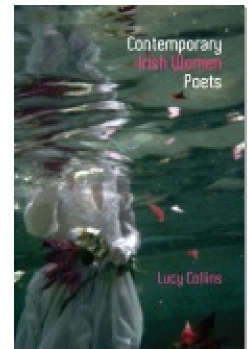
Contemporary Irish Women Poets

Lucy Collins



Published by Liverpool University Press

Collins, Lucy.
Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement.
Liverpool University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/72667.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72667

Access provided at 8 Apr 2020 04:26 GMT with no institutional affiliation

Conclusion

Memories of the Future

The many ways in which contemporary Irish women poets respond to the past is evidence of the significance of this negotiation for generations of writers, and its vital intersection with a range of themes and practices. All the poets featured in this study engage with different dimensions of memory, from explorations of key historical events to the recollection of the turbulent personal past; from shared networks of tradition to textual resonances from their own earlier work. Some of these poets first became established in the 1960s and 1970s, when feminist debates inflected how their work was read and received. The development of their poetry, politically and aesthetically, has not only helped to keep poetry written by women to the forefront of the Irish poetry scene but has also highlighted the significance of reflecting on this process of evolution within creative practice itself.

All acts of reading and criticism take place in time and they too must reflect upon the trajectories of such commentary. In this sense, we remember past reading experiences – poetic and critical – and bring these memories to our analysis of the texts we encounter. Eavan Boland's ongoing interrogation of silenced voices in narrative history has created an awareness of the partial nature of the official past; yet it has also highlighted the strategic character of some memory practices. In the presence of this repeated engagement, other women have traced oblique routes through personal and political histories, using the dynamics of place and belonging as a counterpoint. For poets such as Paula Meehan, Mary O'Malley and Eva Bourke, responses to the past – and the formal mechanisms deployed to explore them – are shaped by the landscapes and streetscapes of experience. The enduring links between temporal and spatial imagination for these poets has not limited their aesthetic

development, instead it has emphasized their creative process as one of constant renewal.

The rich variety of work produced by women during this period emphasizes the interconnected nature of these voices. As some of these poets write out of a specifically Irish present, others move abroad to articulate an Irish experience that may be in the past, yet remains an important dimension of their identity. Mairéad Byrne and Catherine Walsh have demonstrated that unfixed perspectives can be productive of formally innovative poems that extend the boundaries of form and tradition. Though these texts create very different reading experiences, they contribute to a larger network of meaning and representation that encompasses stylistically various texts. This has the important effect of making these texts 'present' to one another, existing in the same critical space and therefore demonstrating an awareness that the poetic practice of others is a vital part of each woman's own writing process.

The generational differences encompassed by this study reflect the overlapping nature of present and past in important ways. The women represented here are born between 1942 and 1983 and represent three generations of creative life. By bringing these poets together, this book draws attention to their evolving styles and preoccupations, yet also shows how key concerns with personal, social and political histories remain strong. Though the younger poets represented here do not identify with feminism, their mediation of the past shows an awareness that such an inheritance spans ideological and personal realms.

Within these patterns of connection, personal relationships remain an important determinant of identity and a means of exploring one's place in the world. A number of poets from the younger generation explore their relationship to time through inter-generational reflection – by reflecting upon their bonds to parents and grandparents, and with their own young children. Sinéad Morrissey's *Parallax* is a volume that brings past and future into alignment in this way. 'The House of Osiris in the Field of Reeds' records the inexorable process of leaving youth behind:

> All through last winter, each day
> made to bear the pressure of impending loss.
> *Soon it will no longer be like this.* The lean girls
> picnicking in the park, their haul of charity-shop
> dresses at their feet
>
> (*PX* 57)

The collection as a whole contemplates how the past can be recorded; its particular histories are read through photography and text. Birth-giving

offers a counterpoint to these explorations, combining memory and futurity in the single unit of the poem.

'A Matter of Life and Death' is particularly significant in this respect. It subtly binds together the process of childbirth with the death of a grandmother, balancing the optimism regarding new life with the loss of the old: '*making room* as she herself predicted' (*PX* 41). This poem of long lines and tercets negotiates the escalating pain of labour through its intensification and release, both mind and body concentrating on the event to come. To pass the time, the speaker watches 'A Matter of Life and Death', a Powell and Pressburger film made in 1946. The film, a fantasy featuring David Niven as a Second World War pilot, plays with the relationship between this world and the next. Our first glimpse of the action interweaves Niven's decision to bale out of a burning plane with a heightening of labour pain from which no escape is possible. At this point in the poem (much as in the film) present and future become confused: references to pethidine and epidurals are followed by a vision of the speaker walking 'the sunny verges / / of our cul-de-sac like a wind-up, fat-man toy' (*PX* 41). Soon the film reveals the monochrome of the afterlife,[1] where the vision of death is one of orderly exchange – a balancing of the books between life and death. This image presages the equilibrium of the poem itself, balanced between the death of the grandmother and the expectation of new life. The film plays a dual role in furthering this theme: it not only suggests the coexistence of worlds but also evokes a period when the speaker's grandmother was young and herself giving birth. This female lineage is an important one, creating a vital link between generations of women that is deeply embedded in the contexts of writing.

The disruption of time is an important way in which the poem unites theme and form, destabilizing our sense of clear progression. Morrissey's focus shifts between present physicality, personal memory and imaginative creation, affirming the mind's tendency to move swiftly across time, to gather and connect disparate elements at first unconsciously and then with more deliberation. At the close of the poem, the grandmother enters the film world – 'young, glamorous, childless, free, in her 1940s' shoes and sticky lipstick' (*PX* 43) – to become twice imagined: first by the speaker's remembrance, then by the cinematic construct. Morrissey's layering of memory and imagination here shows how the poetic text can realize discursive tensions in its own formal techniques.

Morrissey's 'Home Birth' and Leanne O'Sullivan's 'You Were Born

at Mealtime' both explore how the moment of birth changes the space of the family, displacing existing positions to make room for new relationships. Morrissey's use of the sonnet overturns the expected dynamics of arrival: here it is the sick older sibling who goes to hospital, the newborn who emerges at home – 'You came back days later, pale and feverish, / and visited us in the bedroom in your father's arms. / You turned your head to take her in: this black-haired, / tiny yellow person who'd happened while you slept' (*PX* 18). O'Sullivan's poem is more oblique, imagining birth within a space of memory: 'The empty kitchen hummed when I came home / like a swollen river with the swelling gone' (*MR* 14). The delicate balance here of recall and expectation is reflected in the whole volume: *The Mining Road* is preoccupied with the process of recollection, from the 'Old homes and a half remembered word of mouth' in the opening poem (*MR* 13) to the repeated entreaty to the beloved in 'Valentine' – 'remember / / how at night you bring your face to mine' (*MR* 52). The volume resonates with the landscape of West Cork, revealing the ways in which the past is embedded in place and community.

Sara Berkeley's landscapes are distinct from this: her last two collections, *Strawberry Thief* (2005) and *The View from Here* (2010) are largely set on the west coast of America, where Berkeley now lives. The earliest of these poems celebrate birth: the title poem from *Strawberry Thief* speaks to Anne Sexton's poem to her daughter 'Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman' in its use of plant imagery: 'Bean seedling, starting with that soft, divided green, / already you are wild thyme, climbing rose, strawberry thief' (*ST* 15).[2] These poems embrace the present moment in celebrating the newness of the child's life but are also aware of the fleeting nature of this intense experience – 'I touch her tiny shoulder blades as a gentle reminder – / she'll be my flown one' ('The Call', *ST* 13). Within these meditations on happiness and completion, more troubled memories are to be found, reminding the reader of the experiences that have led to this moment, and those that may follow in time. Fittingly, *The View from Here* records the need to look to both the past and the future: 'And though the past / is a dress I'll always wear / I am putting on a new one' ('Carrying', *VH* 15). Many of these poems are preoccupied with loss: 'Meal for Friends' addresses this process unflinchingly. A four-stanza poem, it begins by juxtaposing birth and death: the 'white curtain blowing in the breeze' set against the house with blinds drawn. Yet the poem is a meditation on memory and forgetting:

Everything I needed to remember
has been remembered; everything I yearned to forget
is lost. Who knows what future, who cares what past,
the night sky is no longer far away

(*VH* 54)

Again the poem holds us in the present, but this time not to celebrate the joy of young life but to take stock of the moment that has been reached through years of both suffering and delight. Here the relationship between past and present is vital, even as it is discarded, the poem's stanzas marking the cardinal points by which we must get our bearings – the intimacy of friendships, the broad and ever-changing sweep of our thoughts and feelings.

Leontia Flynn's collection *Drives* also negotiates between the experiences of generations, and in a book of journeys the poems remain grounded in the lives of writers, among them Charles Baudelaire, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath. The act of driving is one that at once invokes the past and seeks to leave it behind, as the poem 'Dungeness' reveals:

Here were the cottage and lighthouse. You wanted to cut ties
so came to this coast
away from '*You know* …' Now I look behind me
and there is our youth among the shingled waste
that recedes before my eyes like the angel of history[3]

(*DR* 57)

The decision to move away from the past prompts reflection on this relationship; the hidden knowledge of the elliptical explanation suggests an apocalyptic landscape, yet one, it seems, that can be escaped.

One of the most resonant poems in this collection reads the landscape as a means to explore the difficult relationship between remembering and forgetting. 'Drive' situates the speaker's mother and father in a landscape that remains meaningful to one, but not to the other. For her father, suffering from Alzheimer's Disease, road signs become words more useful for their musical resonance than for the directions they offer:

They drive along the old road and the new road –
my father, in beside her, reads the signs

as they escape him – for now they are empty signs,
now one name means as little as another;
the roads they drive along are fading roads.

– 'Dromore', 'Banbridge' (my father's going to drive
my mother to distraction). 'In Banbridge town …', he sings.

(*DR* 50)

Retracing their shared life through the form of an imperfect sestina, Flynn suggests the change within sameness; the process of recurrence that may bring new meaning or no meaning at all. The difference in perspective between husband and wife is delicately handled – inverted commas appearing around the place names her father reads. The landscape the mother traverses suggests her adventurous younger self, but behind this 'indefatigable drive' is the clock that ticks – heard first in the sound of the cricket, then reappearing in the clock the mother turns back to recapture her early married life when her grown children were still young. This reminds us that memory will deteriorate, and that shared time, when familial care will still be possible, is short. Flynn's choice of the sestina in which to interweave past and present, connection and detachment, movingly expresses the need for structure to bind us to one another and to the places that are meaningful to us.

In this book of memory and forgetting, Flynn summons key dilemmas for the younger Irish poet: the inescapable facts of geography and history that can be altered at will, or through a twist of fate; painful experience can be shaped by wit. The radical instability of memory, glimpsed in the work of the older generation, is more profoundly expressed by the women growing to adulthood in the 1990s. The personal independence that was the hallmark of this generation profoundly altered their relationship to forms of authority, yet the question of subjectivity remains an enduring preoccupation in their work. In this coming together of private and public, of difficult circumstances and control in their expression, the dynamics of memory and estrangement are aptly expressed. It is this rich and challenging juncture that remains as critically compelling as ever for readers of poetry in Ireland today.

Notes

1 The film was shot in Technicolor, but for the afterlife scenes the colour was not fully developed, giving a pearly monochrome to the scenes. See www.powell-pressburger.org.

2 Sexton's poem, addressed to her elder daughter when aged 11, was first published in *Live or Die* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).

3 'This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past.

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet'. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 249.