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Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Comparate e Storia delle arti

fondata da Carlo Pellegrini e Vittorio Santoli

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ERIN MOURE'S TRANSGRESSING OF THE LIMITS AND BREAKING OF FIXED FORMS

In her creative opus, the Canadian poet, essayist, and translator Erin Moure has transgressed various stages, initiated by her poetry collection published in 1979 under the title *Empire, York Street* (Toronto, Anansi). Her research of different literary periods and her constant questioning and challenging of the temporal frameworks, generic and intergeneric articulation, and national and ethnological specificities that act on the modes of her literary explications, have made her literary texts challenging to interpret in a variety of ways. The mapping of the numerous influences and unraveling of the complex texture of Moure's representative expressions have prompted critics to express opinions complementary to the view of Melissa Jacques:

Erin Moure's poetry is fragmented, meta-critical and explicitly deconstructive. Folding everyday events and ordinary people into complex and often irresolvable philosophical dilemmas, Moure challenges the standards of accessibility and common sense. Not surprisingly, her work has met with a mixed response. Critics are often troubled by the difficult and alienating nature of her writing; even amongst Moure's advocates, the issues of accessibility and political efficacy are recurrent themes¹.

In this paper, we will focus on *My Beloved Wager: Essays from a Writing Practice* (NeWest Press, 2009), in which she centers her attention on the world of literature, and her life, while testing the liminal borders that coexist between different literary expressions and in the seam of specific geographical, ideological and cultural contacts that have marked her own life and the life of her literary work. This book is, according to Anne Leventhal, dedicated to three points, which further branch out into countless, correspondingly important questions: a) the aesthetics of marginalization, b) the impossibility and importance of translation, and c) censorship, which, as Moure writes, precipitate harm to the spirit and body²:

In my own work, I thought at one time that the simplest line was best. Yet when I wrote anecdotal-conversational poems without reversal (which is to say, without the language confronting itself and its assumptions in the poem), I suppressed both my feelings as a lesbian and my concerns as a woman. My poetry was supposed to reflect my life, especially my life as a worker, and

these things were suppressed in that life. To write the poems, then perpetuated (unknowingly) my own pain at being invisible, and left my desire silenced or screened. As if I could belong, by force or will, to that *sameness*, that *anaesthesia*³.

My Beloved Wager: Essays from a Writing Practice is a signpost, at the beginning of which – and the starting point is not easy to determine because getting into the book does not involve the traditional initiation into the reading process – we single out one quotation which states that we are talking about a writer who calls us to go beyond the conventional ways of reading, to read “by immersion”, to “... plunge in. Read widely across domains and epochs, across intentionality, across languages, too, their particular and haunting sounds and formations. You never know how thoughts may come back and re-entwine in the present; thought itself is always haunted by prior or anterior incarnations, by apparent misreadings, by folds and convergences”⁴. Moure recoils to a re-examination of her work ethic and to re-learning of her literary skills, which comes out of such a re-examination because every text is an occasion to re-examine one’s being, the mystery of the text and context, but also the limits (Moure indicates that this noun can only stand in the plural in this context) which exist inserted between them. Through her words, through such a re-examination, she tests “Movement in language that takes me to a place or space that differs (and defers) from what language has been able to do, an opening to a ‘something else’ that perturbs what I know or think I know”⁵. Such exuberance also validates “the margins of possibility in thought, language, and feeling”⁶ that might be initiated from the very beginning of a poem or a book as, according to Moure, those texts do not have to start with something that should be expressed and with an already detailed kind of will that impels work to group many disturbed formations.

Her work, which is often described as political, appeals the society to examine the variety of “frail relations”⁷. For this reason, she shatters language into its basic constitutive measures and smashes one word with another while examining the fragility of relations between subjects, through a constitutive measure that determines her poetic direction, moving it forward, with all its fractures and issued sounds serving as signposts. Thus the development of her writing is “a constellative progression outward and sideways (at times in vain), not dialectical for dialectics disallows too many other types of determination (and here, to me, ‘determinations’ are also ‘frail relations’, not always determinate)”⁸. She also focuses on alterations to human thought, the age in which peo-

ple, as bodies – coding devices – as she calls them, extend over various spaces, virtual and of other kinds.

Critics perceive *My Beloved Wager* as a map that is intertwined with deep philosophical thoughts and a sophistication that is realizable in fragments particularly, while the signals about its complexity we get from an interweaving of contradistinctive discourses, the “shifts, flows, and ebbs” of Moure’s writing. Whilst explaining how she finds inspiration in everything because of acting through different inter-unions, she maps the conversions she comes across while looking at the paper and while listening to the sounds:

To create or explore (for sometimes, mostly, there is no “me” separate from the world that is creating... there is a ‘me’ness in the world...) effects, meaning effects, on many levels. ... Of course, as a person I am interested in history, genealogy, dispersion, feminism, social justice, race and gender/ing issues, so these enter into the work. And much of my work is done with others: mentoring, encouraging, challenging and being challenged, encouraged, mentored⁹.

While mapping the influences of the poets Moure has translated and whose existence is vigorously intertwined and explicitly stated in her texts and while highlighting her exploration of various aspects of our lives (thought, body, language, culture, geography), McLennan indicates the existence of a particular school of poetry that Moure represents and which has been made up of distinctive and separated fragments of other writings (McLennan mentions schools of writing such as the Vancouver school and the avant-garde school from Toronto)¹⁰.

It is in her poetic statement, published in *Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics Across North America* (*American Poets in the 21st Century*, eds. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell), under the title *A Practice of Possibility, a Life in Languages*, that Moure introduces into the story, among others, Fernando Pessoa and her translation of his collection of poetry *O Guardador de Rebanhos*, published in 2001¹¹. While writing about Pessoa’s abundance of authors and about Chus Pato, Moure recalls reading and translating her “gorgeous cacophonies,” which persuaded her to re-examine the significance of small theatres and languages, which we do not yet recognize and which can take us further than the big theatres of war and the discourses which politicians have amplified. She articulates how her musings, inspired by the work of Pessoa and Pato, led her to think of English as a language that gave her pain, being heard of as the sorrowful echo of American

public discourse, thus initiating the impossibility to write in the same language used by American leader as that language sounded corrupted.

In an interview from the early 'nineties, Moure implied the other influences on her poetry and translation work, which manifested themselves through impulses awoken in her being by other writers. At the same time positioning the ascendancies from the domain of the autobiographical, relating to the spaces in which she spent her life, with the images of workplaces, "drawing from her experiences working in factories, on trains, and other jobs"¹², what is also affirmed is her "radical politics through a feminist approach that often foregrounds lesbian desire"¹³. Thus intertwined, her poetic images, which remind us of the myriad of claims, raise the question of how to read Moure's challenging structures, which she calls *the physical artifacts*, abiding the visible but also the hidden while being physically directed downwards to one side. She identifies this process as liberating as such a structure, according to her words, can be located in any abode, whether read wrongly, partially, or from different perspectives, as she concludes that we are not talking about a "book" until it is taken into one's hands and opened and until someone reads it and looks at it¹⁴. The reception of the book is manifold and petitions for cooperation with the writer, "a productive hand," and with the reader whom she leaves, as Moure precisely states, with the implication that she/he is free in her/his movement through the book, that she/he is an untiring and energetic seeker who quests the enduring structures and the long existent beings, thus always being at the threshold of the settings that are strenuous.

While perceiving the creation of the text, as an organism that functions in a heterogenous way that she defines as being voiceful, Moure focuses on dimensionality as an essential concept as she verbalizes the process of creation with the central point of the story about melding with various aspects of the text with activities in a language like movements and noise. She further narrates the story about the relationship between the left side of the book and the right and points to the fact that one part of the text always remains invisible for the moment. Calling those moments a time for opening the compositional space while narrating the story about the "communicative function" of language that is never completely transparent, she concludes that language is still acting on that side of the user's intentions because, at the same time, chance and choice depend on what the readers will do with them and how the readers will allow these to act upon them. What is also noticeable in her text is that the mechanics of perception have different ways of acting and determining what explanations we will give about literary texts and

their perceptions. The methods of thinking that can be implemented are only distinctive prisms through which we watch "reality," as she states, while the body in the context of the noise and the movement of her work is imposed as a "vital language" and, as she says in one interview, culture is written by bodies and activities of bodies, which is not easy to explain through the prism of one category. According to Moure, bodies include a myriad of cultural contacts which she has mastered, primarily through their attitude towards the language, which determines what she called a constant moving of linguistic boundaries that inevitably influence the movements of a poem¹⁵:

Multiple, multiple... in the wilderness of the words I'm playing with, I watch words cohere, watch for places where there are moments in language that no intention of mine could have produced, and I bring these together; generate more, generate additional language, see where it goes, pare away. I work on multiple poems, usually long, at once, and don't finish revising them for years¹⁶.

In a text on *My Beloved Wager* by Anna Leventhal, Moure's work is described as political and poetic, with themes and tones that vary from page to page while also propounding Moure's thread that leads us to think about who we are as speakers, readers, and authors in a book that offers us the possibility for changes that language might cause in the world. Leventhal carefully perceives the book's nuances, its dedication to the transforming facets of everyday life, and the challenges that it proposes to the reader who eagerly searches for the decoding of its poetic images and figures of speech. For Leventhal, the book is about the transformation of ideas, the movement that she, following the thread of Moure's narrative perceives as stimulating: "These essays insist upon a philosophy that is sunk in the real while remaining ethically and practically bound to the realm of the possible"¹⁷, Leventhal writes while focusing on Moure's belief about poetry's radical potential that multiplies. Being radical, in the political and poetic context, though, in the context of its poetic exploration, "it makes more sense to refer to its driving force as 'poetics' rather than 'politics.' A radical poetics, then, articulated and explored through questions of citizenship, censorship, identity, borders, and body"¹⁸.

My Beloved Wager also arose from Moure's thinking about feminism, sexuality, and the somatic, which brings us to a consideration of pain, numbness, and a loss of awareness¹⁹, which is, at the same time, as she has emphasized many times, instructed by the hope of surviv-

ing in this world. What also follows as one of the principal mainstays of Moure's poetics is that reading is a locus of thoughts that invariably expose continuity with what is external to them and it is essential to embrace the locus when it sinks into the organism, when it shatters it and undermines the self-satisfied organism which has resigned itself to the status quo²⁰: "... rather, it is to be seized by those who would seize it, for it is the seizure that characterizes reading. Not seizure as grabbing something to settle it down, but as a force (perhaps external) entering and breaking apart the organism, the organism's complacency, its complicities with the status quo"²¹, which challenges the being to bear in mind its constructedness, to comprehend in what place the conductors of thoughts act as stop signs, to teach one to bypass these conductors, to teach that the limits of one writing are seams. Although she emphasizes that poetry confronts all the elements that traditionally integrate the method of writing, it is possible to map moments of creation, moments of the merging of various cognitive and perceptual investments – sounds attracting words, feelings, pains, ideas, worries, and dreams²². This method is brought to life from beginning to end of many revisions and through the furtherance of words that conduce to relocations of the consciousness system. However, Moure emphasizes that she consciously pushes "words forward and make them tumble, to work through my own perceptual failures, to create a space and duration in the marks that are words where differences are possible, multifaceted articulation is possible. Even if this pushing breaks down the construct of the self – the seeing self, the self as an un-self-conscious observer in the poem, as poetic voice, as stability steering the poem"²³.

Moure considers that poetic structure and form are different phenomena: with its social consequences the structure is about "the stresses and forces in materials"²⁴, while the form is "a cultural artifact, a presentation"²⁵ because words, according to this poet's statements, cannot outright impart our desires, as the fissure between desires and expression is implicit in language, and a poem whose structure resonates with the reader arises as the language is not void of the social and metaphysical order. Another of Moure's compelling arguments is that structure is a jewel, a space that is folded and complex, made up of the multitude of aspects of the world, for enacting linguistic sounds whose interrelationship leads the way to new sequences, as she writes. Every enactment assumes a subject who participates in the process, passes through it or remains fixed in it for some time, while "a poetic structure is a linking that may not be a completion, a final thing. [...] It's a collection of stresses, of rhythmic steps, an interplay with the reader"²⁶.

As is represented in her poems and in her essays, Moure is passionate about words and her words stand as a confirmation of the sound, the rhythm, the otherness and multiplicity “of what is outside the self, an acknowledgment the body makes automatically at a pre-social level to retain its own sense of body, of presence, of equilibrium”²⁷, and that recognition is the key element of the spaces and the beings that get in touch with her world and breath in it. What she is emphasizing in this part of her book is the existence of the rhythmic all-pervasion, which provokes her to wonder about the way in which this interrelation can be pronounced linguistically beyond devaluing it, insisting that linguistic expression remains meaningless until it is converted into a visual representation that will conquer the words. The idea is that poetry destabilizes the given order and the ordinary speech even when using ordinary speech²⁸. Poetry creates cracks in oppressive structures and it “will continue to be suppressed by some governments and some social structures, if not through censorship, then through some other kind of *smoothing*: by not broadcasting certain types of poetry on the CBC, for example, claiming it is too difficult”²⁹.

To emphasize that writing is a social practice, Moure begins her chapter devoted to Bronwen Wallace by talking about words and poetry which regress into insecurity when uttered by women, and she emphasizes how they start from the roots and follow the thread to the point in which they might burst into flame³⁰. She finds the locus for the specified argument in the textual surface of Wallace, describing it as *boldly narrative*, following this part of the story with the details which constitute her literary opus³¹ and mapping the type of poetry in which we find interweavings and connectednesses, such as that of grammar and memory: “Grammar and memory are buried in each other,” Moure writes, “and connected on the same plane as well. And there is a physical grammar – proprioception – that keeps us continually located and present in the world. Without this grammar, the world goes awry”³². Her statement that ideology relies on grammar and memory for any social transformation triggers the issue of the status quo, which belongs to restrictive structures which censor and submit to “discursive play or challenges”³³, making thus the existence of women or poets uncomfortable, given that “the social structure values some people and not others. It maintains the power and constructs the way of seeing a certain class, of a certain sex, a certain race. [...] But they’re not just outside a discourse; they’re outside in economic and social senses as well (health-benefit plans, pensions, clean water, housing, etc.)”³⁴. Moure comments that such a situ-

ation brings a concentration that surpasses the words' simple message, rhythm, and sound because it reverberates through the whole language.

As we suggested initially, for Moure, the communicative function of language is not its only function and it is not its most challenging one. She writes about the ranges of language that are much more significant with the nature that enables us to progress it and to dismantle the limits ordained on it, as in the case of the poetic function: "Accepting the challenge means challenging preconceptions, taking a chance with poetic structures, with using sounds and words to call those deep and senseless images and connections out of you"³⁵, nuclear testing, radiation, the death of diverse animals that constitute the natural world, the labor of marginal groups of people around the world, remain in her story as concrete examples.

Poetry is further defined as a chain in structuring memory that enhances the thread of the story and our perception of how language channels the memory "by the conceptual frameworks buried in language, as use values. If we are not careful, the structure of our work reinforces these frameworks"³⁶. In other words, to quote Moure, it is that poetry and its sound go in advance of "the forms acceptable to the Law: representation, meaning, codification. Yet if we merely use it to oppose the Law, we risk being defined once again by the terms of the Law. Opposition alone just leads back to sameness. Our voices have to leak out *before* the Law settles, or have to keep unsettling it"³⁷. As, according to Moure, the poems give us the possibility to name and codify 'identity', although such a process can never be considered fixed and finalized, the essential element in this story is "identity" as well that must be explored in poems which lead Moure to marvel at what this function means for writing poetry and for the poetry readers who remember. She concludes that validating our act of remembering and conditioning the social order points to the necessity of relocations, such as irony and this way of perception raises the question of recreating myths or words in general, and the opportunity to intensely dedicate oneself to the process of remembering. Moure emphasizes that remembrance and the past keep us alive, structured by language, within what she calls the Polis. While claiming the importance of irony, as it is with irony that she addresses the function of language that maintains coherence or social identity, she relies on Husserl and Kristeva's work:

... our writing must admit and deal with this social identity, which means with our privilege, as well as with our silence. We have only the symbolic to give us the terms to discuss what pre-

cedes its laws. A pre-linguistic memory, the memory of the mother, is unrepresentable without its trace in words, in writing. The Law is hidden in these traces, the Law that privileges some of us. Yet the trace of words can also show us those gaps in language where maternal non-sense is. We have to query *those* traces in our writing, through the act of writing itself, because the social function of language marks our civic place and civic memory. For women, and for men, too, these marks are a structure of anaesthesia. Why frame our writing in this order?³⁸

Moure also frames a list of facets that show the way how before we begin to talk about poetry and knowledge, we should understand that a large part of knowledge is *provisoire*, prone to change, and the impact of current features and frameworks. Alongside the story about the materiality of the very fabric of language and alongside the story about how words cling to each other and how poetry processes the forces of repulsion and noise, gaining thus its own endurance, she maps the pulsations which unbind in front of the reader, disclosing the fundamental opacity of this world³⁹. Moure has no doubt "that sounds and visual presence of words can provoke more than denotative sense. By this 'more', I mean something materialist rather than transcendent, yet something that grapples with abstractions such as the sense of evil, the failure of tenderness"⁴⁰.

Her stance towards her writing sums up her perception of the concerns of language and poetry: "In my poems, I work especially at challenging the mind's conventions. I try to disrupt conventional ways of reading, knowing that the brain will connect (as it always does) and arrange things. I want the reader to pick up little things that aren't necessarily allowed to be 'meaningful' in other types of works that concern themselves with achieving a totally smooth surface"⁴¹. She furthermore enumerates that one of the functions of language is to restructure the limits of what we claim to know. She reckons that this must be one of the functions of poetry that is in all respects unassociated from the strengthening, or "the lulling," as she nicknames the process, of what is conventionally anticipated from poetry, the activity that she correlates to the discoveries in science that often come from the periphery, extending the dividing lines of science⁴². Those, as mentioned earlier, are only some examples by Moure of how poetry does not set in opposition with the other forces in the world, such as humanistic departments that have their own traditional load of knowledge with an attitude that is almost hostile to the knowledge that comes from the boundary, from the otherness. As Moure is appealed to the closeness and possible con-

nection of disparate elements, as well as the lines of their movements and processes, she focuses on the body calling it a melody and defining melody as being worldly, while she also maps the modes of perspective in her poems, which cannot be defined as universal, as “universal is just the suppression of anxiety, anxiety of difference”⁴³. For Moure, that theory can never be marked down to the convention as theory is “not a thing-to-obey but a process of thinking right inside the work that helps push the work where it otherwise could not go or would refuse to enter. I prefer to call it philosophy. This process is both rigorous and aleatory; it does not make for nice poetry at all times, and it irritates nice poets”⁴⁴.

A query that also repeatedly emanates verbalizes the potential of frameworking the conditions for the induction of those works which reiterate on being read as works that can be placed inside the corpus of sexual identity, as lesbian works, “however flexible and permeable this identity may be, while taking into account that as a woman and a lesbian my body is already read in a certain way by this culture, and that this reading can ‘harm me’”⁴⁵. Moure underlines that poetry has always been stranded by unambiguous questions which particularize to the ontological and that her body of work has also been mapping answers for questions such as the following: “what does it mean to love, to exist, to communicate? how does the social framework influence us or limit us? what are the limits of the person, of tenderness, of grace, of honesty, of speech? how do we situate ourselves as beings in civil society?”⁴⁶ Through such research, we can come up with different focus of looking at sexuality, the forming of sexual characters, and feelings, while at the same time considering civil responsibility and civil being. Therefore, her poem desires to contribute to the community through these efforts “so that multiple refractions, questions, and reverberatory echoes”⁴⁷ become potential.

Moure continues to write about the role of the poet and translator, immeasurably contributing to the demarginalization of questions mentioned in this text through hints only. She is not bothered by being criticized for her poetry seeming “difficulty” or “dismissed for purveying ‘rhetoric and jabberwocky’” because criticism, actually, always gives her even more freedom⁴⁸. Whether that is done in verse or prose as in the case, on this occasion, of the presented parts of the book *My Beloved Wager*, her work remains the result of many conjunctions, whether they are geographical, global in the context of cooperation in poetry and translation, and which relates to contemporary text but also those written long ago. For Moure, there are no limits; she transgresses them, punctuates, and enters them, following the origin of her text, the text of

Pessoa, Pato, or Wallace. We are talking about complex processes that never assume singulars because Moure does not acknowledge the existence of singulars. She is the author of immersion: "*plutôt*, immersed. Agitated, engaged, driven to the edge and over"⁴⁹, and of the movement – she is an inbetweener, producer, listener, reverberator – as the action is the world; victory over global problems, moving without a literary text is unimaginable.

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- ³⁷ *Ibidem*.
- ³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 67-68.
- ³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 73-74.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 74-75.
- ⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 81.
- ⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 75.
- ⁴³ *Ibidem*.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 101.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 103.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 111.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 98.
- ⁴⁹ Francesca Bianco, *Where Language Lives: A Conversation with Erin Moure (2017)*, <https://vallum.wordpress.com/2017/04/07/3573/>. Accessed 9 March 2021.