Irish Modernism and the Politics of Venereal Disease, 1890-1939

Lloyd Houston, D.Phil English, Hertford College, Oxford
lej.houston@outlook.com
www.lloydhouston.com

Project Outline
This thesis examines the political and aesthetic role venereal disease and discourses of sexual hygiene played in the emergence of Irish modernism. Conventional accounts of the Revival present Irish sexual conservatism as the apotheosis of the retrograde nationalist milieu which figures like Joyce and Beckett transcended to join the European modernist pantheon. I will complicate this picture by showing that it was precisely in the crucible of debates over sexual conduct and national identity that the avant-garde aesthetic practices of a distinctly Irish modernism were forged.

Research Questions
• How were figurations of venereal disease used by modernist authors to construct and contest models of Irish identity?

• How did contemporary medical discourse and the pathology of diseases themselves inform the aesthetic practices of Irish modernists?

• How did questions of sexual health and national identity inform the relationship between Irish modernism and contemporary advanced nationalism?

Sources
• Poetry, drama, and prose by W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, James Joyce, Oliver Gogarty, and Samuel Beckett;
• Nationalist newspaper, journals, and pamphlets (The Leader, Sinn Féin, Bean na hÉireann);
• Texts on Venereal Disease and Degeneration (Alfred Fournier, Benedict Morel, Henry Maudsley);
• Hospital records (Westmoreland Lock, Richmond District Lunatic Asylum, Sir Patrick Dun’s Hospital);
• Irish military archives (Royal Dublin Fusiliers, Irish Royal Army Medical Corps, ‘Kilmainham Papers’);
• Legal and legislative records (the Contagious Diseases Acts, the Royal Commission on Venereal Disease).

Selected Bibliography
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Castle, G. Modernism and the Celtic Revival (Cambridge, 2001)
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Luddy, M. Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940 (Cambridge, 2007)