted by Yeats. For the poets and the dramatists of the Revival, Romantic Ireland was dead and gone long before 1916.

The negotiation between art and life, thrown into focus by the heated political climate of writing in the 1930s, preoccupied Parisian avant gardists, including

institutionalisation of Gaelicism, is introduced by a short digression on ‘Bando’, a stimulant “no longer to be obtained in this unfortunate country.” As Harrington points out, Bando is a thinly veiled stab at the 1935 contraceptive ban (Harrington, p. 132). Watt’s description of the prohibited item, which “cannot enter our ports, nor cross our northern frontier, if not in the form of a casual, hazardous and surreptitious dribble,” is reminiscent of his mockery of censorship (Watt, Paris: Olympia, 1953; repr. London: John Calder, 1976), p.169). In both he laments the attempt to make concrete boundaries which are inevitably permeable.

Concerns about censorship beset many of Beckett’s contemporaries in London and Paris as well as in Ireland. The issue was often mentioned in correspondence between MacGreevy and Richard Aldington, for example – Aldington discouraged MacGreevy from becoming involved in the defence of the poet Montalk, accused of obscenity: “will you accept my word and Charles [Prentice]’s that M[ontalk]’s work cannot be justified either in law or as literature. If it were Joyce or Lawrence or Sam or anyone that we believed in, I would be headlong in it. But M. is simply a vain foolish boy who is compromising an important cause by his silly nastiness. Those supporting the appeal are making a mistake. It will simply make things harder for all the rest by putting up the backs of the police and lawyers over a case where the writer is clearly in the wrong, i.e. mere sexual slang without any artistic motive or reason whatsoever” (RA to TM, 25 February 1932, TCD MS 8107/68).

Responses to Beckett’s early works from British as well as Irish publishers were cautious about their possible obscenity. See for example the reader’s report for Dream of Fair to Middling Women obtained by Jonathan Cape, which called it “indecent” (Letters, p.120). Beckett’s contact with Jack Kahane in 1938 is also notable. The founder of the Obelisk Press, established to capitalise on the grey area between obscene material and the Anglo-American avant garde, asked Beckett to translate the Marquis de Sade’s Les 120 Jours de Sodome. Beckett was interested in the project, but was concerned that “since he would never agree to translate it anonymously, it might affect his ‘own future freedom of literary action in England and USA’. And he asked, ‘Would the fact of my being known as the translator, and the very literal translation, of “the most utter filth” tend to spike me as a writer myself? Could I be banned and muzzled retrospectively?’” (Knowlson, p.293). Beckett’s concern about ‘freedom of action in England and USA’ show that the negative consequences of association with indecency were not just an Irish concern. Beckett eventually accepted Kahane’s offer, but no contract was provided and the translation was not undertaken. See Letters, p.604, pp.610-11.

Beckett's acquaintances among the little magazines, as well as the 'Auden generation' in Britain. This issue was just as pressing for Irish writers operating in the wake of the Revival and the revolution. Going on to highlight the "strong mimetic, anti-modernist element" in Irish writing of the 1930s, Mays overstates contemporary perception of dual options available to the modernist writer. Using 'Recent Irish Poetry', Mays describes Beckett laying down a straightforward choice "between Yeats, the Twilighters and their later representatives, on the one hand, and Joyce, Paris and self-conscious experiment on the other."39 He rightly calls this an "exacerbated analysis, which formulates a choice as a dilemma and thereby distorts it,"40 and emphasises Devlin's mediation between nationalism and internationalism. In both his writing, engaged with the European tradition and concerned with nationality, and his route to geographical mobility in the service of the state as a diplomat, Devlin's career undermines this posited opposition.

Beckett too negotiated between the extremes that Mays perceives in 'Recent Irish Poetry', and in this sense Mays' reading of the article is itself distorted. A more nuanced reading is suggested by Lois Gordon. Unlike many analyses of Beckett's early life, Gordon sees the "vitality" of Dublin's "cultural scene," which she describes as "diverse and vibrant," and while commenting that "we can only speculate on the extent of Beckett's interest (and participation) in it" she provides evidence of both.41 'Recent Irish Poetry', she suggests critiques contemporary Irish writing not for its national focus, but for its "'flight from self-awareness,' its abandonment of 'the centre' for the circumference, regardless of its peasant or cosmopolitan setting."42

'Recent Irish Poetry' was manifestly a call for engagement in Irish literary culture, not for its rejection. The sense of superfluity, distraction and irrelevance that Beckett described in the poetry of the 'antiquarians' is opposed to an awareness of

42 Gordon, p.28.
the new thing that has happened, or the old thing that has happened again, namely the breakdown of the object, whether current, historical, mythological or spook [...] rupture in the lines of communication.\textsuperscript{43}

This often quoted phrase demanded the poetic examination of “self-perception,” and called for the process of interaction between subject and object to be acknowledged as the centre of poetry. This was not however an encouragement to retreat from engagement with the outer world, conceived in the essay in terms of national consciousness. Instead Beckett called for contemporary poetry to return to the central issue of the relationship between art and life, aesthetics and politics in the broadest sense. The ‘antiquarians’ were condemned not for the prioritising of nationality, but for the failure to get to its heart, instead focusing on the distracting ‘circumference’ of outdated tropes, “whether current, historical, mythological or spook.”

Beckett’s rhetorical flourish involved an opposition, between “antiquarians and others,” which as his placing of MacGreevy between the categories implied was an oversimplification. The choice Beckett laid out, however, was not between nation and exile, but between forward and backward looking aesthetics. He did not hesitate to define these ‘others’ in national terms, and specifically targets the process of institutionalisation of Irish art. Asking “What further interest can attach to such assumptions as these [the thematic preoccupations of the antiquarians]?” Beckett answers “None but the academic. And it is in this connection that our lately founded Academy may be said to meet a need and enjoy a function.”\textsuperscript{44} The comment contextualised his argument in the establishment of approved, often state sponsored, institutions and academies for national art, a process which was taking place throughout the 1930s. Beckett’s “Irish modernist manifesto”\textsuperscript{45} encouraged contemporary Irish writing to reject this process, and instead take the examining, oppositional role of the avant garde.

\textsuperscript{43} ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, The Bookman, August 1934 (under the pseudonym Andrew Belis). In Disjecta, pp. 70-76, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 71.
\textsuperscript{45} Patricia Coughlan, “The Poetry is Another Pair of Sleeves”: Beckett, Ireland and Modernist Lyric Poetry in Coughlan and Davis (eds), pp. 173-208, p. 178.
‘Recent Irish Poetry’ demonstrated Beckett’s engagement with an oppositional trend in Irish writing of the 1930s. His association with European experimental writing combined with this engagement to define much of his creative project in the decade: the attempts in his writing to explore and reconfigure the relationship between art and life in the context of the increasing institutionalisation of national culture. In this context, his geographical mobility, ‘skidding about’ throughout the decade, can be seen as emblematic of the dynamics of his literary approach as well as part of a more general trend in British and European writing; his turn towards Europe was less a renunciation of Irish literary culture than a conscious attempt to rewrite it.

The extent of Beckett’s departures and returns, the “oscillation” described by Vivian Mercier,⁴⁶ is well documented.⁴⁷ During these movements, however, Beckett was self-consciously an Irish writer even while abroad. Knowlson comments that in 1937, Beckett had spent “only a few consecutive months in Ireland,”⁴⁸ but he was involved with Irish literary culture when out of Dublin as well as when at home. The idea that a focus on Europe could not be held simultaneously with a national role was present in the 1930s, through the influence of those like Daniel Corkery who described those who left as ‘wild geese,’⁴⁹ and while it has been challenged by many subsequent critical

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⁴⁶ Beckett/Beckett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.30. Mercier’s discussion is notable for its contextualisation of Beckett in Irish tradition, as he had done in the 1962 The Irish Comic Tradition. He does, however, see Beckett as facing a choice between Ireland and the world, one of the series of oppositions which structures his analysis. He describes the early work as derivative and defined by a growing alienation from Ireland, and his conclusion that Beckett’s artistic greatness depended on a “common human predicament” explored by a “unique self” is part of the universalising trend in early Beckett criticism (p.45).

⁴⁷ Beckett’s movements are recorded in detail by both his biographers and in the Letters. Broadly, significant travels included his summers in France and Italy in 1926 and 1927, Germany in 1928, his years in Paris between 1928 and 1930, regular movements between Germany, Paris, London and Dublin in 1931 and 1932, the London residence between December 1933 and December 1935, his trip around Germany in 1936/37, and his more or less decisive move to Paris in late 1937.

⁴⁸ Knowlson, p.262.

⁴⁹ Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature: A Study (Cork: Cork University Press, 1931), pp.4-5. Corkery’s analysis was a significant point of controversy for both MacGreevy and O’Faoláin. The insularity of conservative cultural nationalism which, for them, Corkery represented, was a less frequent reference point in Beckett’s fiction than were alternative versions of cultural nationalism which emphasised Ireland’s position in Europe. Harrington describes Beckett rejecting both Corkery and his opponents: Corkery’s relevance for Beckett was not, he argues, that “Beckett refutes Corkery; it is
assessments, the sense often remains that Beckett’s regular departures from Ireland signified his alienation from Irishness.

Beckett was, like MacGreevy, associated with those Irish writers who moved between Dublin, London and Paris. Like MacGreevy, he was involved with the circles surrounding Joyce and transition. While MacGreevy developed the potential of literature to order the world in his version of Catholic modernism, Beckett adopted the deconstructive impulses of late modernism to interrogate the relationship between art and society in Ireland. In emphasising the fluidity of national boundaries, Beckett developed a variety of Irish modernist fiction in which national identity was constructed in an international frame.

In thematic terms, Beckett’s fiction between Dream of Fair to Middling Women and Watt was preoccupied with ‘skidding about’. Travel, the importation and transformation of international culture, and the crossing of fraught but permeable borders recur throughout. These themes are identified by Cunningham as recurring in 1930s British fiction, and he describes the practical experiences of travel in Europe working into concerns about thresholds and borders:

rather that Corkery and his formidable opponents together constitute a cultural impasse that is the social milieu of More Pricks Than Kicks.” Harrington’s opposition between “Corkery’s reverence for ‘what was’ [and] O’Faolain’s liberation from it” oversimplifies, however, Beckett’s portrayal of attitudes to Europe in Irish literary culture (Harrington, pp.52-53).

50 Like MacGreevy, Beckett published in transition and his poetry appeared in The European Caravan (the poems which appeared were ‘Hell Crane to Starling’, ‘Casket of Pralinen for the Daughter of Dissipated Mandarin’, ‘Text’ and ‘Yoke of Liberty’. See Letters, p.697). Lois Gordon convincingly establishes the extent of Beckett’s engagement with the Parisian avant garde. She does, however, tend to follow the critical tradition established in Raymond Federman’s Journey to Chaos of viewing the 1930s works as a progression towards the greater achievement of the later ones. See Gordon, pp.32-52 for her discussion of Beckett’s involvement with transition, surrealism and other Parisian movements. She describes Jolas’ 1932 ‘Poetry is Vertical’ manifesto, signed by Beckett: “That their primary goal was the “hegemony of the inner life over the outer life” relates to Beckett’s later use of unconscious thought functioning in his work. Beckett successfully expressed the universal and “transcendental ‘I’” as he moved toward its “final disintegration” – in the creative act of the I’s measuring itself. His heroes, each in search of an irreducible self or voice, became the refinement of each previous fictional hero and moved to silence in the impossible task of touching the core of inner and outer reality” (Gordon, p.42). The last of these sentences shows the influence of Federman’s reading of the early fiction, which as his title suggests he sees as a journey towards the negation of meaning, the controlled chaos, of his work from the Trilogy onwards. His comments on More Pricks Than Kicks, “the work of a young but talented writer who had yet to find himself,” are typical – Belacqua he says “deserves to be remembered because through him are focused the essential themes of the works to come” (Federman, p.54).
for every border offered the threshold’s challenge, with the ancient taboos now actualized, released from myth and fiction into the substantive shapes of inquisitive border-guards, deterring inspectors of one’s identity and pretensions as these were embodied and inscribed in one’s passport (newly introduced for all countries only in 1915). Europe, a kaleidoscope of frontiers and frontier-guards, kept bumping you relentlessly up against threshold anxieties.  

These thresholds were frequently experienced by Beckett in his travels through the 1930s, and his letters often describe the trials of travel which gave concrete form to the resistance and permeability of borders. From the opening of the first main section of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, as Belacqua “sat on the stanchion at the end of the Carlyle Pier” having waved farewell to the “slob of a girl called Smeraldina-Rima”, who has announced she was “taking herself off almost at once to Vienna to study the pianoforte”, to *Murphy’s* circling between London and Ireland, to *Watt’s* closing scene in a train station, journeys, departures and arrivals, and the crossing of borders feature throughout the 1930s fiction. Beckett returned repeatedly to these tropes, and his use of them developed significantly through the decade, as the specific national movements became more abstract and the scale of these movements more confined.

*Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, drawing heavily on Beckett’s own movements in the period around its composition, is largely structured around Belacqua’s

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51 Cunningham, p.366.
52 An example of Beckett’s encounters with travel anxiety was his forced departure from Paris in May 1932. As Knowlson describes, the assassination of the French president triggered the compulsory examination of paperwork for all foreigners in Paris, and Beckett lacked the required *carte de séjour*. He spent a short period in London before returning to Dublin in August 1932 (Knowlson, p.160). Beckett’s poetry from this period, in particular the ‘troubadour’ ‘Sanies’ and ‘Serena’ series, used recurring images of transition and transience. In ‘Serena II’, for example, “this clonic earth […] is fat half dead the rest is free-wheeling,” and evokes the restless anxiety of futile travel: “with whatever trust of panic we went out [/] with so much we shall return” (*Collected Poems in English and French* (London: John Calder, 1977; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1984), pp.23-24).
54 O’Brien and Fournier introduce the novel as having being written quickly in the summer of 1932 (*Dream*, p.vi), but as John Pilling has pointed out, this is disproved by Beckett’s correspondence, which mentioned ‘the German comedy’ as early as May 1931 (*A Companion to Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (Tallahassee: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2004), p.18). Biographical travels featuring in the novel include Beckett’s trip to Italy, featuring the “ill-fated walking expedition by Lake Lugano” (Knowlson, p.73); his visit to Peggy Sinclair in Vienna in Autumn 1928, prior to his arrival in Paris later that year; and his later visit to Peggy and her family in Kassel in 1931.
relationships with three women. These are inseparable from their geographical locations – the Smeraldina in Vienna, and then Kassel, the Syra-Cusa in Paris, and the Alba in Dublin. The narrative is taken up, therefore, with Belacqua’s frequent and repeated movements between these locations, and his relationship with these places and his own mobility between them suggests a version of the endemic restlessness described by Cunningham.

The autobiographical elements of the novel have been useful in the tracking of Beckett’s own movements and experiences in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and specificities of place and people are easily apparent – it is this that leads Knowlson to comment on the “strong sense of place,” the readily identifiable details of locations as well as the vivid recreation of Beckett’s “everyday life.” In narrative and formal presentation, however, the distinctiveness of Belacqua’s destinations is combined with an unsettled quality, a fluidity as they threaten to merge into each other. Belacqua’s constant relocation is inseparable from his state of mind, his reluctant restlessness in search of stability. With their variety within a pattern, his travels are an early manifestation of the constantly moving confinement which recurs through this fiction. Belacqua’s endless fluctuation and repetition, as he searches for an undefined form of contentment, is compatible with Wylie’s verdict on the possibility in *Murphy*:

‘The syndrome known as life is too diffuse to admit of palliation. For every symptom that is eased, another is made worse. The horse leech’s daughter is a closed system. Her quantum of wantum cannot vary.’

Belacqua ‘skids about’ throughout *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, and national and international contexts blur into each other as he searches for a bearable, if not hospitable, society. Belacqua’s doomed compulsion to find transformation in relocation is played out against the paradoxical status of national boundaries – they offer the potential for difference, even revelation, but maintain a permeability that undermines the distinctive autonomy of the nation state.

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55 Knowlson, p.155.
Carlston describes concern with the definition of national boundaries as characteristic of modernism (and of fascism):

While the notion of the nation state as the highest form of social organization prevailed throughout Europe after World War I, the question of where and how to draw the boundaries of particular nations – literally and figuratively – was deeply perplexed [...] the tropes of nationality and exile recur insistently in both fascist rhetoric and modernist literature.  

Belacqua’s exploration of these boundaries suggests in its outlines freedom, novelty and exploration, but the promise of renewal in relocation is not fulfilled. His aspirations are relentless mocked by the narrator, and his own self-consciousness, and dismissed as the thought that “it would be nice to be slavered and slabbered on elsewhere for a change.”

In this process, the “perplexed” question of national boundaries is represented by the frequent journeys which punctuate Belacqua’s narrative. These are presented as sordid and tedious ordeals, while retaining, with the tone of self-referential mockery which characterises the text, a trace of desired glamour and romance. The Smeraldina’s initial departure is “the supreme adieu”, but is examined with such cruel detail that it becomes comically bathetic. The romance of departure becomes grubby and ridiculous, as the Smeraldina’s wave, “an idiotic clockwork movement of her arm,” is “enough to churn [Belacqua’s] mind into the requisite storm of misery” for him to work himself into a “teary ejaculation.”

The separation does not last for long, and Belacqua’s own departure to visit Vienna, a few pages later, is

- a Mallarmean farewell from the Carlyle Pier. At Ostend he secured a corner seat in a through horsebox to Wien and defended it for 29 hours against all comers. The last 599 kilometres on beer (terrible stuff!), and in a horsebox, not a corridor coach, which explains why he stepped hastily out of the train at the Westbahnhof and looked feverishly up and down the platform.

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58 Dream, p.12.
59 Dream, pp.3-4.
60 Dream, p.12.
The length, the grotty detail, and the insalubrious effects of travel feature throughout, as the romance of travel is exposed as “third class insomnia among the reluctantly military philologists asleep and armed as to nasals and dentals.” In the constant assault on Belacqua’s sensibility by the unpleasantness of physical and social reality, custom officials, fellow passengers and bodily needs intrude on the promised freedom of travel. The narrator delights in Belacqua’s degradation, as in his first arrival in Paris:

The facts – let us have facts, facts, plenty of facts – were: his feet, that they were in treacle, his fetid head, a swoon of halitosis, his altogether too tainted conditions.

Journeys are lengthy ordeals, but Belacqua is constantly compelled to indulge in the fantasy of relocation. The narrator satirises the realist impulse towards ‘facts’ in conjunction with Belacqua’s aestheticist desire to escape from reality. Despite the arduous difficulty of travel, arrival provides no satisfaction, as all places reflect the unsettled dislocation that characterises Belacqua’s relationship with the outside world. Even the culmination of his travels in his final return to Dublin (“two channels and 29 hours if we went over Ostend”), towards which the narrator has been trying to work for quite some time, resists the closure promised by a narrative journey. Belacqua remains embroiled in the “muck” of a fragmenting and unsettled existence, as “just as we feared the Alba and Co. have turned out to be as miserable a lot of croakers as Belacqua at his best and hoarsest and the entire continental circus.”

The conjunction of the Dublin ‘miserable lot of croakers’ and the ‘entire continental circus’ recurs in More Pricks Than Kicks. Beckett refined and revised much material from Dream of Fair to Middling Women in this collection as well as adding new stories, and a noticeable change is Belacqua’s loss of geographical mobility as he remains in Dublin. While he has become increasingly fixed, the porous nature of borders remains, as Belacqua’s society is composed of a seething

61 Dream, p.64.
62 Ibid., p.32.
63 Ibid., p.187.
64 Ibid., p.179.
mix of cultural influences. The two channels and 29 hours that separate Dublin from Europe remain passable, even if Belacqua has lost the ability to cross them. In cultural terms, the significance of national boundaries is equalled by their permeability.

A related sense is present in Murphy. The quest to London which dominates the novel retains Ireland as its thematic centre. Irish cultural reference points recur to an extent that J.C.C. Mays has described the novel as a *roman à clef*. Mays’ reading of Murphy as a “farewell to the Dublin literary scene” does not reflect the extent to which Murphy utilises narratives of Irish culture in its interrogation of the relationship between idealism and realism. The various modes of national self-definition invoked in the novel are relentlessly undermined. Beckett does not present an idealised internationalism in opposition to Irish repression, however; narratives of cultural nationalism are inseparable from the novel’s deflation of all attempts to order and control reality in an aesthetic frame, including its own. The sense of unsettled mobility that dominated Dream of Fair to Middling Women remains, but becomes more abstract and literary, rather than literal. Instead of the details of journeys between specific locations which structured the earlier novel, mobility and restriction are woven into the fabric of the text.

65 “Miss Counihan in the novel is Ireland’s Kathleen Ni Houlihan, whom the novel’s characters chase round in circles at a distance from anything central. Neary is a Trinity philosopher named H.S. Macran, a great Hegelian and eccentric, who was often to be found in Neary’s pub. Austin Ticklepenny is Austin Clarke. Mr. Endon has touches of Beckett’s friend, Thomas MacGreevy, and Mr. Willoughby Kelly of Joyce” (‘Young Beckett’s Irish Roots’, in *Irish University Review* 14.1 (1984), pp.18-33, p.23). It is notable that these identifications reflect a version of Irish culture characterised less by insularity than by intellectualism and internationalism. Although Neary, a Cork mentor, fears falling “among Gaels” and not being able to escape, the philistine insularity often figured as Beckett’s Irish environment is not his portrayal here (Murphy, p.6).

66 Austin Ticklepenny’s “gaelic prosodoturfy” skewers the ‘antiquarian’ poetry Beckett saw as the legacy of the Revival. Neary’s encounter with the statue of Cuchulain in the GPO, where he “flung aside his hat, sprang forward, seized the dying hero and began to dash his head against his buttocks, such as they are,” is a crude comment on the official institutionalisation of romantic cultural nationalism. Murphy’s posthumous desire to be disposed of in the Abbey toilet, “if possible during the performance of a piece,” gestures towards the cultural institutions in which the ideals of an earlier generation of national modernism had become established (Murphy, p.53, p.28, p.151). John Harrington details the context of ‘failed cultural nationalism’ in which Beckett’s satire operated. While Harrington convincingly describes Murphy as “an illustration of alienating effects in its dissatisfaction with national terms of identity and collateral inability or willingness to depart from them or to reject them absolutely,” his figuring of the novel as an confounded attempt to escape from Ireland neglects the extent to which Irish cultural narratives formed the reference point for Beckett’s attitude to the ‘rupture in the lines of communication’ (Harrington, pp.82-108, p.107).
This is at its most extreme in Watt. Beckett’s war novel, written between 1942 and 1945, was begun in Paris and completed in Paris and Dublin, but was largely composed in Roussillon during the German occupation. This was a period of both enforced mobility, as Beckett was forced to flee Paris in the summer of 1942, and confinement - Beckett “found refuge from the Gestapo in the small village of Roussillon,” where he was to remain until 1945 - far more serious than the ‘skidding about’ of the Dream years. Its product, Watt, is the opposite of Dream of Fair to Middling Women in its geographical fixity. It takes place entirely in an unnamed but easily recognisable version of Beckett’s home area around Foxrock and Leopardstown. Despite the identifiable location, the abstraction of the setting has contributed to a tendency to see Watt as a decisive step in Beckett’s journey towards placeless universality. However, while the tone and structure of Watt is very different from the colourful effusion of Dream of Fair to Middling Women, the sense of place in both remains comparable. In Dream, the blurring and loss of distinction between places does not equate to placelessness. Watt shares the earlier work’s focus on identifiable details of place, but in place of Dream’s diffusion Watt condenses movement into a complex and heavily layered space.

The repetition and circularity of Belacqua’s travels in Dream of Fair to Middling Women are taken in Watt to their extreme. Watt’s journey to and from Knott’s house, the extended elaborations of deviation and repetition within a closed system which dominate the novel, and Watt’s structure itself (“Two, one, four, three, that was the order in which Watt told his story”) — at multiple levels in this formal experiment, all are versions of the culmination of Dream’s portrayal of the frustration of movement. The final scene of the novel, in the text if not in the

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67 Harrington, p. 110.
69 Harrington, p. 117.
70 See Harrington, pp. 143-47.
71 Watt, p. 214.
narrative structure, is a vivid representation of this preoccupation, as Watt lies still on the floor of a station surrounded by concerned officials and commuters.

Watt makes concrete the unsatisfactory and futile nature of movement first suggested in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. The final verdict on Belacqua’s desire to ‘be slavered and slabbered on elsewhere for a change,’ even then cynically self-aware, comes in *Watt’s* addenda: “for all the good that frequent departures out of Ireland had done him, he might just as well have stayed there.”72 Despite this final resignation, the drive for movement perpetuates. While operating within confinement, the novel is dominated not by stasis but by perpetual flux. The structure of the narrative suggests circularity, but the final image of the dawn – “as pretty a picture, in the early morning light, as a man could hope to meet with, in a day’s march”73 – contains the possibility of development. Progression remains a hope within *Watt*, even if only through as laborious exertion as Watt’s “way of advancing due east.”74

The novel’s most brutal scene of confinement comes at the peak of its self-referentiality. In part III, the strange ‘pavilions’ in which Watt tells his story to the narrator Sam are a disturbing picture of imprisonment:

> This garden was surrounded by a high barbed wire fence, greatly in need of repair, of new wire, of fresh barbs. Through this fence, where it was nor overgrown by briars and giant nettles, similar gardens, similarly enclosed, each with its pavilion, were on all sides distinctly to be seen.75

Even in this scene, however, borders can be passed through as well as seen through. Sam describes in detail the passages between fences a “treacherous channel” which could be crossed, although at risk of impalement. He recounts how “one fine day, of unparalleled brightness and turbulence, I found myself impelled, as though by some

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72 *Watt*, p.249.
73 Ibid., p.246.
74 This is “to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling his left leg as far as possibly towards the north [...] and so on, over and over again, many many times, until he reached his destination, and could sit down.” *Watt*, p.28.
75 *Watt*, p.154.
external agency, towards the fence, and discovered holes running through them all. Passing through these holes, Sam and Watt are reunited in the space between their gardens, and Watt's inverted, painstaking, but still progressing narrative is able to continue. In this scene, the permeability of fixed and fraught borders is at its most literal. Neither Sam nor Watt are content in the transitional space:

In Watt's garden, in my garden, we should have been more at our ease. But it never occurred to me to go back into my garden with Watt, or with him to go forward into his. But it never occurred to Watt to go back with me into his garden, or with me to go forward into mine. For my garden was my garden, and Watt's garden was Watt's garden, we had no common garden any more. So we walked to and fro, neither in his garden, in the way described.

The space between borders, "no-man's land, Hellespont or vacuum," is what makes narrative possible. In the closing scenes of Beckett's main period of English fiction, the negotiation of borders paradoxically concrete and permeable finally achieves a moment of settlement.

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76 Watt, p.155.
77 Ibid., p.162.
78 'Recent Irish Poetry', p.70.
3.2 Beckett’s Dublin

The condensation of place in *Watt* was a culmination of Beckett’s use of the trope of travel and return throughout the 1930s fiction. The crossing and recrossing of permeable borders is represented not as dispersal or relocation, but as a process of accumulation and layering. Through travel, both tourism and the movement of texts and ideas across national borders, multiple national cultures and influences are absorbed by Beckett’s characters and into the world of his novels. This does not result in deracination, however – both individuals and texts retain an Irish identity, and Dublin remains the centre of gravity. National identity is not lost, but made plural. The network of resonances and connections through which both characters and texts relate to their world is made more and more complex by the incorporation of multiple influences and allusions.

Beckett’s 1930s fiction is the production of the Dublin often ignored in narratives of the 1930s which emphasise Ireland’s insularity. His engagement with Irish culture was most intimate in his portrayal of a self-conscious Dublin avant garde. The society evoked in his fiction is the subject of biting satire and ironic scrutiny, but it is characterised by intellectual ambition and international awareness. Beckett was part of this society, and his engagement with it is inseparable from the self-satirisation which dominated the early fiction.

The incorporation of Europe into Dublin was a dominant theme of Beckett’s 1930s fiction. This is apparent from the earliest work in the structure of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. The novel begins and ends in Dublin, and the structure which the narrator so laboriously attempts to impose is geared towards the hopefully climactic return. Throughout Belacqua’s travels, the city is repeatedly invoked through his memories of home and sudden shifts of location. The Alba, “derelict daughter of kings,” the emblem of Belacqua’s Dublin, as the Smeraldina-Rima and
the Syra-Cusa are of Vienna/Kassel and Paris, interrupts the Paris narrative and reappears throughout until Belacqua's eventual reunion with her. 79

Dublin's role as the converging point of the novel is confirmed by the synecdochal Nemo episodes. Nemo's wanderings through Dublin are interspersed with and parallel Belacqua's through Europe. Despite their smaller scale, these do not contrast with Belacqua's apparently more wide-ranging exploration, but condense it, emphasising the layering of Dublin and Europe. Nemo is strongly associated with borders – his appearances centre around O'Connell Bridge, where his pose "curved over the western parapet" positions him between water and land as well as between banks. 80 The crossing and recrossing of borders in Belacqua's narrative is made extreme in this position of transition.

Belacqua himself joins Nemo in this position for a moment on his return to Dublin, but neither can retain this stillness. The moment is interrupted by the rushed and frantic movement of the Polar Bear, who "came cataracting" in chase of a tram "screaming past the Mansion House." 81 Nemo's pose leads to a final movement as his topple into the river is later recorded, reported by the "Twilight Herald" as "Felo-de-se from Natural Causes." Belacqua reads this in "a wayfarer's public near the Island Bridge" and is "[i]ntolerably moved almost immediately," convinced that "the late man, far from having done away with himself, had but by misadventure fallen in." 82

The violent effect of Nemo's death on Belacqua and the language of movement that surrounds him is an unsettling disruption to the momentum of the narrator's hoped-for resolution in the novel. This effect is increased by the brief adoption of an alternative form of metafictional play to the constant narratorial self-referentiality that dominates the text. In a moment prefiguring 'Sam's' appearance in Watt, the narrative shifts to "[y]ears later [...] in the course of a stroll in the

79 *Dream*, p.54.
80 Ibid., p.55.
81 Ibid., p.157.
82 Ibid., pp.183-84.
"Prater" as Belacqua recounts Nemo's death to a 'Mr. Beckett'. As well as providing a new jolt to the reader accustomed by this point to the narrator's commentary, the moment emphasises the absorption of Belacqua's European experience into Nemo's Dublin one. Both are "'John [...] of the Crossroads, Mr. Beckett. A borderman,'" as the correspondences between Belacqua's literal border-crossing and the liminal existence of Nemo is underlined:

Thus through Nemo came Belacqua to a little knowledge of himself and we (though too late for insertion) to a little knowledge of Belacqua, and by the end of Nemo were forewarned.  

Nemo's role remains obscure, but his strange intrusions into the text emphasise the incorporation of the experience of travel into the city of Dublin. Belacqua, like the many other well-travelled (or ostensibly so) characters in the novel, carries the influence of European travel with him, and as the narrator often ironically points out he is as likely as the rest of them to self-consciously highlight this. As Belacqua's later incarnation in More Pricks Than Kicks is accused, they all "make great play with your short stay abroad." The multiple cultural influences of which they make great play are so dominant in Beckett's presentation of Dublin society that the city is shown as permeated by them. Dublin is not shown as isolated from the world. Beckett's portrayal highlighted an aspect of Irish literary culture which undermines the opposition between nationalism and internationalism present in both contemporary and later critical discourse. The society he satirised attempted to combine the international with the national in a self-consciously modern cultural endeavour. Beckett's fiction presented Ireland's incorporation of European influence.

The process in Dream of Fair to Middling Women, through which Dublin increasingly comes to encompass the experience of elsewhere, is furthered in More Pricks Than Kicks. There, Beckett moves from the literal travel of his unpublished novel to a series of stories set entirely around Dublin, in which an older Belacqua endures a

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83 Dream, pp.185-86.
series of episodes of social and romantic failure even more satirically and comically presented. Critics who emphasise Beckett’s alienation from an oppressive national culture still note the centrality of Irish space in the early work. Seamus Deane, for example, describes how “Ireland’s nullity is [...] converted by Beckett into an image of desolation, a zone in which his creatures journey and discover that its ‘illimitable’ space is like infinity from which there is no escape.”  

The Dublin of the early fiction is illimitable in the sense that it is capable of connecting to and absorbing the rest of the world, although it retains a strong sense of identity. In contrast to Knowlson’s view of this strong sense of place in the novel, John Pilling argues that Dream of Fair to Middling Women deliberately neglects geographical identity. Paris, Vienna and Kassel are present vaguely and intermittently throughout the second main section, he argues, and this reflects the fluidity and transience of Beckett’s portrayal of travel. Pilling describes the presentation of Dublin in different terms to Deane, but still sees it as lacking the sense of “social cohesion” which made the city so strong a presence in the work of Joyce:

Beckett’s Dublin, like his novel, has become ‘unstitched’ (113), which enables him to suggest that all encounters are the product of chance, and that even a Christmas party, toward which everyone but Nemo seems to be making their way in section ‘THREE,’ has little to do with community, and is much more a matter of outsize egos intent on being heard above the hubbub.  

Pilling’s reading reflects the lack of coherent engagement and direction in the scene which centres on the Frica’s party. He neglects, however, the extent to which this community is portrayed as self-consciously combining a range of cultural projects in a ‘hubbub’ of influences and discourses. Rather than the barren negation of Deane’s image, the overwhelming sense of Dublin in the early fiction is of a profuse and hyper-fertile network of multiple ideas and ideologies. As Pilling points out, the Dream narrator’s attack on Balzac includes the rejection of the creation of a

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“chloroformed world,” but his refusal to portray a whole, coherent and static society is not necessarily the rejection of any engagement with the social world. The tensions Beckett exposed in the Dublin avant garde were between aspirations for a role in public culture, and self-perception as an intellectual elite.

Through *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks Than Kicks*, Beckett exhibits a high level of social awareness, directed towards the often ignored stratum of Dublin society with which he was intimately connected. The impression given by the fiction, the critical writing and Beckett’s biographical connections is of his involvement in a self-consciously intellectual and international milieu of writers, artists and socialites that considered itself as part the avant-garde of Irish culture as well as being engaged with European aesthetic developments. Beckett could be vicious in his satire of this group, but he mocked their outward-looking preoccupations rather than their insularity. His targeted their pretension, their self-dramatising, and their easy co-option of both national and international culture. The ‘unstitched’ nature of Dublin society – or at least of Belacqua’s experience of it – was not a result of emptiness but of constant flux.

The source of Belacqua’s name suggests his relationship to this society, of which he is scathing but inextricably a part. Dante’s Belacqua is a representative of passivity, unable to enter purgatory – “The heavens must first wheel about me, waiting outside, as long as in my lifetime.” Beckett took the idea of stillness within a whirl of activity but removes order from the outside system to leave chaos, a system devoid of meaning. Describing the relationship between Dante and Joyce in his essay on *Work in Progress*, Beckett described purgatory as “a flood of movement and utility.” In *More Pricks Than Kicks*, Belacqua’s purgatory is full of movement but not utility, and Dante’s divine system of wheeling heavens is debased into the vacant patter of a woman selling tickets to heaven:

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87 *Dream*, p.119.
89 ‘Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce’ in Cohn (ed.), *Disjecta*, pp.19-33, p.33.
'Heaven goes round' she said, whirling her arm, 'and round and round and round and round.'
'Yes' said Belacqua 'round and round.'
'Rowan' she said, dropping the d's and getting more of a spin into the slogan, 'rowan an' rowan an' rowan.'

The degeneration of movement into constant, nonsensical flux is typical of Beckett's depiction of a society overflowing with influences. While More Pricks Than Kicks is more varied in tone than the novel from which it drew, Beckett retained Dream of Fair to Middling Women's satire of Dublin society. Along with the Smeraldina's letter, the part of Dream most faithfully used in More Pricks is the episode of the Frica's party. This was transposed very faithfully from the novel, with generally only minor alterations. Beckett's repetition of the scene suggested his sense of Dublin culture, preoccupied with the relationship between Europe and Ireland, and with their own role in national culture.

In both texts, Beckett's retained the party's centrality as a dramatisation of the excess of Dublin society. It forms the culmination of Dream of Fair to Middling Women, and, as 'A Wet Night', is the longest story in More Pricks Than Kicks. Both versions begin with a vivid demonstration of the layering of place, as Belacqua superimposes Florence onto his walk through Dublin:

To pass by the Queens, the home of tragedy, was a pleasure at this hour, to pass between the old theatre and the long line of the poor and lowly queued up for a thruppence worth of pictures. For there Florence would slip into the cantilena, the Piazza della Signoria and the No 1 tram and the festival of St John [...] Then he walked slowing in his mind down the sinister Uffizi to the parapets of the Arno etc.

The technique of superimposition was used by Beckett in More Pricks to emphasise the incorporation of international influence into Belacqua's Dublin. The scathing comment from the girl Winnie on his 'making great play' is prompted by his consideration of Fingal as a version of France, "it's a magic land," he sighed, 'like Saône-et-Loire.' The effect is to show the permeability of borders between Ireland and Europe which reshapes for Belacqua the city itself. In these heavily
allusive texts, which both range widely in literary reference and linguistic games as well as the geographical mobility of Dream, international culture thickens and complicates national specificity.

The effect of the Florence passage is increased in both texts by the subsequent appearance of Chas, “a highbrow bromide of French nationality with a diabolical countenance compound of Skeat’s and Paganini’s and a mind like a tattered concordance.”\footnote{MPTK, p.55.} He is introduced here in More Pricks Than Kicks, but has appeared earlier in Dream of Fair to Middling Women – notably, on Belacqua’s return to Ireland, Chas escorts him from County Cork to Dublin.\footnote{Dream, p.143.} The crossover between the Dublin scene and the ‘entire continental circus’ emphasises both the fluidity of national boundaries and the text’s prioritisation of Dublin as the locus of these multiple scenes.

Jean du Chas was a recurring character for Beckett in this period. In November 1930 he had given a lecture at Trinity on the fictional poet. The parody mocked the manifesto obsession encountered by Beckett in his association with transition, the European Caravan and other publications encountered in Paris – Chas’ Concentrism is based on “an obsession with the concept of ‘the concierge’: a French institution that provides him, it seems, with the cornerstone of his whole literary edifice.”\footnote{Knowlson, p.121.} The lecture, with its mockery of academic enquiry, probably related to Beckett’s dissatisfaction with the university career on which he was then embarked, as Knowlson suggests.\footnote{Beckett’s growing distaste for academia is summarised in the squib published in the Dublin Magazine in 1934, ‘Gnome’: Spend the years of learning squandering Courage for the years of wandering Through a world politely turning From the loutishness of learning.} It also shows that the self-importance mocked at the Frica’s party was not attributed to Dublin society alone. Beckett’s academic world included both Trinity and the Ecole Normale Supérieure. He considered a
parody of the intellectual pretension of poets such as Chas and the academics who studied him as appropriate for a Dublin audience, and denied later claims that this audiences was incapable of understanding the joke, telling Knowlson that “Everyone was aware it was a spoof.”

While an experimental Parisian poet might appear an unlikely figure in 1930s Ireland, for Beckett such characters were very much part of his scene in Dublin as well as in Paris. In addition to the Irish figures around whom his Parisian life centred, his Dublin circle included various continental connections, and was dominated by those with a strong interest in international culture and travel. Beckett’s portrayal of these groups, rather than contrasting the openness of Paris with Ireland’s insularity, emphasised the ‘great play’ made of these influences.

In both *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks Than Kicks*, Chas is juxtaposed with the Polar Bear, representative of academic interest in modern French writing, and based on Thomas Rudmose-Brown. As Beckett’s professor at Trinity, Rudmose-Brown was a significant influence on his early intellectual development, and his “wide range of scholarly interest, from Pierre de Ronsard and Jean Racine to modern French writers” indicates the internationality of his cultural education. He is scathingly portrayed as the Polar Bear: in a depiction Beckett later regretted he was so easily recognisable that Knowlson describes it as mildly libellous – had the book been published in the 1930s [...] His physical description, fervent anticlerical views, swearing, meanness and lechery all make him eminently identifiable.

The Polar Bear, who “never used the English word when the foreign pleased him better,” is central in Beckett’s exposure of the frantic flux of ideas and influences in Dublin society. He is particularly associated with fast movement – it is his “cataracting” to catch the “screaming” tram that interrupts Belacqua’s moment of stasis with Nemo, and later he is seen on the way to the Frica’s party “speeding

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97 Knowlson, p.122.  
98 *Letters*, p.711.  
100 *MPTK*, p.61.
along the dark country roads in a big honest slob of a clanging bus.” In his conversation with the Alba, theological debate with the Jesuit, and his supercilious displays of knowledge and opinion at the party, the Polar Bear represents a self-consciously elite academicism and “tinned Kultur” from which Belacqua desires to, but cannot, disassociate himself. However, Beckett’s nuanced and thorough portrayal of the fictionalised Rudmose-Brown and the fictional Chas shows his intimacy with the cosmopolitan and international Dublin of his circle. Beckett was a self-conscious participant in a variety of Irish culture which brought together the international and the national.

The organ of this stratum of Dublin society was the *Dublin Magazine*. Seumas O’Sullivan’s journal, with its expensive production and advertising dominated by expensive goods, was explicitly aimed at the elite of Dublin society with no ambitious to a mass audience.¹⁰¹ It has tended to be dismissed by historians of the 1930s. Shovlin describes its “identification with a refined Georgian metropolitanism,” and emphasises the journal’s apolitical stance and O’Sullivan’s unobtrusive editorial policy, very different from the campaigning tone of *Ireland To-Day* and the *Bell* in the late 1930s and 40s.¹⁰² O’Sullivan’s policy was manifested through his choice of contributors and selection of material, and thus was immanent rather than overt through editorials, of which he wrote very few.

Terence Brown highlights this editorial style in his rather scathing description of the magazine. While he notes O’Sullivan’s effort with his wife Estella Solomons to “keep up, with a few others, the tradition of “evenings” for discussion and literary exchange that had so enlightened earlier years,” he is very pessimistic about the dynamism of the culture represented in the journal:

> the *Dublin Magazine* in the 1930s was more notable for its sense of an insecure, self-regarding coterie remembering past glories and for its academic tone than for literary energy and commitment to a coherent, vital editorial policy. That intellectual and imaginative stirring which had once

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¹⁰² Shovlin, p.42.
stimulated Edward Martyn to affirm that “the sceptre of intelligence has passed from London to Dublin” had now ended. Once more Dublin was a place to leave.\textsuperscript{103}

Brown’s description of a coterie reflects the failure to engage with public discourse which beset the \textit{Dublin Magazine}. The magazine also, as Brown suggests, lacked the editorial direction of the \textit{Bell} and \textit{Ireland to-Day}. The journal was not, however, characterised by backward-looking nostalgia. Rather, in the early 1930s the magazine represented a diverse variety of cultural and aesthetic projects. The lack of coherent focus throughout the publication reflected the failure of these diverse attitudes to cohere into a consistent cultural project, rather than the absence of ambition.

The content of the \textit{Dublin Magazine} included discussion of international art and writing, with a particular interest in France, alongside engagement with the development of Irish literary culture.\textsuperscript{104} Anne Fogarty presents a more positive picture of the \textit{Dublin Magazine} than Brown’s, praising its “eclectic and far-ranging set of cultural interests” in the 1930s. Fogarty contrasts the magazine with the \textit{Bell}, which she sees in the 1940s indicating

\begin{quote}
a considerable darkening of the general cultural climate and a consequent narrowing of the range of representative voices finding an outlet in print. \textit{The Dublin Magazine} seems far less compromised by external pressures than \textit{The Bell} in its endeavour to publish a broad spectrum of literature and critical opinion.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{104} Victor O’Sullivan contributed a regular ‘Literature in France’ feature, for example, and Proust was a frequent topic of analysis.

\textsuperscript{105} Anne Fogarty, ‘Gender, Irish Modernism, and the Poetry of Denis Devlin’ in Coughlan and Davis (eds), \textit{Modernism and Ireland}, pp.209-31, p.214. Fogarty describes the content of the magazine juxtaposing "essays on Shakespeare, Joyce, and Synge [...] alongside discussions of Dadaist art and the work of Goethe, Marguerite, Yourcenar, Nietzsche, and Villiers de L’Isle-Adam." English modernism was also discussed, with Auden and the \textit{Criterion} forming particular reference points (see for example \textit{Dublin Magazine} 6.1 (January-March 1931)).

The magazine was also a main platform for new Irish poets, including Devlin and Beckett alongside Kavanagh (See for example \textit{Dublin Magazine} 6.4 (October-December 1931), in which ‘Alba’ appeared with three poems by Kavanagh, Devlin’s ‘Victory of Samothrace’ in \textit{Dublin Magazine} 9.4 (October-December 1934). Fogarty also notes the significant representation of female writers, including Teresa Deevy, Mary Lavin and Blanaid Salkeld (Fogarty, p.214).
The *Dublin Magazine* lacked *Ireland To-Day*'s attempt to contain a range of political perspectives from across the public sphere, although it did publish some notable and controversial cultural polemics.\(^{106}\) There is little evidence of an attempt to publish to a wide or popular audience, however, and the magazine was aimed at a self-conscious intellectual elite. The *Dublin Magazine* represented a strand of Irish literary culture in which European influences, including progressive and experimental literature, were incorporated into international discourse. That Beckett was approached by O'Sullivan to edit the magazine shows the extent of his involvement with this culture even as he satirised it.\(^{107}\) The gaps between avant garde rhetoric and cultural significance, and between postures of radicalism and cosy containment, were the space in which his satire operated.

In his depiction of Dublin's avant garde in the Frica's salon, Beckett was drawing on a feature of Dublin social life of which he had direct experience. As well as his contacts with the *Dublin Magazine*, which involved attendance at O'Sullivan's 'at homes',\(^{108}\) Beckett was involved in the Trinity circles of Rudmose-Brown, and attended the "celebrated salon" of Mrs Walter Starkie. Deirdre Bair emphasises the influence of these gatherings on Beckett, and the intimacy of Dublin's cultural circles:

> these evenings were important because they showed him that there was an intellectual life beyond Dublin. The latest developments in theatre on the continent and in England were argued about [...] Dublin, much smaller than London or Paris, was a manageable city in that all of its artists and writers knew each other, and from this time on Beckett came to know most of them.\(^{109}\)

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\(^{106}\) Its publication of O'Faoláin's attack on Daniel Corkery in 1936, for example, was one of the triggers for the 'controversy' which spilled into *Ireland To-Day*. The *Dublin Magazine* also published W.B. Yeats' notorious commentary on his play *Words upon the Window Pane* (*Dublin Magazine* 6.4 (October-December 1931), pp.5-19).

\(^{107}\) O'Sullivan's invited Beckett to take over editorship of the magazine in 1936 (Beckett told MacGreevy of the invitation in a letter of 9 September 1936, noting that O'Sullivan suggested "that I should take over the editorship of the D.M., he paying for the printing for 3 years. This *entre nous*. What I said at length was: Merci." (Letters, p.372). Deirdre Bair records that after the conversation Beckett avoided O'Sullivan until he had ceased to mention the matter, and that O'Sullivan "was probably relieved by SB's refusal, for the two men had never really understood each other's approach to literature" (*Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978; repr. London: Vintage, 1990), p.248).

\(^{108}\) Knowlson, p.225.

\(^{109}\) Bair, p.45.
The salon most obviously parodied in the Frica’s party was that of another connection of Beckett’s early life, the Mannings, who had been family friends since before Beckett’s birth. Susan Manning held regular ‘at homes’ to which Beckett and his brother were invited, and Knowlson confirms identification of the Frica with her daughter Mary Manning.

Beckett’s portrayal of the Frica is unrelentingly cruel:

Now a most terrible and unexpected thing happens. Into the quiet pages of our cadenza bursts a nightmare harpy, Miss Dublin, a hell-cat. In she lands singing Havelock Ellis in a deep voice, itching manifestly to work that which is not seemly. If only she could be bound and beaten and burnt, but not quick. Or, failing that, brayed gently in a mortar. Open upon her concave breast as on a lectern lies Portigliotti’s Penumbre Claustrali bound in tawed caul. In her talons earnestly she clutches Sade’s Hundred Days and the Anterotica of Aloisia G. Brignole-Sale, unopened, bound in shagreened caul. A septic pudding hoodwinks her, a stodgy turban of pain it laps her horse-face. The eye-hole is clogged with the bulbus and the round pale globe goggles exposed. Solitary meditation has furnished her with nostrils of generous bore. The mouth champs an invisible bit, foam gathers at the bitter commissures. The crateriform brisket, lipped with sills of paunch, cowers ironically behind a maternity tunic. Keyholes have wrung the unfriendly withers, the osseous rump screams beneath the hobble-skirt. Wastes of woad worsted are gartered to the pasterns. Aie!

In the tripartite structure of Dream of Fair to Middling Women, Belacqua’s romantic liaison in the final Dublin section is the Alba. As ‘Miss Dublin’, however, the Frica is the woman most closely associated with place in this section, and her characterisation represents a comment on Dublin society as well as another aspect of Beckett’s complex and troubling portrayal of women in this text.

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10 Knowlson, p.12.
11 Bair, p.44.
12 Knowlson, p.154. Beckett referred to the Mannings as the ‘Fricas’ in a letter to MacGreevy (TCD MS 10402/61, 18 August 1934), and suggests the identification in the novel: “Give it a name quick. Lilly, Jane or Caleken Frica? Or just plain Mary?” (Dream, p.180).
13 Dream, pp.179-80/MPTK, p.56.
14 While ‘A Wet Night’ in More Pricks Than Kicks is very closely based on this episode in Dream of Fair to Middling Women, in terms of Beckett’s use of gender the later text differed. The women in More Pricks again function as foils to Belacqua’s development, which again progresses through a series of relationships, but are in general both more sympathetically portrayed and less central to the text’s structure. In contrast, the minor alterations that Beckett made to the Frica made her less sympathetic and more of an exaggerated grotesque. Glimpses of her inner life were removed: the explanation for her anxious calming of the Alba (“Tricks and turns and games were food and drink to the Frica [...] Scenes only held things up, besides risking to frighten people away.” Dream, p.224), while callous, is replaced by simple obliviousness (MPTK, p.74). Most notably, the narrator’s guilt at
From the beginning, women operate as disruptive forces in both plot and structure. Because of her uncontainable sexuality, Belacqua’s aestheticist romance with the Smeraldina-Rima becomes a sordid entanglement. He can only be “in love from the girdle up,” and attempts to separate the “unearthly radiance” of her face from the animal materiality of her body. She refuses to remain a still and silent object of contemplation:

So he would always have her be, rapt, like the spirit of a troubadour, casting no shade, herself shade. Instead of which of course it was only a question of seconds before she would surge up at him, blithe and buxom and young and lusty, a lascivious petulant virgin, a generous mare neighing after a great horse.

Belacqua’s aesthetic project is made grotesque by the disruptive and revolting actuality of female sexuality. The threat posed by the Smeraldina is soon actualised, as she “rape[s]” him.

The misogynistic disgust evoked by the Smeraldina is not just Belacqua’s. Dream of Fair to Middling Women maintains an unfixable relationship between narrator and subject which makes it difficult to either excuse or exonerate the attitudes towards women expressed within it. The portrayal of women in Beckett’s early fiction has been the source of some critical discomfort, although the constant narrative mockery of Belacqua suggests that he is as much the object of satire as the women.

his “sneering” at the Frica in “fabricated indignation,” and his suggestion of her more nuanced existence (“If only it were possible to be genuinely annoyed at the girl. But it is not [...] No doubt she has her faults. Who has not? No doubt also she is someone’s darling.” Dream, p.216 – compare MPTK, p.67), are entirely removed. The effect was to emphasise the character’s role as the parodic embodiment of the Dublin ‘intelligentsia’. Bouchard describes the function of women in the novel as central to Beckett’s experimentation with avant garde narrative. The “heterogeneity and contradiction that women embody” are the central challenge to Belacqua’s “Cartesian, paranoid striving for wholeness.” Bouchard, pp.139-40.

Dream, p.3.
Dream, p.18.

Arguing that the novel consciously manipulated a tradition of literary misogyny, Ackerly emphasises the “honesty” of the portrayal of Belacqua’s “unforgivable and unforgiven” cruelty in his treatment of the Smeraldina, and argues that Belacqua is the ultimate “object of scorn.” While underplaying the viciousness of the novel’s attitude to female sexuality, Ackerly’s reading emphasises the constantly shifting self-reflexivity of the novel (‘LASSATA SED: Samuel Beckett’s
The instability of narrative authority in the text is further complicated by the narrator’s struggles with his own aesthetic project. His attempts to impose fixed order on the novel’s structure too are constantly frustrated by the disruptive influence of women. The structured progression from the Smeraldina to the Syra-Cusa to the Alba is disrupted by the Smeraldina’s refusal to be left behind. After Belacqua leaves Paris for Dublin and the promised conclusion of his story through union with the Alba, “magic name,” “daughter of kings,”¹²⁰ the Smeraldina forces herself back into the text. ‘The Smeraldina’s Billet Doux’, as it appeared in More Pricks Than Kicks, parodies female expression with its barely literate spelling and rambling construction. The Smeraldina’s language, “ropes and ropes of logorrhoea streaming out in a gush,”¹²¹ is as vigorous and grotesque as her sexuality, and intrudes and disrupts the narrative.

The second of Belacqua’s putative lovers, the Syra-Cusa, first appears as a counterpart to the Smeraldina. She too “had a lech on Belacqua,” and is associated with an uncontainable sexual threat, with her “wanton” eyes, “lascivious and lickerish, the brokers of her zeal, basilisk eyes, the fowlers and hooks of Amourrr.”¹²² Her disruptiveness is most apparent to the narrator, who wrestles with her incorporation into the text:

> Why we want to drag in the Syra-Cusa at this juncture it passes our persimmon to say. She belongs to another story, a short one, a far far better one. She might even go into a postil. Still, we might screw a period out of her, and every period counts [...] A paragraph ought to fix her. Then she can skip off and strangle a bath attendant in her garters.¹²³

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¹²⁰ Dream, p.36, p.54.
¹²¹ Ibid., p.89.
¹²² Ibid., p.50.
¹²³ Ibid., p.49.
The narrator never overcomes this problem, as the Syra-Cusa resists a stable narrative role. Like the Smeraldina, she both triggers aesthetic production and frustrates it.

The pattern continues with the Frica. She initially appears as a disruptive sexual threat to both Belacqua and to the text, “burst[ing]” into the “quiet pages” with her pose of sexual liberation and her barely contained physicality “champ[ing] an invisible bit.” Her body is identified as even more revolting than the Smeraldina’s, lacking even the possibility of aesthetic contemplation. The Frica too has a ‘lech’ for Belacqua, responding with glee to his arrival, soaking wet.

“You must get out of those wet things” she declared “this very moment. I declare to goodness you are drenched to the ... skin.” There was no nonsense about the Frica. When she meant skin, she said skin. “Every stitch” she gloated “must come off at once, this very instant.”

Belacqua easily fends off her lust, however, and it is soon redirected towards the Frica’s major preoccupation – the hosting of her party. Her frustration at Belacqua’s rejection is immediately converted into attention to her “salon.”

Unlike the Smeraldina, the Frica’s sexuality is contained. The heterogeneity and disturbance which characterises female sexuality in the novel is redirected by the

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124 Drawing on Dream of Fair to Middling Women for her biography of Lucia Joyce, Carol Loeb Schloss highlights the misogyny in Beckett’s fictionalisation of her as the Syra-Cusa. She particularly objects to the narrator’s comment that “we were strongly tempted, some way back, to make the Syra-Cusa make Lucien a father. That was a very unsavoury plan.” Schloss’ verdict on this comment, which she sees as a “chilling” admission “that the protagonist played with a young woman’s possible pregnancy,” does not take full account however of the complexity of the relationship between protagonist, narrator and author in the novel. The self-consciously flippant approach to conventional narrative possibilities reflects the figuring in Dream of female sexuality as an ‘unsavoury’ antagonist to aesthetic contemplation. Schloss, Lucia Joyce: To Dance in the Wake (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p.192.

125 Dream p.230/MPTK p.79.

126 Dream, p.231/MPTK, p.80.

127 In another cruel description, Beckett makes the effort of this containment clear. The Frica’s preparation for the evening is a process of tightening and controlling. Her hair is combed back “till to close the eyes became a problem [...] Throttled gazelle gives no idea. [...] It was impossible to put aside the dreadful suspicion that her flattened mammææ, in sympathy with this tormented eructation of countenance, had been exalted into two cutwaters and were rowelling her brassiere.” In an echo of the Smeraldina, whose lovely “little pale firm cameo of a birdface” is intolerably combined with a grotesque “porpoise prism” body (Dream, p.15), the Frica herself attempts to separate her body from her face, “beyond suspicion [MPTK: appeal], a flagrant seat of injury” (Dream p.215/MPTK, p.67).
Frica into the production of cultural discourse. Her party is the most detailed critique of Dublin’s self-regarding intelligentsia in Beckett’s early work, and its connection with the portrayal of female sexuality emphasises its fluidity and distortion. Sex, the comic threat that haunts Belacqua, is a constant presence at the Frica’s party. The early guests wait excitedly for the arrival of “the girls” (“They are the girls [...] beyond any doubt. But are they the girls?”), including a “rising whore” in *Dream*, modified into a “rising strumpet” in ‘A Wet Night’, and a “disaffected cicisbeo.” From their arrival, the party soon disperses into “sinister kiss-me-Charley hugger-mugger that [...] spread like wildfire through the house.”

The Frica acknowledges her guests’ desire for such space in her invitation to “a party with back-stairs, claret-cup and the intelligentsia.” She does not “deign[...] to have any share” in this, however. Her interest is in the cultural display, which exhibits similar sordid confusion; while she tolerates her guests’ “vile necking”, she soon plans to “visit the alcoves, she would round them all up for the party proper to begin.”

‘Miss Dublin’’s idea of the party proper is a jumbled composite of various forms of cultural display. Beckett’s portrayal of her gathering emphasises not its backward-looking lack of ambition, but its superficial co-option of multiple cultural influences. The entertainment provided by the Frica for “the Dublin that mattered” include a recital from de Chas; a performance, which “met with no success to speak of,” of Scarlatti’s Capriccio executed by ‘Maestro Gormerly’ on the viol d’amore; a song in Irish from Mr Larry O’Murcahaodha - “the Frica pronounced it as though he were a connection of Hiawatha” – who “tore a greater quantity than seemed fair of his native speech-material to flat tatters”; and a recital from the Poet, before Belacqua and the Alba finally flee.

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128 *Dream*, pp.219-20/MPTK, p.70.
129 *Dream*, p.232/MPTK, p.81.
130 *Dream*, p.180/MPTK, p.56.
131 *Dream*, p.232/MPTK, p.81.
132 *Dream* p.224/MPTK, p.75.
133 MPTK, p.82. The phrase is absent in *Dream* (p.232).
134 *Dream*, p.235/MPTK, p.84.
135 *Dream*, p.235/MPTK, p.84 (the Frica’s pronunciation is mentioned only in *More Pricks*).
The combination demonstrates the breadth of the Frica’s ambitious, and the diversity of the scene of which she is the centre. However, the display is characterised by discordance. Like the guests, who constantly interrupt each other in self-absorbed pomposity, the multiple modes collected by the Frica do not interact. Each performance is ignored or mocked, by its audience as well as by the narrator. Instead of leading to productive dialogue, the combination of modern and classical, national and European, collide in a ‘hugger mugger’. They are juxtaposed in a flux, like Belacqua’s own skidding about Europe, of constant movement without direction.

In so caricaturing Dublin’s ‘intelligentsia’ as a collection of performers displaying only to themselves, Beckett was satirising a version of cultural discourse in the early 1930s, in which his own career was grounded. This was distinct from nationalist insularity, realist pessimism and internationalist elitism, although it could adopt the postures of all these. Beckett mocked its superficiality and punctured its pomposity, but the group of Dublin artistic figures – the professors, poets and promoters on whom Beckett based the Frica’s guests – considered themselves the avant garde of cultural renewal in independent Ireland. Interested in the combination of modern formal experimentation and national cultural material, the diverse group inspiring the parody were attempting to develop a reinvention of Irish modernism. In Dream of Fair to Middling Women and the fiction that followed it, Beckett himself followed the same direction. Like Belacqua, who is both the subject and object of scorn for the his contemporaries pretensions and his own, Beckett’s mockery of Dublin’s ‘intelligentsia’ was so acute because it came from an insider.

As Beckett’s parody suggests, the attempt to combine multiple influences was fraught. While the existence of a distinctive strand of 1930s modernism has been recognised in Irish poetry, it is not considered a significant part of either other literary forms or of the wider cultural sphere. The self-conscious elitism of Dublin’s intelligentsia was satirised by Beckett as a closed, if constantly moving, system.
However, there is evidence that this coterie had ambitions towards a more significant purpose, both in the development of new artistic forms and in their role in public, if not mass, culture. The potential contradiction in these directions – aesthetic elitism and public influence – is evident. This contradiction, more than the combination of nationalism and internationalism, was the most significant barrier to the productivity of progressive writers, in terms of the dissemination of modernist literature including, notably, theatre. Enthusiasm for potential cultural autonomy combined with European interaction was countered by frustration at state and public conservatism, and disillusionment with the possibility of influencing the world – although, as contemporary writing in England and elsewhere suggests, these feelings of pessimism were not unique to Ireland. Darkening events in Europe and the hardening of insularity in de Valera’s Ireland, cemented by the outbreak of war and Irish neutrality, led to the self-conscious modernists’ energy for active engagement with wider culture fizzling out as the 1930s progressed.

Avant garde internationalism had an impact on national culture beyond the confines of the salon. As well as the *Dublin Magazine*, the formation of the Gate Theatre was a significant and productive activity of the group connected, directly through Manning, to Beckett’s scene as portrayed in the Frica’s party. The connection is not incidental – in its attempt to combine intellectual elitism with public engagement, and modernist European influences with a commitment to national culture, the Gate reflected in part the characteristics identified in Beckett’s juxtaposition of the “homespun Poet” and the “most talentuous young Parisian” du Chas.¹³⁶

The connection between the Dublin of the Frica’s party and the Gate is illuminated by a description of a closely contemporary gathering by Micheál MacLiammóir, one of the Gate’s founders. In his autobiography, MacLiammóir described a party

¹³⁶ *Dream*, p. 203, 232/MPTK, p.57, 82. The Poet, accompanied by “a little saprophile of an anonymous politico-ploughboy,” is sketched with devastating concision in a pose of austerity and authenticity (“Beneath the Wally Whitmaneen of his Donegal tweeds a body was to be presumed. He gave the impression of having lost a harrow and found a figure of speech”).
thrown at the Gate by Pádraic Colum in January 1932. Along with Manning, the guests included a vividly described cast of politicians, poets, professors and actors:

And so the night wore on with Edward and the Polish Minister singing the national anthem of Poland; with Hilton and Lennox and Pádraic Colum deciding that production, playwriting and poetry were all snares and delusions; with Cecil Monsom, a gentle newcomer with a thin prominent nose and a strong social sense endeavouring to interest Christine Longford in gardening; with Lady Tate dropping a diamante bag every time one handed her a drink; with half a dozen love affairs at various stages of rage and despair causing havoc, slammed doors, and infuriated departures at intervals.137

In its diverse composition of figures, with multiple postures, influences and ambitions, MacLiammóir’s record of this party is strikingly similar to Beckett’s fictionalised salon. The “famished faithful” converge on the Frica’s event as the culturally ambitious did on the Gate:

Two novelists, a bibliomaniac and his mistress, a paleographer, a violist d’amore with his instrument in a bag, a popular parodist with his sister and six daughters, a still more popular professor of Bullscrit and Comparative Ovoidology, the macaco the worse for drink, an incontinent native speaker, a prostrated arithmomanic, a communist decorator just back from the Moscow reserves, a merchant, two grave Jews, a rising whore, three more poets with Laura’s to match, a disaffected cicisbeo, the inevitable envoy of the Fourth Estate, a phalanx of Grafton Street Stürmers and Jem Higgins arrived in a body.138

In their casts, both parties are characterised by an open and flexible inclusion of cultural dynamics, but also a narcissistic sense of a coterie performing only to itself. Beckett made this apparent through overinflation, the satirical gap between these people’s ideas of themselves and their grotesque reality, and the mocking commentary of the narratorial voice. With less satire and more melodrama, MacLiammóir, openly at the heart of this group, also highlighted a similar sense of endless movement without direction.

‘Where,’ I wondered, ‘does all this lead to? In a country unbroken by conquest, in France or England or where you will, a dozen developments

138 Dream, pp.219-20. The passage is slightly amended in More Pricks; the novelists have been “banned,” the macaco has become the “saprophile the better for drink,” the communist is now also a “painter and decorator” and the merchant a “merchant prince,” and “a chorus of playwrights” have joined the guests (MPTK, p.70). The modifications emphasise the range and ridiculousness of these poses.
would be the result of to-night. Six actors would have fixed new jobs; a poet and a producer meeting suddenly like two plates crashing in the dark would have discovered, not fresh ideas – there are plenty of those – but new points of departure, new mediums of activity [...] But here in Dublin nothing has happened since Easter Week 1916. These boys and girls of ours will get home somehow, weary and placid, having discovered nothing. 139

MacLiammóir’s account expressed nostalgia for the combination of aesthetic and political radicalism of the pre-independence period, in which he imagined art’s vital role in society. He went on to recall his prophecy of the fate of the “lost leader[s] of Ireland’s faintly stirring energies,” imagining Colum, Lennox Robinson and Denis Johnston taking various paths of disenchantment. This led into a dramatic elegy for the futile ambitions of the Irish artist, condemned to “laugh, gesticulate and protest” to an indifferent public. 140

Such a pessimistic, and self-dramatising, verdict, seems to endorse Beckett’s portrayal of the purposeless pretensions of Dublin’s intelligentsia. However, MacLiammóir’s fame and the continuing existence of the Gate as a cultural force suggests that it at least was one productive result of the multiple energies of Irish modernism, the “fresh ideas” that MacLiammóir recognised. The end of this passage of MacLiammóir’s reminiscence included in its typically colourful rhetoric a memory of optimism that the Gate could be one “medium of activity” in which the national and the international, the avant garde and the public sphere, could productively coexist:

Yet [...] later on, driving through the black morning air towards the sea to eat bacon and eggs at some unreal house, I thought: If somebody can stick this out it will happen one day, it will all happen; palaces will rise over the rubbish heaps and the ruins, and we shall walk head-high and free above the clouds. Yeats is worn out and the Abbey has come to mean something he had never planned; our own theatre is already groping its way through a mire of public indifference and conventional interior neurosis, the muddy reaction of varying talents that can find no existing standard by which they might be measured. But we have proved we are not afraid of work and poverty, and who shall tell but that the spade will hit something more than a stone one day, and the magical fluid spring forth, and our corrupted weary faces be filled with light? 141

139 MacLiammóir, pp.160-61.
140 Ibid., p.161.
141 Ibid., p.161.
MacLiammóir’s account evoked the Gate’s ambitions to a role in cultural formation. This combined a desire for experimental aesthetics with a commitment to public significance. The tensions in this combination were evident – a theatre which defined itself as a radical coterie also had ambitions for cultural significance which required a wide audience. The tensions were perceived by Beckett, in his position among the avant garde society which created the Gate. They were also evident in the Gate’s own publications.
3.3 The Gate Theatre: the modernist institution and national culture

In Beckett’s portrayal of the Frica’s party, he targeted the pretensions of a tight coterie, Dublin’s self-defined ‘intelligentsia’. This group was not shown as backward-looking and closed to outside ideas; in contrast, it was defined by its willingness to adopt multiple international and national discourses, and to apply them to various projects and schemes for the reinvention of Irish culture. What Beckett satirised was the shallowness of this display of open-minded progressiveness. The Frica and her cohorts, despite their ambitions, are condemned to incoherency and self-regarding display. In this, they appear as the condensation of the directionless movement and pointless posturing of Beckett’s depiction of European intellectual life in the 1930s.

The biographical and thematic connections between Beckett and the Gate are evident. The significance of the Gate as a sustained manifestation of the multiple energies of Beckett’s version of Dublin society – the self-consciously highbrow and European circles associated with Trinity, the Dublin Magazine, and the Gate Theatre – suggests that these energies were productive. A larger investigation is necessary to examine the practical and theoretical strategies adopted in the Gate’s attempt to build an Irish international theatre. In the context of Beckett’s early career, however, it is important to recognise that in his response to Dublin’s intelligentsia Beckett was both critic of and participant in a group determined to define independent Irish culture in international and modernist terms.

He was not the only one to recognise the failings of this group – a mocking self-awareness of its own potential ridiculousness was one of its defining characteristics. This did not mean, however, that it was without optimism, determination, and a measure of productive success, as the survival of the Gate in a form close to its originators’ intentions suggests. The sometimes grandiose claims of figures like Edwards, MacLiammóir, Lord Longford and Manning herself were not fulfilled, and
were amenable to the satire of Beckett and, later, Brian O’Nolan. However, the combination of formal experimentation and engagement with national culture, whether in terms of productive intervention or critical analysis, was an ideology which defined both the operation of the Gate circle and Beckett’s work in the 1930s.

The dynamics of the group are revealed in the content of Motley, the Gate Theatre’s magazine. Edited by Manning and running monthly (with a summer break) between 1932 and 1934, the magazine was in part a programme and discussion forum for the inner circle of the Gate’s supporters, appropriate for an organisation which prided itself on being ostensibly owned by its audience. Its ambitions were much wider, however. In a combination of diverse and sometimes contradictory strategies, Motley positioned itself variously as the journal of an exclusive cultural elite, a propaganda organ for a new national institution, a champion of literary and cinematographic as well as theatrical experimentation, and being at the forefront of an inclusive, popular and nationwide transformation in national culture.

The multiple positions that Motley sought to adopt could sometimes result in a hubbub of voices reminiscent of the Frica’s party. This may have been to some extent the result of the magazine’s editorial composition. In this Motley was

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142 The Gate was a frequent reference point in O’Nolan’s *Irish Times* satirical column ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’ (published under the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen). The column, which began in 1940, frequently mocked the pretensions of Ireland’s ‘intelligentsia’. The Gate, the *Bell*, and the Irish Academy of Letters (often cast as the Dublin WAAMA League), were targeted as pretentious postures of intellectualism, radicalism, and cultural regeneration. See Cruiskeen Lawn, assembled by G.J.C. Tynan (Dublin: *Irish Times*, 1943), and *The Best of Myles: A Selection from ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’*, ed. Kevin O’Nolan (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968; repr. London: Grafton, 1987).

143 On the registration of the Dublin Gate Theatre Company in December 1929 and the theatre’s move from the Abbey’s Peacock stage to the Rotunda building early in 1930, Edwards and Mac Liammóir had planned for the Gate to be financially supported by shareholders as well as ticket sales, and so literally owned by its audience. However, by the end of 1930 many shares remained unsold and the company was in financial crisis. Lord Longford, an Anglo-Irish aristocrat who had become firmly Irish nationalist while at Eton, stepped in and bought all remaining shares at a general meeting in December 1930. He also provided financial support for Motley. See Denis Johnston, ‘The Making of the Theatre’ in Bulmer Hobson (ed.), *The Gate Theatre Dublin* (Dublin: The Gate Theatre, 1934), pp.11-20, and John Cowell, *No Profit but the Name: The Longfords and the Gate Theatre* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 1988).
distinctive among its generation of Irish periodicals. In contrast to the discreet editorial style and consensual tone of the *Dublin Magazine*, the attempt of *Ireland To-Day* to present strong opinions from across the political spectrum, and the firm editorial line of the *Bell, Motley* operated as the in-house journal of a small elite that still contained a range of ideological perspectives and aims. As the Gate’s magazine, Manning’s editorship was subordinate to the theatre’s programme, particularly as imagined by Edwards (MacLiammóir apparently was less interested in the magazine) and by Longford. Manning also had a distinctive voice and agenda of her own, and her contribution to *Motley* was much more apparent than as an administrator. In addition, as well as her own programme, Manning was active in bringing together a range of perspectives on national culture. The result was a sometimes contradictory juxtaposition of discourses. In other aspects, however, *Motley* achieved a level of coherency and productivity in its short life, which demonstrated a sustained attempt to formulate an intellectual, at times avant garde, approach to modern Irish culture.

*Motley’s* manifest role was as the forum for discussion and dissemination of the Gate’s approach to modern theatre. This was apparent from the first issue, which began with Longford’s impassioned claim for the necessity of combining nationalism and internationalism in the creation of a theatre as ‘national asset’.

[Some] allege that whatever the merits of the “Gate,” its internationalism makes it impossible to claim it as a national asset. No attack on these grounds need to be feared. The “Gate” has not fettered itself by pseudo-national Shibboleths; it has not tied itself to the letter of Nationality, which is death only too often to the spirit. It has not confined itself to plays written by men with faultless Gaelic pedigrees, acted by Gaelic footballers and produced by professional politicians.

Longford justifies the theatre’s national status precisely through its internationality, in an optimistic and forward-looking call to arms:

Fairly interspersed with national works chosen in their merits, the “Gate” has presented not the offscourings of alien culture, but world masterpieces, without a knowledge of which our own culture would be starved and poor indeed [...] It takes pride in styling itself an international theatre, but by its production of Irish plays, by its revelation to Dublin of the great drama of the world, by the training it has given to numerous Irish actors and actresses, and by its introduction to Ireland of the latest and best ideas in
production and stagecraft, it has not only justified its claim to be an international theatre in the best sense of the word, but has shown itself to be also a national theatre, and will, I am convinced, become the central point in the Irish dramatic movements of the future. No person or institution can justly claim to be international unless it is also profoundly national, or to be national while repudiating the best that the world has to offer for the nation's good. Firm of purpose, unencumbered in action, the "Gate" declares war upon the ghosts and demons that have haunted the Irish drama and sets out confidently to conquer the future.\textsuperscript{144}

Longford's introduction, a modernist manifesto reminiscent of 'Recent Irish Poetry' in its declaration of 'war' on spectres of the past, both justified the Gate's programme and establish \textit{Motley} as its mouthpiece.

The Gate's ambition was to be more than a 'little theatre', and to play a distinctive role in the development of national culture.\textsuperscript{145} This was reflected in a programme which combined international modernism with innovative productions of 'classics' and new Irish writing.\textsuperscript{146} The theatre had to balance its appeal to a small cultural elite with its desire to play a more significant role in public life. In terms of its self-definition as expressed in \textit{Motley}, the combination of internationalism and nationalism was sustained and coherently defended. The conflict in the magazine was in its attempts to be the journal of a self-conscious and self-regarding cultural

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{144} Lord Longford, 'A National Asset' in \textit{Motley} 1.1 (March 1932), p.2.  
\textsuperscript{145} "The Gate Theatre is convinced that it has a distinct part to play in the intellectual life of Ireland [...] The Gate is an international theatre [...] It is also a national theatre." Lord Longford, 'Preface' to \textit{The Gate Theatre Dublin}, pp.9-10.  
\textsuperscript{146} Christopher Morash records the Gate's "modernist repertoire," including works by O'Neill, Capek, Evreinov and Strindberg, as being "as much to do with an existing audience demand" previously catered for by the Dublin Drama League "as with the founders tastes" (A \textit{History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.180). From its early seasons the theatre combined this repertoire with the production of new Irish writing – in its second year two new plays were performed, David Sears \textit{Juggernaut} and Johnston's \textit{The Old Lady Says 'No!}, and showcasing the Gate's role in encouraging more experimental work, Johnston noted in 1934 that both had been rejected by the Abbey but had been successful enough to be revived ('The Making of the Theatre', p.14). \textit{Motley}'s 'Processionals' also emphasised the number of Irish plays, alongside international works, regular Shakespearean productions and classical works such as the 1933 version of the \textit{Oresteia}, performed in a single play as \textit{Agamemnon}. While the repeat performances of new plays including Johnston's and Manning's suggest audience interest in new writing, the Shakespearean productions were among the Gate's most successful. In January 1933, \textit{Motley} recalled that \textit{Hamlet}, \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, and the revival of the Gate's first production Goethe's \textit{Peer Gynt}, were the most successful of 1932 ('Processional' in \textit{Motley} II.1 (January 1933), pp.8-9), suggesting that classics performed in Macliammoir's rich expressionistic staging were most to its audience's taste. The Gate's \textit{Romeo and Juliet} is referred to in \textit{Murphy}, where Murphy suggests he was previously acquainted with Ticklepenny (\textit{Murphy}, p.52).}
elite while also reaching out to wider, and more productive, intervention in national life.

The extent to which Motley could be seen to represent the pretensions of a closed elite is evident in Manning's Processionals. These monthly columns were in part a record of the Gate's productions and of Dublin's theatrical scene. They were characterised by a gossipy, self-conscious tone, with familiar references to the goings-on of Dublin's university and amateur theatrical societies as well as the Gate itself. This tone assumed a particular intimacy with the 'intelligentsia' – a word of which Manning, like the Frica, was fond – and emphasised Motley's sense of being addressed to a self-regarding coterie.147

The narcissism which could result was explicit in 'A Word About the Audience', unsigned but probably written by Manning, which described the Gate as a unique collaboration between audience and theatre. Ignoring the necessity of Longford’s patronage, the writer describes the “special position” of the Gate audience, which “owns the theatre!”: “almost alone among public theatres the Dublin Gate Theatre has no wish to exploit its audiences; it has not even a reason for wishing to exploit them, for it and its audience are one.” The writer goes on to characterise the audience in terms she describes as highly flattering:

The audience at our theatre is highly intelligent; it is most attentive and follows every word of a play with eagerness and with determination to miss nothing. It has a keen sense of the dramatic, appreciates fine speech, and has an eye for beauty whether in play, production, acting, setting, or lighting. They are, perhaps, more easily moved to tears than to laughter, and their appreciation is none the less profound because it sometimes lies too deep for cheers. Ill timed applause and half-witted guffaws we leave to other theatres. Such, then, is our audience. It is an audience drawn from all classes and all ages of people, an audience where the cheapest seats are the best filled, and where youth abounds, best of all omens for the future. We and our audience working together will yet, we trust, be able to give to Dublin the intellectual theatre that she demands.148

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147 'A Word About the Audience' in Motley 1.4 (September 1932), p. 2.
Beckett's portrayal of the cosiness of the Frica's circle, its enthusiastic embrace of aesthetic postures and its performances addressed only to itself, was echoed in the smug tone of Motley's desire to establish its and the Gate's audience as an elite group.

The exclusivity of the Gate's project as reflected in Motley was equally apparent in Hilton Edwards' influence on the magazine. Alongside Manning's Processionals, the editorial space was shared with unsigned opening articles evidently written by Edwards as well as by Manning. As recounted in Motley and other contemporary publications, Edwards was more interested in the formal innovation of the Gate's productions than in its specifically Irish role. Denis Johnston's memory of the founding of the Gate contrasted Edwards' determination to set up a small theatre anywhere with MacLiammóir's "national ideas." Edwards own contribution to this volume, a commemoration of the Gate's sixth year published in 1934, further evinced this perspective. It is a vigorous attack on the "menace" of realism in contemporary theatre, and describes the Gate's purpose in formal terms:

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\text{We wanted a first-hand knowledge of the new methods of presentation discovered by the Continental experimental theatres. We wanted ourselves to discover new forms. We wanted to revise, or at least take advantage of, and learn from the best of discarded old traditions. And, not least, we wanted to put at the disposal of our audiences all the riches of the theatre, past, present and future, culled from the theatres of all the world and irrespective of their nationality. A theatre limited only by the limits of imagination.}^{150}
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His contributions to Motley were in a similar vein: an editorial-style piece called 'Realism', almost certainly by Edwards, attacked the affliction of expectations of naturalism in the theatre. While "when realism first arrived it seemed to bring new life to a commercialized and stagnant drama," he argued, "to-day it spreads stagnation and death wherever it has established itself." In this crisis, the Gate's role is the education of the audience away from these expectations: "The Gate is convinced that it must lead a public, very willing to be led, to new and untrammelled experiments and adventures." The ambition is the transformation of

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149 Johnston, p.12.
an existing theatre-going audience, and Edwards’ aims are formulated purely in aesthetic, not political or national terms.\textsuperscript{151}

\textit{Motley}, as a theatrical little magazine, adopted the rhetoric of aestheticism. The tone of Manning’s Processionals, the cultivation of a dedicated audience rewarded by its association with the progressiveness and glamour of the theatre, and the dissemination of Edwards’ theatrical vision were all part of this role.\textsuperscript{152} This was not the magazine’s only purpose, however. \textit{Motley}’s desire to involve its audience included attempts to reach out beyond the limits of an enclosed intelligentsia towards wider public culture.\textsuperscript{153} It arranged two symposia, for example, to debate issues relating to the theatre and to Irish culture more generally. The first of these was arranged in direct response to a letter from a reader, a J.J. O’Hanlon, which appeared in October 1932. O’Hanlon complained about the Gate’s productions of ‘classic’ plays instead of exclusively new writing, and suggested the formation of a committee of audience members to read and advise on new plays.\textsuperscript{154} This led to an article from Edwards in the following issue, defending the Gate’s wide repertoire and describing the arrangement of a symposium on ‘Should the Theatre be International?’ as a forum for the discussion of the issue. The responsiveness shown in such arrangements demonstrated the flexibility and potential of \textit{Motley}’s insistence on its role as a collaborative effort, and its desire to widen this collaboration beyond intimates of the Gate.

\textsuperscript{151}’Realism’ in \textit{Motley} 1.7 (December 1932), pp.2-3.

\textsuperscript{152} Glamour was as much part of \textit{Motley}’s self image as was intellectualism. The magazine regularly featured glossy photos of the Gate’s stars, with regular references to Mac Liammóir’s attractiveness in particular (correspondence on this subject featured in the March 1932 and December 1933 issues, for example). In October 1933, Manning began a series of interviews with leading figures at the Gate, called ‘The Stars in their Courses’, which emphasised the excitement and variety of their lives.

\textsuperscript{153} Manning often asked for contributions from theatres outside Dublin, with apparently limited success. In 1933, the Processional described a letter from the Cork Drama League, emphasising the limited support the theatre received from “Cork’s small intelligentsia”; "the University, as far as the Drama is concerned, is dead [...] The rich suburbs remain aloof, whether from snobbery or stupidity, or both, it is hard to say, probably both!” (‘Processional’ in \textit{Motley} 2.7 (November 1933), pp.6-9). The passage reflected public indifference to the ambitions of experimental theatre, and the mixture of frustration and pride reflected in \textit{Motley}’s attitude.

\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Motley} 1.5 (October 1932), p.14.
Ambitions to cultivate and audience for Motley and the Gate audience encountered a conflict with public attitudes to the theatre’s internationalism and its desire to break with the past. The symposium was announced in the Processional with the proviso that “Religious and political questions are definitely barred,”¹⁵⁵ but the impossibility of removing these questions from a debate on internationalism was evident. In its verdict on the event, Motley considered it “[o]n the whole” a success, having been attended by 350 people, but ironically noted the preoccupations of its attendees:

During the evening, the subject “Should The Theatre Be International?” was gradually refined down to the burning questions: “Where were you in 1916?” or “What did you do in 1922?” and “Is it necessary to have been in the pre-Truce I.R.A. to write a good play?” [...] I must request that in the next Symposium no member goes back further than Cromwell for his dramatic research.¹⁵⁶

The record showed frustration with the attendees refusal to answer the symposium’s question in the affirmative. The conflict between progressiveness in aesthetic and cultural terms and involvement in public cultural nationalism was manifest within the Gate’s published material. Differences between the founders of the Gate were evident in their comments on the issue, with Edwards again arguing against realism and “stressing the point that his interest in the theatre was neither National or International, simply Theatrical,” while MacLiammóir promoted international influences as capable of educating Irish writers in technique allowing “a coherent expression of their own native drama. This is the true Internationalism of Drama.” Cultural nationalism was clearly not aligned with rejection of internationalism, as praise for Johnston from a practitioner of sectarian criticism showed.¹⁵⁷ While demonstrating the difficulty of the encounter between the ideology of the Gate and perceptions of artistic nationalism in other spheres, the symposium also represented the eagerness of those involved in Motley to engage in this dialogue.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Processional’ in Motley 1.8 (November 1932), pp.7-8.
¹⁵⁶ ‘I’ [probably Manning], ‘The Symposium’ in Motley 1.7 (December 1932), pp.5-6.
¹⁵⁷ Frank Hugh O’Donnell asserted “that it was necessary to be a Catholic to write an Irish play. He followed up this statement by paying generous tribute to Mr. Denis Johnston’s genius as a dramatist, regardless of the fact that Mr. Johnston is a Presbyterian” (Ibid.).
The symposium was apparently planned as an annual event, with one more happening the following year on the question 'The Cinema will eventually supersede the Stage'\textsuperscript{158} This was again derailed by a vocal rejection of internationalism, dismissively summarised in the following 'Processional', \textsuperscript{159} and was again judged as a lukewarm success: "It may not have been responsible for any startling intellectual discoveries, but, at least, it proved quite definitely that a number of young people are taking a lively interest in the work of modern theatre."

The wide variety of projects initiated by \textit{Motley} demonstrated its self-conscious potential as a progressive force in contemporary culture in its own right, as well as being an adjunct to the Gate project. Manning's ambitions for \textit{Motley} were clearly in this direction, and as well as the theatrical features— including the promotion of amateur and touring theatre, the discussion of the Gate's aesthetic and the public symposia – the magazine was intended as a literary journal. Gestures in this

\textsuperscript{158} 'Processional' in \textit{Motley} 2.6 (October 1933), pp.7-9. The subject matter reflected an interest in film particularly pushed by Manning in the magazine. In its fourth issue Manning announced that \textit{Motley} would begin to include film criticism by herself, and in an article called 'Why not a Repertory Cinema?' argued for the public demand for intelligent film and intelligent discussion of cinema (\textit{Motley} 1.4 (September 1932), pp.14-15). Her columns reviewed both Hollywood and European films and discussed formal techniques and the relationship between cinema and theatre ('You see there \textit{is} an art of the cinema' ('The Films in \textit{Motley} 1.7 (December 1932), pp.13-15).

Like many of \textit{Motley}'s projects, the series fizzled out. By the end of 1933 Manning had started to instead contribute stories about the Fairchild family, comedy 'plain people' whom she used to satirise attitudes to censorship and Hollywood productions ('The Films: The Fairchild Family at the Films' in \textit{Motley} 2.7 (November 1933), pp.12-14, and 'Bongo-Bongo' in \textit{Motley} 2.8 (December 1933), pp.13-16). She responded to a request from a correspondent that she return to serious film criticism with a complaint about the availability of good films to be reviewed, and a serious attack on film censorship ('The Films: 1933-34) in \textit{Motley} 2.8 (December 1933), pp.16-17). In 1934, film criticism was taken over by GF Dalton, the Irish correspondent of \textit{Cinema Quarterly}.

Although Manning's energies in this direction were clearly frustrated, they had a period of success, and the relationship between the Gate and film produced \textit{Guests of the Nation}, which was described in September 1933 as the "Gate Theatre film" and included Manning and Johnston in its production team ('Processional' in \textit{Motley} 1.5 (September 1933), pp.8-11). \textit{Motley}'s interest in film was also influential, with Liam O'Laighaire writing in support of Manning's proposal for a repertory cinema, and was one manifestation of the publication's ambitions extended beyond being the Gate's programme.

\textsuperscript{159} "A Gael then mounted the platform and, after a few preliminary remarks in Gaelic for which he was loudly cheered by an alcoholic gentleman who had evidently made good use of half-time, he proceeded to tell us that we didn't want so much of this international drama here; no, we wanted more nationalism, more local drama, that's what we wanted, more local stuff. His remarks were punctuated by loud party cries from the alcoholic gentleman. We distinctly heard, "Up Devil!" "No more Bloody English!" "Up the Republic!"" 'Processional' in \textit{Motley} 2.8 (December 1933), pp.10-12.
direction included the publication of poetry and other creative writing, although in contrast to Edwards' clearly formulated anti-realism manifesto, the writing represented in Motley lacked a clear aesthetic programme apart from the encouragement of young Irish writers. Motley’s preoccupation with youth, and its aspiration to represent the voice of a new generation, was made explicit in the series of literary competitions announced in 1933, and intended to “encourage Youth and contribute in a small way towards the growth of a richer intellectual life in this country.”

Entitled ‘Come into the Sun’, only two of these competitions were completed. The first of these was a competition in lyric poetry judged by Frank O’Connor, the results of which appeared in December 1933. The second, a short story competition judged by Seán O’Faoláin, was completed in February 1934. Both judges were scathing about the results of the competition. O’Connor was fairly damning about the poems he selected to share the prize, and criticised the antiquarianism of most contributions:

That George V reigns still, in poetry as in law, is obvious from the rest of the poems. No one wrote “The Benediction of your Gracious Hand,” or “The Iron Valediction of the Guns,” but I did note “The Semipiternal Chastity of Stars.”

O’Faoláin was similarly dismissive of the results of the short story competition, noting that the entries “did not reach a very high standard, in fact they were decidedly disappointing,” and again splitting the prize between two faintly praised submissions. The failure of the literary competitions to attract a high standard of contributions is reflected in the next planned round. This was to return to

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160 Poetry began to appear regularly in 1933, with work appearing from Charles Donnelly, Irene Haugh, Donagh MacDonagh and Ethna MacCarthy, Beckett’s ‘Alba’, among others. In 1934, Motley featured the poetry of John Lane, championed by Frank O’Connor, together with a series of autobiographical articles from the young Cork poet.

161 Motley 2.6 (October 1933), p.2.

162 The three guinea prize was split between ‘Only the Poet’, a “modern type [...] which says something and says it in an interesting fashion” but had an “artificial, commonplace, and with respects to the poet, derivative” outlook, and ‘Thee Lured He Away His Love to Be’, a pseudo-Elizabethan lyric which had “a real rhythmical sense” but “a certain awkwardness in the use of the word.” Third place was awarded to Cyril Cusack because his poem was in Irish. ‘Results of our first literary competition’ in Motley 2.8 (December 1933), pp.2-3.

163 ‘Results of “Motley” Literary competition, No.2’ in Motley 3.1 (February 1934 [the issue is misdated as 1933 on its title page]), p.16.
theatrical subject matter and self-reflective discussion, being ‘An Imaginary Conversation between Two Prominent Dublin Figures on the Present State of Irish Theatre’ to be judged by Christine Longford, but which never appeared.

The abortive competition series demonstrated Motley’s frustrated ambition to be an active literary periodical representing the younger generation of Irish writers. It struggled to attract a diverse audience and was not viable financially, and clearly ran out of energy after two years. The short-lived duration of many of its projects and ultimately of the magazine itself reflected the challenge of finding a place between exclusive elitism, and inclusive cultural intervention. Motley aimed to reach beyond the closed reflexivity portrayed in the Frica’s coterie, but attempts of Manning and others were frustrated by the multiplicity of their ambitions. Motley could not find a large enough audience for its mix of self-conscious modernity, internationalism and high-minded approach to cultural and political boundaries.

Motley inhabited a cultural space comparable to that described by Paige Reynolds in relation to the Abbey’s publications in the first decade of the twentieth century. Reynolds develops Mark Morrisson’s argument that ‘little magazines’ combined intellectualism and aestheticism with ambition to reach a wider public. She argues that the Abbey’s publications between 1899 and 1909, Beltaine, Samhaine, and The Arrow, were a “site where modernist authors and editors awkwardly strove to cultivate audiences simultaneously elitist and popular, abstracted and actual.” These magazines were directed towards a ‘cultivated’ audience, “one that would support the theater’s critique of popular drama and of conventional

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164 In February 1933, back issues of the magazine were offered for sale at half price from the theatre, presumably reflecting poor sales. By the end of the year, a ‘Motley Medley’ mix of music-hall style sketches was being promoted for the financial support of Motley, which, “like most highbrow or semi-highbrow magazines, lives in a state of financial uncertainty” (‘Processional’ in Motley 2.8 (December 1933), pp.10-12). Manning’s ‘Processionals’ became shorter and shorter through 1934, and despite a promised return in September, the May 1934 issue was the last.
public taste.” However, the Abbey’s position in the Revival, which in its attempt to redefine national culture required a broad audience, meant that its publications combined elitism with attempts to appeal to a popular and nationalist audience. Reynolds describes the awkwardness of this combination in the Abbey’s early self-positioning, as “the occasional magazines of the Abbey anticipated simultaneously a small reading public which would support an experimental theater and a large theater audience which would attend their native plays.”

Reynolds argument is relevant for the Gate and Motley in the 1930s. The Gate was conceived in response to the Abbey’s development after independence. Subsidised by the state from 1925, the increasingly conservative realism of Abbey performances led to the Gate’s conception as a space for experimental theatre requiring neither official support or a popular audience. As the theatre’s move from the Peacock stage to the Rotunda suggested, however, the Gate’s founders were not content to run a salon theatre as an adjunct to the Abbey. References to the Abbey in Motley reflect a sense of the Gate continuing the tradition of progressive national theatre; one contributor proudly described “the world-renowned dramatic revival, that budded in the earlier Abbey, and is now blooming in the Gate.”

In its professed desire to become an institution of national culture, the Gate cannot be described as avant garde. It combined a sense of the national role of art with a faith in the status of a cultural elite, and did not express a radical desire to renegotiate social and cultural relations. The Gate may be seen as avant gardist, however, in Motley’s self-conception as the vanguard of an experimental cultural movement. Its desire to break down the boundaries between performance and

167 Ibid., p.66.
168 See Morash, pp.187-92, for a description of the Abbey’s increasing reluctance to engage in controversy. The 1935 run of O’Casey’s The Silver Tassie was curtailed by opposition in the Catholic press, for example.
169 Unsigned, ‘The Present Position of Irish Drama’ in Motley 1.6 (November 1932), pp.2-3. Motley’s pride at its independence from the state was combined with intermittent calls for state subsidy, which was idealistically conceived as allowing experimentation without either commercial or official pressures (unsigned, ‘Subsidies’ in Motley 1.3 (August 1932), pp.2; G Norman Reddin, ‘A National Theatre’ in Motley 1.1 (March 1932), pp.6-8).
spectator was represented in its emphasis on the Gate as a collaborative project between performance and audience.

An ambitious example of the incorporation of public audience into aesthetic spectacle was Denis Johnston’s ‘National Morality Play’, described in Motley’s first issue. Johnston suggested that O’Connell Street should stage on Easter Monday a public spectacle “re-enacting in a conventionalised form the events of Easter Week 1916.” He described an ‘experimental’ approach, a “brave leap in the dark,” as necessary to reinvigorate Irish theatre, and the public performance as incorporating history, “personal value” and aesthetic experimentation in a dramatic aestheticisation of national culture. The project was evidently important to Johnston’s conception of the role of theatre in society – the piece was republished in the Bell in 1941.

The difficulty in engaging public support for radical theatre was suggested by the response to Johnston’s idea. The next issue of Motley included a response by Manning to an article in the Leader, criticising the Gate and addressing Johnston (then writing as E.W. Tocher) specifically. Manning quoted the correspondent’s (‘N’) criticism:

“It would be E.W. Tocher who should very originally suggest ‘that once a year on a public holiday – Easter Monday – a kind of National morality play should be performed in O’Connell Street, re-enacting, in a conventionalised form the events of Easter Week 1916 ... of course it would have to be begun in the simplest way – quite short and to the point...’ The idea is brilliant, but those who have seen Tocher’s plays might well doubt his ability to do something ‘in a conventional way ... quite short and to the point.”

Manning’s response was furious, highlighting ‘N’s objections on the basis of “the fear of influenza and the inability of the Irish public to take anything seriously” as “Provincial pettiness.” The exchange represented the gap between the Gate’s

171 Wills, p.104.
173 Ibid.
ambitions for a radical and productive engagement in national culture and the hostility of public responses to the theatre’s pretensions.

Despite the tensions evident within its project, however, _Motley_ achieved a significant level of coherency, and was significant in its influence on national cultural discourse.\(^{174}\) As well as the emphasis on nationalism through internationalism seen in the rhetoric of Longford, alongside the Gate’s project _Motley_ aimed to consider international theatre and film in an Irish context. International and national culture were connected through a sustained belief in the possibilities of combining experimental form with national subject. The embrace of formal innovation in order to explore and illuminate modern narratives of national self-definition was a central preoccupation shared by the Gate, _Motley_, and Beckett’s contemporary work.

\(^{174}\) O’Faoláin’s contribution to _Motley_, ‘Provincialism and Literature’, in 1932 was an early example of his cultural critiques. The article challenged the opposition between internationalism and nationalism in Irish culture, and alongside his involvement in _Motley’s_ fiction competitions shows the compatibility between his cultural project and that of the Gate (_Motley_ I.3 (August 1932), pp.3-4).
3.4 Mary Manning, Denis Johnston and Beckett’s late modernism

Beckett’s fiction experimented with formal techniques to interrogate national narratives of self-definition. The tensions and pretensions of cultural nationalism formed the basis of his exploration of the status of fictionality. He was most acute in his portrayal of the cultural project of Dublin’s self-defined avant garde, in which he targeted the gap between ambition and actuality in a satire of progressive postures. In its self-referentiality and self-mockery, Beckett’s fiction dramatised his own position within a group combining internationalism and experimentalism in their attitudes to Irish culture. Beckett was not an isolated or marginalised critic of Irish literary culture, but developed from a specific set of responses to cultural nationalism and high modernism. These can be understood in the context of the development of late modernism internationally.

Those critics who have discussed Beckett’s 1930s fiction in the context of late modernism have emphasised its interrogation of the nature of fictionality itself. Beckett’s novels do not only express the fragmentation of modern experience in a high modernist mode, but expose their own formal construction. In Tyrus Miller’s influential formulation, Beckett’s fiction was late modernist because his fictional worlds offered no consolatory unity, the high modernist compensation for the disorder of the world outside the text.175

Discussing Beckett’s fiction between More Pricks Than Kicks and Watt, Miller locates his late modernist impulse in the exposure of the deceptions and

175 Tyrus Miller, Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp.13-14. Miller draws on Alan Wilde’s distinction between high modernism, in which aesthetic order was conceived as capable of restoring order lost in the objective world, and late modernism, where perception and expression themselves were questioned and the notion of “authentic” reality undermined. Wilde also highlights the intertwining of both modernist modes in the 1930s, and describes late modernism as “a reaction against modernism by writers who retain a good many modernist presuppositions and strategies and who, in a variety of ways, differ from one another as much as they do from the early modernists (Wilde, Horizons of Assent (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), p.107). Wilde’s definition highlights the difficulty of fixing the boundaries between ‘high’, ‘late’ and ‘post’ modernism, and the contentious status of late modernism itself, these difficulties contribute to the impossibility of fixing a stable definition of ‘Irish late modernism’.
negotiations which construct the self in relation to the world. His social satire implicates itself, as Beckett desublimates consciousness, not just through wicked parody of the seedy intellectual-or artist-type characters in his work, in the flaws and foibles of his comic semblables, but also in making his own act of writing ridiculous, his risible handling of literary enunciation and narration.\textsuperscript{176}

In \textit{Dream of Fair to Middling Women} and \textit{More Pricks Than Kicks}, both Belacqua and the narrator are themselves implicated in the social world they mock. The nature of this world, and its specific setting in a Dublin milieu, is unimportant for Miller. He describes Beckett’s “untimely” commitment to in his critical writing of the time, “reaffirm[ing] the heroic ethos of high modernism,” as following the “apparent backwardness of the Irish context that he addressed in his early writings.”\textsuperscript{177} Miller thus establishes Beckett as a central figure in late modernism \textit{despite} his Irishness, and neglects the possible contribution of contemporary Irish literary culture to Beckett’s formal interrogation of the construction of fictionality.

The irrelevance of Irish literary culture for Beckett’s 1930s fiction is also suggested in David Weisberg’s reading. Weisberg contextualises Beckett’s work in the pressures felt by writers in the 1930s to commit to a political stance, arguing that Beckett negotiated his resistance to a view of aesthetic autonomy from the social world not through explicit political commitment, but “by fashioning a narrative form that consciously exploited contradictions inherent in the notion of an autotelic art.”\textsuperscript{178} Weisberg analyses Beckett’s writing in the problematic relationship between avant garde aesthetics and political activism in the 1930s, and argues that critics have continued to explore Beckett’s work on the basis of an opposition between self and society.\textsuperscript{179} This opposition itself is a site of contest in Beckett’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{176} Miller, p.180.
\item \textsuperscript{177} Ibid., p.174.
\item \textsuperscript{178} David Weisberg, \textit{Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel} (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p.9. Weisberg challenges Miller’s opinion of Beckett’s criticism as proposing a high modernist aesthetic which his fiction deconstructs, arguing that “both display a mutually informing influence” (Weisberg, p.170, n.4).
\item \textsuperscript{179} Ibid., pp. 30-31. Weisberg cites Ruby Cohn’s analysis of Beckett’s review of Denis Devlin, in which she sees Beckett “sid[ing] with the self against society,” as an example of this critical opposition (\textit{Disjecta}, p.12).
\end{itemize}
fiction, Weisberg argues, and was worked out in the context of tensions surrounding aesthetic experimentation in which “the outer world – from the agitation for socialist revolution to the rise of fascism – could no longer be ignored.”

Miller, Weisberg and Norma Bouchard convincingly describe the late modernist aesthetic of Beckett’s fiction. Consideration of his work in relation to Irish literary culture, and particularly to the avant gardist rhetoric of the Gate, suggests that his destabilisation of literary form evolved from a response to cultural nationalism as well as to high modernism. The relationship between politics and aesthetics was understood by Beckett in a national framework, which intersected with international late modernist fiction. Norma Bouchard characterises Beckett’s fiction through its will to probe the hermeneutic frames by which not only authors provide tuning forks, but [...] we as readers do as well, assigning identity by excluding the excess and privileging structure to the detriment of conflict in order to consolidate significance into meaning.

The pressing context of this exploration is described by Bouchard as the literary culture of 1930s Europe. The central focus of Beckett’s fiction, however, was the exposure of constructions of literary interaction with social reality, developed in response to various narratives of national cultural self-definition in Ireland.

Beckett’s portrayal of Dublin cultural life demonstrated his relationship with the elements of the self-defined avant garde, who adopted the “deconstructive response” to both high modernism and cultural nationalism which critics have not perceived in 1930s Ireland. The Gate Theatre, with which through Mary Manning both in Beckett’s portrayal of her as the Frica and in his involvement in her own writing Beckett was directly connected, was in part a manifestation of such a response. While the Gate lacked a sustained, radical cultural programme, Motley intermittently represented avant gardist impulses. Two of Motley’s leading figures

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180 Weisberg, p.27.
181 Ibid., p.142.
182 Ibid., pp.1-3.
183 Davis and Jenkins, p.25.
contributed plays to the Gate which dramatised the tensions in these impulses. Both Manning's Gate play and Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* shared both cultural material and formal strategies with Beckett's distinctively Irish late modernism.

Central to these responses was an awareness of their own status in national culture. In the Gate and in *Motley*, the desire for a radical and intellectual audience was combined with a desire for a public role. The tensions in this combination were evident not only to Beckett but to his contemporaries, including the specific target of his satire, Mary Manning. In his portrayal of Manning as the Frica, Beckett depicted her energies as directed in purely social activity. She becomes the embodiment of the skidding superficiality of Dublin's self-satisfied co-option of multiple cultural influences. An alternative and more nuanced perception of Manning, and the importance of her connection to Beckett's early work, is evident in her own writing. As well as her editorship of *Motley*, Manning wrote plays and novels which combined an insider's realist portrayal of Dublin society with a self-conscious sense of modernity. Beckett's contribution to her 1931 play *Youth's The Season...?* suggests the formal connections between his fiction and the theatrical experimentation of the Gate.

Micheál MacLiannmóir's perspective on Manning offers a useful point of comparison to Beckett's fictionalisation. MacLiannmóir recorded Manning's involvement with the Gate, as editor of the Gate magazine *Motley*, contributing "authoress," and centre of the Gate's social scene. His description of her is reminiscent of some aspects of the Frica. While the physical disgust is absent, MacLiannmóir emphasised her constant movement and flitting attention—her brain, nimble and observant as it was, could not yet keep pace with a tongue so caustic that even her native city [...] was a little in awe of her [...]

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184 Manning's novel *Mount Venus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938) portrayed the multiple cultural and political discourses of 1930s Dublin through the story of a bohemian family connected to radical republicanism and Ascendency elitism. The novel clearly draws on characters from the Dublin scene, and was not published in Ireland.
her handsome, rather prominent eyes, deeply blue and dangerously smiling, danced all over the room in search of prey.\textsuperscript{185}

In a half affectionate and half pointed analysis, MacLiammóir like Beckett portrayed Manning as a social hazard, and her interests as the promotion of an artistic coterie:

[...] an impulsive sympathy was fundamental in her nature; what people called her cattery was simply a medium through which she expressed her social ego. Her ruling passion was ambition; she worshipped success. It was the most natural reaction of a temperament set in the major key against the country in which she had lived all her life and where everything has failed; and it was inevitable that she should later have married an American and gone to live in Boston, where one pictures her surrounded by the latest books and the newest people, busily writing, between luncheon-parties, her own novels and plays about a life that must be growing more and more remote to her.\textsuperscript{186}

MacLiammóir’s Manning was an ambiguous figure, whose energies were directed towards multiple targets but with no certain goal other than ambition and social success. While he stressed her abilities with more approval than the narrator’s portrayal of the Frica, both versions share a superficiality and lack of fulfilment. She represented for MacLiammóir the inevitable frustration of Dublin’s limited potential.

In his summary of her play \textit{Youth’s the Season...?}, MacLiammóir similarly mixed praise of Manning’s ambition and insight with a portrayal of her as immersed in a limited and self-absorbed social coterie. He ventriloquised the gossipy tone of the upper middle class in his suggestion that the subject and audience of the play were one:

Everyone in Dublin had been to school with Mary Manning. ‘She was always the same,’ they said. ‘Do you remember her playing The Pixies’ Gavotte? Do you remember what she wrote on the blackboard? My dear, she’s beginning to do it all in print now, the Gate’s going to do a play of hers soon called \textit{Youth’s The Season}; darling, every one’s in it. One really isn’t safe in Dublin any longer.’\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{185} MacLiammóir, pp.150-52.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
MacLiammóir went on to praise the play as “brilliant, in spite of the curious mix of Cowardly influences and unfinished Joycean sympathies [...] the part [of Desmond Millington, played by MacLiammóir], unlike as it sounds, was beautifully drawn, and not the usual meaningless flutter of cheap ridicule.”¹⁸⁸ This decidedly mixed blessing, while acknowledging Manning’s skill, portrays Manning’s creative ability as inseparable from her social role. The suggestion was of modernist ambition, “unfinished Joycean sympathies,” directed solely towards comic display to and of an insider’s cultural scene.

In MacLiammóir’s terms, not too distant from Beckett’s, the openness to diverse influences which characterised Manning and her contemporaries was combined with an inability, and at times an elitist unwillingness, to direct the production of these influences to anyone other than themselves. Youth’s The Season...?¹⁸⁹ both endorses this critique in its form and satirises it in its content. Contemporary with both the Frica’s and MacLiammóir’s parties, it was another portrayal of the social and cultural posturing of Dublin’s intelligentsia. The play also centres around a party, where a cast of self-conscious “Bright Young People” experience various personal and romantic crises – two main plotlines include the ‘rehabilitation’ of the unsentimental Deirdre,¹⁹⁰ and the increasing hysteria of the depressive Terence, who shoots himself in the heart in the play’s melodramatic climax.

¹⁸⁸ MacLiammóir, p152.
¹⁸⁹ Youth’s the Season...? was originally performed in December 1931, while Beckett was writing Dream of Fair to Middling Women, and was revived two years later. It was published in Plays of Changing Ireland, ed. Curtis Canfield (New York: Macmillan, 1936). References to the play are to this volume.
¹⁹⁰ In a Taming of the Shrew style plot-line, Deirdre begins the play committed to a scientific rejection of romance, to the great frustration of her fiancé Gerald ("It’s all so simple. If only we could make up our minds to eliminate romanticism and idealism and recognise that love is only a figment of the imagination; it simply doesn’t exist. So called love is nothing more or less than chemical attraction" Youth, p.346). Advised by her family, Gerald goads Deirdre into jealousy, hits her in front of the party and pretends to break off their engagement. The humiliation leads to her final submission to her ‘sentimentality’, and meek acceptance of his mastery. The plot satirises another posture – Deirdre’s pose of rational modernity – but also suggests a nostalgia for traditional gender roles very different from the repressed but voracious sexuality of the Frica. Mount Venus, in its portrayal of conflict between desires for freedom and for stability in the romantic entanglements of its female characters, reflects similar uncertainty about modern relationships.
MacLiammóir's humorous record of the *Youth's The Season's* self-regarding audience underplayed the extent to which narcissism was the central concern of the play itself. Manning depicted a cast of characters preoccupied and tortured by the roles they play. These roles are primarily versions of the angst-ridden, post-adolescent intellectual, full of potential but without direction. "Oh God, I'm so depressed [...] sick of everything, sick of myself, and unutterably sick of Dublin," declares Desmond in the opening scene. "So am I," replies his sister, "it's only a mood. It'll pass."\(^{191}\) Their intellectualism is decidedly modern (Connie: "I *am* intellectual [*defiantly*]. I've read "Ulysses" through twice!" / Toots: "Only for pornographic pickings"),\(^{192}\) and combined with a relish for their own dissolution. While enjoying their role as "Dublin's underworld,"\(^ {193}\) they are painfully aware of their own pretension, as become particularly evident in the hungover final act:

Toots: I'm sick of my life. Running aimlessly here, there and everywhere. Chattering, forever chattering. [...] We're not real people Desmond; we're only imitation.\(^ {194}\)

Manning's subjects are full of ambition – novels, design and political action are all planned at various points\(^ {195}\) - but finally recognise their entrapment and their pretence:

Harry: I'd like to be buried here.
Desmond: So we are. Buried alive.
Harry: Oh, hang it! I can't explain, but you know what I mean; it's part of us, somehow.
Toots: Yes, I know. We all revile it and run it down and run away from it – but we always drift back sometime. Dublin never lets a Dubliner go.
Desmond: Oh God, the self-consciousness, the gossiping, the bigotry, the Imitation Chelsea, the Imitation Mayfair, the Imitation Bright Young People! And such *un*original sin!\(^ {196}\)

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191 *Youth*, p.326.
192 Ibid., p.335.
193 Ibid., p.358.
194 Ibid., p.381.
195 The party at the centre of the play includes a range of characters who would be at home at the Frica's, including Europa Wrench, "a plump young woman of twenty; a living, breathing mass of Celtic embroideries and hand-woven tweeds" who "speaks with an extreme cultured Anglo-Irish accent" (*Youth*, p.356). She is an enthusiast for both national and international culture, promoting the "March Forward League. An international organisation for cultural relations between the nations!" (*Youth*, p.361), and running a "hand-weaving industry. The workers are peasant girls from all over Ireland – most of them from the Gaeltacht. There are only two at present, but we hope to have many more. We're teaching them hand-weaving, Irish dancing, embroidery, and harp. It is so vitally necessary to improve the peasant *culturally*, I think" (*Youth*, p.365).
196 *Youth*, p.398.
While Manning's play suggests a sense of self-regarding coterie, it is defined by a satirical self-awareness reminiscent of Beckett's narrator. This is particularly true of the play's most interesting formal device, the doubling of the suicide Terence and the "perfect young city man" Horace Egosmith. 197

In its form, Youth's The Season is largely naturalistic. It was included in the 'New Realism' section of Plays of Changing Ireland, a 1936 collection intended to show the range of modern Irish drama to an American audience. In his introduction to the play, editor Curtis Canfield was keen to emphasise that, although metropolitan in focus, Manning's play was indisputably 'national', "as true to its class and its locale as The New Gossoon [also included in the collection] is to its people and surroundings." 198 He also highlighted the connection between the depression which permeates the play's characters and international responses to modernity, as "[i]ts cynicism and tone of disillusionment support the view that the "post-war generation" was not a phenomenon confined to America alone." 199 Canfield saw the play as "harsh and strident, partaking itself of some of the excesses of its young characters," noticing the inseparability of the satired and the satirist in the intimacy of the play's "bitter realism." 200

Canfield also noted the interruption of the play's realism in the form of the character of Egosmith. Entering with and rarely parted from Terence, Egosmith is silent throughout the play, alert and observant: "his eyes wander restlessly seeking the reactions of each person to the next speech." 201 Egosmith, who according to Deirdre Bair was developed by Manning in collaboration with Beckett, 202 is the

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197 Youth, p.330.
198 Canfield, p.196.
199 Ibid., p.198.
200 Ibid.
201 Youth, p.331.
202 Bair records the assistance Beckett gave Manning in rewriting Youth's The Season, and attributes 'Ego Smith' to Beckett. Beckett apparently planned for Egosmith to give a speech which would be the "focal point" of the play, "allowing him to give his version of the world: 'My conception of the universe is a huge head with pus-exuding scabs - entirely revolting.' Edwards and MacLiammoir thought the speech accurate but disgusting and refused to keep it. Beckett also suggested that the hero should kill himself before the end of the play, but again the producers rejected his idea."
"other self"\textsuperscript{203} of Terence, the most dissolve and cynical of the cast, who shares with him the play’s most striking image of revulsion:

Terence (to Egosmith): You know, old man, I sometimes think of the world as a colossal animal, a sort of gargantuan cow. The trees, the rivers, and the mountains are a skin disease which it unfortunately happens to be suffering from; and the inhabitants are merely parasites eking [sic] out a dreary existence from the pus-exuding scabs. In my more footless moments I can even explain God in this way. Curious, very curious.\textsuperscript{204}

As well as his silence, Egosmith’s strangeness is increasingly evident in his role as Terence’s mirror image. As his name suggests, he is the embodiment of Terence’s inner self, and his role as Terence’s audience and reflection emphasises the narcissism and self-referentiality of his performance:

Terence [striking an attitude]. Behold me, Connie! The real me. A hypocrite! A transparent poseur from puberty. For once I’ll be sincere. I don’t love you, Connie. I’ll never love anyone. I can’t even love myself. [Egosmith coughs gently. Terence turns and sees him in the shadows.] Oh, you – [he laughs] for the moment – d’you know, Horace old man – I thought I saw myself, and behold, I was a very ordinary fellow.\textsuperscript{205}

Egosmith’s role as “Terence Killigrew’s Doppelganger” becomes increasingly sinister. Toots’ prediction that “Egosmith is Terence. Terence is Egosmith [...] it’s war to the death between them”\textsuperscript{206} is fulfilled. The satisfaction and flexibility of the performance of roles within a closed setting is converted into despair at self-recognition, and Terence’s suicide:

Terence: Come now, you remember? I said if I ever met myself face to face I’d shoot myself. Well, Flossie, I met myself last night and I saw, what do you think, that I was just a picturesque wind bag! [Toots laughs] – a book of handy quotations – a melancholic misfit [...] It’s so damn funny I almost made up my mind to take Egosmith’s advice and sell insurance policies [...]\textsuperscript{207}

speech given by Terence is evidently a version of this. Bair also explicitly connects the Egosmith character with Beckett’s later work, through his recounted “that it would not be successful unless there was a character offstage who could be heard steadily flushing a toilet. Mrs Howe and her producers were puzzled by Beckett’s fixation with suicide, bartenders and flushing toilets, but he assured them their usefulness in furthering action would be readily apparent when they read his own novel, Murphy” (Bair, pp.249-50). The episode is anecdotal, but the suggestion that Beckett was extensively involved with this most radical feature of Manning’s play confirms both the extent of his involvement with the Gate, and the importance of the thematic connections between Manning’s interpretation of modern Irish culture and Beckett’s own 1930s writing.

\textsuperscript{203} Canfield, p.198.
\textsuperscript{204} Youth, pp.361-62.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., p.352.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., p.401.
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., p.403.
The consciousness of their own self-absorption which intermittently afflicts the other characters becomes entwined in the play at the formal level through the expressionist device of Egosmith. Regardless of the extent of Beckett’s involvement, Egosmith converts the posturing performativity of the play into a formal and a thematic dominant.

The formal strategies which appeared, apparently through Beckett’s influence, in *Youth’s The Season*...? emphasised the self-conscious exposure of the play’s theatrical status. In Denis Johnston’s *The Old Lady Says ‘No!’*, theatrical form was manipulated in a more ambitious experiment with the deconstruction of performance. Performed in the Gate’s second season and published in the ‘Experimentation and Expressionism’ section of *Plays of Changing Ireland*, Johnston’s play manipulated theatrical and nationalist conventions. As Christopher Morash has described, its opening immediately juxtaposed cultural nationalism with modernist formal disruption, being instantly recognisable as a “virtuoso pastiche of a Robert Emmet play, such as Boucicault’s *Robert Emmet* (1884) – albeit a bit purpler than the norm.”208 In the play’s first scene, the dense quotations of romantic rhetoric are shattered by the ‘injury’ of the Speaker, and the ensuing scenes expose the theatricality of nationalist narratives while implicating the audience in their construction.209 The self-conscious theatricality throughout *The Old Lady* echoes the exposed fictionality of Beckett’s prose; both parody the construction of the cultural narratives while emphasising their own engagement with a similar construction.

Johnston’s introduction to *The Old Lady* highlighted the inseparability of its formal experimentation and its location in the specific time and place of 1929 Dublin.210

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208 Morash, p.181.
209 Morash connects the Speaker’s blow to the head with Pirandello’s *Henry IV*, which had been staged by the Dublin Drama League in 1924 and was being performed in London while Johnston was writing the play, then titled *Shadowdance* (Morash, p.181).
210 As the play’s categorisation in *Plays of Changing Ireland* suggested, it was clearly influenced by expressionism, and Johnston himself referred to its “expressionist tricks” (‘Opus One’, introduction to *The Old Lady Says ‘No!’* in *Selected Plays of Denis Johnston* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1983), p.21). Later, however, he denied that the play was expressionist, describing its “thematic method
Johnston described the shared cultural references of his Dublin audience as distinctively amenable to formal deconstruction. *The Old Lady* was written, in Johnston’s explanation, to interrogate the form of cultural narratives by breaking down the boundary between stage and audience. He described his attempt to expose theatrical conventions by evoking cultural reference points familiar to the audience, the “associations and thought-patterns already connected with the songs and slogans of our city.” The associations on which he drew were the tropes of romantic nationalism, fragments stitched together in a pastiche of audience expectations.

The ‘known audience’ of the Gate’s self-consciously modern theatre were presented with the rhetoric of romantic nationalism in the “cultural disarmament of the post-Civil War era.” The Chorus’ onstage spectatorship forces the confused Speaker to confront his anachronistic status; the cultural establishment in which this juxtaposition is played out is made explicit in the play’s second part. In yet another party, Johnston introduces the Speaker into a self-consciously elite gathering of representatives of contemporary Dublin culture.

The comic sequence depicts the institutionalisation of art, and the dissolution of the revolutionary possibilities of romantic nationalism. The scene includes a representative of the now-official cultural nationalism of the new state, in cosy collusion with Lady Trimmer, “of the old regime.” The Minister for Arts and Crafts proposes the necessity of his own version of a cultural republic, in which the artist, “if he deserves it, mind you, only if he deserves it,” may be recruited into the service of the state, “under Section 15 of the Deserving Artists’ (Support) Act, No. 65 of 1926.” Institutionalised, the radical potential of art is neutered, parroted into meaninglessness, and co-opted by a self-satisfied and self-conscious elite:

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212 Morash, p.182.
213 The Old Lady Says ‘No!’ in *Selected Plays*, p.57.
214 The Old Lady, p.55.
Minister: [...] Talent is what the country wants. Politics may be all O.K. in their way, but what I say to An Taoischach is this, until we have Talent and Art in the country we have no National Dignity. We must have Talent and Art. Isn’t that right?
Chorus: We must have Art have Talent and Art.
Lady Trimmer: Quite. And cultivated people of taste. You mustn’t forget them, Mr Minister. Art cannot live you know by taking in its own washing – if I may put it that way.
[...]
Chorus: The State supports the Artist.
Grattan: And the Artist supports the State.215

The parody targets the complacent rhetoric of cultural nationalism into a cosy and elitist discourse.

In a condensed version of the cast of poets, politicians and poseurs who populate the Frica’s party, willing participants in this coterie include “O’Cooney the well-known dramatist, O’Mooney the rising portrait painter, and O’Rooney the famous novelist.” These characters mouth commitment to the radical, the “Daring Outrage” which may delightfully offend, but are hollowed out:

O’Rooney: [...] I do not believe in political Nationalism. Do you not see my Russian boots?
Wife: Mr O’Rooney believes in the workers.
O’Rooney: I do not believe in the workers. Nor do I believe in the Upper Classes nor in the Bourgeoisie. It should be perfectly clear by now what I do not believe in, unless you wish me to go over it again?
Lady Trimmer (archly): Mr O’Rooney, you dreadful man!216

In the complacent confines of the official culture, nothing is believed. The rhetoric of cultural transformation is shown as the affectation of an avant garde lacking a direction in which to lead. They also lack an audience, enjoying their elite confinement in “a small Salon [...] Just somewhere the nicest people ... the people one wants to meet...”217

Their audience was also, of course, that of The Old Lady Says ‘No!’: As Motley shows, the Gate’s own self-perception was that of the elite salon as well as that of the national theatre, and the former element was more evident in the tiny Peacock

215 The Old Lady, p.53-54.
216 Ibid., p.58.
217 Ibid., p.55.
theatre in which Johnston’s play was first performed. The metatheatricality of The Old Lady suggests its own implication in the confined display of the salon. As the on-stage party explodes into the simultaneous recitals and postures of its finale, the constructions of narratives of national identity are exposed alongside the play’s own construction. The play’s virtuoso form displays the possibilities of experimental theatre in an Irish context, and simultaneously deflates it. “You’re only a bloody play-actor,” the Speaker is told, “If you were a man and not satisfied with the state of things, you’d alter them for yourself.”

Written for a self-consciously intellectual and experimental theatre which was also self-consciously national, Johnston’s play satirised the pretensions of Dublin’s avant garde. Its own ambitions, however, suggest that in Irish literary culture the deconstruction of cultural nationalism complemented the formal fragmentation characteristic of late modernism. The Old Lady’s formalist experimentation exposes its own construction, adopting strategies of metatheatricality and self-parody comparable to the fictional techniques of Beckett’s early fiction. Beckett’s London-published (or in the case of Dream of Fair to Middling Women, unpublished) fiction was not produced for the Dublin audience of Manning and Johnston — although a significant crossover between his Irish readers and the Gate’s audience may be assumed. Their parallels in subject and in formal approach provide a new context, however for the parodic deflation of Dublin’s intelligentsia in Beckett’s earliest fiction.

Beckett’s fiction explored the dilemmas facing the Irish writer from a perspective of oppositional deconstruction. His portrayed a culture permeated by international influence, and emphasised the impossibility of sustaining fixed boundaries of national identity. In his 1930s fiction, Beckett destabilised multiple modes of national self-definition. His most intimate satire was directed at the avant gardist element of Dublin culture in which his work developed.

218 The Old Lady, p.71.
The self-perception of the Dublin avant garde reflected concerns about art and national culture related to the focus of Beckett’s fiction. In his novels, the borders of national identity are constantly questioned. National boundaries are presented as permeable. Characters, ideas and influences constantly move between Ireland and Europe, and the rigid borders of the nation state are undermined. Beckett’s writing, like the discourse of Motley and the Gate, presented the isolated and autonomous status of national culture as a fiction.

What also emerges from a consideration of this fiction is the extent to which all narratives of national identity are depicted as unstable and artificial. Often, in the Gate’s publications, internationalist and radical versions of Irish culture were imagined. Beckett satirised the progressive, intellectual salon of Dublin’s avant garde, the basis of the Gate’s audience, as preoccupied with the development of fictions of national identity. In particular, he exposed the gap between postures of significance and effective cultural influence. Despite ambitions to re-invent national culture, Beckett portrayed the Dublin ‘intelligentsia’ as a coterie performing only to itself.

The extent to which questions of audience recurred in Manning’s and Johnston’s writing for the Gate demonstrated their own awareness of the gap satirised by Beckett. Central to this problem was the conflict between radicalism and public engagement inherent in the national avant garde. In Motley, the Gate tried to cultivate an audience, while simultaneously attempting to break down the boundaries between audience and institution. Youth’s the Season...? dramatised the tensions within the self-perception of the Dublin avant garde; these tensions were pushed to breaking point in the formalist experimentation of The Old Lady Says ‘No!’ The connections between Manning’s, Johnston’s and Beckett’s perspectives suggest the importance of considering Beckett’s writing in relation to the avant gardist elements of Irish literary culture. These were the targets of Beckett’s satire, but they also formed his aesthetic. His fiction was dominated by the impulse to interrogate formulations of national culture. The resulting
destabilisation of aesthetic order represented a version of late modernism formed in response to the pressures of Irish culture.
Conclusion

By considering Thomas MacGreevy, Seán O’Faoláin and Samuel Beckett in relation to international debates about aesthetic form, the plurality of Irish literary modernisms in the 1930s becomes apparent. The literary projects of these three writers were very different, but their alternative formulations of national literature developed in relation to shared concerns. The ways in which literature could present and represent the world, the role of the writer in society, and the ideology of narratives of national self-definition, were recurring subjects of investigation and interrogation in the writing of all three. Their conceptions of these issues are illuminated by the context of contemporary debates about realism and modernism in Britain and Europe. In addition, the resonances between their aesthetic and cultural formulations demonstrate the cultural networks of Irish modernism.

A surprising conclusion of this project is the extent to which MacGreevy’s critical writing showed as many affinities with O’Faoláin’s as with Beckett’s. O’Faoláin’s realist fiction may seem to have little in common with MacGreevy’s poetic modernism. However, their perspectives on contemporary Irish culture were comparable. Both expressed disillusionment with the development of Ireland after independence. Their focus was not on the confirmation of a political republic, but on the establishment of a cultural republic. Both saw Irish culture as undeveloped, and although the terms of their programmes for its development differed, both saw the dominance of ‘uncultivated’ tastes as its dilemma. The terms which recur throughout their criticism show hostility to democratic mass culture – variously figured as the egalitarian ‘mob’, and the suburban, genteel, ‘vulgar-sentimental’ bourgeois – resembling the terms of conservative modernism.

MacGreevy’s and O’Faoláin’s formulations of the cultural republic reflected their differing perspectives on the ways literature could respond to the pressures of mass culture. MacGreevy figured the Irish cultural dilemma as Anglicisation, the continued cultural dominance of England over Ireland. He saw the Catholic
Continent as the alternative. His conception of Catholic culture integrated republican hostility to England with the high modernist ideal of the European tradition which MacGreevy found in Eliot. He used a formulation of high modernist aesthetics to reconcile nationalism with internationalism.

MacGreevy’s version of cultural nationalism relied on an understanding of the ‘national genius’ which attempted to reconcile individualism with an ideal of the national community. Although elements of Catholic social thought in Ireland harmonised with MacGreevy’s critical writing, he was reluctant to develop the social implications of his aesthetic. Instead he attempted to separate the cultural from the political, describing an elevated concept of the cultural sphere. O’Faoláin’s aesthetic negotiated different lines of division. Like MacGreevy, O’Faoláin posited Catholicism as a possible ‘ethical base’ for modern literature, which could retain the autonomy of the individual within a harmonious social order. Both too attributed the moral repression of social policy instituted under the banner of the Church to a bourgeois, puritanical distortion of Catholicism. Literary censorship was the totemic example of this ideological distortion.

However, O’Faoláin was more sceptical than MacGreevy about the ability of intellectual, European Catholicism to engage with and cultivate national culture. In 1942, while MacGreevy was beginning his adoption of the role of the Catholic intellectual in Ireland, O’Faoláin argued that the “current ‘intellectual Catholicism’ of the neo-Thomists merely exasperates Irish writers by its gentlemanly academicism, its irrelation to the actual problems, and its ultimate subservience to illiberalism.” 1 O’Faoláin’s connection of Catholic thought with anti-democratic ideology was revealing of the conflict underlying O’Faoláin’s cultural programme in the 1930s, and his differences from MacGreevy.

MacGreevy attempted to avoid the authoritarian implications of his turn to the Catholic Continent by elevating the cultural sphere above the political. O’Faoláin

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1 ‘Yeats and the Younger Generation’ in Horizon 5.25 (January 1942), pp.43-54, p.51.
was more sceptical about the relationship between the political and the cultural. O’Faoláin’s commitment to ‘intellectual realism’ developed from his attempt to reconcile belief in liberal democracy with an elitist and aestheticist sense of artistic authority. Later in his career, O’Faoláin judged this reconciliation impossible in modern Irish society. In the 1930s, he attempted to formulate a realist aesthetic which could represent the totality of society while preserving the status and integrity of the individual artist. His work is productively considered in relation to modernism, despite his conservative attitude to form, because it developed in parallel to assessments of the politics of aesthetics inside and outside Ireland.

In this context, Beckett’s 1930s writing appears as an alternative formulation of modernist aesthetics. In part, his writing can be considered as a commentary on the projects of his contemporaries. He satirised attempts to formulate definitions of Irish culture which relied on constructions of the relationship between aesthetics and society. His deconstruction of the rhetoric of cultural nationalism emphasised the artificiality of attempts to shape society through programmes of cultural self-definition. In particular, his critical and his creative prose emphasised the gap between aesthetic postures and influence on national culture. The relationship between literature and society preoccupied Beckett as it did MacGreevy and O’Faoláin, but while the latter two shared a belief in the primacy of the cultural sphere, Beckett ironically deflated conceptions of the writer’s role in the ‘cultivation’ of national culture.

However, to view Beckett only as a satirical observer of Irish literary culture is to neglect the importance of national specificities in the formation of his aesthetic. Like MacGreevy and O’Faoláin, Beckett was writing in a culture in which the relationship between politics and aesthetics was fraught. In his earliest fiction, Beckett interrogated the status of Irish literary culture through a deconstruction of the Dublin ‘avant garde’. His focus was not primarily the ‘antiquarian’ conception of a direct relationship between aesthetics and politics. Rather, Beckett portrayed Irish culture after independence as obsessed by the tensions in this relationship. He depicted a self-conscious coterie, preoccupied by its own status. This self-
consciousness, the heightened awareness of the construction of narrative and identity, characterised Beckett’s fiction. It also characterised the work of his contemporaries – Dublin’s late avant garde was defined by its self-awareness. In the publications of the Gate, the most sustained expression of avant gardist impulses in national culture, ambitions to reshape Irish culture were combined with awareness of the problematic status of the cultural institution.

Beckett’s 1930s writing connected the international development of late modernism to the post-independence climate of Irish literary culture. His interpretation of the Dublin avant garde also casts light on the theoretical conceptions which underpinned the writing of MacGreevy and O’Faoláin. Beckett deconstructed the relationship between subjective perception and objective reality, locating aesthetic production in the gap between “Mallarmean” ideals and fragmentary reality.2 MacGreevy also saw retreat to the “Mallarmean ivory tower” of subjective isolation untenable in the modern world. He also perceived the unsustainability of objective representation of reality, rejecting the “undiscriminating realism” of the nineteenth century.3 Unlike Beckett, however, he argued that modernist aesthetics were capable of uniting the “subjective” and “objective tendencies,” expressing a totality of experience in which individual subjectivity could be combined with social order.4

Both Beckett and MacGreevy developed alternative versions of modernist discourse, which problematised realist conceptions of unity between subject and object. O’Faoláin’s aesthetic was more conservative. He turned to the nineteenth century realist novel as a possible model for national literature. Despite his later dismissal of his place as the “Balzac of Ireland,” in the 1930s O’Faoláin tried to develop a novelistic form in which the totality of social and individual experience could be represented.5 His condemnation of the ‘nostalgia-fantasy’ in cultural

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nationalism was combined with his own nostalgic desire for a stable realist aesthetic – the totalising novel mocked by Beckett as Balzac’s “chloroformed world.” O’Faoláin attributed his failure to achieve his ambitions for the realist novel to the fractured nature of Irish society. His ‘broken world’ was a realist perspective on Beckett’s ‘breakdown of the object’.

The resonances between these literary projects become evident through the frame of international literary debates. To some extent, the 1930s writing of each writer has been conceived in critical narratives in terms of failure: O’Faoláin’s self-perceived failure to establish the modern realist novel in Ireland; the end of MacGreevy’s poetic career, and his failure to complete his novel at all; and Beckett’s satirical mockery of the failure of cultural nationalism. However, the tensions evident in their writing, and the pressures to which their aesthetic formulations responded, were not solely attributable to the limitations of Irish literary culture. They developed in relation to wider debates and responses to modernism and realism in 1930s Europe.

These international connections are not only evident in terms of literary theory. MacGreevy, O’Faoláin and Beckett worked in a literary culture where Ireland’s relationship with Europe was being considered from a range of perspectives. Contextualisation of their writing in Irish cultural discourse challenges perceptions of a monolithic, conservative and insular national culture. For example, Catholic social thought was in the 1930s optimistic about Ireland’s role within Europe and connections between Irish culture and the Catholic Continent. MacGreevy’s Catholic aesthetic is in this context less isolated from public culture than his association with the modernist ‘exiles’ may imply. The poetic projects of Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey are the most frequently invoked points of comparison with MacGreevy’s, and suggest that further investigation of Catholic modernism in Ireland may be productive. Francis Stuart’s combination of Catholic mysticism and cultural nationalism developed from a perspective related to MacGreevy’s, and

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6 *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, p.119.
Stuart’s controversial involvement with fascism may also be elucidated by comparison with the attitudes to democracy implicit in Catholic discourse.

Attitudes to realism and left-wing politics offer another perspective on the influence of international literary culture on Ireland. O’Faoláin’s writing represented a more nuanced combination of political and aesthetic attitudes than the label of disillusioned republicanism implies, and the realist writers with whom he is often associated demand similar re-evaluation. Frank O’Connor, so often paired with O’Faoláin, expressed a similar set of attitudes to the ‘dilemma of Irish writing’. However, differences in their aesthetic projects are also evident; O’Connor’s irritation with O’Faoláin’s support for neutrality in the Second World War suggests that the relationship between nationalism and internationalism may offer a useful framework for their alternative approaches to national culture in the 1930s. Consideration of O’Faoláin writing in relation to British literary culture suggests useful points of comparison with Louis MacNeice; MacNeice’s place in Irish literary culture may be productively reconsidered in the context of debates surrounding realism and modernism.

_Ireland To-Day_ represented the range of perspectives on Ireland’s cultural development; the platform it provided for republican debates about international politics showed that the Irish left was consciously engaged with Europe. In relation to literature, the significance of realist aesthetics in 1930s Irish writing should be connected to the development of socialist realism abroad. From the left, Peadar O’Donnell’s writing was another alternative formulation of Ireland’s relationship with Europe and of the possible development of independent national culture. Spain was a focal point for O’Donnell’s exploration of political and cultural connections, and was also significant in Kate O’Brien’s writing. O’Brien’s perspective on the relationship between Ireland and Europe, on the cultural potential of cultivated Catholicism, and on Ireland’s place in the political crises of the 1930s, represented another aspect of the interactions between national and international literary culture in the decade.
In my discussion of Beckett, the Gate Theatre has provided an important context for the analysis of avant gardist elements in Dublin culture. The theatre itself is a fertile subject for further investigation, in particular with regard to the impact of its self-consciously internationalist formulation of a national theatre. Similarly, Denis Johnston’s writing – including his autobiographical and fictional work as well as his plays – offers another dimension of interactions between Britain, Ireland, and European formalist experimentation.

The Gate’s appearance in ‘Myles na gCopaleen’s’ commentary on Irish cultural life in the 1940s is only one of the multiple dimensions in which Brian O’Nolan’s writing connected with the subjects covered in this thesis. ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’ often appears as a condensed satire on the preoccupations of self-consciously international, intellectual cultural discourse. O’Nolan’s contributions to Ireland To-Day and the Bell feinted at, alternately, the re-formation of Irish modernism and the re-definition of modern Irish culture. More substantially, At Swim-Two Birds (1939) and The Third Policeman (completed in 1940, although not published until 1967) can be read as deconstructions of fictionality comparable to Beckett’s, although from a very different cultural and social context. Together they suggest a starting point for a wider investigation into late modernist fiction in Ireland.

The recurring appearances of gender issues in this analysis of Irish modernism prompt further questions. In part, my examination of attitudes to the role of the writer in society has developed from the critical opposition between modernism and mass culture. The complex perspectives found within the work of MacGreevy, O’Faoláin and Beckett suggest that this perceived opposition was as fluid in Irish writing as it was elsewhere. Andreas Huyssen’s formulation of the relationship between modernism and mass culture was gendered. Androcentric modernism is.

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7 O’Nolan’s Irish parody of Work in Progress (‘Pisa Bec Oc Parnabus: Extractum O Bhark I bPragrais le Briain Ó Nualláin’) appeared in Ireland To-Day in 1938. Under his best-known pseudonym of Flann O’Brien, he contributed three essays on dog racing, pub-going, and dance halls to the Bell in 1940-41.

8 In addition, his Irish novel An Beal Bocht (1941) interrogated the construction of Irish language fiction, and may be considered alongside the writing of Máirtín Ó Cadhain among experimental writing in Irish.
opposed to the feminine, which was associated with the mass. Reassessments of this divide have interrogated the operation of this opposition within the work of both male and female writers, but Irish modernism has not received equivalent critical attention. Gendered terms appear in the writing discussed here – in O’Faoláin’s association of the feminine with Corkery’s ‘nostalgia-fantasy’, in MacGreevy’s hostility to ‘genteel’ and ‘sentimental’ cultural influence characteristically related to women, and in the misogyny evident in Beckett’s portrayal of women. These aspects require further investigation, however, as does the complexity of gender relations depicted by female Irish writers.

This brief overview of suggested points of development, by no means comprehensive, demonstrates the range of responses to international literary culture evident in 1930s Irish writing. They are connected by a network of contexts, perspectives, and influences. Interactions between national and international culture, and between alternative perspectives within Ireland, created a diverse range of literary responses in 1930s Irish writing. The development of Irish modernism is illuminated by recognition of its affinities both with international literary discourse, and with the wider intellectual culture in Ireland of which it formed a part.
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This thesis is uses a range of archival material, including unpublished writing and correspondence. Specific manuscripts are detailed in the text. My research also included journals and periodicals from the relevant period, accessed at the British Library and the National Library of Ireland; bibliographic entries are provided only for articles referred to directly. Susan Schreibman’s bibliography at The Thomas MacGreevy Archive online, has been an invaluable source of Thomas MacGreevy’s critical work (www.macgreevy.org).

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