

Defining the Field: Irish Women Poets Within and Without the Literary Tradition

The creation of an anthology of literature inevitably involves a process of selection and rejection of texts which is always open to questioning and criticism. The three-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (published in Derry, Northern Ireland in 1991) is a conspicuous example. In his introduction the general editor Seamus Deane claims that it is both a “meta-narrative” of Irish writings over 1,500 years and an “act of definition” of Irish identity/identities (Deane 1991: xix). The scale of the enterprise was unprecedented: it spans a wider time period than any previous anthology of Irish literature and aims to cover writing in a broad sense that extends to political speeches, pamphlets and analyses. All the more surprising then that it should contain so few women writers – only 39 in 4,000 pages – that its publication was greeted with as much outrage as admiration. The outcry at this glaring omission threatened to overshadow its rich and eclectic array of writers and writings. In order to redress the balance a new Field Day project was launched to compile a volume devoted solely to women’s writing. At Deane’s invitation a team of women editors undertook the task, which resulted in the publication, eleven years later, of not one but two volumes under the title *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions* (published in Cork, Ireland, in 2002). This is a lengthy title and a hefty work, running to 3,200 pages of writing by over 900 women and a smattering of men. What I examine here is how these two “works” (volumes I–III and volumes IV–V respectively) can be viewed as engaging one another in a debate on conceptions of Ireland and Irish writing, and how this is reflected in the representation of contemporary women poets in the anthology and their place in the Irish poetic tradition. This involves a close reading

of editorial comment and poets' words with a view to understanding the nature and the focus of the debate.

Defining Opening Statements

First, a look at how the two works define themselves. The subtitle of the second work is already telling: "Irish Women's Writing and Traditions". If the first three volumes had been subtitled "Irish Men's Writing and Traditions", it would almost certainly have been deemed controversial. However, controversy there was as the contents of volumes I–III were criticised for their depiction of Irish writing as a predominantly male preserve. The subtitle of the second work in effect retroactively subtitles the first, underscoring its bias and the limits of its scope.

In his General Introduction, Deane registers his awareness of the limits and the place of this, or indeed any, anthology, saying that the "selection is not made from a preordained 'tradition'; it is selection which ordains the tradition(s)" (ib. xx). He recognises that this work is "one further act of cultural creation" (ib.), and that his subject – Irish writing – is a human construct that has been created, dismantled and recreated repeatedly over the centuries. Clearly, he and his fellow editors do not see themselves as entering uncharted territory. In contrast, the women editors of volumes IV and V emphasize the fact that this is the first such attempt to put together a comprehensive body of texts by and about the women of Ireland. Not only that, they also suggest that "the underlying assumption of much of [the previous] scholarship has been that both reader and writer are male" (Bourke et al 2002: xxxii). Indeed, there is a striking difference in the editorial structure of the two works: volumes I–III are compiled by an all-male team under a general editor while volumes IV and V are the work of an all-female team of eight, over 50 contributing editors and no general editor. Furthermore, the General Introduction to the first three volumes is written by Seamus Deane, a prominent

Northern Irish writer, critic, professor and member of the Field Day¹ board of directors, someone who needs no introduction in the field of Irish letters. Accordingly, when Deane uses the personal pronoun “we”, it comes across a voice of authority speaking for an established body. The Preface to volumes IV and V bears no authorial name(s) and it insists on the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of the editorial work. Here, “we” speaks of and for an assembled group of individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds: scholars from different disciplines, historians, political activists, journalists, theologians, writers and an expert on oral traditions. What unites them is “a shared commitment to feminist work” (ib. xxxii). Thus we have something akin to a committee, appointed for and defined by the task in hand, and a hierarchical team continuing a scholarly tradition.

The very choice of the words “introduction” and “preface” give momentary pause for thought. “Introduction” carries the idea of “leading *in*”, of the editor knowing and showing the way, accompanying the reader and presenting the texts. With “preface” the accent is on “speaking beforehand”, the editorial voice falling silent *before* the reader encounters the texts on his or her own.

A close reading of the General Introduction and the Preface shows that the women editors respond to Deane’s words in a way that is indicative of how they view their task. I give a few of the most revealing examples. Deane envisages the anthology as a meta-narrative that is “hospitable to all the micro-narratives that, from time to time, have achieved prominence as the official version of the true history, political and literary, of the island’s past and present” (Deane 1991: xix). His focus is on the competing and converging (his)stories of Ireland, on continuities and discontinuities; this is a

¹ Field Day started as a theatre company founded in Derry in 1980, a time when this border city was one of the parts of Northern Ireland most marked by the sectarian violence of “the Troubles”. The aim was to establish the divided city as a theatrical centre which would bring theatre to a popular audience. Prominent N. Irish writers soon joined as they saw the significance of and need for such a space, in which prejudices and oppositions might be questioned and identities explored. It quickly gained momentum and grew into a much broader literary and cultural enterprise.

distinctly temporal bias. The women editors offer “a many-voiced narrative of place and environment for women in Ireland” (Bourke et al 2002: xxxvi). Their attention is directed to the (his)story-tellers and their accounts, and how they give voice to women’s experiences of the place that is Ireland. Their focus is on voice and experience, with a spatial dimension. Then, although Deane claims that “there is no attempt here to establish a canon” (Deane 1991: xix), the women’s volumes “set out to challenge the existing canons of Irish writing” and their first act in this direction is the “supplementing and interrogating the 1991 Field Day Anthology” (Bourke et al 2002: xxii–xxxiii). Once again, they have in a sense “rebranded” the earlier volumes.

Terms and titles are recurrent points of contention in what clearly becomes a process of definition. Although the women editors give Deane due credit for recruiting experts from diverse disciplines in his attempt to move beyond the narrowness of “literature” to the more comprehensive “writing” (Deane 1991: xix), they insist that most of the first anthology can still be classified as “literature” since “literary studies have redefined themselves as cultural studies in the past thirty years” (Bourke et al. 2002: xxxiii). They proceed to offer their own redefinition of writing as “the ways people use words” and propose to look at words produced in Ireland and words used by the Irish abroad (ib.). Judging by the Preface it would appear that their business is indeed with words. The dialogue that develops between the Preface and the Introduction at times resembles a “you-said-that-but-we-say-this” kind of argument.

Overall, the Introduction offers a clear statement of intention, of what is included, what is knowingly excluded, and finally a sense of rounding off, of a task completed and the work is ready for the reader. In contrast, the Preface gives an account of what was sought and found, what was attempted and what failed, the gaps that were filled and those that remain, culminating in a sense of an opening up of the field, of a work in progress, and now it is the turn of both the reader and the researcher. In short, and in the editors’ own words, we have two distinct end products: “an act of cultural creation” (Deane 1991: xx) and a “sampler” (Bourke et al 2002: xxxvi); the former

with its abstract, academic and theoretical overtones, the latter suggestive of something more readily accessible, tangible and empirical.

Editing contemporary women poets into the anthology

The editors of the three sections on contemporary poetry continue the dialogue. The contents pages of volume III offer an initially confusing division of 20th century Irish literature (or writing?) into: “Irish Writing: Prose Fiction and Poetry 1900–1988”, “Irish Fiction 1965–1990”, “Contemporary Drama 1953–1986” and “Contemporary Irish Poetry”. A glance at the texts included reveals that the first of these sections – “Irish Writing: Prose Fiction and Poetry 1900–1988” – contains prose and poetry in the Irish language only, while the following three sections cover fiction, drama and poetry in the English language. The haphazard use of the words “writing”, “Irish” and even “contemporary” is hardly illuminating. Abundantly clear, however, is the striking imbalance in the number of contemporary men and women poets included. Eoghan Ó hAnluain, editor of the Irish-language section, selects texts from 23 men (all except one are poets) and 2 women; Declan Kiberd’s English-language poetry selection includes texts by 35 men and 3 women. Women poets are outnumbered 57 to 5. In volume V, the divisions are simpler and more consistent: “Contemporary Writing 1960–2001” is sub-divided into “Contemporary Fiction”, “Contemporary Women Playwrights” and “Contemporary Poetry”. The poetry section, edited by the Irish-language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, groups together 59 women poets, irrespective of language. The net result is that the anthology as a whole offers us a total of 57 men and 59 women poets (The five women poets in volume III all reappear in volume V). The question is what does this numerical redressing of the balance say about the place of contemporary Irish women poets in this anthology and in the Irish poetic tradition as a whole?

All three editors outline the overarching concerns and principles that guided their selection. Both Ó hAnluain and Kiberd, in keeping

with the overall tenor of the 1991 anthology, speak primarily of the political and cultural backdrop and how it impacted on the poetry produced in 20th-century Ireland. There is frequent mention of identity, language and traditions (Gaelic, Irish, Anglo-Irish and English), of loss and revival, of traditional and modern. Poets are singled out for mention who illustrate the making or breaking of a trend, or who characterize a current. They make only two comments on women poets, but both are highly revealing.

First, Ó hAnluain says of Máire Mhac an tSaoi (b. 1922) “one wishes that [she] had written more” (Ó hAnluain 1991: 817). This comment is surprising, given that a glance at Mhac an tSaoi’s list of publications alone shows that she had four collections of poetry by 1987² and she continues to write today. Furthermore, she is a groundbreaking poet who wrote of women’s intimate and sexual experiences at a time (the 1950s and ‘60s) when this represented a distinct challenge to prevailing church and state views on morality. In view of this, Ó hAnluain’s comment appears rather inconsequential.

Kiberd does acknowledge the social and economic limitations imposed on women in post-World War II Ireland. However, he expresses regret that these “struggles of women against a patriarchal church and an archaic legal code are [...] *under-represented* in contemporary poetry” (ib. 1316 – my italics). He seems to suggest that women’s experiences (specified as their “struggles” in society) should feature more prominently in their poetry. Surely, this would be to make poetry a vehicle for propaganda. He points to Eavan Boland, who has “in lines of cool elegance, captured for Irish poetry the experience of women in middle-class suburbia.” (Ib.) He appears almost to cast Boland in the role of a “desperate-housewife” poet, whose function it is to write *about* the experiences of women in or representative of a particular role or status. Together these comments communicate a view of women’s poetry as rather thin in quantity and/or in substance, of women poets as required, and at times failing, to document women’s social experiences. This hints at some form of unspoken

² Mhac an tSaoi published collections in 1956, 1973, 1980, 1987 and 1999.

agreement or agenda concerning what the woman poet should be and should write about.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's introduction to the "Contemporary Poetry" section (volume V, 2002) was written in 1994 in direct response to the original anthology. She claims that not only the *Field Day Anthology* but also earlier anthologies have consistently and persistently failed to represent women's achievements in Irish poetry and "Since anthologies of poetry are one of the most powerful means of shaping a tradition, the fact that so many recent anthologies by male poets have marginalized or excluded women is proof, at the very least, of a tone-deafness to, if not a vested interest in, suppressing the voices of women." (Ní Dhomhnaill 2002: 1291). In her capacity as editor, she eschews any editorial practice that might be exclusive or intrusive. She favours alphabetic ordering over chronological or thematic on the grounds that: "[...] description tends to veer towards prescription and therefore eventually towards proscription" (ib. 1294). Like Kiberd, she points out under-representation, but in this case it concerns the general lack of Irish-language writing (by men or women) in the first three volumes. She maintains that this constitutes a double marginalization of women poets on account of both gender and minority language. Ní Dhomhnaill strives towards equal representation of men and women poets and of poetry in both languages. Her only constraint is space, thus her attempt to accommodate the abundance and diversity of women's poetry results in a certain "smorgasbord effect" (ib. 1297). This is intended to allow the reader to "sample" at will, as advocated in the Preface. Clearly, being equal does not mean sounding the same (Rich 1979 [1971]: 39).

Women poets within and without the Irish poetic tradition

So far we have heard only the editorial voices that emerged in the making of the *Field Day Anthology*. In order to understand what constitutes a poetic tradition it is essential to have a clear concept of what poetry is and to listen to the voices of the poets themselves. My

notion of poetry owes much to the work of Paul Zumthor and Maurice Blanchot. In his extensive research in oral poetics and voice, Zumthor has ably defended the view that poetry is voice. Poetry calls into being: thus it acts, it does not describe (Zumthor 1990 [1983]: 40). Also, the poem is what is received, and each hearing (for we still hear the rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, etc. of a poem even when reading it in print) is a unique, irreversible and complete event (ib.183). This concurs with Blanchot's theory of the poem as experience in that it speaks "anew" every time it is heard, read or uttered. As for the poet, she only exists once the poem stands before her, only *after* the poem, as it were. And yet, paradoxically, the poem requires there to be a poet in order to make it (Blanchot 1982 [1955]: 93). As I see it then, the poem is lived and experienced by both poet and audience. This is a dynamic notion of poetry and does not allow for the view of a poem as static or able to be immobilised into fixed meanings or a single interpretation. The poem is and remains a point of departure.

The application of this notion of poetry implies an aesthetic judgement. While I believe that the editors of volume III also employed aesthetic criteria in their selection procedure, it is evident that their evaluation of the poems was also historically conditioned. This is in keeping with their declared intention of giving space to narratives that have achieved "prominence" in Ireland's political and literary history.

I have selected to listen to the voices of the five women poets included in both volumes III and V: Máire Mhac an tSaoi (1922), Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (1942), Eavan Boland (1944), Medbh McGuckian (1950) and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (1952). Their poetry and their experiences as women and poets in Ireland of the second half of the 20th century reveal that the question of their place within or without the poetic tradition affected them profoundly. They come from vastly different backgrounds but what unites them is their belief in their poetic voice, even in the absence of role models or in the face of opposition. Although Ireland does have a strong poetic tradition, it is well documented that from earliest times the tradition was male-dominated. Male poets have long enjoyed power and prestige, from the early Irish *filí* (a member of an elite professional class of poets,

second only to the king or chieftain in the male hierarchy) to the bards, with their wealthy patrons and bardic schools (seats of learning from which women were barred). Women were pushed more towards the oral tradition – laments, songs, and popular or political ballads – forms held in lower esteem. After the flight of their patrons, the subsequent collapse of the Gaelic tradition in the 17th century and the steady devaluation of Irish culture up to the 19th century, male poets too started to fall back on the oral tradition and to produce more political and nationalistic verse. As a result women found themselves being written into poetry rather than makers of poetry. The most persistent example of this feminization of the national is the *aisling*, e.g.³:

Mise Éire⁴ (I am Ireland)
 I am Ireland:
 I am older than the Old Woman of Beare.
 Great my glory:
 I that bore Cuchulainn the valiant.
 Great my shame:
 My own children that sold their mother.
 I am Ireland:
 I am lonelier than the Old Woman of Beare.

In the newly independent Irish Free State, which for much of the 20th century was conceived of as a Gaelic Catholic Irish nation, women in poetry and song were further identified with the sovereignty of Ireland, the Blessed Virgin, and the Mother of Sorrows. In short, women in poetry had become muses and icons, motifs and emblems, captured within the lines of poems.

³ In the *aisling*, or dream poem, a woman (young and beautiful or an elderly mother) comes to the poet in a vision. She represents Ireland, once great but now abandoned, and speaks longingly of a time when she will be rescued from her distress. Originally a poetry of the 19th century, based on the hope of a return of the Stuart line of English kings.

⁴ “Mise Éire” (1912) by Patrick Pearse (1879–1916) writer and revolutionary. FDA vol. II, 558.

How then did women who thought of themselves as poets find an outlet for their poetic voice? The most penetrating and coherent exploration of this dilemma is to be found in Eavan Boland's prose memoir/meditations *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995). As an aspiring poet and student of literature in Dublin in the 1960s, she scoured the pages of her national literature only to feel increasingly alienated by its "rhetoric of imagery" (Boland 1995: 128). As she contemplated again and again the same passive and decorative images of women, she began to see through them to two harsh truths. First, that male poets were taking the "soft option" (ib. 136) of using and reusing these ready-made symbols when they were no longer politically necessary. In this way they promoted a culture of nationalism that simplified both Irish womanhood and the Irish nation to the detriment of both. For Boland this represented a failure of the collective and the poetic imaginations, as well as a breach of poetic ethics. It gave her to understand that she was "a woman and a poet in a culture which had the greatest difficulty associating the two ideas" (ib.133). The second truth she perceived was that these simplified and serviceable images were actually rooted in real complexities of human experience – the past struggles, losses and defeats of Irish women. She saw too that to remove the symbol from the poetry would be to erase the woman and leave a void. Instead, she disrupts the male poet-muse relationship in order to give voice to the doubly dispossessed women of Ireland's past.

Mise Éire⁵

I won't go back to it –
my nation displaced
into old dactyls,
oaths made
by the animal tallows
of the candle –

⁵ In *The Journey and Other Poems*. 1987. Manchester: Carcanet. FDA vol. III, 1301.

land of the Gulf Stream,
the small farm,
the scalded memory,
the songs that bandage up
the history, the words
that make a rhythm of the crime

where time is time past.
A palsy of regrets.
No. I won't go back.
My roots are brutal.

I am the woman -
a sloven's mix
of silk at the wrists,
a sort of dove-strut

in the precincts of the garrison –
who practises
the quick frissons,
the rictus of delight
and gets cambric for it,
rice-coloured silks

I am the woman
in the gansy coat
on board the 'Mary Belle',
in the huddling cold,
holding her half-dead baby to her
as the wind shifts East
and North over the dirty
water of the wharf

mingling the immigrant
guttural with the vowels
of homesickness who neither
knows nor cares that
a new language
is a kind of scar

and heals after a while
 into a passable imitation
 of what went before.

In Boland's "Mise Éire" the traditional opening formula ("I am Ireland") gives way to the defiant voice of a woman who speaks for herself and repossesses her nation: "I won't go back to it / *my* nation displaced / into old dactyls" (*my italics*). She continues in defining mode: "I am the woman who [...]", "My roots are brutal.", revealing her identity as the prostitute who hangs around the garrison, the emigrant woman clutching her half-dead baby on a coffin ship to America. What Boland has done is to humanize – not immortalize – the feminine in the Irish poem.

This poem is political insofar as the poet engages the idea of the nation, but it is not propagandist. Poetry written with propagandist aims such as persuading others of an injustice or advocating a cause come closer to rhetoric than revelation. This poem is rather the product of what Adrienne Rich terms "re-vision" – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction (Rich 1979 [1971]: 35). Boland repossesses her national tradition by refusing to perpetuate the "crime", the corruption of the feminine.

Being outside the tradition had afforded her an unblinkered view, and she saw that Irish poetry did not entertain the idea of the ordinary life as visionary. She believed in the life she lived and that it had to be part of the poetry that she wrote. To do otherwise would be to write a poetry that was not hers. It is this struggle to identify that relationship between being a woman and a poet that gives rise to her poetry. However, it is not poetry *about* that experience, rather how she lives with it and makes sense of it. Thus, Boland introduces a strain of self-conscious reflection into Irish women's poetry. She finds her voice where she finds her vision (Boland 1995: 254) and in revealing the lives of Irish women past and present, she writes a political poetry that is also personal.

This approach of looking hard at the tradition and finding a place within it is also reflected in the poetry of Máire Mhac an tSaoi. She displays a rare command of the Irish language, underpinned by her

extensive knowledge of and respect for classical Irish poetic forms. What marked her as a new poetic voice though was her expression of an alternative female morality in lines of technical rigour and lyrical beauty. For example, “Mary Hogan’s Quatrains” (“Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin”⁶): “I care little for people’s suspicions / I care little for priests’ prohibitions / For anything save to lie stretched / Between you and the wall”. The poetic persona (another outspoken “I”) is heedless of and unintimidated by any religious or social censure that might ensue from her obvious delight in prohibited desires and behaviour. This shows unusual defiance for the 1950s, when the models of female behaviour promoted by both church and state were the chaste country maiden, the modest home-making wife, and the desexualized mother. It is a singular feat of the creative imagination that this poet saw no incompatibility or dissonance in combining inherited poetic forms with unconventional content. This is both subtle subversion and expansion of the poetic tradition – from within.

Later Mhac an tSaoi articulates this more overtly in “The Housewife’s Credo” (“Cré na Mna Ti”⁷) which is more than a parody of the typical prayer that graced the walls of many a devout Irish home: “Keep the dwelling bright and clean / and the children in order, / wash and scour and clean, / prepare meal and beverage, / turn mattress – spread cloth / but, like Scheherazade, / you will need to write poetry also.” Here the dilemma of the Irish woman poet of the time (balancing domestic demands and literary vocation) is not expressed as a choice. The poem insists that being a wife and a poet are not mutually exclusive lives. Moreover, to deny the poetic calling is artistic death and a missed opportunity for an enrichment of the tradition. Mhac an tSaoi’s opening up of a poetic space within which to explore the domestic and the feminine signals that the tradition is flexible and dynamic. Both Boland and Mhac an tSaoi know Irish poetry inside and out but they know it differently – as women poets –

⁶ Published in 1956 in *Margadh na Saoire* (Market of Freedom). Translation by the poet. FDA vol. III, 906–7.

⁷ Published in 1987 in *An Cion go dtí Seo* (The Amount to Now). Translation by the poet. FDA vol. III, 906.

and they have chosen not to let it have a hold over them, not to be vehicles for passing it on but to make it their own.

A curious twist in Mhac an tSaoi's artistic trajectory is that she is almost invariably hailed as one of a trio of Irish-language poets⁸ who together established the modern voice of Irish poetry (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005: 56; Ó hAnluain 1991: 817). Thus her inclusion in the canon in the company of two equally, but differently, innovative male poets has somewhat eclipsed the cutting-edge feminine aspect of her poetry.

Even so, Ní Dhomhnaill recognises her good fortune as a budding poet in the 1960s in encountering Mhac an tSaoi and Caitlín Maude⁹ on the school curriculum and in person. This led her to assume that women poets were a natural part of the poetic and scholarly tradition (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005: 44) and that the poetry she was writing (however different) could be part of it. Before publication, however, her poems were regularly subjected to unauthorised editing or rejected as non-standard. Clearly, here were two opposing notions of poetry and the tradition. The male poets' stance was largely conservative and protectionist, concerned with maintaining canonical standards of expression and preserving the language (the vessel of the national soul). Women poets inclined towards a view of poetry as cumulative and proactive, and of the tradition as containing a memory of what it was in all that it becomes. The latter concurs with what Zumthor terms the "deep-rooted dynamism" of poetry (Zumthor 1990 [1983]: 207).

Informed by her vision of Irish poetry, Ní Dhomhnaill felt free to explore and exploit her language and literary inheritance. Her poetry is peopled by a profusion of women: female divinities and otherworldly creatures mined from Irish myths and folklore. They are dropped into the thick of the contemporary social and political issues tackled in her poems (nation and gender amongst them), where they speak and behave in unpredictable and unsettling ways. One of her most overtly subversive tactics is to "incorporate" men into her poems as objects of admiration and desire: "You're the one

⁸ Along with Máirtín Ó Direáin and Seán Ó Ríordáin.

⁹ Irish-language poet, singer and actress (1941–82)

they should praise / In public spaces [...] You're the model / For the artist's hand" ("Looking at a Man"¹⁰), or objectified as the land: "Your nude body is an island [...] you lie back, / wistful, emerald, / islanded" ("Island"¹¹). Her women, like the poet herself, take the initiative and disturb the status quo.

Ní Dhomhnaill's language is rich, resourceful and at times racy, to keep pace with her expression of a very contemporary imagination. She knows and shows that language can liberate as well as trap. It is telling that by the end of the 1980s a considerable number of male poets were keen to render her work into English, resulting in a convergence of imaginations and sensibilities as they put their own poetic voices at the service of her work. Disappointingly, she was briefly hailed by some critics as the male poets' muse – a relationship never suggested when they translated male Irish-language poets (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005: 55). Apparently, male poets were beginning to recognise Ní Dhomhnaill as an authentic new voice which far from damaging the tradition was a rich elaboration of it.

However, even as she pushes the Irish language to new heights, Ní Dhomhnaill knows just how uncertain the whole enterprise of writing in a minority language is. In "The Language Issue"¹² she reflects on the fate of her poetry:

I place my hope on the water
in this little boat
of the language, the way a body might put
an infant
in a basket
[...]
only to have it borne hither and thither,
not knowing where it might end up;
in the lap, perhaps,
of some Pharaoh's daughter.

¹⁰ In *Pharaoh's Daughter*. 1990. Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 140–143 (trans. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin).

¹¹ ib. 90–93 (trans. John Montague)

¹² ib. 154–155 (trans. Paul Muldoon); FDA vol.V, 1368.

Clearly, she sees poetry as lived experience, hers will have to fend for itself (in translation, in the tradition), speak anew to its new audience – and this is out of her hands.

Language is also an issue for Medbh McGuckian, who in 1970s Belfast inhabited a divided and inward-looking community where language carried a heavy political and religious load and people often feared to speak their minds. The poetry scene was predominantly male (her mentors and contemporaries were all men) but there was a shared feeling that poetry was a way of dealing with life and that it was political. McGuckian asserted herself by developing a way with words that seems at times to amount to a private language. While polarization and stalemate surrounded her, her language remained fluid and borderless. Her poems take on ideas that resist definition and articulation, linkages made tend to turn in on themselves or garner others. For example, in “The Dream-Language of Fergus”¹³:

[...]
 So Latin sleeps, they say, in Russian speech,
 So one river inserted into another
 Becomes a leaping, glistening, splashed
 And scattered alphabet
 Jutting out from the voice,
 Till what began as a dog’s bark
 Ends with bronze, what begins
 With honey ends with ice;
 As if an aeroplane in full flight
 Launched a second plane,
 The sky is stabbed by their exits
 And the mistaken meaning of each.
 [...]

She further gravitates away from her male counterparts in her exploration of the body and the house (or the body compared to a house) as spaces that are both private and public, that can contain and fragment, in language that is pregnant with meaning, that is

¹³ In *On Ballycastle Beach*. 1988. Oldcastle: Gallery Press. FDA vol. V, 1349.

sensuous and tactile, and yet ungraspable. There is nothing simple or simplified here, this is language that both defines and leaves open.

The most graphic image of women's transition from being subjects of poems to makers of poems is perhaps Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's "Pygmalion's Image"¹⁴:

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 her 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.

There is a hint of danger here as the statue (man-made, inanimate, adored) takes on a life of her own with her Medusa-like hair. And, indeed, as women poets projected their voices in the literary arena, they were often perceived as a threat to the tradition. In reality, they breathed new life into the language and reinvigorated the tradition.

Part of the pleasure of reading an anthology lies in the encounter with the particular perspective of the editor, but the only way to judge an anthology is in terms of the editor's aims. Given Deane's aims, those women poets included in volume III of the *Field Day Anthology* must have been considered representative of a "prominent" or "official" literary and political history of Ireland. However, they did not recognise themselves within this exclusively defined frame (in effect a canon) which confined and compromised their literary and personal identities. They knew that only part of their poetry was acceptable within it. Since a canon is defined and

¹⁴ In *The Magdalene Sermon*. 1989. Oldcastle: Gallery Press. FDA vol. V, 1366.

defining, it does not raise questions of identity, as such it cannot accommodate the experience of striving to find one's voice and place within a poetic tradition. The subsequent supplementing of the anthology was carried out on the basis of more inclusive criteria (e.g. artistic achievement, aesthetic attitudes, social and political issues raised) and was therefore able to cater for the richness and diversity of poetry produced by women (poetry is the fastest growing area of women's writing in Ireland). This redressing of the balance is not purely reactive (rereading and filling in gaps), it is radical in that it questions the very notion of literary canons.

The publication of the *Field Day Anthology* was a defining event. The intense criticism and debate that it generated in literary and feminist circles (and in general) is an indication of the vitality of Irish writing, and women's poetry in particular. The most fruitful outcome is that issues of contention were recognised as legitimate and led to productive debate and collaborative action. It is a testament to Seamus Deane's vision for the anthology that he was able and willing to envisage a sequel; it speaks of openness and space and in this sense remains true to the original principles of the Field Day project.

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