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978-1-107-00897-7 - Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800–2000: The Transformation of Oral Space

David Lloyd

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: a history of the Irish orifice*

This is the loop, the pole
Bread travels along.
We have these mouths
damage stretches.

John Wilkinson¹

With the remarkable consistency that suggests that they are distorted forms of knowledge, stereotypes of the Irish cluster around the things we do with a single orifice, the mouth. They turn on what goes into and what comes out of that singularly labile orifice, and does so to excess. We drink too much and talk too much, at times even too well: we sing and we blather, bawl as we brawl and wail as we grieve. Given to verbal play, we excel in invective; rumour still circulates more rapidly than the daily press, just as subversion was fanned by word of mouth and the Republican ballad. But excess is counterpointed by lack: we starve in the Famine and hunger-strike in prison, and at times relapse into an ambiguous and melancholy silence. Irish silence and the Irish smile – the closed mouth and the disingenuous grin – are construed as dissimulating, subversive, unstable.² The paradoxes proliferate: ‘stretched by damage’, Irish mouths are injured by mental and physical privation but they are, for all that, the loose-lipped organs of excess, subversion and an often counterfactual cultural resistance. The history of this Irish orifice is that of multiple attempts to discipline it, taming its excesses and regulating its disrespect for the proper spaces and times of speech and performance, ingestion and utterance. It is the history of attempts ‘to control a strange bodily economy in which food, drink, speech, and song are intimately related’.³ But it is also the history of the living on of an unruly oral space even in the very architectures and disciplines of modernity, from the pub to the prison cell, and of its resistance to the effort to contain it.

The present book is about a range of Irish bodily practices, about the formation and disciplining of the Irish body at disjunctive but

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subterraneously intersecting moments. But while it analyses a certain set of bodily practices, it does so through the one that is uniquely privileged in relation to the Irish, the mouth. The mouth organizes the perception and articulation of the Irish body to an unremarked but nonetheless striking extent, as for psychoanalysis the penis organizes psychic comportment both temporally and in terms of the spatial distribution of the apperceived body. Likewise, and like the penis in its symbolic status as the phallus, the mouth performs a double role, being the site simultaneously of actual practices and of symbolizations through which the motions and functions of the other members or organs are endowed with meaning. Thus, for example, it is obvious that Irish violence has always been associated with Irish drinking and Irish rhetoric, whether invective or subversive speech. The flying fist and the loose lip are an inseparable couple. Less apparently, however, Irish violence is already an *effect* of the oral space whose recalcitrance to modern disciplinary institutions was always coded as unruly and insubordinate. Even before it erupted as an act considered violent, Irish orality appeared from the perspective of the colonial state to be a manifestation of violence that determined how specific Irish practices were read.

These considerations offer peculiar insights into the ways in which biological markers of identity function in the case of the Irish. Much has been written on the ways in which Irish racial difference was constituted and apprehended. That the Irish were considered to be racially alien by the English and generally as racially inferior is hardly in dispute. What has been hard to account for is how a people who had, as Charles Kingsley famously remarked, ‘skins ... as white as ours’ could appear to be so racially distinct as to merit colonization and subordination by means not dissimilar to those employed to rule Indians or Native Americans.⁴ In the absence of any salient phenotypical or other biological markers, cultural historians have emphasized the ways in which Victorian racial pseudo-science deployed such modes of classification for the Irish as ‘prognathism’ or the ‘index of nigrescence’, all of which now bear a somewhat hallucinatory aura. But in the case of the Irish, it may be that racial difference is principally determined not by markers like skin colour or facial features that supposedly offer themselves to immediate visual recognition, but by the largely non-visual signifiers of orality.⁵ Visually unremarkable as it is, what the mouth *does* and what is done in or with it – in a peculiar blend of activity and passivity, introjection and projection – is what marks Irish difference. The very lability of the mouth as signifier, the uncertainty as to the register in which it signifies or as to

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the way it inserts the subject in the world, accentuates by embodying the racial difference that it symbolizes: the fluctuating, inconsistent nature of the Irish themselves. If, as Hiram Perez has suggested, one of the most powerful ways in which the processes of racialization operate is through the reduction of the being of the racialized to the spectacle of a single organ in an ‘unremitting cultural fixation’, in the case of the Irish, that organ would be the mouth.⁶ The mouth is the privileged corporeal signifier of Irish racial and cultural difference.

That the mouth organizes the apprehension of Irish bodily practices within oral space does not, of course, mean that other Irish corporeal practices are consigned to irrelevance. It is, rather, that their meanings are distributed in relation to orality and to the cultural complexes it sustains and they are read in that context as markers of racial difference. If this focus on the mouth defines Irish practices as *racial* effects, it has had a no less powerful role in the constitution of Irish gender differentiation. Gender is never determined by biological sex difference, which only appears as the natural foundation for distinctions that are, in the fullest sense, performative.⁷ In Ireland, as I argue in Chapter 3, the performance of masculinity turns to a singular degree around a specific oral practice, drinking, and a set of oral practices that are articulated with it, most notably story-telling and verbal play. This is by no means a ‘trans-historical’ constant of Irish gender norms, but a new mode of performance that emerges in the cultural conditions of post-Famine Ireland that followed from the demise of one form of oral space and the migration of some of its practices into the regulated spaces of modernity. By the same token, the reconstitution of Irish masculinity and the regulation of proper gendered spaces that was undertaken by Irish nationalism generated a set of prohibitions and exhortations that focus on the unruly mouth. The oral thus stands as the most resonant metonym for Irish bodily culture and for the distinctive matrix of habits and practices that marks Ireland’s colonial difference.⁸

In significant though by no means all respects, Ireland’s remained an oral culture long after the rest of Western Europe had made the transition to the culture of print capitalism. At the same time, Ireland’s was also a highly literate culture. It was a chirographic culture at a very early period, and affected by a vigorous print culture not much later than England itself. In the wake of successive conquests, respect for written culture remained strong even among the poorest Irish and was possibly even amplified by the strictures on the education of Catholics imposed under the Penal Laws in the eighteenth century.⁹ Orality in Ireland is

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not a mode of existence that is surpassed and supplanted by literacy and the modes of living it presupposes and sustains. Orality implies, rather, a complex interaction of spaces, an intersection of oral and literate modes, each surviving in peculiar ways within the other and even preserving the other's life within itself. Folklorists and others have written voluminously about the ways in which the products of a highly literate culture – those of the Gaelic bards, lawyers and historians as well as poets – were transmitted in fragmentary and distorted forms, though sometimes with remarkable recall, through Irish oral culture. Much has been done to document, translate and transmit the records and archives of those traditions. This book addresses another aspect of orality than its artefacts: it is about ways in which the persistence of the oral within and alongside the institutions and practices of a literate and bureaucratic colonial society impacts the peculiar forms of modernity in Ireland. It is about the ways in which the spaces and practices of oral culture are represented and targeted by the colonial state and it is about the recalcitrance and even the more or less articulate resistance that the oral poses to the imposition of a homogenizing colonial culture and its values; it is about the ways in which the oral lives on, both in and through the intimate damage that colonialism inflicts.

This book is not, therefore, a history of the achievement or failure of a normative transition, the movement from orality to literacy as a component of the modernization of a society. It is not, indeed, a history at all, if what that term implies is a continuous narrative or a narrative of continuities and evolutions. As a study of the transformation of Irish oral space, it seeks to reflect on the *discontinuous*, on the suppression, displacement and unexpected re-emergences of oral practices and spaces in the very processes and institutions of modernity. For if the oral survives, and survives as the form in which Irish cultural difference is registered, it lives on above all as a certain transgressive disposition of both material and psychic space. In focusing on the spaces of Irish orality – corporeal and social – this book takes the mouth as a metonym around which, with possibly unique cultural force, various sets of bodily practice are distributed in both their uncertain disciplining and their unruly eruptions. It offers, in consequence, a counter-historical thesis about the insistence of a spatiality that defies historicist logic. Accounts of oral and literate cultures tend to be driven by a deeply historicist norm: literacy replaces orality in the progress of human kind, producing the conditions for increasingly complex mental processes and social differentiations of practice and function. It subtends what modernization theory regards as the divisions of

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spheres and of labour essential to modernity. Literacy induces individuation and interiorization, putting an end to the communal forms of oral culture. Literacy brings with it, above all, the historical consciousness within which its own developmental suppositions can be thought at all.

From the perspective of that historical consciousness, the oral signifies the pre-modern, the primordial, and is associated with myth and folklore, forms of consciousness that lack historical sense and imply the absence of a notion of change over time if not, indeed, an inveterate resistance to progress and development. A heady cascade of associations follows from such premises with remarkable consistency: the oral is reproductive rather than productive; it rapidly becomes feminized, summoning up old crones and kitchen tables, connoting subjection to natural cycles and atavistic beliefs and impulses. Fundamentally conservative, orality is simultaneously the domain of dark and turbulent forces, whose chaos is the effect of non-differentiation and indistinction. The oral is the clearest manifestation of a domain under the sway of the *pathological* in the strict sense in which Kant deploys it in the *Second Critique*: for him, the pathological is the realm of the subject subjected to nature and to history, as it is to its own impulses and desires. It thus designates a negative and inadequate way of being in the world, although – as I argue in Chapters 5 and 6 – what he terms the pathological might equally be seen as the very condition of life-in-common, the shared constitution of needing, suffering, desiring human bodies. From both a Kantian and a historicist perspective, however, orality shelters the unemancipated subject while literacy is the condition of possibility for discrimination, reflection, interiority, development: the categories of the ethical and fully historical subject of freedom. In its own way, psychoanalysis repeats such judgements: the oral is the first relation of the infant to an undifferentiated world of object-cathexes, symbolized in the first instance by the mother. Oral fixation signifies regression: the development of interiority, of the ego and the superego, obeys the hierarchy of the senses that aesthetic philosophy had already defined as dividing those in which the subject dissolves into its objects – touch, taste, smell – from those in which it is distanced – hearing and sight. This hierarchy of the senses in the oedipal drama parallels and rests on a map of the body's orifices that is disposed on a temporal axis, from the oral to the anal to the genital and finally to the scopic register that determines the castration complex and the movement of internalization that institutes the superego or the subject's relation to the paternal law. Thus the sight of the woman's orifice, read as a tale of lack, spells the onset of the castration complex and opens onto the inner silent

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voice of the superego, just as the lack embodied in the oral gives way to the inwardness and historical consciousness of the literate.

Against such insistent and mutually reinforcing historicist paradigms, I focus here on the oral *space*: on the material and social space that sustains a culture that has been understood predominantly as oral, in difference from modern, literate culture; on the ways orality in culture imagines and uses space. The spatial form that offers the initial paradigmatic instance of oral space is the *clachan* or rundale system of land use and dwelling that in the nineteenth century furnished colonial improvers and reformers with the necessary index of the irrationality of Irish agricultural practice and ways of life. Already little more than a vestige of older forms of communal land-holding, and by no means ubiquitous throughout Ireland, the *clachan* nonetheless came to symbolize the habits of work, sociality and culture that had to be extirpated in order for the Irish to be civilized. Regarded as primitive by the colonial administrator and the political economist, it was rather an instance of what I have elsewhere termed the *non-modern*, living on through and in relation to modernity, coeval with it but not subsumed by it.¹⁰ Increasingly subdivided into smaller parcels on account of colonial dispossession, the arcane and higgledy-piggledy jigsaw of land distribution in the outfield was matched by the disorderly proximity of remarkably populous ‘villages’ in the pre-Famine townlands.

But it was not only this impenetrable and apparently chaotic use of material space that English administrators and landlords longed to subject to capitalist rationalization and uniform, abstract measure. It was also the cultural and even affective space that it sustained. No less scandalous to their minds than the patchwork of land held in common was the unruly mixing of labour and leisure, of marketing and dancing, of music and mourning, that thrived there. The proper separation of spheres into public and private, labour and recreation, economics, religion and politics that modernity prescribes was long resisted in Ireland – as, to a lesser extent, it was among the pre-industrial working classes in Britain up through the 1840s.¹¹ This resistance to the rationalization of space, both in relation to the disposition of properly bounded and stable units of land-holding and in relation to the differentiation of spheres according to their proper activities, correlated to what was perhaps the most scandalous aspect of Irish ‘character’: its apparent emotional instability. The cliché that the Irish appear with ‘a tear and a smile’ is a sentimental vestige of a censorious judgement on what was observed to be their propensity to fluctuate rapidly between contradictory states of emotion, from joy to

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sorrow, from laughter to anger, in a sudden leap and without transition. It is the affective correlative of the ‘through-otherness’ of Irish material and cultural space, a practice of emotional performance that does not obey the ever more rigorously demarcated compartmentalization of affective display that characterizes nineteenth-century English emotional comportment. Irish emotional oscillations, manifest in their political agitations as in their more intimate sorrows or pleasures and indifferent to the decorum of public or private space, corresponded to a diffuseness of boundaries that was an offence both to propriety and to the emerging norms of a well-regulated civil society. The labile mouth, conduit of drink and speech, mourning and mockery, blarney and wailing, food and laughter, was the constant metonym for the peculiarly physical performance of Irish emotion and its intimate intersection with consumption and expression. If a tight-lipped queen clad in mourning became the symbol of a society that increasingly divided – and concealed – the domestic interior and its feminized affects from the practical, masculine world of public affairs and economic activity, the Irish wake and its cloaked keener would become the sign of Irish unruliness, with its peculiar and promiscuous mixing of grief and merriment, wailing and drinking, excessive consumption and seditious complaint.

The terrible silence that fell over the land in the aftermath of the Famine and its catastrophic depopulation spelt, if not the end, then the decay of the wake and the associated practice of keening. Both the Famine and the clearance of the land that ensued were determined by a governmental discourse of political economy that regarded the cultivation and consumption of the potato rather than grain as a major impediment to the development of capitalist agriculture and the English model of a division of social classes into landlord, capitalist farmer and labouring proletariat. Wheat required a quite specific division of both labour and space: the extensive farmland, the division of production between agricultural labourers, the farmer, the corn-factor, miller and baker, and eventually the industrial workforce in the cities that would consume its final form, the wheaten loaf. It implied networks of transportation, processing, a capacity for storage, centralization and distribution, the division of country and city – and, with the repeal of the Corn Laws in midcentury, the division between the metropolis and its colonial ‘bread baskets’. The humble potato, on the other hand, defied both transportation and lengthy storage, being too heavy and moist for either. It could not be processed but would be consumed, as it was grown, locally. Its prodigious reproduction on small and even relatively infertile plots enabled a more or less

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subsistence economy and the remarkable subdivision and reclamation of marginal land that supported the rapid increase of the Irish population from the mid eighteenth century down to the 1840s.

What the Irish put into their mouths as much as what – seditious, witty or cajoling – came out of them was thus targeted by political economy for destruction. The lumpish potato became the index of and the metaphor for Irish recalcitrance to capitalism – a recalcitrance that was proving contagious as the Irish, in another offence to proper bounds, migrated to Britain and mingled among the no less dispossessed English, Scottish and Welsh workers, spreading political dissent and alternative political imaginaries. The potato sustained and was sustained by the spaces of an oral culture that proved a resistant alternative to the processes of capitalist rationalization that enforced dispossession and expropriation through the enclosure and consolidation of land. Accordingly, it was programmed for uprooting even before the Famine re-ordered history by seeming to demonstrate the inevitable failure of the evil root and of the unruly ways of living it enabled. The first two chapters of this book describe the concerted assault on Irish oral space and its alternative possibilities, an assault focused by the catastrophe of the Famine. The first, on political economy and the potato, recounts the perspective of the colonial state at a signal moment in the formation of its institutions for an industrial capitalism to which Irish ways posed a scandalous and dangerously infectious alternative. The second, on the forms of Famine-era oral space, takes, rather, the perspective of those who went down beneath the force of the modernizing project: not only the Irish cottiers whose oral culture resided in the space of the *clachan*, but the Irish and British Chartists who found in a modified form of Irish ways a possible if last ditch alternative to industrial wage labour.

The trauma of the Famine, which accelerated the destruction of the *clachan*, must be registered not only in terms of the cultural damage it inflicted but also in terms of those cultural elements that escaped destruction. To fail to do so is to rationalize Irish history in ways that its singularities constantly elude. We can comprehend this by grasping how the relation to damage as *loss* is counterpointed always by the persistence of damage as a mode of *memory*. Precisely because it is not a form of erasure or supersession, damage itself becomes the locus of survival, the pained trajectory of what lives on and, moreover, continues to resist incorporation. The question in relation to our memory of hunger, which is the Irish version of a question that always insists for the decolonizing process, is how such a resistance to incorporation, articulated through

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the vertiginous ambivalences of damaged cultural forms, counts its psychic and corporeal costs. More importantly, how can such a reckoning lead us to transform the very damage that seams our survival and our difference into something more than survival, into alternative modes of living?

The space of orality not only embodied a set of material relations, but also contained a distinct set of social and cultural possibilities – *other* human potentials realizable solely through spaces different from those of capitalist modernity. Because they spoke to the needs, pains and pleasures of the ‘pathological subject’, their contours could never be entirely erased. They migrated into the other, modern space-times that emerged in their wake; they did not disappear, nor did they get subsumed. What Henri Lefebvre understands as the space of practice – ‘the practico-sensory realm, the body, social-spatial practice’ – cannot finally be reduced to the abstract, frictionless space dreamed of by capital, ‘and hence new, spatial contradictions arise and make themselves felt’.¹² Oral practices live on athwart the institutional spaces of a modernizing Ireland – both the governmental institutions of the colonial state and the new political and civic agencies of anti-colonial nationalism – and their survival is inseparable from the emergence of those spaces and the differentiations they seek to impose on Irish culture.

The following chapters accordingly explore the ways in which that space lives on parasitically within the architectures and compartments of modernity. Oral space does not persist intact, though it has always been known that elements and fragments of oral culture have shown a remarkable capacity to survive, like shreds of some viral DNA, in ballads, stories and music as in a propensity for conversation and spontaneous rhetorical play. To the frustration of both colonial and nationalist authorities, such forms retained an inexpungible capacity to reproduce and disseminate memories of resistance at moments of disturbance and insurrection. Yet not only the contents, but even the *structures* of oral space find ways to live on in damaged and distorted forms and in doing so continue to represent material sites of recalcitrance and resistance both to the disciplines of labour and to the governmental institutions of the state. In doing so, they continue to confound the boundaries that divide public and private, proper and improper, in singular and persistent ways. They furnish what we can call counter-modern spaces and practices, captured and determined by the institutions of modernity, yet preserving and refunctioning elements of the non-modern that remain recalcitrant or antagonistic to the disciplines of capitalist labour or state formation.

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For all its preoccupation with Ireland's phenomenal capacity for reproduction, the discourse on the Irish in the mid nineteenth century shows a remarkable absence of any developed conception of gender differentiation. Perhaps because the Irish tended to be perceived as an undifferentiated and mobile mass, spreading rhizomatically like the potato itself, no extended discourse on gender seems to have developed in or on Ireland, at least until Matthew Arnold and others began to characterize the Irish, or the Celt, as an essentially feminine race in the 1860s. In response to this no less undifferentiated judgement, nationalists sought to produce rigorous models of gender differentiation that could oppose Irish masculinity and feminine domestic virtue to English colonial rule. I argue in Chapter 3 that this attempt to produce gendered norms and gendered divisions of social space was inseparable from another dimension of the oral and its spatialization. The intended production of gendered space, the division between a feminine domestic and a masculine public and economic sphere, found itself in competition with another performance of Irish masculinity: *drinking*. Peculiarly, it may be thought, given the long-standing acknowledgement of Irish sexual repression, the formation of gendered space in Ireland may have less to do with the disciplining of the sexed body than with the negative and productive regulation of another space of Irish orality. Indeed, as Richard Stivers has persuasively argued, the emergence of a sexually conservative and celibate culture in post-Famine Ireland, which has often been understood in relation to new patriarchal practices of land-holding and transmission, was positively enabled by the emergence and celebration of bachelor drinking customs that drew from older forms of reciprocity and moral economy and adapted them to new institutions and social relations.¹³ Temperance nationalism targeted the ambiguous space of that performance, the public house, but was never able to overcome its perdurability as a site where the practices of an oral culture lived on. James Joyce remains that space's most trenchant participant ethnographer. Both *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* furnish maps of urban spaces where oral practices associated with and probably derived from rural culture persist in forms remarkably akin to those of the *clachan*, even if the location and context are utterly different. In the urban pub stalks the ghost of the oral culture that the Famine liquidated, just as Joyce's representations of Dublin's wounded masculinity are haunted by fragments and textures of another sociality and its mores – treating, singing, mingling. Indeed, Joyce is remarkably attuned to the peculiar intersection of utopian desire and psychic damage that is played out in such sites and for which the homosocial pleasures of drinking furnish so rich