STARS James Joyce Literary Supplement

Volume 36 | Issue 1 Article 4

2023

A Posthuman Materialist Modernism?

Marshall Lewis Johnson
University of Nevada, Reno

Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls
University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in James Joyce Literary Supplement by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation
Johnson, Marshall Lewis (2023) "A Posthuman Materialist Modernism?," *James Joyce Literary Supplement*: Vol. 36: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls/vol36/iss1/4

A Posthuman Materialist Modernism?

Zan Cammack: *Ireland's Gramophones: Material Culture, Memory, and Trauma in Irish Modernism*.
Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2021.
$120 hardcover; $54.95 paperback.

Marshall Lewis Johnson

Zan Cammack gives herself a tall task. Analyzing the prevalence of the gramophone in late nineteenth to early twentieth-century Irish literature might at first sound like analyzing the prevalence of carriages or drawing rooms in nineteenth-century British novels; the objects themselves are incidental to the plot. This makes the feat of *Ireland's Gramophones* even more remarkable. Cammack examines this object and its frequent occurrence throughout Irish literature and in key scenes in these texts as relevant to a broader understanding of culturally shared traumas throughout the decades spanning the Great Famine to Irish independence, partition, and civil war. "The budding recording technology," Cammack argues, "grew to maturity alongside Ireland's progressively more outspoken and violent struggles for political autonomy and national stability" (9). In particular, the Irish gramophone is linked to Irish cultural trauma through a "'replaying' of experiences," excellently detailed in this work through the literature of Bram Stoker, George Bernard Shaw, Elizabeth Bowen, Seán O'Casey, Lennox Robinson, and Flann O'Brien (13).

The discoveries made through exploring this connection between gramophones and Irish cultural trauma are often surprising for their insights. The transcribing of Seward's phonograph in *Dracula,* for instance, connects to phonograph recordings of accounts by Famine survivors. The "oral narratives … quickly become important to those interested in constructing a communal narrative" but still "resist seamless integration into a larger narrative" in their orality (42). Furthermore, transcription literally erases the oral accounts; the phonograph recordings of Famine survivors were repeatedly recorded over for collection purposes. In *Dracula,* this impacts the coherence of the narrative. Even more fascinating is the gramophone in Bowen's *The Last September,* which acts as "an extension of [Lois Farquar's] own body" (109). Throughout the novel, Lois is "stuck on a loop" in trying to choose between her Irish and

English identity (114). Similarly, the Mad King Sweeny in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* acts as an "explication of the toll of long-standing violence on an Irish cultural icon," with Sweeny's longest appearance in the novel punctuated by, of course, a gramophone (160).

The material on "phonographysteria" is particularly interesting in suggesting that the gramophone/phonograph is unique in Irish literature through a link to Irish cultural trauma. The term references the supposed "female hysterics over the disembodied voice" which emanates from the phonograph, and Cammack cannot find any instance of the term outside of an April 1899 issue of the *Weekly Irish Times* (57). One wishes that this research might have been expanded in a different direction than it is with *Dracula,* however. A parallel between Lucy's use of a phonograph in the novel and the failure of Home Rule, for instance, seems perhaps a stretch (63). Cultural anxiety about women's empowerment can be seen in the treatment of female characters in *Dracula,* and the emergence of Charles Stewart Parnell's affair with Katharine O'Shea certainly had some role in his and Home Rule's downfall. However, the phonograph barely features in the former and not at all in the latter. By Cammack's own account, Lucy owns but never uses a phonograph in the novel (61), and the object seems to have little to no bearing on the course of Parnell and O'Shea's doomed romance or the eventual fate of the Home Rule bill.

This is further complicated by Stoker's politics. In Cammack's estimation, he was a supporter of both "British imperialism *and* Home Rule," with Stoker viewing Ireland as still the female partner in the marriage union, but a partner who should be given greater autonomy (64). In other words, Stoker was a progressively conservative (conservatively progressive?) feminist. It seems that Cammack's own analysis here just does not fully connect the dots; the "phonographysteria" documented in the *Weekly Irish Times* highlights a phallocentric discourse regarding technology and the public sphere that wants to paint women as still the weaker sex. Both *Dracula* as a novel and O'Shea's own role as intermediary between William Gladstone and Parnell during much of the 1880s suggest that this phallocentric discourse had already failed to contain what it sought to.

As for a readership interested in further exploration of gramophones in James Joyce, they might be disappointed. *Ireland's Gramophones* catalogues the litany of scholarship on gramophones in *Ulysses,* but Joyce's masterwork is not a centerpiece of this study. Additionally, this research does fall into the trap mentioned above on occasion; the table chronicling Irish literature featuring gramophones between the ceasefire of the Civil War and the 1930s, for example, is more of a list than an argument (135).

There is an interesting connection between trauma, the gramophone, and *Ulysses,* however, when looking at Cammack's analysis of abreaction and the gramophone in *The Last September*. If abreaction uses "repetition and release of tension" as a treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (98), and if the gramophone in Irish literature "most frequently crops up in tandem with aspects of national cultural trauma and upheaval" (9), then the brief mention that the object's appearance in *Ulysses* receives is a little too brief, even though it comprises so little of the novel. The gramophone in Bella Cohen's brothel is accompanied by a figure dubbed the End of the World and the voice of the prophet Elijah (*U* 15.2170-2212). The announcement of the apocalypse and the potential dawn of a new era, possibly wonderful, possibly terrifying, seems particularly interesting in the context of early twentieth-century Ireland and Europe. Independence movements coincided with world wars; the ideals of revolution resulted in the senseless death and suffering of innocent civilians. This appearance of a gramophone is an early attempt at producing the crescendo or "release of tension" that will later be reached when Stephen smashes the chandelier. In addition, it appears to act as a jarring announcement of the end of one era and the beginning of another, where the trauma of the former has not been fully processed. Stephen and Bloom, like Ireland at the turn of the century, are still recovering from their own traumatic losses and are not ready for the beginning of a new era, dragged into it despite violent protest.

Regardless, this work is truly wonderful in expanding scholarship on Irish modernism. While Cammack does not herself identify her work in this way, examining the significance of nonhuman elements in works of modernism helps expand the conversation on posthumanism. If we consider posthumanism a school of thought that, more than anything, asks us to reject Western European humanism writ large for its narrow-minded imagining of human experience, then Cammack's study of the gramophone in Irish works centered around issues of gender, trauma, and disability could not be more crucial reading.

—University of Nevada, Reno