Rude Gestures? Contemporary Women's Poetry in Irish

by PETER DENMAN

THE WORK OF Biddy Jenkinson could serve as a bench mark for contemporary poetry in Irish. Biddy Jenkinson is a pseudonym used by a poet who has published three collections since the mid-1980s: *Baiste Gintlí* ["Baptism of the Gentiles"] (1986), *Uiscí Beatha* ["Waters of Life"] (1988), and *Dán na hUidhre* ["The Poem of the Dun Cow," a name adapted from *Lebar na hUidhre*, "The Book of the Dun Cow"—the name of a famous medieval Irish manuscript collection] (1991). Jenkinson does not give readings or speak about her work in public, and resists its translation into English except for publication outside Ireland. Her work is informed by a pagan recovery of spirit, and the sensuality of her poetry informs the very act of writing:

> The writing is a matter of love, the kind I have been describing, a sustaining through my veins and verbs of something infinitely precious, a stretching back along the road we have come, a stand here in the present among the outnumbered and beleaguered but determined survivors of Gaelic Ireland . . . . I prefer not to be translated into English in Ireland. It is a small rude gesture to those who think that everything can be harvested and stored without loss in an English-speaking Ireland.[1]

While the sensuality expressed is startlingly new, the quasi-isolationist stance might seem to be a reversion to the intractability of the earlier part of this century. There has, at least since the 1930s, been a steady if not always flourishing succession of poetry in Irish. The major names were those of Máirtín O Díreáin and Seán O Ríordáin, to which must be added that of Máire Mhac an tSaoi, who was perhaps the most notable Irish woman poet of the mid-century in either language—and who happily is still writing.

Throughout the middle years of this century there was something of a division between poets in Irish and Irish poets in English, in the eyes of their readers at any rate, proceeding from a perception that they belonged to different communities. While poets in English struggled with the dominating legacy of Yeats and sought out American or European models—Kinsella's Pound, Montague's Williams, Devlin's St-John Perse—Irish writers remained located, imaginatively and physically, in Ireland. They did not travel—at least not as writers; they did not correspond with contemporaries overseas; they scarcely interacted with their English-speaking contemporaries; indeed their work scarcely ever ap-

1. "Letter to an Editor," *Irish University Review*, XXI, 1 (Spring/Summer 1991), 34.

peared in translation. Although the language in which they wrote had been the medium for one of the longest literary traditions in Europe, they found their resource in the sense of a linguistic community rather than of a literary community. Their literary tradition had, it seemed, ended with the loss of Irish as a general vernacular at the start of the nineteenth century. This could lead to a sense of deprivation, as notably expressed by Thomas Kinsella in his essay "The Irish Writer."[2] Writing in Irish belonged in the historical past. While it is generally true to say that almost any Irish poet of recent decades has engaged in translation from the Irish—Austin Clarke's versions and adaptations, Kinsella's *The Tain,* and the many poems in *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981); John Montague's "Lament for Art O'Leary," Seamus Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* (1983)—these have invariably mined the lost past, taking texts from earlier centuries so that translation into English took on an archaeological aspect.

In Ireland the demography of poetry readership has been complicated by linguistic considerations. For the poets in Irish particularly the life of the Irish-speaking regions in the west and south of Ireland, attenuated and under threat from the homogenization of Irish culture, still provided them with a vital resource and subject matter. Their attitude to modern Ireland was largely oppositionalist, not because it was modern but because there was an inadequate space for a life that might be lived through Irish. For reasons that were contingent and based on commercial and grant-aided publishing structures as much as they were ideological, their works were not readily available in English.

O Ríordáin's example was perhaps more important than the influence of his poetry; owing to a part-time appointment he had in University College Cork which made him available to interested students, he came into contact with a generation passing through the college in the late 1960s, most of them studying in the Irish department where Seán O Tuama, himself a poet and a pioneer in the academic criticism of modern Irish literature, was on the staff. The Cork group found tangible expression in a publication, *Innti,* which started as a broadsheet and later evolved into a substantial magazine of poetry and criticism. Appearing irregularly, there have been fourteen issues to date, nearly all under the guidance of the founding editor most closely associated with it, Michael Davitt.

Davitt led the way in bringing an urban attitude to bear on the traditional concerns of Irish poetry. This had the effect not necessarily of improving or sophisticating poetry in Irish—it had ample models for sophistication in its own tradition—but of setting up links between the past and the present, between writing in Irish and the contemporary sensibility which finds its expression typically in the English vernacular. Davitt gave currency to Irish poetry, being the most notable of those who first wrote in a modern idiom, and at the same time provided an outlet for like-minded poets through *Innti.* Davitt's achievement has been to set the seal on divorcing poetry in Irish from a specifically Gaeltacht

2. *Davis, Mangan, Ferguson? Tradition and the Irish Writer,* W. B. Yeats; Thomas Kinsella, the Tower Series of Anglo-Irish Studies, II (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970).

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context. While there had been other writers who attempted a more cosmopolitan idiom, it was Davitt (who was fortunate in his timing) who set up the most effective resonances of irony and urbanity in his work.

A contemporary of Davitt's at university in Cork was Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Ní Dhomhnaill has, twenty years later, become the most articulate and prominent of poets in Irish. With three collections in Irish and two dual-language books offering selections of her work, she is undoubtedly one of the most visible poets in Ireland today. This "visibility" is not necessarily dependent on an extensive knowledge of her work among a general readership; she has attained a public profile through appearances in broadcast and print media and through readings and lectures. At the same time she has garnered the respect of her fellow poets, as evidenced by the collection *Pharaoh's Daughter* published in 1990. This contains forty-five of her poems translated into English by a range of translators that reads almost like a "Who's Who" of contemporary Irish poetry: Derek Mahon, John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon *et al.* Her primary collections in Irish have been *An Dealg Droighin* ["The Thorn from the Blackthorn Tree"/"The Blackthorn's Thorn"] (1981), *Féar Suaithinseach* ["Remarkable Grass," or "Miraculous Grass" as Heaney has rendered it in his version of the title poem, referring to a patch of ground which, according to folk belief, has been marked by the accidental dropping of a consecrated host] (1984), and *Feis* ["Festival"] (1991). It was the second of these which established her as a vital presence in contemporary Irish poetry.

Each of her collections is prefaced by a brief prose anecdote drawn from Irish folklore or legend. The thematic connection of this with the poems that follow is variable; its presence does serve to emphasize that Ní Dhomhnaill claims for her poetry a rootedness which is at once intuitive and mediated primarily through the female spirit. No sooner had Davitt cut poetry free from dutiful piety towards the Gaeltacht than Ní Dhomhnaill was able to see the vitality of beliefs enshrined in its folklore. There is also, perhaps, an implicit contrast with the practice of Yeats and other writers of the turn of the century who gathered and used such material as a resource to exploit rather than nourish. The folklore has come from her prolonged stays in Corca Dhuibhne and from trawling through the archive holdings of the Department of Folklore at University College Dublin. Working towards an alliance of folklore and feminism, with each being revitalized and reinterpreted through the other, she has been enabled to profess alternative ways of feeling. This is seen most clearly in a group of poems in *Féar Suaithinseach* grouped under the heading "Bean an Leasa," a phrase that defies easy translation into English. Literally it means "the woman from the fairy ring"; as portrayed in the poems the person emerges as a mixture of witch, enchantress, child-taker, weird sister, and doppelganger: "A bhean a ghaibh isteach/i lár mo dháin" ["You, the woman who comes barging in/ to the middle of my poem"] is how Ní Dhomhnaill addresses her at one point, and continues

Táimse i gcairdeas Críost
le bean an leasa
ó sheasas lena leanbh
ins an lios.

[I am a godmother
with the fairy woman
since I stood for her child
in the fairy ring.]

Recognizably a folk figure in origin, the "bean an leasa" is loaded with tangible menace. Most memorable is her insistent intrusiveness in "An Crann" ["The Tree"], where she barges in with a Black and Decker chain saw to cut down a tree in a suburban garden. The interference dramatizes how the immediacy of primitive subconscious unsettlement will persist in the middle-class estates of semidetached housing.

In the most recent collection, *Feis*, there is a further development, in that Ní Dhomhnaill aims to bring the earth mother into line with personal lived experience. At its simplest this is signaled by a proliferation of brand names: the seductive demon in the retelling of the Persephone legend ["Peirseifiné"] drives a BMW, the child coveted by the fairies in "An Bhatráil" ["The Beating"] needs a covering of Sudocream, and so on. Ní Dhomhnaill's stratagem is to bring the flow of tradition and folk belief into the recognizably contemporary suburban world of middle-class Dublin. It is a conjunction which yields surprising effects, but the fact of its being done in Irish is even more striking. In some eyes, the speaking of Irish has become freighted with social and cultural assumptions which locate it in the rural west, the obligations of the school curriculum, or the empty lip service of state ceremony. In refusing the limitations of popular perceptions, Ní Dhomhnaill has found both a voice for herself and a place for her language. This is not simply a question of making certain objects and emotions visible in a language; it is nothing less than a reconstruction of the conventions of poetic idiom in which she is writing.

The idioms and vocabulary of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry draw repeatedly on those of speech—in particular the Irish spoken in West Kerry as diversified by the co-presence of English. The irruptions of English are often phatic interjections, "Bhuel" ["Well"] or "by dheaid" ["by dad"], and sometimes lead to translingual punning. Talking in a bar

Chuamair ó dheoch go deoch
is ó *joke* go *joke*.

[We went from drink to drink
and from joke to joke.]

The course of this poem, "An Bhean Mhídhílis" ["The Unfaithful Wife"], is demonstrative.[3] It is spoken by a woman who tells the story of being picked up

3. *Feis* (Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, 1991), p. 70. The poem is also included, with a version into English by Paul Muldoon, in *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Loughcrew, Co. Meath: Gallery Books, 1990), p. 104.

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and subsequently pleasured by a man. Through seven stanzas the progressive stages of seduction are detailed, from the initial meeting in a pub to the drive to a lay-by and their awkward but entirely satisfactory coupling in the car. Noticeable in the poem is its dwelling on the sensual and practical details of sex—how to undress passionately and sufficiently in a car. The man remains anonymous, an accessory, but the poem does not exist simply as womanly assertion; it has a specifically literary history, against which it reacts and throws into relief Ní Dhomhnaill's reactive assertion. The poem's indirect origin is Lorca's "La Casada Infiel," which tells of a similar encounter, but in lyrical celebratory language and from the man's point of view.

The immediate background to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poem, however, is Máire Mhac an tSaoi's translation of Lorca into Irish with the same title "An Bhean Mhídhílis."[4] As Ní Dhomhnaill herself has written, Máire Mhac an tSaoi was, along with O Díreáin and O Ríordáin, "one of the great triumvirate of poets who had dragged Irish poetry, screaming and kicking, into the twentieth century back in the fifties."[5] While Mhac an tSaoi brought clearly identifiable womanly techniques and attitudes to poetry, it is noticeable that in her version Lorca remains dominant. It is the man who speaks of taking the woman and Mhac an tSaoi's operations on the poem are at the linguistic level; it remains a man's poem. The additional ironies inherent in Lorca's homosexuality remain outside this discussion, but not, perhaps, those in his coming from a society which is matched only by Ireland for its Catholicism; the unfaithfulness of the wife is as much a setting aside of a faith as it is of a husband.

Lorca dates the events of his poem by a reference to the religious feast of Saint James (which Mhac an tSaoi renders as San Seoin—Saint John, presumably because that is a more significant date in the Irish festal calendar, with the traditional lighting of bonfires and associated festivities). In Ní Dhomhnaill's poem, which is not so much a version of as a riposte to Lorca/Mhac an tSaoi, the primary strategy is to allow the woman a voice. Even in the lovemaking, Ní Dhomhnaill's woman takes the superior position which, even though it may have been the most practical in a car seat, nonetheless directly reverses Lorca who describes the man "mounted on a mother of pearl mare, without bridle or stirrups."[6] As Eavan Boland has been arguing repeatedly, the great change which has affected Irish poetry of late is the way women are no longer simply the objects of poetry (passive, remote) but have become subjects (protean, demanding). Boland's account of her own case, as a woman poet, writing in English, and—as it happens—a contemporary of Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson, is instructive:

4. *Margadh na Saoire* (Baile Atha Cliath: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1956), p. 68.
5. "What Foremothers?" to appear in *Poetry Ireland Review*, 36 (Dublin, 1992).
6. *Lorca*, introduced and edited by J. L. Gili (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 46.

When I began writing poetry, the Irish poetic tradition had been for more than a hundred years almost exclusively male. Images of nationhood in such poetry were often feminized and simplified. Cathleen ni Houlihan. Dark Rosaleen. The Poor Old Woman. These potent mixtures of national emblem and feminine stereotype stood between me and any easy engagement with the poetic tradition I inherited. It would take me years to realize that somewhere behind these images, was the complex and important truth of Irishness and womanhood.[7]

The poetic tradition that Boland speaks of inheriting is that written in English, but the complexity and importance of the realized truth is implicit with concepts of womanhood and Irishness as the poets Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson demonstrate.

Ní Dhomhnaill's woman is picked up in a bar and taken not to a dried-up riverbed but to a lay-by, where the car parked alongside the bagged but uncollected litter. Instead of the romantic and Romany lyricism of Lorca, her speaker finds time to comment on the efficiency of her lover as he undresses her.

Bhí sé cleachtaithe deallámhach
ag oscailt chnaipí íochtair mo ghúna,
ag lapadáil go barr mo stocaí
is an cneas bog os a gcionnsan
is nuair a bhraith sé
nach raibh bríste orm
nach air a tháinig giúmar
is cé thógfadh orm ag an nóiméad sin
ná dúrt leis go rabhas pósta.

[He was experienced and deft
in opening the lower buttons of my dress,
in feeling past the tops of my stockings
and the soft skin above them
and when he realised
I had no panties on
he perked up no end
and who'd blame me at such a time
not telling him I was married.]

Each stanza ends with the refrain "ní dúrt leis go rabhas pósta" ["I didn't tell him I was married"] or a variation thereof, a line adapted up from Lorca's original where the concealing of the marriage begins and ends the poem. Ní Dhomhnaill finishes her poem not with a justificatory statement but with an interrogative challenge: if ever they meet again, "ní admhód riamh bheith pósta.//An ndéanfása?" ["I'd never admit to being married.//Would you?"]

This is not the end of the poem's course, for it is one of the pieces translated in the bilingual collection *Pharaoh's Daughter* where it is given in an English version by Paul Muldoon. Ní Dhomhnaill has elsewhere commented approvingly on Muldoon's own "attempts to deconstruct the literary 'speirbhean'... especially in the poems 'Sky-Woman' and 'Aisling' in *Quoof*."[8] Muldoon's

7. "Time, Memory and Obsession: Elizabeth Bishop," *PN Review*, 18, 2 (Manchester, November/December 1991), 21.
8. "What Foremothers?" *Poetry Ireland Review*, 36 (Dublin, 1992).

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version of "An Bhean Mhídhílis" is very Muldoonish. His rendering of Ní Dhomhnaill's refrain is "I never let on I was married," in which the verbal phrase "to let on" adds an ambiguity to the line. It can mean both "to maintain (fraudulently), to pretend" and "to reveal (truthfully)." There is an equivalent phrase in Irish, "ligean air" (lit. "to let on"), which has the former meaning almost exclusively. It is not the phrase that Ní Dhomhnaill has used in her poem; instead we get a statement that, unlike Muldoon's, avoids ambiguity but has an uncertain truth value. However, Muldoon's ambiguity recovers something of the uncertainty that is present in Lorca's original.

The course of "The Unfaithful Wife," from its origins in Lorca through its various translations until it rests, for the moment, with Muldoon, is an instance of Ní Dhomhnaill's active dialogue with what has, and what has not, been written. The poem, in its passage from Lorca to Mhac an tSaoi to Ní Dhomhnaill to Muldoon, has been notably promiscuous. As the well-worn and no doubt sexist quip has it, translations are like wives—the most attractive ones are rarely faithful. Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry is a challenge to both literary and social attitudes. Other poems in *Feis* are the assertively titled "Mise ag Tiomaint" ["I'm Doing the Driving"]; the last poem of the collection, similarly imperative: "Eirigh a hEinín" ["Rise Up, Little Bird"]; and another poem which offers the definitive explanation why "Bridget never got married."

Another poem, not translated in *Pharaoh's Daughter*, is "Dípfríos" (say the title aloud: "Deepfreeze"), which celebrates the freezer, the "cornucopia of our times" as the opening phrase has it. The poem lists the fruits and meats that it preserves, mimicking the richness of its store in a prolonged listing. It is difficult to read the poem without setting it against William Carlos Williams, "This Is Just to Say." The spareness and concentration is exploded by the apparently exuberant litany of frozen goods, but the exuberance is undercut by the last line: "marbh agus cruaidh is chomh fuar leis an uaigh" ["dead and hard and as cold as the grave"]. The freezer is changed from cornucopia to "memento mori, par excellence." It sums up much of what Ní Dhomhnaill is saying in *Feis*. Richness, fruitfulness, productivity are held in suspension, offered. But implicit in the containment of the frozen food is the possibility of release, the melting towards use.

This is the initial defining sensuality taken as found in Jenkinson's poetry. For instance "Cáitheadh" ["Spray"] describes the sea sweeping the body with a lyrical generalized delight that is as exultant as anything narrated by Ní Dhomhnaill:

> Dá mba mise an barruisce ghabhfainn chugam do bharraicíní.
> Dhéanfainn suirí le do rúitíní le cúr griangheal na scribe.
> Dhéanfainn tathaint ar do choiscéim le haistarraingt na maidhme
> is líonfainn ort na hioscaidí
> le cuilithíní.

[If I were the spreading tide sheets I would overwhelm your insteps.
I would fetch up round your ankles with the sunbleached wrath of storms.
I would coax you to step closer with the swishback of the gravel
and swoosh back up behind your knees
in curls.][9]

Another poem, "Eiceolaí" ["An Ecologist"], invites direct comparison with Ní Dhomhnaill's "The Tree." Again set in suburbia, the speaker here is not the sensitive prey to the irruptions of a disturbing other who comes stepping over the bounds of propriety and property, but a subtle underminer. The poem fastens on the well-maintained garden next-door, with its manicured lawn and ordered plantings, where even a fallen petal is frowned upon:

Cuirim feochadaín chuici ar an ngaoth.
Téann mo sheilidí de sciuird oíche ag ithe a cuid leitíse.
Síneann na driseacha agamsa a gcosa faoin bhfál.
Is an bhféar aici siúd a dhéanann mo chaorthainnse
cuileanna glasa a thál.

[I send her thistledown on the wind,
my slugs rush out at night to maul her lettuces,
my briars send runners underneath her wall,
my rowanberries shelter greenfly who swarm on her lawn.][10]

The attempted separation is subverted, and the encounter is delightful, for one of the parties at least. Both Jenkinson and Ní Dhomhnaill refuse, in different ways, isolation, whether that isolation is defined by the language they write in, sexuality, or the garden fence.

Their writing in Irish is a linguistic choice in that these writers certainly have a competence in English. There is not the same degree of artistic choice, even though in each case Irish was an acquired language. Irish was not their first language chronologically, although it became a first language and, as far as their poetry is concerned, supplanted English. Ní Dhomhnaill has said that she cannot write poetry in English—for that at least her vernacular is Irish. When Máire Mhac an tSaoi voiced the conviction that to write poetry in Irish is a sort of ancestor worship that perpetuates lost forms of feeling, enabling the word to "survive the shipwreck of the way of life from which it sprung,"[11] Jenkinson was quick to protest:

We are marginalised by a comfortable settled monoglot community that would prefer we went away rather than hassle about rights. We have been pushed into an ironic awareness that by our passage we would convenience those who will be uneasy in their Irishness as long as there is a living Gaelic tradition to which they do not belong.[12]

9. *Uiscí Beatha* (Baile Atha Cliath: Coiscéim, 1988), p. 30. Translation by Alex Osborne in *Translation: The Journal of Literary Translation,* XXII (New York, Fall 1989), 116.

10. *Baiste Gintlí* (Baile Atha Cliath: Coiscéim, 1986), p. 32. Translation by Seán O Tuama in *Translation: The Journal of Literary Translation,* XXII (New York, Fall 1989), 114.

11. "The Clerisy and the Folk: A Review of Present-day Verse in the Irish Language on the Occasion of the Publication of *Innti* 11," *Poetry Ireland Review,* 24 (Winter 1988), 34.

12. "Máire Mhac an tSaoi: The Clerisy and the Folk—A Reply," *Poetry Ireland Review,* 25 (Spring 1989), 80.

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Folk—A Reply," *Poetry Ireland Review*, 25 (Spring 1989), 80.

But this dispute about access and intelligibility which focuses on the language in which the poems are written, while real and deeply felt, is but a particular instance of a general condition that is characteristic of women's poetry in Ireland. Medbh McGuckian, one of the most prominent Irish woman poets of this generation, writes in English; her poems are willful encodings of states of feeling, with mystifying syntax and imagery that resist translatable meanings to a degree that Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson never seek to attain. Another, Eavan Boland, has sought to bring experience and events that have hitherto been largely unwritten and private, outside history, out of the occlusions of myth and domesticity and into history.

Like McGuckian and Boland, Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson are concerned with finding a language for their poetry; it is a search which begins but does not end with their poetic vernacular. They are at one with their contemporaries in writing a poetry that is insistent on claiming a place for the contingent pressures of the present. At the same time they are in a situation analogous to that described by Yeats in 1937, the year in which the newly-framed Irish Constitution enshrined Irish as the "first official language." Yeats wrote "Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue."[13] For women poets such as Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson Gaelic—Irish—is the mother tongue, and it offers them a formative intimacy and a matriarchal possibility.

13. "A General Introduction for my Work," *Essays and Introductions* (London, 1961), p. 520.