



Negotiating John Healy's *The Grass Arena*: Poverty, Inequality and Violence in the Immigrant Experience of the Irish in Britain

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The Literary London Journal, Volume 16, Number 1 (Autumn 2020)

Abstract

Some three decades have elapsed since the publication of John Healy's seminal autobiography of Irish immigrant experience in London, *The Grass Arena*. In the intervening years, the text has been the subject of relatively little critical commentary. This article endeavours to contribute to scholarship in the fields of post-war literary studies and Irish literary studies by conducting a close reading of this compelling text. The overall claim posited is that aspects of Healy's experiences are representative of wider facets of Irish experiences in London, and more broadly Great Britain, in the mid-to-late twentieth century. The central thesis underscores the significance of *The Grass Arena's* valuable contribution to a wider understanding of the overall lived experience of the Irish immigrant in Britain in the mid-to-late twentieth century. The critical framework for this argument draws on the scholarship of Giorgio Agamben. From this critical reference point, a case is made for reading Healy's autobiography through the prism of Agamben's notion of the 'state of exception'. The article identifies three instances of 'states of exception', the army, the prison and the hospital, as both physical and symbolic spaces that represent Agamben's model in Healy's text. The overarching argument of this article is that Healy's memoir is a unique, nuanced and valuable literary depiction of the difficult actual lived experience of a particular subset of the Irish diaspora in Britain that warrants sustained critical attention.

Introduction

It was a tough area of London. The locals had no time for foreigners, and although I was born in London and mixed and played with children of my own age, I was considered alien. (Healy 4)

First published by Faber and Faber in 1988, John Healy's autobiography *The Grass Arena* depicts Irish working-class immigrant experience in Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century. Raised in poverty and subjected to violence and inequality, Healy struggled with alcohol addiction, lived rough on the streets of London and spent time in prison. *The Grass Arena* is a critically under-analysed text that offers the reader an alternative means of viewing London, and particularly Irish working-class experience of the city. In this article I argue that *The Grass Arena* is an important, yet often overlooked, text of Irish working-class autobiography that rightly takes its place alongside other works in the genre, as confirmed by its selection for inclusion in Liam Harte's seminal publication in the field, *The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725–2001*. Chief among the salient issues raised in this text regarding Irish immigrant experience are the problems, suffering and even violence that arise from poor integration, marginalisation, and an existence beyond the boundaries of mainstream society. The marginal position Healy describes in his memoir is part of the landscape of Irish working-class immigrant experience in Britain in the post-war period, but it also has wider relevance to all minority and migrant groups in the country. Healy's depiction of this liminal position is described in recent scholarship as a position of 'ingrained poverty and inequality' (Buckridge and Harte 338). One of the aims of this critique is to probe Healy's depiction of the symbolic 'imprisonments' that he experienced as a result of his early exposure to poverty and inequality that characterised growing up Irish and working class in England. The analysis of depictions of violence on the migrant body focuses on Healy as a marginal migrant figure who is regarded in terms of a victim or scapegoat who exists mainly on the margins and outside the law.

Working-class concerns

As Enda Delaney notes, social class is one of the most significant shaping factors in determining the nature of the experiences of Irish immigrants in post-war Britain (Delaney 6). Delaney's assertion is undeniably germane to Healy's lived experience of Irish immigrant experience in London. *The Grass Arena* belongs to a tradition of second-generation working-class memoir of the Irish in Britain.

Predominantly developed from the early 1960s onwards, O'Connor classifies this subgenre of Irish autobiography as 'non-political working-class memoir' (O'Connor 218). Prior to the evolution of this subgenre, made popular by seminal works such as *Dialann Deoraí* or *An Irish Navvy: The Diary of an Exile* written by Dónall Mac Amhlaigh and published in English in 1964, O'Connor notes 'Irish working-class people were much less likely to engage in the writing of autobiography than those belonging to the middle or upper classes'. Further, he argues that 'few regarded the working class and their culture as being of significance' (210).

For Healy, the experience of the Irish working-class immigrant in London is one characterised by poverty, racism and violence: 'how do you talk about love after a life spent relating to others through violence, aggression and fear?' (Healy 255). His experiences are validated by research carried out into the life experiences of Irish immigrants in Britain that sheds light on issues of discrimination and racism.. For instance, a report published by the Commission for Racial Equality in 1997 has demonstrated, through large-scale interviews, that the Irish suffered from discrimination and stereotyping in Britain (Hickman and Walter). This is echoed by Healy, who throughout his memoir summarises his life experiences in Britain as unstable, belonging within a nexus of discrimination, violence and exclusion. As Wills argues, 'both sociological and literary texts continually draw attention to the uncertain position of the Irish migrant within the British working-class community, with "No Coloureds, No Irish" appearing in advertisements for accommodation, and employment notices announcing that 'No Irish Need Apply' (Wills 123). Growing up in the working-class area of Kentish Town in London in the late forties and early fifties, Healy was immersed in a society that was struggling to deal with issues of integration amidst a surge in immigration from Britain's former colonies. Research in this area supports Healy's depiction of his lived experience. One notable study categorised the 1950s and 1960s in Britain as a period in which immigration was framed as a problem, and society was beset by racism (Cantle 2001).

Healy's depiction of his prospects as a working-class, second-generation Irish man in Britain underscores the implications of a childhood marred by poverty and inequality. This is borne out by critical surveys of working-class autobiographies of the Irish in Britain:

The governing preoccupations of second-generation Irish autobiography [...] are dilemmas of identification and belonging, intergenerational tension, the complications of home and the gap between myth and

reality. More often than not, these themes are explored within working-class contexts, through the lens of childhood experience. Ingrained poverty and inequality frame early renditions of the intimate paradoxes of growing up Irish in Britain. (Buckridge and Harte 337–8)

The fact that Healy experiences homelessness as an adult seems to be a direct consequence of his childhood experience. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that statistically Irish first- and subsequent-generation migrants do tend to make up a disproportionate percentage of the homeless population of London. In research published in 2001, it was found that, as an ethnic group, Irish people represented a quarter of homeless day centre users in London, yet they represented only 3.8 per cent of the population of Greater London (Crosscare Migrant Project 12).

Violence features very prominently in Healy's nascent sense of marginalisation and exclusion in childhood. His attempts to relate to those around him more often than not result in violence. His earliest memory, as related on the first page of his memoir, is a lamentable account of a violent assault perpetrated against a six-year-old Healy by his father: 'His eyes turned back in his head as he punched me in the face, knocking me to the ground. The pain and the shock made me cry. He dragged me back to my feet, shouting all the while that I was a tyrant' (Healy 2). Healy describes his futile attempts to avoid his father's rage and violence, 'whatever I did or said, he would tell me to shut my mouth' (1). Not only is his father violent towards him, he also deliberately excludes his son from family life and makes him feel that he is different and other: 'Sometimes my father would leave me locked out in the yard whenever he felt I was "asking too many bloody questions". "Kids should be seen and not heard," he would shout as he bolted the scullery door. It made me miserable because it took away your importance to be locked out in the yard' (2). The negative messages Healy receives from his earliest interactions with a figure of authority presage his struggle with state control and judicial authority in adulthood. His subsequent interactions with authority are, in the main, marred by abuse and violence, as though Healy is destined to repeatedly relive the trauma of his childhood. Although experiences of violence in childhood were of course not exclusive to Irish working-class immigrants in London, scholarship has demonstrated a unique pattern of correlation between violence, working-class status, and Irish immigration during this period.¹

¹ See Claire Wills's discussion of Tom Murphy's 'A Whistle in the Dark' in *The Best are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture*.

Poor integration is another factor of Healy's childhood in London that contributes to his ultimately marginalised adult status in society. Given the realities of Healy's difficult childhood it is hardly surprising that his prospects as an adult were limited. Buckridge and Harte draw attention to *The Grass Arena's* 'harrowing scenes of childhood [...] which include the protagonist's early experiences of being the butt of anti-Irish prejudice in London' (338). From early childhood Healy is aware of his otherness. As the son of Irish immigrants, he is acutely conscious of being different to the other children in his area, Kentish Town in London in the late forties and fifties: 'Our neighbours on both side were Londoners and, being immigrants, we were treated as lepers [...] It was a tough area of London. The locals had no time for foreigners, and although I was born in London and mixed and played with children of my own age, I was considered alien' (Healy 4). A pattern of otherness, exclusion and victimisation is established from childhood, as Healy struggles to find a place of belonging and safety.

Immigrant Experience and Imprisonment

On a thematic level, imprisonment occupies a prominent position in Healy's account of his childhood. When describing his time in a nursery as a child, Healy describes the place as a virtual jail from which he cannot escape. The nursery as prison becomes a symbol for Healy's entire childhood, a hell from which there is no exit route:

I was put in a nursery situated on top of a block of flats. One entered from the balcony through an iron gate. I didn't like it [...] and wanted to go home. One day I managed to open the door and was found wandering the streets by the police [...] Some time passed and I broke out again! After that a lock and chain were put on the gate, so you could not escape your childhood. (Healy 3–4)

When Healy is excluded from the safety, protection and acceptance of the family unit, he seeks solace, acceptance, and companionship amongst the neighbourhood children. However, here he encounters other dominant, authoritarian figures, who use Healy's otherness as the son of immigrants to stigmatise and exclude him from the society of his peers:

I could hold my own with my own age group, but their elder brothers (sometimes by six or seven years) would verbally and physically attack me. Sometimes their mothers and fathers would make insulting remarks to me about immigrants, and I had to smile and bear it or be prevented from

playing with my friends, their sons. I became a bit timid and hesitant to speak or voice an opinion in their company. (Healy 4–5)

While still a boy, Healy must learn to cope with prejudice and abuse at the hands of those in positions of dominance. As Tony Murray notes:

Because he grew up in a tough working-class neighbourhood, Healy had to learn to defend himself physically as well as verbally from an early age. In the immediate post-war years in London, such encounters often had an anti-Irish or anti-Catholic dimension. The vast majority of Irish migrants who came to London at this time were Roman Catholics. They were concerned to raise their children in the faith and did so even within mixed marriages. In a technically Protestant (if largely non-practising) country, this marked the second-generation Irish children with a cultural signifier distinctly at odds with their peers. (Murray 155)

Though naturally intelligent and outgoing, Healy begins to adapt his behaviour in order to survive. In particular, the repeated acts of violence and transgression against Healy's body, both in childhood and adulthood, seem to bring about a severing or split in Healy's identity and individuality. His body becomes a burden; from a young age he is blighted with pain in his neck, shoulders, and back as a result of regular beatings from the older neighbourhood boys. He becomes hunched over, a physical manifestation of his actual and symbolic beatings at the hands of authority figures. The history and legacy of his victimhood is, to borrow from Jeanette Winterson, 'written on the body [...] a secret code only visible in certain lights: the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille' (Winterson 89). Yet, as his memoir demonstrates, he manages to retain something of himself, an inner life, a keen intellect and an amazing capacity to appreciate the small moments of beauty in the world, an essential self that is invulnerable to the forces of destruction his physical being encounters. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that Healy's childhood had a highly detrimental effect upon him and set patterns of exclusion, violence and dysfunction that would be repeated into adulthood.

As an adult, John Healy continues to occupy a marginal position in society. His dependence on alcohol eventually means that he can no longer work and therefore becomes homeless. Having experienced the reality of being a homeless man, John Healy's narrative voice is authoritative when it comes to his depiction of the violence and despair of living rough on the streets of London. It

is of paramount importance to clarify and define exactly what Healy's conception is of the place he describes as 'the grass arena'. For instance, does he experience the grass arena solely as a physical environment? Or is the grass arena a mental state, a social construction, a space of otherness or unbelonging? And, crucially for this study, does Healy himself conceive of the grass arena as what Giorgio Agamben would describe as a 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005, 35)? Furthermore, violence pervades what Healy terms 'the Grass Arena', a physical space, a neighbourhood, a mode of being, a transitional space between the living and the dead. As a physical space, 'the grass arena' can be viewed as backdrop that forms the major part of the setting of Healy's memoir. The public parks, abandoned buildings and graveyards of London are colonised by the homeless, alcoholic, drug-addicted, or otherwise socially excluded. Within 'the grass arena' law is suspended and order is enforced and concessions are gained by other means, chiefly violent. As Healy avows: 'Violence was the currency of the Grass Arena, of the place. It was quite a backwards subculture in this respect – almost like Vikings' (Collings).

Furthermore, if Healy's conceptual locus of the 'Grass Arena' is conceived of as a neighbourhood or community of the displaced, then it concurs with Agamben's definition of the 'State of Exception' as a state of 'being-outside, and yet belonging' (2005, 35). For instance, when Healy first begins drinking in the parks amongst the 'winos and alcoholics' he experiences a novel sense of belonging and acceptance: 'One thing that impressed me about these winos was that they did not care what anyone had done in drink or otherwise the day before' (80). Healy can also be viewed in terms of Agamben's conception of *Homo Sacer*, a victim of state manipulation and violence. Due to his failure to conform to society's norms and abide by its rules, Healy is deemed a threat to social order. He is placed in the 'State of Exception' and is subjected to ill-treatment and violence. Describing one incident of police brutality, Healy recalls: 'I soon became sober enough to make out two black shapes, silver badges gleaming on their helmets, laughing as they trained a hose on me. They'd got me handcuffed to that old iron refuse container in the yard at the back of the station and my wrist was rubbed raw where the cuff had bit into it' (96).

In terms of establishing the applicability of Agamben's conception of the 'state of exception' to Healy's memoir, his concept of the *ban* seems particularly interesting and relevant. Agamben uses the concept of the *ban* to denote exclusion and exception. He explains the origin of the word as deriving 'from the old Germanic term that designates both exclusion from the community and the command and insignia of the sovereign' (2005, 28). In terms of the 'state of exception', Agamben explains:

The relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order. This is why in Romance languages, to be 'banned' originally means both to be 'at the mercy of' and 'at one's own will, freely', to be 'excluded' and also 'open to all', 'free'. (28–9)

These descriptions are especially germane to a critical interpretation of Healy's memoir, in particular his accounts of his relationships with society and authority. He can be viewed as 'banned' from many aspects of conventional society. Healy does not feel any sense of belonging or cohesion in society, a problem that has been well documented in scholarship relating to exclusion and race: 'It is difficult to believe that any society can be truly cohesive if any one section is particularly disadvantaged and disaffected and has no effective stake in society' (Cantle 2008, 17). As Healy feels more excluded and less a part of society, his behaviour worsens. Eventually he relates that he is dishonourably discharged from the army because he continually behaves in a manner that flouts authority and because he tries to run away a number of times. He wishes to escape the restrictive and regimented military lifestyle, however when he does eventually attain his freedom it is in the form of yet another ban or exclusion. Being in the army afforded him a certain degree of respectability, security and state protection. When he is discharged from the army he is effectively banned from these protections and is at the mercy of the darker aspects of society.

For Healy, with his chronic reliance on alcohol, this sets him on a downward trajectory which ultimately leads to further exclusions and bans. Without any structured control, Healy descends into a life of squalor, crime, and isolation. He is banned from the family home for drunken and violent behaviour, he is banned from the more respectable pubs for the same reasons. Eventually, his only option is to drink in the park with the other social pariahs. The more bans imposed upon Healy, the further he is pushed into the 'state of exception' in which he is no longer afforded the privileges and protections that come from conforming to society's rules and regulations. Thus, Healy finds himself on the threshold of society and the law, unprotected and exposed. When he commits a crime or transgression, the consequences for his body, in its unprotected state, can be dire. For instance, during one of his first periods of incarceration, Healy

is badly beaten by a group of prison officers, agents of a state that no longer considers him to have any rights:

Suddenly my arms were pinned to my sides by the escort screws and, with surprising agility for a man of his size, the chief sprang up from the chair and reached me in one bound. I lowered my chin just as he threw a right which caught me too high on the head to knock me down but still with enough force to stagger me. The screws released their hold on me and with a swift blow to the guts he dropped me. The last thing I remember was a boot coming at me. Then I got it in the head. (72)

This is just one of many instances recalled by Healy of his experiences of state administered and sanctioned violence over a period of fifteen years of homelessness and alcoholism.

The Vagrancy Act of 1824 was instrumental in ensuring that many homeless first and subsequent generation Irish people were criminalised, although their only real transgression was homelessness or begging (Rose 3). Healy's description of the Vagrancy Act clearly illustrates the relevance of Agamben's theory of the 'State of Exception' to the depiction of the marginalised position of migrant groups in literature. Healy explains:

In Britain, begging is a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment. On the third offence, one is charged with being 'an incorrigible rogue'. (Only the Home Office could make asking a bloke for a fag sound worse than shagging your sister.) An incorrigible rogue! A phrase from a book, but it is a dangerous book, a law book, a firm unyielding statute that condemns vagrants to be tried at a Crown court, where a sentence for this offence (without a trial or jury) now becomes mandatory and ranges from one to three years' imprisonment. The trial moves swiftly on when the judge has determined the sentence beforehand and against that sentence there is no appeal. (128)

In this excerpt Healy voices his vehement disapprobation of the legal system's disregard for the rights of individuals who constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in society, adding, 'who needs to be reminded that equal protection of the law does not prevail when the vagrancy law is enforced' (128). Thus, a facet of the law itself is envisaged as a marginalising mechanism for those who find themselves in a destitute position; regardless of whether or not they are actually criminals, the law makes no distinction in terms of levels or degrees of

criminality or the perceived threat to the public good. Revisiting Healy's memoir in 2018 leads unavoidably to comparisons between Healy's experiences and the plight of contemporary marginalised groups in Great Britain. The legal system continues to neglect and discriminate against the most vulnerable groups in society, most notably the refugees and asylum seekers who come to the United Kingdom to build better lives.

As argued above, Agamben's conception of spaces outside the law that are categorized by violence and a lack of state protection are germane to a discussion of Healy's marginalized position in British society. This paradigm is in evidence in *The Grass Arena* when Healy is positioned firmly in the realm of violence and exclusion outside of the law. It can be argued that Healy moves through a number of different 'states of exception' over the course of his life. The three main spaces that can be conceptualised as 'states of exception' for Healy are the army, the prison and the hospital. These three places can be conceived as both physical and symbolic spaces for Healy. In the sense that they are physical places, Healy experiences them as places of restriction and confinement. His arrival in these places marks the culmination of his unsuccessful lifelong journey to find a place of belonging in England. The failure of this quest, and his ultimate arrival at these places of actual and symbolic confinement, confirms Healy's embodiment of the psyche of Irish diasporic identity. Ireland is the longed for homeland but he cannot live in Ireland as he is made to feel alien there: 'The Farrell boys started laughing and tried to make me shut up [...] they picked up stones and started throwing them at me, shouting, "You English cur! Go back to England! [...] Go back to England, John Bull"' (13). This fact also precludes him from finding a place to belong in England. Thus, his life becomes a journey or movement through a series of 'states of exception'.

The first 'state of exception' Healy inhabits is the army. The army, similar to the other 'states of exception' specified above, is a space of exclusion, while also being a place of sovereign-controlled violence. On joining the army, recruits enter a 'state of exception', a place where the normal rights and privileges of the free individual are suspended, a place that is set apart from mainstream society. With this in mind, it is therefore interesting to note that John Healy does not choose to join the armed forces of his own accord. The decision is essentially made for him by his parole officer, who tells him that, having spent a week in remand for suspicious behaviour and being found in an inebriated state in public on numerous occasions, he must either find a regular job or join the army, otherwise the probation officer would recommend 'a stiff prison sentence' (32–3). The threat essentially forces Healy to join the army, as he is unable to hold

down a regular job due to his alcohol problem. The army is a space where violence is authorised by the state, but only in a highly regimented form. The paradox of controlled, sanctioned violence is deeply problematic for Healy during his time in the armed forces. On one hand, violence is inculcated into his psyche. He is conditioned and indeed encouraged to act in a physically aggressive manner: 'The general shook all our hands. He stopped by me and said: "Anyone who can fight like that will never get in trouble in the army"' (38). On the other hand he is punished for any act of non-sanctioned violence: 'You was kicking and struggling; they got you cuffed to the pipes, you spat at them, they gave you a few kicks in the ribs' (43). The punishment itself is also meted out through the medium of violence. Healy finds himself subsumed in an all-pervasive culture of violence.

The detrimental impact of this all-pervasive culture of violence is further intensified by Healy's membership of his company's boxing team. His talent as a boxer leads his company commander to urge Healy to volunteer to take part in a boxing tournament. His involvement in the tournament impacts negatively on Healy's mental health and he resumes his heavy drinking in order to help him cope with the anguish of the emotions stirred up by all this violence. Unconcerned with his subaltern's emotional welfare, his only aim being the exploitation of his body, Healy's commander manipulates him into continuing with the tournament, promising that he will be 'looked after, excused all duties, given best steaks to eat' (35). The symbolism of the feeding up of Healy's body with 'best steaks' is striking. In the eyes of his superiors, Healy is little more than a metaphoric pig to be fattened up for slaughter. His body is regarded as belonging to the army and is therefore treated as an object to be used in any manner deemed appropriate. His free will, along with his identity, is discarded. The only part of the person who was once John Healy that is invested with any worth is the body that can be trained and manipulated for deployment in combat. During the training for the boxing tournament, Healy is subjected to total corporeal domination at the hands of his superiors. His every movement is dictated until the simple agency of free control of the body is completely denied him: 'we were supposed to train all day, running, skipping, punching the heavy bags and sparring' (35). When Healy rebels against this control, using his body to engage in a fight outside the boxing ring, he is severely punished. He receives a twenty-one-day sentence of detention. During this period of incarceration, Healy is subjected to extreme corporal control and deprivation: 'There were six blocks of wood, three on each side, which served as beds [...] We spent the morning doing bunny hops, drills and press-ups. By dinner time we were all fit to drop, no one could eat' (45). This extreme physical treatment stands in stark

contrast to the special care bestowed upon Healy's body while it was pressed into obedient servitude for his unit's boxing team. The extremes of corporal treatment Healy is subjected to in the army demonstrate that the state-controlled body is often placed in grave danger and therefore must comply at all time in order to survive.

Eventually, Healy deserts the army, only to be apprehended one year later by the Royal Military Police and placed under arrest pending court martial. Tellingly, on his arrest one of the officers says of Healy: 'He's ours and we're keeping him' (68). The symbolic significance of the Royal Military Police Officers' handling of Healy's body in this extract is also striking: 'They lifted me up between them and carried me downstairs' (68). He is denied the basic right to walk and is instead handled in a brutish and entirely unnecessarily violent manner. Ultimately, Healy is given dishonourable discharge from the army, which can arguably be considered as a minor victory, a small triumph of individual will over the callous regime of state control.

The next 'state of exception' through which Healy passes is the prison. During this time he endures violent treatment at the hands of the prison guards: 'The last thing I remember was a boot coming at me. Then I got it in the head' (72). The violence and physical degradation occurs on a regular basis. On one occasion he is given a sentence of fourteen days' solitary confinement, during the course of which his body is deprived of many basic rights: 'I started to look around for somewhere to sit before sitting [...] on the floor. A small piece of cheese, two slices of bread, a teaspoonful of jam and a mug of cold tea made up the evening meal' (72–3). Healy crystalizes for the reader his suffering at the hands of the penal system and underscores the inhumane nature of solitary confinement as a mode of punishment when he says: 'In the end, though, whichever way you handled it, you were just staring at a wall. A concrete wall reinforced by time and silence' (74). Thus, it is clear that Healy's existence is reduced to 'bare life' in prison, as it had previously been restricted during his time in the army.

As a conceptual space, however, the prison is perhaps more symbolically significant of Healy's place in British society than his place in the army. Symbolically, the prison can be read as the literal embodiment of Healy's sense of being 'foreign' and 'alien' in England. His incarceration in prison confirms his view that he does not belong and that his life as a self-identified Irishman in England has consisted of little more than a series of violent episodes designed to control, discipline and punish his physical being, his foreign body, so to speak. As he observes, his view of the world from childhood was early informed by his experiences of pain and violence: 'It seemed that the world was made up of

punishment and suffering' (14). In his encounters with the representatives of the sovereign, the police and juridical system, Healy experiences brutality, intimidation, violence, discrimination, and victimization. His rights are compromised by the fact that he is not a functioning member of what is regarded as law-abiding, mainstream society. In Healy's alcoholic and therefore enfeebled state, he does not have the resources or strength to defend himself, and thus becomes a helpless victim of the state of exception. The violence perpetrated against Healy's physical self is deemed acceptable by the sovereign state. Healy and his peers are periodically physically assaulted by police officers and prison guards: 'I realized I'd got through another week without falling down any stairs. It seems to be a major cause of death around here. Scotch Billy was found dead in a police cell on Monday. Seems he fell down the stairs' (96). This treatment is condoned by a legal system that views him as beyond the pale. Healy is without rights and powerless to retaliate.

The third 'state of exception' through which Healy passes is the hospital. As a conceptual space, the hospital can be seen a beneficent space of state-control, but Healy does not experience it as such. Rather, the hospital becomes another space of exclusion and exception, a place where his body is once again abused with legal impunity. Healy is admitted to hospital under false pretences when a doctor approaches him and a group of his drinking companions, offering them an opportunity to dry out in hospital. In reality, the doctor has deceived the men into taking part in a medical trial of a drug called Antabuse, an alcohol aversion treatment. Healy realises that he has been duped when he speaks to another patient who reveals that other alcoholics have died as a result of the drug trial; however, Healy has been tricked into signing a consent form so he must continue with the treatment. Having been 'pumped full of Antabuse', Healy and the other men are 'force-fed a bottle of Scotch [...] The nurses handed each of us a bottle of Scotch while the doctor checked our pulse rates. "We're going to have a little party", he said and smiled at us' (115). Healy is once again stripped of all but his 'bare life', his existence reduced to the purely physical, his value lying only in his body's utility as a site of experiment. Having signed the legal consent form he can be harmed or even killed with legal impunity. This is a very real danger, as demonstrated by Healy in the narrative when he mentions the fact that many of the winos who went into the hospital for the clinical trials died as a result of their exposure to the drug and the doctor in charge claimed they had died of natural causes:

That fucking quack always puts 'Heart Attack' on an alky's death cert when he's pumped full of Antabuse before being force-fed a bottle of Scotch.

And it's all legal, 'cause I bet you've already signed a form on admission agreeing to take part in his little aversion treatment 'experiments'. (115)

The sinister representation of the doctor in this extract contributes to Healy's depiction of an alternative vision of a state-run organisation that exists to care for the general public yet appears to treat those at the margins of society in a cruel and sometimes violent manner. In this excerpt there is a direct inversion of the received notion of the doctor/patient relationship, as it is conceived by Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic*: 'medicine in its entirety consisted of an immediate relationship between sickness and that which alleviated it' (Foucault 55). It therefore seems counter-intuitive that a doctor should intentionally set out to do what is diametrically opposite to the very aim of medicine, the alleviation of sickness and suffering.

Furthermore, Healy's account of his experience of being used as a guinea pig in a clinical trial brings to mind Agamben's discussion of bare life, in particular his reference to the case of Wilson, a biochemist who used his own body for medical research and experimentation on discovering he was suffering from leukaemia (1995, 185). In this context, Agamben theorises the body as no longer private, since it has been transformed into a laboratory; but neither is it public, since only insofar as it is his own body can he transgress the limits that morality and law put to experimentation' (186). Healy's experience is a manifestation of Agamben's theory, as having been tricked into taking part in a clinical trial, Healy becomes 'biological' or 'experimental' life. His body becomes a separate entity to his identity as John Healy, and that 'biological life' is completely controlled by the medical authorities.

Conclusion

During his 2014 state visit to Britain, President Michael D. Higgins took the time to visit present and past Irish National Health Service workers at University College Hospital, London. Commenting on the visit, retired nurse Bridie Brennan, originally from Mayo but living in England since the late 1950s, said that President Higgins' visit had been 'the most wonderful thing to happen [...] He makes us proud to be ourselves and he has given us recognition. For people our age, and for what we did when we were working, especially the men' (Lord). This comment is strikingly pertinent to the issues discussed in this article, particularly with regard to the feelings of marginalisation and alienation often experienced by certain groups of Irish immigrants in England. It is only with the passage of time that the concerns of marginalised groups in society come to be fully acknowledged by the state and the wider community.

In re-evaluating John Healy's memoir of exclusion, homelessness and violence in the context of the social and political concerns of the present day, an opportunity arises to take stock of the possible consequences of state neglect and economic austerity for the most vulnerable members of society. Healy's depictions of marginalised immigrant experience in Britain remain relevant today and also give a voice to some of the similar experiences of the silenced minority of contemporary immigrants seeking to make their way in a new country. In these depictions of the negative aspects of Irish migration to Britain, the landscape of England is re-envisioned as a space in which transgressions, both literal and figurative, against the exceptional figure of the marginalised Irish immigrant body, are sanctioned, thus transforming certain pockets of Great Britain into violent spaces. In relating his lived experience of second-generation Irish migrant life in Britain, Healy sheds new light on incidences of inequality, poverty and violence that occurred within this community in the postcolonial milieu of the post-second world war boom in Irish immigration to Britain.

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To Cite this Article:

Rebecca D'Arcy, 'Negotiating John Healy's *The Grass Arena*: Poverty, Inequality and Violence in the Immigrant Experience of the Irish in Britain', *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 18, Number 1 (Autumn 2020): 40–55. Online