

Ireland, Modernity and the Question of Definition

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Abstract

This essay is an exploration of the notion of modernity, and its relationship with tradition. It is a response to John Waters’ article on modernity entitled ‘Reactionary Progressives’. I will respond to the article in three sections. Firstly, I will contextualise the debate as I see it, secondly I will examine the issues raised by John Waters in terms of the relationship between modernity and tradition; and finally, I will offer some observations on the role that the work of John McGahern plays in this debate.

Reading the current edition of *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, I was interested to find a discussion, entitled ‘Reactionary Progressives’, which touched on two areas which are of particular interest to me – namely the issue of modernity as it related to Irish society and culture, and also to the recent book *Engaging Modernity*, published by Veritas and edited by Michael Böss and Eamon Maher. Let me immediately declare an interest here as mine is the final chapter in that book, dealing with an articulation of the writings of Yeats and Heaney and those of Jacques Derrida as expressive of a specifically Irish notion of modernity. Human nature being what it is, I was interested to see how John Waters reacted to this book, and was moved by that reaction to pen this reply.

I will respond to the article in three sections. Firstly, I will contextualise the debate as I see it, secondly I will examine the issues raised by John Waters in terms of the relationship between modernity and tradition; and finally, I will offer some observations on the role that the work of John McGahern plays in this debate.

Engaging with the cultural context

Let me begin by stating the value of such a discussion in the context of the contemporary social *milieu*. That Ireland is now in something of a value-deficit is all too obvious. The aftermath of the various scandals, tribunals and inquiries has left the paladins of church and state very much on the sidelines in terms of the arbitration of cultural and ethical values. The net result has been a fall in respect for the institutions of church and state, and a consequent desire among thinking people to be participative in the shaping of the values that will define the Ireland of the Twenty First century. In this context, a debate such as this one, involving John Waters, Desmond Fennell and Eamon Maher can only be a good thing. If a traditional hierarchical value system is to be replaced by a more emancipatory and democratised one, the creation of such a *sensus communis* is dependent on such interchange. Waters makes the point well himself, stressing the value of debate, and lamenting how such debate can be attenuated by ‘moral censure, personal attack or a combination of both’.

Of course, I agree with and applaud such a perspective. If we are ever to have a serious intellectual forum for the exploration and honing of ideas, then the differentiation between personality and ideas must be clearly demarcated. Regrettably, at times in his article, Waters seems blind to this distinction, and he makes comments which I feel personalise the issues to an unacceptable degree. There is a defensive posture taken up which, again, to my mind, is both unhelpful and unnecessary. For example, Waters speaks of remarks made about him in the introduction to *Engaging Modernity* as labelling him as a traditionalist, and further adding that the tenor of these remarks is to suggest that ‘tradition is, ipso facto, demonstrably dubious, and its adherents intellectually if not morally questionable.’

Reading the introduction to this book, I have failed to find any real sense that tradition is ‘demonstrably dubious’; indeed, Maher and Böss both stress the necessity for a nuanced reading of the interaction of modernity and tradition, and they also stress that theirs is not, in any sense, a final definition, a point stylistically evinced by their title. ‘Engaging’ modernity is an active, dialectical process which seeks to define modernity in a performative manner: this is very far from Waters’s notions of the book as in some way binarising a benign modernity with a malign tradition.

As a self-written tribute to his own intellectual openness, Waters approvingly cites his own collocation of Sean Doherty and U2 as examples of the breadth of his own writing. With this I wholeheartedly agree: academic dons, in their ivory towers, writing of nothing but the great works of a canonical tradition have little to contribute to contemporary cultural debate. They would do well to remember that an ivory tower necessitates an awful lot of dead elephants. However, in *Engaging Modernity*, this is precisely the type of openness that is to be found. The canonical figures of Yeats, Joyce and Beckett mix easily with discussions of church, state and contemporary culture. By posing questions as to the status of the modernity that is the Irish experience, this book sets out some tentative answers, but answers based on what Maher and Böss term ‘interesting dialogues across the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences.’ It is to these dialogues that we now turn.

Asking questions and questioning answers

The points at issue in the article are an attempt to defend the opinion of Desmond Fennell from the ‘sound thrashing’ that Maher is supposed to have doled out (though one imagines that a writer as prolific as Fennell is quite capable of defending himself!), an exploration of the notion of modernity, and its relationship with tradition, and an attack on the sixties generation who clearly are the root of all evil in the Waters *Lebenswelt*. The arguments, as they are structured, are interesting

in that, when one looks for evidentiary reinforcement or clearly constructed points, one looks in vain. We hear, for example, four times in the article, that the ideology of the sixties is a Peter Pan ideology. This is an interesting metaphor and I read on, waiting to see its relevance to the discussion; I was, alas, left waiting in neverland, as the relevance of the metaphor was never explained. This is almost a *modus operandi* of the article as sweeping statements appear, are repeated, and then assume the status of holy writ in the later stages of the piece.

For example, Waters sees the liberal, modernist, post sixties generation as ‘a generation which has not grown up’, and his evidentiary warrant for this assertion seems to be a reading of Bob Dylan’s song ‘The Times they are a-changing’. Waters expresses seeming surprise that the ‘meaning’ of this song has changed over time. Contemporary literary and cultural theory, the discipline that is much in evidence in *Engaging Modernity* (that is if one is to read beyond the introduction and an occasional footnote) would argue that all texts are polysemic – that the notion of a single meaning has long been deconstructed and that the plurality of meaning is one of the key signifiers of the condition of modernity, or post-modernity.

He also posits the notion that for the ‘sixties generation’ the word ‘modern’ is ‘no longer merely an adjective denoting some aesthetic or technocratic recency: it is clearly a moral description’, and he goes on to talk about this generation as seeing its own progress as ‘the One True Journey’ (*capitals original*). Perhaps I’m missing something here but the clarity of which Waters speaks is lost on me, and my one true journey in search of it is unencumbered with evidentiary warrant or examples which could point me in the right direction. Waters obviously takes his sense that the sixties generation are fixated as a given of his argument, and not in any need of example or illustration. Ironically, this is precisely what the thrust of *Engaging Modernity* was calling into question. Many of the essays in this collection took as an overarching perspective the need to call into question the

‘givens’ of traditional Irish society and culture; the essays and analyses contained therein asked as many questions of their own assumptions as they did of those of others.

Waters goes on to describe this generation as envisioning itself as a ‘marginalised bunch of ageing radicals, left-leaning and liberal’ who are seeking to overthrow the establishment, and makes the assertion that this is an easy task as there are hardly any ‘Catholics, nationalists, traditionalists, conservatives or patriarchs left’. Again, one is left to wonder at this! Catholic influence on education at all levels in this country is still ongoing, despite the many incidents which have at the very least cast doubt on the Roman Catholic hierarchies *bona fides* in terms of the care and education of the young. The recent resignation of Justice Lefoy, the mounting resistance to a full tribunal of enquiry and the strong resistance by legal teams on behalf of religious orders, is yet more evidence that, to paraphrase the words of Gerry Adams: ‘They haven’t gone away, you know’. In terms of gender equity, there is still a long way to go, the patriarchs are still in evidence, if in a more covert way, and recidivist nationalism is still capable of killing in the name of its ideology.

The core argument is the notion that the use of the term modern or modernisation is somehow specious, and Fennell’s point, asserting that the Irish have always taken to modern methods is cited. Waters seems to feel that he has won a knock down argument when he hoists Maher on the petard of the modern/traditional binary, noting that Maher seems to see tradition and modernity as both in opposition and as part of the same continuum; as each being neither ‘all good’ nor ‘all bad’. Well, this, of course, is exactly the point: tradition, if it is not to become hypostasised or reified must be teased out of itself by modern impulses, just as modernisation, if it is not to sweep out the baby with the bathwater, must be tempered, to some degree, by the habits of tradition. Maher, in making these points, is positing, both in his *Irish Times* piece and in *Engaging Modernity*, a nuanced, deconstructive (in the strictly Derridean sense wherein the paradigm of choice is both/and as

opposed to either/or) and context-sensitive sense of modernity. This, I would further argue, is precisely Maher's reason for introducing the work of John McGahern in support of his thesis.

McGahern, Modernity and Misappropriation

The objective of Maher's article, in this reader's view, was never to give Desmond Fennell 'a sound thrashing for his blinkered views', but rather to reply to Fennell's previous article that gave a rather simplistic and limited interpretation of what *Engaging Modernity* seeks to achieve: namely a nuanced and non-dogmatic 'engagement' with the thorny and highly complex issue that is modernity. The references to the work of John McGahern, and particularly to his latest novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, sought to bring out the fact that tradition and modernity can co-exist side-by-side, that they must in fact so do because one cannot survive without the other.

Maher is saying that McGahern's latest novel has a traditional rural setting that adds to its impact and charm. The Ireland that is evoked with such power by McGahern is on the verge of disappearing – this is not a cause for lament but for celebration, celebration of a rich culture and tradition that are about to go under. The celebration is all the more palpable because of the sorrow associated with its passing. If Waters had gone to the bother of reading Maher's excellent article devoted to McGahern in *Engaging Modernity*, he would have seen these ideas developed more fully. The unfavourable comparison between McGahern's rural idyll and the current excesses of the Temple Bar was justified and clearly stated the view that tradition in this instance is preferable to modernity. Indeed, this contrast is an exemplum of the nuanced view of modernity that is very much at the core of *Engaging Modernity*, wherein the complex and dialectical relationships between modernity and tradition; Irishness and Europeanness; and literature and culture are teased out.

Waters gives the distinct impression that Maher is not entitled to say anything positive about tradition, given that he is the co-author of *Engaging Modernity*, a tome that is as unappetising to

him as the *Satanic Verses* are to the Muslim world. All Maher is saying is that there aren't any absolutes in this debate. McGahern is a wonderful writer, not because he sticks to traditional settings and style, but because he manages to remain objective in his depiction of a society that caused him much undeserved pain – the banning of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965, led to his dismissal from his teaching post in Clontarf and made him feel 'ashamed' that something as unfair as this could have taken place in the Ireland of post-Independence. So when McGahern expresses the view that the Celtic Tiger is a great thing, he is referring to the almost total absence of emigration now from our shores and the fact that people are by and large better off. He may also be of the view that we have evolved as a society and that people are now allowed to do and say things that wouldn't have been tolerated a few decades ago. This just serves to strengthen the position upheld throughout Maher's article that tradition and modernity have more in common than may appear at first sight, and certainly decries any sense that Maher is being over simplistic in his readings of modernity.

Waters questions Maher's observations in relation to the abuse of alcohol, the high incidence of male suicide and violence and says that these are issues that he has dealt with on a regular basis in his *Irish Times* column. Does this mean that no one else, especially someone as ill-informed and blinkered as Maher, can reflect on them as being indicative of the negative side of our modernity?

Just because John Waters writes about them doesn't mean that they are not burning issues for others as well. Indeed, in a manner that is almost a *locus classicus* of Derridean deconstruction, Waters is accusing Maher of stealing his thunder; it is as if the Waters road is the 'one true journey' and no one else, especially not the 'incoherent and completely unremarkable' Maher, is entitled to space on the road! If there was ever a case of a *tu quoque* argument, this must be it! Maher wasn't one of those who 'dismissed or tried to silence' Waters on his views. And what about this for a sweeping statement that asserts without any qualification or evidence whatsoever: 'I (Waters) think one of the

reasons people cannot extend me any credit for such things (writing about male suicide and alcohol dependence) is that they are imprisoned within the very boundaries of tradition/modernity which they claim to be deconstructing.’ This is the person who a few lines later on will speak so positively of the openness young people display towards the things he thinks and says. I would say that they either don’t read him too often or that what they do read is not the emotive language and self-absorbed rhetoric that are the hallmarks of the *JMI* article. Scholars like Eamon Maher are not the ones trying to ‘destroy this openness’: rather, they are encouraging students to think critically and objectively, to ‘engage’ with problems in a rational manner and not to see everything in personal terms.

Indeed, one must seriously question with what depth Waters has read *Engaging Modernity*, or even the introduction. On page twenty four, there is a quote from the American sociologist David Gross, which foregrounds the attitudes of Maher and Böss to the modernity/tradition dialectic, and which completely refutes the Waters reading of their position. Gross is talking about embracing modernity, but suggests that we do so ‘critically’ by ‘returning to tradition’. He goes on to explain that by this he means: ‘to bring tradition forward in such a manner as to disturb, not affirm, the clichés and commonplaces of the present.’ If this is not a nuanced modernity, I don’t know what is.

Maher and Böss are the people who espouse the very notions of an engagement with modernity that will make Ireland a better place. The very title, with its dynamic suggestion of an engagement with modernity, is important to what is being discussed: far from being a programmatic, simplified cult of ‘the one true journey’, the polysemic connotations of ‘engaging’ suggest an interchange, an involvement, an ongoing dialogue, an argument, a teasing out – all of which are completely at odds with Waters’s over simplistic sense of what is being broached here. If I may conclude this discussion of playing the man, the ball and the game, by playing a little on my own trumpet and quoting myself: the version of modernity that is enunciated in *Engaging Modernity* involves ‘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’.

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