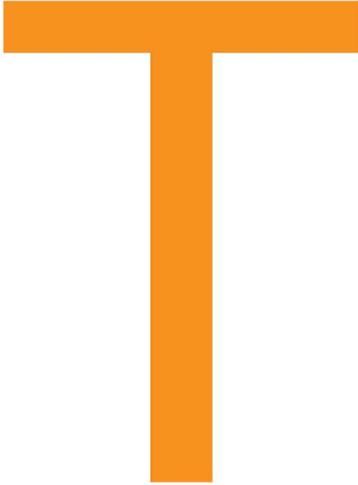
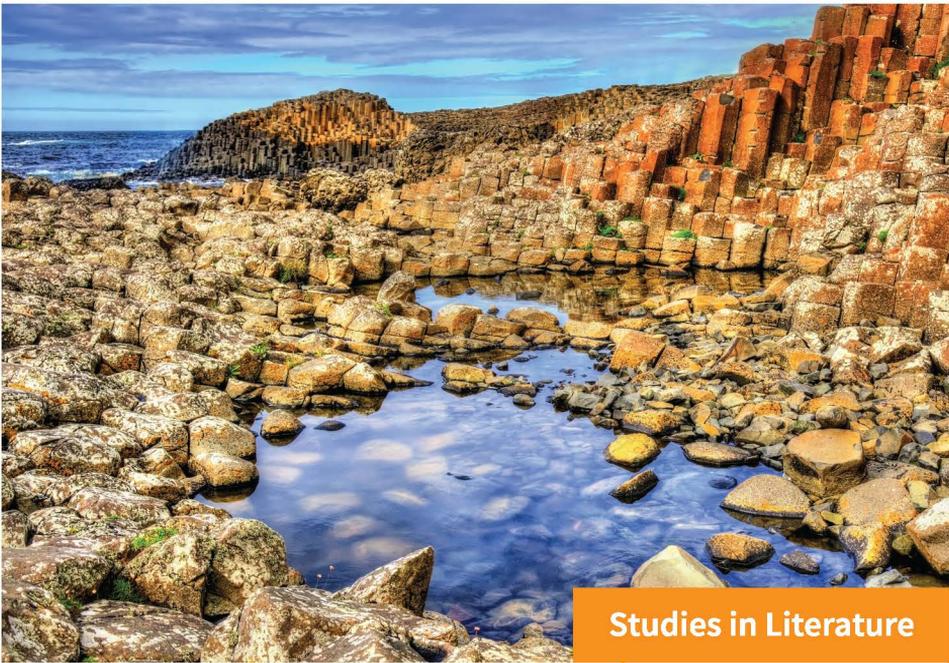


Katarzyna Poloczek



Towards Female Empowerment

The New Generation
of Irish Women Poets:
Vona Groarke, Sinéad
Morrissey, Caitríona O'Reilly
and Mary O'Donoghue



Studies in Literature

Literary Criticism

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Katarzyna Poloczek – University of Łódź, Faculty of Philology
Institute of English Studies, Department of British Literature and Culture
90-236 Łódź, 171/173 Pomorska St.

REVIEWER

David Malcolm

TYPESSETTING

Przemysław Ostalski

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to my Mother

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Preface

I have dedicated this monograph to my Mother whose unremitting and unfailing support “empowered” me to work on this book. Many thanks to my fiancé for not losing faith in me and for his patience. Over the years, while conducting my research on contemporary Irish women’s poets, I have encountered many inspiring and helpful people to whom I am sincerely indebted for their advice, wisdom and encouragement. With regard to this book, my special thanks are directed to Michaela Schrage-Früh, her husband David and Frederic for their hospitality and kindness. I would like to thank Przemysław Ostalski for his help with typesetting of the book, and Richard O’Callaghan Ph.D. for proofreading of the earlier versions of the text. Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Jerzy Jarniewicz for inspiring me to read poetry.

INTRODUCTION

FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE: FOUR IRISH WOMEN POETS

It is especially in the current era that women's relations to power need to be redefined and reconsidered. "For now is a time in which real change for women depends upon a willingness to engage with power with its seductions and responsibilities, democracy with all its open conflicts, and money with all its pleasures and dangers" (Wolf 53).¹ Elaborating this thought, Allen openly declares that

Power is clearly a crucial concept for feminist theory. Whatever else feminists may be interested in, we are certainly interested in understanding the way that gender, race, class, and sexuality intersect with power. (*The Power* 7)

Having admitted that female empowerment ought to be a relevant goal worth pursuing, one has to specify first what this term embodies. It happens because

¹ In further response to the question, "What interests feminists when we are interested in power?" (*The Power* 121), Allen explains in detail:

The first and perhaps most striking is our interest in understanding the ways men dominate women, an interest that remains the impetus of much feminist research . . . a second feminist concern with power: our interest in understanding the power that women do have – that is, empowerment . . . The third interest that feminist theorists bring to the discussion of power comes in the wake of charges that the mainstream feminist movement has marginalized women of color, lesbians, and working-class women. . . . That is, we have an interest in theorizing the kind of collective power that can bridge the diversity of individuals who make up the feminist movement. (*The Power* 122)

“Overturning patriarchy does not mean replacing men’s dominance with women’s dominance. That would merely maintain the patriarchal pattern of dominance. We need to transform the pattern itself” (Kelly 113–114). Therefore, the aim of this book is to explore the ways in which one can transform the pattern of female empowerment to make it relevant to women’s changing needs and do it without restructuring patriarchal understanding of power as domination. As if bearing that in mind, Kelly claims:

Rather than emulating Margaret Thatcher and others who loyally adapt themselves to male values of hierarchy, we must find our own definitions of power that reflect women’s values and women’s experience . . . not power *over* others, but power *with* others, the kind of shared power that has to replace patriarchal power. (114), emphasis original

In this monograph, the aforementioned processes are pursued in the works of four contemporary Irish poets: Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, Caitríona O’Reilly and Mary O’Donoghue. However before having a closer look at their poetic accomplishments, one needs to clarify the notion of female empowerment and the reasons why it means so much to women of the new generation. With this in mind, Allen observes that

Feminists are interested in empowerment because we are interested in how members of subordinated groups retain the power to act despite their subordination – more particularly, in our ability to attain certain ends in spite of the subordination of women. (*The Power* 126)

Furthermore, according to Wolf, women’s power stems from the basic tenets of the twenty first century feminism, outlined by her as follows:

1. Women matter as much as men do.
2. Women have the right to determine their lives.
3. Women’s experiences matter.
4. Women have the right to tell the truth about their experiences.
5. Women deserve . . . respect, self-respect, education, safety, health, representation, money. (*Fire with Fire* 138)

One of the broadest and the least controversial explanations of female empowerment is provided by Miller:

My own working definition of power is *the capacity to produce a change* – that is, to move anything from point A or state A to point B or state B. This can even include moving one’s own thoughts or emotions, sometimes a very powerful act. It can include acting to create movement in an interpersonal field, as well as acting in larger realms such as economic, social, or political arenas. (“Women and Power” 198), emphasis original

The conception of female empowerment to which this dissertation is to a large extent indebted goes back to Allen's study *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (1999). Likewise, starting from the definition of power as "the ability or capacity of an actor or set of actors to act" (*The Power* 127), Allen enumerates three categories of power: power-over, power-to and power-with (this division is reflected in the arrangement of the three chapters in this study). To be precise,

Power-over is the ability or capacity to act in such a way as to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors; power-to is the individual ability or capacity to act so as to attain some end; and power-with is the collective ability or capacity to act together so as to attain some common or shared end. (Allen, *The Power* 127)

Allen employs her triple division to "make sense of masculine domination, feminine empowerment and resistance, and feminist solidarity and coalition-building" (*The Power* 123).² As argued above, power-to is characterised by her "as the ability of an individual actor to attain an end or series of ends. This way of defining power-to suggests that the terms *empowerment* and *power-to* are roughly synonymous" (Allen, *The Power* 126), emphasis original. Along with bringing the issue of women's power into the limelight, Allen's book has contributed to the re-introduction of Hannah Arendt's philosophical works back into the modern feminist discourse. Allen's modern re-reading of Arendt has enabled contemporary scholars to appreciate this thinker's influence not just on philosophy but also on the women's movement in general. In *On Violence*, Arendt explains the phenomenon of power, highlighting its shared dimension (so important for feminists' social and political goals).³

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is "in power" we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. (44), emphasis original

Hence as argued in *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (2006), "The 'I am able' must be understood as the ability to act in a public space, to move in a space of freedom with others"

² The first two types of power are elaborated in Allen's writing on the basis of Foucault and Butler (the empowerment phase). Her most vital contribution to power discourse is showing the co-existence of various aspects of power and their mutual interdependence. Allen's approach to feminism means bringing into focus the idea of women's coalition-building and solidarity, as illustrated on the example of Arendt's philosophy.

³ Furthermore, Arendt argues that "[power] derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow" (*On Violence* 52).

(Birmingham 55, 57).⁴ From a feminist viewpoint, Arendt's notion of plurality reflects aptly the goals of the women's movement:

Power, which is synonymous with acting politically with others, must be inspired by the categorical imperative of the political: the principle of plurality provides us with a new law of humanity, demanding that each actor . . . has the right to appear with others, the right to act and speak within the political space. (Birmingham 60)

Furthermore in "New Faces of Power," Arendt's model of power is referred to as communicative: "communication is necessarily two-way, requiring that speakers and listeners engage in mutually meaningful conversation, debate and dialogue" (Ball 22).⁵ In Lukes's view, "power refers to an ability or capacity of an agent or agents, which they may or may not exercise" (63), emphasis original.⁶ On the other hand, Scott underlines what he calls "the transformative capacity" of power: "To act is to have causal powers, and these powers constitute the 'potency' that defines an organism as a human agent" (1). Similarly in *Power: A Philosophical Analysis* (second edition, 2002), Morris defines power as "a concept referring to an ability, capacity, or dispositional property" (13).⁷ He elaborates this thought claiming that power is "the capacity to effect outcomes" (Morris 34). Unlike other scholars cited here, Morris draws attention to what he calls "the moral context" of power: "blaming, excusing and allocating responsibility" (38).⁸ From a feminist viewpoint, the important aspect seems to be the notion of power-transformers:

Your powers include your ability to effect things directly, by yourself. But they also include indirect power, mediated through others . . . as power transformers . . . it is the power to determine how, through a process of collective decision-making, our individual powers are transformed . . . (Morris 45)

⁴ Birmingham claims that "Arendt's understanding of . . . power is synonymous with action and freedom . . . legitimate power is precisely that power that allows the actor to appear in a public space with others" (56–57).

⁵ This aspect of power as advocated by Arendt has attracted some criticism. Lukes offers a critique of Arendt's assumptions that "[p]ower is consensual" (32) and that it is a "co-operative activity" (35) in his book *Power: A Radical View*. According to Lukes, what is missing in this scheme is acknowledging the conflicts of interests (35–36) and divergent group interests.

⁶ In Lukes's view, "[p]ower . . . is a *dispositional* concept, comprising a conjunction of conditional or hypothetical statements specifying what would occur under a range of circumstances if and when the power is exercised" (63), emphasis original.

⁷ Morris distinguishes power from identification with resources or actions (19), selecting capacity as power's essential characteristic.

⁸ Here the conclusion Morris comes to is quite surprising: the "connection between power and responsibility is, then, essentially, negative: you can deny all responsibility by demonstrating lack of power" (39).

Last but not least, when analysing the discourse of power, one has to pay tribute to the thinker and philosopher who has contributed most to examining, describing and explaining its phenomenon: namely, Michel Foucault. In his canonical works *Madness and Civilisation* (1961), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1975), and especially *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976, 1984, 1984), Foucault⁹ has consistently explored the origin, scope,¹⁰ and cause of power and the effects that power has upon people.¹¹ As claimed by him, indeed, whether one is aware of it or not, power is a part of everyone's daily experience, and there is no person who can exist beyond its space.¹² Besides, as Foucault observes

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, and what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. ("Truth and Power" 120)

The above-mentioned understanding of power¹³ is close to the arguments about female empowerment advocated in this dissertation. This interpretation does not deny or attempt to conceal power's most abusive forms or manifestations (domination and violence), neither does it reduce power to its

⁹ As Foucault himself describes these studies, they have been "the goal of my work for the last twenty years." ("The Subject and Power" 327). His *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*. Volume III probes the aforementioned theme in detail, among other writings, in his seminal essays: "Truth and Power," "The Subject and Power," "Space, Knowledge, and Power."

¹⁰ Accordingly, Foucault introduces the threefold categorisation of power relations, objective capacities and relationships of communication. He claims: "It is necessary also to distinguish power relations from relationships of communication that transmit information by means of a language, a system of signs, or any other symbolic medium" (Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 337).

¹¹ Hence the following introductory remarks will draw primarily upon his synthesising and canonical text "The Subject and Power," first published in English as late as 1982, in which Foucault argues provocatively: "the human subject is placed . . . in power relations that are very complex. . . . – but for power relations we had no tools of study. We had to recourse only to ways of thinking about power based on legal models, that is: What legitimises power?" (327).

¹² Foucault articulates openly the most common objections against power only to refute them: "Isn't power simply a form of warlike domination?" ("Truth and Power" 123) or whether "power is that which abstracts, which negates the body, represses, suppresses, and so forth" ("Truth and Power" 125). Responding to the question "How is Power Exercised," Foucault explains "'How?' not in the sense of 'How does it manifest itself?' but 'How is it exercised?' and 'What happens when individuals exert (as we say) power over others?'" ("The Subject and Power" 337).

¹³ Foucault enumerates five basic tenets that need to be examined when probing power relations: "the system of differentiations," which, among others, entails economic, juridical, cultural, linguistic, and semiotic variables; "the types of objectives," or the means by which power is upheld; "instrumental modes," the means by which power is exercised; "forms of institutionalization" of power relations; and "the degrees of rationalization," which facilitate the existence of power relations ("The Subject and Power" 344–345).

most extreme instruments. As argued in this book (see Chapter Three) after Foucault, to be able to talk of power, there has to exist the capacity for resistance: for no matter how subdued the subjects might be, it can be assumed that they can never be entirely deprived of the possibility of opposing. Beyond this condition, according to Foucault, one cannot talk of power at all.¹⁴ Hence to claim female empowerment, one needs to prove that women, despite their state of being dominated and despite various forms of gender-established disempowerment, are not powerless simply due to their gender identification. As shown in McLaren's article "Foucault and Feminism: Power, Resistance, Freedom," or in Faith's "Resistance: Lessons From Foucault and Feminism," over the past decades, feminists have managed to overcome their earlier reductive and biased readings of Foucault¹⁵ (i.e. depicting the philosopher as promoting corporeal docility or gender-blindness, for instance) to rediscover his work's potential anew.¹⁶ After all, Foucault makes it clear that "The exercise of power . . . is something that is elaborated, transformed, organized . . . Power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social" ("The Subject and Power" 345). With regard to the social field, this domain has been extensively explored by Pierre Bourdieu who, like Foucault, has devoted most of his work to examining the phenomenon of power. Bourdieu's seminal works include *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982) [1991], *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time* (1998), and *Masculine Domination* (1998). The key concepts that Bourdieu has developed have expanded the understanding of power, specifically in its gendered dimension (see *Masculine Domination* (1998)

¹⁴ See also Hook (84).

¹⁵ Compare Allen's account of Foucault's criticism in "A Theory for Women?" (especially Nancy Hartstock) and in "A Theory for Feminists" (*The Power* 37–53). See as well Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*.

¹⁶ Allen maintains that the: "instances of constraint – that is, exercises of power-over – are, for Foucault, possible only insofar as the subject of the constraint is simultaneously enabled – that is, as a subject who has the capacity to act, who has the power-to. Thus, Foucault not only conceptualizes . . . power-over and power-to, he also integrates these two aspects of power in a complex and instructive way" (*The Power* 52). She sums up best Foucault's significance for feminist theory:

. . . Foucault's microphysics of power resonates with feminists' insistence that the personal is political, his account of the impact of disciplinary power on the body has provided feminists with a useful model for investigating the particular ways in which power shapes women's bodies, and his investigation of the institutional sedimentation of power relations has inspired feminist analyses of the sedimentation of male power over women in the institutions of the welfare state. Most important, however, for my examination of Foucault, his theoretical framework for the study of power offers feminists a conception that highlights the interplay between constraint and enablement . . . (Allen, *The Power* 52–53)

[2001]. With regard to his notion of symbolic power¹⁷ (viewed by him as both arbitrary and relational) Bourdieu advocates:

Symbolic power – as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization – is a power that can be exercised only if it is *recognized*, that is, misrecognized, as arbitrary. (*Language and Symbolic Power* 170), emphasis original¹⁸

As argued above, symbolic power entails mostly unconscious involvement of those upon whom it operates and who fail to recognise this power's socially generated and arbitrary character (Thompson 23). With regard to this study, Bourdieu's theoretical thought is applied here as a diagnosis of the existing gender power asymmetry [*Masculine Domination* (1998)]. For instance, reflexivity (a notion which, in a way, corresponds to Foucault's resistance) is evoked in Chapter Three. However unlike Foucault, Bourdieu does not seem to suggest a coherent system of subverting what he calls masculine domination or other forms of symbolic power, although he recognises such a necessity.¹⁹ It may even seem that making the debate on power more abstract, he has made it less real, hence, less perceptible – and, thus, more dangerous.²⁰ Aware of this critique, Bourdieu has explained the misunderstanding of his theoretical apparatus:

Taking 'symbolic' in one of its commonest senses, people sometimes assume that to emphasize symbolic violence is to minimize the role of physical violence, to forget (and make people forget) that there are battered, raped and exploited women, or worse, to seek to exculpate men from that form of violence – which is obviously not the case. Understanding 'symbolic' as the opposite of 'real, actual', people suppose that symbolic violence is a purely 'spiritual' violence which ultimately has no real effects. (*Masculine Domination* 34)

Since power is a complex phenomenon that resides on the borders of many academic disciplines and scholarly research programs, it cannot be analysed only

¹⁷ According to Bourdieu, "Symbolic power, a subordinate power, is a transformed, i.e. misrecognizable, transfigured and legitimated form of the other forms of power" (*Language and Symbolic* 170), emphasis added.

¹⁸ The pivotal words applied to define symbolic power appear to be misrecognition and recognition.

¹⁹ The major objection against Bourdieu stems from his work's key strength: by transferring the discourse of power into a more "symbolic" linguistic, ideological, and theoretical state, he is accused of putting the discourse of power (and especially the discourse surrounding violence against women) into a purely theoretical and cut off from reality context.

²⁰ See the collection edited by Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs: *Feminism after Bourdieu*.

from one perspective or area. Therefore apart from literary and cultural theory, the methodological background of this book involves sociology, philosophy and psychology. It operates on feminist epistemology, putting women – their relations, views and life choices – in the centre of the study. However the concept of female empowerment as advocated here is more than just an application of various practices and approaches. Neither does it mean that this dissertation follows their tenets uncritically. Instead, it puts them to test to see if their claims are verifiable and still relevant in the present day twenty-first century context. To make it specific, the book analyses the works of four contemporary Irish poets: Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, Caitríona O’Reilly and Mary O’Donoghue, (all born at the end of 1960s and beginning of 1970s): who have been witnessing (and creating) major social and cultural changes taking place recently in Irish literature. In her essay “Contemporary Irish Poetry,” Mary Montague (born 1964), not without bitterness, argues that:

To discover, in my twenties, some of the richness of female voices available (if, sometimes, rather difficult to find in those pre-internet days) was both liberating and dispiriting. Where had these women been when I was younger? Why were they not part of the ‘canon’ when they might have helped me negotiate the difficulties of growing into my female body, helped loosen the strangulation of my own voice? (108)

With regards to present-day Ireland, Montague admits that times have changed, and that “a young woman in Ireland today will at least find some of those female voices; and perhaps know with a little more certitude than I did, that she can claim her own voice within her own female human body” (108). What is more, not only are the Irish literary female voices of today more conspicuous than in the past but currently, as stressed unanimously by literary critics, it is women who innovate contemporary poetry in Ireland. Indeed, the change has taken place, to a large extent, due to the women poets of the new generation whose work is examined in this dissertation: Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, Caitríona O’Reilly and Mary O’Donoghue.

Vona Groarke is enlisted by Pat Boran among the poets who have contributed enormously to the development of the contemporary Irish poetic scene, not “in the slightest degree confined by the efforts of their fellows and all of whom engage with and enrich the history and traditions that continue to effect them as citizens, as readers and as writers, whatever their current geographic, historical or formal positions or interests” (“Introduction” 13–14). Vona Groarke was born in the same year as Mary Montague. She is the author of *Shale* (1994), *Other People’s Houses* (1999), *Flight* (2002), *Flight and Earlier Poems* (2004), *Juniper Street* (2006), *Lament for Art O’Leary*, *From the Irish of Eibhlín Ní Chonaill* (2008), and *Spindrift* (2009). In 2014, Vona Groarke published the volume *X*. From her first volume *Shale* (1994), Groarke’s poetry has been critically acclaimed both in Ireland and abroad. Noteworthy among Groarke’s numerous prestigious literary prizes are the Hennessy Award, the Davoren

Hanna Prize (2001) and the Stand International Poetry Prize (2000). Described in *The Poetry Ireland Review* as “an accomplished first collection” (Roche 106), Groarke’s poetic debut *Shale* (1994) won the Brendan Behan Memorial Award. The same year, 1994, Groarke received the award for the Best Poet of the Year. Five years later, Groarke won the Strokestown International Poetry Prize. As early as 1999, Groarke was considered to be “one of the most effective voices of her generation; her own poetic house is very much in order, and will always be worth visiting” (Denman 383). In his commentary upon Groarke’s poetic debut, Johnston reminds us of the poet’s earliest literary achievements:

Vona Groarke won the 1994 Listowel Writers’ Week sonnet competition and currently works as curator of Dublin’s Newman House. Awarding her the *Sunday Tribune* New Irish Writer of the Year and Hennessy Award for poetry, the judges praised her tremendous maturity, sophistication and wit. (“Surprised by Familiarity” 323)

Reviewing Groarke’s first volume, *Shale*, Anthony Roche praises the poet for an “imaginative process,” “witty exuberance,” and above all, “a strikingly individual poetic sensibility rich enough to inhabit a hundred empty rooms” (106–107). In this vein, with regard to *Shale*, Kelly admits that “Critics have been struck by Groarke’s sensibility, the assurance and regulated qualities of her voice” (“The Sinew of Memory” 64). Groarke’s second collection *Other People’s Houses* (1999) continues the themes introduced in *Shale*. In the *Irish University Review*, Denman stresses that the second volume

seems to represent the competent completion of a project that reached its natural culmination some time along the way, it is a measure of Vona Groarke’s undoubted skills as a poet that the poems hold the attention even after the central conceit has become a little threadbare. (383)

Writing about *Shale*, Wheatley observes that “[t]he volume’s elementary fresh and simple imagery recalls the American poet Louise Glück” (“Irish Poetry” 261). Much in line with the above, Lysaght praises *Other People’s Houses* for “a formal conservatism working in tandem with a modern idiom in familiar settings” and “operat[es] regularly on the discrepancy between traditional form and modern content in a gently ironic way” (“At Home and Abroad” 34). Likewise O’Rawe’s review of *Other People’s Houses* admires “the subtle sophistication and impressive formal range of Groarke’s poetic practice,” together with its “technical ingenuity” (“Habitations and Odysseys” 161). In a similarly favourable tone, Fadden comments about Groarke’s second collection:

Whereas other poets’ work may jump out and grab you immediately, bringing you back to reread gluttonously, returning to these poems may be necessary primarily to allow the suppressed narratives to fully emerge. The effect is not always truly revelatory but it is accomplished nonetheless. (32)

Analysing Groarke’s third collection *Flight* (2002), shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection in the UK and Ireland and awarded the

Michael Hartnett Poetry Prize in 2003, Carney, like Lysaght, compliments *Flight's* “quietness, formality and care of her method” (“Poets and Makers” 147). In other words,

They are poems ‘of the air displaced by flight’ . . . – and they put themselves forward inauspiciously, tentatively. But the poems assembled on the pages of this collection are in themselves anything but weak. Impeccable formal skills, impressive and sustained control of images, linguistic play and verse forms are all features here of a paradoxical poetry that is both quiet and diminutive but powerful and intense. (Carney, “Poets and Makers” 146–147)

In this manner, reviewing *Flight and Earlier Poems*, Phillips notices that “Groarke’s patient, serious poems, occasionally ruffled by wit, work things out in their own way . . . lines seem separated by a great deal of space” (236). Concluding, Phillips admits that:

Groarke’s poems often have an air of simplicity But their grounded, private acuteness, their silent insistence on discovering their own methods, makes them subtler and more complex than the poems of most of Groarke’s more extravagantly ambitious contemporaries. (237)

Correspondingly, Johnston’s review of *Flight* subscribes to the cited-above opinions: “This is fresh poetry, fresh moulding of language. Not all of these poems go off with a bang; but then again, someone else stepping on the same poem might just trigger its potential” (“Fashion and Profit” 248). In Carney’s view, “Vona Groarke has worked to create verbal patterns that are commensurate with the elusiveness and transience of such moments, real and imagined, and the result is formidable” (“Poets and Makers” 148). Subsequently, Groarke’s fourth collection *Juniper Street* (2006) is appreciated by critics due to its “meticulous attention to detail, to formal arrangement in her well-wrought poems” (Johnston, “Hauntings and Returns” 99). In addition, reviewers pay tribute to Groarke’s “precise, sensuous detail and sensitive, witty observation” (Johnston, “Hauntings and Returns” 99). In *The Irish Times*, Sampson describes Groarke’s fourth volume as “a poetry of poise and perfectly contrived effect” (“A Light Still” 12). She elaborates her opinion, arguing that “Nothing is clumsy here; nothing is under-achieved, nor is there any of that surplus of the unintended, in language or idea” (Sampson, “A Light Still” 12). As demonstrated, critics tend to agree that in *Juniper Street* Groarke’s

poetry is remarkable both for its use of metaphor and simile to create striking images that gleam and build into a luminous tapestry as the collection progresses, but also for its attentiveness to words as sounds that powerfully reverberate. (Johnston, “Hauntings and Returns” 100)

In other words, “Again, it is the act of writing that fastens and formalises experience. The past is never far from the present. Indeed, there is a sustained

focus on the process of writing throughout; it is often the poet engaged in the act of writing who speaks” (Johnston, “Hauntings and Returns” 101). And yet in the long run, with her persistence to explore mundane household reality of a woman poet, Groarke risks being compartmentalised as Eavan Boland whose poetry tends to be belittled due to her purportedly confined “women’s” thematic grounds. As if addressing this accusation, in “Sufficient unto Our Day Recent Irish Poetry,” Zwiep aptly argues that “[t]he subject of these poems is often domestic (not a pejorative term), focusing on relationships and houses (she is married and has two children)” (467).

Nonetheless it is owing to the mentioned “considerable technical virtuosity,” “a gently ironic way” (Lysaght, “At Home and Abroad” 34), “witty exuberance” (Roche 107), “impressive and sustained control of images” (Carney, “Poets and Makers” 147) and “attentiveness to words as sounds” (Johnston, “Hauntings and Returns” 100) that Groarke manages to avoid being catalogued within stereotypically gender-related subject matter. Indeed, the nature of Groarke’s “paradoxical poetry” (Carney, “Poets and Makers” 147) leads to the paradox of her writing’s reception. Like her other famous predecessors such as the earlier-evoked Eavan Boland or Wisława Szymborska, Groarke consciously chooses a seemingly commonplace path of ordinary issues rather than the pursuit of monumental themes. In other words, Groarke’s poems “entail a certain sacrifice – of grandiosity, of grand themes, of flight – and they put themselves forward inauspiciously, tentatively” (Carney, “Poets and Makers” 147). Other critics seem to subscribe willingly to this view, observing that “[t]he authority of her voice springs from what I will call an impressive plain style, distinctly unpretentious, clear in syntax, and even in line length” (Zwiep 467–468). With the above in mind, no wonder that among Groarke’s literary inspirations critics enlist Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Medbh McGuckian (Grennan, “Coaxing a World”), Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, Larkin (Lysaght, “At Home and Abroad”), Frank O’Hara, Virginia Woolf (Johnston, “Hauntings and Returns”).

Although Groarke may have, like all the great poets do, her own recurrent topics to which she likes to return, she does it in a more and more mature way. In doing so, she continuously extends, alters and updates her scope of observation. Her last three collections: *Juniper Street* (2006), *Spindrift* (2009) and *X* (2014) mark clear stylistic and thematic changes, moving towards universal issues, approached through personal experience. Last but not least: there are not many poets whose most recent volumes are critically acclaimed to be the best out of their literary output. Such is the case with Groarke’s *Spindrift* (2009), a masterly poetic achievement singled out for the Poetry Book Society Recommendation. In his review of *Spindrift*, “Landing a Poem” Brennan notices that “Groarke is an ambitious poet as well as a painstaking one . . . there is a sense that she is still tentative and that there is a long and rewarding road ahead” (277–278). In *The Irish Times* review entitled “Coaxing a World Into Plain View: Spindrift,” Grennan relates to Groarke’s poems as “luminous,” endowed with a “seriousness of purpose, clarity of intelligence, exactitudes of feeling and,

most of all, a quiet mastery of language in its instrumental work as sound and cadence, as image, as metaphor, as just plain statement” (13). What is more, Grennan describes *Spindrift* as “her strongest collection so far,” adding that in this collection Groarke “comes clear in a complex, satisfying, distinct voice that is no one’s but her own” (“Coaxing a World” 13). In 2014, Vona Groarke published the collection *X*. John McAuliffe in *The Irish Times* review of her latest volume, entitled “X Marks a New Place for Vona Groarke and for Irish writing” claims that:

Groarke’s sixth collection . . . inhabits the empty space it describes in a way that feels new in Irish writing: the poems tell a story of reclaimed and recovered spaces, albeit hunted by memory . . . Groarke’s ability to conjure place and feeling is characteristic, but the poems[‘] are both fresh and familiar, even though the landscapes in which the poems occur remain almost entirely unnamed.

In conclusion, one cannot but agree that Groarke fully deserves to be called “a leading figure among the most accomplished poets of her (very talented) generation” (Grennan, “Coaxing a World” 13).

Sinéad Morrissey’s poetic debut *There Was Fire in Vancouver* (1996) came out two years after Groarke’s first volume *Shale*. Sinéad Morrissey won the Patrick Kavanagh Award for Poetry at the age of eighteen. Since then a lengthy list of Morrissey’s literary awards, prizes and scholarships has made her one of the most critically-acclaimed contemporary English-language poets. This is how Jean Bleakney recalls the beginnings of Morrissey’s literary career:

she had hardly walked through the doors of Trinity College in autumn 1990, when, aged 18, she became the youngest ever recipient of The Patrick Kavanagh Award . . . *There was Fire in Vancouver* appeared in 1996 and earned her an Eric Gregory Award from the Society of Authors, the most prestigious award for poets under the age of thirty. (“Poet in Residence” 12)

Along with Ciaran Carson, Morrissey is recognised as a successor of Seamus Heaney’s poetic heritage in the North. In “‘That Black Mouth’: Secrecy, Shibboleths, and Silence in Northern Irish Poetry,” David Wheatley argues that “Northern Ireland enters a new phase and younger talents such as Peter McDonald, Martin Mooney, and Sinéad Morrissey come to maturity in post-ceasefire, post-Belfast Agreement Ireland” (142). Similarly David Butler locates Morrissey in line with other “considerable figures on the contemporary poetry scene – Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paul Durcan, John Ennis, Harry Clifton, Peter Sirr, Greg Delanty, Pat Boran” (“Alive Alive O” 82). George Shirtes admits “[t]he power of Sinéad Morrissey’s poetry lies in sharply pitched precise emotion and a fine ear and eye for texture. The beauty of her short poems is keening, compact and yet airy” (“The Sweet Dance” 95). Moreover other critics widely praise Morrissey’s erudition (see, for instance, Johnston, “Beyond Belfast”), pointing out to the numerous, intertextual references in her work.

Among her most significant poetic inspirations are: Frost, Lowell, Larkin, Kapuściński, Szymborska, and Lorca, to name but a few; “[e]lsewhere we are treated to vignettes of W. H. Auden and Alexander the Great, together with a mischievous piece of rhyming ‘Advice’ to fellow poets” (Phillips, “Criminal Records” 73). In the volume *Through the Square Window* (2009), a list of authors who have influenced her writing is impressive. Johnston admits that:

This is hard-worked poetry, slowly and steadily undertaken with obvious erudition – . . . the styles and spirits of other poets such as, among others, Louis MacNeice, Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and Les Murray are tried out at various times while prose writers such as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Henry James, William Makepeace Thackeray, are invoked with the ambassador of the collection being Lewis Carroll’s Alice, the fearless explorer of Wonderland and other unfathomable realms. (“Beyond Belfast” 107)

Shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize, Morrissey’s second volume *Between Here and There* (2002) was published after the poet’s return to Ireland after the time of living abroad. In his *Northern Irish Literature: 1975–2006: The Imprint of History*, Michael Parker remarks that “the majority of its poems must have been composed when Morrissey was between the ages of 24 and 30 – illuminatory moments from periods of private crisis feature predominantly” (227). As with her poetic debut, critics have enthusiastically received Morrissey’s *Between Here and There*. However there were also some rare voices arguing that “the earlier poems speak more convincingly” (Tillinghast, “The Future of Irish Poetry?” 181) and that “The later ones would appear to grow out of travel to places like Japan, New York, New Zealand – places that are not as evocative for this poet as those about the American Southwest or her emotional home places” ergo “they lack the rough edge of necessity” (Tillinghast, “The Future of Irish Poetry?” 181). Unlike quoted Tillinghast, Parker believes that “geographical and cultural relocations have enriched . . . [Morrissey’s] work and enabled . . . [her] to look back on . . . particular experiences, but also to look upwards and outwards to other cultures, places and times” (226). Similarly other critics praise the poems from *Between Here and There* for “[t]olerance and openness to diversity,” being “multilayered,” for their “visual understanding of language,” and being “an evocation of things that cannot be expressed” (de Angelis 148–151). In 2002, Morrissey won the Rupert and Eithne Strong Award. The poet’s third collection *The State of the Prisons* is appreciated for the fact that “[t]he more challenging the subject matter, the more precise Morrissey’s language becomes” (Phillips, “Criminal Records” 75). Furthermore,

The book also features commentaries on recent political events, and accounts of journeys abroad (to China, New Zealand, and Germany, continuing a “travelogue” theme that has run through both of Morrissey’s previous collections), together with lyrics on the more personal history of childhood and early adulthood. It’s a very broad range of subject matter, marshalled, for the most part, into exquisitely crafted poems. (Phillips, “Criminal Records” 73)

Phillips observes that in Morrissey's third volume, her poetic "monologues . . . engage with history and place [to] transport the reader to exhilarating new territory" ("Criminal Records" 75). By the same token, Parker thinks highly of Morrissey's "scope of her vision ranging far beyond Ireland and its history to embrace the current international crisis," as well as of the poet's "remarkable skills as a creator of others' voices," her "compressed sentences," and successful rendering of the archaized idiom (*Northern Irish Literature* 228–229). Reviewing *The State of the Prisons*, Topping agrees with Parker that "Morrissey's technical achievements in this collection are considerable. She has already proved herself to be as good a craftsperson as Michael Longley, and this collection only intensifies her clear mastery of form, especially the lyric, but also longer narrative / epic-style pieces" ("Justice Marries Humanity" 26). Likewise Topping concludes enthusiastically: "It is exciting to see her using new forms and admitting new voices to her work. This collection must surely now cement Morrissey's status as one of the most significant Irish poets to have emerged and come to prominence during the nineties" ("Justice Marries Humanity" 26). On the whole, reviewers of *The State of the Prisons* emphasise that Morrissey's "drift of language is excellent," adding that "she plays with form as well as with tone," and pay tribute to the work's "surprising spaciousness" (Shirtes, *The Sweet Dance* 95–96). David Butler in "Consolations of Observation" comments that Morrissey's "imagery is frequently both vivid and refreshing" appreciating her fourth volume's "economy and resonance" (106). In *The Irish Times* review of *The State of the Prisons*, entitled "Collections Connecting," Sampson admits with admiration that "It is, in short, a book of splendours," due to "its subject matter," "dangerous quietness," and "the intelligence of generosity" (11). Furthermore Sampson concludes in an affirmative tone: "this necessary book affords proof that a truer, more far-sighted poetics persists" ("Collections Connecting" 11).

Morrissey's fourth collection *Through the Square Window* (2009) was short-listed for the T.S. Eliot Prize and a Poetry Book Society Choice. The title poem of Morrissey's volume won the 2007 UK National Poetry Competition. The critics praise the book as a "grown-up, serious volume," "daring" in themes (Sampson, "Avoiding the Lure" 13). *The Irish Times* reviewer sums it up: "This collection is authentic . . . to a confident, inquiring intelligence that makes itself felt on every page," adding that *Through the Square Window* "promises yet more for the future" (Sampson, "Avoiding the Lure" 13). The poet was also awarded the prestigious Michael Hartnett Poetry Prize. Morrissey's fifth collection, entitled *Parallax* (2013) has won the T.S. Eliot Prize. All in all, the critics compliment Morrissey's "gift for scoring images that impress themselves on the mind" and applaud the way she "hangs her words in the air on tight-rope-like lines" (Johnston, "Beyond Belfast" 109). Accordingly, Eibhlín Evans appreciates Morrissey's poetry for having "fresh lines . . . [being] economical and direct, poised and subtle" (472). In this vein, Johnston admits that Morrissey "renovate[s] the cluttered spaces of contemporary poetry . . . cleaning the

windows of perception, the many-roomed house of Northern Irish poetry would appear to be in ship-shape and looking out, as ever, to sea” (“Beyond Belfast” 109). She points out that Morrissey “shows herself to be a compelling poet, capable of adjusting the way we see” (“Beyond Belfast” 109). In “The Future of Irish Poetry?” Tillinghast declares “that we are in the presence of a new talent” (179). Even more enthusiastically he affirms that “Work of this order renews one’s faith in the art of poetry” (Tillinghast 179). Summing up, he concludes: “Morrissey is an astute student of the human heart” (Tillinghast 180).

Born in 1973, Caitríona O’Reilly has published so far three volumes of poetry: *The Nowhere Birds* (2001), *The Sea Cabinet* (2006) and *Geis* (2015). Apart from her editing work (co-editor of *Metre* and the editor of *Poetry Ireland Review* since 2008), O’Reilly is a highly-acknowledged critic. As a poet, she is regarded as “a great new talent” (Carpenter, “Into Dazzle” 108) and “a poet’s poet” (Naiden 155) who “thrives on tensions, centrally via the paradoxes of language” and “brings a new pattern to them” (Carpenter, “Into Dazzle” 104). In 1999, the Arts Council of Ireland endowed her with a Literature Bursary. Carpenter writes about her: “Caitríona O’Reilly . . . is a poet well equipped to render richness and deprivation, both sensory and emotional” (“Into Dazzle” 104–105).

Emphasising her “doctoral thesis at Trinity College on American literature,” Naiden adds that O’Reilly is “a poet of occasional sheer beauty as well as wild disconcertions” (154). Further Naiden supports this opinion: “Caitríona O’Reilly is not at first an easy poet to understand, at first. Her poems ought not to be skimmed but pondered, in order to absorb their sinews and tendrils.” (155). Other reviewers observe that “She is not the first poet to have earned a PhD, nor will she be the last. But a way must be found to transmute all the learning into lore, in the way Ezra Pound did in his early poetry and then forgot how to do through most of the *Cantos*” (Tillinghast 183–184). The fascination with Sylvia Plath’s work reappears in critical studies of O’Reilly’s poetry time and time again, as in *The Irish Times* review of her second collection (2006): “If this sounds like Plath, it’s perhaps not surprising; since O’Reilly’s poetic project, too, is the appropriation of rich context, including Irish and British history, to personal meaning-making” (Sampson, “Stacking Myths” 10).²¹ Moreover with regard to O’Reilly’s poetic “teachers,” critics point out as well her indebtedness to Lowell, and Eliot; not to mention Larkin, Wordsworth and Milton (Carpenter, “Into Dazzle” 104–106). Analysing her poetic debut *The Nowhere Birds*, Donnelly argues that “Caitríona O’Reilly’s first book . . . has the verve and excitement of life and language newly encountered” (“Making It New” 111). He appreciates the whole volume’s linguistic and thematic inventiveness, the assured “technical variety of the verse,” the poet’s “fine narrative gift,” and “the seemingly effortless control of the speaking voice” (Donnelly, “Making It New”

²¹ However, linking O’Reilly’s doctoral dissertation to Plath’s influence on her poetry might be overhasty. MacNeice might be more appropriate to discuss as an influence in this place.

112). O'Reilly's first volume won the Rooney Prize for Literature and it got shortlisted for the Forward prize. The poet was praised for "a rare gift for the memorable image and a seemingly effortless ability to explore and exploit the formalities of poetic structures" (Donnelly, "Making It New" 112). The critics tend to agree that "*The Nowhere Birds* is thematically eclectic and the variety of the poems reveals a natural talent experimenting and making a mark" (Donnelly, "Making It New" 111). In his review of *The Nowhere Birds* Holdridge calls the collection "the maturation of a poet" during which O'Reilly "creates poems of an impersonal, indeed intellectual, variety" (377). Holdridge applies to her poetry the modifiers such as "self-conscious, philosophical, and widely travelled" (377). O'Reilly's second volume *Sea Cabinet* (2006) was endowed with the Poetry Book Society Recommendation:

The collection's three main sequences (once centred on Goya, one akin to Eliot's 'Landscapes' and the title sequence) acknowledge sources and transcend them. The use of personae is liberating and exacting: the notion of the artist as witness, tied to a medium, chronicler of horrors as well as pleasures, is always close. (Carpenter, "Into Dazzle" 106)

In her review of *The Sea Cabinet*, Sampson pays attention to its "unconventionality," the "strikingly ornate, often historically-derived imagery [that] generates a sense of coalescence, of the irresistible thickening-up of experience," and the poet's "haunted language" ("Stacking Myths" 10). In the same way, Gamble emphasises *The Sea Cabinet*'s "Prominent thematic concerns with environmental damage, travel and the fragile boundaries ordering the self and world strike chords" and "our relationships with the physical world, and the frequently complacent mental stances we adopt" ("Shaping Itself" 26). Like Gamble, Villar-Argáiz in "Between Tradition and Modernity: Twenty-First Century Ireland in Recent Works by Irish Women Poets" draws attention to an "ecological strand in O'Reilly's work" (123). Furthermore, the critic praises O'Reilly's poetry for its sense of "rootedness and attachment to . . . place" (Villar-Argáiz, "Between Tradition" 123). With regard to *The Sea Cabinet*, Gamble concludes that "O'Reilly has always been a stimulating writer, and these poems are no exception: their depths are not easily plumbed, and they thoroughly repay re-reading" ("Shaping Itself" 27). What is more, O'Reilly is also praised for "a gift for metaphor: here is a poet who asks from us patience and a willingness to puzzle out connections" (Zwiep 471). Similarly, Barra Ó Seaghdha observes that "Caitríona O'Reilly can enter into a subject successfully" (111). No wonder O'Reilly's most recent work: *Geis* (2015) has been impatiently awaited with much hope and expectation. Summing up, O'Reilly has been viewed as an aspiring and promising author, "on her way to becoming a stunning lyric poet" (Tillinghast 183) and "an accomplished young poet who is struggling . . . to emerge from the complications of the many things she can do well" (Tillinghast 182). Arguably, the slightly condescending tone with which critics sometimes discuss O'Reilly's poetry is undeserved because

her collections already perfectly fulfil the high standards and aspirations of a mature and talented poet. Justin Quinn enlists O'Reilly as belonging to "a gifted generation which includes Vona Groarke" ("The Weather" 486).

Mary O'Donoghue (born 1975) writes poetry, short stories and fiction [*Before the House Burns* (2010)]. The biographical note²² informs us that "Her short stories have been included in *Agni*, *Salamander*, *The Dublin Review*, *Literary Imagination* and elsewhere" (McBreen 136). O'Donoghue's two volumes of poetry *Tulle* (2001) and *Among These Winters* (2007) have achieved a wide critical appraisal. For her poetic debut *Tulle* (2001), the poet received the Salmon Poetry Publication Prize and the Seán Dunne Young Writer Award. Among O'Donoghue's other literary awards, one could mention the prestigious Hennessy New Irish Writers' Award. With her academic and scholarly background, it is not surprising to discover in O'Donoghue a flair for words; she is a very idiom-conscious poet and a witty writer. In her self-ironic essay, "On Disgrace and the Need for a New-Fangled Envoy," O'Donoghue admits:

And I'm beginning to think that a main driver of my writing has been to make myself smile and or shudder or indulge the range of reactions between, and let readers go and find their own ice-breaking equipment. But of course, writers are doomed to be read and so we give up our home-spun enjoyments when the book goes Out There. (140–141)

Unlike the poems of three other authors analysed in this book, O'Donoghue's work is not frequently reviewed or commented upon. It needs to be emphasised that even though it receives less critical coverage, O'Donoghue's poetry is by no means inferior either as regards formal or linguistic aspects. One of the reasons for this inadequate critical attention may stem from her long-termed work and stay in the United States and her absence on the Irish literary scene. However when critics do examine O'Donoghue's poetry, they enumerate her among those women poets who do "expand their lyric into new territories" (Villar-Argáiz, "Between Tradition" 125), among which one can highlight "the modernization of Irish culture . . . interwoven, sometimes, with gender-focused themes" (Villar-Argáiz, "Between Tradition" 126). On the other hand, "[t]he travel experiences of writers such as Sinéad Morrissey and Mary O'Donoghue influence their poems, reflecting their desire to celebrate a cross-cultural form of Irishness, one that surpasses all sorts of geographical and gendered boundaries" (Villar-Argáiz, "Between Tradition" 131). Barra Ó Seaghdha locates Mary O'Donoghue among "writers whose promise intrigues or who are difficult to categorise" (112), but, at the same time, who "have established their own imaginative worlds" where "they have settled a little too comfortably within its borders" (112). In my reading of O'Donoghue's poems, I have paid a special attention to her exceptional sensitivity to sound, the way she "plays" or in her own words

²² Included in the anthology *The Watchful Heart: A New Generation of Irish Poets: Poems and Essays*.

“orchestrates” her words on a page (musical metaphors are frequent in her writing), and how the poet takes delight in the lines’ auditory sense as well as a semantic and textual one. Another feature of her poetry that O’Donoghue herself admits is a love of words that are not frequently used nowadays: to appreciate O’Donoghue’s work, the most common lexical meanings will not suffice. As noticed by Eibhlín Evans, Mary O’Donoghue belongs to those “women poets [who] display individual voices and offer new expressive possibilities for familiar grievances” (471). All in all, it is only a matter of time until O’Donoghue’s poetry and fiction receive the full-length critical analysis they deserve. Hopefully, if this book could contribute to it, even in the smallest degree, its aim will be accomplished.

The opening chapter of this study: **Power-With: Irishwomen’s Relational Empowerment and Women’s Empowerment in Connection** deals with female empowerment that stems from women’s relational backgrounds. For decades, there has been a critical reductive tendency to perceive women’s poetry (or poetry written by women) via the prism of the relational problems frequently depicted by female authors. As a reaction against it, women poets have preferred to deliberately stay away from what used to be labelled as “feminine” issues. With this in mind, Chapter One proposes an alternative approach according to which women’s autonomy is not hampered but strengthened by female relational embeddedness.²³ Thus, Chapter One examines the poetry of Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, Caitríona O’Reilly and Mary O’Donoghue as empoweringly located within the relational structures of family, kin, romantic or friendly connections. However as demonstrated here, for women, such relations in order to be sustaining, have to be based on reciprocity, mutuality, empathy, autonomy, acting together with mutual benefit and respect for both sides. Additionally, to be considered as empowering, relationality must enhance female individual growth, without stifling women’s own choices and commitments. Nowadays with all their knowledge, education, experience, personal records and previous practices, Irish women poets analysed here: Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, Caitríona O’Reilly and Mary O’Donoghue re-examine carefully their (personal) connections in terms of empowerment and its limits, re-working their relational capital to stimulate and increase their own artistic development.²⁴

The first sub-chapter “Female Relational Empowerment as ‘The Self-In Relation’²⁵ in the Poetry of Sinéad Morrissey” examines Irish women’s connections within family and kinship structures as constituting the empowering potential for creative and individual growth. Hence in Morrissey’s poetry, the female “self-in relation” (Surrey, “The Self-in-Relation” 51–66) is empowered

²³ See Surrey’s “Relationship and Empowerment.”

²⁴ The process is not as easy as it may seem, because, according to Jordan, “our culture has overemphasized the agentic, individualistic, competitive, lonely qualities of human life; and women have suffered, as their valuing of relationship, their immersion in caring and open need for connection have been denigrated” (“Empathy, Mutuality” 289).

²⁵ Surrey (The Self-in-Relation 51–66).

both by the knowledge gained from the previous generations of women in her family and by her own current experience of relationality. Therefore, the female speaker in Morrissey's poems frequently goes back in time to probe the complicated narratives of her ancestral connections to realise how empowering these relations can be for her in an artistic and personal dimension. That latter aspect is examined most meticulously through the persona's relations with her husband and her new-born son. Scrutinising from a de-familiarised perspective her child's speech acquisition means for the persona learning her own voice anew. The process of "growth-in-connection"²⁶ is discerned as a challenging and empowering practice whereby both sides can benefit from each other. In other words, the new perspective that Morrissey's speaker develops while mothering, or earlier looking back upon her own childhood, becomes inspiring for her as a woman and as a writer. Female empowerment in Morrissey's poetry is not viewed essentially.²⁷ What is more, women's relational empowerment is not based upon any gender essence; it arises from exemplary, diverse and particular relational experience that can be enriching only as long as is not falsified by the sameness.

The second sub-chapter, "'To Act in Concert': Women's Mutual Empowerment in the Poetry of Mary O'Donoghue" refers to the collective aspect of women's power. Female empowerment in O'Donoghue's poetry entails the participation and co-operation of other women. It re-addresses the currently questioned issue of sisterhood, reclaimed here as women's solidarity. By examining O'Donoghue's poems, this sub-chapter also challenges a dangerous patriarchal myth, that of women's inability to be loyal, supportive and co-operate with one another. Both Daly and Wolf rightly remind us that patriarchal culture incites competition among women and their rivalry for male partners and social prestige.²⁸ O'Donoghue's poems show how through friendship with other women, one can establish female empowerment. Specifically, Daly's Be-Friending (based on women's creativity, reciprocity and solidary defiance of patriarchal structures) appears significant here. Allen's reading of Arendt leads to the reformulating of the notion of (women's) solidarity²⁹ based on acting together and not on an "exclusionary and repressive concept that is always predicated on some inherent sameness or identity" (*The*

²⁶ The term coined by Surrey (Jordan, Walker et al., 174–177).

²⁷ See "parenting-in-connection" (Dooley and Fedele 233), Jordan ("The Meaning of Mutuality"), Surrey ("The Relational Self"), Walker ("Race, Self").

²⁸ In Jordan's words, "Patriarchy and existing power structures depend on isolation and disempowerment of women. Women are pitted against each other in competition for men and in the demeaning of women who choose to be with women" ("Relational Resilience 43).

²⁹ Allen's innovative interpretation of Arendt enables feminists to re-define the concept of solidarity beyond the framework of sameness. In other words in Allen's reading of Arendt, the ghost of the shared essence is warded off by shared action, as she herself puts it.

Power 123).³⁰ Nonetheless, the very concept of female solidarity looks insufficient without empathy. As an underlying and fundamental component of female empowerment, empathy constitutes a recurrent idea of this chapter. Without empathy, one can hardly imagine any meaningful connection between people, let alone a mutually empowering one. Whether teenage friends, female schoolmates, three middle-age “Hags,” or sisters in blood, O’Donoghue’s speakers manage to engage in and sustain “growth-promoting, life-enhancing, interactive” (Surrey, “Relationship and Empowerment” 164) connections with other women and act together for their common goals. On the whole, O’Donoghue’s female characters are active, rebellious and insubordinate to the Laws of the Father that aim to restrict women’s agency and freedom.

“The Female Power of Relational Autonomy: Establishing Indoor and Outdoor Connections in the Poetry of Vona Groarke” explores female empowerment drawn from relational autonomy. In other words, by analysing Groarke’s poems, this section challenges the view that autonomy demands putting aside one’s relational interconnectedness. The root of the controversy has been already implied in the first sub-chapter, namely, associating independence with the masculine vision of autonomy, separation, fear of commitments, emotional detachment, disengagement or relational disconnection. In contrast to this, Groarke’s poetry examines the potential of relational autonomy that does not juxtapose women’s personal freedom with social embeddedness. As an organising concept in her poems, Groarke chooses the signifier of home / house. It is around this unifying symbol that her persona locates her emotive, relational and personal (indoor and outdoor) connections. Being devoted to relational connections with her children and husband, Groarke’s speaker is, at the same time, committed to writing, her own creative ideals and personal values. In doing so, Groarke’s poetry demonstrates that both female and male autonomy is structured by the relations in which people function. Ergo, it is acquired as a result of connections and attachments, and it cannot develop properly outside a relational context.³¹ As demonstrated in the examined works, balancing between various types of commitments is challenging for women but not impossible. What is more, in Groarke’s poems, women’s relational autonomy is an indispensable component of female empowerment. Without the fundamental ability to decide about their choices, values, and commitments, women can never be empowered.³²

³⁰ Allen argues “Arendt implicitly rejects the notion that group solidarity rests on a shared identity if that identity is understood as resting on an inherent sameness, be it a shared essence, a shared experience of oppression, or what have you” (*The Power* 105).

³¹ In other words, “It is . . . in virtue of our dependency on others in the family that we acquire a capacity for autonomy . . . our capacity for autonomy is acquired in contexts where we are dependent on others” (Barclay 57).

³² Friedman states that “Autonomy is no longer thought to require someone to be a social atom, that is, radically socially unencumbered, defined merely by the capacity to choose, or to be able to exercise reason prior to any of her contingent ends or social engagements” (“Autonomy, Social” 41).

The last part of Chapter One, “The Anxiety of Disconnected ‘Unmoored Pieces’ in the Poetry of Caitriona O’Reilly” studies what happens when women’s connections with others are broken in a prolonged and habitual way, producing what is named by psychologists as a “chronic disconnection” (Jordan and Walker, “Introduction” 2). Additionally, it probes the consequences of such a condition in the sphere of female empowerment. Unlike the cases of the desired, casual and temporary disconnection [“move out of nonmutual, hurtful relationships” (Jordan, “Relational Awareness” 53)], the chronic disconnection leads to female disempowerment (Jordan and Walker “Introduction” 3). In other words, analysing O’Reilly’s poems, the final part of Chapter One examines the causes and effects of female disconnection to establish to whether in this state, any capacity or women’s agency is possible at all. The conclusion reached here evinces that disconnection is synonymous with powerlessness, as demonstrated in the cited research.³³ This happens because a woman becomes cut off from her relational capital (as discussed in earlier sections) that enhances female empowerment (i.e., women’s solidarity, empathy, “growth-in connection” and relational autonomy). In O’Reilly’s poems, without access to the resources that amplify her strength, disconnected female speakers are prone to feel incapacitated, which, in some cases, might even lead to psychosomatic illnesses (eating disorders, for instance) or clinical depression. Hence, the persona in O’Reilly’s poems seems to be immobilised by her need for relationality and connection, and the experience of having this need blocked and “switched off.” That is why O’Reilly’s poetry is full of anxious and eerie images that render the female voice’s disconnection and the pain it causes to her. Even though in-between the lines, the female speaker seems to admit her need for connection, she still appears to be too apprehensive to follow this urge.

The second chapter **Power-At: Ecopower and Irish Women’s Ecological Selves**, studies female empowerment derived from ecofeminism (or the ecopower) that constitutes for women a source of (self) knowledge and change and a chance for re-defining the relations of domination supported by the patriarchy.³⁴ The intrinsic assumption, as outlined by Warren and other eco-scholars cited here, is that there is a non-accidental correspondence between the subordination of nature and the subjection of women. Therefore, this chapter examines the ethical dimension of women’s relation to nature, perceiving ecocare and the land ethic as pivotal components of their own struggle for self-

³³ See the research conducted in Stone Center’s Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at Wesley College (1991, 2004).

³⁴ What is more, it can be argued that “feminism is a transformative philosophy that embraces the amelioration of life on earth for all its life-forms, for all natural entities. We believe that all oppressions are interconnected: no one creature will be free until all are free – from abuse, degradation, exploitation, pollution, and commercialization. Women and animals shared these oppressions historically, and until the mentality of domination is ended in all its forms, these afflictions will continue” (Donovan and Adams, Introduction 3).

recognition, hence, female empowerment.³⁵ As argued above, ecofeminism can be empowering for women, as they are able to scrutinise their cultural, historical, economic deprivations and dispossessions in a wider context of the parallels with the domination of the natural world.³⁶ The caring attitude towards both animate and non-animate co-participants of the natural world enables women to challenge the relations of superiority and supremacy that constitute the prevailing model of addressing nature in patriarchal societies.³⁷

The opening part of Chapter Two, “The Empowering Ecofeminist Care Ethic and Land Ethic in The Poetry of Mary O’Donoghue” explores from an ethical standpoint, the oppression of animals and the violation of the land as the two key areas in which the patriarchal abuse takes place. This thinking leads to the formulation of new ecofeminist ethics that can be applied to critically analyse the existing *status quo*. Irish women poets of the new generation seem to encompass increasingly often eco (feminist) issues into their writing agendas. Addressing the environmental problems and, then, suggesting an alternative way of resolving it, may result in overcoming helplessness and, consequently, it may lead to female (eco) empowerment.³⁸ As shown in O’Donoghue’s poems, women defending the natural world, gain the feeling of interconnectedness with all beings and the sense of belonging to a large world-structure different from the patriarchal one.³⁹ In O’Donoghue’s poetry, female speakers who can draw their empowerment from these newly discovered resources, become more grounded and they offer their strength to those who may need it, if not more than at least as much as they do. Bearing this in mind, eco-ethics entails care and respect for all animate and non-animate participants of the natural world.⁴⁰

³⁵ According to Kheel, “Ecofeminism is still in the process of forging connections between feminism and the environmental movement. If ecofeminism is to rise to the challenge of its potential, it must begin to move beyond abstract statements concerning ethical conduct and thought” (111).

³⁶ Merchant stresses that “[a]lthough ecology is a relatively new science, its philosophy of nature, holism, is not. Historically, holistic presuppositions about nature have been assumed by communities of people who have succeeded in living in equilibrium with their environments. The idea of cyclical processes, of the interconnectedness of all things, and the assumption that nature is active and alive are fundamental to the history of human thought” (293).

³⁷ In other words, “ecofeminist theory includes a systemic analysis of domination that specifically includes the oppression of women and environmental exploitation, and it advocates a synthesis of ecological and feminist principles as guiding lights for political organizing and the creation of ecological, socially equitable life-styles” (Lahar 1–2).

³⁸ The theoretical background for this section is mostly provided by Warren’s publications: *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective On What It is And Why it Matters* (2000) and two earlier volumes edited by her: *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* (1996), and *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (1997), as well as environmentalist works by Aldo Leopold, especially his canonical *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (1949).

³⁹ “If we really want freedom for all to live and exist – to live free from violation by the powerful, – power and privilege must not be more widely shared, they must be radically dismantled” (Kappeler 335).

⁴⁰ Considering all of the above, Leopold reminds us again that “The land consists of soil, water, plants, and animals Such collective functioning of interdependent parts for the maintenance of

Furthermore, the ethical attitude towards the whole natural world involves not only “the care, the respect, even the reverence” (Donovan and Adams, Introduction 7) but also “duties and responsibilities toward all of nature” (Vance 171), “the act of attention” (Kheel 109), “deplor[e]ing . . . all . . . expressions of violence” (Kheel 111), assuming a “nondominance position” (Vance 171), acting to “oppose animal exploitation” and “an anthropocentric perspective” (Scholtmeijer 234, 236) and “overcoming institutionalized barriers to our compassionate connections with animals . . . challenging the desensitizing ideologies and distancing mechanisms” (Luke 314).⁴¹ All in all, O’Donoghue’s poems are non-judgemental and unbiased: hens and horses, cattle and lakes – all receive the same non-discriminatory and equitable care and attention in her eco-narratives.

The second part of Chapter Two, “Mechanical Power versus Women’s Eco-empowering Criticism in The Poetry of Caitríona O’Reilly” analyses the long-term effects that the industrialised worldview exerts upon the natural environment and the human mentality alike.⁴² Examining O’Reilly’s poems enables one to structure the mutual intertwining of the patriarchy and the industrial forces which sustain it. This part studies the poetic representations of the mechanical model and associated with it aggressive industrialization process. The so called mechanical model grew in power around the sixteenth / seventeenth centuries, but its legacy has remained up to the present day, despite the changed circumstances and new technological advances.⁴³ As shown by O’Reilly, mechanical (and patriarchal) power is an absolute power that does not make concessions, especially not to those considered as less powerful (women, animals, other members of Leopold’s “biotic communities”).⁴⁴ On the whole, O’Reilly’s poems demonstrate that (ecofeminist) environmental preservation of all the participants of the natural world is the most effective response to the

the whole is characteristic of an organism. In this sense land is an organism, and conservation deals with its functional integrity, or health” (“Conservation: In Whole” 310).

⁴¹ Vance observes that “Theorists who reject dominance and anthropocentrism may style themselves and their positions as biocentric, ecocentric, zoocentric, or simply antianthropocentric, but they all have a common starting point: they see no reason why moral considerability should begin and end with humans” (170).

⁴² This section traces back the origins of the mechanical outlook to its beginnings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as argued in a seminal book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1989). Other publications drawn upon in this section include Mianowski’s collection (2012) *Irish Contemporary Landscapes in Literature and the Arts* and *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (2010), edited by Christine Cusick.

⁴³ “The mechanical framework with its associated values of power and control sanctioned the management of both nature and society” (Merchant 235).

⁴⁴ In line with that concept, Leopold’s theory illustrates how all its layers mutually depend upon one another. He claims that “Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil The upward flow of energy depends on the complex structure of the plant and animal community, much as the upward flow of sap in a tree depends on its complex cellular organization” (“A Biotic View” 268-269).

mechanised approach. In conclusion, power as promoted by ecofeminists is not based on the submission of nature or women; eco-empowerment stems from protecting and not mindlessly destroying of animate organisms and non-animate beings.

The third part of Chapter Two differs considerably from the previous sections. Unlike the earlier sub-chapters, “ ‘Lay it down there on the newspaper; / let it settle, unearth itself.’ Gendering Nature in the Poetry of Vona Groarke” focuses on “acting to overturn modern constructions of nature and women as culturally passive and subordinate” (Merchant xvi). To avoid gender binarism and clichés, Groarke studies relations between women and men in the context of nature, understood here as the constructed field upon which (as Judith Butler tends to describe it her philosophical works) “normalised and regulatory fictions” of gender are unveiled. Nature, hence, from the onset is to be comprehended as a construct, a collection of cultural, historical, etc., views, clichés and connotations associated with that concept. In addition, Groarke’s argument is more than proving nature or gender to be constructs. By transferring the whole debate into the seemingly neutral, phenomenological and biologic background, she subverts the nature / culture dichotomy. In doing so, Groarke focuses on the cultural and social dimensions of nature-gender correlations. Her poetry demonstrates how the process of nature-contextualising is carried out in language, and what linguistic means are employed to make it feasible and hide its arbitrary and conventional character. In other words, in Groarke’s poems, nature becomes the background and the screen upon which gender stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are projected. Applying a formal poetic schedule, Groarke creates in her works personified male and female characters from the plant world, and by making them “performatively act out” the excessive patterns of femininity and masculinity, she proves her point of the constructed character of the parties involved, including nature itself. As argued in this section, to Groarke, nature performs the function of “the third party” and “the third agent” (as defined by Griffin) in the women-men dyad (“Ecofeminism” 219). Questioning gender’s allegedly “natural” context discloses the fictions of gender’s own “naturalness” (Griffin, “Ecofeminism” 219). Laying bare the apparent “naturalness” of the narrated natural world triggers the empowering process of bringing to the discourse’s surface what is concealed (suppressed) in gender relations. In Groarke’s poetry, the textually empowering reading against the grain of gender of (eco) tales releases them from invisibility and it draws attention to what is hidden and silenced in-between the lines.

The final section of Chapter Two “The Empowered Female Environmental Consciousness as the Source of the Spiritual in The Poetry of Sinéad Morrissey” introduces another aspect in which relations with nature can empower women, that of appealing to one’s spiritual needs. In other words, for women, nature can be perceived as an open, ever-available, non-judgemental and non-discriminatory source of spirituality that may fill in the gap left in the absence or impossibility of the organised religion. Nonetheless, it has to be admitted that

Morrissey's poetry poses a true challenge in terms of this problem. Her poems are debates with God who has created the world and, then, abandoned it. The female speaker's attitude can be best captured by what one of the characters of Iris Murdoch's novel *The Bell* said: "there is a God, but I do not believe in Him" (308). Thus, Morrissey's poems are full of the traces of God's (previous) presence but not of His current guardianship. In this context, nature remains the only connection (mediator) reminding people that God had ever been present on earth. In Morrissey's earlier poetry, one might clearly detect the young speaker's arguments with the absent God. Because God seems to be inattentive, people try to look for Him even in natural disasters or cataclysms. It appears as if even God's supposed anger was more welcome by people than His silence and indifference. In Morrissey's more mature poems, her speakers perceive nature as the representation of Life, valid on its own terms, without regarding it as the reflection or emanation of deity. With regard to methodology, the following sub-chapter outlines feminist process theology. The scholar to whose academic work it is most indebted is Carol P. Christ who has a doctoral degree in Religious Studies from Yale University.⁴⁵ On the whole, in Morrissey's poetry, the natural world can be viewed as a female-empowering source of spiritual sustenance and affirmation. Such an approach is not synonymous with pantheism, though. It does not reduce the transcendental to natural manifestation. Quite to the contrary, it may even demonstrate the impossibility of transcribing women's need for the spiritual onto a natural platform. Nonetheless in relying upon nature-based spiritual resources, women are not dependent upon the patriarchal vision of God and the restrictions arising from it.

Chapter Three, **Against Power-Over: Irish Women's Empowerment through Resistance** deals with women's resistance to patriarchal domination in its most extreme form, namely that of symbolic and actual violence. The concluding chapter of the book analyses the defiant responses to attempts to subordinate women in an organised and systemic way by the means of cultural, political or historical instruments.⁴⁶ However even though power may not be negotiable or consensual, it always generates resistance: "Foucault (1982) also maintains that resistance is a *necessary precondition* for the operation of power: there can be no power without resistance" (Hook 84), emphasis original.⁴⁷ And this resistance (namely, how it is manifested) constitutes the subject matter of the Chapter Three. The first part of Chapter Three "Resisting the Confinement of 'Other People's Houses': Female Empowerment and Political Emancipation in The Poetry of Vona Groarke," examines women's subjugation as a part of

⁴⁵ It is mostly her recent works [such as *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World* (2003)] that have influenced the feminist understanding of the spiritual in that section.

⁴⁶ For more on domination of women see Allen's *The Power of Feminist Theory*.

⁴⁷ Foucault argues that "power is not a matter of consent. In itself, it is not the renunciation of freedom, a transfer of rights, or power of each and all delegated to a few (which does not prevent the possibility that consent may be a condition for the existence or the maintenance of a power relation)" ("The Subject and Power" 340).

political and national domination of Ireland. In Groarke's poems, the discussed strategies of resistance are subversively transferred onto the "home front," onto the women's domestic and spatial area: interior design, architecture, house decoration, food supply and other domestic "backstage" activities. Groarke's persona tracks down the heterotopic narratives in the arrangement of the living space, in the decorative interior details, rendering the life philosophy of the owners and in the political message that the space around us is to communicate to the viewers. In Groarke's poetry, one is allowed an insight into the private face of power that is usually hidden behind its official representations. Whether inspecting colonial Big House architecture or a modern housing estate, Groarke's poems operate on bringing power contradictions to light and revealing incongruities disclosed beneath the surface of the discourse. To a large extent, that part draws upon Arendt's philosophical works and Hook's (2010) re-examining of the spatial discourse in *Foucault, Psychology, and the Analytics of Power*. Women's resistance in this section is manifested in their suspicion of the Grand Narratives, their immunity to pathos, and scepticism of the rhetoric of (Irish) nationalism. By the design of the space around them and their perceptiveness in reading visual codes of spatial organisation, women in Groarke's poetry resist ideology implied in latent constructivist messages. Hence it is neither a direct combat or armed resistance, but everyday domestic arrangements that can be an act of defiance against the Big House colonial and patriarchal discourse.

Quite a different aspect is probed in "Resisting Power Realised as Violence: 'A Power Failure' and Female Empowerment in the Poetry of Sinéad Morrissey." In Morrissey's poems, politically-grounded violence is examined in its civic dimension: how it affects voluntary and non-voluntary actors of its manifestation. Rather than weighing political rights or wrongs, Morrissey's work focuses on the way an individual is confronted in the face of violence. With regard to the Troubles in the North, the poet does not evoke historical or political arguments about the background of the conflict. Instead, in her poems, she looks at how daily existence in the shade of the acts of terror alters the lives and behaviour of average citizens, and how much people's day-to-day routine is transformed. In other words, Morrissey's poetry seems to resist power realised as violence mostly on the grounds of the effect it has upon ordinary people, depicting how it changes their perspectives, life choices and future options. Thus, resistance is presented here as written in the discourse of power, and even more in the discourse of violence. As shown by Arendt, the strategies of resistance to violence can be complicated when violence itself originates as a strategy of resistance. The following part demonstrates how resistance against violence becomes violence itself. "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (Arendt, *On Violence* 80). Analysing international occurrences of violence (i.e. the Chechnya partisans striking back at Russian civilians or the terrorist attack of

11/9/ 2001), the section looks in a more detailed way into the causes and effects of violence to comprehend its derivational roots.

“Resisting The Victimisation of Women in the Poetry of Mary O’Donoghue” probes the strategies of women’s resistance against being victimised by violence applied to them. Therefore, examining the narratives inspired by Biblical, mythological, sociological (domestic violence) and historical sources, O’Donoghue seems to argue that women in patriarchal society have to resort to defiant acts of resistance to save their health, self-respect and dignity. The textual accounts of women’s narratives found in O’Donoghue’s poems testify that even when punished with death or torture, resistance is never entirely abandoned, though it may take different forms. In O’Donoghue’s poetry, resisting the victimisation of women is absolutely crucial for female empowerment. While scrutinising the institutionalised violence against women (especially domestic and sexual violence) depicted in O’Donoghue’s poetry, this section aims to resist turning women into a class of victims by the nature of gender stereotypes. The systemic process of female victimisation does not help the victims of abuse or violence. Instead of focusing on the perpetrators, it upholds masculine dominance by implying that women are natural victims, and, hence, making violence look less abhorrent.⁴⁸ As long as women are victimised, their strength and the potentiality of resistance is undermined or denied entirely. That is why “But grieving for the real victimization that women suffer must be a feminism that also teaches women how to see and use their enormous power so as never to be helpless victims again” (Wolf 142). Apart from other books and articles probing the issue of women’s victimisation, Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination* (published in English in 2001) needs to be taken into account here in the first place.

The final sub-chapter of the book studies the manifestations of female powerlessness and the ways of resisting it. ““Death, desirelessness: such kinless things:’ Resisting female powerlessness in the Poetry of Caitríona O’Reilly” analyses how powerlessness that has reached already women’s corporeal stage (affecting the female bodily “gravitation,” meandering through the maze of the alienated female body, seeing her health condition as fragile, facing the ageing process, fearing being undesired and desireless) can be rendered and, then, confronted via manageable textual imagery. Socially or culturally-induced female powerlessness (be it as a construct or / and an experienced practice) is not the ultimate and unalterable truth about the female existence. Hence, the distinction has to be made here between being deprived of power and being unable to attain it because of the reasons that are beyond one’s scope. Women’s power or female empowerment like everything else has its limits. Therefore, the concluding chapter of this monograph probes the boundaries of female

⁴⁸ During the process of victimization, women tend to be blamed to letting the acts of violence happen, as they did not prevent its occurrence. Blaming the victim strategy leads to the paradoxes that victims are criticised for their allegedly inappropriate behaviour, conduct, clothes, etc.

empowerment which are not usually subject to one's will or choice. For instance, the aforementioned existential fears such as "death, desirelessness kinless things" (the passage of time, loneliness, loss, death) that cannot be prevented. In this case, resistance does not mean a denial of one's apprehension or the elimination of its causes. Resistance here may appear quite paradoxical because it actually means non-action.⁴⁹ In other words, confronting the facts that cannot be altered makes one more powerful than renouncing the limits of one's power. In conclusion, O'Reilly's poetry shows that without acknowledging the power's boundaries, a woman cannot feel fully empowered.

⁴⁹ Compare Lukes 52.

CHAPTER ONE

POWER-WITH: IRISHWOMEN'S RELATIONAL EMPOWERMENT AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN CONNECTION

1.1. Female Relational Empowerment as “The Self-In Relation”¹ in the Poetry of Sinéad Morrissey

*We are constituted by our relationships and would be nothing without them. .
. . Relationships are what we are. (Christ, She Who Changes)*

Searching for female empowerment's foundations, Jordan encourages women to recognise the potential arising from the relational connection model. In her view, this approach draws upon three main sources of women's power, enhancing the capabilities inherent in relational connections with the female self, others and the surrounding reality. To begin with, “[n]aming the strengths involved in relational competence, making these strengths explicit and clear, is a first step. . . . We also have to find ways to stay connected to our internal resources as well as the resources in the world around us” (Jordan, “Towards Competence” 24). Very much in the same vein, Maureen Walker argues that

¹ See Surrey (“The Self-in-Relation” 51–66). See also *Women's Growth In Connection: Writing From The Stone Center* (1991).

affirming relationality as a central figure in women's development (Miller, 1988) . . . provides a liberating language for conceptions of self – a language that says clearly and powerfully that to grow through action in relationship with others is both necessary and good. (“Race, Self” 92)

In other words, women's power in connection, defined as “growing through action in relationship with others” (Walker, “Race, Self” 92) is “the process of enlarged vision and energy, stimulated through interaction, in a framework of emotional connection” (Surrey, “Relationship and Empowerment” 171). Therefore, female relational empowerment results from

the mutual feeling of knowing and being with the other, immersed in experience along with our own. Such connections provide a continual source of growth for the individual and the relationship. This form of connection has startlingly positive effects which Jean Baker Miller (1986) calls “the five good things”: zest (vitality); a more accurate picture of oneself and others; an increased sense of self-worth; an increased desire and ability to act; and a desire for more connection. (Dooley and Fedele 230)

However before being able to participate in relational empowerment's “good things,” the necessary pre-conditions have to be fulfilled. Among others, Fletcher enumerates: “the ability to experience and express emotion, the ability to participate in the development of another, and an expectation that relational interactions can yield to mutual growth” (31). Furthermore, women's relational power is not superimposed or forced upon anybody, as it involves voluntary, mutual and enabling capacities.² As explained by Surrey, female relational empowerment comprises “power with others, that is power in connection” (“Relationship and Empowerment” 163). According to this view, such a capacity signifies

. . . the motivation, freedom, and capacity to act purposefully, with the mobilization of the energies, resources, strengths, or powers of each person through a mutual, relational process. Personal empowerment can be viewed only through the larger lens of power through connection, that is, through the establishment of mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. Thus personal empowerment and the relational context through which this emerges must always be considered simultaneously. (Surrey, “Relationship and Empowerment” 164)

Unlike traditional, patriarchal understanding of power based upon separation, disconnection and self-reliance, the “alternative model assumes that power or the ability to act does not have to be a scarce resource, nor based on zero-sum assumptions – certainly not in interactions between human beings” (Surrey, “Relationship and Empowerment” 165–166). The aforementioned outlook is

² As a logical extension of the aforementioned claim, relational empowerment means “an exercise of power that was covert and unobtrusive, where people behaved in a certain way, not because they were forced by ‘A’ to do so, but it seemed like the right, or only reasonable, thing to do” (Fletcher 16).