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Irish Skin:

The Epidermiology of Modernism

BARRY SHEILS

'He also goes to with I'll walk you back.

No, no, you stay put and *Irish myself* from what I most want'.[i]

Eily, the protagonist of Eimear McBride's second novel *The Lesser Bohemians*, uses the word 'Irish' as a verb. *To* 'Irish' is to block, refuse, reject, to turn away from a narrative possibility out of shame; it also registers, with peculiar sensitivity, the awkward fact of bodies coming into contact with one another.

Arguably, McBride *Irishes* the contemporary novel. She is also often called a 'modernist' writer, and seems open to claiming this designation as a twenty-first century inheritance.[ii] Fragmentation, aphasia, the pronoun switcheroo to convey entanglement and vulnerability, all suggest of her language that, like Joyce's and Beckett's, it is somehow *after* style. And yet her obvious historical (and gendered) remove from the canon of Irish modernist works provokes a disciplinary reflection. On the one hand, 'Irish modernism' is clearly a historicist discourse, inflected by postcolonial critique, and profoundly concerned with the conditions of textual production. On the other hand, it points to an institutional culture of reception. It seems especially significant, in this regard, that as a disciplinary formation it has emerged from beneath the shelter of 'Yeats', 'Joyce' and 'Beckett' studies into a period when historicism and ideology critique have seemed to be on the wane.[iii] In this chapter I would like to acknowledge this formative discrepancy,

arguing that Irish modernism now operates trans-historically as a materially-inflected hermeneutic mode.

Queer and neo-phenomenological approaches to literature have recently focussed our attention on the reproductive ethics which lie at the heart of scholarship. How are discourses perpetuated, histories repeated, originality and influence distributed – and how should receptivity be cultivated? By digging beneath one 'original' work to replace it with another, or by remaining on the surface, recognising the diversity of textual effects and acknowledging their multi-directional force? Within these reflections, figures of surface and skin – the 'membrane of feeling', which connects reading to touch and the materialism of actually being moved in the world – have increasingly been privileged over diagnostic critique.[iv] For example, discussions of skin by Sara Ahmed, Jackie Stacy and Steven Connor have focused on its hermeneutical as well as phenomenological precariousness, arguing that, even when it bears the exclusionary marks of stigma, skin never simply refers.[v] For Anne Anlin Cheng, skin connects modernist preoccupations with race to questions of style, surface and affect: '[it] is a medium of transition and doubleness' which challenges us 'to reread how we read' all historical phenomena.[vi] Re-readings of Joyce have shown likewise how Joycean skin, though subject to various disciplinary gazes (medical, racial, criminological), remains capable of resisting the *deep* determinations of the concept.[vii] Skin is always more than a cover, yet it remains less than an object: it is medial, thrilling, and – to paraphrase Nietzsche – profoundly superficial!

In this chapter a focus on skin (specifically blushing) within a range of canonical texts will unfold onto a consideration of the text *as* skin – hence, an *epidermiology*. If the contingencies of modernist writing have often been secured through genetic scholarship and historical archives, then the returns of this chapter seek to re-open assumptions about when, where and for whom an Irish modernism continues to take place. Instead of asking what the 'Irish' in Irish modernism describes (a homology between the time of artistic production and the time of the nation), I will ask instead what it *does*. What might it mean *to Irish* modernism today? I will re-read a series of

scriptural moments in the construction of a discipline: Yeats's acceptance of the Nobel prize; the opening pages of *Ulysses*; and Beckett's farewell to Irish letters in one of his first French-language texts, 'Premier Amour'. It's my wager that we can re-find in each, through the figure of skin, that awkward place where the critical procedures of reading historically meet the enduringly contemporary, though often disavowed, trouble with being read.

Between humility and the Nobel Prize

On 9 August 1886, at a time when he was contemplating writing the next, and most obscene, volume of his memoirs (in French), August Strindberg wrote the following in a letter to his publisher:

> It disgusts me to be nothing but an artist. My intelligence has evolved from daydreaming to thinking. The deliberate summoning up of hallucinations at the writing desk seems like masturbation to me. The novel and the theatre are about right for the ladies; let them take charge of these entertainments.
>
> It is this battle against my calling that is undermining my health. I have seen through the shams of fiction writing, and I have no illusions about it. That's why I cannot work in that vein anymore.[viii]

The result of this provocative self-reflection, *Le Plaidoyer d'un fou*, was first published in an unauthorized German translation in 1893, translated into English by Ellie Schleussner in 1912 as *Confessions of a Fool* (a more recent translation is titled *A Madman's Defence*) and not published in the author's native Swedish until 1914, after his death. The book recounts in detail Strindberg's illicit affair with Siri von Essen, a minor Finnish aristocrat, Siri's subsequent divorce, the author's marriage to Siri, their travels around Europe together, and the disintegration of their relationship

on the grounds of Siri's multiple infidelities, penchant for cross-dressing and bi-sexuality. It remains a strange work to read, beginning with the immortal line: 'This is a terrible book. I admit that without any reservations, and I bitterly regret having written it'. And it ends with the address, presumably to Siri, who at the time of composition is estranged from Strindberg: 'that's the end of my story, my Adored One. I have got my revenge. Now we're quits.'[ix] This is a book that disavows its own artfulness in the name of honesty, engaging a tradition of confessional writing which reflects on the shame of its own compositional circumstance. Confessional writing often marks an acute self-consciousness with respect to the institutionalization of text: as with Rousseau, with Strindberg too there's an avowed setting straight of an official record, which at a textual level turns out to be a setting awry, as paranoid fantasy and polemical excess (especially against emancipated women) wrestle with historical truth. It remains ironically unclear throughout whether Strindberg is a fantasist, or his wife the sexual adventurist he so delights in depicting her as.

Le Plaidoyer d'un fou's relevance to Irish modernism arrives with Yeats's passing mention of it in his account of going to Sweden to pick up the Nobel Prize. This is from the essay 'The Bounty of Sweden', which Yeats published in 1925 alongside his Nobel lecture from 1923 on the Irish Dramatic Movement. Here, Yeats performs his modesty in the face of institutional recognition. Though occasionally distempered by a dose of pomposity or sycophancy towards the Swedish Court, he is, by and large, successful at employing a version of the humility topos, a containing gesture of embarrassment meant to submit individual ambition to established traditions. The essay begins with a *who, me?* deference. '*Why not Thomas Mann?',* Yeats asks. Then, lacking for champagne, the poet and his wife famously celebrate his award by eating some humble sausages. As they travel in self-deprecatory convoy to Sweden – they have just arrived at Stockholm station – Yeats meets a scholar called Carl Gustaff Uddgren, with whom he talks about Strindberg. The description of the encounter is elliptical, although it is clear in this case that both men agree that Strindberg, when

alive, had been unfairly overlooked by the Royal Academy, and that this was largely on account of his scandalous memoir.

Uddgren had written a scholarly defense of Strindberg, translated into English as *Strindberg: The Man* in 1920, critiqued by its English-language translator Axel Johan Uppvall as 'not quite availing as it might have done of the new interpretative methodologies of psychoanalysis' – in other words, it is a largely descriptive biography.[x] The book includes, however, a further defense of the indefensible memoir *Defence of a Madman* in a chapter entitled 'The Poet and the Wolves', a chapter which Uddgren gives Yeats to read. Yeats offers a pithy summary of Uddgren's argument in the following single line: 'That outrageous, powerful book about his first wife [Siri Essen] is excused on the grounds that it was not written for publication, and was published by an accident'.[xi] Perhaps disappointingly, Uddgren does not defend the book's aesthetic value so much as seek to excuse it from consideration as art. He places accident where the author was. After this summary, Yeats goes on to recall meeting Strindberg himself in Paris, over thirty years before, slyly adding of the Swedish playwright that he was 'dressed up according to the taste of one or other of his wives'.[xii]

This mediated encounter between Yeats and Strindberg stages a revealing conflict: as Yeats proceeds towards his own literary ennoblement at Court, he registers the spectre of Strindberg travelling in the other direction; Strindberg appears as his equal and opposite. Yeats is about to be recognized as a world poet; furthermore, his 'Ireland after Parnell' narrative and insistence on celebrating a collective of theatre practitioners rather than his own individual lyric poetry signposts an institutional direction. He is designating a sovereign identity for the modern Irish nation and, more specifically, entering its literature into competition with other national literatures. Accordingly, in the framing essay, Yeats decides to deal with the question of national sovereignty upfront by insisting there now must be 'a voluntary Federation of Free nations' within the British Empire. And although he claims repeatedly that he does not want political opinion to arrest style, he accounts for his progress to Stockholm via a series of national transferences – the Irish case is

like the Danish case, someone tells him, and then the Finnish and the Swedish.[xiii] This concatenation presents a fairly up-to-date interwar cosmopolitanism of European small-nation nationalisms, and also alerts us to the strategy of containment employed by a poet venturing forth to accept the Nobel Prize on behalf of a modern national movement. The art is underwritten by the nation's sovereign claim, one made in essentially rivalrous terms with other comparable nations.

It is in this context that Yeats's brief identification with Strindberg seems significant, for not only has Strindberg written outside the confines of a national style – in French – but his subject matter is obscene and the historical authority of his genius contested by the artlessness of anecdote and the accidental. It is as if Strindberg functions as a device within Yeats's self-representation, suggesting alternative possibilities for organizing the body of Irish literature from that sanctified in the court of the Swedish Royal Family. This suggestion is amplified through certain striking moments of ambivalence in the same essay, as in this next passage, where Yeats refers to the provenance of his own art:

> When I begin to write I have no object but to find for them [the men I imagine myself to be] some natural speech, rhythm and syntax, and to set out in some pattern, so seeming old that it may seem all men's speech, and though the labour is very great, I seem to have used no faculty peculiar to myself, certainly no special gift. I print the poem and never hear about it again, until I find the book years after with a page dog-eared by some young man, or marked by some young girl with a violet, and when I have seen that, I am a little ashamed, as though somebody were to attribute to me a delicacy of feeling I should but do not possess.[xiv]

This passage is initially intriguing for how much Yeats's explanation of the provenance of the artwork maps on to that offered by T.S. Eliot in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919),

probably the single most influential text in Anglophone modernist studies. Yeats recounts how his personality extinguishes itself through emulation: the words he speaks are marked by their appropriateness to an emotional circumstance not his own, and their patterns are such that they may seem 'all men's speech'. The sense of a naturalized order marks the extent to which the poet who has attained tradition has to be both exceptional and anonymous at the same time, to simultaneously modify and re-conform the tradition through a development of the 'historical sense'. Though Yeats's tradition is clearly more folkloric and Eliot's more bibliographic, we can see that they share the same promise of depersonalization through emulation. In Eliot, we recall that the mature artist (over 25) must develop his historical sense (emulation of Shakespeare is exemplary) in order to become a more perfectly tuned medium for feelings which are not his own. The cardinal error, says Eliot, is to search for 'the new' in personal emotion itself rather than in the complex mediations of the historical – it is an error which leads directly to 'the perverse'.[xv] This counsel has striking resonance today: Eliot's tradition, and the historical sense with which he defends his institution of modern literature, is a bulwark against what is perverse and personal. Yeats's view, certainly in 1924, seems to be heading in the same direction, until we reach the ambiguous final lines of this account, where, by persisting into the afterlife of the artwork, beyond the story of its production and accomplishment, we witness the attainment of institutionality rebound. Yeats returns us from Eliot's aged poets to youthful readers. As well as a feeling of trespass, finding a flower in a book of his own poems left there by a young girl, there is a peeling back of the covers of historical time and institutional logic to reveal a brief and awkward scene of personal dispossession.

It is important to be precise here about why exactly the author might feel ashamed. It is not simply because he cannot live up to words he once wrote – after all, neither the young man nor the young girl is aware of him personally (they read in his absence); rather, it seems, the shame emerges from the fact that he is *not* being asked to live up to his words. What is shameful is that his persisting interest in being associated with his work means that he has not depersonalized

sufficiently, in accordance with his prestige, and the prestige of the tradition of which his name is already a part. This persisting interest in youth, in those who come after him, leaves the poet standing in awkward proximity, as a writer to his readers, suffering a re-personalization which has none of the elevation and assurance of posterity, but which returns him rather to the contingencies of writing and reading *before* they've been institutionally combined as 'tradition'. In this glitch of shame, the poet is shown in a loitering state of un-belonging, feeling himself to have become the embarrassing waste product of his own art, a collateral effect which Eliot in his essay does not deem it necessary to countenance. Nor does Eliot consider the shameful paradox which Yeats's predicament infers: namely, that in order to avoid becoming the excremental remainder of his written accomplishments, the author must own that he has written execrably.

We can follow this embarrassment from the framing essay into the Nobel lecture itself, where Yeats describes the origins of the Irish dramatic movement in the 1890s. One recollection is especially interesting, less for the point it makes about the plausibility of a modern folk theatre than for the contingencies adduced in favour of such a theatre. The poet recollects his response to the question of where he would get his actors:

> [. . .] I had said, 'I will go into some crowded room, put the name of everybody in it on a different piece of paper, put all those pieces of paper into a hat and draw the first twelve'. I have often wondered at that prophecy, for though it was spoken probably to confound and confuse a questioner it was very nearly fulfilled. Our two best men actors were not indeed chosen by chance, for one was a stage-struck solicitors' clerk and the other a working man who had toured Ireland in a theatrical company managed by a Negro. I doubt if he had learned much in it, for its methods were rough and noisy, the Negro whitening his face when he played a white man, but, so strong is stage convention, blackening it when he played a black man.[xvi]

I have written elsewhere of the intersection of the folkloric and chance in this passage, as well as the factor of race which underlies Yeats's apostolic fantasy: the *reductio ad absurdum* of realist convention is revealed through the image of a black actor, R. B. Lewis, applying black make-up to play a black man on stage.[xvii] In order to look appropriate Lewis has to paint his face, overwriting the non-exchangeable facticity of his actual skin with the legible symbol of his race. To bear witness to this artifice, the confection of a realist economy of representation, is not only to challenge it aesthetically, as Yeats intended, but also to register its intrinsic aspect of personal humiliation. Indeed, what this off-stage glimpse of Lewis's face-painting shares with the mention of Strindberg's disgraceful memoir and the poet's own failure at impersonality when confronted with his readers, is how it catches the artistic self off-guard. Consciously or not, Yeats registers, in each case through self-reflexive acts of reading, his resistance to the institutional cover-up, punctuating the narrative of his accomplishment with a series of uncomfortable gestures towards the shameful and obscene.

Irish Blushing

It is an irony closely wedded to the shame affect that linguistic incapacity should be inscribed so frequently within literary language. Blushing, flushing, feverous cheeks, indignant rouge, a reddening or a colouring of the face: these are all familiar literary signs.[xviii] Minimally, the literary blush is a sign of aphasia, of interruption in the midst of speech. It shows up as the expression of an unuttered word, and yet remains exceptionally productive of linguistic interpretation. The literary blush also implies a relation between individual faces, a companionable masquerade in which an improper thought is being made proper. By designating both a seductive promise and an appropriate containment, the blush points to a conclusion (a romantic union or tragic apotheosis) that is bound to give it symbolic significance. In this way, it instigates the seductions of narrative art. And yet, the very same moment of affective intensity marked on the skin remains potentially resistant to interpretation. This is because even having the ability to show one's face, to face-off

against another face, depends always upon a precognition of individual sovereignty, a minimal narrative guarantee of visible identity (as troublingly exemplified by the case of R.B. Lewis, mentioned above).[xix]

In this light, it is significant that the Irish body as represented throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though nearly always temperamentally marked, was often de-facialized. L.P. Curtis opens his now-classic account of this history with a series of appropriately face-related questions – though he neglects to consider the volatility of blushing.[xx] The famous oscillation between 'Ape and Angel' captures the systematic contradiction of racist designation, but de-emphasizes the erotic charge of its phenomenology: the way that the excessive objectification of the creaturely other will also necessarily reveal a perverse identification. Whereas we might be inclined to think of the caricatured Irish-person's face as constitutionally incapable of blushing, a vulgar excluded from polite society, in the very same manifestation it offers-up a fantasy space of self-obliteration (they are, after all, *only* fantasy). It is not simply that they cannot blush, lacking modesty (lacking an individual face); it is also that they are always blushing, for shame. By continually and contagiously bearing witness to the institutional lines that have been drawn around them, they are at once contained as an object of knowledge and forced into the freedom of boundless impropriety.

To consider how this line between polite modesty and faceless shame continued to inform the terms of literary reception throughout the twentieth century (in the wake of modernism and its institutionalization as a critical discipline), we can turn to Christopher Ricks's influential 1974 study *Keats and Embarrassment*, where the author argues against Eliot's position on poetic maturity in favour of the Keatsian value of embarrassed youth. Tellingly, however, Ricks prefaces his study with an account of 'English' moral sentiment:

> Is embarrassment not only a nineteenth-century sentiment but a narrowly English one? There is indeed something very English about the great importance accorded to

> embarrassment, and this is part of that deep Englishness of Keats in which he delighted and which is so vital and honourable. […] It has always been part of the Englishman's objection to foreigners that they are 'brazen-faced', unembarrassable, and therefore untrustworthy. Especially the French.[xxi]

Here two sovereign nations, England and France, face off against each other, antagonistic in their likeness as political entities: one feels exceptionally English, an embarrassed conjugation of pale complexion and moral sensibility, when encountering the brazen French face; the French have no word for embarrassment, says Ricks; and the French verb '*rougir*' does not carry the moral significance of the English 'to blush'. In constructing this geopolitical scene, however, Ricks gives little thought to the 'Celtic' nations, devolved others of the North-Atlantic archipelago, and the question where they might stand, and how they might move, in relation to the embarrassed face of Englishness. And yet when he consults the OED for the first usage of the word 'embarrassment', the first truly embarrassed name he finds is Edmund Burke's.[xxii]

Burke's use of 'embarrassment' gave it novel emphasis. Whereas older usages suggested financial difficulty or the presence of an external obstacle preventing the completion of a task, for Burke, to be embarrassed was to interrupt oneself in the midst of speech:

> Intense emotional or social discomfort caused by an awkward situation or by an awareness that one's own or another's words or actions are inappropriate or compromising, or that they reveal inadequacy or foolishness; awkwardness, self-consciousness. (Now the usual sense.)
>
> […]
>
> 1777 E. Burke *Speech Electors Bristol* in *Polit. Tracts* 347. If my real, unaffected embarrassment prevents me from expressing my gratitude to you as I ought.[xxiii]

There is an established critical tradition associating Irish modernism with the corruption of the tradition of English moral sentiment.[xxiv] Furthermore, Burke's doubleness, as both originator of English traditionalism and deviantly, contagiously Irish, is by now a well-established problematic.[xxv] We can add to this perspective an addendum: not only is Burke's exemplary linguistic incapacity here a suggestive keynote to the by turns loquacious and aphasic character of Irish modernism, but its auto-affective performativity establishes in the linguistic register the question of a bodily limit. Effectively, Burke is saying, *I am interrupting myself here in front of you because of an involuntary excess of feeling*. His use of the word embarrassment is a means of communicating a missing articulation of self. His *real* feeling is at once obscene and visible according to the sheen of a non-referential language act (we are left in the dark about how he *ought* to express himself).

It remains unacknowledged by Ricks, but Burke's introduction of a new sense to the word 'embarrassment' has a metafictional quality: the author performing in character before the Bristol electors in 1777 becomes himself a character in the discourse of English sentiment, at once fathering traditional codes of modesty and aesthetic sensibility, and introducing contagious unlikeness into the cultural discourse. For Sally Munt, Burke's paradox inaugurates 'the discursively connected histories of queerness, sodomy, shame and Irishness' which runs to the most famous case of Oscar Wilde, but extends also, I would suggest, to the queer Joycean paralysis of Buck Mulligan and Stephen Dedalus's decomposing faces in the opening pages of *Ulysses*.[xxvi]

Suggestively, during the course of this famous exchange, both characters' faces change complexion: 'A flush which made him seem younger and more engaging rose to Buck Mulligan's cheek'; and then a page later 'Stephen felt the fever [not *his* fever] in his cheek'. We might further remind ourselves that Stephen and Buck are playing out between them a meta-institutional scene, aping forms of modern Irish theatricality as might have appeared on the London stage, with readable nods to Oscar Wilde and a direct allusion to Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777). This is a coded and decodable scene, the homosociality of which is recognisably structured according to the terms of mimetic desire: a wit-economy established between two clever

young men that attains its levity through innuendo, inversion and the production of clever double meanings. But clearly there is some heavy surplus added to the back-and-forth movement of their conversation, something made explicit which should have remained in the background, interposing a real sense of awkwardness into the management of sly, civilized hypocrisy, which is what Buck and Stephen are supposed to be performing. Their red faces advertise this awkwardness, as well as the fact that it is their status as characters inside a plot which is fundamentally at stake; whether they have anywhere to go that day, anything significant to do. Although we know already that the dramatic reason for this awkwardness is Stephen's supine mother, its affective occasion coincides with Stephen's recitation of Buck's gratuitous term, 'beastly dead'.

In the late-nineteenth century 'beastly' was a largely theatrical utterance, meaning 'exceedingly', which, in the context of Wilde's dramaturgy, also recalled the socially excluded act of sodomy (*bêtise*: the folly of the body). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out, because *The Importance of Being Earnest* places its emphasis upon implied sexual acts rather than modern sexual identities (the homo-hetero classification) it is capable of doing more than simply *inverting* orthodoxy. It sketches, rather, a looser and more playful form of kinship than that enshrined by modern social structure, an 'avunculate' of aunties and uncles which, though pre-modern in character, might yet exist to re-channel the repressive forces of the modern holy family.[xxvii]

'Beastly' arrives in the wake of Algernon's defence of 'Bunburying': the act and art of meeting with non-existent sick friends in order to avoid awkward social engagements. Jack announces his intention to give up such duplicity in the name of his forthcoming marriage, and Algernon chastizes him: without Bunbury, he says, 'man has no *real* company'. At this point, and in response to Jack's accusation of cynicism, Algernon continues: 'It isn't easy to be anything nowadays. There's such lot of *beastly* competition about.'[xxviii] Here the jousting, sociable wit points towards its own negation: a *real* act, which is both obscenely personal and perversely self-obliterating. It is this paradox, deliberately throwaway in Wilde, which in Joyce lands emphatically – literally, we might

say – upon the fact of Stephen's mother's corpse. As much as the transferential blush between the young men is sexual, indicating a degree of feverous contagion, it also calls into question the perilous terms of their individuation ('It isn't easy to be anything'). The horror of incest brought home by the maternal corpse signals Stephen's entrapment in a mode of sexual classification riven and determined by the taboos of Oedipal desire (until the introduction of Leopold Bloom he is bereft of an avunculate). Accordingly, Buck's and Stephen's reddening in the face of one another indicates, beyond the wit economy of adversarial egotism, the potential dissolution of their entire theatre. They are swallowed by the ground.

Indeed, by the end of the first chapter of *Ulysses*, Joyce has projected the transferential complexities of the two institutionally self-aware young readers – indignant, embarrassed, grief-stricken, ashamed – beyond the authority of language. As Stephen walks away, he looks back, edging the figuration of his swimming adversary into the figure of an animal: 'A sleek brown head, a seal's, far out on the water, round'. 'Sleek' carries the insinuation of larval hairlessness, 'round' insinuates effacement. An intact body (and given Buck's earlier parody, we can hardly avoid the holy implication of *Corpus Christi*) is returning to the obscure, amphibious provenance of skin.

Knowing Shame

Almost certainly there is crossover, and indeed confusion, between a literary text's procedures of historical representation and those which operate within the field of its critical reception. We might also discern, extrapolating from *Ulysses'* own inter-textuality, methods of citation that lead to larger questions of cultural practice. For instance, the exigency of knowledge production within a modern university system means that even characteristically shy, affectively hypersensitive writers and works will be subject to the procedures of archival scholarship. We know, for example, that in the midst of failing his examination to qualify as an English instructor at the University of Padua, Joyce came up with the brilliant apothegm, 'modern man has an epidermis rather than a soul'?[xxix] While it might have served well as the epigram to this chapter, putting such a dainty to work in the service

of the 'Joycean' worldview is unavoidably committing a personal act of trespass. Indeed, we may productively wonder in an age of scholarly fervor for new knowledge claims – a modern culture 'avid for details' as Joyce puts it in the same exam – to what extent we can still allow for material that simply refuses our interest and returns us to a productive, meta-archival reflection upon the value of being left in the dark?

Joyce's letters to Nora provide another test case for the same thought, as does the almost-certain knowledge that Yeats and Maud Gonne had sex for the first and only time in December 1908.[xxx] This is 'awkward' scholarship. The poem series in which Yeats came closest to publicizing his own erotic history is 'A Man Young and Old', which appeared in revised form in his 1928 volume *The Tower*. Part of this work was originally published in 1926 in *The London Mercury* as 'Four Songs from the Young Countryman', suggesting an initial attempt on Yeats's behalf to put some distance between the biographical and the poetic. But later, the series was extended from four to eleven, and the persona of the countryman entirely discarded. The first poem of the series is called 'First Love':

Though nurtured like the sailing moon
In beauty's murderous brood,
She walked awhile and blushed awhile
And on my pathway stood
Until I thought her body bore
A heart of flesh and blood.
But since I laid a hand thereon
And found a heart of stone
I have attempted many things
And not a thing is done,
For every hand is lunatic

That travels on the moon.

She smiled and that transfigured me

And left me but a lout,

Maundering here, and maundering there,

Emptier of thought

Than the heavenly circuit of its stars

When the moon sails out.[xxxi]

The correspondence between art and life becomes more explicit as the poem series progresses. The speaker's touch is replayed through the various sections, with the woman coded in section VI as Helen of Troy – which is, of course, Yeatsian code for Maud Gonne. This first section thus provides a kind of template for the memorial repetitions of the same single act through a man's whole lifetime. But what is of particular interest is how that initial vivifying signal of the blush seems to authenticate, in the face of a terrifying lunatic reputation, the woman's humanity (the moon, we imagine, is the figuration of her face): 'she walked awhile and blushed awhile' and therefore she was presumed to have 'A heart of flesh and blood'. The blush contributes to the imaginary organization of the woman's body, celestial bodies as well, and in this way it reassures the speaker's amorous optimism. But of course, it's this same red face of narrative seduction, encouraging the poet to 'lay his hand thereon', that turns him 'lunatic'. He has touched, we imagine, her breast, and finds beneath it a heart of stone, and a lover's promise of union is transformed into contagious lunacy: '…every hand is lunatic / that travels on the moon'. The blush as a signal of courtly composure ends up responsible for dismantling what has been composed, as, Medusa-like, the blushing woman symbolically castrates her suitor, and renders him passive: 'I have attempted many things and not a thing is done.' The poem ends with the moon 'sailing out', the obfuscation of the face which had blushed, and the heavenly disorder which ensues: the poet is empty of

thought, 'maundering', which is to say prattling on without containment or point of destination. He is dispossessed.

As well as affirming its biographical resonance – that Yeats did in fact have a nervous breakdown in January 1909 – and further noting how the stanzas serve to hold and hold off the de-subjectifying 'mad' language the poem infers, this short poem also provides a scripture for a certain version of Irish modernism. The woman who blushes is Maud Gonne, the nation itself in allegorical form, the actor who famously played Cathleen ni Houlihan. Yet by the end of the poem, the terms of the allegory have vanished: instead of the idealized woman-as-nation, there is emptiness and madness; and, as the series progresses, the desperate search for material substitutions or fetishes to take the place of the idealized image which has gone. The speaker ends up nursing a stone, a piece of moon rock, in the place of a child.

As has been pointed out by several other critics, Samuel Beckett seems to have been a careful reader of Yeats's work, and especially adept at dramatizing the point at which national historiography, censor of the personal and the perverse, becomes itself a kind of mad perversion. In his short fiction of the same name, 'Premier Amour' (written in French in 1946 and published in 1970; published in 1974 in his own translated English as 'First Love'), the faces of patriarchal mimicry adjoin linguistically and materially to faeces, thus collapsing the hygienic distance which defines polite society:

> What constitutes the charm of our country, apart of course from its scant population, and this without help of the meanest contraceptive is that all is derelict, with the sole exception of history's ancient faeces […] wherever nauseated time has dropped a nice fat turd you will find our patriots, sniffing it up on all fours, their faces on fire.[xxxii]

Earlier we saw Yeats become the waste product of his own artistic accomplishment, left behind by works he could not retain possession of; here, on the contrary, the historians' mania for

information – turning waste into history – plays out as a disavowal of self-disgust. By identifying historical scholarship with shameless scavenging, Beckett provides a meta-commentary on a tradition of reading, which, presumably, he knows will eventually apply itself to his own texts.

Writing in 1988, David Lloyd was clear that this 'excremental vision' of Beckett's is a form of embodied dissent from the national narrative; since the postcolonial subject is irremediably split, accident and incoherence must continually remerge from the cover-up of national meaning. In the specific case of Beckett's 'First Love', the father's metaphoricity is exposed paradoxically through a surfeit of material: an excessive signification of the body and its discontents refuses to budge itself into allegory.[xxxiii] Yet it remains unclear in Lloyd's work, and in other works of the same period, how this estranging excess at the point of utterance, the remainder left behind unredeemed by the muscular will of historical reason – the skin of discourse – transfers from the terms of literary production to those of reception, thus informing our disciplinary practice. Indeed, what is so striking from our perspective as readers today, is both the methodological confidence of the postcolonial moment and its reliance on the authority of certain male writers; this authority is often reconfirmed through the archive in spite of the fact that much archival work revives the Irish antiquarianism which Yeats, Joyce and Beckett, albeit in different ways, were attempting to surpass.

The curt action of Beckett's fiction concerns a narrator meeting a woman on a bench. She is called Lulu: twice *read*, we might say; but also, noting the cross-lingual pun, already *red*. She is overdetermined for sure, since she soon becomes Anna. Lulu/Anna is a prostitute with whom our narrator moves in, has sodomitical relations with, before leaving her again, having been told that she is pregnant**:**

> The more naked she was the more cross-eyed. Look, she said, stooping over her breasts, the haloes are darkening already. I summoned up my remaining strength and said, Abort, abort, and they'll blush like new.[xxxiv]

This is a blush (presumably cited, or erased, from Yeats's poem) which is also, significantly, not a blush: not in the original French ('ne foncera plus'),[xxxv] but not even in English, where it is only a prospective or hypothetical blush, and one projected onto a woman's breasts, instead of a man's face. If, as suggested above, a literary blush is conventionally proleptic in character, creating a sense of narrative anticipation, then Beckett's hypothetical, non-existent, and misplaced blush works in a contrary fashion to stymie narrative: it is hypothesized before or outside of the space of narrative seduction, and therefore describes a social situation at which the characters might never arrive. The question of reproductive ethics are clearly bound up with this discontinuous future through its rhetorical resistance to heterosexual futurity and the sterile masculinity of the male voice trying to reassert the narrative destiny of a female body.[xxxvi] Indeed, the quotation is a good example of Beckett's late – Irish? – modernist irony around the notion of making new; here 'the new' is wilfully inscribed on a pregnant woman's body, which is seen to have grossly betrayed the aesthetic tradition of virginity and intactness. The non-blush, standing aggressively counter to the normative blushing body, makes conspicuous a timeline of desire which does not converge upon modes of social incorporation. Excepting himself in this way from the libidinal narratives of polite society, but also withholding the contrary consolations of political history, Beckett's bachelor narrator comes to exemplify the madness of a discourse without referent.

Plenty has been written on Beckett's 'schizoid' writing, from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedip*us to Louis Sass's *Madness and Modernism*, much of it connected to the various autotelic, narcissistic, and epidermal praxes of Beckett's narrators whose 'hyperreflexivity', self-defeating categorizations, lists, and obsessional tics, inventing and collapsing distinctions, express a fundamental ontological insecurity. While Beckett's mad language dramatizes psychological incontinence – a failure to render objectively the distinction between the self and the world – in the very same gesture it issues a reflexive challenge to the complacent intactness of literary works: a mad fiction which is dangerously real contaminates the exemplary realism of a literary fiction. Once this paradox is acknowledged and taken seriously it must have consequences for how we

read. Most generally, it directs us away from searching out literary examples, as a means of substantiating already charted concepts and plots, towards scrutinizing moments of affective contamination when the boundary between 'real' life and fiction becomes uncertain. More specifically, related to the characterization of the writer as an 'Irish modernist', it suggests that any such gesture of categorical containment is punctured in advance by acts of self-reading and metafictional reflection upon the shame of being read. The word 'Irish' in 'Irish modernism' might be considered as more than simply descriptive, but may also designate a self-referential enactment that moves to collapse historical discourse into the material and affective realities of the present.

Notes

[i] Eimear McBride, *The Lesser Bohemians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), 196.

[ii] Eimear McBride, 'My Hero: Eimear McBride on James Joyce', *Guardian*, June 6, 2014, last accessed June 20, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/06/my-hero-eimear-mcbride-james-joyce.

[iii] On the rise of 'Irish Modernism' see Edwina Keown and Carol Taafe, eds., *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009); Joe Cleary, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby, eds., *A History of Irish Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). On the waning of ideology critique, see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21; Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2015).

[iv] Sarah Nuttall, 'Surface, Depth and the Autobiographical Act: Texts and Images', *Life Writing* 11, no. 2, (2014): 161–175.

[v] Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, eds., *Thinking Through the Skin* (London: Routledge, 2001); Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2003).

[vi] Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and The Modern Surface* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 28, 13.

[vii] Maud Ellmann, 'Skinscapes in "Lotus Eaters"', in *Ulysses–En-Gendered Perspectives: Eighteen New Essays on the Episodes*, ed. Kimberly J. Devlin and Marilyn Reizbaum (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 51–66; Ariela Freedman, 'Skindeep *Ulysses*', *James Joyce Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2009): 455–468; Abbie Garrington, 'James Joyce's Epidermic Adventures' in *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 73–114.

[viii] August Strindberg, quoted in 'Introduction' to *A Madman's Defence*, trans. based on Ellie Schleussner's version, *The Confession of a Fool*, rev. and ed. Evert Sprinchorn (London, Jonanthan Cape, 1967), 9.

[ix] *A Madman's Defence*, 27, 298.

[x] Gustaf Uddgren, *Strindberg The Man*, trans A.J. Uppvall (Boston: The Four Seas Co., 1920), 5.

[xi] W.B. Yeats, 'The Bounty of Sweden', in *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1993), 396.

[xii] Ibid., 396.

[xiii] Ibid., 395.

[xiv] Ibid., 392.

[xv] T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays 1917–1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1932), 10.

[xvi] W.B. Yeats, 'The Irish Dramatic Movement, in *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1993), 412–13.

[xvii] There was an established tradition of all-black 'authentic' minstrel shows in America throughout the nineteenth century. See: R. C. Toll, *Blacking Up: the minstrel show in nineteenth-century America* (Oxford University Press, 1974).

[xviii] Ray Crozier's 'The Blush: Literary and Psychological Perspectives' in *The Theory of Social Behaviour* 46, no. 4 (2016): 502–516; Barry Sheils and Julie Walsh, 'Shame and Modern Writing' in *Shame and Modern Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1–32.

[xix] Conceived within the European continental philosophical tradition, the face designates, variously, the basis for an ethics of hospitality and openness *and* the essential racism of European man. See, for example, the difference between Emmanuel Lévinas's philosophy of the face and the critical perspective of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: an essay on exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969): 261; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 2004), 196.

[xx] 'What's in a face? What's in a caricature of a face? How were the physical features of a man especially those of a face supposed to reveal both character and temperament?' L. P. Curtis, *Apes and Angels: the Irishman in Victorian caricature* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971), xxxi.

[xxi] Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 18.

[xxii] Ibid., 19.

[xxiii] 'Embarrassment' n.3a. *Oxford English Dictionary* (3rd ed. Dec. 2013). Accessed: October 26 2020.

[xxiv] For example: Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997); Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics and the Colonial Sublime* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[xxv] The full complexities of Burke's position on sodomy and contamination are set out by Sally Munt in *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 20.

[xxvi] Ibid., 28.

[xxvii] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Tales of the Avunculate: *The Importance of Being Earnest*', *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 64. For a further, differently inflected investigation of the same theme see Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'On Joycean and Wildean Sodomy', *James Joyce Quarterly* 31, no.3 (1994): 159–66.

[xxviii] Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (London: Leonard Smithers and Co., 1899), 18–19.

[xxix] Louis Berone, ed., *James Joyce in Padua* (New York: Random House, 1977), 21.

[xxx] See A. Norman Jeffares introduction to *Gonne-Yeats Letters, 1893–1938: Always Your Friend*, edited by Anna MacBride White (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 17–48.

[xxxi] W.B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. P. Allt and R.K. Alspach, (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 451.

[xxxii] Samuel Beckett, 'First Love', *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 33.

[xxxiii] David Lloyd, 'Writing in the Shit: Beckett, Nationalism, and the Colonial Subject', *Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (1989): 83.

[xxxiv] 'First Love', 44.

[xxxv] The quotation bears out to some degree Rick's notion that the French do not share the English sentimental association of blushing with modesty.

[xxxvi] Beckett may have had a take on such matters: see 'Censorship in the Saorstat' in which he speaks of 'sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter'. Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta* (New York: Grove Press, 1997). See also Seán Kennedy, '*First Love:* Abortion and Infanticide in Beckett and Yeats', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 22 (2010): 79–91.