

IRISH POETRY AFTER FEMINISM: IN SEARCH OF 'MALE POETS'

Moynagh Sullivan

I

In this essay I am going to apply a hermeneutics of gender to an existing historiographical narrative, to the treatment of poetry, gender and tradition in a recent high-profile and, for now, definitive 'History': *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2006), which was concerned, not only with recovering work, but also with historicizing Irish literary production. In this analysis, I look at how metaphors of self creation so powerfully invoked in the critical lexicon function ideologically to preserve a masculinist canon. The metaphorical use of pregnancy and motherhood has a long history in rhetoric and poetry, from Plato's cave through the Renaissance, the romantics to the present day. In *Ventriloquised Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* Elizabeth Harvey argues that 'voice as a construct coheres in a particular constellation of metaphors that is frequently found in Renaissance poetry: the image of the pregnant male poet giving birth to voice, being impregnated or impregnating his muse, or serving as a midwife to poetic birth'.¹ Harvey describes this metaphor as having 'particular topicality', which 'ground[s] language and creativity in the female body and its reproductive processes, and they re-enact in their rhetorical strategies the appropriation both of the female body and the creative voice that putatively springs from it'.² Related observations have

Irish Poetry After Feminism

been made by Katharine Eisaman Maus in 'A Womb of His Own: Male Renaissance Poets in a Female Body'.³ Eisaman Maus's argument challenges the twentieth-century assumption that 'creativity and the metaphorical penis, or pen are linked'.⁴ Instead her analysis shows how in the English Renaissance 'the creative imagination is commonly associated with the *female* body'.⁵ She importantly points out that the 'patterns of speech' she discusses are 'largely subphilosophical, suggesting habits of mind rather than carefully articulated systems of thought'.⁶ The self-birthing poet creates his own origin in such paradigms, becomes self-present while mother, and woman, by extension in a matrigynist culture, comes to signify loss.

Richard Kearney points out in *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy*, that as 'psychoanalysis reminds us, the mother has always been a powerful unconscious symbol for forfeited or forbidden origins',⁷ and the symbolic use of the motherland or Mother Ireland in Irish literature and culture as the signifier of the lost nation has always been a undisputed element of all critical discourses within Irish Studies. In terms of Irish criticism, women's writing, both critical and æsthetic, functions as a body of *loss* in Irish Studies, a loss central to Irish masculine culture's self-representation. In terms of what constitutes Irish literary studies today, a preoccupation with origins is central to both the historically led (broadly called Cultural Studies) and the text-led (broadly understood as formalists) attitudes that appear to struggle across opposing camps to define Irish culture. In the discourses of the former, associated especially with the Field Day enterprises, Marxist and post-colonial critiques of Ireland in a multinational world, and a number of universities in the Republic of Ireland, the 'lost' mother of feminism functions to keep the lost nation, the 'forfeited' origin, alive and well in such discourses. This is evident, for instance, in the forfeit involved in volumes I, II and II of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, as well as the positioning of Irish feminism as narcissistically in collusion with multinational capital and as anti-postcolonial and anti-communitarian. Equally however, the latter, those who sponsor a 'textually pure' or formalist, and non-cultural approach to literary studies, those who are often accused of revi-

In Search of 'Male' Poets

sionism—and most obviously represented by the intellectual and artistic groups attached to Queen's University Belfast and to a lesser extent Trinity College, Dublin—invoke a lexicon of aesthetic defence that is steeped in a fascination with, and deep fear of, woman. In formalist economies that measure good poetry by 'originality', making poetry 'new', emerging out from a poem or a body of poetry, then the material 'origin' of the semiotic rhythms of the poem, must be both revealed, but hidden: revealed as the property and gift of the poet, yet concealed as the originating body of the mother. Further, in such an approach any invested originating agendas are seemingly erased through the invocation of formalist measurements such as 'aesthetic standards' and 'poetic value'. In its critical engagements of the relationship of poetic form to political form, it remains the case that it is the *politics* that is problematised in the consideration of form, and not the aesthetic assumptions of what constitutes good and bad form. This talk about poetry can consider socio-political agendas and location within a cultural tradition, but terms such as tradition, aesthetic value and standards are still understood to be somehow above and beyond politics, and to simply exist. Form is measured in relation to politics, but my interest lies here in the politics of the terms of the measurement and history themselves.

II

'AFTER FEMINISM' OR 'FEMINISM DONE'

Irish Feminist agendas therefore negotiate the invested agendas of these two dominant traditions in Irish studies and are caught of the axis of history and textuality that configures such an opposition. Indeed, responses to volumes IV and V of *The Field Day Anthology* are interesting insofar as they expose the limits of both historiographic and hermeneutical approaches that have not examined the terms of their own discourses. Volumes IV and V represent a feminist hermeneutics that exceeds the aesthetic formalisms that structure poetry traditions assembled by men, on either a set of historical or textual rationales. Isobel Armstrong's oft-cited passage

Irish Poetry After Feminism

from her essay on English Letters, “‘The Gush of the Feminine’”: How to Read Women Poets of the Romantic Period’, makes this point much more emphatically:

We have had two hundred years to discover a discourse of and strategies from reading male poets. They belong to a debate, a dialectic; we know how to think about politics, epistemology, power and language, in productive ways that whether it is Matthew Arnold or Paul de Man, who writes, makes these poets *mean* for us. A hermeneutics has evolved. Not so with female poets. We are discovering who they are, but there are few ways of talking about them.⁸

By exceeding the ways that have evolved to talk about men’s preoccupations, volumes IV and V have been left open to criticisms of indiscriminate inclusions for the sake of reaching feminist quotas; in other words, that aesthetic standards and values were disregarded by an *a priori* politics more interested in its own representational agenda. Feminists working on the projects were not and are not statisticians, or number-crunchers, working towards some sort of equivalence of female to male bodies in the canon. Instead, they were concerned with making available a body of work that hitherto had not been collected, or even known about in many instances, and with developing ways of reading these texts in ways adequate to them. It is therefore crucial that we regard IV and V historically, even developmentally, as part of an unravelling of historically gendered relations to texts, to culture and to public life. As a ‘recovery’ project, it sought to establish some sort of canon, and yet was sceptical of, and suspicious of, the humanist subjects it needed to posit in order to pursue a project of equality; for its editors were as influenced by the de-constructive and interrogative positions of what are called the ‘difference’ of French feminists, as they were by Anglo-American social constructivism. Volumes IV and V are only the prologue to a much greater challenge that faces us: to evolve a feminist hermeneutics that can evolve into a hermeneutics of gender that would involve, among other things, generating a curiosity amongst men about the androcentrism encoded in aesthetics and

In Search of 'Male' Poets

literary politics. That is, to start distinguishing men as gendered, as well as women, so that we all talk of male poets as naturally as we talk about female poets and other gendered configurations as well. This would be to find the 'male poets'.

Patrick Crotty's essay, 'The Irish Renaissance, 1890-1940: Poetry in English', which appeared in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, clearly demonstrates how gendered assumptions are woven into the models of inheritance that normalise or naturalize the histories, or 'traditions', that somehow 'pass' as being without inflections. I have chosen Crotty's deft and excellent essay because, as a cultural history it is primarily formalist, and as such it represents an important intersection between the cultural historicism of one view and the textual focus of the other. Further, I have chosen this essay is because it deals specifically, with the exception of Yeats, with what Crotty himself terms, 'the lesser poets of the revival'.⁹ Such lesser company could prove companionable for the women poets brought to the reading public's attention by *Field Day* IV and V; after all, the major criticisms levied at IV and V was that the work 'recovered' was found lacking aesthetically and could only ever be 'lesser'. As women wrote and published poetry prolifically during this period, one would thus imagine that they would be significantly represented in any survey of the 'lesser' poets of this time. Moreover, the essay, given the terms which had set itself, was a wonderful opportunity for the work of such writers to be substantively analysed in a larger frame than hitherto applied, *alongside* lesser male poets in ways that could effect paradigmatic shifts in existing structures of the canon by altering the terms of reading not only the male poets, but the terms of literary history.

However, this challenge was not taken up by Crotty, and the frame in which such lesser poets are read remains dualistic, and configured by the territorial claims to production of an authentically (and here I use terms that risk over-stating the case) Irish writing, between nationalists and revisionists. There are those who might raise objections to what they would see as my overly negative reading of the inclusion of such poets, asking such things as 'isn't this an improvement on what went before?' or 'surely Crotty must be commended for including so many writers?' Clearly Crotty was well

Irish Poetry After Feminism

intentioned, as the self-conscious inclusion of many women poets shows, as does his suspicion of aggrandising tendencies in some of the male poets. However, the terms of his model mean that this inclusion is, in every sense of the word, fruitless. For the patriarchal model of history invoked by Crotty is determined by metaphors of the reproduction of masculinist culture by men. This tradition is built on a set of aesthetic assumptions about originality and poetic newness or freshness that remakes the past without being beholden to it. The mother/woman is the past that must be radically dissociated from and remade in order that the male may re-make himself in the image of his fathers, in the image of other men. Women remain the natural force that must be disavowed in order that the male may identify with patriarchal culture and take his place in a lineage of men. The mother/woman must be dismissed in order that the heredity between the men may be assured and continuous. The presence of the women poets in Crotty's essay performs this naturalising cultural role, in which the masculine subject position and culture becomes so naturalised as to appear as the sum total of culture itself. How does this work?

At the simplest level, Crotty's essay is divided into a number of sub-headings some of which are periodising, such as '1916 and the Great War' and 'Women Poets of the Revival', and others which are thematic such as 'Translators' and 'Ascendancy Poets'. The remaining titles name individuals: 'Yeats'; 'Æ, Synge, O'Sullivan and Stephens'; 'Colum, Campbell, Joyce, Gogarty'; 'In a Free State: Higgins, Lyle Donaghy, Donnelly, Devenport O'Neill, Salkeld, Coffey, Beckett, Devlin'; 'Clarke and MacNiece'. Of the headlining individuals, Blanaid Salkeld and Mary Devenport O'Neill are the only women. I have laboriously listed all these, not to keep some sort of score, but to tease out the relationship between individuation, collectivity and gender. In Crotty's survey, women poets of the revival are considered a collective, and there is no corresponding category of men poets of the revival. Here, representatively, gender remains predicated only of women. Masculinity as a default subject remains unchallenged, and women continue to function as the assembly against which male poets are in Crotty's history, 'distinguished'. The gendering of the masses as female espe-

In Search of 'Male' Poets

cially in the discourses that shaped modernist sensibilities and its cultural legacies, to the extent that we think of popular culture as 'feminine' and high culture as 'masculine', has been well documented by a number of scholars.

III

What is of interest to this essay is the way in which the gendering of the collective and the individual remains an implicit part, and for the most part unchallenged subtext of the value systems used to shape canons, histories and national bodies of work. To take another example, this time from criticism of contemporary poetry, the poet and critic Justin Quinn, who as a co-editor of *Metre* was responsible for publishing a significant number of Irish women poets, could in 1999, write a provocative and challenging review which encoded a number of cultural misogynies. I am not saying that he himself is a misogynist, rather that there is cultural misogyny implicit in many of the points that he makes. As a demonstration of how such gendered assumptions attach to language that contemporary critics use as neutral or innocent, an excavation of the cultural valency of the tropes Quinn invokes is worthwhile. He wrote:

There is a spectre haunting poetry. It is not a particularly Irish phenomenon, neither is it restricted to work by woman, but it is fairly contemporary. You will find it in poetry magazines, collections, workshops—in short—anywhere that verse is brought forth for the attention of others. Many people seem to think it is a type of poetry, but that makes light of the achievements of those who have written the real thing. The formula goes as follow: autobiographical anecdote, the spark for which is often natural beauty, a melancholic intimate tender tone, a consideration of one's own relations with partner or children, extended family, or childhood; various blurring of syntax which the reader should register as 'poetic imagery', the more blurred the more poetic, important ending, usually an image, not a conclusion (thus a cursory nod to

Irish Poetry After Feminism

openness) represented as a kind of minor-epiphany, which should leave the reader trembling between two worlds, full of wonder and awe.¹⁰

Although Quinn specifies that this not restricted to work by women, the subsequent poets reviewed are all women (Catherine Phil McCarthy, *The Blue Globe*, Mary O'Donnell, *Unlegendary Heroes* and Katie Donovan, *Entering the Mare*), and the review appeared in a special issue of *Verse*, dedicated awkwardly to 'Women Irish poets', so we can infer from this that the women would appear more guilty of these types of behaviour than men. He goes on to connect women with collectivity, by writing that 'we are often told, that women's creativity finds a more collective means of artistic expression than that of egoistic men'.¹¹ Egoistic is not (always) a pejorative term in feminist observations about creativity, but is used to describe the condition and terms within which certain subjectivities are understood, privileged and fetishised. In this regard, it is useful to recall the subtlety of Patricia Waugh's argument about the subject in postmodernism:

Women appear threatening... because they carry the culture's more widespread fear of the loss of boundaries, of the uncontrollable... more threatening because unconsciously split off in order to retain the purity of a subjectivity, a humanness defined as autonomy, pure reason, and transcendence. Cartesian dualism thus persists along with strict empiricism in science and impersonality and formalism in literary theory and criticism.¹²

The ego here depends upon a very specific constellation of identity that involves patrolling woman as the boundary of an illusory autonomy and transcendence. Such policing is performed through the practice of empiricism in science and formalism in criticism.

In the light of Waugh's observations, reading the traces of the Eliotic cult of (im)personality that Quinn endorses (an invalidation of autobiography, relational identities, intimacy and childhood) as well as the formalism that finds such writers lacking, it would ap-

In Search of 'Male' Poets

pear that that the protection of 'standards' implied in the dismissal of such poets involves more than monitoring poetic 'purity'. It also involves removing the threat of assailed boundaries from the world views, themes and methodologies of such writers, the threat of 'trembling between two worlds', on the frontier between subject and other. The stable boundaries of the subject's ego—an ego that depends for its formation and its assured continuance on the rejection (and subsequent re-dressing) of the feminine—are necessarily threatened by the revelation or presence of the maternal, of the relational and synaesthetic experiences that recall the emotional and physical dependence on the maternal body of early childhood. The following passage from Quinn's review reveals the anxiety that the invocation of a maternal ancestor who has not been remade by man, 'man-made,' can induce in a culture that depends on her concealment:

If the poet writes this spectral stuff and is a woman, what you will often get in addition are reflections on brave female figures in the past, hints at primeval contact with the earth (in Katie Donovan's case though the use of Celtic mythological figures), quiet indignation at the way *man*-made representations of women were often wilful distortions of the female figure (If the poet is Irish also, this usually comes from Adrienne Rich via Eavan Boland). As ideology this is compelling. What is objectionable is that these poets are epigones, repeating the stances and insights of their forebears with minimal variation. That which was once courage and transgression is now debased, and the poetry they write is a record of imaginative cowardice.¹³

The refusal to make the ancestral mother 'new', as she has been fashioned in patriarchal symbologies, condemns these poets to the fate of a pale imitator. Further, Quinn's piece recalls very powerfully a foundational moment in the period that produced the enlightenment subject of reason, and romanticism, as well as the form of the quarrel between poetry and politics we still rehearse today.

Irish Poetry After Feminism

The 'revolutionary' spectre recalls the monstrosity of 'feminised' mobs identified in Edmund Burke's first letter from *Letters on a Regicide Peace*:

Out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre, in far more terrific guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination, and subdued the fortitude of man [...] that hideous phantom overpowered those who could not believe it was possible she could at all exist.¹⁴

The feminised spectre here, who has 'overpowered the imagination' and subdued the fortitude of man, and whose existence is all but impossible to 'believe', recalls a familiar formalist paradigm. The imagination as a protected 'aesthetic' space, defined by not being a political quarter, is clearly invoked here, and such an opposition is still raised in poetry criticism today as a means of protecting against the realisation of the subjective rights of those who are 'politically' outside the luxury of an 'aesthetic' space. All of these workshop women and their so-called poems and their ideology place the 'imagination' in danger of becoming a place of *ideology*, producing what is effectively agitprop. Quinn's list of 'mistakes' made by the poet, appeals to a standard that measures poetry by accuracy and precision, which powerfully recalls Pound's writings on the role of art, artists and the nation. The poet Mary O'Donnell stands accused of 'imprecision of phrasing and imagery', 'minor inaccuracy', 'imagistic blundering' and depriving 'us of whole worlds of emotion and intellect'.¹⁵

This 'inaccurate' art is not simply loose, but bad, bad, bad (naughty) art, and according to Pound: 'bad art is inaccurate art', for it is 'art that makes false reports'. Not only is it bad, but it is immoral:

Bad art is immoral art... good art, however, immoral it is, is wholly a thing of virtue. Purely and simply, good art cannot be immoral. By good art I mean that which bears true witness, I mean art that is most precise.

In Search of 'Male' Poets

As well as recalling the immorality of imprecision that underwrote so much of Pound's writings, it recalls the other recurring theme in Pound's work, which was the medicalisation or curing of such immorality and imprecisions. When Quinn writes, 'it is not worth attending to the three poets under discussion', he could be a doctor pronouncing the futility of being in attendance on patients beyond cure. Given the framework of disease and health that so preoccupied Pound, the imagist dictum, calling for 'the direct treatment of the thing', reminds us of the direct medicalisation of the 'thing'. For, when the 'application of the word to the thing goes rotten', it has, according to Pound, repercussions for the 'whole machinery of social order and thought':

The function of literature has to do with maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself... when their work goes rotten—by that I don't mean they express indecorous thoughts—but when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of the word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive and bloated, the whole machinery of social and individual thought and order goes to pot.

And indeed this may very well read pot-belly. For the unhealthy 'matter' is slushy, excessive and bloated, recalling the state of womanliness and specifically pregnancy. Pound's work is notoriously punitive of 'excess' flesh and this corresponds to disgust with female bodies that approximate the state of pregnancy. Pregnancy, fat, the fullness of a mature female body is despicable within this 'economy'. Pound's description of the woman's body as 'brown meat' and 'raw meat',¹⁶ represents the maternal body as fit for being devoured (in a reversal of the fear of being devoured), as the matter to be cured, reconstituted and made new. The maternal body is the 'matter' of thought, and the body of the poem, the body of thought, as the boundary of the subject, must be monitored:

Irish Poetry After Feminism

The number of possible diseases in literature is perhaps not very great, the same afflictions crop up in widely separated countries. The good physician will recognise a malady even if the manifestations are superficially different.¹⁷

The 'ma-lady', the mother-lady, has to be transformed into a man. As a 'vaccine' Pound proposed a 'definite curriculum' to prevent against the possibility of pot-bellied literature, of the revelation of the maternal body.¹⁸ The modernist fear and fascination with female reproduction has been much documented by scholars, and is exemplified in Pound's anxieties about wetness and 'excessive' flesh, with what the critic K. K. Ruthven has called the 'anorexic aesthetic of Imagism and its dietary phobia about "superfluous" words'.¹⁹ In 1918 Pound declared himself 'not wildly anti-feminist' but still 'to be convinced that any woman ever invented anything in the arts'.²⁰ Doubting woman's ability to 'invent' alongside the great inventors is tied to Pound's setting male intellectual self-birth against the materiality of female birth in Canto XXIX when he tells 'milady' that 'anything properly made' is 'made in your belly or in my mind'.²¹ Ruthven notes that Pound and Williams both 'liked women, but whether either of them thought that any woman had *it in her to* [my emphasis] be a really first rate poet I doubt'.²² This 'it' that they doubted was *in woman* was in fact *in her*. What woman did *have in her* was a womb, but as the imagination became the site of the fetishised male creative womb, hers had to be annulled. Ruthven observes that Pound responds to the 'strong-mindedness' of women writers he didn't fancy by ridiculing their bodies',²³ but it was a very specific type of ridicule: he calls her a 'tub of old gut',²⁴ an empty and rotting container. Such anxieties involved appropriating the act of birth to the poet or poet/critic themselves as exemplified by Pound's exhortation that for himself he wanted poetry to be, 'harder' and 'closer to the bone', and 'free from emotional slither'.²⁵ This echoes both a dry, or forced sexual entry in which there is no 'slither', no reciprocity in the act of lovemaking, *and* a dry birth or a caesarean section. Pound's desire for the free verse of modern poetry to be more tumescent than the

In Search of 'Male' Poets

'flaccid varieties that preceded [*vers libre*]²⁶ is also a desire to dissociate itself from the softness of the mother's body.

Whilst Pound famously admonished poets not to be beholden to 'influence',²⁷ his exhortation was to remake the ancestor in an agon that would then realign the rebel poet with the father's culture. Alan Durant, in *Ezra Pound, Identity in Crisis: A Fundamental Reassessment of the Poet and his Work*, notes that Imagist techniques that 'assert[ed an] *a priori* existence of the signified to the signifier'—in other words that didn't remake the mother—were what Pound later called 'mushy technique'.²⁸ In order to defend against such mush and slither Pound figured himself as a cæsarean 'midwife' whose 'stroke' of the knife was not to be impeded by any natural labours, any contracting agency on the part of the matter. Thomas Docherty refers to Pound's editorship as the performance of 'savage cæsarean operations'²⁹ implying not only an 'unnatural' birth, but a dry linguistic—that is, an oedipal birth—in which the mother is rewritten as the father. Docherty cites the poem Pound used to describe the appearance of *The Waste Land*, that very specifically rewrites Eliot as the mother of the poem that Pound himself delivers:

These are the poems of Eliot
By the Uranian Muse begot;
A Man their Mother was,
A Muse their Sire.

How did the printed Infancies result
From Nuptials thus doubly Difficult?
If you must needs enquire
Know Diligent reader
That on each Occasion
Ezra performed the Cæsarean Operation...³⁰

In this instance, Pound is both the deliverer *and* the artificial inseminator, as on *each* occasion he performed the 'cæsarean operation'. The naming of Eliot as mother, and the midwifery performed by Pound very clearly, like Plato's metaphor of the cave, and

Irish Poetry After Feminism

Whitman's exuberant self-creation, use the language of birth to describe poetic creation. The use of this template to express creative processes in itself is neither wrong nor suspicious, but coupled with the need to dispense with the maternal body, to dispense with the matter as waste, as old gut, produces a masculinist poetic economy and understanding of tradition in which women can play only a problematic and limited part. And one of the results of this is that women's traditions seen separately alongside men's, without dialogue between them and mutual deconstruction, are necessarily considered derivative and epigonic. Indeed when poetry by women is read as 'not making the mother new', then the result is, as Quinn argues, a grand tradition of mindless imitation: 'many of these poets blur into one another to create a grand anthology of derivative-ness'.³¹ Ironically, it would appear that for a male tradition of influence and originality that depends on impersonation of the mother, women 'impersonating' poet mothers, cannot be tolerated, as it is too powerful a revelation of the original impersonation. Thus women poets often stand accused of being too 'literal', too corporeal, too obsessed with the workings of female bodies. Criticism of women poets often assumes that the speaking voice and the poet are coterminous and lacking the dramatic disjunction of 'impersonation', that is rarely challenged in the work of male poets. Such poets must necessarily be found unable to influence, inspire, in other words, unable fundamentally to procreate to 're-create', the original of themselves.

IV

This is the formalist paradigm that underwrites Crotty's historicising of the period covered in his essay. He wishes to challenge the truth claims of a nationalist lineage of writing, involving blood sacrifice, by suggesting other lineages. Equally, Crotty designates importance by measuring the extent to which a writer shaped subsequent poets: he evaluates works in terms of influence, both chronological and diachronic. And, in the absence of any *evidence* of influence or relationship, foreshadowings are produced or inferred

In Search of 'Male' Poets

and connections forged. 'Lasting', 'lastingly' and 'influence' 'anticipates', 'foreshadows', are all words of praise in Crotty's value system, and are often applied to the otherwise hopeless metrical case of a male poet, to rescue him from obscurity and place him on the timeline of a tradition of masculine influences. Obscurity here it seems means not having anyone to 'imitate' or 'vary' you.

Crotty considers the revival period as a period of latency for the politics if not the literature of the Free State, and he distinguishes between revival of something dormant or dead, and re-birth. However, he misses the invitation opened by his focus on the term renaissance terms of gender relations. Colin Graham, in his essay, 'Literary Historiography', notes the tendency to treat the revival period as a 'first birth', as a 'beginning',³² and Crotty's essay is no exception to this rule as metaphors of gestation and birth abound. He writes that examination of the lesser revival poets, 'throws valuable light on the nature of the cultural matrix from which more lastingly interesting writers, from J. M. Synge and Joyce to Kavanagh, and Louis MacNiece, successfully struggled to emerge.'³³ To set up revival poets as the context and semi-predecessors to Synge, Joyce, Kavanagh and MacNiece, means that the women are immediately cast at a divergent angle to this sure line. Whereas the relationships between male poets are considered in terms of patriarchal influence, generations of women poets are not arranged in a precedential relationship to male poets—that is, as mother poets to Kavanagh et al., nor as mother poets to the daughters of the succeeding generations—but identified synchronically as sisters, even when the relationship is actually intergenerational. Crotty writes that,

though the achievement of women poets in Ireland in the years from the fall of Parnell to the setting up of the Free State must realistically be seen as modest in the extreme, the falling off in literary production by their sisters in the remainder of the period covered by this essay may be taken as an indication of the cultural shrinkage that accompanied the settling in of the new institutional structures on either side of the border.³⁴

Irish Poetry After Feminism

Sisters arranged synchronically do not reproduce. In other words they are not connected to any chain of literary history based on influence, foreshadowing and ancestral connection. The ability to reproduce is demonstrated in the poet's achievement of 'vitality', vigour, 'strength', force, and rigour—all demonstrated by mastery of form, by command of versification and metre, by disciplining the matter of the poem: terms all derived from Leavis's ideas on life force in a poem.

The gendered hierarchialising of attributes in this dialectic does not need spelling out and is an argument well rehearsed in many other places. What is interesting is how this binary structures the tradition to such an extent that women writers are always at right or wrong angles to it. For the woman poets, read as merely derivative, fail to be derived from, lacking the vitality and command sufficient to produce a lineage. The supposed anaemia of their work, is perhaps a condition of the bloodlessness of the critic's response to their work. For instance, Nora Hopper Chesson's work is described as afflicted by 'ethereal, almost vapid verbal textures'.³⁵ Ethna Carbery's quite powerful and interesting poem, the 'The Love Talker' is described as putting 'folk materials to *reasonably* effective use',³⁶ and Katharine Tynan as 'not an *entirely* doctrinaire or predictable poet'.³⁷ Such qualifications are everywhere, as well as a tendency to find the work of this 'body', 'women poets of the revival', for the most part, incontinent. Each is evaluated on her technical competence, and for the most part found lacking: Dora Sigerson Shorter uses 'rudimentary ballad quatrains', Susan Mitchell 'rough and ready versification', Mary Devenport O'Neill's rhyming is 'rather trite' (although she is exempt from 'emotional incontinence'), and Salkeld's work as 'unfluent', and characterised by 'jerky movements and nervous syntax'.³⁸ Exceptionally, Gore-Booth achieves a terseness, but this, according to the author's speculations, may simply be the mark of her class as opposed to any conscious craft or talent (he brackets an interrogative '(class-derived?)' between 'achieves' and 'terseness', the same terseness he notes was 'uncharacteristic' of poetry by Irish women of the period).³⁹

Whereas the work of lesser male writers can be redeemed by an engagement with concerns outside the self—considered central to

In Search of 'Male' Poets

this version of history such as the Rising of 1916, the Great War, and religious concerns—the poetry by women is found solipsistically self-enclosed. McGill's poems despite 'overemphatic rhythms, and stale phrasing', are 'not entirely without interest', because he spent the war years as a stretcher-bearer with the London Irish Rifles. Again, Hopper Chesson is found wanting because of her 'repeated insistence that the empirical domain has less reality than a dimly apprehended inner realm',⁴⁰ and Blanaid Salkeld is considered 'obsessive'.⁴¹ Hopper Chesson, along with Sigerson Shorter are described as 'emphatically secondary poets' (the emphasis presumably to remind us that they are 'even lesser' than the collected company), while Ethna Carbery and Alice Milligan are 'predictable propagandists', the predictability being a condition of their natural tendency to imitation, also to be found in Emily Lawless's work, which is prey to her 'mindless recycling', of Celtic stereotypes. Hopper Chesson, described as 'something of an historical oddity', who 'fell under the sway of the revival', is merely derivative of Yeats, and Salkeld is described as 'odd but individual', enough to merit a headline mention here. However, unlike the other poets dealt with in her section, she is not connected to anyone else, in contrast to Brian Coffey, who Crotty also excoriates (he is described as 'bland to the point of featurelessness'), but who nevertheless is saved from historical 'oddity-ness' by 'a minimalist style based on repetition and variation that is interesting insofar as it *anticipates* [my italics] the (much more musical) lyric mode that would be developed by Coffey's friend Beckett some years later'.⁴² Coffey manages not only some 'variation', but also some offspring, whereas the female poets invoked, listed and evaluated are read as being without fruit, and can thus be dismissed so that the lesser male poets may be distinguished in relation to one another. Crotty is considerably gentler on the stylistic sins of the male poets under consideration, because although often found 'anæmic', 'vatic' and 'lifeless', they still manage to become 'memorable' in some way because of a biographical detail, anomalous subject matter, some striking lines, or because they anticipate somebody better. They find a place in memory and tradition by virtue of some redemptive feature. And these moments or lines can and do, to quote Crotty on

Irish Poetry After Feminism

Francis Ledwidge, 'come to serve as the author's own epitaph'.⁴³ McGreevy, is understood not as bad, or merely derivative, but as simply misguided, having 'miss[ed] his true vocation as a lyric poet'. This suggestion of a compensatory agency behind the work capable of better is demonstrated by none of the women under review. And Ledwidge, whose work lacks an 'insufficiently forceful nature' to have any 'direction', is yet self-aware and successful in places, and able to provide an elegy for himself.

And, whilst the quite wonderful Winifred Letts gets only two short sentences, which acknowledge her aesthetic strengths as well as the broad range of her themes and her committed politics, Seamus O'Sullivan's 'urban lyrics, which 'may be of little formal or rhythmical interest', 'provide *memorable* [my emphasis] vignette's of working class and lower working class life in Dublin in the early twentieth century', and his work is comparatively considered in reasonable detail.⁴⁴ Letts's work also provided such memorable vignettes of Belfast working class life, and yet, despite this and her obvious aesthetic accomplishments she merits almost no time at all. *Æ* may not be much of a poet either, but he still has the 'phrase making power', that mysteriously manages to escape all the women poets discussed here, a talent that is deployed with sufficient care to 'facilitate a moment of lyric gravitas unsurpassed by any of his contemporaries other than Yeats.'⁴⁵ Surely, amongst all of the bad verse written by the women poets, a 'moment of lyric gravitas' can be found? Synge's poems boast a 'muscular robustness' which are of '*continuing* [my italics] literary interest'.⁴⁶ A long meditation on T. W. Rolleston's 'The Dead at Clonmacnoise', foregrounds the 'famous generations', and thus the imperative of masculinist inter-generationality that underwrites this history. Although the age of high modernism has passed, its legacy lives on in its bequest—derived from a long history of metaphorical male labours in the arts—of the myth of the self-birthing male poet, and the fetishised poetic imagination/womb, and the privileging of a self-sufficiency that is illusory. The view that the tradition creates itself, or that the poetry is itself its own progenitor represses and reveals the mother in defence of a tradition in which women can have no part except as she who cannot properly take part.

In Search of 'Male' Poets

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Harvey, *Ventriloquised Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 78.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
3. Katharine Eisaman Maus, 'A Womb of His Own: Male Renaissance Poets in a Female Body', *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. James Turner Grantham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 266-89.
4. Katharine Eisaman Maus writes that 'Sidney and Johnson both identify themselves with a pregnant female body, struggling to "deliver", to "express," an interior fullness' (p. 275). The act of poetic creation seems to require a reference to an inside even as that inside is being externalised, as the difference between inside and outside is transgressed or annihilated.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
7. Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 11.
8. Isobel Armstrong, 'The Gush of the Feminine; How Can We Read Women's Poetry of the Romantic Period', *Romantic Women Writers*, ed. Paula R. Feldman (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), p. 15.
9. Patrick Crotty, 'The Irish Renaissance, 1890-1940: Poetry in English', *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature Vol. II: 1890-2000*, eds Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 53.
10. Justin Quinn, rev. of Catherine Phil McCarthy's *The Blue Globe*, Mary O'Donnell's *Unlegendary Heroes* and Katie Donovan's *Entering the Mare*. This appeared in a special edition of *Verse on Irish Women Poets*, edited by Vona Groaoke. *Verse* 16.2 (1999), pp. 133-35.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
12. Patricia Waugh, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory', pp. 189-204, *Postmodernism: A*

Irish Poetry After Feminism

- Reader*, ed. Patricia Waugh (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), p. 203.
13. Quinn, p. 133.
 14. From *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796), Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 9.
 15. Quinn, p. 133.
 16. K. K. Ruthven, *Ezra Pound as a Literary Critic* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 106.
 17. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (Canada: McClelland and Stewart, 1954), p. 24.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
 19. Ruthven, p. 107.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
 25. Alan Durant, *Ezra Pound, Identity in Crisis: A Fundamental Reassessment of the Poet and his Work* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 22.
 26. Pound, p. 3.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 28. Durant, p. 23.
 29. Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism/postmarxism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 150.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
 31. Quinn, p. 133.
 32. Colin Graham, 'Literary Historiography, 1890-2000', *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature Vol. II: 1890-2000*, eds Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 562-98.
 33. Crotty, p. 53.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

In Search of 'Male' Poets

38. *Ibid.*, p.100.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 75.