

## Animals and the Irish Mouth in Edna O'Brien's Fiction

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### Abstract

*From Edna O'Brien's earliest novels, many commentators have noted that desire is at the core of the narratives. The true irony in such observations lies in their frequently blinkered understanding of what comprises that desire, reducing it to a heteronormative, Barbara-Cartland-style pursuit of "romance." While the characters themselves may think this is what they hunger for, the text inevitably opens up vaster sources of insatiable longing. As Mary Douglas has established, "the body is capable of furnishing a natural system of symbols" (xxxii), and in O'Brien's texts the human mouth, especially when at its most "animal," metonymizes numerous desires, most often balked and even impossible ones, including those that actuate the scene of writing. Mouths are everywhere in O'Brien's novels, licking, yawning, weeping, swallowing, keening, grimacing, biting, shrieking, chewing, singing, speaking, and opening in silence. These mouths give voice to the immaterial, and even animate the inorganic, which, for all of its immateriality, can yet resist manipulation. The inscrutable "inhuman" voice that emerges ultimately reveals "that words themselves are sphinxes, hybrids of the animal, the human, and the inorganic" (Ellmann 77).*

The natural cries of all animals, even of those animals with whom we have not been acquainted, never fail to make themselves sufficiently understood; this cannot be said of language.

Edmund Burke

The absolutely foreign alone can instruct us

Emmanuel Levinas

Ireland is the most rich, inescapable land. That's not sentimentality. It's like a brand that's put on a beast.

Edna O'Brien

Among the attacks levelled against Edna O'Brien in 1994, the year she published *House of Splendid Isolation*, was the *Guardian's* Edward Pearce labelling her "the Barbara Cartland of

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long-distance Republicanism" (18). The elision here between O'Brien and the romance writer Barbara Cartland—an instance of one enduring trope in criticism of O'Brien—in juxtaposition with the Troubles and sectarian violence (however ironic its intent), reveals more about the real subject matter of her fiction than the reviewer realizes. From the earliest novels, many commentators have noted that desire is at the core of O'Brien's narratives. The true irony in such observations lies in their frequently blinkered understanding of what comprises that desire, reducing it to a heteronormative, Barbara-Cartland-style pursuit of "romance." While the characters themselves may think this is what they hunger for, the text inevitably opens up vaster sources of insatiable longing. As Mary Douglas has established, "the body is capable of furnishing a natural system of symbols" (xxxii), and in O'Brien's texts the human mouth, especially when at its most "animal," metonymizes numerous desires, most often balked and even impossible ones, including those that actuate the scene of writing. Mouths are everywhere in O'Brien's novels, licking, yawning, weeping, swallowing, keening, grimacing, biting, shrieking, chewing, singing, speaking, and opening in silence.

Patricia Coughlan offers a reading of the hopelessly "severed" Irish female body in O'Brien's work, and of the role it plays in her failure to propose a "productive alternative narrative of subjectivity":

Recent feminist thought has pointedly and rightly rejected the Cartesian and subsequent Freudian impasses which deliver an atomized self-hood, seen as destructively severed from the body, the other, and the world; feminist theorists have proposed far more productive alternative narratives of subjectivity. But O'Brien's pervasive melancholy answers much better to the old, constitutively misogynist structures, which had after all formed the social order she so sceptically appraised, in the Ireland of the four middle decades of the last century. (176)

Until recently, as Rebecca Pelan observes, "the relegation of O'Brien's writing to the realm of popular fiction," her impressive sales figures, personal glamour, and a reputation as the writer of lightweight, "racy" novels featuring passive, self-defeating, masochistic women have combined to place her outside the precincts of "Literature" (Pelan 75). What Amanda Greenwood identifies as "1970s Anglo-American feminism, with its focus on empiricism," contributed to a tendency to see O'Brien's fiction as an unrestrained and undisciplined outpouring of autobiographical spleen against men (5). With few exceptions, Irish feminism has been slow to re-evaluate the cultural significance of her work. While Coughlan is one of those exceptions, even her valuable positioning of O'Brien in feminist praxis seems compelled to explain away a persistent discomfort with the body in her fiction, and the resulting failure to present feminist alternatives, by confining her relevance to "the four middle decades of the last century." This may be partly due to identifying "the old, constitutively misogynistic structures," rightly recognized as O'Brien's target, almost exclusively with the coalition of church and state that prevailed in post-independence Ireland, but O'Brien writes in the shadow of a larger history implicated in Ireland's experience of modernity. Coughlan's difficulties with the novelist's relentless iteration of a self-defeating narrative of female subjectivity are shared by other critics also favourably disposed to a recuperation of O'Brien's literary reputation. However, despite being hostile and dismissive, the enraged reaction, of journalists like Pearce in Britain, and Fintan O'Toole

in Ireland to *House of Splendid Isolation*, with its sympathetic portrayal of a republican gunman on the run in the Republic, as well as to her concomitant public advocacy of allowing Gerry Adams a legitimate political voice (a position vindicated by history), is finally more insightful as to the historical depth of the sources of oppression against which O'Brien's heroines struggle, or, more often, to which they appear to succumb.

Jack Halberstam, writing as Judith, has recently theorized a practice of "shadow feminism" that "speaks in the language of self-destruction," and is "grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence, offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project, a shadow feminism that has nestled in more positivist accounts and unravelled their logic from within" (124). This "shadow feminism" coincides on many points with Timothy Morton's "dark ecology," which advocates "a willingness to be wrong: to encounter non-identity," a point to which I will return (Morton 193). Some women may, Halberstam argues, "desire their own destruction for really good political reasons," reasons of specific import in the context of colonialism (128). Feminism under colonial/postcolonial conditions may "find purpose in its own failure," resorting to "a radical form of masochistic passivity that not only offers up a critique of the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity itself, but that also opts out of certain systems built around a dialectic between colonizer and colonized" (128, 131). In a description of characters in Jamaica Kincaid's work that can as easily describe those found in O'Brien, Halberstam notes that they "can never thrive, never love, and never create precisely because colonialism has removed the context in which these things would make sense" (132). Eve Stoddard has noted the parallels between the postcolonial fiction of Kincaid and O'Brien, and this distinction is important in an investigation of the body and the animalistic mouth in O'Brien's fiction (104-21).

David Lloyd observes that "The mouth is the privileged corporeal signifier of Irish racial and cultural difference. [...] The oral thus stands as the most resonant metonym for Irish bodily culture and for the distinctive matrix of habits and practices that mark Ireland's colonial difference" (3). This difference has been historically figured as the "femininity" of the Irish, their childishness, their uncivilized closeness to the natural world, their less-evolved animality. The very quality that supposedly distinguishes humanity from the rest of the animal world—speech—when in the mouths of the Irish, has managed to demonstrate their lowly similarity to beasts, as in the infamous "Missing Link" article that appeared in *Punch* in 1862, claiming to have identified "the lowest species of Irish Yahoo," "a creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro," which "when conversing with its kind it talks a sort of gibberish" (qtd in Curtis 100). The Irish mouth is uncivilised, less than fully evolved, unruly: "The history of this Irish orifice is that of multiple attempts to discipline it, taming its excesses and regulating its disrespect for the proper spaces and times of speech and performance, ingestion and utterance" (Lloyd 1). The Irish mouth emits inhuman shrieks and wails—especially in the case of keening women—drinks to excess and continues to consume the potato, a dietary "choice" that abetted pseudoscientific racial theories of the nineteenth-century that positioned the Irish well below their "beef-eating" masters. As Carol Adams notes, "white racism holds up a model of consumption that fixates on animalized protein and [...] distorts cultures that were or are gynocentric and not completely dependent on animalized protein" (92). She quotes a nineteenth-century medical expert, George M. Beard, who reveals the evolutionary and political significance of

the diets of the “savage” who are: “little removed from the common animal stock from which they derived. [...] The rice-eating Hindoo and Chinese and the potato-eating Irish peasants are kept in subjection by the well-fed English” (qtd. in Adams 92). Luke Gibbons focuses on the specifically Irish implications of imperial scientific discourses, including political economy, when he observes that “The pig, the potato, and the compulsory dung-heap outside the cabin door became the prime suspects of a perceived retarded development and sub-human, primitive existence among the Irish” (68).

Animals, including the ubiquitous Irish pig of colonial stereotypes, provide both physical food and material for fattening the textual body, even as they figure as the “intolerable significance” of Julia Kristeva’s abject, the “Thing” repressed in Lacanian subject formation. Such abjection and repression are crucial to maintaining the kind of imperialist power dynamic that continues to haunt contemporary Ireland. Being familiar, in physical proximity, even intimacy, with humans, while simultaneously at an ontological remove—one which allows for the self-authorizing logic Jacques Derrida calls “carno-phallogocentrism”—animals in literature potentially undermine, *inter alia*, the secure sense of difference and division necessary not only to figuration, but also to the maintenance of subjectivity and all of its constitutive oppressions, an instance of “the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity” Halberstam sees the colonized feminist as resisting. The “virile figure at the determinative centre of the subject” in Derrida’s carno-phallogocentrism is both maintained and defined by violence against all “others,” including animals, the physical consumption of which help establish an epistemically “violent institution of the ‘who’ as subject” (“Eating Well” 280, 281). The locus of this particular mode of aggression and assertive opposition is primarily the mouth; an irony when it is the “lower” senses of taste, touch, and smell—all experienced through the mouth—that can “reduce” humans to the level of the animal. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for example, Freud argues for the primacy of sight as critical to human dominance, a hierarchy of the senses that informs what Mary Jacobus calls “the specular legacy of colonial oppression” (110). The mouth, associated in the Freudian model of infant psychosexual development with the mother, returns when it must be most vigorously disavowed, or abjected. But the process of abjection, as Kristeva argues, is never complete, and always implicates not only the feminine but also the animal: “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (12-13). The psychological implications of this “removal” have misogynist consequences that extend, in turn, to cultural structures, as it is the body, and specifically the maternal body, upon which identity formation is predicated.

The first analysis conducted by Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams* is of his own often-discussed dream of “Irma’s Injection.” In it, he looks deeply into his female patient’s mouth. Of this dream, Lacan says:

An anxiety-provoking apparition of an image which summarises what we can call the revelation of that which is least penetrable in the real, of the real lacking any possible mediation, of the ultimate real [...] something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence. (164)

Carrie Rohman's investigation into the figure of the animal in modernist literature, drawing on Kant and Žižek, maintains that the "Thing" repressed in Lacanian subject formation "is homologous to animality": "The 'official' Enlightenment subject is one that represses its own animality or Thingness, and, because of this repression, circulates around a void" (65). The anxiety-provoking "real" seen in the "void" of the (female) human mouth, in the presence of which language fails, is the animal. In *Mother Ireland*, O'Brien reports on the long-standing English fear of contamination by the "thingness" of the Irish, citing, among others, Cambrensis in the twelfth century who warned that "The English stayed [in Ireland...] at great risk to their persons, not only in battle but in coming into contact with the savage Irish they were in danger of degeneration, as though they had tasted of Circe's poisoned cup" (10). O'Brien evokes the curse of being turned into "swine," like Odysseus' men, through a spell cast by a woman and imbibed through the mouth; "Mother Ireland" figures as threatening, a force of disintegration, female, yet penetrative and invasive.

The homology between human and animal mouths organizes representations of the maternal throughout O'Brien's work in a complex shuttling amongst metaphoric registers. Animal analogies are at once embraced and resisted, potential reinscriptions of the worst colonial stereotypes denying the Irish full humanity, but unavoidable in imagining the Irish body. A number of women in O'Brien's fiction, including mothers, are so alienated from their own bodies, as Coughlan has demonstrated, as to find breasts and breastfeeding a source of unease. For example, the narrator of "The Love Object" admits to being "squeamish" about her nipples, and Kate in *Girl with Green Eyes*, the unnamed mother in *A Pagan Place*, and Dilly in *The Light of Evening* are all revolted by breastfeeding. Desperate attempts to compensate for the loss of the infant's experience of undifferentiation (as theorized by Freud and others) are represented between mother and child as well as between lovers throughout O'Brien's fiction. In *Night*, the narrator, Mary Hooligan, recalls a kind of physical merging with her young son with whom she shares a sherbet, and, it seems, a single mouth: "the grains lodged in our taste buds and spread behind the nose and made all the mouth areas itch with pleasure. I suppose mouths experience it first, the resuscitation, the life thrill" (12). The potential neuroses latent in this kind of belated cathexis is heightened in the short story "A Rose in the Heart": "The food was what united them, eating off the same plate using the same spoon, watching one another's chews, feeling the food as it went down the other's gullet. [...] When [the child] ate blancmange or junket it was eating part of the lovely substance of its mother" (113). Immediately after this description is a scene of the mother sucking and licking the girl's cut fingers. When the girl has her first sexual experience, it is recounted entirely in oral terms: she and her lover "devour each other's faces [...]. But these orgies only increased her hunger, made it into something that could not be appeased" (125).

Insatiate pain and mother-hunger are frequently displaced onto scenes between cow and calf, especially depictions of separation, of "sucking calves (severed from their ma's) sucking at worn pails" (*Night* 35), or more emotively presented, as in *Wild Decembers*: "The calves had been separated from their mothers that morning. [...] Ten brokenhearted sucky calves bawling, beating at the fence to get back to their mothers [...], their despairing choir more pitiful and heartfelt than any human" (126). It isn't only the broken oral connection to the breast evoked here, but also the aural echoes of the human voice. A similar comparison occurs in *Mother Ireland*: "Outside in the field the cows mooed, and kept each other

company, lowing one to the other, sending sounds as fetching as a mother's across the air" (32). As O'Brien is aware (and makes specific note of in the personal/national memoir *Mother Ireland*, her selection of Irish folktales and cycle legends, *Some Irish Loving*, and in her fiction), the cow has occupied a significant place in Irish history and culture. In the Irish language there are "personal" numbers used only for counting people—and cattle. This ancient identification of Ireland as the "silk of the kine" metamorphosed under English occupation into a derogation of the full humanity of the Irish. O'Brien activates all of the pre- and postcolonial meanings attached to the animal that the ancient Irish "elevated" to human coeval. In O'Brien's fiction, the human child's consumption of cow's milk secures one of the cow's functions as alternate "mother." Mary Hooligan in *Night*, referring to her mother, says that "the earliest milk she gave me was from a bottle, later a vessel. The cows were my friends" (*Night* 33). In the "Epilogue" to *The Country Girls Trilogy*, Baba reports that her baby daughter "vomited the milk I gave her, rejected me, from day one, preferred cow's milk" (515). This is the same Baba who recommended in *The Country Girls* that she and Kate rub ointment meant for cow's udders on their own developing breasts. The correspondence between human and bovine teats assumed by Baba recurs poignantly in the fantasy conclusion of *In the Forest*, where a little lost boy—who may be a projection of the murderer Michen O'Kane, left motherless as a child—wanders into a field of cows, walks amongst them, and is fascinated by their udders and their mouths: "They were far taller than he was, their coats were silky and they had big pink soft diddies. It was amazing the amount of grass they could take into their mouths [...]. Their tongues were rubbery" (262). In *August is a Wicked Month*, the guilty mother, about to go on a debauched holiday, entertains her own fantasy about her little boy, who is off camping with his father, her estranged husband. She jealously imagines him in a field of munching cows where he "would fall asleep to that unfamiliar soothing sound" (12) and in the morning "he might even dreg a mug of illicit milk for their breakfast" (13).

The illicit appetite for mother is rarely distinguishable from disgust, as Baba's infant daughter demonstrates, and is often accompanied by violence. The mother in "Rose in the Heart," whose "lovely substance" her daughter eats, first appears in the narrative as part of a childbirth tableau that establishes her exchangeability with the body of an animal gratuitously ravaged to satisfy a symbolic hunger for dominance. The midwife announces the birth to the drinking husband and cronies in the kitchen who rush upstairs at the news: "The father waved a strip of pink flesh on a fork that he was carrying and remarked on its being unappetising. [...] The mother felt green and disgusted and asked them to leave her alone" (111). Once they are gone, the midwife begins

the stitching down the line of torn flesh that was gaping and coated with blood. The mother roared again [...]. She bit into the crucifix, and dented it further. She could feel her mouth and her eyelids being stitched too. [...] The stove had been quenched and the midwife said to the men that it was a crying shame to leave a good goose like that, neither cooked nor uncooked. The men had torn bits off the breast so that the goose looked wounded, like the woman upstairs who was tightening her heart and soul, tightening inside the array of catgut stitches. (112)

Using similar imagery, Mary Hooligan, already established as having been deprived of the mother's breast, concludes that she and a near-stranger with whom she has had an unsatisfactory sexual encounter are "no longer human, but like bits of meat, uncooked, flinching, and still betimes looking for some little balsam, a crumb, some gob-stopping tit" (70). All lovers' mouths, tongues, and teeth are closely examined by Mary in this novel, which frequently figures sexual love and competition in terms of cannibalistic desire, perhaps an instantiation of Lloyd's contention that the Irish mouth demonstrates "disrespect for the proper spaces and times of speech and performance, ingestion and utterance" (1), a disrespect that contributed to early colonial accounts of Irish cannibalism, including those from no less a source than Edmund Spenser. The Irish are liable to fail to recognise the "proper" space that obtains, in Derrida's "carno-phallogocentrism," between human and animal flesh in matters of appetitive or even symbolic consumption. Other examples in *Night* include a successful liaison with a "Finn" being described as the lover "turn[ing] ... the flesh itself into a luscious stew" (97), and a jealous outburst about a rival: "You have a wife [...] I hate her. I would tear her limb from limb as does the dog the bunny rabbit, and eat her and presently vomit her, so as not to give her the satisfaction of my digestive juices" (102).

Love objects/rivals are both ingested (and vomited) and ingesting. O'Brien's put-upon rural mothers are consistently depicted as self-sacrificing, usually typified in depriving themselves of food, or eating only the most unpleasant cuts of meat, particularly the "pope's nose," the scanty tail portion of a chicken or turkey. But the mouth is not only site of the mother's self-denying love, but also of her potential for violence. In the recent story "Two Mothers," the narrator has a recurring dream of her own tongue being cut out by her mother. This mutilation fantasy recalls an earlier story, "Savages," in which the violence is displaced onto an "ox tongue" sliced into by the mother, which leads the narrator to think in a self-pitying identification, "poor oxen had not much of a life either living or dead" (75). It is not only bovine mouths that appear in fantasies of maternal violence and violation, however. In *A Pagan Place*, among the self-mortifications the narrator entertains in expiation of an imagined (sexual) sin is one inspired by her mother: "you meant to put wire in your throat, the way she poked wire down young chickens when things got in their wind pipe" (184-5). This horrific image recurs in *The Light of Evening* when Eleanora looks forward to her first session with a female psychotherapist—clearly a mother-substitute—after disappointing experiences with male doctors:

maybe she could reach in and pull out all the tribulation and the mountainous bile. These thoughts often became fanciful and I pictured different methods, many surgical, then recalled my mother putting wire down the throttles of young chickens, to cure them of their pip. She would cure me of my pip, I thought. (226)

The Irish mouth in O'Brien is infantile and unformed, hungry for soft, babyish food, even as it is savage in its masochistic and cannibalistic desires. Its unevolved or devolved state demonstrates some of the traditional stereotypes that have traditionally zoontologized the Irish. After expressing a hankering for "custard, great soft glaubs of it in the mouth [...], harmless mush, feeble under the impact of mastication, perfect at sliding down" (32), Mary Hooligan describes her own people as "a race [...] slack-jawed, weak in the mandibles from

eating sops of hay and farinaceous matter" (35), a melding of bovine and human comestibles that recalls Dr Beard's description of the diet of "savages," including the Irish, as being "little removed from the common animal stock from which they derived." In the "Epilogue," Baba's stroke-addled husband is reduced to a state of childish dependency, a condition underlined by Baba who "makes him potato cakes and barley soup to remind him of his martyred mother and all that Mavourneen mush" (519), an explicit association of Irish masculinity with what Baba considers weak, "effeminate" sentimentality, "toothless" and infantile attachment to "mammy." In O'Brien's texts "edible" young girls are repeatedly compared to ice-cream or blancmange, bland, pabulum-type substances that challenge neither intellect nor palate, a conveniently yielding sweetness, considering the number of the minatory old men in the fiction who are without teeth. The narrator in the story "Over" is an unusual instance of a female consumer of young flesh. Unlike some of her male counterparts, she is not toothless, but yearns to be, overtly equates toothlessness with eating another, a not illogical association if incomplete introjection of the lost breast is behind this hunger, but is perhaps more powerfully an example of Halberstam's radical "masochistic passivity" as critique: "I want all my teeth drawn out of me and other teeth, molars if you will, stuck back into my gums. I want to grind these new teeth, these molars to a pulp. Perhaps I want to eat you alive" (63). The sadomasochistic sequence of extraction, insertion, pulverization, and violent consumption suggests a regression or atavism that obeys its own chronology, The very act of chewing undoes itself, a paradoxical "unchewing" explicitly identified with the cow-mother (who systematically un-chews and re-chews) in *Casualties of Peace* when Willa contemplates ways of disciplining herself against the softness that makes her vulnerable to her lover's cruelties. She considers an ascetic option: "declining bread, potatoes, spaghetti, all the mother foods that your soft, weak, unchewing nature craves for. Cow, without cow's wisdom, without a cow's ruminativeness" (75). The transvaluation effected here, the assignment of wisdom (through a sly etymological aside that "roots" cogitation in mastication) to an animal not usually credited with sagacity, places under ironic pressure the relative status of the human and the beast, the consumed and the consuming, particularly if the cow is symbolic of Irishness.

O'Brien described her own work in the early 1980s as "concerned with loss as much as with love. Loss is every child's theme because by necessity the child loses its mother and its bearings. [...] So my central theme is loss" (qtd. in Guppy 38). It is not only the individual mother who figures in the writer's preoccupation with loss, however, but "Mother Ireland," described in O'Brien's book of that name, as "dim dying and dead" in the time of the Great Hunger (60). The land is movingly anthropomorphized here; the earth becomes a suffering individual. This trope is reversed in the passages that follow, in which O'Brien names individuals, including Queen Victoria, who stand in a metonymic relationship to the British Empire, and details the heartless irresponsibility of their response to the catastrophe. The context for O'Brien's recurring theme of female self-denial in connection with the mouth must include, then, hunger on a large social and historical scale, and as an effect of empire. The Irish mouth is one bred in famine, empty, open, filled only with cries, or alternately, chillingly silent, like the mouth producing the "sound of a dog howling" in the opening of Sinéad O'Connor's song "Famine" (from the album *Universal Mother*). According to Lloyd:

The sound remains uncanny for several reasons. It is impossible to tell if the howl is of hunger, grief, or some condensation of the two; it is difficult to

determine whether the sound we hear is actually a dog's howl or human imitation of the sound, a difficulty which in itself opens the uncanny domain where the human and the natural converge and mimic one another; this animal lament accentuates the absence or the silence of what properly should be the sound of human mourning: it as if the field of human society itself had been decimated to the extent that all remains of its domestic and affective fabric, for which the memory of the dead is an indispensable thread, is the anguish of the domestic animal on the verge of reverting to its wildness. (49)

O'Brien's description of the famine in *Mother Ireland*, a text Margaret McCurtain identifies with the tradition of Irish women's lament poems (272), uses similar imagery of both the absence of "proper" voices and the reversion of dogs to a wolf-like state as figure for the final unravelling of the "domestic and affective fabric":

a vast silence, a creeping ruin over everything, an inability to curse because human passion had been quelled through starvation; children's eyes were senseless and wizened, work gangs who built walls and roads were voiceless like shadows, womanhood had ceased to be womanly, the birds carolled no more, the ravens dropped dead on the wing, and dogs hairless and with their vertebrae like the saw of a bone slunk into the ditch like wolves and the anima mundi, the soul of the land, was lying dim and dead. (60)

Patricia Lysaght's study of the banshee (the supernatural female "death-messenger" of Irish folklore) notes that "the howling of dogs, especially at night, is commonly considered to be a death-omen in Irish tradition" (73). As in O'Connor's song, the indeterminate human-dog howl is an uncanny medium of grief in the last lines of *A Pagan Place*: "the last thing you heard was a howl starting up, more ravenous than a dog's, more piercing than a person's" (203). In *Time and Tide*, a mother's grief at the death of her son transfers to a dog named Charlie, who "start[s] up his own wake, his own subhuman howl [...], a howl that had a human plaint in it. Her own hysteria speaking back to her but animalised" (281-2). The animalized voice of mourning evokes the Irish wake and the role of the keener (nearly always a woman), explicitly so in *Time and Tide*. The rural tradition of ritual keening is not available to the grieving Irish woman in modern, metropolitan London; the closest approximation is a howling animal. In support of McCurtain's suggestion that *Mother Ireland* is a re-appropriation of the lament, or keening, tradition, in a *New York Times* article, "Why Irish Heroines Don't Have to Be Good Anymore," O'Brien regrets the passing of "the glorious tradition of fanatic Irish writing which flourished before sanctity and propriety took over," a tradition she defines as beginning with Eileen O'Leary's 1773 lament for her dead husband, "one of the most *rapacious* love poems" (emphasis added), an adjective collapsing hunger, love, and mourning. It is also significant that O'Brien associates the lament with impropriety, misbehaviour. According to Lloyd, "the Irish wake and its cloaked keener would become a sign of Irish unruliness, with its peculiar and promiscuous mixing of grief and merriment, wailing and drinking, excessive consumption and seditious complaint" (7). In *Night*, the raucous and unruly Mary remembers her mother's funeral as a "promiscuous mixing" of oral effusions: "keenings and ululations," "dribbles snuffles tears gulps all stifled by handkerchief," and "loquacious" men telling ribald tales: grief as mongrel product of the Irish mouth (17, 18).

Giorgio Agamben characterizes the connection between animal cries and death as commemorative, in the same way that the constitutively animalistic keen functions in the wake: "The animal voice is the voice of death [...] which preserves and recalls the living as dead, and it is, at the same time, an immediate trace and memory of death, pure negativity" (43). The negativity of "inarticulate" animal sounds, their paradoxical expressivity hovers uncannily between presence and absence, as in the eerily silent, though crowded, famine landscape in *Mother Ireland*. A landscape empty of animal sounds frequently signals sexual abuse or exploitation for the female protagonists in O'Brien's fiction, including *August is a Wicked Month*, "Plunder," *Johnny I Hardly Knew You*, *Wild Decembers*, and with especial poignancy in *Down by the River*, when the young girl, Mary, is being raped by her father: "Not a sound of a bird. An empty place cut off from every place else, and her body too, the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there" (4). The helpless silence of the abused girl/woman finds an analogue in an evacuated, "denaturalized" nature. The "empty place" is not only the "down there" of "unmentionable" female sexuality, but also the "down there" of the earth itself, particularly the treacherously "feminine" Irish bog: "He struck out with [his metal tape] then waved and dandled it to verify both his powers and his riches which had lain so long, prone and concealed, waiting for the thrust of the slane" (2).

*Wild Decembers*, which concludes with a pregnant, formerly mute girl singing into a receptive and emotional silence, also associates the land with violence and with reproduction that is simultaneously destruction in its opening passages: "Fields that mean more than fields, more than life and more than death too" (1). The reader is told to "Listen. Shiver of wild grass and cluck of wild fowl. Quickening. [...] Fathoms deep the frail and rusted shards, the relics of battles of long ago, and in the basins of limestone, quiet in death, the bone babes and the bone mothers, and fathers too" (1). The land is womb ("quickening") and tomb, a repository of the dead, victims of battle and of the blight:

Slow death for man and beast. [...] Death at every turn. The dead faces yellow as parchment, the lips a liquorice black from having gorged on the sweet poisonous stuff.

They say the enemy came in the night, but the enemy can come at any hour [...] because the enemy is always there [...] locked in a tribal hunger that bubbles in the blood and hides out on the mountain, an old carcass waiting to rise again, waiting to roar again, to pit neighbour against neighbour and dog against dog in the crazed and phantom lust for a lip of land. (1-2)

Lips of the human victims of unendurable hunger turn as black as a beast's, like those of the crazed dog whose roar is indistinguishable from that of human neighbours, hungry for another kind of "lip." The macabre imagery—reanimated "old carcasses," zombies possessed by "phantom lust," the embrace of "bone babes and the bone mothers"—used in these passages that link history, the land, and enduring suffering, recalls Morton's argument for what he calls "dark ecology," as a response (but not a "solution") "to the problem of nature, which has more in common with the undead than with life. Nature is what keeps coming back, an inert, horrifying presence and a mechanical repetition." He continues, using an image of gothic ingestion: "The task is not to bury the dead but to join them, to be bitten

by the undead and become them" (Morton 201), an undoing of the "natural" order of reproduction, what Halberstam identifies as oppressive, determinative "generational logic." In just such an eversion of chronology and the hierarchy of transmission, *House of Splendid Isolation* opens and closes with the words of "The Child." This narrator, at once undead and unborn, presumably the foetus Josie aborted in defiance of an abusive husband, speaks from a position simultaneously "fathoms deep" and transcendent: "History is everywhere. It seeps into the soil, the subsoil. Like rain, or snow, or blood. [...] A people ruminate. [...] The earth so old and haunted, so hungry and replete. It talks." (1); "It weeps, the land does, and small wonder. [...] To go in, within, is the bloodiest journey of all. [...] To go right into the heart of the hate and he wrong and to sup" (232). The weeping, speaking, chewing, supping Irish mouth figures the land itself, the site of unbearable, inevitable repetition and hunger. Not only mothers and motherhood, then, but the Irish landscape, is implicated in the melancholia of motherless girls like Mary in *Down by the River* and Breege in *Wild Decembers*, as well as of the elderly Josie, who has outlived her abuser, in *House of Splendid Isolation*. Morton advocates a "perverse melancholy ethics that refuses to digest the object into an ideal form" (195), a refusal of teleology that evokes the oral and recalls Halberstam's "shadow feminism"—which also "perversely" inhabits the negative as a gesture of defiance—as well as O'Brien's "central theme," loss and longing: "Melancholia is an irreducible component of subjectivity [...]. It is precisely the point at which the self is separated from and forever connected to the mother. Dark ecology is based on negative desire rather than positive fulfilment. It is saturated with unrequited longing" (Morton 186). Morton's description of nature as "an inert, horrifying presence and a mechanical repetition," can also be applied to the act of writing itself, through its connection with the body and the animal. Maud Ellmann argues that "writing is dehumanizing in a double sense, first because it goes on writing regardless of the writer [...] and second because it animalizes its creator, reducing the author to a beast in the machine" (75). Ellmann is discussing the "Circe" episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and claims that it

opens up another scene, comparable to the Freudian unconscious, in which language coalesces with the animal and the mechanical. [...] Human superiority is exposed as a delusion based on the repression of the animal and the mechanical, repressions that return with a vengeance in "Circe" to overthrow the baseless fabric of humanity. [...] If language automatizes, it also animalizes insofar as it subjects the mind to the body, to the muscles of the mouth and hand, as well as to mechanical prostheses such as pen or type that make machines out of those muscles. [...] In "Circe," language is revealed as the witch that changes human beings into animal-machines. (75, 76)

One such mechanical prosthesis, figure for the obsessive rapacity of writing, exhibits a dangerous appetite in *A Pagan Place*: "The pencil was so sharp it ate a hole in the page" (83). The machine can be unfaithful, treacherous, and ravenous in O'Brien, and can also "speak." Ellmann notes that "Inhuman voices reveal that words themselves are sphinxes, hybrids of the animal, the human, and the inorganic, for speech is fashioned out of an acoustic substrate that we share with animals, as well as with machinery and waves" (77). This "acoustic substrate" is revealed in O'Brien's fiction in scenes of tragedy, loss, grief. In *Wild Decembers* the sound of a tractor that will feature centrally in a vengeful murder emits "A wail ... A banshee wail" (144), and in *House of Splendid Isolation*, the siren of the

ambulance that comes in response to the accidental shooting of Josie is described by a guard at the scene as “that despairing yodel that he always thought of as being half-bird, half animal” (227). The narrator in *Johnny I Hardly Knew You* remembers a day with her married lover “that stands out, beyond all others, for its bleakness” (18):

Then he picked out a little fur animal that must have been for his son. All of a sudden and without it being wound up it played a tune and I tell you that tune smote both of us. It was such a wan little voice pertaining to be animal, though God knows what animal, and to me anyhow it was the very same as if his son was pleading. (19)

The voice here is animal, human, both, neither, familiar and strange. A voice emanates from a body, yet stands outside of that body, can gain independence, join a chorus or cacophony, becoming part of another “body,” and can be eerily mimicked to the point of losing any connection to an original source.

The most harrowing instance of this kind of disjunction between utterance and source in O’Brien’s fiction occurs towards the end of *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, with the appearance of a disembodied voice, uncanny in its very familiarity. Kate is in Waterloo station, having discovered that her son prefers the company of his father’s new girlfriend and having failed to wring any sympathy from her estranged husband. After he treats her coldly and walks away, she buys soup from one machine, which she cannot bear to bring to her lips, and wanders over to another machine to weigh herself:

“Eight stone, seven pounds,” a rich Irish country accent told her. She talked back to him. There was no question of this being a metal voice.

“Where are you from?” she asked. He was probably shy, thinking she was making fun of him [...].

“I bet I know,” she said. Still no answer. (456)

She asks the phantom presence whether he had gone home for Christmas and imagines “he had goose with soft, oozy potato stuffing, to which sweetbreads had been added” (457). The dominance of oral images in this moment continues when memories of Christmas dinner recall Kate to thoughts of her father. She wonders “why it was that he meant nothing at all to her now” despite having “had such a calamitous effect on her” (457), in contrast to the vampiric ascendancy of her husband who “sucked every thought and breath of her waking moments” (457). Kate’s defiance in reaction to this awareness of pernicious and relentless patriarchal control is, to use Halberstam’s words, to “desire her own destruction,” and she pursues her mad coaxing of the speaking presence in the machine:

“Come on,” she said to the man behind the machine, “I haven’t all day to talk to you.” Although, of course, she had.

She stepped off, took another penny from her purse, and weighed herself again. Again he spoke. He was still there.

"I bet you find Sundays in London lonely," she said. "I bet you miss not going out in the fields with a couple of hounds and a gun." A thing Irishmen loved to do.

"Please," she said softly, "talk." She tapped the glass, waited, to hear his breath first, then the voice saying, "Hello," or "Where do you come from?" the way these voices greeted each other in dance halls.

Possibly twenty seconds went by. Then something broke loose inside her and she started to scream and bang the glass that covered the numbered face. She hurled insults at it and poured into it all the thoughts that had been in her brain for months. (457)

Kate holds her own breath waiting for one to emerge from what is described as a "face"—though it has no facial features, is mouthless—preparatory to the reproduction of the voices of her childhood, voices heard in rural dance halls, in a time and place far removed from the anonymous city that once ruled the empire. The disembodied yet "richly" specific voice of the weighing machine has opened this rift in time and space for Kate, and like a caged animal, "something" breaks loose in her; screams and words pour forth. The scene is a psychotic dramatization of the writer caught in the "trammels" of what Ellmann calls the "blind machinery of language" (76). Writing as animal-machine gives voice to the immaterial, animates the inorganic, which, for all of its immateriality, can yet resist manipulation, will refuse to be made speak. The inscrutable weighing machine's "inhuman" voice reveals "that words themselves are sphinxes, hybrids of the animal, the human, and the inorganic" (Ellmann 77). Ireland as animalised mouth ramifies backwards and forwards in time, trails the diaspora abroad, lilting, screaming, and spewing its hybrid, mongrelized contents. We anthropomorphize language according to a traditionally hierarchical understanding of anthropomorphism that insists on radical ontological and evaluative difference between the human and the nonhuman, providing one of the grounds for subject constitution, which relies on exclusionary definitions of language. The animal can, ironically, be used to trouble such dualisms in literary interrogations of the "natural" structures of dominance, even as they occur at the level of language itself. In all of O'Brien's fiction the appetite for sex, love, mother, justice, and expression converge in her own "rich Irish country language," only one of the impure productions of the Irish mouth.

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