THE HOUSE OF HISTORY

Flight and Earlier Poems. Vona Groarke. Wake Forest University Press, 2004

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Vona Groarke has enjoyed considerable reputation as a poet in Ireland since her first collection, *Shale*, appeared in 1994. That collection divided almost evenly between poems of intimate love and incantatory language and others investigating the nature of subjectivity with a free, more expository use of line and stanza. This newest volume contains selections from *Shale*, *Other People's Houses* (1999), and the entirety of her most recent collection, *Flight* (2002), offering American readers their first substantial chance to survey the work of a poet who has appeared sporadically in U.S. journals and little magazines for years.

What we find in these pages is a cautious poetry but hardly a conventional one. The subject matter Groarke allows into her poems comes with a certain obliquity that only, in the last pages of *Flight*, turns a bold face to history and the public terrain readers of Irish poetry will find most familiar. Curiously, those poems that are most cagey, most sealed off from explicit contact with history and seem more matters of rhythm and sound than declarative statement – those poems, in other words, that one might be tempted to write off as the apprentice work of a poet feeling out her individual voice – are in fact those where the voice proves most singular and surprising. More conscious of verbal rhythm than most poets writing on either side of the Atlantic, Groarke occasionally uses meter and slant rhymes ("For the Unkept House" reads like a super-subtle Auden song). But she also relies on the syntactical doublings and parallelism that have been with us since the Psalms and provide one of the few musical alternatives to conventional formal verse:

> Won't you call for me at my house by the lake?
> Cedar of Lebanon. Silver Birch.
> Won't you take me in your boat to the centre of the lake?
> Wych elm. Wych elm?
> ("Islands")

One poem from late in the collection, "Cities and Flowers," serves as a well wrought summary of her style as it has unfolded:

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> Well, my garden works its allusions to the death,
> but the poppies remind me of lipstick, the hydrangeas
> of noise. I'm wearing high heels that will stake
> me to my place. There are pavements to be set tinkling;
> streets that need only breath for them to swell.

Groarke's poetry is an allusive garden indeed, or at least a figurative one. From the earliest poems, it deploys imagery of the natural world that we are never meant to take as an idle presentation of idylls. "Shale," for example, dregs up that fruit most infamous in contemporary American poetry, blackberries, only to deploy it in a fashion quite other than that of Robert Hass. For Hass, the fruit, or rather, the *word*, "blackberries," served as occasion to meditate upon the relation of thing to concept, signifier to signified. In other poets' hands, it has been a fruit praised for the sake of praising nature; or rather, natural description in general has served as a token of primitivist authenticity. For Groarke, in this early poem, even the natural world is too over-burdened with history for her to allow blackberries to stand either *for* themselves alone or *in* as a metonymy for the conundrum of language. Rather, she appropriates them, along with the moon, for figures in a world intimate and contained: that of two lovers alone:

> Our hands and lips are smeared with blackberries.
> Your skin, my sloe-skinned lover,
> never so sweet, your hand so quiet.
>
> The sea is breaking and unbreaking on the pier.
> You and I are making love
> in the lighthouse-keeper's house,
> my moon-eyed, dark-eyed, fire-eyed lover.

This is not coital solipsism, though in the more recent poem, "Veneer," it borders on that common vice. Rather, Groarke has methodically prepared her poetic to take on ever-wider circles of experience, always reconciling new contents, new subjects, to the immanent world of two lovers, of husband and wife and mother and father, where a fecund terrain of imagery, adequate to her needs, has been already prepared.

I emphasize this caution because it is a virtue. Groarke has evaded in her poetry what has undone many other Irish poets of her generation. Unlike Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon and their heirs, she has not felt obliged to create an entire poetic of the rift between history and beauty that perdures in Ireland as a result of British colonialism. And unlike the manifold Corkerian descendents of Patrick Kavanaugh and Seamus Heaney, her

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language, though drawing steadily on the quiet detail of the natural world and Irish provincial life, never succumbs to the quest of claiming the poetic line as a test of personal sincerity and national authenticity. Of course, these four poets are all acknowledged talents, and one could do worse than follow in their hobnailed wakes. What Groarke has *also* escaped is consigning herself to an embittered, reactive poetic that merely debunks and de-poeticizes Irish history and established Irish poets, or turns for model to the domesticated and humble post-imagism typical in contemporary American verse. These alternative paths push an open door or lay in a well trampled field of dandelions, respectively.

Groarke has carefully cut her poems from whole cloth, and yet one cannot fail to see a program stretching and expanding from volume to volume. "The Tree House," in *Shale*, conceives that most private of worlds: where one lover, longing for the other to return home, imagines their private world so tight against the skin that even their house has been figuratively constructed around them, with their own hands: "Because someone has been building piles of branches / in the wood, I have been remembering your hands. / I propose to make a shelter with a roof and walls of twigs / So the close-knit warp and weft will keep us safe."

The selections from *Other People's Houses* take for theme these same lovers and an array of houses, literal and figurative, each poem enlarging the village until at last, without grand claim or bold pretense, history itself has been comprised. The title-poem of the volume depicts the poet revisiting a house where she and her husband had lived some years previous. It has been ruined by fire, and in remembering the life they lived there, the poem suggests how all pasts, including those of public history, become irremediable wreckage; even so, from the ruins of memory one can step into an unpredictable but fulfilling present. "The Big House" explores "another ancient ruin / with gaping windows and the roof all in." The "another" here admits the frequency and even banality of old Protestant big houses, and ruins in general, in Ireland. In the poem, however, what had been thought scorched and fallen stone turns out to be a newly piled haystack: the shadow of the past sometimes eclipses the much more modest, less traumatic, life of post-Independence Ireland.

Yet another early poem, "Patronage," details the history of the Protestant ascendancy novelist, Maria Edgeworth, and concludes with the poet's own history, recording the self-consciously mundane way in which their histories overlap. The poet was born in a laying-in hospital that was once the Edgeworth estate:

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> I have never returned to Maria Edgeworth's house,
> but I've passed behind it on the Longford train
> and seen them sitting out in the garden.
> I've noticed how they turn towards us as we pass,
> how their faces are lost in the shadow of the house.

Seamus Deane, in one of his famous admonishments, protested the sycophantic and nostalgic persistence of the Big House as a theme in Irish literature; I suspect he would not disapprove of this poem. Groarke has registered the echoing chasm between Ascendency pretensions and the Celtic Tiger Republic; and her poems suggest that one of the consequences of this lingering material history of houses and ruins is that their presence may evoke mystery or mystique, but does not give us access to any definite meaning. An honest account of the Irish present requires the acknowledgment of these shadowed artifacts on the horizon of the past.

The poems in *Flight* clearly come as a kind of advance on this opening to history They are more narrative in tone, surrendering sadly much of the incantatory language that characterized Groarke's first two books. The long poem, "Or to Come," for example, despite its evocations of Yeats, Goldsmith and Thomas Grey, is sometimes clotted with awkward subclauses. Even so, it documents the visitors to a churchyard in such a way that we can sense the character of contemporary Ireland as it lives with a past that can no longer be univocally understood.

Her sequence, "The Bower," is probably the imaginative triumph of the volume, stealing the names of trees as occasion to talk about the human world (again, Groarke's work has from the first been concerned with the symbolic use of natural objects rather than their literal attributes). It, along with "*En Plein Air,*" suggest Groarke has chosen to use subverted and loose formal verse in the manner of Paul Muldoon, Don Patterson and others, at the expense of her more Psalmic early style. If this is a loss to the auditory imagination, it is a gain for Groarke as a whole, allowing her forms to remain subtle and rigorous without constricting the subject and tone of the poems themselves. Only in "Imperial Measure" does one suspect that the formal influence of her contemporaries – here, Ciaron Carson – has gotten the better of her. But that is one poem out of sixty-five, and it is still very good.

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