

**Bernadetta Jankowska**

Nicolaus Copernicus University

**IRISH IDENTITY AND TRAUMA:  
A REVIEW OF *TRAUMA AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH CULTURE*  
BY MELANIA TERRAZAS-GALLEGO (ED.)**

**Author:** Melania Terrazas-Gallego (ed.)

**Title:** *Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Culture*

**Publisher:** Peter Lang, 2020

**Pages:** 302

**Keywords:** identity, trauma, Irish literature, Irish culture

*Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Culture* (2020) edited by Melania Terrazas is a recent publication of the Reimagining Ireland series that “interrogates Ireland’s past and present and suggests possibilities for the future by looking at Ireland’s literature, culture and history and subjecting them to the most up-to-date critical appraisals associated with sociology, literary theory, historiography, political science and theology” (<https://www.peterlang.com/view/serial/REIR>). The theme of the 94<sup>th</sup> issue is the representation of the concepts of trauma and identity in contemporary Irish culture. The volume is divided into five sections: literature and film (with articles by Asier Altuna-García, María Amor Barros-del Río and Ruth Barton), memory and digital archives (contributions made by Lorraine Dennis and Patrick J. Mahoney), history (papers by Síobhra Aiken and Eunan O’Halpin), music (Fintan Vallely and David Clare) and creative writing (by Emer Martin, Pat Boran and Melania Terrazas).

In “From Undoing: Silence and the Challenge of Individual Trauma in John Boyne’s *The Heart’s Invisible Furies* (2017)” Asier Altuna-García de Salazar analyses the concept of individual trauma experienced by the novel’s main character, Cyril Avery, “an adopted gay” who was born in 1945 (15). The author makes reference to the power structures (mainly the Catholic Church) that shaped the social and political life in Ireland through the twentieth century. Considering that, any behaviours that deviated from the ideological norm were regarded as “shameful” and had to be silenced. The article is an analysis of the process of identifying and overcoming different kinds of trauma as well as finding a way to speak about painful events. The main character is a figure that is a “representative of the experiences of many Irish people who suffered the oppressive discourses of silencing power structures” (32).

The focal point of “Trauma and Irish Female Migration through Literature and Ethnography” by María Amor Barros-del Río is trauma experienced by female migrants in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. As the author indicates in the first part of her paper, women left their mother country mostly because of the lack of perspectives (e.g. mass unemployment). The analysis then focuses on the interpretation of selected materials from the Questionnaire on Emigration to America as well as excerpts from the novels that illustrate the problem of trauma connected with an unwanted migration to a foreign country. The author concludes that “the intersection of literature and ethnography as complementary disciplines for the study of this phenomenon sheds light on crucial aspects that would otherwise have gone unnoticed and offers a broader horizon for the understanding of Irish female migration” (55).

In “Avenging the Famine: Lance Daly’s *Black ’47*, Genre and History,” Ruth Barton discusses Daly’s film with reference to the Western tradition, particularly, as an example of a “revenge Western” (59). The author approaches the Famine as one of the most traumatic events in the history of Ireland (68) and examines the way it was represented in culture. With reference to that, the

main character of *Black '47*, Feeney, is portrayed as “a fantasy avenger”, who does not agree to be victimised by the circumstances and takes a revenge on the oppressors for the death of his relatives. The fact that the film “relegates the lived trauma of the Famine to an unknowable past” (75) may have contributed, according to the author, to its favourable perception in Ireland.

“Reflection of Trauma in the Prisons Memory Archive: How Information Literacy, Human Experience and Place Are Impacted by Conflict” by Lorraine Dennis provides the analysis of prisoners’ recorded memories connected with the period of Northern Ireland’s *Troubles*. At the beginning of the paper, the author offers the readers fundamental insight into the turbulent times in Northern Ireland’s recent history. The author then discusses the way of using the prisoners’ memories of the Troubles, recorded in the form of interviews, in documentary films: *We Were There* (2014) by Cahal McLaughlin and *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* (2015) by McLaughlin and Laura Aguiar (7). The PMA projects give the former prisoners a chance to deal with their traumatic past and also “provide an invaluable opportunity to see and hear people’s stories and offer opportunities for growth and reconciliation in the north of Ireland and beyond” (98).

The role of social media in healing the emotional psychic wounds is discussed by Patrick J. Mahoney in his paper “From the Maze to Social Media: Articulating the Trauma of ‘the Blanket Protest’ in the Digital Space.” The specific example provided by the author is a Facebook group devoted to the prisoners’ memories of the Northern Irish “Blanket” and “No Wash” protests from 1976 to 1981. Despite the original intention of the group owners to be rather a local initiative, it quickly gained popularity and became a place for sharing various memories and painful experiences by the ex-prisoners and their relatives. The author proves that the social media can play a therapeutic role in trauma recovery as well as they can reconnect and rebuild the ex-prisoners community (7, 125).

Síobhra Aiken in “‘The Women Who Had Been Straining Every Nerve’: Gender-Specific Medical Management of Trauma in the Irish Revolution (1916–1923)” analyses the concept of trauma in relation to the treatment of the female military activists involved in the process of forming the independent state of Ireland. It is worth noticing that at that time the means of treatment provided to women were strictly connected with the perception of mental disturbances as the result of female anatomy and menstrual cycle. Thus, the basic aim of the female-oriented psychiatric treatment was to restore women into their socially accepted roles (7-8). The article is an analysis of the situation of the Irish female patients, as well as the inadequacy of treatment supported by the patriarchal ideology, in the first half of the twentieth century.

In “Personal Loss and the ‘Trauma of Internal War’: The Cases of W. T. Cosgrave and Seán Lemass,” Eunan O’Halpin discusses the impact of traumatic experiences on further lives of those prominent politicians. The analysis is closely connected with the concept of “the trauma of internal war” coined by Charles Townshend. Both of them were to some extent affected by the turbulent events of the Irish revolution 1916-1923. The author points out that they were perceived “as effective rather than charismatic politicians, disinclined to grand gestures, and rather reserved individuals” (159). In his paper, O’Halpin uses recently revealed sources, such as the Bureau of Military History, Military Service Pensions and Medals Collections, to discuss Cosgrave and Lemass’s service to independent Ireland. Neither of them made any public statements about their traumatic memories (178). Therefore, the author states that the precise determination to what extent the painful experiences influenced the politicians’ lives is almost impossible (179).

The connections between the traditional, Irish folk music and the traumatic history of the state are highlighted in Fintan Vallely’s essay. “Di-rum-ditherum-dan-dee: Trauma and Prejudice, Conflict and Change as Reflections of Societal Transformation in the Modern-Day Consolidation of Irish Traditional Music” is the discussion about how some instruments typically associated with Irish

culture (such as harp and uilleann pipes) were connected with painful historical events, mostly the British colonisation of the island. However, Vallely indicates that in recent years, the revival of traditional Irish music could be noticed. It is particularly visible in the emergence of the new folk bands and the teaching how to play the traditional instruments. Also, there is a significant change as for the appearance of female musicians in an area previously dominated by men.

David Clare in "Traumatic Childhood Memories and the Adult Political Visions of Sinéad O'Connor, Bono and Phil Lynott" analyses the concept of personal trauma in the songs of the above mentioned artists. Those painful childhood experiences and their future impact on O'Connor's and Bono's lives took the form of artistic protests against the role of the Catholic Church in social life (O'Connor) or in political affairs (Bono). In the case of Lynott, however, the music was the means of expressing the voice of the Black Irish people. Clare points out that by commenting on social problems, artistic activities serve not only to handle the trauma of individuals, but also to shape the future generations of Irish people (239).

In "Hungry Ghosts: Trauma and Addiction in Irish Literature," Emer Martin discusses the relations between addiction and the characters' traumatic experiences on the basis of her novels: *Breakfast in Babylon*, *The Cruelty Men* and *Hardwreck*. In the analysis, she uses the concept of the Phantom, slightly modified by the Buddhist "hungry ghosts" to comment on the motif of transgenerational trauma of colonised nations. Her two latest books are connected with the impact of trauma in post-colonial Ireland, with the addictions as the means of coping with painful personal experiences (10). The author points out that "[her] characters (...) who struggle with addiction and compulsive behaviour often exists as spectral figures" (262), and their voice needs to be heard in order to break the vicious circle.

"Trauma and Identity in Pat Boran's Work: An Interview" by Melania Terrazas is a written record of the author's conversation with the Irish poet. The interview was made during the conference "Irish Itinerary 2018 (EFACIS):

Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Literature and Culture,” which took place at the University of La Roja, Spain. Boran reflected among others on his creative writing process, the exploration of identity in contemporary Ireland and gender issues. Referring to the concept of trauma in Irish society, the poet pointed out that “the changes in Irish society (...) have caused huge hurt and trauma and disappointment” (272) and the role of art in general is to find a way to describe different phenomena indirectly (272).

To conclude, *Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Culture* is an interesting work that offers a deep academic insight into the issue of trauma in contemporary Irish society and the way it is represented in culture. Five different sections: Literature and Film, Memory and Digital Archives, History, Music and Creative Writing offer a multiplicity of approaches to the concept of trauma—from individual to collective. The impact of power structures, such as the Catholic Church or turbulent political events—the Irish revolution 1916-1923 or Northern Ireland’s *Troubles*—have left their marks not only on individuals directly involved in particular events, but also on the whole Irish nation. That is the reason why the witnesses have had to speak in order to heal their wounds and to shape the future generations. The book is invaluable for readers interested in trauma studies and for everyone who wants to study Irish history and culture.

#### References

- Terrazas-Gallego, M. (Ed.) 2020. *Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Culture*. Oxford: Peter Lang.  
<https://www.peterlang.com/view/serial/REIR.DOA.27.04.2021>.