

Kingdoms reflect the leaps  
of courageous bards  
and wait for men  
free of any pale creed.

‘There Are Still Vast Silences’

There is also a religiose streak in Vianelli’s work, which sometimes leads to baffling passages akin to the quatrains of Nostradamus:

The sky should  
betray its origins  
of moonstone  
to become a word of water  
in the August cart.

‘In the August Cart’

Vianelli is best in these later poems at evoking the physical and immediate:

A barefoot boy,  
between the cold hearth  
and my mother bent  
over her lacemaking,  
I wept long  
for an old tuber  
denied to me.

‘The Potato’

The collection provides an ample selection from a poet of uneven achievement.

JAMES SUTHERLAND-SMITH

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## THREE LATIN AMERICAN POETS

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GABRIELA MISTRAL, *The Locas mujeres Poems of Gabriela Mistral* (University of Chicago Press) £13.00

VÍCTOR RODRÍGUEZ NÚÑEZ, *The Infinite’s Ash* (Arc) £13.99

MERCEDES ROFFÉ, *Like the Rains Come* (Shearsman) £8.95

Víctor Rodríguez Núñez is a renowned poet both within his native Cuba as well as in Spain and Latin America. This collection, with its clumsy title, *The Infinite’s Ash*, brings his poems into English for the first time. The translator, Katherine Hedeon, a colleague in the same department at the university where Núñez currently works, has done a fine job in giving these poems a credible life of their own, a task marred only by a number of simple errors: for example, ‘Hypothesis’ has ‘domes’ for ‘doves’, and ‘Trains’ has ‘since I set’ for ‘since nightfall’.

The poet’s sharp intellect and ranging erudition are much in evidence, and some of his best writing occurs when he wears his post-modern heart on his sleeve, as in ‘A Poem With Tiger’, whose playful tone is characteristic of the collection, as in the mock-syllogism of ‘Logic’ or in the scientific discovery in ‘Eulogy for the Neutrino’ that ‘the world fits in an alexandrine’. At his best Rodríguez Núñez blends a range of registers and poetic traditions to powerful effect, so that traces of Vallejo, Neruda, Alberti and Blake can be found scattered through the

selection like a crumb trail.

This makes it all the more difficult to take the poet seriously when he tries to bring *gravitas* to the closing lines of a number of his poems. Here are just two of a number of similar endings – ‘blinded by nothingness’ and ‘sure that everything is forever’ – where Rodríguez Núñez falls into the trap of confusing abstract nouns with profound statement. Such rhetorical seduction occurs frequently in this collection. Oxymoron, paradox and cliché can be equally dissatisfying: evenings dawn, pages write and water calls out like fire, and the night has, in turn, fingers, a belly, a naked body, and ‘tastes of never but smells of tomorrow’. Rodríguez Núñez includes a whole range of tired military metaphors in the love poem ‘A Brave Summer With Kate’, and in ‘Slogans’ he writes, ‘The stars are nothing/ if they don’t reflect in our eyes’. This is poetry that is, at times, lazy and *cursi*.

Roffé’s book *Like the Rains Come* continues Shearsman’s eclectic and well-produced series of translations from Spanish-language poets. In her first book-length translation, Janet Greenberg has made these poems sound like they belong in English. Unlike 2007’s editions of Bécquer’s *Rimas* and Rosalía de Castro’s *Selected Poems*, though, this selection of Roffé’s work is not bilingual; as such, readers are denied the opportunity to use the translations as springboards from which to leap into the sounds and rhythms of the Spanish originals. Nonetheless, this selection gives the British reader a welcome introduction to some of the styles and subjects covered over the years by this deservedly acclaimed Argentine poet.

The book opens with a selection from Roffé’s first book, *The Lower Chamber*. The opening poem acts as a prologue to the collection, establishing many of the poet’s central themes and images, making reference to her Sephardic heritage, as well as to the four North African cities where each of her grandparents came from: Ceuta, Tangier, Oran and Casablanca. This opening poem, like others in this selection, is skilfully formed out of a montage of phrases from different voices and literary sources, such as Rubén Darío, an effect partly lost via the translation. The fractured narrative, much like the *fragmentismo* in traditional Spanish romances, gives the early poems an emotional and rhythmical urgency. In contrast to the later group of poems from *Trial by Ordeal*, in which lines sag with clunky polysyllables, the opening selection is rhythmically taut. The short lines are used to make about-turns in subject and tense, ‘I’ll build walls/ I’ll tie sneakers/ I’ll do the wash in the river/ There was your face in the galleys’, and they become increasingly claustrophobic with each section, as in this terrifying chiasma: ‘what are you doing up at this time?/ With your little girl’s shovel what are you doing?’.

Cross-cultural transmission is one of the poet’s main themes, as seen in the final selection of poems from *Mayan Definitions*. These poems are the product of a series of exchanges between Roffé and the ethnologist Allan Burns. The resulting poems blend oral and literary styles, without losing Roffé’s own distinctive voice; erudite and earthy, these poems contain some of Roffé’s finest work. This selection also shows Roffé’s ongoing dialogue with the Spanish and Latin American literary traditions. The poems from *Night and Words* contain Roffé at her most polemical, when she writes of ‘the violence of silencing other – usually a woman’, quoting two of Spanish poetry’s many examples of ‘turning her into a landscape’: Neruda’s ‘I like you when you’re silent’ and Pedro Salinas’ ‘what you are turns me away from what you say’. This slim selection shows Roffé negotiating language and forms to find an appropriate response to her

literary and cultural heritage.

Gabriela Mistral was the first Latin American and the first female poet to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, and this collection of her 'Locas mujeres' poems, which brings together poems from her final published volume as well as from posthumous editions of her work, shows a poet at the height of her creative powers.

*Locas mujeres, Madwomen*, is a series of intense portraits, grounded in the spiritual and the physical, blending a range of tones and poetic techniques to disquieting effect. The voices in the poems are at once distant and intimate, the images, in turn, homely and terrifying. Many critics have recognised the autobiographical elements in these poems. The critic Jaime Quezada has suggested that the *Locas Mujeres* poems are self-portraits of the poet's childhood years in the mountain village in Chile. Certainly, many poems do appear to have a rural setting, which could be her home country. But most of these poems are set in an undefined landscape, haunted by loss and destruction. Indeed, the only named women are biblical or classical, for example Electra, Antigone, Martha and Mary. In her travels Mistral was a witness to much of the twentieth century's violent madness, at both a national and an international level, and it is this that provides the real backdrop for these poems. Identity here is defined by suffering. Images of desire are never far from those of death, and often the two are soldered into one, for example in 'The Fervent Woman', when Mistral writes, 'and when it was dying into cinders I learned to stoke it with my own body'. The image of self-immolation is charged with a sexual energy that the poem's title suggests.

Mistral gives an almost pious importance to the sonority to her poems. In 'Martha and Mary', for example, the whole poem sounds like a half-uttered rosary; the vowels 'i' and 'a' of María reoccur in each stanza, building to a crescendo in Martha's dying supplication in the close of the poem, 'Hacia María pedía ir/ y hacia ella se iba, se iba,/ diciendo: "¡María!", solo eso,/ y volviendo a decir: "¡María!"' ('She prayed to go to Mary/ and she went and went toward her,/ saying: "Mary!" – only that,/ and saying again, "Mary!"'). At this point the stanza reverberates with the assonantal patterns of the whole poem, as well as echoing that other Nobel Laureate, Vicente Aleixandre, who once wrote that 'life is an instant to say only María'. Randall Couch, in his Introduction, gives a detailed analysis of Mistral's poetics and prosody, explaining how he achieved equivalencies in his translations. Indeed, his meticulous and beautiful translations take great care to reproduce many of the sound structures of Mistral's verse. To give one of many examples of his successful combination of sound and sense, in 'The Woman Unburdened' Couch transfers the effect of the end rhyme of 'araña/ arena' to the sibilance and assonance in the corresponding lines: 'no more than a spider's silk or a tide line on the sand'.

This is an attractive, distinguished edition, complete with well-researched Notes, Bibliography and an enlightening Introduction by the translator which gives the reader a brief summary of the poet's biography and prosody. *Locas Mujeres* is a book that will delight both the specialist and the uninitiated reader.

TREVOR BARNETT

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## RAINING SOUP

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MICHAEL DONAGHY, *Collected Poems* (Picador) and *The Shape of the Dance* (Picador)

Coiner of some of the most alluring first lines since early Auden, Michael Donaghy's regrettably slender *Collected Poems* begins, *con brio*:

Dearest, note how these two are alike:  
This harpsichord pavane by Purcell  
And the racer's twelve-speed bike

(‘Machines’)

Beyond the snap of their witty bathos, and the audacity of the comparison they draw, there is something disconcertingly off-beat about the movement and shape of these lines. They sound like an Augustan couplet, a balanced yet deflationary pay-off clinched by strong rhyme; but there are three lines instead, with no regular metre, and an odd syllable-count of 9-9-7. The effect is a bracing interplay between self-conscious formality and something more dryly colloquial, as though the narrator is putting on John Donne's hat with a mock-theatrical flourish.

But like the old poets, Donaghy wants to assert his presence as a speaking voice ('this talk') addressing a 'dearest' for whom the reader must act as surrogate. A less interesting poet might have written 'This harpsichord pavane's like a twelve-speed bike' but Donaghy wants to meet the reader halfway by asking us to participate in the process of generating the poem's meaning, to note *how* the two are alike, not just that the poet says they *are alike*. This is part of a continual enquiry into the poetry's own interactive gestures and how they stand to be interpreted, as well as a metafictional urge that aims to foreground the poem's own 'gadgetry'.

In fact, the poised philosophical argument of 'Machines' resembles less the baroque convolutions of Donne than slightly earlier 'Silver' poets like Sir John Davies or Fulke Greville – in the line 'The machinery of grace is always simple' there is even an echo of 'The Phoenix and the Turtle': 'Grace in all simplicity'. The poem's paradoxical ending, however ('only by moving can balance, / Only by balancing move'), seems a deliberately ironic revisiting of a famous poem by a near-contemporary similarly enamoured of seventeenth-century models – 'On the Move' by Thom Gunn – where the ex-pat Gunn's macho American bikers, exemplars of thrusting existential self-definition, are downsized to ex-pat Donaghy's graceful English cyclist in a comparably antithetical manner:

'At worst, one is in motion; and at best,  
Reaching no absolute in which to rest,  
One is always nearer by not keeping still.'

(‘On the Move’)

I dwell on 'Machines' because, coming first in *Collected Poems*, it flags up many of Donaghy's key concerns, which themselves read like conscious antinomies: a self-undermining style at once informed by tradition and playfully, demotically current; an emphasis on orality and dramatic address, coupled with an acute sense of the poem as 'verbal contraption'; a broad and often incongruous range of reference and source-material. There is