

# Science of Literature: The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volumes IV and V, and the Making of Irish Feminism



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Irish feminism always grappled with a series of difficulties to do with the patriarchal culture and continuous shifts in the moods of Irish literature. With the Celtic Tiger a new reality and new challenges arrived, although that period of economic revival made possible the publication of many critical studies, as well as fiction itself. The clash between the old and the new was sizeable from the very beginning and the pressures from different political and intellectual circles were strong. Whereas the period between 1940 and 1959 was marked by the themes of isolation, claustrophobia and confinement, the 1960s and 1970s brought memory, time and imagination into Irish literature. The 1990s, the period when *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* was published, focused on intertextuality and instability of identity. Critics turned to continental philosophy to a certain extent, to work through the *aporias* of unstable and porous identity. During that time, various significant projects researching Irish feminism and contemporary Irish women's literature were granted official state funding because their existence was, for a long time, considered both timely and urgent since, as it was being postulated,

Irish women's writing has too often subsumed, and thereby swallowed up, in an Irish [male] literary canon and (...) an Irish literary tradition (...), as the under representation

**Citação:** Zuzanna Sanches, "Science of Literature: The *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Volumes IV and V, and the Making of Irish Feminism". *Via Panorâmica: Revista Electrónica de Estudos Anglo-Americanos / An Anglo-American Studies Journal*. Série 3, 3 (2014): 67-79. ISSN: 1646-4728. Web: <http://ler.letras.up.pt/>.

of female authors in the first three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature* attested (Ingman 2).

It was not only the period of the Celtic Tiger that saw much funding allocated to feminist research; the last thirty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a growing emergence of various scholarly programmes that were to rediscover the voices of Irish intellectual foremothers and grant them the space – a room of one’s own – that they, as women, were for a long time denied in Irish culture. The Irish feminist genealogy was enriched by many publications, among them the LIP pamphlets by Eavan Boland, Edna Longley and Gerardine Meaney published mostly by the Attic Press. There, the three writers and academics were criticising what came to be known as depredatory ideologies in culture, literature and politics. In her *From Cathleen to Anorexia*, Longley was criticizing the long-standing binary dyad of femininity and Irish nationalism that converted ideas such as motherhood and womanhood into national institutions. She also defended the necessity that every scholar has to work within the social and cultural contexts of any country and the specificity of any subject. Feminism was supposed to be the most rooted and hardened philosophical trend of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that could now provide an insight into the intricate structures of a society.

Eavan Boland wrote in her *A Kind of Scar: the woman poet in a national tradition* about the inability of a woman poet to find herself space within a strictly male tradition. She was also accused of ignoring the divisions between Dublin and the North, a division which destabilized the idea of the Irish nation. *A Kind of Scar* failed to offer a new dialectics because it did not reflect the deeper identitarian division of the Irish nation between the North and the South. Gerardine Meaney saw in Boland’s project of the repossession of the nation a new and deeply feminine subjectivity necessary to remake all the imagery of

women in Ireland. The publication of Boland's manifestos has generated many conflicts within Irish feminism, covering issues such as women and the nation, women from different generations, and women and different aesthetic forms.

The Irish feminist movement has been developing rapidly since the 1970s to embrace a myriad of social debates and political campaigns. The 1980s focused on the yet unconquered sexual and reproductive rights that were denied to the Irish population, and especially women in the issues of marriage, divorce and family planning. The 1990s responded to the deepening discussions on legal issues and social sciences, as well as political issues, racism, immigration and the growing Celtic tiger. Cultural boundaries were being discussed during that period, boundaries that the patriarchal state enforced for many years and that were now crumbling in the face of greater personal liberties and more capital. Likewise, the critical attention of Irish feminism has moved gradually from poetry to the novel in the 1990s and, later, to other artistic forms such as theatre and performance, following the critical trends in continental feminist criticism.

A further step was given with the publication of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Irish women's writing and traditions), volumes IV and V, in 2002, edited by Gerardine Meaney and Angela Bourke. The work continued a somewhat controversial project of anthologizing Irish literature, of which the first three volumes omitted, with few exceptions, work done by women writers. Coming out after the first three volumes that inflamed the feminist circles, books IV and V were devoted only to narratives written by women, a fact to which many critics responded quickly: "But that's not Ireland, the Irish said, that's only women" (Conlon 1). Many have said that the Anthology, volumes IV and V, followed the new path announced and paved by Eavan Boland: the path of greater focus on female subjectivity and of concentration on the female self-image. In critical terms, this manifesto has been picked up by a contemporary and much acclaimed critic, Ann Fogarty.

We now seem to be living in a different post-Celtic Tiger era, one that has allowed Colm Toibin, an Irish writer and critic, to talk about post-feminism in Irish women's literature, referring, more specifically and in a humorous way, to the work of Anne Enright. If a great deal of work was done towards the publication of volumes four and five of the study (*Field Day Vols IV & V*, Cork, 2002), there still remains an obligation, if strategically essentialist, to continue writing about the female voice and female tradition in Irish literature, recovering the multiple and heterogeneous voices that have led Irish women writers to continental scholars such as Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, Rosi Braidotti and Jacques Lacan. However, what post-feminism can we talk about if there is still a need to rediscover the meanderings of female affiliation, the foremothers and the trustworthy archetypes? Remembering the thesis of the female affiliation complex described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1985) as encapsulating women's ambivalent and oscillating relationship to both female and male tradition, identity, performances and gendered behaviour, female topography has not yet been constituted in the face of the economic crisis, both in Ireland and Europe, as well as a growing interest in masculinities studies.

Furthermore, one may say that the project of mapping out an Irish female identity is more than an ongoing one. As was well argued by Judith Butler, identity is performative, dynamic and restless, based on the contradiction of autonomy and freedom against a continuous lack of the two. At all times, we are interpellated by the state apparatus, called names and given designations, and at the same time we have the power and conscience to make our own choices. Nation-wise, the above idea is inevitably bound with the broader private processes of identification and their public narrativization, an idea that the private and the public are often indistinguishable. Performativity of identity, and here femininity, is split into two different dimensions of agency and subordination. On the one hand, we are establishing our identity through agency

and free acts every day. On the other hand, norms are imposed on us through the interpellation of official discourses and institutions that call upon us on a daily basis. The struggle between internal and external forces is at the core of identificatory processes and undergoes even further analysis in the continental, post-structural circles of criticism in search of a free-floating feminine signifier, an idea that has made little impact in Ireland.

This is especially true of the nations that deliberately made private discourses part of their national rhetoric, which is distinctly true of Ireland and its appropriation of the narratives of femininity. In Ireland, performing femininity was not a matter of the private space of female subjects since “For women the measure of intimacy [was] the measure of oppression” (MacKinnon 191). The private sphere was never gender- and power- neutral, especially in a country that institutionalised its private discourses, creating the national institution of the family and the mother. “This is why feminism has had to explode the private. This is why feminism has seen the personal as the political” (MacKinnon 191). It is in the institution and the state’s ideology that the masculinist dominant discourse disguises itself as the female voice – the mother’s choice / the daughter’s obligation (hyperfemininity maintaining the hegemony of hypermasculinity). This has an obvious dissolving effect on any female sense of unity, provoking strong feelings of distaste, rejection and ambivalence towards other women. From the European continental perspective such emotions were often re-signified to create new roles, opportunities and challenges for the female subject – their Irish counterparts can be found among the scholars working for University College Dublin, University College Cork, the Dublin Institute of Art, Design and Technology or National University of Ireland, Maynooth research centre. Post-feminism is starting to be widely advocated within academia and the field of Irish popular culture, among them by Professor Diane Negra.

The Irish female voice has been struggling with the redefinition of public and private spaces and, within this context, it is deeply marked by scepticism, anxiety and reluctance that very often take the form of self-inflicted discursive and performative violence in the quest for a motherless discovery of authenticity. For many years the Irish female subject faced silently the ghost of public oppression and its own hesitancy to perform identity that inevitably permeated the mother-daughter narrative, a narrative of which women were disowned by the state. Many writers and critics in the past failed to challenge the official discourse which was narrow and paternalistic and made an unrealistic and unreal woman the beacon of its power. However, when feminism spread across a spectrum of disciplines it became responsible for many major paradigm shifts that led, for instance, to social and cultural changes in the Irish society. In response to that, cultural sciences became university disciplines.

To highlight the Irish mother-daughter story, even though not all contemporary Irish writers choose to use it, filial narratives make an interesting link between the institution of motherhood and psychoanalytical approaches to women's identity. In psychoanalysis, do mothers fail too often to empower their daughters? As victims these find strength in confrontation with the abject and the violence that society commits on the female subject. However, in a carnivalesque way, the disempowering and violent imagery becomes a dictionary of symbols for women artists. Consequently, the sense of self can only be achieved through violence, externalised or self-inflicted: violent appropriation rather than a peaceful hermeneutics of translation. The daughters learn from the mothers' often negative attitudes to sexuality, embodiment, foreignness, fragility and responsibility as well as love and justice. It has already been noted that novels written between 1960 and 1990 depicted daughters trying to escape their mothers' destinies by fleeing the mother-country or deliberately avoiding the patterns of behaviour and conduct of their biological mothers. The daughters

attempt to abandon their mothers' narratives, but this removal only exacerbates the filial/maternal and thus identitarian conflicts and estrangement from the female discourse. All issues having to do with the narrativization of femininity are double-edged swords, only representable as ambiguously troubling. A real discourse representable of real women would have an equal potential for renewal and alienation both in heterosexual and Queer contexts. And yet, have we come such a long way only to find ourselves in the same melting pot of fears and fantasies about a woman that does not exist? The fear of the *vagina dentata*, of the vicious Undine and of a vengeful Lilith continues to have a strong hold on the official language. Will we ever be able to escape this discursive trap?

Many contemporary narratives constructed by Irish writers are those of escape, travel, displacedness, and change; nomadism being one of the key concepts embraced by Irish feminism. Hence they (re/de)construct female subjectivity – a means for celebrating care for the other, compassion, and the necessity of translation between selfhood and otherness. As I have already mentioned, many of the same travel or escape narratives have gained the denomination *nomadic*, where the image of a female nomad is used to challenge a notion of a unified identity.

However, the more the female voice manages to come to the fore, allowing us to learn about its history, characteristics, dynamics and timing, the more obscure does Irish women's literary tradition become. And this is so if we take as our goal classification and compartmentalization, whereas fluid femininity requires dynamic skills. One should learn how to navigate through the intricacies of the female subject rather than try to put a finger on the definitions. Learning to move and work through feelings of power and powerlessness is essential to the well-being of any subject. Traditions are inter-subjective and relative, and authors have ambivalent feelings towards their predecessors, this

being especially true for daughters and their mothers, as could be the case of Irish women writers and their foremothers.

In Ireland this relation was maintained as artificial for a long time, and relied on personifications of Ireland as Woman and Mother: “The mother was the fulcrum of the Irish family which in turn, in 1937, was placed at the heart of the Irish Constitution as devised by the then Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera” (McCourt 150). She was deliberately maintained to be pure at all levels. Fixed concepts of gender became institutionalised in the juridical structure in Ireland and the position of women after 1922 saw a gradual erosion of their political rights. Sexuality became bound up with nationality, and so did childbirth and maternity. As John McCourt writes

Too often in the past when mothers have appeared in Irish literature it has been in clichéd roles, sometimes as the politicised embodiments of the wished-for nation, such as Kathleen ní Houlihan or the Sean Bhean Bhocht – the mother of fine strong sons whom she calls to self-sacrifice so that a new Ireland can be created. (McCourt 149)

For many psychoanalysts the natural dynamics of motherly love and not the normative utopia of it resulted in friction between a mother and her child, producing ambivalence, rage, shame, fascination and rejection. These negative feelings have naturally been abjected by the state’s ideology of mothering to sustain the myth of a benevolent mother. And if negative and contradictory feelings are what the mother experiences, the child is not free from ambivalence and rage. After all, guilt, reparation, envy and gratitude walk hand in hand from the very beginning of our psycho-sexual development. Therefore, the child too, here a contemporary writer or publisher, is wracked by a want of recognition and a drive to out-speak her predecessors. This fantasy of recognition and power is a result of the relationship between the mother and the daughter. It has its origins



in the confrontation with the other, a crisis that ensues from an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. Such *approchement* is a cry from the ego whose power has not been recognised, somewhat similar to authorial anxiety. However, the tension between asserting the self and recognising the other is also the founding moment for our identity construction. There is also a sense of vulnerability involved: death and struggle. As Colm Toibin writes in his *Love in a Dark Time*, writing that

has a tendency to deal in the tragic and the unfulfilled (...) seems most content when there is a dead father or a dead child. (...) The strongest images in Irish fiction, drama and poetry are of brokenness, death, destruction. The plays are full of shouting, the poetry is full of elegy, the novels are full of funerals (in McCourt 149).

Furthermore, dissent and conflict are inevitable, followed by transformation through which we experience our own sense of self, Boland's self-image. Transformation belongs to the sphere of dynamic memory, in which futile mourning has no place. Such mourning is nothing more than a nostalgic sentimentalization of the past, where memories are static and sentimental as opposed to dynamic and generative memory, the forgiving but not forgetting. Memory cannot cloud that which is contemporary; rather it should serve as reference and generative power. Words and memories should propel the new generation to grow. As Toibin writes:

Hemingway's discovery was that in between words there's something which can give you emotion (...) that in a number of simple statements you can hit the reader's nervous system in a way that the reader doesn't know where that energy is coming from. (in McCourt 153)

Anthologies should naturally make this possible as reservoirs of words and memories, narrative dynamite. What are anthologies if not our celebration of memory? They are not only monuments but points of departure for transformation: their aim is not only celebration but production as well.

Celebratory identification in the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vols IV and V*, according to Margaret Kelleher, was

the idiom in which much of the early retrieval work of Irish women writers was presented, and understandably so, however that these writings fell from view in spite of earlier conscious attempts at (their) preservation. In more recent retrievals, the vocabulary has moved to an emphasis on women's writings as 'a distinct oppositional practice' in which 'subversions', 'ruptures' and 'transgressions' have looked like becoming a new orthodoxy in critical writings. (87)

I would argue that anthologies are our doors to self-assertion and achievement. It is in linguistic theories of discursive meta-functions that the ideas of transitionality and transference are found: we make sense of our own identity, our own life, through the representations of the world we construct, and hence anthologies can often speak more about ourselves than about our ancestors. The reason for their publication is twofold: to pay homage to those who have passed away and to celebrate our own voices, to make maps of the past but also to forge new paths into the future. The fundamental crux of the critical space has been the search and recuperation of the female voice as the concoction of various producers within public and private space. New meaning has been given to symbols of the abject, using the Kristevan theory of the abject, delineating identity and its instable borders from the outside and the inside. In contemporary Irish women's literature exclusion of the publicly or privately shamed has provoked a dynamic which has acquired an urgent significance in the context of contemporary revelations of past widespread institutional and state

abuse. The *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vols IV and V* were published in an attempt at transcending the humiliation of invisibility and violence. In chapters devoted to contemporary writing, it was stated that a great deal of Irish women's writing from all parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century implicitly or explicitly represents women trying to find a place for themselves within the narrative of the Irish nation. These women have become a driving force, the third Irish identity. It could be remembered that, just few years before the publication of volumes four and five, John Wilson Foster put forward the suggestion that feminist theory with its stress on difference might provide a third force, a third Irish identity.

Irish feminism has often been criticized for making a weak critique of paternalistic, masculinist discourse while post-colonial criticism, to some extent represented by the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vols IV and V*, contains a stronger intellectual critique:

Rehearsing problematic genderings of feminine weakness and masculine strength, there is a call here for a modern subject who can distance themselves from the conditions of modernity and perhaps (actively) develop their own dreamworld rather than (passively) accommodate themselves to the new order. (Bracken 199)

The strength of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vols IV and V* lies in its encyclopaedic and kaleidoscopic nature. As it has been noted by the critics, historicized expressions of variable womanhood are present in abundance, in an unprecedented combination of subjects among which are literature in Irish, literature in English, criticism, theology, sexuality, politics, history and oral tradition. For this very reason, for its scale, ambition and structure, the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vols IV and V* was from the start a new kind of

anthology. A crucial aspect of this state of the art character and of the significance and weight it had for the future was a new way of editing:

the editors' self-conscious questioning of 'received versions' of literary history, of cultural influence, and of the Irish writing tradition(s). In the context of literary studies, the material invited a radical rethinking of issues of authorship, production, genre and canon-formation and to state the blatantly obvious not just for women's writing. (Kelleher 89)

If variable womanhood was the key concept, it corresponded to what Deleuze called kaleidoscopic identity: an approach that not only represents identitarian abundance but inspires other visions too. Likewise it inspired an anthology of a polyphonic character, one that influenced a new way of doing criticism in Irish studies.

A detailed inclusion of Irish-language writing also played a vital role in affirming the existence of what was called "a writing in a reinvigorated Irish which has been brought into dialogue with other modern literatures" (Kelleher). Consequently, contemporary women authors could find new ways of confronting the dilemma of local allegiance and universalist impulse, of particularism and cosmopolitanism<sup>1</sup> and some of the disabling distinctions drawn on language lines between 'ancient custom and a dynamic modernity' were broken down. As some of the critics quickly stated the selections in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing vols IV and V* did not serve as a missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle but "rather sought to put existing maps into question." (Kelleher 92) To testify to its richness. the final section of volume five of *The Field Day Anthology*, "Ethnicities", highlighted the increasing immigration into Ireland. The danger of the publication was that the Anthology would be seen as the final chapter in a decade-long struggle and research, but the volumes skilfully forged new questions: the critical factor was recognition, institutional support and

readership. The ongoing work of many research centres and other independent projects, such as the HEA-funded Munster Women Writers Project at University College Cork, pointed the way in this regard. As Margaret Kelleher concludes, “a historical perspective shows how swiftly women’s writings may disappear from view” (Kelleher 92); anthologies are crucial to the endurance both of the past and the future.

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