

I am not from here

Also by María do Cebreiro:

(In Galician)

Poetry

O estadio do espello (1998)

Nós, as inadaptadas (2002)

Non queres que o poema te coñeza (2004)

Os hemisferios (2006)

Non son de aquí (2008)

As editor

A poesía é o gran milagre do mundo (2001)

Damas Negras (2002)

Criticism

As antoloxías de poesía en Galicia e Cataluña:

representación poética e ficción lóxica (2004)

As terceiras mulleres (2005)

MARÍA DO CEBREIRO

I am not from here

translated by Helena Miguélez-Carballeira

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**‘I am not from here’:
A Translation for *María do Cebreiro***

Helena Miguélez Carballeira

The ideal I’m envisioning here is a mind receptive
to thoughts, able to nurture and connect them, and
susceptible to happiness in their entertainment.

Eve Kosfosky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.

Theorists of nondualistic thought continue to puzzle over the persistence of binaries, even after almost four decades of direct critique of their limited scope for representation and disarming arbitrariness, and especially of the power differentials they rest upon. This perplexity has been fuelled in part by the particular pace and logic of post-structuralist study, sometimes dilatory, sometimes plain self-cancelling. Critics are now asking pointed questions which acknowledge the continuing need for work that identifies essentialism in its many guises and complicates our understanding of it. But these voices nevertheless show an impatience with the fact that alternative visions have not been forthcoming and that a ‘truly’ nondualistic critical practice, one that is alert even to the potentially bipolar narratives underlying inclusive and constructivist theoretical projects (those orbiting around performativities, genealogies and total histories, to name just a few of the most fertile), is simply quite hard to achieve. Luckily for those of us whose hearts are made lighter through strenuous dialogue with the unintelligible, there are now some phenomenally articulate voices envisaging (and tentatively communicating) new directions.¹ The proposed pathways seem to be turning more and more into nerve-ways, drifting away from the insights that joined world structures to bodies, and into new perceptive stances that join bodies to bodies, minds to minds: a poetics of propinquity and affect, a preoccupation not so much with *beneath*, but as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has put it, with *beside* (2003: 8). We are not oblivious to the fact that

this revelation of a powerful correlation between cognition and affect comes at a taxing time for human sensitivity. We are constantly exposed to narratives of loss: loss of the language we speak, of stretches of undefiled coastline, of the possibility of self and of selflessness. In their sheer ubiquity, these narratives inure us against the risk of pain and prepare us for the world without us, which Alan Weisman has so forcibly drawn (2007). And yet, perhaps, the sense of urgency we derive from being fully enmeshed with processes of irreversible damage is the reason why rational activity has become so people-oriented. Our fight against destitution, too, seems a struggle for collective self-forgiveness: a difficult desideratum, and one perhaps made possible only in the blissful space afforded by reading, thinking and writing.

For some time now I have suspected that the work of poet and literary theorist María do Cebreiro (Santiago de Compostela, 1976) has grappled with these questions in ways that are at the very least triangular and which, importantly, do not evade the suggestion of answers. Since publishing her first book of poetry in 1998, *O estadio do espello* [The Mirror Stage], María do Cebreiro has revealed a creative capacity virtually unbound by the labeling and categorizing enterprise that so often characterizes work in the humanities. She is a dedicated poet and an influential literary theorist, currently based at the University of Santiago de Compostela (Galicia). Her scholarly output inhabits the interstices of critical theory, Hispanic and Galician studies with the kind of obstinacy that reveals a deeply felt commitment to interdisciplinary thought. Her critical and theoretical writing springs from an enormously sophisticated intimacy with ancient, modern and contemporary literatures, as well as intellectual history, delighting in a style spacious enough to house the esoteric and the plain to see. She has lit the way of theoretical paths previously uncharted in Galician studies (related to aspects of the spectral in Galician literature or to the role and status of *traducións de autor* in the Galician cultural field, to name two of her most recent projects), while remaining a key commentator in ongoing cultural debates,

such as those revolving around the nation and nationalism, or the instrumentalised role of women-authored literature.

As a poet, her trajectory has gathered a particular form of (sustained) momentum, at a time when Galician female-authored poetry is being hailed as a long-due literary event. Critics have said of her contemporaries that they disassembled language through the venting of bottled-up drives, contained in a collective female body which had until that moment (the 1990s) remained almost anaemic with neglect. Poets such as Yolanda Castaño, Lupe Gómez or María Lado spoke of fickle instincts, breasts and anorexia. In so doing they told a different story to that traditionally allotted women in Galician historical discourse, with its ingrained sentimentalisation of their capacity for labour and endurance, their robustness and sturdy beauty. While these poets' projects were distinctively engaged and provocative, criticism, even when it aims to publicise their achievements, rarely considers their idiosyncratic features. Radically different poetic voices have been measured by the same gauge, perhaps with the intention to augment their literary force through a celebration of coherence. That their coherence as a 'group' (a 'generation' even, as some put it) may have been slightly contrived is a suspicion that has only recently begun to emerge.

In her capacity as both agent and observer, María do Cebreiro's poetic and academic work has provided key responses to the above processes. She has, for example, single-handedly questioned whether literary recourse to the body in Galician female-authored poetry in the nineties had been a veritably political gesture (Rábade Villar 2008). Her explanation of how it was not looked inward at her own creative practice but was also meant to interrogate a critical environment that sees any form of female-authored creative dialogue with notions such as privacy, sexuality and the body as engaged and political by default. The effects of such critical workings, she has warned, are just as indicative of a restrictive reading of women's literature (one still resting upon untheorised notions of respectability) as they are of an impoverished understanding of what it takes to

be political and to write politically. In her bold definition of what such an undertaking entails, the poet and the critic's voice come together with the kind of conceptual sharpness that is more characteristic of careful reflection than of impulse.

But María do Cebreiro's poetry is not preoccupied with drives. I have drawn for this realization on the work of psychologist of emotions Silvan S. Tomkins and his groundbreaking, yet little known distinction between drives and affects.² Although it is not the place here to delve deeply into Tomkin's work, let us establish at least the following. Freudian and post-Freudian psychology have tended to subordinate affective responsive structures in human psychology to the governing urgency of primary drives, which, by way of this hierarchical logic, are endowed with greater explanatory power. An acute reader of Tomkins' work, Kosfosky Sedgwick has explained his challenge to this widespread view as follows:

'Common sense holds [...] that the drive system is the primary motivator of human behavior, to which the affects are inevitably secondary. Tomkins shows the opposite to be true: that motivation itself, even the motivation to satisfy biological drives, is the business of the affect system.'

(2003: 20)

I see the above as a theoretical *tour de force* and one whose profound implications for the so-called 'affective turn' in political and sociocultural sciences has been seldom considered. I seize it for this analysis of contemporary female-authored poetry in Galicia, and especially María do Cebreiro's work, because Tomkins' distinction between drive and affect suggests to me the possibility of a dividing line between the main shared concerns of Galician women poets writing in the nineties and María do Cebreiro's work today. For if Yolanda Castaño's *yolandolatría* or Olga Novo's *líquidos íntimos* stemmed from a preoccupation with the poetic expression of contradictory, self-absorbed or unfettered passions, in an attempt to jostle Galician readers into recognising the possibility of an intransigent

female body, María do Cebreiro's poetry places passions not against a cognitive tradition that has historically cast them aside as volatile or mundane, but as part and parcel of a new cognitive order conducive to new political possibilities. In her poetry, reason and emotion cease to relate to each other in a dualistic and hierarchical fashion, giving way instead to affective forms of understanding that not only drive, but also result from what Patricia Ticineto Clough has termed a 'felt vitality', a 'felt aliveness' (Clough 2007:2). It is in this sense that I would argue that María do Cebreiro's work, so far available almost exclusively in its original Galician language, enters fully into dialogue with the very contemporary insight that 'powerful emotions have an irreducibly important cognitive role to play' (Nussbaum 1990:7). My reference to Martha C. Nussbaum's work is also evocative of what I consider an equally central aspect of María do Cebreiro's inquiry as a 'thinker-poet' (15), namely that certain truths about human life can be approximated only through poetic language. An unabashed attachment to ethics is not difficult to detect in such a reading of her project. Ethics, however, is to be understood in her writing as a commitment to dialogue with the many manifestations of affect in human existence, with our capacity to affect and be affected, and to sustain this dialogue even in the face of the elusive nature of the notions upon which it rests. It is not surprising that themes such as coherence, happiness, self-betrayal and love recur constantly in María do Cebreiro's poems and that these connect intimately with processes such as learning, thought and study, which are of equal weight in her work.

This preoccupation with affects as/and cognition crystallizes in her book *Non queres que o poema te coñeza* [You don't want the poem to know you] (2004) and takes on a new direction in *I am not from here* (2008). The 2004 collection constantly alludes to the possibility of knowledge and comprehension through affect-guided stimuli and a will to explore the possibility of a 'flexible nonlinguistic account of cognition' (Nussbaum 2001:7). Granted, the body provides one possible pathway to

knowledge and understanding, but so too may one's wish to acknowledge the limitations of traditional forms of cognition and to recognise bewilderment as a state of liberation:

'At the beginning I had always to search for some detail among the papers.
I thought that my disorderly approach was a problem,
that I would never find what I was looking for
amid piles and piles of sheets
until I understood suddenly
that it was my fingertips that were guiding me
for they wanted to learn things independently.' (2004:37)³

The poet voluntarily places herself in a position of non-knowledge and tests her senses for consciousness. The loci where intellectual discernment will occur are not simply poetry, writing or stern deliberation, for as the poet will put it in *I am not from here*: 'poetry is not the space of the possible' (2008:19). Beyond such reflective processes, there is the value of prolonging the encounter with what is alien, seldom with an epiphanic point of closure in mind. The tempo and cadence of a foreign language, which is playfully 'courted' but never apprehended, the discovery that polysemy too is a culture-bound concept, or that calligraphy is a medium with which to dialogue with the world: these are some of the cognitive possibilities for traversing the edges between self and others and the affective spaces that connect and compound us. For similar reasons, traditional artifacts of knowledge transmission (books, letters, historical discourse) are endowed with an excess of meaning which crosses over to the realm of affectivity. Books do not simply convey but converse with knowledge, and they are also the richly textured objects of emotions. And so the poetic voice yearns for an affective connection that uses the intellectual space provided by the poem on the page as a starting line: 'This book you have in your hands today/ how I'd love to see it all underlined' (2004:125).

And so this book you have in your hands today continues to reflect on these lines of thought and others. Specifically, *I*

am not from here reveals a preoccupation with affects and place, a need to move beyond an ontology and into a geography of affects. And again the body provides us with a point of departure, for the focus here is not on the corporeal manifestations of affects. The question is no longer the internal location of the effects of grief, love, fear or sexuality, imprinted on the body in the form of a trembling of the stomach, a convulsion, a shiver. There is, on the contrary, a preoccupation with how the body moves along, creating and shaping in its movement an affective map that has little to do with expected notions of bond and location. Granada, Seixas, Amsterdam, A Coruña, Bangor: and in between them a searching intellect wanders purposefully, envisioning a love in and of displacement.

In previous books (and in her work as both an academic and a literary translator), María do Cebreiro has considered the possibility of untranslatability. For a poet who does not shun notions such as truth and exactitude, this is not so surprising. I have, however, approached the task of translating *I Am Not from Here* with an unsettling sense of ease, perhaps because I was translating into my third language, with all the narrow margin for playfulness that this was allowing me. Like María, I still have family in a region of inland Galicia known as Terra Chá (Flat land), in the province of Lugo. I have touched the core of the bread, which is placed carefully under the wraps and left there to ferment. I have travelled far away from that core and savoured its necessary sourness. Its yeast-like qualities have also helped me grow. But in translating María do Cebreiro's poems I have not drawn on this affinity through a shared place and the emotional weight it evidently has for both of us. In other words, I am not from here either, but that is beside the point. María do Cebreiro's poetry has spoken to me in ways that have little to do with origins. It is the gift of her searching and sensitive intellect, her sincere regard for earnestness in her work and the work of others that have led me to heartening encounters with intellectual curiosity and rigour. Reading her poetry has always been part of those encounters; translating it has been a bonus. It is for this reason that I present the poems below not

as a translation *of* but a translation *for* María do Cebreiro. As a gift, that is.

Notes

¹ In this realisation I draw inspiration from Galician poet Chus Pato, who, during a poetry recital at the Verbum museum (Vigo) in May 2009, said that her heavy heart was always made lighter when reading philosophy.

² For a brief explanation of this distinction see Sedgwick 2003:19–22.

³ My translation from the original Galician.

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In memory of my grandfather Xosé

But poets should
Exert a double vision, should have eyes
To see near things as comprehensively
As if afar they took their point of sight,
And distant things as intimately deep
As if they touched them.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*.

Bangor

1

Don't forget to bring your heart.
But I was left wondering about the wind's habits.

2

We lose what's ours,
not one step further
than this rain.

Further up north,
I close my hands.

He touched my fingers.

3

On his woollen jumper
the map of a language
with no army.

Neither pure, nor injured.

What's the point of hunger?

4

Ireland's potatoes
do not shoot.

What's the point of hunger?

5

To the north of what I'd never imagined
there's a man lying down.

He closes his hands.

I touch his fingers
one by one
and it doesn't add up.

6

Sheep in Wales
do not shoot.

Sometimes you see numbers on them.

7

He never folds into sleep.

You want me to be free
and you don't let me.

8

Stateless nations are windy.

Amarante

*The contraction between earth
and humidity we call wheat.*

1
Everything ends,
we said,
but bodies
explode
with waiting
and they bear
in secret
the long long course
of civilizations
river-like
summed up
between the wind's fingers
and this door
where you read
please
don't disturb
open
nevertheless
for you,
always

but sometimes
I shoot
I twist
inside
for I know
that a part
of me
will be destroyed
and no matter
how I try
I shall never know
which one.

2

In each contraction
there's an element
of hope
and catastrophe.
The small
events of passion
march back
to the mud:
there are no shapes:
there's life,
an attack
on what we currently
understand
by family.
Grain too
will be replaced.
The corn girl will come after
the steel girl,
the wood
after the Black Forest.
The reckless wind, perhaps

they'll want to give it
a place
name:
pretty maybe,
but still a treason.
And at the tip of your toes
there's the love for that girl
who managed to join your twenties
with my thirties,
and the ten years
in between
a big enough space
to be able to say
it was lovely and it lasted
what it had to last, till we hear
that there will always
be someone
to teach us
the meaning of time.
All relationships
are long distance but I am not
from here and I leave
no descendants,
I want no other origin
than this bridge
for as long as it holds us
and when it falls down
let us be noble and walk away
through the debris,
let us know how to part,
let it be as beautiful
as ever.

Do you know what shone
 the most
 in the distance?
 It was in your hand
 and it wasn't my scent,
 it shone just as
 the edge
 of the sheets
 of Rosalía de Castro's books
 printed in Bible
 paper. It shone
 almost as much
 as your words.
 You'd like
 not to be from here
 but you're not going to swap
 what's old for what's new.
 You won't believe
 that the poems
 I write to you
 can collide
 with the wall
 of the world.
 Power is this:
 a circle.
 She has already understood
 for us and for ever
 that the words of love sprawl
 and beg the rich
 for a penny
 at the Court's door. Property
 is this:
 what's yours is mine
 and what's mine is everybody's:

what do I want
a house for
when I have no walls,
and who can carry you
and to what point
when the moment comes
our resistance
to saying no
will make us lose
each other.

4

It could well not be like this,
but poetry
is not
the space of the possible
and yet
Amarante
what a beautiful name
it could be a man or a woman,
the name of something
that never was.
Love is this:
the new.
It can just not happen
for centuries
then disappear
in seconds,
it can heal,
bleed through its wound,
breathe through its mouth,
rekindle the old flame
in the fire, make the volcano's womb
grow.