“the dome of many-coloured glass”

Irish social and cultural history often orients around magnetic opposites that can be explanatory but reductive: tradition and modernity, local and cosmopolitan, nationalist and unionist, Irish Ireland and Anglo-Ireland, postcolonial and revisionist, Irish and British. Commentary on the Irish Revival has often been prone to such binary thinking, not least because this movement can be so easily caricatured and parodied. The nostalgic tone and mood, the reverence for Irish myth and legend, the twilit, dreamy sentimentality, the Kilkarian dialogue—all were abidingly ripe for mockery, satire, and parody, from Gerald McNamara’s play The Miss That Does Be on the Bog (1909) for the Ulster Literary Theatre, to Flann O’Brien’s novel At Swim-Two-Birds (1939). For the major critics of modernism in the mid-century, such as Richard Ellmann or Hugh Kenner, the great Irish modernists, such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, were modern in so far as they transcended their national background. They took their lead from international, cosmopolitan, and generally metropolitan artistic currents, while the stay-at-home revivalists were, in this view, nationalist, valorizing a rural and pre-modern Ireland swathed in cultural purity and twilit nostalgia. This mode of thinking echoed a commonplace modernist hostility for the provincial, articulated for instance by Ezra Pound’s heralding of Joyce as one of the European moderns, rather than part of an “institution for the promotion of Irish peasant industries.”

Thanks to a great expansion in scholarly research and critical reconceptualization of both these movements in recent years, the “institution for the promotion of Irish peasant industries,” far from the opposite to modernism, seems more like an early flourishing of modernist energies. Recent work on the Revival has overturned the caricatures, and led us to a much more nuanced and rich understanding of the cultural context of fin de siècle Ireland and the multiple overlapping projects of Revival that emerged.

91
Scholars have examined not just the traditional “literary revival,” an Anglo-Irish elite affair, led by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and George Russell (Æ), but also journalism, material culture, scientific discourses, pamphlets, and popular entertainment. This has resulted in taxonomic shifts and definitional recalibration. The Revival has come to refer to the Cooperative Movement and the Gaelic Athletic Association as well as to Yeats’s work on folklore or the translations of Douglas Hyde. Scholars have sought to recover demotic cultures and neglected figures, allowing us, for instance, to rediscover forgotten women writers and artists or to learn how the Northern Revival differed from its Dublin counterpart. We now tend to see the Revival not as a clear unified movement with central and marginal players, but as a discontinuous and overlapping collection of individuals, coteries, and organizations with a nationalist cultural agenda. It could manifest in language, sport, music, dress, religion, or economics, in the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (founded 1894) and the Abbey Theatre (founded in 1904). As Clare Hutton pondered:

Is the typical site of revivalism Lady Gregory’s salon at the Nassau Street Hotel, an Alice Milligan tableau, or the meeting place of the London Gaelic League? Is the typical act of revivalism attending the Abbey Theatre, the purchase of Eugene O’Gorman’s Simple Lessons in Irish (a bestseller of the time), or wearing Irish tweed?

Therefore we cannot, or cannot any longer, present the Revival as a singular movement with clear agendas and goals facing off against a “counter-revival,” which sought to undermine it. There was too much variation and differentiation within the Revival itself. While the various organizations intersected and often had common members, there were also divisions, resentments, and cultural, caste, and class rivalries. The detractors and critics of Yeats and his friends are best seen as part of this mosaic, internal dissenters rather than external naysayers. George Moore’s famous quip — “a literary movement consists of five or six people who live in the same town and hate each other cordially” — bespeaks the self-critique, argument, debate, and myriad forms of sibling rivalry.

Yet if new scholarship highlights the differentiation in the period it also exposes unexpected connections, intertwined intellectual roots that complicate simple oppositional narratives. There were certainly face-offs between so-called Irish Irelanders such as D. P. Moran and Anglo-Irish grandees such as W. B. Yeats. But the Catholic-Gaelic and Protestant-Anglo Revivals are not homogeneous forces lining up against one another, along sectarian lines. That caricature underestimates how much overlap and common purpose they shared and also how much internal conflict there was on each side. Both the unionist Standish O’Grady and the physical-force separatist Pádraig Pearse advocated the learning of Irish legends, especially those involving Cuchulain. While Pearse ended up martyred in the cause of an Irish Republic after the Easter Rising of 1916, the most well-known cultural separatist and Irish Irelander — D. P. Moran — was politically close to the Irish Parliamentary Party, sharing a distrust for the political radicalism of Sinn Féin. Moran even felt, for all his Anglophobia, that Christian Brothers’ Boys would make great empire builders. While he starts off hostile to a literary revival in the English language, Pearse later comes to see its value (as does his fellow 1916 martyr, Thomas McDonagh) and often embraces cosmopolitan values, seeking an Ireland that would resist English imitation but for that very reason form part of European modernism. Equally, on the “other side” one need look no further than J. M. Synge and Hyde, both Protestant aficionados of the Irish language, to see that the Anglo-Irish and Gaelic-Irish Revivals do not line up neatly with Protestant versus Catholic divisions.

Equally, a closer look at particular literary and cultural institutions of the Revival reveals conflicting agendas and modish activities that complicate caricature. The signal artistic institution of the Anglo-Irish Revival, the Abbey Theatre, always had contesting positions and aesthetic agendas. Yeats sought to incarnate an ideal, mythic theater of the elite, written in verse with subjects from Irish mythology, but other early Abbey playwrights, such as Edward Martyn or Pádraig Colum, were drawn to naturalist plays of rural life. The division between real and ideal, a drama of verisimilitude versus one of mythic verity, was a feature of the Abbey’s early development. But even an undisputed pioneer of the Irish theatrical Revival, such as Synge, secedes from the mythic subject matter of Yeats, Lady Gregory and Russell, what he called a “Cuchulainoid national theatre,” at least until his final (unfinished) play, Deirdre of the Sorrows.

Equally those contemporary and later writers and intellectuals who disdained the very idea of “cultural nationalism” do not form a coherent “counter” to the Revival. Nationalist and cosmopolitan agendas, though often clashing, also bleed into one another, not just institutionally but even in the same figure. Joyce’s disdain for the Revivalists’ provincial ethos is notorious, evident in essays such as “The Day of the Rabblement” (1901). Yet this picture is greatly complicated by the tautly responsive depictions of Revivalist debates and personalities in other works, fiction and non-fiction. Episode 9 of Ulysses, Scylla and Charybdis, has some ripe parodies
of Lady Gregory’s and Synge’s Hiberno-English; but it also puts Stephen Dedalus in dialogue with John Eglington (William Magee) and Æ, acknowledging an intellectual power to the literary movement that is beyond flowery-tinged peasant exoticism. These figures are involved in knotty negotiations around possible directions for the Revival and form a key part of its intellectual history.

In his 1899 essay “The Literary Movement in Ireland,” Yeats recognizes the variegations of the new Irish movement, including the literary societies, the theater, music, and the Gaelic League, but seeks to establish a unity therein. All, he claims, “have been founded since the fall of Parnell; and all are busy in preserving, or in moulding anew and without any thought of the politics of the hour, some utterance of the national life, and in opposing the vulgar books and vulgarer songs coming from England.” The various manifestations of revival are a form of cultural protectionism, but importantly for Yeats they are not just a national bulwark against English vulgarity. They create new forms of art as well as defend national distinctiveness (“a new kind of romance, a new element in thought, is being moulded out of Irish life and traditions”), even as the various writers and artists who are bringing about this novelty do so in unique and particular forms (“while looking each one through his own colour in the dome of many-coloured glass”). The prismatic dome of glass metaphor (borrowed from Shelley’s “Adonais”) strategically, and with more than a whiff of wish fulfillment, styles the conflict and dispute among the coteries as a shared common goal with spiritual overtones.

Conflicting agendas and literary disputes were to be a motif of the cultural life of this most productive era, often with Yeats at the heart of the fray. As the Revival grew and its values and principles flourished, it also differentiated, with more groups, magazines, perspectives, and agendas. On the literary front, Yeats was centrally involved in the founding both of the London-based Irish Literary Society (founded in 1892 by Yeats, T. W. Rolleston, and Charles Gavan Duffy) and the Dublin-based National Literary Society the same year. It was not long before divisions appeared in both groups. Hyde’s inaugural address for the National Literary Society, “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland,” became a cardinal document of the cultural and literary revivals and was a key text for the founding of the Gaelic League the following year. But Hyde’s call to revive the Irish language as the medium for Irish writing, though it avoided the political question of parliamentary separatism, put Yeats in a delicate position. As a cultural nationalist, aligning himself with the cause of the Irish language was essential. But as an English-language poet profoundly influenced by Blake and Shelley, he needed Irish literature in English to have a central role too. In a letter to the United Ireland responding to Hyde’s address, he gingersly asks: “Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language?” This question was to be an ongoing point of dispute, especially as the Gaelic League expanded as a social and political force, its confidence swelling with a burgeoning Catholic middle-class membership.

Yeats also had a quarrel, in the 1890s, with Duffy (a veteran Young Irisher who had returned from a political career in Australia), about the control over the New Irish Library, a prospective series of Irish-themed books to be published under the auspices of the National Literary Society. This dispute about canon formation—what books should be included and on what basis—seems a local enough affair, but went to the heart of Revivalist ethos. Which Irish culture is exemplary, not only on grounds of distinctiveness but also on grounds of merit? Yeats, sidelined by Duffy, was unwilling to allow what he perceived as the sideling of artistic criteria. In Autobiographies, he frames the controversy as his first public bout against the kind of narrow nationalist orthodoxy that conceives all history “as a melodrama with Ireland for blameless hero and poet.” Yeats would later figure many of his cultural battles in the Revivalist years in terms of artistic integrity holding its own against middle-class nationalist zeal:

It was all the harder to substitute for that melodrama a nobler form of art, because there really had been, however different in their form, villain and victim; yet fight that rancour I must, and if I had not made some headway against it in 1892 and 1893 it might have silenced in 1907 John Synge, the greatest dramatic genius of Ireland. The strategic challenge for Yeats is to keep the forces of Revivalism tethered to those of edification. Yet disseminating the ethos of the artistic salon to a wider audience can create tensions between an elite aesthetic and popular cultural nationalism, especially when that transaction is inflected with sectarian mistrust, on the one side, and condensation on the other. Yet Yeats dreamed that the common culture that could be achieved in Ireland might allow cohesiveness to marry with quality, outside the alienations and fragmentations of modern society:

In Ireland, where the Gaelic tongue is still spoken, and to some little extent where it is not, the people live according to a tradition of life that existed before commercialism, and the vulgarity founded upon it; and we who would keep the Gaelic tongue and Gaelic memories and Gaelic habits of
minds would keep them, as I think, that we may some day spread a tradition of life that makes neither great wealth nor great poverty, that makes the art a natural expression of life, that permits even common men to understand good art and high thinking, and to have the fine manners these things can give.”

The paradox lies in the word “spread.” The yearning for a pre-modern organic society must deploy modern media to disseminate itself. And the Revival in all its modes suffuses through a burgeoning *fin de siècle* ecology of periodicals, newspapers, and theaters, together with the expanding literate readership generated by education reform in the 1870s and 1880s. Notoriously, Yeats will on occasion hold his nose at the vulgarity of the new middle classes, especially following popular displays of philistinism in the *Playboy* riots and the Hugh Lane controversy. Yet he also felt an imperative to participate in the Revival as a public, performative phenomenon, to leave his imprint in what he famously described as “soft wax.”

Doing so demands that he adopt a posture of artistic defensiveness and discrimination. Paradoxically it is precisely the need for dissemination, the need to cultivate a broad national literature, that compels him to don his heretic armor and defend the citadel against barbarism and bad taste. A selective salvage of pre-modern lore promulgated through modern media, the elite literature and drama of the salon seeking to mold itself into a common culture: these tensions in the Yeatsian project indicate how the Revival and counter-Revival are, dialectically, at the very genesis of the so-called literary movement.

Already in the 1890s, the battle lines and divisions obtruded into the public sphere. In an important essay on the institutions of the Revival, Clare Hutson has drawn a rough distinction between two sorts of revival dissemination: first, event-based occasions, such as debates, public meetings, and performances (the literary and dramatic societies, the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League) and second, the written word, such as newspaper, magazine, pamphlet, book, and library.

There is a great deal of overlap, and many societies and organizations establish their own publishing program, such as the Gaelic League’s textbooks or the Abbey Theatre’s in-house journal *Sambain*. The ideas of the Revival rely on promulgation and, while the societies and coteries meet and conspire early in the Revival, it is the printed word that will impact a wider audience. As the movement grew, the means of dissemination shifted to the newspapers and small magazines, which began to pullulate during the period. To a greater or lesser extent of explicitness, each magazine and periodical had its own outlook and point of view, but many of the central Revivalist figures published across the range. I here was Standish O’Grady’s *All Ireland Review* (1900–1906), a weekly literary journal with its editor’s conservative bias. The *Irish Homestead* (1895–1923) indicates something of the eclecticism of the Revival. This weekly journal founded by Horace Plunkett, as the organ of his Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, was edited by Russell from 1905–23. It combined commentary on politics and agriculture with Russell’s theories of theosophy, and short work by new writers, including the earliest stories of Joyce’s *Dubliners* (Joyce dubbed it the “pig’s paper”). These coteries and initiatives were not confined to Dublin. Alice Milligan, a Tyrone-born Methodist who converted to nationalism, became centrally involved in the Gaelic League in Belfast, and quickly became one of its most active members, organizing meetings and touring dramatic tableaux in which silent groups of actors performed stories through pictures. She looked to the United Irishmen of 1798 for an ideal of a composite Ireland of united religions. She co-edited, with Anna Johnston (Etha Carberry) *Shan Van Vocht* (“Poor Old Woman”) (1896–99), a blend of literature, history, and politics that included a substantial number of contributions by women, as well as by the feminist socialist and 1916 leader, James Connolly. *The Shan Van Vocht* ceased publication when *The United Irishman* (1889–1906), a separatist weekly paper edited by Arthur Griffith and William Rooney, was established, taking on the separatist mantle. Yeats would have several clashes with Griffith over the coming years, mainly because the latter’s conviction that the role of Irish art should be to support the political cause of independence conflicted with Yeats’s more aesthetic and spiritual ideals.

There were many other small magazines fueled by and fueling the broad Irish Revival. Among the most notable was the short-lived journal, *Dana: A Magazine of Independent Thought* (May 1904–April 1905), edited by John Eglinton and the socialist economist and playwright Frederick Ryan. Described by Frank Shovlin as “Ireland’s finest and most intellectually ambitious journal,” *Dana* sought to question received wisdom, to be eclectic and international in its intellectual purview, and to push against nativist and sentimentalist ideologies. The editors aim not just for “merely a doctrinaire but a literary, or rather a humanist, magazine,” and aim to publish essays and verse which were “the expression of the writer’s individuality” rather than those which are merely the belligerent expression of opinion. *Dana* was a venue for a liberal form of nationalism, open to the claims of cosmopolitanism. It acknowledged the importance of the Revival, but resisted monological notions of identity, advocating civic
and secular modes of belonging, often allied to the socialist overtones of Ryan.

Yeats, and his Anglo-Irish literary movement, faced a battle on two fronts. On the one hand, Unionist establishment writers and prestigious academics in Trinity College, such as his father's friend and eminent Shakespearean Edward Dowden, responded to the Revival with bemusement and condescension. On the other, the burgeoning Irish Irelators clashed with the Anglo-Irish Revivalists over the nature of Irish culture, the English language, and the sort of high-brow literary theater that Yeats sought to stage in the name of the nation. The Catholic middle-class elements of the Gaelic League looked askance at the effete, Protestant aesthete, and often reacted defensively to the portrayals of the Irish on stage, alert to a condescension that was not always a figment of their imagination. The first play put on by the Irish Literary Theatre, Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* (1902), in which the starving Irish peasantry barter their souls for food, offended on both nationalist and religious grounds. It was the first of a series of controversial theatrical productions, the most famous of which produced the 1907 "Playboy riots," in reaction to Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. As Yeats reflected some years later, the audience lacked the dramatic education to recognize *The Countess Cathleen's* departures from realism: "In using what I considered traditional symbols I forgot that in Ireland they are not symbols but realities. But the attacks in the main, like those upon Synge and O'Casey, came from the public ignorance of literary method."

Another important periodical, *An Claidheamh Soluis* (The Sword of Light) (1899–1930) was the bilingual organ of the Gaelic League, which published original literary works in Irish and English. In 1899, a nineteen-year-old unknown, named Padraic Pearse, wrote a letter to the paper in which he declared:

> The Irish Literary Theatre is, in my opinion, more dangerous, because less glaringly anti-national than Trinity College. If we once admit the Irish-literature-is-English idea, then the language movement is a mistake. Mr Yeats's precious 'Irish' Literary Theatre may, if it develops, give the Gaelic League more trouble than the Addison-Mahaffy combination [two Trinity College Dublin professors of unionist bent who tended to denigrate the Irish language]. Let us strangle it at its birth. Against Mr Yeats personally we have nothing to object. He is a mere English poet of the third or fourth rank, and as such he is harmless. But when he attempts to run an "Irish" Literary Theatre it is time for him to be crushed."

Pearse would come to develop much more cooperative relations with Yeats in the coming years and, by 1913, lavished praise on Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, having originally been among its foremost critics. But the idea that true Irish culture must be in Irish and that the Abbey Theatre consisted of a bunch of colonial-minded Ascendancy eavesdroppers persisted well into the twentieth century and beyond. Its most virulent proponent was D. P. Moran, editor of *The Leader* newspaper from 1900. Moran had cut his teeth on Fr. Thomas Finlay's *The New Ireland Review* (1894–1911), where he wrote a series of polemical articles, often vituperatively opposed to Anglo-Irish culture, later published as *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* (1905). For Moran, the authenticity of national identity is measured by its incommensurability with any other nation: "International misunderstanding is one of the marks of nationhood. It is impatient alike with the 'Shoneens' who ape English modes and values, and with those who indulge in "professed hatred of England but not of things English," Moran insists that a true nationality must get beyond any sort of relationship with another nation altogether. The choice is stark and binary: Ireland must be thoroughgoing Irish or mongrelized and inferior English.

### The Effacing Hand

The Revival is marked by overlapping circles and coteries, connected by family resemblance but, like many families, marked by no small amount of sniping, suspicions, and score-settling. The main disputes, as some of my examples have already indicated, include the role of the English and the Irish languages, the separability or not of cultural and political nationalism, Irish-Irish and Anglo-Irish ideologies, and, finally, nationalist versus cosmopolitan ideas of art. There is no shortage of ideological schisms and distinctions: the hermetically protectionist, Irish-speaking, Catholic monad dreamed of by D. P. Moran bears little comparison to the imperial Ireland, participating proudly in the "Anglo-Celtic Empire" imagined by Standish O'Grady. Can we isolate a common denominator, a view or value that all the groups might share? To begin with, they all, as Gregory Castle points out, deploy "tactical revisions of historical narratives and the redeployment of rhetorical tropes and images in the service of redefining the Irish future. However, even if this future is variously imagined, it does share certain normative features. The Revivalists are united by a sense that Ireland can be a redoubt against the depredations of modernity, though divided around notions of *volkisch* purity versus Anglo-Irish hybridity, cultural nationalism, and separatism. In this respect the Revival typifies
a European discursive strain in its opposition to civilizational degeneration. For all their differences, Moran, O’Grady, Pease, and AE seek a future of vigor, assertiveness, and masculinity as opposed to the fragmentation and decadence of modern materialism. The tactical use of the Irish past is defensive. It can be framed in explicitly anti-colonial or in more broadly culturalist terms: against hegemonic dominance or against formulaic, stale mass culture, or, simply, against fin de siècle ennui and perceived civilizational decline. Understood in this light, the Revival is akin to European modernist attempts, evident variously in D. H. Lawrence, Igor Stravinsky and Paul Gauguin, to pit primitive energy against modern decadence, ennui, and chaos. Importantly, it also gives the Revival an investment in quality as well as distinctiveness, a cultural bulwark against the forces of mass culture and homogeneity. In “The Necessity of De-Anglicising Ireland” Hyde is at pains to emphasize that he does not want the Irish to stop imitating what is best in English people but rather to “set our face sternly against penny dreadfuls, shilling shockers, and still more, the garbage of vulgar English weeklies like Bow Bells and Police Intelligence.” In addition to looking for distinctiveness on a horizontal plane, the Revival also often looks for a vertical discrimination, which is why Yeats’s project of giving high culture to “the common man” fits into both a revivalist and an international frame.

Ironically from a separatist point of view, Revivalist ideology resonates with ideas of culture and education emerging in Britain, which combine Arnoldian ideas of high culture with a nationalist mission to edify, uplift, and unify the populace. Since the 1870 and 1880 Education Acts, a rising tide of literate readers had created a new market in the UK. There was widespread fear among elite classes that entertainments, including cheap magazines and sensational novels, were debasing national life. For some anti-modernist commentators, it was precisely this urge to protect high culture from the grubby hands of the newly literate that motivated modernism’s notorious difficulty. At any rate, in late Victorian and Edwardian England, vigor and morale were linked to the dissemination of quality culture. In Ireland, this project emerged as a nationalist Revival and although, as Stefan Collini points out, we do not generally associate England with a cultural nationalism, there was also a nationalist dimension to the project of edification there. While Irish revivalists were having debates and quarrels about the relationship of nationalism and literature, Britain was founding the National Trust (1895), the National Portrait Gallery (1896), and the British Academy (1905). There was perhaps an easier alignment with British national culture and a cosmopolitan value system, an assumption that the best of British was simply the “best.” But that quasi-imperialist assumption should not obscure the similarity in the mission of cultural renewal across both countries.

This comparison highlights another incipient tension in the Revival between what we might dub the anthropological idea of culture – the distinctive Irish beliefs, practices, and ways of life – and the Arnoldian idea of “high culture,” the sense of culture as art of exemplary quality and aesthetic achievement. For some major Revivalists, including Yeats and AE, the former was a route to the latter and that was its point and purpose. Activating Irish tropes and discourses, producing a national literature, could enliven and refresh the role of art within Europe. But for others, such as Griffith, the artistic mission of the Revival was a distraction from the political goals of nationalism. The relationship of art and politics, literature and history, would resurface again and again in modernist critical discourse. To what extent does literature operate in an autonomous sphere? Where does artistic agency overlap or remain separate from political agency? Though in the Irish Revival these debates have a strongly nationalist flavor, they nonetheless resonate with these wider contexts. For Moran, quality resides in distinctiveness. There is no trade across boundaries that does not dilute: the “use value” of national culture is marked precisely by its incommensurability with an economics of exchange. The distinction between the two ideas of culture, horizontal and vertical, was also often the ostensible ethos behind debates around self-styled nationalists and cosmopolitans. The latter typically charge the former with sacrificing artistic integrity for didactic and provincial ends; the former accuse the latter of rootlessness and covert imperialism.

The most sophisticated thinker of the period to advocate the cosmopolitan position was John Eglinton, the editor of Dana, an old school friend of Yeats who worked as the assistant librarian at the National Library of Ireland. Greatly influenced by Henry David Thoreau and the American transcendentalists, he embraces an ethos of artistic individualism, which chafes against the communal ethos of a “national” culture. Favoring realism over myth, cosmopolitanism over nationalism, Eglinton was perhaps the most critically powerful internal opponent of the Revival’s intellectual foundation, querying whether Irish myth and legend could be appropriated for modern literature, even reneging from the regard that all Revivalists, including Anglophobes, were expected to pay to the Irish language. Moreover, though he and Yeats were generally civil combatants (and Yeats edited a volume of Eglinton’s essays for Dun Emer Press), they have profoundly different conceptions of where literary value lies.
During the summer and autumn of 1898, there was a debate in the pages of the *Daily Express* around what a national literature should look like, and how the Irish literary movement should relate to cosmopolitanism and its stance toward cultural nationalist predecessors, Thomas Davis, and the Young Irelanders. The principle figures involved were Eglinton, Russell and Yeats, with one contribution from George Larminie. The first sallies concerned the appropriateness of legend and myth for Irish drama, with Eglinton arguing that Irish theater needs a more immediate relevance to the problems of society, and Yeats pointing at Henrik Ibsen and Richard Wagner as evidence that myth may indeed be a subject for national drama. Eglinton insists on the need for art to be attuned to the spirit of the times, urging that the force of the imagination be turned on the facts of life. “The poet looks too much away from himself and his age,” claims Eglinton of the myth-oriented Revivalist, “does not feel the facts of life enough, but seeks in art an escape from them. Consequently, the art he achieves cannot be the expression of the age and himself — cannot be representative or national.”  

Yeats responds to this confrontation robustly, condemning a literature based on spurious relevance, which he aligns with vulgar journalism and a crass utilitarianism. True art, for him, escapes from the merely mundane and every day, and is attuned to timeless beauty. In some ways, Eglinton seems a modern, even a contemporary figure, particularly in his prediction that national boundaries are rendered obsoleter by the porous borders of trade and global communications. Yet it would be misguided to see him as simply anti- (or post-) nationalist. He rather wants to ensure that no didactic or sacral ideology, be it nationalist or religious, should inhibit creative freedom or the ends of human truth. He feels that nationalism is justified when it can provide a conduit to humanist verity, allowing a distinct community to discover the “possibilities of human nature” and “universal and essential interests.”

An intellectual nationality, he claims, not a cultural one, will allow Ireland to move into an elevated sphere of the cultivated and civilized societies, those European societies which are “inheritors and preservers of the Promethean fire.” When he equates these verities with a mainstream European culture, he reveals that his humanism and universalism belong not to deracinated truth, but inextricably to one area of the world: Europe.

For those cultural nationalists who feared what Hyde called the “effacing hand of cosmopolitanism,” the problem was that the forces of cosmopolitanism (or what we might now call globalization) were remorselessly leveling and homogenizing. They threatened, like so many of the technological revolutions of modernity, to leach color and specificity from social life, to uproot organic communities and local distinction, to dechristalize ritual and custom. It was precisely the spread of this modern disenchancement that was a spur to the Revivalists in the first place. Also, and relatedly, progressive cosmopolitanism was often the acceptable face of a woflsh imperialist ideology, which assumed a normative superiority to local culture and mistook its hegemony for a form of universalism. This colonial condescension is certainly evident in the anti-nationalism of a figure like Dowden and we can discern it too behind some of Eglinton’s thinking, as well as when he argues that it is not the language and culture of the peasantry that the Revivalist should go after, but the racy-of-the-soil primitive vitality: “Strictly speaking, it is not for language and literature, but rather for the thews and sinews of nationality, that we should look to the peasantry; on the contrary, it is fitting that the peasantry should have the language of a superior culture imposed upon them.”

Yet Revivalist nationalism does not simply face off against the cosmopolitan case, with its hidden imperialist ideology, but rather seeks mechanisms of mediation. A young Yeats wrote in 1888: “One can only reach out into the universe with a gloved hand, and that glove is one’s nation, the only thing one knows even a little of.” A glove is something artificial. Something one can put on and take off. In Yeats’s case there were many gloves and the fit was never perfect. His embroideries and old mythologies, if they are often Irish, are also English and European and Asian. He had little investment in a pure and exclusionary version of Irish culture and, if he wanted to hold it up as a bulwark against middle-class materialism, his cultural nationalism, deeply tied to his anti-imperialism, was not simple. It is this interplay between local and international that ties Yeats to the later tradition of Irish cosmopolitan modernism of Elizabeth Bowen, Joyce and Beckett.

Russell’s contribution veers toward Yeats’s position, though his “Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism,” which brings the *Daily Express* exchange to a close, offers a nuanced negotiation between the two poles. “The cosmopolitan spirit, whether for good or for evil,” he claims, “is hastily obliterating distinctions. What is distinctly national in these countries is less valuable than the immense wealth of universal ideas.” European culture has produced an extraordinary store of shared cultural value, and for a national literature to justify itself it must do so with the “profound conviction that its peculiar ideal is nobler than that which the cosmopolitan spirit suggests.” Irish cultural nationalism will not just save Ireland but Europe too, precisely by reanimating its mythic (and communal) foundations, which Russell finds in ancient Greece and Egypt. He
makes a seemingly paradoxical move here, arguing for the vertical quality of the Revival project by appealing to European Hellenism, while at the same time validating the horizontal axis, by emphasizing the communal, republican aspects of ancient Greece, which he regards as a sort of civic nationalism. Europe has swung toward abstract ideals and non-national art, and if the Irish alternative—a national literature—is to compete against this “immense wealth of universal ideas,” it must produce something so utterly incommensurable and su generis that, like a unique soul, it is precious in itself. So the justification for Irish national literature, its “value,” is precisely because it is unconvertible into the terms of a mainstream cultural economy. However, paradoxically, this withdrawal from the Continental literary marketplace ultimately steals a march on the cosmopolitan literature of contemporary Europe. Ireland’s singularity invokes not just freshness but also, crucially, Hellenic precedent. So by opting out of the European literary field, the Irish leapfrog the large European nations back to that toward which all countries have aspired—ancient Greece. It reanimates the center precisely by moving to the margins, finding archetypes in the untranslatable particular in a way that anticipates Joyce’s Ulysses by a generation.

This doubling back is only possible when the Revival seeks out quality as well as distinctiveness. Inevitably, the new singularity partakes in wider cultural economics, precisely as it proclaims its own shimmering irreducibility to mere exchange value. For all the nationalist agendas of the cultural Revival, it can never be totally isolationist. It will inevitably define itself relationally, even if the relation is one of simple opposition or antipathy (not-English). It will also explicitly or implicitly belong to a wider cultural field. When Moran, Daniel Corkery, or Maud Gonne complain that the Anglo-Irish Revivalists write for an English audience, they have a point. But the deeper point is that beneath debates about cosmopolitanism and nationalism lies a subterranean interdependence. Nationalist identity of course emerges comparatively—in being not somebody else—a point missed by Moran’s incommensurability thesis. In a converse way, the cosmopolitan ethos, though it purports to be humanistic and outside of place and time, tends to reproduce dominant hegemony, which is why its avowed anti-provincialism can so often conceal Eurocentric, imperialist assumptions. Tracing the intellectual debates of the Revival reveals some of these seepages between binary positions.

In a 1904 essay, Yeats writes, “A writer is not less National because he shows the influence of other countries and of the great writers of the world. No nation, since the beginning of history, has ever drawn all of its life out of itself.” Throughout his career, Yeats devises intellectual currents, movements, and streams of thought within and across borders. He is also alert to fields, precedents, international examples. The Irish are like, or should aspire to be like, Greece or Russia, Shakespeare, Wagner, Florentine art and music. This negotiation and strategizing resonates with Pascale Casanova’s influential account of how literary movements emerge across national borders and negotiate the global circuitry of literary prestige. A young Joyce, Casanova notes, was keenly aware of these center-periphery strategies, finding a model for his own enterprise in Ibsen and in Dante’s use of the vernacular. Importantly, however, Joyce needed the Irish Revival in order to have a “national” literature against which he could innovate and revolt, presenting his own work as internationalist and metropolitan against the supposedly provincial Revival. The processes of innovation and reciprocation, rejection and continuation were part of an ongoing marketplace of literary values, and the strategies of the Revival and counter-Revival, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, beg to be judged in this wider context.

Notes
10. Ibid.
18. Catherine Morris’s, *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012) has restored the role of Milligan in particular and the Northern Revival in general to the broader cultural history of the period.
24. Ibid., 5.
32. Ibid., 11.
38. Ibid.
Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
McDonald, R

Title:
Internal Others

Date:
2019-01-24

Citation:

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/274365