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Authors	Coughlan, Patricia
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‘An t-éitheach; is an fíor? ...’:
a note on two late poems by Máire Mhac an tSaoi

PATRICIA COUGHLAN

Máire Mhac an tSaoi is the author of five poetry collections, beginning with *Margadh na saoire* (1956), followed after a seventeen-year gap by *Codladh an ghaiscigh* (1973), and three others in 1980, 1987, and 1999.¹ 2011 saw the publication of a dual-language selection of her poems, *An paróiste míorúilteach / The miraculous parish*, with largely newly commissioned English translations.²

Her most celebrated single work has been the remarkable, short seven-poem sequence ‘Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin’, which won the Oireachtas prize in 1956 and appeared in her first collection.³ In poetic accomplishment, erotic charge and emotional intensity, the ‘Ceathrúintí’ have been rightly admired as breaking new ground in twentieth-century Irish literature, and not least among Mhac an tSaoi’s achievements in the sequence is her compelling and complex construction of a woman’s poetic voice. While other single lyrics are also familiar parts of the canon and have been anthologized and taught, little critical attention has as yet been devoted to her later love-poetry. In this short essay I discuss two powerful poems from the 1980s and 1990s that further explore the themes and material on which the ‘Ceathrúintí’ so intensely focus, and in a sense – both aesthetically and emotionally – resolve the painful conflicts played out there, thus further developing this poet’s earlier transformative contributions both to the traditions of love poetry, and to Irish women’s achievements in poetry.

In a 2000 interview, Mhac an tSaoi remarked of her poems that ‘the common theme is refusal’; when pressed, she defined this as the refusal to commit herself to another person.⁴ But as we shall see her poetry shows that this ‘refusal’ is part of a far more complex cluster of meanings than this would suggest. In fact, her work is pervaded by recurring tensions between contending impulses and forces. On the one hand is the fierce assertion of

1 *Margadh na saoire* (BÁC, 1956), henceforth *MnaS*; *Codladh an ghaiscigh* (BÁC, 1973), henceforth *CanG*; *An cion go dtí seo* (BÁC, 1987), the volume which collects all prior work and adds twenty new poems, henceforth *CGDS*; *Shoa agus dánta eile* (BÁC, 1999), henceforth *SDE*. 2 Ed. Louis de Paor (Dublin and Indreabhán, 2011), henceforth *PM*.

3 See the excellent discussion by Briona Nic Dhiarmada, ‘Máire Mhac an tSaoi’ in R. Ní Fhrighil (ed.), *Filíocht chomhaimseartha na Gaeilge* (BÁC, 2010), pp 15–27 at p. 20.

4 Harry Kreisler, ‘Conversations with history. Conversation with Máire MacEntee’, Berkeley, California, April 2000. Available at: <<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/MacEntee/>>.

autonomy in the emotional and especially the sexual domain; on the other, impulses towards connection, attachment, and mutual recognition between self and other. Closely associated with the former, the imperative of autonomy or agency, is that resistance to norms which she has herself named as a salient personality trait. A compelling quality of her writing is the sheer intensity of its emotional investment in a struggle to claim or constitute selfhood, and how rich a vein it mines, in terms both of its material (emotional, psychological) and of the poetic techniques deployed in working on it. Her focus on this theme coexists, of course, with her impeccable skill and exact ear in grafting her work onto the inherited forms and diction of earlier poetic tradition in Irish, especially the *dánta grádha*: in these respects also, her work is of considerable importance, since it engages so accurately with inherited forms and gestures, ultimately with important innovative effect.

I have written elsewhere about a notable strand within this knot of meanings, namely the negative and sometimes disturbing writing of women's reproductive roles.⁵ A darker side to the warm loving maternity of her poems about children, this recurs repeatedly in contexts of emotional and especially sexual suffering. It includes the fantasy of an incubus-infant who aggressively bites the breast, poisoning the mother; the mother's inability to nurse, her breasts dry or her milk turned salt; nurture withheld and the child dashed from the breast; the torment of erotic jealousy compared with the inescapability of the embryo growing within; the experience of unhappy love likened to a pregnant woman's constant awareness of carrying the foetus 'féna coim', always within her body; and a lover's *absence* overseas felt as a *presence* in the woman's abdomen, in the place where an infant would have nested, though in reality none ever has. All of these scenarios occur in the figurative domain of the poetry, but they are none the less arresting.⁶

In the later collections, from *Codladh an ghaiscigh* (1973) onwards, however, such expressions of bitterness and self-abasement are less frequent, and opposite impulses gain purchase: towards connection, attachment, mutual recognition between self and other, and the sense of achieved insight, transcending emotional pain. The work registers this more positive writing of attachment not only in a few love-poems, including those I discuss below, but in several well-known, charming, and eloquent lyrics celebrating parenting and in particular mothering. These poems have, however, tended to be received in a somewhat essentialist way which takes maternal love as natural to a female poet and to the feminine speakers she constructs in her poems, thereby dulling the force of the ethical and emotional quest which is dis-

5 "For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent": torn motherhood in Mhac an tSaoi's "Love has pitched his mansion" in L. de Paor (ed.), *Míorúilt an pharóiste: aisti ar fhilíocht Mháire Mhac an tSaoi* (Indreabhán, 2014), pp 41–62. 6 The poems referred to are: 'An dá thráigh' (*CanG*, p. 9); 'Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin' V (*MnaS*, p. 62); 'Ceangal do Cheol Pop' (*CanG*, p. 21.).

cernible in Mhac an tSaoi's work, and which awaits more extensive critical analysis. In the Kreisler interview, she somewhat drily remarked: 'The "I" is not me. They are dramatic lyrics'. The context makes it probable that she was here referring specifically to 'Ceathrúintí' and associated work; but the notorious difficulty of maintaining awareness of the performative function of poetry and the fictionality of the lyric persona, as against a quasi-voyeuristic search for the raw expression of a biographical poet's intimate experience, is a pervasive theme in the criticism and scholarship of women's writing internationally.⁷ Mhac an tSaoi's own clear-sighted focus on poetry as the practice of a craft is of course evident in the precision, grace and formal decorum of the poems themselves. T.S. Eliot tried to insist that 'the progress of an artist is ... a continual extinction of personality', and Yeats, similarly, distanced the poet from what he called 'the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast'. Both were rehearsing the creed of high modernism, and both failed, of course, in dispelling biographical interest from their readers' minds.⁸ In Mhac an tSaoi's case, this relation between poet and woman remains a site of exceptional defensiveness and contradiction; this is bound up with that internalization of misogyny I have already identified. Even late in her career, reviewing the *Penguin book of women poets* for *Innti*, she bemoans the domination of the collection by love-poetry, describes the pervasiveness of this as cloying and expresses a longing for intellect, while drily remarking that from time to time 'tiocfaidh tú ar cheardaí mná' ('you will come upon a craftswoman') whose skills are manifest in her poem.⁹ Her resistance to 'faoistiniúlacht' ('confessionalism') and firm emphasis on the 'neamhphearsantacht' ('impersonalism') of the traditional Irish poet-figure are well discussed by Nic Dhiarmada. Both Nic Dhiarmada and Louis de Paor, however, further observe how Mhac an tSaoi's later work, in de Paor's words, in a marked shift from her earlier practice, 'flouts the standard conventions of authorial discretion by exploiting the overlap between her private and public personae' ... thus 'allowing the intimate to infiltrate the public, to reorder and to write it from within'.¹⁰

These counter-currents are important as context for the two poems I discuss here. Thematically, they explore deep concerns about the possibility and the ethics of self-realization in relation to an other. Taken together, they represent the conduct of such a relation as an always-in-process, never-completed, struggle for truly creative and fulfilling attachment. This human need

7 See Vicki Bertram, *Gendering poetry: contemporary women and men poets* (London, 2005); Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and poetry: language, experience, identity in women's writing* (London, 2003). 8 T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the individual talent', *The sacred wood* (London, 1950), pp 52–3; W.B. Yeats, 'A general introduction for my work' in E. Larrissy (ed.), *The major works* (Oxford, 2008), p. 379. 9 *Innti*, 5 (1978), 21. 10 de Paor, 'Contemporary poetry in Irish: 1940–2000' in M. Kelleher and P. O'Leary (eds), *Cambridge history of Irish literature*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 2006), ii (1890–2000), p. 327.

for connection can be expressed in different ways; in Mhac an tSaoi's work, it is often most intensely realized, in her own vivid expression, via 'cumann rúin an tsúsa' ('the secret love under the coverlet'), that 'domhan cúng rúin teolaí', the 'narrow secret warm world' of sexual love, which her poems render with such exceptional vividness and poignancy.¹¹

The two poems I shall discuss – 'Collage' (CGDS, p. 107 [1981]) and 'Cian á thógaint díom' (SDE, p. 58 [1999]) – are widely separated by date of publication and also differ significantly in style and poetic register. But they belong together in the important sense that both clearly address the same intense transgressive love-affair that earlier yielded material for the 'Ceathrúintí', and that they mark two further stages, and emotionally significant advances, in the poetic persona's reflection on and processing of this painful and intense experience. Taken together, the two poems show the evolution of her thought about troubled human embodiment, and the closely associated questions of bodily and emotional attachment.

'Collage', which does not appear in the 2011 dual-language selection, delivers a mild shock to the reader of her previous work by openly identifying this hitherto unnamed lover, now he has died. This is a highly significant breach of a taboo which in this instance is more than merely conventional, as it is in the *dánta grádha* which so influence much of Mhac an tSaoi's own earlier work. In a 2008 interview, she says that in her youth one could write about sex freely in Irish 'because', as she puts it, 'no-one understood [it]', but that the lover who had occasioned many of her poems could not possibly be named because he was married and she was an unmarried young woman.¹² Here is the poem:

COLLAGE

Do Dháithí Ó hUaithne a d'éag 13 Meitheamh 1981

Oráit duit, a David, ós duit a bhí mo chéadchais?

But that

was

in another country ...

... Beo duit, do bhínn ad' chaoineadh –

Cár mhiste dhom do threascairt?

Ar nós bheithígh an Bhíobla

Ár stádar níl ach sealad;

¹¹ Phrases from 'Cian á thógaint díom' (SDE, p. 58), and 'Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin' II (MnaS, p. 60) respectively. ¹² 'Máire Mhac an tSaoi, file, scríbhneoir: agallamh le Páraic Breatnach', Broadcast on TG4, *Soiscéal Pháraic*, 2 January 2008. Available on youtube.com.

Sa gcolainn ár muinín,
Is de réir na colla ár séathlú –
Is an phaidir ghanfhiosáochta,
An fearr í ná leabhar éithigh?

*Suppression of secrets
secretly*

*And yet,
God rest him
all road
ever he offended!
Amen.*

COLLAGE

To Dáithí Ó hUaithne, who died 13 June 1981

A prayer for you, David, since you were my first love?
*But that
was
in another country...*

... In life, I wept over you –
Why should I care that you are felled?
Like the beasts in the Bible
Our life's span is short;
We trust in the body
And in the body we drain away –
And is a stealthy prayer
Better than a false oath?

*And yet,
God rest him
all road
ever he offended!
Amen.¹³*

This text is also macaronic and intertextual, all deliberate effects, and very different from the tightly restrained courtliness of earlier work such as 'A fhir dar fhulaingeas grá fé rún' (*MnaS*, p. 50; in Biddy Jenkinson's fine version 'Man for whom I suffered love / In secret', *PM*, pp 76–7). 'Collage', by contrast, conveys its theme of emotional contradiction and self-questioning in its very fracturing of the smooth surface of the conventional love-lyric. Indeed, three of the poem's eleven lines end with a question. There is also metrical

¹³ My translation.

disruption: though the central stanza does set up a norm of seven-syllable lines, this is varied at l. 7 (six syllables), and ll 8 and 9 (both eight syllables). The opening line is exceptionally long, and the two borrowed English lines are not only italicized, but set off typographically in a way which, to the eye, suggests a gravestone inscription. All these might be termed modernist effects, which make further evident the poem's resistance to smooth lyric closure and consolation.

Yet, while this mixed form of 'Collage' is itself an implicit rejection of traditional conventions, its long opening line uses an allusive vocabulary invoking appropriate Irish traditions to introduce the emotional problem posed by the death of the speaker's long-ago first love. The opening word 'Oráit', from Latin *oratio*, echoes grave-stone inscriptions enjoining the viewer to pray for the dead person's soul, and clearly alludes to Ó hUaithne's work as a major scholar of the early Irish language.¹⁴ The expression 'mo chéadchais' has a specific antecedent in *Dánta grádha*, no. 15, l. 26: 'duit tugas mo chéadchais'. Furthermore, it exploits the ambiguity of the term 'cais', which could mean both 'love' and 'hate' according to context.¹⁵ This allusive line is followed at line 2 by the quotation of a well-known passage which occurs in two canonical English texts, namely Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* and T.S. Eliot's 'Portrait of a lady', and at line 11 by a part-line from Hopkins' sonnet elegy 'Felix Randal'.¹⁶ These two English lines – one seeming cynical, the other compassionate – are symmetrically placed so as to frame the central stanza (ll 3–10) between them. This gesture of reaching for the words of others, and, what is more, for phrases prominently inscribed in another literary tradition, is itself eloquent and powerful, since it stages a kind of aporia or state of being at a loss. Mhac an tSaoi's persona casts about for an appropriate response (a prayer, or what?) to the death of her long-ago first lover, now at last named, and ends without finding one, or at least one which can be expressed in the poem's own language, namely Irish.

The Marlowe appropriation – 'But that was in another country' – is part of a scene where two friars accuse the eponymous villain-hero Barabas of various sins:

14 On Ó hUaithne's personality and his scholarship, see Proinsias Mac Aonghusa agus Tomás de Bhaldraithe (ed.), *Daithi Ó hUaithne: cuimhní cairde* (BÁC, 1994). 15 I thank Seán Ó Coileáin for this information concerning both terms, and for helpful discussion of Mhac an tSaoi's work. See *DIL* s.v. *cais* and Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Dánta grádha: an anthology of Irish love poetry, A.D. 1350–1750* (Cork, 1926). 16 Hopkins' quatrain actually ends: 'Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended': Mhac an tSaoi's modification 'And yet' suggests that in this case there have been real offences. 'Felix Randal the farrier' in W.H. Gardner and N. Mackenzie (eds), *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (New York, 1967), pp 86–7.

FRIAR BARNARDINE. Thou hast committed –
 BARABAS. Fornication: but that was in another country;
 And besides, the wench is dead.¹⁷

With ostensible delicacy Mhac an tSaoi omits the harsh words 'fornication' and 'wench', a tactic which, of course, fails to prevent them echoing in the informed reader's mind. As spoken by Barabas, we can presumably understand the remark as an expression of outright cynicism, carelessly discounting the dead 'wench' (since she is no longer alive to accuse him). Eliot, who quotes the full three lines, uses it as the epigraph to his early poem 'Portrait of a lady', a poem about a failed relationship between an older Boston society woman, constructed as predatory and accusing, and the hesitant ineffectual male persona who is clearly relieved to escape her attentions. Eliot's disavowal of aggression on the man's part, projecting it onto the woman's, may have suggested Mhac an tSaoi's striking reversal of the genders: here it is the 'wench' who lives to tell the tale, not the 'fornicator'. The passage might, alternatively, be understood as a gesture of exculpation for that 'fornication', with 'another country' signifying 'another time', thereby conferring a palliative distance on the pain of things done so long ago; but such softening is not explicit. There may be another faint verbal echo, of the celebrated opening sentence of L.P. Hartley's 1953 novel *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. This ghost-resonance, if present, would strengthen the passage of time as a factor in altering the significance of acts and events.¹⁸

If the opening line ended with a question – to pray, or not to pray, for the dead 'David', here addressed intimately by his given name, as would the lover she once was – so too do ll 3–4 and also 9–10 which end this main stanza. In her *own* voice, then, the speaker seems able to express only uncertainty, a deficit of answers or enlightenment. We may understand the closing line – in Hopkins a prayer that God may forgive Randal's injuries of anyone else – as an answer to the first of her own poem's opening questions, whether formally to mourn her first love-object now he has died. But this strategy, particularly the displacement of the prayer onto another poet's voice and into another language, hardly answers the second, harsher, question at l. 3, namely why she should now mourn his death, as distinct from her grieving ('caoineadh') over the failure, while he was alive, of their clandestine love: 'cár mhiste dhom do threascairt?'

Mhac an tSaoi regularly uses biblical allusions as a powerful intertext for her work, though often below the surface of a line; here ll 5–6 'Ar nós bheithígh an Bhiobla / Ár stádar níl ach sealad' refers explicitly to one of the Old Testament's many expressions of impermanence and mortality: 'But man,

17 Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, ed. N.W. Bawcut (Manchester, 1997), iv, 1, ll 40–2. 18 L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (1953; repr. London, 1971), p. 7.

despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish' (Psalms 49:12). The inevitable fate of the 'beasts', namely to be slaughtered, gives a disturbing frisson to the word 'treascairt' used in l. 3 to mean 'death', strengthening its connotations of forcible bringing low, the felling of oxen or being violently overcome as if in a battle. The equation of animal and human dead is an expression of desolation, disavowing any possibility of transcendence: we merely perish like the dumb beasts. In l. 6, 'ár stádar níl ach sealad', the word 'stádar', which belongs specifically to Corca Dhuibhne vocabulary, suggests the duty of a sentry, soldier, policeman or watchman, to patrol a given 'beat'. Its alliterative conjunction with 'sealad' gives poignancy to the sense of temporariness of the allotted span with an inevitable term (Dinneen defines the related word 'sealaidhe' as 'one that takes a turn about at work' and 'one who relieves, as a guard, one working on a shift').¹⁹

At the outset, the poem's title has already suggested a bringing together of heterogeneous bits and pieces, forming a palimpsest that is deliberately unintegrated, ostensibly like a child's artwork, expressing the unresolved self-questioning and refusal of closure which is this text's defining act. The poem is further enriched by the bilingual word-play between the title-word 'Collage' and ll 7-8, 'Sa gcolainn ár muinín, / Is de réir na colla ár séathlú': we can do no other than live in the body, yet its dissolution always entails our being drained away. The concrete and domestic word 'séathlú' connotes the filtering or draining away of the fleshly body, as if sieving whey from curds, while the genitive 'colla' links, across languages, this spare, economical acknowledgement of physical mortality with the poet's own countervailing activity of trying to assemble stray affects into a coherent emotional whole, and the necessary failure (draining away) of this too. The following lines (9-10) engage in a heart-searching enquiry: is such a furtive, hidden prayer as this poem indeed preferable to the keeping of silence, analogous to perjury by omission? The text offers no definite answer. But in borrowing the Hopkins original, where the priest-speaker is blessing the dead blacksmith to whom he had ministered, it does assent to the gesture of forgiveness and blessing.

I turn now to 'Cian á thógaint diom' (*SDE*, p. 58), which returns later to the same nexus of events and experiences and is one of Mhac an tSaoi's very finest poems. The deliberate jaggedness of 'Collage' contrasts sharply with 'Cian ...', which builds intricately woven sentences, used with strong and regular assonantal and syllabic patterning which plays no small part in its beauty. Remarkably, with its three quatrains and a couplet it simultaneously suggests the sonnet-form, so dominant in Renaissance love-poetry in several European languages including English.

In *An paróiste miorúilteach*, de Paor relocates 'Cian' from its chronological order of composition 'in the interest of thematic continuity', placing it instead

19 *FGB* s.v. *sealaidhe*.

at the end of the 'Ceathrúintí ...' and 'An dá thráigh', poems from at least thirty years earlier (*PM*, p. 228). This offers a biographically coherent ending to the story of the love-affair that provided material for the 1950s work, and it does offer a satisfying sense of closure to the reader of this selection. Here I approach the poem from an alternative perspective chronologically, juxtaposing it rather with 'Collage' (1991), which is not reprinted in *An paróiste miorúlteach*, and focusing as much on the – contrasting – aesthetic character of these two poems, as on that primarily biographical coherence discussed above. In terms of Mhac an tSaoi's conscious artistic design, including that of her individual collections, we should note that 'Cian' is significantly placed as the final poem in the 1999 *SDE* volume. This implicitly indicates its intended function of providing closure for both this key body of poetic material and for the emotional negotiation it has entailed over decades of the poet's life. Here is the text.

CIAN Á THÓGAINT DÍOM

Do mheabhair is mó anois a bhraithim uaim –
Ní cuí dhom feasta cumann rúin an tsúsa –
Cleamhnas na hintinne, ná téann i ndísc,
A d'fhág an t-éasc im lár, an créacht ná dúnann. 4

An mó de bhlianaibh scartha dhúinn go beacht
Roimh lasadh im cheann don láchtaint seo taibhriodh dom?
Téann díom, ach staonfad fós den gcomhaireamh seasc,
Altaim an uain is ní cheistim an faoiseamh. 8

Milse ár gcomhluadar d'fhill orm trém néall,
Cling do chuileachtan leanann tréis na físe,
Do leath ár sonas tharainn mar an t-aer,
Bheith beo in éineacht, fiú gan cnaipe 'scaoileadh. 12

Do cheannfhionn dílis seirgthe i gcré
An t-éitheach; is an fíor? An aisling ghlé.

SORROW LIFTS FROM ME²⁰

More than anything, it's your mind I feel the loss of now.
The love between the sheets has had its day
But the bond of mind, which never fades
Is what tears me, is the wound that never heals.

20 Translation by Peter Sirr, *PM*, p. 99 (reprinted with the author's permission).

How many years exactly since we parted
 Before this brightening kindled like a waking dream?
 I can't remember, and will not count them, but
 Give thanks for the moment and not question its peace.

The sweetness of our company came back to me in the dream,
 The chime of your pleasure still sounds in the room,
 Our joy spread round us like the air.
 Even if no button is undone, just to be alive together.

This is the lie: your fair head withered in clay.
 And the truth? The clear vision in the brightening day.

Only in the closing couplet do we learn that this long-lost lover is dead; up to the shock of this penultimate line, it just seems like a long-finished sexual relationship, from which the speaker is recouping memories of companionship and intellectual converse. Line 13 – 'your fair head withered in clay' in *Sirr's* phrase – brings the first-time reader up short with the shock of physical mortality.

Thematically, 'Cian' sets up a strong body-mind binary, familiar from the traditions of European love-poetry in many languages. On the one hand is the concrete bodily-fluid-exchanging business of sexual relations, rendered in 'cumann rúin an tsúsa' (l. 2), 'gan cnaipe 'scaoileadh' (l. 12), and, as noted, 'do cheannfhionn dílis seirgthe i gcré' (l. 13). On the other are all those experiences of emotional and mental union, figured as brightening light, chiming as of a bell, and even as a radiant vision: 'do mheabhair' (l. 1), 'cleamhnas na hintinne, ná téann i ndísc' (l. 3), 'láchtaint' (l. 6), 'Cling do chuileachtan' (l. 10), 'Mílse ár gcomhlúadar' (l. 9), 'Bheith beo in éineacht' (l. 12), and finally 'an aisling ghlé' (l. 14). This concluding line is divided, with technically brilliant poise, into three: the physical dissolution of the lover's body is shown as sheer falsehood; and the truth is the now luminously experienced dream-vision of their shared happiness. This may, however, be a chimera, like the lovely young woman in *aisling* poetry. So, while 'Cian' is recognisably a poem acknowledging the great poetic tradition renouncing physical love, it also diverges significantly from works in that tradition, in not following their usual path through disavowal of the body to any kind of explicit Christian transcendence.

Mhac an tSaoi maintains the antinomies throughout the poem until the very end. The 'love between the sheets' is relinquished and replaced by the imperishableness of 'cleamhnas na hintinne'. But this farewell to physical love is not readily achieved, nor is it as unequivocal as this formulation suggests. Certainly, the items standing for mental and emotional consolation are more numerous than those representing the stubborn body; but there is nevertheless an abiding sense of loss. One way in which this is figured, with perhaps

uncomfortable vividness, is as 'an t-éasc im lár, an créacht ná dúnnann' (l. 4). This image of an open wound, together with 'éasc' – a flaw in rock or timber, or a soft vein or breaking point (*FGB*, s.v.) – makes an undertow of non-assuaged bodiliness and pain, exerting its pull against all the assertions of emotional solace. The 'éasc im lár', in particular, recalls that cluster of disturbing recurrent imagery involving pregnancy, miscarriage and a failure of physical mothering in Mhac an tSaoi's earlier work.²¹ Section V of 'Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin' is also a striking intertext for this line of 'Cian', with its characterization of the unhappy female lover as 'i bpéin', like one perpetually pregnant: 'ag iompar cuileachtan de shíor / Mar bhean gin féna coim' (*MnaS*, p. 62).

The second quatrain, indeed, dwells on the sheer difficulty of relinquishing 'cumann rúin an tsúsa', acknowledging how protracted and unproductive a process it has been to mark the years since her loss ('comhaireamh seasc', l. 7). The dawning of this new insight in her mind is a relief upon which she seizes, but only after more years have passed than she could, barrenly, count. The concrete and humble metonymies of 'súsa' and 'cnaipe' may, like Gray's paths of glory, lead but to the grave, but there is something irreducible about their persistence alongside the exaltation which must override them. They retain a poignancy recalling the most electrifying passage in the 'Ceathrúintí' decades before:

Beagbheann ar amhras daoine,
Beagbheann ar chros na sagart,
Ar gach ní ach bheith sínte
Idir tú agus falla –
II, 1–4 (*MnaS*, p. 88)

Heedless of suspicion,
Of prohibition by priests,
Of everything but to be lying
Between you and the wall —²²

Both passages refer to items contiguous to the lovers' bodies – the bed-cover, the buttons on their clothes, the wall – rather than the bodies on or under or inside or beside these things. The naked erotic body is itself thereby masked in the language of both poems, and the only body-part actually mentioned is the 'ceannfhionn dílis', now denatured in the grave.

In the final outcome of the poem's meditation on the transience of sexual passion, the brightness of the speaker's concluding vision trumps bodily delight. This brightness is repeatedly expressed in the language of dreams:

²¹ Discussed at more length in Coughlan "For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent". ²² My translation.

‘... an láchtaint seo *taibhriodh* dom’ (l. 6), ‘Mílse ár gcomhluadar d’fhill orm *trém néalP*’ (l. 9), and ‘... a leanann tréis na *fise*’, all leading up to the climactic ‘*aisling ghlé*’. This dream-motif indicates a drawing upon inner experience and the self-capacity to attain meaning through memory and reflection. In this sense, the poem is secular, constructing the human memory of the key relationship as what is permanent, rather than turning to metaphysical transcendence. Yet there are religious associations in the language of the speaker’s newly achieved insight, not only in the persistent imagery of light (‘láchtaint’, leading to ‘ghlé’), but particularly in the lovely phrase ‘cling do chuileachtan’, which invests the lovers’ recalled unity with the persisting resonance of a church or monastery bell whose chime hangs on the air – ‘leanann’ – even after the vision has faded (l. 10). ○ ○

I have earlier noted the conflicted and complex relationship between femininity and poetry-making in Mhac an tSaoi’s thought and in her work, as well as her insistent struggle for autonomy as a separate self, and the painful attenuation of that autonomy so powerfully played out in the earlier love-poems with their powerful and innovative invention of a frank woman speaker, and their countervailing impulses of misogyny. ‘Collage’, as I have sought to show, constitutes a brief but intense engagement with those earlier states of mind, and it arrives at a tentative, muted expression of forgiveness and of the capacity to relinquish and pass beyond the brutal language of ‘wench’ and ‘fornication’. ‘Cian’, in which she returns after some years to this same biographical material, is perhaps especially remarkable for its triumphant establishment of a poise, both aesthetic and emotional, which balances and contains the pain and conflict of all the earlier work. Finally, and not of least importance, the speaker’s state of mind also indicates that the agon of gender also seems to have ceased, in the light of that ‘*aisling ghlé*’ of human loving union which ultimately displaces its rhyme-word, ‘*cré*’, as truth does falsehood. One might say that ‘Cian’ ends what Freud described as ‘the work of mourning’, uncertainly and painfully begun with ‘Collage’ but now at last complete. Taken together, these poems reveal the continuing power and beauty of Máire Mhac an tSaoi’s poetic imagination and strengthen her claim to more, and more sustained, critical and readerly attention.

concludes

o.o. Truly note:
does it subliminally
involve the chair
itself? - The power
of the bell?

Sacred Histories

A Festschrift for

MÁIRE HERBERT

Máire Herbert

John Carey, Kevin Murray &
Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh

EDITORS



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