

## Re-thinking Eating Disorders as Cultural Pathologies in Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

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Eating disorders—a generic term that includes anorexia nervosa, bulimia, binge eating and many other subtypes of problematic relationships with food and eating—are situated at the interface of disciplines as varied as medicine, biology, history, cultural studies, gender studies and the social sciences. Although the reasons behind the development and experience of an eating disorder are individual as well as cultural, these pathologies tend to be analysed from either an exclusively biomedical perspective—which often excludes the cultural factor—or oversimplified as being the result of the stereotypes of beauty imposed on the female body in western cultural traditions. This essay, in contrast, looks at eating disorders as multi-layered metaphors of cultural dissidence within the social order and literary traditions of contemporary Ireland. It is divided into distinct, though interrelated, sections: a brief introduction to eating disorders; a consideration of the problems posed in the representation of emaciated corporealities; a taxonomical classification of the primary sources found in the course of my research; and the analysis of Mary O'Donnell's poem "Reading the Sunflowers in September" as a case study to illustrate the literal and metaphorical employment of anorexia in contemporary Irish poetry. Although the analysis is philological, the perspective adopted is that of the Medical Humanities, in that I will make use of literary, cultural and biomedical literature in order to provide a view that is complementary to the scientific discourse around anorexia nervosa. O'Donnell's poem will be

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considered in relation to European visual arts, particularly photography, in order to enhance the transnational dimension of eating disorders. At the same time, the close reading of the poem under analysis will be complemented by a comparative analysis with other Irish poems of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to underline the relevance of the national context in interpreting the representation of this disease. Ultimately, this essay aims to proffer new perspectives on the pathology and to contribute to the social understanding of those who experience it.

**Keywords:** anorexia nervosa; eating disorders; cultural pathologies; contemporary Irish women's poetry; Medical Humanities.

## 1. Introduction

Eating disorders is a generic term used to describe problematic relationships with food and includes anorexia nervosa, bulimia and binge eating, among other subtypes. Although these pathologies lie at the complex interface of biology, medicine and cultural and social components (Bartel 2021, 1)—to mention just some of the factors involved in their development—the biomedical sciences have traditionally overlooked, underestimated or oversimplified historical and sociocultural discourses in their diagnosis and treatment. In their introduction to “New Insights into Anorexia Nervosa” Philip Gorwood and his team offer an overview of the recent scientific literature around the condition under study, which they define as a “starvation addiction” (Gorwood et al. 2016, 2) of unknown aetiology (1). The authors acknowledge the difficulty of providing a comprehensive explanation for the development and progression of anorexia nervosa but contend that the pathology is “clearly influenced by biological, sociocultural and psychological factors” (2016, 1). However, their review article focuses mainly on the biomedical aspects and only obliquely touches upon the sociocultural as a determining element in the understanding and treatment of anorexia.

In line with this biomedical analysis, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) similarly defines anorexia nervosa as “self-starvation and weight loss resulting in low weight for height and age,” which results in “the highest mortality of any psychiatric diagnosis other than opioid use disorder.” It is considered “a very serious condition [...] driven by an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat” and the aim of treatment is to normalise the patient’s “eating and weight control behavior and restore their weight,” although, it is acknowledged that the risk of relapse is high “in the first year following program discharge” (American Psychiatric Association 2023). Writing for the Limerick Mental

Health Association, Felicity Byrne calls eating disorders “the hidden problem in Ireland” and contends that these pathologies “have been on the rise in recent years” in the country (2023). She uses surveys conducted by the Health Service Executive (HSE) to estimate the prevalence of anorexia and bulimia in Ireland, finding it to be “around 2-3% of the population, with young women being the most affected” (Byrne 2023). Although Byrne mentions genetic, psychological and environmental factors as being active drivers in the development of eating disorders, the latter are summarised as simply “social and cultural pressures to be thin” (Byrne 2023), no reference being made to the specific religious, political, cultural and historical context of Ireland and its impact on the relationship Irish women have traditionally had with their own bodies.

Given the high risk of relapse observed, the APA’s single treatment aim in anorexia nervosa of restoring a patient’s body weight alone is clearly no guarantee of the patient’s recovery. This suggests that a deeper understanding of this pathology is required, and highlights the need for further research on its origins and treatments. The aim of this essay is to analyse anorexia nervosa, arguably the most life-threatening of all subtypes of eating disorders, as the result of, among other factors, the social, historical and religious pressures imposed on the female body in the specific context of Ireland since the 1980s. As mentioned above, the social narrative around eating disorders tends to blame the beauty models of a given time as being responsible for the disease. Interestingly enough, in the poetry studied for this essay, this factor is rarely explored. The emaciated body is instead inscribed as a site of profound cultural dissidence and as the metaphorical representation of gender asymmetries that go well beyond the beauty myth. This essay will present a taxonomical classification of primary sources, mainly taken from poetry, since the number of poems dealing with eating disorders exceeds those of any other genre in Ireland. Outside the scope of this essay is the representation of male emaciated corporealities. As Heike Bartel has contended in her ground-breaking study of men writing about eating disorders in German and English autobiographical narratives, public and medical perceptions of eating disorders as female maladies, together with the pressures imposed by stereotypes of normative masculinity, have rendered anorexia in patients identified as male somewhat invisible (Bartel 2021, 5). Although it is necessary, even urgent, to research this theme across cultures and historical periods, this essay focuses exclusively on the female body. Ultimately, the aim of this study is to provide complementary information to that proffered by the scientific literature on anorexia nervosa, with a view to improving the individual’s experience of, and recovery from, this life-threatening illness.

## 2. Anorexia Nervosa: Problems of Representation

In her influential study on famine literature in Ireland, *The Feminization of Famine*, Margaret Kelleher reflects on the capacity of language to represent what John Banville termed “the inexpressible”—emaciated bodies in advanced states of decay—as well as on the ethical implications of such an enterprise (Kelleher 1997, 2-3). Although it can be argued that the sight of famine victims may disrupt the separation between self and other (Kelleher 1997, 7), arousing sympathetic as well as empathic responses on the part of the witness, the description of the physical dimension of starvation—bulging eyes, swollen bellies, out of proportion heads that resemble skulls—produces the opposite effect through its challenging of linguistic articulation, much the same way as other forms of severe illnesses do. And so, while naturalistic depictions of ill bodies abound in medical literature, approaching the same reality from an artistic perspective has proved more problematic<sup>2</sup> due to the “resistance to language,” or unshareability, of physical distress (Scarry 1985, 4).

Elaine Scarry explains this absence of bodies in pain from the systems of representation by emphasising the radical split that a disturbed physicality triggers between the self in pain (for whom pain is the experience that rules absolutely over all other aspects of their life) and the rest of the community (which remains oblivious to this physical reality happening in someone else’s body, turning illness into something to reject and fear). For Scarry, physical distress lies in a representational paradox: it is at the same time that which cannot be confirmed (by anyone in the community, except the sufferer) and that which cannot be denied (because of its centrality in the sufferer’s life) (Scarry 1985, 4). Anorexic bodies are no exception in this regard. Although comparing self-inflicted starvation with a famine situation would result in unethical oversimplifications, the somatic consequences of both processes are similar. And so, if, as Kelleher contends, famine bodies prove at times difficult to render on the page or canvass, descriptions of anorexic embodiments (traditionally considered a female malady)<sup>3</sup> are principally present in naturalistic approaches

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- 2 There are, of course, instances of bodies in pain in both world literature and the visual arts. In Ireland, novelist Lia Mills, poets Dorothy Molloy, Shirley McClure, Leanne O’Sullivan and Celia de Fréine, visual artist Mary Fitzgerald and film-maker Evan Barry are just a few examples of the recent inscription of different pathologies (cancer, COVID-19, hepatitis C, eating disorders, spine damage) into the artistic discourse of the island. However, the numbers are scant when compared with the amount of representations of emotional suffering.
  - 3 Interestingly enough, famine bodies are also mainly associated with the female physicality. Kelleher argues that “where the individual spectacle of a hungry body is created, this

to the disorder. However, since the 1980s an important body of work on anorexia has been produced by Irish writers (mainly women, though not exclusively), who thus provide their audiences with corporal realities that deviate from the beautiful, compact, idealised—and inevitably healthy—female body of the Irish national muse.

The cultural discourse around eating disorders has fostered the idea that the connection between thinness and success is responsible for the rapid rise in anorexia nervosa, primarily in young women, in the western world. As Susie Orbach has pointed out, globalisation has contributed to the democratisation of beauty, which has ultimately translated into style icons of extreme thinness (and western appearance) which are not subject to aesthetic variation across the globe (Orbach 2009, 3). This tendency towards corporeal homogeneity has contributed to the consideration of anorexia as a “relatively unproblematic category of a medical taxonomy of diseases and disorders” (Malson 1998, x). However, Orbach insists that our bodies are a composite of what she calls the “familial body story” and the “cultural body story”:

Shot through the individual familial body story of how we have been physically treated and treat our children is the cultural body story which both parents and children live through. Everything in our early experience shapes our bodies. Every culture marks the bodies of its people in specific ways and we see the various external markers, from the rings which extend the necks of Burmese women to the hand gestures of the Italian speaker to the way we wear our clothes, are sequestered during menstruation, or do our ablutions. (Orbach 2009, 58)

As summarised in the introduction to this essay, recent research on anorexia nervosa combines the naturalistically-oriented medical work with sociological, psychological and cultural factors that ultimately account for anorexic embodiments as “fluid, contradictory and socially embedded” (Malson 1998, xii). The literary inscriptions of anorexia by contemporary Irish women writers work as artistic illustrations of these theoretical approaches. On the one hand, the texts shatter that inexpressibility that Kelleher pointed out in reference to famine victims and confront readers with the devastating physical consequences of the disease, at times sparing none of the details. These naturalistic descriptions present a challenge for both readers and writers schooled in a tradition of idealised female muses. In “Bulimic,” for example, Leanne O’Sullivan describes the aftermath of an episode of purging: “Blood dries on the bathroom floor” after

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occurs, predominantly, through images of women” (1997, 8).

the poetic persona has “raped [the body’s chambers] with two blistering fingers,” feeling “the caustic passion of juices from the gut” and “erupt[ing] maniacally / until blood makes her hole, barren, empty” (O’Sullivan 2004, 18-19); similarly, in Colette Bryce’s “Form” the protagonist starves herself to achieve “depth to the shallows / of the temples, definition to the cheek, / contrast to the clavicle, the ankle bone, the rib, / the raised X-ray perception of my feet” (Bryce 2000, 17); the poetic persona in Catriona O’Reilly’s “Thin” compares her emaciated body to a small room in which her “hip-bones / stick in the foam mattress” while her sister does not seem to notice “the skin / around my mouth or my ankle-bones” as the result of “[n]o dinner / for six weeks” (O’Reilly 2001, 20-21); and in Molly Twomey’s “The Most Brutal Thing,” the poetic persona describes the “slow collapse / of bones, sprained ankles to sunken cheeks” of Katerina Laktionova, a real patient of anorexia nervosa who had been “fastened and refastened to a gurney, / a gastric tube stuck to her face” before death (Twomey 2022, 17).<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the socio-political and historical specificities of the Irish context (or, in Orbach’s phraseology, the “cultural body story” of Ireland) are also interwoven with the physical descriptions in the poetry, acting sometimes as subtexts, sometimes as mighty generators of women’s somatic reactions. One of the earliest examples of self-inflicted starvation in the Irish literary—mainly poetic—scene is Eavan Boland’s “Anorexic” (Boland 2005, 75-76), where an emaciated Eve has internalised the religious stigmatisation of female flesh as sinful and hence dreams of getting “angular and holy,” of fitting back into Adam’s rib and disappearing from the physical level.<sup>5</sup> In the first decade of the millennium interest in eating disorders as both biomedical and cultural pathologies has continued to grow and the publication in 2004 of Leanne O’Sullivan’s debut collection, *Waiting for My Clothes*, a book almost entirely devoted to the experience of extreme anorexia and bulimia, constitutes a good example. More recently, the publication of Victoria Kennefick’s *Eat or We Both Starve* (in 2021) and Molly Twomey’s *Raised Among Vultures* (in 2022) indicates that anorexia is very relevant in the present of Ireland, not just as part of what Malson called “a relatively unproblematic category of a medical taxonomy of diseases” but as a cultural pathology that deserves more attention as well as a more accurate biomedical and social representation.

4 In her poem Twomey quotes the headline from BBC News about the death of Laktionova, whose body was put in a suitcase and thrown into the sea by her mother in an Italian port. For more on this case, see BBC News 2017.

5 “Anorexic” is included in Boland’s 1980 volume *In Her Own Image*. For reasons of accessibility the reference is taken from her *New and Collected Poems* (2005). For a detailed analysis of this poem, see González-Arias 1996.

### 3. A Taxonomy of Starved Bodies in Irish Poetry

The presence of eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa, in Irish poetry published between the 1980s and today is frequent enough to merit attention. The questions posed by these emaciated presences are numerous: What are Irish women writers trying to say about the female body, Irish culture and international strictures imposed on women's identities across the globe? Is there any reason for the abundant presence of eating disorders in Irish poetry in the period mentioned above or does it respond to a mere aesthetic trend? What are the main metaphors employed to represent the emaciated women that inhabit those texts? Can these poems contribute to the social understanding, diagnosis, prognosis and treatment of eating disorders?

It can be contended that in many of the poems published on this topic in Ireland to date, the emaciated, starved corporealities of women become the somatic surfaces for complex identitarian issues engraved in the Irish collective psyche and act as powerful sites of dissidence within a national context. On other occasions, the anorexic bodies of the protagonists can be read as signifiers of gender pressures that exist across cultures, meaning that any analysis would demand a transnational approach. In the course of my research so far, I have designed a taxonomical classification for these primary sources. However, it is not infrequent to find some overlapping in the thematic interests of a given text between two or more of the categories that follow. The titles provided in each category do not constitute an exhaustive list of Irish poems on eating disorders but are mentioned as representative examples.

(1) Self-inflicted starvation often works as a strategy of resistance against (as well as internalisation of) religious discourses on the female body as the locus of sin. In spite of the increasing secularisation of Ireland from the mid-90s on, and particularly after the unprecedented economic boom known as the Celtic-Tiger phenomenon, the power of Catholicism in the perception of women's bodies is still very strong, even among the youngest generations. Eavan Boland's "Anorexic" (2005, 75-76; originally published in 1980), Eithne Strong's *Flesh: The Greatest Sin* (1993 [1980]<sup>6</sup>) and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's "Marvellous Grass / Féar Suaithinseach" (1993, 74-75) are among the earliest examples of the religious component in the development of anorexia nervosa. However, many of the poems in recent collections by

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6 Strong's volume was originally published by The Runa Press in 1980, the same year as Eavan Boland's "Anorexic." Again, for reasons of accessibility, the reference is taken from the 1993 Attic edition.

the younger generation of Irish women poets—such as Leanne O’Sullivan’s *Waiting for My Clothes* (2004) and Victoria Kennefick’s *Eat or We Both Starve* (2021)—continue to pay witness to the strong influence of religion on the individual and collective constructions of the female body in the country.

(2) Sexual awakenings and sexual abuse constitute other important sources in the development of eating disorders in the texts analysed. As such, in Áine Ní Ghlinn’s “Galar an Aisig” / “Vomiting Sickness” (1996, 14-15) the medical establishment fails to find the cause of the protagonist’s bulimia as it would be unthinkable, in the cultural environment of the Ireland of the time, that a father could be molesting his own daughter.

(3) An emaciated female corporeality is also used to parallel the hunger strike initiated by Irish republican prisoners in Northern Ireland in 1981. The reaction against socio-political colonisation is here complemented by a critique of the gender asymmetries that exist in a national ethos characterised by its masculine bias. In Paula Meehan’s “Hunger Strike” (1986, 9-10) the protagonist stops eating and thus clears some space for female agency in the context of *The Troubles*.

(4) The Irish Famine is also recovered in texts that compare the magnitude of this national trauma to that of the private traumas of women that live in a world saturated by visual images of extreme thinness and beauty paradigms. Leanne O’Sullivan’s “Famine” (2004, 14), in which eating disorders are referred to as “the famine of the 90s,” is one of the most explicit examples of this usage of anorexic embodiments.

(5) Mother-daughter relationships also abound in the poetry that deals with eating disorders in Ireland. In the biomedical literature on these pathologies, mothers are often blamed for the development of their daughters’ pathological relationships with food, particularly if they themselves had shown “high weight and shape concerns” during the breast-feeding period (Gorwood et al. 2016, 12). However, far from this monolithic interpretation, in the poetry researched here mothers become complex, multi-layered characters, at times honoured by their daughters as the origin of life, at times worshipped for caring for them no matter how stubborn their daughters’ eating habits, at times the triggers of conflict around their daughters’ poor health.

(6) The connection between the shaping of a body and the shaping of a literary work also makes an appearance in some of the texts I have compiled, which then contribute to debates on gender and poetic creation in the Irish literary canon, traditionally perceived as the exclusive realm of men. As we will see in the next section, Mary O’Donnell’s “Reading the Sunflowers in September” (2006, 8) constitutes a good example, together with Colette Bryce’s “Form” (2000, 17) and Caitríona O’Reilly’s “Thin” (2001, 20-21).



(7) Given the strong presence of elements of the natural world in many of the poems on eating disorders, the connection between the female body and nature invites a re-reading of these texts under the light of current debates on climate change and the Anthropocene. The degradation of the female body can be related in such poems to the systematic disappearance and/or transformation of natural habitats in the name of progress.

Poetry comes out of an economy of words that is particularly suited to inscribing the economy of flesh and fat pursued by patients with anorexia nervosa. However, in many novels and short stories by Irish women writers these same themes are also present. To this end, in Anna Burns' *No Bones* (2002) the conflict in Northern Ireland is a determining element in the development of the protagonist's eating disorder, and in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's short story "Peacocks" (2003, 143-162), to mention just one of the stories the author has devoted to this topic, anorexia is presented as the result of family and cultural pressures imposed on the two protagonists (the mother-narrator and her starved daughter), who are both affected by the same cultural and social disease in spite of being one generation apart. In its turn, in Emma Donoghue's celebrated novel *The Wonder* (2016) a young girl rejects food on the basis of religious beliefs and with the approval of her family, becoming thus part of a long tradition of religious women who starved themselves in order to be closer to the sacred, transcendent and male-bodied God. In Leanne Waters' autobiographical text *My Secret Life: A Memoir of Bulimia* (2011) the author writes about perfectionism, being bullied at school, religion and the process of coming-of-age as the main triggers of her severe anorexia and bulimia. As in many of the poems researched, Waters' patient-narrator suffers from a body/mind, and body/spirit dissociation that protects her from the distorted self-perception of her own body during the hardest stages of her illness: "Mostly, it feels that though my bulimia was indeed a selected path, it was not I who made the decision. It was made by a determined alter-ego who had by this stage almost consumed me completely. I was at her mercy," Waters recalls (2011, 51-52).

#### 4. Case Study: "Reading the Sunflowers in September," by Mary O'Donnell

"Reading the Sunflowers in September" (2006, 8) is the title poem of Mary O'Donnell's debut collection<sup>7</sup> and constitutes a thought-provoking reflection on eating disorders, religious stigmatisation of female flesh, human and non-

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<sup>7</sup> The reference is taken from *The Place of Miracles: New and Selected Poems*, more accessible to readers than her out-of-print 1990 volume *Reading the Sunflowers in September* (Galway: Salmon).

human interactions and gender stereotyping in artistic discourses. O'Donnell is part of a generation of women poets who set out to consciously diminish the idealised—abstract and asexual—muses of the Irish poetic tradition through an inscription of themes ranging from anorexia, menstruation, pregnancy and ageing to plastic surgery. Writing about female corporeality, the poet remembers, was not at first easy and involved challenging not only potential readers but also the limits of linguistic articulation itself. When asked to read from her poetry on a radio programme, O'Donnell chose "Excision" (2006, 6-7). One line in the poem, she said, "contains the word 'cuntless'—meaning 'to be without a cunt.' It was relevant to the subject of circumcision, obviously. It was not used as a term of offensive denigration, so much as a relevant, descriptive, vernacular word." However, the reporter immediately stopped her "by saying that this was a radio programme and could I please read a different extract," she laments (O'Donnell 2009, 161).

"Reading the Sunflowers in September" focuses on the non-normative corporeality of its poetic persona. It describes the slow movements of a female figure who visits the same field of sunflowers each day. The ordinary activity of walking turns into an energy-consuming one that is only achieved at the expense of great effort on the part of the starved protagonist: "You never know whether she'll make it, / her bones having grown in recent years." The reference to bone-growth identifies the poetic persona as a patient of anorexia nervosa, as this feature is found quite frequently in physical descriptions of the pathology. For instance, in Leanne Waters' memoir, *My Secret Self*, the author dwells on this same image to describe her physical appearance on developing the illness: "I grew bones I did not know were there. From my toes to my ankles, five solid strings attached themselves and resembled a spider's web up my foot" (2011, 73). The outset of O'Donnell's text also proffers what philosopher Havi Carel terms "a geography of illness" (2008, 14), in other words, it presents the world (and hence the individual's interaction with it) as a non-stable background that changes when one is in a disturbed physical state. In spite of the dialogic relationship that exists between the body and the space it occupies, it is the corporeal that takes centre-stage in the acquisition of subjectivity that the protagonist is immersed in. Carel argues that most of our daily activities and routine actions are pre-reflective, that is, "they are the product of habit rather than conscious reflection" (22), a point she illustrates using the example of walking, interestingly enough the same one O'Donnell picks up for her anorexic protagonist:

[G]oing for a walk is such a dialogue of the body with the environment: the legs propel forwards, the labyrinth in our ears keeps us upright and balanced, the eyes provide visual information about the path ahead and any obstacles to be

negotiated, and so on. This kind of dialogue with the environment requires the constant taking in of information and constant recalculation of route, speed and muscular effort. (Carel 2008, 22)

However, a subject alienated from their body through illness, that is, a body whose capacity to perform everyday routine activities has been altered by a weakened physical condition, immediately turns the pre-reflective, and apparently invisible, into a visible task requiring much planning. In the poem, O'Donnell's anorexic persona can never be sure of her capacity to bring to completion such a seemingly straightforward action as a walk to the fields due to the physical exhaustion—and probably physical pain—resulting from her lack of nourishment. The Cartesian body/mind split, whereby the body is conceptualised as a passive recipient awaiting instructions from the mind, is thus upset by the emaciated physicality, now paramount in the dialogue the subject establishes with her spatial context. The meaningful character of the corporeal is extended in the poem to the elements of the natural world, namely the sunflowers. Female corporeality and nature have a long history of associations in essentialist discourses, the main effect of which has been the perception of both as pre-linguistic, pre-discursive or, in Lacanian terminology, pre-Symbolic. However, the sunflowers are here pictured as bearers of signification that, as the titles intimates, will be read and decoded by the protagonist:

Such starvation is an art:  
Admire her craft as she upbraids  
a summer gluttony, tears sheets from herself,  
inspired by shrinkage.

She read sunflowers daily,  
the spindles of her fingers reach out,  
stroke yellow ellipses  
as if each petal were a sign.

Susie Orbach's *Bodies* stems from the belief that the natural body, the body "untainted by cultural practices," is a fallacy: "The very notion of a body," she contends, "has become a product we manufacture and create" (2009, 134-136). Although O'Donnell's poem pre-dates this theoretical approach to the corporeal, it does function as an illustration of it since it establishes a parallelism between the shaping of the body and the creation of a poem. O'Donnell's protagonist perceives her body as a piece of art she is working on daily. As if writing a poem, she is "inspired" by shrinkage, "tearing sheets from herself." This same idea recurs in

contemporary Irish poems on anorexia. In Colette Bryce's "Form," for example (2000, 17-18), the poetic persona describes her self-starvation in terms reminiscent of art-making—"I found I was gifted, good. / And full of my vocation, sat or stood // at the mirror just watching my work / take shape, conform to my critical eye" (17). Similarly, in Catriona O'Reilly's "Thin" (2001, 20-21) the protagonist compares her stomach to an empty room in what becomes a metaphor sustained throughout the text: her body becomes a house that is being fashioned into a "more habitable" and "more distinguished" shape (21) by starvation. And in her memoir of her bulimic years, Leanne Waters describes her excessive exercise to lose weight in terms of art-making—"I imagined someone peeling away my skin, slice by slice. This was making me a better person" (2011, 33)—and the "skinny bodies" she found on the internet in terms of "art" (2011, 42).

In "Reading the Sunflowers in September" the metaphor of art-making is also sustained throughout the text. In the same way a poet dispenses with superfluous material in order to make their piece as compact and complete as possible, the woman dispenses with her own flesh in what she considers a form of artistry. The semantic field of creation, manifest in the poem in a good number of terms (art, craft, sheets, inspiration, reading, sign, word, the telling of tales, critical reviews, conventions) also contributes to comparing her constructed corporeality to the sunflowers, coded with meaning as if they were linguistic signs. Far from being a passive context for the poetic persona's feelings, as in traditional landscape poetry, the marriage between signifier and signified that presides over the linguistic sign makes the sunflowers meaningful entities, thereby problematising views of the natural world as pre-Symbolic.

The conflation of starvation and art in the poem is ethically problematic, its main effect being the triggering of more hunger and the further sinking into illness on the part of the anorexic patient. However, O'Donnell skilfully bypasses this undesired consequence because the similarities between the female body and the signifying elements of the natural world go no further in the text. The seeds that "swell and separate" poignantly contrast with the extremely skinny embodiment of her starvation: "She reads sunflowers daily, / the spindles of her fingers reach out, / stroke yellow ellipses." The swelling movement of the seeds is inversely proportional to the shrinkage the woman has chosen as her particular form of self-expression. Moreover, the summer gluttony represented in the swollen seeds "enchant[s] her hunger / all the more." The sunflowers fully participate in the pleasurable excesses of the summer season<sup>8</sup> and their daily movement from east to west, following the sun, contrasts with the mobility difficulties of the poetic persona in her daily walk to the fields.

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8 Sunflowers will be re-utilised by O'Donnell in the poem "French Fields" (O'Donnell 1998, 7) as an image of carnal desire and sexual fulfilment.

“Reading the Sunflowers in September” also invites a psychoanalytical reading for its references to the visual as a major part in the acquisition of subjectivity. For Lacan, the ego is formed through a process of identification with an illusionary image during the mirror stage, namely the individual’s own specular image, which they perceive as themselves. Therefore, the ego is the result of a misunderstanding whereby the subject is alienated from their own body and identifies with an image which is at the same time themselves and an Other, that is, an illusion (Evans 1996, 114-116). This sense of alienation is in turn connected with the concept of the gaze and its role in the separation between Subject and Other. In Lacan’s early theorisation, the gaze is “that which permits the subject to realise that the Other is also a subject” (Evans 1996, 72). This involves some degree of reciprocity between seeing the Other and being seen by him/her. In Lacan’s later theories the gaze is completely located on the side of the Other. It is the subject that looks, but the gaze that gets back to him/her originates in alterity. However, the participation of O’Donnell’s protagonist in this visual dynamics inscribes her voluntary starvation as a disturbing element in her process of becoming a full subject. Whereas she “reads” the flowers on a daily basis—the reading itself functioning as a metaphor for visual interaction—the plants do not work as radical alterities that send their gaze back to her to help her find her own individualism. Instead, they “gaze / like a thousand eyes at the sun’s path.” Moreover, the sunflowers prove unable to provide the young woman with the illusion of a mirror image against which she will construct her own subjectivity. Their healthy and bountiful aspect becomes a mirror that inspires further hunger in her. The visual is far from functional in this instance. The woman fears the sunflowers’ plumpness could be hers and falls into more accentuated shrinkage.

Although not specifically centred on eating disorders, the work of Spanish photographer Soledad Córdoba provides an interesting illustration of the arguments above, while adding new interpretative layers for the poem. In her series of self-portraits *En el silencio* (*Into the Silence*, Córdoba 2009-2012), the artist puts the female body in contact with different elements of the natural world—trees, flowers, a river, fallen leaves, butterflies, birds, ants and sunflowers—to reflect on the relationship between the human and the non-human. As Córdoba indicates on her website in relation to this series, there is a “silent dialogue” and an “eternal communion” between the human body and nature. In this never-ending interaction the latter is at times a “container full of beauty” and, at others, a source of “unknown dangers,” while humans observe, sometimes passively, sometimes with the capacity to hurt (Córdoba 2009-2012). One of the photographs in the series—“En el silencio II”—pictures a woman in the midst of a field of sunflowers (Figure 1<sup>9</sup>). Like O’Donnell’s

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9 Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

protagonist, Córdoba's is interacting with the flowers but her corporeality—thin, blurred and dressed in aseptic white—contrasts with the elements of the natural world—plump, colourful and oriented towards the light of day. Although Córdoba's figure tries to establish a deeper contact with the richness of nature by reaching out to the flowers, her gaze is not directed towards them, but orientated towards a bird that flies overhead and menaces her physical and emotional stability. The sunflowers, once more, do not reciprocate the woman's attempt at touch and do not even seem to notice her presence, oriented, as they are, towards the light of day. This photograph from *En el silencio* in this way underlines the difficulties of ever finding a complete, and unproblematic, connection with our environment, particularly when the body struggling to make such a link is female.

This transnational reading of the woman-nature connection acquires more nuances in the specific context of Ireland. Traditionally, the green landscapes of the island have been used—by nationalist ideologies first, by the tourist industry later—as the locus of a national identity untainted by colonial discourses. In the canonical marriage between Irish nationalism and Catholicism in the early stages of the Republic, the bodies of women became the asexual reproducers of the independent nation, but their real corporealities were excluded from the idealised landscapes of the island, associated instead with male heroism. Under the context of this national ethos, O'Donnell's protagonist develops a pathology that evidences the embodiment of symbolic exclusion, on the basis of gender, from the land of Ireland and the nation-formation narratives within its patriarchal social order.



FIGURE 1. "En el silencio II," by Soledad Córdoba

In a previous study of “Reading the Sunflowers in September” (González-Arias 2010) I limited my analysis of the connection between woman and nature in the poem to the lack of reciprocity between the anorexic protagonist and the fleshy elements of the natural world. As described above, this disconnection is clearly symptomatic of the protagonist’s illness, as the anorexic patient is moving along a path of self-starvation that radically differs from the movement towards light of the healthy-looking sunflowers. However, the relationship between the human and the non-human in O’Donnell’s poem deserves further analysis within the current debates on climate change and environmental crisis, even though the poem does not explicitly connect the rejection of food on the part of the protagonist to the degradation of the natural spaces around her. As Daisy Hildyard contends in *The Second Body*, the human body is not understood as living “outside its own skin,” but it is considered instead as “a whole and single individual.” However, climate change has shown us that “every animal body is implicated in the whole world,” thus blurring the boundaries around the human body, previously thought of as inviolable (Hildyard 2017, 13). According to Hildyard, every living entity has two bodies and, therefore, has the capacity to be in two places simultaneously: “You have an individual body in which you exist, eat, sleep and go about your day-to-day life,” she argues, but you also have “a second body which has an impact on foreign countries and on whales” (19-20). The environmental crisis of our times calls for a re-connection between the human and the non-human in terms that respect and acknowledge the value of the latter in a dialogic fashion. Under this lens, “Reading the Sunflowers in September” can be said to underline the lack of connection between the body of the human animal and those other bodies of the natural world. The protagonist’s first body, to use Hildyard’s terminology, is undergoing the consequences of a life-threatening pathology, making it impossible for her second body to establish any dialogue with the sunflowers and their regenerative powers. As such her anorexia can be interpreted as both a personal illness and a cultural pathology of global dimensions.

The analysis of the visual in “Reading the Sunflowers in September” also calls for some reflection on the relationship anorexic patients have with mirrors.<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, sight and the visual have been privileged as means of apprehending the world—the metaphysics of presence contributing to the naturalisation of images that are in fact constructed (either individually or collectively). However, anorexia destabilises such notions by emphasising the highly subjective character of what is perceived through our eyes. When in front of a mirror,

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10 For an interesting poetic articulation of perceptual distortions, see Leanne O’Sullivan’s “Mirror” (O’Sullivan 2004, 16).

anorexic patients are unable to see a realistic reflection of their own physicality (if “realistic” can be used at all in this scenario) and systematically describe their bodies as excessive in flesh and form, no matter how skinny they are. Particularly relevant to this conversation is the work of Hungarian artist André Kertész, commissioned to produce a series of photographs on optical distortions (known as the “Distortions” series) in the 1930s. For this project, Kertész worked with two nude female models that he would place in front of carnival mirrors. The physicality of the models was so altered that often only some limb or feature was discernible in the reflection captured by the camera. In “Distortions No. 6” (Kertész 1933a), for instance, the ribcage of the model is exaggerated, as well as her long waist, hence highlighting the physical ideals for the women of the time. In “Distortion No. 49” (Kertész 1933b) the legs and left arm of the lying nude model are duplicated in the carnival mirror, an image that inspires both rejection and fascination because of its radical difference to the model’s body. Similarly, O’Donnell’s poetic persona has no access to an undistorted vision of her own body. As if reflected on one of Kertész’ carnival surfaces, her bones have “grown in recent years” beyond recognition.

The last stanza in the poem opens up new grounds for debate on corporeality and gender-role stereotyping. The lack of reciprocity between the sunflowers’ gaze, orientated towards the sun, and the woman’s eyes, “bent on [her own path],” result, as has been argued, in a deficiency in the protagonist’s process of acquiring subjectivity. The sustained metaphor that juxtaposed the shaping of the body with the creation of a work of art is maintained by O’Donnell as a means to compensate for the paralysed growth of the protagonist. However, once more the magnitude of the creation is threatened by hunger. Her attempts at shrinking have turned her body into an entity that “will have it all.” The angular forms of the anorexic woman become the embodiment of the androgyne, characterised by the integration of male and female elements, and hence the archetypal image of the complete human being. The aspirations of the poetic persona acquire an extraordinary quality that is at odds with the negativity attached to the physical outcomes of eating disorders. However, the next line qualifies this process of integration in terms heavily loaded with religious connotations—“the Word made genderless” is the woman’s goal in her “creative” endeavours. Although the new androgynous physicality should correspond to a lack of gender stereotyping, the Christian phraseology imbricated in the line brings to mind its biblical counterpart: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” In the Christian tradition—very relevant to the context of Ireland—the signifying quality of the flesh is the exclusive realm of the masculine body, created in the image of a God systematically pictured as male in the iconography. In contrast to that, female flesh became the locus of the corruptible and immanent. It is this



conceptual framework that can be found behind what Rudolph Bell has termed “holy anorexia” (1985), in other words, the voluntary starvation that numerous religious women, particularly during the Middle Ages, initiated as a means to get rid of their female forms and achieve the transcendent quality of the male body. The new Gospel imagined by O’Donnell’s character is trapped in just such a discourse and as such requires the disappearance of her physicality, rather than an egalitarian integration of both the female and the male. In the final lines of the poem the emaciated body is once more related to the ripe sunflowers in order to underline the ambiguous character of the protagonist’s creation: the seeds that drop and the petals that “shrink to skeletal” stand for the final death of the anorexic character. O’Donnell’s skilful parallelism between body and nature closes the sustained metaphor and highlights the difficulties of stepping out of received systems of religious thought.

## 5. Conclusions

“Reading the Sunflowers in September” is part of a growing body of Irish poetry addressing eating disorders as visible metaphors for identity conflicts. The same as Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eithne Strong, Leanne O’Sullivan and Victoria Kennefick, Mary O’Donnell moves beyond the mere aesthetic to assess the interference of various ideologies in the treatment of the corporeal. Far from dealing with anorexia from an exclusively medical perspective, the poem uses the striking visual character of a starved female body to denounce the facile perpetuation of traditional role models for the women of Ireland. In this essay, I have related O’Donnell’s poem to recent Irish poems of female authorship that problematise the religious stigmatisation of women’s corporealities in the nationalist discourses of the island. However, “Reading the Sunflowers in September” also participates in transnational conversations about body theory, environmental degradation and climate change. Although anorexia nervosa is inscribed in the poem as a form of artistic creation, all the unethical implications of such a proposition crumble with the final death of the protagonist. Hence, O’Donnell’s poem becomes a profound critique of the different pressures imposed on the female body both in Ireland and beyond, exposing the deadly consequences of internalising canonical gender roles. As the poet herself stated, “starvation in a rich society [is] an anti-poetic action, in which a perverse kind of creativity takes root and must be fulfilled by the self-starver.”<sup>11</sup> Poems such as “Reading the Sunflowers in September” reflect on art and representation and

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11 Unpublished conversation with Mary O’Donnell.

denounce a variety of ideological interests that falsify the reality of women's bodies. Although shrunken and weakened, anorexic embodiments present themselves as sites of radical dissidence, as signifiers of a deep social critique.

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