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Seamus and Sinead: From "Limbo" to Saturday Night Live by way of Hush-a-Bye Baby

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ALTHOUGH THEY BOTH write poetry, Seamus Heaney and Sinéad O’Connor do not, on the surface, have much in common. While Heaney’s trademark is the personal reserve he characterized in “Whatever You Say Say Nothing” as “The famous / Northern reticence, the tight gag of place / And times” (North 59), O’Connor uses the public media to exhibit (her critics would say flaunt) the pain of her abused childhood and the complexities of her position as an Irish woman. What the poet and the singer do share is stardom. In their respective spheres of high and popular culture each is Number One; and being Number One imposes penalties. When O’Connor bought a page of the Irish Times to explain in verse that she missed a Peace ’93 concert because she needed privacy to experience her grief about her childhood, she was greeted by a torrent of vilification. Readers argued mockingly that they would gladly take on the pain of O’Connor’s past if they could have the privileges of her present. She was a spoiled narcissist who needed to stop whingeing about her “inner child” and acknowledge her advantages, which included the freedom to spend £ 11,000 on self-advertisement in the Irish Times.2

Because poetry is a less public art than popular song Heaney has been less publicly castigated than O’Connor; but Desmond Fennell’s hostile pamphlet, Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is Number One, analyzes the poetic-academic complex as a capitalist concern analogous to the rock music enterprise:

Starting out, he did not know that the poetry business at the top in consumer capitalism is a verbal, emotional and intellectual circus; but having found out, he signed on and mastered all the acts—poetic, critical, professorial, oracular and mystical. (44)

Fennell asserts that in Ireland “Heaney is the only poet whom many people buy or give as a present,” assuming that what these deluded folk seek is not the verse but Heaney’s celebrity. Similarly, Fennell writes, “people who normally ignore

1. I am grateful to Luke Gibbons for first alerting me to the importance of Hush-a-Bye Baby in a paper at the “Gender and Colonialism” conference in Galway, 1992, and for supplying me with indispensable information during the writing of this paper. I am also grateful to Angela Bourke for letting me see a pre-publication version of her paper, “Silence in Two Languages: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and the Unspeakable,” which begins from the same concatenation of historical circumstances as mine does. My greatest debt is to Margo Harkin, who answered my questions with illuminating fullness, sent me a large file of materials and cuttings, and generously spent her time supporting the project of someone she had never met.

2. The poem appeared on 10 June 1993. For a representative selection of responses (a few pro as well as con) see the Irish Times letters page, 16 June 1993.

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rock or pop music will, when U2, Enya or Sinéad O'Connor make a noise in the media, purchase a record out of curiosity or to be with the crowd” (24-25). Fennell’s main objection to “Famous Seamus” is that he has bought his rock-star popularity at the price of saying nothing meaningful about the conflict in the North of Ireland. He argues that the production of small, well-crafted, and increasingly opaque lyrics has assured Heaney his massive contemporary reputation, his professorships at Harvard and Oxford, his high sales figures, and his position as Number One.

Despite his shrewd analysis of cultural institutions and his suggestive juxtaposition of poetry with rock music, Fennell’s attack on Heaney smacks of begrudgery. Of course Heaney has said meaningful things, even if he has not provided the “clear, quotable statements . . . about general matters” (14) that Fennell simple-mindedly requires. Others have quarreled with “the extraordinary inflation of [Heaney’s] current reputation” on more substantial grounds. David Lloyd argues that Heaney’s poetic obscures the material determinants of Irish culture and politics. The bog poems, in particular, ignore “the real basis of the present struggle in the economic and social conditions of a post-colonial state.” North refigures the current conflict in terms of sexual difference, “which comes to provide for political, national and cultural difference a matrix of the most elementary, dualistic kind” (“Pap” 35, 19, 26).

Heaney’s mythical deployment of sexual difference and iconic representation of femininity has also attracted the attention of female critics, including Edna Longley, Patricia Coughlan, Clair Wills, and myself. Focusing primarily on North and the bog poems, these commentators critique Heaney’s essentialist representation of the colonizer as seducer or rapist and the colonized as feminine victim in the notorious “Act of Union” and “Ocean’s Love to Ireland,” and challenge the quasi-pornographic voyeurism of “Bog Queen” and “Punishment.” In “Quicksand,” a witty riposte to “Punishment,” Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill rejects the “bogholes underground,” where she fears she will find the subject of Heaney’s poem, “a drowned girl, / a noose around her neck,” in favor of “terra firma . . . hard sand” (Poems 85). Without naming Heaney, Eavan Boland repeatedly laments the objectification of Irish women in the male poetic tradition; but his persistent figuration of Ireland as a woman and the bogland itself as female (in “Kinship” and “The Tollund Man,” for example) makes him an exemplar of the practice she deprecates. Boland will not repeat the words “Mise Eire” (I am Ireland); she “won’t go back” (Journey 10) to the “emblematic and passive” subject position offered to Irish women in the poems of Irish men, for “once the feminine image in their poems became fused with a national concept then both were simplified and reduced” (“Woman Poet” 152). Although it has not substantially reduced his popularity, then, the feminist case against certain aspects of Heaney’s work has been clearly articulated.

My project is to recuperate both Heaney and O’Connor for feminist politics

by juxtaposing canonical poet and popular singer through their participation in a third medium, TV drama. This recuperation can be no more than partial, since I agree with much of the gender critique of Heaney outlined in the previous paragraphs; and in common with many feminists I shuddered when O'Connor defended the rapist Mike Tyson as a victim of child abuse (“Sinéad Speaks” 53). I do not, however, seek to impose unity and coherence upon either the Heaney canon or O'Connor’s various songs, texts, and gestures. My juxtaposition and close reading of so-called “literary” and “popular” signifying practices contributes to the breakdown of the hierarchical opposition between mass and minority culture. Antony Easthope has argued persuasively for a practice of cultural studies that, instead of replacing the analysis of the canon with analysis of, say, advertising or soap operas, recognizes “a necessity to read high and popular [texts] together” (Literary 167).

In Britain a product of contemporary “high” culture can enter the popular consciousness through the syllabi for the “O” and “A” level examinations in English Literature: standardized tests taken by schoolchildren at sixteen and eighteen years of age. Heaney’s poems are frequently set for “O” level (GCSE) in the six counties of the North of Ireland, as they are throughout the United Kingdom, an institutional fact that may explain his sales figures better than Fennell’s birthday present hypothesis. The hegemonic power of the “O” level English syllabus was tacitly acknowledged by a Conservative Member of the British Parliament when he objected to the inclusion of Heaney’s “The Early Purges,” a poem about the drowning of farm kittens, because it was “sick” (Morrison 88–89).

Heaney’s dominating position in the literature curriculum has been affirmed by the Irish feminist filmmaker Margo Harkin. As a founder member of the Derry Film and Video Workshop, Harkin worked on the documentary Mother Ireland, which cogently presents the case both for and against representations of women as the Motherland. Although Heaney’s poetry is not mentioned, some of it clearly falls within the terms of the film’s critique. Yet in the Workshop’s 1989 made-for-TV drama Hush-a-Bye Baby, Harkin places Heaney at the center of a feminist work through the generic frame of the “poem in the classroom”: a teacher reads Heaney’s “Limbo” to a group of fifteen-year-old girls studying for their “O” level exams. The scene could easily have emphasized the pedagogical imposition of irrelevant high culture upon a reluctant teenage audience, but instead Harkin uses Heaney’s lines as a crucial emotional focus for the film’s concern with gender and reproduction. She has told me that “it was very much my desire to get that poem in.”

The Derry collective believed “that too often people are the passive recipients of a one-way flow of information from the dominant audio-visual institutions which do not reflect the values and aspirations of dissenting groups.” Their
project was to resist “dominant audio-visual institutions,” which would, ironically, include Channel Four, the pseudo-radical British TV company that funded them. Harkin is aware of the paradox involved in developing a culture of resistance within the mainstream media, but since “the good ship Channel 4 professed a benign interest in the native culture,” the natives were ready to take their money: “If views were to be constructed of ourselves then we demanded a right to construct an indigenous perspective” (“No Plundering” 19). In *Hush-a-Bye Baby* Harkin creates a counter-hegemonic narrative about working-class Derry teenage girls coming to sexual maturity within a Catholic culture that represses and denies the facts of reproduction and contraception.

Though set primarily in the North, the film draws much of its emotional power from its reference to events in the South. As Nell McCafferty has noted,

The nineteen eighties will go down in history as a lousy decade for Irishwomen. During what have become known as “the amendment years”, church and state fought for control of our bodies and our destiny. The Catholic Church won handily. (*Goodnight 1*)

In 1983 the Republic voted by a two-thirds majority to insert in its Constitution a clause outlawing abortion. The pre-referendum debate was policed and controlled by the “dominant audio-visual institution” of the state, RTE. According to Luke Gibbons,

The kind of open-ended “phone-ins,” magazine programs, and talk shows (such as the controversial *Late Late Show*, the most successful show on Irish TV) that had given women a voice, and had ventilated sexual issues frankly, were explicitly barred by the government-appointed broadcasting authorities from joining the debate. As a result, women’s stories simply were not told. (13)

The next year, 1984, in what Gibbons has characterized as a return of the repressed, the fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett died giving birth to her illegitimate baby in a grotto dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Although the community of Granard had surmised that she was pregnant, no one had spoken about it to her or to her family. A few months later the body of a newborn that had been stabbed twenty-seven times was washed up on a beach in County Kerry. The young woman accused of this infanticide, Joanne Hayes, was cleared when her own illegitimate baby, dead at birth, was found in the field where she had buried it; but the police investigation spared no detail of her gynecological or personal history. As women began to protest against the inquiry, and to contact phone-ins and talk shows with their own stories, the silence and secrecy that had surrounded Ann Lovett and Joanne Hayes, as they bore their stigmatized pregnancies to term in communities that refused to acknowledge their condition, was shattered. 7

The sleeve notes for *Hush-a-Bye Baby* refer to these incidents, as does the film itself, which presents a fictionalized narrative that has obvious connections with the Ann Lovett story. (The case of Ann Lovett has also inspired Paula Meehan’s poem, “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks” [Man 40–42]; Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s *Thar rno Chionn*;8 Leland Bardwell’s short story, “The Dove of

7. For a full discussion of the Kerry Babies case, see McCafferty, *Woman to Blame*; and for Ann Lovett see McCafferty, *Best of Nell* 48–54.
8. For a translation see Angela Bourke, “Silence in Two Languages.”
Peace”; and a song sung by Christy Moore and Sinead O’Connor, “Middle of the Island,” on Moore’s record Voyage.) Harkin felt “that the national consciousness of Ireland had been shocked by these events... and that it would be important to make some sort of contribution to or intervention in the subject.” To democratize the intervention as far as possible, the collective listened to the stories of numerous young Derry women who had experienced unmarried pregnancy (Mackay 29). Since the British Abortion Act of 1967 has never been extended to the North of Ireland, the position of pregnant women is similar on both sides of the Border.9 When the collective showed the script to Sinead O’Connor and asked her to write the music, she had just finished reading A Woman to Blame, Nell McCafferty’s book on Joanne Hayes (Brady 15). Although she had not paid much attention to the tragedies of Lovett and Hayes when they occurred in 1984, she was so moved and impressed by the script of Hush-a-Bye Baby that she requested a small part for herself:

It was a film that really attracted me because it dealt with something I had first-hand experience of—the horror of being young, single and pregnant in a country like Ireland with such backward views on femininity and sexuality. (“Interview”)  

Although O’Connor originally wanted to play a nun, she was eventually offered the part of the heroine’s shy and prudish girlfriend, Sinéad.

The heroine, fifteen-year-old Goretti, is ironically rather than aptly named. Santa Maria Goretti was an Italian teenager canonized for preferring death to rape: she has been fetishized as an example to Catholic girls of the correct attitude towards sex. Unmindful of her namesake’s example, Goretti gets pregnant by her boyfriend, Ciaran. Against the meticulously rendered Derry background of the supergrass trials and constant harassment by the army, Ciaran, who has Republican sympathies, is lifted by the British before Goretti realizes her condition. She is left alone, unable to talk to a mother whose only concession to the female body is her monthly replacement of the significantly named “Stay Free” sanitary towels hidden at the back of the laundry cupboard. At one point Goretti walks past the most famous of Northern murals, “You are now entering Free Derry.” Harkin’s point is that whatever she’s going through was going on before the “troubles”. One of the main reasons for doing the film is that, if we get what we want, if we get a united Ireland, if we get troops out, what kind of a country are we left with? (Boatman 44)

To underline this question, Harkin’s setting shifts from the North to the Republic. Rendered completely unfree by lack of information, lack of choice, inability to communicate, and sheer terror, Goretti mechanically adheres to her previous plan to spend the summer in the Donegal Gaeltacht with her friend Dinky, in order to learn Irish.

Donegal, however, only intensifies Goretti’s psychological distress. A statue of the Virgin, ironically dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, reminds

Goretti of her own transgression, and prompts Dinky’s adjuration: “Don’t you fucking move!” In early 1985 statues of the Virgin, in Cork and elsewhere, were reported to be moving. Religious commentators argued that Our Lady was disturbed by the terrible events of 1984, as well she might have been, but on what score? On RTE Goretti hears a studio discussion of abortion in which the audience is reminded that it is almost a year since the referendum. Insisting that abortion is murder, one woman cites Bishop Joseph Cassidy’s sensational pre-referendum claim that “the most dangerous place for an infant to be is in the mother’s womb.” She is challenged by another woman who asks what relevance these words have to the unfortunate Ann Lovett, and who claims that the vote has increased the “fear and isolation” of women like Goretti.

To illustrate this fear and isolation, Harkin chooses an icon that is saturated with local meaning, although it would probably be lost on a non-Irish audience. Sitting alone and silent on a rocky beach Goretti watches a discarded fertilizer bag wash in: a visual code for the Kerry Babies case, in which the infant was washed ashore in just such a plastic bag. This long, non-narrative scene is particularly important to Harkin, who writes that

Evidence of infanticide by drowning seemed to me to crop up now and then in small newspaper articles since the time of the Joanne Hayes scandal . . . . It struck me that since we live on an island and the sea is such a feature of our lives it was obvious it would play a part in our most tragic, secret dramas. (Letter)

Clearly, thoughts of abortion and infanticide, possibly even suicide, are uppermost in Goretti’s troubled mind. After leaving the Gaeltacht she is further isolated by the imprisoned Ciaran’s self-centered reaction to her news. Under the accusing gaze of another statue of the Virgin, this time ironically juxtaposed with a bottle of gin, she unsuccessfully attempts the alcohol-and-hot-bath method of home abortion. When she returns to school, the options of marriage and abortion closed, and still hiding her pregnancy from everyone but the equally uninformed Dinky, an English lesson presents her with her last and most terrible choice.

Heaney’s “Limbo,” a poem about a mother drowning her baby in the Donegal fishing village of Ballyshannon, metaphorically takes her back to her vigil by the sea. The Heaney poem is the verbal complement of the visual image of the pregnant girl watching the waves. In the earlier scene Harkin had referenced the poem through a second iconic object, the fishing net in which the “Ballyshannon baby” was recovered:

I have referred to both the Caherciveen [Kerry] baby with the blue fertilizer bag, blue being the colour of the Virgin Mary, and to the Ballyshannon baby with the remnant of a fisherman’s net, again blue. . . . I imagine those inanimate accessories trying to wash off their associated sins into infinity and I wish their inclusion to be an acknowledgment of the pain of these women. (Letter)

Harkin’s obsession with blue leads her to alter the facts of the case: the fertilizer bag that figured in the Kerry police inquiry was gray (McCafferty, Woman 56). The religious register of her language suggests the deep psychological hold that Catholic iconography and the Catholic sense of sin can exert in the unconscious minds even of those who rationally reject Catholic theology.
The “poem in the classroom” scene is directly framed by a discussion (based upon a real incident) about a baby found abandoned in the grotto of Derry’s Long Tower Church, and promptly baptized by the local priest. “How did they know it was a Catholic baby?” Goretti asks. “Maybe the mother was just desperate.” Harkin cuts to the image of a baptism, which has a purely iconic, non-narrative function since this infant plays no role in the plot. As the water pours over the unknown baby’s head and a stained-glass window is mirrored in the ripples of the font, Goretti’s woman teacher reads the opening stanza of “Limbo,” after which the image dissolves to the crucifix on the wall of the classroom. The icon of the baptized child coincides with the poem about the drowned, and presumably unbaptized, baby.

The doctrine of Limbo, although it was always uncanonical and has now more or less disappeared as a theological concept (McCafferty, Goodnight 43), permeates Irish folk legend and belief. Limbo is a no man’s land between Heaven and Hell reserved for, among others, the souls of unbaptized babies; they do not suffer, but neither are they permitted to see God. Abortion and infanticide are doubly heinous because the innocent victim is deprived of eternal happiness. Anne O’Connor argues that “Child murderess and dead child traditions in Ireland are profoundly religious in character . . . the popular perception of the woman who takes the life [of her child] is that of a demonic and unrepentant murderer” (309). Folklore in this respect goes hand in hand with the rhetoric of militant anti-abortion groups like the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child: since aborted babies cannot be baptized, they are candidates for Limbo.

Heaney’s poem, however, draws from this popular folk source only to revise sympathetically the traditional moral judgment contained within it. I can imagine two possible hostile readings of “Limbo” (Wintering 70): as a mainstream male literary text appropriating a marginalized woman’s pain; and as a reinscription of Catholic male dominance over women like Goretti, who must not have an abortion or kill their babies because they will be exiled forever in Limbo. Neither of these responses seems to me appropriate, however; and if we watch the film reading the poem, they become impossible. Limbo is indeed imagined according to tradition as a “far briny zone” in which even Christ the fisher of men has no hope of a redemptive catch; and Harkin’s striking use of sea and water imagery throughout the film underlines Heaney’s metaphor. The child murderess, however, is not demonized: indeed, she is identified with Christ in her suffering. Harkin’s shot of the crucifix graphically echoes Heaney’s lines, “She waded in under / The sign of her cross,” while the camera’s relentless focus on Goretti’s face during the teacher’s attempt to generate discussion of the poem emphasizes her own private Calvary.

The poem’s first simple declarative sentence depicts a shocking event in plain and unsensational language, as if the speaker were reading a newspaper account:

Fishermen at Ballyshannon
Netted an infant last night
Along with the salmon.
Goretti Hears Limbo
These lines imply that catching an infant, while unusual, is within the parameters of an angler’s experience, as indeed it may be in a culture that makes it hard for teenagers to obtain contraception. Angela Bourke has situated numerous Irish folk legends in which fishermen “catch” newborns in their nets or on hooks in the contemporary context of the Kerry Babies case; while Harkin speculates that infanticide has been and is common in Ireland, although “the level of collusion and secrecy surrounding these incidents is so powerful in a country which denies abortion that the facts are hard to get at” (Letter).

Heaney’s restrained style, his initial eschewing of descriptive or evaluative terms, nevertheless produces shock through the chilling contrast between the expected and the unexpected contents of the net: the salmon and the infant. His tight four-line stanza and terse diction reveal his debt to the Movement and the idea of the well-made poem, as does his organically unified angling metaphor: the baby is

An illegitimate spawning,
A small one thrown back
To the waters.

The loaded adjective “illegitimate” provides a major exception to the rhetoric of fishing. Totally inappropriate to the life cycle of the salmon, a symbol of untrammelled sexual energy (as in Yeats’s “the salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas”), the obtrusive five-syllable word inserts the harshness of conventional human judgment into the amoral world of spawning. The temptation to judge is no sooner presented than resisted, however. The monosyllabic line, “A small one thrown back,” evokes with understated pathos a fish/child too tiny to be worth the fisherman’s keeping, too insignificant to deserve the ponderous stigma, “illegitimate.”

The fishing metaphor doubles as a birth metaphor, since the breaking of the “waters” occurs early during delivery. The baby comes out of the waters of the womb and is returned to the waters of the sea. The mysterious and surreal opening shot of the film anticipates Heaney’s lines by showing what at first sight appears to be a fetus floating in amniotic fluid, against a rhythmic sound that suggests waves falling on the shore. On second viewing the connection with the Heaney poem becomes even stronger, as we make out a doll’s hand amid a swirl of what might be hair or seaweed. Sinéad O’Connor devised the undersea sounds and produced the eerie wailing, a keen or lament for all the drowned babies and their anguished parents. Harkin has told me that she deliberately began the film with a visual and aural reference to the Ballyshannon baby “thrown back to the waters.”

After this phrase the impersonal speaking voice of the poem changes:

But I’m sure
As she stood in the shallows
Ducking him tenderly

The word "But" dramatically alters the trajectory of the poem, forestalling the reader's question, "How could any mother drown her baby?" Adopting the first-person pronoun (which tempts readers to identify the speaker as Heaney himself), the poet interprets the mother's motives through a non-appropriative act of personal trust: "But I'm sure." He guarantees that her act was not lightly undertaken. He does not speak in her voice; he speaks on her behalf, with empathy. Harkin reinforces this empathy by giving us our first view of the female teacher's face on the phrase, "But I'm sure." Heaney's certainty can be used by a woman—a teacher or a filmmaker—for political and educational ends. Any implications of maternal callousness derived from the metaphor of the unwanted catch tossed back into the sea are dispersed by the line "ducking him tenderly." Harkin's visual introduction to the poem, the watery, rippling shot of the baby at the font (a "small one" who was not thrown back), reads the mother's action as an alternative, unconventional baptism: not drowning, but ducking. Through the surprising adverb "tenderly" the violence one would normally associate with such an act is deflected from the baby back upon the mother herself.

The third stanza is entirely devoted to this reversal. The mother absorbs her child's death into her own body: her wrists "Were dead as the gravel." The infant is not a fish torn by the hook: he is that biological impossibility, a minnow with hooks, and she is the one torn open by the pains of his birth and his death. In birthing and killing her child she has murdered herself. Harkin has said that this part of the poem enabled her own creative act:

Heaney imagines himself with great compassion into her state of being... Heaney's gift here was that he helped me imagine a possible interpretation of [her state] and neither he nor I had experienced it. (...I have no doubt also that a woman poet might have brought a lot more to it but that does not detract from the validity of Heaney's version and his right to do it. It's what we have demanded of men surely, that they imagine themselves into the female condition?) What is more important politically is that even if in the real case the person responsible for that act was full of rage and guilt he took her side and he collapsed into that poem the anguish and the loss and the love that may have clashed so violently in that destroying act and which we absolutely know is part of the desperate condition of so many women imprisoned in a religious culture so completely intolerant of a woman's right to choose. (Letter)

Harkin is certain, as I am, that although Heaney's imagination is steeped in the "religious culture" of the Catholicism in which he was raised, his attitude towards it is equivocal, critical. The conclusion of the poem reinflects the conventional images of crucifixion, Limbo, and Christ the fisherman:

She waded in under
The sign of her cross.
He was hauled in with the fish.
Now limbo will be
A cold glitter of souls
Through some far briny zone.
Even Christ’s palms, unhealed,
Smart and cannot fish there.

The “child murderess” endures a female Calvary that is compounded by her religious beliefs: the cross weighs heavily upon her because infanticide outrages both her feelings as a mother and her conscience, her sense of sin. Ironically, the Church’s refusal to countenance contraception or abortion, combined with its stigmatization of illegitimacy, forces her to the far more heinous sin of murdering a living child.

Although we might imagine that the Limbo evoked at the conclusion is the destination of the baby, as it would be in popular superstition, Heaney’s syntax is ambiguous. “Now limbo will be, / A cold glitter of souls” is open to the question “For whom?” Harkin sees Heaney’s reference to Limbo not as a judgment of the mother of the Ballyshannon baby but if anything a judgment against the Church which has taken control from women and left them without a better choice in the circumstances of desperation. It has created a Limbo for women in the same way it so conveniently created one for unbaptized babies. No one can go in there, no one can talk about this experience, it is the loneliest place; it must be endured. It is a prison sentence without appeal.

In these circumstances not even Christ can redeem the suffering of his daughter; nor can he judge her. Sharing Limbo with her drowned baby she is beyond reach of his unhealed, smarting palms in “some far briny zone.” He has failed her. For Harkin, Heaney’s concluding images were “powerful . . . and overwhelmingly sad and compassionate” (Letter). They permeate not only the scenes on the beach and in the classroom, and the symbolic opening underwater sequence, but the first naturalistic shot of the film: Goretti’s niece, a little girl of about two or three, is shown “drowning” her doll in the bath. Ann Lovett was fifteen, Goretti is fifteen: how old was the mother of the Ballyshannon baby? The child killer may have been a child herself.

Harkin’s use of the Heaney poem as an objective correlative for the national trauma caused by the Lovett and Hayes cases climaxes when the teacher asks her inexperienced young class to comment on the lines that conflate the physical pain of birth with the woman’s pain at the baby’s death, “He was a minnow with hooks / Tearing her open.” The camera stays focused on Goretti, for whom the lines clearly have a meaning far deeper than that available to the other girls; but in the background we hear Sinéad O’Connor offer a clumsy interpretation: “Does it mean the baby was caught with the fisherman’s hook, miss?” O’Connor’s persona in the film is at odds with her reputation as the “hairless hellraiser” (“Sinéad O’Connor” 34): she is sexually reserved, and shown fantasizing herself as a nun or the Virgin. This scene implies that her devoutness impairs her ability to read the poem. It is the pregnant Goretti, identifying with the mother, who offers an interpretation that would doubtless have earned her an “A” in her “O” level exam: “She didn’t want to kill her baby, miss. She must have been desperate. He imagines her ducking him tenderly. She was very unhappy.” The word “desperate” brings Harkin’s carefully structured sequence of words and images
Sinead Hears Limbo
full circle: Goretti began by characterizing the mother of the baby abandoned in
the grotto as “desperate.”

Harkin says that the Workshop chose television as “the most popular medium
through which we could express our ideas” (“No Plundering” 20). She neverthe­
less understood the precariousness of an enterprise dependent upon support from
Channel Four, which became “nervous about its involvement with the work­
shop” after the banning of Mother Ireland. (The ban was incurred because the
documentary featured IRA volunteer Mairead Farrell, murdered in Gibraltar by
the SAS just before the program was due to air.) Indeed, shortly after Hush-a­
Bye Baby, Channel Four withdrew its funding for independent workshops, and
the Derry Film and Video collective went out of business. “We . . . knew,” Harkin
wrote, “that they wouldn’t let us do it for long, whatever it was that we were
doing. Was it culture? Was it politics? Was it community activism? Was it art?”
(“No Plundering” 19). Surely it was all of those things. In appropriating
Heaney’s art for cultural politics, Hush-a-Bye Baby inserts it into the sphere of
community activism. By showing Goretti responding to the poem through her
own pain, the film also proposes a populist literary politics. Poetry is mimetic and
expressive, response is affective, and reading is a process of personal identifica­
tion. Neither Heaney nor Harkin could stand up to the analysis of a Foucauldian
constructionist feminist like Judith Butler, for whom the biological category
“sex” is as much a function of discourse as the social category “gender,” and even
the category “woman” is problematic (Gender 1–7). Nevertheless, as long as
females have babies and males do not, an Irish “woman” is someone whose
womb (if she is fertile and Catholic) is susceptible to male clerical control. If any
country requires a dose of strategic essentialism (a tactic Butler distrusts), it is
surely Ireland.

Harkin’s feminist “reading” of Heaney’s text can be extended to two other
poems with which it is linked by theme and proximity in Wintering Out (1972):
“Maighdean Mara” and “Bye-Child.” In these poems, as in “Limbo,” which
stands between them in the collection, the sexual conventions and prohibitions
of Irish life that Heaney understands so well are shown as a deadly trap for both
women and children: they lead to forced marriages, depression, suicide, infant­
ticide, and child abuse. What distinguishes them from the bog poems is that the
female figures that inhabit them are not representatives of the land or of the
national idea; nor are they icons of rural domesticity like the baking woman of
“Mossbawn.”

“Maighdean Mara” retells the folk legend of the mermaid who is compelled
to marry the man who has stolen her magic garment: “follow / Was all that she
could do.” Heaney comments, “It is not an allegory for getting pregnant out of
wedlock; but it carries that force all right.” He is exceptionally sensitive to the
“violated lives” of people “who were trapped into a domestic life by mistake”
(Interview 45):

11. For an account of this censorship, see Goldson, “Allegories” 8.
Goretti in Labour
She suffered milk and birth—
She had no choice—conjured
Patterns of home and drained
The tidesong from her voice. (*Wintering* 68–69)

It was all that she could do: she had no choice. Heaney has said that the poem was inspired by the suicide of a young married woman he knew who suffered from depression, "and had been inert on the bed in a kind of paralysis almost for months; and then one night left the house and drowned herself in Ballinderry river" (Interview 45). In the poem the mermaid who returns to the sea rather than remain in the prison of a marriage forced upon her by pregnancy is represented as corpse-like, "her cold breasts / Dandled by undertow." Although in some versions of the folk tale she returns at night to comb the hair of her human offspring, Heaney's mermaid suicidally divests herself of the domestic spell of "Her children's brush and combs." They are completely abandoned. In "Limbo," as we have seen, the baby is drowned. In "Bye-Child," the most horrifying of the three poems, the woman imprisons her illegitimate child in a henhouse to avoid the shame his birth would bring upon her. He remains hidden there for years, a domestic "feral child" who is incapable of speech,

Your gaping wordless proof
Of lunar distances
Travelled beyond love. (*Wintering* 72)

Heaney does not attempt to imagine the state of mind of the mother who confines her child in a henhouse, a fate worse than being drowned at birth; but nor does he condemn her. The problem of child abuse is integrally related to the lack of reproductive choice in Ireland, as Heaney implicitly recognizes by situating "Bye-Child" directly after "Maighdean Mara" and "Limbo."

No one has been more vocal about the issue of child abuse than Sínead O'Connor. The cover of *Success Has Made a Failure of Our Home*, for example, features a photograph of a beautiful little boy. The back reads, "Nahaman Carmona Lopez. A street child who was attacked by police in Guatemala City, who later died from the injuries he received. 14 March 1990." The politics of the cover have nothing to do with the songs on the CD, a selection of golden oldies; but the singer's participation in *Hush-a-Bye Baby* merges artistic with political commitment. The shot that juxtaposes the image of O'Connor with the words of the Heaney poem also relates, through an audio-visual metonomy, the realms of high and popular art. O'Connor, who made the film just before she became famous in 1990 with "Nothing Compares 2U," also composed the score, sang her version of "The Bells of the Angelus," and wrote the haunting "Three Babies" that accompanies the closing credits.

"Three Babies" appears to respond directly to "Limbo." Read in the light both of the film and of O'Connor's biography (and O'Connor has often said that all her songs are personal [Hayes 68–70, 92]), this poem implies that the woman

12. See also her poem "What Happens to a Child" on *Am I Not Your Girl?*
who sings has aborted her babies. As in "Limbo," the mother's feelings for them are "tender," but her assumptions about their ultimate fate are radically different. She asserts that she will hold on to them for ever:

Each of these
my three babies
I will carry with me
.............
In my soul
my blood and my bones
I have wrapped your cold bodies round me.
The face on you
The smell of you
will always be with me.

Echoing and reversing the pessimistic conclusion of Heaney's poem, with its doctrine of Limbo as a "cold glitter of souls" who will be forever unreachable and unredeemable, she claims that she has "wrapped your cold bodies round me." Her own faith is defiantly optimistic:

Each of these my three babies
I was not willing to leave
though I tried
I blasphemed and denied
I know they will be returned to me. (I Do Not Want 15)

Her religious terminology ("blasphemed and denied") reveals that, like Heaney and Harkin, she intuitively resorts to Catholic discourse even as she rejects it intellectually.

O'Connor's coded admission of abortion in "Three Babies" changed to an outright political statement when in 1992 a fourteen-year-old Irish girl, pregnant as a result of rape, was prevented from travelling to England for a termination. The Attorney General cited as his justification the 1983 constitutional amendment guaranteeing the right to life of the unborn. O'Connor took a spectacular role in the protests that erupted in Dublin, buttonholing the Prime Minister, addressing rallies, demanding a new referendum in which only women of childbearing age could vote, and admitting to two abortions herself. Journalist Mary Holland wrote,

In general, Irish women are extremely reluctant to talk of their experiences of abortion. Until rock star Sinéad O'Connor stormed the Dail on Thursday, demanded to talk to Albert Reynolds and told the media she would face her Maker quite happy to explain why she had had two abortions, I know of just three women who had "come out" since the start of the referendum campaign in 1983. ("Eire")

O'Connor, who wears T-shirts that say "Recovering Catholic," plausibly locates the source of Irishwomen's reproductive dilemmas in the Vatican, which she views as the primary source of evil in the world. Although she refuses to call herself a feminist, her statements betray the influence of the activist intellectual Harkin and the experience of making Hush-a-Bye Baby. Like Harkin, she argues that, "The Catholic Church have controlled us . . . through their teachings on sexuality, marriage, birth control and abortion" ("Sinéad's Defense" F1).
O’Connor was beaten by her mother, like many Irish housewives a Valium and alcohol addict (Hayes 12–17), and she claims that Ireland has the highest incidence of child abuse in Europe. Where women cannot control their own fertility and numerous offspring strain the resources of impoverished parents, mistreatment by mothers as well as fathers is common. O’Connor also claims that “in the school, the priests have been beating the shit out of the children for years and sexually abusing them” (“People” 78). She constructs a coherent post-colonial theoretical trajectory from the Catholic Church through imperialism to child abuse. She historicizes her antipathy to the Church by insisting on the intersection between religious and political colonization. In the twelfth century Ireland was “given” to Henry II of England by Popes Adrian and Alexander (Curtis 55-57), and O’Connor claims that “the cause of my abuse is the history of my people, whose identity and culture were taken away from them by the British with full permission from The ‘Holy’ Roman Empire” (“Sinead’s Defense” F1).

O’Connor has a long history of confrontational political gestures that, unlike Madonna’s ever-saleable masturbatory Catholicism, actually lessen her popularity. To protest the censorship of black rappers she refused to have the American national anthem played before one of her concerts, and she pulled out of an episode of Saturday Night Live because it was to be hosted by misogynist and homophobe Andrew Dice Clay. To their subsequent regret, the producers gave her another chance. On 3 October 1992 she rehearsed in the Saturday Night Live studio reggae singer Bob Marley’s previously banned “War.” The song, which itself challenged the anodyne formula of the show, is adapted from a speech made by Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, whom Rastafarians like Marley regarded as the only true God. (The speech was reproduced on Marley’s original album cover.) O’Connor sang a capella to ensure that every word was heard:

Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior
is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned
Everywhere is war.

In choosing the Marley song O’Connor substantiated her frequent claims that “hip-hop” and rap were her biggest influences. She was going back to their source in reggae and to the religious philosophy that informed it. Rastafarians, the Jamaican descendants of slaves, who developed a culture of resistance and sought an authentic racial identity in their African roots, accused Christian missionaries of concealing the fact that Adam and Jesus were black. O’Connor’s loathing of the Vatican is compounded by the fact that it “blessed the bombs that went into Ethiopia.” She is referring, quite correctly, to Mussolini’s infamous 1929 Concordat with Pope Pius the Eleventh, and his subsequent invasion of Haile Selassie’s country in 1935. Her identification of Catholicism with fascism

13. For a discussion of Rastafarianism, reggae, and British popular culture see Hebdige 30–45.
is strengthened by her conviction that Pius the Twelfth “gave permission . . . for
the Jewish people to be slaughtered” (“People” 79) by not speaking out against
the Nazi holocaust, but the unsuspecting producers failed to interpret the
significance of the Star of David she was wearing round her neck. O’Connor
adapted the anti-racist lyrics of Marley’s “War” for her own purposes:

Until the ignoble and unhappy regime which holds all of us
through child abuse, yeah
child abuse, yeah
subhuman bondage
has been toppled, utterly destroyed
Everywhere is war.

That “ignoble and unhappy regime,” for her, is “the Roman Empire, the people
who invented child abuse” (“Sinéad Speaks” 53); but at the rehearsal she did not
say so. At the end of the song she held up a picture of a young victim: she was
priming the cameraman to compose the close-up shot. In the live broadcast,
however, illustrating Marley’s concluding words, “We have confidence in the
victory of good over evil,” she replaced the picture of the child victim (good) by
a picture of the Pope (evil), and then tore it up, stunning technicians, producers,
and audience into complete silence.

Unfortunately few people in America understood what she was doing, though
a lot of people knew they hated it. Outside of the Irish context, the gesture seemed
like gratuitous blasphemy. NBC received a torrent of protest calls, and O’Connor
was subsequently booed at a Bob Dylan tribute in Madison Square Garden. In
defiance, she again sang the Marley song instead of her scheduled Dylan number.
The offending Saturday Night Live episode had opened with a self-reflexive skit
about NBC censoring the show because it had satirized General Electric, which
owns the network. Ironically, when this episode was later rebroadcast NBC
silently censored O’Connor by substituting the dress rehearsal footage for the
Pope-ripping version, and they refused to supply me with a copy of the original
tape. Lenny Pickett, a regular musician on the show, told me that she “violated
its premises.” Direct political protest like O’Connor’s ruptures the conventions
of tame political satire, and Pickett suggests that although the producers of
Saturday Night Live (all white males) do not object to controversy, “it wasn’t
their controversy.” Indeed it was not, being a controversy peculiar to Irishwomen,
racial minorities, and children everywhere. O’Connor has recorded a song called
“Jump in the River” with Jesse Helms’s favorite target, the performance artist
Karen Finley, and I read her attempt to make Saturday Night really Live as
performance art of a high order. Her subversive genre-bending produced a
sensational shock effect, even on Madonna, who protested against “ripping up
an image that means a lot to other people.” Given her own use of the crucifix
Madonna can hardly talk, but she did make one valid point: “I think you have to
do more than denigrate a symbol. I mean, burn a flag, but explain why” (1).

O'Connor, who said that her gesture was "for Ireland" ("People" 79), spent many weeks explaining. She had commandeered the most popular medium at her disposal to get an audience for the discursive clarification of the connection between the Pope, the history of Irish colonization, and child abuse that she published in a widely circulated "Open Letter" to the press. Rosemary Mahoney ends her recent book, Whoredom in Kimmage: Irish Women Coming of Age, which explores the changing social and reproductive position of Irish women, with an endorsement of O'Connor's intervention: "It seems, then, no mere coincidence that the Irish singer Sinéad O'Connor destroyed a photograph of Pope John Paul II in a live appearance on American television" (306). Reapplying to her gesture Harkin's question, "Was it culture? Was it politics? Was it community activism? Was it art?" I answer: "Yes." Heaney's canonical poem, Harkin's TV drama, and O'Connor's transgressive appropriation of NBC's commercial format are not isolated exemplars of high, middlebrow, and popular culture, but events that exist on an Irish textual, cultural, and political continuum.

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