

May 2018

## A Review of *Silence in Modern Irish Literature*

Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Houston, Lloyd (Meadhbh) (2018) "A Review of *Silence in Modern Irish Literature*," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34068/IYS.02.02.06>

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol2/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Yeats Studies* by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

## A REVIEW OF *SILENCE IN MODERN IRISH LITERATURE*

Michael McAteer, ed., *Silence in Modern Irish Literature* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2017), hardback, pp. 217, ISBN 978-90-04-34273-6

*Reviewed by Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston*

At first glance, a collection addressing the place of silence in modern Irish culture might seem counterintuitive. Popular stereotype has long presented the Irish as a people singular in their loquacity. For Matthew Arnold, the Celt's feminine and infantilizing aversion to the "despotism of fact" was redeemed by a sentimental linguistic effusion which he hoped would revivify an austere Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition.<sup>1</sup> The "stage Irishman," popularized by Dion Boucicault and derided by Arthur Griffith and D. P. Moran, exemplified this "gift of the gab," courting success and disaster with a seemingly limitless supply of blarney and blather. In the political realm, the immense popular appeal of Daniel O'Connell was staked on the showmanship and verbal fireworks which made his monster meetings such a success.<sup>2</sup> The six revolutionary generations whom the signatories of the Proclamation of the Republic singled out for praise in "Easter, 1916" were better remembered for their rhetorical achievements than their (often dubious) military credentials. In the aftermath of the Rising, Yeats castigated himself for his willingness to exchange "polite meaningless words" with fireside companions in the motley-clad culture of Edwardian Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Even a figure as infamously "lock mouthed" as Charles Stewart Parnell was lauded precisely for his capacity to hold in check the "loose lipped" tendencies of his followers and countrymen.<sup>4</sup> As Yeats noted with approval, where an Englishman might be reserved "because of his want of sensibility," Parnell was reserved "in spite of it."<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, as this wide-ranging and often illuminating collection ably demonstrates, there is much to be said for attending to the role of silence in modern Irish literature (Irish Bull only partially intended). In a society as simultaneously resistant to and implicated in the operation of British imperialism as Ireland, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's infamous query—"can the subaltern speak?"—takes on a range of complex inflections.<sup>6</sup> The political, intellectual, and cultural implications of the silences such a situation engendered are reflected in the structure of the collection, which groups its fourteen essays into clusters addressing the "Psychologies of Silence," the "Ethics of Silence," the "Places of Silence," and the "Spirits of Silence." Under this rubric, the works of figures canonical (W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett), neglected (George Moore, Kate O'Brien), and marginal (Dermot Healy) are examined from a

range of theoretical perspectives by a mix of better-established and early-career academics from across Europe. This diversity of perspective is one of the collection's strengths, resulting in readings that are often refreshing in their breadth of cultural reference and philosophical framing.

In its most successful essays, the collection manages not only to reflect on the role of silence in Irish writing, but also to remedy silences in Irish literary historiography. A recurrent and illuminating trend in many of the essays is an attention to the influence of the Symbolist movement on the development of Irish modernism in a manner which acknowledges the specificity of Irish cultural and political contexts, while refusing to abstract them from their broader European setting. Exemplary in this regard is Emilie Morin's essay on the artistic and intellectual influences which inform the "silent intervals" of Beckett's theatre. While the political, aesthetic, and philosophical implications of silence in Beckett's prose have attracted an abundance of commentary, Morin's essay offers a long overdue account of the role of silence in Beckett's drama, and the debt it owes both to Symbolist theatre and late nineteenth-century psychiatric medicine. Both a typology and a genealogy, Morin's essay traces the origins of the silences of figures such as *Waiting for Godot's* (1953) Lucky and the Mouth of *Not I* (1973) to the work of Maurice Maeterlinck and the public lectures of Jean-Martin Charcot. Morin effectively sketches the inter-implicated and mutually influential histories of Symbolist theatre and psychiatric research into hysteria to illustrate the ways in which the construction of silence as a psycho-pathological phenomenon both provided and was shaped by a theatrical vocabulary of gesture and pause which could be exploited by figures such as Beckett. As Morin acknowledges, the role of W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge in facilitating the transmission of these fused traditions into Irish theatre constitutes a valuable area for future scholarship.

Of particular interest to those in this parish will be Michael McAteer's essay on the psychological and political implications of silence in Yeats's early poem "How Ferencz Renyi Kept Silent." Based on a series of (possibly apocryphal) reports of an atrocity committed during the Hungarian uprising of 1848–49, the poem recounts the experiences of a Hungarian revolutionary who was committed to a psychiatric asylum in Budapest after being forced to witness the execution of his mother, sister, and lover as a punishment for refusing to divulge the identities of his comrades. Excluded from the 1933 *Collected Poems*, it has received only passing critical attention. McAteer addresses this lacuna by reading the poem in light of a series of nervous "collapses" Yeats experienced in the course of preparing *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (the collection in which the poem appeared) for publication in 1889. Placing the poem in conversation with other poems about mental illness in the collection ("King Goll" and "The Ballad of Moll Magee"), and Yeats's critical reflections on Symbolism,

McAteer reads Renyi's refusal to speak as a manifestation of the paradoxical silence which Maurice Blanchot claimed followed the end of all writing: an unending murmur.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the soothing and contemplative silence the young Yeats discovered in certain natural spaces, McAteer argues that Renyi's disturbed and disturbing silence reflects the psychological and political upheavals of late nineteenth-century Ireland and Yeats's uncertain positioning within them. Perhaps most illuminating is McAteer's use of the poem to reconsider Yeats's deployment of idealized feminine archetypes to ratify masculine sacrifice in the name of national independence. In contrast to the supernatural and deathless Cathleen ni Houlihan exhorting the young Michael Gillane to sacrifice his life for mother Ireland, in the earlier poem it is Renyi's mother who sacrifices her life in order to impel him to maintain his silent commitment to the irredentist cause, even beyond the limits of psychological endurance.

The vexed relationship between national identity and silence which McAteer highlights in Yeats's poem has a particularly troubling history in Ireland. As the recent discovery of the remains of over 800 infants and neonates at a former Mother and Baby Home in Tuam makes clear, the silence that has surrounded the institutionalized abuse of women and children in Ireland has immense ethical and cultural ramifications. These are addressed in Alessandra Boller's essay on the interplay of silence and voice in the rendering of gendered and sexual violence in Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996). Situating Doyle's novel in a moment of "modernisation" in Irish society, Boller explores the narrative and stylistic strategies through which Doyle conveys the difficulty with which such individual and cultural traumas are articulated. In particular, Boller highlights the role of ecclesiastical institutions in maintaining a "culture of silence" around abuse, a trend which Willa Murphy's essay on the seal of the confessional in nineteenth-century Ireland seeks to historicize. As Murphy highlights, the silences cultivated by the Catholic Church have long been a focal point for speculation and anxiety. Through a close reading of the 1825 *Report from the Select Committee on the State of Ireland* and the works of Gerald Griffin and John and Michael Banim, Murphy examines how the inviolability of the seal of the Catholic confessional came to function as a hypostasis for the "Irish Question" and the anti-Enlightenment energies with which it was bound up. In Murphy's view, for both the British Government and early Irish novelists, the seal of the confessional suggested the possibility of integrating the Irish into the rationalism of socio-economic modernity, even as it simultaneously represented those features of the Irish psyche that would remain forever beyond colonial apprehension.

As Murphy's account of the "secret selves" such a silence facilitated suggests, rather than bearing witness to the wholesale representational dispossession to which Spivak's provocative question alludes, in an Irish cultural context silence

could be deployed as a weapon of anti-Imperial resistance. A well-worn example in this regard is the commitment to “silence, exile, and cunning” which underpins Stephen Dedalus’s *non serviam* in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), through which Joyce transposes the paramilitary strategies of the Fenian Brotherhood into the aesthetic realm as the basis for an insurgent art.<sup>8</sup> Mark McGahon takes up the multivalent inflections of such a silence in the “Nestor,” “Hades,” and “Cyclops” episodes of *Ulysses* (1922) in his discussion of justice and the *différend* in Joyce’s work. Defined by Jean-François Lyotard as “the unstable state and instant of language” wherein one searches for a phrase to express a feeling of injustice arising from one’s sense that reality is unrepresentable under one’s present circumstances, for McGahon the concept offers a valuable insight into a range of key silences in Joyce’s work.<sup>9</sup> Chief among these is the “brief gesture” sketched by Stephen Dedalus in response to Mr. Deasy’s denunciation of Fenianism and endorsement of the Orange Order in “Nestor.”<sup>10</sup> Trapped between a desire to distance himself from physical force nationalism and an unwillingness to assent to Deasy’s selective and sectarian account of Orange ambivalence concerning the Act of Union, Stephen performs a *différend* which, in McGahon’s view, critiques not only Deasy’s remarks, but the social and cultural circumstances which deprived Stephen of a means of articulating his reservations.

A crucial focal point for any consideration of silence and silencing in Irish culture must be the linked domains of gender and sexuality. If canonization may be understood as an adjudication over whose voices will continue to be heard and whose will lapse into silence, then it is vital that scholars reflect critically on such a process, and put pressure on the boundaries within which modern Irish literature has been located. While not explicitly concerned with issues of canonization, the essays of Heather Ingman and Anne Fogarty are encouraging in their engagement with the work of two authors often considered peripheral to Irish modernism: Elizabeth Bowen and Kate O’Brien. Drawing extensively on the work of Julie Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, Ingman traces the ambivalent silences which surround mother-daughter relationships in Bowen’s writing. In Ingman’s persuasive reading, Bowen emerges as singularly alive to the linguistic dispossession which young women experience upon entry into the phallogocentric symbolic order. However, as Ingman highlights, such a dispossession is not total, and the pre-Oedipal traces of the semiotic maintained in the relationship between mothers and daughters in novels such as *The Last September* (1929), *The Death of the Heart* (1938), and *Eva Trout* (1968) consistently threaten to rupture the hegemony of the Law of the Father in both empowering and disempowering ways. These dynamics are in turn read in the light of Bowen’s own sense of cultural dispossession as a member of a politically and culturally eclipsed Anglo-Irish gentry. Equally enlightening is Fogarty’s reading of the fraught interplay of concealment and

revelation in O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* (1941). Banned upon publication by the Irish Censorship of Publications Board for a single sentence in which direct reference is made to male homosexuality ("[s]he saw Etienne and her father in the embrace of love"), O'Brien's novel of female *Bildung* explores the ways in which the cloistered environment of a nunnery may allow for the flourishing of feminine identity and sexuality, even as it literalizes the constraints of a patriarchal society. Tracing the debates that have surrounded the question of same-sex desire in the novel since its publication and censorship, Fogarty argues that, more than simply a thematic concern, queerness epitomizes the "texture of consciousness" in O'Brien's text. As in the best essays in the collection, Fogarty productively attends to the ways in which the strategic silences of O'Brien's text participate in what Derrida terms "facility of denial," addressing precisely those topics which it is apparently most concerned to negate.<sup>11</sup>

At the conclusion of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Ludwig Wittgenstein bathetically asserts that "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."<sup>12</sup> As *Silence in Modern Irish Literature* demonstrates, it is precisely from a consistent and often voluble engagement with that "whereof one cannot speak" that so much Irish writing continues to derive its power.

### Notes

1. Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1867), 102.
2. Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 32.
3. W. B. Yeats, "Easter 1916," *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 391–94, l.6.
4. R. Barry O'Brien, *The Life of Charles Stewart Parnell, 1846–1891*, vol. 1 (London: Smith, Elder, 1898), 145.
5. Isabella Augusta Persse Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Diaries: 1892–1902*, ed. James Pethica (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996), 169.
6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.
7. Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 218.
8. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 208.
9. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Différend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 13.
10. James Joyce, *Ulysses: The 1922 Text*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford University Press, 2008), 31.
11. Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989), 5–70.
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 189.