

ON TEACHING IRISH LITERATURE OFF-CENTRE

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Thackeray's *The Irish Sketch Book*¹ seems, at first, to fall into the category of travel books; but one soon finds out that the writer's interest is elsewhere. In his book, Thackeray builds a fictional character, a snobbish, sentimental, Victorian gentleman; in the satirical description of his eagerness to establish comparisons between England and Ireland, and his prejudiced statements about the country, there emerges a pathetic, but not sentimental, portrait of the Irish social scene in the years preceding the Great Famine. At the end of his journey Mr Titmarsh (the gentleman's name) concludes that although "Westport is only two days' journey from London now, it lies in a country far more strange to most travellers, than France or Germany can be".² If an Englishman finds Ireland strange, imagine how strange it may seem to other nationalities.

The whole of the *Sketch Book* is about difference: of race, religion, history, civilization, temperament – difference which can be seen, for example, in O'Faolain's invaluable *The Irish*,³ "a creative history of the growth of a racial mind", as the author puts it.

In terms of literature, the autonomous works written in Ireland in English have not been acknowledged as Irish until recently in my country: in the "Área de Inglês" at the University of São Paulo, and also in other Brazilian institutions, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Defoe, the Brontës,

Dickens, Hardy, and Virginia Woolf are some of the writers studied. And of course, Joyce and Yeats, Wilde and Beckett. But never in their Irish historical and cultural context.

Irish writers themselves have wanted to stress their Irishness. Behan, for instance, in *Brendan Behan's Other Island – An Irish Sketch Book*⁴, in a double allusion to Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* and to Thackeray's *The Irish Sketch Book*, is sure to stress the difference.

Let us see how "the gospel of difference" has been spread in Brazil, as Declan Kiberd, on his visit to São Paulo, ironically remarked, and added: "in the light of post-colonial theory Ireland has colonized Brazil..." In the process of remembering and recording, let us find some meaning, some "figure in the carpet".

Looking for a theme or an author for my doctoral dissertation, I accepted the suggestion given by a visiting American professor to read all of Sean O'Faolain's fiction. I fell in love with his short stories and wrote to him - asking many questions (that is one of the advantages of choosing a living author). He answered. Our correspondence, which lasted almost twenty years, was fruitful, because his insight into his own work was sharp and sensitive; it was delightful, for his humour and irony. I can't resist quoting what he wrote in one of his letters about his novel *And Again?*, knowing that my long research was finished and the thesis defended:

I have bad news for you! I have completed a novel, which will be published in 1979!! (will send a copy - late 1979 !!!) More blooming O'Faolain to read? All my sympathies.

Otherwise we are in good spirits - we intend to spend Christmas with our daughter Julia and her husband; being alone at 79 is a bit lonely.

After my doctoral dissertation, "A Personagem nos Contos de Sean O'Faolain", courses and supervision could be offered in the Postgraduate Programme of Anglo-Irish Literature, which started in 1982. Strategies were needed.

In the first years of my post-graduate work, the approach was tentative and diffuse; the results, though good in themselves, made me wonder whether literary analyses and interpretations of works by James Stephens, Brian Friel, Elizabeth Bowen and Seamus Heaney would add much to the vast amount of similar criticism on Irish Studies all over the world. It is true that in the process of interpretation you can always find a different angle. "Is *The Demi-Gods*, by James Stephens, a picaresque novel?" a candidate for an MA asked, and answered, successfully, in her dissertation. However, when dealing with well-known writers, we are always in danger of imitating that famous question, "How many children had Lady Macbeth?"

Besides, it became increasingly more difficult to follow the development of so many different simultaneous projects. You may enjoy reading and teaching poetry, drama and fiction, of in "all ages" to undergraduates; but to pretend to be a specialist in all genres is quite a different matter. From the point of view of the students, they felt that, while dealing with the different periods and genres, there had been hardly any possibilities of cooperation in terms of bibliographies, seminars and tutorials.

It was easy to see, then, that if some kind of unity of purpose were to be achieved, a north, a line of research, ought to be found. An integrated project, concentrating on a period and a genre, was outlined. Two pioneer projects inspired me. The first was "O Projeto de Estudos de Periódicos do IEB" (Institute of Brazilian Studies - USP), devised by Prof. José Aderaldo Castello, a specialist in Brazilian Literature. While noticing the importance of literary magazines as channels for critical ideas, methods and ideologies, he stressed their significance in the understanding of a given literary movement. His supervision of many dissertations, which dealt mainly with the Modernist period, helped enlarge our awareness of the movement's scope.⁵

Also at the Institute of Brazilian Studies, the "Projeto dos

Manuscritos”, supervised by Prof. Telê Ancona Lopez, deals with letters, essays, marginalia and literary creation in the manuscripts which form the “Mário de Andrade Archive”. Concentrating on the Modernist movement as well, its main characteristic is the idea of interdisciplinarity, including music, art and literature.

As I had been working with the autobiographies of W.B. Yeats and George Moore with the aim of drawing a picture of the cultural atmosphere in Dublin and London at the turn of the century, the research for the group could be extended to the letters, diaries, essays, journals, and autobiographies, a relatively new field waiting to be explored. Through these “documents of the self” one could describe a cultural moment, the 1890s – 1930s, in Irish drama.

The first integrated project including seven students and myself was ample enough to offer various opportunities of choice and research, but at the same time had limitations of time and genre. From the beginning, we were concerned with the question of whether or not to include minor writers. The answer was yes, for, in order to define a period, one should aim at it as a whole: it would be incomplete if less significant playwrights or tendencies were omitted. So far, four dissertations have been concluded: on W.B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, G. B. Shaw and Lennox Robinson. With the help of their letters, essays, and autobiographical writings, relationships between authors and works of the period and links between theory and practice have been defined. Work in progress includes research on Dion Boucicault’s use of melodrama, Sean O’Casey’s statements on his, or other playwrights’ drama, and Lady Gregory’s aesthetic and cultural views from her Journals and Letters. By the time every work is finished and published, a reasonably complete picture of the main ideas about drama produced in Ireland in the period chosen will be available to the Brazilian public.

Our first achievement in this project was Rosalie Haddad’s book (from her dissertation) *Bernard Shaw e a Renovação do Teatro Inglês*, São Paulo: Olavobrás, 1997, which will certainly be useful

in Drama Departments or Literary Theory Departments, for example. *O Teatro de W. B. Yeats: Teoria e Prática*, by Fernanda Sepa, is coming out, we hope, in February 1998.

The second, more recent, integrated project, with five candidates, also concentrates on the period of 1890s – 1930s. This time, however, our aim is to define the different tendencies in the fiction of the period. With James Joyce at the centre for reference (but definitely not a target for dissertations) our objective will be to draw a picture of the plurality of approaches to fiction in Ireland, before or after Joyce, with the help of “documents of the self”. We are in the process of choosing the writers.

It is expected that in both projects, our attempt at a cultural history of the period will enlarge and help establish parallels with the same period in our country. A moment for comparison. For example, is a statement about melodrama by Boucicault true for the melodrama produced in Brasil at the turn of the century?

As Antônio Cândido has remarked, Brazilians are born comparatists: Portugal, first, then France and England, the States after 1945, have played a very important part in our cultural formation. If we stress the comparative approach, translation and reception become of utmost importance.

Translation is, perhaps, one of the best forms of literary analysis because, throughout its process, besides “close-reading”, we have to master several critical approaches in order to understand the text in the context of the writer’s work and nationality. This process resembles the meticulous labour of the goldsmith, when the translator searches for the hidden meaning of the word, turns it around and upside down, speaks it aloud, listening to its sound and connotations. Translation is also an essential part in the process of being aware of Otherness.

In this field I believe that ABEI Newsletter (Associação Brasileira de Estudos Irlandeses) has had an important role in challenging specialists to translate, for instance, poems by Seamus

Heaney, W.B. Yeats and Michael Longley, presented in different versions and with different solutions in Portuguese.

Another significant contribution in the field of translation is an anthology of the Irish short story, *Guirlanda de Histórias*. (São Paulo: Olavobrás, 1996), with an introduction to the writers included, and their work, and translations by specialists from different Brazilian institutions. It has been well received by academics, with good reviews, and by the general public, who have enjoyed (the pleasure principle!) the stories by Bowen, Moore, O'Flaherty, James Stephens, Sean O'Faolain, Flann O'Brien, James Joyce and others.

As to reception studies, which tend to emphasize a cultural atmosphere, rather than influence, my research on "Joyce in Brasil" led me to find at the Institute of Brazilian Studies a copy of *Ulysses*, by James Joyce, full of marginal comments by Mário de Andrade, our arch-modernist. His reading of Joyce in a Brazilian perspective was very interesting. This project evolved into the recently published *Joyce no Brasil*. São Paulo: Olavobrás, 1997, with essays on Joyce by Brazilian critics during the last three decades.

This backward glance may provide an answer to a question which has often worried me: the question of the necessity or significance of our contribution "from the Tropics". Irish and non Irish critics from the so-called centre were, and are, better equipped to analyse the Irish cultural production, but I think that there are things that can justify our work. One of them is "divulgação", publicizing, making Irish Studies a "presence" through articles in academically oriented journals, but also in the press; in events, with fiction or poetry reading as in celebrations of the Bloomsday; with performances of plays, so that the public may be in contact with another culture, with the Other. Once a taste for a different culture has been developed, the next steps are translation and reception.

The most important aspects of the answer to my question is that our contribution is part of an international perspective approach to Irish Studies, a tendency becoming stronger through the efforts

of scholars from Germany, the United States, Canada, Japan, Egypt, France, Sweden and many other countries. The comparatist perspective, as I have stressed, becomes an invaluable contribution to the study of the Irish writer by those who are teaching Irish Literatures Off-Centre. To define Wilde's thread in the fabric of decadent art, as I did, in a paper presented at IASIL1995, one would have to trace, for example, the threads of Pater's *Marius*, *The Epicurean*, D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere*, Valle Inclán's *Sonata de Otoño* and Huysman's *À Rebours*, just to mention those threads I tried to unravel in my paper. I am sure that in Portuguese and Brazilian literatures other threads would be found so that the decadent atmosphere of, say, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* or *Salomé* could be understood in a larger perspective. In this way, to use Antonio Candido's expression, "a cultural fecundation" would be achieved.

Notes

- 1 W. M. Thackeray. *The Irish Sketch Book*. London and Glasgow: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1843.
- 2 Idem, *ibidem*, p. 272.
- 3 Sean O'Faolain. *The Irish*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947, p. 5.
- 4 Brendan Behan. *Brendan Behan's Other Island - An Irish Sketch Book*. Boston: Little Brown, 1962.
- 5 From: *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros*, "Comunicação" by Margareth A. Wood da Silva, n° 21, USP, 1979, p. 117.