

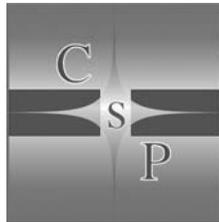
What Rough Beasts?  
Irish and Scottish Studies  
in the New Millennium



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in the New Millennium

Edited by

Shane Alcobia-Murphy



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	vii
Shane Alcobia-Murphy	
The 1981 Hunger Strikes in the Visual Arts.....	1
Cassilda Alcobia-Murphy	
“The Same Seed That Carried Me till It Saw Itself as Fruit”: Medbh McGuckian’s Exemplars .....	12
Shane Alcobia-Murphy	
Seamus Heaney and Osip Mandelstam: “Stretched between Politics and Transcendence” .....	25
Sukanya Basu	
Derek Mahon’s Poetry of Community .....	34
Brian Burton	
“Keeping That Wound Green”: Irish Studies and Trauma Culture .....	45
Conor Carville	
Public Skaith or Well Feigned Sorrow?: The Habbie Elegy in Ireland and Scotland.....	72
Stephen Dornan	
“Among the Many Wonders of the World”: Seamus Heaney’s <i>Burial at Thebes</i> .....	87
Ashley Lange	
Domesticity and Diaspora: Irishwomen’s Associational Life in the North East, 1880-1914.....	102
D.A.J. MacPherson	

“The Histories of Yeer Blood”: Exclusion, Social Inequality, and Genetic-Fallacy in Marina Carr’s <i>By the Bog of Cats</i> and <i>Portia Coughlan</i> .....	121
Margaret Maxwell	
Celtic Identity, Irish Immigration and the Scottish Highlands Tensions in Scottish Interwar Year Literature and Society.....	137
Margery Palmer McCulloch	
Keeping It Reel: Hollywood and Authenticity in Two Recent Irish Plays .....	153
Lisa McGonigle	
Ghost Writer: Beckett’s Irish Gothic.....	167
Sinead Mooney	
Joycean Form in James Kelman’s Early Fiction .....	183
Paul F. Shanks	
“A Day on Which Northing of Importance Happened”: Brian Friel’s <i>The Freedom of the City</i> and <i>Bloody Sunday</i> .....	196
Daniel Smith	
Lockhart and the “Horae Germanica” .....	207
Dan Wall	
Contributors.....	218

# INTRODUCTION

## SHANE ALCOBIA-MURPHY

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

In the late 1990s several key institutional developments occurred to further the scholarly interest in the discipline of Irish-Scottish Studies: the establishment of an Irish-Scottish Academic Initiative between five universities (Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Strathclyde, The Queen's University, Belfast, and Trinity College Dublin); the inauguration of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies in 1999; and the formation of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies in 2001. Following the acquisition of a £900,000 award from the then AHRB, the Centre inaugurated a series of interdisciplinary conferences for postgraduate students to develop intellectual synergies within Irish-Scottish Studies. To date, six conferences have been held under the title *Cross-currents* and the proceedings have been published to ensure the wider dissemination of their findings. In 2005, the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies held an additional conference, entitled *What Rough Beasts?*, to gauge the success of this new discipline in the new millennium, and the following essays constitute that conference's selected proceedings.

The essays are a mixture of single-discipline and multi-disciplinary works, and are arranged alphabetically by author. This arrangement follows the example set by *Cross-currents*: rather than strictly separating work done in different areas such as history, literature, and visual arts, a move which would undermine the cross-disciplinary ethos of the conference, the simple, alphabetical arrangement is intended to tempt the reader to move beyond a single-disciplinary approach. As the editors of the *Cross-currents* series put it: "Ideally, what will arise from this implementation of the alphabet's arbitrary logic is a play of friction and confluence that is stratified by the constellation of competing factors and alternative groupings, allowing each reader to follow their own connective

threads or to leap the sometimes precipitous topic gaps that open up between adjacent essays”. Nevertheless, this introduction does wish to suggest a possible thematic path through this collection of papers.

[T]he duty to remember consists not only in having a deep concern for the past, but in transmitting the meaning of past events to the next generation. The duty, therefore, is one which concerns the future, it is an imperative directed towards the future, which is exactly the opposite side of the traumatic character of the humiliations and wounds of history. It is a duty, thus, to tell. (Ricoeur 1999: 9-10).

Reflecting on the ethics and praxis of memory, Paul Ricoeur argues that memory has two kinds of relation to the past, the first being of knowledge, the second of action. On an ethico-political level, the historian, in constructing a narrative, must tentatively negotiate between the related imperatives to remember and to forget; that is, to avoid an intransigent, melancholic obsession with the past - what Kevin Whelan terms “the entropy of the traumatic version of memory” (Whelan 2003: 93) - yet equally avoid the destruction or erosion of “traces” (Ricoeur 1999: 10). Attempting to tell national “stories”, the historian, by locating, collating and carefully analysing the primary material - be it statistical data, oral or written testimony, census data or other archival material - becomes “a witness, who provides testimony: his ethical position depends on trust, trust in the word of another. This trust in testimony, in the expressive function of language, in the moral power of narrative, enables an ‘ethics of discourse’” (Whelan 2003: 108). Yet such a position becomes problematic for a number of reasons: firstly, as Derrida has persuasively argued, all testimony, however heart-felt and ‘truthful’, is ghosted by the possibility of fiction (Derrida 2000: 29-30); secondly, one cannot provide a full, objective account of an event given that “the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite” (White 1996: 22); and thirdly, any such account will be shaped by a specific ideological framework since, as George Steiner has contended, “[t]he landscape composed by the past tense, the semantic organization of remembrance, is stylized and differently coded by different cultures” (Steiner 1976: 29). Indeed, Irish and Scottish history has been differently constructed according to the political or theoretical purview of its author, its narrative structure changing according to the specific model adopted.

Many of the papers in this collection engage with how history and memory are encoded in Irish and Scottish Studies. **Conor Carville**, for example, argues that Irish historical and literary culture has, in the 1990s,

fostered a “wound culture”; academics, he contends, have simplistically psychologised the relation between the present and the historical past through a “vulgarized, shorthand use of a psychoanalytical temporality”. Carville’s paper raises the question of how we represent and interpret historical narratives. One of the narratives that he cites represents a case in point: the story of the Great Famine in Ireland.

In a short monograph published by Profile Books, Colm Toibin asks a stark question: “How do you write about the Famine?” (1999: 22). Do you take Brendan Bradshaw’s nationalist line and analyse it as a “19<sup>th</sup> century version of the holocaust”? Do you take Terry Eagleton’s approach and attack revisionist historians (like Roy Foster) for their supposed failure to assign blame and for their acceptance of the early-C19th Irish economic system as “natural”? Or do you adopt a clinical, objective tone, an approach which Toibin takes issue with when reviewing Mary Daly’s *The Famine in Ireland*?:

Yet another strategy was deployed to distance the author and her readers from the stark reality. This was by assuming an austerely clinical tone, as befitting academic discourse, and by resort to sociological euphemism and cliometric excursi, thus cerebralising and, thereby, desensitising the trauma. (1999: 24)

Such an overview of the different possible narratives is repeated in a more recent article by Christine Kenneally where she contrasts various interpretative models used to analyse the event: popular folk-memory and oral history that attributes blame to the colonial regime; the “Dehydrated” revisionist narratives which downplay the importance of Ireland’s colonial attachment to Britain; the “Providentialist interpretation” adopted by colonial administrators, who argued that the Famine justified widespread socio-economic change; and the trans-generational model which seeks to foreground the prolonged psychological damage caused by the Famine (2002: 1-37).

The latter became increasingly pervasive during the sesquicentenary, with cultural commentators and artists repeatedly referring to the disabling psychological legacy of the Famine, namely “inhibited experience” (Waters 1997: 27), “malignant shame” (Sean Kenny 1997: 181) and “psychic trauma” (Ní Dhomhnaill 1997: 69). However, historians and cultural theorists from markedly divergent ideological standpoints have taken issue with such a model. Roy Foster in *The Irish Story* adverts to the manifest flaws and dangers of what he terms “the new deconstructed

history, with its stress on the personal and the unmediated” due, in part, to its “complacent anti-empiricism and aggressive sentimentalism” (2001: xv). Commenting on the Great Famine Commemoration of 1995-1997 with its reliance on popular psycho-therapy and the emergent discourse of “Faminism”, he argues persuasively that its practitioners seemed to believe “that ‘history’ can be arranged and packaged into presentations, or pantheons, or waxwork shows, or interpretation centres (where interpreting is, of course, done for you in advance)” (2001: 24). The 200-acre Famine Theme Park on Knockferna Hill, Limerick, is one example that he cites, where, so the official information leaflet says, “it will be possible to experience first hand in this remote area how 1,000 people struggled for survival at the height of the Famine” (2001: 29). Historical narrative here becomes reduced to a soundbite, a heritage trail, merely tourist kitsch. Carville’s paper offers a timely intervention in this whole debate.

**D.A.J. MacPherson’s** paper also focuses our attention on received historical narratives. In his case, he explodes certain received notions regarding Irish women’s associational life in the North East of England from 1880-1914. Current opinion has it that the Irish women during this period conformed to prescribed notions of “correct female behaviour”, that their identity was conferred on them through their work in the domestic realm and their adherence to a patriarchal culture. However, MacPherson’s research demonstrates that such a story is incorrect; in contrast, he argues, the Irish women often “outdid their male counterparts” with regard to public associational life, and that there was a far more complex pattern of female work in the North-East region than has heretofore been presented.

From a literary standpoint, **Daniel Smith’s** paper focuses on a play which takes as its theme the politics of representation: Brian Friel’s *The Freedom of the City*. The play is less about the actual events of 30 January 1972, known in Irish culture as “Bloody Sunday”; rather, the play investigates the manner in which events are discursively represented within different institutions and areas of inquiry (academia; the Church; the Army; journalism; art, etc.). The play demonstrates the author’s keen awareness of how different institutions ideologically frame events, how the different approaches and discourses inflect the stories that are told. The companion paper to Smith’s is that of **Cassilda Alcobia-Murphy**, which also tackles an iconic event in Northern Ireland’s turbulent history, the 1981 republican hunger strikes in the Maze prison. Like Smith, she demonstrates how different discourses can frame a single event.

Contrasting political “self-legitimizing circular discursive logic” with the more open and exploratory artistic discourse, she investigates how three visual artists - Richard Hamilton, Rita Donagh and Shane Cullen – embrace the transformative potential of art to facilitate commemoration and self-reflection regarding what was arguably the most traumatic period of the Northern Irish Troubles.

If one thematic thread running through this collection is that of narrative encoding, then a second has to do with the responsibilities associated with such encoding. Both **Sukanya Basu** and **Ashley Lange** explore how the Northern Irish writer Seamus Heaney responds artistically to political events. In Basu’s paper, we witness a writer who turns to an artistic exemplar, Osip Mandelstam, to gain affirmation for his own artistic response to public events. Heaney’s attention, like that of other Irish poets, has been attracted eastwards to the example set by writers such as Osip Mandelstam and Czeslaw Milosz. Following the path set by Joyce’s elision of the differences between Dublin and Lublin, Heaney’s work continually sets up analogies between Northern Ireland and Eastern Europe, but for a different purpose:

I keep returning to them because there is something in their situation that makes them attractive to a reader whose formative experience has been largely Irish. There is an unsettled aspect to the different worlds they inhabit, and one of the challenges they face is to survive amphibiously, in the realm of ‘the times’ and the realm of their moral and artistic self-respect, a challenge immediately recognizable to anyone who has lived with the awful and demeaning facts of Northern Ireland’s history over the last couple of decades. (Heaney, 1988: xx)

Envious of their “amphibiousness”, Heaney dons the mask of an East European writer. One well-known instance is “Exposure” (Heaney, 1975: 72-3), in which the poet’s “weighing and weighing” his “responsible *tristia*” invokes not only Ovid’s *Tristia* but, more crucially, the poetry of Osip Mandelstam. Heaney’s self-description in his 1975 collection, *North*, as an “inner émigré” recalls the Russian poet’s own status as an “internal émigré”. It is undoubtedly true that the allusion allows Heaney not only to draw on “the traditional energies of exile poetry” but to highlight “that inner expatriation which specially belongs to Northern Catholics in an incomplete state” (Kerrigan, 1992: 264); however, the parallel is far from unproblematic since, in spite of the deep-felt sense of affiliation Heaney has with Mandelstam and the obvious warmth with which he has continued to greet the Russian poet’s enduring legacy, his appropriation

and re-contextualisation of this specific term elides the very real differences between their two lives. It ought to be clear that the acute pressures of living amidst the harsh Russian totalitarianism of the 1930s bears only superficial resemblance to the tribal exigencies and socio-political inequalities borne by the Northern Irish writer throughout the 1970s. In light of the extreme contrast between the freedom of a Laureate “zipping through the stratosphere at Mach-2 somewhere over the Atlantic in his space-age scriptorium” (Brandes, 1991: 3) and the curtailment of Mandelstam’s basic human rights due to politically motivated censorship and imprisonment, how seriously can we take John Desmond’s claim that “[e]xile has led Heaney into an imagined community with Eastern European writers, for whom the issue of the artist’s dual commitment to history and to art has often been literally a matter of life and death”? (Desmond, 1996: 369). Nevertheless, as Basu outlines, Mandelstam’s writing has helped Heaney affirm his own poetic credo and acts as a touchstone regarding “the triumph of the ideals of ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’ in both poetry and life”.

In Lange’s paper, we also witness Heaney turning to a literary exemplar in order to respond to political events; this time, however, he turns to the Greek dramatist Sophocles. Lange’s paper contextualises Heaney’s translation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in light of the post 9/11 invasion of Iraq and the United States’ “war on terror”. Heaney uses the play to embrace the universal theme of human rights and the idea of an individual who is in conflict with society; the translation allows Heaney to comment at an aesthetic distance, and in an oblique manner, on contemporary events.

Both Lange’s paper and that of Basu contributes to a third narrative thread in this collection: the role of artistic exemplarity. Is literary allusion used to invoke the authority of literary exemplars, conferring legitimacy upon a writer’s ideas? Does quotation devolve responsibility from the poet to another writer, allowing the former to ventriloquize controversial sentiments through the latter and absolve himself from all consequences? Does this subsume the writer’s originality? Is quotation used simply for ludic purposes, a whimsical piece of allusive pomposity? Or does its inclusion self-reflexively call into question the validity of the source text, asserting an essential difference, rather than similarity, between the original and new contexts? Many of the papers collected here investigate the purpose of literary allusion. **Brian Burton’s** paper on the Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon explores how such a writer uses his literary

exemplars to assert his own individuality, especially in light of his own community's pressing claims on him. In Mahon's portrait poems and verse letters we witness his "pleas for the wider world to accept the authenticity of humble artists who believe that their actions are conducted in good faith". Mahon associates himself with outsiders like Camus, MacNeice and Beckett as a way of understanding his own "homelessness", but also as an intertextual, trans-historical discourse with a community of other writers. In **Paul Shanks'** paper we see how a Scottish novelist like James Kelman borrows from, and adapts, the narrative techniques of a literary giant like James Joyce. Shanks explores the contextual and formal basis for the similarities between their works, focusing, in particular, on narrative voice and its representation of subjectivity. Offering a framework for a sustained comparison of the two authors, Shanks demonstrates that "their texts reveal a dialogic friction between autonomous subjectivity and the invasive nature of voices external to the self". **Shane Alcobia-Murphy's** paper explores a rather different, and more direct, form of borrowing, namely Medbh McGuckian's imbrication of quotations from works about other female artists. Focusing specifically on the female writer's marginality within patriarchal culture, Alcobia-Murphy shows how a McGuckian poem constitutes a palimpsest - a literary psychohistory - in which the poet incorporates the tropes and ideas of her artistic foremothers in order to read into, and out from, their own psychodramas. Crucially, she does so by using their one of their own strategies whereby "revolutionary messages are concealed behind stylistic facades" (74). The embedded citations, unacknowledged and devoid of quotation marks, replay the concealments and evasions of her predecessors. Indeed, reading about the strategies employed by her precursors affirms her own right to lift the pen/paint-brush.

The majority of the papers in this collection endeavour to make the reader look anew at historical narratives and works of art, none more so than the next grouping which has to do with genre. **Sinead Mooney's** paper re-interprets Samuel Beckett's oeuvre, with its familiar cast of alienated wanderers, narrative circular logic and insistence on fragmentation, as a manifestation of the Irish Gothic mode. Such a critical strategy is bold and utterly convincing, forcing the scholar to read anew Beckett's work in light of his perception of and reaction to the decline of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and their precarious position within the newly established Irish Free State. While Beckett has generally been considered as a writer who refused to engage with his national context, Mooney's paper places the writer back in his Irish context and demonstrates his

writing's oblique negotiation with post-independence sectarianism and explores his depiction of a moribund Protestantism in the Irish Free State. **Stephen Doran** also re-draws canonical demarcations by countering the erroneous reading of the vernacular Habbie elegy as simply satirical or mock-elegiac. His paper shows how the Habbie elegy incorporates humour and sociability into texts which mourn the departed, and how it constituted a crucial (and critically neglected) alternative to the standard English elegy.

While all of the papers mentioned above indirectly touch on ideas of Irish and Scottish identity, the remaining papers directly examine this theme. **Margery Palmer McCulloch** focuses on Scottish cultural production in the interwar years, showing how writers like Hugh MacDiarmid attempted to initiate cultural self-reflection in Scotland and foster a distinct Celtic identity. This theme is also taken up by **Daniel Wall**, though his paper focuses on J.G. Lockhart's attempt in the early nineteenth-century to promote a distinctive Scottish literary culture through his handling of German translations (the "Horae Germanicae" series) in *Blackwoods* magazine. **Lisa McGonigle** contrasts two dramatic takes on Irish authenticity, and shows both the difficulties and the dangers of misrepresenting a national culture. Finally, **Margaret Maxwell** looks at how contemporary Ireland is represented in two plays by Marina Carr and shows how that dramatist exposes the uncomfortable underbelly of unprecedented economic success. The Irish rough beast, the Celtic Tiger, was born in the mid-1990s, and its avid embrace of globalization and informational capitalism initiated a decided paradigm shift, with a cultural discourse that prioritised "individualism, entrepreneurship, mobility, flexibility, innovation" displacing "earlier discourses prioritising national development, national identity, family, self-sacrifice, self-sufficiency and nationalism" (Kirby et al., 2002: 13). While economic success brought cultural self-confidence in Ireland, it also revealed racial prejudice and discrimination with regards the Travelling community. Maxwell's paper is timely in its reminder of how "national identity" may not be all-embracing and how it can suppress minorities.

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# THE 1981 HUNGER STRIKES IN THE VISUAL ARTS

CASSILDA ALCOBIA-MURPHY

The hungerstrike carried out by Republican prisoners in Northern Ireland in 1981 can be partly rationalised in terms of a disjunction in discourses between the British state and the Republican movement as to the status of the Republican prisoners and, by extension, of the territory itself. The ‘normalization’ policy, whereby prisoners convicted of terrorist offences would no longer benefit from special category status, was intended to inscribe Northern Ireland, in terms of the international reading of the conflict, within the context of a solidly unified, modern British economy – and the description, adopted in those years, of the IRA in terms of ‘godfathers’, ‘thugs’ and ‘racketeering’ were meant to portray the movement as a force that is as much of a social as an economic threat.

It is against this framework that the choice of hungerstriking as a form of protest gains added value as a counterpoint to British state rhetoric, since it is not only a re-enactment of past historical instances of resistance to British rule which are very specific to an Irish context – thereby putting into question the ‘normal’ and ‘British’ nature of the six counties – but it also served as a display of self-denial on the part of the prisoners which would fit awkwardly with the label of self-serving, violent criminality.

In Ireland, hungerstriking has been used as a weapon of redress since medieval times (Sweeney, 421-22). However, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century and the Anglo-Irish conflict that hungerstriking was taken up again in Ireland as a political weapon, the most famous example of this being that of Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, who went on hungerstrike in 1920 after being sentenced to two years’ jail for sedition and who refused to recognise British jurisdiction in Ireland, eventually dying after 74 days, one of the longest hungerstrikes on record. His often quoted words, ‘It is not those who can

inflict the most, but those that can suffer the most who will conquer' (cited in Beresford, 19), however, underline not only the political but also the religious dimension of this action, for it is the sacrificial motif of Irish history and mythology that is being invoked here.

Therefore, by choosing to align themselves with the Irish tradition of hungerstriking in the pursuit of justice, the Republican prisoners in Long Kesh are not only claiming for themselves the status of martyred heroes, but are also echoing events of the 'unfinished war'<sup>1</sup> against the British state, thus attempting to redefine the conflict on their own terms, terms which involve a level of political legitimacy which has been denied them.

The 1981 hungerstrike lasted for 217 days, during which period ten republican prisoners died. The prolonged build-up of tension, as each one of the prisoners approached a critical state in the face of British inflexibility, added to the impact of the figure of Bobby Sands, whose smiling, youthful face became ubiquitous in the media, increased the visibility of the conflict not only in Ireland and Britain, but also at an international level. One event in particular would mark a shift in policy for the republican movement towards political action as opposed to purely military intervention (the 'armalite and ballot box' policy): the election of Bobby Sands as MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone as a Sinn Féin candidate (Jackson, 397; Brown, 338). This was also a severe blow for the British government's line of criminalization, since it became harder to uphold the argument which equated the republican movement with a criminal organisation benefiting from little or no support from the local community.

Although many authors, such as David Beresford, in *Ten Men Dead*, have founded their analyses of the ideology and driving force of the hungerstrikes and the way in which they were appropriated by the republican movement on an alignment with significant precedents of struggle in Irish history, as well as a religious tradition of endurance and suffering, Padraig O'Malley, in *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair* goes further in identifying a self-consuming, self-destructive element of the Irish psyche, propitious to the appearance of the kind of degenerative republicanism that preys on its own, and of which the deaths of the ten hungerstrikers are the ultimate example, as he describes 'a victim-bonded society in which memories of

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<sup>1</sup> O' Malley, 19. The Irish Civil War period also witnessed a massive hungerstrike staged by anti-treaty prisoners in 1923 at Mountjoy jail, which registered at its peak 8000 participants.

past injustice and humiliation are so firmly entrenched in both communities and the sense of entrapment so complete that the hungerstrikes are a metaphor for the entrapment of the larger society' (O'Malley, 8, 9).

The most significant academic shift in the analysis of the 1981 hungerstrikes, however, has been that which centres on the body as the privileged locus of expression and re-enactment of the Northern Irish conflict. In *The Hunger Artists*, Maud Ellmann describes the same gesture identified by Beresford of the retrieval, through the hungerstrikes, of a mythical-political tradition, in terms of a process of quotation:

[T]he hunger strikes stage-managed by the IRA unsettle chronological accounts of history because they represent what Seamus Heaney calls the 'afterlife' of former protests, former macerations. By hungering, the protestors transform their bodies into the "quotations" of their forbears and reinscribe the cause of Irish nationalism in the spectacle of starving flesh. (Ellmann, 14)

Thus, the body becomes a textual entity, a living catalogue registering 'in the flesh' the material conditions to which the prisoners were subjected in Long Kesh, as well as a palimpsest of former and present struggle, in a way which not only authorises their plight but also determines their future mythical aura, as the chronological historical logic is warped into a cyclical movement of appropriation and repetition. This passage is also representative of one other strain in Ellmann's analysis, namely the dramatic power and theatricality of the hungerstrikes. Hence, for Ellmann, the hungerstrikes were 'stage-managed': 'self-starvation', she argues, 'is above all a performance' (17), and 'it was not by hungering as such, but by making theater of their own starvation, that the prisoners brought shame on their oppressors and captured the sympathies of their co-religionists' (72). What Ellmann is alluding to is, first of all, the visibility that the hungerstrikes brought to the prison struggle and, by extension, to the ideological claims of the republican movement, and the way in which images (of the Christ-like figures involved in the dirty protests, the photographs which identified and iconized each of the hungerstrikers) became powerful tools in the propaganda war against the British rhetoric of criminalization (whose power relied, therefore, on words alone). But the notion of the dramatization of the body, in its presupposition of audience and dramatic space, also encapsulates a tension between what is essentially a very private experience, unknowable beyond the boundaries of the individual, and the social and political appropriation

of that same experience, a point that is also taken up by Allen Feldman in his book *Formations of Violence*, dealing with the oral history of the H-block protests:

Despite the rhetorical incorporation of the prison struggle into established republican frameworks, the veterans of the H-blocks confess to an unreconcilable sense of being alien, of inhabiting places and situations that cannot be fully comprehended by the non-prisoner, whatever his political identifications. In the wider Republican community, to this day, an unassimilated aspect of the prison struggle remains; this incomprehension is encountered in the painful silences that surround the events of the Hunger strike, the silence of unhealed wounds, unresolved hopes, and fragmentary understanding. (Feldman, 164)

Even though ‘for all the adversary groups implicated in the Hungerstrike ... the body’s process of starvation became a renewed source of ideology production’ (Feldman, 250), what Feldman identifies in this passage is an unknown space that ultimately resists symbolisation and therefore discursive appropriation by either the state, the republican movement or for purposes of journalistic or historiographical narration, as the ‘unhealed wounds’ stand as a painful corporeal equivalent of the unfinished story of the Northern Irish conflict.

Both Feldman and Ellmann emphasise the process of textualization which the body underwent during the prison struggle. Hence, Feldman describes the method of ‘comms’ (messages written in cigarette paper and smuggled during visits, hidden in different orifices of their bodies) by which the prisoners communicated among themselves as well as with the Army Council outside the prison as ‘a remarkable literary production which seemed to flow directly from the dying body of the hunger striker’ (250). This equivalence between disembodiment and literary production is a concept which is also central to Ellmann’s thesis, which she articulates in a passage that closely parallels Feldman: ‘Like Clarissa [the hunger strikers’] starvation generated a peculiarly prolix and rapacious literature, where words rushed in to fill the emptiness that food might occupy’ (83). Ellmann, however, is introducing here a comparison between political struggle and fictional enterprise. By equating the struggle of the hunger strikers with that of the title character in Samuel Richardson’s novel *Clarissa*, and describing it as ‘a struggle for the sign: for the same violence may be described as a revolution or a crime, and the same act as marriage or a rape, depending on the power and the jurisdiction of the speaker’ (88), Ellmann is suggesting a problematic

parallel between the creative potential of artistic and political expression. Although the two may be looking for 'the sign', the political sphere aims, more often than not, to lock it into a self-legitimizing, circular discursive logic which stands in frozen opposition to any ideological stance outside its boundaries. During the hungerstrikes, this was visible in the inflexible position adopted by both sides as each claimed for itself the legitimate reading of the conflict. The inability or indeed the refusal to enter into the other's discursive sphere leads to a petrification of positions which is invariably the space of violence.

For the rest of the article I will attempt to examine how the entrapment and congealment of the sign in political discourse during the hungerstrikes is countered by the artistic release and exploration of the image, through a survey of several visual artworks, and I will also attempt to uncover the extent to which these contribute to an enabling reformulation of the 1981 prison struggle.

In *Thinking Long: Contemporary Art in the North of Ireland*, Liam Kelly reflects on the importance that the representation of the body came to acquire in Northern Irish visual arts, both as a response to the proliferation of media images of 'abandoned roadside dead bodies and scenes of carnage and killings, with related descriptions of torture and mutilation' and as a representation of an ancestral Catholic imagery: 'the temple of the Holy Spirit, the denial of the flesh/the elevation of the soul. This view recognises that the body is to be respected but is ultimately perishable' (Kelly 1996a: 121).

The prison struggle of the early eighties effectively compounded the two motifs, as the hungerstrikers exerted a measure of violence on their bodies which paradoxically foregrounded the ascetic and religious qualities of their protest, in a struggle deeply dependent not only on Christological imagery as projected to an outside audience but also on a committed religious practice within the confines of the H-blocks as a counter to the depersonalising setting of the prison establishment (Beresford, 361). It is this Christological imagery that is primarily recognizable in Richard Hamilton's diptych painting *The Citizen* (1981-3). The work evolved as a response to a television documentary which showed for the first time, to a British audience, the conditions of prison life for those on the blanket protest. The work consists of two canvasses: the left-hand panel is vaguely abstract and represents the excrement-painted walls of the prisoner's cell, whereas the right-hand panel offers a

Christ-like representation of one of the blanket men, a full-size portrait of a long-haired, bearded man wrapped in a blanket, wearing a cross and confronting the viewer with a determined gaze. As Hamilton wrote in the catalogue text for the 1983 exhibition *A Cellular Maze*,

An oft declared British view of the IRA as thugs and hooligans did not match the materialization of Christian martyrdom so profoundly contained on film. One became acutely aware of the religious conflict that had resulted in the civil inequalities that gave a platform for IRA activity. The symbols of Christ's agony were there, not only the crucifix on the neck of the prisoners and the rosary which confirmed the monastic austerity but the self inflicted suffering which has marked Christianity from the earliest times. (Donagh and Hamilton, 7)

Just as the prisoner's gaze confronts the viewer 'head on', so does Hamilton's approach confront the prison issue directly by reproducing the material conditions in which these men lived. This emphasis on the reproduction of the material conditions of prison life for the non-conforming prisoners is underlined by Hamilton's creation of an installation, in a subsequent exhibition in 1988 at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, which includes a 'cell' with 'walls decorated in imitation of those in the protesters' cells at Long Kesh. The artist put a sponge-rubber mattress and a dirty pillow in a corner to complete the furnishing.<sup>2</sup> The tension in this painting is created, therefore, out of the opposition between a 'realistic' representation of the human individual and the mythic character that Hamilton recognises in the Christological imagery supplied by the documentary footage.

The prisoners' claims to political status are alluded to in the title of the painting, a reference to the 'Cyclops' episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which Leopold Bloom runs into a Fenian activist referred to in the book as 'The citizen'. As juxtaposed with a later painting representing a parading loyalist Orangeman, named *The Subject*, the title of the painting is also alluding to the more encompassing project of the republican movement, namely that which refuses to acknowledge the existing political configuration of Northern Ireland as a dependent territory of the British *Crown* in favour of a reintegration with the *Republic* of Ireland. A third artwork, *The State*, completes a cycle of paintings aiming to represent all political participants in the Northern Irish conflict. The painting represents a soldier – and here the metonymic relationship

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Tate Gallery's Collection site, [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)

between title and image intends perhaps to offer a comment on how the British presence in Northern Ireland is mostly visible through its war apparatus, the war itself. However, remaining unacknowledged, its description relegated to euphemisms such as 'The Troubles'.

If Hamilton seems to be treading a dangerous, because uncritical, path by choosing to replicate a significant component of republican self-legitimising rhetoric, namely its alignment with Christian values of redemption through ascetic practices, it is in his representation, on the left-hand panel, of the prisoners' abstract drawings using faeces as the only available material that the overall intention of this work may be best understood. As Hamilton notes, 'Each cell is marked with the graphic personality of its inhabitants; the walls look different because the pigment, of their own creation, is deployed in varying ways. It isn't difficult to discern the megalithic spirals of New Grange inscribed there, nor are the Gaelic convolutions of the Book of Kells remote from the wall paintings of Long Kesh' (Donagh and Hamilton, 8). Although Hamilton is striving somewhat forcefully to establish a doubtful parallel between a Celtic (and therefore 'authentic' and legitimate) heritage and the republican struggle, the painter's ultimate purpose is not so much to give a voice to the prisoners' claims of political legitimacy, but to respond to what he views as the creative potential stemming from a situation of absolute disempowerment which paradoxically allows for the expression of individual and cultural identity in the most adverse of conditions.

Rita Donagh's representational strategy in her painting *Long Meadow* seems to take the opposite direction from Hamilton's. Nowhere are the cells or the gaunt bodies of the prisoners to be seen, as the painting portrays a distanced, aerial view of the prison camp. Rather, it is the stylised letter 'H', in recognition of the symbolic status it acquired in the vocabulary of discord around the prison issue, which haunts this work, since the construction of the H-blocks signalled the shift in British politics from a tacit recognition of political status as practiced in the organisation of Long Kesh into nissen huts to a denial of this same status as embodied in the cellular structure of the H-blocks. The painting offers a representation of the eight H-blocks which practically eliminates all traces of perspective,<sup>3</sup> thus reducing a familiar structure into the graphic symbol of the letter H. The rigid geometric display is counteracted by a superimposition of diffuse, menacing patterns of light and shadow. As

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<sup>3</sup> The painting contains nonetheless a certain level of texture due to the choice of materials, namely oil on canvas.

Kelly points out, ‘the blocks are diagonally set across the canvas like a still from a German expressionist film – light creates the intense mood of this air raid’ (Kelly 1996b: 13). This element of shadow is of vital importance in the creative development of the work as, for Donagh, the letter H becomes associated with the notion of shadow, ‘an alien presence darkening the sky’ (Donagh and Hamilton, 4). By stylising the H-blocks into the letter H, Donagh is thus linking a political, three-dimensional structure (the H-blocks) with the two-dimensional textual sign, in a re-enactment of the way in which the political war became a ‘war of words’, while the ominous shadows associated with the H-blocks offer a comment on how these same H-blocks darkened the political landscape of the Northern Irish territory. The danger in taking up such an unambiguous position *vis-à-vis* the conflict is the renouncement of critical distance, however, and commenting on Donagh’s repeated use of the H-blocks in her work, Jaki Irvine bemoans what she views as ‘the reiteration of a series of simple rhetorical assertions of belief’ to the detriment of ‘a sustained interrogation of the situation, one which does not exclude the different places of artist and viewer in the production of meaning’ (75).

If Donagh’s painting foregrounds the textual sign, Shane Cullen’s installation *Fragmens sur les Institutions Républicaines IV* relies on the textual medium to such an extent that its status as ‘visual’ artwork might conceivably be questioned. For this imposing installation consists of ninety-six eight by four feet panels, featuring around thirty-five thousand words taken from *Ten Men Dead*, Beresford’s account of the 1981 hungerstrikes, an account which was based, to a great extent, on a compilation of the ‘comms’ smuggled out by the prison protesters in their effort to communicate with the Army Council of the Provisional IRA. The text has been meticulously hand-painted by Cullen on Styrofoam panels in white Bodoni typeface against a green background and is organised in newspaper-column formations. The viewer is thus confronted with a work of monumental proportions which holds an ambiguous relationship to its source text, for while it reproduces the ‘comms’ written by the republican prisoners during the hungerstrikes, it does so through the mediation of Beresford’s text.<sup>4</sup> In effect, Cullen’s seemingly non-interventional strategy goes as far as including Beresford’s editorial addenda. This has led to two kinds of negative evaluations of the work. The first, expressed by Fintan O’Toole, is that which dismisses this work as irresponsible in its apparent

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<sup>4</sup> See Murphy, 1-22.

refusal to artistically refashion the textual material in view of the seriousness of the historical events from which it stems:

Both as art and as politics this is an act of evasion. It evades the responsibility of art to transform what it touches. And it evades the responsibility of anyone reflecting on events whose meaning is still being played out in the games of life and death to consider the continuing consequences of words and images.<sup>5</sup>

For behind this body of text stand other bodies, those of the ten dead hungerstrikers, ‘negotiating the terms and conditions of their death’ (Wilson, 19).

The second adverse reaction is that which equates the faithful and painstaking reproduction of the prisoner’s words as tacit and unquestioning support of the republican cause.<sup>6</sup> Both these responses locate the subject-matter of this installation solely in the historical events of the 1981 hungerstrikes and, as Shane Murphy has pointed out in his essay ‘Writing in the Shit’, they stem from an inability to identify the tensions underlying the representational strategies deployed by Cullen in *Fragmens*. For if the sheer size of the installation points to its celebratory, monumentalising character, the material of which these panels are made is the short-lived Styrofoam, which allied to its organization into columns of text suggests, as pointed out by Michael Wilson, ‘the throwaway of news print and the unreliable biases of editorializing’ (Wilson, 19). Moreover, by explicitly incorporating Beresford’s editorial asides and contextualisations into the reproduction of the discourse of the hungerstrikers, Cullen’s work cannot be said to reproduce slavishly the republican logic of protest. In fact, *Fragmens* consistently refuses to substantiate the different strata of sources on which it is based, in any ‘reiteration of ... rhetorical assertions of belief’. Instead, by evoking the rhetoric of the republican movement, embodied in the conscious choice to hungerstrike to the death as the ultimate weapon of redress, as well as the material conditions surrounding this choice (a prominent component of the hungerstrikers’ reflections) through the mediation of Beresford’s reconstruction, Cullen promotes a self-reflexive, dialogical inquiry into the

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<sup>5</sup> Fintan O’Toole, “Second Opinions: An Act of Evasion, as Art and Politics,” *Irish Times*, August 20, 1996. Cited in Michael Wilson, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Such a reaction is cited by Wilson: ‘When a set of the panels from *Fragmens* was exhibited in Belfast in 1995 a viewer was prompted to call the artist a “Nazi and an *Irish Nationalist*.”’ (17).

nature of political struggle and ideology, and the ways in which these are appropriated and incorporated in subsequent representations and eventually registered and catalogued in the collective memory by way of the commemorative impulse which seeks to bring closure to painful, because unresolved, historical moments.

There are multiple challenges and dangers underlying the representation of a phenomenon that is both political and public but also self-absorbed and private, and whose transfigurative impact both on its protagonists and on the socio-political configuration of the Northern Irish territory attests to the tenacity of firmly-held ideological beliefs no less than to its own dramatic power. Indeed, artworks such as Rita Donagh's *Long Meadow* and, to a greater extent, Richard Hamilton's *The Citizen* seem, at points, to forego critical distance in favour of a ready recognition and acceptance of the mythical imagery of the hungerstrikes. For if the artwork is attuned to one of the elements of the conflict in particular, namely, the prisoners' need for visibility outside the prison walls and their insistence on being given a voice, it does little to promote dialogue or reflection as to the causes and significance of the prison protest in its insistent reiteration of this same need.

That the 1981 hungerstrikes remain an exceptionally delicate issue, even when considered against the backdrop of a conflict whose defining trait is its seemingly inexhaustible capacity to produce situations which, in their uncompromising and extreme nature, defy stable and inclusive interpretation is evinced by the uneasiness or even straightforward disapproval with which projects such as Shane Cullen's *Fragments Sur Les Institutions Républicaines IV*, a work completed some sixteen years after these events, was greeted by a Northern Irish audience. By neither monumentalizing nor plainly refusing to pay tribute to the hungerstrikers, Cullen declines the 'confidence in a single position' thus fulfilling what Heaney recognises to be the liberating impulse of the creative endeavour.

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“THE SAME SEED THAT CARRIED ME TILL IT  
SAW ITSELF AS FRUIT”:  
MEDBH MCGUCKIAN’S EXEMPLARS

SHANE ALCOBIA-MURPHY

In *Object Lessons*, the Irish poet Eavan Boland quotes approvingly from the prologue to Ralph Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man*, and seeks to appropriate the narrator’s doctrine of covert action for her own use: his marginality, she suggests, has an inherent subversive potentiality which can be adopted to great advantage by the female Irish poet within the context of their apparent lack of canonical status (Boland, 1995: 146-7). She appears, however, to have put the cart firmly before the horse since her claim is that “[m]arginality within a tradition, however painful, confers certain advantages”, that it “allows the writer clear eyes and a quick critical sense” (1995: 147). While it is right to stress the positive aspects of an alternative perspective with its critical distance, it surely constitutes a serious misreading of Ellison to state that marginality is a subversive condition *per se*. Enforced peripherality is, on the contrary, especially conducive to subjugation and the complete maintenance of the *status quo*. The “quick critical sense” to which she refers, far from being a *consequence* of marginality, is the necessary *prerequisite* for non-cooperation and retaliatory action. The narrator’s self-imposed invisibility is derived in hindsight from his gradual awakening to a prior invisibility, namely the life-long prejudice meted out to him by white Americans which renders him “unseen”. This primary invisibility is defined concisely as “a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality” (Ellison, 1982: 7). Self-awareness spawns a course of strategic counter-action, the (secondary) form of invisibility praised by Boland.

This sequence is almost a constant in other tales of oppression. For instance, the epigraph to Ben Okri’s *Songs of Enchantment*, “*felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas*” (Blessed are those who know the causes of things), prefigures the narrative’s emphasis on the necessity for

revelation to combat exploitation, a theme reiterated by the references to such binary oppositions as sight/blindness, visibility/invisibility. This preoccupation is subsequently taken up and expanded in *Astonishing the Gods* in a manner reminiscent of Ellison's novel. The narrator begins by discovering that prejudice has rendered him invisible: "He searched for himself and his people in all the history books he read and discovered to his youthful astonishment that he didn't exist" (Okri, 1995: 3). Completing his quest for a sense of self, or "the secret of visibility", he comes to cherish "the invisibility of the blessed", a mixture of creativity and grace which implicitly counters his sense of inadequacy at the novel's outset (Okri, 1995: 4, 159). Such narratives recall the significant intervention made in the debate between centre and margin by the post-colonial theorist bell hooks. Exploring what she terms "the politics of location", hooks seeks to delineate a means by which marginality could be established as a "central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives":

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance — as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfils desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world. (hooks, 1991: 153)<sup>1</sup>

Although this outline of her place within society mirrors the distinction made by Ellison and Okri between categorisations which are externally imposed and those which are embraced by the self, hooks' own theoretical discourse retains an unhelpful rigidity, restating rather than deconstructing the original binary opposition between centre and margin.

More cogent for a critical reappraisal of the act of canon formation are the lectures by Toni Morrison which exploit the doubleness of invisibility and explain how the act of reading can make manifest the prejudices and (racial) assumptions of those who, consciously or unconsciously, sought to erase the Africanist presence from American literature:

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<sup>1</sup> See also hooks, 1990: 341-4.

The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides, what happens in that violent, self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers, the finger-prints of the one who does the pouring? (1993: 46)

The bringing to light of that which is omitted from narratives is close to what Boland actually seeks to achieve in her re-evaluation of the role of the Irish woman poet, but with one significant difference: Morrison’s analysis undermines the very notion of a tradition, actively questioning the sense of “self” upon which it is founded. In effect, she does not fetishize her own apartness since this would presuppose an integral, stable centre; rather, by recognizing how subjectivity is rooted in, among other things, gender, race and class, the writer brings a necessary provisionality to her critique, a self-reflexive dimension, one which is apparent in the work of the Northern Irish poet Medbh McGuckian. In what follows I want to examine how the marginal personae in Medbh McGuckian’s poetry are aware of the dangers which enclosure pose and how, as in the novels of Ellison, Okri and Morrison, invisibility subsequently becomes a means of empowerment, a way of undermining established attitudes. The crucial (and as yet underestimated) form which this invisibility adopts is that of metacitonicity, whereby one text is hidden within another.

The second stanza of “The ‘Singer’” (McGuckian, 1993: 14) provides a brief pen-picture of the pressures and frustrations experienced by the narrator as an adolescent:

Every year at exams, the pressure mounted —  
The summer light bent across my pages  
Like a squinting eye. The children’s shouts  
Echoed the weather of the street,  
A car was thunder,  
The ticking of a clock was heavy rain [...]

External phenomena are experienced as invasive and disembodied — the sun becomes a squinting eye, the noise from a car is thunder — and these accentuate the poem’s atmosphere of enclosure, the “squinting eye” and “ticking of a clock” being especially Kafkaesque in their effect. Awareness of time passing also implicitly poses a threat to the narrator as a young girl, introducing as it does the dual frustration of her sedentary, repetitive activities coupled with an as yet unfulfilled sexual yearning, symbolised by the phallic rain and the children’s shouts. Indeed, the