**Chapter 18: 1970-80s Feminism**

**Kit Fryatt**

Writing in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995) of the 'two lives' implied by her subtitle, Eavan Boland states, 'the woman poet is now an emblematic figure in poetry, much as the modernist and romantic poets were in their time. I make this less as a claim than a historical reading.'[1] If Boland's 'reading' is right, then it was in the 1970s and 1980s – decades marked, in Ireland, by sustained attack on women's civil rights by the forces of reaction as well as flourishing feminist cultural activity – that this emblematising process occurred. Given Boland's celebrated critiques of nationalist and artistic personification, of male poets who, '[i]n availing themselves of the old convention […] were not just dealing with emblems' but 'evading the real women of an actual past, women whose silence their poetry should have broken',[2] the reader might also question whether the emblematic condition is a desirable one. Nonetheless, numerous publications that appeared during the decades discussed in this chapter, and many more since (including, of course, this book itself), attest to the development of a paradigmatic idea of the Irish woman poet, one heavily influenced, perhaps consciously created, by Boland herself, and which risks obscuring the diverse nature of poetry by Irish women.

After some private publications in the early 1960s, Boland's first trade collection was *New Territory* (1967). The title, seeming to anticipate her self-fashioning as a pioneer, is belied by conservative and abstract contents, about which the poet would later express ambivalence: 'I was a very long way from Adrienne Rich's realisation that "instead of poems about experience, I am getting poems that are experiences" […]

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[1] Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time,* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995, repr. London: Vintage, 1996) p.xv

[2] Eavan Boland, *Outside History* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990) p.152

Now I wonder how many young women poets taught themselves – in rooms like that, with a blank discipline – to write the poem that was in the air, rather than the one within their experience?'[3] Critics and contemporaries would describe *New Territory* as 'male-oriented,'[4] but equally apparent in Boland's many retrospectives upon her own work is her frustration with closed form, which is – not always helpfully – conflated with patriarchy as oppressive constriction. The problem is embodied, if not fully articulated or explored in 'Athene's Song': dedicated to the poet's father, and spoken in the voice of the most patriarchal of goddesses, it is also at war with its martial tetrameters and a half-realised commitment to full stanzaic rhyme. 'From the Painting "Back from Market" by Chardin', meanwhile, anticipates Boland's strengths in ekphrastic image-making and free verse.

Similar tensions are evident in *The War Horse* (1975), Boland's only full collection of the 1970s. Jody Allen Randolph calls this a 'transitional volume'[5] but, read in the light of the poet's subsequent writing, it can also seem foundational. It establishes, for example, in 'Child of Our Time', in the short sequence 'Suburban Woman', and in the title poem a characteristically deflected approach to political violence. In 'The Famine Road' and 'The Hanging Judge' a concern with the legacies and erasures of a somewhat reified 'history,' becomes apparent, which in the collections beginning with *The Journey and Other Poems* (1986), will become very nearly a fixation. Many critics, among them Edna Longley, Clair Wills, and David Wheatley, have taken issue with Boland's monolithic notion of 'history' and almost equally undifferentiated concept of that which is silenced or relegated by it; it is perhaps particularly ironic that these tropes should have proliferated in her writing – even more so in her memoir and essays

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[3] *Object Lessons*, p.132

[4] This phrase is used independently by Medbh McGuckian and Derek Mahon in the same Boland-themed issue of the *Irish University Review*. Medbh McGuckian, "Birds and their Masters," *Eavan Boland Special Issue* eds. Jody Allen Randolph and Anthony Roche, *Irish University Review* 23: 1 (Spring/Summer 1993), p. 30. Derek Mahon, 'Young Eavan and Early Boland", p.25.

[5] Jody Allen Randolph, *Eavan Boland*, (Plymouth: Bucknell University Press, 2013) p. 60.

than in the poems – at a time when academic historiography tended towards deconstructive scepticism regarding subjective testimony and grand narrative. Little-remarked versions of poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky and Nelly Sachs suggest Boland's interest in more plural understandings of history at this point in her career, but later these are overshadowed by mythologising of Irishness and an ultimately mystificatory view of history.

Between *The War Horse* and *The Journey*, Boland published *In Her Own Image* (1980) and *Night Feed* (1982), often seen as companion texts on the theme of women's physical experience. *In Her Own Image*'s forthright treatment of domestic abuse, mastectomy, menstruation and disordered eating marks a break with earlier metaphorical displacements of women's suffering, but foreshadows the choppy, fragmented rhetoric of much later work. The poems' mordant exclamations and flamboyant, angry *personae* owe a distinct debt to Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton; the less performative aspect of Plath's oeuvre is an influence on the imagistic poetics of *Night Feed*. Boland's speakers – perhaps even more so than those of her American precursors – seem profoundly alone, cut off from even the company of other women, let alone forms of organised solidarity. The governing attitude of In *Her Own Image* is of the woman before the mirror, apostrophising and anathematising feminine performance by turns, that of *Night Feed* – to borrow a title – 'Woman in Kitchen', surrounded by 'white spaces', 'in a room as white and quiet as a mortuary.'[6] The Irish feminist movement of these decades – in which Boland was a participant, if usually in the capacity of journalist, editor and commentator rather than activist campaigner – makes virtually no impact on the poems: even where she speaks with a collective voice, as in 'It's a Woman's World', her theme is of a universalised exclusion:

> Our way of life
> has hardly changed
> since a wheel first

[6] Eavan Boland, *Night Feed* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982, repr. 1994) p. 24.

whetted a knife

[…]

as far as history goes
we were never
on the scene of the crime

[…]

our windows
moth our children
to the flame

of hearth not history.[7]

In *The Journey and Other Poems*, these static figures become more mobile, and Boland's typical line is longer. Alongside fluid and copious enjambment, the staccato syntax that will come to dominate later work has a definite presence, as here, from 'The Emigrant Irish':

Cardboard. Iron. Their hardships parcelled in them.
Patience. Fortitude. Long-suffering
In the bruise-coloured dusk of the New World.

And all the old songs. And nothing to lose.[8]

Though a number of the poems in this collection deal with Irish diasporic voyages, whether those of immiserated nineteenth- and twentieth-century emigrants or the poet's own, more comfortable if still emotionally disruptive travels, first as diplomat's child and then as lecturer and writer-in-residence, the eponymous journey is determinedly classicising, a rewriting of Aeneas's descent into the underworld. It adopts a subaltern strategy of placing marginal, fleetingly acknowledged presences at the centre of the narrative – here, the shades of infants mentioned in lines 426-30 of

[7] (*Night Feed*, pp.37-8)
[8] Eavan Boland, *The Journey and Other Poems*, (Dublin: Arlen House, 1986 repr. Manchester: Carcanet, 1987) p. 54.

book VI. It also participates in the tradition of poems self-consciously written against poetry, beginning: 'And then the dark fell and "there has never / I said been a poem to an antibiotic"'.[9] The poet's guide, in place of the solitary, Apollonian Cumaean Sybil, is Sappho, which perhaps points to a growing need for community with women, though this mid-length piece is not capacious enough for more than a nod towards a homosocial, Dantean dynamic between poet and precursor. Sappho shows her the infant dead, who in Virgil are 'torn from the breast' (*ab ubere raptos,* l. 429); but in Boland's vision cling grotesquely to it: 'Then to my horror I could see to each/nipple some had clipped a limpet shape—/ suckling darknesses'[10]. This allows her to shift focus to the women so profoundly elided that they appear only as generic sources of nutriment, 'the breast.' Sappho warns her against glib ascription of social position or occupation to them, and in a self-castigating moment rather more reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's scrupulousness than her female contemporaries' engagements with poetic ethics, she explicitly proscribes the typical Bolandesque figures of washerwomen and 'court ladies brailled in silk'.[11] Through her psychopomp, the poet deprives herself of a rich and beloved resource – the association of women with fabric and the textile arts, which not only animates a majority of poems in *The Journey*, but links her to an Irish lineage stretching back to the tenth-century Woman of Beare. This iron discipline entraps her in the contradictions of the anti-lyric—the ventriloquised lyric speaker deprecating speech and song, advocating the poet's humility while enrolling her in a Parnassian hall of fame:

> "there are not many of us; you are dear
> "and stand beside me as my own daughter
> 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"[12]

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[9] (*The Journey*, p. 39).
[10] (*The Journey*, p. 40)
[11] (*The Journey*, p.41)
[12] (*The Journey*, p. 41)

The distant echo of Keats's self-epitaph is no doubt deliberate; modern poets working in an essentially Romantic mode of lyric subjectivity continue to contend with Romantic egotism and anti-egotism. The question of whether that mode can be liberating for the woman poet remains. 'My muse must be better than those of men / who made theirs in the image of their myth' Boland writes in the 'Envoi' to 'The Journey', but in having a 'muse' at all, especially one who is so relentlessly committed to 'bless[ing]' and 'sanctify[ing]' Boland's ubiquitous yet elusive 'ordinary' and 'common' lives, she is perhaps condemning herself to being 'the most miserable of women'[13].

The close of the 1980s brought Boland's *Selected Poems* (1989). The most amply represented collection here is *Night Feed*, present almost in its entirety, while *In Her Own Image* is comparatively heavily cut, to five poems of the ten. But in the generous selection from *The Journey,* as well as the choices from the two earliest volumes, the reader can trace the origins of the preoccupation with 'history' and historical erasure that in the 1990s and 21st-century work has brought accusations of self-parody.[14]

It would be glib to ascribe Boland's anxieties about history, nation formation and Irish identity solely to an expatriate childhood. But they are notably not shared by those of her contemporaries who spent more of their early years in Ireland, and – perhaps crucially – can read and write in Irish. Nor are they a matter of overwhelming interest for younger poets, especially those from working-class backgrounds, who started to publish in the reactionary 1980s, when referenda on the introduction of a constitutional prohibition of already-criminalised abortion, and legislation to permit divorce made Irish public discourse cacophonously misogynistic. For poets as different in aesthetic practice as Medbh McGuckian, Rita Ann Higgins, Catherine Walsh and Paula Meehan,

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[13] (*The Journey*, p.43)
[14] See, for example, David Wheatley, 'Changing the Story: Eavan Boland and Literary History', *The Irish Review* 31 (Spring/Summer 2004) pp. 103-120, p.109.

Irish identity is a matter for implicit discussion and critique, rather than the emblematics favoured by Boland.

The career of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has been characterised, from her debut *Acts & Monuments* (1972), by confidence in tackling national and historical material, a confidence underpinned by her career as a scholar of early modern literature. The title of her first collection is typically sardonic, taken from the full title of the sixteenth-century work of English Protestant martyrology popularly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs,* an allusion she recycles, with even more explicit irony, in the title of a 1995 essay for the *Southern Review*: 'Acts and Monuments of an Unelected Nation: the Cailleach Writes about the Renaissance.' More than just a defiantly witty reclamation from an anti-Catholic propagandist, the title accurately characterises poetic strategies which emphasise witness, which are in themselves always both processes and object-records of the processes.

Poems such as 'Lucina schynning in silence of the night', 'Swineherd' and 'Deaths and Engines' – all from that first collection – give the impression of a mature voice emerging fully-formed from the very beginning, which is not to imply dogmatism or stagnation. On the contrary, Ní Chuilleanáin is a poet of uncertainty, searching, and transition. 'What attracts me is that which I do not know,' she said in a 1993 interview,[15] and that desire for the unknown and unmapped extends to her rejection of what she calls 'programmatic' poetics: 'I am not that kind of poet. I find that American poets, in particular […] set out to write twenty-five poems about this or that. Mine would not be like that. I have a definite feeling that each poem will stand up on its own.'[16] Though sequences are well-represented in the early work – the eponymous 'Site of Ambush'

[15] Deborah McWilliams Consalvo, 'An Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', *Irish Literary Supplement*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1993), pp.15-17, p.16.
[16] Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, 'Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Spring - Summer, 2007), pp. 36-49, p.44.

(1975), ‘Cork’ (1977) and ‘The Rose Geranium’ (1981) – Ní Chuilleanáin’s collections are rangy and various, the poems linked mainly by their unobtrusive, ironical narration.

This variety notwithstanding, it is possible to chart a progression towards a more feminist worldview between *Acts and Monuments* and *The Magdalen Sermon* (1989). The ungendered first-person speakers who dominate the first collections are more likely, in the later, to be identified specifically as women; the poems become still more likely to focus on female subjects. As well as drawing attention to erasure and lacunae, Ní Chuilleanáin consistently engages in active recuperation. In conversation with Irene Gilsenan Nordin, she remarks: ‘People who talk about women’s lives being unrecoverable are quite often absolving themselves from looking in the archives, because a lot of them are there. I expect it would be possible to recover a great deal more than has been done…’[17] *The Magdalen Sermon*, in particular, dwells upon instances of documentation, however apparently fragmentary, anecdotal or obscure. ‘J’ai Mal à Nos Dents’ draws upon a letter written to the poet by her aunt, one of three of her father’s six unmarried sisters to enter religious life, remembering a mistake she made she made as a novice learning both French and ‘the rule of poverty where one was not allowed to say “mine”.’[18] The idiosyncratic error, noted in the privacy of a personal letter years after the event, emanates from an unrelentingly corporatist ideology, obliterating any sense of ownership over one’s own body, which in turn perhaps facilitates the courage and endurance shown by the nuns in nursing and evacuating casualties from German-occupied Calais. These acts of bravery and sacrifice are also framed by issues of (non-)reportage, as, in neutral Ireland, the poet’s father listened,

> Five times in a morning on Radio Eireann
> In Cork, as the Germans entered Calais

[17] Irene Gilsenan Nordin, ‘The Weight of Words: An Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’ *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* Vol. 28, no. 2 - Vol. 29, no. 1 (Fall 2002/Spring 2003) pp. 74-83, p.77.
[18] (‘The Weight of Words’, p.78)

> Her name lay under the surface, he could not see her
> Working all day with the sisters…[19]

The poem concludes,

> Going back in her habit to care for her sister Nora
> (*Une malade à soigner une malade*).
> They handed her back her body
> Its voices and its death.[20]

suggesting a near-annihilation of physical autonomy, repealed only at the last moment and accompanied by an onerous duty of care, an impression somewhat belied by Ní Chuilleanáin's extra-poetic memories of her aunt's rebellious forcefulness of character:

> She was quite a tough old lady, and when she came back to Ireland founded an old people's home where couples could be together rather than being separated. But the bishops of Ireland were not having any of that — not for the poor! She ended up founding a hospital, and when she retired she lived […] with another old nun who was a hero of the French resistance […] I remember hearing her once, bawling out her chaplain in French, and I thought, this is something none of her sisters at home could have done.[21]

The poem which gives the collection its title, 'St Mary Magdalene Preaching at Marseilles', builds imaginatively on a very different sort of document. The underlying 'texts' here are the medieval legends of Mary Magdalene's missionary journey to Gaul, her status as apostle to the Apostles and patron saint of preachers. Speaking of this poem, Ní Chuilleanáin quotes Donne's poem 'To the Lady Magdalen Herbert, of Mary Magdalen', adding, 'she is the female image of the person who knows more than the Church knows.'[22]Donne's poem mentions the synthetic nature of the Magdalene figure in order to suggest that his patron enlarges upon her virtues, adding to them 'innocence': 'some Fathers be / Loth to believe one woman could do this; /But think

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[19] Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Magdalen Sermo*n, (Dublin: Gallery, 1989) p.29
[20] *The Magdalene Sermon*, p.29
[21] 'The Weight of Words', p.78
[22] 'The Weight of Words', p.79

these Magdalens were two or three.'[23] Ní Chuilleanáin's vision is by contrast determinedly syncretic, making a master image of the artistic convention of the Magdalene's long red hair even as she also celebrates her preacher's 'voice glittering in the wilderness', and her body at rest: 'The hairs on the back of her wrists begin to lie down / And she breathes evenly, her elbows leaning / On a smooth wall.'[24] Written in a country where the noun most likely to follow 'Magdalene' is still probably 'Laundry', and before the last of those institutions closed, Ní Chuilleanáin's poem offers a powerful counterweight in its image of an older woman occupying public space for the purpose of contemplative repose.

Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry is distinctly uninstrumental, 'very unlikely to make anyone vote for divorce or the Good Friday Agreement'.[25] The sequence 'Site of Ambush', like much Irish poetry of the 1970s, responds to the contemporary Troubles violence through evocations of earlier conflicts, especially the War of Independence, but so subtle is Ní Chuilleanáin's approach that no explicit identifier of place or time appears until the fifth poem, and when it does, is defiantly local in significance: 'The gardener / Is Michael Barry, who threw the bowl / And hit the Chetwynd Viaduct.'[26] Barry's feat of road bowling, a sport particularly associated with Co. Cork, signifies a certain model of Irish masculinity, physically powerful and competitive but good-naturedly humorous, celebrated in the still-thriving subgenre of folk poem and song that commemorates county teams and athletes. The poet's encounter with him is a moment of peaceful respite from the horrors of violence and decay she has detailed in the previous four poems, but the world in which he occupies the place of mythic

[23] John Donne, *Poems of John Donne,* vol I, ed. E. K. Chambers, (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1896) p.156.
[24] *The Magdalene Sermon*, p.33
[25] 'The Weight of Words', p.77
[26] Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *Site of Ambush*, (Dublin: Gallery, 1975) p.26

hero is one with limited space for women: 'He shakes hands / And asks am I married yet.'[27]

Folk knowledge, its documentation, and political violence intertwine in a more woman-centred manner in 'The Informant', though its mode is typically opaque. Prompted by the series of atrocities precipitated by the SAS killing of three unarmed Provisional IRA members in Gibraltar in 1988, the poem takes the form of a folklorist's field interview, questioning an old woman about traditions associated with the banshee. '*Can you describe it?*' asks the folklorist of the mythical harbinger, but the recording equipment briefly malfunctions, 'the sound / Takes off like a jet engine, the machine / Gone haywire, a tearing, an electric / Tempest.'[28] The Gibraltar shootings, unseen by a mass audience and the subject of obfuscation by the British authorities suspected of conspiracy to assassinate, provoked reprisals – by Michael Stone upon mourners at the funeral of the Gibraltar dead, and then upon two British Army corporals at the funeral of one of Stone's victims – which were captured by both news crews and Army surveillance and widely disseminated, becoming some of the most famous images of the Troubles. Both documented and undocumented killings present problems for the poet: 'How can we describe such things? How can we imagine them? Then I tried to imagine someone who could describe it because she has seen it. But then for her to describe it there has to be someone for her to describe it to. So she becomes the informant and he becomes the folkorist. It is perhaps very complicated.'[29] When her taped 'voice resumes' the informant's account of the banshee and the person whose death she foretells becomes obliquely evocative of the killings. But the poem is not entirely ominous: a note of hope and good humour is sounded at the end of the poem as the folklorist asks about another legend, of a woman whose scepticism about the Real Presence of Christ at the Eucharist was answered by a miraculous

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[27] *Site of Ambush*, p.26
[28] *The Magdalene Sermon*, p.36
[29] 'The Weight of Words', p. 81

vision of the priest holding aloft a child at the Elevation. Ní Chuilleanáin's informant, however, is confident in her faith precisely *because* she has baked Eucharistic bread, placing herself and domestic work at the centre of the mystery.

Scholarly and archival, Ní Chuilleanáin's poetics often require the reader to engage in forms of research, in reading around the subject, to uncover what the poet calls 'a contest that I am constantly undertaking — to make my poetry speak to my own moral and political preoccupation.[30] A similarly intertextual impulse, though far more thoroughgoing, might be observed in the work of Medbh McGuckian.

In a prefatory note to *Single Ladies,* one of two pamphlets McGuckian published in 1980, Paul Muldoon advises,

> This then, is a necessarily brief selection from a prolific poetess […] I write 'poetess' advisedly, since Medbh McGuckian insists very firmly on her poems having been written by a woman. And if one has the feeling from time to time that the shades of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath might be looking over her shoulder, one realises too that neither is breathing down her neck.[31]

If McGuckian seems more inclined than most of her female contemporaries to embrace the title of 'poetess', she also deploys it with rather more irony than Muldoon admits, as in 'Ode to a Poetess':

> Untouched, untouchable, the yet-to-be-born weather,
> Distempering me as lips disturb the vespered worlds
> Of grapes, this onset of a poetess and her
> Persuasive bones sending me and my life away.[32]

McGuckian's characteristic slippage between pronouns and persons allows her to address, commemorate, even become the 'poetess', but also to elude those functions:

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[30] 'The Weight of Words', p. 77
[31] Medbh McGuckian, *Single Ladies: Sixteen Poems* (Budleigh Salterton: Interim Press, 1980) p.3.
[32] Medbh McGuckian, *Venus and the Rain,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.11

‘I will not write her name although I know it’, she declares in the second of the poem’s capacious 18-line stanzas, before finally offering the reader a referent in ‘Sparrow Hills’, which seems to connect the speaker with the circle of Boris Pasternak.[33] Even McGuckian’s earliest work, which relies less on found text than that produced after the 1990s, can be seen as a sort of pursuit to its logical conclusion of the methods of the dramatic monologue, in which the reader is given rather less than ‘touches of and bits of outlines’ to go on.[34] But stylistically speaking, the shade looking over her shoulder at the fluid syntax and deranged parts of speech (‘this onset of a poetess’) of this still relatively early work might be, rather than Plath or Dickinson, Gertrude Stein.

Noting the mixed reception of McGuckian’s first four collections, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh finds critics in agreement ‘that her poems had something to do with “womanliness” ’[35] and unhelpfully vague as that may be, it is true that McGuckian, of all the Irish women poets publishing in the 1980s, best rewards a reading in terms of (then fairly novel) ideas of *écriture féminine.* It is one the poet herself seems to accept, despite the ease with which even minimally simplified versions of those theories can quickly come to replicate sexist notions about women’s bodies and intellectual organisation: ‘I just take an assortment of words, though not exactly at random, and I fuse them. It’s like embroidery. It’s very feminine, I guess.’[36]

Practictioners of *écriture féminine* need not, of course, be women—indeed, many of the classic texts of post-structuralist feminist criticism concern themselves

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[33] See Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), pp. 55-9 for a reading of McGuckian’s intertextual engagement with the memoirs of Pasternak’s lover Olga Ivinskaya.
[34] *Robert Browning: The Oxford Authors*, ed. Adam Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.691.
[35] Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996) p.123
[36] ‘[Interview with] Medbh McGuckian’ *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*, eds. Rebecca E. Wilson and Gilean Somerville-Arjat (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1990) pp.1-8, p.2.

primarily with male writers – and the kind of intertextual embroidery that is a salient if not yet wholly dominant component of McGuckian's work as early as *On Ballycastle Beach* (1988), has many male precursors. She acknowledges one such in 'Coleridge', which may be read as a meditation on influence, on the sort of appropriative raids that both poets conduct upon other texts (and are accused of plagiarism for so doing), on McGuckian's frequently expressed desire to recover language from patriarchy and imperialism through a process of infiltration – 'to reach an English that would be so purified of English that it would be Irish':[37]

> It was her own fogs and fragrances
> That crawled into the verse, the
> Impression of cold braids finding
> Radiant escape, as if each stanza
> Were a lamp that burned between
> Their beds, or they were writing
> The poems in a place of birth together.[38]

This apparently cooperative process ends with the male figure pregnant with '[s]ome word that grew within him as a child's / Arm or leg.' If the childbearing metaphor is too familiar from masculine creative discourse to be considered subversive, the same is not quite true of the seminal one that precedes it: 'a little / Silk-mill emptied impetuously into it'.[39] The woman, meanwhile, emerges from the collaboration serenely triumphant, an avatar of idyllic pastoral cultivation:

> If she stood up, easy
> Easy, it was the warmth that finally
> Leaves the the golden pippin for the
> Cider, or the sunshine of fallen trees.[40]

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[37] Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, 'Comhrá, with a Foreword and Afterword by Laura O'Connor', *Southern Review* vol. 31 no. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 581-615, p.606
[38] Medbh McGuckian, *On Ballycastle Beach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) p.34
[39] *On Ballycastle Beach,* p.34
[40] *On Ballycastle Beach,* p.34

Exemplifying the binary logic that McGuckian takes care to undermine, Calvin Bedient asserts she is not 'Catholic Ireland's daughter, after all – or not enough […] she's the heir, however captious, of the Romantics.'[41] 'Captious' seems too quarrelsome an adjective to describe McGuckian's inversion of the logic of literary influence; not only does the woman poet of 'Coleridge' refuse to be anyone's 'daughter' or 'heir', she insists calmly upon inseminating, and then superseding him, to glide into the sunset alone. It is, nonetheless, a quintessentially Romantic manoeuvre to imagine one's progeniture ('But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze…'[42]) as progenitor of one's own genius.

Fantasies of power and expropriation disguised as surrender and submission abound in McGuckian's early work – often, as in 'Ducks and Drakes' or 'The Dowry Murder' located in a context of ambivalently-expressed desire (which commentators tend to assume is primarily heterosexual in nature.[43]) Recent critical work, particularly that of Shane Alcobia-Murphy, in painstakingly identifying the sources McGuckian uses to construct her poems, reveals that this play on the idea of possession also characterises her compositional practices. She takes possession of a text in assembling a poem from unattributed quotation, but the text has also possessed – and speaks through – her. The identification of her source texts, often written by and about women, has provoked feminist reassessments of work previously thought private, apolitical or without substantive content; it might also facilitate more queer readings of her poetry.

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[41] Calvin Bedient, 'The Crabbed Genius of Belfast', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* vol.16 no.1, 1990, pp.195-201, p.196.
[42] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Frost at Midnight', *The Major Works,* ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) pp.87-8, p.88.
[43] Haberstroh firmly averts a lesbian reading of 'The Sitting' (*Venus and the Rain*, p.15) by declaring the sensually-described female subject to be 'one of the speaker's selves' (Haberstroh, p.138).

McGuckian's last book-length publication of the 1980s was *Two Women, Two Shores* (1989), jointly authored by Nuala Archer, whose *Whale on the Line* (1981) expresses a transatlantic sensibility through a witty, whimsical eco-poetics. Beginning, in 'Burial', with a slightly anomalous female 'ox', ploughing textual lines 'toward the red/calligraphy'[44], and ending with a grounded, earthy exploration of North American territory in 'Walking', *Whale on the Line* also explores the frailties of masculinity in its title poem and in 'The Deviant Mantis', who, in a wry comment on perhaps the most contentious word in the Irish poetic lexicon, 'learn[s] of my tradition / while losing my head'.[45] *Whale on the Line* is notable also for being a rare publication by a woman on the astonishingly male-dominated list of the emergent Gallery Press – Ní Chuilleanáin, its first woman poet, remained its only one for most of the 1970s. However, broader trends in poetry publication during these decades show a gradual move towards inclusivity, almost always driven by determined women editors. Catherine Rose founded Arlen House as a feminist-aligned press in 1975, publishing history and sociology as well as literary work; Attic Press followed in the 1980s as a reaction to research into just how little women's writing in all genres was published in Ireland; the 1989 Attic anthology *Wildish Things*, edited by Ailbhe Smyth, being one of its most influential literary publications.[46] Anne Le Marquand Hartigan established and ran a successful reading series based at University College Dublin; under Ruth Hooley's editorship *The Honest Ulsterman/HU* moved from publishing at least two men for every woman to a 50:50 gender ratio;[47] *Cyphers*, whose founding editors included Ní Chuilleanáin and Leland Bardwell, published an eclectic range of international writing; *The Salmon* magazine and Salmon Press, founded by Jessie Lendennie, became perhaps the most important outlet for Irish women's poetry.

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[44] Nuala Archer, *Whale on the Line* (Dublin: Gallery, 1981), p. 9
[45] *Whale on the Line*, p.30
[46] Patricia Ferreira, Claiming and Transforming an "Entirely Gentlemanly Artifact": Ireland's Attic Press, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* vol. 19, no. 1 (Jul., 1993), pp. 97-109, p. 99.
[47] Laura Loftus, 'The White Blackbird: The Marginalisation of Irish Women Poets from Literary Magazines During the 1980s', *The Honest Ulsterman* (February 2018), https://humag.co/features/the-white-blackbird, accessed 19th August 2019.

Among Salmon's early publications were Rita Ann Higgins' collections *Goddess on the Mervue Bus* (1986) and *Witch in the Bushes* (1988). Higgins' poetry stood out in a bourgeois literary milieu for its laconic, witty and rebellious articulations of working-class experience. She documents women's lives as they intersect with the poverty and reactionary conservatism of the 1980s in Ireland, drawing memorable, colloquial portraits, but also building vernacular litanies resembling a performance poetics that was novel in most anglophone poetry communities in the 1980s, and scarcely heard-of in Ireland:

> big tits power
> piercing eyes power
> filed witches' nails power,
> I own this building power
> I own you power,
> fear of the priest power
> fear of the Black n'Tans power
> […]
> Apologise for your mother's colour hair power
> apologise for your father's maiden name power
> apologise for being born power.[48]

Paula Meehan, adopting a more lyrical style, also writes from a perspective less socially privileged than some of her older contemporaries: the speaker in her earliest poems is often an autodidactic, searching figure who, breaking out from a restrictive education in 'a poxy convent in Finglas',[49] is restlessly seeking new intellectual challenge, impatient with an Ireland that she represents in the sequence 'Echoes', for example, as a squalid semi-theocracy. But her two collections of the 1980s also show her to be – as she has remained – a poet of locale, as observant of details of a Shetland or Cretan landscape as she is of the minutiae of her native Dublin.

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[48] 'Woman's Inhumanity to Woman', *Witch in the Bushes*, (Galway: Salmon, 1988) pp. 50-1.
[49] Paula Meehan, 'T.B. Ward', *Return and No Blame* (Dublin: Beaver Row Press, 1984) p. 51.

Despite evidence of a generational difference in attitude and opportunity between poets born in the 1940s and publishing for the first time in the 60s and 70s, and those a decade or so younger, there remained a desire among the latter to trace a distinctively female Irish poetic lineage. In her essay 'What Foremothers?', Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill responds to a complacent review of Eavan Boland's *Outside History* with a tirade detailing the thousand-year erasure of women poets from the Irish-language canon. She acknowledges that scholarship will uncover and make available more poetry by written by women in Irish before the twentieth century – as indeed, in the quarter-century since she wrote, it has – and with conscious, ironic generosity acknowledges some 'advantages' of working in Irish:

> Perhaps I was luckier than Eavan Boland, in that Caitlín Maude was already on the leaving cert course and that Máire Mhac an tSaoi was already enshrined as one of the great trinity of poets who had dragged Irish poetry, screaming and kicking, into the 20th century by their stunning achievements back in the fifties. […] But that was about it. The usual catalogue of indignities dogged the steps of any poem I tried to see into print. […] You name it, I've suffered it; the lack of freedom, the lack of adequate critical reaction, the lack of reviews.[50]

Ní Dhomhnaill's *Rogha Dánta: Selected Poems* was published in 1986 and reprinted as a bilingual volume in 1988, making a generous selection of her work available in English translation. Though Michael Harnett's translations, which make up the bulk of the book, are sympathetic, they also might be seen to represent a benign version of the interventions that Ní Dhomhnaill identifies above: the woman poet inevitably mediated through masculine sensibilities, even as she voices experiences such as miscarriage or nursing a newborn, ventriloquises the women of Irish and other mythology, and defies 'Masculus Giganticus Hibernicus':

> Dangerous relic from the Iron Age

[50] Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, 'What Foremothers?' *Poetry Ireland Review*, No. 36 (Autumn, 1992), pp. 18-31, p.25

you sit in pubs and devise
the treacherous plan
that does not recoil on you
a vengeful incursion to female land.[51]

If linguistic minorities continue to be occluded during this period, then sexual ones are all but invisible. In an interview with Nuala Archer in 1990, Mary Dorcey stressed the continuing 'fundamentalist Catholic' nature of Irish society, and added, 'there is no lesbian or gay writers' community in Ireland. I know of two lesbians living in Ireland who write but not as lesbians or about lesbians. I know of another who writes as a lesbian but has not yet had a book published.'[52] The subject matter and publication history of Dorcey's poetry, as Tina O'Toole notes, 'illustrate the overwhelmingly diasporic nature of twentieth-century Irish lesbian literature.' [53] Dorcey's accessible voice emphasises the experimental possibilities of the 'seemingly conventional, even naturalistic' in contrast to a fractured *écriture féminine.*[54]

However, Irish poetry by women hardly lacks examples of naturalism and relatively conventional poetics. Almost alone in working in a self-consciously idiom of linguistic innovation during the 1980s is Catherine Walsh, who published the pamphlets *The Ca Pa Pater Pillar Thing and More Besides* (1986) and *Making Tents* (1987) with hardPressed Poetry, the small press she founded with Billy Mills in 1985. *Making Tents* opens with the subversive voice of an 'old lady' who advises:

Well it's half-past
hangin' time/ time to
go rob[55]

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[51] Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Rogha Dánta: Selected Poems*, (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988) p.79.
[52] Nuala Archer and Mary Dorcey, 'The Spaces Between the Words: Mary Dorcey Talks to Nuala Archer', *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Dec., 1990), pp. 21-24, p.22
[53] Tina O'Toole, 'Cé Leis Tú? Queering Irish Migrant Literature', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Special Issue: Queering the Issue (Spring /Summer 2013), pp. 131-145, p. 134.
[54] 'The Spaces Between the Words', p.24
[55] Catherine Walsh, *Making Tents*, Dublin: hardPressed Poetry, 1987, n.p.

‘Encapsulate it/and escape it […]  Even /reiterate it’ Walsh continues, and this strategy of precision, evasion, and repetition is maintained in poetry in which the domestic and the pastoral are subject to the torsion of an almost echolalic attention to the materiality of language:

take two cows
Taffy take two
wood pigeons across the river
in the orchard
ka cu coo
khaki kacu[56]

Though the modern small press publication might be said to be the heritor of the chapbooks and emblem books of a pervious age, the mischief of Catherine Walsh is probably not what Eavan Boland had in mind when she wrote of the woman poet’s emblematic status in modernity. But if the main model in Irish poetry by women during these decades (as in the art at large) is the Bolandesque lyrical object lesson, and the dominant narrative one of erased and silenced foremothers, it is all the more important to attend to women poets who resist and refuse those paradigms.

[56] ‘Return Ticket’, *Making Tents*, n.p.

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