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LIMITS AND LANGUAGES

in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry

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INTRODUCTION

The close of James Joyce's *Dubliners* strikes a conciliatory note as Gabriel Conroy sleepily watches the snowflakes, his eyes filled with "generous tears" of recognition:

> snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.[1]

The sense of integrity and belonging, previously lost in the turmoil of the night, is restored in the image of the snow enfolding the island and levelling off edges. It mitigates the negatively defined identity, to which Gabriel was driven in frustration upon being accused of "West-Britonism": "O, to tell you the truth, [...] I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!"[2] Taken aback by how easily his assiduous cosmopolitanism will turn into a vehement denial of everything Irish, including the language ("if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language"[3]) he polarized his after-dinner speech with the ostensible opposition between the tradition of "genuine warm-hearted courteous Irish hospitality" and the "hypereducated"

[1] James Joyce, *Dubliners: Text and Criticism; Revised Edition*, eds. Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz (London: Penguin Books, 1996) 224.
[2] Joyce, *Dubliners* 189.
[3] Joyce, *Dubliners* 189.

young generation which threatens to destroy the latter with its obdurate republicanism.[4] Gabriel's dilated consciousness and puzzling wave of panoptic nationalism in the closing paragraph not only rounds off the story of his own emotional upheaval but is intended as an atoning appendix to the rest of the book. In a letter in 1906, Joyce remarked: "Sometimes thinking of Ireland it seems to me that I have been unnecessarily harsh. I have reproduced (in Dubliners at least) none of the attractions of the city."[5] A year later, "The Dead" was written to make up for that harshness.

The peaceful resolution, however, is underlaid by newly apprehended tensions; Gabriel's serenity becomes an illusion when we look away from the surface evened-out by the snow. As is revealed during the lancers with Miss Ivors, his sense of identity is maintained "with an effort of reason."[6] Pieced together, the various challenges to his will and resolution that come up in the story form its leitmotif. As she abandons the scene a light version of Cathleen Ní Houlihan ("'*Beannacht libh*,' cried Miss Ivors, with a laugh, as she ran down the staircase"[7]), the girl leaves a trace of self-doubt in Gabriel. But the radical Molly Ivors is not the only one stirring up disturbing emotions. Gabriel's wife Gretta, undergoing a series of transformations, repeatedly forces him to question what his role and attitude should be. As he waits for her to join him after the party ends, he wonders "what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of."[8] Imagining himself a painter he promptly adapts to the situation, aware that fixing her in that aesthetic posture is the only way he can deal with her elusiveness. Still, the seed of desire has been sown and the sequel becomes an account of Gabriel's sexual and emotional disappointment, with Gretta receding further west, lost in her memories of a one-time sweetheart. As he observes her

[4] Joyce, *Dubliners* 203.
[5] *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellman (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) 109.
[6] Joyce, *Dubliners* 220.
[7] Joyce, *Dubliners* 196.
[8] Joyce, *Dubliners* 210.

transfiguration from a desired spouse into an allegory – first a *Spéirbhean*, a beautiful young figuration of Ireland, and then and old hag or *Cailleach* ("He did not like to say even to himself that her face was no longer beautiful, but he knew that it was no longer the face for which Michael Furey had braved death"[9]) – Gabriel finds an answer to his former question and discovers the source of the distant music that has set off and accompanied the uncontrollable sequence of changes. For a moment, seized by "a vague terror," he imagines some "impalpable and vindictive being [...] coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world." Indeed, this "impalpable and vindictive being" is Gretta as his unknowable Other, as the symbol of death itself, and the personification of Éire claiming the lives of young Irishmen for her cause. Gabriel, empty-handed, resembles a poet-admirer from the Gaelic vision-poetry tradition (with a message from the now-asleep motherland figure to ponder), and also a West Briton – the subaltern Irishman who begrudges his wife her rural, western origin (to Miss Ivors he pretends that it is just "her people" who are from Connacht).[10]

Like Molly Ivors, whose name and elusiveness are prefigurings of Eileen and the meditations on Tower of Ivory in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Gabriel's bifurcate identity foreshadows the conflicted identity and troubled sense of belonging which determines the character of Stephen Dedalus. In foregrounding a Self that "was fading out into a grey impalpable world" just as "the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling,"[11] "The Dead" not only concludes *Dubliners*, but calls the tune for *A Portrait* and the theme of fissured national awareness that figures throughout Joyce's work. It is not that Gabriel would have accepted as his own the republican ideals of Miss Ivors or come to terms with the threatening reminder of Ireland's "uncivilized"

[9] Joyce, *Dubliners* 222.
[10] Joyce, *Dubliners* 189.
[11] Joyce, *Dubliners* 223.

past in Gretta's origin as a "county cute."[12] Rather, positioned by the window as the imaginary threshold between Anglo- and -Irish, between the living present and the pull of the dead past, he finds reassurance by acknowledging the impossibility of a cosy, ready-made identity and the beneficial but also disruptive tensions pertaining to that cleft. As Jacques Derrida writes of his Franco-Maghrebian origin in *Monolingualism*, identity, however fissured or hollowed-out, is never a given and can only be "promised or claimed." According to Derrida, "The silence of that hyphen does not pacify or appease anything, not a single torment, not a single torture. It will never silence their memory."[13]

The same silent echo resounds in Joyce's story, most strikingly in the final image of "the snow falling faintly [...] and faintly falling" through the universe.[14] The forward and reverse working of that phrase contradicts the connotations of smoothness and repose carried by the snowfall and suggests oscillation: the eternal crossings on the threshold between within and without, between west-of-England and west-of-Dublin, the living and the dead, between the fringe of the Gaeltacht and the pale of the Anglicized capital. [15] Indeed, in pointing to the oppositions, but also the interactions between the pragmatic city and the romantic, rural west (including the obvious linguistic connotations), between the proximity of the dead past and the slipperiness of the present, Joyce's "The Dead" reflects the typical mindset of his time. The experience of being torn apart by multiple affiliations and simultaneously left out on all sides informs the writing of many Irish authors of the period, not least what Laura O'Connor terms the "haunted English" of W. B. Yeats.[16] Such competing allegiances and antagonistic concepts which Muldoon sums up as "the violent juxtaposition of the concepts of 'Ireland'

[12] Joyce, *Dubliners* 187.
[13] Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998) 11. (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.)
[14] Joyce, *Dubliners* 224.
[15] For a detailed discussion for the various "Pale/Fringe" zones of linguistic contact between English and Irish, and the instances of historical as well as contemporary concepts of Irish as the "Other" of English, see Laura O'Connor, *Haunted English: the Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and De-Anglicization* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
[16] See L. O'Connor, "'Eater and Eaten': The Haunted English of W. B. Yeats," *Haunted English* 66-110.

and 'I,'"[17] were also constitutive to the Irish cultural imagination during the final third of the last century, the period this dissertation covers.

Central to my project is to show how this motif of fissured cultural and linguistic identity, linked with the ideas of transience and reversibility, figures in poetry by Irish women of the last forty years. While I account for the significance of the hyphen for the Anglo-Irish as well as the Irish-Gaelic-Irish poets, contradictory tensions are traced not only across and along the linguistic divide, but also in the transition by women from the role of poetic subject to that of the subject of poetry and the shift from the feminist to the post-feminist phase in Irish poetry. Throughout the thesis, those tensions are shown as stimulating rather than destructive. In the works I discuss, the poets occupy an ambiguous border zone where they are able to reflect on the formation of their identity as writing subjects. Derrida's proposition that, in any culture, identity never exists but has to be achieved, together with the abstract and fundamentally unfinished position of the speaking "I,"[18] has special relevance for "Irish poetry" which, due to Ireland's cultural history and the much debated, politicized concept of the "national language,"[19] is an inherently equivocal concept that defies the singular. Starting from this premise, the dissertation follows the formation of the lyric subject, as it is addressed in the essays and thematized in the poems by major Irish women poets from the three final

[17] Paul Muldoon, *To Ireland, I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 35.

[18] See Derrida, *Monolingualism* 14.

[19] *Bunreacht na hÉireann / The Irish Constitution* (1937) refers to Irish as the first and to English the second language of Ireland. In "A General Introduction for My Work" (1937) W. B. Yeats remembers a public dinner given in his honour in London. Like Gabriel Conroy in Joyce's "The Dead," he had to put up with repeated charges of "West-Britonism." He recalls how, exasperated by the perennial question "why I do not write in Gaelic," he claimed "that no man can think or write with music and vigour except in his mother tongue," and adds that "Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue." See William Butler Yeats, "A General Introduction for My Work," *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961) 519, 520. Yet, referring in the same place to the prolonged, though "almost unconscious" formation of his poetics, he describes how he would find himself coalescing the "rich, deliberate" English diction with an "instinct [...] of the past" and the traditional metres that have "developed with the [Irish] language" in order to create a "contrapuntal structure [that] combines the past and present."[19] Yeats, "A General Introduction" 521, 522, 524. He would thus express the specific dilemma of an Irish poet writing in English between national and linguistic affiliation, and allude to his distaste for rigid nationalism that reminds of Joyce's Gabriel Conroy. See Michael O'Neill, "Yeats, Clarke, and the Irish Poet's Relationship with English," *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, eds. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 45.

decades of the last century. Attending to Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paula Meehan, Medbh McGuckian, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, I discuss mostly works that, because of their subject-matter and politically engaged tone, can be described as feminist. The main contribution of the work, nevertheless, is to explore the changes, as well as the consistencies in the lyric subject that are found along the transition from the feminist to the post-feminist writing by Irish women, here represented by the poetry of Biddy Jenkinson, Vona Groarke, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Aifric Mac Aodha, and to illustrate what role the border between English and Irish has played in these processes.

In the largest terms, my argument is that the cleft, hyphenated cultural mindset, delineated above with reference to Joyce, is frequently expressed in poetry by women in contemporary and near-contemporary Ireland, as Irish marginalization is replicated in Irish women's marginalization within the literary canon. The role of the poet in society has always been associated with exclusivity; whether perceived as a prominent or a marginal figure, the poet is the one who possesses insight and the power of words (be they admired or ignored). This exclusivity of the poet's status has been associated with the state of "fixed" liminality (as in the case of the prolonged "transitory" state and identity of monks or exiles).[20] Irish writers, as Muldoon argues, have for long tended to locate themselves between the concepts of the self and nationality, in order to either "bring the two closer together, or to force them further apart. It is as if they feel obliged to extend the notion of being a 'medium' to becoming a 'mediator.'"[21] In this sense, the former marginality of women should not be seen as a drawback, but as a characteristic shared by Irish poets in general that relates to the status of the poet in society. I am interested in examining how women have used their former position

[20] See Bjørn Thomassen, "The Uses and Meanings of Liminality," *International Journal of Political Anthropology* 2.1 (2009): 5-28; Bjørn Thomassen, "Liminality," *The Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006) 322-23.

[21] Muldoon, *To Ireland, I* 35. For more on the poet as comma see Eric Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2012) 52.

in their poetics, transforming the margin into a threshold. If Eavan Boland aphoristically notes that "Years of marginality suggest [...] the real potential of subversion,"[22] it is possible and pertinent to revise her remark by taking it away from the usual associations with "sly civility" and the idea of transgressive nomadology[23] that helped women get to the centre of the literary forum, and to look instead into the implications of the margin itself – not only as a key concern and limiting factor but a central enabling metaphor.

In anthropology, the liminal (from Latin *līmen*, a threshold) refers to the transitory state in social rituals when the previous structuring of identity had been shed while no new stage has been achieved. Typically it is argued to have spatial as well as temporal relevance.[24] Victor Turner defines the liminal thus:

> an interfacial region or [...] an interval, [...] of *margin* or *limen*, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in balance.[25]

I employ this concept not only in relation to the former marginality of women in literature but also to follow the variable forms of the fundamentally hyphenated, ever-emerging identity

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[22] Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006) 147.

[23] According to Deleuze and Guattari's theory, those approaching a system from the outside pose a threat to the authorities and the establishment. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. Brian Massumi (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1986). The Deleuzian concept of subversive nomadism has been taken over by post-structural feminism, most notably by Rosi Braidotti. See for instance Rosi Braidotti, "Nomadism with a Difference: Deleuze's Legacy in a Feminist Perspective," *Man and World* 29 (1996): 305-314; Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[24] See Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1977); Victor Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbology* (New Delhi: Concept, 1969); Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967) 93-111; Turner, "Variations on a Theme of Liminality," *Secular Ritual*, eds. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977) 48-65. For the interplay between margin, marginalization, and liminality in literary studies see Mihai I. Spariosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

[25] Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage* 41.

that inform many of the poems discussed and that are especially relevant in terms of the speaking "I" formation in feminist authors. Moreover, I argue that the thematic expressions of the liminal (in terms of sense perception, cognition, and as architectural metaphors) often occur in poems that deal with issues of inspiration, the uneasy concept of the mother tongue, and poetic translation. Entering the literary "pale" in unprecedented numbers, feminist poets have (however temporarily) turned it into an open, even transitory space marked by the element of change. My point is not that by accessing and transforming the platform these poets have replaced or trumped their established male counterparts but that – precisely in referring to the margin as a powerful, viable motif – they have adopted and reinforced the Irish poet's inherent role as a mediator interposed between the multiple identifications that make up the idea of "Irish poetry." As Laura O'Connor notes of the pale/fringe interface, "it entails a double movement of polarization and interaction."[26] Perceived and employed in this way, the enlivening margin is not a place on the periphery and far away from the centre, but an ambiguous contact zone between two worlds charged with energies that converge and clash. In other words, an excellent place to write poems.

There are multiple ways in which the concept of the liminal is relevant to my material. I have referred to the position of women as historically marginalized speakers and the adaption of that position as an important source of themes. Indeed, despite their varied stances to ideology, language, metrics, and other issues, the poets I discuss share a historical experience of marginality. This bears above all on the pioneering generation of major women poets who started publishing in the two penultimate decades of the last century, represented in the thesis by Boland, Ní Chuilleanáin, Meehan, Ní Dhomhnaill, and McGuckian. If the new poets, starting with Groarke and Jenkinson, and more recently including O'Reilly and Mac Aodha, have been able to look away from the margin as a limit, they are indebted in this to the

[26] L. O' Connor, *Haunted English* 6.

changes brought about by the previous generation. The cleft between Ireland and "I," to which Muldoon alludes as typical of Irish writers in general, would have special relevance to the feminist poets who felt they had to disassociate themselves from the motherland trope and the iconic representations of the nation as feminine. This is closely linked with the problematic stance to the inherited canon. During the 1970s and 1980s, women poets repeatedly spoke of an ambivalent stance to the masculine tradition which, in their eyes, had been hostile to them as authors while exploiting them as objects. As they worked on developing a distinctive, personal style that would enable them to include feminist subject-matter and concerns, Boland as well as Ní Chuilleanáin, Meehan, and McGuckian would often find themselves pulled between the impulse to renounce the tradition altogether and the need to find ways of embracing it.

The inclusion of poets writing in English and in Irish enables me to attend to the various representations of the linguistically fissured state of Irish literature. If Irish and the writers of the language have for long existed outside the pale of Ireland's culture, the theme of marginality is especially pertinent to the women among them. As Ní Dhomhnaill shows, even in earlier Irish society where poets ranked high, women were unwelcome intruders into the hereditary system.[27] Although there are mentions of powerful women poets to be found in the canon, nothing of their work has been preserved:[28] "Whatever the actual literary status of women poets in the Gaelic tradition, they were in general not let near the ink and they were not allowed into the corpus of the canon."[29] This kind of institutional exclusion is a concern that was shared by women of both languages and that lay at the basis of the various complaints of a broken heritage. In a well-known essay, "Outside History," published in the

[27] According to Ní Dhomhnaill's research in the area of oral poetry, "There was a widespread belief that if poetry, which was a hereditary gift (*féith nó tréith dúchais*), fell into the female line then it was gone from that particular family for seven generations to come […]. A similar taboo existed against women telling Fenian tales – 'tráithaire circe nó Fiannaií mná' (a crowing hen or a woman telling Fenian tales.)" See Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* (Dublin: New Island, 2005) 53.

[28] See Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 46.

[29] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 51.

PN Review in 1990,[30] Boland (at that time the best known Irish female poet) had turned to the Irish-language canon, referring to the scarcity of women authors therein to account for her own marginalization by the English tradition. Boland's dismal view was at first vehemently supported by Ní Dhomhnaill (by then and since the best known Irish-language poet): "Nowhere in the Irish tradition can I find anything but confirmation of Eavan Boland's claim that women have been nothing else but 'fictive queens and national sibyls.'"[31] Later on Ní Dhomhnaill toned down her statements,[32] supplying that she had been lucky to have had two living women poets on whom she could rely as role models at the start of her career: due to this "double exposure to [Caitlín] Maude and [Máire] Mhac an tSaoi, women poets, so far as I was concerned, were a natural part of any poetic or scholarly inheritance."[33] In this shift of tone, Ní Dhomhnaill approximated the views of Biddy Jenkinson who has dismissed any generalizing concepts of the tradition as mere "received truths," comparing such notions to sightings from St. Brendan's whale:

> The greater the viewer's confidence in the totality of his vision, the greater the potential for error. [...] The view that Irish women poets of the present have no antecedents seems to me to be just such a borrowed view from a sounded whale. I have always had a very healthy relationship with my living, though deceased, sisters. The occasional male mistake about them never bothered me. To find Eavan Boland, whose poetry I admire, writing them out of existence [...] was quite another matter.[34]

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[30] Eavan Boland, "Outside History," *PN Review 75* 17.1 (September-October 1990). 12 May 2011 <http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=4549>.

[31] Ní Dhomhnaill, "What Foremothers?" *Poetry Ireland Review* 36 (1992): 24.

[32] In a later version of "What Foremothers?" – "An Bhanfhile Sa Traidisiun: The Woman Poet in the Irish Tradition" – Ní Dhomhnaill altered the quoted phrase to refer to the *criticism* of the Irish tradition [in which] *until recently* women have been nothing else but "fictive queens and national sibyls." (my emphasis) See Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 48.

[33] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 44.

[34] Biddy Jenkinson, "A View from the Whale's Back," *The Poetry Ireland Review* 52 (Spring 1997). 14 March 2011 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25578728>.

Jenkinson's outspoken reliance on the Irish-language literary canon was prompted by a reaction to Boland's assertion about its hostility to women authors. But it also stands a reproach to the notions (still prevalent at that time) of Irish and its literature, both in the past and the present, as the echoes of a vanished or vanishing world.

If, compared to their peers in English, both Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson profess to both an assured and reverent attitude to their language tradition, it is due to their having had immediate predecessors. In the 1970s, when Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson started writing, Mhac an tSaoi had been recognized as one of the three major figures of modern poetry in Irish (along with Máirtín Ó Direáin and Seán Ó Ríordáin); having soon established herself as an authority on linguistic authenticity and a stringent critic of her contemporaries, she never really had to assert herself as a female poet. Caitlín Maude was widely celebrated among Irish-speakers as a language activist, poet, and a talented *sean-nós* singer.

This does not mean, however, that the margin would have no relevance for those who write in Irish. As Jenkinson admits,

> It is true that we suffer erosion. Irish speakers are rather like travellers. We are marginalised by a comfortable settled monoglot community that would prefer we went away rather than hassle about rights. We have been pushed into an ironic awareness that by our passage we would convenience those who will be uneasy in their Irishness as long as there is a living Gaelic tradition to which they do not belong.[35]

Again, even as she speaks of being marginalized on account of operating through Irish and thus on the brink of dissolution, Jenkinson stubbornly rejects any nostalgia for the dead past:

[35] Biddy Jenkinson, "Máire Mhac an tSaoi: The Clerisy and the Folk (P.I.R. 24): A Reply," *The Poetry Ireland Review* 25 (Spring 1989): 80.

in refusing to "burden myself with obligations to the dead,"[36] she reacts tongue-in-cheek to Mhac an tSaoi who likes to see herself and those she finds worth praising as the exponents of a dying generation, the possessors of a truth found solely in the oral tradition.[37] Obviously, the sense of being relegated to the periphery while caught between two states of mind is intrinsic to the Irish-language poet's experience. Gearoid Ó Crualaoich notes that "Is é cás an fhile Ghaelaigh […] bheith 'bicultural', scractha idir dhá saol, dhá theanga, dhá mheon, bheith 'as riocht' […], bheith eolgaiseach ar imeall na beatha, ar buile, ar thost síoraí, ar an neamhní."[38] (It is the lot of the Irish-language poet, [...] to be "bicultural," torn between two lives, two languages, two minds, to be "out of shape" [...] to know the edges of life, madness, eternal silence, the naught.) Despite the exalted tone that seems to be at odds with Jenkinson's, but also Ní Dhomhnaill's matter-of-factness, the statement does have relevance for the poets I discuss, who alternately claim to be "speechless in two languages"[39] and to be "at home" nowhere but in Irish. This dilemma is aptly put by Mac Aodha who, like Ní Dhomhnaill, is not a native speaker of Irish: "I am constantly aware that I come to the language, although it my literary home, as something of a tourist."[40] Indeed, even if all three have stressed the indispensability of Irish for their creativity, none of them lives in just one language; they are no members of a "comfortable settled monoglot community" and are not free of doubts, either in relation to the status of the language or to their own competence. Together with Derrida, they may wonder how the language which they with varying degrees

[36] Jenkinson, "A Reply" 80.

[37] One of Mhac an tSaoi's notoriously categoric criterions is, "unless I hear the voice of the tribe therein, the poetry does not impinge." See Máire Mhac a tSaoi, "The Clerisy and the Folk: a Review of present-day verse in the Irish language on the occasion of the publication of *Innti* 11," *Poetry Ireland Review* 24 (Winter, 1988): 33-35. Mhac an tSaoi's view is confirmed by Máirín Nic Eoin who notes that the relationship of the writer with the language is often envisaged as a token of homage to the dead. See Máirín Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac An Díláithriú Cultúir agus Nualitríocht na Gaeilge* (Dun Laoghaire: Cois Life, 2005) 103.

[38] Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, "An Nuafhilíocht Ghaeilge: Dearcadh Dána," *Innti* 10 (December 1986): 64. Qtd. in Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac* 89.

[39] Máire Mhac an tSaoi's phrase, "Bím balbh i dhá theanga" (I'm speechless in two languages), cited approvingly by Ní Dhomhnaill. See Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "'Cé Leis Tú?'", *Éire-Ireland* 35.1-2 (2000): 72.

[40] Aifric Mac Aodha "A Talkative Corpse: The Joys of Writing Poetry in Irish," *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art.* 11 November 2011 <http://columbiajournal.org/902>.

of ease "inhabit," "remains always mute [...], distant, heterogeneous, uninhabitable."[41] Still, while they know about being pulled between "two languages and two minds," this split is rarely thematized in their poems; like in Joyce, the topic is dealt with polemically – if not in after-dinner speeches then in essays and interviews.

Typically, the Irish-language poet perceives her medium as either a privilege of choice or an inevitability – often both at the same time. Explaining why she is unable to write poetry in English, Ní Dhomhnaill remarks: "I had chosen my language, or more rightly, perhaps, at some very deep level, the language had chosen me."[42] Similarly, Mac Aodha affirms that writing in Irish is not a matter of choice: "To ask me why I write in Irish is to ask why I write at all."[43] For Jenkinson who, unlike Ní Dhomhnaill and Mac Aodha, is a native speaker, Irish is simply a given: "I write in my own language, the language of my household."[44] While Anglophone poets also speak of inevitability, it is in reference to their lack of choice: writing in English is not the only workable option, like Irish is for Ní Dhomhnaill or Mac Aodha, but the only practicable alternative; while all Irish-language writers today are bilingual, only a few of those of English are. Writing in Irish entails identification (no matter how hesitant) with the language. The notion of Irish literature in English, as it formed in the nineteenth century, has been based on difference. If it is above all in opposition to English that Ní Dhomhnaill, Jenkinson, and Mac Aodha can speak of Irish as the natural element for their poetry, no such helpful dynamism is available to the poets working in English who, paradoxically, have often found themselves closer to the "margin" than their Irish-language peers. Short of the advantage of useful role-models, Boland and Ní Chuilleanáin in the Republic in the 1970s, and then McGuckian in Northern Ireland in the 1980s, had to tread

[41] Derrida, *Monolingualism* 58.
[42] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 13.
[43] Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse." (A working version of the text was titled "Why I Don't Choose to Write in Irish," and included the cited sentence.) E-mail to the author, 15 November 2011.
[44] Jenkinson, "A Reply" 80.

their own path. Moreover, their work is marked by a conflicted stance to English. Both Boland and Ní Chuilleanáin have repeatedly referred to their essential alienation from the English language, with a look of nostalgia cast in the direction of the vanishing trace of Irish whose "persistence, as a cultural force," as Clarke argues, "is both near-fiction and obdurate if nostalgic longing."[45]

Such wavering on the threshold between the present and the past is rehearsed in the problematic attitude to the mother tongue, which can be related to Derrida's concept of the same as an impossible location or habitat: "one never inhabits what one is in the habit of calling inhabiting. There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia."[46] Once it is defined as the mother tongue, one is already distanced from it. If Ní Chuilleanáin has remarked that she writes "English rather as if it were a foreign language into which I am constantly translating,"[47] McGuckian has called English "this other language which basically gets on my nerves," asserting that English and "The whole grammar of it is foreign to me."[48] Elsewhere, she further develops the image of the language as something external and imposed, using a metaphor of deadly weight: "I do feel [...] that all I've had in my education has been shoved onto me, and I'm lying like a corpse under it all."[49] The nostalgia, of course, is as "impossible" as its object since there is no proper, "prior-to-the-first language"[50] besides English, which is described as unnatural.[51] Irish (and the same after all

[45] O'Neill, "Yeats, Clarke, and the Irish Poet" 56.
[46] Derrida, *Monolingualism* 58.
[47] Leslie Williams, "'The Stone Recalls its Quarry': An Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin," *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, ed. Susan Shaw Sailor (Gaineswille: University Press of Florida, 1997) 31. Qtd. in Justin Quinn, "Incoming: Irish Poetry and Translation," *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, eds. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 343.
[48] Kimberly S. Bohman, "Surfacing: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian," *The Irish Review* 16 (Autumn /Winter 1994): 98.
[49] McGuckian in Laura O'Connor, "Comhrá; a conversation with Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill," *Southern Review* 31.3 (June 1995). 20 May 2011 <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/literary-criticism/9508243323/comhra-foreword-afterword-by-laura-oconnor>.
[50] Derrida, *Monolingualism* 61.
[51] See Derrida, *Monolingualism* 58.

applies to English) is not some "lost language of origin," but can only be an ambition or, to quote Derrida once again, "a future language, a promised sentence, a language of the other."[52] Viewed in this light, the distinction between Irish as the language of the dead past and English as the language of the living present is in constant tension and undergoing a perpetual change that are vital parts of the discussed poetics. The ongoing process of identification is felt as desirable in both English and Irish-language poets. As Nic Eoin argues in relation to Ní Dhomhnaill: "In ionad a bheith de shíor sa tóir ar ghrinneall cinnte féiniúlachta, b'fhéidir gur folláine sa deireadh féachaint ar an sealbhú agus ar an athshealbhú cultúir mar thionscnamh cruthaitheach nach mbeidh deireadh go deo leis."[53] (Rather than being constantly in pursuit of the definite location of identity, it is maybe healthier in the end to look at the possession and the repossession of culture as the origin of bottomless creativity.) Both languages are alternately construed as the impossible, unattainable mother tongue that never has been and that is yet/never to come. Transformed – always temporarily – into the language of the Other, however, each becomes the only possible site of one's creativity.

If the works of the feminist poets abound with examples of such blurred oppositions between the mother tongue and the language of the Other, the new poets in both English and in Irish show to even less clear-cut sense of otherness – in terms of linguistic and cultural identification, or in the sense of poetic affiliation.[54] While the impossible memory of the mother tongue and the sense of language as an elusive "literary home" inform their poetics, the nostalgia is no longer connected with the moribund Irish. It takes place instead on the level of the inevitable alienation in language as such which, as Derrida says, "is always of the other – and, by the same token, in all culture."[55] This general notion of the language as something that has yet to be appropriated while it can never be one's own pertains to the

[52] Derrida, *Monolingualism* 62.
[53] Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac* 281.
[54] See Quinn, "Incoming" 345.
[55] Derrida, *Monolingualism* 58.

process of the lyric-"I" formation. According to Mutlu Konuk Blasing, "In poetry, we recognize ourselves in an uncanny return of something long forgotten, our origins in the passage into symbolic language."[56] It is always at the same time the language of the individual and the language of the community and it is this tension that prevents us from inhabiting or appropriating it.[57] But, as Derrida argues, the subject's abstract capacity to say "I" has nothing to do with a stable, pre-existent linguistic identity (which is an impossible concept and can only always exist in performance). There is no language preceding the "I," and they both must be invented at the same time.[58] Such balancing of the speaking "I" on the edge of language informs the new poetry by Irish women. Although it is generally free of the transactions on the border between English and Irish, the poets are aware that they operate on a threshold. As Aifric Mac Aodha writes: "All poetry, and certainly all the poetry that I am interested in, is in part a negotiation between tradition and the individual poet, between a notional authenticity and a living artefact, between fidelity and assertiveness, origins and originality."[59]

Part One of the dissertation explores some of the ways in which contemporary poets have confronted the inherited tradition and the feminine stereotypes therein, mainly through their ironic subversion. I argue that humour lies at the base of the poems' transgressive as well as poetic potential, and examine parallels between these polemics with the iconic figures of the motherland and the Bakhtinian concept of carnival transgression and link them also with Julia Kristeva's idea of poetic language as *jouissance*, based on the Lacanian-Barthesian opposition of *plaisir* (a controlling, homogenizing principle) and *jouissance* as disrupting the structures

[56] Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) 16.
[57] See Derrida, *Monolingualism* 27.
[58] See Derrida, *Monolingualism* 28, 31.
[59] Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse."

and comforts of cultural identification and signification. My argument is that the frequent use of ironic distance and heteroglossia by major feminist poets has substantially contributed to the current state of linguistic emancipation and political non-involvement in Irish poetry by women and men in both English and Irish. Clair Wills notes in relation to McGuckian that feminist poetry "repeatedly stresses women's dispossession and their displaced relation to the land, and therefore also the language – for there is a sexual as well as a racial element to dispossession."[60] Chapter 1 shows how the major women poets of the pioneering generation have overcome this displacement through a mocking revision of the feminine tropes in the masculine canon. The appropriating gesture, directed at both language traditions, frequently combines the language issue with feminist concerns. Chapter 2 explores how women contradict abstract notions of idealized womanhood. Appropriating the viewpoint of the male admirer they reverse the conventional distribution of roles between the speaking subject and the inspiring object. Laughter opens up a new space.

The main part of the thesis explores how women have adapted conventional figures of poetic inspiration and responded to the issues of intra-poetic affiliation. In Chapter 3 I proceed from instances in which women react against the troping of the female muse to the meta-poetic commentaries on the conscious search for poetic identity and authentic expression, as they are achieved through mock paroles, grammatical and contextual ellipsis, and secret writing in general. In their insistence on the essentially elusive character of the speaking "I," the poets document the move of feminist writing from silence and imposed objectivity to assertive subjectivity. I show how that subjectivity is still very much based on silence – construed not as a deficiency but as a benign factor always linked with the possibility of speech. This tendency to salutary silence goes hand in hand with the distancing techniques of self-irony and obliquity – not in the Barthesian sense of mystery as a hidden (theological)

[60] Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 70.

final sense, but in the sense of an acknowledged plurality of meaning, its endless emerging and disappearances. Together with Wills I argue that the coded narratives and fragmented representation are not primarily intended as an escape from the public sphere into a coded private world but that they are ultimately aimed outwards, thus offering points of intersection in which the political and the poetic meet. The same focus on the use of subversive secrecy informs Chapter 4 which interleaves further examples of mocking muse invocations with transactions over the partition between the two main languages of Irish literature. Special attention is paid to the theoretical, as well as practical implications of poetic translation in the works of Ní Dhomhnaill, McGuckian, Boland, Ní Chuilleanáin, and Mac Aodha. In most of the poems discussed, the liminal coincides with a specific mode, a figurative zone which is the site of inspiration – and the heart of the poem's effect.

PART ONE

NEW LANDS FOR NEW WORDS

In the satirizing dissection of the sectarian strife in the north in *Autumn Journal*, Louis MacNeice asks pungently: "Kathleen ni Houlihan! Why / Must a country, like a ship or a car be always female, / Mother or sweetheart? A woman passing by / we did but see her passing."[1] The image of a woman going by is a taunt apparently directed at Yeats's famous playlet and the figuration of Ireland as *Sean-Bhean Bhocht*. The stereotype, however, has far older origins and a broad scope of variations. The allegorical image of Ireland presented as a female figure can be traced back to the early Irish manuscripts and to medieval political writings, including various forms of the sovereignty myth as well as odes composed for Irish lords. Its diverse forms range from the Poor Old Woman figure to the trope of a young beauty – regal or plebeian – representing the provinces of Ireland awaiting the return of the rightful ruler.

Irish poetry, of course, has no exclusive right to the identification of the national with the feminine. As the Indian political philosopher Ashis Nandy has asserted, the history of political colonization can be theorized as a history of feminization while the attempts of a people to regain autonomy have been customarily described and encouraged as a fight for the resumption of "a traditionally masculine role of power."[2] In western cultures, abundant propagandistic use of the metaphor has accompanied the national and literary resurgence

[1] Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) 138.

[2] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). Qtd. in Gerardine Meaney, "Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics," *Irish Women's Studies Reader*, ed. Ailbhe Smyth (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993) 233.

resulting from the romantic plunge into the unknown waters of the vernacular. It has traditionally – and contradictorily – been paraded as a standard on both sides of various political conflicts, representing the subjugated territories as perceived by the invaders while at the same time symbolizing the resistance of the colonized people. This universality of the identification of the feminine with the national has been emphasized by Angela Bourke: "Both pseudoscientific and romantic approaches to folklore depend on a view of colonized and marginalized people as feminine."[3]

But while the trope is supposed to be of Indo-European provenance, in Irish literature it was employed continuously from medieval times, and even served as the ground of a separate poetic genre. By the end of the sixteenth century motifs of the fruitful bond between the ruler and the female figuration of his region began to be problematized by the tightening hold of the colonizers on the lives of Irish lords and by their deforestation and landscape-charting activities. While the landscape and its inhabitants were plagued by the invaders, the conceit of the feminized land was taken over by the post-bardic poets of the seventeenth century and subsequently appropriated by Irish Jacobitism, becoming the symbol of the colonized nation – an image that would pervade Irish political poetry and nationalist resistance for at least the next three hundred years.

The main subgenre of Irish Jacobite verse, the sophisticated, highly ornamental *aisling* (or vision) poetry refers to the subjugated land most often as *an Spéirbhean* (the Sky-Woman), a regal figure of great physical beauty appearing under one of the Celtic appellations of Ireland, such as Éire, Ériu, Banbha or Fódla. In the slightly later development of eighteenth-century Jacobite folk songs, the Sky-Woman was given a body of flesh and blood and a name in the vernacular, such as Síle Ní Ghadhra, Cáit Ní Dhuibhir and later on Rosaleen or Róisín Dubh, or indeed the *Sean-Bhean Bhocht* (the "Poor Old Woman"). Máirín

[3] Angela Bourke, "Reading a Woman's Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland," *Feminist Studies* 21. 3 (1995): 556-68.

Nic Eoin recapitulates the development of the image into a nationalist symbol writing that after the feminine figuration of *aisling* poetry was taken over by the Irish Jacobite song in English,

> [it] was adopted and adapted to give voice to almost every subsequent national movement of significance. [...] The female image becomes a potent element in nationalistic rhetoric through the publications of the Young Ireland movement [...]. Through the translations of Jacobite poetry [...] Caitlín Ní hUallacháin and her contemporaries enter the literature of the Anglo-Irish cultural revival.[4]

By the time the national and literary revival was in full swing at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, poets had mostly abandoned the conventions of Jacobite forms. Still, the woman-image representing all sorts of abstract concepts and ideals remained cherished and abundantly employed. The trope no longer stood for a metaphorical representation of Ireland, but rather it was an emblem of the oppressed Catholic population.[5] As the chief instrument of cultural nationalism, the feminized icon of Ireland became so intrinsically connected with the awareness of national identity that the latter was virtually unthinkable without the first. The motif appears in a great many variations, ranging from the worshipped Mother-Ireland figure and the *aisling* heroine to the *Sean-Bhean Bhocht* or even a slut. Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is perhaps the most famous reworking of the traditional trope of the *Cailleach – Spéirbhean* transformation:

> – Did you see an old woman going down the path?

[4] Máirín Nic Eoin, "Sovereignty and Politics, c. 1300-1900," *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions*, Vol. 4, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 275.
[5] See Nic Eoin, "Sovereignty and Politics" 273.

– I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.[6]

My aim in this section is to focus on some of the ways in which modern and contemporary poets have confronted the allegorical representations of the feminized land and harnessed them to their own polemics with the literary tradition. I will draw attention to the elements of satire and parody that often inform such efforts of transgression. Outlining certain parallels detectable between these ironic approaches and Bakhtinian conceptions of literary transgression and cultural or political transformation, I will also touch upon some aspects in which they can be aligned with Julia Kristeva's notion of poetic language and her use of Lacan's *jouissance*. To limit the scope, I will concentrate mainly on reactions coming from the pens of women, especially in the two penultimate decades of the last century when revisioning of this kind was largely considered to be necessary so that women could take up the threads of the predominantly masculine tradition, even though mocking responses to the trope have been just as prevalent among male poets.[7] What is of special interest to me here is that satirical revisions of old conventions and stereotypes constitute a unifying element reaching not just across the sexual divide but pertaining to poets coming from both of the literary traditions in Ireland.

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[6] William Butler Yeats, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, in *Modern Irish Drama*, ed. J. P. Harrington (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991) 11.

[7] From early on, the conventions of Irish Jacobite verse and the trope of the feminized figuration of the subjugated land were the object of parodies and subversive commentaries. The trend – begun in works such as *An Airc* (*The Ark*), the caustic political satire by the Scottish Jacobite poet Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair, or Brian Merriman's famous satire *Cúirt An Mheán Oíche* – has had its reverberations in the works of a number of modern Irish poets. See also the discussion surrounding Merriman's burlesque variation on the *aisling* which has mostly been read, since the outset of broad-scaled feminist criticism in the 1970s, in terms of empowering women as social figures and speakers and of liberating their sexual desires. For more on the "suggestively indeterminate" effects of Merriman's *Cúirt* and its use by Seamus Heaney in his debate on women, sex and gender in "Orpheus in Ireland," see Patricia Coughlan, "'The Whole Strange Growth': Heaney, Orpheus and Women," *Irish Feminisms: Special Issue of The Irish Review* 35, eds. Moynagh Sullivan and Wanda Balzano (2007): 25-45. For a detailed discussion of the work see Liam P. Ó Murchú, *Merriman: i bhFábhar Béithe* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 2005). For a reaction to the contemporary "masculinist" readings of the text see Máirín de Burca, "Analysis of *The Midnight Court*," *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions*, Vol. 5, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 1588-91.

The momentous upsurge of literary feminism in Ireland between the late 1960s and 1980s, in which female authors of both languages repositioned themselves, in practical terms, from the periphery to the centre of the literary scene, overlapped in part with the burgeoning post-nationalist stream in poetry and criticism. The revisionist dismantling of the traditional tropes of the feminized land and of the subsequent identification of the feminine with the national was not only common to women poets of both of Ireland's main literary languages, but it coincided with the deconstruction of the same kind of stereotypes by poets and critics (male and female) whose motivations came from their deeply felt opposition to the nationalist tone lingering in Irish poetry well into the latter part of the last century. In this way poets of considerably diverse linguistic, religious and political backgrounds would repeatedly reach back into the Irish-language tradition, which can be seen, in this particular context, as a common reference point shared by poets as different in terms of poetics and their stance to the Irish language as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Paul Muldoon, and Máirtín Ó Direáin.

By looking at poets of the English as well as the Irish language and by applying the specific perspective of subversive humour and irony, I will extend the feminist critique of Irish poetry in new ways. While my key argument in the following two chapters is that the successful *poetic* subversion of literary or ideological stereotypes in the poems to which I refer entails the use of the distancing techniques of ironization and parody, the discussion is also relevant to my general thesis that the current trend of the increasing separateness of the literary production in Irish and English does not signify failure, but marks a new stage of salutary emancipation in both traditions. The latter, I believe, is now possible due to a necessary phase in which a number of poets writing in English and Irish concerned themselves in the closing decades of the last century with the language issue and the related critical debate which was marked by the repercussions of the post-colonial attempts to determine the national language of Ireland.

In her breakthrough revisionist study of Northern-Irish poetry, *Improprieties* (1993), Clair Wills pointed out that the nationalist ideal of a single, unifying common language had been futile from the very start, insisting that "the language which can unify the various sections of the community in the island of Ireland must necessarily be one which can accommodate difference."[8] Most of the current theoretical debates on the future of the Irish language as a creative tool are based on the supposition that Irish has been successfully extricated from its role as a token national language and that it might benefit from the growing plurality of Irish society and the changing linguistic context.[9] With reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the heteroglossic forces in language employed to undermine the unitary discourse of ideology, and in view of the increasingly prominent ideal of social diversity towards the turn of the millenium, I wish to propose that the very heterogeneity of the poets I discuss below – provisionally united in their concern for language and their relation to what is sometimes defined as the shared literary past – can be seen as a denial of the concept of a national language based on linguistic uniformity. If literary production in English and Irish appear to have grown further apart, they can also be argued to belong to a space – physical as well as figurative – less marked by division. Paradoxically, this new absence of the almost habitual opposition, identified previously with the areas of gender politics or nationalist and sectarian sentiments, can be understood as the result of an increasing tendency to alterity in the field of literature, as well as in social and state ideology. The growing diversity and consequent opening of Irish society has coincided with the centrifugal endeavours of various poetics to separate the literary languages of Ireland from nationalist conventions and of extricating women from the stereotypical notions of femininity and national identity.

[8] Wills, *Improprieties* 89.

[9] See for example Michael Cronin, *An Ghaeilge san Aois Nua. Irish in the New Century* (Dun Laoghaire: Cois Life, 2005) 49. Cronin lauds the fact that "Irish is no longer locked into an exclusive relationship with English" and outlines its possible positive effects on the status of Irish in the future.

It is the constant reworking of the trope of the feminized land, the *aisling* conventions and the motherland figure adopted by the national revival, all rooted in the traditional genres of Irish-language writing, which feeds my interest in the diverse instances of poets coming in contact – consciously or unwittingly – with the Gaelic tradition. To a number of these poets the liminal space between the two languages, always privately defined, is a source of genuine concern as well as inspiration. Whenever it comes to the fore, the relationship to the mother tongue seems to be marked by controversy. This awareness of an equivocal linguistic background is particularly apparent in the poetry and criticism of Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian and, not least, in the works of the Irish-language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

Most of the female poets who started to publish between the late 1960s and 1980s were drawn in some way or another to the ongoing social and theoretical debate on the possibility or uselessness of defining a national identity and to the related language issue. Yet, there are others, as we shall see further on, for whom, owing to personal choice or experience, such kind of issues have no relevance. Especially some of the younger poets like Caitríona O'Reilly, Sinéad Morrissey, Leontia Flynn, and (in some respects) Aifric Mac Aodha appear to be firmly settled in their own linguistic milieu, writing in the language of the day rather than trying to align their medium with the Irish literary or political past. The common denominator for the poets discussed here is thus first of all their sense of humour and use of satire which shall come up repeatedly throughout the subsequent chapters as well.

In 1995 Peter Sirr argued that "[the] options open to Irish women writers [...] include the absurd, the outspoken, and the crafty use of the borderlands between the two, as also of the borderlands between two languages (Gaelic and English) and between two traditions (male and female) which overlap intriguingly."[10] While this is accurate enough, I hold that by incorporating their liminal position into their poetics, by turning the margins to which they

[10] Peter Sirr, "'How Things Begin to Happen': Notes on Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Medbh McGuckian," *Southern Review* 32.3 (June 1995): 458.

had been historically ascribed into points of interface (not only in terms of the relationship between the languages and the male and the female tradition, but also, for example, in terms of the dichotomy between the private and the public), women have used their marginality as a point of departure, and made it a fundamental part of their feminism, as well as their poetics. Indeed, in an environment progressively defined by pluralism and difference (as noted above), women's alterity (in the sense of the female "otherness") has proved to be a convenient prerequisite. The current decrease in gender- and language-related subject matter in Irish poetry written by female as well as male authors signals emancipated acceptance of the sexual and linguistic Other that has been achieved not least through the use of heteroglossia and ironic distance in Irish women's verse.

1 REVOLUTIONARY LAUGHTER

The criticism of the 1990s repeatedly remarked that the prevalence of the feminine constructs of the country contributed to the exclusion of actual women from the country's historical narratives and literary tradition. Nic Eoin notes that in the political song tradition, the woman "becomes a site of representation on which are projected political yearnings and hopes as well as deep feelings of historical loss and grievance."[1] According to Gerardine Meaney, women are exploited as "guarantors of their men's status, bearers of national honour and the scapegoats of national identity. They are not merely transformed into symbols of the nation; they become the territory over which power is exercised."[2] Referring to the prevalent endeavours of the female poets in the preceding two decades to define themselves against the inherited literary tradition wherein women were mostly represented as objects of desire and emblems of national and cultural identity, Clair Wills argued that for these women "merely to assume the role and function of poet depend[ed] on a certain stance in relation to this trope of the motherland."[3]

The power of the trope in nationalist discourse is conveniently exemplified in the work of Patrick Pearse, one of the heroes of the 1916 Easter Rising, and the first modern poet in the Irish language (albeit largely promoted by himself).[4] Within his slight body of poetry, Pearse evoked the motherland image in numerous, often contrasting, figurations. However diverse is the form this allegorical female figure takes, the single ulterior objective is revolutionary

[1] Nic Eoin, "Sovereignty and Politics" 275.
[2] Gerardine Meaney in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "*An Bhanfhile Sa Traidisiun*: The Woman Poet in the Irish Tradition," *Selected Essays* (Dublin: New Island, 2005) 49.
[3] Wills, *Improprieties* 56-57.
[4] Frank Sewell lists two main reasons for which Pearse can be considered to be the founding father of twentieth-century poetry in Irish: he was the first to write "short lyrical poems of personal feeling," and he was concerned above all with "the contemporary moment and did not tend to write about Irish as a subject in his literary work." See Frank Sewell, "Between Two Languages: Poetry in Irish, English and Irish English," *Cambridge Companion to Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 150.

agitation. While this propagandist tone has provoked a number of later, often female, poets to take Pearse to task, I would suggest that even in Pearse's highly politically engaged texts, there can be detected a strain of ironic detachment, which is perhaps unwitting and stems from the conflict within him between the ambitious poet aware of the need to emancipate Irish writing from old literary models and the devout crusader for the case of Free Ireland, an agitator. Pearse, in his constant negotiating between the two languages, viewed Irish as both the guarantee of a continuous national identity and as the medium of a new, emphatically contemporary literature detached from the old metrical systems. The present discussion of some of his lyrics is therefore motivated not only by the reactions to his use of the motherland stereotype by a number of feminist and post-nationalist poets, but also by what I think are clearly detectable moments of heteroglossia in his poetry.

In one of his best known poems, "Fornocht do chonac thú" (Naked I Saw Thee),[5] Pearse, obviously in dialogue with Aodhagán Ó Rathaille's famous *aisling* "Gile na Gile," shuns the beautiful, inspiring vision in favour of revolutionary resolution:

Fornocht do chonac thú	Naked I saw thee,
A áille na háille,	O beauty of beauty,
Is do dhallas mo shúil	And I blinded my eyes
Ar eagla go stánfainn.	For fear I should fail.
[...]	[...]
Do thugas mo chúl	I turned my back

[5] Patrick Pearse, "Fornocht do chonac thú" (Naked I Saw Thee), trans. Patrick Pearse, *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions*, Vol. 4, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 291.

Ar an aisling do chumas,	On the vision I had shaped,
’S ar an ród seo romham	And to this road before me
M’aghaidh do thugas.	I turned my face.

Rejecting his muse-figure, Pearse makes as if to subvert the entire *aisling* tradition in which the welfare of the country is placed in the hands of a ruler who is continually ascending or absent, and offers to take action on her behalf. Yet, the prevailing tone of the poem – especially as the poet-persona expresses his resolve to face up “To the deed that I see / And the death I shall die” (Ar an ngníomh do-chím, / ’S ar an mbás do-gheobhad) – is that of melancholy resignation rather than that of defiant eagerness for military action. One could argue that the melancholy stems not so much from fear for one’s own life as from the nostalgia for a literary trope to which generations of poets had been faithful and that is now to be discarded as anachronistic. As Nic Eoin has it, “Pearse [...] gives subtle expression to the emotional pain involved in rejecting the aesthetic allure of the *aisling* tradition, in favour of the concrete reality of military rebellion.”[6]

In another touchingly prescient lyric, “The Mother” written originally in English, we encounter a persona uttering a personal lament for her two sons who have gone out to die “In [a] bloody protest for a glorious thing.” Admitting to being “weary, weary / Of the long sorrow,” she gathers herself in the end to speak in a more appropriate tone: “And yet I have my joy: / My sons were faithful, and they fought.”[7] I would argue that while serving as one of the best examples of the tension detectable elsewhere in Pearse between the demands of poetic language and language as an instrument of political propaganda, this particular shift of tone resulting in the platitudinous exclamation at the close of the poem testifies to the

[6] Nic Eoin, “Sovereignty and Politics” 275.

[7] Pearse, “The Mother,” *The Literary Writings of Patrick Pearse. Writings in English*, ed. Séamas Ó Buachalla (Dublin and Cork: The Mercier Press, 1979) 27.

triumphal strength of the motherland trope. Through its corrective commentary on the preceding lines that express the mother's private suffering, the phrase illustrates the common situation, mentioned above, in which the literary tropes of the feminized nation supplant the lived experience of women.

With regard to the general tendency in contemporary women poets to address the repeated identification of land as woman, Wills suggests that any attempts to define a personal relation to the Mother-Ireland trope are in fact "a contradiction in terms."[8] Referring to the interdependence of the notion of privacy, specified as the domestic, and the public image of femininity, closely related to questions of national identity, Wills argues that the domestic has "a legal as well as poetic expression."[9] The legal formulation of the woman's sphere of activity as domestic (codified as such in De Valera's constitution of the Irish Free State) is seen as confirming both the personal dimension and the public character of the domestic space.[10]

The incoherent tone apparent in Pearse's poem testifies, in my view, not only to the prevalence of the literary and nationalist stereotypes, but to the general ambiguity of the societally defined concept of domesticity identified by Wills. The personal grief of "The Mother" – most convincing when the persona bemoans the gloomy emptiness of her house, preparing to spend the long nights remembering "The little names that were familiar once / Round my dead hearth" – contrasts sharply with the jingoistic phrase at the poem's close. Yet, even though with respect to the prevailing tone of the lyric the forced optimism of the closing statement might seem inapposite, I suggest it is the true purpose behind the poem and the source of its (unintended) irony. As its result, the persona can hardly be read otherwise than as a Mother-Ireland allegory, an insatiate *Sean-Bhean Bhocht* making excuses for not feeling

[8] Wills, *Improprieties* 60.
[9] Wills, *Improprieties* 60.
[10] See Wills, *Improprieties* 60.

desolate at the death of the young men who fought in her name. In this way, Pearse may be seen as unwittingly commenting on the tension between the private and the public dimension of the domestic, as emblematized in the motherland trope. As Belinda Loftus argues, the persisting authority of the motherland images

> derives not from their stereotypical nature but from their transgressive potential: These figures are fascinating and fearful not only because of the roles they play, or their political and religious symbolism, but because they combine the public and the private. They are not clear and clear-cut, but dangerous, dirty boundary figures.[11]

An ironic confusion of the domestic and the public with regard to Irish mothers informs "Imperial Measure"[12] by Vona Groarke. As if in answer to Pearse's mother/land persona Groarke prefixes this – for her – rare commentary on Irish political history with a quote from a letter which Pearse wrote to his own mother during the occupation of the GPO at Easter 1916: "We have plenty of the best food, all the meals being as good as if served in a hotel. The dining-room here is very comfortable." The poem itself reads as a map of the risen Dublin. As on a guided tour, we are taken to different parts of the battlefield, each stanza letting us peek into one of the strongholds of the rebels, displaying mainly the qualities of their food supplies – for what could have been of more importance to a mother of an insurgent son than to know if he had enough to eat? The gastronomic lists create oddly lush, naturalistic images of fighting, suggesting in their sum that "Irish stew" might actually be meant as a sarcastic metaphor for the Rising:

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[11] Belinda Loftus, *Mirrors, William III and Mother Ireland* (Dundrum: Picture Press, 1990) 86. Qtd. in Wills, *Improprieties* 50.

[12] Vona Groarke, "Imperial Measure," *Flight* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2002) 63-65.

The kitchens of the Metropole and Imperial hotels yielded up to the Irish Republic
their armory of fillet, brisket, flank. Though destined for more palatable tongues,
it was pressed to service in an Irish stew and served on fine bone china
with bread that turned to powder in their mouths. Brioche, artichokes, tomatoes
tasted for the first time: staunch and sweet on Monday, but by Thursday,
they had overstretched to spill their livid plenitude on the fires of Sackville Street.

The most explicit expression of the motherland trope in Pearse's poetic output is to be found in another of his frequently quoted texts, "Mise Éire" (I am Ireland),[13] in which the mythological glory of the old Celtic order is invoked and contrasted with the sad reality of a colonized state.

Mise Éire;	I am Ireland:
Sine mé ná an Chailleach Bhéarra	I am older than the Old Woman of Beare.
Mór mo ghlóir;	Great my glory:
Mé a rug Cú Chulainn cróga.	I that bore Cuchulainn the valiant.
Mór mo náir;	Great my shame:
Mo chlann féin a dhíol a máthair.	My own children that sold their mother.
Mise Éire;	I am Ireland:
Uaigní mé ná an Chailleach Bhéarra.	I am lonelier than the Old Woman of Beare.

However, instead of evoking pity, the maternal personification of Ireland sounds merely like a whine as she stubbornly boasts about her primacy over the Celtic sovereignty figure. While

[13] Pearse, "Mise Éire" (I am Ireland), *CELT*, University College Cork. 20 May 2010 <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E950004-015/index.html>.

the old Hag of Beare once protested that she was no king's but the poet's lover,[14] here she is rejected by the poet in a self-conscious gesture, the poem turning into an apologia of the newer – whatever her braggart claims – trope. In the light of this, it is the renunciation of an old, traditional literary figure in the name of agitation for political autonomy and "nationality" which can be named – not unlike in the case of "Fornocht do chonac thú" – as the true source of melancholy.

Pearse's incorporeal, self-pitying persona has been answered by Eavan Boland in a homonymous poem ("Mise Eire"),[15] included in *The Journey* (1987). In her version, which is one of the better-known examples of Boland's persistent deconstruction of the feminized icons of the land, the speaker – a destitute young mother forced to emigrate and possibly also into prostitution – insists with tenacity that she is "the *woman*" (emphasis added) where Pearse's representation would perfunctorily repeat "Mise Éire." She may be nameless, but she is no impersonal symbol of the nation. In unison with her author she declares: "I won't go back to it – / my nation displaced / into old dactyls."[16] Nationalistic sentiment is a notion fit for poetry and songs; it may amount to a few nostalgic memories, but it will not warm or feed her "half-dead" baby. Crouching in her thin coat on board the ship, watching the coastline of Ireland blend with the horizon, she repudiates her nationality preparing for her new immigrant life:

> a new language
> is a kind of scar
> and heals after a while
> into a passable imitation

[14] See "The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare," in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, ed. Donnchadh Ó Corrain (Maynooth, 1989) 308-31.
[15] Eavan Boland, "Mise Eire," *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006) 128.
[16] See Lia Mills, "'I Won't Go Back to It': Irish Women Poets and the Iconic Feminine," *Feminist Review*, 50 (1995): 69-88.

of what went before.

As Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has remarked, Boland ridicules the aggrieved whimpering of Pearse's childless mother/land in showing exactly "what it [is] like to be the bought and sold woman of a captive nation."[17] Justin Quinn detects an even more anti-Pearsean jab in the poem: in having the speaker turn her back on her Irishness, Boland "is insistent that her reclamation of the nation does not repeat the violent nationalism of her forebears": by declaring "I won't go back to it," she means "the patterns of nationalist poetry that led to the blood sacrifices of the likes of Pearse."[18]

But Boland, discarding the "old dactyls" of her predecessors, can be also seen as mimicking Pearse's revisionist gestures in "Fornocht do chonac thú" and "Mise Éire." Indeed, as she rarely keeps to a single point in her sweeping attempts to make up for the historical silence of women, she often appears to want to touch upon as many items on her agenda as possible within a poem.[19] Like in the two poems by Pearse, the gesture of defiant refusal on the part of Boland's persona in "Mise Éire" is tempered by a sense of regret. In the closing stanza (quoted above), a hint of patriotic nostalgia seeps in through the mention of the native tongue of the persona. The metaphor of a scar or unhealed wound standing for the loss of "Irishness" as emblematized by the loss of the Irish language comes up again and again in Boland's work. This identification of national identity with national language points to Pearse and his famous pamphlet on the linguistic aspects of the growing Irish consciousness in *An*

[17] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 179.

[18] Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 164.

[19] For more on Boland's iconoclastic endeavour – and various critical reactions – see for instance Edna Longley who asserts that Boland "destabilizes *Mise* but not *Éire*," and that she "holds to unitary assumptions about 'a society,' 'a nation,' a 'literary heritage'," Edna Longley in A. J. Auge, "Eavan Boland's Poetry of Nationality," *New Hibernia Review* 8.2 (2004):121-41; David Wheatley, "Changing the Story: Eavan Boland and Literary History," *The Irish Review* 31 (Spring/Summer 2004): 104-120; Brian Henry who sees Boland as "using the power of poetry to objectify other women while empowering herself" (Brian Henry, "The Woman as Icon, The Woman as Poet," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 36.1 [1997]: 200); and Clair Wills, in whose view Boland "does not so much represent female experience as trope it" (Wills, *Improprieties* 60).

Claidheamh Soluis wherein he argues that "The people which would give up its language in exchange for political autonomy would be like the prisoner who would sell his soul to the Evil One that he might be freed from his bodily chains."[20] In the last stanza the persona of Boland's poem faces a similar dilemma. The speaker envisages future exile as no more than physical liberty: devoid of the protective shield of the mother tongue and clearly defined nationality, the new life abroad will be but an "imitation / of what went before." In this way, the closing stanza calls in question the persona's opening gesture of disavowal of her "nation displaced / into old dactyls."

One is tempted to speculate that Boland, who has made her guilty stance towards the Irish language one of her recurrent themes, might be commenting on her own work and its standing in relation to the Gaelic-Irish tradition, and her failure to master the language. This is conveniently illustrated for instance in "Witness" in the "Colony" sequence in *The Lost Land* [1998] where the poet helplessly admits that "Out of my mouth they come. / The spurred and booted garrisons. / The men and women / they dispossessed."[21]

Satirizing of the standardized tropes of the literary tradition and undermining of the nationalistic rhetoric are indeed features prevalent in modern Irish poetry in both languages. Another well-known example of a reaction to Pearse's bartered Mother-Ireland icon is "Éire ina bhfuil Romhainn" (To Ireland in the Coming Times)[22] by Máirtín Ó Direáin whose 1942 collection *Coinnle Geala* marked the beginning of a new, truly modern era in Irish-language poetry. Ó Direáin's Caitlín Ní hUallacháin figure is a greedy slut, ready to sell her body "ag gach bodach anall" (to each foreign lout) and unfaithful to her honourable, heroic suitors. Notably, and most alarmingly, Pearse is among those she is disloyal to, and he is presented as

[20] Pearse in *An Claidheamh Soluis.* Qtd. in Frederick Ryan, "On Language and Political Ideas," *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. 2, gen. ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day Co., 1991) 1000.
[21] Boland, "Witness," *New Collected Poems* 247.
[22] Máirtín Ó Direáin, "Éire ina bhfuil Romhainn" (To Ireland in the Coming Times), trans. Tomás Mac Síomóin and Douglas Sealy, *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta* (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1992) 96-97.

a martyr for an ungrateful Éire. In the light of the hard, calculating reality of the capitalist state, Pearse's sacrifice and the old-world ideals of glory and heroism are made to appear not only as futile, but as pitifully ridiculous:

Má shíl gur shaor tú ón iomad náire	If he thought he'd freed you from too much shame,
Nach cuma, óir ní raibh ann ach fear saonta	What odds! He was only a simple fellow,
Is file laochta nár cruinníodh leis stór,	A poet-hero who had nothing saved
Is nár fhág ina dhiaidh ach glóir […]	And nothing to bequeath but glory […]

The promiscuity of Ó Direáin's "Éire" makes her akin to Paul Muldoon's "Aisling,"[23] a poem in which a nocturnal apparition leaves the speaker in fear of a sexually transmitted disease. Typically of Muldoon, the poem contains discontinuous, centrifugal tendencies that break away from the logos suggested in the poem's title:

> Was she Aurora, or the goddess Flora,
> Artemidora, or Venus bright,
> or Anorexia, who left
> a lemon stain on my flannel sheet?
>
> It's all much of a muchness.

The visual centre of Muldoon's poem falls fittingly onto a parodying variation on Ó Rathaille's "Gile na Gile": the irony carried in the nonsensical phrase provides a turning

[23] Paul Muldoon, "Aisling," *Poems 1968-1998* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001) 126.

point through which the speaker slips out of the embrace of his dubious, anachronistic guest into a shameful, prosaic awakening. The poem is a mock-*aisling* jeering at the standard imagery and phraseology of the genre, as well as a caustic critique of nationalist humbug with its hollow excitements and senseless heroism, and their painful repercussions in the current developments in Northern Ireland: "In Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital / a kidney machine / supports the latest hunger-striker / to have called off his fast." Juxtaposing the girl's supposed anorexia with a hunger-striker's waning strength it suggests that, as Edna Longley puts it, "the Nationalist dream may have declined into a destructive neurosis."[24]

Yeats's handling of the Mother-Ireland stereotype in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, recalled with sarcasm by MacNeice, has provided a trigger for the anti-nationalist wrath of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill who has protested that Yeats's metamorphosing image "galvanized a whole population at the beginning of [the last] century, and is still shockingly alive in the collective psyche."[25] Striving to free women from the yoke of the antiquated motherland image, Ní Dhomhnaill uses her own poems to overturn masculinist tendencies prevailing in the canon. On multiple occasions, she has amused herself by reaching back into the patriotic tradition, mocking images through ironic juxtaposition. Indeed, few of the sexist clichés in poetry by male authors ranging from Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin and Aogán Ó Rathaille to Pearse or Yeats have escaped her voracious, caustic attention. In "Caitlín,"[26] the speaker remembers with benign irony the good old days of Cathleen Ni Houlihan:

> Díreach toisc go raibh sí an-mhór ina *vamp*

[24] Edna Longley, *From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1990) 3. Qtd. in Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006) 160.
[25] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 48.
[26] Ní Dhomhnaill, "Caitlín," *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry, 1967-2000*, ed. Peggy O'Brien (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1999) 169.

thiar ins na fichidí, is gur dhamhas sí an Searlastan
le tonntracha méiríneacha ina gruaig dhualach thrilseánach;
gur phabhasae gléigeal í thiar i naoi déag sé déag,
go bhfachthas fornocht i gConnachta í, mar áille na háille,
is ag taisteal bhóithre na Mumhan, mar ghile na gile;
[...]
ní théann aon stad uirthi ach ag maíomh
as na seanlaethanta [...]

Just because she was such a vamp
back in the twenties and since she danced the Charleston
with fluted waves in her curly braided hair,
just because she was a pure bright posy in nineteen sixteen
and since they saw her naked in Connacht, she the beauty of beauty,
and travelling the roads of Munster, she the brightest of the bright,
[...]
she never stops boasting
about the good old days...

The contagious device from Ó Rathaille's "Gile na Gile" makes itself manifest once again. The parody of Ó Rathaille's phrasing, however, merely serves to set the satirical context, the real sarcasm being saved for the rest of the poem which stands a mocking catalogue of some later moments in the military campaign against the British, including the infamous British Reserve Force (known in the early 1920s as the Black and Tans), or the fervent heroism of the 1916 Easter Rising. The glory of Caitlín – however pathetic it used to be – belongs

irretrievably to the past: “is fiú dá mba dhóigh le gach spreasán an uair úd / go mba leannán aige féin í, go bhfuil na leathanta san thart” (even if every slubberdegullion once had a dream-vision / in which she appeared as his own true lover, / those days are just as truly over).[27]

While in “Caitlín” we have encountered Ní Dhomhnaill poking into a corpse, ridiculing a harmless, outmoded emblem, elsewhere, like in “Cailleach” (Hag),[28] the trope still retains the power to frighten new generations. The *aisling* becomes a nightmare when the vision transforms into a spectre of the Self:

Taibríodh dom gur mé an talamh,	Once I dreamt I was the earth,
[...]	[...]
mo dhroma is go raibh an fharraige	that the sea was lapping
ag líric mo dhá throigh	the twin rocks of my feet,
ag dhá charraig sin na Páirce,	the twin rocks of Parkmore
Rinn Dá Bhárc na Fiannaíochta.	from the old Fenian tales.

The dream is so vivid that in the morning the speaker finds herself inspecting her feet “féachaint an raibh, / de sheans, mo dhá chois fliuch” (to see if, / perchance, my feet were still wet). She soon forgets all about her dream-vision until her daughter’s terror brings it up again years later. Like a classic “final girl” in a horror film, the child comes running to her mother, crying:

[27] Ní Dhomhnaill, “Caitlín,” trans. Paul Muldoon, *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women’s Poetry, 1967-2000*, ed. Peggy O’Brien (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1999) 169-70.
[28] Ní Dhomhnaill, “Cailleach” (Hag), trans. John Montague, *Pharaoh’s Daughter* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1990) 134-5.

Ó, a Mhaim, táim scemhlithe.	O, Mam, I'm scared stiff,
Tuigeadh dom go raibh na cnoic ag bogadaíl,	I thought I saw the mountain heaving
gur fathach mná a bhí ag luascadh a cíocha,	like a giantess, with her breasts swaying,
is go n-éirodh sí aniar agus mise d'íosfadh.	about to loom over, and gobble me up.

The good old days of Cathleen Ni Houlihan as a beauty icon may be "truly over," but the archetype of the *Cailleach* has been carried over to this day (notwithstanding Pearse's genuine attempt). In her essay "Mis and Dubh Ruis: A Parable of Psychic Transformation," Ní Dhomhnaill speculates why it should be "the Negative Mother Archetype rather than another form of the Goddess that describes the underlying psychic reality"[29] of Ireland. Skipping her oft-repeated theme of the inherent male bias of the "intellectualized" English, she reaches further back to look for an answer in the pre-Christian times of Celtic Ireland suggesting that the Celts and their tendency towards the cerebral forced them apart from what the French feminists would have as the "language of the body":[30] repressed into the depths of the psyche, the feminine then breaks through in the shape of the negative image.

Yet, Ní Dhomhnaill has devised her own ways of dealing with the perennial negative image, based on appropriation. One lies in introducing a male counterpart, like for instance in her sarcastic address of "Musculus Giganticus Hibernicus"[31] in which the subversive iconoclastic humour encompasses also the figure of the feminized land:

> Iarsma contúirteach ón Aois Iarainn,
> suíonn tú i bpubanna is beartaíonn
> plean gníomhaíochta an fhill

[29] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 84.
[30] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 85.
[31] Ní Dhomhnaill, "Musculus Giganticus Hibernicus," trans. Michael Hartnett, *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1989) 78-79.

ná fhilleann,

ruathar díoltais ar an bhfearann baineann.

Dangerous relic from the Iron Age

you sit in pubs and devise

the treacherous plan

that does not recoil on you –

a vengeful incursion to female land.

The punning contradiction contained in the phrase “fearann baineann” inevitably gets lost in translation into English. *Fearann* is a masculine noun based on a root homonymous with the noun *fear* (“man”). In juxtaposing it with the similarly structured adjective *baineann* (composed of the stem *bean* – woman – and the homographic suffix -ann) Ní Dhomhnaill manages in a single move not only to challenge the standardized troping of the land as feminine, but to further ridicule the ostentatious masculinity of her object, as well as to bring in, with irony, the linguistic aspect of the English colonization of Ireland. On one level the phrase points derisively to the ignorant lustfulness of the usurper who imagines himself to live on “the furze / or the heather that grows / on a young girl’s sunny slopes” (Tiocfá suas ar aiteann / nó ar an bhfraoch a fhásann / ar leirgí grianmhara mná óige). On another level this bullying “Trodaire na dtriúch, fear beartaithe na miodóige” (Country lout, knife thrower) with his undifferentiating arrogation recalls the “spurred and booted garrisons” pouring out of the mouth of Boland’s female “Witness.” As we shall see, Ní Dhomhnaill frequently combines the language issue with feminist concerns.

Ní Dhomhnaill’s next target is as much the *Cailleach* as this symbol of patriarchy. As a native speaker of English, Ní Dhomhnaill has engaged in repeated public defence of her

linguistic choice. While her advocacy of Irish as the proper language for poetry (she writes exclusively in Irish, but most of her critical writing is in English, which she presents accordingly as a tool more suitable for analysis) has served to support its public image as a living, available medium,[32] her use of the language in promoting her feminist concerns has produced its own ironic contradictions. Contrasting English, "intellectualized out of experience,"[33] with the eternal feminine emblematized by the Irish language, Ní Dhomhnaill suggests that through writing in Irish women have a chance to free themselves from patriarchal patterns of thought. While railing against the repeated exploitation of the female body as "female land" or mother-land, she has inflected the concept of the mother language to serve her own (twofold) political purpose. Elaborating on the distinction between the "poetic" Irish and "analytical" English, she reveals her idea of the positive potential of the Negative Mother Archetype which is seen as embedded in the Irish language. Because she thinks that Irish has not been "patriarchalized," she considers "many things, including this idea of a deeper quality, this negative femininity, this hag energy, which is so painful to mankind," as part of "our consciousness, [unlike] in most cultures." According to her, Irish is "the language of the Mothers, because everything that has been done to women, has been done to Irish."[34]

However far-fetched some of her argumentation, it needs to be admitted that in the privatization of the "hag energy" Ní Dhomhnaill shrewdly combines her two main subversive goals: to oppose the subjection of women by patriarchy and to thematize the minority status of Irish. In doing this, however, she risks succumbing to the lure of the eternal feminine and of contributing to another kind of stereotyping. As Clair Wills notes, there is a danger "more or less present in all these writers, that they will simply replace a passive female figure waiting

[32] See Mary O'Connor, "Lashings of the Mother Tongue: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Anarchic Laughter," *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers*, ed. Theresa O'Connor (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996) 151.

[33] Ní Dhomhnaill in M. O'Connor 152.

[34] Rebecca Wilson, "Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill," *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*, eds. Gillean Sommerville-Arjat and Rebecca E. Wilson (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990) 154. Qtd. in M. O'Connor 152.

for her sons to fight for her with a sexually, but not politically, active earth mother, again dependent on her sons for a link with actual history."[35] In the following pages I will attend to some of the ways in which Ní Dhomhnaill and others avoid this danger by using the subversive force of laughter and irony. Various forms of carnival iconoclasm are apparent not only in the adoption of the metaphor of "woman-as-topography,"[36] making it above all a political gesture, but also in the appropriation of the role of sexually active, and (in most cases) no less politically conscious, persona.

[35] Wills, *Improprieties* 54.
[36] Wills, *Improprieties* 69.

2 IRONIC INVERSIONS

The increasing prominence of women in Irish poetry was closely linked with two phenomena: first, the dismantling of iconic figures of the motherland, and second, the polemics with the ideal of the inspiring female Other, still detectable in poetry by men in the second half of the last century.[1] The latter was largely achieved through the reversal of the sexual polarity in the poet-muse relationship. My purpose here is to re-examine some of the instances of this kind of revisionist writing through the prism of ironic distance. Yet, not all poems which employ humour and heteroglossia are successful as acts of revision or as literary artefacts. If Bakhtin argues that it is only through a literary text that the festive forms of popular carnival can achieve what he calls "the self-awareness necessary for effective protest,"[2] then theories of feminist writing must approach their subject of study both as literature and as social and political intervention. While it is now a commonplace that deconstruction of nationalist icons and abstract notions of femininity was a necessary step in women's poetic emancipation, I argue that the transgression was most effective when the criteria of subversive humour and literary quality combined, mutually facilitating each other.

One of Ní Dhomhnaill's self-proclaimed tactics in dealing with the symbolic association of the feminine with national and geographic identity has been to overturn the

[1] Patricia Coughlan, for instance, identifies the tendency in men to harness the feminine principle as "a main motivating force" discernible even in poetry written around the time literary feminism was in full swing in Ireland. In Coughlan's view, the reliance on stereotyped female objects is doubly conspicuous in Montague and Heaney who both engaged in defending the case of another historically underprivileged section of the population, the Northern Catholics. See Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens': The Representations of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney," *Theorizing Ireland*, ed. Claire Connolly (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 41-61.

[2] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Islowsky (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1968) 73. Bakhtin's theory was primarily and exclusively based on the language of the prose. However, its relevance to poetic language has been claimed by a number of scholars. See for example *Dialogism and Lyric Self-fashioning: Bakhtin and the Voices of a Genre*, ed. Jacob Blevins (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2008) which aims to open the language of lyric poetry to analysis based on Bakhtinian

body-landscape trope, representing the land alternatively as a male body. The strategy is apparent even in love lyrics such as "Oileán" (Island):[3]

Oileán is ea do chorp	Your body an island
i lár na mara móire.	in the great ocean.
Tá do ghéaga spréite ar bhraillín	Your limbs spread
gléigeal os farraige faoilleán.	on a bright sheet
	over a sea of gulls.

The reversal of roles is most explicit in the closing lines of the poem where the persona dreams of approaching the spread-eagled body of her nude male object "mar a luíonn tú / uaigneach, iathghlas / oileánach" (where you lie / solitary, emerald, / insular). The choice of the middle modifier, referring to the "green-meadowed," "emerald"[4] island of Ireland, suggests parody of the fetishizing of the national colour.

Of course, in poems such as Ní Dhomhnaill's "Oileán," in which a personified landscape, invoked through and merged with the body of the beloved, is approached outright in the vocative, the outcome is often (intentionally and ironically) inconclusive in terms of the addressee's sex. We can therefore only presume that Ní Dhomhnaill's object is male, depending in the deduction on our knowledge of context outside the particular poem. A similar problem is posed, for instance, by Cathal Ó Searcaigh's "Cor Úr" (Fresh Turn)[5] which is an invocation of the poet's native landscape in Donegal as a lover and muse. The opening is in keeping with the conventions of an amorous dream vision: "Ciúnaíonn tú

dialogism through subverting the generally accepted notion of lyric voice, formulated famously by T.S. Eliot as the meditative voice of the poet talking to himself.

[3] Ní Dhomhnaill, "Oileán" (Island), trans. Michael Hartnett, *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta* 70-71.

[4] See Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Gúm, 2005).

[5] Cathal Ó Searcaigh, "Cor Úr" (A Fresh Dimension), trans. Gabriel Fitzmaurice, *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*, ed. David Pearce (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000) 1183.

chugam as ceo na maidine / mus na raideoige ar d'fhallaing fraoigh" (You come to me calmly from the morning mist, / your heather cloak scented with myrtle). The outline of a beautiful landscape as a seducing body is invigorated by a delightful punning on place-names (mostly invented) evoking various bodily parts and personal attributes: "ó Log Dhroim na Gréine go hAlt na hUillinne / ón Mhalaidh Rua do Mín na hUchta."

Playing on figures of the bardic odes and the tropes of the sovereignty myth, Ó Searcaigh seems to be going through the topographical anatomy in order to remind himself of its attraction and to ask the landscape for creative inspiration. "Ó ná ceadaigh domh imeacht arís ar fán: / clutharaigh anseo mé idir chabhsaí geala do chos, / deonaigh cor úr a chur i mo dhán." (Don't let me become a wanderer again: / shelter me between the white dams of your legs, / grant my poem a fresh turn). Yet, considering the emotive charge of the lines, and Ó Searcaigh's acknowledged, much publicized homosexuality, it is possible to discern an underlying objective which is not so far removed from Boland's proclaimed goals and Ní Dhomhnaill's achievements: that of replacing the atrophied icon with a living figure of flesh and bones.

In "Ag Tiomáint Siar" (Driving West),[6] which Máirín Nic Eoin terms "a most conscious act of pursuit and reworking" on Ní Dhomhnaill's part,[7] Ní Dhomhnaill likewise describes the landscape of her childhood as sustaining her spirit and imagination: "Tá an Chonair gafa agam míle uair / má tá sé gafa aon uair amháin agam. / Fós cloisim scéalta nua uaidh gach uile uair" (I've crossed the Conor Pass a thousand times / if I've gone once, yet each time it unveils / new stories). Unlike Ó Searcaigh in his supplication of the Muse-Country in "Cor Úr," however, the poem's speaker merely has to sit back in her car-seat and let the familiar landscape ingratiate itself with her:

[6] Ní Dhomhnaill, "Ag Tiomáint Siar" (Driving West), trans. Michael Cody, *Pharaoh's Daughter* 132-3.

Labhrann gach cúinne den leathinis seo liom
ina teanga féinig, teanga a thuigim.
Ní lúb de choill ná cor de bhóthar
nach bhfuil ag suirí liom,
ag cogarnaíl is ag sioscarnaigh.

Every nook of this peninsula can speak to me
in its own tongue, in words I understand.
There's not one twist of road or little grove
that can't insinuate its whispered courtship at my ear.

This is a man's country accessed through places like An Chonair (Conor Pass), Loch Geal and Cnocán Éagóir:

Is ar mo dheis tá Cnocán Éagóir
mar a maraíodh tráth de réir an scéil
"seacht grad Seán gan féasóg,"
is na Sasanaigh ag máriseáil ar Dhún an Óir.

And there's Cnocán Éagóir, still peopled
by a tale of *seven hundred beardless Seáns*
butchered as the English
marched on Dún an Óir.

[7] Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac* 266.

As the poem, and the drive, draws to its close, however, the undertone of nationalist pathos suggested in the mention of the bloody sacrifices of a late-16th-century rebellion against English rule is promptly checked by the centrifugal power of a fragment of a phrase which, unlooked-for and conspicuously out of register, comes back to the speaker, sending her down the hill from her daydreaming heights:

As an gceo	Out of the mist
nochtan leathabairt díchéillí a ceann –	a jingle swims nonsensically –
“nóiníní bána agus cac capaill”.	*little white daisies and horse-dung*.
Scuabann a giodam rithimiúil	It sends me lilting on my way
síos isteach ’on Daingean mé.	and sweeps me down to Dingle.

In all its unexpectedness and seeming irrelevance the line reads best as the core of the poem; the persona’s detached perspective is the important bounty of her westbound journey.

Indeed, it is a journey to the west as much as it is a journey back (“siar” having both equivalents): a homecoming and a quest for identity. Born in Lancashire, England, Ní Dhomhnaill spent part of her childhood in the Kerry Gaeltacht. Corca Dhuibhne is where she became fluent in Irish and interested in its narrative powers; it is thus her poetic birthplace. As such it is also the original source of one of the distinct features of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetics – the inseparability of her sense of place and her preoccupation with language. If “Driving West” is an act of “pursuit,” what is being pursued is a claim to one’s soil through celebration in language. Moreover, as an act of “reworking,” it is a conscious attempt to revise the ways in which such things would have been celebrated, an appropriation (also by means of ironic

laughter) of the toponymic tradition of *dinnsheanchas* (commonly, and reductively, rendered as "lore of places").[8]

As Oona Frawley writes, Ní Dhomhnaill "is convinced of the need to root poetry in local lore."[9] Yet, in one of her essays dealing with "*Dinnsheanchas*" as "The Naming of High and Holy Places," the poet warns against an uncritical assimilation of the tradition. Outlining the etymology of its name, she argues that both parts of the compound – "*dinn*" (with its connotations of "spike or a point," "a mountain, hill or hillock" or "an eminent, notable place") and "*seanchas*" (encompassing in its original meaning the various forms of knowledge in the Gaelic world but complicated by its association with "folklore" and the nineteenth-century construct of "national history") – are related to "[the] numinosity of place and the values of blood and soil which are fundamental tenets of cultural nationalism."[10] Considering Ní Dhomhnaill's stance to cultural nationalism which, as she points out elsewhere, "can very easily turn into a deeply fascist, sectarian and sexist movement, as happened in Ireland in the twentieth century,"[11] "Ag Tiomáint Siar" – and especially the "giodam rithimiúil" (rhythmical giddiness) of "nóiníní bána agus cac capaill" – can be taken as a manifesto, or a summary of the poet's subversive attempt to take over the practice of literary writing about Ireland.

This claim involves not only the traditional iconography of the feminized land but also the tradition of *dinnsheanchas* in which Ireland has, from at least the ninth century onwards, been translated into stories, or in other words encoded in narratives of tribal male power and deeds of conquest.[12] With reference to the play on grammatical gender in "fearann baineann" in "Musculus Giganticus Hibernicus" it is worth pointing out that *leithinis* is a feminine noun. Inscribed with public actions of men and place-names monumentalizing their authority, the

[8] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 25.
[9] Oona Frawley, "Introduction" in Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 7.
[10] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 25-26.
[11] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 57-58.

peninsula, presented at first as a men's country, is accessed through this gesture of ironic detachment which serves to Ní Dhomhnaill as a channel for her private as well as poetic homecoming, and as the true source of her initial sense of comprehending unity with the land, whose "Every nook [...] can speak to me / in its own tongue, in words I understand." If the large body of preserved *dinnsheanchas* and their continuation in the collective memory of the Irish-speaking communities in the west of Ireland show, according to Ní Dhomhnaill, that the landscape itself "contains memory, and can point to the existence of a world beyond this one,"[13] she also indicates that that memory does not always need to be stained with blood and linked with sacrifice.

Talking about what she perceives as Ní Dhomhnaill's authentic relationship to nature, the Belfast poet Medbh McGuckian has remarked that to her, Ní Dhomhnaill was "the only poet in the world, except for Tsvetaeva [who had] the same dynamism and the same feeling of being at one with the world."[14] While this is in accord with Ní Dhomhnaill's self-avowed appreciation of landscape imbued with narrative as a "lived dimension of life" that she has found "enormously rewarding and enriching,"[15] it points to McGuckian's more complicated relation to her own (urban) landscape, conveniently illustrated in an early poem, "The Soil Map."[16] In *Improprieties*, Clair Wills terms "The Soil Map" the poet's "most direct reworking of the association between woman and land."[17] Yet, as I would like to show, McGuckian offers a different, less straightforward reversal of the sexual polarity than we have seen in Ní Dhomhnaill. In this poem we encounter a sexually fluid persona (very much typical of McGuckian, as we shall see further on) addressing the house as if it were a female figure.

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[12] See Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 25, 160.
[13] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 159.
[14] McGuckian in L. O'Connor, "Comhrá."
[15] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 41.
[16] McGuckian, "The Soil Map," *The Flower Master and Other Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1993) 36.
[17] Wills, *Improprieties* 69.

The self-professed political intent behind the poem[18] does not need spelling out. The argument is well rehearsed in many other places, especially in McGuckian criticism following the publication of *Captain Lavender* in 1994, as it gradually became a commonplace to talk about extratextual and explicitly political objectives in McGuckian's esoteric verse. Yet, for my present purpose it is useful to reiterate some of the findings of this criticism and to briefly outline the historical context, not to simply submit to them or to propose a counter-claim, but to develop, if not to correct, the accepted interpretation of the poem's central image. Based on the acknowledged personal dimension which the language issue has taken on for the poet, my reading would not be possible without the achievements of scholars like Clair Wills or Shane Alcobia-Murphy.

The house – a decrepit villa in a former Protestant area of Belfast to which McGuckian moved as a young housewife in the early nineteen eighties – has been construed as a symbol of the nationalist orthodoxies of the feminized land over which, as Wills argues, the woman herself has no right as it is being passed, "along with her sexuality, from father to husband."[19]

I am not a woman's man, but I can tell,
By the swinging of your two-leaf door,
You are never without one man in the shadow
Of another […]
[...]
[...] I will not
Take you in hardness, for all the dark cage
Of my dreaming over your splendid fenestration,

[18] See Michael Joyce, "Phone interview with McGuckian on April 21, 2000," Vassar College. 20 January 2011 <http://faculty.vassar.edu/mijoyce/ClodaghWeb/roomshou/troubles.html>.
[19] Wills, *Improprieties* 70.

Your moulded sills, your slender purlins.

The “soil-map” of the title refers to the historical practice in Belfast of allotting plots with soil of better quality preferentially to Protestants. Sufficiently run-down to accommodate Catholic owners, the house stands open and devoid of its former glamour, but not entirely empty. The house can thus be seen as an emblem of the land in whose soil Anglo-Irish history has been inscribed over a pre-colonial Celtic past. The poem becomes an attempt to appropriate that soil through renaming, through the creation of another palimpsest. In the closing stanza the persona tries to deal with the historical fact of colonization as well as with her own uneasy feeling as a trespasser by concentrating on the memory of the women after whom houses such as the one in which she is about to settle were named. Paradoxically, once she makes use of the houses’ female *English* names in her poem, she starts to feel less detached from the alienated soil and from the house which she is now eager to possess, no longer as a sexually undetermined intruder, but in her “power as a bride.” As she starts to identify, through her upcoming domestic experience, with those women of the colonial past who have been monumentalized, but presumably also confined in the houses and their appellations, those houses are no longer to be read as symbols of loss and emptiness, but as “First Fruits” of the poet’s imagination.

I have found these places on the soil-map,
Proving it possible once more to call
Houses by their names, Annsgift or Mavisbank,
Mount Juliet or Bettysgrove: they should not
Lie with the gloom of disputes to interrupt them
Every other year, like some disease

Of language making humorous the friendship

Of the thighs. [...]

[...]

I drink to you as Hymenstown,

(My touch of fantasy) or First Fruits,

Impatient for my power as a bride.

In a different context, Peter Sirr notes that "McGuckian constantly names and particularises."[20] It was this particular instance of naming, or re-naming, which prompted Wills to read the poem as a parody of naming places in the *dinnsheanchas*.[21] I would argue, however, that while such a reading of McGuckian's "soil map" is valid insofar as the *dinnsheanchas* was a *male* poets' method of appropriating the land, traditionally conceived of as feminine, the parody is not without a strong element of self-irony. McGuckian who writes exclusively in English (a grammatically disrupted, but distinctly *non*-Hiberno English) has mentioned on multiple occasions her uneasy relation to her mother-tongue and has referred to her continuous attempts to make her poetic idiom an instrument in subverting the language of the colonist, a kind of "[a] meta-language where English and Irish could meet."[22] In the light of her view of English as "a foreign medium," an "imposed language, [...] although it's my mother tongue and my only way of communication" (as well as the fact that at the beginning of her career she Irishized her name from Maeve McCaughan to Medbh McGucian[23]) it is, I believe, germane to perceive the seemingly surplus mention of "some disease / Of language"

[20] Sirr 460.

[21] Wills, *Improprieties* 72.

[22] Medbh McGuckian, interview by Rand Brandes, *Chattahoochee Review* 16.3 (Spring 1996): 60. Qtd. in Alcobia-Murphy 231.

[23] Born Maeve McCaughan, the poet switched over to the Irish spelling of her name after Seamus Heaney, who was then her teacher at Queens University, Belfast, used it when signing books for her. See Lesley Wheeler, "Both flower and flower gatherer: Medbh McGuckian's *The Flower Master* and H.D.'s *Sea Garden*," *Twentieth*

as referring to the very Englishness of the houses' names, as well as to the poet's own native speech construed not as mother tongue, but as the language of the Other.

In reaction to Wills, who finds an element of satire in the very fact that McGuckian, as a female and a Catholic, redraws the soil-map by listing the English names of the houses in her poem ("But the names are a joke since women, exchanged along with the land, do not have the right to name it"[24]), I argue that the parody is enhanced by, if not dependent on, the self-ridiculing sting contained in the direct mention of a language that is problematic. Understood as a reference to McGuckian's uneasy monolingualism it explains the final resolution of the speaker's gender and her ironic identification with the colonialist women. All this ultimately serves to help her approach the house and the territory as her own.

As Shane Alcobia-Murphy remarks, McGuckian's anxiety about colonial inheritance "is inscribed into the very core of her language."[25] In view of her self-conscious, unstable linguistic identity – "I keep finding fault with English these days, like a *mother* with her *child*"[26] – the sides in the parody encoded in "The Soil Map" appear as ambiguously distributed throughout the narrative as the blurred sexuality of the androgynous speaker in relation to the female house(s). As she finally drinks a toast to the women whose silenced, domesticated lives have become synonymous with the actual houses, announcing herself to be one of them, the names (disregarding the racial connotations) become living spots on the sterile, now anachronistic map, and the poem can, paradoxically, be read as a nod in the direction of Ní Dhomhnaill's understanding of the *dinnsheanchas* when she says that

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Century Literature 49.4 (2003). 10 May 2011 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0403/is_4_49/ai_n6130023/pg_16/>.

[24] Wills, *Improprieties* 74.

[25] Alcobia-Murphy 230.

[26] McGuckian, "Rescuers and White Cloaks: Diary 1968-69." Qtd. in Alcobia-Murphy 230. My emphasis.

> a modern road-map transmits knowledge of a kind that primitive Celts would have found inconceivably abstract. Places would have been known to them as people were: by face, name and history. The last two would have been closely linked, for as the *dinnsheanchas* illustrates again and again, the name of every place was assumed to be an expression of its history.[27]

In order to reclaim the territory in which she is about to settle she appropriates its place names. Thus McGuckian, in a move similar to Ní Dhomhnaill's emboldened downhill drive "home" at the close of "Ag Tiomáint Siar," shows that the history of Belfast does not need to be always associated with the fighting in the streets, but that the private lives going on inside the walls are equally important.

As we have seen, McGuckian's concerns about imaginative freedom at the start of her career were as inseparably connected with the liberation of women from iconic representations as with the problematic status of Irish and with what she presents as her own difficult linguistic identity. This private dimension of the language issue – the poet's doubts about her mother tongue and her guilty stance towards Irish which she experiences not only as a social and sectarian marker but as a very personal thing – informs McGuckian's anxiety about the inadequacy of her medium. The same belief also lies at the heart of my thesis that the upsurge of feminism in Irish poetry in the latter half of the last century went hand in hand, in many cases, with concerns about the language.

This applies well, as I hope to have shown, not only to McGuckian, but to the other two poets dominating the above discussion, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Eavan Boland. Coming from different linguistic and political backgrounds, these women share a common artistic experience marked by linguistic indeterminacy and by their heightened sense of being

[27] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 160.

excluded from the male literary canon (in either language). In their attempts to reclaim their motherland, through the revision of the inherited tradition, they all have had to deal with the claims of their mother tongue which, in its equivocalness, can be defined with Peter Sirr neither as English nor as Irish, but as the borderland between two languages.[28]

In her critical analysis of the conventional representations of the feminine in the works of Seamus Heaney and John Montague from the preceding three decades, Patricia Coughlan noted in 1991 that "[s]peech and naming are the prerogatives of the autobiographically validated male poet, and the various female figures dwell in oracular silence, always objects, whether of terror, veneration, desire, admiration or vituperation, never the coherent subjects of their own actions."[29] Even though Coughlan's critique was certainly valid in its time, gaining much attention and provoking an extended polemic, it is important to bear in mind that she was addressing poetry that was highly influential, but pre-feminist in the context of Irish literature. Owing to analyses like Coughlan's, in combination with the emancipatory successes of women and the development of their poetic oeuvres, which are now central to our understanding of modern poetry, (not to mention the dwindling of nationalism as aesthetic ideology in Irish poetry), such writing has hardly been encountered after the turn of the century. Even Heaney, from *Seeing Things* (1991) onwards, has refrained from relying on stereotyped female figures and tropes of the land. The shift (completed in *Electric Light*, 2001) is more likely to have been the consequence of the generally decreasing prominence of local colour and nationalist sentiments in his poems than a conscious move. As Coughlan argued in a sequel to her "Bog Queens" essay, by 2007 Heaney still perceived women in Irish

[28] Sirr 458.

[29] Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens': The Representations of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney," *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions*, Vol. 4, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 1617.

history as "symbol[s] of victimhood."[30] In any case, many poets of generations after Heaney have had nothing to do with sexualizing of the Irish landscape. Conor O'Callaghan and Alan Gillis, for instance, both write lyrical, sensuous love poems in which they avoid any idealization of womanhood. This change in subject matter and the resulting shift in tone manifest in Irish poetry in the last decade are, as I have argued, the joint result of the general tendency to shake off any traces of nationalist agenda on the one hand and the impact of Irish literary feminism on the other hand. In this way, feminist poets and critics (not necessarily female) have succeeded in bringing about a substantial change in Irish poetry which has affected women, but which has also contributed to a development in poetry written by men, as the latter have turned away from conventional images of the land and the ideal feminine.

Before concluding, I wish to briefly deal with another common tactic that ironically plays with conventional gender of roles, used by women as they rejected the assigned status as "iconic image of disempowerment."[31] Again, this is not to rehash old feminist debates, but to emphasize, once more, the significant use of humour and irony which, as I have argued, is often central to the poem's force as intervention in social discourse and to its success as a textual artefact. Even Coughlan in her critique of Heaney's and Montague's reliance on stereotyped female objects accuses them of fetishization (identified not only as tactless and politically incorrect, but ultimately as obstructing the imagination) only in those places where she is unable to discern at least a touch of "ironic distance."[32] While in the following chapter I will come back to the traditional, gendered distribution of roles within the relationship between the speaking subject and the inspiring object and give more examples by some of the

[30] Coughlan, "'The Whole Strange Growth'" 39.
[31] Coughlan, "'The Whole Strange Growth'" 39.
[32] Coughlan, "Bog Queens," *Theorizing Ireland* 49.

later poets, here I wish to look at the reversal of those roles accomplished by women through the acquisition of the onlooker's perspective and appropriation of the eulogistic mode.

Again, Ní Dhomhnaill's work affords many examples. In the mischievous lyric "Gan do Chuid Éadaigh" (Nude), for instance, she sings her praise of the perfect naked body of a sleeping beau while employing conventions of the *Spéirbhean* description: "do thaobh chomh slim le sneachta séidte / ar an sliabh" (your flank / smooth as the snow / on a snow-bank).[33] A similar reversal of roles is to be found in "Fear" (Looking at a Man) where a male object is stripped in playful revenge by the passionate eyes of the female spectator. The bedazzled persona willingly vacates the position of the artist's model for the man, and picks up the baton as the panegyrist:

ba chóir go mórfaí tú	You're the one they should praise
os comhair an tslua,	In public places,
go mbronnfaí ort	You're the model
craobh is próca óir,	The one should be handed
ba chóir go snóifí tú	Trophies and cheques.
id dhealbh marmair	For the artist's hand,
ag seasamh romham	Standing before me
id pheilt is uaireadóir.	In your skin and a wristwatch.[34]

In her delightful erotic poem, "Veneer," Vona Groarke writes from a similarly transposed perspective. Omitting references to traditional tropes, however, she concentrates on a cherished flaw in the beauty of her lover's body:

[33] Ní Dhomhnaill, "Gan do Chuid Éadaigh" (Nude), trans. Paul Muldoon, *Pharaoh's Daughter* 90-91.

Were he lying down, I'd crook in the hollow

of him and, with my index finger, slub the mole

at the breech of his back that rounds on darkness

like a knot in veneer: shallow, intricate, opaque. [35]

The Gaelic poet Biddy Jenkinson is explicit in her rewriting of the tradition. In "Mo Scéal Féin – Á Insint ag Aisling"[36] (Telling an *Aisling* – My Version of the Story), the situation is inverted twice over: otherwise a virtuous soul, the persona sits up all night so completely taken by the phantom of her sleeping profligate idol that she herself falls into a ghostlike state, turning into a spectre and a slave of her own infatuation.

Codladh i gclúmh aingil anocht ar mo ghrása.

Saraifíní ag téaltú ona ghár-ghrana snámh álainn

Ceiribíní in éad lena shnó is gan snáth air

Bé an síolach ar domhan, ar Neamh 'sé an sách é.

[...]

Codladh i gclúmh aingil anocht ar mo ghrása

Ach spailpín mé féin

Taise bhocht nimfemáineach.

Tonight my darling slumbers in angelic down.

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[34] Ní Dhomhnaill, "Fear" (Looking at a Man), trans. John Montague, *Pharaoh's Daughter* 140-141.

[35] Groarke, "Veneer," *Flight* 48.

[36] Biddy Jenkinson, "Mo Scéal Féin – Á Insint ag Aisling," *Rogha Dánta* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000) 5.

Seraphs creep out of his charming, blissful snoring,

Cherubs envy him his skin – he's stark naked,

Girls abound on Earth, in Heaven and he's most satisfied.

[...]

Tonight my darling slumbers in angelic down;

But I'm just a navvy,

A wretched nymphomaniac ghost.

What Jenkinson's late-night apparition, Groarke's lover and Ní Dhomhnaill's clothes-horse have in common is the enamoured admiration they provoke in their female observers. Expressing their desire, these lascivious female satirists defy normative ideas of what is "appropriate." Mocking male possessive lust as much as their own infatuation, they "contravene," in Mary O'Connor's words, "the outspoken rule of silence about the body, a rule even more stringently enforced by their society with regard to women's own compelling drives."[37] While some of the poems contain jibes, more or less overt, at nationalistic rhetoric, others speak simply of personal love and have no obvious correlatives in history or the male tradition. But whether the prevailing tone is mocking or affectionate, the idealized object is scarcely ever *ideologized*. Even if the incentive behind a poem is to settle an old score, retribution halts sagaciously at the point from which the poet can enjoy speaking from the perspective of an active subject. The objectification of men by women authors is thus rarely effected in patronizing terms, and if so then with a relieving, ridiculing sting. Shifting the emphasis slightly, one could ask if having been so insistently reminded of their

[37] M. O'Connor 154.

otherness and marginality, women and their texts may not be better suited for accommodating the idea of alterity and pluralism in their polemics with the canon and for leading the form of ethical dialogue as it is required by Simon Critchley, for example, who insists that such a dialogue "should not result in the annulment of alterity, but in respect for it."[38]

The poets I have been discussing use the "borrowed," traditionally male standpoint of an admiring artist not so much to pay men in their own coin, but rather to gain distance from their conventional role as passive, silent muse. Thus the reversal of poetic arrangements, to which I have been referring throughout this chapter, cannot be characterized as an attempt to adopt male strategies for their own ends, but has been part of a larger, multifaceted and fundamentally centrifugal process. In place of the usual metaphors describing this process as the coming of women to the heart of literary events, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak about a disruption of the very concept of a compact, homogenous centre through the inclusion of a new perspective and the embrace of alterity. My point is that the emancipation of women on the Irish literary scene, to which some of the poets on whom I have focused in this chapter have substantially contributed, did not mean the assimilation of women to the male tradition, but that it brought about a beneficial diversification of that very tradition. The various ways in which women have drawn on their former marginality, making it integral to their poetics and using it to open up the speaking subject's horizon, will be one of the recurrent themes in the following section.

The comic has been long established as one of the constituent traditions in Irish writing. However, while volumes have been published on the legacy of sardonic and polemic critiques of society in the prose writings of authors such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien and Pádraic Ó Conaire, most critics have tended to neglect or disregard the elements

[38] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics Of Deconstruction: Derrida And Levinas* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 13.

of comedy and satire in literary works by women. Still, even if in recent decades, owing to the research done on authors such as Maria Edgeworth, Clare Boylan, Edna O'Brien or Lady Gregory, the role of women in the tradition of subversive humour in Irish literature has been determined as indispensable, often even formative in the fields of prose and drama, poetry has received considerably slighter attention.

In an essay on the comic in the writings of Edgeworth, the poet Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin argues that the novelist's best achievements are based on the reworking of the dramatic suppression of various, often female voices, thus recalling Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and his theory of the carnivalesque function of the novel that lies in bringing about a comic juxtaposition of marginalized and official forms of language.[39] The Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque as a method of challenging official discourses has been taken up readily by feminist critics like Nancy Glazener who sees it as compatible with the feminist concept of the feminine as an anarchic and a subversive force.[40] Other critics have found Bakhtin's concept of carnival transgression (formulated in *Rabelais and his World*) attractive owing to its promoted aims of challenging the official culture and discourse, i.e. above all the Medieval and Early-Renaissance ecclesiastical culture which renounced the body and the cyclical nature of human life. In this respect Bakhtin's theory seems relevant to the stream in the French feminist linguistic theory that has proposed the formulation of *écriture féminine* as a way of shunning patriarchal (not only academic) discourse, insisting on the close affinity of such specific female utterance with the body.

Yet, such equalizing tends to be simplistic, as has been noted by others. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, rejected the idea of a specifically woman's language, created anew with the reliance on extra-lingual, primarily bodily drives, arguing that there is but one

[39] Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Voices of Maria Edgeworth's Comedy," *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers*, ed. Theresa O'Connor (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996) 20.
[40] Nancy Glazener, "Dialogic subversion: Bakhtin, the novel and Gertrude Stein," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, eds. Ken Hirschkop and David G. Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 110.

language which women simply must "steal and use [...] for their own good."[41] As Mutlu Konuk Blasing in her study of the subversive and constructive potential of poetic language claims, "one must not – if one wants to think of poetry as such – posit an 'unconscious' or 'instincts' and bodily 'drives' to account for the power of poetry and its threat to rational discourse."[42] Julia Kristeva, whose insistence on the fluidity and plurality of the semiotic material (capable of undermining the symbolic order) make her thought compatible with the idea of *écriture féminine*, has warned against the risks involved in an over eager recourse to the body at the expense of language. With reference to Bakhtin's notion dialogized heteroglossia, which in all its aspects presupposes the existence of a *literary* text, she insists that the process of dialogical "transgression" of linguistic and social conventions can only succeed if it accepts "*another law*."[43] As Clair Wills points out, "[t]he challenge of feminist poetry is precisely a *literary* challenge, and only through that a political one."[44]

Kristeva's refusal of the controlling, intrusive superego, which threatens to thwart the achievement of the desirable, productive state of *jouissance*, fundamental for the process of a semiotic act of writing,[45] as well as her definition of poetry as a practice of the speaking subject (formulated as essentially multiple), recall, in turn, Bakhtin's theory of hybridization and of dialogized heteroglossia as a mixture of voices that creates a "complex unity of differences."[46] Thus, through Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in literary language and through Kristeva's use of *jouissance*, we are brought back to the Irish poets' polemic with their literary tradition. By creating a living (or satirically dead) literary counterpart to the cliché of

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[41] Alice Jardine, "Interview with Simone de Beauvoir," *Signs* 5.2 (Winter 1979): 229.
[42] Blasing 3.
[43] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora and Alice Jardine, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (London: Basil Blackwell, 1984) 71.
[44] Wills, "Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women's Texts," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, eds. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001) 141.
[45] Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 161-7.
[46] See James P. Zappen, "Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975)," Tw*entieth-Century Rhetoric and Rhetoricians: Critical Studies and Sources*, eds. Michael G. Moran and Michelle Ballif (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000) 7-20; and Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990) 20-21.

the feminized land, the humour and sarcasm employed in the writings of many contemporary Irish women poets becomes a successful method of transgression. The objective of these poems is to usurp stereotypical representations of Ireland as a female body through the distancing techniques of laughter and irony rather than through the plunge into the mythologized feminine – represented again by the body. In other words, the elements of satire are essential not only in bringing about transformation, but also in the making of good poetry. Writing of the ethics of linguistics, Kristeva notes that "language [is] defined by boundaries admitting of upheaval, dissolution, and transformation. Situating our discourse near such boundaries might enable us to endow it with a current ethical impact. In short, the ethics of a linguistic discourse may be gauged in proportion to the poetry that it presupposes."[47]

The majority of Irish women poets working in the final three decades of the last century engaged in such an ethical, essentially feminist dialogue with the inherited literary tradition. Having been designated to the edge of the cultural, social and political life, they have been successful, in many cases, in turning their historically prescribed marginality to their own advantage. The poets I have discussed so far can be said to have located their poetics in the productive borderland between their private and public experience, between the male and the female tradition and, in a number of cases, between the two main languages of Irish literature. By rejecting the impulse to try to assimilate themselves or simply to do away with the predominantly male tradition, by exploring the various in-between zones within an essentially dichotomous Irish literature, they have contributed to the development of the current, more diversified and pluralistic aspect of Irish poetry, and also produced some of the most significant bodies of work in the Anglophone world. As will emerge in the following, women's poetry from those decades often emerges from a metaphorical liminal position in which its authors place themselves in order to address issues of verbal creation and to deal

[47] Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 25.

with the pre-existing literary tradition, almost invariably construed as hostile to women. Having examined how women appropriated the literary tropes of the feminized nation through the use of subversive humour and irony, I will now look into some of the precise ways in which they have transformed their status as boundary figures into thematic material. Endowed with specific transgressive potential, the border positions of the poems' speakers can operate either provocatively or productively as part of the attempt to reconcile the tensions between the conventional role of woman as the inspiring Other and the requirements of the speaking subject. In the following pages, which deal with the issues of poetic affiliation and inspiration, I will set out to determine to what extent this frequent situating of the persona in the (extremely variable) liminal space is a consciously employed formal strategy with critical consequences.

PART TWO

SECRET SCRIPTS

It is now a platitude to say that the women who started writing and publishing poetry in Ireland between the late 1960s and early 1990s – a period coinciding with the upsurge of Irish literary feminism – saw the inherited tradition as problematic. As examined here, the situation is viewed through the prism of several particularities and specific patterns pertaining to women's revisionist approach to the canon, including their coming to terms with poetic influence and inspiration, and various applications of irony and elusive or coded narrative. This focus shall offer insights into the interplay between the margin and the centre, between the political and the personal, as well as between that which is manifest and that which is being withheld in poetry. While I start from writings that come from the two penultimate decades of the last century, excursions to more recent verse feature at the close of both chapters of this section. This allows me to trace diverse expressions of the tone of political non-involvement increasingly prevalent in Irish women's poetry from approximately 2000 onwards. At the same time I set out to show that this often encrypted, "privatized" lyrical discourse[1] – predominantly found in poetry by Medbh McGuckian, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Vona Groarke, Biddy Jenkinson, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Aifric Mac Aodha – is largely based on considerations that we are accustomed to associate with the engaged, feminist phase in Irish poetry, such as issues of publication, of finding one's own poetic expression in the face of the masculine tradition, and the rejection of the conventional muse.

[1] I am indebted to Clair Wills for the idea of private symbolism and privatized expression used in feminist poetry by way of commentary on public and political issues. See Wills, *Improprieties* 47-120, 158-93.

By examining the various ways in which some of the major female poets of the time responded to the issues of intra-poetic affiliation and inspiration, and exploring how they either appropriate or repudiate the conventional muse figure, I argue that it is mostly from a position between two extremes, or states of mind (silence and statement, furtiveness and open polemics) that these poets set out to work.

Like women writers of the past, whose reactions to misogynist criticism often involved false modesty, poets like Biddy Jenkinson, Paula Meehan, or Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill have written lyrics replete with irony in answer to contemporary (as well as traditional) constructions of women as objects rather than authors of poetry. In post-colonial vocabulary, such strategies are conveniently described as the "sly civility" with which the discriminated turn their gaze "back upon the eye of power," to borrow from Homi Bhabha.[2] For these poets, the "eye of the power" is represented by the masculine tradition. That power holds them in an impasse: it is impossible either to outstare or to simply disregard. Harold Bloom defines this contradictory stance towards the literary past, the tension between the urge to encompass and to reject as the precondition of the agonistic development. He views the history of poetry as a struggle of poetic influence, since "strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves."[3] What made the Irish woman poet's situation in the last third of the twentieth century specific, however, was the acute sense that it was necessary not only to absorb and then deconstruct the influence of a particular established poetics or literary figure, but to define oneself against a whole range of woman-objectifying tropes, metaphors, and forms of rhetoric that pervaded the canon. The situation in the closing decades of the last century from which emerged an unprecedented amount of writing by women in Ireland, was the exact opposite to the one proposed by Bloom, whose strong poets

[2] Homi K. Bhabha "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 113. See also Bhabha, "Sly Civility," *October* 34 (Autumn 1985): 71-78.

[3] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 5.

(as opposed to weaker talents who tend to idealize) wrestle with their strong forebears "even to the point of death."[4] The poets discussed below are neither inclined to idealize their precursors, nor are they subject to the anxiety of influence, since for them the inherited masculine canon already signifies a void or death.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the conceptual vagueness of what constitutes Irish literary or poetic tradition, the fact that both the Irish-language canon and modern poetry in English are marked by a sense of fracture and loss, follows among others from the implicit memory of the Irish language. Paradoxically, this constant awareness of the dead or lost past, materialized in Irish poetry in the form of the linguistic (Irish-English, standard English-Hiberno English) and chronological fissure (oral-written/modern/standardized, Old Irish-modern Irish), is catalyzed by the sense that, as William Faulkner has it, "the past is never dead, [that] it's not even past."[5] The canon thus is at once the site of loss and also a plausible, even inevitable source. This torsion in the tradition is the mainspring of these poets' work.

The literary tradition – as much as the language issue – is both continuous and interrupted. The discontinuity, however, occasions not only the freedom to create a new poetic Self, but provokes a counter-motion of nostalgia for the tradition that has been hostile and hence abandoned. Indeed, while they have delineated, mostly in their prose writings and interviews, the aspects of the Irish literary past that prevented them from relating to and drawing from that tradition, the majority of the poets I discuss have also commented on the impossibility of overlooking it and have made thematic forays into the canon, reacting in their poems against figures and stereotypes which support the image of the woman as a silent ideal. While Part One examined ironic subversions of the iconic figures of the motherland and of the abstract notions of the idealized womanhood, here I want to focus on the ways the poets react against the conventional troping of the female muse, and to show how they reshape those

[4] Bloom 5.
[5] William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011) 73.

earlier figurations, not least when the move from silence to expression and assertive subjectivity becomes the very theme of their poems. Once more I will attempt to show that the seemingly paradoxical preoccupation of these feminist publications with the writings of the former generations and – even more surprisingly – with the language issue is relevant and central for the understanding of contemporary poetry by men and women in both English and Irish, that can in some respects be viewed as emancipated.

Focusing on women's objections against the imposed role of the silent, inspiring Other, the first chapter of this section examines verse by women who construe themselves as "muse poets" (Medbh McGuckian, Vona Groarke, and Caitríona O'Reilly), as well as by those who either disregard or explicitly deplore the idea of muse poetry (Paula Meehan, Biddy Jenkinson, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin). The analyses show how the antithesis of poet and muse is for women often successfully fractured or inverted by means of mocking secrecy, self-irony, and preterition. What these techniques have in common is the moment of simulation through which subversion of established tropes is achieved. A secret, Eric Falci notes in relation to McGuckian's poetry, "is a communication that does not move, and yet it depends on the possibility that it could 'get told.'"[6] What the coded, elusive narratives quoted below do, however, is make secrecy and encryption their tractive power. It is not important if they keep or tell secrets, but that they employ secrecy as a technique and scheme. In their tendency to reticence, to coded or virtually unintelligible expression, they often elude the reader as much as any sense of semantic coherence.[7] Yet, it is precisely through such encrypted reference, fractured narrative, and obscured deictic relations that their poems undermine established figures and discourse, without sounding like agitprop. The same focus on the use of sly obliquity and subversive irony informs the subsequent chapter, which deals with the issue of poetic inspiration. One of the motifs is the moment of metamorphosis that

[6] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 87.
[7] See Falci, *Continuity and Change* 88.

winds throughout the text in various figurations, including the mythological archetype of Pygmalion's statue, the process of poetic translation and linguistic transformation, and representations of interstitial spaces and transitory or liminal states of mind.

As Clair Wills asserts, the impact of Irish feminist poetry follows from

> the characteristic privatization of public narratives engaged in by these poets. They aim to disable one aspect of myth's power – its claim to universality – introducing discontinuity into their version of the myths by privatizing them, by taking them out of the public realm in which [...] everybody knows their significance.[8]

I focus on the hermetic narratives, the moments of cryptic personalism and domesticity in the writings of Medbh McGuckian, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paula Meehan, Biddy Jenkinson, Vona Groarke, and Caitríona O'Reilly in order to show that they often serve as outlets through which the poet-persona eludes public discourse and conventional gendered roles, with the aim of inverting or parodying traditional polarities and scenarios. In the readings of individual poems I show in what ways these rhetorical silences and ironic obliquities not only serve as a way out of the public into the private sphere, but that they are often the moments in which the political becomes the poetic, in which the poems as such start. These "secret scripts" thus serve to help the poets gain distance from conventional social and cultural constrictions, but also to re-establish themselves in the shared, renovated public space of the poem.

The personal and the political are not opposed in these poems, rather they overlap in new ways, most usually in rhetorical silence, mocking, one-way addresses, and referential obliquity. I want to show that the poets turn away from public discourse, just as they comment

[8] Wills, *Improprieties* 75.

upon it. Secrets are central to this dynamic: secrecy, like irony, is not only the forte of these poems, but their prerequisite.

Some of the themes discussed earlier will arise again, all relevant to the topic of fragmented representation and encrypted expression. One is that of silence – for silence, of course, is "privatization" at its most extreme; the other is related to issues of marginality and liminality. Reticence and deliberate vagueness, as I propose, are driving forces in women's poetry: even the most zealous protests become successful – not just as polemics but as poems as well – when elements of secrecy, heteroglossia, and the centrifugal power of silence are employed. Also, these poets wish to avoid a dichotomous, genderized concept of literature. Rather, they employ liminal, transitory spaces and situations which signify convergence as much as difference, creating an alternative, open position on the borderline.

Transition signals an interim. Liminality allows change to originate, and I argue that such temporary liminality is itself a persistent characteristic in the work of several generations of Irish women poets over the last forty-five years. Prominent among those shared representations of the interstice is a tendency in the poets to interpose themselves between the tradition and their own poetic output, between the petrifying male gaze and their speaking personas, between the stereotypes of national or linguistic identity and poetic subjectivity. Through the use of encryption, preterition, irony, ekphrasis, quotation, and various other distancing techniques their poems often are not just medium for self-expression, but become mediators between those opposing trends and categories.

3 THE MUSE IN QUESTION

One of the recurrent themes in Irish women's poetry from the three closing decades of the last century is the necessity of escaping from the conflict between the role of the silent muse and that of the desiring subject. Inevitably, the issue combines political (feminist and revisionist) and personal (as related to the individual poetics) concerns. As we have seen in the previous chapters, in the Irish context poetry with feminist aspects often combines protests against the conservative ideal of the feminine and its role in the society with the rejection of nationalist stereotypes in the literary tradition. According to Wills, the fact that various expressions of women's exclusion from public discourse figure in the analysis of a particular society and culture suggests "the impossibility of approaching the public world except through the prism of private or individual experience."[1] Yet, although feminist poetry and its protests against the absence of women from the public space of the canon do contribute to such an analysis, it does not follow that particular poems offer insight into the private experience of the poets. Rather, as Wills argues, they help us appreciate the extent the female body – its reproductive and aesthetic functions together with its conventional analogue, the domestic sphere – is primarily a public entity and how it must be internalized and claimed for poetic discourse. This personalization is often achieved through strategies of concealment and enigmatic expression. While Wills concentrates on the puzzling narratives of McGuckian, arguing that her fragmented language and imagery are ultimately directed outwards,[2] I want to show that the same is true of other poets as well, not least Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paula Meehan, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Biddy Jenkinson, Vona Groarke, and Caitríona O'Reilly.

[1] Wills, *Improprieties* 43.
[2] Wills, *Improprieties* 76.

Painful awareness of the absence of the female experience from literary as well as historical records is shared by Ní Chuilleanáin whose feminist concerns are focused on striking a balance between the inherited tradition and the necessity of shaping a distinctive tone to deal with these new thematics. Yet, the result of what she describes as a search for strategies to "say 'I' in a female persona"[3] is a conspicuously detached, impersonal style based on reticence. In my view, this seeming paradox is the outcome of her dual engagement, a specific amalgamation of a gaze cast backwards and forwards at once: if, looking back at the tradition, she encountered silence, she made that the *terminus a quo* and one of the prevalent principles of her own writing, making discretion both the aesthetic procedure and central theme of her poetry. Silence, which once inhibited, now becomes the mainspring.

Ní Chuilleanáin's silence, I propose, has three essential motivations, often hardly distinguishable from one another and sometimes detectable within the same poem. The first is the endorsement of tact and the rhetoric of restraint as aesthetic qualities. The second foregrounds constraint as an ethical theme arising from, but also enabling, Ní Chuilleanáin to comment on what she perceives as the rigid limits of cognition and the representational capacity of speech. This "reticent candor," to borrow from Marianne Moore,[4] coincides occasionally with musings on the loss of the Irish language and ironic tracing of its imprints (often presented as illusory) in modern English and the identity of the Irish poet. The fictitious, yet benign, notion of closeness between the two languages, occasioned by their historical proximity, is summed up in "Gloss/Clós/Glass" (*The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, 2001) where Irish first appears to be mere gloss on the English, then proves a source of excitement in the form of a mystery and a hope of revelation surmised behind

[3] Carmen Zamorano Llena, "Overcoming Double Exile: (Re)construction of 'Inner-Scapes' in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry," *Nordic Irish Studies* 3.1 (2004): 158.

[4] Moore uses the term when writing of the influence of tact in American modernists, Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot. See *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore* (New York: Viking, 1986) 453-58. Qtd. in L. O'Connor, *Haunted English* 161. On Moore's "rhetoric of reticence," see Bonnie Costello, *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) 215-45.

a bolted door, "turning the locked lock [clós] green [glas]."[5] The third motivation of Ní Chuilleanáin's silence involves preterition as a mode of resistance which demonstrates (and at the same time facilitates the censuring of) the silencing of women in Irish historical and literary narratives.

Poems like "Passing over in Silence"[6] (*The Brazen Serpent*, 1994) – which is an enactment of the rhetorical device of *paralipsis*, also known as *cataphasis*, or *praeterio* (the latter being the poem's original title[7]) – encapsulate Ní Chuilleanáin's concept of poetry as a strategy for censuring the course of narrative and of history. In keeping with the formal rules of *paralipsis*, Ní Chuilleanáin gives an account of a female subject feigning to pass over a traumatic experience, thus making it the centre of attention. The negative introductory phrases at the start of half of the lines – "She never told"; "She kept the secret"; "She held her peace" – serve to impart distinct contours of what had occurred. But the enactment of *paralipsis* – invocation by denying invocation – is as important as the theme of the insufficiency of speech which the poem also instantiates and which is denoted in its ultimate opacity: "There were no words." This phrase refers not only to the inadequacy of language in the face of the mystery of life and death, or of an unspeakable trauma, but also in the face of the historical silence of women.

What makes this poem characteristic of Ní Chuilleanáin is the tone of reported narrative, connected with the effacement or hollowing of the lyric subject. Ní Chuilleanáin's restrained, mostly third-person narratives rarely record speech. Indeed, when, occasionally, someone is reported to make to speak, they turn out to be dead. This occurs, for example, in "St Margaret of Cortona"[8] (also from *The Brazen Serpent*) in which the woman – the Italian saint and patroness of single mothers and reformed prostitutes, among others – is reported to

[5] Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *Selected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2008) 119.
[6] Ní Chuilleanáin, *Selected Poems* 71.
[7] Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997) 285.
[8] Ní Chuilleanáin, *Selected Poems* 72.

have become "A name not to be spoken"; "A pause [that] opens its jaws." The hush, represented by the dense imagery of cavities and hollows, results from the woman's unknownness, the mystery of her alleged sins that make "the preacher hollow his voice," and the unspeakability of her own trauma: "Her eyes were hollowed / By the bloody scene." Like the negative introductory remarks in "Passing Over in Silence," that in themselves signify hollowness, the cavities here seem to be packed with meaning – just as their grimacing reveals a void: "Behind the silver commas of the shrine, / In the mine of the altar her teeth listen and smile."

Falci notes that Ní Chuilleanáin "stills the lyric subject while keeping it as an enabling hollow."[9] Such personas, who talk about, watch, or listen to silence, enable Ní Chuilleanáin to hint at the unnamable, to bring into the space of the poem the body of the woman and her historically silenced voice, as well as the trace of the Irish language. In this respect, feminism has relevance for Ní Chuilleanáin's political thematics as well as her lyrical form. Her cryptic tone is hardly ever personal, and never confessional. Yet, however detached her personas appear to be, she employs them to communicate some deeply felt anxieties – not least those that concern her poetics and possible conceptions of national, sexual, and linguistic identity. Her hermeticism enables her to continually balance on the edge, construing those anxieties as having both public and personal relevance. Her coded narratives and conceptualizing of the female body, as well as the structuring of her poetics, are conceived, in many cases, as correctives to the existing tradition. The female body has to be liberated from the canon in order to be reconceived and then reinscribed in the space of the new poem, and Ní Chuilleanáin carries out this work by employing elliptic narratives and enigmatic personas.

This idea of balancing on the edge is essential in two respects: as well as corresponding to the strategic reliance on liminal zones in Irish women poets, as proposed in

[9] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 23.

the introduction to this section, it is relevant in terms of Ní Chuilleanáin's relation to the canon and her subject matter. Her conspicuous reliance on figurative as well as formal restraint means that her poems often seem to offer glimpses of personal thought and recollection, even as they forbid the reader to go farther. Her work is replete with instances of saying by refusing to tell, by highlighting the significance of what is being withheld. Poems like "Passing over in Silence" or "St Margaret of Cortona" express reverence for the secrets of an inner life. The poetry's resolute hermeticism follows from the sense of the limits of perceptual mimesis and verbal representation. While it brings about the finished character of most of her lyrics (not in the sense of perspicuous content, but in terms of significant, and signifying, form), it appears to be in contrast with the prevalent notion of secrecy. This very contrast is the enabling paradox of Ní Chuilleanáin's work. The tension between silence and statement creates a new poetic.

Like ironic laughter, secrecy has subversive potential. The "privatization" of the female poet's voice through secrecy and rhetorical silence is, as Wills suggests, not just a way of escaping from the canon and the realm of public discourse (even though it does coincide with the general drift of poetry away from the public sphere and the tendency to fragmented narrative in post-modern literature), but it entails engagement – a subversive return under concealment. Yet, viewed from a different angle, the concealment and fragmentation – in terms of discontinuous narrative and puzzling representation – can be viewed as safeguards against the slipping of such "engaged" poetry into mere propaganda. As I later show, the moments of elusion are often those in which not only meaning or significant implications originate, but poetry itself.

Ní Chuilleanáin admits that it is necessary for the poet to find an attitude to the tradition. Her clearing of the imaginative space for herself, however, involves a digression from the standard affiliation model: while she rejects the heritage, she does not go so far as to

propose a "misreading" of any poems of the past for, after all, she defines herself against what she considers to epitomize absence. Her strategies to elude the "masculine agenda"[10] have included the use of contextual ellipsis, coded reference, ironic ritualization of landscapes, and appropriation of ancient myths and narratives.

Most of those are present in the frequently cited "Pygmalion's Image" (from *The Magdalene Sermon*, 1989). The poem's central image, which can be interpreted at once as a metaphor of the feminized land, the inherited tradition, or the mass of women's voices silenced therein, is an emblem, I want to argue, of Ní Chuilleanáin's subversive secrecy:

> Not only her stone face, laid back staring in the ferns,
> But everything the scoop of the valley contains begins to move
> [...]
>
> The crisp hair is real, wriggling like snakes;
> A rustle of veins, tick of blood in the throat;
> The lines of the face tangle and catch and
> A green leaf of language comes twisting out of her mouth.[11]

As is often the case with Ní Chuilleanáin's explanatory – but hardly clarifying – titles, it is the mention of "Pygmalion's image" at the head of the poem that directs us away from simple bucolic connotations to other contexts, and foreshadows the lyric's mocking, complex undertones. If "Pygmalion's image" denotes an image come to life, the nature and signification of its "life" have always been a matter of scholarly interest and figured in theories of representation and artistic imagination. Indeed, while vividness is the defining

[10] Llena, "Overcoming Double Exile" 158.
[11] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Pygmalion's Image," *Magdalene Sermon* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1989) 9.

feature of the Cypriot sculptor's artefact, it is not measured by the faithfulness of its representation: not a copy (i.e., an image of any living person), the statue is rather a living embodiment of the properties of beauty and life. Even prior to its metamorphosis, induced by divine powers, the stone sculpture already seems lifelike (*quam vivere*).

Gilles Deleuze (in his analysis of Plato's *Sophist*) defines such an image – the nature of which lies not in "likeness" but in "semblance"[12] – as an artefact without a model, an image which belongs to the art of simulacrum.[13] What makes the concept of simulacrum relevant to my argument about the deconstructive power of Ní Chuilleanáin's mimetic secrecy and reticence is its indeterminate status, described by some as being inherently subversive, as "fundamentally vague [and] full of dark power."[14] Deleuze shows that since they are based on dissimilitude, simulacra (*phantasma* in Plato) represent "the evil power of the false claimant," and goes on to argue for the triumph of simulacra over icons and copies (*eikon*) in modernity.

The same kind of dynamism is present in the mixed connotations of Ní Chuilleanáin's image: identified with Ovid's ivory virgin it simply reads as an object of the male artist's erotic desire and points to idealized images of the feminine in the tradition.[15] Viewed as a simulacrum, however, the stone-faced female object is endowed with disruptive potential. If, following Deleuze, the copy is an image that resembles while the simulacrum is an image based on dissimilitude, simulacra must imply "a perversion, an essential turning away."[16] The anarchic effect of the simulacrum, which turns away from essence and is founded on no original, "sets up the world of nomadic distributions. [...] Far from being a new foundation, it

[12] Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum," *October* 27 (1983): 47.
[13] See Plato, *Sophist* 235C-236C.
[14] Victor I. Stoichita, *The Pygmalion Effect: From Ovid to Hitchcock* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008) 9.
[15] The delirium of the mythological sculptor's love experienced has been re-enacted by artists of all times. In her discussion of the Pygmalion myth, aimed at disclosing the gendered power relations that are at work in erotic and elegiac discourse, A. R. Sharrock recapitulates: "Love poetry creates its own object, calls her Woman, and falls in love with her – or rather, with the artist's own act of creating her." Alison R. Sharrock, "Womanufacture," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1991): 49.
[16] Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum" 47.

swallows up all foundations; it assures a universal collapse, but as a positive and joyous event, as de-founding (*effondement*)."[17]

Ní Chuilleanáin's "Pygmalion's Image" describes such "joyful" and salutary collapsing of foundations – if foundations are to be understood in terms of the nationalist tradition and the conservative images of the feminized land therein. The closing metaphor of the poem announces innovation and marks the beginning of a being, or of being in language. As Deleuze says elsewhere, "In the order of speech, it is the I which begins, and begins absolutely [...] be it a speech that is silent."[18] On the one hand, the awakening "I" of Ní Chuilleanáin's poem, serves as an analogue of poetic utterance and belongs to the poet herself – as her way, indeed, of "saying 'I' in a female persona." On the other hand, it relates to no speaking "individual" but rather represents the metaleptic figure of the lyric "I," which is relevant for the figuration of the female poetic subject in general. In a seeming paradox, the persona is about to open her mouth and declare herself no one's ivory maiden just as she confirms her status as a simulacrum – an autonomous image with no model, coincidentally represented in one stream of Western thought by Pygmalion's statue. The fact that the poem stops precisely at this point is significant. Ní Chuilleanáin's treatment of this margin between silence and speech results from an almost ethical unwillingness to fix or to "kill," to use Wills's stronger word,[19] her objects with too loud and definite an expression. After all, it is important to bear in mind that this is as far as Ní Chuilleanáin will ever go in terms of representing speech. Her personas, both male and female, are mostly engaged in watching or contemplating silence, mutely. Silence is construed not as a fissure or as deficiency but as a benign, even healing phenomenon, rich with expressive force.

[17] Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum" 53.
[18] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 15.
[19] See Wills, *Improprieties* 165.

Scholars have read Pygmalion as an archetype of the cultural tendency to perceive woman as symbol of representation, as art-object, or as a mirror image of male desire.[20] While, as Peggy O'Brien says, many of Ní Chuilleanáin's personas "resist being gazed at by intently looking back,"[21] the stifling awareness of the male gaze is apparent in the works of other poets as well. In the following examples I show that even though resistance is often explicitly expressed and the poem's personas for the most part talk back, they share the same inclination to obliquity and concealment that we have observed in Ní Chuilleanáin.

Paula Meehan, as we shall see further on, has taken her revisionist stance to the point of wishing to do without tradition and influence altogether. Yet, she claims to have found her poetic voice inside the taut space between the future and the past: "I believe that [as a poet] you have to go back in order to go forward, that the way forward is a way back as well."[22] This applies to the poet's frequent drawing upon her personal history and family relations, as well as to her occasional jibes at the traditional genderized roles of women and men in society and the literary tradition.

In "Zugzwang"[23] (from *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, 1991), a wife is kept hostage by the husband's searching eyes. Caught in the impasse of a failing relationship and suffering post-traumatic depression she is only left with options that would further aggravate her situation. However, what is piquant about the poem, and what I believe to be its actual impetus, is not the woman's condition, but the paradox embraced in its outcome: while the woman threatens to "let go her grip, / surrender herself to ecstatic freefall" of madness, the unwitting husband still thinks he can hold her together by his assessing gaze, imagining

[20] See for instance Sharrock 36-39; and Martin A. Danahay, "Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation," *Victorian Poetry* 32.1 (Spring 1994): 35-53.
[21] Peggy O'Brien, "Editor's Preface," *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry, 1967-2000*, ed. Peggy O'Brien (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1999) xxvi.
[22] Llena, "Overcoming Double Exile" 159.
[23] Paula Meehan, "Zugzwang," *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1991) 12-14.

himself as a painter "mixing pigment and oil" or a Cretan mosaic worker "fingering a thousand fragments" in search for "the exact shade." While she retains her passionate desperation and – keeping it to herself – continues to move restlessly about the house and beyond its walls, it is the uncomprehending husband (reminiscent of Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead") who is left immobile and silently wondering.

> […] He will not dwell
> on last week's events when he woke
> in the night and she was gone. He found her
> digging in the garden, her nightgown
> drenched through […]

She is a trespasser, unsettling and anarchic in her obscure intentions. The man, on the other hand, appears to be fixed in his predictable role. Ignoring his futile gaze, she threatens to slip away from him. Even after she hits rock bottom, she will carry the subdued drama of the present scene far beyond its confines, "[e]ach shard will reflect the room, the flowers, / the chessboard, and her beloved sky beyond / like a calm ocean lapping at the mountain" – while he stays deadlocked behind.

Meehan's criticism of traditional stereotypes such as the mixing of love poetry with invocations of the muse and the dependence of artists on the inspiring Other has been uncompromising. In a 2002 interview she claimed that "There should be a law against muses [since] they've been affliction on humanity since time began."[24] An outright rejection of the monumentalizing and at the same time belittling gaze of an enamoured man speaks from the

[24] Eileen O'Halloran and Kelli Maloy, "An Interview with Paula Meehan," *Contemporary Literature* 43.1 (2002): 27.

title of "Not Your Muse" from *Pillow Talk* (1994).[25] The persona insists on being taken for what she is. If the man's "love's blindness" makes her look "whole and shining," it also makes her feel "a painted doll," a picture-postcard thing: "I'm not your muse, not that creature / in the painting, with the beautiful body, / Venus on the half-shell."

Several ironies inform the outcome of this address: even though the speaker seems to approach the man, the latter cannot hear her monologue, remaining just as unreal as the product of his own aesthetic idealism. In the end the persona decides to let him have his fantasy and to keep the facts of her life to herself. The decision, however, is as much a gesture of resignation as that of cunning. It is through her secrecy and judicious reticence that the speaker escapes the power relations of her situation, which reflect those in erotic and elegiac discourse.

> But if it keeps you happy who am I
> to charge in battledressed to force you test
> your painted doll against the harsh light
> I live by, against a brutal merciless sky.

Lest peace within the relationship be disturbed, the illusion cherished by the man is left unchallenged until it isolates him, leaving the couple irreconcilably severed. While he is dependent on her as on the focus of his being, she has her own life elsewhere. Her dramatic monologue is addressed, but not meant to be actually delivered, to the man. It is, of course, no mere personal complaint; through its formal and mythological references it functions as a political allegory, as a protest against the concept of poetry and art as an archetypal sexual act against the idea of the poem as Pygmalion's statue.

[25] Meehan, "Not Your Muse," *Pillow Talk* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994) 24.

The form of poetic complaint provides the persona with a rhetorical convention that serves as an outlet for frustration. But unlike conventional amorous complaints which tend to amount to a reconfirmation rather than solution of the complainer's cause, hers does manage to bring about a reversal of the situation. Paradoxically, it is the woman who does the talking. Moreover, just as she complains about being regarded as a mute icon, she proposes the image of a silently admiring man. Through a kind of *paralipsis* – as she announces the harsh facts of her life while keeping them secret – the persona presents herself as outside the confines of the association: she is the one who leads a "real," separate life, although perhaps not of her choice, while he appears to be fixed inside his illusion. Once again, with a nod to the Pygmalion myth, man is presented as an artificer, a "womanufacturer,"[26] to use A. R. Sharrock's term, enamoured with the object of his creation, but perceiving her autonomous life as a threat. The danger of Galatea's stepping down from her pedestal is that she would shed the qualities of the divine and the universal, and take on the carnal and the individual.[27] Meehan's lyric polemizes with this universalizing tendency in amorous adoration, and with the pairing of cold stone with virtuous silence. Like Ní Chuilleanáin, she adopts preterition and secrecy at once to break the prescribed rule of silence and to allude to the complexities of an inner life that cannot be captured in a sculpted image. At the same time, she uses encryption to represent the self-imposed, evasive epistemological scepticism on the part of the male observer.

Medbh McGuckian, although less explicit in disclosing its purpose, relies extensively on secrecy, using it not so much to overcome as to thematize various forms of (imposed) silence and absences. In this way she has created a singular poetic idiom, based on the reductive

[26] See Sharrock 36-49.

[27] See Simon Brittan, "Graves and the Mythology of Desire," *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. Patrick J. Quinn (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1999) 92.

techniques of ellipsis and encryption, as well as on polyphony, that together enhance, rather than curb, the possibilities of the lyric "I." Although McGuckian's baffling referentiality and fragmented syntax provoked a wave of refusal at first,[28] they have lately been perceived as her particular strength. Scholars like Clair Wills, Shane Alcobia-Murphy, and Moynagh Sullivan have prompted us to see her puzzling idiom and occasional hermeticism as creatively subversive. According to Wills, McGuckian's poems offer

> not representations of the truth of feminine experience, but a private language whose rationale is in part the maintenance of secrecy. One consequence of this strategy of concealment is a foregrounding of the problematics of poetic address across different sections of the local and international community. [...] McGuckian's work is very far from acting as an aesthetic refuge, instead it serves to challenge redemptive approaches to everyday life.[29]

Citing Claude Sartiliot, Alcobia-Murphy asserts that McGuckian's poetic method encompasses a rewriting, "a repetition that distorts and misquotes, that destroys in order to transform."[30] Referring to her abundant use of quotations from texts by others, her "openness to inspiration, a willingness to welcome the approach of the Muse through the words of [...] other source," he claims that McGuckian's poetic texts "are original and, even though they are oblique, they possess the coherence which many of her reviewers feel they lack."[31] According to Sullivan, McGuckian's compelling writing "literally makes pre-linguistic sense [as it] affirms the doubleness of being both subject and object, and succeeds as poetry."[32]

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[28] For examples of some of the virulent reactions to McGuckian's work see Alcobia-Murphy 6-7, 43.
[29] Wills, *Improprieties* 191.
[30] Claude Sartiliot, *Citation and Modernity: Derrida, Joyce, and Brecht* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995) 76. Qtd. in Alcobia-Murphy 85.
[31] Alcobia-Murphy 85.
[32] Moynagh Sullivan, "The In-formal Poetics of Medbh McGuckian," *Nordic Irish Studies* 3.1 (2004): 90.

Like Ní Chuilleanáin, McGuckian employs encryption neither to write simply of feminine experience, nor for its own sake as formal ornamentation, but to emblematize the limitations of verbal representation: her halting but multivocal poetic idiom helps not only to define and instantiate those limitations, but to undo them as well. This is brought about, in part, by the distortion of the narrative logic and the obscuring of image creation, which Sullivan refers to as McGuckian's "pre-linguistic sense." It is precisely by refusing to "make sense" within the patriarchal discoursive regimes that McGuckian's secret poems acquire a political dimension and can be associated with feminist efforts to deconstruct the authority of the masculine voice and symbolic order. As Murphy discloses, one of the devices in her strategy of stealthy privatization (which proposes secrecy and concealment in the place of revealing intimacy) is extensive reliance on intertextuality. Although it provides the source (together with consistent manipulation of deictics) of the multivocal opacity of her work, her dovetailing of unidentified quotations is done so well that the tone is seamless. Owing to the scattered provenance of her sources, that have included female as well as male authors of various languages and genres (absorbed exclusively through English translations and cribs), McGuckian can hardly be seen as attempting a revision or censure of the *Irish* literary canon. What she does refute, though, is the standard (patriarchal) model of affiliation. While her poetry produces the surface illusion of smoothness and normalcy (due to the relative regularity of the shape of her stanzas and to occasionally discernible metrical patterns),[33] the mixture of referential and narrative obscurity with the precision and urgency of individual images make her poetry unprecedented within Irish poetry as well as within the broader field of Anglophone writing. Paradoxically, this apparent lack of indebtedness is the effect of McGuckian's extensive borrowing: by including quotations not to support a particular line of

[33] See Falci, *Continuity and Change* 86.

thought but as raw material, she prevents them from disrupting her tone and creates images that are stunningly original.

In "The Villain" from *Venus and the Rain* (1984), McGuckian combines notions of artistic inspiration and matrimony, examined above in the discussion of Meehan's poems, while typically complicating both concepts – and many more at the same time:

> This house is the shell of a perfect marriage
> Someone has dug out completely; so its mind
> Is somewhere above its body, and its body
> Stumbles after its voice like a man who needs
> A woman for every book. When you put your
> Handkerchief to your lips and turned away from
> Me, I saw in the lawn that least wished itself
> Known the reverse of green fingers, taking an
> Over-long walk. [...][34]

In this hardly decipherable tangle of roles, subjects, and objects McGuckian parodies the stereotypical conception of the body or form of the poem as feminine, as well as that of poetic expression as the product of the male mind. Further on, the speaker – with a typically fractured body and Self – identifies with the house through "this my / Brownest, tethered room, the unloved villain / The younger year may locate, and take into its own." Indeed, she seems to make it all her own – the voice of her poem as well as that of every man's book, the interior of the house perceived as the body of the Self, as well as its surroundings fused with one's wondering mind – using it to enhance the possibilities of her speaking "I." While she

[34] McGuckian, "The Villain," *Venus and the Rain* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2001) 22.

suggests she is able to see the hidden, reverse side of things that least "wish themselves known" she manages to make the words of the poem, but also its borrowed concepts appear to be all of her making. The idea of the outside of the house (or the body) as an extension of one's mind – imagined as "the reverse of green fingers, taking an / Over-long walk," – points to McGuckian's latent yet frequent allusions to the indeterminacy of Cartesian dualism.

Yet, as Peter Sirr points out, "McGuckian's work is almost always, on some level, love poetry." In many of these "you poems," he has it, the poet "confronts her poetics [...] as well as the real or fictive addressee." If the addressee is mostly shrouded in a concoction of identities, this includes the unclear distinction between "you" or "we," and "I." The encompassing of the speaker's Self in the address, the turning of the speaking voice back on itself enables the poet to speak through and at the same time to the poem. Sirr adds that this sort of mixed address "has antecedents in the essentially male tradition that conflates love and Muse poetry."[35] While Meehan rails against the muse, McGuckian has proclaimed herself to be dependent on it. According to her, "all poetry is erotic," and to write a good poem feels like "going to bed with your muse."[36] It seems as though she needs a person for every poem: "there is usually one special person the poem is a private message to."[37] Still, in "The Villain," which is a love poem to a man as much as to a house, McGuckian alludes to the principles of male creativity in order to ridicule her own dependence on her muse and male listener,[38] but also to show her ultimate independence of anything at all – to illustrate the liberating effects of imagination. Blurring the limits of the house and questioning its solidity she undermines the validity of the marriage that "someone has dug out completely." While the

[35] Sirr 456.
[36] Bohman 104.
[37] Peggy O'Brien, "Reading Medbh McGuckian: Admiring What We Cannot Understand," *Colby Quarterly* 28. 4 (December 1992): 224. Qtd. in Alcobia-Murphy 43.
[38] McGuckian has claimed that she "write[s] to please a male audience and also to make them aware how a woman thinks." Michael Allen, "The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian," *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992) 304. Qtd. in Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction* 167. Quinn refers to her poetry as consisting of a "continual conversation with a silent man in the midst of metamorphosing landscapes and house interiors." Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction* 167.

persona seems to be left behind by the departing husband, her wondering mind is shown as encompassing – and trespassing – the limits of the house, thus finding a way out of the confines of domesticity. As Wills notes, McGuckian's poems are never content with "translating the feminine image out of the sphere of politics and into that of personal experience, but attempt to hold both in tension."[39]

Unlike in Meehan's "Not Your Muse," this greedy, compulsive appropriation seems to say, "all is muse." Like the other poet's lines, however, McGuckian's poem is spoken to an invisible, silent listener. Imagination, together with the sense of secret grasping of things unknown to others, provides an outlet of private communication. Its outcome, nevertheless, is as personal as it is allegorical and political. McGuckian's subversion consists in her adoption of the Gravesean, essentially sexist concept of poetry. The success of her gesture is due to the fact that she does not simply invert the polarity, but complicates it through entanglement of the gender references and distinctions, and through the use of self-irony.

Most of all, the half-mocking tone resembles that of a letter not intended to be sent, or an entry in a diary. But, as is the case with McGuckian's verse in general, with her centos in which voices of many origins and sources are moulded into the narrative, it is impossible to categorize "The Villain" according to its style. One of the hallmarks of McGuckian's idiom is her use of subversive heteroglossia: the ironic play on the conventional register associated with poetic language and particular poetic genres. In "The Villain," all the rhythms and phrases that would proximate it to a particular form (here mostly to that of an ode or a farewell song) are juxtaposed with ironizing, centripetal images that undermine not just the mimetic, but stylistic integrity of the poem. Irony seems to be not just the saving grace, but the driving force behind McGuckian's poetry.[40] What the irony rests on is, again, the

[39] Wills, *Improprieties* 160.

[40] The prevailing element of self-irony is strengthened by the fact that McGuckian's dependence on the living muse has its counterpart in her direct inspiration not least in letters and diaries by other female writers, such as Marina Tsvetaeva or Tatyana Tolstoy. See Alcobia-Murphy 57-60, 231-36, 72-78.

provocatively cryptic character of her writing. She needs to gain distance from the conventionally prescribed ideal of womanhood, from her muse, but also from her particular textual sources, and, most importantly, from her own pose as a poet. Typically, those unwilling to see the irony, have been puzzled and affronted by McGuckian's apparent hermeticism, and have accused her of arrogance and solipsism, even literary "autism."[41]

McGuckian admits to relying on private experience in her writing, pointing out that it is meant to remain such: "Every poem I've written is about something that's happened to me... but I've coded it."[42] These references to her personal life along with the poet's continuous employment of consistently unspecified intertextual allusions are the source of McGuckian's typical obliquity. They connote issues of broader societal impact and the discrepancies between ideologies and the facts of women's lives. As Wills has it, "A seemingly personal poet [McGuckian] is radical precisely in her attempts to talk about public and political events through the medium of private symbolism."[43]

Clair Wills predicted the tendency in McGuckian's writing from the late 1990s onwards to centre her poems and entire books around various events and symbols of Irish nationalist resistance. Starting with the publication of *Captain Lavender* (1994) and continuing in *Shelmalier* (1998), which Falci described as "one of the most improbable engagements with Irish history in the canon of contemporary Irish poetry,"[44] McGuckian further foregrounded the contrast between proclaimed, though utterly obscure, external reference and the rhetoric of uncommented, but manifest, concealment. If the impulse for *Shelmalier*, as we get to know from the author's note, was the bicentenary of the 1798 rebellion of the United Irishmen, the three books published in quick succession just after the

[41] See Steven Blyth, "Gift Rapt," *PN Review* 106 (November/December 1995): 59. Qtd. in Alcobia-Murphy 6.
[42] Medbh McGuckian in Catherine Byron, "A House of One's Own: Three Contemporary Irish Women Poets," *Women's Review* 19 (May 1987): 33. Qtd. in Alcobia-Murphy 45.
[43] Wills, *Improprieties* 61.
[44] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 84.

turn of the millenium – *Drawing Ballerinas* (2001), *The Face of the Earth* (2002), and *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003) – allegedly refer to various crises in Irish political history, including the 1916 Rising, World War I, the Irish Troubles and the situation in post-ceasefire Belfast. Typically, none of those references surface in the poems themselves; indeed, as Falci has it, the lyrics "include history by forgetting or submerging its details."[45] McGuckian's opacity can be linked to Ní Chuilleanáin's reticence and Meehan's secrecy: in this way her private, encoded symbolism dismantles the gendered stereotypes of the motherland and the female muse.[46] It also enables her to include meditations of the past and present-day political disturbances, and, as we shall see in the subsequent chapter, to incorporate the (vicarious) memory of the loss of the Irish language.

An open ironization of the idea of the muse informs Biddy Jenkinson's "'Ait liom' agus rl"[47] ("Strange to Me..." etc.) from her 1997 collection *Amhras Neimhe*. Jenkinson, who claims to have a "healthy" stance to the tradition and refuses to burden herself with "obligations to the dead, no more than I would burden the next generation with obligations towards myself," regards literary influence as occasional "wind-blown pollen on the stigma of imagination, [...] as a free gift."[48] Here she discards the affiliation as well as the woman-*qua*-muse scheme. She mockingly inverts conventional tropes and "makes free with" man (which is about the most precise translation of "le dánaíocht ort" in the second line).

Leag uait do pheann, a fhir	Lay down your pen, my man
– le dánaíocht ort mo dhán –	– I'll dare you in my poem –
Tusa tú féin an bior	You alone are the nib

[45] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 84.
[46] See Wills, *Improprieties* 73-6.
[47] Jenkinson, "'Ait liom' agus rl," *Amhras Neimhe* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1997) 76.
[48] Jenkinson, "A Reply" 80.

Bíodh d'imscríobh faoi na mná	Let women circumscribe you
Tú an fhoinse fíor	It's you, the true fountain
tobar inspioráide	the well of inspiration
Ná tarraing asat féin –	Don't draw on yourself –
árthaigh ag na mná!	it's women who own vessels!
Toibrigh chugam gan dua	Rise to me easily
– bacann cuimhneamh sil –	– memory hinders flow –
Gin ionamsa an dán	Beget the poem in me
go seolfad é, a fhir.	And I will deliver it, my man.

Having no patience for sentimental brooding over the past, she turns to some of the revered male figures of Irish-language poetry and mockingly dares them to collaborate with her. In keeping with her determination to be considered exclusively as part of Irish-language writing, she deals not just with the general idea of inspiring womanhood, but turns to particular expressions of that attitude in the Irish-language canon. Like the 17th-century poet Piaras Feiritéar paraphrased in the first line,[49] she makes as if she wishes to do without the man, pretending at the same time to praise him as fuel for her creative energy. The general disowning tone of this parody ode is intended not only to deconstruct the trope of the female muse, but to claim that neither of the sexes is essential or of primary importance for the process of poetic inspiration and creation.

[49] See Piaras Feiritéar, "Léig dhíot th'airm," *An Duanaire; 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, eds. Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, trans. Thomas Kinsella (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1990) 96-100. (Léig dhíot th'airm, a mhacaoimh mná, / muna fearr feat cách do lot; […] Folaigh orthu do rosc liath, / má théid ar mharbhais riamh leat; / ar ghrádh th'anma dún do bhéal, / ná faiceadh siad do dhéad geal. *Lay your weapons down, young lady, / Do you want to ruin us all? [...] Conceal those eyes of grey / if you'd go free for all you've killed. / Close your lips, to save your soul; let your bright teeth not be seen.*)

The poem's title refers to the opinion shared by many Irish male authors and critics well into the second half of the last century that woman was unacceptable as anything but the subject matter of poetry. The stance was infamously expressed by Seán Ó Ríordáin who, in his poem "Banfhile" (Woman Poet), insisted by way of a refrain that "Ní file ach filíocht í an bhean"[50] (woman is not poet but poetry), provoking reactions from poets and feminist critics in both languages. As Moynagh Sullivan notes, this repetition carries with it "more than an Irish cultural taboo against women becoming poets, but also, crucially, an understanding of the matter of poetry as feminine, that is as the material matrix from which a distinctive poetic voice is individuated."[51] In her view, "this poetic economy masculinises voice, and feminises form, that is, the body of the poem."[52] Indeed, Jenkinson refutes this model by announcing herself to be the holder of both the voice (go seolfadh é) and the body or the vessel (árthaigh) of the poem. But she goes even further, collapsing the whole masculine-feminine polarity in an ironic mix of role-play and quotes.

While she sets out to subvert the notion of the poem as either feminine or masculine, she undermines the idea of the tradition as belonging to either of the two sexes, wishing to show the irrelevance of such thinking. She protests against Ó Ríordáin's refusal of women as authors in Irish-language poetry, but also contradicts the universal notion of "muse poetry," particularly the romanticizing concept of poetic inspiration based on the confusion of sexual and creative drives. Feigning to ask the man to beget the poem in her she parodies the understanding, common to McGuckian and many others, of poetry writing as an erotic act. Although she admits that "[l]ove is the only possible theme for a writer [and that] the writing

[50] Seán Ó Ríordáin, "Banfhile," *Tar éis mo bháis agus dánta eile* (Dublin: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1978) 45. Apart from a barb aimed at Ó Ríordáin for his misogynous attitude, Jenkinson's title pays tribute to a cornerstone article of feminist criticism in Irish by Máire Ní Annracháin. See Máire Ní Annracháin, "Ait Liom Bean a Bheith ina File," *Léachtaí Cholm Cille XII: Na Mná sa Litríocht*, ed. Pádraig Ó Fiannachta (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1982) 145. The phrase is also taken up in the title of Nic Eoin's 1998 monograph on gender politics in the Gaelic tradition. See Máirín Nic Eoin, *B'ait Leo Bean: Gnéithe den Idé-eolaíocht Inscne I dTraidisiún Liteartha na Gaeilge* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1998).

[51] Sullivan, "The In-formal Poetics" 76.

[52] Sullivan, "The In-formal Poetics" 75.

itself is a matter of love," Jenkinson's idea of love and its role in verbal creation is broader than Yeats's, for example, when he famously remarked towards the end of his career that "no matter how I begin, it becomes love poetry before I am finished with it."[53] Her notion of love poetry exceeds the horizon of erotic motivations: for her part, she says, "poetry takes the place of formal religious observance, as a way of loving whatever there may be."[54]

Like in Meehan or McGuckian her persona turns to a fictive, generic addressee, pretending to usurp all there is in the poem and mocking the kind of self-birthing male subject of which Sullivan speaks.[55] In a joking gesture she appropriates the diction of the androgynous male poet, as illustrated for example in Pierre Albert-Bireau's exclamation, "Et je me crée d'un trait de plume / Maître du Monde / Homme illimité."[56] Jenkinson's deliberate confusion of the subject-object dichotomy, her strangely ambiguous syntax and the indeterminacy of her challenge ultimately show that it is fruitless to bicker over the past (including the canon).

This reluctance to support the once popular idea in the field of Irish culture that – as Claire Connolly puts it – "the country is obsessed with its own past,"[57] is relevant to Jenkinson's position on the Irish-language situation. In reply to Máire Mhac an tSaoi's review of contemporary poetry in Irish on the occasion of the publication of the *Innti* magazine in 1988,[58] Jenkinson challenged the elder poet's view that, as Jenkinson paraphrases, "poetry in Irish is written by a 'dámh' of necrolatrous, alienated, priests chanting in the ruins of the

[53] A letter to Olivia Shakespeare from 25 May 1926. *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. John Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002) InteLex Electronic Edition 4871. Qtd. in Joseph M. Hassett, *Yeats and the Muses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 157.

[54] Biddy Jenkinson in *Irish Women Writers: An A-To-Z-Guide*, ed. Alexander G. Gonzalez (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005) 155.

[55] See Moynagh Sullivan, "Irish Poetry after Feminism: in Search of 'Male Poets,'" *Irish Poetry after Feminism*, ed. Justin Quinn (Monaco: Princess Grace Irish Library Lectures, 2008) 15.

[56] Pierre Albert-Bireau, "Les amusements naturels," Qtd. in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) 185.

[57] Claire Connolly, "Introduction: Ireland in Theory," *Theorizing Ireland*, ed. Claire Connolly (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 12.

[58] See Mhac a tSaoi, "The Clerisy and the Folk" 33-5.

Gaelic Tradition."[59] Opposing the notion (popularized by Ní Dhomhnaill) of Irish-language poetic production as a spectre or a talking corpse, Jenkinson resolutely refuses the widespread ironic awareness "that by our passage we would convenience those who will be uneasy in their Irishness as long as there is a living Gaelic tradition to which they do not belong."[60] She counters Mhac an tSaoi's heroizing image of Irish-language poets as writing in defiance of death and refuses to be praised on account of working in "a fast dying minority language": "I write in a living language for living friends."[61] Yet, even if she refuses to revere the past and disapproves of the Pygmalionesque notion of Irish as dead material that needs life breathed into it, her parodic allusions to the objectification of women in the Irish-language canon show her as engaging with the older tradition. Although the general tone of "'Ait liom' agus rl" is less polemic than might seem from its title and the mocking citations at the start, its censure issues from a female persona who, in defending her own selfhood and integrity, speaks up for an absent, thus necessarily silent and generic, male addressee.

Such enabling irony is constitutive also for the above-cited poems by Meehan and McGuckian whose male objects share the conviction of the unknown and unaccountable nature of woman that prompts them, nevertheless, to pin her down. As I have suggested, Meehan's "protecting" males seem to be more comfortable with a generic ideal than with a living individual. Even though McGuckian's, Jenkinson's, or Ní Chuilleanáin's verse is free of such an explicit, thematic polarity between men and women, and between silence and communication, what they share with Meehan (perhaps outdoing her in this respect) is the liberation of their speakers and personas through the foregrounding of their basic elusiveness. The insistence on

[59] Jenkinson, "A Reply" 80.
[60] Jenkinson, "A Reply" 80.
[61] Jenkinson, "A Reply" 80.

the unknowability of the Self, paired with applications of secrecy and mocking silence, is to be understood as an enlivening, rather than stifling element.

The poems thus offer critical accounts of men's "epistemological scepticism" which Stanley Cavell identifies as "essentially a masculine affair." [62] In his analysis of gnosiological mechanisms in Shakespeare's plays, Cavell argues that in *Othello* as well as in *The Winter's Tale* the man's refusal of knowledge of his Other, his insistence, in other words, on seeing/hearing what he is expected to see/hear, is represented in an image of stone. Othello's extreme image of the dead Desdemona is as a piece of cold marble: "Whiter skin of hers than marble, And smooth as monumental alabaster."[63] It is Othello's jealousy of the woman's autonomy in her unknowability which drives his impulse to deprive her of life. Such construing of woman's autonomy as entailing corruption and perversion chimes with the traditional reading of the Pygmalion myth, particularly stressed during the Renaissance, as containing a moral threat. In keeping with the self-promoted image of Elizabeth I as "marble stone," epitomizing her long-lasting reign and virginity, the Ovidian narrative was either rejected as prompting lewdness and perversion (in its reference to the Propetides as well as in the foregrounding of Pygmalion's necromantic idolatry) or praised as a symbol of the rejection (on the part of Pygmalion) of low human passion in favour of the worship of a mute ideal. This pairing of the steady virtue of Galatea with cold silence is significant. In *The Winter's Tale*, which contains elements of Ovid's Pygmalion, Hermione is rendered practically voiceless: none will listen to her pleadings of innocence; thus she becomes an emblem of silenced truth which, in its turn, signifies death. Deprived of speech, Hermione goes into hiding, pretending to have died and adopting the appearance of cold stone. Looking back on his own jealousy, Leontes imagines the stone "to chide" him "for being more stone

[62] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 125.
[63] Cavell 125-26.

than it" (V.iii, 36-38),[64] until realizing that "she's warm!" (V.iii, 109) some three acts and sixteen years later when he finally allows – and hears – her speak.

It is this idea of melting and softening – the moment of transformation from a lifeless icon (or copy) which connotes coldness and muteness into an independent, individual life suggesting speech and the anarchic effects of the simulacrum – that has informed the above references to the Pygmalion myth. Moreover, the likening of the ivory image to snow and its connotations of speechless attractiveness remind us of the ideal of feminine purity and beauty as recorded in the Irish-language tradition, and to the conventional figurations therein of Ireland as a white-limbed, white-browed maiden. In this, the Pygmalion image has relevance for the revisionist treatments of Irish myth and oral tradition, not least in terms of the latter's silencing in written text and in translation. While the issue of poetic translation will feature as one of the main themes in the next chapter, in the remaining pages here I will examine the creative possibilities of secret writing and reticence, in close readings of poems that share a tendency not only to fragmentation of narrative and opacity of expression, but also to a tone of political non-involvement. Starting with a discussion of the referential breadth of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's images of bucolic stillness, I will go on to look at poems by Caitríona O'Reilly and Vona Groarke in which they write of (and to) their elusive male muse. I will show in what way this apparent detachment from public discourse (foreshadowed in the privatizations of the iconic images of the female muse to which I have so far referred) also comments on the canon, not so much by inverting or modifying the gendered polarity of the conventional muse address (which will be the subject of the following chapter) but in their heightened ironization of the very trope and in further stressing the elusiveness of the muse.

[64] See Barbara Roche Rico, "From 'Speechless Dialect' to 'Prosperous Art': Shakespeare's Recasting of the Pygmalion Image," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 43.3 (Summer 1985): 285-95.

Even as they complain of the enforced historical and literary silence of women, poets like Ní Chuilleanáin, Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland, and Meehan base their poetic expression on preterition and various techniques of naming the unspeakable. In the oral tradition, as well as according to the bourgeois image of the ideal feminine, woman's speech and loquacity is mostly rejected as signifying the lack of male control.[65] Yet women of all times have pretended silence and used ambiguous expression in order to deal with their gender position. Angela Bourke, writing of the unwitting recourse by abused women to rhetorical applications of silence such as *paralipsis* has pointed out that silence is often resorted to in self-defence and self-assertion by those who have been marginalized by society.[66]

Even at the early stages of their emancipation, women can be seen as simultaneously embracing and rejecting silence in their writings. Various techniques of silence, and of writing about silence, were employed so that the unsayable aspects of women's cultural and social experience could be revealed in their poetry.[67] In an extreme understanding, silence with its unrestricted horizons can be seen as an emblem of the infinite possibilities of language. As Michel Foucault writes in Volume I of *The History of Sexuality*,

> There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one

[65] For an in-depth analysis of the various expressions of this attitude in the Irish oral narrative see Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) 50-52.

[66] Bourke in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, eds. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997) 101.

[67] See Amy Christine Billone, *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2007) and Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

> but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.[68]

Ní Dhomhnaill in "Toircheas 1" from *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990) refers to this reproductive power of silence. The poem opens with the speaker asking: "An féidir scríobh ar chiúineas?"[69] (Is it possible to write of silence?). McGuckian, who provided an English version of the poem for that bilingual edition, renders the title as "Ark of the Covenant," with reference to the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, thus adding a religious undertone that is not part of the original.[70] However, the literal meaning of "toircheas" *is* "pregnancy" or "offspring" and the imagery Ní Dhomhnaill proposes by way of an answer to her own question is that of a benign growth:

> Ins an chré phatfhuar, thais, tá síol gan chorraí.
> Ba dhóigh leat a anáil tairrigthe ag an saol. San eadarlinn
> éalaíonn luid deireanach an tsolais ó bhun go barr binne
> faoi mar a éalaíonn go minic an mhéanfach ó dhuine go duine.

> In the coldish, damp soil lies a motionless seed.
> You would think its breath was taken from life. In the halt
> the last of light eludes from bottom to the top of the hill
> just like yawn is often sent from one to another.

[68] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 27.
[69] Ní Dhomhnaill, "Toircheas 1," *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1990) 50-51.
[70] See McGuckian and Ní Dhomhnaill in L. O'Connor, "Comhrá."

The two stanzas that immediately follow the initial question consist of images of various forms of roundness that connote silence,[71] including clouds hanging motionlessly in the sky (a seolta arda, bolgacha, gan chorraí) and bubbles revealing predatory fish as they lie lurking in the depths of the lake (i bhfianaise go bhfuil éisc / go scuaideáil thíos sa doimhneas). But the third strophe (cited above) suggests the possibility of speech and a discovery or a new life, as if with a nod to Ní Chuilleanáin's "Pygmalion's Image." It is but a promise, but, in connection with the infectious yawn, the dormant seed signals birth and reverberation.

The overall effect of silence neither simply follows from the peaceful, natural images, nor does it merely connote the awed hush that surrounds pregnancy. The prevailing stillness is coupled with the elusive possibility of speech given in the images of pregnant roundness and enabling hollows, culminating in the final stanza with the image of a motionless seed lying in the soil. Through the latter, I suggest, the poem relates to one of the dominant themes in Ní Dhomhnaill's work: her idea of the Irish landscape and collective memory as embedded with folkloric material and the awareness of the untranslatability of the oral tradition into writing. The question posed at the start of the poem can thus be said to refer to the paradox inherent in the majority of Ní Dhomhnaill's own poetry, which lies in her insistence, through the very act of writing, on the essential orality of her medium.[72] Ní Dhomhnaill describes the "successful transposition of the spoken voice into writing without loss of any of its inherent strengths or spontaneity" as "being as difficult to achieve as trying to pin a live butterfly to a page."[73] The halt of the interim (eadarlinn) can be read, of course, as the pause before a breath is taken and before utterance starts. But it also lends itself to another interpretation in which the hush

[71] In a joint interview with McGuckian Ní Dhomhnaill talks about the silence that surrounds pregnancy: "There is a quietness about it. That is the thing about writing pregnancy poems. It is almost impossible to do because being pregnant is actually unspeakable it's so enormous." See McGuckian and Ní Dhomhnaill in L. O'Connor, "Comhrá."

[72] See Falci, *Continuity and Change* 160.

[73] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 180.

stands for the necessary fissure – "the process of linguistic disturbance,"[74] as Falci has it, underlying the transformation of Irish as the language of the oral legend into modernity, and the transcription of oral utterances into written texts – that Ní Dhomhnaill's work epitomizes and heals at once.

In "Toircheas 1," Ní Dhomhnaill enacts the popular troping (coined in one of her own essays[75]) of the Irish language and its literary tradition as a resuscitated corpse: a breath is taken and the yawn, handed over from mouth to mouth, sums up the very principle of the oral tradition (*béaloideas*). The seed, lying in the coldish, damp soil, symbolizes the close adherence of the oral literature to the landscape as evidenced in the toponymic tradition of *dinnsheanchas*. This perspective not only relates the poem back to "Ag Tiomáint Siar" and my discussion of Ní Dhomhnaill's revisionist claim of the primarily patriarchal connotations of *dinnsheanchas*, but it lends new significance to the aforementioned connection with Ní Chuilleanáin's "Pygmalion's Image" and the proposed interpretation of the green leaf of language therein as representing the enlivening potential of the fact (either topical or historic) of Irish. Viewed in the dual context of the Ovidian narrative and the traditional local lore, the poem's imagery of rounded silence indirectly subverts the stereotypical necromantic evocation of Irish that informs, among others, Ní Dhomhnaill's concept of talkative cadaver and which Jenkinson has rejected. On the one hand, this foregrounding of silence demonstrates that it is indeed possible to write of the unspeakable. On the other hand it evidences, through the imagery of pregnant hollows and rounded shapes, the potentiality of silence for writing itself. Ultimately it bypasses the notion of writing (especially of writing in Irish) as Socratic memory-killer or the Derridean "dead letter."[76]

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[74] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 162.

[75] See Ní Dhomhnaill, "Why I Choose to Write in Irish, the Corpse That Sits Up and Talks Back," *Selected Essays* 10-24.

[76] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998) 17.

A true Pygmalionesque persona speaks from Caitríona O'Reilly's "Tall Figure in Studio,"[77] the second of her four meditations on "Statuary" in *The Nowhere Birds* (2001). The sequence of four close-ups, in which diverse sculptures are observed as they make "marble remarks" ("III Bargello"), "ring the room" ("I The Crouching Boy"), or contemplate out loud their own conception ("II Tall Figure in Studio"), is ironically prefixed with a quote from Beckett's *Molloy*: "To restore silence is the role of objects." Like Beckett's prose, the poem points to the sly rebelliousness of the material world, subverting the subject-object opposition. Its governing paradox lies in the narratives triggered by observations of – and observations made by – objects carved into cold stone. The poems, indeed, embody the pregnancy, the ringing of the silence that is launched by the final stroke of the chisel.

In "II Tall Figure in Studio" a statue speculates about the intentions of her erratic maker: "I think I am as he wanted me – / the one upright amidst this studied dereliction, / the cobwebs choking on plaster dust, old splintered frames, stained mattresses and rubble." The suggestion of a possible contrast between her fact and his supposed design, her conventional, sexless nudity and the insinuated lust of her maker, underlines the defiance of her tone, despite its apparent subservience:

> I stand rigid, obsessed by my wire core
> and the little else I am given,
> this spoon-shaped pelvis, a suggestion of breasts –
> in form an expression of all his withdrawals
> through the days of my making,
> or like a plucked string, remembering his fingers

[77] Caitríona O'Reilly, "Statuary," *The Nowhere Birds* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2001) 34-35.

as his final silence became proper sound.

The final acoustic image inverts the polarity of silence and sound. Culminating in the closing line, which defines the silence following the final touch of a sculptor's chisel (by definition noisy) not as the ceasing, but as the true beginning of "proper sound," the poem focuses on the art object as eloquent embodiment of silence, of which the poem itself serves as an ultimate proof.

Once again, we come across a female persona speculating about a man's perception, and conception, of herself while showing that her real life – and speech – begins at the very point that his control inevitably stops, and from which on silence – due to her stone substance – would seem to be her only option. Admitting, like Jenkinson's speaker, that the man's was a necessary contribution in her making, she asserts at the same time that the voice and the tone are really her own.

In her next collection, *The Sea Cabinet* (2006), O'Reilly returns "To the Muse."[78] While in the title she admits to her reliance on a muse figure, the poem itself is as far from a conventional muse address or invocation as can be. If anything, it is an ironic inventory of various disastrous outings together, erotic disasters and unsuccessful, "one-way conversations" that feel like "milking // a mastitic cow who regards you / reproachfully, her face framed by caesarean / kiss-curls the shape of question marks." The male object of the poem, titled as the muse, is in fact hardly mentioned at all, the lines evolving around the void that marks the couple's time together, and around the self-obsessed loneliness of the speaker. Once again, the addressee is out of reach, perhaps not even meant to hear what is being said.

[78] O'Reilly, "To the Muse," *The Sea Cabinet* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2006) 21.

There was sexual failure in the guesthouse bedroom,
a broken shower and a groaning cistern,

which we were too far gone to welcome
as Romantic squalor.

[…]
Meanwhile all I could think about at the castle,

under the purple ash toppled by last week's storm,
was my trip here aged eleven, the hung-over

driver glowering on the school bus,
whose indecent advances the evening before

brought the masonry of childhood definitely tumbling,
confirming even my worst imaginings.

All in all, "To the Muse" reads as a refutation of the romantic concept of the inspiring Other. Any idea of exciting amorous experience is checked with the bleak, strangely unhinged reality and tinged with the memory of an unpleasant initiation. This ironic stance to the trope comes across also in other poems which pay closer attention to the muse figure, even though they do not mention it in their title.

In "Heliotrope"[79] – named after the wild flowering plant that got its name in English from the alleged tendency to turn its flower head after the sun – the opening lines evoke the stony, but greening, and finally leaf-sprouting image of Ní Chuilleanáin:

Past beautiful,
stuck in the dust

of a road, her thin
branched head

with its baby hair
and dozen white eyes

so anthropomorphised
and mute – her lover

going down the sky
daily in his flaming steps

and she with her
padlocked gaze –

eternal follower!

[79] O'Reilly, "Heliotrope," *The Sea Cabinet* 56.

Identifying with the flower, the poet re-enacts the muse scheme placing herself in the role of silent admirer. Yet the poem is, of course, a version of an old Greek myth, as told by Ovid in Book IV of the *Metamorphoses*, about the water nymph Clytie who loved Helios so much that she turned into a plant, the turnsole or heliotrope, after being rejected. The formal tone following from the mythological source is much closer to that of an ode to a lover and muse. Nevertheless, the convention of the genre and the expectations of a certain register that it carries also provide space for irony. This emerges in the very first couplet through the unromantic, rather down-to-earth word choice.

Even the closing metaphor of spring confirms the ironic tone of the piece through centripetal vocabulary that suggests free love of the flower children as the budding flowers of hyacinths, lotuses and "narcissus / on his sex-struck stem" are paired with

> all the buried
> girls and boys
>
> whose lost testes
> and ovules stir to life
>
> again this month.

In the end, the poem reads as much as a subversion of the worship of Helios as that of the cult of the muse.

In "Electrical Storm" O'Reilly plays out an almost McGuckianesque medley of images, including those of dreams and rooms, and fusing bodies with water.

And like everything it began with the sea,
that week I spent rinsing myself clean of it
[…] When I arose

it was from a bed: the weight of the sea fell away.
On that night a storm split the sky in two.
Its tearing entered my dream, entered a room
in which we kissed, though I did not know you.
The voice of the storm became your voice,
its lightning, your eyes' most delicate veins.

The lover's "prismatic face" is not just the speaker's focus, but the lens through which the world is perceived and experienced. Like in "Heliotrope," the female persona lets herself be circumscribed by the presence of her lover and looks out at the world through the scope of his presence. While she places herself in the centre from which she can observe, through an analogy with sexual intimacy she fuses with the outside world, letting it "tear" into the private room of the imagining mind where, after all, she can afford to be one with her Other, without needing to be explicit and to decipher his, and the world's, mystery. This acknowledgement, even heightening of the moment of enigma by way of the elusive, non-representational tone, corresponds with the hyperbolic imagery of deluging waters and vociferous storms, remindful of the biblical narrative. Indeed the speaker-poet's own voice issues from that inner secret room and from the persuasion that the poet's task is to be the conduit for mystery.

The generic idea of "*a* room" that at once provides a shelter from and a connection to the climate outside concurs with Elaine Scarry's concept of the room as signifying "an enlargement of the body": while its walls offer warmth and seclusion, in its windows and

doors as the "crude versions of the senses" it enables the Self to move out into the world and allows the world to enter.[80] In many of O'Reilly's poems the persona feels at home in the "room of the air"[81] that is experienced as an extension of the body, and expresses the awareness of the body as a perceiving entity, as well as of its epistemological uniqueness – and ambiguity.[82]Apparently, the poet is as fond of rooms as she is interested in secrets, dreams and nightmares: "If dreams are rooms in which myself accretes, / They also breathe their black into my day."[83] Typically, she searches for a meditative space, and is willing to go into hiding so as to be able to blend with the observed scene; or she examines the dark recesses of the mind in order to apprehend the workings of the imagination.[84] In the rooms of her muse poems, however, she strives to meld with her muse while representing its unknowability. Together with McGuckian, Jenkinson, and to some extent with Meehan, O'Reilly shares the sense that the begetting of a poem is a mutual act: the noise of the storm in "Heliotrope" becomes "your voice" while the persona joyfully admits not knowing who this "you" might be and does not falter in her report of the blustering upheaval in deixis, causality, and representation. The male objects in O'Reilly's love poems are designed not to give the poet a sense of propriety and of appropriateness, but to help her perceive and appreciate the unrestrained power of the elemental qualities of the world.

Similarly to O'Reilly's lyrics, much of Vona Groarke's poetry acknowledges reliance on a male muse, showing the same tendency (as we have seen in "Veneer") to irony and obliquity, whenever straying into the genre of muse invocation. Many of her lyrics are addressed to an expressly absent, thus silent, Other. Groarke's most recent collection,

[80] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 38.
[81] See O'Reilly, "Hide," *The Nowhere Birds* 60.
[82] See O'Reilly, "Hide," *The Nowhere Birds* 60.
[83] O'Reilly, "The Persona," *The Sea Cabinet* 14.
[84] See O'Reilly, "Poliomyelitis," "The Maze," and "Diffraction," *The Sea Cabinet* 11, 15, 17.

Spindrift (2009), reads in great part as a farewell to the muse, and possibly even as a line drawn under poetry writing.[85] "Orchard with Lovers,"[86] an ekphrasis of Gustav Klimt's "The Park" (1909–1910),[87] uses third-person narrative; the poem, however, is not so much about Klimt's art or the two lovers depicted therein as about the omniscient narrator's point of view. Groarke employs flickering metaphors of pointillist technique to capture the elusiveness of a moment. Yet, the "gloss" and "burnish" on the woman's eyelids that match her "dress of sequined apples" is given substance in a fixating male gaze.

> Gilded in afternoons,
> absorbed in vermilion evenings
> sworn to love,
> she could be a trick of the light
>
> except that her lover's eye steadies her
> from a kindred darkness
> that will vouchsafe
> the outcome of desire.

The painting provides a formal distancing tool that protects the poet-persona from too much pain while watching her muse, or perhaps lover, in silent embrace with another: "This art makes children of them / [...] / there is no question of harm." She may be left out of the

[85] In 2009 Groarke remarked: "There's something about the title sequence of my next book, *Spindrift*, that makes me think I have no other poems to write. Maybe that's a common impulse when a book is complete, but it's not one I'm used to. I don't see where to go from here, in poems. I've said what I know how to say in the clearest possible language (for me). I have written no poems since." In the same place she identified her former husband, the poet Conor O'Callaghan, as her source of inspiration and her most important influence. See Groarke in Daniela Theinová, "'Literární vzor je hezká starší sestra,'" (Influence Is Your Good-Looking Older Sister) *A2* 5.21 (2009): 24.

[86] Groarke, "Orchard with Lovers," *Spindrift* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2009) 38-39.

[87] Groarke has noted that the poem was loosely based on this painting. E-mail to the author, 9 September 2011.

lovers' embrace but the position of onlooker enables the expression of the poem. Thanks to her application of form, Groarke manages to be precise in her tone and representation, yet keeps "enough implication in it to suit myself," to use Marianne Moore's phrase.[88] The sense of precision and definiteness, which comes from the easily guessed-at source behind the poem (the inspiration by Klimt is obvious), focuses us on the scene and draws a line that separates both the narrator and the reader from what it implies. While the former function of the notional frame is manifest in the image of "the tracery / of a thousand leaves," the latter is completed in the last stanza with the metaphor of light flashing through the dense line of trees, creating "a hall composed of screens / that close over, nightly." This salutary effect of aloofness is similar to the use of quotations by McGuckian. As Randall Jarrell remarked, in relation to Moore, "quotation is armor and ambiguity and irony all at once."[89] All three are relevant to Groarke's ekphrastic poem: the "undertext" of the well-known painting provides a formal masque behind which emotion can be hidden and suppressed, only to be brought up in the descriptive, ironic treatment of the artwork's obscure arrangement of details. The irony serves both to facilitate and avoid communication of the unspeakable melancholy and emotional pain. Thus, the poem ultimately points to the limits of verbal representation, using the byway of visual art and graphic description to achieve expression. The central image at the close of the poem foregrounds its autonomy and confirms the situation it signifies as ultimately inexpressible: "There we leave them, wishful and enamoured // as the loved world asks them to be."

In this sense, the lyric dovetails with "An Teach Tuí"[90] from the same collection, a poem based on the memory of the "straw-coloured months of childhood / answering each other // like opposite windows in thickset walls" belonging to a house that "has the

[88] See Moore in "Interview with Marianne Moore by Donald Hall," *Poets at Work*, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Penguin, 1989) 87. Qtd. in L. O'Connor, *Haunted English* 154.
[89] See *Marianne Moore: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969) 120. Qtd. in L. O'Connor, *Haunted English* 154.
[90] Groarke, "An Teach Tuí," *Spindrift* 50.

wherewithal / to sit out centuries." Though she has spoken of the sweetening effect of the distant images of childhood homes and shelters and of their significance for her work, Groarke has also repeatedly commented on how the exact sense of comfort and the freeing effect of their recollection were virtually impossible to capture in words. Although the recollection of this "noun house" is, unlike Ní Chuilleanáin's houses that "sit silent,"[91] surrounded by sounds, as "Tea roses bluster the half-door" and "Rain from eaves footfalls the gravel," their representation and meaning remain beyond the poem's range. The elusiveness of both the material and recollected reality, which is one of the verses' main themes, is expressed in the song of the robin that,

> [...] cocksure of himself,
> frittered away all morning in the shrub,
>
> If I knew how to fix in even one language
> the noise of his wings in flight
>
> I wouldn't need another word.

Despite the evanescence of memory and sensory experience that the poem foregrounds, it testifies, in its very existence, to a competing notion behind it: that of lyric writing as a remedy to the painful insufficiency of words. For it is above all through elliptic and compacted expression that poetry is able to deal with, as Muldoon has it, the "complexities of being here"[92] while acting out the difficulty of such themes.

[91] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Gentleman's Bedroom," *Selected Poems* 39.
[92] See Paul Muldoon in John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber, 1981) 136.

Although there is no reference to the muse, "An Teach Tuí" shares with "Orchard with Lovers" not just the ambition to tackle the limits of cognition and verbal representation, but also the reassuring conclusion in which the irrevocability of such limits is confirmed. While I do not want to argue for any systematic pairing between Groarke's muse-poems and her poems of home, there are significant and recurrent instances in which the material image of a house is instrumental in the composition of the elusive concepts of love and the muse. Naturally, as the symbols and containers of intimacy, rooms are expected to provide – as in "Windmill Hymns" [93] from *Juniper Street* (2006) – "a stopgap / for the lives we thought we'd live, that wouldn't be banked in small talk, disappointments, lack of cash." But houses, like people, arouse affections and fade into memories, instead of holding and fixing happiness. If at first the house was an emblem of hope and security ("In the shadow of the windmill we put down our lives"), it is later shown in decay, until the body of the remembering mind is merged with its ruined walls in a comforting, conciliatory gesture: "That what's missing should be called 'the coping' makes me / want to lay my face against the stone; let ivy root in my teeth; / weather grout my skin, my eyes to take on the evening and its down." Throughout her work, Groarke offers loss as a possible gain or solution, and it is most pronounced in those poems that connect subjects such as the aforementioned houses of the past and the elusiveness of love or the muse. In "The Return"[94] from *Juniper Street* the speaker finds "our young day" walled-up in another house of the past: "The bricked-up door still comes as a surprise." As with the other house images, "The Return" blurs the distinction between imagined memories and imagined futures while the architecture, reminiscent of interior-castle dream narratives, catches the persona "somewhere / between surprise and reassurance": "The house is all beyond me; the room recedes. / I begin to lose the sense of what I saw."[95] The poem knows

[93] See Groarke, "Windmill Hymns," *Juniper Street* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2006) 12-13.
[94] See Groarke, "The Return," *Juniper Street* 26.
[95] Groarke, "The Dream House," *Other People's Houses* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999) 24-25.

but won't tell: "I know this house: I wrote our summer here / into words that closed over years ago, and still / I'm back to pick over the same grass." As before in "Windmill Hymns" this nexus of elusive memories and insufficient words is accompanied by the soothing illusion of continuity, the idea that nothing, after all, gets lost with time. Together with this illusion, the shell of the house provides access to the half-sweet, half-shattering memory of "our young day, like the blue of your eyes, / a noticed, simple thing that leaves me dumbfounded / in a half-hearted ruin." Despite the mixed feelings that it creates and in its refusal to be deciphered, the memory also feeds the fantasy of cohesion and constancy:

> My hand on the door admits me
> to those months where our lives bedded down in layers
> I could no more uncouple now than your wrist
> could turn some key or other and have us both
> walk out beyond this final door, into the glare
> of our release, another headlong day.

Groarke's sense of speechlessness can be linked with yet another issue which is the fissure left by the loss of the Irish language. "An Teach Tuí" refers, in Irish, to the thatched cottages in the Irish countryside, not least the West of Ireland where, on the edge of the Connemara Gaeltacht (in a house to which part of the title sequence in *Spindrift* and a number of her other poems are dedicated) Groarke has spent many summers since her childhood. During these stays, she notes, she frequently heard Irish spoken.[96] Even though she claims

[96] Groarke has remarked that she hardly ever comes across Irish as a literary artefact, "if not in translation." The poet herself has published an English translation of one of the classics of Irish literature, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. In the introductory essay she admits to having a limited knowledge of Irish and to have drawn on the many existing translations of the poem. See "Introduction" in Vona Groarke, *Lament for Art O'Leary* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2008) 9-19. While she claims to have found "the craft of the process, the whole problem-solving aspect of the work quite fascinating," her scepticism about the future of Irish

that she has always felt at home in the English language, the theme of Irish arises occasionally as a symptom of homesickness or melancholy. In *Spindrift*, she has two poems called "Away" about the experience of living and making a home in a place that "isn't home," about the periods she spent living and teaching in the United States. "The idea of home," she admits, "is the foundation [...] for most of what I write."[97] The idea of home also seems connected, however vaguely and marginally, with the memory of Irish. In the first of those poems she speaks about the tricks that living abroad can play on one's sense of linguistic integrity, of feeling at home in one language:

> I grow quiet. Yesterday
> I answered in a class of Irish
> at the checkout of Walgreen's.
>
> I walk through the day-to-day
> as if ferrying a pint glass
> filled to the brim with water
>
> that spills into my own accent:
> pewtered, dim, far-reaching,
> lost for words.[98]

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as literary language follows from her critical stance to the scale translations from Irish into English are done and published in Ireland: "It is one-way traffic: the translations run from Irish back into English to reach an audience, hardly ever the other way round. This isn't sustainable: for the two literatures to be mutually attentive, the partitions between them need to be more porous." E-mail to the author, 15 August 2009.

[97] E-mail to the author, 15 August 2009.

[98] Groarke, "Away," *Spindrift* 14.

The lack of words, congruent with a linguistic mix-up and thence following self-consciousness, is the result of the speaker's exiled state. Still, Groarke's lyrics offer no simple narrative of nostalgia. She allows that "the truest homes may be ephemeral anyway and the quickest way to access whatever it is that home might mean is through a projected version of the physical place." Accordingly, she considers herself lucky in that her childhood home is no longer available to her and that she is "free to conjure it at will so that it now has purely symbolic value. [...] I have no way to assess my memories in terms of reality and there is freedom in that. Also in the very notion that loss may confer freedom."[99] Indeed, the sense of loss or want is one of Groarke's great themes, be it related to the idea of home, muse, or language. Almost as often as we encounter her lyric "I" revisiting different houses of the past, she can be come upon in various foreign homes, dealing with the sense of disjointed freedom and the absences and distances they signify. In "Juniper Street"[100] from the eponymous collection (2006), we find her towards the end of a North American winter, left alone in the house, getting ready for the day's work:

> I am the queen of the morning: nothing to do but to fiddle
> words [...].
>
> [...] Or tell you now
> that even in January, with our snow-boots lined up
> in the hall, I slipped your leather glove onto my hand
>
> and felt the heat of you as something on the turn
> that would carry us over the tip of all that darkness

[99] Groarke in Theinová 24.
[100] Groarke, "Juniper Street," *Juniper Street* 52-53.

and land us on the stoop of this whole new world.

This address to the far-off muse, separated by the Atlantic, is yet another example of Groarke's characteristic pitch and point: while poetry may provide the means for healing that gap and conquering the dividing darkness, the very absence of the muse confers freedom, indeed, and facilitates poetry. Occasionally, as we have seen, the missing or elusive muse is coupled with the image of a distant, lost home which, in turn, can be connected with the vague memory of the Irish language.

What Groarke has in common with O'Reilly, McGuckian, Jenkinson, Ní Chuilleanáin, and Meehan in the above-cited poems is that instead of trying to free herself from traditional identification with the muse, she foregrounds various distancing techniques and referential indeterminacy, positing them as important for the workings of her inspiration. Like popular concepts of desire as a perpetually stretched-out hand or a force that alters the mind, inspired imagination has always been connected with the idea of a driving urge. If the muse is approached by way of irony, a mocking tone, an encoded narrative, and concealment, the same techniques serve to confirm its unattainability – for it is in the space separating the creating mind from the source of inspiration and galvanized by absence that poems most often originate. While this is true for poetry and artistic creation in general, what makes it relevant to my present discussion of feminist and post-feminist poetry by women in Ireland is that the space between the poet and her inspiration can be frequently also seen as charged by a sense of the broken tradition as well as attempts to detach oneself from patriarchal discourse, and by the awareness of the linguistic fissure and the loss of the Irish language as mother tongue or as the national language of Ireland. The development in the previous pages has been from revisionist dealings with the traditional representations of the inspiring feminine to the freeing

effect of the absent muse, with references included to the figurations of the representational limits of language as such and of the (mostly enabling) trace of the Irish language. All these concerns, not least as discussed in the latter part of this chapter in relation to works by Groarke and O'Reilly, presage the following material which will deal further with the (mostly mocking) adoption of the muse-invocation genre and with the transactions over the partition between the two main languages of Irish literature, with special focus on the theoretical, as well as practical issues of poetic translation.

4 BEYOND THE "I"

In the preceding pages I used the Pygmalion image to analyse two disparate concepts: first, the resistance of women to the petrifying male gaze, and, second, the status of Irish language. In this chapter I will examine the ways poetic inspiration has been thematized in verse by women in Ireland in the last forty years. Besides concentrating on the various representations of the muse and the effects that contact (or lack of it) with the muse has on the poetic subject, I will further demonstrate how Irish often escapes characterization as moribund and becomes once again a vehicle for poetic expression, as well as a source of inspiration in its own right.

Poets have been expansive on the subject of inspiration; like all that is hard to define, it has always puzzled and intrigued. While essential for the creative process, there is no consensus as regards its source and the ways it can be attained, apart from its general association with the basic concept of vaporousness and the of necessity fantastic notions of its origin and proceeding. Some of the oldest concepts of literary composition reckon with the notion that inspiration is met in a state of rapture, that the poet, when inspired, does not consciously participate in the formation of words, but becomes an instrument of a higher creative power. In the *Laws*, Plato is the first to describe the poet as conduit for words, a mere dictating machine: "whenever the poet is seated on the Muse's tripod,[1] he is not in his senses, but resembles a fountain, which gives free course to the upward rush of water."[2] In *Phaedrus*,

[1] Irish literary tradition contains various concepts of the poet as endowed with an "insight," including the classical category of the blind poet or seer (starting in the Irish context with the myth of Ossian the Bard) and monastic scribes composing in darkness. Laura O'Connor refers to the Old-Irish *filí* as to archaic poets with the connotations of a seer. See L. O'Connor, *Haunted English* 15.

[2] Plato, *Laws* IV, 719C3-8, trans. Robert Gregg Bury. 30 September 2012 <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Plato>.

he has Socrates note how the Muses induce a state of *furor poeticus*, an inspired madness in the poet, which is described as "a noble thing."[3]

Essential here is the idea of a bidirectional flow or criss-crossing between inside and outside, between here and there: in order to achieve inspiration it is necessary to go "out of one's mind," to the outer limits of the Self – first to obtain an invigorating influx from a supernatural source and then to give vent to a spontaneous ebullition of inspired creativity. If in modern theory, starting with John Locke and the Enlightenment, the search for inspiration mostly turns to the unconscious and the realms of psychology, the definitions of its workings still count on an external power or intermediary. The shape and form of this collaborating agent can vary from that of a divine in-breather, through the concept of the muse as an abstract force or a living person, to the effect of hallucinogens. Inspiration is still viewed as a non-rational, unaccountable phenomenon, a power derived from an outside impulse or through a source beyond the limits of one's intellectual capacity.

From early on the concept of inspiration employed the figure of a generic female ideal; inspiration is as ungraspable as the elusive lady, or going further, the lady is the source of poetry itself. This gnostic belief in a feminine deity or wisdom principle has its roots in the classical nine Muses of Greek mythology and is shared by the courtly love tradition where the – as a rule unfulfilled – love of an idealized lady brings out poems of great lyrical power in the poet. In modernity, the dependence on a feminine muse is explored in Robert Graves's idea of poetry as worship of the ancient White Goddess.[4] In his understanding, poetic inspiration is "the poet's inner communion"[5] with the compound deity's human personification. Inspiration, like lightning, is unpredictable, striking "where and when it

[3] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244C, trans. Harold N. Fowler, *Plato in Nine Volumes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).
[4] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (orig. 1948; New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997).
[5] Graves, *The White Goddess* 448.

wills."[6] Woman, who is the goddess's representative, is placed in a supernatural sphere above the male poet who, like the original *mystes*, is an ecstatic devotee of the muse.[7] Graves contends (as Ó Ríordáin would later): "woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing."[8] Yet, there is space for concession within this categorical opposition: "This is not to say that a woman should refrain from writing poems; only, that she should write as a woman, not as an honorary man."[9]

What does that imply? Is the expressly female muse proscribed to women? Unambiguous answers to such questions are not part of Graves's sweeping plan; he was, after all, concerned with poetry as an honorary male activity and referred to anomalies such as female writers only with the aim of supporting the improbable blending of the ecumenical single goddess of many names with misleading views of Celtic paganism, interleaved with cautions to poets – male or female – against marriage and reproduction.[10] While Graves's devout reliance on a female muse confirms the virility of the poet,[11] the single piece of advice provided for the improbable case of a woman poet unconditionally identifies her with the muse. In its abstruse dogmatism, however, this advice can be considered "pure poetry" rather than a proposition of any practical or even theoretical relevance: "She should be the Muse in a complete sense: she should be in turn Arianrhod, Blodeuwedd and the Old Sow of Maenawr Penardd who eats her farrow, and should write in each of these capacities with antique authority. She should be the visible moon: impartial, loving, severe, wise."[12]

Such identifications of the female author as a composing muse rather than an intellectual, gifted being were doubly irritating for Irish women poets when their writing first

[6] Graves, *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (London: Cassell, 1962) 92.
[7] Graves, *The White Goddess* 447.
[8] Graves, *The White Goddess* 446.
[9] Graves, *The White Goddess* 446-47.
[10] See Graves, *The White Goddess* 448-57, 490-91.
[11] Paradoxically, the insistent interpretation of womanhood in the general sense of matriarchal theology only confirms woman as designed to relieve the gender of man as male. As Patricia Coughlan points out, "[t]he gender *there* was before gender was already male." See Coughlan, "Bog Queens," *Theorizing Ireland* 59.
[12] Graves, *The White Goddess* 447.

emerged as a "category" in the 1970s. Their complaints were directed against received ideas of the Irish tradition as a "great male bardic hierarchical triumph,"[13] which excluded women from poetic influence and posterity, deploying them rather as iconic images of the feminized land. Many of the poets I have dealt with express objection to being classified as a male-created concept, insisting rather on figuring as a subject and creator of images. As mentioned in relation to Meehan and Jenkinson, one of the ways to go about such issues has been to explicitly reject or ridicule the stereotypical notion of an inspiring Other. Another has consisted in ironic invocations or mocking dismissals of the mythological muse figure. While the latter is one of the customary rhetorical devices applied by literary women of the past, in the more recent poetry we come across further complications of such modes of address. These include the inversion or indeterminacy of the muse's sex and identity and the tendency to turn to oneself, to use self-reflection in order to drive one's inspiration. I am interested in exploring the work of the feminist poets like Boland, Ní Dhomhnaill, and Ní Chuilleanáin, but also some of the more recent ones in Ireland, in terms of the character and implications of those inversions and modifications of the muse. The variations on the conventional muse, however, are not seen as significant in themselves. Whether they result in the overturning of the muse's sex, or the subversion (or fortification) of the masculine-feminine binary, the close analyses of the poems are motivated by the significance of the poet-muse encounter for the speaking subject's identity.

I do not argue that women relate to the muse in a way markedly different from men, rather that there is a striking analogy between the fact that the muse is mostly met in a liminal state or location and that women previously occupied a marginal position in the canon. There

[13] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 54. Ní Dhomhnaill in defence of Boland's famous complaint first published as "Outside History," *PN Review 75* 17.1 (September/October 1990). 12 May 2011 <http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=4549>. As I mention in the Introduction, Jenkinson, on the other hand, refuses Boland's view and insists on the basically ungendered character of the anonymous tradition and shows how written records of that tradition and scholarship based thereon are ultimately irrelevant. See Jenkinson, "A View from the Whale's Back."

is a shift in more recent writing away from attempts to redress the historical silence of women to poems that are based on dense poetic expression and fragmented procedures. If fragmentation and relativizing of the narrative functions of art have long featured as characteristics of postmodernism, along with the deconstruction of the author, in contemporary women's poetry they can be seen as a continuation of the coded narratives and the rhetorical variants of silence applied in earlier female writing. While most of these poems ignore the feminist call for "coherent subjects,"[14] there is no tendency towards postmodern problematizing of subjecthood as such: rather, the poems testify to the variety of ways in which the speaking "I" is redefined. If postmodern theorists, as Sullivan writes, "celebrate the devolution of the enlightenment subject, and view this devolution as the means by which restrictive writing, reading, and political practices may be subverted and changed,"[15] then the coded reference and narrative in the poems I discuss (not least in terms of the indeterminacy of the speaking subject and the muse figure) can no longer be seen as simply subversive, but as productive in the reinstallation and reconfirmation of the lyric subject.

Though theories of inspiration are myriad, they all stress the element of unaccountability. As already mentioned, inspiration is best understood as experienced by a migratory subject undergoing outward and inward movements, between resigned rapture and fierce concentration. Most of the following examples share the image of a life-giving threshold from which issues of inspiration are approached, sometimes even through direct address to the muse. Even though they find the traditional notion of the female muse inhibiting, rather than reject the canon's strictures, the poets often place themselves or their personas in a figurative liminal zone from which they address, among others, the themes of

[14] Patricia Waugh, *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Patricia Waugh (London: Basil Blackwell, 1992) 194. Qtd. in Sullivan, "Postmodernism, Feminism and the Subjects of Irish and Women's Studies," *New Voices in Irish Criticism*, ed. P. J. Mathews (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000) 247.
[15] Sullivan, "Postmodernism" 245.

creativity and inspiration. This liminal zone in which the muse is encountered is the locus of entry for the female subject and the base of its discursive position.

My argument is that the historical marginality of women in literature accounts for the prominence and the beneficial use of metaphorical representations (such as windows, doorways, and various other borderline locations) of the liminal in contemporary women's poetry. The liminal is employed as a spatial as well as temporal metaphor, a special time-space which allows relating to the Other.[16] It is an essentially ambiguous, forked position on the margin or threshold in which a state of mind is reached that is at the same time transitory and marked by stillness, and combines the elements of passage and potential of change with a sense of trembling balance.[17] It is in its forkedness that the liminal is relevant to women's marginal position: as a generative state of otherness (from that before and from that to come) as well as a place in which, as Sullivan writes, "the person is able to name and accept their Other and thus emerge with an enriched understanding of their relationship with themselves."[18] In this sense the former marginality of women, with its heightened connotations of "otherness," has been not simply a limiting, but an inspiring factor.

Rather than concentrating on the political aspects of this shift – through which the margin ceases to be a restriction but becomes the mainspring and prominent motif in women's poetry – I will look into the implications of that shift in terms of the individual poetics. While attending to the specificities of each poet's approach, I emphasize some points of intersection, including the concept of translation as figuring in the writing process, the complicated notion of the mother tongue or the productive tension between the matter and the content of the poem. Most of the poems I quote include meta-poetic commentary on the process of their own

[16] Here I employ Moynagh Sullivan's definition (with a reference to Christopher Bollas's object-relations theory) of a mood as a special "time-space [...] during which inter-subjective communications are compromised." See Sullivan, "Postmodernism" 248; and Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object* (London: Free Association Books, 1987) 99-106.

[17] See Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage* 41.

[18] Sullivan, "Postmodernism" 249.

making or the working of poetic inspiration as such. In tracing this move from edge to centre, I do not wish to rehearse the transition of women from margin to centre of the canon, but rather explore the ways in which that shift is reflected and utilized in their work – both as motif and technique. Thus, following from the previous chapter, I demonstrate how the practical as well as creative aspects of poetry making are often effectively addressed from a transitional position between opposing concepts (such as inside/outside, silence/speech or communication/silence) or between the constitutive poles of identity (the Self/the Other).

Despite their many differences, poets such as Boland, Ní Chuilleanáin, Ní Dhomhnaill or McGuckian share a concern about the absence of historicized narratives of womanhood from the literary canon. I will examine how they have often been able to turn this lack of continuous history to their own advantage and how the reconceived image of the Self, attained through a reappraisal of the muse has served to enhance the possibilities of the speaking "I." While the foregoing chapter looked into the galvanizing use of sources by McGuckian, into the refusal of the constricting male gaze in Ní Chuilleanáin and Meehan, and into the subversive, essentially creative tendency to "privatization" and fragmentation shared by them all, including O'Reilly and Groarke, here I will refer to poems in which various forms of cryptic expression and semantic disruption are used to explore the indeterminacy of inspiration. In the latter part of this chapter I will explore how the themes of the formation of the poetic Self and issues of inspiration are conflated with the changes in the lyric "I" that are traceable alongside the shift from the feminist to the post-feminist phase in Irish poetry.

As above, the language issue is essential here and I present it not merely as the vehicle of the poem, but also as a factor determining its contents. Besides its fundamental function in the process of inspired composition, language is instrumental in not simply confirming, but also interrogating one's status as a communal being and one's sense of belonging. If, as Eliot writes, "poetry is stubbornly national" and differs from every other art "in having a value for

the people of the poet's race and language, which it can have for no other,"[19] the language factor is impossible to disregard in a discussion of Irish poetry in which the notion of a linguistic community is ridden with complex oppositions and where the Irish language itself has been elegized out of existence. We cannot ignore Gaelic-English oppositions when examining the genealogy of the Irish lyric "I". As Mutlu Konuk Blasing remarks, "The speaking 'I,' whose position any reader occupies, is a radically social construct within a linguistic community."[20] Towards the close of this chapter, I explore the relation of poets to this linguistic community (perceived as more or less fissured), to their own poetic medium and the Irish language construed as the lost mother tongue. The motif of the liminal, a zone (and moment) of passage or transformation, is relevant to the understanding of the two languages of Irish poetry as contiguous and prompts the examination of their various interactions that I argue to be reflected, even constitutive in some of the discussed poetics.

[19] T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1979) 7.
[20] Blasing 12.

MY DREAM SISTER

Eavan Boland made the disparate experiences of being both a woman and an author the focal point of her early poetry. In her own words, she used the "flawed space" between the two polarized forms of her existence as a springboard to creativity: "In a certain sense, I found my poetic voice by shouting across that distance."[21] Sensing herself located firmly between the given "obligations of her womanhood and the shadowy demands of her gift,"[22] Boland, marginalized at the beginning of her career by the gender politics of Irish literature, was thus able to find terms unavailable in that very tradition that allowed her to characterize and ultimately transform it.

In her essay "New Wave 2: Born in the 50s; Irish Poets of the Global Village," Boland asserted that "all poems in their time [made] a fragile, important negotiation between an inner and outer world."[23] Yet, by "inner and outer world" she means a mixture of various opposing concepts, such as the tensions between the conventions prescribed by the community and the demands of her profession, between the public and the private mind, and between the limits of the inherited literary past and her own experience. While the poet-persona of her lyrics – especially the suburbia poems that recur throughout her oeuvre from *The War Horse* (1975) onwards – is often located within the walls of a house, the speaker's ability to change shape allows her to abscond from the confines of the domestic, suburban setting and thus to extend the poems' representational limits. The "Suburban Woman"[24] sequence from *The War Horse* abounds with figurations of an in-between zone. The plurality of the persona-poet's experience is represented in images of constant shifting between incongruous modes of being

[21] Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* xi.
[22] Boland, *Object Lessons* 247.
[23] Boland, "New Wave 2: Born in the 50s; Irish Poets of the Global Village," *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh*, ed. Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996) 137.
[24] Boland, *New Collected Poems* 63-65.

and in the leitmotif of a desirable middle ground. The compound character of the woman's identity is merged with the theme of the changing landscape as the "Town and country [are] at each other's throat / between a space of truce until one night // walls began to multiply." Another ongoing battle which the poem reports is that between concepts of Ireland's present and past; these leave each other (and the female subject's personal history) marked with scars:

> [...] She woke
>
> one morning to the usual story: withdrawing,
> neither side had gained, but there, dying,
>
> caught in cross-fire, her past lay, bleeding
> from wounds each meant for each.

The binary persona "is the sole survivor" of this daily struggle in which her poetry is at once the prize and the neutral middle ground: "Defeated we survive, we two, housed / together in my compromise, my craft / who are of one another the first draft." Significantly, it is the "white flag" of the kitchen blind pulled down that foreshadows the temporary cease-fire, described as a period of productivity during which the woman becomes whole again and, shrugging off "a hundred small surrenders" of the day, prepares to use them as "images, still born, unwritten metaphors." The blind is the line that separates the day of chores from the night of poetry writing, but it also corresponds with the image of the blank page on which the two can coincide: "this territory [in which] blindfold, we meet / at last, veterans of a defeat // no truce will heal." The resigned tone at the end presages the many returns of this major theme in Boland's corpus concerned with the confirmation of woman in the role of the lyric

subject. As if to counter the Barthesian notion of writing as the place in which the identity of the writing body is lost – and to disprove the post-structuralist ideal of a non-subject[25] which is selfless in its rehabilitation of the feminine[26] – Boland insists on positioning the self-reflexive female subject within the poem. The blind that is both contiguous with and obscures the outside world is an emblem of the woman poet's split identity; and this is also a figuration of the liminal position vital for her creativity. If Boland often finds her inspiration at a metaphorical threshold, positively defined as a "field of force,"[27] that threshold also represents the notion of the craft as a healing, but at the same time a compromise that is never satisfactory.

Another fitting illustration of such a beneficial in-between space is to be found in "The Muse Mother"[28] from *Night Feed* (1980). The poem opens on the poet-persona as she stands by a window, watching a woman in the neighbouring garden "working a nappy liner" over her child's mouth until the onset of rain makes her move out of the speaker's visual field. The stylized simplicity of the scene emphasizes the timelessness of the woman's experience. Her potential as muse lies in her spanning of the past as well as the future – in keeping with Plato's description of the inspired poet as the seer on Apollo's tripod at Delphi: "she might teach me / a new language // to be a sibyl / able to sing the past." Read in this manner, the poem's key premise seems straightforward and optimistic: that which is eternal has a claim to the divine and is *bound* to be suitable as subject for poetry. Through the figure of the woman outside, the speaker wishes to acquire a gift of omniscience – applicable in relation to the present, past, and future – to breathe in the knowledge of a language otherwise the privilege of gods. Yet, Boland sets out to demonstrate the unattainability of the muse and through that the irreconcilable polarity of the woman-poet's experience. The speaking position of the poet

[25] Barthes's essay first appeared in English in 1967 in the American journal *Aspen*. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," trans. Stephen Heath, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 142-48.
[26] See Sullivan, "Postmodernism" 247.
[27] Boland, *Object Lessons* 240.
[28] Boland, *New Collected Poems* 102.

is shown as ultimately incompatible with that of the mother who is left secluded in a distinct climatic, as well as acoustic environment:

but my mind stays fixed:

If I could only decline her –
lost noun
out of context,
stray figure of speech –
from this rainy street

again to her roots,
she might teach me
a new language […]

What interests me are the poem's contradictions and paradoxes. As already suggested, it is often from a distinct threshold position, here symbolized by the semi-transparent, wind-swept window pane, that Boland deconstructs cultural and literary stereotypes and replaces them with images allegedly taken from the lived experience of women. The window is a device which at once allows the speaker to gain distance from her subject and to become inspired through an encounter (however restricted) with the muse, allowing her to detach herself from its domesticity in order to make it into art. In this way it is reminiscent of Groarke's notional frame of leaves and tree trunks in "Orchard with Lovers," but also of

Boland's many ekphrastic poems.[29] In "Domestic Interior"[30] from *Night Feed*, for example, the woman poet's dilemma is solved by a double-perspective consisting of the detached viewpoint of a male painter and the loving gaze of a male spouse. Domesticity is seen in turns through the prism of Van Eyck's *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife*[31] and through the borrowed retina of "the convex of your eye" which, according to the poem's dedication, belongs to Boland's husband. The perspective is first based on the wooden frame of the convex mirror depicted in the 1434 painting and, merging with the orb of the man's eye that lends familiar domesticity a "glimmer of consciousness,"[32] coalesces towards the end of the poem with another instance of Boland's kitchen blind:

> But there's a way of life
> that is its own witness:
> Put the kettle on, shut the blind.
> Home is a sleeping child,
> an open mind.

Boland consistently refers to techniques pertaining to the visual arts in order to "paint" scenes of everyday life, and to establish that common experience in itself is a form of art.

In "The Muse Mother," she makes as if she wished to counter the tradition of the monumentalizing male gaze and its reliance on the abstract feminine as a source of inspiration. By mentioning the hope of a new language she creates expectations of a changed

[29] See for instance "Woman Posing" (*New Collected Poems* 110) and "Degas's Laundresses" (*New Collected Poems* 108).
[30] Boland, "Domestic Interior," *New Collected Poems* 91.
[31] Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and his Wife* (1434), The National Gallery, London (NG186, Bought 1842).
[32] The symmetry is almost perfect: opening the fifth stanza and marking a shift in the perspective, the verbal image of the eye connects to the painted image of the convex mirror in Van Eyck's double portrait which, in turn, inspires the four preceding strophes.

perspective. Yet, her craving for an alternative medium, a language facilitating representation that would not result in the confinement of the woman within the boundaries of the poem, is left unsatisfied. The dual promise constituted by the window's interface and the hope for a new language is compromised by the shift in focus, by the poem's turning away from "this rainy street" and its own poetry to old "figures of speech" and unknown roots that possibly refer to the loss of Irish as the language of the community. Just as in "Suburban Woman" and some of her other corrective attempts to re-insert women in the narrative of Irish poetry and history, Boland is unable to keep to a single point on her agenda. As a result, the speaker-poet's mind paradoxically stays "fixed" in concentration on the excessive, self-prescribed task. Boland portrays herself as unable to reach out to her suburban muse, sensing herself to be as much "out of context" as her ultimately silent object. The muse, no matter how mundane, stays elusive. Ironically, the declaration of the desire to lay hold of the muse and to spell her out prevents the poet from interiorizing the conventional trope, confirming woman in the role of an abstract, immutably silent ideal.

Boland's "Muse Mother" thus serves to illustrate the possibilities as well as the limits of the interstitial space, attesting to how "fragile [the] negotiation between an inner and outer world" can indeed be. Mentioning the hope in the closing couplet of being "able to speak at last / my mother tongue," it deals with an issue shared by most women writing poetry in the latter half of the last century who felt it necessary to redefine the inherited canon. Regardless of intra-lingual tensions, many of those poets perceived their respective poetic medium as insufficient for the expression of female experience. Some, as we have seen, search for an alternative idiom that is ostentatiously at odds with the tradition in which there had been little space for women's speech, or for a tone which could be situated in the "flawed space" between the English and Irish. Others have consciously, and repeatedly, resorted to the precarious, but prolific margin between silence and statement. Boland's poem illustrates,

nevertheless, that no specifically female language is to be found or developed, that it can at best be a compromise. Moreover, it shows that no such thing is needed: her lyric could be more compelling – not only in its revisionist purpose, but also as a poem – were it free exactly of the pining for a "new language" made of "lost nouns" that may or may not be Irish. In what follows, I wish to inspect how some of the other major poets of the period have gone about reconciling the conflicting identities of the speaking subject and the silenced object, the artist and the muse.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry attends to silenced Irish women, but it is concomitantly alert to the unspeakability of woman's experience. Her work also abounds with the motif of an enabling interface. Although there is no direct mention of the muse, "The Absent Girl"[33] from the poet's second collection, *Site of Ambush* (1975), is an obvious counterpart to Boland's "Muse Mother." The lyric revolves around an apparently immobile, yet dramatic image of a woman-girl reclining against a courtroom window. The vaporous and at the same time very corporeal female figure is one of Ní Chuilleanáin's frequent personas made "conspicuous by [their] silence."[34] In the course of the poem, she is transformed from a young girl to an aging woman and further to a mere spectre of her former self. This notion of atemporality connects with the historical experience of woman as invisible otherwise than as a generic passive object and as subject to male epistemological scepticism. In the window, the woman's face is erased by the face of the clock, thus Ní Chuilleanáin's poem suggests the way that woman has been removed from history.

> They pass her without a sound
> and when they look for her face

[33] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Absent Girl," *Selected Poems* 30.
[34] Ní Chuilleanáin, *Selected Poems* 30.

Can only see the clock behind her skull;

[...]

The clock chatters; with no beating heart
Lung or breast how can she tell the time?
Her skin is shadowed
Where once the early sunlight fell.

On the one hand, the window seems to connect the woman to the world outside, on the other it reminds us of her acute sense of separation, of the immutable fact of her absence from the court of history.[35] Yet the poem represents that very absence and is thus a recuperation and refiguration of cultural history, drawing attention like many of the works of feminist culture to what has been erased.

Grey hair blinds her eyes
And night presses on the windowpanes,

She can feel the glass cold
But with no time for pain
Searches for a memory lost with muscle and blood –
She misses her ligaments and the marrow of her bones.

[35] See Guinn Batten, "Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and the Body of the Nation," *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 186.

In accenting the timelessness of woman's experience as being "invisible" – in the sense of the continuation of that experience – Ní Chuilleanáin employs different means from Boland. Instead of expressing impatience with her subject's reticence, she proposes silence, along with a thorough use of the interstice, as the element that confirms the very continuity and universality rather than incommunicableness of her past. The figure is a symbol of passing time – dramatized by her lack of reflection in the glass as it is blocked away by the image of the clock – and demonstrates the physical process of a woman's ageing, together with the fixity and invisibility of women's history.

According to Guinn Batten the greatest merit of Ní Chuilleanáin's carefully balanced lyrical narratives has lain in her resolution to encompass polarities and ambiguities, in "finding throughout her career subtle strategies for representing by *not* claiming to represent authentic 'muscle and blood,' for serving others by *not* serving as a subject who represents what she calls in [this] poem 'the absent girl.'"[36] This tangled and paradoxical statement refers to Ní Chuilleanáin's consistent, we might say insistent, reserve. While Batten offers no help in disclosing the referential relevance of her images and narratives, she does pinpoint the core of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetics, based largely on the ellipsis and paralipsis that she consistently applies when writing of women's experience. Batten's conclusion is simple and apposite: even if the lives of women of the past cannot be recreated in poetry (after all, "the memory [*is*] lost with muscle and blood"), the poet thematizes the silence that surrounds them.

In her own commentary on "The Absent Girl," Ní Chuilleanáin identifies her persona as one of the women in history who had to face the "experience of being invisible."[37] Indeed, the blankness of the image recalls her nun characters, particularly the Sister Custos whose

[36] Batten, "Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin" 186.
[37] Ní Chuilleanáin in Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996) 103.

"history is a blank sheet."[38] Yet, whoever she may be, the outcome seems to be the same as in Boland's poem. The girl's experience may be timeless, but in the end, it is the same kind of elusiveness, the same unspeakability that the poem actually communicates. If Boland was perhaps too verbal in naming the issue, Ní Chuilleanáin may be going to the other extreme: while the poet does not expect her subject to speak, she brings the tone of the poem down to her. Its essence being non-expression, the lyric can only be enjoyed on that level – as nonexistence materialized.

Even though Ní Chuilleanáin never talks about her muse, I hold that this shape-shifting female image represents not only the women absent from history, but also something akin to the elusiveness of inspiration. The connection, however, is not a straightforward one. Since Ní Chuilleanáin's work is devoid of any figurations of the muse (male or female, incarnate or abstract), it would be too much to claim that the absent girl is designed as a revision of that trope in male writing. Yet, her similarity to the poet's other female characters with coded, broken, or silenced "histories" make her an obvious part of a broader plan. A spectre representing the actual women absent from historical and literary discourse, Ní Chuilleanáin's image does stand in contrast to the idealized, female Other in male writing. Similarly to her nun figures, for example, she symbolizes the women invisible in the literary canon and the historiography that preceded feminism. Yet, it is precisely in these female "ciphers" that Ní Chuilleanáin often finds her creative impulse, if not source of inspiration. The question is, then, what the elusive figure reveals about Ní Chuilleanáin's lyric subject. While she identifies with her silent personas, using them mostly to comment critically on the silencing of women in history, there are other occasions, including "The Absent Girl," on which the poet seems to celebrate their reticence rather than attempting redress.[39] While this

[38] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Real Thing," *Collected Poems* 68.

[39] See for example "Man Watching a Woman" from *The Brazen Serpent* (1994). Ní Chuilleanáin, *Selected Poems* 82.

puts her in the same starting position as male poets, it is impossible to judge whether these figures are the result of Ní Chuilleanáin's verbal restraint or an excuse for it.

Like elsewhere, in "The Absent Girl" she deliberately just demonstrates the blankness of the central image without writing the emptiness over, without trying to fill it (as Boland does) with a meaning. As Justin Quinn suggests, Ní Chuilleanáin has placed her determination to be "true to the dead," to embody their silences in her verse, over the requirements of her art. According to Quinn, her "scrupulousness about maintaining the silences of the past was often too successful, producing poems for an esoteric circle of one."[40] Indeed, the poem illustrates that Ní Chuilleanáin willingly takes the risk that its merit, as well as its content (which consists in a meta-poetic commentary on the absenting female subject) will stay obscured in the falling dark behind the glass. If this approach makes her poems difficult to read and appreciate, what is however singular is that by subduing the tone of her writing and foregrounding silence with such consistency she has been able to insert the female subject into the poem while enacting (in an unprecedented way) the situation of women in history and the canon. If she has failed in representing the multifarious nature of womanhood, this has arguably never been her ambition.

If the muteness of the "muse" does not come as a surprise in Ní Chuilleanáin, it certainly does so in the case of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill whose provocative, garrulous idiom can be said to be the opposite of Ní Chuilleanáin's reticence. In "Filleadh na Béithe" (The Return of the Muse), the muse figure is confronted by the poet-speaker. As we shall see, however, its potency lies in other than verbal methods of communication. Unlike Meehan, who proposes to do away with the muse altogether, Ní Dhomhnaill admits to being "a muse poet."[41] With reference to

[40] Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction* 173.

[41] Ní Dhomhnaill in Loretta Qwarnström, "Travelling through Liminal Spaces: An Interview with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill," *Nordic Irish Studies* 3.1 (2004): 70.

Kristeva's concepts of the pre-symbolic and the chora, Ní Dhomhnaill stresses the unattainability of inspiration and talks about the muse as "the never-to-be-accessed-again body of the mother."[42] Understood as necessary to poetry, the muse is at the same time seen as problematic: "There have been periods when I've gone dry because there is nobody or nothing in my immediate vicinity which carries that particular focus."[43]

In "Filleadh na Béithe"[44] a creative crisis is averted with the return of "The Prodigal Muse" (in McGuckian's translation), following a rather blasphemous invocation of a deity in the vein of "patois Ghaelscoileanna Bhaile Átha Cliath" (the Bunscoil lingo): "Féach anseo, tusa, faigh as!" (You can bugger off, dickhead). Here is the quibbling report of the process, as it is addressed to the muse (and its rather risqué interpretation by McGuckian):

Siúlann tú isteach im' chroí	You saunter back in
chomh neamhfaisech, chomh haiclí,	as cool and dandy
amhail is nár fhágais riamh é	as if you'd not been
ar feadh na mblianta.	on your travels
	since the Lord-knows-when.
[...]	[...]
Tá sceitimíní	I come out in
áthais orm timpeall ort.	an all-over body-rash,
Faoi mhaide boilg as tsimléara	my erect nipples
is faoi chabha an staighre,	in for a nuzzling

[42] Ní Dhomhnaill in Qwarnström 70.
[43] Ní Dhomhnaill in Qwarnström 70.
[44] Ní Dhomhnaill, "Filleadh na Béithe" (The Prodigal Muse), trans. Medbh McGuckian, *The Water Horse* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2000) 90-91.

geofar láithreach	by the stomach of the chimney
na coda beaga.	stack, or the cubby-hole
	under the stairs.

Presuming that the muse will maintain its usual reticence, the poet readjusts the standard scenario and, letting the visitor just sit there on a comfortable version of the muse's tripod, willingly does all the talking. Not content with the poem itself as testament to the success of her invocation, the speaker suggestively describes the encounter. By the means of contraction (that which Helen Vendler calls parody through miniaturizing of expression and argument[45]) and double entendre, the poem swerves from the mode (however ridiculed) of a muse address, outlined in the first two stanzas, and approximates the tone of a love poem. The two concepts conjoin in the final line of the poem consisting of two words: "na coda beaga." The binary implications of the collocation are necessarily lost in a translation, for no translation can mediate "little pieces" simultaneously as "bits" of poetry (its formal and lexical elements) and as the objects of amorous desire (as the speaker's "little treasures" which McGuckian puts across blatantly as "nipples"). The former reading is in accord with the title's attribution to the muse and the poet's profane complaint about having her name

tíolactha	sacrificed as a penance
mar íbirt dhóite ar t'altóir-se	on your damn altar,
is cad tá fachta agamsa	and what the hell
ina éiric-san?	have I got to show for it?

The latter reading – to which McGuckian uncompromisingly inclines – chimes with the "sceitimíní áthais" (raptures of joy) from the preceding strophe. The tendency towards erotism

[45] Helen Vendler, *Poets Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) 13.

in the last stanza, which points to zones and activities off-stage, is also supported by the Irish phrase "rinne sí coda beaga di féin" (she was excited). While there is nothing in the original to confirm the muses' gender grammatically as either feminine or masculine, the many instances in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry where she extols a male lover make the male option more probable. The swerve, then, is not so much from the supposed feminine to the more probable masculine gender of the muse but from the connotations of a generic, supernatural Muse to a human, male representative at the sight of whom the speaker melts. In this sense, despite the subversive irony of its tone and the inverted conventional gender roles, the poem reads as a repetition of the usual pattern.

Obviously, the undermining of the traditional, "Platonic" notions of the poet-muse relationship is not the lyric's only goal; by means of irony and through the suggestion of sexual embrace, the poet surpasses the opposition between the "I" and the Other, thus achieving inspiration. If, in spite of the arousal provoked by its appearance, the muse's presence remains rather shadowy, I suggest that it is the very fleetingness of the muse, who although having stalked back "isteach im'chroí" is always on the verge of disappearing, always on the threshold where presence and absence continuously merge and diverge, that secures the effect of productive liminality. Even though an illustrative physical interstice is missing from the poem, the muse has arrived from without, thus securing the poet access to the creating Self.

The inconclusive sketching of the muse, including its sex, brings to mind John Montague's axiomatic remark on women and the muse, as Ní Dhomhnaill reports it, with only slight exasperation: "You can't be a muse poet because people will think you're a lesbian."[46] Ostentatiously demonstrating that she does not care what anyone might think, Ní Dhomhnaill mixes indications of bawdiness with ironic overstatement to upset expectations pertaining to

[46] Ní Dhomhnaill in Qwarnström 71.

the set genres with which her poem could be associated. As Mary O'Connor notes, "Ní Dhomhnaill's heroines contravene the outspoken rule of silence about the body, a rule even more stringently enforced by their society with regard to women's own compelling drives." In her humorously cynical poems, O'Connor writes, "she does not present herself as a moral lamppost in the light of which men may see their own mistakes; she mocks propriety while freely donning the mask of the clown herself."[47]

Typically, Ní Dhomhnaill approaches the muse just as she pretends to denounce the very trope. As Frank Sewell has it, she uses "transgression as a strategy in the process of becoming the master/mistress of her self, life, and work."[48] While the erotic undertext cathects the poem, it is also worth noting Ní Dhomhnaill's sly way of pushing her language to the limits of social acceptability, and to consider it in the light of McGuckian's much more overt version. Máire Mhac an tSaoi, who has written some daringly erotic verse and who has attempted – in her own time and terms – to purge Irish poetry of any connection with what she refused as surplus literariness and antiquarianism, has recently claimed: "I was very lucky to write in Irish. If I had used the word 'bed' in a love poem in English, it would never have been published, but nobody reads what you write in Irish or very few people do, and they're not likely to be shocked."[49] If, as O'Connor argues, Ní Dhomhnaill refers without shame to the body in order to break the established literary codes and rules that "repress women's speech in the name of propriety,"[50] McGuckian's translation pretends to support and stretch this interpretation while appropriating the "body" of Ní Dhomhnaill's poem in order to argue her own point.

[47] M. O'Connor 151.
[48] Frank Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 186.
[49] Mhac an tSaoi in "Máire Mhac an tSaoi: a legend in her own rhyme," *Irish Independent* 28 July 2012. 2 September 2012 <http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/mire-mhac-an-tsaoi-a-legend-in-her-own-rhyme-3182098.html>.
[50] M. O'Connor 168.

While things are put more plainly in McGuckian's version, it shades the original to the extent that there is hardly an echo of it perceptible as we read the translation. Some of the shifts are, of course, inevitable, like the loss in the last stanza of the effect of gradual revelation that is secured in Irish through the placing of the adverb, but also the verb, prior to the object, or the foregoing of the inconclusiveness suggested through the passive voice in the penultimate line of the original. But the bravado and the foregrounded erotism of "The Prodigal Muse" – which abandons Ní Dhomhnaill's attractive insinuation – is intentional: it serves to support McGuckian's concept of poetry as an archetypal sexual act, her essential belief that all poetry is "erotic" and her frequent matching of love and muse poetry. Although it may seem paradoxical, Ní Dhomhnaill's Irish original can be seen as feeding McGuckian's creativity which is, as she has repeatedly claimed, driven by her continual awareness of the "native silence" of the Irish language and her declared desire for a language that is as close to Irish as possible.[51]

Like Ní Dhomhnaill, McGuckian uses the space of the poem to come together with her muse. Yet, even though she identifies the trope positively with "a person, a real human being, the muse energy is very mobile [and the] muse always so unattainable."[52] The encounter mostly leaves her uncertain about her own role in the process in which "there is this other person, who you can't actually speak to in real life, but you can in this space that you create. [...] and

[51] McGuckian, *Had I a Thousand Lives* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2003) 38. Qtd. in Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction* 170. See McGuckian and Ní Dhomhnaill in L. O'Connor, "Comhrá." It is interesting to note the use of a third language and a Latinate word ("patois") on the part of Ní Dhomhnaill to comment on the macaronic mixture of English syntax and Irish phraseology in the first stanza of "Filleadh na Béithe": "patois Ghaelscoileanna Bhaile Átha Cliath." Also, while it might seem the product of rhythmic and stylistic requirements, McGuckian's translation of "patois" into "lingo" (with its connotations of an incomprehensible, possibly foreign language) is actually judicious: instead of referring to the features of macaronics, which are lost in the translation as it is impossible to render the Anglicism of the relevant phrase *in* English, she refers to Irish as alien. However corrupted by its proximity to the English grammar the original phrase might be (so that it sounds "foreign" to itself), the notion of otherness contained in McGuckian's choice of "lingo" arguably points to her own feelings about Irish.

[52] Bohman 104.

it's not something you can control."[53] In "The Rising Out"[54] from her second collection, *Venus and the Rain* (1982), this lack of control acquires a more definite shape. The muse, ironically presented as a disturbing element, is not only spoken to, but is reported as doing most of the talking – and is often hard to stop. The poem is about a crisis of inspiration crisis, telling of an uninvited visitor – an anti-muse pictured as the persona's alter ego. As such, it is an early enactment of the poet's creative process as described in an interview some twenty years later: "[...] and then you have to do that liminal thing again, of suspending the conscious, or letting the conscious and the subconscious drift in and out of each other, like dreaming,"[55]

My dream sister has gone into my blood
To kill the poet in me before Easter.
[...]

She gentles me by passing weatherly remarks
That hover over my skin with an expectant summer
Irony, soliloquies that rise out of sleep,
And quite enjoy saying, "Rather a poor year."
I continue meanwhile working on my arm-long
"Venus Tying the Wings of Love," hoping
She will recede with all my heroes, dark
Or fair, if my body can hold her bone to term.

[53] Elin Holmsten, "Double Doors: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian," *Nordic Irish Studies* 3.1 (2004): 96.
[54] McGuckian, "The Rising Out," *Venus and the Rain* 36.
[55] Holmsten 94.

Illustrating the uneasy relationship between the author and her inspiration, the poem ironically deconstructs the whole muse business. Strategically dismissing the anti-muse as a figment of her own imagination, the poet hopes that "She will recede with all my heroes": identified with her other creations, the "dream sister" no longer presents a threat. Participating in the persona's fluid identity, the chimerical muse-saboteur can be contained "if my body can hold her bone to term." But even though it is suggested that she is "my own invention," a "dream," it is not clear *who* is dreaming her – whether it is *me* or *it*. The parody consists in the contracted, elliptical way of argumentation, in the chain of apparently nonsensical utterances and citations that, on the one hand, seem randomly taken from various discourses and contexts, and on the other, appear inevitable and have the authority of absolute truths. All the disjointed soliloquies and out-of-place weather remarks amount to nonsense reminiscent of Alice and her wonderland where she is constantly presented with suchlike plain "truths."[56] Like Carroll's Bruno or Queen Alice, McGuckian's poet/speaker, connate with the poem's object, keeps fading in and out of her subjectivity.

In my mind,
I try and try to separate one Alice
From the other, by their manner of moving,
The familiar closing of the unseen room,
The importunate rhythm of flowers.

"The familiar closing of the unseen room" evokes the hazy, shifting world behind Alice's looking glass. Like Carroll's novels with their underlying chess-board structure and abrupt transitions between the vivid, yet obscure scenes, McGuckian's highly allusive idiom

[56] Vendler 14.

accumulates apparently disparate images. Moreover, McGuckian often employs baffling metaphors of connecting architectural space like "The window not made to open"[57] or the "Door that we close, and no one opens, / That we open and no one closes."[58] Placing the "I" in this unstable, always shifting position between presence and absence, variable identities, and states of mind, McGuckian creates what Falci calls "interstitial subjectivity."[59] Further on, he outlines the reasons for which the window (and the same would bear on her doors and walls) is such a privileged motif in McGuckian's poetics:

> it is the surface whose attributes most poignantly resemble her own modes of composing subjectivity. An inside space defined by its double relation to the world outside, the window is both barrier and threshold. It is only a semblance of a threshold though, producing a subject's own sense of her relation to the world, and countering that same sense. A window – even the most immaculately cleaned – never gives on to the world without asserting quietly its own interstitial presence, forcing the seeing subject to see [...] itself as well as the world beyond, which the window's stains and marks have already marked.[60]

In "The Rising Out," McGuckian construes the "I" and the Other (whose speech is always reported, by the poem's speaker) as two separate voices, only to show how the voice of the Other is enfolded in the body of the speaker in order "to hold her bone to term," but also to confirm her "interstitial" identity. As Falci remarks in another context, the dialogic mode (as

[57] McGuckian, "Ode to a Poetess," *Venus and the Rain* 13.
[58] McGuckian, "On Not Being Your Lover," *Venus and the Rain* 32.
[59] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 91.
[60] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 118.

applied in Muldoon), "juxtaposes two 'different' speakers, but these two sets of voicings also inhabit each other."[61]

Those ambiguous thresholds that remind us of Ní Chuilleanáin's revealing boundary lines and gaping pauses[62] are crucial points in McGuckian's obscure narratives. In their relative abundance they may be said to represent the moment of transition between identities in which the speaking subject originates. Indeed, in the poem above it is immediately after the mention of the "The familiar closing of the unseen room" that the potential of the anti-muse is recognised and that the poet's work comes to fruition in the final image of "the rising out":

> [...] her dream
> is the same seed that lifted me out of my clothes
> And carried me till it saw itself as fruit.

As we have seen, the meeting with the muse mostly entails a bi-directional crossing of limits, at once leading away from one's consciousness and inwards to the subconscious. The sense of lyric subjectivity is as a coherent unity, thus engendering the poem is possible only through encounter with the Other found on the margin of the Self. These delicate transactions between depth and surface, and the Self and the Other are often facilitated by a problematic threshold or interface, in which inspiration can be attained, but in which it is also perpetually being lost. As if in keeping with Kristeva's definition of the speaking subject as a subject "on trial" or a "subject-in-process,"[63] the speakers of these poems seem to be as indefinite and elusive as their (mostly silent) inspiring Other. Occasionally – and most notably in McGuckian – this

[61] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 53.
[62] See Ní Chuilleanáin, "St Margaret of Cortona," *Selected Poems* 72.
[63] Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 22, 25.

incessantly morphing lyric "I" coincides with the figure of the muse. Quite frequently (as we have seen in Ní Dhomhnaill's "Filleadh na Béithe" or in the previous chapters with O'Reilly and Groarke), the sexual polarity of the conventional muse invocation is reversed. In other cases, as in Ní Chuilleanáin, the poet explores her historically silenced female Other by securing its place in the space of her poem. In this way she figures the disappearance of the speaking "I," which may coincide (specifically in Ní Chuilleanáin) with a lack of reference to the muse figure. Wherever the muse emerges in these poems, it is unattainable and evanescent, which is in keeping with the tradition.

Notions of unattainability and silence inform various concepts of inspiration. Together with meta-poetic commentaries on the act of lyric proposition that employ a figurative margin or threshold they bear on the topics of translation, mother tongue, and poetic language. In the next section I will explore how the concept of poetic language, especially as it touches upon the loss of Irish, is frequently identified with the trope of the muse and the notion of the inspiring Other. As Blasing notes, poetry already speaks a kind of "second language." It is "the discourse of the constitutive alienation of the subject in language – the alienation that constitutes the genesis of the 'human.'"[64] In the context of Irish poetry, this notion of a second language and the subject's linguistic alienation is graphed onto the grid of language fissure and anxiety.

As it makes poetry communicable, language represents the "outside" of poetry. Yet, at the same time it constitutes its very essence. While we become human through the "universal historicizing [...] experience of acquiring a language,"[65] without language, without our mastering of a mother tongue there would clearly be no history. But if there is no history without language, what language can be used if there *is* no history, if a history has been "silenced," or, for that matter, if a language has been silenced in history? While these are

[64] Blasing 13.
[65] Blasing 12.

questions that these poets ask, the following pages will also investigate the significance of the mother tongue and the idea of translation for their creative process.

ORIGINAL IN TRANSLATION

The theme of inspiration and the figure of the muse, together with critical assimilation of the tradition, determine the poetic debut of Aifric Mac Aodha, *Gabháil Syrinx* (The Capture of Syrinx, 2010). Although it includes poems from over a period of almost ten years, the book is compact in terms of subject matter, form, and expression. Still, the initial impression of solidity – supported by the strong rhythm of her verse – gives way upon a more careful reading to the idea of fractured temporality based on the mixing of the old with the new. As Mac Aodha herself says, her poems are the result of an attempt to transpose the historical literary tradition to modern Irish. The features of anachronism which follow from her investigation of older poetic meters are countered by the poet's unorthodox use of Irish syntax and lexis: according to Mac Aodha, writing in Irish always entails recovery of a language which *is* dead. Every description of our time thus requires search for words and coining of expressions that have no models in the inherited language tradition.

A square confrontation of the legacy informs the opening epigram "File" (Poet).[66] This satirical account of an idiosyncratic inspiration ritual, allegedly found in the Irish oral tradition, functions as the volume's epigraph or overture; its sly, appalling curtness is in tune with the prevalent self-mocking tone of Mac Aodha's poetry.

Ní iarran sé de chothú	For sustenance he wants
Ach conablach an chait:	only a cat's cadaver:
Guíonn go mbeadh a ghoile	prays that its scything
Á chnaí ag fiacla bioracha,	teeth rend his stomach,

[66] Aifric Mac Aodha, "File," *Gabháil Syrinx* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2010) 11. Trans. David Wheatley, "Poet," *The Stinging Fly* 20.2 (Winter 2011-12): 80.

Go ngreamódh an samhnas	nausea form a thick
Ina screamhán dá theanga,	film on his tongue,
Go stollfaí an dá shúil istigh	the cruel nails poke
Leis na hingne cruálacha.	out his eyes from within.

The reference to the oral tradition in the subheading – "De bhéaloideas na hÉireann é go n-itheadh an file amhfheoil an chait roimh dhul i mbun pinn dó" (Irish folklore records that the poet would eat the raw flesh of a cat before composing) – combines with Mac Aodha's compact, contemporary tone to telescope the tradition as it were. The notion of a nexus between the literary past and now, between what is borrowed and what is new is even stronger if we consider the poem as a sarcastic response to the famous 8th-century Irish lyric about fruitful alliance between a scholar and his faithful cat, "Pangur Bán," who each practice their special art – "Seilg is mian leis sin de ghnáth; / M'aigne féin ar mo shaincheird" (his mind is set on hunting, my mind on my special craft).[67] While the reverse arrangement and mood of the two poems is self-evident, it is interesting to take into account also the rather popular practice of doing "Pangur Bán" into English. As Heaney, who himself authored one such translation, concedes, "Pangur Bán" is a poem that "Irish writers like to try their hand at, not in order to outdo the previous versions, but simply to get a more exact and intimate grip on the canonical goods."[68]

Indeed, translation or transposition is the basic mode not only of this first collection,[69] but of Mac Aodha's general concept of poetic creation. In her contribution to the blog of the American literary journal *Columbia*, Mac Aodha explains how in her case writing in Irish is not a matter of choice, remarking that working on poetry in Irish "forces you to think about

[67] "Pangur Bán," *Early Irish Lyrics*, ed. and trans. Gerard Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956) 3.
[68] Seamus Heaney, "Translator's Note," *Poetry* 188.1 (April 2006): 4-5.
[69] More than one poem in the book adheres to the pattern of introducing a literary or mythological source followed by a modern "version" or a personal commentary.

translation, for practical reasons as well as artistic ones."[70] She is reconciled with the fact that her poems will mostly be published with a translation and that the majority of her readers will not have read her poems in the original. She admits that, however much she might "yearn for the ideal Irish reader, the English translation is an inescapable part of the experience of reading my poems and the aesthetic impact of any given poem comes from a sort of negotiation between the original and the translation."[71] This emancipated, realistic claim of translation at the start of her career is Mac Aodha's way of coming to terms with the fact that she writes in a minority language – a situation which led others to discourage English translations of their poetry in Ireland. If Jenkinson prefers not to be published in English as "a small rude gesture to those who think that everything can be harvested and stored without loss in an English-speaking Ireland,"[72] Mac Aodha forestalls such thinking by declaring translation part of her creative method. Reasoning of this kind, however, poses more questions than it clarifies. The first uncertainty bears on the idea of her audience. Mac Aodha, like many successful poets, most probably does not write with the image of an ideal reader in mind. If, as Walter Benjamin argues in "The Translator's Task," "the very concept of an 'ideal' receiver is spurious in any discussion concerning the theory of art since such discussions are required to presuppose only the existence and essence of human beings,"[73] the same applies to the practical side of writing poetry. Mac Aodha's "translations" are triggered by something other than concern for the generic, ignorant Anglophone and it is possible that she has no reader in mind at all. Her lyric "I" speaks to itself or to nobody in particular, revealing "the self to the self."[74] Indeed, as Benjamin writes, while artistic creation

[70] Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse."
[71] Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse."
[72] Jenkinson, "A Letter to an Editor," *Irish University Review* 21.1 (Spring/Summer 1991): 27-34.
[73] Walter Benjamin, "The Translator's Task," trans. Steven Rendall, *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 10.2 (1997): 151.
[74] See Blasing 2.

"presupposes man's corporeal and spiritual essence, no work of art [...] presupposes his attention."[75]

Another question relates to the nature of her "original." If translation is the basis of her creative approach, it is a translation without a clearly defined original – for her "original" is her very medium that is loaded with ambiguities. Arising on the border between the Irish of historical literary tradition and contemporary usage, her poetic language is innovative and extremely supple. As much as she does not care about the reader, Mac Aodha is not greatly concerned about faithfulness to the historical forms of Irish found in the literary canon which is a major source of inspiration. Apparently, she does not think it possible to convey the historical textures of language – as found in the literary and oral tradition – to contemporary poetry. Moreover, not a native speaker, she describes herself as a "language tourist" and consciously disregards the requirements of *caint na ndaoine*, i.e., to employ one of the recognized dialects of contemporary Irish, championed by the older schools of criticism. Reconciled with the obvious fact that translation cannot have any influence on the original, she is happy to operate in a sphere that proceeds *from* the original. Thus her poems, which she describes as "translations," provide the original with an "afterlife."[76] If her "original" is a language that is "technically" dead, her work, in Benjamin's terms, constitutes its "survival" (*Überleben*).[77] To extend the analogy, it can be said that in her person and her work, Irish (as a poetic language) seems to have found its "chosen translator," and has "reached the stage of [its] continuing life (*Fortleben*)."[78] Mac Aodha's poetic idiom is at once the original and the product of translation. She is her own translator: not primarily in the sense of translating from her native English into Irish (even though this aspect of her situation does come into play, especially when she – or others – translate her work into English), but in the sense of

[75] Benjamin 151.
[76] Benjamin 153.
[77] Benjamin 153
[78] Benjamin 153.

translating the historical tradition. The latter aspect of Mac Aodha's approach, however, is not motivated by a wish to adhere to any particular form of historical literary language: through its temporal and stylistic transposition it strives to provide that original with a continuing life. Still, as already mentioned, Mac Aodha's Irish is by no means straightforwardly contemporary. Due to the poet's own shifting, liminal position between the past and present of Irish, her work provides such a figurative threshold for the language and its "after-ripening" (*Nachreife*).[79]

While I have concentrated on this facet of her "translation" mode, she insists that her straddling of the border between English and Irish is equally important:[80]

> Poetry resides not simply in the original poem, nor can it be located in the translation. It exists between them in a kind of dynamic tension between the source poem and its English version, in the gaps, historical and linguistic, between the Irish way of expressing an idea conceived in Irish and in that idea's translated equivalent. […] Everything is translation, from thought to word, from image to phrase, from one linguistic register to another and from tradition to modernity. If I can act as a translator for the language of my forebears into a vibrant living version of their Irish then I will have served them, and my own poetic concerns, as my translators serve me.[81]

Her work aspires to "translation" in both the aforementioned senses. But while Irish is in part the "original," it can hardly be considered the "target language," for "target" implies finality and completeness. Asserting, like Ní Dhomhnaill, that she is unable to write poetry in

[79] Benjamin 156.
[80] She works as a full time translator for the *New English-Irish Dictionary* at Foras na Gaeilge which had its online version launched on 24 January 2013.
[81] Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse."

English, she calls Irish her "literary home," admitting at the same time that for all its familiarity, she finds it "full of exotic delights."[82]

If Mac Aodha, who approached the field of Irish poetry after feminism, does not investigate the tradition in order to find or confirm her stance as a woman, there are contexts in which she still needs to assert herself as an Irish-language poet. Identifying "translation" as a determining element in her poetics, she removes herself from the margin where she may feel relegated on account of her language choice, and finds a position on the border between the languages, claiming both at the same time. Whether the shifting dichotomy is between Irish and English or between Irish as the language of the national past and Irish as the language of her poetry, she makes the intersection the centre of her poetics and the core of her method and subject matter. Her work aims to overcome interlingual (English-Irish), but also intralingual (Irish-Irish) foreignness of languages.[83] In fact, it can be said – with Benjamin – to testify to the fact that languages are not altogether "alien to each other, but a priori, and independent of all historical connections, related to each other in what they want to say." Based in "translation," her poetry ultimately has as its purpose "the expression of the most intimate relations between languages."[84]

Putting Mac Aodha's "File" on a par with "Pangur Bán" and its abundant English versions has helped me to bring out the poem's relevance to the topic of translation. Even though Mac Aodha's lyric with its sybaritic roughness stands in contrast to the donnish style of the Old-Irish poem, there is an obvious connection in the shared topic, concerned with the

[82] Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse" and a conversation with the author, 6 November 2012.

[83] Her insistence on translation as inherent to her poetics is in fact a "small rude gesture" to those who believe that Irish might be preserved if it could be spared contact with English, those "who were happier," as Terence Brown has it, "with the state of quarantine in which the two linguistic traditions existed until very recently in Ireland." Terence Brown, "Translating Ireland," *Krino1986-1989: An Anthology of Modern Irish Writing*, eds. Gerald Dawe and Jonathan Williams (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996) 137-38.

[84] Benjamin 154, 155.

hard-to-come-by fruits of the "stealthy art" of concentration.[85] Naturally, the notions of inspiration, translation, and influence surround both lyrics. As Heaney remarks of some of the established translations of "Pangur Bán," "since Blake's meter acted as Flower's tuning fork," the poem "pads naturally out of Irish into the big-cat English of 'The Tyger.'"[86] Mac Aodha's "File," as a naturalistic, "wild-gone" image of Dionysian *furor poeticus*, is the first of the various "expositions" of the elusiveness of poetic inspiration that come up throughout the book.

The next poem in the collection interleaves the intangible figure of the muse with a series of liminal images. The premise of "Scéal Syrinx"[87] (Syrinx Story) is the Greek myth of the god Pan who, unsuccessful in his courtship and pursuit of the nymph, made her into the famous reed flute. Yet, the poem – a sequence of three non-symmetrically organized poems inspired by the nymph's fate – is no simple retelling of the myth: it is as much a reflexion on the theme of inspiration as it is a tribute to nature's endless transformations. Although Syrinx only appears in her metamorphosed reed shape, there are several ways in which she can be attributed with the role of the muse. The most obvious one, of course, is to see her as inspiring Pan's song. But it is more interesting, I suggest, to examine her bearing on the poet herself. If at first it might seem that the poet identifies with the nymph as she is about to be captured, through the imagery of constantly shifting light, the moving leaves and wings, and the fleeting shapes of waves, it gradually becomes apparent that she has made Syrinx *her* muse. The ephemerality of the natural world is closely linked with the elusiveness of the runaway Syrinx. But although she stands for the elusiveness of inspiration, the poem with its flowing imagery, veiled contours and indecipherable causality, serves as its perfect embodiment. Indeed, almost every image in the three-part sequence is received through a liminal point or

[85] "All the while, his round bright eye / Fixes on the wall, while I / Focus my less piercing gaze / On the challenge of the page." "Pangur Bán," trans. Seamus Heaney, *Poetry* 188.1 (April 2006): 4.
[86] Heaney, "Translator's Note" 5.
[87] Mac Aodha, "Scéal Syrinx," *Gabháil Syrinx* 12-14. Trans. Justin Quinn.

state of being: “The swan flip-flops its way / out of its shade’s smooth flow”; “The frothy foam will part / along the water’s skin”; “The light shakes slightly / flush with the lake.” Yet, ultimately all is cohesion:

Feileann an t-iomlán	The belt of reeds
Do theorainn na luaracha.	hoops all this in.
Ceileann an chiumhsóg	That edge hides where
Tosach an bhruacha.	the banks begin.

The latter, self-enclosed image anticipates the final two stanzas of the sequence with their meta-poetic material and the sudden revelation of the speaking “I.”

Ligim uaim le haimsir	In time I let it go,
Pictiúr seo na bruinnille:	the likeness of this maiden.
Ní ghéilleann sí d’éinfhear	She yields to no one man
Ná ní sheasann ina choinne.	nor stands in his way.
Anáil mhná, ní scaoileann	A woman’s breath. She readies
Ach eadarghlór ar tinneall:	a half-voice that will sing.
I láthair na gabhála,	It’s time: her body shaken,
Ceiliúrann sí is critheann.	abandon as she’s taken.

This “epilogue” not only sums up the whole sequence, but brings together several of the historical theories of artistic inspiration – from the trope of the majestic and desirable, yet unattainable female muse through the perception of creative genius as a live-giving breath to

the localization of the source of inspiration in the composing mind. But if the poet can be identified with the nymph and yet Syrinx is her muse, what does it mean if she now wants to let her go? Obviously we are glimpsing neither the denouement of the Syrinx story nor a series of beautiful natural images, but a parable of Mac Aodha's poetic maturing. The final message is that she will sing her song, not in spite of anyone, but despite every attempt to stop her. She no longer is in need of a mediating muse and, using a ruse, releases the image of the girl, just as she describes her capture. She readies a half-voice and, pretending to let it be seized, she actually sets it free.

Mac Aodha's poetry illustrates that there is rarely a single, coherent identity and, indeed, just one Other involved when a lyric "I" is speaking. Her poetic oneness always involves at least two Others – that is English and Irish. The latter, of course, can split into a long chain of possible compound identities – such as the Irish in which she writes and the Irish that she speaks; the Irish that she considers a dead language and the Irish that she views as a viable poetic idiom. Ambivalences of that kind are probably common to most poets of different languages, yet in relation to Irish they have special urgency. One of the possible ways to read the closing section of "Gabháil Syrinx," then, is to see the seemingly subdued half-voice as the Irish language which, as Mac Aodha says, "in spite of [others'] heroic and ongoing attempts to revive it, [is] a dead language."[88] Not happy with the inevitable fact that every poem she writes becomes a "sort of apologia for the language and its continued funding by the government,"[89] in her highly original "translations" she perpetuates the language. Associated with the notion of the original, the language itself is construed as a source of inspiration. But if Irish is her muse, the latter's dismissal at the end of "Gabháil Syrinx" does not mean the poet is taking leave of or giving up on Gaelic. Rather, her resolute settling between English and Irish and her adoption of the outsider's perspective positions her at the

[88] E-mail to the author, 15 November 2011.
[89] Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse."

beneficial threshold (represented throughout the poem by the images of the invisible banks and the churned surface of the lake) through which inspiration emerges. Through the figure of translation she deals with the apparent foreignness of the two languages to each other. As a translator for the language of forebears, she does service as much to them as to Irish that constitutes her original and to which she owes her being. In her poems as translations, to refer to Benjamin one last time, "the original's life achieves its constantly renewed, latest and most comprehensible unfolding." [90]

In Mac Aodha, the idea of translation seems to enable her to feel the "joys of writing poetry in Irish" (the subtitle of her *Columbia* blog). More equivocally, the linguistic fissure and the related issues of translation and originality are essential also for the other poets included in this chapter. As in Mac Aodha, the relevance of translation can be detected on the interlingual as well as intralingual level; its bearing for their poetics is based in the prevalence of the translation phenomenon in Irish poetry from the 1980s on that has been argued for by critics such as Michael Cronin, Justin Quinn, and Rui Carvalho Homem.[91] By way of conclusion, I will briefly review the others poets' attitude to the "other" language and its implications for their respective poetic medium, and re-inspect the above cited poems for expressions of those attitudes. This is not only to show in what way Mac Aodha's stance, clearly defined at the beginning of her career, differs from the outlooks of the others, but primarily to argue that it

[90] Benjamin 154.

[91] Some of the works concerned with the translation phenomenon in the context of Irish literature and culture are: Michael Cronin, *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996); Cronin, *Translation and Identity* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2006); Cronin, *Translation and Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2003); Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800-2000*; Rui Carvalho Homem, *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland: Dislocations in Contemporary Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements*, eds. Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Terence Brown, "Translating Ireland"; Tomás Mac Síomoin, "Debate: Thoughts on Translation – Tomás Mac Síomóin, Mícheál Ó Cróinín, Alan Titley, Seán Ó Cearnaigh," *Poetry Ireland Review* 39 (Autumn 1993): 61-71.

can mostly be perceived as a continuation and a natural outcome of processes and constellations that formed in Irish poetry in the three closing decades of the last century.

The theme is particularly relevant in the case of Ní Dhomhnaill, not simply because she writes in Irish, but because her close collaboration with some of the foremost Anglophone Irish poets, including McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin, as well as Paul Muldoon, Michael Hartnett, Ciaran Carson, and Michael Longley, might be seen as a clear precedence for the younger poet's positive stance to translation. Yet, there are important differences in their approach to the language and its "corpse"[92] which they propose to let speak through their verse. Mac Aodha is young – and lucky – enough not to have her work assessed according to criteria "established from beyond the grave,"[93] and promoted by critics such as Máire Mhac an tSaoi, or on the basis of the proximity of her idiom to the language of the Gaeltacht. Ní Dhomhnaill, on the contrary, has been hailed as an exponent of those very standards.[94] The central tension in Mac Aodha's poetics hinges upon the contrast between her unorthodox usages and civil, contemporary settings, and a loose application of traditional bardic forms. Ní Dhomhnaill, on the other hand, has mostly abstained from the complex Irish metres – she engages with the tradition mostly on the level of subject matter. [95]

Even though she claims that her "primary audience is those who read my work in Irish only" and that she has always reckoned with the size of readership that could be counted "on

[92] The title of Mac Aodha's blog, "A Talkative Corpse," refers to Ní Dhomhnaill's well-known "manifesto" in *The New York Times Book Review* (January 1995). See Ní Dhomhnaill, "Why I chose to write in Irish, the Corpse that Sits Up and Talks Back," *Selected Essays* 10-24.

[93] Mhac an tSaoi, "The Clerisy and the Folk" 33

[94] See Mhac an tSaoi, "Introduction" in Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta* 9-12. Mhac an tSaoi praises Ní Dhomhnaill's Irish for being "like that of children brought up by their grandmothers, a hundred years old." For the same attitude see Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, "Contemporary Poetry in Irish: Private Languages and Ancestral Voices," *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995) 92.

[95] Indeed, as Quinn argues, the fact that her work "for the most part uses the loose free-verse forms which spread from the USA in the 1950s," prompts us to perceive the English translations of her poems as "a type of homecoming." Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction* 149.

the fingers of one hand,"[96] due to the frequency with which she has been translated Ní Dhomhnaill is, in Neil Corcoran's phrase, "as significant in English as she is in Irish."[97] Her poetry has become so closely linked with the English on the mirroring page to lead some of her Anglophone audiences to ask why she would insist on reading her poems in Irish at all. This is hardly surprising if we consider that only a minority of her readers will be completely independent of the English translation. If she has been termed the most "visible" of the modern Irish-language poets[98] and has been assigned with a "space apart" in the world of Irish and transatlantic poetry,[99] it is above all due to the fact that since the publication of *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta* in 1986, most of her work has appeared in bilingual editions. Accordingly, her poetry has become a hot article in what Cronin calls the "Irish translation risorgimento" of the 1980s and its aftermaths in the following decade. Especially since the publication in 1990 of *Pharaoh's Daughter* (which included translations by thirteen different Irish poets), critics have commented on the inextricability of her work from the fact of translation and at the same time on the considerable looseness of many of the actual translations,[100] describing her Irish lyrics as mere "starting points" from which the others proceed to write poems that are "emphatically theirs,"[101] referring to Ní Dhomhnaill as a source of inspiration or the muse,[102] wondering where her own voice can be found in this

[96] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 16.

[97] Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997) 9. Qtd. in Falci, *Continuity and Change* 154.

[98] See Peter Denman, "Rude Gestures? Contemporary Women's Poetry in Irish," *Colby Quarterly* 28.4 (1992): 253; and John Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 260.

[99] Alan Titley, "Innti and Onward: the New Poetry in Irish," *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh*, ed. Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996) 89.

[100] Ní Dhomhnaill herself comments on the drawbacks of translation and her bilingual editions: "most of the translated poems, for example, are taken out of context, and the architectonics of the original publications therefore mislaid." Yet, she concedes that "the whole act of translation seems to me vitally important. What we gain is still so much greater than what we lose." See Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 200.

[101] Douglas Sealy, "A New Voice for the Seanachie," *The Irish Times*, 8 December 1990: 9.

[102] Mary O'Donoghue, "Not Their Muse: Irish-Language Poetry in Translation, Cross-Gender Linguistic Ventriloquism, and the Problem of Pharaoh's Daughter," *Babson Faculty Research Fund Working Papers*. 15 June 2012 <http://digitalknowledge.babson.edu/bfrfwp/12/>.

variety of tone and style,[103] or suggesting that those liberties are the inevitable result of the fact that some of her translators are simply "far superior" poets and that some of the translations ultimately "amount to a criticism of her limitations."[104] While critics have duelled on her behalf, Ní Dhomhnaill has been nonchalant about the liberties that her translators, not least McGuckian and Paul Muldoon, have taken.[105] Much of the Irish-language criticism, but some Anglophone criticism as well, has bemoaned the tendency to the "excessive," "domineering" fluency of poetic translations from Irish into English.[106] Whatever the relevance of such complaints in general, they might seem cogent in relation to some of Ní Dhomhnaill's translations whose seamless Englishness seems to block out the light of the original. As Cronin writes, each of her translators "has his/her unmistakable form of fluency, so that it is the original poet rather than the translator who becomes invisible."[107] The matter, however, is more complex. Ní Dhomhnaill has constituted her poetic practice on the oral

[103] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 153.
[104] Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction* 150.
[105] Falci, for example, challenges some of Quinn's arguments about the origin of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetic idiom and the outcome of Muldoon's liberal translations. See Falci, "Translation as Collaboration: Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon," *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, eds. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 328-40.
[106] The fear growing in the course of the 1980s and 1990s was that the overconfident, slick English translation would outshine or efface the Irish original. Critics complain about "the total absence of any foreignizing approach and the utter compliance with strategies of fluency." See Brian Ó Conchubhair, "The Right of Cows and the Rite of Copy; an Overview of Translation from Irish to English," *Éire-Ireland* 35.1/2 (2000): 92-111, at 104. While in view of the linguistic imbalance in Ireland such concerns and the refusal to treat the translation issue in neutral, purely theoretical terms are understandable, it is hard to accept that the practical aspects of poetic translation should be subject to the rules of linguistic politics. For what these language purists seem to imply is that translation would or should be made differently if worked from a dominant language to a minority one or the other way round, or if it takes place between languages whose relation is not marked by rivalry. It is improbable that the same call for "difference" and the "undermining of the seemingly natural ease" with which Irish-language poetry is subsumed by the other culture (Ó Conchubhair 104) would be applied had the market of translation in Ireland not been a one-way business and had Anglophone poetry been regularly translated to Irish – especially in view of the dogmatism with which one stream of Gaelic criticism has deplored poets of Irish who have failed to chime with "the voice of the tribe" and have tainted the language by foreign influence (Mhac an tSaoi, "The Clerisy and the Folk" 34). The decision of poets like Biddy Jenkinson and Louis de Paor to place English translations of their work *in Ireland* under taboo thus seems to be an utterly logical and realistic step which reflects the uneven linguistic situation and allows them not to be part of such debates. The only other plausible way is the opposite strategy employed by Mac Aodha who not only translates her own work, but has acknowledged translation as part of her linguistic situation and adopted it as her basic poetic mode.
[107] Cronin, *Translating Ireland* 177. Qtd. in Falci, "Translation and Collaboration" 330.

tradition and folklore over the values of the historical literary canon.[108] Moreover, she has named this overlapping of the reality and the "otherworld" allegedly still echoed in spoken Irish as the very reason for which she was unable to write verse in English that has drawn a thick line between the two. In her view, this

> framework [that] exists in Irish to describe and deal with the "otherworld" is […] virtually untranslatable due to an inbuilt bias in the English language against the validity and tangibility of otherworldly experience. Put into English this perfectly serious and alternative state of consciousness is reduced to superstition or "Pisroguery."[109]

As her poetic language and expression are grafted onto that alternative state of consciousness (which is elsewhere referred to as instinctive, strictly non-rational, and even "preverbal"[110]), it is inevitably paired with the idea of being "virtually untranslatable." If the author herself is implicitly aware that a "true" translation of her poetry into English – and I do not mean to disparage the extant translations – would reduce her work to mere superstitious gibberish, then the independence of much of her work in English of the Irish original is to be taken as beneficial and, arguably, the only plausible way.

Like Mac Aodha several decades later, Ní Dhomhnaill has from the start referred to the space of the poem as a point of contact with her (second) language; she has named Irish as indispensable for poetic composition, but also for the integrity of her own personality, "that is maybe so deeply fractured that otherwise it might not survive as a thinking entity. In other

[108] See note 113.

[109] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 86. See Falci, *Continuity and Change* 158-61.

[110] Ní Dhomhnaill describes herself as "diglossic rather than bilingual, with Irish being the language of the emotions and even the preverbal and English being for me a bridge to the outside world." Ní Dhomhnaill, "Linguistic Ecology: Preventing a Great Loss" in *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, ed. Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 79-91, at 85. Qtd. in Falci, *Continuity and Change* 160.

words, Irish has again and again saved me from madness."[111] Nevertheless, Mac Aodha's self-irony in choosing the outsider's position and in calling herself a language tourist has nothing in common with the indignant resignation of an exile resounding in Mhac an tSaoi's phrase "Bím balbh i dhá theanga" (I'm speechless in two languages), with which Ní Dhomhnaill has agreed.[112] Her tactical move of claiming "translation" as part of her poetic method might indeed save her the dilemmas which surround the translations and dual-language publications of Ní Dhomhnaill's Irish oeuvre. Arguably, her intention to maintain a distance and to stay on the outside from where she can face Benjamin's metaphorical "high forest" of the language and, calling to the original within, listen for its reverberations,[113] will provide her with a more beneficial use of her liminal position and marginality as an Irish language poet than Ní Dhomhnaill is allowed in her tendency to internalize the language and to readily succumb to its attractions and drives – just as we have glimpsed her surrendering to the muse in "Filleadh na Béithe."[114]

[111] Ní Dhomhnaill, "'Cé Leis Tú?'" 72. See also Ní Dhomhnaill, "Why I Choose to Write in Irish," *Selected Essays* 10-24; and Ní Dhomhnaill in Michael Cronin, "Making the Millenium; an interview with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill," *Graph* I (October 1986): 5-9.

[112] Ní Dhomhnaill, "'Cé Leis Tú?'" 72.

[113] Benjamin 159.

[114] As Falci points out, Ní Dhomhnaill puts the special potential of Irish language down to its "marginalization from the processes of modernity": "It has been marginalized, its status has been taken form it [...] and yet it has survived in extraordinary richness, but not necessarily in a literary form, rather a paraliterary form. The real richness of Irish is not found in the literature of the last two hundred years, but in places like West Kerry." Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 31. Qtd in Falci, *Continuity and Change* 160. This shows how different Ní Dhomhnaill's stance to the literary tradition and the literary powers of the spoken language is from that of Mac Aodha who has based her poetic idiom and identity on an engagement with "the bardic tradition" and an attempt to translate that historical tradition "into a modern literary world that might seem absurd to the historical bard." Mac Aodha suggests that it is precisely this "marginalization from the processes of modernity" that lies at the base of her own difficulties when writing in Irish and that constitutes the drawbacks of Irish as a literary or spoken language today: "The Irish language is, like all modern languages, deluged with English. Those cranks who set out to protect the language (and I am one of them) are forced to reckon not just with the contagion of English in the everyday life of native Irish speakers but with the constantly developing lexicon of modern life. Irish was in steep decline even before the Industrial Revolution (which has still to reach Ireland). We have no native word for a spinning jenny, never mind a jet engine or a flash drive." E-mail to the author, 15 November 2011.

Though not immediately apparent, the linguistic binary in part drives the poetry of McGuckian. Author of some of Ní Dhomhnaill's more questionable "translations,"[115] she has expressed frustration with her medium[116] and her wish "to reach an English that would be so purified of English that it would be Irish."[117] Yet, while she claims to aspire to the language, there is no discernible influence of Irish in her experimental, formally elaborate English verse (just as Ní Dhomhnaill's remark that she has been influenced by McGuckian's use of the poetic line makes us wonder[118]). McGuckian's poetic idiom may be disjointed and deconstructed, but it is not through proximity to Irish syntax, lexis or the influence of traditional bardic forms. In fact, it is exactly her attention to the generative potential of language and the sound of words over their denotations, along with a syntax that is continually undermined by non-sequitur, which affirm McGuckian as one of the most original voices in Irish poetry in *English*. Like her idea of this elusive "other person" whom she admits she needs for every poem, the shadow of Irish as the lost language of the Irish past is a source of inspiration. Similarly to the uncontrollable muse, to whom McGuckian claims to be able to speak in her poems,[119] she expresses her concern for the fate of the Irish language, although its structures and sounds leave no discernible imprint on the page. I think, therefore, that it is possible to compare McGuckian's self-professed reliance on the Irish language to the notion of the poet's unattainable yet unforgettable Other, the "dream sister" that metamorphoses incessantly and stands behind her poetic "rising out."

Interestingly, the allusions in "The Rising Out" to the interiorizing of the difficult muse ("She will recede with all my heroes, dark / Or fair, if my body can hold her bone to

[115] Her translations feature in *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990) as well as in *The Water Horse* (2000).
[116] Bohman 98-99.
[117] McGuckian and Ní Dhomhnaill in L. O'Connor, "Comhrá."
[118] Ní Dhomhnaill in a poetry reading in New York. See McGuckian and Ní Dhomhnaill in L. O'Connor, "Comhrá."
[119] Holmsten 96.

term") coincide with the gesture which at once dismisses the problematic trope and suggests the idea of poetic fruition in the last stanza of the poem:

> If she had died suddenly I would have heard
> Blood stretched on the frame,
> Though her dream
> Is the same seed that lifted me out of my clothes
> And carried me till it saw itself as fruit.

This resembles Mac Aodha's half-voice and its covert triumph at the close of "Gabháil Syrinx." Mac Aodha's word choice in the last line of the poem is symptomatic:

> Anáil mhná, ní scaoileann
> Ach eadarghlór ar tinneall:
> I láthair na gabhála,
> Ceiliúrann sí is critheann.

The feminine grammatical subject "sí" admittedly refers to the "bruinnille" from the first quatrain of the "epilogue," rather than to the more proximate woman's breath or the masculine "eadarghlór." Nevertheless, by the end of the account of Syrinx's capture we naturally identify the nymph with her voice. Indeed, the wide semantic range of the verb "ceiliúr" serves as further confirmation of the initial reference to the mythological source: the dispersed lexical equivalents, which include the verbs "warble, sing," and "celebrate," but also "fade, vanish" or "bid farewell," add up to the forked message of the Syrinx story with its contradictory implications of capture and liberation. The closing couplet thus refers to the

image of the nymph as transformed to voice or sound of the flute. Moreover, as I have argued, through the switch to the authorial first person, the conclusion of the Syrinx sequence encourages identification of the final grammatical subject with the poet's lyric "I" and her complicated, but thoroughly enjoyable medium.

McGuckian's shifting subjectivity – that which Paul de Man calls "pronominal agitation"[120] – and her enfolding of the Other in the body,[121] often assisted by inclusion of architectural images and the questionable margin of windows and make-believe doorways and walls, point to a preoccupation with her speaking voice. In McGuckian, it might appear that we have no choice but to take her word that her fascination with Irish, though purely Platonic, feeds her poetic creativity. Although there are scarcely any direct references to the language,[122] in her early work especially there is dynamism apparent in the application of some of her key words and concepts which connects to her mourning for the silenced Gaelic while it suggests hopeful reliance on its very fact. In poems from *On Ballycastle Beach* (1989), "The Dream Language of Fergus" and "The Dream in Three Colours," she associates the language with dreams.[123] Dreams are recurrent throughout her work and often associated with images of the voice. In her words, dreams are essential because they mean "freedom." Although she admits that it is an impossible dream, she points out that "to have your language back would be the greatest freedom."[124] By this analogy, it is possible to read the object of the

[120] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 243. Qtd. in Falci, *Continuity and Change* 5.

[121] As Eric Falci notes, "one of McGuckian's most effective techniques for having a speaker incorporate its other is by transforming the relationship into a mode of interiority." Falci, *Continuity and Change* 110.

[122] When asked, after having expressed dislike of the English lexis, if she was ever tempted to use Irish words, McGuckian explained that it would hardly benefit either her writing or the language: "it can easily be so *phony*. That can really be the worst mistake, to throw in a bit of the *isle-tongue*. It could be a diminution of it." See Bohman 98.

[123] In an interview with Susan Sailer Shaw McGuckian asserts that they are both political poems, the first dealing with English as her son's first language, the second expressing a dream that "we could be all English and all Irish and all Europeans." Susan Sailer Shaw, "An Interview with Medbh McGuckian," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32.1 (1993): 111-27. 25 October 2012
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrarchive/act2080.0032.001/121:17?page=root;rgn=main;size=100;view=image>.

[124] Bohman 99.

poem – the dream sister in "The Rising Out," whose purpose seems at first to be "To kill the poet in me before Easter" through making "The roots of my shadow almost split in two" with irony and "soliloquies that rise out of sleep" – as referring to the Irish language. In a self-protective urge to defend her poetic integrity, the poet-persona imagines her Other dead, the image stretched on or captured in a frame. Yet, in the last two lines she reverses and concludes the poem with a metaphor of germination, conceding to the beneficial effects of the Other's presence: "her dream / Is the same seed that lifted me out of my clothes." By helping her heal her cleft identity, the dream provides the speaker with a state of perfect freedom and unexpected wholeness which are preconditioned by the unreserved acceptance of the Other (and the language) into one's blood, till the seed can see "itself as fruit."

McGuckian's treatment of the contradictions inherent to poetic translation is in tune with her own writing. When asked about the often commented complexity and referential opacity of her work, she replied by way of drawing attention to the decisive role of poetic language in the process of inspiration:

> […] within the world of the poem, the words mean exactly what they say. […] I come out shaped by me. I can't come out any other way. They expect you to be able to control the way you come out. All you've got are the words, and sometimes I think they forget about the words and go into ideas. The words stand for themselves really.[125]

In this sense, Mutlu Konuk Blasing's argument for the emotional and compositional value of the material of words is especially relevant for McGuckian's poetry where these often seem to have the function of bodily drives inseparable from the mind:

[125] Bohman 105.

> Thus the lyric "I" must be engaged not at the level of representation but both below and above the level of figuration, in terms both of formal schemes and literal processes – meter, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and all kinds of wordplays that destabilize reference and foreground the mechanisms of the code – and the phenomena of rhythm, voice, and emotion motivating the mechanical code.[126]

The speaking "I" is audible through the formality of poetic language, which is perceived as primarily nonrational.

Paul De Man points to the independence of language "of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have," adding that language "does things so radically out of control, they cannot be assimilated to the human at all."[127] The same idea of the independence of words and their primacy over contextual meaning determines McGuckian's approach to poetic translation. She follows the dictates of her own line rather than listening for echoes of the original, and accordingly alters the tone as well as the referential meaning of the poem she translates. Arguably, this is not simply a result of her working from cribs, but it marks her concept of translation and poetic composition. Translation which aims to transmit something can convey nothing but a message, that is, as Benjamin remarks, "something inessential."[128] If poetry communicates very little to those who understand it,[129] any attempt to translate McGuckian's lyrics will show that her main subject is poetic language per se. In view of her realistic appraisal of its paradoxes, translation can be said to have bearing on her creative process.

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[126] See Blasing 14-15.
[127] Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 96, 101. Qtd. in Blasing 9.
[128] Benjamin 151.
[129] Benjamin 151.

Surely, Ní Chuilleanáin's "absent girl" is relevant in terms of language and translation. Although fluent in several languages (she has translated poetry from Italian, Romanian, and Irish), Ní Chuilleanáin's main concern is with a different form of translation which, as Quinn puts it, "listens hard at the silences of history and other people's lives."[130] Her starting point is precarious in its combination of her choice of the "original" (absent personal histories, but also missing linguistic codes) and her resolution to be true to the language that she sets herself to echo: there is, of course, no echo to be recorded. It is as if she set out to live up to Benjamin's definition of the "true language" in which "all the ultimate secrets to which all thinking strives are stored up, at peace and even silent."[131] Though Benjamin speaks of the superiority of words over meaning as defined through the sentence and syntactic relations, Ní Chuilleanáin's use of language that is apparently stripped of meaning through applications of reticence, diminution, and contextual ellipsis suggests a parodic direction. The tendency to mockery is traceable in her reluctance to do the obvious, to try, like some, to overcome the historical silences by putting words and thoughts into the mouths of the absences that populate her lyrics. The satire, however, is also directed against her own undertaking as she concentrates on the absence "conspicuous by silence" and makes it one of the governing themes in her poetry.[132]

The careful evasion of the role of a spokesperson for the dead has to do with her awareness of their irreparable silence. Viewed in this way, her reserve gestures towards the death of the Irish language and provides a testimony to that death, and its utmost translation.

[130] Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction* 172.

[131] Benjamin 159.

[132] The typical detached perspective of an outsider or absent person informs Ní Chuilleanáin's "The Last Glimpse of Erin" from *The Rose-Geranium* (1981), which combines silent personas with the hollowed-out image of a dreamt version of Ireland and the image of a sleeper: "[...] your low shoulder lost in the quilt, / An arm thrown forward: a swimmer"; "The island trimmed with waves is lost in the sea, / The swimmer lost in his dream." Although, in contrast to Boland's "Mise Éire," there is no explicit mention of the language, the title suggests that the memory of Irish is part of the dream island to which the sleeping persona is tied by "spider's navel cord: the distance." The distance, like the dream of Ireland as Erin, is as fragile and vaporous as the image of "The white light skirting the cloud" that "pierces / glass riddled with small scratches and creates / The depths and cadences of a spider's web." See Ní Chuilleanáin, *Selected Poems* 41.

If a true translation must be "transparent" in order not to block out the light of the original,[133] then the difficulty of Ní Chuilleanáin's cryptic verse is not that her "translations" would be too opaque to be true, but that they seek to be true to an original which has lost its light, which is blind and mute.

In "The Absent Girl" the echo of silence, augmented by the hollowed-out speaking position,[134] is so overwhelming that it makes people voiceless ("they pass her without a sound"). This lack of speech can also be related to the loss of Irish; as Quinn suggests, Ní Chuilleanáin's poems are marked by her resolution to listen to the silences of different kinds and her attention "to the tiny, subtle traces of silence and translation."[135] Like McGuckian, she realizes that what is essential is mostly untranslatable. But there are substantial differences in the two poets' starting points and conclusions: while McGuckian represents that untranslatability by having the original silence muffled by discontinuous narrative and dense linguistic growth, Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry insists on being in control. It is based in sparsity that may seem to constitute clarity but which ultimately refutes that expectation by letting little else but representations of silence to make it onto the page. The dangers of such "translation," as Quinn points out, lie in that "failed attempts usually produce silence in the target language, leaving no mark of the things, emotions or issues they left behind."[136] Ní Chuilleanáin's approach is therefore more appropriately described as transcription than translation. To overcome the difficulties of recording non-presence as such, however, she focuses on reproducing the missing content symbolized by the silences she sets out to represent. In this way, despite being so cryptical, she gets close to the risk of pointing towards a message, albeit a lost one, which, as we have seen, is not indispensable in terms of the effect

[133] Benjamin 162.

[134] I am indebted for this idea of the vacated or hollowed-out speaking position to Eric Falci who proposes, in relation to Paul Muldoon's lyric subject, the concept of "a space for speaking [that] is established, but is continually produced as a vacancy, a spot [...] that cannot sustain a discursive path or coherent subject." See Falci, *Continuity and Change* 80.

[135] Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction* 173, 172.

[136] Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction* 173.

of poetry and the workings of poetry translation. Still, whatever the differences in treatment, Irish is conceived in both Ní Chuilleanáin and McGuckian as constituting muteness. The memories of the language have been lost with time, along with the absent girl's "muscle and blood." As mentioned above, with her reflection and her original light blocked out with the image of the clock perceptible through the glass, the girl stands a parable of passing time. But if she is devoid of a voice or language, if she has "no beating heart / Lung or breast," "how can she tell the time?" The point is she cannot, the poem being a model example of the poet's listening to silence.

Contrary to Ní Chuilleanáin, Boland – in keeping with the Irish tradition – proposes to be the interlocutor and the translator for the past. I have referred to her frequent figuring of the status of the Irish language as a void, as a wound that stands for the compromised "Irishness" and which is often associated with accounts of the silencing of women in Irish history and literary tradition. As we have seen, her wish to be able "to sing the past / in pure syllables" to find the shape of forgotten hymns and, above all, to be "able to speak at last / my mother tongue," are all caught up with a hope for "a new language." This apparent anachronism, the paradoxical collapsing of the opposition between the old and new is discernible in poems like "Mise Éire" where Boland proposes to undermine the conventional image of Irish femininity through ironic use of Pearse's refrain. But the gesture also contains a tendency towards unintended self-irony: despite her concern and self-professed admiration for the language, Boland has never seriously applied herself to the study of Irish which, indeed, she would need to learn from scratch as a "new language." Instead, she seems content to comment on the silence of Irish, as if, once it was denied her as birthright, she could never grasp it authentically by later learning it – and in this respect her stance is similar to McGuckian's – as mother tongue. Therefore, her defiant acceptance of the liminal position ("Years of marginality suggest [...]

the real potential of subversion"[137]), does not embrace the linguistic binary: she does not place herself between the languages but inside English from where she can lament the inaccessibility of the language of her foremothers which she construes as her "true" native tongue. The immediate relevance of this arrangement to her poetics is alluded to in "The Muse Mother": concentrating on the "foreignness" of English, Boland admits she has lost the sense of being at home in her poetic language.

As stated above, Boland's concern for the "mother tongue" is part of a discourse that is marked by intention and the poet's emotional politics. Her hope for a "new language" is continually checked by the notion of its inaccessibility and vicious cyclicality: it will only ever be a smarting scar, an emblem of "what went before." Yet, as Blasing argues, commenting on the interlaced concepts of the lyric "I," poetic language, and translation, "[w]e are never at home in poetry" since with poetry "we must think of language as a foreign mechanism *and* an intimate, constitutive history *at the same time*."[138] Because Boland, unlike McGuckian or Mac Aodha, does not come to terms with the foreignness of language (above all that of her own) *and* because she has lost the sense of intimacy with her actual mother tongue, her attempts at translating the speech of the past and her effort to become a spokesperson for its silences are left frustrated.

While one of the central motifs in this chapter has been the figure of the muse, the poets included in the discussion can all be linked through the motif of translation as well. I have paid attention especially to the liberating and purgatorial functions of translation and have focussed on the occasions where poets place themselves in the position between languages. I have explored how this liminal, interlingual position can truly, or only seemingly, be perceived as inspiring for the individual poetics. Important in the discussion has been the

[137] Boland, *Object Lessons* 147.
[138] Blasing 9.

phenomenon of a mother tongue since, as Blasing says, "it is a fact that poetry lives only in its native tongue; it does not translate without a loss of its emotional charge."[139]

Although the thematizing of the Irish language and its loss as the unquestionable mother tongue is not the prerogative of women poets, I have argued that in these poets the binary linguistic situation, the language fissure, and the heightened sensibility to the marginal status of Irish have to do with their former marginality as female poets and citizens. This accords with my general thesis that the apparent shifts in the Irish lyric poetry (from the masculinist to the feminist and from the feminist to the post-feminist phase) are best understood as continuities, as true and logical outcomes of earlier cultural situations and developments, rather than perceived in terms of the reaction and counter-reaction principle. Some of those continuities cross or are even located on the seam between English and Irish, and constitute the traffic and commerce between the two languages.

If there is any change detectable in, for example, Mac Aodha's concept of poetic language and the linguistic divide, in her use of the muse figure and her voicing of the lyric "I," it is the untroubled embrace of Irish (which is her second language), her joyous acceptance of its fact and the realistic acceptance of its status accompanied with relieving irony, based positively in self-ridicule.

Besides transformations, however, there are similarities and continuities traceable in the treatment of the language issue and in its bearing on the lyric "I." A subject in poetry can only be a speaking subject by means of "an inhuman code, which it has had to master in order to be 'human.'"[140] Through their obscurity, by pointing to the *unheimlich* character of the code, to the strangeness of the alienated forms and the uncertain concept of the inherited "mother tongue," the women I have discussed in this part of my dissertation illustrate the "humanity" of the speaking subject. Yet, neither the puzzling images and encrypted narratives

[139] Blasing 11.
[140] Blasing 9.

of Mac Aodha and McGuckian, nor the reticence of Ní Chuilleanáin point to meaninglessness. On the contrary, they serve (with the use of preterition, ellipsis, miniaturization and compaction) to insinuate meaning. Meaning can be ostentatiously discharged (as it is left behind the glass in the case of Ní Chuilleanáin and Boland) or it constitutes its own arbitrariness (as in McGuckian, O'Reilly, and Mac Aodha). The semantic obscurity, however, is revelatory as it serves to testify to the untranslatability and the ultimate superfluousness of message to the effects of poetry. Eric Falci writes that lyric is "a mode of concentration [and] of making dense."[141] In this sense, poets like McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin, Groarke, O'Reilly, or Mac Aodha all take lyric poetry to the extreme.

[141] Falci, *Continuity and Change* 5.

CONCLUSION

Browsing the shelves of New York's Strand Bookstore in 2000 I came across the *Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry, 1967–2000*, edited by Peggy O'Brien. Published the previous year, the copy had obviously been already much in use, and came in very handy as I was to prepare an anthology of Irish women poets in Czech translation. Praised as "beautifully produced [and] now the single best introduction to the kind of writing that is shaping and being shaped by, the new Ireland,"[1] O'Brien's book was the result of the emergence of Irish women's writing in the early 1970s that culminated in the last decade of the century.

In 2002, Vona Groarke's third collection, *Flight*, arrived in the mail hot off the press, with a request for a selection and translation. Accepting, I accidentally acknowledged my pigeonholing as women's translator. Of course Groarke, who started publishing a decade earlier, has from the beginning defined herself against any such labelling. In her editorial to the 1999 issue of *Verse* dedicated to Irish women poets, she expressed hope that such features and special issues would "eventually [become] redundant." Insisting on the variedness of the submitted material, she refused to "typify" the Irish woman poet according to her occupation, subject-matter, prevailing tone, or form. What she most welcomed was that "the best of Irish women poets [were] not writing 'Irish Women's Poetry.'"[2] Even had she uttered no such explicit disclaimer of literary feminism, Groarke's poetry would hardly have been described as "feminist" or "feminine." Although many of her poems are set within and around the house, and often around the issues of motherhood, the domestic is never a mere setting, and no backdrop for playing out "woman's experience." While they stand witness to the lives that take place within their walls, the many houses in her poems have a formative and defining

[1] Kieran Quinlan, "Book Review," *World Literature Today* 75.1 (Winter 2001). 14 April 2013 <ebscohost.com/c/book-reviews/4754284/wake-forest-book-irish-womens-poetry-1967-2000-book-review>.
[2] Vona Groarke, "Editorial," *Verse* 16.2 (1999): 7, 8.

role in those lives. Children's perspective, undiscriminating in scope and unrestricted by habit and sense of finality, is frequently employed to express Groarke's main theme: the paradox between the will to render the encounter with the strange world and the insufficiency of language to serve that end.

If Groarke is consistent about her attitude to literary feminism in her polemical as well as poetic writing, so is – though conversely – Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill who has drawn on pagan orality and the "creative unconscious"[3] in her poetry, and referred to French feminist theory and the "language of the body"[4] in essays and interviews. Yet, like Medbh McGuckian, who relies substantially on the perceiving body wherever her method approaches mimesis and representation but whose referential indeterminacy and organic, dream-like narratives can hardly be pinned down as *écriture feminine*, Ní Dhomhnaill refuses to be "trivialized" as one of the "'begonia poets' or 'wallpaper writers' or, heaven help us, 'Earth Goddesses.'"[5] Of course, none of the poets I list under the heading of feminism write what Ní Dhomhnaill, with her penchant for compounds, calls the "Here-I-am-looking-at-peas-falling-off-the-plate"[6] type of verse, or represent "the domestic, *per se*."[7] But they all belong to a generation that had to deal with practical issues of publication and acceptance, and the lack of role-models and predecessors, and who by broaching themes related to female sexuality and women's experience firmly in the Irish poem contributed to its overall transformation. Still, even though I point out and discuss motifs and motivations that are feminist, my key critical interest is in the value and effect of the works as *poems*. If I attempt to place those poems in a context, it is not the selective context of women's writing but that of Irish poetic traditions and the current poetic scene characterized by emancipation and change.

[3] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 174.
[4] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 85.
[5] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 175.
[6] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 178.
[7] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 178.

While still in the grip of "moral outrage at the way women poets were being treated in Ireland" and at what she perceived as an uneven "playing field,"[8] Ní Dhomhnaill admitted in the early 1990s that women's poetry was "in a state of flux," adding that "we are at the start, rather than in the middle or the end, of a specific phenomenon."[9] Towards the end of the decade, however, she conceded that the situation "has been changed, changed utterly," so that looking back she was able to speak of "the relative neglect of Irish women's poetry that existed until quite recently."[10] *Pace* Johnson's dictum that round numbers are always false, the years around the turn of the millenium are a turning point in Irish, especially women's, poetry. 2002, for example, saw the publication of volumes IV and V of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* dedicated to *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, which has been perceived as much as an achievement in a long-drawn-out battle as the mark of a beginning and a "documentation of a completely new poetry scene."[11] It was a period of change, as that change got confirmed and recorded in the contemporary poetic output by men and women. Matthew Campbell, as the editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2003), describes the preceding decade and the years around 1999 as witnessing in poetry "a changing Ireland."[12] He suggests, nevertheless, that for all these conspicuous changes we should not be oblivious to continuities in some of the key, constituting features of Irish literature:

> Exile and change [...] did engage the Irish poet and his or her characteristic mode of elegy, still preoccupied with the sense that change may also mean loss, the loss of the

[8] Ní Dhomhnaill, "Introduction: Contemporary Poetry," *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writings and Tradition*, Vol. 4, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 1290. Reprinted in Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 171-184.
[9] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 176.
[10] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 184.
[11] Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 184.
[12] Matthew Campbell, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 3.

traditions and certainties of a recognisable national identity. As the Irish poem was written in a world facing environmental as well as economic and social change, so it adapted its traditional concerns with elegy or nature, to these new conditions.[13]

A similar nostalgia, following from the impossible and hollowed-out concept of national identity that is caught between an inert past and elusive present, is traceable in the poems I discuss. The idea of imminent loss follows not only form the preoccupation with the literary past and the ambiguous relationship to the present, marked in the last three decades of the century by continuing discrimination, but issues also from the sense that together with the rejection of the masculine tradition and gendered nationalism a connection is being severed with Ireland as a supposed though problematic locale of national identity – a dilemma epitomized among others by the language issue. This paradox, however, does not take away from the fact that literary feminism has substantially contributed to the wane of the nationalist tone in poetry and criticism and that it helped to deconstruct the pervasive notion of "nationness,"[14] as Ailbhe Smyth has it, that lay at the base of the Irish state and the concept of Irish as the national language.

The linguistic emancipation of the new writers like Aifric Mac Aodha or Caitríona O'Reilly, together with the diminished tone of political involvement, are characteristic of post-feminist writing. Throughout the thesis post-feminism applies to poetry which distances itself from feminism while it is based on its achievements. The term thus indicates how the poets who started publishing in the last ten or fifteen years have grown past, but also out of feminism. In my view, post-feminism complements feminism by including subject matter and

[13] Campbell 3.

[14] Ailbhe Smyth, "Paying Our Disrespects to the Bloody States We're In: Women, Violence, Culture, and the State," *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writings and Tradition*, Vol. 5, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 406. Qtd. in Justin Quinn, "Introduction," *Irish Poetry after Feminism*, ed. Justin Quinn (Monaco: Princess Grace Irish Library Lectures, 2008) 10.

motifs which were introduced by the feminists, while being even less reducible to "women's writing."

Contemporary Czech poetry periodically debates whether engaged writing has its place in a post-modern, and mainly post-communist society. The dilemma between post-feminism and feminism, however, has barely any relevance in the discussion. Perhaps because men and women had to delimit themselves against a shared "oppressor" – the communist regime which (pretending to promote equality between sexes) claimed them *en masse* as its labour force – and because the regime denied publication to all (men and women) who failed to prove a sufficient level of commitment, there was no space, but also no real need for feminist poetry; the revolution against the totalitarian state was fought on other fronts. The ultimate result is that while women have been published on equal basis with men, Czech poetry has lacked major female figures such as the feminist poets in Ireland or the talents of O'Reilly, Morrissey, and Mac Aodha among the younger generation; as Petr Borkovec, one of the foremost Czech poets of the last twenty years, confirms, what he most misses in Czech poetry today are "women authors like Vona Groarke from Ireland."[15] I hold that it is also because they did not emancipate themselves as feminists that Czech women still have to assert themselves as poets and make it to the top. In the light of this comparison with the Czech milieu it is no exaggeration to speak of *revolutionary* laughter in Irish feminist poetry as it focussed on the undermining of the gendered nation-state idea, as much as it is appropriate to refer to *post*-feminism in relation to the current scene.

Although there are critics in Ireland who refuse to assign feminism to the past, arguing that women still have issues to tackle in the society and the cultural mindset of the majority, I propose that in poetry it was over not long after it had become possible and common for

[15] Adam Borzič, "Básník je ten, kdo za všechny a pro všechny udržuje přátelství s jazykem" (A Poet is the Person who Stays Friendly with the Language, on Behalf of and for Everyone), interview with Petr Borkovec, *Tvar* 6 (March 2013). 23 April 2013 <http://www.itvar.cz/cz/2013/06-2013-borkovec-584.html>.

women to function as poets. If poems by O'Reilly, Mac Aodha, or for example the Northern-Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey are still marked by the balancing of tone and search for the lyric "I," it is a search they carry out primarily as poets, not women. Nowhere in their poetry do we find the foregrounding of the feminine ego and the schematically ironic obsession with the ideal masculine that inform the so-called post-feminist media products of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It must have been this standard media image of post-feminism in phenomena like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) or *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) that provoked Moynagh Sullivan and Wanda Balzano in their editorial to the 2007 special issue of the *Irish Review* to put post-feminism on a par with "consumerism" and to impute commercial motivations to it:

> If the use of the term "post-feminism" reveals in its "consumers" a desire to be at all costs modern, and post-modern, in other words progressive and trendy [...], then this dangerously mirrors the more alarming aspects of a winning Celtic-Tiger mentality. One cannot but remain unconvinced of this kind of entrepreneurial, self-congratulary, *à la mode* feminism that follows the capitalistic model closely and is an indulgent form of bourgeois individualism.

The editors are keen to take upon themselves the responsibility of "educational analysts" to extend and revitalize the genuine, diehard feminist issues that are "at risk of being hijacked by conservative political forces."[16] While such an expression of social activism and rallying for "resistance to conformism" could be accepted in a reaction against the ostentatiously unromantic, yet strangely romantic chick-lit (or dick-lit) elements in the fast-growing branch of contemporary women's fiction that has also been referred to as post-feminist, it seems garishly out of place in terms of poetry as it is written in Ireland today. Uncomfortable with

[16] Moynagh Sullivan and Wanda Balzano, "The Contemporary Ballroom of Romance," an introduction in *"Irish Feminisms": Special Issue of The Irish Review* 35 (2007): 1.

the idea of Ireland or "Irish Poetry after Feminism,"[17] the editors focus on the reverse concept of "Irish feminism after poetry."[18] Catriona Clutterbuck who coined the latter, anagrammatic phrase argues, nevertheless, that "Feminism and Irish poetry [...] are natural allies, not antagonists; to posit them otherwise is to declare the redundancy of art in its capacity to change lives on its own terms." Thus she calls for "an investigation of Irish feminism after poetry, in confidence that relations of hospitality and exchange, rather than those of absolutism and hierarchy, can be expected to prevail between the art form and the intellectual, social and political tradition concerned."[19]

The issues of transition, as well as those of hospitality and exchange are relevant to the phenomenon of poetic translation that is an important, and much debated aspect of Irish poetry. As this poetry has experienced change after feminism, a shift has been forming in the attitude to translating poetry from Irish to English and the related criticism that had previously been much controlled by the dichotomy between dominant and translated cultures. If I show, in the discussion of Mac Aodha's approach to writing in Irish, that poetry and translation can be allies – since their essence, as Benjamin tells us, is based on something else than the ambition to transmit paraphrasable meaning which in terms of both is "something inessential"[20] – so can translation and criticism be viewed as compatible. As a translator and critic I hold that there is no closer way of reading a poem than that of a translator. But I do not propose this usefulness of the translator's experience to the critic only on the level of the

[17] *Irish Poetry after Feminism* is the title of the collection of essays from the 2006 conference held in the Princess Grace Irish Library in Monaco, edited and chaired by Justin Quinn. The phrase is repeated in the title of Moynagh Sullivan's contribution, "Irish Poetry after Feminism: In Search of 'Male Poets.'" See *Irish Poetry after Feminism*, ed. Justin Quinn (Monaco: Princess Grace Irish Library Lectures, 2008).
[18] Catriona Clutterbuck, "An Unapproved Alliance: Feminism and Form in the Irish Poetry Debate," *Irish Poetry after Feminism*, ed. Justin Quinn (Monaco: Princess Grace Irish Library Lectures, 2008) 54.
[19] Clutterbuck 54.
[20] Benjamin 151.

attention paid to the language and the creative force of the individual words.[21] The same experience indicates that just as there is no single theory or set of rules that would tell us the best way to approach a text as a translator, there are none that would help us to tackle a poem critically. Both the translator and the critic set about their task aware of the variety of their material and resigned to the idea of inevitable limits and loss. Mac Aodha's embracing of the translation mode is motivated by her belief that "everything is translation"[22] and that all these translations (including that of an image, idea, or a feeling into poetic language) entails a flattening of the original and the loss of some of its dimensions. But Mac Aodha is not alone in thematizing the limits of language and representation. Indeed, the critical and meta-poetic commentary on those limits is one of the important continuities in contemporary women's poetry. Through the acceptance of these limits and by foregrounding elements of silence and secrecy, authors like McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin, Groarke, and O'Reilly all come close to creating poems that match experience in its multifaceted immensity.

[21] See Benjamin who claims that "the word, not the sentence, is the original element of translation. For the sentence is the wall in front of the language of the original, and word-for-word rendering is the arcade." Benjamin 162.

[22] Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse."

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ABSTRACT

"Irish poetry" is an inherently equivocal concept characterized by two fissures, one linguistic (Irish-English; standard English-Hiberno English) and the other chronological (oral-written; Old Irish-modern Irish). Central to my project is to show how this bifurcate cultural identity, prominent in Irish literature due to Ireland's history and the politicized concept of "national language," figures in poetry by Irish women of the last forty years. While I account for the significance of the hyphen in Anglo-Irish as well as in Gaelic-Irish poets, contradictory tensions are traced not only across and along the linguistic divide. In attending to the shift from feminism (Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paula Meehan, Medbh McGuckian, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill) to post-feminism in Irish poetry (Biddy Jenkinson, Vona Groarke, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Aifric Mac Aodha), I illustrate the role that the border between English and Irish has played in these processes.

The dissertation falls into two parts each of which consists of two chapters. Part One explores some of the ways in which poets have confronted the inherited tradition and the feminine stereotypes therein. My argument is that the frequent use of ironic distance and heteroglossia by major feminist poets in the final three decades of the last century has substantially contributed to the current state of linguistic emancipation and political non-involvement in Irish poetry. Part Two explores how women have adapted conventional figures of poetic inspiration and the female muse. I propose that the conscious search for poetic identity and authentic expression has been often achieved through mock paroles and various applications of silence. While the focus is on subversive secrecy, special attention is paid to the transactions across the partition between the two main languages of Irish literature and to the theoretical, as well as practical implications of poetic translation.

ABSTRAKT

Pojem „irská poezie“ naznačuje celou řadu dichotomií, od rozpolcenosti jazykové (angličtina vedle irštiny, standardní angličtina vedle irské angličtiny) po rozpory v rovině chronologické (ústní tradice a proti ní psaná literatura, stará irština versus moderní irština). Cílem předkládané disertace je sledovat, jak se rozštěpená kulturní identita – jako důsledek vývoje novodobých irských dějin a silně politizované otázky „národního jazyka“ – projevuje v poezii irských autorek posledních čtyřiceti let. Práce si všímá významu dvojdomosti a tematizace spojovníku u anglo-irských a irsky píšících básnířek, protichůdné tlaky jsou ovšem dokládány nejenom v oblasti jazykové. Práce zkoumá přechod od feminismu (např. v díle Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Pauly Meehan, Medbh McGuckian a Nualy Ní Dhomhnaill) k post-feminismu (Biddy Jenkinson, Vona Groarke, Caitríona O’Reilly a Aifric Mac Aodha) v irské poezii, přičemž poukazuje na roli, již v tomto procesu sehrála hranice či pomezí mezi anglicky a irsky psanou tvorbou.

Disertace má dvě části, z nichž každá obsahuje dvě kapitoly. Část první sleduje některé z přístupů, jimiž se básnířky vyrovnávaly se zděděnou, převážně mužskou literární tradicí, s konvenčním ideálem ženství a zobrazováním Irska jako ženské postavy. Hlavní tezí je zde názor, že časté využití ironického odstupu a heteroglosie v dílech řady významných feministických básnířek výrazně přispělo k jazykové emancipaci a slábnoucí politické angažovanosti v současné irské poezii. Část druhá zkoumá způsoby, jimiž si ženy přisvojily tropus básnické inspirace a múzy. Argumentace poukazuje na skutečnost, že vědomé hledání básnické identity a původního výrazu se v řadě případů pojí s prvky karikatury, sebeironie a mlčení. Sjednocující je zde moment zámlky a utajení, zvláštní pozornost je však věnována též vzájemným vztahům mezi dvěma hlavními jazyky irské literatury a teoretickým, stejně jako praktickým hlediskům básnického překladu.