



**Giving Shape to the Moment:**

**The Art of Mary O'Donnell, Poet, Novelist and Short-Story Writer**

María Elena Jaime de Pablos (ed.)

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## Introduction

**María Elena Jaime de Pablos**

In May 2006, Mary O'Donnell gave a reading and took part in a discussion during the annual AEDEI Conference, which, that year, took place at the University of Alcalá, Madrid. It was the first time I had heard her read or speak. The reading was impressive, to say the least, and it struck me that this voice, which was a new discovering for me, combined dynamic force with a wide-ranging fearless lyricism and was aesthetically sensitive in its linguistic pursuit of creative expression. The following morning, I and two other colleagues approached Mary O'Donnell with the idea for this book, the aim of which is to present her work and achievement to a wider audience.

In the preface, her friend and long-time colleague Éilís Ní Dhuibhne describes Mary O'Donnell as 'one of Ireland's most interesting and gifted writers'. Ní Dhuibhne, who defines O'Donnell as a poet above all else, remarks on how the two of them have known each other over the years and have had many interesting conversations about Irish writing and writers. They have acted as magnetic sounding boards for one another when they have felt despondent about the literary scene. But, as Ní Dhuibhne also points out, O'Donnell is impressively articulate and 'perhaps spontaneously concerned with finding the ... most precise possible way of expressing any idea or emotion – which is, I believe, the mark of any real writer ...'

If we roll back the years, we discover that O'Donnell has been working on the literary and cultural scene in Ireland since 1982, when her first poem was published in *The Irish Press's* 'New Irish Writing'. Her work, including her short stories, began to appear regularly in that particular outlet and also appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Cyphers* and various short-story journals that thrived for a time during the 1980s in Ireland. Back then, she was producing an increasing amount of radio broadcasts, with programmes on several writers, among them the Swedish-speaking Finnish poet Edith Södergran and the American frontier novelist Willa Cather. Her first collection of poetry

appeared in 1990 and was followed in 1991 by her first collection of short stories. Then, in 1992, came her first novel, *The Light-Makers*.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, O'Donnell's oeuvre has reflected the range of her interests and gifts. She has produced six further poetry collections, a second collection of short stories, three more novels, a collaborative novel and has edited several poetry collections. She also writes essays and criticism and her reviews of and responses to Irish writing illustrate how actively engaging she is as a writer. Her work has been translated into Spanish, Galician, Portuguese, Hungarian and Rumanian. She is, by any standard, an extremely prolific writer whose voice and presence in Irish letters has been steady, highly original and inventive and connected to her culture. At the same time, her body of work is proof that a writer need not confine herself to one genre.

All those who contributed to this volume are academics and writers who have engaged with Mary O'Donnell's writing, each one concentrating on a different aspect of her career to date.

Mary O'Donnell is very much a late twentieth- and twenty-first-century female writer. This is contextualized by Mary Pierson when she considers O'Donnell's prose, which was part of the general flowering of literature by Irish women that unsettled the Irish, male-dominated literary scene. Manuela Palacios brings a new dimension to any discussion of O'Donnell's work because she is the first person to have undertaken an examination of *the writer as critic and commentator*. Once *The Sunday Tribune*'s chief theatre critic, her commentary was fearless and engaged and she was often as interested in the text as she was in the performance.

Pilar Villar-Argáiz's generous essay provides an extensive commentary on O'Donnell's poetic oeuvre, concentrating on a discussion of the writer's intellectual and emotional intelligence, as well as some of her most important themes, among them 'the meaning of life and death', together with ecological concerns and Ireland's multiculturalism. Villar-Argáiz's remarks regarding the problem of summarizing O'Donnell as a poet brings me to a concern to which I will return later in this introduction: where exactly Mary O'Donnell fits into the contemporary canon and why there has not been enough of a resounding dialogue and an academic response until now.

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<sup>1</sup> Republished in a second edition in July 2018 by 451 Editions, Dublin.

Eibhear Walshe is the only male contributor to this volume. His vivid and incisive commentary concentrates on the novels. However, that there is only *one* male voice among the contributors raises certain concerns, among them that of the establishment response to women writers. Is it the case that, even today, a perception exists that the ideas of a female author are of less interest to male critics and indeed to a fellow male author? Because O'Donnell ticks many boxes. She is prolific, serious and literary and her books have been reviewed with interest, enthusiasm and, sometimes, excitement. She has contributed to the critical literary affairs of her own literary milieu and she is well known. However, she herself has referred to the more promising environment which exists today for younger female writers, who do not seem to meet the resistance that O'Donnell's generation of female writers met. It is worth remembering that O'Donnell emerged and flowered during a time when female authors were not generally anthologized by male anthologists in Ireland. Perhaps the most notable instance of this was the compilation of the first three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology*, but there were many other volumes which overlooked female contributions to the literary arts.

Giovanna Tallone engages compellingly and thoroughly with the figure of the artist in O'Donnell's fiction and the way in which O'Donnell's interest in visual art underpins much of her work. Anne Fogarty's interview plumbs the depths and captures O'Donnell's characteristic openness, whether she is speaking about her Monaghan youth and background or her later development as an artist.

The book also contains an original short story, as yet uncollected, 'The Space between Louis and Me', which won the Fish International Short Story Award in 2010. Finally, the book's bibliography will lead interested scholars and even casual readers through the labyrinth in which Mary O'Donnell has worked throughout her creative life. It shows her commitment and her intense need to enter dialogue through writing, translating, commenting, broadcasting and publishing and it is a testament to the constancy of her output.

But questions remain, among them that of where, precisely, Mary O'Donnell 'fits in' to the Irish literary canon. She describes herself as a feminist, but has always insisted that she is not a feminist writer. With an educational background in Philosophy and German and having written a post-graduate thesis on the theme of death in the Bulgarian-born German writer Elias Canetti's novel *Auto da Fé*, she has always been drawn to

reflect on the liminal. That automatically sidelines her from the primary locus of interest in much contemporary Irish fiction and poetry: the edgy, the broken and the dispossessed. She also approaches her subjects with a knife-edge precision and yet she asks questions to which there can be no answers or resolutions. One of her poems, ‘Cosmic Soup’ (in *Spiderwoman’s Third Avenue Rhapsody*) tackles the astrophysical question of whether or not the universe is expanding, written after listening to Stephen Hawking change his mind on this question. Another poem imagines the pre-life voyage of the unborn within a ‘cosmic’ ship. This is the terrain on which her imagination seems most at home.

She is also, as I point out in my essay on O’Donnell’s short fiction, a writer intent on ‘lifting facades’. Hypocrisy is often her target, but there are others. She does not hold back in her critique of the literary culture she inhabits, as evidenced by her short stories ‘Snow’ (in *Strong Pagans*) and ‘An Invitation’ (in *Storm Over Belfast*). But most writers and artists worth their salt do not shy away from examining the culture that half-nourishes and half-restrains them. Picasso criticized his own milieu through his paintings as much as he glorified it; James Joyce bit the hand that fed him (i.e. inspired him) in much of his writing, and Eavan Boland, in her poetry, has created an historical and critical vista of the nation that enriched its artists with idealistic images for their poetry, stories and dramas.

Placing O’Donnell in her own culture has proven to be problematic. Her work has never been feted by either feminist or male academics in Ireland, nor has it quite accommodated the rhetoric of the classless society ideologues. Perhaps, like the English short-story writer Elizabeth Taylor, the work has been accepted, but without much comment outside of newspapers for reasons unrelated to the actual writing itself. She comes from a comfortable rural background and continues to live in the countryside. In Ireland, one wonders if this implies a certain lack of the bohemianism which convention decrees goes hand in hand with the artistic life. An alternative explanation is that her poetic ideas are complex and do not slot easily into ready-made themes popular today. Although many of her poems are have a feminist background, her writing does not, on the whole, carry a feminist agenda and although she writes about family and its intense complexities, readers cannot be sure which families she is writing about. After all, her subjects cover issues such as FGM,<sup>2</sup> gender identity crises, older woman–younger man relationships, mental illness and psychosis,<sup>3</sup> the middle-class marriage in crisis, sexual

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<sup>2</sup> See the poem ‘Excision’, from *Reading the Sunflowers in September* (1990).

<sup>3</sup> See the short story ‘Every Day is Tuesday’ from *Strong Pagans* (1991).

awakening, sexual decline, waiting for the return of Halley's Comet, maternal violence towards a child,<sup>4</sup> the artist in crisis, infertility,<sup>5</sup> parenthood and the family trauma of recovery after an IRA double murder.<sup>6</sup> These are wide-ranging themes which cannot be neatly corralled into one particular subject area, because Mary O'Donnell is not that kind of writer. Manuela Palacios refers to her intellectual inquisitiveness and this may explain why this writer actually *cannot* confine herself to fewer areas of interest. It is not in her nature to do so. Her biography is not out there in the general landscape of literary commentary and she has not written a great deal about her childhood and upbringing, apart from what has been revealed here in Anne Fogarty's interview.

Future scholars will discover in the bibliography an invaluable resource for further research and discussion regarding Mary O'Donnell's work. It was not always easy unearthing the vast amount of writings that needed to be included as O'Donnell's own records were incomplete. She now expresses surprise at the amount of work that has been published in journals, magazines, newspapers and broadcast on radio and television over the four decades during which she has been writing. But it will be no surprise to the reader, researcher or scholar, as they uncover her themes and preoccupations. It is our hope, in bringing this book to a wider readership, that the dialogue we have begun may continue and develop, marking Mary O'Donnell as one of Ireland's most original writers, whose voice and reputation must be honoured.

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<sup>4</sup> See the novel *The Elysium Testament* (1999).

<sup>5</sup> See the novel *The Light-Makers* (1992).

<sup>6</sup> See the novel *Where They Lie* (2015).