

FROM MACCHU PICCHU TO INIS MÓR:
THE POETRY OF MARY O'MALLEY

by Eamonn Wall

The poetry of Mary O'Malley is collected in five volumes: *A Consideration of Silk* (1990), *Where the Rocks Float* (1993), *The Knife in the Wave* (1997), *Asylum Road* (2001), and *The Boning Hall: New and Selected Poems* (2002). In a brief and intensely productive twelve-year period, coinciding with her return to Ireland from ten years spent in London and Portugal to live in the Moycullen Gaeltacht in her native Co. Galway, O'Malley has published work of great originality that has been well received, widely translated, and won her a place in *Aosdána*, the Irish academy honoring creative artists. To a degree, her many-sided and variously-shaped work can be difficult to describe and even harder to place. Keeping these issues in mind, and making some notes on them as I proceed, my focus will be on some of the more clearly defined aspects of O'Malley's work though I will conclude by enumerating on other themes and obsessions in her poetry that critics should also consider. My purpose here will be to examine O'Malley's work in its Western contexts and to show the degree to which her work, and what drives it, is rooted in the West of Ireland and in specific literary, historical, gender-related, and linguistic issues central to the history of the West.

In "Na Beanna Beola/The Twelve Pins, Connemara" O'Malley describes the mountains that dominate and define the Connemara skyline:

Twelve guardians watched
over my child dreams
sometimes soft as peaked cream
sometimes gods of stone.
Always minding, always men.
(*Where the Rocks Float*, 36)

The key word here is the "minding" of the final line, suggesting the extent to which women felt husbanded and herded by men whose moods might oscillate between the softness of cream and the hardness of stone. The mountains that watched and protected had not always been men, it is inferred, though they'd had male attributes hammered into them over time. The position of rural Irish-speaking women in Western society was fatally undermined by the Famine, as Ann Owens Weekes has pointed out, "Gaelic-Irish women had some economic independence before the famine, but they had little independence of any kind after this event" (13). O'Malley was born in the 1950's in a transitional decade in Ireland: she was raised by women who carried with them the final, inherited burdens of the famine though, at the same time, belonging to the first generation of young women and men who would avail of free secondary education, introduced in the mid-1960s, that would open up educational and job opportunities, and transform the Republic. Many of O'Malley's most resonant and most often repeated themes are contained in this short lyric:

in each volume, she will explore the Galway landscape; she will return to it the erased lives and bodies of women; and she will celebrate the lives of men, and not always ironically by any means, who appointed themselves its guardians. Not that the West is necessarily a more hospitable place when its feminine characteristics are restored, as is made clear in “The Countrywoman Remembers”:

The West is hard
with a treacherous yielding,
so sometimes in summer
there is softness. . . .

They used to make me wonder
until I learned the cost, before
they taught me to trust
the surer comforts of stone. (*Where the Rocks Float*, 30)

It is in “The Boat Poems” sequence from *Where the Rocks Float* and the many other boat poems that appear throughout her work that the themes raised in “Na Beanna Beola/The Twelve Pins Connemara” are brought into sharpest focus. O’Malley’s father was a fisherman and boats were part of the everyday world of childhood, “I was allowed out on the currach, and later the bigger boats, with my father. Those boats were lovely but far from romantic. I learned that early, my stomach heaving as the boat slapped around in the swell while lobster pots were hauled or set (*My Self, My Muse*, 35). As a child, her ambition was “to become the first woman skipper in Ireland” (*My Self, My Muse* 37). However, as she leaves childhood, she is no longer welcome on boats, just as Alice Munro’s young women in her Canadian stories are no longer welcome in the fields. Though “something in her belly stirs/and draws her out/to stare at the shiny sea,” she must reach “under her pillow/for a book without a heroine.” The men have put to sea and left the young woman at home:

She is landbound,
lately kept from the sea
by men that know their lives hang
on such a thing as luck in a boat. (“The Vigil,” *Where the Rocks Float*, 14)

For the fishermen, boats are women, notwithstanding their superstition that women on board will bring bad luck, and so much time is spent at sea that these boats are cast as rivals by the shore-bound fishermen’s wives:

Look at her, the black bitch.
I see nothing beautiful.
He spends his day with her,
his nights thinking about her.
I only have peace in October
when he becomes dutiful,

a full-time husband for a stretch. (“Jealously,” *Where the Rocks Float*, 57)

And, to be sure, these wives have much to be afraid of as it is only on the sea, and in their boats, that men will allow their true passions to surface. As they chase the catch, roll wildly or gently on the waves, gut fish, the fishermen allow the raw sexuality and dreamy gentleness that is dormant when they are on land to emerge. In “The Maighdean Mhara,” we understand that men at sea are governed by their boats:

But I can make them sing out
a shower of curses and commands.
I challenge them to win
against the sea and other men.
They listen for the slightest whisper
between me and the wind. They understand
my lightest sigh and respond.

Here in my belly where men feel safe
I draw out their soft talk,
rising, falling, low as breath.
At ease and sure of their control
they are, in Irish, eloquent.
I never let on anything
but fall and rise and humour them. (*Where the Rocks Float*, 63)

In “Tracing,” dedicated to the poet’s father and to the poet Richard Murphy, the two men sit together “tracing the genealogy of pucáns” while a woman sits to one side of their conversation “thinking of women measuring/the rising skirts of the wind, scanning/the swollen sea for one speck/to lift out of a trough,” recalling that she had always wanted to be among the men at sea, and not on shore (*Where the Rocks Float* 52-3). In this poem, alike in its focus on the father’s work and the other course taken by the child, to Seamus Heaney’s poem “Digging” from *Death of a Naturalist*, the woman follows her father’s path, though indirectly: she will write instead of catch and gut fish though the writing of poetry also draws on all of the individual’s physical strength. For both Heaney and O’Malley, poetry is not just connected to the physical world but it is also part of it: the poet draws strength in equal measures from both literary and laboring traditions though the activity of writing separates the poet from the farmer or fisherman:

Heaney writes:

Between my finger and thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. . . (1)



O'Malley writes:

I feel the heft of a satin handled
fish-knife. The poem forms,
a lobster pot turning
on a wooden wheel. . . (*Where the Rocks Float*, 53)

Both metaphors, the spade and the knife, are violent, invasive, connected to water, and a reminder that poetry is an ancient and essential art. Even though, by its nature, the conversation in "Tracing" excludes the woman who is listening in the background, both her father and Richard Murphy are central figures in O'Malley's development as a writer. In many poems, her father is presented as an inspirational and enabling figure, generous in how he passed on his gifts to his daughter:

Golden nets and silver fish
Floating in the sky,
Lift me on your shoulders Daddy,
Daddy swing me high.

And if the fishes are all tears
And if the nets are dry,
We'll chase the moon with blazing spears
Across the ice-cold sky.
Carry me on your shoulders Daddy,
Daddy swing me high. ("Lullaby" *The Knife in the Wave* 14)

Richard Murphy is an important literary model for O'Malley: in her boat poems and in her exploration of the West of Ireland, she is following in Murphy's path. Murphy is of the generation of poets first published by the Dolmen Press in the 1950s and the only major figure of that generation to be from the West of Ireland. Like O'Malley, Murphy is from Co. Galway. After college he returned to Galway to write, and for many years, as is pointed out in *The Kick*, his 2002 memoir, operated a small ferry service between the Galway coast and Inishbofin. Murphy's poetry is full of his own boat poems—"The Last Galway Hooker" and "The Cleggan Disaster" are two prominent examples—and O'Malley's use of personification is borrowed from Murphy. In "The Last Galway Hooker," the relationship between the boat owner and the boat is cast as that between man and wife, and the physical make-up of the boat compared to the body of a woman:

With her brown sails, and her sleek skin of tar,
Her forest of oak ribs and larchwood planks,
Cut limestone ballast, costly fishing gear, (Murphy, *Collected Poems* 19)

O'Malley is the most important new poet to emerge from Galway since Murphy. She is clearly influenced by his work though she revises it: belonging to another generation, her work, though highly crafted and equally allusive, is less formalist than his, and the per-

spective is often different. In Murphy's boat poems, one hears the voice of the sea captain whereas in O'Malley's work what one hears is the often ironic voice of the feminized boat, or the voice of the wife or daughter left on the quay side. A cornerstone of feminist poetics is Adrienne Rich's 1972 poem "Diving Into the Wreck," a poem physically and symbolically rich in boats and the sea, and a work that has had a huge influence on Irish women poets. Although elements of wreckage are evident in O'Malley's work, she simultaneously seeks to strike a balance, and to suggest, as Eavan Boland does, that what has been handed down to women, the hand they have been dealt by time, is a mixed one. An antidote to the oppressed woman is the figure of Grannuaile, the pirate queen, the subject of another of O'Malley's sequences:

I am Gráinne, Queen of men,
 mistress of a thousand ships,
 Bunowen's chatelaine.
 A working mother,
 I keep my maiden name. (*Where the Rocks Float*, 69)

O'Malley, like Boland, is the kind of poetic messenger Rich imagines in "North American Time":

I have felt like some messenger
 called to enter, called to engage
 this field of light and darkness. ("North American Time" 117)

O'Malley's work has much in common with Eavan Boland's, Paula Meehan's, and the work of other contemporary Irish women poets. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh has summarized the achievements of this generation of women poets as follows:

In much of the poetry by Irish women published since 1980, a growing consciousness of the importance of self has led not only to the proliferation of female personae but also to a more confident female voice expressing the value of women's experience and perception. (*Women Creating Women* 197)

O'Malley's work emerges from a received, and many-sided, landscape and seeks to leave a singular mark. Like Moya Cannon, Rita Ann Higgins, and Joan McBreen, she is woman living in Galway and the West and involved in the process of literary reinvention though, as a result of the range of her subject matter and her literary influence, her work is more diverse and many-sided than that of her contemporaries. In terms of literary influence, for example, even though Eavan Boland seems the most important influence, strong echoes of Pessoa, particularly in the use of personae, Walcott, Montague, Neruda, Hughes, Lorca, Celan, and Akhmatova are also notable. Montague's *The Rough Field* is a particularly important influence, a volume O'Malley notes that "released and inspired me, and it inspires me still. The right lines can cut through darkness like a comet" (*My Self, My Muse* 39). O'Malley has noted that "she was raised between languages. . . We spoke English, but almost the entire specialized vocabulary of the sea, the names of fish, rocks, birds, and

plants was in Irish,” and in such Montague poems as “The Severed Head” she finds, for the first time in poetry, an articulation of the world she has been born into (*My Self, My Muse* 37). This dualism is present in the bilingualism of her work where often, when most appropriate or truest to the language she grew up with, the Irish word takes precedence over the English. In no respect is the use of the Irish word instead of the English a mere *blas* designed to convey the merry flavor of place; instead, the use of Irish is a means of describing and representing the language she was taught, the language of experience and place. Today, as a poet writing in English living in an Irish speaking area of Co. Galway, she continues to live and write, and give voice to, this dual universe, often with comic effect:

The locals, sure of what they are
do the opposite. They listen to country music,
speak Irish on the mobile, misbehave
linguistically.
“Connemara Rock, a deir sé. No hassle.” (“The Second Plantation of Con-
naught,” *Asylum Road* 40)

Writing of her contemporaries, Eavan Boland points out that “in the poem written by women at the moment the authority of the poet is offset and challenged by the necessity of dailyness and the awareness of a language which needs to be reclaimed and re-possessed,” and in O’Malley’s case this involves multiple recoveries (“New Wave 2,” 144). Although he doesn’t cite O’Malley’s work, David Wheatley shows that what she seeks to recover is also sought by some, though by no means all, of her contemporaries:

While many older Irish poets have been deeply marked by the Irish language, the same cannot be said in truth of Quinn, Groarke, and O’Callaghan. Applied to them, Thomas Kinsella’s claim for “a divided Tradition” scarred by the loss of the Irish language seems almost nostalgic. Irish language influences have far from disappeared from the work of younger writers, however, as the examples of Moya Cannon, Peter Sirr, James McCabe, Tom French and Frankie Sewell all show (253).

Although the importance of Boland as an influence on O’Malley cannot be over-estimated—her work is frequently referenced, alluded to, and her themes and obsessions are expanded upon—it must also be said that O’Malley provides a counter argument to Boland’s view of the West of Ireland. For Boland, the West of Ireland is a silent wreck from which it’s most silent voices, those of its women, must be recovered, and this is achieved with great success in such poems as “The Achill Woman” and “That the Science of Cartography is Limited.” It is clear that O’Malley, too, wishes to recover the voices of lost women; however, as a poet who lives in the West, O’Malley does not separate the historical West from its present. For Boland, the West is synonymous with the Famine—she views it as the point where time begins and ends; however, for O’Malley, the West continues into the present and has a future, albeit an uncertain one. Boland personifies Declan Kiberd’s view of McGahern when he notes that “whenever a world is about to

disappear, a poet emerges to utter it, and through the poet it achieves a comprehensive articulation” (195). Boland provides an elegy for the West that perished in the 1840s just as McGahern’s *Amongst Women* eulogizes a West that will die with the last hero of the War of Independence. Other writers as various as J. M. Synge and Heinrich Böll see in the fading West the sunset of ancient Europe. However, for most people living in the West of Ireland, and for a majority of their writers—all well aware of the torment endured over the centuries—it will come as a surprise to them and be seen as an insult to be told, either from Brussels, Dublin, or from within, that their place is dying. Clearly, the rural West is struggling with depopulation though it is also vigorously seeking its own survival. In her work, O’Malley is very much engaged with battles for survival, and with battles to define the shape of the West of the future. One aspect of this battle is fighting the presence of the second-home-owners from the East of Ireland for whom the West is not a real place but rather a kind of Bainín Disneyland, fashioned by The Celtic Revival, the Hinde postcard company, *Father Ted*, and all amounting to a kind of Celtic sublime:

“We love Connemara. Bought a little place there.
It’s paradise”, the woman brays, adjusting
her children like accessories.
Even Cromwell knew better.
Failed the first time. Scraggy blackthorn
not covering the rock’s shame, the soil
taken to Aran as a joke. To hell
was the alternative, a hell without golf,
decent restaurants or friends from Blackrock.
Now they come to play, copper-fingered
as that old snob Yeats predicted. (*Asylum Road* 40)

This poem is entitled “The Second Plantation of Connaught,” the Connaught ironically spelled in the British rather than the Irish manner, and suggests that the newly-arrived holiday makers may find Connacht surprisingly resilient and shockingly raw.

Little critical attention has been devoted to the role O’Malley and other women writers have played in the recent re-imagining of the West of Ireland in contemporary writing; however, a good deal has been written in recent times about the role American women writers have played in re-imagining the American West, and much of what they have written seems applicable to the Irish situation. Of particular relevance is Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s polemic *Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays* in which she refutes claims that Western History ended in the late nineteenth century and that her own people, the Plains Indians, were even then a vanishing people. Cook-Lynn’s work provides a platform on which one might begin to answer Kiberd, McGahern, Synge, Boland and the legislators in Dublin and Brussels. Every discussion of the work of O’Malley and others will involve an examination of their relationship with Revival writers who, it might be argued, invented the West. From America, a productive source will be Susan J. Rosowski’s *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity and the West in American Literature*. Rosowski’s approach is oppositional to show how different the male-created American West is, in many respects, from the one imagined by women writers:

In 1902 Owen Wister published *The Virginian* announcing what Mitchell refers to as the obsessive concern over “the problem of what it means to be a man”. That same year, Willa Cather published her first story, “Peter,” and with it announced her own commitment to freeing women from the alterity of the Western’s script. (11)

She goes on to note that “Cather’s early fiction tells of seeking ways to save the West from the literary speculators” (64). Clearly, given the vital role Augusta Gregory played in the Revival, it would be foolish to see all of the Revival writers as sinister, male, literary speculators bent on profit; however, in Irish discourse—literary and political—the actual West has been dwarfed by its nationalist myth, and its inhabitants rendered invisible, and its women perhaps doubly so. It is easy, when an area is designated as dead and unviable, to turn it into a landscape of golf courses, holiday homes, visitor centers, a landscape awaiting the carving of the poet’s face into Ben Bulbin, and an essay by Umberto Eco. At the same time, we should not place the contemporary women poets from the West of Ireland in positions of permanent opposition to the writers from the Revival period. It is true that they tended to create a particular and rather soft-centered vision; however, as Declan Kiberd attests, their representations are also much more complex than they have often been given credit for, and full of “revolutionary reversals” (*Inventing Ireland* 288). Thankfully, the Revival writers lacked the dangerous machismo of their American counterparts. The Irish Western myth owes more to De Valera than it does to Yeats. Rosowski uses “script” rather than “myth” and certainly O’Malley in Galway, like Cather in Nebraska, is committed to freeing women from silent alterity.

Krista Comer’s *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women’s Writing* is a study of the work of a variety of writers—Joan Didion, Wanda Coleman, Sandra Cisneros, Louise Erdrich, and others—who have revised the American West in the contemporary period. She notes that these writers “serve to recast the spatial field in terms that do not render “openness” synonymous with male-gendered specialities or “containment” necessarily synonymous with female gendered roles,” a good way of explaining the many transformations of self registered in O’Malley’s work that Bernard McKenna has unearthed (28). O’Malley’s ambition as a child to be the first Irishwoman to skipper a trawler was an expression of a desire to break free from the containment of the long-established, pre-ordained role that had been identified as hers. Of course, given Irish literary politics and practices, as Eavan Boland has pointed out in *Object Lessons*, choosing a career in poetry was to enter a world as clearly delineated as the sea and the land of the West:

In the old situation which existed in the Dublin, it was possible to be a poet, permissible to be woman and difficult to be both without flouting the damaged and incomplete permissions on which Irish poetry had been constructed. (xii)

At the outset, I pointed out that O’Malley’s poetry is complex and many-sided and that there exist many other aspects of her work beyond what this essay can note. Let me briefly enumerate on some other directions an examination of her work might take. Both classical and Irish mythology are frequently referenced and are often the subject of poems:

in this respect, she has much in common with Kavanagh, Boland, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill who have all sought to describe, subvert, and re-examine these nuggets of their shared literary and psychological heritage. She explores with great sympathy and originality the marks made on the landscape of Connemara by the pre-Christian and Christian beliefs systems, particularly the places and iconographies of holy wells. Each volume contains work written to describe the suffering of women in various parts of the world—this recurring theme was the subject of a vicious review by Patrick Ramsey in an issue of *The Irish Review*—to show the degree to which Connemara is, simultaneously, both separate from and belonging to a wider world. The West of Ireland is indeed a popular place to travel to; however, historically, as a result of the diaspora, it is also a region from which many have traveled away from and this phenomenon has served to connect the Westerner to the wider world. The people of Connemara are closer to New York than they are to Dublin, in many respects. O'Malley writes poems of personal suffering, both physical and emotional, often in a magic-realist mode. Although she has written poems of domestic life, her chosen realm field of interest is the world outside the front door and the world of the interior self. Music and musicians are present throughout her work, and singers as various as Joe Heaney and Billie Holiday. Her poems can be sassy too and wicked in their humor:

The Poetry Harlots
From the Irish

They're the neo-classical can-can girls
who do not terribly matter,
but boys must accessorise
and off-duty they wear pearls. The girls.
They open their vowels
and sharpen their smiles
and converse in iambic pentameter. (*The Boning Hall* 41)

Krista Comer also points out that the New American West contains some of the U.S.'s fastest growing cities reminding the reader of the Irish West to take note of its urban areas, and note their growth and their significance. One of the great phenomenons of today's West of Ireland is the rapid growth of some of its urban centers and this growth of Galway is something O'Malley has cast her ambivalent gaze upon.

Writing of poetry in the Republic, John Goodby has noted that "the situation, while interestingly fluid, still suffers from a lack of focus which continues to bind together and give cohesion to the work of the best Northern Irish poets. No single historical moment has galvanized poetry in the Republic" (319). Goodby's assumption is that the quality of poetry written in the Republic would improve if a big, historical event were to occur. For him, the Republic's *Zeitgeist* is running on empty. The lack of focus Goodby notices might be lauded by another reader as positive evidence of diversity. Similarly, cohesion could easily be viewed as a recipe for weak, formulaic verse. In effect, because of the infinite variety of directions and turns poetry has taken in recent decades, there is no such thing as a definable "Poetry of the Republic," though this is not to say that what is written is weak: the work is diffuse, layered, and complex. Goodby devalues the historical moments that have taken place, the most important being the introduction of free secondary education



in the 1960s (a Great Reform Bill of the Republic) which brought new voices into Irish poetry, particularly those of women, and transformed it. Furthermore, he fails to understand the extent to which loyalties in the Republic are local rather than national. Evidence of this is to be found in the poetry currently being written in the West of Ireland where the frames of reference and the poetics are local, regional, and international rather than national. At the center of this endeavor is Mary O'Malley, a gifted and original voice.

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