

Maggie O’Sullivan: Transformation & Substance

Born in 1951, Maggie O’Sullivan is the author of fifteen books of poetry alongside numerous anthology and magazine appearances in the UK and elsewhere. She runs Magenta Press and also edited *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (Reality Street, 1996). As a key woman writer in the context of Linguistically Innovative Poetry, her attitude is summed up in a famous statement she co-wrote with another important woman poet in this field, Geraldine Monk:

Ultimately, the most effective chance any woman poet has of dismantling the fallacy of male creative supremacy is simply by writing poetry of a kind which is liberating by the breadth of its range, risk and innovation.¹

This “range, risk and innovation” begins with O’Sullivan’s striking use of the page space. The short lines and multiple margins create a twisting sinewy figure; the capitalisations, differing sizes of font, slashes and dashes, and other punctuation symbols, seem to be used as much for visual effect as for organising meaning. The main presentational unit is the phrase, poised and juxtaposed in space and given extra energy by the high frequency of neologisms.

Many commentators have remarked on the importance of O’Sullivan’s live performances of her poetry for understanding her textual presentations. In his essay “The Contemporary Poetry Reading”,² Peter Middleton provides a valuable summary of these discussions, whilst speculating on the complex relationship between speech and writing. Pointing to the “indeterminacy of writing’s representation of sound”, Middleton suggests that poets may be “trying to utilize an imperfect set of written signs to indicate aural complexities that then compel new forms of recognition of links between thought and language”.³ This almost suggests that the performance of a poem could be considered as primary, whilst the text exists only as a notation of it, a score for re-performance. O’Sullivan herself has dis-

cussed this relationship in a statement she produced in *Word Score Utterance Choreography* (1998):

spoken or performed aloud – a text dances its
sonic selves in depths different from written or
marked – different weights vernaculars gestures
colourings & magnetisms – different mobilities
different errings birth & shimmer⁴

Similarly, she characterises the process of writing as one in which

i allow the musics and airs of the verbal word/sound
patterns in the ear my work is gestured or danced around
to suggest their visual & sonic locations within the
page's ground⁵

This latter remark suggests that for O'Sullivan the act of writing is itself a kind of performance. She refers to the "constructional | performative dynamics & magnetisms of a text's | emerging" and yet, when it comes to live performance, part of the intention is "to enact | &/or further improvise/discourse upon the | marks/signs of a text by bodying forth fresh | aural oral torsional terrains".⁶

This begins to suggest some of the ways in which this work can be read. In another statement of poetics, O'Sullivan appears to describe poetry as speech act: "A Blessing. A Curse. A Spell. | A Riddle winding Prayer. | A Retort."⁷ If these poems can be read as acts of language (a phrase O'Sullivan uses in the interview) then it seems important to O'Sullivan that they unfold in a way that is improvised and kinetic rather than laden with normative syntax and meaningful certainties that impair a poem's movement and energy. She describes her work as celebrating the

Materiality of Language: its actual contractions &
expansions, potentialities, prolongments, assemblages –
the acoustic, visual, oral and sculptural qualities
within the physical⁸

In this way O'Sullivan's poetics can function as a critique of normative language use (see interview), in a political way not unlike that of the poetics of North American Language Poetry, with one of whose key

figures, Bruce Andrews, O'Sullivan has collaborated.⁹ In "riverrunning" O'Sullivan makes the statement that her works are

Engaging with the OUT, the UNDER – the UN – the OTHER-THAN, the NON & the LESS – transgression; trespass; disparity; subversion: Milton's 'UNTWISTING THE CHAINS THAT TIE'¹⁰

Therefore she seems to be engaging in a poetics which seeks to articulate areas of experience that are not normally recognised in mainstream culture.

One of the key metaphors used in discussions of O'Sullivan's work is that of shamanism. Part of the reason for this is O'Sullivan's titling of her 1993 book [*In the House of the Shaman*], after a drawing by Joseph Beuys. Beuys' relationship to the idea of shamanism is well-documented, and O'Sullivan herself underwent a "transformative" experience in working on a documentary on Beuys in 1988.¹¹ However, this metaphor has to be handled with care as it has accrued so many differing associations and meanings in Western culture that its usefulness in discussing O'Sullivan's poetics may be obscured. O'Sullivan's affinities with Beuys are openly declared in "riverrunning" where she links his influence to that of Kurt Schwitters in encouraging her to "look away from, beyond the given" at "THE UNREGARDED, the found, the cast offs, the dismembered materials of culture"¹². She further describes her relationship with Beuys as: "I am tributing his work: fluid, changing, inviting new material, urging new responses. His urge to begin with mistakes, to show frailty".¹³ O'Sullivan has explored this influence not only as a writer but also as a painter – some of her assemblage works are described in/as poems in *Palace of Reptiles*, and she has presented several book works as amalgams of the textual and the visual.¹⁴ The second book of *In the House of the Shaman* "Kinship with animals" has an epigraph from Beuys:

To stress the idea of transformation and of substance. This is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development; his nature is therapeutic.¹⁵

In the interview published here, O'Sullivan stressed her view of the transformative nature of language as linked to the materiality of language. In the interview, transformation became opposed to the notion of mimesis of natural processes, leaving room to consider what

transformation might mean within the context of the metaphor of shamanism.

Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology* (1968) characterises shamanic healing as follows:

That the mythology of the shaman does not correspond to an objective reality does not matter. The sick woman believes in the myth and belongs to a society that believes in it. The tutelary spirits and malevolent spirits, the supernatural monsters and magical animals, are all part of a coherent system on which the native conception of the universe is founded. The sick woman accepts these mythical beings or, more accurately, she has never questioned their existence. What she does not accept are the incoherent and arbitrary pains, which are an alien element in her system but which the shaman, calling upon myth, will re-integrate within a whole where everything is meaningful. Once the sick woman understands, however, she does more than resign herself; she gets well.¹⁶

Lévi-Strauss interprets this healing in the following way:

The shaman provides the sick woman with a *language*, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is the transition to this verbal expression – at the same time making it possible to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible – which induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganisation, in a favourable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected.¹⁷

This description seems analogous to the kind of metaphorically shamanic activity that Beuys believed himself to be engaged in, although Beuys in fact redirects the healing process from order to chaos when he describes the transformation process in his art as an attempt

to break off all the residues present in the subconscious and to transfer a chaotically detached orderly procedure into turbulence, the beginning of the new always taking place in chaos.¹⁸

Beuys' healing therefore takes place in the context of breaking out of old, ordered patterns into a therapeutically "healthy chaos".¹⁹ He

attempts this in his art by constructing performances which represent psychic states by refiguring various symbols: the cross, the hare, the piano. This seems analogous to the process in O’Sullivan’s writing whereby the lack of any framing narrator or orderly described setting faces us with an apparent chaos of language in which words are refigured and re-ordered into new patternings.

Most criticisms of the use of the shamanic metaphor in Western art attack the Western idealisation of the shaman as an entranced, wise and benevolent figure, as a distraction from recognising his historical implication in societal power structures.²⁰ Ironically, it was precisely this more historicized view of shamanism that Beuys was criticised for when he was accused of being a showman rather than a shaman. It seems possible, however, to collapse these distinctions one into the other – that shamanism only gains its power by the force of its illusions, its showmanship, the power of its stories. Whilst O’Sullivan disavows any straightforward understanding of her work as therapeutic, it seems possible to read her work as “shamanic” to the extent that its transformations of normative language amount to the appearance of an urgent re-ordering of marginalized psychic states (the NON & the LESS) into something approaching a healthy chaos.

Notes

- ¹ Published in *City Limits* (July 13-19, 1984): cited in *Galloping Dog Press Advertisement*, Spring 1986.
- ² In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. by Charles Bernstein (New York, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998). See pp. 285-290.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 288.
- ⁴ Untitled statement in *Word Score Utterance Choreography in Verbal and Visual Poetry*, ed. by Bob Cobbing and Lawrence Upton (London: Writers Forum, 1998), unpaginated. This text is presented in centred lines on a single page.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ “riverrunning (realisations”, in *West Coast Line* 29.2 (1995), pp. 62-71. Now reprinted in *Palace of Reptiles* (Willowdale, ON: The Gig, 2003), pp. 57-71. This text is presented as a hybrid form of prose and poetry, and is dedicated to Language Poet Charles Bernstein.

- ⁸ Ibid., p. 66.
- ⁹ See *EXCLA* (London: Writers Forum, 1993).
- ¹⁰ “riverrunning”, p. 68.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 68.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 68.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 69.
- ¹⁴ Most notably *Red Shifts* (2001).
- ¹⁵ *In the House of the Shaman* (London: Reality Street, 1993), p. 28.
- ¹⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1968), p. 197.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 197-98.
- ¹⁸ Cited in Donald Kuspit, “Joseph Beuys: Between Showman and Shaman” in *Joseph Beuys: Diverging Critiques*, ed. by David Thistlewood (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1995), pp. 27-49; p. 38.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 38.
- ²⁰ See Andrew Duncan’s review of *In the House of the Shaman* in *Angel Exhaust* 12 (Autumn 1995), pp. 107-118.

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- Divisions of Labour* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Galloping Dog, 1986)
- From the Handbook of That & Furriery* (London: Writers Forum, 1986)
- States Of Emergency* (Oxford: ICPA, 1987)
- Unofficial Word* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Galloping Dog, 1988)
- In the House of the Shaman* (London: Reality Street Editions, 1993)
- Ellen’s Lament* (Toronto: PUSHYbroadside, 1993)
- EXCLA* (with Bruce Andrews) (London: Writers Forum, 1993)
- that bread should be* (Sutton: RWC, 1996)
- etruscan reader III* (Buckfastleigh: etruscan books, 1997)
- red shifts* (Buckfastleigh: etruscan books, 2001)
- Palace of Reptiles* (Willowdale, ON: The Gig, 2003)