

UCD*scholarcast*

Series 9 (Spring 2014)

Dublin: One City, One Book Lectures 2014
(in association with Dublin City Public Libraries)

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'Mine by right of love': Women Poets in the City

If Ever You Go, an anthology of Dublin poems, includes a rich selection of texts drawn from more than three centuries of writing in, and about, the city. Among these texts are many poems by women – some born in Ireland and some travelling there to spend time in its capital city. These poems offer fresh perspectives on urban environments, and in particular on the relationship between the individual and the shared life of the city. Before the 1900s it was comparatively unusual for women to be linked to urban public spaces but, as these poems show, their engagement with Dublin since then has been layered with personal and social reflection. In this talk I'd like to explore some poems by women published in the last one hundred years, and to consider how these representations have evolved as the century has progressed.

I

The earliest poem I've selected was published almost ten years before the foundation of the state – this is the poem 'Home' by Winifred Letts. Though now largely forgotten, Letts was a versatile writer. Born in 1882 and educated first in England and later at Alexandra College in Dublin, she wrote in all the major genres: prose, drama and poetry. The scope of her literary skills can be seen in the poem I've chosen here. It has a powerful narrative yet also displays the shifts in voice and idiom characteristic of drama. As a poet, Letts was best known for her dialect verse and her first volume *Songs from Leinster*, published in 1913, was a popular success. In spite of the rural focus of these early poems she also created striking depictions of Dublin life, and made some pointed social observation in these works. The poem 'Home' considers what it is to belong to a city racked by poverty and disease, and to have no greater expectation than mere survival. In particular, the poem highlights the plight of children, for whom 'home' is not a place of safety but one of suffering and danger. In her anxiety about the fate of these children, Winifred Letts joined the ranks of many middle class women who were acutely concerned for the welfare of the marginalised. This sense of moral obligation often found its way into poetry by women during this time. This poem features an encounter between a middle class character, we presume a woman, and a girl who has been working as a newspaper seller on the streets of Dublin. The two walk to the tenement in which the girl and her family live, so that the visitor can see the conditions for herself. Letts, in choosing to represent the place in detail, wants us as readers to bear witness to the injustice of the situation. It is worth remembering that the poem was written not long after the Dublin lockout when conditions for working class Dubliners were especially severe. The speaker describes the girl in this way:

She went before me on her small bare feet,

Clutching some papers not yet sold,
Down Westland Row and up Great Brunswick Street.
Sometimes she'd turn and peer
Into my face with eyes of fear.
She'd hunch her rags in hope to find some heat,
And stare at shops where they sold things to eat.
Then suddenly she turned,
And where a street lamp burned
Led me along a narrow dirty lane;
Dim glass and broken pane
Stood for the windows. Every shadowed door
Held children of the poor
That sheltered from the rain.
Through one dark door she slipped and bid me come
For this was home.
A narrow stair we had to climb
To reach the topmost floor.
A hundred years of grime
Clung to the walls, and time
Had worked its will.

Letts wants to make the environment real for the reader – the clear description and use of full rhyme makes it impossible for us to misunderstand the scene that is laid before us. Yet the speaker remains an observer throughout the poem; there is always a sense of distance between her and her subject matter.

It's interesting to compare this early 20th-century poem with one written almost eighty years later. 'Three Paintings of York Street' by Paula Meehan was published in the 1991 collection *The Man who was Marked by Winter*. Many of the poems in this book relate to Meehan's experience of growing up in Dublin's inner city and some of the most powerful of these have been selected for inclusion in this anthology. 'Three Paintings of York Street' offers three different perspectives on a city street. Meehan chooses to explore the practice of the visual artist rather than that of the poet, in order to invoke a certain distance from this environment, as well as to emphasise the deliberate decisions that the artist must always make when representing a difficult subject. In the opening poem Meehan depicts the onset of night and the brief period of comparative calm before the disorder of pub closing time erupts. In describing the street as holding its breath before the onslaught, and suggesting that moon dust be sprinkled on the scene, Meehan gives us an inkling of the combination of enchantment and fear that the city exerts over her as a poet. Yet the next poem – 'Woman Found Dead Behind Salvation Army Hostel' – dispels this partly positive reading with a shocking scene of violence. The poem begins: 'You will have to go outside for this one. / The night is bitter cold / but you must go out, / you could not invent this'. The 'you' here is the artist, who is compelled to engage directly with this painful subject matter, yet at first it seems it could be addressed to a woman forced by economic circumstances into prostitution – 'The night is bitter cold / but you must go out'. The dead woman's body and the terrible violence she has endured

must be represented in a graphic manner, in order that the full horror of the crime be revealed. Here is the third, and longest, stanza of the poem:

For consolation there's the line
her spine makes as it remembers
its beginnings, as if at the very end
she turned foetal and knew again
the roar of her mother's blood in her ears,
the drum of her mother's heart
before she drowned in the seventh wave
beyond pain, or your pity.

By likening the dead woman to an unborn child, Meehan emphasises her vulnerability and innocence. The poet draws the beginning and end of this woman's life together making her killing all the more senseless and destructive. Again this emphasises the importance of the act of witness in shaping the moral purpose of the sequence. Whereas the Letts poem takes two characters from different worlds and brings them together in the city streets, Meehan's emphasises how the environment itself intervenes in the fate of the people.

II

There are many poems from the mid 20th century onward that suggest a less tense relationship to the city, while offering an equally personal response to place. Rhoda Coghill's 'In the City' is just such a poem. It is taken from *The Bright Hillside*, published in 1948 – the first of the poet's two short collections. A native of Dublin, Rhoda Coghill was best known as a composer and musician but she published a small number of accomplished and reflective poems. Her approach to the writing process combines lyricism with personal enquiry, indicating not just the experiential roots of her creativity but also larger questions of human endurance in a world that can belittle individual effort.

In this poem Coghill chooses the River Liffey as a central unifying image. It is an image that enables the poet to reflect on both the past and future of the city and on the relationship between the urban space and its larger hinterland. Whereas both Letts and Meehan emphasise the moment of human encounter in their poems, Coghill evokes the passage of time, through a process of recollection in tranquillity. In particular she speaks of her love of the city in strongly visual terms.

Gently in the night flows my river, the Liffey.
It is mine by right of love, this river always
Running, since childhood, under my feet, always
Branching along my veins – this river of birds,
Avenue of serene, Ascendancy swans,
Trail of the single gunman cormorant,
Stage of the seagull's ballet – those faery visitors
Who cry and perch and fly, blown in the air
Like paper toys.

Tonight there are no birds;

The thickening mist blinds me to all but light.
By day small painted boats, wings
Of coloured parrots, tighten their holding ropes
And lie beside the wall. Pale women
Hurry across the bridges, dawdle at windows,
Treasure their handbags, intent on finding bargains.
Crowds at the rush-hour of a Spring afternoon
Move in the clean patterns of thrown confetti.

Here the poet captures the intensity of her feeling for the river and its natural life, as well as for its central position in Dublin's real and imaginative identity. Like Louis MacNeice's poem 'Dublin', Coghill's text combines a dreamlike treatment of the city space with a restrained sense of the bleakness of its history. This is a poem of twilight and its monochrome quality brings a sense of mystery to the scene – gone are the brightly coloured boats and the hurrying shoppers, instead there is 'faint illumination on the darkest water' where seabirds float, waiting for dawn. The mood of this moment is hard to gauge. The poet observes how life endures, even when hidden from observing eyes. Yet these creatures wait in darkness and the poet does not offer a redemptive reading of their presence. Rather she reminds us of the importance of patience and persistence as an integral part of all life.

Another poem in this anthology that chooses the river as its focus is Jessica Traynor's 'Liffey Swim'. This is the title poem of Traynor's first collection, soon to be published by Dedalus Press. Again the Liffey is described in dreamlike terms, yet the scene is not one of solitary reflection but rather an exploration of the relationship between people and their environment.

Liffey Swim

In the dream, the Blessington Street Basin
fills with the Liffey's stout-bottle waters,
but still the swimmers come, in droves,
on the stray sovereign of an Irish summer's day.

The river courses towards the quays,
turning concrete roadways to canal banks
that shrug their shoulders into dark water;
a man rises, seal-like in his caul of silt, to wave.

At the sluice gate, where the river bends
out of sight between toppling buildings,
a black dog jumps, again and again, into water.

And there, at the edge of vision, my parents,
ready to join the swimmers,
gesture their cheerful farewells.

The Blessington Street Basin combines the beautiful and the functional, much as the poem itself elegantly captures a dynamic yet circumscribed scene. Like Coghill's poem this has a specific weather; it is that rare thing – a true Irish summer's day, here likened to a sovereign in its golden promise. The sense of movement is strong here, and again the relationship between the river and the surrounding city is an important one. The perspective adopted in the poem places the river at the centre of consciousness. It is as though the perspective of the poem is the low, continuous motion of the water itself: concrete roadways give way to canal banks and buildings appear to topple as the course of the waterway alters. The swimming man becomes part of the river, covered in its silt, immersed in its texture and in its past – that residue carried with it from the surrounding land. The dog, leaping in and out of the water, is both an amusing detail and a hint at something darker. Just as the black dog can signify a ghostly or depressive presence, we have a premonition of gloom as the river courses onward. In the same way the speaker's parents are both a part of the busy scene and almost out of view: their gestures of farewell are suggestive of change and loss. The movement of the poem from stanzas of four lines, to those of three, affirms this sense of restraint, yet this does not disrupt the flow of the poem that draws speaker and reader forward.

III

The sense of movement to be found in 'Liffey Swim' is expressed in different ways in poems that are concerned with the city as a storehouse of time; a place where history is preserved. Dublin, as Ireland's capital city, is an important repository of the nation's past and this is the final dimension of its representation that I'd like to consider today. Sheila Wingfield's poem 'In a Dublin Museum' gives us insight into our encounter with history, not in monumental terms but a way that is understated and small in scale. This poem tells us much about the subtlety of Wingfield as a poet. Born in England into a wealthy family, Sheila Beddington married Mervyn Patrick Wingfield, heir to the Powerscourt estate, in 1932. In spite of her life of privilege, Wingfield's poems are subtle and unassuming. Many reveal an interest in classical worlds and in the passing of civilizations – a long view of history that may have been shaped by the uneasy position of Ascendancy families within the independent Irish state. This poem is concerned with how the past speaks to us through its everyday materials. The speaker does not choose as her focus a precious item of great aesthetic beauty. Instead she picks an unobtrusive object; one that is hard even to identify. We might think about how this poem – this deceptively simple text – is itself a thing that gestures towards the past; it is at once unremarkable and intensely thought-provoking. Here is the poem in its entirety:

No clue
About the use or name
Of these few
Bronze Age things,
Rare
And in gold,
Too wide for finger-rings.

Till some old epic came
To light, which told
Of a king's
Daughter: how she slid them on to hold
The tail ends of her plaited hair.

By dropping the verbs from the early lines of the poem – 'No clue / About the use or name' – Wingfield reveals that the narrative around these objects is slight. Yet they are 'Rare / And in gold', information embedded within the poem rather than given to us at the outset. Significantly, though, it is a text from the past that helps to reveal the identity of these decorative objects: with the help of the epic their use becomes clear. The lightness of the explanation is characteristic of Wingfield, and the intimacy of this final gesture brings the past alive in the moment of reading.

The museum, as the official repository of a nation's past, is both an intriguing and troubling place for the woman poet. It helps to create a sense of continuity between the writer and the lived past, yet it also suggests how much the narrative of history excludes the personal and domestic details that shaped women's lives. This issue is one that has preoccupied Eavan Boland for much of her writing career. Included in this volume is a poem by her called 'The Dolls Museum in Dublin'. Like the Wingfield poem this text considers the museum as a way of engaging with the material of the past, much as the anthology itself allows us to encounter, and to re-interpret, poems that would otherwise be forgotten. From the beginning of the poem the past is revealed as a complex place: the first words – 'The wounds are terrible' – reveal that the damage to the doll unites the suffering of the past with the present refusal to confront that pain fully: 'The cracks along the lips and on the cheeks / cannot be fixed'. In her deft choice of sensory detail Boland recreates the Dublin of 1916 with such lines as 'Sunlight criss-crossing College Green' and 'Steam hissing from the flanks of horses'. The dolls, in the arms of their child owners, are the passive recipients of their care and attention; the hard consonants of phrases like 'Cradled and cleaned... held close... cold hands' emphasise the detachment of the toys and the sense of foreboding this creates. In its very simplicity of form the poem shows how abruptly a carefree and privileged life can come to an end. By evoking twilight, Boland suggests a symbolic reading of the Easter Rising as a pivotal moment in Irish history. This shadowy scene also reflects our own limited perspectives on the past. It is twilight too in the museum and 'shadows remain' on the bodies of the dolls:

The eyes are wide. They cannot address
the helplessness which has lingered in
the airless peace of each glass case:
to have survived. To have been stronger than

a moment. To be the hostages ignorance
takes from time and ornament from destiny. Both.
To be the present of the past. To infer the difference
with a terrible stare. But not feel it. And not know it.

Survival, in this case, is not an act of will but a matter of chance. And its significance is compromised by the inability of the dolls to bear witness to the reality of past experience. Though they were present at an important moment in the formation of Irish identity, they are not objects we would commonly see as bearers of history but rather as things to be used and discarded. Their inability to register the complexity of the past that they themselves endured sets them apart from the women of the period whose silence in the face of male-authored history is an enforced one. The dolls are saved from the suffering that suppressed emotion can cause; human subjects, the poem infers, are not so fortunate. For Boland, the helplessness evident here is matched by frustration and anger on the part of living women, and her concern to give their experiences voice is the most important dimension of her artistic legacy.

These Dublin poems authored by women testify to the range and significance of their work, and to the vitality of the city space as a place of reflection and creativity for them. Their contribution to the poetic life of the city is not that of embodied meaning, or of symbolic form. Instead they create spaces of social and political exploration in their own experiences of living and writing in Dublin.

References

All references are taken from *If Ever You Go: A Map of Dublin in Poetry and Song*. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2014.

Eavan Boland, 'The Dolls Museum in Dublin', pp. 176-7.

Rhoda Coghill, 'In the City', pp. 9-10.

Winifred Letts, 'Home', pp. 200-1.

Paula Meehan, 'Three Pictures of York Street', pp. 178-80.

Jessica Traynor, 'Liffey Swim', p. 32.

Sheila Wingfield, 'In a Dublin Museum', p. 182.