



**Ingrid Casey (ed). *Anthology of Young Irish Poets*. Athens: Vakxikon, 2019. pp. 124. ISBN 978-960-638-060-0**

Recalling some lines of the late Seamus Heaney, Ireland’s last Nobel Prize Winner in Literature to date and probably one of the island’s “grand old men” of poetry, one might ask: “Since when ... / Are the first line and the last line of any poem / where the poem begins and ends?” (lines 10-12, Heaney 57). And indeed, the poems in the trilingual *Anthology of Young Irish Poets*, written and compiled by writers much younger than Heaney, often seem to have their roots in ground that predates them in one way or another. The anthology comes in three languages: Greek, English and—in the case of Doireann Ní Ghríofa’s poetry—Irish. It is therefore of no surprise that some of the poems delve into history or establish a link between Greece and Ireland—a theme familiar from older Irish and Northern Irish poets like Heaney and, probably more famously, Michael Longley. To see the younger generation in this anthology make use of a variety of such traditions, each in their very own way and with their own distinctive voices, is heartening and gives the reader an idea of the vibrant literary scene on that island on the periphery of the European continent.

The anthology’s editor is Ingrid Casey, who continues the aforementioned tradition in her poem “Artemisia”, where the title can stand for both a strong female character in Greek mythology, who fought on the side of the Persians against Greek city states and acquired renown as a leader of several battleships, as well as for a plant genus under which several officinal plants are subsumed. Thus, Casey establishes a tension between the established image of the woman as the caring sex and the idea that women can be much more than that; she cleverly uses a literary tradition to paint a picture of a socio-cultural tradition to criticize the latter and call it into question. In “Whist”, the poet Elaine Feeney employs similar criticism against pre-emptive obedience, tone policing, and the social pressure women in Ireland still have to face in our times. She speaks out against male expectations, which are never uttered as such in the poem, but come to the fore rather subtly when she creates a strain between the male farmer, up early taking care of a cow, and

the (supposed) female speaker putting on a metaphorical mask and telling herself “to keep my powder dry” and “to hold my whist” (84). While the man is labouring hard and is going about the everyday chores, the woman seems to tend to idle cares; and being aware of living in a society that judges matters with a male gaze, the speaker decides to hide her thoughts from male individuals somewhat close to her. It is of no surprise that Feeney as an excellent poet manages to circumnavigate the description of female body parts such as breasts but writes about the speaker’s lips and mouth instead. That way, she underlines the speaker’s speechlessness, which, at first glance, seems self-chosen. But how much can it be a matter of free will if one is embedded in a society exercising social pressure on women? A question the poet leaves to the readers to answer.

Other poems about pressing social and political issues in Ireland are Annemarie Ní Churreáin’s trademark poem “Sisters” about strong female characters in foster care and the diverse circumstances they come from and live in. Ní Churreáin masterfully manages to throw spotlights and glimpses on several girls she names, and with just a few words gives the readers a very good idea of the stories behind those names. Not to forget Jessica Traynor’s three contributions taken from a suit of poems commissioned by The Salvage Press in 2016 and republished in her second collection *The Quick*. Those pieces draw on Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* in a pungent and satirical manner to provide mock solutions for the housing crisis Irish governments continually seem to fail to tackle. For the anthology, Traynor has provided three out of nine poems from the suit, and they do not appear in the order of her collection. Probably the most outstanding from those brilliant pieces is “Breeders Wanted”, where the poet goes about analysing that “we are evolving ourselves / out of existence” in an almost Utilitarian fashion, hence picking up the threads from Swift’s days (lines 6-7, 78). The solution provided is displayed in a frighteningly unemotional way: “You have a daughter. Fourteen. Strong . . . Put her to breed” (lines 22-26, 80).

Although socio-political themes loom large throughout the anthology, the book holds much more fine verses to discover. There is the Northern Irish poet Colin Dardis with his wry “Sea Buckthorn”, a poem in which the interest in and fascination for a berry seem to turn into hate and disgust once the berry is plucked and begins to ferment. It is a poem which connects nature with perceptions and emotions. It is not a static poem; its great strength lies in the movement and progress of images as the lines continue, in the interaction of humans with their environment and contemporary world. Dardis’ “Fire Music”, on the other hand, could be called a Troubles poem, a very timely piece about the burn of terror attacks—“calling card // explodes”—and federal forces fighting each other, with the speaker right in the middle of all that violence and not content to accept the fighting parties’ behaviour and

stances – “their blazing elbows” – because it is by no means a matter of course that their respective stances would be valid for everyone involved in or affected by said violence (lines 9-12, 64). It is a poem reaching far beyond the Irish maritime borders as we can see regarding the current war-like situation in Afghanistan for example.

The poems in the *Anthology of Young Irish Poets* are firmly rooted in place, sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly, and often commingled with images of human conditions. In “Archipelago”, Rob Buchanan presents us with questions of belonging (nowhere) and searching, with a conflict between the “atavistic lure for incompleteness” and the want “To possess everything” (38). The search, the motion away is an ongoing process of which Buchanan writes “it is dying as it is growing” (40). Although Greek mythology is evoked here once again through the figure of Odysseus, through lines like the above, “Archipelago” seems more of a Heideggerian poem, reminding the reader of the philosopher’s idea of being-toward-death, thus giving the text a reach far beyond the island of Ireland’s watery boundaries.

Despite such heart-heavy moments, the anthology yields lighter themes too, wittily brought forth by Dylan Brennan for example. In “Things You Can Do with a Grasshopper”, he contrasts the forced and artificial beauty in cruel human acts with the natural beauty of what can happen if nature is resurrected or remains unperturbed. It is indicative for this poem that it ends on a positive note letting on there is always something to be said in favour of the goodness in human beings. Yet, Brennan does not paint the violence potentially done to a grasshopper as something inhumane, and so, quite elegantly, avoids stereotype-laden pitfalls of demarcating the evil in us from us, as he seems very conscious of evil being part of the many complex layers of the human condition.

Complexities are often well-contrasted with simple and effective, yet evocative images, as delivered by Alice Kinsella in “Periwinkle (I)”, where the poet displays for us a “shimmering summer sea surface” (34). The alliterative image sticks immediately in this poem about how the present and associations contained in the poet’s words can transport the reader elsewhere. Yet, in “The Ends of It”, the poet notes how first things and important moments – such as being by the summer sea – come to an end, fade out of physical existence and into memory, a theme also resonating in “First Date on Azul Street” by Doireann Ní Ghríofa as well as in Seán Hewitt’s “Häcksjön”. The latter comes with beautiful and vivid descriptions of taking a swim in a lake surrounded by Swedish moors. Here is an Irish writer once again going beyond Ireland’s borders in almost a Heaney’eske way as his poems immediately call Heaney’s bog poems to mind – and yet, Hewitt delivers his verses very much in his own well-developed voice, leaving no doubt that here is a poem

who, with regards to the craft, fits in seamlessly with this assembly of fine writers from Northern Ireland and the Republic, poets well-aware of those who came and went before them, and who seem unafraid of making their own mark in the world of writing.

Stephen Sexton is among those names to look out for in every good bookshop or library. His are what one might call memory poems too. In “Anniversary”, the speaker remembers a sister who always remains unknown, remains in the realm of the unnamed. There is a storytelling quality and a narrative voice to Sexton’s poetry that, with a few tweaks to his texts, could have them appear as micro-fiction as well. One can see this writer easily transcend genres should he ever wish to do so. A writer who has already proved her capabilities in that regard is Doireann Ní Ghríofa. Her “Jigsaw” presents us with one of her trademark themes, namely motherhood. It is quite interesting, but for reasons of space cannot be investigated further, that the present version of the poem is taken from her collection *Lies*, while an earlier different version appears in *Clasp*. “Jigsaw” as well as “Cusp of Autumn” are prime examples of how well Ní Ghríofa plays with language and, by doing so, can gift us with a lightness almost without equal. There is a beautiful friskiness in assonant rhyming words weaved into lines like “slip into the water’s skin, / sketching concentric circles that glint, / thin edges colliding” (lines 6-8, English translation). For the sake of completeness, it must be said that Ingrid Casey has kindly provided me with English translations of Ní Ghríofa’s work (by the poet herself) as her poems in the anthology are in Irish.

Much more could be said about the contents and styles assembled in the *Anthology of Young Irish Poets*, but there is never enough space. One could, of course, praise the keen eye and deep understanding of Manuela Palacios and Lucy Collins who have written the preface and the postface respectively, and who display a grasp of the poems that is at once insightful and much deeper than what I have to offer. In the book, both texts appear in Greek but are available in English on the publisher’s website. One could also ask why a book that is supposed to present young poets features writers in their thirties and forties, when there are many interesting younger voices emerging from the Irish literary community, or why there is no stronger emphasis on migrant voices. My own understanding is that this is not necessarily something to criticise. Much rather, it could be an incentive for another anthology in the future, and to keep an eye on the vibrant and ever-changing Irish poetry scene, North and South. In addition, it should be noted there are always limitations making it impossible to accommodate in such a book everything one could possibly wish for to be there. It can therefore be argued that here we are presented with a well-chosen and well-curated anthology shedding a wonderful spotlight on what poetry from Ireland has

to offer in our times. The non-exhaustiveness inevitably included in such a project should be a reason to take the *Anthology of Young Irish Poets* as a steppingstone to dive into the richness and fullness of what the island's poetry invites us to experience, to make it part of our very own human condition.

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