

FORKED TONGUES

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FORKED TONGUES

*GALICIAN, BASQUE AND CATALAN
WOMEN'S POETRY IN TRANSLATIONS
BY IRISH WRITERS*

Edited by

Manuela Palacios

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I speak with the forked tongue of colony

Eavan Boland, *The Lost Land*

Tides came and went
with me listening
to those whispering
was it possible to speak
with a forked tongue to sing
with a tongue not soaked in milk?

Marilar Aleixandre, *Catalogue of Poisons*

Women Poets in Translation. An Introduction

The trope of the forked tongue hovers over this bilingual collection of poetry. It is primarily intended to suggest the relationship between the source and the target languages—between the vernacular tongues of Galicia, the Basque Country, and Catalonia on the one hand and English as a *lingua franca* on the other. But the notion of the forked tongue arises also of the bilingual condition both of the writers and of the communities involved in this anthology. Galicia, the Basque country and Catalonia each have two official languages, and so has Ireland. Their writers' mutual understanding in this respect, alongside these communities' sundry political and cultural bonds, lie as the main motivations for the present selection of writers. In these four communities, the vernacular tongue coexists with another powerful language—Spanish or English—which has spread throughout centuries over many other nations. It is to this postcolonial condition that the Irish poet Eavan Boland alludes when she says: "I speak with the forked tongue of colony." The Madrid-born poet Marilar Aleixandre, on her part, delves into the choice of Galician as her literary language, though it was not her mother tongue: "to sing / with a tongue not soaked in milk." Historical and political circumstances have made of Galician, Basque and Catalan *minoritized* vernaculars, a phenomenon which justifies the necessity of positive action towards their visibilization and dissemination, such as the one this anthology aspires to facilitate by including the original texts.

Translation also seems to be an apt trope for intercultural relationships. "The common language of Europe is translation," affirms the Italian philosopher Giacomo Marramao in a statement that acknowledges cultural diversity and difference in the face of homogenization. The meeting point of the languages spoken in Europe—with or without a state, official or not, vernaculars or foreign languages imported by immigrant groups—is translation because, otherwise, there is no genuine encounter but submission. Translation is a performative act by which the Other is acknowledged. It is also a new opportunity to renegotiate our cultural bonds on fairer terms. The encounter favoured by translation necessarily entails some conflict too, as it is rarely a meeting of equals. The enormous gap between a world language such as English and the vernaculars in this anthology clearly illustrates this conflict, but the international language is also putting its extraordinary power of dissemination at the service

of the more geographically-restricted vernacular tongues. A bilingual edition like this one circumvents the risk of the bear hug, which would consist in allowing the dissemination of vernacular literatures through monolingual translation but would conceal their languages, thereby adding to their further suppression.

There has been some debate about whether poets should translate other poets. The Mexican writer Octavio Paz suggests that the creative impulse in literary writers who engage in translation might make their texts stray too far from the original version. Along a similar line, Madeleine Stratford has warned about those renderings which bring into focus the poet/translator's interventions, while leaving the writer of the source text in an excessively subdued light, and therefore result in the translator's promotion at the expense of a distorted diffusion of the original author. On the opposite side of the debate and contrary to dismissals that deem writers' engagement in translation work as amateurish, the Galician writer and academic María do Cebreiro Rábade Villar vindicates the role of creative writers' translations, which often result from writers' affinities and mutual admiration, as a necessary counterbalance to the programming and economic interests of the literary market.

The English versions in *Forked Tongues* do not take the original poems as a mere source of inspiration for the elaboration of substantially different texts. Each language has, no doubt, its own rhythm and musicality; its words often have divergent histories and trigger different associations; its literary themes have received distinct elaborations in each literary tradition. For all these reasons, the English versions are necessarily new creations, but they are also co-creations which do not hide their relationship with the source poems: they do not cancel or ignore them, but are attentive and incorporate their concerns and motifs. The English poems thus establish with the source texts an imaginative dialogue in a common search for beauty and authenticity, "contending only for the glory of the language," as Osip Mandelstam has suggested in his discussion of Russian translations (in McGuckian and Ní Dhomhnaill). The majority of the Irish poets in this anthology had previous experience in the translation of literature from the community they engage with here, especially in the case of Galician and Catalan writing. In addition to their background in the source culture, most Irish poets have received the literal translations and, when necessary, literary and linguistic supervision from three specialists in the vernaculars represented here: Dr. Kirsty Hooper for Galician poetry, Dr. Juan Arana for Basque poetry

and Dr. Diana Cullell for Catalan poetry, the three of them from the University of Liverpool. I would like to express my immense gratitude for the enthusiasm and diligence in their collaboration with this project. *Forked Tongues* is, therefore, a communal, collaborative effort that substantiates the plurality of actors who intervene in the production and dissemination of poetry.

§

The unprecedented upsurge of women writers since the nineteen eighties in the four communities represented in this anthology has been one of the most decisive motors of change in their literary systems. One cannot deny the importance, for this phenomenon, of the long struggle of the feminist movement since the early twentieth century and, in particular, that of the pivotal second wave in the nineteen seventies. Women's generalized access to secondary education, and for a substantial number of them to university degrees, has facilitated the broad and solid cultural background needed to become a writer. The gradual, though still incomplete, liberation of women from time-consuming domestic tasks and the commitments of large families has also been a necessary condition in the advance of women writers. *Forked Tongues* wishes to recognize these women's contribution to the normalization and consolidation of their respective literary systems. Male writers should do well to involve themselves in this struggle for the visibility of their female counterparts and this is the reason why, while the Galician, Basque and Catalan poets in this anthology are all women, a number of male poets have been included among the Irish translators.

The rise of women writers in Spain was in part favoured by the instability of political and cultural institutions after General Franco's death in 1975. Times of change may become appropriate occasions for emergent groups to elbow their way into literary centres. Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia are recognized as *historical nationalities* in the Spanish Constitution (1978) on account of their respective Statutes of Autonomy before the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). With the advent of democracy after Franco's demise, new Statutes of Autonomy were passed in Catalonia (1979 and 2006), the Basque Country (1979) and Galicia (1981) which have committed their governments to protect and promote their vernacular languages and cultures. The emergence of women writers in the nineteen eighties, then, coincided with a period of

nationalist self-affirmation, although their respective struggles have not always been encompassed with equity. Helena González Fernández has actually referred to the identity oxymoron woman/nation provoked by the subordination of women's interests to the *totalizing umbrella* of the national cause.

Galician Poetry

In the decade of the nineteen nineties, almost one hundred poets published their first individual poetry collection in Galician (Letras de Cal Editorial Board). The spectacular rise in the number of women poets generated the perception of a decade dominated by an alleged *feminine aesthetics*, with the subsequent risk of homogenizing both the writers and their work. A number of critics, however, have acknowledged women writers' key role in the renovation of the Galician literary system: "After the decline of socio-realism in the 1970s, poetic innovation in Galicia has come more steadily from women than men" (Rodríguez García). Except for Pilar Pallarés, whose first collection appeared in 1980, the rest of the Galician poets in *Forked Tongues* published their first book of verse in the nineties. This decade has been characterized by, among other features, women's repossession of the female body in literary tradition, the elegiac representation of the rural world, the shift of attention to urban, everyday life, the interrogation of the *fatherland* and other hegemonic discourses, and the recourse to conversational and casual linguistic registers (Nogueira). These general features match some, but by no means all, of the poetic explorations represented in this anthology.

Although **Pilar Pallarés** (1957) has vindicated the roots of her writing in social poetry and has been rather vocal about her left-wing nationalist convictions, her poetry usually turns inwards to explore the disputes of the self with the conditions of existence. In her view, "one writes about lack, about what has been lost, denied or forbidden" (in Cambeiro López). Her philological training—a common trait in many of the poets in this anthology—has provided her both with models from a broad range of national and international writers and with the necessary linguistic skills in a language, such as Galician, which has undergone a profound process of normalization and normativization in the last three decades. In her poetry, Pallarés acknowledges the literary influence of a number of women writers who have also left a deep imprint in the work of the other poets in this collection: Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf,

Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Plath, Alfonsina Storni, Alejandra Pizarnik, Clarice Lispector... Like their writing, the poems Pallarés has selected for the present anthology reflect on “transience and the process of decay and regeneration, on the art of life of our animal being, which we tend to ignore, on symbolic expression and the search for the sharpened word, the broken, thinned and necessary word” (in Casas 2003). Maurice Harmon, also a translator of the Galician poet Ana Román, masterfully renders the elegance and poise of Pallarés’ phrasing.

The next poet in the Galician section—poets are ordered following the date of publication of their first book of poems—**Chus Pato** (1955), published her first collection in 1991 but it was her seventh book *m-Talá*, in 2000, that was recognized as a landmark of poetic renewal in Galicia due to its interrogation of literary representation and genre boundaries, its dramatization of speaking voices, its challenge to the conventions of language and logic, and its sustained dialogue with philosophy, history and literary tradition. Pato’s poetry has delved into the themes of exploitation, dispossession, totalitarianism and the possibilities of emancipation. Her writing has been defined as: “torn poetry that fragments and breaks itself up, that interrupts and disperses itself, that goes from one thought to another, from one place to another, from one time to another in an infinitesimal space” (Raña). Pato has selected for this anthology several unpublished poems which illustrate the paths of experimentation she is currently exploring. She takes delight in visual forms, textures, colours, reflections and lines that fuse art and nature. Although she has on some occasion commented that her poetry is not musical, here she includes verse in which visual rhythm goes hand in hand with musical rhythm, and Lorna Shaughnessy, who also translated Pato in the past, deftly conveys the cadences of these Galician poems. In line with her previous writing, Pato continues to inquire into those liminal and porous spaces between melody and meaning, art and life, language and voice, because she firmly believes that “a poem [is] that writing which tries to capture what lies outside a language’s enclosure” (in Casas 2011).

The poems by **Lupe Gómez Arto** (1972) in *Forked Tongues* were chosen in a collaborative way by the author and me. Gómez wanted to include some texts from her collection *Diálogos imposíbeis* [Impossible Dialogues] (2010) and allowed me to choose them, while I was also interested in her *début* collection, *Pornografía* [Pornography] (1995), from which she chose its first poem and I selected her highly influential and widely quoted poem “Enfoque teórico” ([Theoretical Focus], “A Clinical

Stare” in Anne Hartigan’s translation). In the poems from her 1995 collection, the poet challenges the ideal of feminine beauty and deals with women’s repossession of their bodies, while also examining the tensions between woman and nation. The texts from her 2010 collection constitute a reflection on the craft of writing, the writer’s literary complicities and the reciprocal nourishment of the various artistic manifestations, with special emphasis on the intersections of poetry with cinema and theatre. The apparent *naïveté* of her style, her vindication of fantasy and her humorous stance feel like a breath of fresh air which is perfectly matched by Anne Le Marquand Hartigan’s spontaneous and irreverent tone. Lupe Gómez Arto has been identified as a provocative libertarian because of her sexually explicit language, which prudish readers consider to be in bad taste, and she is indeed convinced that art should interrogate our preconceptions (Alonso). As one of her poetic voices claims in *Azul e estranxeira* [Blue and Foreign] (2005): “I am sitting / on the stairway / to the plane. / I like this place, / I’m comfortable. / In the structure / of questions. / In circular poetry.”

In her poetry, **Yolanda Castaño** (1977) scrutinizes the individual as a site of conflicting discourses—consumerist and disinterested, cosmopolitan and nationalist, *fashionista* and feminist, self-centred and cooperative, pragmatic and idealist, fraudulent and authentic, etc. Her writing pitilessly exposes our contradictions, our ineffectual quests and the lies we tell ourselves, and she does so by fragmenting and decentering the subject, by splitting the speaking voice from the construct of her poetic self, as in her cherished trope of the ventriloquist. Her relish for the masks we wear in our various subject positions is in line with her empowering public performances, which is the reason why I thought of Máighréd Medbh, also a remarkable performance poet, as her best possible translator. The poems Castaño has selected for this anthology illustrate her penchant for introspection and the proliferation of fictional selves, her anxiety about social bargaining and her exposure of the disconcerting effects of physical beauty in those moralistic and intellectual coteries which would rather transcend it. Máighréd Medbh bestows upon the English readers a sophisticated version of Castaño’s transgressive syntax, unconventional punctuation and tantalizing imagery.

In her conversation with the Welsh poet Menna Elfyn, **María do Cebreiro** (1976) reflects, in a way that is also relevant for *Forked Tongues*, on the relationship between a *minoritized* language such as Galician and a hegemonic one such as English: “I believe in an idea of language that

is constantly contaminated by other languages, voices, sounds. As of late I am using titles in English (also French and Spanish, but particularly English, as it's really perceived as the hegemonic language *par excellence*) in my poems in Galician. I am very much drawn to the visual force of that clash between a hegemonic language and a language such as Galician, only spoken in that tiny corner in Spain" (*Poetry Wales*). The poet thus turns a possible source of conflict, due to the imbalance of power between these languages, into an effective device of defamiliarization and a poetic trope of fertile miscegenation. Mary O'Donnell, who first conceived this project of Irish writers translating Galician poets for the anthology *To the Winds Our Sails*—a collection that has served as a guide for the present one—is then the most congenial translator of María do Cebreiro's ongoing interrogation of the limits of language, literary conventions and the preconceptions of literary criticism.

Basque Poetry

The Basque critic Jon Kortazar has suggested that it was only after General Franco's death that Basque literature became a literary system. As in Galicia, the Statute of Autonomy of the Basque Country (1979) encouraged the promotion of the vernacular language and facilitated spaces for the publication and criticism of Basque-language literature, with the concomitant upsurge of writers. As late as 1999, Kortazar remarked, however, that there remained an obstacle to be removed: the dearth in translations of Basque literature into foreign languages. Although important efforts have been made in this respect since then, the translation of women-authored poetry is still scarce and this anthology constitutes a step towards the dissemination of Basque-language women poets.

As in other stateless nations struggling for recognition, Basque women poets have been expected to adapt their writing to national *grand narratives* and identity signs. In line with this, Tere Irastorza has commented on literary expectations in the nineteen eighties: "the general tendency in Basque literature at that time was to the attachment to our own language, which impeded the development of anything connected with everyday life" (in Fernández Iglesias). Some of the features to be found in these women writers are: the contestation of dominant discourses, whether moral, nationalist or patriarchal; the importance of keeping memory alive; the concern with what has been silenced; the

search for new language and literary codes that allow us to apprehend reality differently; the repossession of women's body and sexual desire and the exploration of private, domestic experience as a poetic *topos* (Fernández Iglesias).

If Galicia has traditionally been seen as sharing Celtic roots with Ireland, the connections between the Basque Country and Ireland that we most often come across in the media are related to the struggle for national independence and the peace process (Rodríguez Bornaetxea). With this anthology, writers of both nationalities explore other kinds of collaboration and other imaginaries that do not reduce Ireland and the Basque Country to political violence. I have selected poets from two different generations: two who grew up and started writing in a very hostile social and cultural context before 1979 and two who formed themselves as writers after the Basque Statute of Autonomy was passed. The first poet, **Itxaro Borda** (1959), is from *Iparralde*—the Northern Basque Country in the south-west of France. With a degree in History, she is a poet and a fiction writer who has been rather vocal in her contestation of national identity as dictated by some gurus of nationalism. Of her own writing, she has said: “My verse is direct. It sometimes hurts like a blow. It is, most often, like a melancholic caress. It can always be sung, whether free or rhymed verse. It usually has the rhythm of a walk, as if poetic thought were infused with endomorphins” (in Ediciones La Palma). The poems she has selected for this collection either rewrite Basque literary tradition and, in particular, the role it has allocated to women—in this respect, no one could be a better match than her translator Celia de Fréine—or initiates a dialogue with other inspiring women artists, from the Catalan poet Maria-Mercè Marçal to the feminist theorist Judith Butler or *the queen of psychedelic soul*, Janis Joplin.

A number of poems by **Miren Agur Meabe** (1962) have already appeared in English translation in *Six Basque Poets* (Olaziregi). Her poetry has been defined as: “intense and effective, written from the daily context of a female subject who is totally conscious of her body and desire” (Fernández Iglesias). For *Forked Tongues*, she has chosen poems which illustrate this still much-needed woman-centred focus: a middle-aged woman's renunciations and defeats, her memories of the earliest betrayals and humiliations, and her ironic and down-to-earth surrender to the pleasures of the body. Like María do Cebreiro, Meabe reflects on the media's handling of human suffering as a spectacle and on the writer's responsibility in her representation of the pain of others: “No, I

am not worthy to carry you in my voice.” If Borda turns to Janis Joplin, Meabe confers with another icon of North-American counter-culture: Patti Smith and her surrealist dream of Rimbaud. Meabe’s broad range of poetic forms, tones and themes is most aptly rendered in English thanks to Catherine Phil MacCarthy’s malleable craft.

Castillo Suárez (1976) has been included in a Galician anthology of Basque poetry that acknowledges the importance of the *Galeuzca* pact signed in Mexico in 1944 (Kortazar 2000). This pact consisted in the mutual recognition and collaboration of the nations of *Galicia*, *Euskadi* and *Catalunya*. However, neither her poems in that anthology nor the ones she selected for *Forked Tongues* are explicitly concerned with the national cause. Suárez writes about claustrophobic urban spaces under close surveillance where our life is measured by that of our neighbours. Her characters’ psychic wounds manifest themselves in tortured bodies, and the temporary relief sought in conversation, song or sex only accentuates self-deception and frustration. The relationship with the other is always mediated and displaced whether out of fear or a feeling of inadequacy. Susan Connolly captures the disturbing thrust of this poetry and renders its surprising imagery and ominous atmosphere to great effect.

Leire Bilbao (1978) has selected her poems for this anthology from *Scanner* (2011), her latest collection. She has opted for a variety of themes which show her deft handling of different tones, registers, tropes and rhythms. To this versatility Paddy Bushe responds with unsurpassed adroitness and perceptivity. Like Suárez, Bilbao delves into the alienation experienced by the individual in urban settings. She comments on the sprawl of cities and their encroachment on the natural world thus revealing her ecocritical sensitivity. Bilbao’s domestic interiors recall the paintings of Edward Hopper in the mood of resignation, *ennui* and loneliness they convey and in the subtle interaction of the characters with the objects that surround them. However, there is also room for tender love and happiness in this verse, even if it is framed by social comment and an ironic slant.

Catalan Poetry

The fact that Catalonia has been an important industrial and commercial centre since the second half of the nineteenth century, alongside the concomitant nationalist aspirations of its prosperous bourgeoisie and their endorsement of the vernacular language, have no doubt contributed

to the deployment of a dynamic and strong literary system of publishers, writers, critics and readers. However, Catalan women writers have not been granted the visibility one might expect in what would, otherwise, seem like a *normalized* cultural context. A collection such as Corredor-Matheos', for instance, which claims to be the *essential* anthology of contemporary Catalan poetry, does not feature a single woman among the twenty-nine writers born in the twentieth century. This suppression of women's writing has made positive action necessary in the form of women-centred anthologies such as Carme Riera's and Encarna Sant-Celoni's.

A very productive direction in the poetry of the nineteen eighties and nineties in Catalonia examined seemingly autobiographical experience together with its moral and emotional implications. This main drift persists in the early twenty-first century, although it is being enriched with alternative proposals, some of which are illustrated by the poems in *Forked Tongues*: "a more profound exploration of the narrative possibilities of the poem, which is now conceived with a longer length than the conventional epiphanic poem; an increase in the number of learned allusions; a shift of attention to a neater definition of the relationship between literature, reality and the statute of art; finally, a gradual weeding of the anecdotal elements in the poem in the benefit of a meditative style which may prove more apt for poetry of a metaphysical tenor" (Ballart and Julià).

Although Catalan-language poetry is not limited to that produced in Catalonia and has also had important writers in the Valencian Community and Balearic Islands, the already broad scope of this anthology with writers from three Iberian autonomous communities has swayed me to choose four poets from Catalonia whose first published collections have come out in the last twenty years. Apart from being a writer of poetry and essays, **Vinyet Panyella** (1954) has co-organized art exhibitions and has written on painters such as Picasso, Cézanne, Dalí, Rusiñol and El Greco. For *Forked Tongues* she has selected two poems from her 2007 collection *Taller Cézanne* [Cézanne Studio] which evince her interest in the visual arts and their possible intersections with literature: Panyella *reads* a painting and through her verse we conjure shapes, colours, lines and textures; she considers her feminine gaze in relation to that of the male masters of painting in their rendering of the female body; she inquires about the process of identification between the subject and object of representation; she instils emotions in the *silent* art of a still

life. Panyella's poems from her other collections are songs of experience which delve into pain and endurance, the flux of life and identity, and the blurred line between author and text. Michael O'Loughlin's versions have none of the superfluous words or periphrases that we sometimes find in translations. While accurate and attentive to Panyella's writing, his powerful re-creation of her poems reads like an original text.

Susanna Rafart (1962) is a widely acclaimed poet and fiction writer. Her lyric style has been described as "elegant and delicate words, very well chosen and cut with precision for their place within the verse like the tesserae of a mosaic. [...] free of dissonance and fanfare, vulgarity and outbursts, everything is said with the subtlety and tenderness of a cat caressing a hand" (Forcano). For *Forked Tongues*, Rafart has selected poems that dialogue with various literary traditions and, in particular, with female writers such as Emily Dickinson and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, with whom she shares a meditative style and a metaphysical yearning about the soul's quest. Paula Meehan excels in her rendering of Rafart's exquisite imagery and the Irish poet's accomplishment in the rhythm and rhyme patterns of poems such as "Senyor, no m'abandonis a l'amor" [Lord, do not abandon me to love] constitutes a true homage to the craft of translation.

Gemma Gorga (1968) combines the metapoetic creation that confers with literary traditions and writers from a distant time and space, as in "Llegint Matsuo Bashō" [Reading Matsuo Bashō], with poems about the proximity and complicity of bodies and the physical and emotional sensations they arouse. Keith Payne is especially effective in his attention to the pace of Gorga's phrasing and the sensorial impressions of her verse. Gemma Gorga feels at home in the liminal space between language and the real world where they nourish and inspire each other. She construes a desiring female subject who is aware of her agency in shaping her life and her relations. Susanna Rafart has said of her 2005 collection *Instruments òptics* [Optical Instruments]: "[this] is a book of poems of rewarding convalescence. Convalescence produces guiltless inaction and envisages wonder, reflection and detachment from existence. Gemma Gorga opens for us a chamber in which stillness, as a category, conjures a different realm."

Although **Mireia Calafell** (1980) is the youngest poet in this collection, her work has had a significant reception in the Catalan literary world and has already been anthologized (García, Alemany, among others). Both in her academic writing and her poetry, she has been concerned with the

way the body is construed through discourse and with the inscription of identity, gender, sexuality and class, among other categories, in the body. She acknowledges the influence of former Catalan women poets such as Maria-Mercè Marçal, Montserrat Abelló, Felícia Fuster and Teresa Pascual, who have cleared the way for her as a writer. The poems she has selected for *Forked Tongues* interrogate still prevalent notions of romantic love from an ironic stance that suggests revealing comparisons with the Basque poet Leire Bilbao. Theo Dorgan handles sound patterns with a seasoned skill and masterfully conveys emotional yearning, wry humour, the sensuality of the body, and the pain of knowledge.

Some stylistic features and thematic concerns may seem recurrent in this selection of thirteen poets: free verse and speech rhythm, the prose poem, the irregularity of stanzas, the splitting of the poetic voice, the urban setting, the meditative approach, the renewal of imagery, the inter-arts analogy, the ironic stance with regard to ideals—whether public or private—and the exploration of alternative discourses about the female body, to mention a few. There are also some fascinating examples of familiar patterns of rhymes, rhythms and stanzas which evince an ongoing dialogue with literary tradition, with its tropes and subject matter. This anthology does not intend to provide a simplifying and homogenizing survey of women writers' poetry since the nineteen nineties that echoes the editor's personal taste. *Forked Tongues* celebrates the spaces of convergence—among the vernacular literatures on the one hand and between them and their English counterparts on the other—but also the divergent paths that each poet chooses to follow in her individual poetic quest.

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