

## **Report on Daniela Teinová, *Limits and Languages in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry***

This is a very good piece of work with a broad frame of reference and some highly-distinctive qualities. It is written in flawless English, with few typographical mistakes. It is the product of sustained research and also of a prolonged period of intimacy with poetry and poetics. The thesis is in some ways state-of-the art - at times self-proclaimedly post-theory and post-feminist, while nevertheless making good use of various theoretical positions and feminist paradigms throughout. The distinctiveness of the thesis also lies in its comfortable movement between English-language and Irish-language poetry, and the fascinating analysis of what goes on in the border or liminal spaces between those languages and their connected poetic traditions.

Given its breadth of reference the thesis is quite discriminating in its choice of poets to discuss, and offers evidence for a new canon of Irish women's poetry emerging – a poetry which, as the conclusion shows, is provocatively thinking of itself as not *women's* poetry any more, rather moving on to a post-feminist confidence, in both Irish and English. Poets such as Aifric Mac Aodha and Vona Groarke are read productively in this way, even though they do not shirk feminist issues in their work. The acknowledgement of the contribution of Eavan Boland is made, but her position no longer dominates debate – a move in recent criticism and poetry-writing that this thesis acknowledges. The influence of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill remains strong, and she is read generously and with sensitivity throughout. Other important poets chosen for discussion include Medbh McGuckian and Catriona O'Reilly. Thus the thesis moves between generations of poets, constructing a strong counter-canon of Irish women poets, arguing with confidence and considerable knowledge.

There are areas for possible discussion and revision which might enable this thesis to be further developed into the good critical book it can become. I will deal with these in four areas.

1. Structure of the thesis. While individual chapters contain some very good readings and raise some important theoretical issues – silence, translation, double silencing of the Irish-language woman poet, various theoretical approaches to gender, writing and translation - there is an issue with the direction that the thesis takes. It is slightly uneven in execution, and the break of argument between chapters is indistinct. The chapter titles, for instance, are vague and might have been refashioned to give a stronger critical as opposed to poetic indication of their content. The idea of 'Revolutionary Laughter' as in Part One, Chapter One of the thesis, seems to be a good one, and relates well to the consideration of irony which follows in the next section. But it needed defining more strongly as an idea sooner in the argument, and also more strongly promoted to give a sense of what this research is revising in the literary tradition. The revisionary account of Padraig Pearse is good, as is the subsequent treatment of Boland and Muldoon's rewriting of the sacrificial female sovereignty figure. But this is well-known material, subject of many influential critical treatments at least since Patricia Coughlan's first intervention (her 'Bog

Queens' essay appears twice in the bibliography in different anthologies, but was actually first published in 1991). A stronger distinction from previous criticism (from Coughlan and Clair Wills, Edna Longley and Shane Murphy who are also mentioned here) would have been helped if a stronger sense of chapter titles influenced how this argument, and others throughout the thesis, related to established critical positions.

2. Theory. This is related to the above, and is apparent mostly in Part Two and the discussion of McGuckian and Mac Aodha. The question of secrecy is an important one for texts written by authors who see themselves as writing after a period of silence – or even silencing. The account here is good, if fairly conventional – private lives issuing in private language or fragmented 'post-modern' texts. Readings of McGuckian are typical in this respect. The author here does subsequently gesture towards a post- post-modernist poetry (if such a thing could exist). But this thesis maybe does not follow its instincts strongly enough into challenging earlier positions. The instincts on show are to bring such silences and secrecies into the open. Explanation and paraphrase are still legitimate modes for literary criticism, and it would have been good to see less lip service paid to the nostrums of a particular type of criticism and a further bringing of these poems into the plain air, as it were. The sections on the muse and inspiration and of where poetry comes from, are interesting, but this material can be infected by poet-talk – moved to the mystical realm that some of these poets, under the respectable cover of psychoanalysis (Kristeva is a frequent companion here), are drawn. This work could be more profitably criticised or treated with scepticism, that is from a reader's rather than writer's position; or if not, given a stronger critical defence.
3. Actual reading practice. This is related to the above. It may be for reasons of space, but there are times when this thesis is keener to introduce or summarise or to sum up than to get its hands dirty with the business of explication and close reading. The thesis could have quoted more from a broader range of texts. The best bits are in engagement with poems; the even better bits are when moving between two languages. Given this intellectual dexterity, it would have been good to see more of it, more demonstrated from and by the reading of texts rather than implied by them or taken from already-established critical positions. The discussion of Mac Aodha, for instance, is fascinating, but we could really have seen more of her work, and less of the working of it into another argument about the bi-lingual poet. Practice will trump theory in this respect – in fact it seems to be what this thesis is trying to say, so it can be developed in revision from this point.
4. Translation. As stated above, one of the very good things about this thesis is its impressive movement between two languages, and its awareness of the blurred and liminal spaces that are then invoked. This is maybe a familiar point, but it is one carried out with great competence. Could the argument be advanced though, beyond the broadly cultural materialist account here? Could other linguistic or poetic issues be raised? The issue of gender becomes inflected with that of language – and this is

by now almost a given in Irish literary criticism. But the danger is again of a gender-essentialist as well as language-essentialist mysticism (see the comments on the muse and inspiration above). Ní Dhomhnaill, for instance, is quoted (p.172) as saying that writing about the 'otherworld' only becomes 'superstition or "Pishroguery"' when put into English, which has 'an inbuilt bias against the validity and tangibility of otherworldly experience'. The gloss invokes the 'pre-verbal' and 'virtually untranslatable', but much more should have been said, and the conclusion that the many creative translations of her work do not appear as 'superstitious gibberish' because they are not literal or 'true', lets a number of people off the critical hook.

But this is a rare example of the author of this thesis giving up the argument to established opinion or treating an author or critical point with undue reverence. There is much sense evident at many places in this thesis. It is already an achieved piece of work, in many places ready for publication. Further revision will help bring a very good PhD thesis on to become a very good and necessary critical book.

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