Making Strange to See Afresh: Re-visionary Techniques in Some Contemporary Irish Poetry

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The attitude of an indigenous people to their own culture is inevitably altered when they are colonized, for in the course of being treated as strangers in their own land, the colonized people's familiar culture is devalued in favour of that of the colonizer, and is made strange in their own eyes. This estrangement is induced through a forcible blinding to the values of that indigenous culture: it is an act of violence, not an act of artifice such as is recommended in the theories of the Russian Formalists who, in reaction to the Symbolists proposed to poets a process of "defamiliarization" or "making strange," the English terms for Viktor Shklovsky's *ostraneniye* (Lemon and Reis 4).

My thesis is that, after a process of decolonization during which extensive attempts at retrieval of the indigenous culture took place in Ireland, notably over the period of the Irish Literary Revival, some contemporary Irish poetry shows a capacity for "making strange" through artifice those indigenous literary forms that had been jealously re-appropriated during the Revival period. Following a period of cultural atavism, when the native myths and genres were reverently guarded, this contemporary poetry now ironizes while it rehearses certain inherited literary forms which history, through its discontinuities, has prevented from becoming mere clichés.

The Irish language played an important role in the process of nationalist cultural retrieval, and obvious though this may seem, it is worth noting that its discontinuity in the course of English colonization accounts

for why contemporary Irish poetry is written in English.[1] To be estranged from one's own language is an experience commonly and often painfully undergone by exiles. It was an experience even sought by Irish writers like the English-speaking Joyce and Beckett. But they did not seek it out in terms which deprived them of their voice: both of them wrote major works in exile, though they were not necessarily prolific in output.

However, that kind of voluntary estrangement cannot be compared with the forceful suppression of the language of a whole people, which may be regarded as a form of psychic violence. Lacan has made it abundantly clear how vital it is that the individual child should enter the symbolic order through language at a certain point in her/his development in order to become accultured and develop into a healthy individual (Lacan 110–20). What happens then if a whole people are progressively conditioned towards a state of mutism through the denial of their symbolic order? What, in particular, happens to the disposition of those who come in time to be poets, who have been denied access to their inherited language and literary forms and must work in the old oppressor's language? Where colonization has been responsible for this conditioning, it would seem that some form of decolonization of the mind has first to take place for any healthy collective psychic existence to be subsequently possible.

On a collective level, such a decolonization began in Ireland with the 19th-century rash of translations of the largely forgotten native literature into English, in conjunction with the attempts of the Gaelic League to revive the Irish language where it had died out outside of the remote Gaeltacht areas. "De-Anglicizing Ireland" was the task to which Douglas Hyde tried to persuade the nation to commit itself in a version of nationalism that shared certain qualities with nationalism throughout Europe at the time. This kind of 19th-century nationalism has recently been identified by Julia Kristeva in *Etrangers à nous mêmes* as reactionary, backward-looking, assuring an archaic integrity that is culture-and-language-based (261).

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[1] Irish was undermined by excluding those who spoke it (i.e. the Catholic majority) from parliament, from any government office and from the legal profession; and there was a determined policy of displacing the native leadership and culture which nourished the language: see especially Maureen Wall, "The Age of the Penal Laws" in Moody and Martin 217–31.

As Seamus Deane has pointed out, the efforts of this nationalism to define a national identity resulted in a version of Irishness limited to "non-Britishness" or "anti-Britishness," which is clearly restrictive (Deane 81–92). Decolonization, to be thoroughly enabling, should not have its terms still dictated by the colonizer. Therefore, since the revival of the Irish language and culture in its old forms was not entirely successful (nor, given the vitality of which change can be indicative, should this necessarily be regretted), the English language had to be actively appropriated by Irish poets. However, since this was basically a foreign language for them, there were inevitably areas of experience not coextensive with "English experience" (whatever that might be) to be inscribed in it. One of the tasks of the traditional poet in the eyes of his or her community is to continually incorporate in the language what is familiar to it. Hence, contemporary Irish poetry reflects a whole complex linguistic and generic situation where familiarity and strangeness interplay and interchange. The existence of a group of northern Irish poets whose disposition towards the colonial experience differs from that of the poets with whom I am concerned is an additional feature of that complexity. However, since their work remains largely outside the influence of the indigenous language and its literary forms, it will not be considered in the present essay.

Seamus Heaney is one of the poets deploying the techniques of "making strange" which I have suggested are current in contemporary Irish poetry. In his recent collection of critical essays, *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney demonstrates his familiarity with Russian writing, claiming that through translations

> we have been made conscious . . . of the passionate spirits of Russian poetry in the teens, twenties and thirties of this century . . . our sense of the fate and scope of modern Russian poetry has implicitly established a bench at which subsequent work will have to justify itself. (38–39)

The period he mentions here was one of intense interaction between the Russian poets and the Formalist theoreticians. Moreover, in this same essay Heaney identifies Christopher Reid's adoption of the role of "translator" as writing in "a mode involving *defamiliarization*, a sleight-of-image process by which one thing is seen in terms of another thing" (40, my emphasis). These statements, combined with the fact that Heaney has written a poem actually called "Making Strange,"[2] convince me that he is

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[2] *Station Island* (referred to in this essay as SI) 32.

himself consciously deploying the Formalist techniques of "making strange" or "defamiliarization."

While I would hesitate to claim that there is a formal school of contemporary Irish poetry, I would draw attention to a close interaction between the various poets writing in Ireland today, among whom Heaney is a major figure. One only has to look at the numerous dedications from one poet to another in the 1986 *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* to realize the degree to which they are conscious of each other as readers.[3]

The historical process of Irish linguistic estrangement mentioned above is thematically present in several of Heaney's poems, including "The Backward Look,"[4] "Ocean's Love to Ireland" and "Act of Union."[5] All three poems make use of a rape motif, and all their titles have historical references: "The Backward Look" is a reminder of Frank O'Connor's book of that name, *The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature*, which covers literature written both in Irish and English and so attempts to suture a linguistically ruptured literary history. "Ocean's Love to Ireland" echoes Ralegh's poem to Elizabeth I, "Ocean's Love to Cynthia"; and "Act of Union" recalls the parliamentary Act of Union between Britain and Ireland in 1800. This use of familiar titles in a strange context recalls their original references but in a new perspective. Heaney's "Backward Look" unstitches O'Connor's elision by a variety of literary and historical references: he subtly suggests a rape by recalling another one through echoes of Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan," which opens: "A sudden blow: the great wings beating still/Above the staggering girl" (241). These words are clearly being varied in the opening of Heaney's poem:

> A stagger in the air
> as if a language
> failed, a sleight
> of wing.

The illegitimate offspring of the linguistic rape is the italicised translation from the Irish within the poem, recalling many such translations done by

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[3] This is scarcely surprising in a small country where poetry actually sells: there are many small presses that survive almost entirely on poetry, like Gallery or Raven Arts.

[4] *Wintering Out* (referred to in this essay as WO) 29.

[5] *North* (referred to in this essay as N) 46 and 49.

Frank O'Connor and others. The need for translation here arises because the source language has become strange for the target audience. The current strangeness through disappearance of the Irish language is conveyed through an analogy between it and the snipe's bleat:

A snipe's bleat is fleeing
its nesting ground
into dialect,
into variants,

transliterations whirr
on the nature reserves —
little goat of the air,
of the evening,

little goat of the frost.
It is his tail feathers
drumming elegies
in the slipstream

of wild goose
and yellow bittern
as he corkscrews away
into the vaults

that we live off, his flight
through the sniper's eyrie
over twilit earthworks
and wall-steads,

disappearing among
gleanings and leavings
in the combs
of a fieldworker's archive.   (WO 29—30)

Linguistic loss is implied not only in the snipe itself being one of the most difficult birds to shoot on the wing, but also in the bleating or drumming sound *not* being a voice-call: it is made by its tail-feathers as it dives at an angle of 45 degrees, thus it is audible only as a sign of descent, and recalls the current absence of a voice in Irish. Moreover, the "slipstream of the wild goose" recalls the departure of the last wave of the native chieftains,

the Wild Geese, for the continent of Europe, and the "sucking down" effect that had on the Irish language, which was thereby deprived of all patronage for education or poetry. The elegy ends with an acceptance of the disappearance of Irish, apart from what gleanings and leavings the archaeologist can appropriate. But the strangeness of an archaeologist's trophies is proclaimed by their being placed in a museum, or in quotation and translation within this poem in English: they are not available for current usage.

"Ocean's Love to Ireland" fixes on a crucial historical moment of cultural and linguistic displacement, the reign of Elizabeth I and the plantation of Munster implemented on her behalf by such people as Spenser and Ralegh. Here, when Heaney allegorizes that plantation as a rape, he is drawing on John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* for an account of Ralegh backing a maid up against a tree for his pleasure, with the result of pregnancy for her (Corcoran 120f). The maid's complaint within this poem is incomprehensible to an English-speaking ear, but this is not the case of the poem itself.[6] Thus one might say that the poet has become his own community's translator, while at the same time he can address an English audience. Linguistically speaking, he has assumed extended powers of telling what is familiar in strange terms. These two poems record for a traditionally-minded Irish community the process by which the indigenous language came to be archaeologized. But they also signal the beginning of a more energetic embracing of English, which provides a context and capacity for exploiting the possibilities of linguistic strangeness for a contemporary English audience.

This audience constitutes part of the target for the poem "Making Strange," which moves beyond recording linguistic history and dis-covers the strangeness of dialect. The poem embodies four presences: the speaker, the stranger, the "native," and the "cunning middle voice" that "came out of the field across the road/saying 'Be adept and be dialect. . . .'"[7] It ends with the speaker having heeded this cunning middle voice, having taken up a knowing, mediating, mobile position while

[6] Reference to the "Iambic drums/Of English" is a reminder that in the Elizabethan period, syllabic metres still dominated Irish poetry (they were to change to mainly accentual metres in the course of the 18th century), which is one form of technical strangeness that Heaney tries at times to embody in his English metres.

[7] In nationalist discourse, when Ireland is allegorized as a woman, the English are

identifying himself with the native,

> . . . driving the stranger
> through my own country, adept
> at dialect, reciting my pride
> in all that I knew, that began to make strange
> at that same recitation.

Thus, in reciting his pride in his language, he has re-sited himself and extended his audience beyond his immediate community. The "gleanings and leavings" motif that we saw a moment ago in "The Backward Look," is worked in here too with the reference to that biblical stranger, Ruth the Moabite, in "the cornfield of Boaz." And the wild English of the poem is reflected in the "sweetbriar" in stanza four: being a wild rose, it recalls but differs from Yeats's self-justificatory reference to his use of the English language as a "red-rose-bordered hem" trailing "all about the written page" in "To Ireland in the Coming Times" (Yeats 56). Heaney, unlike Yeats, *is* adept at dialect and therefore does not find in it a ready-made strange linguistic form such as Yeats went on to exploit. The "making strange" that occurs in Heaney's recitation is one of process and is something of an inversion, since it is the language that is familiar to the speaker that is being made strange.

Having considered the role of language in the process of estrangement, we shall now look at some of the generic forms that are made strange. Among these, the *aisling* tradition is the most prominent. In allegorizing Ireland as a woman as he did in "Ocean's Love to Ireland," Heaney is drawing on the native *aisling* tradition to which our attention is also drawn through the title "Aisling" of the following poem in the collection *North*. This allegory is taken up again in the poem following that: "Act of Union." However, the speaker in this last poem assumes the voice of England,

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allegorized as the stranger in her house. The native is identifiable because of the unshorn hair prescribed by English legislation: a Law of 1537 ordered that "no person or persons, the king's subjects within this land . . . shall be shorn or shaven above the ears" (Moody and Martin 169). He is also identifiable as native because of the wellingtons, almost uniform footgear in rural Ireland, but also a replacement for the native "brogues," which relates to the theme of language in the poem.

which is entirely alien to the native *aisling* tradition, where the poet speaks in a dream vision as the lover of an Ireland ravaged by England.

The *aisling* poem was developed to its highest form only in the 18th century, though vision poetry did of course already exist in the medieval period. Traditionally, the poet sees the spirit of Ireland in the *aisling* as a majestic and radiant figure called a *spéir-bhean*, meaning literally "sky-woman" (see Corkery 126—42). She bemoans the lack of a fit mate whom she locates beyond the seas — for in the absence of their exiled patrons, the Irish poets espoused the Jacobite Pretender as their only hope. Contemporary use of this genre, by including England as audience or speaker, tends to subvert its original nationalist spirit, which invariably cast England as the absolute enemy and excluded the English as audience because of being written in Irish.

In "Act of Union" the speaker identifies himself as "the tall kingdom over your shoulder," and as "imperially/Male," while he shows his consciousness of the hurt done to the body of the female/Ireland in that past act of union: "leaving you with the pain,/The battering ram, the boom burst from within" (N 49), and "the big pain/That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again" (N 50). Such self-awareness and assumption of responsibility for rape on the part of England is unthinkable in the *aisling* in its received form, and some would argue that it is also confined to the world of dream-vision. But by disrupting the reader's expectations, it effectively opens up the possibility for a change in the conception of the role of England in relation to Ireland, even while it retains a sense of brutality. (However, Patricia Coughlan reminds us of the risks of re-mystification that Heaney runs in opting for a gender-allegory for the exploration of this old political issue.)[8]

Another contemporary poet, Michael O'Loughlin, has also reclaimed the *aisling*: his technically ambitious poem "Medium" (*Stalingrad* 26) takes up the brightness motif,[9] and rehearses the various names by which Ireland is called in nationalist discourse: Erinn, Eire, Cathleen Ní Houlihán, as well as the conventional comparisons with Venus and Helen of Troy. It makes use of several voices, the first of which begins uncertainly "brr

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[8] See opening acknowledgements in the list of Works Cited.

[9] This common motif is present for instance in an *aisling* written by Aodhagán O Rathaille (1670—1726) and translated by Frank O'Connor as "Brightness of Brightness" (Kennelly 72).

bright." This is the voice transmitted by the medium of the title, which gives snatches of information about the *spéir-bhean*. The whole question of authenticity of voice is raised in this attributing the source of information to a voice once removed, which is inevitably not eligible for "objective" verification and lends itself to mystification. The pathos of the original *aisling* is entirely undermined by the banal suggestions of the medium bent on interpretation, saying for instance:

> A beautiful girl, you met a beautiful girl in your wanderings. Where? Was it down by the bus stop? Beside the Chinese take-away?   (26)

Any lofty tone is precluded by the incongruous introduction of a mundane "Chinese take-away" in a dream-vision. The poem ends with a third voice reporting in capital letters "THE SONG IS ENDED/THE MUSIC IS BROKEN" (27), suggesting an estrangement of voice by mechanical reproduction. Yet the poem seems to insist that no matter how tawdry the urban setting in which its occasion takes place, this is where Ireland is now, Dublin in the eighties, not the eighteenth-century Munster of Aodhagán O Rathaille. This kind of realistic disposition is quite alien to the idealistic spirit of the traditional *aisling*.

Similarly, Paul Muldoon de-romanticises the *aisling* in his poem called simply "Aisling" (*Quoof* 39), written after the hunger-strike in the Maze Prison, which he mentions in the fifth stanza. The hunger-strikers saw themselves as part of a whole tradition of self sacrifice for the motherland, which was upheld by the *aisling* tradition and explicit in the sacrificial discourse which surrounded the Easter Rising of 1916. The speaker in Muldoon's poem, on meeting his *spéir-bhean* fails to identify her, asking himself "Was she Aurora, or the goddess Flora,/Artemidora, or Venus bright,/Or Anorexia . . . ?" Thus although he recalls the comparisons traditionally made between her and other legendary beauties like Venus or Helen of Troy, he bathetically introduces the alien figure, Anorexia, as a corollary to the hunger-strikers. His poem embodies many discontinuities, producing something of the effect of nightmare, increased by the numerous images of an unhealthy body. These serve to undercut the *All Clear* with which the poem ends. The army checks which claim to clear danger evoke no confidence, so that the poem subverts both the formal, romanticising use of the *spéir-bhean*, and confidence in authority.

Another short but dense poem by Muldoon in this genre is called "Sky-Woman" (*Quoof* 32) and there the *spéir-bhean* is even more clearly identified with the every-day, through "hoiking" off her man-made blouse of nylon or rayon. The speaker here is also disenchanted. The poem is in part about the writing of poetry, which seems to be reduced to vowel changes contained in the umlaut of l.10, and ellipsis, as the three bright stars in a short line that constitute Orion's belt. One might say that the connection with the *aisling* tradition here is reduced to the translation in the title, as though its terms have been emptied of meaning.

In Heaney's "Aisling in the Burren" (SI 47) the arrival of the *spéir-bhean* is recounted in the second stanza, but instead of the traditional comparison with Venus implied in the "shell" of the line "Out of those scenes she arrived, not from a shell," she is compared to a ball of fire. Since the scenes she comes out of are northern, this recalls the northern troubles and touches something deep and atavistic which sends the "we" of the poem in search of "the fish in the rock, the fern's/bewildered tenderness deep in the fissure," which image on one level suggests fossils in the rock of the Burren, a geologically primitive terrain. This teaching of the *spéir-bhean* in the second stanza is replaced by sermons from stones in the third, recalling the Duke's opening speech in Act II of *As You Like It* ("Sweet are the uses of adversity. . .") while a "startling deer" serves as effectively to evoke a sense of tenderness and vulnerability. Thus the poem endorses the focussing of attention on the immediate, tender, vulnerable life on the present site of catastrophe, not on the potentially destructive figure of the *spéir-bhean*.

Whereas the use of the *aisling* in Heaney's earlier collection *North* (1975) shows him still attending to historical questions while maintaining direct links with the inherited form, "Aisling in the Burren" from *Station Island* (1984) marks a period of active attention to the present and more oblique use of the traditional genre. All three poets, Muldoon and O'Loughlin as well as Heaney, have moved to a position where they are exploiting the form ironically, showing considerable distance from its traditional use for nationalist purposes. They pay critical attention to the complex present rather than evoking any ideal future. This attitude can be clearly seen in Heaney's most recent working of the genre in "Mud Vision," one of the last poems in *The Haw Lantern*. "Mud Vision" could almost be called a "counter-*aisling*." The confusion of which the poem is constructed is an effect of the present state of vision itself, so that instead of a dream-vision of bright beauty, we are given a nightmarish sense of paralysis,

although some movement remains at the level of the visual image:

> . . . We sleepwalked
> The line between panic and formulae, screentested
> Our first native models and the last of the mummers,
> Watching ourselves at a distance, advantaged
> And airy as a man on a springboard
> Who keeps limbering up because the man cannot dive. (48)

The old models or formulae have lost their power for the poet, who from a distance judges mere mummery. Yet no future is apparent either, which leaves him caught in the process of "limbering up." The object of the speaker's vision is not a "she" but an "it," which conveys a sense of the absence rather than the presence of an Ireland which is presented as "dithering between atavistic superstition and yuppie modernity" (Vendler 41). When the unsatisfactory "mud vision" has disappeared, and "we" have failed to dive to a future, the disenchanted verdict is:

> You could say we survived. So say that, and watch us
> Who had our chance to be mud-men, convinced and estranged,
> Figure in our own eyes for the eyes of the world. (49)

There is a move to spectacle rather than vision, and accordingly a fear that poetry itself will become a mere performance for the eyes of the world. Although the estrangement perhaps allows for self-examination (which could be one interpretation of "figure in our own eyes") and for the self-hood of the eyes/"I"s who are doing the figuring, it denies any sense of felt community or future. This absence of felt community and future suggests that the *aisling* form is "written out," and for the present vision has been muddied to the point where the very concept of dream-vision is un-available.

Another indigenous literary genre exploited as a mode of "making strange" is the *immram*, the tale of voyage or circumnavigation involving a journey to the otherworld, situated on islands in the western ocean. Onto this native tradition, after Christianization, the idea of *homo viator* was grafted. However, in Paul Muldoon's use of it, there is no reassuring ultimate destination, spiritual or otherwise: instead, in his long poem, "Immram," in *Why Brownlie Left*, the speaker ends up back where he began, anonymous ("like any other pilgrim") in Foster's Pool Room. His

quest had been a search for his father around the seedy and decadent part
of an American city, always going west. When he had actually found the
object of his search, it had been the public image of the ailing Howard
Hughes:

> He was huddled on an old orthopaedic mattress,
> The makings of a skeleton,
> Naked but for a pair of draw-string shorts.
> His hair was waistlength, as was his beard.
> He was covered in bedsores.
> He raised one talon.
> "I forgive you," he croaked. "And I forget.
> On your way out, you tell that bastard
> To bring me a dish of ice-cream.
> I want Baskin-Robbins banana-nut ice-cream." (47)

Clearly, this version of the sought-for father does not underwrite either
religious or patriarchial values: the waistlength hair and beard have
brought no wisdom. No heavenly otherworld is located and the futility of
the quest is underlined by the cyclic return to the point of departure.

Likewise, the shorter poem "Immrama" (simply the plural of *immram*)
tells of a similar course followed by the speaker trailing his father's spirit,
and although the geographical extent of the quest is greater, it ends with a
no worthier concrete discovery:

> That's him on the verandah, drinking rum
> With a man who might be a nazi,
> His children asleep under their mosquito nets. (23)

Whereas the traditional *immram* heartily endorsed native cultural and
spiritual values, these versions call the value of searching for origins at all
into question. While their titles set up expectations of a traditional form,
they actually offer a thoroughly contemporary scenario, redolent of futility.

A further native Irish genre called *dinnseanchas*, which informs a
number of poems by Heaney, has been defined by himself as "poems and
tales which relate the original meanings of place names and constitute a
form of mythological etymology" (*Preoccupations* 131). However, it is not
mythological etymology that he himself practices, but rather an inscription
of very local place-names such as "Anahorish," "Toome" and "Broagh"

(WO 16, 26, 27), all of which are English versions of Irish words (see Corcoran 87—91). Indeed it is the very vocal form of these names that is inscribed: "*Anahorish*, soft gradient/of consonant, vowel-meadow"; "the soft blastings,/*Toome, Toome,*/as under the dislodged/slab of tongue"; and "the black *O*/in *Broagh*." Familiarity with local place-names is one of the things that binds a community together, and as Neil Corcoran has pointed out, "Broagh" willfully excludes some readers through its pronunciation not being available to English readers, while it acts as a linguistic paradigm of a reconciliation beyond sectarian division by being common to Unionist and Nationalist alike. One might describe Heaney's activity in these poems as inscribing, through his use of barbarolexis and archaism — two of the techniques recognized by Shklovsky for "making strange" (Lemon and Reis 23) — the strangeness and difference of Ulster localities in the canon of English poetry.

A final use of indigenous forms in a mode that makes them strange in contemporary poetry is the travesty of traditional myths. Whereas Yeats, one of the major Revival influences in poetry, took mythical figures like Cuchulainn or Fergus as romantic ideals, contemporary Irish poets undercut their heroism. In Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's series of poems on Cuchulainn, written in Irish, she shatters patriarchal, heroic complacency by assuming a woman's voice, that of the goddess Mór Mumhan, to address Cuchulainn directly as follows:

> Little, dark inflexible man,
> Cú Chulainn,
> You still have a chip on your shoulder
> over spending your first nine months in a cave
> swimming in your mother's waters.[10]

The tone here is cutting, as it is throughout the series. The great hero, instead of being praised as he traditionally is for his strength in resisting women, is berated for having withheld himself for *fear* of them — quite explicitly for fear of castration, or, in another poem, for fear of false teeth in the vulvae (Ní Dhomhnaill 122). Cuchulainn's renowned boyhood deeds and feats of arms are offset by the gory circumstances of his death, when he ends up as a result of his heroism as cold meat, as if on a butcher's hook (Ní

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[10] Angela Bourke's translation. The original appears in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (112).

Dhomhnaill 124). Moreover, when the mythical Cuchulainn is explicitly related to his statue in the General Post Office today (as a reminder of the Easter Rising, as a reminder that Pearse is supposed to have died with Cuchulainn's name on his lips, and as a reminder of Yeats's romanticising Cuchulainn stalking through the Post Office), it is with the fatal war-goddess perched on his shoulder. We are left in no doubt here as to the estrangement of the speaker from the patriarchal bellicose spirit of the myth in its old form, through the poet's assuming a woman's voice.

But this myth is not travestied only by a woman: Michael O'Loughlin, who writes in English, begins his poem entitled "Cuchulainn" in the collection *Stalingrad* by asserting the strangeness of Cuchulainn for the speaker:

> If I lived in this place for a thousand years
> I could never construe you Cuchulainn.
> Your name is a fossil, a petrified tree
> Your name means less than nothing.
> Less than Librium, or Burton's Biscuits
> Or Phoenix Audio-Visual Systems —
> I have never heard it whispered
> By the wind in the telegraph wires
> Or seen it scrawled on the wall
> At the back of the children's playground.
> Your name means less than nothing
> To the housewife adrift in the Shopping Centre
> At eleven fifteen on a Tuesday morning
> With the wind blowing fragments of concrete
> Into eyes already battered and bruised
> By four tightening walls
> In a flat in a tower block
> Named after an Irish Patriot
> Who died with your name on his lips. (34)

By placing the hero against such contemporary cultural markers as Librium, audio-visual systems, telegraph wires, a block of flats and a shopping-centre, O'Loughlin reduces him to an irrelevant anachronism. Asserting the importance of the present historical moment is nevertheless done by using the strangeness of Cuchulainn as a foil. Besides, the hero proves to have a descendant in a current science-fiction serial on TV, so the habit of myth-making seems to be alive and well. However, the voice of

this new hero is not animated, but booms full of mechanical capital letters so that the speaker is explicitly distanced from him. The cover for *Stalingrad* carries a statement which identifies the tone of this particular poem:

> It was once said of a book of contemporary Irish poetry that it was a sign made in the name of a tradition. This book is a two fingered salute shoved in the face of that tradition.

Deliberately crude as these terms are, they convey something of the contemporary disaffection with fossilized forms, and account for the ease with which these can be made strange.

One myth which has been retrieved without subversion by both John Montague and Seamus Heaney is that of *Buile Suibhne*, but there are good reasons for poets *not* subverting it since it recounts the marginalization of "mad" Sweeney. The circumstance that induces Sweeney's madness is an invasion of territorial rights by St. Ronan, which angers Sweeney to the point where he throws the saint's psalter in the lake, which in turn evokes a curse from him. Sweeney is turned into a bird-man, but retains his linguistic power, and produces occasional lyrics. "Mad Sweeney" by John Montague[11] and Heaney's "On the Road" (SI 119) both convey the sense of displacement common to the poet and mad Sweeney. The marginalized bird-man/poet, without permanent resting-place, is also identified with the creative spirit of the scribe in the first poem of the Sweeney Redivivus sequence, called "The First Gloss":

> Take hold of the shaft of the pen.
> Subscribe to the first step taken
> from a justified line
> into the margin. (SI 97)

It is the identification of the marginalized Sweeney with the figure of the poet that makes it unnecessary for the contemporary poets to subvert this particular myth. For marginalization itself provides the necessary distance for clear perception, so that no further making strange is needed.

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[11] In Muldoon (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry* 199.

It would seem that the preoccupations of the contemporary Irish poems we have considered prevent any reverential treatment of most traditional forms. The bathos and confusion perceived in the present Ireland matches ill with any ideal conception of it, thus the *aisling* in its traditional form is made strange so that it no longer underwrites the dangerous ideal of Ireland as a woman for whom her men must sacrifice themselves. Although "her" rape is recorded in some earlier versions of the *aisling* by Heaney, "she" has disappeared from the latest. *Dinnseanchas* is altered from an exercise in mythological etymology to an attempt to create a new vision of a local familiar place. The *immram* ceases to propose a blissful otherworld and suggests instead the futility of quest in current decadence. Assured that no pre-colonial cultural essence can be recovered, poets like Ní Dhomhnaill and O'Loughlin treat Cuchulainn not as an ancient heroic model but as a figure of fun: she uses him as the occasion for addressing issues of current psychological interest, while he questions the very relevance of heroism to poor urban Ireland. Only a form which already accommodates estrangement seems eligible for "straight" adoption from among received traditional forms.

The voices which speak to us in these poems come from the current cultural context: they are not producing "well made poems" according to formulae. When they make use of indigenous forms that are strange to the English tradition, what they have to say can only be perceived by an audience prepared to recognize such forms. That these forms are not treated as mere archaeological trophies suggests a certain vigour, but perhaps this vigour arises in part from their illegitimate status in English — from their having to enforce recognition of their strangeness, thereby ensuring familiarity.

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