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Mo Chorp, Mo Rogha: Female Bodily Autonomy In Anglo-Irish

Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

This project deals with the historical circumstances which have limited the access to abortion in the Republic of Ireland and their impact in literature. First, I study the role of hegemonic Irish national identity in the lives of Irish women, manifested through four main themes: Catholicism, traditionalism, familism and masculinist heterosexuality. Next, I discuss how these themes have been fixed in Irish legislation and what are the effects this legislation has on the bodily autonomy of women. After a short overview of the state of the art, I move on to the analysis of different literary examples connected to this social and legal frame, namely to Eighth Amendment of the Irish constitution. First, I study Paula Meehan's poem "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" and Edna O'Brien's novel *Down By the River*; then, I comment on the main features of two anthologies aimed at campaigning for the repeal of the Eighth Amendment: *Repeal the 8th*, edited by Una Mullally, and *Autonomy: a book about taking our selves back*, edited by Kathy D'Arcy. I conclude that Meehan and O'Brien's texts challenge mythical representations of Irish femininity and open the way for a women-led tradition of writing on female bodily autonomy in Ireland, materialised in collections such as those of Mullally and D'Arcy, which prove representative of the issues surrounding reproductive justice in contemporary Ireland and stand as examples of creative activism.

Key words and concepts: bodily autonomy, national identity, abortion, Anglo-Irish literature.

1. Introduction

In 1983, the Eighth Amendment to the Irish constitution was passed, implying a ban on abortion in almost every circumstance, with direct consequences in the bodily autonomy of Irish women. The aim of this end of degree project (TFG) is to review how these restrictions have been portrayed in Anglo-Irish contemporary literature written after the adoption of this amendment, and what have been the effects of these representations.

In order to fulfil this goal, I divide the body of my dissertation into two parts. The first section works as a descriptive historical framework, dealing with the conformation of the Irish national identity and how it affected women, namely through laws which restricted their access to abortion. Once the context has been set, the next section explores literary samples of my subject matter. These are of two types: on the one hand, the poem “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks” by Paula Meehan and the novel *Down by the River* by Edna O’Brien are reviewed as literary examples denouncing the restrictive situation Irish women suffered, particularly Ann Lovett’s death and the X case; on the other hand, the anthologies *Repeal the 8th* and *Autonomy*—coordinated by Una Mullally and Kathy D’Arcy respectively—are analysed both for their content and for their role as means of change of the situation of Irish women coming from a grassroots movement, since the two of them were used to fund the campaign in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment during 2018.

Regarding theoretical framework, the following pages are written from a self-evident feminist position. Simultaneously, they rely on two key concepts: bodily autonomy and nation.

Bodily autonomy stands for the ability of being self-governing of one’s body. In this project, the concept is applied more specifically to women’s capacity of making

decisions on their reproductive potential; in that sense, it is a synonym of reproductive freedom. However, as professor Lisa Smyth notes, the ability to make a free “private” choice on this respect must be inserted into a broader context—one which interacts with the politicized construction of women’s embodiment—in order to understand how women’s reproduction has been constructed as a socio-political and moral problem (22). Stressing choice as the main issue fails to question the political context within which “privacy” is shaped (Smyth 24) and leaves behind the most vulnerable, such as young, racialized or low-income women. In contrast, a broader perspective includes the decision into the vindication of women’s selfhood, against a discourse that builds women’s embodiment around their ability to be mothers (Smyth 27). In other words, bodily autonomy

requires that all women, regardless of race, class, age, sexual orientation, or marital status, be able to avoid unwanted childbearing through the use of contraception and abortion and be able to bear children without being stigmatized, impoverished, or compelled to give up their education, employment or children (Reagan in Smyth 26-27).

Secondly, according to Anne Marie Thiesse, a nation is a community which becomes a reality the moment a group of individuals declares its existence and intends to prove it (Thiesse 18). In order to do so, the individuals must select a common heritage which the community will know and respect as a means of political affirmation : an “identity checklist” (Thiesse 18), which is, paradoxically, international. Symbolic and material items of this list are a history which sets a continuity with distinguished ancestors, a series of heroes incarnating national virtues, a language, cultural monuments, folklore, a typical landscape, a flag, or an anthem, among others (Thiesse 18); this system flourished in Europe since the eighteenth century. The belief on the distinct community

must be repeatedly endorsed by the initial group with “tenacious proselytism” (Thiesse 18) until it becomes automatically reproduced by the next generations; however, its fictional nature must be always born in mind. Following Thiesse’s conception, a human community enacts—or intends to enact—its existence in a territory once it recognises itself as a nation. Thus, the rules and regulations applied in that territory will reflect the founding elements of the identity checklist.

Along with Thiesse’s understanding of national identities, Justo Beramendi (1991) proposes a system to explain the relationships between them during their conformation. His approach consists of four referents: those of affirmation, analogy, opposition and reintegration. While the affirmative referent corresponds to the nation itself and includes its constituting elements—which are political, socioeconomic, ethnic and historical—(Beramendi 134), the negative referent works as the system from which the nation wants to emancipate and towards which it develops rejection¹ (Torres Feijó 442). Following this logic, England proves key to the construction of Irish identity as a referent of opposition.

In addition to Thiesse and Beramendi’s contributions, the understanding of national identities calls for a link between the individual and the community. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor provides such connection by elaborating on the politics of authenticity. He argues that the modern idea of individuals being unique agents, who must be true to their uniqueness, emerges as a way of thinking about the individuals’ capacity for moral reasoning (Taylor in Smyth 33), and that there is an assumption that people’s authentic selves are closely tied up to those of their national cultures, both of which require recognition in order to flourish (Smyth 33). In this way, not only people,

¹ In a secondary level, nations working as referents of analogy are models the affirmative referent emulates, whereas nations with a reintegrative referent wish to reunite with a fraternal community from which the affirmative referent was separated at a point in history (Beramendi 136).

but nations, claim authentic identities, thus entering in the realm of politics. While national identities order people's sense of who they are, national institutions aim at preserving the communal authenticity, allowing different degrees of contestation to this construct (Smyth 35). Accordingly, the dialectics of national authenticity are shown in the debate on female bodily autonomy within the Irish state.

As for periodization, this TFG covers the timeframe between 1983 and 2018: the years that the Eighth Amendment remained in force. However, other dates are used as references in the next section: on the one hand, 1740 marks the first Irish famine and works as a local milestone for the arrival of the Contemporary period; on the other hand, the Easter Rising in 1916 sets the first assertion of the Irish nation-state, thus allowing legislation to be passed progressively in the Irish Republic up to this day. The appendix features an outline of some of the most important events in Ireland since 1740.

2. To be an Irish woman

2.1. Irish national identity and women

Irish society, as those of the rest of European countries, has been a patriarchal organisation for centuries. Gender dynamics in contemporary Ireland—that is, since 1740—have been described by Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart (2017) according to several parameters.

The primary source of gender conditioning in the period under discussion has been the nuclear family, a unit which ideally divides men and women into providers and nurturers (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 312). In the case of Ireland, once a primarily rural society, families held a rigid sexual division of labour with strong allegiance to the father figure and constituted the centre of the local economy. This reality has been described as “familism” (Arensberg and Kimball in Smyth 42). Familism became hegemonic in

response to the Great Famine: as non-landowning peasantry practically disappeared, the proportion of small farmers increased; with this change, land became the main source of power and social status. The inheritance system shifted from the division of properties among the siblings to the advantage of the eldest son, in order to secure the farm size to avoid poverty (Smyth 42). As a result, women became increasingly dependent on the fathers and husbands, constrained to be mothers and workers in the house or the farm. Thus, they became more associated with subordination, maternity, purity and domesticity.

Along with the family, religion has been the second transmitter of gender norms (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 313), namely since the reinforcement of institutional Roman Catholicism by bishop Paul Cullen during the Victorian period (Barr and Ó Córrain 71-75). The Church offered moral support to the nuclear family model, portraying women as the moral instructors within the household and men as breadwinners².

Regarding labour, wage economy increased gender stratification: work became to refer to an external manly activity, while domestic chores were internalised as part of the feminine nurturing space. The realms of the private and the public were defined, to the point that motherhood was considered the ultimate calling for women. Thus, any woman with a paid job would be performing a “deprecation of the home” (Courtayne in Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 316). The arrival of the double income family model during the twentieth century did not suppose a significant change in the attribution of housework to women (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 318-319).

Finally, the relationships between men and women were almost exclusively designed around the institution of heterosexual marriage and the expectation that it would

² The influences of family and religion were complemented by a highly gendered curriculum in the formal education system that emerged in the nineteenth century, as well as by the gender rhetoric contained in the press, which became more popular as literacy increased (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 314).

bring children (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 320). Therefore, any deviation from the norm—such as premarital sex, childbearing outside the marriage, prostitution or abortion—would carry a stigma: if the main role for women was motherhood within the family, going against it constituted a “womanly crime”, perpetrated by “fallen women” (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 322).

The conditions presented above settled as part of the Irish idiosyncrasy during the process of national identification. In line with them, four central themes to hegemonic Irishness, reinforced by the referential opposition to England, can be identified: Catholicism, familism, traditionalism and masculinist heterosexuality (Smyth 37).

Catholicism became a nationalist trait because, as the Irish language declined, its practice worked as a means of maintaining a distinctively national culture, while, simultaneously, it conveyed heroic anti-colonial associations against England and Protestantism (Smyth 38). Given the pervasive influence of religion and the Church, the Catholic conception of family—a patriarchal unit based on marriage with distinct roles for men and women—, became also key to the Irish identity; underneath the religious ideal, the material conditions discussed above stressed the differences between men and women. Both the strong religious habitus and the familistic social organisation were considered particular enough to be moved to the centre of the Irish national imagery. It is not surprising, then, that the Virgin Mary became an iconic reference for women in Ireland, as Lia Mills points out (69).

In consonance with religion and familism, the opposition between tradition and modernity shaped Irishness in anti-colonial terms once again: against the Protestant, urban, individualistic and liberal culture associated to Englishness, Irishness appeared as Catholic, rural, familial and conservative (Smyth 43). As an example, 1943 Eamon de Valera’s discourse to the nation on 1943 Saint Patrick’s Day portrayed a land “whose

countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads” and was inhabited by “athletic youths” and “comely maidens” living “the life that God desires that men should live” (in Smyth 43). This division between youths and maidens, Smyth holds, “has been central to the hegemonic constructions of traditional Irishness, connecting the ethnic nation with a moral discourse of naturalized gender and sexuality, in disciplined and restrained terms” (44).

Lastly, Smyth argues that Irish identity has specifically been constructed as not-English through a discourse of masculine heroism and feminine vulnerability (45). While republican anti-colonial discourse asserts an exaggerated masculinity in opposition to a history of inferiority and helplessness, women become “the territory over which post-colonial authority is exercised” (46), either weak helpless virgins whose purity became “the measure of the nation” (46) or self-sacrificing mothers, like Mother Ireland.

Once a patriarchal outlook on Irishness was endorsed and the attempts for political independence succeeded, legislation in the new nation-state explicitly supported this social order.

2.2. The Law on women

The Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916 was a symbolically groundbreaking text, since it placed “Irishmen and Irishwomen” as equally entitled to the new political organization and its principles³. However, further legislation placed women in an explicitly distinct position in relation to men. It is the case of the 1937 *Bunreacht na hÉireann*⁴, the main supervisor of which was the Easter Rising only survivor at the time, Eamon de Valera. John Charles McQuaid, who would become Archbishop of Dublin, had

³ The participation of the *Cumann na mBan* (The Irishwomen’s Council) in the rising might account for this gesture.

⁴ In Irish, Constitution of Ireland

also a relevant influence in some parts of the text, such as the definition of the family in Article 41 (Mulligan 6). Its three first points read as follows⁵:

1 1° The State recognises the **Family** as the **natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society**, and as a **moral institution** possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.

2° The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as **indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State**.

2 1° In particular, the State recognises that by **her life within the home**, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2° The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that **mothers** shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in **labour to the neglect of their duties in the home**.

3 1° The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of **Marriage**, **on which the Family is founded**, and to protect it against attack.

These lines condense all the elements discussed in the previous section. On the one hand, the article recognises the family as the basic unit of Irish society, altogether with its rights on moral decisions prior to the laws of the state and the individual, according to Catholic and traditionalist teachings. On the other hand, the text explicitly locates women in the private sphere and acknowledges—with ironic honesty—that the housework they traditionally perform is key to the functioning of society. Also, the phrasing of the document shows how motherhood as the ultimate calling for women is so naturalised that

⁵ Highlights are mine.

it follows directly from their role within the family and the home; the state compromises to keep women in the private sphere, in charge of the raising of children, by avoiding the feminine engagement on wage labour. Finally, marriage closes the circle around domesticity, being recognised as the sacred lifelong institution that supports the family.

As seen above, the gendering of Irish national identity is relevant enough for the association between women and motherhood to be copper-fastened in the main legal document of the Irish Republic, until today. Hence, it is not surprising that reproductive politics in Ireland have been a central issue in the recent history of the country. While abortion was prohibited since the times of English rule, under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act (Field 609), contraception was only legalised in 1980, for married people and under medical prescription (Barry 57). Yet, this small shift towards birth control triggered the most conservative social agents in the Republic.

Contraception policies had been the first break between the laws of the State and the teachings of the Catholic Church (Barry 58). Moreover, Britain had made abortion available under the 1967 Abortion Act and the United States Supreme Court had declared abortion bans unconstitutional in 1973 (Field 609). Fearing further changes, several groups and individuals gathered to promote a ban on abortion in the Irish constitution under the name Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC) in 1981. Given that a national referendum is the only mechanism to modify the *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, the amendment would avoid legislation on abortion (Barry 58). PLAC lobbied the main Irish political parties into passing a referendum bill and, once the bill was passed, successfully led the campaign for the Tá/Yes vote (Field 609-610), despite the opposition of the Anti-Amendment Campaign (AAC). Thus, in September 1983, the Eighth Amendment was approved with 66.9% of the vote (Field 610).

2.3. The Eighth Amendment

The new amendment (Article 40.3.3°) had unprecedented, severe implications for the bodily autonomy of Irish women. It read as follows:

The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to the life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.

As Ursula Barry notes, the text not only prevents legislation on the termination of pregnancies within the Irish State, but also engages in the foetal rights discourse implemented by the American so called ‘pro-life’ movement (59). By granting the right to life of the unborn in equal terms with that of the mother, pregnancies become a conflict of interests in the eyes of the law (Hubbard in Barry 60). In such a situation, Catholic traditionalism has not been enough to support the Irish ‘pro-life’ ideology; rather, as Smyth recalls, anti-abortion discourse in the twentieth century has relied in the construction of the foetus as an autonomous human being, helped by the technological advances in pre-natal imaging which allow the creation of the iconic baby-foetus (28-29). Hence, anti-abortion discourse constructed a new medical argument; according to it, the unborn counts as a patient, in a context where life becomes a mere biological phenomenon to be monitored by medical authority (Franklin in Smyth 30).

After their success in the referendum, PLAC members continued to exert their influence in Irish society. During the following years, the Society for Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), a constituent member of PLAC, pursued injunctions against pregnancy counselling agencies and student unions giving information about abortion services abroad (Field 610). SPUC acted on the basis that these services were in breach of the Article 43.3.3° and was successful in all its trials, since the right to life of the unborn

was considered greater than the right to information of the woman (Barry 60). Thus, on behalf of the Eighth Amendment, both safe, legal abortion and the access to information about it were unavailable in the Irish Republic.

In 1992, however, the case of a fourteen-year-old girl, made pregnant after repeated sexual abuse by a family friend, put the amendment to test. The Attorney General v X injunction, commonly known as the X case, prevented X from travelling abroad to terminate her pregnancy. As a result, X was diagnosed as suicidal (Smyth 4). After the case struck the public conscience, X's family made an appeal to the Supreme Court, encouraged by the Government (Smyth 5). This appeal overturned the previous injunction, stressing that the mother's right to life should be given due regard (Attorney General v X 37). Therefore, as Smyth points out, the Eighth Amendment had facilitated limited legal abortion in Ireland: "precisely what it had been designed to prevent" (6).

As a result of the debate around the X case, the Government proposed three constitutional amendments to be voted in a national referendum in November 1992, as complements for Article 43.3.3°. On the one hand, the Twelfth Amendment intended to overturn the Supreme Court decision of allowing abortion on the grounds of risk of suicide, and was rejected by 65.35% of the voters. On the other hand, the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments intended to overturn the decisions preventing the right to travel for abortion and the right to distribute information about abortion services abroad, and respectively passed by 62.39% Tá/Yes and 59.88% Tá/Yes votes (Field 611). These three votes stressed the limitations of the Eighth Amendment and showed to what extent Irish society relied in exporting its issues with abortion rather than resolving them, as Sara Gerend points out (37).

The year 2002 saw another referendum regarding, among other restrictions, the risk of death by suicide as grounds for abortion, in line with the rejected Twelfth

Amendment. This proposal was again rejected by a narrow margin, 50.42% No votes and, after it, a period followed in which the abortion debate remained relatively out of mainstream politics (Field 612). However, the case of Savita Halappanavar in 2012 brought the issue back in focus. Ms Halappanavar had requested an abortion after suffering from complications in her pregnancy, which would have resulted in an inevitable miscarriage. She was denied the procedure, since the pregnancy did not present a direct threat to her life at the time of the request (Field 612-613). She eventually died due to complications from a septic miscarriage.

Ms Halappanavar's death arose social condemnation and triggered the activity of 'pro-choice' groups and individuals, who demanded action to political parties. This resulted in the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act (2013), which gave general effect to the Attorney General v. X conclusions (Field 613). With the upcoming 2016 general election in sight, groups as the non-hierarchical, women-led Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC) and the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment—featuring dozens of organisations such as political parties or trade unions—raised awareness on the topic and lobbied the main political parties into committing to a revision of the law. While several parties compromised to call for a referendum to repeal the amendment, the eventual solution passed through a Citizen's Assembly and a Joint Oireachtas⁶ Committee before involving a national vote (Field 613, 617). Thus, the referendum bill did not pass until March 2018. The proposal consisted in substituting the Eighth, Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments with the text "Provision may be made by law for the regulation of termination of pregnancies".

⁶ In Irish, the Legislature. It is formed by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), the Dáil (Legislative Assembly) and the Seanad (Senate)

The two months between the passing of the bill and the vote on May 25th saw intense campaigning on both sides. The Níl/No option was supported by two main organisations: Pro-Life Campaign—the successor organisation of PLAC—launched the Love Both brand, while Save the 8th united Youth Defence, the Life Insitute and several other local groups; between them, the Iona Institute—a group with links to the Catholic Church—acted as a coordinator (Field 620). The Tá/Yes side, however, relied strongly on grassroots activism and a civil society focus. Its campaign Together for Yes had three main supporters: ARC, the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment and the historic National Women’s Council of Ireland (Field 619). The Níl/No strategy focused on the proposed legislation to substitute the Eighth being too extreme and in the fear of increasing eugenic terminations, and relied in online advertising; Tá/Yes campaigners leaned on emotional arguments of care and compassion towards ‘crisis pregnancies’, with an important presence of supportive obstetricians and gynaecologists (Field 619-620). Even if most political representatives supported their option, Together for Yes main advantage was its strong local, ground organisation: trainings, canvassing and fund collections were organised by volunteers on a regular basis, along with marches, artistic initiatives and self-care sessions.

Eventually, the Eighth Amendment of the Bunreacht na hEireann was repealed by a margin of 66.4% to 33.6%. The results almost reverted those of the 1983 referendum. Thirty-nine of the forty Irish constituencies, both rural and urban, voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment, paving the way for more open legislation affecting women’s bodily autonomy.

2.4. Current situation

Legislation after the referendum arrived in December 2018 under the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act. This text allows abortions under four

circumstances: under Section 9, two registered medical practitioners must certify there is a serious risk to the life, or serious harm to the mental or physical health, of the woman in order to perform the procedure; under Section 10, emergency terminations may be performed by a single practitioner when he or she certifies the same conditions in Section 9 to be an immediate threat; Section 11 allows to end a pregnancy when two practitioners find the foetus is likely to die either before birth or twenty-eight days after it; finally, an abortion may be performed under Section 12 within three days after a practitioner has certified that the pregnancy has not exceeded twelve weeks.

The very title of the Act and its dispositions stress how the moral dilemma of abortion is resolved by engaging in medical, biologist logic in the Irish State—and this is the case, I would add, in most Western countries. The struggle for authenticity in the national community, with all the aforementioned elements in display, adapts to the interests conflicting within itself with arguments that evolve over time. Thus, the debate on abortion in Ireland, as the journalist Caelainn Hogan points out, is far from over. While anti-abortion groups deem the current Act as too extreme and perform vigils outside clinics “using child-sized coffins as props” (Hogan), women willing to terminate their pregnancy—namely those most vulnerable—confront “the lack of provision, the time restrictions on terminations, the illegal activities of anti-abortion campaigners – and an enduring legacy of shame” (Hogan). Bodily autonomy for Irish women is still to arrive.

3. State of the art

While, as seen in the previous section, there are several solid contributions to the matter of female bodily autonomy and national identity in Ireland, few academic works deal with the impact of the subject in literature or, more specifically, with the relationship between Anglo-Irish literature and the Eighth Amendment. Among these few contributions are those of Sara Gerend and Lia Mills. Their articles analyse how works

by Edna O'Brien and Paula Meehan, among others, have created alternative discourses of motherhood and femininity against that promoted by the Irish state through its abortion policies.

Sara Gerend's article on the novel *Down by the River* starts by setting some antecedents of feminine literary representation in Irish Revival authors, such as W.B. Yeats or P.H. Pearse. Gerend notes that these authors have repeatedly used motherhood as a resource to construct the Irish national identity (35). While Yeats uses the figure of the mother as a "selfless protector of children" (Gerend 35) who is confined to the domestic sphere and has the mission to raise the new Irish masculine citizens, Pearse constructs the figure of the "Mother Ireland", combining the traces of the prophetess Kathleen Ní Houlihan and the Virgin Mary into a desexualized, chaste figure against the colonial rape of English rule (Gerend 36). The critic argues that these representations in literary Irish nationalism have relegated women to a "passive moral and symbolic sphere that has very little to do with most Irish women's actual lives" (Gerend 36). Given the importance of writers and politicians such as Yeats or Pearse in the construction of the Irish nation, it is by no means surprising that the laws of the Republic correspond to this ideal. Therefore, the Eighth Amendment stands as a tool to enforce motherhood for the sake of the nation (Gerend 36). Gerend goes on arguing that authors such as Edna O'Brien have strived to create new spaces for Irish women and mothers through literature.

Mills holds a thesis similar to Gerend's: by examining several poems of different Irish female writers in English and Irish, she concludes that these authors destabilize the union between the national and the feminine and create new spaces for Irish women in literature. Through the subversion of the mythical feminine figures that sustain Irish romantic, nationalistic literature—the muse, the Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland (Mills 36)—, poets such as Paula Meehan, Eavan Boland or Paula Donlon occupy the poetry

panorama with the formerly silenced experiences of Irish women; furthermore, Mills claims, they also occupy the Irish civil and political life (86). Fully aware that the laws of their country mirror a mythical outlook on womanhood, Paula Meehan and Paula Donlon underline the cruelty of the Eighth Amendment using the story of Ann Lovett (Mills 70) and the X case (Mills 84) respectively in their texts.

In order to find some previous critical comments on the most recent texts used in this project, *Autonomy* and *Repeal the 8th*, the main sources are press articles inserted in the political atmosphere of the previous months to the referendum on the Eighth Amendment. *The Irish Times* review by Martina Evans underlines the diverse range of voices and genres contained in both volumes, while it asserts that their readers “could learn surprising things about their fellow Irish women”. This claim points out how these women’s everyday reality does not fit into the space of Irish femininity. Also, regarding *Autonomy*, its editor Kathy d’Arcy acknowledges in an interview to *The Stinging Fly* her belief in the power of creative writing for reaching people’s conscience and triggering a social change. Accordingly, she places her book in the tradition of Irish women writers who have challenged the status quo and made room for themselves in the literary panorama.

In short, the articles by Gerend and Mills provide some academic background for the analysis of texts such as those of my first two study cases; however, there are no similar resources dealing with *Autonomy* and *Repeal the 8th*, apart from the comments on press reviews and interviews mentioned above. Hence, this project attempts a brief, introductory analysis to these works, having into account its topicality, but also the risks it implies.

4. The Eighth and literature

4.1. Songs of outrage

The following examples deal with two of the most well-known and enraging crisis pregnancies in Ireland. While Paula Meehan's "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" questions prototypical Irish femininity with a special focus on its religious side, Edna O'Brien's *Down By the River* exposes national anxieties re-interpreting the X case, which, as seen, worked as a turning point in the development of Irish reproductive politics.

4.1.1. The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks

On 31st January 1984, fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett died after giving birth completely alone. She was found with her dead baby at a shrine devoted to the Virgin Mary at the town of Granard, county Longford, and died after a few hours. The death of both the girl and the baby struck the country just a year after the Eighth Amendment came into force (Lentin). The question was raised of what would have happened if Ann Lovett had had an abortion or proper support instead of closed doors because of her teenage pregnancy, and her case was not ignored by contemporary Irish writers. In the text "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks", the poet Paula Meehan (Dublin, 1955) exposes the hypocrisy towards women's experiences and reproductive rights in Ireland by successfully inverting the role given to the Virgin Mary in Catholicism, as she deals with the death of Ann Lovett.

The poem, first published in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991) and one of the most popular texts by the author (Auge 50), gives voice to the statue of the Virgin in the shrine where Ann Lovett was found in agony. From there, the sculpture describes the surroundings in detail and, most importantly, offers her own subversive account of the story. In Catholic tradition, the Virgin Mary is repeatedly described as a passive

motherly figure: “Mother of Mercy”, “clement”, “loving” and an “advocate” of humankind to the eyes of God are some ways to describe her, for example, in the well-known prayer “Hail, Holy Queen”. Also, the epithet of Virgin itself suggests the idea of purity and absent sexual desire. All these characteristics relate to submission and passiveness. However, Meehan’s text allows the Virgin to transgress this image. In the poem, the sculpture shows her discomfort with the fact that she has to be “stuck up” (line 6) in the grotto and makes clear that she has been “fit to a myth of a man crucified” (line 21) against her will, as the constant repetitions of “they” (lines 20, 21, 25 and 27) show: it is other people who have called her “Blessed, Holy, Virgin” (line 20). Also, she shows no mercy for Ann Lovett, “the child/ who came with fifteen summers to her name” (lines 56-57), when the girl cries to her, refusing to intercede for her:

I did not move,

I didn’t lift a finger to help her,

I didn’t intercede with heaven

nor whisper the charmed word in God’s ear. (lines 64-67)

Moreover, the statue reveals her sexual aspirations by wishing “to be incarnate, incarnate/ maculate and tousled in a honeyed bed” (lines 41-42). As the previous examples show, Meehan reverses the three main attributes of the Virgin in her Catholic traditional depiction—which, as seen, were projected on Irish women—: sexual purity, passiveness and her role as the merciful, motherly intermediary between Christ and humankind. She even does so to the extent of making the statue long for the solstice and pray to the feminized sun, linking the figure with pre-Christian celebrations:

On a night like this I number the days to the solstice

and the turn back to light.

O sun

centre of our foolish dance,
burning heart of stone,
molten mother of us all,
hear me and have pity. (lines 68-74)

As Mills recalls, “the extraordinary power of this poem lies in its subversion of our familiar sense of the mythic” (72).

As for Ann Lovett, her presence in the text shows a contrasting behaviour to that of the statue. While the Virgin wants to descend from her pedestal, the girl looks for help in an ideal of holiness, in which she hopes to find compassion and, as Mills puts forward, a possible motherly figure (70); be it either to look for the comfort of a mother or to know how to be a mother herself, the truth is that the statue gives Ann Lovett no reply. By considering the traditional association between woman, mother and Virgin Mary, Lovett’s presence in the grotto appears as an attempt to approach a role model of femininity that the young girl did not fulfil due to her out-of-marriage pregnancy.

The confrontation of both figures is a powerful image, that becomes even more powerful when recalling the story of the Nativity of Jesus: the same way Mary and Joseph could not find any place to rest in Bethlehem and had to shelter in a manger, Ann Lovett had to give birth to her son “without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand” (line 59) at the only place she could find, “far from the town tucked up in little scandals/ bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises” (line 62). Meehan uses this well-known imagery to underline the lack of mercy of the statue, in addition to the cruel taboo of teenage motherhood. The poet portrays the anger that the death of the young girl provoked by presenting a strange image of the Virgin: the behaviour of the statue is as unnatural and shocking as the death of a defenceless fifteen-year-old girl. Through this

text, readers receive a portrait of a society unable to resolve the struggle between the ideal religious morals and the everyday reality of women.

At the same time these tensions are being displayed, Meehan takes the opportunity to re-signify the space in which the events take place. Instead of as a mere, prototypically Irish, rural background, Meehan presents nature as an active element in the text: while seasons mark the pace of people's lives and rites—with communions and weddings happening in the spring and the summer (lines 31 and 36), and funerals taking place in the autumn (line 43)—the allusions to plants in full bloom, the weather and the passing of time by the observation of celestial bodies are constant. These examples suggest an effort to retrieve a pagan, animistic spirituality on Meehan's part, altogether with a new outlook on femininity—skilfully placed in the voice of the role model she wants to criticise. As Andrew Auge puts it, Meehan intended to show that “if Irish women lived under the aegis of a nature goddess, in which the potency of feminine sexual energy was celebrated rather than denigrated, then the tragedies of Anne Lovett [...] and countless others might have been averted” (53).

To sum up, “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks” shows a clear inversion of the Catholic Marian depiction, based on maternal clemency, passiveness and an intermediary role. This inversion is reinforced by Ann Lovett's extreme situation and serves as an example of the contradictions of Irish society regarding women's reproductive rights at the time the events took place. Furthermore, the text proposes a return to a pre-Catholic spiritualism, in which femininity is celebrated through nature. Paula Meehan questioned the central role model of Irish femininity in times when the distance between it and actual women's lives was constitutionally denied, thus becoming an agent towards change.

4.1.2. Down by the River

In the years following the 1983 referendum, not only poets dealt with the experiences of Irish women. After more than three decades of literary career, the prolific writer Edna O'Brien (Tuamgraney, Co. Clare, 1930) published *Down by the River* in 1996. In doing so, she dealt with central questions risen in Ireland by the X case, only four years after its resolution. In O'Brien's novel, fourteen-year-old Mary MacNamara becomes pregnant as a result of rape by her own father. After a short period in a religious boarding school and the death of her mother, Mary finds herself suffering deep trauma, alone with her rapist. She first elopes to Galway for some days; when she is taken back to her house by the police, the girl asks for the help of her widow neighbour, Betty Crowe, to have an abortion in England. The night before the procedure, Mary and Betty decide to return to Ireland, since another neighbour, Noni, has reported them to the Gardaí⁷ after finding information of the abortion clinic in Mrs Crowe's house. Mary is then put under the jurisdiction of the court and sent to a cousin's house in Dublin, while her case is made public and debated all over the media. Mary manages to escape and contact a lawyer, Cathal, who takes her case to the Supreme Court. Eventually, just as the real Ms. X, Mary MacNamara miscarries after winning her appeal.

O'Brien's re-interpretation of the facts is a valuable exposure of Irish society of the day. To fully engage in the novel's argument, it is necessary to acknowledge the cause-consequence, naturalistic logic of the text, in which character's become rather archetypal. Once this pact has been accepted, one of the traits the novel describes best is the importance of the patriarchal family model. The MacNamaras are an example of household in which the father figure condenses all the authority, while the mother and the daughter live submissively; as seen, this family model succeeded in Ireland, especially in

⁷ In Irish, the Police.

rural areas. The best proof of the women's submissive attitude is their tendency to silence, particularly in front of men, throughout most of their appearances in the novel; as Mr MacNamara admits, Mary is "Quiet... Deep water... Like her mother" (O'Brien 217). However, the most evident sign of the weight of the familistic model is Mr MacNamara's behaviour. As mentioned in previous sections, the power of Irish traditional families was intimately connected to landowning. Succeeding in such an economic system would be a reason for pride and respectability to the father. However, as Gerend points out (46), James MacNamara has this satisfaction denied: the very first page of the novel mentions that his property is a dirty, valueless wasteland. Mr MacNamara is an uneducated man, whose only moral authority comes from being the head of the household, following the motto "might before right" (O'Brien 3); without fulfilling this role, he is simply an ignorant lower-class man, an embodiment of the colonial stereotype on Irish men (Gerend 44). Deprived of a reason to identify with the national hegemonic masculinity, James MacNamara rapes his daughter—significantly, near the bog—in an attempt to assert his power over what he considers another part of his property.

After reading contributions by Patrice Cormier Hamilton (1994) and Emy Koopman (2012), I have previously argued (Cernadas 2019) how the tropes of rape and incest are used to stress failed masculinity, referring to Nobel Prize Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. This argument works similarly in *Down By the River*: the same way Cholly Breedlove rapes his daughter Pecola suffering from trauma and a deep sense of powerlessness, James MacNamara assaults his daughter Mary trying to affirm his patriarchal masculinity, intimately linked to Irish national identity. In this sense, the resource to rape and incest is a powerful device on the part of Edna O'Brien. However, the use of the father figure as the culprit, changing X case facts, has a potentially dangerous reading. By relying on the cruelty of the story, O'Brien invites her readers to

reflect upon Irish abortion laws from an emotional standpoint; yet, her denouncement works within the limits of a dysfunctional family. Should readers think that crisis pregnancies only happen in such backgrounds? Even if the novel shows how the familistic model can be a burden, it does not meddle with its idealness. As Smyth notes, the X case shocked Ireland precisely because it implied a conventional family in distress with both parents supporting her daughter's desire of having an abortion, and, therefore, it had appealed to the common good of the nation (145). By adding the trope of incest to the plot, O'Brien avoids stressing how all unwanted pregnancies are a threat to women's bodily autonomy.

Of course, *Down by the River* does portray how national identity governs a woman's body. The text uses three main elements to stress this influence: tradition, the law and space. As for tradition, the novel shows its power and the social groups trying to maintain it as enshrined in the Bunreacht na hÉireann. This is best embodied in the figure of Roisin, a strong anti-abortion advocate who arrives at the village where the MacNamaras live to alert rural women of the abortions being performed in other countries, especially in England. The focus on England is not accidental: as Gerend points out (45), so called pro-life groups as represented by Roisin try to construct Ireland as a moral paradise against the former colonisers, in whose land "death was offer at a cut price" (O'Brien 134). In the same line, traditional discourses around the responsibility for unwanted pregnancies and how they are a threat to the morality of the nation are uttered by listeners to a radio program in the chapter "Strangers". In it, Mary—whose name obviously recalls that of the Virgin—is described as a "Magdalene", a "slut" whose case "people with liberal tendencies" use to "destroy the country" and who should be sent "to

the laundry that she's named after⁸ (O'Brien 186-187). Also, by depicting a radio broadcast, O'Brien stresses how the media amplified the debate on the X case within Irish society.

At the same time, the law appears as the main obstacle to Mary's autonomy. The novel not only portrays the strictness of Irish constitution—as one of the MacNamara's neighbours puts it, “the law of the land [...] The Law of God” (O'Brien 139)—, but also how patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted among judges. The first chapter of the novel, “A Fresh Crime”, already confronts Mary's rape with the “powerful men” embodying “the whole paraphernalia of the law in motion”, “in the City far away” (O'Brien 5): the contrast between the helpless teenager and the men responsible for applying the law is at the core of the text, and is best shown in the judges' meeting described in “Supper”: while judge Donal refers to Mary as a “little slut about to pour piss on the nation's breast”, judge Cooney coldly states that, even if the girl is in the hospital in an unsound mental state, “the right to travel *simpliciter* cannot take precedence over the right to life” and that, if Mary is in any despair, it is in “despair of salvation” (O'Brien 167). Later on, judge Mahoney admits that, even if he believes Mary is actually suicidal, he wishes “she had gone and done what she had to do and left our lovely constitution with a ribbon round it” (O'Brien 253).

Apart from both tradition and the law, Mary MacNamara is oppressed by the space she inhabits. Like many other Irish women, the girl can only escape compulsory motherhood outside the countryside. As she admits to Luke, the young man she meets in her elopement to Galway, “out in the country things get very murky” and she “would like

⁸ The Magdalene laundries or Magdalene asylums were institutions run mainly by Catholic orders from the 18th to the 20th century, designed to house “fallen women”. In these institutions, women were compelled to work as a means of “penance”. The last Irish Magdalene asylum was closed in 1996 (Higgins) and Irish government issued a compensation fund for their survivors in 2013, to which the religious orders refused to contribute (O'Sullivan).

to live in a city because if you scream someone can hear you” (O’Brien 98). An Irish city, however, is not enough. Mary and Betty must travel to England to get Mary’s abortion, in a “big strange city”, “far from home” (O’Brien 128). In the flight back, Betty sympathizes with Mary, who has been expelled of her own home because of her unwanted pregnancy, and wishes “they could stay up here in the heavens forever [...] in some lost unmapped region” (O’Brien 144). As for Mary, she fights the strong grip over her autonomy—from the moment of rape to the very end of the plot, including the expectations hidden in her name—dissociating from her body and the foetus. When her father is assaulting her, she finds herself in “a place cut from every place else, and her body too, the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there” and she responds by repeating to herself that “it does not hurt if you are not you” (O’Brien 4). While at the convent, she refuses to exercise “trying to have no body, to elude it” (O’Brien 34) and when Betty takes her to the city to a gynaecological revision, Mary imagines herself “bent over a microscope [...] finding the two bodies, her own and his; body and antibody” and plotting to “starve them both” (O’Brien 117). When she is staying at her cousin Veronica’s, Mary avoids looking at herself in the shower because she feels her body is “hateful, an alien” (O’Brien 180).

As in the original case, Mary eventually wins her appeal, but the sentence becomes unnecessary, since she miscarries. Ironically, her body seems to revolt against the pressure she has endured. O’Brien not only mirrors the X case outcome, but also suggests how alternative spaces for womanhood and motherhood can be constructed in Ireland. On the one hand, several characters show compassion towards Mary from different backgrounds and with different arguments, such as Betty or Molly, the teenage daughter of the judge responsible for Mary’s case in the Supreme Court. Betty, who is unable to conceive, has always wanted have children and abortion goes “against everything” she

“believe[s] in” (O’Brien 126), but she still provides Mary with the support she needs from an adult. In “Oh My Ducats, Oh My Daughter”, Molly bluntly asks her father to bend the law and to pursue the real criminal: Mary’s rapist; she even asks the judge what he would do if she were in Mary’s situation, and accuses him of being far from understanding the girl’s suffering, since he is part of the group of “men”, “dignitaries”, “pillars of society” who “go to mass and the sacraments every Sunday” (O’Brien 242). On the other hand, the ending of the novel suggests a future in which Irish women can raise their voices against compulsory motherhood: after being silent through most of the text, Mary finds her agency by singing with a voice “low and tremulous at first”, then a “great crimson quiver of sound going up” answering to the public’s “own souls’ innermost cries” (O’Brien 265). As Gerend puts it, “the Irish woman’s voice is described as an intense, abrupt force that thaws the space of imposed cultural silence on motherhood” (51). Also, as an anecdote, O’Brien shyly hints at how the Irish countryside could be a place of strength and celebration of life rather than a hostile space for women in “A Fresh Crime”: just as in “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks”, in contrast with the struggles to come, the surroundings of the bog bloom “in full regalia” as “a carnival sight”, at the same time the narrator invokes the sun (O’Brien 1).

All in all, *Down by the River* condenses how patriarchal familism, catholic morals and the referential opposition to the former Irish colonisers, all core elements of the Irish national identity as fixed in the Bunreacht Na hÉireann, were against the dignity and the bodily autonomy of Irish women. Even if the combination of cruel circumstances such as rape and incest can make the arguments in favour of reproductive freedom collapse, Edna O’Brien creates alternative discourses on Irish women in a time when the contradictions of the Eighth Amendment were most evident. By doing so, she joins a list of women acting towards change from the realm of literature.

4.2. The 2018 referendum campaign

The next pages explore the main themes displayed in the anthologies *Repeal the 8th* and *Autonomy*. Both books were published during the previous months to the referendum which repealed the Eighth Amendment and have a key element in common: apart from collecting art, thoughts and personal stories around reproductive rights in Ireland, both titles were used to fund the Yes campaign and Irish organisations fighting for bodily autonomy⁹. This means that not only the anthologies kept up the debate from a discursive point of view, but they also contributed materially to a shift in Irish women's situation.

4.2.1. Repeal the 8th

Repeal the 8th is an anthology edited by the Dublin-based journalist Una Mullally. It is defined in its cover as “a collection of stories, essays, poetry, art and photography emerging from, and inspired by, the movement for reproductive rights in Ireland”. The book was published thanks to a successful crowdfunding, supported by 475 people; this means that the publication process actively implied a critical mass of potential readers, but also that it ensured financial stability for the contents to be independent.

Una Mullally's introduction explains how *Repeal the 8th* attempts to “document the aspects of a movement that are often forgotten when its goal has been achieved” (1): the art, reflections and stories that social change inspires. Mullally is fully aware that these cultural products tend to be forgotten once social movements reach their goals; therefore, she intends to preserve the “stories we tell ourselves and each other” in such times (1). It is in the light of this intention that I consider personal stories, interviews and

⁹ While 50% of the profits from *Repeal the 8th* were destined to the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment (Mullally), all profits from *Autonomy* were directed to “support those working to ensure that all women have access to the full range of reproductive healthcare, including safe, legal abortion” (*Autonomy*).

essay-like reflections as literary products for my analysis, as has been done with personal documents attesting historical events¹⁰.

As a book intending to capture “conflicting narratives” about the idea of Ireland (Mullally 1) to be discerned by a national vote, it is not surprising that *Repeal the 8th* texts are aimed at triggering reflection. Most of the pieces, either personal stories or those fitting into prototypically literary genres, engage in the idea of ‘starting a conversation’ about reproductive rights in Ireland. It is obviously the case of Lisa McInerney’s short story “The important thing is that we start a conversation”, in which a class of teenagers set a debate on the issue of abortion after one of the students has read aloud a story about going to the UK for a termination. It is also the case, among others, of Anne Enright’s “The question of consent”, which describes the 1983 vote on the Eighth Amendment as a “tribal, symbolic” process—thus recognising the link between national identity and the legislation on female bodily autonomy—and equates sex without consent to ‘pregnancy without consent’: by accepting the Christian conception that an embryo is a human being from the moment of conception, Enright poses the question of what right has a human being to be inside another one without permission, whether it is seen as a sacred act, in the case of motherhood, or as a sexual act, in the case of rape. She concludes that the argument “may sound slightly absurd, not to mention harsh, but it is exactly as harsh and absurd as the Eighth Amendment to the Irish constitution, which is widely understood without making any sense” (Mullally 29).

As mentioned above, the book intends to collect and preserve silenced stories. In this sense, its texts are representative of the issues surrounding reproductive rights in Ireland during the latest decades. The most common tropes in the collection are young

¹⁰ I am thinking, without any intention to engage in any criticism on the matter, in Samuel Pepys diary, Pêro Vaz de Caminha’s letter on the finding of Brazil or Christopher Columbus letter of the first voyage, to quote some examples.

women experiencing unwanted pregnancies and women travelling abroad to get abortions, who in many cases are the same people; Sinéad Gleeson's short story "Infinite for now" is one of these examples. Gleeson narrates how a teenage girl falls in love with a boy with whom she has her first sexual experience. When she shares her feelings with the boy, he ghosts her. Shortly after, the girl finds out that she is pregnant and travels to London for an abortion. When the summer has elapsed in which she has gone through a love deception and the experience of an abortion, the boy texts back. Gleeson pictures a prototypical situation, in which the boy refuses to take responsibility neither for the emotional attachment experienced by his partner nor to the unwanted pregnancy; yet, while this is by itself an unjust situation, the author introduces the experience of abortion in the plot, thereby adding further distress to the girl's position. Apart from providing a plausible, everyday story with which the readers can sympathize, a reading can be made that the Irish state, like the boy in the story, is unaware of the suffering Irish women are experiencing and refuses to take responsibility for the problem, leaving it to women themselves to solve it abroad.

However, as Enright points out in her piece, travelling is a "middle class solution" (Mullally 30), not available to every woman in a crisis pregnancy. Thus, *Repeal the 8th* also includes some cases that risk being overlooked, such as those of lower-class and migrant women, who could not afford a termination abroad and, in the case of asylum seekers, could also have their application disregarded¹¹ (NYCI). On behalf of the latter, Ellie Kisiyombe's testimony "To Be Included and Heard" celebrates how she decided to intervene in a Repeal the Eighth march in Dublin to vindicate the right to safe and legal terminations for all women living in Ireland, while Emmet Kirwan's poem "Heartbreak"

¹¹ Women seeking for asylum in Ireland still face great obstacles due to their administrative status when trying to access a termination under the current Irish abortion legislation. More information can be consulted in the ARC website.

tells the story of a girl who could not afford to travel and became a single mother of a boy—a boy who will eventually mend her mother’s heart and “help create an Ireland that will stand in awe of all mná¹²” (Mullally 175).

Apart from the themes mentioned so far, I find two reflections to be most enriching in *Repeal the 8th*. The first is a question posed by Ailbhe Smith in the interview “The obvious explanations on how power is held and exercised over women are very basic”, when talking about Irish women making their intimate abortion experiences public: why is it that we are only moved by personal stories? Smith admits not to have an answer (Mullally 140), but she points at an interesting lesson that the referendum campaigners seem to have learnt: empathy has a greater impact than mere reasoning, and literature is a privileged vehicle for stories of empathy that brings with itself the privacy of fiction. Enhancing the perspective of writers who inspired their works in real cases, such as Meehan or O’Brien, authors in *Repeal the 8th*—and *Autonomy*—create stories to trigger compassion and, eventually, social change.

The second reflection I selected is included in Kitty Holland’s piece “Abortion, Regret and Choice”. Holland points out how the concept of choice is a class privilege, and how she felt that the Yes campaign had been dominated by “middle-class identity politics” rather than by an “all embracing feminist movement” that tackled economic inequality (Mullally 45). Yet, Holland points at how her privilege to have a choice on her two abortions was also a responsibility, a question to which nobody other than herself could provide any answer (Mullally 49). Furthermore, she stresses how to terminate a pregnancy she wanted to continue responded to prototypical femininity on a different level: that of being caring and selfless, putting everyone else’s needs before hers (Mullally

¹² In Irish, women.

51-52). Thus, she acknowledges her class privilege, but stresses how gender still became a strong constraint. Ultimately, Holland refers to the very definition of autonomy: the ability to decide whether to stop or to continue with a pregnancy whatever the circumstances.

In short, *Repeal the 8th* presents everyday issues surrounding reproductive rights in contemporary Ireland with the vehemence expected for a collection of texts intending to be a testimony of a social movement. Yet, it does not forget to problematise the pillars on which the movement is constructed and to take advantage in art as a vehicle for change.

4.2.2. Autonomy: a book about taking our selves back

Autonomy is a collection of poems, short stories, speeches and essays, among other genres, edited by the Cork-based poet and professor Kathy D’Arcy. Her experience as a creative writing teacher and a community worker convinced her that writing on the topic of bodily autonomy would have an impact on readers and authors that facts or protests could not achieve (*Autonomy*); therefore, she made a call for submissions on the topic with the independent publishing house New Binary Press. The results are eighty-four texts from both well-known writers and beginners, with a broad scope of perspectives on bodily autonomy and a clear tendency to creative writing rather than to academic or didactic discourse: of all the pieces, forty-five are poems, nineteen are short stories, and there are even examples of short film scripts and fictional political proclamations.

As a book emerging prior to a referendum on abortion legislation, *Autonomy* obviously contains multiple texts on issues surrounding reproductive justice in contemporary Ireland. As in *Repeal the 8th*, many stories deal with the experience of travelling abroad to access terminations. Some account for unwanted pregnancies, such as Margaret Cahill’s “Day Trip”, Elaine Cosgrove’s “The Loop” or Emilie Roberts

“Edges”; on the contrary, “Grace’s Story” by Tracey Smith describes how she had to travel for a labour induction once the daughter she expected was diagnosed with a fatal foetal abnormality, as this could not be done in Ireland if the life of the mother was not at risk. Also, pieces like Alana Daly Mulligan’s poem “The Pictures You Don’t Show” engage in the political climate before the vote and accuse the No campaigners of concealing the real stories of women behind sensationalist propaganda, while texts such as Anna Foley’s “Chestnut Park” hint at the problem of women having abortifacients on their own. Yet, other texts in the collection address broader issues related to the relationship between bodies and society, thus enhancing the concept of autonomy that has been under discussion so far. It is the case, among others, of Sophie Segura’s poem on breastfeeding in public, “Lull”, of Megan Croinin’s poem on the size canon, “> (Greater Than)”, or the question of consent in Nicola Moffat’s “Matryoshka”, a poem accounting for the violations women learn to endure since childhood, as their lives become measured “by the hands/and laws/ of men” (D’Arcy 39).

As *Repeal the 8th*, *Autonomy* aims at representing all collectives affected by the lack of bodily autonomy in Ireland; what is more, the call-for-submissions system proves that people from all walks of life feel compelled to write about the subject¹³. While Elizabeth Rose Murray asserts her fulfilment as a woman despite not being a mother in “Hidden Places”, Dick Edelstein’s “Horoscope” brings up the validity of single women adopting, both texts vindicating models of femininity and motherhood differing from the national ideal. Accordingly, Eileen Flynn and Emily Waszak stand in their speeches for the inclusion in the movement for bodily autonomy of traveller women¹⁴ and migrant

¹³ This is true for writers in English, as those being addressed in this project, but also in Irish: *Autonomy* contains poems by Dairena Ní Chinnéide and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

¹⁴ Irish Travellers are an indigenous minority, with distinct traditions and customs, the most important of which is nomadism. Historically, they have suffered prejudice and exclusion in Irish society (ITM).

women respectively, as Trish Connolly stresses in “Why I Couldn’t March in Dublin This Year” the limitations that disabled women, like her, face under the Eighth. As for the LGBT community, fictional pieces such as Claire Hennessy’s “Colony” include lesbian representation, while Matt Kennedy, as an Irish trans man, describes how being assigned female at birth is “a constitution of who I am so they could make a choice for me” (D’Arcy 239); Kennedy, “[...] capable of getting pregnant/ But not of being a mother” (240), points at how transitioning meant abandoning his Irish identity, as he was abandoning motherhood as well, and advocates for the ability to choose of anyone with that same capacity until Ireland, an “empty house”, “feels like home” (240).

Again, two themes can be highlighted in *Autonomy*. On the one hand, several texts denounce the forced control over women’s bodies under medical arguments, as in Marcella O’Connor’s short story “The Great Hunger”, where a fourteen-year-old girl made pregnant as a result of rape is forcibly fed after she has gone in hunger strike to demand an abortion; when the girl is diagnosed as suicidal by seven psychologists and finally allowed to have the procedure, she is constrained to comply to a c-section, as they have waited “too long” for other methods (D’Arcy 27). This control is best seen, however, in two dystopic texts: “Colony”, by Claire Hennessy, and “Vessel”, by Tina Pisco and Amelia de Buyl-Pisco. “Colony” recreates how, by the 2160’s, the Colonies—human settlements in other planets—educate girls to become “sacred vessels” (SV) to ensure population growth. Girls between nine and sixteen are assigned male partners to conceive, their pregnancies are monitored, and they are indoctrinated to sacrifice their selfhood for the Colonies. SV Eleanor Coyle—who is in love with her classmate Natasha—decides to flee her Colony to get an abortion, after becoming pregnant with her assigned partner, Bryan. Finding Eleanor becomes a top priority and an investigation begins, the evidence of which are the fragments that form the short story. With these fragments, readers

perceive how, despite the futuristic setting, the reality of women is very much alike to that of Ireland under the Eighth Amendment: schools are still named after saints (D'Arcy 12), women keep receiving unsolicited sexual comments and insulted if they reject masculine attention (20), motherhood is socially constructed as a sacred duty and the State controls the decisions women can make over their pregnancies. The same association works for "Vessel": in the future this film script designs, pregnant women must sign a contract and accept to be monitored by a "BabySafe" bracelet; if they breach the contract, any citizen can report them to the police. The protagonist, Jane, is eventually interned in the Farm, a facility for pregnant women who do not comply with the slow violations of their autonomy, and eventually discovers with horror a room full of unconscious pregnant women being monitored and tied to their beds. Both "Colony" and "Vessel" are examples, then, of how Irish women feel their bodies are being controlled by society and the law to an extent that should only be enclosed in science-fiction.

On the other hand, many of the texts in *Autonomy* show a high awareness on the effects the State, the Church and tradition have had over women historically. Two of them stand out: fragments of Fiona O'Connor's play "she had a ticket in mind" and Galway East For Choice's "Proclamation". O'Connor's selection emulates a history lesson in which a group of girls imagines alternative narratives of Irish society and shares the stage with the mythical queen Medb and feminine characters from some of the most canonical Anglo-Irish plays, such as Pegeen from John Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and Juno from Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. All characters on stage deal with Juno's travel for abortion with symbolic, absurd dialogues, in which I find one line to be most significant: "So then we said we might as well all be Mary. If we couldn't be our real selves." (D'Arcy 207). For its part, "Proclamation" emulates the tone of the 1916 Declaration of Independence to demand, by the "2018 Uprising", the repeal of the Eighth

Amendment; the Mná Na hÉireann sign a document with which they refuse to comply and to beg for the respect they deserve (D'Arcy 95). Thus, both “she had a ticket in mind” and “Proclamation” re-signify symbols of the national Republican tradition so that women can claim them as part of their identity.

All in all, *Autonomy* is a thorough exercise of voicing and a multi-perspective account of how bodily autonomy is experienced in Ireland. Being an extensive collection, it grasps the opportunity to explore the topic in a nuanced, broad light, and becomes a valuable example of creative activism.

5. Conclusion

The previous pages have shown how Irish national identity as enshrined by the laws of the country, namely the Eighth Amendment, is a tight grip on Irish women's bodily autonomy, and how Irish writers have been able to recognise and challenge that limitation with their writing. A close reading of the texts by Paula Meehan and Enda O'Brien shows how the Virgin Mary and the Mother, mythical feminine figures of Irish national identity, are reshaped with the pretext of the famous cases of Ann Lovett and Ms. X to trigger a shift in their readers' mentality on feminine bodily autonomy in Ireland. Following such antecedents, the anthologies *Repeal the 8th* and *Autonomy* prove the existence of a woman-led tradition of art for change in the Republic of Ireland, which has been able not only to appeal to the minds of the readers, but also to fund the campaign to repeal the legislation harming women the most. Accordingly, the revision of the four study cases proves how the writing in this women-led tradition evolves as the arguments made against bodily autonomy take new shapes. While these pieces still challenge the definition of womanhood as endorsed by the Catholic Church and the State historically, recent texts portray anxieties about how bodily autonomy has been turned into a right to

be monitored by medical authority. At the same time, authors strive to represent the struggles all people affected by abortion legislation, portraying a comprehensive position on the matter and escaping the class-biased concept of choice. Also, the four study cases portray Ireland as an unwelcoming space for women, that women can and must re-signify. With restrictive legislation still in force and the authenticity of the Irish national identity at stake, literature on bodily autonomy in Ireland still seems to have a long way to go.

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Appendix: some major events in contemporary Irish history

1740: famine breaks out in large parts of the country.

1801: Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland comes into force.

1829: Catholic Emancipation Act.

1837: reign of Queen Victoria begins.

1845-1849: potato blight spreads and the Great Famine takes place.

1849: after being educated in Rome and spending some time in front of the Irish College, Paul Cullen is appointed archbishop of Armagh.

1950: Cullen convenes the first national synod of the Irish Church in Thurles and establishes Tridentine Roman Catholicism fully.

1870: Home Rule movement is launched by Isaac Butt.

1893: the Gaelic League is founded.

1899: Literary Revival starts.

1916: Easter Rising. The Irish Republic is proclaimed on 24 April.

1919-1921: Irish War of Independence takes place. In 1920, Parliaments for the North and the South of Ireland are provided by the Government of Ireland Act. The conflict ends with the signature of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

1922-1923: Civil War opposes Pro-Treaty and Anti-Treaty factions. The result is a victory of the Pro-Treaty forces, which had established the Irish Free State in December 1922 excluding the Protestant counties in Northern Ireland.

1937: The Bunreacht Na hÉireann is introduced by Eamon de Valera. The official name of the country changes from Irish Free State to Éire.

1955: Ireland becomes a member of the United Nations.

1964: Talks on reconciliation between Séan Lemass (Éire) and Terence O'Neill (Northern Ireland) start. Anglo-Irish free trade agreement is introduced.

1968: Civil rights marches begin in the North.

1970: Provisional IRA begins a violent campaign against British Troops.

1972: The Northern Ireland Parliament is suspended. Direct Rule begins.

1973: Ireland becomes part of the European Union.

1983: the Eighth Amendment is introduced in the Bunreacht Na hÉireann.

1985: Hillsborough Anglo-Irish agreement is rejected by the Protestants.

1992: the X case occurs, challenging the Eighth Amendment. Referenda on the right to information, the right to travel and suicide as legal grounds for abortion are held.

1994: both the IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries announce ceasefires.

1996: IRA terminates the ceasefire.

1997: IRA resumes the ceasefire.

1998: Loyalists announce a ceasefire. "Good Friday" agreement is reached.

1995-2008: Irish economy develops rapidly, starting to be referred as the Celtic Tiger.

2002: a new referendum on suicide as grounds for abortion is held.

2008-2014: economic crisis strikes the country.

2015: same-sex marriage is introduced in the Bunreacht na hÉireann.

2018: the Eighth Amendment is repealed from An Bunreacht.