
Estrangement and the Ethics of Attention in Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder*¹

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Abstract. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks, such as Sara Ahmed's "strange encounters" (2000), "willful subjects" (2014), and Judith Butler's vulnerability (2004), the present article aims to explore female agency and action in *The Wonder* as fundamental steps to achieve transformation and change. For this purpose, I first offer a brief introduction to the vulnerability of the female body in Irish history, as it counts on a significant tradition firmly rooted in religious and class politics. Significantly, the novel foregrounds a reformulation of religious superstitions into new patterns of existence. Lib's watchfulness and vigil astutely enact a self-displaying activity that offers the promise of a more communicative and empathic interaction with Anna. In addition, attention will be also paid to the narrative techniques that depict Lib's failure to read Anna's body fully as a wounded individual, thus revealing an encounter with alterity that can only work when there is will, love and affection. The story, then, challenges an aesthetics of grief and guilt and enacts, in turn, a new pattern of existence for both Anna and Lib. Such a pattern demands an ethics of attention and communication aimed to restore the self and display a more affective stance, which is necessary in order to encounter the limits of intelligibility and find out the perverse truth behind Anna's "wonderful anomaly" (Donoghue 2016: 97).

Key Words. Willful subjects, women's sexuality, vulnerability, resistance, stranger, ethics of attention, ethics of communication.

Resumen. Partiendo de los conceptos de "encuentros con extraños/as" (2000) y "sujetos con voluntad de acción" (2014), acuñados por Sara Ahmed, así como de la "vulnerabilidad" (Butler 2004), el presente artículo analiza la agencia femenina y de voluntad de acción en la novela *The Wonder*. Para ello, se ofrece una breve introducción a la vulnerabilidad del cuerpo femenino dentro de la historia de Irlanda, puesto que éste cuenta con una rica tradición firmemente

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arraigada en la religión y políticas sociales. La reformulación de supersticiones religiosas en nuevos patrones de existencia es astutamente enfatizada por la observación y vigilia que ejerce Lib sobre Anna, de manera que su actividad como observadora ofrece, en teoría, la promesa de una interacción más comunicativa con Anna. Sin embargo, la novela incluye técnicas narrativas que señalan el fracaso de Lib para leer el cuerpo de Anna como un sujeto vulnerable, lo cual revela un encuentro con la alteridad que solo podrá reconocerse cuando exista voluntad, amor y afecto. Solo cuando Lib empatiza con Anna, la historia revela una estética del dolor y de la culpa que puede transformarse en un nuevo patrón de existencia para ambas protagonistas. Este nuevo modelo de existencia demanda una ética de la atención y de la comunicación que persigue restaurar el yo para poder desplegar una disposición más afectiva, necesaria para encontrar los límites de la inteligibilidad y averiguar la verdad perversa que se esconde tras la “anomalía maravillosa” que encarna Anna.

Palabras clave. Voluntad, agencia, sexualidad femenina, vulnerabilidad, resistencia, otredad, ética de la atención, ética de la comunicación.

Published in 2016, Emma Donoghue’s *The Wonder* narrates the story of Elizabeth “Lib” Wright, a young widowed English nurse, trained in Florence Nightingale’s demanding nursing techniques during the Crimean War. In her capacity as a nurse, Lib is sent to the Irish Midlands in the years after the Great Famine on a quite obscure and difficult mission. Once in Ireland, Lib takes up a mysterious post in the dark and peaty Irish countryside, in order “to bring the truth to light, whatever the truth may be [...] *simply to observe*” (Donoghue 2016: 16, 18 original emphasis). On behalf of the O’Donnell family, Lib has been summoned by a committee of powerful men to watch the O’Donnell’s only daughter, 11-year-old Anna, who, allegedly, has refused to eat anything for the past four months and has survived on what she describes as “manna from heaven” (88). Lib’s only duty “will be to watch her” (11) for a period of two weeks, since Anna’s health condition is miraculously perfect, so surveillance is required in order to find out the origin of such a wonder. Lib writes down precise descriptions of the child’s anatomy in her diary, meticulous and clinically unnerving, these include exact body measurements, weight, digestive symptoms and intellectual faculties, while she also wonders at many aspects of the O’Donnells’ simple life; that is, their farming practices, their religious devotions and superstitious rituals.

The aim of this article is two-fold: on the one hand, I will relate Anna’s fast to an awkward silence that pervades all throughout the novel and which is finally disclosed as a space of liminality, an ambivalent space that works to enhance both a process of dissolution and decomposition of the self and also of transformation and anagnorisis. Such duality is possible because the novel foregrounds a reformulation of religious superstitions into new patterns of existence. Lib’s watchfulness and vigil astutely enact a self-displaying activity that offers the promise of a more communicative and empathic interaction with Anna. On the other hand, attention will be also paid to the formal strategies of the novel and its textual liminal silences, deliberately crafted by Donoghue as a way, I suggest, to ponder on the intricate and hidden aspects of religious fundamentalism. As the story is suffused by secrecy, so is the reader seduced by suspense, compelled to pay as close attention as Lib in order to find out the enticing and perverse truth behind Anna’s “wonderful anomaly” (97). The multiple gaps and cruxes in the text are reinforced by a narrative that is biased by Lib’s focalization, so much so that it prevents us from discovering the truth at any point except at the very end. It is only when Lib abandons her arrogant and distant position towards the Irish that she is able to become affectively involved with Anna’s dying condition and hence to act accordingly.

As I will argue later, the notion of “willful subjects” as coined by Sara Ahmed (2014) highlights “agency” and “action” as fundamental steps to achieve transformation and change. Willfulness “involves persistence” (Ahmed 2014: 2) and, at the same time, it obstinately allows subjects to deviate from their course. In this vein, Lib’s watchfulness, however active it may be, becomes stagnated by her very act of just observing and guarding Anna from the professional practice of nursing, without any affective involvement. Early in the novel Lib is told by Dr McBrearty just to “keep an open mind” (Donoghue 2016: 14), dismissing any other practice that does not entail scrupulous watching and impeccable note-taking (38). Even though Lib progressively has the purpose of being even “more *exact and careful* in her reports” (76 original emphasis), she writes down in her diary that Anna “*refused mother’s greeting*” (190 original emphasis), regretting it immediately because “the record was supposed to be limited to medical facts” (190). As a keeper, Lib is awake in the night shifts, still overlooking the real cause of Anna’s condition. As will be shown, it is only when she deviates from her scientific stance and becomes affectively involved with Anna that she takes action and decides to save her life.

Female Fasting and the Regulation of Women’s Sexuality

Before exploring the above-mentioned questions, I would like, in what follows, to contextualize *The Wonder* as an Irish novel that follows the trend of other contemporary Irish writing focused on women’s fasting and hunger as a *leitmotiv* that evokes self-sacrifice and resistance, mirroring both the grief and resilience of the scarred colonized Irish nation. The female body has been traditionally portrayed in Irish fiction as a polyvalent receptacle in which collective fears about female sexuality and power have been most forcefully professed. In her essay “Why Irish Heroines Don’t Have to Be Good Anymore”, Edna O’Brien (1986) surveys a set of iconic heroines and women who took the initiative in love affairs and followed the tradition of “fanatic Irish writing which flourished before sanctity and propriety took over” (1). Yet, the depiction of daring and dauntless women changed when the Celtic culture died out as a consequence of different processes of colonization, at the hands of the Vikings, Normans and the English. More specifically, from the Famine years onwards, the Catholic Church imposed a stricter code of morality for women and they became more conventional: “Irish heroines had to be gentle, tremulous, gullible, devout, masochistic and beautiful” (1). On the other hand, we also find iconic Celtic goddesses that embraced fertility and empowerment as found, for example, in the myth of the “sovereignty goddess” (Ochshorn 1981) that appears in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, written by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory in 1902, in a set of Anglo-Irish Gothic stories that have framed women’s desires as threatening for the status quo (Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Carmilla”, 1872), as well as in depictions of “the anorexic body as a path to redemption” (Vanbuskirk 2007). This last view, which writers such as Eavan Boland (1996) and Leanne O’Sullivan (2004) have criticized harshly, stems from Christian theologies that encouraged young women to deny their flesh and bodily appetites for the sake of gaining a highly spiritual, purer and sanitized mind. Self-control and emotional self-restraint became an integral part of Irish women’s lives, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century (Silver 2002), regulating female bodies and their sexual desires. Perhaps more importantly, the cultural narrative that prevails in *The Wonder* and that emphasizes Anna’s fasting as “thriving by special providence of the Almighty” (Donoghue 2016: 31), can be situated in the deeply Catholic ethos that took hold in the years after the Great Famine as part of the gradual evangelization of a population that was appalled by death, sickness, hunger and poverty. As is well-known, after the Famine, the Catholic Church gained an important momentum for the transmission of their creed, since, after the vanishing of native Irish traditional ways of life and beliefs, provoked by the disasters, misery and massive deaths brought about by the Famine, the population needed the spiritual

consolation and eternal salvation that the Catholic priest could offer. In this respect, Zimmermann points out that the increasing power of the Church after the Famine was due to their ability “to give consolation in troubled times and occupy the cultural space left vacant by a partial decay of traditional life” (2001: 275). Moreover, the regulation of female sexuality by the Roman Catholic Church has been a constant from the mid-nineteenth century in Ireland, enforcing a sexual and gender rhetoric that asserted the need to correct female sinfulness. As María Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides argues, the “widespread obsession with sexual immorality, which jeopardized the pillars of a Catholic and principled nation, led to a number of restraining policies that would set the basis for the official approach to what was deemed as moral degeneration” (2016: 17). Such restraining policies were even stronger with the proclamation of the Irish Free State. From this moment on, the Catholic Church and the State had the joint mission of spreading the Catholic creed, a creed which removed fallen women and troublesome children from public display, “with the institutionalization in prisonlike centres” (17) that controlled and consolidated their moral power almost throughout the 20th century. In this context, the Magdalene Laundries, along with other institutions such as Mother and Baby Homes, industrial schools and mental asylums, “supported by (and sinisterly, obscured by) legislation and official public discourse, seemed to have served a more covert regulatory purpose: containing those individuals who were perceived to be a danger to the nation state’s de-colonizing and emerging identity” (Clough 2017: 146).

The vulnerability of the female body counts on a significant tradition in Irish history, firmly rooted in religious and class politics: from the concept of woman as flesh and temptation to the ideal of woman as pure, maternal, domestic and a-sexual. This latter stereotype became a crucial paradigm of womanhood to avoid fallenness and prostitution, to which most poor women were subjected. As Clough observes, “domestic service in Ireland was a known route to prostitution” (150), so the incarceration of these women in Magdalene Laundries was the standard response to their poverty and fallenness. In Catholic Ireland, then, women had to contend with the ideal feminine of the Blessed Virgin Mary and increasingly embody celibacy. The regulation of female sexuality by the Church’s monopoly on Irish social life was to become key for the glorification of a nation that laid its foundations upon strict moral codes of gender behaviour and restrictive premises of female sexuality. Such hegemonic religious forces were to shape the broader socio-political discourse up to the last decades of the twentieth century, when the structure of Irish society changed dramatically, shifting from a predominantly rural and Catholic society to a more urban, modern and secular one. Since then, Ireland has entered a more dynamic and open-minded social order, thwarting all nostalgia and sexual repression, offering “the first glimmers of change and announcing the major mutations that have recently taken place in Irish society and literature” (Mianowski 2017: 5).

Yet, despite the fact that *The Wonder* was published during the so-called Post Celtic Tiger era in Ireland, which refers to the period that follows Ireland’s openness to the global world and market economy, best known as the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger (1990-2008), it hinges on a traumatic past that challenges contemporary Ireland’s prevailing literary trends. As Mianowski suggests, from 2008 onwards, contemporary “Irish fiction has attempted to represent and re-negotiate identity in a multicultural and transnational context” (5). Since then, there has been an explosion of literary activity, marked by a burst of creative energy, dynamic activism and collective alliances among writers that encompass affects as key to their writings. This emphasis on affective relations has created a literary atmosphere that interrogates the post-boom economic landscapes in different ways, giving way to discussions on gender, race, sexuality, disability and class. Within this context, it strikes a chord that worldly-acclaimed Irish writer Emma Donoghue publishes a book that spatially and temporarily takes us to the post-Famine years (1858). It is well-known that Irish literature has been historically obsessed with the past: from the commemoration of traumatic historical events to the memoirs and

testimonies of abused children and fallen women incarcerated in the Magdalene Laundries, Irish culture cannot escape its past. On the other hand, there seems nowadays to be some impatience with and rejection of novels that do not offer updated representations of a multicultural, urban and consumerist Ireland. While some critics have rightly noted that it is simplistic to establish the binary between a monolithic past and a progressive present (Cleary 2006; Kirby et al., 2002), Gerry Smyth argues that “during the lifetime of the Tiger itself there was much talk in all walks of Irish life about ‘new times’, about the necessity of orienting the nation towards the future rather than towards the past” (2012: 133). The melancholia and disillusionment that filter the Irish past may stand at odds with a contemporary need for international acceptance and this acknowledgment is partly based on the denial or disavowal of the past. And yet, this story is also about understanding, moving forward and reconciliation.

My contention here is that Donoghue’s contextualization of *The Wonder* in the 1850s proves that the past is still a contested space which may create “alternate and more complex narratives, taking account of memories that were for too long ‘forgotten’, or sidelined, by Irish history and culture” (Pine 2011: 3). These narratives expand a narrow definition of Irish identity and reconfigure this identity through different techniques and frameworks. As Pine points out in her study on Irish memory, “the significance of this is not merely historiographical, but also ethical: to remember is a moral act” (3). We may wonder at this point what is it that has made the Famine years so attractive for Donoghue? Although in the novel stereotyping works both ways, on the English and on the Irish, she insistently resorts to traditional views on Irish stereotypes as seen and observed by an English nurse who happens to know nothing about rural Ireland. Not coincidentally, with this move Donoghue also highlights the increasing power of the Catholic Church, mainly in rural areas, to attract faithful parishioners and evangelize them, drawing a strong analogy between the suffering provoked by the Great Famine and the subsequent grievance of Anna as an innocent victim of religious fundamentalism. The narrative, then, seems to suggest that the Irish Catholic family is a vehicle for transmitting national and religious values that may destroy young women’s lives, as they are drawn into “calamities that should be kept in the family” (Donoghue 2016: 316).

In line with this, it might be argued that Anna’s vulnerability and frailty are the basic ingredients of victimhood. In Irish fiction, the figure of the victim is mainly the preserve of women and children, and this novel is not an exception, since the construction of Anna as a victim is also a reminder of her own vulnerability as a child. As I have argued elsewhere (2017), Donoghue’s novels often endow their child protagonists with agency and will and, in doing so, she “offers an innovative epistemological framework in which vulnerable children become active subjects” (38), thus forging empowering psychological narratives of subjectivity that can be aligned with various types of connectivity that seek to undo normative patterns of affective kinship that solely rely on human and blood relations. This hint at a politics of mutual recognition discloses an unfamiliar space between Anna and Lib that challenges the binary (English)Self/(Irish)Other and will, therefore, enable new forms of attachments through which to thrive and survive. As Judith Butler reminds us, “vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject” (2004: 43). Yet, as the narrator puts it at the very beginning of the novel, “the very idea of familiarity was a necessary or even helpful qualification for a watcher! But for the other nurse, he’d picked one of Miss N.’s own famous brigade, she thought, to make this watch look sufficiently *scrupulous*, especially in the eyes of the British press” (Donoghue 2016: 18 original emphasis). While the committee of experts decide to contract Sister Michael because “she will provide a sense of familiarity for the child” (18), Lib’s watch must be devoid of any feeling or affective attachment, concentrating only “on the practicalities. *Simply to observe*” (18 original emphasis), as Dr McBrearty says. Faithful to Miss Nightingale’s meticulous nursing lessons, Lib focuses on a scrupulous observance that will allow her to “avoid *mistakes of inadvertence*” (75 original

emphasis). Yet, it will be the announcement of what is not said that will shape the main characters' destinies, opening their future in unpredictable and transformative ways.

From Estrangement to an Ethics of Care

As in many of her novels, Donoghue excels in the art of indirect statements, announcements and revelations – what is not said but nonetheless meant – concentrating on the process of textual observation and thought associations rather than on an explicit act of enunciation. This is clearly seen in *The Wonder*, where the formal structure of the novel points to the building of a secret which needs to be kept away from Lib, and whose revelation will simultaneously shock Lib and the reader: as the story moves on, Lib remains ignorant of the plan, nor is the reader aware of it. It is only when the story is well advanced that the heterodiegetic narrator reveals, through an internal focalization on Lib, what the “wonder” and secrecy behind Anna’s fast has been, not without warning Lib first that “*Her (Anna’s) watchers must beware*” (221 original emphasis). The narrative, then, engages in pauses and delayed events, enacted by Lib’s estrangement and disaffection towards the O’Donnell’s fraud. In her watching of Anna, Lib gradually learns to be more empathic towards the Irish, moving from judging Anna as “a great liar in a country famous for them who is doing this to herself as part of an elaborate trick she’s playing on the world” (67), to remembering that “every disease has a story” (255). When Lib discovers Anna’s secret, she comes to realize that if she hadn’t been so blind and a “little less contemptuous of pious legends” (262), she might have decoded Anna’s secret sooner. Donoghue, thus, centralizes Lib’s initial lack of empathy, incredulity and ironic distance as threatening for her patient’s life. Lib’s watch has been biased by her own prejudices against the Irish peasants as they are seen through the English lens that connects them to backward religion and superstitions. As the narrator puts it: “she understood nothing about this place” (71).

In the narrative, Lib’s focalization shows her colonial superiority and this position makes her conceive of Anna as coming from a savage culture with a superstitious faith, which renders them “like babies, the Catholics, babbling as they squeezed their beads” (89). Likewise, she fails in her diagnosis when, as a nurse, she dismisses her patient’s excess of body hair as a racialized trait of the Irish, whom she remembers depicted in *Punch* cartoons as “apish pygmies” (43), failing to recognize this as an indication of near-starvation. The list of Lib’s cultural prejudices is endless – i.e. “What a rabble, the Irish. Shiftless, thriftless, hopeless, hapless, always brooding over past wrongs. Their track going nowhere, their trees hung with putrid rags” (174) – up to the very last pages of the novel when she comes to learn the perverse truth behind Anna’s fast. Lib’s incredulity and inability to interpret Anna’s behavior are also reflected in the formal organization of the narrative, calling our attention to the different definitions of the chapter titles; namely, “Nurse”, “Watch”, “Fast”, “Vigil”, “Shift” and “Epilogue”, which suggestively, offer a variety of semantic clues for us to unravel. The secret remains untold until the very last chapter, significantly entitled “Shift”, where Lib’s perception and observance of Anna changes and she becomes aware of the significance of Anna’s fast. In the novel, “Shift” is defined as “a change, an alteration, a period or working time, an expedient, means to an end, a movement, a beginning” (265), thus alerting the reader to a climactic turning point in the text. More specifically, the transformation from “a delightful dying child” (218) into Nan, a new young girl whose life will start anew just by “taking a spoonful of holy milk” (326), alters the aesthetics of grief and guilt and enables a new mode of existence for both Anna and Lib. Such a mode demands an ethics of attention, not only for Lib as, paradoxically, in her strict observance she epitomizes involuntary distraction, but also for the readers, who are also blinded and biased by Lib’s focalization. Caleb Smith has recently elaborated on a genealogy of disciplines of attention and defends the ability of literary studies “to restore the self’s agency and to display a kind of ethical virtue” (2019: 888), which is necessary in order to engage with

the lives of strangers and to “encounter [...] the limits of intelligibility, experienced as the resistance of the stranger to becom[ing] familiar” (Hale 2020: 51). In this case, the novel deploys narrative techniques that depict Lib’s failure to read Anna’s body fully as a wounded individual, thus revealing an encounter with alterity that can only work when there is will, love and affection. Interestingly, Lib’s epiphany only takes place when she becomes affectively involved, disobeying Miss Nightingale’s orders against “personal affection and attachments in any form” (Donoghue 2016: 241) with respect to their patients.

The few studies on *The Wonder* published so far centred on the text as a trauma novel, exploring the psychosomatic symbolism of the fasting body to represent the “nonnarratable” (Pettersson 2017), as a narrative charged with a powerful resistance to patriarchal institutions, emphasized by its recourse to fairy tale elements (Ferguson 2018), and as a poetics of corporeal vulnerability that invests the female body with the capacity for affectivity (Slapkauskaitė 2020). Drawing upon some of these ideas, my analysis concentrates on the limits enacted by Anna’s liminal positionality between death and life –Anna’s dying body displays a conflation of affects wherein guilt and shame prevail but also stimulates empathy and social engagement—recalling a relational mode of affection, reciprocity and care, paradoxically delivered by her own persistent willingness to “say no and no and no again” (Donoghue 2016: 228). For this purpose, I rely on Ahmed’s concept of the willful subject (2014)², a concept that entails a compromising action “governed by will without regard to reason; determined to take one’s own way; obstinately self-willed or perverse” (4). It is a form of will that allows humans “not to go with the flow” (5), enacting an act of disobedience and deviation from a trajectory. In *The Wonder*, Anna’s nonviolent refusal to eat is at first sight a self-sacrifice deeply motivated by her religious belief. She prays thirty-three times a day to rescue her brother Pat from purgatory and believes she is surviving on “manna from heaven” (Donoghue 2016: 114). A “watch” is undertaken by Lib and Sister Michael, a Catholic nun that uses religious legends to persuade Anna to confess the real reason for her fast. Throughout the novel, doctors and priests are patriarchal figures who betray anxieties about women’s bodies, pronouncing Anna as “a simple case of hysteria” (125) and, in the case of Father Thaddeus, approving fasting by young women because “moderate fasting mortifies the cravings of the body, you see, so fasting can be a useful penance” (24-25). This is a statement that fully agrees with the contemporaneous tendency of medical assessments to align fasting with the constraint of sexual desire, thus depriving young women of agency and autonomy.

Anna, however, assumes agency and authority over her own body, even if this means bringing her closer to death. Like the hunger striker, she refuses to eat, becoming a willful girl who insists on “giving herself” (274) to the theological view of an ontology of grace that follows Christ’s sacrifice. Unlike feminist hunger strikers whose refusal of food implied resistance to patriarchal power, Anna’s fast is framed from the perspective of an innocent and vulnerable child, revealing an affective quality that conceals a history of violence and abuse. *The Wonder* comprises a more complex truth about sexual violence in Ireland, placing at its heart an incest victim, and elevating Pat, Anna’s brother, to an untouchable status. Pat forces Anna “to marry him in the night” (304) so that they can have a double love; “I was his sister and his bride too”; “*He comes in to me as soon as I’m asleep [...] He wants me*” (304, original emphasis). Anna is made to believe that their union is “a holy mystery” that she must keep secret in order to release her brother from purgatory because “[h]e died so fast [...] he never got a chance to go to confession. Maybe he went straight to hell” (305). To make matters worse, Anna’s mother was aware of Pat’s sexual violence and yet demanded her silence, prolonging Anna’s fast by kissing and feeding her in a bird-like manner, and making her feel that she was receiving “manna from heaven”. Likewise, the family priest, Father Thaddeus, covers up the child’s abuse and

² Following Sara Ahmed, I employ the spelling “willful” rather than “wilful” as “it allows us to see the ‘will’ in ‘willful’” (205).

encourages Anna not to reveal her incestuous sin because “brother and sister, ‘tis a mortal sin [...] and such calamities should be kept in the family” (305, 316). Their attempt to convert a sexual trauma into a religious miracle attests to the unethical and manipulative potential of the family and the Church. Rather than offering Anna protection and spiritual consolation, the patriarchal Catholic nuclear family is presented as the opposite to a loving family. When Lib confronts Rosaleen, Anna’s mother, and confesses to her that she knows the truth, Rosaleen replies: “That’s the same filthy falsehood Anna came out with after Pat’s funeral [...] and I told her not to be slandering her poor brother” (308), thus revealing her neglect as a mother, because as Byrne, an Irish journalist with whom Lib has fallen in love, puts it with respect to the Famine, “[t]o do nothing was the deadliest sin” (281 original emphasis). Lib’s gradual empathy and love towards Anna – she moves on from thinking “*I’m going to crack you like a nut*” (46 original emphasis) to telling her: “You’ve become very dear to me, the dearest girl in the world” (296) – foster an ethics of care that will save Anna. At this point, Lib tells Byrne that “Anna can’t live in this family, they’re no family, they won’t lift a finger to save her” (311), and so she is determined to “take Anna away [...] The farther the better” (312). Lib and Byrne plan to burn down the cottage and make Anna’s death appear accidental. Their action and will contrast with the carelessness endorsed by the O’Donnell family: while Rosaleen is complicit in Pat’s sexual abuse, Malachy O’Donnell, Anna’s father, resorts to religion as the solution for his daughter’s destiny. When Lib urges him to do something because “your daughter doesn’t have long” (279), “you are going to lose her if you don’t act fast. Be firm with her. Be her father”, he replies: “‘Only her earthy one,’ said Malachy, mournful. ‘He’s the only one she’ll hear,’ he said, jerking his head towards the sky” (280). Malachy’s lack of action defines his passivity all throughout the process of Anna’s fast, ignoring the truth and putting his daughter in danger of death.

The Wonder continues the trend of Irish fiction rooted in the past that critiques a highly dysfunctional family and presents a powerful revision of what constitutes an affectively nurturing family, as the narrative highlights how Anna’s vulnerable position enables empathy and compassion, inaugurating an ethics of care whose relational ontology conflicts with the novel’s Christian guilt and neglect. From that moment onwards, Lib’s position as a passive observer turns into one of action and agency, thus offering Anna the possibility of living. Significantly, Lib has convinced Anna about the longing for a different story if she wants to survive, and she indeed provides one by creating a new family based on choice rather than biology. Together with Byrne, they elope to Australia with Anna, collaboratively building up a family whose story is yet unwritten, but full of hope and agency. Although the happy ending of this story may be a bit farfetched, I believe it envisions a more ethical and humanized version of the Irish past and replaces the guilt-ridden children who will do as their parents wish with the embrace of willfulness that revolves around a pedagogy of hope and relationality. By excavating Ireland’s problematic past, *The Wonder* aligns itself with a set of contemporary narratives that define an ethics of alterity in the representation of fictional characters as particular individuals distinct from each other but who, nevertheless, elicit positive affective responses such as identification, empathy, rapprochement and love. As Dorothy Hale points out, “the experience of otherness is defined as the experience of self-limit, a self-consciousness about the self-implication in the operation of social power that opens up the possibility of ethical action” (2020: 9). In *The Wonder* the aesthetics of liminality offers a discursive and ethical platform to represent off-limit experiences that exceed our comprehension and yet find expression in the very affective conditions in which all, writers, readers and characters, become entangled.

The Wonder celebrates a communicative ethics of attention while presenting such an epistemic act as a generous giving, without which Lib could not get close to an ethical encounter with Anna. This latter view is related to an exchange with the figure of the “stranger” as

someone who is no longer a threat to community, but rather as a person that “should be protected and lovingly preserved” (Baumann 1997: 54). According to this perspective, if we are to consider Anna and the Irish community in which she lives as the epitome of strangerhood to Lib’s eyes, then, we may conclude, following Baumann, that the stranger, instead of being a threat or danger, is finally incorporated as part of an ethics of alterity that Anna embraces. The same can be applied to Lib as a stranger for the Irish, so both Lib and Anna engage in the process of incorporating the other. However, Ahmed has questioned this theoretical move because, although she admits that “the turn to the stranger as a figure who should be welcome does question the discourses of ‘stranger danger’”, it is “*only in so far as it keeps in place the fetishism upon which those discourses rely*” (2000: 4 original emphasis). For Ahmed, the celebratory and abjecting linguistic practices around the figure of the stranger propel such stranger fetishism. Instead, she envisages a model of political activism and collective work that avoids narratives that objectify strangers as an object of consumption, turning them into a commodity fetish through their difference. She proposes, instead, an ethical encounter with the other reinforced by openness, hearing and touch. She further argues that such an ethics must involve “the conditions of possibility of hearing” (156), bearing witness to injustices that “always reveal as much as they conceal: they involve trauma, scars, wounds, and tears that are impossible to forget” (158). It is not a coincidence that Lib’s failure of hearing has also made her blind to Anna’s bird feeding nourishment through the kisses of her own deceitful mother. Just before Lib discovers the truth, she ponders:

For months I was fed on manna from heaven. That’s what she said this morning. *I live on manna from heaven*, she’d told her Spiritualist visitors last week. But today, Lib noticed, it has come out differently, in a wistful past tense. *For months I was fed on manna from heaven.* Unless Lib had heard it wrong? Not *for months*. *Four months*, was that it? *Four months I was fed on manna from heaven.* Anna had started her fast four months ago, in April, and subsisted on manna – whatever secret means of nourishment she meant by that – until the arrival of the nurses.”—(Donoghue 2016: 260-261 original emphasis)

Approaching the very ending of the novel, Lib undergoes the “Shift” announced by the narrative, endorsing “a change, an alteration” (265) in her perception of the history of the child, a transformation that is made possible thanks to her will and commitment to her nursing doctrine: “*Never despair*, she ordered herself. [...] Never winning, but never giving up” (303 original emphasis). Lib’s attentive hearing and affective proximity to Anna allows her to diagnose that “every disease had a story with a beginning, middle, and end” (303), and to find out the incestuous story behind Anna’s decision. In this respect, Catalina Wajs (2022) has insightfully argued that Lib’s movement from her initial position to one which is more emphatic and compassionate is possible thanks to the inherent mobile condition of affects and emotions. Wajs relies on Ahmed’s definition of affects as movement: “emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that [...] attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others” (Ahmed 2004: 11). Lib’s closeness to Anna is notably achieved from both a physical and emotional perspective.

A variety of authors working in the fields of Feminist, Queer and Affect Theory have pointed out the importance of diverse forms of affective ties and networks in order to foster “ethical response-ability” (Barad 2012), an ethics that attests to our most sensible and sensitive ontological positions as women. The theorizing of the sensual metaphor of “touch” expands an ethics of care towards a more communicative and communitarian ethics, as “is touching not by its very nature always already an involution, invitation, invisitation, wanted or unwanted, of the

stranger within?” (207). On the other hand, the trope of “touch” was insistently vindicated by writers such as Audre Lorde and Cherríe Moraga, not only as a source of pleasure and vulnerability among women, but also as a call for a return to the mother, as “a political gesture of making reparations” (Musser 2019: 129). Moreover, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick developed the notion of touch as an attempt to move away from dualistic thought and raise new questions about phenomenology and affect. The association between touch and affect is obvious, and Sedgwick’s approach to touching emphasizes a relational narrative reinforced by the title of her work, *Touching Feeling*, which metonymically suggests a wide range of desires, emotions, and filiations. In her own words: “to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always also to understand other people” (2003: 14). In rethinking and reopening the evolution of affective actions like hearing and touch, *The Wonder* brings to the fore recent debates on “strange encounters” that, though resonating with Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of an openness to the face of the other, must move beyond the face, as Ahmed suggests, for the sake of an ethics that keeps alive a wider array of affective circuits and elicits our ethical response-ability. For Ahmed, the stranger cannot be separated from the others who are encountered, “involving an economy of touch” (2000: 7). Echoing Levinas’ and Butler’s ethical demand of opening to the other, Ahmed proposes a model of the other as stranger that is based on hearing and touch in order to consider how these two forms of encounter involve communication: “Communication involves working with ‘that which fails to get across’, or that which is necessarily secret. To hear, or to give the other a hearing, is to be moved by the other, such that one ceases to inhabit the same place” (155-56).

Ahmed’s communicative ethics is aligned with Butler’s theorization on the concepts of ungrievable and precarious lives (2004), relating them to dispossessed ontological positions imposed by social, historical and political constrictions. For Butler, there is a hierarchical structural foundation of vulnerability by which some bodies are more grievable and less disposable than others. As she states: “some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (2004: xiv-xv). Such accountability of lives worth grieving defines different degrees of vulnerable subjects, as there will always be subjects dispossessed of their own vulnerability. Vulnerability thus constitutes the subject as dependent on external factors and humanity as “essentially relational” (Ganteau 2015: 5). As Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau point out, “the common denominator to all definitions of vulnerability is ‘exposure’ or ‘susceptibility’” (2017: 3). In Ganteau’s words: “vulnerability has become a paradigm of the contemporary condition and of contemporary culture and a template for the wounded contemporary subject” (2015, 4). In their recent work on vulnerability studies, María Isabel Romero-Ruiz and Pilar Cuder-Domínguez interestingly link the notion of vulnerability to that of resistance, forging resilience and social integration as part of a reparative move towards “structural forms of vulnerability that generate and justify diverse forms of oppression, and forms of individual or collective resistance and/or resilience” (2022: 3). More specifically, Pérez-Vides focuses her research on how “Ireland’s deficient practices of systemic powers” (2022: 72) have historically produced “the distortion of the official norms of protection and care that the Catholic Church-Irish State dyad and their social allies carried out in their own benefit” (72). Although Pérez-Vides’s claim mainly refers to twentieth century Irish fiction, the complicity between the Catholic Church and the Irish establishment becomes reinforced, in Donoghue’s novel, by the neglect of the family, another social ally that has actively participated in the dismissal of vulnerable Irish subjects, especially children and women. When Anna’s vulnerability touches Lib’s consciousness both become more resilient and willful about breaking away from that suffocating atmosphere and starting a new life.

Conclusion

What appears in *The Wonder* as an anomalous and extraordinarily gifted child, arguably seduced by the sacred scriptures of religion and by her own family, both devoted to attend “the sick, the poor, and the ignorant” (Donoghue 2016: 105), is finally unveiled as the victim of an “incestuous rape” (311), which has been silenced and relegated to the domestic inviolability of Irish society. In this vein, the novel follows the tradition of Irish fiction that harbors social anxieties about the female body, a traditionally dominant view in which “human and especially female sexuality have no place within the language of the sacred, except as a point of negation” (Keefe 2008: 114-15). Anna’s body is literally erased from care and affection, and she is deprived of freedom and joy. In fact, grief and the absence of social contact will lead her to a frightening and incapacitating position in which she can only find solace in Lib’s riddles and affective responses to her world. Interestingly, imagining and solving riddles becomes a noteworthy emotional mechanism that anticipates Lib’s and Anna’s final attachment to one another. Riddles amuse Anna and distract her from fervent prayers, fostering her imagination and communication with Lib. This act of interaction and openness between the two protagonists takes place more and more frequently as the novel reaches its climactic ending, so much so that the greater the number of riddles there is for Anne to guess, the stronger their bond becomes, and the clearer Lib’s vision is with respect to the most challenging riddles of all: that of uncovering the truth behind Anna’s fast.

There is, in this novel, a relationship between the vulnerability of the female body and the abjection of certain discourses, such as that of incest. Delving into the contradictions and emotional dictations of a not-too-distant and institutionalized past, Donoghue’s work displays an ethics of care and affection which is manifest in the engagement of two strangers that transgresses the socio-cultural and historical resonances of complicit participation in such politics of concealment. The interrogation of past legacies in Irish fiction identifies the Catholic family as a harrowing site that reveals children’s vulnerability and deprivation, demonstrating new potentialities of survival that are being crafted by contemporary literature and literary criticism. As I see it, Donoghue’s *The Wonder* is part of this continuous formation of the “willful archive” (Ahmed 2014: 12) in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, one that is contributing to negotiating a shifting landscape of change and hope for those female bodies rendered disposable. The book ultimately draws an analogy between vulnerability and willfulness, passivity and action, observance and movement, all of which is condensed by Anna and Lib to the same extent, since it is the combination of these traits that will transform their lives substantially.

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