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# Scar Issues

## The Year in Ireland

Liam Harte

The recent centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising returned to public consciousness the embodied pain of the insurgents who spearheaded this pivotal episode in the history of the modern Irish nation. A centerpiece of the national program of commemorative events was the “Proclaiming a Republic” exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin, which opened in March 2016. Among the most affective objects on display was the bloodstained vest of the radical socialist organizer James Connolly, which was exhibited publicly for the first time. Connolly, the fifteenth and last of the Rising’s leaders to be executed in May 1916, was “the most spectacularly martyred” (Backus 68) of the group, the severity of his injuries meaning that he had to be strapped to a chair in order to be shot. Although writers such as Dominic Behan would later rebuke the cynicism of those who exploited his self-sacrifice for nefarious ends, the totemic image of the maimed revolutionary tethered before a British Army firing squad cemented his sanctification in the collective nationalist imagination.<sup>1</sup>

The year 2016 also saw the publication of *The Body in Pain in Irish Literature and Culture*, an edited volume of essays that explores “the ways the pained and suffering body has been registered and mobilised in specifically Irish contexts across more than 400 years of literature and culture” (Dillane et al. 1). Although Connolly’s wounds are not explicitly referenced, the book’s contributors pay close attention to how individuals and groups “[marshal] their afflictions into wider symbolic narratives (religious, political, social),” so that “suffering becomes emblematic of fuller subjecthood” (1). Historically, Irish autobiographers have played a central role in this process. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Irish nationalism’s need for exemplary self-narratives gave rise to the male-defined convention whereby “autobiography in Ireland becomes, in effect, the autobiography of Ireland” (Kiberd 119). To a significant extent, the history of Irish life writing since independence in 1922 has been shaped around the displacement of narratives in which the experience of corporeal suffering acts as a metaphor of heroic national

sacrifice by accounts of bodily affliction that express a more individualistic, antiheroic, and distinctly gendered politics of resistance to the definitional power of patriarchal nationalism. The graphic foregrounding of “the localised, singular, and unique body in pain” (Dillane et al. 5) in a crop of confessional narratives published during 2018 and 2019 provides us with a timely vantage point from which to measure the current extent of this eclipse and take stock of the cultural significance of body-centered life writing in contemporary Ireland.

The most celebrated of these recent autobiographical works happens to be written by one of the editors of *The Body in Pain in Irish Literature and Culture*. Emilie Pine’s *Notes to Self* is a collection of six personal essays that has garnered impressive sales, effusive reviews, and high-profile awards since its publication in 2018. Much attention has deservedly focused on the frankness, pathos, and humor of Pine’s account of the many ways in which—despite its being a weary cliché—the personal is still, definitively, the political for Irish women, particularly a “middle-class, heterosexual, cis-gender woman” (112) in contemporary Dublin. Using writing as “a way of making sense of the world, a way of processing—of possessing—thought and emotion, a way of making something worthwhile out of pain” (31), Pine reflects on her experiences of everyday sexism (to borrow the title of a sister work by English feminist writer Laura Bates) and the effects of internalized misogyny, which range from her lingering unease at uttering the word “period” aloud to her delayed self-acknowledgment of having twice been raped as a teenager. Other kinds of hurt and vulnerability are also registered, such as “the limbo of non-existence” (87) Pine experienced as the go-between child of estranged parents in pre-divorce Ireland, and her belated discovery of the hidden anguish within their marriage.

Embedded in the book’s strong seam of sociocultural critique is a trenchant commentary on the dehumanizing effects of women’s encounters with institutionalized medicine, bureaucratic health systems, and state constitutions. “By the time we find him, he has been lying in a small pool of his own shit for several hours” (5): the first sentence of the opening essay, “Notes on Intemperance,” about Pine’s father’s alcoholism and associated illnesses, encapsulates the book’s unvarnished aesthetic and introduces us to the stark reality of managing the care of a sick parent in chronically deficient public health care systems. In what follows, we accompany daughter and father through a succession of hospitals in Greece and Ireland as they endure “hours of waiting, followed by a struggle to attract official attention, only to be told something that we already know.” “After years of teaching Beckett plays,” Pine reflects dryly, “I am finally living in one” (8).

In “From the Baby Years,” Pine mutates from concerned carer into “politicized patient” (Diedrich 26), as she embarks on an arduous odyssey to become pregnant. Her unflinchingly candid account of her reproductive difficulties lays bare her growing estrangement from her own body as she submits herself to a series of invasive tests, probes, and scans. Then comes the knowledge that while she must relinquish control over her body to medical experts, the Irish state reserves the right to

nondisclosure of information about what is happening inside that same body. The most arresting of Pine's many flashes of feminist outrage records "the total disempowerment" she feels on finding herself carrying an "ambiguous pregnancy," which, because of the equal right to life of a fetus in the pre-2018 Irish constitution, made it illegal for her midwives to pronounce her pregnancy over:

They can't say, and I can't know. I am furious. At the situation and, specifically, at them. I am a woman, in grief, and these women will not look me in the eye *as a fellow woman* and tell me that I'm not going to be a mother. It is quite something to find myself in the National Maternity Hospital, not only distraught at the end of an unwanted pregnancy, but denied the right to know what's happening inside my own body. (51–52; original emphasis)

Only with the diagnosis of a missed miscarriage does the implicit threat to Pine's bodily autonomy dissipate: "Everything is very different now that there's no baby and I'm back to being the primary patient. Suddenly, I'm the one that matters" (52).

Pine's feminist protest against oppressive masculine power structures and value systems is amplified by Sinéad Gleeson in *Constellations*, a formally adventurous volume of autobiographical reflections that artfully grapples with themes of power, gender relations, and what Michel Foucault referred to as "the fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices" (xxii). Indeed, Pine and Gleeson frequently carry on an intertextual dialogue through their intense meditations on the female body as a fiercely contested site where biology and culture converge, producing some strikingly reciprocal commentaries on topics such as "the warped idea that blood is taboo when it comes out of a vagina" (Pine 105) and the "anachronistic idea . . . that a woman is not fully a woman until she is a mother" (Gleeson 127).

The two essayists' shared indictment of structural gender inequality is perhaps most evident in their treatment of illness and pain. Unlike Pine, Gleeson's life has been defined by serious illness from a young age. Diagnosed with monoarticular arthritis in her early teens and later with leukemia, her wearying familiarity with "waiting rooms, wards and curtained-off beds" (96), with having "to plead and convince, to prove myself worthy of medical intervention" (17), yields sharp insights into the vulnerability, shame, and anger induced by being repeatedly subjected to the insensitive male medical gaze:

The doctor-patient relationship had its own imbalances. I have never forgotten the sense of powerlessness in the face of instruction: *lie down, bend forward, walk for me. . . .* [T]he patient is never in charge. The kingdom of the sick is not a democracy. And every orthopaedic doctor who examined me during those years was male. (7; original emphasis)

Having had to confront the prospect of death from a young age, writing is Gleeson's expression of her commitment to living. It is also her act of self-reclamation, a defiant formal rejoinder to the identity disturbance and change caused by illness and hospitalization. As we become patients, she asserts, we undergo "an act of transmutation, from well to sick, liberated citizen to confined inpatient" (114). Other acts of resistance to the debasing impact of unshareable pain include her assimilation of medical language in order "to hold on to a small part of my medical story" (116) and her revision of "the vocabulary of pain" (153) codified in the McGill Pain Index.

In "A Wound Gives Off Its Own Light," Gleeson declares: "The sick body has its own narrative impulse. A scar is an opening, an invitation to ask: 'what happened?'" (175). This is the question repeatedly put to Mary Cregan about the mark on the left side of her neck, as she recounts in the opening chapter of *The Scar*, her memoir of recurrent depressive illness. In giving her answer—"I gave birth to a child who died, and I got very depressed. The scar is from a suicide attempt" (2)—and enlarging upon it in her memoir, Cregan is breaking a longstanding familial and cultural silence, "refusing the shame and stigma that still cling to the subjects of mental illness and suicide" (xii). Born in Philadelphia into a large Irish Catholic family, Cregan shares with Pine and Gleeson a desire to extend memoir's range by building "a bridge from my individual narrative to the broader landscape of literature, cultural history and science, where the questions I've been asking have been addressed by many who came before me—writers, poets, psychiatrists, historians, chemists and neuroscientists" (xiii). The result is a richly researched work that blends a deftly historicized story of mental illness and recovery with an account of the chronic effects of growing up with "a deeply internalized sense of shame" (189) and the struggle to overcome a "family's taboo on self-expression—their unspoken rule that it was inadvisable to draw attention to yourself, and that self-exposure could only be cause for embarrassment" (238).

*Notes to Self*, *Constellations*, and *The Scar* each make visible "that which women are meant to conceal," and in doing so "render the private public" (Gleeson 51). As such, they join a pantheon of confessional feminist works that are transforming cultural discourses and debates around the politics of female embodiment in this post-millennial, neoliberal moment, while simultaneously underscoring the regrettable need for the project of challenging systemic patriarchy to be renewed in every generation. Many of these works voice stern liberal critiques of the entrenched misogyny of an "allegedly post-patriarchal" (Manne xii) Western culture, and contribute to clarion calls for change.

If all can, to varying degrees, be labelled activist autobiography, then Vicky Phelan's cancer recovery memoir, *Overcoming*, belongs to the strand of this burgeoning canon that testifies to system-changing activism and the achievement of material improvements to women's lives. Phelan shares with Gleeson a stoicism and resilience born of prolonged personal suffering. She also knows the truth of the latter's observation that illness "is not solely about biology, but intersects with

gender, politics, race, economics, class, sexuality and circumstances” (Gleeson 115). Phelan’s opening metaphor is stark: “Cancer is all about treatment. One treatment after another, or sometimes several all at once. And each treatment leaves behind a layer of pain which, over time, turns you into a scarecrow.” But, as she quickly goes on to clarify, “it wasn’t the cancer in my body that turned me into a scarecrow, it was the cancer in the system” (1), a system whose endemic misogynist bias is encapsulated by the claim, attributed to a male consultant, that “nuns don’t get cervical cancer,” a remark that struck her with galvanizing force:

I felt my temperature rise. In a country where young women have been sent to camps like the Magdalen laundries, shamed and discarded, where they have been repeatedly denied their rights, it seemed as though nothing had changed. A woman was now being blamed for getting cancer. Why? For having sex—the same way any man has sex. I felt ashamed to be Irish. It seemed like women in this country had always been something to be used and shamed. We were subhuman. The system failed us time and time again, and here we were again, in 2018, and still nothing had changed. (321)

Spurred by this injustice, Phelan charts the events that led to her exposing a national medical scandal, whereby she and over two hundred other Irish women with cervical cancer were not told that they had previously received incorrect Pap smear test results, which meant that their illnesses could have been prevented. Her deeply felt account of her tenacious legal battle to make the Irish health service accountable for its actions distinguishes *Overcoming* as a memoir that participates in the project of “writing back” to conventional victim narratives of wounded suffering” (Smith and Watson 143). This book’s strongly communal ethos also testifies to the tangible redress that a determined pursuit of social justice can achieve. Although Phelan’s feminism is less overt than Pine’s or Gleeson’s, she manifestly belongs with them in the lineage of writers and campaigners who have challenged the resilient impediments to gender equality in a male-dominated Irish public sphere.

Emer Nolan’s superb critical study, *Five Irish Women*, provides an illuminating historical framework within which to place these memoirists’ arguments and achievements. Nolan analyzes the individual life stories of five major cultural figures—politician Bernadette McAliskey, singer Sinéad O’Connor, journalist and author Nuala O’Faolain, and novelists Edna O’Brien and Anne Enright—to ascertain how they have tackled “inherited, commodified and contested notions of feminine identity” in a society where women “still belong to the second sex” (10). Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist philosophy, Nolan assesses the intellectual and emotional tensions that have defined these women’s engagements with some of the fundamental social and political issues that have shaped a post-1960 Irish Republic experiencing rapid modernization and a Northern Ireland blighted by protracted sectarian conflict. Valuably, she emphasizes the complex and diverse

nature of these trailblazers' acts of resistance to stubbornly sexist ideologies and institutions, showing that it is not only their contestation of the gendered scripts of nationalism and Catholicism that distinguish them as "heroic exemplars of the free woman, still perhaps just being born in modern Ireland" (3), but their prising open "the door to the realm of the intimate" (205) to expose the messy, often disturbing legacies of their socialization into a patriarchal mentality. Their courageous outspokenness has certainly made these exceptional women vulnerable to harsh criticism, yet without it they would not have become the authors of their own destiny and beacons for those who follow in their wake.

Reading *Five Irish Women* alongside the autobiographical volumes discussed above leads us directly back to James Connolly, who, a year before his execution, questioned the purpose of establishing "any form of Irish state if it does not embody the emancipation of womanhood" (Connolly 48). While much has been accomplished in the struggle for gender equality in the intervening century, the personal testimony of those women who continue to feel "on their souls and bodies the fetters of the ages" (48) provides a salutary reminder of the distance still to travel before Connolly's vision of "a sane and perfect balance that makes more possible a well-ordered Irish nation" (46) can be realized.

## Note

1. The protagonist of Behan's ballad, "The Patriot Game," rues his youthful beguilement by stories of Connolly "shot in the chair, / His wounds from the battle all bleeding and bare." The song commemorates the death of twenty-year-old Fergal O'Hanlon while taking part in an IRA attack on a police barracks in Brookeborough, County Fermanagh in January 1957.

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