

Introduction

Fiona McCann and Alexandra Poulain



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Introduction

Fiona McCANN

Université de Lille SHS & Institut Universitaire de France

Alexandra POULAIN

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3

On a night like this I remember the child
who came with fifteen summers to her name,
and she lay down alone at my feet
without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand
and she pushed her secret out into the night,
far from the town tucked up in little scandals,
bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,
and though she cried out to me in extremis
I did not move¹

It is a confusing feeling – somewhere between diarrhoea and sex – this
grief that is almost genital².

This issue of *Études irlandaises*, entitled “Embodying/Disembodying Ireland”, develops and extends reflection and discussion which began during the 2014 annual IASIL conference, held at the Université de Lille SHS. 2014 marked the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, and as such, necessitated discussion of Irish bodies in that particular context of war. The centenary commemorations held last year, in 2016, rekindled public and scholarly interest in two landmark events in Irish history: the 1916 Easter Rising and the infamous Battle of the Somme, in both of which the materiality of Irish bodies and the body of the nation are literally and figuratively embodied and disembodied. Taking these two central moments as points of departure, this issue then seeks to address the ways in which bodies “matter” in Irish history and culture and to reappraise, in

1. Paula Meehan, “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks”, in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, Oldcastle, Co Meath, Gallery Press, 1991, p. 41.

2. Anne Enright, *The Gathering*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2007, p. 7

particular during this decade of centenaries, the discursive, historical and cultural aspects of the materiality of Irish bodies.

As both Luke Gibbons and David Lloyd have convincingly shown, Irish bodies have historically been the target of British practices of discipline, organisation, coercion, and control. Lloyd's study of what he calls the "transformation of the oral space", which focuses in particular on the orifice of the mouth, reveals the ways in which "[t]he space of orality not only embodied a set of material relations, but also contained a set of social and cultural possibilities³", and he emphasises "how charged this organ is for the ambivalent representation of Irishness⁴". Luke Gibbons for his part exposes the association of Irishness, and Irish republicanism in particular, with uncleanness, and a more general fear of contagion located in Irish otherness, in particular during the Victorian era: "Whether through the association of Irish republicanism with dirt and the pigsty in Victorian caricature, or the stigmatisation of 'Fenian Fever', one of the most notable shifts in racial depictions of the Irish was the transference of moral panics raised by fears of contamination and infection from *actual* disease, typhus, and cholera, to its political counterpart, radical protest and the contagion of political violence⁵." He goes on to analyse Gaelic Gothic as resolutely bound up in questions of race and colonialism, a genre which seems "uniquely appropriate to capture the anomalies presented by Irishness to the racial Gothic of colonialism⁶".

Beyond these colonial stereotypes, Irish bodies were of course also subjected to mass starvation during the Great Famine, the iconography of which features so many "haggard and gaunt expression[s]" on the faces of Irish men, women, and children who were starving to death. As Emily Mark-Fitzgerald shows, "depictions of starvation and impoverished/emaciated human figures, representations of funeral rites and graveyards, depictions of relief efforts, scenes of eviction and emigration⁸" were numerous, and figured Irish bodies in distress and wasting away. The gradual disembodiment of the island which began with the Famine, then continued with mass emigration, resulting in a persistent hemorrhage of the population.

A considerable body of scholarship has, of course, already been devoted to these questions, and it is hoped that the present volume will expand and develop

3. David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of the Oral Space*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 9.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

5. Luke Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization, and Irish Culture*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2004, p. 51.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

7. Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013, p. 45.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

this vast field. One way of doing so would be to acknowledge dissident Irish bodies as so many “willful subjects” to take up Sara Ahmed’s terminology. In a recent essay, she argues for an understanding of willfulness as “a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given”, acknowledging simultaneously that it can also “compromise [...] the capacity of a subject to survive, let alone flourish”. In this sense, her work resonates strongly with Lloyd’s discussion of “the impropriety of Irish conduct¹⁰” and is especially relevant to understanding how forms of oppression, and resistance to them, emerged during the course of the twentieth century and the increasing policing of bodies in Ireland. For Ahmed, “[t]he figure of the willful child becomes crucial to the national project, allowing that project to be framed as a matter of life and death: the project of straightening the children becomes about saving the nation¹¹”.

Lloyd also devotes considerable attention in *Colonial Modernity* to the ways and means by which colonised Irish male bodies were frequently feminised by the British, but one of the most sinister dimensions of twentieth-century Irish history is that of the repression and control of women’s bodies by the newly formed Irish state. This reached a devastating climax in 1984 with the death of Ann Lovett, which Paula Meehan’s poem, quoted in the first epigraph, evokes with such haunting precision. Meehan exposes with cold scorn the corrupt society which forced Ann Lovett to give birth, utterly alone, to “her secret”, in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary, and the failure of either church or state to show compassion or question in what way they might have been responsible for the death of both Lovett and her baby. Notwithstanding the collective hysteria in 1985 around eye-witness accounts of moving statues of the Virgin Mary, this Virgin, the speaker of Meehan’s poem, remains unmoved, literally and emotionally. The 1980s was the decade which also saw, among other landmark events, the Kerry babies scandal, the introduction after referendum of the notorious Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, and protests by women prisoners in Armagh Gaol. In each of these divisive cases, Irish women’s bodies were central, either exposing institutional mistreatment and the inadequacy of sex education, access to contraception, and general lack of care (respectively for the Armagh prisoners and Ann Lovett) or enshrining in law the subordination of women’s bodies to that of a foetus they may not wish to carry. When Nell McCafferty began her now famous *Irish Times* article with the words “There is menstrual blood on the walls of Armagh prison in Northern Ireland. The 32 women on dirt strike there have [...] for over 200 days now [...] lived amid their own excreta, urine and blood¹²”, she provoked readers

9. Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, Durham/London, Duke University Press, 2014, p. 1.

10. David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of the Oral Space*, p. 57.

11. Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 130.

12. Nell McCafferty, “It is my belief that Armagh is a feminist issue”, *The Irish Times*, August 22 1980.

into engaging with the plight of those republican women prisoners, rendered all too visible these bodies which had become too abject to even acknowledge, and took to task mainstream Irish feminists' refusal to take a stance on this issue and intervene in the public sphere on the prisoners' behalf. More generally, in the conflict in the North of Ireland, which spanned at least the last thirty years of the twentieth century, dead and injured bodies were an almost quotidian occurrence, and one of the challenges of the ostensibly "post-conflict" era has been how to deal with such a violent legacy, and the painful issue of the whereabouts of the bodies of those known as the "disappeared" will perhaps never be fully resolved.

For all that the above issues are highly relevant however, how bodies "matter" in Ireland should not just be limited to questions of control, coercion and violation. Literature has long been a space in which the possibilities of pleasure can be explored, even when the censorship board attempted to ban works, like Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls* trilogy, which exploited that space and told stories of illicit sexual pleasures. Anne Enright, to name just one contemporary writer, has repeatedly placed the body and all sorts of permutations of sexual pleasure at the heart of her fiction, from the detailed description of each penetrative thrust by Eliza's lover, culminating in orgasm, in the opening chapter of *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, to the more prosaic description of visceral grief in the second epigraph, taken from Enright's *The Gathering*. Beyond literature, the punk movement of the 1970s and the development of queer (performance) activism in the 1980s and 1990s also enabled the emergence of different ways of thinking about, responding to, and contesting the pressures of (hetero)normative discourses and practices. Irish theatre has also been a site of both enforcement and contestation of bodily norms. Lionel Pilkington¹³ and Mark Phelan¹⁴ have convincingly argued that the embrace of naturalism as the Abbey Theatre's dominant aesthetic has been a means of promoting the Abbey's modernising agenda, forcing the bodies of the actors on the stage into standardised, recognisably modern attitudes, and containing those of the audience, confined to immobility, inaudibility and invisibility by the convention of the fourth wall and its attendant set of learned attitudes. At the same time, however, a whole counter-tradition of non-naturalistic Irish theatre has developed, from Synge and Yeats to Beckett to contemporary playwrights and performers, which foregrounds dissident bodies, bodies incapable or unwilling to subject themselves to the normalising demands of naturalism. The extraordinary set of grotesque, disabled, or differently-abled bodies that have peopled the Irish stage since the inception of the Irish theatrical movement makes visible the harrowing history of deprivation and violence to which Irish people

13. Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and Ireland*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

14. Mark Phelan, "The Advent of Modern Irish Drama and the Abjection of Peasant Popular Culture: Folklore, Fairs and Faction Fighting", *Kritika Kultura* 15 (2010), p. 149-169.

have been submitted in colonial and postcolonial times, and the inherited trauma which continues to affect them, often invisibly. Yet they also express a form of derisive, sardonic resistance to modernising norms and embrace alternative modalities of physicality, often at the cost of abjection – as the brutal expulsion of the beggars who choose to remain blind rather than comply with the working ethos of modern sociality at the end of Synge's *The Well of the Saints* makes clear. This issue of *Études irlandaises* aims to pursue reflection on all of these issues.

Nathalie Sebbane's article, which opens the issue, provides a historical overview of the emergence of Magdalen Laundries, which she places in the context of a broader logic of containment of transgressive bodies. Starting out from the premise that the Laundries were totalitarian institutions whose aim was to imprison, punish, control, and render docile women's bodies which were deemed dissident by the state, she demonstrates, from a Foucauldian perspective, how internment was legitimised by scientific discourses linking mental illness with women's reproductive systems. She also charts the shift from charitable to punitive ideology during the nineteenth century more generally, and the resultant brutal practices in Irish Magdalen Laundries. From these very real abused bodies, Nancy Marck Cantwell turns to a fictional world full of Gothic bodies created by Maria Edgeworth in *Castle Rackrent*. Departing from a close reading of the opening chapter of the novel, and the seizure of Sir Patrick's corpse, she develops an analysis of decomposing Gothic bodies, both literal and textual. In so doing, she foregrounds Edgeworth's political critique, likening it to a Joycean collapse of meaning in part because of a series of monstrous fallen signifiers. Investigating the Gothic body as a site of indeterminacy through the prism of Julia Kristeva's abject, she highlights the collapse of meaning which threatens personal and national identity. In the final analysis, she reveals how a foundering national identity is mirrored in the de-composition of the text.

The two following articles, written respectively by Hannah Simpson and Zsuzsanna Balázs, focus on Yeats's early poetry and on his drama. Simpson focuses on the physically moving, dead female body in Yeats's poetry, which she reads through the lens of mass Irish emigration, and establishes a link between the high emigration rate of Irish women and the recurrence of moving dead or supernatural women in Yeats's pre-1900 poetry. Balázs addresses Yeats's five Cuchulain plays and analyses how the playwright expresses his increasing ambiguities over the cultural and political capacities of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy through the changes of the Irish warrior-hero Cuchulain's body and the growing predominance and influence of the spectral world on his bodily integrity.

Remaining in the realm of theatre, Andréa Caloiaro's article discusses Christina Reid's 1987 *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* and examines the many ways in which this radio play interrogates the Somme as an integral part of Unio-

nist Identity in the North of Ireland, while exposing the ironies at stake in such a political teleology. In this analysis, Caloiaro emphasises the ways in which Reid uncovers the masculinist and imperialist imperatives at stake in the Somme, the streamlining of Unionist history, and the ironies of upholding British imperial aggression, through the main female character Andrea who works hard to disembodify the masculinist ethno-nationality of her World War 1 veteran grandfather. Marylinn Richtarik's article comments on and analyses her forthcoming edition of Stewart Parker's as yet unpublished autobiographical novel, *Hopdance*. Parker, who is doubtless better known as a playwright, also wrote poetry and experimental prose. *Hopdance* deals with the amputation of his left leg at the age of nineteen and as such, transforms body into text, structuring Parker's experience of amputation in a way that gave it meaning for him. Challenging novel conventions and eschewing a linear approach, Parker, Richtarik argues, highlights the restorative power of human connection and of story-telling.

The following article, by Alexander Coupe, brings us up to the more contemporary era, and investigates the performance of trauma in a "post-conflict" North of Ireland. In his analysis of three recent productions by Darragh Carville, Dave Duggan, and the Theatre of Witness, he demonstrates both the limits and the possibilities offered by the strategic use of the body as a "site of witness", and reflects on the ways in which the body bears witness to the singular aspect of a trauma which is recalcitrant to transformation into discourse. Julia Obert turns to a very different type of trauma in her article on Ciaran Carson's poetry collection, *Until Before After* – that of serious illness. She reads this collection through the prism of the theory of relativity, and analyses its aesthetic engagement with the poet-speaker's wife's illness, the spectre of death, and interrogations of the space-time continuum. She also relates Carson's interest in perspectivalism to his knowledge of and prowess in traditional music, in particular the ways in which the latter eschews conventional measures of time and is open to infinite variation. This leads her to demonstrate how this collection offers, in both content and form, an alternative means of apprehending space and time.

Tim Heron focuses on another, very different, alternative means of thinking about bodies in his article on punk in the 1970s in the North of Ireland. In particular, he analyses the potential of the conscious exploitation of the grotesque as a means of destabilising traditional sectarian, gender, and sexual boundaries. Investigating both punk dress codes and music in the North at the height of the Troubles, Heron argues that punk provided a (temporary) liminal space which allowed power relations to be negotiated in new ways. Remaining in the context of contemporary writing from the North, Caroline Magennis argues for something of a critical turn in discussions of Northern Ireland as a "post-conflict" space. Calling for a move away from the dominance of trauma theory, she ana-

lyses moments of pleasure in three recent texts by Glenn Patterson, Billy Cowan, and Lucy Caldwell, and evokes the “affective topography” in which these pleasures, not all of which are sexual, are expressed. In her reading, pleasure and trauma can co-exist and thus provide multivalent ways of dealing with the emotional landscape of this part of Ireland.

It is fitting that the final article in this issue should be devoted to queer bodies in performance and activism, as it also opens up new perspectives for further research, arguing for a move away from the rigid methodologies which all too often govern reflection on what constitutes art and how it might relate to activism. Tina O’Toole focuses on queer bodies and public spaces in the late twentieth century, and analyses in particular the performance activism of Thom McGinty, better known as “The Diceman”, as well as key interventions by queer Irish migrants in New York City. Her article charts the growing importance of street demonstrations and public performance in rendering Irish LGBTQ+ people visible and audible against a backdrop of increased pathologising and policing of bodies and sexualities. The case made by O’Toole for paying sustained attention to performance activism continues to be equally relevant in the current context of the Repeal the Eighth movement in which art and politics are absolutely intertwined¹⁵, and where Irish women’s bodies, and the freedom they should be able to exert over them, are once again central concerns.

15. See for example the organisation of concerts, the development of a book project, as well as many other, extremely varied, forms of action. [<http://www.repeal.ie/>]