



Patricia Nolan. *Strip-Tease*. Le Castor Astral. Letres, 2005. 80pp. ISBN 9 782859 205911.

Fred Johnston

Patricia Nolan is a Dublin-born poet living for some years in Paris, where she has read widely, admittedly mainly amongst the “ex-pat” community of that city, as well as reading in Dublin and here in Galway, for the Western Writers’ Centre; asking a Paris-based “ex-pat” writer, be he or she English, Irish or American, where one might find a *French* writer is futile. Ex-pats abroad are often, Nolan excluded, parochial to a man, islands unto themselves.

French publishers Castor Astral (don’t all rush at once, now) have broken a mould by producing in French translations of work by poets from just about everywhere, including a lovely collection from Wilfrid Owen. “Travelling” was Nolan’s first, presented, as is this one, in dual-language four years back; this facing-pages collection is translated by Emmanuele Sandron, and I think that name should be on the cover of the book along with the author’s.

Nolan’s poetry takes risks and the influence of French poetry is clear. There are “proemes” here, as Francis Ponge, the master of the genre, might have called them. The concerns of the work throughout are intimate, stylish, domestic, the minutiae of the everyday. Yet their move, travelling outside Paris, are vividly sensual, as in “Ceoil na Mara”:

“We stare, dazzled by nature’s wantonness.
In labial sounds, the sea’s music drums
her Venus mound.” (26)

Which, for those who prefer it French, is:

. Nous regardons de tous nos yeux
éblouis par la nature, sa débauche.
La musique de la mer, labiale, martele
Son mont de Venus. (27)

There are a number of poems based in Ireland here, including the wonderfully funnily gruesome “In the Bear Pit”, which is translated as “La fosse aux ourses” – which means female bears: “She-bears like anxious brides can easily be tamed,/trained to perform domestic tricks, washing shirts . . .” (40), which in French is: “Les ourses comme des épouses ardentes/s’apprivoisent: apprendre des tours domestiques,/laver

les chemises . . .” (41) One can’t help enjoying the use of the French “tour” for the English “tricks”. Some poems are simply beautiful and poignant, such as “Playground:”

I thought, perhaps if I gave you a part of the pain disfiguring my
heart. (20)

J’ai pensé: et si je te donnais un peu de ce poids
qui défigure mon coeur? (21)

Patricia Nolan has travelled extensively and the poems here reflect that. This new collection is available here in Ireland, of course, and should be required reading for anyone interested in how translation works against original text, apart from anything else. It is good to see a book like this; if the French can do it, so can we; I was fortunate enough to have an adventurous Galway-based publisher in Wynken de Worde who produced a novel of mine with facing-page French translations. Nolan’s book is well produced, the English text is in italics, and it is an example of just how far in front of the game European publishers are; and ourselves, for all our peacocking, so far behind. I am reminded of a friend of mine who reported an Irish literary agent as having remarked that the “trouble” with so many of the manuscripts crossing their desk was that they were “too literary.” I paraphrase, but you get the idea.