UCD*scholarcast*

Series 12 (Spring 2015)

Modalities of Revival

Series Editors: Giulia Bruna & Catherine Wilsdon
General Editor: P.J. Mathews

The Revival and Visual Art – Harry Clarke's Geneva Window

Róisín Kennedy

In her incomparable study of the life and work of Harry Clarke, from which this paper makes extensive use, Nicola Gordon Bowe notes that Clarke is never mentioned in connection with Art Nouveau, the major fin de siècle art movement from which he drew so much inspiration for his book illustrations and his stained glass and to which he in turn made a unique contribution.[1] Equally and perhaps even more astonishing is the fact that Clarke is rarely mentioned in accounts of the Irish Revival or in biographies of its great writers, W. B. Yeats, George Russell and John Millington Synge. This is despite the fact that Clarke knew both of the former figures well.[2] They visited his studio and commented on his work, taking a close interest in its development. Russell in particular was hugely admiring of Clarke's exceptional awareness of modern literature and of his visionary style. Clarke was equally a devotee of Revivalist literature and especially the work of Synge whose *Playboy of the Western World*, he had hoped to illustrate and whose poem, *Queens* is the inspiration for one of Clarke's most remarkable stained glass commissions.[3]

Clarke, born in 1889 was a generation younger than these figures and removed from them by social class as well as age and religion. The son of a commercial stained glass artist in whose business he was apprenticed and eventually took over, Clarke's short but highly productive career spanned the period from World War One and the early years of the Free State until his premature death in 1931. His last great work in stained glass the Geneva Window is the subject of this paper. In it Clarke pays homage to the Revival and to its wider impact on modern Irish writing and drama. More than this the Geneva Window unites literature, art and the craft of stained glass to create a visionary work of art that encapsulates the desires, the failures and the imaginative realm that the Revival gave rise to.

While the Cultural Revival has been perceived almost entirely in terms of its impact on literature, its profound influence on the production and reception of visual art in Ireland has often been overlooked. The Revival created a new awareness of the significance of indigenous Irish life and culture and more significantly the contexts for imagining and creating new forms of art

that expressed a fresh understanding and appreciation of Irish visual art in all its manifestations.[4] In addition the Revival's acknowledgement of the necessity to engage with wider European movements, most notably Symbolism, encouraged a number of Irish artists to move away from traditional academic art and naturalism and to experiment with the possibilities that a synthesis of Celticism and avant-garde art might offer.[5] Artists like George Russell, Jack B. Yeats, Oliver Sheppard, Beatrice Elvery and Harry Clarke contributed as much to the Revival in their visualisation of Irish subjects, both mythical and real, as they took from it in terms of the stimulus and encouragement that its networks provided.

The efforts of the major organisations associated with the Revival, the Gaelic League, the Irish Agricultural Organisation and the Irish Literary Theatre were equally significant to the development of art and design in their practical and collaborative attitude to the achievement of their goals.[6] The stained glass co-operative, *An Tur Gloine* (the Tower of Glass) founded by the artist, Sarah Purser in 1903 is one such enterprise established in the wake of these initiatives. It aimed to improve the standards of stained glass production in Ireland, then mainly imported and of inferior quality, by reviving traditional craft methods.[7] Its first major project, organised under the guidance of Edward Martyn, was the decoration of Loughrea Cathedral. Harry Clarke benefitted directly from the practical efforts of Purser and Martyn through their involvement in the establishment of a course in stained-glass at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art in 1901**,** which Clarke attended from 1904 to 1913. Here he came under the influence of the teacher A.E. Child, an English Arts and Crafts glass worker who was also studio master at An Tur Gloine.[8]

Within a couple of years of completing his studies, Clarke came into direct competition with Purser's An Tur Gloine in the decoration of the Honan Chapel in Cork. He designed and made eleven of the nineteen windows in the Collegiate Chapel between 1915 and 1917, when he was only in his mid twenties. The Hiberno-Romanesque style building, designed by James F. McMullin and completed in 1916, was situated in the grounds of the Royal University in Cork, now UCC, and paid for by a fund established by the affluent Cork Honan family.[9] It was through his connections to Belvedere College, his former school, that Clarke secured the commission. Laurence Waldron, a governor of Belvedere, and a wealthy Dublin stockbroker and bibliophile had taken a close interest in the precocious young art student. Clarke was a frequent

guest at Waldron's Killiney home, as were John O'Connell, the administrator of the Honan Fund and Bertram Windle, President of the Royal University, both old boys of Belvedere College.[10] (This network of friendship and patronage also included Thomas Bodkin, later director of the National Gallery of Ireland and former ally of Hugh Lane, who was to be Clarke's most prolific and influential critic in both the Irish and international press in the coming years).

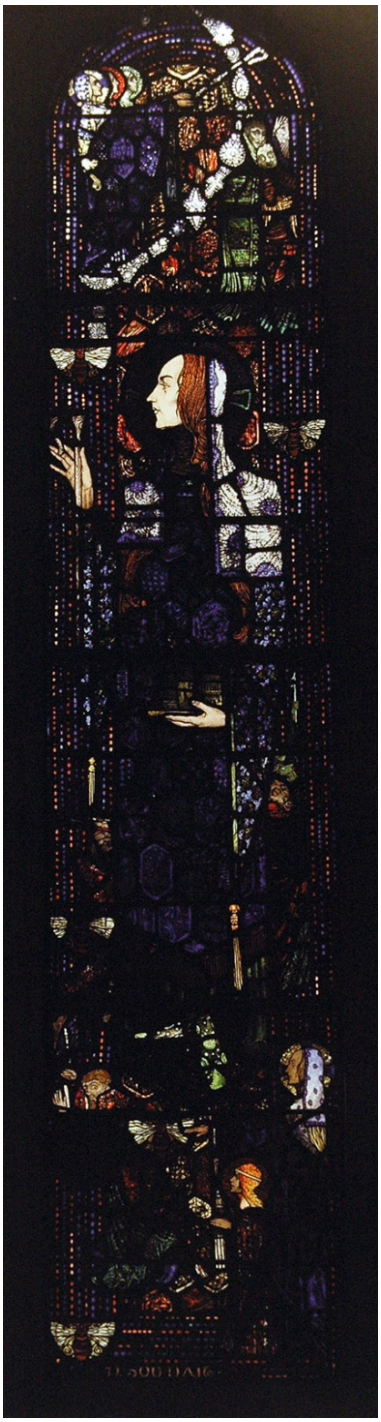
All of these figures shared, in addition to their alma mater, a commitment to the improvement of applied arts in Ireland and were strongly influenced by the climate of enterprise and national pride generated by the Revival. Waldron, O'Connell and Windle, as well as Clarke, were committee members of the Society of Arts and Crafts of Ireland.[11] Established in 1894**,** this organization emulated the ideas of the English Arts and Crafts movement, as advocated in the writings of John Ruskin and William Morris. It endorsed the value of craftsmanship, understanding of materials and vernacular design in opposition to industrialization, mass production and eclecticism.[12]

The positive impact of the Revival on the standard of the work shown at the exhibitions of the Arts and Crafts Society from 1910 onwards was noted by commentators. An abiding preoccupation of the Society was the need for artists to abandon pastiches of Celtic art. In his introduction to the catalogue of the 1917 Arts and Crafts of Ireland exhibition, John O'Connell warned, that, 'It is … essential that no slavish reversion to ancient forms, however beautiful, … should hamper - the Irish exhibition of to-day'. Art, he declared,' must draw its life from the ideals of the moment, or rather must be the expression of the strongest tendency in the current of feeling of the race. … Art cannot be stagnant in any country, however poor, in which there is life and strength and progress...'. [13] Clarke's work alluded to the complexity and labyrinthine quality of Celtic art without being in any sense formulaic or derivative. Oswald Reeves, the Arts and Crafts metalworker, noted that Clarke was the 'one artist represented in the [1917 Arts and Crafts] exhibition, …, whose work illustrates […] how a genuine Celtic character marks the best Irish Applied Art.' He explained that Clarke's work, which included some of his designs for the Honan windows, was ' not a sentimental rehash of the Ardagh Chalice/Book of Kells/ Cross of Cong, so prevalent in the Celtic Arts and Crafts Revival, but [showed] a profound respect and

skill in his chosen craft, whereby a wealth of tiny characters are inscribed in an unfaltering and versatile hand in jeweled colours….'. [14]

The Honan Chapel eclipsed Loughrea Cathedral in the grandeur of its design and especially in the Clarke windows which literally outshone those made by An Tur Gloine for the same building. According to Bodkin, 'Nothing like them had been produced in Ireland. 'The sustained magnificence of colour, the beautiful and most intricate drawing, the lavish and mysterious symbolism combine', he wrote,' to produce an effect of splendor which is overpowering … '. [15] Reeves agreed. 'These windows reveal a conception of stained glass that stands quite alone … There has never been such mastery of technique, nor such application of it to the ends of exceeding beauty, significance and wondrousness.' Never before he asserted, had 'the mysterious beauty and 'liveness' that each piece of glass receives at the hands of the artist' been shown before and neither had 'the jeweled gorgeousness of the pattern that is given to a window teeming with subject-interest and meaning.'[16]

Clarke's depiction of the Irish saints in the tall narrow windows of the Honan Chapel was a revelation to contemporary commentators on the arts in Ireland. With their elaborate references to European symbolism, medieval art and Celtic design his windows combined an innovative technique with a sophisticated understanding of iconography and the medieval tradition of stained glass. He drew on a vast array of art historical sources. His extensive sketches of Inisheer, which he visited on several occasions, are reflected in the austerity of the treatment of the details of the windows, as well as in particular motifs, especially flowers and fauna.[17] The island was coincidentally associated with St. Gobnait, the subject of one of the major Honan Chapel windows. However, far from being dominated by the West of Ireland, the compositions are informed by Clarke's close study of medieval stained glass in England and France and his knowledge of Renaissance painting which he had seen on his extended sojourn abroad in 1914. Clarke was equally aware of avant-garde art and design, which he observed in London and Paris and which he deployed in his own practice, and which was widely distributed through periodicals such as *The Studio*, the London journal that was to give increasing coverage of Clarke's work. [18] He made full use of this range of sources in his construction of the designs for the Honan Chapel.



Harry Clarke, *St. Gobnait Window*, Honan Chapel, Cork, 1916.

The complex iconographical schemes that he developed for each of the windows, was based on extensive research of folklore and historical accounts. The windows were allocated a particular

hue, red, blue or yellow, chosen to suit the attributes of its saint. Blue, the celestial colour was used in the windows dedicated to the Our Lady, St. Brigid St. Ita, and St. Gobnait.[19] In the latter window Clarke invented an elaborate series of emblems to visualize the legends surrounding the saint and her associations with Ballyvourney in Co. Cork. Shown in profile, the Saint's head is silhouetted against a large nimbus in which is outlined the shape of a cross, based on one associated with the worship of Gobnait near Ballyvourney.[20] John O'Connell outlined such local connections in his contemporary account of the Honan Chapel, which he clearly felt proved his aim in the decoration of the chapel that 'Irish artists and craftsmen are capable of producing windows in painted glass as good in design and workmanship as any to be found elsewhere' .[21] In her hand St. Gobnait carries a model of her church much in the manner of Renaissance depictions of saints such as that seen in Carlo Crivelli's fifteenth century painting of *St. Thomas Aquinas* in the collection of the National Gallery in London. The pale hieratic features of Gobnait derive from another work in the National Gallery, a fifteenth century *Portrait of a Lady*,

Photo © The National Gallery, London.

Alesso Baldovinetti: *Portrait of a Lady in Yellow*, 1465, National Gallery of London.

by the Italian painter, Baldovinetti . Her tapered fingers are based on a sixteenth century portrait of Queen Elizabeth I in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Clarke also used contemporary

sources. The elaborate honeycombed patterned robe that Gobnait is wearing is, as Nicola Gordon-Bowe has shown, taken from a costume design by Leon Bakst for the Ballet Russes production of the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*. (1911). [22]

The honeycomb symbolizes Gobnait's role as the patron saint of bees. Large stylized bees hover across the surface of the window. Beneath the elongated body of the saint, a vignette tells of how Gobnait protected her church from robbers by causing a swarm of bees to attack the intruders. Above her ghostly head another vignette refers to the miraculous appearance of the sign of the Cross that prevented the plague from reaching her community. This combination of contemporary and archaic sources makes the windows appear strangely anachronistic. Indeed Edith Sommerville considered Gobnait's face to be 'horrible' – so modern and so conventionally unconventional'. For other commentators, such as Reeves, the elaborate treatment of the glass evoked a particular Celtic quality, one that was both original and mindful of the legacy of older traditions of artmaking including that of Ireland.

Sommerville also privately iterated the fundamental dichotomy of Clarke's work which while sumptuous in colour and form, had a darker element. Upon seeing the Honan windows, she wrote, 'His windows have a kind of hellish splendor. In a chapel dedicated to the Infernal Deities they should be exactly right, gorgeous and sinful'.[23] This aspect of his work became even more evident when in 1919 Harraps published Clarke's illustrated edition of Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. This hugely successful venture was the first time that this anthology of Poe's stories, first put together in 1908 by Padraic Colum, had been illustrated. Poe, described by Edmund Wilson as 'the prophet of Symbolism' had advocated the quality of 'indefiniteness' which he argued was suggestive 'of vague and therefore of spiritual effect'. This principal, sacred to Poe's disciple, Charles Baudelaire, is also central to Clarke's aesthetic.[24] The imagery reveals Clarke's unnerving ability to meet the horrific scenarios described by Poe. For example in his illustration for 'The Pit and the Pendulum', an account of a torture created during the Spanish Inquisition, Clarke uses the nebulous forms of the emaciated body of the terrified narrator covered in rodents and bound by ribbon like ropes to the wall of his chamber to suggest the psychological terror of his predicament while at the same time creating an image of enormous aesthetic power.

Harry Clarke: The Pit and the Pendulum, illustration to Harraps 1919 edition of Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination.*

Clarke's private commissions for stained glass enabled him to develop the more seditious aspects of his work such as that found in his illustrations to Poe. In 1917 he made a series of windows based on J. M. Synge's poem *Queens* for Laurence Waldron. These tiny 2 by 6 inch panels were designed to hang in a row across the bow-shaped library window of Waldron's Dublin home. Like Renaissance miniatures they enhanced the atmosphere of scholarship and enchantment to be found in the exceptional collection of continental and Irish Revival literature contained within this room. Clarke was able in the commission to bring together his skill in book illustration and his elaborate stained glass technique. Completed in 1917 Nicola Gordon Bowe has likened the multifarious detail that Clarke put into their designs to that found in the vignettes of the large windows of the Honan Chapel.[25]

Harry Clarke:'Queens who wasted the East by proxy,/ Or drove the ass-cart, a tinker's doxy', J.M. Synge's poem, *Queens,* 1917, Private Collection.

The *Queens* panels were clearly created to delight Waldron and his literary circle with their myriad references to art history and the richness and complexity of their ornamentation. More crucially in the context of early 20th century Dublin the imagery provided amusing and clever interjections into the meta-culture of European art and literature. As in Synge's poem, Clarke's panels depict beautiful and powerful Celtic and European women. The *Mona Lisa*, Titian's *Venus in A Mirror*, Judith carrying the head of Holofernes, mingle with the Queens of Meath and Connacht. Amongst these grand figures, 'a tinker's doxy' is included. Trapped within the rich finery of their elaborate theatrical costumes and coiffeurs, their faces are drawn onto the glass and their affected expressions hint at feelings of vanity, lust, envy, and even moral and physical degeneracy. These, like Clarke's black and white illustrations can be considered a protraction of Symbolism, indebted as they are to the work of artists, a generation older than Clarke, such as Aubrey Beardsley, with whose work Clarke's early illustrations were endlessly compared, and

Gustav Klimt whose paintings of fin de siècle Viennese society rely on a similar incongruence between the realism of the facial features and the abstraction of the intricate patterning that encases them. Clarke's continued use of the aesthetic of Symbolism clearly resonated with patrons such as Waldron and with a wide range of intellectuals and writers in Ireland in this period.

By the mid 1920s Clarke's distinctive style was omnipresent in publications associated with later manifestations of the Revival. His design of an elegant Regency style couple graced the front of Seamus O'Sullivan's *Dublin Magazine* from its inception in 1923 until 1926 and he designed many of the flamboyant programme covers for the Dublin Drama League in the same period. This group founded by W. B. Yeats and Lennox Robinson in 1918 specialised in plays by contemporary European writers. But as Reeves remarked, 'It is in his stained glass [rather than his black and white illustrations] that the full scope of his undoubted genius is to be seen'.[26] By 1920 four churches in Dublin had windows by Harry Clarke. This was followed by dozens of commissions that over the next ten years saw Clarke windows installed in churches in sixteen of the thirty-two counties of Ireland, not to mention England, Scotland, Wales, Australia and the United States. While the majority of these were destined for Roman Catholic churches a sizeable proportion of them were made for Church of Ireland patrons and one for the Presbyterian Church in Clontarf, Co. Dublin. [27] These mounting commissions in glass allowed Clarke's work to be seen in a range of public contexts in the Irish Free State. In 1928, a series of windows was installed in Bewley's Oriental Café in Grafton Street. In the same period the *Queens* panels were put on temporary display in the Dublin Municipal Gallery of Modern Art.

Harry Clarke: Cover of *The Dublin Magazine*, 1923-26

Given the renown and individuality of his work not to mention its high international reputation, it is perhaps not surprising that Clarke was given a major commission by the Irish Free State Government. In 1927 he was instructed to make a window for the International Labour Building in the League of Nations in Geneva. This was an important opportunity for the newly created state to promote a distinctive Irish cultural identity to an international audience. Clarke was not given any official guidelines or suggestions as to a suitable subject. But, as early as 1926, having visited Geneva and inspected the building, he suggested that the subject 'should not necessarily do with labour, but preferably something from the work of a modern Irish writer. It should give opportunities for phantasy rather than be of mythological or classical interest'.[28]

Other artworks in the building stuck rigidly to the theme of Labour. The French painter Maurice Denis's mural, *La Dignité du Travail,* 1931, a gift of the International Confederation of Christian Trade Unions, is a realist depiction of Christ preaching to a group of modern workers in the Holy Land. The German Ministry of Labour chose, like Ireland to donate a stained glass window partly to reflect the fact that glass making was a major German industry. The large five panelled

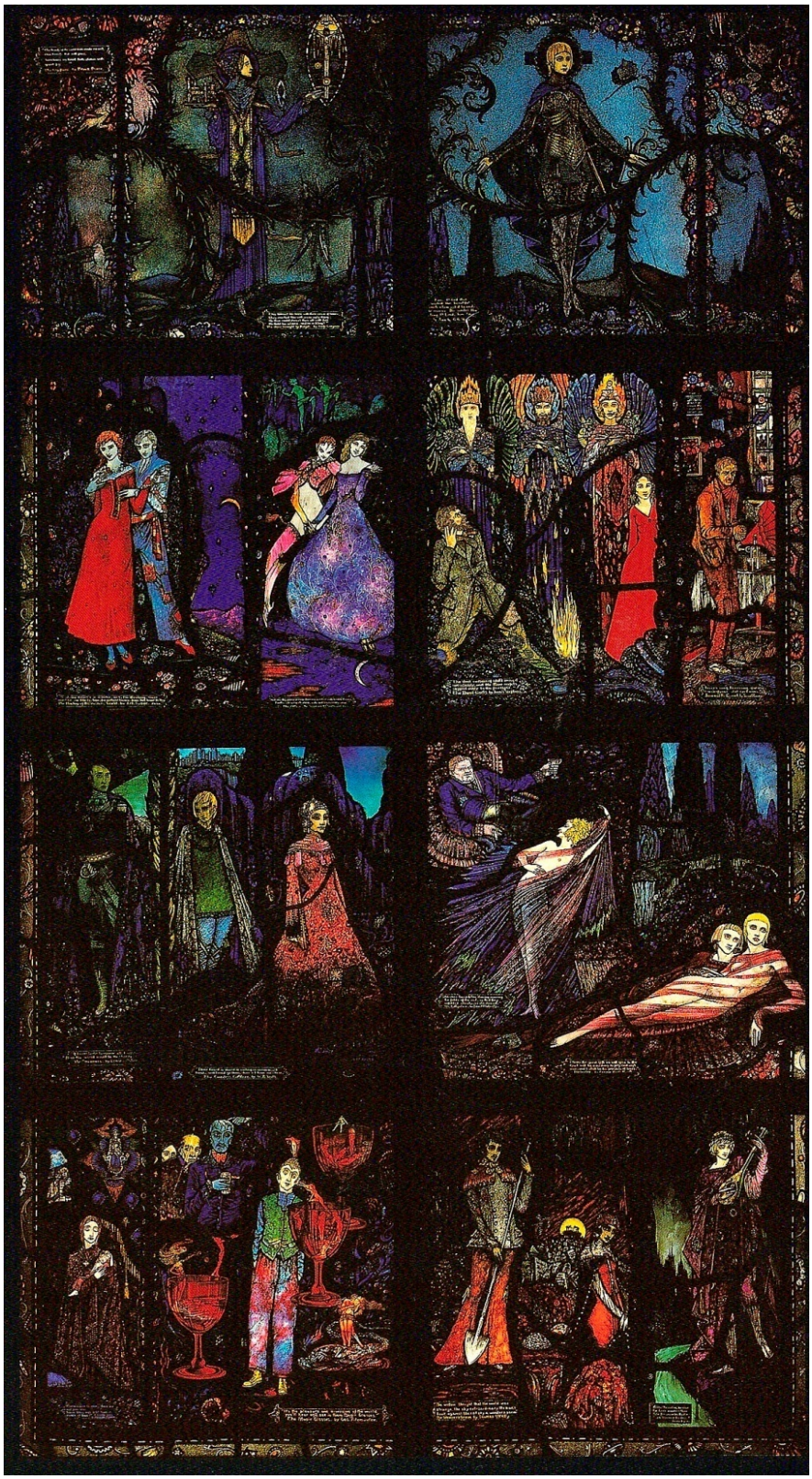
windows were designed by Max Pechstein after a comparatively rigorous shortlisting process. [29] They depict vigorous industrial and agricultural labour, by an entirely male work force.

Max Pechstein, *German Ministry of Labour Window*. 1926, International Labour Office, Geneva.

The German window was installed in the main reading room of the new Labour Building, a key location for work in glass. The architect of the building George Epitaux, who provided Clarke with confidential information on the current state of the art programme, had suggested that he consider this site for his proposed work but the Germans beat him to it. [30] In his 1926 report to the Ministry of Industry and Commerce on the proposed gift of stained glass, Clarke recommended an alternative position for his window, a more modest and unusual location on the staircase outside the Deputy Director's Office. He summarised the potential of a smaller but more innovative window in terms of the relationship between his envisaged design and that of Pechstein.

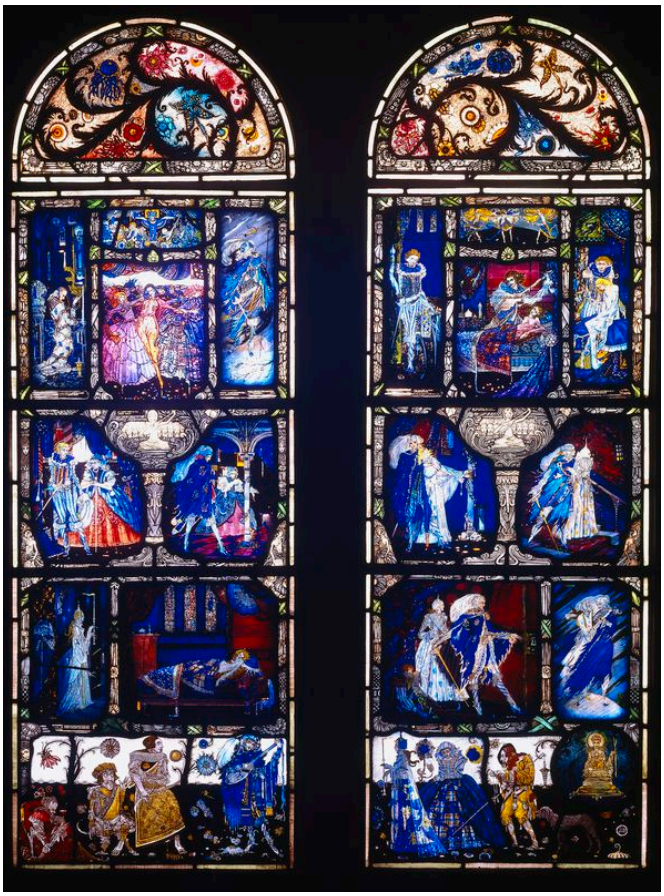
> Regarding this and its comparison as a gift with the German Window, the former is very much smaller but could be made into a precious gift. The German work is clever but to me does not convey any pleasant impression, its position and size are infinitely more dominating than the staircase window, but the latter if properly done should make people more interested.[31]

In stark contrast to the French and German works, Clarke's window offers a vision of fantasy and romance. Intricate and iridescent in colour it evokes the illuminated manuscripts and sacred windows of an imagined past. But its theme brings in a crucially important contemporary dimension.



Harry Clarke, *Geneva Window,* 1929, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, Miami.
http://www.harryclarke.net/geneva_home.html

Clarke's scheme, his own invention, was a highly original take on the project. He chose to illustrate excerpts from the work of 15 modern Irish writers on eight panels. Clarke, like many other Irish artists, was disappointed with the Free State's indifference to art and design education and to the official projections of the state such as the designs for postage stamps, which Clarke described as, 'horrid'.[32] The government's expectation for a religious or at least conventionally monumental work of art is suggested by a later summation of Irish stained-glass as sharing with Early Christian illuminators 'a desire … to suggest the sanctity and holiness of the saints and to see them as removed from the worldly ambience so attractive to artists in other medium'.[33] But the *Geneva Window* was regarded by Clarke as a secular project and one that approached the idea of nationhood in a tangential and highly imaginative manner. In its small scale and intimate detail it followed the kinds of stained glass commissions that he had undertaken for private patrons in Dublin. The design is based in particular on a recent artwork, the *Eve of Saint Agnes* window, which was made in 1923-24, for Harold Jacob, owner of the Jacob's biscuit factory. The *Eve of Saint Agnes*, now part of the collection of the Dublin City Gallery, the Hugh Lane, was originally erected on the staircase of St. Michael's House, the grand Dublin home of Harold Jacob's father. It had been awarded a gold medal at the Aonach Tailteann exhibition in 1924.[34]



Harry Clarke, *Window of the Eve of Saint Agnes*, 1924, Dublin City Gallery, Hugh Lane
http://emuseum.pointblank.ie/online_catalogue/work-detail.php?objectid=234

Like the *Geneva Window* the theme of the *Eve of Saint Agnes* centres on a literary text with mysterious and erotic overtones, in this case John Keats's early 19th century poem of romance set within an imagined medieval world of chivalry and superstition. Keats's tale was beloved by the Pre-Raphaelites who delighted in its chaste and beautiful heroine, Madeleine. Clarke's treatment of the subject is infinitely more complex than their paintings, with each of the major characters in the poem, the beadsman, Old Angela, and the lovers Porphryo and Madeleine given detailed attention. Like the poem Clarke's window unfolds in a sequence of intricate scenes with careful depictions of the furnishings and interiors of the vast meandering moonlit mansion in which the events take place. Its prodigious blue tones suggest not just the night-time setting but the mystery and fantasy of the original verse. As in Keats's poem which consciously reconstructs an imagined age of gallantry, Clarke's work draws attention to the elements of make believe and suspense that is central to the poem. The story is set out in a series of fourteen small panels

separated by borders of clear glass decorated in patterns of foliage. Above each of the two adjoining windows a semi-circular lunette is filled with sea creatures, butterflies and flowers. Along the bottom, a frieze of the dramatis personae is presented like actors at a curtain call.

The Geneva Window is broadly similar in shape and dimensions to the *Eve of Saint Agnes* window. Clarke suggested ministry officials should view the *Agnes* window to get a sense of what the final version of the *Geneva Window* might look like and crucially to examine the elaborate and unique manner in which it had been made. He suggested that the same technique that he had employed in its production be used in the *Geneva Window*. This, although more expensive, was a distinct style rather than the conventional one used in the German window. Pechstein had provided designs for the glass panels but as he was not a glass worker, these were transferred into glass in a separate process. Clarke, as designer, artist and glass worker, proposed as in all his commissions, to create the entire window himself. This was not only true to Arts and Crafts principals, but it would also result in a incomparable work of art in which all the details of its construction, the overall conception of its content and its aesthetic, was controlled by the imagination and the intellectual and physical skill of the artist.

In a letter to Bodkin Clarke outlined his particular technique which was based on time-honoured methods of plating and aciding. In the former two sheets of coloured glass are plated together to create different colours. Clarke has a preference for blue or ruby coloured glass. Through a process of being dipped in acid the range of colours could be extended. Clarke explained:

> A piece of blue glass acided five times gave me four blue tones and white in which I could get three stains varying from pale lemon to orange.
>
> A piece of ruby acided five times gave me four ruby tones and white for three stains.
>
> … there is no limit to the quantity of colour one can get – the panels could be acided to get ten times each, if one had a glass with a good body of colour to start on.

In addition to this, stopping out parts of the glass in hot wax protected it from the acid, preserving the original tone. Clarke then penned details directly on the glass in the more conventional manner of a draughtsman or painter. [35] He also incised intricate detail into the surface of the glass using a needle.

Clarke consulted closely with his friend Lennox Robinson and with W.B. Yeats in his final choice of texts to be included in the design of the Geneva Window. In 1927 he told Bodkin that Yeats had become 'wildly enthusiastic and was of tremendous help with his suggestions'. But for the actual design of the window he would turn to Bodkin for advice.[36] Clarke had an ambivalent attitude to Yeats. Earlier on he had written to Bodkin about an encounter with the writer over a projected design for an Abbey production, 'I know exactly how I feel about Yeats', Clarke wrote, 'and would not consider the business for an instant if I thought I would have to conform in any way to his 'Art' views and guff about composition and colour. He made me want to cat.'[37] Such remarks indicate Clarke's supreme confidence as an artist and his refusal to be overawed by a figure of Yeats's stature.

But Yeats obviously provided valuable advice on the selection of writers and specific texts for this prestigious commission. The final 'line-up' included writings by James Joyce, Sean O'Casey, John Millington Synge, Lennox Robinson, George Bernard Shaw and Augusta Gregory as well as Yeats himself.[38] Some of the writers Clarke knew personally, for others he had long standing admiration. The final selection provides a remarkable and unusual anthology of modern Irish writing. The commission afforded him the opportunity of engaging with Irish literature at a level that he had rarely been able to do before. While he had made occasional illustrations of the poems of W.B. Yeats and of the drama of Synge and of course, the *Queens*, his major illustration commissions had been of international writers most notably Poe and Goethe.

Framed by a rich floral border with dark fronds of foliage meandering across its surface, the complex imagery of the window is revealed in a series of vignettes with each panel illustrating two texts, the words inscribed in the glass beside them. Each of the four horizontal sections is carefully constructed in terms of composition, colour harmony and moves thematically from patriotism, spirituality to grief and sensuality.

The top tier of the window is dominated by two female saints, St. Brigid (from Lady Gregory's play *The Story brought by Brigit*, 1924) and *Joan of Arc* (from George Bernard Shaw's *Saint*

Joan, 1923). They hover, Brigid in profile with a model of her church in her hand, her other extended to an apparition of the crucifixion. While she is placed in the countryside of Kildare, Joan stands in full armour against a backdrop of the Wicklow Mountains. The landscape and the flora and fauna of the Irish countryside feature prominently. Rabbits, a dove and a large butterfly are visible. In the extreme left corner a verse from Patrick Pearse's poem, 'The Wayfarer', written on the eve of his execution, is surrounded by a wreath of pink, red and purple flowers.

In the second tier two sets of lovers embrace. From Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* Christy Mahon and a demure Pegeen Mike in a vibrant red dress share their panel with a twosome from Seamus O'Sullivan's 1922 poem, *The Others*. Watched by green spirits the almost naked male figure pulls his companion's hand suggestively towards his crotch. This section is contrasted by the drama of the companion panel illustrating James Stephens's fantasy novel, *The Demi-Gods* in which three towering phantoms startle Patsy McCann. His daughter, Mary's crimson attire mirrors that of Pegeen. The panel is shared by a scene from Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. Based on a photograph of the celebrated actor F.J. McCormick in his role as Joxer, the realist setting is gleaned from the Abbey's 1924 production of the play. Lennox Robinson later noted that in the panel 'an essential object is the bottle of Guinness – I imagine the first appearance this useful object had made in stained glass'.[39] While the central texts illustrated in this tier refer to the 'meeting of the world of fantasy and reality, the outer scenes taken from Synge and O'Casey deal ostensibly with the tangible.

The third tier begins with a ghost-like Robert Emmet in Volunteer green uniform, from Lennox Robinson's play, *The Dreamers*. Next to Emmet, Yeats's stately *Countess Cathleen*, having 'heard the wailing in hovels' strides 'down, down, down.' In the neighbouring panel is one of the most controversial sections in the window is taken from Liam O'Flaherty's 1926 novel, *Mr. Gilhooley*, in which the middle-aged anti-hero drunkenly leers at his young mistress Nelly. She dances enticingly in front of him in see-through gossamer veils. In the novel, Gilhooley's obsession with her ends in his mental and physical destruction. The figure of Nelly is mirrored by that of Deirdre, from AE's 1902 play, with which it shares the panel. Both female figures, wrapped in transparent cloth, are ostensibly nude. While Nelly dances, Deirdre reclines with her lover, Naisi, awaiting her future as 'the Priestess of Tears'. The sensuality of this panel

counteracts the self-sacrifice and stoicism of Emmet and the Countess Cathleen. Their grand attitudes are counterbalanced by the sinuous forms and physical desires of Deirdre and Nelly. But in all cases sacrifice is made.

The bottom section of the window begins with a scene of mourning in which a young mother embraces her dead infant. An apparition of the Virgin and Child appears above her echoing Padraic Colum's poem *Cradle Song*, 'Mavourneen is going from me and from you. Where Mary will fold him in a mantle of blue!' In the distance men come in from the fields to pay their respects. This vignette shares its panel with a scene from George Fitzmaurice's 1914 play, *The Magic Glasses.* In this the central character Jaymony has acquired a set of magic glasses that will allow him to escape into a world of fantasy where his desires can come true. Tiny nude female figures cavort in the deep red vessels that surround him. Behind his staring face his doctor and his parents look on.

The final panel combines extracts from Seamus O'Kelly's much loved tale, *The Weaver's Grave* and James Joyce's *Chamber Music*, which had recently been published and which Clarke selected over *Ulysses*, a work that is mentioned in an early list of potential texts. The beautiful young widow of O'Kelly's novel and the handsome gravedigger exchange amorous glances amidst the tombstones. In the accompanying vignette, a golden haired minstrel from Joyce's poem wearing a sumptuous purple robe embroidered with golden flowers plays a mandolin. He stands on the banks of a silver river in the midst of a verdant landscape inspired by Florentine Renaissance art. There is no obvious sequence to the various panels which can be read vertically, diagonally or in any way that the viewer chooses.

The Window's use of texts written in English highlights the fundamental role played by Revival literature in the formation of modern Irish culture. As Joyce wrote, 'Condemned to express themselves in a language not their own [the Irish] have stamped on it the mark of their own genius and compete for glory in the civilized nations. This they then called English literature…'.[40] As a work of art designed to represent the burgeoning Irish state it highlights above all the imaginative contribution of Ireland's writers to European culture as well as to their own divergent senses of identity. Through the selection of these texts Ireland is presented not in

terms of its geography or its history but as an imaginative space where reality and fantasy coalesce. This imaginative space is the legacy of the Revival. The window gives equal prominence to the poet founders of national consciousness, Yeats, Lady Gregory, AE and Patrick Pearse, and to those who critiqued such romanticism, Joyce, O'Casey, Synge and Shaw.

Clarke unites the competing concerns of the writers through the unifying design of the window. The predominant blues of its glass are relieved by flashes of red, pink and green across its surface. In the theatricality of its figures, the sumptuousness of their costumes and the delicacy and complexity of its detail the window invites the spectator's individual engagement. It is the ultimate gesamtkunstwerk, so beloved of Symbolism and so central to the ideas of the Revival. It brings together not just a range of literary scenarios but art, design, literature and through its representation of the human figure, theatre, dance and music.

Clarke completed the window in the summer of 1930. Work was interrupted by other commissions but most tragically by the artist's ongoing treatment for TB which necessitated long periods in a sanatorium in Switzerland leading to his premature death in January 1931. The window was erected in Clarke's studio in September 1930 and subsequently at Government Buildings on Merrion Square where it was inspected by representatives of the government, including the Taoiseach William Cosgrave.

While complimentary about the artistic merits of the work, Cosgrave suggested that another panel be put in place of the one illustrating O'Flaherty's *Mr. Gilhooley*. He told Clarke that, 'I feel that it would be unjust to you as well as to the council to lay open to hostile criticism the beautiful work which the window contains by associating it with subjects that would displease'.[41] (HCA.1.88, Harry Clarke Archive)Those who made the final decision regarding the installation of the work at Geneva took a very cautious view of its merits. Their attitude is typified by the reaction of R.C. Ferguson, Secretary of the Department of Industry and Commerce who was shocked at the nudity and sexuality of the imagery. He was determined to prevent the installation of Clarke's work in the International Labour building where, as he put it, 'a nation famed as a Catholic stronghold was to be represented as bizarre almost viciously evil people steeped in sex and drunkenness and, yes, sin'. The government even turned to the Church for moral guidance

and in 1931 the Catholic Bishop of Killaloe, Rev. Dr. Fogarty was asked for his opinion of the work. While expressing reservations about the panel illustrating O'Sullivan's poem *The Others*, the clergyman was in favour of the work being installed. Bishop Fogarty remarked that it was 'simply a pity that Clarke had chosen to immortalise a group who did not represent the mind or character of the Irish'.[42]

By June 1931, five months after the artist's death, it was apparent that the government had decided against presenting the work to Geneva. The window was never erected and nor was it displayed in public for many years. In 1933 Clarke's widow, the artist Margaret Clarke managed to buy it back at the full price of £450 from the new Fianna Fail government which has also disapproved of the work.[43] In 1938 the window was hanging in the front room of the Harry Clarke Studios on North Frederick Street where it was described by a writer in the *Irish Press*.

> This was the last piece of work Harry Clarke ever did before illness took him away forever. In it he is at his most imaginative and the glory of colour, which was his chief gift, is a strange blend of dark beauty and almost spectral luminosity.[44]

In1988 the Window was acquired by the Wolfsonian Museum in Miami, where it at last found a permanent home.

The controversy has been closely examined by Andrew Haggerty who argues that the window was suppressed 'because its sexual content would have cost more politically than the Irish government was willing to pay … in terms of its own Catholic sentiments and wariness of being associated with writers and literary works of dubious moral character'. As Haggerty asserts the Free State government could only resolve its rejection of the window by 'adopting acceptable notions of acceptable art'. [45]The artist's son, Michael Clarke also saw the prevailing Catholicism of the time as ultimately responsible for the sad fate of his father's masterpiece. He noted of the fifteen writers, 'seven were Protestants and of the others very few indeed could be regarded as 'practising' Catholics'.[46]

His views are supported by the coverage given to the *Window* in the *Catholic Bulletin,* one of the rare references to the commission in the contemporary media. In its columns the work was dismissed as a Protestant conspiracy backed as it was by Yeats and Robinson. The Window is

presented as a tribute to George Russell's theosophical ideas on culture rather than referring to the Catholic artist who had created it.

> The Wonderful Window is to become the centre of worship in the Restored Shrine of the Russell Religion which is to be set up on the Teapot Dome Site, Merrion Square ... The plotter and Planner of the Genevan Window, the wonder of Gaeldom, will parade them in Plunkett House. To the soft strains of citterns and citoles, of sackbuts and shaums, the shrine of the new Russell Religion on Merrion Square ... will be inaugurated. [47]

This writer gives little credit to Harry Clarke's artistic integrity presenting him as a puppet of the Revival. The *Bulletin,* more concerned with politics than art, rejects not only what it considers to an inaccurate image of Irishness, but one that has been foisted on the public by a self-appointed elite. Such views are familiar from earlier controversies concerning the Revival. But as Clarke's window was not exhibited publically, its content was never properly debated. In fact Clarke, a product of the late Revival was both in awe of its imaginative scope and sceptical of its faith in the peasant and the aristocrat. The Geneva Window, for those who had the opportunity of seeing it, suggests a darker and more troubling view of Ireland. The images of pathos that it contains, the grieving mother, the deluded Gilhooley and the ragged figure of Joxer rescue it 'from its Celtic brocade hangings' to paraphrase Seamus Deane.[48]

The decadent aspect of Clarke's work should have alerted the government to the potential drawbacks of selecting him for the Geneva commission. The artist was a daring choice for a country that was then embarking on a programme of cultural censorship, a censorship which focused on sexuality and which reflected a very narrow sense of Catholicism. The content of many of Clarke's illustrations and drawings was decadent and often erotic. Lennox Robinson summarised the inherent duality of his work:

> There were two sides to his imagination: the religious side, which found its expression in stained glass, and another side which expressed itself in black and white, in designs which had about them something of the macabre... Both these sides came together in his last great work, his window for the Labour Building in Geneva. [49]

The Window was made and conceived at exactly the moment when the Free State was enacting censorship legislation that would impede the power of literature to critique the nation and

particularly to refer openly to sexuality. Within months of completing the window, books by two of the writers featured in it, Liam O'Flaherty and Sean O'Faolain, were banned.

But the rejection of the *Window* was as bound up as much with the aesthetic that Clarke deployed in its creation as with its content. Influenced by Symbolism, it shares with much Revivalist literature an inherent belief in the individualist nature of sensory experience. It focuses on the ethereal rather than the concrete. The Free State's refusal to install the *Window* suggests a fundamental break between those who had imagined and were continuing to imagine the new State and who were capable of digesting myriad versions of Irishness and those who now governed it. The latter seemed incapable of understanding how a work of art can convey such nuanced ideas and more troubling, were too cautious to allow the individual to make up his own mind.

---

[1] N. G. Bowe, *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, rev. ed. History Press Ireland, 2012, (first published Irish Academic Press, 1989), 28-29.

[2] Bowe. *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, 190, 215, 234, 270. AE published extensive reviews of Clarke's work in *Irish Statesman,* 8 August 1925, 14 November 1925, 21 December 1929.

[3] N. G. Bowe,. 'A Regal Blaze. Harry Clarke's depiction of Synge's 'The Queens'', *Irish Arts Review*, (summer, 2006), 96-105; *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, 117-32.

[4] J. Sheehy,*The rediscovery of Ireland's Past: the Celtic Revival 1830-1930,* Thames and Hudson, London, 1980; T. J. Edelstein, *Imagining an Irish Past. The Celtic Revival, 1840-1940*, University of Chicago, 1992; P. Larmour,*The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland*, Friar's Bush Press, Belfast, 1992, 126-36; J. Turpin,. *Oliver Sheppard 1865-1941: Symbolist sculptor of the Cultural Revival*, Four Courts, Dublin, 2000; N. G. Bowe.'Preserving the Relics of Heroic Time. Visualising the Celtic revival in early 20th century Ireland, in eds.B. Cliff and Nicholas Grene, *Synge and Edwardian Ireland*, Oxford University Press, 2012, 58-78.

[5] N. Gordon Bowe, 'Symbolism in Early 20th Century Irish Art', *Irish Arts Review,* 1989-90, 133-44; Turpin, *Oliver Sheppard 1865-1941*; R. Kennedy, *The Fantastic in Irish Art,* National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 2007.

[6] P.J Mathews, *Revival, The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Fein, The Gaelic League and the Co-Operative Movement*, Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2003.

[7] N. G. Bowe, D. Caron and M. Wynne, *Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass, The Works of Harry Clarke and the artists of An Tur Gloine,* Dublin, 1988; Larmour, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland*, 163-71.

[8] J. White and M. Wynne, *Irish Stained Glass. A Catalogue of Stained Glass Windows by Irish Artists of the 20th century.* The Furrow Trust, Gill and Son, Dublin, 1963, 5-15; J. Turpin, *A*

School of Art in Dublin Since the 18th century. A History of the National College of Art and Design, Gill and MacMillan, Dublin, 1995, 210-16.
[9] J. O'Connell, *The Honan Hostel Chapel Cork,* Guy and Co. Ltd, Cork, 1916; eds. V. Teehan, and E. Wincott Heckett, *The Honan Chapel: A Golden Vision,* Cork University Press, 2004.
[10] N. G. Bowe, 'A New Byzantium. The Stained Glass Windows by Harry Clarke', in eds. Teehan and Wincott Heckett, *The Honan Chapel: A Golden Vision*, 165-67.
[11] Bowe, 'A New Byzantium. The Stained Glass Windows by Harry Clarke', 168.
[12] N. G. Bowe, and E. Cumming, *The Arts and Crafts Movements in Dublin and Edinburgh 1885-1925,* Irish Academic Press, 1998; Larmour, *Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland*, 1-9, 64-89.
[13] John O'Connell, 'Introduction' *Catalogue of Society of Arts and Crafts of Ireland exhibition*, 1917, quoted in Oswald Reeves, Irish Arts and Crafts', *Studio*, October (1917), 17-18.
[14] Reeves, Oswald. 'Irish Arts and Crafts', 21-22.
[15] Quoted in Reeves, 'Irish Arts and Crafts', 20.
[16] Reeves, 'Arts and Crafts', 21.
[17] Bowe, *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, 71, 166.
[18] Bowe, *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, 173-82.
[19] Bowe, 'A New Byzantium. The Stained Glass Windows by Harry Clarke', in *The Honan Chapel: A Golden Vision,* 173-78.
[20] O'Connell, *The Honan Hostel Chapel Cork*, 52.
[21] O'Connell, *The Honan Hostel Chapel Cork,* 39.
[22] Bowe, 'A New Byzantium. The Stained Glass Windows by Harry Clarke', in *The Honan Chapel: A Golden Vision,* 181.
[23] Sommerville quoted in Bowe, 'A New Byzantium. The Stained Glass Windows by Harry Clarke',184.
[24] Edmund Wilson,. *Axel's Castle. A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, London, 1945, 12-13.
[25] Bowe, 'A Regal Blaze. Harry Clarke's depiction of Synge's 'The Queens'', *Irish Arts Review*, 96-105.
[26] Reeves,'Irish Arts and Crafts', 20.
[27] See Appendix 2, Bowe, *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, 312-20.
[28] Harry Clarke, Report on proposed *Geneva Window*, 29 November 1926, quoted in Michael Laurence Clarke, 'The Geneva Window', *Stained glass of Harry Clarke 1889-1931,* (London: Fine Arts Society, 1988), n.p.
[29]Bernhard Fulda, *Max Pechstein: The Rise and Fall of Expressionism,* (Walter de Gruyner, 2012), 260.
[30]Letter of George Epitaux, Lausanne to Harry Clarke, 15 September 1925, HCA.1.66, Harry Clarke Archive, Dublin City Gallery.
[31] Report from Harry Clarke to Department of Industry and Commerce, 29 November 1926, HCA.1.74. Harry Clarke Archive, Dublin City Gallery.
[32] Bowe, *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, 204.
[33] White and Wynne, *Irish Stained Glass.* 15.
[34] Bowe, *Life and Work of Harry Clarke,* 230-33; L. Costigan and M. Cullen, *Strangest Genius. The Stained Glass of Harry Clarke,* History Press, Ireland, 2010, 148-156.

[35] Letter of Clarke to Thomas Bodkin, 3 November 1918, NLI Harry Clarke papers, MS 39,202 (a).
[36] Letter of Clarke to Thomas Bodkin, 8 August 1927, NLI Harry Clarke papers, MS 39,202 (a). Thanks to Fiana Griffin for drawing my attention to the location of this letter.
[37] Letter of Clarke to Thomas Bodkin, undated, NLI Harry Clarke papers, MS 39,202 (a).
[38]The writers and texts were Patrick Pearse, *The Wayfarers,* 1916; Augusta Gregory*, The Story Brought by Brigit*, 1924; George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan*, 1923; J.M. Synge, *Playboy of the Western World,* 1907; Seamus O'Sullivan, *The Others,* 1912; James Stephens, *The Demi-Gods*, 1914; Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock,* 1924; Lennox Robinson, *The Dreamers,* 1915; W.B. Yeats, *Countess Cathleen,* 1892; Liam O'Flaherty, *Mr. Gilhooley,* 1926; AE, *Deirdre*, 1902; Padraic Colum, *A Cradle Song*, 1907; George Fitzmaurice, *The Magic Glasses,* 1913; Seamus O'Kelly, *The Weaver's Grave,* 1919; James Joyce, *Chamber Music,* 1907. See Bowe, *Life and work of Harry Clarke,* 292-300.
[39] Lennox Robinson, *Curtain Up*, London, 1942, 215, quoted in Bowe, *Life and work of Harry Clarke*, 292.
[40] Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, Oxford University Press, 1965, p.26.
[41]Letter of Liam Cosgrave to Harry Clarke, 30 September 1930, HCA.1.88, Harry Clarke Archive, Dublin City Gallery.
[42] Quoted in Andrew J. Haggerty, 'Stained glass and censorship: The suppression of Harry Clarke's Geneva Windows', *New Hibernia Review*', (1999),115.
[43]Letter of Mrs. Harry Clarke to *Irish Press*, 25 November 1938, HCA.1.101, Harry Clarke Archive, Dublin City Gallery.
[44]Anna Kelly,'Around the Town', 25 November 1938, cutting *Irish Press*, HCA.1.100, Harry Clarke Archive, Dublin City Gallery.
[45] Haggerty, 'Stained glass and censorship', 103.
[46] Clarke, 'The Geneva Window'.
[47] *Catholic Bulletin,* (March 1931). 218-21.
[48] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals. Essays in Modern Irish Literature.* Wake Forest University Press, 1985, 61.
[49] Lennox Robinson, 'Harry Clarke Obituary Notice', Irish Times 7 January 1931, quoted in Bowe, *Life and Work of Harry Clarke,* 355-56.