

Preface

Counterpoetics of Modernity is dedicated to Seamus Deane, who passed away in May 2021, even as this book was in its last stages. The epigraph, the last lines of Trevor Joyce's *Rome's Wreck*, renders the Irish proverb "Maireann lorg an phinn, ach ní mhaireann an béal a chan." Those who knew Seamus not only through his unmatched writings on Irish literature and critical theory, but also through his voice, his wit and conversation, and his laughter, will feel deeply the truth of that saying.

My dedication of the book to Seamus is inspired not just by the untimely moment of his passing, but also by my regret about a conversation that never did take place. Trevor once remarked that he "would love to see stuff done on Field Day *and* SoundEye," imagining a possible encounter and discussion between the cultural and political work of the Derry-based cultural and political organization that Seamus directed over many years and the poetry festival that Trevor co-founded and ran for some twenty years in Cork. Though the former evolved out of a theatre company and the latter's focus on poetry intersected with related avant-garde cultural interventions, The Avant and Cork Caucus, both initiatives sought to reinvigorate thought and imagination in Ireland, and opened Irish intellectual and creative life to multiple currents and possibilities from around the world. Their cultural practice represented something sorely lacking in Ireland, the space in which to further the rigorous critical reflection on which both the political and the aesthetic imagination has to draw. The very fact that SoundEye and Field Day seem so at variance in their projects and their aims only means that the conversation Trevor imagined could have sparked an unprecedented and invaluable colloquy, one that might have spawned critical engagements that would have lasted years rather than days.

Sadly, with Seamus's death, the opportunity for that conversation is gone. Nevertheless, though this book can never substitute for the conversation that might have been, I was struck in the course of assem-

bling its final shape by the realization that in a peculiar way it brings together two distinct aspects of my own work over many years that represent respectively ongoing critical dialogues with Seamus and Field Day and with Trevor and SoundEye. That is perhaps unsurprising from one perspective. My first encounters with both Seamus and Trevor took place when I was still an undergraduate studying in Cambridge, stepping tentatively into the field of Irish Studies that was just about to be transformed by new energies and new approaches, many of which were pioneered and sustained by Field Day. Those meetings gave rise to what is now over forty years of conversations that have been my deep good fortune to enjoy. But though poets—Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, and Derek Mahon—were intimately involved with Field Day’s work from an early point, and though Seamus himself began his writing career with the publication of three volumes of poems, poetry was never a principal focus of his work. Nor, indeed, has poetry very often formed the object of the critical tendency in Irish Studies most closely associated with the overall project and outlook of Field Day, that is, postcolonial theory. In particular, the contemporary poetic work that has been understood as carrying forward the modernist impulse of the poets of the 30s—Samuel Beckett, Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin, and Thomas MacGreevy—and that interests me most in the second part of this book, has fallen entirely outside the purview of postcolonial criticism.

In Chapter 4, I try to come to terms with the peculiar ways in which experimental or innovative poetics have seemed to be incompatible with postcolonial or race critical theory. But it will remain surprising to many readers that throughout this book I read not only poets like Mangan and Yeats—who have often enough been understood in relation to anti-colonial nationalism—but also the most innovative of Irish poets, Trevor Joyce himself, Maurice Scully, and Catherine Walsh, in a way that consistently holds the colonial nature of Irish modernity in mind. In fact, however, the thing that should surprise is that they have not been read in this light. This is not only a matter of their content, which consistently engages with Ireland’s past, with the Irish language, with the destructiveness of modernization in Ireland and elsewhere, and with alternative imaginings of social life. It is also a question, which I try to answer in Chapter 1, as to why the modernist impulses that shaped the literary work of the Revival, from Synge and Yeats to Joyce and O’Casey, were eclipsed in the wake of Ireland’s partial decolonization. The anti-nationalist reaction against the Free State was also an anti-modernist one and both tendencies remain dominant in our own time, in writing and in criticism. But it should seem odder than it does that a postcolonial criticism that took for its principal texts the

advanced modernist work of Yeats and Joyce should have neglected the poetry of the most formally inventive of contemporary poets. I hope that *Counterpoetics of Modernity* will contribute to remedying that curious oversight.

This may be the first book-length study of Irish poetry to devote chapters to each of Joyce, Scully, and Walsh and to regard them, along with Ciaran Carson and Medbh McGuckian, in a postcolonial framework and in the context of a broader meditation on the forms of modernization that shaped Irish culture. But it would have been impossible without the pioneering work of two critics in particular, J. C. C. Mays and Alex Davis. Any critic working on what Davis calls “the broken line” of Irish modernist poetry is indebted to their critical work. But my debt to each is also personal. It was Jim Mays who, with generous hospitality and a little mischievous humor at my expense, welcomed me into his home, shared books with me, and above all introduced me to the work of younger Irish poets that he had consistently supported, by his writing and by his attentive reading. At the time, I was just a student looking for material for an Irish issue of what was then still the undergraduate magazine, *Granta*, but Jim has remained an unfailingly generous resource ever since and an unflinchingly insightful critic of poetry. Alex Davis was the first to identify a “neo-avant-garde” in Irish poetry and to devote a chapter of his book on Denis Devlin to the poets he identified as belonging to that tendency. This book could not have been written without his work or the volume on Irish modernism in the 1930s that he edited with Patricia Coughlan. But I am particularly grateful for his generous comments on the drafts of some of this work, and especially for his comments on the first chapter which owes so much to his thinking.

The work has benefited also from the insights of Joe Cleary, whose work on Irish modernism and postcolonial writing brings with it an internationalist breadth of reading and theoretical insight that has invigorated Irish criticism for over two decades. Over and above what I have learned from his thinking, which will be evident especially in Chapter 1, his specific feedback has been invaluable to me. Maureen Fadem’s just and critical editorial eye saved me from many an unwieldy sentence and gave me intellectual encouragement just as my energy was flagging. But beyond such specific debts, I am aware of many others less easy to identify. Irish Studies lives, as everyone knows, through conversations in which ideas are formulated and tested long before they are written—if, indeed, they ever are. Over many years I have gained in more ways than I could name, from such conversations with friends whose intellectual generosity has been an always sustaining pleasure: Luke Gibbons, Lee

Jenkins, Heather Laird, Breandán Mac Suibhne, Conor McCarthy, Victor Merriman, Emer Nolan, Alexandra Poulain, John P. Waters, and Clair Wills.

But it is, of course, to poets that this book owes most: to Trevor Joyce, whose invitations to participate at SoundEye were an incomparable gift, restoring to me conversations and friendships that had long been broken off; to Fergal Gaynor, whose commitment to making new things happen never ceases to amaze me; to Billy Mills and Catherine Walsh, who reached out to me so kindly many years ago and have remained an inspiration ever since; to Maurice and to Mary Scully, whose welcoming home has always been a haven of good food and great talk; and to Geoff Squires and Randolph Healy, whose work forms an essential part of the ongoing “infinite conversation” that constitutes the spirit of SoundEye.

Several editors who published the first versions of chapters of this book, as listed below, gave me not only indispensable opportunities to “road test” my thinking, but also feedback that improved them greatly. My thanks are due to Jimmy Cummins, Eric Falci, Kenneth Keating, Niamh O’Sullivan, Mark Quigley, Sinead Sturgeon, and Rachel Warriner.

The final stages of assembling a book can often prove the most arduous and taxing. I am deeply grateful to Soraya Zarook for her indefatigable editorial and research assistance and her long-suffering patience and good humor, without which this book would hardly have seen the light of day. And, for the second time and with equal pleasure, I have to thank the editorial team at Edinburgh University Press for the great attentiveness, patience and care for producing beautiful books. In particular, I have to thank Eliza Wright for her painstaking editing of the manuscript, without which many more errors and infelicities would have survived than those for which I bear the sole responsibility. Finally, many thanks to Clare Counihan for producing an index that could serve as a subterranean map of the whole book!

For many years, Sarita See has shared with me the pleasures of living and the pains and panics of writing. She has an uncanny capacity to be right. For her insights, readings, laughter and a companionship that makes life rich, I am daily thankful.