

Review of Iván Alejandro Portela Bonachea's *Cantos de Tir na n-Og*

By Olwen Rowe

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Iván Portela's latest collection of poetry, *Cantos de Tir na n-Og*, was published in 2004 by CONACULTA, the Mexican National Council for Literature and the Arts. As the title suggests, the Irish myth of *Tír na nÓg*, the Land of Eternal Youth, and Ireland are the principal inspiration for these poems. Portela is a university lecturer and since 1981 has taught at the Universidad Iberoamericana, a private Jesuit university in Mexico City, where he has been recognised for excellence in teaching. He is also a key participant in a variety of poetry workshops. Among his published books are *La otra cara de Irlanda* (The Other Face of Ireland) (1986), *Cantos Ivánicos* (1992) and *Cantos de fuego* (Songs of Fire) (1998).

Portela is a delightfully anomalous poet. Born in Santa Clara, Cuba in 1944, he moved to Mexico when he was nineteen years old, was subsequently naturalised as Mexican and has made ancient Ireland his poetic homeland. He has taken on the cloak of the 'bard of the Mexican Irish', a Cuban-Mexican Oisín, in search of his true homeland. He must be the only Latin American poet to have written so passionately and extensively about Ireland and Celtic mythology.

Pura Lopéz Colomé, a key contemporary Mexican poet and the official translator of Seamus Heaney into Spanish - from whom Portela takes a number of epigraphs for poems in this collection - establishes in her introduction to the collection *Fervor por Irlanda* (A Passion for Ireland) that there is no better legend or place than *Tír na nÓg* to characterise Portela's poetic undertaking:

Ancient Erin has always been the exclusive vehicle for his poetic explorations, whose purpose is none other than to find a mirror which reflects his true God, he who lives in him and in all that surrounds him, God of meanness and generosity, of pleasure

and misery. In order that the atrocities of the world do not silence him, he returns time and time again to the one true source, the lyric [...]. (11). [1]

The lyrical poem, like *Tír na nÓg*, represents for Portela the land of possibility, the land of beauty and truth, where he feels closest to God.

Cantos de Tir na n-Og, his latest offering of *cantos*, which translates as 'songs', like the titles of his other collections, emphasises his faith in the lyrical form. The collection comprises just over a hundred poems, all of which are dedicated to Ireland and its Celtic mythology. The collection is divided into two sections, 'Cantares para Oisín de Tir na n-Og (Poems for Oisín from Tir na nÓg)' and 'Como la dorada Fáiinne Óir en el Reino de Erin (Like the Golden Fáiinne Óir (Ring) in the Kingdom of Erin)'. The epilogue is taken from W.B. Yeats: 'There is a country called Tir na n-Og, which means the country of the young for age and death have not found it' (from *Fairy and Folk Tales*), thus setting the parameters for Portela's poetic exploration of the land of eternal youth. Yeats is an explicit influence throughout the poems, with direct quotations taken from his better-known poems. Seamus Heaney also features in these poems, amongst a colourful array of historical and mythological personalities who amicably inhabit the mystical world created in *Cantos de Tir na n-Og*, alongside the embodiment of the beloved for Portela, Teresa Cuddy.

The first poem sets the tone for the collection, as Portela invokes important figures from the past, lamenting his own absence from their country:

¡Oh, canto de Irlanda, canto de Tara,
canto de Daedra,
canto de Ulster, canto de Erin!,
¡canto de Patricio, canto do Aimirgín, canto
de Munster,

canto de Connacht, canto de Leinster ...
canto de Oisín!

(Oh, song of Ireland, song of Tara,
song of Deirdre,
song of Ulster, song of Erin!
song of Saint Patrick, song of Amergin, song
of Munster,
song of Connacht, song of Leinster ... song
of Oisín!)

Along with Yeats and Heaney, Amergin, the poet warrior of Conchobar Mac Nessa, who was to become the chief poet of Ulster, frequently appears in the poems, and Portela takes a quotation from Amergin as the epigraph for a later poem. The geographical expanse of this stanza, encompassing all four provinces of Ireland, is reflected in the following poems in the collection, which extend, as the title of one poem suggests, from New Ross to Salthill, taking in key literary sites including Ben Bulbin and Joyce's Martello Tower in Dublin.

The poems and their notes bear testament to the poet's belief that being in key locations in Ireland grounds his vision, so to speak, and lends his words the authority of experience, of having been there. The vibrant synthesis of Irish myths, legends and history in these poems suggests that these stories are not only taken from written material, but also from local oral storytelling, thus explaining the poet's insistence on having been there and the authenticity this seems to give his vision. It also links these poems to this tradition of storytelling as a way of affirming and celebrating identity, in this case, the adopted identity of the poet.

Portela takes on the role of the bard by invoking the mythical and historical voices on his travels. His experiences in Ireland seem to have given his poetry the decisive focus that he desires. In one of the more revealing poems, 'Estoico (Stoical)' (28), we understand that for Portela travel and memories of travel renew the heart. The experiences are implicitly connected to the desire to survive the darker side of the world, and to do so without regret. 'Estoico' ends with the image of the soul being liberated between Tara and the plenitude of God, thus

giving us an essential key to the way in which Tír na nÓg and Ireland are places not only of mythical significance, but are, more importantly, mystical.

The collection is sadly blighted by orthographic errors, particularly in place names, which are often unnecessarily and irritatingly misspelt, thus detracting from the authenticity which the poet stresses he derives from the geographical location, such as Pulatomish (Pollatomish, County Mayo) which was almost unrecognisable.

In this first poem, while the poet invokes the heroes of the past, he also experiences an exile from their country 'Soy hijo de Usnach, voz de Cuchulain / levanta tu cetro (I am Uisneach's son, the voice of Cuchulain, raise your sceptre)'. He feels both at home in and excluded from their country. The refrain throughout the poem is '¿Por qué no estoy allí? (Why am I not there?)'. While the poems celebrate a definite period in Ireland, they also lament Portela's ultimate separation from the country and its 'invisible regions'. The poems in the collection take up this theme time and time again, as the poet laments that while being filled with memories of Ireland, 'No despierto en Irlanda ... (I don't wake up in Ireland ...)' (81). Sadly, while he is full of his experience in Ireland, it is but a blip in universal time, so small as to be almost inconsequential. In a salute to Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, he describes a day in Dublin as 'un fragmento de quarks (a fragment of quarks)' (86).

As Pura López Colomé has insightfully argued, for Portela the lyrical poem plays a redemptive role, and, like Tír na nÓg, it creates a space where he can retreat from violence and evil in the world and attempt to become one with nature. In one poem, it is the pull of the waves which lead to poetry - 'y las olas arrastrando la poesía (and the waves drawing out the poems)'. He hears the lyre in Heaney's voice (27). Portela embraces an Orphic tradition which believes in the power of the poem to heal and redeem. He follows in the footsteps of the Romantics who sought to address and remedy our loss of spiritualism and the increasing reliance on technology as our present and

future salvation. Portela explicitly joins Yeats, who, though classified a Modernist, considered himself to be one of 'the last Romantics'.

In addition to the overarching lyrical and mystical tone of the collection, there are welcome moments of irony and self-conscious humour. Frequent references to 'Irish Mist' and the description of the house of the beloved Eileen, which 'como todas las casas irlandesas, / aromatizada de pollo frito, té negro y spray de cabellera (like all Irish homes, / was fragranced with fried chicken, black tea and hair spray)' (71), provide an effective contrast to the mythological framework.

An effectively ironic poem is 'De Cerro Calvo a Ben Bulben (From Cerro Calvo to Ben Bulben)' (128-9). For me this was one of the more interesting in the collection and it initially caught my attention because of its use of a children's rhyme and the resonance of its singsong quality in the poem overall. In 'De Cerro Calvo...', Portela playfully converses with Yeats and compares Yeats' memories of a waterfall by Ben Bulben with his own memories of the sound of the river Ochoa, which courses over the Cerro Calvo mountain beside his native town Santa Clara. Expanding on the Yeatsian romantic image, Portela adds his own personal vision, including an abandoned fridge, and the bombs and dreams of 1958, the year Batista was overthrown by Castro and fled to the US with Rivero Agüero. Agüero is parodied in the poem, in an adaptation of the children's rhyme 'Mambrú se fue a la guerra' (a French children's song which made fun of the Duke of Malborough after the French defeated the English in 1709. This song arrived in various forms to Latin America. We presume this is the Cuban version). What is remarkable about the poem is that the romantic vision prevails in the end, in spite of the brutal reality and loss conveyed in the poem. Yet as this and other poems insist, this is not mere escapism. And it is in Ireland and in his vision of Ireland that the poet most profoundly experiences release and connection, refuge and redemption.

Portela is well versed in Irish literature, mythology and folklore. He moves with ease

between a variety of forms and contexts. However, at times I wished for a more complex engagement with Ireland and even Mexico. While the poems insist on the poet's attachment to Ireland, and his sensations of finding his home there, the poems sometimes fail to communicate why his attachment is so intense and enduring. A number of times Portela bring his images of Ireland into sharp contrast with the grey Megalopolis, both representing his place of residence, the sprawling Mexico City, but also other giant urban developments, such as New York and Beijing (Peking), 'las monstruosidades de asfalto (the asphalt monsters)' (p.106). These repeatedly appear in his poems as the antithesis of the spirit of Ireland.

Though Portela admits that he believes there is something deep and good in the 'sea of asphalt' which has tried to kill him but cannot, because 'the honour of Diarmuid is sacrosanct' (106), the binarism of the poems often felt restrictive. Having lived in Mexico City and being Irish, I wished to escape the opposition between Ireland and the megalopolis, as it prevents one from seeing Ireland in all its complexity as a country with a complicated history as both a colony and a source of imperialism, and the badly named 'Troubles' which have plagued Northern Ireland. This vision also negates the vibrancy and colour of Mexico City, which for me was also a place of surprising spirituality.

But these are personal preferences, and the vision in *Cantos de Tír na n-Og* is definitively personal. Indeed, it is on the power of finding a homeland other than one's own that the poems are most insistent. That Portela is an exile from his original homeland, Cuba, explains some of the poignancy of his poetic vision of a mother country to which he can belong. Thus this passionate search for a true homeland leads to an idyllic mythical Ireland, an image which inevitably does not account for an anomalous state, as David Lloyd describes it. That Oisín was not content to stay in Tír na nÓg, for he yearned to see friends and family, is also a poignant reminder of the pain involved in exile.

It is in the idea of Tír na nÓg being his spiritual and mystical homeland that we come closest to

understanding Portela's obsession with Ireland. While the geographical location recedes, Portela's memories of Ireland stay with him in Mexico: 'Dublín quedaste ... / sueño sellado / en el secreto / de mi canción (Dublin you remain ... / a dream sealed / in the secret / of my song)'. Ireland becomes a place created within him and within his poems. He twice (28, 102) returns to the image of his heart being renewed and his faith reaffirmed, with the moving expression 'el calor de la fe se renueva (the warmth of my faith is renewed)', attributing this mystical experience both times to 'el Canto de Ciervo (the Deer's Cry)', also known as 'St Patrick's Breastplate'. The beautiful

words of this song give him the resilience he needs to survive the atrocities of the world.

In one of the poems from the second half of the collection, the poet appeals to St. Patrick, asking him to pray for all of us, to pray for him. Pura López Colomé concludes her introduction with characteristic eloquence when she says of these poems: 'The curative capacity of poetry is clear, whether we call it an adopted land, an illuminated insularity or youth which is being perpetually renewed. It is the true Tír na nÓg.' [2]

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Notes

[1] Desde siempre ha hecho de la antiquísima Erín el vehículo exclusivo de sus búsquedas poéticas, cuyo objeto no es otra cosa que un espejo que refleje a Dios, el que vive dentro suyo y en todo lo que rodea, Dios de la mezquindad y la bondad, del placer y la miseria. Para no dejarse enmudecer por la atrocidad del mundo, recurre una y otra vez a la fuente única, el canto [...]. p.11.

[2] Clara resulta la capacidad curativa de la poesía, llámese a ésta, tierra de adopción, insularidad iluminada o juventud en renovación perpetua. Tír na n-Og de la verdad. p.12.

Author's Reply

The author thanks the reviewer and does not wish to comment further.