

MARYNA ROMANETS

Cartographers of Desire: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill Versus the Love Canon in Irish Poetry

One of the most widely known and internationally acclaimed contemporary Irish poets, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill chooses to write in Irish, in a minoritized language in Ireland whose status she defines as “precarious” in her aptly titled article “Why I Choose to Write in Irish, The Corpse That Sits Up and Talks Back” (3). Together with this language of an awesome beauty and infinity of tonalities, she has inherited contrapuntal symbolic territories of the Gaelic tradition, with its multilayered psychohistorical and sociocultural patterns deposited in literature. A writer of enviable emotional intensity and range, Ní Dhomhnaill segments them to produce new conjunctures, as well as engages in an ongoing epistemic dialogue with a vast array of contemporary textual production by subversively deploying its transmigrating imagery, motifs, and tropes. Her poetic transpositions that involve an exuberant interplay along both syn chronic and diachronic axes destabilize culturally recognizable significations and open up the possibility for further iconoclastic readings and meanings.

Through a discussion of the representation of the female body as land — one of the Ur-metaphors which is rooted in the originary etiological myths (Lewes 3) and has quite predictably evolved into a pseudogeographic locus for the articulation of desire — I intend here to examine the correlation between Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry and certain male master narratives. In addition to cross-gender intertextual dynamics, my paper tangentially deals with another aspect of an ambivalent Irish cultural matrix that is also characterized by asymmetrical power relations: the inter-crossings and frictions between Anglo-Irish mainstream and literature in Irish, which is relegated to opaque zones of peripherality. I am interested in the ways Ní Dhomhnaill calls

into question the procedures of representation implemented by hegemonic traditions; in the strategies she uses to reshape an entire territory on which images circulate; in Irish psychohistoric sources she draws on; and in her construction of new, reterritorialized discursive cartograms.

Among specific usages of female bodies as territories in the symbolic production of Western culture, gendering an uncharted landscape as feminine and equating woman with untrodden desiring-zones have undiminishable surplus value. While focussing on the forms of encoding of male desire in European literature within various historical and geographical frameworks, Klaus Theweleit emphasizes that as long as "the body of woman continues to serve as a territory of desire in place of the body of the earth, which is withheld, there is no need for historical images to die away" (359). In the case of Ireland, where the collective psychological paradigm has been determined to a considerable extent by a traumatic sense of history, the land traditionally allegorized as woman is "laden with a history and mythology of invasion, dispossession, plantation, famine, eviction, land wars, emigration, and rural depopulation" (Nash 244).

Emblematising the earth's body as the body of infinite womanhood confines woman to a representational function that reduces her world to the cyclical time of nature. The female body traversed by relentless mapmakers, converting its curved spaces into flat charts, is allotted to the place both of a body outside discourse and of the site for the production and operation of power. Structuring, charting, manipulating, and restricting desire by personalizing it in woman and thus territorializing it into sexuality, dominant cultural formations provide a guiding metaphor for males as avatars of desire and conquerors of "virgin territories" instrumental in affirming an ideology of control.

Ní Dhomhnaill surveys the desiring-territories of texts authored by men, conducting her study into products of what might be called an unconscious intertextuality in flows of male desire. She navigates across the grids established by hegemonic cultural cartographies, turning into a free-floating subject who is constantly trying on the voices and masks of the canonic repertoires. The poet undertakes the project of conceptual reterritorialization by exercising the power to redefine the borders and expand the limits of existing cultural maps. Her poetic territory becomes a cognitive matrix for redrawing the map of male supremacist culture in which a man transgresses

marked borders, violating laws and boundaries, making the territory his possession, and claiming exclusive rights to charter, define, and control.

Ní Dhomhnaill explores such a strict conceptual gridiron according to which man and woman inhabit differently defined spaces in "Amhrán An Fhir Óig" / "Young Man's Song." Her pastiche, where woman is metaphorically a stationary landform and man is a dynamic agent who moves freely on and across feminine terrain, is comprised of the recurrent images in the male poetic repertoire and lexical clichés. The poem starts with the man's subconscious claim to dominate in intimate relations, placing both hands on the woman's territory, on her breasts. Thus, he becomes a carrier of the dominance-oriented strategies of objectification in which women are reduced to the parts of their bodies, with breasts as the primary signifiers of womanliness, signals of sexual specificity, and symbols of female sexuality. According to the male erotic code, this territory has to be conquered first among the female strongholds. Ní Dhomhnaill's young man begins to penetrate feminine domain tactilely; his persistence is expressed by paradigmatic repetition that becomes a formative element of the following parallel constructions in symmetrically positioned textual blocks. The anaphoric positions in vertical structure operate on the basis of commonly used, stereotypical imagery, combining the poetic fetishization of woman's body which runs through the canon with a Gaelic resonance based on the author's knowledge of folklore:

Sníonn do chneas
chomh bán le sneachta,
chomh geal le haol,
chomh mín leis an táth lín.¹
(*Selected Poems* 80)

your skin flows –
as white as snow
as bright as lime
as fine as a bunch of flax. (81)

The poem draws on the literary formulae of the Gaelic love songs that express the need of the body for an unfettered sexual life and are characterized by physical realism, vibrant sexuality, and directness of communication (Kiberd, *Irish Classics* 306-09). However, the strategy of employing this trite figurative language fixed in the oral tradition clearly brings out the conventionality of male questing and the banality of an unpretentious

1 Except the translations included in the bilingual editions of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, I also use interlinear translations by Máirín Nic Dhiarmada.

rural courting. But this inanity of rural routine contains the dormant seeds of a pervasive will to conquest. They flourish in the climax of the poem and are associated with a masculine emblematic self-image of a ploughman accompanied by rural, intrusive phallic symbols (“céachta”/“plough,” “soc”/“sock”), which as signifiers have a crucial position in the language embodying the patriarchal law of the culture, and with subjective female images (“trines”/“trench,” “claise”/“furrow”) that relate woman’s body to an object of sexual tillage in yet another act in a precarious monodrama of vulnerable femininity assaulted by aggressive masculinity:

Osclaíonn trínse
faoi shoc mo chéachta.
Nuair a shroisim bun na claise
raidim. (*Selected Poems* 80)

A trench is opened up
by the sock of my plough.
When I reach the furrow’s end
I buck. (81)

Such male charting of the female body, read as an open space, an uncultivated virgin land that has to be courted and deflowered, equivocally celebrates the act of penetration when a horizontal movement changes its vector and becomes vertical, ingressive, claiming male dominion. By deliberately restricting the poem to a rural background, Ní Dhomhnaill recasts the myth of virility *rusticana*, disabling recognizable tendencies in Irish poetry to romanticize and idealize pastoral pleasures. While employing forms, genres, and various systems of associated commonplaces that have been operative for centuries and by putting them back onto her poetic map, Ní Dhomhnaill reorders the continuum of tradition. Her positioning of rhetorical and figurative conventions outside of their cultural and historical contexts dissolves the boundaries that appeared impenetrable and inviolable, and also questions certain critical dogmas according to which literary process is a ceaseless flux.

The same system of imagery occurs in Michael Longley’s “Furrows,” a poem with explicit sexual implications, where the images of a woman and the earth are interchangeable:

My arm supporting your spine
I lay you out beneath me
Until it is your knuckles,
The small bones of foot and hand
Strewing a field where the plough
Swerves and my horses stumble. (62)

The semantic structure operates within the same lexico-semantic field as in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem. The images of the field and plough are introduced in the penultimate line, and “my horses stumble” echoes “raidim”/“I buck.” The appearance of the equine image in male/female relations is not just a conventional accessory to create a “rustic” atmosphere. Generally, it is a masculine and “heroic” symbol par excellence. Another source of this image is the ritualistic representation of a king as a stallion with great sexual power in ancient Irish inaugural ceremonies that involved a symbolic act of mating of the king with the land of Ireland (Green 187). This allusion turns Ní Dhomhnaill’s young man into a degenerate descendant of the royalty of ancient lore by providing him with an archetypal counterpart.

“Amhrán An Fhir Oig” / “Young Man’s Song” penetratingly captures the logic of male conquest: its violence, latent in the initial stanza, begins to snowball. The final stanza fuses, semantically and thematically, the images of the first two, relating “do dhá nead éin”/“your two birds’ nests” (I) to “an robálaí nead”/“nest-robber” (III), and “faoi shoc mo chéachta”/“the sock of my plough” (II) to “an domhaintreabhadóir”/“world-plougher” (III). The man is compared to the *púca*, a mighty legendary spirit greatly feared in Ireland, appearing after nightfall to create harm and mischief in the guise of a dark horse with sulphurous yellow eyes, terrifying and destructive. This allusion illuminates “raidim”/“I buck” and at the same time reflects the satanic aspect of the horse when the mark of Satan is represented by the print of a horse’s hoof. The image of a ruinous hoof belonging to a “dhiabhal nóin”/“devil at noon” (*Selected Poems* 78, 79) recurs in Ní Dhomhnaill’s “Masculus Giganticus Hibernicus” which updates ancient mythico-ritual scenarios expressing the primeval feminine-masculine dyad.

This hypermasculine creature, *Masculus Giganticus Hibernicus*, a dangerous relic from the Iron Age, has been replicated for centuries. He sustains himself by plotting recurrent, self-asserting raids on female territory that keep him alive because they mirror his victories in other arenas. Besides the demonic dimension, he has another one created by the ambiguity of animal associations: “dhá spág crúb”/“two broad hooves,” “Is tánn tú ceáfrach, buacach, beannach”/“And you’re frisky, prancing, antlered” (*Selected Poems* 78, 79). On the one hand, these associations are consistent with the Satanic implications; on the other, they create an ironic effect. Moreover, the final metaphor of “grazing” assigns this devil of masculinist banality a herbivorous status:

Thiocfá suas ar aiteann
 nó ar an bhfraoch a fhásann
 ar leirgi grianmhara mná óige.
 (Selected Poems 78)

You'd live off the furze
 or the heather that grows
 on a young girl's sunny slopes. (79)

In "Masculus Giganticus Hibernicus," as opposed to "Amhrán An Fhír Óig"/"Young Man's Song," the speaker is an indignant female who neither conforms to the masculinist discursive regimes according to which man and woman comprise the duet where one of the partners is silent and acted upon, nor accepts the myth of a superior male whose identity is asserted against double marginality — the young girl's marginalized gender and marginalized territory, for furze and heather grow on what is often thought of as marginal land. Irony is also latent in the young man's monologue when he compares himself to a powerful *púca*, because the latter could appear in the shapes of a horse or a bull, a goat or an ass, all artiodactyla. Though horns of antlered animals represent force and virility and are associated with aggression and lasciviousness, attributing them to a goat diminishes their noble status, to say nothing of the proverbial characteristics of an ass. In addition, in some parts of the country *púca*, completely deprived of any sinister connotations, "is a sort of horse that fouls blackberries every year at Halloween, making them unfit to eat" (Bradley and Valiulis 301). In the conceptual doubles from both poems, desire for possession completely eradicates any possibility of enjoyment. Like his doppelgänger, *Masculus Giganticus*, the young man also lays claim to the female territory, his claim containing an allusion to the bog, one of Seamus Heaney's complex and ambivalent feminine key-symbols that has "bottomless" connotations.

There is another essential line of flight in this cultural pattern of female/male dichotomy. It reflects a certain tendency in Irish cultural nationalism to emphasize the manly and masculine aspects of the Irish character and to establish a Gaelic masculine ideal in opposition to the nineteenth-century definition of the Irish as "an essentially feminine race," where femininity as a racial trait (Celtic) was linked with subservience to the "masculine" (Anglo-Saxon) colonizer (Cairns and Richards, *Writing Ireland* 46-49). David Cairns and Shaun Richards point out the revival of the Cú Chulainn cult of heroic acts and masculine violence and write that the "need to ensure the stability of the Gael's hypermasculinity, through maintenance of Irish women's dependence, may explain why many nationalist groups, including the parliamentarians and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, were

determined to resist the enfranchisement of women" ("Tropes and Traps" 131-32). Although the campaign launched by the proponents of women's suffrage succeeded, and the 1922 Constitution granted women full voting rights, Éamon de Valera's Constitution of 1937 redefined woman's role "in purely maternal and domestic terms" (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 403). Whereas one may argue that Article 41 of the Constitution could be read as the acknowledgement of the importance of women's household work and the assertion of their right not to work outside the home, the ban on married women in the professions and repressive laws in respect of deserted wives, widow's allowances, and the rights of single mothers severely curtailed women's freedoms (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 403-04). This strict enforcement of gender norms and the traditions of marriage and motherhood, which resulted in an increased intensity of social surveillance and control, insured Irish women's political marginalization and constitutionally sanctioned domestic subordination well into the 20th century. Until the re-emergence of the women's movement in the 1970s, which culminated in the divisive divorce and abortion nationwide referenda of the 1980s, the issues related to women's social status and roles in Irish society were not widely discussed. The outcomes of the 1980s referenda indicated no changes in public views; they upheld the ban on divorce and upgraded abortion from illegal to unconstitutional (O'Connor 74). In the second divorce referendum in 1995 the proponents to end the sixty-year-old constitutional ban on divorce won by "the narrowest of margins" (Bradley and Valiulis 275).

Both "Amhrán An Fhír Óig"/"Young Man's Song" and "Masculus Giganticus Hibernicus" acquire a double refraction through the prism of peculiarly (re)designed Irish identity. The colonial construction of Irishness was acknowledged as denigrating and substituted by a home-made counter-one, a mimicry of colonial masculinity. It turned out to be no less demeaning than the stereotype exported by the imperial centre, for it is also structured on the principle of subjugation and polarity (masculinity vs femininity).

Ní Dhomhnaill's precision in reflecting the male perception of the female world and the female body, the associations evoked by sexual relations, and the male estimation of himself as an explorer, tiller, disturber, and aggressor provides a point of stability from which she can make incursions on and loot freely from dominant poetic discourses. But her self-representational equation of body with land reaches far beyond the conventional masculinist poetic definitions of women as the passive and silent embodiments of matter when

her vision of corporeal landscape is translated into a dream image in “Cailleah”/“Hag.” Once the repressive forces of conscious control are relaxed, allowing the content of the unconscious to rise to the surface, the speaker’s formative memory, incorporated into a massive landform, breaks out of its confinement. She regresses to a suprahumanized landscape which she projects herself onto and identifies herself with:

Taibhriodh dom gur mé an talamh, Once I dreamt I was the earth,
gur mé paróiste Fionntrá the parish of Ventry its length and breadth,
ar a fhaid is ar a leithead, east and west, as far as it runs ... (135)
soir, siar, faoi mar a shíneann sí.
(*Pharaoh's Daughter* 134)

The dream abolishes conventional time and space, presenting the Self distorted and magnified. Her vista blends natural and human shapes, place names and parts of her body. Ní Dhomhnaill’s somnambulist cartographer charts her parish-of-Ventry-of-her-childhood-as-body map, sinking into predictive visions of dream quests and searches for omens from legend and myth. Her vision extends its hallucinatory hold beyond the borders of the dream, and draws into the orbit of the speaker’s hypnologic experiences another participant. It is her daughter who becomes her mother’s double and a mirror through which the speaker’s twilight state of consciousness, evoking the invisible, externalizes itself, though in a horrific form. In this Ní Dhomhnaill brings several experiential layers together; they collapse into each other and correlate the domains of dream and reality, myth and reality, past and present, a dream of childhood and a child both literally and metaphorically. While at the beginning the body is desexualized and emotionally neutral, further it acquires distinct feminine parameters that are terrifying and threatening. A mountain, heaving like a giantess with swaying breasts, who tries to gobble up the speaker’s daughter, reminds us of Celtic folk tales about cannibalistic ogresses consuming baby flesh. Here, a confusion of the fields of representation, imaginary-real-symbolic, takes place. The dream world provides the supplies of unconscious energy whose capricious volatility breaks through in the “real” stanza:

Bhí an taibhreamh chomh beo That dream was so real
nuair a dhúisíos ar maidin that when I woke next morning

gur fhéachas síos féachaint an raibh, I glanced down to see if, perchance,
de sheans, mo dhá chois fluich. my feet were still wet. (135)
(*Pharaoh's Daughter* 134)

The reality is presented in a surrealistically chimeric form of broken associations. It is difficult to say whether her dream contaminates reality or vice versa: the border line between them is vague.

Ní Dhomhnaill’s dream, possessing multiple figurativeness, invites various interpretations. It may be read as a body-text which establishes the relationship between the Irish mind and body and tries to negotiate it because, as Cheryl Herr writes, “Ireland has literally eroded, in the sphere of representations that constitute social identity, a comfortable sense of the body; in tradition as well as in colonial and postcolonial Ireland, the body has frequently been associated representationally with danger...” (6-7). Or the body may become near-Gothic exaggeration, or it may appropriate a popular mode of representation in literary tradition, or may evoke primordial images of collective unconsciousness. The title is also suggestive, as “cailleach”/“hag” relates the poem to numerous significant hags of Irish mythology and folklore, primarily to the *Cailleach Bherri*, the Hag of Berre, shaper and guardian of the earth, a giantess performing a geotectonic function. Then come ambivalent, multifaceted hags who undergo metamorphosis like a hideous hag from an origin-myth about Niall, where she is transformed into a beautiful woman who declares that she is Sovereignty. Terrible war-goddesses, recurrent in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems, also change their image from that of a mature woman to a beautiful young girl or to a hideous old hag, or, of course, Kathleen Ní Houlihan, or a *spéar bhean*, an *aisling* sky woman, appearing in one of her emanations as a hag.

In her interview with Rebecca E. Wilson, Ní Dhomhnaill elaborates on the idea of negative femininity represented by the hag, which she calls “Hag Energy,” the quality that has not been eradicated from the Irish collective consciousness, as it has in most cultures (154). It is the *cailleach*, a shiftable hag, who is her female muse. This invariably ugly female spirit, inhabiting every road intersection in Ireland, nourishes her poetic resources and is a medium in her “response[s] to the unspeakable.” Her hag energy is something “that destroys you, creates psychic dismemberment literally, sends teeth and hands and legs flying all over the place” (153). Ní Dhomhnaill’s hag figure uncomfortably intrudes into the terrain of conventional ideas and represen-

tations of a sublime emblematic muse that has been inspiring poets for centuries.

The tendency to employ generic plot and imagery in an exploration of the morphology of body/land is explicit in both Ní Dhomhnaill's "Oileán"/"Island" and Longley's "Galapagos." Both poets use a corporeal island as a ready-made framework by projecting open spaces of the body onto a natural landscape; both invent their bodyscapes to undertake metaphoric mappings of the regions of desire; both present a map-like body view. The image of the island itself is underlaid with multiple connotations, for it reflects the Irish insular psychology, is one of the key symbols of Celtic mythology where it embodies paradise, and has been reduplicated in the Irish literary heritage since ancient times.

The lexical composition of Ní Dhomhnaill's "Oileán"/"Island" is an organic lexico-semantic field with a semantic dominant "water." This recurrent image incorporates time and space and functions both as a marker of the text's coherence and as the nucleus of its structure. In this the poet draws on tradition, in which water is regenerative, essential for life, fertility, and healing in the Celtic religion, and on the depth and mystery of water as the supreme symbol of the feminine in Irish mythology. "Oileán"/"Island" begins with a panoramic view of the body in the great ocean exposed to the speaker's cartographic eye. The poem is structured on an antithetic principle that incorporates a single theme: the lover ("fuarán"/"a cooling drink," "deoch slánaithe"/"a healing drink") — the poetic persona ("i lár mo bheirfin"/"when I was burning," "sa bhfiabhras"/"when I was feverish") (*Selected Poems* 70, 71). Contrasting pairs create a rich and contradictory spectrum of sensual perceptions that run like an electric charge between two opposite poles delineated along bipolar semantic and gender axes, providing an exchange of pleasure as inexhaustible as nature. Ní Dhomhnaill consistently exploits water imagery in her vista, fusing natural and human shapes to create a refracting aquatic surface for sunlight.

The opening lines of the three initial stanzas form the following structural pattern:

Oileán is ea do chorp / Your body an island (I)
Toibreacha fíoruisce iad t'uisi / Your forehead a springwell (II)
Tá do dhá shúil / mar locha sléibhe / Your eyes / are mountain lakes (III)

Parallel constructions shape a "pictorial" part of the poem, traditionally romantic in its visual mode. It is static due to its lexical composition; nouns and adjectives preponderate over verbs. Much in its poetical arsenal — trite epithets and metaphors in the manner of established clichéd images — is appropriated from male poetry. Ní Dhomhnaill's subversive analytic mimicry, which allows her to "quote" freely from different sources, imparts parody to the text. Simultaneously, accumulated water imagery works to dissolve the solidities of conventional imagistic constructions.

In Longley's "Galapagos," the woman/island correlation may be considered as a double allusion in which both elements are interpreted by each other as in the surrealist game of *l'une dans l'autre*, the one in the other. This interchangeability of woman and land is characteristic of many of his exquisite amorous poems. As Peter McDonald contends, "[t]he processes involved in 'nature-' and 'love-' poetry are very similar in Longley, each necessitating a reverential exploration of new territory" (74). The poem adds yet another example to an impressive volume of male poetic production cited and analysed by Theweleit, supporting the scholar's statement that "in all European literature (and literature influenced by it), desire, if it flows at all, flows in a certain sense *through women*. In some way or other, it always flows in relation to the image of woman. (It is far rarer for it to flow *aimlessly*...)" (272).

Both poets' spatial definition is based on a cinematic representation of the island; but while Ní Dhomhnaill's is a panoramic shot permeated with images of fluidity, Longley's is a tracking one that narrates the body in a fragmentary fashion. "Galapagos" also starts descriptively, but more dynamically, by introducing the verb "scattered" in the first line. The word is loaded with energy and leads the verse straight into its subject: "Breasts, belly, knees, the mouth of Venus" (Longley 69).

Longley accentuates conventional symbols of female sexuality, which Ciaran Carson regards as archetypal, claiming them to be immanent to Celtic sensibility. "The Insular Celts" is a poem about the colonization of Ireland that also reflects Carson's fascination with maps. His first "mapmakers" establish their patterns of iconography of the Irish landscape by constructing a "sexual space" superimposed on the land, which becomes a double-valanced site for acquisition, subordination, and settlement:

They will come back to the warm earth
and call it by possessive names...
to hard hills of stone they will give

the words for breast ...
... to firm plains, flesh (379)

These “topographers” exercise their power of naming, a crucial aspect of both geographical discovery and rituals of conquest, and thus establish their proprietary claim over the territory, for, as Geoff King suggests, fixing names onto the map is “an act of conceptual appropriation inseparable from the seizure of the land itself” (28). By leaving their topographic tracks, they verbalize the uncharted space, converting a land into a coherent corporeal text for generations to read and utilize.

Opposing such surveying techniques in representing the female body, Ní Dhomhnaill romanticizes her personal geography, being concerned with forehead, eyes, and eyelashes. As if complying with the convention of patriarchal explications of sexuality that promote body-charting techniques restricted to genitals, Longley seems to apply mapping that is determined in advance. He observes fragmented, disunited parts of the female body: erotogenic zones, available for male penetration and knowledge. His selectively designed corporeal cartogram resembles in a way medieval portolan charts, used to map small areas for navigation purposes. Although magnetized by an exotic world of Galapagos, Longley’s speaker remains a scientist, classifying and categorizing as part of his rationalizing project. Under his taxonomic eye, a kind of prehistoric life of instincts emerges: the tortoise, which tends to live almost eternally; the iguana, with stable, unshifting eyes; the night-dwelling lemur. Natural, organic species inhabiting this feminized landscape emphasize its instinctiveness, unconsciousness, and sensuality completely divided from the mental or spiritual. All are “peculiar”; everything is in slow motion, almost immovable, unalterable; and time seems to have stood still. This wild, oscillated, insular world is invaded by its antagonist, a traditionally male protagonist, a scientist whose mind is ready to explore the/a female realm, explicitly emphasizing the binary mapping of the masculine progress-oriented civilization and the feminized natural unhistorical world.

The idea of a triumphant male intellect is intensified by the reference to the *Beagle*, an English frigate of the nineteenth century on which Charles Darwin carried out his naturalist research at a time when male explorers and navigators studied, described, and classified, and thus acquired control over unknown and portentous places, frequently associated with the fecundity of both aboriginal flora and women. By this Longley also evokes the great age of British Empire (and the golden age of imperial masculinity) engaged in

redrawing the world map. It is also worth mentioning that Darwinism and especially *The Descent of Man* were instrumental in clearly reinstating the view that civilization was driven by masculine reason and energy, demonstrating the physical, mental, and moral superiority of male over female to support the assumptions that were deeply ingrained in the social thought of the tradition (Siegel 205–06). Longley’s scientist is very much like an inquisitive nineteenth-century English gentlemen, a focal point in the evolution of the species: under the mythic sails of evolutionary theory, he embarks on an exploratory quest voyage constrained by the limits of phallogocentric cultural mappings. The poem also resorts to generally accepted use of gender in the discourse of discovery.

While Longley’s visual surveillance of island/woman, with desire as surveying instrument, implies latent violence suggested by metaphoric dismemberment, Heaney’s “Act of Union” shifts into the domain of blatantly inclement politics where the Anglo-Irish relations are represented in terms both of a gendered landscape and of a sexual act:

Your back is a firm line of eastern coast
And arms and legs are thrown
Beyond your gradual hills. I caress
The heaving province where our past has grown.
I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder
That you would neither cajole nor ignore. (*North* 49)

Female “bogland” is helplessly prostrated, limbs far apart, with no role except enforced submission, under the gaze and in the possession of the aggressive, warrior-like masculinity of an “imperial male” speaker with his assertively active lexicon and syntax. He inflicts pain that is like pulsating explosions within a mined territory, “rending,” “battering,” “burst[ing].” Besides the pain of childbirth, the description contains a more sexually violent variant of interpretation, that of rape, penetration, ejaculation. The connections among conquest, colonization, and rape and the employment of a traditional Irish poetic trope of “the rape of the (female) land by the (male) invader” (Matthews 119) are made even more explicit in Heaney’s poem “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” with its repetitive pattern of “possessed and repossessed . . . ruined maid” (*North* 47).

Both Heaney’s discourse of the perpetrator of violence and Longley’s discourse of discovery and desire differ from Ní Dhomhnaill’s

anthropomorphic island which is not specifically gendered. Her deterritorialization of sexuality erodes an established grid and nullifies the binarism of masculine and feminine. Her island is somehow becoming an island of a manly woman and of a womanly man; the description being essentially androgynous if compared to the fixed gender roles in other poems, for example, those addressed to a man, wherein she is very frank in emphasizing male virility. The author takes great delight in trying on different voices and gender roles — male in “Amhrán An Fhíor Óig”/“Young Man’s Song,” female in “Masculus Giganticus Hibernicus” and “Cailleach”/“Hag,” and “androgynous” in “Oileán”/“Island” — as if always teasing a reader with the question, “Who is speaking to whom?” She thus ensures herself the freedom to trespass assumed gender norms. Ní Dhomhnaill casts a seductive spell of metaphoric cross-dressing that ultimately leaves in suspense the definiteness of such constructs as sex and gender and any fixed character of subject-object relations.

The ambivalence of Ní Dhomhnaill’s corporeal island opens it to a disparate play of meanings. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, for example, insists that “Oileán”/“Island” “describes a man’s body,” and interprets it as Ní Dhomhnaill’s tribute to the “male muse” (186). Haberstroh reads the poem in terms of gender role reversal, in which an autonomous female subject of erotic desire directs and focuses her gaze on a male object. One may also assume that the island described in the poem is Inis na mBró or An Fear Marbh (The Dead Man) which looks like a man in repose, and is one of the Basket Islands situated off Ireland’s South West coast.

Deborah McWilliams Consalvo’s interpretation runs counter to the previous one, for she views the island as female basing her analysis on a highly eroticised English translation by John Montague. In fact, if read intertextually within European tradition, the poem clearly contains an abundance of images traditionally associated in male poetry, as Theweleit suggests, with woman as a territory for desire: woman-in-the-water, woman as a cooling stream, woman as a fountain man drinks from, vagina as wave, love as a sea voyage (283). In addition, Ní Dhomhnaill’s serene, almost puritanically chaste depiction is disturbed by the metaphor of ploughing, which is recurrent in her poetry and is correlated with the male perspective.

McWilliams Consalvo also links Ní Dhomhnaill’s island to the representation of “Irish fertility” (151). In this gender context, another reading may be possible, one that would equate the island with Ireland-as-body and

thus associate the poem with a traditional symbolic representation of the country as female, which derives from the sovereign goddess figure of Irish native tradition and from its modifications in medieval literature. In seventeenth-century poetry, Ireland was allegorized as woman as the result of the suppression of the indigenous Irish culture. Irish poets used this trope to establish a poetic convention where an emblematised female became a sky woman, *spéir bhean*, and the beloved was often substituted for Ireland in love lyrics. This allegory further evolved into the eighteenth-century classical poetic genre, *aisling*, which evasively allowed for the expression of political dissent through the erotic coding. Moreover, in one of her interviews, Ní Dhomhnaill alludes to the female muse. While speaking of this muse’s multiple appearances and shapes, she concludes:

The greatest muse in Ireland is the country — Eire, again seen as a woman, and the whole sovereignty of Ireland. That’s what lies deepest in our hearts here in Ireland. There has been an ongoing love affair between people and the land and the land and the people here for millennia. And we have lavished our imaginations on it until we have projected on to it the depths of our own psyches. (Wilson 153)

Is that where Ní Dhomhnaill is coming from in “Oileán”/“Island”? However, in the same interview, the poet also says, “But the muse doesn’t have to be either male or female” (Wilson 153), as if defying any urge to antithesis and producing the androgynous vision of the body whose gender boundaries are permeable and ambiguous.

The motif of a traveller or navigator, reminiscent of numerous voyage motifs in the Irish literary tradition, is also elaborately expressed in “Oileán”/“Island.” But if for Longley the traveller is a scientist, even on his way to the islands of enchantment, a sophisticated stranger who celebrates his intellect as he pays tribute to a body/island that is his to explore and discover in terms of masculinist epistemology, for Ní Dhomhnaill, the poetic persona is a romantic sailor. The “travelling” part of the poem is distinguished for its colour tonality defined by “bán/fionn”/“white,” a symbol of purity and surrender: “báidín fionndruine”/“a white bronze boat,” “na seolta boga bána / bogóideacha”/“the soft white / billowing sails” (*Selected Poems* 70, 71). White sails allude to a victorious journey as in the folktale of Céatach, Son of King Cor from Ireland, wherein white sails hoisted on his return from Greece should signal to his wife that he is alive, while black sails should signify his

death (O'Sullivan 48-49). White sails with a red touch of love and passion would move the bronze boat of the explorer-lover, its dynamics being enhanced by a graphic, spiral movement achieved through a manipulation of the word "cleite"/"feather," which slips and spins from one line to the other, occupying different positions to emphasize the aural quality of words:

gan <i>barrchleite</i> amach uirthi	not a feather out of place on it
ná <i>bunchleite</i> isteach uirthi	but one feather
ach aon <i>chleite</i> amháin	red feather with white back
droimeann dearg	making music
ag déanamh ceoil	to my self on board.... (71)
dom fhéin ar bord....	
(Selected Poems 70; my italics)	

The speaker is going to navigate under the billowing sails of Irish folkloric imagery, for Ní Dhomhnaill's description of the boat reproduces the recurrent passage from the legend, "Art, King of Leister," almost verbatim,² thus making the poem a collage of assorted images and textual blocks from oral tradition. Besides, a compressed repetition of the island image at the end, which completes the frame initiated by the opening line of the verse, brings to the surface the associations with both *aisling* and *immram*, the voyage to the Paradise of the Pagan Irish consistently reappearing on old maps.

Essential differences between the textual economy, dynamics, strategies, image production, and semantic valences in Ní Dhomhnaill and male authors become particularly illustrative in translations of her poetry from Irish into English by men. Comparative study of "Oileán" and its English variant by Montague demonstrates how and to what degree Ní Dhomhnaill's poetic reterritorializations are deterritorialized in the process of their decoding, recoding, interpretation, and "refraction" in the target cultural and linguistic system. The overall strategy in Montague's reshaping of Ní Dhomhnaill's textual territory consists in stylistic and semantic re-accentuation and intensification. Montague's approach creates an additional asymmetry between the source (Irish) and the target (English) text, which exists on its own anyway, inherent in the inter-connectedness and confrontation of Irish and Anglo-Irish

traditions. The following metaphor, for example, undergoes several transformations:

Original	Interlinear
Toibreacha fíoruisce iad t'uisí	Your forehead a spring well
tá íochtar fola orthu is uachtar meala.	mix of blood and honey.
Thabharfaidís fuarán dom	Could give me a cool drink
i lár mo bheirfin	should I be burning
is deoch slánaithe	and a healing drink
sa bhfiabhras.	should I have a fever.
(Pharaoh's Daughter 40)	

The liquidity of blood and honey in Ní Dhomhnaill is replaced by "deeps of blood, honey crests" (*Pharaoh's Daughter* 41), with distinct opposition of depth and surface in Montague's version. The polysemantic "crest," absent in the original, involves a change in paradigmatic view over the image. This change continues further with the insertion of extremely expressive metaphoric epithets: "A cooling fountain you furnish / in the furious, sweltering heat" (*Pharaoh's Daughter* 41). This develops the antithesis in the source text, stylistically emphasizing the first pair of opposites. The procedure unbalances the text, shifting its lexical, semantic, and stylistic weight. Both of the opposed images in the first pair acquire new dimensions. A well becomes a fountain with a visible upward motion through the surface. The laconic "bheirfin"/"burning" is transformed into "the furious, sweltering heat," and "ag glinniúint sna huiscí" / "sparkling in the waters," into "sparkles / in dark waters." The translator overemphasizes the binary logic of the poem, inserting contrastable planes of his own.

Montague's lexico-semantic and stylistic transformations influence the poem as a whole, stressing possible implications, and create a highly sexualized image of the body/island. That view is established in the initial stanza by the insertion of "nude" with all its erotic associations: "Your nude body is an island / asprawl on the ocean bed" (*Pharaoh's Daughter* 41). By modifying Ní Dhomhnaill's corporeal island with this particular attribute, Montague seems to emphasize conventionalized regimes that represent woman's body laid flat for exposure: nudity, as opposed to nakedness, is always, according to John Berger, placed on display, and that display is always for the male spectator (54). This body acknowledged as the object of lascivious desires is to a considerable extent excluded from erotics of exchange and becomes a site to

2 The description is reduplicated three times in the text of the legend (O'Sullivan 99, 101, 107).

narrate the sexuality of an active masculine lover. The lexical addition in translation pulls the whole set of elaborations into this particular erotic key. Thus, “mara móire” / “of great ocean” becomes “ocean bed,” to culminate in an impressive mirror-like image of “spread-eagled” under “seagulls’ wings,” like a bird in flight and its shadow, one male, one female, fused by an ornithometaphor. The image of the spread limbs, associated with the erotic spreading of a woman’s legs, and the introduction of an eagle V-shape — alongside other female triangles and great V’s ceaselessly reduplicated in Western culture — make the erotic even more explicit. All this is correlated to the original: “Tá do ghéaga spréite ar bhraillín / gléigeal os farraige faoileán” (*Pharaoh’s Daughter* 40) / “Your limbs are spread on a bright sheet / over a sea of gulls.” Montague’s erotic voyage logically ends in the climactical last stanza undercutting the ambiguity of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem:

Montague’s version	Original	Interlinear
... thrust through foaming seas and come beside you where you lie back, wistful, emerald, islanded. (<i>Pharaoh’s Daughter</i> 41, 43)	...threabhfainn trí fharraigí arda is thiocfainn chughat mar a luíonn tú uaigneach, iathghlas, oileánach. (40, 42)	I would plough through high seas and I would come to you where/as you lie lonely, emerald, islandlike.

Montague’s erotization is emphasized by Robert Welch as a shortcoming in an otherwise “elegant and well-crafted” translation. Having quoted the last stanza, Welch continues that, unfortunately, here translation interferes

with the intelligence and awareness of the original, in that the sexual note, which is inserted, distracts from the beautiful manoeuvre the poem is making. Nuala, in the poem, is translating Mangan (“Dark Rosaleen”) back into the Irish of Bardic poetry (“iathghlas, oileánach”), something the (male?) sexuality of the translation omits. (129)

Throughout the metatext, Montague’s development of erotic images of male desire consistently disturbs the original. Ní Dhomhnaill’s “Oileán” may be read as an expurgated “translation” of a male narrative into her own voice, for she “translates” into Irish all that has been translated out of it. Montague “translates” it back into male stereotypes. What was meant to be opposed arrives at its point of departure in translation. The implied proto-model and

the translator’s sexual sensibility are superimposed, thus reduplicating male eroticism at least two-fold and infecting the body of Ní Dhomhnaill’s text with a contagious germ of conventional male representation. The translator concretizes the potentially polyvalent source text by verbalizing its hypothetic implications, and cuts off possible strings of associations, based on the multiplicity of interpretative variants, limiting the poetic perception by one suggested invariant reading.

It must be acknowledged that Montague’s interpretation is very appealing. McWilliams Consalvo, for example, writes appreciatively how his version captures “explicitly the eroticism of the poet’s description” through representation of the act of physical penetration (151). The line between the translation and the original text starts disappearing, and, finally, the target text becomes privileged over the original. Ní Dhomhnaill is completely absorbed by Montague in McWilliams Consalvo’s statement that “Ní Dhomhnaill couples *images of ejaculation* (the ‘*thrust through foaming seas*’) [my italics] with those of the earth-mother cavity ... to represent Irish fertility” (151).

Montague has established his control over the original by imposing his poetic sensibility upon the source text to provide interpretative orientations and to insure the dominance of masculine image-making procedures. Without trying to impose a restricting demand of a formal closeness of translation to the source language text as the only criterion of its excellence, I suggest that such interventions should be minimized and less intrusive. In the consistent raids on the original, the line between freedom of creative interpretation and violence against the author can be easily crossed. A high degree of mutation (which in the extreme turns into mutilation) results in a denial of the original’s sovereign right to signify. What does the reader see in this convexo-concave mirror which decreases the source text while magnifying the metatext? What happens to Ní Dhomhnaill’s meticulously delineated trajectories along which she moves while charting the map of her personal landscape, associating landscape and identity in her literary and symbolic appropriation of place? What happens to her corporeal islands that are palimpsests of different mappings, allowing for a proliferation of possible interpretations created by various aspects of literary tradition and cultural history?

Comparative analysis, however formally constructed the situation might seem and however limited the material is, gives grounds to conclude that Ní Dhomhnaill re-textualizes male models of imagery, bringing them to the extreme and thus creating implications of collaged travesty. She undertakes a

voyage, challenging prefabricated female identities, to accumulate and differentiate her poetic territory. Her quest narratives are opposed to conquest voyages like Longley's traditional discourse of the explorer, characterized by the invader's need for information, who sexually charts the land; to Heaney's enactment of political and colonial suppression and subordination in sexual terms; and to the map-making practices of Carson's Celtic discoverers who achieve dominion over the land by being granted the privilege of naming.

While utilizing body-as-land metaphor, with its whole anthropocentric entourage, Ní Dhomhnaill invents her inscape by examining the territory that underlies Irish poetry. In this she employs inherited imagistic and linguistic patterns and systems, conventional poetic genres, and folklore, merging the border between oral and written traditions and, correspondingly, between male and female spheres of literary influence. While she operates within the framework of a "minoritarian" map determined by the "Irishness" of her poetry, the male authors tend to accept majoritarian codes by adopting what Edward Said calls "great *topoi* of colonial culture" (30), the quest and conquest voyages, and by assuming the authority of European observer, scientist, traveller, and explorer.

For both Ní Dhomhnaill and male authors there is the final destination of their journeys, the other's territory. The tradition of depicting Ireland as a woman and as a female body may be explained by the fact that when chaos and destruction threaten, it is natural, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, to "draw an inflatable, portable territory," to put the territory on one's own body and territorialize it (320). A succession of invasions and the final colonization of Ireland, resulting in a multiple imposition of structures of external authority, developed this defensive strategema in the form of a desired body. The object of this projection is the essentialized female body, the body of the other, who becomes a rationale through which male identity (be it sexual, cultural, or national) is defined. This body has become an object of a double aggression to exterior malefactors and interior benefactors. The anthropomorphic, feminized, and sexualized territory/land is either exposed to a male gaze or subjected to intrusion. Opposed to this politics of representation, Ní Dhomhnaill's anthropomorphic and geomorphic configurations challenge gender-bound power dynamic. Her poetry, with its pluridimensional spaces and richly allusive lexico-semantic textures, charts the whole new territory of desire. Ní Dhomhnaill crosses patrolled borders of male poetic domains to engage in the conversion of her assemblages, her

citations, imitations, and reworkings of a wide range of literary conventions, themes, images, and tropes, into a new discursive form.

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