

Manuela Palacios, ed. 2012. *Forked Tongues. Galician, Basque and Catalan Women's Poetry in Translations by Irish Writers*. Bristol: Shearsman. 20 + 164pp. ISBN: 978-1-84861-241-9.

JACQUELINE HURTLEY

Universitat de Barcelona

jahurtley@ub.edu

Associate Professor of English Literature at the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Manuela Palacios is no stranger to anthologising. In 2010, together with writer and lecturer in creative writing Mary O'Donnell, she edited *To the Winds Our Sails. Irish Writers Translate Galician Poetry*, a bilingual (galego [Galician]-English / Irish) volume, published by Salmon Poetry in Ireland and which, as Palacios states in her introduction, "served as a guide" (2012, 13) in producing *Forked Tongues*. Moreover, in 2003 her own translations of Irish women poets into Galician and those of colleague and poet Arturo Casas had appeared in the bilingual volume *Pluriversos: Seis poetas irlandesas de hoxe* [Pluriversos: Six Irish Women Poets of Today].¹ The present anthology is her most ambitious project to date in terms of range since she has moved beyond the Celtic connection (Galicia-Ireland / Ireland-Galicia), although Galician women poets command a significant presence in the volume, to embrace women writers in the other two autonomous communities in the Spanish state whose tongues may also be envisaged as "forked," i.e., those whose origins lie in Euskadi—The Basque Country—and Catalunya—Catalonia. The image adopted for the main title of the volume draws on Eavan Boland's "The Mother Tongue" and Marilar Aleixandre's "nun coitelo de sal" [On a Knife of Salt]. The pertinent lines from the two poems are reproduced as epigraph and, as Palacios explains in the opening paragraph of her introduction, the image is intended here to evoke both the relationship between the Galician, Basque, Catalan languages and English, as well as the bilingual condition of the writers and the communities they hail from, where the languages in question possess a co-official status with Castilian Spanish.

The volume includes fifty-two poems by thirteen poets: five Galicians are followed by four Basques and, finally, four Catalans; the eldest were born in the 1950s and the youngest of all in 1980. Therefore, in chronological terms with regard to the more senior among the contributors, the text harks back to the time of the Franco regime, though all have

¹ All the Irish women poets included in the 2003 anthology write in English save Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, who writes exclusively in Irish. For information on Palacios's further publications in 2008, 2009 and 2010, fruits of research projects on contemporary Irish and Galician writers, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, see Palacios 2012, 182.

published as poets in the wake of the dictator's demise. The Irish writers responsible for rendering their work into English range from those who write in Irish and English, or exclusively in English, some are members of *Aosdána*, Ireland's academy of the arts, and some are academics as well as practising writers. It may be said, then, that the creative cluster is rich and promising and, indeed, the names and production listed under "Authors and Translators" (Palacios 2012, 171-81) confirm that it is in no way negligible.

The selection of poetry from the thirteen poets included in *Forked Tongues* reveals a focus on subjects which are familiar to a reader of poetry in the Western tradition, thus, birth, love, death, time and transience, loss, longing, memory. However, the poems are distinct in the attention awarded women's existence and experience in their particular environments, both geographical and domestic, as well as original in registering cultural referents beyond the immediate contexts out of which they have grown. They also connect with theoretical discourses which have challenged the established in the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, from feminisms to Queer, passing through the question of woman and nationhood.²

Pilar Pallarés is the first of the Galicians, a poet whose work initially appeared in the 1980s and for this reason has been placed before that of her compatriots. Her first poem, "Matéria porosa na mañá..." [Sieved substance of morning...] is an instance of the crossing of geographical boundaries referred to above. Situated in the large Roman necropolis, the Alyscamps in Arles, the text strikes a meditative note whilst also registering an existential angst. This angst is also manifest in "asi é e asi sexa" [that is how it is and so be it], suffused with the weight of existence. The load of living is lifted in "O desexo era un lóstrego" ["Desire, a lightning strike..."], although the passionate encounter affords short-lived relief within the "abyss" (Palacios 2012, 31).

Chus Pato is Pallarés's contemporary though her first volume of poetry didn't appear until 1991. Rodríguez García has referred to this radical writer as "one of the most exciting feminist voices in contemporary Galician literature," although he also observes that the "experimental freedom" found in her poetry "often takes [the reader] to uncomfortable extremes" (2011, 106). Pato herself has spoken of her writing as "a literature of resistance" (Casas 2011, 135), a resistance which has also manifested itself through her militancy in the *Frente Popular Galega* in the struggle for an independent Galicia. Of the four poems included in *Forked Tongues*, the first might be said to be the most unhinging, and fascinating. The title is already transgressive, highlighting seven concepts, the majority of which bear no mention in the text that follows. The text initially evokes the narrative of a children's book before moving into a consideration of death, of what may be achieved if the heart so believes it, of forms and life in the universe and of a world without the desire for, or memory of, Christianity.

The three Galician poets who follow were all born in the 1970s. The two poems that introduce the selection from Lupe Gómez Arto's work reflect on women's existence.

² On this latter connection, see González Fernández 2005.

“Road Movie” (entitled thus in the original Galician) reflects the impact on her generation of American culture, an impact which is also manifest in the anthology in the poetry of the Basque poets Itxaro Borda (see her “Be My Woman”) and Miren Agur Meabe (“Patti Smith Rimbaudekin ametsetan” [Patti Smith Dreams of Rimbaud]).³ Part of a collage of texts constructed in Gómez Arto’s “Road Movie” rewrites familiar words from the New Testament Sermon on the Mount, and we shall see fellow Galician Yolanda Castaño also reworking Biblical discourse, feminising the Word made flesh and echoing the Gospels according to John and Matthew in “Historia da Transformación” [History of the Transformation].

Rodríguez García has referred to Castaño’s poetry as “notoriously difficult” (2011, 102) and this can already be appreciated in “Pero eu, filla das miñas fillas...” [But I, Daughter of my Daughters...],⁴ where the flamboyant poet’s taste for playing with multiple identities, “ventriloquised alter egos” (Rodríguez García 2011, 112), is made manifest, together with a determination to disrupt an established order, to shock. In the shorter “Corrupción” [Corruption], the speaker is weighed down by androgynous clothing (a diving suit and boots) before being suddenly projected into an unmapped territory which reduces the subject to a position of vulnerability. Like Pato, Castaño is set on unhinging; yet, in the case of the younger poet, the intention is not politically driven.

Do Cebreiro’s “Poesía Erótica” [Erotic Poetry] dwells on the creation of poetry as an erotic experience whilst “Eran follas pequechas...” [They were little leaves...] becomes an exploration of how to write in order to release new vitality. In “Europa (Cuarto Reich)” [Europe (Fourth Reich)], a so-called Fourth Reich in Europe, evocative of the devastating Third, becomes a means of approaching the suffering of women waiting for their men folk to surface from the coalmine.⁵ The poem alludes to this “era” (Palacios 2012, 71) in which women meditated on their own hands, wanting to question their purpose. The “I” speaker who surfaces in the final lines of the poem expresses the desire that “the work of the hands [that] thrives in our minds,” writing, might reach “the heart of the world” (73) since consciousness is only temporal.⁶

Basque poet Itxaro Borda’s texts show her rewriting the fifteenth-century dirge *Milia Lasturkoren eresia* [Milia of Lastur Revisited], foregrounding here, as in “Be My Woman” and “Kartz” [Quartz], love between women. Her use of the Dave Peeverett song in “Be My Woman” reveals her familiarity with 1970s American pop music whilst the allusions to Janis Joplin and Judith Butler take the poem beyond passion into the realm of radical practice and theory. Borda renders homage to the Catalan poet Maria-Mercè Marçal in

³ See also the reference to Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* in Do Cebreiro’s “Europa (Cuarto Reich).”

⁴ Originally published in *Yo es otro: Autorretratos de la nueva poesía* as “Poema a Yolanda.” See Josep M. Rodríguez (2001, 57-59).

⁵ In connection with this, see Rábade Villar’s comment on “the emotional experience of struggle and corporeal vulnerability” (2011, 113).

⁶ O’Donnell reads the Galician “conciencia” as English “conscience” (Palacios 2012, 73), which it may be, though I wonder if “consciousness” is not the case here, also “conciencia” in Galician.

“Maria Merceren (B)egia” [The Eye of Maria Mercè Marçal], and in the English-entitled “Outside,” she reinforces the outsideness of the speaker, “the voice of a nomad” (Palacios 2012, 87), by punctuating the text with English. The climax of the poem expresses defiance of fame or canon and constitutes a prayer, a tribute evocative of the feminist re-cognitions in the latter part of the twentieth century of the struggle of mothers and grandmothers.

Miren Agur Meabe’s “Patti Smith Rimbaudeken” [Patti Smith Dreams of Rimbaud], “La Jolie Fille-ren automitologia” [Self-Mythology of La Jolie Fille] and “Salmoa” [Psalm] are plagued by memories, clearly those of an adult woman with regard to sexual surrender in the first poem and in relation to her childhood in the second, a story of abuse which moves beyond the personal experience to connect with that experienced by “girls . . . today in Burundi . . . in Darfur” or by “[an] Afghan child” (Palacios 2012, 99). In “Salmoa” [Psalm], sacred lexicon is appropriated to speak of the profane: desire and passion. “Zisnearan kantua” [Swan Song], developed in clipped couplets, conveys a melancholic mood, moved by menopause and plunged in disillusionment.

The selection from the work of Castillo Suárez is far from heartening in terms of subject matter, since her poems deal relentlessly with death, sorrow, torture and suffering. This said, the poetry is highly original, and unforgettable. The reader of Suárez’s painful and disturbing verse will find some relief in the first two poems by Leire Bilbao, “1977ko urriko gau bat” [October Night, 1977] and “Terra Nova,” which celebrate the intimacy shared by the speaker’s parents and register the joy of their parenthood, respectively. However, the darker mood of “Kaleko zakurra” [Stray Dog] and “Belarra” [Grass] strongly contrast with the earlier two.

The Catalan contingent in *Forked Tongues* is led by five poems authored by Vinyet Panyella, two of which take us to the painting of Cézanne and the artist’s studio in Aix-en-Provence. “Autoretrat en nu” [Nude Self-portrait] registers rebellion towards the male gaze whilst “Taller Cézanne” [Cézanne’s Studio] uses the careful layout of the artist’s studio, the maintaining of a delicate balance, to make a plea for securing the no-less fragile equilibrium of love. Loneliness, disillusionment and a severe stoicism are expressed in “Cerca’m, si vols” [Look for me, if you like], “Una estona abans...” [A while before...] and “Vaig viure...” [I lived...].

The poems of Susanna Rafart, Gemma Gorga and Mireia Calafell are quite distinct from one another. Rafart’s deal with the determination not to be overwhelmed by adversity (“La veu” [The Voice]), with vulnerability (“Con tardo vuelo” [With Sluggish Flight]) and with fear (“Senyor, no m’abandonis a l’amor” [O Lord, do not abandon me to love]). Those of Gemma Gorga possess great poise. They are philosophical in their questioning and zen-like in their pace, whilst the selection from Mireia Calafell’s work deals with loss, longing and loneliness. Her “Talls” [Cuts] reveals a preoccupation with life’s transience, also a feature in Gorga’s “El barquer” [The Ferryman], evocative of Virginia Woolf’s depiction of the passing of time in the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse*. Calafell’s “Diumenge” [Sunday] foregrounds woman’s susceptibility to the myth of romantic love, whilst Gorga illustrates her agency in “I aleshores ella” [“And Then She”].

The above provides some sense of the riches contained in *Forked Tongues*. Undoubtedly, the anthology merits the epithet of ground-breaking. It has broken ground in bringing poets alongside their colleagues who might otherwise have continued to remain unknown beyond their communities of origin or the Spanish state;⁷ in facilitating access to a public who read English; in revealing the talent, courage and power of women poets in Galicia, Euskadi and Catalunya and in the re-fashioning provided by Irish poets, in the language appropriated from the coloniser, to boot. It might be argued that translation into Irish would have further enhanced the volume but, as it stands, the anthology is already a *tour de force*. The task of coordinating the twenty-eight writers and translators involved in the project is certainly no mean achievement.⁸ The editor deserves hearty congratulations, as do all those who contributed and laboured in bringing the volume about.

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Jacqueline Hurtley is Professor of Literature in English at the Universitat de Barcelona. Her *José Janés: editor de literatura inglesa* was awarded the Enrique García Díez Research Prize by AEDEAN

⁷ Chus Pato, for instance, has been translated into English by Galician-Canadian Erin Moure (Rodríguez García 2011, 124; 19), but hers is a case of exception rather than rule.

⁸ See the notes on the "Authors and Translators" (Palacios 2012, 171-81) referred to above.

in the 1990s. More recently, she has contributed to five volumes in the Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe series. Her biography *Walter Starkie. An Odyssey* was published in 2013.

Address: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya. Universitat de Barcelona. Corts Catalanes, 585. 08007, Barcelona, Spain. Tels.: +34 934035677; +34 934035686. Fax: 933171249.