2 Cities of Conflict

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A writer’s purpose is to describe the life of his day, [...] and I chose Dublin because it is the focal point of the Ireland of today, its heartbeat you may say, and to ignore that would be affectation.¹

At around the turn of the nineteenth century, also the time that James Joyce was growing up, Dublin was becoming a significant literary and cultural centre in its own right. Much of this spurt in artistic activity took place under the auspices of the Irish Literary Movement, a concerted attempt to foster nationalist pride by reviving ancient Irish folklore and legend in contemporary works of literature. Aiming to provide a cultural backbone to the political movement for self-government, the so-called Celtic Renaissance produced some of the best plays, poetry and fiction of the period, and was instrumental in setting up the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1903, which exists to this day. Among the forerunners of the movement were W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Moore and J.M. Synge (whose 1907 play, The Playboy of the Western World, caused the famous ‘Playboy riots’ on its third performance).² The primary impulse underpinning this creative activity was to systematically inaugurate a body of writing that was uniquely Irish in character and drew upon Gaelic folklore and myth as its wellspring, in order to reinvigorate a dying tradition and imbue it with a strong nationalist political valence. Alongside the writing of literature that firmly placed Irish folklore and peasant-life at its centre, other initiatives in the renaissance were the retelling of ancient heroic legends and folk songs that inaugurated a vogue for the primitive and the Celtic, in literary productions such as James Macpherson’s
Ossian and Fingal poems in the 1750s and 60s, Charlotte Brooke’s Reliques of Irish Poetry (1789), Thomas Moore’s Irish Melodies (1807–34), Thomas Davis’s newspaper The Nation (founded in 1842), political ballads culled out from it and published as The Spirit of the Nation (1843), Samuel Ferguson’s Lays of the Western Gael (1865), Standish O’Grady’s History of Ireland (1878, 1880), Douglas Hyde’s A Literary History of Ireland (1899), and his phenomenally popular Love Songs of Connacht (1893), William Butler Yeats’ essays in The Celtic Twilight (1893), as well as his several collections of Irish folk- and fairy-tales (1888–92); translations into Gaelic, such as that of George Moore’s The Untilled Field (1902); the formation of the Gaelic League in 1893 to revive the Irish language and culture, of whom Hyde was a major founder-member, as well as, under the auspices of Yeats, the founding of the Irish Literary Society of London in 1891, the National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892, the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897, the Irish National Theatre Society in 1902 and the Abbey Theatre in 1904.

What is striking is that whilst so much of this creative activity had its basis in Dublin, in terms of theatres, publishing houses, societies and associations, the city itself did not figure in their literary productions in any significant way. Instead, these programmatically chose to focus on the non-urban (and by extension, authentic, primeval and timeless) in their characters, themes and idioms. The symbolic investment in the rural by popular nationalist ideologies of Celtic revivalism will be discussed at length in Chapter 3; here it is sufficient to draw out the contradiction between the material indispensability of Dublin and its almost-total imaginative/symbolic dispensability to the Irish Literary Revival. This also gives us an indication of the significant break represented by a book like Dubliners, which had the city and its citizens soundly at its centre, when it came out in 1914.

While the ideological stake in the nationalist valorization of the peasantry is undeniably and deeply significant and is the primary reason for what can be called the rural turn of the Irish Literary Movement, I suggest that another reason for this could be the paradigm of decline and decay within which Dublin was viewed around the turn of the nineteenth century, rendering it, as a consequence, unsuitable for literary rendition. A cursory look at the titles of some of the book-length works dealing with the Dublin of this period is very revealing in that they seem to focus on what is almost a leitmotif of downfall, deterioration and retardation. Some of the most tactile visual manifestations of decline in Dublin were the notorious tenements (a term used interchangeably with slums in critical discussions of Dublin). In its heyday in the