

## Sylvia Plath's Vital Presence in Contemporary Irish Poetry

Dr. Maria Johnston, Trinity College Dublin

In his autobiography *The Doctor's House*, James Liddy includes an account of the party held to launch John Jordan's *Poetry Ireland* in September 1962. Present among such important Irish literary personages as Michael Hartnett, Liam Miller and Ben Kiely was, as Liddy recalls, "Richard Murphy in whisper-mutter with Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath."<sup>1</sup> That Plath may have been in attendance at the launch of the nation's most long-standing poetry publication is highly fitting. Plath's presence in the work of Irish poets has been persistent and it may be seen as having begun officially with her fateful visit to poet Richard Murphy at his cottage in Connemara in September, 1962. Murphy's well-known poem "The Cleggan Disaster" had been chosen by Plath and the other judges for the Cheltenham Prize in 1962 to win first prize in the Guinness Awards. Plath wrote to Murphy personally in July, 1962 before the official result of the competition had been announced to tell him of his success in a letter that found the young Irish poet "surprised and thrilled" and in which she expressed a strong desire to visit the poet at his West of Ireland home.<sup>2</sup>

Plath had invested great significance for herself and Hughes in this holiday, hoping that it "might be a possible renewal of their marriage."<sup>3</sup> This by now legendary visit had Plath and Hughes pay their respects at Yeats' Coole Park and Thoor Ballylee; Hughes attempted, at Plath's suggestion, to climb up the copper beech in the Pleasure Ground and add his name to the autographs of famous literary figures. Thomas Kinsella came from Dublin to join the party, the four poets partaking in a late-night session over a ouija board. Murphy remembers how Plath, Kinsella and Hughes "greatly enjoyed each other's company"; he found the company of Plath and Hughes an "inspiration," and was

---

<sup>1</sup> James Liddy, *The Doctor's House* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 2005), pp. 82 – 83. Plath's attendance at this event has not, to my knowledge, been corroborated elsewhere. In an email correspondence to this author of 11 November 2006 Richard Murphy writes: "All I can tell you truly is that I did *not* attend the launch of *Poetry Ireland* in 1962. Liddy is mistaken."

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, *The Kick: A Life Among Writers* (London: Granta, 2002), p. 221.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Compton, quoted in Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), pp. 127 – 128.



grateful to both for having given him excellent advice on his poetry.<sup>4</sup> However, the holiday was to end in disaster when Plath made a pass at Murphy and Hughes aborted the holiday prematurely leaving her alone. Murphy insisted on Plath's immediate departure and she was driven back to Dublin by Kinsella shortly afterwards. She then spent two nights in his home, confiding her troubles to Eleanor Kinsella, before returning to England. What is certain is that this highly-charged visit marked the end of the Plath-Hughes marriage and generated tension and unease between the Irish host and American poet.

The strained nature of Plath's departure after Murphy's rejection, followed by her death less than five months later, left the Irish poet with feelings of profound regret, as he himself has written: "For a long time afterwards, guilt haunted me for not having given Sylvia the haven she needed in Connemara; and sometimes I felt angry at being made to feel guilty."<sup>5</sup> Murphy last met Plath at the end of January, 1963 in London and was relieved to find that Plath had "no trace of ill-feeling" towards him.<sup>6</sup> However, she was to take her life shortly afterwards. Two years after Plath's death, in 1965, Murphy penned an elegy for her which remains unpublished.<sup>7</sup> In May 1969, Murphy visited Plath's grave at Heptonstall Church with Hughes during a visit to West Yorkshire.<sup>8</sup> Plath, and the lasting memory of the trip she made to Connemara before her death, has stayed with Murphy and it seems no accident that one of Murphy's most beautiful love poems, "Mary Ure," contains a reference to Plath's late poetry. Ure, herself a beautiful actress married to the overbearing actor Robert Shaw, died by her own hand in 1975, and, as this beautifully-crafted elegy gently laments:

Bare feet she dips across my boat's blue rail

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard Murphy, "A Memoir of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes on a Visit to the West of Ireland in 1962," in Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 351.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy, *The Kick*, p. 230.

<sup>6</sup> Murphy, *The Kick*, p. 229.

<sup>7</sup> For a reference to the poem "For Sylvia Plath" see Ted Hughes, Letter of 9 March, 1965 to Richard Murphy, in *The Letter of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 240 – 242.

<sup>8</sup> Murphy, *The Kick*, p. 279. Hughes and Murphy were the next day joined by Douglas Dunn and Philip Larkin. Larkin insisted on taking a photograph of the four poets in the Heptonstall graveyard. Larkin would later review Plath's *Collected Poems* in 1982. See Larkin, "Horror Poet," in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955 – 1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 278 – 281.

In the ocean as we run under full white summer sail.  
The cold spray kisses them. She's not immortal.

Sitting in her orchard she reads "Lady Lazarus"  
Aloud rehearsing, when her smallest child lays  
Red peonies in her lap with tender apologies.<sup>9</sup>

Here, apart from the obvious signal to Plath's iconic monologue "Lady Lazarus," the use of sea imagery and the vivid coloration of red and blue, coupled with the bestowal of a child's ambivalent blessings in these lines are deeply reminiscent of Plath's symbolism. Also, the matter-of-fact statement "She's not immortal" bringing with it a poignant stoppage in the lilting rhythm as well as breaking the pattern of pleasing end-rhymes, imitates Plath's attentiveness to matters of form and sound as well as her distinctively detached style of terse, impersonal statements. In an interview in October, 2000, Murphy found himself some forty years on still being questioned over the contentious account he gave of Plath's visit for Anne Stevenson's biography of the American poet. Murphy stated that what had troubled him about the incident was the "violation of hospitality" that Plath's pass at him signified, adding that, although he considered Plath "a fascinating person," he would not have wanted to enter into any sexual relationship with her.<sup>10</sup> However, the up-front sexual aspect to this meeting between Plath and Murphy may be seen in itself as a metaphor for Plath's bold entry into Irish poetry and her enduring presence that is to be found in the work of the most gifted contemporary poets. These poets are now only too happy to offer hospitality to one of their most enabling precursors.

Although no sustained examination of Plath's influence on Irish poetry has been attempted, critics have long noted traces of it. Edna Longley, discussing Plath and T.S. Eliot in her introduction to the compendious *Bloodaxe Book of Twentieth Century Poetry* (2000) has stated how: "Their combined influence on British and Irish poetry is

---

<sup>9</sup> Murphy, "Mary Ure," in *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2000), p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Murphy, in Rosita Boland, "Embracing the World," interview with Richard Murphy, *Irish Times*, 11 October 2000, p. 16.



incalculable.”<sup>11</sup> Eamon Grennan, himself an Irish émigré poet living in the US, numbers Plath among a group including Lorca, Rilke, Eliot, Lowell and Milosz, who have all influenced greatly modern and contemporary Irish poetry. As Grennan puts it: “We are fed by such poets, they have nourished us all.”<sup>12</sup> Alice Entwistle, in an authoritative essay which asserts that “without Plath, late twentieth century British poetics would look rather different,” lists Seamus Heaney and Matthew Sweeney as Irish poets who among “later generations of male poets draw on Plath’s example.”<sup>13</sup> In his *Poets of Modern Ireland*, Neil Corcoran recognises Padraic Fallon’s “inheritance of the Plath rhythm and imagery,” describing Fallon’s poem “Trevaylor” as a “brilliant but altogether disconcerting pastiche of Plath.”<sup>14</sup> Brian Fallon, the poet’s son, writing in the “Afterword” to Fallon’s *Collected Poems*, remembers how his father in his sixties was “excited by his discovery of Sylvia Plath.”<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Michael Longley’s “Christopher at Birth” from his first collection *No Continuing City* (1969) is seen to draw on Plath’s “Morning Song,” its opening line “clearly posing a challenge to the bleak world and broken iambs” of same.<sup>16</sup> Longley reviewed Plath’s *Ariel* in 1965 with apprehension and unease: “I was so alarmed by the book that I have kept my review back for some time, reading the poems over and over.”<sup>17</sup> However, Longley’s remarks betray the impact that Plath’s work had on him as a young poet as he admits his inability to understand the workings of her startlingly new poetic technique. The more subtle nuances of Plath’s distinct tone have been discerned by critics too. Michael Allen, discussing influences on John Montague’s poetry, points out Plath’s unassimilated presence in the last line of Montague’s poem “Sybille’s Morning.”<sup>18</sup> More recently, the title poem of Kevin Kiely’s second collection *Breakfast with Sylvia Plath*

---

<sup>11</sup> Edna Longley, “Introduction,” *The Bloodaxe Book of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry*, ed. by Edna Longley (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Eamon Grennan, “Ten Out of Ten,” review of Noel Duffy and Theo Dorgan, *Watching the River Flow: A Century in Irish Poetry*, *Irish Times*, 18 December 1999, Weekend section, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Alice Entwistle, “Plath and Contemporary British Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 63 – 68 (p. 64).

<sup>14</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Brian Fallon, “Afterword,” Padraic Fallon, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Brian Fallon (Manchester: Carcanet; Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1990), pp. 265 – 272 (p. 267).

<sup>16</sup> Michael Allen, “Rhythm and Development in Michael Longley’s Earlier Poems,” in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 214 – 234 (p. 218).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Longley, “Five Poets,” review of Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, *Irish Times*, 2 October 1965, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Allen, “Celebrations,” *Irish Review*, 7 (Autumn 1989), pp. 97 – 102 (p. 99).

has been described as “a psychic whirlwind that becomes an affecting rendering of Plath’s suicide.”<sup>19</sup> However, the sensationalist aspect of Plath’s life after death is allowed to take over to bad effect in this young poet’s hands, for, as another reviewer has identified, “the dialogue from the Plath figure can also read as inaccurately confrontational, spoken by an archetype of the Plath-Hughes industry rather than by Plath herself.”<sup>20</sup> Plath’s compelling, original style has proved so infectious that critics often run the risk of seeing her influence everywhere. Often, it is the comments made by the poets themselves that prove far more helpful in illuminating the full extent of Plath’s persistent force in contemporary Irish poetry.

Poetic engagements with Plath have taken many various forms and some have been less successful than others. Paul Durcan’s collection *Daddy, Daddy* (1990), much of which is concerned with his troubled relationship with his father, has obvious connections with Plath from its title alone. The blurb cites one reviewer’s opinion of how “Like Sylvia Plath’s ‘Daddy’, Durcan’s father is often a terrifying figure of savage vindictiveness.”<sup>21</sup> In an essay that explores the links between Plath’s poetry and Durcan’s *Daddy, Daddy*, Peggy O’Brien sets out by questioning Durcan’s use of what she terms “the single most resonant phrase in women’s poetry” as a title for his collection. O’Brien’s essay concludes by asserting that Durcan is “identifying with Plath both as a fellow suffering human being and as a poetic strategist” and that Plath is, crucially, “a poet sibling from a similar family drama.”<sup>22</sup> It is true that Durcan seems to be drawing on the kindred similarities between himself and the American poet, however the poetic achievement of this creative connection is rather more problematic than O’Brien seems to realize. Durcan employs many of the obvious tropes of Plath’s poetic father-daughter relationship to navigate the troubled relations between himself and his deceased patriarch; the father is at once lover, fascist, pedagogue and oppressor. However, as the poem “Heptonstall Graveyard, 22 October, 1989” reveals – a poem which O’Brien overlooks – he calls on Plath mainly as one who provides him with an available thematic

---

<sup>19</sup> James J McAuley, “Wit, Laments and Bodhrán Satire,” *Irish Times*, 16 July 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Val Nolan, “State of the Art,” *Poetry Ireland Review*, 86 (May 2006), pp. 97 – 100 (p. 99).

<sup>21</sup> Paul Durcan, *Daddy, Daddy* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> Peggy O’Brien, “Your Daddy, My Daddy,” in *The Kilfenora Teaboy: A Study of Paul Durcan*, ed. by Colm Tóibín (Dublin: New Island Books, 1996), pp. 75 – 101 (p. 100).



and symbolic framework for releasing his own emotional and psychological experience as an Irish male.

In this poem from *Daddy, Daddy* Durcan employs Plath's sea imagery to describe the occasion of his visiting the dead poet's grave. In a tone that seems to wish for intimacy and familiarity, Durcan has himself on first name terms with Plath, addressing her as "Sylvia":

In Heptonstall graveyard,  
Mid-ocean in Heptonstall graveyard  
I bob around Sylvia's grave,  
My flag of hope unfurled.<sup>23</sup>

While there, he happens upon another admirer – "another ancient mariner" – who has also come to pay homage at Plath's watery grave, to water her grave with tears and lay flowers. Durcan, as speaker, resents this other younger, attractive visitor for his own "discovery of Sylvia's grave." What is implied is that Durcan wishes for sole possession of the dead poet. Durcan is as a jealous suitor. The poem concludes with an image of carnal union between Plath and the younger man which appropriates the inscription on Plath's gravestone: "His massive fierce-flamed penis between her tiny breasts / Flowering between her golden lotuses." The speaker has by now conceded: "I am put in my place. / You, and you, and you are put in your place." But who is the "you" that is being addressed in the forcefully repetitive style of Plath's allegorical dramatic monologue, "Daddy"? May these be interpreted as the many other poets who come to Plath looking for some form of guidance? The male poet, it seems, like an Oedipal son who has come upon his parents in the act of sex, has grown out of innocence into experience by confronting this knowledge that he cannot "own" Plath. Plath may be viewed as his "poetic mother" as the term goes, but only in the very limited, even incestuous terms of shared biographical experience, that is, in terms of theme but not poetic technique.

---

<sup>23</sup> Durcan, "Heptonstall Graveyard, 22 October 1989," in *Daddy, Daddy*, p. 41.

Thus, Durcan at her graveside is merely a kindred sufferer, Plath's interrogation of the patriarchal figure in "Daddy" providing Durcan with a readily available device with which to articulate and enliven otherwise taboo psychological truths from his own life. It is her highly-charged poetic symbolism which he seeks to emulate throughout. Yet it remains that there is nothing of the technical mastery of Plath's poetry in Durcan's poem and nothing of its metaphoric drive and impact. Durcan's loose, more journalistic form of prose-poetry is in no way similar to Plath's considered use of formal designs and rigorous attentiveness to sound and structure. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the way in which Durcan calls upon Plath at a particular moment to provide him with an example that he can follow, is similar to the way that she operates as an example for women poets who have viewed her as a pioneer for writing about women's experience. As we shall see, the ways in which these poets take from Plath, either reading or misreading her, each, as Durcan recognises in his poem, believing they "own" her, testifies to her singular abilities as a poet. Indeed, the range of interpretations that Plath makes available testifies to her dynamic forms of poetic expression, her rich poetic resource in terms of technique and theme and ultimately the rare power of her poetic voice.

Plath's multivalent poetry has provided interesting possibilities for poets from the North of Ireland also. Paul Muldoon – although he has refused to name Plath directly as an important influence on his poetry – confronts her as a poetic muse and precursor in complex ways throughout his poem "Yarrow" from his 1994 collection *The Annals of Chile*, interrogating her legacy and her work to reveal how her work has been read and misread. Her power is unavoidable. Gerald Dawe has pointed out how certain early poems of his such as "It Always Happens" (originally titled "I'm Through") from *Sheltering Places* (1978) and more particularly "Candlelight" were "written in part under Plath's influence."<sup>24</sup> As Dawe reveals, admitting to the lure and pull of Plath's poetry: "I could never get the first line of Plath's 'Morning Song' out of my head." In terms of the larger scope of Northern Irish poetry, Dawe has confirmed how Plath was introduced to future poets such as himself in the North of Ireland in the late 1960s as a result of her inclusion in the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, which was one of the set texts for A Level

---

<sup>24</sup> Gerald Dawe, personal correspondence with the author.



English Literature. Importantly, Dawe has recognised how for him and others growing up in the North in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “the violence of Sylvia Plath had a very strong echo” in the Troubles of the period. However, no published study of Plath’s possible importance to Northern Irish poets has been carried out, apart from a recent conference paper given by the Irish poet and critic John Redmond.<sup>25</sup> Redmond’s much-needed contribution to this neglected area is an examination of Plath as a dominant influence on the poetry of Seamus Heaney, arguing that Heaney found in Plath two vital factors. The first being “representations of the self as violently compromised by others” and the second, as Redmond describes, is “an awareness, violently represented, of how the self’s repression is misunderstood by others.” Starting out on the understanding that Heaney is a much more inward poet than critics have recognised, Redmond argues for a “competitive relationship” between Heaney and Plath, the two poets having “very similar inner worlds” as Redmond sees it. His paper goes on to investigate “congenial local features and details” in the work of the two poets. As Redmond observes:

Both *North* and *The Colossus* (with Auden in mind) construct a [...] poem around a Breughel painting. Both *North* and *The Colossus*, amidst an array of poems about corpses, include one about a dead mole. Both poets [...] use “root” as a key word and metaphor.<sup>26</sup>

Redmond concludes his study by carrying out an examination of Heaney’s “Exposure” and Plath’s “Nick and the Candlestick” – between both poems there is, as Redmond sees it, “a deep coincidence of mood [...] a crossing of secondary worlds” – and a reading of Heaney’s “Funeral Rites” which takes on “a different cast of light” as Redmond argues, when considered alongside Plath’s “Berck-Plage.”

As Redmond too recognises in his paper, critics have almost entirely neglected the question of Plath’s influence on Heaney and it is one that begs proper consideration. Only fleeting references have thus far been made to Plath in the major studies of

---

<sup>25</sup> John Redmond, “‘Unlikely as a Foetus’: The Influence of Sylvia Plath on Seamus Heaney,” unpublished conference paper, at the “British and Irish Contemporary Poetry Conference: The Line of Poetry,” St. Anne’s College, Oxford, 22 – 24 September 2006. I am grateful to John Redmond for emailing me the script of this conference paper.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Heaney's work. Helen Vendler, examining Heaney's "Bog Queen" from the collection *North* in her study of the Irish poet, sees how "in that final rising the 'Bog Queen' owes something to Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'."<sup>27</sup> As Redmond asserts in his paper, it is in "Bog Queen" that "the link between Heaney and Plath slips into the spotlight." Henry Hart, in his discussion of the poem "North" from the same volume, quotes the opening stanza of the poem:

I returned to a long strand,  
the hammered curve of a bay,  
and found only the secular  
powers of the Atlantic thundering.<sup>28</sup>

In these lines, as Hart claims: "Heaney may recall a similar iconoclastic vision at the end of Sylvia Plath's 'Blackberrying', where she looks 'out on nothing, nothing but a great space' of ocean waves 'like silversmiths / Beating and beating at an intractable metal.'"<sup>29</sup> Neil Corcoran, also examining "Bog Queen," notes how it is "structurally indebted to Sylvia Plath's scarifying poem 'Lady Lazarus', with its vengefully stampeding persona. Both are the monologues of unwilling female returnees from the dead."<sup>30</sup> Corcoran, examining Heaney's "Summer Home" from *Wintering Out*, also states how "Plath is an unexpected but absorbed influence" on Heaney in terms of a technique in which "personal material is deflected away from the confessional towards the metaphoric and symbolic" but offers no further insights into Plath's relationship to Heaney and why exactly this influence is so "unexpected."<sup>31</sup> What Corcoran does assert is that there are strong echoes of Plath in Heaney's early work and these demand closer scrutiny. Elsewhere, in his study, Robert Palter reads Plath's "Blackberrying," first published in the *New Yorker* in 1962, against Heaney's early poem "Blackberry-Picking," from *Death of A Naturalist* (1966), and by doing so finds technical similarities between them – both

<sup>27</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> Heaney, "North," in *New Selected Poems 1966 – 1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 70 – 71.

<sup>31</sup> Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 51.



are “full of harmonious sounds” – as well as thematic ones: “each poem culminates in bleak disappointment.”<sup>32</sup> Brian Fallon has also linked Plath and Heaney – albeit to emphasize what he sees as their inherent differences – as he observes how “poets as diverse as Sylvia Plath and Seamus Heaney have regarded myth and legend as active resources for poetry.”<sup>33</sup>

But these poets are not as “diverse” as they may first appear. Real connections do exist to further the link between them. Heaney’s relationship with America, as a migrant and as a commuter between there and Ireland, along with American influences on Heaney’s work, particularly the “important influence” of Robert Lowell, have been examined by the critic Michael Allen.<sup>34</sup> Paul Muldoon may be the quintessential Irish poet in America but, as Allen recognises, Heaney is Muldoon’s “predecessor on the transatlantic route.”<sup>35</sup> What is more, Heaney was a very close friend of Ted Hughes and both poets have signalled the influence of the other on their work. Heaney has always closely aligned himself with Hughes, professing in a recent interview: “I always thought of my voice as more akin to Ted Hughes’s.”<sup>36</sup> Heaney also gave the eulogy at Hughes’ funeral in 1998, describing the death as “a rent in the veil of poetry”<sup>37</sup> and his poem in memory of Hughes, “Stern” was published in *District and Circle* (2006). More importantly, Heaney was one of the first readers of Hughes’ manuscript of *Birthday Letters*, and Hughes, in response to a letter from Heaney which had “overwhelmed him,” confided in him the very personal details for the book’s origins. This letter to Heaney speaks of the crucial necessity of their personal and poetic friendship and their high mutual esteem: “I dearly wanted to know what you would feel about all those pieces and about the niceties and not-so-niceties of publishing them – your opinion above

---

<sup>32</sup> Robert Palter, *The Duchess of Malfi’s Apricots and Other Literary Fruits* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 719 – 720.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Fallon, in Padraic Fallon, *Collected Poems*, p. 269.

<sup>34</sup> See Michael Allen, “The Parish and the Dream: Heaney and America, 1969 – 1987,” *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), pp. 726 – 738.

<sup>35</sup> Allen, “The Parish and the Dream,” p. 737.

<sup>36</sup> Seamus Heaney, in *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> See Rachel Donnelly, “Heaney Leads Valediction at Poet’s Funeral,” *Irish Times*, 4 November 1998, p. 11.





It is above all Heaney's well-known essay "The Indefatigable Hoof-taps," a seminal examination of Plath's poetry, that confirms the Irish poet's deep engagement with Plath's work. Heaney sets out in this essay disparaging the biographical approach to Plath's work, stressing for example how "Mussel-Hunter at Rock Harbour" may be read without recourse to biography. However, aspects of this essay are problematic in terms of Heaney's tendency at times to read the oeuvre with the facts of the poet's pathology in mind. Indeed, Steven Matthews has put forward the opinion that Muldoon's references to Plath and her work in "Yarrow" "obviously question Heaney's conclusions about her" in his straight-forward reading of "Edge," as Matthews puts it "in order to resist Heaney's reading of 'Edge' as a given, as 'being' in itself."<sup>41</sup> Of course Heaney is not the only reader of Plath who reads her work through a narrow lens that allows for no other possible modes of reading. For the most part it must be said that, as with Hughes whom Heaney references from time to time throughout this essay, much of what the Irish poet has to say about Plath is illuminating and worthwhile. Heaney does betray a deep knowledge of Plath's poems, tracing her "astonishingly swift development" as a poet and a "gifted writer." From the first he speaks of her as a "poet governed by the auditory imagination" and his admiration for her skill and recognition of her poems' "high achievement" in terms of technique is palpable throughout; Heaney persuades the reader of the music of Plath's poetry.<sup>42</sup> His description of "Elm" in terms of its perfected technique, its rhythm and sentence-sounds, is effusive and deeply appreciative; for Heaney, the poem comes as an extraordinary breakthrough: "the window glass is miraculously withdrawn and deep free swoops into the blue pool and into the centre are effected with effortless penetration once the new lines begin to run."<sup>43</sup>

It is interesting that Heaney's negative remarks on Plath come towards the end of this essay when he addresses the question of moral responsibility in poetry. "Daddy," as Heaney has famously described it, although a "brilliant [...] *tour de force*" is a poem that "rampages so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows that it simply

---

<sup>41</sup> Steven Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 205 – 206.

<sup>42</sup> See Heaney, "The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath," in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber, 1988), pp. 148 – 170.

<sup>43</sup> Heaney, "The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath," pp. 161 – 162.

overdraws its rights to our sympathy.”<sup>44</sup> Heaney grapples with this question in his discussion of Plath but it must be remembered that, most pertinently, it is a question that he himself has had to face in charges against his own poetry. The publication of *North* in 1975 provoked much criticism for similar reasons concerning irresponsibility with Ciaran Carson labelling Heaney “the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing.”<sup>45</sup> Heaney has offered the following explanation for the vehement critical response to this collection:

What they objected to, so they said, was what they saw to be the book’s aestheticization of violence. The claim was that I had somehow bought into the notion that the violence that was happening in the North was a cyclic, fated, on-going, predestined thing. I was simplifying and mythologizing and aestheticizing the violence, they felt. So there was a deep resistance.<sup>46</sup>

The impetus behind *North* came from P.V. Glob’s study of the “bog bodies”; the well-preserved human corpses that were discovered in Jutland having died thousands of years previously as victims of sacrificial violence. Heaney, looking back on his making of this collection has explained how “there was a parallel between what was happening in Iron Age Jutland and what was happening in twentieth century Ulster in Ireland [...] I drew a rather large analogy between the idea of sacrifice to a goddess of the territory, between that and Irish republicanism.”<sup>47</sup> With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that this is the same collection in which Vendler and Hart have recognised traces of Plath’s presence, particularly when one remembers Dawe’s insightful comment regarding Northern Irish poets in the seventies finding an echo in the violence of the Troubles in Plath’s poetry. The truth of Dawe’s comment is borne out through the poetry of Heaney and in this collection most acutely.

Apart from “Bog Queen” and “North” referred to above, one of the most celebrated and most controversial poems from this collection is “Punishment.” In this

---

<sup>44</sup> Heaney, “The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath,” p. 165.

<sup>45</sup> See Ciaran Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre,” *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (Winter 1975), pp. 183 – 186.

<sup>46</sup> Heaney, in *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller*, p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



encounter with the corpse of a female victim Heaney adopts the pose of Plath in performance pieces such as “Lady Lazarus” moving from detached observation into direct address. It is truly Plath’s technical power that Heaney looks to here. The use of enjambed, terse four-line stanzas and the descriptive use of language, as well as persuasive aural devices such as alliteration and repeated sounds – nipples like “amber beads,” “the frail rigging / of her ribs” – are all hallmarks of Plath’s technique. As Heaney’s speaker reports:

she was a barked sapling  
that is dug up  
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head  
like a stubble of black corn,  
her blindfold a soiled bandage,  
her noose a ring

to store  
the memories of love.<sup>48</sup>

The perfectly balanced line, aurally as well as visually arresting – “oak-bone, brain-firkin” – is typical of Plath’s rhythmic effects as is the startlingly vivid use of simile and metaphor to identify the body and its accoutrements. Compare the compelling concluding lines of the second stanza quoted here – “her blindfold a soiled bandage, / her noose a ring” – with the following from Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”:

My right foot

a paperweight,

---

<sup>48</sup> Heaney, “Punishment,” in *New Selected Poems 1966 – 1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 71 – 72.

My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen.<sup>49</sup>

The speaker then addresses the dead girl with the salutation “Little adulteress” which is itself reminiscent of Plath, particularly in the opening lines to “Poppies in July”: “Little poppies, little hell flames”<sup>50</sup> or the speaker’s address to her injured thumb, “Little pilgrim” in “Cut” where the injury becomes a conceit for America’s history of violence and oppression.<sup>51</sup> This compelling mode of address continues:

My poor scapegoat,  
I almost love you  
but would have cast, I know,  
the stones of silence.

The rhetorical repetition of the word “I” is also famously employed by Plath in “Purdah” with her exhortation “I shall unloose.” “Lady Lazarus” concerns itself too with the implications of witnessing an atrocity, a violation which makes for a horrific though compelling spectacle. This theme is developed further in “Punishment” in the following lines which imitate Plath’s typical attentiveness to every apprehended detail, as Heaney’s speaker declares:

I am the artful voyeur  
  
of your brain’s exposed  
and darkened combs,  
your muscles’ webbing  
and all your numbered bones:

As Plath does in “The Applicant,” “Lady Lazarus” and elsewhere, the body is dismembered, fractured and in pieces, the pieces scrutinized and catalogued as in an

---

<sup>49</sup> Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 203.

<sup>51</sup> Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 25.



autopsy report after a violent death. In many ways, “Punishment” gains its considerable powers from Plath’s example as Heaney recreates the shocking sensation of confronting the bodies and powerfully interrogates the barbaric practices that made up every-day life during the Troubles in sectarian Northern Ireland. Heaney himself has contemplated this confrontation in terms of the complications that accompany the realisation by the poet of a violent reality, and the extent to which art may be seen as a transformative, redemptive force: “You are aware that you are looking at an atrocity which has been turned into a thing of beauty, almost.”<sup>52</sup>

*North* remains central to Heaney’s work, singled out by more than one critic as having “marked Heaney’s artistic coming of age”<sup>53</sup> and Heaney himself has in no way disowned it from his oeuvre, quite the contrary, describing it as “a book of great strangeness – great strangeness and great pressure,”<sup>54</sup> professing that:

Those poems about the bog bodies, I’m very fond of them still because they are so odd and I thought to myself they’ll really get the hammer these things, but for once I was ready for it, I trusted them entirely [...] I still think they are poems about something, that is I believe in them still. I don’t care what’s said about them.<sup>55</sup>

That Plath should have provided the way for Heaney in *North*, a collection regarded by many as his best to date, is a testament to her influence on the Irish poet’s creative process as well as to the inescapable power of her own distinctive voice and masterly technique. Plath’s presence in Heaney’s work also opens up new possibilities for understanding Heaney’s poetry. As Redmond also realises: “to admit the considerable influence of Plath on Heaney would change how we think about his poetry’s treatment of gender,” yet “the story of Plath’s influence does not fit easily into any of the dominant critical narratives of Heaney’s poetry.”<sup>56</sup> A consideration of Plath’s influence on Heaney

---

<sup>52</sup> Heaney, in *Nightwaves*, BBC Radio 4, 16 September 1998.

<sup>53</sup> Eileen Battersby, “The Poet as Inner Émigré,” *Irish Times*, 26 September 1998, Weekend section, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> Heaney, in *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller*, p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> Heaney, in *Nightwaves*.

<sup>56</sup> Redmond, “‘Unlikely as a Foetus’: The Influence of Sylvia Plath on Seamus Heaney” (unpublished conference paper).

challenges many of the reductive critical narratives that have shaped our understanding of contemporary Irish poetry.

The relationship between Plath and Irish poets is often an uneasy one. Such is the double-edged nature of poetic influence that it is not unusual for poets to deny certain important influences on their work, or shy away from them entirely for fear of being overwhelmed. Redmond attributes Heaney's refusal to name Plath as an influence to the very real possibility that "in Bloomean style, his poetic self is being threatened by her as a powerful precursor."<sup>57</sup> The likelihood of this is increased when one recalls Heaney's response to the question of facing up to Yeats' influence as a precursor: "I don't face up to him: I turn my back and run!"<sup>58</sup> This same refusal has been articulated by Medbh McGuckian. Although McGuckian, in conversation with fellow-poet Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill, mentions Plath as one whom she envies for her ability to have "real things" in her poetry, she has elsewhere dismissed what many critics have pointed out as her indebtedness to Plath.<sup>59</sup> A review of her *Selected Poems* noticed how "her discreetly erotic poems bring to mind such original female talents as Sylvia Plath," McGuckian's "Elegy for an Irish Speaker" marked out for "all too clearly echoing Sylvia Plath."<sup>60</sup> Peter Childs in his survey *The Twentieth Century in Poetry* regards McGuckian as "in some ways [...] a descendant of Plath because they share concerns with logocentrism, patriarchy, relationships and parturition."<sup>61</sup> Patrick Ramsey, in his review of McGuckian's *On Ballycastle Beach*, rather unconvincingly terms McGuckian's "shocking imagery" in poems such as "Lighthouse with Dead Leaves" as "Plathian."<sup>62</sup> McGuckian herself however reverts all too easily to the reductive critical view that fails to separate the much-mythologised circumstances of Plath's death from her work in order to facilitate her disavowal of Plath and deflect attention:

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Heaney, in Robert Druce, "'A Raindrop on a Thorn': An Interview with Seamus Heaney," *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters*, 9.1 (1979), pp. 24 – 37 (p. 26).

<sup>59</sup> McGuckian, in Laura O'Connor, "Comhrá: A Conversation between Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill," with a Forward and Afterword by Laura O'Connor, *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), pp. 581 – 614 (p. 608).

<sup>60</sup> William Pratt, "Review of Medbh McGuckian, *Selected Poems 1978 – 1994*," *World Literature Today*, 72.4 (Autumn 1998), p. 836.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 174.

<sup>62</sup> Patrick Ramsey, "Quality and Quantity," *Irish Review*, 5 (Autumn 1988), pp. 122 – 126 (p. 124).



Plath's poetry and her life frighten me. Her ending in the gas oven terrifies me. She was much more of a socialite than Emily Dickinson but I find some of her poems more gross, more vulgar and in terms of an inner world I'm closer to Emily Dickinson.<sup>63</sup>

It is somewhat disappointing to encounter such an unintelligent approach to Plath's work by one of contemporary Ireland's most gifted female poets, yet McGuckian's attitude is in many ways unsurprising and stands as proof of the stubborn persistence of lazy critical viewpoints where Plath's poetry is concerned. McGuckian's denial of Plath's influence on her work is not unusual and it highlights the view of Plath's influence as "dangerous" that is so often expressed by poets who fear either being overwhelmed in their own creative work by the American or being labelled "Plath-like" by critics. Both of these very real fears display even more the potent and distinctive voice of Sylvia Plath's poetry. "Dangerous" is an adjective often employed by poets and critics to describe Plath's powerful influence and its devastating effects when handled badly. David Wheatley, for one, has warned how Plath operates as a "dangerously powerful influence" in contemporary poetry.<sup>64</sup> A review of younger poet Sinéad Morrissey's collection *The State of the Prisons* pointed out how "one finds ready parallels with Plath in the thrill of a burned finger."<sup>65</sup> Morrissey herself, although she does not dismiss Plath, has stated how, in retrospect, her early Kavanagh-Prize winning poems now seem "far too Plath-influenced." Plath was for her a formative influence, as she puts it: "When I was fourteen I fell heavily under the dangerous spell of Sylvia Plath."<sup>66</sup> Morrissey is therefore aware of the potential dangers that attend over-reliance on Plath as a poetic precursor.

In contrast to McGuckian, Eavan Boland has long been a champion of Plath and has herself signalled the ways in which Plath presides as a major influence on her poetry: "I'm very proud to be someone who read her and found a great fountain and source in her

---

<sup>63</sup> McGuckian, in John Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 173.

<sup>64</sup> David Wheatley, "Subjects Matter," *Poetry Review*, 89.2 (Summer 1999), pp. 71 – 75 (p. 72).

<sup>65</sup> David Butler, "Consolations of Observation," *Poetry Ireland Review*, 83 (July 2005), pp. 102 – 106 (p. 106).

<sup>66</sup> Sinéad Morrissey, in Declan Meade, "Interview with Sinéad Morrissey," *Stinging Fly*, 1.14 (Winter 2002 – 2003) <<http://www.stingingfly.org/issue14/morrissey.html>> [accessed April 2009]

work, very glad to have lived into my life with her voice there.” *Ariel* is for Boland “an absolute benchmark of the century in poetry.”<sup>67</sup> Having first encountered Plath’s poetry at Trinity College Dublin under the guidance of male critics who, symptomatic of their time, presented it as therapy or extremism, Boland at first – rather immaturely as she admits – “flinched from this voyeurism and from the horrible story of her death.” Later, however, as Boland affirms, it was Plath as “the superb nature poet” who “helped me think about that world [of nature].” This key realisation of Plath’s powerful talent came to Boland as an almost numinous experience brought about by her reading of *Winter Trees* as a young mother and as a result of which “the point when the book and the world outside the room and the children inside it and the language of those poems began to establish some rich, shifting and shared boundary.”<sup>68</sup> Boland, after that awakening would, as she puts it, “dismiss forever the views of [Plath’s] work as hysterical or theatrical” railing against Plath studies where the poet is “too often discussed as a character in an American melodrama.”<sup>69</sup> Of Plath’s poetry, Boland has professed how: “I want it to endure as language, music, challenge, poetry and not as legend.” Boland most admires Plath’s “path-breaking poems of motherhood” which she regards as “extraordinarily affirmative poems.”<sup>70</sup> She singles out “Nick and the Candlestick” for its “freedom, dash and élan,” noting its huge significance for her as a poet: “When I was younger and I saw this poem and saw the subject of motherhood being brought in in this extraordinarily rigorous lyric way, this was where I found Plath very empowering.”<sup>71</sup> Plath’s “The Night Dances” has been singled out by an appreciative Boland as a “very free, very improvisational, very unusual poem” and one of the “excellent, affirming, innovative, optimistic poems” that deal with motherhood. In this way, Boland has professed her indebtedness to Plath in no uncertain terms:

---

<sup>67</sup> Eavan Boland, in “A Giant at my Shoulder,” Eavan Boland on Sylvia Plath, RTÉ Radio 1 Broadcast, 15 February 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Boland, in Jody Allen-Randolph, “A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland,” *PN Review*, 26.5 (May – June 2000), pp. 43 – 48 (p. 45).

<sup>69</sup> Boland, in Elizabeth Schmidt, “Where Poetry Begins: Eavan Boland in Conversation,” *American Poet, The Quarterly Journal of The Academy of American Poets* (Spring 1997) reprinted in *Poets.org* <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15939>> [accessed April 2009]

<sup>70</sup> Boland, “A Giant at my Shoulder.”

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



She had gone into that room as a student and participant in this extraordinarily high canon of poetry which had been so reluctant to name children and she had named them all by herself and I had immense respect for that, immense respect for her. It's a life-long regret to me that she doesn't see that she gave this other woman in Dublin that courage.<sup>72</sup>

Plath's example gave Boland the "courage" to write about motherhood and domesticity in her poetry. However, Boland's reading of Plath's poems as "affirmative" and "optimistic" is as naïve as her simplistic statement that "Edge" is "the poem about her death that she wrote." It is clear that Boland chooses not to see these poems in their complexity and she fails to see the deep ambivalence about motherhood that is so vividly expressed by the speakers in Plath's poems, preferring a more positive interpretation. She is therefore creating her own version of Plath through her own misreading of these poems and to enable her own poetic needs. Nor is this an entirely successful poetics for her. Reviewing Boland's *New Collected Poems*, John Redmond, highlighting the derivative nature of Boland's early work, sees the crucial turning point in Boland's poetic career as having occurred in 1980 when, Boland's "line drastically shortened, the full stops multiplied, the subject matter sharpened and a new voice was adopted: that of Sylvia Plath." However, as Redmond continues, the collections *In her Own Image* and *Night Feed* are "so closely modelled on Plath's *Ariel* that they are practically imitations."<sup>73</sup> To support his assertion, Redmond offers the example of the poem "Menses" – the lines: "I am the moon's looking-glass / My days are moon-dials. She will never be done with me. / She needs me. / She is dry" – but any number of other poems (such as "Night Feed," "Domestic Interior," "Hymn," "Energies" and "Monotony" from *Night Feed*) present themselves as inferior imitations of Plath's art to even the most cursory reader. Fiona Sampson also has pointed out how Plath "casts a shadow over virtually every poem" throughout these collections.<sup>74</sup> It is true that in Boland's poems Plath's influence looms

---

<sup>72</sup> Boland, "A Giant at my Shoulder."

<sup>73</sup> John Redmond, "In the Heaven of Lost Futures," review of Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems*, *Guardian*, 18 February 2006, Review section, p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> Fiona Sampson, "Behind the Linen Room," review of Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems*, *Tower Poetry: Poetry Matters*, January 2006 <[www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/january2006/boland.html](http://www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/january2006/boland.html)> [accessed April 2009]

too large, serving only to remind the reader of the greater poetic talent that has enabled such lesser poetic attempts.

It is helpful at this point to compare one of Boland's poems with one of Plath's late poems; the poems that have been for Boland "the most inspiring."<sup>75</sup> Boland's "Night Feed" opens in a tone very similar to Plath's "By Candlelight," addressing the small child as follows:

This is dawn.  
 Believe me  
 This is your season, little daughter.  
 The moment daisies open,  
 The hour mercurial rainwater  
 Makes a mirror for sparrows.  
 It's time we drowned our sorrows.<sup>76</sup>

The tone here is very similar to that of the opening of Plath's "By Candlelight" as it begins with the same emphatic address:

This is winter, this is night, small love –  
 A sort of black horsehair,  
 A rough, dumb country stuff  
 Steeled with the sheen  
 Of what green stars can make it to our gate.<sup>77</sup>

However, while Boland's poem speaks of daisies and sparrows, the darker mood of Plath's poem to her child is there from the first with the rich image of "black horsehair" and aurally in the thudding "uh" vowel sounds in the assonantal line "rough, dumb country stuff." Later, the sky is a "sack of black," the harsh "k" sounds creating a persuasive, grating dissonance. There are no such harsh consonantal sounds in Boland's

---

<sup>75</sup> Boland, "A Giant at my Shoulder."

<sup>76</sup> Boland, "Night Feed," in *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), pp. 92 – 93.

<sup>77</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 236.



tender lines, whereas Plath employs hard “st,” “g” and “t” sounds in her opening stanza alone. Plath’s world in this poem is one of inevitable loss and threat. The shadows cast from the candle are as “violent giants on the wall,” the candle itself a “yellow knife” and the closing lines focus in on the statue of “Atlas” that is the child’s only heirloom – a dubious inheritance, “all you have” – as it stands perpetually “hefting his white pillar,” ever-burdened and ever engaged in trying to avoid extinction, to “keep the sky at bay.” The most haunting statement comes with the final lines which begin with open, bright “b” alliterative sounds punctuated with upbeat exclamation marks only to conclude in a terrifying image and all the more so for its rhyming-couplet simplicity, a tragically false reassurance:

Five balls! Five bright brass balls!  
To juggle with my love when the sky falls.<sup>78</sup>

There is nothing of this masterfully executed sense of threat and fearful mortality in Boland’s far more one-dimensional and unambivalent celebration of motherhood, a much more straightforward expression of uncompromised feeling. Here is described the suckling of her new baby, safe and warm in a “rosy, zipped sleeper”:

I crook the bottle.  
How you suckle!  
This is the best I can be,  
Housewife  
To this nursery  
Where you hold on  
Dear life.

The poem also contains strong echoes of Plath’s “Morning Song” with the symbolic images of mirrors and of roses, but where “Morning Song” speaks of a deep ambivalence at the root of motherhood regarding fears of self-effacement, Boland’s poem exalts her

---

<sup>78</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 237.

condition as “the best I can be,” her identity happily secured as “Housewife / To this nursery.” Unlike Plath’s “Nick and the Candlestick” this poem to a young child ends with the safely reassuring statement: “I tuck you in.” Boland’s is nothing more than a portrait of a night-feed, safe and warm with nature providing pathetic fallacy and a benign, if mutable, world outside. Plath’s poem on the other hand, written during the Cuban Missile Crisis, is a meditation on the human condition and on the forces of war, of annihilation, that threaten the self from outside; the poem allows for no easy consolations. As Cairtriona O’Reilly has observed, a poem such as “The Night Dances” “provides an image of self not as emergent but as fragmented, dissipated, obsolescent.”<sup>79</sup> Overall, for Boland, Plath’s influence remains too great throughout these collections, serving only to remind the reader of the greater poetic talent that stands over her lesser, imitative attempts. As Edna Longley has correctly commented, Boland “signals rather than digests her debts to Sylvia Plath.”<sup>80</sup> The failure of Boland’s poetry to assimilate Plath’s effects in developing a style of her own is a regrettable flaw and one that the work of the younger Irish poet O’Reilly does not suffer from.

Plath has been enabling in more successful ways for a poet such as Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill, a poet who writes in the Irish language. Ní Dhómhnaill, a self-confessed “Plath aficionado,” chose Plath’s “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” regarded by her as a “highly crafted” poem, as her “favourite poem” for the *Lifelines* anthology.<sup>81</sup> Ní Dhómhnaill admires this poem for its imagery and its wonderfully rich use of myth and has also singled out “The Applicant” as a “marvellous poem” for its exploration of gender politics, “the woman behind the man.” Speaking of Plath’s immediate impact on her as a young poet and reader, Ní Dhómhnaill has professed: “I idolised her when I met her first in her poetry in the sixties. She was the poet for that generation.”<sup>82</sup> As a young poet, Ní Dhómhnaill was often compared to Plath and she has commented on how this comparison was stated in negative terms, as excessive and undesirable: “very good friends of mine actually said it in a bad way, ‘bit too much of Sylvia Plath there.’” It is

<sup>79</sup> Cairtriona O’Reilly, “Sylvia Plath,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*, Vol. 3, ed. by Jay Parini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 355 – 362 (p. 360).

<sup>80</sup> Edna Longley, “Irish Bards and American Audiences,” *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), pp. 757 – 771 (p. 764).

<sup>81</sup> *Lifelines 1*, p. 144.

<sup>82</sup> Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill, in “The Best of Rattlebag: Sylvia Plath,” RTÉ Radio 1, September 14 2006, first broadcast January 2004.



clear that Plath's example was not only highly important for Ní Dhómhnaill herself but also for her generation in Irish poetry and in particular in broadening the concerns of contemporary Irish language poetry, as Ní Dhómhnaill has testified: "She was for our generation in many ways the great forerunner, she allowed me in poetry in Irish to actually bring in the personal which was not the strongest side of Irish poetry until then."<sup>83</sup> Plath was clearly an enabling influence for Ní Dhómhnaill and not the "bad example" that she might have been for another poet.

That Plath has been an important influence on a wide range of young Irish poets is undeniable. It is necessary here to distinguish between two generations of Irish poets where Plath is concerned. While the older generation of contemporary Irish poets, including McGuckian, Heaney and Boland, have at times tended to regard Plath with either ambivalence or adulation – all affected in various ways by the now out-dated critical approach to Plath that spoke of extremism and confessionalism and which failed to separate the work from the suicide – the Irish poets of this generation, whom Bloodaxe in the twenty-first century has labelled "The New Irish Poets," have moved beyond the state of "anxiety of influence" that Yeats in particular bequeathed to his successors. Their more unburdened state allows them the freedom to assimilate many, various influences – particularly American and European ones – while never being overwhelmed. Poets such as O'Reilly, Justin Quinn, David Wheatley and others see past a reductive, one-dimensional view of Plath to something more sophisticated and therefore more enriching.<sup>84</sup> These poets are also strong-minded, rigorous critics of poetry and, where Plath is concerned, Wheatley, as noted above, is alert to the ways in which the American poet, as well as being an inspiration for poets, can more often exert too great an influence on their developing work. In a review of Philip Gross's *The Wasting Game* the knowing Wheatley sees how the title poem itself "reeks of Plath."<sup>85</sup> Wryly criticising Gross's poem "That Grave, Heptonstall Churchyard" Wheatley's response is typical of this youngest generation of Irish poets who will not genuflect at the shrine of their poetic

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> For Quinn's account of Plath's formative centrality to his poetic vocation, see Quinn, "Plath as Exemplar," *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), pp. 11 – 12. For my own lengthy examination of Plath's enriching presence in the work of Caitríona O'Reilly, "This is the Life of the Mind," *Contemporary Poetry Review*, October 2006 < <http://www.cprw.com/members/Johnston/oreilly.htm> >

<sup>85</sup> David Wheatley, "Subjects Matter," *Poetry Review*, 89.2 (Summer 1999), pp. 71 – 75 (p. 72).

antecedents, as confident, even irreverent, he declares: “Plath’s grave has to be at the top of anyone’s blacklist of embarrassing subjects for poems.”<sup>86</sup> O’Reilly, an astute scholar of Plath’s work, has warned against reading Plath biographically: “Plath’s poems stand as a poignant testament to the tragic loss of a remarkable talent, but they are also undeniably powerful and achieved works of art in their own right.”<sup>87</sup>

Poets such as Collette Bryce and Matthew Sweeney have heralded Plath for her inspirational example. Bryce has noted how “Larkin and Plath were important and led me forward in my own reading, and eventually into writing” describing herself as “equally drawn to Larkin’s rational process and Plath’s exploration of the psyche, and to the perfect marriage of voice and craft in both.”<sup>88</sup> Sweeney also admires Plath among such company as Robert Frost and Charles Simic, exalting her above all others as “the first contemporary poet who was important to me, and is still possibly my favourite”<sup>89</sup> and his poem “At Plath’s Grave” from the collection *Blue Shoes* pays tribute to her. The experimental poet Randolph Healy has stated how “my heroes were Sylvia Plath [...]”<sup>90</sup> among others, while Vona Groarke has named Plath as one of her favourite writers and admires the “raw embroideries” that are unique to her poetry.<sup>91</sup> Nodding to Plath’s poetry, Conor O’Callaghan’s poem “Inland” from his recent collection *Fiction* (2005) – a work which displays the influence of American poets on his writing – has the opening line from Plath’s “Berck Plage” as its epigraph. “The Flat Earth” also from this collection and addressed to the poet’s young daughter, echoes Plath directly in its second stanza:

The surface, love, is everything.  
It is plenty. The wallpaper ripens,  
the horizon plumbs its own depths

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Caitríona O’Reilly, “Sylvia Plath,” p. 361.

<sup>88</sup> Colette Bryce, in Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Northern Irish Poets* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 2002), p. 314.

<sup>89</sup> Matthew Sweeney, in *Lifelines 2: Letters from Famous People about their Favourite Poem*, ed. by Niall MacMonagle, forward by Paul Durcan (Dublin: Town House, 1994), p. 16.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Archambeau, “The Poet in the Information Age: Randolph Healy,” *Notre Dame Review*, 7 <<http://www.nd.edu/~ndr/issues/ndr7/archambeau/interview.html>> [accessed April 2009]

<sup>91</sup> Vona Groarke, in Fionnuala Dillane and John McAuliffe, “Poets on Poetry: Interview with Vona Groarke,” *Review of Postgraduate English Studies*, 5 (1997), pp. 57 – 61 (p.61).



and the flat earth warms to us.<sup>92</sup>

Drawing on Plath's celebrated poems of motherhood, O'Callaghan pens a poem to his daughter Eve that captures the newness and freshness of an Edenic world which she is eager to embrace in all its fullness. There is none of the ambivalence of Plath's poems to her children here, yet the echoes are unmistakable, the "surface," the "horizon," the "depths," and the assured statement: "It is plenty." The interpolation "love" too is distinctive to Plath also, in poems such as "By Candlelight," "Nick and the Candlestick" and in "Letter in November." O'Callaghan, in the closing lines of his poem, captures something of the fresh, playful quality of Plath's poem to her child "You're". The closing lines, "You're as / full and round as it is and it is all yours", are clearly similar in their delighted use of simile to Plath's energetic, free-flowing profusion of similes and metaphors to capture her child in language.

Thus, Plath's presence in Irish contemporary poetry cannot be overlooked. Her far-reaching influence is there in the work of the major Irish poets of the latter part of the twentieth century, and the different modes it takes on for each poet are fascinatingly diverse. Some poets deny her influence entirely, deeming it "dangerous," too powerful, and to be avoided. For Heaney, her influence comes at a crucial point in his career enabling a particular mode of poetry that can accommodate issues of violence and sectarian hatred in a North of Ireland divided by civil war. For Durcan, Plath's example allows him a certain freedom with repressed issues and taboo subjects. For a poet such as Boland, only one version of Plath is privileged – that of the poet of motherhood – which, though limiting in the way that it reads Plath unambiguously, is again, for this poet, empowering and enabling, giving her the "courage" as she terms it to pursue her poetic project. For a poet such as Ní Dhómhnaill, Plath has made possible a necessary enlargement of the scope of poetry written in the Irish language. Plath is needed at particular moments for these and for other poets. This idea of the Plath "moment" in a poet's oeuvre may be seen to culminate and come to full fruition in the poetry of O'Reilly, where Plath's influence is sustained across her collections *The Nowhere Birds* (2001) and *The Sea Cabinet* (2007). For a young poet and critic such as O'Reilly the art

---

<sup>92</sup> Conor O' Callaghan, "The Flat Earth," in *Fiction* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2005), p. 28.

of Plath's poetry provides a rich, enabling model and O'Reilly's own engagements with Plath, both as a poet and reader, illuminate Plath's own work in significant ways. But all of these poets, whether they admit to taking from Plath's poetry or not, have, through their differing approaches, interpretations, readings or even misreadings of her work and through their navigations around her legacy, revealed much about ways of reading Plath and have in many ways deepened our awareness of the richness and technical virtuosity of her work and the breadth of its poetic resource, thus challenging the reductive critical approaches that have, until recently, plagued Plath scholarship. In the same way, exploring Plath's influence on these Irish poets opens up contemporary Irish poetry and poetics to new possibilities of reading, broadening the critical scope past narrowly-defined boundaries of language, gender and nationality.