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

Ni Dhomhnaill explores such a strict conceptual gridiron according to which man and woman inhabit differently defined spaces in “Amhrán An Phrí Oidh” / “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 subordinating claims to dominance 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. Ni Dhomhnaill’s young man begins to penetrate feminine domain tacitly; 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:

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 canonical repertoires. The poet undertakes the project of conceptual retormalization 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

Snónn do chneas
chomh bain le sneachta,
chomh goel le haol,
chomh main lein an tairt liain.¹
(Selected Poetry 80)

your skin flows —
as white as snow
as bright as lune
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 unconfined sexual life and are characterized by physical realism, vibrant sexuality, and directness of communication (Kilduff, Irish Classics 396-99). However, the strategy of employing this triastic 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 Ni Dhomhnaill’s poetry, I also use interlinear translations by Máirtín Ó Duachadháin.
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 ("céachtú"/"plough," "soa"/"sock"), which as signifiers have a crucial position in the language embodying the patriarchal law of the culture, and with subjective female images ("trísm"/"trench," "caille"/"furrow") that relate woman’s body to an object of sexual usage in yet another act in a precursory monodrama of vulnerable femininity assaulted by aggressive masculinity:

Oscailte trine
faoi sheach sa cheacht.
Swear a thresin ban na claise
raidh. (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 chauvinism of the female body, read as an open space, an uncultivated virgin land that has to be courted and deflowered, unequivocally celebrates the act of penetration when a horizontal movement changes its vector and becomes vertical, invasive, claiming male dominance. By deliberately restricting the poem to a rural background, Ni Dhomhnaill recalls the myth of virility *nathana*, disabling recognizable tendencies in Irish poetry to romanticize and idealize pastoral pleasures. While employing forms, genres, and various systems of associated commonplace that have been operative for centuries and by putting them back onto her poetic map, Ni 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 Ni 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 Ni Dhomhnaill’s young man into a degenerate descendant of the royalty of ancient lore by providing him with an archetypal counterpart: “Amhrán An Fháit Óig” / “Young Man’s Song” penetrates capturing 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 t-nobhaí na ndúirt”/“nest-robber” (III), and “faoi sheach sa cheacht,” “the sock of my plough” (II) to “an domhanhnaíthadhúr”/“world-plougher” (III). The man is compared to the *puca*, a mighty legendary spirit greatly feared in Ireland, appearing after nightfall to cause 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 monstrous hoof belonging to a “diabhal róim”/“devil at noon” (Selected Poems 78, 79) recurs in Ni Dhomhnaill’s “Máisíc Gigaíc Ribeicic” which updates ancient mythico-ritual scenarios expressing the primeval feminine-masculine dyad.

This hypermasculine creature, *Máisíc Gigaíc Ribeicic*, 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 spáig críbh”/“two broad hooves,” “is tairm tó cieltach, busaich, 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 masculine banality a herbivorous status.
In “Máscalus Giganticus Hibernicus,” as opposed to “Amhrán An Phiar 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 duit 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 púcás, 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 púcás, completely deprived of any sinister connotations, “is a sort of horse that fouls blackberries every year at Halloween, making them unfit to eat” (Breadley and Valiulis 301). In the conceptual duality from both poems, desire for possession completely eradicates any possibility of enjoyment. Like the doppelganger, Máscalus 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 mainly 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 16-49). David Cairns and Shain 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” (“Trope and Trap” 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 403.4). 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 referendum of the 1980s, the issues related to women’s social roles and status in Irish society were not widely discussed. The outcomes of the 1980s referendum 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” (Breadley and Valiulis 275).

Both “Amhrán An Phiar Óig”/“Young Man’s Song” and Máscalus 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 miracy 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).

Ni 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
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. Ni Dhomhnaill’s somnambulist cartographer charts her panoply of Ventry’s childhood-as-body map, sinking into predictive visions of dream quests and searches for ormes 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 hypnagogic 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 Ni 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 ogres 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:

Bh an tábharraich chomh beo nuair a bhios ar madain

Thad dream was so real that when I woke next morning.

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

Ni Dhomhnaill’s dream, possessing multiple figuraiiveness, 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 “caileach” / “hag” relates the poem to numerous significant hags of Irish mythology and folklore, primarily to the Caileach Bhorna, the Hag of Berre, shaper and guardian of the earth, a giantess performing a geoeconomic function. Then come ambivalent, multifaceted hags who undergo metamorphosis like a hideous hag from an ongin-myth about Niall, where she is transformed into a beautiful woman who declares that she is Sovereignty. Terrible war-goddesses, recurrent in Ni 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 Ni Houlihan, an aird bhean, an ariling sky woman, appearing in one of her emanations as a hag.

In her interview with Rebecca E. Wilson, Ni 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 caileach, 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 “responder[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). Ni Dhomhnaill’s hag figure uncomfortably intrudes into the terrain of conventional ideas and represen-
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. Ni Dhomhnaill's sly 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 projection is based on a cinematic representation of the island; but while Ni 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 Ciarán 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, Ni 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-charming techniques restricted to genitals, Longley seems to apply mapping that is determined in advance. He observes fragmented, dismembered 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, unshuffling 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, immutable; 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 man 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 gentleman, 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 phallocentric 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 indelent 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 caress 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 “imperially male” speaker with his assertively active lexicon and syntax. He inflicts pain that is like pulsating explosions within a mined territory, “rending,” “battering,” “bursting.” 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) invaders” (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 Ni 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, when oneself is very frank in
emphasizing male virility. The author takes great delight in trying on different
voices and gender roles — male in “Amhrán An Phlait Oíg”/“Young Man’s
Song,” female in “Mascalus Gigantius Hibermcus” and “Caileach”/“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. Ni Dhomhnaill casts a seductive
spell of metaphorical 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 Ni 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 Ni
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 mBro or An Fear
Marbh (The Dead Man) which looks like a man in repose, and is one of the
Blasket 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 Theveleit 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, Ni 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 Ni 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 emblematized female became a sky
woman, airt bhrean, and the beloved was often substituted for Ireland in love
lyrics. This allegory further evolved into the eighteenth-century classical poetic
gene, aiting, which evasively allowed for the expression of political dissent
through the erotic coding. Moreover, in one of her interviews, Ni 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 — Ere, 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 Ni 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
mottos 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 Ni Dhomhnaill, the poetic persona
is a romantic sailor. The “travelling” part of the poem is distinguished for its
colour tonality defined by “bain/bonn”/“white,” a symbol of purity and
surrender; “isaidin Roinnechrn”/“a white bronze boat,” “a saolta boyo bara
/bogóideach,” “the soft white / billowing sails” (Selected Poems 70,71). White
sails allude to a victorious journey as in the folklore of Cúchulainn, Son of King
Con 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 “cleft” /“feather,” which slips and spits from one line to the other, occupying different positions to emphasize the aural quality of words:

gan bhorbhois amach uirthi
na bhanbhacht isteach uirthi
ach son chúite uirthi
droimeann deag
ag déanadh ceol
dom freisin ar bord... (Selected Poems 70; my italics)

The speaker is going to navigate under the billowing sails of Irish folkloric imagery, for Ni Dhomhnaill’s description of the boat reproduces the recurrent passage from the legend, “Art, King of Lesther,” almost verbatim, 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 immrama, 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 Ni 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 Ni 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 Ni Dhomhnaill’s textual territory consists in stylistic and semantic re-acculturation 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Interlinear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toisreacht Floruit na choc’ iúisi</td>
<td>Your forehead a spring well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ta iochtar (fola ortha in uachtar mealta.</td>
<td>mix of blood and honey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thabharfadh tuairim dom</td>
<td>Could give me a cool drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i fór mo bhearn</td>
<td>should I be burning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is deoch slánaithe</td>
<td>and a healing drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sa bhátharbrá.</td>
<td>should I have a fever.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(The liquidity of blood and honey in Ni 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 metaphorical 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 “bhearn” /“burning” is transformed into “the furious, sweltering heat,” and “ag ghlúimint sta iúisl” / “sparkling in the waters,” into “sparkles / in dark waters.” The translator overemphasizes the binary logic of the poem, inserting contrasting 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 / aspawl on the ocean bed” (Pharaoh’s Daughter 41). By modifying Ni 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
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 onomatopoeia. 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 intangibles and great V's ceaselessly reduplicated in Western culture — make the erotic even more explicit. All this is correlated to the original: "Tá do ghabhá spreite at bharruilín / géitléig os fostruin faolcaín" (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 climactic last stanza undercutting the ambiguity of Ni Dhomhnaill's poem:

Montague's version

Original

Interlinear

... the sea
through foaming seas
and come beside you
where you lie back,
withal, emerald, islanded.
(Phrase: Daughter 41, 43)

I would plough
through high seas
and I would come to you
where/as you lie
lonely, emerald, islanded.

Montague's eroticization 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, distorts from the beautiful manoeuvre the poem is making. Nolan, in the poem, is translating Mangan ("Dark Rosaleen") back into the Irish of bardic poetry ("tadhglas, olcennach"), something the (male) sexuality of the translation omits. (129)

Throughout the meta-text, Montague’s development of erotic images of male desire consistently disturbs the original. Ni 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 Ni Dhomhnaill's text with a contagious germ of conventional male representation. The translator concretizes the potentially polyvalent text source by verbalizing its hypothetical 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 set 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. Ni Dhomhnaill is completely absorbed by Montague in McWilliams Consalvo's statement that "Ni Dhomhnaill couples images of ejaculation (the 'thrust through foaming sea') [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 muton (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 Ni 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 Ni 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
enchantment, Ni 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 “manifestarian” map determined by the “Irishness” of her
poetry, the male authors tend to accept modernist codes by adopting what
Edward Said calls “great tops of colonial culture” (30), the quest and conquest
voyages, and by assuming the authority of European observer, scientist,
traveller, and explorer.

For both Ni 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 Deluze 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 invaders and the final
colonization of Ireland, resulting in a multiple imposition of structures of
external authority, developed this defensive strategems 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
(but 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 its scrutiny. Opposed to this politics of
representation, Ni Dhomhnaill’s anthropomorphic and geomatic configura-
tions challenge gender-bound power dynamic. Her poetry, with its
pluridimensional spaces and richly allusive lexicosemiotix textures, charts the
whole new territory of desire. Ni 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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