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'Muting the Klaxon: Poetry, History, and Irish Modernism'[1]

This is an uncorrected and reset version of the original article which appeared as: 'Muting the Klaxon: Poetry, History, and Irish Modernism,' in *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s*, ed. Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davies (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp.43-74.

In the winter of 1923-24 a periodical called *The Klaxon* appeared in Dublin. It was the only issue of what was hopefully announced as a 'seasonal' quarterly. The table of contents makes interesting reading:[2]

Confessional . . . . . L. K. E.
Beauty Energised . . . . . F. R. H.
The Midnight Court (from the Irish). . . . Percy Ussher
North. . . . . H. Stuart
Cheese . . . . . .John W. Blaine
The Will of God. . . . . Sechilienne
The Ulysses of Mr. James Joyce . . . . . Lawrence K. Emery
Cleopatra. . . . . F. R. Higgins
An Inghean Dubh. . . . . G. Coulter
Picasso, Mamie Jellett and Dublin
Criticism. . . . . Thomas McGreevy

Seeking, as its editorial note suggests, to link itself to International Modernism, *The Klaxon* has a Brancusi-like cover device and a 'Negro sculpture in wood' as frontispiece. The 'Confessional' by Lawrence Emery which opens this Irish *Blast* has a fine ranting tone: 'We railed against the psychopedantic parlours of our elders and their old maidenly consorts, hoping the while with an excess of Picabia and banter, a whiff of Dadaist Europe to kick Ireland into artistic wakefulness.' The aggressive Modernism of the doomed journal, and the harshness of the context it expects to insert itself into, is evident in its defense of Joyce and Picasso against philistine taste. The inclusion of Ussher's translation of 'The Midnight Court' also carries a political weight – its bawdy invoking a different Irish tradition from that of the Celtic Twilight (it was to be republished in 1926 with an polemical introduction by Yeats).

Thomas MacGreevy's piece, the longest in the journal, is a defense of Dublin artist Mamie Jellett, 'the first resident artist to exhibit a Cubist picture in Dublin.' Citing Gauguin's dictum that 'Symbolism is only another name for sentimentality', he points out that the Irish tradition (the Book of Kells) supports the use of abstraction and pattern. The resistance to

such art among the Dublin art-fraternity he blames on 'the English tradition'. A fierce attack on English art and literature follows:

> That Gainsborough could make such concessions is a sign of the curious inability of the Englishman ever to be more than half an artist. Spencer, Marlowe, Dryden, Landor, and Keats are perhaps the only exceptions; and Webster, who may have been an Irishman. Practically all the others are moralizing snobs as much as they are artists, Chaucer and Shakespeare and Shelley and Reynolds as well as G.F. Watts and Mr John Galsworthy and the detestable Dr Johnson.

'There is', he adds, 'no artistic conscience in the country whose greatest genius could write both *King Lear* and *King Henry V*.' What is wanted is 'Irish artists and French artists', equated with the progressive Municipal Gallery, rather than the 'dead Dutch boors and English gentlemen' in the National Gallery of Ireland.

That the future director of the National Gallery could launch a youthful diatribe against the institution which he would later head is an unsurprising incident in the battle of the generations, here linked to an animus against 'English' values designed to clear a space for Irish work. MacGreevy continued to dislike Reynolds and to argue for an Irish tradition. But he also offers a hostage to fortune in the form of his implicit programme for an Irish Modernism: formalist and rigorous, it is to be unencumbered by the agenda of the state (*Henry V*), by bourgeois morality, by the necessity to embody a symbolic reality. At the beginning of his career, MacGreevy raises vital questions about the co-ordination of modernism, nationalism, religion, class, and tradition.

In this essay, I will use MacGreevy's writings, and the later work of Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, to investigate the way in which an Irish (and particularly Catholic) modernism seemed possible in the 1930s, and the way in which its promise was at best partially fulfilled. The essay will focus on the split between public and private voices, between the desire to 'sound the Klaxon' for a reformed culture and a sense of personal estrangement from the existing culture.

I MacGreevy and Irish Modernism

Thomas MacGreevy's position within modernism is fascinating for the literary historian: a poet living in Paris and then London who knew Joyce, Eliot, Beckett; author in 1928 of the text of a ballet by Constant Lambert; regular contributor to *transition*; translator of Valéry and others; later a cultured art historian; correspondent of Wallace Stevens. His status as an up-and-coming writer at the beginning of the 1930s is reflected by his appearances in the prestigious Dolphin Books – his 1931 monograph *T.S. Eliot: A Study* (no. 4 in the series) placed him in the company of Aldous Huxley, Richard Aldington, R.H. Mottram, T.F. Powys, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Samuel Beckett. It was followed by a study of Aldington, published the same year as Dolphin Books no. 10.

In the book on Eliot, MacGreevy sees a reflection of 'the fresh wind of Irish poetry that was blowing when Mr. Eliot appeared above the horizon' in those lines in *The Waste Land* from the sailor's song in *Tristan and Isolde*:

> Frisch weht der Wind
> Der Heimat zu,
> Mein Irisch Kind,
> Wo weilest du? (*Eliot* p43)

McGreevy had already incorporated Wagnerian borrowings into 'Crón Tráth na nDéithe,' invoking a mutual interchange between Eliot and himself. That, operatically, is how it still seemed at the beginning of the thirties, with Captains Joyce and Eliot at the helm, MacGreevy and Beckett on board, the wind at their backs. But for all that, MacGreevy's subsequent career as a poet was disappointingly truncated. By the time he published the superb *Poems* in 1934 he had stopped writing poetry; the moving gratitude at the renewal of voice in a few poems written decades later bears witness to the length of intervening silence. Instead he became a pioneering art historian and curator, writing on Jack B. Yeats, Poussin, and Irish collections. A number of questions thus hang over MacGreevy and his context. How symptomatic is his career? Why did Ireland fail to nurture an experimental modernist movement?

One obvious answer (which I want to avoid accepting prematurely) lies in the conservative nature of Irish culture in the 1920s and 1930s – typified by a purient Catholic nationalism manifested in the Carnegie scandal, the protests over *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), and by the Censorship Bill of 1929. This harsh context has been the staple of discussions of the problems facing writers in the period from 1922 to 1950, and of experimental writers in particular.[3] One pitfall of such arguments lies in their tendency to perpetuate the idea of Irish exceptionalism – as if writers elsewhere were not faced with such pressures in the 1930s (conservative aesthetics were advocated from the left in the USA and the Right in Germany). As James Mays points out, the Irish experience can be compared with the failure of the early modernist impulse in America, Britain, and Ireland. He argues that Irish writers, in a post-colonial situation, faced a choice between international experimentalism and a conservative, representative aesthetic associated with 'true' Irishness – but with little of the political inflections attached to those positions elsewhere (*CPD* p24-5). One could compare post-revolutionary Mexico, in which the yoking of an artistic and political avante-garde – at least up to the suppression of the Communist Party in 1928 – produced an extraordinary body of work, particularly in the circle around Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, whose influence on international modernism has barely been assessed.[4]

In that case, the split between the political and the aesthetic avante-garde which Andreas Hyssen sees as definitional to later modernism happened rather earlier in Ireland than elsewhere, as a result of the rapid post-independence vitiation of those revolutionary pressures which might sustain an oppositional aesthetic.[5] Indeed the potential for such a split can be seen at the height of the struggle for independence: Arthur Clery commented, in a 1918 volume celebrating the *Poets of the Insurrection*, that 'To speak of a Catholic Revolution is practically an oxymoron. Yet Pearse's movement inevitably claims that

epithet' – a declaration followed by a critique of the secularizing modernism associated with Nietzsche, Ibsen, etc.[6] A Catholic Revolution will involve, that is, a return to older forms of cultural authority. The pre-existing role of the Revival (and the associated Gaelic League) as the vehicle for a national culture is important here: for all its nostalgic contradictions it formed a ready-made basis for an Irish literature outside the urban mainstream of Anglo-American and European culture, which in its narrow form fed into Corkery's 'Irish Ireland'. The comparison with Mexico is again illuminating: there, a hybrid art incorporating European, American and pre-Colombian elements flourished – as in Rivera's murals in Detroit or Kahlo's extraordinary 'Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States' (1932); in Ireland the use of 'native' materials was more constrained, and defined in terms of a 'return' to purity rather than a reformist sense of the need to incorporate and move on.

More locally, Susan Schreibman suggests that MacGreevey's problems in the Dublin world to which he returned in 1941 included the difficult of access to publication, reflected in the hesitancy with which, even from abroad, he submitted work to Irish magazines. The obscurity of his poetry can even be linked to that self-protective stance, she argues (*CPM* ppxxix-xxiv). That seems paradoxical: less obscurity would have brought more ready publication, and MacGreevy's poetic difficulty was clearly programmatic and self-willed. A range of texts provide evidence that McGreevy *did* have a confidently-promulgated programme for an Irish, Catholic, modernism, connected to a wider European modernism, and registered by an allegiance to Eliot and Joyce. For that reason, we need to study MacGreevy's programme and consider its relation to the period. But we might also wonder how it was that by the mid-1940s he had descended to the position of a pillar of establishment rectitude, to writing articles on church fittings (including realist sculpture) for the *Capuchin Annual* – in which he cites Degas's comment on Velasquez in relation to them, advocating silence before the sublime: 'There are no words. No, there are no words.'[7] For all that he was just making a living, the journalist over-praising national art is uneasily close to the compromised English artists whom he had criticized in 1923.

II MacGreevy's Criticism: A Catholic Modernism?

In his monographs of 1931, MacGreevy feels his way towards an analysis of what a writer's relation to society should be in a new republic. America provides one point of reference, as a grossly materialist culture: 'Where they do not worship money they worship power' (*Eliot* p4). The American writer, he argues, is trapped in an attitude of 'reaction' to this dynamic but morally blind culture, rather than being an organic intellectual. The result is the young Eliot's cynicism:

> The masses can take themselves humourously but will not stand personality except in the matter of energy, the [intellectual] classes cannot take themselves humourously and will only stand personality when its energy has been subdued to mere nervous intensity. (*Eliot* p5)

The masses are energy and comedy; intellectuals, particularly the New England elite, are 'nerves' (recalling George M. Beard's famous diagnosis of 'American nervousness').

MacGreevy's vision of the American writer caught between a philistine mass-culture and a mandrin high-culture is a local and nuanced version of Eliot's own 'dissociation of sensibility', a fracture between art and the common life:

> There are literally dozens of writers of extraordinary verbal talent in America today who cannot find their own subjects because of the attitude that is imposed on them by a state of civilization that is on the one hand blatantly objective and on the other primly emasculate. (*Eliot* p40).

The characteristic American reaction to this 'spiritual bankruptcy' is satire, which MacGreevy sees as essentially reactive and defensive.

For all that this is located in America, and in poets like the early Eliot and Wallace Stevens, the same antinomies dominate MacGreevy's *Richard Aldington: An Englishman*. MacGreevy portrays his friend as representative of his own 'lost' war-time generation, whose writers are doubly skewered: in chronological terms 'between the stupidity of the elders and the mocking indifference of their [often slightly younger] contemporaries' (*Aldington* p71), and in terms of stance between the familiar poles which (in terms borrowed from Aldington's *The Colonel's Daughter*) he calls 'Stimmism', money-making philistinism, and 'Eastcourtism', the disengagement of the aesthete typified by Lytton Strachey. The war generation can accept neither a cynical pragmatism nor the abstraction of Eliot and others: 'reality' has, he argues, a particular weight for the writer who remembers the war.

The predicament of the modern artist is thus a focus of both books, and clearly relates to the Irish situation (in which the memories of a bitter war also intruded). In lamenting the isolation of the artist MacGreevy enters familiar modernist territory. But he attempts to avoid doing so on the terms laid down by Eliot, Pound, and Yeats, whose response to claims of the cultural inadequacy of the 'masses' is to cling to aristocratic culture and the authority of the classics (often combined with a eugenic desire to purge the socially inferior). Instead, MacGreevy criticizes both extremes: that of mass culture, and that of a cultural elitism associated with the Ascendency. His aim might be said to be to plot a route between Stimmism and Eastcourtism – a middle way between disengagement and popularism, abstraction and 'reality', high and mass culture; to provide a sensibility which is not 'disassociated'. Accordingly in *Richard Aldington* he defends a specifically *bourgeois* art against modernist writers who reject it. The bourgeoisie has, he suggests, carried the responsibility for tending the 'Great Tradition' for only a century, and needed more time to live up to it, to produce an art of 'revolutionary humanity' (*Aldington* pp11-12).

We need to notice the shift in attitude here: if in the *Klaxon* piece of 1923 the Dublin middle classes are criticized, in modernist fashion, for their philistinism, by 1931 MacGreevy now advocates an art which avoids elitist terms. If earlier he had said 'Symbolism is only another name for sentimentality,' he now desires something like a common culture with a shared symbolic repertoire. In this he follows Eliot, who by 1930 had moved from the fragmented hostilities and framed 'hysteria' of *The Waste Land* to the tentative collective pieties of *Ash Wednesday*, from the position of outsider to the more inclusive role of editor of the *Criterion*.

Given the alienation inherent in the Modernist stance, the best possible basis of this inclusive art for MacGreevy is Catholicism. Satire is more readily avoided within the collectivity of the Catholic tradition, which (implicitly) furnishes a set of shared symbolic resources and practices:

> Catholics, who have the habit of accusing themselves of their own sins in confession, are less inclined to be satirical about the other fellow than non-Catholics are. That is why the literature of indignation flourishes more in Protestant than in Catholic societies. It is why Mr James Joyce is, philosophically, a more just writer than say Mr Wyndham Lewis. . . It is why Mr Eliot's verse has purified itself of merely social elements as he has moved towards Catholicism. . . . (*Eliot* p16)

The mature Eliot becomes the candidate for the title of the coming Catholic poet, plotting his way through despair and cynicism to affirmation, finding his subject in 'nothing less than death and resurrection' (*Eliot* p34). *The Waste Land* is ultimately 'practically beyond mere literary criticism' because of its spiritual content, which is like that of 'the strictest Christianity' (*Eliot* p56). That does not imply that it is simply doctrinal – MacGreevy worries about 'The Hollow Men' because of its over-literal use of prayer (*Eliot* p59), and has doubts about Eliot's later devotional turn in general.[8] Rather he values *The Waste Land* for its sense of sorting through a crowded cultural terrain to where it can seek a truth outside itself. That point is of utmost importance here (and will remain so as we look at Devlin and Coffey). The aesthetic which MacGreevy champions suggests that the meaning of a work of art can lie outside that work, in the spiritual or religious. Art, which belongs to the fallen world, *quidditas*, must reach beyond itself; it is not (as it was in the 1923 essay) self-sufficient, it can find its meanings and framework in the larger context of Christianity.

MacGreevy's earlier essay on 'The Catholic Element in *Work in Progress*' in *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (1929) presents another version of the Catholic tradition. Joyce encompasses the darker aspects of existence which can only be subsumed within the open spiritual vocabulary of Catholicism. The search for that vision skews MacGreevy's interpretation of *Ulysses*, however: necessarily, he reads Stephen Daedelus as the hero, journeying through 'the inferno of modern subjectivity':

> In this inferno from which Stephen is ever trying spiritually to escape, for he, unlike the Jewish Bloom, knows the distinction between the law of nature and the law of grace and is in revolt against the former however unable he be to realize the latter[,] even the most obscene characters are viewed with a Dantesque detachment that must inevitably shock the inquisitorially minded.[9]

Most modern readers of this passage are probably shocked not at Joyce's obscenity, but by its blunt, even 'Dantesque', view of hierarchy: the Catholic above the Jew with the latter among the damned (nature, the body), and Molly Bloom presumably further down the scale. The phrase used for Eliot – 'purged of all merely social elements' – explains the

choice of Stephen: Bloom is a social creature; Stephen is the embodiment of an allegorical and spiritual quest.

MacGreevy's interpretation of 'Work in Progress' is also skewed by his programme. Where Jolas and others contributors to *Our Exagmination* see its constantly shifting, polyglossic languages as part of a revolution in poetic languge, MacGreevy sees the fact that 'the characters speak a language made up of scraps of half the languages known to mankind' as related to the 'purgatorial, transitional' nature of the text. It is of this world: 'Purgatory is not fixed and static like the four last things, death, judgement, heaven and hell.' MacGreevy expects Joyce, that is, to move beyond the satire and play of 'Work in Progress' to the eternal verities: 'The questions of the law of grace triumphant and of a modern Paradiso will probably be more appropriately raised in some years' time.' This, it seems to me, is an opportunity lost. In the post-Colonial situation in Ireland, one obvious pressure was to locate a linguistic purity in the national language: Irish. But a more inclusive gesture, not simply imposing a fixed language, is suggested by Joyce's strategy of incorporation (as by the hybrid styles of the Mexican artists).[10] MacGreevy ultimately rejects polylogue, not for the 'lost poetry' of the Celt, but for the truths of the Church and the idea of epic art.

That programme fits uncomfortably with the parallel demands of the state for a monologic culture. Writing in the year of the Censorship Bill, the founding of what he calls an 'Inquisition' , the distance between his ideal European Catholic vision and Irish actuality all too obvious. The opposition between society and the writer which MacGreevy had located elsewhere – in America – threatens to come home. As Terence Brown has argued, much of the best Irish writing in the 1920s and 1930s is characterized by a satirical distance from official discourses: O'Casey's drama, O'Flaherty's *The Informer*, Denis Johnson's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'*, and the work of Sean O'Faoláin in particular.[11] The lack of a middle ground on which intellectuals and the 'masses' could meet is particularly apparent on the issue of censorship – as O'Faoláin complained, censorship is inherently divisive, splitting the intelligensia who may know and judge from the 'masses' who are protected. (The fact that *Ulysses* was never banned in Ireland is revealing: the split was already in operation by virtue of its being a 'difficult' text.) Liam O'Flaherty was even more scathing about the paternalism of censorship:

> The tyranny of the Irish church and its associate parasites, the upstart Irish bourgeoise, the last posthumous child from the wrinkled womb of European capitalism, maintains itself by the culture of dung, superstition and ignoble poverty among the masses.[12]

Obviously, MacGreevy was aware of these pressures, self-consciously creating in his criticism a utopian version of Catholic modernism. He argues, for example, that Aldington's anti-Catholic comments can be discounted – including the 'extraordinary historial defense of Protestantism' on the basis of its tolerance in *Death of a Hero* (*Aldington* p54). His exhaustive refutation of the imputation of intolerance to the Catholic tradition (Spain aside) suggests an uneasiness, however, as do other comments about bourgeois puritanism. His Catholic, bourgeois aesthetic is built on a ground which is seems as riven by divisions between actual as real as deep as any he had seen in America.

III MacGreevy's Poetry: Waiting for the 'Object'

How does MacGreevy's own poetry fit into the conceptual framework outlined above, in which the writer plots a path through 'the inferno of modern subjectivity' and emerges into truth, 'purged of all merely social elements'? Does MacGreevy the poet find the middle ground he desired as critic? Beckett's answer to the latter is yes: in his 1934 essay on 'Recent Irish Poetry' he sees MacGreevy as responding to the modernist 'rupture of the lines of communication' which cast the experiencing self and poetic objects equally into doubt. If poets can be divided into 'antiquarians' and the 'poor fish' gasping on the shores of modernity, MacGreevy occupies

> a position intermediate between the above [antiquarians] and the poor fish, in the sense that he neither excludes self-perception from his work nor postulates the object as inaccessible. But he knows how to wait for the thing to happen, how not to beg the fact of this 'bitch of a world' – inarticulate earth and inscrutable heaven.[13]

The process which produces awareness here is waiting and prayer. In his review of the *Poems* (1934), 'Humanistic Quietism,' Samuel Beckett praised MacGreevey for his ability to reach towards prayer and affirmation, even in the 'darkest' poems.[14]

Poems as a whole moves in that direction: from longer poems on the Great War, the Easter Uprising, and the period of the Irish Civil War, to the satire of 'Anglo-Irish' and 'The Other Dublin,' and finally to the series of short, painterly, epiphanic poems which ends the volume. We might see this a shift, according to MacGreevy's own project, away from satire to affirmation. Yet the basis of that affirmation is often personal and obscure, for all that they incorporate formal prayer. Many late poems end in declarations of small redeeming individual activities, centred on the lyric 'I': 'I hear. . .' ('Recessional'), 'I begin my rounds' ('Saint Senan's Well'), 'I recede, too, / Alone' ('Giorgionismo'), 'I rake the fire' ('Nocturne'). 'Nocturne of the Self-Evident Presence' is a good example, its obvious precursor Shelley's 'Mont Blanc,' with its evocation of Alpine nothingness. Shelley's idealistic disappointment is replaced by minimalism; anything said in the face of nature's 'inarticulate' silence goes on the dump of poetic apparatus:

> I see no immaculate feet on these pavements,
> No winged forms,
> Foreshortened,
> As by Rubens or Domenichino,
> Plashing the silvery air,
> Hear no cars,
> Elijah's or Apollo's
> Dashing about
> Up there.
> I see alps, ice, stars and white starlight
> In a dry, high silence. (*CPM* pp42-43)

The silent epiphany which ends the poem is echoed elsewhere, in the 'vast, high, light-beaten plain' of 'Seventh Gift of the Holy Ghost,' for example – it may have even have its origins in Humbert Wolfe's early comments on *The Waste Land*: "there remains in my mind a sound of high and desolate music. So poetry should end."[15] MacGreevy shares this mode is a wintery minimalism with Wallace Stevens, with the St-John Perse of 'Snows,' with the Coffey of 'How Far from Daybreak' – muted tones, first of all those of the Ypres Salient and the Somme, then Whistleresque nocturnes in shades of white, ash, silver, gray, lead, and black. 'Gray' is a constant in his poetry, as in 'Homage to Jack Yeats': 'Grayer than the tide below, the tower; / The day is gray above'.

Often this acts as the painterly wash on which a sparse colour signalling the moment of epiphany is applied. What Beckett called a 'spasm of awareness' is conveyed in splashes of gold, green. Even in the death of an airman: 'A delicate flame, / A stroke of orange in the morning's dress' (p.3) – the pun on 'mourning' indicating the access of grief in the poem's Beckettian tentativeness before its object. 'Gloria de Carlos V' is a meditation on the way in which art can produce a moment of transfiguration. MacGreevy's world, formed in Flanders (the grotesqueries of Grünewald and and gas masks), is mapped onto the difference between the agonistic and the paradisical in Christianity, as he explains how Titian's masterpiece in the Prado affected him:

> My rose of Tralee turned gray in its life,
> A tombstone gray,
> Unimpearled.
> But for a moment, now, I suppose,
> For a moment I may suppose,
> Gleaming blue,
> Silver blue,
> Gold,
> Rose,
> And the light of the world. (*CPM* p36)

The move from 'But for a moment, now, I suppose' to the more declarative 'For a moment I may suppose' encapsultes Beckett's sense of poise: waiting and arrival.

The ability to wait spans the huge silence in MacGreevy's poetic career between 1930 and 1960. His major late poem 'Breton Oracles' (1961) returns in pilgrimage to 'the Brittany of the tender legends', the territory of Renan, of Celtic purity, in order to wrestle a final image from the world. If the 'Gigantic red rocks' which he finds there, with their 'drowsing menace', remind one of *The Waste Land*, the pilgrimage amongst stone crosses is closer to the spirit of 'Little Gidding.' The poem finds its redemptive moment in a characteristic streak of colour:

> You were there;
> And, in the half-light,
> The dark green, touched with gold,
> Of dream leaves;

The light green, touched with gold,
Of clusters of grapes;
And, crouching at the foot of a renaissance wall,
A little cupid, in whitening stone,
Weeping over a lost poetry. (*CPM* p70)

For all the almost irresistable plangency of this image, we need to note its elegiac nature; it is an epitaph. The little stone angel is not an actual angel, but an image for a 'lost tradition' of Celtic monasticism. MacGreevy echos Devlin's tendency to anchor his Catholicism on its places; on the stones of the cathedrals which are the loci of *The Heavenly Foreigner*. The quest is for the object which will act as the container of meaning, but that meaning is located in the past.

Thus, MacGreevy became a guardian of the past: as a social being a curator and churchman, but a silent poet. His major poems were written with a full consciousness of the pressures of history: 'De Civitate Hominum,' 'The Six Who Were Hanged,' 'Homage to Hieronymus Bosch,' 'Crón Tráth na nDéithe,' 'Aodh Ruadh O'Domhnaill' – all respond to the sense of fragmentation produced by the Civil War and its aftermath, often with a bitter satirical pungency. Yet beyond them we have poems reaching towards silence, to a meaning which they could not contain. If MacGreevy's Catholic aesthetic had suggested an affirmation of religious truth, he could not, in general, follow Eliot into the world of 'Ash Wednesday' and the *Four Quartets*. It is difficult to say why: perhaps simply that his rose *was* gray, conditioned by historical realities to which he could not cease to bear witness, and which precluded any movement beyond the individual epiphany.

The struggle for a voice which negotiates between public and private, which MacGreevy returns to again and again, is endemic to Modernist texts. One solution adopted by a number of writers is to split public and private voices, as in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, in which the subjective 'Camera Eye', representing an authorial interiority, alternates with passages of conventional narrative and the 'Newsreels' which chronicle public events. Another solution is the dialogism of texts like *Ulysses* and Lowry's *Under the Volcano*; yet another the modernist collage-text from which the subject is (theoretically) expunged, as in much of the *Cantos*, and in which the power to integrate the material is passed over to the reader or located in an absent centre ('history').[16] MacGreevy did write poems in the 1920s which could in a manner of speaking be called dialogic: 'Crón Tráth na nDéithe' in particular incorporates citation, discord, fragments of musical notation, extending the aesthetics of *The Waste Land* in formulating its sense of malaise.[17] But as a general tendency MacGreevy shows no sign of abandoning lyric; it is the poet's voice and the 'I' which bears the burden of witnessing to his times, taking the burden of petition and at its best finding a confluence of personal and collective feeling, as at the end of 'The Six Who Were Hanged,' with its insistent time and place:

And still, I too say,
Pray for us.

Mountjoy, March, 1921

The consonance here is of a particular revolutionary moment. Beyond such points of crisis the lyric voice falters and becomes isolated as politics and the avante garde peel apart. The only option, apart from silence, is to join those forces which say 'I too' within a true Catholic collectivity – and that is the road to the *Capuchin Annual*.

IV Art Criticism: Jack B. Yeats and the Historical Style

It is in MacGreevy's study of Jack Yeats, published in 1945 but much of it written in London in 1938, that he finds an image of the Irish artist. He declares that the 'secularist tendency' of English criticism offends him, as it had Professor Clery in 1918 – 'secularism' signalling aesthetic individualism.[18] The Protestant Yeats hardly seems a promising model for the non-secular Irish artist; yet it is, one could speculate, his Protestantism which attracts MacGreevy, since it generates an immanence which seeks symbolic objects located in a the world of 'reality'. For MacGreevy he bridges the multiple divisions in modern Irish society – between the subjective and objective, individual and social, between imagination and reality, and between different political groupings: 'In the life of Ireland fact and poetry have parted company. Jack Yeats's work became a passionate recall to poetry – to the splendour of essential truth' (p27). Yeats paints 'the Ireland that matters' (p5), an common humanity unstratified by class (p15).

Elsewhere, MacGreevy uses his art history to formulate a genealogy for the Irish painter who will avoid both abstraction and satire. *Pictures in the National Gallery* (1945) attacks Dutch art, with its 'snobbism' in using comic peasants, as well as the aristocratic British tradition and the stylization of Lucas Cranach. His imaginary genealogy of Irish painting takes in Mantegna and Poussin. The former's 'Judith With the Head of Holofernes,' painted amidst Italian political turmoil, becomes 'a woman condemned to be an assassin for the honour and salvation of her countrymen', as if she were a Republican heroine. Poussin, like Mantegna, combines religiousness with intellectual passion on an epic scale. The Irishman James Barry (1741-1806) forms a third rung in this ladder, though limited by his market: 'Barry dreamed of being a great European "historical" artist like Mantegna or Poussin. He despised professional portrait painting as an inferior branch of art. But English society only wanted pictures of itself. . . '[19]

It is worth pausing over MacGreevy's stress on the term 'Historical'. Associated with eighteenth-century France and the Académie, with the line from Le Brun to David, the Historical style elevates the representation of public action (particularly conflict). The Historical mode is a didactic art dedicated to the ideological needs of the state, often linking itself, as Norman Bryson shows in his *Word and Image*, to the body of a figure who incarnates it. Its mode in Bryson's fascinating account is what he calls *discursive*; that is, it sees painting as the achievement of an embodied or narrated meaning, seemingly independent of the process in which meaning is produced, in contrast to the *figural* work which stresses the painter's brushwork, or the surface of the painting, and which privileges the image rather than the symbol.[20] Like the Catholic work, the discursive painting gestures outside itself.

The 'Historical' is what MacGreevy sees in Jack Yeats; the first great national painter in the line of Poussin and Barry. As in the case of Benjamin West in early national America, the Historical style, in MacGreevy's programme, is to create a landscape-with-figures, suffused with heroic resonances.[21] He insists that Yeats has found a *new* balance between the figures and the landscape, not seen in previous painters, creating a mythology which is both personal and collective – particularly in his later, more sketchy and dramatic technique. In recent works 'the balance between observation and imagination has, in fact, altered' (p28), moving away from that mere realism which one might associate with the detailed and self-suffient surface of the still life (the book on Aldington had praised *nature vivante* over the *nature morte*). The 1945 'Postscript' to *Jack B. Yeats* singles out the recent large-scale mythological paintings, implicitly in terms of their aspiration to the Historical style. 'Tinker's Encampment – the Blood of Abel,' for example, provides an adequate symbol of the war in Europe which combines Irish reality with an epic, Biblical scope which would be appropriate to Poussin or Barry. These are not works of 'withdrawal', he argues, pursuing art for art's sake. Rather they are engaged by virtue of their recourse to a mythology consciously embodied in 'reality', an 'objective correlative'.

V MacGreevy and Wallace Stevens

In his stress on the meditational lyric, MacGreevy can be compared to a poet with whom he had connections in later life: the American Wallace Stevens. Stevens and MacGreevy knew each other's work in the 1930s, and began to correspond in April 1948 after their mutual friend Barbara Church mentioned to the Irish poet that Stevens enjoyed his work; MacGreevy sent a copy of *Poems*, and they continued to exchange letters regularly, only meeting each other in July 1954 at the Church's apartment in New York. The correspondent was productive for Stevens, directly inspiring his poem 'Tom MacGreevy in America,' influencing 'The Westwardness of Everything' and 'The Novel,' and providing material for essays. As Peter Brazeau tells the story, the gregarious MacGreevy also saw the reculsive, private side of Stevens, who stuck to home in Hartford: when the Director of the National Galley of Ireland visited the Hartford Athenaeum the local poet-lawyer was not at the reception, rigidly isolating the world of the imagination from that of work.[22]

Yet as recent critics have suggested, much of the force of Stevens's greatest poetry comes from the points where that isolated stance was most under threat: for example in the fierce debates in the 1930s, continuing into the war, about artistic 'involvement' versus abstraction, which prompted Stevens's most productive atttempts to write a poetry adequate to the demands of history. That concern persisted into the post-war period, for example in the questions about the viability of (America's) 'bearing the weight of Europe' in 'Imago.' These issues are taken up in the correspondence, with a debate on American involvement in post-war Europe in which MacGreevy took an independent line with respect to those bearing gifts, Marshall and Stalin alike. Ireland was, he said, already 'lousy with money'.[23] This sense of self-sufficiency after the 'Emergency' contrasts sharply with Stevens's war, the pressures of which compelled him to produce a poetic equivalent of Yeats's 'History' paintings, mythical and real, while MacGreevy (whatever he felt about the position) could not mediate between the poet and journalist-curator.

In 'Nocture of the Self-Evident Presence,' as we saw, MacGreevy rejected the poetic apparatus of Elijah's chariot in favour of silence. Stevens also declared that the solar chariot was junk, and in 1938 wrote 'The Man on the Dump.' This poet of the junk-heap is noisier:

> One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.
> One beats and beats for that which one believes.
> That's what one wants to near. Could it after all
> Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
> To a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,
> Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
> Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,
> Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds
> On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
> Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
> Is it to hear the blatter of grackes and say
> *Invisible priest*; is it to eject, to pull
> The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?
> Where was it one first heard the truth? The the.

As James Longenbach comments, neither skeptical empiricism (the Johnsonian 'stanza my stone') nor the romantic optimism of the 'invisible priest' are appropriate here, since both 'forsake the work of manufacturing a world that has the value we grant it'.[24] Where MacGreevy reduces the world to silence and frost in order to clear a way for prayer, Stevens does so (as in 'The Snow Man') in order to build it up anew from the materials he finds around him.

For Stevens, this method is supported by his reading in Nietzsche and Vaihinger, and by the American pragmatist tradition. His particularity ('the the'), like that of William Carlos Williams, eschews universal truths. Or at least, it delays them – the story of deathbed conversion to Catholicism which emerged in the early 1980s suggests at best a last-minute entry. 'St Armourer's Church from the *Outside*' is his title. We can say that as a critic MacGreevy made a choice between models. Stevens represented a nativist modernism (Protestant, personal, and local; immanent and flexible in approach); whereas Eliot represented an international Anglo-Catholic modernism (transcendent, authoritarian, and impersonal – in aim, at least). Critical of Stevens in 1931, MacGreevy argues for Eliot's importance. But his difficulty with the orthodoxy of Eliot's later work suggests that Stevens's mode, which represents the road not taken, offered a potentially fruitful set of possibilities, closer to those realized in Jack Yeats. In order to explore the implications of that choice, we can look at two Irish modernist poets who followed MacGreevy: Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey.

VI After MacGreevy: Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey

The careers of Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey begin with the jointly-authored *Poems* of 1930, praised by Beckett in his 1934 article on 'Recent Irish Poetry.' Both show the influence of Eliot. Coffey's work is less mature than his friend's and far from his later style, yet fascinating for the way in which Eliot's disturbed voices infect it:[25]

> Let us consider once more, you and I,
> The sorrows beaded on the chainéd years
> Lonely as tears
> Unheeded wilfully . . .
> Let there be frankness undernearth the sky
> truth in our eyes as each questions why.
>
> Who walks beside me plucking at my hand
> Arousing thoughts I will not understand . . .
>
> O robed lady, clothed in light and rose. . . .

Other early poems are equally fitted with the furniture of Eliot: demotic complaints, geraniums, granite rocks. Significantly, *Poems* as a whole does not have an identifiable politics; unlike MacGreevy's major poems, it is less driven by the historical pressure of the decades which precede it, and more concerned with the problematics of voice.

If Coffey begins in the shadow of Eliot, Devlin's dense, ironic poems already signal a mature distance – partly, as his editor James Mays suggests, under the influence of Hart Crane, but perhaps also suggesting a stance of self-protective alienation: 'O Paltry Melancholy,' for example, is concerned with the rejection of positions rather than their adoption. A certain guardedness was to remain with Devlin. Like MacGreevy, he could mount an attack on the English – as in the comments against Milton, Marvell, and 'the toady, Horace' in 'Encounter' (*CPD* p136) – but as Mays points out he less readily falls into an identifiable literary or political position. Indeed, one could see Devlin's earlier work as dominated by a satiric distance. 'Bacchanal,' originally entitled 'News of Revolution,' works through its grotesque, anaphoric rhetoric to a point of satiric disillusion which parodies the poetry of Audenesque excitement. His 'Forerunners', running 'naked as sharks through water', are a breed reminiscent of Wyndham Lewis's 'Tyros', savage revolutionaries made for a new world, but Devlin holds out no hope of 'intelligence from a brave new State' (*CPD* p65). The piled sentences make this a difficult poem to follow, as does the tangling of post and pre-revolutionary persectives; but that difficulty is, perhaps, the point. Devlin's poetic mode is inherently catacrectic, jumbling discordant registers and abandoning any sense of clear progression, often to the point that sense is threatened. The 'difficulty' is created at the semantic level: his sentences usually seem grammatical, he does not simply arrange words in juxtaposition; it is as if one language were struggling to emerge from beneath another.

Devlin, then, does not seem a ready candidate for the position of MacGreevy's Catholic poet. He did, of course, go on to write 'Lough Derg,' 'The Passion of Christ,' and other devotional poems, *The Heavenly Foreigner* the greatest of them, but even they are marked by distance (eg. the satire of pietism in 'Lough Derg'). It is as if he could not accommodate himself to a public role, a declarative poetry. The idea of the public statue is a useful way into that question (remembering MacGreevy's final image of the stone angel). Mays suggests a comparison between Devlin's 'The Statue and the Perturbed Burghers' and Wallace Stevens's *Owl's Clover*, a sequence written in response to 1930s demands for a politicized art. In fact Stevens meditated on the possibility of a public, monumental art throughout his career, in essays like 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' as well as in poetry. And while that attempt was ultimately to fail, given the difficulty for the modern poet of achieving a collective voice, Stevens's repeated attempts at commemorative art contrast with Devlin's sharply accented sense of discomfort in the face of burgherly values. His 'fluttering boy in tight marble' exists amidst the sarcastically described:

> People of worth and wealth
> Glancing with care at their modes of life
> Walls cradles windows amber orchards. (*CPD* p54)

Stevens, on the other hand, never ceases to attempt a dialogue between the values of art and the bourgoisie.

If the comparison seems unfair, then 'Argument With Justice' – one of Devlin's most political poems of the 1930s – provides another example, opening in the manner of Keats and Hopkins with a series of rhetorical questions to the abstract figure of blind Justice, a goddess who has 'abandoned' her reign. The questions take in most of the poem, and only find a resolution in the final teasing imprecation:

> Come down, let there be
> Justice though the heaven's fall, be virtue of our
> Temporary measure. (*CPD* p89)

The final line, deliberately stranded with its leaden official term for the State's edicts, seems to accentuate the distance between one language and another. Like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, Devlin's blind Justice is blasted by the wind of events – but in this case the Angel does not feel the wind and see it's results with Benjamin's pity and terror.[26] Instead, she is isolated, distant from the chaos, more like Keats's Memnosyne: 'Blown, see, against thy portals, centuries of mortals mouth blasphemy righteous.' We get no further than the portals, while the statue on her 'column transcendental' remains distant. There is no possibility of the epic-historical here.

Devlin remains skeptical about public symbolism, often constructing his poems around a private set of preoccupations and memories which only reluctantly achieves a realization in the world – as in the moving final lyric of 'The Colours of Love.' The only basis on which he could accept public discourse was that identified by MacGreevy, within a Catholicism whose meanings are already externalized – in the extended versions of the Stations of the

Cross in 'The Passion of Christ,' in the cathedrals of *The Heavenly Foreigner* (whose meaning is so fixed that starting an argument about Bath vs. Chartres can stand for Protestantism in general). *The Heavenly Foreigner* is a brilliant poem, achieving a fusion of personal experience, religious aspiration, and formal skill. Yet many readers of 'The Passion of Christ,' I suspect, find it a dry performance (particularly compared to Coffey's version in *Advent* 8). The rigidity of form is suggested by the dedication to Allen Tate, who was in that period busily writing himself into an American version of Eliot's Anglo-Catholic impasse. More often taking the opposite path of distance, difficulty, and resolute individuality, Devlin's status as a 'historical' poet is at best problematic.

VII Coffey and History

Brian Coffey's poetry maps the public-private, political-personal, satiric-affirmative in a different and more complex way. We can begin with 'Missouri Sequence,' the poem which, it seems to me, best balances public and private preoccupations to provide something like the stance which MacGreevy praised in Jack B. Yeats, and which Devlin achieves in *The Heavenly Foreigner*.

Coffey was a slow starter as a poet, with (like MacGreevy) a long period in which he seems to have completed little – between *Third Person* (1938) and *Nine a Musing* (1960).[27] It was only with 'Missouri Sequence' (1962) that he attemped a sustained piece, more open to personal and collective history. The sequence spans a period of crisis in 1952, in which Coffey was forced to leave his teaching post in America, and to re-forge his poetic vocation. At the centre of the poem is the meditating voice of the poet at his desk at night, considering the balance between the ideal world of poetry and experience, but it also evokes larger forces around that space: the natural world and the cycle of the seasons, the Irish diaspora, family life, and a web of friends created in the dedications of individual sections (to MacGreevy, Leonard Eslick, Devlin, and Coffey's wife Bridget).

'Missouri Sequence' is most compelling when Coffey evokes what he calls the 'distraction' of concrete experience:

> Tonight the poetry is in the children's game:
> I am distracted by comparisons,
> Ireland across the grey ocean,
> here, across the wide river.
> * * *
> We live far from where
> my mother grows very old.
> Five miles away, at Byrnesville,
> the cemetery is filled with Irish graves,
> the priest an old man born near Cork,
> his bloss like the day he left the land. (*PV* p69)

To be 'distracted' is to notice suddenly, to enter that present which 'Missouri Sequence' recognises as in time rather than timeless, for all its appeal to an abstract wisdom. At the moment of loss, poetry appears:

> Watch the slender swallow flash its wings,
> dive, sheer sky in two,
> never before, never again
> and such is poetry. (*PV* p86)

Coffey is constantly 'distracted' in the sequence – again in section 1 by the sunfish which play on the surface of a pool, by winter in section 2, from the contemplation of his muse in section 3, by love and anger in section 4, and more globally, by his forced abandonment of the place his children have grown up in. In each case he brings a startling attention to his being in the world, measuring himself against the parables he includes, and pouring himself into his poems as he lives beyond their scope. Among other things, this is a poetry of small detail – frogs among iris leaves, the weather last month, a catalogue of the trees that grow in Missouri. These things work against the discursive, producing a texture against which myth stands out as 'poor alien symbols'. In the opening section of 'Missouri Sequence' he had set out an opposition which his poem dilutes:

> No servant, the muse
> abides in truth,
> permits the use of protest
> as a second best
> to make clean fields
> exults only in the actual
> expression of a love,
> love all problem,
> wisdom lacking. (*PV* p73)

Protest comes to seems intrinsic to the 'actual'. Protest and love, by poem's end, have been subsumed to wisdom and poetry. This Coffey refuses any distinction between the 'merely social' and 'truth'; he recognises the pressures of time, place, history and season, while balancing pattern against impulse, a desire to symbolize against the needs of existence.

Coffey's 'hard' poems are also political and historical, though in a pessimistic sense which sees all experience as flawed. Indeed, *Advent* and *Death of Hektor* remind me most strongly of Shelley's despairing political apocalypses, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas*, in which the ages roll on despite the poet's cry:

> But we blank through ages to Earth's crying out 'how long'
> may note not at all Earth's fairest day-show of beauty
> fudging even the dreams which keep us asleep (*PV* p136)

It is section 3 of *Advent* in which Coffey turns to the question of history and addresses Klio, its muse. This figure, like Devlin's in 'Argument with Justice,' has become seemingly distant and statue-like:

> what have they done to Klio what have they done to our Muse
> of History Muse Klio of Memory daughter and set
> out of place and time on a plinth to reign of silence queen
>
> As if in opened bunker one faced numberless supplicant bones
> and awed by that silent thunder wanted words
>
> What would we call on you for Klio if your style
> were finger on lip to crawl through cunning corridors
> fumbling behind the arras for what was not there (*PV* p122)

This silent muse seems to accede to the terrors of history, to imperialism and nationalism. The muse of 'cunning corridors' (which seems to allude to Eliot's in 'Gerontion') is impotent. Yet history offers no redemption, and the desire for order in history is itself a snare, with no meaning outside its accidents:

> The veil of randomness attracts lawseeking yen
> constants to find to make necessity of
> while history works against the rounded tale (*PV* p126)

The final lines of part 3 take in Ireland's history, 'compromise partition . . . civil war', but conclude that the tangled story is 'earth's unfinished business', not to be plotted before its completion, even within a Christian framework ('no necessary thought will usher in final night').

Similarly in *Death of Hektor* (which has a number of links with *Advent* 3) Coffey denies the possibility of any panoptic view:

> We can not hold time fast in our sights
> as if judging events in a moment unique
> like hill-top watcher taking Battle in at a glance (*PV* p152)

The perspective denied here is that of a particular type of heroic painting, typified by Velazquez's 'The Surrender of Breda,' as well as the god's-eye views of *The Illiad*. The point made at the opening of *Death of Hektor* is that history is sealed off from us, that we have only the poet's myth – the story of violence which Coffey procedes to deconstruct by insinuating it into the modern world. Section 10, for example, refers to 'Doom now in the air like a cloudy mushroom' above Troy (followed by a reference to 'white blood cells'). Section 11 castigates the vanities of public life in language evoking Nazi Germany:

> Doom's rank perfect days the false assumptions of security
> doom as rot of joists beams partner's treachery slave ways

coinage falsified Niagara's of fairy cash corpses candles
chalices gold teeth spendthrift scrip to jack up naked power
(*PV* 161)

Thus, Coffey's mature poetry pictures a radical incompletion in the field of history, a 'point to point' (*PV* p153) awareness of its fragmentary and negotiated nature. *Death of Hektor* begins with a personal memory and ends with not with epic scope but with Andromache amidst her linen, pots and pans:

the years it took to put a home together living against the grain
of great deeds her woman's life on her heart
much held fast word hidden for all (*PV* p165)

One might be suspicious of another image of woman as the outside of history; yet this is a position in which Coffey places himself in 'Missouri Sequence,' claiming no priviledged point of view and 'living against the grain' around him – creating in the difficult textures of his poetry a different grain. Like Shelley, Coffey protests against and finally accedes to Necessity – from the 'Say – could it indeed be otherwise' of 'Exile' (1933) to the 'Must it be this way / How would one better have had it done' and final 'So be it' of the last section of *Advent*, forty-two years later (*PV* 14, 148, 150).

Even outside the strong structures suppled by the Biblical and Classical myths, Coffey's poetry aspires to something more like Beckett's condition of prayer. Yet often it seems to flee from any located place, in contrast to the careful placing of 'Missouri Sequence' – and it is here we see the cleaving of two modes in Coffey. We find ourselves where, as Stan Smith puts it, 'exile is not so much a social condition as a an ontogical given'.[28] Smith's comment is directed at 'Missouri Sequence,' to which it seems to me misapplied: the answer to Coffey's question in the sequence, 'Does it matter where one dies, / supposing one knows how?' is 'yes' – where the Irish immigrants died, Byrnesville, is just the point. But the flight within to a no-place of retreat is apparent elsewhere, as in 'How Far from Daybreak':

There was a sort of place
call it a bowl
encompassed a maze
of growing walls
Let's say there was no way out
all ways lead within
There walls grew strong
around a central waste
grew petrified
'til small distant soul
curled in wordless heaven
and withdrawal (*PV* p103)

'Withdrawal' is what MacGreevy had defended Jack Yeats against; localized here in a wasteland from which Coffey's poem plots its tenuous path to freedom, love, and the 'green light' of dawn. An allegorical space constructed in patterns of layered words, it is one of those modernist Zones whose origin lies in Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (which Coffey has translated): 'forcefields of hurt and bruising' (*PV* p103), 'parks of emptiness or supposition' (*PV* p104).[29] The dark, grey-and-white place, covered in sand or snow, recurs in many poems – 'For What for Whom Unwanted,' 'The Prayers,' as well as in *Advent* itself. In many cases it recalls MacGreevy's characteristic spaces, with their splashes of colour – 'one touch of poppy-red' (*PV* p173) – though Coffey's meditative mode is more pessimistic, and his epiphanies more framed.[30]

There are also harsher moments. The split in Coffey's later career, it seems to me, is between the abstract poems described above and a broad satire. *Advent* appeared in the wake of the self-published children's alphabet *ABECEDARIAN*.[31] Only the poem for 'V' offers a sardonic comment on the wider field of literature:

> I'm a Viper.
> Sunning
> on a stone I lie.
> 'Horseman, pass by!' (*PV* p215)

This is not, of course, to criticise Coffey for writing childen's literature. But it is necessary to recognise a divide between these modes. Equally, for a public political voice we could look at *The Big Laugh* (1976), Coffey's reading of the seventies and particularly the 'Winter of Discontent' in England, where he now lived. It is a family story of apocalypse in which two hand-drawn Jarryesque characters, the ulta-fat Glutz and the rakish Coil, conspire to end the universe – Glutz having taken over first Iceland then the world to regain Coil's love, before blowing it up with 100-megaton cobalt bombs. Though the story is prefaced by rhythmical grumbling about the decline of commercialized society – 'strawberry jam / shouldn't taste / like fish' – and the slogan 'HANDS OFF / THE / UNIVERSE'. Coffey's political discontent seems most readily located in his interpolated one-page 'Playlet by Anne Ankay,' which includes a cast including an 'Enclave of Stewards' and an 'Envy of Lads', and includes the following speech:[32]

> Topman to Nation: Cool it LADS. We've just found under the HOUSE a multiplying gear we didn't know we'd got that fits the BANKNOTEMACHINE. Will you accept quadrupled wages and quartered work?

Whether this inset play is ironized is difficult to say (the title suggests not). Coffey's preoccupations in Southampton in the late 1970s seem disturbingly similar to Philip Larkin's in Hull: national decline and the unions, disgust at junk. The opinions of a conservative teacher distressed at the way the world is going, even in the idiom of Jarry and Beckett, are unsettling reading, the 'merely social' with a vengeance.

The Big Laugh has its rewards (including those of narrative and humour), but it reflects a conservatism, coupled to a suspicion of all state apparatus, apparent elsewhere in Coffey's

late works – in poems like 'Leader,' 'Eleison II,' and 'Call the Darkness Home.' The bitter title piece of *Topos and Other Poems* (1981) describes 'Tiber Topman' who hires 'Angus MacSorass of that Ilk' to kill the poets unhappy enough to have become ad-men:[33]

> MacSorass to bellow the slogan
> 'Self to itself is the Same
> Novelty Fiction Supreme.'

Are these satires 'mistakes'? Certainly, they seem evidence of the relative failure of a public voice for the later Coffey, outside the context of the intense sacramentalism and experimentalism of *Advent* and 'The Prayers.' The confluence of writing, personal, and public history in 'Missouri Sequence' is abandoned in favour of more divided modes in which political life is either a horror, or distanced in time or concept. Coffey becomes *both* of the poems MacGreevy identified: the alienated satirist preoccupied with the social, and the poet of religious 'truth'.

VIII Conclusion

What we have observed is a defining uncertainty in the Irish modernist tradition. If the *Klaxon* blasted existing values, MacGreevy quickly moved to a position in which he wished the poet or artist to be central to national cultural aspirations, representing a broarder base. That in turn involved the creation of a symbolic repertoire, like that which he saw in Jack B. Yeats, which was at least potentially shared. Yet for MacGreevy and for the writers who follow, that communality was most readily located in Catholicism. The result was poems which often locate their meanings beyond the 'merely social', and often beyond the poem itself – in MacGreevy's silences, in Devlin's places, in the religious fulfillment implied by Coffey's *Advent*. The linguistic difficulty of Devlin and Coffey serves not to break a language (the original intention of the avant-garde) but to conserve it in a space beyond the always compromised world of social action. The figural (in Bryson's terms) becomes discursive; it can be read as an index of the difficulties and rewards of Truth, and as symptomatic of a fallen world.

There is always, however, a counter-pressure from the social and historical which informs the best poems of all three writers, and turns them into profound meditations on the nature of human experience. What Coffey calls being 'distracted' sees the poet measure ideals against bitter reality – a reality which MacGreevy could not expunge from his poems. If Devlin often strives to distance reality in his poems (to make it a little harder to see, as Wallace Stevens put it), then that indicates the danger inherent in the Catholic idealism which begins with MacGreevy: a fall into satire or silence as the social world comes to seem polluted.

The long period between 1938 and 1960 in which only Devlin, of the three poets here, was producing significant work is indicative of the problems of that social world, of a delay between MacGreevy's programme for an Irish poetry and the possibility of its fulfillment – a story which lies to a large extent outside the scope of this essay, in the work of Kinsella and others as well as Coffey. It is as if the political call could not be matched by a

sustaining structure (factors like the encouragement offered by the Michael Smith at the New Writer's Press and others in the 1970s would need to enter the story here). One might compare post-colonial America, in which the call for an 'independent' literature to match political independence came after the revolution, and was arguably only matched by a literary response decades later – a literary response whose sense of dislocation from the state is (in Melville in particular) already responsible for a modernist irony.[34]

It is at this point that MacGreevy's move from poetry and literary criticism to art becomes important. In a post-colonial struggle the oppositional forces are partly those of tradition, inherent in the language and its influences as in a shared history. MacGreevy's complicated alignment with respect to Eliot and Aldington, and modernism itself, derives from that fact; it is hard to escape a language. In moving to art history and forging a genealogy for the Irish Historical painter incarnated in Jack B. Yeats, he was able to work on a different ground – and to escape modernism's preoccupation with the figural, with surfaces, and find the discursive, national, art which he sought. The cost may have been a narrowly defined language – implicitly monologic rather than dialogic – and his own poetic silence: there is little room in such a view of art for either the intense but dwindling lyric voice of the nocturnes, or for grotesque, stylized, satirical and surreal effects like the dancing rats in 'Homage to Hieronymus Bosch.'

Devlin, and particularly Coffey, both aspire to something like an equivalent in poetry to this Historical style. But the careers of both poets are marked by the ambivalence which MacGreevy sought to escape – ambivalence about the bourgeois public sphere, ambivalence about the state, and about history itself. Both share the Catholic lexicon which MacGreevy celebrated, but in both cases the satirical impulse erupts elsewhere; the 'merely social' returns as a supplement, in the Derridean sense, to the 'truths' of the devotional mode. Arguably all three poets produce their best poetry when most challenged by the force of experience and history, at those points where they are not merely relying on an established mythology outside the poem to create a sense of ambient meaning. In that sense an (Irish) Catholic Modernism remains as Professor Clery described it in 1918, most productive when most an oxymoron.

Notes

[1] I have used the following abbreviations throughout:

CPM *Collected Poems of Thomas MacGreevy*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Anna Livia Press, Dublin, 1991.
Eliot Thomas MacGreevy, *T.S. Eliot: A Study*, Dolphin Books No.4, Chatto & Windus, London, 1931.
Aldington Thomas MacGreevy, *Richard Aldington: An Englishman*, Dolphin Books No.10, Chatto & Windus, London, 1931.
CPD *Collected Poems of Denis Devlin*, ed. J.C.C. Mays, Dedalus, Dublin, 1989.
PV Brian Coffey, *Poems and Versions 1929-1990*, Dedalus, Dublin, 1989.

[2] *The Klaxon* 1, Dublin, 1923-4, title page. MacGreevy's piece is pp24-26.
[3] See eg. Terence Brown's *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-79*, Fontana, London, 1981, chs1-5; Richard Fallis, *The Irish Renaissance*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, N.Y., 1977, ch12; Dillon Johnson, *Irish Poetry After Joyce*, Dolmen Press, Dublin, 1985, ch1; Augustine Martin, 'Literature and Society, 1938-1955,' in *Ireland in the War Years and After, 1939-1951*, ed. Kevin B. Nowland and T. Desmond Williams, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1969.
[4] Peter Wollen compares Mexico and Ireland briefly in *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth Century Culture*, Verso, London, 1993, pp200-201. The parallel group in Mexico to the poets considered here were *los Contemporáneos*, founded c.1920; the diplomat-poet José Gorostiza's four-part *Muerte sin fin* (1939) bears comparison with Devlin's work.
[5] Andreas Hyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986, introduction.
[6] Professor Arthur E. Cleary, 'Pearse, MacDonagh, and Plunkett: An Appreciation,' *Poets of the Insurrection*, Maunsel, Dublin, 1918, p59. The articles were reprinted from *Studies*.
[7] Thomas MacGreevy, 'St. Brendan's Church, Loughrea, 1897-1947,' *The Capuchin Annual*, Dublin, 1946/47, pp353-73. This was one of a series on cathedrals.
[8] A related problem is the limitations of an established conceptual framework like that offered by the Church, as MacGreevy's discussion of the royalist, nationalist, and proto-Facist critic Charles Maurras suggests. Maurras was one of Eliot's acknowledged influences, eg. in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrews*, which

declared that his attitude was Classicist in literature, Royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion. But Maurras's polemics have cheated Eliot:

> When the Lord God gives an American the gift of poetry he ought to stick to it and and not bother himself and us with his discovery that the mere 'isms' of Europe are better than those of his own country. (*Eliot* p68)

[9] Thomas MacGreevy, 'The Catholic Element in *Work in Progress*,' in *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (1929), Faber & Faber, London, 1972, pp117-27.

[10] Dialogism in relation to the post-colonial is discussed by Graham Pechy, 'On the Borders of Bakhtin: dialogisation, decolonisation,' in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989, pp39-67.

[11] Brown, *Ireland*, p124; see also his 'After the Revival: The Problem of Adequacy and Genre,' in *The Genres of the Irish Literary Revival*, ed. Ronald Schleifer, Wolfhound Press, Dublin, 1980, pp153-78.

[12] Sean O'Faolain, 'The Mart of Ideas,' *Bell* 4, June 1942, pp153-7; Liam O'Flaherty, 'The Irish Censorship,' *The American Spectator* 1, Nov. 1932, p2. Reprinted in Julia Carlson, ed., *Banned In Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp147-50, 139-41.

[13] Samuel Beckett, 'Recent Irish Poetry,' *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, John Calder, London, 1985, p74. The essay first appeared in *The Bookman*, August 1934, under the pseudonym 'Andrew Belis'.

[14] Samuel Beckett, 'Humanistic Quietism,' *Disjecta*, p69. The essay first appeared in *The Dublin Magazine* July-Sept. 1934.

[15] Humbert Wolfe, "Waste Land and Waste Paper," *Weekly Westminster* 1 ns (November 1923), p.94.

[16] See Carol T. Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984.

[17] Defining dialogism in poetry is a problem on which Bakhtin offers little help; for a consideration of the multi-vocal and poly-vocal traditions in modernism, see Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.

[18] Thomas MacGreevy, *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and an Interpretation*, Colm O Lochlainn, Dublin, 1945, p3 (subsequent page refs. in text). MacGreevy makes Burke's 'Essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful' the source of that secularizing tradition – reversing the valuation of Yeats's Anglo-Irish hero.

[19] Thomas MacGreevy, *Pictures in the Irish National Gallery*, Batsford, London, 1945, pp9, 13, 57. The essays first appeared in *The Capuchin Annual* in 1943.

[20] See Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, chs1-2. This is not, it should be noted, an opposition between realist and abstract modes: as Bryson points out,

realism and abstraction may create images which are equally self-sufficient, which refuse outside reference.

[21] See Joann Peck Krieg, 'The Transmogrification of Fairie Land into Prairie Land,' *Journal of American Studies* 19 (1985), 199-223.

[22] Peter Brazeau, 'The Irish Connection: Wallace Stevens and Thomas MacGreevy,' *Southern Review* 17 (1981), 533-41.

[23] Alan Filreis, *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, pp211, 334; the letters are at the Huntington library.

[24] James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, p207.

[25] Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin, *Poems*, Printed for the Authors by Alex Thom & Co., Dublin, 1930, p21.

[26] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, 1969.

[27] The lack of dates for many of the poems in *Selected Poems* (1971) and of details of the composition of the longer poems makes this a supposition, but Coffey himself writes in 'Missouri Sequence' that 'I have grown slowly into poetry.'

[28] Stan Smith, 'On Other Grounds: The Poetry of Brian Coffey,' in *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey*, ed. Douglas Dunn, Dufour Editions, Chester Springs, Penn., 1975, p59.

[29] Brian McHale attempts to define the Zone as a post-modern space in his *Postmodern Literature*, Methuen, New York, 1987.

[30] James Mays comments on the Edenic nature of such moments in 'Passivity and Openness in Two Long Poems by Brian Coffey,' *Irish University Preview* Special Issue: The Long Poem, 13/1, 1983, p71. May's comments on detachment and 'the gap which is filled by prayer' (p76) in *Advent* are also pertinent here.

[31] Brian Coffey, *ABECEDARIAN*, Advent Books, Southampton, 1974. Cited from the text in *Poems and Versions*. The 'split' I am describing is to some extent suppressed by the choice in *Poems and Versions*.

[32] Brian Coffey, *The Big Laugh*, Sugar Loaf, Dublin, 1976, p8.

[33] Brian Coffey, *Topos and Other Poems*, Mammon Press, Bath, 1981, np. (Not reprinted in *Poems and Versions*.)

[34] See Lazer Ziff, *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America*, Viking Press, New York, 1981.