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**Boland, McGuckian and Groarke: Nature and the Self in Three Contemporary Irish
Women Poets**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used to study purposes.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Women Poets Re-Negotiating History

1.1 Women's Roles in Irish Poetry

In her prose narrative *Object Lessons* Eavan Boland ponders the woman poet's recent problematic position between her faithful renegotiation of silenced female subjectivity in the past and her generosity to the literary tradition which sustained her. While combining views of a woman and of a poet, the author implicitly raises the question of relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical in art. As a woman and a poet, Boland refused to accept the treatment of feminine identity in the male poetic tradition, but she did not doubt the artistic value of the poems and their imagery. "On the contrary, I found many of them beautiful and persuasive. It added both complexity and enrichment that these poems which I needed to reconsider as a woman had shaped and delighted me as a poet."¹

The passive role of women in older European literature and its broader political and sociological context in Irish literary history in particular have underpinned and shaped the work, thinking and reception of contemporary woman poets in Ireland. Eavan Boland is one of them and also a leading figure of women's literary criticism and political debate. In her book on writing poetry she offers a personal perspective on the literary and social background of contemporary female poets, which has been widely discussed from different perspectives. The stereotypical idea of the Celts as a feminine race, the national folk tradition of the Mother Earth goddess and the Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary icon have combined to establish a passive desexualized image of the woman. This image was appropriated by male poets in later generations and had a deep impact on Irish women's social position.² This distortion and suppression of real female identity went hand in hand with the fact that woman themselves

¹ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* (London: Vintage, 1995) 235-236.

² C. L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880 – 1935* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 17-22.

rarely published their own work or were at least very rarely read and recognized as writers. Consequently, it was only few decades ago that the female literary voice found its way to anthologies, readers and critical discourse in Irish literature.

A more detailed discussion of historical context of contemporary women's poetry in Ireland will be the issue of the next chapter. However, some aspects of the political dimension of women's literary activity nowadays must be emphasized in the very opening of this dissertation. Being so distinctly bound to its social background and historical connotations, this area of poetry is resonant with questions of the dichotomy of art's autonomy and its ethical meaning. To find an example, we can return to Boland's quote and the obvious tension between her approach to the patriarchal abuse of the feminine in Irish poems and to their aesthetic literary value. She appreciates poetry written by male authors differently as a woman and as a poet. Being a woman poet she must then face the tension by writing true to herself and at the same time following the poetic tradition by a respectful dialogue with it.³ Describing her attitude, Boland discloses the complicated relationship between artistic and political or ethical value of poetry and offers her solution to the problem, her personal method of synthesis.

To frame the analysis of individual poets, also this thesis will have to establish its own attitude to the complicated relation between the independent nature of art and its political impact and meaning. Boland could read the poems of her ancestors as disengaged works of art playing with feminine imagery, on one hand, or as political and social statements abusing and distorting female identity, on the other hand. Also her work, similar to the work of other women poets, becomes both an imaginative treatment of reality, an ethical response and a public standpoint. The contemporary woman poet is free in her poetic imagery, but confronts her traditional social stance. Therefore, also the political and literary values of women's

³ Boland, *Object Lessons* 254.

poetry always coincide and offer various ways of reading. On one hand, the individual poems may be approached primarily as reactions to women's muteness in Irish history, as explicit or implicit struggle with the patriarchal language of previous generations or a direct political statement of self-assertion and eventual emancipation. On the other hand, however, we might read the poems also as independent pieces of art of a deeply personal value, and view their social and historical background as a mere context, impetus or topic for their aesthetic achievement. Considering such questions this thesis will deal with work of three contemporary poets and will be framed by broader historical and critical context of their poetry. My close reading will be opened by historical and ethical background and relevance of the poetry and its imagery, and will be closed by discussion of its implications for the agenda of contemporary poetry in its wider scope. During the reading itself, however, I will attempt to approach the intimate world of poetry primarily as an expression of personal imagery, which is rooted in and carries historical and political meanings, but its artistic meanings transcend its cultural response.

To support my attitude to poetry written by the women discussed in this work and to explain the connection of my reading to issues of contemporary literary discourse, it is important to illustrate briefly the variety of views on Irish poetry and politics in general. If we take W. B. Yeats as an example, we can easily imagine the large scale of different close readings of his poems from purely political to highly spiritual ones. All across the scale, however, his literary output seems to have political value eventually. Although commonly considered a revivalist, Yeats is discussed as an author whose poetic achievement, as Elmer Andrews describes, far exceeded any political ambition.⁴ He is praised for his personal handling of history, myth and symbol; for his explorations of unconscious mind and spirit inspired by Ireland of the imagination. Since Yeats was not committed to the demands of

⁴ Elmer Andrews, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Elmer Andrews, ed. (London: Macmillan Press 1992) 4-6.

society and reflection of modern Irish reality, according to Andrews, the later politically minded critique that considers his vision false and inauthentic misses the point of his poetry. Andrew touches on the problem of the very essence of art when he describes the defence of Yeats's aesthetic opposed by Seamus Deane's controversial critique of his poetic distortions of history.⁵ When we remember the opening quote by Eavan Boland, which articulates the tension between the poet's creative freedom and their ethical responsibility, we discover very distinct similarities. Different historical situations and critical debates revive the persistent question of complicated relationship between politics and art in a concrete shape.

For Andrews, Yeats's poetry "was not to serve Irishry or Nationalism, but rather Nationalism could focus and energise poetry."⁶ This suggestion reconsiders Yeats' cultural as well as political position. His poetry, while not successful as a political statement for its 'false picture of reality', managed to establish a new space for the national poet. Poets who succeeded him could learn the venture of personal treatment of history and faithful concern with their own psychic energies from him. Many of them were much less confident about the transforming powers of imagination and the autonomy of art object, and searched for a way to express their direct personal experience of reality or authentic reflection of the modern diversity in Ireland and were influenced rather by Joyce or Kavanagh.⁷ Nevertheless, Yeats' refusal to be bound to any political or religious thinking and his coherent structuring of spiritual experience of reality might be ascribed a crucial role in development of independent poetic voices. Yeats' example had great cultural significance when reconsidering the poet's place in politics and national history. His poetry mattered not as political speech, but as a free artistic voice complementing the political discourse.

The connection between this literary history and the work of contemporary women poets may initially seem obscure. The debate over the aesthetic and ethical in poetry during the

⁵ Andrews 7.

⁶ Andrews 4-5.

⁷ Andrews 6-8.

National Revival and the aesthetics and ethics of the female response to previous male poetic tradition in the background of my analysis appear to be very different, but both illustrate the meaning of a poem as a public act. The poem tells the personal and imaginative, but is rooted in the public and contextual. The critical acceptance of Yeats serves to touch upon some aspects of the complicated relationship between poetry and politics in Ireland. Andrews strongly refutes reading poetry as newspapers committed to reflection of straightforward ideological divisions. Poetry performs “synthesising powers of the creative mind”, it “complicates simplistic political notions”, and “can give a voice to those ‘narratives’ which have been marginalized or repressed.”⁸ In accordance with Andrew’s argument, my approach will not treat women’s poetry as public reflection of their sense of historically suppressed identity, but will regard their ‘narratives’ as complex responses to reality that exceed political discourse and can contribute to it as an independent whole.

A poem by a contemporary woman poet may, of course, be open to multiple interpretations. The poem is an act of self-assertion and certain rebellion within Irish literary tradition. By the very fact that it is composed it breaks the male language of poetic expression that Boland so long struggled with.⁹ It strives to explore the female sexuality and identity and re-writes the old cliché feminine imagery. By the fact that it is later published it challenges the established role of the poet and poetry in Ireland. All these achievements grant the woman’s poem large political impact. If it is a good poem, its aesthetic and artistic achievements follow these political ones. By gaining a voice, the woman enriches the language of poetry, its figures, images and emotions. She widens its field with her personal themes and concerns, but also with her original imagination that she employs to handle them. Moreover, as it expands the view of human identity and experience, it turns back towards the political discourse. This

⁸ Andrews 3.

⁹ Boland, *Object Lessons* 104-107.

time not as a direct response to social gender imbalances or debts, but as valuable artistic illumination of the public political debate.

1.2 Organization and Objectives

In this thesis, the work of three contemporary Irish woman poets will be introduced within broader literary and political context. Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian and Vona Groarke share an Irish cultural and social background, although Groarke is clearly of a younger generation. All of them have been distinctive poetic voices in Irish contemporary poetry following the vocation of revisiting history and the previous literary tradition of women's silence and passivity. My close reading will not observe the political meaning of their work as a whole, but will focus on one particular aspect of their artistic re-negotiation of the male-dominated literary past and explore the aesthetic achievement of this re-negotiation. The outputs of the three poets are very various, but meet, in my opinion, in their abundant use of nature imagery. By their extensive and very specific employment of nature metaphor and simile, they revisit the women's tie to objects, seasons and elements in nature, which was regularly constructed by male authors during Irish literary history.

Irish cultural history has witnessed a strong tendency to picture and see women as a part of nature. The cult of the Mother Earth established the feminine embodiment of landscape and the female became favourite metaphor for various natural elements in art.¹⁰ The long heritage of feminine imagery connected to the land, in Irish poetry as well as in politics, has dispossessed real women as agents and independent subjects. It has also completely suppressed the actual women's relationship to nature and their actual sense of own place in it. Contemporary woman poets have an opportunity to express their real view of the relationship

¹⁰ Innes 21.

between the woman's self and nature, and to employ their own nature imagery. Boland, Ní Dhomhnaill and Groarke do it with very distinct voices.

In each of the poets' work, organic or inorganic nature, seasons of the year and the broader sense of the spirit of nature find different ways of entering everyday reality and thoughts. In Boland, McGuckian as well as Goarke, however, natural objects and processes become complex metaphors for processes and states of mind. In some instances, the subject becomes immensely open in its internal interview with the objects in nature. Nature meets human feeling and can reflect it, but can be also revived by human sympathetic listening as an independent spirit. All of the three poets create imaginative personal worlds of mutual communication between the self and nature and introduce an unusual relationship between the subject and object in the poems.

My close reading will be based on limited number of chosen poems that feature the figurative use of nature imagery in each poet, but will be framed by general introduction of the poet and her work. Each of the poets will be devoted a separate chapter, but a comparison to other two poets will be also included in my close reading. My reading will be based on the cultural context of women poets' revisiting of traditional literary tropes, but will respect the individual poems as independent pieces of art by a female voice. It will observe the intimate personal imageries, explore the suggested relationships between the self and nature and attempt to understand the internal changes that the female imagery may bring to the Irish poem. My approach will attempt to suggest the broader social meaning of contemporary women's poetry as art supplementing the political discourse. It will also include short discussion of its aesthetic contribution to the male poetic form by the internal changes that it performs within the structure of the poem. Both these undisputable values and impacts of the poetry should be suggested by my close reading, during which most attention will be paid to

what these three woman poets can reveal about their sense of the self and its sensual as well as spiritual tie to nature.

To write poetry as a woman in Ireland, whatever the topic or intention may be, still means a political act, in the sense that the content of the poems and their inner tensions may express authentic female experience and can challenge the conventions of poetry itself. Yet, when Boland speaks to other women poets in *Object Lessons*, she emphasizes the danger of commitment to political or ethical response only:

Our suffering, our involvement in the collective silence do not – and will never – of themselves guarantee our achievement as poets. But if we set out in the light of that knowledge and that history, determined to tell the human and poetic truth, and if we avoid simplification and self-deception, then I believe we are better equipped than most to discover the deepest possibilities and subversions within poetry itself.¹¹

Contemporary women poets are both women and poets, as Boland's views imply. When they manage to achieve harmony in using their immensely productive and subversive potential of their social position and pursuing personal artistic aims, they will become great tribute to Irish literary tradition. By my example of the three women poets, I will try to suggest in what fields and modes Irish poetry becomes enriched.

The historical context of Irish women's writing is very important for contemporary women's poetry, as was mentioned earlier in the introduction, and it will open the next chapter of the paper. Together with more detailed summary of the critical discourse

¹¹ Boland 254.

surrounding women's poetry it will frame my close reading and form a chapter on the context of the chosen poets and their work.

A discussion of feminism and its implications for poetry must be included along with different theoretical approaches to poetry and gender. In the next three chapters I will deal with each author and introduce her use of nature imagery in slightly broader context of her writing. The comparison of the individual poets and their treatment of figurative speech concerning nature and the self will be attempted towards the end of each subsequent chapter. In the concluding chapter of the thesis I will try to summarize my reading of the individual poets and their imagery in relation to the following questions. What new relationships within poetry itself and the communication between subject and object do women as independent subjects reveal? How has their relationship to nature imagery changed? What new ideas does their poetic treatment of the self and identity convey? What may be the contextual relevance of the personal worlds introduced in their poetry? Finally my discussion will turn back to the political and literary context and suggest broader implications of the women poets' aesthetic achievement.

Chapter 2

Irish Women's Poetry: Historical Contexts and Critical Discourse

2.1 Historicizing Irish Women's Poetry—Mediaeval to Modern

In her essay on women's inheritance from the history of Irish poetry, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill describes the recent watershed revealing genuine women's writing force in poetry.¹² Nevertheless, the more she ponders the refreshing and critical voice that women bring to the Irish poetry since the middle of twentieth century, the more she realizes "what little help the Irish literary tradition is to women poets."¹³ Ní Dhomhnaill is bothered by the fact that we can trace very few women poets in history of Irish writing, who "appear as a distant ghostly islands in a great sea of indifference and a fog of unknowing."¹⁴ She expresses distinct indignation when talking about the proportion of active and passive roles of women in Irish literary history. Women characters are very often described and referred to by male poets. Regularly, we can also come across a woman poet introduced in a literary text by a man. Women as authors of poetry are, however, very scarcely to be found in Old and Middle Irish literature, and also later they are only seldom published. With a closer look at Irish literary history it is evident that women played very important active role in culture and literature, but until recently the literary canon seems to have been drawn up without them.

The absence of women writers in the literary canon does not concern only poetry, of course. One branch of Irish feminist criticism focuses on recovery of women's writing and is based on the myth of its lack.¹⁵ Female voices are more abundant than it may seem, but they appear to have been suppressed or neglected by the historical tendencies in canonization. The

¹² Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Hidden Ireland: Woman's Inheritance" in *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh*, Theo Dorgan, ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996) 106.

¹³ Ní Dhomhnaill 111.

¹⁴ Ní Dhomhnaill 107.

¹⁵ Margaret Kelleher, "Retrospective View on Irish Women's Literary Studies," in *Kaleidoscopic view of Ireland*, Munira Mutrand & Laura P. Z. Izarra, eds. (Sao Paulo: Humanitas, 2003) 169.

reasons for this neglect are not easy to state, but Ní Dhomhnaill suggests several facts that may illuminate the difficult position of women poets in the past. Different poets and literary critics express a consensus that writing poetry has been considered a manly act in the Irish cultural tradition (as in most other cultural traditions). Some historical documents even show that there sometimes existed extreme hostility towards the concept of a woman poet. If the gift of composing poetry fell on a female in the family, for example, it could threaten the whole village.¹⁶ On the other hand, Ní Dhomhnaill can discern certain fields in literature which allowed or even preferred female poetry, such as the keening tradition. Nevertheless, she cannot avoid the conclusion that women's poetry was probably not official enough to find its way to manuscripts or that it did not somehow fit the convention that the later scribes followed.¹⁷ In what periods and areas of Irish literary history the voice of women poets does appear and what can it disclose about the role of a female poet in its course? The following pages will try to recapitulate history of Irish women's poetry and identify its basic shifts and changes.

To provide a simple overview of the position of women's poetry in Irish literary history, I will use two basic secondary sources. One of them will be volumes IV and V of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, which supplement the three previous volumes with history of women's writing. The other source will be Patrick Crotty's *The Penguin Book of Irish Poetry*, a very recent anthology, which includes a relatively large number of women poets and seems to pay considerable attention to their part in long range Irish literary past. The project of two additional volumes of *FDA* appears to provide much more than a usual anthology does. In accordance with its basic concept of explanation and compensation for the loss of female subjects in the largely male literary tradition, it offers a broader scope of women's position and point of view. The anthology comprises different sorts of men's writing concerning

¹⁶ Ní Dhomhnaill 111-112.

¹⁷ Ní Dhomhnaill 113.

women and their opinions and social status, it features feminist literary criticism, journalist reports and essays, historical and sociological analyses and then of course extracts of prose fiction, poetry and drama written by Irish women. Crotty's anthology, on the other hand, is not focused on women's writing, but attempts to mediate the "openness to women's perspectives and experience" that it ascribes to Irish poetry in general and its Gaelic tradition in particular.¹⁸

In the oldest preserved texts, which consist mainly of poetry, we can find descriptions of characters and lives of many important women, such as Eve, St Brigid, Créide or Liadan. Old Irish poetry written before 1200 is found to be "alive with female voices", which are "portrayed sympathetically."¹⁹ Nevertheless, as Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha remarks in her introduction to medieval Irish writing, "disappointingly little was actually written by women" and there is "not one complete text which can be attributed with absolute certainty to a historical woman until the early seventeenth century."²⁰ We may possibly argue that 'The Lament of Baoi, The Nun of Beare Island' was composed by Didge, a nun living in the tenth century, and regard it thus as the oldest preserved poem of female authorship. Cross-gendering is believed to be characteristic of the early period, however, and the tradition of male-authored poems featuring women's voices may easily confuse the supposed origin.²¹

Although Patrick Crotty suggests immense productivity of women authors since the very beginnings of Irish literary tradition, we must be reconciled with indirect references to female poetic composition, in its early periods. The Irish tradition of referring to historical poets in poems themselves is very strong, and therefore we can learn for instance about a seventh-century woman poet Liadan or a 'penitent spouse' Gormlaith producing verse in the tenth

¹⁸ Patrick Crotty ed., *The Penguin Book of Irish Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 2010) liv.

¹⁹ Crotty liv.

²⁰ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, "Medieval to Modern 600 – 1900," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. Vol. 4, *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, Angela Bourke, ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 4.

²¹ Crotty lv.

century.²² This rich secondary representation of female voices in Old and Middle Irish poetry is pleasing but very problematic at the same time. From the feminist point of view or according to the contemporary gender-based literary discourse, these delineations of feminine subjectivity performed by cross-gendering, male fantasies about goddesses and earth-mother figures, saga narratives of romantic heroines or references to historical secular figures provided by male writers help to artificially construct female sexuality and social identity. Ní Dhonnchadha emphasizes that it is necessary to read old literary texts with attention to their purpose and context, for example hagiography, romance or political propaganda, and be aware of their power to reinterpret reality.²³ The feminist attempts to trace original female literary works in the past and provide a continuous tradition of women writing appear to be very valuable then. Reconsideration of the balance between passive and active female figures in history and new perspectives concerning women's participation in literary culture form the background of the two last volumes of *The Field Day Anthology*.

From the medieval up to the modern period of Irish writing, relevance of women in literary culture was very broad. They had a large stake as readers, auditors and recipients; numerous sequences of poems were addressed to historical women. They were also important patrons in certain fields of literature. As far as direct authorship of poetry since the beginning of modern Irish literature is concerned, women participated actively in the tradition of courtly love poetry composed during the seventeenth century. Women of aristocratic origin seem to have had no problems becoming professional poets in this period. The first one we have reliable evidence about is Brigid Chill Dara (1589-1682), who was followed for example by Fionnghuala, Daughter of Domhnall Ó Briain, Caitilín Dubh, Úna Ní Bhroin or a noblewoman poet of the second half of the seventeenth century, Eibhlín Ní Choillte. Also some courtly love poems from before the seventeenth century may have been composed by

²² Crotty lv.

²³ Ní Dhonnchadha 2- 4.

women. As Patrick Crotty remarks in his outline of women tribute to Irish literary tradition, these female poets managed all the technical intricacies of bardic verse as well as the teasing paradox of Renaissance English poetry.²⁴ Apart from love poetry, there emerge themes of poetic composition itself and women's gifts and powers, in poems by Restoration poet Philippa (second half of the seventeenth century) and later in 'Enlightment' poet Dorothea Dubois (1728-74). An example of a woman interested in and writing on Old Irish poetry can be found as early as in the eighteenth century. A writer and translator Charlotte Brooke published an important book *Reliques of Irish Poetry* in 1788.

During the eighteenth century, also work of several female poets associated with Jonathan Swift and social satire appeared. Mary Monck living at the beginning of the eighteenth century is very probably the author of several poems of domestic topics and satire on romantic female readers. Similarly, poetry of Mary Barber (1685-1755) featured satire on gender roles and performed a distinct patriotic strain. Among poets writing in this mode for further examples of Constantia Grierson or Laetitia Pilkington can be mentioned. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, also a humorous patriotic poet Henrietta Battier (1751-1813) gained her voice in public and, in contrast, Ellen Talor echoes of domestic service and alienation from literary discourse and becomes the equivalent of Britain's so-called 'uneducated poets.'

In Gaelic culture, religious songs and prayers are believed to have been traditionally composed by women, and women were also in charge of public lamentation for the dead.²⁵ The poetic art of keening was performed for example by Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill in the eighteenth century or Mother of Diarmaid Mac Cárthaigh in the 19th century. Old Irish women authors of prayers are referred to by external sources (Maelísa Ó Brolcháin, 970-1038), which confirm women's activity in this field in the nineteenth century. Women contributed significantly as translators, editors and collectors of ancient Irish prayers during

²⁴ Crotty lv.

²⁵ Crotty lv- lvi.

the literary revival (Eleanor Hull, Katharine Tynan, Susan Mitchell) and wrote own religious poetry in this period. We can mention for example Jane Francesca Elgee (Lady Wilde, 1826-96), the author of “A Supplication.”

Women’s cultural activities connected to the nationalist agenda included also collecting different genres of Irish oral folklore, for example love songs ascribed to women. Love songs and children ballads were composed mostly between 1650 and 1850 in Gaeltacht as well as English-speaking areas and were collected for example by Kate ‘Dineery’ Doherty or Máire Áine Ní Dhonnchadha in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some woman collectors of the Irish Literary Revival, such as Katharine Tynan, wrote their own poetry, and some published solely their own poetry during this period. Emily Lawless, for instance, wrote poems praising different places of the Irish landscape.

2.2 The Revival and its Legacies

With the Irish Literary Revival and broader political developments at the beginning of the twentieth century, an explicitly nationalist expression appears in women’s poetry. This moment in Irish literary history deserves slightly closer attention in this chapter. Already in the chapter one I mentioned the gender discourse about the tropes that treat the woman as a national muse or embodiment of the country. The feminization of the national was launched already by romantic literary nationalism in 1840 and developed further in the Literary Revival. I have also suggested some of the unfortunate consequences of such figuration of Ireland for Irish women, whose realist representations were hindered. It must be remarked at this point that quite paradoxically, “far from denying women literary agency, nationalism may be credited with bringing them out of the private sphere and giving them a voice in the public forum.”²⁶ Nationalist woman writers were supported in their creative help to mobilize the

²⁶Antoinette Quinn, “Women and Literary Nationalism, 1845- 1916,” in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. IV, Angela Bourke, ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 895.

nation, indeed, but repetitiveness and reiteration of the same themes and tropes was demanded and “women authors’ opportunity for innovation was severely curtailed.”²⁷ Antoinette Quinn, the editor of the section on women and politics in *The Field Day Anthology*, concludes that “women authors negotiated the woman-nation symbol in diverse ways, though most appear to have regarded the gendering of the nation as an empowering strategy in a male-dominated rhetoric and some even consciously or unconsciously enhanced the symbol by personal association.”²⁸ The voice gained during this period seems to have been succumbed to the socially prescribed role and devoid of any free expression, although its rise managed to open a path for more personal response in later decades. The genre of nationalist poetry was written mainly during the romantic phase of the revival, for example by Lady Wilde, Ellen O’Leary (1831-89) or Fanny Parnell (1848-82), but occasionally also in its later period, for example by Alice Milligan (1866-1959).

Women’s extensive involvement in nationalism and their active participation in public debate increased throughout the first half of twentieth century and became much more independent. Along with campaigns for women’s suffrage, the assertion of real female identity began to be more visible. Also women’s poetry searched for more private expression. Feminism combined with modernism and opened up new aesthetic.²⁹ Thanks to the influence of Women’s Rights Movements also women’s poetry became more diverse and personal. Out of poets responding more directly to the social disappointment we can state Blanaid Salkeld (1880-1959), Máire Mhac an tSaoi (b. 1922) or the young Eavan Boland (b. 1944). At the same time different writers, such as Joan Sweetman, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Bríd Dáibhís, Caitlín Maude or Roz Cowman appeared to introduce more spiritual themes in the

²⁷ Quinn, 896.

²⁸ Quinn, 898.

²⁹ Gerardine Meaney, “Identity and Opposition: Women’s Writing, 1890- 1960,” in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. IV, Angela Bourke, ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 976.

poems. Hand in hand with feminist movements and political changes women managed to create own space for writing and conception of poetry in 1950s and 1960s.

2.3 Changing Critical Attitudes in the later Twentieth Century

The change in women's poetry and the discourse surrounding it that took place around the mid-twentieth century was significant. The novelty of the authentic feminine poetic expression is emphasized by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, who notes that

many women in Ireland have written poetry in the past but more often than not they used verse as a vehicle for ideological or political stances, whether as nationalists, as unionists, or as explicitly religious poets, and their work has therefore remained isolated from main currents of poetry in the twentieth century.³⁰

Women's movements and women poets have succeeded in shattering the cultural hegemony and its constructed, man-made image of the Feminine. Ní Dhomhnaill does not hesitate to compare such change in cultural discourse identity representation to "an attempt to create an alternative Logos" and points out that this spectacular change is very recent and women's poetry in Ireland is "just about to break into full flower."³¹

It is obvious that the whole approach to women's poetry has been completely different in recent decades; it enabled a renegotiation women's identity and its representation, a revisiting of women's social and literary history, the publishing their older and later works and assertive projects such as the two last volumes of *The Field Day Anthology*. Contemporary women poets come across no large obstacles to being published and entering public debate. There

³⁰ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Contemporary Poetry," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. IV, Angela Bourke, ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 1290.

³¹ Ní Dhomhnaill 1297.

appeared also printing presses exclusively focused on women's writing and women's cultural studies, such as the Attic Press in Dublin. Women poets have also been included to a more equitable degree in recent anthologies of Irish poetry, as we have noticed in Patrick Crotty's *The Penguin Book of Irish Poetry*. There would be therefore not much sense in outlining larger number of names and details of contemporary Irish women poets in this historical overview (Crotty introduces Eiléan Ní Chulleanáin, Dorothy Molloy, Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Rita Ann Higgins, Caitríona O'Reilly and Leontia Flynn). Nevertheless, some new tendencies that the self-conscious female voice has brought to Irish poetry deserve a little space here.

Women's experience and perception has been reflected in various ways, as Patricia Boyle Haberstroh suggests in her essay on new directions in Irish women's poetry.³² Some of the new voices focus on truthful portrayals of ordinary women, for example Paula Meehan or Sarah Berkeley. Some are even concerned with life on the edge, for example Juanita Casey or Leland Bardwell. Others, such as Rita Ann Higgins, offer an ironic view on classical goddess figures or relationships between men and women. An interesting act of revising mythic and religious figures can be found in poetry by Ruth Hooley. Sexual taboos and sexual freedoms are addressed, on the other hand, in poems by Roz Cowman or Mary Dorsey. Thanks to the new private conception of writing poetry, the scope of interests and themes is very wide, indeed, and seems to provide a valuable supplement to male interpretation of everyday reality.

Before proceeding to the second part of this chapter, I would like to briefly return to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's initial indignation. In her first essay written about fifteen years ago she discussed the pitifully minimal traces of women's literary heritage and the unfair procedures of canonization. Now in retrospect we can witness how the literary canon has changed. Expanded publishing opportunities and increasing visibility of women poets bring new

³² Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1996) 209- 212

problems and tasks, though. In her more recent essay, Ní Dhomhnaill mentions one of the newly posed questions about female writers: “Yes, women are writing a lot of poetry now, but is it any good?”³³ Expectations directed towards the woman poet persist in a transformed mode and she retains a special position within poetry. Women’s poetry can be good or bad just as the men’s poetry is, Ní Dhomhnaill remarks.³⁴ It may be added that the specific position does not grant women poets good poetry but does burden them with certain responsibility to literary tradition concerning her gender. She enters it to renegotiate representations and fill in gaps.

2.4 Contemporary Irish Women’s Poetry—Duty and Diversity?

All genres and spheres of contemporary women’s writing explore the newly gained visibility and attempt to solve questions of constructed female identity. Poetry, however, is the greatest area of its expansion, as Clair Wills notes in *The Field Day Anthology*.³⁵ By its specific artistic means of personal expression, women’s poetry significantly contributes to contemporary literary representation of women in Ireland. Moreover, thanks to its internal characteristics and reforms that enter the male-dominated region of poetry, it distinctly develops the very genre. Different questions about the specific inner qualities and novelties of recent women’s poetry and various possible reasons for its particular interests and agenda resonate in literary discourse. What exactly are the traditional social and literary attitudes to gender identities that the woman poet must renegotiate? What renders her position in contemporary poetry special? The following part of the background survey for my close reading, will be devoted to the critical discourse surrounding contemporary women’s poetry.

³³ Ní Dhomhnaill 1290.

³⁴ Ní Dhomhnaill 1294.

³⁵ Clair Wills, “Contemporary Writing, 1960- 2001,” in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. IV, Angela Bourke, ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 1127.

Irish cultural tradition features a specific position of the poet, who historically follows the role of the bardic poet. He used to be the educated man of the court and composed verses that praised the king. Among favourite forms of such poetry belonged the so-called “aisling” poems; a vision poems, in which the land was embodied as a women figure. The king entered a symbolic marriage with the territory – the woman – in the poem, while, in many cases, the poet spoke in the female voice.³⁶ Poetry was closely tied to ownership of territory since its very beginnings and nationalization of the feminine became deeply imbedded in its tradition. The continuous impact and variations of this fusion were later found very dangerous by Boland because of its simplifications of both nationhood and womanhood in Ireland.³⁷ The representation of the Irish nation missed its real female identity due to the objectification of women, and the development and different phases of this objectification will now be surveyed.

The image of the woman as a passive icon was employed for different purposes in the course Irish history. As C.L. Innes details in *Woman and Nation*, the ancient mythology established the figure of the goddess Mother Earth, which was appropriated by modernist male poets and combined with political allegories. This powerful trope also launched the tradition of sexualization of the Irish landscape and placed the body and temptation into the centre of the sense of national identity. Later on, the ideals of Roman Catholic Church blended the image of the quasi-divine mother of the folk tradition with worship of the Virgin Mary. Gradually, a figure of Erin, who symbolized courage and chastity, was established to represent an ideal of Irish womanhood.³⁸ Passive woman icons similar in nature to the traditional tropes and embodiments occur as victimized bodies for example in some early poems by Seamus Heaney or Michael Longley. The fully human woman is believed to be traditionally absent from the literary canon along with her natural ageing process or

³⁶ References in *Uracecht na Ríar*, Liam Breatuach, ed. (D. I. A. S. 1987)

³⁷ Boland, *Object Lessons* 128.

³⁸ Innes 18-22.

expressions of female potential. The literary tradition has “fixed woman bodies into desexualized images of nationhood.”³⁹

During the Irish National Revival in more recent cultural history, the desexualized female image was reinforced to embody the nation. The figure of Cathleen Ní Houlihan was used to support nationalist efforts and encourage the separatist mood during political conflicts with the English rule. Ireland was represented as a maiden or old woman who needed sacrifice of man’s lives to be saved.⁴⁰ In connection to the nationalist agenda and Anglo-Irish relations, more general thoughts about nations and races were employed to illuminate the political discourse. Matthew Arnold followed anthropological ideas and constructs by Ernest Renan to assert the essentially feminine nature of the Celtic race. Based on the already reduced image of women in the nineteenth century bourgeois, Arnold’s views emphasized the helplessness of the feminine Celtic nations. The Irish were supposed to be creative and poetic, but completely ineffectual in politics and in need to be governed by the English. As David Cairns and Shaun Richards describe, also in various pamphlets and illustrated jokes from this period, the Irish nation was frequently pictured as a weak sensitive woman who must be controlled by the rational John Bull, the English nation.⁴¹ The traditional national symbols and metaphors were very distinctly gender-based and did not leave the real Irish women much space to assert their authentic identity.

After this summary of the main concepts that employed and imposed unrealistic constructs of female identity, we should shift our attention to the social status and position of real Irish women in the modern history of the country. How was the actual life and attitude to women influenced by the traditional role of the feminine in mythology and Catholic religion? Ailbhe Smyth’s collection of essays, *The Irish Women’s Studies Reader*, on women in Irish culture is

³⁹ Irene Gilson ed, *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) 6- 9.

⁴⁰ Innes 17.

⁴¹ David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) 46- 48.

pervaded by the idea of obliterated reality of Irish women based on the traditional role offered to them.⁴² In this volume Gerardine Meaney argues that the literary trope of a passive female and the perpetuated virgin mother image lead to pathological male domination over the contemporary woman. It has been very hard for women to be actively involved in politics and in literature; they stayed merely abused as the scapegoats of the national identity.⁴³ The glorification of Mary in Catholic ideology and its stress on chastity and obedience of the ideal woman seemed to have immense impact on the suppression of women's own opinions in issues of sexuality for example, which lead up to unusual political opposition to contraception and abortion in Ireland. Meaney emphasizes various traditions of feminine roles, with which the actual women unconsciously tend to identify. They are thus destructive without any direct political oppression. Within the patriarchal authority and possession women become "unable to accept themselves as thinking, choosing, sexual, intellectual and complex ordinary mortals."⁴⁴

It is not easy to judge to what extent Irish women really lost their authentic voice as Meaney's radical ideas suggest and to what extent they were able to decide about their role in society. Myrtle Hill offers a slightly contrastive view when she admits the Church's authority on sexual matters, but reminds of extensive women's participation in both the cultural and political spheres and their significant contributions on the artistic scene long before the half of twentieth century.⁴⁵ It is not our task to solve the question and decide the degree of women's real identity involved and asserted during these activities. We will concentrate on the fact that definitely not all the Irish women silently accepted their prescribed position, which resulted in Women's Civil Rights Movement in 1960 and feminist movements following till 1990. Women's entry into the labour force was one factor of transformation of gender identities that

⁴² Gerardine Meaney, "Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics," in Ailbhe Smyth ed, *Irish Women Studies Reader* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993) 230.

⁴³ Meaney 242.

⁴⁴ Meaney 231.

⁴⁵ Myrtle Hill, *Women in Ireland: A Century of Change* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003) 13.

occurred in more Western European countries around the same time.⁴⁶ Hand in hand with the political shifts went feminist literary revolts that strived to achieve recognition for woman poets and other artists despite their stereotypical confining role of an inspiration or muse.⁴⁷

The changes that Irish feminist criticism brought concerning visibility and publishing opportunities for women writers were immense. Poetry, fiction, as well as academic texts by women emerged to explore the cultural history of their gender, and the subject of women studies was established. Opinions and attitudes within the movement were diverse, however, and raised many conflicts about the aesthetic form of new women's writing. Eavan Boland as one of its leading figures introduced her project of 're-working' the past misconceptions and stereotypical images of women, but her project was swiftly criticized for example by Edna Longley as controversial re-articulation of clichés.⁴⁸ It would be simplifying to include all the criticism born in this period into feminism. We would find very radical feminist examples, such as Patricia Coughlan's critique of Heaney in her essay "Bog Queens",⁴⁹ but, on the other hand, we remember Boland's respect for the male literary tradition and its aesthetic achievements, which was already mentioned. As Margaret Kelleher in her essay on woman's studies argues, "a distinction could be made between political and formalist readings" when we talk about previous Irish literary tradition.⁵⁰ Boland's own concept of the ethical and aesthetic in all poetry seems to explore this very tension and suggests the poet's refusal of the more radical feminist critical agenda. Her objection to the harmful abuse of the feminine is balanced by her respect for the autonomous artistic value of men's as well as women's poetry. The variety in women's reformist approaches is so rich that we cannot identify political and

⁴⁶ Ailbhe Smyth, "The Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland 1970-1990," in Ailbhe Smyth ed, *Irish Women Studies Reader* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993) 245.

⁴⁷ Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999) 161.

⁴⁸ Kelleher 163- 164

⁴⁹ Patricia Coughlan, " 'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney", in Johnson O'Brien, Toni and David Cairns, eds, *Gender in Irish Writing* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991) 88- 91

⁵⁰ Kelleher 164.

literary aims of the feminist critique and fuse less and more radical attitudes of the women's movement.

According to Kelleher, we may distinguish several concerns or phases of Irish feminist criticism. Firstly, it was the aim of reviving real women's experiences submerged in patriarchal myths and re-writing the old images, which was discussed above and which was attempted in practice for example by Ailbhe Smyth's anthology *Wildish Things*.⁵¹ The second mode of feminist criticism also arose in 1980s and concentrated on the recovery of female literary tradition. During this phase, the myth about women's invisibility was countered and the question of literary canon opened. The assumption that women have been only objects and not authors of Irish writing was challenged when abundant works of women's travel writing, Gothic or Revival writing was discovered. Immediately after, most critics wondered "why only some writing exists to be remembered."⁵²

Women's studies projects that ensued, such as the volumes 4 and 5 of the *Field Day Anthology*, bore the question of canon-formation in mind and tried to respond to the problem of different versions of literary history. When destabilizing the notion of authorship and revealing the uncertain nature of canonization, the feminist critics invited re-imagining of the whole concept of Irish writing.⁵³ Before the particular genre of poetry and its position in the new wave of women's writing will be discussed, it is necessary to state at least some controversial issues resonant in contemporary debates about the flourishing women's writing and criticism. Women's writing workshops have been held, women's writing presses run and many anthologies of women authors only published. Nevertheless, we could easily ask whether these separate representations of women manage to gradually fill in the gaps in literary history or whether they, by their separatism, rather underline and continue the exclusion of women from Irish literary tradition. Critics could swiftly doubt that the newly

⁵¹ Ailbhe Smyth ed, *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women Writing* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989) 13.

⁵² Kelleher 170.

⁵³ Kelleher 174-177.

gained visibility of women authors has solved the question of representation of female identity as part of Irish nation and culture. The disputes about persisting isolation and further marginalization of women writers persist and the views on value of feminism for Irish woman writer differ.⁵⁴

The eventually won opportunity to fully articulate own identity and create new image of the woman cannot be denied the contemporary literary development, despite all its question marks. Within the whole scope of women's writing, poetry plays a crucial role as far as the exploration of the self and its subjective experience is concerned. So as to avoid the perception that all women's poetry is feminist or post-feminist self-defining acts, though, Peter Childs offers three distinct stages of contemporary female poetry in the English language. After the traditionalist poetry and "écriture feminine", the most recent women's poetry has moved to "post-feminist synthesis of the roles of victim and victimizer." It performs playful exploration of roles and subjectivities and eschews didacticism.⁵⁵ Women poets have also ventured to employ new experimental poetic language to express their body, sexuality and experience. Childs emphasizes that women have recently began to "exploit successfully the possibility of an alternative to the phallogentric language through the linkage of the logic of desire with the formal experimentation of poetry."⁵⁶ There have been disputes about the need of specifically female language to describe female experience. Nevertheless, the idiosyncratic formal means and their original internal relationships that can be found in contemporary Irish women's poetry and will be observed also in this thesis suggest the specific language of self-expression that only poetry can provide.

2.5 Feminine Identity and Experience

⁵⁴ Haberstroh 7-10.

⁵⁵ Childs 163.

⁵⁶ Childs 170.

The extensive use of humour and diversity of style in contemporary women's poetry in Ireland was introduced in my short outline of the most recent poets several paragraphs above. The remaining space in this chapter will be devoted to the unique role of poetry in revisiting the feminine identity and experience. The form of the genre seems to enable, apart from its topical content, self-expression or exploration of realities outside the self by other than thematic and narrative means. Next to the specifically feminine topics, the poets seem to reveal more about their imagination, experience of everyday reality and relationship to the surrounding world by the position of the persona, figurative language and experimental syntax within the poems.

When Boland introduces Irish poets emerging on the poetic scene towards the end of twentieth century in one of her critical essays, she conceives a poem as a "negotiation between the inner and outer world."⁵⁷ Every poet makes this negotiation for themselves and the new women poets have made very refreshing changes in this negotiation. Boland describes for example unusual work with language and association in Medbh McGuckian and subversion of public perception of woman and poet in Rita Ann Higgins. What is of crucial interest, however, and reminiscent of the revisited objectification of women in literary history, is women's re-perception of the old subject-object relation. In *Object Lessons*, Boland analyses several poems by Sylvia Plath, Carol Ann Duffy and one by herself and shows the anti-authoritarian tone that the women subjects express towards the objects in the poems. Objects (balloons or the fan in these cases) are not possessed in these poems as they were in cases of females possessed by male imagery in previous poetic tradition, and powerlessness becomes voiced instead possessiveness. Thanks to this reformed relationship between the subject and object, the poem acquires a completely different nature. In Plath's poem "Balloons," for example, the old fixities of the sexual are rewritten. "The dominant

⁵⁷ Eavan Boland, "Born in the 50's; Irish Poets of the Global Village," in *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh*, ed. Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996) 137.

impression left by the poem is of an imagination which has surrendered generously to the peril and adventure of the sensory moment, whose powers of expression have not been confirmed by it and whose bodily vulnerability has been increased by it.”⁵⁸ Not only themes or formal devices, but also the internal relationships in poetry are changed by women poets. The subject does not confirm its possession as it often did in poems of the past, but is open to the processes around.

Boland adds that these inner changes in poetry are certainly not only matter of gender and come with individual poets of both sexes, but female poetry is an undisputable contribution in this field. My close reading will develop this notion of vulnerable, open and curious subject and its attitude towards an object or the environment with a concrete focus on relationship to nature in the three Irish poets. I will then return to discuss the possible specific characteristics and inner re-negotiation of women’s poetry in greater detail after the close reading in the conclusion of the thesis. Before finishing this chapter, however, I will attempt to summarize shortly the contemporary woman poet’s responsibility of revisiting the traditional imagery and adding to Irish past.

It has been the central task of the first generation of newly emerged Irish women poets, such as Boland or Ní Dhomhnaill, to re-perceive the traditional evocations of the archetypal feminine instead of real thought about women. While becoming national icons women experienced their own personal history that had never entered nationalist debates, and has only recently found opportunity to be added to history of Ireland and supplement the picture of its national identity. The woman can now also disclose taboos concerning her real sexuality and explore her actual concerns and themes of everyday life. All this enrichment and re-negotiation can happen within poetry. We could say that Boland’s task and message of adjusting the genre of poetry to expression of authentic female experience⁵⁹ is being slowly

⁵⁸ Boland, *Object Lessons* 224.

⁵⁹ Boland, *Object Lessons* 235.

fulfilled. Moreover, just as poetry articulated male authority over women images and managed to assert control over real women's sexual desire in the past, also the contemporary poetry can implement change. Women poetry can now capture the "belief in the role of metaphor as a means of transformation and empowerment."⁶⁰

The achievement of breaking the hostility of the Irish poem's interior world to women authors in a relatively short space of time brings new energy to Irish poetry and enriches perspective on human experience. In the second generation of the recent female poetic voices, the rewriting of women's experience might be less explicit and performed rather by formal devices of irony and subversive imagery. The poem develops slowly to show up the small erosions and innovation, Boland reckons, and the concerns of new women's poetry may shift in interesting ways. By all means, though, in both generations of contemporary woman poets the re-perception happens not only on the level of theme or experience of reality and history. Women poets set the agenda in contemporary poetry by revisiting old rigid concepts inside the poem. Their private reality refreshes the public one for example by innovation of the fixed relation between subject and object.⁶¹ Also my close reading will attempt to connect examples of re-negotiation of clichés concerning female embodiment of earth and nature with observation of internal characteristics of the poems.

By outlining of historical background and different topics concerning the critical discourse of contemporary female poetry in Ireland I have suggested the vast space for women's authentic voice and exploration of identity within poetry. In following chapters I will focus on one particular area of undermining the authoritative connection between the woman and nature. Contemporary women poets cease to be objects identified with Irish country, landscape or fertility in general, and reveal thoroughly different ties between their selves and nature. Metaphors and other tropes of figurative language are employed in a completely new

⁶⁰ Nordin 13.

⁶¹ Boland, 'Born in the 50's; Irish Poets of the Global Village' 142-144.

manner to perform these ties. Women become subjects who re-possess nature. They search for expression of their identity while exploring their relationship to seasons of the year, objects in nature or its spirit in broader mystical sense. By their open and more vulnerable subjects and their anti-authoritative re-possession of the surrounding objects and environment they also seem to introduce very original internal tensions and opportunities of the poem. Let us explore what the three contemporary woman poets can reveal to us about their personal experience of the self and nature.

Chapter 3

Nature Imagery in the Poetry of Eavan Boland

3.1 The Public Significance of Personal Experience

A branch; a river; will be what is lost of words
as they turn to silences and than to sleep.

(Eavan Boland, 'Mountain Time')

Themes and tropes connected to nature occur in Eavan Boland's poems in different contexts and perform different roles. In this chapter, various ways and implications of their employment will be introduced in wider relation to the development of the author's poetry and its critical reflection. As it is inseparable from Boland's literary oeuvre, her public role will also be remembered on the following pages.

Apart from several teenage years spent in London, Boland grew up in Dublin. She received a degree in English and Classics at Trinity College and published her first book of poetry, *New Territory*, at the age of twenty three. The period of English exile, Boland's college years, and her gradual maturing as a woman and a poet are mirrored not only in her poems and her prose book, *Object Lessons*, but they are also fused with her political opinions in her critical essays.⁶² It could be summarized that Boland's struggle concerning her identity and artistic expression became the explicit core of her political argument and agenda, which reiterated the theme of silenced history of Irish women.

To open the short debate of Boland's public stance, we must return to her position on the scale of feminist movements and attitudes, which was already suggested by my references to *Object Lessons* in Chapter 1. When women consider themselves exposed to language and

⁶² Joan McBreen, *The White Page* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Publishing, 1999) 12.

cultural stereotypes of a patriarchal tradition and determine to oppose it, they appear to have at least two basic options. To pursue the issue of isolation, either they can attempt to reject the established imagery completely and try to develop own language and concept of literary tradition, or they can refuse such a radical separatist stance, create from within the literary tradition and challenge its conventional images and ideas. Boland, as is apparent from her critical work and messages to the next generation of woman poets, belongs to the second group of women. She revises the rigid imagery, which she considers hostile to women's real selves, by making her private experience public.⁶³ She does not try, as some of the more radical feminists do, to discover ancient pre-patriarchal world in old mythology, for example, but she concentrates rather on the continuance between the mythic, past and present stories of women and issues relevant to them. She admits a tremendous effect of American Jungian feminism on her and applies her own interpretation of myths while searching for archetypal relationship between mothers and daughters, for instance.⁶⁴

Boland distances herself from extremist gestures that condemn the male artistic tradition and representation, but her work clearly follows and illuminates some feminist ideas. By appropriating opinions on nationalism and themes such as domesticity, maternity or the female body, she contributes to Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray's central articulations of national construction of bodies. She does not refuse, but does write against the masculine tradition when helping to voice "all that had been silenced in phallogocentric discourse."⁶⁵

Boland's poetry is distinctly autobiographical. It reflects all the stages of her search for self-expression among men poets in Dublin and explores her artistic aim to mediate the authentic sense of womanliness and home. For her, however, the autobiographical narrative

⁶³ Haberstroh 89.

⁶⁴ Veronica House, "Words We Can Grow Old and Die In: Earth Mother and Ageing Mother in Eavan Boland's Poetry," in I. G. Nordin, ed. *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Irish academic press, 2006) 106.

⁶⁵ Coleen A. Hynes, "A Song for Every Child I Might Have Had: Infertility and Maternal Loss in Contemporary Irish Poetry," in I. G. Nordin, ed. *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) 145.

and personal imagery carry public and political value. National heritage in form of literary representation is of crucial importance, and this representation must thus be more true to reality, more true to women's experience. The simplification of the national and the feminine by fusion of these two concepts in Irish cultural history has distorted both the reality of feminine experience and the identity of the nation. It reduced the national identity to its masculine expression, and the Irish history should now abandon its reduced version. To create its healthy representation means to tell the most private experience, for Boland.⁶⁶ The poet feels responsible to nationalism along with her sense of need of authentic representation of women.

Boland's poetry plays with, develops and supports her political notion of suppressed feminine voice in Irish history. They go hand in hand. Throughout various phases of her poetry we can trace explicit and implicit explorations of the theme. The relationship between poetry, and art in general, and public opinions or philosophical approaches changes along with time periods and individual artists. Boland has established one for herself. That such establishment is indeed a matter of subjective resolution, is confirmed by some negative responses to Boland's treatment of literary art, which must be mentioned before we focus on the poetry itself.

Haberstroh includes William Logan's – in her opinion quite devaluing and reduced – judgements into her discussion of Boland's work. Logan considers Boland subjected to “passionless household poem”, and, according to Haberstroh, misses the complexity of feelings in the poems and the author's struggle to be true to her own culture.⁶⁷ A very complex criticism is offered by Peter McDonald in his review of one of Boland's later collection of poems, *The Lost Land*. Apart from labelling Boland's language inattentive and disorganized, he criticises her meditation on history as pathetic and her sense of significance

⁶⁶ Gerald Dawe, “The Suburban Night: On Eavan Boland, Paul Durcan and Thomas MacCarthy,” in Elmer Andrews, ed. *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1992) 171.

⁶⁷ Haberstroh 87- 88.

of own experience as exaggerated.⁶⁸ It is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate different attitudes to the art of poetry, but I cannot resist to add to McDonald's criticism that Boland explained her view of the public value of her private experience very lucidly and that his condemnation of the sincerity of her poetic expression does not seem a particularly valuable literary criticism to me.

One of the most radical judgements about Boland's poetry, and one that leads us back to her sense of link between art and political argument, seems to be provided by David Wheatley's reading. He openly recognizes the challenging and subversive potential of Boland's poems, but regards and criticises them as propaganda.⁶⁹ His argument touches precisely on the tight connection between the political agenda and art that some of Boland's poems distinctly confirm when explicitly dealing with suppression of women's identity and voice in the past or subverting the images of male heroism. To suggest that Boland's vocation and artistic achievement comprises much more than a straightforward ideological opposition to the particular idea of masculine treatment of feminine identity may be one of the aims of this chapter.

3.2 Themes and Phases of Boland's Poetry

As was remarked before, Boland's poems very overtly reflect on her dialogue with the previous poetic tradition, her search for identity, and her commitment to the true representation of women's personal experience of history and contemporary reality. Her early poems, as Haberstroh explains, cover little new territory, however, because they follow the previous literary convention and its male heroes. Only later did the poet realize that such stereotypes betrayed real women, and this awareness enabled her to make "the first step in

⁶⁸ Peter MacDonald, "Extreme Prejudice," in *The Metre Magazine*, Justin Quinn, David Wheatley, eds., Issue 6, Summer 1999, 89.

⁶⁹ David Wheatley, "Changing the Story: Eavan Boland and Literary History" in *The Irish Review*, Volume 31, 2004, 103– 105.

establishing a new aesthetic.”⁷⁰ Gradually, Boland employed more female voices in her verse and began to recover women’s history.

Among very important instances of this revitalization of woman’s experience of historical events that have been traditionally interpreted by men, belongs Boland’s memory of her grandmother. She describes her as living “outside history” in *Object Lessons* and in ‘The Fever.’⁷¹ Other poems convey her ironic view of national heroism. She explores the rhetorical question “Who writes history?” for example by her subversive reaction to Patrick Pearse’s political poem personifying the country as a woman:

I am the woman in the gansy-coat
on board the Mary Belle,
in the huddling cold,
holding her half-dead baby to her.

Boland introduces a real female figure that strikingly defies any heroic nationalist conceptions of the feminine. According to her, this real woman must now enter the narrative, because she is part of it. The individual history must interfere in the false nationalist images and lead towards the complexity of national representation. Boland develops her concept of public meaning of personal experience at this stage of her literary career. Along with the disillusionment with war and Western heroic tradition, also mythological figures of Athene with mute flute, for example, appear.

Soon, the poems do chart a completely new territory, both in subject and form, as Haberstroh notices. Boland’s interest in specifically feminine themes and sexual taboos pervade her third collection of poems, *In her Own Image*, and are later developed in more

⁷⁰ Haberstroh 62.

⁷¹ *Object Lessons* 20-23.

meditative mood in *Night Feed*. The short lines of this poetry and its anti-lyric tone are considered reminiscent of Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, by Haberstroh. Below the titles “Anorexic” or “Menses” stereotypes are parodied, false images of women unmasked and their damaging potential suggested.⁷²

Flesh is heretic
my body is a witch
I am burning it

(‘Anorexic’)

Gerald Dawe emphasizes also the need to understand woman’s own desire, which these poems mediate, and their confrontation with poetic convention by picturing ordinary life in the suburb.⁷³ Boland’s important and frequent themes of domesticity and motherhood seem to have origins in these painful attempts to find words for female sexuality and authentic experience in poetic language. They appear to have much greater meaning than mere aestheticizing of the suburban surroundings and household duties.

a nursery lamp
in a suburb window
behind which is a boiled glass, a bottle
and a baby all
hisses like a kettle

(‘Hymn’)

⁷² Haberstroh 66- 67.

⁷³ Dawe 174- 175.

The undermining of superficial or dehumanized sexual and maternal images of women is connected to Boland's treatment of the unobtainable ideal of the Virgin Mary as well as her recurring theme of the power of art. As Michaela Schrage-Früh argues, a lot of her poems focused on the female body mirror the suffocating and devastating effects that the icon of feminine perfection and purity had on women's self-esteem. The psychological conflict imposed by the prescribed social role and the sense of guilt are developed for example in 'Witching'.⁷⁴

Boland's interest in the fiction of art and the tension between reality and representation provides them with various metaphors during the development of her poetic expression. One of her first explorations of the sense of submission to images of the female sex may be observed in 'Self-portrait on a Summer Evening'.

Jean-Baptiste Chardin
is painting a woman
in the last summer light.
...
Before your eyes
the ordinary life
is being glazed over.
...
I am Chardin's woman
edged in reflected light,
hardened by
the need to be ordinary.

⁷⁴ Michaela Schrage-Früh, "My Being Cries Out to Be Incarnate: The Virgin Mary and Female Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry," in I. G. Nordin, ed. *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Irish academic press, 2006) 123- 129.

The persona in the poem observes the painter at work and toys with the idea of her identification with the artistic image of a woman. Within her fantasy of accepting the role she feels the large distance between her own ordinariness and the romantic idea of women's grace. The poet's meditation on art in this and many other poems not only suggests the uneasiness about the defining power of art, but performs also her strong respect for its beauty. It proves her awareness that the value of art may not be committed to ethical questions. More resentful approach to the artistic treatment of female bodies Haberstroh finds for example in Boland's metaphor of sculptor's hands creating a new woman or in her responses to the burden of beauty imposed on women.⁷⁵

The theme of the demand for passive beauty develops up to the author's later interest in myths and stories about real and historical women. Some poems in *The Journey*, for example, deal with the national past of Irish women. The universal theme of maternity, on the other hand, tries to connect the daily life of contemporary women with their mythic counterparts. Boland alludes to the goddess Ceres, who lost her daughter according to the legend, to ponder the mother – daughter relationship.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, in Veronica House's opinion, her main interest in the Ceres myth “stems from her growing awareness of the absence of ageing women in poetry and mythology.”⁷⁷ Boland finds already the old mythology filled with undying female images, and attempts a subversive redefinition of myths.

The poet's effort to inscribe the ageing body into her poetry connects her challenging of Ceres' constant fertility to her theme of artistic prison for women and resistance of traditional poetic language to their authentic experience. These issues intertwine and resonate throughout Boland's whole work. To conclude the outline of its development and focuses, I will give an example of a poem, in which more of Boland's major concerns are combined. Her troubles

⁷⁵ Haberstroh 73.

⁷⁶ Haberstroh 82.

⁷⁷ House 106.

about finding space for women's self and ageing body in language and nation find their explicit expression in one of the later poems, 'Anna Liffey', in which the author draws a parallel between the river in Dublin and a female persona.

The city where I was born.

The river that runs through it.

The nation which eludes me.

...

It has taken me

All my strength to do this.

Becoming a figure in a poem.

...

An ageing woman

finds no shelter in language.

3.3 The Concept of the Self and Formal Aspects of Boland's Poetry

Boland's poetry features a great deal of explicit reaction to women's position in the tradition of composing poetry, such as in 'Anna Liffey', but offers no less amount of hidden or unconscious re-negotiation of conventional poetic forms and subversive personal imagery, which transcend the contextual meaning of women's poetry. Both kinds of these responses to the previous literary tradition will be discussed in relation to the theme of connection between nature and the self. Before opening the discussion, I will shortly suggest some of the formal tendencies and innovative inner relationships in Boland's poems.

As Haberstroh emphasizes, Boland's poetry should be judged also for its sound and pattern.⁷⁸ Indeed, its stylistic means are inseparable from the ideas and tropes. For example, to convey the painful confrontation with the female body, Boland abandons regular metres and rhymes in favour of short urgent notes and one-word lines.⁷⁹ On the other hand, in her mockery of traditional imagery she experiments with traditional sound patterns such as assonance and alliteration and often works against the regular metre and form.⁸⁰ A detailed analysis of the author's language and methods is beyond the scope of this paper. Her concept of the self, however, and its implications for the internal relationship between subjects and objects in the poems is crucial also for the nature imagery, and will thus be devoted short space before my actual reading.

When Anne Fogarty ponders Boland's voiceless eloquence of objects and inarticulacy of subjects, she draws on the Lacanian notion of silent gazing and listening that produces meaning.⁸¹ For us, her suggestion of the self-questioning incertitude and its implication for the audibility of objects is of special importance. In the open-ended self-reflexive meditation on an object approached as counter-self, which Fogarty observes for example in the treatment of the river in the poem 'Anna Liffey', the poet's stance refuses any self-possessive subjectivity and control over the object frequent in the traditional lyric poem. Her poetry questions its basic conventions. The typical mode of distanced and defining treatment of either a woman, landscape or another object seems to be undermined. The object is not always used to provide figurative expression. In many cases it rather confronts and suspends the subject.

I remember

how strange it felt –

⁷⁸ Haberstroh 88.

⁷⁹ Dawe 174.

⁸⁰ House 109.

⁸¹ Anne Fogarty, "I Was a Voice: Orality and Silence in the Poetry of Eavan Boland," in R. Ingelbien, H. Schwall, eds. *Irish Women Writers* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2011) 12- 13.

not knowing any
names for the red oak
and the rail
and the starways plunge
of the ofsprey.

What we said was less
than what we saw.

(‘The River’)

The illusion of the coherent possessive self is broken in various places of Boland’s poetry, and different kinds of elusive objects or themes are revived by this alternative poetic approach. Fogarty finds for example the vanished experience of historical suffering not only of the poet’s female ancestors voiced. The events seem to be revealed without a meaning imposed by the subject.⁸² Similarly, in the case of the relationship between rather self-less subject and natural objects, the personas often keep their openness to spiritual communication with the surroundings and offer thus a new attitude to nature imagery.

3.4 Boland and Nature Imagery

May it be a very simple simile employing an animal image or view of landscape to picture a situation, or a complex conceit drawing a parallel between the body and nature, Boland’s imagery offers new, specific perspective of the communication between a human being and the natural environment. To trace and explore its various performances I picked several poems from different collections to form the core of my close reading and a few more for

⁸² Fogarty 16- 17.

some basic comparison, illustration and support. The role of nature for subjects in the poems varies, and I will attempt to follow its examples from more lucid ones up to the cases of a deeper internal encounter between nature and the self.

Many poems reflect human interpretation of surrounding nature by weaving a simile or metaphor to describe a particular situation, feeling or an abstract idea. In one of Boland's very early poems, 'The Pilgrim', the destiny of a wandering girl is compared to the life of birds as we may understand it.

When the nest falls in winter, birds have flown,
To distant lights and hospitality:
The pilgrim, with her childhood home a ruin,
She shares their fate and, like them, suddenly
Becomes a tenant of the wintry day.
Looking back, out of the nest of stone
As it tumbles, she can see her childhood
Flying away like an evicted bird.

The parallel is not created by a single simile, but the image of the birds' flight opens the poem and is revived throughout the whole stanza. The girl's situation is mirrored (like them, suddenly/ becomes a tenant of the wintry day), but also the idea of birds leaving their home is developed thanks to the pondering of the pilgrim as their imaginary counterpart in flight (birds have flown/ to distant lights and hospitality; flying away like an evicted bird). The birds are themselves personified as wind's tenants. In this poem, the image is not used as a simple sign, but both the human situation and the animals are mutually illuminated. There is no closure of definition, but its expansion.

For Boland's early poetry, an extensive use of tropes is typical and direct nature metaphors abundant. An interesting example is the poem 'Song', in which the speaker walks through nature and the parallel between her perception of its inhabitants and powers and her experience of inter-human relationship is continuous.

Where in blind files
Bats outsleep the frost
Water slips through stones
Too fast, too fast
For ice; afraid he'd slip
By me I asked him first.

Round as a bracelet
Clasping the wet grass,
An adder drowsed by berries
Which change blood to cess;
Dreading delay's venom
I risked the first kiss.

My skirt in my hand.
Lifting my hem high
I forded the river there;
Drops splashed my thigh.
Ahead of me at last
He turned at my cry:

‘Look how the water comes
Boldly to my side;
See the waves attempt
What you have never tried.’
And he late that night
followed the leaping tide.

The image of the river that the speaker fords is kept throughout the whole poem. Along with an observed snake, its fastness initiates the girl’s activity during the dating, provokes a comparison to the boy’s shyness and finally provides a metaphor for his action. This poem offers a smart play based on inspiration by the power of the river, but does not seem to explore any deeper communication between the self and nature or subversion of the feminine-nature clichés. Its rather conventional use of nature in connection to sexuality is in striking contrast to the following poems by Boland.

Poems focused on female bodies offer some very complex but also many straightforward similes and metaphors of nature processes and objects. A simpler example occurs in the poem ‘In Her Own Image’. The persona in this poem distances herself from the image of an unageing pretty woman, which she feels demanded by the society, and playfully develops this image into a kind of counter-self.

I will bed her.
She will bloom there,
second nature to me,
the one perfection among compromises.

The image of blooming adds to the idea of planting the other woman at home and supports the ironical view of her perfection. In 'The Wild Spray' we find an image of a flower as part of a more complicated simile.

the way I remember us when we first came here
and had no curtains; the lights on the mountain
that winter were sharp, distant promises
like crocuses through the snowfall of darkness.

The lights in the view out of the window speak to the persona as promises, after the couple moved into a new house or flat. They further remind of crocuses veiled by snowfall of darkness. The neat description of the view and its connection to the persona's inner world lets more images intertwine and leaves wide space for meaning and connotations of the flower simile. As P. B. Haberstroh observes, some nature images in Boland's early poetry may also have political reference. In 'Botanic gardens', for example, two lovers walk among plants seeded by a foreigner. The complex image of diverse plants forced to live together seems to suggest the invasion of Ireland. On the other hand, the garden may also be a metaphor for marriage as a harmonious encounter of two different people. Offering more particular ways of reading, the poem introduces a "natural world's model for peace among warring factions."⁸³

After suggesting some possibilities of using natural objects as metaphors for human experience, I would like to turn to nature as everyday surroundings, which appears mostly in Boland's "suburban" poems of *Outside History* and *In a Time of Violence*. 'We are Human History. We are not Natural History.' pictures a summer evening that a mother spends with

⁸³ Haberstroh 64.

her children in the garden. It is a perfectly common moment for them apart from the fact that wild bees have been found that day. The evening is turned almost into magic, however, by the sensitivity of description.

patch of grass across which light
was short-lived and elegiac as
the view from a train window of
a station parting, all tears.

This poem explores the sense of intense inner closeness to the cultivated nature of the garden. The personal perception of nature is reflected not by turning it into a metaphor, but by presenting it with one. The grass in the garden is an important element of the domestic life similarly to other objects that surround the woman every day. The metaphor reveals its subjective meaning. In 'This Moment' the woman becomes an organic part and attentive observer of the stillness in the garden. The single moment and action fit into the constant processes and suspense sensed in nature.

A neighbourhood.

At dusk.

Things are getting ready
to happen
out of sight.

Stars and moths.

And rinds slanting around fruit.

But not yet.

One tree is black.

One window is yellow as butter.

A woman leans down to catch a child

Who has run into her arms

this moment.

Stars rise.

Moths flutter.

Apples sweeten in the dark.

Human existence in the observed nature – the instance of catching the child – is pictured as perfectly supplementing the universal flow of time. The immediacy of the action is contrasted by slow and stable changes in the sky and images of ripening fruit, which expand the present moment. The sense of spiritual belonging to the surrounding environment communicated in this poem reveals a more transcendental level of the theme of women's domestic experience.

The poem 'Our Origins are in the Sea' connects spending time in nature and human imagination in a different way. The speaker walks along a dim-lit coast near her home and ponders the ancient connection between stars and sea water established by sailors.

I turn to go in. The hills are indistinct.

The coast is near and darkening. The stars are clearer.

The grass and the house are lapped in shadow.

And the briar rose is rigged in the twilight,

the way I imagine sail used to be –

lacy and stiff together, a frigate of ivory.

Again, the persona becomes an integral part of the surroundings, where nature and human culture intertwine. In this poem, she revisits the historical meaning of the landscape. In one of Boland's later collections, *Code*, we can find a similar example of a fantasy developed around a natural element. In 'Lines for a Thirtieth Wedding Anniversary' the speaker notices rain coming to the porch through a small leak in the roof and imagines all that the water may have been bringing to the stone underneath.

granite rounding down, giving way,

taking into its own inertia that

information water brought: of ships,

wings, fog and phosphor in the harbour.

It happened under our lives: The rain,

the stone. We hardly noticed.

During various moments of musing upon the everyday encounter with nature, the personas in the poems seem to search for and find their spiritual tie to the surroundings. Some of the poems deal with themes of maternity or love in connection to the intense experience of presence in nature. In neither of them does the observation attempt a mere sensitive picturing

of landscape or natural elements. It performs a deep interest in experience and memory of the animated nature and its meaning for the human world. Different parallels to human relationships and situations might also be drawn from the observations. The meditation upon rainwater in the last poem mentioned, for example, drives the speaker to wonder what wears and what endures among people. Apart from drawing a line between the self and nature by using a metaphor or a simile, Boland's poems explore the relationship between nature and human civilization or personal experience by the spiritual openness of their subjects towards the actual natural objects.

The collection of poems *In Her Own Image* is pervaded by different cases of becoming an organic part of nature. A contrastive example to the subject's exploration of its coexistence with the everyday natural environment would be the speaker's perception of nature processes inside the body. Before discussing the imaginary reflection of exclusively bodily experiences, I want to draw attention to the poem 'Solitary', which could be regarded as a bridge between the intellectual and the sexual, or sensuous, interview with nature. The persona in the poem becomes a night companion of the bushes when sitting hidden in their shelter and lighting a fire.

Here in the shrubbery

the shrine.

I am its votary,

its season.

...

no one sees

my hands

fan and cup,

my thumps tinder.

How it leaps

from spark to blaze!

I flush.

I darken.

The subject's activity of handling and watching the fire completes the natural scenery. Their mutual relationship is conveyed by the opening stanza of the poem. Later, the self almost dissolves in the moment of symbiosis with the darkened landscape. At the same time, the activity connects with sexual sensations in the body.

only I know

these incendiary

and frenzied ways

The boundary between the independent spirit of nature and the internal spiritual as well as bodily experience of the self seems to be shattered, in this poem.

Most poems in this collection deal with the woman's perception of her own sexuality and help thus to undermine the clichés of artistic representation of female bodies. Boland's poetry gains a new tone and form along with her expression of the relationship between nature and female sexuality. Veronica House suggests that the author's interference into the traditional Irish woman – nature correlation pervasive in myths about the Earth goddess is signified also by the breakdown of language.⁸⁴ Within the lines of broken syntax and unfinished sentences,

⁸⁴ House 110.

nature imagery flourishes in a new manner. Fewer similes occur and the nature finds its voice through the body of the speaker to build up more complicated conceits or allegories. In ‘Menses’, for instance, the persona perceives herself as a victim of the moon – as its nourishment.

I am the moon’s looking glass.

My days are moon-dials.

She will never be done with me.

She needs me.

She is dry.

I leash to her,

a sea,

a washy heave,

a tide.

Only my mind is free

The menstruating body is pictured as powerless against the natural force intruding into it. The body becomes succumbed to the power of the moon. It appears to be a part of universal natural processes rather than property of the human self. The distance between the self and the natural world diminishes in a specific way.

I am bloated with her waters.

I am barren with her blood.

...

till I begin

to think like her.

A similar example of the body sensed as a belonging of nature may be found in 'The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish', which further develops the allegorical image of the moon's victim. It is a woman's fantasy of slowly becoming a sexless fish; a detailed recipe for the bodily transformation.

It's done.

I turn,

I flab upward

blub-lipped,

hipless

and I am

sexless,

shed of ecstasy,

a pale swimmer,

sequin-skinned,

pearling eggs

screamlessly

in seaweed.

Like other Boland's poems, these lines feature neologisms, abundant syntactical cuts and subtle details in descriptions. The most impressive aspect, however, is the general image that the poem creates. The woman's body strives to become an animal in order to gain a new freedom from the burden of sexuality. The body of the fish may liberate the mind. Nevertheless, the complete transformation is impossible, because the tie of female sexuality persists even after the imaginary change.

still
she moons
in me.

Throughout this series of poems Boland reveals a new bond between the female body and nature. The woman ceases to personify the land and its fertility. While becoming the subject of the poem, she animates nature through her real body. The female body breaks its rigid imaginary distance from the more authentic connection to natural processes. The poems convey the woman's own perception of the tie between her body and nature and suggest its further implications. Along with the body the human mind seems to be carried from the habitually separated world of human civilization closer to the spirit of nature.

In my concluding discussion of Boland's treatment of tropes and perception of nature, I want to pay attention to more complex cases of spiritual communication between the self and the natural environment. I will focus on two poems that feature contrastive ways of the speaker's approach to the surrounding landscape. In 'Mountain Time', one of the poems of *Outside History*, two lovers spend their holiday in the mountains. In this case, the speaker's experience of presence in nature is different from that occurring in domestic poems discussed before, even though it is reminiscent of their garden meditations. The persona's imaginative

description of her stay in the middle of wild nature conveys her feeling that the human perception of time gave way to the natural order.

Time is shadowless there: mornings re-occur
only as enchantments, only as time for her

to watch berries ripen by on the mountain ash;
for him, at a short distance from her, to catch fish.

After the subject entered such a harmony with the particular moment and place, nothing in nature remained unknown or alien, not even darkness. The internal closeness between the intimate experience of the couple and the landscape also challenges the power of language. Language is not needed here; it becomes irrelevant or rather inadequate. The surrounding nature, which shares the moment, suffices. It speaks instead.

Afterwards, darkness will be only what is left of
a mouth after kissing or a hand laced in a hand;

a branch; a river; will be what is lost of words
as they turn to silences and than to sleep.

The poem 'Home', from Boland's quite recent collection of poetry, *The Lost Land*, introduces a different kind of the subject's openness to surrounding natural objects. The speaker observes landscape and feels or imagines meanings of its parts. This time, however, her interpretation is not purely spiritual or intimate, but distinctly bound to cultural context.

Off a side road in southern California

is a grove of eucalyptus.

It looks as if someone once came here with a handful

of shadows not seeds and planted them.

And they turned into trees.

But the leaves

Have a tell-tale blueness and deepness.

The perception and description is no less sensitive in this poem, but we can discern the persona's distance from the soul of nature. In the previous poem, nature supplemented human language; here, linguistic and cultural order enables imaginative perception of the scenery. The self dwells in a separated human world. Butterflies and the place of their rest are observed by the persona like a painting on a canvas.

Every leaf was covered and ended in

a fluttering struggle.

Atmosphere. Ocean. Oxygen and dust

were altered by their purposes:

They had changed the trees to iron.

They were rust.

In two different ways the self enters a meditative communication with its natural environment, in these later poems. In both of them, rather ordinary language is used, but it penetrates into the depth of the subject's existence in nature. It attempts to animate its objects and capture their link to the human soul by a metaphor or conceit. Throughout Boland's poetry, the individual tropes and complex images suggest the real woman's self's connection to landscape. The subjects of the poems open to explore it, and by means of reflection upon the personal existence in the environment, straightforward comparisons, as well as complex continuous metaphors, their sense of relationship between human inner world and the spirit of nature is expressed.

Chapter 4

Nature Imagery in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian

4.1 Beyond Language and the Self

The sea is made to repeat little phrases
such as ‘the moon is pretty’
from all its wakeful windows.

(Medbh McGuckian, ‘Sleeping with the Sea’)

Another important literary voice that enriches Irish poetic reflection of human presence in nature and human presence in it belongs to Medbh McGuckian. Like Eavan Boland with her aim of rewriting traditional female imagery, McGuckian takes a particular stance within the feminist social critique. She comments on the political situation and explores the ethical opportunities of poetry. Nevertheless, her agenda and literary oeuvre convey different attitudes, interests and personal themes. On several pages that will precede my close reading of McGuckian’s approach to nature environment and nature in figurative language, I will introduce the author and her characteristic poetic representation of women’s experience.

Medbh McGuckian was born only six years after Boland, in 1950. She is, however, a Northern Irish poet and was educated at the Queens University in Belfast. After finishing her studies, she began to teach English at the university and later became its first woman poet-in-residence. Since early 1980s she has been publishing poetry and pamphlets and has received various Irish and English literary awards. She has been travelling abroad and giving readings extensively, in recent years, and has been contributing to international discussions on

women's writing.⁸⁵ Being an unusually prolific poet, McGuckian has written twelve collections of poetry herself and cooperated on others with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. She was a student of Seamus Heaney and during her university years she met a lot of influential male and female poets, who helped to shape her artistic expression and public opinion.

Together with Nualla Ní Dhomhnaill, McGuckian took part in critical debates on different feminist issues; they have been pondering social roles of women or the relationship between gender and nation and its reflection in contemporary women's poetry. Also her work deals with social tensions and political questions, in a specific manner. As Justin Quinn relates, McGuckian becomes one of the central figures in Irish poetry of the last decades mainly thanks to her astonishing experimentation with language. The form and themes of her poems mirror her fighting with the imposed language – English – and the male literary tradition. She attempts to recreate Irish within English and to purify her expression of the patriarchal in language.⁸⁶ McGuckian shares with Boland the sense of being a trespasser when writing poetry as a woman. She feels the marginalisation of feminine experience such as the authentic bodily desire or reproduction, and wants her poems to enact it.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, unlike Boland, McGuckian does not reiterate the dialogue with the traditional national treatment of the feminine. She does not blame the reducing power of artists, but focuses on real relationships with men and original expression of the experience of female sexuality.⁸⁸ McGuckian's struggle for authenticity explores the level of ontology and logic of language and is thus situated in a different locus of the field of feminist efforts.

McGuckian employs various gender topics in her writing, but the core of her representation of the feminine experience seems to be embodied in the conflicts, ambivalences and tensions of her experimental language. As she reveals in an interview, her poetry has "its own logic

⁸⁵ McBreen 150.

⁸⁶ Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 162- 163.

⁸⁷ Quinn 167.

⁸⁸ Quinn 169.

which may be opposite to men's" and interestingly illuminates the feminist descriptions of *écriture féminine*.⁸⁹ McGuckian's work distinctly develops the connection between language and sexuality that Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray define. According to P.B. Haberstroh, her imagery reflects all these voices that see woman's language as "decentred, irrational, and nonlinear, unlike the logocentric, hierarchical expression of patriarchy."⁹⁰

As it is central for McGuckian's oeuvre, the tie between female sexuality and language will be devoted a closer view before I will discuss the individual themes and stylistic idiosyncrasies in particular poems. To achieve true representation of the feminine McGuckian chooses different means than Boland. She does not address what has already been written about women or deliberately subvert old feminine tropes to express her experience. Her primary attempt is to discover original patterns of language and imagery. According to Niamh Hehir, she tries to return to the pre-linguistic order mainly through her bodily sensations. The experience of motherhood, for example, leads the poet to another meaning than words can convey.⁹¹ Hehir illustrates her argument by several lines from two poems that explicitly deal with the theme of language and meaning and mirror also McGuckian's experimentation with syntax.

When you scratch one name you discover others underneath
the root is not clear, but it is probably
one of the versions meaning 'light'
in the pre-language.

(‘She Thinks She Sees Clarissa’)

⁸⁹ Haberstroh 124.

⁹⁰ Haberstroh 125.

⁹¹ Niamh Hehir, "I Have Grown Inside Words/ Into a State of Unborness: Evocations of a Pre-Linguistic Space of Meaning in Medbh McGuckian's Poetry," in Irene Gilsonen Nordin, ed. *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) 58-59.

we harvested the nothingness
of what had been spoken with our senses:
we drank the unmeaningness down
in the well-managed dark.

(‘Angel of the Bay’)

The poet’s search for an alternative source of meaning, reflected by her undermining of linguistic patterns and stylistic expectations, has caused a lot of confusion among readers and literary critics, to which I will return at the end of the introductory discussion. At this point, I would like to mention the rupture of the self that frequently follows the rupture of language, in McGuckian, and outline some critical opinions on the poet’s treatment of the self. The author represents no unified self, but plays with its plural and unstable nature. This expansion of the concept of the self provides opportunities for different themes in the poetry and offers different interpretation of its general pursuit. E. Holmster, for instance, explains this rupture of self-formation by the existential desire for a spiritual other of the conscious self. Giving birth to a child is regarded as a path to personal transformation, and the inability to connect different parts of the self together is explored by inner dialogues of the speakers.⁹² H. Blackmann, on the other hand, emphasizes the sexual aspect of the poems and mentions the example of masturbation as a touch with needs and desires of the body and communication between the self and the lost other in the body.⁹³

There is certainly no fixed “I” in McGuckian’s poems. In some cases, selfhood is fractured into many guises; feminine as well as masculine. For Haberstroh, this post-modern linguistic collage of multiple personalities offers an original alternative approach to the problem of gender roles or different states of the female persona. It pursues for example the theme of the

⁹² Holmster 165-166.

⁹³ Helen Blackmann, “The Desire for the Lost Other in Poetry of Medbh McGuckian,” in Irene Gilsonen Nordin, ed. *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) 199.

split mother, lover and poet figure within one person.⁹⁴ Guinn Batten, on the other hand, focuses on reincarnation of different persons or objects, which the unstable and open self provides.⁹⁵ As well as Boland, McGuckian offers a new relationship between the subject and object, in her poetry. McGuckian's multiple voices do not share Boland's reflexive meditations on the surroundings, but the special audibility of the objects is also implied. The self dissolves, this time to give voice to a dead person, a close relative, or to incarnate an object. As Batten observes, in some poems, the minds of ghosts pass through the speaker's mind, in others, the surrounding objects become more alive than the speaker.⁹⁶ Due to this innovative deconstructive nature of language and the self, national heroes may be revived or objects in nature embodied. The new way of communicating Irish history and employing nature imagery, which McGuckian's unusual personas indicate, will be remembered later in this chapter.

4.2 Themes Resonant in McGuckian's Poetry

In her early poetry, McGuckian's syntactical experimentation is less developed. When reading her first collection of poetry, *The Flower Master*, P.B. Haberstroh finds feminine sexuality and gender play highlighted mainly through metaphors of flowers and other images from the natural world. Flowers often suggest female sexual organs and the sun or rain have male qualities.

No insects

Visit them, nor do their ovaries swell,

Yet every night in Tibet their seeds

⁹⁴ Haberstroh 125- 128.

⁹⁵ Guinn Batten, "Boland, McGuckian and Ni Chuilleanáin and the Body of the Nation," in Matthew Campbell, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 175-176.

⁹⁶ Batten 182.

Are membraned by the snow, their roots
are bathed by the passage of melt-water.

(‘Gentians’)

Metaphors in these poems invoke sometimes more, sometimes less lucid correspondence between the natural and the human world. As Haberstroh observes, “the relationships between women and men, female and male lovers, reproduction and motherhood are all embodied in these images.”⁹⁷ Apart from lovemaking and childbearing, another topic that pervades McGuckian’s whole work is opened in this collection; the woman as artist appears to suggest the counter pole to the domestic and maternal duties. The shattering of traditional feminine roles and the suggestion of multidimensional lives that women lead are further developed in McGuckian’s following collection, *Venus and the Rain*.

This collection features mainly domestic interiors and the theme of children upbringing, but its concern is quite different from poems by Eavan Boland. McGuckian is interested in the idea of mutual independence of mother and child and in the general woman’s struggle to balance her dependence and liberty in terms of her part in marriage. As Haberstroh points out, poems in this collection further explore the theme of contrasts and conflicts in the woman’s self and life, and deepen the author’s concern with female artistic creativity.⁹⁸ As its title suggests, McGuckian turns to astronomy and mythology for her imagery in this book. This time, mainly elements and forces of nature enter the metaphorical connection with the human world.

Nature imagery as well as the actual depiction of nature environment appear to be crucially important for all phases of McGuckian’s output, which is confirmed in the following collections of poems, for example *On Ballycastle Beach* and *Marconi’s Cottage*. Both of them

⁹⁷ Haberstroh 130.

⁹⁸ Haberstroh 137- 139.

are focused on a concrete landscape, where the author spent a considerable part of her life, and reiterate the theme of home and territory. As Haberstroh describes, the illustrations of Ballycastle; a place where McGuckian was born and to which “she is still anchored”, create an interesting link between the themes of personal territory and political boundaries. On one hand, they concentrate on colours of the landscape. They offer meditations on the human presence in it, during which “the boundaries separating the natural elements from one another, and the human figure from nature, tend to disappear.” On the other hand, the poet alludes to effects of borders between England and Ulster and between Northern Ireland and the Republic. The historical and social realities of the Northern area meet the personal memory and sense of belonging, in these poems.⁹⁹ For example the title poem employs images of the ship and the sea, which pervade the volume, to combine a more general sense of loss of home with a concrete scene of reading to a child.

I would read these words to you,
Like a ship coming in to a harbour,
As meaningless and full of meaning
As the homeless flow of life
From room to homesick room.

Also *Marconi's Cottage* explores both personal and public meanings of the surroundings. While evoking Marconi and his experiments with wireless communication over the sea, McGuckian illustrates human response to the landscape and understanding of nature, and draws an analogy between technical communication and the artist's struggle to create and communicate.¹⁰⁰ Throughout the volume, various extraordinary associative parallels appear,

⁹⁹ Haberstroh 142.

¹⁰⁰ Haberstroh 149.

many of them reinventing the theme of artistic commitment. The poems allude to different artists and poets and also the recurring personal theme of the double role of the mother and the poet is remembered here. For example the poem 'On Her Second Birthday', which pictures a persona waiting for a poem, offers an imaginative link between conception, or birth, and writing.

Each languageless flake
Of that night-filled mountain is a sleep
And all that labour is to have
An awareness of one's being
Added to one's being, like a first daughter:

The cloudy, the overcast, then
Something shone upon.

Apart from parallels between different types of creation and different metaphors for writing, also the connection between the celebrated birth of a child and the approaching death of the author's father is established in this book. The overlapping of the birth of one person and the death of another, meets the theme of time, reconciliation and suffering. It returns, as Haberstroh observes, back to the issue of pain involved in the process of artistic creation. The critic finds nature imagery vital for the whole volume. The cycles in human life as well as the creative act are reflected by images of the earth, water and the seasons. Also a rather "conventional association of winter with death and spring with rebirth" recurs and pictures "poetry as the fruit of winter and the garden as the reward for having come through."¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Haberstroh 156.

In McGuckian's later collections of poetry, for example *The Book of Angel* or *The Currach Requires No Harbours*, we find explicit performance of what Lucy Collins aptly calls "spiritual nature of the poet's creative quest."¹⁰² The author herself acknowledges the immense significance of religion for her view of the world. In her later poetry, she frequently introduces the image of an angel as a transitional figure between the spiritual and material world. Her interest in colours and their symbolism persists as well as her widespread use of nature imagery and painterly descriptions, although some poems represent simplicity of expression typical for her latest work.

I encounter now my only
language, an eye that opens
at a summit, something prior
to the sentences we speak,
as if, in the eloquent
survival of that voice,
spirit said something
I wanted to say.

Within the attention to the spiritual at this stage of her career, McGuckian revives themes of the language, feminine experience and the creative process. As Collins argues, the poet becomes more concerned with the spiritual meaning of artistic representation and often engages with the idea of art as revelation.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Lucy Collins, "Joyful Mysteries: Language and Spirituality in Medbh McGuckian's Recent Poetry," in Elke D'Hoker, Raphael Ingelbien and Hedwig Schwall, eds. *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011) 45.

¹⁰³ Collins 54.

Also the theme of the feminine role in society appears in a new light in the later poems. In a similar way to the link between the intimate experience of the Ballycastle Beach and the historical circumstances of the place in Northern Ireland, these poems draw a parallel between the personal experience and the significance of historical female figures in the seventeenth century. As Collins remarks, McGuckian strives to capture a more universal aspect of women's experience, in her later poetry.¹⁰⁴ This notice leads us to the next point we should discuss in our introduction of McGuckian's poetic voice within the Irish context; her treatment of the relationship between the private and the public and her creative approach to the Irish political history.

4.3 Reviving the Past

Throughout her recollections of home in *The Ballycastle Beach*, by the parallels between her personal view of maternity and lives of historical women, or when employing the trope of Annunciation in *The Book of Angel*, McGuckian addresses wider cultural questions. The theme of the Irish history and politics finds an original form in the poet's act of bringing the ghosts of the past wars back to life, mainly in poems of *Shelmalier*. The images from the national past are embodied through the speaker's mind and enter the imaginary connection to the present and the personal. Guinn Batten chooses several lines from the poem 'Pulsus Paradoxus' to give an example of McGuckian's "personal awakening of the history and ideologies of an Irish nationalism."¹⁰⁵

- a picture held us captive
and we could not get outside it
for it lay in our language in the uniform

¹⁰⁴ Collins 53.

¹⁰⁵ Batten 182.

of a force that no longer existed.
Peace was the target he was aiming at,
the point at which doubt becomes senseless,
the last thing that will find a home.

As Batten illustrates in the opening of her essay on the body and the Irish nation, McGuckian's approach to male heroes of the Irish history is completely different from Boland's idea of renegotiating the national representation. Boland emphasized exploitation of national images at the cost of the genuine female body, and aimed at breaking the feminine passivity and sexual exclusion from the authentic voice of Irish literature. McGuckian does not perceive the female body as victimized by the male literary tradition, and does not focus on revision of the false picture of the woman's self. On the contrary, she lets her body become a vehicle for reincarnation of dead historical figures. She is concerned about the present value of the past from another perspective.¹⁰⁶ The idea of reincarnation suggests a completely different link between the female body and the national tradition than Boland's poems establish. McGuckian's sense of the authentic feminine voice is not in contrast with the Irish history narrative. One of the opportunities of the woman's self, in her opinion, is to restore, recapitulate and scrutinize meaning and connotations of important historical events regardless of contemporary gender issues.

While Boland saw the woman poet's social responsibility in adding her personal experience to the public image of the nation, for McGuckian, the contemporary poet's challenge is to return to the roots of national repressions and explore their analogies with other historical events, myths and modern understanding of the world. Sean Murphy draws our attention to direct parallels that the author builds up for example between political treaties

¹⁰⁶ Batten 172-73.

in Old Greece and conflicts in Northern Ireland. He stresses also McGuckian's playful reflection of Irish Civil War, during which the reader follows a bullet's trajectory. As he summarizes, many of McGuckian's poems respond to particular instances of social uneasiness and human tragedies in her native country, and they always do it with a question arising between the lines: Why are we how we are now?¹⁰⁷ While Boland aimed at affecting the political by expressing the personal, McGuckian's relationship between the private and the political can be observed in her ability to revive and illuminate past events and the reciprocal potential of the concrete moments in history to talk to the present social position and personal experiences.

4.4 New Space for Meaning in Language

The specific form of McGuckian's engagement with politics and the past leads us back to her extraordinary language, which is worth our attention once again. There are more contextual and political aspects of McGuckian's experimentation with language that should be remembered prior to a focus on nature imagery. Murphy finds one of the causes for the poet's baffling "paratactic arrangement of metaphors and dislocated syntax" in her composing of centos. She compiles words from biographies, memoirs and works of other poets to achieve an arrangement corresponding to the subconscious and unreachable by words.¹⁰⁸ The poet's attempt of the author to find meta-language for her subconscious in past writing seems to have a similar basis to her deliberate estrangement from the English language, which was mentioned in the opening of this chapter. McGuckian experiments with the form of poetry in order to explore means of expression alternative to the conventional flow of the English language.

¹⁰⁷ Shane Murphy, "Sonnets, Centos and Long Lines: Muldoon, Paulin, McGuckian and Carson," in Matthew Campbell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 201-203.

¹⁰⁸ Murphy 199.

Another important relationship between the form and social or cultural contents of the poems, also remembered by Murphy, can be observed in McGuckian's play with reflecting awkward experience by deliberately awkward language. Murphy directs our attention to Picasso's statement that is quoted by McGuckian in the epigraph to *Captain Lavender*: "I have not painted the war... but I have no doubt that the war is in... these paintings I have done."¹⁰⁹ The eloquence of the syntactical ruptures and stylistic idiosyncrasies is a crucial tool for exploration of individual themes in McGuckian's poetry.

The poet's unusual work with language structure may suggest a completely different sense of meaning and thus a new way of composing and reading poetry. It is often ascribed to the consciously feminine and thus alternative nature of her poetic descriptions. When analysing McGuckian's texts, Lucy Collins pays primary attention to the linguistic and figurative aspects of the poems, and observes how the frequent distortions of expected syntax establish meaning. In the poet's extraordinary language, which is "like an embroidery... very feminine," she discovers a special concern with the process of writing rather than representation.¹¹⁰ Similar to Michael Allen, who revolves his reading around a similar pre-supposition that the poems are not wilfully obscure, but try to enact meaning,¹¹¹ she achieves the conclusion that the poet uses the breakdown of language as a source of an alternative approach to meaning. Her language is considered to have a riddling quality that rejects any closure and reflects the constant change of meaning. It strives to create – to directly represent the real experience – by its very form.¹¹²

Allen pays attention for example to the ability of the rhythm in McGuckian's poems to reflect frustration, or to her mockery of gender roles by playful embodiment of male and female language. He discusses also the poet's telling of dreams, which provides the language

¹⁰⁹ Murphy 200.

¹¹⁰ Collins 43- 44.

¹¹¹ Michael Allen, "The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian," in Matthew Campbell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 291.

¹¹² Collins 46-50.

with an imaginative coherence reminiscent of Mallarmé, or the disorienting effect of translation of life into artefact and artefact into life. To illustrate his last notice I insert an extract from the poem 'Isbe Song'.

... the effect

Was of a gentler terrain within a wilder one,

High-lying hard, as wood might learn to understand

The borrowing of water, or pottery capitulate

Its dry colours.

As Allen emphasizes, in many cases, the power of McGuckian's writing is in the language alone. He admits the difficulty for the reader or critic to construct the plot or logical meaning of the poems, but he strongly opposes the criticism of their deliberate obscurity or forced womanliness. He acknowledges the poet's original approach to figurative language and poetry in general and agrees that it might be the "male empiricism and pragmatism she is undermining."¹¹³ Similar to Collins he suggests the value of McGuckian's feminine language and experimentation. Its elusive meaning and staggering coherence he ascribes, together with some of the feminist readers of her work, to its subversion of the dominant male group of artists, which traditionally "controls the forms, structures and language, in which consciousness is articulated."¹¹⁴

4.5 McGuckian and Nature Imagery

McGuckian's experimentation with meaning and expression of personal experience is inseparably tied to her understanding of natural phenomena and their imaginary relationship

¹¹³ Allen 299.

¹¹⁴ Allen 303.

to human emotions. The final part of this chapter will attempt to trace different instances of the author's poetic reflection of nature as external as well as spiritual companion of the human self, discuss the original connection between women's perception of reality and nature imagery, and compare her treatment of nature to poems by Eavan Boland. Sometimes, McGuckian's figurative language is reminiscent of Boland's imagery, in other cases, it offers a completely new perspective on human understanding of nature. I will begin my reading with observation of separate examples of nature metaphor or simile, which are abundant in all creative periods of both the poets.

While pondering various themes, McGuckian lets clearer or less straightforward metaphors express the state of mind. Also this author uses images of birds or other animals along with their habitual connotations and symbolic meanings to mirror human situations. 'Attention to Seasonality', for example, opens by the personal sense of subordination and lack of spiritual fulfilment, which is compared to the image of birds waiting to burst into song.

We have been poised a long time
like souls – like birds that practise
their songs in their dreams.

In 'Medieval Scriptorium', a poem from the same collection, *The Currach Requires No Harbours*, we encounter a simile of a bee. The insect's missed chance to feed on the rich nectar and pollen in the orchard is related in a similar way to the idea of a muted mother who had wasted her opportunity to flourish fully.

Calmed, brown-violet sea,
my mother has become silenced

without dying, as the bee
leaves the orchard for the fruit
already black.

In both these examples, the metaphor that illuminates the human situation does not work merely with simple visual images of the animals or with associations to their symbolic. The images develop their own story that leads beyond the freedom, the sky or wind associated with birds, or usefulness and renewal connected to bees. A plain comparison is hard to find in McGuckian, indeed. Her similes invite the reader further into the imaginary life in nature. Their fantasy provides the animals with an activity that corresponds to the human situation.

A lot of tropes in McGuckian's poetry provide objects in nature with a complex meaning; they give them different imaginary purposes or suggest new circumstances of their existence. The speakers' interest in surrounding objects in nature makes them transcend their function of serving metaphorical description of human feelings or situations. Therefore, the nature images do not seem simply to refer to a concrete state of mind, but they act with their own conceivable meaning and connotations. McGuckian's very important poem 'To My Grandmother', which is brimming with flower, crop and animal images, will be quoted in its whole length here.

I would revive you with a swallow's nest:
For as long a time as I could hold my breath
I would feel your pulse like tangled weeds
Separate into pearls. The heart should rule
The summer, ringing like a sickle over
The need to make life hard. I would

Sedate your eyes with rippleseed, those
Hollow points that close as if
Your eyelids had been severed
To deny your sleep, imagine you a dawn.
I would push a chrysanthemum stone
Into your sleep without noticing
Its reaching far, its going, its returning.
When the end of summer comes, it is
A season by itself; when your tongue
Curls back like a sparrow's buried head,
I would fill your mouth with rice and mussels.

'To My Grandmother', one of the reincarnation poems, remembers a dead person close to the speaker. The similes employed during the imaginary revival (I would feel your pulse like tangled weeds/ Separate into pearls; your tongue/ Curls back like a sparrow's buried head) are again based on an original metaphorical picture. They provide natural objects with a story of their own, which suggests a deep personal relationship to the objects and interpretation of their spirit. The mirror to human feelings and the fantasy about the independent life of nature go hand in hand. Processes in nature are explored while the whole images work as similes. The direct metaphors (swallow's nest, rippleseed) then lend the objects an active role in the revival of the grandmother suggesting a purely personal sense of their meaning ("I would fill your mouth with rice and mussels").

Although admitting the difficulty of its dramatic interpretation, Michael Allen emphasizes the effect of the original sequence of images to free the poem from sentimentality. McGuckian's symbolism and her gnomic tendency distance us from the loving and grieving

in its centre.¹¹⁵ The link from the speaker's imaginary plunge into the grave to nature images can also be read as euphemistic or redemptive reflection of her emotion. For me, however, the private sense of meaning in natural images, which implies the author's further exploration of relationship between human understanding of reality and the independent world of nature, is of primary significance.

The intimate relationship to nature is suggested in a different way in 'The Heiress', another poem of McGuckian's first collection of poetry, *The Flower Master*. The particular understanding of laws in nature inspires the persona's perception of the order of the human world.

Dead leaves do not necessarily
Fall; it is not coldness, but the tree itself
That bids them go, preventing their destruction.
So I walk along the beach, unruly, I drop
Among my shrubbery of seaweed my black acorn buttons.

In nature the speaker finds a parallel to her own feeling or experience, and later incarnates the natural process of ripening leaves in her body. The speaker's "pinched grain", referring possibly to her inner dilemma of maternity versus unfulfilled bodily fertility, at the beginning of the poem, has been waiting long enough to be distributed now. On one hand, natural phenomena play an important part in conveyance of the speaker's sensations and desires, in these two early poems; on the other hand, they themselves inspire new understanding of the personal situation. This specific mutual imaginary relationship between natural phenomena and the individual private experience is richly developed in McGuckian's later work. Many

¹¹⁵ Allen 288.

poems are based on purely personal interpretation of natural objects – on an intimate communication between nature and human psyche – and establish tropes that may remain quite obscure to the reader. The author’s exploratory treatment of nature imagery can be considered an important aspect of her subversive language.

In one of McGuckian’s following collections of poetry, *Marconi’s Cottage*, the theme of the seasons and their influence on or imaginary parallel to the persona’s mind is fundamental. The poem ‘Storm-Flap’ explicitly relates the speaker’s attentive listening and response to the winter and the spring. Her internal experiences are tied to the cycles in nature and communicate with their spirit.

A wintry look came back to me
And all that now remains of spring
Wants me to tell it things.

The mutual mirroring of natural processes and human psyche occurs also in other poems in this book. The persona’s feelings are often related by a metaphor of a season. In the poem ‘The Man with Two Women’, for instance, the persona expresses a sudden tendency to withdraw from a passionate relationship to a man (“getting dark/ Is the world’s fault: Send me my winter”). A metaphor that exceeds the straightforward connection between the state of mind and the particular time of the year can be found in ‘Turning the Moon into a Verb’. During a more continuous parallel, a deeper interest in the spirit of the particular season is suggested. The explicit incarnation of the seasons in the speaker develops into a playful reflection on her sense of sexual satiation in a relationship.

A timeless winter

That wants to be now
Will go on taking shape in me.
Now everything can begin.

Everything can reach much
Further up; with this new
Listening, the longing at the window
For the missing season weakens.

When springtime had need of him,
He did not offer me the winter
He took away each of the seasons
In its visual turn.

The title poem of *Marconi's Cottage* is concerned with the interview between the human and the natural law in a different way. Not only does nature become alive in the self, but also the different experiences and situations from human reality figuratively describe nature – the season.

Another unstructured, unmarried, unfinished
Summer, slips its unclenched weather
Into my winter poems, cheating time
And blood of their timelessness.

The summer is personified and its spirit interpreted by gaining human traits and habits. At the same time, it helps to form a metaphorical picture for the speaker's impression of unpredicted change in writing poetry. This stanza is an excellent representation of mutual communication between nature and personal or cultural knowledge.

Examples of pondering and describing nature by metaphorical images out of the human world without the nature's reciprocal service of picturing private feelings are abundant in the author's observations of landscape. For example the poem 'Yellow Ultramarine' from McGuckian's latest collection of poetry, *My Love Has Fared Inland*, is devoted primarily to the attentive watching of a tree near to the speaker. Its first two stanzas describe the appearance of the bark and leaves by human traits, habits and activities.

Wood cut in autumn is denser
than wood in spring;
the exceptionally poisonous and treacherous
emerald green
will drown in gold the much-praised earth.

Like safely burnt light
the unblenched leaf
lies over the ground like a veil,
to be pulled completely off like a skin.

The last stanza of the poem describes the colour of the tree by a complex image from the cultural history of human civilization. Throughout this idiosyncratic exploration of an object in nature, the communication between the human and the natural world is also implied. This

time not the persona's feelings and their metaphorical expression but the actual landscape and its culturally rooted perception are in focus.

the sweetness of the colour will return,
as if all the colour needed
were the Naples yellow
roasted on to the tiles of Babylon.

In McGuckian as well as in Boland, sensitive descriptions of the surrounding nature and fantasies about its life form a remarkable part of the literary oeuvre. The cultural frame for perception of nature and the imaginary pictures of sceneries may remind of Boland's 'Home', for example. McGuckian, however, often explores primarily the visual associative links between the particular objects in the landscape and events of the common daily routine or cultural history, as we have observed in 'Yellow Ultramarine', while Boland emphasizes the immediate sense of symbiosis with nature. She is interested in the memory and everyday presence of the surrounding landscape ('Our Origins are in the Sea', 'Lines for a Thirtieth Wedding Anniversary'). In the previous chapter we discussed also moments of the speaker's intense spiritual experience of own existence in nature ('This Moment', 'Mountain Time').

McGuckian's more profound interest in the self's actual physical closeness to the soul of the surrounding nature does appear in a couple of poems of *The Face of the Earth*. The persona's active presence in landscape appears for example in 'Sleeping with the Sea'. She voices the spirit of the sea, which is being watched, and later reveals her concern with maternity. The immediate experience of the sea animates it with metaphorical images out of the everyday reality; a feature already observed in other poems.

The murmur or crash of the waves, obscure
or decisive as the case may be,
are the only two words the stiff dreams
of the earth can remember;

the sea is made to repeat little phrases
such as 'the moon is pretty'
from all its wakeful windows.

By unusual means of personification, which employ highly surprising and contrastive images ("wakeful windows", "stiff dreams of the earth"), the penetration to the spirit of the sea and the earth is suggested. To approach the unknown soul of nature and transcend the conventional human patterns for perception of the world, innovative language is used, which employs common nouns and verbs in new meanings and collocations.

Similar to Boland, McGuckian perceives nature as physical as well as spiritual companion of the everyday domestic life. The two poets appear to share also the interest in its inner order. Nevertheless, their paths from the intimate observation of nature to its imaginary connection to personal experience seem to differ. Boland's observers become organic parts of the environment, but preserve the cultural distance from its spirit. They express their sense of belonging to the universal order that is perceived in the surrounding environment, but do not explore its possible internal tie to the human psyche by opportunities of nature tropes. Apart from the power of the moon felt inside the speaker's body, the self's integrity during the encounter is respected and the imaginary communication with its spirit is not attempted. Nature metaphors for human feelings seem to be established mostly on conventional symbolic meanings. Boland's play with the soul of nature can be found rather in her original fantasies

about the female body, for example its imaginary turning into a fish or succumbing to the moon.

In McGuckian, on the other hand, the figurative interchange between meanings in nature processes and rules of the human life is deployed extensively and may indicate attempts of a personal overcoming of the spiritual boundary between these two. The mutual innovative metaphorical explanation or illumination of both the natural world and the personal experience creates a sense of shared spiritual order, in her poetry. The personas venture internal communication with nature that surrounds them. It happens rarely during the actual observation of the surrounding nature but regularly within McGuckians figurative depictions of human sensations. The poet's exploratory language, which gives to the natural objects human habits and vice versa, challenges the common perception of nature and nature metaphor.

In the conclusion of this chapter I would like to return to the specific tie between self-expression and the figurative employment of nature in McGuckian and give examples of more complex and continuous metaphors or allegories in her poems. Before the final discussion, however, I will attempt to illustrate the author's communication of female sexuality by means of nature imagery. In poems discussed on previous pages, the sexual and the intellectual or spiritual appeared to be fused. In most cases, the themes of ageing or maternity combine both. The symbolic descriptions of flowers and fruits in *The Flower Master*, however, directly refer to female sexual desire and the bodily experience of womanliness.

The theme of life's harvest is central to McGuckian's first book, as Michael Allen observes.¹¹⁶ We have found this topic pervading also her later poetry, for example *The Currach Requires No Harbours*. Nevertheless, the consistency in the emphasis on eroticism in form of references to flowers and the prevalence of the symbolic over the emblematic

¹¹⁶ Allen 299.

meaning of the poems is unique in *The Flower Master*. In 'Tulips', the flowers are compared to governesses exposed to the rain and the sun, which suggest the masculine power. The shape of the blossoms then embodies female sexual organs.

their absent faces
Lifted many times to the artistry of light –
Its lovelessness a deeper sort
Of illness than the womanliness
Of tulips with their bee-dark hearts.

In a similar way, the poem 'Chopping' works with the visual shape and the usual destiny of onions to picture the sense of the feminine wilful submission during the sexual intercourse.

Close your eyes
Unwinding the bitter onion –
Its layers of uncertainty are limited,
Under brown paper its sealed heart sings
To the tune of a hundred lemons.

Today I am feeling up to it
I bent my throat aside –
There is no pain, only the soft entrances
Again, again, the vegetable's finely numbered bones.

Both the poems, 'The Tulips' as well as 'Chopping', which is quoted in its whole here, are opened by the speaker's observation of the object. The symbolic images seem to be neatly weaved from this actual encounter; they comprise the appearance and also the expected behaviour or purpose of the objects. Their complexity leads us back to the beginning of my close reading and my mention of McGuckian's interest in life of nature that is concealed in her simple similes ('Attention to Seasonality', 'Medieval Scriptorium'). The symbolic meaning of natural objects is obvious in *The Flower Master*. The chain of connotations included in the imagery and the purely private allusions, however, make the animal, flower or another part of nature alive in readers' fantasy, as well. Also in the metaphorical poems, such as the explorations of the erotic in this collection, imaginative observation of nature is important. Although 'Chopping' uses the image of cutting an onion for picturing personal experience of sexual intercourse, it invariably changes our perception of the vegetables. We can find the real onion revived and animated by the fantasy. By employing extraordinary metaphors – innovative imaginary links between the personal and the natural – McGuckian explores, describes and enriches both the human and the natural spiritual world. In some poems, she focuses on observation of the surrounding landscape, in others she deals with subtle changes in the human self. In all of the cases of nature imagery, however, she opens again and again new complicated interviews between life in nature and the human psyche.

To finish my discussion of McGuckian and her poetic work with nature I will mention two later poems by the author that develop the dialogue between inner sensation and experience of nature into continuous metaphors. One of them represents symbolic employment of the landscape, the other suggests the incarnation of the spirit of nature in the self. The poem 'Worship of the Plough', which we find in *The Face of the Earth*, reminds of the flower poems, but develops the natural symbol into a more complicated conceit. In this poem, the persona muses upon fulfilment of her sexual desire and compares the female sexuality to a

field. She establishes the self's imaginary approach to the field, witnesses different events that take place there, and ponders its experience of being ploughed. She finishes up with a subversive play with the whole metaphor.

that absolutely level field
field left vacant in me,
well-white and smooth.

I go to the field by night,
to the place where the earth begins
to become moist, to a piece
of moist earth stamped and injured
...
Trees look their best,
Half-wearing the produce
Of one field less desired
If you weed your fields in me.

Like the subject opens to identify the bodily experiences with changes in the field, in this poem, it invites the image of the sea to enter and express the human self, in other poems. The spirit of the sea felt in the persona's body and mind is recurrent in McGuckian's poetry. The water is often ascribed a soul of its own and revived in its closeness to the human sense of sexual desire or spiritual freedom. The author's intimate relationship to the sea is invoked directly in 'Journey with S', in which a couple pays a visit to a woman (I, a hard sea-spirit,/ you, a spirit of the cold). The poem 'Landscape: Noon', from *The Currach Requires No*

Harbours, focuses on a sudden surprise within the inner vision of the speaker. The sea becomes a companion to the persona's mind and the development of its image can relate the subtle changes of the state of mind.

an even redder star with the warmest acre

calms my mind and my sea

to a wave's deathbed hue around an oar.

Immense look without walking,

Now I want the sea as much as you.

The idiosyncratic connection between human psyche, or the woman's inner sensations, and the spirit in nature transcends the conceivable division between the sexual and the spiritual in this and many other poems by McGuckian. Her interest in bodily transformations and sexual desire is crucial for her poetry, but it is often inseparably tied to the fulfilment of her sense of womanliness, which includes spiritual satisfaction of the woman as a human being. The exclusively feminine issues of maternity, pregnancy or fertility seem to be dealt with within more general questions of human spiritual fulfilment. Eavan Boland does not, of course, separate women's sexuality from their spirituality, but the fusion of these two does not belong to primary interests of her poems. Boland pays attention to the lack of feminine experience in Irish poetry and social discourse and subverts the traditional conception of the poem by her imagery that attempts to make up for the lack. In comparison to this poet, McGuckian's implicit subversion of the criticized reducing notion of the woman may be found in her link between the sexual and the intellectual in the woman's self, for example.

In McGuckian's poetry, as well as in the poetry by Eavan Boland, the speakers find the authentic connection between the self and nature. Boland rewrites the traditional connection between the feminine body and the image of unageing fertility and introduces women controlled by invincible and merciless power of nature, or women invited by the everyday landscape to become its spiritual counterparts. McGuckian does not refuse the habitual woman's symbolic connection to fertility in Ireland, but adjusts it by her specific incarnation of natural phenomena in the woman's self. The speakers pursue their sense of connection between their bodies and processes in nature by unusual private nature imagery. The poet's voice is not subversive in terms of rewriting false feminine images, but it significantly contributes to the woman's self-assertion and authentic expression by establishing innovative language for conveying her experience. The personal interpretation of nature and the private meaning of its images play an important role in the authentic self-expression and offer new perceptions of the human link to nature, at the same time.

Chapter 5

Vona Groarke and the Recent Tendencies in Attitudes to Nature

5.1 A Shift to Be Expected

Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian belong to the first generation of poets that actively supported and could enjoy the post-1960s opportunities of Irish women's poetry. Both of them took part in public response to feminist movements, which helped to broaden women's chances of literary career and poetic self-representation. Both of them felt their responsibility to use the newly captured literary medium for expression of the woman's authentic experience, for which also their personal sense of external and internal connection to nature was important. Each of them understood novelty and opportunity of the poetic voice differently. Boland tried to ironize and undermine reducing images of female sexuality and their dangerous symbolic tie to nature; McGuckian voiced the mute territory of women's closeness to natural processes by her experimentation with word-formation, syntax and imagery. Nevertheless, for both the poets, perception of nature and use of nature metaphor are crucial and unavoidable in their exploration and representation of the self. The third poet chosen for my discussion, Vona Groarke, very distinctly shares the deep interest in the relationship between the personal and nature with Boland and McGuckian. This poet, however, finds herself in a completely different position in terms of literary and public concern with feminine identity.

Groarke is a poet of the latest decade of Irish writing. She follows the pioneer generation of post-feminist poets, which includes Boland's and McGuckian's early poetry. The literary canon as well as the social and political environment changed dramatically for women during the latest decades, and therefore also apparent differences in Groarke's themes, attitude to artistic responsibility and work with nature imagery may be expected. In this chapter, I will

mention the general characteristics of Groarke's poetry, and focus on her attitude nature and its role in self-expression. Being a representative of a younger generation of Irish woman poets, she will be discussed in context of the latest literary development in Ireland. I will attempt to introduce her within the contemporary tendencies in woman's poetry and suggest the idiosyncrasy of her treatment of nature.

Although she has already written a great amount of excellent poetry, Groarke can still be considered an artist in the process of formation of her literary voice. Therefore, also my discussion will regard her work as opening rather than defining a new view of femininity and women's imaginary relationship to nature. My introduction and close-reading of Groarke will be slightly shorter and will not aspire to describe her poetic expression in its complexity. I will attempt to approach the poet from the perspective of new possibilities of Irish women's poetry, and suggest the innovative aspects of her attitude to nature and the self.

5.2 Woman's Voice: Vona Groarke and the New Generation of Women Poets in Ireland

Let the waves trip on the part of your name
I don't dare. Let the shingle cup your footfall
and the sea-wind straddle the breath you don't use.

(Vona Groarke, 'To Be Said')

Vona Groarke was born in County Longford in 1964 and educated at Trinity College in Dublin and at University College in Cork. Her first published collection, *Shale*, was very successful as well as her previous occasional participation in various literary competitions.¹¹⁷ She was writer-in-residence at University of Galway in 1999, but moved to United States

¹¹⁷ McBreen 101.

soon after. At the moment Groarke lives and works in North Carolina together with her husband James O'Callahan, who is also a poet.

In the outline of topics and stylistic experiments in the latest women's poetry in Ireland, which I included at the end of Chapter Two, I deliberately omitted Groarke. Most of the aspects mentioned, however, would be typical also for her work. Towards the conclusion of her book on contemporary poetry by women, P. B. Haberstroh lists and briefly analyses several young Irish poets. Their work mirrors the newly acquired sexual freedom, expresses diverse opinions on motherhood, questions contemporary values, challenges taboos, and generally performs quite playful treatment of subversion of the traditional gender and religious imagery.¹¹⁸ All these features confirm the assertive acceptance of the role of poet and increasing self-confidence of contemporary Irish women, which are tied to the recently developed interest in woman's writing and the support of their publishing. The flourishing variety and experiment in women's poetry must be ascribed to its newly acquired literary opportunity, but should be looked upon also from the perspective of more general changes in its social environment.

The economic boom, which labelled Ireland the 'Celtic Tiger' and kindled a lot of general bewilderment and some unethical behaviour, along with multiculturalism, which added to the erosion of traditional values and the sense of place and belonging, were of course promptly mirrored by Irish poetry. Justin Quinn finds literary responses to the social and cultural changes in cynicism, ironical pictures of aggression, or focus on the local.¹¹⁹ The reflection of the particular historical period can be obviously found in male as well as female poets. As a very important feature in the latest development of Irish poetry Quinn emphasizes the weakening of nationalism. Nationalist ideology has been ebbed from Irish culture, and its diminishing power can be distinctly traced also in poetry. After tradition, the Irish language

¹¹⁸ Haberstroh 209#213.

¹¹⁹ Quinn 197.

and Catholicism were dismissed from the mainstream culture in Ireland, also poetry no longer seems to be bound to the nationalist framework.¹²⁰

In contemporary poetry by women, the shift away from nationalism is prominent. Eavan Boland still very deeply engages with the issue, Medbh McGuckian follows with her depiction of English as the oppressor's tongue, but these pursuits seem to be almost absent in the latest literary voice of women. Vona Groarke, however, does not completely abandon the issue. Her concern with the native and the imposed language is not explicitly mirrored in her work, but, as Quinn considers apparent from her public interviews, she distinctly bears the question of uncertainty of writing in English in mind.¹²¹

The issue of feminism, which is closely connected to nationalism in Ireland, seems to be affected by the new opportunities of women's writing in a similar way as the theme of the nationalist ideology is by globalization. Its tasks and concerns are no longer perceived as valid for contemporary poets. Nevertheless, the effects of feminism and allusions to its agenda are not going to perish from the poetry immediately. They continue to resonate in a less serious tone. Vona Groarke herself did not take part in the political debates after the feminist movements as McGuckian or Ní Dhomhnaill did. She critically responds to these public issues, however, and expresses her sense of a shift in women's authentic representation. Justin Quinn mentions her explicit wish that "all such issues will eventually be redundant."¹²² Her claim suggests that the striving for re-negotiation and re-imagining, which Boland pursued, is no longer necessary, and her poetry seems to confirm it. She shares the easiness and more distanced attitude concerning feminine issues with other woman poets of her generation.

5.3 Themes and Characteristics of Vona Groarke's Poetry

¹²⁰ Quinn 198.

¹²¹ Quinn 165.

¹²² Quinn 174.

Groarke follows Boland's concern about domesticity and women's everyday interests and activities and McGuckian's focus on the erotic in relationships. Similar to both the poets discussed before she explores also the theme of adulthood and maternity. Nevertheless, after the questions raised by feminism had already been discussed, Groarke employs these themes in a more witty and subversive way. Her poetry does not appear to be committed to any serious agenda of rewriting the past or establishing feminine language. It contributes to the issue of women's self-expression and representation in a more implicit manner.

In her first two books, *Shale* and *Other People's Houses*, Groarke introduced her tender lyricism and imagination, which are to be found also in her later poetry. In the second collection, she combined local and domestic issues with idiosyncratic wit. She plays with different possible angles of looking at a house and the family living inside.¹²³ At the same time, these poems are pervaded with eroticism and stunning love imagery. Groarke's love poems are at the core of all her books, and I agree without any hesitation with Justin Quinn that "this is a mode in which Groarke excels."¹²⁴ As Quinn observes, she undermines the academic piety that surrounds women's writing by using various puns and by toying with traditional gender roles in art. The poem 'Folderol', for example, includes a kind of subverted *aisling* with the man as the elusive lover and the woman as the poet. And, with Quinn's words, "this kind of witty sexual politics" informs the whole collection.¹²⁵

The author's extraordinary imagination, which empowers her representation of intimate relationships as well as her description of places and objects, is fully developed in *Flight*. The title of Groarke's third collection appears to resonate in its different themes. It might embody the poet's path to adulthood and her new home, her occasional freedom from responsibilities, or even the very movement of the imagination. The imaginative extravagance, which Quinn points out, provides the common settings of the poems with "an impulse towards

¹²³ Quinn 207.

¹²⁴ Quinn 208.

¹²⁵ Quinn 208.

abstraction.”¹²⁶ It creates a specific contrast between the everyday or even vulgar and the lyric and fantastical. This contrast will also be one of the crucial points in my discussion of nature imagery, later in this chapter.

In *Juniper Street*, Groake’s so far latest collection of poetry, the imaginary wandering beyond limits of ordinary situations continues to suggest an astonishing communication with the surroundings. One of its poems, ‘The Local Accent’, explores for example the way in which the landscape might speak through people who inhabit it.¹²⁷ Different places, either in Ireland or in America and their inner life are observed, and human co-existence in them is mirrored by their visual appearance. Shifts in attention and slides of imagination between personas’ sensations and their surrounding environment are characteristic of urban as well as nature sceneries, and will be devoted more space within the discussion of Groarke’s nature imagery, on following pages.

5.4 Nature and the Self in Poetry of Vona Groarke

Although I find the impetus for the imaginative communication between nature and the self elsewhere than in their metaphorical relationship, in Groarke, and I am thus tempted to structure my analysis differently, I will begin my reading with the most basic examples of similes and metaphors, also with this poet. In comparison to Boland and McGuckian, Groarke does not build up her metaphors on allusions to sexuality or original interpretations of life in nature. They work mainly with visual and other sensory associations, which are often spiced with neologisms and unexpected puns.

The simile of a dandelion in ‘Tonight of Yesterday’, for example, depicts ‘flyblown words’ of a person who is being watched asleep. The sleep itself is metaphorically described as “berried with the story of sunlight,” in following lines. The witty switching meanings of the

¹²⁶ Quinn 208.

¹²⁷ Quinn 209.

verb “flyblown” and the extended metaphor for the sleep challenge the reader’s visual imagination. I quote the whole poem.

The evening slips you into it, it has kept a place for you
and those wildwood limbs that have already settled on
the morning. The words you have for it are flyblown now
as the dandelion you will whistle tomorrow into a lighter air.

But, tonight, your sleep will be as round as your mouth,
berried with the story of sunlight finally run to ground.
you are all about tomorrow. The moon has your name
memorized: the curl of your back; your face, an open book.

In ‘Ghosts’, a glimpse of sensation or memory, so subtle that it is impossible to capture and describe, is expressed by similes that stir our sense of hearing, sight, touch and taste.

Not exactly. Something like breath on your cheek
or an aftertaste of summer, years ago; one,
two metallic notes with the cadence of a name;
silverfish throwing your reflection of a beat.
Or a peony petal blown onto your path.

Also in this poem, people in close relationship to the speaker become part of her imagery. In the second stanza, children are found to be more familiar with the ghosts. They bring the indescribable magic moments and are thus responsible for the ghostly impressions.

I don't think so. The children know.
They breath ghosts into January
that stand for the split second
it takes to take us in, and then they are off
as though released, like figments of the air.

The poem 'Cities and Flowers' is addressed to the speaker's companion in her walk and to the city they walk through, at the same time. As the two people are walking, the city becomes alive, its heat flowering and its noises smelling. The first stanza of the poem creates an amazing parallel between the perception of life on the streets and among buildings and actual life in nature or a garden. It is brimming with sensory impressions and their oxymoronic combinations, which almost fuse the imaginary picture of the city and the other person into one description. The closeness of impressions or emotions connected to the person physically present and to the surrounding scenery is typical for Groarke and will be returned to later.

So your city is a garden with its heat in flower,
Stiff with outlandish vibrancy and spill.
And your skin rustles like petals on the turn.
to wisps of music more fragrant even than blossoms
with their careless overtures. So buildings are laying
slabs of shadow out, workmanlike, the way a tree
could never be, with all that giddy lineage, those airs.

As the last example of Groarke's work with nature metaphor I would like to mention the poem 'Maize'. It is a wonderful representative of the poet's sways of attention between an ordinary everyday event and an imaginary story. The persona watches her son drawing with Faber Castells in the car and enjoys his choosing of right colours. Suddenly, she enters the landscape of the drawing, in her fantasy.

See how you have given it petals,
wings, hair I can run my hand through

the way the wind cross-hatches
an open field where corn is sweetening
in its cornsilk skin; where yellow
falters, gold begins to maize.

The persona's hand travels through the imaginary field that the maize colour of the hair in the drawing reminds of. The hand is compared to the wind in an open field and the whole fantastic landscape is described in its shapes and colours.

Groake's metaphors develop pictures of inter-personal communication, human relationships or moments shared by two people, but they do not create links between human feelings and processes, elements or forces in nature. Unlike the tropes encountered in McGuckian, they seem to be based on sensuous rather than spiritual perception of nature. The landscape and natural objects occurring in metaphors suggest the poet's immensely sensitive attention to the visually perceptible life of nature. Thus perceived nature becomes a companion in mundane situations as well as special experiences in relationships. Its shapes, colours, fragrances or melodies are remembered to relate the subtle sensations of the self.

When the actual observation of landscape becomes the core of the poem – a phenomenon frequent and prolific in Groarke – nature becomes an external counterpart to the speaker. It approaches the human world by the impressions it gives to the speaker's senses and its associative links to personal feelings or memory of human relationships.

A beautiful example of imagination wandering from a concrete sight to the verge of consciousness is the title poem of the collection *Flight*. It is also one of very few of Groake's poems that do not explicitly combine experience or memory of intimate relationship with the actual perception of the surrounding environment. In 'Flight', the persona describes the sky and the birds and clouds that gain outlines against its background. The long-lasting observation notices changes in structure of the clouds and consistency of flight-lines, but it extends the moment also by launching the imagination towards abstracted associations.

Effortless and uninscribed, the sky
has earthed everything outside
where even bleached flight-lines

are ground as small as the pellucid breastbone
of a golden oriole or wren
...
And so, away
From the calligraphy of swallows
On a page of cloud; tern prints on snow

That almost lead somewhere,
But then break off and stutter

underground, or into breathless air.

...

and a thinning fiction keen to aspire

to a sequence of hard words laid

one on the other and back again

like a school-girl's braid

At its beginning, the poem creates a moving picture of the sky. It is a painting in process. The observed scenery gains metaphors from the scope of human everyday experience. The metaphor of language pictures the diversity of clouds, for instance (a sequence of hard words laid/ one on the other and back again). Towards the closing lines of the poem, the visual impression touches the personal. The poem performs a feature widespread in Groarke; the link from a visual impression of landscape towards sensation of intense love, loneliness or an unknown emotion.

Soon to be thin air; nothing to write

home about; an advancing quiet

that throws this into shadow underneath

where, by way of leavetaking this time,

death, like a moth in a paper lantern,

is rattling even in these lines.

Like McGuckian, Groarke often personifies nature and imaginatively reflects on its changes. Her tropes, however, do not invite us deeper into the inner order of natural processes, but explore the effects of the encounter with nature on human senses. The lines that describe traces of the flight in the sky are themselves an astonishing flight of imagination across boundaries between different kinds of sensory perception.

the point at which two rumours coalesce,
one to do with vision, one with voice.

One minute, it's rouse and colour,
the next, wingspan and whirl.

The poem 'Glaze' is a similar example of the journey of imagination inspired by one observed image. This time, the persona spots a bird on the frozen river, pauses to ponder the question she wishes to ask it and continues on her way. The poem combines musing on habits of birds – the wondering about their silence in winter – with an original description of the actual bird watched.

A frozen river after a night of rain:

a skim of ice no bigger than your breath
has a single bird on it that is stalled,
sleek as my breastbone, indelibly alone.

Do you know it yet, who rustled songbirds

out of winter and once sparked a hummingbird?

What now of the cold on your wingtip,

the ice on your tongue? With your eye setting
on where I still you, I all but turn away.

Apart from associations revolving around the particular animal or piece of landscape, Groarke's most typical imaginary links are between a visual impression and a private sensation or tension between two people. An extraordinary associative connection between different kinds of trees and intense experiences of human encounters can be found in a sequence of poems called 'The Bower'. The individual short poems in this sequence from *Flight* are titled by names of trees and concerned with the theme of non-verbal inter-personal communication, in most cases. 'Poplar', for example, is a playful mirror to habitual mutual attitudes in relationships.

He could say anything to her, even her name, and still
sound like small leaves tossed in a summer squall.

In this poem, the nature metaphor is directly reminiscent of the tree in the title. In other poems, however, the explicit reference to the tree is completely missing. The connection between the tree and the contents of the poem seems to be purely associative and the whole sequence, along with its main title, works like a jigsaw hiding the different themes or messages underneath the particular trees. In some of the poems, the grace of the image of the tree strongly contrasts with the problem dealt with throughout the lines. Under the title 'Elm', for instance, a piece of prose poetry relates an awkward change in relationship after the persona's operation.

He hasn't touched me on that side

since the op. Oh, he'll work away at the other right enough,
but he turns his head (who'd blame him) towards the wall.

These poems may also be perceived as another example of the poet's fusion of the noble or fantastic and the common and everyday, within nature imagery.

Before concluding my reading of Groarke with suggesting what I regard as the most remarkable example of communication between nature and the self in her poetry, I will briefly discuss the poem 'Sunflowers', the last and very interesting example of observation of the surrounding landscape. This poem introduces a family who passes and watches a field of sunflowers in their car. We learn about the situation only in the last stanza of the poem, though, and read first about the speaker's fantasy that gives life and social role to the flowers according to what their shapes and positions remind of.

Foot soldiers in a long-drawn-out campaign, slumped
under orders, heedless of the stakes,
when news of broken ranks comes dripping through.

Come another way: passengers herded on a platform.
See how they shoulder each other, bearing up, streaming
towards what unsoiled air there is beyond their grasp.

The last stanza then reveals the observer and contrasts the imaginary world conjured up on the field by the realistic picture of a family trip with children seated inside the summer-heated car.

In the height of the here and now, summer presses on us
spoils of chocolate, coffee, wine. The boot is crammed,
the children are a half-inch taller, gilded, sound asleep.

Groarke's attentive imaginative observations of animals and sceneries may remind of McGuckian's revival of the soul of nature through the persona's voice ('Sleeping with the Sea'). Nevertheless, Groarke's poems do not express such a deep interest the internal closeness of the human and the natural spirit. Her poetry is reminiscent also of Boland's meditations in the garden or the forest, but it does not seem to pursue the sense of belonging to the surrounding nature and its rules. Groarke's speakers focus on the external, sensory perception of tiny changes in nature environment. Nevertheless, the self is by no means disconnected from nature, in her attitude. The sensory perception and inspiration from shapes or sounds in nature become important tools for understanding and expressing the most subtle sensations either personal or inter-personal. Apart from being source of metaphors and associations that playfully develop the experience of human relationship, nature becomes a direct companion in the intimate moments of closeness of two people. This Groarke's special attitude to the self and its natural environment will be illustrated by two concluding poems of this chapter.

A short poem 'Drama' carefully pictures the laburnum tree that the speaker meets, and afterwards shifts attention to comparison of an astonished face of the other on-looking person to the image of the tree.

Even the drama of the laburnum tree
backed into the evening sun –
a Roman abundance, a gilded spree –

is as nothing compared to the look
on your face when I directed you to it.

The witty point at the end of the five lines closes Groarke's play with the parallel between impressions from the face of the tree and the human face present nearby. A similar parallel, this time between kinds of speech instead of faces, is developed in the poem 'To Be Said'. In the persona's wish to walk with her lover, supposedly, along the sea shore, nature is invited to participate in the imagined inter-personal communication. The waves would have to interfere and convey what the speaker does not dare. No words would be needed for the exchange of the people's sensations, anyway, and the language-less seashore would be easily able to become a companion in the magic moment. Nature is included in the silent interview between the two persons.

Let's walk the shoreline with it all
to be said and nothing between us but salt.
Let the waves trip on the part of your name
I don't dare. Let the shingle cup your footfall
and the sea-wind straddle the breath you don't use.
We'll hold our tongues. Let you say nothing,
and then, with your voice in my mouth,
I'll say nothing back.

The imaginary relationship between the sea and the momentous connection between two persons, in this poem, is on the verge of a metaphor and abstraction. Also in other Groarke's poems, the surrounding nature furtively begins to emotional experience, mostly of love. The

imagery challenges the self's sensual perception of the surrounding world, and trespasses the borders between visual impressions and inner sensations. This play with perception and emotion does not question masculine or feminine interpretation of reality. The self does not seem to observe its gender, consistency or truthful representation. It is quite self-assured and appears to explore nature in order to extend possibilities of perception of surrounding phenomena and understanding of human private experience.

Groarke's personas do not attempt to find connection between processes in nature and their sexual and bodily experience, nor do they achieve spiritual symbiosis with nature. Nevertheless, the human world is very neatly tied to the natural world, in her poetry. The closeness of these two worlds and the opportunity for their intimate communication is suggested by the associative link between sensuous impressions from the landscape and the emotional experience of the self.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In the opening chapter of this work I introduced the political and social atmosphere that surrounded and distinctly formed women's artistic expression. In the previous chapter I attempted to outline cultural changes that virtually separate younger Irish women poets from the generation directly involved in feminist debates of 1970s and 1980s. When pondering the responsibility of the newly emerging poetry by women, Eavan Boland explained her view of its opportunities as well as dangers. Women's literary voice is about to discover and explore unknown possibilities of the genre of poetry, but it should not rely on its political agenda and novelty in terms of gender of the author. After a couple of decades of women's subjectivity in Irish poetry, we may recall this Boland's opinion and desire. The pioneer feminist or post-feminist poets of Boland's generation, such as Nualla Ní Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian, or Eileen Ní Chuilleanáin, directly responded to the long-lasting literary heritage of feminine sexual imagery created by men. They expressed their frustration concerning the unjust distortion of the woman's self, in poetry, and pursued the task of its authentic artistic representation. Boland's notion of the aesthetic and ethical responsibility of art resonated in contemporary debates, and the women's real relationship to nature belonged to the main issues that challenged the ethical attitude of previous poetry written by men.

The conventional imaginary connection between the feminine and the land has been firmly rooted in Irish poetry and reiterated up to Seamus Heaney. The false image of the woman's self together with misconception of the female body and sexuality based on their embodiment of fertility made the poetry completely devoid of women's real physical and psychic tie to nature, according to the feminist criticism. Women's understanding of processes in nature thus become a significant part of the re-negotiation of the past representation of the feminine

self, which Boland asserts. For the three poetesses chosen for my close-reading, attitude to nature and employment of nature imagery are extremely important for expression of the self.

Briefly after winning the opportunity to read publically and publish extensively, in practically all women poets the theme of expressing femininity and asserting women's real concerns and experience is prominent, and in Boland, McGuckian and Groarke, perception of nature and own existence in its environment is crucial part of the picture. Nevertheless, along with the shift from struggling for independent subjectivity in poetry to the latest modes of experimentation with themes and form, also the sense of responsibility and attitude to authentic self-expression and poetic exploration of nature changed. As Boland suggested, every woman poet re-negotiates the past representation of the feminine by her real voice in Irish poetry, and the three poets I have discussed in this paper re-visit the relationship between the woman and nature in different ways. The basic points of its specific articulation deserve a short summary in the conclusion.

In Boland, we could observe three basic kinds of communication between the woman's self and nature. Female sexuality is explicitly explored by metaphorical images of the moon as the physical power over the body. The woman's actual presence in nature, on the other hand, is reflected in descriptions of moments in the suburban garden or through her sensations of spiritual encounter with wild nature. In Boland's other poems, the cultural connotations of natural objects or elements are meditated upon, and enable thus the woman's experience enter the human perception of nature. McGuckian offers a different kind of subjective openness to the soul of nature and suggests its different imaginary connection to female sexuality. Her flower symbolism develops a playful expression of the erotic. More than a resentful engagement with sexuality, it seems to be a fantastical reflection of love and feminine and masculine principles. McGuckian's other metaphors explore the inner order of life in nature and attempt spiritual incarnation of nature processes or elements in the self. In her private

communication with nature, its seasons and objects are explored and then employed to picture human feeling or situation. McGuckian shares themes of domesticity or maternal experience with Boland, but her interest in the existential tension in the woman's self seems to prevail over the exploration of the social role of the woman, which we could find in the previous poet.

In both Boland's and McGuckian's treatment of nature imagery, we could discern an explicit struggle for expression of femininity – either in rewriting the past picture of her sexuality or in experimentation with language and nature symbolism – as well as implicit voicing of the authentic woman's self and its relationship to nature. On various levels, these poets undermined the clichéd connection between nature and femininity and established new views of the role of nature in woman's experience. Poems by Vona Groarke add an original approach to their voices. Her poetry appears to be unbound from the explicit serious engagement with the self and feminine identity. Groarke does not use nature images to express woman's perception of her body or social vocation, nor does she explore the sense of spiritual closeness to the surrounding landscape. Her metaphors based on sensory imagery and her observations of landscape intertwined with abstract associations suggest a different kind of communication with nature. Nature is connected to the self by immediately sensory evocation of human emotions and its witty interference into inter-personal communication.

Groarke's playful treatment of nature and human relationships shows distinct features of the general tendencies in the latest poetic reflection of women's experience. Along with the diminishing sense of deprivation, which Elke D'Hoker emphasizes, the free spirit in the latest poetry by Irish women is revealed and opens new views on human perception of reality.¹²⁸ The struggle for authenticity of women's poetic expression does not seem to be at the core of their poetic responsibility any more, indeed. The explicit re-negotiation of feminine imagery

¹²⁸ Elke D'Hoker, "Introduction," in Elke D'Hoker, Raphael Ingelbien and Hedwig Schwall, eds. *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011) 16-18.

or patriarchal language is alternated by innovative playful exploration of gender questions and women's experience. This tendency is to be perceived in nature imagery as well as other means of figurative language. We could argue that the work of the younger generation of Irish poets shows a very positive development in terms of combination of women's responsibility to her femininity and the art of poetry, in which Eavan Boland hoped several decades ago.

At the very conclusion of my discussion, I want to briefly ponder the conceivable broader impacts and values of the newly asserted voice of Irish women poets, in which also the original representation of the relationship between nature and the self plays an important part. The subjective expression of women poets can be viewed as a significant contribution to the art of poetry, on one hand, and to social politics, on the other hand. To illustrate the new development within inner relationships of the poem we can give the example of changed tie between the subject and object. Boland's animation of the natural power in the body and McGuckian's openness to incarnation of nature and dead people introduce an unpossessive self contrastive to the subject's control of the object performed in much other poetry dominated by male authors. The extraordinary figurative connection between nature and the self in McGuckian and the experimentation with sensuous and emotional parallel between nature and human intimacy in Groarke open new ways of language opportunities of personal expression. The treatment of nature in all of these authors suggests wide possibilities of women's self-representation, and at the same time enriches the general human perception of nature and surrounding reality by its innovative poetic exploration.

The social and political meaning of women's contemporary poetry shifts from the direct response to feminist ideology towards a more free experimentation with the form of poetry. The broader implication of women poets' aesthetic achievement could be found in the path to a more spontaneous supplementation of men's poetic expression. The unconscious assertion of femininity in the most recent women poets confirms the general tendencies perceived

within the contemporary poetry in Ireland; the slide from the sense of political responsibility of the poets, male as well as female, to the emphasis on independent exploration of private perception of reality. The relationship between art and politics or the public, which was mentioned in connection with Yeats in the opening chapter of this paper, has been subjected to significant changes in the latest decades. It could be argued that the dichotomy of the ethical and aesthetic in art, which Eavan Boland strived to overcome in her poetry and criticism, is no longer crucial, valid or resonant for younger generations. Their exploration of the feminine self-expression and poetic language and their reflection of human understanding of nature has entered a new field of experimentation.

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Summary

This thesis comprises historical and critical introduction to contemporary women's poetry in Ireland and close reading of three poets of its two latest generations, Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian and Vona Groarke. It focuses on her perception of nature and attitude to the relationship between the human self and natural processes and objects. The contextual background to my reading emphasizes the feminist critique of the traditional false images of the woman's self in Irish poetry and politics, and suggests new opportunities of the most recent female poetic voices.

The culturally rooted simplifying or even harmful connection between femininity and the fertile land or Catholic ideals of virginity has provoked a lot of indignation among contemporary women poets, and caused abundant literary attempts of its re-negotiation. The authentic poetic representation of the woman's sexual and spiritual connection to the land and nature along with women's subjective use of nature imagery belongs to crucial points of this re-negotiation. It is pursued extensively in all of the poetesses discussed in this paper.

My close reading considers the political objectives of the poems and notices different modes of their artistic response to the relevant cultural questions. Nevertheless, it emphasizes also the independence of the art of poetry. The analysis attempts to observe also the new experimentation and aesthetic achievement that the interest in nature in these three authors brings. Each of them performs an extraordinary imaginary connection between the self and the surrounding natural environment, and suggests new spiritual closeness to nature or innovative perception of its elements.

The treatment of nature metaphor in Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian and Vona Groarke revisits the traditional nature and feminine imagery and addresses gender issues. On the other hand, it opens new possibilities of poetic illumination of human approach to nature. The thesis pays attention to the political meaning of contemporary women's poetry as well as its

contribution within the genre of poetry in general. It tries to reflect upon the broader circumstances of the post-feminist poetic voice in Ireland and include also suggestions of its changes in the very latest decade.

Resumé

Tato diplomová práce zahrnuje historický a literárně-kritický úvod k současné irské ženské poezii a interpretaci básní tří jejích představitelk, Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian a Vony Groarke. Zaměřuje se na vnímání přírody u těchto básnířek a jejich přístup ke vztahu mezi lidským subjektem a přírodními jevy. Pro kontext této poezie je důležitý feministický kritický přístup k tradičnímu zjednodušujícímu obrazu ženy v irské literatuře a politice. Feministicky orientovaná společenská kritika zdůrazňuje a podněcuje zodpovědnost a nové možnosti současné ženské poezie v Irsku.

Kulturně hluboce zakořeněné klišé spojující ženu s úrodností země nebo naopak nevinností náboženského ideálu Panny Marie vyvolalo mezi mladými irskými autorkami silnou vlnu protireakce. Odhalení nebezpečného vlivu těchto idejí na ženský postoj k vlastní identitě a vyjádření skutečného prožitku ženské sexuality patří k základním tématům současných irských básnířek. Pro toto básnické zkoumání ženského „já“ je velmi důležité také zobrazení skutečného fyzického a duchovního vztahu k přírodě a čistě osobní přístup k přírodní metafoře. Reflexe vlastního vztahu k přírodním objektům a jevům je klíčová v poezii všech tří básnířek vybraných pro tuto práci.

Můj rozbor básní bere v úvahu politické souvislosti této poezie a pokouší se nastínit možnosti jejího uměleckého uchopení kulturních otázek, zároveň však zdůrazňuje nezávislost poezie jako tvůrčího aktu. Pokouším se sledovat také překvapivé umělecké postupy a zvláštní estetické kvality, které zájem o přírodu u těchto básnířek přináší. Každá z nich nalézá jiný obrazný vztah mezi subjektem a okolní přírodou a nabízí osobité vyjádření vnitřní blízkosti člověka a krajiny.

Využití přírodní metafory u Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian a Vony Groarke oživuje v novém světle vztah mezi ženou a přírodou a významně se tak dotýká současných genderových otázek. Žena přestává být pasivním prvkem mýtického tropu ženy – matky

přírody a vyjadřuje skutečný prožitek přírodních procesů ve vlastním těle a ve svém okolí. Toto ženské básnické téma zároveň ukazuje nové možnosti obecně lidského metaforického vztahu k vnímání přírodních jevů. Moje práce věnuje pozornost politicko-sociálnímu významu současné ženské poezie v Irsku a také jejímu uměleckému přínosu pro žánr poezie. Pokouší se představit širší souvislosti tvůrčí práce současných irských básnířek a nastínit směr jejího nejmladšího vývoje.