

LANGUAGE AND CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH-LANGUAGE POETRY

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Modern poetry in Irish has been influenced by two major factors: the interrupted cultural heritage and the minoritized status of the language. With tightening global connections, the precarious situation of Irish has been considered alongside other minor and endangered languages, as well as the deteriorating climate. This article explores the temporal and spatial tensions that surround the language issue and climate emergency in contemporary poetic output in Irish. The main focus is on the poetry of Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh and Aifric Mac Aodha who both express concerns about the future of their medium by way of reference to the existential threats of the Anthropocene. While as poets of globalized consciousness they are acutely aware of the urgency of these topics, their works also attest to how crisis and conflict is intrinsic to the language of poetry per se.

1

One of the main motivations of modern poetry in Irish has been the need to salvage the language. Ever since the proclamations of Patrick Pearse in the early years of the twentieth century that modern poetry in Irish should avoid the problematic dual influence of “the fettered, complicated, vacuous eighteenth century [Irish] model, and the English language model, which had itself colonised the spirit of poetry,”¹ poetry production in the language has been determined by two major factors: the interrupted cultural heritage and the marginalized status of Irish. While the lack of immediate precursors led, indeed,

¹ See Seán Ó Tuama, *Repossessions: Selected Essays on the Irish Literary Heritage* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995) 6.

to the glorification of the Irish-Gaelic tradition, the continuing imbalance between English and Irish has been adopted as one of the underlying themes of poetry in the latter language and resulted in a self-ordained segregation of the two literary milieus. The close association of Irish with nationalism and the endeavours to achieve independence and cultural self-definition hinged on the image of a long-gone illustrious Celtic past. Whether or not motivated by the nationalist cause, Irish-language poetry has clearly been affected by the status of the language and concerned with its preservation.

Although the revivalist agenda presented the language as in extremis, it was believed that Irish could and should become the sole, living tongue of the free nation. This paradoxical notion was based on obvious ideological grounds, but it was also the result of the extremely precarious situation in which the language and its speakers found themselves in the latter half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. As James McCloskey has argued, “[t]he hopes that first energised the revival movement were impossibly naïve. That they were so is not surprising, since until that time there had been no organised attempt to revive a language as close to extinction as Irish had come by 1890s.”² If the revivalists’ goal of eventually replacing English with Irish in all aspects of the public and personal lives of Irish people has proved too ambitious to achieve, Irish-language communities and literary culture have nevertheless persisted. As a result, the development of modern poetry in Irish has been equally marked by victory and failure. Consequently, the various contradictions inherent in writing in Irish and the continuing necessity to compete over space and readership with the dominant English have contributed to the sense of a permanent crisis.

In their introduction to *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry*, Anne Karhio, Seán Crosson, and Charles I. Armstrong illustrate “how strong the belief in an underlying conflict or crisis continues to be in contemporary views on poetry.” The editors of the volume, which maps contemporary Anglophone poetry, including the production of various marginalized groups and individual poetics, argue that “conflict, resistance or rebellion, often against the established notions of poetry’s form and/or function, continues to be one of the driving forces of poetry as we understand it: the struggle of poetry with both tradition and innovation is what keeps it alive.”³ This concept of crisis and conflict as intrinsically connected with the struggle for survival has been a determining

² James McCloskey, *Voices Silenced: Has Irish a Future? / Guthanna in Éag: An Mairfidh an Ghaeilge Beo?* (Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life Teoranta, 2001) 44.

³ Anne Karhio, Seán Crosson, and Charles I. Armstrong (eds.), *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 4-5.

factor in contemporary Irish-language poetry. The constant balancing of the concern for Irish as a personal and communal issue has been one of the prominent and most intriguing aspects of modern poetry in the language. This article explores some of these conflicts and crises as they are reflected in the most recent poetic output. If McCloskey writes that “the nationalist impulse has been the enemy of ‘small’ languages everywhere,”⁴ much of this poetry has foregrounded the language’s minoritized – if not endangered – status, combining it with an environmental slant and a deliberate effort to consider its prospects through other than the revivalist perspective.

If Irish-language poetry has been ridden with paradoxes, the concept of crisis as such suggests many contradictions. The term itself refers to a moment of emergency and imminent disaster. It is rooted in the present and future-oriented: indeed, there seems to be no time to think about the past in a time of crisis. Yet, apart from this sense of acceleration and upheaval, there have been competing notions of crisis which associate it with stagnation. Norman K. Swazo argues that “anyone who adequately apprehends the situation of crisis is faced, all too suddenly, with something like paralysis. When the ground (all grounding) falls away, one stands (?) at the abyss – the whither and the how are lacking.”⁵ According to Allan Megill, rather than prompting us to action, a perception of crisis “can lead one to wash one’s hands of action, on the grounds that every action will become part of the present’s degradation.”⁶ Despite this idea of crisis as sucking up all time into the black hole of a continuing present catastrophe, however, the concept has been closely linked with our sense of the past that often gets construed as a history of crisis. While crisis, of course, does not create history, the awareness of crisis has been one of history’s most common side effects. This figuration of crisis as a metonym for history and the way it keeps repeating itself takes us to the idea of language as not only monitoring crisis but being both implicated in and affected by it.

“By far the greatest mass of the past as we experience it,” writes George Steiner in *After Babel*, “is a verbal construct.”⁷ Yet, if historical awareness presupposes language, there have been parts of history that have been obliterated through the power of language, so to speak, just as there have been

⁴ McCloskey 42.

⁵ Norman K. Swazo, *Crisis Theory and World Order: Heideggerian Reflections* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002) 23-24.

⁶ Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985) 195.

⁷ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 30.

languages silenced by history. Nowadays, language is constantly being updated to keep up with the fast-developing technologies and research areas, but also to reflect the rise in climate awareness and the fear of there being no future left in which the past could be construed. Obviously, language can either be held accountable for or perceived as a casualty of historical crisis and these paradoxes will inform any consideration of language and its role in paying witness to crisis, not least in a period of rapid climate change and imminent environmental collapse. Similar contradictions are also relevant for a discussion of poetry in Irish whose minoritized status in a post-colonial culture has automatically absolved it of responsibility and contributed to its self-image as a victim of larger political and economic forces.

As the Great Acceleration – a term which eco-science has used to refer to the unsustainable impact of human activity on the earth's ecosystems in the latter half of the twentieth century – has picked up even a more momentous speed after the turn of the millennium, there has been an accompanying development in language. The growing consciousness of ecological breakdown goes hand in hand with the need for constantly revised terminology. With each new updating, climate scientists and commentators use stronger language to drive home the emergency of the crisis or, in other words, to make the crisis 'new.'

This contrast between the two competing notions of crisis as something 'old' and 'new' is what makes the concept relevant for the consideration of minority languages in a global context. On the one hand, the emphasis on topicality and the transboundary relevance of terminology appears to rule out any concern for languages on the brink of extinction, isolated throughout the world. On the other hand, the sustained attempts on the part of contemporary Irish-language poets to bring the language issue into the heart of the poem have contributed to keeping not only language but also crisis and poetry alive. In the following pages I aim to explore how the temporal and spatial tensions that surround the concept of crisis – particularly the language issue and climate emergency – are foregrounded in the works of two contemporary Irish-language poets: Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh and Aifric Mac Aodha.

2

In *The Great Derangement*, a fascinating account of why the novel has failed in the domain of climate literature, Amitav Ghosh remarks that "[t]he Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us; it is they who confront most

directly what Thoreau called ‘vast, Titanic, inhuman nature.’”⁸ The same idea has been taken up by Michael Cronin in his dual-language pamphlet *An Ghaeilge agus an Éiceolaíocht / Irish and Ecology*. Cronin holds that while the Great Acceleration did, indeed, leave marginal communities behind – only to have them “sacrificed for the carbon market” – it is from those indigenous communities (and by paying attention to their languages) that the world should be learning about sustainability.⁹ Cronin’s text is a reaction to the Climate Action Plan, issued by the Irish Government in 2019. He begins by complaining that over its almost 150 pages the plan fails to refer to the Irish language even once. How can the authorities expect “to motivate and empower people to take climate action,” Cronin asks, if they choose to “serenely ignore” the potential of the language through which Irish populations have for centuries related to the natural environment?¹⁰

Like many before him, Cronin points to the paradox that English as the first language of the globalized carbon economy should now be the medium through which damage is monitored. Indeed, English has been the accepted lingua franca of the climate crisis and Cronin in his essentially post-colonial outlook repeatedly alludes to how the Anglocene has brought about the Anthropocene. His focus, however, is on the silencing of Irish and the role this has played in how Ireland has (not) engaged with climate emergency. To illustrate how the eradication of the language has led to many former evils as well as the current crisis, Cronin quotes from a research project on Early Modern Ireland (the period of the first systematized linguistic colonization of Celtic Ireland) whose authors warn against using Irish as an alibi for inaction in the face of environmental collapse: “We may imagine ourselves at an angle to the Anglosphere, basking in our guilt-free positioning as both recovering colony and third richest country in Europe but we have little countervailing what exactly the absence that haunts our modernity might be.”¹¹

Cronin’s approach is ecolinguistic rather than ecological in that he writes about the climate to underline the urgency of the language issue, not the other way round. A similar focus on linguistic pluralism as analogical to ecosystem

⁸ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2017) 62-63.

⁹ Michael Cronin, *An Ghaeilge agus an Éiceolaíocht / Irish and Ecology* (Baile Átha Cliath: Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta, 2019) 14.

¹⁰ Cronin 6.

¹¹ Patricia Palmer, David J. Baker and Willy Maley, “Enter MacMorris,” *Dublin Review of Books*, 113 (July 2019), <https://www.dr.b.ie/essays/enter-macmorris> (accessed 1 June 2020). Quoted in Cronin 9-10.

diversity had been chosen by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill – a leading representative of Irish-language poetry in the last forty years – in her account of an intellectual and emotional life split between several languages.¹² Ní Dhomhnaill's text, published in 2003, is an apologia for the poet's openness to translation into English which she accepts as a precaution against the "the linguistic apartheid" that had prevailed in Ireland until the mid-1980s and the situation in which "different linguistic traditions on the island looked down on each other with much mutual disdain and defensiveness."¹³ By way of bridging this chasm and opposing the generalizing, chauvinistic aspects of the concepts of a "national" language and literature, Ní Dhomhnaill adopts the logic of environmental conservation and insists that multilingualism amounts to "Linguistic Ecology" and can be the means of "Preventing a Great Loss."¹⁴

The preservationist impulse of contemporary language activism is, indeed, of the same kind as that of ecosystem ecology. If the future "lies with languages that can [...] reveal ways of being that are connected to the specificities of place but are open to the world," as Cronin predicts, these languages are most at the peril of disappearance. The logical conclusion is that "[t]he standard trope for the protection and promotion of [linguistic and ecological diversity] is salvage."¹⁵ Nevertheless, even if it were possible to preserve the status quo ante (globalization) and maintain a linguistic balance on the macro level, it would not be enough. If the individual small endangered languages are to persevere against the tide of homogenized global "communication" and overcome the tendency to posit self-sufficiency and separation over development, as Ní Dhomhnaill proposes, they need to have balance established within their own micro-climates. On one level, such balance can be achieved through contact with other marginalized groups and cultures. More importantly, however, it must be sought from within. Poetry, with its capacity to shock language out of smug communicableness, is capable of undermining normative usage and facilitates

¹² Apart from Irish and English, Ní Dhomhnaill is also fluent in Turkish and has learnt French, German, and Dutch.

¹³ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Linguistic Ecology: Preventing a Great Loss," *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, ed. Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 89. Ní Dhomhnaill acknowledges the risks involved in translation from a minoritized into a dominant language and explains how for her, a self-imposed quarantine is not a solution; she encourages translation in full awareness of "the lack of the tolerance of cultural diversity [...] in Ireland, of the necessity of holding out." See Ní Dhomhnaill, "Linguistic Ecology" 88.

¹⁴ Ní Dhomhnaill, "Linguistic Ecology" 79-92.

¹⁵ Cronin 19, 15.

renewal. By the same token it has been open to incorporating alterity and an ideal place to address the language issue.

3

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh and Aifric Mac Aodha belong to a generation for whom international travel and global interconnectedness have been no longer a privilege but common aspects of their lives and careers. They both have made efforts to “diversify” the language from within by intermixing it with other tongues and considering it alongside other themes and concerns. Ní Ghearbhuigh was born in Tralee in 1984 and has lived in France and New York before settling down in Cork. She has published two collections in Irish, *Péacadh* (Germination, 2008) and *Tost agus Allagar* (Silence and Dispute, 2016), and in 2016 the Gallery Press published her selected poems in a dual-language edition with translations by thirteen Anglophone Irish poets, entitled *The Coast Road*. Many of her poems comment on what it means to be writing in a minoritized language in a world that has become increasingly globalized.¹⁶ In many places, the poet foregrounds the complexities of her “privileged,” relatively “safe” position as a published author writing in a state-supported and officially recognized, yet marginalized language that has continually been described as moribund.¹⁷

In “Laethanta Lagmhisnigh,” translated as “Despondent Days” by Peter Fallon, Ní Ghearbhuigh puts on a brave face as she anticipates the language’s final demise:

Admhaím corrlá,
bím traochta
dá cosaint os comhair an tsaoil.

[...]

¹⁶ See David Wheatley, “Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh,” *The Wake Forest Series of Irish Poetry*, vol. 4, ed. David Wheatley (Winston Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2017) 246.

¹⁷ McCloskey argues that according to two basic criteria, “the number of speakers” and “the support of a nation-state [...] Irish is among the ‘safe’ 10 percent of languages” when compared with the status most other languages throughout the world. According to McCloskey “[t]here is little chance that Irish will become moribund (at least in the technical sense) in the next 100 years,” which contributes to the unorthodox idea that “the future of Irish is more assured than that of 90 percent of the world’s languages.” See McCloskey 44-45.

tuigim ná beidh fágtha
lá éigin
ach smúit bhalbh . . .

ach an oiread liom féin.

Let's face it – there's only
the odd day I'm not over-
come with standing up
for her,

[...]

[...] I know there'll come a day
there'll be nothing left

but a mute smear
of grime, not a whit –
a bit like myself, now that I come
to think of it.¹⁸

If Irish and its speakers once had a glorious past, the future of the language does not amount to much. Yet, even though the speaker-poet seems keen to be no longer involved in caring for a living corpse, the tongue-in-cheek tone of the poem – and the rest of Ní Ghearbhuigh's fast-growing work – suggests that such despondent days are in the minority. The closing image of the remaining traces of Irish as "smúit bhalbh" [a mute wisp of smoke] allows the speaker to reunite with the language through acknowledging its mortality which seems reassuring in its indiscriminate all-inclusiveness. This reconciliation, however, does not mark surrender but offers, instead, an ironic gesture to the prevalent self-image of the Irish-language poet as defying fate and writing against the tide of history.¹⁹ Rather than as a vessel of truths drawn from the historical tradition, Ní Ghearbhuigh presents the language as being at its last gasp, thus linking it

¹⁸ Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh, "Laethanta Lagmhisnigh" [Despondent Days], trans. Peter Fallon, *The Coast Road* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2016) 58-59.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Máire Mhac an tSaoi, "The Clerisy and the Folk: A Review of Present-Day Verse in the Irish Language on the Occasion of the Publication of *Innti* 11," *Poetry Ireland Review*, 24 (Winter 1988): 33-35.

with the haunting absences of other, mostly less-fortunate languages which pervade many of her poems.

By drawing on her consciousness of various indigenous cultures and communication codes around the world that have either lost their original purpose or disappeared, Ní Ghearbhuigh has been able to subvert the dichotomies that inform the Irish-language poet's situation. In "Irrintzina," the "[t]eanga scairte" [shrieking language] of the Basque shepherds – nowadays mostly reproduced in TV shows and local competitions – takes centre stage as the speaker wistfully describes its capacity to express emotion:

Ó! Dá mbeimis ar bhur nós-sa, a Bhascacha,
ag scaoileadh le gach racht go hard,
ag ligint le gach gomh, gach gol, gach guí, gach gairdeas
i sruth géar, glórmhar, gáirtheach . . .

Bheimis suairc is grágach.

O Basques,
if we could only be like you
letting fly with every emotion,
with every sting, every burst of tears or gladness
whinnying for all we are worth

so keenly, laughingly, with such loud delight.²⁰

Although no longer used by herdsmen to communicate across valleys and stretches of pastureland, the name of the language has been adopted in the title of a 2017 documentary, *Irrintzina: Le Cri de la génération climat* (Irrintzina: The Climate Generations' Cry). In the film, directed by Sandra Blondel and dedicated to the non-violent activism of the environmental organization Bizi!, *irrintzina* is invoked as the powerful ancestral cry: a cry of despair and warning about the collapsing world, but also a cry of joy and hope by those who have joined the Alternatiba protests.²¹ The association between a disappearing way of life and language and a collapsing environment is manifest and it is in no way different from the connection on which most ecolinguistic research is based. Moreover,

²⁰ Ní Ghearbhuigh, "Irrintzina," trans. Peter Sirr, *The Coast Road* 98-99.

²¹ See Sandra Blondel (dir.), *Irrintzina: le cri de la generation climat*, 2017, www.irrintzina-le-film.com (accessed 25 March 2020).

while the film itself post-dates the composition of Ní Ghearbhuigh's poem, the non-nationalist, "alter-globalization" ethos of Bizi! ("Live!" in Basque) is relevant to how the issue of preserving Irish has figured in recent Irish-language poetry production. Considered in the context of various other languages and their legacies, the effort to keep Irish alive has been released from the stifling grip of nationalism and the essentialist aspects of the language revival. As McCloskey has proposed,

[f]ar from being driven by an insular or inward-turning impulse, the effort [to maintain Irish] is worth making because it is our contribution to a much larger effort, a global struggle to preserve a kind of diversity which human society has enjoyed for millennia [...]. Between us and the other communities around the world forced to engage in the same kind of struggle, there is only one principal difference – we are immensely richer than most of them. Viewed in this perspective, the effort to support Irish is actually a fundamentally anti-nationalist effort.²²

While she is conscious of speaking from a 'privileged' position, Ní Ghearbhuigh's meditations on various other languages (which always happen to be commentaries on Irish as well) are not intended as compassionate keens but as testimonies to the plurality and the essentially 'unfinished' character of language. Nevertheless, the apprehension of loss is always present as well, often accompanied by an underlying awareness of the climate crisis and the fact that "silence" and "dispute" (to refer back to the title of the collection *Tost agus Allagar*) have indeed been an inherent part of the language revival and preservation efforts.

In "Babel," Ní Ghearbhuigh revisits the "language issue" and illustrates how speakers of the same tongue could fail to comprehend one another or even agree on how the language and its environment could be saved. First figuring Irish as the ruins of the tower, she then goes on to paint an image of a post-apocalyptic world in which communication fails amidst the squabble about survival:

3

Tá teipthe ar an gciúnas;
tá teipthe ar an teanga:
an gleo atá in uachtar

²² McCloskey 41-42.

go leagfar an túr.
Imeoidh seo is tiocfaidh siúd.

4

Ar seanláthair,
i bhfothracha clogáis,
tá an tost á fháscadh
ag cogarnaíl duine aonair,
tá suantraí á chumadh.

3

Language has failed.
Even silence has failed.
Clamour will win
until the tower is levelled.
This too will pass.

4

In some old, forgotten place
in the ruins of a bell tower,
a lonely whispering
disturbs the silence: someone
is composing a lullaby.²³

Throughout the poem's four parts, words are shown as deficient in the face of crisis. Moreover, in rejecting both silence and language as a possible remedy, Ní Ghearbhuigh responds to Adorno's dismissal of poetry in his Auschwitz metaphor.²⁴ Yet, even if reason and language fail, life and individual experience still matter. In this respect, the sound of the lullaby coming from the debris of the tower – which by this point in the poem has come to stand for civilization/language/nature – epitomizes Adorno's later idea of the "self-restoring immediacy" of lyric poetry which is described as "something that flashes out abruptly,

²³ Ní Ghearbhuigh, "Babel," trans. Peter Sirr, *The Coast Road* 104-105.

²⁴ See Theodor W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 10.1: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 30.

something in which what is possible transcends its own impossibility.”²⁵ It is the verbal act itself rather than verbal contents that matters most in poetry. In highlighting its own improbability – if not impossibility – the wordless, hardly audible song embodies the unspeakableness of most of what is important in life. In this context, it seems to be based on the notion, expressed by Walter Benjamin in his notes “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” that “[t]here is no such thing as a content in language; as communication, language communicates [...] something communicable per se.”²⁶ While she sets her poem at the metaphorical site of linguistic chaos, in its closing image Ní Ghearbhuigh shows that poetry, after all, needs no translation. Since it does not operate on the level of “meaning” – though meaning, naturally, is one of its eternally elusive goals – poetry instantiates Benjamin’s assertion that what language first communicates “is language itself.”²⁷

And yet, even if poetry eludes translation, both its composition and reading are based on the principle of translation. This, of course, has had great significance for Irish-language poetry that has for centuries been motivated by the responsibility to promote the Irish-Gaelic tradition and conserve the language in one of its earlier, uncompromised forms. This mission to revive the language by way of providing it with an “afterlife,” entrusts the poet in Irish with the role of a translator which Ní Ghearbhuigh acknowledges in reuniting the language and the poet in the closing image of a survivor’s song in “Babel.” She thus offers a hopeful answer to her own “Despondent Days.”²⁸ It is the same kind of hope (and duty) as that described by Jacques Derrida in “Des Tours de Babel” – an introduction to his own translation of Benjamin’s “The Translator’s Task” – a hope that follows from the idea that “[t]here is life at the moment when

²⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019) 70.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” *Selected Writings: Volume 1 (1913-1926)*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997) 66.

²⁷ Benjamin, “On Language” 63.

²⁸ The lullaby composed on the site of a catastrophe simultaneously represents a sound of hope and an elegy. For a discussion of the traditional laments and their therapeutic function see Angela Bourke, “Caoineadh na Marbh: Síceoilfhilíocht,” *Oghma*, 4 (1992): 3-12. For an account of the role of songs in Irish-language communities and folk tradition and their repercussions in modern Anglophone poetry of crisis see Seán Crosson, “‘The Given Note’: Traditional Music, Crisis and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney,” Karhio, Crosson, and Armstrong (eds.), *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry* 82-98.

“sur-vival” (spirit, history, works) exceeds biological life and death.”²⁹ In her poetry, Ní Ghearbhuigh accepts and redefines this responsibility for the language which, indeed, surpasses the limits of its speakers’ lifespan and experience. While she contributes to its survival, she acknowledges her debt to the language for her own being as both a poet and speaker of Irish.

Ní Ghearbhuigh keeps returning to this multilayered relationship between language and the individual, often creating a dialogue between those of her poems in which images of disappearing vernaculars and failing communication abound. In “Scéala ón Oirthear” (Lighthouse Story) she recounts a local legend about a lighthouse keeper who lost his hearing in his lonely outpost. Told as an exemplum, the tale is aimed to show how silence or absence of words can lead to deafness, how without usage a language will become an incomprehensible noise and how fear and scepticism can destroy a language:

Nó, b’fhéidir, agus é teanntaithe sa tigh solais,
gur líonadh a cheann lán de ghleo,
gur ghabh táinrith smaointeoireachta tríd,
gur foilsíodh toradh gach tubaiste dó.

Perhaps during his lighthouse confinement
his skull was loaded with noise,
with stampeding apprehensions,
with every wreck’s consequence.³⁰

The deafening silent noise which comes both from within and without offers a counterpart to the voiceless song from the close of “Babel.” As it represents a poetic connection between language and environment, it is evocative of Julia Kristeva’s concept of signifying practices as rooted in an “ecological continuum.”³¹ Kristeva describes poetic language as a “space” that is “indifferent to language [and] enigmatic” but which, in its dependence on corporeal reality and rhythm, cannot be entirely discontinuous with the material surroundings and the ecological system.³² The battered lighthouse and the lighthouse keeper’s

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph G. Graham (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press: 1985) 179.

³⁰ Ní Ghearbhuigh, “Scéala ón Oirthear,” trans. Billy Ramsel, *The Coast Road* 50-51.

³¹ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 77.

³² Kristeva 29, 78-99.

numbed inner ear are open structures, akin to language in how they are supposed to be separate from the surrounding elements and yet cannot stay unaffected by them. In her poems, Ní Ghearbhuigh has shown how neither language nor environment should be taken for granted: as dynamic processes based on interdependence, they refuse to be walled-up in towers.

4

The same half-sarcastic, half-serious notion of Irish as existing between life and death has pervaded the work of Aifric Mac Aodha. Born in Dublin in 1979 and brought up in close touch with the Irish language, folklore, and literature, Mac Aodha has been no less conscious than Ní Ghearbhuigh of her status as a minority-language poet. Translation, again, is perceived as one of the important aspects of this situation, as Mac Aodha acknowledges that

my poems are more often published with a translation than not. The majority of readers, who do not have Irish, will only ever read the translation. [...] The English translation is an inescapable part of the experience of reading my poems and the aesthetic impact of any given poem comes from a sort of negotiation between the original and the translation.³³

Having worked on a team of translators collaborating on the *The New English-Irish Dictionary*, launched online in 2013, Mac Aodha has been a trustworthy advocate of the language's great idiomatic range. Knowledgeable about its diverse etymologies and well-versed in the historical Gaelic tradition, she has often relied on literary and intergeneric allusions in her poetic work and pointed to interlingual and intercultural verbal connections.

Following her first collection, *Gabháil Syrinx* (The Taking of Syrinx, 2010), Mac Aodha published *Foreign News* in 2017 which comprised her Irish originals and translations by David Wheatley. Her symbiotic collaboration with Wheatley – whose own poetry in English has been interspersed with elements of various poetic styles, genres, and linguistic traditions, including Middle Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Latin, and Scots – corresponds with Mac Aodha's dedication to the idea of linguistic pluralism, in both the synchronic and diachronic sense. In

³³ Aifric Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse: The Joys of Writing Poetry in Irish," *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, 25 October 2011, <http://columbiajournal.org/a-talkative-corpse-the-joys-of-writing-poetry-in-irish-3> (accessed 16 February 2020).

acknowledging translation and multilingualism as an important aspect of her work, however, Mac Aodha has not simply yielded to the requirements of the marketplace and the majority Anglophone reader. Rather, she has proposed translation to be an inherent part of writing as such, and of writing in Irish in particular as it necessarily entails transposition of the older tradition and forms of expression into the modern idiom and circumstances.³⁴ Her highly allusive and often enigmatic poems are interlarded with references to the Gaelic tradition, old-time rituals, and idioms, but also with Anglicisms and borrowings from other languages. By this token, Mac Aodha's poetry takes the focus away from the dyadic relationship between Irish and English. In using Irish to report on *Foreign News* and by incorporating diverse linguistic material, Mac Aodha has succeeded in temporarily disentangling the language from its marginal position within that binary.

From the beginning, Mac Aodha has made the sequence her default form, possibly for its capacity to encompass various poetic styles, as well as themes and poetic personas. In many of her long poems she has combined three main concerns: the fate of Irish, her own position as an Irish-language poet, and the continuing oppression of the woman's voice by patriarchal society and the masculine tradition. In one of the central pieces in the collection, "Cailín Bréagach na mBráithre" (The Brothers' Little White-Lie Girl), Mac Aodha explores how consent can be paradoxically denied by refusing to say "No," how conventions can be bypassed by pretending to comply with them while continuing to do "one's own thing."³⁵ In places, the sequence reads like a traveller's diary. But no matter how far from home the "cailín" of the title finds herself, she is being followed by orders from her male companions, encapsulated in the absurd command to "wash the book" [nigh an leabhar].³⁶ Deploying the proverbial *mañana* attitude of her Spanish surroundings, the poet-speaker discovers new ways to avoid stereotypes and obligations by always professing to be on the brink of fulfilling them: "bhí sí, dúirt sí, ar tí an beart a dhéanamh / [...] / *mañana*, a mhaíonn siad, *mañana*, amárach" [she was, she said, just off to do it / [...] / We'll be right on it, they say, *mañana*, *amárach*].³⁷ To master this stratagem

³⁴ Mac Aodha, "A Talkative Corpse".

³⁵ See Mac Aodha reading at the Cork International Poetry Festival 2018 (18 July 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihEN3HYa6NQ> (accessed 15 March 2020).

³⁶ Aifric Mac Aodha "Cailín Bréagach na mBráithre" [The Brothers' Little White-Lie Girl], trans. David Wheatley, *Foreign News* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2016) 28-29.

³⁷ Mac Aodha, "Cailín Bréagach," *Foreign News* 28-29, 34-35.

seems essential not only in order to retain one's integrity as a poet and achieve self-expression as a woman, but to gain dignity as a self-conscious Irish speaker.³⁸

However preposterous it may sound, washing is, indeed, a highly specialized method of restoring and preserving water-damaged books, even though it must entail considerable self-denial to take water to valuable historical prints and manuscripts.³⁹ While this does not make the nagging from the men any less annoying, it bears relevance to Mac Aodha's other theme since similar inhibitions – and impediments – surround the task of transposing old language forms into modern Irish:

Ceanglaíonn sí “altae-som em”
le hailtire, le haltra –
treise léi, croch suas é, is araile,
nó go bhfaigheann an cathú
an ceann is fearr uirthi.

Hearing Old Irish as modern –
“Cú Chulainn, the architect's
nurse, was raised . . .” – took some doing;
good girl yourself, before
temptation got the better of her.⁴⁰

³⁸ In her early poetic manifesto, Mac Aodha commented on her hesitant identification with the language: “I am constantly aware that I come to the language, although it [is] my literary home, as something of a tourist.” In the text, Mac Aodha refers to her own self-consciousness as a non-native speaker whose handling of the language – as she is well aware – will always be questioned. Yet, she also shrewdly points to the fact that the study and preservation of Irish has for long been associated with the voyeurism of intellectual tourism as antiquarians, language revivalists and, more recently, learners of Irish have been flowing into the Gaeltacht areas from around the world and Ireland as well. See Mac Aodha, “The Talkative Corpse.”

³⁹ See Bill Minter, “Water Damaged Books: Washing Intact and Air Drying: A Novel(?) Approach,” *The Book and Paper Groop: Annual*, 18 (1999), <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v18/bp18-10.html> (accessed 20 March 2020).

⁴⁰ Mac Aodha, “Cailín Bréagach,” *Foreign News* 34-35. The Old Irish phrase quoted in the Irish original is uttered by Fergus in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, as he describes how Cú Chulainn came to Emain Macha. See John Strachan (ed.), *Stories from the Táin* (Dublin: School of Irish Learning, 1908), https://archive.org/stream/storiesfromtin00strauoft/storiesfromtin00strauoft_djvu.txt (accessed 11 March 2020).

The language in its inherited historical form *is* dead and as such it appears to be markedly more esoteric than the snippets of Spanish with which the sequence is strewn. Its demise, however, is not deemed to be a matter for elegy, but an inevitable toll of time and just as incidental as the “stretched- / rigid roadkill” absurdly “wet from Segovia’s hailstones” [gach ainmhí righin / ar thaobh an bhóthair [...] fliuch ag clocha sneachta Segovia].⁴¹ Like these random casualties by the side of the road, the historical tradition cannot be truly revived. Yet, its sounds or imprints surviving in the lines of the poem suggest continuance.

If much of “Cailín Bréagach na mBráithre” also reads as a meta-poetic commentary on the artful ways in which women have been able to express themselves despite institutional censure – be it coming from the family, the wider community, or the literary establishment – the same topic underlies “Céad Bliain Anonn” (A Hundred Years Over). While the centuries-old lesson cautions that outright revolt is futile and bound to be dismissed as self-indulgent, art and poetry have provided a space for resistance: “Obair fhónta ní thiocfaidh den éirí amach, / [...] / cneasú thar ghoimh gach clúdach tosaigh” [No profit will come of your uprising; [...] What’s a book cover but the skin of a wound].⁴²

Throughout the sequence – and the collection as a whole – figurative opportunities abound of leaving one’s consensual self behind, replacing it with a camouflage and going the way of duplicity and freedom. But since there is no gain without pain, this freedom has its attached costs too, that involve the various traps into which men and women tend to fall. As the titular “Scéala ón gCoigríoch” (Foreign News) report,

Iascaire de chuid na hIndinéise,
tháinig ar bhrégán gnéis,
thug abhaile í is ghléas.

[...]

Feidhm rud a athrú, sin é ár ngnó,
gó a dhéanamh den fhocal fíor,
fíor a dhéanamh den ghó.

⁴¹ Mac Aodha, “Cailín Bréagach,” *Foreign News* 34-35.

⁴² Aifric Mac Aodha, “Céad Bliain Anonn” [A Hundred Years Over], trans. David Wheatley, *Foreign News* 54-55.

Coming on a sex toy,
an Indonesian fisherman
took it home and dressed it up.

[...]

Art transforms the what and the why,
makes a lie of the true word
and of the true word a lie.⁴³

Disregardful of whether they are part of the news from abroad or take place “Sa Bhaile” (At Home), as another poem in the same sequence indicates, narratives rely on words whose silent and stealthy application has been crucial for the revelation of all true stories. If the sex-doll episode reads like a canard, it is used by Mac Aodha to point to how women have been all too frequently supplanted by a silent, empty likeness. Above all, however, it illustrates how women themselves, and female artists in particular, have always relied on secrecy and affected humility as a form of self-assertion. On a more general level, “truth” and “lie” are presented as two sides of the same coin for it is out of the space between them that all “true” art originates. As another long poem in the collection, “Gó” (Chicane), has it, this is the charged “gap between this and that” [“an bearna / idir seo is sin”]⁴⁴ that both connects and separates “fact” and “fiction.” Ultimately, the distinction between “truth” and “lie” is valid only insofar as it enables the poet to accentuate their fundamental interconnectedness. Indeed, if *gó* means “lie,” “falsehood,” or “deceit,” it is shown to be linked with *fíor* which is a multivalent term that can refer not only to “truth” but also “margin” and “verge,” artistic “figure” or “form,” and “symbol.”⁴⁵ All of these equivalents meet, of course, in the image of the inflatable surrogate female, idolized to the point of absurdity while being simultaneously reminded (with no special tact) that “silence improves lipstick” [gur fhadaigh tost an béaldath].⁴⁶

Still, this ironic medley of meanings that are no sooner implied than they are undermined, suggests a number of other paradoxes. Between the Irish original

⁴³ Mac Aodha, “Céad Bliain Anonn,” *Foreign News* 54-55.

⁴⁴ Aifric Mac Aodha, “Gó” [Chicane], *Foreign News* 12-19.

⁴⁵ See Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Dublin: An Gúm, 1992) 655, 548, <https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/> (accessed 22 February 2020).

⁴⁶ Aifric Mac Aodha, “Sop Préacháin” [A Crow’s Wisp], trans. David Wheatley, *Foreign News* 24-25.

and the English translation, the last line in the second tercet in “Scéala ón gCoigríoch” points us to Indonesia’s national parks which stand in stark contrast to the image of the dummy floating among the garbage in one of the over-polluted rivers in the Indonesian archipelago or the ocean and adjacent seas. While Indonesia has been one of the main producers of plastic pollution in the world, one of the Indonesian words for “angel,” *bidadari*, appears in the names of its “eco” resorts that have been using the image of virgin nature to attract global tourism:

Le teann ómóis, athraíodh
an blús is cóitín gach lá;
ba bidadari anois an bhábóg mná.

In a respectful makeover
he changed its blouse and jacket daily;
blow-up woman turned angel.⁴⁷

Still, there are other ironies that underlie this odd arrangement between a living man and an effigy. The fisherman with his silent female trophy is remindful of the Pygmalionesque phantasy and its many echoes in western and Irish literary tradition, but the image also presents a cunning transposition of the deceitful mermaids (*murúcha*) of Irish folklore and a possible tribute to Nuala ní Dhomhnaill and her crafty exploration of the merfolk.⁴⁸ Closer to the Indonesian shores, it recalls the *ma’nene* ritual, prevalent in some parts of the archipelago, of digging up embalmed corpses of ancestors, dressing them in fresh clothes and – in modern times – taking family photos with them by way of paying respect to the dead.⁴⁹ It is through the combination of all these centrifugal allusions and improbable “meanings” that the poem relates back to the issue closest to home: the fate of Irish.

The subversive question that suggests itself with this baffling piece of “foreign news” is whether the fisherman’s delusive behaviour is much different, after all, from the attempts to resuscitate Irish. In the next, closing section of the

⁴⁷ Mac Aodha, “Céad Bliain Anonn,” *Foreign News* 54-55.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Ní Dhomhnaill’s dual-language collection *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, trans. Paul Muldoon (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ See Elizabeth Coville, “Remembering Our Dead: The Care of the Ancestors in Tana Toraja,” *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints, and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Henri Chambert-Loir and Anthony Reid (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2002) 69-87.

sequence Mac Aodha's predilection for dictionaries comes to the fore as she offers a short meditation on the conceptual implications and lexical connotations of "Athbhean" (Former Wife). Wedged between "athbharr is athbhearradh" in the dictionary ("after-crop" and "second cutting," which Wheatley translates as "aftermath and second time round"), the word has been chosen to emphasize the many ways in which women are being restrictively labelled (the implied truth is that *athbhean* has no masculine counterpart in the authoritative Ó Dónaill dictionary).⁵⁰ But while the connotations of the prefix itself are ambiguous – *ath-* can mean "second" or "later" but also "old" and "rejected" – for a woman (*bean*) in such a situation there is no second time round: she is "marked / with an ex the whole rest of her life" [an t-ath- b'ath- ar lean].⁵¹

Woman's inaccessibility to a new beginning once she has become an "athbhean" is implicitly contrasted with the sonically related term for revival, reanimation and resuscitation: *athbheochan*. Although the word has a number of prosaic connotations, it is closely associated with a particular collocation: *Athbheochan na Gaeilge* [revival of Irish]. By way of tribute to Ní Dhomhnaill and her image of Irish as a "Corpse That Sits Up and Talks Back," Mac Aodha has come with her own version of the oxymoronic epithet: "A Talkative Corpse."⁵² In both cases, the talking corpse is a metaphor for the language that exists in a routine of constant burial and revival. Yet, it is also an emblem for the woman poet who writes against the masculinist aspects of the *Athbheochan* which, in Ní Dhomhnaill's words, "had become just another elitist badge in the social snobbery of the new state."⁵³ From the beginning of her career, Mac Aodha has used the space of her poems to show that for a female poet writing in Irish, the language issue is always associated with the need of polemic self-fashioning.

⁵⁰ See Ó Dónaill 66, 68.

⁵¹ Mac Aodha, "Céad Bliain Anonn," *Foreign News* 57.

⁵² The title of Mac Aodha's text (see footnote 33) refers to Ní Dhomhnaill's well-known manifesto, "Why I Choose to Write in Irish, the Corpse That Sits Up and Talks Back," *The New York Times Book Review*, 8 (January 1995): 3, 27-28.

⁵³ Ní Dhomhnaill, "Linguistic Ecology" 83-84. For detailed accounts of how Ní Dhomhnaill has combined her concern for Irish with her feminism see Ríona Ní Fhrighil, *Briathra, Béithe agus Banfhilí: Filíocht Eavan Boland agus Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 2008) 78-82; and Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, *Téacs Baineann Téacs Mná: Gnéithe de Fhilíocht Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 2005).

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If Benjamin insists that what language above all communicates is its own communicability,⁵⁴ the ironic image of Irish as a communicative corpse has been used to counterbalance the widespread notion of minoritized and endangered languages as codes which have lost their “communicableness.” In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin explains how the awareness of crisis influences the way history is articulated and how tradition is formed and received. He describes this sense of crisis or, the tendency to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger,” as a benign mechanism through which “[i]n every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”⁵⁵ Both Mac Aodha and Ní Ghearbhuigh have combined their heightened awareness of the literary past and the accompanying sense of the language ‘crisis’ with an effort to escape the normative requirements of the tradition. They have tuned their ear to the silences of the recorded past of the language and the mysteries of its imagined future with the aim of translating these haunting absences into poetry. Yet, their poems mostly propose to end this crisis as much as they are keen to sustain it. Like most modern Irish-language poetry, these poets’ work has been dependent on the trope of a continuous ‘end’ (of the language) which has provided creative possibilities of a ‘new beginning.’

In reference to the formation of the Anglophone Irish poetry canon, Kenneth Keating has argued that “[i]nheritance is intrinsically composed of a multiplicity.” According to Keating, in contradicting the concept of the tradition as a singular authority, many contemporary poets “tend to opt instead to embrace the positive destabilising potential of death and an existence composed of multiple spectral presences which necessarily complicates the very principles which establish the foundation of the canon of Irish poetry.”⁵⁶ A similar dynamic can be read into the situation of Irish-language poets who have adopted the image of the language as a live corpse or undying death in order to perpetuate its use.

While one of the reasons listed by Frank Sewell in his argument why Pearse should be seen as the founding figure of modern poetry in the language is that

⁵⁴ Benjamin, “On Language” 63.

⁵⁵ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 255.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Keating, *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Canon: Critical Limitations and Textual Liberations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 33, 42.

Pearse “did not tend to write about Irish as a subject in his literary work,”⁵⁷ the subsequent poetic development in the twentieth century and the first two decades of the new millennium seems to have countered this criterion.⁵⁸ All modern poetry in Irish is, by definition, an expression of concern for its medium since, as these poems repeatedly demonstrate, for speakers of a minoritized language there is no escaping their linguistic reality. The proposition by Karhio et al. that “without an element of crisis, the grounds for poetry’s own survival can be questioned” is, indeed, doubly relevant in the case of Irish-language poetic production.⁵⁹

Even though rarely mentioned explicitly, the language issue has been prominent in the newest poetry output in Irish and has often been combined with an ecological awareness deployed as a slant lens through which the diverseness of the linguistic and natural environment could be explored. Conversely, the widespread, globalized consciousness of the climate crisis has provided the language issue with a new urgency. Although it is impossible to read any hard ecological intent into the poems discussed in the preceding pages or find in their lines an easy connection between the collapsing climate and the endangered language, many of these texts lend themselves to an eco-linguistic and eco-critical perspective. One of the motivations behind this connection has been the need by these poets to undermine the homogenizing tendencies through which both language and natural environment have been exploited as signs of an authoritative, nationally inflected authenticity.

⁵⁷ Frank Sewell, “Between Two Languages: Poetry in Irish, English and Irish English,” *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 150.

⁵⁸ For a summary of various critical prognoses of the development of contemporary poetry in Irish see Brian Ó Conchubhair, “Contemporary Irish-Language Poetry: After *Innti*,” *Post-Ireland?: Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair (Winston Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2017) 179-202.

⁵⁹ Karhio, Crosson, and Armstrong (eds.), *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry* 5.