

Dodging Around the Grand Piano

Sex, Politics, and Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry

by Ailbhe Smyth

L'auteure examine les représentations sexuelles et la sexualité dans la poésie féminine de l'Irlande contemporaine et

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remet en question l'éternelle assomption chez les critiques littéraires que la poésie irlandaise est prioritairement pré-occupée par les mythes, l'histoire et l'identité nationale et culturelle.

She told the one
who was beyond saving
to have a nice day
(she said it twice for effect)

I will, she assured,
I'll have a bastarding ball
dodging the Gods
around the grand piano
that isn't really there at all
—Rita Ann Higgings,
from "God Dodgers
Anonymous"

Knowledge is limited by the scope of the eye, the acuity of the ear, the accuracy of memory. Human, not godly. Even interpreters, explicators, extricators. What can I know if I do not look, if I do not listen, if I do not remember?

Entree en matiere: how to enter without breaking? We are locked and barred against entries of all kinds. Or maybe just we who have lost our innocence. Who has not? Lost, stolen, aged away. What is the matter of sex, of poetry, or sex and poetry and the spaces between?

Some things insist on becoming
lost,
like the be-ribboned straw hat
the girl waved over the bridge
to me.

How ridiculous it
looked,
floating on the
water
between two
swans
who were coaxing
one another to
love.

Although I tried to reach it,
it was swept away.
"Sit still in the boat, you fool,"
she called, "sit still
or you'll fall into the river."

—Joan McBreen,
"The Straw Hat"

Silences

There has been very little written about sex-and-poetry critically, theoretically, historically, or in any way at all.¹ Now, it is absolutely not the case that there is nothing on what Irish women poets are on about (in Irish poems). There are essays and articles, journal special issues, and multiple theses on Irish women's poetry, on Irish women poets. Not enough, yet, and not necessarily in all the best places. But that's another debate, and another day. Men critics say very little about women's poetry, and when they do, they still say remarkably little, although often at length and damagingly. Women critics, and often poets, make the running and the openings, not always to loud acclaim (or any at all). But the important thing is, the great conspiracy of silence around the *fact* of Irish women's poetry has been exposed, and broken. Which does not mean, however, that we are free to

enter how and where we will.

There seems to be an agreed terrain within which Irish poetry criticism—including, perhaps ironically, the very lately included feminist kind—can be exercised. I am not saying it's a fixed terrain, once and for all, because in the last decade or so its borders have been shifted in more ways than one, and by feminists more than most. But it isn't entirely open either. There is an agenda of acceptable topoi, of critical and discursive priorities, beyond which you venture at your own risk and peril. The risk being oblivion, no-critics land.² To be sure, it is difficult, given the political geography and socio-historical circumstances, to write outside the terrain of Ireland and Irishness—because that, I think, is what it is. Irish poetry criticism is (still) hyper-concerned with questions of myth and history, with national and cultural identity.³

This preoccupation with Irishness as the primary terrain of criticism has disturbing repercussions for poetry, because *poems* which do not nourish these critical concerns are considered as either not really Irish, or not really poems—or remain entirely unconsidered. Clair Wills, for example, in her study of politics and sexuality in Northern Irish poetry, devotes a chapter to a discussion of contemporary Irish women's poetry, which she specifically construes as questioning "current definitions of cultural and national identity in Ireland, in particular the repeated association of the use of myth and the writer's attempt to link himself with, to repossess, a history and a community." Her analysis is instructive, but given her definition, I wonder if it doesn't keep out a good deal more than it allows in?⁴ What about poems not determined by "debates over the figure of the motherland?" What about poems which explore areas of experience expressly suppressed by the myth-

makers and law-makers of the motherland?

Certainly, I agree with Eavan Boland (and thus with Clair Wills) that “a ‘nation’ is a potent, important image” (qtd. in Somerville-Arjat and Wilson 84). But, however powerful/disempowering an image Mother Ireland has been for many Irish women poets, it is not the only one and some have chosen to disregard/discard it through poetic relocation (from “contemporary Irish poetry” to the “women’s poetry movement,” in the English-speaking West). Poetic emigration moves in much the same direction as the economic kind (“go west, young woman”), and is likewise not always experienced (or represented) as negative. It can be an experience of opening up, where, liberated from the particular burdens and boundaries of the “nation,” the world becomes a bigger place and can be, may be, differently phrased.

Irish critics need to acknowledge that Irish poets—especially women—do not necessarily write “Irish” poems, given the strength of the pressures to discard tradition and the marked opportunities for poetic and political migration to a more welcomingly open terrain.⁵

“In the City of Boston” is the opening poem in Mary Dorcey’s collection, *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers*. This is terrain unmarked by history or tradition, transnational, open, spacious. But movement towards implies at the same time movement away from: the collection title, the title and positioning of the first poem, decisively accentuate a self-conscious distancing from Ireland and the man-made canonical Irish poem. “In the City of Boston” cuts us loose from what we know too well to see clearly, places us in a new relation to both lived experience and poetic vision. It re-locates us:

I have seen mad women in my time,
I have seen them waiting row on row,
I have seen the stripped flesh,
the abandoned eye,
I have seen the frothing mouth
and heard the cries,
I have seen mad women in my time
—I have never seen them mad enough.

In the city of Boston I once saw
a woman
and she was mad—as mad as
they come
(and oh do they come, mad
women,
as often as the rest?)

She walked the street in broad
daylight,
neat as a pin—a lady no doubt
in blue coat, blue hat, blue purse
blue shoes—the only note
out of place in it all
was her face—the peculiar angle
of her head; thrown back, jaws
wide
and a scream so shrill poured out
it lifted birds from her feet.

as mad what is necessary for survival. The edge defines the centre; the edge is where you go when there is nowhere else to be. It is at least in part about the eccentricity of women’s symbolic place, and the physical and psychic cost of that displacement. But it is not a victim poem. There is no resignation here. The “peculiar angle of the head,” in principle antithetical to both sanity and poetry, is here repositioned to become a different angle of sight and of hearing, enabling us to make sense of the cries, the shrill screams of a mad woman in the city of Boston, not as “other,” but as connected with our selves:

I have seen the abandoned faces
row on row,
I have seen mad women in my
time
—I have never seen us mad
enough.

We can never say it often enough. The repetition with its strategic replacing of the pronoun makes this clear: survival requires that we refuse to be ordered, that we creatively embrace the madness of our anger, even though there is not, anywhere, any

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This magnificently angry poem strips away, line by incantatory line, the layers of decorum which, sealed tightly in place, keep the world neatly in order, *in sanity*. It exposes, in broad daylight, the agonizing irony and literally maddening dislocation of women in a world which defines as sane what is experienced as mad, and

guarantee that it will be enough. For a poem is a delicate instrument and may not, after all, be able to provide us with either a sense of (erotic) connection or an answer to our futures:

(and oh do they come, mad
women,
as often as the rest?)

Irish women's poetry is no more confined to, within, or by national/historical borders than sexuality within motherhood, or sex by love, or Irish women within the jurisdiction of Ireland by legal prohibitions against abortion. This is part of my point. Poems by Irish writers continue to be read through narrow gauge tracks of convention and tradition where lesser (or no) value is accorded to poems not in thrall to the nation. When I read many Irish critics, I am depressed by their introversion, by the limited range of their interests, and I am bothered by the absence of sex on their critical agenda.⁶ This bothers me, among other critical silences, because it is certainly in the poems, at least in poems by women, although not always where, when, or how you might expect:

My wild hills come stalking
 Did I perhaps after all, in spite of
 all
 try to cast them off,
 my dark blue hills,
 a denunciation no less real
 for all its refinement?
 have I dissembled,
 cast myself in the role of a dis-
 cerning mountain lover,
 my acceptance of these as opti-
 mal hills
 being based upon the most im-
 peccable of aesthetic criteria?
 Have I stooped so low
 as to lyricize about heather,
 adjusting my love
 to fit elegantly
 within the terms of disinterested
 discourse?

Who do I think I'm fooling?
 I know these hills better than
 that.
 I know them blue, like delicate
 shoulders,
 I know the red grass that grows
 in high boglands
 and the passionate brightnesses
 and darkneses
 of high bog lakes
 and I know too how
 in the murk of winter,
 these wet hills will come howl-

ing through my blood
 like wolves.

—Moya Cannon, "Hills"

It is low-minded, not quite "lit.crit," and (worse) unsophisticated to seek out sex in poems. This has partly to do with the current bent of literary theory, partly with notions of poetic decorum, and also of course with the historical and socio-political regulation of sex and sexuality. Women are so much more amenable to control in the lowlands. But silences echo one another, howling through our lives, like wolves. The social conventions of sex-talk and the aesthetic conventions of poem-talk place each in frigidly separate spaces and we are, mostly, governed by strict rules of propriety in their observance, rarely broken.⁷ There is no denying that Irish society has a highly dishonorable history of sexual repression, which continues to reverberate in the present. Sex is unspeakable in scholarly company in Ireland.⁸ More significantly and not at all surprisingly, the unspeakability of sex has been constructed (can you construct a silence? most assuredly) through the control of women's sexuality, unthinkable because unspeakable (or vice versa), outside the domain of reproduction. It is equally undeniable that contemporary Irish women's refusal to be regulated out of mind and body, our insistence on the right to sexual autonomy, are a crucial element in the social, political, and cultural disruptions which are re-defining the realities of Irish society and culture (see Smyth 1995a). The audibility of women's breaking of sexual silences—literally and symbolically, politically and culturally—is unmissable. Although it continues to be ignored.

But contradictions and double-talk (ambiguous and ambivalent) seem almost inevitable the moment you step on sex. Even in godly Ireland, we *do* talk and write about sex, not always euphemistically, in private and in public, in bed and in the media, in pornography (which circulates, despite its regulation), in medical and

educational materials (although not in school curricula), in church and parliament and law and fiction.⁹ Indeed, we (i.e., Irish) talk so much about the silence about sex in Ireland, that there comes a point when you realize that talking about the silence is a crucial way of actually talking about sex.

I've already had my fill of sermons against sex. In the Belfast mission-halls of my youth, I remember the sex-haters with their needy wrathful eyes and anoraked bumptiousness.

I have a theory of my own: fleeing from sex is just another way of being caught by it. (Linda Anderson, "Private Dancer")

So, when sex occurs in a poem, we flee, turning a critically coy blind eye, as if the poetic solecism had never happened. As if the poem simply did not exist.¹⁰

Who do we think we are fooling?

The odd thing is that so many of the poems I have been reading really are so much braver and bolder, venturing into territories untouched by criticism. Or is it so odd? Perhaps the relation between poetry and criticism is not unlike that between sexual behaviour and the law: at odds with one another, much of the time, the law restraining and containing what transgresses the boundaries, the limits set by convention, demanded by decorum. Whatever.

It's difficult to talk about them [my erotic poems], because they're about the zones between what is acceptable socially and what is not. It's not a favourite topic in this country. (Mary O'Donnell in Somerville-Arjat and Wilson 23)

Yet a giddily ungodly reading of poems by Irish women turns up far more of "alla this foolishness," in Notzake Shange's memorable (and quite un-Irish) phrase, than lurks within the terms of (disinterested) critical discourse.¹¹

Women talk about sexual things much more. This is something very new in Irish poetry. You would have been excommunicated for masturbation at one time. Now it's much broader and more honest, not before time. (Eithne Strong in Somerville-Arjat and Wilson 114)

Yes, although forms of critical excommunication still operate. And you do have to go looking for the grand piano. Which means clearly identifying the silencers, reading beyond the academic criticism, beyond the reviews, beyond the mainstream anthologies of "Irish Poetry." Now, with less than half a dozen exceptions which prove this general rule, you have to do this anyway to know anything about what women are writing.¹² Women poets who write about sex, for specific example, rarely get reviewed, or if and when they do, the sexy poems are politely not mentioned. Rita Ann Higgins is a stunning case in point, as is Maighread Medbh, in another idiom. Mary Dorcey received the Rooney Prize for her short stories, but not the least

little award for either of her two poetry collections. You won't find much in the line of sexual explicitness in the poems by women included in anthologies of "new Irish poetry." You will need to go to anthologies edited by women, to the collections by women (see Hooley; Archer 1986; Kelly; Smyth 1989; Smyth 1995b), in which women choose not to unsex themselves.

Which is not to say the sexing (of the writing) is easy.¹³

She was important enough
to be left out
powerful enough
to be hidden away
alive enough
to be killed
poet
enough
to be censored

—Nuala Archer, from
"Sheela-Na-Gigging
Around," 1994

Subversions

If the representation of women's heterosexual experience can be "outed" only with difficulty from the shadows and secrecy surrounding it, consider how much more powerfully the prohibitions apply to lesbian sexuality. It is not that lesbianism is forbidden, as a practice, by Irish law. But that it is not, is a sign of its absolute unthinkability. When male homosexuality was effectively defined as unlawful under the (British) Offences Against the Persons Act of 1861, lesbianism was so utterly taboo that legislative measures to prevent its occurrence were simply unnecessary.

When and where did your lesbianism last occur? Last month? Last year? At home? In bed? At school? In front of the neighbours? Please write clearly, preferably in bold, to make yourself as conspicuously different as possible. (Smyth, forthcoming)

Yet outbreaks of lesbianism have been occurring, even in Ireland, with

astonishing continuity for a considerable time (see Donoghue 1993), although Irish lesbians' struggle for rights, freedom, and social and cultural visibility has been slow, arduous, and fraught with humiliation and silent pain:

Have you ever made love
with the TV on
—to spare the neighbours
landlady, lord—
the embarrassment;
the joy undisguised
of two people
especially women
(imagine the uproar!)
coming together?

Come quietly
or the neighbours will hear.
—Mary Dorcey, from
"Come quietly or the
neighbours will hear"

Mary Dorcey was the first Irish poet to make no secret of the fact that she is lesbian, the first to use women-embracing pronouns, and nouns, one of the first women poets to write explicitly about sex, certainly the first to brave, and name, the "uproar" about lesbian sex—more a roaring silence of dismissal and disregard for many years. Her first collection of poems was published in 1982—in Britain, her short stories similarly in 1989. In 1991, Salmon Press became the first Irish press to publish a collection by Mary Dorcey.¹⁴

Her poems do not deal with questions of "national identity," although they do indeed explore other aspects of identity, relations to place and to myriad "other." It strikes me that, ironically, one of the greatest dangers facing a lesbian poet writing in a milieu where such work is exceptional, is the insidious expectation that her work will always be sexual (even "sexy"), and always centred on "lesbian issues"—however defined. An Irish poet is always and ever (still) defined by (his) "Irishness," but a lesbian poet in Ireland does not fit within the given meanings of "Irishness" and her work thus cannot



Gertrude Degenhardt, "Vagabondage—Women in Music,"
Leaf 11, drypoint etching

be categorized as anything other than lesbian.

Mary Dorcey is no longer the only "out" Irish lesbian writer, although there are still extraordinarily few poets. Nuala Archer's work has been published in the U.S. and in Ireland, but she is only partly Irish, and thus different standards are applied—sexually and canonically. Cherry Smyth writes explicitly and sensuously about lesbian desire and pleasure (*inter alia*), but her work rarely ever appears in Irish publications. Smyth, who was brought up in Northern Ireland and now lives in London, inflects the ambivalence of emigration with a powerfully sexual intensity:

I unpack clothes smelling of London,
Lulled by the tease of familiar voices
I still yearn for the anonymity of city.
Peace to read, think, eat, not eat,
to sweat,
Clutter, clatter, stay in bed all day
With the one I love
And talk about her openly.



Gertrude Degenhardt, "Vagabondage—Women in Music,"
Leaf 2, drypoint etching

There is no forgiveness
For escaping the rity of match
and hatch.

"No sign of a wee wedding ring
slipping on your finger?" they
ask.

The spinster is come home with
her fancy airs

And graces and new-fangled
ideas.

—Cherry Smyth, from
"Coming Home"

There is then no "tradition" of lesbian poetry-making in Ireland at this stage—although the trail-blazing of Dorcey, Archer, and Smyth, in their very different ways, is crucial in diversifying the mono-directional assumptions of heterosexual writers and readers, and in giving voice to truths and visions for lesbians in Ireland. Perhaps the wonder is not that there is so little, but rather that it is there at all.

But it's astonishing!
That kind of breathing, that kind
of force.

If we could breathe,
really breathe
we'd know
what it'd be like to have a voice
of infinite colours, a
ladder,
a blood route beyond this despair....

—Nuala Archer, from
"Flaneurs," 1992

So much subversion is needed to shake this country by the roots of its orthodoxies.¹⁵ There is the vast domain of women's "privatized" sexual pain which urgently needs to be spoken. Irish women poets are doing so, not because anger has become "almost an axiom of feminist poetry,"¹⁶ proof of one's bona fides as a "woman poet," but quite simply because women, who may or may not be poets, are angry. Because there are events so shocking that we cannot afford, for our own survival and that of countless other women, to remain silent. This is an ethical and political imperative (why do we separate the two?) as well as a personal and "com-

munal" one. Now, while I am as wary as the next (white academic) woman of metonymy, of presuming that my part is women's whole, I am not prepared to be so separated from other women that solidarity becomes a functional impossibility. Division is a strategy of the powerful, and connection still seems to me a more effective way of thwarting it than any other (what other is there?). Making and maintaining the connections is about wanting to do so, about imagining how they can solder what has been torn willfully asunder, about finding the delicate language to meld the tenuous links.

A political activist directs her anger towards actions whose objective is to eradicate the source of women's oppression, to change the system that allows, or at the very least does not formally prohibit, sex and gender-based exploitation and abuse. An activist poet¹⁷ may direct her anger towards realizing an intensity of vision, a clarity and concentration, which enables articulation of women's unspeakable sexuality—publicly in perpetration and/or privately in annihilation. Both kinds of activism act/speak out of the need, passionately experienced because cruelly denied, to inhabit our own bodies, minds, souls, lives. Granted, activism is not poetry, but it does not therefore follow that poetry cannot (must not) be political, not that anger dilutes the aesthetic.¹⁸

I do not accept that rage is *definitionally* irrational, and therefore aesthetically disabling. Poetry which finds the words to speak what has been stifled by history and culture is bound to seem different, because it is. It *minds* the anger, in every sense, giving it its due weight of passion, alongside reflection, analysis, and vision. Passionate conviction is never *enough* to make a "good" poem, but it is absurd to assume it is therefore an impediment. Nor do I think that "anger poems" (which are not, in any case, a genre apart) are merely a "transitional moment" in women's poetry, now redundant, passé. There is nothing passé about the horrible

presentness of violence in women's lives and outrage seems to me to be an entirely reasonable response to the fact of the continuing oppression of millions of people for no reason other than that of their sex. Anger is not a phase you "work through" (whatever therapy may tell us), not something you can or should grow out of if its source remains painfully alive. If outrageous oppression continues, why should it be *poetically* necessary to "move on"—to what? Yes, we may be blinded by rage, but even that—especially that—can be a powerful focus of vision, raising us, body and soul, up and off the "yes, but" fences erected by patriarchal versions of rationality, which construct women, women's pain, women's anger as unspeakable. Why, we must constantly ask, is anger disallowed? Whose interests does the prohibition serve? Reason can blind us to the necessity of passion: "I have never seen us mad enough" (Dorsey).

The poems which deliberately intervene in and gloss the grosser attempts by state and society to control women's sexuality are impor-



Gertrude Degenhardt, "Vagabondage—Women in Music," Leaf 31, drypoint etching

tant. Powered by indignation, they speak out of *rational* rage, exposing the injustice and cruelty of a system which moulds, uses, and abuses, women at will. In their very utterance, these poems defy the interdiction against women's entry into the *polis*; they refuse to accept as "private" practices which demean and, worse, destroy the personhood of women. In so doing, they launch a crucial challenge to the powers that keep women in silence and in place—they are properly, necessarily political.

Paula Meehan's poem, "The Statue of the Virgin of Granard Speaks," evokes an especially shameful occurrence in recent Irish social history—the death of Ann Lovett. It is at once a meditation of the disempowerment of all women, the difficulty of speech in a world where public silence about sex is a commandment, and a condemnation of the silences we agree to keep through convention, cowardice, or fear of reprisals:

On a night like this I remember
the child
who came with fifteen summers
to her name,
and she lay down alone at my
feet
without midwife or doctor or
friend to hold her hand
and she pushed her secret out
into the night,
far from the town tucked up in
little scandals,
bargains struck, words broken,
prayers, promises,
and though she cried out to me
in extremis
I did not move,
I didn't lift a finger to help her,
I didn't intercede with heaven,
nor whisper the charmed word
in God's ear.

—Paula Meehan, from
"The Statue of the Virgin of
Granard Speaks"

Ann Lovett died giving birth, and her baby too. Alone, Christianity notwithstanding. There was no formal public inquiry, and no major changes in social policy or sex education in

the wake of these deaths. In the poem, the statue of the Virgin speaks her solitary confinement in the profound silence of her plaster virginity, speaks her desire—"My being / cries out to be incarnate, incarnate, / maculate and tousled in a honeyed bed"—her isolation and grief, her shame. She keeps the death of a young girl—"a cacophony of bone imploring sky for judgement / and release from being the conscience of the town." There is no release for those who choose silence over life.

I am Ireland / and I'm sick
sick in the womb / sick in the
head
and I'm sick of lying in this
sickbed
and if the medical men don't
stop operating /
I'll die

.....
I am Ireland / and I'm silenced
I cannot tell my abortions / my
divorce / my years of slavery /
my fights for freedom
it's got to the stage I can hardly
remember what I had to tell
and when I do / I speak in
whispers

.....
I am Ireland /
And I'm not waiting any more.
—Maighread Medbh,
from "Easter 1991"

Maighread Medbh is sick of lying, passive and conned, and will have no more of it, for what is most sacred to the nation is most dangerous to women's well-being. She attempts no separation of politics from poetry, for the one (which one?) grows out of and into the other, and each is vital for survival. She knows no fear, or rather, the writing of the poem exorcises the fears she has been made to live with, silently, for so long—and who may say with impunity that exorcism is the preserve of religion, or of therapy? When the cause of death is known, it must be named.

These are our streets.
If you are a woman you must

and heavy in my hand
like an apple.
—Paula Meehan, "Secret"

Romance and its flowery growth
are also given short, ironic shrift,
which the speaker turns against her-
self, with a side-long glance of rueful
complicity to her reader:

Because she carried flowers:
Lilac and wild red poppies
When she first came to my bed,
I loved her.

Because she carried flowers:
Marigold and lilies
To another woman's bed,
I left her.

—Mary Dorcey,
"Because She Carried Flowers"

And the tales they tell, oh how
they can sting with malice afore-
thought, providing occasions of
multiple pleasure:

That man
Is an occasion of some sin
Against a number of command-
ments
Committed in haste,
To be repented at great leisure.

He is like a whole box
Of very rich chocolates
With a hint of mint in the tail,
The kind that only tantalise the
lips
Linger on the tongue
And slowly settle on the hips.
—Mary O'Malley,
"Gluttony"

These poems have a sharpness
which comes from their tight con-
trol and a line pared down so far it
reaches the quick of sensibility and
sensuality. Their extreme brevity
mockingly counters patriarchal des-
ignations of women as "essentially"
garrulous, frivolous, and empty. It is
no accident that so many of these
"quick notes" take sex as their centre
of gravity—and prick the bubble of
its perfectly self-centred pomposity:
Platonic my eye,

I yearn
for the fullness
of your tongue
making me
burst forth
pleasure after pleasure
after dark,

soaking all my dreams.

—Rita Ann Higgins,
"It's Platonic"

Subversion also occurs more ex-
pansively, and often in terms of a
reversal of roles. The woman persona
of the poem assumes the role of agent,
subject, and speaker (which is, al-
ready, to usurp the male place), turns
the tables, revealing the objectification
to which she is typically subjected,
and laughs uproariously at the ensu-
ing male discomfiture (or silence).
Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill achieves this
with magnificent comic effect in po-
ems such as "An tOilean" or "Gan do
chuid Eadoigh." Mairead Byrne's hi-
larious interview with Romulus and
Remus—geographically and cultur-
ally located generations away from
the canonical "Irish Poem"—sends
up the unreality and emptiness of
macho versions of myth and history
which make men speechless in the
realm of the personal:

Would you let your daughter
marry a wolf?
How fast can you run?
Say, what's your favourite food?
Do you eat raw meat and tear it
apart with your teeth?
Well, I suppose that was quite
common in Rome.
Hey, thanks for your time boys.
It's been real.
You gotta learn to talk soon,
boys.
A lotta people are dying to hear
about this.

—Mairead Byrne, from
"Interview with
Romulus and Remus"

The pleasure is palpable in the writ-
ing, in the reading, in the reciting.
Who could resist it? Who would want
to?

The laws of patriarchal logic and
reason and history and culture and,
simply, the law, prescribe that women
should make babies, not poems, and
have families, not sexual pleasure.
Notwithstanding and nevertheless,
Irish women are making far fewer
babies and a lot more poems. In-
formed speculation, based on a read-
ing of the poems, indicates that there
is considerable pleasure in the having
of the sex and the making of the
poems. There is an increasingly rich
abundance of sex in poems by Irish
women: lesbian and heterosexual,
complicated and direct, explicit and
subtle, straight-talking and vision-
ary, solitary, singular, and plural, ex-
ploratory, interrogative, analytical,
descriptive, subversive, political, play-
ful, ironic, funny, and celebratory.

Where does it all come from?

For a long time I have puzzled over
a line from a poem by Sharon Olds:
"How do they do it, the ones / who
make love without love?"

Even more puzzling to me is the
question: how do they write them,
the ones who make sex poems with-
out sex words?

The answer I suppose, in both cases,
is that you can't. In the first case, you
either do something else—have sex—
or nothing at all. In the second case
the answer requires more initiative
and ingenuity, for you must subvert,
transform, invent, imagine, create.

I do not think that sexuality is at
the "core" of our selves (if we have
such an unfashionable thing as a core,
or even a self, any more). Nor do I
think that sexuality is the fundamen-
tal source of imagination and creativ-
ity (if, likewise, there be such a thing).
But sexuality—and simply, sex—is
also part of experience and it *also*
touches the imagination. It is thus
also, like politics, part of the matter of
poetry.

Of course, I don't know precisely
where or how the words are found,
any more than I know exactly how or
why we experience sex as variously as
we do. Analysis and explanation seem
peculiarly inadequate when they try
to explain these things. I do, however,
know a grand piano when I see one—

or an abundance of them. And I know for certain that poems by contemporary Irish women have been important to me in sighting, naming, and exploring "my wild hills":

... the red grass that grows in
high boglands
and the passionate brightnesses
and darkneses
of high bog lakes
—Moya Cannon, from "Hills"

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¹Notable exceptions are Clair Willis and Jacqueline McCurry.

²I do know who sets the agenda and how they do it, and what happens to those who venture too far, too soon. To be sure, I am not alone in the "knowledge," but that is not my point here.

³Edna Longley talks about the "narrow and doctrinaire perspective" on Irish literature, culture, and politics of the Field Day analysis in a recent interview (*Krino*).

⁴Medbh McGuckian, on whom Willis focusses very significantly, has said that she is "sexless" (as a poet) and claimed that there is "no such thing as an Irish poet" (in Somerville-Arjat and Wilson 5), which seems a high price to have to pay for being a woman, and a poet—and Irish.

⁵Asked how she negotiated between multiple identities, Jackie Kay replied: "I don't feel I need to sing it all the time. If someone just called me a poet, that would be fine" (Somerville-Arjat and Wilson 127).

⁶I am also bothered by how indirectly sexuality bears on sex, in literary critical or theoretical terms (even feminist). I do not even try to sort out sex, sexuality, and the erotic here, but see Marilyn Frye's witty and pertinent discussion in "Lesbian 'Sex.'"

⁷There is an anthology of love poems (including a very few poems by women), but none of Irish erotica (it sounds like an oxymoronic joke). This signifies more about "our" image of Irish literature (and of Ireland) than its realities. Soul and spirit are, of course, more high-minded (and Catholic).

⁸There are just two references to sex in the index of J. J. Lee's *Ireland: 1912–1985*: to the Censorship of Publications Act and to Contraception/Abortion. The discussions of these in-text are ultra-brief. There is no discussion at all of the impact of feminism and the women's movement on changes in sexual practice or on the regulation of sexuality.

⁹In *Dublin*, a fortnightly event guide, contains several pages of advertising for what are coyly called "Personal Services," offering "everything a man's heart desires" in "leather and lace" from "beautiful new young girls" to "elegant ladies from 18 years upwards."

¹⁰The only poem I have come across (i.e., in a contemporary publication) by an Irish woman poet from an earlier period (writing in English) that talks about sex at all does so in just such terms of negative fascination:

Let them not listen to her fatal
song

Nor trust her pictures, nor believe
her tongue.

Contentment blooms not on her
flowing ground,
and round her splendid shrine
no peace is found.

—Mary Tighe (1772–1810),
from "Dissipation" in Kelly.

¹¹Alicia Ostriker uses the phrase "giddy glee" to describe women poets' ludic and irreverent desolemnization of the body and sex.

¹²Richard Hayes (*Poetry Ireland*, 36, 1992) notes that "only one-fifth of the three hundred and thirty or so contributors [to *Poetry Ireland*] have been women in the journal's first 21 issues" (62). A survey carried out by *The Steeple* (Three Spires Press, Cork, June 1992, 56–57) found that women writers now account for five per cent

of poets published by Daedalus Press, 16 per cent by Gallery Press, eleven per cent by Ranve Arts Press, and 45 per cent by Salmon Publishing (the only poetry press headed by a woman). See also Hannan and Wright; Haberstroh; O'Connor.

¹³I don't think it is for men poets either. I suspect that the silencing of men poets who write "off the agenda" is also ferocious.

¹⁴Mary Dorcey's poetry has never been reviewed, for example, in the influential, U.S.A.-published *Irish Literary Supplement*. I am not suggesting that this is deliberate, but the omission is revelatory of the prevailing values and priorities.

¹⁵Eavan Boland, discussing the choice between "separatism" and "subversion," comments: "I want to subvert the old forms. I think where those elements of the Irish experience are repressive, I would rather subvert them than throw the baby out with the bathwater" (Hannan and Wright 62). Subversion, of course, may also lead in extrovert directions where baths no longer seem relevant at all.

¹⁶This is Ostriker's phrase—not entirely positive (Ostriker 126).

¹⁷"Poetic activist" is a term missing from our vocabulary. Its very absence is significant.

¹⁸Ruth Hooley encountered the hostility of "poetry" to "politics" in concrete form: "I recently selected a poem on incest for *H.U. (The Honest Ulsterman)*. It was challenged as having been chosen for its political content: I was told I wanted the poem because of its subject and that had coloured my judgement about it... The other editor's block to the subject prevented him from seeing the poem objectively, as a careful, intelligent piece" (qtd. in O'Connor 36).

¹⁹"If it will be difficult for the serious critic to determine exactly how seriously such playful poetry asks to be taken, there can be no question of the widespread tendency among women poets to promote a yeasty triumph of life over the exhaustion and annihilation that always threaten it" (Ostriker 201). Since I have never experienced this difficulty, I infer—with relief—

that I am not a serious critic. Can play (or pleasure) exist only in a relation of opposition to "seriousness"? Like poetry and politics? For a discussion of the "iconic feminine," see Mills.

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