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***“An inherently magical act”*: collaboration in the work of contemporary Irish women poets.**

Abstract I: Critic Patricia Boyle Haberstroh writes, “The newest direction we can chart in recent poetry is the acknowledgment of links between women poets, as contemporary poets pay tribute to those who preceded them” (Haberstroh 1996: 197). This article meditates on these “links” by addressing collaboration in the work of contemporary Irish women poets. First, it investigates theories of the nature of collaboration, specifically female collaboration; it locates the existence of an Irish female poetic tradition; and it briefly discusses the work of Irish poets Mary O’Malley and Eva Bourke.

Abstract II: Patricia Boyle Haberstroh individua nella poesia più recente la tendenza a riconoscere i legami tra poetesse, dal momento che i poeti contemporanei rendono omaggio ai loro predecessori. Il presente articolo si presenta come una riflessione su questi legami, prendendo in considerazione la collaborazione nell’opera di poetesse irlandesi contemporanee. In una prima fase, vengono analizzate le teorie sulla natura della collaborazione, in particolar modo di quella femminile. Successivamente, viene individuata l’esistenza di una tradizione poetica femminile irlandese e considerata brevemente l’opera delle poetesse Mary O’Malley e Eva Bourke.

“In much of the poetry by Irish women published since 1980,” critic Patricia Boyle Haberstroh observes, “a growing consciousness of the importance of self has led not only to the proliferation of female personae but also to a more confident female voice expressing the value of women’s experience and perception” (Haberstroh 1996: 197).

Indeed, the rise of many Irish women poets and their search for, and expression of, selfhood has been well-documented and has received much-deserved critical attention over the past two decades. To name just a few, Eavan Boland’s poetic attentiveness to the “ordinary” details of domestic life and objects and suburban motherhood has altered perceptions of -and assumptions about - the value of specifically female experience as a subject for poetry; the Irish language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s work re-imagines masculinised myth, “see[ing] a way to recover the female voice in Irish poetry that the English male tradition gradually eclipsed” (Haberstroh 1996: 164); and Medbh McGuckian’s dense, oblique poems juggle female sexuality and the Troubles in the North of Ireland, while they also re-appropriate metaphor and image in the English language via what is arguably an explicitly female approach.

But, as Haberstroh continues, writing twelve years ago in 1996, “The newest direction we can chart in recent poetry is the acknowledgment of links between women poets, as contemporary poets pay tribute to those who preceded them” (Haberstroh 1996: 197). The announcement of this ‘discovery’ has a startled, revelatory tone: is Haberstroh truly as surprised as she sounds here, as she confirms literary links between Irish women poets and their colleagues and predecessors? The answer is, most likely, yes. Female literary collaboration certainly predates the 1980s - but Irish women poets, writing in the second half of the twentieth century, have found themselves faced with the task of writing into a male-dominated tradition, wrestling, as it were, with Yeats’s formidable ghost. Eavan Boland has famously addressed this dilemma in her acclaimed memoir *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet In Our Time* (1995), in which she describes her writing life as a solitary poetic selfhood, devoid of female literary touchstones, as she tried to gain access to an exclusive literary tradition in which, she feared, she would have no place. “The poet’s vocation - or, more precisely, the historical construction put upon it - is one of the single, most problematic areas for any woman who comes to the craft,” writes Boland in *Object Lessons*. “Not only has it been defined by a tradition which could never foresee her, but it is construed by men about men, in ways which are poignant, compelling and exclusive” (Boland 1995: 80) In this light, then, Haberstroh’s pleasurable surprise here is understandable: in 1996, for the first time, she is able to assert the existence of a poetic tradition by Irish women. In language that emphasizes synthesis and genial collaboration rather than exclusion, she declares, “In reaching out to acknowledge the work of other women, Irish women poets have stressed the links that connect them” (Haberstroh 1996: 221).

While the formation of an Irish female literary tradition is essential to the writing lives - and to writing the lives - of Irish women, collaboration, even with its vast potential for stimulating and sustaining creative acts, does not come without its own set of obstacles. Harold Bloom - albeit from a Freudian, heavily gendered perspective that presents serious problems to feminist scholarship - offers an analysis of those obstacles in his seminal book *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1). Poetic influence, Bloom argues, is both inevitable and necessary, and is based upon the poet’s “misprision”, or misreading, of her precursors, where “misreading” is not an interpretive error, but rather is synonymous with “rewriting” or “revision” (Bloom 1975: 30). A full critique of Bloom’s theory is outside the scope of this paper, but his approach to the intertextual nature of collaboration is useful: “We need to stop thinking of any poet as an autonomous ego,” he writes, “however solipsistic the strongest of poets may be. Every poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets” (Bloom 1975: 91). Of course, this concept is not the sole property of Bloom: Percy Bysshe Shelley, writing in 1820, believed that “poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors, and musicians, are, in one sense, the creators, and in another, the creations of their age. From this subjection the loftiest do not escape”, while Jack Stillinger, writing in 1991, claims that “literary production is not an autonomous and self-reflexive activity; it is a social and institutional event” (Shelley in Bloom 1975: 103-4; Stillinger 1991: 199). And therefore it is also a gendered ‘event’. Popular wisdom, from time immemorial, has claimed that women are adept at creating relationships; critic Diane P. Freedman even alleges that “writers in the female mode use language not to gain power but to create intimacy - intimacy often achieved through self-reflexive statements on the why and how of their practice” (Freedman 1993: 364). Here, Freedman’s intent is to advocate the ‘personal over the fixed’ as a means of de-masculinising literary tradition, but this sounds suspiciously like a re-framing of traditional gender roles, equating ‘female’ with ‘nurturer’ or ‘facilitator’. Ultimately, artistic collaboration,

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whether direct or indirect, is a social and institutional event; thus, collaboration between artists of both genders tends to be fraught with discord, competition, and ego (2).

But if collaboration can involve discord, competition, and the tricky negotiation of multiple egos, it can also mean expansion, excitement, and shifts in poetic perspective. The work of Mary O'Malley and Eva Bourke, two contemporary Irish women poets living and writing in Galway, bears witness to the positive effects of collaboration. First published in the 1980s by Salmon Poetry, the now-acclaimed and then-fledgling publisher of Irish and international poetry with an emphasis on writing by women, both O'Malley and Bourke are now well-established poets; both are members of *Áosdana*, an extremely selective Irish affiliation of artists engaged in literature, music and visual arts, and are also the recipients of many other accolades: they have held creative residencies in highly-regarded universities; have been editors of established periodicals such as *Poetry Ireland Review*; and have compiled numerous anthologies of poetry in addition to volumes of their own work.

O'Malley, by her own admission, has been influenced and inspired by diverse poets - "I tend to converse on literary matters mainly with poets from abroad and other parts of Ireland [than just Galway]", she says - but Eavan Boland's work holds particular resonance for her (O'Malley 2007: 1). "I agree... with Eavan Boland that poetry enters where myth touches history", she writes in an autobiographical essay on her writing life (Haberstroh 2001: 34). And O'Malley's poem "The Seal Woman" quotes from Boland's poem "The Pomegranate" as its starting-point: "...And the best thing about the legend is/ I can enter it anywhere. And have" (O'Malley 1997: 57). As "The Pomegranate" rewrites the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, "The Seal Woman" re-mythologises the selkie, the legendary female shapeshifter who changes from a seal to a woman in order to survive on land, but can never spend her life there; ultimately, she must return to the ocean. Here, in a sort of Bloomian misprision or clinamen, O'Malley augments the myth of the woman who lives between two worlds by rewriting it once more, helping, as Boland does, to reclaim it within a feminist, and Irish, context.

The poetry of Eva Bourke, who was born in Germany but has lived and worked in Ireland for the past three decades, reveals evidence of two forms of collaboration; some of her work revalidates the biographies of her literary predecessors by using them as subjects for poems, while other poems respond to works of visual art in what I have argued is a specifically female form of *ekphrasis* (3). In "Gertrud Kolmar, 1894-1943" from her second book, *Litany for the Pig* (1989), Bourke mourns the German poet who met her death in Auschwitz, and also recreates her as a fierce, three-dimensional woman who "wrapped herself solitude/ her warmest cloak,/ or wore the dress of green silk/ in which she longed to be mother/ witch or child-snatcher" before her death (Bourke 1989: 56). Similarly, in "From Correspondence Secrete" from her third book, *Spring in Henry Street* (1996), Bourke draws on the letters of Cornelia von Goethe, sister of the famous Johann Wolfgang, to depict a young female writer of profound but neglected genius, as anxious about her body as she is about her surfeit of intelligence. These concerns are, sadly, still relevant, especially in an Irish literary culture that, scarcely a decade ago, almost completely excluded women writers from the comprehensive *Field Day Anthology* (4).

Bourke's ekphrastic poetry collaborates with visual art by responding to it in a non-traditional way; by focusing on the minute and marginal in a work of art, or on the city that imbues it with context, it offers ways of seeing that are less focused on the masculinist text-versus-image polarity on which much ekphrastic criticism is based. In "Letter to Sujata", the poem's narrator

experiences the city of Bremen itself as a work of art via its idiosyncratic ‘topsy-turvy’ streets and architectural ‘pranks’ before arriving at an exhibition by painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, in which the artworks praise the mundane details of “kitchen-gardens, foxgloves, crockery” (Bourke 2000: 36-7).

As contemporary Irish women poets such as Mary O’Malley and Eva Bourke write into a poetic tradition of their own making, collaboration and intertextuality will continue to be an essential part of the discourses that shape their work. As they pay tribute to their literary foremothers, write and rewrite myths from a female perspective, and work together with artists in other media, the ‘links between women poets’ that Haberstroh addresses will deepen and widen, leading, hopefully, to a richer, more expansive, more inclusive canon of Irish poetry.

NOTES

1. For feminist critiques and rereading of *The Anxiety of Influence*, see, among many others, Kolodny Annette 1980. “A Map for Re-Reading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts”, *New Literary History*, 11:3, Spring: 451-467; Paul Georgina 2007, “Ismene at the Crossroads: Gender and Poetic Influence by Georgina Paul”, *German Life and Letters*, 60:3, July: 430-446.
2. For more on differences among women poets, see Erkkila Betsy 1992. *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History and Discord*, New York: Oxford University Press.
3. My essay on women’s ways of seeing and Bourke’s poetry will be published in Ehnen Jill (ed.) 2009. *Art Objects and Women’s Words: Women’s Ekphrastic Writing 1750 To The Present*, Columbus, Ohio, (USA): Ohio State University Press.
4. Published in 1991 and edited by Seamus Deane, Andrew Carpenter and Jonathan Williams, the *Field Day Anthology* appeared as a massive three-volume collection of Irish writing spanning nearly an entire millennium. It was widely criticised for its all-but-complete exclusion of women writers, and in 2002, a two-volume “addition” to the anthology was published, edited by Angela Bourke. Although the editors' selections for Volumes IV and V of the *Field Day Anthology* were not received without added criticism and controversy, they do aim to rectify the omissions made by the first three volumes.

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