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<th>Irish language modernisms</th>
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Irish language modernisms

The spectre of a ‘lost’ Gaelic language and civilisation haunting the imagination of English-speaking Ireland is a persistent feature of Anglophone Irish writing, providing a highly productive sense of linguistic and cultural disinheritance and a simultaneous sense of liberation from received language and tradition. One of the most remarkable features of Irish language writing in the modern period is a sense of the enduring authority and continuing availability of Irish as a vehicle for literary expression. It might be argued that this confidence conceals a repressed anxiety about the diminishing resources of the language, but for all the heated debates about tradition and modernity that persist right through the period under review, the legitimacy of the language itself is rarely contested. Despite Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s assertion that it is difficult to do your best in a language that might predecease you, most writers in Irish in the first half of the twentieth century seem less anxious about the incapacity of an endangered language than they are about their own ability to deploy and replenish its considerable resources.¹

For all the recent work by Philip O’Leary and others, there is still a tendency to see disputes among early language revivalists as a struggle between nativists committed to protecting the Irish language and its traditions from outside influence and progressives determined to liberate the language and its literature from a preoccupation with rural pieties. Risteard de hÍndeberg’s review of Pádraig Mac Piarais’s collection of short stories, Íosagán agus Scéalta Eile (1907), is often cited as a typical example of the reactionary response to innovation of any kind: ‘If Irish literature is the talk of big broad-chested men, this is the frivolous petulancy of latter-day English genre scribblers, and their utterance is as the mincing of the under-assistant floor-walker in a millinery shop.’² De hÍndeberg went beyond those who opposed English cultural influence to express a more fundamental opposition to modern European ideas and poetics: ‘The resuscitation of the Irish language is not merely a protest against English and Englishmen. It is of far deeper significance for it opposes itself squarely to the modern European spirit, whether it finds expression in current thought (as it is called), in philosophy, in ethics, or in aesthetics.’³ De hÍndeberg’s radical traditionalism failed to derail the revolt initiated by Mac Piarais in his poems and stories, and in editorials published during his stewardship of the Gaelic League’s An Claidheamh Soluis (1903-09). Mac Piarais rejected the folktale as ‘an echo of old mythologies’, unsuitable as a model for contemporary fiction, and traditional style as ‘the debris of an antique native culture [...] a peasant convention, which in its essentials, is accepted by the folk everywhere.’ And he went on to decouple the terms ‘Irish’ and ‘traditional’: “‘Traditionalism’ is not essentially Irish .... The traditional style is not the Irish way of singing or declaiming, but the peasant way; it is not, and never has been, the possession of the nation at large, but only of a class in the nation.’⁴

Frank O’Brien has argued that Mac Piarais pioneered the short story in Irish before it had established itself as a major literary form in English, and that his views on the
relationship between the living speech of the Gaeltacht and the language of literature were more nuanced than the fetishisation of Kiltartanese by many of his Celtic Twilight contemporaries writing in English: ‘the Irish prose of tomorrow […] will be found in the speech of the people, but it will not be the speech of the people; for the ordinary speech of the people is never literature, though it is the stuff of which literature is made.’ It is a useful refinement of the argument of An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire (1839-1920) that a new literature in Irish must draw on the living speech of the Gaeltacht rather than the literary language of the eighteenth century, bypassing the nineteenth-century decline in the language and its literature, to create new work that was adequate to its own time and place. Ó Laoghaire’s novel Séadna (1904) is the story of Goethe’s Faust heavily inflected by the treatment of the same theme in Irish folklore, further proof of the dynamic possibilities of a new relationship between the Gaelic vernacular and European traditions.

Mac Piarais is the most influential critic of the revival period. Central to his poetics is the idea that modernization of literary form and style in Irish requires a deeper engagement with precedents in the native tradition and a realignment of the relationship with contemporary Europe that had been disrupted by English colonialism:

Two influences go into the making of every artist, apart from his own personality, if indeed personality is not in the main only the sum of these influences: the influence of his ancestors and that of his contemporaries. Irish literature if it [is] to live and grow, must get into contact on the one hand with its own past and on the other with the mind of contemporary Europe …. This is the twentieth century; and no literature can take root in the twentieth century which is not of the twentieth century. We want no Gothic revival. In 1903, he rebuked those who confused ‘Anglicisation’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’:

We fear that in Ireland, ‘cosmopolitanism … is only another word for ‘Anglicisation’, and that the world of which ‘we’ are citizens is that portion of the British Empire which – we speak metaphorically – lies between Westminster and Fleet Street. […] Do you seriously contend that we should be wise to cut ourselves adrift from the great world of European thought? … Were we then completely aloof from European thought when we were Irish, and are we more in touch with it now that we are more than half English?  

Although Mac Piarais was among the first to import the European short story into Irish, his stories remain stubbornly conventional in their validation of traditional community values, morally conservative despite their technical innovation. The best of his poems, however, are exemplary instances of the integration of older Gaelic and contemporary European models. The language of ‘Mise Éire’, an early example of free verse in Irish, is the everyday spoken language of the Gaeltacht, heightened by references to Cúchulainn and the Hag of Beare, and by the adaptation of the sovereignty myth of early and medieval Gaelic
poetry to articulate a sense of personal and national crisis that is urgently contemporary. ‘Fornocht do Chonac Thú’ draws on the conventions of the medieval courtly love tradition to interrogate the tension between the beauty of the world and personal sacrifice leading ultimately to death. The language of the poem successfully integrates the archaic and the contemporary while following the regular metre of the aristocratic love poems of early modern Ireland. The formal control adds considerably to the sense of self-repression which is the poem’s subject.

For Mac Piaraí and his peers among the elite of progressive Irish nationalists, products of the British colonial education system, access to English and Continental literatures was part of their cultural inheritance as subjects of empire, while traditional literature in Irish, whether oral or written, had to be rediscovered and rehabilitated through individual and collective effort. In that context, those arguing for a resuscitation of native models might even be presented as more radical than their cosmopolitan counterparts. In any event, as O’Leary reminds us, progressive and nativist refer more to fluctuating positions than to stable ideologies as individual writers and critics move from one position to the other in different debates. The ‘aggressively cosmopolitan’ Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882-1928), for example, announced that he would ‘build a wall around Ireland! A wall thirty cubits high, the same as Tibet ... a wall of brass around it. I wouldn’t let in an idea. Not an idea mind you, from the outside world.’ In a 1908 essay, the same writer pointed to the example of nineteenth-century Russian literature and its preoccupation with darker aspects of human psychology and behaviour as a model for prose writers in Irish:

Nuair a thángadar aníos as an bpoll ’n-a rabhadar ag cuartughadh bhí rud salach smeartha a raibh dealbh duine air aca agus ghlaoidheadar amach i n-árd a ngotha: Seo é an duine! Seo é an fear! Seo í an fhírinne! Ach ní móran áird a bhí ortha ar dtús. Do ceapadh go raibh an rud salach smeartha ró-ghránda le bheith ’n-a fhear ... Ach ní raibh na hughdair úd, Gogol agus an dream a tháinig roimhe, go faiteach scáthmhar. Do mhionnuigh agus mhóidigh siad go raibh an fhírinne faighte acu, agus tháinig Tourgénéibh agus móran eile ’n-a ndiaidh le cruthughadh go raibh an ceart aca – go raibh an mhaith agus an uaisleacht taobh istigh de shalachar agus de ghrándacht an deilbh úd a bhí fáighte aca.

When they came up out of the hole in which they were searching, they had a filthy, smeared thing with the shape of a human being, and they cried out at the top of their lungs: Here is the human! Here is the man! Here is the truth! But they weren’t paid much attention at first. It was thought that the filthy, smeared thing was too ugly to be a man. But those authors, Gogol and those who preceded him, were not fearful or timid. They vowed and they swore that they had found the truth, and Turgenev and many others came after them to prove that they were right – that the good and the noble existed within the filth and ugliness of that form that they had found.
Ó Conaire’s novel *Deoraíocht* (1910) is formally untidy but psychologically compelling in its exploration of the degradation of a Connemara man rendered paraplegic by a motor accident in London. The physical disintegration of the central character is accompanied by an existential crisis of identity as he descends into the grotesque underworld of a travelling freak show. Despite the clumsiness of its structure, the novel’s interrogation of dislocation and despair, of marginalization and isolation is in keeping with the central preoccupations of European modernism. Ó Conaire is the outstanding Irish language prose writer of the revival period. That the setting for his stories is often rural rather than urban, makes them no less modern in their representation of existential crisis and the oppressive burden of social convention, of human beings shadowed relentlessly by their own imminent self-destruction.¹¹

If the achievements of revival writers in Irish do not finally match those of their counterparts writing in English, it is the absence of a sufficient body of significant work in poetry and prose that would vindicate either of the competing ideologies that reduces the battle between progressive and conservative positions to caricature, rather than the ideologies themselves. As Yeats and Synge demonstrated, a naïve preoccupation with rural peasant life was not an impediment to producing literature of a high order. Irish language writers of the earlier period were nonetheless involved in a radical experiment to accelerate the transition from traditional oral modes to modern literary forms of composition and transmission. For at least one of the more accomplished and combative conservatives, Séamus Ó Grianna, the move was too precipitous. If Irish literature had been asleep for three hundred years, he argued, ‘shílfinn go bhfuil sé contabhairteach a cur ar chosaibh anáirde agus an codladh in a súilibh. B’fhéidir gur síos in súmaire a thuitfeadh sí leis an deifre’ [it would seem to me dangerous to set it galloping with sleep still in its eyes. Perhaps it would fall into a bog-hole in its haste].¹² Protagonists on all sides of these debates were conscious of the international contexts of their disputes. Brian Ó Conchubhair has drawn attention, for instance, to the influence of German philologist Max Muller’s idea that dialect represents the dynamic principle of a living language on the revivalist preoccupation with cultural authenticity and the cult of the native speaker.¹³

In that regard, the Blasket autobiographies of Tomás Ó Criomhthain (1856-1937), Peig Sayers (1873-1958), and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin (1904-1950), published between 1929 and 1936, might be seen as the apotheosis of the native Irish speaker. These cross-cultural collaborative texts are the product of contact between the islanders and a succession of European, English, and Irish visitors infatuated by traditional community life as an antidote to modernity.¹⁴ If modernism has always included a strong anti-modern element, the image of life on the Great Blasket contained in these works is carefully constructed to satisfy the expectations not only of Irish cultural nationalists but of an international audience weary of modernity. Although they are hardly modernist in the usual sense, they represent a radical moment of transition in Gaeltacht literature from oral to written forms of self-representation. The celebration of social solidarity in these books is at odds with Seosamh
Mac Grianna’s (1900-1990) autobiographical account of a native speaker from Donegal determined to assert his own absolute freedom from convention in *Mo Bhealach Féin* (1940), a disturbing portrait of an alienated anti-hero in the most unlikely surroundings, whether attempting to lead a black resistance movement in Cardiff, or rowing across the Irish Sea in a stolen boat.

Although critics generally identify the modernist period in Irish language writing as extending from the outbreak of the Second World War to the beginning of the Civil Rights movement in the North of Ireland in 1969, the chronology is useful but imprecise. Mac Piarais and Ó Conaire emerged during the revival period (1893-1939) but there are modernist elements in both their critical and their creative writing, while there are proto-modernist and anti-modernist features in the work of Liam Gógan (1891-1979). Gógan favoured a return to earlier Irish models of language and metre and argued vehemently against adopting modernist techniques and attitudes that were symptomatic of a general moral collapse following two world wars. As Ireland, he insisted, had been spared the horror of these wars, there was no justification for Irish poets to follow the bad example of their European counterparts in abandoning established conventions. An accomplished lexicologist, he invented the term ‘poblacht’ (republic) and proposed ‘bithiúnachas’ or ‘blackguardism’ as an Irish term for ‘existentialism’.15

It is nonetheless true that the generation of writers in Irish who established themselves during and after the war years were better placed than their predecessors to integrate contemporary European thought and influence with detailed knowledge of traditional writing in Irish. There are, however, significant differences between their work and that of their European counterparts, an inflection that reflects the specificity of local circumstances as well as their own individual life experience and patterns of imagination. Máirtín Ó Direáin (1910-1988) may have been well-read in existential philosophy, but his exploration of dislocation and alienation in a city where everyone is isolated in the prison cell of an attenuated self derives from the personal trauma of moving from the Aran Islands to the mainland cities of Galway and Dublin. His sense of displacement speaks to the experience of several generations of Irish people, but the economic crises that make migration a persistent feature of the Irish historical experience are very different from the political upheavals and the ideological and philosophical changes that took place elsewhere in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Seán Ó Riordáin’s (1916-1977) search for a stable authentic self as the cornerstone of personal and literary integrity chimes with a key element of the modernist predicament but the crisis of identity is precipitated by personal illness, coupled with linguistic and cultural uncertainty. Máire Mhac an tSaoi (1922-) explores the intimate and transgressive experience of women in a way that is consistent with the modernist rejection of traditional morality, but her experience of the aftermath of war in Paris seems to have confirmed her commitment to the established conventions of the Irish language, and the imagined stabilities of traditional Gaeltacht community life. There is little sense among modern poets in Irish of the crisis of confidence in language itself.
which is such a pronounced feature of European modernism, although Mhac an tSaoi has acknowledged a growing doubt in her previously unshakeable conviction in the authority of the Gaeltacht world she encountered as a child:

Mhaireas os cionn leachtchéad bliain ins an chluthaireacht san, á iompar timpeall liom im intinn go dtí gur dhúisíos ó chianaíbhin agus go bhfuair a maith le fein chomh maith ar an aer agus celliúrtha. Tá sé ródhéanach agam malairt timpeallacha a chuardach. Deirte go mbhí phoróid é an cainteoir duchais deireannach a phoróidh an mhainne il inne amach. Tá sé tabhachtaí an chuid Bhreatain Chorn, agus gur gairdín sna Ringsend. Mise an phoróid sin.

I lived in that warmth for more than fifty years, carrying it around with me in my head until I woke a short while ago and found my world scattered to the wind, dispersed. It is too late for me to look for another habitat. It used to be said that the last native speaker of Cornish was a parrot and that he lived in Ringsend. I am that parrot.16

Ó Riordáin is exceptional in this regard, as linguistic instability is central to his achievement. His early work, in particular, is idiosyncratic and iconoclastic in its attempt to articulate a poetic imagination that does not, and cannot, fully inhabit a language ‘that is half-mine’.17 His struggle with religious authority is part of an existential conflict between the desire for personal freedom and the overweening authority of church, community, language and tradition. In a series of long poems in his debut collection Eireaball Spideoige (1952), he veers between the security and stability of religious and moral convention and the persistent need for individual liberty. Seán Ó Tuama has suggested that ‘Oíche Nollaig na mBan’ is ‘possibly the first poem in the Irish language where the existence of eternity and of a supernatural creator is openly refuted.’18 Whatever the outcome in any individual poem, the resolution is always temporary as Ó Riordáin’s imagination is defined by the conflict between irreconcilable contradictions.

Religious doubt is, for the most part, more a matter of momentary despair than of ideological conviction among modernist poets in Irish. Even Ó Riordáin’s interrogation of religious belief is different from that of his European counterparts for whom the existential crisis of meaning is predicated on the non-existence of a divine creator. There is little interrogation of religious belief in Ó Direáin’s poems where God is a presiding presence against which to measure human frailty in a world that has slipped the moorings of traditional morality. Máire Mhac an tSaoi celebrates the rituals of religion in some of her poems while flouting conventional morality in others. In later poems, such as ‘Bás mo Mháthar’ and ‘Moment of Truth’ she questions the existence of God but never fully commits herself to agnosticism. The attitude to religion is very different among the Scots-Gaelic poets who came to prominence in the 1940s and 50s. The experience of war was central to the imaginative formation of Sorley MacLean (1911-96), Derick Thompson (1921-2012), and Ian Crichton Smith (1928-98), heightening the tension between their religious upbringing and the erosion of belief, and, indeed, between their nationalist and socialist sympathies.
Despite the closeness of the linguistic relationship, there is little evidence of reciprocal influence between the Irish and Scots-Gaelic poets of the period.

While poetry is the most productive genre from the 1940s through to the 60s, the single greatest achievement in Irish in the modernist period is the fiction of Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1906-1970). Although his work is less formally experimental than is often suggested, Ó Cadhain drew on his encyclopaedic knowledge of the Irish language and its oral and written literatures, and a broad range of European writing in several languages to explore the tensions between personal desire and social conventions in traditional rural and modern urban communities. Although many critics have argued that his creative work and his political activities were entirely separate – ‘It is as though one were to discover that Hans Christian Anderson had a secret life as a terrorist’ – Ó Cadhain is a writer *engagé* whose work is informed by political anger against social injustice. In that, and in his exploration of the Kafkaesque world of state bureaucracies and the alienation of those trapped within them, he is at one with many of his European contemporaries. His work is characterised by a restlessness of form as though his narrative imagination could not be adequately contained within the established limits of either the short story or the novel. While *Cré na Cille* (1950) has been compared to *Ulysses* (1922) for its linguistic exuberance, the narrative structure, which relies almost entirely on dialogue among the dead, owes as much to the verbal jousting that is a characteristic feature of Gaeltacht culture as it does to *avant garde* experimentalism.

Instability of form is also characteristic of the work of Brian Ó Nualláin (1911-1966) who drew on a scholarly understanding of early Irish literature in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and on a comprehensive knowledge of autobiographical writing in Irish in *An Béal Bocht* (1941), ‘a prolonged sneer’ at the excesses of language revivalists, and a parody of Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s *An tOileánach* (1929), ‘the superbest of all books I have ever read’. The contradictory relationship with the Irish language and its literature is characteristic of Ó Nualláin, who remained alert to the enduring capacity of the language for creative expression and the hypocrisy of half-hearted attempts to revive it. *At Swim-Two-Birds* draws much of its structural (in)coherence from the fragmentary tales of medieval and early modern Irish that Ó Nualláin had studied as a student to provide its own idiosyncratic critique of modernist and post-modern approaches to narrative. *An Béal Bocht* is a masterclass in pastiche in which textual authority overruns the human capacity to generate meaning from direct encounters with reality and characters become trapped in a prison-house of literature where stereotype reigns supreme.

If the war years mark the emergence of modernism as the prevailing aesthetic and metaphysical climate of poetry and prose in Irish, it reaches a cusp in the 1960s, a high point that also marks the beginning of its decline. Ó Direáin’s *Ár Ré Dhearáil* (1962) and Ó Riordáin’s *Brosna* (1964) represent a significant departure from the earlier work of each of the two poets, a breakthrough that turned out to be more final than it must have seemed at
the time, while Máire Mhac an tSaoi would not publish a sequel to *Margadh na Saoire* (1955) until *Codladh an Ghaiscigh agus Véarsai Eile* (1973). The title poem of Ó Direáin’s collection provides his fullest exploration of the predicament of the uprooted countryman, adrift and unmanned in the godless city. There are strong traces of misogyny in the exploration of compromised masculinity in a world where men are reduced to the menial routines of sterile clerical work, while women have recourse to the consolations of higher education and travel, ‘I gcúiteamh na gine / Nár fhás faoina mbroinn, / Nár iompair trí ráithe / Faoina gcom’ (to compensate for the seed/That did not enter their flesh,/To compensate for the child/That did not grow in their womb,/ That they didn’t carry nine months/In the hollow of their bodies). Ó Riordáin abandoned the prefabricated metres which were so heavily criticised in his early work in favour of more flexible rhythms determined by the material of each individual poem, effecting a temporary reconciliation between convention and iconoclasm, between the promiscuous resources of English and the more resistant capacity of Irish, before capitulating to the allure of an idealised Gaeltacht where the language of community remains intact, continuous with its own history and place. The rejection of Shelley, Keats and Shakespeare, and the embrace of community, tradition, language, and convention advocated by the poet in ‘Fill Arís’ are at odds with the conflict between irreconcilable opposites which provides the creative dynamic in the best of his poetry and prose. Ó Cadhain’s late flourishing produced two outstanding collections of stories in *An tSraith ar Lár* (1967), which includes a sequence of interconnected stories that articulate the experience of a rural community in transition, and *An tSraith dhá Tógáil* (1970), which extends the exploration begun in his earlier work of male characters trapped by personal incapacity in the wheels of a dehumanising bureaucracy. There is a significant change in Ó Cadhain’s technique in the later stories towards a non-realistic style appropriate to the surreal experience of characters alienated from sel and community, and increasingly detached from reality. His ability to adapt Irish to the modern urban bureaucratic world confirms an enduring confidence in the capacity of language to articulate even the most dehumanising and apparently meaningless aspects of the modern experience.

The 1960s also saw a continuation of the modernist experiment with form among younger writers, including Breandán Ó Doibhlin (1931-), Diarmuid Ó Súilleabháin (1932-85), Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (1919-1982) and Seán Ó Tuama (1926-2006). Ó Tuama’s engagement with French theatre during his time in Paris in the mid-fifties led to a succession of plays that explored contentious social issues, from the predicament of unmarried mothers in *Is é Seo m’Oileán* (1961) to that of a homosexual priest in *Déan Trócaire ar Shagairt Óga* (1970). The stage directions to *Corp Eoghain Uí Shúilleabháin* (1963) indicate that the mock tragedy should progress from allegro to scherzo to andante against a set in the manner of Salvador Dali. *Moloney* (1956) and *Gunna Cam agus Slabhra Óir* (1967) provide an interrogation of Irish history and the heroic, while *Judas Iscariot agus a Bhean* (1967) continues the preoccupation with religious and existential themes, as the mental breakdown of the actor parallels that of the character Judas. Ó Tuama’s first collection of poems *Faoileán na
**Beatha** (1962) is formally dexterous, but contains little of the religious scepticism or, indeed, the agnosticism that characterises his later work.

Ó Tuairisc’s output during this period is prodigious and includes two novels, three plays, and a collection of poems, in addition to his work in English. The verse play *Na Mairnéalaigh* (1960) contrasts political idealism and economic reality as an elderly couple escaped from a sinking coffin-ship cross paths with the boat carrying Daniel O’Connell’s remains to Ireland. *Cúirt an Mheánoíche* (1962) juxtaposes contemporary attitudes to sexuality with Irish mythology to highlight the opposition between poetic idealism and pragmatic realism. *Là Fhéile Mhichil* (1967) draws on Eliot’s reading of Milton’s involvement in the English Civil war to investigate Ó Tuairisc’s idea that ‘Every man, not dead to generous feeling, must sympathise with Satan against the Omnipotent’. The novels, *L’Attaque* (1962) and *Dé Luain* (1966) focus on the interior lives of the central characters to dramatise the historical experience of 1798 and 1916 respectively, providing a more human perspective on suffering and sacrifice beyond the rhetoric of idealism. The interrogation of heroic values is a central preoccupation of the ex-soldier Ó Tuairisc, and the long poem ‘Aifreann na Marbh’ on the bombing of Hiroshima in his debut collection *Lux Aeterna* (1964) the pinnacle of his achievement in that regard. It provides a counterpoint to a more sympathetic critique of the heroic in an Irish nationalist context in the novels, as the glories of European and Irish history and culture are undermined by an act of barbarism that derives from, and ultimately, negates, the achievements of western civilisation. That the poem follows the structure of a requiem mass is partly ironic, but there is a sense throughout that religious faith and ritual may provide the only consolation for human suffering. Both Ó Tuairisc and Ó Tuama continued their formal and linguistic experiments into the 1970s and 80s and it is in their work, and that of Máire Mhac an tSaoi, we find the most accomplished late modernist writing in Irish. The humanist confrontation with mortality following the collapse of religious belief is central to Ó Tuama’s poetic project in *Saol fó Thoinn* (1978) and *An Bás i dTír na nÓg* (1988), while Ó Tuairisc’s last novel, *An Lomnochtán* (1977), articulates the growing consciousness of a child in a fragmented language that is both psychologically and linguistically plausible.

From the alienation of Ó Conaire’s outcasts and Ó Direáin’s countryman adrift in an urban wasteland, to the religious doubt and resistance to traditional morality in Mac Grianna, Ó Riordáin, Ó Tuama and Mhac an tSaoi, from the exploration of compromised masculinity and dehumanising bureaucracies in Ó Direáin and Ó Cadhain, to the experiment with language and form in Mac Piaraí, Ó Conaire, Ó Cadhain, Gógan, Ó Nualláin, Ó Riordáin, Ó Tuairisc, Ó Tuama, and, indeed, the Blasket autobiographies, writers in Irish provide their own imaginative responses to European modernism. Given the very different historical circumstances of Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century, the situation of the language itself, and the preoccupations of each individual writer, it is hardly surprising that Irish language modernisms should be comparable to, and yet, distinct from, European, and indeed, Anglophone Irish modernisms. The relative stability of religious belief, for instance,
confirms the continuing centrality of religion in Irish public and private life, while the relentless experimentation with form and technique arises less, perhaps, from a rejection of tradition and convention than from a determination to prove the adaptability of the Irish language to the pressures of the contemporary moment and of the individual writer’s imagination. Given the continuing decline in the number of competent Irish speakers under both British and Irish governments, the confidence of writers in Irish in the capacity of the language and its literature is, perhaps, the most distinctive, and the most surprising characteristic of all. It is forcefully expressed, with her customary authority, by Maire Mhac an tSaoi, one of the most transgressive voices in modernist poetry in Irish:

Is dóigh le daoine nach leor mórtas cine chun an teanga a thabhairt slán. Táim sásta dul i mbannáí gur leor, agus gurb iad na siocaracha idéalachta, rómánsúla, seachas aon argóint phraiticiúil faoi ndear í a bheith insa mhaith ina bhfuil sí. Fágann an cúrsa uile ualach trom freagrachta orthu súd a thugann faoi scriobh na Gaeilge. Is é ár ndualgas é a chruthú go bhfuil sí beo, agus tá – an fhaid atáimidne ag plé léi. 27

People think that ancestral pride is not enough to save the language. I’m prepared to swear that it is, and that it is idealistic, romantic, ideas rather than any practical argument that has preserved as much of it as now survives. This places a heavy burden of responsibility on those who would write in Irish. It is our duty to prove that she is alive, and so she is – as long as we continue to care for her.

It is an attitude that derives as much from the idealism and commitment of early cultural nationalism as it does from the anxieties of the modernist imagination.

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3 O’Leary, 35.
5 O’Brien, 36, 30, 31.
7 O’Leary, op. cit. p. 56.
8 O’Leary, 14-15.
9 O’Leary, 19.
10 O’Leary,. 39.
12 O’Leary, op. cit. 466.
13 Brian Ó Conchubhair, Fin de Siècle na Gaeilge: Darwin, an Athbhheochan agus Smaointeoireacht na hÉorpa, (Indreabhán: An Clóchomhar 2009), p. 193-236). Ó Conchubhair argues that revivalists were aware of fin de siècle anxiety about cultural and linguistic hybridity, and European debates about miscegenation and degeneration driven by social Darwinism.
Ó Riordáin’s linguistic anxiety is explored in several poems, including ‘A Theanga seo Leath-liom’, from Brosna, (Dublin: Sáirséal & Dill 1964), 25.


