

Irish Neo-Victorianism and An Gorta Mór: The Gendered Body in Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder* (2016)

Introduction

In *The Wonder* (2016) Emma Donoghue presents a fictionalised account set in 1850s Ireland of a pious eleven year old called Anna O'Donnell, who is undergoing a two-week period of 24 hour surveillance in order to verify her status as a 'wonder' of Catholic faith. She purports to live only on occasional sips of water, which the English nurse (Elizabeth or 'Lib' Wright) who has been employed to monitor her, views with suspicion and incredulity. Meanwhile Anna's family and local priest claim she has not eaten for over four months. The lingering details on Anna's body such as her emaciation, her cadaverous skin, hairiness and abdominal distension present a reflection on the Famine and survivor guilt. Relatedly, the novel also evaluates contemporary notions of anorexia and body image as a consequence of Anna's rejection of food. These features identify broader themes and concerns specific to an Irish Neo-Victorianism: the multiple ways in which surveillance and different iterations of the gaze are both used to codify and 'manage' the Irish (a gaze which incorporates the medical and the touristic, and surveys both land and body); the ways in which medical ethics are used to treat women and how these permeate both the nineteenth century and the present day; and finally, how Donoghue's novel analyses and offers a critique of English-Irish relations in the nineteenth-century. This is also a novel of misreadings, insofar as Lib not only misinterprets the underlying cause of Anna's fasting (sexual abuse), but relatedly, the landscape and even psychology of Ireland. As such, the two - both body and topography - become correlated in a highly conventional but important way; the feminized Irish nation is a common trope in both the Irish Literary Revival, and the rhetoric of colonial discourse espoused by figures such as Matthew Arnold in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). The key message is that women's bodies are appropriated as symbolic entities to stand in for 'nation', but also 'reading' such representation of the physical indicates how incommensurable the English and Irish experience was in the nineteenth century.

Donoghue's 'Author's Note' at the end of the book provides a paratextual reference point which makes it abundantly clear that she is working with historical sources:

The Wonder is an invented story. However, it was inspired by almost fifty cases of so-called Fasting Girls – hailed for surviving without food for long periods – in the

British Isles, Western Europe, and North America between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. These girls and women varied widely in ages and background. Some of them (whether Protestant or Catholic) claim a religious motive, but many didn't... Some of the fasters were put under surveillance for weeks on end; some started eating again, voluntarily or after being coerced, imprisoned, hospitalized, or force-fed; some died; others lived for decades, still claiming not to need food. (Donoghue, 2016, 293).

Anna O'Donnell's fictional story maps onto the real life of Sarah Jacob, a fasting girl from Wales who supposedly lived without food from 1867 until her death in 1869 (Bordo, 1995, 44-5). Her case represents the division between those who believed her such as family, religious figures and the public; and the medical authorities who insisted she was an hysteric. For the doctors, Sarah's case was about the detection and pursuit of Truth, a hallmark of the evolution of the medical profession and a testimony to how 'contemporary therapists... "created" a new disease from an old one by discussing the same fasting behavior from within a psychological rather than theological discourse' (Bordo, 142).

The idea of surveillance is crucial to navigating such a case. The whole purpose of Lib's sojourn in Ireland is *to watch* Anna, and indeed, Chapter 2 of the novel is simply entitled 'Watch', with a subheading indicating the slippage between protection, policing, and observation inherent in any gesture of watching: 'to observe; to guard someone, as a keeper; to be awake, as a sentinel; a division of the night' (Donoghue, 2016, 63). As will be argued later in this chapter, Lib's surveillance is implicated in the Foucauldian 'clinical gaze', which represents the development of medicine in the nineteenth century and how it categorised disease, including mental illness. This surveillance also collapses into another form of observation, that of the tourist gaze: as a visitor to Ireland, Lib 'reads' (and misreads) the landscape and its inhabitants, so that her nurse's perspective on Anna's body conflates with wider judgments and prejudices about Ireland: 'Metonymically, Anna acts as a figure for the nation, attempting to control her own borders and boundaries amidst violent penetration' (Ferguson, 2018, 101).

Thinking about the novel as part of a broader Neo-Victorian tradition involves a confrontation with a number of critical problems. My notion of *Irish* Neo-Victorianism is itself a paradox, identifying two incompatible experiences of the nineteenth century. To be Irish, especially nationalist, was to reject the authority of Queen Victoria – hence *Irish* Neo-

Victorianism might be contested or at least interrogated. In fact, Queen Victoria was heralded as ‘the famine queen’ by Maud Gonne in an article in *The United Irishman* (1900), so the status of ‘Victorian’ identities and canonicity is especially relevant during this period. Whilst Heilmann and Llewellyn (2010, 4) famously identify Neo-Victorianism as ‘self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians’, suggesting silenced or taboo subjects are the main foci of its attention, we must also note that the role of colonialism in the nineteenth century complicates any notion of what actually constitutes the ‘Victorian’, and this influences how we reinterpret such material in the present. There is a danger that the appellation of ‘Victorian’ to these colonial experiences merely replicates linguistically the broader enterprise of control and management of colonies during the nineteenth century: ‘the replacement – or displacement – of the term “neo-Victorianism” into international and global contexts is not without its own perils, suggesting as it does an overarching narrative that erases the specificities of cultural memory and inculcates a homogenisation of heritage.’ (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 26) However, deploying the cultural, historical and political identities of ‘Irishness’ as prefix to ‘Neo-Victorian’ also identifies the potential problems with the term. Certainly, current debates in Neo-Victorianism expound the need to decentre England (and usually London as metropolitan centre) in favour of alternative narratives. Barbara Franchi has convincingly argued for a ‘gold rush’ sub-genre of Neo-Victorianism (2019), whilst Elizabeth Ho has provided a concerted engagement with colonialism in her book *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (2012). In her discussion of Ireland and the Famine, Boehm-Schnitker maintains that whilst ‘the term “global” is problematic, one cannot deny that the memory work required for the Victorian age is *of necessity transnational*’ (2019, 87).

With these caveats in mind, Donoghue’s memory work in recovering post-Famine trauma through *The Wonder* is situated here as ‘Irish Neo-Victorian.’ As context, the contested territory of Ireland in the nineteenth century was frequently beset by political agitation, revolution, and rural, politicised secret societies – and it is this contestation which is played out throughout the novel between England (Lib) and Ireland (Anna). My concept of Irish Neo-Victorianism therefore acknowledges and troubles these subsumed narratives whilst at the same time accounting for the concrete specificity of the Irish experience: as both the oldest colony and an uneasy neighbour, Ireland is very much an ‘anomalous state’ (Lloyd, 1993). Recovering such a history in Neo-Victorianism means rethinking the ways in which we characterize Neo-Victorian studies as urban, London-centred, and pseudo-Dickensian.

An Gorta Mór (1845-52)

The Irish Famine (an Gorta Mór) was at a high point between 1845-52, and at its worst, the population of Ireland dropped by two million, through emigration or starvation. Donoghue strategically locates Anna's story in the immediate post-Famine society, claiming of the Irish people in a radio interview that 'We almost define ourselves the people who survived the Hunger... I've never written about the Famine directly because it's too big and too brutal' (CBC Radio, 2016). The novel performs this silence by circumventing direct portrayal of the Famine, whilst at the same time inescapably referencing it and its consequences. In a short pamphlet by Pádraig Ó Móráin (1957), called 'Annála Beaga Pharáiste Bhuiréis Umhaill' ('A Short Account of the History of Burrishoole Parish'), the Famine is represented by absence, silence, and lack: 'We have very little documentary evidence of the sufferings of our people in that hour of darkest tragedy' (Ó Móráin, 1957, 81). This perception of absence also permeates the historiography of the Famine. Kelleher queries that 'One of the first questions raised by a study of famine literature is that of the very possibility of representation: is it possible to depict the horror and scale of an event such as the famine; are literature and language adequate to the task?' (Kelleher, 1997, 2), whilst in a much cited but contested claim, Terry Eagleton queries, 'Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival? Where is it in Joyce?' (Eagleton, 1995, 13). Whether silence about the Famine is historically accurate is another matter (see Fagan, 2016, Morash, 1997). Such refashioning is also very much part of a Neo-Victorian enterprise, complicating the neat divisions between 'fact' and 'fiction.' *The Wonder* certainly rehearses such a perspective, participating in a Neo-Victorian recovery of marginal voices. This is a silence which the novel references but also performs, as Anna's story simultaneously is and is not about Famine hunger. When Lib arrives in the village, she sees a woman and her children outside a cabin seemingly starving:

A woman in a filthy cap was stationed on the verge, a knot of children in the hedge behind her. The rattle of the cart brought them forward with hands cupped high as if to catch the rain. Lib looked away, awkward.

'The hungry season,' muttered the driver.

But this was high summer. How could food be scarce now, of all times? (7)

This interior monologue captures the first of many misreadings which highlight how the English nurse Lib misapprehends the particularities of mid-century Ireland. She doesn't

understand the economic and agricultural failures which have resulted in Famine ('how could food be scarce now, of all times?'), and even shies away from or misunderstands the appeal for sustenance ('hands cupped high as if to catch the rain'). Discussing similar depictions in literature, Kelleher notes that 'famine scenes are very frequently depictions of the failure or collapse of this primal shelter, of the mother's inability to nourish or protect her child' (7). Similarly Fegan notes that the cabin scene is common to Famine accounts, maintaining that 'No encounter better exemplifies the mechanisms of power than that which takes place in a cabin, where those doomed to starve and those destined to survive come face to face' (43). So as one of the first scenes in the novel, this section demonstrates a compendium of images common in Famine representation: standing outside her cabin, a mother fails to nourish her children. This mirrors the later cabin scenes with Rosaleen, Anna's mother, who has been nourishing her daughter surreptitiously through a good night kiss: 'A kiss like that of a great bird feeding her nestling' (220). Anna's refusal of this 'manna from heaven' (219) which had been sustaining her during the last four months stands in for the wider failure of maternal care – the Famine mother who cannot feed her children. Such a conflation of Anna's starvation with the Famine occurs throughout the text. Indeed, whilst Lib reads Anna's body through her nursing training, William Byrne (a journalist from the *Irish Times* sent to cover Anna's case), reads her symptoms directly through the famine: 'The girl's wasting away in front of you... I was sent to study famine when I was only five years older than her' (184). The text invites us to read the Famine anachronistically through Anna's wasting body: 'Anna absorbs the anxieties of a nation uncomfortable with women's bodies, but she is also a vessel for colonial unrest and trauma experienced by Irish survivors of the famine.' (Ferguson, 2018, 100). This national trauma is especially apparent in Rosaleen's account of her daughter, which Lib reflects on, as follows:

If the potato blight had been such a long catastrophe, ending only seven years ago, it occurred to Lib that a child now eleven must have been born into hunger. Weaned on it, reared on it; that had to shape a person. Every thrifty inch of Anna's body had learned to make do with less. *She's never been greedy or clamoured for treats* – that was how Rosaleen O'Donnell praised her daughter. Anna must have been petted every time she said she'd had plenty. Earned a smile for every morsel she passed on to her brother or the maid (137).

For Lib's English and colonial rhetoric, the O'Donnell family dynamic merely represents the broader problems with the Irish: 'Ireland, an improvident mother, seemed to ship half her skinny brood abroad' (22). Ultimately, the failure of Anna's mother to feed her child is revealed not as material want, but self-starvation due to the family's refusal to acknowledge sexual abuse and incest (Anna is actually fasting to save her sexually abusive brother Pat from damnation), and this represents another form of Irish silence – around sexuality. The violence committed in the family home mirrors on a micro level the national experience where 'sexual activity became criminal or hidden' due to the authority of Catholicism in policing behaviour (Ferriter, 2009, 41). Even with the recognition of sexual assault, incest was a moral rather than a criminal offence (Pettersson, 2017, 9). As Buckley explains, 'Prior to 1908, offences could be prosecuted criminally as carnal knowledge or rape of a daughter/sister.' (Buckley, 2011). Given the lack of legal recourse, Anna's fasting becomes a physical expression of her victimhood.

For the contemporary reader, the revelation of abuse towards the end of the novel invites an analogy with *anorexia nervosa*. Susan Bordo explains that 'anorexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, can be seen as at least in part a defense against the "femaleness" of the body and a punishment of its desires' (1995, 13). Pettersson has identified that *The Wonder* 'explores the symbolic language of food-refusing behaviour by tracing the psychosomatic scars of incest trauma through the signs of anorexia nervosa' (Pettersson, 5). Indeed, despite Donoghue's claim that Anna's case is the 'equivalent of what we now know as anorexia' (CBC, 2016), it is crucial not to 'retroactively diagnos[e] particular nineteenth-century women as anorexic... ideologies of food and fasting, and anorexia in particular, function figuratively in narratives, particularly in literary narratives' (Krogovoy Silver, 2004, 3). Indeed, the pathologisation of self-starvation as anorexia, dating from the 1870s (Brumberg, 1988, 3) precludes many circumstances of Anna's historical moment, including a bourgeoisie lifestyle and rapid industrialisation. So this intersection of the history of anorexia and the plot is less about identifying Anna as anorexic and more about addressing the strategies which Donoghue uses to simultaneously reference contemporary anorexia and historical fasting. As Neo-Victorianism features temporal instability by its very nature, looking backwards and to the present day at the same time and constructing alternative visions of history, such contexts as the contemporary understanding of anorexia nervosa (ahistorically) come into play. To push this point a little further in the critical terrain of Neo-Victorianism, Joyce's *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* has

carefully articulated the role of anachronism in contemporary appraisals of the Victorians: ‘we never really encounter “the Victorians” themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving. The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what is behind us, which is the opposite of what we do when we read history in order to figure out the future’ (Joyce, 2007, 4). Neo-Victorianism therefore participates in ‘the ontological and epistemological roots of the *now* through an historical awareness of *then*’ (Heilmann and Llewellyn, 2009, 4). This interplay between historical past and contemporary moment is apparent insofar as Anna’s body stands in for the different experiences and historical contingencies of Famine survivor, Irish Other, anorexic, and child abuse victim.

From early in the novel Anna has a distended stomach which as we have seen earlier in the chapter, Byrne identifies from his experience as a commentator on the Famine: ‘that waddle, the ghastly fuzz on her face. And have you smelled her breath lately?’ (184) The famine body, as Kelleher has perceptively noted, is frequently coded feminine, noting that ‘Ovid’s Fames is one of the earliest written examples of what may be termed “the feminization of famine”, i.e. the representation of famine and its effects through images of women’ (Kelleher, 1997, 2). By this point in the text, it is apparent that Anna stands in for the Famine body, and Byrne will later describe Anna in his newspaper report as having ‘sharp-scented breath known as the odour of famine’ (186). Anna also has a fine down on her body, which spreads as her health declines: ‘Bruises on her knees, typical in children... She noticed that same fine down on the girl’s forarms, back, belly, legs; like a baby monkey. Was this hairiness common among the Irish, by any chance? Lib recalled cartoon in the popular press depicting them as apish pygmies’ (39). Several books and articles, such as Curtis’s *Apes and Angels* (1996), Foster’s *Paddy and Mr Punch* (1995) and De Nie’s *The Eternal Paddy* (2004) have discussed the caricature of the simianized Irish in the English press (*Punch* is the most pervasive example). Such debates are so well-established that they do not need to be rehearsed here in detail. What is noteworthy is that Lib draws on this popular discourse in her analysis of the child. But as De Nie explains, whilst Victorian racial discourses (such as phrenology) presented themselves as scientific, they were also more calculatedly racist. Lib’s medical judgments are implicated in such a schema: ‘The cultural differences and violent outbreaks that marred Anglo-Irish relations for hundreds of years could now be explained by supposedly scientific reasoning. Simply put, the Irish came to be seen by many as “a subrace or people with habits antithetically opposed to English norms of thought and behavior,” a

people whose telltale and inherent defects were theirs alone' (De Nie, 2004, 6). As a corrective to the English caricature however, the simian child is shown to be not a raging Fenian, a drunk, a Young Irelander, nor a 'jolly, joking Paddy.' (Foster, 1995, 180). Instead, she is a vulnerable and very sick little girl. As such Donoghue's characterization of Anna draws attention to, but unpicks, the colonial logic at the heart of Lib's evaluation of the child. Her hairiness is not to be read (as Lib does) as indicative of racial Otherness, but rather, the trauma enacted within the family unit, and more widely, the colonial family (traditionally representing England as benevolent parent trying to control its ill-behaved Irish child). At each turn, Donoghue shows Lib's judgments to be fatally flawed, and identifies how Anglo-Irish relations play out even in the domestic and intimate scenes of the O'Donnell's cottage.

It is inescapable in the Neo-Victorian novel that we have a palimpsest of discourses which impinge on the text: looking backwards and providing a critique of the present, the novel also explores contemporary discourses about women and body image. Anna's symptoms are related to the reader via Lib's forensic eye: the little girl is cadaverously pale, cold, and her skin has a blue tinge. As she slowly declines, she also becomes unable to walk, which appears to be inescapably part of a contemporary disease: 'Anorexic patients experience hypothermia, edema, hypotension, bradycardia (slow heartbeat), and lunugo (excessive body hair)' (Brumberg, 26). Whilst Anna's hairiness reflects the discourses circulating in the English press, it also articulates a more contemporary illness: 'The modern reader will recognize these as symptoms of anorexia, the means by which the body struggles to stave off the effects of its own starvation' (Schwartz, 2016).

As I have argued above, readers should not simply impose an anorexic diagnosis onto an historical narrative, not least because some of the shared commonalities among anorexic girls, such as economic affluence, simply cannot apply in Anna's case (Brumberg, 12). However, there are various hints in the novel that body image is part of the broader discourse of reading Anna's illness. One example is when Lib imparts a peculiar judgment about Anna's waist size: 'No, this girl's belly was rounded, if anything. Fashionable belles tight-laced these days in hopes of a sixteenth-inch waist, and Anna's was five more than that' (36). All at once Anna's distended stomach becomes uneasily implicated in Victorian (and contemporary) policing of women's bodies. Lib is referencing (if not directly supporting) what Brumberg calls 'the cultural explanation of anorexia... generated by a powerful cultural imperative that makes slimness the chief attribute of female beauty' (Brumberg, 31).

Relatedly, in the specific context of Ireland, Anna's declared motivation of fasting to free her sinful brother's soul from hell participates in a broader religious logic which maintains that 'the woman who put soul over body was the ideal of Victorian femininity' (182). Whilst this division of body and soul is a tradition dating at least back to Plato, Anna's disorder can be partially located in the highly misogynistic discourses of Catholicism, which apports blame for sexual abuse squarely with Anna. It makes visible the social and cultural control exerted by the Catholic church about women's bodies and the concomitant discourse of women's culpability. Anna has no real recourse beyond immediate family and her priest: 'Anna had opened her heart to her parish priest, told him of all her confusion about the *secret marriage*, all her mortification. And unlike Rosaleen O'Donnell, he'd been clear-sighted enough to believe the girl. But the only comfort he'd offered was to tell her that *her sins* were forgiven and she should never mention it again!' (266).

As Anya Krugovo-Silver notes, in the fashionable logic of the nineteenth-century, 'women desire small waists because such waists are a sign of the "maiden"' (45). Anna's body is a threat to patriarchal ideas of womanhood because it refutes the normative definitions of reproductive, adolescent femininity and indeed virginity. Lib expresses surprise that the eleven-year old does not know about 'becoming a woman' (102), and is appalled by her tragically innocent understanding of (transgressive) sexuality as a perverse parody of marriage: 'He married me in the night. I was his sister and his bride too' (256). Hence Anna's refutation of normative femininity is also an attempt to protect herself from further abuse. In remaining childlike, her body disbars any sexual attractiveness and attempts to replicate an idyllic and pre-sexualised state.

Whilst novel addresses a very contemporary concept of child abuse (which Donoghue also explored in her 2010 novel *Room*) it also hinges on the transition between different cultural codings of women's hunger – as female (religious) fasting, and what later became known as anorexia. This complex double focus, is a cornerstone of Neo-Victorian fiction representing the Victorian context but also relating to our contemporary attitudes. For instance, Brumberg notes that 'In the history of female fasting behavior, the nineteenth century was a crucial divide. During those hundred years food refusal was transformed from a legitimate act of personal piety into a symptom of disease... [this] captures the parallel processes of secularization and medicalization' (1988, 98-9). Therefore Lib's clinical observation represents a modernising shift from religiosity to pathologisation of fasting as anorexia

nervosa. But even whilst the novel represents Anna's trauma as anorectic, it also seeks to disavow such a diagnosis through Lib's flawed perspective: 'Anna wasn't like any hysteric she'd ever encountered at the hospital: no tics, faints, paralyses, convulsions; no fixed stares or shrieks.' (107). She dismisses hysteria because as Foucault highlights, 'the genesis of the manifestation of truth is also the genesis of the knowledge of truth' (Foucault, 2003, 135). In the discourse of the clinic, the signs of Anna's illness do not match the 'Truth' of Lib's medical knowledge. It is this fundamental error that means Lib does not realise the child's vulnerability until the last possible moment. However, this refusal of hysteria also allows for the multiplicity of readings of Anna's body which can be discerned throughout the text.

The Clinical Gaze

The idea of surveillance is especially important in the context of Anna and her illness. Maud Ellmann notes that 'Self-starvation is above all a performance. Like Hamlet's mousetrap, it is staged to trick the conscience of its viewers, forcing them to recognize that they are implicated in the spectacle that they behold. [The anorectic body] depends upon the other as spectator in order to be *read* as representative of anything at all' (1993, 17). As such, Byrne asks 'Wouldn't you say she's courting the attention of the world by claiming to be a freak of nature as such as any Feejee mermaid at a raree show?' (111). At a later point, Lib concurs and describes 'this freakish spectacle' (194), acknowledging how far Anna's self-starvation is dependent on observation and surveillance in order to gain meaning. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), Michel Foucault defines the clinical gaze as a fundamental shift in practice beginning towards the end of the eighteenth century, and continuing until the middle of the nineteenth century. Espousing an extended analysis of societal surveillance and observation, Foucault maintained the clinical gaze was akin to 'a speaking eye.' He elaborated on this as follows:

It would scan the entire hospital field, taking in and gathering together each of the singular events that occurred within it; and as it saw, as it saw ever more and more clearly, it would be turned into speech that states and teaches; the truth, which events, in their repetitions and convergence, would outline under its gaze, would, by this same gaze and in the same order, be reserved, in the form of teaching, to those who do not know and have not yet seen. This speaking eye would be the servant of things and the master of truth (Foucault, 2003, 141).

Significantly, the clinical gaze *constructs* a medical truth, rather than merely *surveying*. It selects, classifies and orders certain identifiable symptoms (and potentially omits other important pieces of information) and categorises them as part of an overarching disease. In the novel, the clinical gaze is articulated through a peculiarity of prose style: rhetorical questions. Even before meeting the girl, Lib rehearses a catalogue of pathologies which may underline her symptoms: ‘the affectation of refined modern misses... gastric obstruction?... Severe nausea?... Is she melancholic?.. Roman Catholic?’ (Donoghue, 2016, 13). In common with the clinical gaze, Lib seeks to map her observations onto pre-existing disease, and she does so via interrogatory language.

Lib’s purpose in attending Anna and being in Ireland at all is to bear witness and decode the child’s illness. Early in the novel Lib’s conversation with Doctor McBrearty outlines this role clearly, and appropriately navigates different forms of surveillance:

‘Your only duty will be to watch her.’

A curious verb. That awful nurse in *Jane Eyre*, charged with keeping the lunatic hidden away in the attic. ‘I’ve been brought here to... stand guard?’

‘No, no, simply to observe.’

But observation was only the first piece of the puzzle. Miss N[ightingale] had taught her nurses to watch carefully in order to understand what the ill required and provide it. Not medicine – that was the doctor’s domain – but the things she argued were equally crucial to recovery: light, air, warmth, cleanliness, rest, comfort, nourishment, and conversation. (Donoghue, 2016, 12-13)

Her ‘watch’ is represented by an anxious and incessant series of questions. This represents what Andrew Mangham describes as ‘the struggle over the representation of scarcity’ (Mangham, 2020, 8, citing Gurney, 2009, 101), or more simply, Lib’s struggle to represent the processes of starvation, which occur entirely inside the body. Similarly Boyce argues that ‘During the Victorian period, cultural understandings of hunger were negotiated (as they are today) through certain recognisable, reiterated motifs in which ideological meanings inhered. What these anxiously repeated poetical and iconographical depictions finally attest to is the idea that hunger’s gnawing reality resists representation’ (Boyce, 2012, 445). These are not only queries directed to Anna, but wider concerns expressed via interior monologue about the

case. They proliferate throughout the text, featuring prominently in every chapter of the novel:

‘Had Lib been dragged across the sea for this? A child’s whim?’ (13)

‘Was it [prayer] meant to strengthen her resolve every time emptiness cramped her belly?’ (73)

‘How could Lib bring up Dr. Standish’s visit without expressing her opinions?’ (117)

‘Lib remembered the tarry whiff of the water; perhaps it had some mildly disinfectant power?’ (176)

‘Would the O’Donnells even let her in this morning, after what she’d said at the meeting?’ (245)

Lib’s questions are also an articulation of the clinical gaze, and the text underscores the limitations of such a perspective. They represent her dogged pursuit of ‘Truth’, but they also point to instability and the absence of that Truth, because Lib persistently (mis)reads Ireland. In many ways, Lib’s anxious repetition of numbers, dates, and statistics from her notebook impacts on the prose style of the novel. In using interior monologue, *The Wonder* gives the reader access to Lib’s thoughts and feelings through the use of her specific voice and linguistic register which replicates her character. Lib’s incessant questions in the text, along with her record of Anna’s health, therefore present us with textual evidence of the clinical gaze. This becomes crucial in providing a means to understand Lib’s notebook, and more generally the prose style of the novel. The rhetorical questions (which can seem to be quite tedious) are in fact strategic; they are a hallmark of Lib’s medical understanding, performing on a textual level her nursing practice. In Foucauldian logic, Lib appraises ‘singular events’ and demonstrates a fragmentary and partial understanding, rather than the holistic entirety of Anna’s lived experience. As such, she perceives Anna’s individual symptoms but not an overarching cause (incestuous abuse). It also means that Lib misses evidence of Rosaleen trying to feed her daughter surreptitiously, because she reads affective gestures as unimportant: ‘*Refused mother’s greeting*, Lib noted in her memorandum book. Then she wished she hadn’t, because this record was supposed to be limited to medical facts’ (160). As Foucault explains, repetition is crucial to the clinical gaze: it catalogues identifiable symptoms in order to construct disease, whilst also setting aside what is extraneous to diagnosis:

By the means of the endless play of modifications and repetitions, the hospital clinic makes possible, therefore, the setting aside of the extrinsic. But this same play makes possible the summation of the essential in knowledge: in fact, variations cancel each other out, and the effect of the repetition of constant phenomena outlines spontaneously the fundamental conjunctions. By showing itself in a repetitive form, the truth indicates the way by which it may be acquired (Foucault, 135).

The concluding (and false) entry in Lib's notebook is crucial the nurse's development. It means her renunciation of a clinical gaze as she has finally ascertained what is wrong with the child: '9:07: Gone' (Donoghue, 2016, 280). There are no other entries in the notebook. At this point, Lib's subject position shifts from nurse/observer to another form of caregiver: 'for the first time, Lib understood the wolfishness of mothers' (Donoghue, 2016, 281). As Ferguson argues, 'The concluding section of the novel emphasizes that sensitive interpretive skills, rather than religion or medicine exclusively, provide the key to healing Anna. Indeed, only once Lib begins to "read" Anna's story and imagine her as strategic and resourceful can she make headway in determining Anna's real ailment: sexual violence and shame' (Ferguson, 2018, 107).

Concomitant to her appraisal of Anna's ailments in the notebook, Lib also does not understand the Irish people, the culture, the religion – her misapprehension of the 'spirit grocery' (9) and the Cristogram IHS (160) are but two examples of this broader trend.

¹ Lib observes the daguerreotype featuring Pat on the family mantelpiece, but fails to realise it is actually a post-mortem photograph: 'Propped up in his mother's lap. Blackened lips, the first indication of decomposition; Lib should have guessed. Had the O'Donnell boy lain in this kitchen for a whole day, or two or three, while his family waited for the photographer?' (Donoghue, 2016, 128). Those misreadings also feature on an intertextual level: '[Byrne] was staring down the narrow road. "So I wrote that God may have sent the blight, but the English made the famine"' (165). This is actually a paraphrased quote from the nationalist John Mitchel's 'The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)' published in 1861: 'The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine' (Kelly, 2013, 310). So Donoghue quite self-consciously destabilises our faith in Lib as a reliable witness to Anna's condition, or Ireland's political climate. More damningly such features also contest the successful pursuit of 'the satisfaction of science' (42). In his discussions with Lib, Byrne also exclaims his writing was '*Sedition!*' (165). The joke on Lib and the unwary reader continues

with a reference to John Mitchel's transportation to Bermuda in 1848, following a charge of 'seditious libel' (which was later dropped in favour of treason felony).

As Foucault maintains, the clinical gaze is inscribed in language: 'it is the carving up of events by the intersection of the gaze and mutual questions' (Foucault, 2003, 136) so that 'the symptoms that first strike the senses of the observer are noted, but immediately afterwards the patient is questioned as to the pain he feels, and lastly, by observation, the state of the most important physiological functions is described' (Foucault, 2003, 137). Hence Lib's notebook records Anna's symptoms and state of well-being. In her first meeting with Anna she records the following:

Monday, August 8, 1859, 10:07 a.m.

Length of Body: 46 inches

Arm span: 47 inches

Girth of skull measured above brows: 22 inches

Head from crown to chin: 8 inches

[...]

Breadth of chest across level of mammae: 10 inches

Girth of ribs: 24 inches

[...]

Girth of hips: 25 inches

Girth of waist: 21 inches

Girth of middle of arm: 5 inches (34-5).

Anna's tiny form becomes fragmented, observable as a series of parts with particular measurements and symptoms, rather than a coherent whole. This is why Lib fails to diagnose the child: 'Anna's body was a blank page that recorded everything that happened to it' (117). Of course, in the most fundamental way, Anna is far from a 'blank page' but one which has the inscription of abuse that Lib fails to read. At another point in the novel, as Anna further wastes away, she is described as 'quite insubstantial, a drawing on old parchment' (193) and an 'articulate testament' (241). These descriptions also identify Anna's body as a text, and maintains an analogy between her physical form and the written text. This link between body, text and gaze becomes more overt when Lib describes her notebooks as 'velvety white pages [that] seemed to mock her' (179). In Lib's eventual rejection of the clinical gaze, she also

refutes the logic of fragmentation which has been a hallmark of her medical practice. In discussing the impossibility of post mortem due to the absence of Anna's body (part of the fiction created by Lib and Byrne that Anna died just before fire consumed the family home), Lib considers 'there was no little girl they could cut up to satisfy the general curiosity' (285). The 'cut up' body, represented throughout Lib's notebook, finds its high point in post mortem. Lib's rejection of this is part of her realisation of the inadequacy of the clinical gaze. In her evaluation of Anna's condition, Lib almost entirely misreads the clues presented to her until the final moment. To solve Anna's problems, viewing parts of the body is not enough. As a broader consequence, Lib's rejection of the clinical gaze also provides a damning verdict of taxonomical thinking.

The Tourist Gaze

Lib's representation of Anna's body as a series of parts or symptoms to be decoded and categorised relates to how Ireland is often coded as feminine. This analogy is particularly apparent in one of Byrne's remarks about Irish bogland: "Extraordinary stuff, bog" said Byrne. "The soft skin of Ireland" (163). In the same way as the text closes in on particular features of Anna's little frame, it also configures the Irish land as body. Such 'soft skin' genders the land as feminine, which also suggests the sort of fragility we may more commonly associate with the descriptions of Anna herself. In such scenes, the clinical gaze collapses into a tourist gaze: both Byrne and Lib are outsiders in this community (although of course Byrne is Irish), and are surveying the space with competing ideologies and motives. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their relative appraisals of the Famine road. As Lib moves about the village in her leisure time, she provides a commentary on the emptiness of the environment she finds herself in:

"What about you, have you happened on any *sights* yet?"

"Not one, not even a stone circle. I've just been in the graveyard," Lib mentioned, "but there was nothing of historic interest there." (163)

There is nothing for her to see but a visual testimony to death, as where she discovers a mass grave (160-161). Essentially, what Lib is describing is the desolation of the community. Through Famine death and emigration, the landscape has been emptied just as Anna's body has been emptied of food. Indeed, this 'emptiness' was a common experience for those visiting Ireland during and immediately after the Famine. Williams explains that by the end

of the Famine in 1852, ‘the rural landscape changed dramatically... Through abandonment and eviction, tens of thousands of mud cabins, many unroofed, stood vacant. For a few years their stark remnants troubled tourists, but gradually the gable ends and walls crumbled into the ground, leaving only some stones and fallow lazy beds to mark their location’ (Williams, 190-1).

Unlike many who went to Ireland to nurse to the sick, dying or to observe the crisis unfold, Lib is not taken with the picturesque landscape. Her disappointment is apparent and she is infuriated by such features as the Irish bogland – ‘one endless, waterlogged mire’ (163). Crucially, this is where Lib’s gaze reflects that of the tourist: ‘People gaze upon the world through a particular filter of ideas, skills, desires and expectations, framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education. Gazing is a performance that orders, shapes and classifies, rather than reflects the world (Urry and Larsen, 2011, 2). She expected something picturesque to entertain her during her leisure time, and her perspective has much in common with colonial exploration. Under the Encumbered Estates Act (1849), large portions of country that belonged to bankrupted Irish landlords were to be made available to settlers (chiefly from England and Scotland), who would then, it was hoped, ‘create rich verdant fields of gran in place of endless bogs and rushy pastures. The bogs would accordingly be drained and the surviving peasantry, those who had not died or emigrated, would supply a cheap and willing workforce’ (Williams, 186). This would galvanise Irish agriculture and ultimately, industrialisation. The continued existence of the bog marks the failure of colonial planning. Coming from England, Lib’s appraisal of the landscape is entirely determined by her nationality, and therefore she finds the spectacle wanting. Lib’s gaze actually exerts a perspective which mirrors the mapping of Ireland in the Ordnance Survey (1825–46) and has much in common with the objective of dividing and categorising of the land into segments. Declan Kiberd has commented that the Survey was ‘an English grid... remorselessly imposed on Irish complexities. This is a noted feature of imperialism: its desire not so much to translate Irish values into English words as to translate English values into Irish terms.’ (Kiberd, 1996, 619). Lib’s survey of the Irish landscape is therefore also revealed to be a limited, colonial perspective, and therefore she cannot fathom the Irish Famine histories which remain uncalibrated on any map. The ‘complexities’ of Ireland and how Lib translates the land into simple (and colonial) value judgments has some affinity with her similar appraisal of Anna – in both instances, Lib seeks to evaluate and categorise, but ultimately misses the point.

This limited perspective is demonstrated most keenly in the walk Lib takes after one of her shifts at the cottage. During this time she encounters a turf cutter, who requests some bread. Firstly, she assumes he is begging and says she has no money or food. During this conversation the turf cutter mentions that the bread is for ‘the other crowd’ to which Lib responds ‘I’m afraid I don’t know what that means’ (146). He is referring to folkloric fairy belief, which is swiftly rebuffed by Lib’s empiricist and imperial logic. However, this scene is especially important because Lib’s inability to ‘read’ Ireland is also inscribed on the landscape itself. As a visitor and an outsider to the community, Lib’s walk is marked by frustration:

[T]he track had zigzagged up the side of the low rise and down again without any obvious reason. Lib clicked her tongue in irritation. Was a straight path to walk too much to ask? Finally it seemed to turn back on itself, disheartened, and the surface began to break up. The so-called road petered out as arbitrarily as it had begun, its stones swallowed up by weeds.

What a rabble, the Irish. Shiftless, thriftless, hopeless, hapless, always brooding over past wrongs. Their tracks going nowhere, their trees hung with putrid rags (147).

Whilst Lib’s description of the Irish people here is marked by its colonial rhetoric, it is also important that she lacks the contextual reference points or cultural specificity to be able to ‘read’ the landscape. Described as a ‘green road’, this is in fact a Famine road. Established as a means of poor relief, such roads were in fact one of the most disastrous changes implemented by Robert Peel’s government during the Famine, intended to provide occupation for the starving: ‘Employment conditions were harsh, with those employed (including women and children) expected to work for twelve hours a day in physically grueling labour, often on work that had little enduring value, summed up in the phrase “roads that led nowhere and walls that surrounded nothing”’ (Kinealy, 2006, 12). Clearly anticipating some sort of tourist spectacle, Lib is in fact disappointed by the emptiness she finds:

“I walked that so-called green road the other day,” said Lib, making conversation. “A long and rambling waste of time.”

“An English invention, as it happens,” said Byrne.

She looked sideways at him. Was this one of his jokes?

“It was the winter of ’47, when Ireland was chest-deep in snow for the first time in her history. Because charity was considered corrupting,” he said ironically, “the starving were invited to go on the Public Works instead. In these parts, that meant building a road from nowhere to nowhere.” (217)

Byrne provides a corrective to Lib’s gaze, given that she has attributed the zig-zag road to the uselessness of the Irish. By contrast, he states that such roads reflect the cruelty and tyranny of the English. There were cases of such people dying by the roadside, which Donoghue references as follows:

“But I’ll be brief. Whoever was struck down by cold or hunger or fever and didn’t get up was buried by the verge, in a sack, just a couple of inches under.”

Lib thought of her boots going along the soft, flowered edge of the green road. Bog never forgot; it kept things in a remarkable state of preservation.

“No more,” she begged, “please.”

(217)

The conversation between the two here is illuminating, as it represents a dramatization of the competing discourses in circulation at the time – the popular press, government, sympathetic commentators – each of whom brought to bear their specific subject positions and their preconceptions about the land and the people. Lib’s obliviousness to Famine trauma in her appraisal of the landscape is a mirror of her misidentification of Anna’s condition. The colonial gaze – touristic and clinical – is proven throughout the text to be inadequate in assessing the Irish experience, and it is only when Lib moderates her outlook through the intervention of figures like Byrne, that she can actually save the child. Anna’s case therefore is not just about a starving girl. She stands in for a broader commentary on the Irish experience of the colonial gaze, and the damage wrought by this scrutiny. In many ways, this gaze is merely a glance, which ‘does not scan a field: it strikes at one point, which is central or decisive’ (Foucault, 2003, 149). Bringing all her preconceptions with her, Lib’s survey (of Anna’s body and of Ireland itself) lacks nuance, and is so focused on logic and calibration that it misses the key issues at hand. Ultimately, Lib’s intervention in Anna’s case represents a series of misreadings – at the level of biological body, and geographical territory.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapter, I have argued for an Irish Neo-Victorianism and how that might account for the narratives which exist beyond the geographical and cultural borders of England: those which have until recently been overlooked, neglected, silenced, or lost in both academia and broader culture. Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger (2015, 1) suggest that ‘by looking at Neo-Victorianism as both a globally consumed and globally produced commodity, [it opens] up the debate on the role of Neo-Victorianism as a global, adaptive and adaptational phenomenon.’ In situating a reading of the novel as part of a critical turn which broadens Neo-Victorianism’s horizons, the politics of *The Wonder* can also be used to decentre England’s status in Neo-Victorianism and provide a critique of nineteenth-century colonial regulation.

The importance of the various ways in which the gaze functions in this novel – be it clinical or touristic – cannot be underestimated. In each instance, the logic of the colonizer – seeking to regulate the physical body or the physical world – is discernible for its prejudice, its racial inflections, and its limitations. It also does not leave its subject untainted. As Lib succinctly explains, ‘The watch has altered the situation that’s being watched’ (157). In terms of English intervention in Ireland, colonial observation scars the landscape with such hidden features as the Famine road and the ‘emptied’ landscape. At a more localised level, Lib’s watch resulted in Anna’s relocation, a new life, a recovery and a full stomach. As she leaves with Anna (now renamed Nan) for them both to begin a new life with Byrne, Lib recognizes the beauty of the child (*‘Every flawed, scrawny, or bloated part, every inch of the real, mortal girl, I treasure you’* 271) and acknowledges the concomitant beauty in Ireland: ‘Lib looked back over her shoulder and saw the scene for a moment as if in a painting. Horse and riders, the trees, the fading streaks in the west. Even the bogland with its patches of water. Here at the dead centre, a sort of beauty’ (277). Couched in aestheticized language (‘as if in a painting’, ‘a sort of beauty’), the novel concludes with a modification of the gaze, and as such, a plea for reconciliatory narratives and a fantasy of a harmonised Anglo-Irish family to begin.

¹ A Christogram is a symbol made from a combination of overlapping letters (in this case, IHS). These form an abbreviation for the name of Jesus Christ. It is a common symbol in the Christian tradition of medieval Western Europe, and still current in Catholicism today.