In the nineteen-thirties, Irish poet and critic Thomas MacGreevy elaborated a project of interpreting and promoting artistic and literary modernism as complementary to a Catholic worldview. He published a handful of slim volumes, including one collection of poems and two particularly important studies of T.S. Eliot and Jack B. Yeats, which set forth an aesthetic program arguing that the great American poet and Irish painter were each, in some sense, expressive of a sensibility that found its full realization only within the Catholic Church. A decade ago, critics Terence Brown and Tim Armstrong suggested that MacGreevy was engaged in an explicit project to Catholicize modernism, and that this was by and large an aberrant performance exiled from the main stage of the movement and fated to signify little? (1)

I want to examine MacGreevy's critical works in the interest of suggesting three related propositions that can help us reevaluate common assumptions about the nature of artistic modernism as well as its historical constitution. First, following Pericles Lewis's recent essay, "Church Going in the Modern Novel," I want to call into question the "secularization hypothesis" that claims the aesthetics of modernism were intrinsically hostile to Christianity as it existed historically in the West, and were therefore part of a large cultural shift in which technological, economic and political modernization were thought to bring about a secular society. (2) For the scope of this essay, I shall follow the conventional analysis that modernist aesthetics is driven by a desire to represent in capacious form the diverse, often irreconcilably fragmented, elements of experience; by an equally powerful desire to acknowledge the fragmentation of culture and the individual, even as it longs for a means of ordering it by a historically recuperative or transcendental system. As Lewis suggests, these features of modernism do not necessitate opposition to traditional Christianity. Or rather, they are not themselves a secularizing process. As Fredric Jameson has argued, the very concept of a historical-cultural break throws us back on those "cyclical" and "typological" practices that inform Christian historiography. (3) In a very different way, I shall consider how MacGreevy recognized that this despair of and concern with fragmentation characteristic of literary modernism insisted desperately upon the need for a god. Second, and corollary to this first point, I hope to show that MacGreevy constructed a critical framework in which to define modernist art so that it seemed to reflect attributes he believed were central to Catholicism. In doing so, he was asserting that Catholicism was the condition of possibility for all great art and that it was the answer to the particular questions posed by modernist artistic methods.

Third, I wish to situate MacGreevy's readings of Eliot and Yeats in the context of the Irish Free State. MacGreevy did not merely recast the traditional sectarian baiting between Protestants and Catholics that has racked Irish politics for generations by figuring modernism as Catholic. Rather, MacGreevy advanced his idea of Catholic modernism, or the Catholicity of modernism, as a way of...