"Burn through the parochial states of mind": Dorothy Molloy's Illness Poetry as a Catalyst for Change

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how Dorothy Molloy's poetry inscribes the subjective experience of illness, pain, and female sexuality within ostensibly traditional lyric forms to challenge conventional representations of illness and shed light on the inequities of Celtic Tiger Ireland. The poetic medium is ideally suited to express the painful caesura of infirmity, but Molloy's poetry also fulfils perlocutive functions that position her cancer poetry as an agent for social change. The aesthetic of the poems collected in the posthumous *The Poems of Dorothy Molloy* is driven by a socio-political imperative, for the multitude of images depicting debilitated bodies in these verses serves to denounce the problematic perception of terminal diseases and critique the repercussions of entrenched conservative perspectives on the treatment meted out to Molloy and other women in the oncology wards of Irish hospitals during the late 1990s and early 2000s. By adopting an eclectic approach that combines historically-informed close reading with insights from Narrative Medicine, the article shows that Molloy actively seeks an accessible literary form that turns the private experience of illness into public comment and finds it in poetry, which, despite its inherent suitability, demands recalibration. Her verses indicate that prevailing discourses on care in Ireland and much canonical poetic representation of illness necessitate an equivalent degree of adjustment as the medical treatments themselves.

KEY WORDS: Dorothy Molloy; illness poetry; socio-political imperative; body politics; poetic traditions; representation of cancer

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BODY POLITICS AND THE POETICS OF THE BODY IN CELTIC TIGER IRELAND

In the introduction to *The New Irish Poets*, an anthology of poets who published their first collections at the turn of the twenty-first century, Selina Guinness observes how different generations coexisted and cooperated within the same timeframe, resulting in a convergence marked by great variety in formal aspects and stylistic choices and, to a lesser extent, in themes (14-33). No single poetic style or convention dominates, piquing interest in the discernible thematic patterns found in the poetics of the featured authors, among whom is Dorothy Molloy. These patterns arise from a shared confrontation with the gravitational pull that reality exerts on art, or, in other words, the influence of the actual on creative expression that Seamus Heaney, recurrently cited in the anthology, often discussed in his critical essays. In *The Redress of Poetry*, in particular, Heaney recognises the imperative, commonly felt by contemporary artists, to give voice to aspects that have hitherto "been denied expression in the ethnic, social, sexual and political life", and he himself views poetic composition as "a representation of things in the world", capable of unveiling the "potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances" (7, 5). At the same time, the Nobel Prize winner cautions poets not to sacrifice one of poetry's inherent qualities—its "fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness, its joy in being a process of language"—in the endeavour to "redress […] injustices" (7).

According to several commentators, Heaney's call was not lost on the poets of the late 1990s and early 2000s. They crafted verses characterised by "linguistic inventiveness and place in the world", in which an acute awareness of broader socio-political concerns combines with a postmodernist scepticism towards grand narratives and an interest in both national history and micro-histories (Guinness 14; Brown 14; Parker 177). As to the formal aspects, while some poets' bodies of work exhibit the estrangement typical of certain avant-garde poetry or genuine experimentalism, the compositions of others need not discard traditional poetic devices to be truly contemporary; this does not deny innovation in general, as the poetry of the turn of the century distinctly reflects an effort to take on traditional forms, renovate them, and resist a language replete with clichés when depicting the ordinary (Guinness 30). At its core thus lies "the encounter between imagination and the forces of circumstances", i.e. Heaney's "pull of the actual" (4), which, I think, calls for a synopsis of how Irish society transformed in the Celtic Tiger period and the factors that precipitated this change (Guinness 16). The synopsis will allow for a better understanding of the thematic patterns and tendencies evident in the poems of Dorothy Molloy, as well as their contextualisation against the backdrop of coeval poetry.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw substantial changes in Ireland's social and economic landscape. The nation's economy experienced unprecedented growth, surpassing that of the United Kingdom for the first time and transforming Ireland into the poster child of globalisation (Coulter 3). The fact that the Celtic Tiger might have sown the seeds for building a more egalitarian society but ultimately resulted in Ireland becoming "the second most unequal [society] in the Western world" (Coulter 22) is

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relevant to this article in that Molloy's poetry sheds light on the lingering inequities in Ireland during this period.

Ambiguity marked also the changes in social legislation. Some arguably paved the way for the liberalisations of the 2010s, particularly in matters concerning sexual relations and the family. High-profile scandals led to a decline in the influence of the Catholic Church on morality, bringing about a departure from the widespread repression of physical and sexual expression that had existed in the Irish independent nation (Cahill 2; Cullingford 140). The government decriminalised homosexuality in 1993; accessibility to divorce followed the 1995 referendum; and the last Magdalene Laundry closed its doors in 1996. On the other hand, the referenda of 1992 and 2001 failed to overturn the 1983 Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which strengthened an existing ban on abortion ascribing to "the unborn" an equal right to life as that of pregnant women (Kurdi 59). In general, scandals involving abuses by religious orders, controversies on Ireland's abortion politics, and ongoing investigations into medical malpractice—consider, respectively, the inquiries by the Laffoy Commission, the X Case, and the Hepatitis C Scandal—pushed issues related to body politics and, particularly, the treatment of the female or child body by power through institutions, legislation, or social policy, into the public arena in the 1990s. Guinness contends that "the immediate political terrain in the Republic [then] shifted from border politics to body politics", and Irish poets responded to these questions and changes by situating on the artistic map what had been previously hidden (17; cf. González-Arias, "Absolutely" 236).

For instance, among the poets debuting or active during that period, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has written about constrained bodies in the Magdalene Laundries and the Mother and Baby Homes. Doireann Ní Ghríofa's "At Letterfrack" is a poetic exploration of the findings of the Ryan report on Child Abuse. Medical malpractice and the impact of the social and cultural environment on health are also examined. Leanne O'Sullivan's *Waiting for My Clothes*, her début collection, chronicles a deeply personal journey through the traumas of eating disorder. In *Fiacha Fola*, Celia de Fréine makes her speaker suffer from Hepatitis C, contracted through blood transfusions administered as a medical treatment during pregnancy.

Dorothy Molloy began her poetic career within *this* artistic and sociopolitical context, following her success as an internationally recognised painter and researcher in Spain. Her first collection, *Hare Soup*, came out in 2004 and was described as "an Angela Carter-like phantasmagoria of forests, shepherds, circuses, and wild animals, [through] a mordant black humour and great economy of line and form" (Guinness 20-21). It received widespread critical acclaim upon its publication, but Molloy did not live long enough to enjoy it: she died of liver cancer before even receiving the advance copies of the volume by Faber & Faber. Posthumous recognition was attributed to the later collections assembled with the aid of Molloy's widower, Prof. Andrew Carpenter, and Molloy has since attained canonical status in contemporary Irish poetry. Emblematically, Seamus Heaney gave an address at her funeral wake at UCD, Michael Longley published the elegy "The Holly Bush (in memory of Dorothy Molloy)", and her poems now feature on Irish university syllabi (McAuley).

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Here, I look at her entire oeuvre by examining the posthumous collection *The Poems of Dorothy Molloy*, which includes the earlier *Hare Soup*, *Gethsemane Day*, *Long-Distance Swimmer*, and other previously unpublished poems. Aside from discussing the relationship between illness and creative expression that underpins the work, my goal is to highlight the centrality of the body in her poetics since the very beginning, and what Giles Foden calls "the essence of Molloy's gift: to bring the ordinary modern voice into conjunction with the big issue" (9). The emphasis on how her poetry combines "linguistic inventiveness" ("modern voice") and "place in the world" ("the big issue"), to borrow from both Heaney and Foden, distinguishes this study from existing criticism on Molloy, which primarily focuses on her poetic exploration of sexual violence (Villar-Argáiz) and the subversion of religious symbols (Bennett and Brigley; Cunningham). It also foregrounds how Molloy's poetry is rooted in the shifting landscape of Celtic Tiger Ireland.

As if expressing the wider cultural dissatisfaction with the Republic's body politics, almost her entire poetic vision seems to be "channelled through the self-as-body, and particularly in the bodily interruptions of self: blood, sexuality, death" (Evans-Bush). The strength of Molloy's poetry, Gerald Dawe notes, lies in the fact that the poems are crafted out of her "fabric of living", with her life, sexuality, tragic illness, and death creating "an extraordinary intense [aesthetic] experience that draws upon other literatures and visual arts as well" (207-208). Many compositions in *Hare Soup* focus on the abused and violated body of girls and women, in line with contemporary trends in poetry. The physicality of her work, informed by richly visual imagery and vocabulary, then gains more poignancy when she confronts liver cancer and the arduous, protracted treatment that brings with it the consciousness of impending death (Dawe 208).

Molloy's awareness of her own mortality is evident in "My daddy's a skeleton", which may remind the reader of Audre Lorde's "Today is Not the Day" for the shared reluctance of the lyric I to wait around for death—desiring to look her in the face (death is personified in both poems)—and the wish for more time to live:

> […] I wonder will Sister Death telephone first
> or just barge in at the door
> when she comes for me in her black limousine
> with her black dog at her heels,
> and will I have time to pack my bags
> before the death-knell peals?
> […]
> Will I ever be ready, I muse today,
> as I lie in my cosy bed,
> will I always be needing a little more time
> to get things straight in my head? (lines 3-8, 17-20)

Susan Sontag famously contended that "cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry; and it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease" (3). Molloy makes cancer and its treatment privileged subjects of her poetry, yet she eschews any aestheticization of them, committed to avoiding any 'ornaments' that could obfuscate

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her socio-political message or edulcorate the reality of living with cancer. Her poems do not conform to the typical cancer narrative outlined by Jackie Stacey, which portrays cancer as "the chance for a new start in life" that enables patients to "reassess their values and the meaning of their life" and rise, "phoenix-like", as better people: think of Lance Armstrong's *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* (12; Twiddy 10). In "If I should wake before I die", Molloy quotes from the Mote and the Beam parable, which condemns hypocrisy, to solemnly declare: "I'll take that beam out of my eye" (line 2). For all her irony—the poem ends with the line "I'll make a spongy apple pie" (4)—the intent is entirely serious.

The Poems of Dorothy Molloy is an autopathography in the sense that its poems form "an extended narrative" describing "personal experiences of illness, treatment, and sometimes death" (Hawkins 1, 12-13), but the prominence of her own subjectivity and cancer story should not lead one to misconstrue Molloy's work as being detached from public, social discourse. Her lines convey a sense of universalism, which is sketched out in "Credo", a brief text found by Prof. Carpenter in the notebook at Molloy's bedside upon her death. It reads as her "manifesto", wherein she voices her "spiritual and artistic commitment to the universe" (González-Arias, "Poems" 22), with epistrophes and enjambments accentuating the poignancy of the terms involved:

> Burn through the parochial states of
> mind. Art is the flame. Just write. Go
> deeper. Deeper. The answer is always to
> go deeper. Burn. Cut and burn away to
> the truth. And be set free. And keep two
> feet on the ground. Let me connect to the
> universe with my feet. And breathe easy.
> *Amen*. (lines 10-17)

Her poems do not support or align with a specific political agenda, but their representation of cancer and its treatment in Ireland is instrumental to a political vision, because it expresses how cancer patients, especially women, are perceived and treated. First, Molloy's work is valuable in breaking down barriers to the understanding and representation of terminal illness, as well as alleviating the shame, fear, and anger that many people experience as a result of their condition (cf. Twiddy 85-86). Second, the numerous images depicting debilitated bodies in these verses serve to critique the repercussions of entrenched conservative perspectives on the treatment received by Molloy and other women in Irish oncology wards. The patient *as* a person with urges, sexual needs, and convictions is sidelined; the diseased part assumes greater importance than the individual as a whole; the sick are made powerless at the hands of doctors and nurses.

Such socio-political imperatives drive the aesthetic in her work. She seeks an accessible form that could turn her private experience into public comment and strives to resist clichéd language concerning cancer (Guinness 30; Twiddy 16); innovations and traditional forms are employed to uncover the reality of this disease and its physical and psychological aftermath. As will be shown, these urgencies guided Molloy towards a

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'poetry of the body', signifying not only a focus on the sexual and/or ailing body but also the origins of her poems within the body itself.

ON LANGUAGE AND FORM: ILLNESS IS REPRESENTABLE

Language and literary representation may seem hopelessly inadequate when faced with diseases like cancer and the accompanying physical and psychological suffering. "English", Virginia Woolf writes, "which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no word for the shiver and the headache" (6). Illness also actively challenges narrative coherence through its disruptions, and any form of literary representation has to accommodate the chaos it frequently unleashes (Conn 13). Hence the need for re-empowering the verbal, for a new breed of bodily language that will be "more primitive, more sensual, more obscene", breaking the polite discourse of formal language (Woolf 7; cf. Sarkar 40). Likewise, the chosen forms should "register disturbance" and allow "for ambiguity and contradiction, for openness and possibility" (Conn 13).

Molloy is dedicated to conveying the intense experience of illness and her efforts culminate in poetry marked by a deliberate undermining of composure and composition. Recognising the inadequacy of the well-crafted poem in effectively capturing the impact of cancer and its connected social issues, she selects formal devices and language that never yield coherence or solace (cf. Alexander 6). Many of Molloy's illness poems use refrains, hypnotically rhythmic language, and repetitive sounds to convey an impression of inexorability or lack of control, reflecting a patient's powerlessness over what is happening to their ailing body (Darcy, *Strategies* 98, 103). "Last night the itch", about an underreported side effect of chemotherapy, represents the body's betrayal of itself through a relentless rhyme on "itch" from the very first lines: "Last night the itch was a witch / poking her switch in there" (1-2). Instead of creating a pleasant and musical effect, the nursery-rhyme repetitions make the entire poem predictable to the reader, who can intuit what words may arrive next, as if the poet had written her verses mechanically.

Equally striking is her approach to the poetic line and how it works with its lengths and stops, enjambments, and caesurae to create a unique syncopation, which "picks up and drops metre almost foot by foot" (Evans-Bush). Furthermore, perhaps inspired by the elongated phrases and refrains of *sean-nós* singing (Alexander 7), she alternates very long lines, sometimes stretching towards the right-hand margin of the page, with lines made up of monosyllabic words. As a result, her poems often exhibit both the presence and absence of form, attesting to the notion that "cancer is an ambivalent force, one which is formally productive, but one which eventuates in the absence of form" (Twiddy 57).

This is evident in the many poems in *Gethsemane Day* that explicitly address her diagnosis and illness. In this posthumous collection, Molloy elaborates on a preoccupation with mortality and suffering that had already informed a group of poems featured at the end of *Hare Soup*—consider "Earthing" and "Playing the Bones"

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(McAuley)—and is here foregrounded at title level: "Gethsemane" is a clear reference to Jesus's prayer and agony before His betrayal, as narrated in the Synoptic Gospels. The relevant passages revolve around topics such as fear and obedience, for they show a humanly emotional Jesus troubled by the physical and psychological suffering He was about to endure (Sandnes 6-8). Likewise, in her poems, Molloy contemplates the pain caused by cancer, her imminent death, and what would come next, with the 'contemplation' having repercussions on composition.

In "Bones", for example, there is an interplay between the rigid formality of the villanelle and the formlessness of the subject matter on which the speaker broods that is reminiscent of Sylvia Plath's "Mad Girl's Love Song". Molloy adopts the "strict" form of the villanelle, with its "kinds of highly restrictive repetition", to dwell on something as chaotic and unregulated as the thoughts that course her mind during such difficult times, and the source of these thoughts (Jason 136-137). "Bones" features five tercets followed by a concluding quatrain and the double-refrain of the traditional villanelle, with the lines "I feel the bones that will lie in my grave" and "They live inside me, snug, in their enclave" being repeated throughout. On the one hand, the repeated lines play a role similar to that of the bones they describe (Cunningham 12); both serve as "scaffolding, [as] the ringing concave / Vault that holds my brain's irregularity" (lines 7-8). On the other, the whirling rhythm of the lines and the rhyming repetitions that insist on the words "grave" and "cave" indicate an obsession with death and suffering, which is (and are) uncontrollable (cf. Jason 142). As if to emphasise this lack of control, some composition choices undermine the 'geometry' of the villanelle, thwarting any sense of harmony and mastery it may convey. The semi-colon at the hemistich of the seventh line—"My scaffolding, the bones; the ringing concave"—interrupts the flow. The last tercet provides a symbolic break in the form of a dash, forcing the reader or listener to ponder the meaning of the following line: "The bones will lose their marrow, but they're brave— / They'll hollow themselves out for more sonority; / They live inside me, snug, in their enclave" (lines 13-15).

Molloy's "Bones" undercuts the supposition that suffering is indescribable and, in fact, asserts the superiority of the bones in their ability to outlast the feeling self: "When finally I'm winnowed, earth will save / The bones alone, prove their superiority" (lines 10-11). This potential is realised when the lyric voice originates in the bones, which "hollow themselves out for more sonority" (14). It entails placing the body at the centre of the poetry and employing formal devices, metaphors, and tropes that give full flight to the horror of living with fatal diseases, rather than rewriting the experience as something more palatable (Darcy, "Dual Citizenship" 104).

We have already examined Molloy's use of forms and devices that reflect the uncontrollability of the disease and ailing body, as is the case with the repetitions and refrains proliferating like tumorous growth. The discussion will now shift to the metaphors and images that conventionally structured the depictions of terminal illness in Ireland at the start of the twenty-first century. To Molloy, prevailing discourses on care in Ireland and much canonical poetic representation of illness required the same level of adjustment as the medical treatments themselves.

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Language plays a crucial role in medicine. "Cast Out", first published in *Cyphers*, is a meditation on how the everyday lives of patients are affected by language and the mainstream representation of their illness. Set in the Middle Ages, the poem is about leprosy and vividly captures the fear and guilt caused by what is poorly understood, as well as the repercussions of such incomprehension (Johnston 144; Darcy, "Dual Citizenship" 102). Molloy resorts to the mediaeval concept of illness causing a social exclusion to mount a sustained attack on an ethics that allows the healthy to abandon the sick because they believe the sick brought it on themselves (Darcy, "Dual Citizenship" 102). The speaker, likely female, and the unclean antagonist, definitely female, are bound together despite the former's desperate desire to remain separate from the suffering sick:

> From battlement and organ-loft I throw her food to eat:
> unleavened bread, goat's cheese, the flesh of swine. But God forbid
>
> she draw the water from my well or raise her lips to mine. (lines 3-5)

Hers is an instinctive withdrawal from something that reeks of pollution (Ní Chuilleanáin 56). Molloy piles up references to Leviticus—"the flesh of swine", "the slurry / from the trough", "the carrion crow" (lines 4, 9-10, 15)—to address the perceived uncleanness of leprosy, which was upheld by civic and religious institutions and ultimately led to the isolation of the sick. The final stanzas refer to the ceremony in which the leper climbed into an actual grave and a priest poured soil on their head to symbolise the sick person's death to the world (Darcy, "Dual Citizenship" 102). The setting is mediaeval throughout, but Molloy's argument eventually takes on a timeless dimension to suggest that, while it was leprosy to be then depicted as unclean at the institutional level, other diseases and ill people would later be subjected to comparable negative representations that cause the healthy to 'withdraw'. The last couplet—"I wear beneath my robe her running sores. Under my hood, / her face." (lines 14-15)—employs the present habitual tense to suggest that the process depicted in the poem is not "a fluid moment but a condition from which there is no escape" (Ní Chuilleanáin 57).

Yet negative portrayals of illnesses are not the only ones that can adversely affect patients. Elusive representations can foster complacency and reinforce a reluctance to confront the disease directly. Common representations of cancer and of the lived experiences of oncology patients provide a case in point. Even today, despite advancements in our understanding and treatment of malignant tumours, language frequently avoids reality, resorting to euphemisms, omissions, or metaphors that edulcorate it (Twiddy 9). In response, Molloy uses her poems to ridicule metaphors often employed in Irish literature and medical discourse to describe the experience of living with cancer. Specifically, she tackles the metaphors of battle and journey, which respectively uphold the imperative that patients must maintain a fighting spirit and view cancer as a self-empowering experience (Harrington 408). Molloy reacts ironically to these notions by drawing from the traditions of the *immram* (Darcy, "Dual Citizenship" 105) and the spiritual journey into monasticism in the poems "The Dream-World of My Pillow" and "I Swap the Mediterranean". In the former, the speaker

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(arguably Molloy) embarks on a bedridden journey induced by drugs, where the adventurous otherworldly voyage of the *immram* ultimately "escapes" her, and she is left watching her "shadow on the ceiling" (lines 3, 19). In the latter, Molloy compares herself with the monks who retreat from the secular world, though she is not as eager to renounce worldly pursuits, as the things she exchanges her possessions for—highlighted by the anaphoric "I swap"—are no better.

The prevalence of military and journey metaphors in representations of illness may lead patients to suppress their distressing emotions—such as bitterness, frustration, and anger—in an attempt to display a positive fighting spirit or to demonstrate acceptance of what is happening to their bodies. Molloy diverges from the current trend that portrays cancer as an opportunity for self-growth or regenerative change. She recognises that each patient's experience is unique: they assign their own meanings to illness and employ different coping mechanisms when facing terminal disease. While some may perceive fatal illness as a transformative journey leading to an afterlife, others may choose to fight it head-on (McTiernan and O'Connell 641-648). What matters to Molloy is revealing aspects of illness, through the devices of poetry, which reflect the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance a patient may undergo, as well as the inherent 'ugliness' of the entire process.

The poem that opens *Gethsemane Day*, "Barbie", exemplifies Molloy's aesthetic approach. Here, the speaker describes her creation of "a doll of plasticine" using waste materials: "shredder carrots", "potato-skins", and "rotten eggs" (lines 1, 3, 5, 11). Molloy's illness poetry is likewise crafted from the undesirable and the unpleasant (Villar-Argáiz 142). Embracing ugliness allows her poetry to directly confront illness and adhere to the rawness of experience. Thus, in "Fruits of the Womb", she employs the common metaphor of cancer as an alien growth to reinterpret the surgical removal of fibroids into a birth travesty:

> The intervention
> along the bikini-line
> yielded fibroids
> big as melons.
>
> Total weight
> (appendages
> included)
> nine pounds nine. (lines 1-8)

The direct language and imagery, which verge on ugliness, clearly express how emotions and consciousness, i.e. "the appendages", fade away when the body's failures reduce the vision to just the body, or even just the diseased part (Ward 66). The poem, like many others, is also infused with a dark humour that "grounds it and brings it back to earth" (Campbell-Johnston 17).

Similarly, the beginning of "Moult" thrusts us into a patient's sense of darkness after mastectomy without mincing words: "She kept the other breast. The hair / that had

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been fair grew back, black" (lines 1-2; González-Arias, "pedigree" 123). Molloy describes the patient's psychological response to the surgery, above all the sense of loss and fear of the unknown, without relying on metaphors or understatements. Her tumorous breast, in the hands of the surgeons, is treated as a mere replaceable object, with the growth under her arm turned from "a crop of spuds" that are "gouged […] out" to a fabric that is "with curved needles // darned" (lines 3-6; cf. Cunningham 12). Moreover, I dissent from González-Arias's contention that Molloy swiftly transforms emotional and physical pain into images of strength through sustained bird metaphors and references to moult and flight, as seen in Molloy's comparison of regrowing hair to bird eclipse plumage ("pedigree" 123). I argue against a pattern of loss-to-regeneration underpinning the poem. Molloy defers regeneration, breaking with a long-standing pastoral elegy convention: the progression from nature in mournful scenes of autumn or winter to the renewal of life in spring (Twiddy 29-30). The poem begins with "Daisies los[ing] their petals" in the "winds of May" and ends with "a season" for the patient and the speaker of "slow decay", interweaving references to Caroline elegiac poetry by authors like Henry King and John Suckling. The last two lines (21-22), "they wait / for nature's fledge.", deny any resolution to the narrative arc. The atmosphere of suspension, marked by uncertainty about what the future holds and only a faint glimmer of hope, offers no easy solace to the reader. "Moult" subverts the aspirational images of journeying or fighting patients often found in Irish and medical literature, replacing them with a portrayal of female patients who feel powerless in the hands of medical personnel and doubtful about their fate.

Molloy's objective is not to make her verses and depictions of illness palatable for her audience.

MOBILISING THE BODY IN PAIN

While retaining its "fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness" (Heaney 7), Molloy's poetry possesses a clear social dimension. She mobilises the body to engage in a broader discourse on the treatment of women within the medical sphere and, often, this evolves into a critique of the persistent gendered imbalance prevalent in Irish society as a whole. "Ménage à trois" and "S.O.S.", for instance, deal with the disproportionate burden placed on women to provide domestic care for the elderly and the sick, a reality supported by empirical evidence (Darcy, "Dual Citizenship" 103-104). In the second poem, a female speaker grapples with feelings of shame for having sent a close relative to a mental health facility and for neglecting to care for her; the burden proved too heavy to bear alone, given her busy life, yet this realisation fails to lessen her sense of guilt:

> I tied her to a chair
> and put her in the care
> of John of God.
> […]
> I never heard her softly wrap

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the sea around her
like a shroud.

My life was just too loud. (lines 1-3, 13-16)

A socio-political imperative also underpins the poems that closely reflect Molloy's subjective experience of illness, inscribed into seemingly traditional lyric forms. In them, she tackles themes such as the dynamics between the patient and medical personnel, the sense of powerlessness of the former, and the non-holistic perspective adopted by medical practitioners. Patients are reduced to their ailing bodies, a phenomenon that mainly affects female patients. According to Molloy, Catholic morality still held sway in Celtic Tiger Ireland, leading to discomfort regarding the acknowledgment of women's needs, including sexual ones, in the medical field. To challenge this silence, Molloy peppers her poetry with allusions to the desires and capabilities of diseased bodies, as well as to female sexuality, and intermingles them with religious images. Consider, for example, how the poetic voice lingers on describing fibroids along the bikini line in the aptly-titled "Fruits of the Womb", analysed before, or the sexual exploits—"Sex with stray toms" (line 13)—of the mastectomised cat Mavis in "Grief Therapy". Through the lens of humour, Molloy exposes the underlying, prejudicial attitudes that conceive women cancer patients as no longer feminine or sexual (Twiddy 84).

Modern medicine is complicit in perpetuating the reductionism outlined above. In "Freed Spirit", "Radiotherapy", and "I Swap the Mediterranean", Molloy ponders the incessant peering inside the body through modern medical technology, constantly searching for signs of impending failure. Although she acknowledges the benefits of diagnostic machines capable of locating the disease in the human body, she suggests that an excessive focus on the diseased part can lead to the sidelining of the sufferer and its agency, with the part becoming more important than the whole (Sarkar xxi). Whereas poetry, even if of debatable quality, can provide insights into the inner workings of a person, CAT scans entail a narrowing of vision (cf. Ward 66). "Freed Spirit" elaborates on this difference by juxtaposing references to Jane Taylor's "The Star" and W.B. Yeats's *A Vision*, along with imagery pertaining to the concept of (in-)visibility:

Niagara cascades down my neck. Doctors,
oblivious, stare at their flickering screens.
My image

jumps up, a glow emanating from pelvis and
abdomen, thorax and fingers and toes.
Can they see

how I'm gyred through the ether and reach for the stars?
Can they see in this stalk of wild fennel, the twinkle
and spark? (lines 13-21)

The dichotomy between 'I' and 'they' that infuses these stanzas mirrors different perspectives on the treatment of illness, highlighting a potential divide between

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medical personnel and patients, which is also explored in other pieces. While some of Molloy's poems include decidedly negative portrayals—consider the gynaecologist in "Spayed" and the student doctors in "Rigor mortis at Earlsfort Terrace"—her poetic personas tend to depict nurses and doctors in ambiguous ways. Medical professionals are crucial in the healing process, but their work often involves uncomfortable manipulation of the patient's body and insufficient attention to the psychological impact of illness on both the patient and their loved ones (González-Arias, "pedigree" 122-124). "The Healing Touch", about radiotherapy, describes some overly functional, rather bossy institutional behaviour on the part of the nurses, with a notable lack of communication between them and the patient; the symbolic division between the worlds of the patient and the hospital staff is rendered by the sign "PEOPLE KEEP OUT":

> The nurses creep in, realign
> a body that's no longer mine.
>
> They are gone before I can say 'Hi!'
> Goodbye, Yahweh's angels, goodbye.
>
> The barrier is down. It glows red.
> PEOPLE KEEP OUT, or you're dead. (lines 17-22)

Moreover, lines 17-18 address the issue of whose property the ill body is in a hospital situation, where the patient's body is manipulated and perhaps altered (González-Arias, "Absolutely" 233). The patient possesses limited control over the course of diagnosis, treatment, and cure. In the poem above, the poetic I vainly tries to resist complete powerlessness and her dehumanisation to merely an ailing body by establishing contact.

The actual resistance, indeed, lies in Molloy's recovery of the patients' perspectives and lived experiences beyond their illnesses, suggesting that there is more to them than their ailing bodies. However, rescuing the sufferers' viewpoints from being overwhelmed by illness does not automatically grant them agency (cf. Sarkar xxxiii). In "The Healing Touch", Molloy emphasises the helplessness and passivity that often engulf patients, particularly the most vulnerable. This theme is also evident in poems like "Peregrino", which echoes the ambiguity towards modern medicine and extends the reification of the self in pain to the nonhuman, animal body (González-Arias, "pedigree" 130). Peregrino is a cat whose body is rendered passive at the whims of medical intervention, as seen in lines 1 and 9-10: "Three sets of hands are upon him", "The nurse straightens his limbs, / lays him out on his side;". It is up to the poet, in the last stanza, to mitigate the clinical detachment of the vets by focusing on the animal's eyes and bringing to the fore the bond between Peregrino and his owner, as well as the anticipated sense of loss resulting from Peregrino's death:

> Propped against walls that keep edging away,
> I catch sight of his wide-open
> eyes. His pupils dilate.
> They wax like the moon,

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fill the room
with a nocturnal
light. (lines 13-19)

Molloy employs various techniques, such as playing with the poetic line, internal rhymes, punctuation, and sharp enjambments, to zoom in on the cat at the end of the poem, after portraying his powerlessness. Through her work on form and content, she tries to resist reducing Peregrino's micro-story solely to his death.

Molloy's most compelling illness poetry displays "inventiveness" (Heaney 7) in the way it uses basic poetic devices to convey a hard-won independence of spirit juxtaposed with the hopelessness of hospitalised flesh (Potts 18). In this regard, "Gethsemane Day" and "Floating with Mr. Swan" are emblematic. They also denote Molloy's endeavour to break free from ossified thinking and poetry writing about illness, and find an adequate form to denounce female patients' helplessness and imposed passivity. This quest may entail seeking inspiration from poetic traditions beyond the Irish or approaching the latter in a subversive manner.

"Gethsemane Day" centralises the body in pain and the theme of obedience by referencing images of Christ in agony from relevant biblical passages. The poetic persona, Molloy herself, is sweating drops of blood—"the blood I am sweating rubs off on the sheet" (line 3), an allusion to Luke 22:44—while her liver has been sent to the lab for analysis, and she awaits the results. Biblical references are then intertwined with a direct quote from Sylvia Plath's elegy "Daddy" to criticise the infantilisation and lack of autonomy that women face at the hands of doctors and clergy (Ward 65). The last stanza deals with the theme of inevitable obedience to medical authorities:

What cocktail is Daddy preparing for me?
What ferments in pathology's sink?
Tonight they will tell me, will proffer the cup,
and, like it or not, I must drink. (lines 5-8)

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to be spared the cup, symbolising physical and emotional suffering, but ultimately submitted to God's will. No rescue was available for Jesus, since His death was needed for the salvation of others (Sandnes 329), and similarly, Molloy cannot help but drink the drugs offered by the doctors. Her body is betraying her, and "holding on to [her] head" (line 4)—i.e., her way of thinking and the creative expression thereof—is Molloy's only remaining agency. The poem unsentimentally acknowledges the author's fear and dependency, while also highlighting her strength in offering a counter-narrative to the official medical report. Molloy's verses fluctuate between carefully placed internal rhymes and harsh, unmusical sounds, conveying the complexities of her illness experience and the conflict between the lack of control over her body and the desire for it.

These themes, the attempt to present a counter-narrative, and the use of traditional poetic devices to convey the uncontrollable are central also to Molloy's rewriting of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan", titled "Floating with Mr. Swan". Molloy subversively engages with Yeats's poem both in terms of poetics (language and form)

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and portrayal of helplessness. "Floating with Mr. Swan" represents a sort of *summa* of Molloy's illness poetry, as she addresses how the culture and morality of independent Ireland often constructed femininity as weak, passive, and inert, with repercussions in the medical field. Moreover, the poem prompts reflection on our complicity in perpetuating such dynamics.

Molloy's Leda speaks from the operating table. She describes receiving her anaesthetic from a Mr. Swan—though ironically, she is the one figuratively made fowl: "Mr. Swan, the anaesthetist, jabs at my arm / till I'm jelly-leg, head-flop and flap-wing"; then, this Leda makes herself into Mr. Swan's toy, slurring "I wuv ya, I wuv ya" like Mattel's Chatty Cathy doll (lines 1-2, 8; Darcy, *Strategies* 107). She has lost control of herself, and Molloy chooses to depict her plight as a stark contrast to Yeats (Villar-Argáiz 136). If "Leda and the Swan" may find erotic pleasure in Leda's vulnerability and the swan's powerful mastery of her, Molloy's poem takes no pleasure in feminine helplessness.

However, as readers, we may not realise this at first. Molloy plays with us until the unmusical, excessively long sentence that abruptly ends the poem: "All I get is a slap on the cheek / from the nurse with the upside-down watch / and the back-to-front hands" (lines 11-13). These lines, like the slap Leda receives, function as a wake-up call to us. Up to the final stanza, we are captivated by the wordplay and sound devices, such as the compounds of "jelly-leg, head-flop, and flap-wing", the alliterations, assonances, and onomatopoeias (Darcy, *Strategies* 108). We float with Mr. Swan, like infantilised adults caught up in the poem's pleasant babble, oblivious to the more unsettling infantilisation of Leda, rendered powerless and reduced to the conditions of a doll. The abrupt conclusion thus directly addresses the readers, implying that their indifference—whether deliberate or not—to the plight of female patients in Irish hospitals may contribute to the status quo.

While balancing creativity with the imperative to raise awareness, "Floating with Mr. Swan" attests to the social dimension of Molloy's poetry, which aims to give voice to what is often hidden or neglected. Her poems possess a clear perlocutive function, ultimately relying on our willingness to listen.

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF MOLLOY'S EXPERIENCE

A commentary on "Life Boat", a companion poem to "Credo" and "Bones", serves well to round out an analysis that began by emphasising the alignment of Molloy's poetry with contemporary works, which are distinguished by an alertness to experiences obscured by the grand narrative of the nation, a social dimension, and a focus on corporeality. In the case of Molloy's oeuvre, the centrality of the body predates her illness but is heightened by it, as she regards the body as a source of poetry that can transcend death and provide continuance. Poetry is the medium for reaching out to people who may have or have not undergone experiences akin to her illness.

"Life Boat", heavily steeped in biblical intertextuality, immerses readers in a dark atmosphere from the beginning. As usual, the language and imagery are explicit; there

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is no denying the impending death: "I made an ark out of my skull" (line 1). Her skull becomes a sort of Noah's ark, but her journey through a deluge-ravaged world, emblematic of her illness, offers no opportunity for personal growth. It is a dreadful yet polymorphous experience, in which "The creatures in [her] cranium increased / and multiplied" (lines 23-24). She will make these creatures the fabric of her poetry, taking care not to overlook their unpleasant qualities. "Life Boat" ends with the rebirth of the self from the ark into the realm of poetry (Ward 66):

> pounded on my roof. At last, the muddy hydrus
> (the only serpent
> on the side of angels) led me out. And lo, God's gifts
> lay scattered
> all about: rare Paracletes with tongues of fire; (lines 26-30)

The reference is to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire on Pentecost day, which empowered the disciples' speaking to sustain the completion of world evangelisation. The Paracletes are the believers who can articulate and persuade others regarding matters pertaining to God, effecting a transformation of hearts within them (Snaith 50). Likewise, the poetic persona has been endowed with newfound forms of expression to articulate her own experiences. She cannot remain silent but must bear witness to her living with terminal illness. It then becomes our responsibility to ensure that her experience, along with those of people like Dorothy Molloy, are not denied a legacy.

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