



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S53. Women Write Back: Irish Women, Identities and Nationhood

Wednesday 30 August: 9.30-11.30am

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This seminar seeks to address the corpus of modern Irish literature by women as an act of “writing back” - subverting, reinscribing and appropriating a literary tradition in order to change stereotypes and reconceptualize metaphors of femininity. Participants will examine the modes of expansion and redefinition of autobiographical genre and those addressing issues of education, gender roles, sexual politics, national identity and religion in the traditional Irish society. We are also interested in modern Irish women’s poetry and its subversive aspects, and the comparative aspects of the Irish and other national literatures.

‘Less Mortal Than Any Being’: Text, Body and Voice in *The Far Side of a Kiss*

Catherine Smith (University College Cork)

Anne Haverty’s *The Far Side of a Kiss* (2000) questions and reinscribes accepted, male-authored versions of the past by giving a voice to Sarah Walker, the subject of Hazlitt’s 1823 *Liber Amoris*. While rediscovering silenced women has become a standard feminist practice, Haverty engages with the mediation of both history and literature: Sarah is at once a historical and fictional character. The novel playfully deconstructs literary ventriloquism and interrogates the relationship between text and body. Haverty’s choice of Sarah, a servant girl, as a subject suggests an intriguing link between the subaltern and contemporary versions of Irish femininity.

Antiquarianism and Gender in Eighteenth-century Ireland

Cliona Ó Gallchoir (University College Cork)

This paper reconsiders the controversial relationship between antiquarianism and political radicalism by proposing that it is configured not only in terms of tradition and modernity, but also in terms of the private and the public, with consequences, therefore, for how we understand the position of women's writing within the tradition of Irish literature. I will explore these ideas by considering the use of antiquarian material in the work of Sarah Butler and Regina Maria Roche, whose *The Children of the Abbey* (1796)

represents an early example of the incorporation of antiquarian material into the novel form.

Flesh is Heretic: the Female Body in Eavan Boland's *In Her Own Image*

Vesna Ukić (University of Zadar, Croatia)

The paper discusses the poems from Eavan Boland's 1980 volume *In Her Own Image* in which the poet tackles subjects related to the female body: menstruation, anorexia, mastectomy, masturbation, and striptease. In these poems written in the late 1970s, prior to a sea change in Irish society happening in the last two decades of the twentieth century, Boland aims at subverting cherished stereotypes, confronting the then controversial issues of women's sexuality and speaking out openly and shamelessly via her strong lyric. The paper focuses on the perspectives from which her female speakers observe their own bodies, and the way they treat their sexuality.

Reading Irish Women's Autobiography and Nationalism

Piia Varis (University of Jyväskylä)

In my paper, I suggest that we should not be reading autobiographical writings by women who were actively involved in the Irish nationalist movement simply as testimonies of individual lives. Instead, we should examine the contexts of production and reception, i.e. the discursive frameworks within which they were written and have been and are read. Such readings would promote our understanding of the relationship between gender and nationalism, the ways in which the category of 'woman' is historically produced, and the complexity of the process in which autobiographical texts by women acquire their meanings.

Mother Ireland meets the Virgin Mary: Feminine Identities in Anne Enright's *The Wig My Father Wore*

Elke D'hoker (University of Leuven)

This paper offers an analysis of feminine and national identities in Anne Enright's magical realist first-person novel, *The Wig My Father Wore*. It considers the ways in which seemingly neo-conservative development of the novel's I-protagonist – back to nature, tradition and motherhood – is consistently undercut in her narration. This happens for instance through the deconstructive destabilization of traditional binaries and through the playful references to traditional genres such as the female *Bildungsroman*. In this way, Enright's novel offers a subtle and ambiguous picture of what it means to be a woman in contemporary Ireland. By way of conclusion, this analysis of *The Wig My Father Wore* is underscored by references to Enright's oeuvre as a whole.

Claiming the Universal? The Future of Feminism in the Irish Literary Institution

Patricia Coughlan (University College Cork)

This paper discusses unspoken masculinism in the Irish literary system, exploring its partial occlusion of power and patronage. Concrete socio-literary research on its

gendered workings, inside and outside the academy, would build on pioneering work by Smyth (1980s) and Dillane, and UK scholar Vicki Bertram (2005). Larger ideological issues arise. Irish culture positions feminism unstably between the poles of a wearily familiar revisionist-nationalist binary; revisionists deploy it tactically (Longley, Graham), while nationalism, modishly reinscribed as post-colonial, purports to trump it by appropriating universal status. Innes definitively demonstrated this in the national struggle's heroic phase; it is recapitulated at powerful and influential contemporary sites of operation.