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UNMOORED: on and with Erin Moure

Ever since recovering/discovering her Galician antecedence, the bilingual now trilingual Canadian poet and translator Erin Mouré has been changing the spelling of her name at every book, insisting on spelling it variously Erin Mouré, Erín Moure, Eirin Moure. It is the very minuteness of the gesture's insistence that amazes.
All for one letter.
All rise and fall in one letter.
All move at the sign of one accent.
As a noted translator of Pessoa, no doubt no wonder that her own poetry should articulate pessoan-like self-naming instabilities. Let's not forget that his heteronyms are names that stand for a poetic process, not identities that simply tie back to him, while Mouré-Moure simply keeps on shifting the pronounceable ground of her own name. As Julia Kristeva remarks, writers who assiduously use pseudonyms (or mark their work with heteronyms) know exactly that "social protocol views the multiplication of names as a series of repudiations, all of them inauthentic"[1]. It is part of the point that each new spelling of the authorial name will sign off a new work while straining the social contract. As such, her names are always part of the games of the work.

Erin Moure tells the story of the agitated critic who'd called her up as she was about to review a new work and no longer had any idea how to spell the poet's name. It's in such cases that Foucault's notion of the authorial extension comes in handy: just spell the whatswhat what's on the cover! A few years ago, I raised this issue with EM as the starting-point of a short and open correspondence[2].

Letter

3 April 2005
Dear Erin, dear Erin Mouré, dear Erín Moure, dear Eirin Moure, dear EM,

I wasn't sure by which name to address you, so just to make sure, I thought I'd greet you in all the ones I know for you. I should say, the ones I know for your work. The more your work, as a poet and as a translator, proliferates, the more your names do too. […] It makes me wonder what a name provokes in you. The names are misspellings rather than complete hide-outs. […]

[1] Kristeva, Julia. Tales of Love. Columbia University Press, 1987. p. 258 . On Stendhal's practice of pseudonyms
[2] A first version of this piece appeared in Antiphonies: Essays on Woman's Experimental Poetries in Canada, ed. N. Dorward, Toronto: The Gig, 2008.

The more I see how you manipulate your name/s, the more I imagine that it is once the writing is done, that the work names you in it, unfolds an accent for you, points you to it. As such, your writing has stopped being anticipated by your (social) name, writing in the name of what your name stands for (one imagines some kind of sustainable/straitjacketed reputation). Then there's the female gendering of your social name. "Eirin" of course sounds more like the name of a impetuous Icelandic fisherman or an Old Norse balladeer, yet I don't really think that taking on naming as a synecdoche of literary gender persona is a prime issue for you. At any rate, it's not so much your social-authorial name that you're trying to live up to, writing one more in the name of "Erin Mouré", but rather, each new spelling signs each new work off. Each new spelling is a signature in the narrative and structural, rather than the performative, sense.

Knowing you and your work, of course, there's more to it. In fact, not just more, but a madness of names. Inside the work, within the pages, name after name, not yours this time, others' names. *O Cidadán* notably is a an affirmative jungle of names[3]. The whole trilogy, starting with *Search procedures* and following on with *A frame of the book* revels in naming, but *O Cidadán* makes a feat of it. Nearly every page is a pretext to activate a name, to discuss an attributive process, "(Lorcan or Lispectoral)". At every level of the trajectory from the text to the book, names are spelt out, written down, quotes are attributed, there are epigraphs, not just one, but two, but three. *O Cidadán* opens with an epigraph to no less than six poets/artists: "Phyllis Webb", "Robin Blaser", "Jorge Semprún", "Agnes Varda", "Yaguine Koita", "Fodé Tounkara". On the same page, three quotes are attributed to: "Joseba Arregi", "Fernando Vallespín" and "Lisa Robertson".

[You write back to me: Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara are not artists as such. Well, we could call them artists. They were two young African men, teenagers really, who in August 1999 hid in the wheel-wells of a Sabena plane on its way from Guinea to Brussels. Such a journey is impossible to survive, and they froze to death and tumbled out when the plane landed. In their pockets, they had stuffed letters addressed to "Excellent Sirs, members and responsibles of Europe", which were a plea to Europe to help Africa free itself from poverty, hunger, disease and war. What arrived in Europe was their writing transported by their bodies. They were writers. They had used their bodies as an envelope to their writing.].

These tributes are broad, multi-directional. Later on, poems will emerge from named quotes, sentences will scurry with yet other names, "José Saramago" (that you quote in Spanish from the El País newspaper), "Grosz" (Elizabeth never named), "Michael Palmer", names punctuate

[3] All quotes and page numbers are from Erin Mouré. O Cidadán : Poems. Toronto: Anansi, 2002.

the pages, direct the writing, act as nodes to the textual threads, "De Sousa Mendes, Portuguese consul in 1940"; confirm the quote: "Aurelius A", "Lyn Hejinian"; names are chain reactions: "Cixous reads Clarice Lispector", "Derrida citing Levinas", for writers masked in more names: "…said reb Armel. (E. Jabès)"; footnotes carry them on; some initials are decipherable when used as shorthand for a previously named name, "CL", others are not, their identity withheld yet functioning in the way literary or diaristic conventions often do on naming privacy (unless we are in a novel by Marguerite Duras where characters only get initials), they initial it: "LK", "D", "Emma M".

O Cidadán closes with a full page of acknowledgments. It lists some thirty odd books, many written by contemporary philosophers. Then it lists the authors of "fleeting citations". You are fastidious about your sources. The page that follows that one is another extensive page of thanks to sponsors, editors, friends, facilitators. The process of acknowledgment, with its blend of learning and influence is explicit, excessively clear in the entire framing of the work. At every turn it shows up your writing in its contact with others' work. An international and public availability of names. O cidadán! A plurilingual, pluricultural call. Of course, naming as an act of affiliation has a long and established literary tradition. It is a fundamental part of the paratexts that have historically surrounded and defined literature. Medieval texts, Norse sagas, even classical texts had complex and ritualised ways of dedicating their works, of asking for protection, of claiming literary lineage as much as social patronage, of signaling acts of writing as a direct prolongation of social (or spiritual, scholarly, artistic) training. Closer to us, Ginsberg's long and fascinating pages of dedication are but a reminder of traditions of naming one finds in Sanskrit and Tibetan literatures. In a profound sense, it is part of the literary. Names don't only signal the work's exteriority, its cultural environment, they also provide a structuring device, they signal the anteriority of reading in the contiguity of writing. More than this: they provoke writing. In your work, they don't just frame the work, they are the work.

This is poetry as an intellectual and investigative form of writing-knowledge, a highly specialised game, which is exemplified and confirmed by the kinds of names you quote. Here is poetry's flirtation with philosophy. You mention "reading's gesture", you meditate on the philosophical "trait" or "mark" or "trace" of reading, your philosophers are masters of reading, they play language at its own palimpsestic game, they read to write, all of them, Derrida, Nancy, Levinas, Butler....and so do you. Poetry is perceived as a fluid yet critical process of exchange, one that formalises acts of reading. Acts of reading are seen through the lens of thinking and the lens of a renewed sense of activism. Reading becomes inherently a practice of exchange. It is radically communal. On closing the volume you write: "this book is a reading practice in a community of others". In effect, your poetry not only accepts itself as transit, and

necessarily transitory, a critical landing station for names and texts, it is as though you feel that such a transit can provide for a workable social practice of cultural renewal.

Am I far wrong? You assimilate poetic work with civic work **[you say: I want to believe it can be, must be]**. *O Cidadán* opens with this in mind: "To intersect a word: citizen". Certainly it is always a question of democratic measure the extent to which one is free to manipulate ("intersect") one's culture's language and archives. In this sense, to write that one reads and how one reads can be seen as a point of civic responsibility. Writing has always favoured notions of dissemination, of transportable knowledge, of critical matter in circulation. This remains especially true as one follows in the flux and reflux of political in/tolerance, the flux and reflux of in/admissible identifications. Similarly, reading is quickly precarious. Written material will be hidden, disguised, burnt when found. *O Cidadán* announces that it must meditate on written texts and on acts of reading in order to question what citizenship might mean today, tomorrow. This is its declared role as poetry: to embody that it reads. To write how and what it reads. You quote Jean-Luc Nancy, "the readings we can give each other, and the world, are the world, the "sense to come" (68). Reading explicates the activity of the body reading, the situatedness of that gestural commitment. "Reading's relation to the body is intelligibility's demeure" (70).

While writing that you read, reading becomes a practice of responsiveness and of interdependency. It harnesses for poetry an unlikely kind of civic fantasy, a dream of love. Unlikely because your "girls", "georgettes" could never be citizens, not as yet not in full, so long as they are girls that are georgettes that are queers. In your work, reading becomes that which attempts to trace and decode the lingering "policed sexuality" of citizenship, its unquestioned territorialities. Civic is necessarily to an extent normative, even as its citizens' lives always call on the laws to query its bounds. I start to wonder whether this is why there is such a mixed crowd of quoted texts and of names in this recent work: each historicised, gendered, sexuated, body-space becomes multitude, must be construed and poeticised as lived multitude, both temporal and to-come. Each challenge by social singularity contains a seed of tomorrow's collectivity. Your text's borders sing its queered margins.

o

What of "O"? The ancient exclamation, the interjection, the emotive point of address, the lament, the poetic complaint is everywhere in *O Cidadán*. "O Georgette" (97), "O girls my countries" (44). It is insistent refrain, nearly song, nearing ballad. O the old reminder of poetry's musicality, and what is it doing framing the self-conscious intellectuality of your poetic environment? What is it doing opening, punctuating so writerly a work?

It pulls the text away from reading towards song, and by extension towards another kind of public address. Your "O" then becomes perhaps the signal, the sounded text of your bilingual poetry. In addition to the explicit punctuation of a great many nominal phrases, I find it in the multiple use of the near-homophonic "or": "a scar or root" (37) "or rigour" (36) "affix or hesitate" (32), "or test archaeology (32), "or coil" (16), "or insistence a trail" (17). In its reccurrence throughout the text, it is pointing to something else, an underlying rhythm, some unspoken perhaps somatic undercurrent. For de Certeau, it is in the vowels that one can find "a vocal subversion of scriptural norms"[4]. It is in the fluctuations of pronunciation as a form of patois that one finds the "mobile" voice "that escapes from the regular and fixed forms of the national language". Does it function as the rhythmical residue of some fantasised, physical "poetry"?

O not "the poet's voice", but her voicing. The poetic and polemical bilingualism of the vowel also speaks of her mouthing's pleasure. In one sounded letter, the poet encapsulates what she's been telling us along: that she reads to write to read: to perform its pronunciation and its libidinal vowels: to announce amorous bodies, uncertain yet shared body spaces and exhume voiced tracings from the oblivion of history.

This text's complex desire for O is always a risk, ghosted, marked by singularity, and cultural cancellation. The historical examples that are in the work point not only to normative sexuation, but more generally to dehumanisation, state law or state terror applied on to singular bodies. Citizenship as poetic testimony is predicated on remembrance. In this sense, your text names names because it must "catalogue" the "Harms". Semprún, García Lorca, Marc Bloch… If sharing one's readings is a practice of love, is it thus that O is the desire is the courage that sings from the bones of scholarliness? Is that its civic address, its love, "O reader" (98)? The confirmation of both physical longing and collective remembrance? Does it rescue poetic acts from indifference? Does it rescue poetry itself from cultural disenfranchisement, does it manage to do this through fantasies of queer address? **[it's actually just Galician, straight Galician… but I like the way it becomes bilingual when a reader comes to it in English. As if the context of publishing a text primarily in English but with a non English title in an anglo press makes it bilingual. Especially with the problematics around the very title of the book, and around insisting on entering the word "the citizen" at all. Galician *is* hard to see at first. It's a small language. A critic whom I usually find to be quite a good reader, actually accused me in a review of inventing Galician!]**

Letter

10 April 2005

Dearest, queridísima Caroline,

What can I say in response to such a marvelous text? A text that mixes the acts of speaking, of hearing, of seeing, with the act of naming. To name. *Nomear*…. this Galician verb (and sometimes there are things that only think themselves in Galician) so close to my own name…. "a moure", the –girl– moure… and with its u flipped back into an n, again: nomear. A word that also contains "en amor." That dream of love of which you write is present in these conjunctions, these elaborations from a word.

And the significance of the O, this O which in a book of poems in English is ever an English O, for the reader comes to it in English. I see it now in your text, it's the letter without angles or anguishes… it pleases me that you see in this letter the female and lesbian body, when in Galician it is simply the definite article, masculine singular, the universal O of the *universO* that I insist I will inhabit as citizen, citizenne. An "O" is a "I" with air, an "I" (can you see it?) in blossom… is also an open eye, ready…

As I wrote *O Cidadán* I was thinking that the act of inhabitation can occur in language as well as in a place. To me English needed, and needs, words, word-acts, efforts, from other idioms, ours is so wounded, and the wounds are self-inflicted (given political speech we can hear on the radio every day that has just worsened since 9/11…though *O Cidadán*'s writing predates 9/11). The borders, the frontiers of a language are also and must be open to what Manuel Rivas calls "clandestine passages". When I can offer English as a language in the title of this book is an encounter with Galician, with *galego*, with foreignness, with my eternal status as foreigner in English, with a linguistic reverberation that is not fully absorbable. (Though, as I said, to try to absorb it, one reader/critic claimed I invented Galician! That's one way out of a dilemma….).

Flúido. Lúdico. Lido. Leda. Illícita. Citada.
Fluid. Ludic. Read. Happy. Illicit. Cited.

Looking at that line of words generated from sounds, I realize I see letters as drawings, drawings of sounds more than meanings or senses (meanings of course attach themselves to

[4] M. de Certeau, "The World of the Vowel" in The Certeau Reader ed. Graham Ward. London: Blackwell, p.?

sounds), and my name, too, this name I bear, a drawing of sounds, a name so often badly pronounced, with so many varieties and vanities, *variedades e vaidades.* But the border of a name is not a straight line. And has no final point either, except perhaps death, but no, death ends the organism only, and the name endures. The name of a dead person is still that person's name….

And me, I am thinking all this in Galician (and translating it now for you into English), in galego. The artist Orlan changed her appearance, the aspect of her own face, with surgeries. I changed my face by learning Galician, which puts different sounds into my mouth, that are pronounced in other areas of the mouth, and pronouncing words in this idiom changed the physiognomy of my face, of my body even, of my shoulders, my ribs, it changed my body so much that it also changed my manner of being and inhabiting English.

Flúido. Lúdico. Lido. Leda. Illícita. Citada. Cidadá. Citizen, because I can speak, because speaking itself alters the face, because *how can we* know, *until we have faces.*

And yes we have this responsibility, toward the civis. Of inventing ourselves faces. And yes we have an *eu*, an I, solely when we open ourselves to foreignness. O.

Will it change society? Society is, our societies are, already *revoltada*, upside down, in crisis. Society never ceases changing, and this, for the worst, unfortunately, at the moment. Perhaps these conversations we have with each other, these readings, can break the fall a little. If they could, another movement might be possible. Another flash. Trajet. Our faces might change because of the way we can enter speaking, or because of what we find it possible to hear. And for this, we need a plurality of idioms. And the multiplication of borders and porosities. Poetry as enactment, not consolation. It's this that I expect, await. And that we don't consume hope as we consume petroleum. There's not much of it left, after all.
Erín

YO

Moure says, "O" is "I" in Galician, open shifter, that iconises the poet's rapport to her languages, becomes holder of the bilingual speaking tongue, rings the bell, sounds the horn for an inclusive citizenry. This reminds me of the African-American poet Tracie Morris who remarks that in contemporary African-American English, I is you, "having moved from self-address to salutation", having recombined the Spanish "io" and the English "you" into the

address "Yo"[5]. The traffic across historic and psychosocial continents continues to be turned, retuned and heard in this bilingual and bicultural diphtong. Yo, now it shifts twice in one spin, travels from me to yo, from yo to yall, from personal address to rap's public exclamations, doubles back as an identificatory handshake, a complicit gesture, sometimes an invitation. Its social use and translative heat confirms new linguistic and cultural usage in a deanglicised America. It nods at its citizens' co-existing languages and pasts, and sends out its salutation to the future.

London, April 2009

[5] Morris, Tracie. "Black Conceptual Poetics". Talk delivered at the "Conceptual Poetry and its Others" symposium (May 2008). <http://poetrycenter.arizona.edu/conceptualpoetry/morris.shtml#audio>.