

**'THE SHALLOW LOOPS THE BLACKBIRDS MAKE':
MARY DEVENPORT O'NEILL'S VOICES OF ALTERITY**

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Abstract: Mary Devenport O'Neill's (1879-1967) short lyric nature poems often resist figuration to display reciprocity with animals and the natural world. In many of her poems, she aligns herself with animals and nature in order to affirm her own agency, recognising her own individual, female narrative as complicit with the alterity of the natural world. Rather than resisting the position of the literal within nature, in a similar way to a masculinist mentality of transcendence, Devenport turns towards it, literally narrating a world in which the "thou" of animals and nature do not act as subordinate to humans. Ecofeminist analysis of gender binaries in language includes critique of figurative language on the basis that a "chain of signifiers" which are embedded within symbolic and figurative language are liable to "dominate, distort and deaden what is signified – the absent referent" which is also identified by Josephine Donovan as the "thou" (1998, p.75). Ecofeminist "critique of the ontology of domination" proposed by Josephine Donovan, which is based on Margaret Homan's feminist linguistic theory, reveals the ways in which Devenport's poetry modified nature tropes in order to literally express the natural world in a pro-ecofeminist modification of Irish literary narratives (74).

Key-words: Nature poetry, Alterity, Ecofeminism.

Mary Devenport O'Neill (1879-1967) was an artist, poet, playwright and hostess of a literary salon, as well as wife of Education Minister, Irish scholar and author Joseph O'Neill. These many roles placed her at the centre of Irish intellectual debate during the years of the Irish Free State. Her Thursday evening literary salon in Dublin was attended by the most prominent cultural and political figures of her era including Jack B. and W.B. Yeats, George Russell, Frank O'Connor, Austin Clarke and Lennox Robinson. W.B. Yeats's 1920s notebooks record his conversations with

Devenport on his scheme for *A Vision* and she collaborated with Clarke regarding the Lyric Theatre Company's production of her verse-plays. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, her work was regularly published in Irish periodicals, mainly in *The Dublin Magazine*, and she also contributed short reviews to *The Bell* and *The Irish Times*. Her work was broadcast on Radio Eiréann and her verse-plays were performed by the Abbey Theatre and Lyric Theatre Company. Dame Ninette de Valois choreographed a production of her verse-play *Bluebeard* as a ballet-poem. De Valois also worked on three of W.B. Yeats's dance plays for the Abbey. Susan Schreibman has described Devenport's single volume of poetry as "[p]robably the first collection of poetry published by an Irish poet (besides Yeats) which could be considered modernist" (314). Although Devenport made an important contribution to Irish literature in the 1930s and 1940s she was subsequently ignored by literary history. Her writing played a pivotal role in the formation of Irish culture but her poetry is scarcely mentioned in reviews, memoirs of the period, or in subsequent criticism.

Devenport's distinctively female perspective responds to the male-centred omniscient lyric viewpoints and dominant gendered structures prevalent in Irish Literary Revival poetry. Often drawing on ancient Celtic myths and tropes, she has a highly original scepticism towards representations of nature and the feminine. Her poetic constructions of the natural world are often revealed as immanent with her speakers rather than a symbolic reflection of them, and she has a strong awareness of modernist power dynamics, using nature's rhythms to express human emotion, and physical embodiment within nature. Clearly questioning Irish masculinist literary tropes which configure the land as female, her attention to nature's minute aspects also recognises the alterity of the natural world. According to Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, the ideology of an emerging Irish nation at the start of the twentieth century included the idea of Irish landscape as "a bleak but beautiful countryside, peopled exclusively by a sturdy Gaelic-speaking, Catholic people" (28). Supporting this

ideology, Irish twentieth-century visual and literary imagery often personified the Irish land and nature as female and this formed an important trope of the Irish Literary revival. This imagery was formed during the years of the Irish Free State when writers “rescued much from the Gaelic past and reinterpreted that past in the interests of a raised national consciousness” (Brown 80). Engaging with male-centred themes created complexities for female poets because the same hierarchical literary structures which supported them also objectified them. Nature tropes, when employed by women, were designated feminine by the dominant masculine culture which also placed the women on the object side of the subject dyad. However, deployment of nature and landscape tropes also provided a vehicle for Devenport and many women poets of her era to access an imaginative paradigm which was considered by the masculinist literary establishment as suitable territory for what they considered to be the feminine “poetess.” This may also have been detrimental to Devenport’s subsequent status as a poet because of the way in which these nature narratives were later evaluated. The feminised “poetess” also fuelled the notion of poetry-writing as an innocuous leisure pursuit taken up by otherwise idle women. Masculinist evaluation of this nature poetry often ignored it or dismissed it as effete and sentimental.

Devenport aligns her poetic voice with animals and nature in order to paradoxically affirm her own agency, recognising her own narratives as complicit with the alterity of the natural world. Josephine Donovan proposes that in ecofeminist writing “the literal of the natural is itself significant; it speaks in its own language, which humans must seek to hear – not erase through their symbolic code” (80). One of the primary objectives of ecofeminist literary criticism is an analysis of *othering* in a hierarchical order that sees man and culture as an eloquent binary opposite to the muteness of nature and woman. Like all feminist analysis, it is concerned with unravelling relationships between dominance and subservience which remain obscured within apparently innocuous gender constructions. This

theory does not recapitulate the affiliation between woman and nature but it unravels assumptions about literature which cites nature as feminine. According to Margaret Homans, "For the same reason that women are identified with nature and matter in any traditional thematics of gender [...] women are also identified with the literal, the absent referent in our predominant myth of language"(4). Homans goes on to explain that the positioning of the literal poses a dilemma for women's creative voice because "the feminine is, from the point of view of a predominantly androcentric culture, always elsewhere too" (4). Ecofeminist analysis of gender binaries in language includes critique of figurative language on the basis that a "chain of signifiers" which are embedded within symbolic and figurative language are liable to "dominate, distort and deaden what is signified – the absent referent" which is also identified by Donovan as the "thou" (75). She cites a range of women writers in different periods of history including Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Wordsworth and Hélène Cixous who have proposed that women writers should express the "thou" as a living presence in order to "capture reality before it is transformed into an object by signifying texts"(79). This configuration of writing favours a literal description of the object rather than a symbolic and metaphorical expression of it. Homans takes a similar view of the figurative, citing symbolic formations of nature in William Wordsworth as a "tendency to obliterate the image in favour of meaning" and she argues for culture's identification of the literal with women and the feminine (63).

Devenport often avoids this obliteration of image by preferring expression of the "thou" in the natural world and this is revealed through her short bird poems. However, affirmation of the peripheral "thou" and articulation of the abject also creates complexities in women's poetry. Susan Stanford Friedman suggests that, "[t]o themselves, people made peripheral by the dominant society are not "marginal," "other." But to counter the narratives of their alterity produced by the dominant society, they must tell other stories that chart their exclusions, affirm their agency (however complicit and circumscribed), and continually (re) construct their

identities” (Friedman 230). This charting of exclusion is often present, recognised and accepted in Devenport’s poetry. Homans argues that the positioning of the literal poses special problems for women writers because literal language, together with “nature and matter to which it is epistemologically linked, is traditionally classified as feminine, and the feminine is, from the point of view of a predominantly androcentric culture, always elsewhere too” (4). The literary establishment proposes figurative and symbolic constructions as higher forms of discourse, and because literal constructions are associated with the feminine, women writers are often forced to repress the literal in order for their narratives to be accepted by that dominant culture. Donovan suggests that “figurative literary texts reshape, obscure, and dominate the ‘literal,’” subduing it to the claims of the “figurative” (76). Devenport articulates the complexities involved in culture’s repression of the literal and often her writing about the natural world in poetry remains purposely unfixed. She also articulates the complexities of expressing the literal world in nature.

“The Blackbird,” is an example of the influence of early Irish poetry on Devenport’s work. She was familiar with ancient Irish myth, which would have been extensively discussed in the literary salons she held and attended. Her husband, Joseph, studied Celtic philology in Manchester and Freiburg, Germany, before leaving his studies to join the Irish Free State Department of Education. Her poem “The Blackbird” echoes an Irish anonymous quatrain of the same name from the *Leabhar Breac*, which, according to Kuno Meyer, may have been written sometime between 1408 and 1411. This anonymous quatrain provides a starting point for Devenport’s interpretation of the blackbird as an autonomous being:

Ah, Blackbird, thou are satisfied

Where thy nest is in the bush:

Hermit that clinkest no bell,

Sweet, soft, peaceful is thy note (Meyer 100).

Proinsias MacCana proposes that early Irish lyric verse --- written after the seventh and before the seventeenth century --- had qualities influenced by “Latin hymn meters mediated by the *literati* from the monasteries” (1991, p.2). These scribes wrote with “simplicity of expression” and thematically much of their poetry “concerned the world of nature” (p.2). This nature verse often positions the poet as a recluse “living in the woodland in intimate contact with nature” and MacCana goes on to suggest that the use of these nature narratives was “not so much concerned with the actual description of nature” as with an “emotional response to its endlessly varied phenomena” (p.2).

This blackbird is happy to remain alone and does not ask for alms but Devenport’s “big-footed blackbird” enters into barter with the speaker (Devenport qtd. O’Neill 39). Both poems resist use of the bird as a metaphor, but Devenport’s interpretation depends on an equal exchange which leaves the speaker bereft. The poem addresses the bird directly, not as a subordinate, but as an equal and autonomous being:

I gave you two leafy woods, big-footed blackbird,
The oak wood and the willow wood close to my door,
And what did you give me back, wasteful, ungrateful?
A long-drawn-out profitless whistle you gave me –
That and no more (Devenport qtd. O’Neill 39).

The blackbird does not rely on the benevolence of the speaker in either of these poems. In the Irish quatrain the bird is peaceful and satisfied with its place in the bush as a separate being from the world of the poet, and its song is sweet, soft and peaceful. Devenport, in contrast, concludes that the speaker has been short-changed in the transaction by the “wasteful,” and “ungrateful,” bird whose whistle is “profitless” (39). These observations of the bird, and the transaction between speaker and bird, suggest that the speaker may desire the bird as a symbol but the

bird does not consent. The bird's "profitless" song cannot be used in order to create a poetic symbol because recognition of the bird as an independent being will not allow it. By foregrounding the bird's physical characteristics and observing specific details of its appearance the poem attributes an agency of its own to the bird and this literal cataloguing of attributes is resistant to objectification.

The intensity of external landscape energises the speaker's imagination through attention to individual features in "Wishes," and this poem also articulates the demands made on the poet for expression of the evolving "thou." Nature's energy is vividly present when Devenport's inscription of the surrounding scene invigorates hope before it is intimidated by the world of figuration. The speaker responds emotionally to nature's endlessly varied phenomena in the manner of early Irish lyric verse proposed by MacCana. This poem introduces Devenport's preoccupation with individual expression aligned with unfolding nature in a manner which is never seized but remains random and outside of the speaker's control. "Wishes" expresses the fragility of actively present nature before the "thou" is inhibited by the reality of dominating language.

I'll take

The shallow loops the blackbirds make

In their low flight,

And gather the strange white

That changes a green field as night comes on

I'll catch the bars of light,

Before they're gone,

That blinking eyes bring down from the moon,

And make my wishes out of these,

That if I please

I can dissolve them soon –

In time to save them from reality;

The toughness of its stuff would trouble me. (Devenport qtd.

ONeil 19).

The painterly image of Blackbird's flying low in shallow loops conjures up a sense of movement in which the speaker is complicit, creating individual interaction between the poet's imagination and the natural world in motion. The impermanence of alternating light and darkness evoked by the expression "bars of light," coupled an image seen through blinking eyes, and therefore alternating between image and non-image, gives the impression of continual dissipation. The speaker gathers and catches this changing light, holding her wishes, momentarily, before they gradually change into another form. Nature's evolution is precious to the speaker because it fuels hope before it is destroyed by troubling reality. The natural world's processes will not survive the rigour of a formulation which considers them as possessions. Reality's toughness is impermeable and unmoving in contrast to the speaker's wishes which evolve within a fragile and ephemeral world. Nature's alterity and individuality is also empowered by impermanence but this is tempered by the troubling state of reality.

The living presence of the "thou" forms a recurring trope throughout Devenport's nature poetry. In another poem, "Swallows," a lack of resolution represents a literal rendition of the scene which does not dominate the "thou" by insisting on shaping nature through the use of figurative language. Anne Fogarty suggests that in this poem "the outer scene refuses to yield a meaning. This very non-significance of the concrete world seems, however, to reinforce its meaning" (89-90). Although Devenport articulates the complexities of the concrete world, the swallows in her poem refuse a conclusion and instead, she uses a detailed literal description to transcribe the outer scene:

This is my toy ---
To sit in this place
Trying to trace
On a misty sky
The pattern the swallows make
As they fly;
But they break the lines with
Their flittering wings,
And I have more joy
Than is in things
Not knowing why (Devenport qtd. O'Neill 30).

In a similar mode to "The Blackbird" the swallows refuse to conform to the wishes of the speaker who is following their pattern as though she wishes to see an ordered construction. In both of these poems, the speaker responds to the autonomy of the birds who express this through refusing to fulfil the role of poetic object on which a literary figuration could be placed. The scene is a toy, therefore the poet wants to play with it as though she has ownership, but the birds do not comply. Their refusal to conform also represents a liberation which the speaker may identify with. The poet composes formal lines of poetry, and the birds construct and then break their own lines in the sky. Homans writes of Dorothy Wordsworth that "[m]eaning can be in things, literally" (62). In other words, a literal rendition of the scene "comes to be about the lack of distance between object and meaning, signifier and referent," (62) in a similar way to the literal lines of poetry which refer to the swallows' lines in the sky.

The rhyme scheme supports her theme of dissent from linearity, as she uses the line ending “with” to break the design in which each line-ending is either a half or full rhyme with the exception of the line where the birds break the pattern of lines: the rhyme between “place/trace/make, toy/sky/fly, wings/things,” and “joy/why” is broken by the word “with.” The poet’s effort to create a configuration of their lines in the sky is thwarted by the arbitrariness of the natural world, but it gives her pleasure precisely because it is incomprehensible to her. The birds’ resistance to linearity and their refusal of benevolence suggests subversion, but rather than viewing this as dissent from her desire for seeing them in a particular way she is amused by it. She cannot dominate the randomness of the swallows’ patterns through figuration in poetry and instead she charts their exclusion from the formalism of their own lines through a literal poetic rendering of their broken patterns. This supports Friedman’s proposition that narratives of alterity chart the exclusion of the other and this is expressed through a literal description of the arbitrary world of nature.

Devenport’s affirmation of alterity, her use of specific detail, and her literal rendition of nature all capture the “thou” before it is transformed into an object by signifying texts in a way proposed by Woolf, and Cixous. Her poetic speakers recognise and accept subjectivity. Although she proposes alternative perspectives, she refuses to conclude on these and instead her poetry undermines assumptions about dominating and the dominated within poetic discourse.

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