

The Shameful Female Body in Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones*

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In Mike McCormack's award-winning novel, published in 2016, the protagonist Marcus Conway, a middle-aged Irish engineer and father, sits at his kitchen table, reflecting on his life:

this house

I've lived in for nearly twenty-five years and raised a family, this house outside the village of Louisburgh in the county of Mayo on the west coast of Ireland, the village in which I can trace my seed and breed back to a time when it was nothing more than a ramshackle river crossing of a few smoky homesteads [...] my line traceable to the gloomy prehistory in which a tenacious clan of farmers and fishermen kept their grip on a small patch of land.¹

Conway's memories allude to an image of the West of Ireland as firmly rooted in communality and folklore – a version of the Republic that ceased to exist due to the boom and bust of the Celtic Tiger, which Conway describes as 'that collapse which happened without offering any forewarning of itself'.² The novel is set in 2008, the year in which the Irish economic bubble burst. Conway's recollections lead up to this event, but mainly revolve around the many changes brought about by the Celtic Tiger – changes that the traditionally minded protagonist finds difficult to accept.

On a formal level, *Solar Bones* displays a range of experimental features positioning the novel within a (meta)modernist tradition. Providing structure and security in a chaotic, increasingly secularised world, the Angelus Bell is mentioned eighteen times throughout the novel. The omnipresence of the Angelus Bell is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's modernist novel *Mrs Dalloway*, in which the striking of Big Ben serves as a major structuring device. Narratively speaking, the fact that McCormack's novel is initiated by the ringing of the Angelus Bell already alludes to its high degree of experimentalism borrowed from modernist narratives such as *Mrs Dalloway*, which sets the tone for *Solar Bones*' own unconventional, metamodernist quality.³ McCormack's featuring of an already-dead narrator – Conway recalls everything *post mortem* – is reminiscent of Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman*⁴ and thus, by extension, indicates McCormack's commitment to a general modernist oeuvre. Moreover, *Solar Bones* refrains from the use of conventional punctuation, as the protagonist presents his recollections in one single ongoing sentence, in a stream-of-consciousness manner, 'impart[ing] a unique affective quality to the writing' which 'capture[s] the incessant

¹ Mike McCormack, *Solar Bones* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016), 3–4.

² McCormack, 9.

³ Derek Attridge, 'Modernism, Formal Innovation, and Affect in some Contemporary Irish Novels', *Affect and Literature*, ed. Alex Houen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 257, 253.

⁴ Barry Sheils, 'Electric Signs and Echo Chambers: The Stupidity of Affect in Modern Irish Literature', *Technology in Irish Literature and Culture*, eds. Margaret Kelleher and James O'Sullivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 91.

onrush of thought and emotion peculiar to the situation in which Marcus finds himself'.⁵ The renunciation of 'conventional sentences'⁶ can be seen as a sort of transgression – a textual one in this case – in and of itself, which prepares the ground for the negotiation of Irish conventions and traditional values central to *Solar Bones*. The content level mirrors the formal level and vice versa.

In terms of content, the novel primarily deals with the themes of art, politics and generational conflict. In what follows, I want to show how *Solar Bones* addresses these topics with specific reference to the female body, which becomes a 'rhetorical field'.⁷ More specifically, Orlaith Darling argues that in '*Solar Bones*, the female body is used as a refractory site for social conflict, economic collapse and disintegrating infrastructural sureties'.⁸ I would go one step further and argue that through its representation of the female body, *Solar Bones* not only negotiates the economic crisis, but also evokes the ghosts of the Republic's past – matters perceived as shameful and closely tied to the female body, such as Catholic and patriarchal oppression, the institutionalisation of transgressive female bodies and, more generally, gender inequality. In other words, the female body in *Solar Bones* functions as a vehicle for revealing and processing both the current crisis and the historical mistreatment it has been subjected to. In line with this, Spillane argues that,

[f]or women organising during the crisis, the female body became a significant site of struggle as an inherently misogynist state began to acknowledge past abuses of women, in the Magdalene Laundries and the practice of symphysiotomy, while perpetuating abuses of a very similar nature in the withholding of reproductive rights and, arguably, the imposition of savage public expenditure cuts on women and their families and on domestic and sexual violence services.⁹

The corollaries of the Celtic Tiger, along with 'the growing force of feminism'¹⁰ and the destabilisation of the Catholic Church, also had a significant impact on the representation of the female body in Irish literature. Historically, the depiction of the female body in Irish literature¹¹ has been heavily influenced by the post-independence desire to uphold a certain ideal of femininity, a paragon with almost angelic qualities such as 'purity, chastity, and virtue'.¹² This argument is in line with Sorcha Gunne's assertion 'that gender relations in Ireland are haunted by the spectre of the historical trope of the woman as nation personified

⁵ Attridge, 259.

⁶ Attridge, 259.

⁷ McCormack, 218.

⁸ Orlaith Darling, "[The] immediate heft of bodily and civic catastrophe": The Body (Politic) in Crisis in Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones*, *Irish Studies Review* 29.3 (2021): 335.

⁹ Alison Spillane, 'The Impact of the Crisis on Irish Women', *Ireland under Austerity: Neoliberal Crisis, Neoliberal Solutions*, eds. Colin Coulter and Angela Nagle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 167.

¹⁰ Martin Middeke and Peter Paul Schnierer, *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), viii.

¹¹ For more information on this notion of transformation please see Claire Bracken and Tara Harney-Mahajan, eds., *Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland and Contemporary Women's Writing: Feminist Interventions and Imaginings* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2021).

¹² Clara Fischer, 'Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame: Magdalen Laundries and the Institutionalization of Feminine Transgression in Modern Ireland', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41.4 (2016): 822.

by Yeats's Caitlín (or Cathleen) Ní Houlihan'.¹³ I argue, however, that post-Celtic Tiger literature has decisively challenged, if not subverted, this Catholic image of the pure and virtuous – almost angelic – woman through the depiction of shameful female bodies.¹⁴ This association of women's bodies with shame is conspicuous in novels such as Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015), Donal Ryan's *All We Shall Know* (2016), Paul Murray's *The Bee Sting* (2023) and, most importantly in this context, Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones*.

What was once suppressed is now being brought to light during and after the crisis, and a process of reckoning is taking place. The relatively abstract concept of shame, I argue, becomes tangible and apparent through its traditional association with female bodies. However, rather than being merely negative, shame serves as a tool to, first of all, make the past visible and, secondly, trace and understand the impact of external circumstances on the female body. I thus define shame not as destructive, but rather as an estranging affect. Estrangement, a narrative device which the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky called *ostranenie* (defamiliarisation), 'disturb[s] the unspoken suppositions which determine our daily entities, to make us look again at the natural, the normal, the taken-for-grantedness of life', as Sally Munt puts it.¹⁵ The female body transitions from an overlooked and passive site to an active one, not only highlighting past and present social concerns, but also representing agency and empowerment.

To understand the nature of shame, it is vital to examine the interdependency of bodies and their social, cultural and political environments. Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup, referring to Raymond Williams' *Structures of Feeling*, claim that studying affects requires identifying

which bodies are being affected; individual bodies, collective bodies, and composite bodies. It is to chart the relations these bodies have to their surroundings, how they are immersed in dependencies and interactions, and it is eventually to examine how these bodies change and develop within the affective infrastructures in which they reside.¹⁶

In the context of *Solar Bones*, this means that the female body is not naturally associated with shame, but is made shameful by external circumstances. Examining the affect of shame and its connection to the female body thus provides insight into both the environment that surrounds that body as well as the historical context that has led to these conditions. In what follows, I will turn to female bodily shame as a key affect to highlight the loss of traditional pillars of Irish identity formation.

¹³ Sorcha Gunne, 'Contemporary Caitlín: Gender and Society in Celtic Tiger Popular Fiction', *Études Irlandaises* 37.2 (2012): 143. According to Gunne, this gendered conception materialised 'in the genre of *chick lit*' (144), exemplified by novels penned by Cecelia Ahern, Colette Caddle, Melissa Hill, Cathy Kelly, Marian Keyes or Sheila O'Flanagan (143–144). Gunne, however, concedes that '[t]here is a long list of Irish women writers like Anne Enright, Edna O'Brien and Anna Burns who write about contemporary Ireland in ways that challenge and resist dominant narratives' (143).

¹⁴ I am aware that this image has been diversified and challenged in literature also before the Celtic Tiger. The vehemence and frequency of this literary questioning, however, has been decidedly greater since the advent of this economic transformation.

¹⁵ Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 15.

¹⁶ Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup, 'Introduction', *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, eds. Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup (Berlin, Munich, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 16.

Conceptualising Shame

According to Ben Anderson, '[a]ffects are understood as impersonal intensities that do not belong to a subject or an object'.¹⁷ What he points out is that affects are not only ever fleeting, but by attaching themselves to subjects *and* objects, they signify the interrelationality of these supposedly separate entities. Affects circulate between bodies, places, things and people, thereby creating a network of entanglements and constant reciprocity.

Shame is the aptest affect for analysing the reciprocity of (female) corporeality and environment. Being 'the most body-centered of affects',¹⁸ shame reflects social conventions on a bodily level and arises when these very conventions are transgressed. Moreover, shame has a great influence on people's physical appearance and behaviour: anyone who has ever observed a shameful/ashamed individual, or has recognised the following phenomena in themselves, is aware of the power of shame: one sinks down, blushes, flees, talks faster or no longer talks at all. In turn, physical suffering itself can lead to feelings of shame. In a similar vein, Elspeth Probyn describes 'the way in which disgust and shame may illuminate the body's capacities for reaching out and spilling across domains that we would like to keep separate, or hidden from view'.¹⁹ Building on this conception of shame, I contend that by depicting shameful female bodies Mike McCormack's novel *Solar Bones* (2016) illuminates (post-) Celtic Tiger developments that can no longer be 'hidden from view'.²⁰

Yet, how can shame be spotted when it is – as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank called it – 'the most mercurial of emotions'?²¹ I would like to draw a connection between the more recent affect-theoretical approaches to shame and Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. Just as the affect of 'shame is intimately connected with the transgression of boundaries',²² the abject, too, exceeds and violates social conventions and benchmarks that define what a 'proper' female body is. More precisely, 'what is *abject* [...] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses',²³ thus jeopardising the common symbolic order. J. Brooks Bouson builds on Kristeva's concept of abjection when she claims that

¹⁷ Ben Anderson, 'Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of "Total War"', *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 161.

¹⁸ Gail Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 2.

¹⁹ Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 137. I found this book when reading Kaye Mitchell's insightful essay on 'The Uses of Shame in the Work of Dodie Bellamy' (Kaye Mitchell, 'Vulnerability and Vulgarity: The Uses of Shame in the Work of Dodie Bellamy', *Shame and Modern Writing*, eds. Barry Sheils and Julie Walsh (London: Taylor&Francis, 2018), 165–183.)

²⁰ Probyn, 137.

²¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins', *Critical Inquiry* 21.2 (1995): 500. I discovered this quote when reading Luna Dolezal's insightful book *The Body and Shame. Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*.

²² Angela Connolly, 'Abject Bodies: Trauma, Shame, Disembodiment and the Death of Time.' *Temporality and Shame: Perspectives from Psychoanalysis and Philosophy*, eds. Ladson Hinton and Hessel Willemsen (London: Routledge, 2018), 101.

²³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2. *The symbolic*, according to Kristeva, is what structures and regulates language. The *symbolic order* can thus be seen as the established set of rules and conventions that govern a society (67).

[t]he abject, which is opposed to the clean and proper body, produces visceral feelings of loathing, shame, and disgust. Associated with bodily substances and waste products – such as tears, saliva, feces, urine, vomit, and mucus – the abject is defiling and disgusting.²⁴

Considering that shame is an affect that is indeed perceptible yet surrounded by great opacity, as '[o]ur lived experiences of shame are complex and multifaceted, often seeping beyond the realm of our conscious and rational experience',²⁵ the abject can be seen as a concretisation, a visible manifestation of the concept of shame. Thus, by taking account of the notion of abjection, what is deemed 'improper', 'impure' and thus shameful, can be conceptualised as destabilising traditional and contemporary gender norms and power structures while highlighting the importance of addressing and confronting the concomitant maltreatment of women's bodies. In an Irish context, abjection is thus associated with the questioning of patriarchal, Catholic structures and power apparatuses – a pursuit that became particularly prominent after the end of the Celtic Tiger.

Shame and Abjection in Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016)

In relation to the Celtic Tiger, the narrator and protagonist of *Solar Bones* can be described as a *liminal person*.²⁶ Marcus Conway grew up and was socialised *before* the Celtic Tiger, while he spent his adult life in the phase following the major economic changes inherent in the boom. His first-person narrative intimately captures not only his difficulties in meeting the requirements of the Celtic Tiger era but also the latter's impending collapse, resulting in Conway's doubts regarding his personal boundaries and values. The disenchantment of the Celtic Tiger is mainly symbolised by the 'shameful' bodies of the protagonist's wife and his daughter Agnes, which indicates, as Orlaith Darling points out, that '[c]risis in the novel is a gendered, embodied experience, represented both by Mairead's severe illness and Agnes' art'.²⁷ Whereas Mairead's diseased body can be read as a symbol of the actual catastrophe (the downfall of the Celtic Tiger) as well as a subversion of traditional concepts of mother- and wifehood, Agnes' body art represents the transgressions of socio-cultural conventions and boundaries that came with the Celtic Tiger – a change that Conway struggles to accept. This turns him into a conservative antithesis to his daughter, who personifies a globalised, modern and open(-minded) Ireland.

The close connection between shame, abjection and female corporeality is most evident at the protagonist's daughter's art exhibition – unsurprisingly the same place where the generational conflict between Conway and his daughter becomes especially manifest. Conway acts nervously and feels out of place²⁸ as he has not internalised the implicit norms and values appendant to this site – he comes from the countryside and had to drive 'sixty or seventy miles to the gallery',²⁹ which is situated in the city of Galway. Moreover, the trip to

²⁴ J. Brooks Bouson, *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women's Writings* (Albany: Suny Press, 2009), 4.

²⁵ Luna Dolezal, *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism and the Socially Shaped Body* (Lanham : Lexington Books, 2015), 41.

²⁶ 'Liminal person' thus points to Conway's status of being in-between: on the one hand, he is anchored in traditionalism while he, on the other hand, lives in – and grapples with – modern, (post-)Celtic Tiger times.

²⁷ Darling, 334.

²⁸ McCormack, 43.

²⁹ McCormack, 16.

Galway is prophetic of the most shameful transgression, his daughter's artwork *The O Negative Diaries*. This artwork is Agnes' attempt to come to terms with regional court cases, described by Conway as a 'red script which covered the entire gallery from ceiling to floor along its length, handwriting in various types and sizes, a continuous swathe of text which closer examination revealed to be snippets of news stories lifted from the provincial papers'.³⁰ *The O Negative Diaries* are painted with her own blood³¹ and thereby transgress what would be called 'Schamgrenze' in German, which could be translated as 'boundary of shame'. By means of her abject pro- and transgressive art, Agnes is overstepping this boundary, as Darling puts it: 'Agnes utterly violates bodily borders, using her body in an explicitly sexed and subversive way'.³² According to Kristeva, such an exteriorisation of bodily fluids represents 'the objective frailty of symbolic order'.³³ In juxtaposing this form of fragility and destabilisation with Irish politics, the artwork can be seen as a reappraisal of the Irish state's formerly 'rigid and harsh control on female sexuality for Irish women to conform to the canonical construction of femininity, which is essential to women's allocation within the patriarchal family system'.³⁴ Agnes' blood thus represents a passage from the internal to the external, the personal to the political,³⁵ which threatens and destabilises the patriarchal order by means of its abject and transgressive nature.³⁶

Agnes' body art is extensive and pervasive, as her blood 'occupied the whole gallery'.³⁷ The artwork can therefore be regarded as metaphorically representing an inherited collective wound that is carried by the female part of society, inflicted on women by what Megan Dennis calls 'the long history of women's oppression'.³⁸ This stance is supported by the artwork's name, *The O Negative Diaries*, which refers to the blood type, thus implying hereditary traits, which are further highlighted by the Irish patronymic 'O' in the title of the work. This sense of patrimony, however, is satirised and perverted through the abject and shameful artistic content. The attack on what used to be the 'patriarchal family system'³⁹ manifests itself in Conway's shocked reaction, his shame and subsequent leaving of the gallery, thereby showing that '[s]hame causes hiding'.⁴⁰

³⁰ McCormack, 44.

³¹ Claire Connolly even suggests that Agnes uses her own menstrual blood. (Claire Connolly, 'Watery Modernism? Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* and W. B. Yeats's *John Sherman*', *The Edinburgh Companion to Irish Modernism*, eds. Maud Ellmann, Siân White and Vicki Mahaffey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 453).

³² Darling, 341.

³³ More specifically, Kristeva rhetorically asked 'Why does corporeal waste, menstrual blood and excrement, or everything that is assimilated to them, from nail-partings to decay, represent – like a metaphor that would have become incarnate – the objective frailty of symbolic order? One might be tempted at first to seek the answer in a type of society where defilement takes the place of supreme danger or absolute evil.' (Kristeva, 70).

³⁴ José Carregal-Romero, 'Gender, Sexuality and the Ideology of the Family in Ireland', *ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa* 34 (2013): 84.

³⁵ The political is here exemplified by Agnes' art that deals with local court cases.

³⁶ Kristeva, 68.

³⁷ McCormack, 46.

³⁸ Megan Dennis, 'The Oppression of Women in Ireland: Why Socialist Feminism is Our Way Out', *Rupture. Eco-Socialist Quarterly*, 8 March 2021. <https://www.rupture.ie/articles/the-oppression-of-women-in-ireland>. Accessed 1 September 2022.

³⁹ Carregal-Romero, 84.

⁴⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 269. Moreover, it leads him to use abject language himself: 'fit to fucking fill / Mother of Jesus'. (McCormack, 48).

Agnes' artwork plays with the conception that 'bodily changes, deviating from an imagined norm of male bodily stasis, are seen as shameful', and at the same time it subverts the notion of female bodies 'needing concealment'.⁴¹ The externalisation of the abject – her blood – can thus be understood as an act of emancipation that symbolically undermines the patriarchal order. This is further evidenced by her brother Darragh, who is upset by Agnes' followers and their – in his view – abject bodies that deviate decisively from the norm: 'it's easy to see how that installation could become a sacred spot for a small church of self-harmers, a little congregation of cutters and anorexics and dysmorphs, all with their own stigmata of tats and piercings'.⁴² Darragh highlights deviant female bodies against the backdrop of religious imagery, thus intensifying the perception of these bodies as abject and sinful.

If the trans-/progressive and extensive artwork can be said to represent Ireland's globalisation process, its openness to the international market as well as its migratory trends, it contrasts sharply with the conservatism represented by Conway, who in his state of shock returns to his religion and prays.⁴³ The inevitability of modernisation is best symbolised by the pouring rain that Conway is exposed to after leaving the gallery, which – just like shame – pervades his entire being: 'I was now soaked ... I could not move, I could not go back inside from shame'.⁴⁴ This incident shows that shame is contagious, as Conway absorbs the shame that Agnes triggers through depicting the court cases and using her own (menstrual) blood. Moreover, Conway's memory not only signifies that shame is a cumulative affect, because feeling it produces even more shame,⁴⁵ but also that '[a]ffects [such as shame] might flood one's being and change how everything else is seen and understood too, from this time on'.⁴⁶ At the same time, the rain can also be read as an extended metaphor for his daughter's own leaking, porous body thus functioning as yet another fluid matter that destabilises social conventions on an even broader, more universal level. This aligns with Kristeva's observation that 'rites surrounding defilement, particularly those involving excremental [sic] and menstrual variants, shift the *border* [...] that separates the body's territory from the signifying chain'.⁴⁷ The signifying chain in this case is represented by the concept of the patriarchal family which is – similarly to Agnes' blood and the novel's overall lack of (conventionally) structured sentences – dissolved and liquified, represented first by Conway's inability to communicate and second by his escape from the gallery, which by extension can be read as a symptom of what Martin Middeke and Peter Paul Schnierer call 'an increasingly "fatherless" [post-Celtic Tiger Irish] society'.⁴⁸ With this expression, Middeke and Schnierer are not referring to the literal absence of fathers in the Republic. Rather, they allude to their

⁴¹ Dolezal, 106.

⁴² McCormack, 227.

⁴³ McCormack, 47.

⁴⁴ McCormack, 50.

⁴⁵ Munt, 99.

⁴⁶ Clare Hemmings, 'Affect and Feminist Methodology, Or What Does It Mean to be Moved?' *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, eds. Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup (Berlin et al.: De Gruyter, 2015), 153.

⁴⁷ Kristeva, 73.

⁴⁸ More precisely, Middeke and Schnierer focus on Ireland's theatrical developments after the Celtic Tiger and thus claim that '[a]n increasing number of plays and playwrights (McCafferty, McPherson, Roche) have also turned to issues around the construction of masculinities (fatherhood etc.) and the ensuing anxieties involved in the inability to find an expression of men's identity in an increasingly "fatherless" society' (xiii).

decreasing social importance after the Celtic Tiger, caused, among other things, by feminist interventions that are closely related to Ireland's globalisation processes – such as the one exemplified by Agnes. Thus, Agnes' art not only signifies a certain (re-)negotiation of female repression in the Republic but also parallels the general transgression of conventions and norms that arose with the Celtic Tiger. Moreover, the meaning of her first name – pure, holy and also 'lamb of God' – is radically subverted by her abject art as well as her non-conformist behaviour.

Finally, the destabilisation of traditional conventions also becomes manifest on a visual level. After the exhibition, Agnes goes ahead and shows her parents the way to the restaurant. This daughterly guidance is equivalent to a role reversal: having previously taken care of Agnes by figuratively showing her the way, the parents are now suspended and must use their daughter as a compass in the modern world. Conway eventually finds himself in a restaurant whose intermediary location reflects his own disjointedness, as it is 'wedged between a church on one side and a theatre on the other'.⁴⁹ Here, the church acts as a symbol of his Catholic value system, while the theatre embodies his daughter's cosmopolitan, pro- and transgressive art, with Conway being stuck in the figurative limbo this disparity creates. In stark contrast to Conway's own chaotic state of mind, the restaurant is 'a quiet place',⁵⁰ lingering peacefully between the binaries of Catholicism and progressive art. The restaurant can therefore be seen as the spatial epitome of Conway's longing to integrate both the conservative and progressive aspects of his life.⁵¹

The sense of female emancipation inherent in Agnes' art culminates at the end of the novel when she takes part in a demonstration against water pollution. Due to contamination with faeces, the drinking water has become abject itself, marking a 'boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human', as '[f]ood [= water] becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories', Kristeva claims.⁵² By consuming this water and thus tearing down this exact boundary, people's bodies – including her mother's – become abject, i.e. polluted, themselves, a development that is, however, not an individual but a political failure the individual person has to suffer from. This negligence evokes strong associations with the multiple political failures in the era of the Celtic Tiger.⁵³ To protest against these failures, Agnes – 'as a symbolic pillar of the body politic'⁵⁴ – jumps

⁴⁹ McCormack, 53.

⁵⁰ McCormack, 53.

⁵¹ Conway's futile attempt at upholding the 'signifying chain' (Kristeva, 73) of patriarchy is also reflected in his posthumous endeavour to transfer his assumed protector role to another, not yet existing man: 'I found myself wondering why she never seemed to have a boyfriend', resulting in an 'anxiety to course through my entire body at the very idea that my daughter might be lonely in some way' (McCormack, 220). This presupposition of his daughter's heterosexuality suggests that the protagonist is still partly informed by a 'particular heterosexual matrix' (Angela Martin, 'The Practice of Identity and an Irish Sense of Place', *Gender, Place & Culture. A Journal of Feminist Geography* 4.1 (1997): 105.). This sense of heteronormativity, however, is a further standard that Agnes does not live up to, her body is thus unconfined and 'untamed' in that matter and hence represents yet another emancipation from traditional norms and values.

⁵² Kristeva, 75.

⁵³ Bresnihan and Hesse point out that 'McCormack's fictionalized account is based on real events that took place in March 2007 when *Cryptosporidium*, a parasite that causes the acute intestinal disease, cryptosporidiosis, contaminated Galway's water supplies' (779).

⁵⁴ Darling, 344.

naked from the top of a mausoleum.⁵⁵ Similarly to the blood in her exhibition, her nudity can be considered transgressive and certainly shameful in a Christian context, a defection from Catholic values and common decency which again is proof of her wilful destabilisation of the 'symbolic order'.⁵⁶ Accordingly, her performance makes her parents feel ashamed 'in front of the nation',⁵⁷ as the 'cultural body is defined by the exclusion of the abject and anything that traverses the boundaries of the body'⁵⁸, a definition to which Agnes definitely does not correspond, as she is rather intent on *including* the abject. More precisely, with this performance she radically calls attention to – and decisively subverts – the hypervisibility of women in society, who are commonly subordinate to what Luna Dolezal, drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre, calls the 'Look of the Other'.⁵⁹ By placing herself above everyone else and virtually forcing them to look at her naked body, Agnes not only plays with this hierarchy of power but reverses it. Her nakedness can thus be regarded as the exposure of a major political health crisis.

Finally, the morbid setting of her performance – the mausoleum – also bears an abject innuendo as it radically shows how dangerous, even deadly, the water pollution is. Kristeva claims that 'the corpse represents fundamental pollution. [...] it must not be displayed but immediately buried so as not to pollute the divine earth. [...] Burial is a means of purification'.⁶⁰ By exposing her living body, Agnes draws attention to the dead, abject matter, which, metaphorically speaking, is revitalised by means of her performance and thus becomes abject and noticeable again, hence being a radical, public reminder of the water pollution.

Agnes can be seen – at least initially – as a contrast to her mother Mairead, with whom Conway lives in what he describes as 'ordinary contentment', referring to his wife as a 'doting mother'.⁶¹ This romanticised image is forcibly distorted when she becomes sick due to said polluted water, which was served at the restaurant the Conways went to after Agnes' exhibition. The liquidity and thus expansive nature of water – similar to Agnes' blood – is a first hint at Mairead's (involuntary) transgression of boundaries during her illness and the shame this illness entails. Abjection, in this sense, becomes cyclical, just as is the female menstruation to which Agnes' artwork so heavily alludes, or as Conway puts it: 'citizens were consuming their own shit'.⁶² Moreover, this sense of circularity parallels the self-perpetuating cycle of shame in which the feeling of this affect produces even more shame, a 'shame that blushes for being ashamed'.⁶³ It can be no surprise that Conway mentions Mairead's shame about her body three times – in quick succession.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ McCormack, 238.

⁵⁶ Kristeva, 68. By also drawing on Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, Darling warns against conflating Agnes' political action with actual political leverage: '[a]lthough her display is meant as a challenge to the dominant male order of political and engineering failure, Agnes is nonetheless placed within a narrative of bodily excess' (344).

⁵⁷ McCormack, 238.

⁵⁸ Connolly, 112.

⁵⁹ Dolezal, 110.

⁶⁰ Kristeva, 109.

⁶¹ McCormack, 38, 58.

⁶² McCormack, 125.

⁶³ Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002): 373.

⁶⁴ McCormack, 116, 117, 122.

Kristeva sums up the intricate connection between pollution, abjection and shame quite aptly when she claims that ‘orality signifies a boundary of the self’s clean and proper body’.⁶⁵ By this, Kristeva ascribes to food and water the power of turning a ‘docile body’⁶⁶ into an unclean and thus shameful one, one that is deranged, disordered and filthy. Conway elaborates on this extension, or indeed *collapsing* of boundaries as follows:

a fever had taken hold with its purgative heat scourging it from the inside out and which would account for the filthiness of the whole process, the sweat in which she was constantly bathed, the bile that rose out of her gut and the diarrhoea that racked through her stomach and bowels in sudden spasms, leaving her mortified as her whole being stank [...] the room filled with a stench beyond what was human, as if her very soul was being drawn from her body, out through the pores of her skin.⁶⁷

It is precisely this brutal externalisation of the inside by means of Mairead’s diarrhoea, her vomiting and sweating which echoes two decisive factors of shame, namely exposure and vulnerability. In a similar vein, Angela Connolly asserts that ‘shame is linked to the idea that something which should have remained hidden has become exposed, the feeling that the confines between the inside and outside of the body [are] transgressed’.⁶⁸ In shame, it seems, not even the skin is able to keep things in order, to hide what shall not be seen, or as Kristeva puts it: ‘It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s “own and clean self” but [...] gave way before the dejection of its contents’.⁶⁹ The description of Mairead’s illness begins halfway through the book and permeates the entire narrative from thereon. Mairead’s abject body dismantles all gendered conceptions, traditions and conventions, as it decidedly subverts the ideal of the ‘pure’ and ‘chaste’ mother and exposes ‘the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body’.⁷⁰

It is, however, not only the page-long description of her illness, but also the richness of detail that makes Mairead’s abjection concrete and tangible, thus completely subverting Conway’s initial description of her as a composed, doting and caring mother and wife, which supports Kristeva’s point that ‘excremental abjection [...] is the most striking example of the interference of the organic within the social. [...] Food in this instance designates the other (the natural) that is opposed to the social condition of man and penetrates the self’s clean and proper body’.⁷¹ This nexus of the physical and the socio-political is encapsulated by Conway when he says that ‘engineering and politics converg[ed] in the slight figure of my wife lying in bed, her body and soul now giving her an extension into the political arena’.⁷² Mairead’s illness gestures towards the disenchantment that set in with the end of the Celtic Tiger – a time that brutally exposed the intricate connection between the personal and the political, here embodied by the government’s failure to provide its citizens with safe drinking

⁶⁵ Kristeva, 75.

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2012), 136.

⁶⁷ McCormack, 121–122.

⁶⁸ Connolly, 103.

⁶⁹ Kristeva, 53.

⁷⁰ Kristeva, 54.

⁷¹ Kristeva, 75.

⁷² McCormack, 135.

water: 'history and politics were now a severe intestinal disorder, spliced into the figure of my wife who sweated along the pale length of her body'.⁷³

Mairead's vomiting not only helps her to get rid of the abject, which would subsequently lead to her recovery, but it also shows that the individual is left alone with the responsibility of compensating for political mistakes. Conway describes Mairead's vomiting as follows: 'she discharged a rush of bitter gall into the basin, her body buckling at the hips with the effort while I spoke some hopeless words of comfort'.⁷⁴ According to Kristeva, to vomit is to violently discard the abject:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery.⁷⁵

In *Solar Bones*, too, the political in this way reconnects with the personal. The political is once again carried out on the individual person's body, which is reminiscent of Flannery's perspective on the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger: 'the burdens of shame and guilt are to be weighted on the Irish public'.⁷⁶

What is more, Mairead's corporeal delimitation can be said to correlate with the common post-Celtic Tiger melancholic regret 'smacht a chailleadh ort féin' which, when translated, means *to lose the run of yourself*.⁷⁷ This saying was commonly used to deflect the responsibility for the end of the Celtic Tiger from politics to the individual, a method that was facilitated by 'the neoliberal discourse of responsibility'.⁷⁸ It cannot come as a surprise, then, that the era after the Celtic Tiger is also referred to as *period of austerity*,⁷⁹ which implied that the physical body should – quite literally – constrict its boundaries by getting leaner and skinnier, getting rid of the fat accumulated through the 'mad consumerism'⁸⁰ of the (supposedly) excessive and hedonistic years of the Celtic Tiger. This body-centricity is best expressed by Conway when he claims that Mairead's body *used to be* 'with no fat on it to hinder or weigh her down'.⁸¹ However, the impossibility of fulfilling this bodily ideal is emblematised by her abject and uncontrollably leaking body as well as Conway's and her own Sisyphean cleaning up after her.⁸² The futility of their efforts corresponds to Paul Gilbert's observation that 'our body often operates outside our control; it grows, ages, changes its functions, can become sick and disabled'.⁸³ The boundary-crossing entailed by this loss of

⁷³ McCormack, 139.

⁷⁴ McCormack, 154.

⁷⁵ Kristeva, 2.

⁷⁶ Eóin Flannery, *Form, Affect and Debt in Post-Celtic Tiger Irish Fiction: Ireland in Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 19.

⁷⁷ Marcus Free and Clare Scully, 'The Run of Ourselves: Shame, Guilt and Confession in Post-Celtic Tiger Irish Media', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21.3 (2018): 309.

⁷⁸ Free and Scully, 320.

⁷⁹ Diane Negra and Anthony P. McIntyre, 'Ireland Inc.: The Corporatization of Affective Life in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23.1 (2020): 61.

⁸⁰ Fintan O'Toole, *Enough is Enough: How to Build a New Republic* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 3.

⁸¹ McCormack, 121.

⁸² McCormack, 121.

⁸³ Paul Gilbert qtd. in Bouson, 7.

control results in shame, or, as Conway puts it, 'it was a genuine anguish to witness her shame in all this',⁸⁴ which is in line with Krista Thomason's argument that shame 'arises in response to those aspects of ourselves over which we have very limited control'.⁸⁵ Mairead's shame is most palpable when she – despite being helpless and in utter pain – sends Conway out of the room,⁸⁶ her loneliness and isolation being emblematic of the individual-blaming and -centricity that (post-)Celtic Tiger culture is said to promote.⁸⁷

Moreover, Mairead's sick body dismantles the image of her being a 'doting mother',⁸⁸ as she can no longer care for her family, but instead is being cared for by her husband.⁸⁹ With this, she subverts the ideal of womanhood that her husband associates with her and which Clara Fischer elaborates on as follows:

[T]he moral purity at stake in the project of Irish identity formation was essentially a sexual purity enacted and problematized through women's bodies. Women were saddled with the task of being guardians and upholders of virtue in the home [...] while serving as symbols of the fledgling nation.⁹⁰

This sense of purity and compliance, however, is not possible in Mairead's case, as her transgressive, abject body keeps her from being what Conway initially describes as a caring mother and wife. Fittingly, Kristeva claims that it is 'not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules'.⁹¹ The transgression of boundaries and rules is further evidenced by Mairead's and Marcus' role reversal, which parallels O'Connell's observation that in contemporary Ireland, 'the duties and responsibilities of the father are no longer clear-cut'.⁹² Just as Mairead's corporeal boundaries are transgressed, so are cultural and social ones.

This sense of transgression also extends to the state of the kitchen during the short period of time Mairead moves out due to Conway's affair with another woman. The messy, disorderly, abject and, hence, shameful kitchen foreshadows Mairead's corporeal disintegration later on: 'in Mairead's absence [there were] books and papers across the floor to pile up in corners and on seats or under cushions [...] papers and cups and knives moving along the shelves'.⁹³ Even at the time of narration, the kitchen is messy: 'some things wholly out of place, like this tablecloth in front of me'.⁹⁴ The abject, messy kitchen can thus be seen as gesturing towards the questioning of traditional gender roles in a constantly modernising Ireland.

⁸⁴ McCormack, 122.

⁸⁵ Krista K. Thomason, 'Shame, Violence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91.1 (2015): 14.

⁸⁶ McCormack, 117.

⁸⁷ Free and Scully.

⁸⁸ McCormack, 38, 58.

⁸⁹ McCormack, 120.

⁹⁰ Fischer, 822.

⁹¹ Kristeva, 4.

⁹² Michael O'Connell, *Changed Utterly. Ireland and the New Irish Psyche* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2001), 162.

⁹³ McCormack, 165.

⁹⁴ McCormack, 173.

Moreover, Conway's description of Mairead's ordeal as 'that raging helplessness over which there was nothing I could do'⁹⁵ shows that shame is a contagious, transmissive affect, as Conway is – metaphorically speaking – infected by Mairead's shame, her transgression of corporeal and cultural boundaries, and thus he becomes a shamed individual himself. This notion of transmission, of affecting and being affected,⁹⁶ is clearest when he claims that 'Mairead's illness pervaded the house like [...] psychic fog that seeped into my own being and blurred the margins of my body'.⁹⁷ By extension, the blurred margins of his body can be read as forebodings of his own death, decay being yet another form of abjection – if not the culmination thereof.⁹⁸ Hence, Conway's death can be seen as symbolic of the decline of the Celtic Tiger, which – again – brings us back to Kristeva, who elaborates on the liminality of literature: '[A]ll literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted [...] on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject'.⁹⁹ Not only are Agnes' and Mairead's bodies abject, but ultimately Conway's as well, whether through his wife's illness or his own death. Evincing a similar sense of apocalypse, Marie Mianowski describes Mike McCormack's novel as a 'story of a collapse on all scales, whether personal, physical, financial or economical'.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

In sum, it can be claimed that McCormack's literary representation of the shameful female body holds great symbolic power, serving as an indicator, venue, even as battlefield, for various societal developments and changes in the Republic of Ireland, including the reckoning with the atrocities committed against women's bodies. This sense of change is exemplified in *Solar Bones* through inter-generational conflicts that question entrenched social norms and stabilities as well as through the public health crisis, which – on a corporeal level – emblematises the fragility of politics. As Kate Houlden asserts in her analysis of *Solar Bones*: '[T]he failings of neoliberalism are inscribed on, and challenged through, women's bodies'.¹⁰¹ However, studying the affect of shame and its relation to female corporeality and abjection as portrayed in contemporary Irish fiction offers valuable aesthetic insights not only into the concrete material transformations brought about by the Celtic Tiger, but also into the emotional changes and challenges occurring on an affective, physical level. Thus, engaging with the affect of shame illuminates the individual's relationship with their environment and helps to uncover the subtleties and emotions arising from these intricate processes – processes that are often overseen or glossed over in politics but which an affective medium such as Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* can capture.

⁹⁵ McCormack, 122.

⁹⁶ Jan Slaby, Rainer Mühlhoff and Philipp Wüschner. 'Affective Arrangements', *Emotion Review* 11.1 (2019): 3.

⁹⁷ McCormack, 145.

⁹⁸ Kristeva, 70.

⁹⁹ Kristeva, 207.

¹⁰⁰ Marie Mianowski, 'Immaterial Matters in *Solar Bones* by Mike McCormack', *Études de Stylistique Anglaise*, 10 September 2019. <https://journals.openedition.org/esa/3553>. Accessed 5 June 2023.

¹⁰¹ Kate Houlden, 'Tracking the Monstrous Gendered Precarity of Neoliberalisation through Novels and Films of 1980s England and Contemporary Ireland', *Feminist Theory* 25.2 (2024): 197.

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