

Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health

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Abstract

This thesis explores the politicized role of sexual health as a concept, discourse, and subject of debate within Irish modernism. Combining perspectives from Irish Studies, the New Modernist Studies, and the Social History of Medicine, it traces the ways in which authors, politicians, and activists in nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland harnessed debates over sexual hygiene, venereal disease, birth control, fertility, and eugenics to envisage competing models of Irish identity, culture, and political community. Reading the work of canonical authors (W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien) and less often discussed figures (Oliver St John Gogarty, Signe Toksvig, Kate O'Brien) in conversation with a range of contemporaneous medical, scientific, and legal writing on sexual health, this thesis catalogues and interrogate the ways in which an increasingly medicalized and politicized conception of sex informed the emergence and development of modernism in Ireland. At the same time, by reading the work of these literary figures alongside the more polemical and journalistic writing of figures such as Arthur Griffith, Maud Gonne, and Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington it also reveals the ways in which key events in Irish cultural and political history – the Parnell Split, the *Playboy* riots, the passage of the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act – contributed to and were shaped by ongoing debates and dilemmas in the field of sexual health. In doing so, this thesis offers both a reconsideration of the history of sex and its regulation in Ireland, and a new paradigm through which to understand modernism's engagement with sex, health, and the body.

Part One examines the role of sexual health discourse in two of the most significant controversies in the cultural and political history of modern Ireland: the Parnell Split and the *Playboy* riots. In both cases, it reveals the ways in which nationalists and modernists were united in their use of a shared rhetoric of sexual pathology to diagnose the perceived ills of Irish political and cultural life, by which they typically meant one another, and to articulate often conflicting models of personal, cultural, and political autonomy.

Part Two explores how figurations of venereal disease, accounts of its aetiology, and campaigns to regulate its spread were used by figures such as Joyce, Gogarty, Griffith, and Gonne to critique British militarism in Ireland. At the same time, it reveals the ways in which Joyce was to distance himself from the more chauvinistic deployments of this rhetoric, particularly where they concerned Ireland's Jewish population.

Part Three addresses arguably the most significant point of intersection between debates over sexual health and modernism in Ireland: the Censorship of Publications Act and its infamous prohibition of printed material relating to contraception, birth control, and abortion. Where conventional accounts of the Act's passage and operation have framed the responses of Irish modernists such as Yeats, Beckett, and Kate O'Brien as ethically valorous and politically subversive rejections of sexual repression and state-mandated philistinism, this section of my thesis reveals the ideological pitfalls and tensions that could attend such opposition, particularly with regards to eugenics.

Part Four explores the legacy of sexual health as a focus of social and cultural debate in 1960s Ireland, using the late work of Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, etc) to highlight the increasing exhaustion of Irish modernism's iconoclastic engagement with a topic which nevertheless remained culturally and politically urgent.

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Introduction

Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health

When W.B. Yeats wished to convey the vitriolic intensity of the ‘riots’ which greeted the opening run of J.M. Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and signal the perceived hypocrisy of those who incited them, he recounted an anecdote that centred on questions of national identity and sexual health:

As I stood there watching, knowing well that I saw the dissolution of a school of patriotism that held sway over my youth, Synge came and stood beside me, and said, ‘A young doctor has just told me that he can hardly keep himself from jumping on to a seat, and pointing out in that howling mob those whom he is treating for venereal disease.’¹

The irony Yeats sought to emphasize in his tale is clear enough: while the representatives of Sinn Féin [we ourselves] and Irish Ireland were busy disingenuously excoriating the Abbey for its perceived ‘libel’ upon the physical and moral purity of ‘Irish peasant men’ and ‘Irish peasant girlhood’, the theatre’s supporters restrained themselves from revealing an image of Irish sexual life far more damning than anything Synge had brought to the stage.² However, the division the anecdote posits between the sober restraint of the Abbey’s supporters and the hysterical prudery of the nationalists is not as clear-cut or as sustainable as Yeats would perhaps have hoped. On the one hand, by emphasizing the professional credentials of the young doctor who had provided the damning diagnosis, Yeats appears to align Synge and the Abbey with the amoral, apolitical, and dispassionate rationalism which medicine had made its disciplinary preserve since at least the eighteenth century, in implied antithesis to the irrational, intemperate, and partisan ‘howling’ of the nationalist ‘mob’ he wishes to censure. On the other hand, by using the doctor’s diagnosis to present those who opposed the *Playboy* as a sexually-incontinent and ethically-compromised gaggle of hypocrites, Yeats reveals himself to be, arguably, no less partisan, moralizing, or rhetorically extreme than those whom he sought to critique. Indeed, in deploying a medicalized and politicized conception of sex to attack the rioters, Yeats was, in fact, replicating the very rhetorical strategy the nationalist press had employed to decry the ‘extraordinary decadence’ and ‘neurotic atmosphere’ of Synge’s play and its ‘degenerate’ celebration of

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Early Essays. The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Vol. IV*, ed. Richard J. Finneran and George Mills Harper (New York: Scribner, 2007), 227.

² “Abbey Theatre – ‘The Playboy of the Western World,’” *Freeman’s Journal and National Press* (28 January 1907), 10, reproduced in James Kilroy, *The “Playboy” Riots* (Dublin: Doleman Press, 1971), 7.

‘unnatural lust’.³ For both groups, sexual health provided a notionally extra-moral rhetoric through which to naturalize a normative critique of the other as a threat to the physical and cultural well-being of Ireland and its population. As this example illustrates, Irish culture’s engagement with questions of sexual health in the early twentieth century was seldom straightforward, often contentious, and almost always political. The aim of this thesis is to map this engagement by exploring the politicized role of sexual health as a concept, discourse, and subject of debate within what might be broadly termed Irish modernism.

Whether it be George Moore’s caustic depiction of an increasingly ‘celibate’ and ‘empty’ Ireland in *The Untilled Field* (1903), James Joyce’s playfully self-indicting critique of English ‘spylisation’ in *Ulysses* (1922), or Kate O’Brien’s excoriation of those leaders who would tell their populations ‘how they are to breed’ in *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938), there are few major or minor texts in the Irish modernist canon which do not explicitly or implicitly dramatize debates and dilemmas in the field of sexual health.⁴ However, notwithstanding this apparent centrality, no study as yet exists which assesses the significance of these debates for Irish modernism in a systematic manner. This thesis addresses this lacuna by exploring the ways in which authors, politicians, and activists in nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland harnessed debates over sexual health to envisage competing models of Irish identity, culture, and political community. In doing so, it takes its impetus from three major developments in recent scholarship on modernism, Ireland, and the history of sexuality. The first is the emergence of the ‘New Modernist Studies’ and the increasing attention it has paid to the relationship between modernist culture and the medicalized and politicized models of sex and sexuality which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵ The second

³ ‘Avis’, “The Playboys in the Abbey,” *The Leader*, 2 February, 1907, 387-88, reproduced in Kilroy, *The “Playboy” Riots*, 70; *Sinn Féin*, 2 February, 1907, 2, reproduced in Kilroy, 67.

⁴ George Moore, *The Untilled Field* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1903), 416; 417; James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Gabler (New York: Vintage, 1986), 266; Kate O’Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer* (London: Penguin, 1951), 29.

⁵ Scholarship on this topic is legion and will be surveyed in greater depth below. Particularly pertinent examples in the present context include Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Lucy Bland and Laura L. Doan, eds., *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Heike Bauer, *English Literary Sexology: Translations of Inversion, 1860 - 1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Anna Katharina Schaffner, *Modernism and Perversion* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Layne Parish Craig, *When Sex Changed: Birth Control Politics and Literature Between the World Wars* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2013); Paul Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism: Ethnography, Sexology, and Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Aimee Armande Wilson, *Conceived in Modernism: The Aesthetics and Politics of Birth Control* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Mark S. Morrisson, *Modernism, Science, and Technology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Celia Marshik and Allison Pease, *Modernism, Sex, and Gender* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

is the emergence of Irish Modernist Studies as a vibrant sub-field of Modernist Studies and Irish Studies, and the increasing attention it has paid to the significance of Irish social, cultural, and political history for many major and minor modernist texts.⁶ The third is the emergence of a growing body of scholarship on the history of sexuality and the social history of medicine in Ireland, and the pressure it has exerted on exceptionalist narratives of Irish piety, purity, and repression.⁷ While all three areas of scholarly activity have been yielding valuable work for almost two decades now, the insights each has generated have remained largely disconnected. By bringing together aspects of all three, I aim to offer not only a fresh and deeply contextualized reading of the emergence and development of Irish modernism, but a more nuanced account of the medicalization and politicization of sex in nineteenth and twentieth-century Irish culture. In order to offer this account and to understand the implications of the three critical developments I have just outlined for my thesis, it is necessary to answer three overlapping questions: What was ‘sexual health’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? How did it come to be politicized? And what challenges does it present to analysis in the context of both Ireland and modernism?

Sexual Health: Emergence and Politicization

While the term itself was not coined until 1975, the discursive formations and ‘styles of reasoning’ which rendered the concept of ‘sexual health’ conceivable and articulable in a European cultural context took shape over a century before.⁸ As Yeats’s remarks reflect, though both sex and health were, of course, subject

⁶ For major field-consolidating statements on Irish modernism, see Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe, eds., *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Carol Taaffe, “Irish Modernism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 782–96; Joe Cleary, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lauren Arrington, “Irish Modernism and Its Legacies,” in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, ed. Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 236–52; Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby, eds., *A History of Irish Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁷ For significant, book-length publications on these topics, see Chrystel Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland*, ed. Jo Campling (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, 2nd ed (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998); Greta Jones and Elizabeth Malcolm, eds., *Medicine, Disease, and the State in Ireland, 1650-1940* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999); Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); James M. Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009); Margaret H. Preston and Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh, eds., *Gender and Medicine in Ireland, 1700-1950* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012); Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart, *The Irish Abortion Journey, 1920–2018* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁸ I derive the term ‘styles of reasoning’ from Arnold I Davidson’s analysis of the emergence of sexuality, in which he explores the circumstances under which claims about ‘sexuality’ and ‘perversions’ became epistemologically viable candidates for the status of ‘truth’ or ‘falsehood’. Arnold I Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology*

to normative regulation long before the nineteenth century, in the course of that century, a rapid proliferation of discourses concerning sex, health, and their interrelation occurred across Europe, such that it became virtually impossible to conceptualize one without reference to the other.⁹ Where once sex had been the subject of moral regulation, typically through institutional religion, in this emergent *scientia sexualis* [science of sex], it came to constitute ‘an extremely unstable pathological field’ which required categorization, diagnosis, and therapeutic intervention from both the medical profession and the state.¹⁰ In tandem with this transformation, ‘health’ underwent a similar expansion of its regulatory purview, shifting from a perceived concern with the well-being of individuals, to a focus on statistically calibrated standards of ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’, calculated at the level of ‘group’, ‘population’, or ‘race’.¹¹ As Michel Foucault summarizes, under such circumstances:

Medicine [was no longer] confined to a body of techniques for curing ills and of the knowledge that they require; it [...] also embrace[d] a knowledge of *healthy man*, that is, a study of *non-sick man* and a definition of the *model man*. In the ordering of human existence it assume[d] a normative posture, which authorize[d] it not only to distribute advice as to healthy life, but also to dictate the standards for physical and moral relations of the individual and of the society in which [they live].¹²

In Foucault’s view, sex was particularly ripe for this sort of medicalization because, through its combination of intense individual ‘corporeality’ and its ‘procreative effects’, it constituted a privileged point of intersection between the ‘body’ – conceived as a locus of hygiene and discipline – and the ‘population’ –

and the Formation of Concepts (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), chaps. 1 and 2; Alain Giami, “Sexual Health: The Emergence, Development, and Diversity of a Concept,” *Annual Review of Sex Research* 13, no. 1 (2002): 1–35.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), secs. 2 and 3; Georges Lantéri-Laura, *Lecture des Perversions: Histoire de leur appropriation médicale*, ed. Markos Zafiroopoulos (Paris: Economica-Anthropos, 2012); Thomas Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness: A Comparative Study of the Inquisition and the Mental Health Movement*, New ed (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), pt. 2; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, Third Edition [1981] (London: Pearson, 2012), chap. 8; Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 9; Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, chaps. 1–3; Giami, “Sexual Health: The Emergence, Development, and Diversity of a Concept”; Alain Giami, “Sex, Medicine, and Disease,” in *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Modern Age*, ed. Gert Hekma (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 127–48; Chiara Beccalossi, “Sex, Medicine, Disease: From Reproduction to Sexuality,” in *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Age of Empire*, ed. Chiara Beccalossi and Ivan Crozier (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 101–22.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge*: 68; 67.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), 33–36; Michel Foucault, Valerio Marchetti, and Graham Burchell, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, Lectures at the Collège de France (London: Verso, 2003); Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness*, pt. 2; Thomas Szasz, *The Medicalization of Everyday Life: Selected Essays* (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2007), sec. 1; Peter Conrad and Joseph W. Schneider, *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness*, Expanded ed (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), chaps. 1, 2, and 9; Peter Conrad, *The Medicalization of Society: On the Transformation of Human Conditions into Treatable Disorders* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), chap. 1.

¹² Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, 34.

conceived as a ‘multiple unity’ subject to broader biological processes which determine its overall ‘health’.¹³ In such a model, ‘undisciplined and irregular’ sexual conduct is understood to have effects at two levels: at the level of the body, where it is ‘sanctioned by all the individual diseases that the sexual debauchee brings’ upon themselves, and, because ‘anyone who has been sexually debauched is assumed to have a heredity’, also at the level of the population, where both this pathology and the ‘debauched’ or ‘perverted’ impulses which brought it about will reiterate themselves for generations.¹⁴ For Foucault, sexuality – the discursive and conceptual formation through which the ‘truth’ of an individual’s identity is held to reside in their sexual preferences and behaviour – comes into being ‘at the point where body and population meet’ and, as such, becomes a matter not only for ‘discipline’, but ‘regularization.’¹⁵ As Alain Giami suggests, the concept of ‘sexual health’ – a further, regulatory extension of ‘sexuality’ – emerges from this charged point of contact and the medical, social, and political processes of discipline and regularization Foucault envisages.¹⁶ Sexual health thus comprises both an ideal state or condition and a set of strategies of discipline and regulation through which that condition is to be brought about at both the level of the individual and the population.

As Foucault and Giami’s remarks indicate, my first two questions are strongly interimplicated. The consolidation of sexual health as a meaningful concept in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with a shift towards an increasingly interventionist conception of the state and a greatly expanded sense of its rights and responsibilities with regards to the well-being of its citizens. In Britain and Ireland, a poor economic climate, under-performance in the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), and the gloomy findings of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1903-1904) conspired to generate an atmosphere in which greater state welfare provision and more direct government involvement in the private lives of British and Irish citizens were deemed necessary in order to vouchsafe ‘national efficiency’ and reverse the current of perceived degeneration.¹⁷ This ‘new liberal’ shift was particularly pronounced in

¹³ Michel Foucault et al., *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, 1st ed (New York: Picador, 2003), 251–52.

¹⁴ Ibid, 252.

¹⁵ Ibid, 251–52.

¹⁶ Giami, “Sexual Health: The Emergence, Development, and Diversity of a Concept,” 3–6; Giami, “Sex, Medicine, and Disease,” 128–36.

¹⁷ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chap. 2; Martin Pugh, *State and Society: A Social and Political History of Britain Since 1870*, Fifth edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), chap. 7.

the areas of sex and health.¹⁸ In line with the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases (1913-1916), Local Government Boards across Britain and Ireland introduced state-funded sexual health clinics, which provided diagnosis and treatment, free at the point of delivery.¹⁹ By 1924, some TDs could be found calling for the ‘strict segregation’ of patients with venereal diseases in Irish public hospitals for both ‘moral’ and ‘health’ reasons.²⁰ State-sponsored ‘sex education’ was advocated as an important preventative adjunct to these measures and, under a variety of euphemistic soubriquets, was introduced to American and European school curricula from the 1910s, often in the face of staunch opposition from parents, the clergy, and social purity groups.²¹ Birth control advocates such as Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger pressured public officials to follow their lead in establishing state-funded centres to provide advice and contraceptives, particularly to working-class women, even as France, Italy, and Ireland passed pronatalist censorship legislation, implicitly committing the state to the cause of raising the flagging birth-rate.²² At the same time, eugenicists lobbied governments across Europe and the United States to introduce measures to segregate, sterilize, and, in extreme cases, exterminate the ‘feeble-minded’, the ‘criminally

¹⁸ New liberal engagements with the topics of sex and health, particularly through the prism of eugenics, will be surveyed in greater detail in Chapter Five. For a broad overview, see Diane Paul, “Eugenics and the Left,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 4 (October 1984): 567–90; Michael Freedman, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Leo Lucassen, “A Brave New World: The Left, Social Engineering, and Eugenics in Twentieth-Century Europe,” *International Review of Social History* 55, no. 2 (August 2010): 265–96.

¹⁹ The body of historiography that these schemes have generated is too large to permit a comprehensive survey. Pertinent examples in the present context include David Evans, “Tackling the ‘Hideous Scourge’: The Creation of the Venereal Disease Treatment Centres in Early Twentieth-Century Britain,” *Social History of Medicine* 5, no. 3 (1992): 413–433; Roger Davidson, *Dangerous Liaisons: A Social History of Venereal Diseases in Twentieth-Century Scotland* (Amsterdam: Brill | Rodopi, 2000); Philip Howell, “The Politics of Prostitution and the Politics of Public Health in the Irish Free State: A Response to Susannah Riordan,” *Irish Historical Studies* 35, no. 140 (November 2007): 541–52; Susannah Riordan, “‘A Probable Source of Infection’: The Limitations of Venereal Disease Policy, 1943-1951,” in *Gender and Medicine in Ireland, 1700-1950*, ed. Margaret H. Preston and Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 203–20; Howell, “A Response to Susannah Riordan”; Leanne McCormick, “Prophylactics and Prejudice: Venereal Diseases in Northern Ireland During the Second World War,” in *Gender and Medicine in Ireland, 1700-1950*, ed. Margaret H. Preston and Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 221–34.

²⁰ “Dáil in Committee - Local Government Bill, 1924 (Third Stage) Resumed,” Pub. L. No. 9.13 (1924), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1924-11-19/8/>.

²¹ Roy Porter and Lesley A. Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), chap. 10; Robin E. Jensen, *Dirty Words: The Rhetoric of Public Sex Education, 1870-1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), chap. 1.

²² Angus McLaren, *A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), chap. 6; Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), chap. 4; John Horgan, “Saving Us from Ourselves: Contraception, Censorship and the ‘Evil Literature’ Controversy of 1926,” *Irish Communications Review* 5 (1995): 61–67; Maria Sophia Quine, *Population Politics in Twentieth-Century Europe: Fascist Dictatorships and Liberal Democracies*, Historical Connections (London: Routledge, 1996); Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), chaps. 5 and 8; Senia Pašeta, “Censorship and Its Critics in the Irish Free State, 1922-1932,” *Past & Present* 232, no. (1) (2003): 193–218; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 185–99.

insane', and other 'social problem' groups whose reproduction was deemed potentially detrimental to the health of the nation.²³ While such legislative efforts were ultimately unsuccessful in Britain, eugenic sterilization policies were introduced in the United States, Canada, Scandinavia, and, most infamously, Nazi Germany.²⁴ As late as 1946, John Maynard Keynes, one of the intellectual architects of the modern welfare state and a longstanding member of the British Eugenics Society, Malthusian League, and Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress, could be found lauding eugenics as the 'most important, significant and, [...] *genuine* branch of sociology' in existence.²⁵ Not everyone was so sanguine. G.K. Chesterton was quick to discern in the increasingly interventionist attitude of the emergent welfare state a nascent 'tyranny' in which even the 'sanctuary of sex' would be exposed to the regulatory influence of the 'hygienic logician' and the worst 'extravagances of Eugenics'.²⁶ In Chesterton's view, as soon as the state declared its intention to 'safeguard the health of the community', its interference in the realm of sex was virtually guaranteed: 'If a man's personal health is a public concern, his most private acts are *more* public than his most public acts.'²⁷ For good or ill, by the mid-twentieth-century the politicization of sex and its relationship to questions of individual and public health was a well-established fact of life in Europe and the United States.

²³ The historiography surrounding eugenics will be surveyed in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five. Major national and transnational overviews include Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Mark B. Adams, ed., *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*; Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁴ John Macnicol, "Eugenics and the Campaign for Voluntary Sterilization in Britain Between the Wars," *Social History of Medicine* 2, no. 2 (1989): 147–69; John Macnicol, "The Voluntary Sterilization Campaign in Britain, 1918–39," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2, no. 3 (January 1992): 422–38; Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, eds., *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996); Desmond King, *In the Name of Liberalism: Illiberal Social Policy in the USA and Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pt. 2; A. Dirk Moses and Dan Stone, "Eugenics and Genocide," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 192–209; Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885–1945*, Repr. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), chaps. 5 and 6.

²⁵ Emphasis in original. John Maynard Keynes and Alexander Carr-Saunders, "The Galton Lecture, 1946: Presentation of the Society's Gold Medal," *Eugenics Review* 38, no. 1 (1946): 40. For accounts of Keynes' engagement with eugenics and its bearing on his social and economic thought, see Thomas C. Leonard, "Retrospectives: Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (November 2005): 207–24; David Roth Singerman, "Keynesian Eugenics and the Goodness of the World," *Journal of British Studies* 55, no. 3 (July 2016): 538–65; Phillip W. Magness and Sean J. Hernandez, "The Economic Eugenicism of John Maynard Keynes," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 79–100.

²⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Eugenics and Other Evils* (London: Cassell and Company, 1922), 151; 152; 148.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

As I have indicated, in recent years, the ‘New Modernist Studies’ has come to position modernism, particularly in its literary and theatrical manifestations, as particularly responsive to this medicalization and politicization of sex.²⁸ Breaking with traditional conceptions of modernism as a uniformly hostile critique of technical modernity in which scientific concepts were invoked in purely metaphorical form, Tim Armstrong has explored the ways in which modernists eagerly responded to and participated in scientific and medical efforts to ‘regulate’ and ‘clarify’ the body.²⁹ For Armstrong, modernism is ‘characterized by a desire to *intervene* in the body’ and ‘render it part of modernity’ inspired by a growing perception that the body comprised an obscure, but ultimately knowable, ‘complex of different biomechanical systems’.³⁰ As a wide range of recent studies have illustrated, sex and sexuality proved a particularly energetic area for such ‘intervention’. Indeed, in the view of figures such as Heike Bauer, A.K. Schaffner, and Paul Peppis, the stylistic, discursive, and conceptual exchanges between literary modernism and emergent scientific and medical fields such as sexology were so extensive as to render them mutual participants in the emergence of a ‘sexual modernism’ in which generic and disciplinary divisions between the ‘literary’ and ‘scientific’ are often placed under erasure.³¹ In such readings, literary modernism emerges as the vibrant interlocutor of a wide range of fields, theories, and specialisms which took the relationship between sex and health as their focus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a list which includes venereology (the study, diagnosis, and treatment of venereal diseases);³² sexology (the study and categorization of human sexuality in both its ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’ manifestations);³³ psychiatry and psychology (particularly where they overlap with sexology);³⁴ ethnography (particularly in its concern with the sexual characteristics, practices,

²⁸ For an overview of the ‘New Modernist Studies’ and the processes of conceptual, chronological, and archival ‘expansion’ by which it has been characterized, see Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 737–48.

²⁹ Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body*, 5.

³⁰ *Ibid* 6; 2.

³¹ Bauer, *English Literary Sexology*, 8; Anna Katharina Schaffner, “Fiction as Evidence: On the Uses of Literature in Nineteenth-Century Sexological Discourse,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 48, no. 2 (2011): 165–99; Schaffner, *Modernism and Perversion*, 23–29; Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism*, 11; Jana Funke, “Modernism, Sexuality, and Gender,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Modernist Literature*, ed. Ulrika Maude and Mark Nixon (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 250. These readings implicitly and explicitly respond to Mark S. Morrisson’s calls for a model of ‘scientific and technical modernism’ which largely places under erasure distinctions between literary and non-literary discourse. Mark S. Morrisson, “Why Modernist Studies and Science Studies Need Each Other,” *Modernism/Modernity* 9, no. 4 (2002): 675–82; Morrisson, *Modernism, Science, and Technology*, 7.

³² Kathleen Ferris, *James Joyce and the Burden of Disease* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

³³ Bland and Doan, *Sexology in Culture*; Bauer, *English Literary Sexology*; Schaffner, *Modernism and Perversion*; Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism*, chaps. 3 and 4.

³⁴ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Kylie Valentine, *Psychoanalysis, Psychiatry, and Modernist Literature* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Mark S. Micale, ed., *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-*

and beliefs of ‘primitive’ peoples and ‘alien’ cultures);³⁵ demography (particularly in its concern with rates of birth and fertility);³⁶ evolutionary science and degeneration theory (particularly in their concern with natural and artificial selection and various forms of heredity);³⁷ the eugenics movement (in its desire to ‘improve’ humanity’s physical and intellectual capacities through artificial selection);³⁸ and the birth control movement (which mobilized eugenic arguments to call for a more woman-centred model of family planning and a more pleasure-centred model of sex).³⁹ While, for reasons I shall address below, an Irish cultural context necessitates a more circumspect and flexible sense of the relationship between literary modernism and medical science than some of these studies maintain, this thesis shares with them an awareness of the vibrant ‘two-way’ exchanges and moments of ‘creative misprision’ that took place between literature, science, and medicine concerning questions of sex and its regulation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁰

As the broad conceptual latitude of the phrase ‘sexual modernism’ suggests, in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe, sex and health came to enjoy a near-infinite explanatory capacity. By 1886, the influential German sexologist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, could declare sex ‘den gewaltigsten Factor im individuellen und im sozialen Dasein’ [the most powerful factor in individual and social existence].⁴¹ The following year, Friedrich Nietzsche could be found ‘waiting for a philosophical *physician*’ who would ‘pursue

1940 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Maud Ellmann, *The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sigmund Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism*, 5 and 6.

³⁵ Marc Manganaro, ed., *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sinéad Garrigan-Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism*.

³⁶ Mary Lowe-Evans, *Crimes Against Fecundity: Joyce and Population Control* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1989); Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics*, 2001, chaps. 4–6.

³⁷ William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics*, 2001; Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

³⁸ Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics*, 2001; Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*.

³⁹ Craig, *When Sex Changed*; Wilson, *Conceived in Modernism*.

⁴⁰ This model of exchange has most famously been mapped by Gillian Beer in *Darwin’s Plots* (1983), from which these frequently cited expressions derive. Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

⁴¹ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: Eine klinisch-forensische Studie* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1886), 2.

the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity'.⁴² By the end of the century, Krafft-Ebing's British counterpart, Havelock Ellis, would deem sex, in all its 'natural' and 'unnatural' manifestations, the 'central problem of life', which required the attention of 'everyone'.⁴³ As these remarks suggest, as an analytical category, the concept of 'sexual health' can seem unserviceably broad, at risk of subsuming everything into its explanatory ambit. A challenge this thesis faces is thus to analyze the operation of sexual health as a discourse and category in Irish modernism without simply becoming a second-order manifestation of a late nineteenth-century tendency to transform everything into a question of sex or health. I will avoid this danger, insofar as it can entirely be avoided, by identifying and focusing upon four key themes and concerns which dominated social, political, and cultural debates about sexual health in the period with which I am concerned: hygiene, autonomy, heredity, and fertility. As shall be seen, each of these themes is closely implicated with other categories, particularly gender and sexual orientation, whose operation is of central importance to this thesis, but which it would be a distortion to analyze as discrete themes. By exploring the ways in which, under the rubric of sexual health, ideas of hygiene, competing models of autonomy, heredity, and fertility interacted with gendered and sexual norms in Irish modernism, I thus hope to comment meaningfully on the history of gender and sexuality in Ireland, without artificially reifying or hypostasizing either category.

Sexual Health: Key Themes

Of all these themes, the relationship between sexual health and hygiene is, perhaps, the most obvious. To this day, sexual health is intimately associated with the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of sexually-transmitted infections (or, as they were understood and labelled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, 'venereal diseases'). In Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, venereal diseases increasingly came to be viewed less as a divinely-sanctioned punishment for immoral sexual conduct (the so-called 'wages of sin') than as a public health concern, to be combated through regimes of both personal and social hygiene

⁴² These remarks are made in the 1886 'Preface' to the Second Edition. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1882] 2001), 6.

⁴³ This remark appears in the 'General Preface' to the *Studies*, dated 'July, 1897'. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, [1897] 1942), xxx.

– though, as Yeats’s anecdote suggests, these models of ‘hygiene’ were often heavily morally freighted.⁴⁴ Personal hygiene might take a range of forms, including abstinence, monogamy, prophylaxis (which encompassed both the use of contraceptives and different modes of chemical disinfection), and sanitary practices such as the regular washing of an individual’s body, undergarments, and bedding.⁴⁵ Social hygiene typically entailed efforts to monitor and regulate the sexual conduct of perceived ‘high-risk’ groups, such as female sex workers, soldiers, the urban poor, and the physically and mentally ‘defective’, often with socially stigmatizing results and in accordance with a range of gendered and classist double-standards.⁴⁶ The most infamous manifestation of this impulse in Britain and Ireland were the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, which licensed the involuntary inspection, detention, and treatment of women suspected of engaging in sex-work in the vicinity of a range of key British military garrisons.⁴⁷ In the twentieth century, under the influence of the eugenics and birth-control movements, this ideal of ‘hygiene’ came increasingly to centre on notions of physical and mental ‘fitness’ and concerns about the size and composition of families. In Britain, the declining birth-rate and differential fertility – the asymmetrical ways in which that decline was manifesting itself among the lower and middle classes – combined to generate a perception that the most able, intelligent, and affluent were being outbred by their physical, intellectual, and social inferiors, to the over-all detriment of the nation’s health.⁴⁸

As Yeats’s characterization of the ‘mob’ who opposed the *Playboy* as an undifferentiated ‘howling’ mass who lack the capacity for either social or sexual self-restraint suggests, closely bound up with this hygienic ideal was a concern with what I will broadly term autonomy. In virtually all its nineteenth and twentieth-century articulations, good sexual health is staked upon a normative ideal of self-rule, in which the individual possesses the capacity to make rational decisions about their sexual behaviour and to regulate

⁴⁴ For an overview of the development and operation of this ‘medico-moral’ model of hygiene in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830*, Revised Ed (London: Routledge, 2002), pts. 1 and 4.

⁴⁵ Virginia Sarah Smith, *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chaps. 9 and 10.

⁴⁶ Peter Baldwin, *Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chaps. 5–6; Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*, chaps. 1–3.

⁴⁷ The Contagious Diseases Acts, regulationism, and militarism in Ireland will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. For an overview of the Acts in their British, colonial, and Irish instantiations, see Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pt. 2; Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pt. 1; Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940*, chap. 4.

⁴⁸ For an overview of these anxieties and their roots, see Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, chaps. 5–7; King, *In the Name of Liberalism: Illiberal Social Policy in the USA and Britain*, pt. 2; Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, chap. 1.

the impulses and desires which inspire it. The individual hygiene practices outlined above were all, to some extent, grounded in the principles of self-regulation, sexual continence, and moral self-possession which comprised this mode of autonomy. While various strands of rationalist and Judeo-Christian thought had long treated sexual desire as a degrading compromise of an individual's autonomy, nineteenth-century medical discourse increasingly presented an incapacity for sexual self-restraint as an index of pathology.⁴⁹ In the view of Krafft-Ebing, what distinguished 'Perversität' [perversity] – expressions of the 'Geschlechtstriebes' [sexual instinct] which violated what he presented as its natural procreative function – from 'Perversion' – a pathological deviation of the 'sexual instinct' which compelled the individual to commit these acts – was the involuntary character of the latter state: perverse acts were forms of 'Laster' [vice], which invited moral censure and legal sanction, perversion was a form of 'Krankheit' [illness] which necessitated therapeutic intervention.⁵⁰ Diagnoses such as 'spermatorrhoea' – an excessive and involuntary leaking of seminal fluids brought about by excessive masturbation, which was held, in extreme cases, to precipitate potentially fatal interruptions of cerebral activity – literalized such theories, blurring the boundary between a physical and mental incapacity for sexual self-regulation in which cause and effect became increasingly hard to distinguish.⁵¹

Further complicating the question of whether perceived sexual misconduct contributed to or resulted from a compromised capacity for self-rule was the matter of heredity. As noted above, for Foucault, heredity constituted the conduit through which the pathological effects of individual sexual conduct were understood to inscribe themselves at the level of the population.⁵² Degeneration theory, with its neo-Lamarckian stress on use inheritance – a process whereby regularly employed faculties and traits would grow more pronounced from generation to generation, while their neglected counterparts would atrophy – constituted the clearest and most influential articulation of this logic, transforming a parent's 'vices' into

⁴⁹ The relationship between desire and autonomy will be addressed more fully in Chapter One. For an overview of major philosophical positions on desire, see Rockney Jacobsen, "Desire, Sexual," in *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia*, ed. Alan Soble, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006), 222–28.

⁵⁰ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der konträren Sexualempfindung: Eine medizinisch-gerichtliche Studie für Ärzte und Juriste*, 13. Ausgabe (Stuttgart: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1907), 63. For an account of the emergence of the epistemes and styles of reasoning through which 'perversion' becomes conceivable as a form of 'functional disease', see Arnold I Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), 12–25.

⁵¹ E.H. Hare, "Masturbatory Insanity: The History of an Idea," *Journal of Mental Science* 108, no. 452 (January 1962): 1–25; Robert Darby, "Pathologizing Male Sexuality: Lallemand, Spermatorrhea, and the Rise of Circumcision," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 60, no. 3 (July 1, 2005): 283–319.

⁵² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge*: 116–19; Foucault et al., *Society Must Be Defended*, 252.

hereditary ‘pathologies’ that would compromise not only the physical health of their children, but their capacity for sexual self-regulation.⁵³ As Desmond King has noted, this belief was taken up and extended by the eugenics movement, for whom a lack of sexual continence and an incapacity for family planning could be taken as evidence of a lack of ‘reason’ or ‘competence’ on the basis of which an individual could be disqualified from full membership of the liberal-democratic *polis* and the rights and protections it afforded.⁵⁴ These exclusions and the repressive and illiberal measures such as institutionalization or sterilization they facilitated could then, in turn, be circularly justified as efforts to protect and encourage the good-functioning of the liberal democratic state by maximizing the ‘health’ and ‘reason’ of the body politic.⁵⁵

At the fraught intersection of these anxieties about autonomy and heredity stood the question of fertility and its regulation. On the one hand, if, as many anti-Malthusian demographers and economists argued, a nation’s ‘health’ and ‘vitality’ were cognate with the size of its population and the rate of its growth, then efforts to limit fertility were tantamount to ‘race suicide’.⁵⁶ Furthermore, if as Krafft-Ebing and his contemporaries asserted, sex could only be ‘healthy’ insofar as it served a reproductive function, then efforts to restrict or control fertility through various forms of contraceptive practice constituted a sanction for perversion and degeneration. Both positions were echoed by religious commentators, particularly Pope Pius XI, whose 1931 encyclical *Casti Conubii* [of chaste marriage] denounced birth control as ‘intrinsically evil’ and criticized eugenic sterilization policies.⁵⁷ On the other hand, if, as degeneration theory and the eugenics movement contended, the most ‘unhealthy’ and ‘unfit’ possessed a hereditary incapacity for sexual self-regulation and maintained the highest birth-rates amid an otherwise pervasive demographic slump, then

⁵³ Degeneration theory and its application in Irish culture will be addressed in greater detail in Chapters One and Two. For an overview of the theory and its cultural ramifications in nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe, see Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, chap. 9; Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Introduction; Kelly Hurley, “Hereditary Taint and Cultural Contagion: The Social Etiology of Fin-de-siècle Degeneration Theory,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 14, no. 2 (January 1990): 193–214; Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel, 1880-1940*, chap. 1; Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, chap. 3.

⁵⁴ King, *In the Name of Liberalism: Illiberal Social Policy in the USA and Britain*, 52–64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 56–57; 62.

⁵⁶ Richard A. Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England, 1877-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), chaps. 1 and 2; Angus McLaren, *Sexuality and Social Order: The Debate over the Fertility of Women and Workers in France, 1770-1920* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983), chap. 11; McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality*, 1999, chap. 4; Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, chap. 1; Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, chap. 7.

⁵⁷ “Lambeth Conference: Resolutions Archive from 1930,” Anglican Community Document Library, 2019, sec. 15, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127734/1930.pdf>; Pope Pius XI, “*Casti Connubii*, Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Christian Marriage to the Venerable Brethren, Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and Other Local Ordinaries Enjoying Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See,” The Holy See, February 2016, secs. 61 and 63–71, https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html; Craig, *When Sex Changed*, chap. 4.

unregulated fertility constituted a substantial threat to public health.⁵⁸ For birth control advocates such as Stopes and Sanger, these eugenic anxieties existed alongside a belief that, in obliging women ‘to bear and bring forth an infant annually’, unregulated fertility ‘sap[ped] and divide[d]’ their ‘vital strength’ and ‘lower[ed] the vitality’ of each succeeding child’, with sometimes fatal outcomes.⁵⁹ In the aftermath of World War One, debates over family planning meant that the relationship between autonomy and sexual health increasingly became an explicitly gendered issue, with feminists aligning themselves with eugenics advocates and neo-Malthusians to argue that women should be liberated from the burden of repeated, unwanted pregnancies and the threat they posed to the well-being of mothers and their children.⁶⁰ Once again, as the birth control movement’s stress on the lowered vitality of both mothers and infants in successive pregnancies indicates, the justifications offered for this push combined considerations of both individual and public health.

Sexual Health and Irish Culture

As this overview suggests, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the widespread medicalization and politicization of sex combined to render sexual health a conceptual lens through which politicians, activists, and cultural commentators across Europe could describe, critique, and regulate the sexual conduct of both individuals and the populations they were imagined to constitute. However, notwithstanding the apparently all-pervasive nature of this epistemological revolution concerning sex and health, questions have been raised concerning the extent to which it affected Ireland. As such, a further challenge this thesis faces concerns the applicability of ‘sexual health’ as a conceptual paradigm to the history of both sexuality and modernism in Ireland. In a range of influential monographs and articles, historian and sociologist Tom Inglis has argued that the social, cultural, and political influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland in the late nineteenth and

⁵⁸ Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, chap. 5.

⁵⁹ Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (London: A.C. Fifield, 1918), 88–89.

⁶⁰ Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England, 1877-1930*, chaps. 7 and 10; McLaren, *Sexuality and Social Order*, chaps. 9 and 10; June Rose, *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), chaps. 6–8; Carolyn Burdett, “The Hidden Romance of Sexual Science: Eugenics, the Nation and the Making of Modern Feminism,” in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura L. Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 44–59; McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality*, 1999, chap. 4; Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, chaps. 6 and 8; Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, chaps. 7 and 9; Clare Debenham, *Marie Stopes’ Sexual Revolution and the Birth Control Movement* (Cham (Switzerland): Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), chaps. 4–9.

early twentieth centuries was too pervasive for the nation to be greatly affected by *scientia sexualis* and its attendant discourses and disciplines, and has asserted that what was said and written about sex and sexuality in Ireland in this period remained confined within ‘religious discourse’ and a ‘thematic of sin’.⁶¹ However, as Maria Luddy, Greta Jones, and others have shown, the existence of a Dublin branch of the National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (active in the 1870s and 1880s), a Belfast Eugenics Society (founded in 1911), an (admittedly often mismanaged) nationwide venereal disease treatment service (introduced in 1917), a Northern Ireland Society for Constructive Birth Control, and a Belfast-based Marie Stopes Mother’s Clinic (active from 1936-1947) put pressure on Inglis’s claims concerning the uniformly ecclesiastical character of sexual-health discourse in pre- and post-partition Ireland.⁶² Nor was a culture of carefully policed knowledge surrounding sex unique to early twentieth-century Ireland. While scholarly and polemical material concerning sex, sexual health, and, above all, birth control, was undoubtedly able to circulate more freely in Britain than in Ireland in the first decades of the twentieth century, its readership remained largely confined to a privileged and well-educated minority. As a range of historiography has illustrated, for the majority of Britons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a cultivated state of ‘innocence’ and ‘ignorance’ concerning sex and sexuality was the (widely lamented) norm, particularly among young women.⁶³ While practical knowledge of the ‘facts of life’ was undoubtedly widespread in Britain in this period, it typically circulated through informal networks that varied by region, class, gender, and level of education, and it was not until at least the 1940s that officially sanctioned ‘sex education’ became a widespread source of sexual knowledge for British young people.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Tom Inglis, “Foucault, Bourdieu and the Field of Irish Sexuality,” *Irish Journal of Sociology* 7, no. 1 (1997): 5-28, 5; 12; Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*.

⁶² Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940*, 147–55; Susannah Riordan, “Venereal Disease in the Irish Free State: The Politics of Public Health,” *Irish Historical Studies* 35, no. 139 (2007): 345–64; Riordan, ““A Probable Source of Infection”: The Limitations of Venereal Disease Policy, 1943-1951”; Susannah Riordan, “In Search of a Broadminded Saint: The Westmorland Lock Hospital in the Twentieth Century,” *Irish Economic and Social History* 39, no. 1 (December 1, 2012): 73–93; McCormick, “Prophylactics and Prejudice: Venereal Diseases in Northern Ireland During the Second World War”; Greta Jones, “Eugenics in Ireland: The Belfast Eugenics Society, 1911-1915,” *Irish Historical Studies* 28, no. 109 (May 1992): 81–95; Jones, Greta, “Marie Stopes in Ireland - The Mother’s Clinic in Belfast, 1936-47,” *Social History of Medicine* 5, no. 2 (April 1992): 255–77.

⁶³ Historiography on this topic is voluminous. Particularly pertinent examples in the present instance are Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, chap. 11; Sally Alexander, “The Mysteries and Secrets of Women’s Bodies: Sexual Knowledge in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” in *Modern Times: Reflections On a Century of English Modernity*, ed. Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea (London: Routledge, 1996), 161–75; Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), chap. 1; Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England, 1918-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 2.

⁶⁴ For efforts to map these networks and their operation, see Lucinda McCray Beier, “‘We Were Green as Grass’: Learning about Sex and Reproduction in Three Working-Class Lancashire Communities, 1900-1970,” *Social History of Medicine* 16, no. 3 (December 1, 2003): 461–80; Lucinda McCray Beier, *For Their Own Good: The Transformation of English*

Likewise, though less likely to be inflected by overtly religious rhetoric, the stigma surrounding conditions such as venereal disease and the perceived sexual misconduct with which it was cognate was a real and persistent issue across the United Kingdom.⁶⁵ Thus, while I take seriously Inglis's reservations about the applicability of a one-size-fits-all Foucauldian model to Irish sexual culture and share his willingness to ask 'what is missing in a Foucauldian analysis' of Irish attitudes to sexual health, I follow Diarmaid Ferriter and others in seeking to challenge the exceptionalist account of Irish sexuality upon which Inglis premises much of his work.⁶⁶

It is here that the emergent field of Irish Modernist Studies is particularly significant. Where once Ireland was framed as an insular and regressive back-water which figures such as Joyce and Beckett had been obliged to transcend in order to enter the experimental, cosmopolitan milieu of 'International Modernism', in recent decades Ireland has increasingly been understood as the politically and intellectually heterogeneous crucible of a transnational, diasporic modernism.⁶⁷ Through this reappraisal, a new understanding has emerged of the socio-economically and politically debilitating but culturally and

Working-Class Health Culture, 1880-1970 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), chaps. 5 and 6; Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chap. 7.

⁶⁵ Susan Lemar, "'The Liberty to Spread Disaster': Campaigning for Compulsion in the Control of Venereal Diseases in Edinburgh in the 1920s," *Social History of Medicine* 19, no. 1 (April 1, 2006): 73–86; Pamela Cox, "Compulsion, Voluntarism, and Venereal Disease: Governing Sexual Health in England after the Contagious Diseases Acts," *The Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 01 (January 2007): 91–115; Samantha Caslin, "Transience, Class and Gender in Interwar Sexual Health Policy: The Case of the Liverpool VD Scheme," *Social History of Medicine*, September 23, 2017; McCormick, "Prophylactics and Prejudice: Venereal Diseases in Northern Ireland During the Second World War."

⁶⁶ Inglis, "Foucault, Bourdieu and the Field of Irish Sexuality," 16; Tom Inglis, ed., *Are the Irish Different?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, Introduction.

⁶⁷ Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), 29. The negative characterization of Ireland outlined above has its roots in the self-fashioning of many Irish modernists themselves. Essays such as Joyce's 'The Day of the Rabblement' (1901), Yeats's *Synge and the Ireland of His Time* (1911), Beckett's 'Recent Irish Poetry', and Seán Ó Faoláin's 'Irish Poetry Since the War' all offer some version of this thesis. It was most influentially articulated by Richard Ellmann, in his monumental *James Joyce* (1959, rev. 1982), and Hugh Kenner, particularly in *The Pound Era* (1971) and *A Colder Eye* (1983). The version of Irish modernism outlined above is derived from Joe Cleary, "Introduction: Ireland and Modernity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, ed. Joe Cleary and Connolly, Claire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–21; Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe, "Introduction: Ireland and Modernism," in *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics*, ed. Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 1–6; Carol Taaffe, "Irish Modernism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), <http://oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199545445.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199545445-e-44>; Joe Cleary, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1–18; Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Intellectual and Aesthetic Influences," in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 21–34; Arrington, "Irish Modernism and Its Legacies"; Lauren Arrington, "Irish Modernism," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature, February 2017, <http://literature.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-237>; Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby, "Introduction: Irish Modernism, from Emergence to Emergency," in *A History of Irish Modernism*, ed. Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1–22.

aesthetically energizing character of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Ireland's fraught relationship with modernity. Terry Eagleton has influentially argued that, unlike the majority of its European peers, Ireland did not leap 'at a bound' from 'tradition' to 'modernity', but instead represented 'an exemplary case of what Marxism has dubbed combined and uneven development'.⁶⁸ In Eagleton's view this resulted in the emergence of an 'archaic avant-garde', whose modernism was seldom an uncomplicated celebration or manifestation of modernity, but often its querulous and sceptical interlocutor, 'hostile to that stately march of secular reason' which was, for many nationalists, revivalists, and modernists, precisely where 'a soulless Britain had washed up'.⁶⁹ This 'uneven development' hypothesis has been taken up and extended by a range of critics – most notably those associated with the Field Day enterprise – who approach the emergence of Irish modernism through a postcolonial lens.⁷⁰ For Joe Cleary, while the received narrative of European modernization – 'an inventory of inaugural ruptures' ranging from the Protestant Reformation to the emergence of capitalism (or, indeed, 'sexuality') – would cast Ireland as a peripheral and reactive consumer of a modernity being fashioned and theorized elsewhere, a postcolonial perspective might note that 'colonies' such as Ireland were in fact 'the first to endure the accelerated processes of social transformation and cultural hybridization' that characterize modernity.⁷¹ In such a reading, Ireland becomes not a belated and recalcitrant site of deficient and partial modernization, but a locus of 'alternative enlightenment' in which modernity received some of its earliest and most stringent critiques from figures as aesthetically and politically heterogeneous as Yeats and Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien).⁷²

This thesis maintains a more circumspect view of Ireland's colonial status, following Stephen Howe, Linda Connolly, and others in asserting that understanding Ireland as an 'imperial' culture better explains the heterogeneous ways in which different segments of Ireland's population could be both victims of and willing participants in an unbalanced process of modernization which was variously embraced and

⁶⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), 274.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 280.

⁷⁰ Ibid, chap. 7; Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790*, 1995 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Seamus Deane, "Dead Ends: Joyce's Finest Moments," in *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge and Marjorie Elizabeth Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21–36; Conor McCarthy, *Modernisation, Crisis and Culture in Ireland, 1969-1992* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), Introduction; Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, 2001, Introduction; Joe Cleary, "Toward a Materialist-Formalist History of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature," *Boundary 2* 31, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 207–41; Cleary, "Introduction: Ireland and Modernity"; Cleary, "Introduction"; Castle and Bixby, "Introduction."

⁷¹ Cleary, "Introduction: Ireland and Modernity," 3; 6.

⁷² Ibid, 6.

resisted.⁷³ Nevertheless, it shares with Eagleton and Cleary a sensitivity to Ireland's status as a cultural field that unevenly combined modern, pre-modern, and anti-modern currents, and charts the ways this 'uneven development' rendered the emergence of 'sexual modernism' in Ireland a more politically charged, culturally urgent, and less comfortably reciprocal exchange between literature and medical science than that charted by Bauer, Schaffner, and Peppis in an Anglo-American context. To register the complexities of this process, I follow Emer Nolan, Paige Reynolds, and others in embracing an understanding of Irish modernism that encompasses both the forces of what has traditionally been dubbed 'revivalism' (in its Gaelic and literary guises) and the wider currents of Anglo-European avant-garde cultural experimentation commonly referred to as 'modernism', eschewing the binary opposition which has often been taken to exist between them.⁷⁴ This focus allows me to maintain a sensitivity to the particularities of Irish culture and politics, particularly

⁷³ Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chap. 1; Stephen Howe, "Questioning the (Bad) Question: 'Was Ireland a Colony?'" *Irish Historical Studies* 36, no. 142 (November 2008): 138–52; Linda Connolly, "The Limits of 'Irish Studies': Historicism, Culturalism, Paternalism," in *Enemies of Empire: New Perspectives on Imperialism, Literature, and Historiography*, ed. Eóin Flannery and Angus Mitchell (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 189–210; Terence Brown, *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chaps. 1 and 7. A recent systematic articulation of this position is offered in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland* (2016). Of particular relevance in the present context are Richard Bourke, "Introduction," in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, ed. Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 15 and Arrington, "Irish Modernism and Its Legacies," 236.

⁷⁴ P.J. Mathews, *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League and the Co-Operative Movement* (Cork: Cork University Press in Association with Field Day, 2004); Emer Nolan, "Modernism and the Irish Revival," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, ed. Joe Cleary and Connolly, Claire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157–72; Paige Reynolds, *Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Introduction; Rónán McDonald, "The Irish Revival and Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 51–62. 'Modernism' is infamously difficult to define, but most accounts stress a self-proclaimed intention to break with tradition, an opposition to bourgeois values and culture (whether elitist or demotic in impulse), an emphasis on the subjectivity of experience and perception, and an (often anxious) awareness of a perceived breakdown in the coherence and unity of the 'individual', wider notions of community, and the communicative capacity of language (Malcolm Bradbury and James Walter McFarlane, eds., *Modernism, 1890–1930: A Guide to European Literature*, Repr. (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 27.) Since the 1980s, the term has been critiqued for its essential emptiness as a temporal and aesthetic category, its ideological inconsistencies, internal contradictions, and for its various exclusions, particularly in the realms of gender, race, and colonialism (Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution," *New Left Review* 144 (April 1984): 96–113; Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989); Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995); Susan Stanford Friedman, "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 8, no. 3 (2001): 493–513; Laura Doyle and Laura A. Winkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).) In light of these critiques, figures such as Michael Whitworth have argued that modernism is best understood as a 'fragile unity' which encompasses a 'set of responses to problems posed by the conditions of modernity' (Michael H. Whitworth, ed., "Introduction," in *Modernism: A Guide to Criticism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 3.) For a recent account of the emergence of 'modernism' as both a cultural phenomenon and a critical concept, see Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). For overviews of recent criticism in Modernist Studies, see Michael H. Whitworth, ed., *Modernism: A Guide to Criticism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007); Peter Brooker et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Mark A. Wollaeger and Matt Eatough, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jean-Michel Rabaté, ed., *A Handbook of Modernism Studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

in the domain of sex, while at the same time highlighting the ways in which different factions within Ireland responded to wider European events and trends. As a result, I focus both on authors who maintained close ties to Ireland (Yeats, Synge, Oliver St John Gogarty, Brian O’Nolan), and those who addressed Ireland from a greater geographical or cultural remove (Joyce, Beckett, Kate O’Brien, George Bernard Shaw). I also engage with the array of politicians, journalists, and cultural commentators with whom these authors variously collaborated, socialized, and quarrelled, including both major figures such as Maud Gonne, Arthur Griffith, and D.P. Moran, and less often surveyed individuals such as Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, Signe Toksvig, and Ethel Mannin. In doing so, I aim to offer an account the emergence and development of Irish modernism that balances the canonical and the over-looked to reveal the ways in which key events in Irish cultural and political history – the Parnell Split, the *Playboy* riots, the passage of the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act – contributed to and were shaped by ongoing debates and dilemmas in the field of sexual health.

Structure and Scope

In line with my historicizing approach and the schematized analysis of sexual health offered above, I develop my thesis across six chronologically sequenced chapters, clustered into four thematically organized parts. In Part One, I address the themes of autonomy and heredity by examining the role of sexual health discourse in two of the most significant controversies in the cultural and political history of modern Ireland: the Parnell Split, surveyed in Chapter One, and the *Playboy* riots, explored in Chapter Two. Both scandals have traditionally been characterized (and were strategically framed by their participants) as exemplary manifestations of Irish nationalism’s repressed and repressive attitude towards sex and sexuality, in which constitutional nationalists, Sinn Féin republicans, and Irish Ireland revivalists are cast as the prudish and censorious opponents of a more frank and progressive literary avant-garde. In both instances, I argue that this overlooks the extent to which nationalists and modernists alike employed rhetorics of sexual health and sexual pathology to diagnose what they perceived to be the ills of contemporary Irish political and cultural life (by which they usually meant each other), and to envisage and articulate their (often no less conflicting) models of personal, cultural, and political autonomy. In the case of the Split, I offer a fresh reading of the much-discussed ‘Parnell myth’ as a symbolic edifice within which a range of anxieties

concerning the relationship between Irishness and sexual health could be foregrounded and negotiated. Surveying a range of journalistic, biographical, and more overtly literary writing about Parnell, I demonstrate how the images of restraint, continence, and carefully regulated passion that were used to characterize the Chief by his allies before the Split and by modernist authors in its aftermath bequeathed to Irish modernism a pointedly sexualized model of artistry rooted in an ideal of self-siring masculine autonomy. I also chart how, in the hands of Parnell's enemies and detractors, the tropes of the myth could be used to present Parnell as a degenerative and sexually pathological threat to the physical and intellectual integrity of the Irish people.

This discussion is continued in my second chapter, in which I explore the role that both this image of hyper-masculine autonomy and the rhetoric of sexual pathology through which it was challenged play in the oeuvre of J.M. Synge and the controversies it provoked. Calling into question traditional accounts of the *Playboy* riots, which pit a sexually progressive Abbey Theatre against a rebarbative nationalist rabble, I contend that Synge, his supporters, and his opponents were in fact united in their use of a 'rhetoric of health': an over-determined discourse in which the lexicons of evolution, ethnography, eugenics, and degeneration are combined for political ends. Through this re-reading of the riots and an examination of Synge's critical, autobiographical, and ethnographic prose, I illustrate the ways in which the explanatory mechanisms of biology and sexual health could be harnessed to naturalize radically divergent political positions in debates over Ireland's future. I also highlight how Yeats, in his hyper-sexualized posthumous defense of Synge, sought to position his friend as the true inheritor of Parnell's virility, nobility, and hygienic autonomy, in contrast to the mob of syphilitic 'Eunuchs' who had opposed him.⁷⁵ In doing so, I illustrate the ways in which both the Split and the 'riots' lent a political urgency and an aesthetic potency to questions of sexual pathology and sexual health that was to inform Irish cultural and political debate for decades to come.

In Part Two, I address the theme of hygiene by examining how figurations of venereal disease, accounts of its aetiology, and campaigns for its regulation were used by politicians, activists, and authors to construct and contest models of Irish identity in the first decades of the twentieth century. Building on Chapter One's discussion of rhetorics of sexual pathology in the Split, in Chapter Three, I trace the ways

⁷⁵ W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 2000), 162.

in which references to venereal disease were employed in the anti-enlisting campaigns of the Irish Transvaal Committee, *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* [daughters of Ireland], and Sinn Féin to offer an explanatory metaphor for the malign impact of British imperial rule in Ireland. At the same time, I explore the ways in which figures such as Oliver St John Gogarty and James Joyce echoed and endorsed these positions, using venereal disease and its impact on the Irish population to critique British militarism. However, in doing so, I also acknowledge the ways in which Joyce was to distance himself from the more chauvinistic deployments of this rhetoric, particularly where they concerned Ireland's Jewish population. Finally, I trace the contours of an emerging weariness in Joyce's rendering of the entire question of sexual health as the grounds for conceptualizing Irish national identity, a topic that will be taken up and explored in greater depth in Part Four.

In Part Three, I explore the relationship between fertility and autonomy. In doing so, I address arguably the most significant (and fraught) point of intersection between debates over sexual health and modernism in Ireland: the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act and its infamous prohibition of printed material relating to contraception, birth control, and abortion. Where conventional accounts of the Act's passage and operation have framed the responses of Irish modernists such as Yeats, Beckett, and Kate O'Brien as ethically valorous and politically subversive rejections of sexual repression and state-mandated philistinism, I explore the ideological pitfalls and tensions that could attend such opposition.⁷⁶

On the one hand, in Chapter Four, by situating Samuel Beckett's personal, journalistic, and literary responses to the Act in relation to the comments of both other modernists (Yeats, Gogarty, Shaw) and a range of public and political figures, I demonstrate the ways in which, through the Act, wider European debates over fertility, population control, and eugenics became bound up with a broader competition for political influence and cultural capital between intellectual, governmental, and confessional factions within the emergent Free State. In doing so, I complicate the traditional picture of Beckett's heroic opposition to the 'filthy censor' and their 'filthy synecdoche' by emphasizing the debts which Beckett's infamous anti-

⁷⁶ See, for example, Brad Kent, "Zealots, Censors And Perverts: Irish Censorship and Liam O'Flaherty's *The Puritan*," *Irish Studies Review* 14, no. 3 (August 2006): 343–58; Michael Cronin, "Kate O'Brien and the Erotics of Liberal Catholic Dissent," *Field Day Review* 6 (2010): 28–51; Seán Kennedy, "First Love: Abortion and Infanticide in Beckett and Yeats," *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui*, 2010, 79–91.

natalism owes to a strand of Irish sectarian eugenicism which both contributed to and was intensified by the drafting and passage of the Act.⁷⁷

On the other hand, in Chapter Five, I move beyond this more traditional and male-centred framing of the Censorship Act as a matter of sectarian and demographic concern, to explore the responses of women such as Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, Signe Toksvig, and, in particular, Kate O'Brien to its passage and operation. Surveying O'Brien's critical reception, I argue that, in the push to accord O'Brien greater recognition within the canon of Irish modernism and to establish her liberalizing contribution to Irish cultural history, too little work has been done to explore the ideological investments and intellectual origins of her progressive outlook, often resulting in a decontextualized account of O'Brien's sexual politics. To address this lacuna, I explore the ways in which O'Brien's model of an ideal relationship – one compacted between two intelligent, capable, and 'beautiful' individuals, in which sex is the mutually-fulfilling realization of shared desire, and where children are the products of active choice rather than unavoidable necessity – reflects and responds to ongoing debates concerning birth control and eugenics in European, British, and Irish culture. In the process, I demonstrate the ways in which a desire to marry a eugenic conception of sex and sexuality with an investment in individual liberty and social equality could have potentially noxious political implications for a notionally progressive author like O'Brien.

Finally, in Part Four, I bring together all four key themes to explore the legacy of sexual health as a focus of social and cultural debate in 1960s Ireland, and to highlight the increasing exhaustion of Irish modernism's iconoclastic engagement with the topic. To do so, I examine Flann O'Brien's much maligned final novel, *The Hard Life* (1961) – a *Bildungsroman* set in turn-of-the-century Dublin in which a lexicon of weariness and fatigue predominates – and its consistent thematic concern with issues of sexual health and public welfare. The 1960s marked a period of relative liberalization, modernization, and prosperity for the Republic of Ireland.⁷⁸ I explore why, under such circumstances, O'Nolan felt compelled to retreat from an increasingly confident present into what he constructs as the sexually squalid and politically paralyzed culture of turn-of-the-century Dublin. Moving beyond *The Hard Life*, I explore how, in O'Nolan's late fiction and *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, the key themes and debates addressed in my thesis re-emerge in a

⁷⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (London: Faber, 2009), 50.

⁷⁸ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London: Profile, 2005), 537; Fergal Tobin, *The Best of Decades: Ireland in the Nineteen Sixties* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984).

performatively exhausted or ‘used-up’ manner. At the same time, by examining O’Nolan’s thwarted efforts to stage a Syngean confrontation with Dublin audiences and a Joycean confrontation with the censorship board, I illustrate the ways in which Irish modernist provocations in the domain of sexual health had come to be surpassed by their context, even as the issues which animated them remained both socially divisive and culturally urgent. In doing so, I suggest the ways in which the politicization of sexual health in Ireland could remain a nightmare from which modernists were increasingly ill-equipped to help the nation to awake.

Part I

Scandals of Autonomy

Chapter One

‘Bred out of the contagion of the throng’

Irish Modernism, Sexual Health, and the Parnell Myth

I believe no more wholesome and no more chastening step will be taken [...] than when Ireland, erect and in its strength, casts from the body politic the ulcer which these men endeavour to graft upon it (loud applause). We must purge Ireland of this corrupt humour with which they have endeavoured to inoculate our blood (applause).

Timothy Healy on the Parnellite cause (06 June 1891)

—*That bitch, that English whore, did for him, the shebeen proprietor commented. She put the first nail in his coffin.*
—*Fine lump of a woman all the same, the soi-disant townclerk Henry Campbell remarked, and plenty of her. She loosened many a man’s thighs.*

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922)

All that was sung, / All that was said in Ireland is a lie / Bred out of the contagion of the throng[.]

W.B. Yeats, ‘Parnell’s Funeral’ (1934)

As has often been demonstrated, Irish modernists found in Charles Stewart Parnell an exemplary manifestation of a range of personal, political, and artistic virtues, chief among them autonomy, self-mastery, and a capacity for radical self-fashioning.¹ What has been less often noted is the centrality of sexual health to their conception, articulation, and emulation of those virtues. For W.B. Yeats, Parnell’s ‘master solitude’ came to epitomize a form of hygienic sexual autonomy which repudiated all that was ‘bred out of the contagion of the throng’ of petty-bourgeois Catholic nationalists whom he held responsible for the Chief’s fall.² As his self-accusing indictment of all that was ‘sung’ and ‘said’ in Ireland after Parnell’s death suggests, he felt that this anti-septic independence was not only a political but an aesthetic ideal, one which he and his contemporaries had struggled to uphold.³ However, as Timothy Healy’s image of a virile Ireland, ‘erect and in its strength’, purging its ‘blood’ of the ‘corrupt humour’ of Parnellism makes clear, the anti-Parnellite ‘throng’ against whom Yeats retrospectively aligned himself were no less enamoured of this ideal

¹ Michael Steinman, *Yeats’s Heroic Figures: Wilde, Parnell, Swift, Casement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), chap. 4; John Kelly, “Parnell in Irish Literature,” in *Parnell in Perspective*, ed. David George Boyce and Alan O’Day (London: Routledge, 1991), 251–58; Andrew Gibson, *James Joyce* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 44; David Dwan, *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), 188–99; Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2011), chap. 2.

² Yeats, *The Poems*, 2000, 330.

³ *Ibid.*, 330.

of hygienic autonomy, even if they no longer supported the man who had once embodied it.⁴ In both cases, the Parnell myth is closely tied to a form of health in which sex is treated with extreme ambivalence. The thinly-veiled phallic undertones of Healy's image of a virile and tumescent Ireland purging itself of contagion appear to present masculine sexual potency as a key component of the nation's physical and cultural well-being. Yet, the comment itself was made to excoriate Parnell for having displayed an apparent excess of just this virility. Yeats's poem seems to suggest an eschewal not only of the 'throng' and its 'contagion', but the act of breeding through which that contagion is propagated. Yet, within two years of completing it he would undergo the Steinach 'rejuvenation' operation in the hope of restoring his capacity for just such apparently degrading sexual activity, and add a coda to the poem, chastising those who had failed to live up to Parnell's potent example.⁵ If, as the snatch of conversation in the Cabman's shelter from *Ulysses* quoted above illustrates, James Joyce felt that Parnell's legacy revealed the hypocrisy and moral cowardice of a nationalist population unwilling to confront the realities of their own desires, it could leave modernists appearing just as conflicted in their attitudes to sex, particularly in its relationship to health.

As the epigraphs to this chapter demonstrate, the Parnell myth bequeathed to Irish modernism a highly sexualized model of autonomy, rooted in a normative ideal of health. In doing so, it brought that model of autonomy into potential conflict with the other facets of sexual health I identified in my Introduction. In what follows, I trace the tensions and contradictions to which this could give rise and what they can reveal about the political and aesthetic self-fashioning of a range of Irish modernists. To do so, I examine how, through the Parnell myth, competing Irish anxieties about sexual incontinence and the threat of perceived impotence combined to produce an image of the Chief as the embodiment of paradoxically virile celibacy, a model of radical sexual autonomy which, I argue, was eagerly taken up and extended by Yeats, Joyce, and others. At the same time, I explore the ways in which the anti-Parnellite press deployed a rhetoric of acquired and inherited sexual pathology to characterize their former leader as a degenerative

⁴ *National Press*, June 6, 1891 quoted in Frank Callanan, *T.M. Healy* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 296. This chapter is indebted throughout to Callanan's study of Healy's life, which extensively reproduces much of his polemical commentary during the Split.

⁵ For the Steinach operation and its relationship to Yeats's writing and politics in this period, see Virginia D. Pruitt, "Yeats and the Steinach Operation," *American Imago* 34, no. 3 (Fall 1977): 287–96; Richard Ellmann, *W.B. Yeats's Second Puberty: A Lecture Delivered at the Library of Congress on April 2, 1984* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1985); Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body*, chap. 5; Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics*, 2001, chap. 7; R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, The Arch-Poet, 1915–1939*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 13; Joseph M. Hassett, *W.B. Yeats and the Muses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chap. 7.

threat to the physical and cultural well-being of Ireland and its people, a tactic that figures such as J.M. Synge were both to repudiate and replicate in their own writing. In both cases, I reveal the ways in which this Parnellian model of autonomy was perceived to be compromised by the claims of heredity and fertility and trace the impact of the anxiety this generated in the self-fashioning of many of the male architects of Irish modernism. In particular, I demonstrate how this apparent tension between autonomy and fertility prompted figures such as Yeats and Joyce to sponsor an ideal of self-siring masculine artistry that repudiated all suggestion of external biological origin or issue. Finally, turning to the work of Flann O'Brien (Brian O'Nolan) I illustrate how, as the twentieth century progressed, the increasing tendency to approach sex from the standpoint of public health gradually deprived this Parnellian ideal of hyper-sexualized autonomy of much of its iconoclastic charge. Perhaps counter-intuitively in the context of such an account, an interrogation of the politics of sexual health in Irish modernist responses to the Parnell myth must begin with a discussion of celibacy.

Hygienic Autonomy: Celibacy and the 'Parnell myth'

Parnell's reserve, froideur, and stoicism have long been commonplaces of Irish literary and political historiography.⁶ In virtually every piece of biographical, journalistic, or literary writing devoted to Parnell, particularly those addressing his character prior to the Split, the same semantic field is consistently deployed to describe his demeanour and bearing. Parnell is variously: 'impassive, rock-like'; 'calm, silent, and restrained'; 'le moins agité des agitateurs' [the least agitated of agitators]; 'the lock-mouthed master of loose-lipped men'; 'encased in steel'; the embodiment of an imperturbable 'serenity', 'iron resolution', and

⁶ Major surveys of the Parnell myth which stress these features include Herbert Howarth, *The Irish Writers, 1880-1940: Literature Under Parnell's Star* (London: Rockcliff, 1958); F.S.L. Lyons, "The Parnell Theme in Literature," in *Place, Personality, and the Irish Writer*, ed. Andrew Carpenter (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1977), 69–96; F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine*, Repr. (London: Fontana Press, 1992), pt. 2, chap. 3; F.S.L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell*, New ed. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2005); Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Parnell and His Party, 1880-90*, Corrected Impression (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), chap. Epilogue; William Michael Murphy, *The Parnell Myth and Irish Politics, 1891-1956* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986); David George Boyce and Alan O'Day, eds., *Parnell in Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1991); Kelly, "Parnell in Irish Literature"; Frank Callanan, *The Parnell Split: 1890 - 91* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1992); Callanan, *T.M. Healy*, pt. 2; Dwan, *The Great Community*, 2008, 188–99; R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, Repr. (London: Penguin Books, 2011), chap. 17; Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*, chaps. 1–2; Paul Bew, *Enigma: A New Life of Charles Stewart Parnell* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2012); Elizabeth Mannion, "Staging Parnell: Biodrama at the Early Abbey Theatre," *New Hibernia Review* 22, no. 2 (2018): 146–58.

‘impenetrable reserve’.⁷ However, the relationship between this unprecedented continence in word and deed and an ideal of hygienic sexual autonomy rooted in a curiously virile mode of celibacy has been largely overlooked in discussions of the Parnell myth. Prior to the revelations of the O’Shea divorce case, Parnell’s apparently preternatural restraint was frequently figured as a form of abstinence rooted in a symbolic marriage between Parnell and Ireland itself. An article in the London *Leader* in 1888 is typical in offering an almost hagiographic account of Parnell in which his chaste devotion to the nationalist cause is fetishized in an insistent nuptial register:

The Irish people [...] know that under that cold face beats a heart which throbs with love for Ireland. [...] He is, indeed, the ‘Uncrowned King of Ireland’, loved with a love and followed with a fidelity which no leader has commanded since the days of Hugh Roe O’Donnell. There is a kind of shadowy tradition that in his early manhood ‘Charlie Parnell’ was crossed in love. He certainly has not been crossed in love since he ‘took off his coat’ to fight the battle of Ireland [...] she has been his queen, his mistress, the only love of his heart, his Dark Rosaleen.⁸

The Mangan-tinged characterization of Ireland as a loyal and long-suffering mistress was a well-worn one, as was the trope of the nationalist hero forgoing a consummated romantic relationship on the terrestrial plane to pledge himself to Erin’s service on a spiritual one.⁹ The invocation of an anecdotal early heart-break rehearses this narrative to suggest that Parnell’s service to Ireland leaves no room for another, more tangible female presence in his life. The over-wording of terms of ‘fidelity’, loyalty, and commitment offer some sense of just how disastrous the revelations of the O’Shea trial were ultimately to prove for Parnell’s public image and the mythic celibacy upon which it was staked. Parnell’s perceived complicity in this rhetoric is suggested in an account of a (probably apocryphal) exchange between Parnell and the solicitor W.H. Duignan, who asked the Irish leader why he did not marry. According to Duignan, Parnell replied ‘I

⁷ T.C. Luby, R.F. Walsh, and J.C. Curtin, *The Story of Ireland’s Struggle for Self-Government* (New York: Gay Brothers & Company, 1893), 743; *Freeman’s Journal*, February 18, 1881; J.L. Garvin, “Parnell and His Power,” *Fortnightly Review* 64 (December 1, 1891): 880; R. Barry O’Brien, *The Life of Charles Stewart Parnell, 1846-1891*, vol. 1 (London: Smith, Elder, 1898), 145; James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, ed. Kevin Barry, trans. Conor Deane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 194; Garvin, “Parnell and His Power,” 880; T.P. O’Connor, *Charles Stewart Parnell: A Memory* (London: Ward, Lock, Bowden & Co., 1891), 213.

⁸ J. Connellan, *Life of Charles Stewart Parnell, Esq., M.P., Reprinted from the Leader* (London, 1888).

⁹ Examples of this trope in Irish culture are too numerous to permit a comprehensive summary. As Connellan’s comments suggest, one influential example was Mangan’s famous 1847 lyric, in which the speaker pledges to rear ‘Again in golden sheen’ the throne of the eponymous Rosaleen who shall enjoy sovereignty over both his heart and the nation. James Clarence Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan, Vol. 3: Poems, 1845-1847*, ed. Jacques Chuto (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1996), 168–69. For a discussion of other influential renderings of this convention, see Howes, *Yeats’s Nations*, 74–76; Susan Canon Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), chap. 1; Gerardine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2010), chap. 1; Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*, chap. 3.

am married – to my country, and can best serve as I am’.¹⁰ Whether or not the remark emanated from Parnell himself, the fact that it was attributed to him, and the stress it lays on the politically beneficial character of his celibacy (he can ‘best serve’ as a bachelor) emphasize the centrality of sexual continence to the Parnell myth.

However, as the *Leader*’s image of Parnell’s ‘throbbing’ heart suggests, the consistent emphasis laid on Parnell’s steely reserve, and the celibacy with which it was cognate, should not be read as an indication that contemporary commentators believed him to lack passion (or desire). Indeed, as a range of critics have noted, his placid exterior is most often presented as a façade, masking and regulating intense inner turmoil.¹¹ The sense of a constant struggle between powerful drives within Parnell is suggested by the antithetical imagery which Standish O’Grady employed to characterize his temperament, in which an ‘ice clear, ice cold intellect, work[ed] as if in the midst of fire’.¹² This vein of imagery was also taken up by the Parnellite *United Ireland* to describe the frenzy of his final campaign and the fascination it afforded the English press: ‘[It] is the man himself that conquered them, the Titan as he flamed out in the last struggle, like an unsuspected volcano breaking in red devastation through its accumulated ice.’¹³ Decades after his death, Katharine Parnell was to reprise the theme in her intimate biography of her husband, stating that ‘few knew of the volcanic force and fire that burned beneath his icy exterior’ – the not-so-subtle implication of course being that, if anyone was in a position to know, it was the woman who had shared his bed for over a decade.¹⁴ In the Parnell myth, the intense self-mastery of celibacy thus co-existed with a no less strongly stressed sexual potency, which it served to hold in check. For Parnell’s brother, this dynamic was at the heart of Parnell’s courtship of the Irish people, serving as both an aphrodisiac and a prophylactic: ‘a robe that attracted the loyalty’ and excited the ‘wild enthusiasm’ of his countrymen, ‘while at the same time repelling their intimacy’.¹⁵

What was at stake in this paradoxical image of radical chastity and intense virility for Parnell and his supporters, and what was its relationship to sexual health? As the case of Parnell vividly illustrates, Irish

¹⁰ *The Nation*, January 2, 1886.

¹¹ The most relevant discussions in the present context are Dwan, *The Great Community*, 2008, 188–99 and Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*, chap. 1.

¹² Standish O’Grady, *The Story of Ireland* (London: Methuen & Co., 1894), 210–11.

¹³ ‘Parnell and Our Policy,’ *United Ireland*, October 12, 1895.

¹⁴ Katharine Parnell, *Charles Stewart Parnell, His Love Story and Political Life*, vol. 2 (London: London & Co, 1914), 46.

¹⁵ John Howard Parnell, *Charles Stewart Parnell: A Memoir* (New York: Henry Holt, 1914), 127.

attitudes to sexual health in the late nineteenth century were profoundly ambivalent, if not actively contradictory. On the one hand, as Tom Inglis and others have argued, the growing ‘moral monopoly’ of the Catholic Church in Irish public life could make it seem like there was no such thing as healthy sex at all, rendering the topic an apparently undiscussable locus of anxiety which necessitated firm social regulation.¹⁶ British stereotypes of the Irish as ‘undisciplinable, anarchical, and turbulent’ exemplars of a politically disabling mode of Celtic femininity reinforced this impression, encouraging advocates of independence to stress the purity and restraint of the Irish, particularly in sexual matters.¹⁷ Underpinning both positions was a well-worn rationalist conception of sexual desire as a degrading compromise of a subject’s autonomy which impaired their capacity for reasoned thought and self-mastery.¹⁸ The gendered dynamics of this ideal of rational self-rule, particularly in its Enlightenment manifestations, have been well-canvassed, with numerous commentators noting the ways in which figures such as Descartes and Rousseau coded rationality as a signally masculine trait in contrast to the apparent unreason of feminine corporeality.¹⁹

¹⁶ Tom Inglis, “Foucault, Bourdieu and the Field of Irish Sexuality,” *Irish Journal of Sociology* 7, no. 1 (1997): 5–28; Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, 2nd ed (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998); Tom Inglis, “Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland,” *Éire-Ireland* 40, no. 3 (2005): 9–37; Tom Inglis, “The Irish Body,” in *Are the Irish Different?*, ed. Tom Inglis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 88–98; Chrystel Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland*, ed. Jo Campling (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); James M. Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Quoting Henri Martin, Matthew Arnold influentially presented the Celt as ‘Sentimental – *always ready to react against the despotism of fact*’ and argued that the rational, masculine Anglo-Saxon had failed his feminized neighbour in neglecting to cultivate a ‘vital union’ between the two races and cultures. Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1867), 109; 102; xii. For a discussion of the gendered and ethnic politics of this model of Celtic identity, see Howes, *Yeats’s Nations*, chap. 1; Susan Canon Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), chap. 2; Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922*, chap. 1.

¹⁸ In ‘Cratylus’, Plato has Socrates liken desire to a chain whose heaviness increased in direct proportion to its strength, while in the *Republic* he famously has Socrates liken the loss of libido in old age to the experience of a slave who has escaped from long bondage to a savage and unstable master. For Kant, sexual desire famously constituted an extreme form of objectification which violated the subjectivity not only of the desired other, but of the desiring individual themselves. Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato Translated into English with Analyses and Introductions*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd: Revised and Updated (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), 346–47; Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield, Reissued [1993] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), sec. 329c; Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 163. For an overview of philosophical positions on desire, see Rockney Jacobsen, “Desire, Sexual,” in *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia*, ed. Alan Soble, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006), 222–28.

¹⁹ The Cartesian mind-body distinction has long been understood in gendered terms, with masculinity elevated to a state of transcendent reason and femininity reduced to an inescapable biological facticity. Likewise, while Rousseau argued that sex in the state of nature had been a mutually desired and mutually fulfilling exchange between two equally matched (heterosexual) partners, in *Émile* (1762), he argued that men were far more likely to transcend their embodied situation and its attendant desires: ‘Le mâle n’est mâle qu’en certains instants, la femelle est femelle toute sa vie, ou du moins toute sa jeunesse.’ [The male is only male at certain moments, the female is female all her life, or, at least, all her youth.] Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau*, vol. tome II : *La nouvelle Héloïse. Émile. Lettre à M. de Beaumont* (Paris: Alexandre Houssiaux, 1852), 634. For a representative overview of this phenomenon and the commentary it has generated, see Victor J Siedler, “Reason, Desire, and Male Sexuality,” in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed. Pat Caplan, Repr [1987] (London: Routledge, 1996), 82–112. For a version of this critique in the context

In late nineteenth-century Europe, this framing of well-regulated masculine desire as a component of ‘reason’ was both bolstered and brought into the domain of health through the proliferation of discourses and diagnostic taxonomies concerning perceived sexual perversions to which sexology gave rise.²⁰ As I suggested in my Introduction, in texts such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s voluminous *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), which comprised 238 case studies by its twelfth edition (1902), irresistible sexual urges came to be treated as evidence not merely of irrationality, but of physical and mental pathology.²¹ In late nineteenth-century Ireland, to be sexually incontinent was thus not only to offend against Catholic social teaching, but to conform to a model of Irish identity increasingly synonymous with a mode of pathological irrationality and a perceived incapacity for personal and national self-governance.

On the other hand, the absence of sex (or, at least, sexual desire) could be just as ‘unhealthy’ as its excessive presence. While the oft-invoked ‘crisis of masculinity’ which beset *fin de siècle* Europe can be overstressed, the medical literature surrounding ‘male hysteria’ in the 1880s and 1890s undoubtedly reflects an abiding concern with the pathological effects of impotence and diminished or repressed libido in men.²² As Mark S. Micale has shown, ‘anaphrodesia’ (the absence of sexual desire), ‘testicular anaesthesia’, and ‘genital asthenia’ (a progressive loss of sex drive) were all identified as symptomatic of the malady, which, in a cruel irony, was most commonly held to manifest itself in impotent episodes of hyper-eroticized involuntary bodily convulsion.²³ This perspective was not merely confined to the world of medical science. For Friedrich Nietzsche, whose thought was to influence many Irish modernist appropriations of the Parnell

of Modernist Studies, see Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), Introduction.

²⁰ Numerous accounts have been offered of this phenomenon across a range of disciplines. Significant statements in the present context include Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pts. 3 and 4; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, Third Edition [1981] (London: Pearson, 2012), chap. 8; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities*, Reprinted (London: Routledge, 1985), chap. 4; Lucy Bland and Laura L. Doan, eds., *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Heike Bauer, *English Literary Sexology: Translations of Inversion, 1860 - 1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Heike Bauer, ed., *Sexology and Translation: Cultural and Scientific Encounters Across the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

²¹ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der konträren Sexualempfindung: Eine medizinisch-gerichtliche Studie für Ärzte und Juristen*, 12. Ausgabe (Stuttgart: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1902).

²² For the origins of this historiographical turn, see Roger Horrocks and Jo Campling, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies, and Realities* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994); John Tosh, “What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *History Workshop* 38 (1994): 179–202. For an account of cultural attitudes to impotence in this period, see Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), chaps. 5 and 6.

²³ Moty, “Hystérie Chez l’homme,” *Gazette Des Hôpitaux* 30 (March 12, 1885): 235; Elisé-Samuel Maricourt, *Contribution à l’Étude de l’hystérie Chez l’homme* (Paris: Medical Dissertation, 1877), 42; Joseph Grasset and Sidoine Jeannet, *Quelques Cas d’hystérie Mâle et de Neurasthénie* (Montpellier: C Coulet, 1892), 9–11, quoted in Mark S Micale, *Hysterical Men: The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 187.

myth, ascetism and abstinence, the ‘morbid’ by-products of a Christian ‘misunderstanding of the body’, made a virtue of ‘poor nutrition’ by rejecting true ‘health’ as a species of ‘enemy’, ‘devil’, or ‘temptation’.²⁴ The ‘*great* health’ of the mature ‘free spirit’, Nietzsche argued, embraced rather than eschewed the imperatives of sexual desire, which he considered the basis for all evolutionary progress:²⁵

‘*Perfection*’: in those states (especially in sexual love, etc.) there is naively revealed what the deepest instinct acknowledges to be the higher, more desirable, more valuable in general, the upward movement of its type; likewise, *which* status it’s really *striving for*. Perfection: that is the extraordinary expansion of its feeling of power; it is wealth; it is the necessary bubbling and brimming over all limits...²⁶

The echoes of these lines of thought in Yeats’s denunciation of the ‘*Hysterica passio*’ of the ‘throng’ he believed had brought down Parnell, or the ‘eunuch-like tone and temper’ of those who opposed what he identified as the sexual potency of J.M. Synge’s dramatic oeuvre are not far to seek.²⁷ At the same time, as Joseph Valente has suggested, the same Celticist scheme which obliged nationalists to stress Irish purity, also made it necessary for them to emphasize the virile potency of the nation and its political and cultural avatars or risk being deemed too passive to be worthy of self-rule at all.²⁸

Parnell’s public persona was carefully calibrated to balance these conflicting imperatives and the anxieties to which they gave rise, serving as a sort of sexual golden mean in which neither continence nor virility were compromised or allowed to compromise the perceived ‘*great* health’ of the autonomous leader. Though Parnell did not coin the term, as both a project and a slogan, ‘Home Rule’, with its overtones of regulated domesticity, patriarchal autocracy, and intimate self-mastery, performed a very similar balancing-act. Joyce draws attention to both sides of this sexualized ideal of autonomy and the strain involved in balancing them in *Ulysses* through the ironic juxtaposition of the two advertisements which follow Bloom

²⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 50. Emphases Nietzsche’s. Commentary on Nietzsche’s conception of health and its role in his philosophy is voluminous. For a useful discussion of Nietzsche’s idiosyncratic interpretation of evolutionary theory and its relationship to sex, desire, and health, see Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology, and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chap. 3.

²⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4. Emphasis Nietzsche’s.

²⁶ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 160. Emphasis and ellipsis Nietzsche’s.

²⁷ In ‘On Those That Hated *The Playboy of the Western World*, 1907’, Yeats famously presents a midnight encounter between crowds of ‘Eunuchs’ who throng the streets to look upon the ‘sinewy thigh’ of Synge, whom Yeats figures as Don Juan on horseback. The politicized role of sexual health rhetoric in Yeats’s posthumous curation of Synge’s literary legacy is discussed in greater detail in the Chapter Two. Yeats, *The Poems*, 2000, 329; 162; W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Papermac, 1988), 177.

²⁸ Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*, Introduction.

throughout the novel: the ‘HOUSE OF KEY(E)S’ (U 7.141) circular, with its ‘innuendo of home rule’ (U 7.150), which Bloom is trying to have placed in the *Daily Telegraph*, and the notice for ‘*Plumtree’s Potted Meat*’ (U 5.145), with its oft-highlighted suggestion of phallic penetration and its painful reminder of Molly’s infidelity, which confronts him in his morning copy of the *Freeman’s Journal*.²⁹ In Joyce’s view, while the advocates of Home Rule stressed an ideal of hygienic autonomy and self-regulation, they did so in conversation with a model of masculine virility in which no home could be complete without regularly ‘potted meat’. Parnell’s political and cultural appeal lay in his capacity to suggest both tendencies at once. His political and personal ruin stemmed from the collapse of this carefully calibrated dialectic and the revelations of the O’Shea divorce case which precipitated it.

Succumbing to Heredity: Portraits of Parnell as a General Paralytic

When Parnell was named as a co-respondent in Captain William O’Shea’s divorce proceedings against his wife, Katharine, in December 1889, the reputation for superhuman reserve upon which Parnell’s public persona had been constructed, combined with the pointedly sexual nature of his perceived transgressions, lent an added potency and urgency to sexual health rhetoric which anti-Parnellites were quick to exploit. They did so by staging a protracted assault on the claims to hygienic autonomy upon which the Parnell myth had hitherto been so conspicuously staked. Their most consistent target was Parnell’s mental health. Their preferred rhetorical strategy centred on questions of heredity.

In the outpouring of vituperation which followed the Split, Parnell’s failure to uphold in the arena of his sexual life the heroic reserve and ardent restraint upon which his public persona rested, and the protracted deceit the affair was perceived to have required of him, were presented as having precipitated (or, in more charitable accounts, stemmed from) a descent into congenital insanity. At the centre of this recharacterization of the Chief was his former deputy, Timothy Healy, a former member of *United Ireland* staff who broke away to found the *National Press* in the March of 1891 in response to what he presented as ‘a situation which had become not only a scandal, but a source of public danger’.³⁰ Introducing the paper,

²⁹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Gabler (New York: Vintage, 1986). Cited parenthetically by episode and line number.

³⁰ “At the Outset,” *National Press*, March 7, 1891, 4.

Healy promised that the *National Press* would reunify Irish nationalism behind ‘principle’ not ‘personality’.³¹ A key manoeuvre in sponsoring this shift away from the fetish of Parnellism was to insinuate that the ‘personality’ in question was pathologically unstable. An early manifestation of this rhetoric, and the fissures within the Irish party which it reflected, came in an article in the *New York Times* of 13 July 1890 by Harold Frederic, a friend and collaborator of Healy. Amid an increasingly visible disagreement between Parnell and Healy on the question of peasant proprietorship, Frederic presented Parnell’s unexpected intervention in the debate over Balfour’s ‘Purchase of Land and Congested Districts (Ireland) Bill’ as evidence of his increasingly fragile mental state:

There has all along been the difficulty of seeing how he could maintain this post once the O’Shea case had come to trial, and last night a number of Irish members were disposed to fear that brooding upon this trouble had brought on the mental disturbance to which he is hereditarily predisposed. It is the only way in which they are able to account for his astonishing and contemptuous act of treachery to them.³²

Healy was rapidly identified as the inspiration for, if not the author of Frederic’s article, and, though he denied responsibility for its contents, he did not disavow its sentiments or intervene to curtail its circulation. Instead, Frederic’s attacks only grew more explicit and ferocious, with one article, on the basis of Parnell’s ‘strong hereditary predispositions towards mental disturbance’, claiming in its headline that ‘lunacy’ was ‘a charitable construction to put upon his conduct’ and baldly inquiring ‘is Parnell a crazy man?’³³ These trans-Atlantic salvos did not escape the notice of Parnell, who, in the midst of the Split, angrily claimed that Healy had cabled to America ‘to consign [him] to the lunatic asylum’.³⁴ This perception became so widespread that the *National Press* felt compelled to defend itself by disparaging what it dubbed the *United Ireland’s* ‘drive him into an-asylum-or-the-grave yarns’.³⁵ Whatever their origin, the immediate import of Frederic’s remarks was clear enough: the strain of the O’Shea case had precipitated Parnell’s lapse into a politically disastrous form of inherited madness which his lieutenants could no longer afford to ignore.

³¹ Ibid, 4.

³² *New York Times*, 13 July 1890.

³³ Harold Frederic, “Is Parnell a Crazy Man: His Foul Betrayal of the Cause of Ireland. Lunacy a Charitable Construction to Put Upon His Conduct – What His Colleagues Bear – Beginning of the O’Shea Scandal,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1890, 12.

³⁴ Callanan, *The Parnell Split*, 283.

³⁵ *National Press*, October 13, 1891.

While Frank Callanan has offered a detailed and probing analysis of anti-Parnellite efforts to pathologize the Chief's public image in the aftermath of the O'Shea divorce, the most damning implications of Frederic and Healy's image of a constitutionally demented Parnell and its relationship to contemporary medical theories of heredity and degeneration have yet to be fully explored by commentators on the Split.³⁶ Yet, it was precisely this aspect of post-Split rhetoric that was to prove among the most significant in shaping the vexed relationship between the various strands of modernism and nationalism that took root in post-Split Ireland. By linking a suggestion of hereditary insanity to the sexual impropriety for which the O'Shea trial was a byword, Frederic presented Parnell as a victim of and locus for degeneration through what would have been legible to many readers as a tacit diagnosis of congenital syphilis.³⁷ As shall be explored further in Chapter Three, in the degenerationist logic of late-nineteenth century medicine, the birth defects, developmental delays, and learning difficulties which congenital syphilis caused were read as evidence of both physical and cultural decline. Alfred Fournier, one of Europe's foremost authorities on syphilis and its treatment in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, presented the illness as an eschatological threat to the fabric of European society. According to Fournier, congenital syphilis threatened the state with citizens incapable of work, soldiers incapable of combat, increased rates of separation and divorce – 'avec toutes les calamités sociales qui en dérivent' [with all the social calamities which derive from them] – sterile marriages, 'abâtardissement et dégénération de la race' [bastardization and degeneration of the race], polymortality of the young, and eventual depopulation.³⁸ In offering this prognosis, Fournier drew on the work of Bénédict Augustin Morel, whose account of 'des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles, et morales de l'espèce humaine' [the physical, intellectual, and moral degeneration of the human species] became a commonplace of late-nineteenth century scientific and cultural commentary. Morel famously defined 'dégénérescence' as 'une déviation malade d'un type primitif' [a morbid deviation from an original type], in a neo-Lamarckian narrative of environmentally-determined

³⁶ While Frank Callanan's study of the Split acknowledges that 'Parnell's physical aspect and demeanour became [in the wake of the O'Shea trial] a political issue' and traces the ways in which his deteriorating health and dishevelled appearance were presented as indices of his moral decline, it does not highlight the role suggestions of sexual pathology played in such a campaign. Likewise, despite offering a thoroughgoing and perceptive account of Healy's 'sexual rhetoric' against Parnell in chapter 14 of his biography of Parnell's lieutenant to which the present discussion is indebted, Callanan does not identify or unpack the references to venereal disease and degeneration with which it was encoded. Callanan, *The Parnell Split*, 162; Callanan, *T.M. Healy*, chaps. 10–14.

³⁷ Center for Disease Control, "STD Surveillance Case Definitions," STD Surveillance Case Definitions, December 10, 2013, <https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/CaseDefinitions-2014.pdf>.

³⁸ Alfred Fournier, *Prophylaxie de la Syphilis* (Paris: J. Rueff, 1903), 4.

progressive decline soon extended to account for cultural as well as biological decay.³⁹ British psychologist Henry Maudsley, in his influential *The Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* (1867), cites a case study from Morel's *Traité* to illustrate this trend:

First generation. – Immorality. Alcoholic excess. Brutal degradation.

Second generation. – Hereditary drunkenness. Maniacal attacks. General Paralysis.

Third generation. – Sobriety. Hypochondria. Lypemania. Systematic mania. Homicidal tendencies.

Fourth generation. – Feeble intelligence. Stupidity. First attack of mania at sixteen. Transition to complete idiocy, and probable extinction of the family.⁴⁰

The degenerative slide from 'Immorality' to 'extinction' via a succession of ever-intensifying psychological and physiological pathologies charts a medico-moral narrative of progressive corruption that furnished contemporary cultural and political commentators with an uncommonly flexible vehicle for social critique. As Morel's genealogy suggests, General Paralysis of the Insane (GPI) – a terminal state of spastic muscular weakness, violent personality changes, and dementia whose roots in syphilitic infection were strongly suspected, but, as yet, unproven in contemporary medicine – offered both the ideal metaphor for and exemplification of this process.⁴¹ Decried as the 'apotheosis of selfishness', and a condition whose 'opening chapter' was 'moral decadence' and whose conclusion was 'inevitable premature extinction', GPI became a byword for a corrupt and corrupting contemporary culture.⁴² In the hands of Healy and his allies it afforded a valuable opportunity to naturalize a moral critique of Parnellism through a diagnostic register that

³⁹ The best-known and most influential application of degeneration theory to the realm of culture is the Hungarian social critic Max Nordau's 1892 polemic, *Entartung* [degeneration]. In a dedication to the Italian criminologist Caesar Lombroso, Nordau famously asserted that degenerates 'sind nicht immer Verbrecher, Prostituierte, Anarchisten und erklärte Wahnsinnige. Sie sind manchmal Schriftsteller und Künstler' [are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists]. Bénédict Augustin Morel, *Traité des Dégénérescences Physiques, Intellectuelles et Morales de l'Espèce Humaine et des Causes qui Produisent ces Variétés Maladies* (Paris: J.B. Ballière, 1857), 5; Max Nordau, *Entartung*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Carl Dunder, 1893), vii.

⁴⁰ Henry Maudsley, *The Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* (London: Macmillan, 1867), 215–16.

⁴¹ Prior to the establishment of its status as a form of tertiary syphilis in 1913, GPI was taken to stem from a broader confluence of immoral and improvident behaviours, including over-work, alcoholism, and sexual excess. This is not to say that syphilis and GPI were not strongly associated throughout the nineteenth century (its status as a form of sexual pathology had effectively been established by mid-century), but to suggest the variety of social problems the illness could be invoked to address in the period. Elizabeth A. Martin, ed., *Concise Medical Dictionary*, 8th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 301; Jennifer Wallis, "'Atrophied', 'Engorged', 'Debauched': Muscle Wastage, Degenerate Mass and Moral Worth in the General Paralytic Patient," in *Insanity and the Lunatic Asylum in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Thomas Knowles and Serena Trowbridge (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2015), 100.

⁴² R.S. Stewart, "The Increase of General Paralysis in England and Wales: Its Causation and Significance," *Journal of Medical Science* 42 (October 1896): 776.

productively hovered between the literal and the metaphorical, allowing them to present Parnell's continued influence in Irish politics as a demoralizing contagious disease.

Unfortunately for the Chief and his supporters, it was a narrative that modernism was on-hand to reinforce. In a fortuitous coincidence for the anti-Parnellite lobby, just a week after the *National Press* was founded the effects of GPI and congenital syphilis were given infamous visibility on the British stage by the London début of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), which was presented in a private performance on 13 March 1891 by the subscription-only Independent Theatre Society (ITS).⁴³ At the climax of the play, the young artist Oswald Alving reveals to his mother that his 'mind' has been broken down' by an attack of neurosyphilis.⁴⁴ Oswald, who has been informed by a Parisian doctor that the 'sins of the fathers are visited upon the children' and that his 'worm-eaten' condition has its origins in paternal dissipation, asks his mother to help him take his own life should a final episode of cerebral softening leave him incapable of doing so himself.⁴⁵ The scandal provoked by the production became legendary (and somewhat laughable) even in its own day, with William Archer – the play's translator and a founding member of the ITS – offering an amusing compendium of the deluge of abuse it received:

Ibsen's positively abominable play entitled *Ghosts* ... This disgusting representation ... Reprobation due to such as aim at infecting the modern theatre with poison after desperately inoculating themselves and others ... An open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly; a lazar-house with all the doors and windows open ... Candid foulness ... Ibsen's melancholy and malodorous world ... Absolutely loathsome and fetid ... Gross, almost putrid indecorum ... Literary carrion ... Crapulous stuff ... Novel and perilous nuisance.' *Daily Telegraph* (leading article). 'This mass of vulgarity, egotism, coarseness, and absurdity.' *Daily Telegraph* (criticism). [...] 'Morbid, unhealthy, unwholesome and disgusting story ... A piece to bring the stage into disrepute and dishonour every right-thinking man and woman.' *Lloyd's*.⁴⁶

While the analogy can be over-stressed, as both Ben Levitas and Irina Rupp Malone have noted, the Ibsenic qualities of Parnell's fall from grace and the Parnellian qualities of the controversy surrounding the London premiere of *Ghosts* would not have been far to seek for Irish cultural and political commentators.⁴⁷

⁴³ For an account of this performance and its position within the broader rise of 'Ibsenism', see Tracy C. Davis, "The Independent Theatre Society's Revolutionary Scheme for an Uncommercial Theater," *Theatre Journal* 42, no. 4 (December 1990): 447; Katherine E. Kelly, "Pandemic and Performance: Ibsen and the Outbreak of Modernism," *South Central Review* 25, no. 1 (2008): 12–35.

⁴⁴ Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts; An Enemy of the People; The Wild Duck*, Authorized English Edition, trans. William Archer (London: Walter Scott, 1904), 67.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁶ William Archer, "Ghosts and Gibberings," *Pall Mall Gazette*, no. 8127 (April 8, 1891): 3.

⁴⁷ Ben Levitas, *The Theatre of Nation* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 10–11; Irina Rupp Malone, *Ibsen and the Irish Revival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 12–18.

They were certainly detected by the young George Bernard Shaw, who, in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* – published in the October of 1891 – presented the play as ‘an uncompromising and outspoken attack on marriage as a useless sacrifice of human beings to an ideal’ – a comment which might have served equally well to characterize Shaw’s journalistic position on the O’Shea scandal.⁴⁸ Responding to an attack on Parnell by the Baptist minister John Clifford in a letter in the Liberal Party-financed *Star*, Shaw remarked that ‘the relation between Mr. Parnell and Mrs. O’Shea was a perfectly natural and right one’ and that the ‘whole mischief in the matter lay in the law that tied the husband and wife together and forced Mr. Parnell to play the part of clandestine intriguer, instead of enabling them to dissolve the marriage by mutual consent, without disgrace to either party.’⁴⁹ In line with his Fabian eugenicist principles and his defence of *Ghosts*, Shaw concluded that to oblige Parnell to resign over his role in the divorce would be to sacrifice him in the name of a marriage law that favoured a mode of spurious moral ‘purity’ over true public ‘health’:

Until marriage laws are remodelled to suit men and women and to further the happiness and health of the community, instead of to conform to an ideal of “purity,” no verdict in a divorce case will force any man to retire from public life if it appears that he behaved no worse than the law forced him to. Mr. Parnell’s business is simply to sit tight and let the pure people talk.⁵⁰

As the events of the Split were to show, Shaw fatally underestimated not only the power of this ‘purity’ rhetoric, but also its capacity to assimilate precisely the eugenic conception of ‘public health’ through which he sought to defend Parnell. While Frederic and Healy’s deployment of the suggested taint of congenital syphilis was undertaken in the service of a radically different social agenda to that of Ibsen or Shaw, the capacity for the illness to signify an inheritable form of social corruption remained the same, as did the sense that the health of the individual could serve as a metonym for the health of the community or nation.⁵¹ If, as it was for Clement Scott at the *Daily Telegraph*, Ibsen’s play was an ‘essay on heredity and contagious disease [...] cut into lengths’, in the hands of the anti-Parnellite press, the fallen leader’s life became something very similar: a lurid script in which the sins of the leader were visited upon the party (and the

⁴⁸ George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London: Walter Scott, 1891), 82. For a discussion of Shaw’s response to the O’Shea scandal and the Split, see Nelson O’Ceallaigh Ritschel, *Bernard Shaw, W.T. Stead, and the New Journalism: Whitechapel, Parnell, Titanic, and the Great War* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), chap. 3.

⁴⁹ Bernard Shaw, “Shall Parnell Go?,” in *The Matter with Ireland*, ed. Dan H. Laurence and David H. Greene, 2nd ed. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

⁵¹ For an account of Ibsen’s medically-engaged depiction of syphilis, his nuanced deployment of the illness as a vehicle for social critique in his work, and its broader influence in modernism, see: Alexis Soloski, “‘The Great Imitator’: Staging Syphilis in *A Doll’s House* and *Ghosts*,” *Modern Drama* 56, no. 3 (2013): 287–305.

nation), leaving its Parnellite wing prostrated, worm-eaten, and waiting to be put out of its misery.⁵² Whether or not they bore a direct connection to the *Ghosts* controversy, images of toxic ‘inoculation’, open ‘sores’, and sexual infection and accusations of ‘egotism’, ‘morbid’ brooding, and ‘dirty acts done publicly’ were to be consistently marshalled in the reportage and invective surrounding Parnell after the Split, and were to remain features of nationalist rhetoric for decades after its apparent resolution.

Healy was to exploit this rich seam of imagery to the full in his attacks on Parnell’s political strategy and his refusal to concede the leadership of the Irish Party, through articles and speeches in which echoes of contemporary medical conceptions of neurosyphilis, degeneration, and their psychopathological effects abound. Discussing the ‘Rise and Fall’ of Parnell in a March 1891 article for the *New Review*, Healy presents the primary defect of his former leader as a propensity for megalomania which eluded the notice of his allies, but which chimed with the hereditary disposition towards madness so regularly evoked by his biographers: ‘The chief mischief no one exactly divined – the deterioration which unchecked power seems to produce in the mind of its possessor.’⁵³ While at one level this remark seems to be staked upon a clichéd assertion of the corrupting effects of absolute power, the pseudo-medical ring of ‘deterioration’ and the image of mental pathology it evokes, combined with the deliberately tautologous pun of ‘chief mischief’ (linking Parnell’s leadership to his perceived misconduct), conspire to present Parnell’s egomaniacal supremacy as a distinctly morbid psychiatric phenomenon, born of sexual excess. This image of megalomaniacal insanity and diseased ambition had its parallels in contemporary medical thought, particularly in psychiatric accounts of GPI. In a study of the relationship between mental illness and the nervous system, Henry Maudsley identifies the dominant psychological characteristic of the ‘general paralytic’ to be a predisposition towards ‘extraordinary delusions of grandeur’, wildly incommensurate with the status or abilities of the individual in question.⁵⁴ In his exhaustive 1880 study of the illness, William Julius Mickle emphasizes the ‘expansive egoism’ of the sufferer in the early stages of the illness, and the ‘inflated view’ the patient will entertain of their own ‘position, power, and aptitudes’.⁵⁵ Healy was repeatedly

⁵² Clement Scott, “Royalty Theatre,” *The Daily Telegraph*, March 14, 1891.

⁵³ T.M. Healy, “The Rise and Fall of Mr Parnell,” *New Review* IV, no. 22 (March 1891): 196.

⁵⁴ Maudsley, *The Physiology and Pathology of the Mind*, 177. Healy’s image of Parnell as psychotically self-centred also resonates with Max Nordau’s diagnosis of Oscar Wilde’s pathologically self-regarding aestheticism as an exemplary manifestation of the ‘Ich-Sucht’ [ego-mania] of contemporary decadence. Max Nordau, *Entartung*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Carl Dunder, 1893), 137–38.

⁵⁵ William Julius Mickle, *General Paralysis of the Insane* (London: H.K. Lewis, 1880), 10.

to characterize Parnell in precisely these terms during the latter's post-Split leadership campaign, claiming that he had 'gone politically raving mad', denouncing his 'insane pretensions', and asserting in the wake of his death that he must not be judged 'by the deeds of the days of mad ambition, when for his sin, God took away his understanding'.⁵⁶ This tendency may even be detected in Healy's infamous (and most likely apocryphal) declaration that he would hound Parnell into a lunatic asylum or the grave, a narrative trajectory suggestive of the accepted nineteenth-century aetiology of GPI (and syphilis more broadly), in which immortality and sexual 'excess' precipitated a physical and mental decline into insanity, death, or both.⁵⁷ This pathological metaphorical frame could likewise be deployed to account for the continued loyalty of the Parnellite wing of the party following the Split, allowing Healy to elide physical corruption, moral improbity, and political calumny to present Parnellism as a degenerative contagion: '[M]inds are attacked by disease like the body: the germs are there, the development is at first scarcely to be remarked – after a certain point it is difficult if not impossible to prevent destructive growth.'⁵⁸ While the 'disease' remains unnamed, the sexually pathological resonances of this image of a mind beset by destructive bacterial growth would have not been far to seek for a contemporary audience. Indeed, even if they had been, Healy was on-hand to clarify them: 'For ten years we did not know where Parnell lived. The Irish leader was living in caves and holes where nobody could find him. We are told that Mr Parnell was all the time in bad health. He was and I will tell you what was the matter with him – he had *Kitty on the brain*.'⁵⁹ In this decidedly suggestive piece of pseudo-diagnosis, Healy neatly presents Parnell's desire for Katharine O'Shea as both a symptom and the cause of a quasi-metaphorical sexual malady which simultaneously emanated from and drew him inexorably back to the decidedly yonic 'caves and holes' which their relationship had made his abode. Through this strategically circular rhetorical manoeuvre, Healy characterizes Katharine O'Shea as the source of a contagion which compromised Parnell's capacity to fulfil his parliamentary duties, even as he suggests that the desire which drew Parnell to her revealed him to have been constitutionally unfit to lead from the outset. In his post-Split rhetoric Healy thus exploited the very ambivalences concerning sexual

⁵⁶ *The Nation*, June 29, 1891; *The Nation*, July 24, 1891; *The Nation*, October 8, 1891.

⁵⁷ Whatever the provenance of the remarks, the asylum-or-the-grave telos of Parnell's last campaign became an ingrained part of the 'Parnell myth' and its tragic structure in both its Parnellite and anti-Parnellite renderings. Stewart, "The Increase of General Paralysis in England and Wales: Its Causation and Significance," 773; Callanan, *T.M. Healy*, 290.

⁵⁸ Alfred Webb to John Dillon, 07 February 1897, Dillon Paper, TCD MS 6760.

⁵⁹ *The Nation*, June 6, 1891. Emphasis in original.

health and healthy sexuality which had made the Parnell myth so politically effective and culturally compelling to recast its central figure as both the victim of an acquired sexual pathology and the pathologically sexual emblem of desire at its most compromising and irrational. As the *Ghosts* controversy suggests, this rhetoric, with its elision of personal and public health and its images of acquired and inherited sexual pathology more closely resembled the discursive strategies and thematic concerns of an emerging literary modernism than either its Irish exponents, such as Shaw, or many of its subsequent critics might have been willing to admit. As Frank Callanan has pointed out, this rhetoric was not intended to remain confined to the world of politics but was ‘calculated to pass directly into popular usage, as well as to provide primers for parish orators, lay and clerical’.⁶⁰ As such, its impact was destined to outlast the Split and, in Callanan’s view, ultimately came to ‘set the themes of modern Irish nationalism’.⁶¹ As I illustrate in the remainder of this chapter, in setting the discursive terms of engagement for the increasingly fractious relationship between Irish nationalism and an emerging Irish modernism, it was also to prove significant in shaping the artistic self-fashioning of many Irish modernists.

Overcoming Heredity: Parnellites of the Western World

As John Kelly and Elizabeth Mannion have noted, the earliest and most sustained efforts to recuperate and exploit the ‘Parnell myth’ in the decades following the Split were undertaken by the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre, and its spiritual successor, the Abbey.⁶² In Kelly’s view, plays such as Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen* (1899), Edward Martyn’s *The Heather Field* (1899), and George Moore’s *The Bending of the Bough* (1900) – an extensive reworking of Martyn’s *The Tale of a Town* (written 1899 and published 1902) undertaken in collaboration with Yeats – share a common Ascendancy longing for a figure of Parnell’s stature, magnetism, and class background to unify the vituperative factions of contemporary nationalism through a combination of autocratic force of will and aristocratic *nobelesse oblige*.⁶³ Mannion concurs, tracing this tendency through two successive ‘waves’ of biographical drama concerning Parnell at the Abbey in the

⁶⁰ Callanan, *T.M. Healy*, 258.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 259.

⁶² Kelly, “Parnell in Irish Literature,” 259–65; Mannion, “Staging Parnell,” 146–55.

⁶³ Kelly, “Parnell in Irish Literature,” 259–61.

1910s and the 1930s.⁶⁴ However, notwithstanding the comprehensive scope of these surveys, neither addresses the Abbey's equally prevalent, and, arguably, more influential tendency to bring to the stage avatars of the dead leader who emblemized the same virile autonomy with which he had been synonymous before the Split. Nowhere is this tendency more visible than in one of the most infamous recuperations of the Parnell myth and its politicized model of sexual health that was to be brought to the Irish stage in the twentieth century: J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907).

The complex politics of heredity, degeneration, and eugenics in the *Playboy* and the riots which its first production precipitated will be analyzed in greater detail in Chapter Two; however, even a brief survey reveals multiple levels on which Synge's play engages directly with the Parnell myth and the politicization of sexual health to which it gave rise. The surface similarities between Parnell and Christy are plain enough. Like Parnell, Christy hails from a privileged background in which he takes a haughty pride:

CHRISTY [*With a flash of family pride*] And I the son of a strong famer [*with a sudden qualm*], God rest his soul, could have bought up the whole of your old house a while since, from the butt of his tail-pocket, and not have missed the weight of it gone.

MICHAEL [*Impressed*] If it's not stealing, it's maybe something big.

CHRISTY [*Flattered*] Aye; it's maybe something big.⁶⁵

Like Parnell, Christy finds that his high birth and aristocratic hauteur inspire the, often sexualized, admiration of an appreciative public:

PEGEEN [*Standing beside him, watching him with delight*] You should have had great people in your family, I'm thinking, with the little, small feet you have, and you with a kind of quality name, the like of what you'd find on the great powers and potentates of France and Spain.

CHRISTY [*With pride*] We were great, surely, with wide and windy acres of rich Munster land.

PEGEEN Wasn't I telling you, and you a fine, handsome young fellow with a noble brow?

CHRISTY [*With a flash of delighted surprise*] Is it me?⁶⁶

Like Parnell, Christy becomes the subject of intense speculation concerning his possible involvement in political violence ('Maybe he was fighting for the Boers'), land agitation ('Maybe the land was grabbed from him, and he did what any decent man would do'), and sexual misconduct ('Did you marry three wives maybe?').⁶⁷ Like Parnell, Christy woos a woman (Pegeen-Mike) who is already pledged to another, less

⁶⁴ Mannion, "Staging Parnell."

⁶⁵ J. M. Synge, *Collected Works, 4: Plays, Book 2*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), 69.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 79.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 69; 70. On 18 April 1887, the *Times* circulated what it presented as a facsimile of a letter in which Parnell endorsed the 1882 Phoenix Park murders. Parnell denied the accusations with characteristic reserve and the letters

prepossessing man (Shawn Keogh) whose principal interest in their union is financial rather than romantic ('Aren't we after making a good bargain'), and ultimately wins her through a combination of dynamism, vigour, and self-assertion.⁶⁸ Like Parnell, Christy overcomes a poor constitution and meagre intellect ('that dribbling idiot') to attain an apparently self-willed condition of hyper-masculine virility ('the champion playboy of the western world').⁶⁹ Like Parnell, having had his crimes and deceptions exposed publicly, Christy has a woman's undergarments flung at him and is instructed to flee from the site of his intrigues in disguise.⁷⁰

CHRISTY It's Pegeen I'm seeking only, and what'd I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the Eastern World?
SARA [*runs in, pulling off one of her petticoats*] They're going to hang him. [*Holding out petticoat and shawl*]
Fit these upon him and let him run off to the east.⁷¹

And, most obviously, like Parnell, Christy finds himself the victim of what Synge presents as a self-lacerating spasm of mob violence, justified through a blend of hypocritical moralism and a craven regard for British judicial authority:

SHAWN [*Triumphantly, as they pull the rope tight on his arms*] Come on to the peelers, till they stretch you now.
CHRISTY Me!
MICHAEL If we took pity on you, the Lord God would, maybe, bring us ruin from the law today, so you'd best come easy, for hanging is an easy and a speedy end.⁷²

were ultimately proven to be a forgery by a parliamentary Special Commission and Parnell and the IPP were completely exonerated. Bew, *Enigma: A New Life of Charles Stewart Parnell*, 149–64.

⁶⁸ Synge, *Collected Works*, 4, 1982, 59. In the aftermath of the scandal, it became clear that the principal reason that William O'Shea had delayed initiating divorce proceedings against his wife and Parnell for so long was because he anticipated that Katharine's nonagenarian Aunt Ben would leave her niece a substantial sum of money, and he hoped to share in the windfall. When, following Aunt Ben's death on 19 May 1889, it became clear that that he was not be entitled to a share and that her will would be the subject of probate proceedings for at least the next three years, he filed for divorce. Bew, *Enigma: A New Life of Charles Stewart Parnell*, 166.

⁶⁹ Synge, *Collected Works*, 4, 1982, 143; 139.

⁷⁰ Parnell's elaborate disguises and aliases ('Fox', 'Preston') were revealed in the divorce proceedings and offered as evidence that William O'Shea had not connived in his wife's infidelity (which he, in fact, had), and were widely discussed in the British and Irish press. *The Guardian*, November 19, 1890, 6; *The Times*, November 18, 1891. Synge's biographer, WJ McCormack, cites two apparently widespread stories concerning Parnell's post-Split public reception in which a 'shift' had been 'thrown in his face' or in which he had been 'discovered with a lady's shift in his cab'. However, McCormack does not cite a source for either tale, so their provenance is hard to ascertain. WJ McCormack, *Fool of the Family: A Life of J.M. Synge* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 312.

⁷¹ Synge, *Collected Works*, 4, 1982, 169.

⁷² *Ibid*, 169.

On the basis of such parallels, Synge's biographer W.J. McCormack is undoubtedly justified in claiming that, in the *Playboy*, Synge had 'disinterred Parnell'.⁷³ However, such an assertion raises the question, to what end had the playwright exhumed his former Wicklow neighbour?

A hint is given in the title of a pseudonymous article Synge penned, but ultimately declined to publish, in the aftermath of the *Playboy* debacle: 'Can We Go Back into Our Mother's Womb? A Letter to the Gaelic League' (1907). Leaving aside, for the moment, the degenerationist and Oedipal implications of the letter's image of Irish Ireland retreating up the maternal birth canal (addressed in Chapter Two), in the present context, the most significant feature of the letter's title is the ways in which it presents the Gaelic League and its political proponents as an affront to the principles of aesthetic and sexual autonomy with which Synge felt Parnell to embody. Adopting an attitude that was to become common among the male Irish modernists who took Parnell as their political and artistic ideal, Synge's ventriloquized 'Hedge Schoolmaster' emphasizes his revulsion at the Gaelic League for premising their schemes of national revival on an ardent (and, in Synge's view, spurious) fetishization of a point of cultural 'origin' which he figures as feminized, hysterical, and incontinent – a 'gushing, cowardly, and maudlin' doctrine exemplified by the 'hysteria of old woman's talk'.⁷⁴ Crucially, in Synge's view, in pursuing this policy, the League is betraying an Irish nationalist tradition vouchsafed by a succession of hyper-masculine Ascendancy autocrats, at whose head is, of course, Parnell:

I believe in Ireland. I believe the nation that has made a place in history by seventeen centuries of manhood, a nation that has begotten Grattan and Emmet and Parnell will not be brought to complete insanity in these last days by what is senile and slobbering in the doctrine of the Gaelic League.⁷⁵

As this image of an Ireland reduced in its 'last days' from a position of virile and self-actualizing 'manhood' to a 'senile and slobbering' condition of 'complete insanity' makes clear, in both the article and the play it was written to defend, Synge appropriates the rhetoric of the Healyite press to restage the fall of Parnell as a national tragedy in which the representatives of an insular, petty-bourgeois cultural nationalism, not the Chief, are presented as the true degenerative threat to the nation's physical and mental integrity. Where

⁷³ Mc Cormack, *Fool of the Family*, 2000, 426.

⁷⁴ J. M. Synge, *Collected Works*, 2: *Prose*, ed. Alan Price (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), 399–400.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 399.

once Healy had constructed Parnell as a figure who had emerged from the womb compromised by infection and instability, Synge now figures Healy's successors returning to the womb, bringing infection and instability in their wake. In such a context, Synge figures the revivifying promise of his own artistic project, as implicitly realized in the figure of Christy, in pointedly Parnellian terms:

The delirium will not last always. It will not be long – we will make it our first hope – till some young man with blood in his veins, logic in his wits and courage in his heart, will sweep over the backside of the world to the uttermost limbo this credo of mouthing gibberish [...] This young man will teach Ireland again that she is part of Europe, and teach Irishmen that they have wits to think, imagination to work miracles, and souls to possess with sanity. He will teach them that there is more in heaven and earth than the weekly bellow of the Brazen Bull-calf and all his sweaty gobs, or the snivelling booklets that are going through Ireland weekly like the scab on sheep, and yet he'll give the pity that is due to the poor stammerers who mean so well though they are stripping the nakedness of Ireland in the face of her own sons.⁷⁶

Synge's idealized artist-politician will not sow the seeds of congenital madness as Parnell was alleged to have done, but restore 'sanity' to the people; he will not expose Ireland to shame through sexual controversy as Parnell was charged with doing, but will put an end to the flouting of the nation's cultural 'nakedness'; perhaps most crucially, he will not succumb, as Parnell eventually had, to the pathological influence of contemporary journalism, but, Moses-like, will free the people from their thralldom to the 'Brazen Bull-calf' of the British press – an image which combines an ancient Greek torture device (the Brazen Bull), a false idol (the Golden Calf), and an avatar of English cultural hegemony (John Bull) – and the infectious influence of its Irish nationalist equivalent ('the snivelling booklets' of the Gaelic League and Irish Ireland). In short, he will lead the nation into the implied Promised Land of political and cultural self-determination and physical and cultural health as Parnell would have done had he not been brought low by conventional morality, mass-media sensationalism, and factional squabbling. In his own artistic self-fashioning, and in his construction of the figure of Christy Mahon in the *Playboy*, Synge thus reconfigures the Parnell myth to sponsor a hyper-sexualized image of the ideal Irish modernist as a figure who combined virile masculinity, aristocratic hauteur, and a hygienic form of intellectual and political autonomy. However, as Christy's consistently thwarted efforts to overcome and negate his own heredity through parricide and self-reinvention make clear, Synge retained a painful awareness of the ways notions of physical and intellectual inheritance threatened to undermine that ideal.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 400.

Rejecting Fertility: Irish Modernism's Self-Siring Heroes

Synge was far from alone in framing his sense of modernist artistic vocation in this manner, or in conscripting the shade of Parnell to do so. Nor was he alone in maintaining an anxious relationship to ideas of heredity. Indeed, in the hands of figures such as Yeats and Joyce, Parnell's virile celibacy came to serve as the basis for a model of masculine artistry so strongly rooted in an ideal of hygienic sexual autonomy that it repudiated any suggestion of external biological origin or issue. An early example of this trend comes in Yeats's *On Baile's Strand* (1903), one of the three plays chosen to form part of the Abbey's opening-night statement of aesthetic and ideological intent in December 1904.⁷⁷ The parallels between the radically heterodox and fiercely autonomous Nietzschean poet-hero Cuchulain and Parnell are well-established, having been confirmed by Yeats in comments made to Joseph Holloway in 1905.⁷⁸ Like one of Nietzsche's 'free spirits', Cuchulain embodies a 'great health' which combines self-mastery, self-overcoming, and a potent fusion of violence and libido that pointedly offends against the norms of bourgeois romance:

Cuchulain. [...]
I have never known love but as a kiss
In the mid-battle, and a difficult truce
Of oil and water, candles and dark night,
[...]
A brief forgiveness between opposites
That have been hatreds for three times the age
Of this long-established ground.⁷⁹

Like Parnell at his most mythic, Cuchulain explicitly and implicitly repudiates the degrading compromises of modern, bourgeois politics and the negative modes of dependency it entails in pointedly sexual terms.

⁷⁷ For an account of the practical, aesthetic, and political circumstances surrounding the opening of the Abbey Theatre, see Adrian Frazier, *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), chaps. 4 and 5; Levitas, *The Theatre of Nation*, chap. 3.

⁷⁸ Robert Goode Hogan and Michael J O'Neill, eds., *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from His Unpublished Journal: Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 58; Michael Steinman, *Yeats's Heroic Figures: Wilde, Parnell, Swift, Casement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 70–71. For the Nietzschean dimensions of Cuchulain's characterization in the play, see Otto Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche: An Exploration of Major Nietzschean Echoes in the Writings of William Butler Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 25; 145; Frances Nesbitt Opel, *Mask and Tragedy: Yeats and Nietzsche, 1902–10* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 147–58; Levitas, *The Theatre of Nation*, 81–83; Michael Valdez Moses, "The Rebirth of Tragedy: Yeats, Nietzsche, the Irish National Theatre, and the Anti-Modern Cult of Cuchulain," *Modernism/Modernity* 11, no. 3 (2004): 561–79.

⁷⁹ W.B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach and Catherine C. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), 489.

Asked to curb the ‘wildness of [his] blood’ and swear an oath of loyalty to the High King, Conchubar, and ‘[w]hatever child’ he may ‘set upon the throne’, Cuchulain defiantly refuses:⁸⁰

Cuchulain. [...] I’ll not be bound.
I’ll dance or hunt, or quarrel or make love,
Wherever and whenever I’ve a mind to.
If time had not put water in your blood,
You never would have thought it.

Conchubar. I would leave
A strong and settled country to my children.⁸¹

As these remarks make clear, what distinguishes the self-mastery and independence of the libidinous Cuchulain from the prosaic conformity of the once virile Conchubar is not merely attitude, but progeny. Where Conchubar is beholden to (and, implicitly, vitiated by) his children – a ‘soft’ and unprepossessing brood, who lack the ‘pith’ and ‘marrow’ of their elders – Cuchulain refuses to subject himself to what he presents as the ‘mockery’ of childbearing.⁸² Indeed, so keen is Yeats to stress the apparent biological independence of his hypermasculine protagonist, that he rewrites Cuchulain’s origin story to present him as the product of a supernatural union between a human woman and a bird of prey:⁸³

Cuchulain. For you thought
That I should be as biddable as others
Had I their reason for it; but that’s not true;
For I would need a weightier argument
Than one that marred me in the copying,
As I have that clean hawk out of the air
That, as men say, begot this body of mine
Upon a mortal woman.⁸⁴

The ways in which the passage champions a highly sexualized ideal of autonomy, nobility, and hygiene (‘that clean hawk out of the air’) over the perceived dependency, compromise, and corruption of reproductive sexuality (‘one that marred me in the copying’) are clear enough. However, like the Parnell myth, the arrestingly surreal anecdote stages a seemingly irreconcilable dialectic between virility and celibacy. On the

⁸⁰ Ibid, 481.

⁸¹ Ibid, 477–79. Joseph Valente rightly emphasizes that, as Cuchulain’s remarks make clear, Conchubar was once as dynamic and turbulent as his insubordinate vassal and has only recently renounced these values in favour of his present condition of settled domesticity. Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*, 170–71.

⁸² Yeats, *Variorum Plays*, 481; 483.

⁸³ W.B. Yeats, *The Plays. The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Vol. II*, ed. David R Clark and Rosalind E Clark (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 852, n. 251.

⁸⁴ Yeats, *Variorum Plays*, 483–85.

one hand, the image of the bird of prey swooping down upon Cuchulain's mother, appears to present Yeats's hero as the product of a feat of violent and predatory masculine potency in a manner that anticipates 'Leda and the Swan' (1923). On the other hand, the suggestion of spontaneous generation in the almost *ex nihilo* appearance of the hawk, which is variously described as having come 'out of the sun' and 'clean [...] out of the air', works to present Cuchulain as the result of a sort of pagan immaculate conception.⁸⁵ This uncertainty is reinforced through the ambiguity of the formation 'begot [...] Upon', which leaves it unclear precisely how the 'begetting' occurred and whether its having taken place *upon* Cuchulain's mother is meant to signal that it did not take place *within* her.

An almost comically extreme rendering of the same impulse is offered in the second chapter of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), in which an adolescent Stephen Dedalus visits an anatomy theatre at his father's *alma mater* in Cork. As Simon Dedalus searches for the initials he carved into his desk as a student, Stephen is suddenly confronted with 'the word *Foetus* cut several times in the dark stained wood' and experiences a moment of vertiginous disorientation:⁸⁶

The sudden legend startled his blood: he seemed to feel the absent students of the college about him and to shrink from their company. A vision of their life, which his father's words had been powerless to evoke, sprang up before him out of the word cut in the desk [...] the word and the vision capered before his eyes as he walked back across the quadrangle and towards the college gate.⁸⁷

While the intensity of Stephen's reaction is undoubtedly a reflection of the shock he feels at finding 'in the outer world' an emanation of the 'monstrous reveries' which 'he had deemed till then a brutish and individual malady of his own mind', it also reflects a profound discomfort at being confronted with a suggestion of his own contingency and dependence upon a prior biological cause.⁸⁸ Like Conchubar's children or the 'mockery' Cuchulain imagines his own progeny would make of him, the word '*Foetus*', with its connotations of gestation and maternal dependence, affronts the myths of autonomy and radical self-fashioning so central to the rhetorics of both modernism and Parnellism. As if in direct rebellion against this unwelcome reminder, the idiosyncratic 'esthetic [*sic*] theory' which Stephen articulates to Lynch in the

⁸⁵ Ibid, 481.

⁸⁶ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, ed. John Paul Riquelme, Hans Walter Gabler, and Walter Hettche (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 78.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 78–79.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 79.

novel's fifth chapter envisages a mode of 'artistic conception, artistic gestation, and artistic reproduction' in which conventional, fleshly maternity is displaced, so that in the 'virgin womb of the imagination' the word may be 'made flesh'.⁸⁹ As Stephen himself stresses, this scheme represents his attempt to rescue an autonomous conception of 'beauty' from the degrading compromises of a narrowly utilitarian evolutionary model in which 'every physical quality admired by men in women is in direct connexion with the manifold functions of women for the propagation of the species' and 'eugenics' replaces the 'esthetic' [*sic*].⁹⁰ This scheme is extended (and lampooned) in the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode of *Ulysses*, in which Buck Mulligan playful glosses Stephen's semi-serious account of Shakespeare's self-siring art: 'Himself his own father, Sonmulligan told himself. Wait. I am big with child. I have an unborn child in my brain. Pallas Athena! A play! The play's the thing! Let me parturiate!' (*U*, 9.875-77). As David Weir rightly notes, this sort of masculine 'womb envy' was hardly a novelty, with a heritage reaching back to Eve's birth out of Adam's body in the Book of Genesis.⁹¹ The Parnell myth and the Irish cultural anxieties surrounding purity and impotence it sought to address help to explain why this model of 'patriarchal parturition', with its undertones of virile chastity and hygienic sexual autonomy, was to prove such an urgently stressed part of many Irish modernist's conception of artistic vocation.⁹²

However, it is important to note that neither Yeats nor Joyce presents this vision of total sexual autonomy as uncomplicatedly positive or sustainable. Simultaneously bearing out Stephen's theory of 'artistic reproduction' and bathetically undermining its lofty aspirations, Joyce heralds his young protagonist's principal feat of 'artistic conception' in the novel – the writing of the 'Villanelle of the Temptress' – with a moment of 'tremulous morning knowledge' strongly evocative of a nocturnal emission, from which Stephen awakens to find his 'soul all dewy and wet'.⁹³ While not necessarily a repudiation of his young protagonist's pretensions to aesthetic and sexual autonomy, this moment does seem to register Joyce's awareness that such aspirations risked reducing artistic production to a feat of empty onanism. He appears to have Stephen concede as much when his young protagonist admits that, in order to account properly for his model of 'artistic reproduction' he will 'require' not only a 'new terminology', but a 'new

⁸⁹ Ibid, 184; 191.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 183.

⁹¹ David Weir, "A Womb of His Own: Joyce's Sexual Aesthetics," *James Joyce Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 208.

⁹² Ibid, 208.

⁹³ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 191.

personal experience'.⁹⁴ The conclusion of *On Baile's Strand*, in which Cuchulain unknowingly confronts his equally noble, potent, and self-willed son, only to be goaded into murdering him, and, upon realizing what he has done, drowning himself in futile combat with the ocean waves, registers more serious reservations about the value and viability of a Parnellian model of radical sexual health. As this tragic dénouement seems intended to suggest, the line between Cuchulain's fiercely guarded independence and a fatal form of traumatic isolation was far from clear-cut. However, whatever its tragic implications, Cuchulain's unwitting filicide serves only to intensify his identification with a Parnellian model of sexual health, offering a final, hyperbolic literalization of the Chief's radical sexual hygiene and virile autonomy. On the one hand, as this Parnellian *peripeteia* makes clear, the tragedy of the play is not that Cuchulain fails to replicate the radical sexual health of the Parnell myth, but rather that he inhabits it too fully to survive amid a compromised and compromising political present. On the other hand, as the play's concluding feat of murder-suicide anxiously suggests, Yeats clearly struggled to see how such a model could perpetuate itself without violating its own principles in the process.

As Brian O'Nolan (in his 'Flann O'Brien' persona) makes clear in 1939's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, another, arguably greater threat to the sustainability of this Parnellian ideal was a changing sense of what constituted sexual health in an increasingly modern and bureaucratized world. In a characteristic act of simultaneous reverence and subversion, the novel's student narrator has his creation, the puritanical author and moral philosopher Dermot Trellis, mutate Stephen's dream of radical aesthetic autonomy and 'artistic reproduction' into precisely the sort of 'eugenic' scheme it was intended to repudiate. In Trellis's hands, 'artistic reproduction' becomes 'aestho-autogamy', a fully-fledged system of postmodern 'psycho-eugenics' in which, through the act of writing, the male author becomes able to conceive, gestate, and deliver a population 'already matured, toothed, reared, educated, and ready to essay those competitive plums which make the Civil Service and the Banks so attractive to the younger breadwinners of today' without recourse to the 'monotonous and unimaginative process by which all children are invariably born young'.⁹⁵ In this tongue-in-cheek model of aesthetic bio-power, progenitive sex is reduced to an act of reproduction no less mechanical than any documented by Walter Benjamin, while, like Stephen's 'dewy' spasms of artistic

⁹⁴ Ibid, 184.

⁹⁵ Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 37. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CN*.

onanism in *A Portrait*, the novel becomes a masturbatory form to be ‘self-administered in private’ (CN, 21). However, the apparently total artistic and sexual autonomy offered by aestho-autogamy is almost immediately undermined when Trellis is so ‘blinded by the beauty’ of one of his creations, the virtuous Sheila Lamont, ‘that he so far forgets himself as to assault her’ (CN, 58), in the process siring the counter-author who will eventually attempt to have him executed, Orlick. While the ways in which Trellis’s theory parodies the proscriptions of the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act and its infamous prohibition of all printed matter relating to birth control or abortion have been emphasized by a range of scholars, its debts to a sexualized model of artistic autonomy catalyzed by the ‘Parnell myth’ and its violent dismantling in the *Split* have gone largely unacknowledged.⁹⁶ In such a context, the novel’s climax, in which Trellis is put on trial by his own creations for an act of sexual misconduct which violates the sanctity of his public persona, becomes a scenario pregnant with Parnellian resonances. Moreover, by stressing the utilitarian and eugenicist dimensions of Trellis’s appropriation of Stephen’s ‘esthetic theory’, O’Nolan subtly undermines the model of autonomy with which ‘artistic reproduction’ is cognate for Joyce’s young protagonist by consciously conscripting ‘aestho-autogamy’ into the service of a bureaucratically-administered capitalist state, emblemized through the ‘Civil Service’ and the ‘Banks’. Where Joyce’s Stephen aspires to the boundary-transgressing and fiercely independent ‘*great* health’ of a Parnell or a Cuchulain, Trellis’s creations exemplify the homogenous and utilitarian ‘public health’ of the modern welfare state. By 1939, O’Nolan seems to imply, though sexual health remained decidedly politicized in Ireland, the ideological vision it was being conscripted to sponsor and the nature of the ‘health’ it denoted had changed considerably.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this chapter, the Parnell myth constituted an unusually flexible cultural formation through which anxieties over the relationship between Irish identity and sexual conduct and debates over the physical and cultural well-being of the nation could be mediated. In the hands of Parnell’s allies and followers, the myth could be used to envisage not only a model of national and cultural self-rule, but a

⁹⁶ Keith Hopper, *Flann O’Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 1995), 76–88; Keith Hopper, “The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Flann O’Brien and the Irish Censorship Code,” in *Literature and Ethics: Questions of Responsibility in Literary Studies*, ed. Daniel K. Jernigan et al. (Amherst, N.Y: Cambria Press, 2009), 125–28; Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O’Brien* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 32–38.

highly sexualized form of modernist aesthetic practice premised upon a self-siring masculine ideal of ‘artistic reproduction’ and an aggressive rejection of all forms of biological origin or issue. In the hands of his enemies and detractors, its tropes could be used to present Parnell as a degenerative and sexually pathological threat to the physical and intellectual integrity of the Irish people in a manner indebted less to Catholic moralism than to Ibsenite modernism. As both examples illustrate, the O’Shea divorce scandal and the ensuing Split gave to this sexual health rhetoric a new urgency and sharpened political edge in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Irish culture that was to resurface consistently in the, often vexed, relationship between modernists and nationalists. Above all, as the next chapter will show, the debates over degeneration, sexual health, and masculinity which the Parnell myth had crystalized and the Split had intensified would go on to form the basis for arguably the most notorious confrontation between these two groups in Irish cultural history, the *Playboy* riots.

Chapter Two

‘Survival of the unfittest’

Synge, Yeats, and the Rhetoric of Health

On the French stage the sex-element of life is given without the other ballancing [sic] elements; on the Irish stage the people you agree with want the other elements without sex. I restored the sex-element to its natural place, and the people were so surprised they saw the sex only [...] I think squeamishness is a disease and that Ireland will gain if Irish writers deal manfully, directly, and decently with the entire reality of life.

J.M. Synge to Stephen McKenna (28 January 1904)

But life became sweet again when I had learnt all I had not learnt in shaping words, in defending Synge against his enemies, and knew that rich energies, fine, turbulent or gracious thoughts, whether in life or letters, are but love-children.

W.B. Yeats, *Synge and the Ireland of His Time* (1911)

Of all the responses to the controversies surrounding the first run of J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), perhaps the most caustic was to come from the playwright himself. In a journal entry written following Synge’s death in March 1909, Yeats quotes a piece of verse Synge had dedicated ‘To a Sister of an Enemy of the Author’s, who disapproved of *The Playboy*’:

Lord confound this surly sister,
Blight her brow with blotch and blister,
Cramp her larynx, lung, and liver,
In her guts a galling give her.
Let her live to earn her dinners
In Mountjoy with seedy sinners:
Lord, this judgment swiftly bring,
And I’m your servant, – J.M. Synge.¹

Synge’s alliterative taxonomy of physical ailments apparently had the desired effect, for in the same journal entry Yeats records how Synge had explained ‘with mirthful eyes’ that since he had written the poem its subject’s husband had ‘got drunk, gone with a harlot, got syphilis, and given it to his wife’.² Underpinning Synge’s poem and its anecdotal context is a desire to number those members of the audience who vocally disrupted his play in the name of an apparently scandalized sense of national purity among the ‘seedy sinners’ whose degenerate condition it was intended to diagnose and critique. In this regard, ‘The Curse’ (as it came to be titled) represents a particularly prominent example of what may be termed the ‘rhetoric of

¹ W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Papermac, 1988), 202.

² *Ibid*, 202.

health': an over-determined pseudo-medical discourse in which the lexicons of evolutionary theory, comparative science, eugenics, and degeneration are combined for political ends. The appeal of this rhetoric for figures across the political spectrum was its capacity to naturalize a wide range of ideological positions through the explanatory mechanisms of biology and the truth-claims of empiricism. The contradictions to which this could give rise inscribe themselves in Synge's invocation of venereal disease as a form of divine retribution against those who criticized his work for its perceived blasphemy and degenerate sexuality, a rhetorical manoeuvre which, ironically, replicates the basic assumptions of the very value system it was intended to repudiate.

In recent years, the traditional image of the Irish revival as fundamentally anti-scientific and anti-modern in both its orientation and influences has been scotched by a range of historicizing criticism increasingly alive to the role of medical and scientific discourse in twentieth-century Irish culture.³ Through such studies, individual aspects of the rhetoric of health (eugenics, evolutionary theory, primitivism) and the intellectual contexts from which it is derived (medical science, biology, anthropology) have been discussed in relation to Yeats and Synge. However, in outlining the influence of contemporary medical and scientific thought on prominent revivalists, such studies have largely absented their works from the political context in which they were being composed. In particular, they have tended to overlook the ways in which medical and scientific discourses were being combined and utilized by authors and politicians alike to justify apparently irreconcilable positions in ongoing debates over the nature of Irish national identity. In this chapter, I address this lacuna by illustrating the political and aesthetic ends to which the rhetoric of health is deployed in *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and the controversy it provoked. Calling into question traditional accounts of the *Playboy* riots, which pit a sexually frank Abbey Theatre against a rebarbative nationalist rabble, I demonstrate that both sides of the dispute were in fact united in their use of the rhetoric of health to sponsor, admittedly divergent, models of Irish national identity. To do so, I illustrate how Irish

³ See David Bradshaw, "The Eugenics Movement in the 1930s and the Emergence of *On the Boiler*," in *Yeats Annual* No. 9 (London: Macmillan, 1992), 189–215; Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chaps. 7–9; Rónán McDonald, "'Accidental Variations': Darwinian Traces in Yeats's Poetry," in *Science and Modern Poetry: New Approaches*, ed. John Holmes (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 152–67; Rónán McDonald, "The 'Fascination of What I Loathed': Science and Self in W.B. Yeats's *Autobiographies*," in *Modernism and Autobiography*, ed. Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 18–30; Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chaps. 1–4; Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chaps. 2–4; Kathryn Conrad, Cólín Parsons, and Julie McCormick Weng, eds., *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019).

Ireland and Sinn Féin employed this rhetoric to characterize the Abbey's work as an assault on Gaelic purity and virility. I proceed to explore Synge's response to this bourgeois Catholic nationalism and highlight his use of degeneration theory to critique what he perceived to be the pathological insularity of Irish Ireland's model of cultural and economic autarchy. Finally, I interrogate Yeats's hyper-sexualized defence of Synge in poems, memoirs, and essays which present his detractors as syphilitic 'Eunuchs'.⁴ Through this analysis, I demonstrate the ways in which a sensitivity to questions of sexual health and national identity in turn-of-the-century Ireland can allow critics to interrogate and problematize a range of conventional political and cultural boundaries within Irish literary historiography.

Degeneration Theory and the Philosophy of Irish Ireland

One of the most consistent and prominent practitioners of the rhetoric of health in the first decades of the twentieth century was the editor and polemicist, D.P. Moran, the chief exponent of what he dubbed the 'philosophy of Irish Ireland'.⁵ Conceived as a practical response to Douglas Hyde's influential call to de-Anglicize Ireland, the movement's programme of social, cultural, and economic autarchy was summarized in 1919 by Arthur Clery in the image of 'the star of Irish Ireland' whose five points were 'language, industries, music, dancing and games'.⁶ The followers of Irish Ireland were urged to learn Irish, to read Irish literature, to buy Irish goods, to wear Irish clothing, to sing Irish songs, to dance Irish steps, to play Irish sports, and – as Gabriel Conroy discovers to his embarrassment in Joyce's 'The Dead' – to holiday in their beloved homeland. In Book V of *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), Yeats recalls his own comically thwarted attempts to comply with the sartorial dicta of Irish Ireland, believing that he would soon be 'dressed according to public opinion' until he received a letter of apology from his tailor explaining that the delivery of his 'Conemarra cloth' suit would be delayed, as it had to come 'all the way from Scotland'.⁷ While Moran distinguished himself from Arthur Griffith in asserting that separatism was an impracticable dream, both Irish Ireland and Sinn Féin shared an investment in a model of self-reliance rooted in which a

⁴ Yeats, *Memoirs*, 1988, 176; W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 2000).

⁵ Moran employed this phrase as the title for his most influential collection of essays in 1905.

⁶ Arthur Clery, *Dublin Essays* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1919), 131.

⁷ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies. The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Vol. III*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1999), 272.

return to Gaelic culture was insistently sponsored and fetishized. As the movement's seemingly tautologous moniker suggests, this push to revive a culturally and economically Irish Ireland often risked lapsing into a xenophobic drive to establish an ethnically *Irish* Ireland. A prominent advertisement for furniture retailer 'John S. Kelly' in Moran's daily newspaper, *The Leader*, demonstrates how the logic of economic revival and ethnic exclusion could operate hand-in-hand, claiming that his 'Sinn Féin' shop offered discounts to Gaelic League members, supported 'Home Manufacture', and had '[n]o connection with the Jews'.⁸ This chauvinism and anti-Semitism, espoused by an organ of middle-class Catholic opinion, was to prove increasingly unpalatable to Yeats and Synge. However, through their use of the rhetoric of health and their disdain for a culturally compromised present, it was a dynamic they were sometimes at risk of replicating.

The rhetorical underpinning of Moran's program was a lexicon of quasi-metaphoric terminology drawn from contemporary science, which owed its most prominent debts to discourses of degeneration. As suggested in the previous chapter, the concept of 'degeneration' brought together a range of nineteenth-century psychopathological theories of biological and social decline, in which environmentally-acquired physiological deficiencies became transmissible from generation to generation. By the time of Max Nordau, this model had been extended to offer an account of social and cultural decline as a whole, in which the 'social organism' became as susceptible to contamination and decay as the individual.⁹ The utility of these theories for an advocate of cultural de-Anglicization such as Moran was clear, enabling him to contrast the 'degenerate' present with the physical and cultural 'purity' of a pre-imperial past. Moran's deployment of a degeneration-inflected rhetoric of health is particularly evident in the essays which comprise *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* (1905), first published serially in the *New Irish Review* between 1898 and 1900. The title of the collection's first essay sets the tone: 'Is the Irish Nation Dying?'¹⁰ Moran's answer is staked upon the belief that the most distinctive and distinguishing of the 'several collections of human energies' that compose a nation is its language.¹¹ On this basis Moran presents Ireland with a damning diagnosis, noting with dismay

⁸ Quoted in Deirdre Toomey, 'Moran's Collar: Yeats and Irish Ireland', in *Yeats Annual No. 12*, ed. Warwick Gould and Edna Longley (London: Macmillan, 1996), 77.

⁹ For an overview of Nordau's thought and influence in this regard, see Hans-Peter Söder, "Disease and Health as Contexts of Modernity: Max Nordau as a Critic of Fin-de-Siècle Modernism," *German Studies Review* 14, no. 3 (October 1991): 473.

¹⁰ David Patrick Moran, *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland*, ed. Patrick Maume (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

that both ‘the language [the Irish] speak and the literature [they] read, are borrowed from another country’.¹² For Moran, thanks to this linguistic dispossession, the most distinctive racial features of the Irish have become their deterioration and regression: ‘There are certainly some traits to be found in Ireland which stamp the people as a distinct race even yet; but they characterize her torpor and decay rather than her development’.¹³ In Moran’s view, the fatal moment of cultural contamination in Irish history was the establishment of Grattan’s Parliament in 1782, which Moran figures in terms of a dangerous hybridization of Irish identity in which ‘the Gael’ was replaced with ‘an English-speaking, English-imitating mongrel’.¹⁴ Moran’s use of the term ‘mongrel’ echoes the logic of degeneration in its metaphorical alignment of notions of cultural and racial purity, through which he seeks to figure Anglo-Irish culture as a dysgenic threat to Irish bodily well-being. Moran thus appropriates the fundamental tenet of Morelian theory, which identifies degeneration as ‘une déviation malade d’un type primitif’ [a morbid deviation from an original type], to support his sectarian reconfiguration of the ecumenical nationalism of Young Ireland.¹⁵ While Moran felt it foolhardy to ‘fall out’ with Thomas Davis’s ‘comprehensive idea of the Irish people as a composite race’, he insisted that the ‘foundation of Ireland must be the Gael, and the Gael must be the element that absorbs’.¹⁶ This rhetoric recurs in Moran’s vehement rejection of the cultural legacy of Young Ireland, whose greatest crime was to bring ‘into life a mongrel thing which they called Irish literature, in the English language’.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, Moran was to anathemize the work of W.B. Yeats as the epitome of this unhealthy cultural miscegenation, which he argued could only be rendered palatable to the public through the smokescreen of Arnoldian Celticism.¹⁸

Both Moran’s disdain for Yeats and his use of degeneration rhetoric feature prominently in his response to *Diarmuid and Grania*, written by Yeats in collaboration with George Moore and first performed in October 1901. From the outset the play was described by *The Leader* as ‘degenerate and unwholesome’

¹² Ibid, 2.

¹³ Ibid, 2.

¹⁴ Ibid, 35.

¹⁵ Bénédict Augustin Morel, *Traité des Dégénérescences Physiques, Intellectuelles et Morales de l’Espèce Humaine et des Causes qui Produisent ces Variétés Maladives* (Paris: J.B. Ballière, 1857), 5. For a discussion of the sectarianism of Irish Ireland, see Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 32–43.

¹⁶ Moran, *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland*, 37.

¹⁷ Ibid, 43.

¹⁸ Ibid, 104.

and fundamentally ‘un-Irish’.¹⁹ These criticisms were undoubtedly exacerbated by its billing alongside Douglas Hyde’s Irish-language short *Casadh an tSugáin* [turning the jug], performed by Hyde himself with an amateur troupe of Gaelic League enthusiasts, in stark contrast with the professional company of English actors who performed Yeats and Moore’s work to the accompaniment of Elgar.²⁰ As *The Leader*’s choice of adjectives indicates, Moran clearly collocates the cultural fusion of an Irish legend, Ascendancy authors, and English performers, with a dysgenic dilution of the Irish blood. A fortnight later the pseudonymous ‘Mac an Cuill’ [son of the pole] was to intensify this argument by figuring the perceived anglicization of *Diarmuid and Grania* as a form of violent sexual assault:

Diarmuid and Grania [...] is an Irish legend. The Irish mind made it, and the Irish mind preserved it, pure and fresh and wholesome and clean. And now the English mind takes it by force, drags it through the mire of the London streets, brings it back to us bedraggled, besmirched, and befouled, and asks us to admire it in its new dress!²¹

The gendered personification of the myth, the over-wording of sanitary adjectives with sexual connotations (‘pure’, ‘fresh’, ‘wholesome’, ‘clean’), and the barely concealed insinuation of English sexual violence (‘takes it by force’), exemplify *The Leader*’s tendency to figure Anglo-Irish literature as a degenerate sexual aberration which threatens the cultural and physical integrity of the Irish population.

As mentioned in Chapter One, in the logic of Irish Ireland, the necessary corollary of this degeneration is the feminization of the once virile and masculine ‘Gael’ into the feeble and hysterical ‘Celt’, most influentially theorized by Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold.²² In the age of Charcot and Freud, such accusations of irrational femininity took on both a degree of scientific legitimacy and a pointed pathological bite, with the ‘hysterical woman’ (and her even more troubling male counterpart) serving as an increasing locus of medical and social concern throughout the *fin de siècle*.²³ The mutually reinforcing operation of the

¹⁹ *The Leader*, November 2, 1901, 158.

²⁰ R. F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 252.

²¹ *The Leader*, November 16, 1901, 188–89.

²² Ernest Renan, ‘De la poésie des races celtiques’, *Revue des deux mondes* 5 (1854): 473–506; Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1867).

²³ Accounts of the gendered politics of hysteria and its cultural currency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are legion. Some of the more influential include Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, ed. David Cooper, trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2007), chap. 5; Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), chap. 7; Mark S Micale, *Hysterical Men: The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*, Reprinted (London: Virago, 2009); Andrew Scull, *Hysteria: The Disturbing History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

gendered logics of Arnoldian Celticism and hysteria in an Irish context are reflected in Moran's review of a 1905 revival of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), in which he aligns Yeats's play and its protagonist with the kinds of pathologically feminized Celticism which his hypermasculine vision of Irish Ireland was intended to counter:

The 'poor old woman' symbol for Ireland is too greenly sentimental for us. Vigorous Ireland has told the old weeping, wailing creature to move out of its way; but the 'poor old woman' has gained admittance to the scented drawing-rooms where they take a little green sentimentality with the coffee and gossip.²⁴

Moran extends the senescent hysteria with which he characterizes the *Sean-Bhean bhocht* [poor old woman] to the effete femininity of the 'scented drawing-rooms' in which the Anglo-Irish literati take their 'coffee and gossip', all of which is to be shouldered aside by the robust and dynamic figure of 'Vigorous Ireland'. Moran presents this femininity as a contagious threat to audiences who 'simper and sigh' over Yeats's Cathleen, urging Irish Irelanders to demand instead 'a modern man with a heart and a head and a strong hand'.²⁵ Thus, argued Irish Ireland, if the Celt is an archetype of pathologized femininity – hysterical, weak, and a locus of infection – then the Gael must be a paradigm of masculine strength, virility, and robust health.

The debts this model of virile masculinity owed to English notions of 'muscular Christianity' and an imperial discourse in which Celtic femininity necessitated and legitimized British rule in Ireland are not far to seek.²⁶ However, less commonly examined are the anxieties which Moran's collocation of cultural revival and a resurgence of Irish machismo reflected over the gendered implications of Irish Ireland's pointedly non-political and non-violent agenda. If, as David Dwan has argued, the implicit logic of Young Ireland's diffuse and relatively unsystematic political programme was a form of classical republicanism rooted in the cultivation of civic virtue, martial valour, and masculine self-possession then Moran's insistence that nationalism should concern itself largely with questions of domestic economy could be seen as a worrying emasculation.²⁷ While Davis and others had espoused the need for a form of economic

²⁴ *The Leader*, January 17, 1905, 330.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 330.

²⁶ Susan Canon Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 31–32; Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*, Introduction.

²⁷ David Dwan, "Cultural Development: Young Ireland to Yeats," in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride and Richard Bourke (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 217–35.

protectionism responsive to the specificities of Ireland's social and historical situation, this desire to reshape the traditionally feminized sphere of *oikos* coexisted with a belief in the purifying power of war and the need to cultivate an engaged *polis*.²⁸ In comparison with the citizen-soldier sponsored (however anachronistically) by the *Nation*, the *Leader's* image of an Irishman who asserted his national identity not on the battlefield or in the political arena, but in the corner shop and the haberdashery, was apt to seem more than a little limp. Equally unflattering comparisons were likely when such a figure was measured against the fabled virility and stoic reserve of Parnell in his parliamentary and legal confrontations with the British establishment. In such a context, the rhetoric of hypermasculinity articulated in phallically titled organs such as *An Claidheamb Soluis* [the sword of light] and its reports on the 'visible and palpable proof' of the Gael's 'sudden reaccession to manhood', was necessary not only to confound British stereotypes of Celtic effeminacy, but to paper over the cracks of an increasingly strained republican tradition.²⁹ For both Griffith and Moran, the basis for this resurgent masculinity was a return to the 'protoplasm' of Irish-language culture, as sponsored by the Gaelic League and organizations such as Michael Cusack's Gaelic Athletic Association, which, Cusack claimed, had been founded in response to a childhood fascination with the Talteann Games and a desire to realize the linked dreams of national independence, Gaelic revival, and masculine self-actualization: 'Having a mind to make up, I made it up. I resolved to be a Fenian. To be a Fenian I should be a hurler. I became a hurler and a Fenian. This was the beginning of my manhood.'³⁰ Underpinning Cusack's syllogistic model of personal and national *Bildung*, and facilitating its performative assertion of blunt masculine self-assurance, was a conviction that 'Nature' and 'heredity' had vouchsafed to the Irish all the 'workable elements, necessary and sufficient to resist and resent the insolent claims of a hostile gang to rule Ireland'.³¹ As Cusack's remarks suggest, Irish Ireland consistently deployed a gendered rhetoric of health, rooted in degeneration theory, to sponsor a conscious withdrawal from a modern 'mongrel' state of physical and cultural heterogeneity to a former state of 'wholesome' unity.

²⁸ Thomas Davis, "The Morality of War," *The Nation*, June 10, 1843; John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (New York: Press of the Citizen, 1854), 109.

²⁹ "The Third Oireachtas," *An Claidheamb Soluis*, June 10, 1899, 200.

³⁰ *United Irishman*, May 20, 1899, 1; 'Míceál' (Michael Cusack), "The Gaelic Athletic Association – What Does It Mean?," *United Irishman*, March 18, 1899, 3.

³¹ 'Míceál' (Michael Cusack), "The Gaelic Athletic Association," *United Irishman*, March 25, 1899, 3.

‘Can We Go Back into Our Mother’s Womb?’: Incest and Isolationism

Synge’s growing opposition to the kinds of middle-class Catholic cultural isolationism favoured by Irish Ireland is evident in ‘Can We Go Back into Our Mother’s Womb?’, the pseudonymous 1907 open-letter to the Gaelic League discussed in the previous chapter. In the letter, Synge presents the Irish as trapped within a political and cultural binary of their own fashioning in which Ireland is opposed to England to the exclusion of the potentially revivifying aesthetic energies of Synge’s own ‘European’ art: ‘Was there ever a sight so piteous as an old and respectable people setting up the ideals of Fee-Gee because, with their eyes glued to the navel of John Bull, they dare not be Europeans for fear the huckster across the street might call them English.’³² In Synge’s view, the epitome of this paradoxically Anglo-centric navel-gazing and the binarism it engenders is the ‘gushing, cowardly, and maudlin’ doctrine of reviving the Irish language.³³ As has been seen, for Synge, this regressive linguistic policy risks reducing Ireland from a ‘place in history’ secured by ‘seventeen centuries of manhood’ to a ‘slobbering and senile’ state of ‘complete insanity’ in which the Irish will pass England ‘in the hysteria of old woman’s talk’.³⁴ The logical inconsistencies that most likely discouraged Synge from publishing the letter are clear enough: in accusing Ireland of a pathological fixation with England his greatest criticism of the Gaelic League is that they have come to resemble the English. However, more striking is Synge’s appropriation of Irish Ireland’s gendered rhetoric of health, in which hysterical femininity is presented as the index of a process of degeneration into a state of physical and mental incontinence. Synge contrasts this ‘senile and slobbering’ old woman with a quasi-mythic (and, as I emphasized in Chapter One, notably Anglo-Irish) tradition of Cuchulainoid heroism, exemplified by figures like ‘Grattan and Emmet and Parnell’, all of whom Moran had discounted as ‘mongrel’ members of the ‘Pale ascendancy’.³⁵ More than simply a formulaic evocation of the Ascendancy’s greatest hits, this roll-call (composed of two parliamentarians and a physical force nationalist) specifically laid claim to the linked fora of republican virtue which Moran’s petty-bourgeois cultural nationalism had apparently ceded (parliament and the battlefield) and the masculine self-determination with which they were cognate. Just as Moran deployed a pseudo-evolutionary model of ‘hereditary influences’ to present the

³² J. M. Synge, *Collected Works, 2: Prose*, ed. Alan Price (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), 399–400.

³³ *Ibid.*, 399.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 399–400.

³⁵ Moran, *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland*, 46. Yeats positions himself atop a similarly composed Anglo-Irish ‘ancestral stair’ in section II of ‘Blood and the Moon’. Yeats, *The Poems*, 2000, 287.

impact of Anglo-Irish politics and culture as fundamentally degenerative, so Synge now figures Irish Ireland's fantasies of cultural autarchy as a wilfully atavistic attempt to resist the inevitable currents of biological and social change. The title of Synge's letter offers a particularly graphic rendering of the insular mindset which he feels is emblematic of those who opposed the *Playboy*, whom he figures attempting to retreat up their mother's birth canal.

Alongside the regressive impulse this image so grotesquely evokes, and the imputations of hysteria coded by its reference to maternal wombs, its thinly veiled Oedipal undertones serve to align the chauvinism of the Gaelic League and the *Playboy*'s critics with an impulse towards endogamy and incest. While such a suggestion plays upon the well-worn comic trope of Ireland's rural population as a gaggle of inbred bumpkins, it also evokes a long-running and often politicized debate in Victorian and Edwardian society over the propriety and physiological ramifications of consanguineous marriage. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the public health impact of endogamous unions became a matter of increasingly vocal dispute within the medical and political establishment.³⁶ The dominant positions which were to emerge in this debate are show-cased in a pair of articles published in the *Lancet* in the early 1860s. The first, an editorial on 'The Degeneration of Race', presented the causal relationship between consanguineous marriages and congenital defects as an established fact, affirmed by physicians, historians, and ethnologists alike. In the view of such authorities, marriage between family members led inevitably to 'the intellectual and physical degeneration of the offspring of such unions'.³⁷ The article's author claimed that, despite the 'rapid extinction' of 'exclusive aristocratic families', such unions remained alarmingly common, giving rise to 'a large proportion of the idiots, the epileptics, the scrofulous, the rachitic, the enfeebled, and the incapable' who presently afflicted the nation.³⁸ Without further investigation into the causes of these 'hereditary scourges', the article concluded, Britain risked finding itself possessed of a population worthy of 'the imagination of Dante' at his most infernal.³⁹ The dissenting opinion was offered by Dr S. Anderson Smith, a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, who wrote to the *Lancet* in 1861 to question this apparent consensus. For Smith, consanguineous marriage was both divinely ordained – how else, he reasoned, was

³⁶ For an overview of these debates, to which my own discussion is indebted, see Nancy Fix Anderson, "Cousin Marriage in Victorian England," *Journal of Family History* 11, no. 3 (1986): 285–301.

³⁷ "The Degeneration of Race," *The Lancet* 76, no. 1947 (December 22, 1860): 619–20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 620.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

the human race supposed to have proliferated beyond Adam and Eve, or replenished its stocks after the Noahic flood? – and an instinctual reflection of an innate antipathy between and among different social groups. Exemplary for Smith in this regard were the Celts, who, ‘rather than intermarry with the Saxon invaders’, contracted increasingly close-knit endogamous unions, and ‘colonists’, who prefer to ‘annihilate’ those whom they subjugate, rather than marry ‘aborigines’.⁴⁰ In Smith’s account, consanguineous marriage thus constituted an ecclesiastically sanctioned means of cultural and political consolidation rooted in the chauvinistic logic of not only colonial nationalism but also anti-colonial resistance, an irony Synge was to exploit in his critiques of Irish Ireland.

Both positions attracted stringent advocates throughout the late nineteenth century. Despite having wedded his own first cousin, Emma Wedgwood, in 1839, Charles Darwin concluded his 1862 study of fertilization in orchids with a denunciation of consanguineous marriage, remarking that, given the effort required to achieve cross pollination, it may be inferred that there is ‘something injurious in the process [of self-fertilization]’:⁴¹

Nature thus tells us, in the most emphatic manner, that she abhors perpetual self-fertilization. For may we not further infer as probable, in accordance with the belief of the vast majority of the breeders of our domestic productions, that marriage between near relatives is likewise in some way injurious,—that some unknown great good is derived from the union of individuals which have been kept distinct for many generations?⁴²

This image of the incest taboo as an instinctual reaction to the apparently degenerative outcomes of endogamy was challenged by the ethnologist Alfred Henry Huth in his 1875 study, *On the Marriage of Near Kin*. On the basis of a comparative examination of marriage practises among ancient and contemporary societies, Huth argued that the human aversion to incest was not innate, but socially determined, and had no grounding in an observable increase in the frequency or severity of congenital defects among the offspring of consanguineous unions.⁴³ Huth’s findings were in turn questioned by the Finnish anthropologist Edward Westermarck, who influentially hypothesized that the incest taboo arose from an

⁴⁰ S Anderson Smith, “The Degeneration of Race,” *The Lancet* 77, no. 1956 (February 23, 1861): 202.

⁴¹ Charles Darwin, *On the Various Contrivances by Which British and Foreign Orchids Are Fertilised, and on the Good Effects of Intercrossing* (London: John Murray, 1862), 360.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 360–61.

⁴³ Alfred Henry Huth, *The Marriage of Near Kin Considered with Respect to the Laws of Nations: The Results of Experience and the Teachings of Biology* (Longmans, Green, and Company, 1887), 353–54.

aversion to sexual intercourse with near kin born of natural selection – the so-called ‘Westermarck effect’. Westermarck contended that, rather than reflecting a conscious awareness of the negative effects of inbreeding on the part of early human societies, the high rates of sterility in the offspring of consanguineous unions rendered the prohibition of incest evolutionarily advantageous.⁴⁴ Hopes for a definitive statistical answer to the question in the United Kingdom were dashed when an amendment to include a question relating to cousin marriage in the 1870 Census Bill was defeated by a substantial margin in the Commons.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the debate remained live well into the first decades of the twentieth century, drawing medical, psychological, and anthropological commentary from figures such as Charcot, Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Ernest Crawley.⁴⁶

Whether the scientifically literate Synge encountered these widely diffused lines of argument directly or at second-hand, both sides of the debate were grist to Synge’s polemic mill, and significantly inflected the rhetoric of health he was to adopt in his rejection of Irish Ireland and Sinn Féin isolationism. On the one hand, in line with the biological and psychological arguments of Darwin and Krafft-Ebing, the degenerate impulse towards and degenerative impact of incest could be presented as the evolutionarily-mandated correlative of the social, cultural, and economic chauvinism of Irish Ireland and Sinn Féin. On the other hand, from an anthropological standpoint, this stymying nativism could in turn be presented as a mis-reading of the traditions of the pre-imperial Gaelic culture which Irish Ireland and its advocates so fetishized. Furthermore, in the context of the *Playboy* and the controversy to which it gave rise, it could be positioned as a betrayal of the frank and pragmatic sexuality which ethnologists and anthropologists claimed was exemplary of these ‘primitive’ cultures, and what Synge held to be their final foothold in modern Europe, the Aran Islands.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage* (London: Macmillan, 1891), 352–53.

⁴⁵ “Census Bill – [Bill 211] – Second Reading,” *House of Commons Debates*, no. 203 (July 22, 1870): cc805-13.

⁴⁶ Jean Martin Charcot, *Leçons du Mardi à la Salpêtrière: Polycliniques, 1888-1889* (Paris: Progrès Médical, 1889), 11–12; Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der konträren Sexualempfindung: Eine medizinisch-gerichtliche Studie für Ärzte und Juriste*, 13. Ausgabe (Stuttgart: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1907), 447–49; Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Selection in Man: Touch. Smell. Hearing. Vision* (Philadelphia: FA Davis Company, 1905), 204–9; Alfred Ernest Crawley, *The Mystic Rose: A Study of Primitive Marriage* (London: Macmillan, 1902).

⁴⁷ In section I of *The Aran Islands* (1907), Synge describes life on Inishmaan as ‘perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe’. Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 53.

‘We were always primitive’: Primitivism and Inbreeding

Synge’s sensitivity to these possibilities is clearly inscribed in the surviving fragments of his uncompleted autobiography, composed sporadically between 1896 and 1898 and revised in 1907.⁴⁸ The lion’s share of the text is given over to an account of a nascent romance between the young Synge and an unnamed ‘girl of [his] own age’, whom he presents as a ‘neighbour’.⁴⁹ The ten-year-old Synge and his playmate are first presented responding with almost eroticized delight to the natural world in a wood close to Synge’s home following the death of an aunt, an incident which Synge explains in explicitly primitivist terms. Far from provoking grief in the young couple, the ‘sense of death seems to have been only strong enough to evoke the full luxury of the woods’ – a feeling which Synge supposes ‘makes all primitive people inclined to merry making at a funeral’.⁵⁰ This innocent response to death is paralleled by the naturally decorous sexuality the two young people apparently share: ‘We were always primitive. We both understood all the facts of life and spoke of them without much hesitation but a certain propriety that was decidedly wholesome. We talked of sexual matters with an indifferent and sometimes amused frankness that was identical with the attitude of folk-tales.’⁵¹ Throughout both the fragmentary autobiography, and Synge’s prose at large, ‘primitive’ and its cognates operate almost synonymously with this ‘amused frankness’ in the sphere of sexual desire. As the 1904 letter to Stephen McKenna which provides the epigraph to this chapter makes clear, Synge came to regard this effort to restore the ‘sex-element’ to its ‘natural place’ in cultural discourse as a key feature of his work.⁵² However, as the tension between ‘propriety’ and ‘frankness’ in his heavily qualified account of his younger self’s ‘decidedly wholesome’ attitude to sex makes clear, Synge’s sense of the relationship of an unselfconscious and instinctual ‘primitive’ sexuality to contemporary social mores was often more strained than he might have wished to admit. The same ambivalence can be detected in an introductory fragment of the same text, in which Synge expounds a model of life-writing and selfhood in which primitivism, evolutionary theory, psychology, and an occult sense of *anima mundi* are fused: ‘If by the study of an adult who is before his time we can preconstruct [sic] the tendency of life and if – as I believe – we find in

⁴⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² J. M. Synge, *The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 75.

childhood perfect traces of the savage, the expression of a personality will reveal evolution from before history to beyond the science of our époque [sic].⁵³ As Synge's remarks suggest, underpinning this densely overdetermined model of personal, cultural, and biological development is a sense that childhood is marked with vestiges of the 'savage'. However, in making this assertion, Synge enacts an unstable mutual redefinition in which it is unclear whether childhood has taken on the more brutal and asocial characteristics of the 'primitive', or whether the perceived savagery of 'primitive' cultures is being justified as a form of naïve innocence. This instability is further intensified by Synge's implicit self-presentation as an 'adult who is before his time', implying both a sense of social and cultural anachronism (and, presumably, open-mindedness) and a suggestion of early-blooming sexual precocity. As if to underscore this double entendre, Synge offers as an example of his precocity a childhood visit to a 'ladies' bathing place' which was interrupted by a sudden downpour.⁵⁴ Reflecting on the experience of being hastily bundled into an occupied bathing-box, Synge remarks that, though little boys 'are rightly considered inoffensive', thanks to such experiences 'some of them grow up with souvenirs that illustrate a celebrated line in Dante'.⁵⁵ In this context, Synge's assertion that he and his young playmate were 'always primitive' becomes less uncomplicatedly 'wholesome' than his account of their childhood antics would seem to insist. The potential disjunction between this unmediated sexual impulse and norms of civilized conduct is all the more pointed when read in the light of a fact Synge crucially elides: the model for this young woman was in fact Synge's cousin, Florence Ross.⁵⁶

In such a context, the account Synge offers in the abortive autobiography of his first exposure to Darwin, and the diabolical consequences he imagined would ensue, take on a greater medical and scientific significance than their tone of self-ironizing hyperbole might suggest. Following a well-worn trope of Edwardian autobiography, Synge describes his first reading of 'a book of Darwin' at the age of fourteen as an experience which robbed 'the sky [of] its blue and the grass its green' and left him writhing in an 'agony of doubt'.⁵⁷ In contrast to the young Yeats, who derived from his reading of evolutionary theory a pugnacious desire to refute the pious, in the midst of this early paroxysm of inchoate atheism, Synge

⁵³ Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ W.J. Mc Cormack, *Fool of the Family: A Life of J.M. Synge* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 43.

⁵⁷ Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 10.

imagines himself to have become the ‘playfellow of Judas’: ‘Incest and parricide were but consequences of the idea that possessed me.’⁵⁸ Read in the light of Synge’s partially elided involvement with his cousin, the links this passage, and the autobiographical fragments more generally, forge between an ambivalently conceived ‘primitive’ sexuality, evolutionary theory, and the spectre of inbreeding are striking. This is not to engage in a pseudo-Freudian attempt to place sublimated incestuous desire at the core of the Syngean oeuvre, but instead to acknowledge that the anxiety with which Synge’s efforts to imagine a utopian ‘primitive’ sexuality are so often marked is bound up with a concern for the potentially degenerative outcomes such unbridled libido might entail. Such anxieties find their fullest expression in a fragment of the putative autobiography in which Synge recounts his adolescent resolution never to marry because of his persistent illness:

This ill health led to a curious resolution which has explained in some measure all my subsequent evolution. Without knowing, or, as far as I can remember, hearing anything about doctrines of heredity I surmised that unhealthy parents should have unhealthy children. Therefore, I said, I am unhealthy, and if I marry I will have unhealthy children. But I will never create beings to suffer as I am suffering, so I will never marry.⁵⁹

While predicated upon a disavowal of a theorized understanding of Lamarckian inheritance, Synge’s emphasis that this realization shaped ‘all [his] subsequent *evolution*’ seems intended to link this conviction to his wider response to Darwin. Likewise, the suggestion that this insight presented itself to him spontaneously situates it within the same terrain of innate knowledge occupied by ‘the facts of life’ in his account of his flirtations with his cousin.⁶⁰ In both cases, a ‘primitive’ drive to free-love appears to contain within it the seeds of the Dantean catalogue of ‘the idiots, the epileptics, the scrofulous, the rachitic, the enfeebled, and the incapable’ enumerated in the *Lancet*. The ‘primitive’ thus comes to occupy a fraught and ambiguous semantic valence within Synge’s rhetoric of health, valorizing a pre- or asocial sexual licence even as it evokes the spectre of degeneration with which such licence was cognate.

In this regard, these autobiographical fragments anticipate Synge’s curiously ambivalent account of sexuality on the Aran Islands, which he presents as being unselfconscious and instinctual, while at the same time emphasizing that it does not transgress the norms of ‘civilized’ conduct. This is particularly clear in a

⁵⁸ Yeats, *Collected Works*, 1999, 3: 77; Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 11.

⁵⁹ Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 9.

⁶⁰ Emphasis mine.

passage in a which an equally precocious young woman – ‘not yet half way through her teens’, yet ‘in some ways more consciously developed’ than anyone else on Aran – expresses her delight at Synge’s photography: ‘The complete absence of shyness or self-consciousness in most of these people gives them a peculiar charm, and when this young and beautiful woman leaned across my knees to look nearer at some photograph that pleased her, I felt more than ever the strange simplicity of the island life.’⁶¹ On the surface, Synge offers an apparently innocent vignette of ‘primitive’ fascination with modern technology. However, if one bears in mind the implied position of the kneeling young woman’s chest as she strains across Synge’s lap, it becomes clear that, in this moment, both parties must have been able to feel far more than just the ‘simplicity’ of life on Aran. The obliquely signalled sexual licence of primitive life on the islands takes on a more sinister character in the Nietzschean reverie with which Part One of the travelogue concludes. Recounting a dream in which the ‘luring excitement’ of a piece of supernatural music possesses his ‘nerves and blood’ with the irresistible urge to dance, Synge emphasizes how he struggles to ‘remain quiet’ by ‘holding [his] knees together with [his] hands’, lending a decidedly erotic character to the ‘agony’ and ‘ecstasy’ of the Dionysiac frenzy to which he rapidly succumbs.⁶² Significantly, Synge attributes this self-annihilating ‘vortex’ of ‘passion’ to an atavistic resurgence of the ‘psychic memory’ of the ‘neighbourhood’ and the primitivism with which it is cognate.⁶³ Synge addresses the topic of the islanders’ sexuality most explicitly in Part Three of *The Aran Islands*, in which he again strains to present the desires of the islanders as simultaneously socially unmediated and beyond the reproach of mainland morality:

The direct sexual instincts are not weak on the island, but they are so subordinated to the instincts of the family that they rarely lead to irregularity. The life here is still at an almost patriarchal stage, and the people are nearly as far from the romantic moods of love as they are from the impulsive life of the savage.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid, 114; 106.

⁶² Ibid, 100; 99. In the ‘Preface’ to the revised edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872, revised 1886), Nietzsche famously outlines the simultaneous ‘horror’ and ‘blissful ecstasy’ which arise from the ‘breakdown of the *principium individuationis*’ [principle of individuation], ‘complete self-forgetting’, and ‘*intoxication*’ that characterize the ‘*Dionysiac*’. To illustrate his point, Nietzsche cites the example of ‘St John’s and St Vitus’ dancers’ who ‘roamed from place to place, impelled by the same Dionysiac power, singing and dancing as they went’. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17. Emphases Nietzsche’s.

⁶³ Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 99.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 144.

The ambiguity of the term ‘irregularity’ – it is unclear to which of a plethora of perversions it might refer – is somewhat clarified by the telling, if no less obscure phrase ‘the instincts of the family’. More than the legally governed structure of the marital home, Synge’s use of the term ‘instincts’ suggests the web of social, cultural, and evolutionary forces which figures such as Huth and Westermarck had held composed the incest taboo. As such, one of the unspoken ‘irregularities’ of which Synge seems eager to absolve the islanders, is the same endogamous tendency for which he so castigated the advocates of Irish Ireland, and its most obvious sexual correlate, inbreeding.

The contortions of logic which this absolution required of Synge are most visible in his account of the islanders’ signature footwear, the ‘pampootie’ – a soft shoe made from raw animal hide – and the evolutionary benefits such primitive attire has conferred on them. Finding that Synge’s shoes have been torn to pieces by the ‘sharp-edged fossils’ which abound on Aran, his hosts fashion him a pair of island boots to ease his passage along the rocky coast of Inishmaan.⁶⁵ Newly equipped to navigate this pointedly ancient terrain, Synge records that he ‘learned the natural walk of man’ and discovered the ‘natural use’ of his toes.⁶⁶ In theorizing the evolutionary legacy to which he has just been granted access, Synge presents the potentially bestial characteristics of the islanders which the pampootie has allowed them to retain as a revivifying counterpart to, and constituent component of, their inherently aristocratic nature:

The absence of the heavy boot of Europe has preserved to these people the agile walk of the wild animal, while the general simplicity of their lives has given them many other points of physical perfection. Their way of life has never been acted on by anything much more artificial than the nests and burrows of the creatures that live round them, and they seem, in a certain sense, to approach more nearly to the finer types of our aristocracies – who are bred artificially to a natural ideal – than to the labourer or citizen, as the wild horse resembles the thoroughbred rather than the hack or cart-horse. Tribes of the same natural development are, perhaps, frequent in half-civilised countries, but here a touch of the refinement of old societies is blended, with singular effect, among the qualities of the wild animal.⁶⁷

Some critics have sought to present Synge’s Aran writings as an attempt to isolate the islanders in a pre-Darwinian Eden.⁶⁸ However, such a reading overlooks the ways in which passages such as these deploy an evolutionarily-inflected primitivism to engage in a delicate balancing act in which a range of apparently

⁶⁵ Ibid, 65.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 65; 66.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 66.

⁶⁸ Mary Burke, “Evolutionary Theory and the Search for Lost Innocence in the Writings of J. M. Synge,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004): 50.

incompatible value systems are used to redeem one another. The atavistic threat of the islanders' physical proximity to 'the wild animal' is rendered a virtue through Synge's invocation of the 'finer types' of European aristocracy as a point of comparison which transforms the absence of economic and technical modernity on Aran from a potentially degenerative social delay into the catalyst for a process of natural 'refinement'. This analogy in turn reciprocally redeems the aristocratic features of the islanders, which are presented not as the inauthentic product of the eugenics (or incest) necessary to engineer an 'artificially' bred European aristocracy, but as their rightful evolutionary bounty. The islanders are thus elevated from a subhuman state to the level of 'physical perfection,' while at the same time being insulated from the socio-economic inequalities attendant upon a genuine aristocracy. The metaphorical invocation of horse-breeding serves to reinforce this manoeuvre, naturalizing Synge's potentially classist commitment to the elevation of the 'thoroughbred' islanders above the 'cart-horse' of the mainland labouring classes through the explanatory mechanism of evolutionary biology. The centrality of evolutionary rhetoric to the articulation of this argument is underscored when this passage is compared with an earlier account of the same experience published in *The Gael* in 1901, in which references to horse-breeding and aristocracy are absent.⁶⁹ Rather than seeking to insulate the inhabitants of Inishmaan from Darwinian scrutiny, Synge revised his Aran writings precisely in order to apply such an optic to consolidate and redeem their 'Edenic' isolation.

This gymnastic evolutionary approach to the islanders underpins not only Synge's account of their physiological features, but colours his account of the socio-economic condition of the islands as a whole. Synge frames his account of life on the Aran Islands within a binary in which socio-economic 'modernity' is collocated with a degenerate form of complexity which consistently threatens the robust simplicity of life on Aran. This narrative is plotted in miniature in the 'Preface' to *The Aran Islands*, in which Synge unfavourably contrasts the encroachment of the fishing industry on Aranmor with the other 'more primitive' islands, which are nevertheless subject to equally unwelcome 'changes'.⁷⁰ Underpinning this short passage, and Synge's account of complexity as a whole, is the work of the biologist, sociologist, and political theorist, Herbert Spencer. Spencer's model of evolution fused the biological and the social in a totalizing narrative in which the 'law of all progress', whether it be in the realms of 'Earth', 'Life', 'Society',

⁶⁹ J. M. Synge, "The Last Fortress of the Celt," in *Travelling Ireland: Essays, 1898-1908*, ed. Nicholas Grene (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2009), 15.

⁷⁰ Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 47.

‘Government’, ‘Manufactures’, ‘Commerce’, ‘Language’, ‘Literature’, ‘Science’, or ‘Art’, was the development ‘of the simple into the complex’.⁷¹ Spencer read these processes of biological and social evolution as mutually reinforcing and fundamentally beneficial, commenting in his influential *Principles of Biology* (1864, revised 1898) that ‘[s]lowly, but surely, evolution brings about an increasing amount of happiness’.⁷² This model of progressive development from savage darkness to civilized *eudaimonia* posed problems for those who sought to present a return to the ‘primitive’ as a revivifying cultural and political endeavour. As David Dwan has noted, one solution was to accept the basic trajectory Spencer had outlined, but transvalue its poles of orientation.⁷³ This approach was adopted by Yeats in his 1893 lecture ‘Nationality and Literature’, in which he analogized the development of a national literature to the growth of a tree ‘from a simple seed’ to ‘innumerable and intricate leaves, and flowers, and fruits’, emphasizing (in transparently Spencerian terms) their shared movement ‘from unity to multiplicity, from simplicity to complexity’.⁷⁴ However, for Yeats, this growing complexity was not conducive to happiness but to abstraction and senescence, with the ‘old nations [...] forgetting in a trance of subtlety the flaming heart of man’.⁷⁵ A similar trajectory is plotted in ‘The Celtic Element in Literature’ (1898), in which Yeats recasts the ‘natural magic’ of the Arnoldian Celt as ‘the ancient religion of the world’, whose unity has been compromised by an increasingly ‘crowded and complicated world’.⁷⁶ Sinéad Garrigan Mattar emphasizes the ways in which Yeats’s modification of Arnold in this essay is indebted to a selective reading of the work of Celtologist Andrew Lang, accepting Lang’s thesis of a unified ‘early human’ spiritual animism, while tacitly disregarding its implications of ‘savage’ backwardness.⁷⁷ Thus, as Dwan and Garrigan Mattar demonstrate, by reading scientific discourses against themselves, Yeats was able simultaneously to appropriate and repudiate Spencerian theory, advocating a return to a primitivist mythopoesis whose apparent homogeneity in fact served only to render it all the more cosmopolitan.

A similar strategy of inverted Spencerianism is evident throughout Synge’s Aran writings, in which he consistently decries the homogenizing effects of socio-economic modernization. In one early example,

⁷¹ Herbert Spencer, “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, Library, vol. 1 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1891), 10; 14.

⁷² Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, Revised and Enlarged, vol. 1 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1898), 438.

⁷³ David Dwan, *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), 86–87.

⁷⁴ W.B. Yeats, *Uncollected Prose*, ed. John P. Frayne, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1970), 268.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:272–73.

⁷⁶ Yeats, *Collected Works*, 2007, 4: 129–30.

⁷⁷ Garrigan Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival*, 75–76.

Synge castigates the ‘Congested District Boards’ for encouraging a mode of increasing industrial specialization on Aranmor which has served only to render the island more blandly uniform than ever before. In Synge’s view, thanks to these misguided social enterprise schemes there now remains ‘very little [...] to distinguish it from any fishing village on the west coast of Ireland’.⁷⁸ Synge’s resistance to this increasing specialization is reflected in his characterization of the inhabitants of Inishmaan as omniscient, free from the depersonalizing influence of ‘the division of labour’, whose absence results in the ‘correspondingly wide development of each individual’ on the island. Synge notes that each male islander is bilingual, ‘a skilled fisherman’, able to ‘manage a curragh’, ‘farm simply, burn kelp, cut out pampooties, mend nets, build and thatch a house, and make a cradle or a coffin’.⁷⁹ Spencer had identified this absence of specialization as characteristic of ‘barbarous tribes’, noting that ‘society in its first and lowest form is a homogeneous aggregation of individuals having like powers and like functions’ where ‘[e]very man is warrior, hunter, fisherman, tool-maker, [and] builder’.⁸⁰ However, what serves for Spencer as an index of ‘barbarous’ simplicity becomes for Synge the source of the islanders’ physical and mental vitality, granting them ‘the alertness of the primitive hunter’ and necessitating ‘considerable activity of mind’.⁸¹ Synge’s deployment of this evolutionist rhetoric of health thus permits him to follow Yeats in transvaluing simplicity as a richer and more unified species of complexity, while at the same time holding at bay the impression of degenerate insularity with which he associated Gaelic revivalism.

An unintended irony of Synge’s construction of the islanders as robustly self-reliant is its resemblance to D.P. Moran’s image of ‘Vigorous Ireland’ and the autarchic philosophy for which it was the vehicle. Indeed, Moran himself had noted the ‘curious versatility of the Irishman’, arguing that: ‘We all have a bit of everything in us, and none of us have any specialised characteristic stamped upon us, by a long line of hereditary influences, except the almost universal inclination to cringe and crawl which over a century of Pale ascendancy has driven into our souls’.⁸² As often occurs in Moran’s writing, a Lamarckian vocabulary of ‘hereditary influences’ is invoked to suggest the degenerative impact of the Anglo-Irish ‘ascendancy’ on an otherwise formless section of the Irish population who remain pregnant with political possibility.

⁷⁸ Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 47.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 132.

⁸⁰ Spencer, “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” 19.

⁸¹ Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 132.

⁸² Moran, *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland*, 46.

Moran's response to this protean nature is highly instrumentalist, figuring Ireland's 'ignorant peasants' as so much 'raw material' in the shaping hands of a Catholic professional class brought to self-determining political awareness by Irish Ireland.⁸³ However, in Moran's view this project to sculpt the peasant is fraught with danger, because upward social mobility is concomitant with a downward evolutionary movement towards 'an aristocracy and society, more or less alien in blood'.⁸⁴ As his account of the naturally aristocratic islanders makes clear, for Synge, whom Yeats believed to be 'almost as proud of his [Ascendancy] blood as of his genius', the evolutionarily insulated inhabitants of Inishmaan offered a wholly different horizon of political opportunity.⁸⁵ For both Synge and Moran, the rhetoric of health serves as the vehicle for the articulation of normative socio-political commitments which can be disguised as the products of apparently irresistible natural forces. Nevertheless, despite their shared investment in the Irish peasant as an evolutionarily-sheltered wellspring of cultural and physical regeneration, the political ends to which Moran and Synge enlist this figure remain diametrically opposed. The extent of this difference, and the centrality of the rhetoric of health to its articulation, are given prominent expression in Synge's most infamous, and controversial work, *The Playboy of the Western World*.

The Degeneration of the Western World: Degeneration Theory and the *Playboy*

More than any other dramatic work by Synge, *Playboy* embraces a degenerationist rhetoric of health as the vehicle through which to confront the autarchic nationalist programs of Irish Ireland and Sinn Féin in their own terms. Throughout the play, Synge consistently presents insularity as the predominant feature of contemporary Irish political life, ascribing to it a range of regressive physiological effects. This tendency finds its most emphatic expressions in the engagement of cousins Shawn Keogh and Pegeen Mike, established at the play's opening. Synge positions the proposed union between Shawn and Pegeen as an example of a threefold form of insularity, in which ecclesiastically-endorsed incest is to be undertaken to consolidate the family's property and livestock holdings:

⁸³ Ibid, 4.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁸⁵ Yeats, *Memoirs*, 1988, 201.

SHAWN Aren't we after making a good bargain, the way we're only waiting these days on Father Reilly's dispensation from the bishops or the Court of Rome?⁸⁶

Shawn's reference to a Papal dispensation offers a pointed cue to Catholic members of the play's audience that the proposed union violates the prohibition against marriages within the 'fourth degree of kinship' (first cousins) which had been a feature of Canon Law since the middle ages.⁸⁷ In such a context, Shawn's framing of their engagement as a 'good bargain' offers the first of many indications that the marriage is being dictated by economic imperatives, rather than a concern for the health and vitality of the offspring it may yield. In part, this reflects the generally accepted account of consanguineous marriage as a means to retain property and direct its inheritance.⁸⁸ Indeed, Alfred Henry Huth went so far as to posit that the incest taboo had arisen in large part to prevent precisely this monopolizing tendency from determining the course of human sexual and social relations.⁸⁹ However, in an Irish setting this phenomenon was not merely an anthropological curio, but a pressing demographic reality. The disappearance of subsistence farming in the aftermath of the Famine had resulted in an increasing unwillingness on the part of Irish men and women to marry unless both parties possessed sufficient holdings of farm-land.⁹⁰ Griffith regularly offered graphic accounts of the Famine as part of a British 'plan for the extermination of the Nationalist population' of Ireland.⁹¹ One of the primary motives for Sinn Féin's vocal advocacy for economic autarchy (exemplified in a range of 'Buy Irish' campaigns) was to insulate Ireland against this perceived genocidal threat. Thus, for Synge to suggest that Irish reproductive behaviour remained contingent upon a socio-economic crisis orchestrated by Britain was a radical assault on the claims to autonomy that were fundamental to both Sinn Féin and Irish Ireland. Even the hapless Keogh's soubriquet, 'Shaneen', seems intended to underscore this uncomfortable British influence, homophonically evoking Moran's favoured epithet for Anglophile toadies, 'Shoneen'.⁹² For Synge, this intrusion of contemporary economic reality into the sexual practices of the

⁸⁶ J. M. Synge, *Collected Works, 4: Plays, Book 2*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), 59.

⁸⁷ R. Burstel, "Consanguinity (in Canon Law)," in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04264a.htm>.

⁸⁸ Anderson, "Cousin Marriage in Victorian England," 285.

⁸⁹ Huth, *The Marriage of Near Kin Considered with Respect to the Laws of Nations*, 24.

⁹⁰ Robert E. Kennedy, *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage, and Fertility* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 142–55.

⁹¹ Arthur Griffith, "The Economics of the Irish Famine," *United Irishman*, December 6, 1902, 5.

⁹² For a compendium of disparaging Moranite epithets, see Toomey, "Moran's Collar: Yeats and Irish Ireland," 45.

Mayoites is figured as contributing directly to the degenerate stock Pegeen lists when questioning the interest of the Pope in Ireland:

PEGEEN [I]f I was him, I wouldn't bother with this place where you'll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits.⁹³

Tellingly, this catalogue of the stymied, the lame, and the deranged is composed almost exclusively of men, who, like Shawn, offer an obvious contrast with the vitality of the play's female cast. In this sense, Synge's appropriation of Moran's rhetoric of degeneration is doubly subversive of the radically autonomous and hypermasculine image of 'Vigorous Ireland' presented in the pages of *The Leader*, implying that Irish Ireland's phallocentric isolationism renders its supporters complicit in the weakening of the already debilitated 'Gael'. This is particularly clear in the case of the 'mad Mulrannies', whose return from Californian émigré life stems not from Irish patriotic fervour, but from an American drive to return to degenerate Erin her damaged goods.

Synge further emphasizes this tendency when he has Pegeen present the Widow Quin as a locus of insularity so intense as to allow the passage of her breast milk to be traced through the mouth of a sheep to the stomach of a visiting Bishop:

PEGEEN [...] Doesn't the world know you reared a black lamb at your own breast, so that the Lord Bishop of Connaught felt the elements of a Christian, and he eating it after in a kidney stew?⁹⁴

Pegeen here presents the Widow as the apotheosis of a community so close-knit as to be engaged in a pseudo-eroticized form of cannibalism, positioning the Bishop of Connaught in suggestive proximity to the Widow's breast. However, this attempt by Pegeen to render the Widow Quin unappealing to Christy comes laden with an unpleasant irony of its own, serving as a reminder of the clergy's role in abetting her own incestuous engagement to Shawn. This irony is further emphasized by Synge only a few lines later, when the Widow Quin warns Christy of the dangers of wooing Pegeen, who is 'waiting only [...] on a sheepskin parchment to wed with Shawn Keogh of Killakeen'.⁹⁵ Synge suggests that the permission for Pegeen's consanguineous marriage will be given on a document written on the skin of an animal that has

⁹³ Synge, *Collected Works*, 4, 1982, 59.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 89.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 91.

been eaten by a local Bishop, and suckled at the teat of the Widow Quin herself. In doing so, Synge deploys Irish Ireland's preferred rhetoric of health, and his own counter-discourse of incest and inbreeding, to position the Catholic Church – the religious underpinning of Moran's sectarian philosophy – as an institutional sanction for the ongoing degeneration of the population. As much as any other aspect of Synge's drama, it was this characterization of the Irish as evolutionarily compromised inbreds that was to incense the portions of its first audience most closely aligned with Moran and Griffith, and which was to inflect the infamous riots it precipitated.

Shifting the Blame: Reconsidering the *Playboy* Riots

The incident which apparently sparked the *Playboy* riots has become a cliché of Irish literary historiography, neatly encapsulated in Lady Gregory's opening-night telegram to the absent Yeats: 'Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift'.⁹⁶ In Gregory's vignette, and the myth to which it gave rise, a prudish and narrow-minded coterie of nativists, incensed by the scandalously frank sexual lexicon of Synge's play, erupt in violent opposition to a perceived slander on Irish femininity. However, a closer examination of contemporary press coverage and eyewitness testimony suggests that behind the disturbances which beset the play's premiere lurked the airing of a very different kind of dirty laundry. More than a suggestion of sexual impurity on the part of Ireland's women, it is the degenerate state of the nation's male population, and the parricidal pseudo-poet Synge sponsors as their antithesis, which appear to have most animated the play's earliest audiences. The *Freeman's Journal*, the Abbey's most persistent and bitter critic throughout the *Playboy*'s initial run, emphasized this fact in their summary of the play's action. Central to the *Freeman's* account of the play is the opposition between Shawn Keogh, who 'is making sheep's eyes at Margaret' (Pegeen), and 'the tramp' (Christy), compared to whom 'the worst specimen of stage Irishman' is a 'refined, acceptable fellow'.⁹⁷ Intentionally or otherwise, the review's account of Shawn's ovine love-making links his meek sexual demeanour (his 'sheep's eyes') to the intensely insular network of sexual and social bonds within which the Widow Quin's black lamb circulates. At the same time, the review condemns Christy by

⁹⁶ Isabella Augusta Persse Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), 112.

⁹⁷ 'The Abbey Theatre, "The Playboy of the Western World,"' *Freeman's Journal*, 28 January 1907, 10, reproduced in James Kilroy, *The "Playboy" Riots* (Dublin: Doleman Press, 1971), 7; 9.

positioning him as the malign apotheosis of the ‘stage Irishman’, a loquacious and unscrupulous mainstay of British theatre since at least the time of Boucicault. As far as the *Freeman* was concerned, Synge had maligned the present condition of Irish masculinity as pathologically compromised, only to sponsor a ‘hideous caricature’ culled from an alien and Hibernophobic cultural tradition in its stead.⁹⁸

This sensitivity to the play’s caustic rendering of the degenerate condition of Irish manhood was not confined to its opponents. Praising the play in the *Irish Times* for its unsettling realism and ‘moral courage’, Patrick Kenny discussed the relationship between the ‘half idiot’ Shawn and the vivacious Pegeen in explicitly Spencerian terms:

Why is ‘Pegeen’ prepared to marry him? ‘God made him; therefore, let him pass for a man’, and in all his unfitness, he is the fittest available! Why? Because the fit ones have fled. He remains because of his cowardice and his idiocy in a region where fear is the first of the virtues, and where the survival of the unfittest is the established law of life.⁹⁹

For Kenny, Synge’s message was clear: Ireland’s insistently dysgenic breeding patterns – in which the ‘human specimens most calculated to bring the race lower’ were ‘select[ed] for continuance’ while the most able were left to emigrate – were not only violently at odds with the laws of natural selection, but also tantamount to race suicide.¹⁰⁰ Synge endorsed Kenny’s reading in an *Irish Times* piece the following day, praising it as a rare moment of critical clear-sightedness.¹⁰¹ Yeats was so taken with Kenny’s review that, when formulating strategies to mitigate the risks the riots posed to the reception of a mooted American edition of the play with John Quin in the February of 1907, he suggested that ‘Pat’ be invited to provide an introduction.¹⁰² As these remarks suggest, at least as much as its fidelity to peasant life in the West, it was the play’s evolutionist interrogation of the operation of natural and artificial selection in Ireland that the Abbey and its allies were most keen to foreground in their defence of the *Playboy*.

Nor were Darwinian readings of the play solely the preserve of the Protestant intelligentsia. During the debate Yeats organized to capitalize on the play’s notoriety, Mr D. Sheehan, who identified himself as both a ‘medical student’ and a ‘peasant who knew peasants’, claimed he ‘had never seen the doctrine of the

⁹⁸ Kilroy, 9.

⁹⁹ ‘Pat’ (Patrick Kenny), ‘That Dreadful Play’, *Irish Times*, 30 January 1907, 9, reproduced in Kilroy, 38.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 41.

¹⁰² John Kelly et al., eds., *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, IntelLex Electronic Edition (Oxford University Press, 2002), sec. 566.

survival of the fittest treated with such living force' as in the *Playboy*.¹⁰³ For Sheehan, the true object of Synge's satire was the 'form of marriage law' which underwrote the pathological union of a 'fine woman like Pegeen Mike' and 'a tubercule Koch's disease man like Shaun [sic] Keogh'.¹⁰⁴ Like Kenny, Sheehan saw in Synge's play an image of the west of Ireland, not as the untainted well-spring of Gaelic culture, but as an anti-Darwinian incubator for a pathologically compromised masculine population, doomed to a state of terminal atrophy akin to the muscular wastage of tuberculosis. In a breeding pool so shallow and contaminated, Sheehan argued, it should come as no surprise that, 'when the artist appears in Ireland who was not afraid of life' and 'his nature', the 'women of Ireland would receive him'.¹⁰⁵ In a telling echo of the infamous 'riots' themselves, the remainder of Sheehan's comments were rendered inaudible by the 'disorder' of the audience, many of whom left the auditorium in 'astonishment' and disgust.¹⁰⁶ As in the case of the play itself, the resistance of Irish Ireland had been provoked not so much by a reference to the undergarments of Irish women, as by the suggestion that the degenerate state of Irish manhood would leave such women disinclined to remove their undergarments at all.

Disinfecting Don Juan: Yeats's Construction of Synge

The same slippage between a pseudo-scientific model of biological fitness and a performative mode of self-fashioning underpins the image of Synge as a virile and dynamic revivifying cultural force that Yeats was to propagate in the aftermath of the playwright's death in 1909. Yeats's construction of Synge as his 'anti-self' or as a sort of 'Übermensch of the Western World' has been well-documented.¹⁰⁷ However, the pervasive role medical discourses, and particularly discourses of sexual health, played in that construction, and, by extension, the importance of Synge to Yeats's eugenic thinking have received relatively scant critical attention. In the 1905 'Preface' to the first edition of *The Well of the Saints*, Yeats emphasizes the paucity and pathological character of the work the younger writer showed him:

He had, however, nothing to show but one or two poems and impressionistic essays, full of that kind of morbidity that has its root in too much brooding over methods of expression, and ways of

¹⁰³ "Parricide and Public. Discussion at the Abbey Theatre," *Freeman's Journal*, 05 February 1907, 6-7, reproduced in Kilroy, *The "Playboy" Riots*, 1971, 86.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Dwan, *The Great Community*, 2008, 178.

looking upon life, which come, not out of life, but out of literature, images reflected from mirror to mirror.¹⁰⁸

While this is not an unfair assessment of the rather self-conscious 'Étude Morbide' (written c. 1899) and 'Vita Vecchia' (written c. 1895-97), it is nevertheless significant that, for Yeats, the 'morbidity' of Synge's work derives from an excess of literary influence and meta-literary introspection which reduces it to an exercise in stylistic *mise en abyme*. In this sense, the 'morbidity' Yeats diagnoses would appear to constitute a kind of aesthetic sterility born of the sort of cultural inbreeding and intellectual incest which Synge had so excoriated in Irish Ireland and comparable to the impotent *ressentiment* which Yeats was to identify as the key-note of the movement's politicized aesthetic. In establishing the myth of Synge's aesthetic origins, Yeats emphasizes that he was determined not to allow Synge to suffer a similar fate, deploying a gendered rhetoric of health to present his as the crucial transformative influence in the impressionable young author's development.

Yeats's criticisms of Synge's 'morbid' early prose seem to have been inflected by the work itself, particularly the 'Étude Morbide', in which the narrator-diarist fears his 'brain by some horrible decadence is grown a register for appalling things', finding the newspapers full of lurid stories of 'men who have gone mad and slain their kindred' and reading 'in reviews [...] analysis of nerve decay'.¹⁰⁹ Synge's self-reflexive account of the texts that beset him seems to figure the unnameable decadence he detects growing in his mind (which the reference to nerve decay allusively links to the later stages of syphilitic infection) as a contagious product of this journalistic reading-matter. It is worth comparing this earlier account of a Synge infected with meta-stylistic concerns – implicitly borne of an excessive regard for other authors – with Yeats's later figuration of Synge in both his journal and *Synge and the Ireland of His Time* as a figure naturally impervious to the 'contagious opinions of poorer minds', possessed of a literary immune system sufficiently robust 'to reject from life and thought all that would mar [his] work'.¹¹⁰ Read in this light, the infamous exhortation to 'Give up Paris' for the Aran Islands in order to 'express a life that has never found expression' is inflected with a concern for health and purity that is only partially metaphorical and which resonates

¹⁰⁸ Yeats, *Collected Works*, 2007, 4: 216.

¹⁰⁹ Synge, *Collected Works*, 2, 1982, 29.

¹¹⁰ Yeats, *Memoirs*, 1988, 154; Yeats, *Collected Works*, 2007, 4: 238.

strongly, albeit unintentionally, with the rhetoric of health through which Irish Ireland and Sinn Féin were fashioning their models of independent Irish identity.

Underpinning this push to purge Synge's oeuvre of all that was 'morbid' and 'decadent' was a desire to position the playwright as the antithesis of what Yeats perceived to be the degenerate state of contemporary nationalist politics. At times, this critique was very close to Synge's own, in both its tone and execution. As I noted in my Introduction, when describing a disrupted performance of the *Playboy* in *Synge and the Ireland of His Time*, Yeats would follow his friend in presenting the play's opponents as a pack of syphilitic hypocrites, 'howling' at Synge's frank handling of sex and sexuality even as a doctor in the audience restrained himself from pointing out those audience members he was 'treating for venereal disease'.¹¹¹ Beyond the broad insinuation of sexual impropriety and moral lassitude, Yeats's positioning of this anecdote in the essay undertakes a more specific critique of Sinn Féin and Irish Ireland. Yeats locates this image of the venereally corrupted rioters in the paragraph immediately following his account of Griffith's ongoing accusations of plagiarism against Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), which had been a bugbear of the *Sinn Féin* editor since its début. Yeats specifically (mis)quotes Griffith's claim that Synge derived his plot not from an authentic Aran folk-tale, but 'from a writer of Roman decadence'.¹¹² In doing so, he is most likely referring to an editorial concerning a 1905 revival of Synge's play in which Griffith had claimed that:

Mr. Synge's Nora Burke is not an Irish Norah Burke – his play is not a work of genius – Irish or otherwise – it is a foul echo from degenerate Greece [...] She is a Greek – a Greek of Greece's most debased period and to dress her in an Irish costume and call her Irish is not only not art, but it is an insult to the women of Ireland.¹¹³

Just as in his selective retelling of the origins of Synge's first voyage to Aran, Yeats positions what he presents as Synge's engagement with the authentic culture of the west of Ireland in opposition to the morbid tendencies of decadent aesthetics. Furthermore, Yeats seems to imply through the proximity of Griffith's and Synge's remarks that the real reason Griffith is so keen to displace the geographical and cultural origins of Synge's 'degenerate' tale is that it offers an uncomfortable reminder of the degenerate stock from which he draws his followers.

¹¹¹ Yeats, *Collected Works*, 2007, 4: 227.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ *United Irishman*, February 28, 1905.

More common, however, than these explicitly medicalized salvoes, were comments rooted in a rhetoric of health whose origins were decidedly Nietzschean. In a journal entry written in the weeks before Synge's death, Yeats described the exponents of Irish Ireland as having 'suffered through the cultivation of hatred as the one energy of their movement a deprivation which is the intellectual equivalent of the removal of the genitals.'¹¹⁴ In Yeats's view, Moranite agon constituted a mode of *Untermenschlich* nay-saying that, because of its parasitic dependence upon the positions which it sought to oppose, was necessarily incapable of producing original thought.¹¹⁵ Early issues of *Samhain*, the journal of the Irish Literary Theatre, consistently pitted 'Drama' against 'those enemies of life, the chimera of the Pulpit and the Press'.¹¹⁶ As the journal entry implies, for Yeats the sexual correlate of this *ressentiment* was castration. However, such imputations of impotence were not merely metaphorical. In a later journal entry Yeats revisits and extends this Nietzschean premise, explicitly linking the intellectual sterility of contemporary nationalism to what he presents as the endemic celibacy of the Irish population:

Hatred as a basis of imagination [...] helps to dry up the nature and makes the sexual abstinence, so common among young men and women in Ireland, possible. This abstinence reacts in turn on the imagination, so that we get at last that strange eunuch-like tone and temper. For the last ten or twenty years there has been a perpetual drying of the Irish mind, with the resultant dust-cloud.¹¹⁷

Much like Patrick Kenny, who had seen in the *Playboy* an indictment of Ireland's dysgenic marriage patterns, Yeats detects in Griffithite opposition to the play both the result and root of the emasculation which its rhetoric of Cuchulainoid machismo had been intended to remedy. The strategy of sexually-pathologized othering which underpinned these private reflections was ultimately to find public expression in the short poem 'On Those that Hated *The Playboy of the Western World*, 1907', in which Griffith and his supporters are

¹¹⁴ Yeats, *Memoirs*, 1988, 176.

¹¹⁵ In the 'First Essay' of *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche identifies negation (saying 'no' to everything that is 'outside', 'other', or 'non-self') as the principle 'creative deed' of slave morality. Because of this impotent *ressentiment*, slave morality is analogous to an organism that requires 'external stimuli in order to act at all'. The degenerative impact of such herd morality is outlined in section five of *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe, Rev. Student Ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 20; 91–92. For an overview of Yeats's engagement with Nietzschean thought, see Otto Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche: An Exploration of Major Nietzschean Echoes in the Writings of William Butler Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Frances Nesbitt Opel, *Mask and Tragedy: Yeats and Nietzsche, 1902–10* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987). For Nietzsche's conception of degeneration, see Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology, and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pt. 2; C. Heike Schotten, *Nietzsche's Revolution: Décadence, Politics, and Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), chaps 1–3.

¹¹⁶ W. B. Yeats, *The Irish Dramatic Movement. The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Vol. VIII*, ed. Mary Fitzgerald and Richard J. Finneran (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 36.

¹¹⁷ Yeats, *Memoirs*, 1988, 176–77.

again figured as ‘Eunuchs’ running through Hell to ‘stare / Upon great Juan riding by’ and ‘rail and sweat’ while ‘Staring upon his sinewy thigh’.¹¹⁸ In contrast to the shrill, hysterical, and emasculated followers of Sinn Féin and Irish Ireland, Yeats presents an intimidatingly sexual and hypermasculine image of Synge, virtually identical to Moran’s ‘Vigorous Ireland’, and all the more strikingly paradoxical for being applied to a figure whose fragile constitution he had praised as vouchsafing his art.

Conclusion

As Yeats’s construction of Synge as a mirthfully antagonistic Don Juan suggests, a sensitivity to the rhetoric of health not only emphasizes the prominent role which contemporary medical and scientific thought played in shaping the foundational mythology of the revival, but reveals striking parallels between the ways in which the revival’s exponents and contemporary advanced nationalists harnessed the explanatory mechanisms of biology to naturalize their visions of Irish identity. For Moran and his allies, degeneration theory provided a compelling metaphorical corelative to the malign effects of British cultural and political influence in Ireland and allowed an (often wishful) image of a unified, pre-imperial Gaelic past to be contrasted with a physically and intellectually compromised ‘mongrel’ present. It likewise allowed an increasingly insular focus on domestic economy to be presented as the key to a resurgence of virile masculinity, rather than an emasculating betrayal of a republican tradition rooted in ideals of civic virtue and martial valour. For Synge, evolutionary and anthropological accounts of consanguineous marriage provided a vocabulary through which to present this nativist commitment to autarchy as a form of cultural incest alien to the very ‘primitive’ culture Irish Ireland so fetishized. While such rhetorical similarities should not be taken to suggest that the political investments of Irish Ireland or the Abbey were proximate, or even similar, they do indicate the permeable nature of the apparently clear boundary between a sexually conservative nationalism and a sexually frank modernism which the *Playboy* riots have traditionally been held to reflect. They likewise emphasize the ways in which, by reading Irish modernist texts in the light of the history of medicine and science, it becomes possible to appreciate the complex and constantly evolving

¹¹⁸ Yeats, *The Poems*, 2000, 162.

nature of the relationship between Irish authors and Irish nationalists in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Part II

Hygiene and Its Discontents

Chapter Three

‘Their spyhilation you mean’

Irish Modernism and the Politics of Venereal Disease

In the February of 1924, Dr Thomas Percy Kirkpatrick, Ireland’s foremost venereal disease specialist and an amateur historian of medicine, received a disquieting letter, written in a disordered hand and composed in an obvious state of distress. It was addressed to the ‘Dr of the Lock Up Hospital, Dublin’ and had been sent from Coolbanagher in Portlannington by an English-born sex worker, concerned about her health and by the treatment she had received at the hands of the local medical authorities. In it, she offered not only an outline of her present condition, but a harrowing account of her experiences of plying her trade in Dublin at the height of the War of Independence (1919-1921):

Dear Sir,

I am writing to beg you to give consideration to what I am here stating [sic] I am suspected to be deceased [sic] at least it is so stated by Country Doctors who have tried to disease [...] by putting Writings on me and daily fumeings [sic] I was in the City of Dublin about 3 years ago as followed through the city by fumeing [sic] of gas and wirings were held on my head to keep me distinct from the rest[,] the English military were there at the time and I being English thought they would favour me but not so[,] death head was burned on to me as a deased [sic] case death head is still burnt on to me and stink and I cant [sic] make it out[,] they told me I was Clock [sic] a mocked [sic] that is my head was a phone for the wiring to be burned too and the reason I am writing to get you to either Examine or see into my case[,] I am poor only for that I would gone to the City and got my self Examined [sic] I was in the Coombe Hospital and 7 years ago and was treated for slight rupture of the wound[,] I wrote there and got no answer to my letter[,] when in Dublin I stayed Mrs [C] 27 Rialto Cottages second Avinue [sic] I have not been fast so I cant [sic] make it out[,] the Dr [D] of Emo Dispencery [sic] has not made a statement to myself that I was deceased [sic] but I have heard it through the wiring burnt to my head[,] If they wish to prove me a case for asylums then I must go to an English asylum were [sic] I was born of an English mother which they never cease to remind me I must by [sic] begging you to excuse the liberty I have taken[.]

I remain Dear Sir[.]

Sincerely Yours [T.F.]¹

The author’s low level of literacy, the traumatic nature of the events described, and her self-professed inability to make sense of what has happened to her make aspects of her account difficult to interpret or

¹ “T.F. to T.P.C. Kirkpatrick,” February 6, 1924, TPCK/3/5: Kirkpatrick Collection, Patient Letters (1 of 2), Royal College of Physicians of Ireland. The material contained within the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland’s Kirkpatrick collection is subject to the one-hundred year rule, and, as such, the letter has been anonymized. For a full account of the Kirkpatrick collection, its contents, and their implications for the history of sexuality and sexual health in Ireland, see Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston, “‘Dear Dr Kirkpatrick’: Recovering Irish Experiences of VD, 1924–47,” in *Patient Voices in Modern Britain*, ed. Anne R. Hanley and Jessica Meyer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, Forthcoming).

corroborate. The narrative the letter articulates, however, is clear enough: upon entering Dublin, its author sought to engage in sex work with British troops. Having been born to an English mother, she expected to receive favourable treatment at their hands. However, upon discovering that she was infected, they used a heated wire to brand her with a 'death's head' – a skull and cross-bones – to distinguish her from other women who took the soldiers as their clients. While doing so, they appear to have mocked her about the nature of the branding. The scars from this incident persisted and may have become infected (she notes that they 'stink'). The local medical authorities have made her feel further stigmatized by 'putting writings' on her and subjecting her to what she describes as daily 'fumeings' [*sic*]. She has unsuccessfully attempted to communicate with the Coombe Hospital, where she had previously been treated, and has been informed that if she wishes to enter an asylum (presumably a Magdalene laundry, though potentially a psychiatric hospital) she will have to return to England. At the level of personal experience, the woman's letter illustrates the often violent stigma attached to venereal disease, especially among sex workers, in times of armed conflict. At a political level, her letter reveals the complex network of sectarian assumptions which governed the treatment of both sex workers and venereal disease sufferers during and after the War of Independence. Moreover, it highlights the role sexual health played in both defining and undermining the boundaries of national identity in a period of political turbulence. The woman believes that her English heritage will secure her the 'favour' (custom and preferential treatment) of the soldiers. However, her diseased state undermines this identification and sees her treated in a brutal manner. It is only when the woman seeks treatment for her infection and the abuse to which it gave rise that her English identity is invoked, this time to exclude her from care.

Whatever the veracity of the woman's account, the noxious fusion of venereal disease, sectarianism, and militarism it highlights was a very real facet of Irish social and political life, and one that was to inscribe itself thoroughly in the work of Irish modernists. As Chapter One's discussion of rhetorics of sexual pathology in the Parnell split suggests, the use of venereal disease as an index of 'immorality' and cultural and ethnic alterity in Irish political life long pre-dated the War of Independence. In what follows, I will examine how figurations of venereal disease, accounts of its aetiology, and campaigns for its regulation were used by politicians, activists, and authors to construct and contest models of Irish identity in the first decades of the twentieth century. To do so, I will trace the ways in which references to venereal disease

were employed in the anti-enlisting campaigns of the Irish Transvaal Committee, *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland), and Sinn Féin to offer a statistically quantifiable index of British ‘immorality’ and an explanatory metaphor for the malign impact of British imperial rule in Ireland. I will explore the ways in which figures such as Oliver St John Gogarty and James Joyce in turn echoed and endorsed these positions, using venereal disease and its impact on the Irish population to critique British militarism. Where previous studies of Joyce and sexuality have positioned the author as an uncomplicated opponent of the sexual purity rhetoric of Sinn Féin and Irish Ireland, I will suggest the ways in which Joyce may have pursued a more pragmatic approach to these discourses, viewing them as a necessary evil in the pursuit of Irish independence. However, I will also acknowledge the ways in which Joyce was to distance himself from the more pointedly chauvinistic deployments of this rhetoric, particularly where they were used to present Ireland’s Jewish population as a corrupting dysgenic threat to the physical and moral well-being of the nation. Finally, I will trace the contours of an emerging weariness in Joyce’s rendering of the entire question of sexual health as the grounds for conceptualizing national identity, highlighting a performative exhaustion which was ultimately to be revisited and extended in the later work of Flann O’Brien (surveyed in Chapter Six). I will begin by exploring perhaps the most often noted and least thoroughly explored depiction of syphilis in the Irish literary canon: Joyce’s ‘The Sisters’.

‘When children see things like that...’: The Priesthood, the Pox, and Precarious Masculinity

A passing reference to the potentially syphilitic origins of Reverend Flynn’s ‘*paralysis*’ (D 1.10) in ‘The Sisters’ has long been a commonplace in critical discussions of *Dubliners*.² Since the appearance of Burton A. Waisbren and Florence L. Walzl’s ‘Paresis and the Priest’ in 1974, a footnote or introductory remark has attended Joyce’s description of Flynn’s paralytic condition in most editions of the collection, suggesting its resemblance to advanced neurosyphilis.³ However, despite this pseudo-consensus, Flynn’s condition and its role within the story or the collection as a whole are seldom the subject of further discussion. In his seminal biography, Richard Ellmann offers a starting point for critical inquiry by identifying Flynn’s

² James Joyce, *Dubliners: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Margot Norris, Hans Walter Gabler, and Walter Hecche (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006). Cited parenthetically by story and line number.

³ Burton A. Waisbren and Florence L. Walzl, “Paresis and the Priest: James Joyce’s Symbolic Use of Syphilis in ‘The Sisters,’” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 80, no. 6 (June 1, 1974): 758.

paralysis as a ‘symptom of the ‘general paralysis of an insane society’ with which Ireland was afflicted’.⁴ As Ellmann’s reference to the 1904 pseudo-manifesto ‘A Portrait of the Artist’ suggests, it is possible to read the details of Flynn’s expiration as part of a nationalist parable of encroaching imperial paralysis, smuggled into the story via the symbolic resonances of those items of naturalist clutter which appear most innocuously constitutive of its *effet de réel*. In such a reading, the ‘green faded look’ (*D* 1.110-11) of Flynn’s garments serves to identify him as the shabby embodiment of a waning Ireland, whose ‘little house’ occupies a geographically and politically subordinate position on ‘Great Britain Street’ (*D* 1.85). This gnomonic figure (*D* 1.11), whom imperial oppression has left as incomplete as a Euclidian parallelogram and as spiritually bankrupt as a simoniac (*D* 1.12), has been reduced to a state of paralytic senility by a syphilitic infection which finds an obvious analogue in the British occupation of Ireland.⁵

Valid as this reading and the anti-imperial resonances it detects in the story are, they form only part of the political critique with which Joyce opens *Dubliners*. As in so much of his work, in ‘The Sisters’ and its narrative siblings (‘An Encounter’ and ‘Araby’), Joyce seeks to interrogate the intersecting influence of those three masters (English, Italian, and Irish) against whom Stephen Dedalus directs his infamous *non serviam*. In order to identify the dominant cultural formations which Joyce problematizes in ‘The Sisters’, it is necessary to explore the story’s evolution from its initial appearance in John Eglinton’s farming-journal-cum-literary-review, *The Irish Homestead*, in August 1904 to its positioning as the opening of *Dubliners* in 1914. Doing so, it becomes clear that, in rewriting ‘The Sisters’, Joyce introduces the protean spectre of syphilis into the story in order to position the Catholic Church as a degenerative threat to precisely the sorts of resurgent masculinity that Irish Ireland nationalists sought to champion and which Yeats and Synge had endeavored to conscript to their own cultural and political ends.

As has been outlined in Chapter Two, Irish Ireland rooted its policies of linguistic, cultural, and economic de-Anglicization in a model of Cuchulainoid hyper-masculinity designed to resist the dominance of Arnoldian Celticism and the pathologically feminized image of Irish identity it offered. In the 1914 version of ‘The Sisters,’ such rugged masculinity is espoused by Old Cotter and the narrator’s uncle, both

⁴ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 163-64. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *JJII*.

⁵ Walzl reads the incomplete Euclidian ‘*gnomon*’ (*D* 1.11) as a symbol of the stunted development of the Irish character under British rule. See Florence L. Walzl, “Joyce’s ‘The Sisters’: A Development,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1973): 387.

of whom are concerned by the influence of Flynn's 'Education' (*D* 1.58) on the boy's development. Old Cotter's misgivings prompt him to advocate outdoor play 'with young lads his own age' (*D* 1.52-53), in implied contrast with the less salubrious forms of indoor 'play' with which he associates Flynn. The boy's uncle reinforces this position, teasing the narrator for his 'rosicrucian' esotericism (*D* 1.55) before instructing him to 'take exercise' (*D* 1.56), 'box his corner' (*D* 1.54-55), and have 'a cold bath' every morning (*D* 1.57). The Cusackian ring of this self-consciously hackneyed litany of macho truisms is plain, echoing the Gaelic Athletic Association [GAA] and its supporters in its endorsement of masculine self-discipline and physical culture in contrast to the emasculating Yeatsian mysticism of the Celtic revival (the 'New Patriotism') and the 'Young Degeneracy' with which the organization held it to be cognate:

[The New Patriotism] tells us we are but blind bats, that Nationality is not a thing of right, arms, freedom, franchises, brotherhood, duties, manliness, and memory, but a thing of loud singing and lute-playing, of mystic prose and thrice-mystic poesy [...] I suspect this New Patriotism is, after all, a relative of Young Degeneracy. Ever I see it strutting about mouthing its shibboleth of "No Politics" – which means in its jargon no reference to the fact that that fine fellow the Gael is famishing to death.⁶

As was suggested in the previous chapter, such espousals of republican martial virtue ('arms', 'franchises', 'manliness') and denunciations of the decadent aestheticism ('Young Degeneracy') of Yeats and his circle were offered at least in part to counterbalance the implicit threat of feminization which attended Irish Ireland's investment in domestic economy. However, where the GAA and its supporters held Anglo-Irish occultism to be the source of the Gael's famished state, the macho duologue between Old Cotter and the narrator's uncle comes much closer to the position of Yeats and Synge in ascribing responsibility for such degeneracy to the Catholic Church.

Tellingly, Old Cotter's rubric for masculine personal development is absent from 'The Sisters' in its 1904 *Irish Homestead* guise and was added by Joyce in parallel with the revised symptoms of Flynn's illness and the references to 'paralysis' which insinuate its syphilitic cause. In its *Irish Homestead* form, 'The Sisters' presents Flynn as the sufferer of a mental illness ('Upper storey... gone') whose effects were exacerbated by his 'scrupulousness' and brought to a head by the shattering of a chalice.⁷ While this incident is admittedly replete with sexual connotations, these remain relatively oblique, the cause of Flynn's death is elided, and

⁶ "Nationalist," "The New Patriotism," *United Irishman*, March 11, 1899, 3.

⁷ "Stephen Daedalus" (James Joyce), "The Sisters," *The Irish Homestead*, 13 August 1904, 676; 677.

the word ‘paralysis’ remains absent from the story. By contrast, when revising ‘The Sisters’ to open *Dubliners* in the summer of 1906, Joyce was to introduce three instances of ‘paralysis’ and its cognates into the narrative, in each case having the young narrator collocate the malady with references to ‘sin’ (*D* 1.83) and Flynn’s pathological need to confess.⁸ As Joyce would have been aware from his own attempts at medical study, in contemporary clinical discourse ‘paralysis’ served as a metonym for syphilis in its most infamous and debilitating manifestation, general paralysis of the insane.⁹ Joyce’s revisions reinforce the venereal connotations of Flynn’s ‘paralysis’ through the introduction of a range of physical details which closely resemble the symptoms of neurosyphilis. The young narrator notes Flynn’s trembling hands (*D* 1.105), grotesque smile (*D* 1.80), involuntary drooling (*D* 1.81), and mumbled speech (*D* 1.76), all of which indicate a failure of muscular co-ordination consistent with advanced neurosyphilitic infection. Eliza’s description of regularly discovering Flynn ‘with his breviary fallen on the floor, lying back in the chair with his mouth open’ (*D* 1.255-56) suggests that the priest suffered from seizures caused by cerebral syphilitic lesions. This pathologized image stands in stark contrast to the endearing description of the somnolent priest’s ‘make believe’ attempts to read his ‘Prayer Book’ offered by the narrator in the story’s 1904 iteration.¹⁰ In the *Irish Homestead* version this moment offers a benign example of the narrator’s mischievous precocity, in its revised form it links the ‘Divine Office’ – a priest’s duties as outlined in their breviary – with a morbid tableau of syphilitic paralysis. In light of this fusion of Catholic doctrine and the apparent ravages of venereal disease, Old Cotter’s anxiety as to the ‘effect’ (*D* 1.68) such a sight may have on a young mind position Irish Ireland’s hypermasculine ideal of brotherhood, duties, and manliness in conscious opposition to the movement’s sectarianism.

This tension between Irish Ireland’s masculinism and its perceived deference to the priesthood is heavily inscribed in the revisions Joyce makes to the ways in which Flynn’s influence on the young narrator is registered in the text. In its 1904 form, this evidence is confined to the ecclesiastical diction (‘as if by Providence’) and pious register (‘in whose light the Christian must take his last sleep’) with which Joyce inflects the story.¹¹ What is conspicuously absent in this iteration is not only any mention of ‘*paralysis*’ itself,

⁸ Hans Walter Gabler contends that Joyce’s most substantial revisions to ‘The Sisters’ took place between 23 June and 9 July 1906. Hans Walter Gabler et al., eds., *The James Joyce Archive*, vol. 4 (New York: Garland, 1977), xxix.

⁹ Joyce abortively attempted to study medicine in Dublin and Paris in October and December 1902 (*JIII*, 104; 109).

¹⁰ “Stephen Daedalus” (James Joyce), “The Sisters,” 676.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 676.

but the almost voyeuristic fascination which this ‘maleficent and sinful being’ (*D* 1.13) evokes in the young narrator, filling him ‘with fear’ even as he longs ‘to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work’ (*D* 1.14-15). One of the most substantial revisions to the story in this regard is the addition of the narrator’s dream, which serves as a troubling expression of a nascent sexuality whose focal point has become Flynn and his symptoms. Despite his efforts to anchor himself in the naive comforts of ‘Christmas’ and the womb-like security of his blankets (*D* 1.75-76), the narrator feels himself drawn into ‘some pleasant and vicious region’ (*D* 1.88) in which he is pursued by the ‘heavy grey face of the paralytic’ (*D* 1.74-75). This image of Flynn’s pathological and seemingly inescapable influence takes on an even more worrying complexion when read in conversation with the following story, ‘An Encounter’. The narrator’s fascination with the word ‘*paralysis*’, which he repeats to himself during his nightly vigil at the priest’s window, anticipates the circular discourse of the ‘queer old josser’ (*D* 2.248) in the succeeding story. Like the queer old josser, the narrator’s fixation with Flynn’s paralysis threatens to leave him ‘magnetised by some words of his own speech, his mind [...] slowly circling round and round in the same orbit’ (*D* 2.230-31). Likewise, the juxtaposition of the ‘pleasant’ and the ‘vicious’ in the narrator’s dream suggests a sadomasochistic fusion of pleasure and pain which adumbrates the josser’s erotically charged fantasies of punitive flagellation. Through these parallels and lexical echoes Joyce implies that Irish Ireland’s insistent collocation of authentic Irishness with Catholicism in the present threatens to afflict future generations with precisely the kinds of perceived sexual degeneracy against which the movement purported to insulate the country. Thus, even as Irish Ireland sought to position the resurgent Gael as the embodiment of muscular Catholicism, Joyce uses the physical and moral taint of syphilitic infection to undermine the linked ideals of impregnable masculine corporeality and Catholic moral purity upon which this model of identity was founded.

The tacit erotic freight of the narrator’s recollections of Flynn manifests itself more directly when his recollection of the priest’s unsettling habit of letting ‘his tongue lie upon his lower lip’ (*D* 1.147) prompts him to resume articulating the previous night’s reverie. The narrator presents a scene decked in the trappings of Orientalist fantasy, where ‘long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion’ (*D* 1.152-53) evoke a ‘Persia’ (*D* 1.155) identified in terms of its apparent distance from the social mores of contemporary Ireland. The seemingly unspeakable sexual implications of this dream and its conclusion are suggested by Joyce’s use of ellipsis – ‘..... But I could not remember the end of the dream’ (*D* 1.155-56) – to position

the reader in knowing proximity to the ‘puzzled’ narrator, who has earlier attempted in vain ‘to extract meaning from [Old Cotter’s] unfinished sentences’ (*D* 1.72-73) regarding Flynn. Vincent Cheng reads this narratorial fantasy of licentious alterity as a manifestation of the young boy’s desire to escape the culturally and politically torpid ‘labyrinth’ of contemporary Ireland.¹² However, in doing so, he elides the ways in which Joyce uses the lingering memory of the syphilitic clergyman who provided the dream’s imaginative catalyst to thwart this escape by psychologically rooting the threatening sexual license for which this landscape is a shorthand in the narrator’s experience of Ireland and its priesthood.

This Orientalized landscape and its implied syphilitic threat recur in ‘Araby’, which, as its title suggests, contains a string of uncanny doublings, parallels, and lexical echoes with ‘The Sisters’. Its narrator, another young boy, resides in a house in the ‘back drawingroom’ of which a priest has recently died (*D* 3.7-8). Joyce’s decision to distinguish this house, fittingly located at a literal dead-end on ‘North Richmond Street’ (*D* 3.1), from Flynn’s Great Britain Street abode suggests the endemic nature of the diseased ministry he epitomizes. The narrator characterizes his infatuation with Mangan’s sister as a ‘chalice’ to be borne ‘safely through a throng of foes’ (*D* 3.63-64), recalling both the shattered chalice which marked ‘the beginning’ (*D* 1.282) of Rev. Flynn’s syphilitic decline and the ‘idle chalice’ (*D* 1.303) which signifies its fatal end. Like the young narrator of ‘The Sisters’ and the queer old jossler of ‘An Encounter’, the protagonist of ‘Araby’ is subject to a lexical fixation whose repetition casts ‘an Eastern enchantment’ (*D* 3.107) over him which evokes the earlier narrator’s dream. While the web of geographical parallels and recurring diction through which Joyce links the opening triptych of *Dubliners* are in part the product of a retrospective attempt to confer coherence to a diverse group of self-contained narratives, the points at which Joyce establishes liaisons between the stories are both specific and symbolically resonant. Through his Orientalized fantasies of Mangan’s sister (*D* 3.103-07) the narrator of ‘Araby’ attempts to escape from a physical space haunted by a diseased priestly presence into a mental space which ‘The Sisters’ has already linked to a pathologized image of paralysis. Through these echoes Joyce suggests that Irish Ireland’s deference to the priesthood would subvert and frustrate not only the symbolic union of a young male patriot and a feminine avatar of Irish nationality upon which so many nationalist narratives were staked, but precisely the kinds of normative heterosexual union between two Irish young people which the movement sought to encourage.

¹² Vincent Cheng, *Joyce, Race, and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 79-82.

The impact of these revisions, is, of course, not merely a matter of content, but of style. The eroticized Orientalist tropology Joyce deploys to underscore Flynn's syphilitic symptoms in 'The Sisters' inflects the story with psycho-sexual Gothic overtones whose strongest generic debts are not to the 'scrupulous meanness' of realism, but to the polyvocal stylistic profusion of decadence.¹³ Most obviously, in an Irish context, the imbuing of Catholic ritual with a seductive complexity and licentious theatricality chimes with Dorian Gray's reflections on the 'subtle fascination' of the Roman Mass.¹⁴ Suggestively, Wilde's description of Dorian's pointedly aesthetic appreciation of the 'jewelled, lantern-shaped monstrance', 'the chalice', and the 'fuming censers' wielded by altar boys during Communion is precipitated by a discussion of dreams which offer a pleasant and vicious fusion of 'horror and misshapen joy' in which 'black fantastic shapes' and 'dumb shadows crawl into the corners of the room and crouch there', and is followed by an account of Dorian's interest in the 'burning odorous gums of the East' and their sensuous effects.¹⁵ Moreover, this fusion of Gothic dreamscape, Catholic ritual, and Orientalist hedonism, is framed in relation to Dorian's investment in the materialist neurology of the *Darwinismus* movement and his insistence on 'the absolute dependence of the spirit on certain physical conditions, morbid or healthy, normal or diseased'.¹⁶ Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) in Italian in the summer of 1906 – just as he was undertaking revisions to 'The Sisters' – it was by these features (its 'catalogued atrocities, lists of perfumes and instruments', and resemblance to Huysmans) that Joyce found himself most struck.¹⁷ Without wishing to position Wilde's novel as the sole or even the primary influence on Joyce's revisions to 'The Sisters' – the salient features are common to any number of decadent texts, major and minor – the similarities between the cocktail of Catholicism, Orientalism, and psychopathology which inflect the reveries of the protagonists of both texts underscore the extent to which Joyce aligns the priesthood with decadence and a predatory

¹³ Richard Ellmann, ed., *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 134. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LII*.

¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Michael Patrick Gillespie, 2nd ed (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2007), 264.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 264; 263; 265.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 264. For an account of the *Darwinismus* movement – a German strain of evolutionary thought, exemplified by the work of Ernst Haeckel, and eschewing Darwinian natural selection in favour of a neo-Lamarackian model of use-inheritance – see Paul Weindling, "Ernst Haeckel, *Darwinismus*, and the Secularization of Nature," in *History, Humanity, and Evolution: Essays for John C. Greene*, ed. John C. Greene and James R. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 311–27.

¹⁷ Richard Ellmann, ed., *Selected Letters of James Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 96. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SL*.

queerness in 'The Sisters'.¹⁸ Where the GAA and its advocates located the 'Young Degeneracy' and its threat to Irish masculinity outside their ranks, through the tropes of decadent fiction and the suggestion of syphilitic infection Joyce undermines this divide, situating the physiological taint of degeneration, the perceived moral threat of same-sex desire, and the very real physical and psychological threat of child abuse firmly within the institutional apparatus of the Catholic Church.

As has been often noted, throughout *Dubliners* Joyce seeks 'to convert or pervert stories of imagined adventure, escape, heroism or fame into studies in a cultural pathology'.¹⁹ For Joyce, syphilis provides a means by which both to effect this subversion and to reify this pathology, allowing him to present the complex and mutually reinforcing effects of British occupation and the models of Irish identity which nationalists constructed in response. However, as the tale's uncomfortable collocation of syphilis with same-sex desire, and same-sex desire with child abuse makes clear, a subversive appropriation and inversion of the gendered rhetoric of health through which cultural nationalists sought to justify and naturalize their programmes of social and political reform was by no means guaranteed to yield a progressive or liberal politics of gender or sexuality. Indeed, for all that Joyce was to critique Irish Ireland's cult of masculinity for its deforming effect on Irish youth, he was equally convinced in public and private that Wilde's queerness – though Joyce studiously avoided any direct allusion to it – was ultimately 'the logical and inevitable product of the Anglo-Saxon college and university system' and the 'seclusion and secrecy' they enforced.²⁰ Notwithstanding, then, the desire of Joyce Studies to find in the author a reflection of contemporary identity politics or an anticipation of deconstructive critiques of gender, sexuality, and colonialism, attention must be paid to the ways in which the normative assumptions which undergirded the rhetoric of sexual pathology upon which Joyce drew to critique Irish Ireland and their allies were apt to reinscribe themselves in the critiques that rhetoric facilitated. In this sense, as will be seen in the cases of Samuel Beckett (Chapter Four) and Flann O'Brien (Chapter Six), 'modernist' efforts to reject the constraints of Irish Catholic sexual mores could, and often did, lapse into a no less conservative strain of iconoclasm.

¹⁸ For accounts of Joyce's debts to and deployment of Wilde in his handling of gender and queer desire, see Joseph Valente, ed., *Quare Joyce* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), chaps. 2, 3, 4, and 7.

¹⁹ Seamus Deane, "Dead ends: Joyce's finest moments," in *Semicolonial Joyce*, eds. Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21.

²⁰ Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, 150.

Both this rhetorical strategy and this dynamic were to recur in Joyce's interrogation of the impact of British militarism in Ireland in *Ulysses* (1922).

An 'army rotten with venereal disease': *Ulysses*, Syphilis, and Militarism

As he stops to collect an erotic epistle at the Westland Row post office in the 'Lotus Eaters' episode of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom's eye is caught by a British 'recruiting poster' depicting 'soldiers of all arms on parade' (U 5.57).²¹ The 'showy' appearance (U 5.69) and concomitant sexual appeal of these troops brings to his mind contemporary nationalist anti-enlisting propaganda: 'Maud Gonne's letter about taking them off O'Connell street at night: disgrace to our Irish capital. Griffith's paper is on the same tack now: an army rotten with venereal disease: overseas or halfseasover empire' (U 5.70-72). Bloom's collocation of militarism and sexually transmitted disease chimes with a prominent strain of nationalist discourse which figured the occupying British forces as a constant threat to the physical and moral well-being of the Irish. As Bloom's reflections indicate, the most vociferous exponents of this position were Maud Gonne and Arthur Griffith, who had overseen the anti-enlisting activities of the Irish Transvaal Committee.²² The 'letter' to which Bloom refers was addressed to the *Freeman's Journal* on 06 June 1904. In it, Gonne recounts the difficulties facing children who attend Irish language classes in Dublin 'because of the condition of the streets' brought about by 'the disgraceful conduct of the British military'.²³ Gonne shares her experiences of a journey to the General Post Office made at 10 pm, during which she was 'jostled against by soldiers and screamed at by poor unfortunate girls, whom the soldiers seem to incite to insult any respectable woman who ventures, on what they consider [...] their side of the street'.²⁴ Gonne's implied fear that it is becoming impossible to visit the GPO without contracting GPI prompts her to dub this spectacle 'one of the most humiliating evidences of foreign rule' and its 'demoralising effect on men's characters' she has ever experienced.²⁵ The letter's petition for the nocturnal removal of British troops from O'Connell Street was reiterated in pamphlets published and circulated by Gonne's feminist-nationalist organization, *Inghinidhe na hÉireann*

²¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Gabler (New York: Vintage, 1986. Cited parenthetically by episode and line number.

²² Donal P McCracken, *Forgotten Protest: Ireland and the Anglo-Boer War*, Updated and Revised (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2003), 158.

²³ Maud Gonne-MacBride, "To the Editor of the Freeman's Journal," *Freeman's Journal*, June 6, 1904, 6.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

[daughters of Ireland]. The group's publications targeted 'Irish Girls', emphasizing their patriotic duty to forego the company of enlisted Irishmen, whose complicity in the country's occupation rendered them 'traitors'.²⁶ These pamphlets used degenerationist rhetoric to link the soldiers' perceived ideological infidelity with a physiological descent into disease and debility. In these publications, membership of the 'most degraded and immoral army in Europe' renders the servicemen 'unfit to be the companion of any girl', aligning them with the 'lowest and most depraved characters' drawn from 'the slums of English cities'.²⁷ In line with contemporary theories of degeneration, the rhetoric of Gonne and *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* presents venereal disease, poverty, and moral degradation as the interimplicated symptoms of a debilitating decline from a state of physical and cultural 'purity' with which the British armed forces threaten Ireland.

As Joyce has Bloom note, Griffith's publications of this period were firmly 'on the same tack'. The week before Gonne's letter appeared in the *Freeman*, Griffith's *United Irishman* devoted several columns to a meeting of the South Dublin Union Board intended to address the conduct of the 'most licentious soldiery in Europe' on Dublin's streets.²⁸ As the decade progressed, Griffith's campaign intensified, with *Sinn Féin* featuring twelve articles on the subject of venereal disease in the British Army between May 1906 and February 1907.²⁹ The topic was a propaganda windfall for Sinn Féin, with venereal disease offering a statistical index of English 'immorality', against which the Irish could be constructed as physically and culturally 'pure'. At the rhetorical level, venereal disease provided Griffith with a persuasive explanatory metaphor through which to replicate Sinn Féin's call for linguistic, cultural, and economic autarchy at the microcosmic level of the individual Irish body. One such article reports the remarks of Dr Ridgeway, Dean of Carlisle, to a meeting of the Christian Social Union, in which he declared that: 'Seventy per cent of [British] soldiers, not during war, but in England, during peace, were on the sick list in the course of the year, large numbers through the sin of impurity.'³⁰ Ridgeway concluded that if this venereal 'evil were not destroyed by the people it would destroy the people'.³¹ The author notes that while the English population is empowered to 'destroy' this problem by Act of Parliament, the Irish must 'accept the sin of impurity

²⁶ Inghinidhe na hÉireann, *Irish Girls!* (Dublin: Inghinidhe na hÉireann, 1914).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *United Irishman*, May 28, 1904, 5.

²⁹ *Sinn Féin*, 6 May 1906; 7 July 1906; 8 September 1906; 15 September 1906; 10 November 1906; 17 November 1906; 24 November 1906; 1 December 1906; 22 December 1906; 19 January 1907; 9 February 1907; 22 February 1907.

³⁰ 'The British Army,' *Sinn Féin*, May 6, 1906, 2.

³¹ Ibid.

quartered in their midst in that dutiful submission which becomes a people who have no Constitution other than that derived from the clean, pure hearts God and their mothers gave them'.³² The play on 'Constitution' in both its legal and medical senses juxtaposes the political disempowerment of the Irish with their apparently innate bodily well-being, whose origins it locates in a union between feminine purity and dutiful piety.

While this social purity rhetoric certainly did not go unchallenged in nationalist circles - Pádraic Pearse, for one, had little patience for those who conflated patriotism with an exaggerated sense of national cleanliness – it was widespread in the first decades of the twentieth century.³³ The most prominent example of this tendency with which Joyce was to engage directly was a series of articles published by Oliver Gogarty in *Sinn Féin* between September and December 1906 under the heading 'Ugly England'. The first positions itself as a blend of travel writing and anthropology, offering its readers a scathing typology of the 'English common man' in his natural habitat.³⁴ From the outset Gogarty constructs a pathologized caricature of English identity, in which simply 'to touch' this 'human dredger' threatens to render the Irish equally 'despicable'.³⁵ This tendency inscribes itself onomastically, with Gogarty refusing to refer to his archetypal Englishman as 'John Bull', preferring instead the soubriquet 'Sludge'.³⁶ Through this cloacal epithet Gogarty presents Englishness as a corrupting tide of effluent against which the Irish must construct a cultural and political levee. The greatest marker of this corruption for Gogarty is, of course, venereal disease. He notes that though this 'English monster' lauds the 'virtuous forbearance' of his military, he has nevertheless published 'a book – too sordid and lost to see his own hypocrisy – wherein are statistics to prove [...] that his own army is rottener and more immoral than any or all the armies in Europe'.³⁷ The 'book' in question was Dr Frederick F. MacCabe's *War with Disease* (1906), which *Sinn Féin* had 'reviewed' on 07 July 1906.³⁸

³² Ibid.

³³ In a 1912 article for *An Barr Buadh* [the trumpet of victory], Pearse presents the parable of 'an fear meathta' [the degenerate man]: a figure so obsessed with 'ghlaíne' [cleanliness] that he cannot bring himself to utter the word 'briste' [trousers] aloud for fear that 'd'fhéidir go mbeadh bean ag éisteacht' [a woman might be listening]. Eventually, the titular figure becomes so monomaniacally focused upon scouring books for possible 'salachair' [dirt] that his mind is permanently 'truailigheadh' [polluted] and it becomes impossible for him to think or speak of anything else. Pádraig Mac Piarais, "Fabhal-Scéalta: Sliocht Leabhair Bhuidhe Bhaile i bhFad Síos Annso: VII. An Fear Meatha," *An Barr Buadh* I, no. 7 (Aibreán 1912): 2. I am indebted to Aidan Beatty for providing me with access to this resource.

³⁴ Oliver St John Gogarty, "Ugly England (I)," *Sinn Féin*, September 15, 1906, 3.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "The British Army," *Sinn Féin*, July 7, 1906, 3.

It consisted of a collection of lectures on preventative medicine originally delivered to the ‘officers, NCOs, and men of the Cavalry Brigade at the Curragh’ in Kildare.³⁹ As part of his lecture on the prevention of venereal disease MacCabe had noted that infection rates among British troops in India ran as high as ‘517 per 1,000’ men admitted to hospital and recommended the nightly disinfection of all servicemen returning from duty in Irish cities.⁴⁰ On this basis Gogarty was able to claim that the British Army constituted ‘a body of men who, as their own statistics show, are already more than half leprous with venereal excess’.⁴¹ It was a thesis that Gogarty was to pursue not only in the columns of *Sinn Féin*, but in his creative practice, above all, in his influential tenement drama, *Blight, the Tragedy of Dublin*, which premiered in December 1917.

‘The wages of sin is a month in the Locke’: *Blight*, Blighty, and British Militarism

Lauren Arrington has identified a decisive ‘shift to politics’ in the programme of the nearly bankrupt Abbey Theatre in the wake of the Easter Rising. She locates the first instance of this shift in a series of debates organized by W.B. Yeats in the autumn of 1918 to publicize a revival of his 1903 hunger strike drama, *The King’s Threshold*.⁴² However, I would argue that Gogarty’s *Blight*, which opened almost a year earlier, is a clear participant in and early financial success story of this politicizing turn, a fact evidenced by its three 1918 revivals.⁴³ I would further contend that it is Gogarty’s depiction of venereal disease and the medico-legal apparatus through which it was regulated which cements *Blight*’s status as agitprop theatre.

In the play’s opening scene, Lily Foley, a young sex worker whose father has sought employment as a British serviceman, and Miss Maxwell-Knox, a District Visitor for a local Protestant social purity movement, engage in a tensely comic bout of verbal sparring in which allusions to venereal disease play a central role. Spotting Lily in make-up and a provocative fur coat, the zealous reformer loudly proclaims that the ‘wages of sin is death’.⁴⁴ Lily greets this remark with an obscene ‘gesture to Miss MK with her fingers

³⁹ Frederick F. MacCabe, *War with Disease*, Second (London: Baillière, Tindall, and Cox, 1907), ix.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 39; 37–38.

⁴¹ Gogarty, “Ugly England (I),” 3.

⁴² Lauren Arrington, *W.B. Yeats, the Abbey Theatre, Censorship, and the Irish State: Adding the Half-Pence to the Pence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20–21.

⁴³ ‘Blight - The Tragedy of Dublin by Oliver St. John Gogarty as Gideon Ousley,’ The Abbey Archive, 2017, https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/archives/play_detail/10218/.

⁴⁴ “Alpha and Omega” (Oliver St John Gogarty), *Blight, the Tragedy of Dublin: An Exposition in Three Acts* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1917), 15.

and thumb’ and a rendition of the chorus of the popular 1916 music hall number ‘Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty’: ‘*Hi tiddy li-i-ti, Carry me back to Blighty*’.⁴⁵ Undeterred, Miss Maxwell-Knox reiterates her pious platitude with renewed emphasis, prompting the adolescent streetwalker to declare that the ‘wages of sin’ are not ‘death’, but ‘a month in the Locke’ [*sic*].⁴⁶ The ‘Locke’ in question was Dublin’s Westmoreland Lock Hospital. Located at 21 Townsend Street, since 1792 it had served as one of the capital’s dedicated institutions for the treatment of venereal disease. Significantly, it is an institution the interior of which is apparently known to both women. For the biblical tag which the District Visitor so chidingly cites and which the young streetwalker so bitterly subverts served as the institution’s semi-official motto, inscribed above its chapel door in red lettering as a morbid warning to patients and patrons alike.⁴⁷ As the exchange continues, its caustic political implications become increasingly apparent. Asked by Miss Maxwell-Knox why she is not at a Magdalene laundry ‘doing *honest* work’, Lily retorts that it is because, when she was, she ‘didn’t get *honest* wages’.⁴⁸ This materialist account of sex work in Ireland is underscored and explicitly linked to the debilitating socio-economic impact of British militarism when Mrs. Larissey sharply reminds Miss Maxwell-Knox that, if Lily has been driven to seek financial sustenance through commercial sex, it is only because her father has been forced to serve the British war effort by the meagre employment prospects of Dublin under British rule:

MRS. L: If ye can’t mind yer own business, ye can interview her father when he comes back from the fighting [...] If it’s good yer after maybe ye’ll explain to [the landlord] how Mrs Foley is to pay him 4/6 a week and keep her six children and the baby that’s coming on the pay of her husband who got a job at the Front?⁴⁹

Miss Maxwell-Knox rebuffs Mrs. Larissey’s materialist analysis of Lily’s position, instructing her not to refer to Mr. Foley’s position as ‘a job’, but to view him as ‘fighting for humanity and civilization, as every able-bodied man should’ – a claim certain to invite derision from a sizeable portion of any Dublin audience only a year after the execution of the Easter rebels. However, the irony of Miss Maxwell-Knox’s remarks runs deeper than a simple condemnation of British barbarity. For, in praising the civilizing humanitarian virtues

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ The tag is derived from Romans, 6.19-23. Laurence M. Geary, ‘The Wages of Sin Is Death’: Lock Hospitals, Venereal Disease, and Gender in Pre-Famine Ireland,’ in *Gender and Medicine in Ireland, 1700-1950*, ed. Margaret H. Preston and Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 167.

⁴⁸ ‘Alpha and Omega’ (Oliver St John Gogarty), *Blight*, 15. Emphasis Gogarty’s.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 16–18.

and ‘able’ bodies of the British Army, Miss Maxwell-Knox is venerating both the single largest client-base of the sex industry in Ireland and the nation’s most prominent vector for venereal disease.

The pathological co-dependence of British garrisons and commercial sex in Ireland was acknowledged by contemporary commentators of every political stripe. An 1854 Select Committee on Dublin Hospitals reported that, of the 6,550 unmarried women admitted to medical institutions in the city with venereal disease in 1850, at least half were believed to have been infected by soldiers.⁵⁰ Gogarty himself drew playful attention to the issue in what is perhaps his most frequently quoted piece of doggerel, ‘The Irish Yeoman’s Return’, published under the suggestive pseudonym ‘J.R.S. of Knocklong’ in the staunchly Unionist *Irish Society* in June 1901. What at first blush appears to be a straight-faced ode of welcome for an Irish regiment returning from the Boer War proves, on closer inspection, to be an acrostic in which the first letters of each line combine to declare that ‘THE WHORES WILL BE BUSY’.⁵¹ A ‘Public Health Circular’ issued by the Sinn Féin Public Health Department in February 1918, shortly after the premiere of Gogarty’s play, addressed the perceived threat posed by the ‘100,000 Irishmen serving in the British army’ who would return to Ireland following the cessation of hostilities in Europe, 15,000 of whom – ‘at the very lowest estimate’ – it predicted would be syphilitic.⁵² Penned by Kathleen Lynn, a physician, activist, and founder of St Ultan’s Children’s Hospital, and Richard Hayes, a Sinn Féin MP and eventual director of the Abbey Theatre, the pamphlet outlines what it presents as the devastating impact of the ‘the great black plague’ on Ireland’s ‘living children and her yet unborn children’ and on the as yet untainted blood of the ‘rural districts’:

If from some imaginable cause thousands of Consumptives were to be dumped down en masse on our shores and scattered among our people, we would hear a loud outcry of its criminality from many quarters, and it would be incumbent on any Government having a sense of its responsibilities to devise a scheme to cope with such an evil. Here is a greater danger threatening us and State and Sanitary Authorities are quite inactive.⁵³

In this context Lily’s wry recitation of ‘Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty’ – which narrates the fate of three homesick British soldiers on the Western Front – offers, through its tacit echo of the venereal *Blight*

⁵⁰ *Report of the Select Committee on Dublin Hospitals*, 1854, Q. 39.

⁵¹ ‘J.R.S. of Knocklong’ (Oliver St John Gogarty), ‘The Irish Yeoman’s Return, or Love Is Lord of All,’ *Irish Society*, June 1901.

⁵² Kathleen Lynn and Richard Hayes, ‘Public Health Circulars, No. 1’ (Sinn Féin Public Health Department, Dublin, February 1918), 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2.

of the play's title, a bleak adumbration of her syphilitic fate, revealed in the play's third act. For Gogarty then, venereal disease and the Lock hospitals through which the British state inadequately endeavoured to contain its spread are the necessarily pathological corollaries of Ireland's occupied status. The syphilitic blight which afflicts Dublin's tenement dwellers is the result of the physically and morally corrupt military administration of Ireland. Indeed, Gogarty goes so far as to argue that the decorous squeamishness which causes the Irish to 'mix morals even in [their] medicine' and blinds the Dublin Corporation to the realization that 'prevention is better than cure' is itself a form of 'imported hypocrisy' alien to an implicitly pure Irish outlook.⁵⁴

'The "venereal excess" cry' and the 'old pap of racial hatred': Sinn Féin, Sex, and Anti-Semitism

It is perhaps unsurprising to state that Joyce balked at Gogarty's position, particularly in the 'purity' which it tendentiously afforded Ireland. For Joyce, if any one was 'too sordid and lost to see his own hypocrisy', it was Gogarty. In a letter to his brother Stanislaus, dated 04 October 1906, he wishes that 'some unkind person would publish a book about the venereal condition of the Irish; since they pride themselves so much on their immunity' (*LII*, 170-71). Joyce insists that syphilis is 'a disease like any other disease', caused by 'anti-hygienic conditions' (*LII*, 170) and 'venereal ill-luck' (*LII*, 171), rather than the 'excess' which Gogarty had sought to censure. The source of Joyce's frustration was not simply Gogarty's hypocrisy, but his sense that these articles revealed an ugly strain of bigotry in Sinn Féin's rhetoric. In particular, Joyce sensed that 'the "venereal excess" cry', and the degenerationist anxieties it engaged, were being deployed to '[educate] the people of Ireland on the old pap of racial hatred' (*LII*, 167) and replicate in inverted form the strategies of othering which underpinned Britain's imperial public health and social hygiene policy. This tendency is exemplified by Gogarty's second 'Ugly England' article, which characterizes the degenerate 'Sludge' through a range of dehumanizing epithets as 'an ogre', a 'no more than human animal', 'a slave', and 'a sewer'.⁵⁵ In a sectarian manoeuvre sure to please a *Sinn Féin* readership, Gogarty positions Oliver Cromwell's ascent to power as the originary moment of this 'devolution' in the 'Anglo-Saxon' race, which he associates with the

⁵⁴ "Alpha and Omega" (Oliver St John Gogarty), *Blight*, 43-44.

⁵⁵ Oliver St John Gogarty, "Ugly England (II)," *Sinn Féin*, November 24, 1906, 3.

rise of evangelical Protestantism.⁵⁶ By an act of gymnastic chauvinism, Gogarty proceeds to argue that this ‘Puritanism’ has inscribed itself in ‘the physiognomy and physique of the people’ in the ‘distinctly Jewish’ features of their ‘race-type’.⁵⁷ In an anthropometric register Gogarty describes the ‘anaemic face and aquiline nose’ of a nearby shop-girl, whose poor teeth, ‘narrow’ palate, and inability to ‘breathe well’ he presents as defects common in ‘half-breeds’.⁵⁸ As in his first article, Gogarty implies that the clearest manifestation of this degenerative threat in Ireland is the venereally-diseased British Army, whose officials fear that the ‘hot-blooded Irish may become too educated [...] to bring upon themselves the moral ruin and physical decay which joining the English mercenary forces certainly involves’.⁵⁹

The debts such anti-Semitic rhetoric owes to the Dreyfus affair and the Limerick pogrom are not far to seek, with both scandals being afforded consistent and often inflammatory coverage by Griffith’s *United Irishman*. The Limerick pogrom – a three-month sequence of boycotts and attacks against Jewish traders, many of whom had fled Russia following anti-Jewish purges in Kishnev – was incited by a sermon delivered by the Redemptorist preacher Father John Creagh on 13 January 1904, in which he instructed his flock to cast from their community ‘a viper that might at any moment slay its benefactor’.⁶⁰ The common tropology of anti-Semitic slander – the crucifixion, Christian martyrology, the blood libel – which Creagh drew upon to figure the Jewish population of Limerick as a parasitic threat (‘leeches [who] draw our blood’) to the city’s Catholic community has been well documented by critics and historians.⁶¹ Less often noted are the ways in which Creagh, and the anti-Semitic tradition upon which he drew, figured Jews as a degenerate and degenerative sexual threat to the nation’s physical and cultural integrity. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Jewishness, mental illness, and nervous disease had been virtually synonymous in European medical and popular discourse. Charcot spoke for many during one of his hugely influential Tuesday lessons at the Salpêtrière in 1888 when he stressed ‘combien, dans la race, les accidents nerveux de tout genre [...] se montrent incomparablement beaucoup plus fréquents qu’ailleurs’ [how incomparably more frequent

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Fr John Creagh, “Jewish Trading, Its Growth in Limerick, Address to the Confraternity,” *Munster News*, January 13, 1904, reproduced in Dermot Keogh and Andrew McCarthy, *Limerick Boycott 1904: Anti-Semitism in Ireland* (Douglas Village, Cork: Mercier Press, 2005), 35-36, 35.

⁶¹ Ibid. For an overview of the pogrom and its relationship to anti-Semitism in Ireland more broadly, see Keogh and McCarthy, *Limerick Boycott 1904: Anti-Semitism in Ireland* and Cormac Ó Gráda, *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce: A Socioeconomic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), chap. 9.

nervous accidents of all types are among the [Jewish] race than elsewhere].⁶² This predisposition to neurological illness was attributed to the sexual alterity of the Jewish, who were held by popular opinion and sexology alike to be both pathologically endogamous and dangerously licentious.⁶³ In the case of Creagh's polemic, a particular focal point was the seductive danger Jewish traders posed to 'the women of a house' and the sanctity of the marital home: 'The Jew has got a sweet tongue when he wishes – he passes off his miserable goods upon her.'⁶⁴ Creagh invoked the sexually vulnerable figure of the 'servant girl' as an example of the kind of woman too easily tempted by 'the designing Jew' and his 'cheap, gaudy jewellery, [and] showy dresses.'⁶⁵ Under such an influence, Creagh warned, Ireland's young women would squander their 'scanty earnings' in pursuit of a debauched and implicitly sexualized aesthetic.⁶⁶ Turning to the figure of the housewife, Creagh sketched a narrative of furtive meetings and spousal deceit fitted with all the trappings of an extra-marital affair:

She has to spare and stint to get the money to pay off the Jew without her husband knowing it, and then follow misery, sorrow, and deceit. The wife is afraid lest her husband should find out that she has been dealing with the Jews. The Jew makes his appearance while the husband is in the house. [...] The wife, too, will beg the Jew not to come to her house – she does not want him coming, and then stealthy visits must be paid at night, in the darkness, lest the dealings be found out. Stand at a prominent Jew's house at night, and you will be surprised to see the number and the class of people who are going in and out, under cover of shawls, to pay the Jew his usury.⁶⁷

Tellingly, the nature of the 'payment' exacted in such an encounter is left elliptically vague, tacitly aligning Limerick's Jewish pedlars with sex work and the diverse physical and social maladies with which it was cognate. Creagh underscored this image of Limerick's Jewish community as a sexually corrupting influence on the local population when, drawing on the cultural isolationist rhetoric of Irish Ireland, he accused the city's Jewish pedlars of 'distributing to innocent country people indecent pictures, impure books, and aiding [in the] corruption of morals in other ways'.⁶⁸ Even before Creagh's sermon, concerns about Ireland's Jewish community, particularly in Dublin and Limerick, had prompted a number of investigations by the RIC under the direction of Dublin Castle. A common allegation concerned Jewish tea dealers, who were

⁶² Jean Martin Charcot, *Leçons du Mardi à la Salpêtrière: Policliniques, 1888-1889* (Paris: Progrès Médical, 1889), 11.

⁶³ Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, 153–56.

⁶⁴ Creagh, "Jewish Trading" in Keogh and McCarthy, 35.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

alleged to be in the habit of ‘collecting from hotels and other large establishments of the sort, used tea leaves, drying them, mixing with them deleterious drugs, and selling the compound to the poorer classes as tea’.⁶⁹ These contaminated preparations were presented as a concern to public health, ‘producing nervous disease and insanity’ in the unwitting consumer, symptoms heavily inflected by contemporary anxieties around degeneration and venereal disease.⁷⁰ As these examples suggest, in both Creagh’s sermon and the broader terrain of contemporary Irish anti-Semitism, Sinn Féin and Irish Ireland’s investments in domestic economy took on a pointedly sexual dimension, in which conducting business with an outsider constituted a sexually corrupting violation of the *oikos* that threatened not only ‘local trade and industry’ but the purity of the Irish population.⁷¹

As has often been noted, the most obvious mouthpiece for Gogarty’s fusion of Anglophobia and anti-Semitism within the world of *Ulysses* is ‘the citizen’ (U 12.58), whose monomaniacal conception of Irish national identity is self-consciously indebted to the worst excesses of both Creagh’s sermon and Sinn Féin rhetoric:

- Those are nice things, says the citizen, coming over here to Ireland filling the country with bugs.
[...]
- Swindling the peasants, says the citizen, and the poor of Ireland. We want no more strangers in our house.

(U 12.1141-51)

In this regard, it is perhaps unsurprising that the citizen’s most programmatic endorsement of Irish cultural and economic autarchy is initiated by a venereally-inflected pun. After a discussion of the Irish language movement prompts J.J. O’Molloy and Bloom to speak in defence of English ‘moderation and botheration and their colonies and their civilisation’ (U 12.1195-96) the citizen rounds on the colonial apologists, exclaiming: ‘Their syphilisation, you mean... To hell with them! [...] No music and no art and no literature worthy of the name. Any civilisation they have they stole from us’ (U 12.1197-1200). While hardly an inspired exercise in linguistic gymnastics, Joyce’s wordplay nevertheless succeeds in neatly encapsulating Sinn Féin’s tendency to figure English culture as a pathological and parasitical threat to Irish socio-economic integrity. The citizen reprises this theme when the conversation turns to ‘Edward the peacemaker’

⁶⁹ Sir Anthony MacDonnell to Sir John Ross, 02 February 1903, reproduced in Keogh and McCarthy, *Limerick Boycott 1904*, 22.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 23.

⁷¹ Creagh, “Jewish Trading” in Keogh and McCarthy, 36.

(U 12.1399), remarking that he finds ‘a bloody sight more pox than pax about that boyo’ (U 12.1400-01), a reflection that prompts Alf Bergen to compare Edward’s stable of racehorses to ‘all the women he rode’ (U 12.1406). The citizen’s characterization of the English monarch as a syphilitic womaniser is predicated on an implicit contrast with the sexual purity of the Irish, whose bodily integrity is intended to mirror the integrity of the nation as a whole. However, the limits of this virginal conception of Irish identity have in fact already been suggested through another venereal allusion made earlier in the episode while the citizen decries the Anglicization of the once Parnellite *Irish Independent*:

Listen to the births and deaths in the *Irish all for Ireland Independent* [...] And he starts reading them out:
 [...] Deaths. Bristow, at Whitehall lane, London: Carr, Stoke Newington of gastritis and heart disease: Cockburn, at the Moat house, Chepstow...
 - I know that fellow, says Joe, from bitter experience.
 - Cockburn [...] How’s that for a national press, eh, my brown son!

(U 12.221-34)

Here the corruption of the ‘*Irish all for Ireland Independent*’ by English death notices is ironically paralleled and undercut by Joe’s bawdy allusion to a personal brush with venereal disease (Cock-burn), which places under tacit erasure the innate Gaelic purity the citizen strives to defend. Indeed, the very structure of the pun is predicated on an Irish mispronunciation of the surname (the citizen’s repetition suggests that he only gets it right on his second attempt) which seems to align the infection it encodes with the citizen rather than the deceased inhabitant of Chepstow.

Joyce’s problematization of Sinn Féin’s attempts to construct a model of national identity predicated on an illusory sexual purity finds its fullest expression in the ‘Circe’ episode of *Ulysses*, which contains the novel’s highest concentration of references to syphilis and its treatment. This satirical project manifests itself in Joyce’s characterization of ‘THE FIGURE’ (U 15.217) Bloom encounters at the episode’s opening: ‘(A sinister figure leans on plaited legs against O’Beirne’s wall, a visage unknown, injected with dark mercury. From under a wideleaved sombrero the figure regards him with evil eye.)’ (U 15.212-14). This individual, who accosts Bloom upon his entrance to Nighttown, seems to serve simultaneously as a gatekeeper to its brothels – demanding that Bloom utter a ‘Password’ before entry (U 15.219) – and a member of their staff. This paradox is reflected in its vexed identity as an embodiment of syphilitic infection and an example of the measures taken to police its transmission and mitigate effects. The figure’s ‘plaited legs’ may be the product of ‘Locomotor ataxy’ (U 15.2591), a failure of muscular co-ordination caused by neurosyphilis, while its ‘evil

eye' suggests iritis, a symptom of tertiary infection with which Joyce may have been painfully familiar.⁷² Most tellingly, the figure has been 'injected with dark mercury', a common treatment for the illness prior to the development of Salvarsan in 1909. Amalgamated in 'THE DARK MERCURY' (U 15.749) are the desire to police the perceived vice of Dublin's brothels and a depiction of the dehumanizing effects such vice can produce, registered in its unstable role as both a preventative and a sufferer of syphilitic infection. Bloom addresses the figure, assuming it to be a sex worker: '*Buenos noches, señorita Blanca, que calle es esta?*' (U 15.218). Its response, '*Sraid Mabbot*', marks it out as a 'Gaelic league spy' (U 15.220), a member of the organization whose policies of Irish language revival and cultural de-Anglicization stood at the heart of Sinn Féin's political agenda. The manifest evidence of the figure's diseased condition thus jostles uncomfortably against its alignment with a model of Irish identity predicated on a physical purity which it fails to embody. Like Joe's 'Cockburn', this figure embodies Joyce's desire to use venereal disease to permeate the apparently immutable physical boundaries within which Sinn Féin sought to locate Irishness.

Part of what Joyce highlights in his efforts to drown out 'the "venereal excess" cry' in *Ulysses* are what he perceives to be the reductive debts which Sinn Féin's 'purity' rhetoric owed to Catholic sexual politics. For Joyce, these threatened to undermine Griffith's commitment to 'secular liberty' (LII, 187) and an ecumenical nationalism whose roots lay in Young Ireland. Gogarty's contributions to *Sinn Féin* are clear examples of this shift towards a model of sexually-constructed Irish identity in which nationalism and Catholicism are treated as synonyms. In their colloquial tone, sectarian outlook, and heavy use of disparaging epithets ('Sludge', 'Snudge', 'Snuck'), Gogarty's articles self-consciously emulate the idiosyncratic style and polemical content of Moran's *Leader* editorials.⁷³ In *Ulysses*, Joyce problematizes this investment in bodily 'purity' and the 'racial hatred' it facilitated through his satirical deployment of Bloom's potato as an unstable emblem of blighted Irish identity. During the composition and revision of 'Circe' Joyce emphasized the role of the prophylactic herb *moly*, given to Odysseus by Hermes. He outlined its function in a letter to Frank Budgen in September 1920: '[*Moly* is] the gift of Hermes... the invisible influence (prayer, chance, agility, *presence of mind*, power of recuperation) which saves in case of accident. This would

⁷² '(locomotor ataxia) a form of neurosyphilis [...]. Severe stabbing pains in the legs [and] unsteady gait [...] are common. Some patients have blurred vision caused by damage to the optic nerves'. Elizabeth A. Martin, ed., *Concise Medical Dictionary*, 8th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 716.

⁷³ For an account of the *Leader*'s house-style and Moran's agonistic political philosophy, see Toomey, "Moran's Collar: Yeats and Irish Ireland".

cover immunity from syphilis (*σὺ φιλος* = swine-love?)⁷⁴ Bloom's potato offers a clear parallel to this gift in 'Circe', apparently embodying precisely the kinds of 'immunity' upon which Gogarty and his readership had so spuriously prided themselves in 1906.⁷⁵ Time and again in 'Circe' the potato is invoked as the questionable talisman of a 'pure' Ireland, protected from illness by its emblematic tuber. The folk-lore associations between the potato and immunity are skeptically expressed in 'Oxen of the Sun': 'Spud again the rheumatiz? All poppycock you'll scuse me saying' (U 14.1480-81). However, by the time Bloom enters Nighttown these curative properties have expanded exponentially, as Bloom notes: 'The Providential... Poor mamma's panacea' (U 15.201-02). The 'invisible influence' (LI, 148) of the potato here imbues Bloom's Irish heritage with an explicitly religious ('Providential') dimension, just as the Sinn Féin discourse of 'purity' which Joyce satirizes was founded upon an implicitly Catholic politics of fertility.

The hypocrisy Joyce detects in this union manifests itself in the conclusion of the blasphemous bidding prayer made by 'THE DAUGHTERS OF ERIN' (U 15.1940) – Joyce's rendering of *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* – to Bloom during his martyrdom: 'Potato Preservative against Plague and Pestilence, pray for us' (U 15.1952). The prophylactic connotations of the Francophone pun 'Preservative' have already been underscored in 'Oxen of the Sun', where 'Preservative had given [the clients of the sex worker 'Bird in the Hand'] a stout shield of oxengut' (U 14.465) as protection from the 'foul plague Allpox' (U 14.464). The biblically inflected 'Plague and Pestilence' thus take on decidedly venereal resonances, just as the 'Providential' (prophylactic) role of Erin's 'Potato Preservative' is shown to be irreconcilable with the Catholic dogma which Joyce detected in Sinn Féin's conception of Irish identity. Joyce's decision to have a pious parody of *Inghinidhe na hÉireann*, staunch allies of Griffith, perform their devotion to a sexualized symbol of Ireland emphasizes the moment's subversive political content. Undertaken in concert with their anti-enlisting activities, theatrical performances were central to *Inghinidhe na hÉireann*'s program of nationalist consciousness-raising, with the group regularly organizing elaborate multi-night cycles of 'Gaelic Tableaux'. These stylized sequences combined scenes from Gaelic mythology ('the Faerie Changeling) and Irish history ('the story of King Brian'), with conceptual pieces depicting images such as 'Ireland Fettered'

⁷⁴ Stuart Gilbert, ed., *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 147-48. Hereafter cited parenthetically as LI. Emphases Joyce's.

⁷⁵ Budgen identifies this parallel in Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 230.

and 'Ireland Free'.⁷⁶ By having the Daughters of Erin enact a blasphemous tableau in celebration of a sexually suspect emblem of Irish national identity, Joyce thus subverts a prominent nationalist attempt to stage a culturally and politically unified Ireland founded upon a dubious claim to sexual purity. The ultimate expression of this ambivalence comes when the English sex worker Zoe runs her hand over Bloom's crotch and makes an unsettling discovery:

ZOE

(in sudden alarm) You've a hard chancre.

[...]

(Her hand slides into his left trouser pocket and brings out a hard black shrivelled potato. She regards it and Bloom with dumb moist lips.)

BLOOM

A talisman. Heirloom.

ZOE

For Zoe? For keeps? For being so nice, eh?

(U 15.1303-15)

Zoe believes Bloom to have a syphilitic 'chancre' (an indication of primary infection), which is revealed to be the '*black shriveled potato*' that has acted as Bloom's protective 'talisman' throughout the episode. However, in the context of this substitution, the potato now serves as an ominous symbol of corrupted Irish nationhood through which Joyce imbues the suggestion of syphilitic infection with resonances of the Great Famine of the 1840s and '50s.⁷⁷ Rather than raising the spectre of the Famine to advance a nationalist agenda, a common trope in Griffith's writing, Joyce figures this emblem of Irish nationalism as an infectious and corrupting influence in itself.⁷⁸ Bloom's description of this chancre-tuber as an 'heirloom' evokes contemporary syphilology's image of the illness as an inherited and incurable dysgenic threat, explaining why Zoe will take possession of it 'For keeps' (with no hope of cure) as her reward for 'being so nice' (sexually willing). In this moment Joyce brings together Bloom - the Irish-born son of a Jewish Hungarian immigrant, baptized in both the Protestant and Catholic Churches - and Zoe - an English-born Jewish sex worker, resident in Dublin - through an emblem of Irish identity which hovers unstably between its irreducibly dual roles as a 'a killer of pestilence by absorption' (U 15.1357-58) and an apparent propagator

⁷⁶ "The Gaelic Tableaux," *United Irishman*, 13 April 1901, 4-5.

⁷⁷ A link possibly suggested by Gogarty's *Blight*, which Ellmann lists among the contents of Joyce's Trieste library. Richard Ellmann, *The Consciousness of Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 98.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of Joyce's responses to this discourse and to the Famine more generally, see Lowe-Evans, *Crimes Against Fecundity*, chap. 1.

of syphilitic infection. Through the suitably universal spectre of the ‘foul plague Allpox’ (U 14.464), Joyce thus constructs a scene which resists both the politicized binary of Irish purity and English corruption which Sinn Féin sponsored, and the racialized opposition between the muscular Gael and the degenerate Anglicized Jew which it entailed.

‘Mary Shortall was in the lock with the pox’: Joyce’s Syphilitic Acts of Union

Notwithstanding the satirical force of this critique, neither the nature nor the cause of Joyce’s rebuttal of Gogarty’s articles and *Sinn Féin*’s broader position on sexual health in Ireland should be misconstrued. While Joyce is undeniably ‘nauseated’ (LII, 191) by Gogarty’s hypocrisy, he is also palpably amused by it, and draws his brother’s attention to it as a source of entertainment, and, more importantly, as part of a broader attempt to defend Sinn Féin’s policies and political approach. Thus, though Joyce rejects *Sinn Féin*’s purity rhetoric – ‘their lying drivell about pure men and pure women and spiritual love and love forever’ (LII, 191-92) – it is important to bear in mind that, in doing so, he does not reject their platform or broader ideology. The young Joyce’s commitment to a Griffithite policy of economic separatism following his departure from Ireland is well-documented, taking tangible form in his attempt to establish himself as an agent for Foxford tweeds in Trieste in 1909 (JJII, 269; 303). This investment manifests itself in his letters to Stanislaus in Joyce’s increasingly strained attempts to isolate Griffith and his political philosophy from the apparently malign influence of *Sinn Féin*’s regular contributors, whom Joyce characterizes as mercenary hacks. In a letter written just after the publication of ‘Ugly England’, Joyce unfavourably contrasts Gogarty’s article with ‘Griffith’s speech at the meeting of the National Council’, whose insights he believes sufficiently profound to ‘justif[y] the existence of his paper’ (LII, 167). Joyce claims that, in order to make up space, ‘[Griffith], probably, has to lease out his columns to scribblers like Gogarty and Colm, and virgin martyrs like his sub-editor’ (LII, 167). Following the publication of Gogarty’s second article, Joyce addresses his brother’s objections to *Sinn Féin* with a similar appeal to editorial pragmatics: ‘You complain of Griffith’s using Gogarty & Co. How do you expect him to fill his paper: he can’t write it all himself’ (LII, 187). In a final bid to insulate Griffith, Joyce prophesies that, should Sinn Féin’s policies succeed, Gogarty will ‘play the part of [Leonard] MacNally and [Thomas] Reynolds’ (*Ibid*) and betray the movement. Far from rejecting Sinn Féin outright, in these letters Joyce shows a willingness, if not to endorse, then, at least, frustratedly

accept sexual health rhetoric as a necessary evil in order to achieve the movement's political aims and fill the pages of its flagship periodical.

Indeed, Joyce's writing in this period sometimes seems not simply tolerant of, but actively influenced by Griffithite thinking and 'the "venereal excess" cry' (*LII*, 191) to which it gave rise. References to syphilitic infection are a regular rhetorical feature of Joyce's artistic self-fashioning and cultural critique of Ireland under British rule throughout the first decades of the twentieth-century. As has been noted above, the 1904 pseudo-manifesto 'A Portrait of the Artist' concludes with an image of revolution in which 'the competitive order is employed against itself, the aristocracies are supplanted; and amid the general paralysis of an insane society, the confederate will issues in action.'⁷⁹ In a diary entry written on 13 August the same year, Stanislaus Joyce records how:

Jim [...] boasts of his power to live, and says, in his pseudo-medical phraseology, that it comes from his highly specialized central nervous system. He talks much of the syphilitic contagion in Europe, is at present writing a series of studies in it in Dublin, tracing practically everything to it. The drift of his talk seems to be that contagion is congenital and incurable and responsible for all manias and being so, that it is useless to try to avoid it.⁸⁰

However, when Joyce turns specifically to the question of syphilis in Ireland, socialist prophecies and decadent images of universal 'syphilisation' give place to a decidedly *Sinn Féin* inflected aetiology of the illness, in which responsibility for the presence of the illness in Ireland resides firmly with the British. In a discussion prompt for Berlitz students in Trieste composed circa 1905, Joyce claims that: 'Ireland is a great country. It is called the Emerald Isle. The metropolitan government, after centuries of strangling it, has laid it waste. It's now an untilled field. The government sowed hunger, syphilis, superstition, and alcoholism there; puritans, Jesuits, and bigots have sprung up' (*IIII*: 217). Though Joyce's tongue is seldom far from his cheek, especially in such moments of adolescent provocation, the statement bears close attention for the political and cultural co-ordinates within which it situates its characterization of contemporary Ireland. Most obviously, it ascribes responsibility for the contemporary cultural and economic underdevelopment of Ireland to the 'metropolitan', which is to say, British, government. Furthermore, it presents the presence of syphilis in Ireland not simply as a by-product of British imperial governance, but as a conscious technique

⁷⁹ James Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings: Including Epiphanies, Giacomo Joyce, and "A Portrait of the Artist,"* ed. Richard Ellmann, A. Walton Litz, and John Whittier-Ferguson (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 218.

⁸⁰ Stanislaus Joyce, *The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce*, ed. George H. Healy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 51.

for the oppression of the Irish comparable to the Famine ('hunger') or the brewing industry ('alcoholism') – a rhetorical and historiographical manoeuvre lifted straight from the playbook of Sinn Féin and Irish Ireland.

Nor is this pragmatic sensibility or political affiliation confined to his letters and personal writing of the early 1900s. However much he may have critiqued Sinn Féin's use of venereal disease as a means to police the boundary of Irish identity, in both *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, syphilis and its metastases are deployed to oppose and critique British rule in Ireland. Such a critique would appear to be offered in the 'Circe' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* when, in the midst of the psycho-sexual phantasmagoria of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus' visit to Bella Cohen's Mecklenburg Street brothel, the sex worker Kitty breathlessly relates how: 'Mary Shortall was in the lock with the pox she got from Jimmy Pidgeon in the blue caps had a child off him that couldn't swallow and was smothered with convulsions in the mattress' (*U* 15.2578-80). Kitty's reference to 'the blue caps' identifies the pox-ridden Pidgeon as a member of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, the predominately Irish regiment which Bloom identifies as being 'rotten with venereal disease' in 'Lotus Eaters'.⁸¹ While Joyce is more often held up by critics as a vocal opponent of the artificial binary of Irish purity and English corruption upon which much contemporary advanced nationalist propaganda was predicated, in this moment, he highlights, in affecting stark terms, the very real role British militarism played in the transmission of venereal disease in Ireland.

Contained within this indictment of British militarism is a repudiation of the models of ethnic and sexual difference through which British rule in Ireland was rationalized and justified in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As I emphasized in Part One, the Arnoldian image of the Celt as 'feminine', 'sentimental', and fundamentally 'undisciplinable' constructed Irishness as a state of hysterical and self-destructive femininity which could only be redeemed through 'vital union' with the rational, masculine 'Anglo-Saxon'.⁸² As my reading of Healy's post-Split characterizations of Parnell in Chapter One has already suggested, in the masculinist logic of contemporary degeneration theory and the discourses of social hygiene to which it gave rise, such pathologized femininity was closely allied to the dysgenic impact of syphilis and

⁸¹ Major Arthur Mainwaring, *Crown and Country: The Historical Records of the 2nd Batt. Royal Dublin Fusiliers, formerly the 1st Bombay European Regiment, 1662-1911* (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1911), 294.

⁸² Matthew Arnold, *The Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1867), 108-09, xii; Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 1; Susan Canon Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), chap. 1.

its hereditary manifestations. The illness and its inherited degenerative effects were an abiding concern for British colonial administrators and medical specialists alike. In an 1891 letter to the Secretary of State, Lord Landsdowne, Viceroy of India, expressed his concern that ‘infected men’ would return home from overseas service ‘to spread the contagion among the civil population of Great Britain’ and ‘transmit a heritage of misery to posterity’.⁸³ British and European venereologists offered an alarming image of this heritage, outlining the still-births, birth-defects, and life-long health problems to which congenital syphilis gave rise.⁸⁴ For Alfred Fournier, the effects of congenital syphilis constituted, for both the individual and the species, a litany of ‘déchéance’ [decay], ‘abâtardissement’ [bastardization], ‘infériorisation’ [inferiority], and ‘dégénérescence’ [degeneration].⁸⁵ Similar, if less shrill, characterizations were offered by respected British sexologists well into the twentieth century. In Havelock Ellis’s *Essays in War Time* (1916), a polemic on ‘The Conquest of Venereal Disease’ appears alongside discussions of ‘War and Eugenics’, ‘Eugenics and Genius’, and ‘The Production of Ability’, in which syphilis is presented as ‘the most dangerous of all racial poisons’.⁸⁶ As Joyce’s description of the new-born’s dysphagia, ‘convulsions’, and suffocation makes clear, Mary Shortall’s child is the victim of congenital syphilis, and, as such, an apparent manifestation of the degenerative process which Fournier, Ellis, and Landsdowne outline. However, by having Kitty insist that it is Jimmy Pidgeon who has infected Mary Shortall with syphilis, and not the reverse, Joyce subverts a dominant narrative of British social hygiene policy which positioned subaltern women as a pathological threat to the administrators of colonial rule. Far from offering salvation from a hereditary state of sexually-pathologized irrationality, in Joyce’s rendering the ‘vital union’ of an archetype of Irish femininity with an avatar of British martial authority serves only to deprive the Irishwoman of her health, her liberty, and her child, whose death may be read as a symbol of Ireland’s thwarted political futurity.

⁸³ Lord Landsdowne (Viceroy of India) to India Secretary, Lord Cross, 4 February 1891, quoted in Levine, *Prostitution, Race & Politics*, 44.

⁸⁴ For an overview of British medical thought surrounding congenital syphilis in the early twentieth century, see D’Arcy Power and J. Keogh Murphy, eds., *A System of Syphilis, with an Introduction by Sir Jonathan Hutchinson* (London: Frowde, 1908), chaps. 22–25.

⁸⁵ Alfred Fournier, *Prophylaxie de la Syphilis* (Paris: J. Rueff, 1903), 383.

⁸⁶ Havelock Ellis, *Essays in War Time: Further Studies in Social Hygiene* (London: Constable and Company, 1916), 33.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the strong nationalist resonances of such an image, it would be naïve on the basis of moments such as these to offer an uncomplicated portrait of the artist as a young Shinner, or to lose sight of the ambivalence which often inflects Joyce's critiques of British imperialism or his deployment of nationalist arguments. Returning to the Trieste pedagogical gambit, it is clear that, for Joyce, the corollary of the British campaign of sexual germ-warfare he identifies is not merely the frustration of Ireland's socio-economic potential, but religious zealotry, sectarianism, and xenophobia – an indictment of precisely the culturally Catholic and ethnically Irish image of Ireland which Sinn Féin's anti-imperial rhetoric was intended to sponsor. Complicating matters yet further, Joyce intertextually frames this image of Irish inanition, inebriation, and infection through a reference to George Moore's 1903 short story collection, *The Untilled Field*. Opening with 'In the Clay', a story in which an Irish sculptor is driven from his native village because the clergyman who has commissioned an altarpiece from him realises its model is a local girl, and progressing through tales of emigration ('Home Sickness'), frustrated sexual desire ('Some Parishioners'), and a thwarted scheme for clerical marriage ('A Letter to Rome'), Moore's collection insistently presents a meddlesome Catholic priesthood as the single greatest barrier to the cultivation of social and sexual modernity in Ireland. Fused, then, within Joyce's deliberately scandalous image of an infected Ireland full of unfulfilled promise is a revivalist critique of the nation's Church-abetted socio-economic and intellectual underdevelopment and an aetiology of British imperialism and Irish sexual disease in which the Irish Ireland movement is presented as a symptomatic manifestation of the very cultural pathology it sought to remedy.

Indeed, at times in *Ulysses*, Joyce seems less concerned with highlighting either the culpability of Ireland's British military authorities or the hypocrisies of Sinn Féin in their handling of venereal disease, than with emphasizing how threadbare the entire question of ascribing blame for the presence of sexually transmitted infection in Ireland had become. A hint of this exhaustion is caught in the 'Eumaeus' episode of the novel, in which redundancy, dead metaphors, and a general air of performative lassitude are the dominant stylistic features. Sitting in the cabman's shelter with a worse-for-wear Stephen Dedalus, Bloom is confronted with the 'glazed' face (*U* 16.704) of a 'frowsy whore' (*U* 11.1252) he had earlier encountered when leaving the Ormond Hotel bar in "Sirens". Joyce's emphasis on the sex worker's 'demented glassy grin' (*U* 16.724) and Bloom's sense that she is 'not exactly all there' (*U* 16.724-25) suggest that she is

suffering from the early stages of neurosyphilis. Bloom, adopting the haughty tone of a *'paterfamilias'* (U 16.744), expresses to Stephen his disbelief that 'a wretched creature', fresh from 'the Lock hospital reeking with disease', should be 'barefaced enough to solicit' openly on the streets of Dublin (U 16.729-30). The indignant Bloom insists that 'women of that stamp' (U 16.741) ought to be 'licensed and medically inspected by the proper authorities' (U 16.743).

The Joycean ironies one would expect from such a moment are all present and correct, the most obvious being that Bloom, who questions how 'any man in his sober senses' (U 16.730) could endanger his health through sexual contact with what he perceives to be a syphilitic woman, has himself previously engaged her for an, albeit abortive, 'Appointment' (U 11.1257) while she was working at a Magdalene laundry ('any chance of your wash': U 11.1255-56). A greater irony is articulated by Stephen, who reflects that in Ireland 'people sell much more than she ever had and do a roaring trade' (U 16.736-37). Stephen's wry remark emphasizes the paradox of punishing Irish sex workers for fraternizing with British troops when other forms of political, cultural, and economic complicity in the operation of British imperialism were richly rewarded. As Stephen argues, by the logic of Ireland's subaltern position, the sex worker is merely 'a bad merchant. She buys dear and sells cheap' (U 16.738). Here syphilis is apparently figured as the basis for an uncomplicated nationalist indictment of British occupation, consistent in both tone and content with contemporary Sinn Féin and *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* anti-enlisting propaganda.

However, perhaps the greatest irony of all is that the scheme Blooms proposes is neither novel nor innovative, but instead deliberately evokes a long-abandoned body of British social hygiene policy: the Contagious Diseases Acts. Introduced to the United Kingdom in 1864, in their domestic manifestation these Acts established 'subjected districts' in which any woman suspected to be engaged in sex work within a five-mile radius of a British military encampment could be subjected to an involuntary and invasive medical examination. If a woman refused, she faced a month's imprisonment, and, if found to be infected with venereal disease, could be forcibly hospitalized for up to three months (a period extended to six months in 1866 and nine months in 1869).⁸⁷ Following a protracted campaign by a coalition of first-wave feminists and social purity advocates, the Acts were repealed in 1886. The Acts have most commonly been understood as manifestations of a gendered double-standard in which male promiscuity was licenced at the

⁸⁷ Peter Baldwin, *Contagion and the State in Europe 1830-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 372-73.

expense of women's bodily and personal autonomy, demonizing female sex workers, while leaving their clients unmolested.⁸⁸ Less often remarked upon, however, are the colonial origins of these Acts, which were first introduced not in Britain or Ireland, but in Hong Kong in 1857.⁸⁹ As Philippa Levine has demonstrated, in Britain's Asian, Caribbean, and Australian colonies, the inability of mid-nineteenth-century diagnostic medicine to distinguish between venereal and non-venereal treponemal infections dovetailed all too easily with imperialist narratives of British cultural and racial supremacy to allow conditions such as yaws, pinta, and bejel to be misdiagnosed as syphilis and taken as proof of the degenerate and immoral condition of the indigenous population.⁹⁰ As a result, colonial Contagious Disease policies were introduced earlier and repealed later than their domestic counterparts.

Viewed in the light of this martial heritage, Bloom's tone of apparently disinterested empiricism ('medically I am speaking', *U* 16.728) and his desire to regulate only female sex workers position him as a mouthpiece for an outmoded British social hygiene policy intended to serve the interests of Ireland's military administration. Joyce sartorially reinforces the imperial undertones of this moment through the sex worker's 'black straw sailor hat' (*U* 11.1252), ironically costuming her in the uniform of the 'gunboat' (*U* 16.727) whose crew seemingly constitutes her clientele. However, Joyce's decision to have an Irishman, Bloom – however overdetermined his national identity may be – rather than a figure of British military authority, serve as the sexually-compromised mouthpiece for a punitive and superannuated colonial social hygiene policy frustrates the polemical potential of this scene in favour of a more ambivalent image of mutual Anglo-Irish infection.⁹¹ Moreover, in framing Bloom and Stephen's conversation – the longest in the novel concerning the regulation of syphilis – in relation to the long-defunct Contagious Diseases Acts, and by positioning that conversation in the novel's most pointedly weary episode, Joyce seems to suggest that attempts to arbitrate Irish identity in relation to sexual health were already past their sell-by date. As the concluding chapters of this thesis will illustrate, this sense that nationalist claims concerning the

⁸⁸ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pt. 2; Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940*, chap. 4.

⁸⁹ Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 40.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁹¹ Though the legitimacy of Bloom's claims to 'Irishness' forms a point of controversy in *Ulysses*, in this moment his over-determined racial, national, and religious affiliations only serve to reinforce Joyce's critique of the binaristic logic of British colonialism and Sinn Féin chauvinism.

exemplary sexual purity of the Irish had ossified into empty cliché was to be deepened and extended in the emergent Free State by Samuel Beckett, Kate O'Brien, and Flann O'Brien.

Part III

Heredity and Fertility

Chapter Four

‘Sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter’

Beckett, Censorship, and Fertility

An Act to make provision for the prohibition of the sale and distribution of unwholesome literature and for that purpose to provide for the establishment of a censorship of books and periodical publications, and to restrict the publication of reports of certain classes of judicial proceedings and for other purposes incidental to the matters aforesaid.

Censorship of Publications Act, 1929: Preamble

This phrase is chosen with care, lest the filthy censors should lack an occasion to commit their filthy synecdoche.

Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (1938)

To claim that Samuel Beckett was opposed to censorship is unlikely to raise many eyebrows. From the goading of the ‘filthy censors’ in *Murphy*, to the withdrawal of *All that Fall* (1956) and *Endgame* (1956) from the 1958 Dublin International Theatre Festival following the suppression of a proposed stage adaptation of *Ulysses* (1922), Beckett’s distaste for publications control was forthright and thoroughgoing.¹ As the deliberate ‘care’ with which the narrator of *Murphy* seeks to provoke the censor and ‘debauch the cultivated reader’ suggests, Beckett’s prose repeatedly engages with and responds to the implicit and explicit threat of suppression.² The recent historicizing and Hibernicizing turn in Beckett Studies, and the growing interest in Beckett within Irish Studies more broadly, has done much to root this opposition in an Irish context.³ Central to such accounts has been the Free State’s 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, which, in an effort to combat the circulation of ‘evil literature’ in the young nation, infamously prohibited all printed matter which advocated ‘the unnatural prevention of conception or the procurement of abortion or miscarriage’.⁴ John P. Harrington has shown how ‘Che Scigaura’ [what a misfortune] (1929), one of Beckett’s earliest

¹ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (London: Faber, 2009), 50; James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 447–48.

² Beckett, *Murphy*, 75.

³ Monographs and collections devoted to uncovering an ‘Irish’ Beckett include John P. Harrington, *The Irish Beckett* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991); Mary Junker, *Beckett: The Irish Dimension* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1995); Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Patrick Bixby, *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Jennifer M. Jeffers, *Beckett’s Masculinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Seán Kennedy, ed., *Beckett and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett, Critical Lives* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010); Rina Kim, *Women and Ireland as Beckett’s Lost Others: Beyond Mourning and Melancholia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴ Dáil Éireann, “Censorship of Publications Act, 1929,” Irish Statute Book, July 2014, <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1929/en/act/pub/0021/print.html>.

pieces of published prose, and ‘Censorship in the Saorstát’ (written c.1934-1936, published 1983) seek to satirize and scandalize what he presents as Ireland’s ‘agenda for *cultural exclusivism*’.⁵ Patrick Bixby argues that this climate of censoriousness and the coercive collocation of Catholicism, fertility, and Irish identity which he claims the Act legally mandated were key catalysts for Beckett’s antagonistic rendering of post-independence Irish political and cultural self-fashioning.⁶ More recently, Seán Kennedy has offered a reading of the short story *Premier amour/First Love* (written c. 1946, published in French in 1970 and in an English self-translation in 1973) which emphasizes Beckett’s opposition to what he presents as the Catholic pro-natalism of the Censorship Act, a thesis reinforced and extended in Paul Stewart’s study, *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work* (2011), in which resistance to reproductive sexual activity is identified as central to the Beckettian aesthetic.⁷ In each case, Beckett is presented as an uncomplicatedly valiant defender of the linked modernist ideals of intellectual and sexual autonomy outlined in Part One, in the face of the culture of state-mandated philistinism and fertility represented by the Censorship Act.

While these critics are undoubtedly correct to assert that the Censorship Act and the state-mandated culture of fertility it seemed to represent were ‘problems of Irishness’ with which Beckett grappled throughout his career, the accounts they offer of the nature of that problem and the manner of Beckett’s responses to it are often limited and selective.⁸ To begin with, each of these studies is staked upon a relatively uncomplicated opposition between Beckett and the implicitly repressive Catholic sexual culture that the Censorship Act is taken to embody. In such readings, Beckett emerges as the defiant modernist *par excellence*, following proudly in the footsteps of Joyce in scandalizing all those who sought to place aesthetic or moral constraints on his work. On the one hand, such an account risks replicating the ‘enlightened Irish artist transcends benighted Erin to join the liberal European avant-garde’ narrative which studies of Irish modernism have been keen to problematize in recent years. On the other hand, it overlooks moments in which Beckett remained silent on the question of censorship (particularly the Irish suppression of *More Pricks Than Kicks*), or expressed active anxiety over projects which he felt might tarnish his reputation with

⁵ Harrington, *The Irish Beckett*, 21–27; 35–39; 22. For a similar reading, see David A. Hatch, ‘Samuel Beckett’s “Che Scigura” and the Subversion of Irish Moral Convention’, *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui*, 2007, 241–255.

⁶ Bixby, *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel*, 9–14.

⁷ Seán Kennedy, “First Love: Abortion and Infanticide in Beckett and Yeats,” *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui*, 2010, 79–91; Paul Stewart, *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁸ I derive this useful formulation from Emilie Morin’s reading of Beckett’s engagement with his homeland in Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*.

the economically and culturally ghettoizing label of ‘obscenity’, an impulse most visible in his deliberations over a commission from Jack Kahane’s Obelisk Press to translate the Marquis de Sade’s *Les 120 journées de Sodome* [the 120 days of Sodom] (written 1785, published 1904, and not translated to English until 1938).⁹ Perhaps most significantly, given the Foucauldian account of sexuality upon which the majority of these readings are staked, in presenting Beckett’s obscenity, anti-natalism, and the often grisly tone of his depictions of sex as intrinsically valiant repudiations of the conservative sexual culture of Ireland, such analyses risk conforming to the logic of precisely the ‘repressive hypothesis’ that Foucault’s account of the history and deployment of sexuality was intended to problematize.¹⁰ At the very least, these charitable accounts of Beckett’s sexual politics have a tendency to downplay the most troubling features of his engagement with sex, offering a paradoxically sanitized image of Beckettian obscenity.

Where previous criticism has presented Beckett’s response to censorship and pro-natalism in Ireland as an ethically valorous and politically subversive rejection of state-mandated fertility and confessional identity politics, in this chapter I stress the complexities of Beckett’s engagement with eugenics and its fraught relationship to a strand of Irish sectarian agon which both contributed to and was intensified by the drafting and passage of the Censorship Act. To do so, I explore the ways in which, through the Act, discourses of sexual health, eugenics, and population control became bound up with a broader competition for political influence and cultural capital between different intellectual, governmental, and confessional factions within the Free State. Through close-readings of ‘Censorship and the Saorstát’ and *Murphy*, I demonstrate the sometimes troubling ways in which Beckett’s early responses to Irish censorship replicate many of the arguments used by other Protestant cultural commentators to frame the Act as not only an affront to meaningful notions of intellectual value, but a dysgenic threat to the physical and cultural well-being of the emergent Free State. At the same time, I explore how, through Harry Sinclair’s 1937 libel action against Oliver St John Gogarty, Beckett’s personal experience of censorship brought him fact to face with the noxious realities of this sort of ethno-nationalist bio-politics and its ramifications for contemporary

⁹ Beckett confided to George Reavey his concerns over the effect this project would have on his ‘situation in England’ and how it ‘might prejudice future publications’ of his own work there. While Beckett did not ‘mind the obloquy’, he did not wish to be ‘spiked as a writer’, nor was he prepared to publish the translation pseudonymously. Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld et al., vol. I: 1929-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 604.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pts. 2–4.

Irish and European politics. Finally, I explore how, in the light of this experience, in *Premier amour/First Love*, Beckett sought to subject his earlier sectarian eugenicism to pressure by linking the Ireland of the Censorship Act to the landscape and policies of Nazi-occupied Vichy France. In the process, I highlight the ways in which Beckett's oeuvre both unconsciously reveals and self-consciously interrogates the ideological contradictions that awaited those who sought to appropriate the logic and discourses of eugenics for notionally progressive ends. In doing so, I wish to argue that, as an artist whose oeuvre has been held up as the 'only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps' and the racial science through which they were justified, Beckett's interrogation of his own engagement with eugenicist discourses merits close and sensitive scrutiny, and should not be overlooked in an effort to position him as an uncomplicated champion of free speech and reproductive rights.¹¹ To offer such an account, it is first necessary to examine the ways in which the Censorship Act has been interpreted in Irish historiography and to identify the implications of such accounts for an analysis of Beckett's response to censorship in Ireland.

A 'rhetoric of shock, horror, and outrage': The Censorship Act in Irish Historiography

Due in large part to its notorious prohibition of all printed matter relating to birth control, the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act has become both a by-word for the sexual 'repression' of the Irish, and a focal point for critical efforts to interrogate and problematize this popular stereotype. This has resulted in the emergence of two relatively well-defined positions with regards to the Act and its broader significance as a reflection of Irish cultural attitudes to sex in the early twentieth century. The first, exemplified by the work of Tom Inglis (but a feature of responses to the Act from its inception), emphasizes its status as an archetypal legislative manifestation of the influence of the Catholic Hierarchy in the administration of the Free State and the shaping of Irish sexual identity. For Inglis, the Act constitutes one facet of the 'Catholic Church's monopoly on morality' in the emergent nation, establishing a social atmosphere in which 'even the mildest suggestion of or allusion to sexual transgression encountered a rhetoric of shock, horror, and outrage.'¹² In Inglis's reading, this censorious climate becomes one of a range of social, cultural, and institutional forces which, from the late nineteenth century onwards, shaped the 'Irish body' into a template

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York, 1973), 380.

¹² Tom Inglis, "Foucault, Bourdieu and the Field of Irish Sexuality," *Irish Journal of Sociology* 7, no. 1 (1997): 5-28, 27.

established by a ‘normative, particularly sexual, Catholic social order’.¹³ The second position, articulated in the work of Diarmaid Ferriter and Senia Pašeta, downplays the centrality of Catholic doctrine to the Act by situating its proscriptions in the wider field of contemporary European nationalism and the discourses of pro-natalism with which France, Italy, and others responded to a period of diminishing birth-rates and demographic decline.¹⁴ They argue that, when viewed in light of anti-Malthusian censorship policies such as the French *Loi du 31 juillet 1920*, which prohibited all perceived ‘provocation à l’avortement’ [provocation to abortion] and ‘propagande anticonceptionnelle’ [contraceptive propaganda] or the national battle for fertility declared by Mussolini in his 1927 ‘Ascension Day’ speech, the Act seems less a uniquely Irish phenomenon than an idiosyncratic manifestation of a broader European trend.¹⁵ Furthermore, Ferriter cautions against reading the Act in narrowly sectarian terms, noting that, despite being presented as ‘promoted exclusively by the Catholic Church against the spirit of Anglo-Ireland’, the Act was supported by representatives of all churches.¹⁶

Elements of both positions are detectable in ‘Censorship in the Saorstát’, Samuel Beckett’s essay-length response to the Act. Commissioned in 1934 by the soon-to-be-defunct *Bookman* and revised in 1936 to note Beckett’s own inclusion on the Irish Register of Prohibited Publications, Beckett would eventually disparage the essay as a piece of hack-work ground out in response to an unwelcome deadline.¹⁷ However, read in its intended context as a publisher’s guide to the logic and inner-workings of the Censorship Act, it offers a valuable opportunity to politicize and historicize the rejection of reproductive sexuality which

¹³ Tom Inglis, ‘The Irish Body,’ in *Are the Irish Different?*, ed. Tom Inglis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 88–98, 90.

¹⁴ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (London: Profile, 2005), 335–42; Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 185–91; Senia Pašeta, ‘Censorship and Its Critics in the Irish Free State, 1922–1932’, *Past & Present* 232, no. (1) (2003): 193–218; Peter Martin, *Censorship in the Two Irelands, 1922–1939* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), chap. 3.

¹⁵ ‘Loi du 31 juillet 1920 réprimant la provocation à l’avortement et à la propagande anticonceptionnelle,’ *Journal officiel de la République française*, 1 August 1920, 3666; Michael S. Teitelbaum and J. M. Winter, *The Fear of Population Decline* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1985); Maria Sophia Quine, *Population Politics in Twentieth-Century Europe: Fascist Dictatorships and Liberal Democracies*, Historical Connections (London: Routledge, 1996); Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), chap. 4; Franz Eder, Lesley Hall, and Gert Hekma, eds., *Sexual Cultures in Europe: National Histories* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1999); Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), chaps 7–12; Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), chaps 2–3.

¹⁶ Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 340. A middle-ground is struck by Pašeta, who uses the broader European context outlined by Ferriter and Martin to analyze the ways in which the Act and the debates surrounding its passage allowed the Catholic Church to secure a substantial measure of cultural and administrative hegemony in the Free State. Pašeta, ‘Censorship and Its Critics in the Irish Free State, 1922–1932’.

¹⁷ Samuel Beckett to Thomas McGreevy, 28 [for 27] August 1934, TCD, MS 10402/62, quoted in Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, I: 1929–1940:224, n. 9.

Stewart and others identify as a hallmark of Beckett's work, and to test the applicability of Inglis and Ferrtier's accounts of the model of Irish sexuality the debates over censorship reflect. Analysing the Act section by section, Beckett identifies Part IV – its proscription of birth control literature – as the 'essence of the Bill and its exciting cause'.¹⁸ He argues that under the conditions of the Act 'to waive the off chance of a reasonable creature is no longer a mere mortal sin, but a slapup social malfeasance'.¹⁹ Like Inglis, Beckett perceives in the Act an effort to enshrine the 'mortal sin[s]' of Catholic fertility doctrine as the basis of the Free State's independent national identity. In a pastiche of the rhetoric of the Act's exponents, Beckett emphasizes the ways in which its restrictions on prophylaxis were justified under the rubric of a strained cultural nationalism: 'France may commit race suicide. Erin will never. And should she be found at any time deficient in Cuchulains, at least it shall never be said that they were contraceived'.²⁰ Beckett derived both the phrase 'race suicide' and the example of France from remarks made by Deputy J.J. Byrne, the Act's most vocal parliamentary supporter (and Beckett's most consistent target for derision), during the Second Stage Dáil debate on the Censorship Bill:

To the vast majority of the people the limitation, the control of births, or the infliction of race suicide upon this nation is one that is bitterly resented [...] If one might refer with all respect to the great French nation, what has happened there? The French population actually exceeded the German population in 1850. To-day the German population stands at 69 millions and the French population at 39½ millions. Is that for the benefit of France? [...] Does it make for the production of a better race, and what is the effect upon a people from whom all moral responsibility, as far as the marriage tie is concerned, is removed?²¹

Beckett's parodic appropriation of Byrne's oratory mimics its histrionic tone to foreground the quasi-eugenicist fixation on producing 'a better race' which he feels underpins the Act's prohibition of birth control literature. Like Ferriter and Pařeta, Beckett thus situates the Act in a wider European context of anti-Malthusian fertility policies, in which the Act's blurring of public health and public morality in an effort

¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: J. Calder, 1983), 86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 87–88.

²¹ "Censorship of Publications Bill, 1928 - Second Stage (Resumed)," Pub. L. No. 26.6 (1928), <<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail1928101900003?open&document=1>>. As Byrne's remarks reflect, the phrase 'race suicide' was used synonymously with 'birth control' in Irish debates over censorship. However, in European eugenics the term had a broader significance, denoting what alarmists such as R.R. Rentoul took to be the eschatological threat unchecked degeneration posed to humanity: 'Day by day, hour by hour, and year after year we add [to] diseased humanity – the children begotten by the diseased, idiots, imbeciles, epileptics, the insane, deformed, and those contaminated by venereal and other diseases. [...] Does anyone contend that such a scheme of pollution works for race culture? Rather, I contend, that it works for race suicide.' Robert Reid Rentoul, *Race Culture; Or, Race Suicide? A Plea for the Unborn* (London: Walter Scott, 1906), 7–8.

to administer and direct sexuality becomes legible as one of the ‘techniques’ for the ‘subjugation of bodies and the control of populations’ which Foucault identifies as the basis of ‘bio-power’.²² However, where Ferriter treats the confessional and nationalist impulses which motivated Catholic action groups such as the Catholic Truth Association of Ireland (CTSI) to militate for censorship as coincidental to its drafting and operation, Beckett’s reference to ‘Cuchulains’ positions the Act’s implied pro-natal bio-power agenda as the logical correlative of the well-worn nationalist cult of Gaelic hypermasculinity and cultural de-Anglicization traced in Chapter Two.

As Beckett’s remarks suggest, the synonymy of ‘evil literature’ and imported English papers and periodicals was, by the 1930s, a rather exhausted trope of Irish cultural nationalism. In the mid-nineteenth century Thomas Davis and Young Ireland lamented what they perceived to be an Irish popular mind ‘contaminated’ by an English press in the thrall of Jeremy Bentham.²³ Douglas Hyde, in his famous 1892 address on the ‘The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland’, called upon the Irish to ‘set [their] faces sternly against penny dreadfuls, shilling shockers, and still more, the garbage of vulgar English weeklies’ in favour of ‘everything that is most racial, most smacking of the soil’ in Irish language culture.²⁴ In the wake of Pope Pius X’s 1907 encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* [feeding of the flock] – a polemic against Catholic ‘Modernism’ and the secular rationalism it was held to reflect – Hyde’s imperative was taken up in increasingly sectarian form in Catholic periodicals such as the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, the *Catholic Pictorial*, and the *Irish Rosary*.²⁵ In his inaugural address to the 1911 CTSI annual conference, Rev Robert Kane, SJ outlined the political and theological ‘Vocation of the Celt’ with regards to imported literature:

The modern infidel world has declared war against Christ. That war is intellectual [...] its triumph has been so far so complete that of all nations there is not now left one single nation thoroughly, profoundly and emphatically Catholic except one. That one true Catholic nation is Ireland [...] As the war is intellectual, so the chief weapon of the modern infidel is his literature [...] Our chief weapon must therefore be our Catholic literature. But first we must hurl back from our shore the inroads of atheistic and immoral books. We must take all lawful means to resist the invasion of these satellites of Satan.²⁶

²² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge*: 140.

²³ *Nation*, 13 April 1844, quoted in David Dwan, *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), 40.

²⁴ Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland,” in *The Revival of Irish Literature*, ed. Charles Gavan Duffy (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), 117–61, 159.

²⁵ For an account of the role of this encyclical in catalysing the ‘combative censoriousness’ of the CTSI and its allies, see Ben Levitas, “Reading and the Irish Revival, 1891 – 1922,” in *The Irish Book in English, 1891-2000*, ed. Clare Hutton and Patrick Walsh, vol. 5, Oxford History of the Irish Book (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 64–65.

²⁶ *Catholic Truth Society of Ireland Annual and Record of Conferences* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society, 1912) quoted in Levitas, ‘Reading and the Irish Revival, 1891 – 1922’, 65.

This intensely combative rhetoric, with its martial imagery and fusion of confessional and national identity, had long been popular among the exponents of Irish Ireland. Outlining the grounds for conflict in what he termed ‘The Battle of Two Civilisations’ over a decade before, D.P. Moran had noted that, in an economically depressed Ireland, the ready availability of ‘the cheapest class of periodicals’ had left Ireland ‘feeding on a questionable type of British reading matter’ to the continued detriment of the nation’s moral and intellectual life.²⁷ Following the founding of the Irish Vigilance Association in 1911, the campaign against ‘English dirties’ became a regular feature of Moran’s daily, the *Leader*, and served as a vehicle for attacks on a range of the editor’s political and cultural bugbears. In a satirical verse intended to spur the lax Vigilance Committees of Waterford and Kilkenny to action, the *Leader* presented ‘The Demon of Dirty Papers’ as a flood of sewage surging into the country from across the Channel in ‘ill-odoured streams’.²⁸ This corruption, which ‘still fester[ed] unchecked’ in the two cities, was presented as an ‘alien decadence’, whose fettering of the minds of the Irish population was made possible through the ‘green toleration’ of ‘shoneens’.²⁹ As these remarks suggest, the threat of ‘evil literature’ was regularly metaphorized through images of bodily effluent, infection, and degeneration, in which the revival of the Irish language was presented as the best ‘antidote’ for the ‘microbe’ of the English popular press.³⁰ In a manner reminiscent of Healy’s rhetoric in the Parnell Split, sexual and social hygiene thus came to be framed as key means by which the Irish could vouchsafe both their personal and national autonomy. The social upheavals of the First World War, the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, and the Civil War lent to this push for cultural autarchy many of the characteristics of the climate of ‘moral panic’ which predominated in

²⁷ David Patrick Moran, *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland*, ed. Patrick Maume (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006), 102. Philip O’Leary rightly counsels against treating Moran’s opinions as representative of the attitude of the majority of language revivalists, many of whom regarded the issue of ‘English dirties’ as, at best, a trivial distraction, and, at worst, an effort on the part of the Irish Vigilance Association to seize control of the Gaelic League. Nevertheless, they merit citation in the present context as particularly extreme examples of the tradition which Beckett felt himself to be resisting. Philip O’Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881-1921: Ideology and Innovation* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 42–45.

²⁸ “A.M.W.,” “The Demon of Dirty Papers,” *The Leader*, January 18, 1913, 572.

²⁹ Such campaigning also made good business sense, providing valuable opportunities for self-promotion on the part of Moran and other Catholic and nationalist publications. The typically caustic *Leader* was uncharacteristically fulsome in its praise of the activities of ‘Good Literature Barrows’ in Limerick and Queenstown, which stocked the paper as a sanitary alternative to ‘English periodical filth’. “A.M.W.,” 572; “Current Affairs,” *The Leader*, February 1, 1913, 614; “The Vigilance Committee,” *The Leader*, February 8, 1913, 643; “The War on Dirty Papers,” *The Leader*, February 15, 1913, 68.

³⁰ “The War on Dirty Papers,” 668; “Carrigadrohid,” “Waterford and Pernicious Literature,” *The Leader*, January 18, 1913, 571.

European nations throughout the 1920s.³¹ As Maria Luddy asserts, in the absence of an English garrison to blame for the nation's moral and physical corruption, state and ecclesiastical discourse increasingly came to focus on the 'redemption of chaste reproductive sexuality' as a panacea for the nation's social problems.³² These problems were outlined in a range of published and unpublished official documents including the 'Report of the Interdepartmental Committee of Inquiry Regarding Venereal Disease' (1926), the *Report of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor* (1927), and the 'Report of the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts (1880-1885) and Juvenile Prostitution (1931)' – the infamously suppressed 'Carrigan report'.³³ In the context of the Committee on Evil Literature, whose 1926 report provided the Censorship Bill's initial template, this resulted in a narrowing of focus from the broader concerns with cultural and physical purity which had animated the campaign for censorship to an explicit emphasis on issues of birth control and fertility. While partly a reflection of the doctrinaire Catholicism of the CTSI and the Vigilance Association, this shift was at least as much a by-product of the European and international legislation the Committee consulted in compiling their report, most of which prohibited material advocating contraception or abortion.³⁴ This shift was also reflected in the evidence submitted to the Committee by ecclesiastical groups and social workers, with only one of the twelve witnesses and associations it consulted (the Protestant 'Dublin Christian Citizenship Council') expressing anything less than clear condemnation of the practice.³⁵ In a pamphlet prepared specifically for the Committee, the CTSI devoted one of six chapters to the dangers of 'Neo-Malthusian Birth Control Propaganda', while the Committee ultimately gave over a quarter of its final Report to condemning 'Propaganda advocating the Prevent of Conception'.³⁶

³¹ For accounts of this 'moral panic' and its legislative outcomes in Europe and the Free State, see McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality*, 1999, chap. 1; Finola Kennedy, "The Suppression of the Carrigan Report: A Historical Perspective on Child Abuse," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 89, no. 356 (2000): 354–363; Mark Finnane, "The Carrigan Committee of 1930-31 and the 'Moral Condition of the Saorstát,'" *Irish Historical Studies* 32, no. 128 (2001): 519–536; James M. Smith, "The Politics of Sexual Knowledge: The Origins of Ireland's Sexual Containment Culture and the Carrigan Report (1931)," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13, no. 2 (April 2004): 208–33; Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 2005, 321; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, chap. 2; Maria Luddy, "Sex and the Single Girl in 1920s and 1930s Ireland," *The Irish Review*, no. 35 (2007): 79–91.

³² Luddy, "Sex and the Single Girl," 81.

³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁴ Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Dublin: Scepter Books, 1968), 33–34; Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 2005, 341; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 185; Peter Martin, "Irish Censorship in Context," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 379 (2006): 261–268; Martin, *Censorship in the Two Irelands, 1922-1939*.

³⁵ Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience*, 1968, 32.

³⁶ Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, *The Problem of Undesirable Printed Matter: Suggested Remedies* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society, 1926), chap. ii; *Report of the Committee on Evil Literature* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1926), 13–16.

What Beckett's remarks suggest, and this evidence highlights, are the ways in which, under the rubric of an apparent drive to de-Anglicize the Free State, but largely in response to a European and international climate of pro-natal nationalism, birth control increasingly came to be presented as antithetical to both Irish cultural identity, and to the physical, mental, and socio-economic well-being of the nation.

As these examples indicate, neither Ferriter nor Inglis can offer a holistic picture of the social and political issues with which the Act was implicated. On the one hand, a mono-causal account of the Act in which the Catholic Church's influence in a range of fields renders it omnipotent in its capacity to shape Irish sexual attitudes exaggerates the degree of Catholic hegemony in the Free State, and overlooks the ways in which legislation justified through a pietistic rhetoric could still participate in the operation of bio-power. On the other hand, a revisionist reading which reduces the Act to a parochial manifestation of European pro-natalism occludes the range of cultural, denominational, and ethno-national tensions which manifested themselves in its drafting and operation, detaching it from the broader history of Irish cultural nationalism. As Beckett's critique of the Act suggests, only by establishing a dialectic between these positions does it become possible to appreciate the range of debates which the Act crystallized. One starting-point for such a synthesis is a consideration of the ways in which the Act and the controversy its passage generated reflect and participate in contemporary disputes over the role of the state within liberal political philosophy.

A 'depraved taste for equality': Censorship, Democracy, and the End of the State

In their efforts to position Beckett as a champion of reproductive rights, accounts of his response to censorship have tended to downplay the extent to which Beckett's horror of fertility was bound up with an anti-democratic animus shared by many of his contemporaries. As I suggested in my Introduction, this hostility reflected a wider uncertainty concerning the appropriate telos for an increasingly democratized state. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, the emergence of the institutional and intellectual apparatus of the welfare state placed classical liberal theories of government, in which the state remained neutral with regard to the physical and moral well-being of its citizens, under increasing pressure. In contrast to the laissez-faire state envisaged in various forms by Locke, Smith, and de Tocqueville, and manifested in the policies of successive Gladstone administrations, British new liberals such as L.T. Hobhouse and Lloyd George drew upon the work of Mill and Bentham to argue that true liberty could only be guaranteed if the state intervened

to release its citizens from the burdens of poverty, hunger, ignorance, and disease.³⁷ In so doing, they sponsored a model of government in which physical and spiritual welfare of the population were regarded as both coextensive and within the purview of the state. This outlook took legislative form in a tranche of welfare reforms, exemplified by the 1907 Education (Administrative Provisions) Act, the 1908 Old-Age Pensions Act, and the 1911 National Insurance Act, which established the contours of the modern British welfare state.³⁸ In the midst of such an identity crisis, the vocation of the state, and the role of democracy in its pursuit became unclear. Was the state's duty to recognize and foster excellence, or was it to reflect the will of the masses?

The question itself was far from a political novelty. De Tocqueville sensed in democracy 'un goût dépravé pour l'égalité, qui porte les faibles à vouloir attirer les forts à leur niveau, et qui réduit les hommes à préférer l'égalité dans la servitude à l'inégalité dans la liberté' [a depraved taste for equality that leads the weak to want to bring the strong down to their level and that reduces men to preferring equality in servitude to inequality in liberty].³⁹ For Mill, nowhere was this 'tyranny of the majority' in democratic states more insidiously manifested than in the coercive and censorious influence of 'prevailing opinion' and its capacity to 'fetter the development' of independent thought.⁴⁰ These concerns found influential expression in Ireland in the writings of W.E.H. Lecky, who echoed de Tocqueville in highlighting the apparent irreconcilability of democratic principle and meaningful notions of cultural excellence. For Lecky, modern democracy 'level[led] down quite as much as it level[led] up' and was unfavourable to the 'higher forms of intellectual life', offering only the 'apotheosis of the average judgement'.⁴¹ As David Dwan has noted, in Lecky's account, culture and democracy were 'implacably opposed' in so far as democracy was incapable

³⁷ For major discussions of the ideological stakes of state intervention and welfare provision in new liberal thought, see Freeden, *The New Liberalism*; Michael Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); David Weinstein, *Utilitarianism and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁸ Geoffrey BAM Finlayson, *Citizen, State, and Social Welfare in Britain 1830-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), chap. 1; John Brown, *The British Welfare State: A Critical History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), chap. 1; Martin Pugh, *State and Society: A Social and Political History of Britain Since 1870*, Fifth edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pt. 2; Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: A History of Social Policy Since the Industrial Revolution*, Fifth Edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan Education, 2017), chaps 7 and 8. For a discussion of the emergence of the welfare state in Ireland, see Fred Powell, *The Political Economy of the Irish Welfare State: Church, State and Capital* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), chaps 1–3.

³⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Pagnerre, 1848), 85.

⁴⁰ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty; with The Subjection of Women; and Chapters on Socialism*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8.

⁴¹ William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *Democracy and Liberty*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1896), 108.

of ‘producing or even recognizing intellectual authority’.⁴² It was to this apotheosis that George Russell (AE) was to object in his critique of the Bill in the *Irish Statesmen* for August 1928. Russell agreed with the advocates of censorship in their denunciation of the reading matter available to the majority of the Irish population, which, he noted, comprised ‘little else than newspapers,’ as books were ‘too heavy reading for the quarter-educated mind.’⁴³ However, for Russell, the answer was not to homogenize the experience of readers through a lowest-common-denominator model of state-approved reading matter: ‘Irish people read the cheapest journals. Instead of providing better reading, our moralists wish to bring about a national censorship, so that cultivated and uncultivated alike will be permitted to read only such books or papers as the State thinks are harmless.’⁴⁴ This paradoxically undemocratic one-size-fits-all mediocrity was exemplified for Russell by the composition of the ‘recognized associations’, whose task it was to present obscene works to the Censorship Board in early drafts of the Bill. Russell argued that, rather than ‘associations of intelligent or cultivated men’, the Bill would recognize those ‘fanatics’ who had most vocally advocated for censorship, and whose fervour had manifested itself in a spate of armed raids on trains transporting English papers.⁴⁵ Yeats concurred, decrying the ‘incredible ignorance’ and ‘lawless vulgarity’ of this ‘Society of Angelic Warfare’.⁴⁶ For Pádraic Colum, the question was clear: if Ireland was to be made ‘powerful, prosperous, and respected’ it would have to set itself the task of ‘training an elite’ in a philosophy rooted in ‘the traditions of the country’, but open to ‘the ideas of the modern world’.⁴⁷ In contrast, he argued, the CTSI seemed ‘bent on giving outsiders the impression that the mental age of Catholic Irish people [was] about seven and a half.’⁴⁸

In Beckett’s view, the anti-intellectual populism for which Russell, Yeats, and Colum excoriated the Act was inseparable from its prudery and pro-natalism. For Beckett, the failure to recognize cultural excellence or aesthetic value in the stipulations of the Act, and the push to appoint a non-academic Censorship Board, paradoxically resulted in a group of censors equipped only to read texts through the prism of sex. Yeats, in his *Irish Statesman* response to the Bill, had taken the ‘Catholic lawyers’ and

⁴² Dwan, *The Great Community*, 2008, 6.

⁴³ George Russell, “The Censorship Bill,” *Irish Statesman* 10 (August 25, 1928): 486.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 487.

⁴⁶ W.B. Yeats, “The Irish Censorship,” *Spectator*, 28 September 1928, 391; 392.

⁴⁷ M. Lyster, “Padraic Colum on the Censorship,” *Irish Statesman* 11 (October 13, 1928): 107.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

‘ecclesiastics’ he believed to be its sponsors to task for betraying the Thomist principle that ‘anima [...] est tota in toto corpore et tota in qualibet parte corporis’ [the soul is in every part of the body, and whole in every part of the body] through a definition of indecency which demonized ‘sexual passion’.⁴⁹ George Bernard Shaw had likewise castigated the framers of the Bill (an unholy alliance of ‘morbid Catholics, mad with heresyphobia’ and ‘Calvinists mad with sexphobia’) for enforcing through the proscriptions of the Act an intrinsically perverted mode of aesthetic perception that would teach the young ‘to associate loveliness’ not with ‘blessedness’, but ‘with debauchery, like all censors’.⁵⁰ In ‘Censorship in the Saorstat,’ Beckett highlights and critiques this blend of philistinism and erotomania through a sexualized burlesque of the censorious reading process in which the Board’s engagement with texts is rendered in bodily terms. In Beckett’s parodic account, the Act ‘emits [its] definitions’ of indecency and obscenity as the ‘cuttle squirts ooze from its cod’, transforming its proscriptions against material ‘inciting of sexual immorality or unnatural vice’ into an ejaculatory discharge from a metonymically evoked cod-piece.⁵¹ For Beckett, the debauched pleasure which he imagines the ‘excited’ TDs and Senators to have taken in rendering this definition ‘orduretight’ has led them to oblige the Censorship Board to disregard authorial intention and, by extension, considerations of literary value, in their assessment of texts.⁵² Beckett notes that a plea to distinguish between indecency ‘obiter’ [in passing] and indecency ‘ex professo’ [as an expressed intention] was disregarded by ‘a caucus that ha[d] bigger and better things to split than hairs, the pubic not excepted’.⁵³ Through a deliberately tired pun on bureaucratic hair-splitting, Beckett pastiches the ‘down-to-earth’ tone of the Bill’s supporters to link their anti-intellectual disregard for literary value to what he perceives to be their equally cavalier desire to regulate the sexual practices of the Irish population. This somaticized rendering of the reading process continues when Beckett disparagingly quotes the Minister for Justice, James FitzGerald-Kenney’s justification for disregarding authorial intention when considering the indecency of a book: ‘it is the effect which [the author’s] thought will have as expressed in the particular words into which he has *flung* (eyetals mine) his thought that the censor has to consider’.⁵⁴ Through the

⁴⁹ W.B. Yeats, “The Censorship and St Thomas Aquinas,” *Irish Statesman* 11 (September 22, 1928): 48; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 1 (Paris: Bloud, 1880), 56; Dáil Éireann, “Censorship of Publications Act,” pt. 1.2.

⁵⁰ George Bernard Shaw, “The Censorship,” *Irish Statesman* 11 (November 17, 1928): 208; 207.

⁵¹ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 84.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

corporeal *caveat lector* of his disdainful ‘eyetalics’, Beckett draws attention to FitzGerald-Kenney’s visible disregard for authorial craft and offers a punning reminder that, like Job, and the Irish citizens whose sexual conduct so concerns them, the Censorship Board must encounter a text through ‘eyes of flesh’ (Job, 10:4). In doing so, Beckett emphasizes the well-worn paradox at the heart of censorship as an intellectual project: that the censor must read and pass judgement on texts that they believe will ‘corrupt and deprave’ others, without themselves being corrupted or depraved.⁵⁵ More damningly, Beckett also implies that the censor’s perversely sensuous optic is in fact a by-product of the philistinism FitzGerald-Kenney’s remarks seem to flaunt.

Beckett’s use of this somaticizing rhetoric to critique the Board’s rejection of cultural merit in its deliberations reaches an obscene climax when Beckett addresses Deputy J.J. Byrne’s ideal Board, and the level of textual engagement expected of them. Byrne discounted the ‘literary crank’ in favour of the more ‘common sense’ figure of the ‘man broad minded and fair’.⁵⁶ As far as Byrne was concerned, it was ‘not necessary’ for such a ‘sensible individual’ to read the ‘whole of a book’ to be able to reach a conclusion as to its moral and aesthetic worth.⁵⁷ The Minister for Justice concurred, citing the example of *Ulysses* as a work ‘so blatantly indecent’ and infamously obscene that it would be unnecessary for the members of the Board to read every line’.⁵⁸ Beckett’s response to such anti-intellectualism is at once lurid and learned. Imagining the deputy’s ‘selection’ to the Board confronted with the ‘*Secret Life* [sic] of Procopius’ – an uncompromising account of the debauchery of the Emperor Justinian’s court – Beckett contends that ‘[h]is position would be as invidious as that of Jerome reading Cicero [...] were it not that the man broad-minded and fair is at liberty to withdraw his purities from the pollution before they are entirely spent, that is to say almost at once’.⁵⁹ Through a series of pointedly ineffective euphemisms Beckett renders the censor’s engagement with Procopius’s text in sexual terms, linking it to the anti-contraceptive ‘essence’ of the Bill.

⁵⁵ The Act defines the word ‘indecent’ as ‘likely [...] to corrupt or deprave’ (I:2).

⁵⁶ “Financial Resolutions - Censorship of Publications Bill, 1928—Committee,” Pub. L. No. 28.1, § Committee on Finance (1929), <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail1929022000039?opendocument>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Financial Resolutions - Censorship of Publications Bill, 1928—Committee (Resumed),” Pub. L. No. 28.2, § sec. Committee on Finance (1929), sec. Committee on Finance, <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail1929022100025?opendocument>, quoted in Beckett, *Disjecta*, 85.

⁵⁹ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 85.

In so doing, Beckett turns the Act's logic against itself, figuring the process of censorious reading as an example of exactly the modes of non-reproductive sexual activity which the Act circumscribed. The Board's ideal censorious reader (the 'man broad-minded and fair') must necessarily fail as the nation's ideal self-censoring lover through the liberty he enjoys to 'withdraw his purities' from the polluting text 'before they are entirely spent'. Beckett thus accuses the Censorship Board of encouraging its members to engage in the intellectual equivalent of *coitus interruptus*, a form of contraception prohibited by the Catholic dogma to which Beckett attributed the Act's pro-natalist bent.⁶⁰ Beckett implies that the anti-intellectual disregard for literary expertise which the remarks of Byrne betray will lead to the appointment of censors whose ignorance will leave them capable only of viewing Procopius' text in pornographic terms, an anti-populist stance underscored by Beckett's *recherché* frame of literary reference. In Beckett's rendering, Byrne's populist fetishization of the 'average judgement' lends legal backing to a reading process based on a partial and eroticized engagement with literature, that results in the premature intellectual ejaculation of a censorious judgement in which, as Beckett mischievously notes, the Board member finds his purities 'spent [...] almost at once'.⁶¹ In doing so, Beckett performatively undermines both the intellectual and moral authority of the architects of the Act and the Board they constructed, by showing how their democratizing fetish for 'common sense' and their disregard for literary excellence would result in a hypocritical and sex-obsessed mode of reading to the detriment of the nation.

'Sterilization of the mind': The Censorship Act and Eugenics

In highlighting the negative impact of the Act's interimplicated cultural and sexual proscriptions, Beckett's caustic critique strongly resonates with debates over fertility politics, the role of the state, and questions of cultural capital which were taking place in the contemporary eugenics movement. Coined by the English statistician and polymath Francis Galton in his 1883 study *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*,

⁶⁰ The Church's position on contraception in this period was outlined in the 1930 encyclical, *Casti Connubii* [of chaste marriage], which stated that those who frustrated the 'natural power and purpose' of the 'conjugal act' sinned against nature. Pope Pius XI, "*Casti Connubii*, Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Christian Marriage to the Venerable Brethren, Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and Other Local Ordinaries Enjoying Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See," The Holy See, February 2016, https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html.

⁶¹ Emphasis mine.

‘eugenics’ – derived from the Greek *εὐγενής* [well-born] – came to denote a diverse field of scientific (and pseudo-scientific) activity in which evolutionary biology, sociology, and public policy were combined in an effort to facilitate the ‘cultivation’ of the human race through selective breeding.⁶² The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed the proliferation of eugenics societies across Europe and the United States – including the establishment in 1911 of the short-lived Belfast Eugenics Society, which dissolved in 1915 – with followers undertaking research into genetics and genealogy, organizing conferences and symposia, lobbying for changes to public health and education policy, and publishing treatises on a range of social issues.⁶³ While this ‘science of improving stock’ found a range of nationally specific expressions, advocates of eugenics shared an investment in the physical and mental improvement of humanity, a desire to regulate who reproduced with whom, and a set of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ eugenic strategies for doing so.⁶⁴ ‘Positive’ eugenics sought to engender what Yeats, in his infamous 1938 polemic *On the Boiler*, envisaged as ‘the best bred from the best’, by encouraging exemplary individuals to reproduce under optimal conditions for the welfare of the resulting offspring.⁶⁵ Through positive eugenics, it was hoped the human race could be rendered ‘intrinsically better, higher, stronger, healthier, [and] more capable’ by cultivating features such as intelligence, creativity, and strength.⁶⁶ ‘Negative’ eugenics, conversely, sought to arrest the perceived ‘deterioration’ of humanity, by eliminating hereditary illnesses and checking the proliferation of what the Oxford philosopher F.C.S. Schiller dubbed ‘human weeds’.⁶⁷ As Schiller’s remarks suggest, the anxieties which animated eugenics had their roots in nineteenth-century theories of physical and cultural degeneration charted in Parts One and Two. In its efforts to prevent ‘dysgenic’ individuals such as the

⁶² Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 24. The goal of identifying the source of human intellectual ability and finding means by which to improve it was first explored in Galton’s popular and highly influential *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences*, published in 1869 and updated in an eagerly anticipated second edition in 1891.

⁶³ For major historical overviews of the movement and its development in a range of national and transnational contexts, see G. R. Searle, *Eugenics and Politics in Britain, 1900-1914* (Leyden: Noordhoff International Pub, 1976); Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Mark B. Adams, ed., *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For an account of Irish eugenics, see Greta Jones, “Eugenics in Ireland: The Belfast Eugenics Society, 1911-1915,” *Irish Historical Studies* 28, no. 109 (May 1992): 81–95.

⁶⁴ Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, 24–25.

⁶⁵ W. B. Yeats, *Later Essays. The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Vol. V*, ed. William H. O’Donnell (New York: Scribner, 1994), 238.

⁶⁶ F.C.S. Schiller, *Social Decay and Eugenic Reform* (London: Constable, 1932), 25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

mentally ill, the physically and mentally disabled, and those deemed to be of ‘inferior’ racial stock from procreating, negative eugenics could encompass not only relatively benign techniques such as sex education and birth control, but more repressive measures such as voluntary and forced sterilization, restrictive marriage laws, institutionalization and segregation, and, in extreme cases, extermination.⁶⁸ As this overview suggests, eugenics came to bear an almost circular, if not tautologous relationship to notions of sexual health. In the logic of eugenics, healthy off-spring are off-spring who have healthy sex; in order to have healthy offspring who will have healthy sex, one must oneself have healthy sex; in order to breed those who will breed well, one must oneself have been well-bred. And so on. In such a system, sex becomes both the object of a regulatory scheme premised upon an ideal of ‘health’, and the mechanism through which that regulation is itself to be undertaken. As I suggested in my Introduction, in such a context a perceived lack of sexual continence or an incapacity for family planning could be taken as evidence of a lack of ‘reason’ or ‘competence’ on the basis of which individuals or groups could be disqualified from full membership of the liberal-democratic *polis* and the rights and protections it afforded in order to vouchsafe the ‘health’ and well-being of the body politic.⁶⁹

Both Ferriter and Pašeta have claimed that what gave the Irish debate over censorship and birth control its idiosyncratic character with regard to its European counterparts was the absence of a visible engagement with theories of eugenics and anxieties over population decline which marked similar debates in France or Italy.⁷⁰ However, an examination of both literary and non-literary responses to the Bill suggests that such concerns were not absent from Ireland, but instead became part of an overdetermined competition for cultural capital and legislative authority among the confessional, intellectual, and political

⁶⁸ For an overview of these policies and their impact, see Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Stefan Kühl, *For the Betterment of the Race: The Rise and Fall of the International Movement for Eugenics and Racial Hygiene*, trans. Lawrence Schofer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), chaps. 5 and 6; King, *In the Name of Liberalism: Illiberal Social Policy in the USA and Britain*, pt. 2; Robert N Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000); Eric Ehrenreich, *The Nazi Ancestral Proof: Genealogy, Racial Science, and the Final Solution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Marius Turda and Paul Weindling, eds., *“Blood and Homeland”: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900-1940* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007); Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*, chaps. 3 and 4; Marius Turda, “Race, Science, and Eugenics in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 62–79; Moses and Stone, “Eugenics and Genocide”; Melvyn Conroy, *Nazi Eugenics: Precursors, Policy, Aftermath* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2017).

⁶⁹ King, *In the Name of Liberalism: Illiberal Social Policy in the USA and Britain*, 52–64.

⁷⁰ These reflections are made on the basis that Ireland was not experiencing an abnormal decline in population in this period, and that the Free State did not engage in the same legal drive to incentivize reproductive sexual activity that was undertaken in France or Italy. Pašeta, “Censorship and Its Critics in the Irish Free State, 1922-1932,” 217; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 191.

factions of the Free State. Although the multid denominational composition of the Committee for Evil Literature (composed of three Catholics and two Protestants) and the generally ecumenical tone of the Dáil debates caution against reading the Bill itself in narrowly sectarian terms, it is undeniable that such tensions did manifest themselves in the press coverage and public debate surrounding its drafting and passage, and that eugenic discourses were regularly deployed in their articulation.⁷¹ Catholic advocacy for the Bill in the periodical press and in the statements of members of the Hierarchy at vigilance society conferences in the late 1920s manifest a clear tendency to exploit the Censorship Bill's proscriptions concerning birth control, and the anti-Malthusian discourses of 'race suicide' with which they were enmeshed, to stake a claim for a guiding role in the young nation. Addressing the CTSI annual conference in 1928, the Archbishop of Cashel endorsed the Bill unreservedly, asserting that there should be 'no compromise with the promoters of the empty cradle.'⁷² His remarks were followed by a paper by T.A. Finlay on 'A Catholic Nation: Its Laws and Its Citizens', in which he deemed it the state's duty to 'remove by legislation [opportunities] for indulgence in immorality or vice' and to adopt 'measures to prevent the spread of physical disease.'⁷³ Finlay praised the Censorship Bill as just such a measure, a reflection of the extent to which organizations such as the CTSI viewed the legislation as an opportunity to cement the centrality of the Catholic Church to Irish government through policies which presented the moral and physical well-being of the nation as inextricably linked. While Pašeta is correct to assert that ethical and doctrinal issues were the primary and most often discussed catalysts for Catholic opposition to birth control literature, that certainly did not prevent the *Irish Rosary* from adopting a decidedly triumphalist tone when foregrounding the demographic decline of the Protestant population in the new state. Writing in response to a discussion of birth control in the *Irish Times*, one contributor notes with a mixture of relief and pride that 'the crime of race suicide has gained no footing among the plain people of Ireland, that is, among the Catholic people' – a fact attested to by the healthy birth-rate of the 'peasant classes in rural areas' and 'the proletariat of Dublin'.⁷⁴ By contrast, the

⁷¹ The members of the Committee on Evil Literature were: Reverend James Dempsey; Robert Donovan, professor of English at University College, Dublin; Thomas O'Connell, Labour TD for Galway and General Secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organization; Reverend T. Sinclair Stevenson (Church of Ireland); and William Edward Thrift, an independent unionist TD and professor at Trinity College, Dublin. Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience*, 1968, 24.

⁷² "Catholic Truth Society. Message from the Pope. Archbishop and Evil Literature," *Irish Times*, 18 October 1928, 11.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Delta," "Race Suicide and Souperism," *Irish Rosary* XXXII, no. 4 (April 1928): 305–7, 305.

commentator asserts that Irish Protestants, 'tainted with the modern mania of race suicide', are 'heading for [an] extinction' which they are desperately seeking to avert by means of 'Souperism'.⁷⁵ This emotive evocation of the Famine and the image of a decadent and predatory ascendancy it evokes serve to emphasize the ways in which the Catholic action groups who had sponsored the Bill sought to harness the issue of birth control to cement the Church's authority in the Free State.

The Anglo-Irish literati, whom Yeats was pleased to report the Bill had succeeded in bringing into a rare and revivifying moment of political accord, were equally alive to such questions.⁷⁶ For Shaw, the eugenic implications of the Bill were both obvious and disturbing. In his view, through its definition of indecency (which included any material 'calculated to excite sexual passion') and its prohibition of birth control manuals, the Bill sought to establish a 'Censorship extending in general terms to all human actions'.⁷⁷ More specifically, he argued that it was targeted to curtail 'any attempt to cultivate the vital passion of the Irish people' or 'to instruct it in any function which is concerned with that passion'.⁷⁸ As these remarks suggest, more than an intellectual or aesthetic denunciation of the draft Bill's definition of indecency, Shaw's opposition to its proscriptions was rooted in an instrumental image of sexual activity, in which 'passion' possessed a range of 'functions' beyond the merely reproductive, and could be 'cultivated' in a carefully determined fashion. The Censorship Bill, by depriving the Irish population of the necessary 'instruction' in such matters, was thus predicated upon a fundamental 'terror of life' and 'aimed at the extermination of the Irish people'.⁷⁹ The obvious (and infamous) source for such 'instruction' was Dr Marie Carmichael Stopes, whose 1918 study *Married Love* and leading role in the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress had made her name synonymous with family planning. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, in her best-selling manual, Stopes presented contraception as a eugenic and

⁷⁵ Ibid, 306. The demographic decline of Ireland's Protestant community had been an ongoing phenomenon since the late nineteenth century, reaching its peak between 1911 and 1926, when the Protestant population fell by nearly 34 percent. This process was still ongoing but had begun to slow by the time of the Act's passage. The role of birth control in precipitating such a decline was almost certainly negligible, with Kurt Derek Bowen citing heavy emigration, the withdrawal of British troops, and the disbanding of Irish regiments in the wake of the Treaty as its primary catalysts. Kurt Derek Bowen, *Protestants in a Catholic State: Ireland's Privileged Minority* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 20–21.

⁷⁶ In his *Spectator* response to the Bill, Yeats records having awoken in the middle of the night with a suggestively eugenic 'sense of wellbeing, of recovered health and strength' which he attributes to the realization that Ireland's 'men and women of intellect, long separated by politics, have in the last month found a common enemy and drawn together'. W.B. Yeats, "The Irish Censorship," *Spectator*, September 28, 1928, 391.

⁷⁷ Shaw, "The Censorship," 207.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

feminist adjunct to a healthy marriage, liberating women from the physically and emotionally exhausting ordeal of multiple consecutive pregnancies in which '[a] man swayed by archaic dogma will allow, even coerce, his wife to bear and bring forth an infant annually'.⁸⁰ In Stopes's view, only a well-informed approach to family planning, rooted in the use of contraceptives, could obviate this necessity. For Stopes and her fellow eugenicists, the unchecked reproduction that would otherwise result was not merely a matter of individual well-being, but a question of racial vitality. Such a flurry of fertility would 'sap and divide the vital strength which is available for the making of the offspring', resulting in a pattern of diminishing biological returns and progressively weaker children.⁸¹ Discussing the 'Imperial and Racial Aspects' of birth control, Stopes offered a vision of 'Utopia' brought about through the 'conscious elimination of all diseased and over-crowded lives *before* their conception'.⁸² In a foretaste of the positions he was to expound at greater length in *On the Boiler*, Yeats echoed Stopes in his *Spectator* article on the Bill, wryly noting that, if neo-Malthusian prophecies of apocalyptic overpopulation were accurate, the Catholic Church would be obliged either to ask married couples to live in celibacy, or to rely upon Swift's 'Modest Proposal' to make 'love self-supporting'.⁸³ As the (admittedly tongue-in-cheek) reference to Swift's essay and its images of improvident over-breeders starving as a result of their ill-managed fertility makes clear, for Yeats and many other Protestant commentators, Ireland had already offered a chilling testament to the Malthusian thesis through the catastrophic events of the Great Famine.⁸⁴ Only by shouldering the burden of intellectual responsibility their free-thinking religious background entailed, Yeats implied, could the minority dissuade Ireland's Catholic population from conspiring in their own extinction.

⁸⁰ Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (London: A.C. Fifield, 1918), 88. For overviews of Stopes' life, work, and contribution to the birth control movement, see June Rose, *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992); Clare Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution and the Birth Control Movement* (Cham (Switzerland): Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁸¹ Stopes, *Married Love*, 89.

⁸² Marie Carmichael Stopes, "Imperial and Racial Aspects, II," in *The Control of Parenthood*, ed. James Marchant (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1920), 221. Stopes's writings combine a romantic investment in the centrality of sexual compatibility to happy marital union with an intense commitment to a negative eugenics founded on hierarchies of class and race in which it should be made 'impossible for those whose mental and physical condition is such that there is well-nigh a certainty that their offspring should be physically and mentally tainted' to reproduce. This blend of feminism and eugenics will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Five. Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Radiant Motherhood: A Book for Those Who Are Creating the Future* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1920), 237.

⁸³ Yeats, "The Irish Censorship," 391. For an account of Yeats's engagement with eugenicism and the difficulties it has posed for critics of his work, see Bradshaw, "The Eugenics Movement in the 1930s and the Emergence of *On the Boiler*," and Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics*, chap. 7.

⁸⁴ In his famous 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus presented 'gigantic inevitable famine' as the ultimate corrective for the imbalance between the earth's material resources and the size of the human population. Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society. With Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet and Other Writers.*, 1st ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1798), 139.

Such eugenically-inflected Famine imagery was not merely confined to responses to the Bill from within Protestant literary circles but became a feature of the editorial and correspondence pages of the Unionist press. In one particularly idiosyncratic example, Dudley Fletcher, a prominent Church of Ireland Rector and a regular *Irish Times* correspondent, deployed a surreal blend of economic theory and speculative science fiction to criticize the Bill's restrictions on information concerning family planning. Advancing the Malthusian premise that throughout 'nature' there occurs 'the strictest limitation of living creatures to economic conditions', Fletcher invited his readers to imagine a hypothetical future (the year 2198) in which a 'Peace Pact' and advances in medical science have rendered birth control the only means to avert apocalyptic overpopulation.⁸⁵ For Fletcher, Protestants held a position of particular moral and political responsibility to confront such possibilities, as the majority of the Irish population were 'not allowed to hold an independent opinion' on the subject out of deference to (Catholic) 'ecclesiastical authority'.⁸⁶ Yeats concurred, invoking the freedom of religion clauses of the Free State Constitution to call upon those unaffiliated to the Catholic Church to 'compel the fullest discussion' on the issue of birth control.⁸⁷ In the eyes of these critics, the Catholic members of the proposed Censorship Board had been denied the capacity to participate independently in such a discussion by the proscriptions of the Vatican's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* [index of prohibited books], which effectively rubber-stamped Catholic clerical control over the intellectual life of Ireland.⁸⁸ The ramifications of this limited perspective were often quantified in terms of their dysgenic public health impact. In the words of one correspondent, the Bill's restrictions would shroud 'the diseases consequent upon ignorance of sex hygiene [...] in a prurient pall', leaving them free to multiply unchecked.⁸⁹ Another urged the government, in the absence of a British garrison to blame for the presence of venereal disease in Ireland, not to confuse suppressing any mention of its existences with effectively combatting its spread.⁹⁰ As Seán Kennedy has noted, for figures such as John Gregg, Archbishop of Armagh, and W.B. Stanford, Professor of Classics at Trinity College, Dublin, the more pressing issue

⁸⁵ Dudley Fletcher, "Letters to the Editor: The Free State Censorship Bill," *Irish Times*, September 5, 1928, 4.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ W. B. Yeats, *Later Articles and Reviews: Uncollected Articles, Reviews, and Radio Broadcasts Written After 1900. The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Vol. X*, ed. Colton Johnson (New York: Scribner, 2000), 217.

⁸⁸ J.W. Poynter, "Letters to the Editor: The Free State Censorship Bill," *Irish Times*, August 16, 1928, 4; G.W. Murray, "Letters to the Editor: The Free State Censorship Bill," *Irish Times*, September 1, 1928, 7; Yeats, *Collected Works*, 2000, 10: 215.

⁸⁹ "Lux," "Letters to the Editor: The Free State Censorship Bill," *Irish Times*, August 24, 1928, 8.

⁹⁰ James B. Leslie, "Letters to the Editor: The Free State Censorship Bill," *Irish Times*, August 18, 1928, 9.

was the survival of the Irish Protestant population itself.⁹¹ Gregg consistently and bitterly opposed the practice of mixed marriages and the threat the Catholic doctrine of *ne temere* [be not rash] – the obligation to raise the children of such exogamous unions as Catholics – posed to Irish Protestantism, while Stanford called on Protestant ‘young people to have larger families and for experts in each sphere to devise methods of dealing with special problems of economics, finance, social organization and education, to assure the Church’s future.’⁹² In mounting these arguments and suggesting these remedies, figures such as Gregg and Stanford transposed long-standing eugenic anxieties concerning the differential fertility of the middle and working classes into an Irish sectarian context.⁹³ For a certain strand of Protestant and Anglo-Irish opinion, the Bill thus simultaneously rendered it possible to offer a pathologized image of the cultural and numerical ascendancy of a hyper-fertile Catholic majority over the soon-to-be-eclipsed minority, and to present that minority as bound to the recently formed state by an intellectualized form of *noblesse oblige* upon which their claim to continued cultural and political relevance could be staked.

Accounts of Beckett’s sexual politics have tended to situate him in uncomplicated opposition to this sort of eugenic thinking. Kennedy presents ‘the rich cluster of abortions, abandonments[, and] infanticidal urges’ in Beckett’s mature works as a rejection of both the ‘coercive sexual mores’ of the Free and the eugenicist drive to ‘reinvigorate the Irish Protestant tradition’ advocated by figures such as Yeats and Stanford.⁹⁴ In a discussion of Beckett’s response in *En attendant Godot* [waiting for Godot] (1953) to the eugenicist discourses which predominated in the health, education, and social policies of Vichy France, Andrew Gibson presents Lucky’s speech as a ‘defence of indigent forms of humanity’ in the face of a ‘noxious violation’ of their rights and dignity.⁹⁵ Such a defence would appear to be adumbrated in Beckett’s

⁹¹ Kennedy, “First Love,” 2010, 83–85.

⁹² John A.F. Gregg, *The “Ne Temere” Decree: A Lecture Delivered Before the Members of the Church of Ireland Cork Young Men’s Association on March 17th, 1911* (Dublin: Association for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1911); *Irish Times*, April 24, 1924; *Irish Times*, November 10, 1926; *Irish Times*, November 13, 1926; William Bedell Stanford, *A Recognised Church: The Church of Ireland in Éire* (Dublin: Association for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Dublin and Belfast, 1944), 23.

⁹³ Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Knopf, 1985), chap. 5; Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), chaps. 1, 2, 4, and 9.

⁹⁴ Kennedy cites the pro-natalism of Yeats’s ‘A Prayer for My Daughter’ and the sectarian infanticide which concludes early drafts of *Purgatory* (1938) as examples of the poet’s aversion to mixed marriages and increasingly intense investment in the need for Ireland’s Protestant communities to reproduce both ‘sexually’ and ‘socially’. Kennedy links this strain in Yeats’s work to an encounter with Gregg at a Church of Ireland Synod in 1934, and Stanford’s controversial 1944 pamphlet *A Recognised Church*. Kennedy, “First Love,” 2010, 89; 84–85; R. F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, The Arch-Poet, 1915–1939*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 737.

⁹⁵ Gibson, *Samuel Beckett*, 105.

caustic précis of the aims and impact of the Irish Censorship Act at the rhetorical climax of ‘Censorship in the Saorstat’: ‘Sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter suit well together. Paradise peopled with virgins and earth with decorticated multiparas’.⁹⁶ Approached in the manner Kennedy and Gibson suggest, Beckett’s remarks function as a pastiche of the pseudo-scientific register of J.J. Bryne’s call for a ‘better race’. The nationalist ideal of a populous and sexually pure Ireland is to be bought at the expense of turning its (female) citizens into an army of continually pregnant mothers, stripped of their prophylactic skin. In such an analysis, the privileging of an idealized image of a ‘pure’ Catholic citizenry – the ‘virgins’ – necessarily entails the inhuman treatment of the nation’s fully-realized population – the ‘multiparas’ – whose task it is to ‘people’ a Paradise they will never inhabit. The corollary and condition of this ‘apotheosis of the litter’ is the ‘sterilization of the mind’ through censorship, paralleling and contributing to the growth of the population beyond the limits of sustainability. Read in this light, Beckett’s remarks appear to emphasize the ways in which the Censorship Act justifies the constraints it places on the Irish population by reference to the legal fiction of an ideal reader-citizen whom the censor in the act of protecting seeks to reify. The textual logic of censorship, which effaces or replaces ‘obscene’ passages in publications, is thus replicated at the level of the readership it constructs and the forms of citizenship it seeks to enforce.

While both Kennedy and Gibson are undoubtedly correct to highlight Beckett’s opposition to such schemes of regulated fertility, the risk of such accounts is the presentist desire they manifest to place Beckett on the ‘right side’ of a history in which eugenics has become synonymous with the Holocaust. Thus, though elements of the above critique ring true, it is worth noting what it occludes. For one thing, it ascribes to the essay a feminist outlook which neither it nor the early Beckettian oeuvre can be held to reflect.⁹⁷ For another, read in light of the remarks of Yeats, Shaw, and other Protestant commentators on the Bill, it become far harder to ignore the contemptuous tone of Beckett’s remarks and the sectarian perspective with which they resonate. A key phrase in this regard is ‘Sterilization of the mind’, a formula which seems deliberately intended to evoke the British Departmental Committee on Sterilization – the so-called ‘Brock Committee’ – and its divisive 1934 *Report*, which advocated the voluntary sterilization of ‘mental defectives’

⁹⁶ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 87.

⁹⁷ Linda Ben-Zvi, ed., *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Mary Bryden, *Women in Samuel Beckett’s Prose and Drama: Her Own Other* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993); Jeffers, *Beckett’s Masculinity*; Kim, *Women and Ireland as Beckett’s Lost Others*.

and the ‘feeble-minded’.⁹⁸ In contrast to the Brock Committee, Beckett implies, the Catholic architects of the Censorship Act have committed an act of mental self-laceration which will leave Ireland both intellectually impotent and increasingly overpopulated. In such a context, rather than pitiable victims of clerically-sanctioned pro-natalism, the ‘multiparas’ come closer to resembling the hyper-fertile Catholic hoard whom Yeats and Fletcher had disparaged. While it would be a mischaracterization to claim that Beckett actively endorses eugenics in this moment, it must be acknowledged that his decision to appropriate the discourse of contemporary eugenics to critique the philistinism and pro-natalism of the Censorship Act brings him far closer in tone and attitude to figures such as Yeats and Stanford than many critics would care to admit. Where Kennedy and others would have Beckett seeking to topple Yeats from his ‘old boiler’ in his response to the Censorship Act, the ways in which ‘Censorship in the Saorstat’ resonates with both literary and popular Protestant attacks on the legislation make this opposition difficult to sustain.⁹⁹ However, if this difficulty is embraced rather than elided, and this exculpatory approach to Beckett is set aside, it becomes possible to offer a fresh and more nuanced account of the political stakes of his obscene anti-natal aesthetic and his desire to affront Ireland’s ‘filthy censors’ in the 1930s.

‘Quite exceptionally anthropoid’: Beckett and Eugenics

An obvious starting-point for such an account is *Murphy*. Composed between August 1935 and June 1936 – only a year after Beckett’s first collection of short fiction, *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), had been placed on the Irish ‘Index of Forbidden Books’ – and written with an uncharacteristic specificity of geographical and historical reference, Beckett’s first novel has long been considered his most explicit literary response to the Ireland of the Censorship Act. Paul Stewart, among others, has highlighted the ways in which *Murphy*’s euphemistic ‘music, MUSIC, MUSIC’ is used to highlight the commoditized forms of sexual exchange which animate much of the novel’s plot, while at the same time positioning the ‘filthy synecdoche’

⁹⁸ For an overview of the Committee’s research, findings, and strong eugenic sympathies, see John Macnicol, “Eugenics and the Campaign for Voluntary Sterilization in Britain Between the Wars,” *Social History of Medicine* 2, no. 2 (1989): 147–69; John Macnicol, “The Voluntary Sterilization Campaign in Britain, 1918–39,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2, no. 3 (January 1992): 422–38; Desmond King, *In the Name of Liberalism: Illiberal Social Policy in the USA and Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chap. 3.

⁹⁹ Yeats, *Collected Works*, 1994, 5: 220.

of censorship as a prominent effort by the state to regulate sexual activity.¹⁰⁰ Wylie's amorous encounter with Miss Counihan in (or, for legal reasons, '*not in*') Wynn's hotel in Dublin is evinced as one such example of this trend, in which musical terminology, an avowed desire to deprave the reader, and a eugenicist narratorial perspective coincide:

A kiss from Wylie was like a breve tied, in a long slow amorous phrase, over bars' times its equivalent in demi-semiquavers. Miss Counihan had never enjoyed anything quite so much as this slowmotion osmosis of love's spittle.

The above passage is carefully calculated to deprave the cultivated reader.

For an Irish girl Miss Counihan was quite exceptionally anthropoid. Wylie was not sure he cared altogether for her mouth, which was a large one. The kissing surface was greater than the rosebud's, but less highly toned. Otherwise she did. It is superfluous to describe her, she was just like any other beautiful Irish girl, except, as noted, more markedly anthropoid. How far this constitutes an advantage is what every man must decide for himself.¹⁰¹

As Stewart highlights, the passage is deliberately overladen with implicit and direct sexual references, from the juxtaposition of the elevated music of Wylie's kiss with the grotesque exchange of 'love's spittle', to the suggestive image of the 'highly toned' rosebud (slang for both the anus and the vagina) Wylie would rather have been kissing. Even Miss Counihan's name, which collapses the non-sexual idealization of Cathleen ni Houlihan into a French pun on 'cunt', seems to throw down a nationally specific gauntlet to the Irish censor. However, what Stewart's account overlooks are the ways in which this censor-baiting relates to the 'markedly anthropoid' character of Miss Counihan. In emphasizing the ape-like (or, at the very least, sub-human) features of this warped embodiment of an idealized Ireland, Beckett is invoking a nineteenth-century discourse of Irish simianization used by British political cartoonists to caricature Home Rule agitators and physical force nationalists.¹⁰² In contrast to the ideal reader-citizen of the Censorship of Publications Act, obliged to remain an intellectually innocent 'Virgin' or a reproductively over-active 'multipara' in the name of producing a 'better race', Miss Counihan is presented as an evolutionary hangover whose most attractive feature (her 'toned' rosebud) is identified with non-reproductive sexual activity. Being generous to Beckett in this moment, one might argue that by collocating this anachronistic racialized slander

¹⁰⁰ Paul Stewart, *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Beckett, *Murphy*, 147; 50.

¹⁰¹ Beckett, *Murphy*, 75.

¹⁰² For an account of the fluctuating political ends to which these discourses were deployed, see Lewis Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, Rev. ed (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997); Michael Willem De Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1882* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

with the implied presence of the ‘filthy censor’ Beckett seeks to remind Irish readers of the toxic political tradition to which eugenically-inflected moral hygiene policies such as the Censorship Act belong. Being less charitable, one might link this moment to the recurrent flashes of sectarian disdain for the institutional authority of the Catholic ‘Gael’ which occur throughout the early prose to reflect on the ways in which Beckett, in his desire to affront the censorious Free State in this period, risks replicating not only the rhetoric but also the eugenicist logic of the Censorship Act’s Protestant critics. More than simply a throwaway jibe at the expense of an economically underdeveloped and culturally insular Ireland, the opposition Murphy’s horoscope posits between the ‘*Civilised World*’ and the ‘*Irish Free State*’ comes to take on the air of an unstated conviction on Beckett’s part.¹⁰³

Partly in recognition of this animus, Beckett’s emigration to France in 1937 has been characterized by scholars as the moment in which the artist transcended his native ‘prosodturfy’ for the ‘intellectual milieu’ of a European avant-garde to which he had always belonged, ‘despite his Irish roots’.¹⁰⁴ However, such a trajectory elides an important episode in Beckett’s experience of Irish censorship and Irish sexual politics which necessitated his almost immediate return to Dublin – his involvement in Harry Sinclair’s 1937 libel action against Oliver St John Gogarty and the crucial role that the suppression of *More Pricks* played in discrediting Beckett as a witness. Given the embarrassment, anxiety, and shame the highly publicized Sinclair trial caused Beckett, it has traditionally been read in terms of its impact on his personal reputation in Dublin and its role in cementing his conviction to leave his homeland for good.¹⁰⁵ Yet, such readings occlude the extent to which the libellous passages of Gogarty’s *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street* (1937) and the trial to which they gave rise reflect and extend the same bio-political debates over sexual conduct and the boundaries of Irish identity which the passage of the Censorship Act had catalyzed. In particular, they overlook the ways in which these debates inscribe themselves in Gogarty’s anti-Semitic portrait of Sinclair, his brother William (Beckett’s uncle), and their grandfather, Morris Harris, in which ethnic alterity and sexual deviance are presented as synonymous.

¹⁰³ Beckett, *Murphy*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ Chris Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader’s Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), xv.

¹⁰⁵ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Vintage, 1990), 281–85; James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 275–81; Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 268–75; Ulick O’Connor, *Oliver St John Gogarty: A Poet and His Times* (Dublin: O’Brien Press, 2000), 276–85.

‘I can smell a Jew’: Sex, Anti-Semitism, and the Sinclairs

As Emilie Morin has valuably outlined, the ‘innuendos and rumours relayed in Gogarty’s memoir and at the [libel] trial were far more pernicious and serious than they have been made out to be’.¹⁰⁶ In one particularly lurid passage, Gogarty describes Sinclair’s grandfather, Morris Harris, and the habits he had allegedly bequeathed to his grandsons:

Now, there was an old usurer who had eyes like a pair of periwinkles on which somebody had been experimenting with a pin, and a nose like a shrunken tomato, one side of which swung independently of the other. The older he grew, the more he pursued the immature and enticed little girls into his office. That was bad enough; but he had grandsons, and these directed the steps of their youth to follow in grandfather’s footsteps, with more zeal than discrimination.¹⁰⁷

The passage’s exaggeratedly grotesque style almost occludes the debts its blatant anti-Semitism and rhetorical structure owe to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century models of scientific racism. As has been shown in Chapter Three, since the mid-nineteenth century, Jewishness and pathology (particularly mental illness) had been virtually synonymous in European medical and popular discourse.¹⁰⁸ This predisposition towards neurological illness was attributed (in often contradictory ways) to the sexual alterity of the Jewish, who were regarded by both popular opinion and the emerging field of sexology as simultaneously hypersexualized and dangerously endogamous.¹⁰⁹ This intellectual heritage is most visible in Gogarty’s strategy of linking physical manifestations of what he views as the ethnic and cultural alterity of the Harris-Sinclairs (the grandfather’s eyes and nose) with an itinerary of their allegedly rapacious, legally prohibited, and morally repugnant sexual appetites (child abuse and indiscriminate sexual predation). Indeed, the very manner in which Gogarty introduces his description of Morris’s continued line (‘That was bad enough; but he had grandsons’) seems intended to frame his abusive sexual preferences as an inevitable hereditary taint which would have been better left unpropagated. In an accompanying piece of doggerel Gogarty reiterates this caricature, and the model of mutually reinforcing sexual deviance and ethnic alterity on which it is predicated:

¹⁰⁶ Emilie Morin, *Beckett’s Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 73.

¹⁰⁷ Oliver St John Gogarty, *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street: A Fantasy in Fact* (London: Rich and Cowan, 1937), 70–71.

¹⁰⁸ Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, chaps. 6 and 8; Sander L. Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁰⁹ Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, 153–56; Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character: Authorised Translation from the Sixth German Edition* (London: William Heinemann, [German: 1903] 1906), chap. XIII.

Two Jews grew in Sackville Street
 And not in Piccadilly,
 One was gaitered on the feet,
 The other one was Willie.
 [...]
 They kept a shop for objects wrought
 By Masters famed of old,
 Where you, no matter what you bought
 Were genuinely sold.
 But Willie spent the sesterces
 And brought on strange disasters
 Because he sought new mistresses
 More keenly than old Masters.¹¹⁰

As in Gogarty's portrait of Harris, traditional anti-Semitic tropes (usury), markers of visible difference (Harry's gaiters – an apparently common piece of attire among Dublin's Jews), imputations of rapacious sexual misconduct ('Willie's transparently phallic name and predilection for new and expensive 'mistresses'), and suggestions of sexual pathology ('strange disasters') combine to present the brothers as fundamentally alien to Irish culture.¹¹¹ Even the convoluted evocation of Piccadilly seems to offer a shrill testament to this perceived ethnic difference, implying through its redundant negation that the Jewish brothers would be more at home in the English metropolis than on a Dublin thoroughfare.¹¹²

Such rhetoric, of course, resonates strongly with the racial politics of Italian and German Fascism, however it also participates in the long-standing tradition of Irish anti-Semitism sketched in Chapter Three. In particular, as Morin has shown, this characterization of the Harris-Sinclairs had its roots in another, no less ethnically-charged trial. In the final months of 1906, Harris's wife, Kathleen – an Irish Catholic by birth – sought to divorce him on grounds of adultery, cruelty, blasphemy, and paedophilia, and a variety of criminal activity which she alleged he had committed with the help of his grandsons.¹¹³ Though the jury ultimately cleared Harris of every charge save cruelty (the minimum necessary for the divorce to proceed), the accusations were given a wide and eager airing in the press.¹¹⁴ As the Harris divorce proceedings were reaching their apex, Gogarty began publishing his 'Ugly England' series in Arthur Griffith's *Sinn Féin*, in which he offered his diagnostic anthropology of the English and their corrupting influence in Ireland. As I noted in the previous chapter, in these gymnastically chauvinistic articles, the 'venereal excess' of the British

¹¹⁰ Gogarty, *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street: A Fantasy in Fact*, 65.

¹¹¹ The Sinclairs' legal representative, Albert E Wood, identified the 'strange disasters' to which Willie fell victim as 'venereal disease'. "£900 Damages Awarded in Libel Action," *The Irish Times*, November 24, 1937, 5.

¹¹² "£900 Damages Awarded in Libel Action," 5.

¹¹³ Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, 74.

¹¹⁴ Morin cites coverage by the *Freeman's Journal*, *Irish Independent*, and *Irish Times*. Morin, 74–75.

Army, the ‘gross materialism’ of the English mercantile class, and the ‘wormy’ (which is to say ‘syphilitic’) blood of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy are presented as linked manifestations of a decadent and degenerative Jewish influence to which all of Ireland’s ills may be attributed: ‘I can smell a Jew [...] and in Ireland there’s something rotten.’¹¹⁵ At times this whiff of Jewishness is largely analogical – a rhetorical means by which to identify and denigrate what Gogarty perceives to be the most reprehensible of England’s many failings:

England becoming Jewry... It explained how many things! [...] that shopkeeping, moneying instinct; that hatred of things generous or artistic: *-make ye no graven images*; that filthy sensuality, unrelieved even by gaiety; that furtive and narrow timidity, and that panic-stricken, cowardly way of taking revenge[...]¹¹⁶

However, at others it is presented in a pointedly anthropometric key, coded as a series of identifiable racial features whose pathological influence infuses itself into the blood of any nation to which it is introduced:

If the race has really gained supremacy in the country, the race-type ought to be marked in the physiognomy of physique of the people. Yes; distinctly it was perceptible... when allowance was made for the blending of the races:– The shop-girl type with her anaemic face and aquiline nose, her eyes often brown and closely set; hair scanty. Her teeth are bad, for her palate is narrow, and she cannot breathe well through that long nasal cavity of hers. Yes; she lacks the better characteristics of either race, as is the case always in half-breeds... Oh Israel!¹¹⁷

While it is impossible to say whether Gogarty was aware of the Harris divorce proceedings while writing these articles, his emphasis on the dysgenic character of ‘half-breeds’ is suggestive given how frequently the press emphasized the perceived incompatibility of Harris’s Judaism and Kathleen’s Irish-Catholic heritage.¹¹⁸ Whatever their relation to the Harris divorce, as Gogarty’s emphasis on ‘race-type’, ‘physiognomy’, and the various congenital defects with which the young shop-girl is afflicted suggests, his comments drew on and participated in a long-standing tradition of racial science and anti-Semitic discourse which figured Jews as a degenerate and degenerative sexual threat to a nation’s physical and cultural integrity.

Further compounding the bio-political bite of Gogarty’s anti-Semitic caricature was the immediate political context in which it was made. Damning under any circumstances, Gogarty’s accusations of Harris’s

¹¹⁵ Gogarty, “Ugly England (I),” 3; Gogarty, “Ugly England (II),” 3; Oliver St John Gogarty, “Ugly England (III),” *Sinn Féin*, December 1, 1906, 3; Gogarty, 4.

¹¹⁶ Gogarty, “Ugly England (II),” 3.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Ellipses Gogarty’s.

¹¹⁸ “Her Life a Hell,” *Irish Independent*, November 3, 1906, 5; “Humanity: Jew and Christian,” *Sunday Independent*, November 4, 1906, 7.

child abuse would have carried a particularly pointed charge in the wake of the Carrigan Committee. Established by the Cosgrave government in 1930 amid the same atmosphere of moral panic which had prompted the passage of the Censorship Act, the Committee had been tasked with gathering evidence of Irish sexual conduct as the basis for a more stringent Criminal Law Amendment Act. However, the Committee's Report, which detailed 'an alarming amount of sexual crime', 'increasing yearly' and frequently involving 'criminal interference with girls and children', was ultimately deemed unpublishable by the Fianna Fáil government which succeeded the Cosgrave administration.¹¹⁹ The controversy surrounding the Report simmered until 1935, when a revised Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed. As a member of the Seanad, Gogarty would have been at least aware of the nature and general character of the Report, even if he did not personally have access to it. Such a familiarity is reflected in his remarks in a 1935 *Irish Times* article, in which he criticises the Censorship Board for moving beyond their perceived remit of suppressing birth control literature: 'If this country had produced great sinners there would be something to censor but even the Carrigan report was not made public so we didn't know what is the enormity of our crimes.'¹²⁰ Diarmaid Ferriter has rightly warned against reading the Carrigan Report and the decisions which led to its suppression as the products of a univocal 'hegemonic discourse' of Irish purity or a unified 'containment culture' surrounding sexuality in the Free State.¹²¹ Nevertheless, Beckett certainly appears to have perceived the Censorship Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act as linked parts of a larger regulatory regime surrounding sexual conduct and Irish identity. His first act upon receiving the commission for 'Censorship in the Saorstát' from the *Bookman* editors appears to have been to attempt to acquire a copy of the latter, as yet undrafted, Act:

The *Bookman* writes, postponing all articles on Gide, Rimbaud & kindred dangers, in favour of one on the wicked Censorship in Ireland. By all means. I tried to get the Criminal Law Amendment Act, but it has not yet been issued in the form of a bill, or even taken shape as such according to Eason's expert.¹²²

¹¹⁹ William Carrigan (Chairman), *Report of the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts (1880-85), and Juvenile Prostitution* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1931), 14; Kennedy, "The Suppression of the Carrigan Report"; Mark Finnane, "The Carrigan Committee of 1930-31 and the 'Moral Condition of the Saorstát,'" *Irish Historical Studies* 32, no. 128 (2001): 519–536; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 134–45.

¹²⁰ "Censorship of Books. Views of a Free State Senator. The Board's Great Fault," *Irish Times*, February 6, 1935.

¹²¹ Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 136.

¹²² Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, I: 1929-1940:218.

As such, Beckett would have been well placed to detect the ways in which Gogarty's portrait of Harris as an alien sexual threat to the vulnerable young women of Ireland was inflected both by the Report and by the climate which prompted its suppression, drawing on its image of an Ireland in which the sexual abuse of young girls was common, even as it displaces responsibility for such crimes away from the Irish (and Catholic) population and onto a perceived ethnic outsider. Called upon to defend his work, Gogarty contended that the 'usurer' was a 'composite photograph' intended 'to throw discredit on usury and moneylending' in general, tacitly acknowledging that even if the specific libel against Harris and the Sinclairs had been unintentional, the characterization of Jews as a sexual threat to vulnerable Irish girls was wholly deliberate.¹²³ It is unimaginable that Beckett, freshly returned from a prolonged stay in a Germany increasingly vocal in its embrace of Nazi racial ideology, would have been deaf to the implications of Gogarty's remarks, and the rhetorics of sexual hygiene, eugenics, and racial science which underpinned them.¹²⁴ Nor, would he have missed the ways in which their influence was reflected in the efforts of Gogarty's representatives to discredit him in court.

A 'man who indulged in the psychology of sex': Beckett in the Dock

The ways in which Gogarty's barrister, J.M. Fitzgerald, KC, sought to undermine Beckett's credibility as a witness by emphasizing his continental connections, dubious scholarly interests, and obscene literary output are well established.¹²⁵ However, read in the light of the above analysis, it becomes clear that this line of attack was not only a piece of shrewd legal theatre, but a strategically deployed reprisal of the logic and tone of Gogarty's text in which the Censorship Act would play a crucial role. Fitzgerald began his attack by ascertaining Beckett's present address ('Ah Paris [...] He lives in Paris'), and the nature of his academic output: 'Have you written a book about a man called Marcel Prowst?'.¹²⁶ The trap was an obvious one, with Beckett's impeccably pronounced correction, along with his Parisian lodgings, combining to position him from the outset in the minds of the jury as a morally suspect adherent of foreign decadence. This impression

¹²³ "£900 Damages Awarded in Libel Action," 5.

¹²⁴ For an account of Beckett's awareness of and reaction to these discourses, see: Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries, 1936-1937* (London: Continuum, 2011).

¹²⁵ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 281–85; Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 275–81; Cronin, *Samuel Beckett*, 268–75; O'Connor, *Oliver St John Gogarty*, 276–85.

¹²⁶ Cronin, *Samuel Beckett*, 271.

was compounded when Fitzgerald enquired if Proust was ‘a man who indulged in the psychology of sex?’¹²⁷ The question was damning on a number of levels. For a lay-person, Fitzgerald’s use of the verb ‘indulge’ framed the ‘psychology of sex’ as an obscene act which, the question implied, Beckett had sought to document and excuse. However, for those in the know, Fitzgerald’s reference to Havelock Ellis’ *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928, banned in Ireland in 1931) seems intended to invoke its most infamous volume, *Sexual Inversion* (published in 1897 and tried for obscenity in Britain in 1898), and the various modes of same-sex desire, queer experience, and gender-non-conformity it catalogued. Compounding these insinuations of sexual alterity, there was the question of Proust’s ethnic background. The subject had been given a caustic public airing only a year before by the Abbé Ernest Dimnet in a widely reported address to the Royal Dublin Society in which he had attributed what he perceived to be the want of religious feeling in Proust’s work to the influence of his Jewish mother.¹²⁸ Indeed, as Emilie Morin highlights, in an even-handed letter to the *Irish Times* Harry Sinclair had taken Dimnet to task for the ‘race exceptionalism’ which underpinned his dismissal of Proust and the critique of Zola which had preceded it.¹²⁹ In such a context, while it is impossible to ascertain how cognisant Fitzgerald was of Proust’s Jewish heritage, it is hard not to read his comments on ‘Prowst’ in conversation with his cross-examination of Sinclair, in which he commented on the ‘strange names’ taken by Jews whose birth-names are ‘unpronounceable’.¹³⁰ The question of ethnicity was further stressed when Fitzgerald emphasized Beckett’s family connections to the Sinclairs and asked whether he ‘called [himself] a Christian, Jew or Atheist’ (Beckett characteristically declined all three labels).¹³¹ Fitzgerald’s opening salvo thus positioned Beckett as an ethnically ambiguous Parisian blasphemer who had appropriated sexually-explicit scientific reading matter to sponsor the non-heteronormative and, by extension, anti-natal oeuvre of a foreign, Jewish author.

When Beckett sensibly (if disingenuously) declared himself unaware of Proust’s interest in the psychology of sex, Fitzgerald changed tack, deliberately eliding the *Proust* essay and *More Pricks Than Kicks* by asking how long it had been before his ‘blasphemous and obscene’ book had been ‘banned by the

¹²⁷ Cronin, 271.

¹²⁸ “Machiavelli of Statesmen: Abbe Dimnet on Mussolini: Gulf Between Nazism and Fascism,” *Irish Times*, November 13, 1936, 4; “From a Paris Balcony: Lecture by Abbe Dimnet,” *Irish Times*, November 14, 1936, 10.

¹²⁹ Morin, *Beckett’s Political Imagination*, 75; Henry M Sinclair, “Letters to the Editor: Mehr Licht,” *The Irish Times*, November 17, 1936, 9; Henry M Sinclair, “Letters to the Editor: Mehr Licht,” *The Irish Times*, December 1, 1936, 3.

¹³⁰ “Dr. Oliver Gogarty Sued for Libel: Quotations from Book about Dublin: “Venomous Libels” Says Counsel: Dublin Divorce Case Recalled,” *Irish Times*, November 23, 1937, 5.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

Censorship Board of Ireland'.¹³² He pressed his point by quoting a passage from the short story 'A Wet Night' in which the Polar Bear (a caricature of Beckett's French Professor at Trinity, Thomas Rudmose-Brown) discusses Christ with a no-nonsense Jesuit:

The *Lebensbahn* [...] of the Galilean is the tragi-comedy of the solipsism that will not capitulate. The humiliations and *retro me's* and quaffs of irreverence are on a par with the hey presto's, arrogance and egoism. He is the first great self-contained playboy. The cryptic abasement before the woman taken red-handed is as great a piece of megalomaniacal impertinence as his interference in the affairs of his boy-friend Lazarus.¹³³

The features of this description which Fitzgerald intended to highlight in order to prejudice the jury against Beckett when he enquired whether this was not a 'blasphemous caricature of the Redeemer' are obvious enough.¹³⁴ However, without wishing to credit Fitzgerald with a subtler engagement with Beckett's work than might be expected of a working barrister, many features of the passage and its position within the story make it resonate strikingly with both Gogarty's remarks and with the proscriptions of the Censorship Act. As Andy Wimbush has noted, what animates the Polar Bear in this moment is the irreconcilability of two mutually contradictory images of Christ which have been central to Christian theology since the middle-ages: the *Ecce Homo* [behold the man] or suffering Christ, bowed and resigned to his fate, and the *Christus Victor* [Christ the victor], conquering death through his miraculous raising of Lazarus and his eventual resurrection.¹³⁵ Wimbush argues that, for Beckett, the *Christus Victor's* triumphant failure to capitulate undermines the authenticity and appeal of the *Ecce Homo's* solipsistic resignation. However, read in the context of the Censorship Act, what is striking are the ways in which the revivifying imperative the triumphant Christ apparently embodies is undermined throughout the passage through implicit and explicit references to non-reproductive sexual activity. The unrelenting 'solipsism' of Christ (which links him both to Belacqua and the, as-yet unconceived, Murphy) is given a distinctly, if paradoxically, sexual flavour through his figuration as 'the first great self-contained playboy'. This reference to the *Playboy* and the furore

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, ed. Cassandra Nelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 50–51. The passage is transposed virtually unaltered from the conclusion of Beckett's abortive first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, composed between May 1931 and July 1932. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), 199–241; John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett's 'More Pricks Than Kicks': In a Strait of Two Wills* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.

¹³⁴ "Dr. Oliver Gogarty Sued for Libel," 5.

¹³⁵ Andy Wimbush, "Hey Prestos and Humilities: Two of Beckett's Christs," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 25, no. 1 (April 2016), 78–95, 78.

it generated transforms Christ's solipsism into an act of unrelenting onanistic self-love, comparable to Christy Mahon's narcissism and self-aggrandizing eroticism. Likewise, the Polar Bear's linking of Christ's abasement before an adulteress with his 'interference' with his 'boy-friend' Lazarus foregrounds the obvious sexual and homoerotic overtones of the latter jibe in a manner that collocates Christ at his most robustly triumphant with a range of non-reproductive and morally-censured forms of sexual activity, all of which were deemed obscene under the terms of the Censorship Act.¹³⁶ The Catholic triumphalism which Beckett and others had detected in the Act's restrictions on birth control literature is thus subjected to an exuberant sexualized pastiche in a manner and tone comparable to that of the later *Bookman* essay. While, as John Pilling cautions, it is dangerous to present the Polar Bear's position as identical to Beckett's in this moment, (the Jesuit ultimately outwits the Polar Bear, obliging him to pay both their tram fares), it is clear that in court, Beckett was obliged to answer for these remarks as though he had made them *in propria person*.¹³⁷ By understanding the ways in which Beckett was publicly obliged to account for both the story and the collection in response to what he perceived to be a Church-sanctioned culture of philistinism, pro-natalism, and ethno-nationalism in the midst of his apparently decisive departure from Ireland, it is possible to arrive at a more nuanced consideration of his aesthetic practice in its aftermath. In particular, it sheds a telling light on the first substantial piece of prose Beckett was to complete entirely in French after leaving Ireland, the 1946 novella *Premier amour/First Love*.

'Fibrome, or brone': Sectarianism, Eugenics, and Vichy France

As a range of critics have illustrated, *Premier amour/First Love* is firmly rooted in the Ireland of the Censorship Act.¹³⁸ The 'Elysium for the roofless' in which the story takes place is identified explicitly in terms of its 'scant population' – tellingly achieved 'without the help of the meanest contraceptive' – a comment which seems to gesture towards both the unprecedented death-toll of the Famine, and Ireland's uncommonly high

¹³⁶ The Act's definition of indecency included all material 'inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice' (I.2), a long-standing euphemism for same-sex sexual activity.

¹³⁷ Pilling, *Samuel Beckett's "More Pricks Than Kicks"*, 74.

¹³⁸ David Lloyd, "Writing in the Shit: Beckett, Nationalism, and the Colonial Subject," *Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (1989): 69–85; David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), chap. 2; Kennedy, "First Love," 2010; Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 454.

rates of emigration.¹³⁹ Likewise, the narrator's meetings with 'Lulu', a sex worker and the eventual mother of what may be his child, regularly bring him back to a bench on the bank of one of the city's two (easily confused) canals, tacitly evoking Dublin's Liffey and Dodder. In this context, the narrator's abandonment of his child and its mother appears to constitute an effort towards independence comparable to Beckett's departure for France, or the obscene French idiom in which the novella is composed. However, as Kennedy emphasizes, though Beckett's narrator may 'leave' his new-born child at the story's close, he cannot 'leave behind' the pro-natalist claims and Irish context its cries represent.¹⁴⁰ If Kennedy's insight is extended to the aesthetic of *Premier amour/First Love* as a whole, it becomes clear that the harder Beckett works to transgress the limitations of Irish censorship, the more they come to shape the text he produces. Following his father's death, Beckett's narrator finds himself evicted from his familial home during a period of troubled defecation: 'One day, on my return from stool, I found my room locked and my belongings in a heap before the door'.¹⁴¹ His description of his faecal issues grows increasingly detailed and ultimately blasphemous: 'At such times I [...] just gazed dully at the almanac hanging from a nail before my eyes, with its chromo of a bearded stripling in the midst of sheep, Jesus no doubt, parted the cheeks with both hands and strained, heave! ho! heave! ho!, with the motions of one tugging at the oar'.¹⁴² The narrator's Christological qualification, 'Jesus no doubt', nestles snugly between two longer descriptive clauses, which it serves to part like the narrator's 'cheeks'. The physical and syntactic proximity in which Beckett places 'Jesus' to the narrator's 'heaving' attempts at evacuation form part of a range of narratorial shock-tactics that serve as provocations to censorship throughout the text. The narrator's exile status and this obscene aesthetic intensify in tandem throughout the story. The narrator's morbid preference for graveyards is explained with reference to the number of suitable locations they afford for a 'piss', and the relief they offer from the stench of the 'sticky foreskins' of the living.¹⁴³ When the narrator seeks refuge in a cowshed after attempting to break off his relationship with 'Lulu', he traces her name in the 'dry and hollow cowclaps' that surround him.¹⁴⁴ This act of faecal inscription prompts a reflection on his homeland, which the narrator

¹³⁹ For ease of reference, all quotations are from Beckett's English translation. References to French diction will be made only where marked divergences occur. Samuel Beckett, *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End & First Love*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber, 2009), 64.

¹⁴⁰ Kennedy, "First Love," 2010, 89.

¹⁴¹ Beckett, *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End & First Love*, 64.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 62; 61.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 69.

presents as manured with 'history's ancient faeces', dropped in steaming piles to be 'sought after, stuffed and carried in procession' by the nation's 'patriots'.¹⁴⁵ Finding himself in 'Lulu's company one evening, the narrator considers 'kicking her in the cunt', but instead finds himself 'at the mercy of an erection' which she helps to relieve.¹⁴⁶ When 'Lulu' announces her pregnancy, the narrator advises her to '[a]bort, abort' so that her darkened nipples may 'blush like new'.¹⁴⁷ As this short summary deliberately emphasizes, *Premier amour/First Love* seems to take the Censorship of Publications Act as a schematic for its content, containing as it does obscenity, blasphemy, sex work, references to contraception, vocal advocacy of abortion, and a cloacal obsession fit to rival Joyce at his most eye-watering.

For Kennedy, this intense obscenity and the anti-natal outlook it reflects combine with the narrator's quietism and social isolation to register a dual rebuke to the Catholic-nationalist imaginary as encoded in the Censorship Act and the equally fertility-driven programme of Protestant rejuvenation advocated by Gregg, Yeats, and Stanford. In doing so, Kennedy mobilizes the conceptual armature of Queer Theory to present the narrator's abandonment of his new-born as politically, morally, and aesthetically preferable to the eugenicist and sectarian infanticide which conclude early drafts of Yeats's *Purgatory* (1938). In Kennedy's account, Beckett's narrator embodies the nay-saying ethical imperative of queerness by rejecting 'the child' as the heteronormative signifier of 'reproductive futurity' with reference to which Lee Edelman has argued all political discourse and activity is implicitly justified and regulated.¹⁴⁸ While Kennedy is correct to emphasize the rejection of fertility both in *Premier amour/First Love* and the Beckettian oeuvre at large, in positioning Beckett's as the ethically preferable response to the political and demographic twilight of Ireland's Protestant population, his analysis of the story elides the misogyny of the narrator, the ambivalence with which his calls for abortion and his departure from 'Lulu' are depicted, and the ways in which these features link the Irish context in which Kennedy reads the novella, to the immediate post-war French context of its composition. Significantly in this regard, it overlooks the ways in which the narrator's rejection of reproductive sexuality jostles with the eugenic register in which he describes 'Lulu'. This eugenicist perspective manifests itself when the narrator describes his first night in the home of 'Lulu'

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 69.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 66; 67.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 78.

¹⁴⁸ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2–3.

(whom he rechristens ‘Anna’). Despite his indifference to her appearance – she has a ‘face like millions of others’ – as she undresses he is struck by her ‘squint’.¹⁴⁹ This realization, which occurs during a de facto strip-tease (‘Anna’ undresses with a ‘slowness fit to enflame an elephant’), undermines the impression of normalcy which he had previously held of her face (‘it *seemed* normal to me’), implicitly identifying ‘Anna’ as one of the ‘human weeds’ Schiller and his fellow eugenicists had been so anxious to eliminate.¹⁵⁰ The French rendering of this moment (‘je vis qu’elle louchait’) is even more suggestive.¹⁵¹ Syntactically, it highlights the narrator’s implicitly eugenicist perspective by juxtaposing his unimpaired vision (‘je vis’) with her straining sight (‘elle louchait’). Semantically, it plays upon the varied senses of ‘loucher’ – the biological condition of ‘squinting’, the act of regarding someone in a deceptive manner, and the act of coveting something – to emphasize the hostility and suspicion with which the French narrator, the Vichy French government, and the eugenics movement more broadly regarded the sexual desires of those whom they perceived to deviate from the biological norm.¹⁵² The crucible for such ideas in occupied France was the *Fondation Française pour l’Étude des Problèmes Humains* [French foundation for the study of human problems], established by Vichy decree in 1941.¹⁵³ This institution, tasked with improving the French population by eugenic means, was overseen by the Nobel laureate, Alexis Carrel, whose best-selling 1935 popular scientific study *L’homme, cet inconnu* [man, this stranger], argued for the cultivation of ‘une aristocratie biologique héréditaire’ [a hereditary biological aristocracy] through a form of ‘eugénisme volontaire’ [voluntary eugenics], in which ‘éducation appropriée’ [appropriate education] would prevent the propagation of ‘des fous’ [the insane], ‘des faible d’esprit’ [the feeble-minded], and ‘des individus inférieurs’ [inferior individuals].¹⁵⁴ Confronted with ‘Anna’s squint, the narrator of *Premier amour/First Love* engages in just such an act of ‘voluntary eugenics’, deflecting her sexual advances by refusing to undress and asking for a tour

¹⁴⁹ Beckett, *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End & First Love*, 73; 74.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 74; 73. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵¹ Samuel Beckett, *Premier Amour* (Paris: Minuit, 1970), 40.

¹⁵² ‘Loucher (verbe transitif indirect): Regarder furtivement, de biais, à la dérobée: Loucher sur la copie du voisin. Convoiter quelque chose, quelqu’un, avoir des vues sur eux: Loucher sur l’héritage d’un vieil oncle.’ [To squint (transitive indirect verb): To look furtively, sideways, stealthily: To glance at a neighbour’s copy. To covet something, someone, to have views on them: To eye up the inheritance of an old uncle.] “Loucher (v.t. Ind.),” Larousse dictionnaire de français, March 2017,

<http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/loucher/47870?q=louchais#47788>.

¹⁵³ Gibson, *Samuel Beckett*, 104–5.

¹⁵⁴ Alexis Carrel, *L’homme, cet inconnu* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1935), 364; 367; 363. Carrel also sponsored a less ‘voluntary’ eugenics, in which ‘un établissement euthanasique, pourvu de gaz appropriés’ [a euthanasic institution supplied with appropriate gas] would permit society to dispose of ‘des défectifs et des criminels’ [defectives and criminals] in a manner both ‘humaine et économique’ [humane and economical] (Carrel, 387–88).

of the premises. Having been shown the parlour, he proceeds to eject its furnishings, creating a space of womb-like security in which only a single sofa remains. As he removes the final item of furniture into the now obstructed corridor, the narrator overhears the indeterminate word ‘fibrome, or brone’, which, though he disavows recognizing it or understanding its meaning, he feels compelled to record.¹⁵⁵ Phil Baker posits that the word the narrator most likely overhears is *fibroma*, ‘a benign tumour of the wall of the uterus’, which Paul Stewart reads as an analogue for the narrator, safely ensconced on his sofa beside the vaginal (and now impassable) doorway, in implied contrast with the ‘malign growth’ of the baby the narrator flees at the story’s close.¹⁵⁶ Like Kennedy, Stewart thus presents this moment as a queer rejection of reproductive sexuality rooted in the Freudian death drive.¹⁵⁷

While such resonances are available in the story, a solely anti-natal reading of *Premier amour/First Love* elides several key narrative details. The first is the relation the narrator’s reference to uterine tumours and his reluctance to consummate his relationship with ‘Anna’ bear to his reaction to her ‘crooked’ eyes.¹⁵⁸ Upon learning that ‘Anna’ is with child, the narrator conducts a survey of her physical condition – a deliberate restaging of the earlier strip-tease – in which the apparent obtrusiveness of her ocular impairment and the evidence of her pregnancy increase in tandem: ‘The more naked she was, the more cross-eyed’.¹⁵⁹ The register adopted for the narrator’s survey in the original French is equally eugenicist. The French narrator notes how ‘Anna’s nudity in this moment renders her ‘strabique’, a cognate of the diagnostic term *strabismus* and a reference to the congenital defect it denotes.¹⁶⁰ This clinical survey of ‘Anna’, in which the medical gaze and the male gaze operate in unison, follows hot on the heels of the revelation that she lives ‘by prostitution’.¹⁶¹ As the work of Judith R. Walkowitz, Philippa Levine, and Maria Luddy has shown, the female sex worker was a focal point for eugenically-inflected social hygiene discourse and public health

¹⁵⁵ Beckett, *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End & First Love*, 75.

¹⁵⁶ ‘*fibroma*’ may denote a benign growth on any part of the body. Both Baker and Stewart identify the resonance as specifically uterine for the reasons outlined above. Phil Baker, *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 95; Stewart, *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work*, 65.

¹⁵⁷ Stewart, *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work*, 65–70.

¹⁵⁸ Beckett, *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End & First Love*, 73.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁶⁰ Beckett, *Premier Amour*, 52. ‘Strabisme (nom masculin): Déviation permanente résultant du défaut de parallélisme des axes visuels des deux yeux. (Dans le strabisme convergent, la déviation se fait en dedans, par opposition au strabisme divergent.)’ [Strabismus (masculine noun): Permanent deviation resulting from the lack of parallelism of the visual axes of the two eyes. (In convergent strabismus, the deviation is inward, as opposed to the divergent strabismus.)] ‘Strabisme (n.m.),’ Larousse dictionnaire de français, March 2017, <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/strabisme/74801>.

¹⁶¹ Beckett, *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End & First Love*, 78.

policy throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁶² Legislative measures taken to regulate the spread of venereal diseases targeted women engaged in sex work as the most easily isolated (and morally censured) vector for infection. As Chapter Three has shown, the most notorious of these measures in Britain were the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, 1869), which permitted the medical inspection and incarceration without consent of any woman alleged to be engaged in sex work in the vicinity of a military garrison who was accused of being infected. Ireland supplemented these Acts with an abusive network of ecclesiastically managed Magdalene Laundries and Mother-and-Baby Homes, in which ‘fallen women’ were ostensibly offered the opportunity to redeem their sexual transgressions through spiritually ennobling and financially rewarding labour, while at the same time being removed from a breeding pool and a public sphere it was feared they would contaminate.¹⁶³ In contrast to the rosy image Kennedy and Stewart offer of the narrator’s advocacy of abortion and abandonment of ‘Anna’ in *Premier amour/First Love*, these actions, when read in such a context, take on a different complexion. Rather than reflecting a horror of reproduction qua reproduction, or an anti-eugenic strain of Protestant quietism, the narrator’s insistence that ‘Anna’ should abort the impending infant may instead be taken to indicate a desire to ensure that the sexually compromised and physically inferior ‘Anna’ does not perpetuate a tainted line. The narrator’s evacuation of the parlour, and symbolic obstruction of the corridor which leads to it, ‘making egress impossible, and *a fortiori* ingress,’ (74) thus become acts not of thanatic self-annihilation, but of sterilization intended to render birth (egress), and, indeed, penetrative sex of any kind (ingress), unfeasible.

Beyond their eugenic resonances, these acts also possess a sectarian character, hinted at in the unattributed and deliberately ambiguous term ‘fibrome, or brone’. While Baker’s account offers a productive starting point for considering this moment of strategic obscurity, it does not engage with the specific national cues such a moment offers, nor the cultural resonances they engage. Thus, while Baker is justified in an Anglophone context to gloss ‘fibrome’, which has no direct parallel in English, with the medical Latin *fibroma*, he overlooks the fact that ‘fibrome utérin’ is the standard French term for a uterine

¹⁶² Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge, 1980); Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York, 2003); Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940* (Cambridge, 2007).

¹⁶³ Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940*, chap. 3; Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment*, chaps. 1–2; Martin McAleese, “Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to Establish the Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries” (Department of Justice and Equality, February 2013), <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/MagdalenRpt2013>.

tumour, disengaging the novella from the historical, political, and linguistic context in which it was composed. In doing so, he elides the ways in which the narrator's actions, and the depopulated and nationalistic landscape in which the story is set, evoke the eugenic logic of the government of Vichy France, through which Beckett had fled in 1942.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, while Baker accounts for the mysterious 'fibrome', he leaves the even more puzzling qualification 'or brone' unexamined. One suggestive homophonic resonance for this seemingly trivial syllable that presents itself in a Gaelic cultural context is the Irish word 'brón' ['sorrow' or 'regret'], a common piece of diction in Irish-language verse.¹⁶⁵ In contrast to the conventional expressions of sentimental Celtic heartache offered in *aislings* such as 'Mo Bhrón ar an Bhfarraige' [my grief is on the sea] or Pádraic Pearse's 'Bean Sléibhe Ag Caoineadh A Mhac' [a woman of the mountains keens her son], the only 'brón' Beckett's narrator appears to feel is that he may have conceived a child with a physically defective sex worker, whose unintelligible singing of 'old folk songs', association with a fragment of unattributed Irish, and unwillingness to abort the child, suggest a Gaelic cultural affiliation and a Catholic heritage the propagation of which the narrator is keen to prevent for eugenic reasons.¹⁶⁶

In contrast to the uncomplicatedly valorous and politically subversive rejection of the nativist fertility drive with which Kennedy and Stewart identify the story's anti-natalism, a sensitivity to these cultural resonances reveals that the enflamed elephant in the room in *Premier amour/First Love* is its deployment of a eugenically-inflected and sectarian narratorial perspective far closer in logic and tone to the comments of Yeats, Gregg, and Stanford than has previously been acknowledged. This is not to suggest that Beckett's perspective is identical with that of the narrator. Instead, it is to highlight the self-indicting ways in which Beckett appears to construct the narrator as a parodic embodiment of his own earlier attitudes to the pro-natalism and cultural exceptionalism of the Irish Free State. At least as much as a rejection of the horrors of coerced fertility, it is the desire to highlight and subject this former sectarian agon to self-reflexive critique which animates *Premier amour/First Love* and its blurring of the geographical and political terrain of post-independence Ireland and Vichy France. Through the lexical and cultural slippages facilitated by strategically ambiguous terms such as 'fibrome' and the liaisons they forge between the positive eugenics

¹⁶⁴ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 314–18.

¹⁶⁵ I am indebted to Alan Graham of University College, Dublin, for drawing this linguistic echo to my attention.

¹⁶⁶ Beckett, *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End & First Love*, 66.

of J.J. Byrne's drive for a 'better race' or Yeats and Stanford's push for a resurgent Protestant ascendancy, and the negative eugenics of Nazism at its most monstrous, Beckett renders his own anti-natalism at best a questionable political good. In this regard the narrator's closing reflections are doubly fitting:

[There] was no competing with those cries [...] As long as I kept walking I didn't hear them... But as soon as I halted I heard them again, a little fainter each time, admittedly, but what does it matter, cry is cry, all that matters is that it should cease. For years I thought they would cease. Now I don't think so any more.¹⁶⁷

Just as the narrator can never fully escape the cries of his new-born, or the dysgenic, exogamous union to which they attest, so Beckett, in the first act of his apparent linguistic independence, revisits the Ireland of the Censorship Act to interrogate the ways in which its sectarian prejudices and cultural conflicts may have followed him across the Channel. In doing so, Beckett illustrates the potentially noxious social, political, and cultural outcomes of rooting a model of post-independence Irish national identity in a vexed politics of sexual health, even as he advertises the ways in which his own responses to the (mis)birth of an independent Irish nation participated in precisely this dynamic. As Chapter Five will suggest, Beckett was far from alone in discovering the politically troubling ramifications of using eugenicist discourse to critique censorship and pro-natalism in Ireland, or the ideological pitfalls into which it could lead apparently liberal and progressive authors.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 79–80.

Chapter Five

‘But perhaps this new child will be perfect!’

Kate O’Brien’s Eugenic Romances

The power of parenthood ought no longer to be exercised by all, however inferior, as an “individual right.” It is profoundly a duty and a privilege, and it is essentially the concern of the whole community.

Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Radiant Motherhood* (1920)

A root his bodily fineness might be called, but the horse he caressed was a flower. He was nature’s heedless work, but she, taking her inbred and high-bred quality from generations of great blood stock, was a work of art.

Kate O’Brien, *Without My Cloak* (1931)

In 1942 the actions of the Censorship of Publications Board became the object of sustained public scrutiny for the first time since its inception. Long-term opponent of the censorship, Senator Sir John Keane, brought a motion to the Seanad claiming that ‘in the opinion of Seanad Éireann, the Censorship of Publications Board appointed by the Minister for Justice under the Censorship of Publications Act, 1929, has ceased to retain public confidence and that steps should be taken by the Minister to reconstitute the Board.’¹ Keane’s motion had been prompted by an exchange of letters in the between Frank O’Connor, Seán Ó Faoláin, and others in the *Irish Times* concerning the banning of three books: *The Tailor and Ansty* (1942) by Eric Cross, a pseudo-ethnographic account of the relationship of an unmarried west Cork couple; *The Laws of Life* (1935), a guide to the ‘safe period’ method of birth control, published with the *permissu superiorum* [by permission of the superiors] of the Catholic Bishop of Westminster; and Kate O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices* (1941), a *Bildungsroman* set in a French convent in rural Ireland.² The first had been suppressed for its sexual frankness and its depiction of pre-marital cohabitation, the second for its (albeit Church sanctioned) discussion of birth control – though, confusingly, the ban had been made on the basis of the text’s ‘indecenty’ – the third for a single explicit reference to male same-sex desire: ‘She saw *Etienne* and her father, in the embrace of love.’³ The debate crystallized a growing sense among Irish liberal intellectuals

¹ Seanad Éireann, “Censorship of Publications—Motion,” Pub. L. No. 27 (1942), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1942-11-18/6/>.

² For an account of the banning of the texts and their place in the debate, see respectively Caleb Richardson, “‘They Are Not Worthy of Themselves’: The Tailor and Ansty Debates of 1942,” *Éire-Ireland* 42, no. 3 (2007): 148–72; Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Dublin: Scepter Books, 1968), 88–92; Jana Fischerova, “The Banning and Unbanning of Kate O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices*,” *Irish University Review* 48, no. 1 (May 2018): 69–83.

³ Kate O’Brien, *The Land of Spices*, Repr. (London: Virago, 2007), 165.

that the worst fears of the opponents of the 1929 Act had been realized.⁴ Rather than targeting the British popular press as had been intended, the Board had centred its energies on Irish novelists, with notions of cultural value and a sensitivity to likely readership having apparently been disregarded in favour of pious philistinism. Moreover, in targeting even a text like Sutherland's – an ecclesiastically endorsed medical manual by a pro-natalist, Catholic doctor, which described in largely technical terms a non-barrier method of birth control intended to be used in situations where another pregnancy would threaten a mother's health – the Board had revealed itself to be out of step even with the Church whose doctrines it was widely believed to uphold.⁵

While it would be naïve to credit the over-worked and increasingly disgruntled censorship board with too detailed an awareness of Kate O'Brien's work and its implied sexual politics, the juxtaposition of O'Brien's novel and Sutherland's manual is instructive: in its attempts to balance a pragmatic approach to sexuality, a concern for women's reproductive health and general well-being, and a sincere regard for Catholic social teaching and medical ethics, *The Laws of Life* shares many of the key tensions of O'Brien's oeuvre and its handling of sex and fertility.⁶ Keane's motion (which, following arduous discussion, was convincingly defeated) and the debates which precipitated it have been discussed at length in a range of contexts, as have their implications for O'Brien's career.⁷ However, what the debates suggest about the relationship between O'Brien's writing and the birth control movement in Ireland has received far less attention. O'Brien is widely, and rightly, credited with bringing a liberal tolerance and candour to the

⁴ For an exhaustive account of the debate see Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience*, 1968, chap. 4.

⁵ A flavour of Sutherland's ardent pro-natalism may be caught in his alarmist 1922 polemic, *Birth Control: A Statement of Christian Doctrine Against the Neo-Malthusians*, in which he deems the 'declining birth-rate' to be the most serious issue ever to have 'confronted the British people', in comparison with which 'all other dangers, be they of war, of politics, or of disease, are of little moment': "Where are my children?" was the question shouted yesterday from the cinemas. "Let us have children, children at any price," will be the cry of to-morrow.' Halliday Sutherland, *Birth Control: A Statement of Christian Doctrine Against the Neo-Malthusians* (London: Harding and More, 1922), 155.

⁶ Jana Fischerova notes that between 1936 and 1953, five out of O'Brien's nine published novels were submitted to the Board for consideration (*Mary Lavelle*, *The Land of Spices*, *That Lady*, *Pray for the Wanderer*, and *The Flower of May*), with two (*Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices*) being suppressed. Fischerova, "The Banning and Unbanning of Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*," 69; 81 (n.4).

⁷ The debate commenced on 18 November and was resumed on 02, 03, and 09 December, when the motion was defeated by thirty-four votes to two.

Seanad Éireann, "Censorship of Publications—Motion (Resumed).," Pub. L. No. 27 (1942), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1942-12-02/8/>;

Seanad Éireann, "Censorship of Publications—Motion (Resumed).," Pub. L. No. 27 (1942), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1942-12-03/3/>;

Seanad Éireann, "Censorship of Publications—Motion (Resumed).," Pub. L. No. 27 (1942), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1942-12-09/3/>.

For a discussion of the ways in which the ban and the debates it generated surface in O'Brien's work, see Michael Cronin, "Kate O'Brien and the Erotics of Liberal Catholic Dissent," *Field Day Review* 6 (2010): 28–51.

discussion and representation of desire, pleasure, and their often physically and emotionally complicated consequences among the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie, that was often lacking in the literary and public discourse of her day.⁸ Critical accounts of O'Brien's life and writing present her as an ardent advocate of 'aesthetic, emotional, and sexual freedom' for women, a queer dissenting voice who unsettles 'conventional views of femininity' and 'challenges the insularity of Free State Ireland', and 'an aesthete and a subversive' who blends an 'engagement with the art of the novel on modernist terms' with an ongoing appreciation for 'nineteenth-century realism'.⁹ However, in the push to accord O'Brien greater recognition within the canon of Irish modernism and to establish her liberalizing contribution to Irish cultural history, too little work has been done to explore the ideological investments and intellectual origins of her progressive outlook, often resulting in a decontextualized account of O'Brien's sexual politics and a rather anaemic sense of what her outlook on 'liberty' actually entailed. In particular, critics have tended to overlook the extent to which O'Brien's model of an ideal relationship – one compacted between two intelligent, capable, and, above all, 'beautiful' individuals, in which sex is the mutually-fulfilling realization of shared desire, and where children are the products of active choice rather than unavoidable necessity – participates in and responds to ongoing debates concerning birth control and eugenics in European, British, and Irish culture.¹⁰

A notable exception has been Layne Parish Craig, who has situated O'Brien's first novel, *Without My Cloak*, within a wider tradition of 1930s 'family sagas' which respond to the Church of England's 1930 Lambeth Conference – which expressed qualified support for the use of contraceptives by married couples

⁸ Prominent examples include Adele M. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990); Eibhear Walshe, ed., *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993); Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006); Eibhear Walshe, "Kate O'Brien," in *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, ed. Heather Ingman and Cliona Ó Gallchoir (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 227–43; Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity: Sex, Art and Politics in Mary Lavelle and Other Writings* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2011); Michael G. Cronin, *Impure Thoughts: Sexuality, Catholicism and Literature in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), chap. 3; Heather Ingman, *Irish Women's Fiction: From Edgeworth to Enright* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2013), 110–16; 123–30; Gerardine Meaney, "A Disruptive Modernist: Kate O'Brien and Irish Women's Writing," in *A History of Irish Modernism*, ed. Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 276–91.

⁹ Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien*, xvii; Anne Fogarty, "Women and Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 157; Meaney, "A Disruptive Modernist: Kate O'Brien and Irish Women's Writing," 277.

¹⁰ For a probing account of O'Brien's fetishization of beauty and the challenges it poses for those who wish to stress the queer, feminist dimensions of her work, see Patricia Coughlan, "Feminine Beauty, Feminist Writing, and Sexual Role in the Work of Kate O'Brien," in *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*, ed. Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), 59–84. For a more exculpatory account of O'Brien's idealization of beauty, see Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, "La Belle - Kate O'Brien and Female Beauty," in *Women, Social, and Cultural Change in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Dissenting Voices?*, ed. Sarah O'Connor and Christopher C. Shepard (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 183–98.

‘where there is a clearly-felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood’ – and the 1930 Papal encyclical, *Casti Connubii* [of chaste marriage], which denounced efforts to regulate fertility as a ‘calamitous error’ and ‘intrinsically evil’.¹¹ In what follows, I will build on Parish Craig’s account and a range of recent scholarship on the cultural politics of twentieth-century eugenics to explore how issues of desire, fertility, and notions of ‘fitness’ are dramatized in O’Brien’s writing in the 1930s and 40s.¹² In the process, I aim to supplement the more conventional account of the sectarian, male-centred debate around censorship and fertility offered in the previous chapter, by exploring the ways in which O’Brien and a number of other Irish women and female modernists responded to the Censorship Act and its proscriptions. In doing so, I do not wish to conscript O’Brien and her oeuvre as stand-ins for an artificially totalized vision of ‘Irish women’ or the different strands of Irish feminism operative in the period.¹³ However, notwithstanding the apparent idiosyncrasy of O’Brien’s perspective – that of a queer, university-educated member of the Catholic bourgeoisie, whose most productive years were spent in Bloomsbury and Spain – I do wish to argue that she is representative of a broader set of strains and paradoxes that characterize modernism’s often vexed engagement with birth control and eugenics in the inter-war period even as they put pressure on exceptionalist accounts of Ireland’s sexual politics in the 1930s and 40s. To this end, in the final section of this chapter, I situate O’Brien’s handling of these topics in a wider British and European context, to suggest the ways in which a desire to marry a eugenic conception of sex and sexuality with an investment in personal freedom and equality could have potentially noxious political implications even for a notionally progressive author like O’Brien. In order to situate O’Brien’s handling of birth control, eugenics, and sexual health in its Irish cultural context, it is first necessary to explore the wider terrain of women’s responses to the introduction of censorship to Ireland.

¹¹ “Lambeth Conference: Resolutions Archive from 1930,” sec. 15; Pope Pius XI, “*Casti Connubii*,” sec. 61; Craig, *When Sex Changed*, chap. 4.

¹² Layne Parish Craig, “Passion’s Possibilities: Kate O’Brien’s Sexological Discourse in *Without My Cloak*,” *Éire-Ireland* 44, no. 3–4 (2010): 118–39; Craig, *When Sex Changed*, chap. 4.

¹³ For an account of Irish feminisms in this period and the historiographical debates they have generated, see Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women’s Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), chaps. 1 and 2.

‘Always to be legislated for by the other sex’: Women’s Responses to Irish Censorship

If Beckett’s vision of anti-natal independence in *Premier amour/First Love* left little room for fellow-travelling or feminist solidarity, it reflected a broader trend in early opposition to the Censorship Act. For all the voluminous commentary Irish censorship and reproductive rights have generated, women’s responses to the Act and its restrictions on material relating to birth control and abortion in the decades immediately following its passage have proven harder to trace than the sectarian and neo-Malthusian arguments discussed in the previous chapter. That Irish people of all denominations practised birth control and abortion, albeit with regional and class variations, is clear enough.¹⁴ The 1926 Committee on Evil Literature noted that all the major publications concerning birth control were ‘on sale’ in Ireland, and that ‘cheaper pamphlets’ were readily ‘purchasable in the poorer districts of Dublin’.¹⁵ The 1931 Carrigan Report described contraceptive use as ‘extremely prevalent, not only in cities and larger towns, but also in villages and remote parts of the South and West of the country’, with some vendors making ‘no attempt to conceal the sale of them’.¹⁶ Diarmaid Ferriter cites a 1933 letter in which Jesuit social reformer and censorship advocate, Father Richard Devane, informed the Minister for Justice that he was aware of ‘four houses openly engaged in selling contraceptives’ in Dublin alone, with ‘several chemists’ also engaged in the ‘vile traffic’.¹⁷ From 1936 to 1947, the Marie Stopes Society for Constructive Birth Control operated a Mother’s Clinic in Belfast, which offered family planning advice and contraceptives – though not abortions – to married women, while court records on both sides of the border in the decades following independence and partition reveal numerous cases in which young women sought to avoid both the stigma and practical difficulties of single motherhood through illegal terminations, with often calamitous results for their health

¹⁴ Cormac Ó Gráda and Niall Duffy, “Fertility Control in Ireland and Scotland: C.1880-1930, Some New Findings,” *UCD Centre for Economic Research Working Paper Series; WP89/14*, December 1989; Mary E. Daly, *The Slow Failure: Population Decline and Independent Ireland, 1922-1973* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 94–95; Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 193–99.

¹⁵ *Report of the Committee on Evil Literature* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1926), 15.

¹⁶ Carrigan (Chairman), *Report of the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts (1880-85), and Juvenile Prostitution*, 36–37.

¹⁷ Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 193–94.

and well-being.¹⁸ However, Irish historiography has found evidence of the attitudes of women to the legislation which made such measures necessary harder to recover.¹⁹

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a parliamentary debate conducted almost exclusively by men – the Dáil had one female member and the Seanad only four at the time of the Act's passage – the voices of Irish women were conspicuous largely by their absence in public discourse surrounding censorship.²⁰ Notwithstanding the fact that senator Jane Wyse Power (Siobhán Bean an Phaoraigh), who had served as a member of the Irish Film Censorship Appeal Board since 1923, was one of the only parliamentarians directly qualified to speak to both the theory and practice of publications control, women made relatively few comments on the Bill as it moved through both houses of the Oireachtas.²¹ Likewise, in both the literary and popular press, female-authored commentary on the proposed legislation was limited. A notable exception was respected feminist and anti-Treaty republican, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, who addressed a meeting of the Women's Freedom League in Bloomsbury, London in November 1928 on the subject of the 'ridiculous and impossible' legislation.²² In remarks reproduced in the *Irish Times*, Sheehy Skeffington characterized the Bill as an exemplary manifestation of the Free State's patronising and paternalistic attitude towards women: 'We are not to be allowed to use the free will which we are all supposed to enjoy. But we are to have this grandmotherly, or rather, I should say, grandfatherly, legislation imposed on us; for it seems we are always to be legislated for by the other sex.'²³ To appreciative laughter from her audience, Sheehy

¹⁸ Jones, Greta, "Marie Stopes in Ireland - The Mother's Clinic in Belfast, 1936-47"; Cliona Rattigan, "'Crimes of Passion of the Worst Character': Abortion Cases and Gender in Ireland, 1925-50," in *Gender and Power in Irish History*, ed. Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 115–40.

¹⁹ As Diarmaid Ferriter reminds commentators on 1930s Irish culture, one reason for this difficulty, particularly where working-class testimony is concerned, may simply be that '[e]lite debates about censorship and contraception were of little relevance to the majority, who carried on reading the westerns and romances they desired and having the children they felt duty-bound to.' Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London: Profile, 2005), 361.

²⁰ Mary Clancy, "Aspects of Women's Contribution to the Oireachtas Debate in the Irish Free State, 1922-37," in *Women Surviving: Studies in Irish Women's History in the 19th-20th Centuries*, ed. Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (Swords, Co. Dublin, Ireland: Poolbeg, 1989), 210–12; 231–32.

²¹ Wyse Power's contributions to the drafting of the Bill were confined to practical reflections on the size of the proposed board, the necessity of anonymity for its members, and the need to recognize individual submissions from the public in its operation. Seanad Éireann, "Censorship of Publications Bill, 1928 —Third Stage.," Pub. L. No. 12.5 (1929), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1929-04-25/2/>; Seanad Éireann, "Censorship of Publications Bill, 1928 —Third Stage (Resumed).," Pub. L. No. 12.10 (1929), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1929-05-15/4/>; Seanad Éireann, "Public Business. Censorship of Publications Bill, 1928 Recommittal Stage.," Pub. L. No. 12.12 (1929), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1929-06-05/8/>.

²² Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, 'A woman's view of censorship: "ridiculous and impossible"', *Irish Times* (23 November 1928), reproduced in Margaret Ward, ed., *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Féiner Her Memoirs and Political Writings* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2017), 254.

²³ Ibid.

Skeffington attributed the Bill to a ‘monastic, celibate’ mindset which viewed women as ‘not only dangerous and explosive, but also rather an indecent quantity’.²⁴ As Shaw would do in his response to the Censorship Act, Sheehy Skeffington detected in this misogynistic puritanism a fixation with women’s dress and appearance often more perverse than the attitudes of those whose works they sought to suppress: ‘They linger on the shortness of women’s hair or her skirts, and seem to regard such things as just a little immoral (Laughter).’²⁵ While Sheehy Skeffington did not critique the Bill’s prohibition of birth control literature in and of itself, she did express concern that it would inadvertently see ‘some of the best papers’ from Britain banned.²⁶ She also playfully foregrounded the issue of reproduction by presenting the ‘grandmotherly’ legislation as the mental off-spring of its inherently suspect male authors: ‘This bill, of course, was fathered by a lawyer, and anything that comes from a lawyer’s brain we women have learnt to distrust.’²⁷ Sheehy Skeffington concluded her critique on a somewhat glib note of defiance, arguing that ‘as far as we women are concerned, we may let them go ahead with the Censorship Bill; for we shall probably read in the end exactly what we want.’²⁸ That these remarks were made to a feminist society in liberal Bloomsbury, rather than an equivalent group in Dublin goes some way to undermine the blithe certainty of their conclusion. Returning to the topic almost a decade later for the New York *Saturday Review*, Sheehy Skeffington was more emphatic in highlighting and critiquing the Act’s pro-natalism, and its broader impact on the capacity of Irish people to regulate their sexual lives:

The unusual, the daring, any criticism of the Catholic Church generally, or of individual clerics, indictments of marriage, sex, hygiene, medical views of birth control, sex education for the young, all these are marked down, Marie Stopes, stock, lock and barrel, and writers like Bertrand Russell (*Marriage and Morals*) and Havelock Ellis (*Essays of Love and Virtue*) as well as Jules Romain’s *Men of Good Will* are lumped together under the absurd formula ‘in general tendency indecent’.²⁹

Offering a taxonomy of recently banned books, Sheehy Skeffington highlighted a range of titles in which birth control, abortion, or women’s reproductive freedom and sexual self-knowledge feature prominently, including Ethel Mannin’s *Common-Sense and the Child: A Plea for Freedom* (1931), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New*

²⁴ Ibid, 255.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, ‘Censorship in Éire’, *The Saturday Review*, New York (18 March 1939), reproduced in Ward, 350.

World (1932), Sinclair Lewis's *Ann Vickers* (1933), Vera Brittain's *Honourable Estate* (1936), and Signe Toksvig's *Eve's Doctor* (1937).³⁰ In many areas Sheehy Skeffington's criticisms overlap with those of the male, Protestant critics of the Act cited in the previous chapter – like Yeats, Beckett, and others she detects in the Act a blend of anti-intellectualism, prudery, and undue deference to ecclesiastical authority that threatens freedom of thought and expression and meaningful notions of cultural value. However, where the debates charted in the previous chapter largely framed birth control as a demographic and, implicitly, sectarian issue, Sheehy Skeffington appears more concerned with the realities of sex and fertility and their management in individual lives, particularly those of women.

This granular sensitivity to lived sexual experience is reflected in the texts Sheehy Skeffington singles out. Mannin's *Common-Sense and the Child*, a frank and polemical parenting manual heavily influenced by Freud and Adler, drew directly on her experiences in raising her daughter Jean (pictured in Mannin's author headshot) and featured chapters on 'Sex-Knowledge and the Child', 'The Sexual Life of the Child', and 'The 'Sins' of the Child', which included masturbation, sexual play, and 'fornicatory language'.³¹ In a moment which succinctly offends against multiple aspects of the 1929 Censorship Act, Mannin describes the questions the nine-year-old Jean had for her following a trip they took with a friend of Mannin's to a gynaecologist. When asked why the friend emerged from her consultation crying at the news that she was pregnant, Mannin proceeded to explain to Jean that 'people mated because they liked doing so, not always because they wanted to have children' and described 'a rubber pessary to her, as simply as possible'.³² No less direct in its rendering of the physical realities of fertility and embodiment was Toksvig's *Eve's Doctor*, a novel set in an Irish maternity hospital closely modelled on the Rotunda, where Toksvig had undergone a hysterectomy and developed a close (most likely romantic) relationship with the Master, Bethel Solomons in 1931.³³ The novel is framed as a conflict between the 'materialist, cosmopolitan,' and studiously

³⁰ Ibid, 349.

³¹ Mannin, a prolific author and ardent sex reformer, became a familiar figure to the Anglo-Irish literati through her relationship with the W.B. Yeats, who was introduced to Mannin by Norman Haire to test the efficacy of the Steinach rejuvenation operation he had just performed on the ageing poet. Ethel Mannin, *Common-Sense and the Child: A Plea for Freedom* (London: Jarrolds, 1931), chaps. 9, 10, and 18; Hassett, *W.B. Yeats and the Muses*, 182.

³² Mannin, *Common-Sense and the Child: A Plea for Freedom*, 108.

³³ Toksvig's research for the novel and developing relationship with Solomons can be traced through her diaries from 1931 to 1937. Lis Pihl records that, preparing the diaries for possible future publication in 1967, Toksvig excised fifteen pages which detailed a crisis in her marriage precipitated by her involvement with Solomons. Lis Pihl, "'A Muzzle Made in Ireland': Irish Censorship and Signe Toksvig," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 88, no. 352 (1999): 451–52; Sandra McAvoy, "All About Eve: Signe Toksvig and the Intimate Lives of Irish Women, 1926–1937," *Irish Review* 42 (Summer 2010): 47; Signe Toksvig, *Signe Toksvig's Irish Diaries, 1926–1937*, ed. Lis Pihl (Dublin: Lilliput Press,

‘progressive’ Michael Murrough – a sensitive and professional gynaecologist who ‘did not go to mass, did not belong to a party, and openly scoffed at compulsory Irish’ – and Frank Carrick, a loyal member of the government party (implicitly Fianna Fáil) and nephew of the local priest, who, through a combination of incompetence and deference to Catholic medical ethics has ‘killed or maimed more women than Jack the Ripper’.³⁴ Throughout the novel, the spectre of clerically sanctioned pro-natalism is evoked through the figure of the assistant surgeon, Shawn O’Rourke, who studiously observes Murrough in the hope of catching him performing an operation ‘unlawful under the laws of both God and man’, so that he can report it to the ultra-orthodox Father Cooley and see him dismissed.³⁵ In a dénouement that anticipates the fraught ethical dilemmas generated by the infamous Eighth Amendment to the 1937 constitution, Murrough is ultimately replaced by Carrick after privileging the life of a healthy mother over that of her hydrocephalic foetus during a protracted and meticulously described birth. That an appetite existed for the novel’s candour and insistent concern with fertility politics is reflected in the weekly ‘What Dublin Is Reading’ feature of the *Irish Times*, in which *Eve’s Doctor* appeared on multiple occasions during the month between its publication and suppression.³⁶

While Sheehy Skeffington did not directly mention O’Brien in her 1938 article, she had singled out the author for praise the previous September in a talk on ‘Irish Women Writers’ chaired by O’Brien herself.³⁷ O’Brien’s oeuvre undoubtedly shares a great deal with the work Mannin and Toksvig in both outlook and subject matter. As a range of commentators have noted, physical, emotional, and sexual development are a recurrent concern in O’Brien’s work, from the three generations of Considine family traced from birth to maturity in *Without My Cloak*, to the *Bildungsroman* format of *The Land of Spices* and the queer, feminist rewriting of *A Portrait of the Artist* (1916) for which it provides the vehicle.³⁸ Likewise, as *Without My Cloak*’s title suggests through its simultaneous punning evocation of unprotected sex and the

1994); William Murphy, “Solomons, Bethel Albert Herbert,” in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a8187>.

³⁴ Signe Toksvig, *Eve’s Doctor* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 41; 77; 47.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 77–78.

³⁶ “What Dublin Is Reading,” *Irish Times*, March 1, 1937, 05; “What Dublin Is Reading,” *Irish Times*, March 6, 1937, 07; “What Dublin Is Reading,” *Irish Times*, March 20, 1937, 07.

³⁷ The talk was given to the Women’s Freedom League in Minerva House, Bloomsbury and was reported in the group’s *October Bulletin*. See Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, 342–43.

³⁸ This queer, intertextual, Joycean reading of *The Land of Spices* is most fully articulated in Margot Backus and Joseph Valente, “*The Land of Spices*, the Enigmatic Signifier, and the Stylistic Invention of Lesbian (In)Visibility,” *Irish University Review* 43, no. 1 (May 2013): 55–73.

refusal of obfuscation, questions of fertility and free expression were central to O'Brien's writing from the outset. However, as the rest of this chapter will illustrate, the ideological stakes of this engagement were not as clear cut or as uniformly liberal and progressive as has often been claimed.

The 'weariness and pain of pregnancy': *Without My Cloak* and Birth Control

In his study of the influence of the birth control movement on twentieth-century culture, Layne Parish Craig succinctly sketches the standard tropology of the 1930s birth control novel: 'the weakened mother, the overlarge family beset by economic and health problems, the sexually frustrated husband, and the dysgenic couple who bears sickly children.'³⁹ As Parish Craig notes, all are present in some form or another in *Without My Cloak*, a family saga which saw O'Brien dubbed the 'Irish Galsworthy'.⁴⁰ The novel charts the fortunes of three generations of the Considines – 'Honest John and His Children: 1860-61', 'Molly, Caroline, Denis: 1861-70', and 'Denis: 1874-77' – as they rise from the status of runaway groomsmen to a position of comfort and prosperity amid the Catholic bourgeoisie of Mellick (O'Brien's fictional portrait of her native Limerick).⁴¹ Through the various contortions of its multiple plots, a range of eugenic, sexological, and fertility-related issues are dramatized and debated, including, but not limited to: physical incompatibility and separation (Caroline and her sexually inept husband, Jim), a heavily implied queer romance (Eddy and his London associate, Richard Froud), incestuous flirtation (Eddy and Caroline), venereal disease (Teresa's son Reggie), an extra-marital affair with a foreign sex worker (Anthony), exhaustion through multiple pregnancies (Caroline and Molly), a fatal failure of family planning (Molly), and a forbidden romance across class-lines (Anthony and Molly's son Denis and the illegitimate Christina Roche). In his discussion of the novel, Parish Craig focuses on three of the most substantial of these threads – Anthony and Molly's fatal romance, Caroline's unsatisfying marriage, and Eddy's queerness – with a particular emphasis on O'Brien's engagement with (and subversion of) the work of popular birth control advocates such as Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger. Discussing the intense mutual attraction between Molly and her husband Anthony and

³⁹ Craig, *When Sex Changed*, 100.

⁴⁰ Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, 343.

⁴¹ Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, Repr. (London: Virago, 2006), 8; 102; 230.

its ultimately disastrous consequences for the former's health, he notes the clear debt passages such as the following owe to the work of Stopes and her contemporaries:

She [Molly] knew that he deplored for her the discomfort of incessant childbearing and would do much to lessen it, but saw no help within the social and religious code they both upheld. He knew that childbirth frightened her, wilted and crushed her and gave her in her babies only very slender compensation, for she was by nature far more wife than mother. But it was a problem which they could never thrash out, and it was heightened by the fact that they were both on the crest of life, and if not loving each other very perfectly at all times and in all the regions of love, yet doomed to find a terrible delight, again and again, each in the other's body.⁴²

As Parish Craig notes, O'Brien's willingness to stress the equal intensity of Anthony and Molly's desire for one another, emphasize the shared satisfaction it affords them, and highlight the discomfort, fear, and harm the resultant pregnancies cause Molly all indicate a sympathy for and familiarity with contemporary sex manuals such as Stopes's best-selling *Married Love* (1918).⁴³ This sympathy is no less apparent in O'Brien's decision to attribute the fatal fecundity of the couple to the Roman Catholic 'social and religious code' to which they both subscribe and which, in the prefatory materials to *Married Love*, Stopes had presented as little more than a sanction for degeneration: 'Is then a Roman Catholic mother, the increases to whose large family get punier and punier, to be privileged to go deliberately with that host of puny children *at the expense of others*, not only through that part of Eternity called Time, but through all Eternity?'⁴⁴ As Parish Craig rightly highlights, this depiction of the late nineteenth-century Catholic middle classes as ignorant of and unwilling to engage in any form of family planning was, in fact, an expedient inaccuracy – in reality, by the 1870s, family size among the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie was in decline.⁴⁵ However, the polemical value of this anachronistic image of an over-populated Catholic Ireland in which innumerable women were sacrificed on the altar of uncontrolled fertility was too great to overlook, and both Stopes and O'Brien exploited it accordingly.⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid, 76.

⁴³ Craig, *When Sex Changed*, 106–12.

⁴⁴ Stopes, *Married Love*, 1918, xvii.

⁴⁵ Layne Parish Craig, 'Passion's Possibilities,' 123; Timothy Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration, and the Rural Economy in Ireland, 1850-1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 248–52.

⁴⁶ Stopes devotes a chapter of her 1933 broadside, *Roman Catholic Methods of Birth Control*, to 'Ireland, the Tail-Wagger', in which she offers an (unsurprisingly sectarian and tacitly Hibernophobic) account of the 'Roman Catholic intrigue' that introduced censorship to Ireland, and outlines its ramifications for the freedom of the British press. By obliging any British publication that wished to see the light of day in Ireland to exclude any material relating to birth control, Stopes argues, the 'Irish tail wagged the great English dog of the press'. In a succeeding chapter on 'Roman Catholic Defectives and the State', Stopes goes on to offer a Carlylean image of the Irish as degenerate over-breeders, who threaten to overwhelm a Protestant stronghold like Scotland with 'a race less moral and law-abiding than her own

While Parish Craig's account of the ways in which O'Brien's novel appropriates elements of contemporary birth control and sexological literature in order to offer a feminist critique of pro-natalism and a franker and more pleasure-centred engagement with sex and desire is well-supported and persuasively argued, his broader characterization of O'Brien's sexual politics invites a number of questions. Contrasting *Without My Cloak* with Charles Gilman Norris's *Seed: A Novel of Birth Control* (1930) – a similarly structured, but, as its title suggests, more orthodox and explicitly polemical endorsement of family planning – Craig argues that, where 'Norris's advocacy circumscribes his readers' contraceptive options within conventional – and eugenic – boundaries', O'Brien's 'undercover' birth control novel 'calls her readership towards a radically inclusive, woman-friendly approach to reproductive and sexual freedom.'⁴⁷ While undoubtedly more 'woman-friendly' and less orthodox or consistent in its sexual politics than *Seed* or some of the eugenicist tracts that inspired it, I would take issue with Craig's assertion that O'Brien's writing is 'radically inclusive' in its agenda or particularly forceful in its challenge to the 'conventional' boundaries of contemporary eugenics. Beyond the obvious paradox of a 'radically inclusive' eugenics – a difficult proposition for an ideological programme and reproductive system premised upon selection and exclusion – I would argue that such a reading risks eliding a central tension (and frequent source of contradiction) in O'Brien's work: the difficulty of squaring a eugenic approach to sex and sexuality with an aversion to authoritarianism and a passion for personal liberty.⁴⁸ The eugenics and birth control movements undoubtedly provided a conceptual framework and vocabulary through which O'Brien could critique and confront what she perceived as the heteronormativity, pro-natalism, and cultural isolationism of the Free State and its censorship regime. However, that framework and vocabulary came with an often noxious set of ideological presuppositions from which O'Brien would find it difficult and sometimes impossible to extricate her writing. A sense of the ways in which this tension informs O'Brien's work can be caught through an examination of what might be termed the cultural politics of O'Brien's candour regarding sex and sexuality in O'Brien's second novel, *The Ante-Room* (1934).

sons and daughters'. Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Roman Catholic Methods of Birth Control* (London: Peter Davies, 1933), 189; 191; 203.

⁴⁷ Craig, *When Sex Changed*, 103.

⁴⁸ For a succinct outline of the tensions and paradoxes confronting those who sought to advocate a more moderate and liberal 'reform eugenics' in the 1930s, see Macnicol, "The Voluntary Sterilization Campaign in Britain, 1918-39," 422–27.

‘She had better know the facts’: *The Ante-Room* and the Cultural Politics of Candour

If much of the narrative tension and dramatic irony of the Anthony-Molly plot-line of *Without My Cloak* was premised upon an unstated and anachronistic readerly awareness that contemporary methods of birth control and family planning could have averted its tragic outcome, a similarly anachronistic perspective on questions of sexual health and fertility was to become an explicit, almost jarring feature of the novel’s semi-sequel, *The Ante-Room*. Centred on the ‘Eve of All Saints’, the ‘Feast of All Saints’, and the ‘Feast of All Souls’ – the three days in the Catholic calendar most concerned with the boundary between life and death – the novel has rightly been discussed in terms of its juxtaposition of ‘mortal and eternal’ temporal perspectives.⁴⁹ However, this emphasis on the contrast between the dying Teresa Mulqueen’s faith in a divinely vouchsafed afterlife and her daughter Agnes’s more anxious awareness of the day-to-day personal cost of Catholic doctrine has occluded another significant temporal tension in the novel: the gulf between the historical moment of the plot – 1880 – and the socio-cultural moment of its narration – the early 1930s. This gap, which O’Brien repeatedly and deliberately highlights, manifests itself in a curious mode of narratorial anachronism that is consistently associated with discussions of desire and sexual health. This is most apparent in O’Brien’s presentation of the ardently anti-romantic young misogynist, Dr Curran. When Curran realizes himself to be both physically and emotionally in thrall to the novel’s protagonist, Agnes Mulqueen, his response is introduced explicitly in terms of its historical and cultural situatedness:

He was on fire, and for a space could do no more than suffer the unexpected flames.

But he was not a poet. He was a Victorian bourgeois, rationalist in the idiom of his mind, Catholic in tradition and practice, a man eager to harness feeling into usefulness.⁵⁰

Confronting his feelings again following the realization that Agnes was in love with her sister’s husband, Vincent, Curran is again discussed explicitly in terms of his ‘rationalism’, ‘flat prose’, and status as a ‘Victorian bourgeois in a temper’.⁵¹ As the playfully self-aware reference to ‘flat prose’ suggests, sometimes this anachronistic perspective seems to trouble the borders of the novel’s fictional world, granting a

⁴⁹ Bridget English, *Laying Out the Bones: Death and Dying in the Modern Irish Novel* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017), 65.

⁵⁰ Kate O’Brien, *The Ante-Room* (London: Virago, 1997), 57.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 186.

character like Curran a level of almost metanarrative insight: ‘He looked up again at the familiar furnishings of his solid, ugly study, and he laughed. This was 1880, and he was a small-town doctor. Where had his sense of humour gone?’⁵² There is, undoubtedly, an element of under-examined, even self-congratulatory presentism to this anachronistic narratorial perspective. Where Curran makes a futile effort to restrain and channel his lust, O’Brien seems to imply, she and her worldly, Freud-literate readership know that such repression will only sublimate his desires. However, to read O’Brien’s early novels as offering an unreflective Whig interpretation of Irish sexuality is to overlook the strategic political ends to which presentism is consciously being deployed in these texts and to ignore the multiple readerships they simultaneously address. There is a polemical, even coercive reasonableness to the candid and matter-of-fact tone in which so many of the more notionally salacious aspects of O’Brien’s narratives are rendered that distinguishes her writing about sex and sexuality from her male contemporaries’ more ribald, but often more squeamish handling of the topic.

As Parish Craig has suggested, when engaging with the topic of sexuality, O’Brien’s historical novels had to navigate three separate contexts and corresponding levels of assumed sexual knowledge, experience, and possibility: the late nineteenth-century Ireland in which they were set, the post-Censorship Act Ireland they implicitly addressed, and the British and American contexts in which they were published and circulated.⁵³ An examination of how the physical, emotional, and social impact of Reggie Mulqueen’s syphilis are presented and discussed in *The Ante-Room* offers an opportunity to identify O’Brien’s methods and motives in addressing these three contexts. In a novel peopled with medical professionals and insistently concerned with the practical, emotional, and spiritual challenges of chronic illness, it is telling that Teresa Mulqueen’s cancer is handled with greater euphemistic circumspection than her son Reggie’s syphilis. Despite catalysing *The Ante-Room*’s plot and determining its duration, Teresa’s malady is not explicitly named until the novel’s ante-penultimate chapter, with the reader otherwise left to infer the nature of her illness from descriptions of her pain, various surgeries, and passing references to the nature of the English cancer expert Sir Godfrey Bartlett-Crowe’s specialism.⁵⁴ By contrast, Reggie’s full medical history,

⁵² Ibid, 187.

⁵³ Layne Parish Craig, “Passion’s Possibilities,” 125.

⁵⁴ Bartlett-Crowe is identified as ‘one of the greatest authorities on cancer now living’ in the novel’s fourth chapter, but it is not until page two-hundred and eighty-eight of three-hundred and six that Teresa is described as having ‘borne the fluctuating tortures of three years of cancer’. O’Brien, *The Ante-Room*, 44; 288.

including the name, nature, and debilitating physical and social implications of his illness, are matter-of-factly narrated early in chapter two:

Reggie was now thirty-five. Ten years ago, in 1870, he had been infected with syphilis, and for three years had spent long periods in nursing homes, until sufficiently cured to live uninterruptedly at home. But marriage and love were forbidden him henceforward and seasonal doses of mercury, increased and decreased as considered necessary, and doing their specific work, also did harm. But a greater harm was wrought upon the mind and spirit by the sustained humiliations and fears of his state of health, so that a native invalidism became a justified habit, until he gave up all pretence of doing any work, or leading the life of a normal man.⁵⁵

The forthright tone and medical lexicon which mark this passage, particularly in its punning use of the term ‘specific’, owe more to the case histories and medical treatises surveyed in Chapter Three than they do to the romance genre within which the novel otherwise situates itself. This strategic transposition of late nineteenth-century syphological discourse into what is notionally framed as a popular romance setting serves to facilitate a franker handling of the topic of sexual health, even as the passage’s somewhat archaic phraseology and syntax (‘wrought upon the mind’, ‘native invalidism’) performatively suggest that such frankness is long overdue. Indeed, the novel even goes so far as to congratulate itself for its own forthrightness (and to praise its reader for what it assumes to be their want of squeamishness) when the narrator recounts how Dr Curran communicated the nature of Reggie’s condition to Agnes:

[As] he realised that Agnes was perplexed about her brother’s ill-health without knowing anything definite to it, he decided that for everybody’s sake she had better know the facts. Briefly and accurately, then, he gave them to her; but he was a conventional and puritanical young man, she was a young unmarried lady, and the year was 1880. They did not get through the conversation without some embarrassed pauses.⁵⁶

As the pointed (and, by this point in the narration, superfluous) reference to the year in which the event takes place seems intended to make clear, unlike Agnes and Curran, neither O’Brien nor the reader have any excuse to be ‘conventional’, ‘puritanical’, or ‘embarrassed’ about the topic of sexual health or the details of Reggie’s case. Indeed, O’Brien presents the ‘sense of release and naturalness’ this candour brings and the sense of ‘ease and confidence’ to which it gives rise as the basis for the couple’s (albeit frustrated) intimacy and the grounds of possibility for Curran’s growing attraction to Agnes.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 18–19.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 55.

As several critics have noted, this interplay between *Eros* and *Thanatos* is one of the primary structuring tensions of the novel, staged both in Teresa's refusal to die until the future of the syphilitic Reggie has been secured through marriage, and in Marie-Rose's husband Vincent's conviction that suicide is the only way to escape the impasse of his thwarted love for his sister-in-law, Agnes. For Bridget English, one of the more provocative formal features of O'Brien's novel in this regard is its pessimistic subversion of the traditional narrative telos of the romance genre. In English's view, by permanently sundering the novel's primary romantic pairing – the only union in the text governed wholly by mutual desire and sympathy – through a suicide framed in terms of Catholic martyrology, O'Brien presents the conflict between 'Catholicism and secular modernity' as fatally insoluble: 'The old world may be dying, but *The Ante-Room* offers no vision of a new world to come'.⁵⁷ English is right to emphasize the novel's failure to articulate an alternative to the Catholic social order it critiques, but, if anything, understates the thoroughgoing sterility of its conclusion and overlooks the centrality of sex and sexual health to its construction and articulation. In particular, what is missed in English's reading are the ways in which the novel's subversion of the traditional trajectory of the romance plot by extension serves to dramatize the frustration and failure of the model of heterosexual reproductive futurity upon which that plot is premised. In this sense, the novel pointedly resists what Patricia Dreschel Tobin has termed the 'genealogical imperative' of the nineteenth-century realist novel and the thematic and structural investments in families and filiation with which a range of critics have associated the form.⁵⁸ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the fact that the only relationship successfully compacted during the novel is one that has been consistently framed in terms of the impossibility of its safe consummation: the engagement of the syphilitic Reggie to the socially ambitious Nurse Cunningham. At multiple points throughout the novel the reader is reminded that Reggie is 'a man unfit to love, unfit to marry'; 'a wreck'; 'invalided and incapable'; a 'ruin'.⁵⁹ So apparent is Reggie's disqualification from the ranks of those deemed suitable for reproduction that both Curran and Bartlett-Crowe are able to diagnose him on sight, while his sister Agnes (the novel's most consistent voice of liberal

⁵⁷ English, *Laying Out the Bones*, 65.

⁵⁸ Patricia Dreschel Tobin, *Time and the Novel: The Genealogical Imperative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); James Kilroy, *The Nineteenth-Century English Novel: Family Ideology and Narrative Form* (New York: Palgrave, 2007); Barry McCrea, *In the Company of Strangers: Family and Narrative in Dickens, Conan Doyle, Joyce, and Proust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁵⁹ O'Brien, *The Ante-Room*, 17; 22; 184; 288.

Catholic dissent) is ‘horrificed’ by his touch, and responds to news of his engagement with ‘horror’ and ‘distaste’ (while, admittedly, censuring herself for the ‘folly’ of such feelings).⁶⁰ One might argue that, in so ardently emphasizing the sterility of Reggie and Nurse Cunningham’s anticipated union, O’Brien performs what Barry McCrea has presented as modernism’s characteristic subversion of the realist novel’s ‘genealogical imperative’, in the process queerly frustrating the implicit pro-natalism of both the nineteenth-century, middle-class Catholic culture she is dramatizing and the post-Censorship Act nation she is implicitly addressing.⁶¹ However, as the consistently negative, often disgusted tone of these remarks suggest, in doing so, one must also concede that O’Brien’s handling of Reggie and his condition exposes an aspect of her much-celebrated progressive frankness concerning sex and sexuality that is less than comfortable for contemporary readers: the debts it owes not only to the discourses and vocabulary of the eugenics movement, but also to its normative commitments and proscriptions.

‘I’d be afraid to have a child’: O’Brien’s Eugenic Romances

Notwithstanding the debateable sympathy with which Reggie’s inner life is handled – his refusal to confront his mother’s impending death is presented as a psychologically coherent but nevertheless embarrassing failure of masculine self-possession – O’Brien’s depiction of his physical appearance and fumbling efforts at seduction are consistently inflected with a tacit eugenicist disquiet, often verging on revulsion:

He was a large wreck of a man, and although he had the habit of moving with caution, a non-adjustment between his big, virile bones and his increasing flaccidity kept him clumsy. His flesh, uniformly red, was dry and flaky about his mouth and bulging neck, and sweaty on his forehead and hands. His hair, which Teresa remembered thick and dark and wavy, had receded completely from his temples and the top of his head, and was only a dusty straggle about his ears and the back of his skull. His eyes, well set, and once quite fine with a spark of impudent virility, were lashless and bloodshot, and the black brows above them thinned away to untidy tufts. His teeth were discoloured and broken; his hands thick, hot and beautifully cared for. His whole appearance had an exaggerated, antiseptic immaculacy. He was a wreck, but still, in the tilt of his shoulders, and in the smile that now lit his face for Teresa, there were revealed the tatters of a commonplace charm, a departed power to please women.⁶²

The passage is worth quoting at length not only for the tensions it reveals between O’Brien’s liberal (or, at least, anti-censorious) candour and her eugenicist investments, but for the ways in which it reveals these

⁶⁰ Ibid, 280; 295; 296.

⁶¹ McCrea, *In the Company of Strangers*, Introduction.

⁶² O’Brien, *The Ante-Room*, 21–22.

principles to be co-extensive. In its particulars – hair loss, skin irritation, tooth decay – the description offers an accurate, if somewhat sensationalized, depiction of the effects of mercury treatment, a remedy often more harmful than the infection it was intended to combat.⁶³ This graphic detail and unwillingness to euphemize the nature or ramifications of Reggie’s condition clearly seem intended to affront the prudery and state-mandated culture of silence with which O’Brien appears to have associated the Censorship of Publications Act. However, in its emphasis on Reggie’s flabby impotence, decayed virility, and implicitly feminine fastidiousness, the passage betrays an investment in a eugenic ideal of normative masculinity and physical ability reproduced through well-regulated generative sexual activity. While these features of the description may well form part of a performative evocation of the nexus of degenerationist anxieties and naturalist aesthetics the novel’s 1880 setting evokes, they also seem to suggest that O’Brien’s paradigm for determining the suitability or ‘fitness’ of a union was closely bound up with contemporary sexual science. *The Ante-Room*’s image of a childless union compacted for reasons of palliative care and financial gain stands in sharp contrast to *Without My Cloak*, which, as has been noted, presented the Considine family as an ever-expanding clan of hyper-fertile, middle-class Catholics sorely in need of a reliable method of contraception. While in *Without My Cloak* Teresa still possesses the same all-encompassing desire to see Reggie cured ‘so that he might marry and she might see his sons before she died’, in the earlier novel Teresa’s syphilitic son is presented as the exception to an otherwise healthy and fertile generation of Catholic bourgeoisie, confident in its capacity to ‘reproduce’ itself both socially and sexually:

She had grandchildren now. Her eldest daughter, Alice, married these four years to young Dr Condon of Galway, was about to have her third child this summer. Moreover, Daniel, Teresa’s third son, who was on the Stock Exchange, was engaged to a nice, healthy girl, and would no doubt be quick to reproduce himself when wedded. And Marie-Rose had become engaged at Easter.⁶⁴

No such quiet confidence bolsters *The Ante-Room*, whose cast is depicted as increasingly isolated from this familial network in a home which has ‘grown very quiet’.⁶⁵ There are shades of Ibsen in this narrative emphasis on a relationship which pointedly offends against a model of social reproduction rooted in generative (and eugenic) sexual activity. Like *Ghosts*, the *Ante-Room* suggests that the social order it

⁶³ Claude Quétel, *History of Syphilis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 31–32; Kevin Brown, *The Pox: The Life and Near Death of a Very Social Disease* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006), 23–25. For nineteenth-century attitudes and approaches to syphilis as a medical and social issue, see Quétel, *History of Syphilis*, chap. 5.

⁶⁴ O’Brien, *Without My Cloak*, 422–23.

⁶⁵ O’Brien, *The Ante-Room*, 7.

dramatizes is too constraining of desire, invested in propriety, and inimical to honest discussion of emotional and sexual matters to deserve or be capable of anything other than iterative decay. Likewise, in its image of an insular community in which Catholic social teaching conspires to frustrate the desires of the most ‘virile’, able, and attractive, while, at the same time, endorsing a dysgenic union such as Reggie’s, there is more than a hint of Synge in *The Ante-Chamber*’s bleak outlook. Most obviously, Vincent – alongside Dr Curran, the most eligible and eugenically appealing male inhabitant of Mellick presented in the novel – dies without having fathered a child. There is no younger generation figured or suggested in the text to take up the narrative as the cast of *The Ante-Room* does from *Without My Cloak*. Likewise, while notionally undertaken so that Agnes and Marie-Rose may ‘flower again’, there is something pointedly backward-looking in the emotional and psychological framing of Vincent’s suicide.⁶⁶ While undoubtedly presented in conversation with the tradition of Catholic martyrdom traced by English, Vincent’s decision to take his own life is also pointedly framed in terms of the unresolved Oedipal imbroglio to which his relationship with Agnes presents the apparent solution. This is clearest in the novel’s concluding sentences, which transcribe Vincent’s final thoughts: ‘Darling mother. He smiled. He could see every detail of her smile. Darling mother. He pulled the trigger, his thoughts far off in boyhood.’⁶⁷ This insistent Freudian transposition of Agnes and Vincent’s mother, whose traumatic early death appears to have arrested Vincent’s psycho-sexual development, is a recurrent motif of the novel, and is presented as central to Vincent’s attraction to his wife’s sister:

‘When I’m tired the two of you get mixed in my head. But she wasn’t ever, I should think, as beautiful as you. Only she had the trick you have – of somehow being perfection!’
She took his hands and kissed them.

‘It seems to me,’ she said, ‘that she passed on that trick to you! Oh, I love you so much, so much!’

[...]

‘If you’re ever the mother of a son,’ he sobbed, ‘oh, don’t die until he’s hardened to the idea!’

‘I’d be afraid to have a child! There’s too much in this business of attachment!’⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid, 304.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 306.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 255.

Read in the light of his remarks concerning the interchangeability of Agnes and his mother in his memory and affections, Vincent's insistence that Agnes should not die before her prospective son has sufficiently 'hardened' takes on a suggestively Freudian complexion. However, rather than resolve this Oedipal attachment through a primitivist escape to the idealized, neo-Hellenist landscape of 'Aegean hills', 'Adriatic rocks', and 'children with [Agnes] for mother' he envisages while trying to persuade Agnes to run away with him, Vincent ends his life with an act of fatal nostalgia.⁶⁹ Indeed, as Agnes's remarks suggest, not only does Vincent's sublimated incestuous desire root him in a past he is unable to transcend, but the attachment to which it gives rise likewise robs her of her willingness to reproduce, frustrating any apparent futurity that might be signalled by the respectable, if unsatisfying marriage the novel implies she will compact with Dr Curran. By having its most traditionally virile male character kill himself before having fathered a child, leaving behind a lover who has foresworn children and who concludes the novel wishing that she 'could only die', O'Brien's novel seems to augur no future for a society in which Catholic doctrine governs romantic and sexual behaviour.⁷⁰

Yet, by staking the tragic character of its conclusion upon the frustration of this eugenic union and the flourishing of its dysgenic counterpart (Reggie's marriage), the novel reveals the tensions and contradictions that awaited those who employed eugenic thought as a mechanism to critique conservative and pro-natalist sexual cultures. The eugenicist perspective O'Brien adopts in *The Ante-Room* allows her to indict Irish Catholic doctrine and social teaching concerning sex and sexuality by implying that, in prohibiting divorce and disrupting the free and open acknowledgement of desire and the discussion of its consequences, Irish Catholic culture was obstructing its own most cherished reproductive ends and, in the process, compromising the physical and mental well-being of future generations of its adherents. The 'genealogical imperative' of the nineteenth-century novel is thus not, as a McCrea-inspired reading would have it, deconstructed or queered, so much as suspended in order that its absence might be mourned. Likewise, in implying that candour regarding sexuality was valuable precisely because, without it, it would be impossible to determine who should or should not reproduce and under what circumstances, O'Brien unintentionally reveals the extent to which, for those who sought to wed a eugenic approach to sex and

⁶⁹ Ibid, 258.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 301.

sexuality with a liberal political outlook, a commitment to freedom (particularly of expression and sexual activity) and an investment in equality could come into direct conflict. While it is clear that O'Brien believes the Catholic Church's opposition to divorce and its censorious proscriptions concerning the discussion of sex and reproduction are a dysgenic threat to the propagation of Irish society, it is less clear that she is certain that a figure such as Reggie should enjoy the same freedom to pursue relationships as his more biologically 'fit' siblings. O'Brien was not alone in confronting this difficulty, and the moments of strain it generates in her work reflect a tension at the heart of both the eugenics movement and the twentieth-century liberal-democratic state when confronted with the need to balance individual freedoms with the demands of public health.

'King Demos must be bred like all other kings': Liberty, Equality, and Eugenics

The question of whether a 'liberal eugenics' is possible, and, if so, desirable, remains a live one to this day.⁷¹ As many commentators have noted, in a post-Holocaust world, the phrase can sound almost oxymoronic.⁷² The term 'eugenics' has become so indelibly associated with state-mandated programmes of forced sterilization, mass extermination, and fantasies of 'racial purity', that it has come to function for many as a self-evident signifier of moral reprehensibility.⁷³ Even before the rise of Hitler, the eugenics movement was being critiqued for its apparent disregard for individual liberty and its failure to value all human life equally. In a detailed and even-handed discussion of 'The Catholic Church and Race Culture' featured in the *Dublin Review* in 1911, the English cleric Thomas J. Gerrard detected in the eugenic 'zeal for reform' the seeds of nascent 'oppression':

Feeble-mindedness is so often a cause of poverty, and poverty so often a cause of feeble-mindedness, that there is a danger of confusing one with the other. Catholics, therefore, need to

⁷¹ For an influential recent attempt to outline a 'liberal eugenics', see Nicholas Agar, *Liberal Eugenics: In Defence of Human Enhancement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

⁷² For commentators such as Jürgen Habermas and Michael J. Sandel, to attempt to accommodate the principles of eugenics within a liberal political framework is to arrive at a model of liberalism so far removed from traditional understandings of the term as to no longer merit the name. Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), chap. 6; Michael J. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2007), chap. 4.

⁷³ The convolutions and solipsisms to which the debate has given rise are captured in the tongue-in-cheek title of a recent survey of the topic, 'How Liberal is (the Liberal Critique) of a Liberal Eugenics?' Nathan Van Camp, "How Liberal Is (the Liberal Critique) of a Liberal Eugenics?," *HUMANAMENTE Journal of Philosophical Studies* 7, no. 26 (May 2014): 223–38.

exercise a strong vigilance, lest, under pretence of eugenic reform, the rights of the poor are infringed. Poverty is no bar to the sacrament of marriage.⁷⁴

Such objections were not confined to Catholic ecclesiastical circles. As early as 1901, G.K. Chesterton could be found arguing in a review of Karl Pearson's *National Life from the Standpoint of Science* (1901) that, in advocating the 'crushing and driving out' of 'weaker and more barbarous races', eugenics constituted little more than the 'principle of the survival of the nastiest' and the 'great biological morality of kicking a man when he's down'.⁷⁵ Returning to the topic in 1922, Chesterton presented eugenics as an exemplary manifestation of a 'modern craze for scientific officialism and strict social organization' which, in seeking to bring marriage and sex within the purview of modern medical bureaucracy, proposed 'to control some families [...] as if they were families of pagan slaves'.⁷⁶ For Chesterton, any positive liberty gained through the physical and mental improvements eugenics purported to offer were greatly outweighed by the compromise to negative liberty which institutionally-administered eugenics would entail.⁷⁷ The influential new liberal, L.T. Hobhouse, concurred, arguing that if 'racial progress' was to be sought, it was not through the homogenizing and coercive influence of state-administered programmes of selective-breeding:

[T]he most fundamental necessity from the point of view of racial progress is to maintain an environment in which any new mutation of promise socially considered may thrive and grow, and by this line of argument we arrive once more at the conclusion that liberty, equality of opportunity, and the social atmosphere of justice and considerateness are the most eugenic of agencies.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Rev Thomas J. Gerrard, "The Catholic Church and Race Culture," *Dublin Review* 149 (July 1911): 62. Gerrard argued that while Galton's overall aim was commendable, the movement he had inspired was hampered by both its materialism and its identification with figures such as Shaw and Nietzsche, who sponsored little more than 'a complete return to the life of the beast' (Gerrard, 53). Furthermore, insofar as eugenics was compatible with liberty, equality, and Christian ethics, Gerrard argued, its aims were already being met by the Catholic Church and its programmes of Catholic action (Gerrard, 61-68). Gerrard eventually extended this article and its arguments into a book-length discussion of the topic. Rev Thomas J. Gerrard, *The Church and Eugenics* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1917).

⁷⁵ G.K. Chesterton, "Science and Patriotism," *The Speaker: The Liberal Review*, February 2, 1901, 488.

⁷⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Eugenics and Other Evils* (London: Cassell and Company, 1922), i; 10.

⁷⁷ For an influential outline of the distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' liberty, see Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166-217.

⁷⁸ In the lecture in which these remarks appear, Hobhouse offers an even-handed assessment of 'The Value and Limitations of Eugenics' in which he concludes that, while advocates of eugenics were right to argue that a rational form of artificial selection was preferable to unregulated natural selection, insufficient evidence and consensus existed to support their broader claims about human 'fitness' or licence the illiberal policies through which they sought to cultivate it. Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse, *Social Evolution and Political Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911), 71. Nevertheless, as Diane Paul notes, Hobhouse did concede that, in the case of the 'feeble-minded' – a group whom it was possible 'to identify with fair precision' and 'whose condition is asserted to be hereditary in a marked degree' – the eugenic case for institutionalization or sterilization was a valid one. Hobhouse, 45-46, quoted in Diane Paul, "Eugenics and the Left," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 4 (October 1984): 571-72 n. 12.

Echoing Hobhouse, liberal historian W.L. Blease argued that, by ignoring the role of environment in human development, eugenics risked putting the cart before the horse: ‘only when all have a chance of survival’ would it be possible to ‘distinguish the naturally inefficient from the accidentally inefficient’.⁷⁹ For figures such as Hobhouse and Blease, only when total equality of opportunity had been achieved could eugenics hope to address inequalities of ability effectively, let alone ethically. Until then, in the absence of a reliable and objective means by which to calculate human ‘fitness’ and ability, eugenics, through its tendency to conflate inequality of opportunity with inequality of ability, risked offering a biological sanction to a range of pre-existing prejudices. Confronted with poverty, the new liberal periodical the *Nation* argued, the ‘eugenicist tends to become an aristocrat, morbidly afraid of the ‘uneducated’.⁸⁰ In the aftermath of the First World War, these arguments were taken up by many within the Labour movement, who viewed the Eugenics Society as a coterie of self-congratulatory elitists for whom poverty and mental disability were indistinguishable. When, in July 1931, the Labour MP, A.G. Church, sought leave to introduce a bill advocating voluntary sterilization for ‘mental defectives’, he was robustly denounced by his fellow party member, Hyacinth Morgan, who declared the proposal an ill-considered piece of ‘anti-working-class legislation’ founded on questionable science and reminded his colleague that society was ‘not apical, with the Eugenicist at the top and the hoi-polloi in the valley’.⁸¹ In his 1932 primer, *Genetic Principles in Medicine and Social Science*, Lancelot Hogben, a professor in the newly formed Department of Social Biology at the London School of Economics and a vocal member of the Independent Labour Party, claimed that eugenics had become little more than a smoke-screen for ‘ancestor worship, anti-Semitism, colour prejudice, anti-feminism, snobbery, and obstruction in educational progress’.⁸² In a private letter to A.M. Carr-Saunders

⁷⁹ Walter Lyon Blease, *A Short History of English Liberalism* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913), 340.

⁸⁰ “Eugenics and Social Reform,” *The Nation*, August 27, 1910 quoted in Michael Freedon, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 189.

⁸¹ “Sterilization,” *House of Commons Debates* 255 (July 21, 1931): cols. 1249-56. John Macnicol emphasizes the fringe status of Church and his views within the party, noting his ‘white-collar’ union background and his repeated tendency to defy the party whip. John Macnicol, “Eugenics and the Campaign for Voluntary Sterilization in Britain Between the Wars,” *Social History of Medicine* 2, no. 2 (1989): 162; Macnicol, “The Voluntary Sterilization Campaign in Britain, 1918-39,” 429.

⁸² Lancelot Hogben, *Genetic Principles in Medicine and Social Science* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1932), 210 quoted in Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 123. Hogben was to develop these views further in Lancelot Hogben, “Race and Prejudice,” in *Dangerous Thoughts* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939), 44–58. For an overview of Hogben and his contribution to a left-wing critique of eugenics, see Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, chap. 8; Pauline M.H. Mazumdar, *Eugenics, Human Genetics and Human Failings: The Eugenics Society, Its Sources and Its Critics in Britain* (London: Routledge, 1992), chap. 4; Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), chap. 9.

the same year, C.P. Blacker, the recently appointed head of the Eugenics Society, conceded that, when confronted with the old-guard of the organization, he shared many of Hogben's anxieties.⁸³

Yet, as the example of A.G. Church suggests, a persistent (albeit fluctuating) 'ideological affinity' did exist between the eugenics movement and a range of 'progressive' social and political causes in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁸⁴ Of the new liberals, Hobhouse's contemporary and sometimes ally, J.A. Hobson, was the most eager to embrace eugenics and what he saw as its potentially transformative contributions to 'national efficiency':

Though 'stock' and 'race' are not everything in national life and the world struggle, they are most necessary starting-points of profitable study, especially for those who hold that the evolution of mind enables civilised man to economise energy by substituting rational for 'natural' selection and rejection as modes of progress.⁸⁵

Fabians were particularly enthusiastic in their support for eugenics, finding in its model of biological meliorism an extra-moral normative framework through which to justify radical social reform.⁸⁶ Figures such as Caleb Saleeby mobilized eugenic arguments to advocate for a range of social and political reforms, including 'no-fault' divorce, female suffrage, clean-air measures, socialized medicine, and nudism.⁸⁷ The latter he openly advocated in *Sunlight and Health* (1923) and tacitly sponsored through the work of the Sunlight League (1924-1940), an organization which promoted heliotherapy (sun-bathing), particularly for children in urban areas.⁸⁸ Following her 1924 divorce from the Dutch author-critic, Gustaaf Reiner, the young Kate O'Brien would spend two years serving as publications secretary for the organization and its

⁸³ Carlos Paton Blacker to Alexander Morris Carr-Saunders, 06 June 1932, quoted in Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, 196.

⁸⁴ Michael Freeden, "Eugenics and Progressive Thought: A Study in Ideological Affinity," *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 3 (September 1979): 645–71; Michael Freeden, "Eugenics and Ideology," *The Historical Journal* 26, no. 4 (December 1983): 959–62; Freeden, *The New Liberalism*, chap. 5. For a critical response to Freeden's account, see Greta Jones, "Eugenics and Social Policy Between the Wars," *The Historical Journal* 25, no. 3 (September 1982): 717–28.

⁸⁵ John Atkinson Hobson, "New Books: Mr Wells' Utopia," *Manchester Guardian*, April 25, 1905, 5; Freeden, *The New Liberalism*, 187.

⁸⁶ Freeden, "Eugenics and Progressive Thought," 664–65; Paul, "Eugenics and the Left"; George Robb, "The Way of All Flesh: Degeneration, Eugenics, and the Gospel of Free Love," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 4 (April 1996): 589–603; Lucassen, "A Brave New World."

⁸⁷ Caleb Williams Saleeby, *Woman and Womanhood: A Search for Principles* (London: Mitchell Kennerley, 1911), chaps. 1, 16, 17, 18, and 19; Caleb Williams Saleeby, *The Eugenic Prospect: National and Racial* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1921), pts. 2 and 4. For an overview of Saleeby's engagement with these issues and the potential limitations of his feminism and egalitarianism, see Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, 132–37 and 149–62.

⁸⁸ Caleb Williams Saleeby, *Sunlight and Health* (London: Nisbett & Co., 1923), 69–70; Philip Carr-Gomm, *A Brief History of Nakedness* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 159–60.

journal, *Sunlight*, where some of her earliest writing appeared.⁸⁹ George Bernard Shaw went further still, arguing that true eugenics necessitated the suspension of a range of bourgeois institutions, particularly private property and marriage.⁹⁰ In the ‘Revolutionist’s Handbook’ which accompanied the published edition of *Man and Superman* (1903), Shaw has the play’s protagonist, John Tanner, stress that equality is ‘essential to good breeding; and equality, as all economists know, is incompatible with property’.⁹¹ In Tanner’s view, class divisions and socio-economic inequality, by ‘cut[ting] humanity up into small cliques’ and limiting the ‘selection of the individual’ to their ‘own clique’, would ‘postpone the Superman for eons, if not forever’.⁹² Marriage, by conflating ‘domesticity’ and ‘conjugation’, was no less dysgenic:

There is no evidence that the best citizens are the offspring of congenial marriages, or that a conflict of temperament is not a highly important part of what breeders call crossing. On the contrary, it is quite sufficiently probable that good results may be obtained from parents who would be extremely unsuitable companions or partners [...] But mating such couples must clearly not involve marrying them.⁹³

A similar argument is articulated in the play’s supernatural third act by Don Juan (Tanner’s avatar and alleged ancestor), who seeks to persuade Ana and the Devil that marriage is only valuable insofar as it has furthered the interest of the ‘Life Force’ – the governing ‘Will’ and ‘vital power’ at the heart of Shaw’s quasi-religion of ‘Creative Evolution’:⁹⁴

In the sex relation the universal creative energy, of which the parties are both the helpless agents, over-rides and sweeps away all personal considerations and dispenses with all personal relations [...] The pair may be utter strangers to one another, speaking different languages, differing in race and color [*sic*], in age and disposition, with no bond between them but a possibility of that fecundity for the sake of which the Life Force throw them into one another’s arms at the exchange of a glance.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Tellingly, O’Brien’s biographer, Eibhear Walshe, downplays Saleeby’s staunch advocacy of eugenics, euphemistically dubbing him a ‘medical reformer’ and philanthropist. Walshe, *Kate O’Brien*, 2006, 37–38.

⁹⁰ Freeden emphasizes both the relative idiosyncrasy of Shaw’s views and the unease his support generated in eugenic circles. Freeden, ‘Eugenics and Progressive Thought,’ 648.

⁹¹ George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy* (Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co, 1903), 186.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid, 186–87.

⁹⁴ Shaw himself noted what he presented as the coincidental but providential parallels between his theories of the ‘Life Force’ and ‘Creative Evolution’ and Henri Bergson’s conception of ‘*élan vital*’ as outlined in *L’Évolution créatrice* (1907), which he attributed to the influence of Samuel Butler, whose *Luck, or Cunning, as the Main Means of Organic Modification?* (1886) Shaw had reviewed for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1887. George Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters, 1911–1925*, ed. Dan H. Laurence, vol. 3 (London: Max Reinhardt, 1985), 542–43. For an account of the ‘Life Force’ and ‘Creative Evolution’, particularly insofar as they pertain to eugenics, see Warren Sylvester Smith, *Bishop of Everywhere: Bernard Shaw and the Life Force* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), chaps. 2, 8, 10, and 11; Stuart E. Baker, *Bernard Shaw’s Remarkable Religion: A Faith That Fits the Facts* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), chaps. 3, 6, and 7; Matthew Yde, *Bernard Shaw and Totalitarianism: Longing for Utopia* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), chap. 3.

⁹⁵ Shaw, *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy*, 125.

Addressing the topic in *propria person* in a published response to Galton's 'Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims' (1904), Shaw argued that, in its present form, marriage militated against public health both in its successes and its failures: 'If the selection is eugenically erroneous, there is no remedy. If it is so brilliantly successful that it seems a national loss to limit the husband's progenitive capacity to the breeding capacity of one woman, or the wife's to an experiment with one father' then 'customs and norms' stood no less firmly in the way.⁹⁶ Shaw's vision of how consent was to be gained for the measures necessary to supersede these norms was decidedly circular. In the 'Revolutionist's Handbook', Tanner argues that, since only the 'true Superman' could attain the lofty intellectual perspective necessary to 'snap his superfingers at all Man's present trumpery', only a 'Democracy of Supermen' could be trusted to introduce the measures a eugenic outlook on sex and health rendered necessary.⁹⁷ 'King Demos', he wryly notes, 'must be bred like all other kings'.⁹⁸ Thus, a 'State Department of Evolution' or 'some organization strong enough to impose respect upon the State' would have to enact eugenic reforms unilaterally in order to secure the consensus necessary to have justified them in the first place.⁹⁹ As these remarks imply, in Shaw's view, only eugenics could create the social conditions necessary to render eugenics palatable to the public:

The only fundamental and possible Socialism is the socialization of the selective breeding of Man: in other terms, of human evolution. We must eliminate the Yahoo, or his vote will wreck the commonwealth [...] [T]o hand the country over to riff-raff is national suicide, since riff-raff can neither govern nor will let anyone else govern except the highest bidder of bread and circuses.¹⁰⁰

While pronouncements such as these were undoubtedly intended to be as playful as they were provocative – it is important to note that Tanner ends *Man and Superman* a querulously married man – they reflected a commitment to a socialist eugenics premised upon the free operation of the 'Life Force' that was to remain a mainstay of Shaw's literary and political writing. Well into the 1930s Shaw could be found insisting that only by removing 'inequality of income' would it be possible for 'Nature' to bring about the eugenic couplings necessary for a 'well-bred race', devoting a chapter to a positive discussion of 'Eugenics' in both

⁹⁶ Sociological Society, ed., "From Mr. G. Bernard Shaw," in *Sociological Papers* (London: Macmillan, 1905), 74–75.

⁹⁷ Shaw, *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy*, 194; 198.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 223.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 220; 222.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 219; 223.

the 1928 and 1937 editions of *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism*.¹⁰¹ Though, publicly, he was ultimately to deem the possibility of a 'Government department' of eugenics struggling to 'select our husbands and wives for us' more 'amusing' than 'practicable', in private, Shaw appeared to remain more sanguine on the topic of state intervention on eugenic grounds, infamously commenting to fellow Fabian Beatrice Webb in February 1938 that the 'Jewish question' ought to be tackled 'by admitting the right of States to make eugenic experiments by weeding out any strains that they think undesirable, but insisting that they should do it as humanely as they can afford to, and not shock civilization by such misdemeanors [*sic*] as the expulsion and robbery of Einstein.'¹⁰²

As her involvement with Saleeby's Sunshine League suggests, Kate O'Brien's handling of eugenics bears the impress of these debates and reflects many of their contradictions. On the one hand, she shares with Chesterton a hostility to the homogenizing and centralizing tendencies of socio-economic and political modernity, particularly in their illiberal intrusion into the realms of sex and health. In her 1937 travel-guide-cum-eulogy, *Farewell Spain*, O'Brien positions herself in opposition to the 'forward marchers' of contemporary Europe, celebrating what she presents as the scandalous 'non-utilitarianism', 'individualist excitement', and 'intractable beauty' of getting 'away from it all' in a world still sufficiently undeveloped to be variegated in its culture, heritage, and infrastructure.¹⁰³

Away from it all! That is a cliché of ours which for our great-grandchildren, in their uniformed world, will only have meaning when they die. One thing we can do and they will not find possible – get away from it all. That is a strength, that weakness of ours, which, unless they are indeed to be supermen, they are likely to feel the need of.

[...]

Unless gland control can pull off such a monstrous miracle as poor old Christianity never even visualised, our descendants may, I fear, discover themselves to be – if they know the word – unhappy. A happy discovery, I venture incorrigibly to believe. Happy, even if bewildering, even if irredeemable – save by making ducks and drakes of the Home Counties. And someone may even take that retrogressive measure, since, whatever else their model citizens may be, their seed, controlled, conditioned, what-you-willed, may still be supposed to be Adam's. Or is such sentimental implication painfully outmoded?¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ George Bernard Shaw, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (New York: Brentano's, 1928), 55. The 1928 edition's chapter on 'Eugenics' was reproduced verbatim when the book was revised and expanded to form the first two volumes of Allan Lane's new 'Pelican' series. George Bernard Shaw, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism, and Fascism*, Pelican, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1937), chap. 16.

¹⁰² Shaw, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, 54; George Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters, 1926-1950*, ed. Dan H. Laurence, vol. 4 (London: Max Reinhardt, 1988), 493. For a largely charitable account and exculpatory account of Shaw's engagement with eugenics in the context of his wider political thought, see Gareth Griffith, *Socialism and Superior Brains: The Political Thought of Bernard Shaw* (London: Routledge, 1993), 118–20; 178–81; Baker, *Bernard Shaw's Remarkable Religion*, 169–72. For an excoriating reading of Shaw's eugenic investments which stresses their totalitarian character, see Yde, *Bernard Shaw and Totalitarianism*, chaps. 3–5.

¹⁰³ Kate O'Brien, *Farewell Spain*, Repr. (London: Virago, 2006), 13; 17; 15.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

As the passage's well-advertised, albeit tongue-in-cheek references to endocrinology ('gland control') and the pseudo-Nietzschean aspirations of both the Nazis and figures such as Shaw ('unless they are indeed to be supermen') make clear, in O'Brien's view, eugenics, in its efforts to 'control', 'condition', and 'what-you-will' human sexual conduct, offends against the 'sentimental individualism' with which she aligns herself throughout the text.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, while she does not root her conception of sex and sexuality in anything as supernatural as the 'Life Force' or develop it into anything as systematized as 'Creative Evolution', O'Brien shares with Shaw and Saleeby a tendency to use an implicitly eugenic model of health and 'fitness' to naturalize her critique of the social and sexual mores of her contemporary culture. A paradox of O'Brien's depiction of sexuality, then, is that the most eugenic unions presented in her work are almost invariably spontaneous affairs, conducted in spite of the social institutions through which eugenic theory was typically envisaged as being administered, while the most dysgenic unions are those which are carefully overseen by concerned avatars of familial, religious, or state authority. As the epigraph with which I began this chapter highlights, in *Without My Cloak*, O'Brien follows Shaw in stressing the equal eugenic fitness of both Anthony Considine, whose 'peasant beauty' and 'bodily fineness' had been 'flung up accidentally' by 'nature's heedless work', and the horse he has stolen, whose 'inbred and high-bred quality' had been carefully cultivated 'through generations of great blood stock' in an 'aristocratic stable'.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the major thesis of the novel, affirmed through the structural parallel between Anthony's theft of a thoroughbred and the illegitimate 'peasant girl' Christina's seduction of the now affluent Anthony's son, Denis, is that, only by breeding across class lines can 'beauty' – O'Brien's highest and most consistent term of eugenic approbation – be properly cultivated.¹⁰⁷ As this example and the reading of *The Ante-Room* offered above suggest, O'Brien presents desire as a fundamentally asocial force, with little regard for class distinction, Church doctrine, or institutions such as marriage. Terry Eagleton has noted the almost apocalyptic nature of desire in O'Brien's work, claiming that 'sexual love for her is a kind of delicious insanity, a wayward, unmanageable, implacable force which disrupts all settlement and involves an ecstatic casting loose of one's

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 7.

¹⁰⁶ O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, 3–4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 290. O'Brien further underscores this point by revealing that Christina is the daughter of the 'second son of a great house in the west' where her mother had been a housemaid, and that this had secured her a claim to 'intellectual aristocracy' alongside her parents equal 'beauty' (Ibid, 291).

moorings'.¹⁰⁸ However, in stressing the 'wayward' and 'disruptive' quality, Eagleton downplays the ways in which desire operates in O'Brien's novels according to a largely consistent and uniform eugenic logic. As couples such as Agnes and Vincent in *The Ante-Room* indicate, O'Brien seems to believe that, without the interference of conservative social institutions and forces, desire will ultimately bring about unions that are beneficial to the social order and satisfying for all parties. Paradoxically, then, for O'Brien, it is a eugenic necessity and almost a prerequisite of social stability and cohesion that desire be unrestrained and unregulated. In this way, O'Brien seeks to square a Shavian investment in eugenics as a mechanism through which to leverage, or, at least, justify greater socio-economic equality and sexual freedom, with a liberal, Catholic hostility to the coercive homogeneity of technical modernity and the compromises to physical and mental autonomy it was perceived to entail. As in the case of Shaw's 'Democracy of the Superman', undertaking this synthesis could generate moments of palpable strain in O'Brien's work, leading her to endorse a curiously unequal egalitarianism and a sometimes illiberal model of freedom. This strain is perhaps most visible in O'Brien's most explicitly polemical and self-avowedly 'contemporary' work, *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938).

'How they are to breed': Birth Control, Eugenics, and European Politics

Set only a year before its publication date and written as a clear riposte to the social, cultural, and political forces which O'Brien felt had conspired in the suppression of *Mary Lavelle*, *Pray for the Wanderer* is O'Brien's most direct indictment of what she presents as Éamon de Valera's growing political and cultural hegemony in the nascent Republic of Ireland.¹⁰⁹ This contemporary critique is reflected in the novel's setting, with the dénouement of its romantic plot keyed to coincide with the 01 July plebiscite which would ratify the nation's new constitution and cement de Valera's influence on its culture.¹¹⁰ The plot centres on Matt Costello, an Irish-born author and former IRA member whose books are regularly banned in Ireland and whose latest play, *The Heart of Stone*, is enjoying huge success in the West End. Costello returns to his childhood home

¹⁰⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 242.

¹⁰⁹ For an account of the novel's efforts to confront the perceived cultural politics of the censorship board, see Brad Kent, "An *argument manqué*: Kate O'Brien's *Pray for the Wanderer*," *Irish Studies Review* 18, no. 3 (August 2010): 285–98.

¹¹⁰ Charles Travis, "The 'Historical Poetics' of Kate O'Brien's Limerick: A Critical Literary Geography of Saorstát Éireann and the 1937 Bunreacht na hÉireann Plebiscite," *Irish Geography* 42, no. 3 (November 2009): 323–41.

in Mellick to stay with his brother, Will, sister-in-law, Una, and their children, to centre himself following the breakdown of his relationship with his lover and muse, Louise Lafleur, the married star of *The Heart of Stone*. During his stay, Matt meets and falls in love with Una's sister Nell, a de Valera devotee who 'teaches world history in Irish', and who was once engaged to Matt's friend and former comrade, Tom Mahoney, an urbane solicitor and sometime moral philosopher, but broke off the engagement and fled to Rome when she discovered Mahoney had fathered an illegitimate child in his paramilitary youth.¹¹¹ The novel is framed as a competition between Matt's commitment to Louise and the artistically vibrant and sexually liberated milieu with which she is associated and his growing attachment to the principled, but by no means naïve Nell, and the claims of history, tradition, and loyalty she represents. Underpinning Matt's choice between continuing his burgeoning career in cosmopolitan Bloomsbury and returning to Ireland to battle the rising tide of social conservatism and cultural isolation is the worsening political situation in Europe, which the majority of the novel's Irish characters are content to ignore or dismiss. Nell ultimately refuses Matt's proposal of marriage and returns to Tom Mahoney, who finally succeeds in articulating his long-standing feelings for her. The novel ends on a resigned note, with Costello steeling himself to return to London to 'write and in due course die' in that face of 'doom, panic, and despair'.¹¹²

As this dour ending suggests, notwithstanding its protagonist's impeccable liberal credentials, the novel is decidedly ambivalent in the model of individual liberty and intellectual and sexual freedom it articulates, especially when viewed in relation to the wider European context which O'Brien is so keen to evoke. For Matt (and, implicitly, O'Brien), the contemporary political moment is one in which liberal individualism ('freedom for everyone') is assailed on all sides by a bellicose and expansionist totalitarianism, intent on the management of every level of its citizens' private lives:¹¹³

[G]rown men taking instructions from this little creature or that as to how they shall think; how, or if they shall pray; how they are to breed, what work they must do, how many rooms they may occupy; what salute they must give to what flag, and what songs they must sing. Abyssinia, China, Spain. Spain – one of Europe's eternal glories – tearing herself apart, not being hindered. The same doom awaiting every country in every other country's re-armament intentions. Man's courageous, individual heart undiscoverable everywhere.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ O'Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer*, 54.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 183.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 19.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 29.

Such comparisons serve both to reinsert Ireland into a European intellectual and political milieu from which it had been complacently willing to insulate itself, and to align the ‘curious anomalies’ and ‘alarming signposts’ of the proposed constitution with the worst authoritarian excesses of that milieu.¹¹⁵ The novel abounds in indictments of Ireland under de Valera as a dictatorship in the making.¹¹⁶ In several of Matt’s extended reflections on his homeland, ‘Dev’ is presented as a thoroughly ‘up-to-date’ statesman, cut from the same authoritarian cloth as Franco, Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin, though he deems him ‘a more subtle dictator’ than his Fascist and Communist counterparts.¹¹⁷ However, when O’Brien comes to discuss the topic of sex and sexuality – one of the areas of ‘personal liberty’ she is most eager to defend – the novel’s investments in reproductive freedom, freedom of conscience, and gender equality come into visible tension. While O’Brien may spend much of the novel eagerly decrying those who would tell the populations of Europe ‘how they are to breed’, in *Pray for the Wanderer* she nevertheless seems to maintain an equally well-developed sense of how they ought not to breed.

Both Matt’s relationships and the narrative structure of the novel’s romance plot are consistently shaped by an implied personal and narratorial investment in the teachings of eugenics and its sister discipline, sexology. As the preponderance of salmon imagery in the novel suggests, Matt’s return to Ireland is, in part, framed as a migration to the place of his birth where he is expected to breed and ultimately extinguish himself. This narrative current is made most explicit when, confronted with an upsetting telegram from his former lover in London, Matt places the missive in his breast pocket and accompanies Nell and Una’s son Liam to the river: ‘Liam skipped and shouted as the great fish hurled themselves at the

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 30.

¹¹⁶ O’Brien was far from alone in viewing de Valera as an autocrat in the making in the mid-1930s. De Valera’s decision, upon taking over as President of the Executive Council from Cosgrave in 1932, to dismiss Eoin O’Duffy as the Commissioner of the Garda Síochána was perceived by many in pro-Treaty circles as the beginnings of an anti-democratic Republican power-grab. The *Irish Times* remarked that, if a ‘public servant’ of O’Duffy’s standing was ‘liable to lose his office at the desire of a minority’, then it was ‘time that President de Valera should abandon his pretence of democracy.’ For some, de Valera could not abandon this pretence quickly enough. In the eyes of W.B. Yeats, de Valera’s greatest fault lay not in his authoritarian tendencies, but in his want of conviction in pursuing them. Yeats initially identified de Valera’s ascent to power with a ‘heroic’ turn in Irish politics in which ‘any one’ of ‘half a dozen men’ might become a new ‘Caesar’. However, as ‘Parnell’s Funeral’ (1935) and its accompanying paratexts suggest, this optimism was relatively short-lived. *Irish Times*, 16 March 1933, quoted in Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy: A Self-Made Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 201; John Kelly et al., eds., *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*, IntelLex Electronic Edition (Oxford University Press, 2002), 5915. For a survey of recent scholarship putting pressure on traditional understandings of Ireland in the 1930s as an increasingly conservative monoculture fashioned in de Valera’s image, see Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, chap. 5 and Diarmaid Ferriter, *Judging Dev: A Reassessment of the Life and Legacy of Eamon de Valera* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007).

¹¹⁷ O’Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer*, 30.

leap. Matt held his left arm tight against the pocket in his breast, and set himself resolutely to watch for the heroic, up-going curves of the great salmon.¹¹⁸ As a result of this moment and the conversation to which it gives rise, Matt decides to purchase a salmon-rod Nell has asked for ('The salmon of knowledge, Liam. Aunt Nell's an Irish scholar and knows his noble place in Irish literature') which will ultimately catalyze the novel's romantic plot by prompting him to confess his attraction to her.¹¹⁹ Prior to this point in the novel, Matt's lover and muse, Louise, has been framed as the source of a creativity which O'Brien makes synonymous with his sexual vitality. Discussing Stephen Dedalus's characterization of Hamlet's return to Elsinore in the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode of *Ulysses* with his soon-to-be romantic rival, Tom Mahoney, Matt reflects:

Is it time to plant the mulberry tree? Oh, barrenness. Is it not enough to be in flight? The positive strength required for that makes it almost seem creative. But there whence he fled was the seed. There, in that face, where roses and soft lilies blow, he had found at his most emptied moment a personal answer to contemporary negation; found that which he had long ceased to look for. And found it good and durable. His seed, his potency.¹²⁰

The seminal imagery with which the passage is laced and the juxtaposition between 'barrenness' and fecundity upon which it is premised are so obvious as to need almost no gloss: in the face of the 'contemporary negation' of rising totalitarianism, philistinism, and censorship, Matt's pursuit of exile and his attraction to Louise vouchsafe his generative intellectual and sexual capacities. What ultimately breaks this attachment and prompts Matt's return to the streams of his youth is Louise's refusal to leave her 'kind, condoning, self-centred, impotent' (and ironically named) husband, Adam Wolfe: 'You won't be my lover, now the big, useless blond is home again?'¹²¹ As these remarks suggest, Costello's contempt for Wolfe is justified on almost entirely sexological and eugenic grounds, indicting his lack of virility, his superficial good looks (and the effeminate care with which he maintains them), and a never explicitly articulated, but heavily queer-coded, sexual defect:

'Oh, my God! Divorce *him*, Louise!' 'I can't. There's no evidence. There never will be. Besides—' 'Besides, you don't want to!' 'No, perhaps I don't. For ordinary purposes our tame arrangement suits me.' '“Tame” is right. And within its tidiness there is no room for me.'
[...]

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 82.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 99.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 43.

¹²¹ Ibid, 89.

‘He isn’t *impotent*, Matt!’ ‘Oh no, not technically – but *impotent*, I say – returns at last from Hollywood, and refuses to have his domestic pattern broken up, his publicity spoiled, his fans disappointed, refuses to lose his façade as Louise Lafleur’s magnificent and enviable husband – because he knows that he could never get another normally sexed woman of your fame to stay with him—’¹²²

While Louise’s sympathy for her husband’s ‘very touching’ and ‘alarming’ plight is framed as a commendable index of her progressive credentials and emotional generosity, there is no doubt that Wolfe’s queerness and aversion to physical intimacy are presented as pathological aberrations which render him a mediocre figure in comparison to the ‘strange vitality’ of Matt and an inappropriate partner for the ‘normally sexed’ Louise.¹²³

‘But in the end I find his plight very touching – and alarming [...] I’ve seen him crying and humiliated and miserable. I’ve seen him at his very worst, and at his most unhappy [...] Before me there were women – who wouldn’t stand things, and left him. He has told me. You see how grotesque it is. He looks like a natural ladies’ man, doesn’t he? Cut out for it, and he likes women. And they like him! Go to any of his films, any of his matinées. He has made an immense success on the suggestion of possessing immeasurably the quality he hasn’t got at all – sexual energy. He just hasn’t got it. There’s nothing wrong with him, and he *isn’t* impotent, Matt – he’s just unimaginative and inept in feeling – and infrequent. He likes what is called “petting” – real feeling seams out of his range. And of course he has always devoted so much of his life to the sacred business of preserving his physical beauty that – oh, I suppose a lot of virility has escaped into that.’¹²⁴

In its presentation of Wolfe as a physically and emotionally immature figure, unable to progress beyond adolescent sexual fumbling (‘he likes what is called “petting” – real feeling is out of his range’) and an emasculating self-regard (‘the sacred business of preserving his physical beauty’), this pseudo case history draws heavily on contemporary sexological and psychoanalytic understandings of bisexuality. In contrast to the present-day designation of bisexuality as a sexual orientation and an identity category, late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century sexology and evolutionary theory used the term to denote both embryonic hermaphroditism, sexual dimorphism, and the co-existence of male and female sex characteristics (male nipples, female facial hair, and a range of intersex traits) in human and animal bodies.¹²⁵ Extrapolating from this biological model, Freud conjectured a no less capacious conception of bisexuality as an infantile and atavistic psycho-sexual stage out of which a healthy individual would eventually develop along a stable

¹²² Ibid, 88–89. Emphasis O’Brien’s.

¹²³ Ibid, 91; 90.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 91.

¹²⁵ For an account of this development and its social, cultural, and epistemological implications, see Steven Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), chap. 2.

heterosexual axis.¹²⁶ Alongside its ironic indictment of his deficient masculinity, the Edenic ring of Adam's name thus seems intended to convey a sense of this atavistic and originary state of sexual immaturity, against which Matt's much remarked 'sex appeal' is meant to bulk all the larger.¹²⁷ Thus, while sexology allows O'Brien to write with a measure of candour and sympathy about the gendered and sexual non-conformity of Wolfe, her eugenic investments generate a structural tension between such sympathy and the dictates of the romance plot upon which the novel is notionally premised: 'touching' though Wolfe's plight might be, there is little doubt that, in O'Brien's view, Matt is the more 'fit' and fitting partner for a woman of Louise's talent and beauty. O'Brien seems to foreground this point when she has a distressed Nell emphasize, following's Matt's profession of love for her, that if Matt had only 'stopped talking, and kissed her' he might have 'captured her love', despite her insistence that they could not marry.¹²⁸ Whatever the virtues of Nell's final reconciliation with Tom and the rapprochement it is intended to signal between the conservative Republic and its revolutionary past, readers are undoubtedly invited to feel a pang of eugenic regret that the 'noble' and 'aristocratic' Nell, whose beauty appealed to 'sophisticated tastes', and the talented and dynamic Costello, a taller and more rugged 'Napoleon', will not raise a family together.¹²⁹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this eugenic tendency is perhaps most visible when the novel discusses the children of Will and Una, particularly their daughter, Maire. *Pray for the Wanderer* is positively exuberant in its disdain for Maire, who is made the butt of many jibes, both diegetic and narratorial. Matt deems Maire 'the dullest of the children', and, when Una jests that Nell is 'terrified' that any of Una's children 'may grow to have as good a figure as she has', Matt restrains himself from reflecting that 'it was clear that Maire would not'.¹³⁰ At multiple points in the novel the child is singled out for being intellectually unprepossessing, physically unassuming, and possessed of an unrestrained appetite – a fatal trifecta in O'Brien's scheme of values. Matt avoids inviting Maire on trips into town with him and her brother Liam ('that would have meant inviting Maire too, who bored him. Matt was never willing to suffer boredom') and salves her with

¹²⁶ Freud most influentially expounded this theory in the *Drei Abhandlungen Zur Sexualtheorie* (1905) [three essays on sexuality], in which he stated that, without taking 'der Bisexualität' [bisexuality] into account as a starting-point for human psycho-sexual development, 'wird man kaum zum Verständnis der tatsächlich zu beobachtenden Sexualäußerungen von Mann und Weib gelangen können' [one will hardly be able to understand the actually observed sexual expressions of men and women.] Sigmund Freud, *Drei Abhandlungen Zur Sexualtheorie* (Leipzig und Wien: Franz Deuticke, 1905), 62.

¹²⁷ O'Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer*, 163.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 77; 149.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 69.

‘presents and chocolates – a sop for which Maire forgave much.’¹³¹ Crucially, this pattern of Maire-bashing culminates in a passage in which Matt confronts her parents, Una and Will, about their attitude to birth control, and implores Una not to compromise her vitality further through another pregnancy:

‘We’ll have another child before Christmas,’ Una said.
[...]
‘Six! My Heavens!’
‘Don’t be silly. Why not six? Why not twelve?’
‘No, Una. Not one more than six. Do you hear?’
She laughed with deep amusement.
[...]
‘But it isn’t fair to them – to exhaust yourself, to grow ill and old –’¹³²

To justify this Stopesian plea, Matt offers the example of his immediate family: of ten births, seven survived with ‘[n]o money’ and ‘no real love from the elders to direct’ them, and, of those seven, only he and Will ‘have got something worth living out of life’.¹³³ Adopting a well-worn Catholic counterargument, Una ripostes that it is not Matt’s place to determine that his sisters would ‘have been better unborn’ and chastises him for being so ‘cocksure and materialistic’.¹³⁴ In Una’s view, ‘[l]ife is worth living, on most terms’, and the Catholic Church is right to insist ‘that man is a spirit’ and that it is their ‘duty to go on propagating him to the glory of God’.¹³⁵ Countering that Una is almost alone in that conviction now, Matt encourages Una to look around the other families in her social orbit:

‘Yes, you’re still Catholics – but in the middle class already with a difference. Look about you, Una. Count up any other young families of six that you know.’
She smiled graciously in defeat.¹³⁶

The exchange is a representative one in a novel often lamented for being self-congratulatory in its cosmopolitan liberalism and ‘impotent’ and ‘self-defeating’ in its critique of Catholic bourgeois hypocrisy.¹³⁷ More interesting, however, and less self-assured is the discussion that immediately follows this contretemps. Asked by Matt what kind of child she is hoping for this time, Una replies:

‘I’d like to have a raving beauty of a daughter.’
‘You have two already.’

¹³¹ Ibid, 97.

¹³² Ibid, 138.

¹³³ Ibid, 139.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Kent, “An *argument manqué*,” 285.

‘Don’t be so correct. Una bán looks like being lovely – but Maire is plain. You know she is.’
 ‘I know nothing of the kind.’
 ‘Oh, Matt! The poor child *is* plain. It’s most unfair – because look at these boys with their unnecessarily lovely faces! And she really is a nice kid – though I know she bores you. You know, Matt, when I consider the bland insolence of men, creatures like you and my cousin Tom, I could die of guilt towards Maire for having made her plain!’
 He laughed delightedly.
 ‘Of all the nonsense!’
 ‘It isn’t nonsense. It’s a fearful thing to be a downright plain woman – unless you’re a saint or a genius. And I honestly see no hope of Maire’s being either. But perhaps this new child will be perfect!’¹³⁸

On its surface, the passage offers a feminist critique of a beauty standard that denies ‘downright plain’ women such as Maire a meaningful position in a social order governed by the ‘bland insolence of men’. However, the agency Una ascribes to herself in expressing her regrets over Maire (‘I could die of guilt towards Maire for having made her plain!’) and her, albeit tongue-in-cheek, desire to have a ‘perfect’ child, sit oddly with her earlier conviction that life is ‘worth living on most terms’ and that it is the duty of devout Catholics to ‘go on propagating’ it without regard to the difficulties it entails for those who would ‘have been better unborn’. Like the Anthony-Molly plot in *Without My Cloak*, or the narratorial anachronism of *The Ante-Room*, this moment seems intended to prompt O’Brien’s readers to recognize that a solution to Una’s wishes for a ‘perfect’ child exists, if only she were prepared to look past her middle-class Catholic foibles: the strategies of artificial selection advocated by eugenics. As any good follower of Stopes or Galton would be able to tell Una, she might have avoided having ‘made’ Maire plain, if she had only better regulated her fertility. While it would be an over-statement to claim that O’Brien actively indicts Una for having allowed such an apparently mediocre specimen as Maire to have been conceived, the absence of any narratorial commentary or mediation in this moment leaves such a reading decidedly available, if not actively encouraged. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, as in so much of O’Brien’s writing, while eugenics discourse may allow her to offer a liberal critique of the unreflective pro-natalism of Irish Catholic culture and its casual disregard for women’s well-being, in doing so, it risks imposing serious limits on the scope of her egalitarian politics.

¹³⁸ O’Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer*, 139–40.

Conclusion

As the cross-section of O'Brien's work and the wider terrain of Irish feminist responses to pro-natalism offered here has demonstrated, the birth control and eugenics movements provided a set of decidedly double-edged political and rhetorical tools for those who sought to oppose the growing conservatism of the newly independent nation. On the one hand, the work of figures like Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger provided a vocabulary through which to discuss female desire, sexual pleasure, and the physical and emotional costs of pregnancy and childbirth in a scientific and amoral register and offered a public health framework through which to justify doing so. It also provided a means by which to take a debate about censorship and fertility that was often conducted at the level of sectarian demography and in male-dominated environments and refocus it on the bodies of the women whom it was most likely to affect. On the other hand, as so much of O'Brien's fiction reflects, the difficulties of squaring the top-down, institutionally-administered model of sexuality upon which much eugenic thought rested with the egalitarian liberalism O'Brien and others cherished often led to writing which espoused a curiously etiolated, or, at the very least, inconsistent model of freedom and equality. Embracing the birth control movement's use of arguments from positive eugenics to critique the social policy and insular mindset of Irish Catholicism and de Valera's government made it difficult to avoid tacitly and sometimes explicitly embracing arguments from negative eugenics about who should be free to enjoy the social and sexual freedoms under discussion. Kate O'Brien's oeuvre shows how, even in the work of an apparently progressive and subversive figure, both positions could co-exist in often troubling proximity.

Part IV

Sexual Health and Exhaustion

Chapter Six

‘Veni, V.D., Vici!’

Flann O’Brien, Sexual Health, and the Exhaustion of Irish Modernism

In critical circles, Flann O’Brien’s *The Hard Life* (1961) has more than lived up to its name. Despite enjoying positive reviews and relative commercial success on publication, the novel – a *Bildungsroman* set in turn-of-the-century Dublin composed in the closest Brian O’Nolan ever came to a style of scrupulous meanness – is widely held to be the author’s weakest effort.¹ What scholarly work *The Hard Life* has generated has tended to take its cue from the text’s subtitle – ‘An Exegesis of Squalor’ – to focus on its status as a failure or to interrogate its more onerous features. Tess Hurson and Neil Murphy contend that *The Hard Life* is most instructive as a guide to what is best about O’Nolan’s other fiction, with Hurson suggesting that its ‘conspicuous absences’ are best taken as a template for better understanding the virtuoso efforts of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and *The Third Policeman* (written c. 1939-1940, published 1967).² Neil R. Davison and Maebh Long find in it an exemplary catalogue of O’Nolan’s misogynistic tendencies, foregrounding his disgust over female corporeality, his minimizing of female intellect and his consistent side-lining of women in general.³ For Carol Taaffe, the novel reflects O’Nolan’s implicit repudiation of the unmarketable experimentation of his early work in favour of a more ‘commercial’ style, while, for Hugh Kenner, its ‘Joycean rescriptions’ are manifestations of an impotent Oedipal *ressentiment*, in which ‘mythic readings of Irish life’ are revealed to be ‘impossible and absurd’.⁴ Even in the most charitable critical appraisals of the

¹ For an aggregate of the reviews, positive and negative, the novel enjoyed upon its release see Tess Hurson, “Conspicuous Absences: *The Hard Life*,” in *Conjuring Complexities: Essays on Flann O’Brien*, ed. Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen’s University of Belfast, 1997), n. 3, p. 178.

² Hurson, “Conspicuous Absences”; Neil Murphy, “Flann O’Brien’s *The Hard Life* & the Gaze of the Medusa,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 148–61.

³ Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O’Brien* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), chap. 4; Neil R Davison, “‘We Are Not a Doctor for the Body’: Catholicism, the Female Grotesque, and Flann O’Brien’s *The Hard Life*,” *Literature and Psychology: A Journal of Psychoanalytic and Cultural Criticism* 45, no. 4 (1999): 31–57.

⁴ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O’Brien, Myles na GCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 184; Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 260; Mary Power, “Flann O’Brien and Classical Satire: An Exegesis of *The Hard Life*,” *Éire-Ireland* XIII, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 89.

novel, a lexicon of weariness, fatigue and exhaustion predominates.⁵ After a hard life, the consensus goes, Brian O’Nolan was spent.

In my concluding chapter, I want to take O’Nolan’s final novel as the starting point for an examination of what might be at stake in this ‘exhaustion’, not only for O’Nolan, but for Irish modernism more broadly, in relation to issues of sexual health. If, as Anthony Cronin reflects in a late issue of *The Bell*, the culturally and economically torpid Ireland of the 1950s had offered an exemplary ‘climate for the death wish’, by the 1960s conditions were decidedly less morbid.⁶ While Diarmaid Ferriter rightly warns against the unqualified optimism of Fergal Tobin’s 1984 study, *The Best of Decades*, the early 1960s nevertheless marked a period of liberalization, modernization, and relative prosperity for the Republic.⁷ Though its ‘seminal’ status and uniformly beneficial impact have often been overstated, the First Programme for Economic Expansion (1959-1963), which signalled the Lemass government’s increasing commitment to free trade policy, exceeded even the expectations of its instigators, yielding a 35 percent rise in the value of the country’s exports in little over a year.⁸ By the Programme’s end, Lemass could be found on the cover of *Time* magazine, where he was lauded for ‘Lifting the Green Curtain’ of Ireland’s protectionist tariff regime and opening the nation to direct foreign investment.⁹ This rosier economic climate saw a substantial reduction in the rate of emigration, from 14 people per 1000 for the period 1951-1961, to just 5 per 1000 the following decade.¹⁰ The ‘arrival’ of Ireland as a modern nation seemed to be cemented in the popular imagination by the 1963 visit of John F. Kennedy, the first by a serving US President, presented in the Irish media as an opportunity to celebrate ‘one of their own’ who had reached the highest political office in the

⁵ Jonathan Bolton reads the novel as a travesty of the *Bildungsroman* that ‘mimics the expectations of self-cultivation, but then subverts its own narrative trajectory’ to generate a deliberate ‘comedy of failure’. Jennika Baines reads the novels themes of failure and exhaustion in the light of O’Nolan’s late-modernist skepticism concerning the representational strategies of both realist and high modernist fiction, finding in it an ‘insecure, imperfect’ pastiche of the Joycean *Künstlerroman*.

Jonathan Bolton, “Comedies of Failure: O’Brien’s *The Hard Life* and Moore’s *The Emperor of Ice Cream*,” *New Hibernia Review* 12, no. 3 (2008): 118; Jennika Baines, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Dubliner: Eroding the *Künstlerroman* in *The Hard Life*,” in “*Is It About a Bicycle?*”: *Flann O’Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 143.

⁶ Anthony Cronin, “This Time, This Place,” *The Bell* XIX, no. 8 (July 1954): 7.

⁷ Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 2005, 537; Tobin, *The Best of Decades*.

⁸ Following Tom Garvan, Graham Brownlow argues against reading Secretary to the Department of Finance, T.K. Whitaker’s *Economic Development* (1958) as a ‘big bang’ moment in Irish economics. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the impact of the reforms it inaugurated should not be underestimated. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 2005, 542; Graham Brownlow, “Fabricating *Economic Development*,” *Working Papers in British-Irish Studies*, no. 92 (2009): 1–21.

⁹ “Ireland: Lifting the Green Curtain,” *Time Magazine* 82, no. 2 (July 12, 1963): 28–40.

¹⁰ Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 2005, 542.

West and returned to their ancestral home.¹¹ As Terence Brown has reflected, though the realities of economic and social modernization in the Republic were both less even and more pernicious than such a generalization allows, in the ‘collective memory’, 1958–1963 came to be seen as the ‘period in which a new Ireland came to life’.¹²

While less uniform, explicit, or widely celebrated, the beginnings of a similar shift were also discernible in attitudes to sex and sexuality.¹³ Edna O’Brien’s debut novel, *The Country Girls* (1960), became a *succès de scandale* for its lyrical, forthright, and, above all, accessible rendering of the intellectual, emotional, and sexual development of a pair of young rural Irishwomen, initiating a pattern which would see O’Brien’s first five novels banned in Ireland even as they were publicly praised by members of the censorship board and the clergy for their striking literary merit.¹⁴ Less dramatic, but ultimately more representative evidence of this shift is visible in Irish women’s publications of the period. As Caitríona Clear has illustrated, the letters and advice pages of magazines such as *Woman’s Life* and *Woman’s Way* register the uneven distribution of sexual knowledge in Ireland, even as they signal a growing appetite among Irish women (or, at least, Irish editors) to approach questions of sex, sexual health, and fertility in a more frank and pragmatic manner.¹⁵ On the one hand, letters from readers asking whether it was possible to get pregnant from ‘heavy kissing and hugging’ or from ‘love-making in a car’ suggest a profound (and, perhaps, playfully exaggerated) ignorance in matters of sex and fertility.¹⁶ On the other hand, the regularity with which these topics were featured in such widely read publications suggests an editorial belief that an audience existed for such

¹¹ Sylvia A. Ellis, “The Historical Significance of President Kennedy’s Visit to Ireland in June 1963,” *Irish Studies Review* 16, no. 2 (May 2008): 113–30.

¹² Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–2002*, Revised Edition (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 229–30.

¹³ Marjorie Elizabeth Howes, “Public Discourse, Private Reflection: 1916–1970,” in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Seamus Deane, Angela Bourke, and Andrew Carpenter, vol. 4 (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 929; Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 335–38.

¹⁴ Donal O. Drisceoil, “‘The Best Banned in the Land’: Censorship and Irish Writing Since 1950,” *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 2005, 154; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 381–88; John Horgan, “Edna O’Brien Faces Limerick Audience: Priests Praise Her,” *Irish Times*, April 23, 1966, 7; “What They Think About Her: Members of the Censorship Board and Prominent Literary Figures Give Their Assessment of Miss O’Brien’s Work,” *Irish Times*, December 14, 1967, 8; Mary Maher, “Who’s Afraid of Edna O’Brien?,” *Irish Times*, December 14, 1967, 8.

¹⁵ Caitríona Clear, *Women’s Voices in Ireland: Women’s Magazines in the 1950s and 60s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), chaps. 2, 5, and 6.

¹⁶ *Woman’s Way*, 19 May 1967, and *Woman’s Way*, 26 April 1968, quoted in Clear, 82. Clear emphasizes the dangers of treating these letters and queries as unmediated forms of access to the sexual attitudes and knowledge of Irish women in this period, but, stresses their value as one of the only available sources of evidence of the ways in which women discussed what they identified as their most pressing ‘problems’ with other women in a secular context.

material.¹⁷ As these examples suggest, though Larkin-esque assertions as to the ‘watershed’ status of the 1960s in Irish sexual life should be handled with due circumspection, a greater willingness to discuss and critique Irish sexual mores undoubtedly manifested itself in Irish public discourse and popular media.

Under such circumstances, it is intriguing to consider why, in 1961, returning to the novel form after a twenty-year hiatus, O’Nolan felt compelled to retreat from this increasingly confident present into what he constructs as the cultural and political paralysis of Dublin in the early 1900s. O’Nolan foregrounds precisely this deliberately backward-looking perspective in a 1961 letter to his literary agent, Mark Hamilton, in which he characterizes the novel as ‘old, elegant, nostalgic piss’.¹⁸ The formulation is suggestive in its fusion of wistful reminiscence and scatological disgust. Indeed, it is arguably this very disgust that serves as an object of and vehicle for that nostalgia. John McCourt highlights this dynamic in his discussion of the novel’s ‘Juvenalian emphasis on dirt and excremental humour’ and the ‘clear connections with the Swiftian grotesque’ it betrays.¹⁹ Following Anne Clissmann and Taaffe, McCourt reads the novel’s taxonomies of domestic squalor, ‘alcohol and alcoholism, idleness, crime, illicit sex, sexual disease and vomit’ as performative efforts to situate it within a canon of Irish cloacal obsessions in which Joyce and Sterne loom large.²⁰ As Taaffe notes, Collopy’s characterization of Manus’s literary wares as ‘dirty books, lascivious peregrinations on the fringes of filthy indecency, cloacal spewings in the face of Providence’ (CN, 541) deliberately echoes early critical characterizations of the Joycean oeuvre even as it seems to offer a script for the scandalized response O’Nolan was certain his own novel would provoke in Ireland (‘I know that THE HARD LIFE will be banned here’).²¹ This curiously queasy nostalgia has its correlative in the novel’s deliberately worse-for-wear aesthetic, which stands in sharp contrast with the ebullience of O’Nolan’s early prose.

¹⁷ Clear charts a shift in the explicitness with which questions of sex and sexual health were dealt across the two publications. Of the 477 problems submitted to *Woman’s Life* between 1951 and 1959, 198 (41.6 percent) concerned ‘courtship’ while 51 (10.5 percent) were ‘marital’ in focus. Sexual and gynaecological questions were answered privately by ‘Our Medical Advisor’ or answered obliquely in the magazine without reproducing the original query. *Woman’s Way*, by contrast, was more direct. Of the 1,186 problems submitted to the magazine between 1963 and 1969, Clear claims that 374 (31.5 percent) concerned ‘sex, pregnancy, and birth control’. Clear, 29 and 81.

¹⁸ Flann O’Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive, 2018), 264.

¹⁹ John McCourt, “More ‘Gravid’ than Gravitas: Collopy, Fahrt and the Pope in Rome,” in *Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority*, ed. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 176.

²⁰ McCourt, 174.

²¹ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O’Brien, Myles na GCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 189; O’Brien, *Collected Letters*, 279.

The O’Nolan oeuvre, particularly the early fiction, has often been read as exemplifying a postmodern aesthetic and outlook. In Keith Hopper’s influential portrait, O’Nolan’s ‘dismemberment of Orpheus’ – the overturning of Apollonian order by Dionysian chaos in a manner that is generative rather than destructive – is presented as a source of energy and abundance.²² Hopper outlines the ‘metonymic code’ through which O’Nolan playfully evokes male same-sex intimacy (the ‘impact between moving balls’; *CN*, 48), contraception (the ‘advancement of French language’; *CN*, 45), and pregnancy (a ‘very advanced state of sexuality’; *CN*, 269) even as he highlights the apparently repressed and repressive sexual culture which renders such circumlocutions necessary.²³ Such an account suits well with the virtuoso exuberance of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, in which bawdy puns and tongue-in-cheek allusions to prophylaxis, non-normative sexuality, and abortion (as well as darker and less palatably provocative themes such as rape and abuse) abound. However, it is a less comfortable fit with the aesthetically and ideologically fatigued character of the later fiction, which bears a closer relationship to another influential formulation of the so-called ‘postmodern condition’: ‘the literature of exhaustion’.²⁴ The term was coined by the novelist and academic John Barth in a 1967 lecture at the University of Virginia. By it, Barth did not seek to diagnose a contemporary ‘physical, moral, or intellectual decadence’, or to presage the oft-heralded ‘death of the novel’, but instead to highlight ‘the used-up-ness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities’.²⁵ Leaving aside Barth’s wider thesis (a defence of the virtuoso artist in the age of Warhol’s Factory), this sense of exhausted possibility might nevertheless prompt us to regard O’Nolan’s later work as more than simply a litany of failure, and to reflect on the political and cultural stakes of sexual health in the Ireland from which it emanates.

Without wishing to argue that *The Hard Life* is an under-rated classic of the O’Nolan oeuvre – it is not – or to suggest that the novel’s sexual politics are anything other than problematic – a sleeveless errand – in what follows, I wish to interrogate why, in the midst of a tentative moment of social and cultural liberalization in Ireland, O’Nolan chose to revisit a high-water mark in the cultural revival and to examine

²² Hopper, *A Portrait of the Artist*, chap. 1; Hopper, “The Dismemberment of Orpheus.”

²³ Hopper, *A Portrait of the Artist*, chap. 2; Hopper, “The Dismemberment of Orpheus.”

²⁴ Throughout this chapter, ‘exhaustion’ is used in line with Barth’s elaboration of the term, as distinct from Gilles Deleuze’s influential formulation of ‘The Exhausted’. John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Putnam, 1984), 62–76.

²⁵ Barth, 64.

why sexual health plays such a prominent role in this ambivalent homage. Put more bluntly, if the Irish had never had it so good, why did O’Nolan prefer the Dublin of *Dubliners* to the present-day metropolis, and why are the topics of venereal disease and sexual health so central to this shift in both form and content? To answer these questions, I explore how, in O’Nolan’s late fiction, many of the key themes and debates from Irish modernism’s engagement with sexual health which have been addressed in this thesis – the Parnell Split, the regulation of venereal disease, myths of Irish purity, eugenics, and censorship – re-emerge in a performatively ‘exhausted’ or ‘used-up’ manner. I begin by analyzing a series of 1949 *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns in which early emanations of this performative exhaustion with the topic of sexual health can be detected.

‘Cesspools of infection’: *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the Exhaustion of Purity

In late July 1949, the sexual (ill) health of the Irish population became front-page news. In response to an article on treatment default rates in the *Journal of the Medical Association for Eire*, the *Irish Times* published a four-part exposé on ‘Venereal Disease in Ireland’.²⁶ Written by a ‘special correspondent’ following a week of statistical research and interviews with key health professionals and government officials, the series presented itself as an in-depth and clear-sighted analysis of the contentious topic.²⁷ In the *Medical Association* article, Dr Raymond Oliver had recorded that, of the 766 male syphilitic patients treated in the previous ten years at a clinic with which he was involved, 159 (20%) had been ‘cured’, while 607 (80%) had defaulted on treatment before its completion.²⁸ The articles sought to establish the veracity of Oliver’s claims, interrogate the effectiveness of present measures to combat the spread of venereal disease, and canvass opinion on how the incidence of infection in the Republic might be lowered. Despite what the reporter described as the ‘iron curtain’ of secrecy which surrounded the topic of venereal disease in Ireland, the articles offered a detailed and even-handed account of (admittedly, well-worn) arguments for and against mandatory

²⁶ “A Special Correspondent,” “Venereal Disease in Ireland – I,” *Irish Times*, July 21, 1949; “A Special Correspondent,” “Venereal Disease in Ireland – II,” *Irish Times*, July 22, 1949; “A Special Correspondent,” “Venereal Disease in Ireland – III,” *Irish Times*, July 23, 1949; “A Special Correspondent,” “Venereal Disease in Ireland – IV,” *Irish Times*, July 25, 1949.

²⁷ Interviewees included the Minister for Health, the Almoner of a Dublin hospital, a member of a Dublin hospital board, a Medical Officer of Health, a Dublin-based private practitioner, an ‘Eminent Irish venerealogist’, and a retired Army medical officer. “A Special Correspondent,” “Venereal Disease in Ireland – II,” 4; “A Special Correspondent,” “Venereal Disease in Ireland – IV,” 7.

²⁸ “A Special Correspondent,” “Venereal Disease in Ireland – I,” 4.

notification, compulsory treatment, and public awareness campaigns, framed in the context of British and European approaches to sexual health.²⁹

The articles were the most thoroughgoing example of the sustained coverage the *Irish Times* gave to the regulation of sexual health in Ireland in the 1940s. Throughout 1943 and 1944, headline after headline attested to the increasing incidence of venereal disease in the country, with medical experts decrying the ‘ignorance and apathy’ of the general public concerning sexual health and the ‘hush hush’ policy of the Ministry of Health, which, they alleged, did nothing to remedy the problem.³⁰ The paper decried the ‘complacency, and even smugness’ of the Irish people concerning their sexual health, and the tendency to believe that ‘the mere accident of birth in this little island endows the individual with moral and social virtues unknown, or, at any rate, exceedingly rare, elsewhere’.³¹ The editor of a ‘woman’s paper’ highlighted the volume of letters she had received in the last six months ‘from young girls who are obviously suffering from venereal disease in one or other of its manifestations, but who simply [had] not the slightest notion of what [was] wrong with them.’³² In October 1944, the paper covered the inaugural meeting of the TCD Philosophical Society, in which the society’s president highlighted the ‘absolute social, physical and psychological ruin’ wrought by venereal disease, and the threat it posed to the future of the nation.³³ The speech, entitled ‘The Diseased World’, received a vote of thanks from the Church of Ireland Archbishop for Dublin, A.W. Barton, who complained of the barriers the Censorship Act erected to the circulation of effective educational material concerning sexual health and emphasized the minority episcopate’s support for public health measures to prevent the spread of disease.³⁴

Support for a more proactive approach to venereal disease was not confined to Protestant intellectual and ecclesiastical circles. In May 1944, the infamous John Charles McQuaid, Barton’s Catholic opposite number, donated £3,000 for the establishment of ‘a first-class modern unit’ for the treatment of venereal disease at the Jervis Street Hospital, open to ‘any person who may choose to visit’, and for similar

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Need for Women Police to Cope with V.D. Problem,” *Irish Times*, May 20, 1944, 1; “V.D. Should Be Notifiable,” *Irish Times*, May 26, 1944, 1.

³¹ “A Social Scourge,” *Irish Times*, May 24, 1944, 3.

³² “M.B.,” “V.D.,” *Irish Times*, May 23, 1944, 3.

³³ “Control of Venereal Disease Urged,” *Irish Times*, October 27, 1944, 3.

³⁴ “T.C.D. Society Discussion,” *Irish Press*, October 27, 1944, 4.

clinics to be established by the Sisters of Mercy at the Mater Misericordiae, Dublin and St. Michael's Hospital, Dun Laoghaire.³⁵ As part of the scheme, a young physician was sent to the Stokely Institute of the University of Philadelphia to receive postgraduate training in modern methods of diagnosis and treatment, a fact much trumpeted in the *Irish Times*.³⁶ The progress of the scheme was frustrated when the newly qualified physician drowned in a 'yachting mishap', but the clinic was eventually opened as per the Archbishop's instructions.³⁷ Behind the scenes, McQuaid sought to harangue ecclesiastically maintained medical facilities such as St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin into providing outpatient clinics and gender-segregated inpatient sexual health wards, though these efforts were often met with resistance.³⁸ As Diarmaid Ferriter notes, while conservative in some particulars – sex education and public information campaigns were not to be countenanced – McQuaid's extensive correspondence on venereal disease is notable for 'its concern with medical treatment rather than casting moral or religious judgement'.³⁹

Notwithstanding the increasingly pragmatic (if not uncomplicatedly 'progressive') nature of public discourse surrounding venereal disease in Ireland, the 1949 exposé ruffled feathers, particularly within medical circles. When, in the second article, the Minister for Health questioned the accuracy of Oliver's reported default rates, the doctor wrote to the *Irish Times* to excoriate the contemporary state of venereal disease treatment in Ireland: clinics were overcrowded, ill-equipped, and mismanaged, with one attempting to diagnose syphilis without even access to a microscope.⁴⁰ Oliver quoted a London-based venereal disease specialist and adviser to the British Ministry of Health, who claimed that 'nearly half of his patients contracted their disease in Ireland' and stated that he 'looked upon Dublin as being one of the greatest remaining cesspools of infection in Europe – a delightful reputation for our fair city, where, once, the girls were so pretty!'⁴¹ The following day, Michael Ffrench O'Carroll, wrote to critique Oliver's letter for its 'cheap, destructive, and inaccurate approach' to the problem. In particular, Ffrench O'Carroll criticized

³⁵ "Venereal Disease Clinics Founded," *Irish Press*, May 19, 1944, 3.

³⁶ "Drive to Combat V.D. May Follow National Inquiry," *Irish Times*, May 19, 1944, 1.

³⁷ "A Special Correspondent," "Venereal Disease in Ireland – I," 4.

³⁸ Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 265–67.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 266.

⁴⁰ "A Special Correspondent," "Venereal Disease in Ireland – II," 4; "Letters to the Editor: "V.D." in Ireland," *Irish Times*, July 26, 1949, 6.

⁴¹ "Letters to the Editor: "V.D." in Ireland," 6.

Oliver for what he deemed his undergraduate assertions about infection rates in Dublin relative to those of other European cities, asking him to produce statistics to bear out his point:

I am ashamed of Irish doctors who refer to their native city as “being one of the greatest remaining cess-pools of infection (V.D.) in Europe” without producing reliable European figures to verify these statements. However much they may wish to improve Irish medicine, such phraseology will not do credit to them or our country.⁴²

G.L.M. McElligott, the authority whom Oliver had cited in making this claim, also contributed to the debate and adopted a similar tone of bruised national pride. McElligott emphasized that he had characterized Dublin not as a ‘cesspool’, but as a ‘reservoir of infection’, the source of which resided firmly in Great Britain.⁴³ Where Oliver had implied that McElligott’s patients had carried infection from Ireland to Britain, McElligott claimed that the majority of his Irish patients contracted ‘their infections from Irish consorts in London’ and brought the infection back with them during their periodic trips home.⁴⁴ The contaminating influence, McElligott implied, was not that of the Irish on London, but of London on the Irish. Likewise, Dublin’s status as a ‘reservoir of infection’ was not a reflection of native immorality, but the ‘syphilitic legacy’ of the Irish capital’s time as ‘the most heavily garrisoned city in the world’, and the ‘inordinately high’ rates of infection experienced by the British Army.⁴⁵

In the best traditions of the nationalist purity rhetoric outlined in Chapter Three, where McElligott could not ascribe responsibility for Ireland’s venereally compromised condition to English ‘syphilisation’, he laid it at the door of Irish women. Thus, though ‘the kaleidoscope of multicoloured uniforms’ was no longer to be seen ‘on a summer’s evening on the Post Office side of O’Connell street’, and the ‘notorious houses in Tyrone and Mecklenburg streets’ had been ‘spiritually and physically exorcized’, the ‘promiscuous female population’ could be relied upon to ‘top up the reservoir of infection’.⁴⁶ Just as it had done in the pages of *Sinn Féin* and in the anti-enlistment campaigns of *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* in the first decade of the century for McElligott, the presence of venereal disease in Ireland served as a pathological reification of British imperial rule.⁴⁷ However, as McElligott’s shift in register from medical pragmatism to almost literary

⁴² ““V.D.” in Ireland,” *Irish Times*, July 28, 1949, 5.

⁴³ ““V.D.” in Ireland,” *Irish Times*, August 3, 1949, 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Gonne-MacBride, “To the Editor of the Freeman’s Journal,” 6.

reminiscence shows, the strain of plausibly sustaining such an argument in the twenty-second year of Irish independence was increasingly heavy. The pressing reality of British servicemen ‘jostling’, ‘insulting’, and soliciting Irish women which Maud Gonne had sought to address in her 1904 letter to the *Freeman’s Journal*, gives place in McElligott’s letter to something closer in manner to the ‘phantasy in fact’ of Oliver St John Gogarty’s *As I was Going Down Sackville Street*.⁴⁸ Indeed, as McElligott’s purple prose and almost nostalgic tone suggest, the effort to square the reality of an undeniably ‘promiscuous’ contemporary Ireland with an ideal of purity in which, for example, sex work could have no place, risked giving a rather appealing complexion to the balmy ‘summer evenings’ of British occupation.

It was precisely this florid style and somewhat wistful outlook that O’Nolan, through his Myles na gCopaleen persona, was to highlight and pastiche in his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column for 08 August the same year. Addressing the controversy between Oliver and McElligott, Myles reflects upon the pleasing ‘delicacy and elegance’ of the term venereal ‘*disease*’: ‘It does not mean sickness, *morbus*, or deadly infection. It means just “non-ease,” remote disquiet.’⁴⁹ On the grounds of a similarly ‘dignified’ linguistic performance, of the two combatants, Myles deems McElligott ‘worthy to sit at [his] table in Santry’.⁵⁰

Barring his reference to “the kaleidoscope of multi-coloured uniforms on a summer’s evening” – a rash prismic excursion by the good doctor – I find that he expresses himself coherently and temperately. I regret to record that Dr. Oliver is not yet old enough to dine with me.⁵¹

In line with his frequently professed relish for cliché and redundancy, Myles singles out for notice the most tautologous and banal assertions of the various participants in the debate, such as Ffrench O’Carroll’s reflection that ‘the Rotunda is a maternity hospital’ or Oliver’s wish that Shakespeare could serve as ‘adviser in V.D. to the Ministry of Health’ (Myles notes that his ‘primitive experience of sanitation and hygiene’ leave the Bard poorly qualified for such a role).⁵² Chief among such banalities was McElligott’s assertion that ‘up to 1922, Dublin was probably the most heavily garrisoned city in the world’.⁵³ For Myles, the ‘accretions of wisdom which come with age’ precluded him from treating such an ‘aphorism’ as ‘news’.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Maud Gonne-MacBride, “To the Editor of the Freeman’s Journal,” *Freeman’s Journal*, June 6, 1904, 6.

⁴⁹ Myles na gCopaleen, “Cruiskeen Lawn,” *Irish Times*, August 8, 1949, 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Noting that the diseases McElligott treats have ‘ever been associated with crafts of Mars’ (and, as such, form ‘part of Marshall Aid’), Myles concludes the column by reflecting that Julius Caesar had made McElligott’s point both ‘quicker and better’ through the immortal phrase ‘*Veni, V.D., Vici!*’.⁵⁵ As if to bear out his point, Myles frames these reflections on venereal disease by a discussion of a recent *Irish Times* headline – ‘BRITISH ARMY BEATEN BY LEPRECHAUNS’ – which had trumpeted the success of the Irish Defence Force cricket team over their British counterparts.⁵⁶ Myles notes that ‘there is nothing new’ in such a headline, citing the Battle of Mag Tuired in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* [the book of the taking of Ireland], in which the invading *Tuatha Dé Danann* [the tribes of Dana] triumphed over the *Fir Bolg* [men of bags] by disguising themselves beneath the smoke of their burning boats, as an example of Irish military prowess.⁵⁷

While a general air of sardonic pedantry, often shading into crotchety ill-humour, was an increasing feature of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* from the mid-1940s, the exhaustion which Myles detects in McElligott’s efforts to present sexual pathology and British occupation as synonymous is palpable. In part, this exhaustion is registered through the pseudo-historicism with which Myles frames both the martial history of venereal disease and Anglo-Irish relations. McElligott’s invocation of the ‘syphilitic legacy’ of the British garrison in Dublin is shown to be as old as the Caesarean tag with which Myles concludes his column, and as tired as the pun for which it serves as the vehicle. More tellingly, if, as Myles contends, the dissemination of venereal disease has been the eternal prerogative of the invader, then, as his reference to the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* suggests, the true ‘syphilitic legacy’ of Ireland must not be English in origin, but born of the Irish themselves. In a manner evocative of the Finn McCool passages in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in which the epic hero is figured as an elderly leech, this play upon Gaelic mythic history serves to implicate the *Tuatha Dé Danann* in the sexual pollution of Ireland through the very logic by which McElligott had sought to exculpate their successors.⁵⁸ The point is underscored in Myles’s assertion that, like the smoke-screen deployed by the *Tuatha Dé Danann* in their conflict with the *Fir Bolg*, the ‘Celtic twilight’ was ‘not a literary matter’, but an ‘ancient military phenomenon’ which may yet serve as ‘the spearhead of the approaching

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Myles quotes the passage verbatim from Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister, trans., *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, vol. 4 (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1941), 141–43.

⁵⁸ O’Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 57–58. Hereafter cited parenthetically as CN.

war with Russia'. Notwithstanding the difficulty of extracting a consistent ideology or political orientation from the polyvocal and often deliberately contradictory *Cruiskeen Lawn* – the pun, gag or leg-pull is apt to take precedence over a coherent thesis –, this column offers a sustained critique of sexual health rhetoric as a 'used-up' tool in the construction of Irish identity and the mediation of Anglo-Irish relations. In doing so, it strongly adumbrates the performative 'exhaustion' with which the topic is handled in *The Hard Life*, and the somewhat jaundiced realism through which it is dramatized.

'Old, elegant, nostalgic piss': *The Hard Life* and the Exhaustion of Realism

In an effort to account for what she presents as the novel's tonal and thematic deracination, Tess Hurson frames *The Hard Life* as a conflict between the 'marvellous' – exemplified by the literal, linguistic, and legal wire-walking of Manus – and 'realism' – exemplified by Finbarr's stolid moralism and Collopy's bathetic demise – in which O'Nolan is 'morally on the side of realism'.⁵⁹ Leaving aside the question of what the ethical investments of realism might constitute, it is worth asking how realistic the realism of *The Hard Life* actually is. This is not to attempt to quantify the 'success' or 'failure' of the novel as an act of mimesis, but, instead, to ask to what extent its deployment of the codes and tropes of turn-of-the-century realist fiction – most obviously the 'scrupulous meanness' of Joyce's *Dubliners* – function alongside an investment in the facticity of the social and political life of 1890s Ireland.

In John McCourt's view, to take the novel's realism at face value is to overlook the 'essential roguishness' of the novel and its efforts to 'both tender homage to and at the same time challenge the realist strain in Irish fiction'.⁶⁰ Yet, what is to be made of a novel that subverts the 'presumed cultural authority' of realism, even as it advertises the ways in which it is set 'rather precisely' in a specified cultural and historical moment?⁶¹ An influential formulation of this question is offered by Frederic Jameson in his reflections on the features and function of the 'historical novel' in a postmodern age. For Jameson, a defining feature of postmodernism, and the intellectual correlative of its aesthetic 'depthlessness', is a 'weakening of historicity', in which both 'public History' and 'personal temporality' cease to be experienced

⁵⁹ Hurson, "Conspicuous Absences," 119; 122.

⁶⁰ McCourt, "More 'Gravid' than Gravitas," 177.

⁶¹ Ibid.

as stable, linear phenomena.⁶² In this dressing-up-box of historical discourses and tropes, postmodern fiction foregoes any referential relationship with a ‘past history which was once itself a present’, offering only ‘pop history’ and simulacra: reproductions of ideas and stereotypes about the past for which no original has ever existed.⁶³ Just such a ‘pop’ historiography is foregrounded in O’Nolan’s characterization of *The Hard Life* as ‘old, elegant, nostalgic piss’. The concrete historicity suggested by the relatively value-neutral term ‘old’ jostles in O’Nolan’s remark with the ‘elegant’ – which is to say posed, or, at least, poised – artificiality of ‘nostalgic’, and the playful vulgarity of ‘piss’ (and the ‘piss-take’ it metonymically evokes). As the sentence unfolds, a shift takes place from historical fact (that which is ‘old’) to a simulacrum of historicity (‘nostalgic piss’) in which wistful reminiscence and scatological disgust coalesce. In this sense, the novel’s apparent ‘realism’ (the piss) in fact offers only an exhausted simulacrum (or piss-take) of the historical ‘squalor’ O’Nolan sets out to catalogue and critique.

This exhaustion is most immediately palpable in the novel’s bathetic refiguring of the geographical and symbolic topography of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* – a pastiche firmly rooted in questions of sexuality and sexual health. As Mary Power has noted, in *The Hard Life*, O’Nolan offers readers not the Liffey, but the Grand Canal; not the vocal Ur-mother Anna Livia Plurabelle, but Annie, the almost silent servant-cum-sex-worker.⁶⁴ Nor, as Jennika Baines has suggested, is *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* spared a Daedelian descent to earth.⁶⁵ Despite opening in 1890, barring one brief reference, the shade of Parnell is almost wholly absent from *The Hard Life* and its young narrator’s cultural imaginary. The manner with which this date is introduced at the conclusion of the novel’s first chapter seems deliberately intended to invite then frustrate the expectation of a figure of Parnell’s stature, and the sea-change his sexual misconduct precipitated in Irish political and cultural life: ‘Reckoning backward, I find I was about five years old. The year was 1890, and my young bones told me that a great change was coming in my life. Little did I know just then how big the change. I was about to meet Mr Collopy’ (CN, 504). Where the young Stephen Dedalus experiences a sequence of febrile self-identification with the Uncrowned King of Ireland and witnesses his father reduced to tears at the Chief’s fate, the transformative patriarch for O’Nolan’s Finbarr

⁶² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), 6.

⁶³ Ibid, 25.

⁶⁴ Power, “Flann O’Brien and Classical Satire,” 89.

⁶⁵ Baines, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Dubliner: Eroding the Künstlerroman in *The Hard Life*.”

is not the betrayed figurehead of the Home Rule movement, but Mr Collopy, a thwarted advocate for female public lavatories. Where Stephen's entry into political awareness ("That was called politics. There were two sides in it:") is precipitated by Parnell's fall from grace and influence, Finbarr's quietism is punctuated only by Collopy's literal fall through the stairs of a Roman opera house.⁶⁶ Even Collopy's uncertain living arrangements and the marital status of his bed-ridden spouse, Mrs Crotty, whom Finbarr speculates may be 'a kept-woman or resident prostitute' (CN, 508), seem intended as bathetic evocations of the more lurid revelations of the O'Shea affair, in which the question of Parnell's residency with Katharine ultimately proved central to the outcome of the trial.⁶⁷

At one level, this consistent impulse to debase that which Joyce had elevated manifests an apparent commitment to the sort of blunt 'realism' Hurson regards as the novel's moral core and which O'Nolan strove to preserve as its aesthetic key-note. However, the novel's claims to 'realistic' historicity are strained by its stylistic proximity to early Joyce and the virtual absence of Parnell from the political and social life it depicts.⁶⁸ O'Nolan's intervention is thus not so much historical as it is intertextual, acting not to offer a more historically grounded image of turn-of-the-century Dublin life, but to replace one simulacrum with another. The operation and effects of this substitution are particularly visible in the positioning of Collopy as a kind of Chief-writ-small, and the implications this has, when read in the light of Chapter One's discussion of rhetorics of sexual pathology in the Parnell split, for how his Vespasian reform schemes are to be interpreted throughout the novel.

⁶⁶ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 14.

⁶⁷ Parnell's co-habitation with Katharine O'Shea was consistently evinced by both critics and supporters during the Split to suggest the sexual impropriety or emphasize the domestic normalcy of their relationship. Perhaps most infamously, Parnell was reported to have regularly fled encounters with Katharine by means of 'a balcony' or 'fire escape' when disturbed by her husband, a farcical manoeuvre which, William O'Shea's representatives argued, would have been unnecessary if he had colluded in the affair. T.P. O'Connor, *Charles Stewart Parnell: A Memory* (London: Ward, Lock, Bowden & Co., 1891), 135–37; November 19, 1890; *The O'Shea-Parnell Divorce Case: Full and Complete Proceedings* (Boston: National Publishing Company, n.d.), 27.

⁶⁸ This whiff of spilled Joyce was recently confirmed by a computational stylometric analysis which identified statistically 'significant' similarities of style, vocabulary, and syntax between *The Hard Life* and *Dubliners*. James O'Sullivan et al., "Measuring Joycean Influences on Flann O'Brien," *Digital Studies/Le Champ Numérique* 8, no. 1 (March 27, 2018): 7.

‘What-you-know’: *The Hard Life* and the Exhaustion of Venereal Disease

Maebh Long has elucidated the deluge of liquids (Mrs Crotty’s urine, the rain, the gravid water) which eventually precipitate Collopy’s tragi-comic downfall and their metonymic relationship to both menstruation and female desire.⁶⁹ To this list of resonances and the abjection they encode, I would add the suggestion of venereal disease and the efforts to regulate its spread. One of the structuring principles of the novel, and an intended source of much of its humour (however debatable), is the persistent deferral of certainty over the nature and focus of Collopy’s project to improve the lives of Dublin’s women. The comedy of Collopy’s interview with Pope Pius X, in which Collopy’s comments are consistently elided (‘COLLOPY spoke’; ‘COLLOPY spoke again’; ‘COLLOPY mumbled something’; CN, 592), is staked upon the reader’s efforts to infer what the zealous reformer has proposed from the remarks of the increasingly incensed pontiff:⁷⁰

Dear Cardinal, I fear you have made a mistake in bringing this pious man to see us. [...] Can it be that he is in the wrong place? We are not a doctor for the body.

[...]

But this is monstrous. Nor should our office be confused with that of a city council.

[...]

It is a derogation of our presence. Does such an unheard-of suggestion lie within reason? We have never heard such a thing before.

(CN, 592)

The revelation of Collopy’s scheme in its entirety is withheld until the reading of his will and the elucidation of the groan-worthy epitaph Manus has chosen for him, ‘*Here lies one whose name / is writ in water*’ (CN, 602):

– After all that has been done, Mr Sproule went on, we have to set up the Collopy Trust. [...] The Trust will erect and maintain three establishments which the testator calls rest rooms. There will be a rest room at Irishtown, Sandymount, at Harold’s Cross and at Philsborough. Each will bear the word PEACE very prominently on the door and each will be under the patronage of a saint – Saint Patrick, Saint Jerome and Saint Ignatius.

(CN, 604)

⁶⁹ Long, *Assembling Flann O’Brien*, 167–68.

⁷⁰ Alana Gillespie has convincingly used this ambiguity to link *The Hard Life* to O’Nolan’s response to the 1951 ‘mother and child affair’. See Alana Gillespie, “Slow Change Coming: The Mother and Child Scheme, Myles VS Alfred and *The Hard Life*,” in *Flann O’Brien: Gallows Humour* (Cork: Cork University Press, Forthcoming).

The debts Collopy's scheme owes to Leopold Bloom's ruminations on the urinal below Sir Thomas Moore's statue on Westmoreland Street have been well-attested.⁷¹ However, Collopy's scheme and the manner of its (non-)articulation also echo another moment of Bloomian reformism: his remarks to Stephen on the need to regulate commercial sex in 'Eumaeus'.

As was suggested in Chapter Three, Bloom's paterfamilial insistence that female sex workers should be 'licensed and medically inspected by the proper authorities' (*U* 16.743) evokes the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, which legislated for the mandatory inspection, treatment, and incarceration of women suspected of engaging in sex work. The parallels between the rest rooms envisaged in Collopy's will and the Lock hospitals which these Acts mandated are clear enough. The ecclesiastical soubriquet ('Saint Patrick, Saint Jerome and Saint Ignatius') and pietistic tag ('PEACE') with which each rest room is to be emblazoned echo Ireland's landscape of Church-maintained hospitals and dispensaries, just as their fusion of physical and spiritual hygiene evoke the Magdalene laundries with which efforts to regulate venereal disease in Ireland were closely associated. O'Nolan draws attention to the link when, in one of the novel's less clumsy gestures towards a feminist critique of the hypocrisy inherent in Irish efforts to regulate female sexuality, Finbarr notes that Collopy 'had a horror of laundries and mass-washing' which he held were 'a certain way to get syphilis and painful skin diseases' (*CN*, 557). Collopy's solution is to insist that 'Annie had to wash his things' (*CN*, 557), a manifestation of patriarchal complacency which, if Manus is to be believed, leaves Collopy prey to precisely the infectious influences he wishes to hold at bay. Read in this light, Collopy's comic circumlocutions around the true nature of his reforms seem partially intended to leave open the possibility that they are concerned with women's sexual health. Revealing the news of Mrs Crotty's death, Collopy refuses to confirm 'that what-you-know was the sole reason for the woman's demise [...] But by Christ it had plenty to do with it' (*CN*, 537). The 'what-you-know' in question is apparently Mrs Crotty's fatal incontinence, but the euphemistic refusal to specify the nature of the malady leaves room for speculation that her illness may be more severe and socially-stigmatizing. This speculation is only intensified by Collopy's response to the suggestion that he should stand for election to the Corporation in two years: 'But two years, you said? Only the Almighty knows how many unfortunate

⁷¹ 'They did right to put him up over a urinal: meeting of the waters. Ought to be places for women. Running into cakeshops. Settle my hat straight.' (*U* 8.414-16). Myles alludes to the statue and the passage in Myles na gCopaleen, "Cruiskeen Lawn: Oft in the Silly," *Irish Times*, November 28, 1961, 8.

women would be brought to an early grave in that time' (CN, 537). Both the fatal implications of this delay – comic in the context of public lavatories, but more plausible as an echo of public health discourse around venereal disease – and the tone of paternalistic concern in which it is evoked are of a piece with the rhetoric of both regulationists and moral hygiene advocates discussed in Chapter Three and exemplified in Tumulty's concluding speeches in Oliver Gogarty's *Blight* (1917).⁷²

The link between feminine (sexual) incontinence and venereal disease is made explicit when Annie, one of the three-and-a-half women in the novel, is discovered by Finbarr to be frequenting Wilton Place, which he knows 'from other experiences to be haunted by prostitutes of the very lowest cadres' (CN, 572). As has been noted by Long and others, these remarks fuse in Finbarr's mind with his reflections on his idealized love-interest Penelope (the most explicit and least developed of the novel's Joycean intertexts), to suggest that all women are corrupting sources of potential pollution:

I had, in fact, been thinking of Penelope, and that one word [*Seemingly*: Annie's catchphrase] threw my mind into a whirl. What was the meaning of this thing sex, what was the nature of sexual attraction? Was it all bad and dangerous? What was Annie doing late at night, standing in a dark place with young blackguards? Was I any better myself in my conduct, whispering sly things into the ear of lovely and innocent Penelope?

(CN, 572)

Less often remarked upon than this misogynistic horror of the monstrous feminine, and the general aversion to desire in all its forms which pervades the O'Nolan canon, is the reaction of Manus to the news of Annie's nocturnal activities.

'Diagnosis without examination': *The Hard Life* and the Exhaustion of Regulation

In a letter to Finbarr written in response to his Wilton Place revelations, Manus offers a voluminous clinical account of granuloma inguinale, lymphogranuloma venereum, gonorrhoea, and syphilis in its primary, secondary, and tertiary manifestations, which he presents as the 'inevitable' (CN, 575) infectious outcome of Annie's suspected (but never confirmed) profession. A number of critiques are coded in O'Nolan's rendering of this epistle. First, in its essentially groundless certainty that Annie must be infected and in the

⁷² "Alpha and Omega" (Oliver St John Gogarty), *Blight, the Tragedy of Dublin: An Exposition in Three Acts* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1917), 62-74.

self-professed futility of its efforts toward ‘diagnosis without examination at [...] distance’, the letter absurdly performs precisely the kinds of paternalistic bio-political policing of female bodies endorsed by the Contagious Diseases Acts and satirized by Joyce in ‘Eumaeus’. As in Bloom’s indictment of a ‘frowsy whore’ (U11.1252) he has himself solicited, the irony of this moment resides in the dubious claims to purity of both the author and recipient of the letter. More even than his hand-wringing self-interrogation over the nature of his desire for Penelope, Finbarr’s allusion to ‘other experiences’ in Wilton Place suggests a more compromised and compromising attitude to ‘this thing sex’ than the string of rhetorical reflections would appear to allow. Likewise, as Maebh Long has highlighted, the nature of Manus’s relationship with Annie and the ‘what-you-know’ (CN, 557) for which he pays her is deliberately left open to readerly speculation:⁷³

In the last eighteen months or so, she was asked to undertake another duty to which she agreed willingly enough. The brother had given up the early-rising of his schooldays but would often hand Annie some money for ‘what-you-know’ from his bedside. He was in need of a cure, and the poor girl would slip out and bring him back a glass of whiskey.

(CN, 557)

The recurrence of the euphemistic ‘what-you-know’ serves to link Annie’s more dubious domestic duties both to Mrs Crotty’s possible status as a ‘resident prostitute’ and to Collopy’s schemes for female health. Likewise, while the money Manus gives her is ultimately suggested to be for the purchase of whiskey, the strategic ambiguity of the ‘need’ Annie meets and the ‘cure’ Manus procures from her serve to undermine his later pretensions to medical objectivity at least as thoroughly as his fly-by-night scholarly approach to sexual pathology.

The second critique concerns the relationship between venereal disease and national identity which the letter seems to posit. In a novel from which O’Nolan boasted ‘[d]igression and expatiation’ had been studiously excised, Manus’s encyclopaedic account of the venereal consequences of Annie’s apparent profession stands out in its sheer length (two pages in the novel’s first edition) as both exhaustive and exhausting.⁷⁴ Particularly striking in their redundancy are the descriptions of granuloma inguinale and lymphogranuloma venereum, both of which Manus discounts on the basis of their being ‘a near-monopoly of the negro’ (CN, 575). While of a piece with both the haphazard scholarship of Manus’s pseudo-academic correspondence courses, the invocation of these ‘tropical’ illnesses and the pointedly racial grounds on

⁷³ Long, *Assembling Flann O’Brien*, 174–75.

⁷⁴ O’Brien, *Collected Letters*, 269.

which they are dismissed implicitly invokes the use of sexual health as a means to police the boundaries of ethnic, racial or national identity. As Chapter Three suggests, ‘the “venereal excess” cry’ and the ‘racial hatred’ which had so incensed Joyce in 1907 had long operated in tandem, both in the policies and discourses of British imperialism, and in the purity rhetoric of Irish Ireland and Sinn Féin.⁷⁵ In their deliberate over-elaboration, Manus’s remarks draw upon both traditions to ‘exhaust’ this rhetoric, both in the aesthetically ‘used-up’ manner Barth suggests, and in a manner closer to the frustration betrayed by the young Joyce.

O’Nolan’s interest in this rhetoric recurs in the unfinished novel fragment, *Slattery’s Sago Saga*, which he was drafting in the months prior to his death in 1966. The eponymous Sago (a starch extracted from the spongy centre and pith of various tropical palm stems) is introduced to Ireland by Crawford MacPherson – a short-tempered Scots Presbyterian whom O’Nolan consistently presents as a grotesque termagant – as a part of a megalomaniacal scheme to ensure that the Irish never again emigrate to America due to famine. MacPherson’s motives in seeking to prevent Irish emigration centre on her belief that the Irish are a locus of venereal disease, sex work, over-population, and degeneration:

They bred and multiplied and infested the whole continent, saturating it with crime, drunkenness, illegal corn liquor, bank robbery, murder, prostitution, syphilis, mob rule, crooked politics and Roman Catholic Popery [...] Adultery, salacious dancing, blackmail, drug peddling, pimping, organising brothels, consorting with niggers and getting absolution for their crimes from Roman Catholic Priests....⁷⁶

The nineteenth-century origins of this litany of Hibernophobic clichés are not far to seek – an archaism underscored by the novel’s repeated references to the Land League, ‘agrarian kidnapping’, and Fenianism – situating MacPherson and her scheme firmly in the debates over degeneration and emigration mapped in Chapter Two.⁷⁷ Likewise, its insistence on the unsustainable hyper-fecundity of the degenerate Irish strongly recalls the objections raised by Protestant opponents to the Censorship Act discussed in Chapter Four. However, as has been noted above, by 1966 Irish emigration was at an all-time low. For Synge, Griffith,

⁷⁵ Richard Ellmann, ed., *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 167. For the colonial politics of British sexual health policy, see Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁷⁶ Flann O’Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien*, ed. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 102.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 103; 122.

and the agitated audiences of the Abbey, questions of emigration and its impact on Ireland's breeding stock had been a pressing matter of national socio-economic and sanitary concern. As the pointedly outdated nature of MacPherson's anti-emigration rhetoric, and the racial slur with which her invective culminates seem intended to suggest, by the time of the novel's drafting, they were little more than an anachronistic pretence for jingoistic racism. In the Ireland of the mid-60s, O'Nolan suggests, the use of sexual health as a rhetorical tool to police the boundaries of national identity was at once exhausted, and perniciously resilient.

The same logic underpins the extrusive culmination of *The Hard Life* – Finbarr's 'tidal surge of vomit' (CN, 607) – which is precipitated by Manus's suggestion that Annie might prove a suitable wife for him: 'Annie is an industrious, well-built quiet girl. There are not so many of them knocking about. And you don't see many of that decent type across in London. Over there they are nearly all prostitutes [...] Decent people are rare everywhere [...] And decent people who are well got are rarest of all' (CN, 606). Given what Finbarr has witnessed in Wilton Place, the ironies of this recommendation are not far to seek: the ill-concealed suggestion of sex work in the image of the 'industrious' Annie 'knocking about' Dublin rather puts the lie to Manus's efforts to characterize commercial sex as an exclusively English phenomenon. What is perhaps more telling is not that Manus commends Annie as a fit and fitting bride for Finbarr – an in-character reflection of his unscrupulous pragmatism – but that he does so on the grounds of ethno-national affiliation, wealth, and an implicitly eugenicist notion of good breeding. The claim that Annie is a 'decent type' is rendered ridiculous precisely because it is staked upon her apparent distinction from what Manus presents as the endemic sex work of London. Likewise, the assertion that she is 'well got' – a reference to the 'substantial house and three hundred pounds a year for life' (CN, 606) she has been willed by Collopy – also seems to suggest that she is well-gotten, a claim to eugenic fitness hardly borne-out by the 'streel of a girl with long lank fair hair' (CN, 501), 'permanent bad temper' (CN, 501), and vocabulary composed almost exclusively of the word 'seemingly'. Like Synge in the *Playboy*, O'Nolan pastiches Irish pretensions to physical and moral purity by emphasizing the dysgenic character of the population and highlighting the spurious exceptionalism upon which such pretensions were predicated.

This frustration with the stymieing effect of pious narratives of Irish purity also registers itself in Collopy's invectives against the inertia of the Dublin Corporation – in which traces of *Blight* are again

discernible – and in his refusal to enlist the support of the Gaelic League to his cause because he is convinced that they ‘wouldn’t understand this crisis in our national life’ and might instead dub him ‘a dirty old man’ and ‘send for the D.M.P.’ (CN 523). However, as the bathetic revelation of Collopy’s lavatorial life’s work emphasizes, what Synge presented as an evolutionary threat to Ireland’s future, Joyce broached as a serious question of self-determination and state regulation, and Beckett understood as one of the defining issues of sectarian relations and cultural identity in the Free State, O’Nolan ultimately deflates to an exhausted pun on Keats’s epitaph. This is not to diminish the value of O’Nolan’s treatment of venereal disease and eugenics in Ireland per se, but to highlight the ways in which O’Nolan’s efforts to revisit the interrelationship of sexual health and Irish identity in Irish modernism ultimately only serve to emphasize and extend its ‘used-up’ character. Where the handling of venereal disease in the ‘Eumaeus’ episode of *Ulysses* was tired, *The Hard Life* is positively exhausted.

‘Ignorant balloxes’: *The Hard Life* and the Exhaustion of Censorship

One corollary of this sense of sexual health rhetoric as a vitiated tool of social critique in Ireland was its increasing failure to shock, a form of exhaustion clearly reflected in O’Nolan’s struggles with the nation’s censors. The problem posed by the Censorship of Publications Board to Brian O’Nolan was, if not unique among Irish authors, then certainly idiosyncratic: they consistently failed to ban his work. As has often been remarked, O’Nolan wrote *The Hard Life* with the deliberate intention of provoking its suppression under the Censorship Act and subsequently contesting the ban in court.⁷⁸ Keith Hopper sees in the novel a mode of censor-baiting ‘textual manipulation’, which goes ‘well beyond scatological naming’ – though he is less clear on its operation or effect.⁷⁹ Undoubtedly, as Anthony Cronin suggests, by 1961, O’Nolan, conscious of the cultural cachet conferred by inclusion on the Register of Prohibited Publications, was keen to ‘join [a] club’ which included almost every major Irish author of the last half-century.⁸⁰ A hint of this desire for notoriety can be caught as early as 1941, in a *Cruiskeen Lawn* column in which Myles disparages *The Bell* for its formulaic denunciations of the Censorship Act. Responding to an editorial in which Seán O’Faoláin had

⁷⁸ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (London: Grafton, 1990), 214–15.

⁷⁹ Hopper, “The Dismemberment of Orpheus,” 224.

⁸⁰ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 214.

claimed that there was ‘hardly an Irish writer of repute [...] who has not been banned’, Myles derided the suggestion as ‘bunkum of a dimension which is grandiose’: ‘I know many good Irish writers who have not been banned. Have we reached the stage when a writer is considered to be “of repute” because he has been banned?’⁸¹ If these comments betray more than a hint of bruised ego – one cannot help but think that one of the ‘good Irish writers’ Myles has in mind is Flann O’Brien – they nevertheless record a sense that, by the 1940s, the myth of the defiant modernist facing down the apparatus of a socially conservative state was wearing thin: ‘The rule is that you must make a scathing reference to the Censorship at every possible opportunity. [...] Then you are made as an Irish intellectual and eligible for your first corduroys.’⁸² Nevertheless, whatever his protestations to the contrary, by the mid-40s O’Nolan was keen to expand his wardrobe.

This desire to court controversy was to manifest itself in *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green: The Insect Play*, O’Nolan’s 1943 adaptation of the Čapek brothers’ 1921 play, *Ze životy hmyzu* [the lives of the insects], commissioned by Hilton Edwards for the Gaiety Theatre. The play, advertised as the work of Myles na gCopaleen, was denounced by Gabriel Fallon in the Catholic *Standard* as a ‘Disgusting Performance’ which bombarded its audience members ‘with expletives until [their] ear-drums [...] burst under the detonated consonance of b——s’.⁸³ In Fallon’s view, na gCopaleen’s fetish for ‘innuendo’ and his willingness to make light of ‘subjects like sex and maternity’ reflected a failure to distinguish between ‘honest dung of the farmyard’ and the ‘nasty dirt of the chicken run’.⁸⁴ Particularly objectionable for Fallon, in the light of this perceived profanity, was the Gaiety’s use of the ‘20th Dublin Troop of the Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland’ as extras.⁸⁵ O’Nolan’s response, published in the *Standard* the following week, was concerned less with refuting Fallon’s accusations than with amplifying them. In a letter from Myles to the Editor of the *Standard*, O’Nolan showcased the same capacity for innuendo and disregard for propriety which Fallon had singled out for censure. In a pastiche of what he perceived to be the perverse and fetishistic perspective of the censorious critic, Myles attacks Fallon for his ‘latrine erudition’ and ‘faecal reveries’, refusing to speculate on the ‘odd researches that led [the critic] to his great discovery’, and expressing his concern that Fallon

⁸¹ Myles na gCopaleen, “Cruiskeen Lawn: Bell-Idiocy,” *Irish Times*, October 6, 1941, 2.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Gabriel Fallon, “Disgusting Performance,” *The Standard*, March 26, 1943, 3.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

will seek to ‘associat[e] Boy Scouts with dung’.⁸⁶ In doing so, Myles dwelt at length on Fallon’s objections to the play’s language, inflating references to ‘expletives’ and ‘innuendo’ into a claim that the play ‘abounded in obscenity, filthy language, and gibes at sacred things’.⁸⁷ While the image such comments offer of the censorious critic as a monomaniac, more perverse than the supposedly obscene authors whose corrupting influence they seek to arrest, chimes with Beckett’s critique of ‘Censorship in the Saorstat’, O’Nolan’s attack on Fallon seems less a challenge to Irish censorship culture than an effort to exploit it for publicity.

Intriguing in this regard is the letter which featured alongside Myles’s response, purporting to be from an audience member, ‘S.M. Dunn’, who seconds Fallon’s attack on the play’s explicit language and references to maternity in a heightened tone of pietistic outrage. Where Fallon had failed to cite specific examples of what he found most objectionable in the play, ‘Dunn’ quotes several exchanges from Act I, in which a pair of bees discuss their desire for ‘the “Queen” up in the sky’ and their intention to ‘keep pure’ until they are able to ‘meet’ her, to emphasize the scene’s status as a burlesque of Catholic Mariology as a sexual lottery in which Holy Mother is the ultimate prize.⁸⁸ ‘Dunn’ likewise draws attention to what they coyly dub ‘the “maternity” act’ in the play’s mid-section, which they decry as ‘vile’.⁸⁹ In response to this perceived blasphemy from a ‘Catholic (!)’ playwright, ‘Dunn’ calls upon *The Standard* to form a ‘league [...] to rouse public opinion against the “taking in vain” of God’s name’ modelled on the life and conduct of the working-class Dublin ascetic, Matt Talbot.⁹⁰ It is possible that these were indeed the comments and reflections of a more than usually zealous reader of the robustly Catholic publication. However, as Robert Tracy suggests, it is difficult to escape the suspicion that ‘Dunn’ was in fact another in a long line of O’Nolan pseudonyms, a suggestion borne out by ‘Dunn’s apparently detailed familiarity with the play-text.’⁹¹ Read as a strategic intervention by O’Nolan himself, ‘Dunn’s targeted objections to the play appear intended to

⁸⁶ Myles na gCopaleen, “Our Theatre Critic Attacked and Defended: (Letter from Myles Na gCopaleen),” *The Standard*, April 2, 1943, 5.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ The passages which correspond to those complained of by ‘Dunn’ would appear to be Basil’s expression of his desire to ‘meet the Queen [...] Alone, I mean quite alone, you know [sic], in the sky’ and Cyril’s advocacy of ‘[c]ontrol of the passions and all that’. S.M. Dunn, “Our Theatre Critic Attacked and Defended: (Letter from Member of Audience),” *The Standard*, April 2, 1943, 5; Flann O’Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, ed. Daniel K. Jernigan (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 173, 174.

⁸⁹ Dunn, “Our Theatre Critic Attacked and Defended: (Letter from Member of Audience),” 5.

⁹⁰ Sir Joseph Aloysius Glynn, *Life of Matt Talbot* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, 1928).

⁹¹ Robert Tracy, “Introduction,” in *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green: The Insect Play*, by Flann O’Brien, ed. Robert Tracy (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1994), 15.

draw readers' attention to the 'metonymic code' through which the play's sexualized blasphemy operates, exaggerating its apparent obscenity.⁹² Meanwhile, the cumbrous euphemism of 'the "maternity" act' (by which is presumably meant the laying and hatching of the talking Egg in Act II) simultaneously derides the prudishness of Catholic moral alarmism and suggests something more shocking than the play itself delivers. More significantly, if a deliberate intervention by O'Nolan, 'Dunn's calls for a 'Matt Talbot League' bespeak a desire to incite a public controversy comparable to that of the *Playboy* riots or the opening night of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). As Chapter Two makes clear, it took more than a shift to incite the ire of the Abbey audience in 1907, and the controversies surrounding the *Playboy* were at least as much a product of its engagement with the social and biological implications of Irish autarchy as they were with perceived slanders on Irish womanhood. Unfortunately for O'Nolan (and the Gaiety's box office receipts), changing sensibilities and the *Rhapsody*'s lack of a comparably consistent and disquieting theme, meant that such a paroxysm of moral outrage was not forthcoming, and the play finished its short run unmolested, and with a tepid critical reception.⁹³ As the *Bell's* theatre critic noted of the controversy, having only a 'normally healthy dirty-mind', he was inclined to find that the play's lack of 'proportion' and focus were more immediately objectionable than its double-entendres.⁹⁴

By the time of *The Hard Life*, O'Nolan's censor-baiting had grown both less subtle and even further out of step with contemporary mores and the operation of the Censorship Act, which had been moderately reformed in 1946 to introduce an appeal process, and the censorship board, whose membership had been reconstituted in 1957 following an internal schism.⁹⁵ A sense of O'Nolan's rather tame desire to shock can be caught in a sequence of letters to his friend and editor Timothy O'Keefe, in which he outlined his plan to ensure that *The Hard Life* is suppressed in Ireland. O'Nolan informed O'Keefe of his certainty that the novel would be censored because the Board, 'composed exclusively of ignorant balloxes', ban 'any book

⁹² Hopper, "The Dismemberment of Orpheus," 229–30.

⁹³ The *Irish Times* found the play 'rather more of an entertainment' than its source material, but concluded that this was not to its benefit, a position shared by the *Bell*, who felt O'Nolan had 'lost most of the point' of the play. The *Irish Independent* was more positive, dubbing the play an 'amusing satire' and praising its use of an Irish setting. The *Irish Press* echoed the *Standard's* objections to the play's language, which it deemed 'a poor substitute for drama'. *Irish Times*, March 22, 1943, 3; "C.C.," "The Theatre," *The Bell* 6, no. 2 (May 1943): 156; *Irish Independent*, March 22, 1943, 6; "T.W.," "The Insect Play at the Gaiety," *Irish Press*, March 23, 1943, 3.

⁹⁴ "C.C.," "The Theatre," 157.

⁹⁵ For a detailed account of these reforms and shifts, see Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience*, 1968, chaps. 5–7.

they do not like'.⁹⁶ In particular, he explained, the flatulent epithet of Father Kurt Fahrt had been chosen to cause 'holy bloody ructions' and 'wirepulling behind the scenes [...] to have the book banned as obscene'.⁹⁷ Following the anticipated suppression, O'Nolan planned to mount a legal challenge 'in the High Court' to show that the book offended against neither of what he perceived to be the Censorship Act's key stipulations – '(a) plain obscenity, and (b) advocating the unnatural prevention of birth' – and to sue not only for a 'declaration that the book [was] one to be properly on sale' but also 'damages from those who imposed the ban'.⁹⁸ O'Nolan was confident that the 'quite intelligent' High Court would find in his favour – he was convinced that the Board would 'be shown in court to be incapable of quoting a line that contravenes' the Act – and feared only that the trial might be a 'jury case'.⁹⁹ As his scrotal soubriquet for the Censorship Board and his investment in the wisdom of the upper judiciary over the judgement of the general public suggest, like Beckett, O'Nolan perceived in the Censorship Act a form of state-endorsed philistinism. Likewise, as his characterization of the Act's proscriptions and the grounds upon which he anticipated that *The Hard Life* would be suppressed indicate, O'Nolan shared the Protestant intelligentsia's sense that this anti-intellectual populism served as the vehicle for a noxious blend of pro-natalism, Catholic cultural hegemony, and ignorant caprice. Above all, like the novel's cast, setting, and aesthetic, the plan seems intended to recall or recapture an earlier, Joycean moment of modernist controversy, hoping to replicate in Ireland what the elder author had achieved three decades before in his tussles with the United States' justice system.¹⁰⁰ Yet, the book remained obstinately uncontroversial, and the desired suppression and ensuing legal battle never occurred. This muted reception should not be taken to suggest that the Censorship Act had been defanged – the board banned almost four times as many books in 1961 as it did in 1946 – or that the debates over sexual health which had attended its passage had been resolved – contraception would remain illegal (albeit increasingly available) in Ireland until 1978 and unmentionable in print until 1979.¹⁰¹ Instead, it reflects the extent to which Irish modernism's approach to questions of

⁹⁶ O'Brien, *Collected Letters*, 279.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 283.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 279; 280.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 283; 280; 283.

¹⁰⁰ For an overview of the circumstances surrounding Judge John M. Woolsey's decision in *United States vs. One Book Called 'Ulysses'* (1933) and its impact for Joyce and modernism at large, see Paul Vanderham, *James Joyce and Censorship: The Trials of Ulysses* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002), chaps. 4 and 5; Kevin Birmingham, *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses* (London: Head of Zeus, 2014), chaps. 26 and 27.

¹⁰¹ In 1973, the Irish Supreme Court ruled that section 17 of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act – which prohibited the importation and sales of contraceptives – was unconstitutional, prompting an unsuccessful and contentious effort

sexual health had lost its iconoclastic charge. Where a previous generation of Irish modernists had been comfortably able to frame themselves as the virile traducers of conservative sexual norms, it was now the Edna O'Briens of the world, not the Flanns, who were facing 'wirepulling behind the scenes' for their engagement with debates over sex, health, and their fraught interrelation in Irish culture.¹⁰² As O'Nolan's dashed hopes of having his Joycean day in court suggest, by 1961, Irish modernist provocations in the domain of sexual health had been surpassed by their context, even as the issues which animated them remained both socially divisive and culturally urgent. Like *The Hard Life* itself, O'Nolan's thwarted gesture of defiance was thus simultaneously belated and timely.

Conclusion

Returning to the question of *The Hard Life*'s 'realism' and O'Nolan's turn away from his contemporary socio-economic moment in the light of this discussion, it becomes clear that the novel offers not an exegesis of squalor, but of the simulacra that compose the appearance of such squalor, and, by extension, the virtue with which such squalor is contrasted. On the one hand, the novel exposes the moral alarmism and purity rhetoric of Irish modernism's ancestral bugbears – the Catholic hierarchy, the Gaelic revival, and their various socially conservative institutional and cultural metastases – as empty simulacra of virtue – kitsch, Plastic Paddy performances of Irishness as a condition of hypocritical piety, artificial shame, and a sexuality whose repression is honoured more in the breach than the observance. On the other, O'Nolan's text, in its squeamishness around directly depicting sex, its failure to goad the censors, and its paradoxically conservative critique of the plight of Irish women, offers a no less unconvincing simulacrum of the kinds of cultural and political rebellion for which Synge, Joyce, and Beckett had been both lauded and vilified. By the 1960s, the novel seems to suggest – for a certain strand of the nation's liberal intelligentsia at the very

by the Fine Gael - Labour Party coalition government to legislate the issue in 1974. In 1976, the Supreme Court ruled that the Irish Family Planning Association's 1971 publication *Family Planning* should not be banned under the Censorship Act. The 1979 Health (Family Planning) Act addressed both issues (albeit in a relatively conservative fashion), by deleting references to 'the unnatural prevention of conception' from the Censorship Act, and by making contraceptives available to married couples by doctor's prescription. Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience*, 1968, 119; Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland*, chaps. 4 and 5; Brian Girvin, "Contraception, Moral Panic and Social Change in Ireland, 1969–79," *Irish Political Studies* 23, no. 4 (December 2008): 555–76; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 407–30.

¹⁰² Discussing *Country Girls* with Dermot O'Flynn in 1962, Archbishop McQuaid would boast that he had 'had the book banned'. Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, 2009, 382.

least – the relationship between Irishness, sexual health, and ideals of purity had become a register of language that had lost all reference in the real world. In its failure to incense the censors and its bathetic recapitulation of many of the key debates within Irish modernism over sexual health, *The Hard Life* seems to throw into sharp relief the famous refrain of John Montague’s ‘The Siege of Mullingar, 1963’: ‘*Puritan Ireland’s dead and gone, / A myth of O’Connor and O’Faolain.*’¹⁰³ More than simply auguring the death of the ‘myth’ of Ireland as an exceptionally repressed and repressive environment – it was and is alive and well – *The Hard Life* seems to highlight, by accident and by design, that efforts to envisage and police models of Irish identity on the grounds of sexual health were both an exhausted hang-over of turn-of-the-century cultural politics, and a pernicious presence in the novel’s contemporary moment. More than this, it foregrounds the paradoxical conservatism of the iconoclast in a period of relative liberalization, resurrecting old taboos simply so as to have something to subvert. Much as Beckett’s *First Love/Premier Amour* seems almost to depend upon the proscriptions of the Censorship Act for its tone and content, in *The Hard Life*, the conservative germ of iconoclasm blossoms into a mode of rebellion not merely parasitically reliant upon, but actively sustaining of the social and political conditions it apparently seeks to critique. In its jaundiced realism and self-defeating efforts to scandalize nineteenth-century social mores for the benefit of a mid-twentieth-century audience, the novel attests to the postmodern status of Irish sexual health rhetoric as a simultaneously exhausted literary trope and a seemingly inexhaustible political tool: a zombie rhetoric, unkillable, yet already long dead. In the process, *The Hard Life* may help to explain how, even in an increasingly liberal Ireland, the logic of ‘*Veni, V.D., Vici!*’ could remain so exhaustingly unvanquished.

¹⁰³ John Montague, *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1991), 62.

Conclusion

In a 1904 diary entry quoted in Chapter Three, Stanislaus Joyce records that his brother ‘talks much of the syphilitic contagion in Europe’ and Ireland, ‘tracing practically everything to it’, and claiming it was ‘useless to try to avoid it’.¹ While not every Irish modernist may have shared Joyce’s conviction concerning the endemic nature of syphilis, as this thesis has shown, many shared his tendency to understand and respond to his political and cultural milieu through the prism of sexual health. For the authors, politicians, and activists whose work I have surveyed in the preceding chapters, the medicalized and politicized model of sex that emerged in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provided an extra-moral normative framework through which to envisage and critique a range of (often conflicting) models of Irish identity, culture, and political community. In doing so, it informed the self-fashioning of many Irish modernists, both major and minor, and came to set the terms of debate between nationalists and anti-nationalists, and, in the wake of independence, between the competing social, cultural, and political factions of the emergent Free State. As a concept, sexual health allowed figures such as Yeats, Synge, and Joyce to present themselves as the potent opponents of a conservative sexual culture, even as it enabled them to espouse a model of hygienic autonomy in which sex was treated with deep suspicion. At the same time, it provided a discourse of sexual hygiene through which advanced nationalists such as Moran, Griffith, and Gonne could denounce British influence in Ireland – though, as the case of Gogarty suggests, in doing so, it also served to offer a notionally scientific sanction to a noxious strain of anti-Semitic jingoism. It dominated debates surrounding the Censorship of Publications Act, allowing figures such as Beckett and Kate O’Brien to denounce the populism and pro-natalism of what they perceived to be an increasingly conservative and Catholic Free State. However, as my analysis of the fraught relationship that both authors maintained with eugenic thought has shown, it also consistently threatened to expose the conservatism and contradiction that haunted such iconoclasm. Ultimately, as the case of Flann O’Brien reveals, it was to prove an issue whose evolving political significance and enduring cultural relevance were to outpace and outlast Irish modernism’s capacity for provocation and subversion.

¹ Stanislaus Joyce, *The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce*, ed. George H. Healy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 51.

Reflecting on the increasingly robust body of scholarship on Irish modernism that has emerged in the last two decades, Paul Fagan has asserted that the time has come to cease trumpeting the ‘arrival’ of Irish Modernist Studies as a ‘new field’ and, instead, ‘initiate a conversation that tests the field’s borders, coordinates, and key texts for their blind-spots and as yet untapped possibilities’.² It is my belief that the politicized model of sexual health I have charted in this thesis provides a valuable lens through which to undertake such an audit. As my re-readings of well-canvassed events such as the Parnell Split, the *Playboy* riots, and the passage of the Censorship of Publications Act have demonstrated, attending to these late nineteenth and early twentieth-century debates over the sexual health of the Irish reveals both a more ‘modern’ and scientifically literate nationalism than has hitherto been acknowledged, and a more conservative and sectarian modernism than has sometimes been conceded. It also puts substantial pressure on accounts of the history of medicine and sexuality in Ireland that seek to downplay the medicalization and politicization of sex in nineteenth and twentieth-century Irish culture or exceptionalize the Irish case in this regard. Nevertheless, while intended to be comprehensive in scope, this thesis cannot claim to have exhausted the topic of sexual health and its politicized role in Irish modernism, or modernism at large. Though focusing on major debates in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Irish cultural history has allowed me to offer a fresh and robustly contextualized reading of the emergence and development of modernism in Ireland, it has, with some exceptions, also confined my focus to a corpus of relatively well-established figures in the Irish modernist canon. If, as I have argued, a medicalized and politicized engagement with sex and its relationship to questions of hygiene, autonomy, fertility, and heredity constitutes a major feature of modernism in Ireland, it is intriguing to consider which underexamined figures in the nation’s cultural and political history might take on new significance as contributors to Irish modernism when read in this light. Likewise, though I have made a sustained effort to situate my account of the politics of sexual health in Irish modernism in a wider European and transatlantic context, the inherently transnational nature of the discourses which informed the concept of sexual health and the medical, legal, and cultural networks through which they were disseminated necessarily strains against a single-nation frame. Indeed, as this thesis has illustrated, it was this capacity for questions of sexual health

² Paul Fagan, “Opening Remarks” (Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities, University of Vienna, 2016). I am grateful to Paul for sharing the text of these remarks with me.

to trouble the bodily, cultural, and national borders which the concept was often conscripted to reinforce that made it such a vexed, vibrant, and urgent topic for modernists. The history of modernism and the transnational politics of sexual health has yet to be written. It is my hope that this thesis provides future scholarship with both the framework and the impetus to do so.

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