

The Image of Ireland in Iberian Galicia in the Early Twentieth Century

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Special issue **New Trends in Iberian Galician Comparative Literature.**

Ed. María Teresa Vilarinho Picos and Anxo Abuín González

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Abstract: In her article "The Image of Ireland in Iberian Galicia in the Early Twentieth Century," Anne MacCarthy explores Galician intellectuals' relationship with Ireland in their attempt to create a Celtic imaginary for Galicia which would act as a cultural fortification in the face of centralizing forces of Castilian Spain. In periodicals prominent in the 1920s, *Nós* and *A Nosa Terra*, the wish to construct a separate identity for Galicia, apart from Spain, is often expressed and embodied in reference to Ireland. Whereas the interest in Ireland was increased by the struggle for independence in that country at the time, the basis for the similarities found between the two cultures was mythical and imaginary.

Anne MacCARTHY

The Image of Ireland in Iberian Galicia in the Early Twentieth Century

In Spanish Galicia in the 1920s and 1930s writers in two periodical publications, *Nós* and *A Nosa Terra*, voiced the wish to construct an independent nation. Certainly, the fact that a small country achieved independence from a powerful state filled Galician nationalists with the hope that Galicia could achieve autonomy. The Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 and the subsequent War of Independence (1919-1921) and the creation of an independent state in 1922 were facts which had immediate repercussions in Galicia. When we read these two early twentieth-century journals we can see that Galician intellectuals needed their Celtic sister to be mysterious, rebellious but, most of all, to be a Celt.

Joep Leerssen suggests that the concept "the Celts" is a construct. That is not to say that the term is valueless or wrong; rather, it means that its appearance is a product of discursive and cognitive activity, that its emergence can be historically (roughly) dated and that it carries the imprint of a number of connotations and ideological presuppositions (4). Leerssen states that "to the extent that 'Celtic' is an idea with a wide and variable application, Celticism becomes a complex and significant issue in the European history of ideas: the history of what people wanted that term to mean" (3). This is applicable to Galician intellectuals of the early twentieth century: they found in Irish literature and culture a Celticism which suited their nation building and culture constructing ends. Leerssen continues to say that to trace the "construction and development of the notion of Celticism is not just a matter of antiquarian interest, concerning a bygone chapter in the history of European science and ideology; on the contrary, it is a matter of continuing relevance to attempt a historical and imagological analysis of these pre-inscribed connotations of 'Celticism'" (6). Imagology helps us to understand the significance of images that have a cultural value beyond facts. They can be of more value than historical evidence as they express the aspirations and hopes of a culture in terms which are relevant to the present. For example, Celticism has been given a new lease of life in recent Irish criticism, endorsed by Edward Said's interest in Ireland. It is often used as a parallel to Said's term "Orientalism" to indicate how the British constructed an identity for the Irish as a mysterious and poetic but weak and effeminate "race." These racial stereotypes were adopted unconsciously by those who wished to find an autonomous identity for the Irish. In their writings about Ireland, Galician intellectuals in the early twentieth century use these racial stereotypes to indicate the positive aspects they perceive in Celticism, but also without realizing that these clichés were employed to give an exotic view of the Celts. In other words, this exotic perception implies that the Celt is too weak or too unstable, or both, to maintain independence from the British empire.

Celticism is relevant not only to the study of the construction of a national identity or the establishment of national literatures, it is also a means by which these same literatures can be more cosmopolitan, as Leerssen emphasizes when he claims that it helps them to overcome the ever-present centre-periphery polarity: "for the story of Celticism is more than the sum of Gaelic, Welsh and Breton stereotypes and nationalism, more than the sum of the peripheries' relations with their respective centres: it is also the story of these regions' sense of ethnic interrelatedness as 'Celts', and of the contacts between these peripheries mutually" (18). For Leerssen, "Celticism is a multi-genre, multinational phenomenon" from which it is clear that "the exchanges between countries, and between the various spheres of intellectual or artistic activity, are at least as important as the developments within each genre or region" (20). The overcoming of geographical and temporal frontiers indicates the cosmopolitanism of new literatures. Therefore, the Galician belief in Celtic ancestry helped the region to leave behind its marginalisation and led to an awareness that it belonged to a Celtic world different to and beyond the Iberian peninsula.

In the 1920s Ireland was capturing headlines worldwide owing to its political state of affairs and so it is not surprising that small nations identified with Ireland, a small country also, but one that achieved independence from a powerful state. In addition, as Leerssen says, "Ireland is often focused on as the place where the most archaic vestiges of ancient Celtic culture and tradition have lingered longest and have left their best-legible traces" (8-9). It was generally held that the Romans never reached Ireland (although this has been recently put in doubt) and for that reason Celtic culture was

preserved uncontaminated. Without doubt it was significant that Ireland managed to free itself from the twentieth-century equivalent of the Roman empire, the United Kingdom, and thus was a powerful model to emulate, as it successfully achieved independence and was the safeguard of culture.

It is clear that the interest in Irish literature shown in them has its origin in the War of Independence and the establishment of the Free State in Ireland: "we have here the reason we should look towards our sister Ireland that is nowadays giving to the world, as a manifestation of her promises, a literature which, perhaps may be, among modern literatures, the most original, the youngest, the most adventurous" (Risco Agüero, "A moderna" [*Nós* 26 (1926)]: 5; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Ireland, as a newly formed state, should have a literature which is modern and risky. Because of the adjectives used, one would think that the writers and texts mentioned in these three articles would be *avant-garde*. The writers dealt with in these articles were principally those associated with the "Celtic Twilight" or "Celtic Revival," terms which are generally used synonymously without being exactly the same. In the *Diccionario cultural e histórico de Irlanda* the Celtic is defined by highlighting its Romanticism and the fact that the works written by those associated with it have supposedly national characteristics, to distinguish them from works by English authors; hence the suggestion that these writers cultivate the heroic Gaelic past, full of mythical and legendary figures and create a unique literary style (see Hurlley, Hughes, González Casademont, Praga, Aliaga 50). Further, the authors associated with the "Celtic Twilight" tried to create a new literature in Ireland based on a specifically Irish tradition, so for that reason it was new in that it was different from English literature. However, it was not what would have been considered modern literature in the 1920s, when these articles were written. It was by no means modernist. Nevertheless, the literary model which Galicians sought at the time was to be found in the texts written by these authors, creators of a new literature which referred to a mythical Celtic past. As a consequence, the "Celtic Twilight" had more in common with Romanticism than with what was considered modern at that time.

The writers associated with the Celtic Twilight expressed a Romanticism which was easily assimilated by Galician intellectuals, but when the facts did not suit their purposes, these same intellectuals either ignored them or made them fit their ends. Sometimes this was because of their limited knowledge of the facts, but also because there was a conscious effort to modify them. Vicente Martínez Risco Agüero describes each one of the writers he mentions in an almost identical way, as mysterious, strange rebels and begins with a reference to *Connvadh na Gaedhilge* (The Gaelic League, founded by Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNeill in 1893 to revive the Irish language). Risco Agüero says that Douglas Hyde was "a perfect Celt even in his physical appearance, kindly, cheerful and merry" (*Nós* 26 [1926]: 6). Hyde (1860-1949), a nationalist and first president of Ireland, was Anglo-Irish, i.e., a descendant of English Protestants and so this judgement based on his physical appearance is off the mark as he was not a Celtic Irishman but Anglo-Saxon in origin. The same occurs with Standish O'Grady (1832-1915). He was a philologist, historian, and translator of Old Irish and in the above mentioned article he is described in this way: "he reaffirmed his faith in the future destiny of his race" and "like Galicia, Erin is full of strange people. Standish O'Grady is one of the strangest" (Risco Agüero, "La moderna" [*Nós* 26 (1926): 6]). However, O'Grady was also Anglo-Irish, thus not a "strange" Celt, although enthusiastic about all things Celtic and conservative in his political ideas (Hurlley, Hughes, González Casademont, Praga, Aliaga 242). Nevertheless, "while he was alone he was a nationalist, since he saw that separation was a possibility, he became a Unionist, when Unionism made some progress, he then became a communist" (Risco Agüero, "La moderna" [*Nós* 26 (1926): 6]). This highlights his Celtic eccentricity and does not take into account that some of those, like O'Grady who were interested in Irish culture were neither nationalists nor communists, but conservative Anglo-Irish. Indeed, as Robert Welch reminds us, O'Grady felt that the ascendancy, or Anglo-Irish ruling class, had a role to play in offering leadership to the native Catholic Celts. Applying Thomas Carlyle's ideas on heroism to the Irish state of affairs, Welch felt that the "Anglo-Irish ascendancy should have taken over the leadership of the Gaelic people" (434). O'Grady, rather than supporting any subversion of the status quo, was actually in favor of preserving the authority of the ruling class to which he belonged, thus demonstrating how different he was: his philosophy shows that he did not trust the Irish Celts to rule themselves thus revealing that he believed them to be inferior.

O'Grady expressed his reservations about Irish myths thus: "early Irish history is the creation mainly of the bards" to which he adds "doubtless the legendary blends at some point with the historic narrative" but it is difficult to draw a distinction between what really was historically true and what was a legend (524). In particular he voices his reservations about the Milesians: "running down the long list of Milesian kings, chiefs, brehons, and bards, where first shall we pause, arrested by some substantial form in this procession of empty ghosts — how [to] distinguish the man from the shadow, when over all is diffused the same concealing mist, and the eyes of the living and the dead look with the same pale glare?" (524). The conclusion he reaches is as applicable to Galician literature at the beginning of the twentieth century as it is to Irish literature, when both found a dignified tradition in their mythical, Celtic past. This view anticipates critics such as Leerssen who speaks of the imaginary quality in some of the views on the origin of the Celts. O'Grady recognizes that the history of a country and its literary tradition do not have to be based on fact to have discursive, identity potential. Instead, they have, as he says, a reality which is as relevant, or more so, than historical fact. Further, Risco Agüero depicts the search for a dignified tradition in Galicia without giving any significance to a factual view of history. The "modern" Irish of whom he speaks exist with the Galicians in a common Celtic territory, beyond time.

Another enigmatic Celt is John Millington Synge and Risco Agüero describes him "as a good Irishman, as a perfect example of someone from western culture, Synge is decidedly a Romantic, and as such, he hates our artificial, enslaving civilisation. Like our Pondal, a sympathizer with rebels, tramps, the lonely, all those who gesticulate, revolting against artificial modernity" (Risco Agüero, "La moderna" [*Nós* [1926]: 6]). Risco Agüero portrays Synge as a rebellious Romantic writer and thus the modernity which this Galician intellectual finds in Irish literature has nothing to do with modernism. In fact, he rejects modern society in a typically Romantic fashion. What is new in Irish literature is that it breaks away from English literature to form a new autonomous writing. Thus, modern Irish literature was modern because it was a new literary expression. Modernity is also seen by them as being quite negative. Like the Romantics, they identified with a rebellion against the modern world and so rejected a progressive modern society. This Romanticism is manifested in their beliefs about the Celtic world. As George Watson holds, "the Celt that has been constructed over the last two hundred years is constructed out of opposition to modernity, and especially to aspects of modernity such as science, technology and administration. He is unable to change, because he has been instructed that change is a non-Celtic quality" (220). This inability to change shows us that the myth of the Celt and its associated beliefs, create a history which is non-historic, beyond change, beyond time and consequently in opposition to the idea that change brings progress, particularly scientific or technical change, to the idea that the future of humanity is superior to the past.

Risco Agüera refers to several names which were to be dealt with in future articles, although in the end these never appeared. These are all writers or cultural nationalists associated with the Celtic Twilight or with Ireland's struggle for independence: Lady Gregory, Padraic Colum, Edward Martyn, Padraic Pearson [Pearse], Thomas MacDonagh, John Eglinton, Seamus O'Sullivan, Terence MacSwiney, Arthur Griffith, Daniel Corkery, Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Casey, Oliver Gogarty, and Desmond Fitzgerald (Risco Agüero, "La moderna" [*Nós* [1926]: 5]). It would have been interesting to read what authors in *Nós* would have had to say about Daniel Corkery. Corkery criticized the "Celtic Revival" for the nationalist conception of Irish tradition and history as being frozen in a non-time and in an idealistic location. Corkery (1878-1964) wrote *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931), a landmark in Irish criticism and in which he asks which of the two literatures in Ireland at the time, the literature written by the "Celtic Revival" or popular literature would be the foundation of future Irish writing: "if one then hold that Anglo-Irish literature has scarcely begun to exist, one may ask: Whether is this unsophisticated popular literature, with its Irish message, or the exotic poetry that Ireland, the Ireland that counts, cares so little for, the better foundation to build upon? Does it not seem that this simple poetry, close to the ground, clumsily endeavouring to recapture the notes that beat, pulse-like, in the nation's heart, is capable of being refined, of being intensified, of being carved into shapely forms? Whereas one may well wonder if the all too sophisticated alien-minded poetry of the 'Celtic Revival' school, dead tired as it is, weary of staring at its own airs and graces in the mirror, is capable of further growth" (24). He is critical of the "Celtic Revival" because it does not express the real Ireland. He describes it as something exotic, strange, that cannot develop further because it is too different

from the realities of the country. He also writes using Romantic terms but his description of the same writers they admire is different. According to Corkery, these writers do not create a future Irish literature because they are not Irish and do not understand the life of ordinary people. On the contrary, popular literature does understand them and although it is not sophisticated, it is not exotic either. For Corkery, the "Celtic Revival" is stagnated because it is artificial and it is out of touch with Ireland and thus he uses the term "exotic" to describe its foreignness which distances it from the Irish people.

Authors who published in *Nós* were aware of the criticisms of the "Celtic Revival" in Ireland at this time. For example, in a text in *Nós* published in 1928 we read that "Liam O'Flaherty, in spite of his beautiful name ... doesn't seem to feel love for the Aran Islands [off the coast of Galway, in the West of Ireland]. Those stone crests scarcely visible eight days out of three hundred and sixty five in the year, in the dynamism of the mists and the waves, slashed by the sea birds. He said that Synge had given a purely literary impression of the islands. I don't think so. The same was said of Pondal. There are many types of objectivity and the worst, the most deceptive and dangerous, is to let oneself be carried away by the average sensibility of people. It could be that there is a lot of cutting a dash in this, as it was always sweet to hurt the hallowed master. Sometimes the shopkeeper's attitude triumphs and no attention is paid to what the old fisherman thinks. Or even to what the young fisherman thinks" (140). The writer cannot understand why O'Flaherty does not appreciate the beauty of the Aran Islands and here again we see a reflection of the beliefs held by the Celtic Revival that the West of Ireland was the real Ireland, a backward region which, because of its very backwardness, held the treasure of Celtic heritage. Perhaps what is most outstanding in this, however, is Otero Pedrayo's affirmation that "sometimes the shopkeeper's attitude triumphs and no attention is paid to the thoughts of the old fisherman" (140). This shows that the author has read Yeats and preferred his view of Ireland, which he considered an innovation, to the darker one, that he found in O'Flaherty, who preferred to describe the reality of Irish life. This idea is expressed in terms used by Yeats (he is in fact referring to his poem "The Fisherman"). The backwardness yet natural beauty of what Yeats saw as the simplicity of the people who lived in the West coast epitomized a Romantic vision of Ireland. Beyond this dream are the realities of Irish society which Yeats criticizes both in this poem and in "September 1913," when he laments the pettiness of the Irish of his generation: "What need you, being come to sense, / But fumble in a greasy till / And add the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer, until / You have dried the marrow from the bone? / For men were born to pray and save" (55). Thus the terms the author borrows from Yeats are the fisherman who stood for that Romantic, exotic view of Ireland which overlooked its cultural diversity and the harsh realities of life there, and the shopkeeper, standing for Yeats's criticism of what he saw as the sordid realities of Irish life.

The realistic depiction which O'Flaherty gives in his writings of the life of many Irish people in the early twentieth century does not fit in with what writers in *Nós* and *A Nosa Terra* are searching for in Irish literature, as he shows that the Irish are not living in an ideal legendary space beyond time. He prefers to show the hardships caused by the particular circumstances in which they live, as a result of the colonial history of Ireland, inescapable historical facts. However, to get an even clearer idea of what the Galician intellectuals wanted Irish literature to be, it is interesting to read what Risco Agüero says about Synge: "his writing is not without an idealistic and mysterious depth superior to Maeterlinck" ("*La moderna*" [*Nós* 28 (1926): 5]). John Millington Synge (1871-1909) was a writer and dramatist associated with Yeats, the Celtic Twilight, and the Abbey Theatre, the national theatre of Ireland. His description of the Aran Islands in *The Aran Islands* (1907) is evidence of his interest, in common with other writers in the Celtic Revival in the West of Ireland and most of all for those parts where Gaelic was still the first language. For them the real Ireland was preserved in the West, an Ireland different from England, primitive and backward, frozen in time. It is not strange, then, that later generations would criticize this attitude and would prefer to speak not only of what life was really like for the fishermen and farmers in these coastal parts but of what it was like for all Irish people in all parts of the country. Otero Pedrayo avoids those realistic descriptions which bind the writer to a particular time. He says that O'Flaherty is a writer who gives an "offensive analysis that scarcely leaves a mysterious reputation in the chosen soul ... in Synge's work there is evidence of the universal and the *eternal*. Nothing could be further from and farther above a modern environment than the

environment of Synge's plays, where the souls move in front of an unchanging natural background, a background which influences them and of which they are a fragment" (*Nós* [15 March 1926]: 6). Texts in *Nós* show distrust in modernity because at the beginning of the twentieth century the world was changing much more quickly than before, a fact which may have led this group of intellectuals to seek an identity in the mythical, the primitive, in what existed before history. Watson writes of the Celtic world in the same terms, explaining that it "is placed outside, or deprived of, history" (208). Sometimes, when a search for a cultural identity is closely associated with the seeking of a suitable cultural history, it is preferable to ignore the latter and go beyond it to a mythical past. Galician intellectuals in the early twentieth century found their Celtic identity in this mythical time and so felt that they belonged to something eternal, universal, and transcendent, all values necessary in cultures struggling for a dignified identity.

For Irish nationalists, history is the account of the development of a national identity closely tied to a particular place. However, it is interesting to see that Galician identity is not tied to one place but crosses frontiers to create a new Celtic space made up of different Celtic countries. Celticism creates a world on the margins of Europe, independent of the limitations imposed by time. Risco Agüero claims that "however it happened a treasure was released, opening up again the eternal spring of Tradition" (*Nós* [15 February 1926]: 6). In other words, the Celtic world shares an unchanging and eternal treasure, its tradition. It is not common to one Celtic country, but belongs to all. This pan-Celticism is seen in *A Nosa Terra* in a series of articles which describe Irish history as a constant fight against British oppression from a nationalist Catholic point of view. These articles likely derive from a Galician translation of a book mentioned in *A Nosa Terra* in its 15 November 1921 issue, *La tragedia de Irlanda* by Darrel Figgis and Erskine Childers translated to Spanish by A. Ruiz y Pablo (7). We have already seen O'Grady express his doubts about whether this is just legend or historical fact. For these Galician writers, however, the history of Ireland began within a prehistoric, ethnic framework. Its historic development began when Milesius sent the first settlers from Galicia and thus, consequently, the Irish are descendants of Galicians. This was of great importance to Irish nationalists, not only because it emphasized that the Irish were racially different from the English, but also because Irish culture was never contaminated by the Graeco-Roman tradition and if it survived that ancient imperialism untouched it could survive British imperialism. There appeared in *Nós*, on 15 February 1931, the first of a series of articles on the *Leabhar Gabhála*: "the History of King Breogán and the Sons of Mil, according to the *Leabhar Gabhala*" ("A historia d'El-Rei Breogán e dos fillos de Mil, asegún o *Leabhar Gabhala*") (Risco Agüera). The *Leabhar Gabhála* is a mythical history of pre-Christian Ireland describing five invasions which took place before the arrival of the Celts (Hurtley, Hughes, González Casademont, Praga, Aliaga 34). Welch writes that it is "now read as a work of mythography and legend" rather than historical fact (304). The Milesian invasion of Ireland described in the *Leabhar Gabhála* interested Galicians particularly in the 1920s: "keeping in mind the considerable importance which this book has for us, in that which refers to the invasion of Ireland by the Milesians or the Brigantiños, we are going to publish here the Galician version of Chapters 11, 12 and 13, which are those concerned with the race of Breogán" (Risco Agüera, "A historia" 23). The article suggests that the mythical character of this story in a quotation from Hyde but does not seem to clarify if the Milesians were or were not Celts. Perhaps this distinction was not considered important. Further, it is clear in the articles published in *A Nosa Terra* in 1920-1921 that Irish identity has not changed since the time of Milesius but has survived all subsequent invasions and remained intact. A mythical dimension does not have to submit to affirmation or negation, it is of no import if what is mentioned happened or not. What is important is that the myth exists. Although the writers who wrote about Ireland in *Nós* and *A Nosa Terra* were nationalists in the viewpoints expressed, they did not like to limit themselves to a particular place. Nor did they wish to limit themselves to a definite time. In *A Nosa Terra* there is a text entitled "Do discursiño de conferencias nacionalistas na Exposición Castelao. A fermosa disertación de Viqueira" ("About Nationalist Discourse at the Castellan Conference: The Beautiful Discourse of Viqueira") with a reference to a monk who spent three hundred years listening to a nightingale sing and he is "intoxicated with music is a symbol of our musical Galician soul, dreaming of (or living intimately in, does it matter which?) the noisy shores of the Atlantic" (*A Nosa Terra* [10 April 1920]: 2). We understand from this that time does not matter: the monk overcame its

limits by living longer than normal and in fact living those years more intensely when he forgot time listening to the nightingale sing.

In the poetry of James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849), one of the first Irish writers to use English, we find a similar fascination with tropes and figures which live longer than the limits of a normal lifetime: this is a Romantic theme and is often found in folklore. Mangan showed his interest in it by translating many poems on this subject from German and Mangan expresses his negative view of the changes which the protagonist of the poem experiences during his long life. Although it does not present the idyllic vision of the monk listening to the nightingale, it is showing a similar concern with the limits which time imposes. Mangan's anxiety was caused by the time full of political and social changes during which he lived, a revolutionary time when it was feasible that Ireland could become an independent nation even if in the future. This possibility is reflected in a literary concern with the eternal which surpasses the limits of time. It is an expression of nervousness about the survival of new literatures and new cultures once they have achieved autonomy. It is also a wish for stability as new literatures are fragile and this is a possible explanation also for their longing for the eternal, that which will prevail over current obstacles.

Perhaps what was true for Ireland at this time can also be said about Galicia in the early twentieth century. When defying the restraints imposed by the regime the idea of being able to surpass the limits of time came to represent the creation of a new time for a new nation. The writer of "A fermosa disertación de Viqueira" is of the opinion that all Galician artists have the monk's soul and that music has a nation building capacity that can help to achieve the eternal, the permanent: "individual efforts are not frequent: we have to live in spiritual communion with our people and in this way through a collective revival we will be able to get back what is best in us: lyricism" (*A Nosa Terra* [10 April 1920]: 2). Through the lyrical in art Galician artists will reach a spiritual reality beyond the facts of the present or the past. Thus Galician culture is not temporary but will achieve that permanence necessary to those looking for, or having just achieved, autonomy.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri claim that "the great Western metaphysical tradition has always abhorred the immeasurable" and tell of the "deep hatred that metaphysics has for the immeasurable" because if there is no measure "there is no cosmos; and if there is no cosmos, there is no state ... Throughout modernity, the immeasurable was the object of an absolute ban, an epistemological prohibition" (355). Galician literature expressed this fascination with the immeasurable, perhaps in defiance of what Hardt and Negri define as the "epistemological prohibition" of modernity on that which is beyond time and place. New literatures wished to free themselves from the hierarchical straitjacket which measure and imposes and so were not only fascinated with the immeasurable but employed mythic views of history and place to flee from a more exact, precise version of reality.

In conclusion, Galician intellectuals sustained a mythic view of Irish literature and culture that was not gauged by facts either by a time which can be measured or space which can be identified with a particular place. As both Leerssen and O'Grady suggest, myths are more potent than facts. Celtic countries, far from being limited to a specific geographically locatable spot, belong to an ideological space, one which exists but which is imbued with a common sense of belonging which goes beyond frontiers. New literatures often express their desire for independence by transcending the limits imposed by time and space thus inscribing in the acceptance of regional status within Spain for Galicians. The interest in all things Celtic in Galicia shows how intellectuals were breaking with the past through bypassing these limits and finding an imaginary tradition which held out the hope of a better future.

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