



Review: Review Article

Reviewed Work(s): Engaging Modernity: Readings of Irish Politics, Culture and Literature at the Turn of the Century by Michael Böss and Eamon Maher

Review by: John McDonagh

Source: *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 93, No. 370 (Summer, 2004), pp. 227-231

Published by: Irish Province of the Society of Jesus

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30095952>

Accessed: 08-10-2018 10:24 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Irish Province of the Society of Jesus is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*

REVIEW ARTICLE

***Engaging Modernity: Readings of Irish Politics, Culture and Literature at the Turn of the Century*, edited by Michael Böss and Eamon Maher, Dublin: Veritas, 2003, pp.234.**

The cover of *Engaging Modernity* features an image of perhaps the most potent and ubiquitous symbol of late 20th/early 21st century Irish modernity: a mobile phone. The luminous green screen glows with the title of the book curiously printed across it, a lower case 'e' and an indented capital 'M' reversing and upsetting formal and traditional capitalisation. This image certainly points to one of the key philosophical stances of this challenging and fresh approach to the hoary old nut of modernity, namely that modernity is merely the application of contemporaneous cultural discourses to the traditional methods of artistic expression with the intention of undermining the roots of any complacent ideologies that might be about to take hold. Refreshingly, the editors, Eamon Maher and Michael Böss, make no claim for the denial of tradition in favour of some amorphous, shiny post-Celtic Tigerness, but declare to that this collection of essays will look to the 'tensions, contradictions and dynamic character of individual identity and evidence of the interdeterministic relation between

the individual and the groups with which s/he identifies'. As a classic example of this overlapping, the image of the mobile phone screen uses the symbol of a bell for its ringtone, perhaps subconsciously paying tribute to Sean O'Faolain's eponymous journal of the 1940's and 50's, in which a burgeoning sense of what could be regarded as the foundations of contemporary modernity was clearly evident.

Joe Lee's essay, the first in the collection, attempts to trace the roots of late 20th century Irish modernity to a time that he feels is firesomely and incorrectly regarded as the anti-thesis of modernity, namely de Valera's ascendancy in the early decades of the Free State. Lee contends that contact with outside intellectual forces was far greater than is generally acknowledged, and de Valera's portrayal as an inward looking isolationist by O'Faolain, amongst others, compares rather favourably with the motley crew of fascist dictators who governed Europe, with increasingly murderous intent, throughout the 1940's. Lee is clearly signalling that the identification of

.....

the moment of the birth of modernity is, to say the least, contentious. He cleverly uses his in-house experience of the modernist influences in the History Department of University College Dublin to argue that perceptions of our contemporary state have to be set in the context of discourses and dialogues that long precede the contemporary and whose parameters provide for a more scholarly and reasoned approach to the controversial and difficult concept of modernity. Indeed, in his book *Irish Classics*, Declan Kiberd claims that Ireland is an example of 'modernity *avant la lettre*' and posits the view that the constant competition between rival cultural forces meant that 'the only persistent tradition in Irish culture was the largely successful attempt to subvert all claims to make any tradition official', a conclusion that could equally apply to a reading of *Engaging Modernity*. Modernity, it appears, sends out tendrils that gradually coalesce into a discourse that has to be examined, questioned and refined, however much that process is resisted by the phantasmagoria that pose as the modern. Lee's essay, however, skews the book somewhat in that it alone occupies the first of four parts of the text, entitled 'Taking Stock'. Given that the following three sections contain three, five and five essays respectively, it would have benefited the book if such important historical contextualising could have been elucidated in more detail. However, given that the book is based on the proceedings of a conference organised by EFACIS (European Federation of Centres and Associations of Irish Studies) such exclusion is logistically understandable.

The editorial chapter to *Engaging Modernity*, ranging as it does over the varied discourses of sociology, economics, and popular culture, encapsulates the inherent and recurrent difficulties with the modernist project. Modernity, ironically, is not new, and the basic concepts that underpin its formal expression can be found at the points of fissure between competing historical and cultural plates. Each era, however it is defined chronologically, attempts to codify and quantify the dominant characteristics that appear to drive its specific cultural manifestations and the importance of books like *Engaging Modernity* lies in the specific analysis of the varied characteristics, necessarily selective, of the contemporary. Therefore, writers such as John Banville, John McGahern, Martin McDonagh and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin are explored in the context of an extension, if not a re-definition, of the concept of Irishness. The extent to which these writers can be read as reflecting various models of Irish modernity provides the book with a sustainable and viable core argument that attempts to contextualise contemporary modernity by tracing its often bizarre and individualistic gestation.

.....

One of the most interesting structures used in the compiling of the book is the variable focus on the State and the individual. Sections two and three tackle the heavyweight issues concerning emergent models of Irish modernity, namely the shift towards new models of Church and State and a re-imagining of the crucial and incestuous relationship between national identity and history. Section two, for example, cleverly develops a multi-layered perspective on the changed position of the Catholic Church and Catholicism in contemporary Ireland. Moving from Tom Inglis's detailed and credible charting of the 'fragmentation of the Church's symbolic domination of Irish social life' through Catherine Maignant's extension of that perception to a wider decline in Christian belief throughout Europe, the section concludes with Eamon Maher's balanced and sensitive reading of the novels of John McGahern in which he concludes that the writer '...does not dogmatise, or preach or lament. He allows the reader to interpret because, in his mind, the book is the coffin of words'. Maher's sentiments are very close to those of one of the most influential of literary Modernists, T.S. Eliot, who stated that 'the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist'. The combination of the sociological, global and literary in this section is classically modern, eschewing the boundaries of discreet discourses in favour of a blurring of genres and the consequence is a section that challenges on a variety of fronts and which derives its intellectual strength from its preparedness, as is stated in the title of the book, to engage.

Section Three concerns itself with a more exclusively literary reappropriation of concepts of the nation and history. Derek Hand's essay on W.B. Yeats' *Purgatory* perfectly captures the sense of 'degeneration' that necessarily pervades the entire modernist project, predicated as it is upon the passing of the 'old' into the 'new'. Hand, however, interprets Yeats' play as resonating with the 'potential –and the heartbreak - of the liminal and transitory space he finds himself inhabiting', and is one of a number of essayists in the collection to see the passing of the traditional as an organic and transitory episode in the development of the contemporary rather than as an anachronism in need of shedding. Mischievously, Hand concludes his essay with the word 'Maybe', further undermining any pretensions to concrete determinism towards which the collection might aspire. The essays in this section rightly point to the centrality of historical hermeneutics in the construction of models of contemporary identity, and Michael Böss's essay on Dermot Bolger, and Bernard Escarbelt's treatise on Richard Murphy are good examples of sensitive, perceptive and intuitive readings of the pervasive influence of tradition on the modern. Böss

.....
appositely notes that 'Bolger enters into a dialogue with ancient, pagan tradition, providing, through poetic re-appropriation and re-interpretation, his own rootless, semi-urban community with a past which extends into the present by being remembered and told'.

Two key words used by Böss, re-appropriation and re-interpretation, reoccur frequently throughout *Engaging Modernity* and they clearly signal the key strategies adopted by the majority of the essayists in the collection. This is exemplified in the final section of the book, entitled 'Exploring Selves', in which the grand socio-cultural discourses of the previous sections are replaced with the more tentative explorations of individual responses to Ireland's putative modernity. The choice of writers in this section is also clearly designed to reflect the complexity of a modernity that is in a constant state of self-reflexivity and flux. Lucy Collins, for example, explores the acknowledged 'oblique' poetry of Eilean Ni Chuilleanain in the context of making the hidden visible, and her conclusion that 'the individual experience' will ultimately 'make the search for definitive meaning ultimately futile' parallels Elke D'hoher's analysis of the novels of John Banville in which she argues that the latter's often 'impenetrable' work relies upon the 'interiorisation and transformation' of the external and the visible. Common to both is the presaging of the individual response, a key modernist concept that also has strong resonances with the Romantic movement of the late 18th/early 19th centuries. However, Michal Lachman's essay on Martin McDonagh appears as a less critically aware essay than the others in that he falls into the popular fawning language that McDonagh appears to inspire. His claim that 'the 'Leenane Trilogy' deconstructs almost every myth of the Irish theatre' typifies the tone of an essay that sits uneasily with the more studied and elusive analyses of Banville and Ni Chuilleanain. McDonagh's Anglo-Irish heritage is repeatedly referred to in the essay, suggesting that perhaps this alone is enough to make him suitably modern, while his one-dimensional characters are given motivations and contexts that are not really sustainable.

The collection concludes with Eugene O'Brien's tightly-written and convincing essay in which he places the work of Yeats and Heaney firmly in the context of their varied and different engagement with a chimerical notion of modernity. Basing his analysis on Jacques Derrida's concept of *hauntology*, O'Brien's essay in many ways ties up a good many of the loose ends that such a diverse collection of essays is bound to create. The key methodological practice of engaging with modernity, he argues, is 'the questioning of the givens of the past in order to carve out a space that is

.....

both aware of that past but at the same time focused on the modern and beyond'. This Janus-faced approach to the notoriously complex and shifting concept that is modernity is closely reflected in the selection of essays for the book. *Engaging Modernity* looks back to tradition to tease out a tentative source for the contemporary analysis of the state of Ireland, sensitive to the unique economic boom of the past decade and the consequent changes wrought on Irish society. A new millennium needs a few signposts, and this book will provide its readers with the curious comfort of feeling, as Brendan Kennelly has noted, 'at home in a sense of homelessness'.

John McDonagh