



## CHAPTER 2

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# Conspicuously Silent: The Excesses of Religion and Medicine in Emma Donoghue's Historical Novels *The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars*

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### INTRODUCTION

Emma Donoghue's literary production, prolific, accomplished and diverse in the exploration of a great variety of genres, including poetry, drama, short stories, film scripts and children's books, defies easy classification. Though endowed with a distinct personal voice that transcends literary currents and trends, she has excelled in the historical novel, a genre that started to flourish two decades ago in Ireland and to which she has made a significant contribution. Interrogating how the past has been handed

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down to us, she often engages in the unveiling of the silence, marginalisation and neglect of the lives of women or of the Others of society, placing them at the centre of narratives from where they recover their own agency and visibility. Commonly relying on female characters who were ahead of their times, Donoghue's novels *Slammerkin* (2000), *Life Mask* (2004), *The Sealed Letter* (2008) and *Frog Music* (2014), all set between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Ireland, Great Britain and the United States, delved into liminal characters that transgressed social and gender expectations and stood outside the margins of society. Likewise, in her more recently celebrated novels *The Wonder* (2016) and *The Pull of the Stars* (2020),<sup>1</sup> the author has widened her interests to address the wrongs of the male-dominated institutions of religion and medicine, silently complicit in various forms of female invisibility and subordination.

Set in nineteenth-century post-famine Ireland, and revolving around historical accounts of the so-called fasting girl's phenomenon, *The Wonder* crafts a plot of female voluntary starvation amidst a muted community governed by wonder, fear and shame. Seen and narrated through the eyes of a prejudiced female colonial Other, an observant English Nightingale nurse, who questions religious fervour and scientific scepticism, the story gradually discloses a backward and diseased culture nurtured by toxic practices of silence.<sup>2</sup> In a similar mode, set in a Dublin ward during the 1918 Great Flu pandemic, *The Pull of the Stars* interconnects the lives of three female characters, a nurse trained as midwife, a volunteer nobody and a physician, in their struggles to save the lives of labouring women

<sup>1</sup> Both novels have been translated into many languages and have become best-sellers in Canada, the United States and Ireland. *The Wonder* won a Shirley Jackson Award and a Medici Award, and was shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and for Ireland's Kerry Group Novel of the Year. It has recently been adapted as a feature film for Netflix. For its part, *The Pull of the Stars* was shortlisted for the Eason Irish Novel of the Year, the Trillium Book Award, the Stonewall Book Award and the Barbara Gittings Literature Award. It was also longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael McAteer's *Silence in Modern Irish Literature* (2017). Though the book does not discuss Donoghue's writings, its relevance lies in being the first edited collection that addresses silence in the literary realm, by way of exploring a wide range of meanings attached to it, such as loss, resistance, oppression, displacement or disturbance. A more apt approach to my reading of Donoghue's novel is provided by Eviatar Zerubavel, in his exploration of the "conspiracy of silence" as a phenomenon that explains how "people collectively ignore something of which each of them is personally aware". For him, "such 'silent witnessing' involves situations where each 'conspirator' is aware of something yet nevertheless unwilling to publicly acknowledge it" (2010, 32).

infected with the deadly virus. In her engagement with such underrepresented themes in literature, Donoghue discloses concerns aligned with the historically silenced female body, controlled by male regulatory practices of health care and religious morality, issues that I intend to address in the present discussion.<sup>3</sup>

This analysis will focus on the conspicuous silences that surround Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars* from a cultural history approach with a focus on issues of gender, class and politics. Since the exercise of looking into the past might have an impact in how we construct the present and envision the future, this study will revise the meanings traditionally attached to two historical landmarks in Irish history: the post-famine period and the Great Flu pandemic. If *The Wonder* explores a time when religious belief, superstition and communal practices of silence determined the lives of the ignorant and the uneducated, *The Pull* resonates with present-day concerns of how the medical treatment for a pandemic might uncover social and gender inequalities, perpetuated by the invisibility of suspicious Others. Since the two novels raise concerns about the place of women in society, I shall dig into the debate on their roles as the unheard voices of the community. I will, therefore, survey the pervasive influence of religion and medicine in the shaping of femaleness and in their erasure from mainstream accounts, with the aim to restore them back in Irish history.

## THE CULTURAL HISTORY APPROACH

The concepts of cultural memory and cultural history are often misleadingly intertwined, even though their meanings and implications place them apart. Cultural memory, an approach that has flourished in the last decades within the field of Memory Studies, basically holds that, as the past cannot be faithfully recalled, we are always debating ourselves between different versions and interpretations of it (Whitehead 2009;

<sup>3</sup> I am using well-known Foucauldian terminology, as expressed in his widely cited works *Discipline and Punish* (1977, 200–215) and *The History of Sexuality* (1978, 144) to explain how Foucault's theories of biopower, resistance and the fabrication of docile (silent) bodies function as surveillance mechanisms within a technology of power with which to facilitate control, discipline and silence. See also my own review of *Milkman* (2019), in which I discuss silence as an architectural form of containment.

Ricoeur 2004; Nora 1989). As such, it critiques traditional historiography in its linearity and static narrative of events, defending that memory is individual, social and culturally informed. For its part, cultural history focuses on the ideologies, beliefs and ideas that construct a given time and requires that the socio-political circumstances of an epoch are addressed. It should be remarked that the consistent study of women's roles in the making of history and the assessment of their functions in society did not develop in Ireland until the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup> In parallel, attempting to unearth how the past has been rendered in Irish historical discourses, the last two decades have witnessed a noticeable upsurge of a renewed trend of historical novels that interrogate how the past has been constructed and the purposes it has served. It is in this context that we place Donoghue's literary production, among that of other women writers, such as Mary Morrissy, Martina Devlin, Lia Mills, Nuala O'Connor, Marita Conlon-Mckenna or Henrietta McKiervy, who address the past with the intention of identifying gaps, omissions and silences largely missed in mainstream historical accounts. In tone with Linda Anderson's claim, that "women cannot simply be added on to history (...) without putting under pressure the conceptual limits that excluded them in the first place" (1990, 130), I contend that they are engrossing a list of authors whose approach to received interpretations of previous epochs constitutes the very essence of their writings.

Hence, from a cultural history approach, the Irish contemporary historical novel should be seen not as a type of fiction that is merely set in the past but as a narrative that entails redressing throughout time and restoring back in history. Such move is the result of adopting more adequate theoretical and epistemological postulates to deal with the discourses that nourish history and with the need to reconsider the role of women in the articulation of the narratives of the nation, from which they were mainly written out. In this regard, it needs to be noticed that the equation of history and memory has not been sufficiently contested by historians in Ireland. As Kate Mitchell astutely suggests: "Conventionally history and memory, like history and fiction, colonise each other" (2010,

<sup>4</sup> In her study, *Ariadne's Thread: Writing Women into Irish History* (2009), Margaret MacCurtain delved into this idea encouraging further investigation. The growth and wealth of the scholarship produced in the last decade have been outstanding. One of the most recent accomplished studies is *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature* (2018), edited by Heather Ingman and Clíona Ó Gallchoir.

29). While in mainstream historical narratives there is always a chain of events that explains its own succession, the current tendency reclaims a bottom-up approach to history that includes probing into the role of undermined subjects. Besides, the concepts of individual and collective memory, embedded in cultural history, incorporate the complexities, unfitting motives and inexplicable facts that shape cultural identity. In turn, they provide interconnections through a network of relations that are applicable to the study of literature and more specifically to the genre of the historical novel, for its subversive potential to construct an alternative reality. Accordingly, probing into the writing of contemporary historical novels necessarily involves exploring the complex issue of the (un)reliability of historical renderings and their framing within a cultural history approach that reclaims filling the gaps that (mis)formed the past.

### *THE WONDER* (2016)

Set in the 1980s in rural Ireland, *The Wonder* tells the story of a marvel, a wonder, a fasting 11-year-old girl, Anna O'Donnell, who claims to have been without food for four months. An only-men local committee, formed by the priest, the teacher, the doctor, a rich man and a neighbour, is constituted to find out whether they are in front of a miracle or a hoax. To that end, they decide to hire an Irish nun, Sister Michael, and an English nurse, Lib Wright, who will take shifts to watch the girl every hour of day and night for two weeks. Lib, the protagonist and narrator of the story, is an English nurse trained by the famous and highly reputed Flora Nightingale, known for her experience in extreme cases of illnesses and for healing men during the Crimea war.<sup>5</sup> As a woman of science and an atheist, Lib only believes what she can see with her eyes and is sceptical and unsympathetic to the villagers. Unable to understand the customs of the Irish Midlands, she is initially appalled by the level of deprivation of the place and prejudiced against their religious fervour and

<sup>5</sup> The Nightingale Training School of Nurses was founded in 1860 by Florence Nightingale, a famous woman who arrived at Scutari during the Crimea War to heal injured soldiers. She contributed to turn nursing into a respectable and skilled profession. For more information on its history and achievements, see the following web page: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/nmpc/about-us/history>.

ignorance. However, her fondness for the little good-natured girl eventually challenges her own beliefs triggering her process of self-discovery. The undoing of riddles, Anna's favourite pastime, pulls the narrative into a spiral of untold secrets, lies and violence perpetrated by the conspicuously silent family, religion and society at large, turning the novel into the true riddle.<sup>6</sup>

As a contemporary historical narrative that tackles delicate issues and taboo subjects in a network of intricate interactions, *The Wonder* evades easy classification. It has been described as “an alternative historiographical narrative of the Great Famine” that addresses a traumatic stage in Irish history and as a psychological thriller (Lai 2019, 58–59). Oliveira Carneiro has placed it within the female gothic tradition in the way it “reminds the reader that in the human world nothing should be taken at face value” (2019, 146). For his part, Pettersson maintains that it is a “psychological drama” (2017, 1), and Jordan sees it as a “thrilling domestic psychodrama that draws its power from quotidian detail as well as gothic horror” (2016). But, while these different genres and modes are present in the narration, they fail to explain the essence of such a complex novel. Donoghue has explained that Anna's story was invented, though inspired by many cases of fasting girls, for which she used “‘nuggets of reality’ as steppingstones for writing fiction” (Oliveira Carneiro 2019, 144). At the same time, through the individual case of Anna, she wanted to centre on a time in Irish history tragically affected by real starvation, placing “the idea of voluntary starving against the appalling context of involuntary starving” (cited in Simon 2016).

Early records of women who could inexplicably survive for weeks or even months without food, the “fasting girls” or the “fasting Saints” phenomenon, seem to date back to the sixteenth century, across and outside Europe in an array of unconnected cultures. In Donoghue's own “personal note”, she explains that cases were found in Protestant and Catholic families and in different age groups and backgrounds. Some were discovered as frauds, some died, some others resumed eating and yet others insisted that they could live without any food. The writer explains that she had become fascinated with this phenomenon because it evoked the lives of the Medieval saints who starved to death for a penance and

<sup>6</sup> According to Zerubavel these should be called “open secrets”, rather than hidden, since “unlike ordinary ones, [they] are actually known by everyone thereby constituting ‘uncomfortable truths hidden in plain sight’” (2010, 32).

of the suffering anorexic women, and the two interrogated what it meant to be a girl.<sup>7</sup> Individual and communal silences were on most occasions common denominators, irrespective of the outcomes of the victims, of either their apparent act of resistance and transgression against authority or of the inconvenient unnameable truth that might lie beyond.<sup>8</sup> Under this light, Ferguson has explained that: “*The Wonder* excavates Ireland’s past, envisioning fasting as coded resistance to patriarchal institutions that compound violence against women through silencing” (2018, 108).

Though fasting can take many forms, the Christian symbolism that relates it to martyrdom and redemption finds its most appropriate expression in Irish history. In fact, as Donoghue explains in her personal webpage, “ever since the Great Famine of the 1840s, we’ve defined ourselves as a people intimate with hunger”. In this regard, the Great Famine or even the hunger strikes resonate with the fasting girl phenomenon in the way they bring to light hidden symptoms ingrained in Irish society. Anna’s starving body is controlled by toxic practices of silence that, I will contend, function as a synecdoche of a nation that suffers from poverty, malnourishment and neglect from Great Britain. When the committee is appointed to investigate the case, it is done because “Several of the important men hereabouts feel that the honour of the county –possibly of the whole Irish nation– is at stake” (pos. 174).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, half-way through the narration, the English Lib poses this fundamental question: “Was it Anna who was suffering from religious mania or the whole nation?” (pos. 2071).

Margaret Kelleher has addressed the silences surrounding the history of the Great Famine as a result of the trauma of remembering countless deaths and also massive emigration, concluding that they are intimately connected with the female self (2007, 4). In this like manner, *The*

<sup>7</sup> See Donoghue’s personal web page <https://www.emmadonoghue.com/books/novels/the-wonder.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Some of these miraculous fasting girls worth mentioning are the cases of Ann Moore (1761–1813), which proved to be a fraud, and of Sarah Jacobs (1857–1869), a “Welsh Fasting Saint” who died while she was being watched, and who, according to Pettersson, directly inspired Donoghue (2017, 2). Throughout history, many cases brought the attention of the Church, the medical world and people in general, though many scientists rejected them (Pettersson 2017, 6). See Walker Bynum (1988) and Brumberg (2000), for further information.

<sup>9</sup> As I have used a kindle edition of *The Wonder*, the numbers that appear in brackets refer to positions and not to pages.

*Wonder* contributes to counteract the prevailing silence and its erasure from history, ultimately revealing “how young women’s bodies become canvases for projecting shame experienced by the community, while silencing the woman’s own histories” (Ferguson 2018, 93). For that reason, Lai asserts:

Donoghue’s writing of hunger confronts us readers not only with the horrors of starvation and the detrimental power of superstition but, furthermore, if not more significantly, with the remembering of the Famine as a historical construction through a famished eleven-year-old girl on a somehow miniature scale. (2019, 60)

In *The Wonder*, Anna’s claim that she lives on “manna from heaven” (pos. 1026) poses an important challenge to the community. In need for a martyr, the villagers peregrinate to visit her and are determined to prove a miracle that Lib’s scientific beliefs can only see as a hoax. But demonstrating the fraud does not prove easy, since the unfolding of secrets and lies clears an obscure web of unspeakable actions that cover a dreadful incest, protected by both mother and priest. What is more, the priest, who has access to people’s confidences through the sacrament of confession, suggests that it had happened to other families. As the well-known Orange Report, published by the Department of Justice, revealed, silence surrounding incest in Ireland “has been strongly maintained, given the dominant ethos of family life as sacred, private and protected from outside” (cited in St. Peter 2000, 126). Interestingly, incest was a taboo subject in Ireland until the 1990s, when the uncontested values of the hegemonic Catholic family were challenged by writers such as Claire Keegan, Lia Mills, Jennifer Johnston, Dorothy Nelson or Edna O’Brien, among a much longer list.<sup>10</sup> In the novel, once the girl stops wanting to be embraced by her mother—who had secretly fed her twice a day through kisses to keep the wonder alive and hide the shame<sup>11</sup>—her health starts deteriorating. This precipitates Anna’s downfall, which nevertheless allows her to abandon her engaged and claustrophobic little room.

<sup>10</sup> See my previous work on dysfunctional families for an account of incest in Irish literature (Morales-Ladrón 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Donoghue probably took this idea from Ann Moore’s case, who had been fed by a member of her family through kisses, emulating how birds feed their little ones (Pettersson 2017, 7).



Though Lai has interpreted the secret of passing on the food from mother to daughter as a form of force-feeding and Anna's final refusal to be embraced by her mother as "the failure of religious control (...) of a religious ideology that is intrinsic to Catholic Ireland in the nineteenth century" (2019, 60), I contend that the girl's corporeal reality needs to be addressed as the signifier of a grieving body in pain.<sup>12</sup>

The connection between sexual abuse and eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia, is historically informed, at the same time that the relation of religious fasting with anorexia has also been noted by critics, on grounds of their similar symptoms (Petterson 2017, 6). Religious fervour, martyrdom or holy visions were often reported in these stories, which exposed female self-denial, body and mind dissociation, suffering or need for control; all of these, visible signs in *The Wonder*. Anna's body is a text that needs to be read. Indeed, it is "a female text", according to Ní Ghríofa's chant in her stunning *The Ghost in the Throat*, who explains that "the etymology of the word 'text' lies in the Latin verb 'texere': to weave, to fuse, to braid" (2020, 99). Lib keeps a diary of the evolution of the child and writes down with minute detail any sign and symptom that calls her attention. Cleverly, she writes down that "Anna's body was a blank page that recorded everything that happened to it (...). So the girl truly believed herself not to have eaten for four months. But her body told her another story" (pos. 1592). The corporeal reality of her story, of her female body/text, is only visible to Lib, a nurse professionally trained and able to detect that Anna's mind shows symptoms of dissociation from her body. Explained in psychological terms, dissociation is a defence mechanism of survival that is activated when the mind cannot cope with a traumatic event.<sup>13</sup> Being unable to integrate the experience of the sexual abuse perpetrated by her own 13-year-old brother, Anna's mind resorts to separate herself/her mind from her sinful body, making it responsible for an unbearable sexual act.

<sup>12</sup> For more on how the pained and suffering body has been registered and mobilised in a broad range of specifically Irish contexts of literature and culture, see Fionnuala Dillane, Naomi McAreavey and Emilie Pine's *The Body in Pain in Irish Literature and Culture* (2016).

<sup>13</sup> Though experiences of dissociation can be to a certain extent common in people, the dissociative disorder occurs when it turns dysfunctional, a condition that needs to be professionally treated. See the "Dissociative Disorders" section in the DSM-5-TR, published by the APA, recently revised in its 5th edition of April 2022.

Driven by religious fervour, Anna's mind had decided to fast—and punish her body—when she turned eleven, after hearing a sermon of a Belgian priest on the mortal sin of sex between brother and sister, and she realised that her brother was not in heaven: “Maybe God took Pat because of what we'd done.”Tisn't [sic] fair then, Mrs. Lib, because Pat's bearing all the punishment” (pos. 3594). Once the priest assures her that God has forgiven her since, as their children, they must endure hardships with resignation, she is advised to keep the secret “in the family” (pos. 3733). Disavowing the harm caused by the abuse, her concern only lies in saving the soul of his brother, wandering in purgatory. As Ferguson has explained:

By implying that Anna was at fault in part for her brother's sexual abuse, that both had sinned, the priest silences her and reinforces her self-blame for the sexual violence committed against her, foreclosing the possibility of healing. It is no surprise that Anna takes literally the idea that she might fast and pray Pat's way out of purgatory. To assuage her trauma and further betrayal by her religious leaders, she creates a story using the concept of fasting as intercession. (2018, 99)

With the help of her mother, who would rather have two children in heaven than acknowledging the sin of her son, she refuses to accept reality: “‘That's the same filthy falsehood Anna came out with after Pat's funeral,’ Rosaleen went on, ‘and I told her not to be slandering her poor brother’” (pos. 3635). So, Anna tries to redeem her guilt and save her brother through religious sacrifice. As dissociated bodies negate pain, Anna feels that she is a holy angel in communion with God, while she dissolves and purifies her sin through her body, which is gradually disappearing in the destructive process of fasting. Inflicting pain on her sinful body through self-denial will bring her own death and, with it, the preservation of the dreadful secret carefully kept by her complicit family and the church, a form of violence perpetrated to control the female—sexual—body. In a more than apparent nod to Eavan Boland's poem “Anorexic”, Donoghue evokes the Christian myth of creation, for which the female body carries centuries of shame, guilt and sin. Like Anna, the symbolic Eve of the poem starves herself to death: “Flesh is heretic. / My body is a witch. / I am burning it” so that “in my self-denials” being “sinless, foodless (...) / I will grow angular and holy” and will be allowed to return to Adam's rib, to the perfect holy body that was created in God's

image “as if I had never been away” (1980, 17–18). Like Anne, this Eve aspires to be caged in the rib, where she will be protected from her own seductive nature and will be able to undo the original sin for which she is responsible.

The function of secrets, lies and silence in the novel bears further meaning in the way it reinforces control and violence. Unfolding the truth behind fasting reads like an open book for Lib, whose own story discloses a hidden past that needs to be redeemed in parallel to Anna’s. Not a widow but abandoned by her husband after her own little daughter died in her arms and was accused of producing “sour” milk, the English nurse had been a victim of popular poisonous beliefs and superstitions that ultimately questioned her mothering abilities. Unable to fulfil social expectations of what it means to be a good mother and a wife, Lib’s body is controlled and violently excluded by familiar stigma:

Her parents hadn’t been sympathetic. Appalled, rather, that Lib had been so unlucky as to lose a husband less than a year after catching him. (Thinking that she’d been negligent, perhaps, to some degree, though they never said that aloud.) They’d been loyal enough to help her move to London and pass herself off as a widow. This conspiracy had shocked Lib’s sister so much, she’d never spoken to any of the three of them again. (pos. 3417)

Lib’s move from the metropolis to a rural Ireland governed by fear and a traumatic past proves ineffective to make up for her own failure. Instead, control is exerted here with even more power and violence. The decision of the committee that investigates Anna’s case to hire a nun and a nurse to corroborate their findings as “a simple case of hysteria” (pos. 1476) only serves to patronise Lib and downgrade her professional skills, knowledgeable comments and medical findings. But the doctor had “decades of study and experience that Lib lacked, that no woman could ever obtain” (pos. 1497). In this regard, Ferguson affirms that, “doctors are patriarchal figures who repeat the violation of Anna’s body” (2018, 99). Thus, the clash between religious and science, between the backwardness of Irish society—“Was it true that the Irish were impervious to improvement?” (pos. 42)—and the apparent progress of Great Britain, embodied by Lib, is the source of much distress in the narrative. Lib represents both the outsider’s vigilant eye on the colony and the career woman whose intelligence menaces the villagers. Therefore, she is “Othered” and silenced

by the community whenever she tries to “making sure sense prevailed over nonsense” (pos. 409) and looked down. Besides, the irreconcilable duality religion/science is further embodied in the figure of the Catholic journalist Byrne, who searches for truth beyond fanaticism and irrational beliefs, and also challenges the religious and medical authorities with little success. In such society, governed by fear and silence, triumph eventually rests in Lib’s invention of another lie with which she outsmarts the male order. Her clever plan will provide redemption for Anna’s sin and a new life away from a toxic family, a perverse religion and a traumatic past. Accordingly, making the whole community believe that Anna has died in a fire, her apparent burned corpse is allowed to be born again into the body of Nan Burns, an 8-year-old child, a time prior to the rape.

Therefore, throughout the novel, silence is a perverse mechanism that permeates different layers of meaning attached to sexual abuse and violence and unfolds in diverse ways depending on whether it is broken or shared. Though attached to a toxic practice, its redeeming power eventually not only saves Anna from a tragic destiny, but also Lib, who shares her secrets with Byrne, turning her story of oppression into a narrative of resistance.<sup>14</sup> Her new beginning as Anna’s foster mother, with the child’s rebirth, provides the narrative with an uplifting ending. After Anna’s fake death, her story will be buried and the secret will be kept as it serves everyone’s purposes: in Lib’s case, to protect the child from a painful and unbearable truth; in the case of the mother, through the dissolution of the sin once her two children have died; in the case of the church, always protected by the secrecy of confession, the miracle will not need to be proved; and in the case of the villagers, the sanctity of the family will be preserved as the icon of love and protection. Thus, the newly formed family exchanges Ireland for Australia following the Joycean trope of “silence, exile and cunning” (*AP* 247) and undoing centuries of oppression and subservience.

<sup>14</sup> In tone with Sara Ahmed’s claim that: “Sometimes silence can be a tool of oppression (...) Sometimes silence is a strategic response to oppression, one that allows subjects to persist in their own way; one that acknowledges that, under certain circumstances, speech might not be empowering, let alone sensible” (2010, xvi).

### *THE PULL OF THE STARS* (2020)

If *The Wonder* discloses perverse practices of silence safeguarded by a Catholic ethos and a medical male community that overrules the place, *The Pull of the Stars* sanctions the politics of patriarchy under the protected veil of the institutions of marriage and the health care system in the appalling circumstances brought by last century's Great Flu pandemic. Despite its devastating consequences, this historical landmark was largely overshadowed by the effects of the First World War, with which it coincided in a dramatic overlap that made difficult to separate the effects and casualties of each. With the purpose of bringing to light the silences that surrounded women's experiences at the time, Donoghue engages in a narrative that pays homage to the memorialisation of the centenary of the tragedy and unveils striking similarities with our current pandemic times. Thus, the intersection of health and gender in the narrative is another constitutive example of how invisibility and silence can be brought to light through the articulation of discourses largely ignored in literature. The novel is not only women-centred, it further explores the exclusively female themes of pregnancy and giving birth, frequently submerged into the broader and more debated issues of motherhood and mothering. In Donoghue's engagement with such underrepresented themes in literature, she discloses concerns of the historically silenced female body, controlled by masculine regulatory practices of health care and religious morality, which will be addressed in the present discussion.

Set in 1919, when the influenza was shattering the world and millions of people were dying, *The Pull* delves into expecting women infected by the disease to showcase how the interrelation between gender and class is an indicator that correlates with socio-economic disadvantages.<sup>15</sup> Divested of basic medical resources, a tiny maternity ward in an inner-city Dublin hospital serves as the setting where the plot unfolds in only three days, keeping in tone with Donoghue's taste for enclosed spaces and intense action. Three struggling women, unknown to each other before

<sup>15</sup> Though Donoghue's narrative resonates with present-day COVID-19, she has explained that she wrote the novel inspired by the commemoration of the centenary of the Great Influenza pandemic, a major event that had somehow faded from cultural memory. At that moment, she could not foresee how timely and relevant a manuscript she had started two years before would be until she was pressed by the editors to publish the novel before the planned date (Morales-Ladrón 2020).

the course of the events, are placed centre stage to save the lives of pregnant women in the most adverse conditions: Julia Power, a nurse trained as a midwife; Bridie Sweeney, a volunteer nobody with no education but brimming compassion; and the “infamous” Dr Katherine Lynch, the only real historical character in the novel. She is based on the figure of one of the first women obstetricians in Ireland and a defender of children’s and women’s rights, but who finds herself in the run from the police at the time of the events as a result of her political activism. While these women work hand in hand to ease the effects of the virus, precarious means, little instruction, insufficient staff and an overcrowded hospital only serve to highlight how gender and social inequality are at the basis of the poor prognostic of these pregnant women and their babies.

Being labour the main theme of *The Pull*, it dwells entirely in an improvised maternity ward where pregnant women coming from all walks of life, economic means, religions or ages are quarantined together. Donoghue has explained that she focussed on this issue because, though birth is not an illness, it can kill mothers and babies, and she had discovered that pregnant women, especially in their later stages or after birth, were more likely to be affected by the flu or experience side effects, including premature births. Yet, she reveals that, unsurprisingly, she could not find much information on how or where these women were treated (Morales-Ladrón). Early in the novel, Julia notices that expectant women were more vulnerable to catch the flu and had more difficulties to recover from it, especially if they were poor: “only medical observations were permitted on a chart. So instead of poverty, I’d write malnourishment or debility. As code for too many pregnancies, I might put anaemia, heart strain, bad back, brittle bones, varicose veins, low spirits (...)” (23). At the core of her findings, layers of neglect, ignorance and subservience spark off.

Thus, I argue that Donoghue’s novel highlights that the way in which women are objectified—and therefore silenced—by religion, science and politics is evinced in society’s ignorance of women’s health and its disregard for their more basic needs. Additionally, *The Pull* unwraps the most oppressive aspects of marriage and motherhood for women, who were forced to be almost permanently pregnant, even at the cost of risking their lives. It is Julia that again raises her voice against the perverse saying: “*She doesn’t love him unless she gives him twelve* [sic]”, resenting that some are as unlucky as to find themselves pregnant twice in the same year, and adding that: “In other countries, women might take discreet

measures to avoid this, but in Ireland, such things were not only illegal but unmentionable” (23–24). In this regard, it needs to be stressed that women’s capability to reproduce has been at the service of patriarchy for economic and moral purposes since the beginning of times. Its success rested precisely on the fact that the physiological processes of pregnancy and childbirth were part of a narrative of omission and obliteration that associated giving birth with the sexual act, turning it into a taboo subject; women could procreate but could not be sexually active. In fact, up until the 1960 in Ireland, “churching” was a generalised blessing practice for married women who had just given birth and who could only return to mass after being blessed by a priest, when “the ‘sin’ of childbirth was washed away” (Lewis, 2013). The absence of literary works devoted to pregnancy and the experience of labour, a unique female experience, is inexcusable, especially if we compare it with the visibility of mothering and motherhood.<sup>16</sup>

Fortunately, it seems that the last decade is changing the narrative, and now more works that highlight this matter are being published, notoriously in the much-used form of autofiction, though not exclusively. A notable recent instance that deserves to be mentioned is Doireann Ní Ghríofa’s awarded “female text”, *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020), with celebrates motherhood, birth, breastfeeding and creativity in an extraordinary blending of “the twin forces of milk and text” (2020, 39). Merging the process of creating a new being with creativity itself, the author defends that her work was genuinely “composed while folding someone else’s clothes. My mind holds it close, and it grows, tender and slow, while my hands perform innumerable chores. This is a female text borne of guilt and desire, stitched to a soundtrack of cartoon nursery rhymes” (2020, 10). As if echoing Ní Ghríofa, Donoghue’s own narrative of labour becomes a political act which brings to light new possibilities and insists on exploring the myriad ways in which the female body/text has been historically quieted and subsumed through masculine regulatory practices of health care and religious morality. Vindicating a place for the celebration of the expectant body, the author features pregnant women on the verge of death to raise awareness of how their lives are determined by motherhood. Premature dangerous labours, damaged babies

<sup>16</sup> This absence has been noted and thoroughly studied by Francisco José Cortés Vieco, who masterfully interweaves fertility with creativity in the literary realm and suggests that procreativity is a liminal experience of gestational minds (2021).

and wounded mothers are the focal point of a narrative that does not fall short of details of physical body functions, pain, bleeding, urination and other more disquieting scenes. The hyper-realistic descriptions of the process of giving birth under dire circumstances ultimately contribute to commend the multidimensional female self and to honour the female text/body.

Since, as Cortés Vieco has demonstrated (2021), pregnancy and birth have traditionally been rendered invisible in literature, little was known about the real experiences of women, who have always gone through miscarriages, abortions, problematic births or stillborn babies, with scarce information and few medical resources. In fact, in the early twentieth century, the death rate in childbirth was very high. It was a dangerous experience due to the lack of hygiene and the precarious state of medicine, to which the ignorance of their own bodies and physiological functions are to be added. A case in point in the ward is the seventeen-year-old girl, who believes that her baby will come out of her navel:

She shook her head and caught a cough with the back of her hand. Just wondering how I'll know when it's about to open.

I stared. Your belly button?

Her voice trembled as she paced. Does it do it on its own or will the doctor have to (...) [sic] force it?

I was embarrassed for her. Mrs. O'Rahilly, you know that's not where the baby comes out?

The information shook her; she opened her mouth wide, then clamped it shut and coughed again, eyes shiny. (67–68)

Women had to rely on the experience of other women to spare their fears and anxieties, though not always with a happy resolution. Additionally, as Julia explains, midwives shared a more practical knowledge passed on among themselves by word of mouth, which did not appear in obstetric medical books written by men for their unscientific value. However, *The Pull* offers many examples of how medical resources were not only rudimentary. Pregnant women were treated with aspirins, chloroform and whiskey to ease the pain, which probably caused as much damage in the babies as the flu. In a superb contrast, the dashing figure of Dr. Katherine Lynn emerges in the text going as far as to practice a clandestine autopsy of a woman who had died in childbirth to find out whether the virus had reached the placenta and infected the foetus.



While *The Pull* does not bring politics to the forefront, and in fact does not place Dr Lynn as the protagonist, it inevitably raises social, political and gender issues. Her relevance in the novel swings between her role as an obstetrician and as an activist. She was a suffragette, the chief medical officer for the Sinn Fein, a rebel in the Easter Rising and a researcher on the flu, experimenting with vaccines and autopsies. Though her struggle advocating women's issues, health and social justice deserve her a place in Irish history, such critical stance is carried out in *The Pull* through the voices of other more marginal characters. Julia tells Dr Lynn that she has "no time for politics" (209), but the doctor rightly tells her that everything is political and that Catholic beliefs of servility are to be blamed for much more than the virus. Interestingly, though Julia initially refuses to let politics get involved in her work, as soon as she has to assist her patients, her awareness of social injustice and of male medical ignorance raises—"These inexperienced doctors rarely knew one end of a woman from the other" (79)—and she ends blaming the patriarchal order. When Dr Pendergast orders her to give a sedative to a woman who has just thrown up, even though she knows that it is a wrong choice, she assents because: "I'd been taught never to contradict a doctor; it was held that if the chain of command was broken, chaos would be unleashed" (43).

Unschoolled and underprivileged, the volunteer orphan Bridie likewise voices some of the strongest outcries against the oppression of women and children in society, once she is given her first and only opportunity to occupy the space society had denied her, risking her life, to assist pregnant women in terrible circumstances. Silenced and erased from history, Bridie's function is instrumental in the way she condemns the institutionalised female confinement managed by the Irish State, which included residential schools, orphanages, asylums or mother-and-baby homes. Bridie's story of her appalled upbringing in a deprived industrial school parallels the case of one of the pregnant women in the ward, Ita Noonan, whose penance lies in being unmarried and knowing that for a second time her baby will be taken from her: "It was known that if a woman got into trouble she'd be taken by the nuns; these institutions dotted the country, but nobody ever said much about what they were like inside" (131). Through these two women, who showcase Ireland's

architecture of containment,<sup>17</sup> Donoghue exemplifies how deviations from societal rules and expectations were solved: through displacement, silence and invisibility. In a reversal from a doomed destiny, when Ita dies in labour, Julia steals the baby, turning into a surrogate mother. Such triumphant ending noticeably resonates with that of *The Wonder* thus turning these two narratives of oppression into narratives of resistance.

This triangular relationship ultimately unfolds characters influencing each other in unexpected ways, broadening the impact of their own transgressions. At a turning point, Julia and Bridie discover an attraction for each other that transforms their mentoring relationship into a same-sex fondness. As a novel of discovery, this subplot places Julia and Bridie exploring a new sexuality that ultimately contests the given limitations of women in society. In a narrative in which motherhood is aligned with duty, the obliteration of the female self and the female body, sorority serves as an antidote against female oppression. Moreover, Donoghue portrays three main female characters, extremely advanced for their times, who manage to escape from the oppressive institutions of marriage and motherhood (the three are single and rebel against subordination) and, thus, embody the novel's criticism against societal expectations and patriarchal values. In sum, by exploring this triad, the novel celebrates a network of women healthcare labourers, othered from and by society, which ultimately reveal how strongly health correlates with class and gender, and how insufficient means and education are at the base of women inequality.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the present discussion of Emma Donoghue's historical narratives *The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars*, it has been argued that conspicuous silences overflow the stories of women, endangered by oppressive institutions from which they have historically struggled to escape. Denial and self-denial—of the individual body and of Ireland—are at the core of these narratives, engaged in the undoing of a history that had suppressed female voices rendering their own experiences invisible. Through the analyses of the excesses of religion and medicine, the writer

<sup>17</sup> Significantly, in the "Author's note" at the end of the novel, Donoghue explains that most details about Bridie's brutalised childhood were inspired by the 2009 Ryan Report (291).

denounces the devastating consequences of ignorance and superstition. In order to overturn the authority of the patriarchal system, Donoghue vindicates the adequacy of raising one's voice against the grain and of searching for an alternative space where a new order can be inscribed. The uplifting tones rendered in the endings of the two novels clearly attest to this move. Thus, in Donoghue's contribution to history, she rewrites centuries of control and oppression of the female body and the female self, transforming narratives of oppression and silence into discourses of resistance and rebirth.

In *The Wonder* female fasting and self-denial are placed alongside the Irish famine brought by decades of poverty and neglect, to be replaced by the breaking of silence and the coming to terms with the past. For its part, *The Pull* revisits last century pandemic and brings to light two underrepresented and silenced themes in literature, pregnancy and birth. The novel ultimately reveals how the invisibility of such exclusively female realms is symptomatic of a patriarchal society that has ignored the pain and suffering of the female body and the risks of related female diseases. The choice of two nurses as the protagonists of both texts moreover contests the male-dominated field of the medical practice, to which they make an invaluable contribution. In fact, this resonates with the United Nations' decision in 2020 to commemorate the international year of the nurse and the midwife, issuing a stamp with the image of Florence Nightingale on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of her birth.<sup>18</sup> In sum, both novels raise pressing concerns and urgent issues, place women's experiences at the forefront and demand to be probed as exercises in resisting oblivion. In an act of responsibility, Donoghue has contributed to disclosing the silence around the experiences of women throughout history and has demonstrated that the past is not neutral and, therefore, it requires to be addressed from a gendered perspective.

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<sup>18</sup> The stamp includes a legend in German that reads: "Live life when you have it, since it is a present of no small size". See <https://www.who.int/campaigns/annual-theme/year-of-the-nurse-and-the-midwife-2020>.

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