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Pearse Hutchinson

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REFERENCES

Pádraig Ó Gormaille and Bernard Escarbelt (eds.), *Pearse Hutchinson, Poèmes*, Lille, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2008, 138 p + CD, ISBN 978-2-7574-014-2, 21 euros

- 1 “Translation is the language of Europe”. Umberto Eco’s *bon mot* springs to mind when one opens this new translation into French and English of a wide selection of the Irish language poems of Pearse Hutchinson. From the wild Atlantic shores to the carillon-haunted *plat pays*, from 1920s Glasgow southwards to the sun-soaked stones of Catalonia and Galicia, this trilingual anthology casts its origins far and wide. Acclaimed academics Pádraig Ó Gormaille, Professor of French at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and Bernard Escarbelt, Professor Emeritus of English at l’Université de Lille 3, along with a host of collaborators, are to be congratulated on this ambitious enterprise. The reader is rewarded not just with a satisfyingly rich text but also with the poet’s voice reading his poems in their original Irish on the CD that accompanies the translation.
- 2 The three prefaces, in French, English and Irish, to the translations under analysis here set the tone: rich, informative and often lyrical, they are at all times complementary, not mere echoes of each other. The same is true of the translations: master classes in counterpoint, they travel skilfully and often astutely across three languages. At no point are they mere translation exercises.
- 3 It would be difficult to summarise the range encompassed in this anthology. Hutchinson’s concerns are as wide as those of Montaigne: “*C’est moi-mesmes que je peins.*” Through his poetry, he puts us in touch with our common, shared humanity. His poems sometimes seem suffused with a light shining from a distant Irish past: his Meantán Mór/Great Tit/Mésange charbonnière is surely a cousin of the blackbird of Belfast Lough, first sighted in an eleventh century Irish manuscript, and beloved of Heaney, Montague *et al!* Irish folklore threads its way through many a poem here:

Hutchinson's riff on the soul leaving the body questions the stark medieval body/soul dichotomy, as soul and body here seem happily wedded to each other!

- 4 One of the editors, Pádraig Ó Gormaille, emphasises: "Pearse Hutchinson speaks against religion but in a manner which suggests that he cannot do without it" (p. 15). His anger in "Maitheamh/Forgiveness/Pardon" recalls powerful *non serviam* proclamations from three hundred years ago in the work of Kerry poet, Aogán Ó Rathaille. However, most texts see him moving beyond organised religion into a more embracing private spirituality often with strong Eastern overtones. Indeed, his poems sometimes approach a pithiness close to haiku concision, as in "Piotal/ Petal/ Pétale".
- 5 The great linguist, Georges Mounin, once remarked that all translation is fundamentally doomed, that even the term "bread" is untranslatable, given its different taste, shape and use in different cultures. The ambitious translation under discussion here would suggest otherwise. Hutchinson's exploration, through a minority language on the fringes of Europe, of what it means to be European as a way of exploring what it means to be human, has been well served by his editors and translators. Indeed, their composite work reminds us that, although English may have become the *lingua franca* of commerce, it is only when one moves from monolingualism into multilingualism that (to borrow a recent felicitous phrase from historian Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh) one escapes from mono into glorious stereo.
- 6 It is fitting that this handsome volume should have seen the light of day in the northern city of Lille, a city that has been so consistent in its support of matters Irish over so many centuries, from the establishment there of the Collège des Irlandais in the seventeenth century, down to the late twentieth century when Patrick Rafroidi set up the ground-breaking Centre d'Etudes Irlandaises at l'Université de Lille 3. This important volume in Eco's "language of Europe" is proof that this fine tradition is set to continue.