

New Lands for New Words

In the satirising dissection of the sectarian strife in the North in *Autumn Journal*, Louis MacNeice asks pungently why a country, “like a ship or a car,” should always be construed as female.¹ While it may appear in many different shapes, MacNeice complains, like Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the land is always at the same time a threatening presence and an elusive dream. The image of a woman going by, included in MacNeice’s autobiographical long poem written at the close of 1938, is a taunt apparently directed at Yeats’s famous playlet and the figuration of Ireland as *Seanbhean Bhocht* (Poor Old Woman). But the trope of Ireland 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 old crone 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 identifying the national with the feminine. Writing of *Women in Irish Culture and Politics*, Gerardine Meaney adopts the concept of Indian political philosopher Ashis Nandy concerning the history of political colonisation which, according to Nandy, can be theorised as a history of feminisation while the attempts of a people to regain autonomy have been customarily described as a fight to resume a “traditionally masculine role of power.”² In Western cultures, abundant propagandist use of this metaphor has accompanied the national and literary resurgence resulting from the romantic plunge

into the unknown waters of the vernacular. It has commonly—and contradictorily—been paraded as a standard on both sides of diverse conflicts, representing the subjugated territories as perceived by the oppressor while at the same time symbolising the resistance of the colonised or marginalised people.

However, while the trope is supposed to be of Indo-European provenance, it was employed in Irish literature continuously from earliest times, and even served as the basis of a separate poetic genre. By the end of the sixteenth century, motifs of the formerly fruitful bond between the ruler and the female figuration of his region began to be seen as problematic with the tightening hold of the colonisers on the lives of Irish lords and with their deforestation and landscape-charting activities. While the landscape and its inhabitants were plagued by the invaders, the conceit of the feminised land was taken over by the post-bardic poets of the seventeenth century and subsequently appropriated by Irish Jacobitism. It was at that point that it became the symbol of the colonised nation—an image that would pervade Irish political poetry and nationalist resistance for the next 300 years.

The main subgenre of Irish Jacobite verse, the sophisticated, highly ornamental *aísling* (or vision) poetry refers to the subjugated land most often as the *Spéirbhean* (Sky-Woman), a regal figure of great physical beauty appearing under one of the Celtic names for Ireland, such as Éire, Ériu, Banbha or Fódla, adopted from the ancient sovereignty myths. 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 Caitlín Ní hUallacháin, Síle Ní Ghadhra, Cáit Ní Dhuibhir and, later, Rosaleen or Róisín Dubh, or indeed the *Seanbhean Bhocht*.³ By the time the national and literary revival were in full swing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, poets had mostly abandoned the conventions of Jacobite forms. Still, the woman image representing all kinds of abstract concepts and ideals remained cherished and used abundantly. Through the Irish Jacobite song in English, it developed into a nationalist symbol and pervaded the rhetoric of the Anglo-Irish cultural revival. As the chief instrument of cultural nationalism, the feminised icon of Ireland became so inextricably linked with the awareness of national identity that the latter was virtually unthinkable without the former.⁴

This section of the book focuses on some of the ways in which modern and contemporary poets, both male and female, have confronted the allegorical representations of the feminised land and harnessed them to their own polemics with the inherited literary tradition. The necessity to come to terms with past iniquities is, of course, one of the common themes in feminist theory, and Irish poetry and criticism have paid close attention to the absence of women from both language canons. My aim in Part I is not to give a definitive survey of the existing stances and arguments but rather to review some of the older polemics in the light of the book's dual focus on *limits* and *languages*. To keep the discussion within bounds, I will concentrate mainly on reactions penned by women. My intention, however, is to look at their responses in the context of other writings and criticism of the period, and to show how they are often directed at specific manifestations of stereotyped femininity and nationhood in poetry by their male predecessors and near contemporaries.

In their vehement rejection of the old topoi that ascribe to women either silence and passivity on the one hand or intimidating sexual power on the other, female poets often lend their support to the anti-nationalist, revisionist stream in poetry and criticism of the 1980s and '90s. Also in response to the escalating sectarian conflict in the North, the latter demanded eradication of conventional images of nationality, pointing to their emptiness as well as potential perniciousness. Although revisionist critics such as Edna Longley would occasionally question the conceptual integrity and legitimacy of some of the feminist complaints by Eavan Boland and others,⁵ it is pertinent, I suggest, to view the two trends as part of one sociocultural milieu.⁶ In pointing out the decisive role that factors of linguistic and geographical division had played in Irish literary history and categorisation, poetry inflected by the rise of feminism was—particularly within the anglophone production—part of the move towards historical revisionism in Ireland.

In keeping with the book's secondary focus on strategic applications of laughter and secrecy, I will draw attention to the elements of satire and parody that often inform these efforts of transgression. Towards the end of Chapter 2, I will outline certain parallels detectable between these ironic approaches by women poets and the Bakhtinian concept of the heteroglossic forces in language employed to undermine the unitary discourse of ideology.⁷ At the heart of the following two chapters are poems that originated in the final third of the last century when revising of this kind was largely considered to be necessary so that women

could take up the threads of the predominantly masculine tradition. What is of special interest to me, however, is that satirical revisions of old conventions and stereotypes constitute a unifying element reaching across the sexual divide (as MacNeice's words quoted at the beginning of this section illustrate) and pertaining to poets of both English and Irish, over a long period of time.

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. As the majority of the country's literary history took place through the medium of Irish, contemporary poets can often be seen exploring the Irish-language canon in their attempts to reconcile with the past. This aspect of literary and feminist revisionism coincided with an inevitable phase in which a number of poets writing in English and Irish concerned themselves in the closing decades of the twentieth century with the language issue. The critical debate on this subject was marked to a large extent by the repercussions of postcolonial attempts to determine the national language of Ireland.

In her breakthrough study on Northern Irish poetry, *Improprieties* (1993), Clair Wills pointed out that the nationalist ideal of a single, unifying common language had been futile from the outset, and insisted 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 In this, Wills alludes not to the limits between languages but to the limitations and ultimate pointlessness of the idea of politically motivated linguistic identity which, no matter how inclusively defined, will always prove to be restrictive and potentially discriminating. One of the most interesting aspects of the current theoretical debate on the future of the Irish language as a creative tool is the question of whether Irish has been successfully detached from its role as a token national language. On this subject, Michael Cronin has lauded the fact that "Irish is no longer locked into an exclusive relationship with English" and argued that its status might benefit from the growing plurality of Irish society and the changing linguistic context.⁹

In view of this ideal of social diversity prominent towards the turn of the millennium, the very heterogeneity of the poets I discuss can be seen as denial of the concept of a single "national language" based on linguistic uniformity. Provisionally united in their relation to a shared literary past, they show how this pluralistic notion of languages has been

instrumental in surpassing the limits of discriminatingly defined nationality. If literary production in English and Irish still appear to constitute two separate worlds, they also arguably belong to a space increasingly less marked by division. The almost habitual opposition between the two languages, based on their historical and continuing imbalance, has occasionally been identified with the areas of gender politics or nationalist and sectarian sentiments. While the status of English and Irish remains unequal, the greater diversity and consequent opening up of Irish society has coincided with the endeavours of some poets to further separate the literary languages of Ireland from nationalist conventions and to extricate women from the stereotypical notions of femininity and national identity.

It is the constant reworking of the trope of the feminised land, including the *aisling* conventions and the motherland figure adopted by the national revival that sustains my interest in the diverse instances of poets coming into contact with the Gaelic tradition. In the Constitution of Ireland from 1937, Irish was established as the first official language in the Republic of Ireland. However—both in the Republic and in the North—it has also been the language of a minority. In the South, Irish has been taught as a compulsory subject at primary and secondary level, yet the system has obviously not produced any new native speakers. Irish-language education in Northern Ireland in the post-partition period was affected by the withdrawal of official funding and was subsequently run on a voluntary and community basis.¹⁰ Although the number of people learning the language on the island has increased since the turn of the twentieth century when Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League), a social and cultural organisation dedicated to preserving and promoting the Irish language, was gaining a wider influence, there is a limited number of those who are fluent in and use the language on a daily basis.¹¹

Consequently, many anglophone readers and writers will have no direct connection with the vast majority of Ireland's literary past and will have to rely on translation and paraphrase in relating back to the Irish canon. Very few of those writing in Irish today will consider it their first language and be living their lives, personal and professional, exclusively through Irish. Thus, 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 with one's creative language 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,

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and, not least, in the works of the Irish-language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

In 1995, Peter Sirr argued that the options left to Irish women poets included “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.”¹² While this is accurate enough, I would claim that by turning the margins to which they had been ascribed into points of interface, women have used their peripherality as a source of opportunity. Attending to the borderlines between the languages and the male and female traditions, as well as, for example, to the dichotomy between the private and the public, they have made marginality a fundamental part of their feminism, as well as their poetry. Indeed, in an environment progressively defined by pluralism and difference, women’s alterity (in the sense of the female “otherness” or specificity) has proven to be a convenient prerequisite. The change of tone and in the approach to gender- and language-related subject matter in Irish poetry after the turn of the millennium signals emancipated acceptance of the sexual and linguistic other. If, in their search for *new lands for new words*, these poets did occasionally approximate an alternative form of expression, it was in their frequent use of irony and heteroglossia.

NOTES

1. Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 138.
2. See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983). Qtd. in Gerardine Meaney, *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1991), 6–7.
3. See Máirín Nic Eoin, “Secrets and Disguises? Caitlín Ní Uallacháin and Other Female Personages in Eighteenth-Century Irish Political Poetry,” *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: Iris an dá Chultúr* 11 (1996): 7–45.
4. The factors leading to the transformation of the image into a nationalist symbol are summarised succinctly by Máirín Nic Eoin in “Sovereignty and Politics, c. 1300–1900,” *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writings and Traditions*, eds. Angela Bourke et al., vol. 4 (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 273–6.

5. See Edna Longley, "From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands," *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), 173–95.
6. See Longley, "Feminism, Culture and Critique in English," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 4, 1578–87; For summaries of the debate, see Luke Gibbons, "Challenging the Canon: Revisionism and Cultural Criticism," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 3 (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), 561–680; *Revising the Rising*, eds. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha and Theo Dorgan (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991); and Longley, *The Living Stream*.
7. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Islowsky (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1968), 73.
8. Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 89.
9. Michael Cronin, *An Ghaeilge san Aois Nua. Irish in the New Century* (Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life, 2005), 49.
10. Studies that explore the dichotomous language situation in Ireland, with a view to language education and politics, include *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements*, eds. Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); *Languages of Ireland*, eds. Michael Cronin and Cormac Ó Cuilleaináin (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003); Camille C. O'Reilly, *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland: The Politics of Culture and Identity* (London: Macmillan, 1999); and Janet Muller, *Language and Conflict in Northern Ireland and Canada: A Silent War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
11. According to the Central Statistics Office, "[o]f the 1,761,420 persons who answered yes to being able to speak Irish [in the 2016 Census of Population in the Republic of Ireland], 418,420 indicated they never spoke it, while a further 558,608 indicated they only spoke it within the education system. Of the remaining group, 586,535 persons indicated they spoke Irish less often than weekly, 111,473 spoke weekly while just 73,803 persons spoke Irish daily." See "Irish Language and the Gaeltacht," Central Statistics Office, accessed 15 May 2019, <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/ilg/>.

In Northern Ireland, the data gathered in the 2011 census indicate that 184,898 (10.65 per cent) have some knowledge of Irish while only 4,130 people (0.2 per cent) speak Irish as their main language at home. See "Irish Language Skills," Northern Irish Statistics and Research Agency, accessed 15 May 2019, <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/PivotGrid.aspx?ds=2778&lh=37&cyn=2011&sk=136&sn=Census%202011&yearfilter=>.

According to the 1901 census, only approximately 641,000 people were able to speak Irish in Ireland and only 20,953 of those claimed to be monolingual Irish speakers. See Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary* (London: Routledge, 1990), 19–23.

For an account of the complexities of interpreting the language question and the returns of the censuses around the time of the language change in rural areas of Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century, see Barry McCrea, *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 4–7, 35, 148n.6, 14 n.7, 149n.8, 153–154n.9. For an assessment of findings on the language question in the nineteenth-century censuses, see Garret Fitzgerald, “The Decline of the Irish Language,” *Ireland in the World: Further Reflections* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2005), 11–22.

12. Peter Sirr, “‘How Things Begin to Happen’: Notes on Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Medbh McGuckian,” *Southern Review* 32.3 (June 1995): 458.

WORKS CITED

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Islowsky. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1968.
- Central Statistics Office. “Irish Language and the Gaeltacht.” Accessed 15 May 2019. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/ilg/>.
- Cronin, Michael. *An Ghaeilge san Aois Nua. Irish in the New Century*. Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life, 2005.
- , and Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin, eds. *Languages of Ireland*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003.
- Fitzgerald, Garret. “The Decline of the Irish Language.” *Ireland in the World: Further Reflections*, 11–22. Dublin: Liberties Press, 2005.
- Gibbons, Luke, ed. “Challenging the Canon: Revisionism and Cultural Criticism.” In *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, edited by Seamus Deane, vol. 3, 561–680. Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991.
- Hindley, Reg. *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Longley, Edna. “Feminism, Culture and Critique in English.” In *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writings and Traditions*, edited by Angela Bourke et al., vol. 4, 1578–87. Cork: Cork University Press, 2002.
- . *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994.
- MacNeice, Louis. *Collected Poems*, edited by Peter McDonald. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.

- McCrea, Barry. *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015.
- Meaney, Gerardine. *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*. Dublin: Attic Press, 1991.
- Muller, Janet. *Language and Conflict in Northern Ireland and Canada: A Silent War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Nic Eoin, Máirín. “Secrets and Disguises? Caitlín Ní Uallacháin and Other Female Personages in Eighteenth-Century Irish Political Poetry.” *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: Iris an dá Chultúr* 11 (1996): 7–45.
- . “Sovereignty and Politics, c. 1300–1900.” In *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writings and Traditions*, edited by Angela Bourke et al., vol. 4, 273–6. Cork: Cork University Press, 2002.
- Ní Dhonnchadha, Máirín, and Theo Dorgan, eds. *Revising the Rising*. Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991.
- Northern Irish Statistics and Research Agency. “Irish Language Skills.” Accessed 15 May 2019. <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/PivotGrid.aspx?ds=2778&lh=37&cyn=2011&sk=136&sn=Census%202011&yearfilter=>.
- O’Reilly, Camille C. *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland: The Politics of Culture and Identity*. London: Macmillan, 1999.
- Sirr, Peter. “‘How Things Begin to Happen’: Notes on Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Medbh McGuckian.” *Southern Review* 32.3 (June 1995): 450–67.
- Tymoczko, Maria, and Colin Ireland, eds. *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003.
- Wills, Clair. *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.