

Transcript

Three Irish Poets – Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill

interview with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Angus Calder: Language, gender and poetry

Angus Calder:

When you're writing, I know this is an artificial question because writing is partly a spontaneous and unwilling thing. But when you're writing, is it more important to you that you're a woman or that you're Irish or that you're writing in Irish Gaelic?

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

The most important thing is that I'm writing in Irish Gaelic. That's the most important thing. Being a woman maybe comes into it after that, and being Irish is maybe the least of my worries, quite honestly. I think we're so narcissistically navel-gazing about it in Ireland that this thing about Irish identity really gets severely up my nose. I don't have any problems with that because I write in Irish Gaelic and you can't get bloody more Irish than that.

I'm very much a woman, and I have managed to empower myself outside the kind of male system, and my poetry comes from there. So I don't have any problems with this, and it's something that you can't take from me. But the language can be taken from me.

The language, by being dropped out of the cultural menu, can be taken from me in a way that you can't take my being a woman from me. And I feel much more threatened by the loss of Irish. I have to really work hard just to keep a certain richness of language going. That's a real, everyday struggle. Comparatively, gender is not such a big issue.

Angus Calder:

But you've just said it, haven't you? You're very self-consciously identifying with a language which was colonised, stamped over, prohibited, and eventually -

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

And still exists in spite of everything. In spite of the neo-colonial thing that's going on at the moment, it's still there and we refuse to be put down.

Angus Calder:

Do you think, when you're writing in Irish Gaelic, you're expressing precisely that, the forbidden and the transgressive?

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

Yes. And my mother would much prefer me to write in English, even though she's a native speaker of Irish, and that's great. It gives me an unholy glee. You're right about the transgressive, yes.

Angus Calder:

Yeah. I'm going to push you now towards the theories of Julia Kristeva where she distinguishes between the symbolic order, in which male business goes on in which the world is conducted, and the

semiotic, in which everything bubbles up as in small children before they've learned how to use the symbolic order of language.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

Well, yes. I think that's how I started writing poetry and how I still write poetry, that it comes unbidden really, a pattern. It's not words. It's not meaning. I mean, meaning is the last thing that I'll attach to it. Words are the second last thing that I'll attach to it. A rhythmical pattern will come long before actual words and then actual meanings of words.

So I would agree with Kristeva's theories about this. And I don't know they were so forbidden. But you know, the forbidden fruit is always more interesting, so all the more reason to do it. I love that level of language. I love it in any language. I love it in children. I mean, it's a form of prayer. It's the most natural thing in the world. It's how birds sing. It's what human beings do naturally before we're told not to.

Angus Calder:

It's also what a great poet like Emily Dickinson does completely unnaturally as it were by calculation.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

Doesn't matter so long as it works, no matter how you set about doing it.

Angus Calder:

These extraordinary phrases that Emily Dickinson comes up with, they're child-like. Isn't it?

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

They are. Yeah.

Angus Calder:

Yeah.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

Yeah. What's that one about, I saw a funeral in my brain. Simple lines like that. The simplicity of it, the artful simplicity of it. I mean, she's managed to hide the skill that goes into that. I think that's wonderful. That's what I'd be aiming at.