
The transformation of Irish Literature through time; Modernism in Irish-language literature

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Brian Ó Conchubhair, Associate Professor of Irish Language and Literature at the University of Notre Dame (Indiana, US), shone light on the arguably ambiguous nature of modernism in Irish-language literature and culture, in his visit to Charles University students this March. Renowned for his adoration of the technical aspects of the Irish Language, his latest research has seen him gradually probe into the intricate features of Irish literature and examine the correlation of historical events that precipitated these developments.

In his opening address he confessed that his invitation to Charles University to deliver a presentation on modernism in Irish literature, compelled him to revisit the area after taking a brief intermission from his analysis. Ó Conchubhair playfully teased lecturer Radvan Markus, from the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Culture in the Faculty of Arts of CU, for his perseverance in ensuring the presentation primarily revolved around the challenging and opaque personality of modernist Irish literature.

In order to analyze the distinctions in modernist Irish literature pro's, Ó Conchubhair emphasized the necessity to track the developments in chronological format. His corroboration of the Irish language as becoming increasingly "successful, glamorous and hip" in nature endorsed the theory that there was a more prosperous "pathway to a career in media" than there has been before.

Ó Conchubhair explained that the Irish literary revival manifested itself in the late 19th century and early 20th century. By the time the revival reached the 1990's, the establishment of an Irish television channel, TG4, diffused a greater appreciation for the Irish arts and for the first time that century Irish literary works were more accessible to the Irish public and became a trendy phenomenon.

So what are the key features of modernist Irish literature? Ó Conchubhair broadly stated that modernist Irish pro's are usually delivered in a primitive and narrative form. He began by acknowledging that modernism in Irish literature is a "complex" and "non-linear" development. The Modernist movement that broke into Irish literature revealed the friction that exists between the "cosmopolitan individualism" of modernism and the "vernacular" national bias that undercuts literature from post 19th and 20th century modernism. He added that these vernacular works were "devoured by the masses" and led to the concept of modernism being "unpopular not accidentally but by intent".

He identifies Eoghan Ó Tuairisc and Pádraic O'Conaire as fundamental writers to the transition from 19th century realism to 20th century modernism in Irish literature. Their works published in the early 1900's paved the way for future writers adaption of this alternative approach to writing. However Ó Conchubhair highlighted that the rise in modernism prior to the 1950's was often nonlinear in terms of chronology and it is difficult to pinpoint where exactly the thematic and stylistic elements of modernism precisely developed.

Diarmaid Ó Súilleabháin openly embraced the modernism approach in his literary works such as 'Caoin tú fein' in the early 1960's. His writing was seasoned with techniques such as the stream of consciousness and interior montage. Such an exotic style for its time was eloquently captured in a quote from Sean O'Riordan in the Times August 12, 1972: "*Is deacair Ó Súilleabháin a mholadh nó a cháineadh mar ní féidir é a thuiscint*" (i gcló in Traidisiún Liteartha na nGael, 1979), which translates to "*It is difficult to praise or criticize Ó Súilleabháin's work as one cannot understand it.*" This is an accurate reflection of the hesitation to the introduction of modernism in Irish literature.

Ó Conchubhair concluded with an account of Mairtín Ó Cadhain's literary breakthroughs. He criticizes *Cré na Cille* for possessing a fractured narrative which leads to the text being rather impenetrable for readers. However, Ó Conchubhair argues that this abrupt tone was utterly compelling and the dialogue presentation should be praised for its era.

Ó Conchubhair emphasized that modernism in Irish language literature can be probed and scrutinized endlessly and it is an area he himself is often at the end of his tethers with. However, we can establish after a riveting presentation from our welcomed guest, that the analyzing of modernism in Irish literature is as baffling as it is nourishing to the mind.

Aoife Brady is an Irish International Law student on Erasmus in Charles University. She enjoys observing and reporting on the cultural immersion of Erasmus students and the integration of foreign students studying abroad. She also has a keen interest in travel and is looking to improve her journalistic skills. At home she studies at the University College Cork.

[Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Centre for Irish Studies](#) invite you to a lecture by **Professor Brian Ó Conchubhair** (University of Notre Dame, USA). Prof. Ó Conchubhair is Associate Professor at the Department of Irish Language and Literature, University of Notre Dame. His monograph *Fin de Si?cle na Gaeilge: Darwin, An Athbheochan agus Smaointeoireacht na hEorpa* (2009) presents a detailed intellectual history of the Irish Language Revival. He has edited numerous volumes including *WHY IRISH? Irish Language and Literature in Academia* (2008), critical editions of Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche/The Midnight Court* (2011) and of Liam O'Flaherty's play *Dorchadas/Darkness* (2011, 2014), as well as a collection of contemporary Irish language short stories *Gearrscéalta Ár Linne* (2006). His current research focuses on modernism in Irish-language literature and culture and the relationship of mainstream modernism to minority languages.