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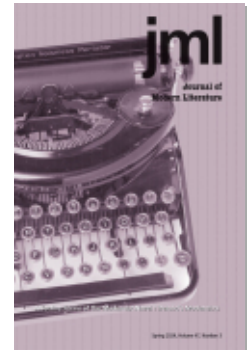
## Ferdinand Levy: A Harlem Renaissance Dubliner and De-Colonial Cosmopolitanism

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# Ferdinand Levy: A Harlem Renaissance Dubliner and De-Colonial Cosmopolitanism

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*Flashes from the Dark* was the 1941 debut by Jamaican poet Ferdinand Levy, published in Dublin while he was a medical student. It brought something of the Harlem Renaissance to Lower Baggot Street. Despite favorable reviews by Irish poets such as Austin Clarke and others, Levy has vanished from literary posterity. His many passions—literary, political, musical—situate him at a properly intersectional literary history of mid-century Dublin, and he critiques the particular structure of systemic racism in 1930s and '40s Ireland. Levy's "decolonial cosmopolitanism" mounts a challenge to nationalist tendencies within the mainstay of Irish postcolonial thinking, a factor in his occlusion. His awkward poetics—wavering between a belated signature of the Harlem Renaissance and parodies of English sonnets and ballads—constitutes "mimicry" in Homi Bhabha's sense—destabilizing white discourse with "flashes from the dark."

**Keywords:** Ferdinand Levy / Irish poetry / race / decolonization / cosmopolitanism / Harlem Renaissance

Jamaican-born Ferdinand Levy (1904–1972) was a medical student at Trinity College, Dublin in 1941 when Colm Ó'Lochlainn's Three Candle Press published his only collection of poetry, *Flashes from the Dark*. He spent over a decade in Ireland, arriving in 1932 and leaving in 1947, eventually becoming a Medical Officer of Health for the Parish of St. James, Montego Bay in Jamaica where he died in 1972. Levy, who had been in New York in the 1920s, brought

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something of the Harlem Renaissance to Lower Baggot Street. Senator John Harold Douglas, at whose wedding Levy served as an usher, described his friend in an obituary in *The Irish Times* as “a well-known personality” in 1930s Dublin, “patron of the arts, and a poet of no small merit” (11). Columnists leave impressions of a “trim, immaculate figure with . . . long, thin cigarette holder” (“From the Dark” 5), an “inveterate first nighter . . . quite a character in cosmopolitan Dublin” (“Spectator” 6). In his memoir, future Nigerian Health Minister Moses Majekodunmi describes Levy as an “urbane affluent Jamaican,” president of the Association for Students of African Descent (ASAD) in the period Majekodunmi served as secretary (Majekodunmi 30). The overall image of Levy left by Dublin contemporaries is one of worldly charm, aesthetic enthusiasms and talent, a young man of some financial means. Despite favorable reviews from luminaries such as Austin Clarke, Levy has failed to garner more than a footnote in Irish literary history (see Stewart, “Louis le Brocquy” and Müller, “Postcolonial Pursuits” 147). What dynamics are involved in the cultural amnesia of a well-known Jamaican acolyte of the Harlem Renaissance active in the Dublin literary scene of the 1930s and early 1940s? How might a recovery of his work aid in our understanding of “historical processes of othering” that continue to shape contemporary Ireland (Farágó and Sullivan 1)?

Levy’s many passions—literary, musical, political—situate him in a literary history of mid-century Ireland that is properly intersectional. His poetry grapples with issues of race, class, sexuality, nationalism/transnationalism/cosmopolitanism, and postcolonialism without reduction. It is perhaps precisely this complexity, beyond the disabling binaries that dominate Irish literary history, that have marginalized him as an alternative voice. Shallow engagements with ideas of intersectionality can reify received categories such as “race” and “gender” (Carastathis 114). Levy’s residency in post-revolutionary Dublin provides a fascinating insight into the simultaneity and heterogeneity of identity, its dissonances and internal contradictions. He demands to be thought *with*, not *about*. This, I would argue, make Levy a less pliable, “fungible” object (Winnubust) for Irish ideas of identity and freedom than other Black writers with Irish connections, even where those writers themselves drew explicit connections. From Claude McKay’s (complicated) postcolonial solidarity with Irish revolutionaries in 1920 to Alain Locke’s favorable references to the Irish Literary Revival in his seminal text of the Harlem Renaissance *The New Negro* (1925), Black modernists looked to Ireland for example and correspondences, seldom the other way around (Mishkin, 1–23, Jenkins).<sup>1</sup> Interperipheral perspectives based on complex identifications—resistant to essentialism—between the “black and green Atlantic” have been expertly examined in the work of David Lloyd and Peter D. O’Neill, as well as Michael Malouf (*Transatlantic Solidarities*).

While Levy shared McKay’s alacrity in drawing parallels between the Black and Irish cultural experiences, his residency in Dublin for over a decade more often than not frustrated easy assumptions of a one-size-fits-all postcolonialism. A cosmopolitan migrant at mid-century, Levy does not conflate, or easily afford

instrumentalizing conflation of discrete experiences of colonialism and racialization. Instead, his poetry offers what Lloyd and O'Neill have termed "fascinating repertoires for contrapunctal thought" (xviii): a complex refraction of identification and antagonism. This complexity has surely contributed to Levy's obscurity in Ireland.

Furthermore, while his poetry was often warmly received by contemporaries, the context of that reception deserves closer inspection: it predicts the patterns by which he would recede into literary oblivion. In assessing this occlusion, my article is indebted not only to emergent work on Irishness and race (Lloyd and O'Neill, Brannigan, Gander, Enyi-Amadi and Penny, Mulhall, Nakase, Pilar-Argáiz), but also to a growing body of scholarship recovering and reassessing mid-century Irish women poets (for a useful recent round-up, see Darcy and Wheatley). Finally, the form of Levy's poetry also contributes to a degree of canonical awkwardness: his belated rhythms of the Harlem Renaissance in the early 1940s give us an extraordinary migrant's view of Dublin, balladic Éire shunted aside for the "shim-sham-shimmy" of Levy's bluesy moon shining "upon the Irish Sea" (*Flashes from the Dark* 28–29). The belatedness of jazz rhythms in 1940s Dublin, a sense of Black cultural energies that have already been outmoded, is further complicated by poems in Levy's collection that are written in a radically different style. Far from a plain and simple failure of cohesion, this awkwardness is crucial to grasping the particularities of Levy's literary achievement and his absence from Irish literary history, a de-colonial cosmopolitan poetic that is ripe for rediscovery.

### **"NO RACIAL BARRIERS" IN IRELAND: THE MIGRANT POET OF COLOR AT MID-CENTURY**

Ferdinand Northcut Constantine Levy was born in Jamaica on 19 October 1904. His father Cecil is described as a clerk in Levy's matriculation records, and it is clear from contemporary descriptions that Ferdy, as he was known, was financially comfortable. In the 1920s, he lived in New York, where he was involved in the cultural flowering of the Harlem Renaissance. According to the dustjacket on his book of poems, he "first became interested in literature around 1928/9—a period commonly referred to as the Negro Renaissance. During this period, he was closely connected with the Gumby Book Studio Group, a young clique of enthusiasts who were determined to pay their part in helping to break the traditional inferior status of the Negro in American poetry" (*Flashes*, dustjacket).

Gay socialite, rare book collector, and scrapbooker L.S. Alexander Gumby opened his Book Studio with funding from a wealthy backer around 1925; the venue at 2144 5th Avenue—combining features of the salon, gallery, and workroom—was at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance until its dissolution during the Crash. The venue was a crucible "for black modernism and black political emancipation," where "high" and vernacular cultures commingled promiscuously (Rasmussen 212, 206). The Studio "quickly grew popular as a gathering place for actors, artists, intellectuals, and gays and lesbians of the Harlem Renaissance"

(Gilger 117). In Gumby's own estimation, "the Gumby Book Studio was the first unpremeditated interracial movement in Harlem" (qtd. in Gilger 117). In 1950, Gumby donated over 150 homemade scrapbooks of "Negroana" to Columbia University Library—four decades of collecting and curating fragments and ephemera of African American culture, what Gilger calls "history in the making" (124). Levy shared Gumby's passion for collecting and curation: music records, and in later life, orchids.

Music, rather than literature, was the central enthusiasm of Levy's Harlem days. He was friendly with two musicians: Leviticus Lyon and Hall Johnson, who are numbered among the dedicatees of Levy's poetry volume. Lyon was a singer and choral director who earned a transfer from San Francisco to the New York Customs office in 1919 by impressing officials with his singing talent. In New York, he received a fellowship to study at Juilliard in 1925 and performed at Carnegie Hall. He was a co-founder of the Negro Symphony Orchestra, living in Harlem until his death in 1958. Levy maintained a semi-regular correspondence with Lyon while in Dublin. Hall Johnson was a composer and arranger of African American spirituals, director of the Hall Johnson Negro Choir; he played on Broadway and his music appeared in Hollywood cinema, including *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Dumbo* (1941). According to the dedication in his poetry volume, Johnson was Levy's "earliest and most constructive literary critic," while Lyon "first stimulated" his "artistic and musical tastes" (*Flashes* n.p.). Levy appears not to have corresponded with Johnson while in Dublin, but often mentions him in letters to Lyon.

In the early 1930s, Levy spent some time in Washington D.C. at Howard University, contributing poems to the student magazine *The Hilltop* (2). In October 1932, he left New York on the S.S. *Laconia* traveling to Europe to seek admittance to university, with the intention of studying medicine. In a 22 January 1933 letter to Leviticus Lyon, Levy gives a lyric description of lifting anchor: "to see New York from the stern of a ship at night is a spectacle marvellous to behold—the glare of lights, her massive structures reaching into the clouds like greedy arms—all registers themselves [sic] vividly upon a man's mind as slowly, slowly, they seem to recede into the distance" (Letters to Lyon). With other students of color, Levy disembarked at Liverpool. He enjoys telling Lyon about his run-in with a potentially racist customs official: "'Have you any objection to my searching you?' was the next question flung at me. 'Well,' said I, 'I don't know that I relish the idea of being searched, but if it gives you great pleasure, why . . .'" (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). The innuendo places sex and race together, a connection Levy frequently makes in his correspondence, and occasionally his poetry, as he probes what Frantz Fanon sardonically refers to when he writes "in relation to the Negro, everything takes place on the genital level" (*Black Skin* 157). Negrophobic sexual neurosis among white Irish interlocutors is a source of fascination, amusement, and anger in Levy's letters to Lyon.

Borders are mentioned regularly in Levy's correspondence. The customs check crossing the border on the train from Belfast to Dublin, the entry to Britain

from the US Imperial and racialized borders collide in Levy's experience, but they are not completely coterminous. The trauma of Partition is set alongside racialized "border imperialism . . . processes by which the violence and precarities of displacement and migration are *structurally* created as well as maintained" (Walia 5–6). The two are profoundly linked—witness the violent displacement of thousands of Catholics during the Belfast pogrom 1920–1922—but there is a temptation to ignore the crucial significance of whiteness in the construction of such borders. Levy's border crossings are on the wrong side of what Ghassan Hage calls the global apartheid of racialized border regimes (qtd. in Mulhall 100). Ironies abound, however, with Levy delighting in them: he tells Lyon that he was warmly received by Edinburgh University authorities on account of his "Britisher: colonial citizenship" (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933).

Levy spent several days in Edinburgh and Belfast investigating whether or not he should matriculate at the universities in those cities, before deciding on Dublin, where other Black students on the passenger ship had traveled. He encountered racism throughout this trip and was refused accommodation on false pretenses. On other occasions however, including a tearoom on the Belfast Dock, hospitality was afforded: a "wizened little old woman" disarmed Levy with her politeness, serving him coffee and discussing the non-sectarian Outdoor Relief Riots, a worker's strike that had erupted in the city (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). He mentions that he "got quite a kick out of" the name Jamaica Street (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933).

Arriving in Dublin, Levy initially applied to University College, but had second thoughts about what he had heard of its reputation for nationalism and clericalism: "[it] is governed by priests and fanatic Irish students. Need I say, then, that it is painfully narrow in scope? . . . all the anti-British go there. Priests and Nuns are turned out by the dozens here" (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). Levy's anti-imperialism was inflected by anti-clerical cosmopolitanism, refusing to countenance the extremes of Irish-Irelandism he saw dominating UCD. Levy matriculated instead at Trinity College Dublin on 17 January 1933, passing the preliminary examination in arts for entry to medical school that summer. He received his BA in the summer of 1939; the records from his time as a medical student are not entirely transparent, but it appears that he passed exams on the MB (Bachelor of Medicine) in spring 1940, apparently pausing his studies at some point during the 1940s before returning to Dublin to complete the course and graduate as a doctor in the summer of 1950 ("University News" 7, "University of Dublin" 3, "Summer Swallow" 5).<sup>2</sup>

From letters, appearances in Irish newspapers, and poems, we are left with vivid impressions of Levy's student days as a migrant and person of color navigating disparities of culture, race, and class in his adopted city, as well as many instances of intra- and inter-racial friendship and community. The dedication in his book of poems describes his Dublin years as "a most delightful episode" (*Flashes* n.p.); nevertheless, racial discrimination was an everyday occurrence. Levy's sense of "foreignness" doesn't exhaust his literary output, nor should a

critical approach silo him off within that frame. It is as a Dublin poet of color that Levy leaves an original mark on the landscape of twentieth-century Irish poetry in *Flashes from the Dark*, one who writes the city with a sense of tender familiarity. These intersectional aspects enable a rich, complex set of encounters that unsettle reductive narratives, and go a long way toward explaining why Levy has not received even a cameo in Irish literary history.

Levy's interests and extra-curricular activities were diverse, including race activism and attempts to forge de-colonial consciousness. In the early 1940s, he was president of the Association for Students of African Descent (ASAD). Members included future Nigerian statesman and jurist, Jaja Wachuku, and New York ENT specialist and McArdle prize-winning surgeon, the Trinidadian Errol A. Thompson. The association maintained close links to J. Harold Douglas's Overseas Fellowship. ASAD held meetings in the Quaker Friends' Meeting House on Eustace Street, with talks on racial justice, the expropriation of land in Kenya by white settlers ("Oppression in Africa" 8), broadcasts delivered via Radio Éireann ("Radio Éireann—Next Week" 5), and dinners held in the Country Shop, St. Stephen's Green ("A Picturesque Party" 6). In August 1935 at the height of the Abyssinia Crisis, a delegation from ASAD went in person to petition De Valera to support Ethiopia, with Levy (then treasurer) among them ("Abyssinian Situation" 2). A poem in *Flashes*, "The Rape of Ethiopia," links Mussolini's invasion to previous colonial conquests:

The last stronghold  
 Of all black men  
 Is now devoured  
 By the whites.  
 The pretext now  
 Is not as when  
 The French and British  
 Robbed  
 Our rights (*Flashes* 32–33)

Not the white man's burden now, but naked threat. "The bubbling wrath / Of Fascist herd" wafts down "in mustard gas" (*Flashes* 32–33). Levy urges "bleeding Africa" in pan-African mobilization "from Cape to Daka" to avenge the "Roman wound" (*Flashes* 33).

Levy was also involved in the Dublin University League of Nations Society. In a February 1933 meeting, he strikes an anticolonial note, opining that "England would never give up her islands in the West Indies without a struggle" ("The Way of the World" 4), citing exports and its strategic location in relation to the US as sticking points. He also mentions Jamaican antipathy to annuities paid to Great Britain, and the need for its own constitution. His speech touches on points of mutual interest with sections of his audience in De Valera's Ireland, set on a political course that would see the introduction of the 1937 constitution, return of the Treaty ports, and default on payment of land annuities to the British government

(“The Way of the World” 4). In correspondence, he relates that a crowd at a De Valera rally pushed the Black students to the front, to join in the chanting: “this is one night that a coloured man’s face was his pass port” (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933).

Unlike earlier Black writers and intellectuals who make throwaway connections to the Irish situation (Locke) or see serious points of commonality (McKay), Levy was keen to analyze the structure of Irish and Black postcoloniality, in a critical rather than merely sympathetic spirit. In his letters to Lyon, Levy draws out what “the black race have . . . to learn from the Irish”:

They really do enjoy themselves at a dance. The Tango, the Paul Jones, the Old Fashion Waltzes and what have you. Complete abandonment. I find the Irish a race just waking up, as from a long sleep; and gradually coming to realise that they are free from the harsh master’s yoke (England). They are now running rampant with nationalism: Ireland for the Irish! Buy Irish goods! Our Irish spirit! And a lot of other such tripe . . . Whether or not this will be successful is doubtful, not in this age when the entire world [yearns] for unity. If the movement is making any headway, I have yet to be convinced. (22 Jan 1933)

Levy’s cosmopolitan brand of anti-colonial politics refutes simplistic exchanges, and he senses that the Irish state is a reactive copy of the colonial regime. Dublin’s uneasy relationship with Empire, and its sublimations of this, are felt in many of Levy’s letters. In passing, he mentions Trinity’s lounge and reading room, where “a giant tusk of what must have been a giant elephant” is displayed in a case over the fireplace (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). In the Natural History Museum, he encounters African masks, “not at all hideous, as they would have been in your country, he tells the American Lyon (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). These vestiges of colonial history, sublimated in their original context and understated in Levy’s text, serve as flashpoints: they are aesthetic experiences that arguably hinge on questions of whiteness and the “locality” of postcolonial mentalities as much as ideas of Western civilization.

In addition to more directly political affairs, Levy was interested in the radical potential of theatre. In August 1938, Levy heard Michéal MacLiammoir lecture on problem plays at the Abbey Theatre Festival in the Gresham Hotel (“Preparing Sail”). Randolph Edmonds, an expert on Black theatre from Dillard University in New Orleans, accompanied Levy to the lecture (“Preparing Sail”). A regular contributor to Black journals such as *Crisis*, Edmonds was in Dublin on a Rosenwald Fellowship, studying how amateur theatre groups were organized. During his stay, Edmonds made final revisions to his major dramatic work, *The Land of Cotton*, a play “designed for social theatres rather than in the university theatres” (vii) which deals with the brutality of tenant farming in the US south. Later, in 1940, Levy gave a paper “The Irish Theatre as Seen by a Foreigner” to the Trinity College Philosophical Society that lauded the influence of dramatists like Sean O’Casey and J.M. Synge on young Harlem literati; his talk doubtless owed much to conversations with Edmonds.



Racism, overt and subtle, was an everyday occurrence for Levy in Ireland. In Belfast, he was stared at like “some damned curio” (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). In Dublin, children hurled racial abuse, and men made threatening gestures. Staring was typical: “you can sum up the stares in this way: For the girls, admiration and desire for sexual try-outs; for the child, you are a curiosity; for the men, a feeling of resentment and a fear that their women will become too intimate with you . . .” (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). More than twenty years before Fanon would write his seminal exploration of the psychic effects of colonialism and racism *Black Skin, White Masks*, Levy’s letters probe racialized sexual anxieties he encounters in Dublin, within a culture that had an already fraught relationship with sex.<sup>3</sup> An extraordinary poem “Down O’Connell Street”—so extraordinary one wonders how it escaped Irish censorship—turns the main shopping thoroughfare of Dublin into an arena for racialized sexual neurosis. Levy passes a woman “all dressed in green / From head to feet—/ Lord, Lord!—/ Down O’Connell Street!” (*Flashes* 26). Her smile is “indiscreet” (26), and the poem ends with an explosive revision of the refrain, a gut punch not quite like anything else in Irish poetry:

I’d make her know  
That tropic love is sweet.  
Lord, No!—  
Not down O’Connell Street. (27)

In “Harlem Cabaret,” a poem beholden to Langston Hughes, he upbraids “all you ’fay boys” urging them to take care when black girls dance:

Ah ’fay boy, ’fay boy,  
Steal away  
When black girls  
Dance  
that  
lazy  
sway. (*Flashes* 11)

“Ofay” was Harlem slang for whites, possibly from pig-Latin for “foe.” Levy’s militancy is smuggled into Irish publishing via Black vernacular rhetoric. However, not every sexual reference in his correspondence or poetry concerns white psychopathology: he mentions being taken home by two girls after a dance and sends Lyon “A Plea for the Pianoforte,” a love poem addressed to a former pianist who works in a record store on Grafton Street (Letters to Lyon 28 Mar. 1933).

Levy’s experiences of racialized identity in Dublin grate against the view that racism is an aggregation of prejudices, rather than, as argued by critical race theorists, a structural issue. If a mid-century Irish context for such structures requires nuance and distinction from a contemporary British or American one, as it clearly does, this does not mean these structures do not exist. In fact, it is precisely in its unique context that Irish anti-Black racism takes on its structural

tendencies. As Brannigan writes of the prevailing view in Irish scholarship until recently, “racial ideologies and racist expressions within modern Irish culture [since 1922] are merely overlooked as secondary, or belated, signifiers of an effectively redundant colonial interpretative regime” (6). This reduction of Irish racism to an epiphenomenon of British colonial rule is seductively specious. Aspects of Irish racism were inevitably inherited and discharged along recognizably colonial lines, but they were also products of “the specific historical conditions, forms, objects and effects of racial ideologies and racist expressions within modern Irish culture” (Brannigan 7).

Ireland’s unique relationship with its diaspora is one such important condition. In a paper “The Irish Theatre as Seen by a Foreigner” to the Philosophical Society in Trinity College Dublin, Levy decried racist caricatures on stage: “[foreigners] did not go to the theatre to be complimented, but they did not go there to be insulted” (“Irish Theatre” 6). He concluded by praising the “hospitality, the kindness, the good manners, and the capacity for enjoyment of the Irish people” (6). In response, P.T. Montford, the vice president, disassociated Ireland from stage minstrelsy: “any offensive shows on the stage here had not their origin in Dublin or in Ireland” (“The Irish Theatre” 6), a comment that overlooks multiple examples of blackface not limited to touring US minstrel shows (see Nakase 193–198).

There were Dublin audiences for racist caricatures, and theatres were willing to show them. These included a 1927 Abbey Theatre production of Eugene O’Neill’s controversial play *The Emperor Jones* directed by Lennox Robinson, with Rutherford Mayne in blackface in the titular role; it was revived in the early 1930s. Dublin theatre diarist Joseph Holloway praised the play, his entry littered with the N-word, while in *The New York Times*, J.J. Hayes lamented an unconvincing performance from Mayne, that he “became the white man playing the black man in the white man’s way” (qtd. in Harrington 598–599).

When Paul Robeson visited Ireland in February 1935, ASAD entertained the actor-vocalist, his wife, and accompanist (see **Figure 1**). Robeson was toasted by the students, replying that “one of his race’s chief problems was understanding among themselves” (“Paul Robeson Entertained” 4). Moses Majekodumni gives a slightly more colorful rendition of the occasion: ASAD were ejected from the theatre for booing and catcalling, “greatly displeased with the subservient buffoon type roles” Robeson acted (Majekodumni 30). Robeson sought them out the next day, and in Levy’s flat on Baggot Street, the association discovered “he was no less race conscious” than they were (Majekodumni 31).

The relationship between the Dublin stage and Ireland’s diaspora inflects questions of Irish racism. In the US, as several scholars following Noel Ignatiev have shown, blackface minstrelsy “transformed [Irish-Americans] from racial Others into white ethnic Americans” (Nowatzki 184). Levy alludes to Irish-American racism in his poem “Harlem Depression”:



**Figure 1:** Robeson with Black students during his 1935 Dublin tour, possibly taken in Levy’s flat. Dr. Errol A. Thompson second from right, back row. It is not known if Levy is in shot. Image courtesy of Karen Greene.

Sprawled out in public park . . .  
 Nice warming sun.  
 Almighty God, just a-lying there—  
 Nice warming sun.  
 Big ole Irish cop kicked me—  
 Just for fun. (“Harlem Depression”)

In response to Levy’s paper on Irish theatre, Ernest Blythe, former politician and soon-to-be managing director of the Abbey Theatre, told him on no uncertain terms that “it was not the business of Irish dramatists to present only a picture of Irish life that would give a good impression to foreigners” (“The Irish Theatre” 6). If Blythe meant that the theatre was not the Board of Tourism, that is one thing, but the context—and Blythe’s rather stale theatrical tastes—suggest we read his remark in terms of the entrenched cultural protectionism of post-independence Ireland at mid-century (see Daly 6–18). Blythe’s xenophobia, Montford’s reflexive desire to disown Irish racism, and the relationship of Dublin’s cultural life to the Irish diaspora constitute complex manifestations of Ireland’s postcolonial history, and it is only by examining these enunciations that we can properly understand structures of mid-century Dublin racism, which could be insidious.

In an address to ASAD, October 1949, the Lord Mayor of Dublin Dr. Cormac Breathnach minimized anti-Black racism in Ireland: “[Dr. Breathnach] told the gathering, many of whom wore picturesque African costume, that the

Church to which he belonged knew no racial barriers. . . . ‘We, like you . . . have suffered a good deal from foreign domination. We, in this country . . . have freed ourselves in a way that Africa has yet to achieve . . .’” (“No Racial Barriers in Ireland” 2). The north of Ireland is strikingly absent in this summary. Interracial solidarity here is what Denise Riley calls “illusory centres, the seeming results of a consensus, yet where no one was ever consulted” (9). The Lord Mayor’s well-intentioned peroration is the obverse of the familiar nationalist lament a generation previous that Ireland was the last white nation without freedom: Dublin post-colonialism masks over Irish white universalism—a denial of racialized hierarchies, differing distributions of colonial power. Nor have these subtle maneuvers gone away: Ronit Lentin argues that a “disavowal of the pain of emigration” lies behind the refusal to countenance the plight of asylum seekers in the appalling conditions of Direct Provision, as well as their racialization through Irish racism (25). This includes the recent phenomenon of the Irish far-right cynically applying the rhetoric of “plantation”—state-sponsored early modern colonization—to asylum seekers and refugees (Park and Kelly). Such perennial dynamics make of a poet like Levy an uncanny “return of the repressed.”

### **“THIS DEPARTURE FROM INSULARITY”: LEVY’S DE-COLONIAL COSMOPOLITANISM**

If Levy exposes racialized discourses within mid-century Dublin, he also challenges nationalist tendencies within the mainstay of Irish postcolonial thinking (for thoughtful critiques of the same, see Graham, “Liminal Spaces,” and Smyth, *Decolonization and Criticism* 9–34). A “‘located and embodied’ cosmopolitanism” (Ramazani 18) is crucial to understanding Levy’s transnational engagements beyond a reductive postcolonial framework into which he does and doesn’t fit. Intersectionality—by which is meant not an additive model of oppression, but intragroup differences mutually constituting multiple arenas of oppression—also make Levy a compelling figure, while helping to explain his absence from the historical record. As a middle-class light-skinned person of color, Levy could exhibit prejudiced sentiments. In an address to the Dublin Rotary Club on 24 April 1933, he mentions the frequency with which he faced “racial antagonism,” hoping that bringing it to the attention of “respectable citizens” would nip it in the bud, a sign of how class prejudice and race cleave and intersect (“Rotary’s Gesture of Friendship” 5). Warming to his new home, he tells Lyon that a dance and the beautiful girls he met there “erased from my mind the common American saying: ‘Thick Irish,’” adding that New York Irish are “the rustic fellows . . . the cream of a country always stay at home” (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). Despite the casual use of a nativist anti-Irish trope, Levy appears to want to disentangle Irish racism from more ingrained Irish-American racism, but this messy task is further complicated by a tendency toward snobbery and mild sexism.

Mentioning luxuries in his first-class passage to Belfast from Glasgow, he confides in Lyon that “money is important,” while his letters exhibit numerous

classist remarks: the Black sailor “flashily dressed as a circus clown” with his white consort; the “greasy little waitress who is as filthy as the table cloth” in his Dublin boarding house (22 Jan. 1933). Although it has to be contextualized as bragging to a friend back in the U.S., he tells Lyon that he lives on “Dublin’s Park Avenue” (presumably, Lower Baggot Street): “you see, over here we are rich coloniels [sic]. Ahem! Our prestige must be upheld” (22 Jan. 1933). He also relates the racist price-gouging when he walks into a store: “The American adopts the attitude that ‘the fool and his money must part’; over here the attitude is ‘the rich must be soaked’” (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). Ireland’s economic underdevelopment (Crotty) is a liminal point at which discrete Irish and middle-class Jamaican-via-Harlem postcolonial situations interact.

Levy’s class identifications frustrate essentialist schema of metropolitan and peripheral, Eurocentrism and Third World. His “situatedness” as a cosmopolitan middle-class Jamaican in Dublin via Harlem is important to grasping the particulars of his contribution to Irish literature and forays into anti-colonial discourse, which refuse to flatter or conform to totalising Irish nationalist ideas of colonialism. As Frantz Fanon writes:

History teaches us clearly that the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism . . . the native bourgeoisie . . . will fight to the bitter end against [those] “who insult our dignity as a nation” . . . the fact is that such action will become more and more tinged by racism . . . from nationalism we have passed to ultra-nationalism, to chauvinism, and finally to racism. (*Wretched* 149–156)

De-colonial cosmopolitanism, then, is a critical cosmopolitanism that uncovers the intellectual and material lines of influence between non-Europe and Europe (Gopal, 892), as well as what Fanon calls “a new history of Man” (315)—one that would have profound implications for national histories.

Never less than aware of the material location of his enunciations, Levy’s silenced history shows an individual navigating the consequences of colonial racism and differing distributions of colonial power in Dublin. In poems like “Soul of Africa,” with its transformative echo of Whitman in Levy’s “wild, barbaric dance,” he celebrates an ideal Africa “Free / From Western arrogance” (*Flashes* 21)—not British or imperial, but Western. In “The Negro,” he confronts his Irish readership with the hydraulics of Black othering and subaltern status: “He is the great mummer / of the universe” (*Flashes* 20). “My Brother Died” depicts a brutal murder in which a Black man is staked, tarred and feathered, shot, and burned alive:

Our white brothers—  
They laughed  
And jumped  
And screamed,  
And begged of the fire  
To lick him clean. (*Flashes* 14)

The location of interracial kinship within a common humanity in the phrase “Our white brothers” draws attention to the white supremacist refusal of that kinship, but also suggests Levy’s resistance to a flattening adoption of postcolonial “post-racial” fraternity in Ireland.

If Levy stressed the importance of race as a modality in postcolonial experiences, he also navigated complicated feelings as a Jamaican person of color getting to know fellow medical students from Africa, which could on occasion edge into colorism. He thought the Africans, many of them royalty, “well educated, but not cultured,” their professions of hatred for whites probably only confined to white men, and he negotiated discriminations on the basis of skin tone, partly as a sarcastic reflex at having any sense of Afropolitanism frustrated by these encounters:

Since I have met these African boys I have come to the conclusion that the browns and high yallers or what have you of our race will have to go out and form a new race of their own. I am regarded as a half-cast by these chaps, and people of my colour aren’t particularly wanted in the old country. So voila! (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933)

He further mentions some Trinidadian students in Dublin who have chosen to pass as Cuban. These powerful instances of culture clash, discrimination, intervening hierarchies of class and race, and internalized racism “dwell within the colonial difference.” At times they are harbingers of old colonial ways of thinking, while at others, in their very plurality and heterogeneity, they make up the dissonance of Levy’s postcolonial identity, constituting a fitfully de-colonizing way of thinking, mid-century Dublin navigated through the complex postcolonial matrices of Harlem, Jamaica, Africa.

The major passions of Levy’s Dublin years were cultural. In addition to the theatre, he had a keen interest in the visual arts. He attended a 1940 exhibition of the Dublin Painter’s Society which included work by Jack P. Hanlon, Nano Reid, Norah McGuinness, and Patrick Hennessy. Louis le Brocquy, one of Ireland’s foremost painters renowned for his interest in writers as subjects, painted Levy’s portrait in 1939—his first according to his wife, Anne Madden le Brocquy (39). A pencil sketch for the work, “Negro,” serves as a frontispiece to Levy’s book of poems (**Figure 2**). Levy’s championing of Irish artists went beyond acting as a sitter; his home boasted “a fine collection of original paintings,” which apparently included works by Paul Henry, Mainie Jellett, and Le Brocquy (“Leader Page Parade” 6; “Town Topics” 6).

Levy was best known in Dublin for his impressive record collection. With civil servant Francis J. Kelly, he founded the Dublin Gramophone Society, which in the early 1940s held fortnightly meetings in Exchequer St. Central Hotel; Levy’s friend, J. Harold Douglas, was another key member of the society. Levy frequently hosted gatherings in his flat on Lower Baggot Street:

In the soft light of the open fire, flickering, grotesque shadows against the canvasses on the wall, impeccable host Levy plays from his enormous collection of records. A connoisseur, he possessed the best recordings of any music on earth—from Beethoven



**Figure 2:** Sketch by Louis le Brocquy of the author of *Flashes from the Dark*, frontispiece. Image courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Maynooth University. © The estate of Louis le Brocquy.

to negro spirituals, on which he has a unique collection, keen as he is on the art of his race . . . His small brown hand—made to be a surgeon’s—glides with an electric lamp as thin as a pencil along the hundreds of records in their racks. The evenings he gives for his friends are of rare relaxation, of old world charm—the world’s culture at its best—in the Dublin home of this Jamaican. (“Leader Page Parade” 6)

According to the ebullient *Irish Times* columnist “Quidnunc” [aka Patrick Campbell, 3rd Baron Glenavy], Levy’s “collection of records became recognised as one of the best in the country and was considered second only to the collection of Mr. Harold Douglas, except in its folk music range, where Ferdy had an international selection probably unequalled in these islands” (“Summer Swallow”). Music is central to *Flashes from the Dark*, both in its belated workings of Harlem Renaissance jazz and blues rhythms, and subject matter: “Harlem Cabaret,” “Cabaret,” and “On First Hearing Stravinsky” are just some of the poems that concern music.

Levy’s involvement with the Dublin literary scene only gathered pace after the publication of his debut collection in 1941. However, in the 1930s he recited poems at social events, including a gathering of foreign students at the home of Senator James G. Douglas, where an Australian played jazz, a Trinidadian sang “Old Man River,” and an African student performed a native song. Through the Douglas family, Levy came to know Æ (the poet and painter George Russell), visiting his Rathgar home and corresponding with him on poetry (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). Prior to the appearance of *Flashes* in 1941 (which included poems written as early as 1932), Levy does not appear to have published any poetry in Dublin. He later contributed a poem, “Harlem Depression,” to the Runa Press Quarto *Tidings* in September 1943, a venture from polyamorous bohemians, Eithne and Rupert Strong.

In November 1941, he took part in the premiere of a “poetry by candlelight” series in the Dublin Painter’s Gallery entitled “Masques and Voices,” alongside visiting English poet Stephen Spender. Spender and Cyril Connolly were in Dublin at the invitation of poet, press attaché (and Ministry of Information operative) John Betjeman, to air British views on the war (Smith 54). They addressed the Trinity College Historical Society on the role of the intellectual in modern society, impressing on their Irish auditors the need for Ireland to remember its role in civilization, and the threat to intelligence posed by tyranny (“Intellectuals in World Order” 1). A few days later, replete with masks, candles, red curtains swaddling the doorway, and artificial palms, the “Masques and Voices” soirée in Emergency Dublin was decidedly “benevolent” toward wartime English poetic culture (“Masques and Voices”). The painter Patrick Hennessy read John Betjeman’s long poem “Sir John Piers”; G.M. Brady read from his own work; actress Shelagh Richards read Stephen Spender’s “To Poets and Airmen”; while Spender himself read two poems, “Dusk,” a skeletal pastoral, and “Air Raid” (“Masques and Voices”). Levy, who according to one correspondent “reads his poems better than any poet we have yet heard,” recited two from his book and two new poems, “Ah’s Feeling Sad” and “Lines to an Ugly One” (“Masques and Voices”). He later supplied Betjeman with a Harlem Renaissance reading list (Letter to Betjeman 22 July 1943).

The context of Levy’s reading highlights how, in Guy Woodward’s analysis, “Éire’s neutrality and consequent indirect role in the war complicate attempts to describe how the war affected cultural activities in the southern state” (23). A



rhetoric of isolation and degrees of “parochialism” (including northern “regionalism”) oblivate traces of a cosmopolitan poet like Levy during the Emergency, especially acute in an episode like the “Masques and Voices” reading where British wartime cultural propaganda enters neutral Dublin.

Nevertheless, traces exist, and it is instructive that several reviews of Levy’s poetry were broadly positive, notwithstanding his later occlusion. Austin Clarke gave *Flashes* a relatively warm review in *The Irish Times*:

To read his rapid, rhythmic lines is to turn the knob of the nearest wireless set and be swept away by the squawks and bangs of “hot” music. . . . The strains of jazz from the nearest Irish dance halls invade his scenes. . . . Most of the verses are written in what the learned would call catalectic dimeter. Underneath the jazz and crooning, however, a deeper note is implied. The negro is “the great mummer of the universe,” and his antics are a “holiday from social sting.” (5)

Clarke, never a booster of the contemporaneous, gives Levy a fair hearing, although some words jump out: “invade,” “antics.” By contrast, his review of Louis MacNeice’s *Plant and Phantom* alongside it excoriates MacNeice for his Swinburnian meters and occasional verse, who is at his best when he “forgets about journalism and politics” (Clarke 5).

In the July 1941 issue of *The Bell*, its literary editor Geoffrey Taylor [Phibbs] compared “sophisticated poet” Levy’s “thin” verse with a spiritual from an anonymous nineteenth-century spiritual hymnodist, and with the other poet under review, Donagh MacDonagh: “He has other moods and poetry is not absent from them but he is not and probably never will be in Mr. McDonagh’s class” (93–94).

By far the most interesting review of Levy’s work is by a writer who has suffered a similar fate of literary oblivion, Mary Isobel Leslie (aka “Temple Lane”). Lane’s review in *The Dublin Magazine* is a rich, conflicted, serious piece of criticism. “Here is something that promises excitement,” Lane opens: “the question is, whether this departure from insularity will prove an aesthetic disappointment” (71). Lane’s review is not without racial superiority and blind spots. She writes confidently, “The Negro race, emerging from captivity, has produced nothing like the psalms” (71)

Nevertheless, this is a curious reviewer, a critic who has at least attempted to grapple with the poetry on its own terms and with readerships and contexts in mind not delimited to the Irish nationalist frame:

The damage done to human dignity by slavery is found in the sorrow of the Spirituals: it survives in the “Blues.” An American writer, E. Simms Campbell, has treated this question in print (see *Esquire*, December 1939). He does not say—nor, to such an audience, would he be likely to say—that the literary critic is expecting some great outburst of indignation, and can only find it expressed (for obvious reasons) in timid forms . . . As long as any race is the entertainer of its captors (or former masters) no great work can emerge. Mr. Levy knows this. A whole treatise on social injustice is compressed in the last two lines of “Dance, Brown Girl, Dance.” (Lane 72)

Lane sympathetically apprehends Levy's achievement in working free of white formal expectations. She wonders if he has quite managed it in all the poems, some of them full of "American wise crack stuff," more serious poems fearing "to let bitterness out of its cage" (73). Lane is also attuned to Levy's "acquired language" (73), that is the belatedness of Levy's Harlem Renaissance mode, the fact that it is no longer fresh. "The lighter lyrics make tunes from themselves" (73) she says of Levy's "On First Visiting Killiney": "And how we stood / At Killiney bay / And watched yellow lights / Twinkling / Up at Bray" (*Flashes* 28).

Contemporary reviews of Levy, in the main positive, appear on the face of it to make his disappearance in literary posterity the more baffling. However, unpicking the subtexts of that reception—Clarke's jazzy radiophonic "squawks and bangs," Taylor's "sophisticated" ephebe who cannot strike the grandeur of Victorian hymnody—help make sense of it. Only Lane attempts a serious formal engagement with Levy that situates his poetry within racialized, properly transnational contexts.

### "WAVERING BETWEEN TWO STYLES": LEVY'S AWKWARD POETICS

Levy's style, significant to his achievement as a poet, further sheds light on his disappearance from literary posterity. Writing to Lyon, Levy mentioned that Æ read and critiqued some of his short stories (the whereabouts of these are unknown), and regarding his poetry was "of the opinion that I have talent, but I have not as yet found my own style; he seems to think that I am wavering between two styles" (Letters to Lyon 22 Jan. 1933). This criticism is borne out in *Flashes*, which contains Harlem Renaissance-influenced jazz poems, frequently, but not exclusively in dialect, often directly treating Black cultural life, racism and racial violence, Pan-Africanism, and embodiment. As Temple Lane seemed to recognize, these were "an acquired language," or a belated style; this, she intimated, is a crucial function of how they signal for an Irish readership. However, the collection also includes poems in a quite different stylistic register. "A Sonnet" is a parody—more pastiche than parody in its sestet—of Petrarchan love poetry, with echoes of Shakespeare and Milton: "Methought I once had smelt the perfumed spouse, / But soon I came to scenting something worse / Than stagnant pool. It was effluvial! (*Flashes* 18). (The next rhyme word is "cunubial" [18]).

Toying with cast-offs from the English poetic tradition and Audenish light verse, Levy's bitter love poem diverges from Black vernacular blues and jazz poems elsewhere in the collection, as does "The Serving Maid and the Village Lads," a parody of the English ballad, and the lovely "On First Hearing Stravinsky," a rejection of modernism for Scandinavian tone poems:

I am no musical martyr:  
For me  
The Swedish woodland airs.

Even music  
 Of sounding water  
 Is far more pleasing  
 To mine ear (*Flashes* 35)

So much for Austin Clarke's "squawks and bangs." Right down to the archaic possessive in the final line, the rejection of modernism for pastoral, Levy eschews stylistic consistency in *Flashes*, embracing a liminal, awkward poetics full of irony, pastiche, and subversion.

Where *Æ* reads only misfire and lack of realization, these poems in a different key are crucial to the texture of Levy's collection. They constitute "mimicry" in Homi Bhabha's specific sense: stylistic echoes of regulated, disciplining (white) discourse that menace it, "a difference or recalcitrance which . . . poses an immanent threat" (122–123).<sup>4</sup> This difference concurs with how Levy's poetic language is concerned with "signifiyin"—Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s coinage for a revision of the meaning that terms convey via Black rhetorical strategies: troping, pastiche, double-voicedness (49–97). Quite distinct in mid-century literature, Levy's poems are not ironic points of light, but flashes from the dark. This awkward poetics, the stylistic signature of Levy's de-colonial cosmopolitanism, does not sit easily within Irish nationalist discourses he encountered. It is a significant factor in the cultural amnesia of a well-known, talented Black Dublin poet.

As Priyamvada Gopal insists:

Decolonising requires that we remain vigilant about its misuse as an alibi for renewed subjugation. Césaire notes correctly that it is not the anticolonialist who desires a simple return to a precolonial past, but colonialism itself which "has actually tended to prolong artificially the survival of local pasts in their most pernicious aspects." This means a "return" to any state of what existed before colonialism, stripping away the colonial to achieve a recuperation of the precolonial (or even the "decolonial") and to segregate cultures and knowledges is a self-defeating project. (891)

In terms of Irish Studies and Irish literary history, the obscurity of Ferdinand Levy's poetry renders visible the ways in which migrant writing, de-coloniality, cosmopolitan entanglements, and racialized writers have erstwhile been ghosts at the Irish postcolonial feast.

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## Notes

1. For McKay's fleeting, non-committal recognition of the racist Irish nationalist refrain that Ireland was the last white nation under the yoke of foreign imperialism, see James 195. The wording, however, of his final analysis of Irish anticolonialism needs to be stressed: "The Irish revolution—*nationalistic* thought it is—is an entering wedge directed straight to the heart of British capitalism" (19; italics added). This is not a straightforward compliment.
2. I am indebted to Ellen O'Flaherty, archivist at Trinity College Dublin's Manuscripts and Archives Department, for supplying vital information from student records.
3. Brannigan remarks that the absence of race in Irish Studies is related to the "social repression of the body" (7).
4. For an application of Bhabha's "ambivalence" to an Irish context, see Graham 32–33.

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