

The Subject and the Grand Narrative

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I

When Field Day Theatre Company's central text, *Translations*, was premiered in Derry's Guildhall in 1980, some critics charged the dramatist, Brian Friel, with simply reiterating old myths of dispossession and oppression rather than interrogating them. The central dramatic conflict in *Translations*, arises when a platoon of Royal Engineers of an Ordnance Survey arrives in a rural, Irish-speaking community in County Donegal in 1833 to map the country and translate Irish place-names into English equivalents. As well as the arrival of the English soldiery, the play refers to the imminent abolition of the hedge school which has been supported by the local people and its replacement by the new state-run national school in which the teaching will be not in Irish but English. It might be natural, considering the contemporary situation of Ireland where historical revisionism is thriving, that some critics refer to the Field Day enterprise, including *Translations*, as a prisoner of its own Catholic, Nationalist bias, regarding Friel as emphasizing external pressure and neglecting the fact that the decline of Irish 'resulted from forces within Irish community itself'⁽¹⁾. According to Sean Connolly, the Ordnance Survey enlisted the expertise of eminent Irish scholars, poets and antiquarians of the day-men such as John O'Donovan, Eugene O'Curry, George Petrie and James Clarence Mangan. Connolly asserts that there is no historical ground for presenting the whole enterprise 'as having been undertaken in the "Sanders of the River" spirit of colonial paternalism portrayed by Friel'⁽²⁾. Critics like Connolly complain that the play's Nationalist perspective leads on one hand to an exaggeration of the British military's repression, and the other hand to a suppression of the fact of Republican violence. Brian McAvera believed that

'traditional nationalist myths were being given credence' in *Translations*, and that 'a dangerous myth' was being shored up — the myth of 'cultural dispossession by the British'⁽³⁾ However, the core of the play is, as could be easily seen by scrutinizing it (or by the title itself), not in the historical fact or truth but in the iterative function of past inscribed in language. As the old hedge schoolmaster in *Translations*, Hugh, says, 'it is not the literal past, the "facts" of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language'.⁽⁴⁾ Friel himself says that 'I don't want to write a play about Irish peasants ... The play has to do with language and only language'.⁽⁵⁾ Nevertheless, even the influential Belfast critic, Edna Longley, accuses Friel of avoiding a complex contemporary reality and retreating into a 'mythic landscape of beauty and plenitude that is pre-Partition, pre-Civil War, pre-famine, pre-plantation and pre-Tudor (italics mine)⁽⁶⁾, a Hibernian pastoral that is destroyed by the incursion of British colonialism. I don't mean to judge here whether the reading of *Translations* by such critics as mentioned above is superficial or not: this controversy is introduced as just one example to show the extent to which contemporary poets, novelists, and critics are sensitive to and resist the national *myth* or grand narrative which was created during the period of the so-called Celtic Revival.

As Seamus Deane observes, 'between the end of the Famine in 1848 and Sinn Fein's great electoral triumph in 1918, Ireland began the long process of its transformation from a British colony into a modern, independent state'.⁽⁷⁾ It is natural that, to be an independent state, colonial Ireland needed some national identity different from what was imposed by the British; a 'second nature' imagined by literary men like Spenser or Arnold, whether it invokes turbulence,

wildness and barbarousness, or romantic spontaneity and valor, had to be countered by a 'third nature'. According to Edward Said:

With the new territoriality there comes a whole set of further assertions, recoveries, and identifications; all of them quite literally grounded on this poetically projected base. The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes, myths, and religions...⁽⁹⁾

Thus myth as an ideological weapon was deployed by the Revivalists. However, in the context of Irish writing, such cultural nationalism could not deviate from the tradition of literary unionism which is represented especially by Maria Edgeworth and Sir Samuel Ferguson: the ancient figures of Fionn, Cuchulain and Cathleen Ni Houlihan were invoked whose 'prehistoric integrity might compensate for the ruptures of Irish history and resolve its endless quarrels between colonizer and colonized, Planter and Gael, Protestant and Catholic'.⁽⁹⁾ But, such cultural nationalism or formation of national identity has caused further trouble. Despite the invaluable work of cultural retrieval undertaken by successive nationalist movements, one principal and consistent dynamic of identity formation has been the negation of recalcitrant or inassimilable elements of Irish society. Though the conflict in Northern Ireland is clearly based on the political problem caused by British colonialism, the problem of identity, which includes other problems such as sectarian divisions, has been substituted for the problem of politics. To complicate matters even worse, the search for identity invokes a search for origin. Concerning the problem of origin in the context of the conflict of Northern Ireland, Seamus Deane says as follows:

The Irish Revival and its predecessors had the right idea in looking to some legendary past for the legitimating origin of Irish society as one distinct from the British, which had a different conception of origin. But the search for origin, like that for

identity, is self contradictory. Once the origin is understood to be an invention, however necessary, it can never again thought as something "natural". A culture brings itself into being by an act of cultural invention that itself depends on an anterior legitimating nature.... Nature may be a cultural invention, but it is nonetheless powerful for that... In Northern Ireland that invention is not lost; it is in dispute. The terms of the dispute can be crude. The "native" Irish can say they came first; the Protestant planters can say that they were the first to create a civil society...⁽¹⁰⁾

In addition to the problem of whether one is Protestant or Catholic ("native" Irish), there also lies in the conflict the implicit violence of identity formation, not so much in the sense that identity seems to provoke and legitimate a sectarian antagonism towards the different, as in the far more fundamental sense in which the formation of identity requires the negation of other possible forms of existing.

How do Irish contemporary writers react to such sociopolitical conditions? How do they deal with the question of identity and how can the individual subject be envisaged in relation to its community, its past history, the grand narrative of Ireland, and a possible future? Not only the sociopolitical condition but also the literary tradition in Ireland seems to drive them to a predicament. It would be easy to attack Yeats as an inventor of national myth which is an agency of integrity, continuity and unbroken heritage, and to take sides with Joyce who treated myth as an agency of critique and rewrote 'it as a subversion of origins and identities, a catalyst of disruption and difference, a joker in the pack inviting us to a free variation of meaning'.⁽¹¹⁾ It is true that many modern Irish poets, novelists, and critics resorts to such simplification. Richard Kearney's mapping is a typical example of it. He writes, following Karl Mannheim :

In *Finnegans Wake* we find the axial characters of Celtic mythology — for example, Fionn and Anna — redrafted as actors of liberty and fun, iconoclasts of the very notion of a sacrosanct

identity transmitted unscathed and uncompromised from the ancient past. They become 'bringers of plurality'. This approach to myth I call *utopian*. In contrast to the [Yeats's] *ideological* use of myth, which seeks to reinstate a people, nation or race in its predestined 'place', the utopian myth opens up a 'no-place' (*u-topos*). It emancipates the imagination into a historical future rather than harnessing it into a hallowed past.⁽¹²⁾

Yet when Kearney appeals to 'pluralism' which is the very ideological model of how contradiction between specific and universal may be resolved, isn't he tracing the rut made by the Revivalists who were modernists at the same time? That is why Seamus Deane opposes mystifying pluralism which is 'the concealed imperialism of the multinational'.⁽¹³⁾ If Yeats is singled out as an inventor of an Irish grand narrative or a 'heroic style', then Joyce could be referred to as an inventor of another Irish grand narrative, another 'heroic style', as Deane observes:

Joyce, although he attempted to free himself from set political positions, did finally create, in *Finnegans Wake*, a characteristically modern way of dealing with heterogeneous and intractable material and experience. The pluralism of his styles and languages, the absorbent nature of controlling myths and systems, finally gives a certain harmony to varied experience. But, it could be argued, it is the harmony of indifference, one in which everything is a version of something else, where sameness rules over diversity, where contradiction is finally and disquietingly written out. In achieving this in literature, Joyce anticipated the capacity of modern society to integrate almost all antagonistic elements by transforming them into fashions, fads — styles, in short.⁽¹⁴⁾

In other words, Yeats and Joyce are the 'great twins of the Revival' who 'play out in posterity the roles assigned to them and to the readers by their inherited history'.⁽¹⁵⁾ This considerable weight of inheritance

constitutes what I called literary 'predicament' for contemporary Irish writers.

As is mentioned above, many of the Irish writers after the Celtic Revival have tackled the problem of myth, in the course of which both the national identity established during the Revival and the identity as subject have been questioned. Yet most such attempts have ended up with the same old harmony between specific and universal. Patrick Kavanagh, in *Self-Portrait*, declared his total repudiation of what he termed 'this Ireland thing', regarding the Revival as a trap sprung by the 'Celtic Twighlighters'. That is why he generally drew mythic figures from Greek rather than Celtic mythology. But it was only to show how the grand narratives of myth are inextricably bound up with the local vicissitudes of everyday life. In 'Pygmalion' the Grecian goddess is cast in the form of a 'stone-proud' woman... Engirdled by the ditches of Roscommon'.⁽¹⁶⁾ In 'Epic' the poet contrasts world-shattering events with the dispute between neighbors, Duffy and McCabes: 'Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind / He said: I made the Iliad from such / A local row. Gods make their own importance'.⁽¹⁷⁾ These are mere reductive reproduction of the structure of Joyce's *Ulysses*, that is, another heroic style of Irish literary tradition, where the contradiction between particular and universal is harmoniously resolved. Similar attempts are found in the poetry of Thomas Kinsella, who, in the 1970s, returned to motifs of Irish mythology and Jungian psychology. The recurring patterns of myth — such as birth and death, invasion and appropriation — and the cyclical turns of collective and personal history are found in his volumes such as *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, *Song of the Night*, and *The Messenger*. This attempt to achieve a new equilibrium between the rival claims of historical disorder and poetic order is nothing but an Arnoldian formation, to which Eagleton, who reads Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy as Britain and Ireland* and finds in it a sectarian gesture, refers as follows:

In the stalest of Arnoldian clichés, the poetic is still being counterposed to the political — which is only to say that the "poetic" as we have it today was,

among other things, historically constructed to carry out just that business of suppressing political conflict. Imagination and enlightened liberal reason are still being offered to us in Ireland today as the antithesis of sectarianism; and like all such idealized values they forget their own roots in a social class and history not unnoted for its own virulent sectarianism, then and now.⁽¹⁸⁾

The poetry of Kavanagh and that of Kinsella mentioned above share a common feature which constitutes the impasse: both of them neglect the temporality which is necessarily inscribed in the text. The subject under the grand narrative is a being already narrated or represented as a referent by the *anterior* text. As J. F. Lyotard observes, 'the one doing the speaking speaks from the place of the referent'; 'As narrator she is narrated as well. And in a way she is already told, and what she herself is telling will not undo that somewhere else she is told'.⁽¹⁹⁾ Therefore it would be deceptive to connect the present subject synchronically with myth as anterior text; there is always a temporal gap between the subject and the anterior text. At the same time, it would be also deceptive to behave as if the subject had nothing to do with the grand narrative, because the fact cannot be eliminated that he/she is always already narrated by it.

Some contemporary Irish writers are conscious of this condition. I will argue that two poets, Paul Durcan and Medbh McGuckian, develop strategies, which it seems to me, point to the locus where an interstitial future emerges in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present.

II

Paul Durcan is one of the most popular contemporary poets in Ireland. Maurice Elliott describes Durcan's popularity as follows:

As I write this, in November 1990, Paul Durcan is 'a kind of rage', He has just been awarded the Whitbread Prize for poetry for *Daddy, Daddy*; he is to be heard on Van Morrison's latest release,

Enlightenment; and he has been publicly quoted by the newly elected President of the Republic, Mary Robinson. He is an excellent reader of poetry, and he commands large audiences whenever he appears.... there have long been ordinary people in Ireland who 'would go a hundred miles to hear that chap!'.⁽²⁰⁾

First of all, it would not be wrong to say that his popularity is chiefly based on his talents as an entertainer. Next, one of the reasons for his popularity is his explicit attacks on social hypocrisies, as his plain parody of newspaper-items shows: 'Minister Opens New Home for Battered husbands', 'National Day of Mourning for 12 Protestants', 'Margaret Thatcher Joins IRA', 'The Perfect Nazi Family is Alive and Well and Prospering in Modern Ireland', 'Archbishop of Kerry to have Abortion'. Besides, one might say that such attack of his (especially on patriarchy in Ireland) is so naive that it easily evoke the people's sympathy. In fact, when one reads Edna Longley's interpretation of his 'The Haulier's Wife Meets Jesus on the Road Near Moone', he/she may mistake it for that of a melodrama. Longley regards the title of the poem as addressing 'social class, the subjugation of women, and spiritual salvation', and observes:

The haulier's wife, not knowing where she is, doubting the validity of her parish and her sexuality, dresses up to the nines and takes the restless provincial's road to Dublin to watch 'My favorite actor, Tom Hickey'. However, she is diverted on the way to Damascus by meeting 'a travelling actor' called 'Jesus' who kisses her. The last stage of the poem develops another litany which maintains the extraordinary fusion of sexual and spiritual, real place and promised land...⁽²¹⁾

Durcan's feminist credentials are often taken for granted and celebrated. But, as is apparent in the case mentioned above, his pseudo-feminism and anti-Establishment gesture based on naiveté seem somehow to have appeal to the people. 'The Pieta's Over' could be counted as one of such poems, where

the poet explicitly encourages the male reader to be independent of the maternal figure symbolized in the 'pieta'. Though the poem opens with one scene of personal divorce, such words as 'the eternal feminine' makes the female narrator overlap with the Virgin Mother, who is a constituent of the Catholic ideology in the Republic of Ireland. So when the narrator says, 'out there where the river achieves its riverlessness — / That you and I can become at last strangers to one another'²²⁾, she recommends that people be divorced from the nation's narrative which has the Catholic ideology as a constituent and which confines them in a united identity. This is Durcan at his worst.

Will the imperative mode in 'The Pieta's Over' have an effect on the nation's narrative? Certainly some readers will be so impressed that they 'would go a hundred miles to hear that chap'. Yet its impression will be no more than one made by a writer of tabloids. For the narrator's imperative mode in the poem shows that she easily establishes herself as the subject. As far as one believes in his/her simple subjecthood, he/she cannot interfere with the nation's narrative; such simple subjecthood is a mere mirror image of the nation, which will result in reinforcing the Establishment, despite the anti-Establishmentarian gesture of the subject. For it does not question 'the progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion — *the many as one* — shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by the theorists who treat gender, class or race as social totalities that are expressive of unitary collective experience'.²³⁾ The founding dictum of the political society of the modern nation — *out of many one* — shows that it has in itself a dialectic system which can synthesize such simple oppositions as seen in 'The Pieta's Over'.

Then how could a writer interfere with the nation's narrative? One may find a beginning of the poet's new recognition in 'The Dublin-Paris-Berlin-Moscow Line', in the fourth stanza of which he prays:

May I lack always a consistent vision of the universe
 When I am saying my poems;
 May I remain always inarticulate

When I am composing my poems;²⁴⁾

In these lines, the poet not only resists consistency but also finds the impossibility of telling or conveying meaning, shown in the word 'inarticulate'. He must compose and be dumb at the same time. What does this ambivalent condition mean? The implication is clearer in his early poem, 'Before the Celtic Yoke'. In its first stanza, the poet is deprived of his voice and thrust with others' language such as 'Elizabethan, Norman, Viking, Celt'. Here he is an object who is told in the nation's history or narrative. On the other hand, in the second stanza, the poet recovers his voice. Yet, as can be seen in its passive mode, it does not mean the poet has regained simple subjecthood. And it is depicted in an ambiguous movement with maritime metaphor:

My vocabularies are boulders cast up on time's beaches;
 Masses of sea-rolled stones reared up in mile-high ricks
 Along the shores and curving coast of any island;
 Verbs dripping fresh from geologic epochs;
 Scorched, drenched, in metamorphosis, vulcanicity, ice ages.²⁵⁾

The words uttered by the poet, as 'sea-rolled stones' or fragmented 'boulders', never find any stable place ('island') to settle themselves in, approaching and leaving the shore, though they cannot insist on their independence because they are always an object which is to be subject to transformation — 'scorched, drenched, in metamorphosis'. In the sense that the subject is always transformed, it cannot be wholly grasped by the history or grand narrative. Thus the lines in the last stanza: 'I am as palpable and inscrutable / As is a mother to her man-child'. Here the words, 'palpable' and 'inscrutable' means that the 'I' is an object to be seen or told. On the other hand, as the comparison — 'As is a mother to her man-child' — shows, the 'I' is not an almighty subject who can grasp the origin of identity or a grand narrative — 'a mother' who is precedent to 'her child'. The subject is always already narrated or represented in an anterior nation's

narrative, where they have to repeat the reciprocal movement between the subject and the object. A writer or the people could turn pagan only when they start this ambivalent and vacillating representation in which the subject is capable of indefinite self-objectification without ever quite abolishing itself as subject, projecting outside itself ever diminishing fragments of itself. This narrative inversion or circulation, which reveals splitting of the poet or the people, makes untenable any nationalist claims to cultural mastery, for the position of narrative control is neither monocular nor monologic. The subject is graspable only in the passage of telling and told, or representing and represented. As is mentioned above, in this double scene of 'here' and 'somewhere' — 'what she herself is telling will not undo that somewhere else she is told' — the poet's words begin to insinuate or interfere with the nations narrative.

Some critics refer to Durcan as in direct Irish descent from Joyce, pointing out his inclination toward 'exile'. Certainly, to put himself imaginatively in countries other than Ireland — Berlin, Asia Minor, or Russia — is one of Durcan's strategies to escape from the nation's narrative. Referring to the Nessa figure in Durcan's *Berlin Wall Café*, Richard Kearney says, 'she is no Cathleen Ni Houlihan and Durcan is no Cuchulain'.⁽²⁶⁾ Yet, contrary to Kearney's suggestion that such foreign countries are 'no-place (*u-topos*)' that allows the poet 'liberated imagination'⁽²⁷⁾, his utopia is not Berlin, Asia Minor, nor Russia in themselves; it appears as it were in-between Ireland and such foreign countries, which is clearly described in 'Going Home to Russia'.

'Going Home to Russia'⁽²⁸⁾ starts with the description of the poet as 'an Irish dissident / Who knows that in Ireland scarcely anybody is free / To work or to have a home or to read or write'. He is 'the solitary passenger' waiting for the flight to Moscow. What Moscow means to him is completely the opposite of what it means to the Irish people represented by the immigration officer in Shannon Airport who mutters 'Good luck' to the poet 'as if to a hostage or convict'. Considering that he is about to fly to Russia, one may think of Russia as his utopian 'home'. However, Russia

itself cannot be affirmed as an utopia after reading the fourth stanza:

We Irish have had our bellyful of *blat*
And *blarney*, more than our share
Of the *nomenklatura* of Church and Party,
The *nochalstvo* of the legal and medical mafia.

This stanza apparently depicts corruption in Ireland. But the reader, finding the Hiberro-English word 'blarney' put together with the words 'blat', 'nomenklatura', and 'nochalstvo', which are Russian, cannot help being reminded of corruption in Russia. Such words as 'blat', 'nomenklatura', and 'nochalstvo' bifurcate; they signify Irish corruption on one hand, Russian corruption on the other. In this sense, a utopian impression attributed to Russia reveals rupture. In addition the pilot of 'the Aeroflot', who is naturally enough a Russian, overlaps with 'the long-distance bus driver / On the Galway-Limerick-Cork route', who is Irish. In spite of the poet's devotion to a utopian Russia opposed to the status quo of Ireland, the borderline which distinguishes Russia from Ireland becomes less and less distinct. Then, in the thirteenth stanza, the reader encounters a description in which an act of moving rather than Russia as utopia is affirmed as something heavenly:

Copenhagen-the Baltic-Riga-Smolensk —
If there be a heaven, then this is what
It must feel like to be going down into heaven —
To be going home to Russia.

The 'heaven' here is not the actual Russia but the present participles repeated in the stanza, that is, 'going down into heaven- / To be going home to Russia'. That is why Russia as a nation, which was supposed to be a utopia at the beginning of the poem, begins to be described with the same feminine metaphor as that often deployed to signify Ireland—a motherland:

By his engine-murmurs, the pilot sounds like a man
Who has chosen to make love instead of to rape
He caresses the Russian plains

With a long, slow descent—a prolonged kiss.

With the night down below us, with Russia
Under her mantle of snow and forest;
A block of flats lightens up out of nowhere—
The shock in a lover's eyes at the impact of
ecstasy.

*O Svetka, Svetka! Don't, don't!
Say my name, Oh say my name!
O God O Russia! Don't, don't!
Say my name, Oh say my name!*

In the aftermath of touchdown, gently we taxi;
We do not immediately put on our clothes;
In the jubilation of silence we taste our arrival—
The survival of sex.

The way the airplane descends and lands is described in terms of sexual intercourse. The airplane, the pilot and the poet are a collective male figure; after the pilot is described as 'a man', the pronoun, 'he', shifts to 'we' and 'us', while a feminine feature is attributed to Russia. As can be seen in J.C.Mangan's 'Dark Rosaleen' and Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Irish nationalists have often described Ireland as a female figure, though it is a common phenomenon which can be found all over the world. In addition, as G. Meaney suggests, 'the Catholic ideology of the Virgin Mother and its permutation at all levels of the concept of nationhood' has complicated the subjecthood in contemporary Ireland, and the contrary functions of such national myth, 'revolutionary and conservative, are acknowledged in and exert a pressure on the work' of contemporary Irish writers.⁽²⁹⁾ In 'Going Home to Russia', Russia is, just like Irish national myth, a land which is the object of mythologizing as a motherland: 'Nine months in your belly, I can smell your soul'. Russia as motherland is an equivalent of Ireland as motherland, just as contemporary Irish corruption is equivalent to Russian corruption. Or rather, in the movement of the poem, Russia supplements Ireland, Ireland supplements Russia. Here the nation itself is, whether it is Ireland or Russia, a sign — a hollow vessel

where the nation's identity or totality is confronted with, and crossed by, a supplementary movement of writing.

The heterogeneous structure of what Jacques Derrida calls supplementarity in writing closely follows the ambivalent movement between the nation's narrative and the individual narrative. According to Derrida, one meaning of a supplement is: '...a surplus, a plentitude enriching another plentitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, techné, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function'.⁽³⁰⁾ This is a function of the nation's narrative. For the nation's narrative insists on its continuity, that is, accumulative temporality based on a historical origin or events. In Ireland, the General Post Office in Dublin could be referred to as a typical topos of such supplementation: as Yeats indicates in 'The Statues', Patrick Pearse acted as a supplement to an Irish mythological hero of blood sacrifice and redemption, namely, Cuchulain, when he proclaimed a free Ireland, identifying themselves with mythological heroes. Pearse proclaimed a free Ireland in the GPO, where a bronze statue of Cuchulain was erected. This is a form of nationalist historicism: that there is a moment when the differential temporalities of cultural histories coalesce in an immediately readable present. Irish myth is added up by Pearse in the GPO in Dublin.

On the other hand, Derrida points out another function of a supplement which does not serve to accumulate presence but functions where presence is absent:

It[the supplement] intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*, if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [*suppleant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct and subaltern instance.... As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief. ...Somewhere, something can be filled up *of itself*, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and

proxy.⁽³¹⁾

In 'Going Home to Russia', 'Ireland' or 'home' is no more than a sign which can be supplemented by Russia. Yet, in this case, Russia does not add up to Ireland because there is no shared origin or temporal continuity between Ireland and Russia. Or rather, the notion of 'home' or national identity constituted by myth or nation's narrative is supplemented with the signs, 'Russia' and 'Ireland'. Even if the poet seems to escape from Irish identity through the flight to Russia, he is forced to stand before the beginning of another identity:

My dear loved one, let me lick your nose;
 Nine months in your belly, I can smell your soul;
 Your two heads are smiling — not one but both of
 them —
 Isn't it good, Svetka, good, that I have come
 home?

*O Svetka, Svetka! Don't, don't!
 Say my name, Oh say my name!
 O God O Russia! Don't, don't!
 Say my name, Oh say my name!*

The repetition of 'Say my name' shows the poet's condition under which he cannot help standing in the passage between the subject and the object. While he needs subjecthood as a poet, he recognizes himself as the object of nation's narrative; once he finds his 'home' in Russia, he will be told in its discourse. Thus he only repeats the act of supplementation to show that the cultural identity made up by the nation's narrative is a hollow vessel which is filled by sign and phantom proxy. This is the topos or 'utopia' in Durcan's narrative, which is neither the transcendental idea of history nor the institution of the state, but a strange temporality of the one in the other — an oscillating movement in the governing present of national authority. Whether it is Ireland or Russia, the poet as subject is always already told beforehand in the nation's narrative; his discourse supplements the temporally precedent national discourse in the way the former reveals the latter's hollowness or its impossibility of

being filled up of itself in any continuity.

III

Contrary to Paul Durcan's strategy to undermine the nation's narrative, which often foregrounds each theme explicitly, Medbh McGuckian's poetry seldom denotes sociopolitical problems. For example, it is difficult to find on first reading some concrete political subject matter in the poem, 'Dovecote', which reads as follows:

I built my dovecote all from the same tree
 To supplement the winter, and its wood
 So widely ringed, alive with knots, reminded me
 How a bow unstrung returns again to straight,
 How seldom compound bows are truly sweet.

It's like being in a cloud that never rains,
 The way they rise above the storm, and sleep
 So bird-white in the sky, like day-old
 Infant roses, little unambitious roads,
 Islands not defecting, wanting to be rescued.

Since I liked their manners better than
 The summer, I kept leaning to the boat-shaped
 Spirit of my house, whose every room
 Gives on to a garden, or a sea that knows
 You cannot reproduce in your own shade.

Even to the wood of my sunflower chest,
 Or my kimono rack, I owed no older debt
 Than to the obligatory palette of the rain
 That brought the soil back into tension on my slope
 And the sea in, making me an island once again.⁽³²⁾

According to Clair Wills, McGuckian says that, while 'the poem is about the attempt of a woman to recover self-definition in body and mind after giving birth to the child which had occupied and to some extent "taken over" her body.... it also about the attempt of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland to recover or nurture its sense of self-definition during the Hunger Strike at Long Kesh in 1981'.⁽³³⁾ One may find some

political implication in such words as 'Islands not defecting', 'the boat-shaped / Spirit of my house' and 'making me an island once again' which is a quotation from Thomas Davis's nationalistic poem 'A Nation Once Again'. But as Wills observes, the poem 'isn't generally read as a poem with political subject matter at all', much less one on the actual event. On the other hand, it is far easier to find that the poem has the problem of 'self-definition' as its subject matter. In the first stanza, homogeneous identity is affirmed in the course of the comparison between 'the same tree' and 'compound bows'; it is reinforced, in the second, through words like 'bird-white' or 'day-old infant roses', which imply spotless purity without any invasion of exterior elements. Yet, the 'Spirit' is exposed to the exterior world — 'a garden' and 'a sea' — which is a sign of the introduction of heterogeneous elements: 'You cannot reproduce in your own shade'. In the fourth stanza, the poet accepts the heterogeneity as her 'self definition'. She owes a debt to 'the obligatory palette of the rain' which is contrasted with a representative of homogeneity — 'a cloud that never rains' — rather than to 'the wood of my sunflower chest' which overlaps with the 'wood' made of 'the same tree' in the first stanza. Thus read, the poem seems, as McGuckian herself comments, to deal with the problem of 'self-definition' of a woman, not of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland during the Hunger Strike. As can be typically seen in this case, it is difficult to point out in McGuckian's poetry, contrary to that of Durcan's, an explicit political aspect. Nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to say that she attempts to confront the problem of self identity without any reference to issues of national identity. In fact 'the boat-shaped/ Spirit' seems to imply the boat-shaped island — Ireland — which is necessarily forced to accept the heterogeneity of Catholics and Protestants, Irish and English. When the poet thinks of her self identity, she cannot help thinking of the exterior force — 'the obligatory palette of the rain'. As we saw in Durcan's 'Before the Celtic Yoke' and 'Going Home to Russia', the poet's subjecthood is exposed to an oscillating movement between the nation's narrative and her own narrative. The movement is iterative and

never fixes an established subjecthood, as is shown in the rhyming words in the fourth stanza, that is, 'the rain' and 'once again'. This observation reveals a condition of McGuckian's writing which is quite similar to that which Durcan explores. The problem here is why McGuckian chooses not explicitly to denote the sociopolitical element, and how her poetry expresses the subject between the nation's narrative and the poet's narrative.

McGuckian's poetry is said to be like a 'riddle' in which its meaning or purport is elusive, slipping away from the reader, as Clair Wills observes:

Throughout the poem ['Venus and the Rain'] specific denotation is avoided; the reader is presented with a sequence of 'provocative' half-truths or truths which seem to contradict one another, so that s/he is tempted to 'name' the object without being able to do so.... The alternative narrative in McGuckian's poem is not perhaps a means of expressing female experience, but a way of resisting 'invasion'. In poetic terms it consists of a resistance to objectification....⁽³⁴⁾

It is true that the reader's attempt to grasp the 'meaning' of the poem (through 'objectification') — 'to name the object' — will end up with failure. Yet what is significant in McGuckian's poetry is not only its elusiveness to the reader but also the poet's failure to 'name' or appropriate the object in her discourse; the movement of her poetry is nothing but the process of the failure to 'name'. For example, in the poem titled 'Hotel', to use the terms coined by I. A. Richards, the 'vehicle' fails to be the image which is to embody the 'tenor'.

I think the detectable difference
Between winter and summer is a damsel
Who requires saving, a heroine half —
Asleep and measurably able to hear
But hard to see, like the spaces
Between the birds when I turn
Back to the sky for another empty feeling.⁽³⁵⁾

A 'damsel' seems to be a vehicle for the tenor, 'the detectable difference'. Yet, when the vehicle is taken over by the simile, namely, 'like the spaces / Between the birds', the vehicle results in repeating a similar image of the tenor; the image of the temporal interstice — 'the detectable difference / *Between* winter and summer' — is embodied by the image of the spatial interstice — 'the spaces / *Between* the birds'. The signification of the poem cannot hold its ground, suspended *in-between* the tenor and the vehicle, only to seek for 'another empty feeling'. It seems to be impossible for the poet to make her words focus into an image; words are beyond her control and slip away from her. Peter Denman points out this indeterminacy from the stylistic point of view, which can be applied to 'Hotel':

the [McGuckian's] poems are all in blank verse, and the individual lines do not function as metrical units. The basic unit is in fact the stanza ... The end of a stanza nearly always coincides with the end of a sentence; there is no run-on from one stanza to the next. On the other hand, it is rare for the end of a line within a stanza to coincide with a full stop. Marked neither by the completion of a sense unit or a syntactical structure, nor by rhyme, line-endings are modulated so that, instead of being endings they become loci of indeterminacy.⁽³⁶⁾

As Denman observes, there is a line-break between the tenor, 'the difference', and the vehicle, 'damsel': between the word 'damsel' and its qualifying clause. It seems that the fissure between the words and the image they embody, rather than the connection, is emphasized. In the second stanza which is in the past tense, one will see how cognitions come about.

I would bestow on her a name
With a hundred meanings, all of them
Secret, going their own way, as surely
As the silver mosaic of the previous
Week, building itself a sort of hotel
In her voice, to be used whenever

The tale was ruthlessly retold.

The poem's failure of signification in the first stanza is not due to the plurality of words' meanings, because the poet would name 'with a hundred meanings'. What disturbs the signification is the fact that all the meanings begin to go 'their own way'. It is worth noting that a temporal difference is introduced here by the words 'the previous week': there is a temporal void between the poet and the reader or the poet and words. If one finds a kind of wordplay in the fifth line in which 'hotel' echoes a verb, 'tell', contrasted with 'retold' in the last line, then s/he may also find there a situation analogous to that of the subject under the nation's narrative; 'As narrator she is narrated as well. And in a way she is already told, and what she herself is telling will not undo that somewhere else she is told' — words are told and tell at the same time. Similar recognition is expressed in 'For a Young Matron'⁽³⁷⁾, which is said to be written for Paul Muldoon's American wife, the poet Jean Hanff Korelitz.⁽³⁸⁾ In the third stanza of the poem, a male figure (perhaps Muldoon) tells a female figure (perhaps Korelitz) to change a word in her writing, saying 'You cannot become its[the word's] passenger'. While the male figure takes it for granted that he can control a word as he likes and that he can be its passenger whose intention is properly delivered to the reader, the narrator caricatures such a mistaken idea: 'It says, Once it wasn't like this'. As in 'Hotel', the identity of a word is not regarded as stable, but rather it is divided by temporal rift. Or rather, a word is a hollow vessel in which the act of supplementation is repeated 'by the anterior default of a presence'. In 'The Dream- Language of Fergus'⁽³⁹⁾, which is an attempt of transplantation of Osip Mandelstam's essays into her own text⁽⁴⁰⁾, such a feature of language is referred to as 'a jar':

So Latin sleeps, they say, in Russian speech,
So one river inserted into another
Becomes a leaping, glistening, splashed
And scattered alphabet
Jutting out from the voice,
Till what began as a dog's bark

Ends with bronze, what began
 With honey ends with ice;
 As if an aeroplane in full flight
 Launched a second plane,
 The sky is stabbed by their exits
 And the mistaken meaning of each.

Conversation is as necessary
 Among these familiar campus trees
 As the apartness of torches;
 And if I am a threader
 Of double-stranded words, whose
Quando has grown into now,
 No text can return the honey
 In its path of light from a jar,
 Only a seed-fund, a pendulum,
 Pressing out the diasporic snow.

Not only language but also McGuckian's text is a 'jar' or a hollow vessel in which 'Mandelstam's discussion of the nature of Dante's classicism, or the "European" nature of the Russian language, are placed' to supplement 'thoughts about a child's language acquisition, and the history of language in Ireland'.⁽⁴¹⁾ The 'conversation' in the last stanza might be regarded as 'dialogue' in a Bakhtinian sense, which is the locus of unfinalizability where 'the author's consciousness does not transform others' consciousnesses ... into objects, and does not give them secondhand and finalizing definitions'⁽⁴²⁾, as '*now*' in the poem is echoed by 'the diasporic *snow*'.

One of the reasons McGuckian's poetry is regarded as elusive and inconclusive is that she foregrounds the 'diasporic' or 'dialogical' feature of language. For example, in 'Harem Trousers'⁽⁴³⁾, which starts with a sentence, 'A Poem dreams of being written/ Without the pronoun 'I', the pronoun 'I' is not a sign of the self, the subject, nor a substantial being. The second and third stanza proceed without the pronoun 'I', and in the last line of the fourth stanza, a question is posed: 'What if I do enter?'

As I run to fetch water
 In my mouse-coloured sweater,

Unkempt, hysterical, from
 The river that lives outside me,
 The bed whose dishevelment
 Does not enchant me.

Your room speaks of morning,
 A stem, a verb, a rhyme,
 From whose involuntary window one
 May be expelled at any time,
 As trying to control a dream
 Puts the just-completed light to rest.

The 'I' is a mere placeholder here with pronominal neutrality; the space which the subject occupied – the pronoun 'I' or 'my' room — becomes 'your room'. 'The river bends lovingly / Towards this one, or that one, or a third' in the space called 'I'; the past belongings to the 'I' as a 'jar' or a hollow vessel do 'not enchant' the pronoun 'me'. The question which is often posed about the referents of the pronouns in McGuckian's poetry is out of place here, because they do not have any referents; if there are any, they are to be substituted with other referents.

In both 'Venus and the Sun'⁽⁴⁴⁾ and 'Venus and the Rain'⁽⁴⁵⁾, what is supposed to be a mythological figure, 'Venus', assumes a function quite different from Kavanagh's 'Pygmalion' mentioned above. The first person pronoun 'I' is supplemented with Venus as planet, Venus as goddess, and Venus as person. In 'Venus and the Sun', 'I' appears as an astronomical figure in the connection with the sun; as goddess with Mars and the moon (Diana); and as a person who is the speaker. At the same time 'Venus and the Sun' implies the male and the female, the original and the secondary or the derivative. The 'I' tells and is told at the same time: 'The scented flames of the sun throw me / Telling me how to move — I tell them / How to bend the light of shifting stars'. The subject, which is supposed to be told or represented in the light of 'the sun', that is, what is original or the grand narrative, finds its position in relation to emptiness:

And the sun holds good till it makes a point
 Of telling itself to whiten to a traplight —

This emptiness was left from the start; with any choice

I'd double-back to the dullest blue of Mars.

The origin recedes into such a distant past — the sun is too white to look at — that it appears as a mere void or emptiness (it might be called 'empty tomb' to quote Yeats). Although the origin or the grand narrative does no longer have any substance, 'the emptiness is left from the start', which conditions the subject. While the discourse of 'Venus and the Sun' focuses on the emptiness of the origin, the emptiness of language is foregrounded in 'Venus and the Rain'

White on white, I can never viewed
Against a heavy sky — my gibbous voice
Passes from leaf to leaf, retelling the story
Of its own provocative fractures, till
Their facing coasts might almost fill each other
And they ask me in reply if I've
Decided to stop trying to make diamonds.

.....

Whatever rivers sawed their present liars
Through my lightest, still-warm rocks,
I told them they were only giving up
A sun for sun, that cruising moonships find
Those icy domes relaxing, when they take her
Rind to pieces, and a waterfall
Unstitching itself down the front stairs.

Certainly, the poem has much implications of the female body and imagery which recalls Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' with the rivers cutting their way down to a sunless sea. On the other hand, the movement of the 'I' has as much significance. The first line shows that the emptiness of the origin in 'The Venus and the Sun' is applied to the derivative or secondary Venus in this poem — 'White on white'. The 'I' which is an equivalent of Venus shifts to 'my gibbous voice' which retells 'the story / Of its own provocative fractures'. Whether the demonstrative pronoun 'its' means 'the story's' or 'my gibbous voice's', the 'I' begins to be detached from the self. In the penultimate line of the first stanza, 'its own provocative fractures' which are

supposed to belong to the 'I' have their own autonomy as the third person 'they' that 'ask me'. It is not surprising that in the last stanza the third-person pronoun 'her' appears which does not have any referent in the poem. It is true that 'her' implies 'me' in the sense that it might be regarded as a general idea of woman, but 'her' is not the speaker's complete object of representation as far as it overlaps with 'I'; 'I' shifts between two positions — the subject and the objects — in the course of the narrative, as a 'jar' or vessel through which various significations pass. Neither Venus as mythological figure nor Venus as planet completely fills the vessel 'I', just as 'I' cannot reach its origin because of its emptiness in 'Venus and the Sun'.

Compared with Paul Durcan, McGuckian seems to reach more fundamental insights of identity formation under the grand narrative, in the sense that one cannot help dealing with the problem of language — the sign as anterior to any site of meaning — to consider the position of the subject. Her voice opens up a kind of anti-metaphoric void: 'the destruction in fantasy, of the very act of that makes metaphor possible — the act of putting the oral void into words, the act of introjection'.⁴⁶ Most of the contemporary Irish writers have tackled the problem of the subject under the influence of the grand narrative, chiefly because they are burdened by the nation's narrative established during the period of the Celtic Revival. Yet when we who are not Irish witness the tactic of McGuckian's poetry, which does not refer directly to the nation's narrative, we will find that the problem of contemporary Ireland is not a matter of no concern to us.

Notes

- (1) Connolly, Sean. 'Dreaming History: Brian Friel's *Translations*,' in *Theatre Ireland*, 13 (autumn 1987) 43-4
- (2) Connolly, 'Dreaming History'. 43
- (3) McAvera, Brian. 'Attuned to the Catholic Experience', in *Fortnight* 3 (March 1985). 19
- (4) Friel, Brian. *Translations*, in *Selected Plays*

- (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) 445
- (5) Friel, Brian. 'Extracts from a Sporadic Diary', in Tim Pat Coogan (ed.) *Ireland and the Arts*. (London: Quartet Books, 1982) 58
- (6) Longley, Edna. *Poetry in the Wars*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1976) 191. In spite of Field Day's repeated attempts to reveal the negative aspect of national identity, Longley has been contending against the enterprise of Field Day, referring to it as Nationalistic. She refers to as "Nationalist language" such as Seamus Deane's words as "a form of writing which is unique to us", and she says "In certain lights, the Field Day writers seem dedicated to replacing the alleged cultural power of the Revival with their own myths and rhetorics". See Longley, Edna. *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994) 9-44. But her hysterical objection seems to be based on mere factional rivalry among Irish academics. For, even though Deane conveniently uses such words as "unique to us", it is quite easy to find that his intention is not to insist on uniqueness of Irish identity which mystifies the political elements, but to mention the unique historical experience in order to locate the source of the present conflict, opposing mystifying pluralism which is 'the concealed imperialism of the multinational'. Dean, Seamus (Ed.) *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 3-19. Longley's regionalism seems to be another version of imperialistic pluralism. Terry Eagleton whose play for Field Day is called "thoretical entryism" by Longley (*The Living Stream*, p29) says 'though most Irish scholars welcome contributions from elsewhere, there are among them for whom some of us are "entryists" and "interlopers", usually those commentators most distressed by chauvinism and wedded to pluralism'. See Eagleton, Terry *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995) ix
- (7) Deane, Seamus. *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1985) 12
- (8) Said, Edward. 'Yeats and Decolonization' in Seamus Deane (Ed.) *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 79
- (9) Kearney, Richard. 'Myth and Modernity in Irish Poetry' in Elmer Andrews (Ed.) *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (London: Macmillan, 1992) 41
- (10) Deane, Seamus. 'Introduction' in Seamus Deane (Ed.) *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. 17. In another essay, Deane points out another harmful effect of identity formation and says as follows: 'The terms of the dispute[a battle between Romantic and contemporary Ireland] are outmoded but they linger on. The most obvious reason for this is the continuation of the Northern "problems", where "unionism" and "nationalism" still compete for supremacy in relation to ideas of identity racially defined as either "Irish" or "British" in communities which are deformed by believing themselves to be the historic inheritors of those identities and the traditions presumed to go with them'. Deane, Seamus *Heroic Styles: the tradition of an idea* A Field Day pamphlet No.4 (Derry, 1984) 13
- (11) Kearney, 'Myth and Modernity in Irish Poetry'. 42
- (12) See Kearney, 'Myth and Modernity in Irish Poetry'. 41-42
- (13) Dean (Ed.), *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. 19
- (14) Deane, *Heroic Styles: the tradition of an idea*. 16
- (15) Deane, *Heroic Styles: the tradition of an idea*. 17
- (16) Kavanagh, Patrick. *The Complete Poems*. (Newbridge: The Goldsmith Press, 1984) 26
- (17) Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*. 238
- (18) Eagleton, Terry. 'Nationalism: irony and Commitment' in Seamus Deane (Ed.) *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. 33
- (19) Lyotard, J.Francois and Thebaud, J.L., *Just*

- Gaming*. Trans. W. Godzich. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985) 41
- (20) Elliott, Maurice. 'Paul Durcan- Durchain' in Michael Kenneally (Ed.) *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995) 304
- (21) Longley, *The Living Stream*. 216 - 217
- (22) Durcan, Paul. *A snail in my Prime: New and Selected Poems*. (London: Harvill, 1993) 111
- (23) Bhabha, K. Homi. *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994) 142
- (24) Durcan, *A snail in my Prime* 238
- (25) Durcan, *A snail in my Prime* 31
- (26) Kearney, 'Myth and Modernity in Irish Poetry'. 42
- (27) Kearney, 'Myth and Modernity in Irish Poetry'. 54
- (28) Durcan, *A snail in my Prime* 152-156
- (29) See Meaney, Gerardine 'History Gasps: Myth in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry' in Michael Kenneally (Ed.) *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995) 99-101
- (30) Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G.C. Spivak. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) 144-145
- (31) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. 145
- (32) McGuckian, Medbh. *Venus and the Rain*. (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1994) 40
- (33) Wills, Clair. 'Voices from the Nursery: Medbh McGuckian's Plantation' in Michael Kenneally (Ed.) *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995) 380
- (34) Wills, 'Voices from the Nursery'. 379
- (35) McGuckian, *Venus and the Rain*. 37
- (36) Denman, Peter. 'Ways of Saying: Boland, Carson, McGuckian' in Michael Kenneally (Ed.) *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995) 170-171
- (37) McGuckian, Medbh. *On Ballycastle Beach*. (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1995) 38
- (38) Wills, 'Voices from the Nursery'. 383
- (39) McGuckian, Medbh. *On Ballycastle Beach*. 57-58
- (40) See Wills, 'Voices from the Nursery'. 385
- (41) Wills, 'Voices from the Nursery'. 385
- (42) Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and Trans. by Caryl Emerson. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 68
- (43) McGuckian, Medbh. *On Ballycastle Beach*. 40-41
- (44) McGuckian, *Venus and the Rain*. 11
- (45) McGuckian, *Venus and the Rain*. 32
- (46) N. Abraham and M. Torok, 'Introjection — Incorporation', in S. Lebovici and D. Windlocher (Ed.) *Psychoanalysis in France* (New York: International University Press, 1980) 10, cited in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 165