

Literary Connections between Ireland and Latin America

By Laura P. Z. Izarra and Patricia Novillo-Corvalán

Guest Editors

In his seminal essay 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition' (1951), Jorge Luis Borges invented a model of Argentine – and Latin American – literature based on the example of the Irish tradition. He declared Ireland a sister nation in view of its peripheral position in relation to mainland Europe and encouraged Latin American writers to follow the example of the Irish who, as outsiders, had turned the Western archive to their own advantage. The innovativeness, irreverence and iconoclasm of Ireland, claimed Borges, resided in the fact that throughout history the Irish felt entitled to freely recreate Western discourses without any sense of duty or attachment to them (Borges 1999: 426).

Borges illustrated his thesis with the names of some of the most illustrious Irishmen: the eighteenth-century philosopher George Berkeley, the satirist Jonathan Swift and the playwright and socialist George Bernard Shaw. This list spreads outwards to include Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and prominent contemporary voices such as Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel, Paul Muldoon, and Marina Carr, to name a few. By re-inventing Latin American literature through the model of the Irish, or by superimposing one tradition upon another, Borges opens the door to a wide range of cross-cultural relations. What has been, therefore, the outcome of this complex engagement? Have Latin American artists and writers – as Borges predicted – looked upon the mirror of Irish art to find a secret reciprocity, a composite image that reflected their own creative endeavours? Have the Irish, in turn, gazed across the Atlantic Ocean at the vast, fluid, and intriguing shapes of the Latin American landscape?

If we take as an initial example Borges's own literary trajectory, we learn that at the tender age of nine, a precocious Borges launched his literary career with an impressive Spanish translation of Wilde's story 'The Happy Prince'. In 1925 a youthful and avant-gardist Borges continued and developed his passionate

engagement with Irish literature with a pioneering translation of the last two pages of Joyce's revolutionary *Ulysses*. If an Argentine writer had been wandering through the labyrinthine streets of Joyce's urban novel, in the 1940s a young Irish writer, Samuel Beckett, was making his own excursions through the fertile ground of Mexican poetry. Like Borges and Joyce, Beckett was a notorious émigré and an accomplished polyglot: his linguistic repertoire boasted an impressive range of European languages: English, French, Italian, German and a reading knowledge of Spanish. Beckett combined his linguistic dexterity and poetic sensitivity to superbly render into English an extraordinary anthology of Mexican poetry compiled by Octavio Paz. His translation strategy, moreover, had much in common with the model practiced by Borges's French writer Pierre Menard, in that Beckett sought to produce a type of translation that is richer, more subtle than the original. He translated the poetry of the most eminent Mexican men of letters of the nineteenth and twentieth century, including, amongst others, Alfonso Reyes, Enrique González Martínez and Ramón López Velarde. At the heart of Beckett's translation of Reyes's poem 'Sol de Monterrey', lies a lyrical sentiment, a fervent desire that seeks to conjure up the essence of poetry, an aesthetic impulse shared by Irish and Latin American writers:

*When I with my stick
and bundle went from home,
to my heart I said:
Now bear the sun awhile!
It is a hoard – unending,
unending – that I squander.
Cuando salí de mi casa
con mi bastón y mi bato,
le dije a mi corazón:
- ¡Ya llevas el sol para rato!
Es tesoro – y no se acaba:
no se me acaba – y lo gasto' (Reyes 1997: 90).*

The omnipresent warmth and luminosity of the sun of Monterrey stands as a symbol for an ars

poetica, an art of writing that fuses the mutually complementary Spanish and English discourses of Reyes and Beckett. 'The main thing is to write for the joy of it', whispers the ghost of James Joyce to Seamus Heaney in his imaginary encounter with the blind Irish bard in Station Island (Heaney 1990: 192). In his tributary poem to Joyce, a blind and elderly Borges similarly called forth:

*I am the others. I am all those
whom your obstinate rigor has redeemed.
I am those you do not know and those you continue
to save.
Yo soy los otros. Yo soy todos aquellos
que ha rescatado tu obstinado rigor.
Soy los que no conoces y los que salvas. (Borges
1999:288-9).*

The redeeming joy of writing that the phantasm of Joyce conveyed to both Heaney and Borges from beyond the grave encapsulates the active dialogue between past, present and future generations, so that the ever-recurring investment between Ireland and Latin America can continue to be realised. For this reason, it is important to remember that the otherwise separate literary paths of Borges and Beckett eventually converged in 1961, when a jury in France jointly awarded them the prestigious Prix Formentor. Amongst other things, this double gesture fulfilled Borges's prophetic words about an Irish and Latin American brotherhood and, in a larger way, contributed towards the combined repositioning of Ireland and Argentina in world literature.

Another way of looking at the interface between Ireland and Latin America is through the Irish diaspora and their descendants, particularly in their contributions to literature, painting and music. As Declan Kiberd puts it: 'Wilde believed that it would be, in great part, through contact with the art of other countries that a modern Irish culture might be reshaped' (Kiberd 1996: 2). Indeed, the conviction that transcultural contact between different literatures, cultures and languages would give birth to, or encourage the formation of, an invigorated modern Irish culture lies at the centre of the historical exchange between Ireland and Latin America.

This special issue of *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* seeks to explore, analyse and document

the literary, artistic and cultural interactions between Ireland and Latin America. It remains undeniable that Irish artists, writers and philosophers have cast their powerful spell in the Latin American imagination. Equally significant is the inverse phenomenon, whereby the Irish have looked to Latin America as an inexhaustible source of inspiration and enrichment for a wide range of creative projects. The unique interviews with the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa and the Irish playwrights Marina Carr and Larry O'Loughlin that open this issue are testament to this continuing exchange of ideas. This complex engagement has contributed to the creation of a long-standing dialogue that has woven the multifaceted figures of a complex tapestry. The historian Angus Mitchell interviewed Vargas Llosa about his current novel based on the life of the Irish revolutionary Roger Casement. For the first time, Vargas Llosa spoke in detail about his recent trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to conduct vital research on Casement's human rights mission in 1903, the historical controversy surrounding the publication of the Black Diaries, as well as the much debated issue of Casement's sexuality. In her interview with Marina Carr, Patricia Novillo-Corvalán engaged in a fascinating dialogue with one of Ireland's most gifted female dramatists. Their lively and magical conversation revealed a two-way transmission of culture as they charted new literary interconnections between Ireland, Spain and Latin America. Carr openly talked about her childhood in County Offaly, the essence of her theatre, as well as her predilection for Spanish and Latin American writers such as Federico García Lorca, Gabriel García Márquez, and Jorge Luis Borges. In her interview with the Irish playwright Larry O'Loughlin, Laura Izarra directed her attention to the intersection between literature and history and the aesthetic process of representing the conflict between the United States and Mexico in the American-Mexican war (1846-48), as depicted in O'Loughlin's one-man play about five hundred Irish soldiers who deserted the American Army during the war and joined the Mexican side where, led by John Riley from Clifden, County Galway, they fought as the San Patricio (St. Patrick's) Battalion. O'Loughlin

enthusiastically explained the art of storytelling which configures his drama.

The broad spectrum of articles that comprise this special issue of *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* aspires to develop new transnational approaches, thus uncovering a planetary dimension to Irish Studies, particularly in their ability to point to numerous directions and locations, languages and cultures, unveiling a diasporated model that seeks to complement and expand upon national perspectives of Ireland. The issue begins with a triangular response to James Joyce's widespread impact in the Hispanic world, offering three outstanding articles by international Joyce scholars: Marisol Morales, Carlos Gamarro and Diana Perez García. Their enlightening articles survey the reception of the Irish Modernist icon in Spain (Morales), Argentina (Gamarro), and the cross-cultural transactions between Joyce, García Márquez and Faulkner (Perez García). In 'Two Contemporary Medeas', Zoraide Rodríguez Carrasco de Mesquita uncovers an unprecedented comparative reading of Euripides' *Medea* through the light shed by two contemporary afterlives of the classical tragedy: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...* and Pontes and Buarque's *Gota D'Água*

. In 'The Transfiguration of History: Knowledge, Time and Space in Northern Irish Poetry', Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação explores Seamus Heaney's and Ciaran Carson's poetic responses to a painting by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya entitled *Shootings of the Third of May*. She argues that both poets' historical transfers dislocate categories of time and space in order to produce a poetic translation that projects Goya's Spanish shootings onto the political conflict of Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

References

- Borges, Jorge Luis, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Alexander Coleman (London: Penguin, 1999).
- Heaney, Seamus, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).
- Kiberd, Declan, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996).
- Reyes, Carlos, 'Sol de Monterrey', trans. by Samuel Beckett in *Twentieth-century Latin American Poetry*, ed. by Stephen Tapscott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

At a time when it has become paramount to examine the cultural effects of the Irish diaspora on a global scale, it is essential to study the transformative and cultural effects of the several generations of Irish descendants in Latin America. Six interdisciplinary articles from the fields of music, art, literature and history address this issue of extreme relevance. Rebecca and Patrick Geraghty explore the life and works of the Hiberno-Argentine writer William Bulfin through his engagement with issues of nation, travel writing, exile, home and nationalism. Andrés Romera examines the legacy of the Irish diaspora as portrayed in the fiction of contemporary Argentine writer Eduardo Cormick. Mariano Galazzi takes the reader on a pictorial tour of the nineteenth-century Irish-Argentine painter Henry Sheridan, while Edmundo Murray and Eduardo Cormick explore the complex legacy of Irish music in Latin America, charting musical genealogies and retelling tales that have been woven into a national mythology, such as the heroic achievements of the Argentine musician Buenaventura Luna. In a circular way, the journal ends with Angus Mitchell's provocative and thoroughly engaging article: 'Beneath the Hieroglyph: Recontextualising the Black Diaries of Roger Casement', which not only complements his momentous interview with Vargas Llosa, but also immerses the reader in the turbulent waters of Casement's *Black Diaries*.

Above all, it is our hope that the interviews, essays and book reviews that make up this issue will further consolidate the cultural brotherhood between Ireland and Latin America, and will serve as a solid foundation for the enlargement, enrichment and sustained scholarly interest in this historical engagement.

Laura P. Z. Izarra and Patricia Novillo-Corvalán

