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## From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition

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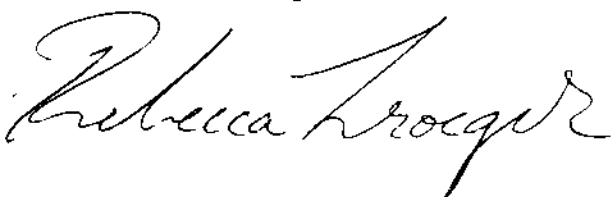
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Rebecca Troeger

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rebecca Troeger". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter 'R' being particularly large and stylized.

From Image to Image Maker:

Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition

The Irish literary tradition has always been inextricably bound with the idea of image-making. Because of Ireland's historical status as a colony, and of Irish people's status as dispossessed of their land, it has been a crucial necessity for Irish writers to establish a sense of unique national identity. Since the nationalist movement that led to the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the concurrent Celtic Literary Revival, in which writers like Yeats, O'Casey, and Synge shaped a nationalist consciousness based upon a mythology that was drawn only partially from actual historical documents, the image of Nation as Woman, and the use of Woman as a symbol for sovereignty and motherland, has become more and more prevalent in Irish culture. Now, that image is ubiquitous, and any Irish woman who intends to write must consciously deal with the fact that women in Irish literature are often symbols for an abstract idea. Therefore, an unresolvable opposition is formed between "Woman/Nation" as an empty, static concept and muse that is created, defined, and utilized by men, and real women who speak and act, and are therefore by the very fact of their existence excluded from the Irish literary tradition. In this study of Irish women writers, I will look at the formation and the history of the image of woman in mythology and literature, and how it is used in current mainstream poetry by Seamus Heaney and John Montague. Also, I will look at contemporary Irish women poets' widely differing ways of dealing with their exclusion from the literary tradition.

# I: "Nothing Could She Say": The History of the Mother Ireland figure and her various manifestations

## A: Origin in Celtic/Pre-Christian religion and poetry

From the earliest known Irish mythologies, the figure of the goddess who embodies the concept of sovereignty, and who confers kingship upon whichever man she chooses, is common. This is the source of the modern-day Mother Ireland figure. Although mythologies change dramatically according to region and time, there is a constant goddess figure who is an embodiment of Ireland itself. She not only represents the nation-- she actually is the nation. This goddess is often in search of an ideal mate, or king, to wed, and the removal of a good king from the throne results in her grief. Also, her personal characteristics are defined by the status of the country-- if the country is poor, then she is poor; if the country is in need of a good king, then the goddess begins to decline. She is immortal, but ages until she finds the right king. As Proinsias Mac Cana writes in "Women in Irish Mythology<sup>1</sup>:"

From the beginning of history and before, until the final dissolution of the Irish social order in the seventeenth century, traditional orthodox thought was dominated by this image of the *puella senilis*, the woman who is literally as old as the hills yet endlessly restored to youth through union with her rightful mate.

The story of how Ireland was named has this goddess figure as its central character. According to the twelfth-century Book of Invasions, the first inhabitants of Ireland were the sons of Mil-- the Gaels, who defeated the gods of the Tuatha De Danann who then inhabited it, and then walked to Tara, where all kings of Ireland were traditionally crowned. They were met on the way by three goddesses whose names are all synonymous with Ireland: Banbha, Fodla and Eriu. One of the sons, a poet-priest, promised Eriu that the island would be named after her, and she in return promised that the island would forever belong to the Sons of Mil<sup>2</sup>. The name Eriu later evolved into Erin, the current Irish Gaelic name for Ireland, and also Eire, which was the basis for the Anglicized name Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> Mac Cana p. 7

<sup>2</sup> Mac Cana p. 7

This story shows the roots of the Irish nation to be intricately bound with this goddess figure. According to Mac Cana, it was common for the goddess to be represented in triadic form, and the names Banhba (more commonly Banba) and Fodla are still in common usage.

Not only did the nation owe its very identity and name to the goddess, but the goddess was highly dependent upon the Irish people for her well-being. Unlike the Christian god, who remains powerful regardless of whether or not his people respect him, Erin/Banba/Fodla reacts in her very substance to the integrity of the king and his followers. In this structure, then, the human king is given much more significance and power. This interdependency was centered on the marriage of sovereignty ceremony or *banfheis rigi* between king and goddess that occurred at coronations. Here, the goddess represents both "the abstract sovereignty and the physical substance" of the kingdom<sup>3</sup>. According to Mac Cana, the union between king and goddess (embodied in a young woman) was physically enacted. Although the ritual lost popularity when the Christian church gained power in Ireland, the sexual element in the ideas of king and nation remained ingrained in literature and the popular imagination to the present day.

Another myth that has this goddess figure at its center is the story of Niall and the hag at the well. Niall, a warrior, and his brothers were preparing to cook a meal and went out in turn to look for water. Each of them encountered a hideous old woman guarding a well who asked for a kiss in return for the water. Niall was the only one who consented to kiss her and lie with her, and she immediately turned into a beautiful young woman who identified herself as Ireland personified and told Niall that his descendants would rule Ireland. This myth comes directly from the belief that formed the basis for the *banfheis rigi*-- that a man must have sexual relations with a woman who embodies sovereignty and nationhood in order to be king. His worth as a king then decides her fate-- if he is wise

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<sup>3</sup> Mac Cana p. 8

and strong, she remains beautiful, and if he is unworthy, then she becomes an old, ugly hag.

As with any myth, this situation can be interpreted in a myriad of ways, and also can be used to further many viewpoints. On one hand, this gives the king unlimited power over nation, nature, and woman, since it is his performance as king that determines her physical appearance, traits and identity. She is completely dependent upon whatever king is on the throne. On the other hand, it is she who chooses him in the first place. She is able to make demands of him, and ultimately legitimize him as king. Moreover, she outlives him. Whereas he is married to her for life, she goes through a series of marriages indefinitely. Although she can be hurt by the king, she cannot die, and in this way, she can be seen as the most powerful figure.

The Mother Ireland figure persisted through many drastic changes in Ireland's social structure, and although she remained a central figure in the literary imagination, she changed forms along with Ireland's changing ideologies. The ninth-century poem "The Hag of Beara"<sup>4</sup> is one of the earliest poems to use the Mother Ireland figure. This poem is a monologue, delivered by an old woman who looks back to an ideal earlier civilization during which she was a beautiful young woman. She criticizes Ireland for giving way to a lower level of morals and civilization: "Possessions,/ not people, is all you value./ As for me, when I was young/ it was people only I loved." She also refers to her past as queen to many kings, and thus refers to the mythology I have described: "Chariots at high speed/ and horses seizing the prize,/ there was a flood of them once./ And I bless the King who gave them", "Nothing but narrow bones/ you will see when you look at my arms./ But they did sweet business once/ round the bodies of mighty kings." and "I had business once with kings/ and drank their mead and wine./ But I drink whey-water now/ with other withered ancients". The great majority of the poem is focused on the old woman's self-pity and nostalgia for youth. Interestingly, she characterizes this youth by a freedom which is lost

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<sup>4</sup> Kinsella, Thomas, ed. The Oxford Book of Irish Verse. p. ?

on the youth of the time she is speaking in: "I wasted my youth from the start/ and I'm glad I chose to do it./ If I'd 'leaped the wall' only a little<sup>5</sup>/ would this cloak be any the newer?". Also, there is no hint at a possibility that the right king would make this old woman return to her youth. The poem is about aging as much as it is about the devolution of Irish civilization, and the myth of Ireland as an old woman who can be transformed into a young and beautiful woman by the right king does not return until hundreds of years later, when poetry became more overtly political.

Although "The Hag of Beara" suggests an acceptance for women to lead liberated lifestyles through the woman's mention of "leaping the wall," other early poetry points to a contempt for women as seductresses, temptresses, and ways for men to get distracted from more holy duties. The poem "Epitaph for Cu Chuimne<sup>6</sup>" written in the seventh century, presents women and wisdom as oppositional interests for men:

Cu Chuimne in his youth  
studied half the truth,  
then turned from the second half  
and studied women.

With the fullness of his years  
he developed wisdom,  
and turned away from women  
to complete his studies.

Here, interest in women is portrayed as a youthful mistake. This epitaph is in fact not about women at all, but about the rightful course that men should take in their lives. The poem "Eve am I, great Adam's wife<sup>7</sup>," was written four centuries later and shows a similar attitude, only this time the speaker is a woman, and she shows herself to be the wrongdoer who condemned women to subservient, inferior roles for eternity. Lines like "I stole Heaven from my kin/ It is I should hang upon the Tree," and "As long as womankind shall live/ they will not lose their foolishness" make the message clear: because of Eve's

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<sup>5</sup> "leaped the wall": gone wandering; in modern usage, to leave a convent (Kinsella 24)

<sup>6</sup> Kinsella p. 14

<sup>7</sup> Kinsella p. 56

original sin, women are inferior to men and therefore should rightfully be subservient to them.

These two poems contrast significantly to poetry that relates to Mother Ireland as a revered and wise goddess since the women in them are looked at with contempt and scorn. While Mother Ireland is loving to her “sons”, the Irishmen, and deserves respect, Irish women are to be avoided, lest their foolishness and sinfulness rub off.

#### B: Transformations of Mother Ireland from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries

Irish poetry changed in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and became more political. Concurrently, Irish politics became more and more defined by English aggression<sup>8</sup>. In 1541, King Henry VIII declared himself the king of Ireland. The major problem connected with this is the fact that at about the same time, he broke from the Roman Catholic Church and made Anglicism the official religion of England. Therefore, Anglicism was enforced on Ireland, a Catholic country. The reverberations of this were not felt, however, until the reign of Queen Elizabeth the I in 1558, when plantations were established with English landlords. Most Irish people, then, were forced to work on these plantations for the permission to live on them. Under the Irish landowner Hugh O'Neill, the Irish people rose in revolt in 1595 and failed in 1603. The situation after this became one of oppression and poverty for the Irish, and in 1607 the majority of the leading families exiled themselves to Spain in what is referred to as the Flight of the Earls. With the most powerful Irish leaders out of the way, the rest of the population was left vulnerable and in 1649, Oliver Cromwell invaded Ireland. When he left, between 50 and 66 percent of the entire Irish population were killed, and thousands more were sold into slavery in the American colonies and the West Indies<sup>9</sup>. Soon after this, the Act of Settlement was passed.

<sup>8</sup> Historical information is from the website Chronological List of Dates of Irish History at <http://sunsite.unc.edu/gaelic/Eire/7.8.2.html>

<sup>9</sup> from <http://www.somemothersson.com/cmp/histch1.html>



which held that no Irish person could live east of the River Shannon (a small river in the far western part of the island) by penalty of death, and only those who could prove they had not been rebels against Cromwell could own land west of the Shannon. All other land was divided among Protestant settlers.

With these struggles, Irish poetry became more and more urgently political, and poets turned to the Mother Ireland myth to express their outrage. Fear Flatha O Gnimh's "After the Flight of the Earls", written in the early 1600's, is an appeal to the Irish people to fight back even though their leaders have left them behind. There are numerous references to Ireland as a grieving mother:

Denial of faith and justice  
are to Fodla<sup>10</sup> the same as death  
and disgrace to her sons and sages,  
if the stories and songs are true.

How can Banba not perish  
now her gallant herd of heroes  
have taken their way to Spain?...

...Her nobles and freemen dead,  
she cannot cure her shame.  
It is a shameful step for the Gael,  
if we dare presume to say it.

By a blow of Balor's eye  
her lovely land is sickened,  
her corn blossomless in the clay  
--and I pray God rest her soul.<sup>11</sup>

The themes in this poem are common to Irish poetry of this period: that Ireland will perish if her sons neglect her, and that the land itself will cease to be fertile until it is saved. It is notable that O Gnimh refers to Irishmen as "the seed of Bearra's high clan," in reference to the ninth-century poem.

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<sup>10</sup> Fodla, Banba, and Eriu are commonly seen together as a triple manifestation of Mother Ireland.

<sup>11</sup>In Kinsella, Thomas ed. Oxford Anthology of Irish Poetry, p. 162. Trans. Thomas Kinsella

Owen Roe MacWard's "Dark Rosaleen" (In Irish: "Roisin Dubh" which also translates into "The Little Black Rose," another popular symbol for Ireland), written at about the same time as "After the Flight of the Earls," is an extremely well-known ballad that centers on the Mother Ireland figure<sup>12</sup>. This poem introduces a new name for Mother Ireland and also a slightly different personality. Instead of a poor, wise old woman who loses her beauty and youth when Irish people desert her, she is now the young, beautiful beloved of the poet who needs him to save her from an unnamed evil force. MacWard refers to her "holy delicate white hands" and "my virgin flower, my flower of flowers" . In the first stanza, MacWard names possible saviors of Dark Rosaleen: "The priests are on the ocean green,/ They march along the Deep./ There's wine . . . from the royal Pope" and instructs Irish people to turn to the Catholic Church for help, and the line "And Spanish ale shall give you hope," looks back to the Irish noblemen who fled to Spain. Unlike the other poems I have discussed, the tone here is hopeful and looks towards Dark Rosaleen's salvation: "But yet . . . will I rear your throne/ Again in golden sheen:/ 'Tis you shall reign, shall reign alone./ My Dark Rosaleen!", and finally, the last three lines proclaim her immortality: "The Judgement Hour must first be nigh,/ Ere you can fade, ere you can die./ My Dark Rosaleen!"

The concept of Ireland as a maiden in distress who must be saved by Irish men and their allies is the defining characteristic of a poetic form called the *aisling*. Dark Rosaleen is an example, as is many other poems and songs. The most popular and prolific writer of *aislings* is probably Eogan O'Rathaille, who lived from 1670 to 1726. In his *aislings*, the poet encounters a beautiful maiden who tells him of Ireland's rightful king who will come back from exile and defeat the undeserving foreign powers that banned him and then she disappears. After extensive searching, he finds her in a mystical Celtic landscape, with a foolish man who clearly doesn't deserve her. She is aware of this but is somehow unable to leave him, and it is up to the poet to save her from this hateful would-be husband. The

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<sup>12</sup> In *Faber Anthology of Irish Verse*. Trans. James Clarence Mangan

maiden is of course Mother Ireland as a virgin, and the undeserving foreign power (England) is equivalent to the would-be husband in the second scene. O'Rathaille's "Brightest of the Bright"<sup>13</sup> is a perfect retelling of the story: The maiden is superhuman and "seemed like some fair daughter of the Celestial Powers" and she "chanted me a chant, a beautiful and grand hymn,/ Of him who should be shortly Eire's reigning King--/ She prophesied the fall of the wretches who had banned him. . . ". The poet finds her in a "magic palace reared of old by Druid art" sitting "low beside a clown". She is a "maid so fallen whose charms deserved a crown". Overall, the poem is highly political and has at its center a female figure who is not an actual woman at all, but rather a symbol for a nation. Here, she remains young and beautiful despite the crimes committed against her, but she is unable to fight for herself-- as O Rathaille writes, "Her tears ran down in rivers, but nothing could she say". This weeping, powerless maiden in need of rescue became the most popular personification of Ireland as the struggle for independence gained momentum in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In "Mother Country: The Feminine Idiosyncrasy," C.L. Innes traces the development of the Mother Ireland figure from the beginnings of the nationalist movement in the early 1800's to the formation of the Irish Free State in 1921.<sup>14</sup> She also looks at the possible reasons that Ireland was envisioned as a woman during this time. According to Matthew Arnold, a prominent Victorian political and literary theorist, "the sensibility of the Celtic nature, its nervous exaltation, have something feminine in them, and the Celt is thus peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy; he has an affinity to it; he is not far from its secret."<sup>15</sup> He, along with many other theorists, English and Irish alike, associated the Irish character with the feminine-- in other words, Irish people were emotional, instinctual, irrational, and, according to unionists, unable to govern themselves.

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<sup>13</sup> In *Faber Anthology of Irish Verse* p. 142. Trans. James Clarence Mangan

<sup>14</sup> Innes, C.L. *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*. p. 9-25.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Innes, p. 9

Images of Ireland as a virginal maiden-- in the tradition of O Rathaille's and others' poetry that had been popular for centuries-- were plentiful in political publications and cartoons. Unionist cartoons portrayed England ("Britannia": Latin for Britain) as a strong, stoic woman in warrior garb, to whom Hibernia (Latin for Ireland) comes for protection against the Irish nationalists, portrayed as drunken, ugly louts. Hibernia's main characteristics in these cartoons are helplessness and passivity<sup>16</sup>. Also, unlike other colonized areas under Britain like India or Africa, Hibernia's racial sameness is emphasized, thus making her an ideal daughter, sister, or wife who needs a protective domestic relationship to England and who needs to be rescued from the Irish people, who are, as Benjamin Disraeli wrote in 1868, a "wild, reckless, indolent, uncertain and superstitious race."<sup>17</sup> Charles Kingsley called them "human chimpanzees" and stated that they were "happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours."<sup>18</sup> The Irish, then, are seen as almost worse and definitely more worrisome than the "savage races" in Africa and India: they were seen as white savages, and traitors to their race.

However, it was the Irish nationalists who most frequently depicted Ireland as a woman. They were in fact continuing with a literary tradition that went back, as I have shown, for over a millenium. Both the image of Ireland as a maiden in need of rescue and as a neglected old woman in need of care were common and, as in the old myth, interchangeable. However, specific characterizations of Ireland became popular. One of them was Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan, a personification that went back to James Clarence Mangan's poem, written in the early 1800's. Here, Kathaleen is the embodiment of hope for Ireland's future. She is an old woman like the Hag of Beara, but she lacks the Hag's anger. Mangan stresses her appearance and how it is misleading:

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<sup>16</sup> Innes pp. 12-14

<sup>17</sup> Innes, p. 14

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Innes, p. 14

Think her not a ghastly hag, too hideous to be seen,  
Call her not unseemly names, our matchless Kathaleen:  
Young she is, and fair she is, and would be crowned a queen,  
Were the king's son at home here with Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan!

Sweet and mild would look her face, O, none so sweet and mild,  
Could she crush the foes by whom her beauty is reviled;  
Woollen plaids would grace herself and robes of silk her child,  
If the king's son were living here with Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan!

Another popular personification of Ireland was Erin, who was most often the image of Ireland in political cartoons and posters. As L.P. Curtis describes her:

Erin was a stately as well as sad and wise woman, usually drawn wearing flowing robes, embroidered with shamrocks. Her hair was long and dark, falling well down her back; her eyes were round and melancholy, set in a face of flawless symmetry. Occasionally she wore a garland of shamrocks and appeared with a harp and an Irish wolfhound in the foreground.<sup>19</sup>

Whether young or old, the Mother Ireland figure in literature, in political imagery, and overall, in the national cultural imagination, served a very specific purpose: She was a completely abstract ideal and she embodied popular ideas about the feminine and about nationhood. As the Victorian era began to emphasize puritanical ideals, so did Mother Ireland. Richard Kearney writes that "Woman became sexually intangible as the ideal of national independence became politically intangible. Both entered the unreality of myth. They became aspirations rather than actualities<sup>20</sup>." Thus, Erin began to share the characteristic of unattainable holiness and piousness with the Virgin Mary, and Mother Ireland became synonymous with Mother Church. In the cartoon "The Birth of the Irish Republic, 1916," Erin rises above the men who took part in the 1916 Easter Rising, which set off the War for Independence which ended in 1921 with the formation of the Irish Free State. She seems to be protecting them as she moves towards a light from above, and as

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Innes, p. 17

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Innes, p. 22

Innes writes, the image draws on “the iconography of the Assumption and the transfiguration of the Blessed Virgin Mary after her death<sup>21</sup>.”

This connection between Erin and Mary is not surprising, since both are figures that have been at the center of Irish culture for many centuries. Because Catholicism is an intrinsic part of Irish culture and identity, the central female figure of the religion easily becomes combined with the foremost symbol of nation. Erin, then, acquires religious as well as political importance, and becomes all the more important to the collective imagination of Ireland.

## II: The representation of Mother Ireland in popular contemporary poetry

Mother Ireland is still very much a monolithic figure in Irish poetry. In this section, I will look at the poetry of two of the most widely recognized Irish poets, Seamus Heaney and John Montague, and how they make use of the Mother Ireland tradition. Because they write in a time when Irish culture is rapidly changing and the government is weakened by the division between the Republic and the North of Ireland, the political rhetoric is necessarily different. However, both Heaney and Montague employ traditional ideas about gender and how it symbolically relates to politics in order to communicate new ideas about nationhood. Also, as Patricia Coughlan points out in her essay “‘Bog Queens’: The representation of women in the poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney,” while much of the poetry written by these poets announces itself as political work that uses gender purely as a symbolic gesture, it in fact reinforces gendered power structures by portraying political liberation as dependent upon the triumph of the (masculine) individual over the feminine nation/land.

Coughlan writes of two aspects of womanhood found in this poetry that are common to the characteristics of the Mother Ireland figure which I have already discussed:

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<sup>21</sup> Innes, p. 24

The representation of femininity which occurs most insistently in this material takes the form of dualistically opposed aspects: beloved or spouse figures versus mother figures, which are in turn benign and fertile or awe-inspiring and terrible. . . . In Heaney, for example, the nature-goddess is simultaneously spouse, death-bringer and nurturer. . . . such representations of feminine power ultimately arise from a masculine psychological difficulty in acknowledging woman's subjectivity as a force *in itself*, and not merely as a relation to man's.<sup>22</sup>

Coughlan's statement that the positioning of female figures at extreme ends of a human spectrum-- such as the virgin/whore or the good mother/evil hag binarisms, is the result of a reluctance to acknowledge women's subjectivity. Although many of these images are powerful, such as the sovereignty goddess at the well who has the power to choose the kings of Ireland, they are defined by their relations to men and never in and of themselves. Their mythical status removes them even further from the possibility of representing actual women. Coughlan states further:

In Montague's and Heaney's lyrics each masculine speaker characteristically celebrates the domestic as immemorial and relishes it as sensually and emotionally satisfying, but defines himself in the performance of his most characteristic activity, poetry, in contradistinction from it. Woman, the primary inhabitant and constituent of the domestic realm, is admirably observed, centre stage but silent. . . . What ostensibly offers itself as a celebration may rather be read, then, as a form of limiting definition, in which certain traditional qualities of the feminine are required to persist for a fit wife, mother or Muse to come into being. [It is a] blotting out of the individual qualities of *actual* women by the dominant-- and stereotyped-- *ideal*.<sup>23</sup>

John Montague's "The Sean Bhean Bhocht" (trans. "The Poor Old Woman," reminiscent of the Hag of Beara and the Old Woman of the Roads)<sup>24</sup> attempts to show that Irish culture needs to go beyond the old myths and superstitions that trap Irish people in a cycle of oppression, but in doing this Montague perpetuates the very mythology that he is trying to debunk. The poem begins by describing an actual woman the speaker remembers: "As a child I was frightened by her". The old woman is very stereotypical and has all the

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<sup>22</sup> Coughlan p. 88-89

<sup>23</sup> Coughlan p. 90

<sup>24</sup> Montague Selected Poems p. 18

characteristics of the mythological hag. This woman begins to narrate a story about a fairy war and a dead queen, supposedly a story which has doomed the Irish people indefinitely. The storyteller is weighted with "racial memory," she has "shrunk gums," and "her clothes stank like summer flax", suggesting the speaker's repulsion for both her and the stories she tells. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker turns from a description of the hag to announcing his impressions of the scene, dismissing her stories and their importance, and then describing a scene which defies the old woman's story's fatalistic prophecies:

Only the scratching now, the labouring breath,  
Prophecy rattling aged bones.  
Age is neither knowledge nor authority,  
Though it may claim both,  
Weaving a litany of legends against death.

But in high summer as the hills burned with corn  
I strode through golden light  
To the secret spirals of the burial stone:  
The grass-choked well ran sluggish red--  
Not with blood but ferrous rust--  
But beneath the whorls of the guardian stone  
What hidden queen lay dust?

Here, Montague rewrites the myth that has been told to him by this ugly old woman-- the ancient queen/goddess is dead, but the land is still fertile and beautiful, and life goes on. Also, the speaker dismisses the old woman's authority by saying "age is neither knowledge nor authority." The poem is one of rebellion against old superstition and cyclical history, but because of this, the speaker needs to establish a stereotypical mythical figure who has access to ancient knowledge and "racial memory" against whom he can rebel. In the end, this is a poem about a male individual establishing his own voice by effectively killing the voice of a woman-- or rather the idea of Woman as a powerful force.



Montague's poem "The Wild Dog Rose"<sup>25</sup> has the same theme, expressed in more explicit and violent terms. Again, the title of the poem echoes a mythological symbol of Ireland, the "little black rose" or "roisin dubh." Not surprisingly, the old woman who is the subject of the poem loves wild roses and considers them to be a symbol of the Virgin Mary. From this, and from the first two lines, "I go to say goodbye to the *Cailleach*<sup>26</sup>/ that terrible figure who haunted my childhood", Montague sets up a familiar scene: the poem is centered on an old, frightening woman who lives alone, has never been married, and is connected with the wild rose, thus coming to symbolize the Virgin Mary's passivity and Ireland as a nation. In the second stanza, Montague connects her to the land itself:

. . . The rank thistles  
and leathery bracken of untilled fields  
stretch behind with-- a final outcrop--  
the hooped figure by the roadside. . .

The old woman is that hooped figure, and here she is the "final outcrop" of a decaying landscape. The speaker feels "ancient awe, the terror of a child" before this woman, who has a "great hooked nose, the cheeks/ dewlapped with dirt, the staring blue/ of the sunken eyes, the mottled claws/ clutching a stick" and thus characterizes her as a witch, but stands up to her as he has never done before, returns her gaze and refuses to be intimidated by her assumed power. Because of this "she greets me, in friendliness." As in "The Sean Bhean Bhocht," the speaker needs to personally bring feminine power under his control before an adequate relationship can be established. It is at this point that the poem goes into a second section and focuses on an earlier night when a drunken stranger invaded the cottage and raped the woman:

. . . In the darkness  
they wrestle, two creatures crazed  
with loneliness, the smell of the  
decaying cottage in his nostrils

<sup>25</sup> Montague *Selected Poems* p. 124

<sup>26</sup> *Cailleach*: Irish and Scots Gaelic for an old woman, a hag (Montague's note, p. 124)

like a drug, his body heavy on hers,  
the tasteless trunk of a seventy year  
old virgin, which he rummages while  
she battles for life

The rape is rendered problematically as something this woman needed to cure her loneliness. Throughout the poem, Montague hints that her life without a man is the only injustice this woman has ever had to endure, and "The only true madness is loneliness,/ that monotonous voice in the skull/ that never stops/ because never heard." Therefore, the rapist was actually doing this woman a service as well as curing his own loneliness. The third section focuses on the old woman's love for wild roses as symbol of survival: " 'The wild rose/ is the only rose without thorns,' . . . 'Whenever I see it, I remember/ The Holy Mother of God and/ all she suffered.' " This rape, then, as the old woman tells the story, has brought her closer to Mary and thus has enriched her life. Again, balance is achieved by the conquering of feminine power, first by the speaker himself by conquering his fear of her, and secondly by the rapist. Both men in the poem transform the old woman from a fearsome, repulsive hag into a more fulfilled, more passive, and more approachable person.

In her article, Patricia Coughlan cites another poem of Montague's that uses Irish hag mythology. "The Music Box"<sup>27</sup> centers on an old woman who lives alone near a well and thus recalls the legend of the young prince who becomes king by sleeping with an ugly hag guarding a well. Again, the hag is personified in a specific character the speaker knows well, and in this poem she has a name, Mary Mulvey, who "lived in the leaning/ cottage, beside the old well/ she strove to keep clean," an "ageing guardian/ whom we found so frightening". The speaker remembers chiding her as a child with the rhyme "*Marie Marunkey married a donkey*," thus combining a hatred of womanhood with an insult to her sexuality. As a child, curiosity was mixed with this hatred and the children "thronged around" as Mary "shared her secret," which was a magic music box, loved for

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<sup>27</sup> Montague, Collected Poems p. 186

its timelessness, “regular sounds,” and “small figure on its rosewood top/ twirling slowly, timeless dancer.” Mary Mulvey is thus connected to a cyclical natural world and history. Her guardianship of the well also gives her mythological implications, as Coughlan writes:

The sovereignty-figure at the well, . . . is in Montague an enabling-figure for his imagination to work: the reader may conclude that like the young prince at the well he acquires sovereignty in his craft by his brave attention to such ugly and unpromising women. The encounter is always one-sided, however; the shape of the myth guarantees that the female figure is there to be kissed and transformed: her passivity is part of the prescription, like ignorance, deprivation and gendered speechlessness of the women in the poems.<sup>28</sup>

Coughlan's statement makes sense especially in light of the fact that the old woman becomes “too crippled to move” at the end of the poem, and the music box, which embodies the same concept of perpetually renewed fertility and energy as the well, “halts. Silent. Motionless.” The female energy has gone to the speaker, who has acquired sovereignty, whether over himself or over his craft, by his overpowering of this old woman.

Seamus Heaney, probably Ireland's most well-known poet, employs many of the same themes as Montague-- as in Montague's poetry, the male poet's self-formation is dependent upon the conquest of a female figure or a female symbol, and much of it refers to Irish mythology in which a young man beds a sovereignty goddess and therefore has her power conferred upon him. Heaney develops the theme of Ireland and land itself as a goddess, and makes much use of agricultural themes as a metaphor for sexual and political conquest. As Patricia Coughlan writes, female figures are “the epitome of a general silence, at the opposite pole from the describing, celebrating, expressing poet. Whether active or passive, these figures are spoken for, and this division is a highly problematic one.”<sup>29</sup> Heaney's poetry and symbolic system can be read by the analogy masculine: feminine// England: Ireland// plough or spade: earth// pen: wisdom// penis: vagina. It is a

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<sup>28</sup> Coughlan, p. 93

<sup>29</sup> Coughlan p. 101

system that depends upon strict binarisms and assumptions of truth in myths. Also, there is a strong Freudian basis in Heaney's poetry, and Oedipal struggles between fathers and sons-- real and metaphorical-- for control over the feminine in all its various forms is a common theme.

Heaney's poem, "Digging"<sup>30</sup>, is based on a young man's reflections on his father's and grandfather's work with the land in relation to his work in poetry. There is overt sexual imagery from the very beginning, starting with the title and the first two lines:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Here, the first line suggests masturbation and definitely identifies the pen as a phallic instrument. It is "squat" and resting, and it is to be assumed from the gun simile that it will be used soon. The speaker turns his attention to his father who is outdoors, working the ground with a spade, "his straining rump among the flowerbeds/ Bends low, comes up . . . / Stooping in rhythm . . . / the shaft/ Against the inside knee was levered firmly." The message is that the speaker's father is violating the ground, and the speaker is jealous: "By God, the old man could handle a spade./ Just like his old man." By going back through his father and his father before him, the speaker sets up a tradition of patriarchy and conquest over the feminine ground. The grandfather is respected for his skill in stripping ground of its covering: "My grandfather cut more turf in a day/ Than any other man on Toner's bog." When the speaker brings him milk (another symbol of femininity) he "straightened up/ To drink it, then fell to right away/ . . . going down and down/ For the good turf. Digging." Here, the sexual imagery is intense and the speaker exhibits nothing but respect for these men who are so virile and able to dig into the earth, plant seeds, and retrieve from it "new potatoes that we picked/ Loving their cool hardness in our hands." The potatoes, too, become objects of sexual pleasure. The sexual partner--

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<sup>30</sup> Heaney, Selections p. 3-4

the earth-- remains endlessly fertile, always receptive, passive, and life-giving, but never active. Any production of life is done in the earth, but is initiated by the men and predicated by the violation of the earth and the stripping down of her layers of peat and topsoil.

The poem ends with the speaker's statement "But I've no spade to follow men like them,/ Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests./ I'll dig with it." Here, the pen, like the spade in the hands of the father and grandfather, becomes a phallic instrument, and the speaker will cultivate poetry out of language and ideas as his fathers cultivated the earth.

The poem "Act of Union"<sup>31</sup> uses many of the same metaphors and continues the Oedipal theme, but brings it to a political level. Here, the speaker is England, speaking to Ireland as a rapist to his victim, expressing some sympathy but ultimately, no regret. Also, he questions the very idea that this "act of union"<sup>32</sup> was a rape at all-- in this poem, there is the possibility that England, being "imperial/ Male," was doing what was natural to him as a man, and that Ireland, being naturally passive and receptive, did not encourage him but also did not fight, and therefore the act was acceptable ("Conquest is a lie."). The poem is in two sections-- the first describing the act itself, and the second as England looking back on the effects and the development of an Oedipal struggle between England and the Irish nationalists, here imagined as the child produced from the union.

In the first lines of the poem, the parallel between country and body is clear: "Your back is a firm line of eastern coast/ And arms and legs are thrown/ Beyond your gradual hills./ . . . I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder." Although the speaker does not admit responsibility ("Conquest is a lie"), he does express sympathy: "And I am still imperial/ Male, leaving you with the pain,/ The rending process in the colony . . .". There is also an element of fear of the child that will result from this act:

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<sup>31</sup> In *Ireland's Women* p. 266

<sup>32</sup> The Act of Union was an act of the English Parliament in 1801 which made Ireland officially a part of the United Kingdom.

His heart beneath your heart is a wardrum  
Mustering force. His parasitical  
And ignorant little fists already  
Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked  
At me across the water.

This child is on one level the Irishmen who will fight England to regain control of their Mother Ireland and thus complete the Oedipal cycle, and on another level violence itself. The entire narrative is presented as an unavoidable struggle that results from normal male/female interactions.

Patricia Coughlan discusses this poem extensively in her article, and emphasizes what she sees as a vagueness in the poem concerning whether or not this is about rape: "There is a crucial ambiguity about the sexual act: rape (indicated by a reference to Elizabethan massacres) or seduction by a male force whose energy is attractively irresistible?<sup>33</sup>" This ambiguity, according to Coughlan, leads to a self-contradiction on the part of Heaney: "The application of force in the agricultural handling of nature, imagined as male sexual domination, is felt as deeply right. But the occurrence of the same structure in political relations is (presumably, in the work of a poet of Catholic nationalist origins) to be taken as reprehensible and grievous<sup>34</sup> " However, because male aggression is seen to be natural and unquestionable in Heaney's poetry, and female land/nature and inherently passive and lacking any overt will, it seems that within the context of this poem, the "act of union" was fated and unavoidable. Here, imperialism is entirely justified as long as it is committed by a man to a woman. It is only when a nation is seen as masculine, as England is in the poem, and as the future Ireland-- that is the son of England and the natural aspect of Ireland-- is, that imperialist conquest is morally reprehensible. In other words, when a nation is defined as a group of self-governing and independent (and therefore masculine) individuals instead of a natural landscape, then that image of nation is masculine and active

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<sup>33</sup> Coughlan p. 105

<sup>34</sup> Coughlan p. 105

instead of feminine and passive, and that nation must do the conquering and not be conquered. Heaney, then, is not contradicting himself by saying that imperialism is fine as long as it does not reach the political level and Irish men are on the receiving end of it, but rather, he is saying that masculine imperialist aggression cannot rightly be committed against another masculine aggressive force. If this son of England and Ireland is allowed to fully develop, then it is his responsibility to engage in an Oedipal struggle against his father and attain control over his mother in order to attain independence.

In the poetry of Heaney and Montague, whether the struggle between male and female centers upon a young man and an old woman, spade and land, England and Ireland, the individual and the Other, subject and object, or a new generation and the mythology it is struggling to overturn, the struggle is always seen in terms of male and female, and the female is always, by definition, silent, passive, mysterious-- and a path towards knowledge for the male individual. The female is a point of contention, a field on which different men fight for autonomy, and a muse that inspires great creations. However, she is never herself a creator or a begetter of knowledge. Within this framework it is masculine to have a voice at all, or to have any access to self-definition. The female is the force that the male must conquer in order to define himself. Also, it is not just the two poets I have isolated as illustrations of this tradition-- any Irish poet must begin with the knowledge that this system has always been and will continue to be a basis for the production of poetry in Ireland. Yeats, known for his nationalist poetry, and Synge, a nationalist playwright, were very concerned with the establishment of a national identity and saw it as the struggle to conquer, in a sense, the land that their forefathers have been living on for centuries and to reclaim Mother Ireland for themselves.

### III: Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Where to Go From Here?

The Irish literary tradition is, like many others, one that lacks a contingent of women authors or poets who have been visible and canonized for a long time. As Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill points out in "What Foremothers?"<sup>35</sup> it is extremely difficult to write poetry-- in Ni Dhomhnaill's case, poetry in Irish, which complicates her situation even further-- when there are so few predecessors to look back to. However, contemporary Irish women poets have the added problem of being excluded from the national canon not only in historical fact, but also in the structure of the ideology that forms the basis for the national imagination. The Mother Ireland figure, as I have shown, has been and still is enormously powerful, and represents a male construction of femininity as something that is defined only by its difference from masculinity. Mother Ireland has no specific identity of her own-- instead, she is a vehicle for men to express political, personal, and sexual emotions and beliefs. She is a muse, and she never speaks but is spoken to by an active male poet. Actual women, then, are ideologically excluded from the profession of writing poetry and relegated to the business of trying to imitate Mother Ireland's unattainable perfection.

Mother Ireland is an empty metaphor for womanhood and nationhood and therefore a poor representative for Irish women. However, she is the only image of womanhood that contemporary women writers have to look to. Therefore, the introduction of women into the literary tradition as poets, as opposed to muses, marks an enormous transition which Eavan Boland makes note of in her essay, "Outside History"<sup>36</sup>:

...the central premise of my argument ... is that over a relatively short time-- certainly no more than a generation or so-- women have moved from being the objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them. It is a momentous transit. It is also a disruptive one. It raises questions of identity, issues of poetic motive and ethical direction which can seem almost impossibly complex. ... such a transit inevitably changes our idea of measurement, of distance, of the past as well as the future. And as it does so, it changes our idea of the Irish poem, of its composition and authority, of its right to appropriate certain themes and make certain fiats.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In O'Connor, The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers p. 8

<sup>36</sup> Boland, Object Lessons, p. 123

<sup>37</sup> Boland Object Lessons p. 126



As Boland states, the very concept of a woman writer in a national tradition that routinely places women in a voiceless, emblematic role is inherently disruptive. It defies the idea that the act of writing poetry is masculine-- an idea that is a common thread to the poetry of Montague and especially Heaney, as well as many others-- and replaces that idea with the question of what the act of writing actually is, if it is not a masculine exploration, explication, and conquest of a feminine Unknown. Female poets, therefore, have the responsibility not only of finding their own voices when female voices have been categorically silenced, but of redefining poetry so that it is possible for them to take part in its production. This is a difficulty that Boland realizes and tries to approach in her essay, saying that "a woman poet is rarely regarded as an automatic part of a national poetic tradition and for the reason [that] she is too deeply woven into the passive texture of that tradition, too intimate a part of its imagery, to be allowed her freedom.<sup>38</sup>" Since this tradition depends upon women's innate silence, a woman poet who breaks this silence shakes the very foundation of the tradition.

Boland also describes, with an urgent tone, what is lost when women are reduced to emblems of nationhood. It is not only the details and histories of any individual woman, but also a deeper truth-- "human truths of survival and humiliation. . . Gone was the suggestion of any complicated human suffering. Instead you had the hollow victories, the passive images, the rhyming queens.<sup>39</sup>" In other words, it is not just the particularities and details about women's lives, but whole ideas, voices and truths are lost. Women who had an active part in Irish history lost not only representation but also their humanity.

The most attractive avenue for an Irish woman poet, then, is to deny the literary tradition and attempt to ignore the magnitude and force of women's objectification in Irish poetry. If it is possible for a tradition that relies so heavily on feminine symbols to cut women out entirely, then it must be possible for women to ignore that tradition entirely.

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<sup>38</sup> Boland Object Lessons, p. 147

<sup>39</sup> Boland Object Lessons p. 137

Boland acknowledges this as a path many women writers have taken, and what has resulted is new theories about language and culture, such as the idea of "écriture féminine" in French feminism that posits that there can be a specifically female language. However, Boland resists the urge to separate herself from a tradition that makes up her own history.

Then why did I not walk away? Simply because I was not free to. . . . We ourselves are constructed by the construct. I might be the author of my poems: I was not the author of my past.<sup>40</sup>

By making the statement that she will refuse to abandon her heritage as an Irish woman, Boland seeks to change the tradition from the inside. Her aim, then, is to work with the woman/nation metaphor instead of against it, and try to see if she could use it to portray women as active human beings instead of passive, imaginary symbols:

The truths of womanhood and the defeats of a nation? An improbable intersection? At first sight perhaps. Yet the idea of it opened doors in my mind which had hitherto been closed fast. I began to think there was indeed a connection, that my womanhood and my nationhood were meshed and linked at some root. . . . I was excited by the idea that if there really was an emblematic relation between the defeats of womanhood and the suffering of a nation, I need only prove the first in order to reveal the second. If so, then Irishness and womanhood, those tormenting fragments of my youth, could at last stand for each other.<sup>41</sup> "

Boland's strategy for finding a genuine female voice within the Irish literary tradition, then, is not to openly deny the importance of the woman/nation metaphor but to change it slightly: instead of using stereotypical and imaginary images of women to illustrate the metaphor and to prove a predetermined point as many Irish poets do, she focuses on the truthful portrayal of women's lives and trusts that the metaphor, because it is so powerful, will grow out of that portrayal and will finally be an image that allows for active, diverse women to be a part of it-- or rather, it will be a part of women instead of forcing them to be a part of it.

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<sup>40</sup> Boland *Object Lessons* p. 146

<sup>41</sup> Boland *Object Lessons* p. 148

Boland's poetry reflects a progression from a belief in the rigid structures, forms, and images of canonical poetry to innovation and new definitions of poetry, and as a part of that, new definitions of women. The work that marks the largest change in Boland's writing style is In Her Own Image, a collection of ten poems that focus a woman's defiance of a culture that cuts her out of history. The theme of all these poems is self-definition in a world where women are commonly defined by men as an act of rebellion. The first poem in the collection, "Tirade for the Mimic Muse"<sup>42</sup>, is the speaker's direct address to a national muse-- specifically, Mother Ireland-- whose impossible standards are no longer acceptable for this woman. Since this poem's structural aspects are integral to an understanding of its themes, it is important to notice how she uses diction, rhythm, rhyme, pacing and overall structure.

The tone is true to the title-- unlike the calm, understated poetry of Boland's earlier works, this poem is very much a tirade. The opening line is accusatory and angry: "I've caught you out. You slut. You fat trout". This sets the tone not only with its aggressive and vulgar diction but also with its jolting, violent rhythm and the way Boland addresses the muse directly in short sentences. Boland uses rhyme throughout the poem, giving it music and an immediately obvious rhythm. Very often, the last line of her ten-line stanzas end with a word that rhymes with the sixth or seventh line, such as in the first stanza, ("An aging out-of-work kind-hearted tart./ Our Muse of Mimic Art."), the third stanza, ("From the lizarding of eyelids/ How you fled") the fourth stanza ("A world you could have sheltered in your skirts--/ And shook it off like dirt.") and the last stanza ("I will wake you from your sluttish sleep./ Look in them and weep.") Because these rhymes occur on stressed syllables at the end of the middle and last lines of most of the stanzas, they jump out from the page and grab our attention and enhance the aggressive tone of the poem by using aggressive rhyming techniques that Boland characteristically avoids in other poetry.

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<sup>42</sup> Boland Collected Poems p. 55

Despite the vivid emotion and intensity of the poem, Boland keeps it controlled and clear by using a strict ten-line stanza form, keeping her lines to four or five beats, except for two short lines in the middle of each stanza. The final stanza, an assertion of pride and identity that is separate from this false Muse, is especially rigidly structured, beginning with a line that is rhythmically identical to the opening line of the poem ("Your luck ran out. Look. My words leap"-- compare to "I've caught you out. You slut. You fat trout") and making further use of rhyme, changing rhythms, and repetition to make the last statement extremely effective:

Your luck ran out. Look. My words leap  
Among your pinks, your stench pots and sticks.  
They scatter shadow, swivel brushes, blushers.  
Make your face naked,  
Strip your mind naked,  
Drench your skin in a woman's tears.  
I will wake you from your sluttish sleep.  
I will show you true reflections, terrors.  
You are the Muse of all our mirrors.  
Look in them and weep.

Here, all the previous images (of makeup as a mask, the female body as a site of contention over identity, mirrors as a way of measuring up, and nakedness and tears as expressions of truth) recombine to form a final stanza that not only restates what the poem has already asserted in a more vehement tone, but gives one last command to the Muse and establishes the speaker's voice as being far more powerful than that of the Muse. It is a triumph of truth and reality over the imaginary ideal.

The poems "It's a Woman's World"<sup>43</sup> and "Domestic Interior: The Muse Mother"<sup>44</sup> appeared in a later work, Night Feed. In this collection of poetry, Boland's theories of the place of the woman poet is more developed, and in both of these poems, she begins by describing real-life situations and then allows a more universal significance to grow from

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<sup>43</sup> Boland Collected Poems p. 79

<sup>44</sup> Boland Collected Poems p. 92

them. The tone in both poems is more relaxed and meditative, rather than rageful. The voice is that of a woman who is beginning to see the world in a new way.

"It's a Woman's World" addresses women's exclusion from Irish history and the often oppressive stereotype of femininity as constantly cyclical, and never really changing. The first stanza, "Our way of life/ has hardly changed/ since a wheel first/ whetted a knife." suggests a possibility of essentialism and a general put-down of women throughout Irish history. However, Boland avoids this by showing women's absence from the history books to be a kind of advantage:

It's our alibi  
for all time:  
as far as history goes  
we were never  
on the scene of the crime.

So when the king's head  
gored the basket--  
grim harvest--  
we were gristling bread

or getting the recipe  
for a good soup  
to appetize  
our gossip.

For the women Boland describes, their lives are centered around "hearth not history." Their lives are unrecorded, as are "the low music/ of our outrage," a point that Boland presents as something that can still be changed, also something that this poem itself works to change.

Finally, "The Muse Mother," from the sequence titled "Domestic Interior," picks up where "Tirade for the Mimic Muse" left off. Now that the old Mother Ireland image has been rejected for its emptiness and purely symbolic function, Boland now describes a muse that is based upon a real woman.

The poem begins by describing otherwise inanimate objects that acquire an unexpected agency: "My window pearls wet./ The bare rowan tree/ berries rain." The

window and tree are not passive receivers of rain, but seem to be producing pearls and berries out of the rain. This transformation foreshadows the woman who will be the subject of the poem. In the next stanza, Boland begins the central narrative by stating "I can see/ from where I stand," thus claiming a standpoint and a voice for herself. The woman then appears-- she is unfemininely "hunkering" and "busy." Boland uses words like "nappy" and "sticky, loud/ round of a mouth" to give the poem familiar diction, thus bringing the tone closer to the reader and bringing this new muse to the level of the everyday. After this establishment of scene, the woman begins to acquire divine status:

Her hand's a cloud  
across his face,  
making light and rain,  
smiles and a frown,  
a smile again.

The focus then shifts to the speaker's thoughts, and she wishes that she could name this woman in a language that takes into account her creative powers that connects her with the window and tree. She is a "lost noun/ out of context,/ stray figure of speech"; an idea that is inexpressible in patriarchal language. If the speaker makes the true description of this woman her goal, she is pointing herself in the direction of an entirely new way of knowing that is based on women's everyday lives:

she might teach me  
a new language:

to be a sibyl  
able to sing the past  
in pure syllables,  
limning hymns sung  
to belly wheat or a woman--

able to speak at last  
my mother's tongue.

Eavan Boland is easily the most popular contemporary Irish woman poet, and part of the reason for this, I believe, is her strong, highly defined, clear-voiced assertion of a

female voice within a tradition that, until now, has denied the existence of that voice. Her poetry focuses on the creation of new ways of expressing old mythologies that can liberate women from their former positions as silent muses to new abilities and powers as speaking, active subjects who can articulate their own knowledge.

Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill is another contemporary poet who is concerned with reclaiming mythology for Irish women. She writes in the Irish language, which places her in another sub-category of writers. In her essay, "What Foremothers?<sup>45</sup>", she traces the sparse history of women writers in the Irish literary tradition and reflects on why women writers were so widely ignored:

Gearoid O Cruaíaoich, in his controversial essay "Dearcadh Dana," notes how the writing of poetry is considered a manly act in the Irish tradition. Indeed, there is a consensus on this idea, which is expressed most succinctly, perhaps, by Sean O Riordain in his poem "Banfhile," in which he repeats again and again with a sense of ever-increasing hysteria, "Ni file ach filiocht i an bhean" ["Woman is not poet but poetry"]<sup>46</sup>.

O Riordain's statement echoes the criticism Boland outlines for the Irish literary tradition-- that women should be spoken of or to, but should not speak themselves. Ni Dhomhnaill also lists a number of Irish superstitions and myths that warn against women poets, such as the saying "Na tri rudai is measa i mbaile-- tuidoir fluich, sioladoir tiubh, file mna" ["The three worst curses that could befall a village-- a wet thatcher, a heavy sower, a woman poet<sup>47</sup>."] Also, since poetry was considered to be a hereditary gift, there was a belief that once this gift fell into the female line, it would cease to be a part of that family.

For Ni Dhomhnaill, though, this background makes the practice of writing in Irish all the more attractive. It is, for her, a radical postcolonial strategy, and she believes it is "beginning to be appreciated for the revolutionary and subversive act that it undoubtedly

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<sup>45</sup> In O'Connor, ed. *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers* p. 8

<sup>46</sup> Ni Dhomhnaill p. 13

<sup>47</sup> Ni Dhomhnaill p. 14

is.<sup>48</sup>". The woman writing in Irish is automatically revolting against a tradition that silences her in two ways: First, by writing in a precolonial language, she makes an implicit statement against the imposition of the English language on Irish culture and therefore on the invasion of Ireland in political, social and cultural terms as well as linguistic. Secondly, because she is a woman writing in a tradition that literally considered a woman poet to be a curse, she is openly defying the precolonial tradition itself.

Like Boland, though, Ni Dhomhnaill is not interested in abandoning tradition altogether, simply because the act of ignoring history will not make it go away. She conducts considerable research into Irish folklore and mythology and bases much of her poetry on the retelling of myths and a concentration on commonly under-emphasized female figures from mythology. Because of this, she risks falling into the trap that Heaney and Montague have succumbed to: in the process of attempting to rewrite mythology, they strengthen the gender divide by relying heavily on essentialist binarisms. When Ni Dhomhnaill looks at Irish mythology and concentrates on representations of the feminine, she risks this same simplification.

Ni Dhomhnaill's poem "Taimid Damanta, A Dheirfearacha [We are Damned, My Sisters<sup>49</sup>" expresses a rebellion against mythical prescriptions of subservience for women and describes a carefree lifestyle. The speaker here always uses the pronoun "we," never "I" or "you" and therefore establishes a deep connection and bond between women, although it is difficult to see whether Ni Dhomhnaill is implicating all women in this poem, or a specific few women. The structure is very lyrical, with each stanza beginning and ending with the line "We are damned, my sisters." The language is very romantic, evoking images of nymph-like play: "we who swam at night/ on beaches, with the stars/ laughing with us." In these lines, a connection between the women and nature is established, and the traditional nature goddess is suggested. Ni Dhomhnaill goes on to evoke the Eden

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<sup>48</sup> Ni Dhomhnaill p. 16

<sup>49</sup> Women's Studies International Forum 11:4, p. 395



myth. These are the women who "ate from destiny's dish/ who have knowledge of good and evil/. . . We spent nights in Eden's fields/ eating apples, gooseberries . . ./ . . . singing songs/ around the gipsy bon-fires" Here, Ni Dhomhnaill interprets Eve not as the traditional unleasher of evil on the world, but as a woman who makes the conscious decision to experience sensual pleasure and is therefore damned as a harlot. The third stanza brings the poem into the present:

We preferred to be shoeless by the tide  
dancing singly on the wet sand  
the piper's tune coming to us  
on the kind Spring wind, than to be  
indoors making strong tea for the men--  
and so we're damned, my sisters.

This positioning of mythical themes in modern culture helps to reappropriate the mythology for women, but does not quite succeed in escaping the simplifying effect that myth and metaphor can have on poetry. Although Ni Dhomhnaill's language is beautiful and many of the images are empowering, she does not back up her statements with a basis in "real life," and she also does not question the systems that mythology is based upon. As in Montague's and Heaney's poetry, this poem ends with the destruction of this female power, suggesting that any attempt at female autonomy is doomed:

Our eyes will go to the worms  
our lips to the clawed crabs  
and our livers will be given  
as food to the parish dogs.  
The hair will be torn from our heads  
the flesh flayed from our bones.  
They'll find apple seeds and gooseberry skins  
in the remains of our vomit  
when we are damned, my sisters.

In this closing stanza, we see again the triumph of a masculine force-- the church-- over a liberated, powerful female force. The parish dogs, lowliest in the church hierarchy, are given their livers to eat, and their bodies are dismembered and scattered, symbolizing a

gruesome rape of their bodies and therefore their selves. In this way, Ni Dhomhnaill seems to be painting a fatalistic picture for women who seek to express themselves and find physical pleasure in their bodies in a culture where such expression is forbidden.

This poem does differ from Heaney's and Montague's poetry in two important ways. First, with the apple seeds and gooseberry skins found in their bodies at the end, a minimal victory is accomplished by these women, since they have acquired forbidden knowledge, despite the fact that they were punished for it, and no masculine institution can take that away. More importantly, though, whereas Heaney's and Montague's poetry centers on a male speaker/poet's search for identity as something to be gained by the conquest of the feminine, identity for the speaker in Ni Dhomhnaill's poem is gained through rebellion against patriarchal law, with the knowledge that this rebellion will lead to death. Perhaps, then, these women are only damned in the sense that they cannot survive in a patriarchal world once they have found the "forbidden fruit" of self-definition.

The success of this poem in reappropriating mythology is ambiguous. Although Ni Dhomhnaill does turn the message around to one that is empowering for women, she still relies heavily on mythological stereotypes, whereas Eavan Boland avoids stereotyping by describing real-life experiences first and letting mythological implications grow from them.

In the past ten or twenty years, there has been a surge of new Irish women poets, all with different ideas about poetry but all concerned with the idea of women's voices and how they fit-- or don't fit-- into the national tradition. Eilean Ni Chuilleanain's poem "Pygmalion's Image"<sup>50</sup> uses the Pygmalion myth-- in which a sculptor falls in love with his creation and begs the goddess of love and nature to transform it into a real woman-- to illustrate a woman's entry into language and the subsequent quickening of all inactive objects. Here, the Pygmalion figure is conspicuously absent, and this coming-into-being of a female voice is portrayed as an entirely female act:

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<sup>50</sup> In *Ireland's Women* p. 263

Not only her stone face, laid back staring in the ferns,  
But everything the scoop of the valley contains begins to move  
(And beyond the horizon the trucks beat the highway.)

A tree inflates gently on the curve of the hill;  
An insect crashes on the carved eyelid;  
Grass blows westward from the roots.  
As the wind knives under the skin and ruffles it like a book.

The crisp hair is real, wriggling like snakes;  
A rustle of veins, tick of blood in the throat;  
The lines of the face tangle and catch, and  
A green leaf of language comes twisting out of her mouth.

Here, a woman's awakening is described in terms of her connection with nature and the nature goddess, and also as her awakening as a writer. Her skin is "ruffled like a book," and her moment of birth is when language "comes twisting out of her mouth." The imagery is powerfully feminine, and the one masculine image is distracting and disruptive-- that of the trucks beating the highway-- but is conveniently removed "beyond the horizon." This is plainly a female landscape, and unlike Ní Dhomhnaill's damned sisters or Heaney's bog queens or Montague's poor old women, this is a female force that has a long future and shows no signs of defeat whatsoever.

Finally, Ruth Hooley's poem "Cut the Cake"<sup>51</sup> is a humorous recharacterization of the Virgin Mary. She is taken out of context and placed on a modern ski mountain, seen as a woman living in modern times. Because of this, we can look at the circumstances of her life as we would look at any woman's life. This approach to mythology is similar to Boland's strategy of finding real-life illustrations of mythology in order to revitalize it:

Our Lady, dispossessed  
on some alpen ice-cap  
would not look out of place  
in ski-pants, zipping  
down virgin slopes  
to the sound of music.

But wait for her second  
coming round the mountain--  
the icon-shattering thaw.

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<sup>51</sup> In *Ireland's Women* p. 344

Our immaculate image, white-iced  
and frosted for two thousand years,  
might melt to nothing more divine  
than a seething woman, cheated  
out of sex and a son in his prime.

The poem comes through as being humorous not only because of its use of casual diction (such as the image of the Virgin Mary in ski pants) but also because of the songlike tone. The last three line, especially, have a light rhythm and rhyme that bring a cheerful tone to an otherwise serious message. This use of humor is strategic: if Hooley can convince people that mythology as important as that of the Virgin Mary can be laughed at, then it is easier to convince them that Mary was perhaps reluctant to trade physical, sexual pleasure and her son for immortality.

#### Conclusion: The Future of Irish Women's Poetry and the Development of a Tradition

Irish women's poetry has only been recognized as a tradition in and of itself for a few years, and there is still much debate about whether Irish women poets should be read in relation to each other, since there is the risk of their collective exclusion-- once again-- from the national canon. However, from my study of the Mother Ireland mythology and its influence on any poet who writes in the Irish tradition, it seems to be highly crucial to recognize that women need to change the very definition of poetry, and the act of writing poetry, before they can find a legitimate voice-- and individual voices-- of their own.

Boland's approach to a solution makes sense to me. In "Outside History," she wrote:

If a poet does not tell the truth about time, his or her work will not survive it. Past or present, there is a human dimension to time, human voices within it and human griefs ordained by it. Our present will become the past of other men and women. We depend on them to remember it with the complexity with which it was suffered. As others, once, depended on us<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> Boland Object Lessons p. 153

Telling this truth, for Boland, means that poets have to move beyond the idea of mythology as a static metaphor that binds women to the task of living up to impossible ideals. The Mother Ireland figure was created, defined, and utilized by men for their own purposes and most often had nothing to do with real women, but there is something to the connection between woman and nation that has persisted for a millennium. This is a powerful metaphor and does not necessarily need to be dropped entirely-- in fact, it is so embedded in the Irish imagination it cannot be dropped-- but it does need to be revitalized and reworked so that it can function as a true representation of women and the nation.

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