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Oral Textuality, Gender and the Gothic in Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020)

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Abstract. In Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*, the first-person narrator details her scholarly endeavour to translate into English *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* – the Irish-language lament of the eighteenth-century Kerry woman, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, on the death of her husband, Art Ó Laoghaire. Interwoven with this narrative, is the narrator's intimate account of her lived personal experience whilst researching and translating this caoineadh. And yet, even as her search for the *Caoineadh*'s origins grows increasingly fervent, the narrator becomes ever more wary of the viability and implications of such historical retrieval. Caught between a desire to recover Ní Chonaill's voice and presence and a recognition of the illusory nature of such longings, Ní Ghríofa's text probes the interstices between the *Caoineadh* and its myriad iterations in performance, transcription, and translation. In this way, Ní Ghríofa confronts longstanding European anxieties regarding the relationship between writing and orality.

Drawing on Jacques Derrida's seminal critique of this eighteenth-century crisis of writing, this article commences by revealing the caoineadh as an unacknowledged yet ongoing flashpoint in Enlightenment debates concerning orality and textuality. The article then turns to a discussion of Derrida's associated reflections on haunting to consider the ways in which Ní Ghríofa responds to the marginalisation and silencing of the matrilineal tradition of keening in which she engages. Departing from Derrida's genealogy of political inheritance, it argues that Ní Ghríofa's narrative rehearses an alternative gothic textuality in which the oral and the written are intricately interwoven within Ireland's past, present, and future. In so doing, it eschews the androcentric, ethnocentric and, as the text's conclusion lays bare, anthropocentric hierarchies that continue to impinge upon both the *Caoineadh*'s legacy and the Irish literary canon in the twenty-first century.

Keywords. Orality, Ireland, Gender, Hauntology, Lament, Doireann Ní Ghríofa.

Resumen. En *A Ghost in the Throat* de Doireann Ní Ghríofa, la narradora detalla su labor académica al traducir al inglés *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, el lamento de Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, una mujer de Kerry del siglo XVIII, por la muerte de su esposo, Art Ó Laoghaire. En su relato, la narradora también explica su experiencia personal mientras investiga y traduce esta

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obra. Su búsqueda de los orígenes del cantar de lamento o *Caoineadh* es apasionada, pero la narradora se muestra cada vez más desconfiada en cuanto a la viabilidad e implicaciones de dicha recuperación histórica. Atrapada entre el deseo de recuperar la voz y la presencia de Ní Chonaill y su asunción de lo ilusorio de sus anhelos, la voz narrativa de Ní Ghríofa se sumerge en los intersticios entre el *Caoineadh* y sus innumerables reverberaciones en la interpretación, la transcripción y la traducción. De este modo, Ní Ghríofa se enfrenta a antiguas preocupaciones europeas sobre la relación entre escritura y oralidad.

Considerando la crítica de Jacques Derrida sobre la crisis de la escritura en el siglo XVIII, este artículo interpreta el caoineadh como un detonante no reconocido, aunque vigente, en los debates de la Ilustración sobre oralidad y textualidad. El artículo se centra en las reflexiones de Derrida sobre hauntología para examinar la forma en que Ní Ghríofa responde a la marginación y el silenciamiento de la tradición matrilineal del lamento, de la que participa. Partiendo de la genealogía de la herencia política de Derrida, la narrativa de Ní Ghríofa proyecta una textualidad gótica alternativa en la que lo oral y lo escrito se entrelazan intrincadamente con el pasado, el presente y el futuro de Irlanda. De esta forma, se evitan jerarquías androcéntricas, etnocéntricas y antropocéntricas que, como se pone de manifiesto en la conclusión del texto, siguen afectando tanto al legado de *Caoineadh* como al canon literario irlandés del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave. Oralidad, Irlanda, género, hauntología, lamento, Doireann Ní Ghríofa.

> *A mhná so amach ag gol*
> *stadaidh ar bhur gcois*
> *go nglaofaidh Art Mhac Conchúir deoch,*
> *agus tuilleadh thar cheann na mbocht,*
> *sula dtéann isteach don scoil —*
> *ní ag foghlaim léinn ná port,*
> *ach ag iompar cré agus cloch.* (Ní Chonaill 1773)
>
> *Un texte a toujours plusieurs âges, la lecture doit en prendre son parti.* (Derrida 1967: 150)

Published by Tramp Press in 2020, Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat* (hereafter *AGITT*) recounts the author's endeavours to translate the eighteenth-century lament *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* into contemporary English. As Ní Ghríofa's text details, this traditional Irish "keen" was originally performed on 4th May 1773 by the young Gaelic gentlewoman, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill (c.1743-c.1800), on the sudden and violent assassination of her beloved husband, Art Ó Laoghaire (1747-1773), at the order of a local Anglo-Irish MP, Abraham Morris (1752-1822). Written in a confessional mode that incorporates elements of both auto-fiction and essay, *AGITT* elides conventional narrative distinctions between author and protagonist. This is evident not only in the text's conflation of Ní Ghríofa and her narrator, but also in this textual avatar's relationship to Ní Chonaill. As a mother soon expecting her third child, the narrator is alert to the affinities between her own life and that of her subject, who was similarly pregnant with a third child at the point of Ó Laoghaire's murder. Conceiving of her written translation as an attempt to "conjur[e] a voice through hundreds of years, from her pregnant body to mine" (20), the narrator provides an intimate account of her lived personal experience whilst researching Ní Chonaill's caoineadh. Library visits intended "to chase down every

translation of Eibhlín Dubh's words", are interrupted to "shove a forbidden banana into [a toddler's] fist" (24). Family demands, however, are not the only impediment to her researches. The narrator also expresses profound dissatisfaction with most previous translations of the *Caoineadh*, objecting to their "flimsy sketches of Eibhlín Dubh's life that are almost always some lazy variant of the same two facts: Wife of Art O'Leary. Aunt of Daniel O'Connell" (70). Rather than emulate these "dead texts that try, but fail, to find the thumping pulse of Eibhlín Dubh's presence", the narrator "long[s] to know more of her life, both before and after the moment of composition" (25). Most crucially, the narrator explicitly envisions this biographical enquiry as an act of feminist recovery. Both the opening sentence of the first chapter and the final sentence of the last chapter boldly assert that "THIS IS A FEMALE TEXT" (3).

And yet, even as her search for the *Caoineadh*'s origins grows increasingly fervent, the narrator becomes ever more wary of the viability and implications of such historical retrieval. As Sarah E. McKibben observes:

> [T]he *Caoineadh* is a complex, multiply mediated work at odds with various official discourses, whose original form(s) we cannot know, whose precise oral and performance history we may only surmise, echoing with masterful shared locutions and deliberate repetition, and which simultaneously served very different functions as a matter of course. (2010: 101)

Composed and performed extempore by Ní Chonaill at Ó Laoghaire's wake, the *Caoineadh* was then augmented on his reinterment at Kilcrea friary several years later. It survived into the nineteenth century in a proliferation of oral and manuscript variants which, depending on the version, included purported interpellations by Ó Laoghaire's sister and father (see Nic an Airchinnigh 2010). The *Caoineadh* was first translated into English by Father Peadar Ua Laoghaire (1839-1920) at the behest of Mrs Morgan John O'Connell [née Mary Anne Bianconi] (1840-1908), who published this translation in 1892 as a supplement to *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade* – a memoir of her husband's granduncle, Daniel Charles O'Connell. Since this time, the *Caoineadh* has been repeatedly translated and adapted into poetry, song, theatre, and film. Renditions by, amongst others, Seán Ó Tuama, Liam Ó Noraidh, Thomas Kinsella, Vona Groarke, Manchán Magan, and Dermot Bolger have cumulatively bequeathed the *Caoineadh* with an artistic pedigree that has secured its privileged status within the Irish literary canon. As the narrator observes, "[s]uch is the number of individuals who have chosen to translate this poem that it seems almost like a rite of passage, or a series of cover-versions of a beloved old song" (24). She complains, however, that "[f]ew come close enough to her voice to satiate me, and the accompanying pages of her broader circumstances are often so sparse that they leave me hungry" (24). The narrator therefore pledges to "*donate my days to finding hers*" (70; original emphasis). Unfortunately, the very evanescence that draws the former to the *Caoineadh* enables the latter to elude the historical record.

Eventually, Ní Ghríofa's text evolves into its own lament upon the "impossibility" of imagining "what the past really sounded like" (269). Caught between a desire to recover Ní Chonaill's voice and presence and a recognition of the illusory nature of such longings, *AGITT* probes the almost imperceptible interstices between the *Caoineadh* and its myriad iterations in performance, transcription, and translation. It both haunts and is haunted by these textual, and by extension, spatio-temporal ellipses. Via this ruminative exploration, Ní Ghríofa confronts longstanding European anxieties regarding the relationship between writing and orality. In a seminal critique of continental philosophy and its struggles to identify and discriminate between oral and written language, Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1974 [1967]) famously identifies the eighteenth century as "the place of this combat and crisis" (98). *AGITT* interrogates the determining role that the Enlightenment pre-occupation with "the problem of

writing" (1974: 35) has played in the transmission and circulation of Ní Chonaill's caoineadh from the eighteenth century to the present. However, whilst Derrida reads the language debate "as exciting the passions of all European minds at the end of the seventeenth and all through the eighteenth centuries" (75), it assumed particularly acute and often contradictory resonances in penal-era Ireland where Gaelic was legally prohibited. By repeatedly bearing witness to its author's frustrated attempts to conjure Ní Chonaill's voice, *AGITT* not only underscores the colonial dimensions of Enlightenment discourse on language but also calls attention to the problematic gender dynamics underpinning both historical and contemporary thought on this topic. Drawing on Derrida's exposition of the eighteenth-century crisis of writing, this article commences by revealing the caoineadh as an unacknowledged yet ongoing flashpoint in this debate. It then turns to a discussion of Derrida's associated reflections on haunting to consider the ways in which Ní Ghríofa responds to the marginalisation and silencing of the matrilineal tradition of keening in which she engages. Departing from Derrida's genealogy of political inheritance, it argues that Ní Ghríofa's narrative rehearses an alternative gothic textuality in which the oral and the written are intricately interwoven within Ireland's past, present, and future. In so doing, *AGITT* eschews the androcentric, ethnocentric and, as the text's conclusion lays bare, anthropocentric hierarchies that continue to impinge upon both the *Caoineadh*'s legacy and the Irish literary canon in the twenty-first century.

Irish Orality and European Enlightenment

Initially, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* is introduced into Ní Ghríofa's text via a "scruffy photocopy" which her first-person narrator picks up as a means of "inviting the voice of another woman to haunt my throat a while" (10). The narrator's instinctive sense of affinity with this woman, who "had been dead for centuries" (11), is further limned in a reflection on her first encounter with Ní Chonaill, which occurred as a child in a dreary modular classroom:

> Look: I am eleven, a girl who is terrible at sums and at sports, a girl given to staring out windows, a girl whose only real gift lies in daydreaming. The teacher snaps my name, startling me back to the flimsy prefab. Her voice makes it a fine day in 1773, and sets English soldiers crouching in ambush. I add ditch-water to drench their knees. Their muskets point towards a young man who is tumbling from his saddle now, in slow, slow motion. A woman rides in to kneel over him, her voice rising in an antique formula of breath and syllable the teacher calls a "caoineadh", a keen to lament the dead. Her voice generates an echo strong enough to reach a girl in the distance with dark hair and bitten nails. Me. (11)

The narrator then recalls "develop[ing] a schoolgirl crush on this *caoineadh*, swooning over the tragic romance embedded in its lines" (11; original emphasis). Although the narrator claims that her relationship with the *Caoineadh* once again "swerve[s]" in adulthood (13), it is evident that her romantic fixation upon Ní Chonaill remains unabated. In her efforts to "chase down" Ní Chonaill (24), the narrator hunts "through scholarly volumes, through histories of eighteenth-century Ireland, through translations and old maps" (68), as well as birth records, marriage certificates, grave inscriptions, private letters, and personal heirlooms. As the narrator probes deeper into the written record, however, Ní Chonaill's voice becomes ever more elusive. She begins to question both the feasibility of her aims and the ethics of her methods:

> A revoltingly nosy woman might take it to the internet. In wondering whether Eibhlín Dubh was pregnant before her wedding, she might seek a website that calculates conception dates in reverse […]. In pressing *Return*, such a woman might feel shame.

> She might ask herself (again) why she is clattering around in the intimate life of a stranger, without permission. Such doubts have been drawing question marks in the margins of my days for some time, though I try to ignore them. What are you doing here? those question marks seem to demand, and Who will gain from this labour? Not I, exhausted and googling conception calculators at 3:15 am. Not Eibhlín Dubh, either, for I am beginning to suspect that none of this quest is truly to her benefit. In death, she would hardly worry over how her life is portrayed by academics. (138-39; original emphasis)

Admitting that "I have begun to feel troubled by my behaviour" (153), the narrator further queries: "If my desire to make her feel true makes of her a marionette then that makes me … what?" (154). The realisation that her written translation of Ní Chonaill's oral performance is as much a display of historical ventriloquism as an act of feminist retrieval leads the narrator to describe her work as an "inevitable failure" (41). Though determined "to conjure [Ní Chonaill's] presence" (39), the narrator mournfully concedes that "[m]y document doesn't hold her voice" (41). Unable to resurrect the *Caoineadh* yet unwilling to relinquish the search for its genesis, *AGITT* manifests an anxiety regarding the relationship between orality and writing that derives from Enlightenment debates regarding the origin of language. More specifically, by envisaging Ní Chonaill's voice as "shift[ing] through bodies [...] from voice to hand to paper" (37), it both inherits and interrogates eighteenth-century Europe's pre-occupation with the role of language in determining both bodily and spiritual presence. As Derrida states:

> [W]riting, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech and to the logos. And the problem of soul and body is no doubt derived from the problem of writing from which it seems – conversely – to borrow its metaphors. (1974: 35)

Hence, eighteenth-century efforts to comprehend the origins and evolution of language were a "symptom of the crisis of European consciousness" (1974: 75). Enlightenment theories of writing wrestled with, on the one hand, the theological burden of the Judaeo-Christian scriptural tradition and, on the other, the appeal of unparalleled access to – and appropriation of – non-occidental scripts. Whilst the former prejudice supposedly confirmed language's origins in biblical Greek and Hebrew, the latter presumption enabled European thinkers to co-opt both ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics and the so-called ideography of Chinese into an abstract and ahistorical philosophy of language. Yet the reaction against this universalist "idea of a *general science of language and writing*" (1974: 99; original emphasis), only further ensconced the language debate in European ethnocentricism. In a "rereading" of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (2019 [1781]), Derrida details how Rousseau responds to this "threat of writing" by insisting that the origin of language resides not in "reasoning" but in "feeling" (1974: 101, 263). Because Rousseau regards speech as natural, instinctive, and immediate, he deduces that "the passions wrung the first voices" (2019: 262). In contrast with this "songlike and passionate" speech, Rousseau represents writing as "plain and methodical" (2019: 263) as well as enervating and adulterating:

> as enlightenment spreads, language changes in character; it becomes more precise and less passionate; it substitutes ideas for sentiments, it no longer speaks to the heart but to the reason. As a result accent dies out, articulation spreads, language becomes more exact, clearer, but more sluggish, more muted and colder. (2019: 262)

Crucially, for Rousseau, these opposing characteristics of speech and writing correspond, albeit with certain qualifications, to the geo-political entities of "South" and "North". Whereas the languages of "mild climates" and "fertile regions" were "daughters of pleasure and not of need", the languages of "cold climates" were "sad daughters of necessity" that reflected their "harsh origins" (2019: 266). Because "mutual need united men far more effectively than sentiment", Rousseau argues that "society was formed solely through industry" (2019: 290). Thus, the languages of the North developed alongside the progress of civilization, but they also grew more servile as they became more dependent on writing. Unlike speech, which thrives in the public spheres of democracy, a language dominated by written expression curtails freedom. For Rousseau, "it is impossible for a people to remain free and speak that language" (2019: 310). Derrida does not challenge this relation of "the power of writing to the exercise of violence" (1974: 106). Instead, he deconstructs Rousseau's privileging of "a naturally innocent speech" contending instead that this "is the originary violence of a language which is always already a writing" (1974: 106). By demonstrating how Rousseau's phonocentrism hinges upon this supplementary conception of writing, he exposes the ethnocentricism at play in Enlightenment thought on language – even when it asserts the contrary. Drawing attention to Lévi-Strauss' perpetuation of this ethnographical "gesture inherited from the eighteenth century" (1974: 114), Derrida states:

> Non-European peoples were not only studied as the index to a hidden good Nature, as a native soil recovered, of a "zero degree" with reference to which one could outline the structure, the growth, and above all the degradation of our society and our culture. As always, this archaeology is also a teleology and an eschatology; the dream of a full and immediate presence closing history, the transparence and indivision of a parousia, the suppression of contradiction and difference. (1974: 114-15)

Importantly, Derrida emphasizes that he is referring above to "a certain eighteenth century […] for even in that century a certain sporadic suspicion of such an exercise had already commenced" (1974: 114). Arguably, eighteenth-century Ireland proffers a particularly heightened example of such suppression – and suspicion. As stated above, the contested status of the Irish language across the penal era disrupted any easy correlation between writing and civility, even as English legal and administrative systems encroached ever more persistently upon Gaelic Ireland. Reminding us that the "eventual linguistic hegemony" (2020: 32) of English was not inevitable from a seventeenth-century perspective, Marie-Louise Coolahan describes the complex cultural mediations of a multilingual island where Irish, English, French, and Latin interacted within overlapping linguistic contexts. This shifting dynamic had profound implications for Irish-language modality, with survival depending upon the mutability of oral and manuscript traditions. As English expansionism continued to disrupt élite modes of Gaelic cultural transmission, "scribes and families moved to preserve more vernacular forms of verse, including women's compositions" (2020: 36). The caoineadh was one of the most popular yet peripheral forms in which women composed. It was therefore an object of both deep investment and heavy suspicion for Gaelic Ireland and Anglo-Ireland alike. Its origins in liminal and extempore female performance rendered the caoineadh subordinate to an established (and decidedly masculine) manuscript culture in the early modern period. Paradoxically, however, as the Irish language struggled to survive into later centuries, the caoineadh's ephemerality facilitated its preservation within an élite literary tradition that was forced to evolve to accommodate it.

Such "fissures in the modes of cultural transmission" (Coolahan 2020: 36) not only deranged generic and gender hierarchies within Gaelic Ireland but also challenged wider Enlightenment discourses regarding European civilization. Irish orality neither conformed to

pre-existing stadial accounts of human progress nor Rousseau's idiosyncratic inversions of this linear trajectory in his geo-history of language. This is not to refute the significance of Rousseauvian thought to Irish self-representation from the later eighteenth century onwards nor to underplay the ways in which Enlightenment trends in knowledge circulation influenced the transmission of Irish-language texts – both oral and written – across the same period. Although the recent proposition of a specifically Irish Enlightenment remains contested, Irish participation in, and engagement with, European intellectual networks was too persistent and variegated to be under dispute (see Ó Gallchoir 2005; O'Shaughnessy 2019). Whilst it would be tenuous to suggest that the flow of influence ran as liberally in the opposite direction (see Ó Ciosáin 1999), the Irish language did feature prominently in wider eighteenth-century debates regarding the status of non-literate societies. Defining oral tradition in its "recognizably modern form" as "a coinage of the eighteenth century" (1996: 161), Nicholas Hudson argues that this concept nonetheless remained contentious throughout this period. Originally employed by Renaissance theologians to describe the Catholic church's "unwritten heritage of doctrine and ritual" (1996: 163), the term developed a widespread secular use in the eighteenth century, especially during the mid-century controversies regarding Ossian and Homer. Published in the 1760s, both James Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* (1765) and Robert Wood's *Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (1769) proposed that a rich oral tradition could exist without a concomitant literature. Whilst history would eventually bestow greater credence upon the latter author's claim than the former, the validity of both were hotly disputed on initial publication. Critics as renowned as Samuel Johnson invoked the sophistication of Irish orthography to disprove Macpherson's claim that Scottish Gaelic could produce epic poetry to rival that of Ireland without an equivalent manuscript culture (see also Brunström 2001).

Irish orality, then, could serve both as evidence of the language's primal vitality and its systematic cultivation. In this way, eighteenth-century Ireland manifests what Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf describe as the "dynamic" relationship between "spoken language and its graphical counterparts" (2002: 38) across the *longue durée* of the early modern period. Arguing that it is "less instructive to think in terms of inversely correspondent relationships between oral, scribal and print cultures, in which an advance in one must entail a consequent retreat in another", they suggest we regard "these three media as complementary and mutually sustaining" (2002: 28). Notably, in forwarding his case for an "explicitly Irish Enlightenment" (2016: 7), Michael Brown presents mid-eighteenth-century Ireland's scholarly negotiation of its various oral and written cultures as key to the progression of a more enlightened political sphere. He argues that a mid-century "Irish school of oratory" directly challenged Lockean scepticism regarding the value of rhetorical speech by championing its cultivation as an engine of societal advancement (2016: 172). This was also, however, a more divisive political culture, as evidenced by a renewed enforcement of certain penal laws in the same period. Citing this "resuscitation" of penal laws as the "immediate cause" of Ó Laoghaire's assassination, Brown locates Ní Chonaill's caoineadh within a complex political landscape in which the oratorical optimism of the 1760s was superseded by "a culture war in the unlikely realm of antiquarianism" (2016: 359, 323).

Although the economy of power between Ireland's oral and written cultures had till then remained in flux, the late eighteenth century witnessed an accelerated move away from Irish vernacular language use to English and a rapid shift from Irish oral traditions towards anglophone models of print transmission. According to Lesa Ní Mhungaile, Gaelic scholars and scribes were increasingly obliged to rely upon antiquarian patrons and societies to ensure the survival of Irish-language manuscript and oral traditions. She cites the translation projects of Anglo-Irish antiquarians such as Charlotte Brooke, Joseph Cooper Walker, and James Hardiman as evidence of "this two-way process of literary crosspollination" (2020: 38). Despite the ascendancy's newly awakened interest in the Irish language, its investment was primarily

in ancient manuscripts and decidedly not in contemporary speakers, many of whom were illiterate in both Irish and English. Gaelic culture was thus legitimised via a canon-building process of selection, translation, and collation from which the majority of Irish-language users were excluded. As Jim Kelly observes, this "enlightened form of ethnography" resulted in Irish oral culture being regarded as "an alternative system of knowledge [which is] paradoxically always already contained as an object within the system that it is an alternative to" (2011: 155). This endeavour to construct an Irish-language genealogy that aligned with a newly expanding and increasingly "national" self-identity exposes the ethnocentric impulse underlying such acts of cultural retrieval. Responding to Derrida's critique of such "genealogical self-representation" (1974: 102), Ian Balfour argues that we must recognise "the obligation for reading to take account of the complex temporality and historicity of a text" (2007: 469). Within the Irish context, however, the construction of a national genealogy becomes even more fraught once we take into account Joep Leerssen's argument that "Irish cultural nationalism, grown as it has out of a culturally and politically divided country, is to a large extent an interiorized form of exoticism" (1996: 66). Thus far, this article has endeavoured to interrogate any neat bifurcation of Ireland's competing yet interdependent cultural and linguistic traditions. As Joseph Lennon's exploration of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century responses to medieval Irish manuscripts such as the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, or, *The Book of Invasions*, reveals, Gaelic scholars were often complicit in perpetuating this self-representation. Nevertheless, Leerssen's delineation of Irish auto-exoticism as a "mode of seeing, presenting and representing oneself in one's otherness" (2004: 37) further underscores eighteenth-century Ireland's complex positionality vis-à-vis European Enlightenment debates on language.

Oral textuality and the Gothic Body

Given these historical intricacies, it is worth exploring the particular channels through which *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* entered a nascent Irish literary canon. Even though earlier caointe by Fionnghuala Ní Bhriain (fl. 1557–1617) and Caitilín Dubh (fl. 1624-29) were hesitantly incorporated into seventeenth-century manuscript culture, both the Catholic and colonial hierarchies of eighteenth-century Ireland continued to regard the popularly female domain of the caoineadh with suspicion and hostility (Lysaght 1997; see also Bourke *et al*. 2002; Coolahan 2020; Ní Dhonnchadha 2002). With its brutal poetic excoriation of Ó Laoghaire's adversary, Abraham Morris, and implicit refutation of the civil and administrative order that enabled his flagrant abuses of office, Ní Chonaill's caoineadh remained outside the purview of the era's antiquarian vision. As Angela Bourke remarks, the *Caoineadh*'s appropriation by, and assimilation into, a self-designated "national" literature did not occur until O'Connell published Ua Laoghaire's English translation in her family memoir at the *fin de siècle*. Since then, the *Caoineadh* "has been through two separate packaging processes: first by the nationalist romantics of the late nineteenth century, then by twentieth-century scholars of the literature and folklore of the Irish language" (1997: 134).

Bourke argues that each of these processes has further entrenched the *Caoineadh* in later, and specifically literary, assumptions regarding "authorship, originality, gender, and genre" (1997: 137). Discussing the historical reframing of the *Caoineadh* as a "literary production", Bourke outlines the ways in which these later readers privileged the printed text over its "oral origins" and thereby obscured the dialogic "richness" of the oral culture from which it emerged (1997: 132). For example, in his celebration of Ní Chonaill as the author of "the greatest poem written in these islands in the whole eighteenth century" (1984: 18), Peter Levi joins both Irish folklorists and feminists in envisaging the *Caoineadh* as the mantic vision of "an individual, aristocratic genius, working in opposition to, rather than within, the people's tradition" (1997: 142). Monumentalised in this way, Ní Chonaill has been isolated not only

from the medium in which she performed, but also from the other female keeners, or *mná caointe*, with whom her caoineadh interacted. Their contribution to the communal and customary ritual of keening is further marginalised. Once again, the ostentatious celebration of orality conceals a covert ethnocentricism, or as Bourke puts it, "literate civilization's colonization of oral culture" (1997: 133; see also Lloyd 2011; Ní Shíocháin 2023).

And yet, even though Bourke is careful to present Ní Chonaill as working within the conventions of a ritual speech-act and its associated "stock of formulas and themes" (1997: 135), a scholarly appreciation of the *Caoineadh*'s oral context does not indemnify us against such ethnocentric distortions. In fact, Bourke's insistence upon "asserting the primacy of the Irish-language versions over any translation" suggests a similar privileging of speech-as-presence as that which impels Rousseau's quest for the origin of languages (1997: 136). How, then, might we engage meaningfully with the oral culture of eighteenth-century Ireland without resorting to a Rousseauvian romance of origin? More specifically, in what ways can contemporary scholarship grapple with the problematics of feminist retrieval that have been bequeathed to us, in part, by the eighteenth century's own crisis of writing? As stated at the outset of this essay, this is arguably the central question with which *AGITT* contends. Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh suggests that Derrida's exposition of "hauntology" in *Specters of Marx* (1994) provides a useful framework for understanding Ní Ghríofa's engagement with the fraught temporality and historicity of Ní Chonaill's lament. In this late work, Derrida outlines the political implications of his earlier deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence by interrogating the linear chronology that underpins the concept of inheritance. Although this work speaks directly to the Marxist political and philosophical tradition, Derrida commences with a discussion of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that evinces broader concerns regarding our engagement with the past and how it mediates the politics of our future. Here, Derrida emphasizes the "paradoxical incorporation" of the past as "manifested" in the spectre of the murdered King of Denmark, who is "neither soul nor body, and both one and the other" (1994: 6). The spectre that haunts Hamlet does not appear to him, or us, in a distinct and definable "present" nor as a distinct and definable "presence", but instead "de-synchronizes" (1994: 6):

> Repetition and first time, but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time, makes of it also a last time. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it hauntology. (1994: 10)

According to Derrida, this spectral asymmetry and anachrony, or, "hauntology", evinces "the radical and necessary heterogeneity of an inheritance" (1994: 16). Transforming a political inheritance into a political future requires acceptance of such "apparently disordered plurivocity" (1994: 22) and an understanding that attempts to interpret and translate the past "will always be haunted rather than inhabited by the meaning of the original" (1994: 22). In a recent discussion with Katie Mishler regarding *AGITT*'s engagement with the gothic, Ní Ghríofa articulates a strikingly similar conception of history as haunting:

> History is a ghost itself […] that sense of retelling and reassembling – like talk about *Frankenstein*, you know – of going into history and reaching your hands into it and choosing different elements of it that feel significant to stitch together into a new whole and trying to make it come to life. (Mishler 2021)

For Ní Ghríofa, then, the work of interpretation and translation must ultimately acknowledge the spectrality of its own conjuring of the past. Remarking upon the myriad French translations of Hamlet's assertion that "[t]he time is out of joint" (2006: 1:5:186), Derrida contends that any

attempt to translate or interpret necessarily produces a gap "that can only aggravate or seal the inaccessibility of the other language" (1994: 22). As Ní Éigeartaigh observes, "[t]his conjuring of a space, or, to use Jacques Derrida's term *différance,* into a text through translation and rearticulation" resonates strongly with the caoineadh tradition (2022: 44).

Reading *AGITT*'s opening call for readers to "join in" with the text as a "celebratory acclamation of female unity and strength" (2022: 40), Ní Éigeartaigh regards *différance* as "a space in which multiple voices can fuse together to create additional layers of signification [and] 'conjure' new interpretations into being" (2022: 44). Unfortunately, Derrida's delineation of hauntology in *Specters of Marx* is not as hospitable to the caoineadh tradition as Ní Éigeartaigh implies. Christopher Wise, for example, argues that *Specters of Marx* wholly elides the matrilineal inheritance that Derrida elsewhere proclaims. Instead "the mother and her voice are described in terms of the abyssal pre-inheritance" (Wise 2009: 83). Even as he deconstructs phallogocentricism, Derrida's spectres are genealogically male, whether "the ghosts chained to ghosts" be "*Shakespeare qui genuit Marx qui genuit Valéry*" or "*Kant qui genuit Hegel, qui genuit Marx, qui genuit…*" (Derrida 1994: 5). Most significantly, in Derrida's reading of *Hamlet*, it is the oath sworn by Hamlet, Marcellus, and Horatio upon the former's sword that conjures the spectre of the dead king. Wise underscores "the importance of the human voice in summoning the ghost" (2009: 79, 85); however, he also notes that Derrida omits to consider those who either cannot or refuse to engage in such "phallogocentric" conjurations (2009: 86). Wise regards Gertrude as "a palpable danger" to Hamlet and his political conspirators because she "is either unable or unwilling to recognize the specter" that haunts Elsinore (2009: 86). Ultimately, "the revolution that is instigated on her behalf, or that is held so that her silenced voice may be restored, does nothing to render her audible" (2009: 87). This conspiratorial act of conjuration between men also contrasts starkly with one of the play's other few direct allusions to oath-swearing, which is pronounced by the play's only other female character, Ophelia. Traumatised by the murder of her father, Ophelia seeks to speak with Gertrude. Though Gertrude is informed that Ophelia's "speech is nothing" (2006: 4:5:7), Horatio, as one of Hamlet's close conspirators, nonetheless warns the queen that "Twere good she were spoken with; for she may strew/ Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" (2006: 4:5:14-15). Once allowed to speak, Ophelia begins to perform a curious folksong about a broken vow, stating: "Indeed, la, without an oath, I'll make an end on't" (2006: 4:5:57). Significantly, the phrase "without an oath" derives from Hebrews 7:20, where it refers to those priests who acquire their role via an inheritance rather than an oath to God. Arguably, Ophelia's greatest threat lies in her claim to an alternative inheritance that does not require participation in the act of oath-swearing that conjures the spectre of the father. It is my contention that it is to this inheritance without conjuration that *AGITT* eventually aspires.

The final section of this article demonstrates how Ní Ghríofa ultimately unburdens her text from the desire to re-embody the *Caoineadh*. Rather than conjure Ní Chonaill's presence and voice, the narrator instead begins to reflect upon "the imperceptible beat in which a word exists between the articulation and the hearing" (125). In so doing, she gradually learns to embrace a mode of gothic textuality that simultaneously resides in, and is inscribed upon, female bodies. Lambasting the "academic gaze" that places Ní Chonaill in "a masculine shadow" (70), Ní Ghríofa refutes eighteenth-century distinctions between oral and written texts. She argues, however, that while male bards copied poems into "*duanairí,* handwritten anthologies that also often held genealogies and sacred texts […], literature composed by women was stored not in books but in female bodies, living repositories of poetry and song" (74; original emphasis). For this reason, she insists upon recognising Ní Chonaill explicitly as the author of the *Caoineadh*:

> I have come across a line of argument in my reading, which posits that, due to the inherent fallibility of memory and the imperfect human vessels that held it, the *Caoineadh* cannot be considered a work of single authorship. Rather, the theory goes, it must be considered collage, or, perhaps, a folky reworking of older keens. This, to me – in the brazen audacity of one positioned far from the tall walls of the university – feels like a male assertion pressed upon a female text. After all, the etymology of the word "text" lies in the Latin verb "texere": to weave, to fuse, to braid. The *Caoineadh* form belongs to a literary genre worked and woven by women, entwining strands of female voices that were carried in female bodies, a phenomenon that seems to me cause for wonder and admiration, rather than suspicion of authorship. (74)

By drawing on the classical association between writing and weaving, Ní Ghríofa reclaims a symbol of female creativity that had been employed regularly by Irish women writers from at least the eighteenth century onwards (see Lawrenson 2021). From "a family calendar scrawled with biro and pencil marks" (43) to "a bright pink cardigan […] in which every stitch is a syllable" (72), Ní Ghríofa repeatedly reminds us of the elusive textuality by which we routinely encode and interpret our lives – or, what we might describe as arche-writing in Derridean terms. In this way, *AGITT* exhibits what Jonathan L. Ready has recently described as "oral textuality". Rejecting the conventional alignment of textuality with writing, Ready argues that "[t]extuality can indicate the presence of attributes that render an instance of language use a text irrespective of medium" (2019: 3). Whilst live embodied performances are often regarded as "ephemeral utterance", both performers and audiences nonetheless understand implicitly that "something identifiable […] pre-existed the moment of utterance" and that something may also "be abstracted or detached from the immediate context and re-embodied in a future performance" (2019: 17). Through performative strategies such as formal framing, intertextual allusions, embodied features, and iterability, oral performers engage in a process of entextualization that Ready defines as "the art of shaping utterances capable of outlasting the moment" (2019: 4). Though foregrounding the Homeric epics as his central case study, Ready demonstrates the relevance of oral textuality to a global range of disparate performance contexts where performers "look backward and forward as they interact with past and future texts" (2019: 4). This includes the lament, the textuality of which he describes as extractable, repeatable, and portable. Fundamentally, however, to endow the lament with textual coherence "is to engage with bodies, one's own and that of the deceased" (2019: 65).

Ready distinguishes between the modes of textualization involved in the creation of written versions of an oral text and the intertextuality mediated between oral texts. Ní Ghríofa's written text, however, participates in the oral intertextuality of the *Caoineadh* by engaging with the bodily domain of the lament. More specifically, she repeatedly identifies female bodies, including that of her own daughter, as "squirming, living female text[s]" (228). As a mother whose days revolve around breastfeeding and research, the narrator's life is "decanted between the twin forces of milk and text" (25). As her body "emit[s] pale syllables of milk, [she sips her] own dark sustenance from ink" (25). On eventually ceasing to breastfeed, her body acquires a palimpsestic legibility:

> I […] document my body with curiosity: my milk-bottle thighs split by turquoise seams; my breasts, lopsided and glorious; the holy door of my quadruple caesarean scar, my sag-stomach, stretch-marked with ripples like a strand at low tide. My bellybutton grimaces there, the invisible cord that will always connect me to my mother, just as hers connects her to her mother, and on, and on, and on. I study this body of mine, just one more in a long line, and feel no revulsion, only pride. *This is a female text*, I think. My

> body replies in its dialect of scars. *Ta-dah*! it seems to say *Ta-dah*! (216-17; original emphasis)

Admittedly, some reviewers have objected to what they regard as the text's conceptualising of maternity as a privileged nexus of creativity, arguing that Ní Ghríofa conflates reproductive sexuality with female textuality. This accusation certainly seems to carry weight when comparing *AGITT* with another Tramp Press publication from the following year – Sophie White's *Corpsing: My Body and Other Horror Shows* (2021). Similarly presented as a confessional narrative, White's text articulates her experience of motherhood by refashioning longstanding horror tropes of female monstrosity. In so doing, White not only refutes the exalted fecundity of the maternal ideal but also undermines the very notion of a coherent biographical female self. In contrast, the narrator of *AGITT* obsessively yearns for Ní Chonaill's "throbbing presence" (279) even though her endeavours to retrieve it prove both exhaustive and exhausting. Reluctantly acknowledging that "possession works both ways" (137-38), she begins to wonder "who is haunting who?" (178). In this way, Ellen Scheible's claim that "Gothic trauma in recent Irish fiction is often performed on, and sometimes produced, repressed and reclaimed by a female body" (2023: 232) is no less true of *AGITT* than a more radically destabilising text such as *Corpsing*. Although refusing to subjugate or sublimate its narrator's desire to embody this long-deceased stranger, Ní Ghríofa's text nonetheless attests to the epistemic violence such possession inflicts upon the past and the present.

Indeed, on recalling her former experiences as a student of dentistry at University College Cork, the narrator reflects that "[p]erhaps the compulsion to lay a woman's life before me and slowly expose each layer started in the dissection room" (115). Significantly, the narrator is equally willing to sacrifice herself, both mentally and physically, to the recovery of Ní Chonaill's presence, or, as the text puts it, "absenting myself from my own days to seek the days of another" (153). Likewise, her description of pregnancy as "a female body serv[ing] another by effecting a theft upon itself" pertains as directly to the process of translation as motherhood (35). Whereas the *Caoineadh* famously describes Ní Chonaill gulping her dead husband's blood to relieve her grief (291), the narrator appears to sustain her creativity by depleting her bodily resources, whether it be the breastmilk she donates to premature babies or the sleepless nights she devotes to researching Ní Chonaill. Arguing that "[t]here is a peculiar contentment to be found in absenting oneself like this, subsumed in the needs of others", she rejoices in such "erasure" and paradoxically describes her work as "a deletion of a presence" (33). This desire to conjure presence through absence culminates in her decision to bequeath her own body to the university's dissection room after death. She furthermore chooses to get a tattoo in order "to leave a message for the strangers who would be the last to touch me" (113):

> In choosing white ink for my tattoo, I thought of the milk bank. I thought of the *Caoineadh* emerging from a sequence of pale throats. I thought of all the absent texts composed by women, those works of literature never transcribed or translated. I thought of Hélène Cixous: "there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink." I knew then that I must choose the words of Eibhlín Dubh. (113-14)

And yet, if this act of bodily self-inscription proffers "the poetics of a gesture" that allows the narrator to "orchestrate a moment of my future in which my body will echo a moment from my past" (113), the text itself does not allow for such an easy reconciliation of past, present, and future selves. The narrator readily admits that it "might also be construed, for example, as a failed attempt to exert some control over the body's fate after death" (112-13). Repeatedly, *AGITT* problematizes its narrator's relationship to bodily presence and exposes the egocentric

and ethnocentric impulses concealed within her almost compulsive acts of bodily self-sacrifice. It is only when the narrator manages momentarily to suspend her anthropocentric vision and reflect upon the radical alterity of the non-human matriarchy of the beehive that she glimpses a truly selfless matrilineal inheritance:

> They are only bees, it's true. In the absence of the neurological embellishments that make moral beings of humans, we assume other creatures' lives – their unique imperatives and plots – are somehow lesser by comparison with our own. However, a bee, being a bee, will accept her own death to let her sister bees live, a decision with which any human would surely struggle. The opposite of selfishness, this – if she stings, it is to protect others from danger, knowing that she will soon fall sputtering in the dirt, donating her life so that others may survive. (273)

Beyond this (somewhat idealised) vision of a benevolent beehive, however, divisions of human and non-human, body and mind, writing and orality remain stubbornly relevant (see Sen 2023). Confessing that "only now do I see that I can't continue to grip her like this, in quiet selfishness" (282), the narrator concedes that she will "have to surrender to an ending" (281). The text's final sentence, however, reminds us that this ending is also a beginning – or, rather, a return. On a final visit to Kilcrea to visit the Ó Laoghaire family burial site, the narrator concludes her mourning of Ní Chonaill by envisaging a new text. Reflecting that she "already know[s] the echo with which that first page will begin", she once again asserts "[t]his is a female text" (282). Whether it resides in self-sacrificing female bodies or haunts the peripheries of the Irish literary canon, the oral textuality of the *Caoineadh* persists.

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