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*Moynagh Sullivan*

## Looking at Being Somebody: Class and Gender in the Poetry of Rita Ann Higgins

And for Christ's sake  
At all times  
Watch your language.  
'Be Someone',  
(Rita Ann Higgins)<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I explore how the relationship of looking and watching, speculation and the specular, informs question of class and gender in the poetry of Rita Ann Higgins. Drawing on how Ailbhe Smyth embeds a Higgins poem between two *Oxford English Dictionary* references in an essay in which she questions the validity of boundaries that empathically separate genres and 'disciplines', and suggests a speculative theoretical paradigm rather than a denotative one, I look especially at how Higgins's framing of how language is itself watched as an invitation to the reader to reflect on how questions of proper form are underlain by intricate positioning of class and gender in discourse:

**REVELATION** (OED): Select an appropriately relevant meaning.  
1. Disclosure of facts made by a person; exposure of something previously disguised or concealed.

*And we saw  
what we saw  
and we didn't see  
what was hidden*  
**(Rita Ann Higgins)**

What are the facts? Some call them 'data', some 'empirical research'. Some don't call them at all. Constructing airy immaterial edifices.

**THEORY** (OED): Contemplation, speculation, sight. From the Greek, *Theory*, the root, spectator.<sup>2</sup>

For criticism to respond to watching language work in Higgins's poetry requires a consideration of her specific location. To this end I look not only to poetry criticism to think through Higgins's aesthetics, but also to feminist and cultural theory:

Feminism has been a major transformational force in modern Ireland for the past three decades, but the changes it has generated and expedited are volatile, incomplete and unevenly beneficial. Gender transformations impact on people differently and above all unequally, and always intersect with other experiences, locations and regimes of social control, including class, ethnicity, and sexuality, age and (dis) ability, among others. To consider feminism is therefore a complex business, requiring attentive, knowing, empathetic and imaginative scrutiny of the ways in which specifically-located women can and do live their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Higgins's poetry addresses the complicated intersections Smyth refers to between gender, class, and sexuality, (dis)ability and age, if not to unravel, then at least to acknowledge the trickiness of the speaking human subject in all her or his relations. Originally from Galway city, Higgins now lives in *An Spiddeal*, on the edge of the south Connemara *Gealteacht* in Co. Galway. She grew up in a working class area of Galway, married young, and famously became a writer after discovering reading during a convalescent stay in a sanatorium when recovering from TB in her early twenties. Her work includes *Goddess on the Meroue Bus* (1986), *Witch in the Bushes* (1988), *Goddess and Witch* (1990), *Philomena's Revenge* (1992), *Higher Purchase* (1996), *Sunny Side Plucked* (1996), *An Awful Racket* (2001), *'Throw in the Vowels': New & Selected Poems* (2005), and *Hurting God* (2010). She has also written a number of plays and screenplays. Higgins's work challenges some of the most well established orthodoxies, not only of Irish Literature, but also of the economies of Irish literary tourism, with its post-revival fetishisation of the west of Ireland as a misty retreat, peopled by artists and writers in blissful quiet, a haven to which one escapes the imprecations of city and urban life, a place to get away from it all. Higgins writes about the lives of those who 'cannot get away from it all', but who live in the often devastated cityscapes occluded by the city-country dialectic of Dublin and the 'west'. In her work the islands and rocks, the solitude and romanticized peace are peripheral to the landscape of the factory, the pub, the church or the dole office. In Higgins's work, Yeats's and Synge's peasants are survivors of chronic misogyny and misandry, living lives blighted by utilitarian and disrespectful urban and social planning. Higgins does not salve the liberal conscience of a

predominantly middle class poetry readership with characters who survive social injustice with plucky humour and hope, but instead focuses on the coping mechanisms of commodity fetishization and self medication/abuse that shore up the privileges and inequities of class-based capitalism.

In Higgins's work formal encoding of viewing and seeing mean that the character studies of her poems can be read as particular participants in moving picture ensembles rather than as renderings in representative humanist universality. As Smyth points out, the root of theory can be declined back to spectator, which in turn comes from the Greek, *theā*, a viewing and *oros*, seeing, and here I contemplate the revelatory aspects of Higgins's poetry — asking how the poetry theorizes, with a 'viewing' that lets us see what is often beyond the subject of poetry.<sup>4</sup> Higgins rejects the exhortation to 'be someone' by watching her language, and initiates a shift away from the individual subject of poetry to an ethics of 'some people', an indeterminate number, a community rather than a humanist individual. As such, her work repudiates the fetishisation of the individual as the propelling agent of upwardly mobile culture, as exemplified in the poem, 'Be Someone':

Learn to speak properly,  
always pronounce your ings.  
Never smoke on the street  
(2005, p.39)

Higgins declines to 'watch her language' and to 'learn to speak properly' epitomizing the 'impropriety' that Clair Wills's ground-breaking work elaborates.<sup>5</sup> In an *Irish Times* interview with Arminta Wallace, Higgins recounts how writing poetry was based on an improper relationship to language from the first. When she began writing, she wrote short stories, and the responses she received to these in writing groups prompted her to write poetry:

The prose was going in and out of tenses – the past, the present and the future. And someone at the workshop said, 'You can't do that. You have to stick to the same tenses. You can't be doing what you're doing.' I thought, 'God, there must be an easier way.' So I started to write poems. You didn't have to worry about tenses and verbs. You could write a poem without a verb, and if you didn't know what a verb was – and I didn't – it was okay.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of trying to fit what she wanted to say to the grammatical and syntactical rules of narrative that also represent middle class propriety, Higgins asked language to fit her world instead, staying faithful to her

own environment; Molly McAnailly Burke notes that 'Rita has no intention of betraying her own background by slipping into the literary middle class, where she would surely wither and die of boredom'.<sup>7</sup> The poem, 'Poetry Doesn't Pay', from her first volume, *Goddess on the Mervue Bus* (1986) addresses the conflict between the speaker's desire to write poetry and her need to keep a roof over her family's heads, as well as the impossibility of her being able to translate the 'something' she has into her poetry into a currency that can allow her to provide and survive: 'People keep telling me/Your poems, you know,/You've got something there,/I mean really' (2005, p.21). Here, the 'something' she is told she has in her poems translates as 'nothing' to the corporation.<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Rich notes that middle class women exchange 'self-respect for respectability' and Higgins emphatically refuses this exchange, instead highlighting the ineffectiveness of the 'exchange' of her poem, her possible permit into the middle classes, as an item of exchange. Instead of 'watching' her language in order to move into the literary middle classes, she looks at how her poems transgress the social, gendered, and poetic taboos of gendered middle-class nation building. As McAnailly Burke observes:

Money means absolutely zip to her and fame even less. Yet her witty, sexy, and poignant blasts from Ireland's muffled underbelly continue to cause her international audience to be curious about this "genuine specimen", the burp from the bottom that is not supposed to enter polite society lest it confront the fact that a factory girl could well have an IQ higher than their own, and have led a much more interesting life. In fact, because of her "difference" she unquestionably gets interviewed a lot more than your average artsy poet.<sup>9</sup>

Higgins makes 'some' a recurrent subject in her work in place of becoming a 'some-one' herself, and in this repetition the definitional indeterminacy of 'some' becomes determinedly class specific, simultaneously panning back on how the term references anonymous and non-individuated lower socio-economic sectors in media and popular cultural representations, and zooming in to reveal the lived pain of such occlusions. In her work, a number of different language codes are explored where they intersect: ('This is somebody speaking') and it is this embodiment which is always site specific, although never static. In 'Partial Visions', an illuminating review of *Throw in the Vowels*, (the collection brought out by Higgins's publisher to mark Higgins's fiftieth birthday) Claire Bracken writes that Higgins's 'poetry has sought to aestheticise and poeticise Irish working class culture — a space left relatively unsymbolised and unexamined in the poetic sphere.'<sup>10</sup>

Higgins refuses to be someone — the individual one — in order to emphasise the body, in order to be a ‘*somebody*’, a carrier of the palpable patterns of policies and ideologies that privilege the illusory autonomous self-minding individual (who must be young, able-bodied, have access, be non-dependent or have dependents) over the good of communities and the realities of relatedness and connection, age and infirmity. Bracken elaborates:

Speaking from the margins, Higgins’s work problematises the universally legitimated visions of Irishness and Ireland (urban prosperity and rural idyllicism respectively), constructing another perspective – a partial vision which makes evident the perspectivism inherent in the act of looking itself: “Some people know what it’s like, / ...to be second-hand / to be second-class / to be no class / to be looked down on / to be walked on / to be pissed on / to be shat on / and other people don’t.”<sup>11</sup>

The reader cannot be comfortably affirmed in liberal compassion from a safe distance, as we are often brought straight into the drama or dialogue without a framing speaker, without epiphany, or without a cumulative and reassuring symbology. This ‘*some-body*’, this materialist voice, challenges traditional formalist and inherited views of poetry primarily conditioned by the lyric ‘*I*’, as Higgins remains far from specifically-situated in canonical terms, and her poetry sits uneasily in accounts of contemporary Irish poetry. Higgins is a seeming anomaly in Irish poetry — a working class poet who is ‘*inassimilable*’ to a literary middle class, a woman who resists gentrification in favour of her unique poetic vernacular, with its insistence on the uncomfortable thematics of class and social inequity, its aural patternings influenced by liturgy, prayer, and idiolects of local parishes and communities of working class Galway. Critics often note the importance of Higgins’s work, but are shy of writing about it. Lucy Collins’s 2003 essay, ‘*Performance and Dissent: Irish Poets in the Public Sphere*’, is a notable exception to this, and Collins’s subtle analysis explores how Higgins’s poetry acts in a culture where ‘*the critical attention to poetry still far exceeds popular readership*’, as a potentially disruptive interface between the performance of poetry and the enshrinement of writing.<sup>12</sup> Collins’s essay picks up on the craft and formalism of Higgins’s work, and she argues that Higgins ‘*speaks out of the situation she depicts and seeks to align her form and language with the characters and situations in her poems. Thus the act of writing itself becomes entangled with more obvious social themes*’.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Catriona Clutterbuck’s fine argument that Higgins’s work stages formal interventions as part of a re-mapping of the borders of the psychic Irish

republic situates her work politically;<sup>14</sup> while Patrick Crotty's sensitive review of *An Awful Racket*, notes importantly that 'the language of Higgin's poems exists at a tiny crucial remove from actual speech.'<sup>15</sup> However, this 'tiny, crucial remove' has frequently been missed to the extent that Higgins is often positioned uneasily in relation to her contemporaries, so that despite enjoying enormous popularity, as well as being considered a wonderful performer of her own poetry, Higgins has yet to find a 'place', or places in Irish critical cultures.

Her work is often left out or nominally mentioned in descriptions of contemporary and recent Irish poetry, as for instance in Justin Quinn's recent *Cambridge Introduction to Irish Poetry*, which refers to Higgins only peripherally, and her inclusion in Crotty's recent *The Penguin Book of Irish Poetry*, has been controversial, her inclusion opposed to Paula Meehan's exclusion, as if there can only be room for one working class woman poet. McAnailly Burke suggests that Higgins's acceptance into *Aosdána* after four attempts was in part due to such prejudices,<sup>16</sup> as well as what she calls 'the *Aosdána* gender problem',<sup>17</sup> and she recounts a comment from an *Aosdána* member who 'spells out the probable source of Rita's delayed entry: the fact that what she does isn't exactly considered poetry but "prose with short lines"'.<sup>18</sup> It appears that one of the most troubling aspects of Higgins's poetry is not so much that it highlights class as a component of social and political life for in this respect her subject matter is accepted as 'worthy', but that her work more disturbingly insists on class as a structuring factor of aesthetics. The implication that it 'isn't exactly poetry' but 'prose with short lines', demonstrates that her work can fall foul of discriminations that are fundamentally about class, but are shrouded in a language of formal art. The title of *An Awful Racket* is a playful recuperation of the criticism levied at her. Will the reader hear an awful racket, a harsh collection of seemingly unestheticised political moans, or the nuanced interpellations of voices across discourses? As well as making 'someone' problematic by resisting individualist ideologies, by refusing to 'watch' her own language in literary circles that emphasize bourgeois concerns, by looking closely at the dehumanising 'some' of class nomenclatures, she also turns an eye to the reader's expectation of the poetic, specifically the 'I'/eye centred lyric, in order to throw our perspectivism on art itself into question.

In *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, Paul Virilio's landmark text on the ideology of looking, he describes the act of taking aim — an act of looking that allows us to obliterate that at the other end of our sight — as a 'geometrification of looking, a way of technically aligning ocular perception along an imaginary axis that used to be known in French as the "faith line" (*linge de foi*)'. He goes on to note that 'the word faith is no longer used in this context in contemporary

French: the ideal line appears thoroughly objective, and the semantic loss involves a new obliviousness to the element of interpretative subjectivity that is always in play in the act of looking'.<sup>19</sup> In Higgins's work, the act of looking itself becomes 'playful' with deadly seriousness: the act of looking comes into focus as a destroyer of the Other, and the faith that allows the over-seeing of Others is simultaneously demolished. In 'It's all Because We're Working Class', (2005, pp.34-36) one of Higgins's earliest poems from her second collection, *Witch in the Bushes* (1988), a drama unfolds in the form of a monologue that is itself a meditation of the politics of looking. The lines spoken are not 'in perspective': 'Fuckin' coal bag washers/ And grass eaters/ The whole fuckin' lot of them;/ And it's all because we're working class' (2005, p.35). But rather than pillory the long earned chip on the shoulder of the speaker that seems at first glance to be the subject of the poem, Higgins returns the 'element of interpretative subjectivity' to literary middle-class perspectives about rhyme, reason, and space. The speaker in the poem is the parent of a child, Ambrose, who has had a serious accident as a result of being prescribed 'big thick spy-glasses' (2005, p.34) when his eye patch to cure a lazy eye was prematurely removed, and the speaker laments the helplessness and 'powerlessness/he feels' in the face of poverty and patronizing medical authority. Through these glasses 'you could see/ no rhyme reason/ or gable end' and these distorting spectacles were prescribed by 'that coal bag washer/ and grass eater/ from the Shantalla clinic' (2005, p.34). The glasses intended to bring Ambrose's 'wrong' eye back to the 'middle' distort the natural rhythms of his life, the reason of his rhyme, although the prescribing optometrist promises him enhanced vision:

Burn your patch  
 he said  
 and be a man;  
 slip these on  
 and see into  
 the souls of men  
 (2005, p.34)

In the optometrist's exhortation, poetry and class are explicitly linked, as the altered perception lent by the *pre-scribed* middle glasses is supposed to allow Ambrose to see through the liberal humanist discourse of literary 'soul' and shared 'manity' of mankind. In this poem where poetry and spatial reasoning are interlinked through acts of looking, the reader is sent back to look, as is almost always the case in Higgins's work, at the objectivity of reading itself, as tacit faith in the universal subject of lyric poetry is disrupted. No purchase can be made along the *linge de foi*, the faith lines that run into the vanishing point of



perspective, and as we swing from perspective to perception, the moral compass alters, so that the reader is prevented from finding a stable point of view, a primary means of access, a privileged site of sight from which to establish a 'balanced' symmetrical and coherent 'perspective', in which the Other at the end of the sight line can be established to be obliterated in a transcendent act of in-sight. Ambrose's sight is forever damaged because the glasses that allowed him to look into the 'souls of men', hampered his ability to steer his own course, detached him from his own sensory perception of his life, and he 'walked into/the gable end/and his life/was in splinters/thereafter' (2005, p.34). Difficult and unhappy realities do not 'vanish' into the point of a poem, but collide with them as Ambrose did with the gable end pointing; the single point of a Higgins's poem, the unified subject can often be impossible to discern if the reader is trying to look into the 'souls of men'. Ambrose had had a 'lazy eye' that was a 'wrong eye' to his 'right eye' and simultaneous rightness and wrongness had served him well and he knew his ground; he had eyes that weren't in accord, that didn't look in the same direction yet he could see to navigate his own 'pointing'. However, after the corrections of perspective by another's *script*, his vision is 'splintered' by the broken middle-glasses, which are specifically related to questions of poetic framing by alliteratively bringing rhyme and reason into focus. No comfortable binaries can be established in this poem which resists the frame of literary assumptions of individualism as its revelations are anti-epiphanic and it frames more problems than solutions.

The complications of power and its variables from context to context inform Higgins's work at all levels. Higgins has a diploma in Women's Studies from NUIG and she cites Mary Wollstonecraft, and the Irish Republican, Mary MacSwiney as her 'idols', because of their 'unbridled fighting spirits'.<sup>20</sup> Whilst she writes about domestic abuse, violence in the home and on the streets, and dramatizes gender inequities, both men and women are depicted as suffering equally, if in different ways, under a political and economic system which is dehumanizing and inequitable. Medbh McGuckian writes that Higgins's 'irony oscillates from humour to *saeva indignatio*. It is not an intrinsically feminist document in so far as there are as many ballads about heroes as heroines, as many male victims and cracker-ups as female sufferers'.<sup>21</sup> Higgins's feminist politics are powerfully inflected by her class consciousness, and as such the gender issues her poems highlight are often a study in intersecting formations of inequity, and she describes herself as:

more for people than for specific gender. I'm conscious of the imbalance of power in Irish society in general. There's a lack of

understanding between the bureaucrats and the ordinary person. There's an abuse of power that goes on which is very subtle.<sup>22</sup>

Power is investigated through illustrating the ways in which it traverses language as desire for that material thing that would finally be the 'highest purchase', recalling the concerns and title of her powerful 1996 collection *Higher Purchase*. Her work exposes the ways in which capital operates through desire to make men and women both complicit in their own abuse by each other, and through an economic structure that traps people in debilitating debts from hire purchases. The wrong eye and the right eye work together in her poems to produce syncretic representations of real physical needs for change, comfort and, very often for women, safety, harnessed into tranquilising or self-hating economies of catch-up and dislocation. In an earlier interview with Molly McAnailly Burke in 1990, Higgins recounts how having the time to read during her long convalescence, combined with the realities of her life as a young mother in Galway's Ragoon Flats, 'began to create a class awareness':<sup>23</sup>

We were on the fourth floor, and I was so tired having to carry the pram up and down the steps because there was no lift. I realised there were thousands and thousands of people in the same position. You wonder why, you begin to ask who is responsible, and you become aware.<sup>24</sup>

Higgins's 'Ode to Ragoon Flats', from her first volume, *Goddess on the Mervue Bus* (1986), is not a meditation on a vision of beauty, temporality, and art, but about the broken dreams laid waste by the cycle of poverty invigorated by unplanned pregnancies, drugs, and the indignities of low-income housing:

O Ragoon, who made you  
to break the hearts  
of young girls with  
pregnant dreams

of an end of terrace,  
crisp white clothes  
lines and hire purchase  
personalities?  
(2005, p.26)

Although class awareness forms a deep seam of political bedrock throughout her poetry, Higgins, as MacAnailly Burke points out, resists

'cheap categorising' as a "'housewife-poet", or as the "voice of the working class"'.<sup>25</sup> But given that her initials RAH appear imbedded in the first syllable and stressed phoneme of Rah-oon, we are given a hint that Higgins's poetry potently explores the tensions between self growth and community responsibility, the conflict between personal dream and ethical demand, and the growing pains in the act of personal, political, and relational metamorphosis. So while 'specifically situated', the final lines of 'Ode to Ragoon Flats', visualizes the downfall of the salvational machine for modern living, when the Christological flats are undone in a cruxifictional crumble with no promise of resurrection or renewal:

Ragoon, why are you  
so cruel to young  
husbands, hooked on  
your butter voucher

bribes? If you crumbled  
would it take three days  
or would the ground swallow  
you up, payment for your sins?  
(2005, p. 26)

This desire for specific social and political situatedness to change for the better is reflected in her ideas of poetic form itself. For her, poems should not be static, privatized sites of authority and meaning, but shape-changing in and of themselves, although open to re-interpretation, and specifically to intervention by others, a view demonstrated when she recounts the story of an encounter with a reader in Belfast: "'Young lady," he says, "poems should not be arguable with." And I thought, "You fool: everything should be arguable with"'.<sup>26</sup> Understanding her poems as arguments is central to seeing how she theorises her poetry as a set of formal interventions in discourses outside itself, and outside the self-enclosing language of poetry, to challenge hierarchical interpretive communities through exegetical privileging and generations of textual de-coding that promote inclusions and exclusions.

Taxing the exclusions of the privatised poem extends to testing the enclosures of the privatised nation. *An Awful Racket* (2001) moves from Galway to a number of other sites, including Majorca and Jerusalem, and it includes 'They Never Wear Coats', a poem about Newcastle, a Northern English working class town, which shares its name with an historically working class area in Galway city. This is one of her most powerful and painful poems and it explores the spiritual and psychic diminishment, the emotional deadening and the brutal sexual

economies that result from poverty, addiction, and abandonment. By making the Newcastles of Ireland and England visible in alliance and not in national opposition to one another, this poem refuses the work of nation building and instead focuses on extra-national connections between the 'underbellies' of the 'nations' — at that which is topographically 'under the belly': 'Carol as always has to pee, / "have ya a good look like," / I'll shove your face in it for ya?' (2005, p.172) The promise to 'shove your face in it' is made good by many of Higgins's poems, but in what is the reader's face being shoved?

Her poems shove the reader's face in the spectacle of the bodily place from which a woman pees as well as pee itself revealing the woman's body hidden in language and text itself, each in turn intimately politicised around the issues of woman's authority, especially around her own body as a site of reproductive politics and of the generation of meaning. So, when Higgins doesn't watch her language, but brings into view that which was 'hidden', as a woman, she takes considerable risks with her own status as a public figure and as a site and source of even self-authority. The 'C' word remains the most powerful curse, the most offensive word in English, linguistically hidden in its euphemism, and in respectable clothing, and it is this that Higgins repeatedly makes us 'see' and 'watch': '[s]ome people know what's it's like, / to be called a cunt in front of their children' (2005, p.58). She exposes, 'something previously disguised or concealed'. In 'Be Someone', gender, sexuality, and language are revealed as even more emphatically intertwined when the cunt is ironically exposed through watching watchfulness itself: 'Don't be caught dead / In them shameful tight slacks' (2005, p.39). The shameful tight slacks emphasise a woman's genitals, and put the curve of her vaginal lips on show, to be 'watched', and this line gestures to the relationship between outspokenness and sexuality. In this paradoxical exhortation to 'watch' the lips, we are asked to acknowledge that watching your language doesn't just mean watching your tongue. In 'Anything is Better than Emptying Bins', when the poet tries to send her poems away for publication, initiating the transition between writing for self and claiming the right to a public platform she encounters '[m]ore lip and less tongue' (2005, p. 44), announcing how her public voice reveals the relationship between female sexuality and the economies of discourse in her work, from the 'C wearer's of 'People Who Wear Cardigans Are Subversive' (2005, pp.67-68) to the 'bitch' 'collapsin' engine of 'Misogynist' (2005, p.69). The lips reveal the 'w' shape made through the shameful tight slacks, the watchword at the centre of the body, and of a symbolic order predicated on the prohibition of female desire. The 'w' tells the disruptive desire of the woman, a shibboleth that betrays the inside of the outsider, the desire hidden within discourse — the

witch in the bush. 'Witch in the Bushes', dramatises how fear of female sexuality and genitalia becomes sublimated for one man into lifelong anger fuelled by an avuncular inner voice's paranoiac warning to be vigilant: "'About/ the witch in the bushes,"/ it said/ "Watch her,/ she never sleeps"' (2005, p.43).

'Watching' language so that the prohibited does not erupt into its accepted codes and practices of gender class is the activity of many institutions and many social practices, and the modification of language to exclude the taboo is a primary indicator of social and political place. Given that middle class indexes of emphasised femininity valorise and reward minimised body space, sexuality and speech in a woman, Higgins's work breaks at least two taboos by being 'unfemininely' outspoken and by cursing not only publicly but in public poetry. The use of 'dirty words' involves the rupture of proper language by the unseemly, and like the excrement and urine it often references, like the use in her work of toilets as dramatic stages, it allows seepage of social discontent into discourses designed to keep it at bay, or hidden. Obscene language is an act of violence in speech and writing, it is an aggressive act, however affectionately the 'curse' word has been declined or parsed. The curse word represents the interruption of the symbolic order, of what is presentable and acceptable within language, both at the level of the sacred and of the abject. Increasingly since modernists such as James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and DH Lawrence used crude or dirty language in their work it has been acceptable as an indication of authentic vernacular and of a certain sort of muscular masculinity in writing.<sup>27</sup> However, valorisation of the plain and crude language of the working and soldiering man as an index of social truth is often made without due attention to the sexual violence implicit in such language. That is not to say that women don't use or access crude language, or even enjoy it, but rather that when the language iterated publicly is primarily from a masculine point of view, then women tend to be the objects of it, and not the shapers of it. Cursing, the breaking of social codes is acceptable for men, often read as a form of linguistic bravery and audacity, or even as politically strategic and necessary. Cursing in an Irish literary context has often been read as a post-colonial 'talking back', a calibaneque riposte to the empire, yet it remains an almost entirely masculine affair. Why does the same sexiness, bravado, or cool swagger not attach to a woman 'talking back to patriarchal capitalism', an equally imperial economy? The intrusion of male sexuality into public discourse no longer disturbs social codes, but is seen as underwriting its generational logic, whereas the incursion of female sexuality and embodiment from a woman's pen undoes this logic.

Women's disingenuous management of their sexuality within the economics of capital leads to reward, and in 'Be Someone,' being

'caught' works in two senses, for in not being caught in shameful self-revealing slacks, one can pass, can use the watchword to marry up, and, like the aphorism where a man chases a woman until she catches him, the sensible woman can be 'caught' for reproduction of a social order that needs the regulation and hiding of her desire. 'Learn to speak properly, / always pronounce your ings', 'spare the butter' (2005, p.39) — manage your commodity, don't let yourself go (free), but make sure you get a good price. 'Have nothing to do/with the Shantalla gang, / get yourself a right man/with a Humber Sceptre' (2005, p.39). The Humber Sceptre is a niche car which denotes social status, conferring authority on those who drive it, recalling all of the rods and staffs from Bishop's crooks to imperial sceptres that function as a ceremonial emblem of authority and sovereignty and that are passed on from one generation of men to another. The addressee of this poem, being exhorted to 'watch' her language and her body (her passport to another class) is being asked to climb a social ladder that may improve her material lot, but which structurally serves to keep patriarchal heterosexual marriage and the legitimate family firmly in place as the site of reproduction. Thus sexuality in Higgins's work is most often tied to the reproduction of social and gendered inequities. Female desire is often specifically linked to maternity and a lifetime of unpaid labour as in 'Mamorexixia' (2005, p.123) and 'Tommy's Wife' (2005, p.16). Whilst the emotional richness of maternity is also explored, the material realities of a pro-natalist state that neither supports nor values actual maternal production are never far from the surfaces of her work, as in 'Light of the Moon' which begins with pleasure and desire:

Question:  
Can you tell me  
the way to maternity?

Answer:  
Walk on the beach  
in the West of Ireland  
at four in the morning  
in the middle of summer  
with a man who's six foot two  
and you'll get there  
sooner or later  
(2005, pp.72-73)

However, despite the playful delight in abandon and intimacy, it ends with the labour cycles of unpaid and unvalued domestic life and childbirth, which are shown to be initiated and sustained through

socially accepted and government supported practices of self-anaesthetisation through drink:

but the glare from the moon  
 which makes you say  
 in seagull Russian  
 'Fuse me bix foot skew  
 In your stocking wheat  
 Bould you kind werribly  
 if I jay on the bat of my flack  
 For the bext three-quarters of a bour  
 The boon is milling me'  
 (2005, p.73)

Drinking, with weekend binges as the highlight of the week, is often underscored as the mechanism by which people become inured to and bound to poverty and sexual and emotional violence. 'They Never Wear Coats', illustrates young girls whose self-worth is injured to the extent they will not even protect themselves from the bitter Northern English winter with a coat. Dehumanised as 'tubes on legs', with their senses so spoilt they do not even feel the cold, they cannot walk away from repeated brutal and unhappy encounters with rough men:

They know all the words of all the songs,  
 they sing them all day in the work place.  
*'I try to say goodbye and I choke  
 I try to walk away and I stumble'.*  
 This night they sing louder  
 helped by vodka and gin.  
 (2005, pp.172-173)

The embedded lines from Macy Gray's 1999 hit song, 'I Try', reveals a focus on popular song and culture in Higgins's work, shown here to have the same narcotic effect as drink.<sup>28</sup> The closed poetry of its formulaic repetitions becomes the tranquilizing looping soundtrack to the seeming inescapability of their lives, operating in much the same way as it does in 'Work On', to prevent the critical thinking that would help them 'walk away' from choking. In 'Work On', the boredom of the factory is relieved by anticipation of the weekend's drinking and courting, and the soundtracks of the nightclubs are blared on the radios on the factory floor, keeping the women working there in a permanent 'disco', and in a state of heightened romantic and sexual arousal, discursively centred around the ritual sucking of cigarette ends, so that they 'work on' regardless of the indignities of the job which are hidden by the narrative of hope of romantic rescue by a 'hero' with 'acreage, physique' and a 'car':

Two jived to the beat, two killed the smoke  
and seven sank further into hand basins.  
(2005, p.18)

This poignant couplet, a vignette of a high-spirited stolen break, underscores how cruelly young women invest their hope in the romance that they are sold as a means of changing their life. Smoke is of course the real killer, not the girls who swat it away, and the use of 'killed' in the past tense, suggests the inevitable stillbirth of the dreams of the girls working here, where most will end in sink estates, unsalvaged by a 'thousand Ranch House fantasies' over cigarettes in the factory toilet. When desire is tied to reproduction in Higgins's poetry, it is most often linked to the reproduction of inequality and poverty, where the same political realities and semiotic economies get reproduced by seemingly inescapable cycles of unmet needs. The heart-breaking poem 'Mothercare' explores how desire functions as capital for the child or teenage mother caught in chains of reproductive poverty.

Mothercare is the well known trademark of a chain of shops specialising in the paraphernalia of parenting, and the use of the compound brand name, rather than the phrasal 'mother care' in the title, suggests that the poem's subject will be the commodification of reproduction and the reproduction of commodification. The concatenation of desire and capital is explored when the emotional hunger that haunts this poem is revealed in displacement: when the terror of feeling the full force of helplessness is staved off by an overarching need for power, approval, and control that is partially, but never completely met in the fetishisation of the commodity – the status buggy, which has 'underbelly things we hadn't seen' (2005, p.117). Here, the 'underbelly' revealed is not only the seductive power of the phallus as it operates in commodity culture, but specifically its damaging colonisation of dreams in a socio-economic bracket where people are priced out of their dreams into debt. The buggy is described in the coded terms of a sports car, a high status object of desire and signifier of speed, upward mobility and totem in a culture in which social mobility is improbable and in which ambitions for a life outside physical reproduction are short circuited. The poem directs us to the underclass status reinforced by such desire, a social reality that the young girls cannot see, for the underbelly delights that distract them from the revelation of their own cyclical and intergenerational relation to poverty are specifically phallic — specifically, in a lacanian sense about display, pleasure and power. The buggy visibly responds to touch:

A little touch here  
and it collapses  
a little touch there



and it's up like a shot  
 you barely touch this —  
 and you're in another street  
 another town.  
 (2005, p.117)

Although designed as transport for the baby, part of its powerful draw for the teenage mother is that it can be a transporter for her too: it appears to have the power to convey her into another life, another street, another town, reaffirming what Adorno identifies as the infantilisation at the heart of commodity culture, as the child-mother herself becomes the baby in the buggy highlighting her own need to be mothered and cared for.<sup>29</sup> Desire for this transporting buggy offers the mother the illusion of control in a life in which she has little or no control:

A mind of its own  
 a body like a rocket  
 it's yours to control —  
 just like that.  
 (2005, p.117)

The helplessness felt by the mother and the over-compensatory veneration of the buggy/phallus is not mere social climbing, not simple vanity and self-aggrandising, but a desperate bid for psychic survival. Here, the buggy/phallus stands in for the child, providing in Freud's formulation of femininity, the penis substitute that finally makes a woman feminine. Expressly however, in Freud's observations of a society in which one gender carries more value than another, it is the birth of a son that finally fulfils this feminine destiny and supplies woman with the penis she has missed and envied, and thus the child mother calls her daughter 'Tomma', a feminised version of the boy's name 'Tommy', and to this affixes a hyphenated androgynous suffix — 'Lee' which functions as a surname, or father's name where there is no father. In this way, the law of the father remains the means of identification for the child-mother who struggles to survive as one part of a half in a system that confers identity on her only through the mediation of the missing half — the father/husband. The over-devotion to the phallus/buggy is also a means of staving off what Luce Irigaray calls symbolic dereliction, for without identification with the phallus, she cannot feel herself exist. It mediates belonging to a symbolic system that threatens to exclude her on her own terms.<sup>30</sup> Further, Freud's essay also suggests that a woman must not only bear a male child, but she must also make her husband her child. Here, in the absence of a husband, or a father for the child, where the buggy stands in for the phallus, for the law of the father and the market, the child-

mother also makes the buggy her child, and the commodity comes to occupy the place of the baby, as it is cooed over and receives the pride, affection, and care that should be Tomma-Lee's: 'the girls came over/ to see the new buggy' (2005, p.117).

Here, a cycle of diverted love becomes evident, as the echoes of the child/mother's own childhood resound in the early emotional emptiness she seeks to fill with the buggy, perpetuating a dislocation between herself and Tomma-Lee, as she touches the buggy but not her child, and mediates kinship through the commodity and not through her own kind. It seems that the real enemy of intimacy in Higgins's work is not poverty, although the poems make clear how it generates powerlessness and fear that is detrimental to spiritual and psychic well-being; instead the real impediment to closeness is the power of desire for the 'thing'. The real scarcity is desire for an-other in a culture that urges us to desire the thing. Higgins's work brings into focus the chasms between people who cannot touch as their bond is mediated through objects that serve to alienate both from the self and the other. Long before the Celtic Tiger roared its last, 'Between Them', addressed a culture in which an abyss was placed between people by advertising and questioned the emotional soundness of a society that envisaged social renewal through material aspirations alone:

between them  
you could fit:  
two McNerney Homes  
three Berlin walls  
Martha Glynn's fantasies  
four empty factories (I.D.A.)  
seventeen rocket couriers (slightly overweight)  
forty-eight good quality reconditioned colour TVs  
incalculable curriculum Vs

cat fights  
frog fights  
bull fights  
dog fights  
broken hearts  
hearts in jars  
lost wars  
lost teeth  
teeth in jars  
pope's intentions  
sexist free Bibles  
(2005, p.83)

The two McInerney homes and the 'Berlin walls' that keep intimacy out reference the most desired object in Irish social economy in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, the self-owned house. This triumphalist symbol is necessarily the site of the phallic mother, the ideological *habitus* for the reproduction of patriarchal capital. In 'They Always get Curried Chips', the semiotics of the kitchen extension are parsed with a strong sexual emphasis on risings and erections: 'the extension means more than space/ her status will rise in the estate'. It 'will take your eye out', so that the wrong eye can no longer guide, and instead the right eye will measure 'every doodad': 'they talk shape, they talk size/when it comes to it/size is everything' (2005, pp.156-57). In contrast, by refusing the investment of pleasure into estate, into size, the speaker in 'The Did-You-Come-Yets of The Western World', shakes herself as the phallically fetishised house in an orgasm that undoes that economy. It begins:

When he says to you:  
 You look so beautiful  
 you smell so nice-  
 how I've missed you  
 -and did you not come yet?

It means nothing,  
 and he is smaller  
 than a mouse's fart.  
 (2005, p.38)

The obsession with producing an orgasm as a way of investing in desire to produce a direct end to pleasure is linked to a preoccupation with size and status, with show and tell. A fixation with the end of pleasure spells its ending in sexual regulation in service of capital's ends: 'and they will talk their slippery way/ through fine clothes and expensive perfume,/fishing up your independence' (2005, p.38). However, the foundations of this economy can be disrupted by the woman who grounds herself in her own desire:

in time one will crawl  
 Out from under thigh-land.  
 Although drowning he will say,  
 "Woman I am terrified, why is the house shaking?"

And you'll know he's the one.  
 (2005, p.38-39)

The waters that threaten to 'drown' him, bring him instead to life and into relationship with the woman revealed by the folding of the 'house' where ideologies cross. Sex, in ceasing to be instrumental, becomes an act of intimacy and journey, of connection and openness, in which other relational possibilities are opened. In this, the 'privatised space' of the woman/house becomes open but not 'public'. Higgins's work charts the edges of public and private spaces, negotiating the conflicts between a class inflected political desire for an undoing of privatisation, and a desire for safety and equal ownership of 'public' spaces as a woman, in a culture in which a woman's body and sexuality are very often considered 'public property'. In 'The Apprentices', a group of young men 'perch/ during factory lunchtimes/ on their man-made Olympus', and from this panopticon, they pass hurtful and denigrating judgements on the women who have to pass by. The speaker asks, 'who will attempt to pass/ through their veil of lust unscathed/ by Henry Leech-along's recital/ of his nine favourite adjectives?' (2005, p.19), while the apprentices claim the street. In contrast, the women from the factory in 'Work On' occupy a toilet to discuss acreage and intention. In 'Space Invader', this relationship is reversed and the poet-speaker is on the street, while the man who harasses her 'lived in a toilet'. The speaker-poet is approached on the street by a homeless man who exhorts her to:

Write a poem  
about me  
about the time  
I lived  
in a toilet  
for six months.

After all  
you're the poet  
girlie missus  
the one with  
the fancy words.  
(2005, pp.85-86)

He asks her to represent him in a symbolic system to which he has no access, in which he has no authority or subjective purchase as a poet, but by repeating 'girlie', he can access a language of derogatory gendered terms with which to belittle her.<sup>31</sup> Higgins refuses to close the text in an assertion of her own authority by allowing the speaker to 'author' the poem and thus declines the univocalism of an aspirational some-one. In this way she makes explicit the operations of authority

based on privileging logocentrism, and refuses to transcend her own material context as a working class woman whose discursive power cannot vouchsafe her own space.

Higgins challenges the terms of poetic authority itself, and she recognises that she too is the 'space invader', invading the space of public poetic discourse. 'Consumptive in the Library', in many ways her 'manifesto poem', plots the coordinates for the materialist aesthetic that she would characteristically make her own. Whereas Seamus Heaney's 'Digging' set out his poetic agenda as a journey into history, etymology, and the unconscious, collective and individual, Higgins is diverting from following this same direction by the insistent interruptions of a consumptive homeless man:

I started with Heaney,  
 you started to cough.  
 You coughed all the way to Ormsby,  
 I was on the verge of Mahon.

Daunted, I left you the Ulster Poets  
 to consume or cough at.

I moved to the medical section.  
 (2005, p.12)

The awful racket of the scandal of an ill man without care, home, or medication persistently interrupts her earnest study of the Ulster poets, whose writing about the Troubles largely dominated discussions of Irish poetry from the last third of the twentieth century. By following the coughing man's cues she sets her face away not only from the Troubles, but from the notion of poetry as occurring between the pages of a book in a dedicated section of the library, and is taken on a different orphic journey by the homeless man who wears a St Christopher's medal round his neck. The patron saint of journeyers directs her obliquely to the medical section, to where the body is the object of enquiry and subject of learning, and thus she announces the body, not as a closed form, but as a political and social space as her subject: the conflicts and interlinks of desires, needs and wants of the poet and the homeless man in the public library comes to stand for this interspatial aesthetic in which relationship has to be affirmed. She remains resolutely specifically situated at the interface of public and private, at text and sound, at body and utterance and refuses an enclosed 'room of her own'.

Higgins's poetry exemplifies theory on the edge, writing from the threshold spaces between conflicted public and private spaces,

between rasping sounds and fetishised text, negotiating the psychic, physical, and emotional needs for boundaries and safe spaces with lived knowledge of the inequities of an economic and political system derived from private enclosure. Unlike the subject of the poem 'Prism', the 'man/ up our street' who 'stuck broken glass/ on top of his back wall/ to keep out/ those youngsters/ who never stopped/ teasing his/ Doberman Pinscher' (2005, p.129), Higgins's work does not function to keep anyone out, but invites them to sit on the back wall with her, looking in all directions from this edge. Whereas he 'watched the Castle Park sun/divide the light/and scatter it/all over his property' (2005, p.129), a transcendent subject surveying his enclosed space, Higgins's prismatic refractions are not about illuminating meanings that are her poetic property, but about setting readers and meaning alike and unlike on edge.

## NOTES

1. Rita Ann Higgins, *Throw in the Vowels: New and Selected Poems* (Glasgow: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p.39.
2. Ailbhe Smyth, 'A Reading From The Book Of Beginnings', *Estudios Irlandeses* (2005), 127-140 (p.136).
3. Ailbhe Smyth, 'Momentary Views: A Personal History', *The Irish Review, Special Issue: Irish Feminisms*, 35 (2007), 7-24 (p.11).
4. Smyth, 'Book Of Beginnings' (2005), p.136.
5. See Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
6. Arminta Wallace, 'Lovely Rita Metre Maid', *The Irish Times*, 11 June 2005, p.B16.
7. Molly McAnailly Burke, 'Educating Rita', *Sunday Independent*, 16 March 1997, p.B36.
8. 'After 12 years of writing and four years of diligent applications, she has finally been elected to *Aosdána* and will be a recipient of its £8,000-a-year stipend, which approximates an "income" on the dole. Unquestionably, this small sum, and the security it affords (confer *Aosdána's* life membership), will make a serious difference to Rita, whose books budget alone must be major. But she feels the struggle to "make it" into *Aosdána* was embarrassing enough – God of the Hatch Man in another guise. "I feel that the old geezers in *Aosdána* don't familiarise themselves enough with the work of those applying," she says'. McAnailly Burke (1997), p.B36.
9. Molly McAnailly Burke, 'Educating Rita.' *Sunday Independent*, 16 March 1997, p.B36.
10. Claire Bracken, 'Partial Visions', in *The Irish Review, Special Issue: Irish Feminisms*, 35 (2007), 165-167 (p.166).
11. Bracken, p.166.
12. Lucy Collins, "'Performance and Dissent": Irish Poets in the Public Sphere', in Matthew Campbell ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.209-228, p.219.
13. Collins, p.219.
14. Catriona Clutterbuck, 'Irish Women's Poetry and the Republic of Ireland: Formalism as Form', in Ray Ryan ed. *Writing In the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949-1999* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp.17-43.
15. Patrick Crotty, 'The Different Islands of Personal Verse', *The Irish Times*, 23 June 2001, p.53.

16. 'The Arts Council established *Aosdána* in 1981 to honour those artists whose work has made an outstanding contribution to the arts in Ireland, and to encourage and assist members in devoting their energies fully to their art. Membership of *Aosdána*, which is by peer nomination and election, is limited to 250 living artists who have produced a distinguished body of work. Members must have been born in Ireland or have been resident here for five years, and must have produced a body of work that is original and creative. The current membership is 246.' (<http://aosdana.artscouncil.ie/>). It pays an annual stipend to its members, and represents a steady income as well as professional underwriting and acceptance for artists and writers.
17. The gender problem to which McAnailly Burke refers is the small percentage of women to men amongst its literary membership. As of May 2010, only twenty five percent of its literary members are women.
18. McAnailly Burke, 'Educating Rita' (1997), p.B36.
19. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), p.3.
20. Katie Donovan, 'A Right Terror', *The Irish Times*, 7 November 1996, p.16.
21. Medbh McGuckian, 'Don't Talk to me about Dance', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 35, Summer 1992, pp.98-100. The view that feminism is anti-men or desires to overpower or subjugate or exclude men from the egalitarian visions of feminist politics has become a sort of default popular truth about feminism, and it functions very powerfully to keep women away from feminist political practice, seeing it as a means of alienating them from men they love as husband, sons, fathers and brothers. Equally, feminists are often put in a position where they have to address this straw feminist, by qualifying their feminism and insisting that their feminism is not of the 'man-hating' media bogey kind. For a more extensive discussion of this see, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 2007).
22. Donovan, p.16.
23. The Ragoon flats were tower blocks built on outskirts of Galway in 1971, as a low-cost housing project provided for people with lower incomes. They were notorious for a number of reasons, including being a dangerous place for children and a dumping ground for rubbish. They were demolished in 1998 and replaced by houses which were designed to be more family friendly and to provide more dignity and safety and for those living there.
24. McAnailly Burke, 'The Iron Fist', p.20.
25. McAnailly Burke, 'The Iron Fist', p.20.
26. Wallace, p. B16.
27. See Loren Glass, '#\$%^&\*!?: Modernism and Dirty Words.' *Modernism/Modernity* 14.2 (2007), 209-233, for a discussion of class and gender in 'dirty' modernist words.
28. Macy Gray, 'I Try', EMI Publishing, 1999.
29. See Brian O Connor, *The Adorno Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
30. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
31. For an earlier reading of this poem see Moynagh Sullivan, 'Assertive Subversions: Comedy in the Work of Julie O'Callaghan and Rita Ann Higgins', *Versé*, 16 (1999), 83-87.