

Gregory Dobbins

Lazy Idle Schemers

Irish Modernism and the Cultural Politics of Idleness



Within Irish literary modernism, originating with Wilde and further developed, especially by means of formal experiments in narration, by Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien, lies an alternative version of modernity which gives to an historically complex concept of idleness the centrality that capitalism and nationalism give to work. Other writers, Yeats and Eimar O'Duffy among them, elaborated a role for the intellectual in the formation of the State, but this was consistently challenged by the notion that labour and work have an oblique and often sterilizing impact on creativity and emancipatory politics. **Gregory Dobbins** here redraws some of the contours of modernism, especially as it developed in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century.

Cover: Pierre Latour and Lucien Raimbourg in *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett. Production of Roger Blin. Babylon Theatre, Paris, January 1953.
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Abbreviations

- A W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (New York: Scribner, 1999)
- AC Eimar O'Duffy, *Asses in Clover* (London: Putnam, 1933)
- AP Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)
- ASTB Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (New York: Plume, 1976)
- CWW Oscar Wilde, *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems and Essays* (London: Collins, 1966).
- D Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove Press, 1984)
- I Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Aphorisms* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968)
- KGB Eimar O'Duffy, *King Goshawk and the Birds* (London: Macmillan, 1928)
- LM Eimar O'Duffy, *Life and Money*, 3rd edn. (London: Putnam, 1935)
- M Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: John Calder, 1963)
- P James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992)
- SMS Eimar O'Duffy, *The Spacious Adventures of the Man in the Street* (London: Macmillan, 1928)
- U James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1961)

I Introduction

I

'At your work, all of you!' shouts the fearsome Father Dolan, prefect of studies at Clongowes Wood College early in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Dolan appears in the narrative briefly and memorably, addressing Stephen Dedalus's Latin class with the exhortation, 'we want no lazy idle loafers here, lazy idle little schemers. At your work I tell you!' (P, 50). Upon discovering that Stephen's hapless fellow student Fleming has failed to prepare adequately for class, he beats the student with a pandybat for being 'a born idler' (P, 49). Noting that Stephen is not doing the same Latin exercises as the rest of the class — he has broken his glasses and has thus been excused from class work — Dolan accuses him of 'scheming', or of coming up with an underhand plan to avoid work. Stephen, who is an excellent student and not guilty of shirking his responsibilities, is beaten; this is a traumatic moment for him:

Stephen closed his eyes and held out in the air his trembling hand with the palm upwards. He felt the prefect of studies touch it for a moment at the fingers to straighten it and then the swish of the sleeve of the soutane as the pandybat was lifted to strike. A hot burning stinging tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick made his trembling hand crumple together like a leaf in the fire: and at the sound and the pain scalding tears were driven into his eyes. His whole body was shaking with fright, his arm was shaking and his crumpled burning livid hand shook like a loose leaf in the air ... The scalding water burst forth from his eyes and, burning with shame and agony and fear, he drew back his shaking arm in terror and burst into a whine of pain. (P, 52)

So Stephen comes to understand the arbitrary and cruel nature of power. There are no exceptions to Father Dolan's discipline, however merited the grounds for it might be. Dolan demonstrates that work is the crucial element in the relationship between obligation and punishment. One must work or face the painful consequences.

Almost fifteen years later, the incident still reverberates in Stephen's memory. Throughout *Ulysses*, he frequently remembers the phrase 'lazy idle schemer', usually when offered the possibility of some form of employment. In 'Circe', an apparition of Father Dolan emerges from a jack-in-the-box in order to remind him that he is a 'lazy idle schemer' (U, 561). But Stephen the child and the Stephen of 16 June 1904 have very different notions of the obligation to work. The older Stephen spends much of that day wandering the streets of Dublin in a boozy idleness, pondering, without coming to any conclusion, how he might undertake some innovative form of intellectual labour in the future. Father Dolan's accusation that the younger Stephen was a lazy, idle schemer was unjust, but it certainly describes the Stephen of *Ulysses* correctly. It thereby draws attention to something that, in my view, helps to organize the periodization of Irish literary history. Unlike the active and productive intellectuals of the Irish Literary Revival (some of whom, in fictionalized or semi-fictionalized form, appear in *Ulysses* as well), Stephen never really manages to get any work of any consequence done. His lazy scheming provides a central motif to one of the strongest tendencies within Irish modernism. Stephen's role in this novel as a 'lazy idle schemer' — a term I will be using to designate those would-be literary intellectuals who refuse the widely accepted obligation to labour — is prototypical of a series of such figures in the works of Eimar O'Duffy, Samuel Beckett, and Flann O'Brien. His idleness also challenges the ideologies of capital and the state that gradually strengthened during the long process of decolonization in Ireland. The cultural politics of Irish modernism are illuminated by an overwhelming narrative emphasis upon the representation of idleness.

While it was once controversial, the 'post-colonial turn' in Irish Studies is perhaps the most visible aspect of what Claire Connolly calls a 'critical orthodoxy' in Irish Studies over the last three decades.¹ Yet the application of that theory to Irish modernist texts has varied a great deal. On the one hand, the post-colonial theoretical approach has led many critics to insist upon the exceptionalism of Irish modernism. This was in part a response to metropolitan literary criticism's long-standing claim that Irish history had little importance for an understanding of writers like Joyce or Beckett.² A critical inquiry

1 See Claire Connolly, 'Theorising Ireland', *Irish Studies Review*, 9, 3 (2001), 301.

2 A statement by Franco Moretti in an essay about *Ulysses* offers a particularly egregious example: 'I have dealt — and shall continue to deal — with Joyce and *Ulysses* as expressions of English society and culture. Of course, it is a well-known fact that Joyce is Irish and that *Ulysses* takes place in Dublin. But if Joyce were an Irish writer, comprehensible and containable without any loose threads within Irish culture, he would no longer be Joyce; if the city of *Ulysses* were the real Dublin of the turn of the century, it would be the literary image *par excellence* of the modern metropolis. Cultural phenomena cannot be explained in terms of their genesis (what ever has emerged from the studies that interpreted Joyce on the basis of Ireland?); what counts is their objective function.' See Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, rev. edn. (London, 1988), 189–90.

into the particularity of Irish modernism was launched, reinforced by what Declan Kiberd calls ‘a discrimination of modernisms’, that recognized the distinct qualities of different national literary traditions.³ On the other hand, the post-colonial theoretical approach to literary history has also had the opposite effect. One of the most significant attributes of the ‘new modernist studies’ has been its focus on the relation modernism had to a more recent understanding of transnationalism.⁴ Thus, familiar figures from the modernist canon (including, at times, Irish writers like W. B. Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett) are reconsidered as part of a global movement that had both material connections and thematic links to non-European writers not previously considered in a modernist context.⁵ The history of national specificity often recedes in this scholarship in comparison to the emphasis placed upon a global and — frequently — imperial history that enables the possibility of similarity between a broadly conceived group of international writers.

The concept of transnationalism has enabled a renewed understanding of the relationship modernism had to both imperialism and global capitalism. However, in its treatment of Irish writers, it occasionally runs the risk of reiterating older metropolitan assumptions about their relation to national history, which recent work in Irish Studies has so effectively challenged. Sometimes, the significance of either nationalism or national particularity is dismissed or reduced in favour of a cosmopolitanism ‘in the service of antiracism, democratic individualism, and transnational community’ that is somehow incompatible with cultural nationalism.⁶ While no one would deny that such values have a place in Joyce’s writing, they are by no means necessarily antithetical to nationalism or national specificity. Different strains of Irish nationalism have long valorized cosmopolitanism and insisted that there is a necessary, inextricable relationship between the two (as the writing of Joyce’s contemporaries Thomas Kettle and Arthur Clery, to

For specific responses to Moretti’s assessment of Joyce, see David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham, NC, 1993), 11; Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996), 165; and, in particular, Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London, 1995), 9. The rather considerable achievement of the reconceptualization of Irish modernism initially emerged in studies that interpret Joyce on ‘the basis of Ireland’; see in addition, Enda Duffy, *The Subaltern Ulysses* (Minneapolis, 1994) and Andrew Gibson, *Joyce’s Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in Ulysses* (Oxford, 2002).

- 3 ‘All of which suggests that it is time for a discrimination of modernisms, a recognition that Irish modernism may not be at all the same thing as English modernism ... And French and American modernisms may be something else again.’ Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge, 2005), 247.
- 4 See Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, ‘The New Modernist Studies’, *PMLA*, 123 (2007), 737–48.
- 5 There are numerous examples of the recent ‘transnational turn’ in Modernist Studies, but for a representative selection, see Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago, 2001); Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton, 2005); John Marx, *The Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge, 2005), and Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation* (New York, 2006). All of these books deal with Irish modernist writers.
- 6 Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, 56. For a prolonged critique of the way Irish nationalism has been profoundly misunderstood in previous generations of Joyce criticism, see Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism*.

cite just two examples, makes clear).⁷ But more importantly, such contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism often treat nationalism in monolithic, unilinear, and frequently essentialist terms. Irish nationalism — or, as Partha Chatterjee suggests, any number of anti-imperialist nationalisms — is not one unified, coherent position that one can merely be in favour of or oppose, but rather embraces several different, even contradictory, positions.⁸ The distinction between a form of nationalism committed to the capture of the state and a more general pervasive commitment to republicanism is important here. As Philip Pettit argues, the republican ideal has its origins in a conception of liberty as a form of non-domination.⁹ In its most radical, utopian form, republicanism insists upon the universal extension of the principle of non-domination, rather than a narrower valorization of a particular form of identity identified with the interests of the state. In Irish cultural history, republicanism in this sense is opposed to the forms of domination identified with both colonial rule and the post-colonial state, but it nevertheless engaged with the terms of its own national specificity. While the specific political positions of each of the modernist writers I will be concerned with here were quite different, they share a general, typically republican, opposition to the exercise of domination.¹⁰ Nationalism is, of itself, too broad and amorphous a concept to allow us usefully to say that writers such as Joyce or Beckett were simply for or against it. However, when particular aspects of Irish cultural nationalism coincided with a general opposition to forms of domination founded upon the exclusion of certain forms of identity — a position that ran through various strands of republican thought both before and after independence — they provided important co-ordinates for the emergence of Irish modernism.

But critical commentary is not alone in prioritizing a liberal conception of cosmopolitanism that sometimes fails to take into account the importance of national specificity. Occasionally literary criticism that is informed by a more radical understanding of cultural history makes a similar mistake, by an orthodox insistence upon retaining fidelity to theoretical concepts rather than entering into an account of the anomalies and particularities of Irish history.¹¹ As Joe Cleary has powerfully demonstrated, those

7 Thomas Kettle, 'The Economics of Nationalism', in *The Day's Burden* (London, 1918), 103–18; Arthur Clery, 'Cosmopolitanism and Nationality', in *The Idea of a Nation* (Dublin 2002), 74–76. See also Luke Gibbons, 'Constructing the Canon: Versions of National Identity', in Seamus Deane, ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 3 vols. (Derry, 1991), vol. 2, 950–1020.

8 See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis, 1993), 1–53.

9 See Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, 1997), 80–109.

10 Recent scholarship suggests that the term 'republicanism' is particularly useful for a more general consideration of Irish modernism at large. See, in particular, Nicholas Allen's *Modernism, Ireland and Civil War* (Cambridge, 2009), which argues quite persuasively that unrealized radical conceptions of republicanism provided a crucial determination for the emergence of Irish modernism. See also David Lloyd's article 'Republics of Difference: Yeats, MacGreevy, Beckett', *Field Day Review*, 1 (2005), 43–67.

11 For example, see Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations*, 213. Though Brown is more respectful of the colonial and anti-colonial co-ordinates of Joyce's writing than Moretti, he agrees that 'the ambitions of Ulysses plainly lie elsewhere', leading to the claim that 'it should be emphasized, however, that this