



## Institutions and Shadows

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# Institutions and Shadows: Jonathan Swift, Enlightenment and Recent Irish Poetry<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This article traces Jonathan Swift's legacy in the work of three modern Irish poets: Jessica Traynor, Rita Ann Higgins and Derek Mahon. I use two motifs to explore this inheritance: institutions and shadows. Using the work of Genevieve Lloyd, I argue that meaningful engagement with Enlightenment's legacy must recognise its moral ambiguity and emotional complexity through the metaphor of shadow. Institutions, whether in the case of St Patrick's Hospital, Dublin (Ireland's first psychiatric hospital, founded by Swift), the residential institutions of the twentieth century or the modern apparatus of Direct Provision, embody a continuing legacy of suffering, control and containment. Imagination and empathy are the difficult but necessary means through which these legacies must be acknowledged and confronted.

**Key Words.** Jonathan Swift, Jessica Traynor, Derek Mahon, Rita Ann Higgins, shadow, institutions.

**Resumen.** Este artículo aborda el legado de Jonathan Swift en la obra de tres poetas irlandeses modernos: Jessica Traynor, Rita Ann Higgins y Derek Mahon. Se explora este legado a través de dos temas principales: las instituciones y las sombras. Utilizando la obra de Genevieve Lloyd, sostengo que un estudio significativo del legado de la Ilustración debe reconocer su ambigüedad moral y su complejidad emocional a través de la metáfora de la sombra. Las instituciones – ya sea el caso del Hospital St Patrick de Dublín (el primer hospital psiquiátrico de Irlanda, fundado por Swift), las instituciones residenciales del siglo XX o el sistema moderno de Provisión Directa – encarnan una herencia perpetuada de sufrimiento, control y contención. La imaginación y la empatía son medios difíciles, aunque necesarios, a través de los cuales debemos reconocer y afrontar estos legados.

**Palabras clave.** Jonathan Swift, Jessica Traynor, Derek Mahon, Rita Ann Higgins, sombra, instituciones.

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## Institutions and Shadows

Whether we praise or deride it, we now live in its shadows and must reckon with what it has bequeathed us. Western thought is haunted by the Enlightenment. (Lloyd 2013:1)

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment can be broadly conceived as a European movement promoting secular learning, religious tolerance, rational enquiry and an international sense of community. Immanuel Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1996 [1784]) famously distinguished this movement from processes of personal intellectual advancement by insisting on its communal and social nature: "the public use of reason", he wrote, "must at all times be free and it alone can bring about enlightenment" (59). Enlightenment ideals therefore depended for their propagation on a public sphere comprised of institutions: universities, a free press, clubs and learned societies, venues like libraries and coffeehouses. As well as by stimulants like sugar and caffeine, traffic in ideas was fuelled by the intangible instruments of finance capital (particularly stocks, debt and insurance), as well as by abstract notions like liberty and other "Enlightenment values". Together these institutions, instruments and ideas served cultures of learning but also functioned to enable and justify what today is recognized as a darker side to Enlightenment, which is not easily separable from its achievements.

Recent critical work on Enlightenment shows how each of the elements outlined above can be countered or shown to have fallen short. Despite claims to inclusiveness, "a wide range of exclusions operated within this nominally open public sphere", as Clíona Ó Gallchoir notes, "which meant that white, middle-class men monopolised the shape and meaning of public participation" (2005: 3). Though aspiring to secularism and tolerance, Enlightenment was in practice, as David Dwan has shown, "expressive of religious animosity as much as it was an attempt to mitigate its effects" (2020: 104). In a global context, for Daniel Carey, Enlightenment as period and movement is typified by "disjunction [...] between a politics of liberation and autonomy", on the one hand, and on the other, practices of "imperial expansion and the subjugation of native peoples", underpinned by a slave trade "unprecedented in its scale and brutality" (2009: 105). To admit a connection between the two is not, Suvir Kaul argues, "to trace [...] a betrayal of Enlightenment sympathies" which must be "excused away"; it is rather to accede to the truth that "Enlightenment cosmopolitanism is as [...] pointedly the intellectual viewpoint of European colonialism as it is of more egalitarian forms of contact and understanding" (2009: 111-12). Even abstract notions such as liberty partake in this apparent contradiction, as Tyler Stovall makes apparent in his book *White Freedom* (2021). Stovall's premise is that "two seemingly opposite philosophies, liberty and racism are in significant ways not opposites at all", an anomaly which has persisted "from the Enlightenment to the present" (x).

George Berkeley exemplifies this double-edged conception of Enlightenment. He has long been celebrated as a major figure in the Irish Enlightenment for his work on philosophy of mind and perception, but his record of practical involvement in and theoretical support for Atlantic slavery has recently come under scrutiny. In contrast to white abolitionists of the later eighteenth century who saw emancipation as a Christian duty, Berkeley maintained, in a style of thought that closely corresponds to Stovall's concept of white freedom, that "gospel liberty consists with temporal servitude", arguing that "slaves would only become better slaves by being Christian" (1725: 5). Berkeley's philosophical work and his easy acceptance of the institution of slavery are in equal part Enlightenment legacies. That they come as a package helps explain the charged language used by Genevieve Lloyd to delineate her concept of Enlightenment shadows, which appears as the epigraph to this article. For Lloyd, Enlightenment legacies are haunting but not ethereal. They are rather a near-material presence: a force to be reckoned with and a space in which we are compelled to live. The de-naming of the Berkeley

Library at Trinity College Dublin is an example of the reckoning described by Lloyd, an effort by an institution to re-orient itself, and shows how such reckoning is a practical exercise rather than a purely intellectual one. As Lloyd says of such moral imperatives, anyone wishing at present “to think [...] in the spirit of Enlightenment thought” might be “better served by trying to cultivate new forms of cosmopolitan imagining [...] rather than doggedly invoking our supposed heritage of superior ‘Enlightenment values’” (2013: 162).

Such an approach requires us to look beyond Enlightenment’s central metaphor of illumination. As Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova note, “there was a whole epistemology behind the use of images of ‘light’ in the eighteenth century”, but as their collection *Enlightenment and Its Shadows* makes clear, “the major issues of our intellectual life today are still implicated, for better or worse, in the shadows cast by the multifaceted Enlightenment project” (1990: 3, 4). Such remarks do not make for a rejection of Enlightenment but a recognition that its legacies are persistent, problematic and equally difficult to embrace or avoid. For these writers, as for Lloyd, shadow refers not only to the continuing significance of Enlightenment ideas and debates in our time but also to their complex moral ramifications, which require the admission of fault and the exercise of emotion, imagination and sympathy as well as reason. While there are clear limits to the sympathy it invites, Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (2018 [1729]) provokes a visceral, emotional response. Its discussion by Eoin Ó Cuinneagáin in this issue illustrates this text’s importance to the critical revision of Enlightenment. *A Modest Proposal*’s legacy is one which modern Irish poets have been compelled and commissioned to confront, as the third section of this article details. Although described as counter-Enlightenment in its orientation, Swift’s text might be more aptly discussed as one which lends equal weight to modes of thought that can be labelled Enlightenment and shadow.

A further analytical use of shadow derives from its rich critical history as an optical phenomenon in the fields of aesthetics and perception. William Molyneux, an influential figure in both the politics and philosophy of the Irish Enlightenment, provides an enduring example. Optical shadow was central to the “Molyneux problem”, which hypothesised about a formerly blind man’s ability to distinguish a cube from a sphere by sight alone. Enlightenment therefore saw, as Michael Baxandall says, “an implication of shadow in the basic matter of human knowledge”, growing to the point where “attention to shadow [...] is serious and pertinacious to a degree that is sometimes hard to understand” (1995: 28). So central is it to the workings of visual perception and the cognition of objects, movement and scale, that shadow can be regarded as a “cornerstone of human understanding of the cosmos”, as William Chapman Sharpe outlines in his book *Grasping Shadows* (2017: 4; cf Sorenson: 2008). As well as a metaphor for the continuing reach of the Enlightenment project, then, shadow was itself a central object of Enlightenment inquiry. More figuratively, shadow endows writing with emotional and symbolic nuance: shadow, shade and other cognates can denote a foretelling, a mood, a ghost, a reflection, a person reduced in vitality, or one following or poorly imitating another person. In John Hollander’s study of shadow as poetic device, *The Substance of Shadow* (2016), the phenomenon becomes “a form of knowledge” which makes the “study of shadows [...] a locus for thinking about poetic survival, that power to renew itself, to gain continuing life, which poetry discovers in the most volatile things” (Gross, cited in Hollander 2016: xiii). In Derek Mahon’s poetry, as discussed in the second section below, such survival encompasses continuity and dialogue with the legacy of Swift, but also a more literal form of personal survival against crushing psychological strain. Light and shade figure Mahon’s relationship with Swift’s literal, literary and metaphorical legacies, which for Mahon encompass personal affiliation for Swift’s cantankerous personality, as well as conscious influence reflected not only in Mahon’s own verse but also in his 2006 edition of Swift’s poetry.

A final, political, notion of shadow returns us to eighteenth-century Ireland and the term's use in modern appraisals to describe the political disenfranchisement and cultural despondency that followed the Treaty of Limerick in 1691. Following this defeat, the native aristocratic class mutated, in Kevin Whelan's words, "into an underground gentry, the shadow lords of eighteenth-century Ireland" (1996: 3). Eavan Boland's essay "Daughters of Colony" describes a member of this class, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill (discussed at length in Sonja Lawrenson's contribution to this issue), as standing, in 1773, "deep in the shadow of a world that was losing its light" (1997: 15). These images of eighteenth-century Gaelic Ireland as shadowland draw on the language of loss and obscurity that suffuses Daniel Corkery's classic cultural history *The Hidden Ireland* (1924). The idea of the eighteenth as "our darkest century" (2005: 279), to quote Boland again, counterpoints portrayals of the period as literary Enlightenment and crucible of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition. Boland's dark eighteenth century aims to challenge and revise the conventional literary historiography of this period, typified by W.B. Yeats, who saw it as a bright point in Irish cultural history and himself as its natural heir, declaring that he sought "an image of the modern mind's discovery of itself, of its own permanent form, in that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion" (1966a: 957). Reinstating this confusion and putting some shadow back into Enlightenment is characteristic of what Irish poets since Yeats have done with this period. Looking at Mahon's work alongside more recent responses to Swift by Jessica Traynor and Rita Ann Higgins, this article brings some of these shadows to light.

### **Derek Mahon: "a civilization built on superfluous light"**

Set in an institution, directly invoking the legacy of Jonathan Swift, and making charged aesthetic use of shadow, Derek Mahon's poem "Dawn at St Patrick's" brings together the concerns just outlined. Its title refers to St Patrick's Hospital, Dublin, the psychiatric institution founded by Jonathan Swift with a bequest in his will and which is the oldest such institution in continuous operation in Europe. With financial help from friends, Mahon was admitted to St Patrick's, a private institution, to receive treatment for alcoholism in the winter of 1989. Appropriately for a poem of recovery, it ends on an apparently upbeat note:

Light and sane  
I shall walk down to the train,  
into that world whose sanity we know,  
like Swift, to be a fiction and a show.  
The clouds part, the rain ceases, the sun  
casts now upon everyone  
its ancient shadow. (2021: 158)

As the triple rhyme "know / show / shadow" reflects, the poem deals in themes of knowledge and appearance, certainty and doubt. Meteorological light and shade repeatedly invoke these themes, climaxing in the almost-cloying motif of sun breaking through cloud in the closing lines of this final stanza. Earlier stanzas find the poet praying to the rain-clouds that his children "never come / where their lost father lies" and that he "may measure up to them" and their mother "before I die"; Mahon finds himself "on my Protestant bed, a make-believe existentialist, / and stare at the clouds of unknowing". Along with existentialism, allusion to the work of fourteenth-century mysticism *The Cloud of Unknowing* here reflects the uncertainty and anxiety of mid-life and addiction. These pre- and post-Enlightenment modes of thought are associated with cloudy opacity, but rather than provide a burst of clarity, sunlight arrives only to throw this uncertainty into relief. "Light and sane", the apparently confident self-declaration

in the final stanza's opening line, effects disburdenment with the light of reason, but this assurance is undercut by the unsettling deconstruction of sanity in the following lines. The statement that that he knew sanity to be a "fiction and a show" reflects Swift's own fear of succumbing to psychiatric illness, his eventual pronouncement to be of "unsound mind and memory" and the apocryphal belief that he ended his days in the hospital that he founded. This biographical subtext heightens Swift's career-long tendency to inhabit, through satiric and rhetorical fictions of madness, a faultline between the rational and the irrational. Occupancy of reason's borderlands is an ambiguity heightened through Mahon's apparently paradoxical invocation of the sun casting "its ancient shadow". Here, a literal impossibility powers poetic conceit: the sun does not cast shadow but rather sheds light on objects which, by reflecting or absorbing some of that light, cast shadow on other objects. The equipoise of the closing lines therefore comes at the cost of straining the laws of optics, reflecting a psychic tension which the preceding stanza builds up through further allusion to Swift:

Soon a new year  
will be here demanding, as before,  
modest proposals, resolute resolutions, a new leaf,  
new leaves. This is the story of my life,  
the story of all lives everywhere,  
mad fools whatever we are,  
in here or out there. (2021: 158)

Mahon's description of his confinement as "the story of my life" discloses the painfully autobiographical nature of the poem, while also recognizing the phrase's common use to mean repeated, negative patterns of behavior or occurrence. False starts and alcoholic relapses are further implied in the phrase "modest proposals and resolute resolutions". In this context of fallibility, Swift's apparently derisive labelling of his hospital as a house for "fools and mad" – from the poem "Verses on the Death of Dr Swift" (1731) – becomes an admission of vulnerability and sympathy. Swift is an unusual but highly suggestive figure in the history of mental wellbeing, who stands in for a wider cultural transformation whereby the Enlightenment's drive to exult reason succeeded in amplifying the power and fascination of the irrational. "[T]he aggressively rationalist imperatives of the epoch", as Terry Castle writes, were accompanied by "a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement, and intellectual impasse" (1995: 8). Mahon uses the figure of Swift to embrace this doubled epistemology, transforming the public discourse of Enlightenment into a language with which to articulate and confront personal crisis.

If resolution (another optical pun) is aspired to but not achieved in "Dawn at St Patrick's", greater clarity and composure come in "Noon at St Michael's". This is another hospital poem, which takes place around St Michael's hospital, Dun Laoghaire. In this locale, Swift surfaces as an oblique presence rather than an obvious one, as we see in the second stanza:

I try to read  
a new novel set aside;  
but a sword-*swift* pain  
in the left shoulderblade, the result  
of a tumble in *Sheridan* Square, makes reading difficult:  
writing you can do in your head.  
It starts to rain. (2021: 155; my emphasis)

This poem carries over more than the weather and “concertina-like stanza” (Haughton 2007: 220) from “Dawn at St Patrick’s”. As indicated through italicization above, the poem makes subliminal, punning reference to Swift and his friend and correspondent Thomas Sheridan. Their friendship is idealized and held up to reflect the poet’s own relationship with his addressee, Patricia King. He imagines her bathed in literal and metaphorical light:

While you sit on your sun-porch in Connecticut  
re-reading Yeats in a feminist light  
I am there with you. (162)

Light cast through glass is a phenomenon which often accompanies the presence of Swift in Mahon’s poetry. In the introduction to his edition of Swift’s poems, Mahon characterizes Swift’s verse as “a recurrent means of dramatic self-projection” (2001: vii) and Mahon’s own poetry heralds Swift with motifs of projected, reflected or refracted light. “St Patrick’s Day”, another verse epistle which along with the dawn and noon poems completes a Swift-inspired trilogy, is written to the same addressee on her birthday, in imitation of Swift’s birthday poems to Esther Johnson, whom he famously renamed for a source of light, “Stella”. It opens with an image of Swift’s marble bust “shining unregarded through a shower of dust” and closes on an image of “prismatic natural light” refracted through the window of the poet’s workspace. “Dawn at St Patrick’s” similarly opens on “Georgian windows shafting light and dust” (156) and closes, as discussed above, with the speaker’s punning self-description as “light and sane”. Light imagery in Mahon’s noon poem has a different range and focus, however:

for you are the light  
rising on lost islands, the *spéir-bhean*  
the old poets saw gleam in the morning mist. (162)

Swiftian muses merge here with the visionary woman of the *aisling* tradition, a fixture of Irish language poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who functioned to lament the defeat of the Gaelic order and prophesy its return. Mahon’s poem effects an unlikely reconciliation between Swift, his Anglophone heirs and the native literary culture they were largely seen to have displaced. This suspension between two traditions is a utopian vision in terms of cultural reconciliation but less so in its gender politics. The poem draws on two culturally separate but formally adjacent stylizations. The *spéir-bhean* serves as “a female figure of the nation [who] took on and intensified the shame, suffering and sin originally borne by Irishmen” (McKibben 2010: 51). Light infuses Swift’s complex, enigmatic and at times apparently controlling relations with women, including his poetic characterization of Stella (herself named for a light source), and of Esther Vanhomrigh (known to Swift as Vanessa), whose love, as Greg Lynall observes, is, in the poem “Cadenus and Vanessa”, “figured as a prism which refracts the incident light of the things she studies” (2012: 153). Further complicating this light-play is the invocation of Yeats, famous for his arrogation of Swift, and for claiming of his “ancestral stair; / That Goldsmith and the Dean have travelled there” (1966b: 480). In the shadow of such patriarchal and patrilineal genealogies, the project of “rereading Yeats in a feminist light” becomes an onerous one indeed. Mahon’s poem enacts a momentary suspension through the light of personal friendship, but shadow returns in the final poem of his Swift sequence.

“St Patrick’s Day” takes up the previous poems’ interplay of illumination and shadow, focusing in particular on the technological mediation and manipulation of light. Sardonicly appraising what the sequence *New York Time* calls “a civilization based on superfluous light” (2021: 198), Mahon summons a suite of luminary imagery to compose what Hugh Haughton

calls a “critical phantasmagoria or allegorical tableau of a post-modern Ireland” (2007: 333), embodied in the 1999 St Patrick’s day celebrations. This is a virtual world, actuated through “electronic animation, / wave motion of site-specific daffodils, / closed-circuit video in the new hotels” (2021: 249-50). Unlike the Hollywood golden age summoned in this poem through memories of “wise-cracking dialogue as quick and dry / as that in *The Big Sleep* or *The Long Goodbye*” (250), postmodern culture is distinguished by the status of ordinary people as producers of images as much as consumers, whether self-consciously or as unwitting subjects of video surveillance. This proliferation widens and modernizes the ambit of Swift’s project of “dramatic self-projection”, as Mahon called it: “scholars and saints be d-mn’d, slaves to a hard / reign and our own miniature self-regard” (249). Thralldom to image production for Mahon is wholly negative, whether pursued through eighteenth-century elite cultural practices like portrait miniatures or the now ubiquitous “selfie”. His poem offers an equivalent to Swift and his Anglo-Irish peers’ denunciation of the Ireland as a “land of slaves”, nominally governed from Dublin but subject in law to the Westminster Parliament. Eighteenth-century crises of political sovereignty yield to a “post-literate” (251) tyranny of the image, and as with Mahon’s psychic disintegration in “Dawn at St Patrick’s”, cast shadow is a figure for this loss of autonomy. The connection is made in a stanza which appeared in the first published iteration of the poem, but disappeared from subsequent versions. It adapts into verse part 3 of *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Populated by a technocratic governing elite, the flying island of Laputa exacts obedience from its earthbound dependencies by depriving them of sunlight and rain:

...A vast opaque body obscured the sun,  
 rising and falling in an oblique direction,  
 bright from the sea below, one even plate  
 above the clouds and vapours smooth and flat,  
 adorned with figures of the moon and stars,  
 fiddles and flutes, the music of the spheres.  
 The king can deprive them of the dews and rains,  
 afflicting them with drought and diseases;  
 or drop stones, against which no defence,  
 directly upon their heads whenever he pleases...

(Mahon 1999: 287; original emphasis)

The artificial eclipse staged here reverses the sun’s emergence at the end of “Dawn at St Patrick’s” and introduces a new dimension to Mahon’s meditations upon light and shadow. Despite the Laputans’ efforts to starve and bombard them into submission in *Gulliver’s Travels*, the city of Lindalino successfully rebels against the flying island, an episode widely interpreted as a commentary on the Wood’s halfpence affair of 1724 and which was omitted from early editions of the book because of its political sensitivity. This stanza, itself omitted from editions of Mahon’s poems subsequent to *Collected Poems* (1999), pointedly omits the insurrection so that the king of Laputa remains at liberty to exercise his tyranny and violence “whenever he pleases”. Haughton suggests that in Mahon’s adaptation, “Laputa is reassembled to resemble the modern USA” (335). Another interpretation might see the stanza as presenting a vision of Ireland untethered from its history and floating free from apparent consequence, raining stones on those underprivileged by or excluded from the neoliberal economic revolution of the 1990s known as the Celtic Tiger. This vision is fully realized in twenty-first century poetic responses to Swift’s *Modest Proposal*.



### **A Modest Inheritance: Jessica Traynor and Rita Ann Higgins**

In October 2019, to mark the 290<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Swift's satirical pamphlet, BBC Radio 4 broadcast *My Modest Proposal*. Six Irish poets – Jessica Traynor, Rita Ann Higgins, Mary O'Malley, Kevin Higgins, Sarah Clancy, and Nick Laird – made, in the producers' words, "their own modest proposals to tackle the social inequalities of today" (Rockfinch Ltd 2019a). Four of these poets addressed problems common to affluent western societies of the early twenty-first century: care of the elderly, species extinction, housing shortage, phone addiction. Traynor and Rita Ann Higgins pinpointed issues which, while not unique to Ireland, nonetheless address concerns with special relevance to the theme of this issue. By highlighting instances of cruelty and violence, and reaching back into the past to suggest not merely analogies but continuities with earlier times, Traynor and Higgins' poems reject the idea of *A Modest Proposal* as historical curio to be admired from the satisfied vantage-point of enlightened modernity. They posit legacy as an encumbrance, outlining a relationship with the past marked not by progress but repetition, path-dependency and determinism. Both poets foreground institutions and shadows in their response to Swift.

Tackling both concepts head on, Higgins' *Modest Proposal*-inspired poem "Proof" is about the legacy of institutional violence. It highlights the obstruction faced by survivors of historic abuse in claiming compensation from the Residential Institutions Redress Board, set up in 2002 to "make fair and reasonable awards to persons who, as children, were abused while resident in industrial schools, reformatories and other institutions subject to state regulation or inspection" (Residential Institutions Redress Board). In the poem, the Redress Board speaks through a voice of bureaucratic condescension which unwittingly reprises the language of Swift's pamphlet. "You won't be a burden to the people of Ireland / when we are finished with you", says the voice, before going to remind the addressee of what first caused them to be institutionalized: "You stole those apples / You also took the biscuit looking for compensation for your incarceration" (Higgins 2009: 8). As well as the extended title of *A Modest Proposal*, which aims to prevent *the children of poor people in Ireland, from being a burden on their parents or country*, Higgins echoes the pamphlet's opening lines which depict "helpless infants who, as they grow up, [...] turn thieves for want of work". Continuing rather than resolving their abuse, the actions of the redress board further denigrate survivors as complicit in their own suffering, offering only conditional admission to the ranks of the "deserving poor". Higgins is forced to remind herself that this "wasn't Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* of the 1720s, this was Ireland in 2018" (7).

Implicit in the poem is a conceptual pun on the idea of state "bodies". As corporate entities, both the Redress Board and the carceral institutions it claims to supplant are powerful bodies deployed to inflict pain and humiliation on individuals whose corporeal integrity is denied in every sense. Despite their designation as such by the board's own rubric, they are considered not as persons but disjointed and dislocated body parts. Rejecting the applicant's claim for a pair of dentures, the voice chides them to make do with a half-set, advising them to "grind your troubles / Into your bottom jaw" and smirking that "When we finish with you / Your smile will be seen from Uranus" (Higgins 2009: 8). Suturing the grim humour of institutional sadism to the scatological bent found often in Swift's work, this remark produces a grotesque fusion of the oral and the anal, a literally preposterous image which underlines the poet's bewildered sense of disjointed time. "Proof" attests that the "undeserving poor" identified in the opening paragraph of *A Modest Proposal*, and the systematic cruelty directed at this class, cannot be assumed to be a thing of the past in post-institutional Ireland.

Also focusing on bodily violence, Traynor's "A Plea for the Sanctification of the Ditches of Ireland" zones in on marginal but highly symbolic space. In the context of Enlightenment legacies, the title suggests the clandestine activity of the penal era and the

repurposing under its legislation of hedges and rocks as schoolhouses and religious altars. In fact, as Traynor discloses, the poem was occasioned by femicide and in particular by the case of a woman's body found in a County Wexford ditch in January 2019 (Sheehan 2019). Traynor's "Plea" is in fact her tenth poem written in response to Swift: she was commissioned to write a nine-poem sequence in 2017, published as a separate edition by the Salvage Press and later as part of Traynor's collection *The Quick* (2018). "A Plea", Traynor notes, proposes:

that rather than dealing with the root cause of these violent crimes we continue to do what we always have done as a nation, which is to pray to a distant deity, to make martyrs of those who were killed, and potentially even to set up little altars in the ditches where these bodies were found. (2019: 2)

Ironically recasting these ditches as miraculous ground, the poem invokes not just Catholic piety but pre- and post-Christian rituals of magical healing:

If we worship them here  
                   maybe their fractured ribs will knit  
 like a Moses basket to shelter the heart;  
                   contusions to the chest  
   legs  
   forearms

will fade like darkness licked back  
                   into an inky horizon;                  broken necks  
 will kink into place with a click  
   as neat as a car boot's closing

and mirrored                  in the meadow's satin dew  
                   will be a host of little Virgins  
   mothers of the field  
   ditch  
   cistern. (Traynor 2022: 21-2)

Traynor integrates male violence against women into Catholic ritual, mixing in cultic traditions of sacrifice and rebirth. This reanimation of dormant belief systems is also present in Traynor's source text. *A Modest Proposal's* speaker is a caricature whose zealous mockery of Catholic custom and ritual blinds him to his own advocacy of what is in effect ritual sacrifice designed to boost the vitality of the eighteenth-century Anglican elite. In manipulating the *Proposal's* speaker into such a contorted position, Swift's irony creates dissonance but not opposition; its extremism rendered ambiguous rather than vitiated. Clíona Ó Gallchoir summarizes this interpretation with the point that *A Modest Proposal* was "in many ways written from *within* the position it satirises" (2019: 42). As Ó Gallchoir goes on to elaborate, nonsatirical pamphlets by Swift and his contemporaries amply illustrate this position; similarly, Eoin Ó Cuinneagáin notes in his contribution to this issue that "when Swift used [...] dehumanising narratives" in the pursuit of satire "they were not clear departures from his other political writing, particularly when it came to characterisations of the Irish" (2023: 16). The opening of Swift's *Proposal* describes as "a melancholly Object" the fact that Dublin streets and country roads are "crowded with *Beggars* of the female Sex, followed by three, four, or six Children, *all* in Rags and importuning every Passenger for an Alms" (Swift 2018: 146). Such observations were a

commonplace within pamphlets where well-meaning Anglican gentry aimed at solutions to the problem of poverty by provoking an unsavoury blend of pity, contempt and fear. Especial vehemence is seen in Robert Molesworth's *Considerations for the Promoting of Agriculture and Employing the Poor* (2011 [1723]). When he states that his proposed measures should be confined to children who are the product of matrimony, Molesworth offers an insight into the ragged children who appear in the opening of Swift's *Proposal*. Molesworth's language also offers an ideological precursor for the violence described by Traynor, with the ditch a shared locale of abjection: his *Considerations* highlight "Ditches, and Hutts, worse than Hogsties; from whence you will often see creeping out like Vermin, whole swarms of Bastards, the Produce of Adultery and Incest, and whereof, there are more in the neighbourhood of *Dublin*, than any other part of the World" (350). Molesworth was a political ally of Swift's, addressee of one of the Drapier's Letters and in his own right a significant figure in the progressive politics of the Irish Enlightenment. Despite these credentials, a reader might be forgiven in confusing his words with the hyperbolic cruelty of Swift's satire, and might additionally note that both writers essentially invert Enlightenment imperatives of cosmopolitanism and hospitality.

In *A Modest Proposal*, the people congregating on the city are internal refugees, driven from rural areas to Dublin streets by starvation; Swift also compared international refugees fleeing religious persecution to "helpless infants" as they are labelled in the *Proposal*, offering them as evidence to refute the maxim that "People are the Riches of a Nation" (1951: 94). Referring to the 1709 arrival of around 13,000 Protestant refugees from the German Palatinate states, Swift writes in *The History of the Four Last Years of the Queen* (1951 [1714]) that:

to invite helpless Families by Thousands into a Kingdom inhabited like Ours, without Lands to give them, and where the Laws will not allow that they should be Part of the Property as Servants, is a wrong Application of the Maxim; and the same thing, in great, as Infants dropt at the Doors, which are only a Burthen and Charge to the Parish. (95)

Like Molesworth's "swarms", a term retained in today's anti-migrant vocabulary, Swift's language invites readers to see refugees as other than human – literally infantilized at first, they then become a burden. This trope of inert mass is one *A Modest Proposal* later takes up. This kind of discourse militates against the imaginative sympathy for refugees which Lloyd in *Enlightenment Shadows* advocates as a response informed by Kantian cosmopolitanism. Lloyd suggests that the "hard exercise of imagining the lives of others" might be a more suitable response to the issues of refuge and asylum "than shouting [...] across an abyss of failed imagination" (160). To imagine another in this way, "we must first see him or her as having an inner life"; this can be "a demanding exercise" easily misdirected into "indulging in an exercise of self-projection, so that the imagined experiences of another becomes an extension of our own inner life" (2013: 159-60). Traynor's poem, "The Camp" (2018), the seventh in her nine-poem sequence *A Modest Proposal*, is set in Mosney Accommodation Centre, County Meath, a repurposed Direct Provision site which had first opened as Butlin's Mosney holiday camp in 1948 and became Mosney Holiday Centre in 1982. Drawing on Irish readers' familiarity with the site's history, "The Camp" literalizes the metaphor of projection and opens with a reflection on the difficulty identified by Lloyd: "People once came here on holidays. / Can you imagine?" (51) The rhetorical question appears like an expression of middle-class incredulity that foreign holidays were once beyond the means of most people, who decamped instead to the sodden plains of county Meath. However the ensuing poem takes seriously the injunction "imagine", compelling readers to attempt to envision the lives of others while acknowledging the difficulty of the task.

To this end "The Camp" quickly moves on from the kitsch associations of the twentieth-century holiday camp to reflect on the asylum detention centre as total institution. As a former

holiday centre, Mosney typifies to an unusual degree Giorgio Agamben's concept of the camp as the defining "political space of modernity", produced when "an apparently innocuous space [...] actually delimits a space in which the normal order is defacto suspended" (1998: 176). Total institutions commandeer time as well as space so that, as Erving Goffman observes in *Asylums*, "time spent in the establishment is time wasted or destroyed or taken from one's life" (1968: 66). Drawing on Vukašin Nedeljković's *Asylum Archive* website<sup>2</sup> (now also a book), Traynor's poem offers a comparable insight, noting that in her exploration of the site:

One image in particular stayed with me: a cardboard clock, the numbers on its face drawn in marker by a child, lying abandoned against a wall, a symbol of the time that's been stolen from entire families by the Irish State. (Traynor 2017)

A further point of comparison between "The Camp" and *Asylum Archive* is the absence of recognizable human figures. Very few people appear in Nedeljković's photos; those that do are shown at a distance without their faces visible while the images foreground vacated spaces, architectural features, dilapidated fixtures, personal belongings or found objects like the child's cardboard clock. Although Traynor employs an arresting language of sight, light and visibility throughout the poem, the residents of the camp are never directly shown, but rather presented indexically through the sounds that they make and the shadows that they cast. This much is evident in a section where, as with Mahon's asylum poem, Traynor undercuts symbolic associations between dawn, vitality and renewal:

the horizon lifting

like a cat's third eyelid  
above the frozen ground,  
the glare of a bare light bulb

casting tableaux behind families  
hunched over scheduled dinners,  
as tablets rattle in medication vials (2018: 51)

Traynor's evocation of the horizon as line demarcating darkness from light is also taken up in her "Plea for the Sanctification of the Ditches of Ireland", which promises that bruises on women's bodies "will fade like darkness licked back/ into an inky horizon" (2019: 3). Optical and animal metaphors of eyelid and tongue acquire an agentive power: they flick and lick night and day into being. Highlighting the surreal quality of an eyelid that permits vision, "The Camp" also seems through ambiguously active verb forms to muddle the assumed powers of agency between humans and inanimate objects or effects. If, as the poem insists, cameras are "flat black eyes" (51), then lightbulbs glare and tablets rattle as if to express hostility. The inhabitants of the camp, by contrast, are present as tableaux, static images formed by their cast shadows. This image unites Enlightenment and postmodern aesthetic practice.

The portrait silhouette became popular in eighteenth-century visual culture by allowing likenesses to be produced quickly and cheaply, while the tableau was influentially theorized by the *encyclopédiste* Denis Diderot, who applied the term to discuss a moment in theatre where actors, through their posture and relative positions on stage, produce a uniquely expressive scene. The tableau, according to Diderot is an "arrangement of [...] characters on the stage so natural and so true to life that, faithfully rendered by a painter, it would please me on canvas"

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.asylumarchive.com/clock.html>

(Diderot, cited in Fried 1980: 95). Modern artists have returned to the power of static images and shadows. Kara Walker highlights the political potential of shadow through large-scale panoramas composed of black paper silhouettes with satirical, mock-historic titles including *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery* (1997) and *Grub for Sharks: A Concession to the Negro Populace* (2004). Citing Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* among her influences, Walker discusses her use of silhouette to reduce rather than heighten emotional depth. She likens the technique "to stereotyping, in which individual identities, situations and personalities are reduced and distorted into easily-caricatured forms" (Walker 2004). As objects of sympathy and contempt, subject to global trafficking and often at risk of drowning (or becoming "Grub for Sharks" to use Walker's satirical phrase), refugees occupy a place in contemporary media and imagination comparable to that of enslaved people as depicted by Walker. In "The Camp", Traynor's depiction of asylum seekers as shadow tableaux uses optical depth (or its lack) to invite reflection on the way certain groups are viewed. Presenting detainees as two-dimensional shapes on a flat surface recalls the way most people will engage with asylum seekers and refugees: as images on a screen or page rather than through any meaningful personal contact or even through "the hard exercise of imagining the lives of others" (2013: 160), advocated by Lloyd. Thus the literal technique of reducing complex figures to two dimensions offers a meditation on the ethics of such representation. It evokes the paradigmatic example of the opening words of *A Modest Proposal*, with its presentation of women and children as a "melancholy object" for the reader's consideration. Presenting detainees alongside inanimate objects and challenging readers to register them as more than simply objects of a distracted or punitive gaze, Traynor's shadow theatre offers a challenge to readers. It confronts them with the knowledge that exponential growth in technologies of containment and surveillance has not been matched by a corresponding maturing of emotional and imaginative sympathy.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on a series of poems set in or inspired by institutions, this article has argued that the central metaphor of Enlightenment is countered and complicated by ideas and images of shadow. As a corollary of light, shade and shadow do not necessarily oppose or invalidate the historic significance and intellectual achievement of Enlightenment, but rather point to its inescapable legacies in our present. As well as neutrally to denote the endurance of its central ideas and figures, shadow presents a mode of thought that compels modern readers to look for complexity and engage imagination as well as reason. Although often regarded as marginal or even antithetical to classical notions of Enlightenment, Swift is central to this more complex, nuanced and double-edged formulation, as the readings developed in this article have shown. As a privileged and enfranchised figure in eighteenth-century Irish society, Swift's entitlement to speak on matters of national import affords him membership of an idealized public realm. This space is shadowed by others excluded from such communal conversation and presented by him as a "melancholy object" for the public gaze. Considering the disparity between Swift and those he presented as a "melancholy object", it is understandable that the eighteenth century has been considered as both an enlightened time and a benighted one, as the introduction to this article discussed. There I contrasted W.B. Yeats' play about Swift, *The Words Upon the Window Pane* (1931), and its ideal of the eighteenth as "that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion", with Eavan Boland's stark portrayal of the period as "our darkest century". As well as different positions of gender and class, these opposing views reflect an enduring ambivalence over Enlightenment's legacies in modern Ireland and more widely: does it bequeath a form of modernity which promotes peace, tolerance and equality, or do these values provide an alibi for something altogether darker?

The poems discussed here suggest that it does both. Mahon's loose trilogy of Swift poems "Dawn at St Patrick's", "Noon at St Michael's" and "St Patrick's Day" uses images of light to conjure companionship, intellectual enquiry and hospitality, while at the same time hinting at darker legacies embodied in literal and metaphorical institutions like the asylum and the Anglo-Irish literary tradition. Also set around institutions like the Church, government departments and direct provision centres, Traynor's and Higgins' poems illustrate how Swift's *Modest Proposal* has acquired quasi-institutional status to become the exemplary form through which Irish writers may comment on matters of public wellbeing. Both poets present institutionally-inflicted pain and exclusion through vivid portrayals of individual bodies reduced from thinking, feeling subjects to stark and static objects. Traynor's poetic and political use of shadow is also a striking feature of her response to Swift, complementing and complicating Mahon's affinity for images of light.

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