

MARÍA JESÚS LORENZO-MODIA (Ed.), 2016. *EX-SISTERE: WOMEN'S MOBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH, WELSH AND GALICIAN LITERATURE*. NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE: CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING, 230 pages *

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A salient outcome of the project coordinated by Manuela Palacios¹, this collection, edited by María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, foregrounds the existing confluence between the literary production of Galician, Irish and Welsh women poets. In its ten chapters the reader explores the analysis given by both poets and scholars of identity, genre and migration, each of which is presented as a cause, consequence and part of the others.

Declan Kiberd, a leading international authority on the literature of Ireland, both in English and Irish, has kindly written the foreword to this book, which he initiates with the opening sentence to *The Irish Writer and the World*, where writing and going into exile become *conditio sine qua non* of the existence of each other. Professor Kiberd explores how women have traditionally disappeared in history without writing, relegated to the always ephemeral oral transmission of their experiences. After describing the evolution from the traditional conception of men as nomads to the contemporary conception of women as nomads, Kiberd presents the essays in this collection as evidence of the new role of women as both agents and subjects of the new phase within the culture of travel and resettlement.

The foreword is immediately followed by the Introduction. In the Introduction, the editor highlights the similarities between Irish, Galician and Welsh contexts, given their geographical situation and their agricultural economy, which caused the social diaspora suffered by these Atlantic regions during the nineteenth century. The triggering effect of migrations on a literary rebirth within them is noted as a means of cultural connection within the Atlantic archipelago, thereby emphasizing the importance of approaching diaspora within the three cultures. The editor then describes how

travelling and mobility have been a subject of study from the point of view of male travellers and male writers, demoting women to immobility, thus justifying the gendered perspective. After establishing the aim of the study to be exploring literary and social intersections between the three societies, the editor proceeds to account for the contents of the essays included in the collection and for their grouping in three parts, entitled “Galician Literature”, “Irish Literature” and “Welsh Literature”.

The structure of the first section of the collection, containing four chapters, deals with “Galician Literature” and ranges from a more analytical academic perspective to the intimate retelling of a family narrative to which almost every Galician reader could relate. The first chapter, “Women’s Mobility in Contemporary Galician Literature: From “Widows of the Living” to “I too wish to navigate””, María López Sández presents the idea of nationality and identity from an ecofeminist point of view, exploring the difference between migration and voyage through the works of Rosalía de Castro, the *Xeración Nós* and the literary figure of Penelope. The origin of contemporary Galician literature is related to migration, consequently creating a marked gender dichotomy between the male traveller and the female guardian of the land, thus implying a sense of female stagnation, both physical and psychological, which is symbolised by the complete fusion of women with landscapes, also transforming Galicia into a woman. López Sández analyses the post-colonial issue of the representation of Galicia as a submissive entity that can only wait, like Said’s Orient, equating it to Ulysses’ spouse and thereupon de-constructing Penelope in the work of various Galician poets. The author, then, states the necessity of creating a new ecofeminist understanding and representation of Galicia where women become the defenders of the land. López Sández manages to bring together the values that lie at the root of Galician nationalism and the characteristics of twenty-first century Galician women by defending the need to change the idea of “feminine” without necessarily switching to “masculine” characteristics, but rather by applying feminism.

The second chapter, by María Xesús Nogueira, “Naming the Foreign: External Toponymy in Galician Poetry Written by Women (2000-2014)”, presents the use of toponymy in Galician poetry during

the last decades as a symbol of culturalism and cosmopolitanism; apart from gender and chronology, the analysis is also focused on the paratext of the poems dealt with. The function of toponymy within the whole work of these poets is explored alongside its use as a tool to understand space, together with the linguistic treatment given to certain exonyms. Personal experiences are emphasised as the base for developing a microtoponymy and a macrotoponymy that help create the idea of linguistic otherness. Such otherness can well be literary, thus relating travelling with writing. Toponymy is presented, too, as a means to show openness towards new concepts and identities, to express solidarity with foreign places and conflicts, as well as to identify the psyche of the poet with a specific context, which is usually either a forgotten or a peripheral place. The analysis is not comprehensive, as the author admits at the very beginning. However, it leaves the reader with the need to explore more thoroughly the gender issue behind toponymy.

In “The Chronotope of Galician Migration in Eva Moreda’s *A Veiga É Como un Tempo Distinto*”, Olivia Rodríguez-González continues with the idea that places are also zones of action where modes of existence are represented in constant opposition within the public and the private sphere. The novel, the story of Gelo and Elisa, two Galician emigrants in

London, is presented as a rounded structure with an open ending where prolepsis and ellipsis are used in order to maintain suspense. The author analyses the chronotope within the title as a means to inform the reader in a spatial-temporal manner about the past as a means to understand the present. A Veiga is used as a metonymy of Galicia, thus transforming the memories of one character into the memory of a people. Chronotopes are also explored within the description found in dialogues, through the presentation of space from a psychological point of view. The idea of the physical abandonment of the space and time where a person has developed his/her culture and ideology, opposed to the psychological journey that has to be endured, is what makes this chapter interesting.

The closing chapter of this section, “Virtudes and Isabel: Two Galician Women in London”, gathers the personal testimony of its

author, Xesús Fraga, about his migrant mother and grandmother. It is presented as the narrative of Virtudes, a Galician woman abandoned by her husband once he migrates to Venezuela, and forced to move to London, followed by her daughter Isabel and her husband. Loneliness and independence are explored as the main feelings that these two women experience, opposed to their longing to return to Galicia, which makes the women feel dislocated. The author bases his narration on the process of adaptation to London of Isabel and Virtudes and of his own process of adaptation to Betanzos when they return. Xesús Fraga explores the idea of identity and nationality, not based on given characteristics of the land or the language, but rather on the construction of a *personal* identity through the *personal* experience of his mother and grandmother, who evidence how women become, in fact, the homeland.

The second section, “Irish literature”, is also formed by four chapters and follows a structure very similar to that of the first section, closing with the revisiting of real life stories through poetry. The collection opens with an essay that bridges Galicia and Ireland: “Ireland, Spain and Galicia in the Work of Honor Tracy”, where José Francisco Fernández presents the travel writings of Honor Tracy under the light of Post-colonialism, together with the idea that travel writing is based on domination. Through the analysis and comparison of Tracy’s *Mind You I Have Said Nothing!* (1950) and *Silk and No Breakfast* (1955), the author points out how Irish, Spanish and Galician cultures are described from the subjective point of view of the writer, an Englishwoman. The depiction of Ireland as the no-place that Declan Kiberd described in *Inventing Ireland*, contrasts with the light of nobility shed over the poverty and brutishness of Spain. The feeling of impatience and dislike experienced by Tracy when visiting Galicia (she considers the region “un-Spanish”) is further explored from a postcolonial point of view when the author highlights how the asymmetrical power relations observed in Spain represent a perfect attitude of coloniser and colonised, thus allowing the subsequent categorisation of the people, whilst Ireland and Galicia appear to Tracy as no-contact zones, described in terms of separation as uncategorised, primitive and tribal. Such display of the three cultures, from the point of view of a person foreign to all of them, highlights how identity is acquired and, at the same time, given.

María Dolores Gómez Penas and María Amelia Fraga Fuentes, in “The Discourses of Identity and Emigration in Christina Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup*”, explore how women in Northern Ireland are given identities within their religious communities and their families, and how mobility –physical and psychological- is presented as a way of proving that identity is not given by discourse, but rather occurs in the course of it. The story of Beth, the main character of this two-act play, is displayed in opposition to that of her Catholic best friend, Theresa, thus highlighting the construction of identity as the clear differentiation of the self-versus the others. Furthermore, the framing of the self is noted to be almost entirely based on a given ideology the matriarchs of the families instil in the main characters, since all the men in the play are absent. Identity is also affected, state the authors, as a consequence of the conflict in Northern Ireland, triggering the migration of Theresa to London. Both women personify their religious and social background at the same time as their friendship becomes a metonymy of the sought-after understanding between communities in Northern Ireland. These two authors make a really thorough analysis of how stories women tell other women affect their development as human beings and how, in the end, they have to leave a part of their given identity behind, in order to create their true identity. The fact that men are absent from this process strikes one as interesting, since it is women who preserve their patriarchal system for them.

In the third chapter of this section, “On Not Leaving Belfast in Trouble: Medbh McGuckian as a Symbol of Irish Resistance”, by María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, the idea of resistance to conflict within a conflict is explored through the close analysis of “The Marcella Quilt”, among other poems and collections by McGuckian. The poet is presented as an obscure writer that transforms the richness of suggestion of her poetry into a gender issue, thus including Irish women poets in the literary canon. A parallelism is found between the opening and closing verses of “The Marcella Quilt” and James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, considered as a connection with the person epitomising resistance from exile while locating the action in a space and time where Irish women and their struggles are represented. Another highlighted aspect of the poetry of McGuckian is the use of ekphrasis to describe one art with another. The sea is presented as a motif of mobility in *My Love Has Fared Inland* as opposed to the island, where

the poet is a witness and a spokesperson for conflict through comparison with similar conflicts abroad. “The Nth of Marchember” opposes the private as a sanctuary against public horror in the form of an elegy to the mother of the poet, whose physical mobility has been restricted due to all the struggles and conflicts experienced. Medbh McGuckian is analysed as a voice for those women who remained prisoners in their own land, or even in their own bodies, as a consequence of political conflicts from which they could not escape.

In “Stand Still: Photographs of Irish Migrating Women”, Manuela Palacios presents a collection of pictures of Irish migrating women accompanied by the true testimonies of their relatives: nine Irish writers of different genres (namely Paula Meehan, Rita Kelly, Celia de Fréine, Evelyn Conlon, Lorna Shaughnessy, Máighréad Medbh, Catherine Phil MacCarthy, Mary O’Donnell and Lia Mills). Based on the etymology of the latin word *existere*, that names this collection, as an act of moving out of the self, the author explores how the acquisition by these women of a masculine trait such as travelling helped create a new cartography of representation of feminine mobility. Diaspora is presented and analysed as both a consequence of trauma and a cause for trauma. The analysis of the comments provided by the writers depicts women’s mobility as a “lacuna” in literature while defending their role as travellers and not as mere travelling companions to male migrants. A parallelism appears, then, between the reliability of the information provided by photographs and the literary canon. The blending of these two artistic forms creates a moving opposition between the objectiveness of the images and the subjective testimonies, provoking in the reader the mixed feeling of admiring those real life characters and getting lost in their narrative, fit for an adventure novel.

The last section of the book is the shortest, containing two essays. “Welsh Literature” offers the perfect closing for this collection, where life and identity are explained by poetry. The first chapter, “Indian Defences: Mobile Identities in Nikita Lalwani’s *Gifted*”, by Kevin Mills, explores through the use of chess as both a motif and a metaphor the development of identity as a result of questioning and rebelling against the place where it is given. *Gifted*, the story of a Hindu family of three that moves to Cardiff, is described as a novel dealing

with dislocation from a post-colonial perspective. Shreene, the mother, is annihilated by the patriarchal hegemony within her home, a result of the impact that social race has had on Mahesh, her husband, obsessed with the Western, superior world. The character of Rumi, the daughter, is explored as being dislocated from both cultures, since she considers her space of belonging to represent an embodiment of her boundaries. Chess is used as a motif of both marginalisation and inclusion, symbolising both cultures playing on the same board. Through this analysis the reader observes the complex journey that Rumi has to experience in order to belong. In it, she confronts the traditional figure of masculine migration, triggered by the wish to succeed, with the womanly representation of her homeland as a symbol of traditional feminine immobility.

The last chapter of the book, “Mobility, Migration and Settling in Mid-Wales”, is an autobiographical narrative of the author, Chris Kinsey, intertwined with fragments of her poems, signifying her sense of identity and belonging through ecocriticism. Life is posed as a struggle to avoid mobility, symbolised by migration from a rural space, where the author feels she belongs, to an urban one. Such immobility is unveiled as a reverse mobility, whereby the author returns to nature, to the rural ambience from which her grandparents migrated in the past. Identity is linked to the land and its topography rather than to the identity of the mother as stationary or the father as migrant. Chris Kinsey describes her own identity through her poems, where every salient event of her life is depicted through her connection with nature, the landscapes that serve as an understanding of the world inside and out. This last chapter is the most lyrical in the book, proffering nature as a beginning and an end. By valuing her surroundings and escaping the big cities that require a greater purchasing power, the author leaves the reader with the unsettling and at the same time peaceful feeling that immobility does not always equal passiveness, yet it is an act of defence of the land.

Due to its impeccably well-rounded structure, the collection provides the reader with a sense of unity between all the women present in its chapters, thus fulfilling the aim of the editor of creating a social and literary liaison between Galicia, Ireland and Wales, and of giving visibility to women poets from these regions. The de-

construction of gender roles through migration transforms mobility from a physical act to a symbolic one, the act of leaving the self that the paratext implies. Furthermore, the blending of scholars and poets succeeds in building in the reader a sense of familiarity that makes this collection a pleasure to read. *Ex-Sistere: Women's Mobility in Contemporary Irish, Welsh and Galician Literature* is a good example of a soaring line of study which changes and expands both literary and social borders.

NOTES

¹Seven chapters of this collection were completed as part of the “Ex(s)istere: la movilidad en las mujeres de la literatura gallega e irlandesa contemporánea” [Ex(s)istere: Women's Mobility in Contemporary Galician and Irish Literature] research project, financed by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and FEDER (FFI2012-35872), and coordinated by Manuela Palacios.

WORKS CITED

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