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The Irish Modernist Literary Writing: A Dialogic Space

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RESUMEN:

El argumento central de este artículo gira en torno a la experimentación lingüística y narrativa que domina la literatura irlandesa moderna, ya no es sólo un intento de subversión lingüística, sino un esfuerzo de innovación nacional. La dinámica de la literatura modernista permite a escritores irlandeses transformar la opresión colonial en una tradición literaria positiva. El estado colonizado de los escritores irlandeses modernos ofrecen una forma de exilio voluntario que se materializa en la autonomía del arte y el lenguaje lúdico y el texto, que ya no es señal de un significado unívoco, sino una obra significativa. De todo ello se desprende, probablemente, el por qué tantos escritores irlandeses desde Swift, Wilde, Beckett hasta O'Brien, se apoyan en el juego de palabras y la innovación lingüística. El lenguaje lúdico que re-organiza letras y palabras constituye un acto de naturaleza política. En lugar de apoyar la violencia, los escritores irlandeses ridiculizan el papel de las imágenes como norma que limita su entendimiento. Los debates en torno a la novela transforman a éste en un movimiento a través de sus narraciones, voces onomatopéyicas, y sus diferentes discursos. Las narraciones caleidoscópicas socavan los modos más convencionales del discurso, concentrándose en la inestabilidad lingüística y, en particular en torno a la naturaleza dialógica del lenguaje. Se abstiene del significado en favor de una forma dinámica en la que diferentes significados son operativos. Un efecto de interacción continuo que genera una experiencia dinámica e ilimitada.

Palabras clave: Irlandés, escritura no representacional, debate, narrativa autorreferencial, heteroglosia, diálogo.

ABSTRACT:

The core argument of this article is that linguistic and narrative experimentation that dominates the modernist Irish literature is no longer just an attempt at linguistic subversion but an endeavour of national innovation. The dynamics of modernist literature allows Irish writers to transform colonial oppression into a positive literary tradition. The colonised status of modern Irish writers offered a form of voluntary exile that is apparent in the autonomy of art and the playful language and text that no longer signal a univocal signification but a meaningful play. This sense of detachment probably explains why so many Irish writers from Swift through Wilde to Beckett and O'Brien were so fond of word play and linguistic innovation. The playful language that re-arranges letters and words is a political act. Instead of supporting violence, Irish writers ridicule standard images they saw as limiting. Colloquy transforms the novel into a movement through its onomatopoeic narratives, voices and discourses. Kaleidoscopic narratives undermine conventional modes of discourse by concentrating on linguistic instability and in particular on the dialogic nature of language. It eschews meaning in favour of a dynamic form in which meanings are constructed. The effect of continual interplay is a dynamic and unbounded experience.

Keywords: Irishness, Non-representational writing, Colloquy, Self-referential Narrative, Heteroglossia, Dialogue.

I begin this article by asserting that Ireland's relation to England has been governed by the political aspiration to assert its difference, as well as its compatibility with the political and cultural systems of England. In the Irish case, modernist literature is loaded with too much history and politics that changes are denied. Much energy in Irish literature is devoted to dissuasions of the Irish national character and similarly writings on Ireland by English authors are similarly devoted to this topic. The modernist Irish writings have in different ways been affected by and responsive to the Irish socio-political actualities. As a result, there is a curious Irish bias against representational writing in favour of the non-representational: failure, void, cunning and silence. Representational instability reveals the ability of Irish cultural criticism to trace the relationships and conflicts of colonial and marginal literary production. A major effect of centuries of colonization in Ireland has been the dislocation of language and narration. The English literature of Ireland no matter how excellent or authentic is neither a continuation nor a substitute. There is little analysis of the ways in which the colonial situation provided fertile ground for the controlled manipulations of narrative, language and style. The Irish literary writing is crowded with these stereotypes and this article looks beyond these stereotypes to find intriguing hybrid formations in

Irish cultural ephemera. Unfortunately, the stereotype freezes historical and cultural changes into a pattern of destiny. One sign of this concern is the preoccupation of the modernist Irish writing with its own method and the form and function of its language, style and narration. The resulting literary work becomes self-reflexive and self-sufficient, with its reality being nothing more than what it is.

What I am arguing is that the modernist Irish writing that embraces emptiness and blankness endeavors to represent the new Ireland as it had never been represented before. In the new space, various attempts to represent Ireland were based on the belief that the country had not been adequately represented before. This sense of blankness, emptiness and the evolution of literary techniques by which it could be filled is an enduring feature of the Irish writing. The dialogic Irish writing in the twentieth century points to the increasing conception of Irish culture as something not to be constrained by simple geographical, cultural and literary boundaries. The deterritorialized narratives make clear the historical sense that represents the diasporas of Irish history. The suggestion is that sociopolitical pressure denies modernist Irish writers the opportunity to indulge in the conventional literary tradition. Ireland becomes a new cultural space through the

mediation of art. There has been various kinds of writings to allow the contemporary Irish writers to resort to 'self-referential fiction.' There is insistence on Irish realities that compromise a program of radical fictionality. The Irish modernist writing portrays a sense of nowhere, a territory not yet represented. Critical accounts of William Butler Yeats's literary works testify that his autonomous literary career has been partially prompted by the Irish cultural nationalism to the extent that Yeats established a close link between great literature and nationality.

The making of the Irishness seems to presuppose a sort of dialogue which happens among the Irish exiles and other literary groups who surrendered themselves to literary experimentations that serve their political revolution and aspiration for autonomy. Literary and linguistic exile becomes the most favorable strategy of representation in the twentieth century. Ironically speaking, this dialogic space of writing is a claim to disposition and possession. Thus, the Irish colloquy could be read as a set of dialogical conventions that resist the norms of English writing. Irish writers worked in the gap of writing in English that in its defamiliarity evokes the presence of the other. In James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus criticized the Dean's insistence that a tundish is a funnel. Stephen announced his alienated relationship to the English language that stands in contrast to his English master. Many modern artists including Joyce, Beckett and O'Brien view writing neither as reality nor as representation of reality, but as a mass of dead words that inhibit man from perceiving his condition. Such decontextualized narratives represent a geography which has been deprived of history. Colloquy allows connections and registers varieties of Irishness and Englishness with unusual authority. I am referring to what I define as 'the varieties of the Irishness' that reminds us of the complexities of the Anglo-Irish relations. By considering unexpected connections and conjunctions, English and Irish, Paddy and Mr. Punch and literary and political we can carry forward the controversial project of making sense of Ireland. Interactions led to the increasingly complex representations of Ireland and the Irish in the literary milieu. The sense of being denied a familiar context and being asked instead to improvise a set of values in a terrifyingly open space is a major challenge of Irish writers. Irishness sometimes denotes a kind of refractory logic that seems to have all the gratuitousness of literary conventions.

The attempt by Irish writers to live simultaneously in both the old and the new world explains the complexity of much of its twentieth century literature and accounts for the willingness of artists to take extreme liberties with the forms of English literature. The conflicting possibilities in the representation of Ireland in literary milieu in Britain and the co-existence of these multiple texts seems to suggest that Ireland offering itself as "the family of ideas" according to Edward Said. The attempt to produce a cultural space is simultaneously imperative and doomed to failure. Since Ireland cannot be accommodated within the canonical British forms of representation, Irish writing is highly dialogical in its search for alternative forms and highly subversive of its own procedures that are not being sufficiently canonical. Charlotte Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* that sought to found a national consensus through the melding of the Gaelic-English language

traditions in poetry can be seen as an attempt to reconcile in literature what was irreconcilable in politics.

Irish writing in the twentieth century is often charged with diverse dialogues, voices and discourses competing for contextualization. This dialogic writing undertakes to restore a world lost and oppressed under the nets of history, poverty and colonialism. In such ways, modern Irish personality and culture were reshaped and in Benedict Anderson's words the emerging culture, 'like a white-on-black photographic negative' capturing the mixed and hybrid experience of Irish writing. The article emphasizes the ordinariness of this heterogeneous type of cultural space as the Irish question of home rule asserted itself in its kaleidoscopic form of writing. Irish exiles contributed massively to the invention and refinement of the idea of Irishness as a case of hybridity, colloquy and dialogue. The Irish exiles of the nineteenth century were well aware of the hybrid sources of their nationalism. Oscar Wilde argues that only when large numbers of Irish people spoke and wrote in English, French, as well as Irish could this heteroglossia happen. Wilde made this argument in his capacity as an Irish emigrant. The earlier Irish nationalism dedicated itself to expanding the expressive freedom of Irish individuals to the emergence of what Yeats defines as 'a new species of man.' No doubt that Yeats perceives literature as a realm that is crucial in revitalizing and in creating a unique culture of the oppressed Ireland. Literary accounts of Yeats' literary development acknowledge the presence of the Irish cultural nationalism in his poetic career that is generated by the political friction between the two nations. He asserts that "There is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature" (Yeats, 1989: 30) Similarly, he implies that the function of poetry is to measure that is unmeasured or immeasurable. In his poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", the most celebrated poem of decolonization, the geographic impulse informs the poetic inspiration:

I will arise and go now, and go to
Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay
and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a
hive for the honey-bee,
And I live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for
peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning
to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and
noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will rise and go now, for always night
and day]
I hear lake water lapping with low
sounds by the shore;]
While I stand on the roadway, or on
the pavements grey,]
I hear it in the deep heart's core.
(Yeats, 1994: 60)

The relationship between Irish politics and Irish art is intimate. Yeats found dignity and significance in Irish landscape that is steeped in local history and mythology. He immersed himself in the Irish folklore stories and mythology and skillfully weaved these threads into the fabric of his major

poems and plays. The poem is about a lost place, as well as about imagining a place through sound and visual images. He was yearning for a quiet place in County Sligo where he spent most of his childhood. Yeats was dreaming "of living a life of lonely austerity ...in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree." (Yeats, 1922:45) The poem came from a sudden remembrance. It was inspired as Yeats was walking by a shop window displaying a water fountain that reminded him of Lough Gill, west of Ireland and made him felt homesick. The poem is a study in contrast and the most obvious contrast is between the rural identified in the title of the poem and the other by implication urban. 'Innisfree' is an Irish place name meaning 'island of heather' that explains the purple glow in the poem. Besides, the phonetic appeal of the word renders an attractive title for Yeats and also gives a distinctive Irish quality to the poem that was written in English not Gaelic. He affirms that 'To read Anglo-Irish poetry one must follow either Irish music or Anglo-Irish prose speech.' (MacDonagh, 1916: 70) The poet attempts to create an artifact that is Irish, despite being written in English. By evading the usual English metric standards, Yeats affirms that to read Anglo-Irish poetry one needs to follow either Irish music or Anglo-Irish prose speech that renders the wavering verse. He was interested in creating and imagining a place through sound and visual images. Yeats affirms his Irish sense of belonging through an acoustic appeal that is most evident in the closing line of the poem. The appeal of the poem has to do with its musicality, rural vocabulary, as well as its longing for home. Finally, the repeated use of the adverb 'there' in the poem signifies moving away from London towards Ireland and gives the poem a wavering and songlike quality. Yeats brought the Irish voice into English verse. Musicality is a key component of Yeats's poetry and Yeats's thinking about poetry. He is 'the Master of Sound' and in particular the Irishman's voice with its inflections, cadences and idioms. This acoustic influence is related to the importance of the native oral tradition most apparent in Irish literature. Brian Devine states that "Yeats managed to move beyond the prevalent trend of the nineties for a stylistically attenuated and orally muted verse" (Devine, 2006: 75) The Irish were fascinated by the power of words. Orality is a vivid testimony to a long-lived and rich Gaelic tradition of stories, narrative techniques, songs and ballads. It embraces the literature of the mass of the people. Likewise, Douglas Hyde affirms that Irish language oral literature praised what is courteous, noble and most important the best and truest of thoughts.

However in Irish colloquy, there is no opposition to culture, no transcendent perspective or language and no singular self-definition because all find their meaning in this either/or case. The releasing power of the dialogic text helps in constructing the Irish culture without invoking a norm or a real by initiating a dialogue among the various discourses vying for ascendancy. Irish differences can be obliterated or accommodated but can never be autonomous in themselves. Once Ireland became constitutionally integrated with Britain through the loss of its own parliament in Dublin it was necessary also to integrate it culturally. One of the first manifestations of the project of cultural integration was the growth in travel literature, a genre in which Ireland had been rich because it was consistently considered as a place both 'domestic and foreign' and 'home and other.' This binary opposition indicates a real tension at the heart of recent Irish writing. Ireland in literature is

an experiential phenomenon that exists beyond but always within sight of authors, readers and writers.

The heteroglossia of Ireland prompts the notions of marginality and hybridity which have become common-place in colonial thinking of Ireland. Ireland was often represented as a place that was in exile from itself, from its language, its heroic past, its Celtic spirit and its position as the Island of Saints and Scholars with Stephen Dedalus as its prominent embodiment in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This literary exile is rooted in economic need and ambition. Yet, exile should not be viewed as a form of deracination. It is also a position from which the country can be surveyed. It is possible to regard the Irish Revival Literature as a new form of cultural tourism as in Edmund Synge's return from Paris to Wicklow and the West, in Yeats's shuttling back and forth between London, Oxford and Dublin, in George Moore's experimental revisiting of Ireland and in Joyce's fascination with the city and the country of Dublin. Ireland became a new cultural space when it was refigured as the place to be retrieved and reintegrated with world culture. It is no wonder that Irish modernity adapts the discourse of inspection, retrieval and tourism to the requirements of an art that is at once native in substance and cosmopolitan in its form. Exile, the high cultural form of emigration became a favored strategy for the representation of Ireland in the early twentieth century. It is a form of dispossession that paradoxically retains the claim to possession. This form initiated the critique of the peasant view of Ireland and Irish writers such as Wilde, Bernard Shaw, Sean O'Casey and many other famous Irish exiles who occupied this position. Ireland for these writers was 'nowhere,' a territory not yet represented and a place caught between geography and history. Representation becomes an auratic process by which the place that had no representation or not represented finally achieves an overwhelming presence. Auratic representation replaces the political by the aesthetic and this aesthetic that is complete by itself absorbs the political. The linkage between the territory and the aesthetic category is a reverse act of colonial possession achieved within a discursive space that is enclosed between notions of possession and disenchantment of possession. If Joyce claims an epistemological privilege for writing, Yeats claims it for the autonomous Irish writing. This is not to say that Yeats is more national than Joyce. Rather, it points out two different but connected moments in the nationalist enterprise in which Ireland as a territory, specific to itself and not adjunct to England would be constituted for the first time in writing. Yeats is aesthetically and politically an exponent of home rule; Joyce is an exponent of radical separatism. For Yeats, the Ireland of anachronicity is retaining what England had lost in the process of modernization. For Joyce, chronicity or anachronicity are irrelevant. The issue for him is spatialization of that which had been displaced in time and history. Irish history is not ordered in either linear or cyclical fashion. Instead, it is thrown into a synchronous space, plural and present. In Ireland, even more than in England, the middle classes had to demonized so that the imperial civilization they were assumed to represent could be humiliated culturally and politically. Yeats consistently speaks of the weak culture of the Irish Catholic middle class that was moving towards political and economic control. And Joyce who was representing the authors of this class emancipated himself and

his idea of Ireland by exploiting the intimate relationships between national and class stereotypes on one hand and the aristocratic version of the artist on the other. Both Joyce and Yeats constructed the myths of the artist as simultaneously intimate and exilic and eventually creating an image of Ireland as a country that was at once shrinking in backwardness and also estranged in timelessness. In a crucial sense, the country was to be freed from its oppression through art. The self-creation of the artist as a person freed from the conventional has particular significance in Irish writing. Yeats, Joyce, Shaw, Wilde and Synge are the best known examples who created the myth of the tragic generation of poets and artists doomed to failure and self-destruction. Ireland saw itself as 'a romantic culture' indicating its difference with England that saw itself as 'a utilitarian culture.' At the cultural level lays the representational paradigm that governed literary writings between the two countries for most of the nineteenth century. Thomas Moore, James Clarence, Wilde and Shaw responded eagerly to this paradigm while Yeats and his contemporaries excluding Joyce had become institutionalized into racial millenarianism.

Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two Birds* is an exemplary text that opens itself to cultural, narrative and discursive colloquy. The dialogic narrative strategy is instrumental to destabilize the monological cultural discourse. The book enters into dialogue with an Irish tradition at a critical moment of national self-articulation. It violates conventional frametale ontology and draws into textual colloquy narratives of various ranks, professions and ideologies that range from pre-post colonial Irish history to the present Irish history; however none of these discourses is privileged. The novel portrays Irish culture as a system of discourses competing for ascendancy. The novel derides various attempts to inscribe Ireland within the literary languages of the Celtic Revival, realism or modernism; rather the book voices the heteroglossia of mid-twentieth century Ireland that is in constant dialogue with its past history of colonization and repression. The Irish had a dilemma with the English imperialism and its aim to impose the English language as the dominant discourse. A heterophonic discourse emerged as a new Irish discourse that differentiates and separates itself from the language in power. There is a constant tension between the official language that is unitary and centripetal and the heterogeneous centrifugal discourses dominating the novel. The nationalist myth of an Irish Ireland offers a centrifugal challenge to the monologic rule of imperial Britain by shaping a collective identity that is essential for independence. This doubleness is similar to Terry Eagleton's notion of 'self-irony' that is vital to a nationalist perspective that seeks to evade reproducing the imperative it has struggled to abolish. *At Swim* challenges the official constructions of the Irish for it shapes an open and cacophonous text which articulates Ireland as a dialogic mosaic with its multiple styles, voices and extracts.

The first few pages of *At Swim-Two Birds* demonstrate the book's method in its complex manifestations as when the narrator contemplates the inadequacy of the conventional single opening and ending of literary works. Instead, the narrator declares that "a good book may have three openings" (O'Brien, 1976:9) The comic dialogue in *At Swim* reveals the relational status of any attempt to articulate Irishness at a time when the

entire nation was undertaking the task of self-consciousness. The dialogic text of the book marks the potential borders of Irishness. More critically, O'Brien criticizes Trellis and realism in general which silence the critical potentials of heteroglossia. O'Brien's writing deconstructs the inherited narratives of classical realism. Although *At Swim-Two Birds* makes reference to giants, fairies and mad poets, it is possible to find an engagement with the real. Besides, there is interplay between mythic and modern characters. Furrisky and Finn MacCool are juxtaposed and a comedy emerges from the contrast. Mikhail Bakhtin observes that a given character's language in the dialogic text becomes itself the object of narrative scrutiny, "simultaneously represented and representing" (Bakhtin, 1981: 45).

Furthermore entering into dialogue with this language, Bakhtin observes that the text argues with it and agrees with it. O'Brien perceives a mechanism in the dialogic novel that releases the multiple voices. The student narrator's 'found documents' reveal the conflicted discursive fields and their intertextual juxtapositions. Bakhtin observes that such strategy "parodic-travestying literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and more importantly too contradictory and heteroglot to be fit into a high and straightforward genre" (Bakhtin, 1981: 55) O'Brien's postmodern strategy allows an equivocal position that neither embraces nor rejects the old staff of the native land. Richard Kearney states that "the crisis of the twentieth-century Irish culture as a clash between revivalism and modernism—between those who seek to revive the past and those who choose to rewrite or repudiate it altogether" (Kearney, 1988: 10) permeates *At Swim*.

The Irish cultural richness demands a narrative strategy that refuses to privilege a singular perspective on the past or to escape its ideological parameters that might be invoked. The parodies in the novel interrogate the inherited narratives to hinder their ossification into cultural stereotypes. Yet these parodic citations refigure the past by introducing modernist readers to a traditional text that might otherwise have remained unknown. Moreover, parody recontextualizes stereotyped narratives by bringing them into dialogue with the critical needs and conditions of the present. Eventually, the Irish culture becomes an on-going process, as the Irish past is engaged in continual and critical colloquy. It is in this context that O'Brien's cultural dialogue with modernism adds a new dimension. Linda Hutcheon describes the pervasive program "to work toward a public discourse that would overtly eschew modernist aestheticism and hermeticism and its attendant political self-marginalization" (Hutcheon, 1988: 23) The novel undermines the realist discourse and replaces the nationalist myth in its parody of the fiction of Trellis. Trellis is the protagonist of the student narrator and he himself is writing a novel that depends on its end on the conditions it intends to expose. While Trellis wants his salutary book to be read by all, he realizes that a moralizing tract would not reach the public. Eventually, he put a lot of smut into his book. To maintain his aesthetic rule, Trellis compels his characters to live with him in the Red Swan Hotel so that he can keep an eye on them. Trellis borrows these characters from earlier literature to use in his novel. O'Brien deliberately violates the frametale ontology to

permit the novelist's characters to occupy the same level of reality. He interrogates the central artifice of literary realism that creates the fictional characters and their world. Trellis's artifice presents an authorial impartiality so that his creation seems authorless and timeless. O'Brien exposes the opposition of this aesthetic by revealing that Trellis is duped by his own artifice and in particular with the beauty of one of his fictional characters and he seduces her. Furthermore, the book compromises the opportunism of Verney Wright and devotionism that is based on William Cowper whose description of how a day should be spent is embedded explicitly in the novel. By including two texts of British origin in Irish colloquy, O'Brien acknowledges the effects of British colonialism and particularly he exposes the epic values implicit within the Celtic Revivalists. To construct a heroic Irish essence, Revivalists celebrated political and literary figures who could lend cultural coherence to their struggle for independence; however in advocating a singular Celtic past they tend to dispose the heterogeneous essence of Irish history. O'Brien restored it by engaging the old staff of the native land in a comic dialogue which undermines the high pretensions of Revivalism.

To conclude, feelings of displacement and alienation immerse Irish writers in a middle position between Irishness and Englishness. The indeterminacy of Irish literary writings and the refusal of a dominant narrative voice is related to a colonial erasure of Irish history and identity. Irish writers have in different ways been affected by and responsive to the Irish political and social actualities. In any case it would be wrong to assume a tradition or suppose that it would be good thing once approaching a modernist Irish writing as each literary text has to be singular, separate and individual if it is to be of any good.

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