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'For nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent'

Torn motherhood in Mhac an tSaoi's 'Love has pitched his mansion . . .'

Patricia Coughlan

> My mother had to sever some part of herself to let me go.
> I have felt the wound ever since.
> Jeanette Winterson

> [. . .] But Love has pitched his mansion in
> The place of excrement;
> For nothing can be sole or whole
> That has not been rent.

This essay focuses on a powerful, enigmatic and disturbing poem which richly repays attention.[1] It reveals important aspects of Máire Mhac an tSaoi's vision, notably in respect of her representations of femininity and of motherhood, connecting with some of her most celebrated earlier work. 'Love has pitched his mansion . . .' uses a rich and complex range of symbolic material; the content of its very narrative is puzzling, the nature of its narrator opaque, and it conspicuously withholds the lyric grace and aesthetic repose

achieved in many other of her poems. Attempts at a unified reading tend to be ghosted by other possible meanings, and the poem's texture is pierced by shards of intense feeling: anxiety, rage, and violent impulses of disavowal, betrayal and injury.

An cailín mánla deoranta nár dhual di an obair tháir seo,
Do tháinig sí croíleonta le héileamh chugham ón mháthair;
'Comhairigh an uile ghiobal beag a bhaineann le mo pháiste,
Cuntais iad go scrupallach, ná fág aon loc gan áireamh,
Má fhanann oiread 's bríste amú, tá an lios i ngreim im bábán –
Is dá fhaid ó bhaile a scarfam iad, 'sea is mó dá chionn a thnáthfaidh!'

'*Ním agus glanaim*,' ar seisean, '*agus scagaim mo dhá láimh Ann!*'. . .
I mbríste beag an cheana, banúil, breacaithe le blátha;
Cuirim tríd an sobal é, rinseáilim agus fáiscim –
Níl naomh a thuigfeadh m'aigne 'stighse ach ab é Píoláit é!
Solas na bhflaitheas dá anam bocht go ngnóthaí an níochán so!
Amen!

Aithis chun scrín na baindé gur tearmann di an t-ard beag!
Do stolladh fiail an teampaill mar do thairngir an fáidh é!
Scaoilim an t-iarann ar an éadach is is clos dom an t-éamh ag Reáime –
Agus tugaim uaim an t-altram is a balcaisí pacáilte . . .
De gháire na nathrach seanda, de gháire na leasmháthar! (2011: 132)

The gentle girl from far away, not bred to this rough work,
Came to me sore-hearted, with this charge from the mother;
'Count every single garment belonging to my child,
Make a careful tally, leave no rag from the reckoning:
If so much as a knickers is lost, the lios will get my little one –
And the farther from home these clothes go, the more she'll waste away!'

'I wash and clean', he said, 'and scour my hands of Him!'. . .
In the small knickers love chose for her, feminine, flower-patterned;
I put them through the lather, I rinse them and I wring –
No saint would understand my mind, only Pontius Pilate!
May this washing gain heavenly light for his poor soul!
Amen!

An insult to the goddess-shrine, her sanctuary on the height!
The veil of the temple was rent as the prophecy said!
I let loose the iron on the fabric and I hear the cry of Ramah –

The fosterling I send packing, with every shred of her stuff . . .
And I laugh like the serpent long ago; I laugh like the stepmother!

(my translation)

Introduction: What happens in the poem

The central interpretative problems are the identification of the speaker and the nature and significance of her actions, feelings and thoughts. Who is this housewife or mother-figure for whom the gentle foreign girl comes to work, evidently in some subaltern role? On her arrival she is already 'croíleonta' – heart-wounded – by the break with 'the mother'. What indeed is this 'rough work' that she must now do and for which she is ill-suited? May she be a 'cailín aimsire', a domestic servant like those many girls from rural Ireland in the past, sent to work in more affluent town and city households or on farms, like Peig Sayers and hundreds of others? This seems initially to make sense of this first sending away, together with her clothes, by (presumably) her own mother. But the latter's solemn injunction, not to lose or let go a single one of these garments but to account carefully for every shred, has a mysterious intensity which quickly removes the narrative from a social-realistic milieu, and into a symbolic one. We recognize, from vernacular beliefs about fairy abduction, the *lios* which, the mother insists, will get her into its grip if every garment is not scrupulously tallied and conserved. But where and what corresponds to such abduction to the *lios* and detention within it: what, here, does the *lios* stand for? The final line of stanza one complicates the matter when it mentions the danger of carrying off the girl to any great distance: seemingly it is this 'scar[adh] ó bhaile', literally this separation from home, which will lead inexorably to her 'tnáthú' or wasting away (see Bourke 1992).

Stanza two begins with an apparent swerve from this first narrative situation. It quotes Pilate's notorious disavowal of Christ, brought before him for judgement, from the devotional poem 'Caoineadh na maighdine' (Partridge 1983: e.g. 175-86). But Pilate's hand-washing is then echoed and amplified by the speaker's over-energetic and quasi-obsessive laundering of the girl's knickers. This process of putting them through the lather, then rinsing, wringing and ironing them, continues into stanza three. It becomes disturbing for the reader: one can hardly avoid recognizing such vigour expended on a minor domestic task (with a concentration similar to that of 'an mháthair' in stanza one), as a displacement of anger from somewhere else. This state of unease is exacerbated by the focus on the undergarment worn closest to the girl's body, its marked flower-patterned femininity and its smallness, replacing our earlier tentative understanding of the new arrival as an adult or late-adolescent girl and showing her to be a small child. Yet it is the adult speaker, the one in charge and doing the washing, who expresses such mental suffering that she identifies perversely with Pilate. Despite his universal execration in Christian tradition, she proclaims pity for him, rather than for Christ his victim, and even, in a quasi-blasphemous gesture, dedicates her own washing to the salvation of his 'poor soul' and cries 'Amen!' to her own wishing him heavenly light.

The final stanza starts by again disorientating the reader. The prayer for Pilate affronts even the pagan goddess in her shrine on the height, recalling the rending of the temple veil in Jerusalem at Christ's death; will this make the narrator repudiate her own sympathy for Pilate? If this invocation of the Magna Mater – or the Irish sovereignty-goddess, discussed extensively by the poet in a 1983 lecture – steps momentarily outside the poem's strongly Judaeo-Christian framework, in the event it does so to align pagan with Christian mythology by immediately citing the tearing of the veil (Mhac an tSaoi 1983). This tearing of fabric is also symbolic, suggesting a tearing of human bodies and, as noted in my title, it echoes Yeats's poem. But far from altering her stance, this obsessively cleaning and making-proper mother-figure now 'lets loose' her iron on the cloth of the small knickers. As she does, she hears 'the cry from Ramah'. This echoes the biblical passage 'in Ramah was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not' (Jeremiah 31:15). In Jewish scripture, Ramah stands for the killing of Jews and their sending into Babylonian exile; in Christian tradition the grief of Rachel, one of the principal mother-figures in Judaism, is extended to Herod's slaughter of the innocents (Matthew 2:16-18). The Rachel allusion has powerful associations with other ideas relevant to the poem, some subliminally: besides the killing of children, it connotes infertility, causing grief and guilt, and surrogate motherhood via the servant-woman Bilhah who bears 'her', Rachel's, sons to Jacob (Genesis 30:1-8, 31:15; Jeremiah 40:1).

The narrator's extraordinary embracing of guilt crystallizes

in the key moment of the poem: 'The fosterling I send packing . . . /And I laugh like the serpent long ago; I laugh like the stepmother!' In orthodox Christian tradition the serpent is telluric adversary of the sky-woman represented by Mary (avatar of the goddess, in comparative-mythological terms): a familiar image, seen in statues of the Virgin crushing the serpent's head in Catholic schools and churches all over Ireland. So, as with Pilate, to identify with the serpent is perverse. The stepmother's laugh comes from the Grimms' 'Snow White' where the wicked stepmother laughs once she has, as she thinks, killed off Snow White with the poisoned apple; and, strikingly in the context of this poem, her name confirms that she is not in need of purification.

The most pressing question is: what happens to cause the speaker so painfully to disavow the child and wash her hands of her? She washes, rinses, wrings and irons, with every appearance of care and exactness in tallying the items as enjoined, but after all this brusquely rejects their wearer: 'tugaim uaim an t-altram'. What is her motivation?

Interpretation

I interpret the poem as follows. The poem's 'I' is a transnational adoptive mother, who, shockingly, identifies herself with 'bean an leasa', the fairy woman believed to steal human children; her house is the 'lios', and the 'máthair' is the birth mother who is giving up her child.[2] To combine adoptive mother with evil abducting fairy-woman is a startling and painful conjunction; this is a text which voices an intense anxiety of emotional incapacity to give loving care to, as distinct from hygienically controlling, the child other. It is a remarkable expression of

those darker affects which many parents may experience but whose voicing is taboo.

If indeed we see the speaker as self-identified with 'bean an leasa', then in turn with Pilate who disavows Christ, with the serpent, and with the evil stepmother, we are in a position to recognize the poem's powerful and courageous gesture. It names and enacts the fear of not being, in Winnicott's famous phrase, the 'good-enough mother' (1971: 13). This use of the fairy-abduction motif to explore real-life adoption is as brilliant as it is disturbing. When once we grasp the repugnant casting of the poem's persona as the abductor, the mention of 'an obair tháir seo', 'this rough work', is explicable literally (so to speak) as the labour which the fairies were said to demand of their victims, and symbolically as that tough emotional work of adaptation to a radically different life entailed by the family incorporation of a 'foreign' adoptee, often from great distances or with ethnic difference, or both. The birth mother's desperate instructions not to separate the child from her clothes and to lose nothing are also readily understood. She is trying to send something across the tear in the fabric of identity between origins and later existence, so that the new life of the 'bábán' will retain some shred or rag of her first home.

In the rest of this essay I first explore the various contexts, biographical and textual, which generate and support this reading, then the originality and prescience of its representation of mothering, and its role as an early exploration of adoption. In conclusion, I discuss Mhac an tSaoi's use of the Yeats poem quoted in her title, and the power with which she infuses the two key recurring images

of her poem – washing and rending – to anatomize human attachment in the vital instance of parent-child relationship.

Biographical and textual contexts

In what must have been some of the earliest instances of Irish transethnic adoption, at the end of the 1960s Mhac an tSaoi and her husband, Conor Cruise O'Brien, adopted an infant boy, Pádraig, then a girl, Máiréad, both of mixed Irish-African ethnicity. Her autobiography explains two occasioning factors of this: one was the couple's deep attachment to Africa, the other their desire to have children, disappointed by an extra-uterine pregnancy early in their marriage (2003: 298). Her many poems of loving affection about both children are familiar to readers and, as Nic Dhiarmada observes, the family's life together is the manifest context, and often the subject, of all the work beginning with *Codladh an ghaiscígh* (1973), and contrasting with the conventions of lyric concealment predominating in *Margadh na saoire* (1956)

Notably, considering its enigmatic and harsh qualities, 'Love has pitched his mansion . . .' opens the collection *An galar dubhach* (1980: 9-10). It is immediately followed by a warm and loving poem, in realist mode, about five-year-old Máiréad's first visit to the hairdresser's (1980: 11). But this everyday event in childrearing has a melancholy undertow. The child weeps at losing her curls, in a distress twice described as fear ('sceon' and 'sceimhle'), hiding her shorn head on the lap of her mother who, gloomily and without differentiation, enumerates the phases of femaleness awaiting her – menstruation, love, marriage, childbearing –

as all 'gaiste an mhóramha' ('the snare in which most are caught') and finally reads hatred for womanhood itself, 'fuath don mbaineann' ('hatred for the female'), into the child's emotion.

The negative cast of this feminine life so pre-envisaged is dismaying, but it accords with the downbeat and depressed sense of women's lives which characterizes much of Mhac an tSaoi's poetry. Her 1948 short story 'An bhean óg' is remarkable for balancing a young mother's attentive and loving care of children with forthrightly expressed awareness of the lack of fulfilment in her role of wife and mother, paralleling then contemporary arguments by de Beauvoir and anticipating 1960s Anglo-American feminism, for example Friedan's *Feminine mystique* (Bourke et al. 2002: 1139-41). Nic Dhiarmada has ably contextualized Mhac an tSaoi's work within growing feminist consciousness from the late 1960s on, noting its vigorous participation in the process of strengthening critique and resistance to inherited formations of femininity (24). But her earlier writings already invoked motherhood in dark and troubling ways, and these join the biographical facts as highly suggestive contexts for the understanding of 'Love has pitched his mansion . . .'.

Her most celebrated work, the seven-poem sequence 'Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin' (1956), together with the fine, bitter poem 'An dá thráigh', 'conceived as an epilogue' to the sequence, traces a failed transgressive love affair (de Paor 2011: 228). Always at the level of metaphor, these poems repeatedly describe an unloving mother-figure who either wilfully repudiates her infant, or finds herself incapable of nurturing it. The short lyric 'Ceangal do cheol pop' (2011: 124), probably from the early 1960s, in a sense belongs with

these by virtue of its startling reference to interrupted gestation and maternal nurture withheld. In all of these, the protagonist castigates herself as failing in the obligations of womanhood, and even presents herself as a predatory anti-mother. This is seen in the fragmentary 'Ceangal', where the apparently light refrain for a (non-existent) pop love-song is suddenly pierced with a shard of grief at either infertility or miscarriage. Addressing a lover journeying abroad, it opens: 'Ait liom go ngeofá slán uaim!/Éaló uaim thar farraige sall!': strange he should get safely away from her, since, it goes on, she carries him inside her very body, where a child would be 'dá mbeadh aon pháiste ann!' ('if any child were there'). The strangeness resides presumably in the fact that an embryo cannot survive outside the maternal body; but the speaker's affect towards the lover too seems, on reflection, oddly threatening. Not only does the poem assimilate or elide woman into mother, in classic Freudian fashion, the whole persona becoming-womb, but worse, this is an unsafe womb, for lack of that good-mother capacity for holding which relational psychoanalysis calls 'containing' (Winnicott 97).

This pregnancy metaphor echoes 'Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin', section V, where the unremitting pain of unhappy love is likened to a pregnant woman's constant awareness that she carries the foetus in her body. This is only slightly less disturbing than the savage imagery of section IV of the same poem, where the jealousy she feels in the troubled love affair is described as itself a monster-infant, always feeding from her nipple with a poisonous bite; in 'An dá thráigh', self-culpabilization reaches a peak of intensity when, the relationship now over, she blames its failure on her own incapacity to nurture either herself or the lover: at first she is

both the infant dashed from the breast, the calf denied milk, and the one who has torn it away: Frank O'Brien's mention of Lady Macbeth's infant-murdering fantasy is apt (1968: 96).[3] Sexual desire is then figured as a flowing stream at which, in the past, she has felt compelled to drink. However, she has now figuratively become this source, yet cannot assuage her lover's thirst; she is a mountain well yielding only salt water. Worse, in banishing him she has become the mother who aborted the baby she carried because it was not fit to live.

All this amounts to a horrifying internalisation of misogynist destroying-mother stereotypes. Its intensity is scarcely lessened by its being deployed at the figurative level, as part of the troping of failed sexual and emotional attachment, and it has an obvious relevance to 'Love has pitched his mansion . . .', which I read as an experiment in the representation of powerful counter-currents within maternal experience. The self-projection as cruel stepmother we see there clearly in some sense remobilizes this prior self-indictment as unnatural by the persona of the love-poems, though here it may serve to express anxiety on the part of the adoptive mother about her own putative predatoriness.

Mhac an tSaoi and the critique of motherhood

Friedman observes that there is a 'repressed in women's narrative', namely 'what has not or cannot be spoken directly because of the external and internalized censors of patriarchal social order' (1989: 142). This helps to explain the enigmatic, opaque character of Mhac an tSaoi's text. 'Love hath pitched his mansion . . .' coincides with – or anticipates – the series of ground-breaking analyses of motherhood as a social construction emerging after the mid-1970s: an important strand of the poem's meaning is as an act of resistance to essentialist assumptions about mothering. Key milestones in the dismantling of these assumptions are Rich, *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*, Warner, *Alone of all her sex: The myth and cult of the Virgin Mary* (both 1976), and Ruddick's 'Maternal thinking' (1980), which, somewhat differently, focuses on the coherence of actual practices of mothering, as distinct from the falsely idealized 'perfect mother' projections of ideology.

Setting out to explore the simultaneous 'devaluation of women in other spheres and the pressures on women to validate themselves in maternity', Rich analysed motherhood as a social phenomenon 'embedded in a political institution' rather than purely a natural given (1977: xii). Her insights clarify the mute anger of the poem's narrator: Rich observes that while mother-love is 'supposed' by ideology to be 'continuous' and 'female anger threatens the institution of motherhood', in real people 'love and anger can exist concurrently, along with the fear that we are not "loving" '. Furthermore, since 'the mother's very character, her status as a woman, are in question if she has "failed" her children', grief at felt inadequacy can be translated into 'guilt and self-laceration' (46). 'Love has pitched his mansion . . .' vividly exemplifies these workings of 'our cultural ideology of blame and idealization of mothers', internalized by many women (Chodorow and Contratto 1982: 65). Mhac an tSaoi's writing as a whole is illuminated by Suleiman's investigation of 'maternal splitting' and the antinomies of writing and motherhood: both show the complex relation of women's creativity with ideologies of femininity and maternity (1994: 13-55).

These anxieties about adequacy in mothering are matched by women's widespread internalization of social disapproval in another context, that of infertility. The culpabilizing of married-but-childless women about perceived failure to fulfil their role is an international phenomenon. Rich notes how 'throughout received history, the childless woman has been regarded (with exceptions such as the cloistered nun or temple virgin) as a failed woman', and denied what she calls 'the hypocritical and palliative reverence accorded the mother' (251). Such censure was strong in Irish communities: 'Lots of women have no children . . . but the men have no value in them if they don't' (Arensberg and Kimball 1968: 201). Infertility was understood as caused by a lack – 'barrenness' – specifically in women: 'childlessness was almost totally blamed on women' (Curtin 1968: 161). The reference to Rachel in 'Love has pitched his mansion . . .' is a subliminal allusion to this complex of negative emotion surrounding childless women. Genesis is eloquent here: when Rachel sees 'that she bare Jacob no children', she says to him 'Give me children, or else I die'; and when, eventually, God 'opens' Rachel's womb, she says he has 'taken away my reproach' (30.1-2, 8).

Transnational adoption

The distinguished novelist Jeanette Winterson wrote of her own adoption: 'My mother had to sever some part of herself to let me go. I have felt the wound ever since' (2011: 220). She described her feelings about her birth mother as emotional turmoil, felt contradiction and inner conflict:

> I don't know what I feel about her . . . This isn't a head/heart split or a thinking/feeling split. It is emotional matrix. I can juggle different and opposing ideas and realities easily. But I hate feeling more than one thing at once. Adoption is so many things at once. (228)

While Winterson's perspective is an adoptee's, this strikingly echoes the affective instability, splitting and sharp swerves we have observed in the narrative of Mhac an tSaoi's persona, while her phrase 'emotional matrix' recognizes the founding role of mothering in identity.

The original mother's warning to keep child and clothes together has the air of a magic-symbolic injunction which must not be breached. But this is no mere mysterious prohibition of the kind often marking human-otherworld interaction in myth and legend. Considered psychologically, it is also powerfully resonant. Adoption is an extraordinary transaction between birth and adoptive parent, intimately personal yet usually rendered anonymous by circumstances or social prohibition, sometimes even by law. Read in the context of this separation of person from origins (this 'rending'), the warning to keep count of the clothes must really be about the care of the child herself. The birth mother is sending away her daughter, but tries to ensure that a set of 'transitional objects' – the clothes – be passed across what is a painful and momentous divide (on the concept of the transitional object, see Winnicott 1-34).

This insistence indicates awareness of trauma, not only for the giving other, but for the girl herself, who indeed arrives 'heart-injured'. It thereby mirrors what is now considered best practice in the emotional management of adoption,

contrasting with the imperative of previous generations towards concealment from the child of her or his origins. This was usually accompanied by a change of given name, an eloquent indication of the desire of some adoptive parents so far as possible to erase all indications of the child's origins and early experiences elsewhere. These practices, emanating from an era which saw the nuclear family as the centre of social order, subjecting all instances of transgressive or irregular reproduction to disapproval and exclusion, are now considered profoundly mistaken and damaging to all parties. But the attempt to effect an absolute break between a person and his or her birth milieu must always have been an inappropriately controlling one with destructive effects.

In this context, the obsessive washing in the poem finds an echo in the enactment of what Sweden, up to the recent past, called 'clean' adoption, namely one which severed all connections between birth and adoptive contexts, sometimes by law (Yngvesson 2010: 79-81). Yet, because contexts stick to people, even infants, adoption always entails strangeness, at every level from the sensory to the linguistic and the cultural: the adoptee must indeed be 'deoranta' (foreign), and the new (m)other, at the outset, profoundly other.

In the 1970s when this and Mhac an tSaoi's other poems about adoptive mothering were mainly written, systematic regulation of intercountry adoption had not begun to happen (the relevant Hague Convention came into force only in 1995), and in psychology, social policy and even law, this continues to be an emerging field. As Yngvesson, a contemporary authority, explains, adoption is still conceived to some degree as 'a familiar narrative in which children must be abandoned so that the "family" can be preserved' (13). Within

what she calls the 'genealogical imaginary' of most societies, neither a birth mother, on the one hand, nor adoptive parents, on the other, are somehow sufficient to be felt to 'constitute a "real" (two-parent, biogenetic) family' with 'blood ties' (25-6; 174-5). In striking similarity to Winterson's experiential account, Yngvesson discerns an inherent tension in 'adoptive kinship', a tension which 'simultaneously constitutes and disrupts' this deeply grounded 'genealogical imaginary' (15). This remains so despite the establishment of a predominant 'liberal legal form of adoptive kinship', seeking to address abuses which particularly surround intercountry adoption. The Hague Convention recognized a need for measures to safeguard children's fundamental rights and prevent 'child laundering' and 'abduction, sale of, or traffic in children' (Yngvesson: 13; Hague Convention.) Mhac an tSaoi herself has execrated Ireland's treatment of babies as 'little bundles of merchandise' in the 'veritable trade with the USA in white babies for adoption' from the 1940s to the 1970s (2003: 299; see Milotte 1997).

She also very frankly expresses what Yngvesson calls the 'disruption' of the 'genealogical imaginary' in 'An t-altram allúrach' (The foreign fosterling), a poem about her son's adoption. It merits quoting for reasons of both parallel and contrast with 'Love has pitched his mansion . . .':

> Criosantamam ciar fén mbáistigh mothal a chinn,
> Beola ciosiontaithe, Eros nó Tutankhamun,
> Aghaidh fidil órga a ghnúis, thar ghaineamh-shleas tháinig,
> Oíche loigeacha na súl, péarlaí a charball,
> 'Gus mise an chearc ar gor ar ál anaithnid. (1999: 25)

A dark chrysanthemum in the rain his bush of hair,
His bee-stung lips, Eros or Tutankhamun,
His face a golden mask that came out of a sand-dune,
His eyes night-hollows, his teeth pearls,
And me the hen hatching an unknown brood.
(my translation).

This first exoticizes the child's ethnic difference in almost orientalist mode, but ends disarmingly with the rural-domestic image of a hen hatching 'ál anaithnid', an unknown brood to register the mother's sheer non-recognition of the infant.

The later work broadens and shifts the poet's earlier focus on interiority and individual emotional struggle, registering a broader ideological awareness, in particular via the poems' address to this experience of adopting ethnically mixed children, bringing, as such adoptions do, the majority world willy-nilly into the white family context. Thus 'Do phatalóigín gearrchaile' vividly describes little Máiréad's arrival amid international disturbance and 'fear on the radio', and 'Pádraig roimh an mbál' tempers joy at her Dublin adolescent dressed for a dance with compunction about 'that other mother's son' already a soldier in a Nicaraguan war-zone (2011: 122; 156-160). In this context, the invocation in 'Love hath pitched his mansion . . .' of the cry from Ramah implicitly extends Rachel's maternal sorrow for all lost children to the contemporary era, invoking the wars, massacres and displacements elsewhere which often lie behind the practice of northern-hemisphere transnational adoption.

Washing and rending

Washing, whether of clothes or domestic vessels, is a constitutively feminine activity, figuring negatively in other poems as a synecdoche for housekeeping in general ('Mutterrecht', 2011: 163, 'Neamhscéal', 1999: 11, and 'Sci-fi', 1980: 19). But the washing in 'Love has pitched his mansion . . .', with its invocations of goddess, serpent and stepmother, may generate more sinister echoes too. O'Connor cites international vernacular beliefs about 'restless spirits of women who murdered children' returning as washerwomen 'endlessly washing out the bloodied corpses, or clothes, of the murdered child' (2007: 139).

The poem's symbolic material weaves a texture of its own, drawing us towards deeper meanings. The violent rending of the temple veil complements what the washer 'puts' the garment 'through', described in language carrying a force incompatible with affection or the demands of nurture but entailing an unloving attenuation of the child herself, displaced onto her garment. Furthermore, can the 'excrement' – in whose place 'love has pitched his mansion' – be far from this? Is the (adoptive *lios*-) mother, scrubbing shit from the cloth, not attacking the very stain of human bodily being? 'Scaoileadh', the word used for the ironing, means release or letting out: what is being let out or let fly on the cloth? Hatred? Jealousy? Fear? No wonder she hears at that point 'an t-éamh' (the wail) from Ramah. If the clothes are indeed a metonymy for the child herself, fabric for the flesh it covers, then the *lios*-mother's violent laundering acts out her need to make the girl into what Kristeva calls a 'clean and proper body' (1982: 3). Can what she tries obsessively to eradicate be in fact

the child's difference: to wash away the 'excrement' of her origins? Is this because of the alien – 'allúrach', 'anaithnid' – nature of these?

But as Pilate could not cleanse his hands of Christ's blood, which has stayed stuck to them throughout the Christian era, this washing fails to remove the child's strangeness: no purification ritual can, or should, simplify the complexities of embodied being into proper and improper, clean and tainted, native and strange. In all self-other attachment, besides, what is cherished and what is rejected are always inextricably intertwined, and what Kristeva calls the process of abjection – expelling, disavowing – is incapable of completion. However decisively this splinter-self of unloving motherhood may cast away the child – 'tugaim uaim an t-altram', 'I give the fosterling away from me' – and however she may laugh the bitter laugh of serpent and stepmother, she still hears from Ramah the cry of her own alter ego Rachel, with her history of infertility and recourse to surrogate motherhood.

Yeats' Crazy Jane and wholeness

At the poem's threshold, its title calls upon Yeats' rejection, via his Crazy Jane persona, of those body-spirit, immanence-transcendence, and female-male dualisms which run as a fault-line throughout Western thought, blocking human wholeness and self-realisation for either gender. Crazy Jane says 'nothing can be sole or whole /that has not been rent', alluding to the tearing of the hymen which initiates sexual intercourse but, far more broadly, describing the sometimes bruising and never-ending process of self-formation and integration entailed in trying to become 'sole or whole'.

In choosing her title, Mhac an tSaoi might seem to be implicitly adopting Crazy Jane's assertion that love and excrement are indissociable, and that all human things (the self, the body, the forming of attachment) must necessarily be torn in order to achieve wholeness. Yeats is using his persona Crazy Jane (herself an avatar of An Chailleach Bhéarra, whose robust defence of the sexual she echoes) to repudiate the 1930s Irish bishops' horror of the body and especially of the female body (Mhac an tSaoi 1983 quotes 'An Chailleach Bhéarra' in full; and see Cullingford 1993: 235-7). But the speaker of 'Love hath pitched his mansion . . .' in fact has an affinity with the bishop, who urges repentance and asceticism, and with Crazy Jane, none. Fixated on cleansing, she visits this purging on the child at the centre of the poem, of whom we learn only that she is mild or gentle, has been exiled and has suffered emotional injury ('mánla', 'deoranta', 'croíleonta'). The persona is, then, both tearing and herself torn. 'Rent' by guilt and self-blame at her own inability to accept the child with, as we might put it, all her baggage – 'every little bit of stuff that belongs to my child' – yet she cannot quell her own compulsion to scrub at and ultimately to disavow the one who is other. So Yeatsian wholeness and self-completion is never attained. The poem is a dark fantasy of failed mothering, of an abortive attachment in which recognition could not come about: as in the desolating 'An dá thráigh', 'Níor leoite marthain don rud', 'The thing didn't stand a chance' (2011: 96). Therefore, as the veil of the temple was 'rent' at Christ's death, the nurturing bond is twice 'rent': once by separation from the birth-mother, and now again by the failure of the poem's 'I' to love the child in all her difference.

Conclusion

Discussing post-1950 poetry in Ireland, John Goodby contests what he calls 'consolatory' uses of the lyric form, in which contradictions are reconciled and pain assuaged (Goodby 2000: 59, 218, 253). In such texts and such readings, what Beckett elsewhere calls 'the suffering of being' is briefly allayed, momentarily holding sorrow and rage at bay (Beckett 1969: 19). Mhac an tSaoi characteristically withholds such consolation. In so doing, she offers a profound insight into the contention of love and horror within each self, and never more than in the ceaseless and difficult work of human attachment. This text plays out the always-possible failure of love: we may all sometimes hear, and need to hear, the wail from Ramah and the stepmother's laugh.

NÓTAÍ

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[2] I thank Lucy McDiarmid for proposing this idea and for much helpful discussion of the poem.

[3] 'I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:/I would, while it was smiling in my face,/Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums/And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you/Have done to this.' *Macbeth* I. vii.