

Manuela Palacios González, ed. 2003: *Pluriversos: seis poetas irlandesas de hoxe*. Trad. Manuela Palacios González y Arturo Casas. Santiago: Follas Novas. 311 pp.

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In *Clearing the Space*, the Irish poet Anne Le Marquand Hartigan states that in bardic times “it was considered a great misfortune to have a poet in your family.” If the poet happened to be a woman, she continues, “this was a *double* misfortune” (Hartigan 1996: 20; emphasis in the original) since her power was supposed to be surrounded by magic and, hence, was much feared. Hartigan makes a connection between this old story and the prejudices held against contemporary women poets by the Irish literary establishment. Regardless of the validity of her argument from a purely historical perspective, Irish women writers in general—and poets in particular—have traditionally experienced invisibility beyond the borders of Ireland. Far from obtaining the international recognition they deserve, these poets are rarely included in university syllabuses in Spain and their books are not offered for sale in our bookshops. Those of us who devote our time to the field of Irish Studies are familiar with the names of the women poets translated by Manuela Palacios and Arturo Casas in the book I am now reviewing. But Spanish audiences in general have not heard of them, in part due to the lack of translations. *Pluriversos: seis poetas irlandesas de hoxe* translates into Galician six of the most reputed women currently publishing poetry in Ireland: Eavan Boland, Paula Meehan, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Mary Dorcey, Medbh McGuckian and Anne Le Marquand Hartigan—and by doing so inscribes their work in our country. I consider this task to be particularly important, bearing in mind the interest that arises every time one of the poems translated in *Pluriversos*—or any other by these writers—is mentioned in a paper, within the walls of a classroom or even in casual conversation with friends.

Some of the most vibrant and challenging work published in Ireland in recent decades is of female authorship. In an interview with the novelist Lia Mills, Paula Meehan remarks that in Ireland “[w]omen’s writing . . . has been such a phenomenon that anyone who doesn’t see it is really blind. I’m not saying this,” she continues, “in any kind of egotistical way, but anyone who hasn’t seen it must be going around with bags over their heads” (Mills 1992: 7). However, there has been an imbalance, in Ireland and elsewhere, between the quantity and quality of the poems written by Irish women and their inclusion in newspaper reviews, university courses and anthologies of contemporary Irish literature. A recent example would be *The Field Day Anthology*, which was planned to be *the* definitive anthology of Irish writing but which practically ignored the work of women when the first three volumes came out. There was uproar in the country and eventually a fourth and fifth volume was published, this time dealing entirely with Irish women’s writings, both past and present (Bourke 2002). It took the eight editors a decade to organise and finish this new project. In the meantime, for many critics and writers these two volumes were mere appendices. As Lia Mills stated in an interview in 1998, in the midst of the controversy and when it was thought that only a fourth volume would be brought out: “what will happen is, when it comes out, it will be the optional extra volume, and how many people are actually going to hear about it and buy it when it does come out?” (González Arias 1998: 184). In the end, the final result of this long process of selecting and editing women’s writings was excellent, but *The Field Day Anthology* has

become the publication that summarises all other debates around women's visibility in Irish culture. In our country anyone interested in the literary production of Ireland can have access to good translations of male writers, from W. B. Yeats and James Joyce to Seamus Heaney and Frank McCourt. But the women, and especially the poets, remain in the shadow. *Pluriversos* implicitly addresses this issue and casts some light over alternative versions of Ireland and of the Irish literary arena.

Among the merits of this book are not only the selection of poets but also the heterogeneity of their linguistic choices, subject matter, styles and origins. In spite of a certain tendency to separate authors from the Republic from those from the North, *Pluriversos* acknowledges the common history of artists coming from both sides of the island and translates Medbh McGuckian—one of the most imaginative voices the North has produced in recent decades—together with women from the Republic who, in any case, do not form a homogeneous lot. The Ireland that comes to us in the news or in the form of commercial films (usually produced in the States) is a divided territory where identity tends to be analysed in terms of binary oppositions: Northern Ireland versus the Republic, Protestants versus Catholics, English versus Irish. However, such divisions are but the reflection of a colonial agenda and/or a nationalist ideology that used the two languages and the two religions as mutually exclusive identitarian features. It is now generally accepted that Irish identity can no longer be perceived as a confrontation between the two terms of a dichotomy. Manuela Palacios' clever mixture of writers from both sides of the political divide offers a more nuanced view of contemporary Ireland. This has also been the approach adopted in previous compilations and critical studies published in Ireland and the States, such as Ailbhe Smyth's pioneering *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing* (1989), the comprehensive *Ireland's Women: Writings Past and Present* (Donovan 1994), or Patricia Boyle Haberstroh's *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (1996), among others.¹

Palacios' inclusion of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill in her selection also deserves some attention. Of the six poets represented in the volume, she is the only one who systematically uses Irish as a creative medium, "not out of any specifically conscious agenda as such," she says, "but because I have no choice (I can write prose in English no bother, and even jingles and verse, but *never* poetry)" (Ní Dhomhnaill 1992: 18; emphasis in the original). If Irish women poets are colonised by a patriarchal literary establishment, Irish women poets writing in the Irish language experience a double colonisation, seen, as they are, as inhabiting an inferior part of the Irish psyche and belonging to the Ireland of farmers and fishermen, the Ireland that supposedly cannot catch up with European modernity. However, this old-fashioned stereotype is deconstructed every time an Irish poet writing in the Irish language is translated and/or included in volumes such as this. Separating writers writing in Irish from those using English might indeed imply a marginalisation on the basis, once again, of binary opposites which are no longer operative.

1. Although published in 1996, *Women Creating Women* is still considered as one of the most comprehensive introductions to the work of contemporary Irish women poets. Boyle Haberstroh's analysis covers the poetry of Eithne Strong, Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Paula Meehan, Anne Hartigan, and Mary Dorsey are repeatedly referred to in the book and are the subject of the last chapter, "New Directions in Irish Women's Poetry" (197–224).

In her introduction to *Pluriversos*, Palacios remarks that the book does not purport to be an anthology, but to illustrate the richness of the poetic production of these women artists. All too often the label “Irish women writers” refers to the rejection of a patriarchal literary tradition that has systematically used women’s corporeality as the embodiment of the nation, depriving real flesh-and-blood women of an identity of their own. All the women selected in this volume have at some stage admitted publicly—and continue to do so—their disapproval of the metaphorical relationship between Woman (generic and capitalised) and Land (mythical and also capitalised) in their culture. The thematic weight of the Mother Ireland trope, however, does not overshadow the varied preoccupations of the poems translated. The differences in subject matter and style are important enough to avoid the dangers of homogenisation frequently associated with the label “Irish women poets”; here, again, Palacios has successfully fulfilled her aims.

Any selection is bound to have omissions. How important they are depends on factors such as the personal taste of the receiver of the texts or his/her ideological preferences. Choosing just ten poems by these six writers becomes particularly problematic if we take into account how extensive their production is, and how much of their work is representative of the Ireland of the ‘80s and ‘90s. However, the editor has not left out the poems that could be considered a must for anyone wanting to gain a fair introduction to contemporary Irish women’s poetry. Eavan Boland reflects the postcolonial and post-nationalist dimension of her cultural heritage in poems like “A Habitable Grief” and “Heroic,” but also focuses on the specific realities of the female body. “Anorexic,” about an emaciated Eve who has internalised the message that her body is sinful and shameful, and “Mastectomy,” about the implications that the removal of a breast has for the narrator, were first published in the poet’s 1980 collection *In Her Own Image*, and take us to a terrain previously edited out of the Irish literary tradition. Both social class and gender are among the main preoccupations of Paula Meehan. In “The Pattern,” she recalls her own childhood in the north of Dublin and a problematic mother-daughter relationship, in which the mother is depicted as the main means patriarchy has to perpetuate and transmit gender segregation. “Not Your Muse” reacts against the reification of female corporeality by male voyeurism and “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks” focuses on the social problems that stem from too repressive and too Catholic an Ireland.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems are full of references to the world of Celtic myths and fairies, a realm where the female psyche was much more readily accommodated than in later Christian imagery. The poet’s belief in the irrational and unconscious component of life is one of her distinctive characteristics and is reflected in *Pluriversos* in poems such as “An Bhatráil.” Irish is for Ní Dhomhnaill the “language of the mothers,” repressed by the colonising force of the English tongue. The very physical presence of the Irish original on the pages of this bilingual edition is already a statement for the preservation and recognition of that other Ireland—pagan and irreverent to the colonial eye but equally real, equally Irish. Mary Dorsey, who is also an excellent short-story writer, was a pioneering voice in clearing a space for same-sex desire. At a time when lesbian themes were something of an oddity (not to say nothing short of a scandal) in a heterosexual Ireland, Dorsey wrote love poems in which desire and eroticism were shaped in an unconventional way. Writers like Emma Donoghue undoubtedly owe much to Dorsey’s work, and her inclusion in this book contributes to the variety Manuela Palacios aimed to achieve. The translations of poems by Medbh McGuckian, considered by both critics and readers as among the most difficult of

contemporary authors, deserve special attention. The magic and imagination of her lines are translated into Galician with the care necessary to preserve their original playful dimension. Palacios' knowledge of contemporary Irish poetry and Casas' expertise in poetic creation are to be credited for translations that do justice to their originals. The inclusion of Anne Le Marquand Hartigan in this book is particularly worth praising: language, poetry, Christian mythology and repressed sexuality are among the topics covered in her work; but in spite of her challenging voice, this poet, painter, playwright and critic has not yet received the critical attention she deserves. Hartigan's writing is at times experimental, the breaking of the line unconventional and subversive—see "Land," for instance. Again, the translations into Galician convey the original spirit and technique.

Ireland, Scotland and the north of Spain are intimately related by a common interest in pagan ornaments, in the fantastic, in the irrational. In addition, Galicia and Ireland share a history of exile and parallel economic struggles. These translations, therefore, acquire an extra dimension of visibility for repressed linguistic communities. Galician audiences will no doubt appreciate this aspect. The book includes an excellent introduction to an Ireland unknown to most Spanish readers, suggesting further reading for anyone interested in continuing the journey initiated with *Pluriversos*. The quality of the edition matches its contents. All too often women's writings are published by marginal presses with sparse budgets, the pages falling out of the book the moment it is opened. Follas Novas has published a book that confers dignity on the work it contains. One may have preferred, though, a more detailed index including the title and pagination of all the poems, both in English/Irish and in the Galician translation. In *Pluriversos* the reader only gets the names of the poets in the index and the pages where each of the sections starts, which does not facilitate the location of a specific text.

This is an innovative addition to the Spanish literary landscape. A volume exclusively dealing with women's writing could be perceived as contributing to the marginalisation of the very work it tries to bring to the centre of representation. But *Pluriversos* is not a ghetto. Although some of these poems do address issues that have been contested by women elsewhere, they do not become a set of postmodern free-floating signifiers, but are culturally specific texts. As such, they are triggered by the specificities of being female, being a poet and being Irish in the last decades of the twentieth century. They stem from the need to reclaim some agency in the cultural heritage of Ireland. Therefore, the women translated in this book add six different pieces to an Ireland that until too recently used women as objects, not as subjects of the representation or, in the words of Eavan Boland, as poems, not poets. Some of these poets have, in one way or another, made it into the canon. A growing number of Spanish scholars doing research on Irish studies are publishing critical articles on the women poets translated in *Pluriversos*. However, these authors are still total strangers to the average Spanish reader. I see this book, as Palacios remarks in her introduction, as a *po-ética*, an original and appropriate way to summarise the social commitment this publication involves: a pioneering collection of voices. I would welcome the chance to review many more translations of the work of Irish women, either in isolation or as part of anthologies where female voices are fairly and strongly represented. *Pluriversos* has been the first to do so in Spain. But there are many other poets whose voices are waiting to be heard, to be translated and to be read so that alternative versions of Ireland can be offered to Spanish audiences. In the introduction to the book we read that these translations "facilitan a viaxe da vista e da mente por dous textos diferentes

entre os que, máis que unha relación de fidelidade ou traizón, se dá un trato de respecto e admiración coa finalidade de favorecer a difusión e a supervivencia do texto orixinal” (16). These bilingual pages do appeal to the senses but they also confront the reader with alternative versions of “the nation.” This project can be best summarised in Eavan Boland’s last lines of “A Habitable Grief” (“A mágoa habitáble”) (Palacios 2003: 44–45), where the poetic voice defines language as a site of power that presided over her childhood:

This is what language is:

a habitable grief. A turn of speech
for the everyday and ordinary abrasion
of losses such as this:

which hurts
just enough to be a scar.

And heals just enough to be a nation.

* * *

Iso é o que a lingua é:
unha mágoa habitáble. Unha clase de fala
para a abrasión adoita e cotiá
de perdas como esta:

que doe
o xusto para ser unha cicatriz.

E cura o xusto para ser unha nación.

In her essay on contemporary Irish women poets and the privatisation of myth, Clair Wills contends that in order to question traditional definitions of femininity and nationhood, “the process of ‘raiding’ the past must involve an interrogation, not simply a reconfirmation, of existing symbols” (1991: 252). In *Pluriversos*, Boland, Ní Dhomhnaill, Meehan, Dorsey, McGuckian and Hartigan revisit the past and reconstruct the present of Ireland with their own voices and from their personal and individual perspectives. Anyone looking for a challenging vision of Irish myths—past and present—will not be disappointed by the texts chosen and translated by Palacios.

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