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Introduction

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ONE OF THE GREAT strengths of Irish literature has always been its ability to renew itself from themes and identities that coexist uneasily, yet are profoundly linked. The history of Irish poetry in this century has been, therefore, one of successive waves of renewal brought on by the emergence of new voices from a wide range of apparently conflicting identities. The century opened with the powerful resurgence of Irish writing brought about by Yeats, and is ending with the overlapping waves of renewal brought on by the strong emergence in the sixties and seventies of Northern voices and, in the eighties and nineties, by the unprecedented arrival of women’s voices. Anyone who comes to Irish literature in 2000 can see that these renewals have become not a disruption of one another, but part of the continuum of Irish literature.

Where such huge redefinitions of Irish literature were at stake, it is no surprise that some of these emergences were contested. This issue of Colby Quarterly does not track the controversy as much as it celebrates the emergence of what Albert Gelpi calls “the first great woman poet in the history of Irish poetry.” Nevertheless, since the controversy and emergence seemed to me to be linked in revealing ways, it seemed useful to record in addition to the strengths of the emergence, some of the sources of controversy. Because Boland has a large critical following in America as well as in Ireland, it seemed appropriate in an American journal to frame this issue around that double context. By having both distinguished Irish and American views this issue has tried to present the richness and variety of the conversation that Boland’s work has generated in both countries. Divisions of opinion evident here between Irish and American views, as well as between Irish critics and Irish poets, are a testament to the interest and excitement that has accompanied this most recent renewal of Irish poetry, in which Boland has played a central role.

The frame of a double context locates the poet, and to some extent it locates this editor as well. It is the natural outgrowth of the perspective of my coming as an American to Irish poetry. As someone who has been a privileged witness to that developing conversation on both sides of the Atlantic, I felt a helpful way to frame this preface might be to talk about my own sense of what has been a pivotal period in Irish letters. I came to Ireland at the end
of the 1980s as a Mellon Fellow engaged in Irish studies but, in a deeper sense, informed by one of the great intellectual adventures that happened in the American canon. I was a graduate student from the first generation of American scholars who saw what the integration of the literary achievement of women had done to the American literary canon. Moreover, my generation had seen how figures of dissent—poets like John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich—had entered poems from unexpected angles and created unexpected identities of the poet. They had shown that tradition could be approached from unexpected angles and still be radically enriching to American poetry.

To American critics of my own age, especially to those of us who came to Ireland in the eighties and nineties, the American poet who symbolized the change in American poetry that meant the most to us was Adrienne Rich. She was exemplary not only for her poetry, but for the powerful connection she had made between poetry and a prose critique. Also among our heroes were critics like the Gelpis, Albert and Barbara, who had done a great deal to shape the critique of Adrienne Rich’s work at a time when it was not likely to bring them reward. And Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who, along with poets like Rich, had made the gender critique by which the American canon had been reassessed. And Arnold Rampersad who in his biographies of African-American poets had made more visible what should have been visible but was not—the centrality of African-American poets to the American canon. Just as a few years later David Kalstone’s accounts of literary influence would move Elizabeth Bishop to the center of our attention, as he moved her to the center of a male generation whose accomplishment became partially defined by hers. These were the poets and critics who, as I left, were in the process of providing new definitions of American poetry.

What I saw when I first came to Irish poetry seemed a striking discontinuity with what I had seen in my own country’s literature. Far from being accepted as a possible source of change in Irish poetry, the perception of women poets remained, even so late in the century, both fragmented and resistant. As an American scholar, I was very aware of not wanting to let the American version of women and poetry overwrite the Irish history of it. Thus it seemed to me extremely important that as an American academic, I should try to tune in to what had obviously been a very different critical evolution with a very different system of poetic values and reevaluations in play. At the risk of sounding personal, I have to say it has been a unique adventure to compare and keep intact these separate stories of profound change in two different national literatures.

The more I saw of Irish poetry, the more it seemed to me that whereas American poetry as I experienced it could be radicalized and changed by new voices moving from margin to center, such freedom of movement was far more restricted in Irish poetry. This was due in part to the very different relation of poet to history that prevails in Ireland, where the roots of poet to historical definition were so painful and hard won that any movement in this
area was fraught with fear of change and suspicion of novelty. From the beginnings of the poetic tradition in Ireland right down to the present time, Irish poets have been more obligated to the history of their country than most American poets ever felt themselves to be. This hit home with the most force in 1989 when I first read Eavan Boland’s LIP pamphlet *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*, the essay that laid the cornerstone for Boland’s expanded prose critique in 1995 in *Object Lessons*. Not only did she feel more obligated to a specifically national tradition than American women poets, but it was clear that because she did, she had set out to redefine the very nature and structure of being and becoming a poet. In order to write herself out of the oppressions of a national tradition, she had to find a whole new forward direction for it.

Long before the importance of Boland’s prose critique began to sink into my understanding of Irish poetry, I had first encountered her poetry at the Yeats International Summer School in Sligo, where she read one rainy evening not long after I arrived in Ireland. She read from both *The Journey* and *Night Feed*, but it was the luminously beautiful poems from the latter that made me catch my breath. Hearing those poems rearranged everything I knew or had been reading in poetry. They seemed to come both out of the tradition of American poetry that was pioneered by Plath, and out of the tradition in Irish poetry that included Yeats, Kavanagh, and Boland’s Northern contemporaries.

Here it seemed was a voice speaking out of some of the most central and defining emotional and physical experiences of being embodied as a woman in a voice that, until then, had not existed in Irish poetry. That she made the domestic historical, not universal, lent an ominous undersong to the celebration these poems made of the powerful, sensual experience of motherhood, of the beauty of small children, of the incredible safety of houses at dusk. I was years away from motherhood myself, but I understood immediately that these were deeply subversive poems to a tradition that had fortified itself against those themes and illuminations. When that reading ended, I felt as if I had seen the future of Irish poetry, that it would follow this poet and these extraordinary poems.

So I was surprised to hear in the after-reading conversation that one of the reservations about women poets, and Boland in particular, had been their handling of the domestic. In a country whose literature contained an almost monumental sense of the heroic, I would have thought that the small wonders and dailyness of the domestic made a counter-argument that was deeply challenging, and in some senses ominous. This difference of interpretation about the domestic was my first encounter with what would become much more familiar in subsequent years: an intellectual refusal to allow women in Ireland to come to the center of Irish poetry and take up their proper roles in redefining it.

And yet the ability of Irish poetry to redefine itself was one of my first attractions to Irish poetry. I had of course heard of the gifted generation of
Northern poets, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Michael Longley, who had emerged internationally fifteen years before I came to Ireland, and I had admired their work. As I set to work researching and compiling a bibliography on Boland (later published in the *Irish University Review*), I was so drawn into the adventure of that generation that I undertook similar projects on Derek Mahon (also published in the *IUR*) and Michael Longley.

But I could also see that the generation of women poets which included Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin was one that was crucial and inevitable not only for Irish literature but for the whole of Irish culture in this century. Diverse in their voices, styles, experiments, subject matters, sensibilities and backgrounds, they were clearly a new resource and a growing asset to Irish poetry. Equally independent and vital younger poets like Paula Meehan and Mary O’Malley were already following in their wake. Yet for all of the sparkling variety and opulence of achievement I saw in both poetic generations, Irish poetry seemed to me to be at a moment of genuine risk. There was a danger that these two poetries would come to be seen in opposition to each other instead of as part of the continuum.

The fierce commentary of resistance that had built up around Irish women poets in the 1980s and early 1990s is by now a well-known story. And this is not the place to record the exclusions that took place or the damage that was done. Undoubtedly, the resistances had something to do with the fact that, in a small country like Ireland, where gender divisions reach deep into the heraldry of the nation, the emergence of voices filled with these energies would have far-reaching implications for the poetry in which they happened. Nevertheless, that the climate of resistance included actual exclusion of women poets from anthologies put Irish poetry at risk of losing another chance at a major renewal.

I was saddened to see a country drawn into a conflict in which these two great redefinitions of Irish poetry, whose projects overlapped both in time and theme, might come to exclude one another. That their projects came out of similar sources of oppression and liberation, that their conflict was rending further a generation that had already suffered the divisions of Irish history and cultural identity, that they should now become divided by gender seemed a further wound and indignity to a great poetry. Yet whatever have been the contradictions, the divisions, the upheavals, the wounds of history, Irish poetry has always found ways to absorb them into its powerful continuum of voices. Historically, these resolutions have been made by the reader, often from a subsequent generation, who sees the diversity of poems on the page and knows there is space for it all.

The last few years have brought a rising tide of increasing agreement, some of it international, that it is time now to welcome the strong and undoubtful emergences of women’s voices into the central definitions of Irish poetry. When my colleague Tony Roche and I put together a first special issue on Eavan Boland for the *Irish University Review* in 1993, it was to
give voice to the developing tradition of Irish women poets and to Boland’s central and defining place within it. Now public awareness of that tradition and the roles Boland and her contemporaries have played in defining it has been fully established. As a critic who has been an advocate of these energies it gives me great pleasure to see this discourse finally coming on track. Pat Haberstroh’s 1996 book on contemporary Irish women poets has been followed by Peggy O’Brien’s timely anthology of Irish women’s poetry from 1967-2000. That Alex Gonzalez has just brought out a collection of essays by male critics celebrating the work of Irish women poets is further evidence of a growing critique in an area that, because of its associations with a wider postcolonial critique, is beginning to generate considerable interest outside of Ireland. That many of the scholars mentioned above come from an American context shows, I think, how those of us who came out of one tradition into the other were able to recognize the hurts and powers of a small country with a great literary tradition and wish it well.

Irish poetry has been, from the beginning, a ferocious series of arguments. But it has also been distinguished by a great succession of renewals that came from emergences against the odds. This century has already seen an extraordinary number of those emergences in the form of Yeats, Kavanagh, MacNeice, and Heaney. And so it seems appropriate for a country that began the century with freedom against the odds, to end the century with poetry against the odds—one which proves, as Sandra Gilbert remarks on the back jacket of O’Brien’s anthology, that “Yeats’ daughters and granddaughters are the keepers of a flourishing female literary tradition.”

This special issue, in the interest and diversity of the views it presents, is an example of how poetry remains in our time a place where the contexts and issues meet. Albert Gelpi’s work on the differences between Rich and Boland will no doubt be a classic reference point for future work on both poets. Michael Thurston’s account of how Boland’s sequences move in the interdependent spaces between the historic and the domestic, between history and home, to create a politically and ethically centered poetry will be another. Catriona Clutterbuck’s overview of the hesitations and counter-hesitations that have made up a particular strain of Boland’s critical reception in Ireland will no doubt fuel further debate, not least because it shows how a woman poet has been at the center of a national debate. As will Anne Fogarty’s distinguished account of the prehistory of Boland’s generation of women poets, and her examination of the decanonizations that made invisible most of Ireland’s women poets from the 1930s onward. Finally, Mary O’Malley’s and Eavan Boland’s eloquent witness on their experience as Irish women poets during some of the years and issues framed by this special issue makes a historical contribution to the new story all of these essays are pointing toward: the sense in Irish poetry of a new knowledge, and a new way of looking at things that moves beyond the contentiousness of the past twenty years into a new era in which there are daughters as well as sons.