

## Shades of a Writing Life. Encounter with Mary O'Donnell

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It is a great honour for *Studi irlandesi* to have the opportunity to publish some new poems and stories by Mary O'Donnell, whose voice is one of the deepest, most sensitive, resonant and effective in contemporary Irish writing. This happens at a very special moment, as 2017 also marks the publication of the first full-length critical study on the poetry and fiction of Mary O'Donnell, the volume edited by María Elena Jaime de Pablos, *Giving Shape to the Moment: The Art of Mary O'Donnell, Poet, Novelist and Short-story writer*, due to come out very soon with Peter Lang.

Mary O'Donnell's first poetry collection, *Reading the Sunflowers in September*, goes back to 1990 and her latest, *Those April Fevers*, was published in 2015. Besides seven collections of poetry, Mary O'Donnell has written four novels, *The Light-Makers* (1992), *Virgin and the Boy* (1996), *The Elysium Testament* (1999) and *Where They Lie* (2014), two collections of short stories *Strong Pagans* (1991) and *Storm over Belfast* (2008), and has participated in the collective comic crime novel *Sister Caravaggio* edited by Peter Cunningham (2014). She has been involved in translation projects, has written critical essays and has been a drama critic for the *Sunday Tribune*. Besides having presented a number of literature programmes for the radio, Mary O'Donnell is also involved in teaching creative writing, an experience she describes in the volume edited by Anne Fogarty, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, and Eibhear Walshe, *Imagination in the Classroom* (2013).

Her voice is rooted in the present of contemporary Ireland and the wide spectrum of her creative interests has a counterpart in the wide range of issues and topics raised in her poetry and fiction, from the impact of the passing of time and the ageing female body, the role of women and their elision from history, to family reunions, intergenerational misunderstandings, social change, environmental concerns and the process of artistic creation. Such thematic richness makes Mary O'Donnell difficult to classify as a writer, but is consistent with the linguistic exuberance of her writing, the careful research of the exactness and precision of words, whose essence is a carrier of significance. In the "Introduction" to her 2006 poetry collection *The Place of Miracles* O'Donnell defines poems as capable of replacing ordinary speech: "When feeling fails in ordinary speech to do the work of being human, sometimes a poem steps into the void". Therefore the power of words is unique, "they are my light burden, my alchemist's bag, usually open" (xiii).

*Studi irlandesi* now publishes four poems – “Those Prostitutes in Cuba”, “Heron and the Women”, “Unlegendary Heroes”, “The Kitchen Girl’s Pumpkin” – and two stories – “La Mer” and “The Path to Heaven”. The latter first came out in 2016 in the anthology *The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women from the North of Ireland*, and the poem “Unlegendary Heroes” forms the title poem of her 1998 collection. In fact, themes connected to the role of women, together with the impact of universal experiences on the individual, the ghosts of the past and social change, not to mention – more recently – the process of ageing, are interspersed among these texts.

The poem “Those Prostitutes in Cuba” exploits exotic setting to shed light on the constant difference between the sexes and the double standards of behaviour that still exists in the twenty-first century. Reporting the account of the encounter of a probably middle-aged man (“he said”) with prostitutes in Cuba, the speaking voice expresses her envy: “I thought – against my own sex – how / enviable his freedom”, “It could never happen / to a woman my age”. Animal imagery enhances sexual encounters that are never openly expressed, female kittens turn into male tigers in mutual enjoyment in which no violence is perceived – “two tiger men / who would not wound”. The desire of the “vitality” of the prostitutes merges with the dream of a *ménage-à-trois* in “a dusky room” where the sunlight acts as a disturber. The reference to Matisse, who made colour the crucial element of his paintings, is an oblique reference to creativity capable, like the sexual act, to give birth to the completely absorbing “riotous world / within and without”.

Also “Heron and the Women” presents an overt implication to writing and to artistic creation. The bird of the title acts as a spectator of the world below caught in the everyday stillness of the morning “on the far side of the canal”, he hears “female voices” contrasting with his silent flight, “above / the careless spirals of words”, a movement that is parallel to the spiral movement of the flying heron. Embedded with a variety of symbolic features – “Ancient symbols appear” – the heron is a solitary creature, whose movement recollects the process of writing, by itself a solitary action. Explicit references to “a page” that remains “unread”, to “wet inks” and “a script” highlight the natural detail of the canal as “vellum” on which the heron as a would-be artist can leave his mark.

“Unlegendary Heroes” is one of Mary O’Donnell’s most personal and paradigmatic poems. Introduced by a quotation from Patrick J. Duffy’s *Landscapes of South Ulster* (1993), the poem is anticipated by a further paratextual element, a list of great men in rural areas whose names have remained in local history for their small heroic deeds in everyday life, among them, being able to perform something extraordinary like mowing “one acre and one rood Irish in a day” or being “a great oarsman”. To this list Mary O’Donnell counterpoints a list of unheroic figures in everyday life, women who have performed extraordinary deeds like washing “a week’s sheets, shirts / and swaddling, bake bread and clean the house / all of a Monday”. Among the various unrecorded and forgotten names of women who were extraordinary for their strength, also women endowed with creativity and artistic inclinations appear, “Cepta Duffy, Glennan, / very good

at sewing – embroidered a set of vestments / in five days” or “Mary Conlon, Tullyree, / who wrote poems at night”.

Artistic creation is also embedded in the fourth and last poem, “The Kitchen Girl’s Pumpkin”, in which the unnamed kitchen girl, simply referred to as “she”, makes experiments with the plants and “studies the crop”, in order to create something extraordinary, when she “composes extraordinary soups / for the long table upstairs”. The “santoku knife” that appears at the end of the poem is an allomorph for a pen, creation and creativity are linked to conception and birth, as “The mother plant lies shrivelled, / puckered as an umbilical cord after birth”, just like a woman who has just given birth, prostrated by her “hefty youngster”. Careful details of work in the kitchen garden follow the line of the unheroic deeds of “Unlegendary Heroes”, performed in the private world of domestic labours.

In the two short stories published here Mary O’Donnell returns to the issues of the impact of history and social change that mark her fiction. Indirectly recalling her 2014 novel *Where They Lie*, which deals with the challenging and disturbing topic of the “Disappeared” during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the short story “La Mer” sheds light on the very recent terrorist attack in Nice in July 2016 through the focus on the strong bond of friendship among women. The setting alternates between Ireland and France, the world of everyday life and the better elsewhere of “une petite vacance”. This is emphasised by the iterated use of expressions in French, ranging from single words or phrases (*maison secondaire, chez elle, la belle France, politesse bijou*) to full sentences (*Je vais tourner la page, Going for our promenade soon. It’s 14th July, fireworks tonight!*). The choice of characters in italics marks the distance not so much between the two different language systems, rather between the ordinary and the upsetting extraordinary. At the same time the text plays with the subtext “of the French writer Colette, whom we admired for a certain witty feminine intelligence”, a writer with a multiple career, evoked in the opening paragraph.

The impact of History takes the shape of the “19-ton truck” crushing into “The hundreds of revellers, their children, who had drifted carelessly along the Promenade des Anglais, which we three friends knew and loved – no, adored – a place of whole, affectionate histories, destroyed in seconds”. The conclusion of the story leaves our doubts unresolved as the speaker touches on the question of just who is writing the pages of history: “Once, it was the Germans who inscribed the worst on the text of history. Now, the others are writing our texts before we have even imagined them”.

German history is in the background of the second story, “The Path to Heaven”, in which the issues of immigration and foreign labour, and domestic violence in contemporary Ireland are set against the memory of the concentration camp of Sobibór in World War II. The protagonist is a writer, Lauren, who employs the Polish young woman Kalina as a cleaning lady and slowly gets involved in her life of deprivation and violence. Kalina comes from near Sobibór, a subtext that provides the story’s title: “These helper Jews accompanied the people about to be gassed as they walked along a path in the forest, later referred

to as “The Path to Heaven”. The path to Heaven is a metaphor for Lauren’s attempt to find a way out for Kalina’s life of violence, ready to pay for her journey home and relieve her of the burden on her daily endurance. She is thus creative in Kalina’s life, she tries to change the plot, juxtaposing the “path to Heaven” of the Holocaust and Kalina’s path to Heaven, split between the new possibility of escape and the desire to remain. The character of Kalina recalls the figure of the crippled girl from Eastern Europe in O’Donnell’s poem “Girl from the East, Palmerstown traffic-lights”, said to be “at war with deficit” for her physical, social and economic condition. Kalina conveys again O’Donnell’s concern with immigrant figures in Ireland, and her condition is similar to a lot of women like her, “with two children, no money, limited English”.

*Studi irlandesi* is grateful to Mary O’Donnell for considering the Italian scene and for offering the readers of the Journal the possibility to encounter the wide spectrum and perspective of her poetry and fiction. A special word of thanks goes to the publishing houses and journals that have granted permission to republish O’Donnell’s work: “The Path to Heaven” originally appeared in the anthology *The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women from the North of Ireland*, ed. by Sinéad Gleeson (New Island, Stillorgan 2016, 268-279); “Those Prostitutes” was originally published in *The Café Review* (28, 2017, 18). “Heron and the Women” was originally published in *RAUM Poetry* (1, 2016, 16). “Unlegendary Heroes” was originally published in *Unlegendary Heroes* (Knockeven – Cliffs of Moher, Salmonpoetry 1998, 22-24). All reprinted with permission from the copyright owners.

#### *Publications*

##### **Novels:**

*The Light-Makers*, Swords, Poolbeg, 1992, 1993.

*Virgin and the Boy*, Swords, Poolbeg, 1996.

*The Elysium Testament*, London, Trident Press, 1999.

*Where They Lie*, Stillorgan, New Island Books, 2014.

*Sister Caravaggio*, collaborative novel with Maeve Binchy, Peter Cunningham, Neil Donnelly, Cormac Millar, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Mary O’Donnell, Peter Sheridan, Dublin, Liberties Press, 2014.

##### **Short Story collections:**

*Strong Pagans*, Swords, Poolbeg, 1991.

*Storm Over Belfast*, Stillorgan, New Island Books, 2008.

##### **Poetry:**

*Reading the Sunflowers in September*, Knockeven - Cliffs of Moher, Salmonpoetry, 1990.

*Spiderwoman’s Third Avenue Rhapsody*, Knockeven - Cliffs of Moher, Salmonpoetry 1993.

*Unlegendary Heroes*, Knockeven - Cliffs of Moher, Salmonpoetry 1998.

*September Elegies*, Belfast, Lapwing, 2003.

*The Place of Miracles. New & Selected Poems*, Stillorgan, New Island Books, 2006.

*Csodák földje*, Hungarian edition of *New & Selected Poems*, trans. by Tamás Kabdebó, Budapest, Irodalmi Jelen Könyvek, 2011.

*Those April Fevers*, Todmorden, Arc Publications, 2015.

##### **Translations:**

*To the Winds Our Sails, Irish writers translate Galician poetry*, ed. by Mary O’Donnell and Manuela Palacios, Knockeven - Cliffs of Moher, Salmonpoetry, 2010.