“To Hell with Shell”: Anti-Capitalist Rhetoric in the Poetry of
Rita Ann Higgins

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Some People know what it’s like,  
to be called a cunt in front of their children  
to be short for the rent  
to be short for the light  
to be short for school books…

and other people don’t.

The above quotation ("Some People", 1-5, 34) speaks to the theme of much of Rita Ann Higgins’s work. A working-class writer whose poetry is concerned with the social conditions of contemporary Ireland, Higgins has been called an “artistic outsider” (O’Toole n. pag.). Much of her work has focused on articulating otherwise ignored class divisions within present-day Irish society. The handful of critics who have written on Higgins’s work have considered her as part of a group of poets criticizing Irish economic globalization and the rise and collapse of the boom period known as the Celtic Tiger (Keatinge and Flannery). Changes in the Irish economy have come with a tendency for public discourse to focus on the economic fortunes and hardships of the financial elite as if those experiences are applicable to the entire nation (Maher and O’Brien 9). Multinational capitalist interests are furthered by the focus on a rhetoric that links their wellbeing to that of the Irish nation. Irish poetry in general points out that this rhetoric is not wholly true (Maher and O’Brien 9).

In this essay, I examine the way Higgins’s poems operate not only to criticize the hegemonic narrative which upholds multinational capitalism, but also, through their use of fantasy, provide an alternative to diminish the power of this narrative. Higgins’s ironic and fantastic modes of speaking are necessary to express anti-capitalist sentiment, because the ubiquity and strength of multinational capitalism’s hegemonic narrative means that it cannot be criticized directly. The power of this narrative is discussed by Frederic Jameson in "On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act". Jameson has pointed out the narrative’s
perceived universalism, and the way it has conditioned our conception of the society in which we live. While we see this society operating under hegemonic social standards and values, Higgins’s poetry demonstrates that these universal values are far from neutral, and conformity to them is equivalent to submitting to oppression. In a time where Irish identity is commodified for sale in the tourist industry, her poetry insists that those whose experience does not align with the marketed Irish experience are leading real human lives. Because of the tendency of the capitalist narrative to position itself as the one true way of thinking about society, the project of Higgins’s poetry is to work against acceptable definitions of “truth”. The ironic tone of her work debunks the capitalist claim to these acceptable definitions. With its shift away from a strict version of reality, her poetry also becomes a space where marginalized people are able to assert their rights.

Higgins writes out of a long tradition of Irish writers critiquing society. Coming from an island which has spent over four hundred years under British control, Irish poetry has necessarily been concerned with the question of how to prove the existence of the Irish nation, and the status of this nation has had a significant impact on the Irish poetic psyche. Thomas Kinsella points out in *The Dual Tradition: an Essay on Poetry and Politics in Ireland* that the fall of Ireland to England and the end of the Gaelic aristocracy meant that Irish poetry changed in the seventeenth century from “a professional art of privilege” to “a popular art of conscious defeat” (20). The awareness of a need to reverse this conscious defeat is a feature of Irish nationalism, which glosses over the injustices that occur within the nation. As Gerardine Meaney writes in “Race, Sex, and Nation: Virgin Mother Ireland”, “national identities are structured by the binary of them and us, insiders and outsiders, natives and foreigners” (128). The binary of Irish versus non-Irish is so consuming that it leaves no room to consider any rifts within Irish society. Meaney notes that the claim of a postcolonial Irish identity relies on
nationalist rhetoric that requires the oppression of immigrants, travelers, and other minority groups (129). Ireland’s entry into an era of multinational capitalism, she claims, means that Irish people can no longer claim to be a marginalized group (129). There is a need for Irish society to recognize these divisions in the modern era.

Recently, however, Irish poetry has moved beyond simple political nationalism in its observations of identity and society. Writing in “Performance and Dissent: Irish Poets in the Public Sphere”, Lucy Collins sees Higgins as part of a new group of poets writing about lines of social division other than the traditional divide between Irish and English. “Violence, materialism and social tension have become the focus of attention” of current Irish poetry (209). Justin Quinn also writes in The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry that most Irish poetry has moved away from a nationalist focus (197). In reality, however, Irish nationalism has changed form, rather than disappeared. The tendency of nationalist thought to unify the people of a nation under one cultural interest was replaced during the Tiger period by an assumption that the country was unified by the pursuit of the same material success, and Irish identity remains important in an economic context. In her meditation on the Celtic Tiger “What Happened to Irish Art?” Carla Power writes that, while Irish art forms are popular export commodities, “the influx of cash for the arts” (n. pag.) has not been distributed evenly. Artists who do not produce what is stereotypically “Irish” art do not have the same government support as those who do produce this kind of essentialist art (n. pag.). Irish identity has therefore been commodified, representing the larger dominance of multinational capitalism in Ireland.

During the Tiger period, “Irishness” was synonymous with financial success. Maher and O’Brien describe this period of industrialization, globalization, and financial speculation as a
time of “confident assertions that Ireland had confounded all existing economic theory and that...growth would be exponential 'going forward’” (1). Irish society at the time of the financial boom was governed by a “mythology of the entrepreneur” (1). This represents an elevation of capitalism to the same status as the hero tales that are so familiar when one thinks of Irish culture. In spite of a belief that the collective fortunes of the nation were rising, the economic growth in the Tiger period did not benefit everybody equally. The era was also marked by the privatization of services, increasing inequality (Maher and O’Brien 3).

If one must be economically successful to be Irish, the stories of those who are were left behind in Ireland’s financial bubble are erased from the narrative of Irishness. While this might be seen as a general or nonpolitical narrative, Frederic Jameson argues that such apparent neutrality actually perpetuates the hegemony of the capitalist narrative: “The convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes…a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life” (20). With its clear depictions of class disparity, Higgins’s poetry strongly resists interpretation as nonpolitical and is able to demonstrate that the Irish identity conditioned by multinational capitalism is not free from social and political bias.

Higgins demonstrates that there is no distinction between personal and political experience in the way she thinks about her writing. She confronts multinational capitalism’s tendency to generalize about what it means to be Irish, not only with the experiences of her characters but with her own experience as a writer. Critics have described her tone and subject matter as “working-class” (O’Toole n. pag.) and stated that her career as a poet “is a lesson in serendipity” (Steele 15). She was a high school dropout, who began to read and write poetry after
convalescing for tuberculosis (Steele 15). In an interview with Karen Steele from The Irish Times, she describes her experiences in welfare offices:

I hate having to go into buildings to deal with people behind glass and people who have superior attitudes...It just makes me nuts. I have had a lot of problems in that area, you know, when I go in and try to sort out the money details. You will be running around and you might have small kids...To get over it, I'm handling it through the poem. I think. (15)

Although Higgins’s poetry discusses larger social relations, when asked to explain its purpose, she turns to her personal experience. This turn to the personal aligns with her refusal to define herself based on her class or gender identity. When asked whether she sees herself as a “woman poet”, she says, “I now feel that I don't want to be in an all-women's book anymore. You get to a stage where you don't want the gender isolation” (Steele 16). Considering her working class identity, she points out that “if you're going to be the working class poet you have to take on the vernacular to be the working class poet. It is much easier to just be a writer and get on with it” (Steele 16). By framing her work in a personal, rather than a political context, she insists on the ubiquity of political struggle in individual lives, outside of acceptable definitions of what constitutes politics. At the same time, her work hardly acquiesces to upper class definitions of “poetry” (Sullivan 116). Her refusal to be either working class or owning class demonstrates the importance she places on individual resistance to conformity.

Higgins’s poetry counters the hegemonic narrative of elite financial discourse in Ireland by focusing on the experiences of those whose lives do not adhere to this discourse. Eóin Flannery rightly points out that her work demonstrates that “much of the phoney discourse of acquisition and plenty [during the Tiger era] was utterly alien to scores of lives and communities across Ireland” (216). With her poems “This was no Ithaca”, which depicts the monotonous lives of women who embrace their world of sexual double-standards, and “The Brent Geese
Chorus”, which details the threat a multinational company brings to the people of Erris, County Mayo, she refuses to conform to the fiction that a rising tide lifts all boats.

When the nationalist practice of creating binaries is added to the capitalist tendency to claim there is a universal human narrative, it allows those who determine the narrative to deny the existence of those not part of it. Higgins’s poetry points out the danger of this rhetoric. One of the ways she implicitly argues that her characters are dehumanized by being seen as part of a collective experience is in her equation of social conformity with oppression. In “This was no Ithaca”, the town of Baile Crua [“hard town”] is home to women who conform to social expectations, but cannot fulfill their individual desires. These women, as the people with less power, follow societal rules, while their more powerful male relatives are able to leave the town and break the rules of marriage. The women fret over daughters who step out of line and become pregnant out of wedlock:

    These women were busy imploring
    their loving Godling…
    not to allow shame to fall on the family
    by letting any daughter of theirs
    waddle down the aisle
    with a belly full of baby (30-1, 34-7)

Each woman’s primary concern is for her family reputation, rather than for her own happiness, suggesting that they identify with a collective interest rather than as individuals. The women’s devotion to prayer and their families’ welfare suggests that they are capable of holding strong desires. Significantly, however, they are deprived of their individual capacity for sexual expression.

    The women’s inability to express themselves sexually demonstrates their lack of humanity. Fintan O’Toole, in his review of Higgins’s book Ireland is Changing Mother, states that, in her poems, “sex...turns [people] into individuals, gives them some kind of private power”
But for the women of Baile Crua, who “never filled their heads / with yellow and pink rollers” (“Ithaca”, 2-3), and are contrasted with the “women with magnolia vision / and pencil shaped dreams / and always a jezebel cigarette / between those blood-red lips” (7-10), sexual desire is something which cannot be fulfilled. Lacking physical existence, these first women become images of the Virgin Mary, symbol of Ireland. Meaney describes how this symbolic Irish mother figure was “idealized out of [physical] existence” (131). Even when their ability to desire might make them human, their lack of physical bodies prevents them from having full sexual agency. Higgins describes them with missing images; we learn not what they look like, but what they “never” did with their appearance. While demonstrating the ideal Irish female identity, they are forced to give up their humanity. The other women, who have physical features like lips, and whose shape is described in the affirmative when they are compared to pencils, do have concrete bodies, but they are hardly more human. Instead, they are pencil-shaped objects. Their images come back to us later in the eyes of the men “whose heads were / pencil shaped” (45-6). The second type of women are not in control of their bodies, even if they are granted a physical existence. The only people who do have the ability to fill their sexual desire in the poem are the men, whose power comes from their ability to flout the social rules which the women must follow. The woman allow “their vagabond sons” (17) to roam “further afield” (19) and their husbands to pursue individual sexual desires as if they are “god-given rights” (23).

The irony in “This was no Ithaca” offers a slight possibility of escape, even while demonstrating the way the women are regulated by an oppressive system. The only woman in the poem who is referred to as an individual or by name is “Missus-all-over-hurt” (58). Missus-all-over-hurt is not trapped in the same life that the other women have, of endlessly cleaning and
pleasing her husband, to the detriment of her own personal desires. Rather than family reputation and obedience to a godling, she obtains her pleasure from

a small brown bottle
that brought instant rapture
when she tossed three or four
of them beauties onto her palm (60-3)

Missus-all-over-hurt is separated from the other women, partly because of the speaker’s reference to her by name, but also because her individual voice is allowed to come through the poem. The phrase “them beauties” is not spoken in the same register which the speaker uses, partly because it uses a different grammar than the overall poem, and partly because the speaker would never refer to pills as beautiful. Missus-all-over-hurt can attempt to fulfill her individual desires by acting in ways not condoned by the community of women. Without the hard work of constant prayer and devotion, she appears able to achieve “instant rapture” with the use of unsanctioned drugs. However, her ability to find happiness in depravity is hampered by the speaker’s ironic skepticism. The claim that she can somehow achieve a blissful state of rapture from the drugs she takes is undercut by her name, which suggests she has not found the rapture which the speaker claims she has found. The fact that Missus-all-over-hurt must destroy her body in order to achieve what is not actually true happiness demonstrates her inability to make a complete escape from the system in which she is trapped. This woman, who attempts to act as an individual, but whose name and actions reveal her failure, demonstrates that rebellion is desirable in the poem, but ultimately impossible.

By forcing the reader to think beyond the poem’s immediate location to uncover the causes of oppression, Higgins suggests that the sexual repression in the poem is actually a symptom of a larger system. “This was no Ithaca” is not merely a poem about sexual double standards, or a critique of conservative Irish values. In her essay “Looking at Being Somebody:
Moynah Sullivan notes that Higgins focuses on the coping mechanisms of…self medication/abuse that shore up the privileges and inequities of class-based capitalism” (14). While Higgins writes about issues that seem insular to a rural Irish town, her criticism of the small injustices which occur in Baile Crua are actually a part of criticizing a larger system. When women conform to their society, they are being oppressed not only by their husbands, but also by the greater socio-economic system in which they live.

Higgins’s poem “The Brent Geese Chorus” demonstrates this same equation between conformity and oppression, seen in the imposition of the values of multinational capitalism on the people of Erris, Mayo. The Royal Dutch Shell Company preys on a place of natural beauty in their attempts to drill for and refine oil from the Corrib Gas Field and build a pipeline “under Sruwaddacon Bay, a special area of conservation” (Finn).1 Shell attempts to dominate Erris by imposing its values of financial profit on to the local population. The company suggests that animals are only valuable if they serve the needs of human beings, and tries to force the residents to ignore their concerns for the wildlife: “ne bac leis an [“never mind”] dirty dolphin / what did he ever do for you?” (63-4). The company has a profit-driven definition of value which they assume will convince the people of Erris to give up their concerns for the wildlife. Shell also demonstrates its commitment to common values by coercing the local residents to submit to its plan, claiming that everybody else has signed away the rights to their fields: “Sign here on the dotted line / and don’t look foolish on the ninth day / when all Erris will have signed but you” (55-7). The economic fortunes of their neighbors are used as an incentive to force the people to

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give away their land: “Sign here like your neighbours over there” (65). The poem demonstrates that Shell’s values are not universal.

When one agrees with the capitalist assessment that financial success is the ultimate indicator of happiness, it is possible to claim that the people of Erris will benefit from following their neighbors and acquiescing to Shell’s demands. However, such conformity does not necessarily lead to happiness in the poem. The speaker subtly points out the lies in the prediction of success which Shell espouses:

> Words like refinery, pipelinery, raw gas
> Terminal, three stage payment,
> Enterprise, outerprise, no prize, jobs my eye words.
> No risk, no danger, no landslides
> We can walk on stilts if we choose words (89-93)

The sequence is sprinkled with words like “refinery” and “enterprise”, which make up a positive vision for the economic future of Erris, but quickly degenerates into made up words like “pipelinery” and “outerprise”, which makes it difficult for us to believe the words “no risk, no danger, no landslides”. While Shell encourages the local people to do what everybody else is doing, the poem exposes its impact as dangerous. The precariousness of its promises is exemplified by the phrase “we can walk on stilts if we choose”, suggesting overconfidence in the ability of multinational capitalism to improve the town. Shell also contradicts itself in ridiculous manner throughout the poem, asking people: “How is your cat and your dog and your budgie?” (44), and later “what’s yours is ours / and to hell with your budgie” (50-1). The speaker exposes Shell as so illogical that it cannot possibly be trusted. This exposure is what Keatinge calls “one of the characteristics of good satire…to use the vocabulary of received ideas in order to mock those same ideas” (71). Keatinge has described contemporary Irish satirists as “guarantors of the integrity of language in an environment where the devaluation and bowdlerization of language
has been widespread and where the dictates of the market have created a newly vacuous vocabulary and set of ideas” (71). With Shell’s blustering rhetoric and her act of transforming its words to appear ridiculous, Higgins works to make the reader aware of this “devaluation…of language”, while simultaneously devaluing the way Shell speaks.

By exposing Shell’s values as false, Higgins is resisting the imposition of modern financial activities from abroad onto Ireland, but she does not necessarily oppose modernization in principle. For Erris, the pre-modern religious version of Ireland is just as dangerous as Shell. It is the community’s dependency on a biblical framework which allows Shell to be attractive: “At first Shell worked through / the priest and the Bishop / like the Holy Spirit” (20-2). The priest’s “alleluia” (24) is repeated at different points throughout the poem, demonstrating that the traditional forces of Irish society are in collusion with modern exploitation. Rather than writing explicitly for or against tradition, Higgins uses what are considered traditional features of Irish society in order to demonstrate modernization’s problems. As she mixes Shell’s capitalist talk of profit with Irish phrases, Higgins creates a cross-pollination between essentialist Irishness and the success of multinational capitalism. The devaluation of Shell’s words means that its Irishness is not to be trusted. Shell’s failed attempt at Irish identity tells us that insiders and outsiders do not always adhere to expected characteristics of identity. Rather than a blanket condemnation of modernism, Higgins’s criticism of outside forces imposing their values on a small Irish village is more reminiscent of criticisms of colonialism, demonstrating an understanding of its historical legacy.

“The Brent Geese Chorus” works to close the gap between acceptable definitions of Irishness and an anti-capitalist position. In spite of Shell’s attempt to create profit-driven values that everybody should live by, the poem shows the experience of the residents of Erris to be not
only valid, but relevant to the rest of Ireland, as well. Higgins places them in a canonical
narrative by relying on biblical imagery. The motif of the creation story runs through “The Brent
Geese Chorus”: “On the seventh day God rested / and North Mayo was fashioned / and it had no
likeness anywhere in the world” (1-3). Shell’s threat that the gas “will trawl through your lives
and your land / like a plague” (28-9) evokes plagues in the Bible. The landscape under threat by
multinational capitalism was made specifically by God, demonstrating its centrality to a story
with which most of the Irish public is familiar. Higgins suggests that the injustice in North Mayo
matters because of its prominent part in a widely used narrative, but she does not credit the
ordinary biblical narrative enough to adhere to the typical system of seven days, since Shell’s
visit occurs “on the eighth day” (4).

Other poems besides “This was no Ithaca” and “The Brent Geese Chorus” demonstrate
the way capitalism dehumanizes people who occupy marginalized positions in society, and point
out that such dehumanization is false. “Gretta’s Hex” captures a dialogue between a factory
owner and the woman who cleans the factory for him over whether she can have a day off to be
able to mourn her dead dog. The poem draws a contrast between Gretta’s dedication to her job
and her emotional needs. “she never missed work / not when her four girls / had the measles, /
nor when the Pope came / to Ballybrit” (14-17). Her devotion to the capitalist system is so great
that she never gives in to her human devotion to family or religion. Although living in this
dehumanizing system, she retains enough humanity to love her pet dog. Her boss denies her this
one experience of her humanity by refusing her request. Like Shell in “The Brent Geese
Chorus”, his words demonstrate that he makes his decisions in service to profit: “I can’t spare
you now” (26). In his refusal, Gretta becomes another expendable employee. He does not see her
as an individual, because he cannot even remember the name of any of the women who work for
him. He addresses his employees: “Sorry Ann / I mean Gretta” (24-5) and “Sadie, I mean / Annie” (27-8). By refusing to allow Gretta to take her one possible method of escape from a dehumanizing system, her boss is exposed as ridiculous in his demand that she come to work. His ridiculous nature is highlighted by the casual tone with which he responds to Gretta’s unusual request: “take an extra five minutes / at tea break, good girl” (33-4). His disrespect is exemplified by his refusal to recognize her age. His casual apathy is contrasted with Gretta’s care and diligence, and this contrast exposes his oppressive treatment as unreasonable.

“Burden of Proof” is told through the voice of a similarly unreasonable ticket seller who does not want to give a discounted ticket to an unemployed person. His objection is based on the argument that the ticket buyer is not human: “Get proof / that you are human and unemployed”, he commands (9-10). As long as he can pretend that the ticket buyer is not human like he is, the ticket seller can be as rude as he wants. Like Gretta’s boss, the ticket seller is made ridiculous by the contrast between his rude words and the polite entreaties of the ticket buyer, told back to us in the seller’s voice: “you want a ticket please, with concessions” (1-2). The deliberate dehumanization of the ticket buyer and the other oppressed figures in Higgins’s poetry represents a wider system of dehumanization under private enterprise. Higgins throws the weight of her poetry against this system, bringing the human features of her characters to the forefront of her poems, even when they do not act in ways predicted by the hegemonic narrative.

Perhaps it is because she is taking a cue from her characters that Higgins refuses to fit her work into expected definitions of what Irish poetry should be. Critics often describe her as an “outsider” in the poetic tradition. Fintan O’Toole’s review of Ireland is Changing Mother praises her for this status: “It shouldn’t be unusual to hear a smart, sassy, unabashed, female working-class voice in Irish writing. But it is” (n. pag.). O’Toole’s reaction suggests that, even when
admired, Higgins cannot transcend her outsider status. Sullivan points out that it took Higgins “four attempts” to be accepted into the Irish literary and artistic society *Aosdéana* because they did not accept her work as “poetry” due to its style (117). Higgins’s use of what some might consider “non-poetic” syntactical conventions is one place where Sullivan sees her work as a refusal to conform (116). She ties this refusal to class identity, stating that Higgins “resists gentrification in favour of her unique poetic vernacular” (116) and “her work more disturbingly insists on class as a structuring factor of aesthetics” (117). In her rebellion, Higgins is following Adrienne Rich’s ideal of art “not as a privileged and sequestered rendering of human suffering, but as news of an awareness, a resistance, that totalizing systems want to quell: art reaching into us for what's still passionate, still unintimidated, still unquenched” (25). Higgins brings this “unquenched” state into her poems when she refuses to describe her scenes of “human suffering” the way she is expected to portray them.

Sullivan suggests that another way Higgins refuses to conform to expectations is in her decision to paint scenes of Western Ireland in her poems not as a “misty retreat”, but as a place of “often devastated cityscapes” peopled with “those who ‘cannot’” use it as a place to “‘get away from it all’” (113). Karen Steele concurs, stating that Higgins, shows “a gritty, urban landscape, where the disempowered and the disenfranchised speak” (15). Her depiction of Ireland is what Keatinge calls an “evolution of Irish society away from essentialist definitions of Irishness” (73). However, the stereotypically misty Western landscapes are not absent from Higgins’s poems. The women of Baile Crua praise their godling at “any place that resembled a cross, / ditch, bóithrín or bog (“Ithaca” 56-7). In Erris, it is the parish’s “unspoilt beauty” which is hurt by Shell’s exploitation (“Brent Geese” 38). The presence of these stereotypically rural Irish features in the poems suggests that the Western landscapes that Sullivan claims are not
central to Higgins’s poetry do continue to have an important impact on her work. The landscapes imbue the poems with a sense of unease by remaining present alongside decidedly not romantic scenes of exploitation. The mythic landscape still exists, but rather than a place of peace and rest, it is a place of despair and struggle against a system of inequity. Furthermore, Higgins’s rejection of the idealized Western landscape is more than a simple poetic innovation. It represents a rejection of capitalist views of Ireland as a place that can be marketed for tourism. During the Celtic Tiger, Irishness was exported and became defined by its aspects most attractive to foreigners. Quinn writes that “the distant past of ancient Ireland is now acceptable for use in the heritage industry” (196). For Higgins, being Irish does not necessarily mean following the global definition of Irishness, and not everybody who lives in Ireland is given the same number of citizenship rights. She writes about the “alienation of peripheral citizens from the Irish State” (Flannery 209). With her poetry, she has interrupted the marketing strategy designed to attract the tourist business into Ireland by imposing her own narrative onto the landscape and demystifying the Irish experience.

Higgins’s refusal to tell the story that is marketed to us as Irish experience works directly against multinational capitalism’s presentation of its story as the one true story. The multinational capitalist narrative is dominant because of its success in making this claim. In reality, however, there are a number of different stories to describe any situation. Jameson writes that our society is “mystified in quite so many ways…saturated as it is with messages and information” and “if everything were transparent, then no ideology would be possible, and no domination either: evidently that is not our case” (61). The use of language that does not match reality can be seen in Irish society, with significant impacts on the relationship between economic classes. The economic boom and collapse is described as a time where “we all
partied” and were then forced to pay for it, and what was once the “private debt” of “speculators and bondholders and bankers” is now considered “Irish sovereign responsibility” (Maher and O’Brien 9). Maher and O’Brien criticize this wording as “patently not true and…typical of the vacuous language that has dominated public discourse in Ireland during the past two decades” (10). They also point out the danger of believing this version of truth. Because nobody could adequately describe what was happening to Irish society during the boom period, it was difficult to anticipate the collapse of the economic bubble (11). They also claim that literature can reveal the truths about society which ordinary economic discourse does not, allowing us to avoid making risky economic decisions (11).

By insisting on the reality of persecution and powerlessness in her poems, Higgins exposes multinational capitalism’s façade that high economic growth is a normal and common Irish experience. She does this by creating an ironic tension between two voices. One is the voice of the oppressor, which attempts to universalize the story, and the other is a descriptive voice, which demonstrates the nuances of class subjugation and the unreliability of the hegemonic narrative. This phenomenon is most clearly illustrated in “This was no Ithaca”. The speaker claims that the women of Baile Crua have no desire to escape the life they lead, where “all you needed was a loving Godling to polish and die for” (82). The speaker would have us believe that the women are perfectly happy and have no other needs. However, the poem also describes the hard work they are doing: “the women with no rollers / would wear their knuckles inside out / making God’s altar shine” (40-2). From the speaker’s perspective, the godling may be enough to satisfy the women, but it is clear from the poem’s description that they are physically suffering. Knowing the truth, and hearing the speaker make a statement which contradicts it, makes us
uncomfortably aware of the forces threatening to normalize the abuse of the economically disadvantaged.

Higgins’s use of this ironic voice is not only clever, but absolutely necessary due to the condition of public discourse. The language of multinational capitalism is so pervasive that we must use it, even when critiquing what that language says. For Jameson, what we read is “vitally dependent on our experience of the present, and in particular on the structural peculiarities of...late monopoly or consumer or multinational capitalism...what Guy Debord calls the society of the image or of the spectacle" (11). Higgins’s work openly rejects the image and spectacle of multinational capitalism, exposing it as abnormal by forcing us to look beyond the speaker’s words. Here, we can return to Sullivan’s discussion of the role of spectatorship in the poems. Sullivan claims that Higgins allows us to watch her characters and “lets us see what is often beyond the subject of poetry” (114). The speaker’s voice is often one which upholds the hegemonic narrative. However, the poems communicate messages beyond what the speaker states. In “The Brent Geese Chorus”, the description of Shell as “coveting” Erris (10) is decidedly negative, even when Shell’s statement that they are providing jobs (18) makes them seem beneficial. This prevents the reader from listening only to the poetic voice, and forces her to remember the lives of those who are left out of the image and spectacle. In her poems, images and spectacles are cause for distrust, rather than wonder. When a person becomes a spectacle, he or she can be controlled.

For Sullivan, speculation, the act of watching and theorizing, is an act of power of the watcher over the watched. She points out that in Higgins’s poem “Be Someone”, the poem’s subject is rebellious and does not “watch” (ie censor) her “language” (114). Sullivan believes that many of the characters we watch are those who are powerless and have no escape. Financial
speculation, which grew in Ireland in the economic boom period (Maher and O’Brien 2), is also a way outsiders take advantage of those who are part of a community, and includes the watching and manipulation of commodity prices.

In “The Brent Geese Chorus”, Higgins clarifies the relationship between watching and oppression, and associates spectacle with dishonesty. The poem turns on capitalism by exaggerating its images and spectacles, and its tendency to make false promises and worship profit over all other characteristics of a place. North Mayo “had no likeness anywhere in the world” (3). Erris cannot be duplicated into an advertisement version of itself, and therefore is the very opposite of a spectacle. But Shell only sees it as an opportunity for profit. They “took long strides across your fields / measuring profit with every step. / Then they flew over, looking down, coveting” (8-10). Shell continues to speak in the language of promises rather than concrete gains throughout the poem, enthusiastically proclaiming that “the gravy train is coming” (14), and “the gas is coming” (23). For Shell, images are a place to look for profit. Higgins’s poem works against this by turning Shell into its own image and spectacle. The businessmen are reduced to their superficial appearances. Rather than solid, they are depicted as made up of their clothing, “a voice in wellingtons and a suit” (11). “The suits were grinning and saluting / waving and hooting / and chanting at the crossroads” (58-60).

The same disproving of images occurs in “This was no Ithaca”. The poem thwarts any attempts to gloss over its hardships by turning them into the kind of myths that are used to sell Irishness to the greater world. The ordinariness of the town is maintained in the poem’s measured syllabic pace. It begins with its statements broken into relatively equal lines, often where they have prepositions or conjunctions, words that allow the sentences to be naturally fragmented into small pieces:
The women of Baile Crua
filled their heads
with a loving Godling
whom they duly served
every waking second (11-15)

The last three lines of the stanza all have relatively equal numbers of syllables, giving it an even, almost weary tone. The rhythmic pattern is as predictable as the women’s behavior. In a testament to the poem’s repetition, the stanza also begins with the same line as it did two stanzas before. It is only when the poem moves to the question of harm done by the husbands “claiming their God-given rights” (23) that this semi-regular rhythm is interrupted. It is at this point that the poem moves beyond conveying the ordinariness of the town and begins, with its irony, to offer space for criticism.

Such critical awareness disappears at the end of the poem, where Higgins reasserts the town’s ordinariness and insists on its disturbing reality and closeness:

You could get here by taking
a bus from Eyre Square
and collecting your parked bike
from a friend’s garden
and cycle the last mile (70-4)

By locating the town in relation to a familiar place like Eyre Square\(^2\), Higgins situates it in daily Irish life. In her poetry, she explicitly rejects the use of myth, a piece of the commodified Irish identity. She distances Baile Crua from the heroically sought place of Greek myth, stating “this was no Ithaca / no sweat was ever broken / trying to reach here” (67-9). The women and men in the town are not achieving the kind of heroic individualism achieved by Odysseus and Penelope.

When read as a reflection of the time when Irish people were heroic in their ability to earn

\(^2\) Eyre Square is in the center of Galway, Higgins’s hometown.
money, the scenes encompassed by the poem are a reminder that such heroism is not what defines Irishness.

In order to criticize the multinational capitalist narrative, Higgins must make the reader aware that it exists. The reach of multinational capitalism makes us unable to see its influence on our lives. As Jameson states, our acts of interpretation are “dependent” on the multinational capitalist society in which we live (11). While capitalist literature is seen as neutral and universal, Higgins points out that this neutrality is false by depositing her reader directly into the poem’s landscape so that the reader understands the negative experiences of its subjects. The reader is addressed as if she is one of the women in “This was no Ithaca”: “There was no Poseidon here / to blow a hole in your dreams / this was a place you didn’t need / rollers in your hair for” (75-8). In the same way that a national elite might decide what constitutes appropriate behavior and ideology for the populace, the speaker commands what the reader’s desires are. The reader, feeling uncomfortable that she is being told she is satisfied even though the women’s life is clearly not satisfactory, recognizes their oppression as deliberately created, rather than a normal phenomenon which blends into the landscape.

“The Brent Geese Chorus” ends with the speaker addressing the readers directly as if they are the people of Erris: “Shell on stilts with a swagger they stalk / onto your land without permission they go” (132-3). There is a sense of urgency in the present tense, as if the speaker needs to remind her readers that any sense of freedom they have is an illusion. Once the reader understands the existence of multinational capitalism, it becomes not an unavoidable situation, but a condition of inequity which can be changed. By showing multinational capitalism’s invisible influence on the reader’s life, Higgins demonstrates its subjectivity. Adrienne Rich writes that a poem shows us “how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to
imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us” (140). Higgins’s poetry allows us to reflect on the ways in which multinational capitalism has conditioned the way that Irish people conceive of their experience.

The potential for liberation which exists in Higgins’s language comes not only from the poems’ ability to make the multinational capitalist system abnormal, but also from the way they assert an alternative to that system. Because of the pervasive way capitalist values influence our ability to think about society, Higgins is required to imagine her own version of what happens. “The Brent Geese Chorus” provides this alternative to capitalist exploitation with a chorus of geese who can speak the opinions of the voiceless residents. It ends with a stalemate, rather than complete triumph by Shell, asing “Can they drill on water? / is what Erris wants to know” (134-5). The unanswered question leaves the reader with a sense of uncertainty. This suspension in the poem’s struggle is enacted by a constant refrain of Brent Geese, who are mentioned several times throughout the poem: “Shell to hell, to hell with Shell, / and that chorus ran in and out of the bog / and it was everywhere in North Mayo” (70-2). Eóin Flannery writes in “‘Ship of Fools’: The Celtic Tiger and Poetry as Social Critique” that this chorus “alerts us to the agency of the local community” (210). Nowhere else does the local community speak directly to Shell in human form, until the unanswered question at the end of the poem. Their silence is not for lack of opinion. We know how they feel about Shell’s exploitation. Higgins uses Shell’s voice to repeat their hesitancy to give in to the company’s demands: “Why Erris! You asked in ainm Dé? [“in the name of God”]” (33). Shell’s repetition of the community’s words gives us a sense of their feelings; significantly, it does not give them the agency to speak for themselves. The fact that the community can only express its distaste for Shell through the non-human mouthpiece of the Brent Geese demonstrates how necessary it is to deviate from accepted realities of who has the
power of speech. Geese do not normally speak, but when human beings are not able to speak against an attack on their community, alternative voices have to be found to speak for them.

Like “The Brent Geese Chorus”, “Gretta’s Hex” offers a depiction of what might initially be called nonsense as a means for characters to escape the oppressive system in which they live. The poem ends with Gretta’s turn to black magic in order to enact revenge on her boss:

“She wished him:
Sightreducingweekendsahead
buffer festering
the company of bats
the company of bees (over-tired and hungry ones)
nouns with genitive singular inflection” (47-52)

Gretta’s curse is nonsensical, creating new words, and including grammatical technicalities we would never expect somebody of her social class to understand. After the excerpt given here, the poem continues for several more lines with her curse, while her boss is given no further chance to respond. Gretta has a power that she would not hold without her ability to harness nonsense to gain power.

By situating such fantasy within the structure of her poems, Higgins maintains the authority of her words and makes fantastic liberation believable. “Some People”, quoted at the beginning of this essay, employs a gradual transition into fantasy as it crosses the line between reality and fiction while still making that fiction seem true. The poem’s repetitive structure and its understated, ironic tone allow it to maintain the pretext of reality, even as it introduces possibilities for subversion that might be dismissed outright if introduced in a different situation. As it deviates from reality, it continues to elicit the belief that its illogical turns of phrase are still real. It begins with expected indicators of poverty, and, maintaining its structure, shifts to more fantastic possibilities: “Some people know what it’s like….to be short for the rent” (1, 3) eventually gives way to “[Some people know what it’s like]…to be in space for the milkman”
(18). It is impossible for the poem’s subject to actually be in space, but leaving the earth is a means of escape from paying the milkman. The poem’s structure allows this escape to occur.

How significant are these means of escape, depicted in poetry, but not possible in real life? Lucy Collins has considered the fantasy in Higgins’s poetry as a liberation in language only, stating that “language itself becomes a manner of revealing and transcending material and emotional poverty. These liberating acts of imagination occur for the speaker rather than for her characters and this inevitably restates the circumscribed role of the verbal” (120). For Collins, the poems consciously fail in their attempt to change existing social structures. However, when narrative is often used as the tool of domination, the language used to evoke that narrative matters. This is especially true given Maher and O’Brien’s emphasis on the way language conditioned Irish economic decisions in the Tiger period (10).

By injecting her poems with what seems like fantasy, Higgins makes manifest the alternative reality which they desire, a reality where poor and working people are able to escape the hardships they encounter due to their class position. Rich points out that one of poetry’s radical functions is its ability to assert an alternative vision. She claims there is a difference between “ideologically obedient hack verse and an engaged poetics that endures the weight of the unknown, the untracked, the unrealized, along with its urgencies for and against” (Rich 33). Higgins’s poetry does not merely reify existing injustice but offers alternatives to them. By playing with a malleable version of truth, her work allows room for rebellion against the status quo. In doing so, she takes advantage of Jameson’s vast numbers of “messages and information”, exploiting flexible realities so that the poems serve as description of her characters’ victories. Like irony, fantasy is a necessary strategy because of the strength of existing ideology in the multinational capitalist system. The victorious moments in Higgins’s work are not what we
would first see to be “true”, but if what we see as “true” is conditioned by the ideological biases of the person speaking to us, Higgins’s purpose of criticizing those biases is better served by not adhering to typical rules of what constitutes truth.

Reading Jameson, we learn that the nature of multinational capitalist rhetoric is that it is pervasive, not easily discerned, and able to dominate our discourse by claiming that it is the only version of truth, when, in reality, truth is not singular. The rhetoric surrounding the Celtic Tiger and its subsequent fall, and the perceived definition of Irish identity in relation to the country’s economic situation, exemplify this discourse in that the experience of living through the economic boom and collapse is described as a standard Irish experience. The myths of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath are made believable by the fiction that what is true for the capitalist class is true for everybody in Ireland. Higgins’s poetry points out the dangerous oppression inherent in this kind of conformity. With multinational capitalist fictions seen as objective and non-ideological, the work of an anti-capitalist poet like Higgins is to expose their absurdities, and demonstrate that the multinational capitalist narrative is one among many. She accomplishes this by ironically adopting capitalist opinions and then debunking them, by making the reader aware of what may be an invisible system of dominance, and by creating alternative realities that make it possible to counter that dominance.

After establishing Higgins’s ability to resist the hegemony of multinational capitalism, however, we might ask ourselves whether her work presents the danger of enacting similar binaries to those created between Irish and non-Irish national identity, or between Irish economic success and non-Irish failure. The adaptation of Irish political nationalism into economic nationalism has demonstrated the ability of hegemonic ideology to adapt to changing social conditions, while still maintaining its basic function of excluding those who do not fit essentialist
definitions of the dominant social group. In resisting multinational capitalism, how can Higgins avoid compromising the individual identities of those who are placed within the collective of anti-capitalist ideological orientation? Even though she chooses not to speak on behalf of a general Irish identity, Higgins has been seen by some reviewers as speaking for a greater Irish society. The back cover of *Ireland is Changing Mother* calls her “a gutsy, anarchic chronicler of the lives of the Irish dispossessed” (Bloodaxe Books n. pag.). Once separate from an Irish psyche because of her refusal to adhere to the decadence of an economic boom, Higgins is now considered an integral part of Irish society. O’Toole refers to her as one of “our real treasures” and somebody who “simply sees and writes”, making a “direct and powerful statement of the class divide in Irish society” (n. pag.). He suggests that Higgins was Irish all along, but it is only after the financial collapse that she is recognized for the important role she plays in the consideration of Irish experience (n. pag.). His description of her work as simply describing what exists leads us to believe that he, unlike Jameson, believes there is one obvious version of truth. But truth is conditioned by social identity. One might ask who the “we” is when O’Toole talks about “our real treasures” (n. pag.). The shift in Higgins’s perceived identity exemplified in O’Toole’s review raises questions of whether she has entered some kind of post-nationalist space or the Irish nationalist binary has merely shifted to accommodate her.

It is unlikely that Higgins’s work can ever be completely accommodated into a hegemonic discourse about what it means to be Irish. Her oppositional attitude towards conformity, as expressed in her commentary on Irish society and her poetic style, as well as her insistence on the personal nature of her poems, rather than a particular class experience, prevent her from claiming the stories in her poetry can be universal. The resistance offered in her poetry is more broadly against social conformity, rather than the particular ideology of multinational
capitalism. Collins’s observation of the inequity in liberation between the speaker and her characters is useful in helping Higgins’s poetry avoid becoming a new kind of hegemonic discourse. Although she writes about the experiences of Irish outsiders, she can never claim to speak for the experience of an entire social class of people, because her poetry always presents her as separate from the stories she tells.

Works Cited

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