



*Poem-ando Além Fronteiras: dez poetisas contemporâneas irlandesas e portuguesas. Poem-ing Beyond Borders: ten contemporary Irish and Portuguese women poets.* Ed. & Trans. Gisele Giandoni Wolkoff. Coimbra: Terra Ocre-Palimage, 2011.

Reinforcing intercultural dialogue is one of the stated objectives of this bilingual anthology, which has resulted from both a literary research project on contemporary Irish and Portuguese women poets and the collaboration with the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra. Portuguese and Brazilian universities have a long-standing tradition of Irish Studies and Gisele G. Wolkoff's commendable contribution consists in exploring the cultural and social ties between contemporary women poets in Ireland and Portugal. Her research has necessarily been informed by current debates in comparative literature, feminist critical theory and present-day poetics of resistance. Wolkoff's collection *Poem-ando Além Fronteiras / Poem-ing Beyond Borders* is not merely an inquiry into intercultural dialogue but a performance of this dialogue. The bonds between today's Irish and Portuguese women writers may not be initially evident to the common reader, but Wolkoff's anthology is a manifestation of how these bonds can actually be substantiated.

In her introduction, Wolkoff avoids essentialist standpoints by referring to "women's universe as a social practice" (12) and consequently acknowledges the foreseeable differences among the writers of each community and between both literary traditions. That said, she is interested in women writers' poetic strategies as they engage in the "various social problematizations of belonging and fragmentation" (12), in their belonging to a nation, a literary tradition, a common sexual identity, but also in their disaffection regarding normative identities and patriarchal institutions that consign them to the margins. These are writers who suspect the patriarchal bias of language and often elaborate on experiences of loss and silence. Nevertheless, writing also entails empowerment and language may be a propitious tool to apprehend the world, even if these poets are conscious of the gulf between "what is said and that which one aims at saying" (12) and take up the challenge posed by the limitations of language.

To the marginalisation of gender one could add that of genre because, although poetry enjoys considerable symbolic capital, it remains marginal in numbers of readers and in the literary market. For this reason, Wolkoff's initiative and its favourable reception by the publishing house Terra Ocre-Palimage are doubly praiseworthy as a courageous act of cultural resistance; even more so if we bear in mind that there is translation work involved which, rather than rendered invisible – as is often unfortunately the case –, is made manifest here through the bilingual layout on facing pages. The attractive front cover illustration by Alemterra already suggests a mirror strategy of reflections and distortions which is paralleled by the facing disposition of source and target texts. The

Portuguese-language version of both Portuguese and Irish poems goes on the right-hand page, which implies that the intended audience is a Portuguese-language one. However, the book provides English originals and translations from cover to cover and thereby becomes easily accessible to English-language audiences worldwide. A note must be included regarding the admirable effort made by Gisele G. Wolkoff who, apart from organising the collection, selecting the poets and their poems, writing the introduction and the poets' singular biographical sketches, provides the translation, not just of the Irish poems into her mother tongue, but also the other way around, from Portuguese into English.

*Poem-ando Além Fronteiras / Poem-ing Beyond Borders* collects poems by five Portuguese and five Irish women poets. In her introduction, Wolkoff summarily explains what she means by “contemporary” poetry, which, on the Portuguese side, is framed by the early work of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, followed by a highlight in the seventies with the publication of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, and reaching until the present day. On the Irish side, Wolkoff pays homage to the inspiring role of Eavan Boland since the early 1980s. However, neither Boland nor other acclaimed Irish poets such as Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill are included in this anthology, which wisely makes room for other widely-awarded and prolific writers who are less ubiquitous in academic and literary criticism.

The collection begins with four poems by Ana Hatherly “one of the iconic figures of Portuguese Experimentalism” (18). As in the rest of the anthology the poems here selected were first published around the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. Hatherly's writing is highly metapoetical and delves into the workings of the imagination and the creative process, as well as into the potential and limitations of language. Her poem “As palavras de papel” [Sheet Words]<sup>2</sup> (20-21) is dedicated to the linguist Eugénio Coseriu and alludes to his conception of literature as the plenitude of language: “A literatura / (disse um célebre filólogo) / é a plenitude da lingua”. The reader remains haunted by Hatherly's oxymoron in her reference to literary writing as the “real imaginado” [imagined real thing]. The dialogue between source and target versions is especially apt in the poem “As palavras aproximam” [Words Approach] (24-25), where the English version captures the conceits and rhythm of the original: “[as palavras] Soltam freios / abrem clareiras no medo / fazem pausa na aflição” [They release brakes / open clearings in fear / make pause in affliction].

The following poet – the arrangement seems to follow the alphabetical order of the poets' first name – is Ana Luísa Amaral, “the poet of metalanguage” (28), who is represented with seven poems, four of which have Irish settings. Curiously enough, her first poem bears the same title as one by the Irish poet Celia de Fréine, also in this anthology – a Contents page with page numbers and titles of individual poems would have facilitated this recognition: “Terra de ninguém”, “No Man's Land”. Amaral stands out for the variety of subject matter in the poems here selected, which range from a desire to transcend the self, “Digo espaço / ou receita qualquer / em vez de mim” [I say space / or any such recipe / instead of me] (30-31), to the materialisation of time in verse “[...]”

ampulhetas feitas de sol / e versos” [hourglasses made by the sun / and verses] (32-33), or the lyric persona’s obsessive passion in “Imagens” (35). The poems on Ireland pursue the various inscriptions of myth and history in Irish landscape in ways that would yield a productive dialogue with Susan Connolly’s poetry, in particular with her collection *Forest Music*.<sup>3</sup> Amaral’s verse playfully overflows the constrictions of poetic conventions very much like that Irish river which “engrossou e ameaça transbordar” [thickened and threatens overflowing] (46-47).

Conceição Riachos is introduced with a poetic appreciation by Gisele G. Wolkoff: “quando as palavras não chegam, os quadros o fazem” [when words are never enough, paintings will do] (48-49), as Riachos cultivates both literature and painting. The poems here selected are an exercise in concise and terse language which inquires, among other topics, into a loveless, routine existence: “Há uma corrente / de pequenos nada / a encadear os dias” [There is a current / of small nothingnesses / chaining days] (52-53). Riachos shares with her fellow Portuguese poets an insatiable curiosity for the workings of language, as her poem “Password” masterfully attests: “Primeiro / tirei a pontuação / depois / a preposição // Tudo o que pudesse / fazer ligação” [First / I took out punctuation / then / preposition // All that could / make connection] (54-55).

Helga Moreira is represented with eleven short poems – the largest number of texts by a single poet in this anthology, as Wolkoff shuns excessively symmetrical arrangements in her very personal collection. The poet is introduced with an alluring phrase: “a senhora das situações, quando o véu pára de existir...” [the lady of situations, when the veil has ceased to exist...] (62-63), which inevitably connects her with T.S. Eliot’s poetry, an association that I find particularly fruitful in Moreira’s poetry of negation: “não pertenço a lado nenhum, / não tenho / país ou terra, nenhuma raiz, / nem escolhas ou nome, / nada a dizer, nada a calar” [I belong nowhere, / I don’t have / a country, land, or root / either choices or name, / nothing to say, nothing to shut] (84-85). Moreira explores the challenges of undecidability and indeterminacy: “[...] Apenas frases / e frases / que impedem / do que não sei” [Only sentences / and sentences / that keep me / from what I don’t know] (82-83).

Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen is introduced with Wolkoff’s fitting trope of hybridisation and multiple perspective: “a poeta-sereia, mar abaixo, acima do mundo...” [the mermaid-poet, under the sea, above the world...] (86-87). Her poems in this anthology close the Portuguese section with fulfilling self-affirmation: the power of memory to conjure up past passions, the capacity of writing to convey experience, a woman’s determined quest, and the celebration of those moments of being which are rendered eternal. Her last poem is a sonnet with a musical rhyme pattern which is inevitably lost in translation, although Wolkoff succeeds in producing assonant and consonant sound patterns that make this forfeiture less objectionable. Andresen’s “Em todos os jardins” [In all gardens] contemplates the dissolution of the self and its total fusion with the natural world: “Em todos os jardins hei-de florir, / Em todos beberei a lua cheia, / Quando enfim no meu fim eu possuir / Todas as praias onde o mar ondeia”

[In all gardens I shall flower, / In all, I shall drink the full moon, / When at last, in my final moment, I possess / All beaches where the sea waves] (96-97).

The Irish section begins with six poems by **Anne Le Marquand Hartigan**, a poet, playwright and painter. I have had the opportunity to translate some of her work into Galician – a language which shares a common stock with Portuguese – and into Spanish,<sup>4</sup> so I am pleased to find, in this anthology, Wolkoff’s updated choice from Hartigan’s more recent collections *Nourishment* (2005) and *To Keep the Light Burning: Reflections in Times of Loss* (2008) both published by Salmon Poetry. As Wolkoff rightly claims, “[t]he voice that dares speaking of desire in a very Catholic country, influenced by all the Protestant Puritanism is that of Hartigan’s, highlighting women’s strength and weakness, women’s humanity” (100). Hartigan’s poetry valiantly brims with carnal desire and scrutinises a woman writer’s predicament in this respect: “She too can stain white sheets, / With hot blood. / With black ink.” [Ela também pode manchar lençóis brancos, / Com sangue quente. / Com tinta preta] (104-105). Hartigan is the poet of the present moment, of *carpe diem*, as her poem “Eternity is Now” [A eternidade é agora] illustrates (108-109). “The Hawser” [A amarra] is a study in the metaphoric of affection where the beloved’s stretched arm is rendered as “a rope from boat to shore” [uma corda que vai do barco à costa] (106-107).

Celia de Fréine is a poet, playwright, screenwriter and librettist who writes in Irish and English. I would like to commend Wolkoff’s achievement in the translation of de Fréine’s poem “Dear Friend” [Querida amiga], since the translator manages to convey the elegant poise and stately pace of the English lines: “[...] As soon as the storm // passes we can unpack the future and watch / the sun rise on our calendar of expectation” [... Tão logo esta tempestade // termine poderemos desempacotar o futuro e observar / o nascer do sol no nosso calendário de esperança] (124-125). De Fréine’s life and poetry is seasoned in the experience of crossing borders, very much like the pebbles, grass blades, winds and birds of her poem “No Man’s Land” [Terra de ninguém] (120-121). Her poetic persona defies all dangers and engages in her particular life odyssey, full of hope and curiosity about the world: “At last I discover a small boat to store hope in [...] / its glass bottom a screen through which I glimpse / the fish and the crustaceans and the people who live / on the ocean bed [...]” [Por fim descobro um pequeno barco onde posso guardar a esperança ... / o seu fundo de vidro, uma tela a través da qual vejo / os peixes e os crustáceos e as pessoas que habitam / o leito oceânico...] (118-119).

Kerry Hardie, a poet and novelist, is represented in this anthology with nine poems of varied subject matter. Like Celia de Fréine, Hardie suspects the neat contours of countries on maps: “The new names, lettered firmly, lie quite still / within the boundaries that the wars spill over” [Os novos nomes, solidamente escritos, permanecem perfeitamente intactos / dentro das fronteiras que as guerras destruíram] (128-129). The poet opts for the partial view, the close-up picture with indirect light: “The mole’s view. Paths and small roads and the next bend. / Arched trees tunnelling to a coin of light. / No overview, no sense of what lies where” [A visão estreita. Caminhos e estradinhas e a próxima virada. / Árvores arqueadas em tunnel a procurar um feixe de luz. / Sem visão

ampla, sem o sentido do quê está onde] (128-129). Hardie's lyrical personae struggle with contradictory notions of resignation and dissatisfaction, old age conformity and the irreverence of youth, physical ruins and the bustle of life.

Mary O'Donnell is a poet, novelist and short story writer. I have had the privilege of co-editing with her an anthology of contemporary Galician women poets translated by Irish writers, which constituted another fascinating exercise of intercultural dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Her poems in this collection revolve around the tensions between private and public life and elaborate, among others, on the following topics: society's problematic relationship with women's ageing, the transience of life as opposed to the obstinate permanence of our personal belongings, the communion of soul and landscape, the inscription of the world's ages in the land, the moments that bring together mother and child in unsatisfactory intimacy, the complicity of lovers' bodies and, finally, the clash between our social life and the yearnings of our imagination. O'Donnell's verse is crisp and terse at will, as in "Ageing Girls" [Garotas crescidas]: "Prolapses repaired / faces tightly injected, / they dress to kill / so they can live" [Prolapsos refeitos, / rostos bem injetados, / vestem-se para matar / e assim poderem viver] (148-149). On occasions, however, O'Donnell delights in contrasting a longer and more dense stanza with the revealing final couplet, as is the case in "Snow 3" [Neve 3]: "Minute by minute, we meet as strangers, / and I, the absent one, must explain" [Minuto a minuto, encontramos-nos como estranhos, / e eu, a estrangeira, devo explicar] (160-161).

For Vona Groarke, "Poetry is an everyday commitment, a kind of quotidian search for word, much beyond inspiration" (166). She is represented with five poems which inquire into our private and public selves, the close and distant perspective, the paradox of eloquent silence, and the growing estrangement in today's compulsive use of communication technologies. Groarke's poetic persona tries to negotiate the pull of her curiosity about other people's intimate lives and her reluctance to intrude, her respect for their otherness: "windows flecked with Christmas trees / and flicking bulbs that are telling us / to notice this... Don't notice this. Drive on" [janelas salpicadas de árvores natalinas / e lâmpadas tremelicantes que estão nos dizendo / para não notarmos nisso ... Não notes. Arranca] (168-169).

All in all, *Poem-ando Além Fronteiras / Poem-ing Beyond Borders* is an invitation to bridge gulfs between cultures, trace common concerns and learn from diverging strategies. The range of poets included in this collection gives an accurate idea of the plurality of explorations in contemporary poetry written by women. No attempt is made at imposing similarities between Portuguese and Irish writers, but readers will no doubt feel interpellated to map convergence and heterogeneity.

*Manuela Palacios*

## Notes

- 1 This review has been written in the context of the research project, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (FFI2009-08475/FILO) and by the Galician government (INCITE09-204127PR), for the study of contemporary Irish and Galician women writers.
- 2 All the translations in square brackets are by Gisele G. Wolkoff.
- 3 Susan Connolly, *Forest Music*. Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2009.
- 4 Manuela Palacios González (ed.). *Pluriversos: Seis poetas irlandesas de hoxe*. Trans. Manuela Palacios and Arturo Casas. Santiago de Compostela: Follas Novas, 2003. Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, “Librando espacio: Un porqué de la escritura.” Trans. Manuela Palacios. *Palabras extremas: Escritoras gallegas e irlandesas de hoy*. Eds. Manuela Palacios González and Helena González Fernández. A Coruña: Netbiblo, 2008. 109-125.
- 5 Mary O’Donnell and Manuela Palacios (eds.) *To the Winds Our Sails. Irish Writers Translate Galician Poetry*. Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Poetry, 2010.