

**Speaking of Silence: Myth and History in  
Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry (1989-2004)**

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## Abstract

Although, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian avoid labelling themselves ‘feminist poets’, each provides a ‘feminist insight’ into what Catriona Clutterbuck describes as their ‘marginalization from official systems of representation’.<sup>1</sup> This thesis will primarily discuss how each of these women poets, from both the North and South of Ireland, writes from the margins of Irish myth and history to question the concept of silence. The introduction interrogates the meaning of silence in relation to wider philosophic responses to the politics of silence in contemporary Irish poetry. This chapter will also briefly review some of the more monumental anthologies of Irish literature and major works of literary criticism (1989–2004) to illustrate how women poets have emerged from their obscurity and established themselves as prominent figures within a patriarchal tradition that had previously marginalized their voices.

As an example of their rise in status, Chapter II will have a comparative look at how all three poets employ the body to paradoxically speak of women’s silence, while using it to maintain a level of silence. This thesis will then move on to discuss how Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian all write from the margins of Irish myth and history to speak of the unspeakable. In Chapter III, Ní Dhomhnaill speaks of women’s silence through Irish myth and history by engaging in the oral tradition of storytelling. Whereas Ní Dhomhnaill favours myth over history, Boland’s overall ambition in Chapter IV is to write woman out of her silence, thus ‘out of myth [and] into history’ by using her autobiography.

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<sup>1</sup> Catriona Clutterbuck, ‘Irish Women’s Poetry and the Republic of Ireland: Formalism as Form’, in *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949-1999* ed., Ray Ryan (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp.26-27.

The fifth chapter will return to the mythical realms of McGuckian's more radical approach to history in her later poems from *Captain Lavender* (1994) and discuss her private symbolic re-reading of Northern Ireland's political history. Since in much of their later poetry, Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian all adopt the ethical position of speaking while maintaining a certain silence, Chapter VI will conclude with a comparative look at some of the Irish women poets writing of silence in the twenty-first century.

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## List of Abbreviations

### **Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

- SP            *Rogha Dánta : Selected Poems* (1984)  
PD            *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990)  
AC            *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992)  
WH            *The Water Horse* (1999)

### **Eavan Boland:**

- OH            *Outside History* (1990)  
IATOV        *In a Time of Violence* (1994)  
OL            *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in our Time*  
(1995)  
  
CP            *Collected Poems* (1995)  
LL            *The Lost Land* (1998)  
C             *Code* (2001)

### **Medbh McGuckian:**

- CL            *Captain Lavender* (1994)  
SHEL         *Shelmalier* (1998)  
DB            *Drawing Ballerinas* (2001)  
SOYII        *Soldiers of Year II* (2001)  
FOTE         *Face of the Earth* (2002)  
HIATL        *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003)

### **General:**

- N             Seamus Heaney, *North*, (1975)  
  
SOT          Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, *Sruth Teangacha / Streams of Tongues: Rogha Filíochta / Selected Poetry* (2002)  
  
NIP          Selina Guinness, ed., *The New Irish Poets* (2004)

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Speaking the Unspeakable: Expressing the Inexpressible

#### i. 'Head down, feet together, mouth shut and what ever you say, say nothing'

In 1989, in the introduction to *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing*, Ailbhe Smyth adapted the title of Seamus Heaney's poem 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' (North, 1975) to present a bleak stereotypical image of the Irish woman in subservient silence: 'Head down, feet together, mouth shut and what ever...[she says], say nothing'.<sup>1</sup> In the rhetoric of Irish feminists, like Smyth, women poets were portrayed as being critically silenced by the then patriarchal literary establishment, rather than them being physically unable to speak. In literary history, women poets have been denied opportunities of speaking frankly about the humdrum of their everyday lives as women and poets. As Smyth so robustly stated, 'As women, we have been denied the right to speak by the patriarchs who have appropriated unto themselves exclusive rights of public utterance.'<sup>2</sup> In a convincing rhetorical manoeuvre, she cleverly adapted the political grounding of Heaney's words as part of her feminist agenda, thus calling on Irish women poets to speak out.

The poem, 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', is a satiric phrasing of 'The famous / Northern reticence, the tight gag of place' (N, p.59). The metaphor of the 'gag' may be extended to more specific questions of the role that silence has

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<sup>1</sup> Ailbhe Smyth, ed., *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989), p.9. Seamus Heaney, 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', *North* (London: Faber & Faber 1975), pp.57-60. All further references to 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' will be referenced in parenthesis within the main body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

played in women's poetry, of how women have had to find a way of speaking while gagged. This dissertation's main preoccupation will illustrate how saying, while seeming to say nothing, suits the ethical silence that is at the heart of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian's work. When each of these Irish women poets say that she is unable to say anything, the words that are used to make this statement court the paradox of appearing to leave the articulate poet in an obfuscating silence. In their attempts to give a voice to the silenced, Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian each explore the difference between being voluntarily silent and involuntarily silenced, thus, strategically employing silence to move between their quiet private and declamatory spheres. As will become evident, Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian all play in their poetry with the taciturn as each poet's discussion of silence comes to an abrupt end.

George Steiner claims that 'In much modern poetry silence represents the claims of the ideal; to speak is to say less.'<sup>3</sup> According to Steiner, the more the contemporary poet speaks the less they say, suggesting that the words that are spoken conceal that which remains unsaid. Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian's silence, however, does not mean that they do not have anything to say, but when the boundaries become clear that determine what can and cannot be said, then Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian each search for ways to speak in code. Returning to Heaney's poem, he goes on to caricature about 'O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod', each being a loaded gesture that hints that there is more being suggested than the words that are spoken (N, p.59). While 'whispering morse', the poem plays out coded ways of speaking about political

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<sup>3</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958 - 1966*, abridged ed., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p.70.

silence (N, p.60). As with Heaney, Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian's creative use of linguistic codes distinguishes between what they chose to speak openly or opaquely about in their poetry.

The resulting paradox of speaking while maintaining a certain silence creates psychological barriers that determine what we say about ourselves and what others say about us. There are instances when each of these poets will say so much: not only do they 'wink and nod' at their readers suggesting that they are holding back from saying any more, but frequently all three poets deliberately refuse to disclose any further information. There is a marked difference between what each poet actually says compared with what the words literally mean and what they suggest, particularly in McGuckian's poetry. The resulting ellipticism secures the secret knowledge of that which remains unsaid within the various coded forms of speech. Thus, these poets rely on the literary devices of metaphor, metonym and symbol to create codes that enable them to say one thing while suggesting that they are talking about something else.

Heaney's, 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', contains an oblique reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous statement that concludes his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence'.<sup>4</sup> Caveats like the title of Heaney's poem warn the poetic self and his readers that if you are unable overtly express what you want to say, then be silent. While Heaney's silence is broken by the act of 'saying nothing', the silence that is achieved by not saying anything in particular is maintained. Speaking 'civil tongued with civil neighbours', there is an unwillingness to speak in order to

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: The German Text of Ludwig Wittgenstein's Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*, trans., D. F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p.151.

maintain a civilised silence (N, p.57). Although the “voice of sanity’ is getting hoarse’ (N, p.58), Heaney’s reticence in this poem is about saving face as he strategically withdraws into his words, ‘whatever you say, you say nothing’ (N, p.59).

In a ‘pestering / Drouth for words’, is it, therefore, sufficient for Heaney to invoke Wittgenstein, saying that he cannot say what he has to say (N, p.59)? What does he actually say in this oblique political allegory and should the poem have remained unwritten? In ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’, the narrator’s detached and matter-of-fact tone, which offers a brief commentary as opposed to an emotive witness account, also brings to mind the long-standing question of the barbarism of writing poetry after atrocity, as formulated by Theodor Adorno in 1949.<sup>5</sup> Alicia Ostriker has suggested that ‘a possible response [to Adorno’s statement] is that there must be poetry after Auschwitz. Not to go on with poetry would be like not going on with life: a surrender to the powers of human destruction.’ The unwritten poem, then, can be read as a sign of powerlessness and defeatedness. As Ostriker continues, ‘We understand that silence is surrender’, so to write poetry is to speak, to give a voice to the silenced.<sup>6</sup> Although silence may also be used as a form of power, to break that silence by writing poetry is also a necessary liberating act.

The question of breaking the Adornoan silence extends itself to women’s unwritten or unpublished poetry, in particular women’s war poetry. The fact that women are rarely described as ‘war poets’, if at all, returns to the question of the

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<sup>5</sup> See Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans., Samuel & Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Alicia Ostriker, ‘Beyond Confession: The Poetics of Postmodern Witness’ <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3692/is\\_200103/ai\\_n8931886/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3692/is_200103/ai_n8931886/print)> [accessed 6 May 2007].

silencing of women's voices through their unwritten and unpublished poetry. There is also the question of women poets silencing their own political voices as war poets as suggested by Medbh McGuckian in her earlier reference to Pablo Picasso in *Captain Lavender* (1994), 'I have not painted the war...but I have no doubt that the war is in...these paintings I have done'. A more recent example of McGuckian's oblique war poetry is in her reference to the *Five Notebooks from the Lodz Diaries: The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak* (1996) in 'Jeszcze Polska', a poem dedicated to Dawid Sierakowiak's memory (HIATL, pp.95-96).<sup>7</sup>

In his discussion of this poem, Shane Murphy describes how after McGuckian had attended a conference in Poland, she wrote "I have had a week of nausea and shock which would either kill or cure a poet."<sup>8</sup> This was written on the back of a postcard of the ruins of the Gas Chamber and Crematorium II at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Murphy explains that McGuckian's heavy reliance on Sierakowiak's eye-witness account of the Jewish Ghetto is because she is not 'an authoritative witness'.<sup>9</sup> As Eavan Boland has remarked, more explicitly, 'Women are not usually war poets. They are not primary agents of conflict; they do not sign or violate treaties. They are rarely at the front line.'<sup>10</sup> Boland's 2004 volume, *After Every War*, consists of her English translations of nine German women poets. All of these women poets are witnesses and participants of the horrors of World War II and survivors of the Holocaust.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Sarah Fulford in 'Lyric Flight', *Poetry Review*, 93-4 (Winter 2004) <<http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/review/pr93-4/fulford.html>>[accessed 19 November 2005] the title, 'Jeszcze Polska', 'remembers the rallying cry, "Poland has not yet perished"'.  
<sup>8</sup> Medbh McGuckian, Personal Correspondence with Shane Murphy, 27 February 1998, is cited from Murphy's, "A Code of Images": Northern Irish Centos', *Irish Studies Review*, 10 (2002), p.200.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.201.

<sup>10</sup> Eavan Boland, *After Every War: Twentieth-Century Women Poets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.3.

Margaret Kelleher has observed that Primo Levi's writings as an Auschwitz survivor have questioned the 'possibility of witness, since the true witnesses, "those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it, or have returned mute."' <sup>11</sup> Levi's witness accounts of his experiences of Auschwitz both support and question Adorno's famous declaration based on his doubts of whether language is adept enough to truly speak of such atrocities. Discussing Levi's 'language of the witness', Michael Tager says that Levi 'admits that words like "hunger", "fear", "pain" "cold", fail to convey the intensity of those feelings at Auschwitz, and that only a "new harsh language" could describe them.' <sup>12</sup> Putting words like "hunger" to the ultimate test, there is an overwhelming sense for those reading or listening to Levi's accounts that this word does not even come close to expressing what this word actually meant to Auschwitz survivors. Thus, the difficulty of finding the words to convey a speaker's horrific experiences may leave him or her mute. As Boland remarks in the introduction to *After Every War*, 'These poems re-create that moment when poetry itself is called into question, when language is tested almost beyond its limits, when a vocabulary comes to the edges of the poem which the poem can hardly bear.' <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), p.7.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Tager, 'Primo Levi and the Language of Witness' <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2220/is\\_n2\\_v35/ai\\_13917253/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2220/is_n2_v35/ai_13917253/print)> [accessed 12 October 2007].

<sup>13</sup> Boland, *After Every War*, p.8.

## ii. Women's Anthological Silence

One of the ways that the experiences of women poets have passed over in silence has been illustrated by their exclusion from various landmark anthologies. As Smyth polemically states, 'Let the skeptics count our voices...[in] the anthologies in which women's writings are represented. It will be quickly done.'<sup>14</sup> During the late 1980s and early 1990s many critical reviews of Irish women's poetry began with a comprehensive list of the contemporary anthologies of poetry, along with some of the established publishing houses, that had inadequately represented women's voices, but, more than adequately catalogued their silence. Dennis Hannon and Nancy Means Wright's 1990 article listed the following anthologies of Irish poetry, whose contents pages displayed a disproportionate male to female ratio: Gerald Dawe's, *The Younger Irish Poets* (1982), included two women and nine men. As editor of *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1988), the revised edition, Anthony Bradley presented an astonishing five women compared to forty-four men. Published in 1990, Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon's, *The New Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, included four women and thirty-five men.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian accompanied by Sara Berkeley, were the four women included in *The New Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* with the notable omissions of Eithne Strong and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, for example. Strong published her first collection of poetry, *Songs of Living*, in 1961 followed by four subsequent volumes of poetry. Her fifth volume, *Let Live* (1990), was published in the same year as *The New Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*. Similarly, Ní

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<sup>14</sup> Smyth, *Wildish Things*, p.9.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis. J. Hannon and Nancy Means Wright, 'Irish Women Poets: Breaking the Silence', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 16 (1990), p.58.

Chuilleanáin published *Acts and Monuments* in 1972, the first of six volumes that were published throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with Gallery Press's publication of *The Magdalene Sermon* in 1989 a year before *The New Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* was published. Strong and Ní Chuilleanáin are evidence that women poets were not only writing but were being published at the time they were omitted from Fallon and Mahon's anthology.

In his review of Irish poetry's entry into the twenty-first century, David Wheatley says that, 'The indignation that greeted *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991 is merely the best-known example of the almost constant crossfire generated by the question of canons and canon-formation.'<sup>16</sup> According to Wheatley, anthology-making is an act of literary criticism that prescribes which poets are seen as valued by the canon makers, while those who are excluded by anthologists are devalued by their very absence. In Irish women's literary history, Field Day's highly contentious three volume *Anthology* is 'the best known example' to date of Irish women's canonical marginalisation and of how their silence was anthologised. Although Irish women were not completely excluded from the *Anthology*, many women's voices were silenced by Deane and his fellow editors' limited exploration of 1,500 years of the word literature. Comparing *Field Day* to previous anthologies of Irish writing, Deane claimed that:

in this anthology we aim to take a much wider time span, embracing 1,500 years, and we avoid the narrow sense of the word literature, extending it to cover various other kinds of writing, especially political speeches, pamphlets and analyses, all of which have been an important part to play in the story which this anthology has to tell.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> David Wheatley, 'Irish Poetry into the Twenty-First Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed., Matthew Campbell, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.251-252.

<sup>17</sup> Seamus Deane, gen.ed., *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol 1 (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), p.xix.

The aftermath of the Field Day group's under-representation of women poets, writing in both English and Irish, went on to fuel an eleven-year literary furore. At the beginning of the 1990s, there continued to be a steady flow of detractors, who criticised Field Day for their part in writing women out of literary history. One of Field Day's most unrelenting critics was Edna Longley. Responding to the controversy that ensued shortly after the 1991 *Anthology* was published, Longley wrote that 'it received a bad press, particularly for the under-representation of women all the more striking in a compilation that suspects the aesthetic in favour of the political.'<sup>18</sup> It seemed that Longley went to great lengths to expose Field Day's nationalistic tendencies, even criticising Field Day through a charge she made against Tom Paulin's poetry 'as writing Protestants out of history unless [they were] prepared to go back and start again in 1798.'<sup>19</sup>

Since anthology-making can be regarded as an important tool of literary criticism, this has greatly influenced how contemporary Irish women's poetry has been received. Much of the Irish poetry that was written before, during and after the 1980s, which spoke of ordinary women's experiences, was often deemed unsuitable literary subject matter by the Irish canon that was primarily composed of male literati, who regarded women's poetic exploration of their domestic experiences as unspeakable, inexpressible and unarticulated matter. For example, William Logan's review of Boland's *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990*

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<sup>18</sup> Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p.22.

<sup>19</sup> Longley cited from John Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.225.

dismissively wrote her off as the ‘expert in the passionless household poem’<sup>20</sup>.

Discussing the reasons why she began to write her critical prose essays in an interview with Jody Allen-Randolph, Boland explains that:

It was the middle of the 1980s. Things were beginning to be tense around questions of gender. The anthologies which came out at this time – I’m thinking particularly of [Thomas] Kinsella’s *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* – showed these strange disconnections. No women poets at all. That was a turning point....<sup>21</sup>

In the years that were to follow, Irish women poets redressed the ‘strange disconnections’ that their overwhelming absence from various anthologies like Kinsella’s more than illustrated. Milestone anthologies, like *Wildish Things*, whose sole aim it was to ‘break that age-old silence’<sup>22</sup>, demonstrated the rising strength of women poets, who began to speak out about their experiences as women and poets. *Wildish Things*, published by Attic Press, brought together a miscellany of Irish women’s poetry and prose written in Irish and English to make ‘a necessary statement of the fact of Irish women’s writing now’.<sup>23</sup> Quoting from Rita Kelly, Smyth thus declares that ‘The once “loyal, polite and dutiful” daughters are learning to show scant respect for any but the rhythms and shape of their own lives and tongues.’<sup>24</sup>

Women writers, researchers and editors joined forces and became the makers of their own anthologies that gathered together a host of new research into

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<sup>20</sup> William Logan, ‘Animal Instincts and Natural Powers’, *New York Times Book Review*, 21 April 1991, p.22.

<sup>21</sup> Jody Allen-Randolph, ‘A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland’, *Colby Quarterly: Special Issue on Eavan Boland*, (Dec 1999) <<http://www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=5;doctype=interview>> [accessed 19 March 2005].

<sup>22</sup> Smyth, *Wildish Things*, p.12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

<sup>24</sup> Within her quote, Smyth, *Wildish Things*, p.11, inverts the lines from Rita Kelly’s, ‘The Patriarch’ in which the speaker says, ‘I remained loyal, polite and dutiful / hiding my rage with life’.

the rediscovery of their foremothers' lost voices. Research undertaken by feminist cultural historians, such as Angela Bourke and Margaret Kelleher, has provided illuminating evidence that there has been a consistent, but undocumented, tradition of Irish women poets dating back to the seventeenth-century.<sup>25</sup> This mounting interest in Irish women's literary history highlighted the fact that there had been a women's poetic tradition running alongside the predominantly male one, which had gone unnoticed because much of their poetry was performed orally or published anonymously and under pseudonyms. The literary bias that women had experienced was also counterbalanced with the phoenix-like double emergence of feminist publishing houses, such as the Dublin based Attic Press, Galway's Salmon Press and Summer Palace Press in Donegal, and women assuming roles as editors of poetry journals as well as anthologies.

To their credit, the Field Day group did create the much needed critical forum through which to discuss gender issues and the space for women to assert their voices into literary history. Back at the time of original publication, it was unforeseen that Field Day's first three volumes of Irish literature would later document a long-awaited turning-point in Irish women's literary history. The balance was redressed with the much anticipated publication of volumes IV & V of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (2002). Published in 2002, this expansive piece of research evidenced a

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<sup>25</sup> See Margaret Kelleher, 'Writing Irish Women's Literary History', *Irish Studies Review*, 9 (2001), p.5. Kelleher began her article on Irish women's literary history with an excerpt from the Preface to Elizabeth Sharp's 1887 anthology, *Women's Voices: An Anthology of the Most Characteristic Poems by English, Scotch and Women*. Kelleher notes how Sharp collected over eighty women's voices spanning two centuries from 1685-1887. Kelleher, p.6 quotes Sharp as writing, 'The idea of making this anthology ... arose primarily from the conviction that our women-poets had never been collectively represented with anything like adequate justice; that the works of many are not so widely known as they deserve to be; and that at least some fine fugitive poetry could thus be rescued from oblivion.'

strong history of Irish women writers along with the rapid emergence of many new women's voices.<sup>26</sup>

In 1997 Ní Dhomhnaill felt compelled to revise her original 1994 introduction to the 'Contemporary Poetry' section of the 2002 *Anthology*, stating that 'The current expanded selection makes room for new voices, and is actually the documentation of a completely changed poetry scene.'<sup>27</sup> Previously in the early 1990s, Ní Dhomhnaill decided to contribute to the *Anthology* 'out of a sense of moral outrage at the way women poets were being treated in Ireland'.<sup>28</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill said that:

Since anthologies of poetry are one of the most powerful means of shaping a tradition, the fact that so many recent anthologies by male poets have marginalized or excluded women is proof, at the very least, of a tone-deafness to, if not a vested interest in, suppressing the voices of women.<sup>29</sup>

Not so many years ago, anthologies, like the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), typified women's silence by their exclusion. Having read anthology-making as a form of literary criticism, the wealth of Irish women's voices that were brought together in the 2002 publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions* is in itself indicative of how women poets are now writing on a more equal footing with their male contemporaries. Other landmark anthologies, like Peggy O'Brien's *The*

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<sup>26</sup> Despite many positive reviews of *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, detractors like Aisling Foster in, 'Too Much, But Still Not Enough', *The Guardian*, 4 January 2003, p.18, charged the anthology with repetition, omission and datedness. In her review, she states that: 'The makers of any strong-minded anthology often stand accused of bias, chauvinism or cliqueness. But there is datedness here, too. Surely, in the years since it was first conceived as "a shared commitment to feminist work", the chill winds of the last century against which Irish feminists fought so bravely have warmed in their favour?'

<sup>27</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill, 'Contemporary Writing 1960-2001', in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol v, various ed's (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), p.1297.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p.1290.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p.1291.

*Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry 1967-2000*, have earmarked the pre-eminence of Irish women poets by their international acclaim in America. For over a decade, therefore, the Irish woman poet has travelled far from Ailbhe Smyth's 1980s portrayal of her standing in a literary tradition with her 'Head down, feet together, mouth shut and what ever... [she said, she said] nothing'. Thus women poets have emerged from their obscurity and established themselves as pre-eminent figures within a patriarchal tradition that had previously marginalized their voices. In doing so, Irish women poets have offered a radical re-reading of the literary canon as seen through their everyday experiences as women and poets.

Before moving on to discuss how myth and history are used to create coded forms of speech for which to speak of Irish women's silence, this introductory chapter will go on to introduce Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian and illustrate how each uniquely explores her different experiences of silence, of being able and unable to speak, express one's feelings or opinions along with being both silent and silenced.

### **iii. 'When you opened your mouth to say what was amiss / all that emerged was a meaningless hiss': Translating Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Silence**

Aged five, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill left her parents to live with her aunt in the Irish speaking area west of Ventry in Co. Kerry. Born in Lancashire in 1952, she recalls being 'wrenched unceremoniously from...[her] middle-class existence in Lancashire... and coping rather dubiously with cows, dust roads, no running water or electricity, Irish and the fact that nobody could understand...[her] Scouse

English, anymore than...[she] could understand their Kerry accents.’<sup>30</sup> Here the paradox of speaking while remaining silent moves between the realms of sense and nonsense and silence and articulation. For the young Ní Dhomhnaill, the act of speech turned the world into an incomprehensible place. When Ní Dhomhnaill was asked the question, ‘Who do you belong to?’ (‘Cé leis tú?’), she literally interpreted the question and bravely replied, ‘I don’t belong to anyone. I belong only to myself’ (‘Ní le héinne mé. Is liom féin mé féin’).<sup>31</sup> Rather amusingly, this question was the local way of asking children their name. Considering that we speak to make sense of the world and define who we are within our society, such vivid experiences of cultural exile later raised deeper questions of which tradition, language and value system she belonged to.

Since embracing traditional Irish culture and choosing to write poetry in Irish aged sixteen, Ní Dhomhnaill has centred questions of post-colonial and feminist silence on the historical decline of the Irish language. Introducing Ní Dhomhnaill’s *Selected Essays* (2005), Oona Frawley remarks that Irish is ‘the language in which it becomes most possible to communicate essentials of the mind and body’s experience’.<sup>32</sup> Writing in Irish offers Ní Dhomhnaill a sense of psychological freedom of expression. Of her experiences as a woman poet writing with creative ease in Irish, Ní Dhomhnaill states that:

Irish in the Irish context is the language of Mothers. because everything that has been done to women has been done to Irish. It has been marginalized, its status has been taken away from it, it has been reduced to the language of small farmers and fishermen, yet it has survived.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays*, ed., Oona Frawley (Dublin: New Island, 2005), p.97.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Wilson and Gillean Arjat-Somerville, *Sleeping With Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p.154.

For Ní Dhomhnaill, the post-colonial survival of Irish marks a feminist survival of women. Together they are 'the corpses that sit up and talk back'.<sup>34</sup> Early in her career, Ní Dhomhnaill published her first two collections of poetry, *An Dealg Droighin* (1981) and *Fear Suaithinseach* (1984) in Irish, despite the risk of silencing her own voice and limiting her readership to a minority audience. Hence as a woman poet writing in Irish, Ní Dhomhnaill has had to find a way of resolving her experiences of being doubly silenced due to the historical marginalization of women poets and the Irish language. This she achieved through the art of translation.

David Wheatley has remarked that, 'For writers in a minority language, especially if that language is Irish, the question of translation into English is necessarily vexed.'<sup>35</sup> The Irish-English translation question is so 'vexed' for some Irish language poets, like Biddy Jenkinson and Louis de Paor, that they refuse to have their poetry translated into English in Ireland. Ní Dhomhnaill broke her silence by allowing her poetry to be translated and began to gain recognition as an Irish language woman poet both at home and abroad when she joined forces with Michael Hartnett, a skilled translator of his own and others' work. *Selected Poems: Rogha Danta* was published in 1986 in a dual-language format. She then engaged in a massive translation project in collaboration with a host of leading contemporary Irish poets writing in English, including Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Medbh McGuckian, amongst others, to publish a further dual-

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<sup>34</sup> See Ní Dhomhnaill's, 'Why I Choose to Write in Irish: The Corpse that Sits up and Talks Back', in *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, ed., Susan Shaw Sailer (Florida: University Press Florida, 1997), pp.45-56.

<sup>35</sup> David Wheatley, 'Soaked in the History Rain', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 June 2000, p.7.

language collection, *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990).<sup>36</sup> This collaboration created a sense of creative flow between male and female poets writing in both Irish and English.

Although the act of translation bridges a gap between the unspoken and spoken word, such a poetic marriage can be problematic for a woman poet writing in Irish, particularly in relation to questions of silence and silencing. Running the risk of silencing Ní Dhomhnaill's voice in favour of the translator's, I would like to make it clear that all further discussions of Ní Dhomhnaill's poems in this thesis will be based on their English translations. But my discussion of the phenomenon of Ní Dhomhnaill's writing will turn on its dual-language nature, written and first published in Irish, but then published to a much wider audience in English versions. Of course, the inherent problem of translating Irish language poetry into English are the occlusions that occur when the literal meanings of the Irish words are replaced with English ones that offer more of an interpretation or representation of their Irish counterparts. Ní Dhomhnaill, however, is fully aware of this herself when writing Irish poetry which knows it will be translated.

Various translators of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, along with the poet herself, openly acknowledge that their translations are not literal and are more interpretations of the original Irish versions. This is particularly true of translations by Medbh McGuckian. In an interview in 1997, I discussed the

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<sup>36</sup> During the late nineteenth century the art of translation developed into a massive European project. In his review of *Pharaoh's Daughter*, 'Translation as Tribute', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 34 (1992), p.125, Robert Welch refers to 'periods of intense translating activity' beginning in the 1780s with Charlotte Brooke followed by 'James Hardiman and his team in the 1820s; Ferguson and the little group in Belfast in the 1830s; Mangan, O'Daly and O'Donovan in the 1840s; and the 1890s, which saw Hyde, Sigerson and Kuno Meyer at work. We shouldn't forget, either, that other poetry was being translated by Irish writers: Henry Cary translating Dante with "learned simplicity" (Coleridge's phrase); Mangan undertaking Hafiz, Schiller, Herder; Butcher producing a version of the *Odyssey* with Andrew Lang in 1879; not neglecting Anster's *Faust*.'

problems of translation with Ní Dhomhnaill and asked her how she felt about the diversity of such translations like those of Michael Hartnett and Seamus Heaney. She said that she did not mind that her translators are not faithful to the poem's literal meaning and if the words mean different things. Speaking to Laura O'Connor, she had said, 'The most important thing is to get the voltage that is behind the words.'<sup>37</sup> To me, she said that, ultimately, 'I'm so aware of poems in translation anyway, of this level of silence and secret...I'm so aware of the poem even being a translation of something that is beyond language'.<sup>38</sup>

But does the poet, who invites her work to be so freely translated, play a part in silencing her own voice, particularly when the translator's voice is male and he is speaking of a woman's sexual experiences? I would like to briefly discuss some of the difficulties caused when translators of the same poem present varying translations. For example 'Marvellous Grass' translated by Hartnett in *Selected Poems* (1986) later appears as 'Miraculous Grass' translated by Heaney in *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990). These two significantly different translations of Ní Dhomhnaill's original, 'Féar Suaithinseach', raise a further question as to whether such a poem is interpreted as a sensual love poem or dismissed simply as pure erotica. Even the difference between a single word can corrupt the poem's innocence. In 'Marvellous Grass', the phrase 'gur dhein sé slí / dó fhéin istigh' [he made a way for himself] is translated by Hartnett as 'it penetrated my insides'. For Heaney, it becomes 'worked itself in so deep and sheer'. Ní Dhomhnaill writes:

Mise, ní dúrt aon ní ina thaobh.  
Bhí náire orm.  
Bhí glas ar mo bhéal.

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<sup>37</sup> Laura O'Connor, 'Comhrá', *Southern Review*, 31 (July 1995), p.601.

<sup>38</sup> Unpublished Personal interview with Ní Dhomhnaill in Cabinteely. May 1997. For a full-length version of my interview see Appendix A.

Ach fós do luigh sé ar mo chroí  
mar dhealg láibe, gur dhein sé slí  
dó fhéin istigh I m'ae is im' lár  
gur dhóbair go bhfaighinn bás dá bharr.

Which translates literally as:

Me (I, myself), I did not say anything against him  
I was ashamed  
My mouth was locked.  
And still he lay on my heart  
Like a muddy thorn, he made a way for himself into my liver and into the  
core of me  
Such that it was possible that I could die because of it.<sup>39</sup>

And is translated by Hartnett as:

I – I said nothing.  
I was ashamed.  
My lips were locked.  
But still it lay on my heart  
like a mud-thorn until  
it penetrated my insides.  
From it I nearly died.

Whereas as Heaney writes:

I felt shame, I never  
mentioned it once,  
my lips were sealed.  
But still it lurked in my heart  
like a thorn under mud, and it  
worked itself in so deep and sheer  
it nearly killed me.

As poetic meanings are lost or added in translation, the English reader does begin to question if they are truly experiencing the complete dynamism of the Irish original, particularly in terms of gender bias of the male translator. Interestingly, however, the two male versions of 'Féar Suaithinseach' neutralise the gender

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<sup>39</sup> 'Féar Suaithinseach' translated by Máirín Casey via Personal Correspondence, November 2007.

identity of the mysterious lover by referring to 'it' as the cause of the woman's muteness rather than the 'him' in the original. Nevertheless, reading all three poems together, the poem's original intention of not speaking in favour of silence holds true.

Following the success of the dual-language format of Ní Dhomhnaill's *Selected Poems: Rogha Danta* (1986) and *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990), Paul Muldoon went on to translate some of Ní Dhomhnaill's poems from her Irish volume *Feis* (1991) in a dual-language collection that he entitled, *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992). According to Ní Dhomhnaill, however, Muldoon did not translate the whole of *Feis*. Of the poems that Muldoon did translate from *Feis*, Ní Dhomhnaill said that, 'Some of the poems that have been translated have been translated out of context, so what you get in *The Astrakhan Cloak* is actually about a third of the book....It has its own structure, which is fair enough. But, I mean as long as people realise that something else is going on in Irish'.<sup>40</sup>

The question of poets like Muldoon translating Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry is further complicated when the poet himself is notorious for his linguistic games. Frank Sewell describes Muldoon as a 'technically and imaginatively gifted translator, who plays simultaneously with both languages.'<sup>41</sup> As translation proves to be a wonderful linguistic game for Muldoon, Sewell further comments that the word 'Astrakhan' is a play on the Irish 'aistriúchán' that means 'translation'.<sup>42</sup> Take for example, the etymology of Ní Dhomhnaill's original title *Feis*, which primarily means festival; secondly, high festival or party conference. Thirdly, as

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<sup>40</sup> Unpublished interview with Ní Dhomhnaill.

<sup>41</sup> Frank Sewell, 'Between Two Languages: Poetry in Irish, English and Irish English' in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed., Matthew Campbell, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.163.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Ní Dhomhnaill says, ‘Feis’ literally means ‘to sleep with, to fuck, that’s what the book means. You can’t really translate that into English. When Muldoon translated that poem it had to be translated as ‘carnival’ with the emphasis on ‘carni.’<sup>43</sup> If Ní Dhomhnaill had not said that the emphasis was on ‘carni’, then the sexual implications of this word would perhaps have been missed and substituted with a general sense of celebration.

After the success of *The Astrakhan Cloak*, Ní Dhomhnaill’s *The Water Horse* (1999) translated by Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, boasted an all woman line-up that forged the voices of three of Ireland’s leading poets, which in itself is indicative of the Irish woman poet’s prominence in twenty-first century poetry. However, Muldoon’s wit and talent was called upon once again to translate Ní Dhomhnaill’s 2006 volume, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*. As the foremost translator of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry, Muldoon has spoken of how ‘the act of translation forces him to come to terms with one of the most interesting bodies of work in contemporary poetry’. Like Muldoon’s modest interpretation of the word ‘Feis’, when translating ‘The Mermaid in the Hospital’, from *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, he admits that his ‘rather indelicate phrase “arse-over-tip” is a lot less indelicate than the [Irish] original, “cocs-um-bo-head”, a macaronic construction including a play on a slang term for the male member.’<sup>44</sup>

Gearóid Mac Lochlainn warns that ‘English translations are a reality and each Irish language writer must approach them cautiously for they often gain an

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<sup>43</sup> Unpublished Interview with Ní Dhomhnaill.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Muldoon’s translation of ‘The Mermaid in the Hospital’, *Poetry*, April 2007, <[http://www.poetrymagazine.org/magazine/0407/poem\\_179429.html](http://www.poetrymagazine.org/magazine/0407/poem_179429.html)> [accessed 15 October 2007].

autonomy of their own and eclipse the Irish.’<sup>45</sup> Therefore Ní Dhomhnaill’s Irish poems are in danger of becoming Muldoon’s English ones, or, in fact, those of any translator. Ní Dhomhnaill is not only aware of this, but also allows the translator freedom of expression. The interpretations of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry do, however, conceal unvoiced or untranslatable meanings into their English translations. Furthermore, the dialogue that takes place between the Irish and English languages during the translation process creates a coded form of speech, one that offers the Irish language poet a voice, while it is seemingly silenced by the English translator. Thus, while Ní Dhomhnaill’s silence is broken on one level it is maintained on another.

#### **iv. Eavan Boland’s Other Silent History**

‘Silence *is* an alternative’, writes George Steiner. ‘When the words in the city are full of savagery and lies, nothing speaks louder than the unwritten poem.’<sup>46</sup> For Steiner language is unforgiving. As he cannot find the words to adequately speak of the past, he chooses to forget history’s crimes in his unwritten poem. Discussing the failures of language, Lisa Jardine observes that for Steiner art and philosophy are not ‘immune from blame’ in his search to answer questions that remain unanswerable. Jardine says that Steiner ‘returns repeatedly, in a compellingly plangent refrain, to the moments in Hitler’s Germany at which creativity in the arts failed to stop the horrors – failed, as he puts it, to say “No!”’

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas Crowe, ‘Interview with Gearóid Mac Lochlainn: ‘Speaking in Tongues’, *Asheville Review*, 10 <[http://ashevillereview.com/v10n1/Interview\\_Mac\\_Lochlainn.php](http://ashevillereview.com/v10n1/Interview_Mac_Lochlainn.php)> [accessed 9 November 2004].

<sup>46</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence*, p.76.

to the atrocities around them.’<sup>47</sup> Ironically, it was Hitler’s order to burn books by Jewish and Marxist authors, amongst others, on massive bonfires in Berlin that halted creativity at this time as the books had knowledge and this knowledge could lead to power.

‘The problem with human catastrophe is that it can be remembered all too well. But it is harder to re-imagine it’, states Eavan Boland.<sup>48</sup> Depending on the ‘resilience of language’<sup>49</sup>, Boland uses silence as an alternative to write poems that re-imagine ‘the other history [that] is silent’ (C, p.34). In the historical and poetic arenas, Boland finds it difficult to represent the silencing of a people’s wilfully forgotten past including her own. Eavan Aisling Boland was born on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1944 in Dublin. Her father, Frederick Boland, was President of the United Nations General Assembly. Frances Kelly, who was a painter, was her mother. After moving away from Ireland at the age of five, spending her childhood living in London and New York, Boland lost her sense of national identity through the loss of her language. The English words that the teacher spoke to Boland were not only alien, but also ‘full of savagery and lies.’ As a young school child she remembers:

Always seeing a teacher in front of the map, speaking with certainty and precision. Often entering the strange illusion that teacher was mute and the map was speaking through her. Look what I own it said. See what you have lost.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Lisa Jardine, ‘When Words Have Failed Us’, *The Independent*, 17 March 2001 <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4158/is\\_20010317/ai\\_n14367078/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_20010317/ai_n14367078/print)> [accessed 6 May 2007].

<sup>48</sup> Boland, *After Every War*, p.3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p.14.

<sup>50</sup> Eavan Boland, ‘A Question’, *Literary Review* (Fall 2000)

<[http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m2078/1\\_44/67532122/print.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2078/1_44/67532122/print.jhtml)> [accessed 27 November 2003].

Since the publication of Boland's mature volume, *Outside History* in 1990, a woman and nation's silence have been her primary concern. For Boland, map-making is a metaphor not only for Ireland's silenced history, but also for her own personal silence as a consequence of being an Irish child growing up in London during the 1950s. Reading 'What We Lost' (OH, pp.43-44), as an elegiac mode of redress, Boland laments not only women's history through the address of her lost familial past, but Ireland's as well.<sup>51</sup> The facts that once filled these familial anecdotes are representative of 'what is lost' when history is passed down the female generational line. The poem begins by re-creating a scene of Boland's mother as a 'child at her [grandmother's] side' waiting in anticipation of a story that would never be fully retold because:

The frail connections have been made and are broken.  
The dumb-show of legend has become language,  
is becoming silence and who will know that once

words were possibilities and disappointments,

The familial connections that were made by passing down stories between Boland's grandmother and her mother have been broken before being passed onto Boland herself. Returning to the poignancy of her mother's story some years later, Boland realised her mother was showing her that there was something valuable and hidden in between the words spoken.<sup>52</sup> The absence of detail that loses itself in between the words represents the 'other history [that] is silent'. The linguistic withdrawal from history is recorded by the gradual shift from the pluperfect tense,

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<sup>51</sup> See Clair Wills' discussion of Paul Muldoon in 'Modes of Redress: The Elegy in Recent Irish Poetry', *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 59 (Spring 1998), p.603. Of 'Incantata', she states that, 'Muldoon's grief at the death of Mary Farl Powers becomes a mourning for the loss of a whole history, and entire worlds.'

<sup>52</sup> Boland, 'Daughter's of Colony: A Personal Interpretation of the Place of Gender Issues in the Postcolonial Interpretation of Irish Literature', *Éire-Ireland*, 32 (1998), p.11.

'have been made', to a simple past tense, 'has become', then to the present continuous tense of 'is becoming'. But as a result this withdrawal also records the shift in the speaker's passivity to activity as she takes control over the story. The 'dumb-show of legend' has replaced the words that once told the grandmother's real story with a mere fictitious gesture that is devoid of the words that once spoke of 'possibilities and disappointments'. Accepting that 'the dumb-show of legend has become language', therefore, suggests that the poet does not want to fight for the voice that is now lost in an irretrievable past.

The interplay between fantasy and reality that results from Boland's imaginary creation of 'other history [that] is silent' creates the paradox of speaking but not really saying anything. In 'A Dream of Colony', when the dream-woman's unlimited possibilities of speech are translated into the real world restrictions are placed upon the speaker. The facts are concealed in the lines that negatively cancel each other out; 'She was saying / I was saying / *what have we done?*' (LL, p.28). Thus while the dream-woman's silence is broken it is paradoxically sustained through Boland's inability or unwillingness to answer the question on the behalf of women. Thus the paradox of speaking while saying nothing is sustained when the speaker fails to disclose what had actually happened. Indeed, the paradox is enforced when Boland hushes, stifles even, the silenced voices of victims from Ireland's post-colonial past by replacing their words with those of her own.

As will be argued in Chapter IV, Boland is characteristically speaking on behalf of women. In her reclamation of the past, Boland feels that because she had no tangible evidence of Irish women's history, she has no option but to create

imaginary dialogues between herself and other women, thus creating a symbolic truth, a representation of the past. Boland's recovery of women's history will question whether the act of recovery necessitates the rediscovery of the truth. Having trust in language to represent the truth is central to Boland's silence. If, therefore, the middle-aged Boland is to recover a sense of a national identity then, as she says, she must search through 'the wreck of language / and the remnants of a nation' (CP, p.106).

**v. 'I have nothing to say which I can say': Medbh McGuckian's 'Loose Tongues and Liberty'**

Hanif Kureishi writes of how the power of speech is taken for granted by those fortunate enough not to have experienced the use of silence as a form of tyrannical control, one that dictates 'who says what to whom, and about what.' Kureishi refers to Franz Kafka's 'The Penal Colony' that describes the use of an ingenious machine to torture a man to death, condemned for disobedience. This machine is equipped with ink-jets that inscribe the name of the crime on the victim's body as he bleeds to death. Kafka's story describes how during this process of writing as killing written on the man's body will be 'Honour thy Superiors'. The victim is denied the right to speak and the opportunity to tell his story as his body 'carries the inscription of the other'.<sup>53</sup> Kureishi states, 'Silence, then, like darkness, carries something important about who the authorities want others to be, something important about the nature of authority itself, and the way it wants to dehumanise

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<sup>53</sup> Hanif Kureishi, 'Loose Tongues and Liberty', *The Guardian Review*, 7 June 2003, p.4.

others in silence.’<sup>54</sup> According to Kureishi, this death sentence of silence is the ultimate form of a man’s humiliation.

In a similar Kafkaesque vein, Medbh McGuckian’s dead father’s body ‘carries the inscription of the other’ in *Captain Lavender* (1994). Imprisoned in his silence, the paternal body inadvertently speaks of the crimes of others. Very often in McGuckian’s oblique re-reading of Northern Ireland’s political history, Wittgenstein’s ‘say / show distinction’ as proposed in his *Tractatus* comes into play: ‘the inexpressible’ that which cannot be ‘said’ instead ‘shows’ itself.<sup>55</sup> For example, in ‘The Nearness of the Grape Arbour to the Fruit Cellar’, the speaker states, ‘His hands, burned red, looked calm, but blazed / with the things he could not say’ (CL, p.71). Red is used here as an ambiguous symbol for revolution, republicanism, loyalism, unionism, anarchy, and socialism. A further coded reference to the Red Hand Commando is also being made with the blood ‘red hands’ that speak of the silenced activities of this paramilitary group.<sup>56</sup> McGuckian extends the use of the ‘bloody hand’ to speak of the allegiance and heraldry that ‘the sinister erected hand coupé at the wrist gules, and borne by baronets in a canton or inescutcheon on the arms of Ulster symbolises’.<sup>57</sup> The

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Denis McManus, *The Enchantment of Words: Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p.36.

<sup>56</sup> For example, members of this loyalist paramilitary group were linked with the controversial, but unsolved murder of Seamus Ludlow on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1976, in County Louth. Although the Garda claimed that the IRA were responsible for this murder, those involved in the initial investigation covered up various information leading to the true identities of Ludlow’s killers; members of Red Hand Commando and Ulster Defence Regiment. Ludlow’s family, supported by the BIRW (British Irish Rights Watch), have campaigned for the real truth to be revealed for over twenty years. Information cited from articles in the *Sunday Tribune*, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1999, and *The Sunday World*, 27<sup>th</sup> September 1998.

<sup>57</sup> This definition of ‘red hand’ is cited from *Chambers Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd, 1998).

male 'hands' visually articulate that there is more to their symbolic red than meets the eye without actually expressing 'the things he could not say'.

Having been born in 1950 and growing up a Catholic in Belfast, McGuckian responds to the history of Northern Ireland's political violence through her obscure symbolist poetics. McGuckian protects herself from the realities of political violence by using poetry to 'shut off each moment of terror that... [she] lives through.'<sup>58</sup> She recalls that:

The first poem that I ever wrote that I thought was a poem was about one of the bombs. There was an image in it of the corpses being covered like dumplings.... I think it was the beginning of doing that, of softening the blows, and covering things to shield myself from really cracking up.<sup>59</sup>

What is seen or witnessed by the poet is absorbed and broken down into private symbolic images. As McGuckian is her own authorial authority over the written word, she has semi-silenced her political voice through holding back from speaking overtly about the Troubles. Hence, 'muted' is the word that best describes McGuckian's silence, a silence that locates itself around a more political force, one that plays a pro-active commemorative role by keeping your mouth shut for political reasons. This accounts for the Heaneyesque nature of McGuckian repeatedly telling her readers that she has nothing to say which she can say. This simply means that she speaks in 'sentence[s] of speechlessness' (CL, p.36) to court the paradox of saying while saying nothing. Accordingly, the poet's conscience determines what can and cannot be spoken of, which results in a silence that marks the difference between what the spoken word literally says compared to what it actually suggests. This is the case in McGuckian's poem.

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<sup>58</sup> Kimberley Bohman, 'Surfacing: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian', *The Irish Review*, 16 (Autumn / Winter 1994), p.99.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

‘Elegy for an Irish Speaker’, in which the male, who is ‘in danger / of becoming a poetess’, speaks to the poet with her ‘consciousness / and not with words’ (CL, p.42).

McGuckian places restrictions on language when working within the boundaries of a finite selection of words. Words are given prefixes and suffixes such as ‘de’, ‘un’ and ‘less’ or ‘lessly’ to break away from the conventions of English and establish what McGuckian refers to an ‘un-English language’ in ‘The Partner’s Desk’ (MC, p.70). Occasionally, it is as though McGuckian has turned language inside out and in doing so words have become devoid of their original meaning and purpose, particularly as McGuckian says that ‘Because we talk / nothing meaningful gets said’ (FOTE, p.70).<sup>60</sup> Here lies one of the main difficulties with McGuckian’s poetry in which the collision of words, images and rhythms that work together in collusion to present various, but conflicting ‘roaming root[s] of multiple meanings’ (CL, p.42). Strange combinations of words are put together to defamiliarise and decontextualise the familiar environment of the individual meanings of certain words making them unrecognisable to others.

Like her contemporaries, Ní Dhomhnaill and Boland, McGuckian searches for a way of reviving the language of her ancestors since in ‘The Wake Sofa’ she states that ‘I have not spoken words with roots’ (CL, p.30). These severed ‘roots’ refer not only to her unconventional use of language, but the break from her ancestral ties to Ireland and its language. McGuckian states that she has ‘hardly

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<sup>60</sup> See Guinn Batten, ‘The More With Which We Are Connected: The Muse of Minus in the Poetry of McGuckian and Kinsella’, in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, ed’s., Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valulis (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), pp.212–244, which discusses both McGuckian’s and Kinsella’s use of empty and negative spaces that she terms ‘the muse of the minus’.

any traces of dialect in her' because she has lived in Belfast for most of her life. What she 'misses most about her father is his voice and the accent of the country that stayed with him.'<sup>61</sup> Although English is McGuckian's 'mother tongue', she feels that it has been imposed on her and admits to fighting with it all the time.<sup>62</sup> Silence, therefore, is not always a result of the inadequacies of language, especially if the poet chooses to reject his or her own language in favour of another's or even an alternative mode of communication.

'The question of whether the poet should speak or be silent, or whether language is in a condition to accord with his needs, is a real one', states Steiner.<sup>63</sup> In explaining how Heaney's statement, 'whatever you say, you say nothing' (N, p.59) works in Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian's poetry, it is evident that the legacy of Ireland's silence has impacted on each of these women poets differently. Hence one of this dissertation's foremost preoccupations will question how and why these women use Irish myth and history as forms of representation to simultaneously break, and sustain their silence. As will become evident in the following chapters, Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian never achieve the complete freedom of speech. Hence the paradox comes into play in the work of each of these poets when speaking of the unspeakable and expressing the inexpressible.

## **vi. Speaking of Silence Through Irish Myth and History in the Work of Three Irish Women Poets: An Overview**

In her preface to *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry* (2000). Peggy O'Brien states, 'the historical silence of women in Ireland nests within the larger

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<sup>61</sup> O'Connor, 'Comhrá', p.603.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, pp.605-606.

<sup>63</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence*, p.75.

silence of a people.’<sup>64</sup> For Irish women poets, like Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian, finding a voice in Ireland has been both a feminist and post-colonial issue. If like McGuckian, Ní Dhomhnaill and Boland are unwilling or unable to speak of women’s silence then what options do they have? When challenging the marginalization of the Irish woman and poet’s voice, each poet chooses to create various codes of silence to address their post-colonial and feminist silence. Since silence, or silencing or being silenced is at the heart of Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian’s poetry, the contemporary woman poet has a choice of whether to speak of her post-colonial and feminist experiences or to make a political or ethical statement by not speaking and being silent.

At the beginning of this chapter I argued that the silent contempt that women poets have experienced resulted from a patriarchal refusal to acknowledge their writing when notably excluded from various poetry anthologies. Chapter II will illustrate that one of the ways of inscribing women’s voices into a literary canon is by using images of the human body symbolically to speak of their silence. Thus, these women poets not only speak liberally of their once muted bodies, but their symbolic, rather than literal use of the body to speak of silence is indicative of their newfound pre-eminence. Having explored the concept of silence through the body, this thesis will then move on to discuss how Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian all write from the margins of Irish myth and history to speak of silence, while it is sustained.

Ní Dhomhnaill invokes myth in order to speak of history, and a deliberate obscurity results from this interplay, enabling her ambiguous discussion of gender

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<sup>64</sup> Peggy O’Brien, ed., *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women’s Poetry* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2000), p.xvii.

politics. Chapter III will begin with a comparative discussion of how in the work of Ní Dhomhnaill and the feminist cultural historian, Angela Bourke, the fairy abduction legend is used as a metaphor to discuss Irish women's history. Although Bourke uses the narrative of Bridget Cleary's fairy abduction to foreground a wider discussion concerning nineteenth-century issues of Irish colonialism and gender, Ni Dhomhnaill adapts the tradition of how such tales incorporate a moral code by encoding a feminist response to contemporary women's lives within her modern day fairy tales. Concerned more with oral than written legend, her tales follow the traditional lore of women, children, and occasionally men, being abducted by the fairies. This chapter will, therefore, discuss the various ways in which Ní Dhomhnaill speaks of women's silence through her revival of the Gaeltacht oral tradition of telling stories about fairies.

One pitfall, however, of such deliberate obscurity is of collapsing fantasy into reality, fusing myth and history, and thus leading to the possibility of real women's lives becoming mythologised. Consequently, in Chapter IV, I will illustrate how Boland has 'chosen' to use her autobiography to move woman 'out of myth [and] into history' (OH, p.45). Although Boland places herself firmly within the centre of the literary tradition that has excluded her both as a woman and a poet, if she is to unsilence woman from the metaphorical restraints of myth and history by using her autobiographical self she has to become both the subject and object of her poetry at the risk of merely replicating mythological / historical national images of woman.

For example, in the sequence, 'Anna Liffey', from *In a Time of Violence* (1994), Boland adapts the myth of Anna Livia Plurabelle to express her anxiety

over her ageing body. The mythical story of a national icon, Anna Liffey, is set against the domestic experiences of the middle-aged Boland. Doubts are thus raised as to whether Boland's use of autobiography as the foundation from which to re-write history is written for women in general or merely for personal reasons. Nevertheless, Boland is determined to use her autobiography to re-write women into Irish history.

While Boland's vision focuses on using myth to move woman in from history's margins, McGuckian moves out of history and back into myth. Unlike Boland's poems that use fantasy to represent fact, McGuckian's 'don't so much translate fact as build fantasy on fact.'<sup>65</sup> As part of McGuckian's aesthetic everyday reality takes on a secret symbolic meaning. As we will observe, it is McGuckian's symbolic inner vision, which uses the body to respond to the external reality of the everyday that is most intriguing. The fifth chapter will return to the mythical realms of McGuckian's more radical approach to history in her later poems from *Captain Lavender* (1994) and conclude with her private symbolic re-reading of Northern Ireland's political history.

Edna Longley has argued that although '*Captain Lavender* arrives late on this stage where history and poetry meet', McGuckian was 'provoked' into writing some of the poems included in this volume because she was 'omitted' from Frank Ormsby's anthology *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (1992).<sup>66</sup> Published in 1994, *Captain Lavender* was a radical departure from

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<sup>65</sup> Kathleen McCracken, 'An Attitude of Compassions', *The Irish Literary Supplement: A Review of Irish Books* (Fall 1990), p.20.

<sup>66</sup> See Edna Longley, *Poetry & Posterity*, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000), pp.309-311. According to Longley, *Captain Lavender* was completed before the first IRA ceasefire in 1994. She says that 'the poems respond to the escalating violence of 1993 together with the hopes for peace raised by the Hume-Adams rapprochement and by the Downing Street Declaration

McGuckian's earlier domestic poetry, which primarily focused on childbirth and motherhood.<sup>67</sup> One way of addressing the 'Troubles' while evading them is through the metaphor of personal relationships. So while Boland uses her autobiographical self to confront history, *Captain Lavender* is only autobiographical in the sense that McGuckian uses her dead father as a muse in many of these poems.

In extravagant conceits of her father's death, the grief suffered from the loss of her father is analogous to that felt from the death and destruction caused by the political violence that McGuckian has witnessed. Speaking of her father's demise would be like speaking of her country's too, and thus breaking the faith, her vow of silence, to both father and country. Since silence plays a pro-active political role within a chapter that focuses on McGuckian's address of the politics of history, the body is used to write a political history, which moves from the oblique to the overt in her later love poems.

No longer talking about 'martyred Marys'<sup>68</sup>, this thesis will track how Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian's coded address of silence has redirected literary history with a poetry that offers a feminist insight into the mythical and historical silencing of Irish women's lives. Since the publications of their first volume of poetry some twenty or thirty years ago, Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian have established themselves as three of Ireland's leading poets.

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(December 1993). Either of the latter might be 'the treaty that moves all tongues' in 'The War Degree'.

<sup>67</sup> See McCracken, 'An Attitude of Compassions', p.21. McGuckian, however, says that the history of the Troubles was 'touched on' in poems like 'The Dovecote', from *Venus and the Rain* (1984), written during the hunger strikes. She later wrote, 'The Blue She Brings With Her', from *On Ballycastle Beach* (1988), for a mother whose son was destroyed. She states however, that 'one could argue that I don't deal with or solve anything; I just suggest an attitude of compassion in what is part of a universal tragedy.'

<sup>68</sup> Smyth, *Wildish Things*, p.14.

Through their redirection of the traditionally mapped out course of literary history, these foremothers have set a new precedent for the next generation of women poets. Chapter VI will, therefore, conclude by questioning if the next generation of Irish poets writing of silence in the twenty-first century face the same difficulties as when Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian began writing of the silence in the twentieth-century.

## Chapter Two:

### Three Irish Women Poets Speak of Silence

#### i. Introducing Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eavan Boland & Medbh McGuckian's Corporal Silence

Patrica Boyle Haberstroh states that, 'One of the ways we recognise that a woman has taken some kind of jump is that her muted parts begin to explain themselves.'<sup>1</sup>

In much of their recent work, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian all use various body parts, particularly mouths, to speak of their silence and redefine their position within the literary canon. Interestingly, all three poets associate silence with images of the tongue and mouth like stone. For example, attempting to explain her silence, Ní Dhomhnaill in 'Aois na Cloiche', translated by Derek Mahon as 'The Stone Age' (PD, pp.68-69), imagines:

...a stone getting up each morning,  
shaking its rocky shoulders  
and moving its stony tongue,  
trying to speak; well that was me.

Returning to the pre-historic stone-age years, the speaker conveys a bleak image of finding a voice. The burdensome imagery of the stone's weighty silence conveys the woman's struggle to speak. The association of stone with the tongue articulates the hard, cold reality of trying to speak in Irish, a language that was believed to be extinct.<sup>2</sup> In Boland's erotic return to the landscape of Dublin city,

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1996), p.92.

<sup>2</sup> Prejudices like Sabina Sharkey's belief in 'And Not Just for Pharaoh's Daughter: Irish Language Poetry Today', in *Poetry in the British Isles: Non-Metropolitan Perspectives*, ed's., Hans-Werner Ludwig and Lothar Fietz (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), p.193. She argued that the Irish language was doomed when she argued that, 'there is a general consensus that if not stone

she writes in 'Heroic': 'I moved my lips and wondered how the rain / would taste if my tongue were made of stone' (LL, p.50). The imagery of the stone and tongue works on a different level of representation than the one in 'The Stone Age' in that Boland is looking at Dublin's heroic statues and tries to imagine if the histories that they silently represent would ever speak of those of heroines. In comparison to Boland, McGuckian's 'Script for an Unchanging Voice' (SHEL, p.16), refers to 'a stone with a stone's mouth inside' suggesting that she is exploring the contrasting layers of silence. For all three poets, the image of the stone is used in accordance with the tongue, lips and mouth as a linguistic tool to communicate the difficulties they face in their attempts to give a voice to the silenced.

This comparative chapter will continue to illustrate how Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian employ images of the mouth to create a symbolic form of speech and explore the difference between being voluntarily silent and involuntarily silenced, while moving between silence and articulation.

## **ii. Is it Possible to Describe Quietness and Silence? De-censoring Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Body Talk**

In a 'Comhrá' or Conversation with Laura O'Connor, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Medbh McGuckian questioned the differences between the concepts of quietness and silence through their English translations of 'Toircheas 1' (PD, pp.50-51).

Although McGuckian's version, 'Ark of the Covenant', a title coined from the litany of the Blessed Virgin, provides more of an interpretation of Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Toircheas 1', she asks Ní Dhomhnaill for a literal translation of her

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cold yet, the language is *in extremis* and a likely candidate for a grand state funeral', invoked language revivalists to present Irish as being very much alive.'

Irish original. Hence Ní Dhomhnaill responded with the lines, ‘Can you speak of quietness – of the way / that cloudy galleons sail through the sky, their sails rounded out, swollen, without movement / and to the right, the sun, without a sound, sliding under the horizon.’<sup>3</sup>

These paradoxical images describe the feeling of being suspended in quietness, of wanting to talk about pregnancy but not being able to. The delicate images of the mother ship silently drifting into oblivion convey Ní Dhomhnaill’s experiences of a ‘double bind’ that is like ‘talking into a void and being invisible.’<sup>4</sup> The enormity of this experience is voiced when the speaker’s heavy sigh of relief reverberates from within the poem. So she says that when a woman first discovers that she is pregnant there is a certain quietness about this, a quietness that is written into her other pregnancy poems, as she cannot find the words to express this life-changing experience, ‘because being pregnant is actually unspeakable it’s so enormous.’<sup>5</sup>

Whereas Ní Dhomhnaill is unable to speak personally of being pregnant because of the enormity of this life-changing experience, McGuckian describes how pregnancy is publicly ‘very hushed’<sup>6</sup>, a state synonymous with being psychologically silenced by the social policy of the Irish Church and State. Historically, working along side the State, Catholicism provided a discursive framework to promote an asexual image of the woman’s body, one that could be read as a religious manifesto based on an ideal of sexual purity. As Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford has stated, ‘As a result of refusing women control over their

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<sup>3</sup> Laura O’Connor. ‘Comhrá’, *Southern Review*, 31 (July 1995). p.600.

<sup>4</sup> Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, ‘Tradition and the Female Voice in Contemporary Gaelic Poetry’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 11 (1988), p.388.

<sup>5</sup> O’Connor, ‘Comhrá’, p.600.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

reproductive functions, the law produced an official discourse about sex.’<sup>7</sup> Within the framework of this anti-woman discourse, Irish women were not only unable to publicly discuss their sexual bodies, but they silenced themselves by not speaking about what was culturally proscribed as improper. Consequently, they censored information about their lives by the way that they decided what to disclose publicly, or sustain as private knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Back in 1989, Ailbhe Smyth asked Dolores Walsche’s question ‘can abortion be spoken of only East of Ireland?’<sup>9</sup> In the light of such questions, if McGuckian had spoken freely about the then taboo subject of pregnancy, she may have been critically received because in Ireland pregnancy was viewed as ‘a holy state, but an unclean state as well’.<sup>10</sup> In her allegory about pregnancy, language and writing, McGuckian begins ‘Ark of the Covenant’ by attempting to describe the verb ‘to be quiet’ through a series of similes that convey a pregnant woman’s frustration of being unheard and unseen:

‘How can I begin to explain my quiet to you?’  
As the sleepwalk of treasure-laden clouds,  
Their full sails poised and stationary?  
As the sun’s speechless exit, stage right?

McGuckian states that ‘instead of saying, “Is it possible to describe this silence”, I say, “How can I begin to explain my quiet to you?”’<sup>11</sup> Her alternative

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford in *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.228.

<sup>8</sup> For a further discussion see Cheryl Herr, ‘The Erotics of Irishness’, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (Autumn 1990), p.14. She states that ‘Censorship in Ireland is not really a political or legislative issue at heart; it is a symptom of a specific kind of psychological development on individual and group level.’

<sup>9</sup> Ailbhe Smyth, ed., *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Women’s Writing* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989), p.10. Writing about her lesbian sexuality, Mary Dorcey was described by Smyth as ‘a rare voice from a deeply hidden pool.’

<sup>10</sup> O’Connor, ‘Comhrá’, p. 600.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

question asserts an air of confidence about what the speaker is aiming towards. Also, by exchanging the word 'silence' with 'quiet' she suggests that being quiet is not as regimented as being silent or silenced and is less intimidating. This is communicated through the tranquil image of 'the sleepwalk of treasure-laden clouds.' Each simile creates the paradox of wishing to speak, but remaining quiet through images of motion contrasted with those of motionlessness. Thus the maternal body, like language, is in a state of anticipated transition.

Likewise, as the sleepwalking 'treasure-laden clouds' prepare to set sail with their 'full sails poised', not only are they 'stationary', but full of air. This sense of dryness is synonymous with being unable to talk because of having a dry mouth. The overwhelming quietness of pregnancy is visually communicated through images of the sky, clouds and sun, suggesting that language has moved onto a higher, more spiritual plane. The impenetrability of this metaphorical use of language communicates the difficulty, if not impossibility, of the representation of the physical and psychological experiences of this bodily responsibility. Rather than concluding with definitive answers, suggestions are made of how to answer the question 'how can I explain my quiet to you?'

Coding strategies, like the ambiguous use of rhetorical questioning, indicate that Ní Dhomhnaill is deflecting from rather than reflecting on her quiet.<sup>12</sup> So while Ní Dhomhnaill is searching for ways to explain woman's 'quiet', she is also looking for alternative modes of expression to speak 'on the quiet' about taboo subjects like pregnancy in her poetry. A resolution was to speak of

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<sup>12</sup> For a more in-depth discussion see Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, 'Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures', in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed., Joan Radner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p.5. They state that, 'Sometimes a code is not visibly signalled, but the fact of censorship is sufficiently foregrounded that the possibility of a coding practice becomes evident.'

women's lives with and through the body, which acted as a contemporary mouthpiece to break the silence of the repressed history of women's sexuality. In a 1997 interview with Ní Dhomhnaill, I asked her about the significance of the urgent need to 'rise and tell' in 'Éirigh, A Éinín' (translated by Michael Hartnett as 'Celebration', PD, pp.28-31). She stated that, 'I am so aware that so many things occur that are not being expressed and I've always been aware of much more going on than meets the eye.... Like body language, all the things that are not said, the really, really important things that are not said.'<sup>13</sup> Although Ní Dhomhnaill's body language bridges the gap that is created between the words that are spoken with those left unspoken, the symbolic use of body divides the poet's public voice from her private one.

'Northern poets', says Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, 'have a sly reticence or coded referencing system relating to the North. "Don't rock the boat or bite the hand that feeds you, don't mention the war" etc are still prevalent attitudes that have led to self-censorship in poetry here.'<sup>14</sup> Poets from the South, like Ní Dhomhnaill, also operate a 'coded referencing system' that evolves around issues of self-censorship. Ní Dhomhnaill uses bodily images of the human mouth as a coded reference system to describe the quietness of her experiences of being an Irish woman poet writing of women's domestic lives in Irish. Ní Dhomhnaill's use of the mouth as a coding strategy reiterates the fact that she is deflecting from rather than reflecting on women's quietness and silence.

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<sup>13</sup> Unpublished Personal Interview with Ní Dhomhnaill in Cabinteely, May 1997. For a full-length version of this interview see Appendix A.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Crowe, 'Speaking in Tongues: An interview with the Belfast Poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn' <[http://www.ashevillereview.com/v10n1/Interview\\_Mac\\_Lochlainn.php](http://www.ashevillereview.com/v10n1/Interview_Mac_Lochlainn.php)> [accessed 11 September 2004].

Tongues are a particular favourite form of expression and appear everywhere in Ní Dhomhnaill's poems as well as their translations. Here are a few examples of how Ní Dhomhnaill and her translators employ images of Gaelic tongues to pose questions of the colonial silencing of Irish:

‘An Bhábóg Bhriste’:

A bhábógín bhriste ins an tobar,  
caite isteach ag leanbh ar bhogshodar  
anuas le fánaidh, isteach faoi chótaí a mháthar.  
Ghlac sé preab in uaigneas an chlapsholais  
nuair a l éim caipíní na bpúcaí peill chun a bhéil,

Translated by John Montague as ‘The Broken Doll’:

O little broken doll, dropped in the well,  
thrown aside by a child, scampering downhill  
to hide under the skirts of his mother!  
In twilight's quiet he took sudden fright  
as toadstool caps snatched at his tongue (PD, p.59).

‘Aois na Cloiche’:

Samhlaigh duit féin cloch ag dúiseacht gach lá is ag eirí as an leaba,  
ag searradh a charraig-ghuailne  
is ag bogadh a theanga sall is anal mar leac  
ag iarraidh labhairt.  
Bheul, b'in agaibh mise.

Translated by Derek Mahon as ‘The Stone Age’:

Imagine a stone getting up each morning,  
shaking its rocky shoulders  
and moving its stony tongue,  
trying to speak; well that was me. (PD, p.69)

‘Ag Tiomáint Siar’:

Labhrann gach cúinne den leathinis seo liom  
ina teanga féinig. teanga a thuigim.

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Níl lúb de choill ná cor de bhóthar  
nach bhfuil ag suirí liom,  
ag cogarnáil is ag sioscarnaigh.

Translated by Michael Coady as 'Driving West':

Every nook of this peninsula can speak to me  
in its own tongue, in words I can understand.  
There's not one twist of road or little grove  
that can't insinuate its whispered courtship at my ear. (PD, p.133)

'Loch a' Dúin':

Is chualathas mo chéile ag rá ina theanga féin  
'Ná fiafraigh d'fhile cá bhfil an bóthar go Baghdad.  
Léimfidh a samhlaíocht thar íor na spéire  
is raghaidh tú amú sa phortach.'

Translated by Paul Muldoon as 'The Lay of Loughadoon':

And my husband was heard to remark in his own tongue,  
"Don't ask a poet the way  
to Baghdad for among  
the bogs and bog-holes she'll lead you astray." (AC, p.69)

'An tEach Uisce':

Is i dteanga éigin iasachta a thuig sí  
cé nárbh fhéidir léi na focail a dhéanamh amach i gceart,  
d'iarr sé uirthi a cheann a ghlanadh  
is na míola a bhí ag crá an chin air a chnagadh  
lena hingne fada.

Translated by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as 'The Water Horse':

And in a foreign tongue she understood  
Though she could not properly make out the words.  
He asked her to comb his hair  
And crush with her long nails  
The creatures that were pestering his head. (WH, p.29)

‘Fionnuala’:

Cé go bhfuil again fós ár nguthanna daonna  
a bhréagann na slóite,  
ár gciall, ár gconn, ár nglórtha binne  
is ár nGaeilge féin,  
do thabharfainn aon rud  
ach bheith soar ón mallacht,  
is ós na geasaibh droma draíochta seo  
a bhain ár gcló nádúrtha dínn  
ag bronnadh crot agus nádúr an éin orainn.

Translated by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as ‘Fionnuala’:

Although our human voice remains  
To enchant the hearers,  
Our mind, our sense, our sweet music  
And even our Gaelic tongue remains,  
What would I not give  
To be free from the curse,  
The dread laws we obey,  
That took our natural shape away  
And gave us the blood and shape of birds. (WH, p.125)

As mentioned earlier in Chapter I, part of the difficulty of reading Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry in translation is that the English versions are very often interpretations rather than literal word for word translations. In ‘An Bhábóg Bhriste’, Ní Dhomhnaill speaks of ‘a bhéil’ (‘his mouth’), then later in the first stanza ‘a béal’ (‘her mouth’). Montague may have replaced ‘mouth’ for ‘tongue’ to refer to a particular silencing, like for instance, when a child was quiet the parent might ask “did the fairies get your tongue”? Certainly, in ‘Aois na Cloiche’, both the poet and translator refer to the tongue in the context of the organ the tongue. However in ‘Ag Tiomáint Siar’, ‘teanga’ has been used twice in the same line both meaning tongue as in language or words. Here Coady’s translation is quite faithful to the Irish in which Ní Dhomhnaill is describing her

journey, her drive West and how the landscape is able to speak to her in its own tongue, a tongue that she can understand.

Generally speaking, the Irish words for 'tongue' when translated into English mean language, one's own tongue ('theangna féin'), a foreign tongue ('dteanga') or 'and our own Irish' ('is ar nGaeilge féin').<sup>15</sup> Lamenting the demise of the Gaeltacht's oral tradition, while celebrating its survival, images of tongues address the long-standing Irish language question. References to the 'Gaelic tongue', (as in the lines 'speak to me / in its own tongue', 'remark in his own tongue' and 'in a foreign tongue'), represent the survival of Irish in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry. In 'Fionnuala', the speaker's superficial use of a modern day language fails to replace the deeply ingrained traditions that are represented by the 'Gaelic tongue', a tongue that continues to speak of the Otherworld.

In Medbh McGuckian's, 'The Merfolk and the Written Word', an interpretation of Ní Dhomhnaill's, 'Na Murúcha agus an Litríocht', the storyteller brings together the opposing oral and literary traditions.<sup>16</sup> By bringing the old and new together through a fusion of the oral and written traditions, Ní Dhomhnaill is able to move easily between Ireland's past and present. The merfolk, who speak in 'their own fish-tongue', are symbolic of the Irish people who were culturally uprooted. According to Angela Bourke a cultural transition took place in Ireland after the Famine when a new middle class rose, who favoured 'literacy, rather than orality; English rather than the Irish language'.<sup>17</sup> The oral tradition of

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<sup>15</sup> See <<http://www.englishirishdictionary.com>> [accessed 2 December 2007]. Please note the above translations are based on personal correspondence with Máirín Casey, November 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's, 'Na Murúcha agus an Litríocht' / 'The Merfolk and the Written Word' is cited from *Southern Review*, 31 (July 1995), pp.440-443.

<sup>17</sup> Angela Bourke, 'Reading a Woman's Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', *Feminist Studies*, 21 (Fall 1995), p.559.

storytelling representing traditional Irish values was displaced by a new progressive printed literary tradition. But the rural Gaeltacht areas in the West of Ireland continued to follow their traditional belief systems. The merfolk are praised for their restraint in not writing their tales down in favour of preserving the oral tradition:

Although they were literate in their own-fish-tongue  
from the day and hour they landed,  
and composition was taught to their offspring  
until the Island School was closed down  
by the Department of Dried-Out Islands  
back in the '50's (so the story went,  
for fear of avalanches),

they never took to the pen  
or cultivated the native prose text:  
they didn't invent yarns and fiction,  
donning the writer's hat.  
They disdained the freaks of printing  
and never capitalized  
on the fabulous, enchanted existence  
that had been theirs.

The irony of the poem is that the poet herself, like the third person narrator, by telling their tale and writing it down is doing exactly what the 'merfolk' resisted. In this humorous story, the storyteller, who combines 'yarns and fiction' with empirical fact creates a sense that she is censoring the story because she does not reveal what their 'the fabulous, enchanted existence' had been. While embarking on her story-telling art, then, Ní Dhomhnaill is actually preserving her heritage by recording her own versions of the folk tales and mythological stories that have formed part of the oral tradition that her ancestors followed.

In a similar vein to Ní Dhomhnaill's experiments with a stream of her own tongues, other Irish language poets employ the metaphorical association of tongues and water to foreground the fluctuating historical status of Irish. One of the founding members of *Innti*, Gabriel Ravenstock, enthusiastically encouraged Gearóid Mac Lochlainn's immersion into Ireland's cultural waters when saying, 'Come on brothers and sisters, let's all go down, let's all go down now and immerse ourselves in a stream of tongues.'<sup>18</sup> Although in Mac Lochlainn's *Streams of Tongues / Sruth Teangacha* (2002), his tongues are silenced, and in a state of loll 'thirsting for words', they compete with each other to speak. Many of Mac Lochlainn's tongues are drenched in their own silence: In 'Sruth' / 'Stream', the speaker is 'floundering in a whirlpool of a speech / wading waist deep / in a stream of tongues' (SOT, pp.22-23); 'a bloody-mouthed butcher of syntax / tongue lolling, / thirsting for words' ('Cú-Fhear' / 'Wolf', SOT, pp.60-61); 'we stuck a stock in its mouth, / wrapped it in wet towels / and carried it in silence / to the river' ('Breith' / 'Birth', SOT, pp.72-73).

In McGuckian's translation of Mac Lochlainn's 'Sruth Teangacha (*do Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill*) as 'Going with the flow', the speaker says that, 'I think I'll risk it / and swim in this untamed / deluge of Irish' (SOT, pp.180-181).<sup>19</sup> The hesitation caused by the risk of death when immersing into Irish waters is reminiscent of how Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Ceist na Teangan', translated by Paul

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<sup>18</sup> Gabriel Ravenstock cited from Crowe's interview with Mac Lochlainn, 'Speaking in Tongues'. During the 1970s, Ravenstock, Ní Dhomhnaill, Cathal Ó Searcaigh, and Michael Davitt, amongst others, formed the language literary journal, *Innti*.

<sup>19</sup> See also McGuckian's translation of Mac Lochlainn's, 'A Glór' as 'Mo Chara Mourns a Change of Tone' in *Sruth Teangacha / Streams of Tongues: Rogha Filiochta / Selected Poetry*. (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2002), pp.154-155.

Muldoon as 'The Language Issue' (PD, pp.154-155), deals with the issue of a woman poet choosing to write in Irish:

I place my hope on the water  
in this little boat  
of the language, the way a body might put  
an infant

in a basket of intertwined  
iris leaves,  
its underside proofed  
with bitumen and pitch,

then set the whole thing down amidst  
the sedge  
and bulrushes by the edge  
of a river

only to have it borne hither and thither,  
not knowing where it might end up;  
in the lap, perhaps  
of some Pharaoh's daughter.

Of 'The Language Issue', Sabina Sharkey says that 'with this poem we have returned to the question of language and the agency of the poet writing in Irish. Ní Dhomhnaill has cast the poet persona as a carer, though hardly a caretaker.'<sup>20</sup> Choosing such a mystical figure of hope as the Pharaoh's daughter has both a public and private significance for the poet. The image of her placing her 'hope on the water / in this little boat of the language' relates to Ní Dhomhnaill's personal choice of writing poetry in Irish, compared with the public significance of her participating in taking 'Irish back from that grey-faced Irish revivalist male preserve.'<sup>21</sup> 'The Language Issue' is concerned with inheriting a language, keeping alive, but then making new poetry that is steeped in tradition.

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<sup>20</sup> Sharkey, 'And Not Just for Pharaoh's Daughter', p.206.

<sup>21</sup> O'Connor, 'Comhrá', p.589.

Despite the fact that Moses might not have survived, like his mother, the poet is faced with a choice of whether to let the child / language live, die or sell it to a foreign tongue. Although she is unable to foretell its fate, there is an overwhelming feeling of having the sole responsibility to keep it alive by setting it free on the river and giving it the opportunity to grow and mature. The fate of Irish is then placed in the hope of it finding ‘the lap of a Pharaoh’s daughter’, which is the English language, an uncertain possibility.<sup>22</sup> The uncertainty that is still in question is whether the poem will survive the translation process from Irish to English: The Pharaoh is the oppressor, the English language, and the poem knows that it is going to be translated. There is a lot of trust invested in this act of faith by the mother / poet hoping that all will end satisfactorily and the child / poem will survive being translated.

Questions of an inbuilt silence that result from a poem being translated are evident in the work of up and coming Irish language poets, like Mac Lochlainn. Voicing his views on translation and silence Mac Lochlainn states that:

I began to think in terms of silence, sound and contexts. Poetry, I believe brings us closer to silence like the stillness at the centre of a good Haiku. The translator’s process is to work out from the silence signified by the last full stop of the original and re-sound in a new language. The translator looks to capture the tonal breath of the original.<sup>23</sup>

According to Mac Lochlainn, the translator must begin at the point where the poet stopped speaking. So the silence that the translator is left to work with is marked by a nothingness, a wordless page, which allows for the poem to transform itself into something other than words on a page. Although it was feared in Chapter I

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<sup>22</sup>According to Theresa O’Connor ed., in *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p.6, a Pharaoh’s daughter was one of Ní Dhomhnaill’s ‘West Kerry ancestors numbered among their foremothers.’

<sup>23</sup> Mac Lochlainn, *Streams of Tongues / Struth Teangacha*, p.190.

that the translator may substitute his / her voice for Ní Dhomhnaill's, s/he does not speak over the poet, but rather continues to write the poem at the point where the poet stopped. This transformative act is something that Ní Dhomhnaill is also aware of when stating in the Introduction, 'I'm so aware of the poem even being a translation of something that is beyond language'.<sup>24</sup> Certainly in Mac Lochlainn's case the poem in translation moves beyond language into a new dynamic mode of expression, that of music.

Representing a new generation of *Innti* poets in the North, Mac Lochlainn's bi-lingual title, *Streams of Tongues / Sruth Teangacha*, pre-empts the inherent problems of silence when translating Irish into English and also poetry into music. As in many of Ní Dhomhnaill's poems, Mac Lochlainn, who Ní Dhomhnaill describes as 'the real McCoy', addresses the historical silence of the North through frequent images of tongues.<sup>25</sup> The lines from 'Poet's Choice', 'I want to speak, rant and rave, untie tongue till it bleeds in seven shades of street rhythms' (SOT, pp.182-183), aptly summarise the aim of Mac Lochlainn's experiment in *Streams of Tongues* that is 'to translate the rhythmic tongue'.<sup>26</sup> In poems like this, politics and music inharmoniously spark off each other as the words dance off the poet's tongue in his own tongue.

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<sup>24</sup> Unpublished personal interview with Ní Dhomhnaill.

<sup>25</sup> Introducing *Sruth Teangacha / Streams of Tongues*, p.16, Ní Dhomhnaill wrote, 'I admire Gearóid Mac Lochlainn for many reasons: for his wild anarchic streak; for his willingness to bring the colloquial speech of the Belfast Gaeilgeoirí (and often Gaolgóirí) into the written language; for his willingness to shock, but not for the sake of shock alone.'

<sup>26</sup> Mac Lochlainn, *Sruth Teangacha / Streams of Tongues*, p.189. In his author's notes, pp.188-189, Mac Lochlainn, states that 'Poetry is a deep musical language within language....To translate the rhythmic tongue ('drum language as the Jamaican Maroons call it) of a djembe player the guitarist will be forced to re-think his instrument and look at it a purely a percussive voice, speaking the language of percussion.'

Tongues also take centre stage in titles like ‘Teanga’ / ‘Tongue’ and ‘Teanga Eile’ / ‘Second Tongue’ (SOT, pp.52-57). In the latter of these poems silence works on many contrasting political levels as the speaker manifests himself in various guises: ‘I am the tongue / in the kidnapper’s sack / lips stitched’; ‘I am the tongue / bound on the butchers block / in government offices’; ‘I am the tongue / you shun on dark roads, in pubs’; ‘I am the tongue / you silenced’. Here the seditious tongue of the collaborator or informant is silenced. The tongue also communicates experiences of exile and isolation because of the tongue that one speaks in.

Ní Dhomhnaill’s forked tongues are especially used to communicate between the Irish oral and English written traditions, but also to address issues of self-censorship and silence in Irish poetry. The silencing of the Irish language and explaining the quietness of women’s experiences is centred around the allegorical association of childbirth, religion and language that work together in manifesto poems like ‘Ceist na Teangan’/ ‘The Language Issue’ and ‘Toircheas 1’ / ‘Ark of the Covenant’. Apart from the political implications of not speaking, much of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry focuses on a historical religious prerequisite to remain silent. Once again, here are a few examples of how images of tongues inherently speak of a woman’s socio-religious morality:

However much the drink had loosened my tongue  
I never let on I was married.  
(‘An Bhean Mhídhis’ / ‘The Unfaithful Wife’, PD, p.105).

You won’t hear a cheep from me.  
The cat has got my tongue.  
My hands do all the talking.  
(‘Feis’ / ‘Carnival’, AC, p.17).

“Mammy, why are you moaning?”  
“Because”, I bite my tongue, “because my heart  
is filled with pride and joy on the day of your First Communion.”  
(‘Lá’Chéad Chomaoineach’ / ‘First Communion’, AC, p.33).

The tip of his tongue  
down the brush of the telephone  
lassoes my nape.  
(‘Stigmata’ / ‘Devil’s Tattoo’, WH, p.35).

Within Ní Dhomhnaill’s erotic love poetry there is a preoccupation with women silencing their conspiracies of adulterous love. Questions of moral silence are further proposed in ‘Feis’ / ‘Carnival’, a sequence of surrealist love poems conveying varying emotions from erotic pleasure to the despair of lost love. The woman who ‘spent all last night / driving down the byroads of your parish’ (AC, p.17), confirms that she will not verbally confess to her and the priest’s adulterous love. But there is a sense of uncertainty as to whether her body will reveal the forbidden love. Although the words on the tongue have been muted, the body is being used to hint at the lover’s secret. The information that is revealed by the hands is nonsense, almost as if they were out of control. The imagery of the tongue and hands illustrates a central paradox at work in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry of self-silencing and of being silenced. The sacredness of silence and the burning desire to discover what lies behind the conspiracies of love is what creates the poem’s erotic aura.

In Seamus Heaney’s erotically flirtatious translation of ‘Féar Suaithinseach’, entitled ‘Miraculous Grass’, he tries to translate Ní Dhomhnaill’s silence by intensely focusing on how women have been psychologically silenced, and thus, physically muted. Whereas quietness is when a woman is unable to

express her inexpressible private experiences, like pregnancy, silence is more a result of not speaking about certain experiences because of wider consequences. In 'Miraculous Grass', the (anorexic) girl takes a moralist stance of whether to confess or remain silent about her secret love:

There you were in your purple vestments  
half-way through the Mass, an ordained priest  
under your linen alb and chasuble and stole:  
and when you saw my face in the crowd  
for Holy Communion  
the consecrated host fell from your fingers.

I felt shame, I never  
mentioned it once,  
my lips were sealed.  
But still it lurked in my heart  
like a thorn under mud, and it  
worked itself so deep and sheer  
it nearly killed me.

This erotic fairy poem is based on a well-known religious legend concerning a lost communion host that results in a girl becoming sick.<sup>27</sup> The poem begins with a build-up to a confession that hints at some of the girl's immoral thoughts and actions. Perhaps the girl and priest were once, or still are, lovers and he drops the host at the shock of seeing her. Just as she is about to tell all, her 'shame' of what she has done is 'sealed' into the pronoun 'it', referring to her deep felt guilt about her desire for the priest. The question of whether the girl will kiss and tell is intensely located around the ambiguous image of the 'sealed lips'.

If reading this poem from a feminist psychoanalytical perspective the 'sealed lips' recall those of Luce Irigaray:

Wait. My blood is coming back from their senses. It's getting warmer inside us, between us. The words are becoming empty, bloodless dead

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<sup>27</sup> Angela Bourke, 'Fairies and Anorexia: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Amazing Grass'', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 13 (1993), p.26.

skins. While our lips are becoming red again. They're stirring, they're moving, they want to speak.<sup>28</sup>

At this point in the argument it is important to acknowledge the critical debate largely between French feminist theorists, such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, concerning the concept of *l'écriture féminine*, thus raising the vast question of whether there is a male language existing independently from a feminine one. Here Irigaray puns on the dual bodily function of the woman's oral and vaginal lips by associating language with sex. When searching for a way to challenge established Irish patriarchal discourses about women and their sexual bodies one of the central questions that may be considered is that of Irigaray who asks, 'how can women speak, or even think, in a language which is inherently anti-woman?'<sup>29</sup> Irigaray sees the creation of an erotic body language as a possible solution to this question as she says that, 'there should no longer be separation: Sex / language on the one hand, body / matter on the other, then perhaps another history would be possible.'<sup>30</sup> The integrated treatment of these entities enables woman to think and speak in an alternative symbolic language, one that is not essentially male.

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<sup>28</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'When Our Lips Speak Together', *Signs*, 6 (1980), p.75. For a further psychoanalytical discussion of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, see Linda Reverie's analysis of 'Parthenogenesis' through the feminist theories of Hélène Cixous in "'Parthenogenesis": A Bisexual Exchange' in *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed., Michael Kenneally (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), pp.351. Reverie states that, 'Although Irish is a mother-tongue to men and women alike, it is often thought of more "feminine" because repressed by "masculine" conquering tongues of the Romans, Scandinavians, French and English peoples who settled in the Celtic countries. It follows then, that an Irish woman is twice victimized by her "gendered" mother tongue, as she is rendered powerless by her own patriarchal society that wants to repress her female voice, and also by the colonizing culture that wants to suppress the Irish language. By attending to the female body, and making their findings known in writing, these two authors challenge conventional notions of patriarchal discourse and thereby dismantle the language and in its place resurrect versions of the feminine text.'

<sup>29</sup> Maggie Humm, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p.104.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.107.

Discussing Irigaray's concept of body language Diane Elam states that, 'Rather than celebrating a hypostatized female body, Irigaray's use of the rhetoric of biological discourse refigures anatomy, writing *through* and *with* the body: this is the sense in which [Hélène] Cixous has also spoken of "writing the body."<sup>31</sup> The Irigarayan concept of using the body as an alternative way of communicating is at work in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry and by writing *through* and *with the* body she is writing *of* the body in which bodily improprieties involve a physical engagement with the textual body. But the truth about what has really happened remains private as the woman slips into an (anorexic) unconsciousness:

Next thing then, I was laid up in bed.  
Consultants came in their hundreds,  
Doctors and brothers and priests,  
But I baffled them all: I was  
incurable, they left me for dead.

...And where the scared wafer fell  
you will discover  
in the middle of the shooting weeds  
a clump of miraculous grass.

The priest will have to come then  
with his delicate fingers, and lift the host  
and bring it to me and put it on my tongue.  
Where it will melt, and I will rise in the bed

as fit and as the youngster I used to be.

The Irigarayan claim that woman has been denied the right to speak of her sexual experiences is reflected through the images of how the lips and tongue work together as symbols of silence that hint at women's socio-religious sexual repression.

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<sup>31</sup> Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1994) p.62.

In Bourke's discussion of 'Féar Suaithinseach', which she translates as 'Amazing Grass', she associates silence and starvation with fairies and anorexia.<sup>32</sup> She states that, 'Women abducted by the fairies should know that they must not touch the food in the fairy dwelling, for if they do they will never go home; while those who do escape are very often mute.'<sup>33</sup> The girl's starvation of food to fuel the body is synonymous her with being starved of the language to speak of her sexual experiences. As Maud Ellmann and Margaret Kelleher support, women are able to take physical and psychological control over their sexual (reproductive) bodies by what goes in and out of their mouths.<sup>34</sup>

The anorexic body is, therefore, used to make a statement about who is in control. The truth remains private as the girl slips into an unbroken / unfed silence and is unable to confess her secret desire for the priest until he has recovered the lost host and placed it on her tongue. The fusion of his 'delicate fingers' with the girl's tongue presents a radical alternative to how the traditional Holy Communion is performed. Envisaging the 'youngster I used to be', the girl is reliant on the priest rescuing her from the fairy Otherworld. Finding the lost host leads the priest into sexual temptation, but he is the only person who can cure the girl from psychosomatic starvation, and thus break the silence of the desire from

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<sup>32</sup> Bourke, 'Fairies and Anorexia', p.25. For a comparison see Michael Hartnett's translation of 'Féar Suaithinseach: Fianaise an chailín I ngreim "Anorexia"' as 'Marvellous Grass' in Ní Dhomhnaill's *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta*, trans., Michael Hartnett (Brookside: Raven Arts Press, 1993), pp.74-75. Later, Seamus Heaney's translation of 'Féar Suaithinseach' as 'Miraculous Grass' was published in *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1990), pp.32-35. Interestingly, as Bourke points out, both Hartnett and Heaney omit Ní Dhomhnaill's subtitle from her Irish original, which she translates in 'Fairies and Anorexia', as 'Testimony of a girl in the grip of anorexia.'

<sup>33</sup> Bourke, 'Fairies and Anorexia', p.29.

<sup>34</sup> For a further discussion of anorexia as a form of political protest see Maud Ellmann's, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993). Alternatively, see Margaret Kelleher's discussion of Irish women and the 1840's Famine in *Feminization of the Famine: Representations of Women in Famine Narratives: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997).

which she nearly died. The grass is miraculous because it promises the girl a voice to speak of her desire. 'Miraculous Grass' concludes using the future tense, so, not only is the reader left in suspense as to whether the girl will recover; she too is left suspended in silence.

Ní Dhomhnaill's erotic love poems, physically rich both in their language and imagery, are concerned with the lustful honesty of women's desire while paradoxically maintaining a sense of integrity. Women, who keep quiet about their forbidden adulterous love, thus maintain their virtuous public persona. The moral of this cautionary tale is that for women who fail to fulfil patriarchal ideologies the truths of their lives become lost to an unrecoverable silence. The metaphorical use of fairy lore to explain the silencing of women's lives, therefore, works on two contradictory levels; on one level that sustains silence, while on another silence is broken. The body that is used to speak the unspeakable acts as an alternative to the oral tradition of storytelling.

In using images of the mouth to write an erotic love poetry, Ní Dhomhnaill discreetly takes control of the body and uses it to challenge the silence that has resulted in its censorship. The failure to decipher Ní Dhomhnaill's body language fully suggests that the body is not completely liberated from the limitations of censorship, thus resulting in the suspension of disclosing her silenced secrets. In terms of the body being used as a liberating force, the choice, however, of whether or not to speak openly about women and their sexual bodies, be it on a voluntary or non-voluntary basis, raises the question of whether women's silence

is symbolic of their sexual repression or liberation.<sup>35</sup> Employing the body in such a way there is a paradox at work here in that the body poems are not only poems discussing or describing bodies, but that the poems are representative of bodies in their own right. While in the poetry the various parts of the body tell a story, they are at the same time withdrawing and embodying the very words that they are speaking. Thus, while Ní Dhomhnaill puts images of the body on public display, at the same time she withdraws information about it. What has evolved, then, is the creation of a psychological boundary between public and private discourses of the body.

### **iii. 'What we said was less / than what we saw': Eavan Boland's Bodily Spectacle of Irish History**

Although Niall Ó Ciosáin acknowledges that there have been few historiographical social and official memories of the 1840s Famine, he does question whether this history was actually silenced. 'Until recently', he argues, 'it is maintained, there were few public commemorations or institutional expressions such as museums; the centenary passed largely unremarked; and academic historiography, the ultimate arbiter of official memory, is held to have ignored the Famine.'<sup>36</sup> According to Ó Ciosáin, some witnesses to history were reluctant to disclose their memories of what was seen for fear of retribution. This was evidenced in a letter that Ciarán Ó Síocháin sent to the Folklore Commission in October 1945 with his collection of folklore material containing accepted clerical

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<sup>35</sup> As Radner and Lanser in 'Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures', p.3, suggest, 'If the production of coded messages is a sign of oppression and censorship, the deciphering of such messages may be the very process through which liberation becomes possible.'

<sup>36</sup> Niall Ó Ciosáin, 'Famine Memory and the Popular Representation of Scarcity', in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed., Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.96.

Famine narratives in Cape Clear. He apologised for not being able to write a full commentary because, 'You would not hear anything about the Famine itself, it was said that the old people who witnessed it did not like to talk about it at all. There was nothing they would talk about more than faith and the minister during the Famine.'<sup>37</sup>

When making a decision to withhold memories by strategically maintaining, 'What we said was less / than what we saw' (OH, p.18), Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill says that Eavan Boland's address of the 1840s Famine 'becomes the focus of a quiet and unhurried deliberation on pain and tragedy, horror and denial.'<sup>38</sup> While Ní Dhomhnaill focused on the unspeakable aspects of women's lives, Boland more reflects widely on how silence represents a humiliating sense of loss and victimisation for those lost and forgotten to Irish history.<sup>39</sup> Since Boland's early address of the Famine in *The War Horse* (1975), the silenced experiences of poverty, despair, hopelessness and powerlessness have been developed throughout her subsequent collections. For example, manifesto poems like 'The Achill Woman' (OH, pp.27-28), that address the historical marginalisation of a nation, woman and poet, commemorate 'the sites outside history of a country whose past is so shaped by oppression.'<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See Ibid, pp.109-110. Ó Ciosáin discusses the various socio-political reconstructions of famine memory, particularly the emergence of contrasting nationalist and catholic narratives of the Famine from various parts of Ireland. Some of the catholic narratives of the Famine that were collected by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1945 presented the idea that this was the result of divine punishment from God.

<sup>38</sup> Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, 'Contemporary Writing 1960-2001', in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Women's Writing*, vol v, various ed's (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), p.1295. For a more in-depth discussion of Ní Dhomhnaill and the Famine see her essay, 'A Ghostly Alhambra', in her *Selected Essays* ed., Onna Frawley (Dublin: New Island, 2005), pp.69-79.

<sup>39</sup> See for example, Ó Ciosáin, 'Was there Silence about the Great Famine?', *Irish Studies Review*, 13 (1995-6), pp.7-10.

<sup>40</sup> Eavan Boland, Mary O'Malley and Paula Meehan, *Three Irish Poets: An Anthology* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2003), p.9.

Honouring the thousands that died in the 1840s Famine as 'Great People', Boland remembers how the Achill woman 'was the first woman to speak to me about the Famine'(OL, p.124). Although Boland sensed that she had found her vision through the Achill woman, she admits that, 'I wanted to say that I understood this woman as emblem.... Of course I did not. Yet even then I sensed a power in the encounter. I knew, without having words for it, that she came from a past which affected me'(OL, p.125). Considering that breaking historical silence is central to 'The Achill Woman', the poem is fundamentally flawed. Although words were exchanged between Boland and the Achill woman, the young poet, who was 'all talk, raw from college' (OH, p.27), speaks on behalf of the Achill woman in the third person, and thus, sustained her silence. Through her perception of the Achill woman as merely an 'emblem' for a lost and forgotten past, the poet failed to recover the histories that remain hidden in the words that were unspoken on that cold evening, those that spoke of a nation, woman and poet's silence.

In Boland's defence, Ann Owen Weekes argues that if she had given the Achill Woman an opportunity to speak this 'would have been easy, but inaccurate and a contradiction of the argument, the self-condemnation of the poem.'<sup>41</sup> Boland, however, is not concerned about recovering accurate details. 'The past, by definition', she claims, 'is not a series of measurable statistics. It is also the shame, the silence. It is what is wilfully forgotten.'<sup>42</sup> Since there was no way of

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<sup>41</sup> Anne Owen Weekes, 'An Origin Like Water: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Modernist Critiques of Irish Literature', in *Irishness and Postmodernism*, ed., John Rickard (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1994), p.175, cited from David Wheatley, 'Changing the Story: Eavan Boland and Literary History', *Irish Review*, 31 (2004), p.113.

<sup>42</sup> Boland, 'The Last Year (the effects of the potato Famine in Ireland)', *Harpers Magazine*, June 2000 <[http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m1111/1801\\_300/62298105/print.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1111/1801_300/62298105/print.jhtml)>[accessed 27

knowing what this woman would have said, Boland could have created a dialogue between them but chose not to. Instead, we are left with a poem that is inaccurate, one that contradicts the fundamentals of its argument, that woman is no longer the silenced object of the male poet, but the speaking subject, and thus, is filled with self-condemnation.

Brian Henry charges Boland with ‘using the power of poetry to objectify other women while empowering herself.’<sup>43</sup> Given that ‘The Achill Woman’ was supposed to chart Boland’s rejection of how male poets availed themselves of ‘the old convention, in using and reusing women as icons and figments’, she too objectifies women in this way. Ironically, she continues to critique her male predecessors for ‘evading the real women of the past, women whose silence their poetry should have broken. In doing so, they ran the risk of turning a terrible witness into an empty decoration’ (OL, pp.152-153). Not only is this survivor of the Famine ornamentalised, but as with Boland’s own life story, it is questionable as to whether the Achill woman is merely a figment of her poetic imagination used simply as an accessory to aid her re-writing of a nation, woman and poet’s incidental past back into Irish history. Having fulfilled her emblematic purpose, therefore, the Achill woman’s ghostly figure travels back into myth just as quickly as she walked into history at the poem’s beginning. Although Boland’s imaginary encounter with the Achill woman marked the true beginning of her mythical recovery of a woman’s past, she becomes stuck in the centre of her own paradoxical argument.

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November 2003]. For a more in-depth discussion of the impacts of the Famine see Tom Hayden, ed., *The Irish Hunger: Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1997), particularly, David Lloyd’s chapter, ‘The Memory of Hunger’, pp.32-47.

<sup>43</sup> Brian Henry, ‘The Woman as Icon, The Woman as Poet’, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 36 (Winter 1997), p.200, cited from Wheatley, ‘Changing the Story’, p.113.

Christopher Morash argues that John Mitchel's narratives, *Jail Journal* (1854) and *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (1861), have significantly shaped Irish history. He states that Mitchel's readers 'would find that Irish history after 1848 enters a state of suspended animation – suspended in the midst of the Famine.' Thus 'History as unfinished business, like Robert Emmet's unwritten epitaph, challenges its readers to write their own ending.'<sup>44</sup> Boland remembers a story told by her mother about a woman in her eighties, a survivor of the Famine. 'My mother's memory of the details was not quite clear, but her sense of the shadow they cast had remained intact across half a century.' The story 'was told about a woman, to a woman and by a woman. As such it belonged, as far as I could see, neither to history nor to the past'.<sup>45</sup> Recreating the past from the margins of history, Boland becomes suspended in 'neither history nor the past'.

Since the past is an unreliable historical source, in much the same way that Ní Dhomhnaill uses Irish fairylore, Boland taps into the fantastic realms of Irish folklore to construct a national sense of Famine memory. She not only modernises local and national memories of the Famine, but her private memories become representative of official public ones when she fictionalises them too.<sup>46</sup> Included in her fiction-making are the irrelevant details of a 'wilfully forgotten past', those

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<sup>44</sup> Christopher Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.61. For a more in-depth discussion of Mitchel see Chapter 3, 'Mitchel's Hunger' in *Writing the Irish Famine*, pp.52 – 75. See also how Boland incorporates one of the most influential nationalist treatments of the Famine that of the transported Irish patriot, Mitchel, into her re-construction of Irish history in 'The Last Year (the effects of the potato famine in Ireland)'. Her reference to Mitchel's incomplete story justifiably, in this instance, allows her to end his story, which of course she does.

<sup>45</sup> Boland, 'Daughters of a Colony: A Personal Interpretation of the Place of Gender Issues in the Postcolonial Interpretation of Irish Literature', *Éire-Ireland*, 32 (1998), p.14.

<sup>46</sup> See Ciosáin, 'Famine Memory and the Popular Representation of Scarcity', p.97. He states that, 'The influence of the Irish Folklore Commission's conception of folklore as national memory is very clear in the material collected during the 1945 survey, which by organising narratives around the event, itself shaped or constructed Famine memory.'

that were excluded from the official version of Irish history. A folkloric sense of Famine memory is constructed in a fictional account of the Famine, 'The Last Year (the effects of the Potato Famine in Ireland)'. In this short story, Boland imagines that:

The potato blight had lasted five years. Folly and hypocrisy and the deepest inhumanity, masquerading as economic theory, had accompanied it every step of the way. In the worst hours of the Famine, the Limerick docks had been piled with pork, butter and oats for transport to England...But they would never forget that their people had died, degraded by hunger and disease, within miles of plenty and harvest. Now that healthy potatoes were coming out of the ground this was the year the blight began to recede – grief, rancor, disbelief remained. And now everyone, far and near, wanted to have a say. Only the victims were silent.<sup>47</sup>

'The folly and hypocrisy and the deepest inhumanity, masquerading as economic theory' refers to Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus' demographic and economic theories that promoted depopulation through a 'metaphor of disease'. In his discussion of Malthusianism and the Famine, Morash argues that Sir Charles Trevelyan's, *The Irish Crisis: Being a Narrative of the Measures for the Relief of the Distress Caused by the Great Irish Famine of 1846-7* (1848), one of the earliest accounts of the Famine, 'turned to a metaphor with the power to contain both the deaths of millions of human beings and the "permanent good" of "supreme wisdom" – disease.'<sup>48</sup> This metaphor was the 'metaphor of disease', which equated to, 'poverty is disease; disease is contagious; ergo poverty is contagious.'<sup>49</sup> Morash points out that 'the metaphor of "Ireland's disease" was by

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<sup>47</sup> Boland, 'The Last Year (the effects of the potato famine in Ireland)'.  
<sup>48</sup> Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine*, p.22.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p.24.

no means unique to the Famine period'.<sup>50</sup> In one of Boland's early poems, 'The Famine Road' (CP, pp.29-30), she employs the Malthusian metaphor of disease to act as a polemical exposé of Trevelyan's demographic cure of Ireland's poverty and disease and all in the name of progress:

It has gone better then we expected, Lord  
Trevelyan, sedition, idleness, cured  
in one; from parish to parish, field to field;  
the wretches work till they are quite worn,  
then fester by their work; we march the corn  
to the ships in peace....

According to Julia Reinhard Lupton 'the key word in [Edmund] Spenser's Irish Plot is *waste*: Spenser's tract defines Ireland as wasteland (desolate, depeopled and unpossessed) in order to defend an active policy of further wasting followed by restorative 'plantation'.<sup>51</sup> Boland's imaginary colonial discourse between Colonel Jones and Trevelyan is reminiscent of the contrived colonial tactics like those Spenser laid out in his theoretical work, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596), and Book V of his epic poem *The Faerie Queen*. Spenser depicted the Irish as being wild and unruly in order to justify the earlier period of English colonialism. Boland plays on the historical victimisation of the Irish during the Famine. Like Spenser, she too refers to the Irish as being 'seditious', 'idle as trout' and 'wretches'. In a later Famine poem, 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited' (CP, pp.174-175), Boland continues to evoke Spenserian depictions of the woodland as 'desolate, depeopled and unpossessed'. She revisits

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.23. Morash quotes Nicholas Canny as 'indicating that it can be found (although with a more surgical emphasis) in Spenser's 1596 *View of the Present State of Ireland*.' For a further discussion see, Nicholas Canny's, 'Edmund Spenser and the Development of an Anglo-Irish Identity', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 13 (1983), pp.1-19.

<sup>51</sup> Julia Reinhard Lupton, 'Mapping Mutability: Or, Spenser's Irish Plot', in *Representing Ireland: Literature and the Origins of Conflict, 1534-1660*, ed's., Brendan Bradshaw, Andrew Hadfield, and Willy Maley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.93.

the 'famine road' as a cartographer to survey and map out a new landscape that tells of an Irish people's silenced history. But once again Boland fails to do so, when dwelling on an image of 'where they died, there the road ended' and on 'the line which says woodland and cries hunger.'

Peggy O'Brien states that the theme of this poem is 'the idea of seeing nothing, the denial upon which civilization is predicated' and 'the limits of linear, historical narrative to contain the infinite ramifications of tragedy, the failure of language to communicate the silence of great loss.'<sup>52</sup> Like O'Brien, Boland finds that language is as treacherous as memory<sup>53</sup> when recollecting accounts of the Famine. Boland blames language for being unable to represent a nation and woman's silence; 'This is what language did to us', she states in 'Time and Violence' (CP, pp.206-207). Boland's 'country silences' (C, p.19) are not just about being denied the opportunity of 'having a say', but also dealing with the inability to find the appropriate words to speak of history's tragedies.

Margaret Kelleher questions, given the Irish context, how can such histories, like the Famine in the 1840s, be truly represented? Considering this she asks, 'is it possible to depict the horror and scale of an event such as famine; are literature and language adequate enough to the task?'<sup>54</sup> John Banville's reference to famine as 'the inexpressible expressed', causes Kelleher to suggest that literature and language are perhaps not adequate forms of aesthetic

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<sup>52</sup> Peggy O'Brien, ed., *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2000), p.xx.

<sup>53</sup> See Boland's, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.123. Here she states that, 'Memory is treacherous. It confers meanings which are not apparent at the time.'

<sup>54</sup> See Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), p.3.

representation.<sup>55</sup> Boland not only finds it difficult to speak of certain catastrophes of history but also of how to represent the silence of a people's wilfully forgotten past. Since she cannot find the words to re-write a silenced past into Irish history she employs the mouth to express the inexpressible. Like Ní Dhomhnaill previously, she uses images of the human mouth to create the paradox of speaking while maintaining a certain silence about her nation's and her own silences as both a woman and poet. Here are a few examples of how Boland employs the mouth to compensate for the limitations of language and to 'communicate the silence of great loss':

...they spoke rapidly  
in their own tongue: syllables in which pain was  
radical, integral, and with a sense of injury  
the language angled for an unhurt kingdom....  
(‘In Exile’, OH, p.40)

...when the hero  
was hailed by his comrades in hell  
their mouths opened and their voices failed and  
there is no knowing what they would have asked  
about a life they had shared and lost.  
(‘Love’, CP, p.183)

‘The truth of a suffered life. The mouth of it.’  
(‘Anna Liffey’, CP, p.202)

Out of my mouth they came:  
The spurred and booted garrisons.  
The men and women  
they dispossessed.

What is a colony  
if not the brutal truth  
that when we speak  
the graves open.  
And the dead walk?  
(‘Witness’, LL, p.15)

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.3.

I was born on this side of the Pale. /  
I speak with the forked tongue of colony.  
(‘The Mother Tongue’, LL, p.31)

History’s silence has spoken to Boland through images of the mouth that articulates a woman’s and a nation’s experiences of exile, possession, powerlessness, hope and despair. Mouths create a language of tragedy and loss out of ‘syllables of pain’. Boland plays out the role of victim once again in the poem ‘In Exile’ in which she says, ‘Here, in the scalding air, / my speech will not heal. I do not want it to heal’ (OH, pp.40-41). The scars that the wounded speech has left inadvertently suggest that Boland cannot forget the pains of her national exclusion. In *The Lost Land*, ‘colony’ is a language that represents pain, conflict and defeat. Using the language of the coloniser is something that Boland admits to in ‘The Mother Tongue’, when she says, ‘I was born on this side of the Pale. / I speak with the forked tongue of colony’. This historical reference to ‘the Pale’ is that of the English pale that was the district in Ireland within which only the English had the power for centuries after the invasion in 1172. In *The Lost Land*, where geographical location is of particular significance, various images of Ireland focus on an ambiguous North / South divide. Particular places in the rural West of Ireland are compared with urban Dublin, representing Gaelic Ireland and a contemporary City respectively. So here the ‘forked tongue’ represents the political divide between the colonised and coloniser.

Guinn Batten states that in ‘Witness’, (a poem which echoes Yeats’s ‘Fragments’), ‘Boland takes back the agency that Yeats gives to the female director of the séance: “Where got I that truth? / Out of a medium’s mouth, / Out of nothing it came.” Like the spiritualist, but as an Irish native rather than as a

medium, she makes the graves of history open.’<sup>56</sup> This sense of un-colonising her nation is acted out in ‘Witness’ in the lines, ‘Out of my mouth they came: / The spurred and booted garrisons. / The men and women / they dispossessed.’ Boland has discovered that when ‘We started talking / I saw our words had the rare power to unmake history’ (LL, p.27). The simple art of her storytelling erases the official colonial versions of history and replaces them with ‘the other history [that is] silent’ (LL, p.27).

Rather than colluding with the English coloniser, these poems of *The Lost Land*, that desperately attempt to repossess a colonised nation, suggest that Boland actually returned as the un-coloniser ‘undoing, unmaking and unsaying’ history and replacing the language of colonialism with nothing, but silence (LL, p.27).<sup>57</sup> Behind this mirage of silence images of mouths act as if they are a historical source for which to begin writing of Ireland’s silenced histories. These images of mouths are used as an oral source to create the image of her speaking about post-colonial and feminist concerns of silence. In ‘Anna Liffey’, in which the mouth of the woman / river is the source of the truths of her silent suffering, she is not only pictured as a national icon, but as a middle-aged woman. Although Boland claims that she is searching for the symbolic truth in between the words that remain unspoken, those of ‘the old wounds / [that] wait for

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<sup>56</sup> Guinn Batten, ‘Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and the Body of the Nation’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed., Matthew Campbell, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.179.

<sup>57</sup> According to Bourke in ‘Reading a Woman’s Death’, p.560, ‘Dark’ was of course a favourite adjective of colonial discourse, simultaneously suggesting ignorance, superstition, crime, and the skin colour of African and Asian peoples, as well as the growing contrast between town and country as streets were lighted first by gaslight and then by electricity.’ *The Lost Land* that is filled with a gentle tranquillity and melancholic tone, is consumed by darkness and shadows suggesting that Boland is in mourning for a nation’s history, which has excluded her. The dark settings in *The Lost Land*, created by the repetitive use of the words ‘dark’ and ‘darkness’, are used by Boland to present her nation in darkness, because this is how she sees it as she has not been able to know or understand it.

language, for a different truth' (OL, p.117), they conceal the truths that she has been searching for.

In much of Boland's domestic poetry, there is an overwhelming feeling of concealing the past within images of doors closed; there are floorboards 'to sand down and seal / with varnish' (OH, p.14); 'the shadow doll' is 'under glass, under wraps' (OH, p.17). Boland is, however, quite insistent that her readers should 'look' beyond the superficial quiet of her domestic themes in 'An Old Steel Engraving'(OH, p.39):

Look....  
More closely now:  
at the stillness of the unfinished action in  
afternoon heat, at the spaces on the page. They widen  
to include us:  
we have found

the country of our malediction where  
nothing can move until we find the word,  
nothing can stir until we say this is

what happened and is happening and history  
is one of us who turns away  
while the other is  
turning the page.

Reading in between the spaces of the words on the page the source of woman's silent role within a nation's history has been located. When 'looking more closely' at the historical text, there are no visible signs of women's presence. So what is the point of looking and listening when nothing can be heard or seen? The empty spaces that occupy language say more than the actual words of the text itself. Boland sees that the gaps in between the words of the country's 'malediction' provide an opportunity to re-write woman history into the established male one. The 'turning [of] the page' marks a new beginning of

woman's transition 'out of myth [and] into history' and further presents an opportunity to read two sides of the story.

However, Boland has spun a pun out of the word 'malediction', which literally means a bad saying or evil speech, to suggest that she is referring to woman's inclusion into the language of men. So, until the speaker finds the words to break the curse of the malediction, the words that will tell the tale of women's history will hang in the balance of time. Considering the poet / speaker's dishonest approach towards women's inclusion into the 'country of malediction', does Boland really want to speak of women's silence, particularly, as the turning of the page suggests that while the past is slowly being erased from the text, history continues to be re-written?

In 2003, Boland stated that the 'association between the woman and poet has certainly changed in Irish poetry. It has also radically altered the idea of the Irish poet. If a poet can be not just the voice of history but the witness to a silence, then the Irish poem stands to gain immeasurably from that authority.'<sup>58</sup> As part of her role as 'witness to a silence', we are advised in 'How We Made a New Art on Old Ground' to 'follow this / silence to its edge and you will hear / the history of air'(C, p.34). Listening to history's silence, therefore, is crucial for Boland if she is to record the 'darker sound, the unarchived, unrecorded, senseless noise of the past' through images of mouths and tongues.<sup>59</sup> Since the body magnifies and amplifies history's silences, silence, then, is to be read as a linguistic bodily code that is to be broken if the past is to be re-discovered.

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<sup>58</sup> Boland, *Three Irish Women Poets*, pp.9-10.

<sup>59</sup> Boland, 'The Last Year (the effects of the potato Famine in Ireland)'.

Throughout Boland's last four volumes of poetry, *Outside History* (1990), *In a Time of Violence* (1994), *The Lost Land* (1998) and *Code* (2001), silence has taunted her when fluctuating between being deceptive and defensive and innocent and virtuous. History's deceptiveness is dependant on 'one' playing the role of lookout, while the other commits the criminal act. As 'the key witness to the geology of secrets', Boland is unreliable because of her deceptive approach to the re-writing of women's forgotten past into history. The act of 'turning away' while 'turning the page' in 'An Old Steel Engraving' suggests that the accomplice of the crime is not willing to speak of this incursion. Boland plays the deceitful role of a witness to history, and so speaks of the past's silences obscurely. Time and time again Boland makes a pact with history not to speak of the past: 'Tell me you will never speak about the ashes', she said in 'Embers' (C, p.16). Playing the role of witness is central to Boland's histrionics, but she rarely discloses what was actually seen. In 'The Burdens of a History', (C, pp.37-38), the gap between the past and history moves further apart when some kind of mutual agreement is made between the lovers:

## II

We said we would not talk about the past:  
 About what had happened. (Which is history.)  
 About what could happen. (Which is fear.)

Speaking earlier in *The Journey's* title poem of 'love's archaeology' (CP, p.122), love retains its power to preserve the past and its histories. The avoidance of discussing the 'past' suggests that the speaker has overcome some kind of personal crisis, the mystery of which remains deeply hidden within history. The fact that the lovers made the decision not to 'talk about the past' evokes the

feeling that by its absence it very much still dominates what happens in the present and to some extent what could happen in the future. This secret 'past' seems to have some kind of hold over the relationship. Even the silence that looms over it is threatening. This, however, is typical Boland in the way that she overlooks what happened in history in favour of fabricating the past. Acting as a witness at the scene of the crime would mean admitting the truths of the past that are lost to history. Having established that truths of the past have been lost in words that will never be spoken, there is an air of virtue about her silence. Although Boland avoids speaking of what was once witnessed to reflect on history's denial of Ireland's tragedies and loss, the body is used to create the allusion of speaking of a silenced Irish (woman's) history in her poetry. So as declared in 'The Pomegranate', Boland 'will hold / the papery flushed skin in her hand / And to her lips. I will say nothing' (CP, p.185).

#### **iv. 'What ever you say, you say nothing': Deciphering Medbh McGuckian's Bodily Silence**

Seamus Heaney's classic line, 'whatever you say, you say nothing' (N, p.59), has been employed many times in Northern Irish poetry when addressing the paradox of whether to speak or remain silent about the Troubles. Medbh McGuckian is faithful to Heaney's words in that 'whatever she says, she says nothing'. As with Heaney, silence is politically symbolic for McGuckian. Echoing Heaney's famous words, *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003) opened with the line, 'I have nothing to say which I can say' (HIATL, p.13). Accordingly, many critics have argued that

McGuckian is being deliberately 'oblique', 'opaque', or 'wilfully obscure'.<sup>60</sup>

Actually, she has been obsessed with discovering a way of communicating and this she discovered using the body as an alternative mode of communication other than with language. As McGuckian herself explains:

Why do I write? Out of the helplessness of the human condition – the only kind of control I can muster over the incoherence and apparent senselessness of it. Also to communicate and diagnose and express what cannot otherwise be expressed; to be a voice or give a voice to things that have been oppressed and repressed in my peculiar culture; to find an emotional valve for the deepest joys and sorrows.<sup>61</sup>

McGuckian's rhetorical use of linguistic terms for the body creates a biological discourse to 'express what cannot otherwise be expressed'. Since *Captain Lavender* was published in 1994, the frequent images of mouths that McGuckian has used to speak of Northern Irish political history has demonstrated that she is not being intentionally incomprehensible. As McGuckian turns to focus on the history of Northern Irish politics to establish a sense of reality before distorting the everyday, her bodily silence, does however, raise a question as to whether this Northern Irish poet's earlier oblique radicalism has truly become overt in *Captain Lavender*. The following discussion will introduce and illustrate McGuckian's intense use of the mouth to foreground her dilemma of whether to

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<sup>60</sup> See Elizabeth Lowry's review of Medbh McGuckian's *Selected Poems* (1997), 'Dream On', *Metre*, 4 (Spring / Summer 1998), p.46-51. Lowry states that, 'In her early thirties, McGuckian had it all: power, verve, an impressive formal command and a seductive self-confidence that still took the reader's separateness and craven desire for meaning into account.' Lowry notes that there was a marked change in McGuckian's style around the time *On Ballycastle Beach* was published in 1988. Lowry uses poems such as 'Querencia' to describe this third volume as 'dream poetry with a vengeance'. She believes that these later poems are less accessible, thus less desirable, or rather 'disturbing and irritating' because they 'often create a parallel world in which the signifiers have mutated and no longer correspond to their workaday meanings, so that one has to guess what even the most ordinary words are supposed to denote.'

<sup>61</sup> McGuckian cited from <<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth02D9P274512627448>> [accessed 22 July 2006].

speak or remain silent throughout her poetry from *Captain Lavender* (1994) until *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003).<sup>62</sup>

Throughout *Captain Lavender* images of dismembered bodies create a private coded symbolism through which to reflect on Northern Irish political history. *Captain Lavender's* mouths do not work together in unison to sustain or break silence. Hence, one of the difficulties with McGuckian's body language is that the images of dismembered bodies are constantly evolving within poems like 'Ignotas in Artes' in which 'Lips applied to other lips, / fingers thrust into fingers, fingers / pulled apart, legs forming angles' (CL, p.24). The sharp, intense sensual movements of the way the lips and fingers touch, sense and consume each other evokes an erotic image while paradoxically illustrating how bodies are built then demolished like structures. In this 'poetry of collective breathing' (CL, p.45), dismembered body parts became entities in their own right as they split from the body.

While McGuckian sends decomposing bodies on a 'body-breaking journey' (CL, p.24) the dismembered parts, which survive the decomposition process, fuse and subsequently give birth to new ones. During this metamorphosis the new bodies that are rebuilt with discarded body parts fail to recreate a complete anatomical image. Interestingly, such bodily reincarnations are concentrated around mouths, which have been a persistent political silencing force. For example,

His tongue was cramped into a few  
very pale, casual sensations  
though a thousand years of breeding

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<sup>62</sup> For an extensive list of examples see Appendix B.

moved the bright muscle of his mouth  
(‘Et Animum Dimittit’, p.22)

We are things squeezed out, like lips....  
Your mouth works beyond desolation and glass....  
Your tongue, layered with air, presses a triple breath  
(‘The Finder has Become the Seeker’, p.41)

his lips wind-packed with snow  
(‘Apostle of Violence’, p.80 )

Since images of the mouth are used to paint a linguistic picture of ‘that mute province we call home’ (CL, p.22), the body becomes a silencing force within *Captain Lavender*. Whereas the political body may speak volumes, its bodily silence advocates secrecy. Here images of tongues that are paralysed with ‘cramp’ and ‘layered with air’ accompanied by ‘lips wind-packed with snow’, and ‘bright muscle’ mouths waiting to burst with speech conflict with each other, thus illustrating McGuckian’s paradox of speaking while maintaining a strategic silence. So while the mouth is employed to tell a political story, it paradoxically secretes political meanings into the poems, even marking out territorial boundaries between speech and silence in lines like ‘the line engraved / around the mouth’ and the ‘binding lip / around its border’.

Having laid the foundations for her return to Irish history with *Captain Lavender*, and troubled by the breakdown of peace talks, McGuckian revisited the 1798 Rebellion of the United Irishmen in *Shelmalier* (1998). Adopting Heaney’s words, “We are living in a moment when hope and history rhyme”, which were also borrowed by Bill Clinton during his visit to Northern Ireland when taking part in the peace talks of 1995,<sup>63</sup> she states that:

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<sup>63</sup> Article by Stephen Castle and Paul Routledge in *Independent on Sunday*, 3 December 1995, p.17.

I found that what I had written in the form of epitaph and commemoration or address for the present day disturbances of the North fitted like an egg into its shell that previous whirlwind moment when, unbelievably, hope and history did in fact rhyme.<sup>64</sup>

The image of packing away the Troubles into the shell of the egg recalls the earlier image in Chapter I of ‘the corpses being covered like dumplings’, both of which McGuckian created as a way of ‘softening the blows, and covering things to shield’ herself.<sup>65</sup>

*Shelmalier* employs the mouth to obliquely commemorate the bi-centenary of the 1798 Rebellion of the United Irishmen and to dissolve the political intentions of these love poems that ‘masquerade war as love’ (SHEL, p.69). Reflecting on the silence that followed the United Irishmen’s defeat by the English, inverted images of mouths, lips and tongues internalise a negative energy that is created from saying nothing of 1798. Accordingly, silence advocates secrecy when accompanied by these images of deceptive acts of conspiracy: ‘tongues locked in the wrong house’ (SHEL, p.16); ‘lips that had lost their way’ (SHEL, p.24); ‘the child that is always missing / buried his rounded mouth’ (SHEL, p.43) and ‘a false keyhole, / whose key turns fourteen tongues at once’ (SHEL, p.97). These mouths, lips and tongues do not betray their speakers and honour their code of silence: tongues that are wrongfully imprisoned, lips that have lost their direction and the missing child’s mouth that is buried distract the reader from finding their true location, like in the search for the bodies of those abducted and murdered by the IRA.

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<sup>64</sup> McGuckian, *Shelmalier* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1998), p.13.

<sup>65</sup> Kimberley Bohman, ‘Surfacing: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian’, *The Irish Review*, 16 (Autumn / Winter 1994), p.99.

The most controversial example dealing with the common trope of blood debt is Heaney's analogy in *North* (1975) between the sacrificial bodies that were discovered preserved in the bogs along with those sacrificed as part of ritual political killings in Northern Ireland. McGuckian touched upon the common trope of blood debt earlier in *Captain Lavender*. In 'The Albert Chain', the dead father became representative of those who have died violently in Ireland in the lines, 'I am learning my country all over again / how every inch of soil has been paid for by the life of a man, the funerals of the poor (CL, p.68). This theme of blood debt has continued to run through *Shelmalier's* poems that focus on being silenced. Whereas Eavan Boland searched for the words that speak of Ireland's post-colonial scars and wounds, for McGuckian 'The really faithful / memory is the part of the wound that goes quiet' (SHEL, p.40).

'The collaborator's mouth is open only so that the tongue may be cut out', states David Wheatley.<sup>66</sup> In *Shelmalier*, silenced memories of blood-shed that resulted after 1798 are articulated through disturbing violent images of the tongue being silenced. For example, in 'Killing the Muse', the male is silenced when his tongue is sliced in two; 'In your smileless mouth, / a sign of two lips, / a parted male tongue bleeds' (SHEL, p.78). Reminiscent of McGuckian's cutting of the tongue to silence it is Paul Muldoon's silencing of the tongue in his 2006 volume, *Horse Latitudes*. Muldoon's 'Burma' is an oblique political allegory addressing the silencing of dissent after September the 11<sup>th</sup> in the lines, 'Her grandfather's job was to cut out / the vocal chords of each pack-mule / with a single. swift excision'. Carlotta's Grandfather, the political muse in many of these sonnets

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<sup>66</sup> See David Wheatley's discussion of Muldoon's 'Third Epistle to Timothy', from *Hay* (1998) in "That Blank Mouth": Secrecy, Shibboleths, and Silence in Northern Irish Poetry', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 25 (Fall 2001), p.9.

(their titles are all battle sites beginning with 'B'), is thus the silencer as opposed to the silenced. Both Muldoon and McGuckian, therefore, use coding strategies to break political silences, while remaining silent.<sup>67</sup>

Whereas the political history of 1798 provided a 'shell' in which 'hope and history did in fact rhyme', there is no such guided focus in McGuckian's 2001 volume, *Drawing Ballerinas*. Perhaps this is because the speaker of 'The Marital We' states that, 'I can find no simile to fit the shell / of my lover Hope' (DB, p.65). But as in *Shelmalier*, *Drawing Ballerinas* continued to associate silence with violence through images of mouths, like those in 'Condition Three' of 'mouths sewn / in protest' (DB, p.17). Silence staged a further political protest in 'Monody for Aghas' in the lines (DB, p.27)<sup>68</sup>:

your once-red lips before  
and after folded together and left down  
quietly, never to be parted

This elegy is McGuckian's response to the inhumane act of force-feeding the political prisoner, Thomas Ashe.<sup>69</sup> Ashe, who was an Irish Volunteer and school-teacher, went on hunger-strike in Mountjoy during September 1917 protesting

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<sup>67</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p.21. See also how Muldoon mocks how President Bush became a Texan oil millionaire in 'Blackwater Fort', p.9; "“Why”, Carlotta wondered, “the House of Tar? / Might it have to do with the gross / imports of crude oil Bush will come clean on / only when the Tigris comes clean?”” Later in 'Badli-ke-Serai', p.15, the line, 'On which...On which Bush will come clean' is repeated.

<sup>68</sup> 'Monody's' reference to 'the red flag' is the flag of Jim Connell's (1852-1929) song with the same title. Information about Jim Connell, the man who wrote the red flag cited from <<http://www.comms.dcu.ie/sheehan/jc-bio.htm>>[accessed 23 January 2003]. Born in Kilskyre, County Meath, Connell became involved in land agitation and joined the Republican Brotherhood. 'The Red Flag' was written in 1889 on a train from Charing Cross to New Cross after attending a lecture on socialism. Inspired by various international acts of political unrest such as The London dock strike, the Irish Land League, the Paris Commune, the Russian nihilists and Chicago anarchists. In present day Ireland, Irish trade unionists and political activists in Crossakiel, 1998, sang 'The Red Flag'.

<sup>69</sup> See Selina Guinness, 'Mercurial Witness', *Metre*, 11 (Winter 2001-02), pp.107-9. In her review of *Drawing Ballerinas*, she reveals that the history of Thomas Ashe is interwoven in three elegies entitled 'Oration', 'Monody for Aghas' and 'Black Raven on Cream-Coloured Background'.

against the refusal of political status. He died three days after being force-fed by the authorities. McGuckian's ambiguous address of the 'you', and the later reference in the poem to 'ten others', suggests that Ashe's death is representative of other political prisoners who have also died for their political beliefs. Although McGuckian may be criticised for not referring directly to this now forgotten history of Irish patriotism, she too, like Ashe in the poem, makes a political statement with her reticence.<sup>70</sup>

By mixing art with politics, *Drawing Ballerinas* wrote obscurely of the Troubles through images of the body. Since Matisse's art was used as a means of foregrounding coded political statements, the war was painted with and into the body as a way of establishing a personal sense of inner peace when writing in a time of violence.<sup>71</sup> 'I may not be in the trenches, but I am in a front line of my own making', stated Matisse on the 19<sup>th</sup> July 1916.<sup>72</sup> Although Matisse did not physically fight for his country, he fought his own internal war by imagining

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<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, the illustration on the front cover of *Soldiers of the Year II*, published by Wake Forest University Press in 2002, is of Thomas Ashe between guards at Kilmainham, 1916. Although this volume is comprised of a selection of poems from *Drawing Ballerinas* (2001), *The Face of the Earth* (2002) and *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003), there are some new additions as later discussed. In her afterword to *The Soldiers of Year II*, p.128, Guinn Batten states that 'Oration' 'is addressed to the grandson of the actor Gregory Peck, the bodily heir on whose genes are engraved a bodily legacy, who is, like his grandfather, one of Thomas Ashe's descendents. It seems therefore particularly fitting that a child named for the author of a novel (Harper Lee) – a novel that became a film in which the grandfather acted (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) – is the recipient of this poem. 'Oration' alludes to how words become bodily and oral, and therefore, how words, like the future for which his ancestor Ashe gave his life, must have a human habitation to be realized.'

<sup>71</sup> For further examples of how McGuckian interprets the Troubles through art and poetry see her poetic diary, entitled 'Rescuers and White Cloaks: diary, 1968-69', in *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, ed., Patricia Boyle Haberstroh (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), pp.135-154. For example, in August 1969, aged seventeen she writes, p.152, 'A full peach-coloured moon. He is not air to me. There were riots last night–my mind is filled with flowers and stains. A liquid gold dawn kneeling over the city. Trouble with the Apprentice boys in Derry, troops brought in. Five people dead last night. Troops in Belfast, in Ardoyne. We listened to the Athlone news. I sat reading Dante in a sunny interval, with white arrow-lines of cloud.'

<sup>72</sup> Matisse quotation cited from the backcover of *Drawing Ballerinas* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2001).

himself in front of his own firing squad. Like Matisse, who used his art as a psychological escape from the realities of war, McGuckian's various references to artists and paintings take on a significant political role in *Drawing Ballerinas*. Reflecting on the prolonged agony of silence, mouths paint images of deep psychological and physical pain resulting from internalising memories of sectarian violence:

...there is some hurt beginning to happen,  
its slow bleed bringing eyes  
down into pages, mouths down  
to the onion-thin sheets of paper  
butterflied, ebonied by the bombs.

(‘Condition Three’, p.16)

He carried Ireland around with him  
like the cardboard tongue pinned to their backs

(‘Act of Settlement’, p.20)

speech that sounds like speaking,  
from the bone-cup of his tongue's root

(‘Copperheads’, p.51)

an arrow...that hurts more than the deep places  
of lips, the back of the throat

(‘A Waiting Place’, p.60)

In ‘Condition Three’, images of the body shutting down are painted into *Drawing Ballerinas* poem-paintings. The violence that is recorded through the body ‘down into pages’ is then reduced to ‘onion-thin sheets of paper’ and finally destroyed when ‘ebonied by the bombs’. It is like the words explode in front of the reader's eyes. McGuckian's drawings of ballerinas are destroyed by the political violence that they historically attempt to reproduce. In the excerpts above, McGuckian is also searching for the root of silence, moving to its depths through images of the ‘tongue's root’ and ‘the deep places of lips’. The depths of

these images evoke a sense that she is being psychologically weighed down by silence.

The body and its relationship with language continued to be a common theme in *Soldiers of the Year II*. 'It is a common word, / my very body, my very mouth', says the speaker in 'Mourning Engagement Ring' (FOTE, p.14). The experience of being physically entrapped in words is frequently expressed through images of mouths that restrain while they free the speaker to explore the linguistic body. Earlier in 'The Birthday of Monday', the speaker stated that 'His tongue cannot / make the word written / into his body smoother' (SHEL, p.117). This shared experience of being physically imprisoned by silence intensifies McGuckian's paradox of whether to speak or remain silent. When people do speak their voices are silenced and only 'with the greatest difficulty / can we hear the silent voice' (HIATL, p.87). So 'You could scream, there would still be silence' (SOYII, p.72). Thus, as the further examples of mouths illustrate below, it continued to play a pivotal political role in the development of McGuckian's body language:

Your silk-dry  
mate cry  
is a name I would cord  
to my tongue  
(*'Blood-Words'*, p.29)

Hand over hand she loops her hair  
below each ear, searching the desiccated  
womb of the piano for a mouthful of sounds  
(*'Soliloquy to a Cloud'*, p.46)

Skin over the mouth's repeating gold watch:  
lame piano with torn-out strings;  
(*'English as a Foreign Language'*, p.70)

These examples from *Soldiers of the Year II* are a further reinforcement of McGuckian trying to 'express what cannot otherwise be expressed.' Here

McGuckian is searching for harmony, but instead the instruments are dried up and disabled. Once again like *Shelmalier's* deceptive mouths, the cords of the mate cry, the 'desiccated / womb of the piano' accompanied by the 'lame piano with torn out strings' work in unison to create a cacophony of silence.

Since *Captain Lavender*, McGuckian has employed the body to create oblique political narratives. *The Face of the Earth* (2002), however, took an unexpected return to religion, particularly as McGuckian begins with an epigraph from Psalms 104.30, 'Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth.' This volume not only marked a thematic turning point, but also renewed McGuckian's faith in silence. Hence there is a particular connection between religion and mouths suggesting the sanctity of silence:

Our Lady of Salvation, of Safety,  
moulding upon our imperfect lips  
the low words of painted praying  
(*'Studies of Her Right Breast'*, p.36)

The bitter receptors  
of my mapped tongue  
forgot the pagan name  
(*'This Ember Week'*, p.41)

The cup from which  
I drank is unnumbered bits  
of a bigger story, smeared by my lips  
(*'Valentine Not to be Opened'*, p.55)

Mellow, distant, resigned, and mouthishly  
fertile in unmeaning miracles, he uttered  
black swanskin in the thin hours...  
following the softest conceivable  
opening of his mitred mouth  
(*'Novena'*, pp.64-5)

Creating a new religion through a worship of nature in 'Novena', the (male) nightingale's song of spring was used by McGuckian as a political code.

The nightingale, acting like a priest, places all his hopes for a new beginning in spring. As he preaches his 'tepid prayers' he is embraced by the inner strength, a 'bird-happy hope'. Although *The Face of the Earth* began by honouring a code of silence, with the lines 'I am placing a lock / upon my lips, though nine deaths / were in my unhemmed mouth' (FOTE, p.11), liberation from silence is sought through these bird-songs that are 'mouthishly fertile' (FOTE, p.64). As the speaker of 'A Poem for St. Patrick's Day' stated, 'Salvation itself is the sensation of not quiet', suggesting that deliverance is achieved through speaking (SOYII, p.60).

Although in *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003) McGuckian continued to speak while maintaining a certain silence, she developed a mutual relationship with language by using the body as a mediator between the inner and outer worlds, thus protecting herself from the outer world by withdrawing into the body of language. As the bodies close up they seal secret meanings into the flesh. The speaker of 'The Muse-Hater's Small Green Passion' (HIATL, p.69) withdraws into the body of language in search of an emotional safe haven:

so we can travel across ourselves  
in tidy mouths  
mobile as language  
from the well-knownness  
of your lighted parts  
and lightless state of mind

Cutting across the linguistic body, the 'drive' into the centre of 'words' evokes feelings of deception and secrecy in 'Sky in Narrow Streets' in which the speaker states that, 'I drive words abreast / into the interiors of words' (MC,

p.100).<sup>73</sup> The mobility of language suggests that the speaker and her language are in state of transition when traveling across time towards an unfamiliar place. The destination, however, is to an imaginary place, one that leaves death, destruction and tragedy behind.

Since 1994, the body, particularly the mouth, has been a more than reliable cryptic source of communication throughout McGuckian's last six volumes of poetry (1994 –2003). So having stated in 'Aisling Hat', from *Captain Lavender*, that 'to speak / is to be forever on the road, / listening to the foreigner's footstep', McGuckian played with the idea that language was the enemy stating that 'I want words that don't exist' ('Idée Mère'). Since then, as a precautionary measure, bodies were stripped of language leaving only 'bare lips', a 'raw mouth' and 'his tongue [that] felt lame / as if he has stripped off / his body too soon' ('Clara Theme', 2003). The bareness of such images conveyed the fact that McGuckian finds that language fails adequately to represent the harsh realities of Northern Ireland's political history.

Occasionally, speech is treated as a token gesture of complicity in that whatever McGuckian's speakers say they say nothing when using 'speech that sounds like speaking, / from the bone-cup of his tongue's root' ('Copperheads', 2001). The suggestion that McGuckian paid lip service to (the English) language is enforced through images of self-silencing: 'My earth-imbalanced voice / posted a sentry before my lips' ('The Change Worshipper', 2002) and 'Your silk-dry / mate cry / is a name I would / cord to my tongue' ('Blood Words', 2002). Despite

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<sup>73</sup> Calvin Bedient, in 'The Crabbed Genius of Belfast', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 16 (1990), pp.201-202, refers to McGuckian's 'interior of language' in his discussion of 'The Dream-Language of Fergus'.

the body's constant reinventions, the over-powering paradox of speaking but saying nothing is sustained.

Peggy O'Brien writes that, 'The body is the democratic reality that binds all these poets, however refracted corporeality may be by widely ranging relationships to it.'<sup>74</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian have all discovered the power of speaking while seeming to say nothing through their employment of mouths. Yet, each withholds certain information for very different reasons: Ní Dhomhnaill equates silence with not being able to speak of what the Irish Church and State have historically regarded as taboo aspects of Irish women lives, thus offering a psychological explanation of women's quiet. On the other hand. Boland is responsible for hushing and stifling the silenced voices of victims from Ireland's post-colonial past by replacing theirs with her own. McGuckian's silence, however, locates itself around a more private and protective symbolism.

Since Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian have all adopted the ethical position of speaking but maintaining a certain silence, I will further question how and why these Irish women poets use myth and history as forms of representation to simultaneously break, and sustain their silence. This thesis will now move on to discuss how each of these women poets writes from the margins of Irish myth and history to speak of silence beginning in Chapter III with how Ní Dhomhnaill's feminist revival of the Gaeltacht oral tradition of storytelling speaks of women's historical silence. Whereas Ní Dhomhnaill favoured myth over history, Chapter IV will return to question Boland's overall ambition of writing woman out of her silence, thus 'out of myth [and] into history' by using her autobiography. Moving

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<sup>74</sup> O'Brien, *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry*, p.xxix.

out of history and back into myth with McGuckian, Chapter V will explore in more depth how various other body parts are employed as an alternative mode of communication to speak of a silenced Northern Irish political history.

## Chapter Three:

### **Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill ‘Away with the Fairies’: A Feminist Revival of Irish Fairylore.**

#### **i. ‘Bridgie is Burned!’ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Fairies, Silence and the Bridget Cleary Story**

On the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1895, in Ballyvadlea, Co. Tipperary, Michael Cleary, assisted by his relatives and neighbours, burned his wife, Bridget to death. Bridget’s prolonged illness sparked off the story that she had been abducted by the fairies, who in turn left a fairy changeling in her bed. After Dr. Crean from Fethard had diagnosed that she was suffering from bronchial catarrh and nervous excitement, Cleary was dissatisfied and consulted Denis Ganey, a fairy-doctor from Kylethlea, who gave him a cure of milk mixed with herbs to give to his wife. On the evening of Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> March, Bridget was forced to take the concoction after being soaked in urine and burned with a hot poker. The next day there were signs that Bridget was feeling better since she dressed and joined her visitors in the kitchen. There Cleary asked his wife to eat some bread, which she did. But when she refused to eat the last piece he had given her this strengthened his suspicions that his wife was ‘away with the fairies’.

When tensions were becoming fraught between Michael and Bridget, it was Bridget’s suggestion that Michael’s mother “used to go with the fairies” that fuelled her husband’s rage. Angered by this belief, Cleary threw Bridget to the floor in front of the fire. While placing a piece of burning wood in front of her, he ordered her to say her name three times to prove that she was not a changeling. Failing to do this, Bridget was drenched in lamp oil and set alight. Whether Cleary

truly believed that the fairies had taken his wife was never established. But after he had buried the remains of his wife's body he seemed convinced that Bridget would return to him riding on a white horse from inside the fairy fort at Kylenagranagh. Bridget never returned. The presiding jury at Cleary's trial found him guilty of manslaughter. He was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment for burning his wife to death.<sup>1</sup>

Angela Bourke's illuminating interdisciplinary study, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (1999), is a feminist reconstruction of a woman's history, which presents a picture of a post-colonial country that was culturally divided along the lines of a progressively literate and urban nation and a traditional rural one that continued to follow a belief system based on an oral tradition. Bourke's contemporary interpretation of the Bridget Cleary case suggests that Cleary created the fairy abduction story to cover up the fact that his wife was a victim of his domestic abuse. She argues that 'fairies provided a convenient label in vernacular culture for everything that could not be otherwise categorized'.<sup>2</sup> Hence Cleary may have been angered by the association of his wife and mother being 'away with the fairies' because this phrase was used as 'a coded form of speech'. According to Bourke, 'it may have meant that [a woman] suffered periods of depression or mental illness, that she was a liar, that she

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction to this chapter is a summary based on Angela Bourke's, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Pimlico, 1999), and her article, 'Reading a Woman's Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', *Feminist Studies*, 21 (Fall 1995), pp.553-86. See also Richard Jenkins, 'Witches and Fairies: Supernatural Aggression and Deviance Among the Irish Peasantry', in *Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed., Peter Narváez (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1991), pp.302-55, and Thomas McGrath, 'Fairy Faith and Changelings: The Burning of Bridget Cleary in 1895', *Studies*, LXXI (1982), pp.178-84.

Alternatively, Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates', *The Cooper's Wife is Missing: The Trials of Bridget Cleary* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) uses court records and newspapers to reconstruct the case, while like Bourke, placing the case within a wider historical and political context.

<sup>2</sup> Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, p.136.

neglected her children or her household duties, or was unfaithful to her husband.’<sup>3</sup>

Due to society’s inability to deal with powerful women like Bridget, who, aged 26, showed signs of sexual and economic independence, they were sometimes labeled witches or fairies as a means of explaining their deviance.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, nineteenth-century fairy abduction stories, like that of Bridget Cleary’s, obliquely addressed immoral or taboo aspects of women’s lives, while incorporating a patriarchal moral code that was aimed particularly towards women.<sup>5</sup>

According to Bourke, fairy abduction stories ‘by their very obliqueness...offer a possibility of expressing things that are generally unspeakable’.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill explains that her Otherworldly fairy stories express ‘what was repressed – what was left out of the dominant discourse. Of course, the Otherworld is another word for that.’<sup>7</sup> So, whereas Bourke uses the narrative of Bridget Cleary’s fairy abduction to foreground a wider discussion of nineteenth-century issues of Irish colonialism and gender, Ní Dhomhnaill adapts the Gaeltacht oral tradition of storytelling by encoding a feminist response to contemporary Irish women’s lives. Since fairy abduction stories, like that told of Bridget Cleary, formed part of the nation’s popular culture, the parallels that were drawn between the Otherworld and the human one were

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> In Bourke’s reading of the reasoning behind Bridget Cleary’s death in *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, it is the balance of power between genders that is central to her argument. Bourke says that Bridget ‘had accumulated power, both economic and sexual, it seems, far in excess of what was due to a woman of her age and class, and when the balance tipped, all the anger flowed towards her.’, p.136.

<sup>5</sup> See Katie Donovan’s discussion in, ‘Hag Mothers and New Horizons’, *Southern Review*, 31 (July 1995), pp.504–505. She argues that, ‘while Yeats’ early poetry, for example, dwells within an amoral fairy world of enchantment and desire, a poem like [Ethna] Carbery’s ‘The Lovetalker’ – superficially about a fairy lover – has a punitive moral subtext for [nineteenth-century] women who gave their favours too freely.

<sup>6</sup> Bourke, ‘The Virtual Reality of Irish Fairy Legend’, in *Theorizing Ireland*, ed., Claire Connolly (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2003), p.28.

easier to make because they were told within the same parameters of time. The problem with Ní Dhomhnaill's adaptation of fairy legend to discuss gender issues is that her contemporary liberal attitudes are being embraced by old-fashioned values of gender.

Gearóid Denvir argues that the differences between historical dimensions of time are an issue for the modern day storyteller like Ní Dhomhnaill when interpreting real life issues through an imaginary folkloric perspective. Combining contemporary domestic reality with the legendary fairy world, the amorality of the Otherworld, however, conflicts with the morals of the modern world. He states that:

The main problem for a modern writer wishing to draw upon folklore as a source of inspiration for his/her work is the question of modern consciousness intervening in a worldview, which by its very nature was simplistic and extremely basic in its imagery and in its concepts. The protagonists of the folktale, for example, are invariably types, representatives of their own class in society, and not individual conscious of a personal fate or destiny in the same sense as is accepted by 20<sup>th</sup> century man. Adaptations of folk themes, therefore, run the risk of becoming obvious simplistic allegories or of being mere retelling of tales or themes already known and certainly better told and more relevant in the societies and times in which they originated.<sup>8</sup>

Ní Dhomhnaill, however, does not view the use of Irish myth to question women's contemporary lives as an obstacle. She believes that, 'Myth is a basic, fundamental structuring of our reality, a narrative that we place on the chaos of sensation to make sense of our lives.'<sup>9</sup> As for Bourke, fairies are a feminist issue for Ní Dhomhnaill, and she positions herself on the margins of Irish tradition to write poems that carry cautionary messages with a contemporary twist that are

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<sup>7</sup> Deborah McWilliams Consalvo, 'Adaptations and Transformations', *Studies*, 83 (Autumn 1994), p.318.

aimed towards men and women.<sup>10</sup> Concerned more with oral than written legend, many of Ní Dhomhnaill's modern day tales steeped in traditional fairy lore read as dramatic monologues that obscurely address silenced issues of adultery, domestic violence, child abuse and sexual desire. Overall this chapter is structured thematically as opposed to chronologically and will address how Ní Dhomhnaill invokes myth to speak of history. A deliberate obscurity results from this interplay, enabling the ambiguous discussion of contemporary gender politics.

One of the ways in which feminism and the fairy abduction legend work dynamically together in Ní Dhomhnaill's fantastic tales, is through the figure of the 'bean an leasa'. Peter Denman claims that this phrase is one that 'defies easy translation into English. Literally it means "the woman from the fairy ring"; as portrayed in the poems the person emerges as a mixture of witch enchantress, child-taker, weird sister, and doppelganger.'<sup>11</sup> Although fairies are generally thought to be genderless, very often in Irish legend evil fairies seem to be either imagined as women, or some kind of animal; 'I am the púca / who comes in the night', says the fairy woman of 'Amhrán An Fhir Óig' / 'Young Man's Song' (SP, p.81). Since fairies were seen as demonic, associations of evil and fear are

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<sup>8</sup> Gearóid Denvir, 'Continuing the Link: An Aspect of Contemporary Irish Poetry', *The Irish Review*, 3 (1988), p.49.

<sup>9</sup> Laura O'Connor, 'Comhrá', *Southern Review*, 31 (July 1995), p.604.

<sup>10</sup> See Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, 'Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures', in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed., Joan Radner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p.3. They define their use of feminist messages as 'messages critical of some aspects of women's subordination.' See also Joan Radner, "'The Woman who Went to Hell": Coded Values in Irish Folk Narrative', *Midwestern Folklore*, 15 (Fall 1989), p.111. This story is about the daughter of a widow who reluctantly married a farmer, but then left him when he told her mother to leave, and became an unmarried mother. Radner states that tale 'is freighted with information about family and marital relationships essential to traditional Irish culture, and in particular, with information about the roles and obligations of women in different stages of life....It carries messages about women's lives that are important to both sexes, important in the maintenance of traditional Irish society.'

<sup>11</sup> Peter Denman, 'Rude Gestures? Contemporary Women's Poetry in Irish', *Colby Quarterly*, 28 (Dec 1992), p.253.

manifested in this feminine Otherworldly figure. It was believed they were bad angels who were banished from Heaven during a war between God and Lucifer.<sup>12</sup> It is the human fear of the fairy woman's unpredictable immoral behaviour that fuels the disruption of conventional everyday life in Ní Dhomhnaill's fairy abduction poems.

Whether the fairy woman is presented as a seducing 'Queen of the Fairies' (WH, p.11), 'an ancient crone / who wishes you neither life nor health' (SP, p.19), or as an interesting contrast as a slaughtering Thatcherite 'iron lady' (WH, p.103)<sup>13</sup> at her most sadistic, she is at the centre of every man and woman's nightmare. The woman from the fairy ring continually reinvents herself in various different guises within many translations of Ní Dhomhnaill's feminist fairy tales. In Michael Hartnett's version 'An Crann', which he entitles 'The Tree' (SP, pp.92-95), the fairy woman causes both fear and chaos. She wreaks havoc with 'a Black and Decker' when visiting a housewife, who in a shocked silence simply stands by and watches the fairy woman cut down her tree. Alternatively, Paul Muldoon spices up his translation of 'An Crann', 'As for the Quince' (PD, pp.36-39), by presenting the mythical figure of the 'bean an leasa' in a more contemporary light when referring to her as 'this bright young thing'.

When he returned home, on finding that the fairy had cut down his tree the woman's husband defensively and suspiciously asked his wife, "“Why didn't you stop her / What's she up to?”" (SP, p.93) The wife is left stuck in the middle of the

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<sup>12</sup> Patricia Lysaght, 'Fairylore from the Midlands of Ireland', in *Good People*, p.31.

<sup>13</sup> See David Wheatley's review of *The Water Horse*, 'Soaked in the History Rain', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 June 2000, p.7, in which he states that, 'There is a tremendous violence in many of these poems, as when the *Bean an Leasa* or fairy-fort woman goes on the rampage in "Slaughter". McGuckian gives the poem an unexpected political turn when the fairy woman becomes a Thatcherite "iron lady"'.

Other woman and her husband, playing more a role of mediator. The following morning the fairy revisited the woman during her breakfast to find out what the husband had said about his tree, or in other words, had he confessed to his affair. After the wife tells the fairy woman that her husband threatened to retaliate by going round to her house and cutting her tree down, both versions of 'An Crann' conclude with the Other woman having the upper hand over her human counterpart. Hartnett says that:

The bottom fell out of my stomach  
and as if I got a good kick  
or punch in the guts  
a weakness came over me  
that made me so feeble  
I couldn't lift a finger  
for a whole three days  
Unlike the tree  
Which happily, healthily grew away.

Whereas Muldoon writes:

The bottom falling out of my belly  
As if I got a kick up the arse  
Or a punch in the kidneys.  
A fainting-fit coming over me  
That took the legs from under me  
And left me so zonked  
I could barely lift a finger  
Till Wednesday.

As for the quince, it was safe and sound  
And still somehow holding its ground.

The physical impact of the husband and fairy woman's overwhelming verbal attack of the housewife is communicated through her disabling depressive illness, leaving her as the vulnerable injured party of this affair. The contrasting images of the women in 'The Tree' / 'As for the Quince' could in fact be two

sides of the same woman, one who is prepared to challenge the marital status quo, while the other is mentally fatigued by her conformity. There could even be the suggestion here that the tree's re-growth means that the wife has found out that she is pregnant and despite this act of violence the baby that 'happily, grew away' is 'safe and sound'. On the other hand, Hartnett and Muldoon's lines, 'The bottom fell out of my stomach' and 'The bottom falling out of my belly', may not just describe how the woman was left devastated over the affair, but perhaps that she has given birth prematurely. The patriarchal social order, as represented by the tree, has survived its challenge at the expense of the woman's mental health. This control over the woman's psyche does not mean that future changes may not be contemplated later.

According to Frank Sewell, in 'Epithalamium' Ní Dhomhnaill 'remember[s] that marriage isn't a chain but a vessel / in which feelings are put under strain and pressure'.<sup>14</sup> Marriage is not physically restricting, but psychologically numbing, hence the manifestation of the various psychotic illnesses that women have experienced in Hartnett and Heaney's 'Miraculous Grass', and 'Marvellous Grass' and in Hartnett and Muldoon's 'The Tree' and 'As for the Quince'. Later, in McGuckian's version of 'An Prionsa Dubh', which she entitles 'The Ebony Adonis' (WH, pp.22-25), the mother warns her pubescent daughter to be careful when being coaxed into a 'spellbound inn'. Speaking from experience, the woman cautions her daughter against giving 'an inch to the ebony Adonis'. She says, 'You'll be laid low as I was in a type of ME / at the dregs of a well like a sort of Ophelia'. So for dancing with the Devil she was 'tortured with

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<sup>14</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Epithalamium' is cited from Frank Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.192.

[these] symptoms for fourteen years'. However, the more than sexually experienced mother, who boasts that she had 'been there and done it', throws caution to the wind and advises her 'honeychild' to do her 'own thing' and not to 'give a shit,

for Old Death will not get us, though he'll not let us go,  
any more than this life will condone us  
one kiss from our ebony Adonis

Rather than the girl's mother advising her daughter to steer clear of archetypal dream men like the 'Ebony Adonis', she encourages her to live for the moment. The moral of the tale, therefore, is that a woman's morality does not guarantee her immortality.

In an earlier poem of Ní Dhomhnaill's, 'An Bhean Mhídhílis', (translated by Paul Muldoon as 'The Unfaithful Wife', PD, pp.104-109), morals are loosely pushed to one side when the married woman confesses, 'However much the drink had loosened my tongue / I never let on I was married'. Muldoon's version continues to detail the improprieties of what happened after the man, drink and the language had seduced the unfaithful wife. After debating whether to kiss and tell, the woman makes a decision and 'vowed not to breathe a word / to a soul about what I'd done.' The resulting silence creates the poem's erotic energy and a thirst to discover the exclusiveness of the lover's secret. Denman says that, 'the unfaithfulness of the wife is as much a setting aside of a faith as it is of a husband.'<sup>15</sup>

Discussing 'The Unfaithful Wife' with Ní Dhomhnaill in an interview, I asked her if the lack of faith that this poem demonstrated was a lack of faith in

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<sup>15</sup> Denman, 'Rude Gestures?', p.255.

love, by the way that the woman's infidelity questions the institution of marriage. Ní Dhomhnaill referred to her poem as being 'deliberately anti-romantic'<sup>16</sup>, the antithesis of the poem's indirect origin, 'Lorca's 'La Casada Infiel', which tells of a similar encounter, but in lyrical celebratory language and from the man's point of view.'<sup>17</sup> In his discussion of 'The Unfaithful Wife', Denman says that, 'the poem does not simply exist as womanly assertion; it has a specifically literary history, against which it reacts and throws into relief Ní Dhomhnaill's reactive assertion.'<sup>18</sup> According to Denman, the Irish language poet Máire Mhac an tSaoi (who Ní Dhomhnaill greatly admires), translated Lorca into Irish. Although Mhac an tSaoi gave her translation the same title as Ní Dhomhnaill, the male takes the traditional dominant role as in Lorca's poem.<sup>19</sup>

However, in Muldoon's contemporary re-interpretation, the woman is equally the seducer as well as the seduced, if not the dominant one when mocking her lover after 'he had dropped his trousers' to reveal his 'proper little charlie' and particularly in the climactic scene when she 'rode him past the winning post' claiming the un-named male as her trophy. Denman comments that as the poem, in all its 'promiscuity', passes from Lorca to Máire Mhac an tSaoi to Ní Dhomhnaill to Muldoon, it challenges social and literary history as it moves towards the end of the twentieth-century. Thus Denman states, 'As the well-worn and no doubt sexist quip has it, translations are like wives – the most attractive ones are rarely faithful.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Unpublished Personal Interview with the author in May 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Denman, 'Rude Gestures?', p.255.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.257.

Bourke remarks that, to her knowledge, ‘No psychologist has built a theory of therapy from them [fairy-legends]...yet they are resonant with awareness of mental and emotional turmoil.’<sup>21</sup> In the light of facing such emancipating acts of infidelity, fairy legend provides Ní Dhomhnaill’s *femme fatales* with an opportunity to detach their selves psychologically from reality and re-evaluate their lives. Through the fairy woman, Ní Dhomhnaill experiments with a new psychological mask, one that distances the reality of woman’s domestic routine by fantasizing about being the Other woman. As soon as the fairy woman walks into Michael Hartnett’s translation of Ní Dhomhnaill’s ‘Fuadach’ as ‘Abduction’ (SP, pp.60-63), she fills the poem with a demonic dynamism. She has the power to energise and stimulate the woman poet’s imagination, while providing her with an alter ego. The discourse that takes places between the poet and the fairy woman in this ‘psychodrama’<sup>22</sup> is representative of a negotiation between a woman and poet’s conscious and unconscious selves. In this instance, the contemporary housewife’s psyche is projected onto the fairy woman to re-evaluate her marriage:

The fairy woman walked  
 into my poem.  
 She closed no door  
 She asked no by-your-leave.  
 Knowing my place  
 I did not tell her to go.  
 I played the woman-of-no-welcomes trick  
 and said:

“What’s your hurry, here’s your hat.

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<sup>21</sup> Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, p.206.

<sup>22</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays*, ed., Oona Frawley (Dublin: New Island Books, 2005), p.163. When writing the poem ‘Fuadach’, Ní Dhomhnaill remembers, ‘One does not have to believe at all in the supernatural to see a wonderful and multi-layered collective psychodrama continuously being remade and renewed. It is a rich linguistic vein for any writer to mine, and as the most extensive and varied fairy accounts are in the Irish language, a veritable goldmine for the writer in Irish.’

Pull up to the fire,  
eat and drink what you get –  
but if I were in your house  
as you are in my house  
I'd go home straight away  
but anyway, stay.”

She stayed. Got up and pottered  
round the house. Dressed the beds  
washed the ware. Put the dirty clothes  
in the washing-machine.  
When my husband came home for his tea  
he didn't know what he had wasn't me.

According to Julia Casterton, Ní Dhomhnaill ‘writes from within a life that she construes as heroic and ordinary at the same time by using myth instrumentally, as a metaphor for what is ‘real’...speaking from inside a mythic time.’<sup>23</sup> The fairy woman is a fantasy figure that becomes real when she makes a cunningly convincing attempt to deviate from her non-conventional behaviour by imitating the human woman's wifely duties, those that the husband generically expected of her on his return home. Since the fairy will go to any lengths to seduce the man to satisfy her amoral desires, she relishes in imitating the human woman's domestic routine so that the husband will not be suspicious, and not even notice that his wife, in the guise of the fairy woman, is behaving any differently:

For I am in the fairy field  
in lasting darkness  
and frozen with the cold there  
dressed only in white mist.  
And if he wants me back  
there is a solution –  
get the sock of a plough  
smear it with butter  
and redden it with fire.

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<sup>23</sup> Julia Casterton, ‘Review of Ní Dhomhnaill's *Selected Poems / Rogha Dánta*’, *Ambit*, 115 (1989), p.84.

And then let him go to bed  
where lies the succubus  
and press her with the red iron.  
“Push it to her face,  
burn and brand her,  
and as she fades before your eyes  
I’ll materialise  
and as she fades before your eyes  
I’ll materialise.”

While the housewife is ‘away with the fairies’ within the depths of the fantastic Otherworld, she subserviently waits alone in the margins of the dark cold field. Replaced by the ‘succubus’, (a devil supposed to assume a female body and have sex with men in their sleep), the fairy woman takes centre stage as the main protagonist in this act of infidelity. The human woman is uncertain as to whether her husband wants her back. So, she puts his fidelity to an Otherworldly test by using the fairy woman to play a psychological waiting game with her husband. First, he must realise that his wife is not herself, but a fairy changeling. The woman’s rescue from the Otherworldly margins depends on her husband’s success at completing a series of tasks, meaning that he, and not his wife, has the power of choice of whether to resolve their marital difficulties.

Although Ní Dhomhnaill and Bourke use Irish legend to rewrite Irish women’s history, as opposed to autobiography, say as Eavan Boland does in Chapter IV, these writers are in danger of fictionalizing, even sensationalizing women’s lives for the purpose of their own feminist argument. With ‘Abduction’, Ní Dhomhnaill attempted to lay down the gauntlet by using mythology to challenge patriarchal ideals of Irish history. Hence her critique of women’s homogeneous compliance in lines like, ‘when my husband came home for his tea / he didn’t know that what he had wasn’t me.’ Whether the human woman escaped

to the fairy world to redress her oppressive marriage, she fails to 'materialize' and remains alone, alienated, and most of all marginalized in the Otherworld.

The lines, ““Push it to her face, / burn and brand her”” work closely with the lore that employs iron and fire as both well-known weapons against fairies. This image of the changeling being burned is reminiscent of Bridget Cleary being burned. Bourke informs us that on visiting Bridget, ‘William Simpson and his wife both noticed a slight burn mark on her forehead. They were told that a hot poker had been brandished in her face to make her take the concoction that the fairy-doctor had prescribed.’<sup>24</sup> So, as in the way Bourke claimed that Michael Cleary created the fairy abduction story to cover up the fact that his wife was a victim of his domestic abuse, although unsuccessfully, this is also being hinted at here in coded form. If the Bridget Cleary fairy abduction story is to be read as a codified tale of marital conflict, then, according to Bourke, ‘Hubert Butler has suggested that jealousy about a possible affair between Bridget and an egg merchant...may have been what drove Michael to such a pitch that he convinced himself of her fairy possession and killed her.’<sup>25</sup>

Reading stories of being ‘away with the fairies’ as cautionary tales warning women against deviating from the traditional value systems of the communities in which they were originally told send out conflicting political messages when retold outside late nineteenth-century Ireland. According to Bourke, ‘Outside the pages of literary folklore, the storyteller’s art became invisible or even to be regarded as a disease: a symptom of lamentable

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<sup>24</sup> Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, p.80.

<sup>25</sup> Bourke, ‘Reading a Woman’s Death’, p.578.

backwardness'.<sup>26</sup> At the time of Bridget Cleary's death it was fashionable to hear fairy abduction stories being told. Once the story of Bridget's disappearance had been written down and printed outside Ballyvadlea, it became vulnerable to misinterpretation and misrepresentation. Hence, during the weeks following Bridget Cleary's death, the facts of her private story began to pale into insignificance when the narrative of her death was publicly spoken of and written down outside its original cultural context. Bourke describes how the Unionist paper, the *Clonmel Chronicle's* account of Bridget's disappearance 'was short on detail and inaccurate.' The *Nationalist*, however, that was printed on the same day, provided a 'notably more accurate account in its description of people and places', but employed a language of romantic nationalism that targeted a reading public. As the modern print culture gradually replaced the traditional oral one, along with its traditional value systems, Bourke states that, 'Newspapers, not storytellers, became the tellers of "what happened."' <sup>27</sup>

Despite the historical demise of the traditional storytelling art, both Bourke and Ní Dhomhnaill employ fairylore as a valuable vehicle to speak of unspeakable nonconforming aspects of women's lives. The allegorical use of fairy abduction legend to address women's silence works on two opposing levels in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry. On one level silence is sustained, while on the other silence is partially broken. Ní Dhomhnaill continues to employ this paradox of whether to speak or remain silent when using the fairy abduction story to address issues of self-censorship and silence in her feminist address of the tragic story of Ann

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<sup>26</sup> Bourke, 'The Baby and the Bathwater: Cultural Icons in Nineteenth Century Ireland', in *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, ed's., Tadhag Foley and Sean Ryder (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), p.83.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.89.

Lovett. Fears of intrusion, seemingly pertinent to Irish rural communities, into the private lives of others resulted in the development of psychological boundaries, particularly when individuals and their communities begin to censor information about their lives in terms of what personal information they choose to publicly disclose or sustain as private knowledge in order to sustain an element of dignity within the public eye.<sup>28</sup> Since silence is pivotal to Lovett's story, the chapter will continue to discuss how Ní Dhomhnaill employs the fairy abduction story to address the unspeakable and redress the psychological boundaries between the public and private, oral and printed discourses of Irish women's lives.

## ii. "Granard Numbed by Happening": Ann Lovett: A Cautionary Tale

After keeping her pregnancy secret from her family, school friends and teachers, Ann Lovett died aged 15 after giving birth in an open-air grotto, in Granard, on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1984.<sup>29</sup> According to Moira Maguire, 'The national press pointed the finger of blame at the people of Granard who, by their silence allowed Ann Lovett to give birth outdoors, on a cold damp January day, frightened and alone.'<sup>30</sup> Emily

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<sup>28</sup> This became evident from the critical reception of Nancy Scheper-Hughes' ethnographic study of mental illness in rural Ireland, *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. viii-ix. After Scheper-Hughes completed her research in 1976, she returned in 1981 to Ballybran to discover that her book had caused much outrage amongst the inhabitants of the village. Although Scheper-Hughes felt that she had exercised discretion over the sensitive details disclosed to her, she was told that, 'There is quite a difference between whispering something beside a fire or across a counter and seeing it printed for the world to see. It becomes public shame.' This importance of keeping up public appearances was further illustrated by the fact that Scheper-Hughes also discovered that no one would openly admit to buying or reading her book, apart from those who had emigrated from Ballybran to America or to study at University in Cork or Dublin. As a student writing to his mother remarked, "...and you can tell Da that 'that book' is the first to speak the truth about this secret Ireland of ours." Ballybran's community unofficially banned the book since its contents disclosed individual secrets of a personal nature to the whole community.

<sup>29</sup> Nell McCafferty, *The Best of Nell: A Selection of Writings Over Fourteen Years* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1984), p.47.

<sup>30</sup> Moira Maguire, 'The Changing Face of Catholic Ireland: Conservatism and Liberalism in the Ann Lovett and Kerry Babies Scandals', *Feminist Studies*, 27 (Summer 2001), p.341, states that, 'This view was expressed by people interviewed by reporters in Granard days after Lovett's death:

O'Reilly reported in her newspaper article, 'A Teenage Pregnancy Could Not Have Gone Unnoticed', that 'rumours and common gossip were rife' in the town that Ann was pregnant.<sup>31</sup> In fact, O'Reilly disclosed that on one evening while driving to Dublin Pat Scanlon and Pat Maguire discussed their suspicions of the pregnancy. Maguire then told Scanlon that he and his wife had 'quizzed' Ann about her pregnancy but that she repeatedly insisted that she was not although she was five months pregnant.<sup>32</sup>

The feminist journalist, Nell McCafferty recollects that the silence surrounding the Lovett scandal spoke of a communal refusal to accept the blame for what happened. She records the fact that no one in Granard, including the Family, would publicly discuss the pregnancy, and later, the deaths of Lovett and her sister, Patricia, who died of a drug overdose, aged 14 on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1984. McCafferty explains that this enforced code of silence was based on the community's mutual respect of not *interfering* [my emphasis] in the Family's affairs:

People could hardly just come out and offer help that might be misinterpreted as interference. It was assumed that the Family knew and had made arrangements. Did the Family know? 'Ask the Family', says the community, leaving the Lovetts to cope full-frontally with the disaster. The twenty-two year old sister of Ann Lovett, with whom Ann spent some time in Dublin before Christmas, says 'no comment'. The uncle of Ann Lovett says, 'Ask the Family', adding that it is the business of no one but the parents.

The Family sit behind the closed doors of the pub. Diarmuid and Patricia Lovett refuse to speak to reporters. The community will not, cannot, speak on their behalf. Canon Gilfillen says, 'I'd like to be able to help the family

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"The media in Dublin are trying to exact revenge for the defeat of the anti-amendment lobby. They are saying, 'Look you've won the amendment but this is the way your priest leaders are treating unmarried mothers.'"

<sup>31</sup> Emily O'Reilly, 'Ann Lovett: A Teenage Pregnancy Could Not Have Gone Unnoticed', *The Sunday Tribune*, 12 February 1984, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

now but they've shut themselves away and seem to want to be alone. One's instinct is not to intrude'.<sup>33</sup>

McCafferty described the death of Lovett and her baby 'as a private family tragedy' regardless of the fact that this silenced scandal inadvertently created a public controversy.<sup>34</sup> In the ensuing weeks, the national press pressurized the local media in Granard to break their communal silence. During this media war, however, the locals chose to play the innocent victim of national slander running with headlines like, Ann Lovett's Decision and National Media Wallow in Granard Disaster.<sup>35</sup> The Longford Leader featured a front page article entitled 'Granard People Reject Slur' which aired Granard's anger at Nuala Fennell's, Minister for Women's Affairs, earlier comments that reported her stating that, "she had thought that the era of squinting windows was past."<sup>36</sup> In Granard's defense, a spokesperson remarked that, 'Had they been *asked* [my emphasis] to help in the Ann Lovett situation there is no doubt they would have obliged. They were not *asked* [my emphasis] to help and that's something that seems to have been forgotten.'<sup>37</sup>

Following the furore surrounding Lovett's story, referred to by Fennell as a 'national tragedy'<sup>38</sup>, a group from Kilbarrack in north Dublin wrote, 'We demand that Ann Lovett's death not be in vain. That her death and that of her baby will raise the consciousness of society which supposedly venerates motherhood within marriage, yet denigrates it outside of marriage.'<sup>39</sup> The

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<sup>33</sup> McCafferty, *The Best of Nell*, pp.48-9.

<sup>34</sup> McCafferty, *A Woman to Blame: The Kerry Babies Case*, (Dublin: Attic Press, 1985) p.10.

<sup>35</sup> Maguire, 'The Changing Face of Catholic Ireland', p.341.

<sup>36</sup> Nuala Fennell is cited from P. Murphy & P. Cunningham's article, 'Ann's Tragedy: Inquiry Sought into Lonely Deaths', *Irish Independent*, 6 February 1984, p.1.

<sup>37</sup> 'Ann's Decision', *The Longford Leader*, 10 February 1984, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> Fennell is cited from 'Ann's Tragedy', p.2.

<sup>39</sup> 'In the Valleys of Squinting Windows', *The Sunday Tribune*, 12 February 1984, p.4.

psychological impact of Lovett's death that weighed heavy on the nation's consciousness meant that public attitudes towards abortion progressively changed. During the controversial 1992 'X' case an anonymous source produced and sold T-shirts with the slogan, 'Remember Ann Lovett'.<sup>40</sup> Whereas Granard's community refused to 'interfere' in private family matters, in the 'X' case the public intervened through street protests that helped to influence the officials decision over whether 'X' would be allowed to travel to Britain for an abortion. Reading the tragic story of Ann Lovett as a cautionary tale outside its original locality, it is filled with wider political, historical and psychological messages. According to Maguire, therefore, Lovett's story is 'noteworthy because...[she] created a space, for the first time in Irish history, for a wide-scale discussion of the issues that increasingly divided Irish society into 'conservative' and 'liberal' camps'.<sup>41</sup>

Accompanying reporters, Irish writers, poets, song and film writers and performers have redressed the silencing of women by using Ann Lovett's death as their metaphor. For example, Leland Bardwell's short story, 'Dove of Peace'. Sinéad O'Connor and Christy Moore's ballad, 'Middle of the Island', captures the essence of the chilling silence that laid heavily on a nation's consciousness while appealing to its conscience:

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<sup>40</sup> Maguire, 'The Changing Face of Catholic Ireland', p. 338. See also Ailbhe Smyth's discussion relating to the 'X' case in 'States of Change: Reflections on Ireland in Several Uncertain Parts', *Feminist Review*, 50 (Summer 1995), pp.26-27. Smyth says the appointment of the Attorney-General to the presidency of the High Court caused a 'show-down between the leaders of the Coalition Government, Taoiseach Albert Reynolds (Fianna Fail) and Tanaiste Dick Spring (Labour). 'This was the same infamous Attorney-General who had initiated proceedings to prevent the fourteen year-old girl, 'X', from going to Britain to have an abortion in January 1992, culminating in the abortion referendum at the end of that year.' The Tanaiste's opposition originated from his involvement in the 'X' case. Opposition grew through the dissatisfaction 'with the reasons he gave for the seven-month delay in processing extradition warrants for a paedophile priest, Brendan Smyth, in connexion with child sexual abuse charges in Northern Ireland.'

everybody knew, nobody said  
 a week ago last Tuesday  
 she was just fifteen years  
 when she reached her full term  
 she went to a grotto  
 in just a field  
 in the middle of the island  
 to deliver herself  
 her baby died  
 she died  
 a week ago last Tuesday  
 it was a sad slow stupid death for both of them  
 everybody knew, nobody said<sup>42</sup>

Moore and O'Connor's lyrics simply suggest that if someone would have spoken openly about the schoolgirl pregnancy, then the 'sad slow stupid death' may not have happened. It seems, then, that Lovett had no other 'choice' but to seek deliverance by delivering her child in the grotto. O'Connor, who has spoken 'disparagingly of organized' religion in various interviews, made her acting debut in Margo Harkin's 1989 film, *Hush-a-Bye Baby*, in which she played the friend of a fifteen-year-old girl who became pregnant. The film was factually based on Ann Lovett. O'Connor stated that the film "shows some of the bad effects an Irish Catholic upbringing can have on young girls."<sup>43</sup> According to Kathryn Conrad, Harkin compels the viewer to accept that every "choice" Goretti, the protagonist acting as Ann Lovett, 'might make is shaped by political and religious discourse.'<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Middle of the Island Lyrics <<http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Middle-of-the-island-lyrics-Sinead-O'Connor/0>> [accessed 26 September 2006].

<sup>43</sup> *Treading Upon The Lion and the Cobra: The Biography of Sinéad O'Connor* <<http://www.angelfire.com/music4/sineadoconnor/biography2.html>> [accessed 26 September 2006].

<sup>44</sup> Kathryn Conrad, 'Fetal Ireland: National Bodies and Political Agency', *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies*, (Fall / Winter 2001) <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FKX/is\\_2001\\_FallWinter/ai\\_83447253](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FKX/is_2001_FallWinter/ai_83447253)> [accessed 26 September 2006].

The contemporary Irish poet, Paula Meehan sought to challenge the socio-religious discourses of women and their sexual bodies by giving a voice to those silenced. Her feminist interpretation of Lovett's death entitled, 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks', challenges iconic images of women by giving the Virgin Mother an opportunity to break the silence and speak of what she had witnessed:

On a night like this I remember the child  
who came fifteen summers to her name  
and lay down alone at my feet  
without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand  
and she pushed her secret out into the night,  
far from the town tucked up in little scandals,  
bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises  
and though she cried out to me in extremis  
I did not move  
I didn't lift a finger to help her,  
I didn't intercede with heaven,  
nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear.<sup>45</sup>

One of the poem's more poignant features is that Lovett and her baby died at the feet of a shrine to the Virgin Mary. The iconic use of the Virgin Mary works on two different levels of representation. She represents Granard's communal decision of not 'interfering in family matters', while upholding her image of perfection. 'The shrines', says Lia Mills, 'serve as reminders, impossible images, models of inhuman perfection. Although these figures have particular relevance to women who are Catholic, their presence is obvious to all of us, while the ideology that sustains them also sustains our Constitution.'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Meehan's poem, 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks', from *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1991), is quoted from Lia Mills, "I Won't Go Back To It", *Feminist Review*, 50 (Summer 1995), p.72.

<sup>46</sup> Mills, "I Won't Go Back To It". p.70.

After reading Lovett's case in the papers, Ní Dhomhnaill immediately wrote 'Thar Mo Chionn', an emotionally charged response to this tragedy.<sup>47</sup> Unlike Meehan, Ní Dhomhnaill does not call on the Virgin Mother. Instead, she chooses the fairy woman to aid her feminist re-writing of the Irish fairy abduction legend and locates her poem in a fairy grotto, rather than the religious one. Yet Meehan and Ní Dhomhnaill's poems present contrasting images of women and a hierarchical model of femininity ranging from one that is almost unattainable as manifested in the figure of the Virgin Mother, to an alternative figure of inhumanity in 'the woman-of-the-lios'. At the centre of this feminine hierarchy is the human woman that provides equilibrium between the ideologies of goodness and evil that these two icons respectively represent. The fairy woman is, thus, the antithesis of the Virgin Mary. This Otherworldly figure is symbolic of traditions old and new in that she is a paradigm of what may be phrased as an 'anti-woman'.

Laura O'Connor's 'Mea Culpa', an interpretation of Ní Dhomhnaill's feminist fairy poem, 'Thar Mo Chionn', tells of a young woman who was abducted by the fairies to wet-nurse abducted human children, because, according to legend, it was believed that fairy women were infertile.<sup>48</sup> As in the natural world, the family is fundamental to the survival of the Otherworld. Richard Jenkins argues that the familial concerns of the fairy kingdom paralleled those of a peasant family. He states that the fairies 'were conceived of as a society outside society, with its own leaders, the King and Queen, and its own particular

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<sup>47</sup> Personal correspondence with Ní Dhomhnaill, 13 September 2003. 'Thar Mo Chionn' was originally published in Irish in *Fear Suaithinseach* (1984). Laura O'Connor's translation of 'Thar Mo Chionn' as 'Mea Culpa' is cited from "'War of the Womb': Folklore and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", in *That Other World: The Supernatural and the Fantastic in Irish Literature and its Contexts*, vol. 1 ed., Bruce Stewart, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), pp.186-204.

problems.’<sup>49</sup> The poem draws on the similarities between the lack of choice Irish women had over issues of motherhood in the years proceeding the 1980s in the natural world and their lack of control during their imagined abduction by the fairies:

I set no store  
on the woman-of the-lios's talk  
She'd already said so much  
to hoodwink the likes of me  
I was overjoyed  
To take to my heels  
and make it safe home.

If the fairy woman had a particular maternal role in mind when trying to ‘hoodwink’ the woman, she casually dismisses the woman-of-the-lios’s talk without even considering the consequences of her actions. The speaker’s strength of will shows signs of independence, distancing herself from a culture which wrote in its 1937 Constitution that the ‘Family is...the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society’.<sup>50</sup> Deviance, therefore, from societal expectations is one of the ways that women can regain a choice over motherhood in both the Otherworld and the human one. Although the woman was quite proud of herself for outwitting the fairy woman, she fails to realize or believe that another will suffer for her deviance. All was calm,

Until the morning I opened the newspaper  
Only to find there, in black and white,  
My story.  
I broke into a cold sweat  
And wept.  
The poor creature, God love her

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<sup>48</sup> See Jenkins, ‘Witches and Fairies’, p.315. He states that there is ‘the believed inability of fairy women either to bear healthy children or to feed them – hence the need to abduct human babies and wet nurses for them.’

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.314.

<sup>50</sup> O’Connor, ‘War of the Womb’, pp.187-188.

A young fifteen-year-old girl  
Who struggled to the woods in the throes of labour  
to give birth beside the grotto. And now I know  
that it was she who had gone on my behalf  
For they have her in the lios without a doubt.

Reading of the girl's (Lovett's) death in 'black and white' makes the woman realise that this could have been her story too had she not been so eager to dismiss the fairy woman's words of warning. The transition of the spoken words into print refers to the vast national media coverage that Lovett's story received and reflects the paradox of a belief versus a non-belief in the Otherworld. The woman's disbelief in this superstition is challenged when she reads her story in the newspaper. The reference to Lovett's story as the speaker's own story, differentiates between the storyteller's that is imaginary and Lovett's that is real. Lovett was, and remains the storyteller's subject, rather than the storyteller herself. In the beginning, the woman 'set no store' by what the fairy woman had told her. Now there is no 'doubt' that mother and child are 'away with the fairies.' The guilt-ridden speaker blames herself for Lovett's abduction because she did not believe in the fairy woman's prophecy that another would be taken to mother the child.

Reflecting on this, after the storyteller realises that, 'I know / that it was she who had gone on my behalf', she decides to speak on Lovett's behalf. So, despite the poem's intentions of giving the unnamed girl an opportunity to tell her story, her silence is sustained through the use of a third person narrator. The ambiguous reference to Lovett, may, however, be a sign that her privacy is respected. Silence is thus, an oblique commemoration of Lovett's memory. According to Maguire, before the media explosion of the story, the *Sunday*

*Tribune* of February 5<sup>th</sup> 1984, was the first newspaper publicly to mention the story in a page one article following an anonymous tip. Reporters heatedly debated the ethics behind revealing Lovett's identity: some felt that her age and the circumstances of her death warranted confidentiality; others argued that if she was publicly named, then people would be able to identify with her suffering.<sup>51</sup> The question here of whether to speak or remain silent reflects once again on the media attention that the case received. The moral of this cautionary tale, which warns women who do not conform to the Irish Constitution's prescribed models of motherhood, is that silence is a virtue.

O'Connor explains that she literally translated 'Thar Mo Chionn' as "on my behalf", 'because of the poem's tone of guilt-ridden self-abasement.'<sup>52</sup> She argues that, 'The rhetoric of blame surrounding the Lovett affair reflected the confusion of a community whose sense of sin was confounded by the manifest blamelessness of the Virgin's devotee.'<sup>53</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill attempts to achieve a sense of closure by apportioning the blame for this tragic death. Although the remorseful speaker at the beginning feels completely responsible for Lovett's death she quickly exonerates herself by transferring the blame onto the legendary figure of 'the woman-of-the-lios'. The Virgin Mother is relieved of her blame by her notable absence from the tale told in 'Mea Culpa'. Thus, both the cause and blame of Lovett's death are transferred from one ideological figure to another, from the Virgin Mother onto 'the woman-of-the-lios':

And O, woman-of-the-lios,  
This is the worst deed  
You've done for a long while.

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<sup>51</sup> Maguire, 'The Changing Face of Catholic Ireland', p.339.

<sup>52</sup> O'Connor, 'War of the Womb', pp.192-193.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p.194.

You've gone too far.  
If I can't put a stop  
To your stalking right away  
Let my name be dust in the wind.

Referred to as a modern day stalker, women and children become the victims of the woman-of-the-woods by the way she will not settle until her obsessions are satisfied. Although the fairy woman's desire is not sexual, her unhealthy compulsion to stalk humans may be seen as a form of erotomania. The use of the erotic here is not sexual; her stalking is a public display of her desire. The psychology of this obsession is about controlling the objects of desire through intimidation. The woman's final words challenge the fairy woman's integrity. Determined to avenge the fairy woman for what she has done, the speaker says that if she fails to apprehend the fairy woman's stalking, then her vengeance would have been in vain and her name no more than 'dust in the wind'.

'Mea Culpa' is not an overtly confessional or commemorative poem, but a further example of how a woman looked to the margins of the Otherworld for liberation, but remained exiled in silence. Rather than liberate, the cautionary use of the fairy abduction story exposes the patriarchal attitudes towards Irish women back in the 1980s. During this time, Ní Dhomhnaill returned from Turkey to Ireland to note 'the difficulties women were facing and the many notorious incidents that rocked and polarized the country.'<sup>54</sup> In the midst of a feminist furore over abortion and divorce, she remarked that,

The traumas of the cases of the Kerry Babies, Ann Lovett, Eileen Flynn and other social scandals highlighted the utter contempt in which the lives

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<sup>54</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays*, p.151.

of ordinary women were held by an unholy alliance of clerics and lay bigots who still ran the show in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>55</sup>

Many feminist interpretations of Ní Dhomhnaill's Otherworldly poetry, like O'Connor's 'Mea Culpa', have focused on a historical religious prerequisite of not being able to speak of what have been historically regarded as taboo aspects of Irish women's lives. Such poems that respond to the way women were being treated by the Irish Catholic Church and State, question the functionality of marriage and the concept of the family based around issues of infidelity and motherhood outside of marriage.

Following the controversy over Lovett's death that illuminated the 'utter contempt' the Irish Church and State had of women, politicians considered introducing limited abortion services in Ireland. In November 1997, these liberal attitudes towards abortion were reflected in the treatment of a thirteen-year-old girl known as 'C', who became pregnant after being raped. She was taken into care by a state-funded agency, who accompanied her to Britain for an abortion. Despite such radical changes in Irish legislation on abortion and divorce that were inadvertently influenced by the death of a fifteen-year old girl, Granard still refused to speak of this tragedy.<sup>56</sup> Writing some twenty years later, Nicola Tallant's 2004 newspaper article entitled, 'Death of a Girl Still Silences

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.152. Flynn, a teacher in a secondary school run by nuns, lost her job after becoming pregnant with a married man irrespective of the fact that she was living with him and raising his children, and that, she could not marry him because there was no divorce in Ireland.

<sup>56</sup> Maguire, 'The Changing Face of Catholic Ireland', pp.354-355. Maguire observed how Lovett's death remained an unspeakable subject in community during the 1990s: People in Granard are still reluctant to discuss Lovett's death, reflecting the continued belief that they were maligned in the media frenzy, but many people from around the country regret that a young unmarried mother had to die before social attitudes began to change. Maguire notes how the producer of the RTE documentary, *Letters to Ann*, was met with a communal unwillingness to speak of the lingering effects of Lovett's death. When the producer tried to interview people in Granard most were unwilling to discuss the scandal. She even had doors slammed in her face.

Villagers', reports on how Lovett's death continued to have an impact on the community's memory through their sustained reticence:

Twenty years after the deaths of teenager Ann Lovett and her newborn son scandalized Ireland, the issue is still a taboo subject in her home village.

A documentary crew, which tried to investigate the story recently, was greeted with silence in Granard, Co. Longford, where the 15-year-old died in a religious grotto after giving birth to a baby boy on January 31, 1984. The tragedy prompted a huge change in Irish attitudes to teenage pregnancy and was one of the most poignant stories to come out of rural Ireland in recent times.

Only parish priest, Fr. Francis Kelly, who arrived in Granard two years after the tragedy, agreed to be interviewed for Scannal, a new RTE 12-part series exploring scandals that rocked Ireland.

He tells the documentary that locals are still coming to terms with their loss and recalls how the media were "only interested in getting a story" at the time of the event.

Fr. Kelly also insists that nobody in the community knew that 15-year old Ann was pregnant – despite the fact that she was full term when her baby was born and archive footage includes an interview with a friend of the teenager, which contradicts that.

When she was found in the grotto the baby was already dead and she was suffering from shock. She died later that day in hospital, but five days later her story appeared in the papers sparking a flood of emotions from women all over the country.

In the documentary, Gay Byrne recalls how thousands of letters arrived to his Late Late Show from women telling how they suffered similar crisis pregnancies, but had survived.

He said: "looking back at these letters now, it seems to me that not only are we living in a different country, it's like we're on a different planet."<sup>57</sup>

The controversial silencing of Lovett's tragic death is paradigmatic of how up until the feminist backlash of the 1980s Irish women were psychologically silenced, and thus physically muted to maintain a dignified silence. From a literary perspective the use of the fairy legend as a metaphor for the marginalized explores the historical silence of Irish women. Hence myth is being used to address a twenty-year-old historical argument of 1980s feminism. Believing in the

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<sup>57</sup> Nicola Tallant, 'Death of a Girl Still Silences Villagers', *Sunday Mirror*, September 26 2004 <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4161/is\\_20040926/ai\\_n12907077/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4161/is_20040926/ai_n12907077/print)> [accessed 12 February 2006].

timeless psychology of fairy tales, Ní Dhomhnaill's remarks that, 'The Irish fairy tradition gives me a ready-made psychomachia'<sup>58</sup> the make-up of which is able to embrace the psychology of contemporary women. The purpose of Ní Dhomhnaill's storytelling art is to set woman's imagination free to explore and express the darker side of her psyche. The fairy abduction story, therefore, offers a gateway into the mind of the contemporary woman and poet, and enables her metonymical use of women's history to offer a political insight into feminist issues, such as domestic violence, infidelity and (unmarried) motherhood.

### **iii. The Kerry Babies Case: 'Womanhood goes on Trial in Tralee'**

John Goodby emphasises that Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'An Bhatráil' translated by Paul Muldoon as 'The Battering', 'needs to be read in the light of one of the *causes célèbres* of the 1980s backlash against women, the infamous Kerry babies Case.'<sup>59</sup> Early on Friday morning, 13<sup>th</sup> April 1984, Joanne Hayes secretly gave birth and then buried her dead baby's body on the family farm.<sup>60</sup> On 14<sup>th</sup> April, a baby boy was found dead in the rocks on the White Strand beach, three miles from Cahirciveen.<sup>61</sup> Hayes was questioned and charged with the murder on the 1<sup>st</sup> May. Nell McCafferty describes the murder investigation as a 'woman-hunt', since there was no evidence to link Hayes to this case. Accordingly, in October all charges were officially struck from the records in Tralee Courthouse.<sup>62</sup> Following

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<sup>58</sup> Personal correspondence with Ní Dhomhnaill, 13 September 2003.

<sup>59</sup> John Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.263.

<sup>60</sup> McCafferty, *A Woman to Blame*, p.23.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, pp.8-9.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p.13. McCafferty, p.77, later states that, 'Joanne Hayes became the real live model of the biological trial and error experiments conducted by the five all-male teams of lawyers, three per team, representing the Judge, the director of Public Prosecutions, the Superintendents of Police, the Guards and the Hayes.'

Hayes' ill-treatment while in custody, the Family lodged an official complaint against the gardai. The tribunal began on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1985, during which she was questioned extensively about her sexual history, menstrual cycles and contraceptive use by five all-male teams of lawyers.<sup>63</sup>

According to Maguire, like Ann Lovett, Hayes 'became a feminist symbol of what happens when a woman transgresses the codes of moral and maternal behaviour established by the Roman Catholic Church and the Irish State.'<sup>64</sup> Whereas Lovett became the victim of her own story, Hayes was the villain in hers. Such a humiliating public interrogation into Hayes' private (sexual) life sparked off a massive feminist demonstration outside the Tralee courthouse, involving women from all over the country. According to McCafferty, these women felt that Hayes 'had undergone agonizing scrutiny because she was a woman. The perfect excuse had been found to pin a woman under the microscope and have a good look at her. She had been charged with no crime, but womanhood itself was on trial in Tralee.'<sup>65</sup>

Goodby argues that Ní Dhomhnaill's 'attempts to set folk material at a critical angle to the contemporary world can be seen most disturbingly' in Paul Muldoon's 'The Battering', an interpretation of Ní Dhomhnaill's, 'An Bhatráil' (AC, pp.24-27).<sup>66</sup> If Ní Dhomhnaill's allegorical use of the fairy abduction story to discuss modern day issues is taken from a 'critical angle', this oblique stance brings into question Gearóid Denvir's earlier critique of her allegorical use of fairy legend to discuss contemporary gender issues. With this in mind, Goodby,

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<sup>63</sup> Maguire, 'The Changing Face of Catholic Ireland', pp.347-348.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.338.

<sup>65</sup> McCafferty, *A Woman to Blame*. p.127.

<sup>66</sup> Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950*, pp.263-264.

however, believes that 'The Battering' sets out to achieve more than a simple equation of 'folkloric images of maternity with a modern female psyche.' Rather:

By drawing parallels between the innocent Hayes and the persona ascribed to her it is also implied that the demonic aspect of the female psyche may not be part of the female psychological make-up at all, but rather a collective projection of patriarchal attitudes towards women... 'The Battering' reveals a folkloric female unconscious, but removes it from the poem's speaker in order to turn it back against a society which need to believe in the existence of demonic female infanticide.<sup>67</sup>

The feminist fairy poem, 'The Battering' is a further example of how Ní Dhomhnaill uses the 'ready-made psychomachia' that the fairy abduction story provides her with to explore a psychic dislocation, like that of post-natal depression. Speaking from personal experience, Ní Dhomhnaill views post-natal depression as a kind of 'psychic dislocation' when in some 'passages', such as birth and marriage, a 'level of self' is lost. Compared to Ní Dhomhnaill's emotionally charged response to Lovett's death in 'Thar Mo Chionn', translated by Laura O'Connor as 'Mea Culpa', the later poem 'The Battering' is a more detached treatment of Hayes. Thus, Ní Dhomhnaill believes that this is a far superior poem because it is more generally applied. Although Ní Dhomhnaill says she had Hayes in mind when writing the poem, she 'wanted to try a general hypothesis of what kind of psychic dislocation must be involved for a person to batter a child.'<sup>68</sup> The artistic distance that the poet allowed herself enabled her to treat the 1980s feminist backlash against unmarried motherhood from a more disconnected psychological perspective.

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<sup>67</sup> Goodby, p.265. See also McCafferty, *A Woman to Blame*, p.173. According to McCafferty, Judge Kevin Lynch depicted Hayes as a 'sexually evil Eve, mesmerising a helpless Adam in the vale of Tralee'.

<sup>68</sup> Personal correspondence with Ní Dhomhnaill, 13 September 2003.

Angela Bourke reports that various ‘accounts can be found in nineteenth-century newspapers and police reports of suspected child-changelings in Ireland being placed on red-hot shovels, drowned, or otherwise mistreated or killed.’<sup>69</sup> One such tale, was that of Patsy Doyle, aged thirteen, who was murdered by his mother, Joanna Doyle, on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1888 with a hatchet. According to Bourke, ‘she had murdered her “imbecile” or “epileptic son”’, because she believed that he ““was not my son, he was a devil, a bad fairy.””<sup>70</sup> In ‘The Battering’, the (post-natally depressed) mother uses the fairy abduction theory to try to rationalise the abuse her child has suffered at her hands. The poem’s contemporary setting invites the reader to take a look behind the closed doors of domestic reality:

I only just made it home last night with my child  
from the fairy fort.  
He was crawling with lice and jiggers  
and his skin was so red and raw  
I've spent all day putting hot poultices on his bottom  
and salving him with *Sudocrem*  
from stem to stern.

Of the three wet-nurses back in the fort,  
two had already suckled him:  
had he taken so much as a sip from the third  
that's the last I'd have seen of him.  
As it was, they were passing him around  
with such recklessness,  
one to the next, intoning,  
'Little laddie to me, to you little laddie.  
Laddie to me, la di da, to you laddie.'

On this occasion, the woman quickly realises that she has only got away with hurting her son by the skin of her teeth. It is uncertain whether she truly believes that the fairies had violently attacked the boy from head to toe, or if she is just using this as a coded form of speech to cover up the truth. But who would

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<sup>69</sup> Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, p.33.

believe her that the young boy was treated as an object to feed the fairies' savaged maternal desire? Their devilish treatment of the child is maternal in the way they 'suckled him', but vampiric by way they feed off him. The boy's powerlessness to take 'a sip from the third' wet-nurse is a variation of the traditional legend of how women could save themselves from the fairies by refusing to eat. This then is his mother's only chance of rescuing him from the fairy fort. Her heroism takes courage, cunning and sheer strength of will to outwit the fairies. If the mother is to rescue her child from the fairies, then, she has to overcome various Otherworldly obstacles that try to prevent her from succeeding:

I came among them all of a sudden  
and caught him by his left arm.  
Three times I drew him through the lank of undyed wool  
I'd been carrying in my pocket.  
When a tall, dark stranger barred my way  
at the door of the fort  
I told him to get off-side fast  
or I'd run him through.  
The next obstacle was a briar,  
both ends of which were planted in the ground:  
I cut it with my trusty black-handled knife.

So far, so good.  
I've made the sign of the cross  
with the tongs  
and laid them on the cradle.

Each 'obstacle' that is conquered is a step closer to the mother rescuing her child, synonymous with what she is searching for, a way of accepting her son after rejecting him when he was born. The mother's final act of resistance occurs when she makes 'the sign of the cross / with the tongs / and laid them on the candle.' According to Linda Ballard, children used to protect themselves from evil

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p.34.

fairies with ‘tongs’.<sup>71</sup> The ‘obstacles’ that the mother has to defeat not only add a heroic mystical quality to the narrative’s plot, but illustrate how Ní Dhomhnaill is working closely with the original legend. Thus, this fairy abduction poem could simply be read as an allegorical tale of the boy’s *rite de passage* as in the traditional fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, or the Irish oral tradition of storytelling. As Jenkins says, ‘Children up to the age of about eight or nine seemed to have been most likely to have been taken. For boys this signified their passing out of the domestic sphere of their mother into the keeping of their father; this was the beginning of their socialization into adulthood.’<sup>72</sup>

In her discussion of ‘The Battering’, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh states that, ‘Using what ...[Ní Dhomhnaill] calls “undifferentiated other world stuff” ...[she] connects folk tales with modern psychology in an attempt to describe the disturbed mental state of the speaker, making the tale a paradigm for the woman’s troubles.’<sup>73</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill questions archetypal models of motherhood by putting the woman to such Otherworldly tests. Hence, she will have to adopt various guises if she is to outwit the fairies, thus placing conventional motherhood aside. On their spiritual journey of self re-discovery within *The Astrakhan Cloak*, women are presented with many (psychological) obstacles: in ‘Deora Duibhshéibhe’, translated by Muldoon as ‘Dora Dooley’, the woman ‘wonder[s] if I might have the wit / and the presence of mind / to ask her if she happens to know / what it would take to lift the spell / on the sunken fort’ (AC, pp.46-47). The

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<sup>71</sup> Linda-May Ballard, ‘Fairies and the Supernatural on Reachraí’ in *Good People*, p.56.

<sup>72</sup> Jenkins, ‘Witches and Fairies’, p.315. See also, Radner’s article ‘The Woman who Went to Hell’, pp.109-117, in which she discusses this folktale as being an allegory for the female protagonist’s *rite de passage*.

<sup>73</sup> Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1996). p.192.

woman is afraid that on meeting 'the banshee' (a female messenger of death) she will not have her 'wits about her' to prevent her imminent death. Ní Dhomhnaill, then, relies on traditional, but unconventional, solutions that are often at work in Irish fairy legend to resolve modern day issues.

According to Frank Sewell, 'Ní Dhomhnaill's view is that unless you face and if necessary fight the dark strangers of the unconscious, you can either fall prey to their violence or become an agent of it'.<sup>74</sup> The mother is faced with confronting the darker side of her psyche 'When a tall, dark stranger barred my way / at the door of the fort'. Ní Dhomhnaill's travels 'through the porches of the psyche' (WH, p.25) have enabled her to confront certain fears of 'the monsters of the imagination, the demons of the air' (AC, p.51). Entering into the fairy fort enables Ní Dhomhnaill to 'articulate the anxiety a woman might feel as she negotiates with the subconscious'<sup>75</sup>:

If they try and sneak anything past  
that's not my own, if they try to pull another fast  
one on me, it won't stand a snowball's  
chance in hell:  
I'd have to bury it out in the field.  
There's no way I could take it anywhere next  
or near the hospital.  
As things stand,  
I'll have more than enough trouble  
trying to convince them that it wasn't me  
who gave my little laddie this last battering.

If this poem was read in the light of the 'Kerry Babies' case, as opposed to a more general exploration a woman's 'psychic dislocation', then the concluding stanza obscurely refers to how Hayes buried her dead baby's body on the family

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<sup>74</sup> Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry*, p.176.

<sup>75</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill cited from Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women*, p.193.

farm.<sup>76</sup> The tale ends with a controlled ambiguity when the poem protects its subject matter by withholding and concealing vital information as to whether the mother really did beat her son. The final lines do suggest that this is not the first time the child has experienced a ‘battering’, whether it was from the fairies or his mother. But having been given another chance she knows that this is the last one before losing her son for good. Although the mother is convinced that the fairies had beaten him, she realises that the authorities would not believe her. Once again, the superstition that the fairy belief legend is based on is being questioned when set in this modern day context, since a firm disbelief in the fairies would make this tale read as a classic case of child abuse.

While reading Ní Dhomhnaill’s fantastic tales of fairy abduction, however, it is left for the reader to decide whether to interpret the narrative along with the meta-narrative as a tale of true-life or just mere fantasy. The storyteller’s success of ensuring the reader / listener believes that the narratives are based on real life is of course dependent on the willing suspension of their disbelief in the legendary superstitions on which tales of fairy abduction are based. The advantage of telling tales of fairy abduction is that the storyteller not only elaborates on the fantasy but also encourages the reader / listener to interpret the poem’s moral.

For centuries adults have told folk and fairy tales to their children, which have been passed on to their children’s children, as a means of delivering an implicit moral education.<sup>77</sup> In his classic 1976 psychoanalytical study of the

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<sup>76</sup> See O’Connor, ‘War of the Womb’, p.197, who like Goodby, also relates ‘The Battering’ to the Kerry babies case. She argues that the line ‘I’d have to bury it out in the field’ alludes to the burial of Hayes’ baby in a field. The burial of unbaptised stillborn, miscarried or aborted infants on unconsecrated ground, such as under ditches, outside graveyards and on the *lios* (fairy forts), was part of the European folk practice.’

<sup>77</sup> For a more in depth discussion see Marcia K. Liberman, ‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale’, in *Don’t Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist*

importance of fairy tales, Bruno Bettelheim told of how they must not be read as mere reflections of daily life, but as tales of fantasy that can provide some kind of rational explanation to help a child interpret the psychological difficulties of their everyday life. 'If one takes these stories as descriptions of reality', says Bettelheim, 'then the tales are indeed outrageous in all respects – cruel, sadistic....But as symbols of psychological happenings or problems, these stories are quite true.'<sup>78</sup> Bettelheim thus emphasises how fairy tales may have a deeper psychological meaning at work in them, one that reflects on the reality of everyday life.

'The myth of the end of myth-making is the worst myth of all', remarks Ní Dhomhnaill; 'it means that the unconscious has been finally cut off and is irretrievable.'<sup>79</sup> So, Ní Dhomhnaill would agree with Bettelheim that fairy tales present psychological interpretations of reality. The poet employs the fairy motif in her modern day tales to stretch conventional boundaries of women's real life experience, such as psychotic dislocation, and explore and confront the 'monsters of her imagination, the demons of the air' (AC, p.51). Fairy tales then regulate or rationalise the chaos or irrationality of the reality.

#### **iv. The Sisters Grim: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Erotic & Psychotic Modern Day Tales of *The Water Horse* (1999)**

Patricia Duncker says of Angela Carter that her 'strength of the tale lies in the fact that it does not sink into the slough of dailiness. rather it un-fetters the

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*Fairy Tales in North America and England*, Jack Zipes (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1993). pp.185-200.

<sup>78</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p.155.

<sup>79</sup> O'Connor, *Cohmrá*, p.604.

imagination.’<sup>80</sup> Duncker, however, does not believe in Carter’s psychological interpretation of the everyday. She argues, ‘The unconscious is not a treasure vault containing visionary revelations about ourselves. It is rather a cesspool of our fears and desires, filled with common patterns that are also projections of the ways in which we have been taught to perceive the world.’<sup>81</sup> Described as ‘the moral pornographer’<sup>82</sup>, the fairy tale’s cautionary function was taken to its extreme by Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* (1981). In this collection of short stories, the child-like innocence of the tales that was recorded by Charles Perrault in the late seventeenth-century was replaced with tales that are filled with sexual corruption and perversion. Carter finds the traditional fairy tale’s repressive ideology that warns against women’s immorality most attractive in that this framework offers her an opportunity to shatter everyday expectations of women.

Writing nearly twenty years after Carter, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill also takes the traditional fairy tale’s cautionary function to the extreme in her 1999 volume, *The Water Horse*, translated by Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. In this collaborative project, these women poets work together to take pleasure in their imaginary sexual fantasies that work within few, if any, moral constraints. These dark erotic, psychotic tales do not work within the historical confines of tales recorded by Perrault, or even the Brothers’ Grimm. Instead, they loosely adapt the romantic psychology of love and marriage that the traditional fairy tale projects to expose women’s erotic fantasies. In a Jungian analysis of the American poet, Anne Sexton’s appropriation of the Brothers’ Grimm tales in her *Transformations*

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<sup>80</sup> Patricia Duncker, ‘Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter’s Bloody Chambers’, *Literature and History*, 10 (1984), p.3.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

(1971), John Hruschka focuses on the psychological differences between what romance and love means for both men and women:

The romantic ideal of love and marriage fostered by our patriarchal society, reified in Grimm, is brought into critical focus in [Sexton's] *Transformations*. The foundation of this romantic ideal,..., is what Jung called the anima and the resulting confusion men experience between the real, human women they meet in life and the ideal, divine Woman of anima.<sup>83</sup>

*The Water Horse* more than illustrates that women too have archetypal ideals about men. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh says that Ní Dhomhnaill describes 'herself as a woman writer "returning the compliment" to males who, inspired by a female muse, have written in praise of the female body.'<sup>84</sup> Averting the gaze from the woman onto the male, Ní Dhomhnaill's erotic enjoyment of the male body challenges the conventional sexual politics of voyeurism.<sup>85</sup> These erotic fairy poems invite the reader to participate in a voyeuristic engagement with the male body, proclaiming that 'women have eyes too'. Accordingly, the sexual semantics of the word 'voyeurism' that has traditionally worked on the premise that 'looking is for men only' is redefined.<sup>86</sup> In Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's version of Ní Dhomhnaill's long narrative title poem, 'An tEach Uisce', entitled 'The Water Horse' (WH, pp.26-33), the woman's sexual fantasy of her ideal man is played out in a daydream. Strangely, rather than the woman being relieved that she has escaped from the horrific realisation that her dream man desired to eat her.

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<sup>83</sup> John Hruschka, 'Anne Sexton and Anima *Transformations*: Transformations as a Critique of the Psychology of Love in Grimm's Fairy Tales', *Mythlore*, 75 (Winter 1994), p.45.

<sup>84</sup> Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women*, p.186. See also Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.153. She states that, 'The male author / subject invites the male reader to enjoy a visual spectacle in which the woman becomes an object for his scrutiny and pleasure.'

<sup>85</sup> *An Anthology of Women Writing Erotica*, ed., Margaret Reynolds, with a foreword by Jeanette Winterson, (London: Pandora Press, 1990), p.222: 'And sight is often the beginning of the erotic adventure. Attraction begins when the lover sees a pleasing sight; it is fuelled by gazing on that face, that form, and inflamed by the return of the gaze as the beloved looks back at the lover.'

she engages in an erotic fantasy about being devoured when ‘she’d sit there on the cliff edge / Day after day’ longing for him. The woman achieves erotic satisfaction at the mere thought of her demon lover when:

... she thought about the green gleam  
In the strange eyes that had looked at her with desire,  
That was as simple, clean, clear  
In its own way as a hearty hunger;  
The rhythmic shining of his brown limbs  
And how they narrowed to slim wrists  
And the shape of the hands.

More than anything else she remembered the muscular  
Weave of his body that was tense  
And how light as a tightened bow. The spring  
Wound up, alert constantly  
Ready to be released again.

As ‘The Water Horse’ illustrates, the speaker takes great delight in surveying the male body. The intricate description of the body by the speaker is significant in that a particular sexual discourse is being created about the male muse here, and therefore, he is objectified by the woman poet. The male’s eyes clearly communicate that an erotic desire for someone does not have to be spoken since it can be articulated visually through the body. As the images of the body pulsate on the page, the words bring the body alive through its very description, and build up the tension of the poem’s erotic energy. Accompanying the rhythmic sensuality of Ní Chuilleanáin’s words, the bodily images of ‘The spring / Wound up’ and ‘Ready to be released again’, evokes the sense that the male body has been in some way sexually repressed. Alternatively, adding to the sexual anticipation, the male is ready to ‘spring’ or sexually perform at any given opportunity.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Reynolds defines voyeurism as, ‘Looking is for men only.... Women have eyes too.’

Mary Russo compares 'the grotesque body' which 'is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing', with 'the classical body' which 'is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek'.<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, while classical images of bodily perfection are projected onto the male, the women in the grim tales are unquestionably grotesque. This transference of traditional feminine values onto her archetypal male muse subverts the rigid gender politics of a traditional tale in that men are feminised while women become masculinised. There is for instance, 'Eithne Uathach', translated by McGuckian as 'Eithne the Hun', a cannibal, who was raised by 'the Decies tribe of Munster / who reared her on a diet / of the fatted flesh of youngsters' (WH, pp.44-45). Further images of grotesque women appear in Ní Chuilleanáin's interpretation of 'Margadh na Gruaige' that she entitles, 'The Hair Market' in which a woman who 'went there once' describes how 'they cut my long red locks close to my skull, / And sold them to the Sultan for the best price of all' (WH, pp.46-47). This de-feminization of women questions the value of how women's beauty has been used as a commodity to obtain the best deal on the fairy tale marriage market.

In her discussion of the fundamental role that beauty plays in the fairy tale, Alexandra Robbins argues that because of her complete perfection 'Cinderella epitomizes what could be considered the anti-grotesque'.<sup>88</sup> Expectations of youthfulness in the Jungian sense are an archetypal prerequisite of fairy tales. The beauties are frozen in time in order to resist the conventions of ageing through

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), p.8.

<sup>88</sup> Alexandra Robbins, 'The Fairy-Tale Façade: Cinderella's Anti-Grotesque Dream', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 32 (Winter 1998), p.104.

being forever youthful. As in traditional fairy tales, beauty is not only fundamental to the development of the tale itself. The witch of traditional fairy tales, such as those of the Brothers Grimm, has historically represented all that the human woman is supposed to repress.<sup>89</sup> But it is the grotesque hags, evil witches and jealous queens who hold the power from their jaded experiences to challenge what Rosalie Murphy Baum refers to as fairy tales' perpetual 'psychology of youth.'<sup>90</sup>

Speaking on behalf of ageing women, Russo imagines them 'growing old ...or being grotesque in other ways. I see us viewed by ourselves and others, in our bodies and in our work...so that looking at us will be a new question...that never occurred to Bakhtin in front of the kerch terracotta figurines – Why *are* these old hags laughing?'<sup>91</sup> In many women's contemporary feminist fairy poems old hags laugh outlandishly at the archetypal gender roles that traditional fairy tales promote. Deviant women, in the form of ageing witches and hags that feature heavily in Anne Sexton, Liz Lochhead and Ní Dhomhnaill's feminist fairytales lavishly dispense their combination of irony with a deadpan-localized humour. Of Sexton's feminist re-workings of the Brothers Grimm, Vernon Young says that, 'She undermines the fairy tale with deadly address and a merciless employment of city-American idioms: occasionally vulgar, often brilliant, nearly

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<sup>89</sup> See Eileen Fauset, 'That Other World: Women and the Fantastic in Celtic Literature', in *That Other World*, p.144. Discussing the witch as 'an agent of misrule', Fauset says, 'in psychoanalytical terms the symbolic demonic witch figure in fantasy literature is predominantly an externalization of the fear of women, hence the idea of women and misrule; an idea born-out in mythology, folklore and fairy tales.'

<sup>90</sup> For an alternative discussion see Rosalie Murphy Baum, 'Work, Contentment, and Identity in Aging Women in Literature', in *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*, ed's.. Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker (Westport: Praeger, 1999), p.90. She has questioned the notable absence of ageing women in traditional fairy tales. Baum has argued that this is because, 'most fairy tales in most cultures are "youth tales", that is tales "focused on children or adolescents" and reflecting the psychology of youth.'

always hilarious'.<sup>92</sup> Evil witches and stepmothers are pivotal in Sexton's re-working of Grimm's fairy tales in *Transformations* (1971). For example, in 'Hansel and Gretel', 'the witch looked upon her / with new eyes and thought: Why not this saucy lass / for an hors d'oeuvre?'<sup>93</sup> But behind their laughter is strength of determination to break with the tradition that being beautiful and effervescently youthful is everything.

Lochhead unleashed the stinging humour of hags, harridans and furies in her 1981 volume, *The Grimm Sisters*. According to Dorothy McMillian the sisters in Lochhead's tales are indeed grim. She describes them thus: 'Women are sluts with ashcans full of stubbed lipsticks and lipsticked butts, matted nests of hair lurk in the hedgehog spikes of brushes: they pop pills and cherish their own masochistic self-offerings to men, they are selfish lovers and bad mothers and they don't grow old gracefully.'<sup>94</sup> In 'Harridan', from the sequence 'The Furies', Lochhead is seduced by Breughel's 'Mad Meg', which she describes as 'a work of great power, most interesting'. On deciding to choose it for her 'History of Art essay' she questions 'Was Meg 'mad' or more the Shakespearean Fool?' Soon she discovers that:

The fool I was! Mad Meg, Sour-Tongued Margot,  
maddened slut in this mass of misery, a Virago,  
at her wit's end, running past Hell's Mouth, all reason  
gone,  
she has one mailed glove, one battered breastplate on.  
Oh that kitchen knife, that helmet, that silent shout.  
I know Meg from the inside out.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, p.75.

<sup>92</sup> Vernon Young, 'Review of *Transformations*', in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed., Steven Colburn (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1988), p.255.

<sup>93</sup> Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 289.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Crawford & Anne Varty ed's., *Liz Lochhead's Voices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p.20.

<sup>95</sup> Liz Lochhead, *Dreaming of Frankenstein & Collected Poems* (Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 1993), p.74.

Ready to battle with symbols of domesticity, such a transformation is a positive move on behalf of women.<sup>96</sup> Working with Flemish legend, Lochhead transforms this piece of art into a representation of all that women have become when living a life of dulled and miserable domesticity. Lochhead's speaker is so in tune with Mad Meg's psyche that she too becomes 'wild-eyed, unkempt, hellbent, a harridan'. Of Lochhead, Joy Hendry has argued that 'The monstrous in the human psyche is evidently of great fascination, revealing as it does our greater depths, the unwholesome self which cannot be continuously suppressed.'<sup>97</sup>

Whereas Lochhead employs harridans like 'Mad Meg' to defy contemporary expectations of a woman, Ní Dhomhnaill's fairy woman is called upon once again to unleash woman's repressed dark side. Since the fairy woman walked into Ní Dhomhnaill's *Selected Poems / Rogha Dánta* in 1989, many translations of her fairy poems have worked towards resolving women's psychological problems. She has taken women on a progressive psychological journey of self-discovery through an exploration of the darker side of their psyche. During this journey, Ní Dhomhnaill's feminist adaptation of fairy tales charts how she has challenged their archetypal ideals, ones that were patriarchal in the Irish Church and State.

Ní Dhomhnaill's laughter is carnivalesque, in the Bakhtinian sense, in that it re-writes the very tradition that it attempts to preserve. For example, 'Comhairle

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<sup>96</sup> For a critical review of Lochhead's *Grimm Sisters*, see James Campbell's, 'Bits and Pieces', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 May 1981, p.553. He views Lochhead as 'a domestic poet with a vengeance.' But he claims, 'If one thing is worrying, it is the limited scope of this small book. The addition of images taken from folklore has deepened Liz Lochhead's themes but has not given her new ones.'

<sup>97</sup> Joy Hendry, 'A Popular Voice: New Twists to Old Stories: The Poetry of Liz Lochhead', *Verse*, 10 (1993), p.119.

Ón mBean Leasa' (PD, pp.144-147) incorporates a humorous use of modern day idioms when telling the tale of a traditional heist. On colluding with the Otherworld to perform a modern day 'heist' in Burgundy, Paul Muldoon's version, 'The Heist', describes how 'one shady lady left the fairy host / and sidled up to me / and advised me that the best bargains in wine / were to be had in this neighbourhood.' Although the women in Ní Dhomhnaill's poems do have a sense of maturity about them, humour is used to challenge fairy-tale archetypes of gender.

Like Lochhead, Ní Dhomhnaill projects a modern day psychology onto the fairies to question the internalised silence of contemporary women. *The Water Horse's* dream poems are deeply rooted within the terrors of the female psyche, resulting in a loss of domestic conventionality. In these Carteresque gothic romances, the dream men that the women fall in love with do not come to rescue women from their nightmare; they are the nightmare. The reader of these dream poems soon begins to realise that tales, which begin as erotic indulgences, end as gothic tales of horror. In McGuckian's translation of 'Stigmata' as 'Devil's Tattoo' (WH, pp.34-37), a woman's erotic pleasure is gained by merely sensing the male's presence through his sensual bodily aromas. But the way that his bodily essence consumes the poem creates an image of male omnipotence. Once the Devil has seduced the woman, he turns her dream into a nightmare as the ghostly presence of his scented body haunts what once used to be the woman's erotic fantasy. The scent is used like a drug to enable the Devil to take control over the woman's mind and body:

The tip of his tongue  
down the brush of the telephone

lassoes my nape.

A pillar of cloud  
pulls me by day,  
a pillar of fire by night.

Till my morning sickness  
dawns on me for the first time:  
why half-dead groping  
for his love-bites on my neck.

I come across these scraped on  
paper scraps that were my sheets.

The woman realises that while being seduced by the Devil incarnate, the man of her dreams, he imprisons her at the same time. Behind these tales of immorality, male domination is an overwhelming theme in many of Ní Dhomhnaill's sexual fantasies. Endeavouring to promote women's enjoyment of their own sexuality, Ní Dhomhnaill is seemingly in danger of sustaining the traditional misogynistic boundaries that Avis Lewallen has criticised Carter for.<sup>98</sup> The domination of women in these tales, however, can be read in two ways; one that suggests Ní Dhomhnaill is reinforcing the fairy tale tradition that portrays women as victims; or that such images are being used for polemical purposes, particularly as it is the woman who dreams of being dominated. Such an ambiguity of the victimised woman's sexual enjoyment of male domination is illustrated through the image of the tongue lassoing the woman's nape, evoking a further image of a Venus fly-trap capturing its desired prey. The focus on the nape of the neck suggest that the Devil has vampiric tendencies.

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<sup>98</sup> See Avis Lewallen, 'Wayward Girls but Wicked Women? Female Sexuality in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*', in *Perspective on Pornography: Sexuality in Film and Literature*, ed's., Gary Day and Clive Bloom (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), p146. Here Lewallen argues, 'In *The Bloody Chamber* Carter is attempting to promote an active sexuality for women within a

A woman's fantasies have a mental and physical impact on her reality. These 'tales of terror' are not 'just a bad dream's dregs.' Not only does the woman have to deal with the physical memories of her erotic encounter with the Devil, but she is also left with the psychological scars obtained from his rape of her mind. As she wakes to discover that she has been a victim of her own fantasy this stark realisation further suggests that she actually desired to be dominated by her dream man. The fact that the woman wakes alone in bed desperately searching for the evidence of her sexual liaison enforces the idea that her encounter was merely illusory. The illusion of the woman's imaginary love is broken when the tale ends with an image of the immaculate conception of Satan's child. In reality, the tale can ultimately be read as one of phantom pregnancy. The unborn child, then, is representative of the 'devil's tattoo' that he has inscribed onto the woman's body that can never be removed.

In a review of *The Water Horse*, Derek Coyle argued that, 'Ní Dhomhnaill combines Irish and Classical mythology with what is by now a thoroughly demythologized and desacralised modern world. She does this with élan and truly gifted imaginative brilliance.'<sup>99</sup> The protagonists of Ní Dhomhnaill's fairy tales in *The Water Horse* are merely figments of the poet's imagination. As with Carter, the contemporary re-definition of women's sexuality is reliant on the anachronistic psychology of the fairy tale's invariable plots and protagonists. It is this that has enabled Ní Dhomhnaill to negotiate the space that is required to make the journey between the past and the present. These poems are rooted deep within the terrors of a subconscious dream world in which voices from an inner self

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Sadean framework, and therefore, within the logic of the world she creates, sexual choice for the heroines is circumscribed by Sadean boundaries.'

speak from within woman's psyche. In Michael Hartnett's version of 'Mór Cráite', which he entitles 'Mór Anguished', the goddess of sovereignty and fertility recognises that, "every one's enclosed / in their own tiny hells" (SP, pp.36-37).<sup>100</sup> It is the articulation of these 'tiny hells' that represents the darker side of the female psyche that frees woman from the terrors of her subconscious mind. The subconscious feminine self, therefore, is placed firmly at the centre of Ní Dhomhnaill's dark erotic tales in which the realities of everyday life are surpassed in favour of an imaginary dream world. Favouring myth over history, therefore, Ní Dhomhnaill moves woman further away from the realities of history and into an imaginary pre-historic Otherworld through her use of Irish fairy legend to speak of women's silence.

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<sup>99</sup> Derek Coyle, 'The Water Horse', *Honest Ulsterman*, 109 (Summer 2000), p.85.

<sup>100</sup> For a more in depth discussion see Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women*, p.168, in which she states, 'Ní Dhomhnaill's female deities, like their human counterparts, acknowledge their "evil" side.'

## Chapter Four:

### 'Out of Myth into History' Through Eavan Boland's 'Autocritography'

#### i. 'What is History but a Fable Agreed Upon?' An 'Autocritographical' Tale of Woman's History

'Autocritograph' is a term that Jody Allen-Randolph has borrowed from Henry Louis Gates, who coined it in relation to African-American writers. Allen-Randolph says that Eavan Boland and Adrienne Rich use their autobiographies to challenge literary tradition, and that by 'Constructing complex, persuasive prose critiques, in a personal and accessible style, they have created a new prose genre for women poets: a hybrid form of criticism'.<sup>1</sup> The use of personal autobiography to discuss metonymically the socio-political lives of women poets generally forms a narrative framework for Boland's *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and Poet in Our Time* (1995) and Rich's *The Arts of the Possible* (2001).<sup>2</sup> Complemented by their poetry, these autocritographies comprise their ordinary experiences as women and poets, and read like feminist manifestos that present a critique of woman's marginalisation from

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<sup>1</sup> Jody Allen-Randolph, 'New Critics: Eavan Boland's *Object Lessons*', *PN Review*, 22 (Nov / Dec 1995), p.15. See also Victor Luftig's comparison, "'Something Will Happen to You Who Read": Adrienne Rich, Eavan Boland', *Irish University Review: Special Issue on Eavan Boland*, 23 (Spring / Summer 1993), pp.57-66.

<sup>2</sup> For a further discussion see Bernice Schrank, 'Studies of the Self: Irish Autobiographical Writing and the Discourses of Colonialism and Independence' *Auto-Biography Studies*, 9 (1994), pp.262-273. In this article Schrank argues that the autobiographical writings of William Butler Yeats' *Autobiographies* (1966), Sean O'Casey's *Mirror in My House* (1956) and Brendan Brehan's *Borstal Boy* (1982), 'may be read as studies of the self and as cultural narratives.'

history and a poet's marginalisation from a patriarchal literary tradition.<sup>3</sup> Not only does the life meet the work, but also the personal becomes political through an employment of autobiography to write a critical account of women's historical silence.

Despite Boland and Rich's critique of women poets being on the 'outside [of] history' (OH, p.45), it is their contrasting views of feminism that position these two poets at dichotomous poles within this theoretical camp.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Rich firmly believes in the need for separatist feminism, Boland fundamentally believes that the woman poet must integrate herself within the very traditions that have excluded her. She argues that Rich's separatist approach to re-writing history has,

...a persuasive and dangerous influence on any woman poet writing today. It tempts her to disregard the whole poetic past as patriarchal betrayal....But women have a birthright in poetry. I believe, though an antitraditional poet might not agree, that when a woman poet begins to write, she very quickly becomes conscious of the silences which have preceded her, which still surround her. These silences will become an indefinable part of her purpose as a poet. Yet as a working poet she will also – if she is honest – recognize that these silences have been at least partly redeemed within the past expressions of other poets, most of them male. And these expressions also will become part of her purpose. But for that to happen, she must have the fullest dialogue with them. She needs it; she is entitled to it. And in order to have that dialogue, she must have the fullest dialogue with her own experience, her own present as a poet. I do not believe separatism allows for this.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Jeanne Heuving's review of *Object Lessons*, 'Poetry in Our Political Lives', *Contemporary Literature*, 37 (Summer 1996), p.317. In her comparison of Boland's *Object Lessons* with that of Rachel Blau DuPlessis's, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Heuving states that, 'the forms of their texts, which might be seen as the respective manifestoes of these two women poet-critics at mid-career, reveal their differences.'

<sup>4</sup> Various critics have commented on the similarities between the Irish and American women poets, Boland and Rich. Apart from Luftig's, "'Something Will Happen to You Who Read'", see also Jody Allen Randolph's, 'New Critics: Eavan Boland's *Object Lessons*', *PN Review*, 22 (Nov / Dec 1995), pp.15-17.

<sup>5</sup> Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1996), Boland, pp.244-245. All references from this point on will be referenced in the main text.

Here Boland argues that an 'antitraditional' separatist poet's complete disregard of literary tradition would only sustain woman's historical silence. If Boland is to break woman's age old silence, she must converse with the 'silences that have preceded her' through a dialogue with her own experiences as a poet like that of 'The Achill Woman' (OH, pp.27-28) that focused on women being 'outside history' in Chapter Two. Although questions of silence are central to Boland's autocritographical writings, Boland, as a young poet, who was 'all talk, raw from college', spoke on behalf of an emblematic figure of the 1840s Famine in the third person. As highlighted in the discussion of this poem, since the interplay of myth with history and fantasy with reality is at work in Boland's reinvention of women's history, women, like 'The Achill Woman', are in danger of becoming imprisoned in between the worlds of myth and history. Furthermore as Boland continues to employ myth to speak of women's histories in Chapter IV it will become evident that it is difficult to distinguish between what constitutes as fantasy and reality.

Primarily, Chapter IV will argue that Boland manipulates her autobiography to write an autocritographical account of a woman and poet's silenced history and past: 'I have chosen: / out of myth into history I move to be part of that ordeal', Boland stated in 'Outside History' (OH, p.45). Moving 'woman out of myth [and] into history', Boland chooses to use her autobiography as opposed to Ní Dhomhnaill's use of women's biographies. Whereas Ní Dhomhnaill favours myth over history, Boland's feminist recovery of a woman's past is as dependent on myth as it is history. This Chapter will illustrate the various ways Boland replaces

memories with mythical possibilities of what could have been when writing a fictional account of a woman's silenced history and past.

Women's improvised journey of 'out of myth [and] into history' that began with 'The Achill Woman' continues with the mythical recovery of Boland's grandmother's history in the poetry and prose versions in the tale of 'Lava Cameo'. This introductory chapter to *Object Lessons* begins with Boland trying to retrace the history of her grandmother Mary Ann Sheils' last steps before her death. The scene that is carefully reconstructed tells of a woman who died alone on October 10<sup>th</sup> 1909. Her grandmother's story represents not only a forgotten past, but also a history that was never written. As in the recollection of Boland's own life, the truth-seeking tale of her grandmother's story incorporates further anecdotes about her great-great grandfather, grandfather and mother, combined with a socio-political description of late nineteenth-century Ireland: 'In her lifetime Ireland had gone from oppression to upheaval. A language had been reclaimed. Laws had changed. Conspiracies and explosions were everyday occurrences. And she existed on the edge of it' (OL, p.68). The narrator uses snippets of political history to fill the irrecoverable gaps in her grandmother's social history. The historical connection that Boland tries to make in 'Lava Cameo' by telling her grandmother's social history within the context of an Irish political one fails as her grandmother's story pales into insignificance when it is re-told against the political one. 'My grandmother lived outside history', says Boland. 'And she died there. A thirty-one-year-old woman, with five daughters, facing death in a hospital far from her home' (OL, p.68).

Read autocritographically, 'Lava Cameo' illuminates Boland's concern with the rhetorical effects of how a woman's history is reconstructed, rather than with recovering the facts behind the individual story. Consequently, the actual details of the grandmother's past are replaced with those that the storyteller sees as being acceptable representations of the truth because the storyteller claims that a recovery of a past is impossible when women's histories are readily unavailable to the willing historian. So:

...whatever she saw that morning, it is lost. Whatever that journey yielded – the child with a hoop who never existed, the woman with the red hat I am now inventing. This is the way we make the past. This is the way I will make it here. Listening for hooves. Glimpsing the red hat which was never there in the first place. Giving eyesight and evidence to a woman we never knew and cannot now recover (OL, pp.4-5).

Accordingly, there is 'no way now to know what happened then - / none at all unless, of course, you improvise', states Boland in 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me'(OH, p.11). Boland is in a powerful position because we cannot question her improvisations of the past. Simply we have the choice of whether to accept or reject the way the truth is contrived. Since the details of the past are replaced with Boland's romantic notions of the truth, her autocritographies illustrate what 'the past makes when it has transferred its available resources from memory to allegory' (OL, p.9), when memories are replaced with mythical possibilities of what could have been. Given also that in 'We are Always Too Late' (OH, p.42), Boland believes that 'Memory / is in two parts'; 'First, the re-visting: Then / the re-enactment', she can not re-enact the events of what really happened, hence she re-tells the story as she imagines it may have happened. These fantastic perceptions of history give her poetic

licence to explore the possibilities of history at a risk of exploiting woman's past, which she continues to do in the poem, 'Lava Cameo', from *In A Time of Violence* (1994).

Despite telling the story from a slightly different slant, both the poetry and prose versions of the grandmother's story carry a similar subversive message about how history is made, or in woman's case re-made. The poem, 'Lava Cameo' picks up the story earlier, when her grandmother was waiting for the return of her sea-captain husband:

I like this story –

My grandfather was a sea-captain.  
My grandmother always met him when his ship docked.  
She feared the women at the ports –

except that this is not the story,  
more a rumour or a folk memory,  
something thrown out at once in a random conversation;  
a hint merely.

If I say wool and lace for her skirt and  
crêpe for her blouse  
in the neck of which is pinned a cameo,  
carved out of black, volcanic rock;

if I make her pace the Cork docks, stopping  
to take down her parasol as a gust catches  
the silk tassels of it –

Power is achieved when the narrator omnipotently positions herself within the poem to gain authority over the past and its histories. Shortly after the story begins, the narrator quickly reminds herself that this is not a love story, but one of historical recovery. The tone shifts from making definite statements about her grandparents'

past to one that is filled with uncertainty when creating a romantic image of how she imagines her grandmother would wait for the safe return of her sea-captain husband. When re-telling her grandmother's story, Boland, like Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, in turn looks to the unconscious realms of 'folk memory' as a poetic resource. The story's reconstruction, then, is tenuously held together by a few suggestions of the truth that were 'thrown out once in a random conversation'. After the semi-colon, across the line ending the words 'a hint merely' enforce the fantasy on which this tale is based, particularly as the narrator continues her tale with suppositions like, 'if I say wool and lace for her skirt' and 'if I make her pace the Cork docks'. In the recovery of her grandmother's story, the details of the woman's history are replaced with those that the storyteller sees as being acceptable representations of the truth. The woman's particulars are no longer relevant to this tale, and so the storyteller manipulates the facts to enhance the fiction.

According to Boland, the need to rely on the power of invention is because the oral family history was broken when her mother (subconsciously) withheld certain memories about her own mother's life from her daughter. 'Unlike most people', says Boland of her mother, 'she treated the past as an opportunity for forgetfulness rather than a source of definition'(OL, p.14). Apart from blaming her mother for the blurred inherited memories, it is also suggested that not all women want to determine their present-day lives through those of the past. Rediscovering her grandmother's story gives Boland a sense of historical belonging, a sense for which she has been searching from her family's past. In 'What we Lost' (OH, p.43), Boland's grandmother's story is used once again to foreground her argument of how

she was denied any ‘traces’<sup>6</sup> of ‘Her letters and mementoes and memories / [that] are packeted in satin’:

The tea is poured, the stitching put down.  
The child grows still, sensing something of importance.  
The woman settles and begins her story.

Believe it, what we lost is here in this room  
on this veiled evening.  
The woman finishes. The story ends.  
The child, who is my mother, gets up, moves away.

In the winter air, unheard, unshared,  
the moment happens, hangs fire, leads nowhere.  
The light will fail and the room darken,  
the child fall asleep and the story be forgotten.

After taking particular care to set a scene of domestic contentment, this comes to an abrupt end when the focus on the minute detail moves into the poem’s background. The images of fading light falling over the grandmother’s past secure the details of the woman’s story into the ‘veiled evening’. In this unwilling disclosure of the truth, an emphasis is placed on the significance of the specifics of a moment, rather than on the details that may have filled it. The delicacy of the ‘winter air, unheard, unshared moment’ points to the cold isolation of being on the ‘outside of history’. The assonance in this line of the entrancing monotone sounds create a quiet atmosphere of someone who is whispering so gently that what is disclosed in the story may not even have been heard. The particulars shared between the woman and

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<sup>6</sup> See Liz Stanley, ‘Is there Life in the Contact Zone? Auto/Biographical Practices and the Field of Representation in Writing Past Lives’, in *Representing Lives: Women and Auto/Biography*, ed’s., Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey (England & New York: Macmillian & St. Martin’s, 2000), p.10. Stanley refers to R.G.Collingwood, who she says, ‘points out that the historian typically works with ‘traces’ of the past, all of which are material traces in the sense of being, whether ideas or artefacts, materially and impingently here in the present’.

child are swept away into the 'winter air'. In this single solitary moment Boland's mother had the chance to either accept her place within her family's history or become free from its past filled with untold secrets. Thus, Boland says,

This is not a story about luck, or even memory but about what replaces them. And whether we have the right to replace them. She survived, but only in fits and starts of oral recollection and memory. Looking back, I can see those fractions, those chances more clearly (OL, pp.13-14).

Boland believes, therefore, that it is her birthright to make of the past what she will, to seize 'those fractions and chances', to fantasize about history. As established earlier in the chapter, she knows of the risks of her deliberate fabrications of the truth, but she still chooses to 'improvise' in 'Lava Cameo'. Since we only have Boland's word that the facts surrounding her grandmother's life were not available to her in the first place, the erasure of the woman's past from history evokes the possibility of a self-conscious effacement of the truth. Hence in both the poetry and prose versions of 'Lava Cameo', Boland is building on a mythical story that she knows does not exist, but wants to be representative of the truth. The ethical arguments that the prose version of 'Lava Cameo' presents with regards to moving woman 'out of myth [and] into history' are contradicted by the aesthetics of the story's poetic counterpart. While Boland has been desperately trying to make a connection with the past, she has also been searching for a way to escape its actuality:

there is a way of making free with the past,  
a pastiche of what is  
real and what is  
not, which can only be  
justified if you think of it

not as sculpture but syntax:

a structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers  
the inner secret of it.

Margaret Mills Harper observes that Boland defines ‘the past’ and ‘history’ as strikingly different. Distinguishing between these two concepts of time, she says that for Boland, ‘history records and narrates, while the past most often disappears, leaving only traces of the human inhabitants of a time or place.’<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the past is a ‘pastiche’ comprised of fact and fiction, myth and history. Boland asks the reader to ‘consider’ how the truth may be presented as ‘a passable imitation of what went before’, as in ‘Mise Eire’, (CP, p.102), suggesting that she is looking for some kind of external acceptance of this symbolic truth. Thus, she attempts to ‘justify’ why she is ‘making free with the past’ by telling us that the past is not set in stone like a ‘sculpture’. If a ‘pastiche’ is created that is comprised of representations of ‘what is real and what is not’, and this is thought of as ‘syntax’, a (linguistic) structure, that is not contained in one body of meaning, then they are many ways of reading the past.

‘The static ‘sculpture’ gives way to the fluid ‘syntax’, states Rose Atfield, ‘the dead stone to the living word.’<sup>8</sup> Atfield offers a postcolonial critique of Boland, and argues that the historian’s words have covered up ‘the real truth’ about women’s past lives. Thinking of the past as ‘syntax’ rather than a ‘sculpture’, Boland took the opportunity to change history through a further reconstruction of her grandmother’s past. Whereas, in ‘Lava Cameo’, syntax was regarded as ‘a structure extrinsic to

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Mills Harper, ‘First Principle and Last Things: Death and the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Audre Lorde’, in *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class and Nationality*, ed., Susan Shaw-Sailer (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p.182.

<sup>8</sup> Rose Atfield, ‘Postcolonialism in the Poetry and Essays of Eavan Boland’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 8, (1997), p.178.

meaning', in an earlier poem, 'Fever' from *The Journey*, 1987, syntax is presented as a structure intrinsic to meaning. Thus, instead of being given a chance to 'make free with the past' and change the course of a woman's history, Boland is distracted by the need to uncover the meanings of her grandmother's legacy that consists of nothing but 'hints / and a half-sense of half-lives remain.' Once again, 'nothing else' of the past will remain, 'nothing unless', Boland 're-constructs':

... the soaked-through midnights;  
vigils; the histories I never learned  
to predict the lyric of; and re-construct  
risk; as if silence could become rage,

as if what we lost is a contagion  
that breaks out in what cannot be  
shaken out from words or beaten out  
from meaning and survives to weaken

what is given, what is certain  
and burns away everything but this  
exact moment of delirium when  
someone cries out someone's name.

The fever casts doubts over what is real, 'given' and 'certain', which results in one woman's past being contained in one 'exact moment of delirium' when there is a brief return to reality. The 'contagion that breaks out', but 'cannot be / shaken out from words' illustrates one of the main contradictions at work in Boland's poetry and prose, that is her desire to rewrite women into history, while denying them a sense of a past. For Boland, trying to reconstruct a woman's past is like having a fever when the realities of the past are obscured by illusions of the past. She is driven by an intense desire to discover the hidden truths of the past that have been wiped out by history. In her delirious state it becomes difficult to distinguish between fantasy and

reality. The dead become victims of their own histories, as 'Lava Cameo' continues 'to predict the lyric of the histories [that she] never learned' in 'Fever':

She will die at thirty-one in a fever ward.  
He will drown nine years later in the Bay of Biscay.  
They will never even be  
sepia, and so I put down

the gangplank now between the ship and the ground.  
In the story, late afternoon has become evening.  
They kiss once, their hands touch briefly.  
Please.

Look at me, I want to say to her: show me  
the obduracy of an art which can  
arrest a profile in the flux of hell.

Inscribe catastrophe.

Since art is an imitation of life, Boland's grandparents' ordinary lives will never be imitated in art in the form of a drawing or photograph or 'even be sepia' (the colour of sepia; a brownish tint or colour). Attempting to define, even classify an Irish women's history, Boland searches for a series of motifs to represent 'the obduracy of an art'. One such image-system that is frequently at work in Boland's grandmother's story is various allusions of heat, like the fever and the lava cameo that 'arrest[s] a profile in the flux of hell'. A stationary image of her grandmother frozen into the lava cameo asserts a reclamation of a woman's past. As mentioned earlier, because Boland was denied any 'traces' of her grandmother's memory, she relies on making her own archeological discoveries when searching for objects from the present day to represent what was lost. She freezes a particular historical moment by carefully placing woman into a specific time and place. The objects that are placed very accurately in her reconstructions of the past are representations of a woman's

forgotten past, like the symbolic use of the 'lava cameo' that commemorates Boland's grandmother's life. Inevitably, such emblems act as a substitute for women's history:

Her name. Her emblem. There was a complexity for me remembering the cameo, and the more I thought about it, the more complex it became. To inscribe a profile in the cold rock. To cut a human face into what had once flowed, fiery and devouring, past farms and villages and livestock. To make a statement of random and unsparing destruction. All these acts were very far from being simple. They were ironic and self-conscious. They employed artifice and irony. They put the stamp of human remembrance on the material of natural destruction (OL, pp.33-34).

Cultural artifacts, like the lava cameo, place 'the stamp of human remembrance' onto history when 'inscribing catastrophes' of women's past. Boland recognises the irony of this contrived act of remembrance in that a life is preserved in the material which has the power to destroy without human regard. A further and inevitable irony is that women have become the inanimate objects of Boland's histories rather than the subjects of them. The aesthetic value that is placed on the female muse is something that Boland explicitly admits in 'Envoi', from *The Journey* (1987). In this poem, which reads like a litany, she states, 'My muse must be better than those of men / who made theirs in the image of their myth.' It is difficult to see how the freezing of woman's 'profile' into art, evoking the sense of the ageless beauty, differs from the poetic practice for which Boland has much criticised male poets. As Boland says,

In previous centuries, when the poet's life was an emblem for the grace and power of a society a woman's life was often the object of his expression: in pastoral, sonnet, elegy. As the mute object of his eloquence her life could be at once addressed and silenced. By an ironic reversal, now that [...]woman's life is that emblem of grace and power (OL, p. xiv).

The strategic placing of woman as an ‘emblem of grace and power’ firmly at the centre of her autocritographical writings suggests that Boland has successfully moved her from the mythological margins of history. The autocritographical tale of ‘Lava Cameo’ began with Boland’s grandmother dying on the ‘outside of history’ and it is there that she remains when the story concludes. In fact, in using her own life story in such an emblematic way, Boland has enforced her own objectification as a woman and a poet. Of course, the metonymical use of a woman’s life story for which to speak of women’s history generally is filled with the poet’s own self-importance, particularly as she places her private family history on public display when rewriting the past as autobiography. Reading *Object Lessons* as a representation of an Irish woman poet’s history, it is Boland’s heavy reliance on her imagination that steers the reader away from the truths expected from a personal confessional when presenting ‘a passable imitation / of what went before’ (‘Mise Eire’). The ambiguous truths of Boland’s stories reflect how she is playing ‘the fictional interventionist’(OL, p.10) with her own life story. She blatantly admits that,

I have, after all, been describing ideas and impressions as if they were events. I have been proposing thoughts and perceptions in a way they did not and could not occur. I have given hard shapes and definite outlines to feelings which were far more hesitant (OL, p.150).

The poet’s fictionalisation, even sensationalisation of women’s lives in her poetry and prose, sustains the denial of a woman’s history. Becoming victims of Boland’s personal reconstruction of history, women, like her grandmother, who constantly

haunt Boland's memories, are merely 'fictions of her argument'<sup>9</sup> and used as accessories to aid her writing of women's past back into Irish history. Boland, then, manipulates the past to assert her arguments concerning women being 'outside history', and is guilty of writing women 'out of history [and] back into myth'.

Roland Barthes argues, 'Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives: it silently disappears'.<sup>10</sup> While in Barthes' account history represents events that actually took place in the past, myth is a symbolic construction of reality.<sup>11</sup> Since Boland believes that 'History will suppress the past'<sup>12</sup>, when telling these tall tales her attentions focus on covering up the past and its histories particularly as myth is called upon to place a distance between reality and fantasy. When returning to the past to rewrite women's history, because myth is used as an aid to do so, its elusiveness creates a sense of an unwillingness to disclose the truth. Boland's reliance on myth to rewrite history means that what replaces history is a set of false assumptions about the past. Thus, as reality loses itself to a mythical illusion the truths become further and further distorted in Boland's poetry. Women, including Boland herself, become imprisoned between the worlds of myth and history. If Boland is to unfreeze woman from the metaphorical restraints of myth and history by using her autobiographical self she has to become both the subject and

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<sup>9</sup> Boland, 'Daughters of Colony: A Personal Interpretation of the Place of Gender Issues in the Postcolonial Interpretation of Irish Literature', *Éire-Ireland*, 32 (1998), p.83.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans., Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), p.151.

<sup>11</sup> See also Allen-Randolph's, 'Finding a Voice Where She Found a Vision', *PN Review*, 21 (Sept / Oct 1994), p.15, in which she says that 'time like myth is an artificial human construct – an attempt to restrict meaning by controlling it – which ultimately breaks down the face of morality.'

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp.14-15.

object of her poetry. Thus, she risks replicating mythological / historical national images of woman in later poems such as 'Anna Liffey', from *In a Time of Violence* (1994).

## ii. 'Anna Liffey': An Auto-Mythological Tale of Age and Beauty

Remembering Patrick Kavanagh as 'an example of dissidence', Eavan Boland recalls how during her meeting with him in the mid-1960s, 'I had seen the witness of someone who had used the occasion of his life to rebuff the expectations and preconceptions of the Irish poem. I would remember it' (OL, pp.99-100). Patricia Boyle Haberstroh describes how Kavanagh 'saw himself as an outsider', and how he 'waged his own battle with Yeats and the heritage of the Literary Revival.' Thus, *The Great Hunger*, 'attack[ed] the idealistic world of Irish nationalism and Yeatsian romanticism.'<sup>13</sup> Kavanagh chose to write from the margins of a literary tradition that he wished to be excluded from. Since ordinary women's lives are the subject of Boland's auto-mythological tales, she has no choice but to write from the margins of a tradition that has excluded her as a woman and a poet.

Although Boland and Kavanagh have both shared experiences of being the literary outsider and challenged the established literary tradition by writing anti-establishment poetry, it was Kavanagh's chauvinism towards women poets that questioned the aptness of him being 'an example of dissidence'. So, although Kavanagh took a radical approach to his poetry, he was also a traditionalist in that he

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<sup>13</sup> Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1996), p.5.

viewed woman and her body at the centre of the male poem. In his *Collected Prose* (1967), he claims that women could not write because:

The body with its feelings, its instincts, provides women with a source of wisdom, but they lack the analytic detachment to exploit it in literature. The great writer is the man who has in him some of this feminine capacity for perceiving with the body.<sup>14</sup>

Later, such patriarchal views would lead Boland to use her body to question why the woman poet 'could give a voice to the certainties of my mind but not to the questions of my body' (OL, p.114). 'The truth is', says Boland, 'I began reading and writing poetry in a world where a woman's body was at a safe distance, was a motif and not a menace' (OL, p.26). Realizing that, 'I would not find myself in a poem unless I wrote it', Boland's anxiety concerning her ageing body is the focus of 'Anna Liffey', from *In a Time of Violence* (1994).

In defining what is meant by 'auto-mythology', Alex Goody argues that, 'Mina Loy's depiction and interpretation of her own life can be described as *auto-mythological*, that is, an individualized (and personally applicable) adaptation and conglomeration of an eclectic range of mythical structures and stories which fundamentally refutes the transparent process of personal realisation celebrated by the Romantic artist-hero.'<sup>15</sup> In Boland's 'auto-mythological tale' of Anna Liffey, myth and history fuse when a woman's mythological tale is told in conjunction with another's autobiographical one. Metonymically using her ageing body as a site of

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick Kavanagh's quotation from *The Collected Prose* is cited from Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women*, pp.5-6.

<sup>15</sup> The concept of 'auto-mythology' has been borrowed from Alex Goody's chapter, 'Autobiography / Auto- Mythology: Mina Loy's *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*', in *Representing Lives*, p.270.

transference for which to write woman out of myth and into history, Boland challenges the historical objectification of woman as a national icon. In 'becoming a figure in a poem. / Usurping a name and theme', Boland attempts to place herself firmly within the centre of the literary tradition that has excluded her both as a woman and a poet by becoming both the subject and object of her poem. Risking the emblematisation of her own body, Boland then looks to middle age as her theme. David Wheatley, however, argues,

Whose name does Boland have to usurp to stand in her doorway? Such is the power of her rhetoric of alienation that she can only experience "becoming a figure in a poem" as a form of usurpation, even when the poem is one of her own making. Or put more plainly, she makes her continuing victim status the very basis of her successful self-expression.<sup>16</sup>

Boland could have usurped the woman in the doorway who spoke with Stephen Dedalus' friend Davin one night whilst walking home from a hurling match in Buttevant in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).<sup>17</sup> Davin recalls how,

...a young woman opened the door....She was half dressed as if she was going to bed...she had her hair hanging; and I thought by her figure...she must be carrying a child. She kept me in talk a long while at the door and I thought it was strange because her breast and shoulders were bare.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere, in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's Anna Livia Plurabelle fulfills her iconographic role as both womanhood and Dublin particularly in Chapter I, viii when

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<sup>16</sup> David Wheatley, 'Changing the Story: Eavan Boland and Literary History', *Irish Review*, 31 (2004), p.116.

<sup>17</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Paladin Books, 1988), pp.185-187.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.186. For a further discussion see Kathryn Conrad and Darryl Wadsworth, 'Joyce and the Irish Body Politic: Sexuality and Colonization in *Finnegans Wake*', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 31 (Spring 1994), pp.301-313. Also, Sheldon Brivic, 'The Terror and Pity of Love: ALP's Soliloquy', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 29 (Fall 1991), pp.145-171.

she exchanges innocence for fertility. From a polemical perspective, Ailbhe Smyth explores the many extreme definitions of the mythological heroine Anna Livia Plurabelle that have attributed to the iconography of woman's fragmented national identity; one definition being, '*Anna Livia Plurability*, transmuted from Joyce 1939 into stone monument in the centre of Dublin City 1987, erected by the Smurfit Corporation in agreement with Dublin City Corporation.'<sup>19</sup> Boland invents a personal mythology by adapting the nationalistic myth of Anna Livia Plurabelle to address her middle age and in doing so usurps Joyce's childbearing sexual temptress with a middle-aged woman:

If I could see myself  
I would see  
A woman in a doorway  
Wearing the colours that go with red hair.  
Although my hair is no longer red.

I praise  
The gifts of the river.  
Its shiftless and glittering  
Re-telling of a city,  
Its clarity as it flows,  
In the company of runt flowers and herons,  
Around a bend at Islandbridge  
And under the thirteen bridges to the sea.  
Its patience at twilight –  
Swans nesting by it,  
Neon wincing into it.

Longing to visualise herself in her poem, Boland begins to write 'Anna Liffey' in a vain attempt 'to find her / the woman I once was' (OH, p.29). So, although she is writing against the sexual politics that are embodied in this national

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<sup>19</sup>Ailbhe Smyth, 'The Floozie in the Jacuzzi', *The Irish Review*, 6 (Spring 1989), pp.7-8.

icon, Boland is in awe of her youthfulness. Finding a vision has been of great importance to Boland in much of her earlier poetry. For example, the impaired vision of 'the spectacles out of focus' in 'Distances', the concluding poem to *Outside History*, was later followed by a celebration in *In a Time of Violence's* epigraph poem, 'The Singers', who were 'rejoicing in / finding a voice where they found a vision.' Boland's presence within her own poem is merely supposed at its beginning as her vision is blurred, even overpowered by the iconoclastic image of Anna Liffey. As the ageing poet reflects against the river woman's ageless beauty she becomes a mere shadow of her former self. The poet then becomes envious at Anna Liffey's vision, her 'clarity' as she travels focused towards her destination. Thus the poet looks to this mythical goddess for spiritual guidance. This newfound vision, therefore, is distorted by Boland's inability to see her ageing self, evoking feelings of hesitation and uncertainty concerning her groundbreaking attempts to write herself into a poem that will allow her to age and die.

The re-occurring image of the 'woman in the doorway of a house' not only suggests that she is home and dry, but is framed by her domesticity. Despite acknowledging that 'A river is not a woman', 'any more than / a woman is a river', Boland is recording the separation of woman from river by creating a boundary between them. Reinforced by the reference to the 'Liffey' as the impersonal pronoun, 'its', the estrangement of the real from the mythical woman, and vice versa, marks the point at which Boland attempts to break away from using traditional images of woman as the nation. Interestingly, various images of woman in a state of fluidity, most notably that of Anna Liffey, are very often used by Boland when dealing with

woman's relationship with myth. It is the fluidity of Anna Liffey's sexual power and control over the nation that the poet finds most inviting. Boland tries to reinvent her ageing self within the poem in the image of the more sexually appealing Anna Liffey. As Boland surveys the body of her nation, along with her own, through the eyes of Anna Liffey, rather than rejecting the idealised vision that she sees before her, the ageing poet looks to ageless beauty as a way of recovering her colourful youth. But:

An ageing woman  
Finds no shelter in language.  
She finds instead  
Single words she once loved  
Such as 'summer' and 'yellow'  
And 'sexual' and 'ready'  
Have suddenly become dwellings  
For someone else –  
Rooms and a roof under which someone else  
Is welcome, not her. Tell me,  
Anna Liffey,  
Spirit of water,  
Spirit of place,  
How is it on this  
Rainy Autumn night  
As the Irish sea takes  
The names you made, the names  
You bestowed, and gives you back  
Only wordlessness?

The reader of 'Anna Liffey' must look beyond the metonymical ageing body to discover how Boland exposes 'the vulnerabilities of language'<sup>20</sup>. The words, which once embraced the woman in her youth no longer provide a safe haven for the body that they are unable to articulate. The vacant and hollow images of words that have

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<sup>20</sup> See *Object Lessons*, p.85, in which Boland states, 'When I wrote an essay or a poem, I saw the vulnerabilities of language and its exposures. But here was a language which was also a system; here was a code of meaning and arrangement where the mind could be protected from its own frailties.'

been erased by time equate with the woman's barrenness. The poet has been cheated by her ageing body and left searching for the words to continue writing the poem that will 'Make us human / in cadences of change and mortal pain / and words we can grow old and die in' (CP, p.208). The metonymical menopausal body is, therefore, presented in very cold black and white images.<sup>21</sup> The lack of vibrant 'reds' and 'yellows' in her life denotes the passing of time. As the warm images of youthful beauty sap from the ageing woman's body so does her power. By replacing the ageless beauty's body with that of an ordinary woman's ageing one, the male poet's traditional object of desire is de-eroticised. So as the body ages and the colours drain from her the poet denies herself a sexual identity. The beauty of Boland's own eternal youth is sacrificed by presenting herself in an image of a woman who is grieving for her past experiences of youthfulness, those of which Anna Liffey still embodies.

Debrah Raschke claims that, 'Myths, inescapably, are part of our ordinary lives – they enrich the intensity, depth and mystery of ordinary experiences....But myths are also the catalyst for doom, particularly when we attempt to live our lives as if they were myth.'<sup>22</sup> Although the mythical and real women are placed parallel to each other at the beginning of this auto-mythological tale, it feels as though Boland begins to absorb some of Anna Liffey's mythical qualities. As Boland and Anna Liffey become one in this comparative stanza, a double vision of woman is presented as both vulnerable and powerful. This vision of youth and age alludes to Boland's

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<sup>21</sup> For a further discussion of the negative images of the metaphorical representation of the menopausal body see for example, Emily Martin's, 'Medical Metaphors of Women's Bodies', in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed's., Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp.15-41.

<sup>22</sup> Debrah Raschke, 'Eavan Boland's *Outside History* and *In a Time of Violence: Rescuing Women, the Concrete, and Other Things Physical from the Dung Heap*', *Colby Quarterly*, 32 (1996), p.138.

perception that ‘the body of one woman is the prophecy of the other’(OL, p.206). Thus, the vision of Boland’s ageing body predicts what Anna Liffey’s will become if Boland successfully moves this national icon out of myth and into history.

Whereas in ‘Anna Liffey’ the ageing woman’s body is used as a prophecy of what will happen to the younger woman’s body, the child’s body in ‘The Scar’, from *The Lost Land* (1998), serves as a historical reminder of the past. In demonstrating the fluidity of Anna Liffey’s identity, there has been a twist in this auto-mythological tale in that the heroine, Anna Liffey, has been reinvented in ‘The Scar’ as an image of the city of Dublin. Just as the woman’s name of Life was given to the land in ‘Anna Liffey’, it is now Dublin that takes a woman’s name. The poem begins with an image of rebirth, the birth of a new city being created and renamed Anna Liffey. In bringing youth to the city, Anna Liffey not only endorses Dublin with new life, but she has the power to take it away:

Dawn on the river.  
Dublin rises out of what it reflects:

Anna Liffey  
looks to the east, to the sea,  
her profile carved out by the light  
on the old Carlisle bridge.

I was five  
when a piece of glass  
cut my head and left a scar.  
Afterwards my skin felt different.

Wheatley argues that 'The Scar' shows Boland 'has few qualms about mistaking her own predicament for that of her nation'.<sup>23</sup> History's silence has spoken to Boland through wounded images of bodies that articulate a woman and nation's experiences of exile, possession, powerlessness, hope and then despair. In 'Anna Liffey', the mouth of the woman / river is the source to the truths of her silent suffering, not only as a national icon, but also as a middle-aged woman. In 'The Scar', the representation of a nation's history of unforgettable suffering is symbolised through the association of scars, wounds and the body. The renaming of 'Anna Liffey' as 'The Scar' suggests that Boland cannot forget either the physical or the psychological pains of her national exclusion. The metonymic use of the scarred body in *The Lost Land* develops Boland's previous concerns about the loss of a national identity. The poet re-envisages her own history and that of Ireland through the national myth of Anna Liffey. This iconoclastic female figure of the city of Dublin is used to enhance Boland's own psychological journey of self-discovery of finding her identity as a woman and a poet.

The remembrance of a childhood scar not only employs the body to record a particular point in history, but also create allusions of the passing of time. Yet time is of the essence in both *Outside History* and *In A Time of Violence* since these volumes lack the zest of youth. Various proclamations of it being 'too late' for Boland to move woman 'out of myth [and] into history' echo throughout her poetry. In 'Beautiful Speech', for example, the speaker answers her own question when she says, 'it is too late / to shut the book of satin phrases?' It is, however, 'too late' for Boland in 'Anna

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<sup>23</sup> Wheatley, 'Changing the Story', p.109.

Liffey' because she has metaphorically run out of time as a result of her death within the poem. The various images of Boland gradually ageing within the poem, thus leading to her ultimate poetic death, conclude with the epitaph:

In the end  
It will not matter  
That I was a woman. I am sure of it.  
The body is a source. Nothing more.  
There is a time for it. There is a certainty  
About the way it seeks its own dissolution.  
Consider rivers.  
They are always en route to  
Their own nothingness. From the first moment  
They are going home. And so  
When language cannot do it for us,  
Cannot make us know love will not diminish us,  
There are these phrases  
Of the ocean  
To console us.  
Particular and unafraid of their completion.  
In the end  
Everything that burdened and distinguished me  
Will be lost in this:  
I was a voice.

Despite her determined efforts to write her ageing self into her poem by using her 'body as a source', Boland is now faced with the bleak realisation that death is now inevitable. Lamenting for her youth suggests that the immortal beauty has been released from 'the terrible / suspension of life' (CP, p.210). As woman is released from the timelessness of myth, the ageing body metaphorically regulates the historical passing of time. In theory, therefore, as the body ages within the poem, Boland is moving woman 'out of myth [and] into history'. But as the realms of myth and history meet, as in 'Lava Cameo', what then becomes of the body of the ordinary ageing woman when the poem reaches its conclusion? The resonance of both a fading

voice and body as the poem gradually drifts towards the poet's death marks the beginning of the end for Boland. Her success in creating a poem which she 'can grow old and die in' is only temporary. Any achievements gained from writing 'Anna Liffey' might almost have never been.

In a review of *In A Time of Violence*, David Barber further doubts Boland's success in 'Anna Liffey'. He argues that the poem 'collapses under the weight of its overblown self-dramatization....but in doing so, she's abandoned her customary exactitude and economy of scale. Its centre does not hold.'<sup>24</sup> Although Boland wrote of her ageing self in 'Anna Liffey' to challenge traditional gendered images of Ireland, she not only sustains the nation's femininity, but also reinforces it. Boland's ideals concerning woman's political body have been forsaken as a way of being accepted by her nation and its history from which she has felt isolated:

I came here in a cold winter.

I had no children. No country.  
I did not know the name for my own life.

My country took hold of me.  
My children were born.

Theoretically, the nation, then, is only willing to embrace woman in her youthful and maternal prime. Boland's feminist re-writing of the political poem would require both complicity and dissidence if she were to re-gender the national poem in her next collection *The Lost Land* (1998). In his review of *The Lost Land*, Colin Graham states that Boland's failings lie not in her poetics, but in her politics

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<sup>24</sup> David Barber, 'Review of *In a Time of Violence*', *Boston Review*  
<<http://bostonreview.net/BR19.5/barber.html>> [accessed 5 June 1998]

because 'Her ideas of nation and of (its) history are those which the nation dictates.'<sup>25</sup> Her self-promotion as a national poet aiming to write a political poem, however, begs the question of whether she is searching for a nation to validate herself as a poet. In this seemingly nationalistic volume, Boland's collusion with her nation's demand for acquiescence is based on an agreement that promises a re-conception of what the nation, along with its history, actually means to her personally as both a woman and poet.

### iii. Eavan Boland's Erotic Return to Heroic Ireland

'What is this thing – nation – that is so powerful it can make songs, attract sacrifice and so exclusive it drives into hiding the complex and skeptical ideas that serve it best?', asks Eavan Boland (OL, p.69). The nation, viewed as an 'expendable construct' (OL, p.145), is a constantly evolving concept that Boland as its 'citizen' chooses to redefine freely in the poetry of *The Lost Land*. In this 1998 volume gendered images of the nation are presented to challenge contemporary national definitions of Irish masculinity and femininity. For example, 'Mother Ireland' begins by working with the traditional iconography of woman as land with the lines, 'At first / I was land / I lay on my back to be fields' (LL, p.39). Later in the poem, Mother Ireland performs an act of self-recovery. Rising up from the land in a phoenix like image of rebirth declaring, 'Now I could tell my story. / It was different / from the story told about me' (LL, p.39). The creation of an imaginary nation in this volume.

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<sup>25</sup> Colin Graham, 'Reviews', *The North*, 24 (1999), p.39.

which brings together Boland's previous concerns about establishing a sense of national identity, concentrates on an exclusive inner vision, one that distorts established gendered definitions of 'this thing – nation'.

Catriona Clutterbuck, however, argues that Boland 'replicate[s] rather than extend[s]' images of woman as Ireland, and is not convinced by what she describes as Boland's 'direct critique of outworn icons of nation.'<sup>26</sup> Poems like 'Mother Ireland' and 'Imago', in which the speaker says, 'Head of a woman. Half-life of a nation' (LL, p.18), lead Clutterbuck to the conclusion that the 'nation stands in this collection for woman'.<sup>27</sup> Since the nation for Boland is an inter-changeable concept, presented rather loosely as an abstract image system, it is hinted at as being male and female in *The Lost Land*.<sup>28</sup> Presuming, then, that the other half of the nation referred to in 'Imago' is male, Boland not only offers an androgynous vision of her nation, but one that celebrates the fusion of a woman and male's history.

Since Boland's early autobiographical experiences have become distorted by time, the fantastic use of the imaginary, presenting unlimited possibilities of what could have been, is used to replace childhood memories of what actually happened: 'If I could not remember a country,' states Boland, 'I could at least imagine a nation'(OL, p.57). Stating in 'The Colonists' that, 'I am ready to go home / through

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<sup>26</sup> Catriona Clutterbuck, 'The Trustworthiness of Treachery', *Irish University Review*, 29 (Autumn / Winter 1999), p.406.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p.407.

<sup>28</sup> For a further discussion see Edna Longley's critique of Boland's oversimplified vision of an united Ireland in 'From Cathleen to Anorexia', in *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 1996), p.178, when she comments that Boland in her LIP pamphlet, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*, 'ignored the extent to which the North has destabilized the 'nation'. Boland holds to unitary assumptions about 'a society, a nation, a literary heritage.' Troubled about 'the woman poet', she takes the 'national tradition' for granted – and perhaps thereby misses a source of her trouble.'

an autumn evening' (LL, p.25), the imaginary nation that is created in such poems from *The Lost Land* presents a psychological inner vision of Boland's return to her native Dublin. Once again, the poet's metonymical use of her personal exile from her native city of Dublin deals with the wider issue of moving woman 'out of myth [and] into history' by challenging her traditional relationship with 'the nation as woman; the woman as national muse' (OL, p.136).

Having left 'the Bardic Order' of the 'Gaelic world' behind in *The Lost Land's* opening poem, 'My Country in Darkness' (LL, p.13), Boland proceeds by imagining a nation that is very much in transition.<sup>29</sup> On her imaginary return to Dublin, she does not play out the traditional role of the tourist or sightseer, rather in the guise of a voyeuristic historian she is more like a flâneuse as Luke Gibbons thus describes it:

In his essay 'On the Difficult Art of Taking a Walk', Franz Hessel, friend and collaborator of Walter Benjamin, describes how the aimless movement of the flâneur through the city subverts the routinised and functional pleasures of the tourist sightseer: "*sight-seeing*. What a forcible pleonasm!" The tourist guide', he explains, 'now forces our gaze' towards national monuments, 'or is directed towards the Prussian State Bank, meanwhile I glance over at the famous cellar which E.T.A. Hoffman used to frequent.' While the tourist is spirited through the city on a bus, which leaves little time to linger the sights, the flâneur prefers site to sight-seeing, unearthing the hidden histories and unexplained details of what is presented to him.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Wheatley's discussion of 'My Country in Darkness' in 'Changing the Story', p.110. He argues that, 'Boland's assurance that her anonymous bard can stand in for the entirety of the Gaelic world is simultaneously bland and reckless. The darkness that overtakes him is all too convenient: The Gaelic world was not so completely silenced that Boland couldn't tell us a lot more about it if she choose. For the purposes of *The Lost Land* though, Gaelic Ireland exists only as anonymous and doomed, almost Arnoldian in its Celtic melancholy.'

<sup>30</sup> Luke Gibbons, "Where Wolfe Tone's Statue was not': Joyce, Monuments and Memory', in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed., Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.149.

Boland prefers the role of site-seeing to that of sightseer because this focus will enable her to see beyond Dublin's monuments of heroes and patriots and 'unearth Ireland's hidden histories'. Reviewing Irish history through the lens of gender, points to the *Lost Land's* revisionist objective.<sup>31</sup> Considering how the term 'revisionism' may be applied to contemporary history, George Boyce and Alan O'Day state that, 'Revising national history is perilous, especially if cherished legends are debunked or heroes pushed off their pedestals.'<sup>32</sup> In *The Lost Land's* revisionist history many men are referred to as anything but heroes. Poems such as 'City of Shadows' feature Boland's father as an anti-heroic figure in the image of him defeatedly 'buttoning his coat [at Trinity College's] Front Gate'. Pre-empting his demise Boland recalls that, 'I thought he would look like a man / who had lost what he had. And he did' (LL, p.210). Such weak images of defeated masculinity reflect on the 'contradictions' that Boland proposes to re-write into these poems that promise a revisionist history. Observed through an erotic vein, therefore, men are reduced to historical representations of failure.

In his review of *The Lost Land*, Graham argues that Boland struggles to carry out her revisionary task. He states that, 'No matter how much she resists and discusses the granite figures of the patriots who watch over her in the main streets of Dublin, their fixture in the granite remains. While other Irish poets...are symbolically

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<sup>31</sup> See Catherine Nash, 'Embodied Irishness: Gender, Sexuality and Irish Identities', in *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography*, ed., Brian Graham (London: Routledge, 1997), p.117. Nash has argued that the 'critical attention to the way in which the nation is conceptualised has focused on the ways in which what has come to be understood as national history has been structured through gender.'

<sup>32</sup> George Boyce and Alan O'Day, ed's., *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p.1.

blowing up the statues, Boland is kicking their plinths.’<sup>33</sup> Obsessively devoted to re-writing history, Boland, the voyeuristic historian, is however, intent on presenting a ‘counterrepresentation’<sup>34</sup> of Dublin’s history. By combining ‘Sex and history. And skin and bone’ in ‘Heroic’ (LL, p.50), Boland explores ‘the different ideas of how political colony and sexual colony could talk to each other.’<sup>35</sup> This dialogue between the political and sexual not only restores a sense of physicality back into Irish history, but as the voyeuristic historian, Boland uses the erotic’s potentially disruptive forces to make a connection with her nation and its history. ‘In a certain sense’, says Boland, ‘I discovered my country by eroticising it: by plotting those correlatives between maleness and strength, between imagination and power which allowed me not only to enter the story, but also to change it.’<sup>36</sup> The erotic’s transformatory power is used in conjunction with its ambiguous semantic intangibility to re-balance the traditional power relations of male strength over female weakness. When changing the story, the erotic is used as a medium to dissolve the exclusiveness of the public and private realms of both the nation and woman.

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<sup>33</sup> Graham, ‘Reviews’, p.39.

<sup>34</sup> For a further discussion see Molly Mullin’s, ‘Representations of History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Difference’, *Feminist Studies*, 17 (Spring 1991), pp.29-50. In this article based on the 1988 celebrations of one thousand years of Dublin history entitled the ‘Dublin Millennium’, Mullin, p.29, discusses how Irish women took the opportunity to present their own ‘more marginal, counterhegemonic representations of the Millennium, including several produced by Irish feminists. Among the counterrepresentations of the city’s past was a poster which attempted both to commemorate former Dublin women – a few who are not well known, but *could* be – and to protest against the consistent exclusion of women from the more widely distributed representations of Dublin history.’

<sup>35</sup> Jody Allen-Randolph, ‘A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland’, *Colby Quarterly: Special Issue on Eavan Boland*, (Dec 1999)

<<http://www.carcenet.co.uk/cgibin/scribe?showdoc=5;doctype=interview>> [accessed 19 March 2005].

<sup>36</sup> Boland, ‘Letter to a Young Woman Poet’, *PN Review*, 24 (Nov-Dec 1997), p.18.

The erotic for Audre Lorde is a power source for woman to use as ‘a resource’, one that ‘offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.’<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Sylvia Henneberg argues that Lorde believes that the erotic has multiple intangible meanings when stating that her ‘understanding of the erotic exemplifies just how far the meanings of eroticism can be pushed, how far they can shift and multiply’.<sup>38</sup> Historical gratification is achieved when Boland eroticises her own history through the recollection of the stories of her voyeuristic youth. Writing this erotic unofficial history presents a direct challenge to the ‘official’ one by offering a woman poet’s immoral vision of history. In ‘Unheroic’ (LL, pp.23-24), Boland re-enacts an imaginary sexual drama, which centres on an autobiographical anecdote of how as a teenager she became obsessively mesmerised by the untold history of a middle-aged hotel manager. She recalls:

It was an Irish summer. It was wet.  
It was a job. I was seventeen.  
I set the clock and caught the bus at eight  
and leaned my head against the misty window.  
The city passed by. I got off  
above the Liffey on a street of statues:  
Iron orators and granite patriots.  
Arms wide. Lips apart. Last words.

I worked in a hotel. I carried trays.  
I carried keys. I saw the rooms  
when they were used and airless and again  
when they were aired and ready and I stood  
above the road and stared down at

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<sup>37</sup> Audre Lorde, ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power’, in *Writing on the Body*, p.277.

<sup>38</sup> Sylvia Henneberg, ‘Neither Lesbian nor Straight: Multiple Eroticisms in Emily Dickinson’s Love Poetry’, *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 4 (1995), p.4.

silent eloquence and wet umbrellas.

Gibbons states, 'It is true that commemorative ceremonies, like public monuments, have the capacity to freeze and immobilize the past'.<sup>39</sup> The statues that figure largely in *The Lost Land* merely provide Boland with a reference point to begin where history was suspended. Speaking on behalf of these silent witnesses, Boland seizes the opportunity to pick up the story where it was left by Ireland's patriots and heroes, only she retells it from a woman's perspective. As Boland 'got off / above the Liffey on a street of statues' the 'Iron orators and granite patriots. / Arms wide. Lips apart. Last words' overwhelmed her with their presence. Boland says that she still remembers:

...the almost physical oppression I felt walking down O'Connell Street...passing statue after statue – all those bronze, gesturing patriots with their plaques. It wasn't that I didn't feel drawn to the enterprise of trying to be a nation or a people because in some ways I did. It's just that this theatre is so hierarchical. And so unacknowledging of women.<sup>40</sup>

Having got off the bus 'above the Liffey', Boland positions herself in the middle of this hierarchical theatre. The strategic placing of the woman at the centre of the city to observe it while it 'passed by' demonstrates the fluidity of the nation's indefinability as seen through her eyes. The contrasting images of being motionless when all that surrounds her is moving suggests that Boland is frozen in time. Thus, she is able freely to re-discover her sensual reunion with Dublin. Recalling a summer's evening in the suburban Dublin hills she says, 'Everywhere you look there

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<sup>39</sup> Gibbons, "Where Wolfe Tone's Statue was not", p.154.

<sup>40</sup> Allen-Randolph, 'A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland'.

is evidence that this is a landscape of rapid change and ordinary survivals' (OL, p.203). Boland reads the city as if it were a piece of history, one that makes itself vulnerable to re-interpretation. Like Dublin's 'landscape', Boland looks at the meek manager as an 'ordinary survivor'. His mundane existence makes him the antithesis of what would be regarded as a hero. Instead he is re-figured as some kind of 'anti-hero'. Even his domestic environment denies him of his masculinity:

There was a man who lived in the hotel.  
He was a manager. I rarely saw him.  
There was a rumour that he had a wound  
from war or illness - no one seemed sure -  
which would not heal. And when he finished  
his day of ledgers and telephones he went  
up the back stairs to his room  
to dress it. I never found out  
where it was. Someone said in his thigh.  
Someone else said deep in his side.

Boland's intense focus on the manager transforms him into the erotic object of her desire. Seduced by the manager's reticence, as in the recovery of her grandmother's story in 'Lava Cameo', the story is tentatively rebuilt on hearsay, a mere 'rumour' created out of various speculations. The hotel manager's one and only act of heroism is silenced as the wounded flesh of his body absorbs the story of what really happened. It is not the physical wound that is erotic. Rather it is the silenced secret of the unknown history of the wound that is erotic, which in turn has the power to fix the voyeur's gaze. Cracking the silence is vital for Boland if she is to look beyond the words of history to discover what was not said:

He was a quiet man. He spoke softly.  
I saw him once or twice on the stairs

at the back of the building by the laundry.  
Once I waited, curious to see him.

‘If I had looked about me with a wider sense of curiosity, I would have noticed more’, says Boland. ‘To start with, I would have seen a past as well as a present’ (OL, pp.156–157). Boland’s youthful curiosity fuels her obsession of discovering the manager’s hidden secret. Such curiosity may, however, lead to a distortion of the truth by imagining what might have been. Curiosity, then, becomes a key to the past that plays a part in determining how the present is re-viewed. Fuelled by her intrigue of the male body, his physical imperfection is objectified through the voyeuristic historian’s curiosity. It is the mystery behind the manager’s perfect image of his masculinity that is erotic, and which drives this voyeuristic act. Boland explores the history behind his wounded body as though it was a symbolic representative of her nation and its history, both of which she is determined to be included. Reading the male body as though it was a piece of historical survival, Boland is synonymously making a territorial claim on the male body.

Deborah Sarbin suggests that in her revisionist approach to history, Boland rewrites history from an ethical position in order to distinguish her unofficial women’s history from the official male one. She states that ‘It could be argued that history from a woman’s moral standpoint would be about connections and failures of connection, rather than individual deeds of greatness.’<sup>41</sup> As it has been, Boland’s

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<sup>41</sup> Deborah Sarbin, “Out of Myth and into History’: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 19 (July 1993), p.86. When interpreting Boland’s claim ‘As far as history goes / we were never on the scene of the crime’, from ‘It’s a Woman’s World’, Sarbin states that ‘in keeping with that spirit of dual purpose, while ruefully acknowledging the

long-term aim to rewrite women into the predominantly patriarchal history the making and breaking of connections have been an important part of Boland's poetry. Looking from within her own history and 'into the patient face of the unhealed' in 'Unheroic', Boland 'attempts to find a private history within the public one'(OL, p.52). The poet makes a connection with Irish history through re-living part of her own history through that of the manager's. In 'Unheroic', earlier suggestions of an androgynous nation are fuelled when images of the nation are set against those which are both male and female:

Mostly I went home. I got my coat  
and walked bare-headed to the river  
past the wet, bronze and unbroken skin  
of those who learned their time and knew their country.

How do I know my country? Let me tell you  
it has been hard to do. And when I do  
go back to difficult knowledge, it is not  
to that street or those men raised  
high above the certainties they stood on -  
*Ireland hero history* - but how

I went behind the linen room and up  
the stone stairs and climbed to the top.  
And stood for a moment there, concealed  
by shadows. In a hiding place.  
Waiting to see.  
Wanting to look again.  
Into the patient face of the unhealed.

The focus of a youthful Boland walking 'bare-headed to the river' set against 'the wet, bronze and unbroken skin / of those who learned their time and knew their country' creates an erotic image of the poet as a disembodied woman almost touching

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absence of feminine agents in Irish history so far, suggests a sort of prelapsarian innocence, a sly assertion of moral superiority'.

the imitations of male skin. Unlike the flawless perfection of the 'bronze and unbroken skin', however, there are flaws in Boland's story. Boland it seems is aloof from history. Had she chosen to look more closely at the statues, then she would have seen a different story. Turning her focus away from the truth, like a disoriented observer of her nation, she rises above 'Ireland hero history' to take up her concealed position in her makeshift watchtower. She waits in great anticipation to see the manager's hidden secret. Although a distanced position is assumed from which to observe the male, it is this imaginary relationship with the manager that has enabled her to rediscover her nation. Whereas the poem began with the nation in motion with Boland motionlessly observing it, the nation now is static with Boland in motion. This suggests that the power relations between the poet and her nation have been redressed. As 'Unheroic' concludes with an image of this voyeuristic historian on the outside of history looking in, there has been a gradual sense of Boland redirecting her vision focusing on the importance of recording an internal personal perception of the past as opposed to recreating the physical facts of a woman's history.

Boland returns to her nation's history through this imaginary voyeuristic encounter with a male's undisclosed history. As the voyeuristic historian, she speaks from within the centre of a history that is her own, rather than from the outside of one that she has been excluded from. The strategic placing of the autobiographical self at the centre of this manager's history means that she has allowed herself to become absorbed by the male's history. As Boland has been denied a sense of national history, she has allowed the recreation of her own history to be dictated by that of a middle-aged hotel manager. Through her carefully calculated and planned voyeuristic

intrusion into the male's privacy, Boland has taken control of the male's history and made it her own. The focus on the autobiographical self at the centre of the poetry, and the fact that history is being reviewed through her autobiographical experiences, returns to the earlier question as to whether Boland is re-writing history for women or simply herself. By using her autobiography as the driving force behind her poetry, what Boland has presented in *The Lost Land* is a psychology of history, an internal critique of her own inner vision of Irish history.

#### **iv. Writing History as Romance in Eavan Boland's Anti-Love Poetry**

In her discussion of 'post-ceasefire literature'<sup>42</sup>, Edna Longley says of Seamus Heaney's *The Spirit Level* (1996) that, 'some poems roughly accord with [Hayden] White's definition of writing history as Romance, that is as 'a drama of self-identification symbolised by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it.'<sup>43</sup> According to Longley, in White's conclusion to *Metahistory* (1973) he 'identifies with three interacting kinds of "explanatory strategy" in the nineteenth-century historians he studies'. The third of these 'explanatory strategies' consists of "four different archetypal plot structures" taken from Northrop Frye (Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire).'<sup>44</sup> In her discussion of Irish history and historiography, Longley reads Northern Irish poetry as history through each of White's plot structures

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<sup>42</sup> See Edna Longley's comments in *Poetry and Posterity* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000), p.280. She states that, 'For months after the first IRA ceasefire, arts journalists from abroad would visit Belfast to ask writers 'what are you going to write about now?' and occasionally ask critics 'What will post-ceasefire literature be like?' One reply was that it might be less a matter of writing differently than of reading differently'.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.305.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.289.

above. Romance and tragedy are two of the archetypal plot structures that work alongside each other in Eavan Boland's historic volume, *Code* (2001). Boland's anti-love lyrics take on a political focus when questioning the concept of human love when faced with national tragedy. Distracted by the catastrophes of history, sexual love is not the object of *Code's* anti-love poetry that is filled with many images of poverty, despair, hopelessness and powerlessness. Unlike Heaney's celebration of the victorious hero, Boland's lovers are victims of history, not victors. We are told in 'Once' (C, p.20) that 'The lovers in an Irish story never had good fortune'. In this anti-love lyric, Boland exposes how time takes its toll on marital love because she says that:

I want to show you what is hidden in  
this ordinary, ageing human love is  
there still and will be until

an inland coast so densely wooded  
not even the ocean fog could enter it  
appears in front of us and the chilled-  
to-the-bone light clears and shows us

Irish wolves: a silvery man and wife.  
Yellow-eyed. Edged in dateless moonlight.  
They are mated for life. They are legendary. They are safe.

'Once' begins with a story of two lovers kissing 'at the edge of death.' This impenetrable love will be there until the end of time, suggesting that this love is eternal. Since this is not a historical love story, but a 'legendary' one, love does not suffer from the catastrophic consequences of history. The love between 'a silvery man and wife' has been protected by the timelessness of legend and not exposed to 'the toxins of a whole history' (C, p.15). It is only real love that suffers from an

unhappy ending, compared with the imaginary one that follows the traditional fairy tale ending of 'and they all lived happily ever after.'

Boland rewrites history through a code based on marital love that has stood the test of time. Of *Code*, Clair Wills remarks that, 'if codes can be governmental, regulatory, even penal, they can also be clandestine, subversively secret....The ways we encrypt and decipher things, Boland suggests, are finally not a distortion, but part of their truth.'<sup>45</sup> Codes based on romance and tragedies are employed in this collection of anti-love poetry to clarify, not distort history's truth. The title poem, 'Code', is dedicated to Grace Murray Hopper (1906-88), 'maker of a computer compiler and verifier of COBOL'. In this ode, Boland imagines this emblematic figure of history 'compiling binaries and zeroes. / The given world is what you can translate.' Boland in turn writes exclusively in code 'One word at a time. / One woman to another' (C, pp.28-29). She is dealing with codes that specifically relate to women and their experiences of writing of the history of their ordinary lives in code.

Re-writing history through an autocritographical vision of love, the romance plot is employed in *Code's* marriage poems to write the contradictions of marital love into the past and its history. In 'Against Love Poetry', from *Code's* first sequence, 'Marriage', Boland celebrates her thirty years of marriage with her novelist husband, Kevin Casey, to whom this volume is dedicated. Yet, these poems do not linger on the marital love Boland has had with her husband. Rather, in dealing with the harsh realities of woman's faithful servitude to marriage, she uses the experiences of her own marriage as the basis from which to question the eternity of marital love. Thus

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<sup>45</sup> Clair Wills, 'No Longer Islanded', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 February 2002, p.12.

claiming, 'It is to mark the contradictions of a daily love that I have written this. Against love poetry.' So, although these anti-love poems set out to explore 'the idea of women's freedom', the contradiction at work here is how marriage is presented as 'not freedom.' Since 'love poetry can do not justice to this', states Boland, 'every word here is written against love poetry.' Writing 'against love poetry' as a form of feminist protest, Boland is not intending to test the history of physical love, but to question the ideology behind everyday marital love. As the speaker of 'Thanked be Fortune' says, 'We learned by heart / the code marriage makes of passion - / *duty dailyness routine*' (C, p.21).

Focusing on the 'violations of love' in earlier poems such as 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me', from *Outside History* (1990), Boland explains how and why she wrote this poem as a 'back-to-front love poem':

It would be wrong to say I was clear, when I wrote this poem, about disassembling an erotic politic. I was not. But I was aware of my own sense of the traditional erotic object – in this case the black lace fan – as a sign not for triumph and acquisition but for suffering itself. And without having words for it, I was conscious of trying to divide it from its usual source of generation: the sexualized perspective of the poet. To that extent I was writing a sign which might bring me closer to those emblems of the body I had seen in those visionary years, when ordinary objects seemed to warn me that the body might share the world but could not own it. And if I was not conscious of taking apart something I had been taught to leave well alone, nevertheless I had a clear sense of – at last – writing the poem away from the traditional erotic object towards something which spoke of the violations of love, while still shadowing the old context of its power. In other words, a back-to-front love poem (OL, pp.230-231).

Traditional erotic objects lose their sexual appeal in becoming objects that hold a socio-historical significance. The black lace fan, which had been given to Boland's mother by her father 'in a heat wave in Paris in the thirties' with 'wild roses

appliquéd on silk by hand, / darkly picked, stitched boldly, quickly', is strategically placed within the poem as a symbolic reminder of the poor working conditions women lace makers were made to suffer in eighteenth-century Ireland at the expense of love. Similar violations of love are further explored in 'In Which Hester Bateman, 18<sup>th</sup> Century English Silversmith Takes an Irish Commission' (C, p.11). Whereas the black lace fan represented women's historical suffering, the marriage spoon in this poem represents a nation's suffering. Tracing the political history that lies behind the making of a marriage spoon, this Irish commission of an English artist using 'the sweet colonial metal', later described as 'her craft of hurt', commemorates the pains of colonialism rather than the celebration of the marriage. With this in mind the speaker invites the reader to:

... See how

Past and future and the space between  
The semblance of empire, the promise of nation,  
Are vanishing in this mediation  
Between oppression and love's remembrance

Until resistance is their only element. It is  
What they embody, bound now and always:  
History frowns on them: yet in its gaze  
They join their injured hands and make their vows.

For Boland, history and love are as treacherous as each other since this is a marriage made in hell, not heaven. Focusing on the imperfections of marriage, rather than its ideals, the man and woman are joined together through pain and violence. The expected passion and anticipations of love have been replaced with pain and suffering, as the couple have been forced together in this making of history. 'The

semblance of empire, the promise of nation' presents a superficial vision of the beginning of a new post-colonial, possibly even united Ireland. Inwardly, however, the silence of their collapse is as quietly doomed as the marriage itself. As the Irish and English become united in this loveless marriage, history casts its disapproving moral gaze when playing witness to this act of rebellion.

In his review of *Code*, Alan Brownjohn says that 'Love, for Boland is not tested at night in the lovebed, but by hunger and deprivation'.<sup>46</sup> When put to the historical test in 'Quarantine', love is subjected to the devastating effects of the 1840s Famine. Boland informs us that the poem is based on an anecdote that was left by a man, who wrote it down sixty years later. She says, 'This incident must have been like hundreds of others and would probably have been forgotten.'<sup>47</sup> In this 'dark love story, and an exemplary one'<sup>48</sup>, the ideals of love, as promoted in traditional love poetry, are completely rejected. While time places historical limitations on love in 'Quarantine', earlier in 'Once', love blossoms when set within the timelessness of myth. When comparing these two poems it becomes clear that certain historical events have the power to destroy love while preserving it at the same time. In 'Quarantine' the marriage vow of till death do us part is pushed to its ultimate limits when the love between a man and woman becomes a matter of protection and survival. In blaming history for the demise of love, it is doomed from the poem's beginning:

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<sup>46</sup> Alan Brownjohn, 'Bondi, Bullocks and The Book of Kells', *Sunday Times*, 18 November 2001, p.45.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Caffeine Destiny and Eavan Boland <<http://www.caffeinedestiny.com/boland.html>> [accessed 15 May 2002].

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

In the worst hour of the worst season  
of the worst year of a whole people  
a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.  
He was walking – they were both walking – north.

She was sick with famine fever and could not keep  
up.

He lifted her and put her on his back.  
He walked like that west and west and north.  
Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.

In the morning they were both found dead.  
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole  
history.  
But her feet were held against his breastbone.  
The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.

Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.  
There is no place here for the inexact  
Praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.  
There is only time for this merciless inventory:

Their death together in the winter of 1847.  
Also what they had suffered. How they lived.  
And what there is between a man and woman.  
And in the darkness it can be best proved.

Since love and history work together to form a marriage of their own in *Code*, it is not surprising when Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford states that ‘Love poetry cannot exclude itself from the process of history’.<sup>49</sup> In her analyses of the role history has played in Yeats’ love poetry, Butler-Cullingford argues that in his poem ‘Politics’ he ‘rejects politics in the interest of desire.’<sup>50</sup> Desire is rejected in favour of challenging

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<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.2.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. See Butler-Cullingford’s comments on Yeats’ poem ‘Politics’, p.2. She argues that, ‘generically, Yeats rejects public verse in the interests of love poetry, as the speaker turns away from the news report to gaze at a good-looking woman: “How can I, that girl standing there, / My attention fix / On Roman, or on Russian / Or on Spanish politics?” Written when the attention of the world had for a decade been anxiously fixed on just such topics, ‘Politics’ sees love poetry as a distraction from history.’

the sexual politics of traditional love poetry. Love, then, is stripped of the intimacy of the private sphere when moved into a public arena. Boland 'disassemble[s] the erotic politics' of love poetry in 'Quarantine', by placing a 'threshold' between the sensual and physical worlds. 'The sexualized perspective of the poet' is averted from gazing at the woman and her body in favour of recording a cold and 'merciless inventory' that merely states the fact that the lovers simply lived and died as man and wife. As the narrator, therefore, begins to drift into the erotic romanticism of the man's sacrifice of his 'last heat', his final act of love, the only one that he was able to show his wife in the face of death, she is prevented from doing so by the 'threshold' that divides love and history.

Debrah Raschke says that, 'Myth is a way of distancing that avoids human relations, that in essence, avoids life – the Platonic ascent, the forever unconsummated romance.'<sup>51</sup> When telling this political love story, the narrator's fairy-tale tone not only deprives the history of any emotion, but the hyperbolic tension that is built up in the repetition of 'worst' leaves an air of disbelief as to what actually happens later in the poem through its sheer overdramatisation. As in the use of 'worst', the repetition of 'whole' in the lines 'of a whole people', and 'of a whole history', suggests that Boland is trying to establish a complete picture or story. Speaking on behalf of a nation through this emblematic story of just one man and woman, the poet fails to establish their history of 'what they suffered. How they lived' before 'Their death together in the winter of 1847.' *Code's* anti-love poems critically contextualise history while it is fictionalised. As an Irish child growing up in

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<sup>51</sup> Raschke, 'Eavan Boland's *Outside History* and *In a Time of Violence*', p.139.

London during the 1950's, Boland recalls her lack of knowledge of Irish history when she says that, 'I knew nothing. Nothing of nations or that Napoleon said, "What is history but a fable agreed upon?"' (OL, p.44) Like the fable of the King in 'Against Love Poetry', history is also being rewritten here as though it was a fable. Her political use of fable in 'Quarantine' voids this love poem of any intimate sentimentality that may have existed between the lovers.

Boland suggests that history can test 'What there is between a man and a woman', but it cannot deprive them of their love. In this simple historical commemoration of love, the couple, despite their faithful devotion to one another, will only be remembered as victims of history. Her use of chilling emotion to suppress the couple's true identities suggests that they have become supplementary to the anecdotal tale. Thus, the coldness of the finite details of the man and woman's love lives on only in the margins of history's darkness. By telling this story of the shared, but diseased love, the narrator attempts to expose 'the toxins of a whole history'.

Colin Graham, in his review of *Code*, says, 'the terms "colonial", "violence", "empire" and "nation" have been edging towards joining History in a dark pantheon of awful certainties. Such solidities are then chipped away at by Boland, pitting the paradoxical strength of the small voice against the booming ideological monoliths.'<sup>52</sup> No matter which way Boland exhausts her autobiography to take on the 'ideological monoliths' of History, Woman and Nation it has always disappointingly ended in

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<sup>52</sup> Colin Graham, 'Meeting the Frowning Gaze of History', *Irish Times Online*, 13 October, 2001 <<http://www.ireland.com>> [accessed 15 July 2003].

failure. As we have seen on her journey of moving ‘woman out of myth [and] into history’, the Achill Woman, Boland’s grandmother, Anna Liffey and Boland herself have played an ornamental role in her autocritographical poetry and prose. Thus in these highly elaborate tales women merely act as accessories, emblems to the recreation of a past that did not and never will exist.

Yet Boland still ‘believes that if a woman poet survives, if she sets out on that distance and arrives at the other end, then she has an obligation to tell as much as she knows of the ghosts within her, for they make up, in essence, her story as well’(OL, pp.248 –249). Has Boland told us anything new about the woman and poet that we did not know before? In fact, any grasp on reality that the reader may have had before embarking on this journey with Boland has probably been distorted because of her constant fabrications of the past. Fundamentally driven by her need to establish her identity as a woman and a poet, she is caught between telling the truths of the past, while telling them at a slant. Like the history that continues to be an inhibiting burden in *Code*, as it is defeated by the past, Boland concedes that, ‘The past is not hot wax or soft syntax. It is the inert, unchangeable, sometimes brutal reality of what happened.’<sup>53</sup> ‘The past’, says the speaker of ‘Making Money’, ‘is not made out of time, out of memory, / out of irony but is also / a crime we cannot admit and will not atone’ (C, p.31). Boland realises that she alone cannot compensate for the ‘crimes’ of the past or face up to its harsh realities. Rather, they are avoided when she chooses to sensationalise history when rewriting it as a mythical romance in *Code*.

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<sup>53</sup> Boland, ‘Daughters of Colony: A Personal Interpretation’, pp.12-13.

Since declaring in 1990 that her primary aim was to write woman 'out of myth [and] into history', Boland has dedicated much of her career to writing women's voices back into the (male) literary history that once silenced them as objects. Boland, however, rather disappointingly failed to transform woman from the object of the traditional male poem into its subject of her own poem. Despite Boland's indomitable drive in Chapter IV to rewrite history, she does so in such an oblique way that her autocritographical tales read like mythical accounts of a woman and poet's history.

In terms of Irish literary women's history, it has come to light that researchers and historians have found documentary evidence that women have been consistently writing and publishing since the seventeenth-century at least. Such findings, therefore, question Boland's use of autobiography to re-write women's history, particularly when claiming that 'I intend without apology, to use my personal experience and convictions as the text of proof. There is no other available to me.'<sup>54</sup> As women have travelled out of myth into history and back into myth in Boland's poetry and prose, her feminist recovery of Ireland's silenced post-colonial history is as dependent on myth as it is history because the past 'will be what is lost of words / as they turn to silence and then to sleep'(OH, p.19).

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.10.

## Chapter Five:

### Medbh McGuckian's Phantasmatic Corporal Vision of Northern Irish History (1994 – 2003)

#### i. 'I have not spoken words with roots / since I last saw you': Medbh McGuckian's Silent 'Eye / I'

According to David Wheatley, 'Seamus Heaney and other Northern Irish Poets deploy strategies of silence, secrecy, private reference, and tribal shibboleth rather than "blabb[ing]out."' <sup>1</sup> Wheatley quotes the following lines from 'The Stone Verdict' to illustrate how Heaney's 'dead taciturn father' is as silent in death as he was in life: 'It will be no justice if the sentence is blabbed out. / He will expect more than words in the ultimate court / he relied on through a lifetime's speechlessness.' Through not 'blabbing out', Heaney's father refrains from being labelled an 'informer' by honouring the code of silence. <sup>2</sup> Like Heaney, Medbh McGuckian's employment of her dead father as her male muse for which to write oblique political narratives, suggests that she too is not willing to play the role of 'informer', and or witness since she commits her dead father to a 'sentence of speechlessness' in *Captain Lavender* (CL, p.36). The plural meaning of the word

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<sup>1</sup>David Wheatley, "'That Blank Mouth": Secrecy, Shibboleths, and Silence in Northern Irish Poetry', *Journal of Modern Irish Literature*, 25 (Fall 2001), p.2. For more on Heaney and his father see Steven Matthews' discussion of 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge: Killed in France 31 July 1917' in *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation: The Evolving Debate, 1969 to Present* (Houndmills & New York: Macmillan Press & St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp.7-8. He argues that Heaney's use of 'the familial as a link to the war and to Ledwidge's death only serves to exaggerate the awkward distance between the domesticity of certain views of Ireland and the actualities of modern war.' See also Terence Brown's, 'Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness' in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed., Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.133-148. Like Heaney, Michael Longley uses his father's experiences of the First World War to address political violence. For example, Longley's 1972 elegy 'Wounds' relives the murders of three soldiers and a bus conductor through his father's experiences of the Great War.

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on the political consequences of 'informing' see Wheatley, "'That Blank Mouth'", pp.7-9.

‘sentence’ is put into play when the father is ‘sentenced’ to an imprisonment of deadly silence, and how he uses his dead body to write a ‘sentence’ of silence.

This shared experience of being physically imprisoned by silence intensifies McGuckian’s paradox of saying while saying nothing. She continues to present the body of language as imprisoning in a later poem, ‘Reading in a Library’(HIATL, p.33), in which the speaker says, ‘I bring a sentence to your body’. As mediator between the living and dead in ‘Hessian, Linen, Silk’, McGuckian has the power to decide whether historical memories will survive by passing a (death) ‘sentence’ or preserving life in a ‘sentence’ (a series of words) in the lines ‘It cannot be disposed of by a sentence, / By sentence upon sentence, / By sentence opposed to sentence’ (SOYII, p.72). The paradoxical placing of the sentences ‘upon’ and ‘opposed’ to each other creates feelings of covering ‘it’ up, or, wiping ‘it’ out. Hence, Clair Wills argues that in McGuckian’s poems,

instead of intimacy we are confronted with secrecy, a refusal to offer the narrative up for inspection,...as a historical narrative is glimpsed in fragmented forms through the articulation of intimate body parts – that these are not private narratives anyway, but political allegories.<sup>3</sup>

Cutting through the politics of history, McGuckian performs a linguistic post-mortem of her father’s body to exorcise the paradox of speaking and being silent. This introduction to Chapter V will illustrate how *Captain Lavender’s* elegies, that not only lament the loss of a dead father, but also of language, use the body, namely images of the eye, to create oblique political narratives. Following this, the chapter will continue to centre a historical discussion of political silence employing the eye as a form of visual communication. Through McGuckian’s mind’s eye of *Shelmalier* (1998), the poet cryptically encodes an intimate

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<sup>3</sup> Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp.75-76.

(re)vision of the failed rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798 by ‘war masquerading as love’. At this particular point in the chapter, chronology will be placed to one side in order to briefly compare McGuckian’s bi-centennial commemoration of the 1798 Rebellion with that of the executions of the insurgents, Robert Emmet and Thomas Russell in 1803 in *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003). The eye in *Drawing Ballerinas* (2001) is that of the witness but not informant. Finally the chapter will conclude with a discussion based around an analysis of one poem, the title poem of *Drawing Ballerinas*, to illustrate the intensity of how McGuckian and Henri Matisse in their drawing of ballerinas created the psychological space to reflect and record while withdrawing from the horrors of war.

McGuckian’s multiple uses of the eye are indicative of her constantly evolving relationship with language and the body. The cover painting of the 1994 Gallery Press edition of *Captain Lavender*, Jack. B. Yeats’s ‘Communicating with the Prisoners’ (1924), instantly depicts the volume’s preoccupation with visual communication. In their art, both Yeats and McGuckian focus on the idea of political prisoners being silenced through the power of surveillance. The ‘County of Dublin Kilmainham Gaol’ (1796-1924) ‘imposed power through the self-censorship encouraged by visible observation and reduced oral communication rather than through physical force’.<sup>4</sup> According to Pat Cooke, the ideology of the

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<sup>4</sup>*Captain Lavender* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1994). The cover of the Wake Forest edition of *Captain Lavender* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 1995) is also of ‘Communicating with the Prisoners’. The painting concentrates on the women gazing up towards the Republican women political prisoners, who were imprisoned by the Irish Free State in the rotund tower. According to Kathleen O’Brien in ‘Gaol / Gaol: Re-viewing Silence in Kilmainham Gaol’, in *Éire-Ireland: Special Issue on the Visual Arts*, 3 & 4 (Fall / Winter 1998) & 1 (Spring 1999), pp. 179-180, the East Wing as ‘a massive and visually impenetrable form situated atop a rise in the local community landscape, the gaol can be seen as a strategic link in a more pervasive

architectural design of the Gaol's East Wing, built in 1861, shares common ground with Jeremy Bentham's 1843 plan for the panopticon penitentiary.<sup>5</sup> Although O'Brien says that 'the East Wing was not exactly a panopticon', she states that Cooke 'situates this new addition in a matrix of similar structures that prioritize unverifiable observation as an effective silencing device for the control of many by a few.'<sup>6</sup> Although, theoretically, Kilmainham Gaol's political prisoners seldom saw themselves being watched, they knew that there was a possibility of this and, therefore, restricted what they said, or created ways of speaking in codes. Thomas McGreevy's interpretation of 'Communicating with the Prisoners' reports, some of the Republican women political prisoners broke the windows of the Gaol's imposing tower so that they could communicate messages, sometimes cryptic, to the women who waited outside.<sup>7</sup>

As argued earlier in Chapter II, despite the fact that many critics have accused McGuckian of being intentionally oblique, she has been, and continues to be in *Captain Lavender*, intent on using body parts as an alternative form of communication. Whereas, the paradox of speaking while maintaining a certain silence was intensely located around images of mouths, tongues and lips, the eyes, in particular, play an important role in this coded non-verbal communication in

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kind of control, a silent but visibly oppressive representation of power in the daily lives of the local population'.

<sup>5</sup> O'Brien in 'Gaol / Gaol', p.178, citation taken from Michael Foucault's, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans., Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp.201-3.

Foucault explains that, 'Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the intimate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the tower from which he is spied on. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know that he is being looked at any one moment but he must be sure that he may always be so....'

<sup>6</sup> Pat Cooke cited from O'Brien's, 'Gaol / Gaol', p.179.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas McGreevy, 'Three Historical Paintings by Jack. B. Yeats', *The Capuchin Annual* (1942), pp.238-251

<<http://www.macgreevy.org/style?style=text&source=art.cpa.001.xml&action=show>>[accessed 9 October 2005].

*Captain Lavender*. For example, in 'Skull Light' the speaker states that 'The real look is creeping back into his eyes, / eyes I feared to read, that nailed or burned / the words to my lips' (CL, p.66). The inter-relationship between the eyes and vision with speaking and silence alludes to Kilmainham Gaol's imposition of power through self-censorship encouraged by visible observation that intended to reduce oral communication. The powers of self-censorship are explored in 'The Colour Shop', through the dead father's 'deep-set eyes /[that] say no, say little, and only / in the language of destination' (CL, p.59). Here the eyes that stare towards the imminent death, the image, or the reflection from within the hollow eyes communicate that the history that was once witnessed through the eyes is left unspoken. So what is seen is not always what is said as the politics of Northern Irish history are cryptically encoded into McGuckian's dead father's muted body.

In his political reading of *Captain Lavender*, Steven Matthews argues that Northern Irish poetry which deals with violence in the North 'set personal relationships as ontological metaphors for the political and historical situation in Ireland'.<sup>8</sup> McGuckian retains a vague sense of reality through her familial relationships, particularly her dead father, who provides much of the emotional drive in *Captain Lavender*. Until her most recent volume, *The Unswept Room*, the American poet Sharon Olds' trademark was the daughter's address to her father. Carol Rumens observes that Olds 'is never as relentlessly central or focused as the father who in previous collections, is a massive bodily presence shaping the emotional thrust of poem after poem.'<sup>9</sup> When Olds says in 'Directly', that 'My

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<sup>8</sup> Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation*, p.38.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Rumens, 'Body Beautiful', *The Guardian Review*, 26 April 2003, p.25.

father's harm is fading' she suggests that she has won some emotionally charged triumph over her father that now frees her mind to focus on the mother.

Like Olds, McGuckian uses her father as her male muse in *Captain Lavender's* political love poetry that manipulates metaphor to aid McGuckian's oblique political narratives by addressing him as though he was her political prisoner. For example, in 'The Colour Shop' images of bodily imprisonment are displayed in the lines, 'I still have your head, body, arms, legs, / all in my keeping' (CL, p.61). Remembering her father's death, McGuckian says that, 'It wasn't a war-death, it was a normal-death, but I treated it as a war-death. I address him as if he is a political prisoner. It eased it. But it was a metaphor to help me deal with something I couldn't deal with.'<sup>10</sup> As part of her father's reincarnation as a political prisoner, McGuckian experiments with the politics of gender identity by visualising him as a woman in 'Black Virgin' (CL, pp.56-57). She says that this sexual transformation alludes to the way that 'the prisoners are castrated – they have their manhood taken away – as part of the punishment for being so violent. So they're made into women. It's like puberty. It's not the discovery that you are a woman, it's the discovery that you are not a man.'<sup>11</sup> The ultimate punishment, then, is the denial of masculinity, of being emasculated:

If you are a woman there is no question  
of a word like me being able to comprehend  
the voice that uttered it, or its sign language  
lordly and off-balance, with the inwardness  
of war....

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<sup>10</sup> 'Kimberly Bohman, 'Surfacing: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian', *Irish Review*, 16 (Autumn / Winter 1994), p.100.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.101.

The politics of gender identity are being questioned through an ambiguous use of language. Although 'me' is the key word here it is unclear what the word 'me' actually means or refers to. Does the poet mean a word (like me) or a word like 'me'? The uncertainties surrounding the semantics of this word suggest that the poet is wrestling with the multiple and conflicting meanings of language. If the father becomes a woman, then, McGuckian is unable to communicate with him as the voice of the word 'me' or 'its sign language' is 'lordly and off balance'. Both verbal and visual communication has broken down here because of 'the inwardness of war'. This internal struggle is based on the differences between male and female perceptions of the Troubles and the inability to synchronise these through language.

Employing her father's death to address Northern Ireland's political violence while dealing with personal grief, the 'Troubles' and McGuckian's father, alias Captain Lavender, become metaphors for each other. In 'Black Note Study' (CL, pp.39-40), a rather extravagant conceit of her father's death, McGuckian compares the emotional love felt for her father with that of her country. The grief suffered from the loss of her father is analogous to that felt from the death and destruction caused by the political violence that McGuckian has witnessed:

Now you are my Northerner,  
more first than first love.  
Your eyes just show me the smoke  
settling on roads open to you  
only because they are pure offerings.

The prisoner's eyes do not speak of what they have seen by jumping straight to an image of the speaker recovering from the aftermath of war or love. The 'smoke'

not only hints at the smouldering of political violence, but also that of her father's cremation. The 'eyes' that inadvertently point to the 'smoke' create a sense of an inverted vision. As the 'smoke / settl[es] on the roads', a ghostly allusion to political violence fades away with the father. The body absorbs and stifles the historical effects of war. Any images of violence that he may or may not have witnessed are concealed in the body.

'The political poem' states Eavan Boland, 'is not the report of a privileged witness. It is a continuing action which revises, in some decisive way, the perceived relation of power between an inner and outer world.'<sup>12</sup> McGuckian's transcendental embrace of her father's dead body envelops the politics of Northern Irish history. Both McGuckian and her father employ the eyes as a form of power and control over the living and the dead. Her gaze at the real world through her dead father's eyes enables her to move freely between the realms of the spiritual and real worlds. The speaker of this political poem assumes a position of authority by imprisoning the dead body. With this possession comes a sense of resolution for the speaker. The images of domination and submission suggest that McGuckian and her father continue to play power games between the living and the dead. After a period of resistance, death has left the patriarchal body vacant, enabling its control. While she holds on to a physical memory of her father, she also becomes imprisoned by his spirit, and thus, cannot free her mind of his memory. Although McGuckian is searching for a way out of her imprisonment, her father's strong psychological presence within the poem provides her with a sense of power as if only she could release him from his death.

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<sup>12</sup> Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in our Time*, (London: Vintage, 1996), p.190.

The patriarch's silent and motionless body that is encompassed by the freezing 'winter' later in 'Black Note Study' is sealed tight like a vacuum. Once the decision has been made to seal history into the body it then becomes irretrievable. Thus, it reflects the Foucaultian idea that the body gains power through an ability to encode knowledge into the flesh. The body 'fold[s] mortal messages in the slow closing / of both eyes' (CL, p.75). The father's sacrifice of his eyes as 'pure offerings' is the key to doors of which 'All the locks of that country turn with that key'. The sacrificial offering of the 'eyes' also provides the key to his soul. The key to the Otherworld along the roads that McGuckian's father's spiritual journey takes him, is the key to obtaining freedom from his symbolic imprisonment.

Guinn Batten, in an afterword to *Soldiers of Year II* (2002), stated that 'while the body may become a shared prison, nevertheless through its agency, through its ability, literally to act, the suffering and even the dead may find, if not release, then at least a common language.'<sup>13</sup> Through the agency of the body McGuckian constantly re-negotiates the positions of domination and submission in her relationship with her father and language. Although the imprisoning 'I' of the daughter / gaoler imposes a 'sentence of speechlessness' on her prisoner / father, language is the key to liberation in 'The Finder Becomes the Seeker' when the prisoner taunts his gaoler with his silence when he 'jangle[s] the keys of language' he 'is not using' (CL, p.41). There is a possibility of becoming free to speak openly. The suggestion, then, that the body of language is imprisoning, but

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<sup>13</sup> Guinn Batten, *The Soldiers of Year II* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2002), p.130.

also liberating, implies that there is a further paradox running through McGuckian's political love poetry.

McGuckian is more interested in using music to establish or restore harmony rather than language, and so the notes are played to fill a wordless void. Orchestrating the father's death, the sounds of war echo from within the decomposing patriarchal body. These sounds 'of frozen music' create a musical symphony of deathly silence. The lovers playing each other's bodies like they were instruments, assert their individual identities when approaching the instruments from completely different angles. Hence, music is employed as a metaphor for harmony. The lovers' / musicians' bodies act like a fugue, and move backward and forward until they reach a harmony and become one in musical unison:

I hear two voices without either  
disturbing the other – four harmonies  
where there was only one.  
One voice spells out the same notes  
as the other in reverse order.  
One violinist starts at the end,  
the other at the beginning,  
the backward version fits perfectly  
against the forward.

Thomas Docherty states that, 'A recurring feature of McGuckian is 'untimeliness', the sense of the gap between what is said and the voice that says it. There is a fractured "unpunctual" consciousness here'.<sup>14</sup> The lovers / musicians working in isolation against each other, suggest that they are each working within their own dimensions of time and space (as in 'The Feminine Christs', the speaker

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Docherty, 'Initiations, Tempers, Seductions: Postmodern McGuckian', in *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*, ed., Neil Corcoran, (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), p.192.

says, 'Their pulses are differently timed', SHEL, p.34). The void that is created between music and language suggests that words have become vacuous, or meaningless. The empty spaces that occupy language say more than the actual words of the poem itself. The musicality created between the bodies articulates silence. Although successfully harmonised at first, the couple move progressively further apart. Suspended in the void that exists between their contrasting zones of time and space, the lovers become distanced from each other once again. As the speaker becomes distracted by the demise of love:

The gap between our hands is no wider  
than the middle section of a ship,  
which used to be sure of its sun,  
or the soundpost joining an instrument  
inside, knowing the sky by heart.  
And it's nothing to do with proximity  
on the keyboard, or the playing length  
of the string, on my unaccompanied cello,  
if a single chord is repeated over thirty times,  
or a note of C—or E-ness  
is tied over into that blank space,  
held like an undeniable  
gull-screech underhand.

The simile of the 'undeniable gull-screech' refers to the violinist's bow screeching erratically across the strings that resounds like dissonance creating the score being scribed by the bodies. There are further attempts at establishing a sense of harmony by the insistent playing of a 'single chord'. The notes 'C' and 'E' are used purposely to represent fixed points and the perfect pitch that they should sound like to establish a sense of standard or universal sense of language. McGuckian uses the imagery of harmony and dissonance to reinforce her fixed ideas of language. Like the violin following the notes on the sheet of music, the ship uses fixed points of references on a compass to guide it, or the sun to give a

sense of direction when lost. But the focus on the 'middle', 'inside' and 'heart' all looking inwards suggests an inability to see that the speaker has lost her sense of vision.

As a poet, McGuckian questions her own gender identity through her father's. She has stated that, 'I sort of feel that I'm not a woman when I write sometimes. I feel sometimes I can stretch beyond gender into a sexless being, or be two people and be like a man.'<sup>15</sup> Readers who are familiar with McGuckian's poetry from her first volume, *The Flower Master* (1982) will, however, suspend their preconceptions that the 'you' is masculine, while the 'I' is feminine in this psychological romantic drama. The 'I' that is constantly in question and redefined in terms of other lovers is engaged in a recurrent gender identity crisis that is taking place behind a psychological mask worn while forming different relationships with various 'yous'.

An external force, one that has the authority to offer a definition by negating the individual's sense of autonomy, is shaping the poet's identity in 'The Astral Picture'(CL, p.22-23). S/he says that, 'They say that I am not I, / but some kind of we, that I do not know / where I end.' The positioning of the poetic 'I' firmly at the centre of the poem alludes to Boland's main objective of becoming the subject of her own poem as opposed to the object, as previously addressed in the discussion of 'Anna Liffey' in Chapter IV. Unlike Boland, the political purpose of this positioning is to attempt to present the 'I' to the public eye. However in 'The Albert Chain', the sense of observation and self-evasion

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<sup>15</sup> Alison Muri, 'Interview with Medbh McGuckian', Ottawa, March 1991, <[http://www.lights.com~muri/mm\\_interview.html](http://www.lights.com~muri/mm_interview.html)> [accessed 23 May 2001]

combined with that of surveillance and illusion present a deceptive 'I' / eye in the line 'only an eye that looks in all directions can see me' (CL, p.68). The poet, then, critically re-defines the narrative course of history and of her 'self' as seen through the eyes of her father.

Vision is the key to speech in *Captain Lavender*. The poet's ability to see her father is the key to her being able to speak. In 'The Wake Sofa', the speaker states that 'I have not spoken words with roots / since I saw you; / the light around my eyes / from your transparent grass / is the tightness around everyone's lips' (CL, p.30). The ability to see her father defines how the poet sees herself. Thus, failing to see him in 'The Aisling Hat', that presents a series of images of the father's body disintegrating before the poet's eye creates a loss of power: 'Your eye raised the picture / to its own level, you retreated / into this picture before my eyes' (CL, p.47). Images of the father's body fading away as 'bone becomes transparent / against the background of viaticum' (CL, p.36); 'The transparency of his eyes' in 'Et Animum Dimittit' (CL, p.21) recreates the sense of covering 'it' up or wiping 'it' out. McGuckian's inability to speak of the shock of seeing her dead father is associated with seeing nothing to speak about, as 'the light around the eyes' that reflects from the 'transparent grass' illustrates McGuckian's paradox of speaking while remaining silent about what has been seen.

*Captain Lavender* is both prisoner and gaoler of the public and private histories that are written with and read through McGuckian's father's body. The metaphorical use of McGuckian's dead father's body means that he has inadvertently become a re-representation of Northern Ireland's political history. While McGuckian places androgynous images of the (father's) body on public

display, the political history that this textual body absorbs is withdrawn from the public eye. The paradox of using the body to speak while maintaining a level of silence extends itself to that of disclosing what is seen or not seen. McGuckian withdraws the politics of history from public display. Specific facts of the Troubles are absorbed and then translated into an anti-political narrative through the body that substitutes a potentially cold matter-of-fact commentary with a warm romantic perception of death.

## **ii. 'Don't mention the war': 'War Masquerading as Love' in Medbh McGuckian's Historical Romance**

Joep Leerssen states that due to the tragic ending of the 1798 Rebellion of the United Irishmen<sup>16</sup>, the slogan of 'don't mention the war' was attached to the failed Rebellion. According to Leerssen the Rebellion, along with Irish history and politics at this time, 'became unmentionable, and thus, it was not until the mid-1840s that 1798 was 'beginning to be made accessible for positive commemoration and political aspiration.'<sup>17</sup> There were those Irishmen who dared to speak of '98 in their poetry and song, but furtively. John Kells Ingram's, 'The Memory of the Dead' captured the embarrassed and confused incubation period of

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty: The Story of the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969), p.13, describes the 1798 Rebellion of the United Irishmen as 'the most violent and tragic event in Irish history between the Jacobite wars and the Great Famine'. His account passionately describes how within weeks after 24<sup>th</sup> May 1798 30,000 men, women and children 'were cut down or shot or blown like chaff as they charged up to the mouth of the cannon.' The United Irishmen, who were inspired by the French Revolution, aimed to break political links with England in an attempt to gain Irish independence by uniting Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters. After a series of battles that took place within Ulster, rebel attempts to capture Southern towns of County Wexford led to the United Irishmen's defeat by the English. A revised edition of this book has been published in London by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997. See also Stella Tillyard's biography, *Citizen Lord: Edward Fitzgerald 1763-1798* (Chatto & Windus, 1997).

<sup>17</sup>Joep Leerssen, '1798: The Recurrence of Violence and Two Conceptualizations of History', *Irish Review*, 22 (1998), p.39.

half a century that ensued the failed Rebellion in the lines, ‘Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight? / Who blushes at the name?’<sup>18</sup>

Irish ballads were a popular vehicle to make coded references to ’98. Of the publication of this ‘most famous commemorative ballad in *The Nation* newspaper on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1843’<sup>19</sup>, Luke Gibbons says that, ‘The alarm displayed by the authorities in Dublin Castle...showed that there was good reason for fearing to speak of the memory of the dead.’ This was because, as Gibbons states, ‘The ballad formed a central part of the prosecution case against Daniel O’Connell, Charles Gavan Duffy (the editor of *The Nation*) and others for sedition in a state trial in 1844.’<sup>20</sup> Thomas Moore’s ballad, ‘Oh Breathe Not his Name’, made a veiled tribute to Emmet. Exercising Emmet’s words of warning that there is ‘virtue in silence’, thirty years of silence passed before Moore made explicit reference to friendship with Emmet. Of the Irish melody, Ronan Kelly says that ‘the theme of the song is silence – whatever you say, say nothing. But in this conspiratorial quiet, action is also urged.’<sup>21</sup>

Writing *Shelmalier* some 200 years after the United Irishmen’s 1798 Rebellion, Medbh McGuckian should not fear if she speaks explicitly of ’98. Published in coincidence with the bi-centenary commemorations of the 1798

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<sup>18</sup> John Kells Ingram cited from Luke Gibbons, ‘Where Wolfe Tone’s Statue Was Not’: Joyce, Monuments and Memory’, in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed., Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.145.

<sup>19</sup> Roy Foster, ‘Remembering 1798’ in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, p.67.

<sup>20</sup> Gibbons, ‘Where Wolfe Tone’s Statue Was Not’, p.145.

<sup>21</sup> Ronan Kelly, ‘Another Side of Thomas Moore’, *History Ireland: Special Issue on Robert Emmet Bicentenary*, 11 (Autumn 2003), pp.39-41. Kevin Whelan in ‘Robert Emmet: Between History and Memory’, *History Ireland*, p.53, states that ‘Shelley visited Dublin in 1812, inspired by Emmet and also wrote poems on him.’ Kelly continued to say that, ‘In his notebook Coleridge made the cryptic comment: ‘Emmet = mad Raphael painting ideals of beauty on the walls of a cell with human excrement.’ It is difficult not to conclude that Emmet was the accusing ghost for a generation of English Romantics (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, etc.) swinging round from radicalism into conservatism.’

Rebellion, McGuckian returned with this 1998 monumental volume, a further radical departure from earlier poetry, to understand political issues of commemoration and silence that have historically surrounded 'The regret of having to remember shabby war years' (SHEL, p.50). Whatever McGuckian says of 1798 in 1998, however, she chooses to do so obliquely rather than directly. The predominant silence that haunts these political love poems suggests that McGuckian is honouring the Irishmen's code of silence by exercising their paradox of speaking about this buried tragedy while saying nothing.<sup>22</sup> As discussed above in *Captain Lavender* (1994), vision continues to be the key to speech in *Shelmalier* (1998). In this commemorative volume, there is a particularly strong relationship between trees and eyes that sets up the paradox of speaking of '98 while maintaining a level of silence. Here are a few examples:

the way trees grow, in groups, how they  
 are bodily sunk to the lips  
 in the age of the garden  
 ('The Sofa in the Window with Trees Outside', p.21)

I look towards my father's voice  
 but saw only the first fruit-coloured  
 leaves, grooves on their inner and outer edges.  
 ('Cancelleresca Bastarda', p.22)

If they destroyed all the words like electric light,  
 out them in a grave beneath branches,  
 could trees be expected to heal....

Without looking at me the trees  
 speak into this anxiously protected room,  
 their moving lips almost seeing

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<sup>22</sup> Luke Gibbons, 'The Politics of Silence: *Anne Devlin*, Women and Irish Cinema.', p.107, cited in O'Brien, 'Gaol / Gaol', pp.184-185. Discussing Pat Murphy's 1984 film, *Anne Devlin*, Gibbons notes that in 'popular imagery Devlin is the faithful servant, courageous because of her self-sacrificing refusal to speak – that is, to betray her male "master" and the nationalist cause' and that 'Devlin's silence was an achievement: it is the silence that comes from holding something back rather than having nothing to say.'

how they have lost their way  
(‘The Rose-Trellis’, p.24)

...A shower of words  
scourged the trees to a glorious warm black  
(‘Sentinelle Perdue’, p.27)

seeing through dry mist  
in native trees  
(‘The Field of Nonduality’, p.45)

And no answering of siege  
but her ears closed and her lifetime’s gaze,  
the forced glint of the real pupil  
through the inferior blue,  
on her own reflection, undigested,  
in the fruit with their dismembered trunks  
of faces.  
(‘Self-Portrait in the Act of Painting a Self-Portrait’, p.65)

Each tree had the profile of a man’s face,  
near enough to arouse and betray.  
(‘The Shadow Prize’, p.87)

Trees have had a psychological impact on McGuckian’s national identity; ‘Conscious of trees’, she says in ‘The Mickey-Mouse Gas Chamber’, from *Drawing Ballerinas*, ‘I taste my far-from-clear / citizenship’ (p.18). Discussing ‘The Mickey-Mouse Gas Chamber’, written when ceasefires were being spoken of, McGuckian said in a radio interview in 2004:

The word tree is very loaded for us, for me anyway. First of all it is the central Christian image, that Christ died on a tree, “this was the wood of the Cross” is our main protection and our main invocation and we wear it around our necks and we pray to it. The tree of the fruit of good and evil goes from one end of the Bible to the other so it is unavoidable in the psyche. But also the trees in Ireland are extremely problematic because Ireland was totally forested, and the old native Irish people lived in forests and it was by uprooting the trees and destroying trees and levelling the ground and civilising the place, that the old Irish culture was destroyed. In fact the trees were uprooted and made into the British navy. In Ireland the trees went into the making of the navy: they came here and used our trees

or my trees to build their boats. The word tree has all that kind of resentment in it as well.<sup>23</sup>

McGuckian's reworking of the word 'tree' is a perfect example of how everyday objects take on multiple symbolic meanings. In fact, in this typical McGuckianesque stream of consciousness, she begins quite faithfully to the traditional religious symbolism of the tree of good and evil only to completely distort it into a symbol of post-colonialism.

*Shelmalier's* particular link with silence, the body and trees alludes to some of the unidentified sites that commemorate insurgent leaders of '98. 'Sites of execution of popular heroes became venerated sites of commemoration. The tree on which Fr. Conroy of Adragoole was hanged at the Mall in Castlebar remained an object of local reverence until it was uprooted by a storm in the early twentieth century'.<sup>24</sup> The 'crosses [that] look like missiles' in 'The Sickness of the Cloth' (SHEL, p.99) are reminiscent of the Celtic crosses that 'were made from the wood of the tree and kept by local nationalist notables.'<sup>25</sup> Referring to the part of the Rebellion in which the French invaded Connacht,<sup>26</sup> the speaker of 'Cancelleresca Bastarda' compares 'sleep' to 'a night march through Connacht' in the search for her 'father's voice', but only saw, 'Half of him is lost on me / and on the trunk with its initials standing / creedless as a tesseract, on end'(SHEL, p.22). Similarly, 'Each tree [that] had the profile of a man's face'(SHEL, p.87) speaks to McGuckian of defeat and betrayal of the English colonialism of the Irish. Viewing

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<sup>23</sup> McGuckian, 'In the Country of Comparative Peace', Encounter, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 12 December 2004  
<<http://www.abc.net.au/cgi-bin/common/printfriendly.pl?http://www.abc.../s1259334.ht>>  
[accessed 6 August 2005].

<sup>24</sup> Guy Beiner, 'Negotiations of Memory: Rethinking 1798 Commemoration', *Irish Review*, 26 (2000), pp.63-64.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.64.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.61

trees that are associated with acts of memory and commemoration, McGuckian continues:

Trees were also where people were hanged. Do you know, you can drive past whole clumps of trees – as I'm driving around anywhere in Ireland – you can actually see a grove of trees and it used to be that I would look at the trees and I would say how beautiful, lovely grove of trees, and then when I'd read up about these groves I'd realise that there may be 30 or 50 men, maybe children, maybe women as well, hanged on these trees and that why people have managed to keep them as a kind of memory. So trees are, when I say I am conscious of them, I am saying I am conscious of my whole history now and being conscious of all that makes me very kind of insecure.<sup>27</sup>

For McGuckian, trees have a deep-rooted personal religious, historical and political symbolic significance. Thus illustrating that she is not afraid to take on nationalist symbolism and make it her own. Moynagh Sullivan views McGuckian's imposition of a 'fecund private symbolism' on that of Irish history's 'public and over-determined symbolic order' as problematic.<sup>28</sup> She argues that *Shelmalier* is difficult not because 'some of the poems are expressedly political, but rather that the transition from a poetics characterised by a political subconscious to one informed by a conscious politics appears to create fixed allegiances which disrupt the fluid transitions from outer to inner worlds'.<sup>29</sup> Reading the history of 1798 through a private symbolism, McGuckian dissolves the boundaries between the politics of public and private histories by remembering the past through her present, thus leaving a legacy of distorted personalised memories of 1798. Stating earlier in 'Mantilla' that she 'saw their time as my own time', the poet's subconscious mind absorbs the 'conscious

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<sup>27</sup> McGuckian, 'In the Country of Comparative Peace'.

<sup>28</sup> Moynagh Sullivan, 'Review of *Shelmalier*', *Irish University Review*, 29 (Autumn / Winter 1999), pp.430-431. See also Clair Wills' review of *Shelmalier*, 'In Time's Turnings', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 April 1999, p.26. Wills states that, 'the intimate sphere is shot through with collective memory, and in *Shelmalier* the politics of memory comes to the fore.'

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

politics'. As the poet's mind offers itself to history in *Shelmalier*, she becomes the object of her political love poems through her psychological embodiment of the dead. 'The theme', says McGuckian,

is less the experienced despair of a noble struggle brutally quenched than the dawn of my own enlightenment after a medieval ignorance, my being suddenly able to welcome into consciousness figures of an integrity I had never learned to be proud of.<sup>30</sup>

This welcoming of a repressed political history, that once subconsciously 'penetrated' McGuckian's dreams, like a 'thorn', brings with it a sense of psychological release for the poet that is 'suggestive of an awakening' (SHEL, p.17). The dead of '98 that are resurrected in *Shelmalier* take over the poet's mind and use it as a historical site of commemoration for 'an afterlife / that thinks and knows' (SHEL, p.78). In return, the poet courts the speech of her anonymous romantic heroes as in the sonnet, 'Shelmalier'. She says, 'I court his speech, not him' (SHEL, p.75), thus offering the 'him' a contemporary mouthpiece, but through her eyes. Through her courtship of the United Irishmen's 'still unused voices' from the past, they become 'soon-to-be-living words' in the present. (SHEL, p.24). Thus, they aid the transition of a silenced past into the present from the poet's subconscious to the conscious mind.

Like Thomas Moore's symbolic use of Robert Emmet and Sarah Curran's romance to make veiled references to the politics of '98 in 'The Fire Worshippers' section, from the long oriental poem *Lalla Rookh* (1817), *Shelmalier* extends *Captain Lavender's* metaphor of personal relationships through McGuckian's

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<sup>30</sup> McGuckian, *Shelmalier*, p.13.

imaginary love affair with the dead.<sup>31</sup> ‘Masquerading war as love’ (SHEL, p.69), therefore, the spirits that haunt these ‘resurrective verses’ (SHEL, p.119) return not as revolutionaries, but as imaginary lovers. Reading the history of the United Irishmen’s 1798 Rebellion as a psychological romantic drama, the un-named dead cultivate McGuckian’s fantasies in ‘The Feastday of Peace’ (SHEL, p.23). The dead drive the speaker’s ‘unislanded dreams’ on a spiritual journey to a time and place that is uninhabited. The mind, like the imaginary place, is unconquered and free, enabling the enjoyment of unlimited possibilities of what might have been:

Deep in time’s turnings  
And the overcrowded soil,  
Too familiar to be seen,  
The long, long dead  
Steer with their warmed breath  
My unislanded dreams.

‘The overcrowded soil’, suggestively refers to the thousands who died during the Rebellion, and is representative of what Beiner describes as ‘commemorative landscape’.<sup>32</sup> Discussing the concepts of ‘social memory’ and ‘commemoration’ in relation to the 1798 Rebellion, Beiner claims that the ground of the ‘burial sites identified with 1798 insurgents was tilled or mowed’ out of respect for the dead.<sup>33</sup> Beiner continues that this ‘Cultivation of the graves offered each community local monuments to maintain the memory of their dead’.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Kelly, ‘Another Side Thomas Moore’, p.41, argues that ‘While ‘Iran’ closely echoes ‘Erin’, Hafed and Hinda, the lovers of ‘The Fire-Worshippers’ section, are thinly disguised incarnations of Emmet and Curran.’

<sup>32</sup> Beiner, ‘Negotiations of Memory’, p.64. See also Brian Graham’s ‘The Imagining of Place: Representation and Identity in Contemporary Ireland’, in *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography*, ed., Brian Graham (London: Routledge, 1997) pp.192-212. Discussing the significance of memory and place, Graham states that, ‘The function of memory is defined by the present, its connections with history and place vested in emblematic landscapes and places of meaning that encapsulate public history and official symbolism.’

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Respecting the memory of the dead through the liaison with history, death is erotically cultivated by the 'eighteenth-century fingers [that] spice the soil / with blood and bone' in 'Cleaning Out the Workhouse' (SHEL, p.30). It is the sexual union of the living and dead that creates an erotic reunion of the past and present. The politics of violence are, then, eroticised in McGuckian's Otherworldly sexual fantasies with history in which 'Dreams have no moral' (CL, p.74). Re-cultivating the dead, like the father in *Captain Lavender*, the decaying dead bodies fertilise the ground in which they were buried. Instead of unearthing the history of '98 it remains buried deeply within 'time's turnings'. Thus, the decomposing bodies dissolve the history that they embody, 'As if a whole month's / history of Ireland were fainting into a leaf' (SHEL, p.70).

For some critics of *Shelmalier*, McGuckian acts a bit too much on the side of caution with her coded nature references to '98. For example, in her review of *Shelmalier*, Clair Wills argues that, 'even the most well-read critic will find the book tough going, since the texts with which it is inter-twined are the various histories of the 1798 United Irishmen rebellion, and the writing and speeches of the protagonists themselves.'<sup>35</sup> McGuckian is guarded when it comes to drawing on the history of '98 to address Northern Ireland's present day political violence and so chooses to use nature imagery like those of '98 before her. For example, in 'The Temple of Janus', the speaker goes as far as to say, 'You speak to me of the country's hostilities', but, 'as though describing a harvest, / or a wedding during Advent' (SHEL, p.110). Nature imagery is used in similar vein, in the various epigraphs McGuckian has employed to hint at the political history embedded into

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<sup>35</sup> Wills, 'In Time's Turnings', p.26.

the poems themselves. *Shelmalier's* epigraph cites James (Jemmy) Hope as having stated:

Physical force may prevail for a time...but there is music in the sound of moral force which will be heard like the sound of the cuckoo. The bird that lays its eggs, and leaves them for a time; but it will come again and hatch them in due course, and the song will return with the season.<sup>36</sup>

Like the cuckoo's insurgent birdsong, that of skylarks is later heard by the Republican hero, Roger Casement in an epigraph to McGuckian's *Selected Poems* (1997). The English executed Casement after the Easter Rising in 1916 for being a traitor. He had been negotiating with Germany for the sale of rifles to Irish insurgents. In 1964, Casement's bones were reburied in Ireland.<sup>37</sup> While awaiting his execution he said in a letter to his sister, 'I cannot tell you what I felt', and thus wrote, 'The sandhills were full of skylarks rising in the dawn, the first I heard for years – the first sound I heard through the surf was their song'. Historically, therefore, since Irish rebels could not speak explicitly about their political beliefs and courses of action, they used ambivalent references to nature to urge action. McGuckian too uses images of nature in her oblique political narratives. According to Wills, declarations of 'the Protestant leaders of the United Irishmen, Theobald Wolfe Tone, Lord Edward Fitzgerald and, later Robert Emmet' echo obliquely through McGuckian's lines.<sup>38</sup>

Since *Shelmalier*, various 'figures of integrity' have drifted in and out of the epigraphs and titles of her later poetry. Veiled memories of martyrdom live on posthumously through Russell's words that resound in McGuckian's titles of *The*

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<sup>36</sup> James (Jemmy) Hope cited from an epigraph in *Shelmalier* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> See W.B. Yeats' poem 'Roger Casement', in *Poetry 1900 to 1975*, ed., George MacBeth (Essex: Longman & Faber and Faber, 1979), pp.38-39.

<sup>38</sup> Wills, 'In Time's Turnings'.

*Face of the Earth* (2002) and *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003): ‘I think the Irish the most virtuous nation on the face of the earth’, said Russell in October 1803, ‘they are a good and brave people, and had I a thousand lives, I would yield them in their service.’ Having been released from Dublin’s Newgate Prison in June 1802, Russell went to Paris and met Emmet. In March 1803, Russell returned to Ireland to organise the North. After Emmet was arrested in Dublin, Russell went to rescue him, but was arrested, tried for high treason, hanged and then beheaded on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1803. According to Kevin Whelan:

the crucial difference between the 1803 and 1798 insurrections was that the Act of Union had taken place in the interim. That of 1798 was a Rebellion against an Irish Government in College Green. Whereas that of 1803 was directed against a British administration in the brand-new United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>39</sup>

Whereas McGuckian’s political narratives in *Shelmalier* (1998) discreetly paid homage to leaders of the United Irishmen through an imaginary love affair, those in *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003) implicitly honour the memories of Emmet and Russell’s executions in 1803. Comparing the change of tone and theme of these two volumes reflects the change in the United Irishmen’s political focus. In her review of *Had I a Thousand Lives*, Sarah Fulford says that in the many poems about birds and bird-songs, ‘there is possibly a gesture towards Seamus Heaney’s “Sweeney” poems, and these are echoed in images of flight and exile central to McGuckian’s understanding of Irish identity.’<sup>40</sup> The polyphonic bird-songs of *Had I a Thousand Lives*, like that of the Passerine, reflect on the experience of silence resulting from exile in the line ‘I am songless at his far-crying / flight

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<sup>39</sup> Whelan, ‘Another Side to Thomas Moore’, p.51.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Fulford, ‘Lyric Flight’, *Poetry Review*, 93 (Winter 2003 / 2004) <<http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/review/pr93-4/fulford.htm>> [19 November 2005]. Fulford also comments that the cover painting, ‘Bird on a Wire’, by the Country Antrim artist, Basil Blackshaw, connects to Seamus Heaney’s cover page of *Sweeney Astray*.

song' (HIATL, p.39). Given the chance to speak, presumably, to Emmet through her vision of him in 'Nightingale-nights' (HIATL, p.17), McGuckian muses:

If I could see him  
before with his eyes he asked  
me not to ask, I can't think  
what he would ask

In this contorted imaginary dialogue with Emmet this is McGuckian at her most evasive. These bird-songs filled with 'catechetical speeches'(HIATL, p.91) speak of sacrifice, blood shed and exile as in the image of 'the river' that 'has a heavy, sickly smell from all the blood' in 'The Rock Dove' (HIATL, p.18). In 'Slieve Gallion', a poem which makes reference to "Slieve Gallion Brae", a traditional lyric mourning the exile of Irishmen abroad<sup>41</sup>, McGuckian acknowledges (perhaps) the unknown whereabouts of Emmet's grave in the line 'a place not to be trodden' (HIATL, p.15). Also in 'Standing Army', the lines 'With his head towards the west, at the cardinal points of the day, / the unlettered headstone rings' (SHEL, p.52) may loosely allude to Emmet's uninscribed headstone. Pat Cooke says that:

It was Emmet himself who set the haunting note, insisting in his famous speech from the dock on a form of memorial absence – that his tombstone remain uninscribed until his country had taken its place among the nations of the earth. Uncannily, this wish was soon tragically compounded by the disappearance of his body: a blank tombstone and an unknown grave remain twin absences that sustain Emmet's compelling spectre among the ranks of Irish political martyrs.<sup>42</sup>

Although Emmet is remembered, he is at the same time forgotten and silenced through his own self-exile. Wheatley argues that, 'The unknown whereabouts of a grave bear emotive resonance in Irish politics: the location of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Pat Cooke, 'The Ghostliness of Robert Emmet', *History Ireland*, p.5.

Robert Emmet's grave is famously unknown, while more recently attempts have been made to locate the graves of abducted and disappeared Irish Republican Army victims.<sup>43</sup> Discussing Paul Muldoon's search for Captain Robert Nairac's grave in 'Mink', Wheatley says that 'Before its escape the mink's body had been due for industrial processing, just as according to legend Nairac's body was disposed of in a meat processing plant, his body never having been found after his abduction and murder.'<sup>44</sup> McGuckian, like Muldoon, engages in 'emotive resonance in Irish politics' by mixing the natural world with the political one. Throughout her silenced address of Emmet in *Had I a Thousand Lives*, the volume concludes as obscurely as it began with an epilogue cited from Yeats in 1904:

His burial place, like the burial place of the great French orator, Mirabeau [sic], remains unknown. His enemies seemed to have wished that his dust might mingle with the earth obscurely; that no pilgrimages might come to his tomb and keep living the cause he served. And by so doing they have unwillingly made all Ireland his tomb.

According to Yeats, Emmet was, therefore, to be remembered while forgotten at the same time. Luke Gibbons imagines Tomgin Kernan musing over where Emmet was buried: 'Let me see. Is he buried in St. Michan's? Or no, there was a midnight burial in Glasnevin.' Gibbons says that Kernan's musings have merged here with those of Bloom who had earlier pondered the fate of Emmet as he chanced upon the name of one Robert Emery on a grave in Glasnevin.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Wheatley, "That Blank Mouth" p.7. According to Wheatley, 'Captain Robert Nairac was one of the most notorious British undercover agents in Northern Ireland, a Grenadier Guardsman who worked as a liaison officer for the SAS and RUC.'

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Gibbons, "Where Wolfe Tone's Statue Was Not", p.152-153.

Through McGuckian's psychological embodiment of Emmet's spirit, and those of the other United Irishmen in the commemorative volumes, *Shelmalier* and *Had I Thousand Lives*, they become imprisoned in what Whelan describes as a 'temporal dimension', meaning that you may generate a living memory that keeps you perpetually alive, in suspended animation between history and memory.<sup>46</sup> Acting as a mediator between the realms of the material world and that of the spiritual, the dead are given eternal life. McGuckian's contemporary address of these Otherworldly heroes mean that they have become suspended in time and that their memories become imprisoned between myth and history in an inanimate textual body that provides a 'pseudohome for a pseudohope' (SHEL, p.33).

### **iii. Medbh McGuckian's 'Tribute' to Henri Matisse in *Drawing Ballerinas* (2001)**

Since Medbh McGuckian's earlier reference to Pablo Picasso in *Captain Lavender* (1994), 'I have not painted the war...but I have no doubt that the war is in...these paintings I have done', her poetic allusions to various artists and their paintings have been a way of simultaneously addressing while escaping from Northern Ireland's political violence. Like Picasso, who regarded painting as 'an instrument of war', McGuckian's 2001 volume, *Drawing Ballerinas*, paints a history of Northern Ireland's war through and into images of the body.<sup>47</sup> Although McGuckian hints at the influences of Henri Matisse in her title poem, 'Drawing Ballerinas', she holds back from referencing the direct quotes she cribs from John

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<sup>46</sup> Whelan, 'Robert Emmet: Between History and Memory', p.50.

<sup>47</sup> Picasso quotation cited from an epigraph to Russell Martin's, *Picasso's War: The Destruction of Guernica, and the Masterpiece that Changed the World* (London: Scribner, 2003), a study of the political influences behind one of Picasso's great works of art, 'Guernica'.

Elderfield's, *The Drawings of Henri Matisse* (1984). In this instance, therefore, as McGuckian simply reworks Elderfield's commentary within the main body of her political poem some would regard her use of Elderfield's words as those of her own as simple plagiarism.<sup>48</sup>

Critics such as Shane Murphy have presented various examples of how McGuckian 'embeds or dovetails' quotations as tributes to the likes of Emily Brontë in 'Gigot Sleeves' from *Marconi's Cottage* (1992), without revealing her source of information.<sup>49</sup> Such 'intertextuality' may be regarded simply as 'plagiarism', but McGuckian's silent 'tributes' would go unnoticed for those readers who are not familiar with the writers and their texts that are appropriated by the poet. Murphy has recently argued that by not acknowledging the sources of what he refers to as McGuckian's '*bricolages* of quotations',<sup>50</sup> 'she is able to encode political subtexts into her work.'<sup>51</sup>

I have chosen to draw on 'Drawing Ballerinas' as a recent example of McGuckian's 'intertextuality' to illustrate just how deeply she 'encodes political subtexts' into her poems and to demonstrate how the politics surrounding Ann Frances Owens' death is diluted through the process of visualising politics through art, especially as McGuckian does not quote from Elderfield's analysis on

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<sup>48</sup>Quotes from Elderfield that are integrated / appropriated by McGuckian in 'Drawing Ballerinas' are highlighted in bold and italicised within the text and poem.

<sup>49</sup>Shane Murphy, 'Obliquity in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian', *Eire-Ireland*, 31 (Fall / Winter 1996), pp.76-101. For a further discussion on the influences of the Romantics in McGuckian's poetry see Murphy's, "'You took Away My Biography": The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian', *Irish University Review*, 28 (Spring / Summer 1998), pp.110-132. See also Sarah Broom's, 'McGuckian's Conversations with Rilke in *Marconi's Cottage*', *Irish University Review*, 28 (Spring / Summer 1998), pp.133-150. She discusses the influences of Rainer Maria Rilke in poems such as 'Visiting Rainer Maria' and 'To Call Paul Paula'. More recently, see Deryn Rees-Jones' discussion of McGuckian's poem 'Slips' in relation to Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, in *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), pp.175-186.

<sup>50</sup> Murphy, "'A Code of Images": Northern Irish Centos', *Irish Studies Review*, 10 (2002), p.193.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p.199.

one particular drawing, i.e. *Ballerina Seated in an Armchair* 1944 (Fig 1). Instead snippets of quotes and references about various drawings by Matisse, ranging from his early experiments with Cubism in 1915-16 to his later concentration on abstract charcoal drawings from the 1930s onwards, are secretly enfolded into the poem. McGuckian, therefore, interweaves her own contemporary political picture of Northern Ireland with a brief history of Matisse's drawings that are an emotional visualisation of the First and Second World Wars.

McGuckian turns to 'The painter, Matisse, [who] when asked how he managed to survive the war artistically, replied that he spent the worst years "drawing ballerinas"'.<sup>52</sup> Growing up in an area of France that had been devastated by the Franco-Prussian war, Matisse had been surrounded by the effects of war from an early age.<sup>53</sup> His abstract drawings are a particular emotional response to both the First and Second World Wars. The drawing, *Ballerina Seated in an Armchair* (1944) is indicative of how he 'spent the worst years of the war drawing ballerinas' (See Fig 1 below). 1944 was particularly painful for Matisse because both Madame Matisse and Marguerite, who were active in the French underground were captured. Mme Matisse was sent to prison for six months, while Marguerite was tortured and sent to Germany in a prison train. The camp at Ravensbruck was its destination.

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<sup>52</sup> Matisse quotation cited from McGuckian, *Drawing Ballerinas* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2001), p.15.

<sup>53</sup> John Elderfield, *The Drawings of Henri Matisse*, with an Intro. by John Golding and catalogue by Magdalena Dabrowski (London: Arts Council of Great Britain & Thames Hudson Ltd, 1984), pp.119-120.



**(Fig 1) Ballerina Seated in an Armchair 1944**

Meanwhile, Matisse was drawing ballerinas causing Clement Greenberg to ask, ‘What are we to make of this apparent distance of Matisse’s from the terrible events of his time and his place?’<sup>54</sup> In ‘Drawing Ballerinas’, the reader is drawn instantly to the elegy’s political significance via a footnote. Acting like a caption to the poem-painting, it is explained that, ‘This poem was written to commemorate Ann Frances Owens, schoolfellow and neighbour, who lost her life in the Abercorn Café explosion, 1972.’ On the 4<sup>th</sup> March 1972, two Catholics were killed and 130 others were injured in the attack on this Belfast café that was bombed without warning. Although the IRA (Irish Republican Army) was suspected, they did not admit to this bombing. Ann Owens died aged 22.

McGuckian’s use of a ballerina / woman’s body to articulate the horrors of war visually in ‘Drawing Ballerinas’ follows Matisse’s use of art both as a form of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.309.

expression and as a psychological distancing device. By mixing aesthetics with politics, the poet paints the war with the ballerina body of 'A young girl that dressed up as a woman / And pulled her gown tight across her breast'. As one body enfolds into another, the girl imprisons herself within the body of a woman. At this moment also, the girl / woman both become fixed into the historical painting of the ballerina. Initially, the painting of the ballerina's innocent, but seductive, form averts the poet's gaze from the atrocities of war. Then as the ballerina's image begins to dissolve on the page she is drawn back into the painting:

And the lines' desire is to warp to accommodate  
a body, a lost and emptied memory of a lost  
body, the virgin mind emptied from or of it,  
to discover the architecture of pressed-together  
thighs, or lips that half-belong to a face.

As the body is voided of all consciousness it becomes disassociated from the mind, transforming into separate entities in their own right. Interestingly, the truths of this woman's history are warped before they are accommodated, rather than being housed then distorted. The 'lines' of the body that desire to 'warp' the political truths of history while 'accommodating' them illustrate the paradox that runs persistently throughout *Drawing Ballerinas* of the dilemma of whether to speak of the unspeakable. Whereas the line for Matisse was the perfect artistic form for expressing emotion, McGuckian's lines of the body closing up express a symbolic silence.

‘There are two ways of expressing things’, wrote Matisse in 1908, ‘one is to show them crudely, the other is to evoke them through art.’<sup>55</sup> Elderfield remarks that in 1937 Matisse ‘made a pair of splendid charcoal drawings that remember the manifest solidity but flatten it two-dimensionally to the surface.’<sup>56</sup> As the ballerina’s body superimposes that of Ann Owens, the sensual delicacy of the ballerina’s exterior image conceals a body that has been destroyed by war. Beginning as a representational piece of women’s history, the ballerina’s body is reborn when the poet / painter chooses to favour the abstract. The transition from life to death is captured in the poem-painting at the moment when the body explodes across the page:

*The body turns in, restless, on itself,  
in a womb of sleep, an image of isolated sleep.  
It turns over, revealing opposing versions of itself,  
one arm broken abruptly at the elbow and wrist,  
the other wrenched downwards by the force of the turning.*

When *Reclining Nude with Arm Behind Head* (1937) and *Reclining Nude* (1941) (See Figs 2 & 3 below) are ‘viewed together, they suggest the same **body turned over to reveal opposing versions of itself**....The contradiction of these images prevents us from identifying the subject with either of them. The subject is not one image, it emits images; each image is whole, but neither is wholly the subject.’<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.119.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.120.

**Fig 2 Reclining Nude with Arm Behind Head 1937**



**Fig 3 Reclining Nude 1941**

By recreating a geometric image of the body, one similar to Matisse's nude, McGuckian is experimenting with questions of woman's national identity. Like most things for McGuckian, however, the idea of beauty is not absolute and she

experiments with multiple meanings of beauty through the figure of Lady Lavery, the epitome of Irish beauty. The poem, 'Hazel Lavery, The Green Coat, 1926' (DB, pp.34-35), is a prime example of McGuckian's questioning national ideals of Irish beauty as part of her feminist aesthetic. This painting, which was originally titled 'Lady Lavery', was shown at the Royal Academy in 1925 (See Fig 4 below). Hazel Lavery was the wife and muse of Sir John Lavery, who was an Irish nationalist. He played an important, though unauthorised, part in the London negotiations over the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, leading to the establishment of the Irish Free State.<sup>58</sup>

**Fig 4 The Green Coat 1925**



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<sup>58</sup> See Robert Tracy, "When Time Began to Rant and Rage": Figurative Painting from Twentieth century Ireland', *Éire-Ireland: Special Issue on the Visual Arts*, p.291.

In 1927 the 'Note Committee' of the Free State commissioned John Lavery to reproduce an image of his wife's head for the new Irish currency.<sup>59</sup> Despite some reluctance aired by his wife, Lavery worked on a half-length oval representation of Kathleen ni Houlihan during Christmas.<sup>60</sup> (See Fig 5 below)



**Fig 5 Lady Lavery as Kathleen ni Houlihan 1927**

Kenneth McConkey states that 'Hazel Lavery's dark eyes and wistful looks became an embodiment of the land and people which she identified as her spiritual home and family. The potency of the symbol transcended both model and artist, to be recognised in more universal terms by future generations of Irishmen as the embodiment of their nationality.'<sup>61</sup> The importance of her beauty is commented on by the speaker of McGuckian's 'Hazel Lavery, The Green Coat, 1926'. This representation of Irish beauty is brought to life when recognising that her 'sense of chastity / starts a shape in me attached to life at all four corners, saying what your beauty means to you.' In capturing the shining radiance of her

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<sup>59</sup> Kenneth McConkey, *Sir John Lavery* (Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993), p.164.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

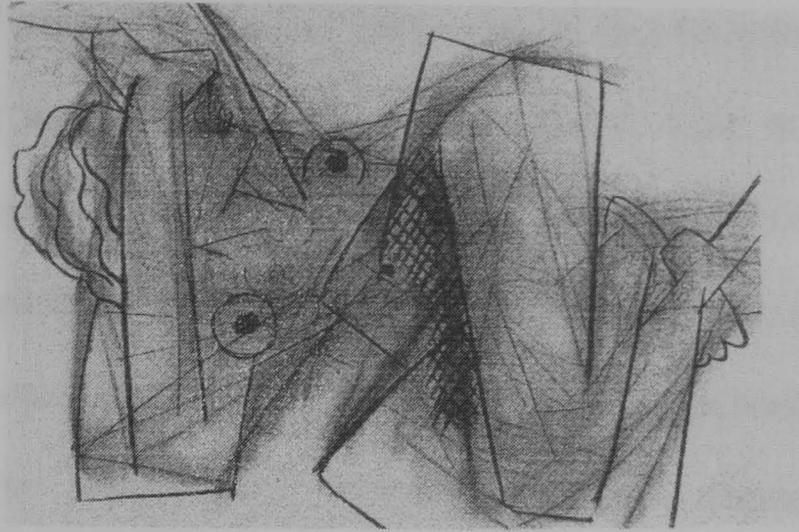
beauty, the speaker states that, 'He has been able to bring your inner sun / to full view, a real heartbeat and a lucid mind / inhabiting a body degrading into matter.' As the body disintegrates into sheer 'matter', Hazel Lavery is not only stripped of her beauty, but also of her national identity in 'a world that seems bared of its covering'.

In his review of *Drawing Ballerinas*, Julian Turner is highly critical of the poet's aesthetic interpretation of Northern Irish politics. Discussing 'The Mickey-Mouse Gas Mask' (DB, p.18), a poem also dealing with a sectarian bombing, Turner claims that, 'The commitment to aesthetics on the one hand, and the need on the other to do justice to the reality of the Troubles, conflict with each other.'<sup>62</sup> In 'Copperheads', for instance, describing 'how war itself became lovelier', violence becomes aestheticised as in 'Drawing Ballerinas', which also presents it through the superficial image of the ballerina's beauty as something visually appealing to the eye. McGuckian's obliquity is aided by mixing warm sensual images of beauty with cold violent images of war. Beauty as a source of truth is the key behind both Matisse's and McGuckian's aesthetic. *Nude Study* (1938) (See Fig 6 below) that encapsulates '*the mutely isolated figure, wrapped in a womb of sleep*', is among Matisse's most haunting and unsettling images, for all its beauty. And for all their beauty, the drawings that prepare for it are unsettling too.'<sup>63</sup> 'Silence or indifference, like a domestic muse, masks the best of war', states the speaker of 'The Flora of Mercury' (DB, p.58). Beauty has the power to mask the psychological effects of war.

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<sup>62</sup> Julian Turner, 'Some Poems Perplexing, Others Delightful', *Poetry London*, 42 (Summer 2002), p.40.

<sup>63</sup> Elderfield, pp.120-121.



**Fig 6 Nude Study 1938**

Edna Longley, in discussing the influence of various artists and their art in contemporary Irish poetry, argues that, 'Poetry's consciousness of painting inevitably highlights and measures its *aesthetic* self-consciousness, tilts the see-saw away from history.'<sup>64</sup> In reality, however, McGuckian is searching for an aesthetic that will enable her to adequately represent this history of political violence. Written during a time of 'peace-war paradoxes' (DB, p.57), *Drawing Ballerinas* looks beyond the aesthetics of the abstract world of figurative art for 'some clues' to uncover while concealing hidden truths of Northern Ireland's political history. As in 'Red Trial' in which the speaker says that, 'when I tried to interview the ever present dead / I wanted the truth and all I got was his body' (DB, p.37). Having stripped the ballerina of her beauty, the truths of history / war are simultaneously revealed, but concealed:

*It settles under its own weight, like some weighty  
nude. It flattens to the surface on which it lies,  
a series of fluid, looping rhythms, let loose  
by one last feeling. As if it had obligingly  
arranged its legs, or joined those imprisoning arms.*

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<sup>64</sup> Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p.227.

In a state of turmoil Ann Owens' ballerina body wrestles with its own identity. The use of the neutral pronoun 'it' suggests that in death the body becomes imaged as neither male nor female. A sense of personal detachment and a neutral, less subjective position has been assumed by the poet / painter. It feels as though history has become inconsequential to the poem and poet, as bodily images on the page paint over Ann Owens' 'memory' and past. Through this act of commemoration, Ann Owens, however, becomes something other than simply a schoolfellow and neighbour. She figures in this poem-painting as 'a domestic muse' posing for this political piece of art. What began as a representative piece of art has reduced the woman's body to a mere object of art, thus a woman's ordinary life is politicised.

Discussing *Eva Mudocci* (1915) and *Greta Prozor* (1915-16), Elderfield comments that, 'These drawings have literally been reconstructed from destroyed matter. And they freeze into their temporally perceived wholes the turn of a head, the movement of a *body settling under its own weight*.'<sup>65</sup> (See Figs 7 & 8 below)

**Fig 7**  
**Eva Mudocci 1915**



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<sup>65</sup> Elderfield, p.72.



**Fig 8**  
**Greta Prozor**  
**Winter 1915-16**

Both the poet and artist create figurative paintings of disfigured women from various blown away body parts of war victims. These bodies are reconstructed in such a way that they sit or lie awkwardly at angles on the page / canvas in an attempt to piece together any clues of the lives that these bodies once represented. In 1938, many felt the imminence of war including Matisse. His drawing, *Nude Study* (1938), which poses with ‘a leg so firmly (and unembarrassedly) pulled up toward the head as to create *sequences of fluid, looping rhythms* in the centre of the sheet’ reflects on this through the impression of the body closing up and shielding itself from the threat of war (See Fig 6).<sup>66</sup> Similarly, ‘*Those joined imprisoning arms*’ of the *Reclining Model with Flowered Robe* (c.1923-24) not only ‘serve to shade the model’s eyes’<sup>67</sup>, but prevent them from revealing anything that they may have witnessed (See Fig 9 below).

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p.119.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.88.



**Fig 9 Reclining Model With Flowered Robe c. 1923-24**

When all these snippets from Elderfield fuse together in the poetic form, McGuckian creates her own abstract portrait by piecing together different parts of bodies from various Matisse drawings. A new life is being created to replace the one that was lost. Thus, employing the same artistic technique as on the canvas / page when dislocating bodies, but rebuilding them whole:

The oval of the head is a wire folded  
in tension to spring back at right angles  
across the neck from which it has been lifted.  
And what are those *unnerving sparks of matter*,  
the astonishingly open, misaligned eyes?

Of *Madame Matisse* (1915), Elderfield states that, 'It was by penetrating amid the lines of the face that Matisse discovered the character of the sitter...not only a hard, bitter rigidity, but *unnerving sparks of matter* that fly around the nose and eyes in an electrical storm of emotion.'<sup>68</sup> (See Fig 10 below)

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p.72.



**Fig 10 Madame Matisse 1915**

The 'misaligned eyes' that are replicated in 'Drawing Ballerinas' are all that remains of the woman's face, almost as if she is devoid of an identity. The body becomes an horrific visual representation of sectarian violence through the grotesque robotic image of the head as a modern day sculpture. What was once a live woman's body is now viewed as sheer matter, that which is devoid of all human emotion. McGuckian presents an image of the death and destruction that lies behind a superficial image of a ballerina. As the body is stripped of its beauty, a grotesque image of a body destroyed by war replaces the ballerina's sensual delicacy. The body 'obligingly' offers itself as a willing victim to fulfil the political intentions of this piece of art. The body articulates the atrocities of political violence through its grotesqueness. After exposing the truth the body collapses under the 'burden' of its own weight:

That suffer like a camera, and fall asleep  
a great deal to *subdue the disquieting  
existence of others* – an aerated grey,  
but the page stays light, the paper with ease, at ease,  
possesses the entirety of the sheets they occupy.

Matisse made what Elderfield describes as a ‘shocking’ statement; ‘It is I who bring into being this world....I am therefore a consciousness, immediately present to the world....’<sup>69</sup> Responding to Matisse, ‘If he is consciousness’, says Merleau-Ponty, ‘I must cease to be consciousness. But how am I then to forget that intimate attestation of my existence...? And so we try to *subdue the disquieting existence of others.*’ Questions of consciousness are evident in ‘Drawing Ballerinas’ when McGuckian presents a new perception of reality through her art, wiping out all traces of life as she does so. Finally the ballerina in her original form ceases to be when her consciousness is absorbed by the omnipotence of the page / canvas:

*The contours become brittle and start  
to fracture, as if the body-burden  
with its stripped-down beauty, having rested,  
removed her necklace, had put her gown  
back on, tied back her hair, resettled her hat.*

According to Elderfield, in the 1940s Matisse ‘return[ed] to the first pose, but in the style of the earlier Cone studies and at times they worry *their contours so much that they become brittle and start to fracture.*’<sup>70</sup> The stiffness of the bodily lines on the canvas / page cracks under the pressure of representation. The period of being relieved of the burden of her beauty is now over and a vision of superficial perfection has been recreated. Thus, a sense of order is restored through the womanly vision of virginal innocence. The drawing of the ballerina becomes invisible as the viewer / reader is blinded by the stark overwhelming images of ‘whiteness’ leaving only a blank canvas / page. Mallarmé believed that ‘the intellectual core of the poem conceals itself, is present – is active in the blank

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p.116.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p.120.

space that separates the stanzas and in the white of the paper: a pregnant silence, no less wonderful to compose than the lines themselves.’<sup>71</sup> Matisse restated Mallarmé’s belief in *The Moroccans* (1915-16). This drawing, which he referred to as ‘un souvenir du Maroc’, preserves the memory of the Moroccan experience during the difficult years of the First World War until peace returned and the memory could be physically reconstructed in Nice.<sup>72</sup> The ‘soft’ memory was ‘produced by blending colours and volumes alike in *underlaid whiteness*’<sup>73</sup> Like Matisse, McGuckian too experiments with the body politic in its wholeness as it encompasses the whiteness of the page / canvas:

So that *underlaid whiteness* is reunified  
by light into a breathing white, an undivided  
whiteness, a give or take of space  
across or within that same whiteness,  
that simplest of solutions, the same whiteness everywhere.

Elizabeth Lowry, when discussing McGuckian’s increased obliquity since *On Ballycastle Beach* was published in 1988, argues that ‘some of these later poems are accompanied by hints that we should approach them as if they were paintings – possibly the sort of abstract expressionist pieces done by Kandinsky, as in the titles ‘Sea or Sky’, ‘The Blue She Brings With Her’ and ‘Breaking the Blue’ suggest.’<sup>74</sup> According to Lowry, the difficulty with McGuckian is if we read these later poems as though they were paintings. ‘Words are not like paint’, argues Lowry, ‘which is infinitely flexible in what it may represent, but have quantities already assigned to them.’<sup>75</sup> Artists such as Renoir and Matisse would, however.

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<sup>71</sup> Mallarmé quote is cited from Elderfield, p.107.

<sup>72</sup> Elderfield, p.107.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Lowry, ‘Dream On’, *Metre*, 4 (Spring / Summer 1998), p.52.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

have not agreed with such a statement particularly as Renoir told Matisse. 'You speak the language of colour'.<sup>76</sup>

Colours have been important as a mode of expression in McGuckian's private symbolic vision. The language of 'blue' was frequently used in earlier poems, such as 'Scenes from a Brothel' (OBB, pp.48-49), when despairing that there are, 'so few words for so many colours / This blue, this blue'. Referring to 'the colours of war' in 'Condition Three', the speaker continues, 'I am listening in black and white / to what speaks to me in blue' (DB, p.16).<sup>77</sup> In *Drawing Ballerinas*, blue does not yield as much power as white when taking on a new political significance. The colour drains from the words on reception making both language and the war very matter-of-fact. Apart from the earlier reference to 'an aerated grey', the war is painted in black and white in 'Drawing Ballerinas'. Stark contrasts of the 'black silk' with the 'white shell' mark the differences between the delicacy of art and the harshness of sectarian violence. White, then, is symbolic of equality marking the freshness of a new beginning. Images of war are then sealed into the body as a way of relinquishing anger in order to establish an inner peace. The poet / painter uses 'white' to capture a sense of peace, a personal 'solution' or resolution that McGuckian has been searching for since *Captain Lavender* (1994). The speaker of 'The Disinterment' appeals to the inner senses of the 'Deep-quivering muse, army dissolver / You who have driven war away,' to 'Dance with me, anoint / My warlike eyes with peace' (DB, p.53).

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<sup>76</sup> Carol Strickland & John Boswell, *The Annotated Mona Lisa: A Crash Course in Art History from Prehistoric to Post-Modern* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1992), p.134.

<sup>77</sup> For a more recent example see 'Not Yielding to the Will of Yellow', from *Had I a Thousand Lives* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2003), p.57. The poem's speaker says that, 'My eye sweeps / led by white, to speak of blue.'

In each of McGuckian's volumes spanning nearly a decade (1994–2003), she has not just dealt with issues of gender identity, but national ones too. Although McGuckian is not preoccupied with discovering the truths of history, like Boland, or of those of myth, like Ní Dhomhnaill, she does speak on behalf of those who have been silenced. However, she is unwilling to play the role of witness or informer and evades speaking of Northern Irish politics while making a political statement with her reticence. Unlike Boland, McGuckian in Chapter V makes it clear that she is not interested in re-writing an established male history, or in writing a specifically 'encoded' woman's history. She states, 'I don't feel the need to rewrite what men have written because I'm very with it and I'm very proud of it, and respect it so much.'<sup>78</sup> McGuckian's poems, therefore, do not romantically confront a nation's history and its past, like Boland's. Rather, images of dismembered bodies are used throughout her poetry from *Captain Lavender* onwards to reflect obliquely on Northern Irish political history through a private coded symbolism. Thus, by employing images of the body to direct her vision inwards, McGuckian has shifted un-represented Irish histories of both men and women from the margins of history.

While images of the body speak volumes they paradoxically secrete meanings into the poems to create political allegories, thus painting a linguistic picture of 'that mute province we call home'(CL, p.22). Although discovering images of the body as a method to read, or crack the McGuckianesque poems, one of the difficulties with McGuckian's private vision is that the symbols used, particularly the body and its relationship with language, are constantly evolving

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<sup>78</sup> Muri, 'Interview with Medbh McGuckian'.

within the poetry. The body has been used as a psychological distancing device that marks McGuckian's gradual retreat from history to a point now where there seems to be no return. McGuckian experiments with a new way of looking at Irish history, a way that incorporates avoiding witnessing its past. While McGuckian has taken ownership of the past she has simultaneously disowned it in favour of presenting a phantasmatic corporal vision of Northern Ireland's political history.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> For a more in depth discussion see Guinn Batten, 'Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and the body of the nation' in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed., Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.173. Batten argues, 'To Boland's argument that women writer's become political when they eschew victim-hood while representing those women who remain victims, McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin often present speakers or historical figures who acquire agency through bodily surrender. To Boland's anger that women in Ireland have been historically silenced or absent they offer a poetry that figures silence and absence as replete with strategies for rethinking the course of narrative and of history. And to her objections to an Irish and Catholic iconography of woman, its veiling of her 'actual' or 'real' body, they suggest that the body is itself phantasmatic, a broken relic that is in excess of history and yet remains, in Ní Chuilleanáin's 'Brazen Serpent', 'real'.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion:

### 'Is it Still the Same'? Making the Old New in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Irish Poetry

In her introduction to *The New Irish Poets* (2004), Selina Guinness has said that 'Women have been notoriously badly served by anthologies in the past, a fact for which few male editors have admitted responsibility.'<sup>1</sup> This landmark anthology launches the latest generation of Irish poets, the youngest being Leanne O'Sullivan (b.1983) compared with the oldest, Fergus Allen (b.1921), redressing the disproportionate male to female ratios with her balanced selection of 18 male poets and 15 women poets. Following the anthology wars of the last twenty years, Irish women from the past and present, Northern and Southern Ireland and abroad have aspired to make their voices heard in new anthologies of Irish writing. In 2003, eminent women writers and poets, Deirdre Brennan, Medbh Maighread and Nuala Ní Chonchair, selected the short stories that explore love and relationships in *Divas! An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing*, published by the feminist press, Arlen House.<sup>2</sup> Then, in 2004, Anne Coleman, Moynagh Sullivan and Medbh McGuckian edited *The Grateful Muse: An Anthology of Irish Women's Poetry from 1677 to 1920*, an anthology that promised an abundance of foremothers spanning nearly three centuries.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Selina Guinness, ed., *The New Irish Poets* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p.21.

Hereafter, all poems quoted from this Anthology will be referenced in parenthesis in the main text.

<sup>2</sup> Deirdre Brennan, Medbh Maighread and Nuala Ní Chonchair, ed's., *Divas! An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing* (Galway: Arlen House, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Coleman, Medbh McGuckian and Moynagh Sullivan, ed's., *The Grateful Muse: An Anthology of Irish Women's Poetry from 1677 to 1920* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004).

If anthology-making is a form of literary criticism, then the steady flow of all women anthologies, along with those that establish a sense of equilibrium between contemporary male and female poets, are indicative of how women have been written into a tradition that once marginalized their voices. Reading Irish poetry written between the years 1989-2004, this thesis has demonstrated how Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian have challenged literary tradition with a poetry that has offered an insight into the mythical and historical silencing of Irish women's lives. The new generation of women poets continues to make the traits of the previous generation of poets new by re-charting literary history with their contributions to twenty-first-century Irish poetry thus far. Through their redirection of the traditionally mapped out course of literary history, these foremothers have set a new precedent for the next generation of women poets.

In Boland's introduction to the 2003 anthology, *Three Irish Poets*, she says that, 'Inscribing new voices in a tradition can be disruptive. Nevertheless women's voices are now deeply marked on Irish poetry'.<sup>4</sup> Boland reflects on how the direction of literary history has changed for the younger woman poet in her sonnet, 'Is it Still the Same' (C, p.47). Visualizing a young mother-poet, 'who climbs the stairs / who closes a child's door', Boland reminisces that,

I wrote like that once.  
But this is different:  
This time when she looks up, I will be there.

Throughout Boland's autocritographical poetry and prose, she has recurrently recreated the scene of climbing the stairs and going to a table in a

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<sup>4</sup> Eavan Boland, Mary O'Malley and Paula Meehan, *Three Irish Poets: An Anthology* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2003), p.10.

room to write, an experience that as a young student at Trinity College Dublin and later as a mother living in suburban Dublin has been used as a metonym for women writing at the margins of tradition. In the prose essay, 'Outside History', Boland creates an imaginary encounter between her younger and older poetic selves to confront herself as a young poet:

I draw up a chair, I sit down opposite her. I begin to talk – no, to harangue her. Why, I say, do you do it? Why do you go back to that attic flat, night after night, to write in forms explored and sealed by Englishmen hundreds of years ago? You are Irish. You are a woman. Why do you keep these things at the periphery of the poem? Why do you not move them to the centre, where they belong?' (OL, p.132)

Questioning whether literary history 'is still the same', although the domestic scene that is carefully constructed once again remains the same, Boland has relocated the Irish woman and poet from the periphery of the poem by moving her middle-aged self not only to the centre of her own poem, but also, to that of the young poet. By moving the Irish woman and poet from the poem's margins to its centre, tired and outdated national icons of Mother Ireland, Mother Church, Cathleen Ní Houlihan and Dark Roseleen - the list could go on - have been liberated and replaced with the lives and experiences of ordinary women.

Moving from 'trope to traitor', to use Eibhlin Evans' phrase<sup>5</sup>, we have seen a complete role reversal in women's poetry that extends itself to the use of the male body as the woman's muse. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh has said that Ní Dhomhnaill describes 'herself as a woman writer "returning the compliment" to males who, inspired by a female muse, have written in praise of the female

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<sup>5</sup> Eibhlín Evans, "Moving into the Space Cleared by our Mothers". *Critical Survey*, 8 (1996), p.199.

body.’<sup>6</sup> In ‘returning the compliment’, Ní Dhomhnaill’s use of the male body in her feminist-voyeuristic ‘Gan do Chuid Éadaigh’, translated by Paul Muldoon as ‘Nude’, strips her muse down to the ‘root that is the very seat / of pleasure, the pleasure-source’ (PD, p.93). Similarly, in ‘Fear’, translated by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as ‘Looking at a Man’, the male stands before the artist in all his glory in just his ‘skin and a wristwatch’(PD, p.143). One of the new Irish poets, Katie Donovan also ‘returns the compliment’, in her amusingly erotic ‘Watermelon Man (a painting by Rufino Tamayo)’ (NIP, p.89). The speaker imagines her male lover’s:

watermelon chuckle  
trickling out of you  
like sweet sticky juice;  
you curve the ends of my black and white day,  
my day of bleary head and blowsy self-pity  
into a sticky pink smile  
at myself and the world;

The eroticism that exudes from the watermelon mirrors those in Tamayo’s still-lives. Tamayo (1899-1991), a Zapotecan Indian who was born in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, used recurring images of watermelons in his art to symbolize ‘the sensuousness of the mundane world’. Donovan adopts Tamayo’s symbolism in her imaginary encounter with the watermelon man when he spices up her ‘black and white day’ by making her smile at herself and the world. According to William Sheehy, ‘Although the shape of the halved watermelon can be seen as a smile....This fruit is cut with a knife. Even the shape, the angular slice of melon

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<sup>6</sup> Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1996), p.186.

suggests the process of cutting.’<sup>7</sup> In ‘Watermelon Man’, images of the watermelon being cut, like those of ‘your curved melonslice grin’ and ‘grins slicing all over me’, suggest the ritual of blood sacrifice through being silenced or sliced. Although on this occasion it is Donovan’s male muse, the watermelon man with his ‘sticky pink smile’, who is silenced.

In her introduction to a groundbreaking study of women poets writing during the last hundred years, *Consorting with Angels* (2005), Deryn Rees-Jones observes that, ‘Women’s poetry is now very much a visible part of contemporary poetry. It is the ‘spectacularity’ of the work of these women poets...who wrote and who have shaped the writing which succeeds them, which demands, in every way, another and a different kind of look.’<sup>8</sup> Thus the revisionary strategies employed by Irish women demand a look: take for instance Ní Dhomhnaill’s 1995 work with the photographer, Amelia Stein and the dancer and choreographer, Cindy Cummings, in a collaboration known as ‘Triúr Ban’ (‘Three Women’). This project aimed to ‘express and explore their response to life in contemporary Ireland’, and collectively, the stark black and white photographs and poems of Stein, Cummings and Ní Dhomhnaill sought ‘to give voice to the silences of the past by “revisiting” an inherited repertoire of image and narratives of women in Ireland.’<sup>9</sup> The ‘spectacularity’ of this artistic collaboration not only attempted to

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<sup>7</sup> William Sheehy, ‘Rufino Tamayo’

<[http://www.latinamericanmasters.com/english/artist\\_tamayo\\_essay.html](http://www.latinamericanmasters.com/english/artist_tamayo_essay.html)> [accessed 28 October 2006].

<sup>8</sup> Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p.29. Read these essays with Rees-Jones’ companion anthology *Modern Women Poets* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Memory and Resistance: Triúr Ban and Re-Membering of the Female Body’ cited from the Sixth European Social Science History Conference (22-25 March 2006) <<http://www2.iisg.nl/esshc/programme9606.asp?selyear=8&pap=2859>> [accessed 26 September 2006].

give a voice to those women who were artistically silenced, but also those whose bodies were visions of silence.

In his discussion of the ‘crowd-control’ tactics of British anthologists, David Wheatley has referred to how Ní Dhomhnaill was once regarded as ‘the one-woman embodiment of Irish-language poetry’.<sup>10</sup> It is thus important to note how Ní Dhomhnaill has brought Irish into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not just as a ‘corpse that sits up and talks back’, but one that is kicking and screaming. After spending many years championing the use of the Irish language, Ní Dhomhnaill now believes that,

the culture wars are coming to an end. In Irish, especially since the publication of Robert Welch’s *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (1996), for the first time ever the two languages of Ireland and their attendant literatures were at last on an equal footing.<sup>11</sup>

Ní Dhomhnaill has, however, had to wait a long time before making this statement. Back in 1990, *Pharaoh’s Daughter* concluded with the signature poem, ‘Ceist na Teangan’ / ‘The Language Issue’ by placing the Irish language like Moses into the lap of the Pharaoh’s daughter in the hope that it would survive. Nearly twenty years on, Ní Dhomhnaill places a renewed faith in the new Irish language poets writing from both Southern and Northern Ireland. Although she is more famously known for having her poetry translated into English by other poets, Ní Dhomhnaill provides the translations of Colette Ní Ghallchóir that were chosen by Guinness in *The New Irish Poets*. Praising Ní Ghallchóir’s poetry for its ‘clear-eyed appreciation of what it has been like for her people to live in the

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<sup>10</sup> David Wheatley, ‘Irish Poetry into the Twenty-First Century’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed., Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.252.

<sup>11</sup> Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, *Sruth Teangacha: Rogha Filíochta / Streams of Tongues: Selected Poetry*, intro., Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2002), p.16.

countryside', Ní Dhomhnaill has included Ní Ghallchóir in her selection of poetry for *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol 5. Ní Dhomhnaill is, therefore, pivotal in continuing the tradition of translation and, in doing so, widens the audiences of women poets writing and translating both home and abroad.

'This new map, unrolled, smoothed, seems innocent as the one we have discarded', writes Kerry Hardie in 'We Change the Map', (NIP, p.144). Hardie is suggesting here that this new map is not as innocent as it seems, that the new Irish poets writing in English and Irish have some kind of hidden agenda in mind. Vona Groarke is one of the most outstanding voices to emerge from the new poetry scene and in *Verse's* 1999 special issue on Irish women poets, she states that, 'the best of Irish women poets are not writing "Irish Women's Poetry". There is no convergence of subject-matter, no orthodoxy of theme or tone, no received notion of what is appropriate or what is beyond our reach.'<sup>12</sup> Writing 'Irish Women's Poetry' as a subcategory of 'Irish poetry' not only carries with it expectations that women will write simply and only of their domestic lives, but that they are not yet writing on an equal footing with their male counterparts.

So, what if 'not writing "Irish Women's Poetry"' means that the woman poet should reject writing about ordinary aspects of her life, like her experiences of motherhood, in favour of the domestic acting as a substitute for the political, as in Groarke's 'Imperial Measure'?(NIP, p.136-137). Similar to Boland's eroticisation of Irish history, Groarke's domestication of it is a further means of writing women into the official version of the past:

The kitchens of the Metropole and Imperial hotels yielded  
up to the Irish Republic

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<sup>12</sup> Vona Groarke, 'Editorial', *Verse*, 16 (1999), p.8, cited from Guinness, *New Irish Poets*, p.23.

their armoury 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 poem takes its epigraph from a letter that Pearse sent to his mother from the GPO in Easter 1916. He writes, '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's form illustrates how the political commentary cuts into the domestic one. The political and domestic act in turn as metaphors for each other, thus creating what Guinness referred to as the 'domestication of national history'.<sup>13</sup>

The paradox of speaking while saying nothing is part of the legacy that Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian have left the next generation of Irish poets. Of the three poets discussed in this thesis, McGuckian was the one who most glaringly entered into an intense dialogue with silence firmly stating, 'I have nothing to say which I can say' (HIATL, p.13). Such pregnant silences remain prevalent in today's Irish poetry. Here are a few examples from Jean Bleakney, Colette Bryce, Vona Groarke, Nick Laird, Conor O'Callaghan and Catriona O'Reilly, all quoted respectively:

I can't begin to tell you  
(I keep *meaning* to tell you)  
how it feels to drive away...  
the absolute gobsmackery  
...I'll remember  
what it was I wanted to say,

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<sup>13</sup> Guinness, *New Irish Poets*, p,30.

Something relating to constancy...  
But just for now, here I sit,  
stoically inarticulate

(Jean Bleakney, 'On Going Without Saying', NIP, pp.47-48)

Someone must know what I've done /  
and there's no one to tell.

(Colette Bryce, 'Form', NIP, p.52)

And what would I tell them /  
given the chance?

('The Full Indian Rope Trick', NIP, p.56)

You shout out our names to claim possession. /  
The silence brings a sense of being adrift.

(Vona Groarke, 'Rainbearers', NIP, p.131)

When we had nothing to speak of, we used stone.

('The Glasshouse', NIP, p.133)

What can I say?

('The Way it Goes', NIP, p.139)

This is the closeness casual once in the trenches  
and is deft as remembering when not to mention  
the troubles or women or prison.

They talk of the parking or calving or missing.

(Nick Laird, 'Cuttings', NIP, pp.156-157)

The silence is only disturbed by your voice /  
saying it can't possibly be so easy.

(Conor O'Callaghan, 'River at Night', NIP, p.239)

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth again in class.

(Catriona O'Reilly, 'Thin' NIP, p.261)

Husband and wife, Groarke and O'Callaghan nicely set the paradox of speaking while maintaining a certain silence in their lines above. This in turn implies that there is still a reluctance to speak as freely as has been suggested. Bleakney's compliance to remain 'stoically inarticulate' means that she is incapable of clearly expressing 'how it feels to drive away', and thus sinks into an impassive state. The inability to find the words to express how one feels,

accompanied by finding an opportunity to speak and someone to listen is at work in the anorexia poems of Bryce and O'Reilly. Despite their sensitive address of anorexia, it appears that this subject is still a taboo, one that continues to be inexpressible. Reflecting on the diminishing body through ubiquitous mirrors and windows, the narrative of the anorexic body speaks of the woman's silence and isolation.

Laird's excerpt from 'Cuttings' above suggests Northern Irish poets continue to speak obliquely of politics. His dexterity in not mentioning 'the troubles or women or prison' employs the strategy of talking about anything other including 'parking or calving or missing'. Like McGuckian's response to the Abercorn Café explosion in Belfast on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1972 in 'Drawing Ballerinas' (2001), Paula Cunningham's title sequence in *A Dog Called Chance* (1999) addressed the immediate aftermath of the Omagh bombing of 15<sup>th</sup> August 1998, in which twenty-nine people were killed. Cunningham's poem 'Hats' (NIP, pp.69-70) taps into the tradition of obliquely speaking of Northern Ireland's Troubles. She says that she has,

...tried on voices just like hats  
The weather changed  
The cease-fires came  
And screaming like a banshee  
My severed tongue came back.

Searching for a voice in a time of political unrest, the poem invokes hats as a mode of expression. The multitude of voices / hats that the speaker tries on until she finds one to suit include a 'whore hat', 'poetry obsessed hat' and 'my rhyme all the time hat'. Having been previously silenced, Cunningham's need to try 'on voices just like hats' suggests that she has not been able to freely speak

with her own tongue, or even that she has not found her own true voice. Alternatively, it could be that she finds liberation in her ventriloquism, when speaking in a number of different voices. Eventually, she finds her voice in the guise of the banshee; or when she tries on her father's hat to put on a political voice which will recount the way his life depended on the way he pronounced 'O-M-A-G-Haich or -Aitch / depending on belief.' Maybe, with the promise of peace, Cunningham anticipates a new voice that will speak freely about the Troubles in Northern Irish poetry.

'Undoubtedly the presence of female poetic forbears has been liberating for these poets', states Guinness.<sup>14</sup> After experiencing a taste of women poets writing in the twenty-first century, it appears that they write with the gusto that was inherited from the later poetry of Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland and McGuckian. With the promise of more exciting times ahead on the contemporary Irish poetry scene, I look forward to Ní Dhomhnaill's, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2006), Boland's, *Domestic Violence* (2007), and McGuckian's, *The Currach Requires No Harbour* (2006). Finally, I wonder if each of these foremothers will continue to speak of silence through Irish myth and history and how the next generation of women poets will continue, as Vona Groarke says, to 'tell the story another way' ('The Lighthouse', NIP, p.132).

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<sup>14</sup> Guinness, *New Irish Poets*, p.22.

## Appendix A

### Talking Gender, Faith and the Erotic with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

*I had the pleasure of informally discussing the issues of gender, faith and the erotic with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill one morning at her home in Cabinteely on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1997. This interview was one of series of discussions that was part of a research trip to Dublin and Belfast during May 1997. After learning that the Petrie Watson fund was willing to assist me in my studies, I decided to try contact the poets, Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Dr. Maryann Valiulis (Director of Women's Studies, Trinity College, Dublin) in advance in the hope that they may even respond to my letters, let alone agree to speak to me as they did. I was in awe when I received a message from my parents saying that Medbh McGuckian had phoned and left her contact number to return her call. After meeting Medbh at Queens University Belfast, we chatted as we walked back to the town centre, and she asked me if I had arranged any other interviews. I replied that I had been trying to contact Nuala, but with no success. Without hesitating she asked, "Have you tried her at home?" I cautiously replied, "No, I haven't got a contact number." Instantly, she gave me Nuala's number and reassured me that she wouldn't mind at all if I just rang her in the hope of meeting up. The following morning, I plucked up the courage to try the number. It rang and a lady answered. "Could I please speak to Ms. Ní Dhomhnaill please?" Nuala replied, "Speaking." After being completely astounded, I explained who I was and why I was in Dublin, and that Medbh had given me her number the previous day. Hesitantly, I asked if there was a chance of me talking to her. She said, "Yes if you will come to my house." Would I. She then proceeded to give me*

*directions along with an anecdote about the BBC going to the wrong house. The following is the discussion that took place the next morning:*

**AA:** *I'd like to start by asking, since writing your 1990 article, 'What Foremothers' do you think Irish women poets have been recognised by the established Irish literary tradition?*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, I think that people now at least realise that there is a problem, but there's an awful lot that was overlooked. There's the keening tradition which was the predominantly feminine tradition....Now people have said, 'Oh yes, Croft & Crocker did seven or eight versions of the keen transcribed into English in 1820. Oh yes, we forgot about that.' And so yes, I do think yes it has been highlighted as a problem, and a lot what's gone on since then the way that the fourth volume of Field Day when it comes out will set the agenda maybe for the next generation.

**AA:** *So, do you think that Irish women poets are starting to be recognised by the literary establishment?*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, yes. But it's because we kept hitting them over the head with dead women poets and living women poets, and god knows what else. They're not going to change by their own religion, but if we can prove incontrovertible historic presence, and, also an indomitable presence, then they are going to have to do something about it.

**AA:** *By making that presence felt, do you mean the persistence of women writing poetry?*

**Ní Dhom:** Ultimately, keep on writing poetry. [But] every time you think you've won an argument and put something on the map forever, next thing you know you've been written out again. For instance, Irish language poets and writers are being written out by English language writers. Only last year in the States I came across somebody who was going to give me an actual date and proof of people like Edna O'Brien saying when she's asked, "What's happening in Irish? She replies, "Oh, that's not done anymore." This is long after she has read in public with me and other people, who are writing in Irish. There's a certain bad faith on the part of English language writers, who will only accept Irish as a dead language.

**AA:** *How do you feel about being a leading contemporary Irish woman poet?*

**Ní Dhom:** I just want to get on with the poetry basically. But then you find yourself pulled into these other controversies.

**AA:** *Obviously, you feel passionate about writing in the Irish language to keep the tradition alive.*

**Ní Dhom:** Oh, I do. That's more ontologically insecure issue than the woman poet one. I think that the woman poet thing has been taken on board in the way that the rights for the Irish language have not been. But, mind you having said that, Robert Welch's compendium of Irish literature, *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (1996), is a wonderful book, and it is the first book ever that has published the highest amount of Irish literature. So we have some Irish literature in Irish and some in English and that's that! So really I'm pleased on that ground that paradigmatic changes are occurring; that you cannot talk about Irish literature without including Irish and the past history of Irish and all the other stuff that was left out of Field Day. Like all that stuff about the bardic poem, none of that was in Field Day.

**AA:** *The publication of the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing (1991) caused quite a controversy, didn't it?*

**Ní Dhom:** It did, and the feminist response to it was well orchestrated and well organised. On the other hand, us Irish language speakers still mumble around about the whole thing. We didn't get our act together, and I feel that more strongly at the moment about the prejudice against the Irish language. The refusal to accept it as part of the culture; refusing to accept it as a bonifide artistic activity.

**AA:** *Do you feel that there is a tradition of Irish women writing love poetry?*

**Ní Dhom:** I don't know if you could call it love....But the folk songs, there's so many of them; extraordinary, passionate complaints of love. Obviously there was a woman's input into them, and often some of the great singers are women.

**AA:** *Could you tell me something about the erotic tradition in Irish literature, and how this may relate to your poetry?*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, it's not that it's an erotic tradition of Irish writing, it's just that the body by not being Victorianised makes it more natural. But the language itself, rather than the writing tradition, makes it easier to write in the erotic vein. For instance, Patrick Pearse even has one or two poems, which are so erotic really without him being aware of it that Thomas McDonagh advised him not to translate into English.

**AA:** *Because they could be seen as....*

**Ní Dhom:** Because they could be seen as paedophilic, homosexual, or god knows what of this great Irish patriot....It's actually the language itself that makes it easier.

**AA:** *So, it's the language that makes the tradition erotic?*

**Ní Dhom:** Not so much the tradition as such, because the tradition is as misogynous as any other tradition. Really the language and the tradition is in the hands of those who use it. There's been a huge misogynistic thing in Irish as much as anywhere else. For instance, the 1970's poem by Sean O'Riordian, 'Ní file ach filíochta, bhean' / 'Woman isn't a poet but poetry'. He was actually very kind to me. So I was actually very hurt and took it personally when I came back from Turkey to find this poem published because on a one to one he wasn't like that....But, it wasn't just me. Marie Mhac tSaoi and himself had a famous run in the '50's, may be some of the bile from that was still in affect....

**AA:** *Would you say, then, that he attacked Irish women poets generally?*

**Ní Dhom:** Oh, I was absolutely mad. I had a hysterical reaction of fear and terror....Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin had a wonderful poem called 'Pygmalion' where this statue kind of comes to life, but it comes to life in ways that maybe the creator was not expecting.... It's emblematic of our time. It expresses a lot of what's going on when women, when the statues began to talk. As Ní Chuilleanáin says, "The great green leaf of language comes from out of her mouth". A lot of poets / critics were ontologically brought into the status quo of women being the poem and not the poet were deeply reactive....

**AA:** *One of Eavan Boland's main criticisms is that woman should be the poet, not the poem.*

**Ní Dhom:** Oh yeah, Eavan is very fundamentally part of this change. It was she who charted us in many ways.

**AA:** *How do you feel about your poetry being interpreted through an erotic vision of love?*

**Ní Dhom:** I don't mind it. [Nuala laughs] They are intimate love poems, but they're also written with a certain ironic detachment....What annoys me is when the 'I' of the poem is seen to be explicitly the 'I' of the person. The difference between the 'I' of a poem, the narrator of a poem and the me that's here and now is negotiable. Sometimes, it's an alter ego I write in. Sometimes it's under a mythological mask. Sometimes you don't, these are all tricks of the trade. I mean, basically, you are trying to grab the reader and the first and second person are marvellous to have discovered. For instance, a lot of the best novels are written in the first and second person....It grabs the readers because you are immediately hauled into the world and you identify with the writer or the person who's talking to you....That's the psychological trick....I do think it's one of the greatest strengths of the Irish tradition.

**AA:** *Which collection would you describe as being the most erotic and why?*

**Ní Dhom:** *Feis*, the one in Irish because it's the marriage of heaven and earth, the marriage of male and female principles within. The name of the poem in Irish 'Feis' means to sleep with, to fuck. That's what the book means. You can't really translate that into English. [Nuala laughs] When Paul Muldoon translated that poem it had to be translated as 'carnival' with the emphasis on 'carni'.

**AA:** *That's now in The Astrakhan Cloak (1992)?*

**Ní Dhom:** Yeah. But actually the original book in Irish, *Feis*, is structured on that pattern of the palloch, the unredeemed feminine, then the demon lover, and then you've got Jung....I structured them according to the whole idea of transformative marriage....

**AA:** *And Feis has not been translated into English?*

**Ní Dhom:** No, the whole book hasn't been translated. Some of the poems that have been translated have been translated out of context, so what you get in *The Astrakhan Cloak* is actually about a third of the book....It has its own structure, which is fair enough. But, I mean as long as people realise that something else is going on in Irish. So, I think having got that out of my system....I can do something else now for a change. [Nuala laughs] Mermaids and transformation.

**AA:** *I've read some of your mermaid poems....*

**Ní Dhom:** Transformation and séanchalore; I have a poem on that in a recent copy of *Innti*. It hasn't been translated yet. It's the moment when they turn into birds, and the moment when the bag falls out of your hand because you don't have fingers anymore, you have claws. You lift up your arm and knock all the stuff off the table because you have this big wing hanging where you felt your arm was....

**AA:** *Do you see mermaids as being erotic beings?*

**Ní Dhom:** Oh, I don't know. I think there's a lot of anger in the mermaid poems. The ones that have been translated definitely have an awful lot of anger....But erotic?

**AA:** *When thinking about mermaids, I have this image of them [women] lying seductively on the rocks or seashore.*

**Ní Dhom:** Yeah. But I think my mermaids are different....Well, they're merpeople to start with. They're a mertribe. You see I had a problem with the word 'mermaid' in Irish, which actually means 'sea virgin', and that's much too limited for what I wanted to do. So I went back to folklore material and I found a word 'envroabh' / 'envroamh', but it's spelt in two ways; sometimes with a 'bh'; sometimes with an 'mh'. But they both mean 'merperson.' Sometimes it's male.

Sometimes female. It can be anything. I've revived that word because in a way a 'merperson' is not gendered....

*AA: It's a neutral word?*

**Ní Dhom:** Yeah, it's much more useful for me. But I use the 'mh' form, because that probably is the original form....The other form 'bh' is probably a later misspelling. It is in the dictionary, but it's not commonly used. So, I've reinvented it in a way to be used on my terms, which are non-gendered.

*AA: One of the questions that I've been thinking about is, are there masculine and feminine forms in Irish, say like in French?*

**Ní Dhom:** You have in Irish also.

*AA: Do you use neuter, ungendered forms like in German?*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, sometimes. It's very hard. All the words for 'sea' are feminine.... All the words for 'sun' are feminine. Two words for the 'moon' and they're both feminine. But, one of them could be male or female. I mean a lot of the really important words are feminine.

*AA: I've been thinking about the gender of Irish, because as a non-Irish speaker, I'm having a problem with the various English translations of your poems. I believe that these are not literal translations, more interpretations, particularly those by poets like Medbh McGuckian. Further, I'm concerned about gender bias when male poets like Paul Muldoon translate a woman's poem concerning women's issues and experiences.*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, most translations were male. But, that's because there weren't so many people who had Irish that were interested in doing translations. Eavan, for instance, has no Irish, but has never been interested in doing translations anyway. Medbh has just some Irish....

*AA: What do you believe distinguishes love from erotica?*

**Ní Dhom:** The emotional indifference is the main thing, the bonding. The fact that the erotic is part of something bigger.

*AA: Do you think the erotic is more about equality between two people than love?*

**Ní Dhom:** I don't know. I would think the erotic in one form of expression of something that's bigger....The loving feeling of not being armoured pathologically, about defensiveness – defencelessness – not being defensive....

**AA:** *I think that it's fantastic that the male muse provided much of the dynamism in your poetry. I wondered what inspired you to create a male muse?*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, I think I've grown out of that. Like I said, I wrote a whole book, *Feis*, where I more or less worked that out....I kind of feel that I worked that out and I'm just not interested in it at the moment....It's kind of become translucent for me, maybe, it's just a phase I'm going through. Maybe, I'm just middle-aged.

**AA:** *I was thinking about the erotic treatment of the male muse in later poems like 'Gan do Chuid Éadaigh' / 'Nude' and 'Fear' / 'Looking at a Man', from Pharaoh's Daughter (1990).*

**Ní Dhom:** Not just in the English tradition, but also in the Irish one of Dantá Gra. These medieval poems, which are wonderful, beautiful, beautiful poems, which I love, but they're very fetishistic. They cut the woman up into bits & pieces. There's an arm here, and a leg there. It's a bit like being at the butchers and seeing fine cuts of beef. So I thought I get my own back. [Nuala laughs]....I do it with a certain sense of humour and I'd like to say an ironic detachment....People have tried to have comeback. Down in the Merryman Winter school a few years ago,... [a male critic] gave the keynote lecture the night before I arrived, and spoke about my poem, 'The Unfaithful Wife' as being a sexist poem. He made a big case about it....The poem speaks for itself. You either understand it, or you don't....Frank McInlay subsequently in an article about translation and this poem, in particular, showed how this critique was wrong. He was so caught up in his own male superiority....A man can go into a pub and talk about his conquests. But if a woman went into a pub and talked about her conquests, the reaction would be entirely different....Years later, Paul Durcan says on a radio programme recently that I do to men, what men have been doing women....

**AA:** *I feel that the Pharaoh's Daughter's love poems use the erotic in a fantastic way to create new or revive lost love. How do you fell about this?*

**Ní Dhom:** Oh yeah, a lot. It is wishful thinking. [Nuala laughs]

**AA:** *In the Pharaoh's Daughter (1990) secrets are concealed into male and female bodies. For example, in 'Dún', translated by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as 'Stronghold', the speaker refers to 'a secret garden between the shoulder blades.' Could you perhaps explain these lines?*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, it's a line from a folklore song. There's these wonderful songs in the séancholore tradition that I might take lines from.... [Nuala Sings] So, basically, it's not obvious whether the person involved is male or female. I don't think it matters because it's an expression of containment, held in a warm embrace....It's the feeling of containment that's important; a mountain of warmth around you. That mountain of warmth may be ultimately maternal. But, I mean at some stage it probably goes back to the mother body. Then again, it may be transferred to a more contemporary body whether male or female it doesn't really matter.

**AA:** *I feel that there's a lot of censorship (authorial control) over the information that is withheld by sealing meaning into the body. Do you feel that too?*

**Ní Dhom:** Oh yeah! There's a poem where this happens, when people have said is it a man or a woman. I probably don't remember anymore. All I know is that the poem exists....The experience that's behind it has been so transformed at this stage by memory and by everything else....That's why I'm probably a very ruthless poet in that human experience, which is just there to be mimed for the poem rather than being important in its own right. I'm inclined to be a ruthless poet....You have a choice of perfection of the life or of the work, life's never perfect anyway any mother knows that....Perfectionism and motherhood is a contradiction in terms.

**AA:** *The erotic silences within many of your poems indicate that your poetry is not confessional.*

**Ní Dhom:** I would agree, no it's not. I transform even the ones that seem so obviously confessional....I don't like confessional poetry. In American confessional poetry I don't mind Plath. Plath is good because although confessional, Plath is greatly transformative. She transforms the thing so that it feels like a confessional, but it isn't. But, then, people like the late Ann Sexton,...., I just can't stand it.

**AA:** *What about John Berryman?*

**Ní Dhom:** I like John Berryman in a way because again he plays around with the confession. I mean I don't like his more confessional stuff, like the Sonnets, which are more straightforwardly confessional. But, then, when he gets to 'Dream Songs', then you're talking about something else. I like his later poems again all about God....

**AA:** *I very often get the feeling that you go so far with the story, and, then, hold vital information back.*

**Ní Dhom:** Oh yeah. Even the ones that are obviously seemingly confessional like for example, 'An Bhean Mhídhílis' / 'The Unfaithful Wife', I got the details from here, there and everywhere. For instance, the 'dog shit' from *Redemption* by Francis Stewart, who I happened to be reading at the time. There was a love scene, while they're making love there's the dog shit. That's the kind of detail that I use....

**AA:** *I feel that the silence at the poem's core is erotic....*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, maybe it is in the sense that I've just been reading one of Donald Cosby's books.... He's damn interesting, and I think art criticism is way ahead of poetry criticism, because he talks about the inaccessibility in modern art. All the

time I was reading, and he was saying modern art, I was thinking modern poetry, modern poetry....And I think it is part of the post-modernist, or modernist tradition that there is something ineffable....Part of the poem that gets its form of core of silence that gives it power, one hopes....

*AA: I'd like to ask you about the Catholic symbolism at work in many of your poems....*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, it's just another area that's emotionally charged for people....It's like Greek or Irish mythology, or any 'ology. I was brought up a catholic, and in a way my imagination was formed by mythology. Good and bad that may seem, but there are huge outlets, imaginative outlets for children; all the male altars and giving flowers for Our Lady....It was wonderfully imaginative....

*AA: For example, I was thinking about Michael Hartnett's version of 'Éirigh, A 'Éinín' entitled 'Celebration', from Pharaoh's Daughter, and the image of the women 'in their crimplene dresses in August heat. / The fat one starts the Rosary chanting.' This is a stark contrast to the 'dolphin-like English girl / in a yellow bikini'.*

**Ní Dhom:** The woman in the bikini. I just happened to see her one-day. I happened to be down in West Kerry on a very, very, very hot day. There was a tourist in this bikini and I drive by and saw all these things...I saw the other woman with a child.... ['a middle-aged woman is on her way, / depressed in sand dunes, pushing for miles / a pram which contains a retarded child.'] And, then, later on when I had to write a poem about celebration, I heard the bird, but somewhere else. It just all seemed to fuse together....I just happened to have been a little bit hyper that day, maybe. It's always the feminine images, it's the women. I don't know why there's no men in that picture. I don't know what they were doing, I wasn't interested in them. I was interested in what the women were doing....

*AA: Because your main concern is to write of women's experiences into your poems?*

**Ní Dhom:** Yes, you go by and wonder what their lives are like. I do that all the time. I don't do that much with men. I'm just not interested. I think that they have had their say, and had a chance to speak their speak, or to say their say....I find myself thinking about women's lives a lot. Like the different lives of those three women in 'Celebration'.

*AA: I found those images of the women in 'Celebration' interestingly contradictory.*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, you see that in women's lives. If you were to walk into a supermarket now and watch the looks on women's faces and the different body language and everything else, it's amazing.

**AA:** *Many of your poems present women in positive, but negative ways. Is this because this is your general perception of women?*

**Ní Dhom:** Mmm, yes. It's probably because this is how I see women just living their lives. I don't think I have an agenda there. It is interesting that you should say that because that's never dawned on me in that poem. The child is male obviously because he sits up in the pram, but why at that stage I only saw what the women were doing with their lives...?

**AA:** *And the stress in 'Celebration' to 'tell' over and over again....*

**Ní Dhom:** Yeah, the need to express, which is what the bird is doing, just by being a poet. It's very important, the need to express, which hasn't been done with women's lives, and maybe that's why I have all these different types of women. I've never thought of it like that, but you're right. It's very important to me our reality. If feel that if I die without expressing the reality of the women in Ireland in the last part of the twentieth century and maybe hopefully a little bit into the next century, then, I would have lived in vain....I am aware of so many things that occur that are not expressed. I've always been aware of much more going on than meets the eye and much more than what's being said. Like body language, all the things that are not said. It's the really, really important things that are not said.

**AA:** *Yes, I feel that this comes through very strongly in much of your poetry. Particularly, the way the body is used to communicate the unspoken aspects of women's lives. I think Medbh McGuckian uses the body in this way too. I've noticed that in some of your more erotically charged love poems that the body is used to speak on occasions of forbidden love. That you don't have to say 'I love you' because this may be articulated by a look, or through a touch, maybe.*

**Ní Dhom:** And, that's the way things are done I think. It's the things that aren't said between people that are really important....

**AA:** *Do your erotic love poems present a lack of faith in love, in that they question Catholic ideals through love? I'm thinking particularly of 'An Bhean Mhídhílis' translated by Paul Muldoon as 'The Unfaithful Wife', from Pharaoh's Daughter.'*

**Ní Dhom:** I've just read *Mary Lavelle* by Kate O'Brien, and, then, reviewed it....It began to make me think about the great minotaur of instinct and feeling lurking in the labyrinth of the human heart. I have always loved *Mary Lavelle*, but it had been a few years since I've read it, and there it's clear that love is an illusion....

**AA:** *So, you wouldn't describe it as a lack of faith in love?*

**Ní Dhom:** Well, it's an illusion....Expressing it in some form or other, not necessarily acting out, hence all the love poems.

**AA:** *By a lack of faith in love, I mean the way that infidelity questions the institution of marriage in 'The Unfaithful Wife'.*

**Ní Dhom:** That poem is deliberately anti-romantic, really deliberately anti-romantic because it is based on a Lorca poem. The first time that I heard that poem performed I was very young in my teens, which was translated into Irish by Marie Mhac tSaoi. Then I discovered that it was translated an awful lot....

*As Ní Dhomhnaill and I continued to speak about her anti-romanticism and of Lorca, our conversation drifted into a more general discussion of my research so far and her forthcoming plans.*

**May 1997**

## Appendix B

### Speaking of McGuckian's Bodily Silence Through Mouths

#### *Captain Lavender* (1994)

like an oyster shell  
that has held life between its lips  
so long,  
(**'Candles at Three Thirty', p.15**)

Nobody has ever seen  
the true shape of your lips.  
You are walled round, a too-well-laid-out path  
Your detour round the language  
like a wound closing wearily.  
(**'Story Between Two Notes', p.17**)

What do you care if I, your younger mouth,  
stay or leave....

If I dare  
upon your silence  
(**'Speaking into the Candles', pp.18-19**)

You give me your mouth uncluttered  
by ordinary corrupt human love  
(**'Faith', p.20**)

His tongue was cramped into a few  
very pale, casual sensations  
though a thousand years of breeding  
moved the bright muscle of his mouth.  
(**'Et Animum Dimittit', p.22**)

Lips applied to other lips  
(**'Ignotas in Artes', p.24**)

I have not spoken words with roots  
since I saw you;  
the light around my eyes  
from your transparent grass  
is the tightness around everyone's lips.  
(**'The Wake Sofa', p.30**)

I miss a serious amount of silk  
from my arm where it nestles unsaid  
in the bend of the *L* or goes into stone-pierced water  
between the ornamental lips of the fingers;  
**(‘Drawing in Red Chalk at a Death Sale’, p.35)**

If I had dipped the tip of my finger  
in water to cool your tongue  
**(‘Field Heart’, p.37)**

We are things squeezed out, like lips....  
Your mouth works beyond desolation and glass....  
Your tongue, layered with air, presses a triple breath  
**(‘The Finder has Become the Seeker’, p.41)**

the lips of your fireproof eye  
burned like poppies, firmly reminding  
everyone that speech is work.

Until we remembered that to speak  
is to be forever on the road,  
listening to the foreigner's footstep.  
**(‘Aisling Hat’, p.47)**

...passion  
exhausts itself at the mouth  
**(‘The Over-Mother’, p.64)**

eyes I feared to read, that nailed or burned  
the words to my lips  
**(‘Skull Light’, p.66)**

war-talk sentences  
act as if they had never been shot at  
**(‘Credenza’, p.67)**

Tonight, when the treaty moves all tongues  
**(‘The War Degree’, p.74)**

making fingers of lips and lips of fingers  
**(‘Timed Chess’, p.75)**

Rusting there is second-best  
to dreaming of the membrane of your mouth  
**(‘For the Wind Millionaire’, p.79)**

his lips wind-packed with snow  
(**'Apostle of Violence', p.80**)

its little wounds open and close like a mouth  
to feed, over a furrowed throat....  
the wafer of your mouth, the body of  
your mouth, your body's mouth, your mouth's  
body....  
(**'Dividing the Political Temperature', p.82**)

***Shelmalier (1998)***

Here is a stone with a stone's mouth inside....

The leaves are tongues whose years of blood are locked  
in the wrong house  
(**'Script for an Unchanging Voice', p.16**)

Like a lip or spade, a scooping tongue or scooped ladle,  
with nothing of the dryad or faun about him  
(**'Pass Christian', p.18**)

Their longing conversation  
upsets all the letters in my head....

the way trees grow, in groups, how they  
are bodily sunk to the lips  
(**'The Sofa in the Window with the Trees Outside', p.21**)

...the trees  
speak into this anxiously protected room,  
their lips almost seeing  
how they have lost their way  
(**'The Rose-Trellis', p.24**)

The rose unfolding at the corner of your mouth....

My heart in your mouth is a tan-coloured telephone  
that hears your near-dying voice everywhere  
(**'Cleaning Out the Workhouse', p.30**)

drawing my hands to and from my lips  
like dusk adding truth to the chain  
of pictures lining the house  
(**'Circle with Full Stop', p.31**)

All their fingers are together, they are  
tight-lipped, unwakeable mothers  
embraced to the hilt and reconceived  
**(‘The Feminine Christs’, p.34)**

And the child that is always missing  
buried his rounded mouth  
in my breath-coloured rim  
like a partial cremation  
**(‘The Summer of a Dormouse’, p.43)**

Like a map your lips promised  
**(‘The Field of Nonduality’, p.45)**

I place the same / red on his lips  
**(‘Green Crucifix’, p.46)**

Once I lay across  
his wrist in the apron of shade,

hearing the bone-lipping sound of an enlarged  
heart massage the tone of parting  
**(‘The Third Chessplayer’, p.50)**

Higher and higher the tearless grass  
opens a window under my feet,  
and quite across my mouth....  
...with smeared lips on which no beard grows,  
but the blood of winter flaming  
**(‘The Building of the “Hebe”’, p.53)**

Your lips stung  
with the stained whiteness of the loose-hung  
windows  
**(‘The Tree Cloud’, p.62)**

seven lipsticks dry  
the unwanted morning’s of lipped feeling  
**(‘Man Dressed as a Skeleton’, p.66)**

Your mouth of fire blouses like the coldest, whitest skull  
**(‘Man with Crossed Arms’, p.68)**

How often is he to be buried  
with a flower at his lip....

an open and urging fire  
from my shoulder to my lip  
**(‘War Masquerading as Love’, p.69)**

My headless convict-doll  
has the mouth of someone spoiled  
**(‘Foliage Ceiling Rose’, p.77)**

In your smileless mouth,  
a sign of two lips,  
a parted male tongue bleeds’  
**(‘Killing the Muse’, p.79)**

War-bred birds circle above  
the leaf-roofed water  
like half-tender wolves of the sea....

Their mouths are purses....

where the tide makes itself felt  
from mouth to mouth....

They take the words up  
as from lips,  
pouring off at intervals  
the outer rings of blood  
**(‘The She-Eagles’, p.84)**

shoals of slow rustling convent clouds  
split their aching distances to form a sort of mouth....

Our two tongues, two churches, placed like a gift’  
**(‘La Bien Cercada; the Well Walled’, p.86)**

An Anglo-Saxon word for shade or enclosure  
hidden like powder enough for ten evenings  
through the ranks of men of the streets –  
cup with two handles on either side, two lips.  
**(‘Impressionist House’, p.89)**

nor would he care  
whether my lips were red more or less red.  
**(‘Blue Doctrine’, p.90)**

Remember well their blood-tunnel perfume  
as it enters the refuge of your lips  
(**'White Magpie', p.92**)

I, a false keyhole,  
whose key turns fourteen tongues at once'  
(**'Praying Male Figurine', p.97**)

...Its silence  
deadens two contrary musics  
but its tongue is luminous  
(**'The Sickness of the Cloth', p.99**)

Passing jewels ripened  
on the outskirts of my untried mouth  
(**'Columbarium', p.102**)

Father with your smooth lip  
my graveless departure,  
swallow its stillness....

And welcome back  
ourselves, our own almost,  
the coldness of my mouth now.  
(**'Shannon's Recovery', p.104**)

the hollowed-out steps in your body  
whose last step is the peace  
of your mouth  
(**'The Latissimus Station', p.105**)

He moves only his tongue,  
saying goodbye many times,  
his tongue has a little salt about it....

Hips lips, a line of cinder-dry iron  
dustless....

A rush of earthbound, makeshift air  
that cannot be bitten by his mouth  
soothes his lungs....

...His tongue cannot  
make the word written  
into his body smoother  
(**'The Birthday of Monday', pp.116-117**)

And my raw  
mouth a non-key of spring, a cousin  
sometimes source  
**(‘Mantilla’, p.119)**

***Drawing Ballerinas (2001)***

...there is some hurt beginning to happen,  
its slow bleed bringing eyes  
down into pages, mouths down  
to the onion-thin sheets of paper  
butterflied, ebonied by the bombs....

...mouths sewn  
in protest, in arms crossed behind necks  
and eyes which are almost too clam.  
And sudden set of midsentence years  
will be served like some hours,  
or the last time your bare lips’  
uncertain shrines were used  
**(‘Condition Three’, pp.16-17)**

where the broad road passed over  
the graves caught in its mouth  
**(‘A Ballet Called Culloden’, p.19)**

He carried Ireland around with him  
like the cardboard tongue pinned to their backs....

And the graces of government  
that I meant to bring to my own lips  
**(‘Act of Settlement’, p.20)**

the whole sea breaking up that comes each time,  
its rhymes buried in folds of meaning  
wrenched into a small space, the line engraved  
around the mouth between the actor  
**(‘Oration’, p.25)**

...your once-red lips before  
and after folded together and left down  
quietly, never to be parted’  
**(‘Monody for Aghas’, p.27)**

...the barest shadow  
of its most stately, most mobile mouth  
(**'Black Raven on Cream-coloured Background'**, p.31)

...an evaporating memory  
concentrates on a square-lipped

lasting peace, superbly green  
(**'The Swan Trap'**, p.44)

like an old warhorse seeing out the season,  
her bitter and subtle mouth never at rest  
(**'The Pochade Box'**, p.47)

Your define my body with the centre of your hand;  
I hear through the shingled roof of your skin  
your ear-shaped body enter the curved floor-line  
of my skin. My hands just skim the cushioned opening,  
the glitter of your mouth; all woods, roots and flowers  
scent and stretch the map that covers your body.  
(**'The Colony Room'**, p.48)

speech that sounds like speaking,  
from the bone-cup of his tongue's root  
(**'Copperheads'**, p.51)

Taste the bottle containing  
the thirty-year truce,  
the magic wine of the victory-defeat  
speaks in your mouth: 'Go wherever you wish.'  
(**'The Disinterment'**, p.53)

...an arrow of his or her birthwood  
that hurts more than the deep places  
of lips, the back of the throat....

the moon a brown grape late and high  
puts her mid-heaven lips to the centre of the cobweb  
(**'A Waiting Place'**, p.60)

Every dialect  
that danced on his tongue  
dissolved her internal dream,  
of immortality with a kiss.  
(**'The Orange Island'**, p.61)

***The Face of the Earth (2002)***

My encircler, I am placing a lock  
upon my lips, though nine deaths  
were in my unhemmed mouth  
or thy mouth breast-white to my breast.

The tongue and knot and pulsing oil  
Of death without death goes round  
**(‘The Brood-Bird’, p.11)**

It is a common word,  
my very body,  
my very mouth  
**(‘Mourning Engagement Ring’, p.14)**

a rush of strange mouths  
named after the river  
**(‘Ramoan Parish Bulletin’, p.19)**

An almost song, even lark-like,  
non-penetrative,  
but a unique tearing of his rusty  
breast-crescent, by his muscular tongue  
**(‘Field Character’, p.24)**

And look to the snowy dome  
of Our Lady of Salvation, of Safety,  
moulding upon our imperfect lips  
the low words of painted praying  
**(‘Studies of Her Right Breast’, p.36)**

the flower of your oft-won mouth, hearing  
your name inexplicably called out’  
**(‘The Fortified Song of Flowers’, p.37)**

The bitter receptors  
of my mapped tongue  
forgot the pagan name  
**(‘This Ember Week’, p.41)**

as though they had grown deafer;

and addressed a conversation  
to no one among us,  
to the gardens framed by your windows,  
that can imitate the shape of flowers

with their mere mouth and their empty fingers.  
(**'High Altitude Lavender', p.47**)

My earth-imbalanced voice  
posted a sentry before my lips....

He no longer lays  
his ear to the weapon of my lips  
(**'The Change Worshipper', pp.50-51**)

...in the furrows of prayer  
that were blowing up my minutes  
like voluptuous-to-be  
disappeared-into lips.  
(**'House with Its Own Island', p.52**)

...The cup from which  
I drank is unnumbered bits  
of a bigger story, smeared by my lips  
(**'Valentine Not to be Opened', p.55**)

congested or besotted look, your wild indigo  
lips are dusky all the time  
(**'The Dance Garden', p57**)

so bared by burning,  
would be to over-shoulder throw  
the earth that has received  
the great heat of his mouth.  
(**'The Water Guardian', p.59**)

Mellow, distant, resigned, and mouthishly  
fertile in unmeaning miracles, he uttered  
black swanskin in the thin hours,  
and tepid prayers embalmed by hope,  
a bird-happy hope.

...held the oil-silk edge of my lips  
to the fire as my life and in my life....

following the softest conceivable  
opening of his mitred mouth  
(**'Novena', pp.64-65**)

...Her inflamed  
mouth feigns breathlessness  
(**'The Moon-Spirit', p.68**)

while a pale leafing voice,  
burned clean, not yet awake from winter,  
breathes her likely death into  
my midnight-starved mouth.

**(‘Speranza’, p.72)**

the transdermal earth was my first glorified lips  
**(‘Small View of Spire and River’, p.73)**

the crushed brick of her lipless mouth  
**(‘The Gas Curtain’, p.74)**

Words lightly spoken on the ends  
of her lips in a blend of three lands....

What did it mean, the rough dried  
yellow root cut of a loaf Mass  
in an Irish mouth? A pit of old potatoes.  
**(‘The Journey Present’, pp.75-76)**

I haven’t opened my mouth  
except for one remark,  
and what remark was that?  
A word which appeases the menace  
of time in us, reading as if  
I were stripping the words  
Of their ever-mortal high meaning.  
**(‘She is in the Past, She has this Grace’, p.81)**

### ***The Soldiers of Year II (2002)***

Artemis, protector of virgins, shovels up  
fresh pain with the newly-wed  
long-stemmed roses, pressing two worlds  
like a wedding kiss upon another Margaret:  
lip-Irish and an old family ring.  
**(‘Love Affair with Firearms’, p.22)**

Your silk-dry  
mate cry  
is a name I would cord  
to my tongue  
**(‘Blood-Words’, p.29)**

...She stroked his head into her  
normal contours, covered his lips’ colder continent

with the silvery blackness of her hand....

Mouth against time, his foreign mouth  
Reached out to the edges of her thirstless tongue....

the black / kiss all the way, inhabited all the open mouths  
**(‘Antebellum Backlash’, p.35)**

Word-of mouth news lowers itself  
from the windharp of your eyes  
**(‘Language Renters’, p.43)**

Hand over hand she loops her hair  
below each ear, searching the desiccated  
womb of the piano for a mouthful of sounds.  
**(‘Soliloquy to a Cloud’, p.46)**

that memory-plus-moisture in the air:  
more unawakened, fireless lips, unlevied hair.  
**(‘To Make Two Bridges Necessary’, p.48)**

Confused mouths locked  
into a diary  
**(‘Round Square’, p.51)**

the poisoned oysters of your cloven lips  
versifying the “Imitation of Christ”  
**(‘The Soldiers of Year II’, p.52)**

I stopped on the lip  
of peace that had no beginning....

My skin hunger answered  
as if the spousified child  
holding unbroken bread close  
to the mouth, being stayed  
in its downwardness.  
**(‘Safe House’, p.53)**

...the mouth of the other world  
holds me in the renewed earth as in a cup or skirt.  
**(‘Mating with the Well’, p.56)**

Woods on the lips where skin is the thinnest  
begin to redden.  
**(‘A Poem for St. Patrick’s Day’, p.60)**

Skin over the mouth's repeating gold watch:  
lame piano with torn-out strings;

**(‘English as a Foreign Language’, p.70)**

...the sun  
set between our lips moving towards each other  
the way the world might die – our requisite

**(‘Photocall’, p.73)**

putting that binding lip around its border,...  
as small as the mouth which doubts not  
to swallow the day.

**(‘Fourteen Century Hours of the Virgin’, p.77)**

### ***Had I a Thousand Lives (2003)***

I do not sing of arms and the man,  
have nothing to say which I can say

**(‘River of January’, p.13)**

regrettably modern road paved the thread  
of its voice - its breath-poem  
into battle letters, its mouth music

into a pocketful of women-nation-  
voters

**(‘Slieve Gallion’, p.15)**

The river wide and slow at its mouth  
has a heavy, sickly smell from all the blood.

**(‘The Rock Dove’, p.18)**

...the full language watering your mouth

**(‘Blue Kasina’, p.24)**

It takes the strain off my lips, their loving  
each other, being rubbed smooth and jerked out  
into talk that smears a ring around my mind  
like winter's soot on my blotting-paper wallpaper.

**(‘Bedroom with Chrysanthemums’, p.32)**

You wake me up with the name  
I carry inside me like a first  
language. It becomes needles

on your lips, slight grey, a waste  
(**'Reading in a Library', p.33**)

My native silence reeled  
silently out of reach  
(**'Cathal's Voice', p.34**)

...your whole length to your locked  
throat tensions and your rounded lips.

You make the most space possible in your mouth,  
Tightening the supple organ of your tongue  
(**'The Mirror Game', p.35**)

the poems of the world tugging at your throat,  
and suddenly it becomes difficult to say  
what my meaning feels like

in my poor-sounding tongue-string  
(**'The Mirror Game', p.36**)

I try to feel what your tongue and lips  
have to do, the straight substitution  
of one sound for another  
(**'The Mirror Game', p.37**)

all those honest and usable Englishings  
that were the heat-death on lips  
(**'The Mirror Game', p.38**)

Then the prison of your tongue within  
the prison of your sleep watered me  
with a beautiful easy language  
(**'The Grief Machine', pp.43-44**)

...I sucked his eye  
like a breast, my eye was sipped  
by his lips....

His fingers pressed against the thin path  
of silence in my lips  
(**'My Father Walking', p.49**)

The fourteen-pointed star  
bells out in the air  
stretching across my mouth  
(**'The Gregory Quarter-acre Clause', p.54**)

My meal of pleasure crisped like a wave  
in the perfect circle of his lips

**(‘Filming the Famine’, p.55)**

a love the colour of a yellowed  
cameo, powdery and vanilla  
on the tongue.

**(‘The Yellowest Child’, p.59)**

pacifism of their tongues

**(‘Ring Worn Outside a Glove’, p.63)**

He sucks the feel of the leaf from his mouth  
parts, his tongue’s side edges the sun’s tide  
across like a glowworm on a snail’s back.

**(‘Scotch Argus on Jerusalem Sage’, p.64)**

...the bell-tongues and blood-  
greased stones

**(‘To My Disordered Muse’, p.67)**

So we can travel across ourselves  
in tidy mouths /  
mobile as language

**(‘The Muse-Hater’s Small Green Passion’, p.69)**

and his tongue felt lame  
as if he has stripped off  
his body too soon

**(‘Clara Theme’, p.71)**

I take hold of the purely thinkable  
body with my lips closed, unclosed,  
as if there were a rune less divine  
that could make him mine.

**(‘The Pyx Sleeper’, pp.76-77)**

...life is held /  
only from the tip of the lips....

a second coat  
a layer of silence on the cultivable ground:  
like a river-mouth without any river

**(‘The Chamomile Lawn’, p.78)**

I would go outside and lie  
naked in the dry sand

for their Caravat lips, because they were  
dry and folded

**(‘Corduroy Road’, p.80)**

I laid my body across his  
in the shape of a cross, I cut myself  
a grave across his head: I took  
a meal at the grave by setting

two vases mouth to mouth in his  
*Gioconda* smile

**(‘Locust in the Cemetery’, p.85)**

The sea is the act of wiping,  
a thought unhesitatingly  
pointing into a sign.  
A loving mouth bursts through it  
like a natural gate.

**(‘The Sleep Cure’, p.86)**

...old Europe  
couldn’t raise a cup to our lips

**(‘The Scissors Collection’, p.89)**

a spider’s web with its nailed  
tongue, tearing his gliding  
spinal cord from the cover  
of his limbs

**(‘Crystal Night’, p.92)**

...a mouth-hug fitted  
to your war....

Shine appearing  
diagonally across your tongue,  
your pinch-pleated cheek-pouch.

And half-a-glass  
of my blood  
from lips to lips  
down the centre of your throat

**(‘Jezcze Polska’, p.95)**

Voices on propped elbows  
go warmly through the air;  
tongues lift, and yet  
do not lift

**(‘On the Mulberry Tree at Heilsbrück’, p.97)**

To sell a dream that follows the mouth  
and is taken in by its nets  
**(‘Pale Adjective’, p.101)**

We cannot see his eyes, and can discern  
only a hint of his mouth  
**(‘Forcing Music to Speak’, p.103)**

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