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To cite this article: Liam Harrison (2023) Mike McCormack's style of post-mortem modernism, Textual Practice, 37:11, 1708-1736, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2022.2111709](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2022.2111709)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2022.2111709>



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Published online: 15 Aug 2022.



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Mike McCormack's style of post-mortem modernism

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ABSTRACT

The legacies of modernism in Irish literature have frequently been approached through the prism of influence, as writers are often compared with James Joyce, Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett. This essay reconsiders how we can critically approach modernist legacies by closely examining the style of Mike McCormack's one-sentence novel *Solar Bones* (2016). I argue that *Solar Bones* responds to the Irish economic crash of 2008 by performing a kind of 'post-mortem' on modernist forms of narration and temporality, which is reflected in how the novel is written. Building on David James' framework for tracing modernist legacies in *Modernist Futures* (2012), I consider how *Solar Bones* self-reflexively explores various modernist styles through a posthumous narrator as a means to portray the social and historical fallout of the Celtic Tiger. Consequently, McCormack's style of post-mortem modernism exemplifies how we can critically attend to the particular formal, affective and political qualities that animate contemporary engagements with modernism's legacies, while also allowing us to consider the novel in relation to a 'rejuvenated experimental pulse', as McCormack puts it, in twenty-first century Irish literature.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 9 December 2021; Accepted 31 May 2022

KEYWORDS Modernism; Irish literature; modernist legacies; twenty-first century literature; style; posthumous narration; mike McCormack; solar bones; celtic tiger; late style; lateness; experimental literature

Beyond Mount Rushmore

The Irish author Mike McCormack has frequently spoken of a 'Mount Rushmore' of Irish modernism, describing the faces of James Joyce, Flann O'Brien, and Samuel Beckett carved into a mountain, and pronouncing that this 'holy trinity' of authors 'handed us a licence to go forth and experiment'.¹ While McCormack acknowledges that many Irish writers have found this modernist legacy 'disabling and overshadowing', he claims to have found it 'hugely enabling'.² Speaking with Stephanie Boland in 2016, McCormack elaborates:

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[i]t feels like we're digesting their legacy. I don't know if it's something about being able to see them clearly now, but people are no longer afraid to name-check the three masters [...] This is a really exciting time: for the first time in my lifetime, there's been a rejuvenation of the experimental pulse in Irish fiction.³

This sense of a rejuvenated 'experimental pulse', in terms of the stylistic and formal innovations in Irish fiction throughout the 2010s, can be traced across a wide range of contemporary authors who, in various ways, engage with modernism's legacies. A non-exhaustive list could include Anna Burns, Eimear McBride, Claire-Louise Bennett, Danny Denton, Sara Baume, Keith Ridgway, Anakana Schofield, David Hayden, Kevin Barry, Nicole Flat-tery, June Caldwell and Rob Doyle, and could also be extended to include non-fiction writers like Sinéad Gleeson, Emma Dabiri, Kevin Breathnach, Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Brian Dillon. Dillon has remarked on the sheer array of innovative writing that, 'If there is a modernism of sorts at work in current fiction in Ireland, it's less a return [...] and more an acknowledgment of the variety of experimental traditions on which young writers now draw'.⁴ This article engages with and develops a range of new scholarship that has complicated comparative accounts of modernist legacies which are predicated on an 'anxiety of influence' model, and instead echoes Dillon's emphasis on the 'variety of experimental traditions' at play in contemporary engagements with modernism.⁵

I am drawing on recent scholarship such as David James's *Modernist Futures* (2012) to emphasise a less anxious understanding of modernist legacies, even if this understanding contradicts the comparisons invited by authors themselves. While James argues that '[i]nfluence is and must be a key factor in understanding how modernist aesthetics are redeployed for new politico-aesthetic ends', he also stresses that modernist legacies 'urge us to refine the distinction between modernism's achievements as a heritage to which writers simply allude and the more substantive function of modernist ideals as catalysts for enterprising if not unprecedented kinds of fiction'.⁶ My thinking is informed by the latter half of James' description of modernist legacies here, departing from the crucial but well-catalogued aspect of influence when it comes to tracing modernist lineages, to consider how 'modernist ideals' operate as a way of exploring new developments in twenty-first century literature. In this article, I will examine McCormack's 2016 novel *Solar Bones* in the context of modernist legacies in Irish literature, analysing how McCormack's writing explores intersecting questions of form, style, and representation, that allow us to consider modernist legacies not as 'historical artefacts' but as a set of 'persisting resources'.⁷ This article develops the critical commitments of James' *Modernist Futures* to examine *Solar Bones*' posthumous narrative perspective, and how it can be considered in relation to modernist formal innovations which articulate

and illuminate the novel's ethical and political concerns. More broadly, by examining how representational concerns uniquely emerge through innovative forms and styles in recent literature, I propose that we are better placed to trace contemporary authors' engagements with modernist legacies without constantly returning to (often) debilitating or retrospective narratives of influence.⁸

McCormack has argued that the 'experimental instincts' of fiction are integral to its capacity for tracing social dynamics and political changes, suggesting a novel like *Ulysses* as a prime example.⁹ Rather than applying a comparative Joycean lens to McCormack's writing, I am more interested in how this particular modernist legacy – the relationship between experimental forms of writing and socio-political concerns – can be closely read as it emerges in contemporary literature.¹⁰ The political significance of form can be traced across recent Irish literature; we see it in Anna Burns' portrayal of a divided society during the Troubles in *Milkman* (2018), Eimear McBride's linguistic rendering of corporeality and trauma in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), Melatu Uche Okorie's depictions of institutional racism in Direct Provision centres in *This Hostel Life* (2018), and Nicole Flattery's stories of late capitalist inertia in *Show Them a Good Time* (2019), as well as in many other recent works.¹¹ However, any attempt to cohesively group the diverse literary responses to these myriad political crises under a united banner of 'new modernism' quickly falls apart due to these authors' disparate aims and artistic objectives.¹² Rather than conceiving of modernist legacies in terms of a set of techniques that can be imitated by contemporary writers to achieve similar results, I suggest we consider contemporary responses to modernism as more of a conceptual problem – a series of challenges regarding form, style, and representation – that are addressed, reanimated and complicated by contemporary literature and recent history.¹³ As James proposes, 'by registering how the formal procedures and thematic pursuits of contemporary writers extend modernism's technical and ethical engagement with multiple dimensions of affective experience', we can observe modernism's productive and varied presence in recent novels, not as a retrospective aesthetic that gains value only through associations with previous works of art and historical moments, but as a continuous and renegotiated set of artistic practices centred upon the compositional, affective and political efficacy of post-millennial literature.¹⁴

Another way that we can move beyond defining modernist legacies through the prisms of influence and comparison, I suggest, is by highlighting the expressive significance of style. Intersecting with the political and ethical questions of formal representation, this article emphasises the affective capacities of style in McCormack's novel. My understanding of style builds on the work of critics like Garrett Stewart, who argues that

style is not a supplement or adjunct to narrative in prose fiction, some fetishized refinement of its literary form, but rather its operative vehicle: its almost tactile delivery system. Style is the discernible fictional energy of the prose itself, its level of pure invention – in effect, its fictionality in essence.¹⁵

James similarly captures the importance of style in terms of shifting understandings of modernist legacies, as he examines the significance of Toni Morrison's work, associating the 'modernist character of Morrison's ambitions' with the 'risks she undertakes at the level of style'.¹⁶ In turn, by unpacking the risks that McCormack undertakes at the level of style, examining the way it functions as a 'tactile delivery system' for conveying the political fallout of the Celtic Tiger – Ireland's particularly severe economic crash in 2008 – I suggest that *Solar Bones* provides a case study for reconsidering how we critically approach modernist legacies in contemporary literature, namely, by closely attending to the stylistic, affective and expressive capacities of individual works of fiction.¹⁷ By these lights, *Solar Bones* demonstrates how a variety of Irish novelists are renegotiating modernism, not as homage, but as a means of exploring the limits of representation to address pertinent political, aesthetic and ethical questions in the twenty-first century.

Despite the tribute that McCormack pays to its enabling qualities, I therefore suggest that we reassess the long shadows of his Mount Rushmore analogy, and that a more productive critical understanding of modernist legacies may draw on a vocabulary of reinvention and distinction – and in *Solar Bones*' case, a vocabulary of posthumous rupture – rather than tracing paths of comparison and continuity.¹⁸ My focus, considering modernist legacies through a practice of formal close reading, thus departs from McCormack's invitation to track Joycean and Beckettian similarities and allusions. Instead, an alternative approach towards modernist legacies allows us to unpack the idiosyncratic style of *Solar Bones*, a style that underpins the novel's political concerns with the historical fallout of the Celtic Tiger, and concurrently speaks to McCormack's generative notion of modernist legacies as 'an experimental pulse' that resonates across recent Irish writing. Consequently, my reading of *Solar Bones* resists conceptualising modernist legacies in terms of a narrow set of strategies or traceable influences, and instead focuses on how contemporary engagements with modernist quandaries of form and expression can respond to pressing representational challenges – from capturing local histories to rendering temporality – in twenty-first century fiction more generally. Ultimately, I propose that by closely reading the formal and thematic concerns in *Solar Bones* – its concerns with quotidian daily rhythms, local politics, environmental catastrophe and the experiences of sickness – we can see how McCormack engages with modernist modes of mentation and perspective in a way that captures a particular kind of twenty-first century engagement with temporality, we well as alluding to possible new futures for the novel.

Post-mortem modernism

Born in 1965 and raised in Louisburgh, County Mayo, in the west of Ireland, McCormack is the author of the novels *Crowe's Requiem* (1998) and *Notes from a Coma* (2005), as well as the short story collections *Getting It in the Head* (1996) and *Forensic Songs* (2013). *Solar Bones* is McCormack's third novel and was published by the independent publisher Tramp Press in 2016. After initially struggling to find a publisher, *Solar Bones* won the Goldsmiths Prize in 2016, the Dublin Literary Award in 2018, and it was long-listed for the Booker Prize in 2017.¹⁹ *Solar Bones* is written in one endless, sparsely punctuated sentence, narrated by a posthumous protagonist named Marcus Conway, a civic engineer who lives (or lived) in County Mayo. McCormack has said of the novel's style: 'Once I realised that Marcus was dead then his ghostly presence dictated the prose style [...] this is not a stream of consciousness [...] I always understood the style to be more in the nature of a stream of post-consciousness'.²⁰ The central premise of the narrative therefore stems from its formal distinctiveness, as the one-sentence structure of *Solar Bones* mirrors the ghostly content that it depicts. As a reading experience the form and narrative perspective of *Solar Bones*' 'post mortem aria' operates as a catalyst for drawing us into Marcus' thoughts and memories, where 'all things are out of synch and kilter, [...] every edge and outline blurred or warped and each passing moment belated, lagging a single beat behind its proper measure'.²¹ McCormack engages with this sense of belatedness and aftermath to experiment with temporality and 'post-consciousness', in a way that allow him to highlight the quotidian aspects of Marcus' quiet life – his job, daily commute, family dynamics, local environment etc. In turn, these temporal rhythms relate to modernist challenges of representation, specifically, in how to depict character and cognition through innovative modes of language.

The opening pages of *Solar Bones*, indicate why Boland has suggested that the novel represents a 'resurrection for Irish Modernism'.²² The narrative begins with the ringing of the Angelus bell:

the bell
 the bell as
 hearing the bell as
 hearing the bell as standing here
 the bell being heard standing here
 hearing it ring out through the grey light of this
 morning, noon or night
 god knows
 this grey day standing here and
 listening to this bell in the middle of the day, the middle of the day bell,
 the Angelus bell in the middle of the day ringing out through the grey light to
 here

standing in the kitchen
hearing this bell²³

The uncapitalised first word, the separate line-breaks, the rhythmic repetition that aurally echoes the sound being described (the ringing of the bell), and the absence of full stops all demonstrate how the material shape and narrative flow of the novel are propelled by the mental and sensory processes that it focalises. The structure of the novel establishes, to borrow James's phrase, that 'questions of form are indissolubly linked to questions concerning how fiction confronts the material world through its imaginative simulation of how that world is sensed and known'.²⁴ In *Solar Bones*' next lines, 'snag my heart and / draw the whole world into / being here', we also detect the first indications that our narrator is dead, as the snagged heart suggests what will later be confirmed: that it has stopped beating.²⁵ This is an open secret. It is the first line in the book's blurb ('Marcus Conway is dead').²⁶ However, within the narrative Marcus is unaware of his posthumous condition, as he obliviously haunts his old kitchen while listening to the church bells outside, reflecting that 'there is something strange about all this, some twitchy energy in the ether which has affected me from the moment those bells began to toll, something flitting through me, a giddiness drawing me'.²⁷ This twitchy energy finds a conduit in the novel's distinctive form, as the entire narrative ostensibly appears to be told in one endless sentence without a single full stop. McCormack has said that the prose is 'a continuous outpour because that is the way a ghost would think [...] continuous, never stopping for fear that, as a ghost, he might dissipate or falter'.²⁸ Through this 'continuous outpour' the novel organically merges form and content to convey the rhythms of Marcus' post-conscious cognition. Nonetheless, indented paragraphs and line breaks perform the work of invisible punctuation, rendering the novel more like a series of flowing fragments rather than a single sentence, and it is the structural organisation of these fragments that allow the reader to easily follow the narrative, which settles into a less cryptic register after the opening lines. Indeed, the rolling spectral prose is not navigable *despite* the novel's complicated structure but precisely *because* of McCormack's architectural composition, as the language strives to capture the continuous flow of retrospective thought. McCormack has said, 'I always think of my books visually as architecture, as constructs, as pieces of engineering', and this can be seen and felt in the way that the rhythms of Marcus' cognition is constructed.²⁹

Solar Bones is not only a narratological exercise in crafting a posthumous perspective, relayed to us from a temporally dislocated afterlife; it also conducts a kind of *post-mortem* upon modernist forms of expression. McCormack's style of post-mortem modernism, in my terms, encompasses the way he self-reflexively dissects what can be considered as the conventions

and formal strategies of literary modernism, such as exploring the narrative possibilities of perspectivism, interiority and consciousness.³⁰ *Solar Bones*' style and form, therefore, are crucially bound up with the spectral conceit of the novel, in a way that speaks to a kind of late modernist afterlife, and post-mortem modernism therefore acts as a descriptor for capturing this afterlife. Concurrently, within the novel's narrative, post-mortem modernism can function as a shorthand for Marcus' style of ghostly narration, as he surgically analyses the minutiae of his life, imaginatively deconstructing the everyday objects of his local environment. In one memorable scene Marcus recalls his father dismantling a tractor:

the sight of that engine spread over the floor would stand to me forever as proof of a world which was a lot less stable and unified than my childish imagination had held it to be, the world now a rickety thing of chance components bolted together in the dark, the whole construct humming closer to collapse than I had ever suspected³¹

The description of the dissembled tractor is one of many scenes that depicts technology in a way which produces a jolting sense of alienation, a sudden feeling of smallness, alongside a tender sense of interconnectedness with these material objects, which, like the posthumous Marcus, are 'humming close to collapse'. An emotive register is wrought from the mechanised language of engineering, as Marcus extends his posthumous perspective to comment on a variety of structures, objects and social dynamics, often performing a kind of narrative autopsy through his granular level of scrutiny. Marcus ruminates on the minutiae of his own life, slowly contemplating the ontology of seemingly banal objects such as dissembled tractors, wind turbines, and kitchen knives. These objects are instilled with the same sense of disjointed temporality as Marcus' ghostly narration, and they contain the promise of old memories and unrealised futures. Marcus' style of taxonomizing his local environment is thereby propelled by the posthumous or post-mortem style of the prose. Beyond neatly summarising the narrative flow and Marcus' anatomising descriptions, such as the deconstructed tractor, post-mortem modernism also speaks to the way that McCormack anatomises the novel's thematic, linguistic, and stylistic concerns, in relation to modernist legacies that are still being 'digested' and reworked across different kinds of contemporary Irish literature. However, this article stops short of trying to coin a new critical vocabulary that would narrowly define the 'variety of experimental traditions' across contemporary Irish literature.³² Instead of conceiving of McCormack's resurrected modernism as part of a movement of metamodernism, new modernism or post-postmodernism, I am more concerned with the immediate sense of resurrection in the novel; Marcus, as the novel's posthumous narrator, conducts a retrospective post-mortem upon his own life in a way that creates an affectively

conflicted reading experience and captures a politically charged historical moment.³³

While not advocating for post-mortem modernism as any kind of new critical paradigm, I suggest that the term allows us to particularise and unpack McCormack's engagement with modernist legacies, as well as side-step well-worn debates of influence, because it encourages us to reconsider how contemporary writers are engaging with and dissecting modernist forms of expression, and, in *Solar Bones*' case, finding ways to posthumously reanimate them. This methodological focus, significantly, allows us to examine how the compositional and political aspects of *Solar Bones* are deeply intertwined, as post-mortem modernism captures both the diegetic sense of Marcus' posthumous narrative, alongside McCormack's own anatomisation of the novel's expressive capacities and affective registers. McCormack's style of post-mortem modernism, I argue, facilitates critical approaches towards modernist legacies that are more concerned with the expressive and formal particularities of contemporary fiction rather than paying homage to a tradition of hagiographic comparisons. By closely reading the posthumous narrative, disjointed temporalities and distinctive style of *Solar Bones* we can see how these modernist reworkings come to fruition.

A stream of post-consciousness

The thematic scope of *Solar Bones* often switches its focus between intersecting temporal currents, mapping how daily systolic rhythms interact with and reflect upon largescale structures of political and ecological collapse – most explicitly seen in the narrative when a cryptosporidium outbreak infects the water supply in the west of Ireland, poisoning its inhabitants and infecting Marcus' wife Mairead. The belated temporal register of *Solar Bones* also speaks to the kind of 'late untimeliness' which Peter Boxall detects in certain twenty-first century works of fiction that explores the 'discordance between newly passing time and the expired narratives with which we have made time readable'.³⁴ Boxall traces literary 'posthumousness and historical disorientation' through a series of 'late styles' defined by their 'pared-down sparseness of expression, a tautness at the level of the sentence'.³⁵ However, McCormack's own sprawling kind of late style is not based on a biographically late phase of writing (as Theodor Adorno and Edward Said define it in their studies of late styles), or the pared-down, Beckettian sparseness that Boxall focuses on, but is conveyed through *Solar Bones*' sweeping posthumous narration and the affective disorientation that it produces. Marcus' posthumous narration captures a sense of a time out of joint which speaks to the historical enfolding of the 2008 economic crash in Ireland, where it feels like:

the collapse of a small bank in an island economy becoming the fault line through which the whole universe drains, the whole thing ridiculously improbable, so unlikely in scale and consequence it's as if something that never was has finally collapsed or revealed itself to be constructed of air before eventually falling to ruin in that specific way which proved it never existed³⁶

The serpentine structure of the prose, with its discussive pivots and thematic rumination on negation ('something that never was', 'which proved it never existed'), combines the artistic and political concerns of the novel through an intertwining of content and form. By metaphorically representing the economic crash as a kind of leak, as money that trickles down a drain and takes the whole universe along with it, McCormack's style manages to affectively capture this image as well as a kind of 'historical disorientation' through its forking syntax and flowing rhythms. Consequently, McCormack's style of post-conscious narration conveys the ghostly afterlife of the economic crash, as the fluctuating single-sentence reflects the intangibility of abstract global markets, while the narrative channels these large-scale phenomena through the geo-political locale of a small town in Mayo. The novel's style therefore manages to communicate collapse on an intersecting bodily, local, and global scale, through the malleability of its protean form.

The novel's form also facilitates the strange experience of reading about a life that has already ended. As readers, we anticipate Marcus' death in the narrative's future, while Marcus simultaneously remembers his life through a kind of posthumous lament. The challenges of representing these conflicting temporal trajectories, in turn, begins to mirror the political and social friction of Marcus' local Mayo environment. Here we can see how the political concerns and formal innovations of *Solar Bones* are deeply interwoven, as the novel collapses boundaries between the local and the global, the private and the public, to consider how abstract political decisions manifest in the flesh and body of daily material realities. For example, Marcus reflects upon these intersecting forces after his wife Mairead falls sick:

I found myself trying to hear something which fully recognised the reality of what it really meant to be someone like Mairead who was taking the brunt of it, all its sickness and wasting, but there was no such acknowledgement in those droning voices as councillors and engineers, one after another, came before mic and camera to speak in defensive assurances which leant heavily on the repetition of preprogrammed mantras that were carefully calibrated to contain nothing to which the speaker might be held accountable, spokesmen droning on as the days passed, pushing the story into some bloodless realm which left the individual human scale of the thing untouched, the human grit of the situation untold³⁷

While McCormack's flowing prose style manages to capture the affective rhythms of Marcus' stream of 'post-consciousness', it also demonstrates

communicative breakdowns in passages such as this one, where the endless ‘droning voices’ predicated on ‘preprogrammed mantras’ emphasise how political forms of language fail to capture the experiences of individual suffering. Moreover, these passages take on renewed significance in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, as these localised events of quotidian suffering now assume a global resonance that nonetheless often fails to capture the ‘human scale of the thing’ and the lived realities of sickness. McCormack’s distinctive style contributes to a growing corpus of experimental literature that explores social and political inequities in twenty-first century Ireland by drawing on an uneasy modernist legacy, based on challenging ‘generic and representational conventions’, in James’s terms, in an attempt to affectively capture the ‘human grit of the situation’.³⁸

By ‘responding to the prospect of a strangely unreadable future’, many contemporary writers, Boxall proposes, are ‘adapting the formal structures with which to capture it [...] refashioning the legacies not only of realism, but also of modernism and postmodernism’. Under these terms, I suggest that *Solar Bones* marks a formal and stylistic attempt to render this kind of ‘latent, untensed time’ legible – to give it shape, form and literary expression in a specific historical context and through a distinctive, posthumous style.³⁹ McCormack engages with modernist legacies of representing consciousness and disjointed temporalities, in a way that allows *Solar Bones* to reflect upon the formal, material and political difficulties of capturing recent Irish history through innovative modes of expression. In *Solar Bones* this recent history comprises the death throes of the Celtic Tiger, which McCormack specifically depicts within the west of Ireland through snapshots of quotidian life, describing scenes of political malpractice and examining Marcus’ vocation as a civil engineer, a role that grants Marcus the tools to survey his local environment, albeit from a posthumous perspective. The narrative conceit of a posthumous narrator who is unaware of his own death creates the affective dissonance of McCormack’s style of post-mortem modernism, as Marcus’ ‘stream of post-consciousness’ operates at a ghostly and elegiac remove from everything that he describes. Intermittently, Marcus shows a faint awareness of his own deathly state of flux, as he is

conscious of something stagnant in the house itself, as if all its pulses and rhythms have been swept from it so that time itself is legless here with all things, myself included, suspended in a kind of stalled duration, an infinitely extended moment spinning like an unmeshed gear⁴⁰

The late Marcus Conway’s posthumous narrative voice is propelled by this ‘twitchy energy in the ether’, as the undying and temporally-vexed style of *Solar Bones* conveys a sense of an ending that refuses to end.⁴¹ The final lines of *Solar Bones* capture this unending dynamic, when Marcus suffers a heart attack:

these residual pulses and rhythms which for these waning moments, abide in
 their own recurrent measure, nothing more than a vague strobing of the air
 before they too are obliterated in that self-engulfing light which closes over
 everything to be
 cast out beyond darkness into that vast unbroken commonage of space and
 time, into that vast oblivion in which there are no markings or contours to
 steer by nor any songs to sing me home and where there is nothing else for
 it but to keep going, one foot in front of the other
 the head down and keep going
 keep going
 keep going to fuck⁴²

The temporal conflict demonstrated in this passage, between obliteration and continuity, residual pulses and steady rhythms, captures the kind of late style at play throughout the entire novel. While Marcus emphasises an absence of certainties or consolation ('nor any songs to sing my home'), the propulsive onward current ends the novel on an ambivalent note, inflected by Marcus' Mayo dialect, that oscillates between persistence and negation. More broadly, the cyclical, sense of an un-ending in the novel not only echoes but refracts modernist modes of temporality, as McCormack reworks the formal strategies of endless and stalled durations in a localised exploration of the daily rhythms of his south Mayo environs. These rhythms are set to the tempo, the 'systolic thump' of the Angelus bell, as rendered in the opening lines ('the bell / the bell as / hearing the bell as / hearing the bell as standing here') that reverberates beyond the confines of Marcus' kitchen and perforates his thoughts throughout the narrative.⁴³ It is this temporal register that grounds McCormack's novel in a specific place and time which resists eternal impassés, and crafts, in Boxall's terms, a 'language that might articulate' a kind of 'imminent futurity', through the impulse to 'keep going / keep going to fuck', even if Marcus' death and his spectral form appear to cast this future just out of reach.⁴⁴

We can see how the representational concerns of *Solar Bones* are animated by its temporal relations, as the novel's formal innovations of language work with and against various timeframes. The posthumous narrative perspective, as Marcus looks back on his life, provides a surprisingly fitting form for the novel's quotidian concerns, while simultaneously containing an ominous note that foreshadows the narrator's demise – Marcus' death is in both the narrative's past (from his perspective) and its future (for the reader). As readers we await the heart attack that has already happened (stated implicitly in the narrative and explicitly in the novel's blurb) and become affectively 'depresentified', in Alice Bennett's terminology, by the vertiginous sense of anticipation and reflection.⁴⁵ Bennett, writing about posthumous narratives, details how 'the voices of the dead de-sacralise closure and its revelations by adding supplementary time beyond the end and refusing to keep silent about what could fall outside any given plot'.⁴⁶ The supplementary timeframes of

Solar Bones interweave an anticipatory voice (that narrates Marcus' life leading up to his heart attack), with a voice of posthumous retrospection that echoes elegiac, epistolary novels. Rather than overwhelming the novel's narrative cohesion, these conflicting voices and temporalities often coalesce to convey a sense of rhythmic serenity, a celebration of an ordinary life well-lived, that still bears signs of its formal struggle and deathly future.

Solar Bones' twinned depictions of ordinary life and its hope for alternative futures stems again from its formal structure, as the novel interweaves several narrative threads that span different temporalities, creating what Marcus calls, 'my post mortem aria / my engineer's lament'.⁴⁷ The central narrative begins with Marcus standing in his kitchen on the second of November, All Souls' Day,

when the souls of the dead are bailed from purgatory for a while by the prayers of the faithful so that they can return to their homes, [...] the mearing between this world and the next is so blurred we might easily find ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder with the dead⁴⁸

Marcus' spectral voice is grounded by a 'systolic rhythm', as McCormack puts it, that pulls the reader along through Marcus' telescoping narration as it flits between different temporal timelines.⁴⁹ These systolic rhythms give both narrator and the reader a structural anchor and provides some form of consolation, even after we realise that Marcus' own life has ended. And yet, the temporal rhythms of *Solar Bones* are not always consoling. Historical time fluctuates in the novel, as material and technological forces shift and contort, whether in the moment that a Skype call with Marcus' son suddenly cuts out, or through the outbreak of cryptosporidium in the Galway water supply that subsequently infects Marcus' wife Mairead. Indeed, Marcus captures this fluctuating historical time by describing the temporally disorientating state of sickness as it descends upon Mairead:

Friday, Saturday and Sunday
with their patient, attritional wasting which seemed to consume her down at the very smallest grains of her being, drifting from herself on clouds of her own breath, each laboured exhalation peeling away another layer of her into the ether, this illness which had settled into the most sheltered niches of her organism from where it could achieve the most finical, attentive wasting⁵⁰

In these instances, the novel's unpunctuated syntax gains a particular kind of affective potency in conveying the relentlessness of Mairead's sickness. McCormack's late style appears almost uniquely suited to capturing the 'attritional wasting' and 'laboured exhalation' that Mairead so vividly feels, as the novel's endless sentence echoes the endless torment of her illness 'at the very smallest grains of her being'. As each breath that Mairead takes peels 'away another layer of her into the ether', her corporeal state begins to resemble and foreshadow that of her deceased husband Marcus. The

post-mortem style of description that allows Marcus to anatomise his local surroundings inflects the language with a kind of deathly quality, that threatens to melt everything solid into air.

Both Marcus' heart attack and Mairead's sickness demonstrate the strange atemporal state of illness, as a portrayal of untimeliness and what Boxall describes as a kind of 'lateness' to oneself.⁵¹ Here we viscerally witness how

the failure to measure oneself to one's time leads not just to inarticulacy but also to the early and difficult encoding of a new kind of subjectivity, a new way of feeling the flow of time as it passes through the body.⁵²

While Marcus' narration often coheres into a consoling form, a 'new kind of subjectivity' that runs against the grain of the novel's deathly reality, Mairead's illness emphasises the difficulty of articulating and 'encoding' illness, and speaks to subjectivities that are beyond the novel's remit. As Orlaith Darling notes of *Solar Bones*' narrow and traditional portrayal of gender roles, 'men engineer, women suffer; as women suffer, men interpolate their suffering bodies into yet more social engineering which reinstates gender norms'.⁵³ The ethical challenge of portraying Mairead's illness therefore may embody not only the expressive qualities but also the limitations of McCormack's style of post-mortem modernism, as it demonstrates and struggles with the pressing representational concerns of twenty-first century Ireland, such as the historical silencing and underrepresentation of women in social, political and cultural spheres. Nonetheless, through the unique vantage point of its posthumous perspective, we can step back and see how *Solar Bones* engages with the material realities of recent Irish politics and history.

Death of the Celtic Tiger

Huge social and political transitions have taken place in Ireland since the turn of the century.⁵⁴ This period of historical changes and reckonings has produced the need for new forms and modes of expression to capture the specific shifting cultural and political realities in Ireland, and, more broadly, to articulate what Boxall has called 'a new historical structure of feeling' in the twenty-first century.⁵⁵ Concurrently, Paige Reynolds has emphasised the 'particularly rich and exciting moment for Irish writing' in the twenty-first century, and she argues that 'a refusal to relinquish modernism in Ireland suggests that the modernist project is not complete; its quest to "make it new" lives on in a present-day Ireland'.⁵⁶ *Solar Bones* can be considered at the crosscurrent of both this modernist persistence and the need for 'a new historical structure of feeling'. These two forces converge, perhaps surprisingly, in *Solar Bones*' focus on structural engineering (Marcus' work focuses on 'scale and accuracy, mapping and surveying so

that the grid of reason and progress could be laid across the earth’) and how it corresponds to political malpractice, quotidian rhythms, and the threat of environmental catastrophe.⁵⁷ Marcus’ profession as a civic engineer plays a crucial role in the formal composition of *Solar Bones*, as the novel reflects on various structures – political bodies, economic growth and collapse, media consumption, health and sickness, and the codes of individual citizenship – and how these structures were affected by the imminent collapse of the Celtic Tiger. McCormack has commented on how the material realities of the novel and its historical moment are deeply integrated into the formal method of composition. ‘The collapse of the Celtic Tiger was a dramatic and surreal event which was both physically tangible and a collapse of abstract values’, McCormack has said, ‘therefore it seems likely those fictions which would deal with it would have to step outside the bounds of the realist novel’.⁵⁸

This formal concern with both tangible and abstract values can be seen in Marcus’ vocation as a civic engineer who is responsible for building infrastructure in his local Mayo environment. Throughout the novel he clashes with the short-termism of local politicians, and the cronyism which typified Irish politics in the Celtic Tiger years (and beyond). Marcus’ relationship with structural engineering functions as a kind of rebuke towards these politicians and it informs his holistic worldview. Moreover, the scenes that describe the act of construction possess an almost numinous quality, as well as providing a formal conduit for the novel’s pliant prose style, such as when Marcus observes the pouring of cement:

I’ve seen it done umpteen times before, there is still something to wonder at in the pouring of a concrete foundation, the way it draws so many skills and strengths together, the timing and cooperation needed and the way the rising and spread tide of concrete itself demarks, as no other stage in the building process can⁵⁹

The ‘rising and spread tide of concrete’, like many tactile and material descriptions in the novel, provides another correlative for the flowing rhythms of the ghostly prose, as Marcus appears to fixate upon objects and substances that mirror his own pliant narration. Marcus goes on to celebrate the ‘uncanny sense of a building beginning to take on mass and shape in the blue light of the world’, revelling in the aesthetic pleasure of seeing the structure take shape.⁶⁰ While the concrete sets, the prospect of building of a new national school attempts to provide a literal solid foundation for the future. However, the certainty that the new structure represents is undone, and the concrete is found to be just as unstable as the local political environment. Before the foundation is laid, Marcus performs a slump test to measure the consistency of the concrete. The slump test fails, rendering the concrete unfit to use, and Marcus refuses to sign-off on the construction, leading to a

confrontation with a local politician called John Moylette. Marcus' civic sense of vocation, his role as world-builder, clashes against the realities and temporalities of parish politics: 'fuck engineers, Moylette roared, his temper now routed / engineers don't make the world, you should know that more than anyone, politics and politicians make the world'.⁶¹ Marcus responds by once again drawing on a temporally-inflected vocabulary, 'your decisions have only to hold up for four or five years – one electoral cycle and you are an acclaimed hero – but my decisions need a longer life-span than that'.⁶²

As we see in the altercation with Moylette, Marcus' role as a 'metaphysical engineer' excludes or at least demotes him in the politicians' republic of late capitalism.⁶³ The novel's thematic focus on engineering emphasises how these unstable political foundations, alongside the persistence of political cronyism in Ireland, precipitated both the uneven rise of the Celtic Tiger, as it prioritised the silicon docks of Dublin, and the inevitable ruin it caused.⁶⁴ Linking the economic reality to the literature that followed the 2008 crash, Aran Ward Sell notes how 'the Tiger's collapse precipitated the emergence of a school of textual resistance in Irish literature, which uses experimental representations of damaged consciousnesses in an attempt to unpick the seams of twenty-first-century neoliberalism'.⁶⁵ *Solar Bones*, then, written from the vantage point of 2016, manages to perform an autopsy upon the corpse of the Celtic Tiger by means of its experimental representations and its explorations of post-consciousness. While I am not suggesting that 2008 marks any kind of 1922 moment in Irish literature of modernist resurrection or rupture, there has been a demonstrable shift in the writing, reading and publishing habits in Irish literary culture since the economic crash, and, in particular, an increased willingness to engage with experimental forms of writing.⁶⁶

The critical distance between *Solar Bones* and the historical moment it focuses on, like the distance between Marcus' own life and death, allows certain political critiques to emerge.⁶⁷ The human waste that causes the cryptosporidium outbreak and contaminates Galway's water supply marks one of *Solar Bones*' few tangible events, and it functions as a politically charged correlative for the accretive and porous prose, as the novel's content and style combine to emphasise the west of Ireland's crumbling infrastructure and the devastation it has wrecked upon individual lives. Marcus describes Mairead's sickness through intersecting personal and political terms:

down the hall in the far bedroom, engineering and politics converging in the slight figure of my wife lying in bed, her body and soul now giving her an extension into the political arena in a way, which, if she had been aware of, would have startled her.⁶⁸

The disjointed temporal condition of Mairead's illness functions as a historically specific kind of sickness, capturing the precise failures of pre- and post-

crash Irish politics located in the cryptosporidium outbreaks of Galway in 2007, and, more immediately, located individually in Mairead's feverish body.⁶⁹ *Solar Bones*, then, explores how 'bodies and environments can be reshaped by the political, by forms of maldevelopment', as Treasa De Loughry writes, and it is the novel's style, I argue, that strives to capture these intersecting forces.⁷⁰

There is a play on *waste* and *wasting* throughout *Solar Bones*, as seen in the political corruption of the Celtic Tiger years that wastes long-term sustainable plans for short-term profits, or in the literal waste ('a viral parasite which originates in human faecal matter') that causes the cryptosporidium outbreak.⁷¹ Marcus' daughter Agnes, upon learning more about her mother's cryptosporidiosis, dramatically claims that

it was now the case that the citizens were consuming their own shit, the source of their own illness and there was something fatally concentric and self-generating about this, as if the virus had circled back to its source to find its proper home where it settled in for its evolutionary span⁷²

Marcus responds to his daughter's hypothesis with despair, 'would she ever stop / mother of Jesus / stop'.⁷³ Just as Marcus' posthumous voice haunts and animates the narrative, refusing to recede into the waste lands of death, so does the novel's physical waste return to infect the inhabitants of the west of Ireland in a motion that is 'fatally concentric', as well as politically and historically specific, and it anticipates further instances of bodily and structural collapse.⁷⁴ The temporal disjointedness of *Solar Bones*' formal construction, made up of its 'single unbroken continuums', contains a political critique of the nefarious and substandard housing and social planning that typified the Tiger years, a critique that is propelled and enabled by the novel's capacious form and post-mortem retrospective.

The relationship between politics, waste and abundance also resonates with the environmental considerations of *Solar Bones*. One scene in the novel illustrates these relationships between development and destruction, composition and collapse, as Marcus witnesses a gigantic low-loader lorry pass through the main street of Louisburgh:

the flatbed behind him carried something that was dismantled in sections and tied down on both sides with ratchet straps and chains, something that at first sight appeared to be the luminous bones of some massive, extinct creature, now disinterred, with its ribs gathered into a neat bundle around the thick stump of a massive spinal column which time and the elements had polished to such a cool ceramic gloss that if I were to leave my hand on it I would have been surprised if it felt like anything other than glass, and it was only when the whole thing had passed by completely and I saw the back of the trailer hung with caution tape and hazard decals that I recognised the load as a wind turbine which had been completely broken down with the vanes and conical tower separated from the nacelle and stacked length-wise along the trailer

but with enough corrosion around the flanges on the base sections to indicate that this turbine had recently been taken apart as a working project, faulty or redundant or obsolete in some way or other⁷⁵

The spectre of this ‘massive, extinct creature, now disinterred’, appears to descend from another language and world, compared to the docile Mayo town of Louisburgh. Marcus’ perception focalises into recognition when he eventually realises that this rough beast was always an inanimate bundle, a heap of broken objects containing vanes, nacelle, and conical tower. The wasted remains of the extinct creature are revealed to be a proliferating technology that has nonetheless turned faulty and obsolete, as both the true and false images conspire to remind Marcus and the reader alike of the existential brink upon which we now teeter. Marcus laments this strange funeral with a sense of unrealised possibility, as he stands in the street

recognising this as a clear instance of the world forfeiting one of its better ideas, as if something for which there was once justified hope had proven to be a failure and the world had given up on some precious dream of itself, one of its better destinies⁷⁶

By closely unpacking the wind turbine scene in *Solar Bones*, we can see how McCormack’s narrative use of perspectival duration adds to the novel’s style of post-mortem modernism. The turbine comes into gradual focalisation, and the moments pass before Marcus’ perception can combine these disassembled parts into a coherent image, illustrating how narrative indirection and optical dispersion allows McCormack, counterintuitively, to express the interconnected relationships between different structures and phenomena. This narrative motion mirrors the incremental build of the novel’s overarching sense of duration; the steady rhythms that are upheld by the temporal ‘solar bones’ find a visual counterpart in the ‘luminous bones’ that we witness here. The slight tension in the ominous, accretive build-up of the passage (‘at first sight’), ironically creates a sense of suspense in a novel which is relatively plotless by any conventional standard, bestowing the scene with a kind of existential significance, as Marcus’ eventual lucid vision formulates into an almost epiphanic moment. The corporeal focus of Marcus’ language, (as he lists the ‘luminous bones’, gathered ‘ribs’, and a ‘massive spinal column’), emphasises the animating capacities of the post-mortem style of narration, as Marcus’ words give life to inanimate objects even as his voice stems from beyond the grave. Moreover, the symbolic breakdown of environmental technologies – technologies that contain the promise of a redemptive aura, and one of the world’s ‘better destinies’ – turns the scene into a kind post-millennial fable.

This post-millennial fable might suggest that the previously ‘justified hope’ of avoiding environmental catastrophe appears to have collapsed

along with this broken and obsolete wind turbine, and Marcus' epiphany only reveals that we are left to face a secular postlapsarian fall, with the scattered remains of our 'precious dreams'. Just as Boxall writes of Don DeLillo, McCormack's narrative is shaped by the dramatisation of 'the historical passage toward[s] a looming apocalypse', where the medium of cultural expression is 'determined by an overwhelming lateness'.⁷⁷ Lateness here extends beyond the systolic rhythms of the novel, which mark a heartbeat that has long stopped beating in real time, and can also encompass a 'palpable historical condition' of post-millennial existential dread, suffused with an impending sense of ecological catastrophe.⁷⁸ The historically late hour, in scenes such as this one, is where McCormack's intricately structured prose assimilates sci-fi imagery and modernist forms of duration to craft the contrapuntal rhythms of his 'engineer's lament'. This lament allows Marcus to elegiacally reflect upon the inner world of his own life while also gesturing towards the untensed time of lost futures and 'better destinies' that are sliding out of view.

Rites, rhythms and rituals

While the posthumous formal structure of *Solar Bones* generates its elegiac and retrospective narrative, the novel's quotidian concerns cohere to create another counterpoint, as they thematically juxtapose against the novel's deathly reality and its depictions of various forms of crises, such as environmental catastrophe and Mairead's sickness. These conflicting forces are contained within the single torrent of Marcus' ghostly narration, even as his mind flits between old memories and the present moment, haunting his old kitchen. The assuaging quality in Marcus' narration builds through the novel's accretive narrative flow, through its abundance of descriptions, as *Solar Bones* accumulatively details the small pleasures of an ordinary life. For example, Marcus praises:

those daily
rites, rhythms and rituals
upholding the world like solar bones, that rarefied amalgam of time and light
whose extension through every minute of the day is visible from the moment I
get up in the morning and stand at the kitchen window with a mug of tea in my
hand, watching the first cars of the day passing on the road, every one of them
known to me
name, number-plate and destinations⁷⁹

These 'daily rites, rhythms and rituals' are used as a refrain throughout the novel in an expressive act that simulates, through repetition, the very sentiment that it describes. In turn, these 'rhythms and rituals' also generate a kind of quotidian solace which pushes back against the cyclical and stalled durations of Marcus' posthumous narration, as well as the descriptions of

personal and ecological catastrophes. The familiar destinations of his local parishioners as they set off for work ('every one of them known to me'), and the almost spiritual affinity he possesses with his local environment, offsets the unknown destination of Marcus' ethereal existence and his unending narrative. By combining a ghostly form with a celebration of the quotidian, McCormack crafts a 'post-mortem aria' through a temporally fraught style that resists a single glossing; *Solar Bones* depicts both a pastoral idyl and viral epidemic from a deathly remove that undercuts any easy sense of readerly consolation or despair.

The novel's lyrical endorsement of the ordinary life marks another mode of resistance against the widespread political malpractice in contemporary Ireland that McCormack attempts to critique. As noted, Marcus' brief moments of satisfaction occur when the thematic focus on engineering is relayed through the novel's capacious narrative style. For example, in one scene Marcus remembers driving over a country bridge:

the bridge always affected something deep in me because every time I passed beneath it, with Mairead beside me and the kids in the back, I would experience that subtle shift within me which I always imagined was my soul flinching in the landscape that opened up beyond that bridge⁸⁰

The ritualistic crossing of boundaries creates a bond between Marcus and the landscape, a bond which is extended to Marcus' family, his wife Mairead, and children Agnes and Darragh, who provide another kind of structural anchoring for Marcus' tangential recollections. The 'subtle shift' that Marcus undertakes by passing underneath the bridge hints at a sense of consolation which contrasts with the deathly reverberations contained in the same scene, as Marcus' soul threatens to cast off its mortal coils and is summoned to a place 'beyond that bridge'. The gesture outwards to this 'beyond' place, affectively captures Marcus' deep sense of attachment to his local environment, while also signalling towards the supplementary time that the dead Marcus (and, therefore, the current narrative) now occupies – beyond the idyllic quotidian rhythms, and towards a late temporal moment that is caught between anticipation and retrospection. The unique perspective of Marcus' posthumous narrative vantage point allows neither the quotidian nor posthumous inflections of the scene to gain the upper hand, but instead combines the two through the novel's conflicted temporal style. These rhythms create, as McCormack has described *Solar Bones*, a 'hymn in praise of engineers'.⁸¹ This hymn manifests through the connection that Marcus feels with the landscape and infrastructure of his Mayo environment, as he recalls navigating it with a sense of secular and civic devotion, even on commonplace occasions such as driving underneath a bridge. Later on in the novel, Marcus comments on his personal investment in 'these bridges / these private dwellings scattered the length and breadth of the county / [as] the

work of a civil engineer'.⁸² The 'engineer's hymn' manages to structurally blend a celebratory tone with an elegiac expression, as neither the aestheticization of rural life in Mayo nor the melancholic reflections from beyond the grave are allowed to dominate the narrative.

It is once again the novel's serpentine form that affectively carries this veering motion, as the structures of paragraphs and would-be sentences pivot at emotional peaks, and aligns the reader with Marcus' streams of thought, as he reflects that 'all this comes to me now in such an unbroken torrent'.⁸³ As *Solar Bones* progresses, it becomes ever more apparent that the absence of full stops is not simply an Oulipian formal exercise in restraint, but is integral to the novel's interweaving stylistic, affective and thematic concerns. Derek Attridge notes of *Solar Bones* that 'no utterance is allowed to fully complete itself before the language is moving on to the next one'.⁸⁴ Elaborating on the affective consequences of this perpetual deferral, Attridge argues that the novel's 'climaxes, instead of arresting the narrative, become part of its onward current'.⁸⁵ The onward current of its style, I suggest, demonstrates how *Solar Bones* explores modernist modes of representing temporality to speak to its historical and political moment. The novel experiments with a style that gestures towards finality without end to create its own post-mortem rhythms that are – through the narrator's death, Mairead's sickness, and the constant threat of economic and ecological collapse – capable of gesturing towards 'a new historical structure of feeling'. More than simply a modernist homage in a post-millennial guise, the quotidian concerns of *Solar Bones* show how McCormack engages with modernist modes of mentation, perspective and disjointed temporalities, and reformulates them to scrutinise the geo-political intricacies of his local Mayo environment and dramatise its daily 'rites, rhythms and rituals'.

By expanding the parameters and repurposing the vocabulary of James's *Modernist Futures*, we can see that *Solar Bones*' modernist recalibrations demonstrates how 'the particularities of form are central, rather than incidental, to our estimation of contemporary fiction's involvement in ethical and political realms', as the novel's politically charged themes and interventions find a conduit in the formal and stylistic fluidity of the prose.⁸⁶ Indeed, the interconnected structures and rhythms of *Solar Bones* underpins 'how mental experiences are shaped by material circumstances, how protagonists' psychological states adapt to and are mutually pervaded by the social realms they navigate'.⁸⁷ Through these terms we can trace the enabling capacities of modernist legacies in post-millennial contexts, where novels like *Solar Bones* connect 'interiority and accountability, braiding the description of characters' innermost reflections into the fabric of worldly situations'.⁸⁸ McCormack's style of post-mortem modernism, then, is more than simply a means of conveying a disjointed sense of temporality, and it facilitates the novel's political and ethical engagements with quotidian life, ecological

catastrophe, and individual sickness, as the posthumous prose affectively ‘depresentifies’ both narrator and reader alike, while celebrating a quiet life and hinting towards possible futures: ‘there is nothing else for it but to keep going, one foot in front of the other / the head down and keep going / keep going / keep going to fuck’.

Echoes of futurity

‘We are living through a time that speeds and slows according to material, economic, and technological forces that have undergone a mutation’.⁸⁹ By advancing this claim, Boxall and Bryan Cheyette pose a challenge: ‘For this generation of writers, the task is to find a means of capturing this transformation, of giving expression to this historical change as it takes place, without resorting to older models of historical narrative’.⁹⁰ We have seen how the ethical and formal concerns of *Solar Bones* are profoundly felt through its temporally fraught style – its attempts to render affectively and politically charged forms of time, spanning quotidian systolic rhythms, the strained time of sickness, and the disjointed temporality of posthumous narration. Indeed, having attended to the temporal affects in McCormack’s ghostly take on the modernist novel, we can start to reconsider on a wider scale how modernism functions as a catalysing force in the twenty-first century for opening up new possibilities of novelistic expression, as writers attempt to capture historical changes and ‘mutated’ temporalities through forms of writing that responds to the specific social and representational challenges of their milieu. The upshot of approaching ‘modernism’s regeneration in contemporary fiction along two interrelated trajectories: the compositional and the political’, as James proposes, is that we can see how these trajectories, in a novel like *Solar Bones*, manage to capture both the textures of contemporary temporality alongside the political fallout and continuums of recent history.⁹¹

In an emblematic instance of *Solar Bones*’ temporal concerns, Marcus contemplates the ‘awful hour of the day, this soft hour bracketed between the Angelus bell and the time signal for the one o’clock news’, where it feels ‘as if the whole world was exhausted’.⁹² Marcus’ feelings of temporal malaise and *Solar Bones*’ posthumous rhythms are demonstrative of Boxall’s proposal that ‘late fictional style in contemporary writing performs the exhaustion of a culture’, while at the same time we can detect in these exhausted, unending works ‘the narrative conditions in which the new, the future might come to expression’, where ‘one might hear the first faint echoes of next year’s voice’.⁹³ These ‘echoes of futurity’ are expressed through the connections and fault lines that emerge through the intersecting currents of *Solar Bones*, as the accretion of daily systolic rhythms interact with and reflect upon largescale structures of political and ecological

collapse, across what Marcus calls the ‘greater circum-terrestrial grid’ of local and planetary relations.⁹⁴ The narratological possibility contained in the post-mortem Marcus performs on his Mayo environment, alongside the post-mortem McCormack performs on modernist modes of mentation and temporality, animates the narrative rhythms and its depictions of local and global precarity, as the novel casts its gaze over the faulty foundations and subsequent collapse of the Celtic Tiger’s political logic. The novel, as Malcolm Sen notes, veers ‘from the personal to the national, and from the national to the planetary, conflating [and capturing] economic, political, and ecological concerns’ and contingencies.⁹⁵ *Solar Bones*, therefore, is not simply a homage to a bygone era of modernism, or a hat tipped towards the ‘three masters’ Joyce, O’Brien and Beckett, but is demonstrative of how modernist concerns with form, style and the limits of expression can be engaged with to address specific twenty-first century concerns and create new affective registers that inflect ‘next year’s voice’, or open up new ways of thinking about formal innovation and modernist legacies in the twenty-first century.

It is through these competing forces that McCormack crafts his novel into an ‘accessible experiment’, as he engages with modernist forms of temporality as a means to wrestle narratological possibility from the brink of various forms of collapse and stasis.⁹⁶ When the memory of his death finally begins to perforate his stream of post-consciousness, Marcus remarks upon his surroundings, in a reflection that could encompass his local parish or equally operate on a global scale: ‘I have known it to be a sacred and beautiful place, hallowed by human endeavour and energies, crossed with love and the continual weave of human circumstance’.⁹⁷ The weave of overlapping human circumstances and collapsing structures of feeling between inner and outer worlds are precisely what *Solar Bones* strives to articulate through the ‘systolic thumps’ and post-mortem cadence of its belated temporal register. In the critical act of particularising these temporal rhythms, and tracing how they distinctively speak to social and political contexts through the novel’s formal composition, we can see how *Solar Bones* grants us the tools to reconsider and reconceptualise modernist legacies across Irish literature and beyond. Indeed, we can productively situate *Solar Bones* within a growing corpus of Irish literature that engages with modernist legacies and the ‘variety of experimental traditions’ which Dillon detects, amongst novels such as Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, Anna Burns’ *Milkman* and Claire-Louise Bennett’s *Pond*. And yet, the critical currency of post-mortem or post-millennial modernism only gains traction, I argue, when used to address individual engagements with the politics of form and the ethics of style, and these terms fall apart when attempting to define overarching creative or movements of ‘new modernism’ and its variants.⁹⁸ My critical approach towards modernist

legacies has not argued that *Solar Bones* resolves or transcends its cultural heritage, or that we should simply disregard the ‘three masters’ of Irish modernism whom McCormack so strongly praises in his Mount Rushmore analogy. Instead, I hope to have demonstrated that McCormack’s post-mortem modernism bestows a series of critical possibilities in terms of how we approach the relationship between form, aesthetics, style and history in contemporary Irish literature, allowing for a more capacious understanding of modernism’s continuous, and sometimes posthumous, reanimations.

Notes

1. Mike McCormack quoted in De Loughry, “... a Tiny Part of That Greater Circum-Terrestrial Grid”: A Conversation with Mike McCormack’, *Irish University Review*, 49.1 (2019), p. 113.
2. Ibid.
3. McCormack quoted in Stephanie Boland, ‘Mike McCormack: “British Fiction is Dominated by an Intellectual Conservatism”’, *The New Statesman*, 7 November 2016. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2016/11/mike-mccormack-british-fiction-dominated-intellectual-conservatism>.
4. Brian Dillon, ‘Hmmm, Stylish’, *London Review of Books*, 38.20 (19 October 2016). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n20/brian-dillon/hmmm-stylish>.
5. Recently across Irish and Modernist Studies there has been a backlash against the canonical rigidity that reduces ‘Irish Modernism’ to a holy trinity of Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett (with Flann O’Brien occasionally substituted in for Yeats). See Paige Reynolds: ‘The stature, influence, and marketability of modernists like Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett have also deflected attention from more contemporary writing in Ireland. [...] The contemporary can appear [...] as the diluted corollary of Irish modernism, an afterthought. This approach, while confirming the porous boundaries between tradition and innovation, risks the implication that recent Irish writing represents the culmination of a prior era of national literary exceptionalism rather than the launch of exciting new possibilities’. Paige Reynolds, ‘Introduction’, in Paige Reynolds (ed.), *The New Irish Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 10.
6. David James, *Modernist Futures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 40.
7. Ibid., p. 5.
8. There are many critical studies which productively examine modernist legacies through the prism of influence, such as Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges, *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018). For a specific example, Peter Boxall traces Beckett’s influence beyond a Bloomian model of anxiety: ‘One of the most significant of Beckett’s legacies [...] is a conception of legacy itself, a conception of influence, which does not depend upon such opposition between past and future generations, between father and son, between parent

and child. In Beckett's writing the father is as likely to belong to the future as he is to the past, just as those who register Beckett's influence tend to think of him not as parent to be slain, but as a possibility to be glimpsed, the spectral boy in the wasteland outside the refuge rather than the progenitors in the trashcans'. Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 16. And yet, the critical domination of comparative accounts which often detract from the formal innovations of contemporary literature, as well as my determination to forge a less retrospective account of modernism's contemporary resonances, means that this article utilises an optics of 'modernist legacies' without returning to Joycean and Beckettian comparisons, even if such authors *can* play a productive role in the formal composition of contemporary Irish literature.

9. McCormack quoted in Val Nolan, 'Experiment or Die: A Conversation with Mike McCormack', *Ariel*, 43.2 (2013), p. 97.
10. We can acknowledge, on the one hand, that 'Ireland has a canonized modernist literary heritage', as Aran Ward Sell notes, while, on the other hand, consider how new responses to modernism 'are not simple recapitulations of Joycean or Beckettian prose styles, but revivifications of a modernist textual ethos'. Aran Ward Sell, 'Half-Formed Modernism: Eimear McBride's a Girl is a Half-Formed Thing', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 25.2 (2019), p. 398.
11. Many of the Irish writers listed above engage with modernist legacies through 'politically urgent reassessments of formal innovation', as James writes, in that 'twenty-first-century writers seek to challenge generic and representational conventions in responding to global modernity's systemic inequities, the material alienations or disenfranchisements of racial and sexual identity, and the lived adversities of enduring imperialisms'. David James, *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 59.
12. Lucy Caldwell is one of many writers who define a trend in contemporary Irish literature as 'the new modernism'. Lucy Caldwell, 'Introduction', in Lucy Caldwell (ed.), *Being Various* (Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 8. In contrast, Claire-Louise Bennett has stated, 'The term "new modernism" is meaningless, but we are always looking for parity it seems, rather than being alert to what is distinct and fertile'. Bennett quoted in Emma Nuttall, 'Claire-Louise Bennett on debut collection, *Pond*', *The Skinny*, 20 November 2015. <https://www.theskinny.co.uk/books/features/claire-louise-bennett-pond-fitzcarraldostinging-fly>.
13. James argues, 'Modernist continuities cannot be homogenised just as novelists' strategies today must be particularised', James argues, 'if we are to see how the promise of modernism survives within and because of them'. James, *Modernist Futures*, p. 40.
14. David James, 'Modernism's Contemporary Affects', *Modernism/Modernity Print Plus*, 3.4 (11 December 2018), n.p.
15. Garrett Stewart, *The Value of Style in Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 3.
16. James, *Modernist Futures*, p. 164.

James' emphasis on Morrison's audacious style provides a more incisive model for considering twenty-first century modernist engagements, beyond the assumption that modernist compatibility and credentials 'can be gauged

simply in terms of identifiable influences', which can be drawn upon as 'a bank of stylistic reserves'. Put another way, contemporary engagements with modernism amounts to more than 'snatching frills from *Finnegans Wake*'. Ibid., p. 163, p. 140.

17. The term 'Celtic Tiger' was coined in 1994 by the investment firm Morgan Stanley to capture Ireland's resemblance to the booming 'Asian Tiger' economies of the post-war period. See Kevin Gardiner, 'The Irish Economy: A Celtic Tiger', *Ireland: Challenging for Promotion*, Morgan Stanley Euroletter, 31 August 1994, pp. 9–21.
18. Kevin Brazil has also critiqued the 'embarrassment' that results from historicising contemporary literature in relation to a modernism 'to which it always will be late'. Brazil argues: 'Questions of literary value are different from questions about modernism's historical legacy, and it is revealing that this difference had been elided. For authors as well as critics, it has been easier to cling to the value of the modernism they think they know, rather than respond to the strangeness of writing they don't'. Kevin Brazil, 'An Embarrassment of Lateness', *Modernism/modernity*, 3.4 (2018). <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/embarrassment-lateness>.
19. Sarah Davis-Goff, publisher of *Solar Bones* at Tramp Press, criticised The Booker Prize for excluding Irish publishers. Sarah Davis-Goff, 'Why are Irish Publishers Shut out of the Man Booker Prize?' *The Guardian*, 14 September 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/sep/14/why-are-irish-publishers-shut-out-of-the-man-booker-prize>.
20. McCormack quoted in Derek Flynn, "'A Stream of Post-Consciousness": Mike McCormack on *Solar Bones*', *Writing.ie*, 1 September 2016. <https://www.writing.ie/interviews/literary-fiction/a-stream-of-post-consciousness-mike-mccormack-on-solar-bones/>.
21. Mike McCormack, *Solar Bones* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2016), p. 221, p. 81.
22. Stephanie Boland, 'Bedad He Revives: Why *Solar Bones* Is a Resurrection for Irish Modernism', *The New Statesman*, 4 July 2016. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2016/07/bedad-he-revives-why-solar-bones-resurrection-irish-modernism>.
23. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 7.
24. James, *Modernist Futures*, p. 7.
25. Ibid., p. 8.
26. Ibid., n.p.
27. Ibid., p. 10.
28. McCormack quoted in Derek Flynn, 'A Stream of Post-Consciousness'.
29. McCormack quoted in Val Nolan, 'Experiment or Die: A Conversation with Mike McCormack'.
30. It is difficult to define the precise 'modernist strategies' that McCormack is reformulating. Taking my cue from Derek Attridge, I suggest this is because modernist strategies resist being articulated into a clearly defined discourse: 'What often gets called (and condemned as) the self-reflexiveness of modernist writing, its foregrounding of its own linguistic, figurative, and generic operations, its willed interference with the transparency of discourse, is, in its effects not always in its intentions, allied to a new apprehension of the claims of otherness, of that which cannot be expressed in the discourse available to us – not because of an essential ineffability but because of the constraints imposed by that discourse, often in its very productivity and

- proliferation'. Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 4.
31. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 26.
 32. Julia Jordan has written on the difficulty and paradoxes of defining the 'experimental' in relation to modernist legacies: 'To be an experimental writer after modernism is to inherit something defined by its resistance to tradition; the group must be continually engaged in trying to repeat unrepeatability without, of course, repeating it'. Julia Jordan, 'Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde Renaissance', in David James (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 145.
 33. Attridge writes of McCormack and other Irish novelists, that 'we could call them late modernists or metamodernists' but ultimately he concludes that the labels 'do not matter'. Instead, Attridge asks us to consider how, these writers 'have accepted the challenge laid down by their modernist predecessors, and have shown that it is possible to create highly successful fiction that, though it may be unimaginable without the earlier example of the Irish modernists, breaks open new ground in the writing of fiction'. Derek Attridge, 'Modernism, Formal Innovation, and Affect in Some Contemporary Irish Novels', in Alex Houen (ed.), *Affect and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 253.
 34. Peter Boxall, 'Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century', *Contemporary Literature*, 53.4 (2012), p. 701.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 702.
 36. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 19.
 37. *Ibid.* p. 121.
 38. James, *Discrepant Solace*, p. 59.
 39. Peter Boxall, 'Conclusion: Imagining the Future', in Peter Boxall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980–2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 279.
 40. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 194.
 41. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 42. *Ibid.*, p. 223. It may be obvious to most readers, but 'keep going to fuck' is an inverted, Hiberno-English dialect equivalent of 'fucking keep going', rather than conveying any kind of sexual impulse.
 43. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
 44. Boxall, 'Conclusion: Imagining the Future', p. 279.
Boxall and Bryan Cheyette gesture towards the ambivalent conclusion of *Solar Bones* during a discussion on the future of the novel: 'It requires us both to gauge the political pressures that will be brought to bear on the novel, and to feel for the kinds of future that the novel harbours, that might not make themselves readily available to thought, that might not accord with existing political, formal, and generic descriptors, but that nevertheless come to a kind of precognition in its uncreated depths'. Peter Boxall and Bryan Cheyette, 'The Future of the Novel', in Peter Boxall and Bryan Cheyette (eds), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 7: British and Irish Fiction Since 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 566.
 45. Alice Bennett, 'Unquiet Spirits: Death Writing in Contemporary Fiction', *Textual Practice*, 23.3 (2009), p. 470.
 46. *Ibid.*, pp. 470–71.

47. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 221.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
49. Treasa De Loughry, “... a Tiny Part of That Greater Circum-Terrestrial Grid”: A Conversation with Mike McCormack’, *Irish University Review*, 49.1 (2019), p. 111.
50. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 106.
51. Boxall, ‘Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century’, p. 709.
52. *Ibid.*
53. Orlaith Darling, “[The] Immediate Heft of Bodily and Civic Catastrophe”: The Body (Politic) in Crisis in Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones*’, *Irish Studies Review*, June 2021, p. 6. For more, see Orlaith Darling, “It Was Our Great Generational Decision”: Capitalism, the Internet and Depersonalization in Some Millennial Irish Women’s Writing’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 24 October 2020, pp. 538–51.
54. For an overview of these historical changes and how they emerge in contemporary Irish literature see Eric Falci and Paige Reynolds, ‘Introduction’, in Eric Falci and Paige Reynolds (eds), *Irish Literature in Transition: 1980–2020* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 1–24.
55. Peter Boxall, ‘Introduction: Framing the Present’, in Peter Boxall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980–2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 3.
56. Paige Reynolds, ‘Introduction’, in Paige Reynolds (ed.), *The New Irish Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 14; Paige Reynolds, ‘Introduction’, in Paige Reynolds (ed.), *Modernist Afterlives in Irish Literature and Culture* (London: Anthem Press, 2016), p. 4.
57. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 92.
58. McCormack quoted in Derek Flynn, ‘A Stream of Post-Consciousness’.
59. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 173.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*, p.167.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Sharae Deckard contextualises these municipal failures within the broader exclusion of rural Ireland from the boomtime benefits of the Celtic Tiger, noting that ‘the novel’s political anagnorisis reveals how the peripheralisation of the west and the uneven development of its infrastructure during the Tiger housing boom is physically and emotionally experienced by individuals’. Sharae Deckard, ‘Solar Bones Is That Extraordinary Thing, an Accessible Experiment, Virtuosoic yet Humane’, *The Irish Times*, 21 October 2016. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/solar-bones-is-that-extraordinary-thing-an-accessible-experiment-virtuosoic-yet-humane-1.2838095>.
64. For more on the ecological impact of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath see Sharae Deckard’s ‘World-Ecology and Ireland: The Neoliberal Ecological Regime’, *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 22.1 (March 2016), pp. 145–76.
65. Ward Sell, ‘Half-Formed Modernism’, p. 410.
66. For more on modernist legacies in the post-crash Irish literary culture see Ruth Gilligan, ‘Eimear McBride’s Ireland: A Case for Periodisation and the Dangers of Marketing Modernism’, *English Studies*, 99.7 (2018), 775–92.
67. The scenes where Marcus’ engineering principles clash with political short-termism are where, as Malcolm Sen notes, the ‘ecology of the novel casts an ironic gaze over the geographical and political identity of Ireland’, as the

- promise of new futures, such as the flawed structure of the national school, also anticipates a pre-empted collapse. Sen stresses how *Solar Bones* amplifies ‘the instability of the financial edifice of the Celtic Tiger’, as well as illustrating how ‘the infrastructure that keeps the nation buoyant is also crumbling, so that toxicity, in its economic and biological forms, extends from the financial sector to water taps in individual homes’. Malcolm Sen, ‘Risk and Refuge: Contemplating Precarity in Irish Fiction’, *Irish University Review*, 49.1 (1 May 2019), p. 27.
68. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 117.
 69. For more on the Cryptosporidium outbreak in Galway, see Liam Reid, ‘Human Waste Main Cause of Galway Contamination’, *The Irish Times*, 12 June 2007. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/human-waste-main-cause-of-galway-contamination-1.1209958>.
 70. De Loughry, ‘a Tiny Part of That Greater Circum-Terrestrial Grid’, p. 106.
 71. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 31.
 72. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
 73. *Ibid.*
 74. Adam Hanna has argued that ‘the corollary of McCormack’s re-imagining of inhabited space, and of narrative, as single unbroken continuums is a critical rethinking of the individualistic society that was promoted by the property boom’. Adam Hanna, ‘Habitations: Space, Place, Real Estate’, in Eric Falci and Paige Reynolds (eds), *Irish Literature in Transition: 1980–2020* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 127.
 75. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, pp. 26–7.
 76. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
 77. Boxall, ‘Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century’, p. 686.
 78. *Ibid.*, p. 687.
 79. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 76.
 80. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 81. McCormack quoted in De Loughry, ‘a Tiny Part of That Greater Circum-Terrestrial Grid’, p. 108.
 82. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 174.
 83. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
 84. Attridge, ‘Modernism, Formal Innovation, and Affect in Some Contemporary Irish Novels’, p. 257.
 85. *Ibid.*
 86. James, *Modernist Futures*, p. 4.
 87. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 88. *Ibid.*
 89. Boxall and Cheyette, ‘The Future of the Novel’, p. 585.
 90. *Ibid.*
 91. James, *Modernist Futures*, p. 4.
 92. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 100.
 93. Boxall, ‘Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century’, p. 683.
 94. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 129.
 95. Sen, ‘Risk and Refuge: Contemplating Precarity in Irish Fiction’, p. 14.
 96. Deckard, ‘Solar Bones is that Extraordinary Thing’.
 97. McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p. 221.
 98. As Martin Paul Eve notes, the phrase ‘late modernism’ has begun to ‘telescope historically’, and such labels are often unhelpful when describing ‘specific literary practice given that the underlying definition of modernism is itself plural

and polyvalent'. Martin Paul Eve, 'Late Modernism, Postmodernism and After', in Peter Boxall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980–2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 104.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Wolfson Foundation [grant number 1931378].