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## Contemporary Irish Women Poets

Lucy Collins

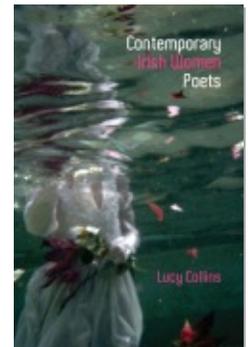
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# Introduction

## Memory, Estrangement and the Poetic Text

For Irish women poets, past and present exist in thematic and aesthetic alignment, making their treatment of memory of enduring importance to readers. Since the process of remembrance reveals as much about present needs as it does about past events, its conceptualization in the work of women poets reflects contemporary critical debate, as well as issues around the formation of Irish poetic traditions. In this way, to remember is to engage with a process of cultural evolution, perhaps even more than with calculated political change: 'Images of the past change or remain the same [...] to the degree that they fit into a changing or stable culture, a process that calls our attention away from cynical manipulations to an analysis of culture *sui generis*'.<sup>1</sup> This study of contemporary women poets explores the function of memory in their work, examining the impact that both individual and cultural memory has on their creative processes. Their handling of poetic temporalities is of fundamental importance in exploring, whether obliquely or directly, their place in the tradition. All these women acknowledge poetic precursors and their work engages with earlier poems – their own and the work of others – in ways that constitute acts of textual memory. In this sense the book also considers the broader temporal framework within which the poetry must be read, in both political and aesthetic terms. Literary memory prompts exploration of the relationship between poet and reader, as well as of the larger critical contexts that support and impede the production of creative work. This study is concerned with issues of tradition and innovation as well as with the negotiation of public and private roles for these poets.

From these binary states emerge questions of belonging and estrangement which continue to shape women's perceptions of their relationship to Ireland's culture and its languages. The generation of Irish women who began to publish in the 1960s were the first to attract a wide readership both in Ireland and abroad yet their work remains alert to marginal states, to the silences at the edge of tradition. In their poetry the relationship between self and other is frequently interrogated, highlighting not only the place of the poetic subject but the process by which subjectivity itself is expressed in language. Julia Kristeva sees art, religion and psychoanalysis as the three main ways in which we try to understand our encounter with the other, but poetry is another important form through which ideas of the strange can be explored.<sup>2</sup> By challenging unitary perspectives, many of these poets confront their readers with an experience of estrangement that simultaneously probes cultural exclusion and emphasizes the incongruity of language itself. In this way, the dynamics of private and public remains at the heart of the poetry explored here.

The development of memory studies in the Irish context has drawn attention to the relationship between individual and shared versions of the past, and this difference has significance for the ways in which literary tradition is perceived, especially by groups who have not had an established role to play in these debates. Increasingly we come to view our engagement with the past through the lens of memory. For Barbara Misztal, since the end of the cold war there has been:

a newly important politics of identity, which proclaims memory as the basis of the collective identity of a community and sees memory as a resource for the construction and defence of cultural identities. Memory is used strategically: not merely to explain the group past but also to transform it into a reliable identity source for the group present.<sup>3</sup>

From an academic perspective, Memory Studies has brought the disciplines of history, politics, literature, art history and sociology into close proximity, as well as interrogating the relationship between scholarly approaches in the sciences and humanities. More recently, scholars of Irish history and culture have found this field to offer useful ways of engaging with the continued importance of the past in contemporary Irish cultural and political life. The Irish Memory Studies Network, founded by Emilie Pine, has fostered debate in the field among Irish and international scholars and arts practitioners. *Memory Ireland*, a four-volume collection of essays edited by Oona Frawley, also

demonstrates the broad spectrum of scholarly interest in this area, as well as highlighting the significance of key historical moments in the formation of modern Irish memory.<sup>4</sup>

This study of contemporary Irish women poets does not posit the direct intervention of poets in these debates. Instead, it explores their continuous engagement with the processes of remembering, both individually and collectively, in their work. Their attention to the moral, political and aesthetic dimensions of past, present and future overtly and implicitly critiques received versions of history as well as problematizing simplified acts of remembrance. As Charles Maier has recently argued, the current interest in memory studies is not evidence of historical confidence but rather of a retreat from transformative politics, a concern to mediate the present through reflection on the past.<sup>5</sup> For contemporary women poets this means that the role of memory acquires political significance, given the uneasy relationship between women's place in Irish history and their current position in literary culture. The period from 1980 has seen a significant rise in the publication and reading of poetry by women and a corresponding evolution of styles and themes in their work. Although the most important sources for the study of cultural memory have historically been letters and diaries, literary texts offer specific insights into the how cultural memory is produced and understood.<sup>6</sup> In light of the evolving role for women in Irish culture, their poetic mediation of the past is of considerable significance. It has also deepened our scrutiny of the relationship between the politics of writing and its forms.

The concept of memory has come to indicate a wide range of applications – as Geoffrey Cubitt notes, “Memory” may be mental or physical, natural or artificial, conscious or unconscious, individual or social: it may be embodied in animal instinct, or in cultural programming, or in electronic systems.<sup>7</sup> Mieke Bal has gone on to define memory as a ‘travelling concept’, one that moves between disciplines and periods as well as between geographical locations; definitions of memory are further extended by these different applications.<sup>8</sup> This breadth of inference can create critical problems: in this book the application of memory acknowledges its relevance for the individual as well as the group and considers its function in contexts beyond the island of Ireland. Yet the treatment of memory here remains firmly grounded in its relevance to literary production, as well as its specific potential to extend our engagement with and understanding of poetic texts. The first part of this study explores some of the key ways in which poetry's relationship to the past has been mediated by women poets. Eavan

Boland is a key figure in this respect and the opening chapter is devoted to an exploration of the dynamics of personal and cultural memory in her work. Her interrogation of the place of the woman poet in the Irish literary tradition has set the terms for these debates in recent decades and has proved foundational to the study of gender and Irish poetry. These issues of identity and tradition are also relevant to the study of migrant poets, whose mobility challenges our sense of a unified literary tradition. Women poets born in Ireland but living abroad, together with those who have moved to the country from elsewhere, have extended our sense of the poetic past in important ways. Their work, explored in Chapter 2 of this book, raises key questions concerning the unifying function of memory. Next the role of private memory in constructing subjectivity, and in changing the relationship between self and other, is explored. For many poets the traumatic past is shown to link personal and collective experience in key ways, so the debates in this chapter have an important resonance for the study as a whole. In the second part of the book, four individual poets are explored in detail. Here there is a growing emphasis on the relationship between memory and aesthetic judgment in the works of these poets, and the extent to which the textual past shapes their current practice is of central importance. This trajectory demonstrates the necessity for examining individual responses to memory and estrangement, as well as considering the shared dynamics that these writers exhibit. The study as a whole confirms the importance of sustained close reading in exploring the unique and considered engagement of each poet with private and public pasts.

### Remembering Place

In any study defined by concepts of a national tradition, attention is immediately drawn to the role of place and belonging in how identities are formed. The experience of space may be our first entry into temporality and, some have argued, our predominant means of remembering the world.<sup>9</sup> Both Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora have signalled the importance of spatiality in the shaping of collective memory, and, for the individual too, place may prove inspiring or inhibiting to creative expression. Engagement with both public and private spaces is an important characteristic of work by contemporary Irish women poets. Some are explicitly identified with particular locations: Paula Meehan with Dublin; Mary O'Malley with Galway; Sinéad Morrissey with Belfast. Some draw creative sustenance from other cultures as does

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Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin from Italy. These complex interrelationships indicate the importance both of imaginative freedom and of creative and critical space for the production of original work. The space of the Irish tradition has not always been hospitable to women and this feeling of estrangement has been recorded by many of those who feature in this book.<sup>10</sup> Under these conditions, women found it difficult to be easily assimilated into groups or movements within the larger poetic tradition, leading them to emphasize their individuality, rather than their feeling of belonging. Even poets who identify with specific group identities can never be seen as simply representative but rather as individuals working within the compass of their own experience to explore more public roles.

Eavan Boland is the first poet of the older generation to draw repeated attention to the important relationship between place and writing. She uses memories of growing up in London and later New York as the experiential foundation for an enquiry into the concept of belonging, both personally and culturally, to a particular place. Boland's interrogation of the role of the woman poet in the Irish tradition is directly related to her engagement with the processes of memory and to her deepening awareness of the exclusions practised within Irish literary culture. Boland understands her experiences outside Ireland to be formative of her later stance on this issue; in other instances, too, the diaspora has clearly influenced the kinds of literature, in both form and theme, which have been – and continue to be – produced by Irish writers. For diasporic women writers the dynamics of exclusion are formative. The crossing of boundaries that bilingual poets and immigrant poets must enact fundamentally questions the relationship between self and other. Poets are confronted with the notion of the stranger within – with the extent to which their own creative self encompasses opposing perspectives.

Identity debates are also shaped, at least in part, by those who live – or have lived – outside Ireland. Justin Quinn has noted the importance of childhood to these writers and problematizes the role of memory in retaining a connection to that earlier self.<sup>11</sup> Women poets featured in this study respond to this issue through the evolution of their craft: Dublin-born Mairéad Byrne has lived in the USA for most of her adult life; for her the geographical move offered opportunities to extend her poetic practice beyond the lyrical into performance and electronic modes. Other poets have spent shorter periods abroad but their work has been shaped in important ways by the experience: Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey and Catherine Walsh are just three poets whose work explores personal memories of other countries as well as the larger

implications of this boundary-crossing for their creative process. All reflect on the heightened relationship between self and other that such experiences generate – Groarke and Morrissey by deploying different forms of poetic sequence to record the experience; Walsh by extending the inclusive shape of her experimental texts to facilitate a movement between geographical locations. All these poets reflect deeply on the relationship between individual and shared pasts and on the ways in which different cultures and new experiences may suggest familiarity as well as estrangement.

For other women the space of the past is shaped by the language question. Poets who have travelled to Britain or to America experience no linguistic barrier. However, for those spending time in non-English-speaking countries (such as Sinéad Morrissey in Japan), the journey is not only geographical but also linguistic. Likewise, poets born outside Ireland but making their home there must choose their creative language. Eva Bourke, for example, publishes originally in English though she carries with her the rich heritage of her upbringing in Germany. Though they are not the specific focus of examination here, Irish-language poets such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Celia de Fréine must also consider the past in relation to its linguistic expression. For these and other writers in Irish the importance of that language tradition in shaping the relationship between past and present draws attention to the role of folklore and myth in the Irish tradition. Cultural memory, then, is deeply implicated in the language in which the remembering is done.

### Memory and History

The relationship between memory and history is a significant one and is often conceived in oppositional terms: a historiographical process entails a systematic examination of evidence in the pursuit of understanding, while memory remains subjective and loosely formed. The contrast can also be imagined in temporal terms – as material passes from living memory it becomes subject to archival process and historical study. Yet this transition is not an unproblematic one. Pierre Nora has argued that the archive is associated not with remembering but with forgetting: once the material has been deposited it can be eliminated from personal memory.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, once the sites of memory become history, rather than part of living commemorative experience, they cease to be fully meaningful. For marginalized groups, such as women, this process

is a significant one since it affirms the important role of intervention in the processes of cultural formation.<sup>13</sup> It also marks a specific disjunction between the material of everyday life and that of narrative history – a division more profound in the experience of women than of men.

The complex relationship between remembering and forgetting reminds us of the contingent nature of memory practices. The importance of forgetting can also be demonstrated in the larger cultural arena, especially where the handling of traumatic political pasts is involved:

Every act of remembrance, whether individual or collective, necessarily involves selective, partial, or otherwise biased forms of forgetting [...] The problem which is posed does not take the form of a clear choice for either remembering or forgetting. Instead, we are faced with concrete choices about when, how and which events of the traumatic or guilty past will eventually be recalled and faced by individuals, community and state.<sup>14</sup>

In the Irish context there are a number of historical events that have been subject to this difficult dynamic of memory and forgetting. The Northern Irish Troubles is among the most recent, and prominent, of these. Much research has been done in this area – since it is within living memory there is ample opportunity for oral testimony as well as detailed documentation of events. This memory-work has been influenced by other models, such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and takes account of the important role of individual as well as of collective memory. The important ways in which these two are intertwined is reflected in the work of poets who had direct experience of the Troubles, such as Medbh McGuckian, Sinéad Morrissey and Colette Bryce. Yet their poetry also demonstrates that the violence in the province did not affect everyone in the same way, or for the same duration. Each of these three women responds to the events in strikingly different ways, from McGuckian's explicit commemoration of earlier revolutionaries to Bryce's memories of childhood encounters with members of the British Army. Even when expressing states of collective consciousness, the poets acknowledge the importance of private perspectives on events of enduring historical importance.

The versions of the past that emerge from such situations of violence and trauma may be closely linked to the formation of the nation state and to its cultures of memory. Eberhard Bort has commented thus on the multi-layered purpose of the practices of remembrance: 'Commemorations may serve competing goals – to pay tribute to the dead, to console the bereaved, and to incorporate mourners' individual

memories into a larger political discourse'.<sup>15</sup> The last of these aims has been the most contentious, especially in its tendency to reduce the significance of individual experiences that may not serve this larger narrative. Women poets are especially attuned to the effects of exclusion from commemoration and, conversely, to the powerful impact that recognition – however belated – may have.<sup>16</sup> Seamus Deane was a prescient critic of the commodification of Irish history<sup>17</sup> while more recent work by Guy Beiner has explored the problematic intersection between contemporary political discourse and the public commemoration of Ireland's past.<sup>18</sup> From the end of the nineteenth century the rise in nationalism demanded an increased emphasis on the concept of a shared history, including the deliberate elision of elements that would prove disruptive to idealized unity. The practice of popular commemoration was designed to enhance this development.<sup>19</sup> As Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have argued, the legitimization of existing class structures in the face of a rising proletariat necessitated the invention of traditions that would emphasize a shared history.<sup>20</sup> While Ian McBride has problematized any simplistic reading of this tendency, it helps to situate Irish state formation in a larger political context, and to see the place of women in this dynamic as historically determined, at least in part.<sup>21</sup> It also sheds light on how the discipline of history intersects with the process of cultural formation, confirming Ernest Renan's contention that historical study poses a threat to nationality by revealing differences between shared memories and actual events.<sup>22</sup>

For women this process of elision has had serious consequences. As well as confronting the same difficulties as other citizens of the newly independent nation state, women faced a form of cultural marginalization that quickly became an integral part of Irish identity-in-process: 'Womanhood and Irishness are metaphors for one another', Eavan Boland would later declare, 'there are resonances of humiliation, oppression and silence in both of them'.<sup>23</sup> Yet the relationship between political challenge and a politically engaged poetics is not a straightforward one. As Guinn Batten has pointed out, an emphasis on representation of the revolutionary spirit may prevent the actuality of revolution.<sup>24</sup> For this reason there is little direct correlation between a feminist aesthetic and specific activism.

Boland's insistent return to the concept, as well as to the material, of history, signals its importance for the construction of female subjectivity among Ireland's writers. Boland detects a moral difference between the male-determined histories and the kind of history that women will

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write. Women, as they move from being objects within poems to being authors of poems themselves, raise questions of poetic motive and ethical direction.<sup>25</sup> Gerardine Meaney takes this issue further:

Anxiety about one's fitness for a (masculine) role of authority, deriving from a history of defeat or helplessness, is assuaged by the assumption of sexual dominance.

Women in these conditions become guarantors of their men's status, bearers of national honour and the scapegoats of national identity. They are not merely transformed into symbols of the nation. They become the territory over which power is exercised.<sup>26</sup>

As this comment reveals, the woman writer must renegotiate her position within the national imaginary with care. Perhaps for this reason Boland's poetry is more responsive than her prose to the ambiguities of this dialogue. As her poem 'Outside History' suggests, the process of connecting with something beyond the self is crucial, even though this connection may deepen the subject's awareness of the significance of individual perspectives. This testing of association has important implications for the exploration of shared memory and for the creation of imaginative worlds that will be open to a wide range of readers. The biases of history are inevitable results of the subjectivity of all narrative acts, yet the imbalances are clearly not confined to gender issues: racial identity and class affiliation also influence representation crucially. Many women poets address these issues directly in their work both in their rewriting of historical material and in their recognition that their encounter with the past is often through texts which, by their very nature, must cause women to question their relationship to tradition. This is especially true for Irish-language poets and for migrant writers.

It is important to recognize that memory is historically embedded and is shaped by the expectations of its own time and place. In this way, memory can tell us as much about the conditions for those remembering as it can about the past. Women poets writing in Ireland since 1980 have witnessed the most far-reaching changes in the lives of women in this century. The significance of Ireland's modernization – its movement away from the conservative Catholic past towards a liberal European future – is an important part of this transition. The generations of women considered in this book, from those who paved the way, such as Eavan Boland and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, to younger poets including Colette Bryce and Leanne O'Sullivan, reveal the remarkable transition in the role and the expectation for women both in Ireland and abroad.

### Cultural Memory and the Irish Woman Poet

'Memory is more than the act of recollection by recollecting persons', writes Edward Shils, 'memory leaves an objective deposit in tradition'.<sup>27</sup> It is this continuing role for memory within the dialectic of past and present that is most significant in the study of contemporary poetry in Ireland. Halbwachs's views on the transformation of social memory within a group confirms that this memory is always in danger of erosion, whether by the loss of members or by conflict amongst them. He argues that past events and people are not forgotten due to indifference but because the group remembering them fade away.<sup>28</sup> This notion of shared or collective memory, while foundational to modern memory studies, is also controversial. Critics have argued that Halbwach's concept of collective memory limits the role for the remembering self – a significant limitation when reading poems that, for the most part, present complex individual responses. Wulf Kansteiner is among those who have suggested other ways of understanding the relationship between the individual and the group here: he distinguishes between 'collective memory' and 'collected memories' – the former are shared communications, the latter 'an aggregate of individual memories which behaves and develops just like its individual composites'.<sup>29</sup> This dynamic permits us to address productively the complex relationship between the individual poet and the term 'Irish women poets'. This study does not attempt to create a unified sense of this term, nor does it argue that all the women whose work is explored here prioritize gender as a shaping force on their work. What it does suggest, though, is that all these poets write with some awareness of the Irish tradition – and of the woman poet's place within it – and in this way are implicitly in dialogue with writers and readers on these terms. Some of the figures explored here are conscious of the implications of writing out of a shared context for women's experience: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin explores the relationship between individual and community especially in a religious context; Catherine Walsh's innovative poetics challenge our perception of the boundaries between self and other. Even poets from the younger generation are concerned with the networks of belonging that shed new light on contemporary individualism.

Eavan Boland is perhaps the most outspoken of contemporary poets in dealing with the role of the woman poet in Irish society. She drives the inquiry away from broad social issues towards more exclusively artistic ones but in doing so highlights the role of creative individuals in giving

expression to political, as well as to personal, positions. *A Kind of Scar* (1989) – her pamphlet on the role of the woman in the Irish poetic tradition – blends poetry, personal anecdote and critical reflection; here she acknowledges the vexed role of memory early: ‘Memory is treacherous. It confers meanings which are not apparent at the time.’<sup>30</sup> The past, then, *is* another country, yet one that cannot easily be removed from contemporary maps. Boland’s continuing engagement with the representation of women from the past emphasizes the connected nature of women’s lives across time. Boland is acutely aware that – as Jacques Derrida has argued – gender, race and class determine those who are allowed to write and those whose work is preserved in archives.<sup>31</sup> Our access to memory is profoundly shaped by social factors and Boland wishes to draw specific parallels between the exclusion of women in the past and conditions faced by women today. Her poem ‘The Famine Road’ is one example of shifting historical perspectives that operate in subtle and original ways. In combining a narrative concerning the building of famine roads with the story of a woman learning that she is unable to bear children, the poem itself represents the intersection of historical and personal, public and private worlds. This imagery links directly to the evocation of famine through the figure of the starving woman and child: in folklore, as Patricia Lysaght has commented, ‘this is often tempered by the parallel image of the generous woman who comes to their assistance’.<sup>32</sup> Here Boland creates a poem that simultaneously speaks to the contemporary reader and examines a familiar folk image, marking the combined intellectual and emotional power of her work.<sup>33</sup>

The role of folklore in extending the range of cultural memory is a significant one, not only for Irish language writers – who have, historically, the closest connections to the folk tradition – but for all modern poets who enquire into the representation of the past.<sup>34</sup> A number of women poets explore the past by means of folklore. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill is renowned for her engagement with a folk past that is full of vigour and energy – breaking with tradition to create strong and outspoken female characters. Mary O’Malley also draws on the folk materials of the western seaboard to explore the dynamics of land and sea and of belonging and estrangement in such poems as ‘The Maighdean Mhara’ and ‘Song of the Wise Woman’ (*BH* 70, 92). In a similar way, much of Boland’s poetry presents, though it does not constitute, an improvisatory practice that ventures into areas of the past from which no definitive readings can be produced. Boland returns to this theme again and again, most memorably perhaps in ‘Lava Cameo’ from her 1994 collection *In a*

*Time of Violence*, where the story ‘is not a story, / more a rumour or a folk memory, / something thrown out once in a random conversation’ (TV 35). The distinction she draws here between story and folk memory is significant in that she claims both less certainty and more significance for her poems of family pasts. Many scholars have drawn attention to the specific role of folklore in the reclamation of the past. Cormac Ó Gráda has questioned its value in exploring ‘what really happened’, suggesting instead that it reveals much about people’s attitude and feelings.<sup>35</sup> Guy Beiner has also drawn attention to the problems inherent in wholesale dismissal of folk material by historians:

Though useful in putting insular misconceptions into perspective, such realist iconoclasm, which is founded on a sweeping dismissal of popular beliefs as ‘harmful mythology,’ proves to be of limited value for studies of *mentalité* that seek to decode conflicts sustained by intransigent mindsets.<sup>36</sup>

The need to consider not only what can be known about the past but also how its practices can be decoded is an important part of the contribution of poetry to memory debates.

### The Body and Traumatic Memory

The importance of experience in the formation of memory is especially prominent in the context of contemporary poetry, and the extent to which this experience might involve the recollection of traumatic events is significant. This form of memory has a very different relationship to thought than do other modes; in this case, as David Farrell Krell has argued, memory is both the source of the malady and the therapy it requires.<sup>37</sup> This doubleness is also expressed in the recurrent nature of the experience itself, as Cathy Caruth writes:

trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way in which it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.<sup>38</sup>

The necessity of continuous engagement has important cultural ramifications too. Dominick LaCapra emphasizes this dimension of historical trauma, in which ‘the hauntingly possessive ghosts’ of traumatic events affect not just individuals but society at large.<sup>39</sup> While acknowledging the importance of truth claims to this process, LaCapra argues that these must be ‘cogently related to other dimensions of historiography, including empathic, responsive understanding and performative, dialogical uses of

language'.<sup>40</sup> The latter observation leads him later to indicate the value of literary texts in providing insight into the emotional response to trauma.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, poetry plays an important role in the exploring of traumatic conditions, since it facilitates the representation of complex and changing emotional states, as well as interpretative positions.

For some women the personal past is a difficult space; while not experiencing specific trauma these women might register their childhood or earlier adulthood as troubled or deprived. This experience may have a larger cultural or existential resonance – writers such as Paula Meehan and Mary O'Malley are aware of the power of this darkness to both inspire and overwhelm creative achievement. The importance of the body in the mediation of traumatic states is one of the reasons why it has been an area of representational difficulty for women writers who struggle at once to present and to re-think the symbolic reading of the female body in Irish myth and history. Suffering is expressed in these poems in both occluded and explicit ways: sometimes the expression of taboo subjects at once confirms and breaks the silence of oppression. Eithne Strong, an important precursor for women in this volume, speaks of the prohibitive attitudes towards bodily pleasure that overshadowed her upbringing in the Ireland of the 1930s. This control was felt by some poets of the first generation explored in this study. Mary Dorsey, one of Ireland's most prominent lesbian writers, has written about the trauma of repressed sexuality on her work; though her use of language and form is often comparatively conventional, many of her poems use repeated lines and syntax to emphasize the relentless nature of the conditions she describes. Since political and moral restraints on the body have been a significant feature of Irish social development, writing about the body is an important way for Irish women poets to initiate new forms of self-representation. The body expresses not only lived experience but an influential range of symbolic readings and is a way of investigating the links between actual experience and metaphorical understanding. For many women poets the body provides a useful axis in considering both biological and cultural identities, as well as in articulating important tensions between past and present.

As the bearer of experience, the body itself – through the revealing of wounds or scars – may be the means by which the trauma is expressed. In the words of Maud Ellmann: 'Pain without marks is like speech without writing, doomed to pass into oblivion.'<sup>42</sup> The representation of the disfigured self alerts us to the process of change at the same time as it refuses to allow such change to obscure the moment of suffering.

Violence against the body also disrupts the normal dynamics of private and public, revealing what is normally hidden from view.<sup>43</sup> The representation of pain is itself a process burdened by problems; it is difficult to express pain adequately in language and almost impossible for another to understand fully the impact of that experience. In many ways, pain reflects the disintegration of language and exposes its inherent limitations. The rendering of pain in poetic form, therefore, not only pushes poetry to the limits of its aesthetic capabilities, it also bridges that important gap between private and public realms, between past and present, between the body and the imagination, between nature and culture.

Physical illness also has accompanying psychic and bodily wounds and presents a particularly interesting case, since it represents the body in rebellion, the part threatening the life of the whole. While the relationship between actual and metaphorical readings is suggestive,<sup>44</sup> the representations of illness to be found among contemporary women are usually bound closely to personal experience. What Kerry Hardie calls the 'ancient practice' of sickness has exerted a shaping force on her body of work as a whole, which often catalogues the slow process of overcoming debilitating illness. The exact knowledge, brought about by the slowness of time and of death, allows the pain and diminution to remain in the private realm yet imbues it with a significance that exceeds a purely personal connection.

The importance of experience is central to many of the debates on the definition of the woman poet. Ironically, critical views here at once particularize experience and highlight its shared nature. The drawing together of the act of writing and that of experience is a notable one, permitting experience to become not just the inspiration for the poem but the poem itself. As Boland had commented, 'for somebody like me, who thinks of herself as a lyric poet, writing is not an expression, it is an experience'.<sup>45</sup> It is a position that restricts the development of form in key ways; however:

the feminist poetry that has been institutionalized within women's studies programs and teaching anthologies can be restrictively organized around a normative concept of 'experience' that renders all but the most tentative formal innovation by women inadmissible and anathematizes theoretical reflection on poetic practice.<sup>46</sup>

These limitations highlight the tendency to attribute to women experiential rather than textual memories and therefore to confine them to a relationship with the past which is stripped of its cultural significance.

### Memory and Poetic Practice

In spite of the pre-eminence of experience in the critical framework applied to women's poetry, the extent to which these poets remember through the agency of poetic texts is considerable. Writing itself is an act of memory as well as one of interpretation:

All texts participate, repeat, and constitute acts of memory; all are products of their distancing and surpassing of precursor texts. In addition to manifest traces of other texts and obvious forms of transformation, all contain cryptic elements. All texts are stamped by the doubling of manifest and latent, whether consciously or unconsciously.<sup>47</sup>

Many of the women whose work is explored here are in dialogue with earlier texts, whether with major Irish figures such as W. B. Yeats, Louis MacNeice or Thomas Kinsella or international artists – John Berryman, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath. Yet in spite of the stimulus provided by these texts, some Irish women poets specifically register a lack of literary foremothers. Their sense of working creatively without the sustenance which earlier female achievement would bring can emphasize their estrangement from literary tradition. Anne Ulry Colman argues that these precursors can easily be found, especially among women writing during the nineteenth century: 'Contemporary women poets may be writing out of silence, but it is the silence of ignorance, brought about through the time's neglect of their maternal literary heritage.'<sup>48</sup> Thus Boland's contention that women writing today have little sense of their own precursors is at once a limited view on the question of influence and an accurate presentation on the perception of writers working in the field. This dynamic is not only confined to women, though; it has contributed to a division between generations in terms of the operation of memory, as Paul Connerton has observed:

Across generations, different sets of memories, frequently in the shape of implicit background narratives, will encounter each other; so that, although physically present to one another in a particular setting, the different generations may remain mentally and emotionally insulated, the memories of one generation locked irretrievably, as it were, in the brains and bodies of that generation.<sup>49</sup>

This necessary work of reclamation constitutes an important part of any study of women in literature, not only in shaping critical perceptions but also in altering the individual poet's sense of their relationship to others, past and present.

The state of women's history in Ireland has been undergoing progressive change. This, in turn, demands a re-evaluation of women's relationship both to their personal past and to the narratives of the past that persist in their psyche, as well as to their creative work. As Renate Lachmann points out, 'Literature becomes the bearer of actual, and the transmitter of historical, knowledge and it construes intertextual bonds between literary and non-literary texts.'<sup>50</sup> Thus any re-evaluation needs to take account of the intertextual nature of the relationship between past and present, and of the ways in which women have interpreted the literary models open to them. It is often in more experimental works that the relationship between private and public realms is most obviously problematized. Clair Wills argues that experimental poetry by women often reveals:

not the absence of a sphere of privacy but the ways in which that private or intimate realm of experience is constructed 'through' the public, and therefore elements of 'expressivity', though radically divorced from notions of authenticity, are present.<sup>51</sup>

This uncoupling of 'expressivity' from authenticity is an important one for women and a decisive step in freeing them to participate in more innovative creative practices. In this study the integration of lyrical and avant-garde poets, as well as the inclusion of poets from different generations, seeks to overcome the unproductive categorization of women poets. This strategy also emphasizes the aesthetic choices made by these women as formative of their response to the past and their perception of its larger political ramifications.

The craft of poetry is foremost in the elucidation of memory in the work of contemporary Irish women poets. Marked by a wide variety of techniques and influences, these texts negotiate the relationship between past and present in unique ways, revealing the vital importance of the moment of writing and the changing dynamics that shape all creative processes.

### Notes

- 1 Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 8.
- 2 Julia Kristeva's work on estrangement underpins this investigation. Richard Kearney's *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2002) situates the philosophical dimensions of estrangement in ways that illuminate the work of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Immanuel Kant and Kristeva herself. All these thinkers form an important basis for the discussions here.

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- 3 Barbara A. Misztal, 'Memory and History', in Oona Frawley (ed.), *Memory Ireland*, vol. 1, *History and Modernity* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), p. 3.
- 4 *Memory Ireland* covers a wide range of material, from conceptual considerations of postcolonial memory to explorations of the impact of the Great Famine, the War of Independence, the Troubles and institutional child abuse on national identity. Key essays by Guy Beiner, Oona Frawley, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Emilie Pine, David Lloyd and Barbara Misztal are referenced here.
- 5 Charles Maier, 'A Surfeit of Memory: Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial', *History and Memory* 5.2 (1993), pp. 136–52.
- 6 Ann Rigney stresses the vital role that literature plays in the production of cultural memory. See Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory', *Journal of European Studies* 35.1/2 (2005), pp. 209–26.
- 7 Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), loc. 198 [Kindle edition].
- 8 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2002), p. 24.
- 9 See Elizabeth Grubgeld 'Topography, Memory, and John Montague's "The Rough Field"', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 14.2 (January 1989), p. 26.
- 10 The publication of the three-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991) revealed how marginal women writers remained within the Irish tradition, even to recuperative projects such as this one. The limited number of texts by women in these volumes caused a protracted critical debate which resulted in the production of a further two volumes devoted to Irish women's writing and traditions.
- 11 Justin Quinn, 'Introduction', *Metre* 3 (Autumn 1997) – 'Irish Poetry and the Diaspora'.
- 12 Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (London: Routledge, 2009), loc. 2431 [Kindle edition].
- 13 Eavan Boland's choice of a cyclical structure for her book, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1996) builds on this necessity for repetition and continuous engagement.
- 14 Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt, 'Memory and Political Change: Introduction' in Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt (eds), *Memory and Political Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 5.
- 15 Eberhard Bort (ed.), *Commemorating Ireland: History, Politics, Culture* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004), p. 2.
- 16 In February 2013, the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, made a public apology to the women who had suffered abuse in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. Mr Kenny had been criticized by survivors for his initial failure to make an adequate response to the McAleese Report, which investigated state involvement with the laundries. This apology, together with the announcement of a compensation scheme, was welcomed by those who had fought for acknowledgment of the state's responsibility in these events. The official nature of the apology significantly increased its impact.
- 17 Seamus Deane, 'Wherever Green is Read', in Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha and Theo Dorgan (eds), *Revising the Rising* (Derry: Field Day, 1991).
- 18 See Guy Beiner, 'Commemorative Heritage and the Dialectics of Memory', in Mark McCarthy (ed.), *Ireland's Heritages: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity* (London: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 55–69; 'Between Trauma and Triumphalism: The Easter Rising, the Somme, and the Crux of Deep Memory in Modern Ireland',

- Journal of British Studies* 46.2 (April 2007), pp. 366–89; also ‘Modes of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting the Irish Rebellion of 1798’, in Oona Frawley (ed.), *Memory Ireland*, vol. 1, pp. 66–82.
- 19 Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 63–5. Some writers of the early years of the twentieth century, including George Bernard Shaw, were particularly critical of the urge to memorialize, judging it to be at the expense of principled attention to present and future.
- 20 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14.
- 21 Ian McBride, ‘Memory and National Identity in Modern Ireland’, in Ian McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 8.
- 22 See *ibid.*, p. 1.
- 23 Eavan Boland, in Gilleán Somerville-Arjat and Rebecca E. Wilson (eds), *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1990), p. 84.
- 24 Guinn Batten, ‘Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and the Body of the Nation’, in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 170.
- 25 Eavan Boland, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989), p. 6.
- 26 Gerardine Meaney (*Un*)like Subjects: *Women, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 233.
- 27 Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), p. 167.
- 28 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), p. 82.
- 29 Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies’, *History and Theory* 41.2 (December 2002), p. 186. Different modes of conceptualizing shared memory are outlined in Whitehead, *Memory*, loc. 2103–600 [Kindle edition].
- 30 Boland, *A Kind of Scar*, p. 74.
- 31 See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 32 Patricia Lysaght, ‘Perspectives on Women during the Great Irish Famine’, *Bealoideas* 64/5 (1996–7), p. 76.
- 33 For further exploration of the role of famine memory, see David Lloyd, ‘The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger’ and Margaret Kelleher, ‘Commemorating the Great Irish Famine: 1840s–1990s’, both in Oona Frawley (eds), *Memory Ireland*, vol. 3, *The Famine and the Troubles* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), pp. 17–58; 91–120.
- 34 Niall Ó Ciosáin’s essay on famine memory explains the ambiguities that are central to the Folklore Commission itself: ‘on the one hand, the Folklore Commission and its archive were established precisely as a repository of national memory, manifest in the oral tradition, and can itself be considered a form of institutionalized public memory. On the other hand, the work of the Commission in practice conceived of memory as personal recollection’. Niall Ó Ciosáin, ‘Famine Memory and the Popular Representation of Scarcity’, in Ian McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 95–117.

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- 35 Cited in Ó Ciosáin, 'Famine Memory', p. 99.
- 36 Beiner, 'Between Trauma', p. 369.
- 37 David Farrell Krell, *Of Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing: On the Verge* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 106.
- 38 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.
- 39 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), loc. 52 [Kindle edition].
- 40 *Ibid.*, loc. 74 [Kindle edition].
- 41 *Ibid.*, loc. 278 [Kindle edition].
- 42 Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 85.
- 43 For further discussion of the implications of this transition between private and public, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 44 These analogies have been explored by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978) and *AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989).
- 45 Eavan Boland, in Somerville-Arjat and Wilson, *Sleeping with Monsters*, p. 82.
- 46 Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller (eds), *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.
- 47 Renate Lachmann, 'Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature', in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), p. 304.
- 48 Anne Ulry Colman, 'Far from Silent: Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Writers', in Margaret Kelleher and James H. Murphy (eds), *Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Public and Private Spheres* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997), p. 203.
- 49 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), loc. 121 [Kindle edition]
- 50 Lachmann, 'Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects', p. 306.
- 51 Clair Wills, 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice', *Critical Quarterly* 36.3 (September 1994), p. 41.

