



POETRY AND PANDEMY: AN IRISH RESPONSE STUDY CASE

Prof^a Dr^a Gisele Giandoni Wolkoffⁱ

Marina Bertani Gazolaⁱⁱ

ABSTRACT – This paper aims at looking into how one particular poet replied to the pandemic in her works, through a dialogic display of themes that discuss fragile individualities in the view of a completely new living experience worldwide. As we look into Celia De Fréine's new poems of pandemic, **In Search of a Horizon**, comparatively to her aesthetics, that is, to the whole of her works so far, we reflect upon how such production helps us think about the role of poets facing traumatic experiences, such as the 2020 pandemic, as well as that of translators, who face transculturality as a means of adaptation.

KEYWORDS – Irish Poetry; pandemic; transculturality.

RESUMO - O objetivo deste artigo é analisar como uma determinada poetisa respondeu à pandemia em suas obras, por meio de uma exposição dialógica de temas que discutem individualidades frágeis na perspectiva de uma experiência de vida mundial completamente nova. Ao olharmos para os novos poemas de pandemia de Celia De Fréine, **In Search of a Horizon**, comparativamente à sua estética, ou seja, ao conjunto de suas obras até agora, refletimos sobre como tal produção nos ajuda a pensar sobre o papel de poetas que enfrentam experiências traumáticas, como a pandemia de 2020, e também de tradutores, que encaram a transculturalidade como meio de adaptação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Poesia irlandesa; pandemia; transculturalidade.

In writing, life experiences can be inspiring and the main theme about that which authors write. Some contemporary writers dedicate themselves to writing about historical events that affect them or that are related to some particular situation that they

have experienced. Nowadays, the world is facing an unusual moment: the coronavirus pandemic. It is a fact that this virus has affected each individual differently. Some are closer to their relatives; others are taking the opportunity to strengthen relationships



and deal with remote work and family. And others are struggling with isolation. Bearing this in mind, one issue has triggered us: how are writers facing it? How are they responding to it? More specifically, how does it appear in contemporary Irish poets? Therefore, this paper aims at looking into how one particular poet, Celia de Fréine, has replied to the pandemy in her works through a dialogic display of themes that discuss fragile individualities in the view of a completely new living experience worldwide.

Renowned playwright and screenwriter in Irish and English, the poet Celia de Fréine has made groundbreaking contributions to the depiction of the life of women in Ireland and, therefore, in the realm of contemporary Irish poetry, which has historically neglected women from the viewpoint of public presence and representation. Celia de Fréine writes in Gaelic and translate her writings into English. This bilingual activity values and respects the origins of the Irish language.

From **Scarecrows at Newtownards** (2005) along **imram: odyssey** (2010), **Alphabet of an Age** (2011) to the collections **A Lesson in Can't** and **Blood Debts**, her concerns revolve around both social issues that involve women (such as marriage, gender, social margins and the law) in Ireland and the intimate, lyrical world of the everyday.

Both **A Lesson in Can't** and **Blood Debts** have the author's biography as a starting point, since the former has been the result of De Fréine's seven years work in "non-stream Education as literacy and numeracy teacher of fifteen and sixteen-

year-olds and some older women". **Blood Debts** is the English version of her 2004 collection that first talks openly about the Hepatitis C scandal, of which the poet has been a victim.

In her first volume of poetry, however, **Scarecrows at Newtownards**, the theme of women's inferior condition in Ireland in 1960 already appear, with pointing out to the Hepatitis-C scandal in Irish public hospitals. From this initial volume to **Alphabet of an Age**, there has been a transition from the standpoint of the themes surrounding women: initially, the report on the atrocities regarding feminine belonging in Ireland was more explicit and clearly political, whereas, in **imram: odyssey**, the poet focuses on poems that portray women in various atmospheres, particularly, those that are more private. Thus, **Alphabet of an Age's** thirty-eight poems range from depicting madness as a historical, feminine disease to several topics lyrically displayed along poems that bring characters that are women. Other poems in **Alphabet of an Age** deal with universal themes, including the metalanguage of writing.

Thus, the theme of words and the power of discourse, along with discussions surrounding the hierarchy of gender (female and male) are also found in the volume **riddle me this** (2014) which is a book written during De Fréine's time in Slovenia, even though there is a part dedicated to her stay in Portugal for the occasion of the Poets' Residence Programme and a sequence, written in Paris. Once again, many are the poems that establish



metaphors of female emancipation and images that allude to social change.

As we can notice through her poetic publications mentioned above, Celia de Fréine is concerned with issues that surround her life experiences. Moreover, a similar attitude is noticed in her writing during the coronavirus pandemic. In her new collection **In search of a horizon: lockdown poems** (2020) prized by the Arts Council for the grant of Covid-19 crisis response, there are seventeen texts (poems and prose poems or as the poet classifies it herself, poems and “flash prose”) that depict how people in general and the poet’s lyric-I are facing the 2020 pandemic and dealing with the situation. Since this new collection still awaits publication, Celia de Fréine has generously sent us these texts that have already been presented at the XV Symposium of Irish Studies in South America: Virtual Encounters in Irish Irish Studies in South America, 2020. One of the steps for presenting such production at the Brazilian Association of Irish Studies’ event has been the partial translation of **In Search of a Horizon** into Portuguese, and our reflections upon the role of poetry itself, of poets, as well as that of translators.

These poems and prose poems (or “flash prose”, as De Fréine names it) talk about hope, wishes for a “normal life”, feelings that express those we miss, and situations we wished were in their normality, as well as an awareness of new atmospheres and different ways of keeping relationships.

In the first poem of the collection, “Advice”, Ceres, the Goddess of Agriculture advises the lyric-I that “in truth, every field must lie fallow now and again”

(DE FRÉINE, 2020). This advice seems to be directly linked to Celia de Fréine’s own writing. For a long time, she has focused on writing drama and prose and this new collection has taken her back to the poem field again: “some years ago I had strayed out of my comfort zone // into the fields of drama and prose” (DE FRÉINE, 2020).

In the second poem, “Facts”, De Fréine demonstrates how the numbers of the pandemic have affected us. While we had waited for number updates, good things, such as reading poems that celebrate life as well as good memories of the ones who departed from this world affected by the corona virus or during the pandemic are mentioned such as in the last stanza: “the way he might doff his hat/the way she loved to go dancing- / dressed in a taffeta gown// and patent leather shoes” (DE FRÉINE, 2020).

Facts

The figures are relentless
accurate – though not definitive –
in that they might not indicate
the full extent of the disaster

A lull might occur one day
when deaths in a nursing home
are not included
a spike another day that comprises
hospital figures
that stretch back two months

Each day I skip over
poems that celebrate life
when all it takes
is mention of an anecdote
to animate those lost:

the way he might doff his hat
the way she loved to go dancing –



dressed in a taffeta gown
and patent leather shoes
(DE FRÉINE, 2020)

In “Those on-screen streets” she illustrates everybody’s wish for getting together and leaving isolation behind. While time runs and plants grow, people keep waiting for good news and the lyric-I describes images that represent hope, such as the pears that “(...) bud in the garden/ clematis wavers on the railings...” (DE FRÉINE, 2020). Yet the reality is tough: “the back gate remains locked” (DE FRÉINE, 2020). Interesting to notice that this last verse “the back gate remains locked” seems to minimize the tragedy because it is added to the previous lines with the conjunction “and”, instead of “however”. So the tragedy of isolation is presented as a “natural flow of events” in the world where “those on-screen streets” appear twenty-four hours watched over and over.

Those On-screen Streets

The streets are calling –
those near empty boulevards
of Christmas long ago
when everyone stayed home
and shop windows flaunted their wares
–

ready for the sales to begin
How I long to inhale that fresh air
listen to birdsong
amble along
without having to fight through the
crowd
a fox for companion – perhaps

One thing I am sure of, however:
as soon as my soles touch
those cobblestones

the crowd will be there before me
fumes will have invaded the air
birdsong will have died out
the fox will have returned
to his lair in the suburbs

Meanwhile pears bud in the garden
clematis wavers on the railings
and the back gate remains locked
(DE FRÉINE, 2020)

Being at home, reading the news and waiting for the gates to open give people time to think about the past situations that led them up to here. Memory is key in understanding the present, which is shown all along this new series of poems. For example, in “You Know” we hear the lyric-I signaling the importance of those who are in charge of other people’s lives, as well as the memory of all past experiences regarding one’s health: “Not a day goes by you don’t/ feel the hurt of that loss/nor imagine the life /you might have had//Not a day goes by you don’t / know it’s because you were healthy / you pulled through// or that you must now trust in those/ in whose care you have been placed” (DE FRÉINE, 2020).

These verses refer to the time when Celia de Fréine had Hepatitis-C, as more than 1600 women around Ireland, because of public negligence. Moreover, the poem signals the importance of looking at the people who care for others, which has clearly become more evident with the pandemic.

While we are waiting for the moment when we will be able to walk on the streets in safety, the poem “Gloom” reminds us that our cars could provide the little joy we were waiting for – at least, in our dreaming



of driving them. We can feel hope and see each other inside our cars, enjoying the journey to our beloved houses guided by songs that make us transcend the moment. It is in the depiction of imagination that the poem leads the reader into a hopeful atmosphere, such as the protagonist Guido (played by Roberto Benigni) in the 1997 prized film *La Vita è Bella* in which Giosué's father, Guido, tells his kid that they are playing a game that involves many courageous actions that sum up points, while in truth they had been sent to a concentration camp for Jews and are running life danger! Bringing happiness through retelling imagination is both Guido's main objective while trying to keep his son alive, as well as the lyric-I's in the poem "Those On-screen Streets" and "Gloom". In the latter, by imagining driving her car, listening to Leonard Cohen's music, the lyric-I in the poem is overcoming the pain of isolation, and of not being able to leave home because of pandemy. The intertextuality with Leonard Cohen's "You Want It Darker" can only reassure the level of optimism proposed in this new series of poems. After all, Cohen's song says "you want it darker/ we kill the flame". We do not want it darker. We want light, we want to move further, go beyond all such crisis. The other very relevant word in Cohen's song is "hineni" which in Hebrew means "I am here" and it is the lyric-I's waving, the lyric-I is saying "I am here, God, at your service". What is the impact of such musical intertextuality in De Fréine's poem? Totally positive, as it breaks the sadness suggested by the title, "gloom". Gloom is past. Writing brings the present and makes the poet (and

her readers) go beyond it all towards a brighter future.

Gloom

I haven't taken to the road
since the night my car was totalled

Today I sit into the one
I bought in its place –
that hasn't made a journey since –

and turn the key in the ignition
to charge the battery
for an on-the-spot trip

I slide my Mother's Day disk
into the state-of-the-art sound system
and listen as Leonard Cohen drawls

YOU WANT IT DARKER
(DE FRÉINE, 2020)

Coronavirus has stopped the world but has kept us united. What are the other situations that keep us united? Are there good ones? The poem "Symbol of Hope" reminds us that the Olympic Torch travels everywhere to connect us and give us hope. The lyric-I asks us not to forget another torch "and though it may well remain a symbol of hope // let us not forget that other torch // as it made its way to Beijing // and we spoke of *June* in many tongues / our words connecting in a relay // to honour the poet being held for ten years" (DE FRÉINE, 2020). In the afterword section of this new collection of poems, Celia de Fréine explains that she is talking about the poet Shi Tao and his poem "Meithamh" that got translated into English under the title "June" and published in her book *Blood Debts* (2014).



People are together in this crisis and searching for ways to fight against it and to deal with all the changes that we have been facing. In “Disease Knows No Border” we can notice that there is a great movement towards an agreement to find a solution; a bigger one when compared to the history of Ireland “the disease has done // for the people of the North // what the Good Friday Agreement // failed to achieve” (DE FRÉINE, 2020)

One of the changes that we are facing with the coronavirus is the cancelation of the events. There is no wedding, no graduation, no prom. All the plans had to be postponed. The poem “Wardrobe” pictures the wardrobes with the dresses waiting to be worn. The wind that blows through the window gives us hope, it will blow bad feelings away and show us that there is hope and one day the dresses will be worn and there will be weddings, graduations and proms. “letting you know they are waiting // that they will do // for future events // that your wardrobe is full” (DE FRÉINE, 2020)

Unfortunately, some people that we love will not be able to wear those clothes and go to those events. How can we deal with the loss of parents, friends, sons, lovers? The poem “Lost” depicts several memories in which our parents were protecting us. And these memories hurt because some are gone without a goodbye. “you wonder what it might have been like // to visit him on his deathbed” (DE FRÉINE, 2020)

The poem that entitles the collection “In search of a horizon” depicts how hopeful we are, recollecting memories while we are willing to revive them. It is a clear metaphor

of life processes. Life is a journey that matters in its trajectory, as depicted in the third stanza: “(...) you know that to swim/ is not only to make the journey/ it is the journey itself/ the letting yourself down/ into the chill comfort of water” (DE FRÉINE, 2020). The element of water there is very relevant as it is from water (mother’s uterus) we all descend and the space where we swim. Another very relevant element in this poem are levels of awareness of what our environments truly are.

In Search of a Horizon

For three months now there has been
no sighting of the sea apart from
waves of longing that lap
upon rocks in your mind’s eye

You want to look as far
as the horizon
You want to swim towards it
though you know
you would never reach it

Even so, you know that to swim
is not only to make the journey –
it is the journey itself
the letting yourself down
into the chill comfort of water

more than that bringing you back
to the beginning
when the war was over
and you did not know what it was to
worry
(DE FRÉINE, 2020)

“In Search of a Horizon” brings up the need for action, for attitude taking upon awareness, which is carried out in the following poems, “My Carbon Footprint” and “Eva: Meaning of Life”.



In “My carbon footprint” dedicated to Celia Acca, de Fréine’s lyric-I exemplifies how our day-to-day tasks have been adapted to the lockdown situation. Thanks to technology, now, we can see each other and keep our academic and artistic lives through electronic devices. A new reality that has already been applied to strengthen distances since before pandemy, but that has been intensified due to it. This poem alludes us to a Vona Groarke’s poem “Away” in which the lyric-I already evokes virtual realities in relationships amongst family members, which has become an increasing reality with the pandemy.

My Carbon Footprint

For Celia Acca

Never in my wildest dreams
did I imagine I’d visit those countries
make friends abroad
write books about my adventures

The time has come to make amends:
from now on my attendance at
conferences will be virtual
my poetry readings take place online
I will throw kisses from server to server
to land on colleagues’ cheeks – pure
though diluted

more than that I will bind my travel feet
with yards of fine-woven restraint
making sure to limit my movements –
allow
no poison lotus spring from my step
apart from when it comes to visiting
you, my love

In the meantime I shall imagine myself
step
onto the Roman Bridge
allow the scent of wild mint guide me
as far as the back meadow of La Balestra

(DE FRÉINE, 2020)

The metalanguage of art, of writing and living in pandemic times is seen in the poem “An Ability Such as This”, for the direct exposure of processes of memory, and sharing emotions and thoughts is evidenced up to the point in which the lyric-I reaches the most fearful image: that of the coffins, the burial of the dead without the presence of many and the echoes in the lives of creators who think about representing all this: “how is it you can smell the freshly sawn pine / in the coffins that hold the unclaimed bodies / about to be buried / three deep in rows of two / by men in hazmat suits on Hart Island? / It is unlikely, though, that either of you / will come up with a satisfactory answer” (DE FRÉINE, 2020) says the last verses of this poem. Yet, by pondering all this, poet De Fréine already provides us with positive responses: writing, creating, offering the world imagination. Following the comments about the poems of this new anthology, we can say that “An Ability Such as This” takes the courage of representing life as a serious matter, which is all about being such a relevant poet in the contemporary Irish scenery.

The subjective hue’s climax is in the poem “One Giant Step On Behalf of the Elderly”, which involves not only memory and imagination, but again the courage of exposure of such intimate world to all those willing to understand and accept its complexity. It is an invitation to lyricism.

The last poem of the series “Eva: meaning of life”, dedicated to her third granddaughter, is the climax of hope as it brings new life in the middle of social



catastrophe, which is what we have seen around along these many months of pandemy.

Eva : Meaning of Life

When I sweep the floor I come across a
feather –
small as a snip from a thumbnail
and rather than whisk it into the scoop
I scoop it into my pocket
ask myself where it has come from
during the days we wait for you

The signs are remarkable –
basking sharks frolic off the west coast
orca whales return to Strangford Lough
swans glide along a canal in Venice –
all testing the waters, as it were,
before you to swim into our ken

There is talk of a generic title for
children
born at this time –
the C-Generation has been mooted –
and whether or not this comes about –
when it comes to naming you
Eva – meaning of life – works for me

And when your first cry is heard
rising above the rooftops of the disease
epicentre
I understand it was your guardian angel
who sent the snip of feather floating
down –
she who will stay by your side long after
the swans
sharks and orca whales have taken off
(DE FRÉINE, 2020)

Here is contemporaneity, yet there is lyricism, the voice in the poem matches the flow of feelings of the poet towards her granddaughter fearlessly of what such intimate exposure might bring or might lead to. Therefore, for anyone still questioning lyricism in contemporary poetry, here is the

answer: lyricism in its fullness, only “broken” by the final texts that are critical of social matters. The prose poem “Turquoise” pins a highly relevant social matter: that of the marginal existence of Indigenous populations in the USA, helped by Irish people. We quote from “Turquoise”:

Practical help as well as positive energy was required. To heal those who had become ill. And so groundwater seeped through an Irish consciousness. Reacting to the minerals of memory. And the world learned the names of those who contributed to the GoFundMe campaign: O’Neill, O’Leary, Burke, Hanrahan. Opening a window on a past generosity that the people of Ireland will never forget. (DE FRÉINE, 2020)

The second prose poem “A way in which to Overturn the Pecking Order?” is a reflection about dignity, putting oneself into another’s place. The lyric-I asks us “how will we celebrate those lowly-paid, inadequately-clad workers who risked their lives while looking after the ill and dying?” (DE FRÉINE, 2020). After going back to a story of years ago, in which a butler risked his life to save his lord, the prose poem finishes with an answer regarding a possible way to honor everyone that is taking care of people in hospitals: “so that we might stand in a relay of thunderous applause once more to celebrate a future. Normal in which all lowly paid, inadequately-clad workers, who risk their lives while looking after the ill and dying, receive their just reward” (DE FRÉINE, 2020).

The last text of the collection is “For Generations to Come”, which is an appeal



to consciousness and respect. In the future, Corona Pandemy will be just another story in the history books, but people should take it seriously and learn from it. More than that, the cure and the treatment of every disease should be available to everyone.

Right now I speak from the place of pandemic to congratulate you, to say it is good you have this cure. These machines. But they must be handled with care. That knowledge is a special resource. As is the sharing of it. As is the treating with respect the cure that has been developed. That it should not be abused so that no one in future contracts illness the way I did.

The fact that much Poetry has been the outcome of uncertainty due to the new pandemy is the object of observation of those who examine the Arts and their production, once between elaboration and final outcome, there is the time of reflection, assimilation and architectural thoughts. The matter of time, how much time is needed so that there is perfect distance between what has happened and how we tell/narrate/rereate it has also been the focus of much thought upon the making of Arts and the media. Back to the Gulf War, when television watchers could have immediate access to what was happening in the Middle East as the missiles were always too close to the reporters on the screen of our living rooms or, during the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the World Trade center, the distance seemed to be erased forever - at least the distance between that which happened and that about which something was narrated. In the case of the 9/11 episodes, one month later, Noam

Chomsky's new book on the subject came out to our surprise! So that meant the distance between thought, elaboration and product mattered less as part of the process of (intellectual) elaboration. Yet, how about the Arts and Poetry?

Well, certainly, the covid-19 pandemy has brought us a new dimension on such distancing and artistic productions. Many artists have also been immediate and have even been incentivated to produce immediately, which was the case of Celia De Fréine, along with other Irish poets who have engaged in prizes attributed by national governmental agencies as part of policies that help widespread culture. Yet, rereading De Fréine's poetry as belonging to contemporary Arts, from the perspective of Brazilian translators, means going beyond multiculturalism as an understanding of societies in their national representations, yet not forgetting them, because if the pandemy is worldwide, the solutions to each nation are different and require time. Yet, the latter seems to be less required in the reconstruction of pain or loss, as the ongoing writing helps us all go beyond, writers and readers meet the final ground of emotional recovery in the Arts, in Poetry. Translators are, thus, not given much time. Different cultures (not just languages) await for translators' voices/bodies as bridges that will lead them to the future.

In this sense, *transculturalism* is a path going beyond the nation states, beyond the national literatures, as well as the idea of fidelity and making sense of recreation, and has accompanied us in the understanding of time between facts, nations and narrations



(to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, 1994). The fact that Poetry is a genre that is born to be spoken (amongst the Ancient Greek population) reaches the same status with the Renaissance and the sonnets as seen in William Shakespeare's works and questions the validity of lyricism with Experimentalism leads us to the hopeful understanding that the translation of poetry also applies to the individual and to the subjective realms of our beings. In other words, we go back to the idea found in Lev Semenovich Vygotsky's first published in English work entitled **Thought and Language** (1986). For Vygotsky, speakers are translators as we translate our minds in words. Therefore, that which we speak is the product of our thought on language, the individual translation of personal perceptions of the environment around us, the chemistry of our bodies also translated in that which we are able to speak within the context in which we belong. Translators have to do such "transferences" at least twice – from the minds of the language of departure to the minds of the language of arrival, yet in the middle of "untranslatable" culture, and the inverted commas is because there is nothing "untranslatable", in truth. Particularly, if we are dealing with transculturalism or transculturality, which is a term coined by Naoki Sakai (1997) to refer to translation as mediation and no longer representation. In this sense, as we translate Celia De Fréine's poetry into Portuguese, and which first appears in Gaelic, gets by

the poet herself translated into English, we are dealing with many universes – that of a bilingual Ireland, that of the English speaking world of publishing literature, that of Portuguese speakers, particularly, in Brazil, and the many cultural layers that all such universes involve. Yet, containing all of these worlds, we do have the context of the pandemic and the time that cannot await any longer, for we must heal (physically and emotionally). And Poetry is the channel. Translation can be the means. Transculturality allows us to move on, respecting all the aforementioned universes, yet taking into account the temporal and atemporal issues of both Poetry and Translation as mediation, and no longer as just representation.

The truth is that if on the one hand we live in a world where the growing pharmaceutical industries and software companies thrive as opposed to the many businesses that have had to reinvent themselves or even extinguish themselves, Poetry responds, such as this new work by De Fréine, give us hope and drive us to horizons where Life is. Simply. Intransitively. Beyond cultures and differences. In transculturality. And readers reach the consensus that Life exists in its multiple possibilities, even if only in dreams. And the dream of Poetry going beyond borders, helping solve the effects of all sorts that the pandemic has brought us!



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¹ Gisele Giandoni Wolkoff é professora do Instituto de Ciências Humanas e Sociais da Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). Tradutora, é autora de textos acadêmicos e poéticos. Atualmente, finaliza os produtos dos projetos que têm vindo a coordenar, “Transculturality and Poetry: Brazil, Ireland and Japan” (com apoio da UFF/Kyoto University of Foreign Studies) e “Cultura e artes na região sul-fluminense: memória & história” (UFF/FAPERJ).

LUMEN ET VIRTUS
REVISTA INTERDISCIPLINAR
DE CULTURA E IMAGEM

VOL. XI N° 29 DEZEMBRO / 2020
ISSN 2177-2789



ⁱⁱ Marina Bertani Gazola é mestre em Letras pela Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR).
Tradutora, publicou no *Plurivozes Americanas/American Plural Voices/Plurivoces Americanas*.
Curitiba: CRV, 2015 e trabalha no projeto “Cultura e artes na região sul-fluminense: memória
& história”.