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<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: Reclaiming women’s voice from song</th>
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Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: 
Reclaiming Women’s Voice from Song

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An absence is a very difficult thing to define or describe especially when there has never been a presence around which to measure it. I read contemporary Irish writing, both poetry and fiction, with an ever growing feeling of grievance. A nagging sense of ‘Ah that’s all very well and good as far as it goes, but surely there is something missing, only what the hell is it?’ I have always known that this dissatisfaction on my part was a result of my being a product of a largely oral tradition, and of therefore having a strong sense of living a life which was only partially and even then, very imperfectly, reflected in literature. (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1988a, p. 116)

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill is one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary Irish literature. Her work, drawing on Irish mythology, folklore and orature has also attracted considerable international acclaim and has been widely translated. However, her remarks above reflect an awareness of the problematical relationship of women historically to Irish literature. Women have for centuries been portrayed, whether in the Gaelic aisling or in the literature of the literary revival, as representative of Ireland, often to the neglect of their real lived experiences. Equally, within the Irish literary tradition, as Seán Ó Tuama has noted, 'attested works by women are quite rare' (Ó Tuama, 1995, p. 35). Women’s ‘literature’, as Ní Dhomhnaill suggests, was found largely in the oral tradition much of which went unrecorded. Throughout her poetry, she regularly draws on aspects of this legacy of women’s performances, including the lament and song traditions, to inform her work. This obvious intertextual process at work in her poetry is examined in this paper with regard to the traditional process of composition of songs and laments by women in Ireland and in relation to its use in other contexts. This paper will also explore how this process of reclaiming aspects of Ireland’s oral culture represents Ní Dhomhnaill’s rewriting and replacing of the female voice within her own work while asserting her own right of expression in literature.
For Irish female poets such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill the construction of women in Irish literature has been deeply problematic. Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem ‘An tSeanbhean Bhocht’ alludes to the late eighteenth-century song, ‘The Shan Van Vocht,’ which Padraic Colum describes as a ‘peasant song made at the time when the Irish were expecting help from revolutionary France, in 1798’ (Colum, 1922). While the Shan Van Vocht is, according to Patricia Boyle Habersroh, ‘an enduring figure who appears in many guises in Irish legend and culture but is best known in the modern age in the literature of the Revival’ (Haberstroh, 1996, p. 187), she is also representative of the portrayal of women in Irish literature and in popular songs, as Eavan Boland has noted (Boland, 1989, pp. 8-9), as motifs or mythical figures, often representing, as in this song, the Irish nation while bearing little relationship to the reality of Irish female experience.

Ní Dhomhnaill’s ‘An tSean Bhean Bhocht,’ however, is far from the glorious figure personifying Ireland of the 1798 ballad. Rather the lady of the title is a self-pitying cantankerous old woman who may indeed represent England, or possibly the Queen of England, as much as Ireland. Indeed, Ní Dhomhnaill appears, perhaps a little mischievously, to pity those who saw her in the glory of her youth and felt obliged to fight in the British army many miles away in order to escape from her:

Féachann sí orm anois leis an dtrumhéil fhuar.
ag meabhrú dí féin im fhíanaise, leath os iscael.

That ice-blue pity stares through me, she
Whose eyes were radiant once with youth and blue fire

As Ní Dhomhnaill has noted, ‘[w]oman, as woman, has only been accepted in the literary tradition as either Muse or, if she refuses to play that dreary, boring and unpaid role, then as Bitch’ (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1996a, p. 114) much as Gilbert and Gubar found women traditionally in nineteenth-century literature represented as
women were either angel or monster (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 17). However, Ní Dhomhnaill is equally aware of the uncertain position of female poets in Irish literary history:

women poets in Irish were always highly discriminated against and still are [...] the very concept of a woman poet was inherently threatening, as witnessed by the extreme hostility that surrounds the subject. I was brought up amid a welter of proverbs and formulaic phrases of the likes of: 'Na tri rudai is measa i mbaile-túidhir fluich, stoladóir tiubh, file mná' [The three worst curses that could befall a village- a wet thatcher, a heavy sower, a woman poet] (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1996b, pp. 9, 14).

Her view is reflected in the work of several scholars of Irish literature, including Máire Ní Annracháin, (Ní Annracháin, 1982, p. 145) Maureen Murphy (Murphy, 1989, p. 141) and Sean Ó Tuama, (Ó Tuama, 1995, p. 35) who all concur with the remark of J. E. Caerwyn Williams that 'women figure only rarely among historical poets and authors of the medieval and modern literature.' (Caerwyn Williams, 1992, pp. 237-238.)

However, there were female poets in the Gaelic tradition. Yet, due to the oral nature of a great deal of their compositions, much of their work has been lost. What remains is found in the surviving laments or caoineadh and in the amhrán grá, or love song tradition. Indeed, as Rachel Bromwich suggests of the 18th lament of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill for her husband, Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire, it represents a form of female composition with 'an ancient tradition behind it' although little of it was recorded in the surviving manuscripts of Gaelic literature (Bromwich, 1948, p. 240).

These primarily oral traditions of lament and song offered women a means of expression outside the more restricted areas of literacy. As Ní Dhomhnaill again contends:

The fact of the matter was though the literary canon was drawn up without them, there were women poets. The extensive keening tradition, or caoineadh was the major 'prerogative' of women poets. The very excellence of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill’s lament for her husband in ‘Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire’, it represents a form of female composition with ‘an ancient tradition behind it’ although little of it was recorded in the surviving manuscripts of Gaelic literature (Bromwich, 1948, p. 240).

The Irish lament and song traditions have been an important inspiration for Ní Dhomhnaill. She has recalled from her own childhood both her mother and father singing to her. While her mother introduced her to the caoineadh, including Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire and other caoineadh, which along with Caoineadh na Luasach, she tells us was ‘the sort of thing I knew by heart’ (Ó’Connor, 1995, p. 590), her father ‘used to sing us sean-nós songs’ (McDiarmid and Durkan, 1999, p. 103). As a child
she remembers travelling on a school bus and while everyone else had their party pieces, the only things she 'knew how to sing were 'Bean Dubh an Ghleanna' and 'Róisín Dubh.' 'I was embarrassed by this sort of stuff,' she has admitted 'but when it came down to brass tacks and singing in public, this was the level that was most vivid' (ibid.).

When she began performing her own poetry, Ní Dhomhnaill would also find her contemporary idols among practitioners of the song tradition. As she has recalled:

At my very first ever reading, 'Fili Eireann go hAonteach', at the first ever Cumann Merriman Winter School in my hometown of Nenagh in February 1969, I was congratulated and encouraged by no less a personage than Caitlín Maude herself, back from England, reciting poetry impromptu when she was not singing incredible 'sean-nós' songs like 'Dónall Óg' or 'Liam Ó'Raghallaigh'. I was utterly enthralled. I had found my role model (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1996a, pp. 106-107).

Throughout her poetry, one finds references to this song tradition, including repeated allusions to both 'Dónall Óg' and 'Liam Ó Raghailligh'. Titles serve as touchstones, recalling songs and forms from the tradition: 'Mo Mhile Stór,' 'Amhrán an Fhir Óig,' 'Amhrán grá,' 'An Mhaighdean Mhara.' Equally, Ní Dhomhnaill often includes words and lines from this tradition in her poetry. An early poem, for example, 'Támaid Damanta, a Dheirfrách' recalls lines from 'Liam Ó Raghailligh':

Beidh dr sriile ag na peisteanna
Is dr mbéala ag na portáin ... (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1988, p. 14)

Your eyes with the maggots,
Your mouth with the crabs ... (Ó Tuama and Kinsella, 1981, p. 337)

Equally, Ní Dhomhnaill has drawn on the caoineadh tradition in her work. This is a tradition of lament for the dead according to Breandán Ó Madagáin which was 'performed in the presence of the corpse, usually by the bean chaointe or keening woman' and 'performed to music: neither the keen of the common folk not the learned elegy was given mere recitation'(Ó Madagáin, 1982, p. 311). As Maureen Murphy has noted, Ní Dhomhnaill has taken 'elements of the caoine and transformed a traditional form in elegies that express [her] own poetic voice' (Murphy, 1989, p. 141).

Murphy has highlighted formal aspects of the caoineadh, specifically 'the direct address to the deceased, the formulaic language, the praise for the deceased and the sympathetic response of nature' which are apparent in the poetry of Ní Dhomhnaill. 'Above all,' Murphy claims 'the caoine has provided [Ní Dhomhnaill] with an emotional context for [her] elegiac poetry' (ibid. p. 143). Murphy offers the example of Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Caoineadh Mháire Nic Aodha' which she argues illustrates the traditional 'sympathetic response of nature' as nature appears to join with the poet to mourn Máire Nic Aodha:
Seo chugainn an geimhreadh
rátthe míd-arámarach,
úsáir dúr, gan rath gan dath,
ach amhán dath na n-oráisti (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1981, p. 42)

Here comes the winter
Unfortunate time
A hard season, without bounty or colour
Save for the colour of the oranges

An example of praise for the deceased can be found in Ní Dhomhnaill’s ‘In Memoriam Elly Ní Dhomhnaill (1884-1963),’ while ‘Caoineadh Mhoss Martin,’ a tribute to the piper Moss Martin, displays the traditional address to the deceased:

Seo leat, ba thú ár mbuachaill beo
Ár ngiolla mear, ár rogha, ár bpíobaire
Seinn suas anois is bagair sinn
Go dtí Tír Táirngire.

Here’s to you, our lively lad,
our nimble sidekick, our choice, our piper,
play up now, lure us
to the promised land. (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1990, pp. 46-47)

This practice of taking formal elements from, and adapting, older songs is very much part of the Irish lament tradition itself. As Rachel Bromwich has noted, ‘[a]ny idea that it was not legitimate to borrow freely from the work of a predecessor is entirely foreign to the nature of the keen’ (Bromwich, 1948, p. 445). Similar to this process, Ní Dhomhnaill often weaves lines and verses from traditional songs and Ireland’s oral culture into the fabric of her poetry. A comparable practice has been found in the composition and performance of traditional songs in Irish. In Tomás Ó Fiaich’s study of the amhrán grá, Ó Fiaich lists recurring motifs and themes within the songs (Ó Fiaich, 1983, pp. 59-87). Tomás Ó Canainn similarly notes that similar lines and sentiments sometimes appear in different songs. For Ó Canainn the ‘traditional performer may sometimes appear to resort to the use of clichés in variation or composition – he would not see them in this light of course, but would regard them as being almost the standard building-blocks, as it were, of his art’ (Ó Canainn, 1978, p. 3). Indeed, as Ó Fiaich notes, as songs were passed on orally from one generation to the next, frequently verses from one song would appear ‘ar aisacht’ (borrowed) in another (Ó Fiaich, 1983, p. 83). Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella’s anthology of Irish poetry since 1600, An Duanairt, 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed, includes several examples of such including the song ‘Dá dTéinnse Siar’ in which the second verse is the same as a verse from ‘Dónal Óg,’ a poem we will return to shortly:
Tá mo chroí chomh dubh le hairne
Nó le gual dubh a dóigh I geacárta,
Ní le bonn bróige ar hallaf báná,
Is tá lionn dubh móir os cionn mo ghdhire

As several scholars have noted, it is common practice in primarily oral cultures generally that songs would be composed using elements from other songs. Alan P. Merriam in his book *The Anthropology of Music* has found that one of the most frequently mentioned techniques of composition is that which involves taking parts of old songs and putting them together to make new ones (Merriam, 1965, p. 177). Indeed, as Walter J. Ong has noted, ironically the word ‘text’, itself:

from a root meaning 'to weave', is, in absolute terms, more compatible etymologically with oral utterance than is 'literature', which refers to letters etymologically/(literae) of the alphabet. Oral discourse has commonly been thought of even in oral milieus as weaving or stitching – *rhapsoidein*, to 'rhapsodise', basically means in Greek 'to stitch songs together (Ong, 1982, p. 13).

But more critically within Ní Dhomhnaill’s own poems her frequent borrowings from the Irish lament and song traditions and the consequent presence of several voices destabilises her own single authorial voice, and creates an intertextual relationship with earlier compositions. This process reveals Ní Dhomhnaill’s attempt to reclaim the feminine voice from Irish history while expressing her own voice beyond the confines traditionally imposed on women in matters such as literacy and sexuality. It is reminiscent of the movement in African literature where, according to Gitahi Gititi:

The intertextuality between orature and the printed text is a recurrent theme in literary debate ... this intertextuality becomes the nexus of resistance and self-empowerment ... 'Orature,' a term coined by Pius Zirimu (Uganda) to denote oral texts, constitutes the primary source of literary creativity in Africa. The privileging of (written) *literature* over *orature* is increasingly discredited in view of the continual flux between orality and literacy. In most of Africa orature already provides exemplary texts of resistance and discursive contest (Gititi, 1997).

This view would seem to echo that of Ní Dhomhnaill’s who has remarked that 'there is an equals sign between the feminine voice and basic orality, or a literature based on *féiméine* forms’(Cronin, 1986, p. 5). Ní Dhomhnaill has also acknowledged the intertextuality, not just of her creations, but of her very existence writing that 'We are all of us-men and women-as Eavan Boland points out, existing in a mesh, a web, a labyrinth of associations ... We ourselves are constructed by the construct' (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1996, p. 16).
Two songs already referred to which recur in a number of Ní Dhomhnaill's poems are 'Dónal Óg' and 'Liam Ó Raghailligh.' These songs belong to a branch of the Irish language song tradition which Séan Ó Tuama describes as 'the young woman's love lyric' (Ó Tuama, 1983, p. 294). While one cannot be certain that these amhrán grá that survive and appear to be written from the perspective of women were actually composed by women, there is a strong tradition of women's songs in Irish and Ní Dhomhnaill has built on and developed this tradition in her own poetry. Both 'Dónal Óg' and 'Liam Ó Raghailligh' are alluded to in poems from Ní Dhomhnaill's 1998 collection, Cead Aighnis, including the poems 'Dubh' and 'Faoitnín.' The title of the collection itself is reminiscent of a line from the traditional song 'Droimeann Donn Dilis':

Dá bhfaighinnse cead aighnis nó radharc ar an gcoróin,
Sacsanaigh do leadhbfainn mar do leadhbfainn
Seanbhróg, ...

'Give me licence to fight, or one look at the Crown,
And Saxons I'd clout as I'd clout an old shoe...'  
(Ó Tuama and Kinsella, 1981, pp. 310-311)

While Thomas Kinsella translates this phrase, 'Cead Aighnis,' in An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed as 'licence to fight', a more direct translation would be right or 'leave to speak,' while 'Droimeann Donn Dilis' was written to lament Ireland's oppression by England, Ní Dhomhnaill, in her poetry often subverts the more straightforward narratives of such songs, to celebrate her own right of expression through literature in contemporary Ireland, a right valued all the more given women's problematical relationship with Irish literature in the past. The first poem of this Cead Aighnis collection, for example, 'Mo Mháistir Dorcha/My Dark Master,' develops this point particularly in its final verse where the young female subject of the poem who has hired herself out to work as a maid wonders if she will ever be allowed leave or to have her say:

O táimse in aímsir ag an mbás
is baolach ná beidh mé saor riamh uaidh.
Ní heol dom mo thurarastal ná mo phá
nó an bhfaighidh mé pá plaic nó cead aighnis

I've hired myself out to death. And I'm afraid that I'll not ever be let go. What I'll have at the end of the day
I've absolutely no idea, either in terms of three hots and a cot
or if I'll be allowed to say my say (Muldoon, 1995, p. 79).

Ní Dhomhnaill has recalled the inspiration for this poem: 'When I was young,' she has said, 'I knew people who had gone to hiring fairs when they were young; and
what they bargained for most of all was ‘pá phliuc no cead aighnis’—the pay of well-rounded cheeks and the right to say your say (Redmond, 1995).

The ‘right to say your say’ for Ní Dhomhnaill includes expressions of her own sexuality (an area again in which female expression was restricted in the past), often by drawing on lines from the song tradition. These songs, as Tomás Ó Fiaich has noted, frequently included references to the hair, mouth and complexion of the beloved, (Ó Fiaich, pp. 60-62) and all are present in one of Ní Dhomhnaill’s most sensual poems ‘Leaba Shíoda’ (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1988b, p. 154). In this poem the poet/persona offers to make a bed for her lover in a field under trees where they might openly make love. Apart from references to various features of the lover (skin, hair, ears), ‘Leaba Shíoda’ also includes the line, ‘Is bheadh do bheola taise/ar mhilseach shiúcura’ (And your damp lips/would be as sweet as sugar) reminiscent of a line from one of the most famous amhráin grá ‘Una Bháin’: ‘A bhéilín an tsiúcura, mar leamhnacht, mar fhion ’s mar bheoir’ (O little mouth of sugar, like new milk, like wine and like beer).

The sexual candidness of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry has been remarked upon by various commentators including Máire Ní Annracháin who notes that Ní Dhomhnaill celebrates her own sexual openness and condemns the ecclesiastical system that made a ‘cúplail meata as suirí usáid’ (‘decadent coupling out of noble courtship’) (Ní Annracháin, 1982, p. 161). Similarly, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh has described how

[i]n poem after poem, Ní Dhomhnaill’s speakers celebrate the sensual pleasures of dancing, singing, eating, and sex...For Ní Dhomhnaill’s personae, sex involves choice, not obligation, as they actively pursue their roles as daughters of Earth. Blatantly sexual, they can be simultaneously lovers and mothers... (Haberstroh, 1996, pp. 175-176).

To conclude, a primary concern of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry is the articulation of the authentic feminine voice. As part of this process she has drawn on the significant body of orature associated with women in Irish literature, particularly the caoineadh and the amhrán grá. While her return to the past, and use of forms and song fragments from lament and song traditions in Irish in the composition of her poetry parallels the process of composition in Ireland in previous centuries, this identification, and incorporation into her work of aspects of Ireland’s oral culture in addition reflects movements in other post-colonial literatures where this intertextuality has become the nexus of resistance and self-empowerment. It also allows her to express herself poetically, in poems noted for their sexual candidness, beyond the constraints traditionally imposed on women in literature and sexuality.

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