Selena Daly

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Futurism and Irish literature

Marinetti never visited Ireland and there was never an exhibition of Futurist painting in Ireland during Marinetti's lifetime (nor indeed, since). Nonetheless, a number of Irish-born artists and writers did come into contact with Futurism, and the influences of Marinetti's movement can be felt in their work, although any direct contact they had occurred either in Great Britain or in mainland Europe.

The Irish Nationalist poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was the first Irish writer who crossed Marinetti's path, during the latter's pre-Futurist, Symbolist phase. French translations of some of Yeats's early poems appeared in French magazines in the early years of the twentienth century, including Vers et prose and Mercure de France (see Vinall: "English Contributors to Poesia", 550-551), which Marinetti would have read. The future leader of Futurism then invited Yeats to contribute some work to Poesia, Marinetti's international poetry revue, and in 1907 he published an extract from Yeats's forthcoming play *Deirdre*, based on a figure of Celtic mythology (Yeats: "A Dirge over Dierdre e Naise [sic]", 12). Marinetti and Yeats met on at least two occasions between March 1912 and June 1914, when Marinetti visited London (Vinall: "English Contributors to 'Poesia'", 558). Deirdre O'Grady has argued that the influence of Marinetti "as both symbolist and futurist proved instrumental" to the development of Yeats's aesthetic (O'Grady: "Futurism in Exile", 35) and pointed to the echoes of the hero of *Mafarka il futurista*, Gazurmah, in Yeats's exploration of the mechanical human being and puppet in the plays The King of the Great Clock Tower (1934) and The Herne's Egg (1938).

It is Ireland's most famous writer, James Joyce (1882–1941), though, who is most readily associated with a Futurist influence. Joyce encountered Futurism while he was living in Trieste in the 1910s and was exposed there to the ideas of Marinetti and his followers. It has often been speculated that Joyce was present at the Futurist *serata* held at the Politeama Rossetti on 12 January 1910, and if he had not been present, he would certainly have been aware of the event and its raucous unfolding in the city. Joyce was also in possession of a number of Futurist books, including Palazzeschi's *Il codice di Perelà* (1911), Marinetti's *Enquête internationale sur le vers libre* (1909) and Boccioni's *Pittura e scultura futuriste* (1914) (Budgen: *James Joyce*, 194; Lobner: "James Joyce and Italian Futurism", 79).

In 1918, Joyce reportedly asked his friend and fellow writer, Frank Budgen, about the 'Cyclops' episode in *Ulysses*, enquiring "Does this episode strike you as being futuristic?" (Budgen: *James Joyce*, 153). This suggests that Joyce felt some echoes of Marinetti's doctrine in his work. Futurist influences in *Ulysses*, both in terms of style and content, have been traced by a number of scholars (McCourt: "James Joyce: Triestine Futurist?"

and Lobner: "James Joyce and Italian Futurism", 79). The onomatopoeia of the opening of 'Sirens' and the lack of punctuation in Molly Bloom's monologue 'Penelope' both recall Marinetti's declarations regarding parole in libertà and Futurist literature. The abundance of modern technology in 'Aeolus', the violence and praise of war in 'Cyclops', and the nighttime setting of 'Circe' (recalling Futurist 'insomnia') have all been presented as ideas inspired, at least in part, by Futurism. Lobner went so far as to propose that the figure of the semi-paralysed Commendatore Bacibaci Beninobenone in 'Cyclops' "suggests a satire of Marinetti" who was wounded during the First World War (Lobner: "James Joyce and Italian Futurism", 86). These parallels notwithstanding, it is important to note that a utilization of certain Futurist themes and stylistic devices by Joyce in *Ulysses* by no means indicates a wholesale approval of Marinetti's pronoucements and actions. This did not, however, stop Marinetti from claiming in 1934 that, despite "Joyce's original genius", the Irish writer owed his parole in libertà experiments to the Futurists (Marinetti: "Joyce e le parole in libertà", 2).

In fields other than literature, the influence of Futurism on Ireland is more difficult to trace. While no official Futurist *serata* or exhibition ever took place in Ireland, it appears that a performance of Futurist music was planned for Dublin. From 15-21 June 1914, Luigi Russolo conducted with his Intonarumori (instruments for 'tuning sounds' at various pitches) a Grand Futurist Concert of Noises at the Coliseum Theatre in London. In his 1916 book, L'arte dei rumori (The Art of Noises), Russolo described how he planned a tour around Europe with these musical instruments, writing that "from London we should have gone on to Liverpool, to Dublin, to Glasgow, Edinburgh and Vienna, and then start another long tour that would have included Moscow, Berlin and Paris. The war caused it all to be postponed" (Russolo: L'arte dei rumori, 26).

A Futurist woman painter: Mary Swanzy

In the visual arts, Cubism received far more attention in Ireland than Futurism, although there was a limited appetite for avant-garde art in pre-war Dublin. The wariness in Ireland towards modern art was rooted in the country's particular political and cultural history. The partition of Ireland and the founding of the Irish Free State in the early 1920s "created a political climate that was suspicious, inward-looking and xenophobic" (Kissane: "Analysing Cubism", 15). The Gaelic Revival had begun in the late nineteenth century as a literary phenomenon but soon spread to other artistic fields. The nationalist aims of this movement appeared at odds with the international and forward-looking spirit of Modernism. Art critic Robert O'Bryne has commented that

within Ireland, opposition to the introduction of non-national influences habitually sprang from an understandable fear that the consequence of this cultural invasion would be the engulfing of indigenous traditions. Modernism was thus regularly contested on the basis that it was not Irish. (O'Byrne: "Irish Modernism", 13)

Terry Eagleton has also noted that there was "little or no avant-garde" in Ireland, continuing that "there could be no exhilarating encounter between art and technology in such an industrially backward nation" (Eagleton: *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, 299).

In spite of these challenging conditions for modern artists in Ireland, the avant-garde did succeed in penetrating the Irish cultural landscape in the 1910s. In 1911, Ellen Duncan (later curator of the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin) organized an exhibition in Dublin, entitled *Works by Post-Impressionist Painters*, featuring paintings by André Derain, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. The following year, she held an exhibition of Cubist paintings at the United Artists Club in Dublin, showing works by Picasso and Juan Gris. This exhibition, *Modern French Painters*, was the first to show Cubist paintings in Ireland.

Ireland is unusual in its relationship to avant-garde art because its most famous proponents were in fact women, primarily Mainie Jellett (1897–1944), Evie Hone (1894–1955) and Mary Swanzy (1882–1978) (Marshall: "Women and the Visual Arts in Ireland", 28). All three women were influenced by Cubism, but it was only Swanzy who also displayed echoes of Futurist expression in her artworks. Thus, she can be identified as Ireland's first and only Futurist painter (see Daly: "Mary Swanzy"). Born in Dublin to a professional Protestant family, Swanzy began attending classes at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin in 1897 and was primarily a portrait painter. Before the First World War, she spent time in both France and Italy, where it is likely that she came into contact with Futurism. Based in Florence in 1913, she could not have been unaware of *Lacerba* and the exhibition of Futurist artworks at the Libreria Gonnelli (13 November 1913 – 18 January 1914). Swanzy rarely dated her paintings, so a chronology of Futurist influence on her work is difficult to ascertain. Yet it appears that she experimented with Futurist styles in the period 1913–1920 and again, briefly, in the 1940s.

In 1923, Swanzy identified herself as a landscape painter, and several of her land-scapes indicate a familiarity with the tenets of Futurist painting, in particular the compositional style of many of Giacomo Balla's landscapes and natural subjects (Cullinane: *Mary Swanzy*, 33). *White Tower* is Swanzy's most overtly Futurist-style painting. According to Swanzy herself, it was actually painted while she was in Italy. However, like most of her work, the work is undated, and she only recalled to Patrick Murphy (the painting's current owner) in a conversation in 1971 that it had been painted "many years before" (Murphy: *A Passion for Collecting*, 78). The influence of Futurist ideas on this painting is unmistakable. Indeed, in his memoir, Patrick Murphy recalled an anecdote where Beth Straus, then Vice-President of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, mistook the painting for a Futurist masterpiece (Murphy: *A Passion for Collecting*, 267). The tower of the title is one of the many structures in the Tuscan town of San Gimignano, and yet in Swanzy's painting it resembles not so much a medieval tower as an urban skyscraper. The smooth façade and grey colour of the building suggest a concrete construction, and the low vantage point of the viewer makes it appear even

taller. It rises up out of the earth with an energy and dynamism similar to that evoked in many Futurist paintings. In addition, the clean lines and bulk of the tower also bring to mind the architectural sketches of Antonio Sant'Elia (1888–1916).

Although best known for her Cubo-Futurist and Samoan landscapes, Swanzy did not neglect other subjects in her work. Two quite similar paintings, *Propellors* (1942) and Futuristic Study with Skyscrapers and Propellors (undated), show evidence of the influence of Futurist ideas in both their composition and their subject matter. The composition of both paintings is almost identical. Propellors on long poles shoot out from the bottom-right-hand corner of the canvas, creating an energetic sense of forward motion. The paintings are more abstract than many of Swanzy's works but demonstrate a clear interest in objects associated with modernity and speed. Although not concerned with the depiction of movement itself, as the Futurists were, these paintings do seem to have drawn inspiration "from the tangible miracles of contemporary life, from the iron network of speed which winds around the earth, from the transatlantic liners, the dreadnoughts, the marvelous flights that plow the skies, the shadowy audaciousness of submarine navigators" (Boccioni et al.: "Manifesto of Futurist Painters", 62). Swanzy's portrait Woman with White Bonnet (undated, but c. 1920) has been likened to Pablo Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein (1905–1906) (Kennedy: "Squaring up to Mary Swanzy", n.p.), which Swanzy saw in Stein's house, although there seems to me to be, at best, a very tenuous link between the two works. A more convincing influence on Swanzy's portrait is Umberto Boccioni's Costruzione orizzontale (1912). In accordance with the tenets of Futurist painting, there are multiple intersecting planes in Boccioni's portrait. Swanzy employed a similar technique in her painting. Pushing up past the figure's right shoulder and almost plunging into her eye is a thick pillar, which could be a tower or a chimneystack. Plants sprout from the woman's left shoulder and right hip, revealing no separation between the subject and the background. The woman's body appears transparent at times, as the brown wood of her chair and easel can be seen overlapping with and penetrating her body, recalling the Futurist statement: "Our bodies penetrate the sofas upon which we sit, and the sofas penetrate our bodies" (Boccioni et al: "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto", 65). While Boccioni's Costruzione orizzontale represents a more sophisticated application of Futurist principles, Swanzy's portrait is nonetheless a striking interpretation of these proclamations.

Reports on Futurism in the Irish press

Although artists and writers in Ireland needed to travel abroad in order to come into direct contact with Marinetti's movement, Futurism was not entirely unknown in Ireland. Once the movement had been launched in 1909, Marinetti included Ireland in his projected sphere of influence. As is well known, the impresario was famous for sending out announcements and copies of his publications to critics and newspapers all over the world in order to promote Futurism. Luca Somigli has observed that "even in countries where there was not an active futurist artistic practice, the publication of manifestoes in the popular press became a way to establish a presence, to get the public interested and involved in the futurist project" (Somigli: *Legitimizing the Artist*, 165). This was the case in Ireland, where Futurism received a moderate amount of coverage.

For the most part, Futurism in Ireland received a similar treatment in the press as it had in Great Britain. The Futurist exhibitions and concerts in London between 1912 and 1914 were greeted with responses ranging from disdain to dismissive bemusement. Two typical headlines were "Picture Gallery of a Madhouse: Crazy Dreams Put on Canvas" (Daily Express, 1 March 1912) and "Lunacy Masquerading as Art" (Daily Express, 30 April 1914) (quoted in Black: "The Vorticist Critique of Futurism", 163). The Irish Independent commented sarcastically on Futurist literature in an article of 22 August 1912, writing that "this new literature would at any rate appeal to the schoolboy, for with the abolition of verbs, adverbs, and adjectives, there would pass away most of the rules of grammar" ([Anon.]: "Futurist Literature"). A review in the Sunday Independent of Marinetti's performance of the Bombardment of Adrianople in London's Doré Gallery in June 1914 was harsh in its judgement of the spectacle ([Anon.]: "Futurist Poetry to Hammer-Beats and Drum Rolls"). The critic wondered whether it was intentional that a desk collapsed when Marinetti beat a hammer onto it to signify the sounds of the bombardment. When Marinetti began marching through the audience declaiming his Words-in-Freedom, a Futurist in the audience whispered to the critic that this was meant to represent the besiegers entering the city, at which the anonymous critic caustically commented: "So the picture must have been as clear to the audience as daylight" ([Anon.]: "Futurist Poetry to Hammer-Beats and Drum Rolls").

Futurist innovations in painting did not escape comment in the Irish press either. In a light-hearted piece, advice was offered to young men about how to become Futurist painters, with the following rationale:

I cannot explain what Futurist drawing is, and I am afraid the Futurists could not tell you themselves. But I do know that under the Futurist spell you can take a large canvas, rub it all over with a very juicy fruit pie, and label it "Paddington Station in a Rush" and everyone will believe you. Always label Futurist drawings on the back. All the Futurists do this because they wouldn't know what it was themselves if they did not. (Jay: "In Lighter Vein")

One point that does set the reaction of the Irish press apart from its British counterparts is the relative attention paid in Ireland to Marinetti's political activities, hyper-nationalist outlook and revolutionary goals. By contrast, Luca Somigli has noted that "the political dimension of futurism was almost completely erased from the reports in the British press" (Somigli: *Legitimizing the Artist*, 173). The reason for the different response in Ireland may be that aspects of the Futurist programme were

deemed to have particular resonance and relevance for the country's political circumstances. In the first *Irish Times* article dedicated to Futurism, dated 5 May 1909, the commentary concluded by relating the content of the first manifesto to the Irish context, stating:

If the 'Futurists' do in the next ten years a tenth part of what they propose to do, they will have warmed their hands to some purpose. [...] The younger generation in Ireland will follow with interest, and possibly with some sympathy, the developments of this fiery Italian movement against the cramping tendencies of a socialistic age. These young men may not be destined to go far, but they manifestly intend to go fast. ([Anon.]: [s.t.])

While Somigli noted that only one British newspaper journalist mentioned Marinetti's involvement in Italy's campaign in Libya in 1912, the same was not true in Ireland. In fact, in an Irish Times editorial of August 1912 about Futurist literature, the writer was confident of a familiarity with Marinetti among the newspaper's readership precisely because of his links to the Tripoli campaign, writing: "Signor Marinetti's name is, no doubt, known to many of our readers; his championship of the Italian attack upon Tripoli gave him a wider notoriety than he could ever have won with his philosophy of art" ([Anon.]: "Editorial"). Much of this familiarity can be attributed to the war reportage of Francis McCullagh, a Catholic journalist born in County Tyrone in present-day Northern Ireland. Variously describing himself as Irish and British, he was an internationally renowned war reporter (Horgan: "Journalism, Catholicism", 172). His book on his experiences in Tripoli, *Italy's War for a Desert*, was published in 1912 and featured heavy criticism not only of Italy's actions in Libya but also of Marinetti, who travelled as a war reporter for L'Intransigéant to Tripoli. In an appendix entitled "'The Cult of the Cannon': An Examination of Signor Marinetti's Philosophy of Blood and Iron", McCullagh was highly critical of Marinetti's jingoism, stating that "this adoration of slaughter is almost as great a sign of degeneracy as the Futurist movement itself" (McCullagh: Italy's War for a Desert, 397). McCullagh's book and his criticism of Marinetti received coverage in numerous Irish newspapers. The *Ulster Herald* in April 1912 recounted an amusing encounter between McCullagh and Marinetti ([Anon.]: "Frank McCullagh Challenged Again"). The latter, in London on one of his Futurist propaganda trips, read the dispatches by McCullagh in *The Nation* criticizing Italy's campaign in Tripoli. Thus, accompanied by an Italian journalist and "a well-known Futurist painter", he set off to McCullagh's isolated house in the Surrey Downs to confront him. When he did not receive a denial or apology from McCullagh, Marinetti challenged him to a duel. McCullagh refused to engage because proper protocol for a duel had not been followed. Marinetti left his card and reluctantly departed. When McCullagh rang Marinetti's hotel the following day to organize the duel, he was informed that the Futurist leader had already departed.

Not all commentary on Futurism in Ireland was negative and dismissive in its tone. *The Irish Times* devoted the most considered and balanced judgement of Futurism from an Irish source to be found on public record. The newspaper received

copies of all of Marinetti's manifestos directly from the Futurist headquarters in Milan. The first mention of Futurism appeared on 5 May 1909, just over two months after the *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* was published on the front page of *Le Figaro* in Paris. It is in fact surprising that this article did not feature in Marinetti's own round-up of international reactions to his first Futurist manifesto, which he published in *Poesia* in July 1909. According to this forty-eight-page documentary section, only two other English-language newspapers remarked on the birth of Marinetti's movement, the British *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sun* in New York.

The report in *The Irish Times* commented on the "newest literary cult" from Italy, of which Marinetti asked the newspaper's "sincere opinion". At first, the anonymous journalist appears merely amused by the excesses of Futurism, writing: "New schools of literature are always welcome. They disturb with a pleasant flutter of excitement the routine of intellectual life. The greater their futility or extravagance, the better entertainment they furnish for the archaeological instincts of posterity." However, the overall judgement was in fact positive and the writer declared himself "very impressed" with the Futurists who have "raised the standard of revolt with a vengeance. They swoop down upon literature as a racing motor car might plunge into the crowded traffic of a city street" ([Anon.]: [s.t.]).

The previously mentioned editorial from August 1912 opens by stating that "we are constantly flattered by receiving communications under the address of Milan from Signor F. T. Marinetti" ([Anon.]: "Editorial"), although the judgement of Marinetti's *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* was rather scathing. For the most part, however, the reports were free from the hostility evident in many British publications, with the Irish reactions mainly confined to curiosity, bemusement and light-hearted mocking. Marinetti's visit to London in 1913 was covered in some depth by *The Irish Times*, which observed that the visit "has done something to inform men's minds in these countries as to the real objects of the Futurists" ([Anon.]: "Revolution in Art"). The presentation of Futurism was considered and nuanced, rather than merely dismissive. The report continued:

As a rule, we are inclined to regard this literary and artistic sect as merely a suitable subject for jokes. The red grass and the green faces of the Futurist pictures have brought the whole movement into disrepute. It certainly is in some aspects very ridiculous. We should be sorry to see the day when it was no longer the impulse of the ordinary man to laugh at such a cult. But when the laughter is over, we sometimes think that there must be more in all this than we see at a glance. Unless Futurists are all lunatics, there must be some comparatively reasonable theory at the back of the weird pictures and literature. ([Anon.]: "Revolution in Art")

The journalist made a concerted effort to judge Futurism on its merits, an attitude not often to be found in the media of the time. He apparently saw some truth in Marinetti's doctrine, suggesting that the abolition of adjectives, adverbs and metre may not be such a bad idea. He observed that for some less able poets, metre can be "a hindrance and a nuisance", while others fancy themselves as accomplished

poets merely because they are adept at the use of poetic prosody. While his ultimate verdict of Futurism was negative, he was far-sighted enough to intuit its potential legacy: "They [the Futurists] will not succeed, but they will probably make their mark. Perhaps, when the present generation is dead, some saner man will take what is good in their theories and introduce it to the world. That is the way in which reforms are brought about" (Anon: "Revolution in Art").

Coverage of Futurism in *The Irish Times* diminished during the First World War, with one arts reviewer noting that "in the midst of graver matters, echoes of the hysterical shrieks of Marinetti and the noisy sans culottes of the new revolution in art and literature have a hollow ring" ([Anon.]: "Futurism", 1915). A few months later, the paper reported on the birth of the Futurist Theatre of Essential Brevity (*teatro sintetico futurista*) and its latest tour in Italy (see p. 256 in the chapter on Italian Theatre), certainly inspired by a missive sent from Futurism's headquarters in Milan. While the Futurists' theatrical pursuits were treated as somewhat of an oddity, the report is evidence of a sustained interest in Futurism in certain circles in Ireland. The article also confirmed that Futurism was still alive and active in spite of the war, under the leadership of "its chief apostle, Signor Marinetti, the inspirer of Futurist art, poetry, and music, [who] still leads the noisy brotherhood of artistic revolutionaries in Milan" ([Anon.]: "Futurism", 1916).

Although a certain amount of knowledge of Futurism and of Marinetti circulated in Ireland in the early years of the twentieth century, direct encounters with the movement were only possible for those with the means to travel beyond the island's shores. Thus, while Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus were imbued with certain Futurist traits as they rambled around Dublin, the same could not be said of the average Irish intellectual in the nation's capital.

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