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Jeanne M. Armstrong Ph.D.
Western Washington University, jeanne.armstrong@wwu.edu

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Ce Leis Tu? To whom do you belong: Teeth mothers, muses and longing in the poetry of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill and John Montague

Ce Leis Tu? which translates as ―to whom do you belong?‖ is the title of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill‘s essay that touches on her childhood in the Gaeltact, cultural identity and the difficulty of maintaining the Irish language (Ni Dhomhnaill, Ce Leis2000). In this essay, she describes her encounter at the age of 5 with an old man in Ventry. When he asks her Ce Leis Tu , she indignantly replied that she didn‘t belong to anyone but herself. According to Ni Dhomhnaill, this older generation could ―no more imagine an unattached human being than it could identify a star without its surrounding constellations‖ (Ni Dhomhnaill, Ce Leis2000). This question, ―To whom do you belong?‖ could be posed to poets Ni Dhomhnaill and John Montague, both of whom have complicated relationships with their mothers and with Irish identity. These poets were born outside Ireland, Montague in the US and Ni Dhomhnaill in England, where their parents emigrated either for political reasons or for economic opportunity. Ni Dhomhnaill states in this essay, ―I am of the Gaeltact but not from the Gaeltact. The Irish diaspora has seen to that.‖ She feels that being ―at home in two languages in very different mind sets, caused an ―inner contradiction‖ that has been a source of both creativity and psychic pain. In her essay, ―Why I choose to write in Irish,‖ first published in the *New York Times,* Ni Dhomhnaill states that one of her reasons is that the ―deep sense in the language that something exists beyond the ego envelope . . . is a great source of linguistic and imaginative playfulness‖ (Ni Dhomhnaill 1997). Although she was his student at University College Cork, the sensibility she shares with Montague may be the result of their personal histories rather than direct influence. In any case, it seems from their exchanges, that Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill has certainly challenged his assumptions about women poets as I will discuss later.

There are similarities between themes and patterns in these two poets‘ lives as well as between some themes and images in their work. This paper will explore aspects of loss, muses and healing in the work of these two poets by looking at several poems that convey the dislocations in cultural and personal histories as well as other poems that

can heal a fragmented tradition -stories for their children but also for all the ―children‖ of Ireland and the Irish diaspora.

John Montague‘s father, a Republican Catholic in Northern Ireland, had to leave when the Republic agreed to relinquish six northern counties in the treaty with Great Britain (Montague global 1979). Montague was born in New York City, a late child apparently unwanted by his mother, and was fostered out to aunts in Garvaghey at age 4 (Montague figure 1989). It is well known that Montague‘s poems, especially the Rough Field and the Dead Kingdom chronicle the tragedy of Irish history, his childhood in Northern Ireland and his anguish over maternal abandonment (Quinn 1989). In his interview, ―Global Regionalism,‖ he states, ―The bitterness of our province is inescapable. The destruction of the O‘Neills and the plantation of Ulster were historical acts, a pogram to keep Ulster Catholics in their place.‖ (1979)

Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill was fostered out for the summer to relatives in the Gaeltact town of Ventry starting at age 5 (Ni Dhomhnaill 2000). Though the separation from her parents was not as permanent as Montague‘s was, she nevertheless comments that this experience at such an early age must have been very painful, a feeling of being abandoned. Like Montague, she also comments on the traumatic effects of Irish history that ruptured the bond of the people with their land and language. In ―Ce Leis Tu,‖ she states that ―The more I think about it the more it seemed that to be educated out of one‘s mother tongue. . . must be as deep a shock to one‘s sense of identity as a radical change in body image‖ (2000).

During her recorded conversation with Medbh McGuckian in Dublin, Nuala admits that she had a deep sense of being abandoned by her mother, who even pushed away her attempted embrace in front of everyone at her father's funeral. However she also mentions an early experience in which her mother evidently felt rejected by Nuala. When the mother returned from a two year hospitalization for TB with a cage-like rack on her back, the two and a half year old daughter wouldn't come near her. As Nuala tells McGuckian, ―My mother died when I was six months old. The woman who came back when I was two-and-a-half was the witch in the fairy tale. It's very unfair, but that's the way it happened‖ (McGuckian and Ni Dhomhnaill 1995).

In ―Ce Leis Tu,‖ Ni Dhomhnaill describes another traumatic experience with her parents when they objected to her relationship with a Muslim man from Turkey. She was made a Ward-of-Court at the age of nineteen and a half after her father filed a court deposition to prevent her running away with the lover who eventually became her husband. Nuala refers to this trauma as falling through the ―meshes of the patriarchal mindset that underlies Western discourse and its civic structures.‖ This had the effect of driving her into an ―inner wilderness of reactive depression‖ which eventually inspired her to recover her sanity through writing poetry (Ni Dhomhnaill 2000).

In her essay on Montague, Guinn Batten suggests that he identifies not so much with the ―Law of the Father but with the absence of the mother in the patriarchy that is the law‖ (Batten 2004). She also observes that the colonial influence effaced the presence of a native Gaelic culture from what becomes henceforth an uncanny landscape. While his mother is doubly lost to Montague through the patriarchal order that erases her and through his childhood abandonment, all children experience this abandonment to some degree as the primal loss, separation from the mother‘s body. Sean O'Tuama refers to some early poems by Ni Dhomhnaill such as Leaba Shioda (The Silken Bed), as lesbian poems but has the understanding that she hopes to resolve her longing for a nurturing mother through these poems (O' Tuama). According to the Qwarnstrom interview, Montague once told Ni Dhomhnaill, ―You can‘t be a muse poet, people will think you‘re a lesbian‖ (Qwarnstrom 2004).

Elizabeth Grubgeld in her discussion of ―Matriarchs, Mother goddesses and the poetry of John Montague‖ chides him for failing to recognize that a woman too may desire reunification with her mother (1993). Both poets elide this separation from the mother with the cultural loss inflicted first by colonialism and later by globalization. Thus longing for the primal maternal connection merges with longing for reciprocity with a landscape that has not been inscribed by the colonizer nor haunted by ancestors killed or driven out during the colonial period.

Both Montague and Ni Dhomhnaill are aware that the muse is an internal aspect of the self that has been repressed psychically or socially and needs to be reclaimed in order to heal the inner state of being wounded. In her interview with Qwarnstrom, Ni

Dhomhnaill mentions that Kristeva speaks about the muse as this never-to-be-accessedagain body of the mother. Montague admits that he had initially embraced Robert Graves notion of the muse as ―being reincarnated in a succession of striking young women‖ but now realizes that the Muse is anything that ―excites you—to awe first and to poetry second—and that, for me, also includes wells, stones, old women and babies.‖ Whereas he was questioning the lesbian implications of a female muse poet in the remark to Nuala, he states in this 1989 interview with O'Driscoll that a poet ―whether male and female is to some extent androgynous.‖ (O'Driscoll).

In The Sweet Way, an essay he was asked to write on his creative process, Montague credits ―An Cam Dilis, the sweet path of love,‖ which he associated with the tradition of courtly or mystical love that can be traced to the ―primitive awe before the creative power of the feminine‖ embodied in prehistoric earth mother figurines (Sweet). Yet he also recognizes that the origins of this male awe toward the Earth Mother may be ―contaminated with patriarchal condescension, the urge to dominate by adoring‖ and argues for a wider definition of the muse as ―whatever excites one to an awareness of the mystery, which for the Greeks was male beauty‖ (Sweet 33).

Ni Dhomhnaill's poetry and her idea of the muse often has a dark edge that expresses her conflicted relationship with her mother and Irish history. Unlike Montague, she has not found this sweet path of love either through integration of a positive male muse or through rescue by a hero-lover in the real world. O'Tuama observes that Ni Dhomhnaill has no choice but to keep seeking the hero who can show her to herself but seems to keep encountering men of that ―boastful masculine ilk that has emerged in western Europe since the Iron Age!‖ This is the type of man that the poet rejects in Masculus Giganticus Hibernicus while she longs for a Dubh Ruis, the harpist whose love can transform the ugly hag or tooth mother into the speirbhean.

As Ni Dhomhnaill remarks in ―Mis and Dubh Ruis,‖ ―I'm still working on that inner Harper in all his powerful dream manifestations as Enemy, Sea-Horse or Minotaur, Bull of the Mothers‖ (Mis and Dubh Ruis). At her 1999 reading in New York, she stated that, ―In place of the perfect man, I am now seeking the perfect reader‖ (Burke). However while Ni Dhomhnaill believes the muse can often be a frightening demonic

energy rather than Dante's divine feminine, she emphasizes that the ―ongoing love affair between people and the land‖ has been an investment of such imaginative psychic energy that the land can be the muse but not in the romanticized sense of the sovereignty goddess.

While her tone is more ironic than Montague‗s mainly elegiac voice, this difference can be understood as her ambivalence toward the role of the bardic poets, who were traditionally men as were tellers of the Ossianic hero tales.. While Montague adopts a bardic tone easily employing stylistic elements similar to Wordsworth or Dante, Ni Dhomhnaill, as a woman poet, must be more subversive while exploring this territory, especially in the poems that give voice to the goddess of sovereignty. Ni Dhomhnaill mentions being particularly offended by Sean O Riordain's claim that ―A woman can be a poem but never a poet‖ (travelling?). She agrees with the assertion of some French feminists that there is female writing which can express the female psyche that has been repressed throughout history.

In the process of investigating outlets for this previously frustrated female creative energy, Ni Dhomhnaill has had some interesting debates with Montague that highlight her sense of their gendered differences despite their personal and cultural similarities. When Montague translated the last verse in Oilean (Island) as ―I have a little boat‖ rather than the conditional tense used in Nuala's original Irish, ―If I had a little boat,‖ she realized that, as a man, ―his ontological security‖ was unconscious. (trav) In her poem translated as ―The Unfaithful Wife,‖ she rewrites Garcia Lorca‗s ―La Casada Infiel‖ to tell the story from the woman‗s perspective rather than the lover‗s version. Montague evidently told her, ―You have ruined that Lorca poem, you've made it so Irish‖ (trav). He may have been disturbed by her focus on the woman‗s passion instead of the male desire expressed in Lorca‗s poem. When Ni Dhomhnaill discusses how her parents had the court deprive her of rights at the age of 19, she comments that this behavior was ―understandable in a post colonial situation where the bodies of women become a major site of contest and conflict‖ (Lin Ecol 2003)

When she was studying in Ireland in 1989, Margaret Garry Burke attended a poetry reading by Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill. Ten years later in 1999, she went to her reading

in New York City and noticed that the poet had an air of ―world weariness,‖ which was different from her ―glowing‖ appearance in 1989. Ni Dhomhnaill explained to the audience that her life had become difficult during the intervening years. She had almost died giving birth to her last child, her mother had ―gone demented‖ and her husband had a severe stroke. She mentioned to me at the 2004 ACIS conference in Greeley that her youngest child needs special care. Thus like many women, Ni Dhomhnaill has heavy responsibilities as a caretaker in addition to the challenge of cultural prejudices and obstacles experienced by Irish women poets.

She has often used folk tales and myths in poems to explore these psychoemotional challenges faced by women. According to Clodagh Brennan Harvey, ―the category of tales traditionally considered the purview of women is known collectively as seanchas (literally history) which includes shorter narratives such as those about encounters with supernatural beings and unusual local happenings‖ (Harvey 1989). Many of Ni Dhomhnaill‘s poems resemble these folk or fairy tales told by women and serve a similar purpose of exposing unconscious threats to psychological health or social norms. Poems such as the ―Three Sneezes‖ and the ―Water Horse‖ explore this dangerous realm that was traditionally negotiated by the tales women told. Angela Bourke‘s essay on ―Language, stories, healing‖ tells of her childhood experience with stories. ―Words and names in Irish were doorways into stories‖ that were metaphors for life‘s challenges transitions and situations that are beyond human control. In her words, ―Fairy legends are meditations on change reassuringly rooted in the past yet their psychology is timeless‖

(Bourke). Ni Dhomhnaill‘s poem, ―The Three Sneezes‖ describes a great grandmother who became a ―spirit in the wilderness‖ because her family failed to provide the blessing that would protect her during dangerous life transitions (Ni Dhomhnaill AC 1992).

For both Ni Dhomhnaill and Montague, the gaps of missing place names, stories and people eradicated first by colonialism and then globalization represent an uncanny absence that elicits longing for an unbroken tradition and a language interwoven with place. Longing for the absent mother blends with this longing for the lost unity with community and landscape. The legacy of this traumatic past when ancestors died from

violent conquest or famine is an unresolved grief and an absence in the landscape, which has lost those who can decipher the place names. Storytellers forge the covenant between the people and the land giving meaning to the place through their accounts of events that occurred there.

Montague's poem, ―A lost tradition‖ refers to the dinnseanchas tradition that bestowed significance and history on places. ―Scattered over the hills, tribal and place names, uncultivated pearls, no rock or ruin, dun or dolmen but showed memory defying cruelty through an image encrusted name‖ (Montague 1995). Yet this landscape is a ―part of our past disinherited‖ that we can no longer interpret having lost the language and stories that bestow meaning on a place. The Flight of the Earls segment in the ―Rough

Field‖ describes a lament played by the fiddler that recalls a ―communal loss and a shattered procession of anonymous suffering. . .burnt houses, pillaged farms a province in flames.‖ Montague quotes Chichester's 1607 letter to Mountjoy, ―We have killed, burnt and despoiled all along the Lough to within four miles of Dungannon…we spare none of what quality or sex _soever and it had bred much terror in the people‖ (1995). In The ―Sound of a wound‖ Montague records the bitterness and race hatred Montague inherited from his father towards the Jacobean planters who ―used his people as servants flushed his women like game.‖ He laments that, ―A civilization died here . . . it rears in my blood stream when I hear a bleat of Saxon condescension‖ (1995).

Ni Dhomhnaill has mentioned using the mermaid motif to suggest the traumatic effect of losing one's native language and culture. Water is her symbol for the traditional cultural environment of the mermaid who violated natural law with painful consequences when she ―swapped swimming for walking on earth.‖ Ni Dhomhnaill's poem ―The tragic story of the children of Lir‖ again uses a tale of metamorphosis to evoke the anguish of colonial loss and displacement. ―It's a story containing such grief and pain I can never bear even to hear it again . . when you raised what you thought was a finger, a shaggy feathered birdlike fin would sweep the tea things in the bin. When you opened your mouth to say what was amiss, all that emerged was a meaningless hiss‖ (Ni Dhomhnaill WH 2000).

The transgenerational pain of cultural trauma surfaces in Ni Dhomhnaill‘s poem ―Plutonium,‖ which is ―a dangerous radioactive isotope, also the name of the temple of the Infernal Gods where underground gases were breathed by eunuch priests. ―It was a terrible power-It was the power of terror that kept the grip of dread firmly on the local people‖ (Ni Dhomhnaill WH 2000). The speaker had forgotten about this dangerous radioactive gas until she ―heard a mad line‖ from a family member in the mental hospital who thought it was a protestant place where they wanted her to deny her faith. Although this hasn‘t been true for generations, it was true during the great famine in Ventry. ―It‘s the radioactive rain of history. A deadly residue of starvation and soupers.‖ In ―My father‘s people,‖ Ni Dhomhnaill remembers the tribulations of her paternal ancestors—―Micky the Skinner‖ was put out on the side of the road during the Land War and his father before him that they called Sean of the Women who fell down dead as he worked out in his field. The coroner said this is the body of a man 70 years old,‖ though he was only 50. Ni Dhomhnaill concludes that these ancestors with their hard lives are the cause of her getting out of bed ―vicious as a bee while feeling her father‘s people still with her‖ (NiDhomhnaill WH 2000).

Montague also feels the presence of the old people, not his relatives, but ancestors of his community. Jamie Mac Crystal sang a broken tune to himself, signifying as Eamon Grennan has noted, a vanishing tradition of story and music. Maggie Owens was reputed a witch but was merely a ―fanged chronicler of a whole countryside‖ (1995) These people of his childhood were rural Irish in a harsh land, symbols of an ancient Ireland alive until the recent past in the ―rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head, Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud‖ (1995). The poet‘s imagination transforms them into ancient forms their shadows haunting a circle of standing stones and providing a semblance of permanence.

John Montague has mentioned drawing inspiration from stones and wells and having an appreciation for the Celtic and American Indian spiritual relationship with the natural world (Montague 1989; O'Driscoll 1989).. His poem ―For the Hillmother‖ mimics a Catholic litany to the Virgin Mary but expresses a pagan relationship to nature as embodiment of the divine feminine rather than a devotion to the transcendent virgin

Mother. The lines, ―Hidden cleft speak to us, portal of delight inflame us and gate of birth open for us‖ in particular refer to the sensual and maternal aspect of nature as goddess (1995). If nature is holy, then environmental destruction is a violation and degradation of the sacred. Montague notably addressed this in his poem ―Springs‖ about the dying salmon suffering with sores ringing its gills. ―There is no more pitiful sight than a royal beast stained to death‖ (1995). In one version, the poet implores the ―lord of flux to erase from this earth our fouled disgrace‖ and restore the salmon‘s domain.

Ni Dhomhnaill‘s poem ―The Whitethorn Bush‖ honors this bush which has had a sacred significance in Irish traditional culture marking the place where this world and the supernatural realm are in contact. A child slips out of the house ―wading through cowslips and showered with a golden wave of pollen from the buttercups‖ to discover in this magical natural world a solitary whitethorn in bloom on a hill. ―Before this vision of visions, the little elf bowed her head and fell to her knees…no image of the virgin hung above it, nor did it burn like the bush of Fatima or Sinai. It was wonder enough‖ (Ni Dhomhnaill AC 1992).

In contrast, her poem ―Great Mother,‖ like ―Springs,‖ deplores the violence done to nature and suggests that the Great Mother will bring bitter consequences upon those who have poisoned the environment. ―Maiden, and mother, oh nurse oh atom bomb you will spurt on us the black liquid milk -volcano dust will burst from your throat . . . We‘ll be extinguished with kisses drenched with bitter tears of acid rain-our own home brewed rain‖ (Ni Dhomhnaill RD 1991). In this poem as well as her several poems giving voice to the Great Queen, Ni Dhomhnaill grants agency to a goddess who is not merely a landscape or body acted upon by male heroes.

Montague mentions in his essay, ―The Sweet Way,‖ that part of the equipment of the poet was knowledge of genealogy and local history, stating ―What in English is called topographical or pastoral deepens in Irish to Dinnsheancas or place wisdom‖ (Montague 1996). Ni Dhomhnaill describes feeling surrounded by tradition bearers in Ventry who associated local landmarks with their tales. ―The big rock called Lic Caoil off Thomas

Murphy‘s land. .wasn‘t that the petrified body of Caol mac criomhthain, the last of the

Fianna?‖ (2000) In her essay An t-Anam, she states, ―when I fell out of the reality principle, the straws I clutched at were stories from the Dinnseanchas which are the result of our emotio-imaginative involvement with the physical features and landscape of Ireland, projecting onto the landscape the landscape of our souls‖ (Ni Dhomhnaill anam). Her article on Dinnsheanchas claims that this place lore is ―a cultural container for our deeply held heartfelt need for a homeland-a compound word that puts together two of the most powerful words in the whole vocabulary of human identity‖ (Ni Dhomhnaill dinn). Ni Dhomhnaill's ―The Lay of Loughadoon‖ and Montague's ―Sean Bhean Bhocht‖ express an appreciation of place name lore. In the Lay of Loughadoon, the narrator tells her children stories that are inspired by the mythical birds and plants and the ancient sites, a megalithic tomb and Iron Age fort, present in the landscape. Her children beg for stories about an enchanted time ―When Ireland was still under a spell.‖

And every sheep had two heads forsooth
And before the inexhaustible cow had been milked into the sieve
And oak trees grew in the Big bog where the Fianna went in chase of deer
The country belonged to Kate Dwyer and Larry Lynch had horses ears
And they believed me –far beyond them still
Was the split between sense and sentiment
Prophesy and prophesy fulfilled
The subjunctive mood and the past tense

The poet tells of the stag of many tines, the red-eared hound, the wild ox and boar, the wolf in its den and the griffen. Donna Potts has discussed in detail in her article, ―When Ireland was still under a spell‖ the symbolism of these animals associated with the otherworld. Soon the children's imaginations take over and they created their own tales of ―giants, monks and the Knights of the Red Branch‖ (Potts 2003). The poet picks a tuft of wild thyme to hold the spell cast by the lake where a wanderer might easily slip into the realm of the children of Lir or Fionn and the Fianna. The tales and traditions she evokes are inspired by the Dinnseanchas that relate stories about the intersections of this world with the Otherworld.

In an interview, Montague referred to his poem Springs as a poem that is a —kind of charm. Charms and spells are aspects of poetry. Shakespeare is full of them‖ (O'Driscoll 1989). His poem, —Sean Bhean Bhocht‖ like Ni Dhomhnaill's —The Lay of Loughadoon‖ can be considered spells or rituals that are intended to heal a broken world. In Sean Bhean Bocht, Montague recalls an old woman from his childhood who was frightening in her —cocoon of rags and shawls, eyes rheumy with racial memory‖ (Montague 1995). She told anyone who would listen to her the stories of fairy wars and local history. Though the old woman seems like an artifact from an archaic era, she has stirred the child‘s imagination with her tales. He realizes that the well runs red with ferrous rust, not with the blood of fairy wars, but the child become poet still wonders

—beneath the whorls of the guardian stone what fairy queen lay dust‖ (1995).

The similar trajectory of these two poets‘ lives provides them with a perspective that is local and cosmopolitan while being wary of globalization‘s effects. Ni Dhomhnaill like Montague has lived in other countries as well as in Ireland and Northern Ireland in Montague‘s case. After marrying her lover, they lived in Turkey for several years. Montague's two wives were French and he has a home in France. They are conversant with a variety of literature, philosophy and theory while maintaining an appreciation for the traditional local culture experienced in their childhoods. In an interview, Montague remarks, —a global brain is growing both in the sense of communications and the spiritual growth described by Chardin but the old instincts of religion and race are fighting a rearguard action against centralization. My solution is sympathy for the endangered world and intense attention to your home area‖ (McEneaney date?). Ni Dhomhnaill speaks about the challenge of preserving the Irish language in a world where —there is no

Ithaca to return to. The cancerous spread of global —pop‖ monoculture has seen to that‖ (2000).

Despite the early pain of being abandoned, Montague remarks that the years in Garvaghey were a kind of blessing, an encounter with a disappearing way of life that he refers to as a —drowned world‖ (1989). Likewise Ni Dhomhnaill remembers her time in

Ventry as the happiest of her childhood. Both poets are too aware of the poverty and suffering in Irish history and the potential for cruelty and insularity to romanticize this disappearing world, yet they recognize that something important has been lost, the pastoral rhythms of cultivating the earth in a natural way or the fluid boundaries between the otherworld and the so called real world.

Ni Dhomhnaill hopes that, despite globalization, a renewed interest in dinnseanchas will satisfy our need for a place to belong so that we can again begin to cherish the earth. While he is aware that he can't return to the Garvaghey he knew because the whole farming world of his childhood is gone, Montague attempts in his poetry to bestow dignity on the mysterious old people and the places layered with history that encircled his childhood. His Mount Eagle is a place lore poem explaining how the mountain acquired its name but also, as Dillon Johnston suggests, it's a poem that expresses the poet's concern for the ecology and peace of his children's planet (1989).

> But now he had to enter the mountain
> Why? Because a cliff had asked him?
> The whole world was changing
> With one language dying and another encroaching
> And the region needed a guardian
> So the mountain had told him and
> A different destiny lay before him

To be the spirit of that mountain.

The eagle that has been extinct in Ireland for some time represents an irrevocable loss and a vanishing way of life. Yet like the ancestors whose spirits haunt their poetry and the extinct eagle whose memory remains in place names, these poets are guardians of the land and the stories.

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