

When Ireland landed in the Pampas: The Irish in Argentina Project in the University of La Pampa (2007-2009)

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The interest in Irish literature and culture of a group of teachers of English as a foreign language, led to, in early 2007, Ireland landing in La Pampa as a field of study and research, and as a clear proof that in a global world of diasporas, certain antagonisms are no longer possible. The 'Irish in Argentina: Recuperation of literary sources, translation and criticism' project, to give it its full name, is an experimental development and involves teacher-researchers in charge of different areas of literature, culture and translation from the Faculty of Human Sciences at the National University of La Pampa, Argentina. One of the objectives of this project is the analysis of the reception of Irish literature in Argentina, through the recuperation of various texts that represent the multiplicity of the Irish subject and can be found in periodical publications. Another important aspect on which our research is based is the translation of critical, theoretical and fictional essays into Spanish. In this way, contemporary critical literary and socio-cultural debate will be enriched from a comparative perspective. All of this will contribute to the dissemination of Irish culture and the reinforcement of intercultural relations.



*Driving goats on the Pampas
(Eliggi 2008)*

Introduction:

The Irish in Argentina Project

Nothing could be further from the smooth and undulating fields of Ireland than the winds and emblematic sand flats of La Pampa. Nothing seems to be more in contrast than the damp grey of that island and the torrid and dry sun of the Pampa; or the persistent cheerfulness of the

Irish people and the sometimes taciturn sullenness of the people of the Pampas. Nevertheless, the interest of a group of teachers of English as a foreign language - crusaders on intercultural frontiers - in the literature and culture of the Celtic country caused Ireland to disembark in La Pampa at the beginning of 2007 as an area of study and research, and as a clear demonstration that in a

globalised world of diasporas, certain antagonisms are no longer possible.

At the end of 2006 and arising from a postgraduate course taught by Laura Izarra of the University of São Paulo at the Faculty of Human Sciences of the National University of La Pampa (UNLPam) on the literature of the Irish diaspora in general, a great deal of interest was generated among the assistant research professors. This translated into the creation of this new research project with its main focus on the Irish migration to Argentina in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The project 'The Irish in Argentina: Recuperation of literary sources, translation and criticism', to give it its full title, is an experimental undertaking and involves the researcher-professors in charge of the subjects Introduction to Literature, English and North-American Literature, Culture of English-speaking Countries, Literary Theory and Analysis, Seminar on Research Methodology of the English Faculty of the National University of La Pampa, and of the Translation Service of the Faculty of Human Sciences. This is framed within the field of Minority Literature in Argentina and literary translation and its possible fields of application are Contemporary History, National and Regional History, Sociology and Community Studies.

Although the researchers who decided to focus on the study of Irish literature have been working in the area of literary and cultural studies for more than ten years as an independent group within the Department of Foreign Languages, the beginning of this new project was a big challenge given how new and heretofore unexplored the theme was in our university. In light of the opinions expressed by the project's external evaluators, who highlighted 'the originality not only in relation to the research itself but also in the proposals for applying the results' (Boiero, M. 04/01/07), soon after beginning we realised that the undertaking we had just begun was not well explored in other study and research centres affiliated with national universities and/or third level institutes in our country. One year after its initiation, the 'Irish in Argentina' Project has

attracted the attention of new young researchers who asked to join for the purpose of finishing their English Language and Literature degree studies with the idea of writing their theses on this new field of research. The incorporation of these new members has in turn elicited a very positive response from those of us leading the project, and this entails a double responsibility and even greater challenge. All of the above demonstrates the relevance of this project and, at the same time, opens the door for the future creation of a Centre for Irish Studies within our university, with the possibility that this will be open not only to literary and cultural studies, but also to other interdisciplinary studies such as, for example, socio-historical and economic studies.

In previous projects the research team had proposed dealing with issues relating to the formation of identity within a particular culture, based on the analysis of different variables so that these could be used as a basis or starting point for later comparison with the literature of other English-speaking ethnicities and/or minorities. In successive projects we focused on the comparative study of English-language literature from the perspective of genre, ethnicity and personal, cultural and religious identity. Lastly, and based on the work completed thus far, the team decided to limit the theoretical as well as application corpus to texts written by contemporary Irish authors and also by Irish-Argentine authors, literature which for a very long time was considered marginal in relation to canonical English literature.

This new stage of research will deal with analysing the reception of this literature through the recuperation of literary texts published in newspapers of the Irish community in Argentina, among other sources, with the aim of helping to configure the literature of the diaspora in South America, a research project which had already been initiated at the University of São Paulo (Brazil) in 2000. Another important aspect on which our research is based is the translation of critical and theoretical essays and fictional texts into Spanish, to disseminate Irish culture in

Argentina, which will contribute to the information on this and to the understanding and strengthening of intercultural relations.

Thus we propose to give visibility to non-canonical Irish literature and culture, which, as stated in the previous paragraph, has remained on the margins of English-language output. On noting its resurgence in the literary world in recent decades, we propose to select and analyse texts from writers who represent the multiplicity of the contemporary Irish subject and translate them for the Argentinean public, a key objective that our research is aiming for. In this way current critical literary and socio-cultural debate will in turn be enriched from a comparative perspective. Nevertheless, in order to reach this objective we must, in the first place, make a literary map of the Irish presence in Argentina, taking the nineteenth century as our starting point. This was the era when a great number of Irish immigrants arrived in our country and settled mainly in the Pampas region forming an endogenous community who imported items and books from the old country in order to keep their roots alive.

The relevance and feasibility of this research increases if we consider that the Irish community in Argentina from the mid-nineteenth century on had various mechanisms of socio-cultural communication and dissemination, starting with the establishment of newspapers like *The Irish Argentine* (1888-1889) - which will be consulted should we gain access to it -, *Fianna* (1910-1912), *The Hiberno-Argentine Review* (1906-1927), *The Standard* (1861-1954) and *The Southern Cross* (1875 to the present) which in themselves constitute an important repository of sources. This reading material will in turn enable us to trace those distinctive signs and/or marks which define the idiosyncrasy of the Irish diaspora in Argentina. Therefore, the analysis of journalistic material of that era, where literary texts are published as serials, and critical summaries, will be compulsory reading in order to construct a literary history of the reception of Irish writers in Argentina from that time until the present. In the same way, and if we are granted access to these, the analysis of documents such as first-

hand accounts, letters, personal diaries, travel journals, among others, would constitute other notable written evidence that would enable us to achieve a more fine-tuned situational analysis, completing our study on this subject.



Caldén trees in La Pampa (*Prosopis caldenia*)
(Eliggi 2008)

Irish Literature as an Academic Theme

The literature of the Irish diaspora of the end of the nineteenth century and contemporary literature form this project's academic theme. This helps to re-evaluate the mechanisms of constructing and representing a particular identity, that of the Irish, characterised since the mid-nineteenth century by displacement and cultural dispersion, and who developed strategies of what could be called a 'culture of survival'. Towards the last quarter of the twentieth century however, Ireland moved from a subordinate position to become a European Union member-state and witnessed an inverse diaspora process when it became an area that attracted the immigration of other peoples. A description of the current situation of the theme set forth by this project, then, allows us to observe that, faced with the historical-cultural changes of present-day Ireland, its literature in recent decades has shown the transformation of a postcolonial vision towards a global vision. In this sense a critical study of the state of Irish art within and outside of Ireland will enable us to reflect on the appearance of new literary elements in the different genres, which will contribute to the debate on comparative studies in our country.

On these bases, we pose the following questions: how does contemporary Irish literature represent the transformations of modern Ireland and in what way are the new cosmopolitan identities formed? How do these 'new identities' interact with the systems of representation from the nineteenth century? How can the Irish question be moved and translated historically to the Argentinean context? How is contemporary Irish literature received in present-day Argentina? What are the implications of these cultural translation processes?

It should be made clear that light has been shed on these questions by the advances stemming from the seminal - though much debated - work of Benedict Anderson (1983) and of its application to Irish literature by Declan Kiberd (1996), both supported by solid post-structuralist bases and promoters of a representation of the nation and literature as cultural constructs, as 'imagined communities', as 'invention'. Moreover, and due to the fact that our questions are based on an interdisciplinary logic, our study must necessarily be framed within what Sabrina Sharkey (2003) considers to be revisionist practices, those in which they propose tackling dominant narratives about Ireland subject to the deconstruction demanded by certain specific historical crossroads.

In light of the above, these questions influence the choice of a corpus of analysis which is formed in part by the summaries of the aforementioned newspapers for the purposes of determining what Irish literature was read in Argentina. Next, works by Irish authors in Argentina are considered, such as the work of William Bulfin, and descendants of Irish people in Argentina as is the case with Juan José Delaney, and these are analysed according to the contact zones which are established in the intercultural representation. Thirdly, contemporary Irish works are selected and their reception among groups of students in literature courses in our English Faculty is evaluated.

The study of these representations in a context of tensions provoked by the meeting of

different cultures opens new ways of understanding the processes of forming cosmopolitan identities in the contemporary era. Therefore, these issues and those which arise in the future of the research will have to be resolved by reconsidering the meaning of the concept of 'cosmopolitan' in the present time. This is an adjective which, according to postcolonial theories, allows one to characterise individuals, particularly marginalised individuals, who pass through the different cultures and frontiers within their own geographic, social and cultural space but at the same time, with the possibility of recreating and questioning their identity in the debate on current globalisation (Bhabha, 1990: 139-40).

In this way the phenomena of (im)migration and diaspora become the centre of discussion and relate with the diverse processes of identity construction. Our questions take on more life in this context as they aim to reconsider the flows of the Irish diaspora towards Argentina as is reflected in the literature and to evaluate the global possibilities of contemporary Irish literature in the present-day context.

Thus, we will be working on both the centrifugal and centripetal directions of Irish movements and in two definite temporal contexts. The study and theorisation of the diaspora, focusing on the dispersion of peoples and cultures through geographical areas, and as a part of a network of crossroads of several fields of research, will then enable us to re-examine history and literature in order to discuss again and re-signify the concepts of transnationalism, transculturalism, globalisation and cultural hybridity, in this case in the relationship of Irish literature with Argentina.

Preliminary Advances

All landings are misty and arduous, even in times of computer networks and global communications. All landings also imply displacement and migration for the people who experience them. All landings are a sign of mobility understood in the specific or most abstract sense of the word, as a change of mental structures and as the appropriation of new concepts and methods. In our case, and

for these very reasons, one of the aspects considered by the project demonstrates a more prudent advance. The displacements implied by the necessary trips to the archives located in Buenos Aires and the journey from Language and Literature towards History and Historiography have meant that the recuperation of literary sources and the analysis of the literature of the Irish diaspora in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century is still in the stage of gathering data and the systematic study of the interdisciplinary crossovers which we are proposing. While we are already quite comfortable in some areas, namely Literary Criticism and Teaching Literature, our advances are more promising and we can say that we are already walking on terra firma.



The cemetery at Kilmonaghan, near Clara, County Offaly, Ireland
(Murray 2005)

Criticism of Irish Literature in Argentina

During our first year of research (2007) and within the context of this project, we wrote a series of works of literary criticism, gathering

journalistic data and imparting educational information, presented at two international forums. One took place in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil: The First International Conference of ABRAPUI, Federal University of Minas Gerais, which the directors of the project attended as speakers. The other took place in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, with the title 'Second Symposium of Irish Studies in South America'. It should be pointed out that our University, through this project, played an active part in its organisation which entailed more than half a year of management and organisation alongside the University of São Paulo, Brazil, all coordinated by Laura Izarra, the project's external adviser, and which culminated in the National University of La Pampa Press (EDUNLPam) releasing a CD containing a selection of the most relevant papers presented on that occasion.

Among the contributions by UNLPam researchers we can give special mention to those papers focused on analysing the work of the Irish-Argentine writer Juan José Delaney dealing with concepts of place, displacement and diaspora and social self-marginalisation. Several papers were also presented on writer William Bulfin's *Tales of the Pampas*, critical texts contemplating the analysis of the implications of Irish immigration to Argentina; the attitude towards the new land, its inhabitants and customs; the construction of the identity of being Irish; and the intercultural crossovers which are forged through the different mental representations held about the Irish foreigner and vice-versa. Other papers discussed issues closer to the author's personal choice. Among the topics dealt with, those relating to the construction of identity and autobiography can be cited. Lastly, as coordinator, participant and writer who is a member of the Irish-Argentine community in Argentina, Juan José Delaney interviewed his peers Susan Wilkinson, Lilian Doyle and Michael John Geraghty who referred to the process of developing themes on the diaspora, common to many of their works and related to their status as descendants of Irish people.

The Reception of Irish Literature at the English Language Faculty. A case study

Ireland has held a privileged position in the field of Literary Studies. Nevertheless, its literary production was always joined to that of the UK. One need only mention James Joyce and W.B. Yeats, figures who have been undisputed and anthologised *ad infinitum* within the canon of English literature. If, in our search for a 'decolonisation' of Irish literature, we debate this location as we talk, as we did years ago in one of faculties belonging to the project, of 'Literature, nation and nationalism: the case of Ireland and its literary "renaissance"', perhaps we inadvertently move towards the extreme of stressing nationality over literature itself, of putting the GIWs (Great Irish Writers) on a pedestal. The subject '20th Century English-Language literature' at the English Faculty in UNLPam presented a favourable context for the resolution of that debate due to the fact that the lack of a national identification in its title allows room to explore the different literature produced in English-speaking countries in the twentieth century, including Irish literature, and also enables us to transfer the knowledge acquired by the teacher-researchers in the context of the project in question.



National University of Ireland, Maynooth
(Murray 2005)

In a changing world of displacement and cultural dispersion, the corpus which the students need to tackle forms an initial problem. Though the narrative work of Joyce,

Yeats' poetry and Synge's dramatic work are unavoidable in the context of twentieth-century literature, we detected that these were on the road to becoming unreadable for our students, of faster, more de-contextualised and less informed readings. For this reason, in the first place we decided to leave these contexts behind and our first explorations on Irishness are today constituted by some Bernard MacLaverty short stories and some non-fiction pieces by Ian Sansom, which invite one, as Sharkey suggests (129-131), to 'revisit' Northern Ireland, as do the plays of the Irishman living in London, Martin McDonagh, and "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" (1996) and "Translations" (1980) by Northern Ireland's Brian Friel.

With the inclusion of the latter works we have discovered that the student, even without access to a performance, enjoys this reading which s/he considers more accessible and which allows him/her to mentally recreate the context in his/her own terms, better than the narrative. All of these works, in one way or another, carry the idea of diaspora in their content, either in the migrant background of their authors, or in the migrating quality of the tone. This re-articulation of the corpus is what allows the students later on to return to the also nomadic yet always a Dubliner Joyce and to understand the reason why Gabriel Conroy is so desperate to leave Ireland in "The Dead" (1916). At times, this can be viewed even in relation to a more familiar context, present-day Argentina, or to re-adapt their readings and re-appropriate the events described in Yeats' 'Easter 1916' with the eyes of someone who already knows that Ireland exists and that it is not only the green hill on a postcard but a culture that is also experienced, written, and lived.

In this sense, the second problem stems from the methodology used in literature classes. At first we accompanied our view of Ireland as a national entity with the classic historical context following on from the textual approach to the works, in order to culminate in describe-and-discuss type questions, such as why the use of the Anglo-Irish variety of the language can form part of a more generalised movement

towards the establishment of a radical national identity (Birch, David 1992: 6). Emphasis was placed on the literary institution and how this accompanies the political institution, a view which is, on the one hand, very narrow and on the other, very far from the reality of our students who, we reiterate, ending up viewing Ireland as a mere object of study.

At this time we chose to propose a living Ireland to the students. The contexts and exercises of post-structuralist reading have gradually left room for questions which are perhaps simpler in some senses, but which allow those involved in reading the literary work to select and organise its elements, excluding some and emphasising others, in order to construct a consistent yet personal whole (Terry Eagleton, 1987: 122). Tackling the problem of the protagonist of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in the first person, for example, was one of the essay questions given. Thus, we believe we are gradually getting closer to one of the aims of the project, the dissemination of contemporary Irish literature in La Pampa and, even in a global and cosmopolitan but sometimes misinformed context that exists nowadays, to work towards Ireland persisting in the mind and memory, in whatever form the readers - in this case, our students- may give it.

Conclusion

With the 'Irish in Argentina' project, Ireland definitively landed in La Pampa through its literature and the rediscovery of the history of those who left the Green Isle to populate the Argentinean Pampas. The results of our studies, though still partial, have shown a significant advance in the quality of the approach to literary works and in the interest in Irish culture this has created, not only among our students, but also among younger professors who choose to broach the theme in their degree studies. Though some of our areas of interest are still in the early stages, our expectations regarding the results to be obtained towards the end of this project are numerous but can be summarised in the transfer of our knowledge to the different subjects involved in the project, the publication of a series of working papers organised according to key thematic-historical issues, the translation of literary texts into Spanish, teaching courses and organising events relating to the theme of the project, all of which will promote Irish culture and the relations and academic exchange between our University and other Centres of Irish Studies in Argentina and abroad.

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Notes

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