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## Music, Symbol and Negativity in Eilis Ni Dhuibhne's "The Pale Gold of Alaska"

by **Michal Matynia**  
Dalarna University College, Sweden

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**Abstract.** This article attempts to reveal a transitory point in the course of which the protagonist of Eilis Ni Dhuibhne's "The Pale Gold of Alaska" endeavours to question polar truths that position her in the 'Irish female' scheme, thus causing her transformation into the enigma –a symbol that escapes the necessity of verbalising one's Self. To do so, I dwelled heavily on musical parallels which proved helpful in the analysis of the mentioned negation of verbal identity. The use of musical symbolism, though, does not evolve solely from an analytical interest, since, as I see it, musical patterns and symbols are deeply rooted in literary works and help us understand literature in ways not yet explored. Though musicology bears a strong resemblance to philosophical and literary movements, the ideas of philosophers like Kristeva, who is very fond of musical metaphors while describing her semiotics, never formed a separate area of literary criticism. Still, her idea of using a non-verbal signifying system to explain linguistic and even psychological patterns is inspiring enough to carry out similar practice in relation to literature.

**Key Words.** Psychoanalysis, semiotics, musicology, identity, negativity, enigma.

**Resumen.** El artículo pretende revelar un punto transitorio en el transcurso del cual la protagonista de "The Pale Gold of Alaska" de Eilis Ni Dhuibhne intenta cuestionar las verdades contrapuestas que la sitúan en el esquema de 'mujer irlandesa', transformándola en el enigma –un símbolo que obvia la necesidad de verbalizar el propio ser. Para tal propósito, he recurrido frecuentemente a paralelismos musicales que me han resultado eficaces para el análisis de la mencionada negación de identidad verbal. El uso de simbolismo musical no proviene únicamente de un interés analítico, puesto que, a mi parecer, las estructuras y símbolos musicales están fuertemente enraizados en obras literarias, y nos ayudan a entender la literatura de forma inusitada. Si bien la musicología se asemeja mucho a los movimientos filosóficos y literarios, las ideas de un filósofo como Kristeva, que recurre a menudo a las metáforas musicales al describir su semiótica, nunca constituyó un área separada de la crítica literaria. No obstante, su uso de un sistema de significación no verbal para dar cuenta de modelos lingüísticos e incluso psicológicos abre el camino a prácticas similares en relación a la literatura.

**Palabras Clave.** Psicoanálisis, semiótica, musicología, identidad, negatividad, enigma.

And the instrument of Darkness, whom they have  
designated, will not be set down a word from then  
on except to deny that she must have been the enigma.  
S. Mallarme<sup>1</sup>

The process of growing into adolescence is

the key to understanding Eilis Ni Dhuibhne's  
writing. Yet, in "The Pale Gold of Alaska" this  
process is not linked with the effects of  
physical ageing as such, but with Irish

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<sup>1</sup> Fragment of Mallarme's poem in Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 30.

heroine's mental change achieved through her adaptation of the American lifestyle and perception. However, despite the highly assimilatory character of mainstream American culture, Sophie, the story's protagonist, succeeds in finding herself a niche in a new cultural context. Due to the flexibility and openness of her ontological melody, Sophie manages to break down overtly disparate Irish-American identities into one semiotic 'melody of self', a melody which resounds in the musical body –the female Diapason. It is the process of negativity that accompanies musical fusion and propels a continuous movement between polar opposites, thus enabling Ni Dhuibhne's woman to go beyond both Irish and American instruments of categorisation. The perpetual movement between the semiotic and the symbolic triggers the fusion of categories and transforms the Irish female in Ni Dhuibhne's writing into a musical enigma that questions positioning of any kind. Therefore, the purpose of this analysis is to explore musical patterns that dwell in the female psyche of Ni Dhuibhne's characters; the patterns of negativity that allow the female protagonist to escape being labelled by national archetypes and metamorphose her into the enigma –a mouldable semi-identity that exists somewhere in-between-the-binaries.

Due to the fact that the process of negativity is set in the movement between two opposing entities, the analysis of "The Pale Gold of Alaska" is also framed around juxtaposition of binaries, in order to mark the path of negativity and see how the dissolution of categories advances. What is more, such a binary framework helps in adding a more universal dimension to Ni Dhuibhne's work, thus saving her from the 'Irish female writer' label. One ought to bear in mind however, that Ni Dhuibhne's 'melody of the self' is encapsulated in a female body, which means that even though her protagonist moves in-between gender dichotomies, the same protagonist continues to deliver an engendered discourse of Ni Dhuibhne's female Self. The gender binary is crucial for understanding the duality and omniscience of Ni Dhuibhne's writing, for her female protagonist, Sophie, is set firmly against the capitalist mode of production that Kristeva associates with categorising and patriarchal practices (Kristeva

1995: 28). Both Orla in *The Dancers Dancing* and Naoise in "Summer Pudding" (*The Inland Ice*) or Sophie and Pat in *The Pale Gold of Alaska* manifest strong attachment to semiotic rhythms of landscape, the rhythmical flow of rivers or the seeming spirituality of Nature. Thus, the quest that Ni Dhuibhne maps out for her female characters aims to retrieve the melody of their inner selves, the melody which is not connected with the verbal system, but with the pulsating patterns of Nature. Consequently, it is the melody that enables Ni Dhuibhne's women to escape being patronised by a capitalist society.

Since the corporeal-instrument echoes the semiotic rhythms and melodies of the environment, the body is a repository of internal semiotic melodies as well as the tone-drives of the social context. As a result, the heterogeneity of Ni Dhuibhne's female characters does not emerge purely from the internal juxtaposition of feminine with masculine, but is anterior to such gender division. In its most primeval form the heterogeneity begins with the dissolution of binaries imposed upon the body by spatial and class positioning. In an interview, Ni Dhuibhne mentions that contradictions of Irish identity, such as the difference between urban and rural, contribute to duality in the Irish individuality torn between a number of drives (Moloney 2003: 102). Indeed, the social differentiation between urban and rural which is present in Ni Dhuibhne's works bears the significance of a spatial binary that triggers heterogeneity at the level of the psyche. The author allows her female protagonists to enter a rite of passage by forcing them into a binary struggle on the level of soma and social context in order to internalise their drives, which later enables them to question both outside and inside positioning. In a way, the struggle of urban-rural oppositions recreates Ni Dhuibhne's personal experience and how she herself manages to enter the realm of in-between-the-binaries.

The author acknowledges her familiarity with the condition of being in-between, for she states that the process of questioning polar opposites started for her very early and can be traced back to the time when her family, from a rural background, moved to an urban environment (Moloney 2003: 104). This social

differentiation created a number of scission layers in Ni Dhuibhne's mind that later contributed to the process of negativity in which a constant *negation* and *affirmation* formed a truly heterogeneous subject: the enigma. The author transfers this negativity model upon her female characters, which results in their creation of sound space in-between-the-binaries. Indeed, though the author positions her writing in the bildungsroman tradition (Moloney 2003: 102-103), Ni Dhuibhne's bildungsroman deviates from the tradition in that it alternates the quest for "knowledge" with fluidity and movement between the symbolic and the semiotic. In this way, Ni Dhuibhne allows Sophie to abandon the pursuit of knowledge and moves her into the realm of in-between in which no final solution can ever be acquired. In the words of the author herself, her bildungsroman is more about survival in the struggle between flux and stasis, rather than achieving success (Moloney 2003: 112). Yet, in order to survive in-between-the-binaries without losing self integrity, the protagonist needs to rediscover the trans-verbal enigma, for, as Kristeva puts it, the survival in the clash of the semiotic and the symbolic structure can only be obtained through non-verbal significance present in art, music and dance (De Nooy 1998: 183). Hence, as a result of the musical nature of the enigma along with its kinetic patterns, it is possible to draw parallels between musical theory and the process of negativity, in order to designate the point where the transformation into enigma occurs.

The choice of musicology as a method of analysis may seem quite unusual. However, there are a number of reasons for which musical analysis seems more applicable to reading Ni Dhuibhne than purely textual insight. Primarily, since my analysis attempts to mark the movement of enigmatic drives that dwell outside the realm of verbal significance, it seems more reasonable to use an equally ephemeral medium through which the language of analysis describing the movement can be filtered. Apparently, there is always a danger that the structuring qualities of language may fix the flux of analysis in categories inherent in the capitalist mode of production. On the other hand, music is a non-verbal practice and, as such, fits the analysis of semiotic flow better than the verbal system. At

At the same time, the language of musical theory is close enough to the realm of linguistic meaning to save an analysis from falling into a psychosis of non-significance. Still, musical language cannot be treated as an alternative to human language, since music is a signifying system which, repeating Kristeva, does not carry linguistic meaning because codes-pitches do not form a one to one relation with the signified (Jackson 1991: 247). Consequently, in the course of this analysis, musical parallels will refer strongly to human language as such, yet, certain philosophical terms will be used interchangeably with musical terms and symbols to bring Eilis Ni Dhuibhne's writing closer to non-verbal signifying practice.

The second argument for the choice of musicology as a method comes from the fact that the very flow of drives in the semiotized body is based on the tonality of that body. Since even the most primordial process by which the body is shaped and semiotized refers to music, the perception of music as an external phenomenon is bound to change into a vision of an internalised 'melody of the self'. Owing to drive vibrations, the body changes into a musical instrument that responds to vibrations and sets rhythmical patterns of sound. At this stage, the drive vibration is echoed by the body for the first time and the resonance level of the corporeal is established. The body chooses the range of sounds that it is capable of resounding and, in turn, receives a range of pitches in which the 'melody of the self' shall move. The musical range of the body, the Diapason, attributes a tonal scale to the subject's biological instrument, whereby the scale designates how the instrument should be tuned in order to resonate the music of the Self and the environment in one sounding body. Furthermore, the process by which musicality of the body is established corresponds to what Wishart describes as a vocal act that triggers the biological instrument to enunciate its Self in language (1996: 263-269). However, the Diapason is a biological construct prior to entering the verbal system and is not to be understood as a complete tonal scale of the verbal act. The Diapason is a semiotic music that has not yet been affixed to particular pitches. Therefore, it is but a complete range of sounds that the body is capable of resonating, sounds tuned directly

from vibrations and frequencies of the semiotic drives.

As soon as the Diapason enters the structure, sounds are attached to particular pitches and pitches are assembled into musical scales. The scale of the Self, which consists of five pitches that revolve around one tonic pitch, is the sole survivor of structuring practices carried by the body and the biological substratum. Thus, the Pentatonic scale is the first scale to play the 'melody of the self', yet, in musicology, it is also the most ambiguous scale in which the centre of gravity is constantly shifting and any of the five pitches is always already prepared to become a tonic (Duckworth 2001: 202). During the initial phase of negativity, the Pentatonic subject strives for fusion with the object, in order to integrate with a melody of the external world. Simultaneously, the Pentatonic scale searches for a centre of gravity for its melody and looks upon social structure as the source of stability. The gravity is achieved by adding two pitches from the social context, one *dominant* and one *subdominant* tone, to the Pentatonic scale and the melody of the subject and object comes to its harmony via seven pitches in a full Octave. Consequently, the composition of the Self, consisting of internal as well as external pitches, resonates in the body-instrument as a single 'melody of the self' fused with social structure in which the body is positioned. But there is a price to be paid for the harmony of the body with the surroundings. The *dominant* tones also formulate the hierarchical order of *dominant* (better, preferable) and *subdominant* (worse, negative) and as soon as the Pentatonic 'melody of self' is fused with the *dominant* tones in one sounding body (Diapason), the tones cause a thetic rupture in our perception of the environment.

As far as the function of the Pentatonic is concerned, suffice to say that the term pinpoints the five primary desires in the corporeal order, the Freudian desires which trigger the psychic dynamic as well as the process of negativity (Kristeva 1995: 6). Yet, the function of the Pentatonic does not cover its rich symbolism. In the process of negativity, the musical motion, which is advanced by *affirmation* and *negation* of varying musical structures, is in fact perpetuated by the Pentatonic desires. Hence, the Pentatonic

'melody of self' is the enigma, for it exists outside the linguistic and visual order and forms, at once, an integral and disintegrated identity. It is the essential core of our Selves built upon trans-verbal echelons of being. Still, the Pentatonic does not mark a single scale, but rather the relations between the five pitches that can further be retuned to different reference tones. The connection between different musical modes based on five pitches and human behaviour dates back to Ancient Greece. Aristotle believed that the Pentatonic inclines specific desires in people, depending on the musical value of the tonic (reference) pitch. He developed an 'ethos of music', the effect that music has on people's mood, so as to create a detailed description of each of the modes and its effects on human characters.<sup>2</sup> By using Aristotle's 'ethos of music' it becomes apparent that the desires-tones underlying the typically Irish Pentatonic fit Aristotle's Hypodorian mode perfectly. The Hypodorian mode is central for the Irish collective Self as it parallels what Ni Dhuibhne calls a typically Irish feeling of dislocation and remoteness stimulated by the process of transition (Moloney 2003: 102). Therefore, in the Irish context, the Pentatonic has a specific timbre marked by tones of life, lack, joining with *the Other*, exile and death that match the Hypodorian mode of sadness, melancholy and dislocation.

### The Nature of Sonic Space

As I have suggested above, the Pentatonic enables a subject to articulate itself through trans-verbal enunciation and makes it possible for the subject to go beyond the biological fatalism of a solely verbal enunciation postulated by Lacanian model of identity construction (Eagleton 1983: 143-145). Since the musical subject gains an additional layer of signification on top of the verbal one, it is always already prepared to play the 'melody of self' in order to counter and dissolve the purely verbal construct. Indeed, Kristeva argues for the abandonment of a purely verbal function, in order to understand the process of negativity visible through corporeal drive pulsations (1984: 122). However, upon the release of the

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical\\_mode](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_mode), 13 August 2006.

semiotized body into the social structure the subject is forced to repeat the ‘melody of self’ in order to sustain the identity construct imposed by the environment and, in effect, falls into a vicious circle of a continuous articulation of Self. As soon as the ‘melody of self’ turns into a repetitive practice, the five primary desires of the Pentatonic fade in the composition that structures the tones into a more socially compatible identity. Butler argues that the process of repeating one’s Self on the verbal level, results in incapacity to achieve self-identity (Rivkin and Ryan 1998: 727). Still, the ‘psychic mimesis’ of the trans-verbal ‘melody of self’ may cause even more damage, for the subject gradually fails to discern the Pentatonic architecture of desires. It is therefore imperative to explore what propels the musicality of Ni Dhuibhne’s protagonist before her arrival to a repeated ‘melody of self’, so as to establish the timbre of tone-desires that the isolated Pentatonic scale embraces.

In “The Pale Gold of Alaska”, Sophie is thrown into reconstructing the lost two tones of the Irish Octave ‘melody of self’ in order to come to terms with her own amputated existence as an immigrant-exile. Whenever a social context is altered, the hierarchy of values caused by the binary division into *dominant* and *subdominant* tones also shifts, which allows the true Hypodorian music to resound in the de-territorialised Diapason. In the story, the immigrants partake in the process of negativity that pushes them into the *negation* of Irish nationality and effectuates a feeling of emptiness, being remote from Irish *dominant* tones. The transitive moment between abandoning Ireland and arriving to *the Other*-America detaches Irish *dominant* tones from the ‘self composition’ and triggers the Hypodorian mode that reverberates in the immigrants’ Diapasons. Sophie is one of those who can hear the Hypodorian through her ‘exile melancholy’, but, at the same time, is unable to verbalise the feeling. For a moment, she finds herself between the two countries and their social systems, an experience that enables her to hear the enigma that dwells in-between-the-binaries. Sophie’s interrogative mood is consistent with Ni Dhuibhne’s own view that conflicted identities are produced by postcolonial or immigrant experiences (Moloney 2003: 115). However, she is unable

to accept the enigma’s flux without losing Self integrity and falling into psychosis. In the process of negativity, the *negation* is always followed by *affirmation*, which stimulates Sophie’s assimilation into the American system. Thus, she strives to incorporate American *dominant* tones into a newly converted Hypodorian ‘melody of self’ by means of *affirmation-klisis*, a schizophrenic drive that marks a unifying tendency in Sophie to accept the world outside (Kristeva 1984: 168). The unifying drive leads Sophie to lean towards the *dominant* and *subdominant* of the verbal significance which deems her musical experience to be of little or no importance. Still, in Ni Dhuibhne’s collection, it is the transitive point between adolescence and adulthood that causes what Kristeva describes as the “hysterical anxiety” (1995: 78), a state of scission between the emotional and “knowledgeable” Self which reawakens the semiotic scale.

As a result of *affirmation-klisis*, Sophie embarks on a quest to structure the desires on both a biological and social level. Parallel to her national affiliation, Sophie’s corporeal order is at a transitive point between semiotic adolescence and symbolic adulthood, hence the negativity movement between Ireland and *the Other* also refers to biological migration from innocence to experience. Primarily, for Sophie’s Hypodorian to be structured, she has to adhere to the patriarchal discourse represented by Ned Burns, also an immigrant whom Sophie met during her trip to America. Sophie commits a symbolical infanticide on a child that lingers within the Hypodorian ‘melody of self’ and takes on a more homogenous identity brought about by her marriage to Ned. Apparently, she is unable to sustain the *infans* stage carried by the Hypodorian, a stage characteristic of autistic children who wish to bury themselves in the inexpressible by expressing the meaning, but not signification. Kristeva observes that the only means of getting through to such children is music (1995: 106), but by deciding on infanticide, Sophie submits to a visual culture of signifying signs and images. Yet, only by offering her virginity and musicality to the symbolic is Sophie allowed to “join with *the Other*” and accept American structuring tones. From this perspective, Sophie’s fate is an allegory of Irish immigrants’ struggle to create

a hybrid Irish-American ‘melody of self’, whereas the name of the ferry, the ‘Maid of Erin’, is a metaphor for Sophie’s role as an offering made to *the Other* and designates the qualities which are to be sacrificed before the Irish are allowed to mingle with mainstream American society.

One may speculate regarding the circumstances that lead to Sophie’s departure from Ireland. What is important, however, is that she takes the challenge to seek out new significance by escaping the loop of performativity and continuous enunciation of self. In the Irish context, the obvious choice as a source of musical inspiration would be America, since it stands for *the Other* and is a polar opposite to what Ireland tends to represent. However, Sophie falls into an illusion of America as a land of promise, an image of *the Other* that creates false significance and encapsulates her ‘melody of self’: “[America] the word becoming lands and lights and buildings in front of her eyes” (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 4).

Apparently, America functions as an image that locks Sophie in a visual experience, which deems false representations and appearances to become an important factor in the process of Irish-American identity formation. Quite soon the protagonist realises that her desires will not be echoed in America, for it is a system that attempts to freeze her ‘musical self’ in a glamorous picture that oppresses her. As a result, the idealised image of America is contrasted with an everyday reality of consumerism in which the burden of repeating one’s identity is imposed upon Sophie by means of monotonous activities at the assembly line as well as wage labour. In this respect, the money creates false significance that loops the ‘semiotic melody’. Similarly, the tedious waving activity of “pushing the heavy shuttle to and fro, to and fro” (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 11), marks the point where the Hypodorian ‘melody of self’ is tailored by practice into a continuous enunciation of self. Consequently, the musical series of Sophie’s melody are transfigured into a fabric made of bright colours that are pleasant to look at, but, in reality, symbolise the false glamour of the American lifestyle.

On the other hand, the American world of visual signification stimulates Ned’s obsession with money. Ned gradually turns into a

a Kristevan ‘phantasmatic operative’, a spectacle without imagination, a product of industrial neurosis/psychosis characteristic of the anxious and depressed societies of steel cities (Kristeva 1995: 27). Overwhelmed by voyeurism, a drive to pursue a visual experience, Ned mingles with the American collective and engages in buying and selling goods and images, which are just shallow symbols. In the fast paced urban society that moves its whole energy towards a phantasmal realm of image, consumer’s products, pursuit of meaningless symbols and advertisement of this life, the individual has no time and space to create souls (Kristeva 1995: 6-10). Ned is locked in his role as a ‘phantasmatic operative’, an individual who operates through images and denies sexual, subjective and moral identity. Consequently, he begins to repeat his ‘melody of self’ and becomes performative in his struggle for pleasure, from which he acquires no satisfaction. Ned’s and Sophie’s ‘melodies’ come apart for Ned turns into a narcissistic personality indifferent to Sophie’s emotions. Instead, he projects an idealised image upon Sophie and drags her to the realm of false appearances by wishing her to be “neat, well-turned-out, pretty”, but nothing else besides that. Clearly, Ned wants to encapsulate Sophie in the system of surface images and identity masks and denies her the entrance into the domain of patriarchal knowledge. Accordingly, Ned worships a misogynist system of Christian dogma that, simultaneously, patronises and silences Sophie’s desire to teach the children how to read and write, a demeanour which uncovers his affinity to the phantasmal-patriarchal order.

Gradually, Sophie becomes tired with the practice of verbalising one’s Self as well as being diminished to the role of an object of admiration. Since she hoped to gain understanding for her Hypodorian desires, she comprehends that the restrictions dictated by the American *dominant* tones are not much different from what she had experienced in Ireland. Sophie’s withdrawal from the American categorising practices generates an interrogative mood that undermines the patriarchal structure by means of trans-verbal forces. Following her transformation into a heterogeneous, desire-driven subject, she obtains the qualities of the sacred feminine, a Goddess that exerts her influence upon the

male world. In addition, she manifests herself as a sexual being and seduces Ned's cousins who, driven by sexual desire, also start questioning the rationality of the system that denies them access to Sophie's body. Hence, Sophie is bound to become a Goddess-seductress that lures the cousins' 'melodies of self' into a more natural order directed by sexual instincts. What is more, though in her role as a Goddess Sophie poses a threat to the patriarchal code of conduct, she remains relatively safe in this position since none of her passions and desires enter the symbolic order of language: "[their affection] was never mentioned, by anyone .... As long as you said nothing you didn't have to do anything" (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 9). The symbolic perception depends on image and word. In this system, whatever is non-material or cannot be verbalised is simultaneously non-existent.

Somehow, Ned finally gets to know about Sophie's affair: "he heard something. A reference to Sophie's good looks ... followed by a reference to Sophie's husbands" (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 11). Apparently, Ned cannot tolerate Sophie's behaviour, which undermines his authority. Even though nothing really has happened between Sophie and the cousins, to Ned it is not important, as his perception of Sophie is shaped by rumours and appearances. The verbal and visual signifying systems again start to picture Sophie's 'melody of self' and drag her back to the order of language and the symbolic. She is punished by Ned who, at first, denies her "the word", does not want to speak with her and scorns her idea to teach the children, and finally rapes her. In this way, Sophie's sexual desires are oppressed by turning them into a brutal practice and physical harassment. The Freudian drama in which a phallic symbol imposes the symbolic is re-enacted by Ned who overpowers Sophie's 'melody of self' and causes the female Goddess to be encapsulated in the material. Ned marks clearly his authority in the relationship and forces Sophie into a subservient (*subdominant*) position in the binary male-female. Thus, he marginalises the significance of Sophie's 'melody of self' and pushes her to compete with the visual and linguistic significance of the American collective. From this time on, Sophie fails to free herself from the power positions indicated by the hierarchy of *dominant* tones and gains

an inferior status in the gender binary.

Only when Ned decides to go to Greenough does the axis of spatial positioning change, which allows Sophie's Hypodorian to resound anew. Since the axis of binary scissions is brought down to an internal conflict between rural and urban America, the identity constructs advocated through gender and national binaries are no longer valid. Accordingly, America ceases to represent *the Other* to Sophie, who undergoes a shift from Ireland-America to the New York-Greenough dichotomy, a transition which affects binary opposites on all levels. Therefore, it is no longer nationality that matters, but a social class resulting from a struggle between urban and rural Americas. The internalised New York-Greenough axis creates new layers of binary scissions that govern Sophie's and Ned's social positioning and enables Sophie to escape from being pigeonholed as an Irish female fighting for her subjectivity. Despite the fact that the new axis brings about new stereotypes and categories, the level of musical response increases, since rural categories are more resonant to Hypodorian 'melodies of self' than the New York environment. Seemingly, the organising power of the collective lies in its capacity to silence the 'melodies of self' by bringing them down to a repeated unison in which individual melodies cannot be discerned. Yet, whenever a subject is moved from the urban environment into a sparsely populated area, the collective is no longer capable of incorporating isolated female melodies into a cumulative musical practice. In the agrarian environment of Greenough, the collective does not orchestrate mass consciousness, but the people are able to mark their musical presence and feelings in other people.

Still, what initially pushes Ned to go to Greenough is not the possibility to live peacefully outside urban clamour, but a pervasive fetishism of the 'phantasmatic operative' to follow the idealised image of gold. In this respect, gold is symbolic in a couple of ways, for one, it is the image that represents wealth and prosperity. However, the true value of gold is impeded by an illusionary significance that the imposed economic value creates. Furthermore, the pursuit of gold may be seen metaphorically, parallel to a medieval quest for the Holy Grail.<sup>3</sup> Ned sees gold solely

as a marketable entity, as a golden chalice that, to him, is only fit for sale. Yet, such perception of the Holy Grail conceals its true value as a sacred symbol that contains the blood of Christ, a symbol which is priceless, but only to the ones who believe. Thus, Ned's greed hinders him from the 'semiotic redemption' and does not let him be spared by the discovery of the "pale gold of Alaska".

### Mapping the Landscape of Sound

In Greenough, the state of 'having' and 'lacking' is a dividing line between the settlers and the Indians. Gradually, the settlers begin to position themselves in relation to what they do not know or fear, namely the entity which exists outside the visual world of possession. The Indians, who do not belong to the financial order, come to represent *the Other*. At the same time, the process of marginalising the Natives coincides with a change in their spatial positioning and their relocation from the fertile lands to the mountains. The clash of the two cultures triggers the negativity movement between the indigenous Indian community and the colonising settlers. In this struggle, the settlers represent stasis, as they tend to position themselves in space by fencing off Nature, but also by surrounding themselves with objects that create false significance. In the ongoing clash between kinesis and stasis, the settlers are driven by consumption that forces them to repeat their 'melodies of self' and entangles them in a hopeless quest to articulate their Selves by amassing resources that designate social status.

As soon as the stage is set for a binary clash on a macro level, between the two varying cultural practices, the process of negativity changes the Pentatonic scale to individual Diapasons, musically responsive elements on the biological stratum, so as to make semiotic melodies resound in people. By constructing the cottage, Ned tries to encapsulate his and Sophie's 'melodies of self'. Yet, despite the enclosed space of the house that muffles the semiotic influence, the Pentatonic reverberates in Sophie's Octave melody, a melody that carries five primary pitch-desires governed by the binary of *dominant* and *subdominant*.

Apparently, the semiotic pulsations are triggered by the close proximity of natural materials, like wood, that enact upon Sophie's 'melody of self': "The wooden walls emitted a pungent, resinous smell. The fire burned wood all the time, adding to the spicy atmosphere" (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 17). Smell, music and gesture all refer to a pre-verbal stage during which the *signifying chora* generates the signifying position by means of the musical, gestural and olfactory senses (Kristeva 1984: 26), therefore, all three of them are deeply intertwined in communicating semiotic messages that exist outside the symbolic order. Since all living things originate in one organic formation (Kristeva 1989: 322), the fact that the rhythmical presence is permanent causes the olfactory qualities of the cabin to emanate pulsating patterns that influence Sophie on a trans-verbal level. Even though the enclosed space of the cabin imprisons Sophie by detaching her from the natural environment, the material from which the cabin is built allows semiotic awareness to crawl into Sophie's musical consciousness. Left alone in the cabin and surrounded by objects that hold no musical significance, Sophie finds ways to echo the Pentatonic desires, whereas the silence evoked by the state of loneliness puts Sophie in a contemplative mood and enables her to reverberate the semiotic rhythms in her musically responsive body. Thus, she discovers a niche in which to compose a new melody, the 'sound space of Self' which embraces Irish Hypodorian melody aside from visual representations and binary perspectives.

As a consequence of her ongoing transformation into the enigma, Sophie gains the ability to move living things from the objectified position to the role of artefacts that hold trans-verbal significance. Hence, Sophie's semiotic empathy enables her to hear the pulsating patterns, but also to reach a state of union with Nature: "On the floor were deer skins, red and silver ... alone in her cabin she felt the company of creatures who had once inhabited the skins" (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 17-18). The semiotic empathy is echoed by the "living materials" that shape Sophie's psyche and increase the volume of the Hypodorian melody. When Ned brings her the sealskin coat, he sees it purely as a functional object that is supposed to keep Sophie warm. Yet, with Sophie, the object loses its attachment to

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy\\_grail](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_grail), 4 August 2006.

functionality and gains new significance that, simultaneously, expands Sophie's consciousness and brings her back to the pulsating order of Nature: "When she wrapped herself in it she felt she was a different person. She did not feel human at all, but part of the huge animal world which surrounded her now on all sides, which was with her inside and outside her cabin" (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 18). As was the case with the cabin, the 'living' fabric of the coat is capable of communicating with the user on a trans-verbal level. The coat's olfactory and musical apparatuses dissect its form and pragmatic function imposed by the patriarchal order. Therefore, the 'living' structure of the fabric and its connection to natural patterns transgresses the imprinted visual value. Instantly, Sophie is able to contrast the tinsel of dyed textiles from New York with the semiotic significance of the coat's texture. As soon as she wraps herself in the coat, she opens her eyes to the true significance of the material which does not refer to its looks or appearances, but to the musical and olfactory essence that dwells within it. Respectively, the coat advances Sophie's transformation into the enigma by marginalising the visual realm for the sake of an auricular trip back to the pre-verbal stage: "She felt like animals she did not see but heard in the depth of the night" (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 18). In the course of this trip, Sophie fuses her Hypodorian melody with the natural rhythms that invite her to reawaken her animal Self.

Apparently, in order to enter the realm of Nature, Sophie's 'melody of self' has to be reconstructed to include natural rhythms and animal desires. In this way, her Hypodorian tonality of desires is conjoined with the animal instincts to allow Sophie a real pre-verbal experience. She realises that in order to grasp the Hypodorian melody she has to become one with Nature: "The high dark trees, secreting the world of animals ... fascinated her" (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 18). As a result of the *klisis* drive, the unifying tendency that effectuates in a wish to be brought back to the beginning –the mother's womb, Sophie abandons the order of Culture to which she was attached for so long. Through her quest to regain 'the paradise lost' in Nature's rhythmical patterns, she pays homage to the sacred feminine. In return, the sacred feminine empowers Sophie to restore

the equilibrium between Culture and Nature. It seems that water is a symbol that marks the borderline between the settlement and the forest, and, simultaneously, is a passageway to *the Other*. Sophie is literally "baptized" into the trans-verbal order when she secretly bathes in a creek. By this very act, she performs a ritual to renew her bond with Nature, but also to wash off the "primordial sin" of the patriarchal order. Thus, she purifies herself by wiping clean the *dominant* tones and only as the pure Hypodorian melody is she permitted to enter the realm of the 'in-between', the queendom of the Goddess.

At the pub, it is evident that Sophie is becoming increasingly sensitive to the 'music of self'. The scene in which the protagonist is surrounded by men drinking beer and whiskey may hold a symbolic meaning where Sophie, subject to gender discrimination and the authority of her husband, has to share her sound space with the female Diapason of Kathleen Sullivan, whose musically responsive body is capable of echoing Sophie's emotions. Apparently, the ritual of drinking draws a dividing line between men, encouraged to drink beer to differentiate themselves from women and manifest their status in the patriarchal structure, and women who are expected to drink wine that imposes a ritual of sophistication and elegance carried by the image of 'port wine'. Still, the musical significance of the scene is increased when Sophie hears a familiar tune from Ireland and, overwhelmed by the feeling of loss, finds herself crying. Though not particularly attached to her home country, the tune brings about the binary dichotomies of Ireland-America, music-ritual and identity play-performance, only to remind Sophie of the core of her Octave melody, specifically the Hypodorian 'melody of self' that precedes the addition of two *dominant* tones. In this way, Sophie is pushed to reconstruct her Hypodorian awareness and built upon the singular pitch of 'exile melancholy' triggered by the Irish fiddler. Furthermore, the whole scene of drinking wine and listening to music may be perceived symbolically as the quest for the Holy Grail –"the pale gold of Alaska". In this respect, while men are busy searching for the golden chalice, Sophie acquires the sacred significance of the Grail, which she manifests

by drinking wine –the symbolic blood of Jesus Christ. The fact that she is worthy of receiving the sacred blood means that she had been successfully purified of ‘original sin’ and acquired the innocence of the “Maid of Erin”. Thus, Sophie can take her place among the “saints” of the semiotic. Not only is she allowed to drink the Messiah’s blood, her holy task to bring Nature and Culture together grants her a special place in the Christian symbolism. Kristeva confirms this, arguing that the symbolic incarnation of Christ fuses soul and body, and nourishes both psychic dynamic and negativity (Kristeva 1995: 6). Hence, by breaking through the dualism of body and soul, Sophie delivers equilibrium to the world of binary scissions, whereas her role as the sacred feminine in this undertaking earns her additional association with Virgin Mary. From this perspective, Sophie’s quest to bring redemption to the patriarchal order is the same as giving birth to a unifying symbol, the Messiah, which will fuse Nature and Culture, as well as all the other binaries, together.

In addition, contrary to the common prejudices held by the villagers in regard to the Indian community, Sophie feels strangely in tune with one of the Indians visiting her. She re-establishes her bond with Nature by repeating the ritual that links her, water and the Indian together: “He had a mug of water in his hand. He handed it to her and she drank a few drops of the ice-cold liquid” (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 22). The water is a symbol that holds heterogeneous forces which dissolve artificial images and differences erected between them by the villagers. As soon as the ritual is complete, the Blackfoot’s Pentatonic and Sophie’s Hypodorian are bound by the semiotic rhythm which organizes the tonality of their melodies and lets them resound in unison. By this very act, Sophie acquires an integral identity in which the American rhythm of natural cycles worshipped by the Indians is attuned to Irish desires. What is more, going beyond the perceptions imposed by the villagers requires the joining of the primeval musical patterns with animal instincts, which causes the musical union to be followed by the corporeal one. Apparently, along with her transformation into the enigma, Sophie has to reinforce her Hypodorian tone to ‘join with *the Other*’ with a sexual desire. The act of sexual union seals the American and Irish melodies

and forms a tune that crosses spatial and temporal borderlines. As soon as Sophie hears the new ‘melody of self’, she is detached from the *dominant* tones and, simultaneously, disembodied: “her mind and her eyes were outside her body, hovering somewhere around her head like a dragonfly staring down at herself. It was not an unpleasant sensation” (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 22). By escaping both corporeal and social order, she becomes a fully ephemeral entity. At this point, Sophie’s Hypodorian retunes the ‘melody of self’ to gain entrance to the world of “in-between-the-binaries”, but also to allow her transformation into the Goddess that exists beyond any positioning, the true enigma.

Sophie’s quest to undermine patriarchal structures by bringing the binary oppositions together is hindered by Ned, who still wishes to control Sophie through language and image. However, Sophie gradually comprehends that the binary hierarchies carried by language are relative as she begins to question the authorities who impose value upon words that have no real meaning: “Why is gold valuable? ... It’s nice to look at, but it’s no use” (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 28). Through juxtaposition of the two perspectives concerning gold, Ned’s perception that treats gold purely as a commodity and Blackfoot’s outlook that relates gold to the Sun and natural symbols, she discovers that the value of gold is completely relative. Though neither of the two perspectives has the capacity to see the trans-verbal significance of gold, North Wind’s perception is full of religious, pagan symbolism and, as such, has closer affiliation to the semiotic melody. Both systems impose a certain value upon gold, yet, Ned’s understanding of gold is purely imaginary and holds no real life relation. Sophie observes that Ned’s perspective praises the objects which have no value but only properties. Still, she proceeds with her deconstruction of the imaginary presence of the oppressive symbols and dissolves the patriarchal liking for pragmatism and appearances that seem to govern Ned’s system of values. As a result, she successfully breaks through Ned’s patronising practices by devaluing the symbols that create false significance.

Sophie disseminates the realm of the symbolic by breaking the relation between the signifier and the signified which, in turn, frees

her from binary hierarchies: “What does Sophie mean? .... It does not mean anything .... Names don’t have a meaning” (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 29). After the dissolution of the signifier-signified couple, Sophie disowns her name and detaches it from herself as the subject of trans-verbal enunciation. Sophie does not feel that her name, the sound of it, reflects who she really is. In this respect, she opposes the realm of image and escapes being positioned by the signifier that does not even echo her ‘melody of self’. Ni Dhuibhne points to a special bond between the Irish and their names. In her view, whenever there is some kind of transition, it automatically affects the name and results in melancholy and a feeling of loss (Ni Dhuibhne 1999: 48), the qualities that match perfectly the Hypodorian scale. However, the change of name also triggers dualism in the Self associated with identity given by the name as well as a drive towards reconciliation-*klisis* (Moloney 2003: 103). The drive of *klisis*, designated by the change of name, leads to an immediate fusion of binary couples or, as in Sophie’s case, diffusion of hierarchies associated with dualism. As soon as the binary order of language is dismantled, the whole patriarchal system that oppresses her is deconstructed and crumbles down.

In the process of negativity, Sophie’s Hypodorian searches for a centre of gravity to her ‘melody self’, and designates the desire to ‘join with *the Other*’ as the tonic (centre) of the Hypodorian scale. Apparently, she cannot merge with Nature directly, for natural patterns deconstruct the tonality of the ‘melody of self’ into a series of rhythmical pulses that could result in Sophie’s psychosis. Still, since the Indians founded their society based on the relationship with land and pagan symbolism, they retain the union of the corporeal, spiritual and natural order. Furthermore, the Indians despise the realm of image and even their knot writing system is marked by rhythm, but not by form (Kristeva 1989: 23). This special feature of the Indian communication system, which entangles symbolisation without becoming representation, allows the Indians to exist in-between Nature and Culture as an organised society. Simultaneously, they are saved from the psychosis which is normally caused by the enigmatic presence. Thus, in order to escape disintegration and psychosis, Sophie has to filter her own *Otherness* through the Indian

perspective and assign the notion of *the Other* to ‘hidden’ America, the land as it is seen by the Indians.

Having left the false image of America behind, Sophie adopts the Indian way of life and rediscovers *the Other* America, a hidden sound space that reverberates enigmatic desires and allows her to uphold the integrity of self. Indeed, her Irish tonality is organised on a trans-verbal level by Native American rhythms and natural cycles, which allow her the rediscovery of the “pale gold of Alaska”, the pureness hidden in *the Other*. Instantly, she merges with the semiotic pulsation of the American landscape to impersonate the stasis of American flora, visible when “she heard the trees talking to her ... she felt she was a tree”, but also the flux of fauna that Sophie experiences while “bathing in the dark pool of the creek, she felt she was a fish” (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 31). The whole American environment enacts upon Sophie, who holds on to her Irish tonality and balances between America’s binary conflicts and scissions. Accordingly, she is no longer susceptible to accepting polar truths: “North Wind had skewed her power to do that, had taken away her ability to distinguish black from white, silver from gold, bad from good, good from better” (Ni Dhuibhne 2000: 33). Sophie struggles to fuse the dichotomies by marking her presence in them as the enigma—a unifying sign. Symbolically, she is reshaped into the Irish Goddess driven by the North Wind across the American plains with only one thing in mind, which is to bring equilibrium to the patriarchal order. Consequently, she counters patronising practices by fusing with *the Other* through sexual intercourse with North Wind, whereas the child, the fruit of the fusion, is bound to become a ‘pagan Messiah’ who shall release the patriarchy of its dogmatic values. Yet, since Sophie partakes in the process of negativity in which *negation* of social order is always followed by *affirmation-klisis*, the *negation* drive vector is reversed towards *affirmation*, which again freezes Sophie in the stasis of Ned’s authority.

Eilis Ni Dhuibhne confirms that synthesis is never complete in her novels, which are more about survival than achieving success (Moloney 2003: 102-105). Thus, Sophie fails in her quest to fuse the binaries and is again imprisoned in the society’s stasis. The child

born out of flux cannot withstand the stasis developed by Ned and dies due to disturbance in the kinetic field. In the end, there is little hope for Sophie's heterogeneous 'melody of self' when she is forced into the repetitive practice. Overwhelmed by Christian dogma, she is burdened with the practice of retelling prayers, a mantra that loops her Hypodorian. However, Sophie prays to the Virgin Mary with whom she shares a position of the sacred feminine, a pure virgin, but also the mother of the Messiah. In this way, the enigma of the pure Hypodorian resounds again and reminds Sophie of the state of 'in-between' carried by the rhythmical pulsation of North Wind. As soon as North Wind appears in Sophie's prayers, the rhythm of the repetitive mantra breaks down and North Wind one last time carries Sophie outside patriarchal positioning. This time, however, Sophie abandons her noble quest to merge the opposing dichotomies and decides to retrieve her musical pureness by referring to pure Hypodorian scale. As a result, she detaches her mind from the body, abandons the verbal order completely and falls into a state of psychosis. Devoid of the *dominant* tones, Sophie carries her whole Self unto higher echelons of trans-verbal significance, to a niche where she can never be reached, never to return to the verbal order, "except to deny that she must have been the enigma" (Kristeva 1984: 30).

### Conclusion

In Ni Dhuibhne's work, the musical motion causes the enigma to reverberate in her female Irish heroines, women like Sophie who begin to comprehend that the scale of their melodies is not set. As the instrument of Self changes its shape through growth and experience, so does the melodic range of Sophie's musical composition. Indeed, Sophie abandons her positioning in what Kristeva refers to as the rhythm of the collective (Clement 2001: 133) by rejecting American *dominant* tones. As a result, she turns to other sources of sound such as rhythms of American landscape or tonality of Native Americans. Moreover, after the initial *affirmation* of urban American *dominant* and *subdominant*, Sophie moves to retune her Hypodorian pitches by means of sounds that lurk in *the Other* America. From there, the Irish Diapason widens its range and the melody

that it plays becomes a random succession of sounds that cannot be evaluated by any means. Consequently, Sophie's musical motion becomes identical to a quest for pitches that go beyond time and space. This motion also parallels the movement of the enigma, who wishes to fuse with new sounds and rhythmical patterns that are eternal, so as to resonate an infinite spectrum of the semiotic drives.

The very practice of movement prompts the enigma to leave a mark in the material, an echo of its existence in the ontological melody that resonates in the body-instrument. Yet, in the course of analysis of the enigma movement, the reader might get the impression that certain stages of enigma transformation are repeated. This is so because the enigma is never identical to itself and, as such, can never be fully acquired. Indeed, Sophie's transformation into the enigma is never complete, for the continuous *reconciliation* and *negation* of negativity never come to an end and the enigma is always already present to haunt the binary opposites on the level of psyche and soma. In "The Pale Gold of Alaska", the enigma can be heard, but refuses to give itself to physical presence. Furthermore, gender, social and national binary pairs, through which the enigma manifests itself, spread into an infinite network of combinations. The network of binary conflicts further blurs the trajectory of the Irish enigma and the trajectory is no longer a linear path, but an amorphous shape that can be heard and felt but never seen or measured. The amorphous female enigma loses its meaning in the course of negativity, but the mark left in dichotomies retains its non-verbal significance mapped out by the context and verbal division. This simultaneous presence and absence of the enigma in binary opposites makes it extremely difficult, if at all possible, to follow the development of Ni Dhuibhne's female characters. Still, the enigma of Self always already exists in all dichotomies and resounds its presence in the movement between polar opposites.

In the course of negativity, the enigma follows an amorphous path in the infinite network of dualities, rather than oscillating between two opposites. Interestingly, the closest counterpart to this kinetic pattern is the movement of a string in a musical instrument. Though the string appears to vibrate between two points, A and B, in reality, its movement is

much more complex. Only when the string vibrates around its own axis as well as between many polar points is it possible for the string to resonate musical frequencies in the sounding body (Wishart 1996: 51). Furthermore, the wave form of the string cannot be fixated within a certain area of axes, but, in order to produce frequencies of sound, the string has to vibrate in a seemingly random way. Similarly, negativity is only capable of resounding the 'melody of self' by vibrating simultaneously around many axes, which is the only kinetic pattern that qualifies for musical significance. Only through such random vibration can the fundamental, harmonic significance of the Diapason be established. Through analysis of this characteristic kinetic pattern of the enigma movement I have attempted to illustrate a transitory stage in "The Pale Gold of Alaska", where the Pentatonic of the Irish female immigrant goes beyond its own fixation in comprehensible melody that is enforced by national, social and gender categories. Undoubtedly, the presence of the enigma questions the fossilisation of identity masks, but also challenges the traditional preconceptions regarding Nature and Culture as two separate categories. Musicians and philosophers alike argue that constructs such as music or identity are contextually viable. Since our perceptions of music change depending on our tastes, ideologies and preconceptions, music has no absolute value. Even though the value of music is relative, it is also true that the fundamental rules of harmony remain relatively solid across space and time. Similarly, the Irish 'melody of self' is constant in terms of relations between pitch-desires that remain intact regardless of their positioning in cultures.

Therefore, Ni Dhuibhne's story designates that the biological instrument of the Irish female Self (the Irish Diapason) behaves just like an ordinary musical instrument, as it is capable of changing and shifting its scales. Through an immigrant experience which is constant in her stories, her Irish female protagonists are detached from national identity constructs and are moved towards the adaptation of a new culture. Yet, the experience of "hysterical anxiety", the pivotal stage during which the Pentatonic becomes temporarily available while in search of

missing *dominant* and *subdominant* pitches, retunes the Pentatonic scale and makes the protagonists aware of its existence. Thus, in "The Pale Gold of Alaska", migration is the only way to reach out for a more complete experience, instead of reproducing the same Irish melody on and on again. Consequently, the process of negativity liquefies patterns of social practice and transforms the fixated female body into a musical enigma, a state which does not yield to verbalisation and hence is never achieved. The enigma can never be fully analysed as it constantly forms, deforms and forms itself again into something else to resonate in the body-instrument. Yet, even the music has a binary role in Ni Dhuibhne's works, as it holds qualities of both language and the semiotic flow. Similarly to language, the significance of music is produced by context and structure of successive pitches (Kristeva 1989: 310). At the same time, music goes beyond significance by a limitless range of possibilities in which pitches can be assembled to form a scale and sounds tuned to form pitches. As a result, musicology is capable of grasping the transformation into enigma on the level of language and flow, by means of symbolic parallels between musical motion and Sophie's experiences. Therefore, by following the echo of a sounding enigma, it is possible to trace personal progress of Ni Dhuibhne's characters and pinpoint the parameters that constitute the Self of her writing. In addition, the immigrant experience parallels Ni Dhuibhne's own background and can be seen as a purifying re-enactment of a psychical drama performed by the protagonists of her novels. Apparently, the clash of Irish-American cultural practices is a crucial part of the author's ritual to overcome her binary positioning, but also to prevail in-between two different national systems while retaining integrity of her Self.

What I am suggesting here is that it is not the perception of identity or music or even the 'melody of self' that matters, but an intricate network of relationships between pitch-desires and semiotic rhythms that make the 'melody of self' happen in the first place. All identities are constructed in one way or the other and not only due to social mechanisms, such as the binary order of language which positions identities in the network of hierarchies, but

because we use the rules of harmony to relate our bodies to social contexts. Thus, organising practices are not solely the domain of Culture, for it is Nature that equips us with the tools to structure our desires, govern relations between them and shape their melodic timbre. As a consequence, we are all enigmas at certain points of our lives, yet, imprisoned by the false significance of language and image, we do not

realise our illusory existence. To raise awareness of our enigmatic presence is what I hoped to achieve in the course of my analysis of Ni Dhuibhne's texts. As I see it, the author meant to achieve the same, which is visible in her substituting the quest for knowledge with an endeavour to return to musical innocence, so as to enable us to rediscover "The Pale Gold of Alaska".

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