Secret Scripts

In coming to terms with the problematic canon, women inevitably concerned themselves with the issues of poetic influence and inspiration, often basing their approach on various applications of irony and coded narrative. A focus on these distancing rhetorical devices provides insights into the interplay between the margin and the centre, between the political and the personal, as well as between what is manifest and what is being withheld in poetry. The following chapters begin with an examination of writing from the 1970s and '80s in which some of the major female poets of the time either appropriate or repudiate the traditional muse figure, and also include excursions to later verse. This allows me to trace the tone of political non-involvement—in terms of removing feminist and post-nationalist anxieties from the centre of political concern—increasingly prevalent in Irish women's poetry from around 2000 onwards. At the same time, however, I show that the often encrypted, privatised lyrical discourse—found in poetry by Vona Groarke, Caitríona O'Reilly, Aifric Mac Aodha, Sinéad Morrissey or Ailbhe Darcy—is largely based on content that we are accustomed to associate with the engaged, feminist phase in Irish poetry and stems from the subversive use of secrecy by authors such as McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin or Ní Dhomhnaill.

Like women writers of the past whose reactions to misogynist criticism often involved false modesty, some of these later poets have written lyrics replete with irony in response to traditional constructions of women

as subject matter rather than authors of poetry. In postcolonial vocabulary, these strategies are conveniently described as the "sly civility" with which those discriminated against turn their gaze "back upon the eye of power," to borrow from Homi Bhabha.[1] For the women who accessed the Irish literary scene in the last third of the twentieth century, the controlling eye of power is represented by the masculine tradition, a power that holds them in an impasse as it is impossible either to outstare it or to simply disregard it. Harold Bloom defines this contradictory stance towards one's predecessors, i.e. the tension between the urge to encompass and to reject, as the precondition of the "agonistic" development.[2] The history of poetry, as Bloom construes it, is a struggle to achieve poetic influence in which poets find their tone and position by misreading one another. Women poets in Ireland, however, often felt that they needed not only to absorb and then deconstruct the influence of a particular established poetic or literary figure but to define themselves against a whole range of woman-objectifying tropes, metaphors and forms of rhetoric that pervaded the canon. Thus, their situation was the exact opposite to that proposed by Bloom, whose strong poets wrestle with their forebears "even to the death," as opposed to weaker talents who tend to idealise.[3] The poets discussed below are neither inclined to idealise their precursors, nor are they subject to the anxiety of influence since, for them, the inherited masculine canon already signifies a void or death.

The essentially contested concept of "Irish poetic tradition" and the view that both the Irish-language canon and modern poetry in English are marked by a sense of fracture and loss follows, *inter alia*, from the implicit memory of the Irish language. Paradoxically, this widespread awareness of the dead or lost past, materialised in Irish poetry in the form of a linguistic shift (Irish–English, standard English–Hiberno-English) and chronological development (oral–written/modern/standardised, Old Irish–modern Irish), is catalysed by the sense that, as William Faulkner has it, "the past is never dead," and that "it's not even past."[4] The canon is thus at once the site of loss and also a plausible, even inevitable source.

The literary tradition is both continuous and interrupted. The discontinuity, however, not only occasions the freedom to create a new poetic self but also provokes a countermotion of nostalgia for the tradition that has been hostile and has therefore been abandoned. Indeed, while they

have described, mostly in their prose writings and interviews, the aspects of the Irish literary past that prevented them from relating to or drawing from that tradition, the majority of these poets have also commented on the impossibility of overlooking it. While Part I examined ironic subversions of the iconic figures of the motherland, in Part II I would like to focus on how the poets react against the traditional troping of the female muse. I will demonstrate how they reshape these earlier figurations, not least when a shift from silence to expression and vigorous subjectivity, as well as various aspects of the language issue and translation, becomes the very theme of their poems.

The study as a whole is based on the idea that the ways in which women have been represented in literature in Ireland have not only changed but kept evolving over the course of the last fifty years. An important underlying feature of this development has been the language issue which I approach as an essentially plural phenomenon with diverse aspects and manifestations. This concept of language as a key factor in the formation of poetic identity will be more systematically highlighted in the individual chapters. In the poems I examine, the hermetic narratives and moments of cryptic personalism often serve as outlets through which the poet-persona eludes established speech roles and conventional gendered scenarios, with the aim of inverting or parodying traditional polarities (sexual as well as linguistic ones). The analyses in the subsequent chapters illustrate how these silences and ironic obscurities not only provide a way out of the public into the private sphere but they are often the moments when the political becomes the poetic, when the poems effectively start. These *secret scripts* thus serve to help the poets move away from stereotyped social and cultural constraints and also re-establish themselves in the shared, renovated public space of the poem. In these poems, the personal and the political are not opposed to one another; rather, they overlap in new ways, usually in rhetorical silence, mocking, one-way addresses or referential ambiguity. Thus, the poets turn away from public speech just as they comment upon it.

Some of the themes discussed earlier will arise again, all relevant to the topic of fragmented representation and encrypted expression. One is the theme of silence—for silence, of course, is "privatisation" at its most extreme—the other is related to issues of marginality and liminality.

Despite their protests and polemics, these poets generally aim to avoid a dichotomous, genderised concept of literature. Rather, they employ liminal, transitory spaces and situations that signify convergence as much as difference, thus creating an alternative, open position on the border-line. It is often from a point between two extremes, or states of mind (silence and proposition, furtiveness and open polemics) that they set out to work.

Transition signals an interim. Liminality allows change to originate, and I argue that temporary liminality is in itself a persistent character-istic in the work of several generations of Irish women poets over the past fifty 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 (or deliberately silent) personae, between the stereo-types of national or linguistic identity and poetic subjectivity. Through the use of ellipsis, irony, ekphrasis, quotation and the distancing effect of translation, their poems are often not just a medium for self-expression, but they become mediators between those opposing forces.

All the chapters in Part II pay special attention to the binary concepts of feminism and post-feminism and focus on the conceptual continuities and contrasts between the two categories. The idea of change as signalling continuity is particularly relevant in Chapters 5, 7 and 8 which discuss the ways in which Irish poets of several generations have explored the orig-inative power of silence, poetic translation and the porous lines between cultures and art disciplines. It can be seen from these chapters that themes related to women's position in national, literary and social communities are now being approached from increasingly globalised perspectives.

NOTES

1. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004), 132–44, 280. See also Bhabha, "Sly Civility," *October* 34 (Autumn 1985): 71–8.
2. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xxiv.
3. Bloom, *Influence*, 5.
4. William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 73.

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