Chapter 5: Electric Signs and Echo Chambers: the stupidity of affect in Modern Irish Literature (Barry Sheils, Durham University)

Few would argue that Tennyson in his 1848 poem 'The Splendour falls on Castle Walls', written while he was on holiday near Killarney, was profoundly concerned with the Irish famine:

> […]
> O love, they die in yon rich sky,
> They faint on hill or field or river:
> Our echoes roll from soul to soul,
> And grow forever and forever.
> Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
> And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying, dying.[1]

Also known as 'The Bugle song', later part of *The Princess*, this is clearly a poem interested in its own sound. For Matthew Campbell it is 'about immortality: it views the eternity of both the soul and memory'. It recalls works by Thomas Moore and Mary Tighe, entering the tradition of the romantic sublime wedded to place, and at the same time constitutes part of Tennyson's 'sublimated response to the horrors around him'.[2] We might also note, however, that the poem's attempt to convey music in writing, the bugle's echoes returning key phrases to the listener over and over again, characterizes its scene as one of Narcissistic enchantment. This suggests the contiguity of 'dying' sounds with dying bodies will not become a matter of realistic identification. Those dying 'echoes' will never re-present the dying people Tennyson must have disregarded on the side of the road.

The pioneering theorist of electromagnetic fields, James Clerk Maxwell, wrote a half-serious imitation of Tennyson's poem. Referring to the galvanometer, a machine for measuring electric current in submarine telegraph cables, Maxwell replaces the bugle's echo with electricity: 'Flow, current, flow, set the quick light-spot flying, / Flow, current, answer light-spot, flashing, quivering, dying'.[3] As Jason Rudy comments, 'a transcription of sonic waves into written form [in Tennyson's verse] becomes in Maxwell's poem 'the translation of an oscillating light into a telegraphic message'.[4] Reading Tennyson back through Maxwell's pastiche alerts us to the sensationalism of the original. The poem resonates and is about resonance – and this perhaps accounts for Maxwell's tribute: the translation of electrical current into communications technology depends on resonance, the decipherment of vibrations back into audible sound.[5] Read in this way, 'The Bugle Song' is less the 'localised romance' suggested by Campbell, with its implications of landscape and the egoic sublime, than a recursive and resonating sound system that does not refer except to itself – an echolalic abstraction. The bugle's echo moves towards and away from the poet, emerging and at the same time fading, travelling into the distance; the poem's meaning is this register of nearness and farness as a modulation of somatic charge.

---

[1] Alfred Tennyson, *The Complete Works* (New York: R. Worthington, 1882) 152.
[2] Matthew Campbell, *Irish Poetry Under the Union, 1801-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2014) 141, 139.
[3] Quoted in Jason R. Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009) 3.
[4] *Electric Meters*, 5
[5] John Townsend Trowbridge, *The Advance in Electricity Since the Time of Franklin*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1922) 46.

Electricity is charged matter. We might say, in this respect, that Tennyson's poem is electric. But electricity is also, socially and culturally speaking, infrastructural. It is this problem which Tennyson's poem disavows. Michael Rubenstein has shown how the development of Irish public utilities (including electricity) influenced the formal qualities of Irish modernist literature. This was a consequence of the historical experience of underdevelopment, and most specifically of the cultural memory of absent famine relief and the infamous 'Irish Board of Works'. If the Celts remained where Matthew Arnold had wanted to locate them, geographically as well as spiritually opposed to the governing apparatus of the modern state, then the Irish modernists of the 1930s and 40s had left Celticism well and truly behind. Ireland's literary culture, in tune with the example of the newly established Free State, itself responsible for the world's first state-controlled electric grid in the 1930s, became unusually receptive to the networked quotidian, with writers including Joyce, Bowen and Flann O'Brien, able to accommodate state infrastructure without denigrating it as mere utilitarianism.[6] Registering the unusual rapidity of Ireland's social development, the changing relation between private and public worlds, as well as between the city and the country, they were also willing to regard the technologies of state as facilitating citizenship.

Even so, although there might have been, as Rubenstein suggests, less posturing against infrastructural modernity in Ireland than elsewhere in Europe, electrical modernity was recorded ambivalently. Unlike fresh water, electricity was not a basic amenity; what's more, its production was relatively occluded, even occult by reputation, while its manifestation as light – a light to produce telegraphic messages in Maxwell's poem – placed the emphasis on distribution and reception. While electric light continued to stand, both technologically and symbolically, for modernity and enlightenment, its proliferation was scandalously deceptive, its assault upon the dark a disruption of the perceptual field. Almost inevitably, this invited counter critique. We can see this, for example, in Yeats's descant on the lights of central Dublin in the 1930s, which is ironically reminiscent of Tennyson's exhilaration on the MacGillycuddy's Reeks nearly a century before.

> When I stand upon O'Connell Bridge in the half-light and notice that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form, a vague hatred comes up out of my own dark and I am certain that wherever in Europe there are minds strong enough to lead others the same vague hatred rises; in four or five or in less generations this hatred will have issued in violence and imposed some kind of rule of kindred. I cannot know the nature of that rule, for its opposite fills the light; all I can do to bring it nearer is to intensify my hatred.[7]

It is worth noting that the 'modern heterogeneity' Yeats so laments is an ironic consequence of a new infrastructural cohesion: the Shannon Hydroelectric scheme was already in operation in the 1930s. The predictability of Yeats's response is that of a romantic poet deprived of the sublime: the lightning strike of nature, a sudden and potentially endangering meteorological event, has been earthed and redistributed in the banal form of an electric sign. The relative security of modern light compromises the self-image of a deep subject capable of apprehending phenomena which exist beyond the scope of human ingenuity. Though never straightforwardly Arnoldian, neither was Yeats averse

---

[6] Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure Irish Modernism and the Postcolonial* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) 21, 29, 24.

[7] W.B. Yeats, 'A General Introduction For My Work,' *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961) 526.

to borrowing the anthropological perspective on Irish underdevelopment: the small well-lit adventures of his London life had often been metaphysically transformed against the elemental backdrop of Ben Bulben and Knocknarea, his circumstantial emergencies given their proper twilight perspective by the deep field of the primitive. It is suggestive, then, that when Yeats loses this depth perspective – this is electric light in Ireland, not London! – his affective life is fundamentally reordered. Instead of sublime awe, he feels a 'vague hatred' come up and out of 'his own dark', which is like a compensatory memory for the 'proper dark' paradoxically obscured by electricity.[8]

We might recall that Joyce, writing as Stephen Dedalus, was fearful to the point of revulsion of the Irish dark: 'I fear his [the old man's] redrimmed horny eyes'. For Joyce, the dark was contagious and creaturely, an illiterate element capable of submerging his whole being: 'the peasant woman's bat-like soul wakes to consciousness of itself in darkness'.[9] But for Yeats, it remained a manageable poetic resource – part of his unending crepuscule. And yet, despite how obviously privileged his resistance to 1930s electrification, Yeats registers rather well its de-stabilising effects. It is especially significant in this example that his hatred for modernity is unsupported by the reality he seeks to pose against it: his future 'rule of kindred' can only be apprehended vaguely as an affective intensity. This disorienting loss of object connects his hated of electric signs to Tennyson's echolalia. In 'The Bugle Song' the poet is exhilarated by the movements of citation – from copy to copy to copy. Likewise, the 'electric signs' when viewed from O'Connell Bridge signify according to their repetitions. So, although Yeats's critique is patrician in character, it nonetheless helps elucidate the topographical and geopolitical predicament of the electric world, already legible in Tennyson's poem: namely that a body thrilled by its connectivity, entered into sensational relations with sound or light, a world of virtual stimulation, can become blind to the local imaginary of romanticism, as well as to any unbrilliant or unsounded material that happens to exist in proximity to it. The networked body does not feel itself to be local. Similarly, the technological imaginary of the state infrastructure is not equivalent to the historical imaginary of the nation. And the latter, for all its many deep problems, recalls a structure of care potentially lost to the systematic vitality of the former.

I would like, then, to extend but also further complicate the infrastructural optimism described by Rubenstein. This means recalling familiar Frankfurt School critiques of bureaucratic one-dimensionality (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse) and, more specifically, identifying a formative affinity between the logic of neoliberalism and that of the electrification of culture. Both are logics of *currency* emerging out of the modernist age, though ultimately fatal to modernism's more mythopoeic and hierarchical expressions. Neoliberalism, in Wendy Brown's memorable formulation, is a process of democracy defunding itself.[10] It is a contortion within the enfranchising promise of modern infrastructure. Its model of power, Brown writes, transfers from 'the hierarchically organised command and control' to 'governing that is networked, integrated, corporate, partnered, disseminated and at least partially self-organised'.[11] Crucially, its various networks come to resemble one another according to the rationalisations of the market: even the provision of public utilities becomes infiltrated by market logics. Governments

[8] '[Our]proper dark' is a phrase taken from Yeats's poem 'The Statues'. There it seems to suggest a nation or race-based stay against the 'filthy modern tide'. *W.B. Yeats, Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 2010) 430.

[9] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, edited by H. W. Gabler with W. Hettche (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993) 281, 248.

[10] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015) 200.

[11] *Undoing the Demos*, 123.

begin to act *as if* they were private business, or else they exempt themselves from objects of public concern in the name of consumer choice: the market as a fantasy of democratic self-regulation is always right. That private interests can rule the day under the cover of this fantasy of unfettered currency will come as no surprise to anyone who witnessed in the last years of the twentieth century the remarkable transformation of part of Ireland from post-colony to paradigm of neoliberal extravagance.

Electricity remains an appropriate image or synecdoche for this extravagance. It is a metaphor for capital flow which also, literally, facilitates capital – a fact that is especially apparent in the age of the internet. And yet, I suggest, electricity has also functioned as a self-reflective literary device. Though Ireland was in a rush to embrace electrification through state infrastructure in the 30s and 40s, and then again in the post Celtic Tiger digital age of Yahoo and Google, its literature has consistently found ways to restore unbrilliant, material contiguity to the semiotic field. This depends on what I will call its tradition of stupidity. 'Stupidity' here is not meant in a strictly pejorative sense, nor does it designate the neutrality of mere error; rather, following Avital Ronell, I use it to further questions of embodiment and materiality. While the material world itself is not stupid, its conversion into exchangeable forms of knowledge inevitably produces a supplementary discourse on the gross, the vulgar and the un-reconstitutable. Needless to say, 'Irishness' has often stood-in for rustic, uneducable stupidity in the history of English letters through the egregious figure of the racial stereotype. To be stupid, in this fashion, is to de-sublimate a polite economy of affect: to stand as the butt of a joke and convenient resource to be used up for other people's stimulation. It is also clear that this historical subjugation by means of cultural caricature has been significantly challenged by Irish writers and transformed into various powerful forms of satire, romantic elegy, and political speech. It is my suggestion, however, that the old stupidity receives new impetus in the electronic age for its ability to highlight those moments when metaphoric connections die in the body; when clumsily contiguous materials are revealed in the midst of flighty and idealistic associations; and when a sudden disarticulation within the structure of exchange reveals some material distress that has been overlooked. 'The question of stupidity is not satisfied with the discovery of the negative limit of knowledge,' writes Ronell: 'it consists, rather, in the absence of a relation to knowing'.[12] This non-relation at the heart of connectivity is key to understanding the figurative importance of electricity in modern Irish literature; it is not simply that there is an outside (an excluded other) to the cohesion of infrastructural modernity, but also that within ever more complex networks of animation there is an incompatible element – a discrepancy which emerges intermittently into view.

My keynote example is the 'electric lift' in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*. In O'Brien's novel, the narrator enters a space called 'Eternity' which resembles a power station. It is located on a hidden road and accessed by an electric lift which can only be found and operated by the lighting of a match. Accessed by contradictions, in other words, 'Eternity' is a place of endless productivity where the narrator orders gold, money, ' a bottle of whiskey, precious stones to the value of £200 000, some bananas, a fountain-pen and writing materials, and finally a serge suit of blue with silk linings'.[13] But nothing he possesses can be taken outside: his sundry stimulations within the power station remain forever unrelated to the contiguous world, their value untranslatable into terms of the surrounding countryside. This is because the electric lift will only work if the narrator weighs exactly the same when he leaves as he did on entry; it is an incongruous device

[12] Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 3, 5.
[13] Flann O' Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Harper Perennial , 2007)141.

which also enforces an incongruity between different worlds for comic effect. Yet it is a rudimentary truth within the universe of the novel that the exhilarations which obtain in the electric precinct of 'Eternity' are, despite the comedy of strict separation, implicated with the most ordinary things (particularly bicycles!). If stupidity, in its first iteration, is a dumb refusal to be connected and vitalised, then O'Brien's parody of technological connectivity, embodied by the too-clever-by-half obtuseness of the policemen who operate the devices of 'Eternity', points us towards the conclusion that overstimulation is its own kind of stupidity – and, even more paradoxically, a form of death. Indeed, that excessive life can be a form of death is the novel's final revelation.

Stupidity in O'Brien's work is not simply a mistake; it is, rather, a persistent lack of brilliancy, an active *unknowing* which lives on – just about – beside or within more spectacular vitalities. Moving through several literary examples taken from the mid-twentieth century to the present day, I would like to suggest three themes by which this stupidity can be re-registered as a complicating factor within an electric modernity set adrift on the neo-liberal current: emigration, constitutional politics and ecology. In some ways, the first two of these themes are anachronistic, summoning the predictable and possibly redundant forms of satire, romantic elegy and political speech which have characterised so much of Irish literature in the past. But it is through their very persistence beyond the parameters of their initial historical context that they emerge productively into new interpretive paradigms, specifically that of ecological critique. And while this third theme is clearly more future-oriented, its disruptive insistence on the finitude of natural resources compels us to reconsider the place and historical value of redundancy. The purpose of the examples I offer, then, is to show how disconnection functions, thematically and formally, within a networked imaginary, and how it might be repositioned within new discourses oriented around climate change. If, according to Friedrich Kittler, '1800' was the discourse of the mother tongue, and '1900' that of technological mediation, then '2000' would seem to indicate a further shift toward the discrepant co-existence of an apparently inexhaustible virtual world with an exhausted materiality.[14] Thinking historically through electricity is one way to make this present discrepancy feel culturally real.

Emigration

Although electricity can indeed be saved, the act of saving it can seem, within a modernist frame, to be a gross stupidity. It is as if by drawing attention to the measure of its expenditure one misunderstands its essential immeasurability -- its fundamentally excessive nature. This is certainly the formative accusation levelled against James Tyrone in Eugene O Neill's 1955 play *Long Day's Journey Into Night* whose inherited 'fear of the poor house' means he keeps turning off the lights:

> Tyrone: [reacts mechanically] I never claimed one bulb costs much! It's having them on …that makes the Electric Company rich.[15]

Tyrone's 'mechanical' reactions are tellingly anachronistic when discussing the magic of electricity. Indeed, his astute detection of a profit motive operating within the

[14] Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks: 1800/1900*. Translated by M. Metter with C. Cullens (California: Stanford, 1990)
[15] Eugene O'Neill, *A Long Day's Journey into Night* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 117

infrastructural miracle of the grid is tied to his pathological alcoholism and 'homesickness for Ireland'. A true mid-twentieth century capitalist, a white-migrant to America at least, is supposed to bathe in a world of affects – to further intensify the already intense stimulations of his life. Turning on and off the lights in O Neill's play becomes therefore a significant drama of origins; Tyrone's miserliness, a pre-capitalist refusal to spend, is repeatedly linked to the pre-electric imaginary of his parents' homeland. The Irish dark is the locus of his injury and self-harm but remains also a theatrical device for reflecting on, and even critiquing, the migrant's dream of futurity. It is dialectical, in other words; and though there is a predictability to the generationally inflected contest between de-territorialised modernity and the obdurate stupidity of place and home, the use of electric light significantly recodes the question of character and personal fulfilment as a matter of social energy and natural resource.

We can see something very similar happen in Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* trilogy, the first two volumes of which register the continued electrification of rural Ireland in the 1950s. Clearly the tenor of these volumes is not *against* modernisation; in fact, their gender politics conspire with technology in favour of vitalism and mobility. And yet, when mediated through attitudes to electricity, Kate Brady's personal oppositional relation to her abusive father – a totem of place and stupidity – is rendered in its full social complexity.

> We got into the convent town at dusk … we drove through a narrow street that had electric lights every fifty yards or so along the pavement and there were poplar trees in between the green metal lamp posts. The dark sheet of water and the sad poplar trees and the strange dogs outside the strange shops made me indescribably sad.
>
> 'Nice place,' my father said, and snuffled. Nice place! A lot he knew about it. How could he think it was a nice place by just looking out the window?[16]

This is Kate, her father and the Brennan family arriving at a new boarding school, fulfilling the bildungsroman destiny of Kate's academic prowess. The association of light and literacy is quite obvious. But the daughter-father relation supplements the narrative of personal escape, and potential improvement, with a distorted form of attachment. Kate's father's illiterate stupidity is conveyed through his admiration for light: the town is estimable because it is electrified; it is estimable precisely because he knows nothing about it – and his ignorance remains to chastise and ironize his commendation. Kate, on the other hand, is dependent on knowing and feeling the force of light and connectivity. Later-on in her development she scandalously admits to loving the 'neon fairyland of Dublin more than [she] had ever loved a summers day in a hayfield'. And later still, when she moves back to the countryside, albeit in more genteel circumstances with her lover Eugene, she remains entirely unperturbed at the idea that the telegraph poles would spoil the view.[17] Connectivity is essential to Kate's development; it facilitates her escape from abuse but at the same time remains symptomatic of her enduring need to be in more one place or locale at the same time. She is far from a romantic.

Kate's repulsion at her father's express admiration for the technology she so desperately depends upon establishes the question of electricity as generational and pathological as well as infrastructural and modern. Accordingly, her brilliant vitality remains inseparable

[16] Edna O'Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017) 81
[17] *The Country Girls Trilogy*, 167, 447

from her mania and self-destruction throughout the series. In the final volume, separated from Eugene and living alone in a small 'single storey terrace' in London, she has her son Cash over to stay. There is no electricity and the boy, afraid that the candlelight 'might turn into something else', cries out for his father. Kate's bluff optimism on this occasion – 'you'll come back when the electricity is in and things are cheerful' – cannot cover over the trauma of the situation: she has been pulled back into her own father's dark.[18] But still *The Country Girls* does not propose a recursive myth; nor, despite the tragedy of its epilogue, is it an over-salutary story about excess. We are left, rather, with the impression that Kate has experienced genuine freedoms, availing of the grid insofar as she was allowed to. Electricity enables her reading, her physical mobility, and the possibilities of her sexual life. And yet, no-matter the intensity of the stimulations involved, obdurate attachments and real costs find a way of making themselves apparent. Brilliancy and stupidity remain aligned – this is the lesson of Irish electrification, both as state-led initiative and as a migratory phenomenon: when bodies move towards a brighter modernity they are not entirely released from the local dark.

Constitutional Politics

It was part of Ireland's infrastructural imaginary, and the magical thinking around total automation which underlay it, that investment in electricity and water would lead to the reunification of the island.[19] Clearly this didn't happen, and while electric goods aplenty were smuggled across the border, the electric grid remained, with some notable exceptions, effectively partitioned.[20] Once more, when connectivity breaks down in a particular place – on the border itself – stupidity emerges as a form of affective deadness. Indeed, it was once a generally acceptable sentiment in Dublin and London that the Northern Irish problem was a problem of stupidity, and those engaged in/caught up by the violence merely pathological. In this way, constitutional politics could be reset as a question of natural elements, the resources of a people, and their recalcitrance deemed fundamentally incompatible with the liberalising imaginary of modern infrastructure. The language of 'peace dividend' in the aftermath of The Good Friday Agreement testifies to this same logic: namely, that the presumed co-option of politics by the currency of affect is held up as the only realistic solution.

Stewart Parker's 1987 play *Pentecost* is a forceful corrective to this view. It is a play about the failure of infrastructure, the de-electrification of Northern-Ireland and the stupidity of sectarian impasse – and how this is too easily conflated with the stupidity of politics itself. It takes place just before and during the 1974 Ulster Workers' Council strike, which was effectively a Unionist protest designed to topple the Sunningdale Power-sharing initiative. The quick translation from electric power back to political power is telling in the context, but also reflects the broader consideration of the electric grid: when it is deemed isomorphic to modern life itself, how might electricity be disconnected without pushing everyone back into political stagnancy and cultural death? The characters in Parker's play occupy a dead space, a dead woman's house, which is one in a row of houses situated at a flash point between the rival communities. The infrastructure is disabled, the houses on

[18] *The Country Girls Trilogy*, 617
[19] *Public Works*, 147
[20] See for example: 'Smuggling Electric Goods', RTE https://www.rte.ie/archives/2018/1206/1015520-smuggling-electrical-goods/ [accessed 1/2/2021]

the street ransacked, bits of gas lamps, we are told, repurposed for bombs. The stage direction with which the play opens emphasises the central problem of light:

> There is a single electric light with conical shade hanging from the middle of the ceiling in kitchen and scullery both; but there are also working gas mantles on the walls.[21]

Here, light doubled presages light to be taken away. The duplication of lights and their prominent staging recalls James Tyrone's class anxiety intersecting with electrical expenditure – but it also insists on periodisation: the history of the house vies with its present situation. Only the older gas lights remain lit in scene 2, an ominous return to the past, following which the play descends into darkness and candle. What this descent means for the main characters, two disenfranchised couples - one Protestant, the other Catholic - besides being condemned to the stupidity of sectarian violence, is to make apparent the fact that public utilities, despite the apparent impartiality of their stimulations, are owned – in this case by a section of the Unionist population.

One of the play's key scenes involves Marian, who is living on the verge of madness, daring to speak back to the ghost of the dead ex-tenant of the house, a Protestant widow called Lily Matthews:

> You think you're haunting me don't you. But you see it's me that's actually haunting you. I'm not going to go away. There's no curse or hymn that can exorcise me. So you might as well just give me your blessing and make your peace with me Lily.[22]

First of all, this is allegorical: a Catholic is taking joint ownership of a Protestant house in Belfast in 1974. But it's also a deliberate exchange of life for death. Marian's libidinal connections are breaking down in the play, specifically her marriage with Lenny -- ended in the wake of losing a child. Her prior worldliness is replaced by a decisive occupation: a refusal to budge from the precarious, stupid street she wants to call home. Choosing a kind of death, she also begins to figure a new kind of vitality which redirects the play's infrastructural imaginary. Indeed her small-scale obduracy contrasts to the ludicrously idealistic endeavour recalled by Peter who had planned in his student days to energise the entire Belfast water supply with LSD: 'we actually got as far as Dundrum …before negative signals began to filter through even to us … the silent valley reservoir had been blown up by the UVF'.[23] The Troubles, we are reminded, was an infrastructural war: buildings and utilities bombed in order to return cosmopolitan flow to the contingent realties of place, and the politics playing out therein. These were melancholic repetitions in many terrible ways, though also intentionally counterproductive, their stupidity a strategic reminder that the infrastructural imaginary and its modernising promise – the promise of de-territorialised flow – remains vulnerable to the political agency it attempts to surpass. Accordingly, Marian at the end of *Pentecost* makes no glib appeal to modern life and electricity to save her and her friends from the benighted stagnancy of 1974 Belfast -- there is no 'transcendent gesture' to emulate Peter's student idealism. Nor is she, strictly speaking, ideological – she offers, rather, a political way to live in the dark.

---

[21] Stewart Parker, *Pentecost* in *Plays 2* (Merseyside: Methuen Drama, 2002) 169-245: 171.
[22] *Pentecost*, 210
[23] *Pentecost*, 235-6

Ecology

Contemporary ecological thought often struggles to frame political agency: how might we live in the dark, as Marian in *Pentecost* plans to - deliberately, but not atavistically -when the very notion of subjective intention can seem to indicate a standing over and against the natural world, a 'challenging' of its resources, premised on engrained ideas of the human exception?[24] Yet without the image of a political subject there remains the perennial danger of conflation between ecological registrations of the earth's bio-spheric systems and the economic dream of global markets as endlessly self-correcting flows of information and capital: complex but not deep; interconnected but not humanely social. Ruth Leys instructively interrogates the ecological worldview of philosopher Jane Bennett along these lines. Bennett's vital materialist philosophy allows that the failure of the North American electric grid in 2003 was due as much to the agency and unpredictable 'strivings' of the electric current itself as it was to human agency.[25] Not only, says Leys, does Bennett's analysis let the neoliberal deregulators off the hook (and how, we might ask, would this philosophy speak to the Unionist government in Stormont in 1974?), it proposes a vital politics of autonomic systems. As Leys writes: 'If communication is understood on the materialist model of a vibration of water, or of an electric current sent down a wire or neural network, then nonhuman things and objects can and do pass on their affects without recourse to representation or signification'.[26] We are back with Yeats's electric signs whose brilliancy obscured any object that might oppose it. The danger for Leys is that without subjective intervention – without, in Brown's terms, the revival of *homo-politicus* – we come to mystify through our philosophy and practice a nervous vitality that admits of no regulation, and which finds new modes of intensity even as it disavows its dependency on finite resources.

Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* is a novel concerned with this contemporary join between the politics of ecology and electronic infrastructure. Its protagonist Marcus Conway is an engineer, citationally modernist in his sensibilities, and tellingly lost amidst the vitalities of the internet age. The significance of this disorientation is doubled by the novel's primary narrative conceit, borrowed from *The Third Policeman*, of having Marcus narrate the novel when he is already dead. The electric world he finds so unmanageable marks the passing of his vitality: he is dead stupid. In one sense this invokes the formative paradox of patriarchy: Marcus, a deceased father to two children, a deceased husband to one wife, exerts linguistic and symbolic control from beyond the grave. In another, more interesting sense the novel attempts to shift the grammar of fatherhood, displacing Marcus' vocational engineering certainties through the virtual world (which is how he communicates with his distant son) as well as through his daughter Agnes' shockingly visceral artworks. It is also important that Marcus is forced into the historically feminised labour of nursing his wife Mairead when she becomes seriously ill from the cryptosporidiosis virus. It may be, then,

[24] The problem of 'challenging' the earth's resources [*Herausfordern*] is a central idea in Martin Heidegger's critique of modern extraction economies, allied to the regime of modern aesthetics in 'The Question Concerning Technology', *Basic Writings,* translated by W. Lovitt (London: Routledge, 1993) 213-39
[25] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 30
[26] Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 349

that not only has the father died in this novel, but that the fatherly imaginary has died with it.[27]

Such a possibility plays out through Marcus's deliberations on infrastructure: 'systems which make the house a living thing with all its walls and the floors pulsing with oil and water and electricity'.[28] This is a vital environment of care corrupted, in Marcus's view, by political avarice and short-sightedness such that bodies which are supposed to be sustained and charged by the government are instead poisoned - like Mairead's has been by the local water supply. As a critique of Celtic Tiger recklessness, the point could hardly be more critical: this is a crisis brought on by the privatisation of care. But, once more, electricity – not a basic amenity – proves a complicating factor. Marcus's engineering mindset cannot fix the political opportunism he laments because his twentieth-century materialism, in love with concrete and the internal combustion engine, has been revealed as its own kind of idealism, left floundering by new twenty-first century realities. For all of the novel's experimentalism, fragmentary sentences and modernist citation (specifically to the Ithaca chapter in *Ulysses*), its affinity with Marcus' own worldview means that it, too, is fundamentally stupid – providing a retrospective meditation on its own redundancy as much as on the redundancy of Marcus's enthusiasm for the mechanical world.

Redundancy and electricity come together in the novel's formative image of the felled wind turbine 'hauled through the main street on its bier without fanfare or procession.' Marcus charts the line from his own modernist desire for mechanics and engines to this: 'if I saw the dismantled tractor as the beginning of the world … then this wind turbine was its end, a destiny it had been forced to give up on a dream of itself shelved or aborted or miscarried, an old idea which echoed'.[29] As we saw with Tennyson, an echo can be the sound effect of current running through the body, entered into a world of effects without apparent origins, replicated today in the echo chambers of the internet whose connectivity often propagates a disregard for physical contiguity. Echo also marks the point at which the endlessly connected body is revealed as the fatally narcissistic body, when the stupidity of disconnection which vitality opposes emerges as central to vitality itself. As Ronell puts it, stupidity does not oppose thought so much as repulse it.[30] If it is too obvious to associate stupidity with the un-electrified rustic, the idiot outside, it remains instructive to find stupidity at the heart of the electric dream: the break in the circuit, the sudden disconnection, the comic juxtaposition of what is faraway with what is nearby. This is the predicament embodied by the wind turbine in *Solar Bones*: the abstract thrill of its energetics entered into an incongruous looking proximity – a mere contiguity of matter. It might be a fallen God, or a new Gulliver suddenly exposed to Lilliputian vulgarity. But is it, as Marcus suggests, the end of hope? The turbine marks more than what the infrastructure has historically excluded – there has always been stupidity beyond the light; it also marks what infrastructure exhausts – the raw material of the earth. A fallen turbine marks a failure of renewal and also of the modernist, technocratic dream that one form of productivity

[27] Mike McCormack, *Solar Bones* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2016) 55. The emerging critical literature on this novel has emphasised both its concern for the quotidian and its feel for catastrophe. Deirdre Flynn, for example, reads *Solar Bones* as a meditation on loss at the local level, while Malcolm Sen has written on the novel's 'engineering anguish' as an essentially multi-scalar registration of the environmental crisis. Deirdre Flynn, 'Holding on to "Rites, Rhythms and Rituals": Mike McCormack's Homage to Small Town Irish Life and Death', *Representations of Loss in Irish Literature*, edited by D. Flynn and E. O'Brien (Cham: Palgrave, 2018): 37-52; Malcolm Sen, 'Risk and Refuge: Contemplating Precarity in Contemporary Irish Fiction' *Irish University Review* 49.1 (2019) 13-31: 22.

[28] *Solar Bones,* 128-9

[29] *Solar Bones,* 27-8

[30] *Stupidity*, 23

can be replaced by another without having to acknowledge loss – as if climate change itself might be ludicrously resolved by a further intensification of light.

Bibliography

Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
Brown, Wendy, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).
Campbell, Matthew, *Irish Poetry Under the Union, 1801-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
Flynn, Deirdre, 'Holding on to "Rites, Rhythms and Rituals": Mike McCormack's Homage to Small Town Irish Life and Death', *Representations of Loss in Irish Literature*, edited by D. Flynn and E. O'Brien (Cham: Palgrave, 2018): 37-52.
Heidegger, Martin, *Basic Writings,* translated by W. Lovitt (London: Routledge, 1993).
Joyce, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, edited by H. W. Gabler with W. Hettche (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993).
Kittler, Friedrich A., *Discourse Networks: 1800/1900*. Translated by M. Metter with C. Cullens (California: Stanford, 1990).
Leys, Ruth, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
McCormack, Mike, *Solar Bones* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2016).
O'Brien, Edna *The Country Girls Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017).
O' Brien, Flann, *The Third Policeman* (London: Harper Perennial , 2007).
O'Neill, Eugene, *A Long Day's Journey into Night* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
Parker, Stewart, *Pentecost* in *Plays 2* (Merseyside: Methuen Drama, 2002).
Ronell, Avital, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).
Rubenstein, Michael, *Public Works: Infrastructure Irish Modernism and the Postcolonial* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).
Rudy, Jason R., *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009).
Sen, Malcolm, 'Risk and Refuge: Contemplating Precarity in Contemporary Irish Fiction' *Irish University Review* 49.1 (2019) 13-31.
Tennyson, Alfred, *The Complete Works* (New York: R. Worthington, 1882).
Trowbridge, John Townsend, *The Advance in Electricity Since the Time of Franklin*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1922).
Yeats, W.B., *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 2010).
Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961).