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DISERTAČNÍ PRÁCE

Daniela Theinová

LIMITS AND LANGUAGES

in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry

MEZE A JAZYKY

v poezii současných irských autorek

vedoucí práce: doc. Justin Quinn, PhD

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Any monograph on Irish poetry will meet with questions concerning the delimitation of its subject. Unlike the majority of canons that can be categorized, on the surface at least, by linguistic and/or national affiliations, “Irish poetry” is commonly used to refer to no less than three different literary scenes and traditions (Irish poetry in Irish, Irish poetry in English, and Northern-Irish poetry), with the linguistic and national identifications often in contradiction. 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 as the national language of Ireland. If the notion of Irish literature in English, as it formed in the nineteenth century, has been based on difference from the “pale” of the English canon, (O’Connor) the idea of difference applies also to the poetic production in modern Irish, which distanced itself from the interrupted bardic tradition and has been on alert against the proximity of the dominant English.

The disturbed cultural and linguistic identity is represented in Irish poetry and criticism as the linguistic (Irish-English; standard English-Hiberno English) and chronological (oral-written/modern/standardized; Old Irish-modern Irish) fissure. As Jacques Derrida writes of his Franco-Maghrebian origin in *Monolingualism*, cultural and linguistic identity is never a given and can only be “promised or claimed.” Deconstructing the idea of the mother tongue as a natural aspect of identity, he asserts that there is no language preceding the “I,” and that, in any culture, they must be invented at the same time. Derrida’s proposition bears special relevance to “Irish poetry” which, due to Ireland’s cultural history and the much debated, politicized concept of the “national language,” is an inherently equivocal concept. Starting from this premise, the dissertation follows the formation of the lyric subject, as it is addressed in the essays and thematized in women’s poetry of the last forty years.

While I account for the significance of the bifurcate identity and competing allegiances for the Anglo-Irish as well as the 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. Throughout the thesis, those tensions are shown as stimulating rather than destructive. In the works I discuss, the poets typically place themselves in an ambiguous borderline position that is construed as the site of continuous clash as well as attachment and which enables them to reflect on the formation of their identity as writing subjects. The poetry often issues from a metaphorical liminal position in which its authors place themselves in order to address issues of verbal creation.

I employ the concept of the liminal in relation to the former marginality of women in literature, but also to follow the variable forms of the fundamentally hyphenated, ever-emerging identity 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 scene 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 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 role as a mediator interposed between the multiple identifications that make up the idea of “Irish poetry.” (Muldoon)

By looking at poets of both English and Irish and by applying the specific perspective of subversive humour and irony, I offer new insights into poetry by Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paula Meehan, Medbh McGuckian, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, which could,

according to its subject-matter and politically engaged tone, 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.

Part One of the dissertation examines some of the ways in which contemporary poets have confronted the inherited tradition and the feminine stereotypes therein, mainly through their ironic subversion. I point to 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 definitions of poetic language as *jouissance*, based on the Lacanian-Barthesian idea of *jouissance* as disrupting the structures 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.

The criticism of the 1990s repeatedly commented on the irony of the fact that the very prevalence of the feminine constructs of the country in culture was one of the factors that contributed to the exclusion of actual women from the country's historical narratives and literary tradition. Chapter 1 shows how the major women poets of the pioneering generation have overcome their 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.

Towards the close of Chapter 1 I point to the fact that satirical revisions of traditional 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. The upsurge of literary feminism in Ireland between the late 1960s and 1980s 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 happened to coincide with the deconstruction of the same kind of stereotypes by authors (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 Gaelic tradition, which can be seen as a common reference point shared by poets as different in terms of poetics and their stance to the language issue as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Paul Muldoon or Máirtín Ó Direáin.

The process of women gaining a more prominent place on the Irish poetic scene was as closely related to the deconstruction of iconic figures of the motherland as to the polemics with the ideal of the inspiring female Other, still detectable in poetry by men in the 1970s and 1980s. Chapter 2 explores how women contradict those 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. My purpose is to reinspect some of the instances of this kind of revisionist writing through the prism of ironic distance which, again, I argue to be an enabling element.

If the poets use the “borrowed,” traditionally male standpoint of an admiring artist to gain distance from their conventional role as passive, silent muse, the reversal of poetic arrangements is shown not to have been motivated by a single-minded attempt of women to

adopt male strategies. Rather, it 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. 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 the essentially dichotomous Irish literature, they have not only been able to create poetry which secured them a position at the forefront of the contemporary literary scene, but they have contributed to the development of the current, more diversified and pluralistic aspect of Irish poetry, evidently less marked by division.

While my key argument in Part One is that the successful subversion of literary or ideological stereotypes in the poems to which I refer entails the use of the distancing techniques such as 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.

I propose that the very heterogeneity of the poets I discuss – 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. (Wills, Cronin) 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.

Having examined how women appropriated the literary tropes of the feminized nation through the use of subversive humour and irony, in Part Two I explore some of the ways in which they have transformed their status as boundary figures into thematic material. Endowed with specific transgressive potential, the borderland 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. I 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.

Chapter 3 proceeds 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 parodies, 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) final sense, but in the sense of an acknowledged plurality of meaning, its endless emerging and disappearances. Together with Clair 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.

What is shared by most of the examples is the aspect of a life-giving interstice from which poets approach the issue of poetic inspiration, sometimes even directly addressing the muse. As mentioned above, my argument is that the historical marginality of women in literature can be seen as accounting for the prominence and the productive use of the liminal in contemporary women's poetry. Rather than concentrating on the political aspects of this shift – through which the margin ceases to represent a restricting condition but becomes a constituting element and a prominent motif in women's poetry – I look into the implications of that shift in terms of the individual poetics. While paying attention to the specificities of each poet's approach, I comment upon some points of intersection, including the concept of translation as figuring in the writing process, the complicated notion of the mother tongue, or the expressions of the productive tension between the hermeneutics and poetics in the individual poems and the poets' critical writing.

Although 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 included in Part Two. This allows me to trace diverse instances of slackening political engagement prevalent in the poems' tone from approximately 2000 onwards. At the same time I set out to show that this often encrypted, privatized lyrical discourse is to a large extent based on considerations that we are accustomed to associate with the engaged, feminist phase in Irish poetry, such as the issues of publication, of finding one's own poetic expression in the face of the masculine tradition, and the rejection of the conventional muse. Looking into the various ways in which some of the major female poets of the time responded to the issues of intra-poetic affiliation and inspiration, defining them as matters of feminist concern, and listing various instances of the appropriation or, indeed, repudiation of the conventional muse figure, I propose that it is

from a position between two extremes, or states of mind of silence and statement, of furtiveness and open polemics that the practical as well as creative aspects of poetry making are most frequently addressed.

I focus on the hermetic narratives, the moments of cryptic personalism and domesticity in the writings of Medbh McGuckian, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paula Meehan, Biddu 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 writings" 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 same focus on the use of subversive secrecy informs Chapter 4 which interleaves further examples of mocking muse invocations 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. Besides concentrating on the effects that contact (or lack of it) with the muse has on the poetic subject, I further demonstrate how the Irish language 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.

As in Chapter 3, most of the examples cited in Chapter 4 contain the motif of an enlivening threshold from which their themes are approached. Even though they find the traditional notion of the female muse impeding, instead of opposing the inherited canon and simply rejecting that which is most limiting, the poets often place themselves or their personas

in a figurative liminal zone from which they address, among others, the issues of 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. (Bollas, Sullivan) 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 change with a sense of trembling balance. (Turner) It is in its forkedness that the liminal is relevant to women's marginal position: as a generative state of otherness which occasions, as Moynagh Sullivan notes, a new understanding of the Self. In this sense the former marginality of women, with its heightened connotations of "otherness," has been not simply a limiting, but a salutary factor.

Towards the close of Chapter 4 I explore the relation of poets 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 main 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. While one of the central motifs in this chapter is again the figure of the muse, the poets included in the discussion can all be linked through the motif of translation as well. Employing Walter Benjamin's notion of translation as "a continuing life" (*Fortleben*) of the original and the "after-ripening" (*Nachreife*) of its language, I pay attention especially to the liberating and purgatorial functions of translation and focus on the occasions where poets

place themselves in the position between languages. My aim is to show to what extent this liminal, interlingual position can be perceived as inspiring for the individual poetries.

Although thematizing of the Irish language and its loss as the unquestionable mother tongue is no prerogative of women poets, what I propose is 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 main 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.

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