

## Preface

The state is concentric, man is eccentric.

James Joyce (1882–1941)<sup>1</sup>

In a previous volume of this series, the editors of *Classics after Antiquity* noted suggestively how tempting and easy it is to conceive of literary modernism as a “fixed point” in history, one whose diverse engagements with classical learning we may consolidate by “culling” its past selectively with academic shorthand.<sup>2</sup> One need only to think of Wilfred Owen’s “old Lie,” James Joyce’s reputed “mythical method,” Virginia Woolf’s salient discussion on “Not Knowing Greek,” or Ezra Pound’s “Died some pro patria, non dulce non et decor” to find a “clutch of well-known and well-worn quotations” by which we sometimes dilute, or package, the heterogeneity of modernist classical receptions for broader scholarly discussion and classroom-ready understanding.<sup>3</sup> This kind of error is in no way endemic to reception studies in classics, or to the study of modernist writings at large: it remains a threat to scholarship of many types, for when contextualizing or theorizing the tendencies of any artwork(s) or period, the temptation to employ categories or other abstract principles as a blunt instrument has a strong concentric pull – perhaps even more so when dealing with works notorious for their lexical difficulty, thematic ambiguity and avant-garde distortions of received stylistic convention. We might choose to ignore certain historical details and seize on others; we might develop certain theoretical complexities while the nuance of other aspects may be recentered or lost; we may smooth out the distinctive formal ambiguities of a particular text, object or period of study where its characteristics, to say nothing of its genesis, could in fact be much rougher, much less tidy. In this way the densely

<sup>1</sup> Borach (1954) 326.

<sup>2</sup> Blanshard, Butler and Greenwood (2015) ix.

<sup>3</sup> Blanshard, Butler, and Greenwood (2015) ix.

packed eccentricities of particular creative moments in history are made to seem less volatile, less ambiguous and perhaps more comparable to phenomena we can recognize more easily. Reception studies in the classics has long sought to counter this tendency, plunging scholars deep into the thicket of style and history while making them aware of the very historicity of interpretative activity itself. All encounters with classical literature, with the complex circulation of its knowledge and meaning, are always mediated afterwards – in a labyrinth of ways – and it is these serpentine movements of transmission that create stories whose call and response may be worth retelling. Yet no matter how dispassionately we may conceptualize the nexus of past encounters, our understanding is always framed within our own moment, caught in parallel pathways of interpretation and transmission. Thus, as we narrate stories of reception, we do so always for our own place, in our own time, and often with intentions towards, and representations of, the ‘classical’ known only in part. “Understanding in which ‘the dead trace of meaning’ is ‘transformed back into living experience,’” writes Charles Martindale in *Redeeming the Text* (1993), “is always made *within history*; indeed our own historicity is a necessary concomitant of understanding of this kind.”<sup>4</sup> As the evolutionary force of “previous readings by previous communities” takes hold, present interpretative work is drawn into that “chain of receptions” that has made possible our knowledge and retellings of literature and its past.<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt that a book devoted to classics and its place in the work of Yeats, Joyce, Jones and MacDiarmid could not exist without a vast chain of receptions. Many previous readings have helped set the dimensions and defining characteristics of Anglo-American literary modernism, while often also assigning Yeats and Joyce among its most prominent figures. On the whole, this book does not dispute that assignment, nor does it discount the fact that many of the earliest scholarly accounts – especially of Yeats and of Joyce – were attuned to something of the significance that Celtic modernists attached to the Greek and the Roman. Yet from the beginning, I would argue, the compulsion to periodize, to canonize – to cut a cleaner picture of modernism in unambiguous lines – has been a powerful force, one that has often overwhelmed more detailed and local consideration of specific writers’ eccentric engagements with classical learning. Yeats and Joyce in particular,

<sup>4</sup> Martindale (1993) 7.

<sup>5</sup> Martindale (1993) 5, 7.

from an early stage in their scholarly reception, were sometimes cast as the latest inheritors of a so-called classical tradition in 'Western' literature, an insistence whose crude theorization diminished how conflicted, how subtly enmeshed their own receptions were in their time and place. Following the upheaval of the First World War and the collapse of the world economy nearly a decade later, the notion of an enduring 'classical tradition' in European literature took on new importance in Anglophone societies. Over the course of the previous fifty years, classical education had seen its role shift dramatically. Once critical in marking rank – in settling deeper questions of civic enfranchisement – among the governing and the governed, the value of classical knowledge gradually came under profound scrutiny across the British Empire, and to some its value seemed largely discredited. Nonetheless, as the Pax Americana began to emerge, the Anglo-American academy reinvigorated the study of classical antiquity and recast its importance in universities and in English-speaking societies at large. Influential scholars from the 1920s through the 1950s – figures such as Gilbert Murray, Douglas Bush, Gilbert Highet, R. R. Bolgar among others – salvaged something of its institutional and cultural prominence by stressing the existence of a classical tradition. The formative and benevolent impact of this tradition, they argued, could be traced in the development of all major European civilizations and their literatures – and perhaps nowhere was it more apparent than in English literature whose study at Anglo-American universities was fast becoming a widely available means to acquire a liberal education. Though classical works were then predominantly read in English translation, the literatures of Greece and Rome were still regarded as spiritual ideals, forms from which the postwar world would have to learn if it were to contribute something lasting to the progress of Anglophone civilization. This stress on the invigorating power of an enduring 'classical tradition' injected some life, in new contexts, into some of the older, Victorian claims that knowledge of Greek and Latin had previously maintained on social prestige, cultural fluency and political enfranchisement. Thus its study became, for a time, a critical organizing principle in the expansion of liberal education and in the social cohesion of democratic 'Western' civilization, newly reborn amid the Cold War.

Under these auspices, many of modernism's more prominent receptions of Greek and Roman antiquity were first studied and curricularized for broad institutional consumption, and some figures of 'high modernism' were seen as contemporary exemplars of a more or less

unbroken line of descent from classical antiquity, one whose apparent ‘purity’ or cultural stability ran back behind the ravages of world war, genocide and economic devastation. The apparent longevity of this tradition was thus cast in terms of broad civic consolation – the classics existed as a model of ‘wisdom literature’ that could still provide examples of aesthetic unity and social order for a generation tempered by war and beset with the desire to recover. Nonetheless, this ‘traditional’ way of presenting the heterogeneous stories of classics and its modernist receptions tells much more about the importance of antiquity in the immediate postwar period than it does about exceptional encounters with the *Nachleben* of Greek and Latin a generation earlier, not least because many of the period’s most innovative interventions with classics were born, not in efforts to conform with ‘timeless tradition’ but with skepticism, envy and sometimes outright antagonism against customary ways of institutionalizing and transmitting classical knowledge. The last thirty years of study in modernism and classical reception have helped demonstrate the dynamism of these struggles, even as the very definition of modernism(s) has come under renewed scrutiny and new forms of revision. Reimagining the critical paradigms that first prized modernism’s mainly European and American expressions, studies of the period have been engaged in what the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (2010) have called “an ongoing process of redefinition that takes its cue from analyses of a modernity that is increasingly seen in globalizing and thus transnational terms.”<sup>6</sup> The shift, moreover, towards new historicist approaches and to genetic criticism of prominent literary texts has further discouraged pursuits of “grand unified accounts” of modernism at large and instead opened up and expanded its scholarly fields empirically and theoretically.<sup>7</sup> This expansion has been predicated largely on the view that modernity itself represents a geographically diverse phenomenon across the globe, one whose intermittent temporal paths in specific places can be better analyzed with forms of “local historicism.”<sup>8</sup> It is with this in mind that this book brings together some of the disparate stories that have helped determine the specific histories of classical reception within the evolution of so-called Celtic literary modernism. What follows is thus not a unified account of a movement per se but an attempt rather to

<sup>6</sup> Brooker et al. (2010) 3.

<sup>7</sup> Hacking (1989–1990) 345. See also Brooker et al. (2010) 3.

<sup>8</sup> Brooker et al. (2010) 4, and Hacking (1989–1990) 345.

document the eccentric character, and stylistic consequences, of five particular encounters with the traces of classical antiquity. Broadly speaking, these encounters took place at a moment when classics' diminished cultural authority had become entangled across the British Isles with a variety of insurgent ideologies centered on Celtic revival and proto-postcolonial resistance. As that happened, receptions of the ancient world became contested sites among an emerging literary avant-garde, palimpsests on which a variety of popular nationalist receptions of antiquity were enmeshed with and radically overwritten by imaginative – often linguistically hybrid – reworkings of the Greek and the Roman. These receptions – fired by skepticism, satirical mimicry, outright mistranslation and creative adaptation – made the 'classical' a disputed "third space" within Celtic modernism, one where national self-determination and experimental poetics could be, as Homi Bhabha has written, "appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew."<sup>9</sup>

The scholarly approach adopted in this book joins interest in the hermeneutics of modernist reception with what has recently been called narrative historicism. This critical method emerged as a way to examine works of twentieth-century literature, and the specific contexts of their genesis and reception, in part with the 2014 publication of Kevin Birmingham's *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses*. While Birmingham's book is not concerned with the *Nachleben* of classical literatures, his approach is evidence of a broader desire to see the active voice of narrative history, of storytelling, reinvigorated in literary criticism. On being awarded the 2016 Truman Capote prize for the book, Birmingham insisted that the telltale sign of so-called narrative historicism was the embedding of "arguments in a story" instead of "embedding stories in an argument."<sup>10</sup> In seeking "patterns in the boggling immensity of the past," narrative historicism

asserts relevance, identifies influence and qualifies importance. It draws out nuances of personality, of moments in time, of settings and disputes and gestures. Criticism is not distant. Literary history accumulates from a litany of intimacies, from the small, day-to-day experiences of men and women of letters. Recreating those experiences is as crucial as forming arguments about them. In fact, it doubles as an argument about them.

<sup>9</sup> Bhabha (2004) 55.

<sup>10</sup> Birmingham (2017).

Narrative details serve critical purposes. The size and style of James Joyce's notebooks are important.<sup>11</sup>

Although *Classics and Celtic Literary Modernism* does not tell the story of a single work in twentieth-century literature, its approach to documenting key moments in the history of modernist classical receptions works in something of the way Birmingham describes. The analysis of pivotal, creative encounters with classical learning (and the institutions that guarded the diffusion of that knowledge) can not only generate fresh exegetical accounts of modernist literature but also deepen our understanding of modernisms at large, reenacting the complex ways in which classical allusions, adaptations and translations of the 'past' were mediated to and then renovated by widely regarded writers. Thus the narrative details of this book – its "litany of intimacies" – serve critical purposes: the stories of each chapter are designed to show how classics' different institutional and ideological receptions remained transformative in the early twentieth century. Despite evolving prestige, classics and its receptions shaped not just the nationalist ideologies of Celtic revival and renaissance but the unusual, hybrid literary responses of Anglo-Celtic writers as well. The emphasis this book places on narrative history is not to sideline wider discussion of theoretical implications but to suggest rather that sound reflection can best be made when key contextual differences are drawn out from the receptions under examination. The prominent Irish, Anglo-Welsh and Scottish writers selected for this study were chosen because the thick historical contexts that molded their forms of reception (and transformed their reputations) are parallel, if not altogether shared. However, even when similarities of place, style or ideology can be noted, it is equally important to remain skeptical of patterns observed, to retain, as Peter Burke has suggested, "a variety of concepts" – a variety of stories even – when investigating 'classical' encounters with cultural nationalisms.<sup>12</sup> This seems especially salient at present as more critical forms of reception studies have taken hold recently amid the rise of new kinds of populism and nationalism. The classics and reception have again been implicated in ideologies and movements that have sometimes cast themselves as 'rightful' inheritors of the so-called classical tradition or legacy of 'Western' civilization. In this moment, to remain rigorous about describing and judging differences of context and situa-

<sup>11</sup> Birmingham (2017).

<sup>12</sup> Burke (2009) 66.

tion in specific cultural encounters is essential, I believe, to gaining perspective on how receptions of antiquity continue to foment nationalist fervor and crude political animus – even while offering, in some cases, fertile ground on which eccentric modes of collusion with, or profound resistance against, these receptions can stand. As this study demonstrates, the aesthetic of Celtic literary modernism did not emerge from or produce an ossified ‘classical tradition’ of predetermined significance. Instead it catalyzed a variety of insurgent ideologies, literary idioms and experimental expressions across languages – forces that left, in their wake, compelling stories for a new age.

