

6 *Review*

**PALACIOS,
Manuela; and
LOJO, Laura eds.**

*Writing Bonds:
Irish and Galician
Contemporary
Women Poets*

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Writing Bonds, the twenty-sixth volume in the series *Hispanic Studies: Culture and Ideas*, is dedicated to the emergence of women poets in Ireland and Galicia in the last 30 years. As Irene Gilsenan Nordin, director of the Dalarna University Centre for Irish Studies, remarks in her Preface to the collection, this volume is a welcome addition to a body of critical writing that has often focused on well-known mythical links between Ireland and Galicia while overlooking perceptible bonds such as those connecting the work of contemporary female poets.

The collection includes a total of ten chapters on the subject and is preceded by an illuminating introduction by the editors, Manuela Palacios and Laura Lojo. 'Poetry, Gender and Transnational Bonds: An Introduction' is tantamount to a chapter in its own right, going far beyond a mere introduction to the compiled essays in order to provide a common critical background from which to approach those writings. The editors start by discussing the most frequently recognised connection between Ireland and Galicia: their common insertion in the Celtic community and the visibility of a supposed Celtic heritage in their culture. They then refer to the social and cultural elements that gave shape to the lives and minds of women in the twentieth century, paying special attention to the influence of religion, linguistic conflict, rural setting or emigration. Finally, they focus on the coeval appearance of generations of women artists, especially from the 1980s on, whose achievements –including the appropriation of female mythical figures, the re-appropriation of female bodies and their denunciation of social issues affecting women– are still very much in vogue thirty years on. The editors' intention is presented

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as twofold: on the one hand, they wish to show the relevance of debates on contemporary Galician women poets for the Irish context (and vice versa). However, they also aim to create a meeting point between artists and critics. These objectives are made clear through their division of the volume in two parts, one dedicated to critical writings on poetry ('Poetic Bonds: Critical Perspectives on Irish and Galician Women Poets'), and the other to poets' personal insights into their own work ('Writing and Unwriting: Poets at Work').

The first two chapters in the volume are dedicated to the examination of the work of poets Mebd McGuckian and Olga Novo. In "'Longer and Longer Sentences Prove Me Wholly Female": Mebd McGuckian and Feminism(s)', the authors, María Jesús Lorenzo Modia and Cristina Fernández Méndez, study how the innovative treatment of the female experience in McGuckian's work enters into dialogue with feminist discourses. Their analysis includes a painstaking revision on how critics have noticed and interpreted the feminine aspect present in McGuckian's work. Lorenzo and Fernández warn the reader about the dangers of coalescing poets and their poetic voices into one entity, calling for the essential separation between author and voice – or between conscious and unconscious thought – which would justify McGuckian's apparently contradictory views on her own work as contextualized in the featured material from interviews. Lorenzo and Fernández effectively prove the difficulties of labelling McGuckian's work, indicating that its most noticeable features (her obscure poetic idiolect, her celebration of motherhood and her playful rejection of binarisms) may bring the Northern Irish poet's work not only closer to feminism(s), but also to postmodernism and poststructuralism. For his part, an analysis of the work of Galician poet Olga Novo allows Manuel Fernández Rodríguez to trace the presence of 'othering' strategies in 'Primitive Alchemy: Alienness in Olga Novo'. As happened with McGuckian's, Novo's work also seems to hint at a combination of femininity, feminism and postmodernism. Manuel Fernández's in-depth analysis of her poetic production highlights Novo's awe-inspiring ability to predate the poem in a search for the origin of life. According to Fernández, Novo's poems constitute a 'return to the seeds', as primitive, maternal, erotic or natural notions mix in a vacuum where time, space and knowledge have been suspended; this is a situation that instigates the poetic voice's extraneous feelings. The author also points to Novo's celebration of alienness and of the nomadic and universal stance it requires from the poet.

Olga Novo's exhilarating merging with the universe relates the abovementioned chapter with Manuela Palacios's 'The Course of Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Contemporary Irish and Galician Poets'. Her essay looks at the emergence of contemporary women poets in connection with the rise of eco-critical perspectives on the relationship between human and non-human nature. From within an eco-feminist framework, Palacios analyses several instances in which women poets have turned to nature in their work. Her extensive research of poems where nature appears illustrates the variety of approaches to nature in contemporary women writing. Thus, nature may be seen as a means to discuss language and the possibilities of human knowledge, as the object of erotic love, as a metaphor for the spaces that women poets still have to conquer and their processes of artistic creation or, even, as an allegory of cultural formation. The wide-ranging uses of the nature trope confirm Palacios's

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earlier warning: that the eco-feminist approach to contemporary women writers, as indeed any critical approach to their work, must expect to elicit a polyphonic array of responses. Palacios extends her study to focus, most significantly, on the merging of the nature motif with that of female pre-Christian deities, a constant feature in both Irish and Galician literary traditions. She demonstrates how women poets have created, through their revision of ancient myths, a series of 'empowering figures who challenge the patriarchal subordination of women and who reveal an intimate connection between woman and earth' (94).

Palacios's work appropriately precedes a chapter by María Xesús Nogueira, since the latter will also focus her analysis on the poets' treatment of intriguing female figures. Notwithstanding, in 'Dolls, Princesses and Cinderellas: New Feminine Representations in Contemporary Galician Women's Poetry', Nogueira does not discuss the revision and rewriting of well-known myths but rather she foregrounds the creation, in the work of young writers, of extraordinary female figures drawn from popular culture. Thus, she illustrates how the poetic inclusion of 'dolls' both challenges the commonly idyllic perception of childhood and condemns the imposition of sexist values upon little girls whose views on beauty, consumerism, and household chores are informed by numb plastic beings. While images of dolls are usually connected to autobiographical memories, 'princesses' would be based on the shared oral tradition; their insertion in women's poetic production denounces the perpetuation of cliché-ridden symbols of beauty and passivity. A special case of princesses for Nogueira are the so-called 'Cinderellas', whose passivity turns them into almost inert beings which must be approached in disapproval. Nogueira's article shows that dolls and princesses cannot be considered in any case as role models for real women. Consequently, poets must find alternate ways of including their real selves into their work. The necessity for such an inclusion becomes the core of the following essay, by Laura Lojo.

In 'The Poetics of Motherhood in Contemporary Irish Women's Verse', Lojo comments on contemporary poets' strife to reconcile their aesthetic programme as authors with their experiences as women. Women writers have tried to strike this balance in multiple ways, yet mainly by trying, as Eavan Boland put it, to move from an object to a subject position within the national literary tradition. In her essay, Lojo chooses to focus on the authors' approach to motherhood and the maternal experience. She illustrates how contemporary women poets develop more realistic views on motherhood, as well as on the complex relations between mothers and daughters. Lojo also points to the iconoclastic revision and subversion of traditional mother figures -archetypal images of motherhood which not only permeated the literary canon but society's perceptions as well- such as the Virgin Mary, Penelope or Demeter. The corporeality of maternal experience also finds its way into this essay, which mentions the authors' ambivalent approach to maternity as well as their use of quotidian experiences such as breast-feeding as literary matter.

Poetic creation will become the essence of the rest of the collection, as critical writings give way to the poets' more personal accounts of their processes of creation and their perception of poetry. Thus, the volume's second part is inaugurated by Carmen Blanco's 'Alicia in Galicia: Sex and Place', a thorough analysis of her retelling of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Blanco starts by explaining the relevance of the poem prefacing the story, seen as an affirmative chant which gives strength to the feminist,

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universalist and egalitarian notions present in her work. As for the body of the text, Blanco explains her reworking of real places into mythical ones, and the significance of the story's spaces and characters to create a piece that would constitute a celebration of Galicia as a free place inhabited by free men and women. Her analysis is preceded by an English translation of the text being discussed, which will certainly help an English-speaking readership contextualize Blanco's dissection of her own work's meaning.

Re-reading is also at the core of Mary O'Donnell's essay, which offers a privileged first-hand account of historical and social conditions in Ireland throughout the twentieth century and, most significantly, of their impact on the emergence of contemporary women poets. Thus, in 'Irish Women and Writing: An Overview of the Journey from Imagination into Print, 1980-2008', O'Donnell casts her eye back onto recent history to denounce the perceptible segregation or even ghettoization of women poets in the literary scene, a predicament which became particularly visible when a series of anthologies of Irish women's writing were published. She calls for the necessary reconciliation, both of women poets with the previous male-dominated literary canon and of male readers and critics with the body of literature being produced by women. O'Donnell rejoices over changes which have come into being in the last decades and over the freedom of younger poets who do not feel as gender-conscious as her own generation did. Lastly, the Irish author includes some remarks on fiction writing and on the difficulties of being a 'serious' writer engulfed by the advent of the chick-lit era.

As revealed in its self-explanatory title, the following chapter, Luz Pichel's 'Pieces of Letters from My Bedroom', becomes a letter to the editor on the process of creative writing. The volume's readers are given a privileged position, having the opportunity to look over Pichel's shoulder in order to have a sneak peek at the author's reflections on her work while she sits, in Woolfian terms, in a room of her own. This unconventional chapter bears witness to Pichel's comment about her own playful approach to literary creation, on seeing poetry as a play on words and motifs, and on trying to say what has already been said in yet a different way. The author also talks about choices she has made – or has had to make – in her work, such as privileging sound over language or, most importantly, choosing a language and writing in Galician or Spanish.

The last two chapters in the collection include two interviews that bridge the volume's self-imposed gap between critics and authors on the one hand, but which prove the fruitfulness of their rapport on the other. Thus, in Laura Lojo's 'Making Sense of Wilderness' through the Written Word: An Interview with Anne Le Marquand Hartigan', readers will not only have the unexpected pleasure of finding Hartigan's unpublished poem 'Sheela-na-gig' but also access to a first-hand account of the poet's concerns as a literary author in Ireland today. The second interview, in María Xesús Nogueira's 'Most Faithful Stories: An Interview with Luz Pozo-Garza', goes further in waiving the cartographical separation between Ireland and Galicia. The first woman writer to join the Royal Galician Academy, Pozo Garza talks of her first steps towards artistic creation, the progressive permeation of feminist discourses into her work, and her inclusion of female figures drawn from mythology or popular culture. Most significantly, the Galician poet also speaks of Ireland, mentioning the cultural and family bonds that draw her closer to the island, as seen in her work *As Arpas de Iwerddon*.

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Pozo's final words makes for a defence of the enduring productivity of the Atlanticist link which, as the reviewed collection demonstrates, can be renewed by focusing on further and less-discussed confluences between Ireland and Galicia. This volume, a much-needed addition to the field of Irish and Galician Studies, is also a pleasant and illuminating read. The editors are worthy of praise for their incisive and thought-provoking renewal of the writing bonds between contemporary women poets who are entwined, rather than separated, by the Atlantic.