

## Transcript

### Three Irish Poets – Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill interview with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Angus Calder

#### Angus Calder:

This poem of yours, "The Language Issue," it refers to a point in the Bible where a poor woman gives her child to the waters. In the case of your poem, the Irish language is the craft in which the child is set afloat. Craft, craft, two different kinds of craft. This child grows up to be something quite different from what the poor woman could have imagined, the great messianic male leader of the Jewish people, Moses.

#### Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

Yeah, but you notice in the poem, it's the mother who makes the act of faith, who gives it to the waters. The rivers, in Irish tradition, were feminine, they're all goddesses names. And OK, so in the Bible, the child turned out to be male, but that's just because I was using the biblical form. I mean, I just happened to find that with a handy myth, which I used.

And it doesn't really bother me because, in a way, the child, rather than the fact that he's male, it's the child within or the child as the image of the future.

#### Angus Calder:

Aren't you giving in, in this poem, to the idea of Mother Ireland? Mother Ireland who gives her sons.

#### Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

I never thought of that. No, I still think I was talking about me. I was talking about my writing a poem. If it has those connotations for you, then that's fine. I mean, I can't stop you putting those readings on it. But I was just talking about why the hell am I sitting up in my room day after day writing in a language, which may be dead before I am, for all I know, while I could be down, playing with my children?

#### Angus Calder:

When you saw Paul Muldoon's translation of your poem, what did you feel had been lost, if anything, in the translation?

#### Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

Well, actually, if you're talking about word by word, Moses gets dropped in the English translation, right? Moses, the name Moses is in the Irish. But that really doesn't matter because we all know that story so well that Moses is implied. Actually, what I liked about it is that he managed to transpose into English the rhythmical patterns.

And that's how Irish works. Irish is carried an awful lot by assonance, by half rhymes, and that poetry's carried by sound an awful lot. And he got that across, and I thought that's really great.

#### Angus Calder:

I mean, asking the same question another way, you wrote the poem in Irish Gaelic, presumably because you felt that Irish Gaelic was the language for you to write the poem in. So something must have been lost in translation.

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

Oh, yeah, of course. But, I mean, life is an accumulation of losses if such a paradox is possible. And you gain some, you lose some. Swings and roundabouts. But, I mean, I can't write in English, let's put it like that. So I've gained a translation. I, again, gained a poem in English, but I can't write poetry in English.

**Angus Calder:**

It's a very striking thing about your poems, that most of the top Irish male poets have translated you.

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

You know, that was a sort of flavour of the month for about a month. It was a fashion.

**Angus Calder:**

A fashion for translating you?

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

Yeah. I'm delighted with all the translations. I mean, I think a translation is a great compliment, and I take what I get. You don't look gift horses.

**Angus Calder:**

You don't think that you're being turned into Mother Ireland all over again?

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

Not at all. No, I am not their muse. They are my translators, right?

**Angus Calder:**

In that article of yours, "What Foremothers," you go on about how Irish women were excluded from the Irish Gaelic tradition of writing.

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

Yes, that's true. Since then, I have actually done more research, and I have found a few more. I mean, well, there are just ghostly presences. They're here, and they're not there. I mean, you get a few lines from here and a few lines from there. And if scholars do a lot more study, they will unearth a few more. But it's still not the canon.

**Angus Calder:**

When Seamus Heaney is talking about his language, as he does it a great deal in many of his very best poems, do you feel it's your language as well that he's talking about?

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

No. No, he started writing about English, and that's fine, but that's not mine. I'm not even interested.

**Angus Calder:**

You don't think that language itself, English Irish, English Gaelic, is a common topic?

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

No, because I see what he does with the Irish roots and things, poems like "Anahorish," where he talks about the meanings of the words in Irish and then brings them into English. See, a poem like that or even a subject like that is quite redundant in Irish. It doesn't mean anything because the place names are anyway functional in Irish. "ceann ruadh" means "the red head," and "cruach àrd" means the "high mountain."

You can do that in English, but you can't do that in Irish because it's not just that it's twee, but it's just meaningless. So you're talking about completely different registers that you're given as a poet.

**Angus Calder:**

You're very specifically thinking about the Irish Gaelic language.

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

Oh, yeah, I am. That's why I'm so pleased that Paul translated it as the language "issue" Because "ceist" could mean question or issue, or it could mean lots of things, and he translated it as the language "issue". And it is an issue, it's a political issue. And that's the word that's always used when we're talking about Irish and Ireland. It's an issue.

**Angus Calder:**

Can poetry actually help in this case?

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

Yes, it can. And a poem is not a poem unless it is alive on the page, unless it jumps out of the page. If you can make the language alive on the page, that's the equivalent of a cultural Molotov cocktail.

**Angus Calder:**

But, I mean, you throw a Molotov cocktail into the street, you can't throw a poem into the streets in the same way, can you?

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

Well, you can. They have a life of their own. This whole question of translation is proof of it. I just wrote these poems in Irish, and then they walked away and walked the world and said, bye, bye, mummy, thank you very much, but I'm going, you know.

**Angus Calder:**

That is the image in your poem, "The Language Issue." It's the image of the poem going away from you and becoming something different. But if it doesn't actually get into the streets of North Dublin, for instance.

**Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:**

It may not get into North Dublin, but it's getting into West Dublin. Tallaght now has a population problem, I mean, something like 60% of the people of Tallaght are unemployed, and everyone is mad learning Irish. Which was really what it was at the turn of the century, when the Gaelic League was founded. It's a genuinely empowering, enabling act.

**Angus Calder:**

What does it empower people to do?

**Nuala Ní Dhomhaill:**

Well, it helps them get out of the English language monolithic mentality, for starters, the head Germanic mentality. Now, this started in America, but is now genuinely global. It's taken over the world. It is the dominant discourse. Irish is different, Irish has a different mindset, and it's a way of creating general cultural diversity in Ireland.

And that's all the more reason why I am for it. I mean, for, anyway, because I don't have any choice.

**Angus Calder:**

You feel the language chose you rather than you choosing the language.

**Nuala Ní Dhomhaill:**

Yeah. But then having found that, I've found that I've fallen into a goldmine, so I don't mind. Keep me going. It'll keep me out of mischief until I die, and I suppose that's one of the things you could expect in your life. One of the great things to have a driving passion. And maybe I do it out of a form of defensiveness that I need to defend myself against the constant encroachment of English in me.

I mean, I'm bilingual after all very deep within me, and maybe a lot of deep conflict about all of this. I refuse to write poetry in English. But maybe it's not that. Maybe the poetry refuses to come in English, let's put it like that.