Eavan Boland’s and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s Silences: Negotiations with Gendered Writing in Pre- and Post-Independence Ireland

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This article focuses on Ireland’s pre- and post-independence moment for a study on gendered postcolonial writing. I addresses the Revivalist Movement and particularly the Irish Literary Revival, the Celtic Twilight, leading up to the moment of independence in 1919, and the ways in which authors such as Yeats and Synge have both used and written against the female body of, for instance, “Cathleen Ní Houlihan” as a metaphor for the land of “Mother Ireland”, the colonised state which needs to be liberated by independence fighters. It examines how, due especially to the literary revival of a mnemonically constructed mythology propagated by Yeats, this link between the colonised land and the female body was so pervasive within the Irish cultural imagination. Thereby, it uses examples of poets such as Seamus Heaney who was outrightly sceptical about the revivalist movement but still utilized this trope in, for instance, his bog poems, constructing bog queens buried within the land waiting for liberation. After establishing its cultural pervasiveness, it considers how female artists have written against this canonical trope and their relative successes in doing so. The main authors who are analysed for this purpose are Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. In these readings, silence as a metaliterary form of expression will be useful to frame the silences these poets hear both within historical women’s writing and in their own work. With regards to Boland’s work, the article thus addresses the metatextual silences of her female figures in poems such as “The Journey”, while in Ní Dhomhnaill it considers the larger, culturally implicit silences of writing in Irish.

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I have brought you here so you will know forever
the silences in which are our beginnings
in which we have an origin like water
(Eavan Boland 2005, 149-50)

This article focuses on pre- and post-independence Ireland for a study of gendered postcolonial writing. It addresses the Irish Literary Revival surrounding the moment of independence in 1919 and the ways in which members of this movement used the female body of mythical figures such as Cathleen Ní Houlihan as a metaphor for “Mother Ireland”, the colonised nation that needs to be liberated from the colonisers by independence fighters. I thereby examine how within literary reconstructions of mythologies the link between the colonised land and the female body has often come to pervade the Irish cultural imagination. Afterwards, I further consider how female artists have written against this canonical trope. The main authors I analyse for this purpose are Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. In their works, a metaliterary silence will be shown to respond to the pervasiveness of the mythologisation of women. More specifically, in Boland’s work I will address the deliberate silences of her female figures in poems such as “The Journey”, while in Ní Dhomhnaill I will consider the larger, culturally implicit silences of writing in Irish.

The Irish Revival

Undoubtedly, Ireland’s history in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a history of apartheid, in which those who spoke Irish, adhered to Irish culture or dress, or married an Irish person were driven “beyond the pale”, or, at a later date, disenfranchised. The Irish Revival came as a direct reaction to the marginalization and oppression of the Irish people and is inseparable from the upcoming nationalism in Ireland around the turn of the twentieth century. It attempted to construct a national identity contrary to that superimposed by Britain in order to give the Irish a sense of national pride and belonging in their fight for independence. Ernest Boyd announced in 1922 that the Irish Literary Revival had done “more than anything else to draw the attention of the outside world to the separate national existence of Ireland” (Boyd 1916, 7). The ideological grounding of the Revival lay in the belief in their ability to revive the glory they saw in the ancient Gaelic civilisation. For all their individual quarrels and disagreements with Irish Nationalism and its most vigorous representatives, many of the writers and thinkers of the Irish Revivalist movement saw the spirit of this civilisation reborn in the Rising of 1916 and believed that the old spirituality might be born anew in a Europe grown weak and infertile in an old age of rationalism, science and economic utilitarianism (Brown 1979, 157).

A significant part of the Revivalist moment consisted of Irish writers’ attempts to dismantle the stereotypes which the British had constructed of their colonised subjects. One of the most pervasive tropes involved the feminization of the Irish nation, contrasting it to the masculine and dominant British people (Howes 1996, 23-25). Stereotypes of this sort were influenced by works such as Renan’s The Poetry of Celtic Races (1896) and Arnold’s On the Study of Celtic Literature (1867), which use such generalizations to argue that the Irish are unfit for self-government and unable to
ensure the material progress of their civilization; instead they must accept English, “masculine” leadership. In fact, the feminization of Ireland in English colonialist discourse can be traced back to the sixteenth century, in particular to the work of Edmund Spenser. Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass discuss the way in which Spenser feminizes the Irish in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) and the ultimately political purpose such a cultural strategy served: “effeminating the conquered would be a way of reasserting the masculinity of the conqueror” (Jones and Stallybrass 1992, 168).

The pervasiveness of this feminisation of the Irish as well as Celticism influenced many Irish writers of the revival period. Historian Oliver MacDonagh emphasizes the pervasiveness of the link between femininity and a nationalist agenda when he writes that:

> [e-]ven the Hibernophiles might explain themselves in terms of arch-femininity. Harold Bigbie, the *Daily Chronicle* journalist, introduced his Home Rule Tract of 1912 with Ireland a young and capable matron seated at her fireside, who raises her gray eyes to the visitor and says, with a whimsical and ingratiating play of laughter on her lips, “I wish to do my own housekeeping.” (MacDonagh 1983, 54-55)

A common critique of nationalist movements and modern nations is that they rely on “invented traditions,” such as Celticism, which are of recent provenance and often spurious origin as opposed to other “natural,” organic “continuities” (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983, 14). Such nationalism becomes especially problematic if its traditions rely on the perpetuation of reductive gender stereotypes. Geraldine Meaney writes that “[i]n post-colonial Southern Ireland a particular construction of sexual and familial roles became the very substance of what it meant to be Irish” (Meaney 1991, 6). Already from the eighteenth century onward, nationalist *aisling* poetry constructed the idealized figure of a vulnerable virgin ravished by the masculine English invader, whose function was to remind her countrymen that they must fight to regain possession of their land. “Mise Eire”, meaning “I am Ireland” was the standard reply given to questions concerning her identity by this passive, pure, beautiful maiden, the *spéirbhean* (Cullingford 1990, 5-6; Kearney 1985, 4).

As Richard Kearney has rightly noted, this native tradition of allegorising and idealizing both the physical reality and the political identity of the colonized land as female resulted in real Irish women themselves entering the realm of myth, of “spiritual timelessness” as opposed to “material worldliness” (Kearney 1985, 63). He writes:

> Woman became as sexually intangible as the ideal of national independence became politically intangible. Both entered the unreality of myth [...] The more colonially oppressed the Irish became in historical reality, the more spiritualized became the mythic ideal of the Motherland. (Kearney 1985, 76-77)

In his study on “Women in Irish Mythology”, Proinsias MacCana reminds us that the trope of “the land and its sovereignty conceived in the form of a woman” had been part of the Gaelic tradition long before Ireland suffered the impact of English conquest and colonization. However, in the ancient Irish tradition, women’s sexuality was central and frequently explicit (MacCana 1980, 521). For instance, a future king’s legitimacy depended on a ritual of initiation, the *banfhais rígi*, including the enactment of the physical union between the king and the goddess personifying Ireland, who was
not represented as a passive virgin, but rather as an active, fully sexualised participant. The reconstruction of the myth of Mother Ireland in the Revivalist movement and the concomitant idealization of Irish womanhood resulted in the negation of female desire and an emphasis being placed on virginity and motherhood. While women were idealized, they were also “put firmly into [their] place” (Mosse 1985, 90); as desexualised mothers, they became the repositories of private morality within the patriarchal nuclear family.

One of the authors who were famously influenced by the trope of an idealized Mother Ireland was W.B. Yeats. The early Yeats was acutely aware of contemporary cultural connections between Celtic character and a cultured, nervous, bourgeois femininity: in his copy of Renan’s *The Poetry of Celtic Races*, Yeats wrote three marginal comments next to Renan’s description of the Celts’ femininity: “Delicacy,” “a feminine race,” and “The Ideal of Woman” (O’Shea 1985, 223). He struggled to construct an Irish nationality that incorporated a trait that had become so closely associated with weakness and pathology that it seemed impossible to convert it into a positive attribute. For a brief period, Yeats then followed Arnold and Renan’s gendering of the Celt without reproducing their political corollaries to it, outlining a version of the Celtic spirit that combined two contrasting models of the Irish national character: one was Arnoldian, feminine and particular, and another was anti-Arnoldian, masculine and universalist (Howes 1996, 25).

In a general sense, Yeats’s Celticism was thus complicit with and dependent upon the rhetoric and stereotypes perpetuated by British imperialism. The shape of this relationship changed over time, however, and the different aspects of Yeats’s Celtic writings offered a variety of forms of repetition, appropriation and critique in relation to imperialism. Yeats’s 1904 play *On Baile’s Strand* makes some progress towards breaking through gender stereotypes and tropes in the characters of Aoife and Cuchulain in whom gender ceases to be a restricted structure as gender characteristics are allowed to mingle with the other. For instance, Aoife’s “turbulent” spirit, “stone-pale cheek”, and surpassing beauty identify her with the masculine “pale windy people”, but her “wild body” is female and mortal. (Yeats 1957, 487, 485, 522, 487). Likewise, the female choruses present during the fire ritual are not as Conchubar wants them to be, female pillars of society preserving the mortal community. Instead, in them the feminine-occult and feminine-domestic intermingle; they occupy a new position that Conchubar does not want within his borders (Harris 1996, 482–4). Likewise, Yeats’s poem “Before the World Was Made” shows a certain reflectiveness on the trope of the feminized Mother Ireland, as it maps a woman’s appropriative and critical relation to the symbolic role assigned to her. Rather than simply accept or reject her role, the speaker mimics it for her own purposes and reveals some of its contradictions. As the speaker becomes aware of her association with eternal beauty, “the face I had/ Before the world was made” (Yeats 1997, 275), she uses this mythologisation against the society that criticizes her vanity. She argues that her behaviours arise directly out of the symbolic role they assign her: as an avatar of eternal beauty, standards of individual responsibility, honesty and love do not apply to her, since she is merely cast as an object of display. What she resists is the contradictory demand that she become both a thing and a person, both an icon of eternal beauty and an autonomous ethical subject.

Already by the time Yeats wrote “To Ireland in the Coming Times” which first appeared in 1892 in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*, he had started
to recognise that the relationship between femininity and heroic national literature had become one of the central problems of his Celticism rather than one of its distinguishing virtues. However, Yeats remains associated with the gendered representation of Mother Ireland, as he also served to perpetuate this trope through his most famous plays, including *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) and *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (1902).

However, he wrote within a group of authors also including Patrick Pearse, David Patrick Moran, Arthur Griffiths, Maud Gonne and Lennox Robinson, who all displayed what Ashis Nandy has called a “colonial hypermasculinity” in their treatment of Ireland and femininity (Nandy 1983, 9-10). Next to Yeats’s *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, Pearse’s *The Singer*, Gonne’s *Dawn*, and Robinson’s *Patriots*, instead of remodelling the myth, reinforced the prevailing gender system. This strategy reflects not only the depth of their investment in the hierarchical distinctions that the system supplied but also the oedipal nature of their rhetorical struggle with British imperialism.

Each of these texts involves a desexualised mother figure; as the old woman in *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* makes a point of declaring: “With all the lovers that brought me their love, I never set out the bed for any” (Yeats 1997, 228). In *The Singer*, Maire is listed simply as “mother of MacDara,” the title character and revolutionary protagonist, and, as is typical in Pearse’s work, no biological father is mentioned. The same is true in Maud Gonne’s play *Dawn*, which focuses on the sufferings of a mother and a daughter (who is also a mother) without accounting in any way for either’s sexual relationships. The British image of Ireland as wife is countered with an image of Ireland as sexually pure Mother; yet this is not to reject the imperialist iconography so much as to engage it in a sort of family romance, to set up a conflict between seniors and juniors, fathers and sons, over the allegorical body of the wife/mother (Valente 1994, 196).

A popular trope used within these plays is the “Caillaic Bear’s instantaneous rejuvenation,” whereby the desexualised mother/old woman of the play is miraculously rejuvenated through the male hero’s commitment to the rescue of Ireland, most famously acted out in Yeats’s *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*. Michael Gillane is preparing to marry Delia Cabel when the poor old woman comes to his parents’ cottage and solicits his assistance in recovering her “four beautiful green fields” from the stranger (Yeats 1984, 226). Michael’s seduction by her erotised politics of death catalyses her pantomime-like transformation at the climax of the play. The ways in which the singular promotion of such internecine hypermasculinity can be dangerous for female figures is forcibly evoked also in the play *Patriots* by Lennox Robinson (2013), Yeats’s co-religionist, whose nationalist ardor was first kindled by a performance of *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*. Written a year before the Easter Rising, the play records the release of James Nugent, leading Fenian, from a life imprisonment for the murder of an informer. At the centre of this play is his wife Ann, who flourished in his absence by pursuing her self-centred financial goals as a shopkeeper rather than his revolutionary aims as she had in the past. When she lost her function as Nugent’s revolutionary muse, as the symbolic woman, Ann observes that upon her husband’s arrest “at twenty-six I found myself old and ugly and grey and worn out,” a young woman suddenly transformed

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1 Also known as the Easter Rebellion, the Easter Rising was an armed insurrection in Ireland during Easter Week, 1916, mounted by Irish republicans to end British rule in Ireland.
into an old hag (Yeats 1984, 30). The failure to sustain the commitment to the warrior tradition and James’s patriotism, Robinson seems to be saying, has the effect of reversing the process of the Caillaic Bear’s instantaneous rejuvenation.

But it was not only literary writers who emphasized the importance of motherhood for the rejuvenation of the Irish nation. Griffith, a journalist of the United Irishman, who saw the Famine as a genocidal British conspiracy, believed that increasing the size of the Irish population was critical to resisting British imperialism (Griffith 1902, 5). The Irish woman’s dual reproductive responsibility – the demand that she reproduce not only strong and healthy Irish bodies but a pure Irish “soul” – made her “virtue” a political and economic problem. Griffith’s efforts to promote the mother/homemaker role as the Irish woman’s patriotic calling were assisted by other contributors, including several women (Harris 2002, 61–8; 2009, 107). The most prominent example was Maud Gonne, who despite her radical activism and status as a “secretly unwed mother” which pushed her well beyond the boundaries of conventional femininity, produced writings for the United Irishman which, like the weekly column devoted to her organisation Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland), echoed Griffith’s focus on the national importance of “women’s life within the domestic sphere” (Steele 2007, 74). Even after Ireland’s independence such ideological links of women to the household continued to hold power: de Valera’s 1937 Constitution claims the family as the fundamental social unit, and commits the state to ensuring that mothers, and indeed women at large, shall not work outside the home, while also forbidding them to divorce.

However, there were also contrasting voices in the Revivalist writing scene. While Yeats only occasionally questioned the uses of the Mother Ireland trope, many of the plays of his great mentor Synge contested the nationalist narration of the intersection between national identity, gender and sexuality. While Synge’s involvement in the Irish Revival is undeniable due to his profound contributions to the early Abbey Theatre, he explicitly wrote against regressive, reactionary and backward-looking traditionalism. In 1903 Synge’s play The Shadow of the Glen already caused a stir among audiences and critics alike during its opening run in Dublin. In fact, his treatment of gender and sexuality is credited with starting the most notorious theatrical controversy in the riot-studded history of Irish theatre (Harris 2009, 104).

In The Shadow of the Glen Nora’s husband Dan feigns death to test her fidelity, and orders her out of the house once he discovers what he believes to be her disloyalty. Nora subsequently departs with a tramp who has chanced on their cottage during a storm that provides the backdrop to a far from idealised rural existence. Nora’s exit into the wild Wicklow darkness with a stranger aroused passionate disclaimers about the character of the women of Ireland. Synge, unlike many of his contemporaries, did not try to sanitise Irish representations of sexuality, male/female relationships, and power dynamics, and Frawley suggests that if we extrapolate from the Irish literary traditions on which he draws, Nora might well be embarking on a more satisfying relationship and existence, though beyond the bounds of the only culture she has experienced (Frawley 2009, 25). However, with Mother Ireland and “Cathleen” as dominant metaphors for Ireland during this period, Nora was seen as an abomination. As is often noted, the original Cathleen Ní Houlihan, Maud Gonne, left a performance of The Shadow in protest and wrote against “the insidious and destructive tyranny of foreign influence” (United Irishman, 24 October 1903, 2–3; quoted in Frawley 2009, 21).
Like for Nora, for Deirdre of Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1909; see Synge 2010), home always and only means captivity. It is by keeping Deirdre at home that her husband, the ageing Conchubor, seeks to keep her bound to him. Conversely, Deirdre finds happiness only when wandering with Naisi through the woods of Alban. Synge’s plot highlights the connection Griffith implied between the integrity of the home and the chastity of the Irish woman – but only to reveal chastity as a social construct which is meaningful only for women who can afford it. Marriage is represented not as a sacrament but as a social arrangement whereby a woman barters her youth, beauty and freedom for the home that promises security. Nora Burke describes her own marriage to Dan in these terms: “What way would I live and I an old woman if I didn’t marry a man with a bit of a farm, and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills?” (Synge 2010, 56).

However, despite the attempts to deconstruct the link between feminisation and nationalism, the trope of Mother Ireland remained prominent in the Irish literary imagination, even with authors who were critical of the Revivalist movement. For instance Seamus Heaney, who names Kavanagh as the only Revivalist writer he was able to identify with, returns to the fields and bogs of the Earth Mother in his poetry collection *Field Work*. Therein the trilogy “Triptych” illustrates Heaney’s quest for rejuvenation. He asks of a young Sibyl, a youthful Nerthus laden with fruits of the earth: “What will become of us?” (Heaney 1998, 148). In her role as muse guiding the young hero, she advises him to turn from the worship of the helicoptering cycles of death and violence to the worship of the ancient mysteries. The poet must “go barefoot, foetal and penitential and pray at the water’s edge” (Heaney 1998, 149) for the revitalization of his people. Heaney turns from the killing to the living waters which he has always associated with the Earth Mother.²

**Female authors and Mother Ireland’s legacy**

The election of Mary Robinson as President of Ireland in 1990 was welcomed by many as the eventual end of a lack of representation of women in the public and political sphere (Meaney 1991, 5). However, change in the literary sphere took a long time to be effective: all the way through the twentieth century, reviews of British mainstream anthologies and critical works construct the Irish poet as inherently male. Despite the number of anthologies of women’s poetry published during this period most of the mixed anthologies and critical reviews of poetry published in the United Kingdom and Ireland pay little attention to poetry by women or are reductive or dismissive in their discussion (Taylor 2001, 18). For instance, in Heaney and Hughes’ *The School Bag* only 23 out of 271 poets are women. Indeed statistical analyses of women’s inclusion in anthologies of poetry would give one the impression that few women write poetry: in a study on the twentieth century, Christine Fitton has established ratios as low as 1:9 (quoted in Goodman 1996, 47).

Some women writers have achieved fame and prominence in the literary scene, however, and have spoken out against this lack of proportion in terms of critical attention and publishing opportunity. Eavan Boland has spent much of her career deconstructing the trope of the woman as representation for Ireland, “an association of the feminine and the national – and the consequent simplification of both” (Boland

² Most notably, critics Elizabeth Butler Cullingford and Patricia Coughlan question Heaney’s symbolic use of gender in this collection and in *North* (see Coughlan 1997, 185-205; Haffenden 1987, 89-116; and Butler-Cullingford 1990, 1-21).
1996, 135). Themes such as dispossession, exile and the search for some connection to the Irish language, nation and a matrilinear tradition are prevalent in Boland’s work. Her prose has been argued by critics such as Kirkpatrick to provide a revision of the literary geography set forth by Heaney and his investigation into the status of symbolic utterances in the poetry related to political debates (Kirkpatrick 2000, 192). Exiled from the very tradition that Heaney is able to contextualize, she attempts to recover or to “repossess” her nation from a hollow rhetoric that makes her, as a woman, “an outsider in my own national literature, cut off from its archive, at a distance from its energy” (Boland 1996, 128).

In writing as an Irish woman about the lives of other Irish women, Boland sets herself out as a pioneer, realizing how little precedent writers like her have in her country’s literary tradition (Reizbaum 1989, 471-479). Despite this, she neither intends to separate herself from the Irish tradition nor from Irish nationalism. She claims that woman, now the artist rather than the subject of poetry, can utilize the idea of the nation in her own writing and does not need to distance herself from a tradition she herself is writing in (Boland 1996, 147). Therein, her approach differs from that of another prominent feminist writer of her time, Edna Longley. Longley argues that neither nationalism nor unionism share common ground with feminism because both rely on absolutist and essentialist forms of self-definition that require violence to create and maintain (Longley 1990, 23). She deems it far better for both genders to embrace the “more varied, mixed, fluid and relational kinds of identity” she finds in her own cultural context in Northern Ireland (Longley 1990, 24). More in line with Boland are the arguments of historian Carol Coulter: proposing that the opposition between nationalism and feminism is a false one, she maintains that during the nationalist movement in the early twentieth century “women came onto the public stage in large numbers” and that although the new states created by such revolutionary movements closed up the spaces they had once opened for women, they nonetheless helped to establish traditions of resistance that women could build upon later (Coulter 1993, 59). She fears that a feminism which asks for an identification either with the nation or feminism “ignores the living links between women (as well as men) and their communities and culture, and asks them to deny their culture in order to express themselves as women” (Coulter 1993, 54).

Such thoughts and fears are echoed in Boland’s writing; rather than fully separating herself from nationalism or the patriarchal Irish literary tradition, she attempts to find a place for herself within this tradition in which women until very recently had been an object rather than an agent of change. Instead of Dark Rosaleen, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, the Old Woman of the Roads, passive projections of a national idea, she wants living and breathing and complex women. Hence, in many of her poems, she attempts to rediscover the details of everyday domestic lives that are absent from others’ literary renderings of female Irish roles (Dillon 1999, 311). Critical of history as it was written, and seeing the past as only an “archive of silences”, she constructs the so-called domestic poem as a “counter-history” (Boland 2011, 99-100).

Boland’s poetry thus attempts to show the gap she sees between an official “history” and an authentic past. The past is therein “the inert, unchangeable, sometimes brutal reality of what happened” which “in its silence and inconvenient completeness – should not be remade” but “must remain in the suffering, powerless place it surely was and is” (Boland 1997, 13). On the other hand, she conceptualises history as referring only to the “official version[s]” of the past, quasi-mythic
“narrative[s] of concealed power” (Boland 1997, 14) that appropriate the past for the purpose of consolidating national identity. Throughout her poetry, Boland rejects this objectification of the past and instead imagines its relation to the present as being one of unsettling intimacy. Her story of the Achill woman becomes a tale that fills the gaps which Boland sees in history, attempting to represent a female oral tradition which has been erased. The silence of the Achill woman is thus implicitly necessary, becoming, as Weekes (1994) asserts, representative of “[C]he silence of women of the past in history is an ‘aspect’ of their truth, and the silence of the Achill woman is the truth of the young ‘gesturing’ poet’s response: to presume to break this silence is an insult” (Boland 1997, 6).

These silences are so crucial because to Boland language appears as inherently “his”, as is the case for many other female poets writing in Ireland and beyond. The stories of women have not been recorded in it, thus they become dispossessed and alienated from the canonical tradition. Silence has become part of women’s stories and cannot be ignored or replaced by language in attempts to recover them. For instance, in her poem “The Journey” Boland uses silences to show how some aspects of women’s pasts cannot be recovered in a conventional way. In Boland’s revision of Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, it is Sappho who leads the woman speaker into the Underworld, echoing the tradition of women writers looking for their literary foremothers and, oftentimes, finding them in Sappho. In this Underworld, Sappho shows the poetic “I” a vision of unhappy mothers suckling and cradling their children. Boland encounters a reality that has not been recorded and which she feels the need to insert within artistic representation. When realizing this, the poet implores: “let me be/ let me at least be their witness”, but Sappho immediately tells her that what she has seen is “beyond speech,/ beyond song”. Returning to the world of the living, as they “emerged under the stars of heaven”, Sappho proclaims the speaker as her special sibyl, with these prophetic words: “I have brought you here so you will know forever/ the silences in which are our beginnings/ in which we have an origin like water” (Boland 2005, 149-50). In this sense, Boland creates a tension between her act of witnessing and the impossibility of giving testimony. What is lost is not simply the story or the voice, but the process of transmission itself.

Language is often presented by Boland as inadequate to represent the feminine and especially the maternal, something which can be located especially in “The Journey”, “Love”, “Mise Eire”, and “What we Lost” (Boland 2005). Silences, dissonances, and dissolution abound in Boland’s poetry whenever she attempts to reconstruct a more “ authentic” Irish past, and whenever she wants to incorporate “real” female experiences. Her poems move towards that “inaccessible blankness” or “untranslatable strangeness” Gayatri Spivak and Elleke Boehmer (Spivak 1988, 89 and Boehmer 1995, 234) identify in postcolonial texts: as language is an insufficient medium of representation, reality can only be suggested by other means, such as textures, gestures, hints, repetitions and echoes, irrational and incoherent cries, dissonances, and silences (Villar-Argáiz 2007, 487). Boland does not necessarily write elegies to commemorate the past but instead registers this past as inherently

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3 For recent debates around history and alternatives to conventional history-writing, particularly in a postcolonial context, see Rao 2014 and Ifowodo 2013. For the Irish context in particular, see McBride 2001 and Frawley and O’Callaghan 2014. Of interest might also be recent trends in memory studies examining de-colonisation through the lens of memory rather than historicism. See, for instance Erll 2012 and Rothberg 2009.
unrepresentable, as a residue that disrupts rather than consolidates the present consciousness. She urges the poet to remember the losses and erasures, which occur between history and myth, between the past and the present memory of that past.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill is a female poet writing in Irish who shares a history of mutual support and respect for Eavan Boland, which becomes most obvious in her essay entitled “What Foremothers” in which she critiques Anne Stevenson’s response to Eavan Boland’s *Outside History* (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1992b; Boland, 1990). Ní Dhomhnaill criticises Stevenson for being polemical in asking why Boland would not appeal to the “long healthy chain of foremothers” that is seemingly available to her as a woman poet in Ireland (Ní Dhomhnaill 1992, 18). Ní Dhomhnaill then presents her own assessment of the Irish literary tradition, arguing that “[n]owhere in the Irish tradition can I find anything but confirmation of Eavan Boland’s claim that women have been nothing else but the ‘fictive queens and national sibyls’ of which Anne Stevenson, going by her enumeration of the great deeds of Gráinne Mhaol, seems to be enamoured” (Ní Dhomhnaill 1992, 24).

However, as much as Ní Dhomhnaill and Boland agree ideologically, there are some significant differences in their poetic responses to the tradition of Mother Ireland. While Eavan Boland reworks myth to reclaim an authentic past, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill returns to myth to heighten contemporary experience. Potts has shown how her rendering of nature, with its emphasis on the reciprocity of landscape and self, human and animal, sacred and mundane, fantastic and realistic, may be viewed as an attempt to revive the Celtic worldview as reflected in Irish poetry that predates English colonization. Through her return to ancient Celtic tradition she reclaims the sexual and political power women had in those times (Potts 2003, 53). The women in her poetry are not mythologised, rather they escape from legend into disruptive forces like the Bean Sí, the legendary wailing woman. They are shape shifters, meeting at the point where myth and history intersect, revealing the gaps and inconsistencies of each set of discourses.

Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry is inevitably bound up in complex strategies of subversion and silence due to the fact that she writes exclusively in Irish. For women writing in Irish the struggles which female authors face in Ireland multiply. Ní Dhomhnaill describes how it has been a “long and tedious struggle for us women writing in Irish to get even a precarious toehold in visibility. Like the boy in the magic cloak in the fairy story you’ve got to keep saying to the ship of culture ‘sail sail, little boat, I’m there too’” (Ní Dhomhnaill 1992, 26). Indeed, she states how all her life she has considered it her “bounden duty” to recover the Irish language from snobbery and elitism, predicated on the suffering of women and, in schools, of small children (Ní Dhomhnaill 2003, 83), narrating the vivid memories she has of Irish being beaten into children in primary school (Ní Dhomhnaill 2003, 84). Despite this prominent agenda, she stresses that it was not her choice to write in Irish, instead she claims that for her, writing in English simply did not feel right (Ní Dhomhnaill 2003, 86). Writing in Irish and not translating her own poetry leaves her with an entirely new kind of silence, however, explaining how her text is left “at the mercy of my translators” (Ní Dhomhnaill 2003, 88). The only alternative she sees is the case of her friend Biddy Jenkinson who refuses to translate her poems into English in Ireland as a political gesture. Although she considers Jenkinson to have the high moral ground in this situation, Ní Dhomhnaill describes herself as having a “vocation to the missions”, allowing translations as long as they are published in a dual-language
format despite her knowledge that the issue of translation is inevitably fraught with problems (Ní Dhomhnaill 2003, 89-90).

Potts argues that Ní Dhomhnaill’s decision to write and publish in Irish is integral to her effort to convey the simultaneous existence of the other-worldly and the worldly, because she contends that the difference between the Irish language and the English language underscores the disparity between precolonial Irish and postcolonial British worldviews (Potts 2003, 53). Irish poetry and literature often deal with “an saol eile”, the preternatural or “the Other World” which is impossible to translate directly into English where the post-Enlightenment language has a built-in prejudice against it. (McWilliams Consalvo 1995, 160) In “Na Murúcha agus an Litríocht” (“The Merfolk and the Written Word”), Ní Dhomhnaill associates mermaids with the oral tradition, describing the merfolk “literate in their own fish tongue,” whose “Island School” is “closed down/ by the Department of Dried-Out Islands/ back in the ’50s.” Their plight is emblematic of that of Irish-speaking islanders, recalling in particular the evacuation of the Blasket. Ní Dhomhnaill writes, “They never took to the pen/ or cultivated the native prose text”, suggesting that her own use of the Irish oral tradition is an act of defiance that enables her and her readers to imaginatively inhabit this folkloric realm. (Ní Dhomhnaill 1995, 441). Her use of Irish thereby constitutes a deliberate silence within the English publishing world, whereby she draws attention to the enforced silences on Irish speakers and retroactively integrates their stories into the mythical Gaelic canon in a format and language appropriate to their stories. Although she allows English translations, she excludes those readers who do not read the language from experiencing elements of her poetry inextricably linked to the Irish language’s inherent characteristics. Especially the transformations of female Irish folk heroines such as the Mór, Morrigan and Babd are linked in her poetry to the continuous motion of the Irish language, which is untranslatable into English. This is for instance the case in her rewriting of The Táin, in which Morrian and Queen Maeve collapse into one character and where Babd and Morrigan become aspects of the same goddess of death, placed in rivalry with each other. Despite these exclusions, however, Ní Dhomhnaill nevertheless intends her dual-language format to “alleviate what I think is a great loss and to promote a more inclusive, holistic attitude to the rich linguistic environment in which we all live” (Ní Dhomhnaill 2003, 91).

Aware of the problems inherent in translation, both Ní Dhomhnaill and her translators attempt to subvert and play with the processes of translation in order for the poet to recover as much agency as possible over her own poetry. The best example of this can be found in the translation by Paul Muldoon of “Dara Dooley” in the Astrakhan Cloak, where Muldoon introduces the fabric astrakhan (Ní Dhomhnaill 1992a, 46-7). The Bean Sí is not dressed thus in the base text; Muldoon has not so much translated the poem as co-created it. Ní Dhomhnaill’s “faoi chloca uaithne” translates as “under a vivid green cloak”, but becomes “with the cloak of green astrakhan”, punning on the Irish word aístriuchán, which means “translation”. This is a collaboration in which Muldoon uses humour in order to pay homage to the subtleties of Ní Dhomhnaill’s base text.

Kidd furthermore suggests that “under a vivid green cloak” is a metaphor for a type of Irish poetry that covered the female figure and appropriated her for its own nationalistic ends and later, reinforced under de Valera, when women were wrapped under a blanket of domesticity and repressed lives of secondary status (Kidd 2003, 41-42). Muldoon’s pun places the Bean Sí in a cloak of translation – a cloak whose very
fabric is both constructed and at the same time is itself an act of construction – something which is both the subject and the object of Muldoon’s actions. Thus he grants her both the subject-author status women were lacking during the Revival movement and the authority of linguistic duality, giving her the authenticated freedom he is seeking to employ in the act of translation itself. As the Bean Sí thereby comes to stand for a mythological tradition of Irish females, their transformative qualities which are inexpressible in English can be retained in the Irish poem. While for many readers this transformation is shrouded in a silence effectively similar to that of Boland’s women, the cloak of translation describes the negotiations Irish-speaking women undergo with English in an increasingly global world.

Through emphasizing these strategies of subversion by adding his own, Muldoon salutes Ní Dhomhnaill’s strategy of re-writing, of overthrowing confinement and limitation through poetic revisions. He also suggests a co-operative alliance between the English and Irish: in translation ideas and images can produce more complex meanings than one language could, as words and phrases go beyond direct correlation to express and identify mutable and disruptive presences such as that of the uncanny Bean Sí. What is lost in silence to readers of only one of the two languages, becomes the signal of an interplay of meanings once the reader has regained what Ní Dhomhnaill considers every Irish citizen’s civil right: the ability to speak both Irish and English (Ní Dhomhnaill 2003, 91).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has shown how both Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill have found themselves in need to renegotiate with the poetic tradition they were writing in. Through their strategies to repossess and subvert their literary traditions neither of them completely turned away from either the Irish literary canon or nationalism; rather, they attempted to write women into a history they themselves wanted to be part of.

In their differing strategies both writers were influenced by the silences of their foremothers. Unlike their male counterparts, it is not the anxiety of influence that serves as a goad for their individual creativity but it is the entire absence of a female line of influence that acts as a powerful impetus to question, refurbish, and invent poetic strategies of self-definition. Boland is inspired to express the silences of her foremothers through gaps and dissonances in her poetry, together with open admission of the unexpressible in an expressive medium. While Ní Dhomhnaill also finds these silences within the experience of mythologised women in the past, she as a woman writing in Irish has to furthermore negotiate the silences inherent in translations, always wary of translators appropriating her words. While this is not an issue pertaining to female writers in particular, Ní Dhomhnaill uses the untranslatable as a metaphor specifically for the endless transformations of the female heroines of the past, in stark contrast to the static mythology that was utilized by Revival writers.

Their contributions to the Irish literary scene has opened up more possibilities for other women writers. In recent years women have started to become editors; thus, the bias in favour of male authorship which was a tacit but immutable law of Irish publishing has been undermined to a significant degree. For instance, the literary journal Cyphers has had two women, Leland Bardwell and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, on its editorial board since its foundation in 1975, and has published and actively
reviewed a broad range of writers including Sara Berkeley, Medbh McGuckian, Mary O’Donnell, Caitlin Maude, and Joan McBreen (Fogarty 1999, 264). However, silence has remained a powerful symbol in Irish women’s writing, notable for instance in the plays of Marina Carr, wherein the variety of its uses still marks it as a rich subject for critical inquiry.

Works Cited


