

University of Cluj March 16 2017
Address on the Irish Revival

This great university pioneered the pursuit of Irish Studies in Romania through the later decades of the last century. Its leaders and scholars had the vision and audacity to take Ireland, a small island on the very edge of Europe, as a test-case of the modern world. Doubtless, the struggle of a people for freedom has moved many to take up this study, but the attempt by writers such as WB Yeats and James Joyce to provide a critical exploration of that freedom for readers across the globe is a further reason for the high level of interest. The Ireland which was invented a hundred years ago was a creation of political leaders such as James Connolly and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington but of writers, painters and musicians. Right now on the island we are still in the middle of a decade of commemoration, which began in 2012 on the centenary of the Ulster Covenant, and has continued with commemorations of the Dublin Lock-Out in 2013 and of World War One in 2014 and in the past year with memorials of the 1916 Easter Rising. We have yet to confront the anniversaries of the subsequent War of Independence or the celebration of the centenary of the Irish State in 2022, not to mention the Civil War which immediately followed.

We ourselves live in a time of tumultuous global change, a moment of latency. It is difficult for us to predict what our world will look like in a few year's time. The role of accident in history is still insufficiently understood, the sense in which even the major actors of the past acted on impulse without knowing where exactly they were going. Our commemorations have tried to restore to our past moments the "openness" which they once had, before later events took on the look of inevitability. We are learning how to be Connolly's and Joyce's contemporaries: we read them far less fully as yet than they read us. We are the future of those great founders, for whom they did so much; yet they are also our best evidence that an Irish future did once exist—and still could. We are emerging from a decade of dire austerity, unemployment and emigration---and we can be inspired to courage by considering the ways in which the Revival generation, coming out of famine and the loss of the native language, was able to offer a diagnosis of its condition and point a clear way forward.

What were the causes of the Irish Revival? As complex and difficult to list as the causes of the First World War. The novelist George Moore liked to joke that a literary revival occurred because five or six clever people "lived in the city of Dublin and hated one another cordially". High levels of unemployment allied to improved levels of education are always likely to produce a younger generation committed to cultural activity. In Ireland the aftershocks succeeding the Great Hunger of the 1840s convinced people like Yeats of the need to fill the vacuum left by the lost Irish language with new national institutions such as the Abbey Theatre, in which the stories of ancient epic heroes of Gaelic Ireland could be retold in the form of English-language plays. Many people still thought in Irish while using English words---and the result was a wholly new sense of the syntactical possibilities of the English language. An interesting analogy would be with the ways in which African-Americans, at much the same time, were taking up violins, pianos and clarinets to produce that haunting new music called Jazz.

Every cultural revival is in some senses a sustained act of translation, in which one discourse is remapped through another. The leaders of the Irish revival understood that to translate Ireland was to invent it all over again.

Did they fully understand where it would all lead?---that the gathering of an audience in a national theatre would, as in the later case of Havel's Theatre in Prague, come to be seen as a rehearsal of revolution? That the heroic gestures of Cuchulain on the Abbey stage would be emulated by men and women in the streets outside the theatre during the Rising of 1916? Oscar Wilde once said that the first duty in life was to adopt a pose—and what the second was, nobody had yet found out. The leaders of the Revival assumed a free Ireland in order to prove it---they took it for granted before anyone fired a shot for it.

The Easter Rising was indeed the central moment in the Irish narrative, the moment from which our subsequent freedom and independent state emerged. But, in submitting to any experience, even in memory, we always need to remind ourselves of the other experiences which we had, or might have had. The role of the Ulster Volunteers, of the World War, of the Dublin trade union militancy, of the suffragist and socialist movements, as well as the attempt by the Gaelic League to restore Irish, should also be seen as contributing to the Ireland that emerged.

A proper commemoration affords the chance (as the French so wisely put it) of “reculer pour mieux sauter”---of taking a few steps backwards, the better to leap forward. In fact the consciousness of the Revival generation was itself based on THEIR decade of commemorations---marking the centenary of the 1798 Rebellion the fiftieth anniversary of the Famine, as the great symbolic year of 1900 approached. The writers and political leaders were ready to leap forward into a future which was exhilarating to precisely the extent that it was unknown. No wonder that so many of them are now famous for excavating the Unconscious.

The problem with the wrong kind of commemoration is that the steps backward are taken---and that is all. And the problem with remembering the Rising and not the other events is that 1916 as event has tended in later accounts to suck up the immense creative moments which preceded and followed it, like a vortex into which everything disappears. This is a most unfortunate thing, given the amazing quality of writing and action between 1891 and 1922. One element, for instance, is the ways in which Protestant ideas of “self-help” informed not just Yeats's theatre but also the Gaelic League and the movements to revive agriculture, industry and the arts and crafts. One further cause of the revival indicated by Vivian Mercier was this---it was created to provide employment for the children of Protestant rectories, who could no longer believe what their parents believed but who applied old Protestant ideas of self-sufficiency. The very notion of self-determination for the emergent state was itself an embodiment in the political sphere of the notion of self-election---of every man and woman being their own priests. This makes for an interesting paradox---self-government was the ultimate achievement of the Protestant mission in Ireland.

Some people have suggested that the current commemorations should, therefore, be used to critique recent flaws in our society. For example, there are real analogies between the caustic comments by Patrick Pearse on a payment-by-results metric in the colonial system of education and the critique of those who treat education as a mere business matter of league-tables. Or between the Gaelic League's exposure of the erosion of cultural sovereignty by the yellow press of the 1890s in the new conditions of mass literacy and the contemporary complaints about the creation of a depthless space by digitized global media. These seem reasonable points, especially if the past in such an accounting allows us to confront some persisting blind-spots in the present.

Yet, every person writes and acts at the mercy of his or her own immediate moment. We should not beat ourselves up because today we have nobody quite like Yeats or Joyce or Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Their generation was the sort which comes along in the history of a people perhaps once in a thousand years. It was as if Ireland were undergoing the Renaissance and Enlightenment and Modernism all at one and the same time, as events went on fast-forward and cultural change speeded up. They were amazing people, who saw ideas not just as interesting in themselves but as the basis for action. They wrote in popular newspapers as well as intellectual journals, assuming a wide audience, not just at home but overseas. Synge wrote in French newspapers, Joyce in Italian, Yeats in American. They often disagreed among themselves but were, if anything, even more fascinated by the thinking of their opponents than by that of their supporters.

They emerged, as I said, out of the economic frustrations and cultural blockage consequent upon a famine in which over one million died and after which the population of Ireland fell from eight to four million. Yet they picked themselves up and produced one of the great examples of RISORGIMENTO in the modern world. They had plenty of reasons to fear that Ireland had no future and would soon disappear. The rebels who entered the General Post Office at Easter 1916 seized on the symbolic meaning of the date, portending resurrection, rebirth, spring-life coming from a dead land; but they worried in conversation on the opening day that the old idea of Ireland might be vaporizing in the trenches of World War One. They were not stupid fears---after all, many empires went into that war but only two came out of it, and in its process whole nations disappeared. Yet we find in the writings of the Revival a constant preoccupation with the future---Yeats wrote poems "To Ireland In The Coming Times"; Joyce tried to forge "the uncreated conscience of my race"; and Patrick Pearse, the leader of the Rising, wrote of how "millions unborn shall dwell in the house I shaped in my heart, the noble house of my thought".

They were practical mystics. Whereas the English sought an answer to the Irish Question, they wanted something deeper---a meaning to the question. In fact they were so far ahead of their time that they sought answers to questions which had not yet been fully asked---how else to explain their advanced ideas of social democracy, of interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness, of a dramatic stage which depicts the interior of the human mind?

One reason they had such a vivid sense of the future and of the Unconscious was that they did not deny themselves a full knowledge of their own past. The colonial education system had denied them access to the story of their own people but they insisted on teaching it to their readers. This also has ironic implications for current Irish society, which has relegated the study of history to a marginal activity in many secondary schools. The best way in which to give young people a sense of momentum into the future is to imbue them with a sense of the past; without that, they may succumb to anomie and thoughts of suicide, a major problem among the youth of Europe today. Of course, the uses to which the past is put can vary a lot over time and place---in the England and France of the 1890s there was a fear that people were living in the fin-de-siecle; but in Ireland the country felt itself both very old and extremely young at one and the same time. A figure of Dorian Gray indeed.

Even among those gifted people, however, serious mistakes were made...especially in treatment of women. Anna Parnell, who led the Ladies Land League when her brother Charles was in jail, found that he closed their bank account to punish their radicalism when he regained freedom. And Constance Markiewicz warned constantly that many men in the nationalist movement seemed insufficiently aware of social deprivation, whether among schoolchildren in Dublin or the poor of Connemara.

It was experiences such as these which explained the warning given by the labour agitator James Connolly that there was a danger that people could become drunk of mere remembrance; and that what could follow would be in such cases "a carnival of reaction". The commemoration of the Lock-Out of 1913 in Dublin four years ago was staged as just such a nostalgic spectacle---its reenactment was performed by actors separated from citizens, with no sense of irony, by private bouncers from a security firm! Yet the great texts of the Revival resound with warnings against that false kind of carnivalism---O'Casey in *The Lough and the Stars* mocks the plumed ostrich hat worn by nationalists, such as one might see in a "toyshop" or a "pantomime". And Joyce in his great story "The Dead" warns against fixation on the past, that the only good singers are dead singers.

These writers, even a century ago, warned against the danger of uncritical commemoration---that the national past might be ransacked as a wardrobe filled with gaudy costumes and be reduced to a theme-park operated by event managers. The past in such a formulation would become a place of retreat rather than an impulse to revival.

This is a risk which haunts all acts of innovation. Whenever a community attempts something new, some of its members become unnerved by the sheer unknowability of all that may follow. To give themselves courage, they pretend that the new thing is really a restoration of something familiar and old. So, as Marx observed, the businessmen of revolutionary Paris in 1789 presented themselves as resurrected Romans, restoring democracy. Or Shakespeare's hamlet, on the brink of interior monologue and modernity, saw a ghost. As one possible consequence, only the steps backwards are taken, but not to jump

forward---the ghost sets all agendas, and the act of revolution is taken away from the very people who seek to perform it. History is recued to a narrative stutter and a costume drama. This is the nostalgic past-fixation mocked by Joyce and O'Casey, who knew that whenever a real revolution comes the people wear their own clothes. When they don't, they get trapped in images of the past, marching forward (as so many hyper-nationalists are doing once again) into a bright new yesterday. Leaders, incapable of innovation, ask their followers to become drunk on remembrance.

This is what Conor Cruise O'Brien may have meant when he warned the Irish Republican Army in the 1970s that it might cause Irish people to "commemorate themselves to death". But it was what Joyce kept on asking too. In the Sirens episode of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom listens to the rebel ballad "Who Fears to Speak of 98?" and asks a pertinent question "Who Fears To Speak of 1904?" Joyce liked to laugh at the statues of Dublin which sought to memorialize the past---he said there were only two kinds: one which requested "For God's sake, how do I get down off this plinth?" and the other which held out its hand saying "in my day the dung-hill was so high".

For me, all these reservations were magnificently summed up by James Connolly when he warned against a narrowing fetishizing of Irish Studies----"glorious and heroic indeed, but still only a tradition". That is a key phrase---still only a tradition. It would only be better than that when it became a ground for comparison with other national stories and a basis for analysis and renewed action. That is why it is so important that Irish Studies is no longer confined to Ireland, or even to English-speaking peoples. What you do here is a reminder that the leaders of the Irish Revival always saw themselves as citizens of the world, as part of the Enlightenment. Not for nothing did one the rebels of 1916 say that one of the aims of their movement was to put an end to the rule of the fairies in Ireland.

So there must always be a place for critical commemoration; and a need to be vigilant about the use and abuse of the past. If Joyce were to return to Dublin on any given Bloomsday, he would be delighted to think that his masterpiece *Ulysses* was being reenacted by ordinary citizens in the streets. His book, after all, located modernism as a movement of the streets and celebrated circulation. He would enjoy all the drinks and japes---and be glad to note that the citizens were healthier, better-fed, jokey. He would also be glad that his festive day allowed people in a now much larger city to recapture something of the intimacy, freshness and friendliness of Dublin in 1904.

The commemorations of events such as the World War or the Rising, the independence struggle or the Civil War, in which so many people died, are more difficult and challenging. I am never at ease when any battle of the past, however remote, is reenacted as costume drama and the pain of ancestors is commodified as mere entertainment. By all means let us reconnect with our country's inventors, but in ways which are appropriate and do not engage in what the historian EP Thompson once castigated as "the enormous condescension of posterity".

The past is never fully decodable---and never was. The rebellion of 1916 was a surprise to the British authorities but it may also have been in some sense a surprise to the rebels themselves. No honest person ever knows exactly what they are doing, or what consequences will flow from their actions. In key moments of history, people are overtaken by forces of which they are but dimly aware. Did any of the men and women who seized the Post office in 1916 suspect that the independence of India might also flow from their deed? Did Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, when she went on hunger strike in a Dublin jail in a 1912 suffragist protest, realize that Mahatma Gandhi would take her act as a model decades later?

The role of the Unconscious in the writings and actions of Irish revivalists is crucial, that Unconscious which contains an imaginative “surplus” to be revealed only in the future. This is a key to the paradox which inheres in all rebellions by subject peoples. One needs a self in order to narrate a story, but how can one ever presume to know that self until the story is fully told?

Every act of radical creation has an arbitrary quality and can seem impulsive, insufficiently motivated. But years of subsequent hack-work can make the momentary intuition incarnate. Joyce must have imagined a modern story based on Homer’s Odyssey in a flash of insight---but it took him seven years to build the full model and to ensure that he WAS really doing something new and not just lapsing back into the old story. The 1916 rebels likewise blew away the bourgeois Edwardian colony and seized control of Dublin’s streets in anew form of republican citizenship. But it took many decades before the people could fully “catch up” with the meaning of 1916 or of Ulysses, could make themselves complete contemporaries of those founding moments. As I said, those moments of insight offered answers to questions which had never been fully asked. But, as in Greek drama, the unaskable question, once put, would shatter all the paradigms of the inherited world.

After such moments, as Yeats observed, “all changed, changed utterly”; and the bases for a knowledge of Ireland had to be laboriously reconfigured. It is that reconfiguration which continues even today, as a global project, under the name of Irish Studies. I want to thank and salute those here who contribute so much to it. But I also want to remind myself of what I said at the outset, and once or twice in this talk---that we can never FULLY understand why anyone does anything. The boredom endured by young people in cities of drastic unemployment may be as potent a factor in the creation of art or revolution as any more palpable political or cultural causes. People do strange things for reasons of which they are never completely aware. They grow tired of the available paradigms and embrace a future which is exciting to the extent that it is unknown.

Thank you for listening-----thank you for hosting me----and thank you for the honour you accord to Irish writing by studying it so well.