

Mary O'Donnell, and Manuela Palacios, eds. 2010: *To the Wind Our Sails. Irish Writers Translate Galician Poetry*. Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare: Salmon. 172 pp. ISBN 978-1-907056-37-6

Katharina Walter  
National University of Ireland, Galway  
katharina.mara.walter@gmail.com

*To the Wind Our Sails*, an anthology of poems edited by Mary O'Donnell and Manuela Palacios, ventures into the largely unexplored terrain that connects the cultures of Galicia and Ireland today, making an exquisite and diverse selection from contemporary Galician women's poetry available to readers of English and Irish. Ten of the most distinguished contemporary women poets from Galicia are represented with five poems each – four in English, one in Irish, thus highlighting the language question as a strongly politicized issue that these two writing traditions share. The poets represented in this anthology have chosen the Galician vernacular over Spanish, a decision that might be obscured by the translation of these poets' works into English as the lingua franca *par excellence*, were it not for the fact that one out of five texts is rendered into Irish, another regional language. This trilingual anthology thus acknowledges the importance of language choice, while still enabling the vast number of English-speakers worldwide to read recent Galician women's poetry.

O'Donnell's and Palacios's anthology complements the vividly emerging field of comparative scholarship on contemporary Galician and Irish women's poetry. Notably, collections of essays and interviews such as *Palabras Extremas* (Palacios González and González Fernández 2008) and *Writing Bonds* (Palacios González and Lojo 2009) have already highlighted many shared concerns in these two bodies of poetry. Both contemporary Irish and Galician women's poetry have emerged from male-dominated literary traditions and under the influence of Catholicism. In the cultivation of the absolute binaries, for instance, of the Virgin Mary versus Mary Magdalene as instructive models of womanhood, both cultures have instrumentalized female sexuality and corporeality for establishing and protecting social orders that have ultimately subdued women, while also involving them in the consolidation of these orders. In Ireland, the discourses of religion have been closely interwoven with those of the nation, which has led to a complex entanglement of conceptions of gender and sexuality with those of national identity. These intricacies have also coloured more recent political debates on issues like birth control and abortion, showing that the female body is still to some extent publicly owned. Both Ireland and Galicia have cultivated a myth of motherland as part of a, historical or constructed, Celtic cultural substrate. In doing so, both cultures have contended with the image of an, existent or projected, 'feminine' nation. Palacios identifies this forging of an identity as distinctive from that of a larger, domineering entity as the product of a "Celtic imaginary", which "may not be strictly Celtic in its origins but which has been constructed as Celtic through the cultural practices of many generations" (Palacios González and Lojo 2009: 90). In that respect, Galicia has often emphasized its ties with Ireland, and Galician artists have often looked towards Ireland for inspiration, an interest which has not been required to the same extent. *To the Wind Our Sails* addresses this imbalance and enables a more reciprocal understanding of the ties between the cultures of Ireland and Galicia. The order in which different poets' works are arranged in *To the Wind Our Sails* is determined by the years of their births, starting

with Luz Pozo Garza (born in 1922) and ending with Xiana Arias (born in 1983), thus spanning several generations of poets from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Luz Pozo Garza's poems, translated by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, explicitly forge a connection with Ireland, envisaging a common Celtic heritage and shared Christian values as a foundation for this bond. In 'Os palacios de inverno' / 'Winter Palaces', the speaker explores Dublin with a Bible from Santiago de Compostela, drawing attention to psalms "que regulan a alianza / dunha linaxe celta en dúas ribeiras" / "that regulate the alliance of a Celtic lineage / on two shores" (30-31). Setting out from the Hill of Howth, 'Bosque de rhododendros' / 'Forest of Rhododendrons' journeys via Bran's 700 AD voyage towards the Irish Literary Revival (34-35). 'Páxina atlántica' / 'Page of the Atlantic' evokes "os míticos tesouros delque reino de Tara" / "the mythical treasures of the Kingdom of Tara" (38-39). In this anthology, Pozo Garza's poems are the foremost examples of a cultural tradition in Galicia since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that has explored Celtic legends in search of cultural models that would differentiate Galicia from Spain. In other poets' works, direct references to Ireland are less frequent. Nevertheless, the reader versed in Irish women's poetry will find many familiar themes, including a renegotiation of the discourses of nationalism with its, often female, archetypes, and a foregrounding of the body, of urban and rural landscapes and environmentalist concerns.

María do Carme Kruckenberg's poems delve into memories of passionate, fraught relationships. A sense of fatality and loss characterizes the pieces included in this anthology, which have been rendered into English by Anne Le Marquand Hartigan and into Irish by Rita Kelly. In 'O cristal axústase...' / 'The Mirror Reflects...', the speaker's gaze is hit by fleeting images in the mirror, glimpses of which are captured in short, ruptured lines. The ephemeral nature of what is depicted in the body of the poem is in contrast with the closing lines, which make reference to the permanence of the "erro insalvável de caridade" or, in English, the "insurmountable / failure of love" (50-51). In a similar vein, 'Lembro aqueles tempos do verán...' / 'I Remember those Summer Days...' reminisces about past loves in the face of passing time and the inevitable ageing process (52-53), thus addressing a concern that also features prominently, for instance, in the poetry of Eavan Boland.

With translations by Celia de Fréine, the anthology presents an exquisite selection from the works of Xoana Torres, whose erudite, eclectic poems draw on Greek legend, Shakespearean tragedy, as well as Cubist painting, often reviewing famous heroines from mythology and world literature. The fatality of love is a theme that unites these otherwise diverse poems. In 'Penélope' / 'Penelope', Xoana Torres's most famous poem, which is included in Irish, the wife of Odysseus imagines her own odyssey (58-59). In 'The Course of Nature', Manuela Palacios points out that in the poem "[t]he sea, traditionally only a space where male fishermen, sailors, explorers and pirates dared to venture, and which women could only languidly contemplate from the shore, becomes now a privileged trope for women's participation in the public sphere" (Palacios González and Lojo 2009: 84). The speaker in 'Ofelia' / 'Ophelia' addresses Hamlet's lover, who is in a state of mental disarray in the face of imminent death. Eros and Thanatos are close companions in this poem, which is pervaded by a sense of decay, with many references to the fatality of love itself (60-61). In 'Ribadavia' / 'Sibyl in Ribadavia', finally, Torres refers to Marc Chagall, whose Cubist aesthetic the poem seeks to emulate (62-63).

Marilar Aleixandre's poetry, translated by Mary O'Malley, captures strong, distinctive images, often characterized by stark violence. In 'Derrotas domésticas' / 'Domestic Defeats', the speaker addresses her mother, whose complacently smiling face in

photographs is contrasted with the forcefulness with which she carries out her day-to-day household duties, beheads eels and guts sea bream. Aspects of her personality that are not in integrity with her subservient maternal role function are obliterated, rendering her as a woman whose “francés e alemán / eran inútiles contra a graxa nos fogóns”; in the English translation: “French and German / were in vain against the grease on the stove” (72-73). In its comment on the self-effacing role in which mothers may be cast, Aleixandre’s text is sympathetic with many of Paula Meehan’s poems. Likewise, the latent anger that accompanies the mother’s self-denials in ‘Derrotas domésticas’ is also present in Meehan’s ‘The Pattern’, first published in her collection *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991: 17-20). The futility of language in the face of oppression in ‘Derrotas domésticas’ makes way for a more optimistic statement on the power of words in ‘O diario (3 rabuda)’ / ‘The Diary (3 Surly)’, which portrays a woman who “usa as palabras para cortar” / “uses words to cut” (74-75). In ‘Varrer as cinzas’ / ‘Sweeping up the Ashes’, a son addresses his absent father, of whom the fire in the kitchen becomes a symbol (76-77) – an interesting analogy, as in many traditions since the Roman Vestal Virgins the hearth is conventionally feminine. ‘Comedores de cabezas’ / ‘The Head Eaters’ opens with a quotation from Ovid and makes reference to the naiads, water nymphs in Greek mythology who inhabit rivers, springs or waterfalls. The strength and dynamism of the children of the naiads, their mobility and dexterity in water is in contrast with ‘our’ need to use sails (80-81).

Luz Pichel, who only started publishing in Galician in 2006 and whose poems were rendered into English by Catherine Phil McCarthy, uses images from the natural and the animal world to question the internal dynamics that govern human societies and the self. ‘Queimar a leña’ / ‘Breaking the Firewood’ opens with the rustle of people passing and a rooster’s cry, then comments on the animal’s fear of humans, to conclude with the speaker’s acknowledgement of her own destructive impulse (86-87). In ‘Pénsanlle as pólas á figuera con carga dos figos’ / ‘The Branches of the Fig Tree are Laden with its Crops of Figs’, nature is personalized and gendered. A fig tree, chafed by a male wind, is analogized to a mother-to-be, pregnant with ‘dolls of the mist’ in the morning, then relieved due to the intervention of men of the air. The poem evokes a variety of female archetypes, echoing the maiden / matron / crone from Celtic mythology. The image of female fertility identified in the fig tree is mirrored in the portrayal of a scarecrow with a doll. The scarecrow in turn is also reminiscent of a hag (88-89).

Chus Pato writes hybrid texts between poetry and prose, which were translated by Lorna Shaughnessy (English) and Rita Kelly (Irish). Pato’s poems inquire into the relationship between the individual and society, and the impact of language on the negotiation of the same. ‘Porque non é só o idioma o que está amenazado...’ / ‘Because it is not only Language that is Threatened...’ explores the sometimes vague boundaries in the relationship between language and material existence (96-97). ‘A voz era pánico...’, translated by Lorna Shaughnessy as ‘The Voice was Pure Panic...’, is an anxious, breathless text about the creative process, which resonates strongly with the writings of Hélène Cixous on ‘écriture féminine’. The piece overflows, transcending the page, the human body, the billboard along the motorway, as well as nature. In fact, the poetic persona, ‘wo/man’, also transcends the boundaries of gender and of the ego (98-99).

Ana Romani’s poems, translated by Maurice Harmon, offer articulations of the somatic that diverge from the homogeneous, idealized body images that have long predominated in western cultures. Rather than the *closed body*, to use a phrase coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, from the predominant cultural paradigm in the western world since the Renaissance, Romani portrays a corporeality that is ‘open’ and in process. ‘Os lagartos

víron a pasar...’ / ‘The Lizards Watched her as she Passed...’ envisages the body as a site for the inscription of lived experience, pointing to the “strange shapes pain inscribes / on wasted flesh” (108-09). ‘Por que sei que te vas ás veces...’ / ‘Because I Know you Sometimes Leave...’ and ‘Que os cabalotes me suban polas pernas...’ / ‘Would that the Sperm Whales should Climb my Legs...’ articulate the sexual impulse as a desire to efface the boundaries of the body and of integral subjectivity, thus highlighting another aspect of the body in the process of becoming (110-11, 114-15).

In María do Cebreiro’s poems, translated into English by Cairíona O’Reilly and into Irish by Rita Kelly, references to love and wounding are frequent, as is an intertextual dialogue with other voices from world literature. Do Cebreiro’s ‘A terra devastada’ / ‘The Waste Land’ is obviously indebted to T. S. Eliot’s 1922 poem ‘The Waste Land’, with which it shares not only the title but also several characters and other references. Like in Eliot’s post-war text, in do Cebreiro’s poem worlds are also disintegrating, but this disintegration is viewed more positively in terms of its potential to bring renewal. In do Cebreiro’s literary response to ‘The Waste Land’, Eliot’s text and the ‘real’ world collide. The female speaker, the owner of a printing press, merges with T. S. Eliot and with the clairvoyant in his poem, thus being at the same time both male and female, the maker as well as the object of the poem. The description of the making of poetry as a craft, finally, defies the binaries of mind versus body, and culture versus nature (122-23).

Translated into English by Máighréad Medbh and Irish by Rita Kelly, María Lado’s ‘Así doe novembro’ / ‘How November Hurts’ is one of the highlights of this anthology. The landscape becomes a site for the inscription and manifestation of the speaker’s aches, wounds, scars and desires. In addition, nature also absorbs political strife and other aspects of collective histories. The merging of the personal and the political is anticipated in the opening lines of the poem: “así doen as moas apretadas contra ti, coma un barco, / unha traxedia para un pobo / ou o recordo dun membro fantasma” (“how my molars hurt, ground against you like a boat, / how a national tragedy hurts / or the haunting memory of a limb” [136-37]).

The speaker’s yearnings are mirrored in the “mareas de máis encher / e a illa é a penas unha pedra na que morde o mar”; in English: “ravenous tides / chewing the island to a stone” (138-39). María Lado has been publishing from 1997 onwards, and her work includes four collections of poems and a blog: *Casa atlántica*. Apart from writing poetry, Lado also has a background in audiovisual art and puppet theatre.

The poems of Xiana Arias manifest an honest, unpretentious, confident voice that speaks of what it is to be young. Born in 1983 in Lugo, Arias, whose poems have been translated by Paddy Burke, has published two collections since 2007, as well as working as a journalist. ‘Este é o lugar onde media a morte...’ / ‘Here is the Place of Death’s Growing...’ speaks of death, shadows overcasting the sun, and being drunk (148-49). ‘Non hai pistolas...’ / ‘There are no Guns...’ offers a succinct portrayal of suburban domestic conflict (150-51). ‘Sentada na porta da casa...’ / ‘By the Door of her House, Sitting...’, finally, comments on an imagined or “hysterical” pregnancy (155).

As an anthology, *To the Wind Our Sails* is both excitingly diverse and, in the best possible sense of the word, sketchy. The book does not constitute an act of canonization, nor does it pretend to do so. Rather, *To the Wind Our Sails* is carried by the dynamism in the encounter of works in progress from two distant, yet connected shores. Approaches to translation in *To the Wind Our Sails* are varied, ranging from verbatim transcriptions to very free interpretations of the Galician originals. The plurality of voices in the original Galician poems in *To the Wind Our Sails* is thus enhanced by the fact that different writers have also

produced the English- and Irish-language versions. At a more general level, *To the Wind Our Sails* is making an invaluable contribution to the understanding of the complex dynamics that characterize the relationship between regional and European cultural identities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The poems in this anthology show that we are neither solely defined by our regional affiliations, nor can we discard those in favour of an exclusively European identity. Rather, living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe requires us to negotiate our own individuality within our various collective affiliations; to understand the particularities of our regional backgrounds, as well as our various ties with other cultures.

#### Works Cited

- Meehan, Paula 1991: *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*. Loughcrew: Gallery.
- Palacios González, Manuela and Helena González Fernández, eds. 2008: *Palabras extremas: Escritoras gallegas e irlandesas de hoy*. Oleiros: Netbiblo.
- Palacios González, Manuela and Laura Lojo, eds. 2009: *Writing Bonds: Irish and Galician Contemporary Women Poets*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Received 22 July 2011

Accepted 30 September 2011

Katharina Walter (Ph.D. National University of Ireland) has published several articles about contemporary women's poetry and gender discourse. She has been teaching at the School of Humanities (English) and the School for Modern Languages (German) at the above university since 2004. Her teaching interests include contemporary women's writing, poetry, Shakespearean and contemporary drama, as well as cultural theory. Katharina Walter's current research focuses on contemporary Irish women's poetry and Migration Studies.

Address: School of Modern Languages, German Section, School of Humanities, English Section. National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland. Tel.: +353 91 492226. Fax: +353 91 494572.