

Letters and weak theory in Irish modernism

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Are letters literature, or are they simply, occasionally, literary? Are missives and memos, lying in state in an archival folder or published in the pages of collected letters, modernist works? Or are they addendums to modernist works? The publication of edited collections of letters is heralded as a major event, yet how many monographs or collected essays dedicate themselves to the study of letters alone? In Edgar Allan Poe's short story, the purloined letter is hidden in plain sight – there but invisible. The treatment of letters in scholarship is often similar: the letter is there but we fail to see it, as we keep looking through it. We read its contents eagerly but seldom see the letter as a form: we read the letter writer, rather than the letter; we reflect on the subject of letters rather than on letters as a subject. Despite modernist studies' turn to the material and to the archive, letters in themselves are often under-utilized: they are prized for the insights they offer to authors, works and contexts but rarely allowed to take centre stage in their own right. We write about little magazines as the birthplace of modernism, but before there are magazines, there are always messages.¹ What would modernity be without the post office, and what would modernism be without letters, telegrams, radio programmes and phone calls? This chapter reflects on the potential of the letter and the place of the post office within Irish modernist studies and beyond. It asks what new aspects of the field might come to light if we consider modernist studies' current engagements with weak theory as a postal turn and speculates on the changes we could see within Irish modernist studies were our engagements to mirror the weakness and power of the post.

Letters, routes and weakness

Hugh Kenner described the published volumes of James Joyce's letters as 'a second *Work in Progress*, almost an epistolary novel', and in my introduction to the correspondence of Brian O'Nolan (pseud. Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen), I described O'Nolan's letters to the editor as fictions that function collectively in much the same way.² Is there something more at stake in these comparisons, or in the connections we draw between letters and autobiographies, than a simple recognition of similarities between forms? There is, I suspect, a certain twentieth- and twenty-first-century unease regarding

posted communication, as despite the long tradition of publishing correspondence, we frequently countersign letters with works of weight and bind them to the solid figure of the single author. Letters, be they formal or intimate, are most usually conversations with implied readers. And yet, as these conversations are impeded by the immediate absence of the interlocutor and the delays caused by the post, letter writers converse with an imagined version of the recipient, whose responses to their words they can guess but do not know. Each letter is a monologue that is first a dialogue only in imagination and subsequently a dialogue only when the epistle receives a reply. These dialogues, of course, are overlaid by their potential to become public addresses; politically active letter writers know that state surveillance renders private dialogues public, and reputation-minded writers inscribe future audiences of scholars and admirers into their missives. Yet, despite the rich potential of letters' shifting temporal, geographical and emotional spaces, our tendency is to stress the monologic and the present and prioritize the single writer, alone, centre stage.

When I edited O'Nolan's letters, I was intrigued by the web of connections between him and other modernist writers, but this web was always dominated by and filtered through O'Nolan. How might the modernist scene change if we read letters less as single-author studies – the letters of Brian O'Nolan or Elizabeth Bowen or Samuel Beckett – and instead as networked, multi-authored works? Even letters to ourselves take account of multiple selves, and our access to authors' letters depends on the involvement of numerous people, from the person who deemed the letter worthy of preserving to the archive or library who decided to acquire it, to the editors who organize the correspondence for publication, to the estate overseeing the process. Letters presuppose plurality, and yet conversations are often turned into monologues. There are exceptions, of course, such as the publication of the letters between W. B. and George Yeats, or the letters about Joyce between Hugh Kenner and Adaline Glasheen, or the exchanges shared by Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene and V. S. Pritchett.³ There is also no question that scholarship on Irish writers has engaged with questions of literary circles, mutual inspiration and collaborative work. The potential remains, however, for work on correspondence to have a 'death of the single-author' moment and decentre the acclaimed author to accentuate the postal trails of letters between rooms and offices, reading conversations that evince the shifting, networked relations within modernisms.

To engage with letters, and collections of letters, as communiques shuttling between mail bags, and less as series of short personal essays, would be to place the emphasis not on one prestigious figure but on the connections between numerous figures. It would be to read with an eye to omissions and delays and to be intrigued by the transient and the arbitrary. It would allow letters to be, at times, far from belles-lettres, while avoiding the urge to use letters written with a literary flourish to confirm that the great writer is always great, even in private, or to call on letters dull with commonplace complaints as proof that exceptional art can be produced even when rooms are cold and plates are empty. In the case of certain authors, everything becomes important, which in turn reinforces the author's importance. In the introduction to the first volume of Yeats's letters, John Kelly explains that the letters project will stretch to twelve volumes because 'Yeats is a great poet and the more we can know of him

and his work the more we shall be able to appreciate his achievement in its entirety'.⁴ Similarly, in their introduction to the first volume of Samuel Beckett's letters, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck write that 'no special pleading need be made as to the importance of even perfunctory letters from the hand of a writer as important as Beckett'.⁵ The brilliance of Yeats and Beckett is by no means here in dispute, nor is the reward in publishing all of their writing, including notes, postcards and telegrams. But perhaps the real potential of letters is less in the strong, scholarly scaffolding they provide to the few great masters and more in the smaller, brief connections they reveal between writers and between contexts.

In their introduction to 'Remapping Irish Modernism', a special issue of *Irish Studies Review*, Deaglán Ó Donghaile and Gerry Smyth critique the tendency for Irish modernism to be triangulated through Yeats, Joyce and Beckett. They call for a reorientation of the discipline, which would require scholars to reconceptualize the 'size, scale, distance, terrain and perspective' of modernism in Ireland.⁶ Similarly, Joe Cleary's introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* asks how we might 'reconfigure' Irish modernism if we shift our gaze from this literary trinity and look instead to the 'tapestry of modernist artistic achievement'.⁷ Neither Ó Donghaile, Smyth, nor Cleary are calling for scholarship to ignore the contributions of canonical figures. Rather, they invite a formation of Irish modernist studies less concerned with fixed categories determined by the works of a small number of major Irish or international figures and more engaged with the shifting relations, styles and interests that can be mapped between fluid groupings of different writers.

Modernism, particularly in its Anglo-European incarnation, has long been about the coterie, but if we follow the trails of letters, we see that around, through and underneath the clusters of Bloomsbury sets and Left Bank intellectuals are a multitude of tendrils reaching through the mail and extending through the postal service's communication links – telegrams, telephones and the radio. This is not a new point; the 'tangled mesh of modernists' in Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism* (1990) traces weak and strong links between modernist writers, some of whom never met in person, but were linked through mutual friends or the writing of reviews and critiques. Yet, the potential of letters as a form through which to map weaker, fleeting connections has yet to be fully realized in modernist studies, and despite the publication of the letters of so many modernists, modernist studies both in Ireland and in general awaits an epistolary, postal moment to permeate its approaches to the field. Modernism is not, or not only, a collection of great works firmly fixed in the literary canon but a postal service rhizome, with roots tracing mail routes through a disordered, fertile series of literary and cultural affiliations. Dominant constellations can be decentred by the myriad of smaller, briefer connections, and by a reading practice attuned to the epistolary, we can trace major and minor notes in Irish modernism and allow new patterns to emerge.

Letters allow us to trace all manner of links, between Yeats and Wyndham Lewis, Joyce and T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Beckett and Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir and Eugène Ionesco. Yeats writes to Lady Gregory, who writes to Joyce. Brendan Behan corresponds with John Ryan about Anthony Cronin, John Ryan pens O'Nolan a letter about Dominic Behan. Joyce writes to James Johnson Sweeney, Sweeney writes to Niall

Montgomery, Montgomery writes to O’Nolan. Con Leventhal corresponds with Joyce and O’Nolan and Beckett. Yeats writes to Seán O’Casey to criticize *The Silver Tassie*, O’Casey writes to O’Nolan to praise *An Béal Bocht*. Joyce and Yeats write private letters to Seán Ó Faoláin; Flann O’Brien writes public letters to and about Ó Faoláin. Letters from Hilton Edwards link Beckett to O’Nolan. Graham Greene writes to Elizabeth Bowen, O’Nolan to Graham Greene. Yeats with Ethel Mannin, Mannin with O’Nolan. Letters present us with a modernism of constantly shifting parts, as links are made in hope or condemnation, about art and about money, directly or through degrees of separation.

These networks are bound by historical circumstances, as the popularity of the author during their lifetime, the dependability of those who inherit their public and private writings, social conventions, gendered expectations, social classes and many other factors determine if scholars are left letters to follow. Publishing biases, critical biases and patriarchal structures that, as Virginia Woolf puts it, align against Judith Shakespeare mean that male voices currently dominate female voices, and colonial legacies mean that letters in English are in greater published number than those in Irish. Even a decentred postal network will perform these social biases, but mapping letters will always be about gaps, omissions and palimpsests. Jacques Derrida uses the postal service to insist that every text can always signify differently: in David Will’s concise formulation, once a ‘letter can *not arrive*, quite simply, it *cannot arrive*’.⁸ That is, it is not that occasionally we do not understand a piece of writing but that it can never fully and completely be understood. There is always more that a message can mean, and so it is always still in transit, never quite arriving: weak. As such, the postcards that Derrida writes in ‘Envois’ (Dispatches), and by extension the notes that we all write, are dead letters, as all letters, to an extent, go astray.

Reading the epistolary in this way brings Irish letters into conversation with weak theory, an approach that is currently generating much debate within modernist studies. Wai Chee Dimock’s 2013 essay on weak theory in relation to Henry James, Colm Tóibín and Yeats was followed by Paul Saint-Amour’s special issue on weak theory in *Modernism/modernity* in 2018, which as of 2021 has led to four rounds of responses and one round of ‘responses to responses’ in *Modernism/modernity*’s Print Plus.⁹ In her article Dimock argues that a ‘weak theory’ is a theory that is not sovereign, in that it does not lay claim to a clearly delimited territory, but is leaky and rhizomatic, exhibiting a ‘breakdown of immunities’ and playing out on ‘extended and locally mediated relational threads’.¹⁰ A weak theory is one that does not attempt to control a discipline by stipulating strict requirements for inclusion but is tentative, provisional and shifting. It recognizes an academic field, supposedly predicated on clear borders and recognisable, repeatable, knowable content, to be ‘a playing field semiautonomous at many points, open to any number of feedback loops, and open to emerging forms arising at different locales, each ordered in a different way, and each defining its own working coordinates’.¹¹ Weakness means disorder and uncertainty, but it also means complexity, insight and the recognition of difference within networked global flows.

Weakness replaces a continental, imperial centre, around which everything revolves – or is triangulated, as Ó Donghaile and Smyth put it – with a series of archipelagos that show countries and coteries to be variegated and interlinked.¹² The

critical lens of a weak, postal modernism gains particular relevance in the context of Irish modernism, for which the stakes of the fleeting, networked movements of the wider postal community are particularly high, as it was for so long a continental modernism, dominated by familiar, illustrious figures resident in Europe and connected to Ireland primarily by exile and the post office. By joining Joyce and Beckett to Ireland through a weak, postal service imaginary we embed them in a larger, more vibrant Irish modernism of diffuse connections: we decentre the continent to network islands. Yet, interlinked archipelagos are not without hierarchy, and connectivity is not innocent of domination: as an instrument of state control and surveillance, first by the colonial administration and then the independent state, a consideration of a rhizomatic Irish modernism must also consider the ways our weak postal connections are facilitated and interrupted by the power of the postal service. By controlling letters, as well as the new media of telegrams and the radio, and by being embroiled in espionage and censorship, the postal networks of modernity are bound and tainted by strong state power. In moving from the strong (major figures, continental/imperial control) to the weak (minor connection, postal relations), we cannot overlook the power concealed within the weak itself (the combined strength of the rhizome, the postal service). Such power, which we explore in the following section, might be less important from the perspective of the heart of empire, but a postcolonial modernism cannot ignore the ways that the tendrils of control accumulate.

The 'new', expanding modernist studies is a place of vernacular modernisms, bad modernisms, geomodernisms, planetary modernisms, archipelagic modernisms and, in its open, permeable borders, pertains to a weakness that is productive of new thought and engagement. Current definitions of modernism tend towards descriptions of pliable, moveable units, as we see in Jessica Berman's description of modernism as 'a dynamic set of relationships, practices, problematics and cultural engagements with modernity rather than a static canon of works, a given set of formal devices, or a specific range of beliefs'.¹³ Or, in Susan Stanford Friedman's words, modernism is '*the expressive dimension of modernity*', which 'encompasses a range of styles among creative forms that share family resemblances based on an engagement with the historical conditions of modernity in a particular location'.¹⁴ In both cases, modernism is that which is fundamentally concerned with modernity, but modernity is recognized as comprising multiple moving parts, some major, some minor, some found in multiple locations, some in isolated occurrences. The critical value of 'modernism' as an organizing principle does not lie in a strong ability to organize and systematize but in a weaker capacity to facilitate reorganizations and connect local specificities across transnational spaces. The question, therefore, is not whether certain Irish authors meet the criteria for inclusion within a modernist framework but what our studies of authors, be they progressive or conservative, cosmopolitan or nationalist, avant-garde or realist, can gain from modernism understood as a network – a postal service – comprising multiple parts communicating across villages and seas. Modernism is becoming *post-modernism*, so to speak, as modernist studies is going postal.

If a weak theory can have a perfect form, it is the letter, as it is a form that is almost no form at all. How can one draw fixed and firm boundaries to the epistle? A letter can be a lengthy essay, or a few lines dashed off in haste. It can be sent without salutation

and sign off, or sent addressing itself to all, and therefore to none in particular. A letter might never meet the hand of postal worker or messenger, but rest, unposted, in a hallway drawer. A letter can be anonymous and unsigned, or legitimized with many signatures. Letters are the direct outpouring of intimate passions: 'In a man's letters ... his soul lies naked, his letters are only the mirror of his breast; whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process; nothing is inverted, nothing distorted: you see systems in their elements; you discover actions in their motives.'¹⁵ And yet, letters are a performance in which writers wear many masks, altering tone, vocabulary and personality depending on the recipient. Letters blur the public and the private to provide news, commentary and chatter. In their border-crossing openness, letters are fundamentally weak. A weak, open form for a weak, open theory.

Once a field becomes interested in the variable and transient – brief liaisons rather than entrenched relationships, the connections between various 'minor' individuals instead of the singularity of major names – its focus grows to include aspects such as the domestic, the middlebrow and the everyday. Increasingly, modernism is making room for writing and lives, or aspects of lives, that are commonplace, while problematizing the assumption that what constitutes high or low, strong or weak, extraordinary or average is fixed, or indeed that these binaries have longevity. Modernism, that is, is giving space to minor histories: 'the presence of quasi-events, or events whose eventful status is in dispute, inside the theatre of major history'.¹⁶ A minor history is one told in the 'small dramas that inhabit the lower depths [of a discourse] in the guise of footnotes, fragments, anecdotes, digressions, fleeting testimonies, parentheses, curious asides, affective depositions and the like'.¹⁷ Minor histories are the 'structures of feeling and force that in "major" history might be otherwise displaced'.¹⁸ While the large affairs of state or literature are recorded for posterity, minor histories are those small, insignificant occurrences, reactions and hesitations whose passing is noted, sometimes whimsically, sometimes incidentally, but most commonly in passing. Minor histories are accounts told in marginalia.

Personal letters are a minor history: personal, affective footnotes to the major works of the literary canon. They inhabit the lower depths, providing us with epigraphs and asides, supplementing engagement with the major texts, adding context and biographical information: so often considered interesting but not quite integral. Domestic, sometimes trifling, and deeply human, letters are full of aches and pains and financial concerns. The publication of letters by an important author is a major event, but as fragments, anecdotes and parentheses, letters themselves are predominantly minor. They tell critics of the conditions under which texts are written; they provide us with glimmers of authorial intention and their addition to scholarship is, at times, little more than supplementary embellishments and scholarly flourishes. And yet, as Sudesh Mishra notes, minor histories haunt and interrupt major accounts, providing narratives that destabilize dominant themes. To listen, he writes, to the seemingly inconsequential is to hear 'history murmuring in the minor key against its own striving for plenitude and finality'.¹⁹ To engage with the minor is to engage with the strength of the weak, and not only to introduce affect and intimacy to our work but also to further undercut totalizing illusions of completion and full representation. There is always another footnote, and always another letter. Always another way the hurried

note could have been written. Always another link between correspondents, always another complexity arising from the seemingly insignificant.

The post office, roots and power

Once we engage with the dead letter offices of the many, we cease to triangulate Irish modernism through the dominant trinity of Yeats, Joyce and Beckett and view it through the perspective of a postal imaginary. This imaginary can accommodate vast connections: in 1914–15, there were some 192 million letters mailed within Ireland.²⁰ Letters had ceased to be the domain of the wealthy in 1773, at least for those in the capital, when the Dublin Penny Post offered a cheap and swift way to correspond across the city and suburbs: at the height of its services in 1822, it offered six deliveries a day.²¹ Reforms to the Royal Mail in 1840 made penny postage available to the public across Britain and Ireland,²² and as the nineteenth century moved into the twentieth, and the mail moved from the coach to the train, letters sped across fields and towns. There was correspondence to mothers and cousins, lovers and bank managers. There were letters to newspapers written with pomposity, and letters to bishops written in desperation.²³ Letters were dispatched to businesses on the other side of the city, and letters mailed to family on the other side of the world.²⁴

For those abroad, modern Ireland was mediated by crossed-out words in letters, static on the radio and money sent by wire. The first telegraph line in Ireland opened in Dalkey in 1844, and the Telegraph Act of 1868 gave the government a monopoly of the telegraph service to the Post Office of Britain and Ireland. By 1877, there were telegraph stations across the country, and as George Griffiths wrote from Wexford with pride, ‘we can communicate with almost all parts of the world in a couple of hours.’²⁵ When the potential of telephones was realized, the Royal Post Office insisted that these were covered by the Telegraph Act, and a successful court appeal in November 1880 stipulated that telephone exchange business could only be carried out with the permission of the postmaster general. The first telephone exchange opened in Ireland in 1880, and by independence in 1922, there were 19,218 telephones or 12,500 subscribers, served by 192 exchanges in the 26 counties.²⁶ For those like Brendan Behan who did not like to write letters, the post office facilitated communication through the lines.²⁷ But, as technology grows, and comes under the remit of the postal services, the grafting of weakness and power comes ever more into focus. The shifting rhizome of the postal network, with all its weak connections, is facilitated by a powerful institution whose roots go back to Oliver Cromwell’s Postal Act of 1657.

The year 1926 was greeted by the first broadcast by Ireland’s radio station, 2RN (‘to Erin’), which was part of the portfolio of the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. The postal service was by then quietly in control of a national imaginary propagated through the mass communication of the air waves. From 1928 to 1973, broadcasting issued from the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin, providing the listener at home and abroad with music, live sporting events, sponsored programmes, quizzes, the news and culture. The voices of some of its presenters and commentators provided the soundtrack to Irish lives: Tim Pat Coogan recounts that when he attended an

All-Ireland final in person, rather than listening to the commentary Michael O'Hehir had provided on the radio from 1938, the live experience seemed like a poor substitute for the thrills and significance that the radio could bring.²⁸

When one follows postal routes, one also follows money: the Post Office Savings Bank was established in 1861, and when it was introduced to Ireland in 1862, it became the largest branch banking institution and the 'dominant institution of "thrift" in Ireland.²⁹ An international money order service allowing for the transfer of small sums of money was set up by the post office and their savings banks, which in a period of increasing emigration furthered their popularity.³⁰ The UK's Old Age Pensions Act of 1908, which Cormac Ó Gráda describes as 'the most radical and far-reaching piece of welfare legislation enacted in Ireland in the twentieth century', gave pensions to Ireland from 1 January 1909, and these were administered through the post office, which further stamped it as the benevolent face of colonial control.³¹

The strength of the postal service, of course, lies in its ability not only to connect but also to disconnect, a fact that is of vital importance within a colonial modernity. On 8 August 1914, the British government passed the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), which transferred intelligence gathering in Ireland, and legal action responding to this intelligence, to military control. As part of DORA, postal censorship was established, which meant the interception, examination and potential disposal of certain communication. With the exception of the Pearse brothers, every leader of the 1916 Rising had his or her post censored in the first twenty-one months of the First World War,³² and Ben Novick writes that in December 1915, seventy-one censorship warrants were running simultaneously.³³ The efficiency of the postal service in Dublin meant that the suppression was readily evident to those being censored: when letters could take less than an hour to cross the city, consistently delayed receipt of mail was suspicious. Letters began to be written with an awareness of covert readers, and code words began to creep into correspondence, with Sinn Féin meetings referred to as 'dancing classes' and those likely to be arrested described as 'ill'.³⁴ As Darrell Figgis wrote in a letter intercepted at the end of December 1915, 'I must write, not that there is much to say, or rather there is much that can't be said, but would not let be suffered to go through the post'.³⁵ A postal modernism, particularly in sites of colonial control, is always a political, polyvalent modernism, as the post office is an agent of state surveillance, and private letters are always potentially public. In our Irish post(al)-modern scene, polysemy is escalated by political exigency, which makes the letter even less likely to arrive.

Prior to Irish Independence, 'improper' books were controlled by statutes including the Post Office Act (1908), which prevented the posting of 'any indecent or obscene print, painting, photograph, lithograph, engraving, book, or card, or any indecent or obscene article'.³⁶ The censorship that the British operated in Ireland from June 1916 to August 1919 led to the banning of books associated with the 1916 Rising, including P. S. O'Hegarty's *Sinn Féin: A Bird's Eye View* (1917) and Redmond Howard's *Sinn Féin* (1917), and nationalist literature continued to be seized during the War of Independence.³⁷ But it was modernist literature that provoked the greatest censorship in Ireland after 1922. The Censorship of Publications Act 1929 led to the banning of major international modernist writers including Marcel Proust, Ernest Hemingway,

William Faulkner, Aldous Huxley and Thomas Mann and Irish authors including Joyce, Beckett, George Bernard Shaw, Sean Ó Faoláin, Frank O'Connor, Austin Clarke, Kate O'Brien and Sean O'Casey. The Knights of Saint Columbanus had maintained vigilantes at ports and postal depots since 1922.³⁸ The Irish postal service kept a list of novels it detained, including *Ulysses* in the 1920s, and the American post office's refusal to distribute copies of the *Little Review* containing instalments of *Ulysses* led Margaret Anderson to make cuts to the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode.³⁹ In 1946, a joint customs and post office department called the 'Bookscale' was formed, tasked with examining books entering the country by parcel post. The larger consignments that came in crates by sea were checked by customs and post office officials at the ports, and suspicious books were returned to the publisher or burnt.⁴⁰

The post office thus shaped colonial and postcolonial Irish modernity by facilitating communication, interrupting conversations, transferring money and regulating cultural lives. As Ferguson puts it, with 'services covering so many aspects of everyday life – from mails and banking to telegraphs and telephones – the Post Office was the greatest department of the state.'⁴¹ Pádraig Pearse checked a long history of imperial control when he read out the Proclamation of the Irish Republic on the steps of the GPO. When the building, further battered during the Civil War, was rebuilt and reopened in 1929, W. T. Cosgrave presented it as 'symbolic of the new order. As this building has come back to us, renewed and beautiful, so is the Irish nation progressing in the path of prosperity and peace.'⁴² The post office is always belated, as it circulates communiques written hours, days, weeks earlier. Its venerability as an institution further entrenches it in a history of colonial control and rebellion. Yet, its ability to embrace and adapt to changing technologies and ideologies means that it was also a place of reinvention, a site of a modern Ireland making it new. Modernity is a time of rupture and the neoteric, but it is also a time of nostalgia. Modernity, particularly in countries embroiled in or overthrowing colonial power, gazes at tradition while moving towards the future; within an institution such as the post office, the old and the new overlap, which renders it all the more a place of control.

And yet, while we must continue to register this strength, perhaps the greatest gain to scholarship does not stem from recognizing the post office's iconic, emblematic importance, that is, its old imperial strength and new authority in independent Ireland. Rather, we need to concern ourselves with the ways the weak and the powerful aspects of institutions and imaginations interact and track the transitory, fleeting interactions and connections that the postal service enabled and obstructed. We cannot ignore the reach and power of the post office, and must in particular reckon with any strength that, like the purloined letter, has come to be hidden in plain sight, but we are well practiced at mapping dominant figures and fixtures. To the solidity of the post office, we need to add the potential of the epistolary. We need to think of the postal service as the sign system itself and understand it in a way that 'avoids submerging all the differences, mutations, scansions, structures of postal regimes into one and the same great central post office.'⁴³ Rather than use the post office to create a new modernist monolith, then, the post office can be figured as part of a postal imaginary, not a root but a route – a node that is undeniably a strong one, but that is embedded a network of brief encounters, a point of communication and control, a site of agency and interruption, identity and failure.

How, finally, might we read in terms of a weak, postal imaginary? An engagement of this type might follow the chance encounters that letters allow, enabling footnotes to tell their story, and prioritizing minor interventions instead of, or in connection with, major works. It might take a form similar to Emily Ridge's 'Close Reading an Archival Object: Reflections on a Postcard from Salvador Dalí to Stefan Zweig, Circa 1938'. In this essay, Ridge notes that we tend to plumb the archive in 'order to add detail, light, shade, colour, or, indeed, a backdrop to our analytical endeavours' but rarely position the archive outside this supporting role.⁴⁴ Ridge inverts the relation between footnote and text and uses Zweig's novel *The Post Office Girl* to add detail, lighting, support and context to a single piece of correspondence: a postcard. In telling the minor history of the postcard, and her encounter with it, Ridge triangulates Dalí, Zweig and Sigmund Freud, with Derrida as a shadowy fourth, and reflects on postal obstructions, the material form of the postcard, the ways we read a card's image, the clarity or confusion of the sender's text and the relation between the places of transmission and reception. Using a postal imaginary to traverse time and space, Ridge follows a minor connection between major names, and while she views her work as 'reading an archival object creatively',⁴⁵ she performs what I have been suggesting as a weak, postal engagement. A weak engagement with the letters of Irish modernist writers would engage with unexpected networks, transitory notes and ephemeral ties. It would explore the value of replacing single-author essays with fragmentary conversations and reconsider major literary contributions in terms of involvements considered minor. It could reconfigure stream-of-consciousness techniques as avant-garde reworkings of the epistolary novel and the gaps and silences of modernist texts as the evidence of dead letter offices. It would stamp modernist works as missives and letters as modernist works that circle through the postal services, never quite arriving, strong in their weakness.

Notes

1. Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 43.
2. Hugh Kenner, 'The World – Gritty, Particular', review of *The Letters of James Joyce* vols. II and III, in *National Review* 19 (5 September 1967): 969; Maebh Long, 'Selection', in Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), xxi.
3. W. B. Yeats and George Yeats, *W. B. Yeats and George Yeats: The Letters*, ed. Ann Saddlemeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Hugh Kenner and Adaline Glasheen, *A Passion for Joyce: The Letters of Hugh Kenner and Adaline Glasheen*, ed. Edward M. Burns (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2008); and Elizabeth Bowen, *Why Do I Write? An Exchange of Views Between Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene and V. S. Pritchett* (London: P. Marshall, 1948).
4. John Kelly, 'General Introduction', in W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, vol. 1 1865–1895*, ed. John Kelly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), xxxiii.
5. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, 'Introduction to Volume I', in Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929–1940*,

- ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), lxxxvii.
6. Deaglán Ó Donghaile and Gerry Smyth, 'Introduction: Remapping Irish Modernism', *Irish Studies Review* 26, no. 3 (2018): 299.
 7. Joe Cleary, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2. See also Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby, 'Introduction', in *A History of Irish Modernism*, ed. Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1–24.
 8. David Wills, 'Post/Card/Match/Book/"Envois"/Derrida', *SubStance* 13, no. 2, issue 43 (1984): 22.
 9. Paul Saint-Amour, 'Weak Theory, Weak Modernism', *Modernism/modernity* 25, no. 3 (2018): 438–59.
 10. Wai Chee Dimock, 'Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín and W. B. Yeats', *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 4 (2013): 732–53.
 11. *Ibid.*, 737.
 12. For more on the relation between modernism and archipelagos, see John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the British and Irish Isles, 1890–1970* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Maebh Long, 'Aphorisms and Archipelagos: Relationality in Modernist Studies', in *Aphoristic Modernity: 1880 to the Present*, ed. Kostas Boyiopoulos and Michael Shallcross (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Oceania, the Planetary and the New Modernist Studies: A Coda', in *A New Oceania: Modernism and Modernity in the Pacific*, ed. Matthew Hayward and Maebh Long (London: Routledge, 2019).
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