

Laughter before the law: censorship, caricature and hunger strike in modern Irish literature and art.

Laughter is a body traversed by the sound of language and at the same time rendered speechless. It is compulsion, and also a performance of compulsion, an expenditure of energy that is seldom without reserve. Laughter shows itself on the lips, in the eyes, through the shoulders and the head, and announces itself as soothing or grating, or, most often, as something in between. It says *I am here* yet also demands translation.

Laughter also has a peculiar relationship with the law. Am I allowed to laugh in court, for example, or is that always contempt? Can laughter be rationed, or does it always indicate a disruption of rationality? Is laughter, in fact, the very essence of mimesis, a doubling and a doubling over, the factor of contagious reproduction which Plato couldn't sanction within the boundaries of the State? Although in the European tradition of philosophy laughter has often been characterised as distinctively human (on the side of the law), it has also manifested as the unstable relation between the human and its extra-judicial other. For Aristotle, laughter was compatible with reason (animals don't laugh, though they can be laughed at), while for Bergson, writing in the nineteenth century, it was a means of testing the inelasticity of reason, as when reason itself had become inhuman with technological automation (see Chaplin's tramp in *Modern Times* mimicking the machines he is attempting to master).¹ Charles Baudelaire identified two kinds of laughter: the moral superiority of the *comique significatif*, as when witnessing a body fall beneath the dignity of reason; and the *comique absolu* when it

¹Aristotle, *Parts Of Animals*, III, 10; Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1956). For a detailed and sophisticated account of this tradition of thinking about laughter see Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

becomes apparent that the fallen body is an elaboration of artifice, as in a pantomime when the audience has been duped into their disdain.²

But withdrawing knowingness and control from the essence of laughter was not original to Baudelaire. The poet might have found a similar thought in the work of Scots-Irish philosopher Francis Hutcheson writing in 1750. For Hutcheson laughter was a form of contagion; ‘nor are they all fools,’ he wrote ‘who are apt to laugh before they know the jest’.³ Significantly, for Hutcheson, though its sound was first the rattle of private interest, laughter’s predictable coding of superiority could also give way to unexpected kinship. In fact, he considered laughter was at its most characteristic when the object of ridicule ceased to be its sufficient cause.

Such a shift, from ridicule and objectification to a form of solidarity premised on exuberant inarticulacy, where laughter abuts nonsense speech, has a special resonance throughout the history of Irish literature in English. Most clearly, the stock Irish character was a literary machine for converting the law of representation, including the fair exchange of crime and punishment, into laughable pathologies: accent, lisp, limp, irascibility, lachrymosity and so on. Likewise, the humourful Irish voice persistently over-wrote –and continues to overwrite – the forensics of what *really happened* (think here of ‘Honest Thady’ in *Castle Rackrent*⁴, the narrator of *The Third Policeman*, or ‘middle sister’ in *Milkman*). This transfer from ridiculed body to an intermittent mode of linguistic production, by turns aphasic and logorrheic, and

² Charles Baudelaire. ‘On the Essence of Laughter’ in *The Painter of Modern Life and other essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964).

³ Francis Hutcheson, ‘Reflections on Laughter’ in *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design* ed. P Kivy (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973) 102-119: 113.

⁴ For more on this character and his function in Edgeworth’s novel, see Max Barrett’s essay in this volume.

close always to the physical breakdown of a laugh, accounts for the short journey between the Irish stereotype and Irish style. As Margaret Kelleher's recent study of the Maamtrasna Murders in 1882 has emphasised, the entry of the Irish language into the monolingual legal system of the UK was germane to the predicament of Irish character as fundamentally comic. What Kelleher calls the 'pantomimic endeavours' (75) of court translation in the late nineteenth century inevitably drew on an established literary tradition depicting, in often exaggeratedly visual terms, scapegrace Irish rogues who might of course only be pretending not to understand the language of the law.⁵

The argument of this chapter is that the law requires a fantasy body to exercise itself on. Without a fantasy body, there is no law. I will suggest that the laughing body not only makes conspicuous this necessary act of imaginary identification, but also troubles the legibility of the body's utterances, its placement and propriety within a linguistic and legal order. There are three related ways in which modern Irish artistic and literary works have recalled the law to its dependence on body image: censorship, caricature and the physical protest of hunger strike. In section one I consider the interaction between censorship and the joke as fundamental to the operation of the law as a structure of fantasy. Paying particular attention to John McGahern's *The Dark*, I follow how jokes work to distribute laughter between bodies within a given social scene. In section two I propose the necessary collapse of this symbolic order in the field of caricature. Francis Bacon's portraits focus on the point when ridicule becomes a contagious mode of identification, endorsed through the grotesque physiology of laughter. In section three I compare these incontinent bodies to the moral continence of the hunger striker, whose body is nonetheless forced to the point of spectacular decomposition.

⁵ Margaret Kelleher, *The Maamtrasna Murders: language, life and death in Nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin: UCD Press: 2018): 75, 93.

Drawing a line from Yeats through Terence MacSwiney, I end with the writings of Bobby Sands. For the hunger striker laughter reflects the predicament of a political will tipping over into convulsive pathology.

While these cultural examples are preparative rather than representative, and specifically male, they do, I think, suggest a variety of aesthetic outcomes and avenues for further study. They also describe a tradition especially sensitised to the function of laughter as a means by which literary and legal conceptions of utterance make contact with one another, but also potentially part ways.

Jokes without laughter: censorship

Check-in attendant: Did you pack your bags yourself, sir?

Me (in a distinctively North-of-Ireland accent): No, I let the man wearing the balaclava pack them for me.

The most interesting thing about this kind of joke is how relatively untried it is. Not because it is a bad joke, but rather because it is a joke that as soon as it is thought enacts a prohibition on laughter. In other words, when I am asked in an airport whether I packed my bags myself I may be tempted to answer ironically, and I may rather grandiosely imagine the attendant's laughter at my response, but in reality when it comes to it I always answer obediently:

Check-in attendant: Did you pack your bags yourself, sir?

Me (neutral, like a bride re-living her marriage vow): I did.

Why do I submit in this fashion? Most simply, because I do not believe the law has a sense of humour. Even if the check-in attendant understood the fact that I was being ironic, the part of them that represented the law would be tone deaf. The law determines the real meaning of my words no-matter what I claim about my subjective intention to amuse.

I have chosen this example, which I presume is fairly commonplace, in order to point out that although the law seems to suppress laughter, it also creates the tension which determines laughter's possibility. How does this come about? First of all, because, as I have already suggested, the law operates through fantasy. In this case, the primary fantasy of the law is that it is able to translate all my utterances into their *real* meaning, and by this power asserts its authority over my body. There is a supplementary fantasy too, namely that I might disarm the power of the law with humour, by making it laugh – in Freudian terms exercising an oedipal revenge against it. Yet the fact that the joke is privately censored suggests I find it difficult to believe that the law ever does laugh. And what would it mean if it did? Could it still be trusted? In other words, the thought of this joke can only let me know I am subject to a law I resent. And, indeed, that my resentment may be key to its authority.

The law defines the meaning of my words. It turns a potential joke into a potential crime and inhibits my speech. This is related to its sacred status, its reliance on taboo – or in terms of modern political sovereignty, treason. One of the peculiarities of treason as a crime against the sovereign is that I do not have to *do* anything to be guilty, I only have to *say* something.⁶ Even more significantly, I don't have to mean what I say. The law of treason, as the law which establishes sovereignty itself, requires that every personal utterance be translated into meaning: language isn't allowed to remain entirely idiosyncratic. We might say that

⁶ For a further discussion of the crime of political treason, see Katherine Ebury's essay in this collection.

claiming a stranger packed your bags before a flight is a modern version of treason, given that once said it can't be unsaid by appeal to subjective intention. As Ottave Mannoni puts it in a related discussion of writing and madness in the famous case of Judge Schreber, whose nervous illness and memoir became central to the theorisation of psychosis: 'sacrilegious speech is already guilty and he who utters it finds no safety in conscious innocence.'⁷ For a citizen living in obedience to the law, the censoring of their speech in this light is part of an implicit acceptance that they don't own the meaning their words convey. And yet a satiric voice attends and comments upon this ordinary acceptance, even foments the temptation to utter a profanation. It is precisely the space of these unsaid, half-said, not publicly registered words, and of the stifled laugh, that comprises the archive of the self. Ironically, someone's acknowledgement that they don't control the meaning of language in the face of the law establishes the essentially private terms of their interest within a legal framework.⁸

Two familial scenes from John McGahern's 1965 novel *The Dark* can help exemplify how the suppression of laughter might indeed be constitutive of such a satiric privacy before the law, as well as productive of a recognisable aesthetic convention. The novel opens in the aftermath of a profanation, the protagonist in the middle of being chastised by his overbearing father, Mahoney:

⁷ Ottave Mannoni, 'Writing and madness: Schreber als Schrieber' in *Psychosis and Sexual Identity: Towards a Post-analytic view of the Schreber Case*, eds. D.B. Allison et al. (New York: Suny Press, 1988) 43-60: 48.

⁸ Bakhtin famously wrote of modern satire that it is 'laughter that does not laugh' because its economy of private exchange and moral reimbursement implicitly rejects the material culture of the carnival. In an era when several comedians have come to political prominence, this writing of the privatisation of laughter has recovered its prophetic force. What could be a better example of 'laughter that does not laugh' than a president becoming his own satirist, laughing at his own jokes, inanely, all of the time? Mikail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 69,79.

‘Say what you said because I know.’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘Out with it I tell you.’

‘I don’t know I said anything.’

‘F_U_C_K is what you said isn’t it? That profane and ugly word. Now don’t you think you can bluff your way out of it?’

‘I didn’t mean it, it just came out.’⁹

This passage has been characterised as a proleptic dig against the Irish censorship board who would ban the novel on publication.¹⁰ This is almost certainly true; yet beneath anticipatory knowingness, the scene equally dramatizes the intimate and necessary role censorship plays in the creation of a private subject. The father’s voice asserts itself over, but also *into* the son; we can see this by the fact that the son’s profanation is conspicuously re-articulated by the father, indeed quadrupling the energy of the missing word by insinuating its crime into each of its letters. The law relishes what it also forbids. This displaced pleasure from the protagonist’s excluded voice into the father’s censorious mimicry inaugurates the novelistic discourse which is also, paradoxically, the space of the protagonist’s personal development. McGahern continues to notate this shifting ground of generational interpellation through the use of pronouns, alternating throughout between ‘he’, ‘they’, ‘I’ and ‘you’. The story of the son’s gradual accomplishment of personhood is continually imperilled by the unstable location of narrative authority.

⁹ John McGahern, *The Dark* (London: Faber, 1965): 7

¹⁰See, for example, Richard Robinson, *John McGahern and Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 56.

The corresponding scene takes place towards the end of the novel as the protagonist, having won a scholarship, prepares in good Bildungsroman fashion to escape his father's cruelty and join the world.

He had to look solemn but he felt free after the hotel and wanted to laugh. He watched his father cycle by his side home, the head low into the wind over the dynamo lamp, pushing. He waited for him to pass the graveyard.

'It gives me the creeps, that place! No matter what happens it winds up there. And you wouldn't mind only there's people dying to get into it,' everybody repeated themselves but suddenly at the old joke he wanted to laugh with him and say, 'You are marvelous, my father'.¹¹

Twice in short order the protagonist wants to laugh. Twice he doesn't laugh. Each time, however, the suppression of laughter suggests something different. In the first instance it is withheld scorn, a further iteration of his obeisance to his father's solemnity; in the second, the potentially more subversive decision to let an old, generationally encrypted joke wither into silence. McGahern leads the reader to a threshold, in other words: do these two withheld laughs cancel each other out, or does the final transformation of resentment into affection signal a full internalisation of the power structure which once afflicted the protagonist violently from without? Significantly, the conflicted inhibition, both satiric and affectionate, establishes the protagonist as a speaking subject able to defend his siblings from their father's verbal or physical abuse. Inevitably, however, this standing up to, and speaking out against the father as a form of resistance is also a form of patriarchal emulation. In psychoanalytic theory, such conflicted intergenerational identification is characterised as a question of

¹¹ *The Dark*: 160

mourning. For Freud, delving into prehistory, the ritualised act of eating the dead father was the means by which the sovereign stored himself in the crypt of his offspring, who thereafter remained subject to his edicts.¹² Over time this primitive meat economy became linguistic: the name of the father forever held in the mouth at the instigation of what Lacan calls the symbolic order. To be inducted into the law, to have the law transmitted through the body, is to attain the privilege of being able to speak. But the price of speaking, of attaining legal personhood, means that intention cannot simply control the meaning of utterance ('I didn't mean it, it just came out').

McGahern's reputation as a Chekovian chronicler of rural life fully engaged in critiquing the dangerous complexities of familial becoming has occasionally been disputed by those who see his naturalistic authority as overly accepting of an inherited imaginary, specifically the routines and rituals of the Irish countryside.¹³ It may be, however, given the scenes just highlighted, that we can reframe this contest by noting simply that McGahern registers the destructive, taboo-shattering capacities of laughter without himself indulging it. The apparent dignity of his writing, its manifest labour and rejection of frivolous decoration, the importance it places on authoritative understatement, especially when confronted with the censorial pleasures of other people, all amount to a recognisable style, the writing of which does not breakdown the convention it troubles. It is certainly the case that McGahern would have been a different writer, one more in sympathy with Judge Schreber, but also his near-contemporary Samuel Beckett, had he permitted the son to laugh out his euphoric scorn. Instead, he built a literary method on letting the father's joke quietly and ambiguously resound.

¹² Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV* (1914-16) (London: The Hogarth Press): vii-162.

¹³ Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2007): 165,229.

Laughter without the joke: caricature

Every joke requires three people, Freud tells us: a teller, their audience and the butt; a triangulation which apes the legal structure of prosecutor, judge, and defendant. Significantly, however, Freud dedicates a considerable portion of his study *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) to the potential dissolution of linguistic sense (puns, sound effects and the fragmentation of words) and the essential connection between this dissolution and the body of the laugh.¹⁴ If conventional jokes serve as convenient release valves for ridding a ‘healthy’ culture of excess aggression and so forth, their everyday proliferation also indicates a symbolic-linguistic order which tends towards its own decomposition: e.g. ‘F.U.C.K’.

Specifically, Freud draws our attention to the mimicry involved when we laugh at a physical symptom: a grimace, or a face that moves too much, or is ‘ugly’.¹⁵ Recalling Baudelaire’s point mentioned above, the laughing subject is capable of turning himself into the object of his disdain. As Anna Parvulescu has narrated its modern history, nineteenth-century physiognomists were agreed that the noncriminal should not laugh too much.¹⁶ Laughter indicated there was something uncontained about a character which attracted cultural suspicion to the body image, and, more specifically, to the face. This is why it is significant that L. P. Curtis opens his account of Irish caricature with a series of questions about the face.¹⁷ The status of having a face that *passed* was more than a matter of inheritance, it was

¹⁴Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. J Strachey, The Penguin Freud Library Volume 6 (London: Penguin, 1960): 65.

¹⁵ Freud, *Jokes*: 250.

¹⁶ Parvulescu, *Laughter*: 57.

¹⁷ L.P Curtis, *Apes and Angels: the Irish man in Victorian Caricature* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971).

also, on pain of disqualification, an object of disciplinary scrutiny: the eighteenth and nineteenth-century 'Irish' face was always in the midst of dissembling, through whatever top-of-the-morning humour it displayed, a pathology -- exhibiting at the same time a fundamentally treacherous inconstancy of character. Curtis provides us with a formative insight into this history of this ideological objectification but he doesn't develop the aesthetic question of reception which accompanies it: if these object-faces are designed to be laughed at, what does it mean when 'we' do in fact laugh? At what point does ridicule cross over into sympathetic identification? In other words, how does the historical meaning of the joke-image interact with the material transfer of affect from viewer to image and back again? How does the image utter itself in the face of the law?

Let's take an example from the other side of the nineteenth-century *Volkscharakter* coin from Irish humour to establish the significance of these questions. The following passage comes from Hegel's remarks on the visual portraiture of sovereign figures:

[The portrait painter] must flatter, in the sense that all the externals in shape and expression, in form, colour, features, the purely natural side of imperfect existence, little hairs, pores, little scars, warts, all these he must let go, and grasp and reproduce the subject in his universal character and enduring personality. It is one thing for the artist simply to imitate the face of the sitter, its surface and external form, confronting him in repose, and quite another to be able to portray the true features which express the inmost soul of the subject.¹⁸

¹⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: lectures of fine art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975):155.

Here is character refined to the point of identification with an historical event. A world-historical hero in other words, the ‘concrete universal’ whose presentation as a body refined into legibility depends on the de-pathologisation of his appearance (just as current passport photographs depend on the de-temperamentalsing of appearance). Left unedited, suggests Hegel, such small-scale realities as ‘hairs, pores, little scars, warts’ would distract the viewer from the image’s significance as the personification of the law.¹⁹

The caricature offers a clear contrast in this regard. As a bundle of un-reconciled pathologies, a face broken apart into epidermiological and temperamental fragments, it refers to a body fallen beneath sovereignty. And while it is certainly the case that caricature is a version of a character whose physical features are negatively exaggerated on ideological grounds, Hegel’s commentary alerts us to the additional fact that entirely ordinary facets of ‘imperfect existence’ should be edited out of historical representation. In other words, the caricatured face that comes apart is not only a salutary symptom awaiting sublimation into ideal form, it also points the way towards an unruly commonness which endures beneath the march of historical dialectic. The abjected body, around which criminological and racial lines have been drawn, remains unsettlingly contagious, a site for identification in the moment of its reception: *oh, to be such a character, free of the responsibility of historical event!* It is this doubleness, the disciplinary object reproduced as material contamination, which in the case of Irish caricature allows a racialised discourse to return as the basis for an artistic tradition.

¹⁹ The affinity of Hegel’s ‘soul baring form’ to Yeats’s tragic philosophy – ‘character isolated by a deed’ is indeed striking when reflecting on the Irish context. Significantly, however, Yeats’s tragic seriousness began as a way of overwriting the buffoonery of the Irish type on the London stage, or in the stories of Croften Croker and Samuel Love. See, for example: Yeats, *Representative Irish Tales*, ed. Helen Mary Thuente (Gerrards Cross, Bucks: Colin Smythe, 1979): 7-8.

I would like to suggest two examples from the history of the ‘Irish’ face to support this point. Though they exemplify very different intentions and styles, they demonstrate together the transformation of caricature from a representation of what the law excludes – the negative body image – into a convulsive form of attachment. The first face is that of ‘Brigid McBruiser’ [Figure 1, on the right], a scientific illustration by F.A. Chapman from one of the standard texts of Victorian-era physiognomy by Samuel R Wells, published in 1867 in New York. ‘McBruiser’ is Irish only in name; or, should that be, she is ‘Irish’ *because* she is only a name, has no substance beyond designating a fantasy of the negative. She is designed to be laughed at. Accordingly, she is placed beside the form of Florence Nightingale. Whereas Nightingale is clearly delineated, ‘McBruiser’s’ lines are sketchy and vague, her complexion obscure. ‘[O]ne is bright, intellectual and spiritual; the other opaque, dull and sensual’, writes Wells, beginning a page-long comparison which makes absolutely no mention of the decisive difference between them: namely that one is the representation of a historical personage while the other is a fantasy.²⁰

²⁰ Samuel R. Wells, *New Physiognomy, or, Signs of Character as Manifested through Temperament and External Forms, and especially in the ‘The Human Face Divine’* (New York: Fowler and Wells Publisher, 1967): 537-8.

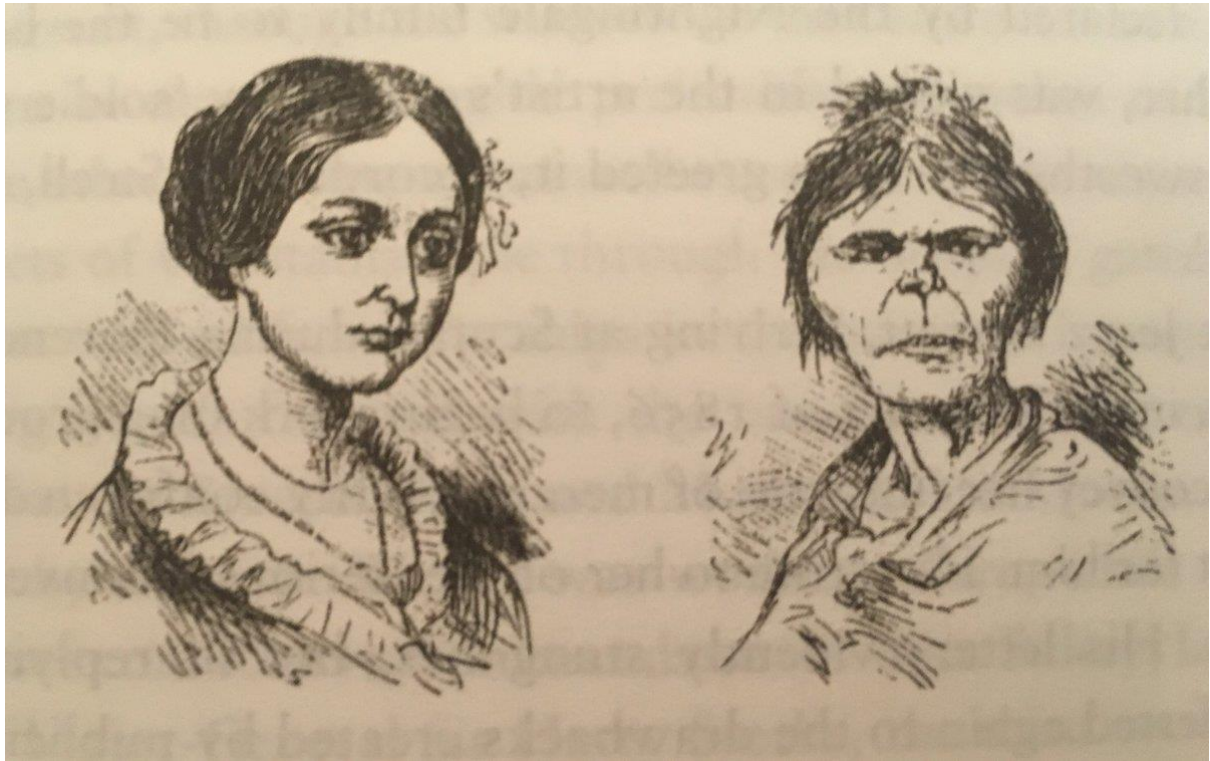


Figure 1

The second face I'm interested in is that of Pope Innocent X as painted repeatedly, obsessively, by Francis Bacon. In both 'Head VI' (1949) and 'Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X' (1952) a canonical depiction is effectively scribbled over and an image of institutional power given a new affective dimension by a force of decomposition. The figure, possibly laughing, probably screaming, and apparently incarcerated, is also being liberated from the figurative, according to Gilles Deleuze, whose study of the artist emphasizes how often in Bacon's work bodies attempt to spasm themselves from the scenery and story of a painting *into* sensation.²¹

We might wonder whether a nineteenth-century sketch of an Irish not-man, creaturely emblem of the uncivilized, is really of a kind with a modernist work of art produced by a Londoner born in Dublin, painting on the European subject matter of the Roman Catholic

²¹ 'The Figure acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh whereas abstract form is addressed to the head, and acts through the intermediary of the brain' Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*, trans. D.W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003): 25.

Church. The 'Irish' is disfigured in the first; in the second, arguably, it is an agent of disfigurement. But even as we mark this distinction on moral grounds, it is clear from an aesthetic point of view, especially thinking through the tradition of 'Hiberno-English' writing from Edgeworth to Joyce, that political caricature and artistic experimentation are aspects of the same overdetermined mode; they cannot finally be parsed, in other words, but perform a blurring of the lines between exclusion from the law and subversion of it.

Indeed confounding the clear distinction between racial caricature and satire in this manner is hardly unusual (we need only think of Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal'); both genres use text or image to enact a swerve of recognition and violent dis-identification. There is a structural ambivalence encoded though each: a seeking out and then a rejection which incites anger, hurt, or shame, but which cannot establish once and for all the terms of its provocation, and which then veils the ambiguity of its attachment with laughter. Donald Winnicott proposes that the obfuscating skins of Bacon's faces enter us into an inter-sopic, potentially shameful relation with the work: not only seeing the work, but trying to see through the work if we are really being seen by it. Bacon himself said that 'he likes to have glass over his pictures because then when people look at the picture what they see is not just a picture; they might in fact see themselves'.²² In other words, the viewer sees herself looking for herself in the picture of another. Such a rebounding act of looking, from active to passive, to active again, and surely not without the anxiety of misidentification, continually lands upon the screen, the membrane *between*, and therefore has less and less to do with the objective contours of the figure depicted. Tellingly, as Pope Innocent X has had his membrane coarsened it is also made more permeable, the excess of lines troubling the body's intactness. And the very same goes for Brigid McBruiser. Though wearing the burden of

²² See Donald Winnicott 'Mirror-role of Mother and family in Child Development' *Playing and Reality* Routledge 1991 [1971] 149-159: 156, 157.

racial identification, her roughly-drawn skin poses the problem of containment.

The resemblance between McBruiser and Bacon's figures suggests that the un-sublimated materialism of caricature might be transformed into a counter-aesthetic of sensuous parts, physical imperfections and mimetically contagious pathologies. To put it another way, the law which endorses the privatized laughter of ridicule, the audience which adjudicates the visual caricature appropriately exiled from historical meaning, does not always survive the exertions of laughter itself. Which is not the same as saying that Bacon's portraits redeem the object of ridicule – there is little straightforwardly redemptive about them. Rather, their materialism renders conspicuous the process of fantasy identification by which a body comes before the law: his paintings are like linguistic utterances irreducible to general truths, his figures meaning always more or less than they can be said to represent. And of course, they come close to meaning nothing at all. Like belly laughs, indicating a somatic relation between the objectified figure and whosoever comes intending to prosecute or judge it (the audience or viewer), they pose the problem of reference. Whereas McGahern's aesthetic saw the subject emerge upstanding through his suppression of laughter and incorporation of the father's old jest, in Bacon's art all potentially human figures seem incapable of standing without orthopedic props – chairs, cubes, an assortment of apparently sadistic apparatuses. There is the disintegrative rumour of a laugh moving between bodies, but no discernible joke to give them symbolic order.

Laughing into the future: hunger strike

Hunger strike makes explicit the connection between law, language and body image. In this respect, it is intrinsically related to both caricature and laughter. And while we might expect its tragic theatre of willed starvation to abjure mere frivolity, it is instructive to note in the crosshatching of political and literary modes how often the oral parsimony when it comes to

eating calls forth the compensatory largesse of vocables – language brought up from the throat to the point of exuberant nonsense. As Maud Ellmann puts it: the 1981 Irish hunger strikers starved as ‘clamorously’ as did Clarissa in Samuel Richardson’s 1748 novel. Indeed Ellmann identifies a specifically Irish dimension to this tradition of associating bodily disintegration to sentimental linguistic productions through the death of Lord Mayor of Cork City Terence MacSwiney by hunger strike in 1920. MacSwiney’s death, especially as channelled through Yeats’s play, *The King’s Threshold*, established a sacrificial crisis – a crisis of political representation – at the heart of Irish literary culture.²³ Ellmann doesn’t dwell, however, on the fact that Yeats wrote his play about the hunger strike of an ancient Irish poet Seanchan in 1903, well before MacSwiney’s protest, and that his 1920 revision was most startling for its decisive coupling of laughter with physical expiration at the play’s end.

The play opens with the ancient Irish poet Seanchan on hunger strike, lying on the steps before the King Guaire’s palace. The occasion for Seanchan’s protest is the withdrawal of his ancient right to sit at the high table of political power. In the 1903 version Yeats allows Seanchan’s protest a successful end: Seanchan’s demand to have the rights of poets recognized is granted by the King. Revisiting the play in 1920, however, Yeats decides to let Seanchan die. If the 1903 version insists on the integrity of the poet’s cause – alternative sovereignty; a better law – the 1920 version focuses on the integrity of hunger strike as a theatrical device designed to split the law and show its fundamental inconsistency. It is plausible that Yeats had MacSwiney’s own play *The Revolutionist* (1914) in mind as he made these changes. In *The Revolutionist*, protagonist Hugh O’Neill rails against the secret-society ethos of Irish Republicanism as well as the public ‘laughter of fools’. In a world divided

²³ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: starving, writing and imprisonment* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993): 63 .

between intrigue and chatter, his final stand takes the form of remaining still and saying nothing: it reveals itself as pathology, leading, eventually, to the ‘trace of a smile’ adorning his dead face.²⁴ Though the 1920 edition of *The King’s Threshold* is not a simple endorsement of MacSwiney’s politics, it does seem to borrow from his dramaturgy. The excessiveness of the protest becomes paramount in the new version and it foregrounds the inexorability of the poet’s death.

The first 1903 play ends as follows:

KING (kneeling down before Seanchan): Kneel down, kneel down, he has the greater power I give my crown to you.

[Seanchan rises slowly, supported by one of the Pupils and Fedelm]

SEANCHAN: O crown, O crown,

It is but right if hands that made the crown

In the old time should give it when they will.

(He lays the crown on the King’s head)

Silver trumpets be you lifted up

And cry to the great race that is to come

Long-throated swans among amidst the waves of time

Sing loudly for beyond the wall of the world

It waits and it may hear and come to us.

(Some of the pupils blow a blast upon their horns)

Here the poet accepts the political solution by crowning the King, in the same gesture

²⁴ Terence J. MacSwiney, *The Revolutionist: a play in five acts* (Dublin: Maunsel and Co. Ltd., 1914): 128,132

endowing him with the power to adjudicate the meaning of words. The poet, we imagine, takes his pace within this symbolic order. But it is this moment of symbolic incorporation which the 1920 version disqualifies. Instead of symbolism, in 1920 we get the opacity of laughter (and no joke):

Youngest Pupil: Dead faces laugh! The ancient right is gone, the new remains,
And that is death.

...

Oldest Pupil: Nor song nor trumpet blast
Can call up races from the worsening world
To mend the wrong and mar the solitude
Of the great shade we follow to the tomb.²⁵

Seanchan dies laughing and he also transmits this laughter to his students – his laughter confounds their mourning. One thing laughter seems to do here is double the theatricality of the hunger strike. What the hunger strike does to the body, laughter does to language: by refusing content it enters spectacular but illegible materiality.²⁶ The dead, laughing Seanchan becomes a replacement for the King's law: a law without symbols or formal representation. The law as an illegible intensity of matter.

²⁵ W.B. Yeats, *The King's Threshold: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Declan Kiely (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005): 562.

²⁶ I have considered the fanatic character of this intensity standing in for the law elsewhere. See: Barry Sheils, 'Poetry in the Modern State: the example of W.B. Yeats's 'Late style' and 'New fanaticism'', *New Literary History*, 45.3: 483-505.

Irish republican hunger striker Bobby Sands inherited from Yeats not only admiration for MacSwiney's sacrifice, but also this reflex vacillation between political symbolisation and the materialism of laughter. Sands's memoir, journal and poems return us over and over again to laughter. In prison, he is subject to the laughter of ridicule; yet he also dreams of his own laughter – of 'our' laughter – in the future, and recalls laughter from his childhood in the past. Laughter, for Sands, is clearly framed as a form of persecution transformed into an ideal; yet, like the hunger strike itself, laughter also inevitably signals the power of a body falling from history into pathologies it may not be able to contain.

Ironically, however, what first strikes the reader of Sands's memoir *One Day in My Life* (written in 1979) is the embarrassment of its language. Despite the fact it was written on toilet paper in the most abject circumstances, it is stylistically reserved, apparently keen to resist, except in the most representative and heroic terms, the intensities of sensation. The conditions for Sands's final hunger strike, the prisoners' refusal to wear the uniform that designated criminality and the protest against the UK Emergency Provisions Act, were already set when he wrote the memoir. The 'blanket men' were incarcerated in Long Kesh prison ('the Maze') without clothes, and deprived of the relative advantage of ordinary prison facilities. They were also subject to repeated body searches. It is in the context of this exposure, as well as the wretchedness of the 'dirty protest', a predicament of incarceration and abjection reminiscent of Bacon's caged, sensationalist figures, that Sands's style seems oddly (frustratingly, though also compellingly) ornate and defended. For example:

Naked, I rose. [...] The stench of excreta and urine was heavy and lingering, I lifted the small water container from amongst the rubbish and challenged an early morning drink in a vain effort to remove the foul taste in my throat. God it was

cold.²⁷

This might simply be how a young literary-minded person writes, the final exclamation intended to convey the immediacy of his experience. Yet the refusal to use more colloquial, more materially riveting terms for ‘excreta’ and ‘urine’ suggests an inhibition felt before his readership (including his mother with whom he corresponds) and himself. As well as being physically vulnerable, Sands is shown to be linguistically vulnerable. For instance, he depicts the prisoners learning ‘Gaelic’ from cell to cell: the teacher ‘shouting the lesson for the day at the top of his voice’.²⁸ The pedagogic dedication is moving, yet it also demonstrates a body caught between two linguistic ideas; two laws, in fact: ‘literary’ English which he has in mind as he writes, and a ‘native’ Irish which he has in mind as he speaks and acts. If Sands seems coy by refusing to write the very ordinary words shit and piss, even though this is the dirt he lived amidst and wanted to convey, arguably it is because he wants to sublimate the body and its products into representative (and upstanding) symbols of cause and duty, thereby saving the sympathetic reader her disgust. Ultimately it is the failure of his narrative authority in this respect which constitutes his literary success. The space of self-assertion, of standing up (‘Naked, I rose’) and overcoming his adversaries is replete with material inconsistencies, often made conspicuous through laughter.

This is discernible through the depiction of his relation to the prison guards. His political opprobrium at their cruelty is clear, yet somehow it does not exhaust the material reality of his experience, which leads him to return compulsively, perhaps unwittingly, to their pathologies: ‘The second screw I had seen was B---, a sectarian bigot. He was of medium

²⁷ Bobby Sands, *One Day in My Life* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2001): 25.

²⁸ Bobby Sands, *One Day in My Life*: 33.

build, black hair, good-looking and all go...'²⁹ The term 'good looking' is significant here. Sands doesn't need to notice the fact that his oppressor is attractive. A sectarian bigot we expect to act violently and unreasonably: it is tautological and serves therefore a convenient symbolic function. A 'good looking' sectarian bigot is a more uncomfortable proposition, however, because it admits that an element of sexual attraction can coexist with unjust punishment, permitting aspiration and intimacy in the face of outrage. It is the scandal of this unjustified intimacy which remains so fascinating when reading Sands's writings.³⁰

The persistent and persistently disavowed sexuality of his predicament is most apparent in the cavity and mirror searches, during which the guards are enduringly keen to have the prisoners 'bend over'. This homoeroticism and corresponding feminisation of the prisoners' bodies as carriers of contraband is discernible, though never consciously articulated by Sands the author. Indeed, the major set piece in *One Day* sees Sands being so sure the guards will look in his 'anus' that he holds his 'comms' – the forbidden letter and tobacco – in his mouth.³¹ This is a humiliating scene; and it is also quite ridiculous. But if he wants to ridicule the guards, in turn, for their latent homosexuality he cannot do so without implicating his own heroic ideal, the fastidiousness of his language, and the pristine masculinity of his national ideal.

When Sands refuses to 'bend' he is subject to 'forced laughter':

²⁹ Bobby Sands, *One Day in My Life*: 32.

³⁰ Steve McQueen's 2008 film *Hunger*, as well as recapitulating from MacSwiney's play the metaphysical standoff between a member of the clergy and a figure of politicised self-harm, capitalises on the intimacy of the hunger strike. McQueen skirts around the political image of Sands as a wounded Christ and instead zooms in on bodily fragments: blood, feces, skin, grazed knuckles. Similarly, the pace of the film seems designed to let characters, including Sands, step outside the time of political instrumentality.

³¹ Bobby Sands, *One Day in My Life*: 83.

[one screw] stepped beside me, still laughing and hit me. Within a few second in the midst of the white flashes, I fell to the floor as blows rained upon me from every conceivable angle Someone had my head pulled back by the hair while some pervert began probing and poking my anus. [...] It was great fun; everybody was killing themselves laughing, except me...³²

The irony of inclusivity is noteworthy. It seems intended to sharpen articulation of revenge; this is why the guards, specifically, are ‘killing themselves with laughing’. Soon someone else will be laughing, on Sand’s side of the divide: ‘we’ll get those bastards someday...’ he concludes later, literally spitting blood in his cell. The scene testifies to abuse. And yet to hold up, even for a moment, the spectacle of his own pleasure (‘it was great fun’) is more than sardonic. It hints at contagion where the ridiculed body joins in with the laughter with which he is persecuted, coupled therefore to the perversion of his persecutors, and in the process befuddling language and the transactional nature of justice. The scene offers a momentary pantomime where the terms of personal offence are rendered absurd.

Sands stayed with the clamour and commotion of laughter until the very end. His late journal entries pose the same pointed calculus: one laughter against another – the vindictive guards’ ridicule against ‘our’ native laughter in the future.

Diary 1-17 March 1981

I have poems in my mind, mediocre no doubt...poems of hunger strike and

MacSwiney.... But the weariness is slowly creeping in.... never despair.....Let the

³² Bobby Sands, *One Day in My Life*: 28.

bastards laugh at you all they want, let them grin and jibe, allow them to persist in their humiliation, brutality, deprivations, vindictiveness, petty harassments, let them laugh now, because all of that is no longer important or worth a response..... unlike their laughs and jibes, our laughter will be the joy of victory and the joy of the people, our revenge will be the liberation of all and the final defeat of the oppressors of our aged nation.³³

Often a similar sentiment is expressed on the gable walls of Derry or Belfast as ‘our revenge will be the laughter of our children.’ Despite the image proffered of a self-delighting laughter which knows no malice, we may presume the fact that it is held aloft in the spirit of revenge articulates a significant discrepancy. There is surely a point at which self-delight becomes cruelty, especially if it doubles as a kind of transcendent payback that persists indefinitely for some else’s benefit. The degraded body reedited, returned intact to a state of pre-sexual play (childhood), comes into conflict with the facticity of laughter itself: the fact that even when children laugh they do so in compromising ways. Laughter is the spirit of contamination; if you want to control its meaning in advance in the attempt to make it proper – to make it ‘theirs’ or ‘ours’ – then you have ceased to laugh.

Of course Sands’s political aims continue to be legible. The requisite symbolism of the hunger strike was instrumental to the politicisation of Irish republicanism in the 1980s. Yet Sands’s literary legacy, inheriting from Yeats the space between symbolic unity and laughter, sits alongside his historical legacy as a reminder of what is not redeemed for the future. What gets covered over in the embarrassment of his language – language which was already reaching for epigraphs, proleptically mourning its author – is not simply obscene; or, at least,

³³ Bobby Sands, *Writings from Prison* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1997): 239.

it doesn't have to be. The degradations Sands suffered, which were also bodily stimulations, remind us of material life which doesn't mature into respectable ideological forms, whose representation will not be complete, and which returns us intermittently from the historical to the pathological. If there is a legacy of materialism in Irish literature and art, it is linked to the character of this abjection before the law and marked by the force of laughter.