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A REVIEW OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND IRISH MODERNISM

Kathryn Conrad, Cólín Parsons, and Julie McCormick Weng, eds., *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019), paperback, pp. 405, ISBN 978-0-8156-3598-7.

Reviewed by Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston

One of the most fruitful areas of the “expansion” which has characterized the “New Modernist Studies” has been the growing attention that has been paid to the role of science and technology as concepts, discourses, and transformative socio-political forces in nineteenth and twentieth-century culture.¹ In the last two decades, an array of studies have emerged which answer Mark S. Morrison’s call for critics to embrace a fundamentally interdisciplinary model of “scientific and technical modernism” which attends to what Gillian Beer has identified as the “two-way” traffic of “ideas,” “metaphors,” “myths,” and “narrative patterns” between scientists and non-scientists which marked the period.² However, with a few notable exceptions, scholars have been slow (if not actively reluctant) to extend this analytical framework to Ireland and its culture.³ Under such circumstances, the fifteen essays that comprise *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* constitute not only a timely intervention in Irish Studies, but also a robust contribution to the history and philosophy of science in Ireland.

As Kathryn Conrad, Cólín Parsons, and Julie McCormick Weng point out in the introduction to their path-breaking collection, received critical wisdom has tended to exceptionalize Irish cultural attitudes to science and technology, which have traditionally been presented as uniformly hostile. However, as the diverse array of material surveyed in the collection makes clear, while many Irish cultural figures regarded the “scientific worldview” as an unwelcome colonial imposition, this did not preclude them from dramatizing its impact in their works, or from trying to envisage alternative modes of scientific endeavor and technological innovation. Indeed, some of the collection’s most rewarding essays attend in detail to the idiosyncrasies of Ireland’s efforts to cultivate (or synthesize) an autochthonous brand of scientific, technical, and cultural modernity, such as the establishment in 1940 of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DAIS), a pet project of Éamon de Valera, which brought together the Schools of Theoretical Physics and Celtic Studies, and provided an academic home to Erwin Schrödinger following his flight from Nazi-occupied continental Europe. For Andrew Kalaidjian, the DAIS provides a crucial context for reading texts such as the late Flann O’Brien (Brian O’Nolan) novel, *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), in which the protagonist envisages a collaborative

encounter between James Joyce and the mad scientist, De Selby, the outcome of which would be a book sufficiently “recondite, involuted and incomprehensible” to “be no menace to universal sanity.”⁴ Luke Gibbons, in an essay whose diffuse but evocative form replicates the montage effects with which it is concerned, offers a reading of the Easter Rising as a surreally “Modern Event,” peopled by Chaplain impersonators, matinée idols, and posters for an array of “cancelled futures” (63)—performances that would not take place, to be held in theaters the Rising would destroy, in a nation that had been changed utterly. In a high-point of the collection, Susanne S. Cammack explores how Lennox Robinson—playwright, manager, producer, and director at the Abbey Theatre from 1909 till his death in 1951—deploys a malfunctioning gramophone in his 1925 drama *Portrait* as a metaphor both for the traumatized psychological state of the play’s male protagonist and for the as yet unreleased political tensions of an Ireland tentatively emerging from over a decade of sectarian violence, anti-colonial struggle, and civil war: “an Irish gramophone, enacting an Irish cultural anxiety” (136).

Surveying a broad stretch of Irish cultural history, from the nascent revivalism of the 1880s through the “high” modernism of the 1920s, to the “late” modernism of the 1930s and, in some instances, far beyond, the collection is admirable in its scope and in its attention to both major and minor figures in the Irish modernist canon. Thus, while Synge, Joyce, Beckett, and Bowen make expected appearances, so do less often canvassed figures such as Emily Lawless and Seumas O’Sullivan. Likewise, while prose fiction and drama comprise the lion’s share of the material under consideration, admirable attention is paid to formats that feature less prominently in traditional accounts of Irish modernism, such as Joyce’s vinyl recordings or Denis Johnson’s BBC and RTE radio plays, and the complex negotiations of cultural capital which attended their engagement with these signally modern forms. Damien Keane’s essay on Joyce’s recording of an excerpt from the “Aeolus” episode of *Ulysses* (1922) not only provides a detailed account of the fractious negotiations between the Society of Authors (Joyce’s estate), the Poetry Collection at the University of Buffalo (which held copies of the rare recording), Folkways (a record label associated with spoken-word performance), and Caedmon (a record label associated with prestige recordings of authors) which dogged efforts to reissue the reading in the 1960s, but also reflects valuably on the ways in which “the reproduction of a gramophone recording” became the stage for “the reproduction of social relations” between a range of artistic, scholarly, and commercial institutions as a result (155). Likewise, Jeremy Lakoff’s essay on Johnson explores how the young playwright, himself a radio and television producer at the BBC, developed a “hypermediated” mode of metadrama that deployed decidedly modernist aesthetic strategies to unapologetically

“middlebrow” ends (162, 170). Alongside its attention to these technological developments, the collection offers a wide-ranging account of Irish modernism’s engagement with a range of scientific theories and disciplines, including natural history, eugenics, psychoanalysis, and the “new physics.” In a tour-de-force of close reading and nuanced historicism, Enda Duffy traces Joyce’s pointedly medicalized attention to his characters’ pulses, impulses, and other physiological indices of “aliveness” through the pages of *Ulysses*, linking this “new protocol of modernist representation” to the vibrant research culture of nineteenth-century Irish medicine, the expansion of the nation’s public health infrastructure in the aftermath of the Famine, and long-standing characterizations of the Irish as preternaturally nervous and predisposed to mental illness (187). While Duffy’s assertion that, through Joyce’s fiction, “the protocols of the Irish nineteenth-century medicoclinical gaze become the literary modus of modern Irish fiction” may be something of an overstatement (201), he makes a compelling case for analyzing Irish modernism in light of the social history of medicine.

In the course of the collection’s fifteen essays, it is the revival and late modernism which are the most decisively reconsidered. Challenging traditional constructions of the revival as uncomplicatedly anti-scientific and anti-modern in orientation, Seán Hewitt explores the ways in which revivalists adopted decidedly modern scientific techniques to critique the abstraction and alienation to which they felt scientific and technical modernity could give rise. Building on the work of Sinéad Garrigan, Mattar and others, Hewitt explores the ways in which Lawless, Synge, and O’Sullivan—all of whom were keen naturalists—deployed the discourses and methodology of natural history to “re-enchant” the natural world and imbue the primitive with a spiritual dimension which the positivism and secularism of Enlightenment reason had threatened to efface (29).⁵ As Hewitt’s close reading of their fiction and non-fiction writing reveals, for these figures, the mysterious spiritual charge of the natural environment did not reside “beyond” but “within” its material forms (21), and was best apprehended through the scientific modes of close observation practiced in the naturalist field clubs to which all three authors belonged. In a similar vein, Alan Graham reveals the extent to which degenerationist and eugenic models of physical and cultural decline were central to both the theory and rhetoric of revivalism in Ireland. As Graham rightly emphasizes, while critics may wish to quarantine the presence of eugenic thought in twentieth-century Irish culture to what they present as a belated flirtation on the part of an aging Yeats, in reality, its influence was widespread among cultural nationalists of every stripe, particularly where issues of language revival and the English popular press were concerned. Indeed, if there is a limitation to Graham’s persuasive and well-evidenced essay, it is only that it does not pursue the influence of eugenic

thought further into other areas of the cultural life of twentieth-century Ireland, such as the debates surrounding the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act and its proscriptions on printed material pertaining to birth control and abortion, to which a broad spectrum of Irish modernists vigorously contributed.⁶ Rounding out the collection's reconsideration of the revival are essays by Weng and Conrad, who explore the relationship between revivalists and technology. On the one hand, Weng offers an intriguing portrait of John Eglinton (William Fitzpatrick Magee) as an "Irish Futurist" who "viewed machines as vehicles that could advance cosmopolitan impulses in Ireland and Irish literature" by serving as "ambassadors" between individuals, communities, and nations (35, 36, 45). On the other hand, Conrad explores the more ambiguous and ambivalent attitude to technology manifested in Tom Greer's proto-modernist dynamite novel, *A Modern Daedalus* (1885), in which, Conrad argues, cutting-edge weapons technology comes to function as an avant-garde "medium of expression" in an emergent mass-media culture (82). In both cases, Joyce figures as a key inheritor and interpreter of these (admittedly idiosyncratic) modes of technologically inflected revivalism, extending, rather than repudiating their pointedly Irish approach to technology. For Weng, though Eglinton theorized an aesthetic of cosmopolitan materialism, it was Joyce who would most fully and concretely manifest its possibilities through stories like "The Dead" (1914), in which gaslight and electric light eventually allow Gabriel Conroy to experience a new sense of connection to his wife Gretta, her deceased sweetheart, Michael Furey, and their shared homeland, in all its heterogeneity. For Conrad, the influence of Greer's novel and its protagonist hover in the background of Joyce's work, informing both the character of Stephen Dedalus and his ambivalent attitude to the modern technological networks (or "nets") which Eglinton had so celebrated: "Instead of escaping," Conrad argues, "Joyce suggests the artist's need to fly *by means of* those nets" and, in so doing, acknowledges their capacity both to liberate and constrain (94).

If the contributions of Hewitt, Graham, Weng, and Conrad are valuable because they challenge long-standing critical truisms concerning the revival, the essays which deal with late modernism in Ireland are valuable because they constitute robust contributions to a critical discussion still in its infancy. For Kalaidjian, traditional theorizations of late modernism, which focus on British responses to the uncertainty generated by the Second World War and the unravelling of the Empire, do not fit the Irish case, because Irish neutrality in the "Emergency" arguably meant that the Irish state had never been more drearily secure.⁷ In Kalaidjian's account, the work of late Irish modernists such as Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, *et al.*) is characterized by an investment in uncertainty which grew in direct proportion to the mundane certainties of life in the mid-century state. According to Kalaidjian,

the late Irish modernist “turns to uncertainty not,” as in the case of their high modernist predecessors, “because Ireland itself is murky,” but because “Ireland—as a nation—is entirely too real” (248). For Parsons, projects such as John Banville’s ‘science tetralogy’—a loose series comprising *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981), *The Newton Letter* (1982), and *Mefisto* (1986)—embody a form of late modernism that simultaneously “trades in and rejects the very temporality of lateness,” deploying “astronomical” scales of time to question “received ideas of the time of modernism” (266, 265, 266). Belatedness and anachronism also surface in Chris Ackerley’s essay on “Samuel Beckett and the Biological,” which explores the author’s consistent preference for outmoded theorizations of the organic world derived largely from Wilhelm Windelband’s *History of Philosophy* (1893)—a key source for the soon-to-be-published “philosophy notes”—and Ernst Haeckel’s *The Riddle of the Universe* (1899), whose account of “larval consciousness” Ackerley posits as a key inspiration for his 1953 novel, *The Unnameable* (226). In different ways, all three essays offer a vivid sense of what Irish Studies and Science Studies can offer Modernist Studies in its approach to late modernism, while, at the same time, providing a valuable starting-point for future efforts to conceptualize “lateness” in a specifically Irish context.

As the editors readily admit, Yeats, who famously dismissed “the man of science” as one who had “exchanged his soul for a formula,” might seem to cut an unusual figure in such a collection.⁸ Yet, while Yeats is often held responsible for the popular image of the revival as fundamentally anti-materialist and anti-scientific in bent, as Ronan McDonald and others have shown, his professed animosity towards contemporary scientific thought often occludes the oblique yet significant ways in which it shaped and inflected his writing.⁹ A recent special issue of the present journal on “Yeats and Mass Communications” edited by David Dwan and Emilie Morin paints a very similar picture regarding Yeats’s relationship to technology. Though he preferred to “cast himself as a dilettante, a dissenter, or a naïve observer” of the proliferation of “mass media” and its attendant technologies, as Dwan and Morin note, Yeats regularly exploited them with the proficiency of “a master.”¹⁰ *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* valuably extends this more nuanced consideration of Yeats’s response to scientific and technical modernity by exploring the ways in which it informed his work for theater, in theory and practice. At the more abstract end of the spectrum, Gregory Castle offers a Deleuzoguattarian reading of Yeats’s Cuchulain plays as “machinic assemblages” which increasingly eschew a model of cultural authenticity rooted in “painstaking fidelity” to “well-ordered archives” that “attest to a truthful [...] version of past events” in favour of the “creative potential” that arises from the “intransmissibility” of those events and their “aura” (101, 99, 98):

When Yeats reimagined the story of Cuchulain, the Iron-Age hero of the Red Branch of Ulster, he sought a new pathway through technological modernity: his dramatic productions superadded to the legend the basic mechanics of modern theatre as well as avant-garde innovations that sought to undermine them. He worked with translations by [Standish] O'Grady and [Augusta] Gregory, but in large measure fashioned his own machinic arrange of the story, an arrangement that accommodated tradition as something *added to* the work[.] (102–03).¹¹

Another area of machinic arrangement to which Castle draws attention is Yeats's dramaturgy, particularly his engagement with the aesthetic practices and stage techniques of Japanese Noh theater in plays such as *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), which Castle argues provided the formal "basis for the break with traditions that he contemplate[d] in his aristocratic 'inventions'" and had "the machinic effect of eliminating the temporal and geographical distance between the audience and the legendary story" (104, 105). While Castle gestures towards the "material limits of theatre" and their impact on Yeats's "machinic" drama, his commentary largely remains confined to the level of textual analysis (96). A more historicist account of the ways in which the stage machinery of the Abbey Theatre served to realize (or constrain) Yeats's vision in these plays might have served to concretize Castle's claims. This is suggested not to criticize Castle's piece, which offers a nuanced account of the decidedly modern ways in which figures such as Yeats, O'Grady, and Gregory approached questions of tradition and authenticity, to highlight its status as something of an outlier in a volume which otherwise approaches the topic of "technology" in more literal terms.

More materialist in approach (if not in subject matter) is Katherine Ebury's essay on "Science, the Occult, and Irish Drama," which charts the ways in which the "new physics" informed Yeats and Beckett's staging of occult phenomena and ghostly apparitions. Surveying the plethora of popular science publications which sought to communicate Einstein's work on relativity to a mass audience, Ebury illustrates how "ghostly metaphors were written into the new physics and how it was received" from the outset, particularly where light was concerned (235). On the one hand, as Michael Whitworth has argued, the finite velocity of light—a central constant in Einstein's mathematics—and, by extension, the notion that the past is preserved in travelling light rays, conferred a "patina of modernity" to the literary tropology of the restless dead.¹² On the other hand, as Ebury notes, quantum theory's image of light simultaneously behaving as a wave and a particle destabilized its status as a reliable constant, conferring upon it, in aesthetic terms, both "realistic" and "surrealistic" properties (231). For Yeats, who read Einstein's *The Meaning of Relativity* (1922), Bertrand Russell's *ABC of Relativity* (1925), Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1925), and Arthur Eddington's *The*

Domain of Physical Science (1925), among others, the new physics appeared to bear out his convictions concerning the “limitations of nineteenth-century positivist science” (235). More than this, it offered a scientific sanction for occult research into the “unseen” and “unknown,” which, Ebury argues, manifested itself in the “increasing prominence” of “ghostly light” in plays such as 1936’s *The Words Upon the Window Pane* and 1938’s *Purgatory* (239). However, as Ebury shows, though Dublin theaters experimented with “black light” (ultraviolet) techniques in the 1920s and 1930s, the Abbey’s lighting rig remained decidedly conservative, changing little from its installation in 1904 until the theater’s destruction by fire in 1951. As such, Ebury argues, it was not until productions such as James Flannery’s contentious “expressionistic” rendering of *Purgatory* at the 1990 Yeats Theatre Festival that the full dramaturgical implications of the playwright’s interest in the “difficult light of the new physics” and its occult ramifications were thoroughly explored (243). An unintended boon of such productions, Ebury argues, is the way in which they illuminate the hitherto under-acknowledged debt which Beckett’s later “haunted” dramas owe to Yeats’s “occult theatre” (243). In Ebury’s view, plays such as *Footfalls* (1976) manifest not only a decidedly Yeatsian desire to “make it ghostly”—a direction Beckett gave to Billie Whitelaw in its inaugural production—but an interest in the occult potential of modern lighting techniques derived from the “new physics” which had inspired the older writer.¹³ In Ebury’s compelling reading, “Yeats’s interest in the science of light demonstrates that he is less antiscientific than is typically perceived, while Beckett’s interest in the occult reveals that he is more Yeatsian than is expected” (230). In its examination of the mechanisms of cultural exchange between literature and science in the early twentieth century, its close attention to the relationship between technology and aesthetic form, and its desire to put pressure on received narratives of modernism and modernity in Ireland, Ebury’s essay exemplifies the virtues of a collection that will be indispensable to scholars and students of Irish modernism, the cultural revival, and the history of science in Ireland alike.

NOTES

- 1 Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 737.
- 2 Mark S. Morrisson, *Modernism, Science, and Technology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 7. This call to action was first issued in Mark S. Morrisson, “Why Modernist Studies and Science Studies Need Each Other,” *Modernism/Modernity* 9, no. 4 (2002): 675–82. Representative examples of this critical turn include Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A*

- Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael H. Whitworth, *Einstein's Wake: Relativity, Metaphor, and Modernist Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Heike Bauer, *English Literary Sexology: Translations of Inversion, 1860–1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Katherine Ebury, *Modernism and Cosmology: Absurd Lights* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Paul Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism: Ethnography, Sexology, and Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 3 Recent exceptions include Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sinéad Garrigan-Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Rónán McDonald, “Accidental Variations’: Darwinian Traces in Yeats’s Poetry,” in *Science and Modern Poetry: New Approaches*, ed. John Holmes (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 152–67; Rónán McDonald, “The ‘Fascination of What I Loathed’: Science and Self in W. B. Yeats’s *Autobiographies*,” in *Modernism and Autobiography*, ed. Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 18–30; Emily C. Bloom, *The Wireless Past: Anglo-Irish Writers and the BBC, 1931–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
 - 4 Flann O’Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 712.
 - 5 James F. Knapp, “Primitivism and Empire: John Synge and Paul Gauguin,” *Comparative Literature* 41, no. 1 (1989): 53; Garrigan-Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival*; Giulia Bruna, *J. M. Synge and Travel Writing of the Irish Revival* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017).
 - 6 Seán Kennedy, “First Love: Abortion and Infanticide in Beckett and Yeats,” *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 22 (2010): 79–91; Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston, “‘Sterilization of the Mind and Apotheosis of the Litter’: Beckett, Censorship, and Fertility,” *The Review of English Studies* 69, no. 290 (January 31, 2018): 546–64; Seán Kennedy, “Beckett, Censorship and the Problem of Parody,” *Estudios Irlandeses* 14, no. 2 (October 31, 2019): 104–14; Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston, “Beckett in the Dock: Censorship, Biopolitics, and the Sinclair Trial,” *Estudios Irlandeses* 14, no. 2 (October 31, 2019): 21–27.
 - 7 Kalaidjian has in mind studies such as Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and Joshua Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
 - 8 W. B. Yeats, “‘Poetry and Science in Folklore,” in *Uncollected Prose*, ed. John P. Frayne, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1970), 174.
 - 9 Garrigan-Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival*, chaps. 2–3; McDonald, “Accidental Variations”; McDonald, “The ‘Fascination of What I Loathed’: Science and Self in W. B. Yeats’s *Autobiographies*.”
 - 10 David Dwan and Emilie Morin, “Introduction: Yeats and Mass Communications,” *International Yeats Studies* 3, no. 1 (November 2018): 1.
 - 11 Emphasis in original.
 - 12 Whitworth, *Einstein’s Wake*, 178.
 - 13 Quoted in Mary Luckhurst, “Giving Up the Ghost: The Actor’s Body as Haunted House,” in *Theatre and Ghosts*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 163.