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## IRISH STUDIES IN SPAIN – 2009

### Reviews by

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### Introduction

The reading of Shane MacGowan's text in one of the books reviewed below (*Beber para contarla*) has brought to mind one of the most picturesque, extravagant and funniest encounters of all time between an example of dyed-in-the-wool Spanish culture and the imagination of Irish visitors, expressed in the song "Fiesta" by The Pogues, featured in their album *If I Should Fall from Grace with God* (1988). The song in itself is a wonderfully carnivalesque piece that strikes

a cord in listeners of whatever nationality and impels them to jump from their seat and join the revelry.

Contrary to what many of us believed, The Pogues did not come to Almería to sing at the feria (which takes place, incidentally, for ten days in the second half of August each year), but they were here filming *Straight to Hell* (1987), by Alex Cox. As with all the great stars of the Spaghetti Westerns, they stayed at the Gran

Hotel Almería, situated at the end of the Paseo, facing the harbour. This was the summer of 1986 and at that time the feria was still in the Parque Nicolás Salmerón, just below the hotel. A few years later it would be taken to the Avenida del Mediterráneo, its present location, near La Térmica beach. This meant that when the members of the band came back from the film set in the Desert of Tabernas at about 20:00 h. every evening, and after having a few drinks to relax, they went to their rooms to get some sleep and the noise from the fairground was in full swing: traffic, children's attractions, food stalls, *casetas*, the works. A nightmarish pandemonium that is indeed reflected in the song's crazy lyrics. The main tune of "Fiesta", in fact, was borrowed from the endless, repetitive advertisement for food in one of the stalls' loudspeakers.

In some way, The Pogues simply continued a tradition of Irish visitors to Spain impressed by the vitality and *joie de vivre* of the inhabitants of this unfathomable Southern country. There have been other traditions, learned and introspective ones, think of Kate O'Brien or, more recently, Caitríona O'Reilly, but there is certainly a joyful and carefree trend pursued by many Irish in Spain, and the founding of this tendency can surely be attributed to Walter Starkie (1894-1976), a Dubliner who, with the passing of time, would become the first director of the British Institute in Madrid and who actually died in Spain.

Starkie was fascinated by Gipsy folklore and he was an expert in Romani, the Gipsy language. In the 1930s he published two books on Spain, based on his own journeys around the Iberian peninsula: *Spanish Raggle-Taggle. Adventures with a Fiddle in North Spain* (1934) and *Don Gypsy. Adventures with a Fiddle in Barbary, Andalusia and La Mancha* (1936). In the latter book he began his adventures in Southern Spain travelling to Morocco, as he wanted "to see just enough to colour my mind with an African hue before I invade Andalusia from the South". Starkie was a wonderful travel writer, and being a mendicant musician was the perfect excuse to mix with the lower strata of the Spanish population of the time: tramps, beggars, the common people. The poor and backward country that Spain was then is reflected in his books, and

he records everything from an affectionate viewpoint.

When travellers visit a foreign city, he writes, they should pay attention to which of their senses is more at work, which is a reminder to modern tourists what serious travelling is about! His descriptions are colourful and funny, although rather suspiciously he records lengthy conversations with the people he meets. His being both a learned professor and a vagrant produces an interesting contrast in the kind of observations he makes about popular Spain. *Spanish Raggle-Taggle* and *Don Gypsy* were translated into Spanish in the late 1930s and early 1940s by Antonio Espina, and there exists a recent edition of the former, *Aventuras de un irlandés en España* (Espasa, 2006), with a prologue by Ian Gibson. Perhaps it would not be a bad idea to make a new edition of both works in a single volume.

As has been said, not all Irish travellers came to Spain to have a good time. While writing these lines, in February 2010, a monument in honour of the young Irish poet Charlie Donnelly, who fought in the Spanish Civil War, is being unveiled near the Jarama battlefield where he and other brigadiers died. Different traditions, all of them reflecting the longstanding historical links between Ireland and Spain.

**Aliaga Rodrigo, Esther. 2009. *Huir del laberinto. Crecer en Irlanda del Norte. Una mirada literaria*. A Coruña: Netbiblo. ISBN: 978-84-9745-268-7.**

The idea that governs this book is suggestive and it is bound to provoke the interest of the reader. There are undoubtedly many accounts of The Troubles, historical, sociological, biographical, etc. but the present study supports the belief that literature may offer a serene vision that not only reflects the protagonists' point of view and that of their circle of family and friends, but also presents a questioning impulse that looks for causes and delves into the origins of things. Esther Aliaga-Rodrigo has successfully completed this task with *Huir del laberinto*. She fulfils the objective of reading the period through its literature, casting a literary glance at a landscape of intransigence and

sectarianism.

The project is not as easy as it seems. Novels cannot be reduced to a mere slogan and political positions in literature are entangled in a mess of emotions and contradictory feelings. “Novels at their best are complex things with lives of their own” novelist Ian McEwan once said. “They tend to make political points that are so broad you’d have to call them moral points, if they make those at all.” Esther Aliaga overcomes the problem of indefiniteness by carefully choosing the novels under study.

Firstly, the four narratives chosen to investigate the conflict in Northern Ireland in recent years share the same characteristics, which contributes towards a unified perspective: All of them were published in the mid and late eighties, when the conflict had reached a stalemate and civil society was as divided as ever. The creation of a climate of confidence which might enkindle the hopes for a better future was still far in the horizon.

Secondly, the four novels dealt with in the book are clear examples of *bildungsroman*. The experience of a youth growing up in a warlike environment may produce an astonishing fresh account of a tediously long and cruel conflict. Thirdly, Esther Aliaga has democratically selected novels that represent the experience of each side of the struggle: in one of the books the protagonist is a Catholic girl, in another the main character is a Catholic boy, and in the other two novels Protestant boy and Protestant girl occupy the centre stage. Finally, each author belongs to the environment they describe, thus enhancing the authenticity of the testimony. There is no place for a Weekend Troubles writer with a superficial love story among the ruins.

The novels in question are *No Mate for the Magpie* (1985), by Frances Molloy; *Burning your Own* (1988), by Glenn Patterson; *Sunday Afternoons* (1988), by Julie Mitchell and *Ripley Bogle* (1989), by Robert McLiam Wilson. Surely other narratives could have been added to the list. *Cal* (1983) by Bernard Mac Laverty immediately comes to mind, but Esther Aliaga takes pains to insist that this is not a revision of the literature of The Troubles, but the study of four representative cases. As historic events (the Peace Process, weapons decommissioning,

devolution of power to the Northern Ireland Assembly) have lessened the pressure on a chastised population, perhaps it is the right time to understand the causes and the consequences of the tension lived for so many years. Like most books deriving from a PhD dissertation, Aliaga’s study proceeds in a systematic and precise way, preparing the ground for the close analysis of the novels, which are given a chapter each at the end of the book. Unlike many books deriving from a PhD dissertation, Aliaga’s study unfurls effortlessly in a clear and engaging voice.

Few aspects in relation to the novels’ connection to their environment are left unattended: all the young protagonists are exposed from an early age to the phenomenon of violence, although they react differently, either repeating acquired habits of behaviour or escaping the restrictive and provincial realms of their childhood. Throughout her exploration of the *bildungsroman* in Irish literature, Aliaga reaches arresting conclusions: while in the classic form of the genre the individual gradually understands the rules of adult society and finally integrates himself/herself into their company, in the Northern Irish manifestations of the form, the individuals struggle to put a distance between them and their claustrophobic surroundings, this attitude normally leading to a better knowledge of themselves. As Esther Aliaga states: “En la literatura irlandesa el *Bildungsroman* está impregnado de una fuerte presencia de la historia y de las circunstancias políticas y sociales” (23). In the literature of Northern Ireland the idea of integration is clearly subverted. Politics in these four novels act as a major force in the lives of the protagonists, not as an abstract universe of ideas but in the shape of everyday events that determine their existence.

The second chapter, devoted to the revision of Troubles literature is comprehensive and incisive in its analysis of a neglected tradition. Up to the nineteen eighties the novels that paid attention to the conflict in Northern Ireland gave superficial accounts to a vast audience. The urban warfare was normally a mere background for the action, there was no interaction with the historical origins and the narratives were ridden with clichés, the Irish usually presented as naturally violent. No mention was made of loyalist para-

militaries as there were only officially two sides in the conflict, the IRA terrorists and the British Army. Against this simplistic vision of the struggle, a number of young writers (including Colin Bateman, Mary Costello, Brenda Murphy and the authors of the four novels studied in *Huir del laberinto*) changed the lens through which the scene was normally seen: they portrayed life in Northern Ireland in all its complexity and offered universal approaches to a local theme considering, for instance, how violence at the time was not an exclusive feature of this tiny part of the world (the Vietnam War, students' protests in France, etc.). They turned their attention to the beginning of the modern Troubles, the nineteen sixties, as a way of distancing themselves from their harsh present-day realities and also in understanding the causes that provoked an endless flow of deaths for both communities. What is at issue for Esther Aliaga is not so much the different presentation of violence by this new group of writers, but rather the commitment to their society without being sectarian, without using a Manichaeic dualism and without portraying an essentialist version of the Irish.

The third chapter is devoted to the sense of place in Northern Irish literature, reinforcing the connection between a personal sense of identity and loyalty to a particular territory. The reason for being a predominant symbol in the literature of the North was clearly summed up by Inés Praga in her chapter "La novela del norte" (from the book *La novela irlandesa del siglo XX*, 2005): "Realmente lo que confiere una fuerza tan extraordinaria al sentido del lugar, (...) es precisamente la facilidad con que este sentido se siente amenazado e incluso amputado por la fuerza" (224). Although Esther Aliaga does not mention Inés Praga's influential text, she maintains this line of thought, going back to the colonial experience to explain that for both communities, Catholic and Protestant, this is the land of their ancestors, concluding that in Northern Ireland even the dead exert pressure on the living.

Belfast, which is present in the four novels, emerges as the menacing icon of a damaged land, always represented in dark colours, doomed for tragedy, holding its inhabitants in its grip. Geography, as Aliaga explains, leaves little space for personal growth; once born in a particular district of the city, one's life is determined for ever in a particular direction. It is an external imposition and those who resist suffer alienation from their communities. In her almost forensic study of the Troubles before analysing each novel, Aliaga also pays attention to the familial relationships that bear the brunt of the conflict. The father being an absent figure or a weak model to follow, mothers in both communities take the role of heads of the family, becoming surrogate fathers themselves. At the same time, curiously enough, they are forced to follow a compulsory passive role outside the domestic realm.

Another important factor, essential in understanding the novels under scrutiny, is the guilt felt by parents for bequeathing to their children a legacy of hatred and fear. For their part, Aliaga explains, children in Northern Irish novels do not normally rebel against their parents as part of their growing to maturity, there being other barriers to tear down which become instead the target of their anguish (the state, the army, the IRA, the paramilitaries...). Perhaps in an attempt to be normal the young protagonists of the selected novels in *Huir del laberinto* do confront their parents, as a way of asserting their "normality". The fifth chapter deals with the socio-political conditions that explain the conflict, and it offers a particularly acute profile of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland, this being the social group that has normally had fewer resources to define their identity in positive terms.

The present book is another example of an accomplished and serious work of criticism in a solidly edited collection whose supervisor is Prof. Antonio Raúl de Toro Santos, director of the University Institute of Research in Irish Studies *Amergin*, University of Coruña.

**de Prada-Samper, José Manuel, ed. 2008. *Cuentos populares irlandeses*. Madrid: Siruela. ISBN: 978-84-9841-227-7.**

Once upon a time, in County Cork, three brothers married three sisters whom they had met in a country fair. The three sisters were known for their wit, and accepted the challenge of a landlord who offered a prize for the one who would ridicule most her man. The eldest sister made her husband believe that he was dead. The second sister blackened her husband's body as a sign of mourning and bade him go to this brother's wake in that fashion. When the neighbours gathering at the eldest brother's house saw that a black figure was approaching, they thought that the devil had come to retrieve the corpse and ran away. So did the dead man, who hurriedly abandoned the house wrapped in his shroud, followed by the blackened brother running after him. They bumped into the third brother, who was crawling in a field looking for his hair, previously cut by his wife while he was asleep. The mirth caused in the village by the incident was notorious, and the three sisters collected their prize, obtaining also 20 years free of rent.

This is only one of the 47 stories, perhaps the funniest, that comprises *Cuentos populares irlandeses*, collected and translated by Spanish writer José Manuel de Prada-Samper. The first thing that must be mentioned is the quality of the edition; the book itself is a lovely object, carefully printed and bound, as is the trade mark of Siruela publications. The present volume complements a collection which already includes popular tales from India, Spain, the Mediterranean and the Gipsy ethnic group. Furthermore, it is a highly commendable collection because the author has not simply put together a number of stories, but has grouped them according to their theme, specifying the source of each of them. As a true researcher should do, the introduction is also very good, tracing the evolution of Irish storytelling, from the Celtic *fili* and the *seanchaí* who followed them to the early Romantics who began the task of collecting popular stories.

Finally, the editor has added a bibliographic list on Irish folk tales that is useful for

academics. There is also a brief glossary of Irish terms, a typological classification of the stories and an appendix with testimonies from famous folklorists. In short, it is an enjoyable book of traditional tales for a wide audience and it offers an additional element of erudition that makes it attractive for scholars.

The editor is right in stressing the importance of story-telling in Ireland: more than a mere pastime, it was a true form of sharing, an integral part of life in rural communities that became a cultural lifeline during the English colonization. The exclusion of the Irish people from the benefits of formal education allowed for the flourishing of a popular tradition of legends and myths that became a sign of their identity. As de Prada-Samper rightly states, the Irish bard of the aristocratic households found a place in the popular classes. At the beginning of the 19th century scholars began to pay attention to the old tales and to collect them. Thomas Crofton Croker, a contemporary of the Grimm Brothers, was one of the first compilers, later to be followed by Samuel Lover, William Carleton and Patrick Kennedy. The first wave of collectors of folklore partially selected the most picturesque stories, adapting the content to please the readers of their time. The Irish peasantry, most notably, is distorted in these collections, as the idea was to offer a colourful vignette as light entertainment. Lady Jane Francesca Wilde would inaugurate a second wave of folklorists, adding quality to the stories that she took down from villagers and peasants. For the first time popular culture was associated with a powerful nationalist conscience. Lady Wilde provided her stories with her own finish and style, although sometimes she went too far in the embellishment of the narratives she collected.

Jeremiah Curtin was the son of Irish emigrants to America and he is probably the first "scientific" folklorist. He returned to the land of his ancestors to record the testimony of the last survivors of an old tradition and documented all this findings, being strictly faithful to the oral tradition. The Irish Literary Renaissance was probably the golden age of story-collecting, with relevant names in Irish literary history such as Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats devoted to the preservation of ancient myths.

With the birth of the Irish nation, the task of preservation of Irish tales was passed to the hands of the government with the creation, in 1935, of the Irish Folklore Commission. The Department of Irish Folklore of UCD took over the activities of the Commission in 1971.

Among the innumerable sources to select his own stories from, de Prada-Samper has opted for choosing the most representative compilers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It was certainly a period of splendour, when quality was joined with stylistic vigour. *Ancient Legends* (1887) by Lady Wilde is his earliest source and Lady Gregory's *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920) the most modern. In between, he collects stories which were in turn re-discovered by Jeremiah Curtin, Douglas Hyde and W.B. Yeats. There are, in fact, three stories in *Cuentos populares irlandeses* which belong to Yeats's *The Celtic Twilight* (1893).

In de Prada-Samper's collection there are representative tales of all the different trends in the Irish tradition: fairy tales, ghost stories, religious accounts, Fenian legends, magic stories and tales of wit. The historical section is wholly devoted to Finn MacCumhail, the leader of Fianna. There are not, however, any stories in the present collection from the other ancient Irish epic hero Cuchulainn.

The compiler has translated into a clear standard Spanish the Hiberno-English of the original, avoiding any temptation to embellish the style. Sometimes this produces awkward results, particularly in the prosaic conclusion of many of the stories, but it was probably necessary to maintain the link with the oral tradition they belong to. The bibliography is complete and relevant, if only circumscribed to the English language. Perhaps the pioneering work of Ramón Sainero *Leyendas celtas en la literatura irlandesa* (Madrid: Akal, 1985) should have been included as a precedent of these kinds of compilations in Spanish.

**Haining, Peter, ed. 2009. *Beber para contarla*. Barcelona: La otra orilla. ISBN: 978-84-92451-52-4.**

*Beber para contarla* is a selection of 12 pieces from Peter Haining's anthology *Great Irish*

*Drinking Stories* (2002), and nobody in their right frame of mind can say that this is a careless selection: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, J.M. Synge and Flann O'Brien, among others, have been chosen by Miguel Martínez-Lage, who is in charge of the present edition. The main idea, as in the original book, is to provide a panoramic view of the talents that have been applied to the Irish drinking culture. Martínez-Lage has commanded a team of six highly competent translators, including himself, and the result is a varied, colourful and attractive volume with more than one interesting surprise.

One would expect a celebration of revelry in all the stories in the volume, but the reality is quite different. Very few stories, in fact, deal with the joys of drinking, but rather with its aftermath and with that terrible word, consequences. Although most of the stories take place in a pub, the focus normally falls on the effects of drink, as it would correspond to a guilt-ridden country. With respect to alcohol, here it can be applied what Hanif Kureishi says about sex in his latest novel. The protagonist's son would soon discover "how problematic sex is, and how much people hate it, as well as how much shame, embarrassment and rage it can encourage" (*Something to Tell You*, 2008: 29). The same negative responses are associated with the consequences of drink in the stories of *Beber para contarla*. Think of the superb "Grace", by James Joyce ("Por la gracia", translated by Martínez-Lage) in which Mr. Kernan has been found unconscious on the toilet floor after a bout of drinking. Or consider the pub grotesques in "Ding-Dong", a story by Samuel Beckett, where an old tramp lady sells seats in heaven to the locals. This story by Beckett is a rarity in its original version and even more in its Spanish translation. It belongs to Beckett's only volume of short fiction, *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), a volume translated into Spanish by Víctor Pozanco in 1991 with the unfortunate title of *Belacqua en Dublín*. (Some years later Jenaro Talens would suggest as a possible title *Más pichas que dichas*, which is quite funny). In "Ding-Dong" Martínez-Lage fully extracts the colour and flavour of Beckett's text, a smooth texture covers it all and the sentences flow naturally, as if the words had been adopted as

one's own by the translator.

But going back to the after-taste of alcohol and to the surprisingly gloomy tone of this collection of drinking stories, the reader cannot feel but appalled at the deadly consequences of Mr Doherty's secret habit and at the bitter tears of his widow at the end of "The Diviner" by Brian Friel ("El Zahorí", translated by Eugenia Vázquez Nacarino). "The Hen Party" by Eamonn Sweeney ("La despedida de soltera", translated by J. L. Miranda) ends up in a gory massacre in a pub, although the effect of drinking is more poignantly dramatic in "Just Visiting" by Bernard Mac Laverty ("De visita", translated by Carlos Pranger), a beautifully sad story that only a master of the short form like Mac Laverty could put into words.

It is completely adequate that at least a few pieces share some of the fun that is associated with the *craic*. Thus, it is refreshing to read "The Rocky Road to Dublin" by the leader of The Pogues Shane MacGowan ("El pedregoso camino a Dublín", translated by Carlos Pranger) even though it is not a short story but a fragment of his memoirs *A Drink with Shane MacGowan* (2001). Here MacGowan reveals the circumstances that surrounded the birth of his group and how their music is closely connected to Irish writers and to the nation's passion for popular Irish music and drink. Rather than sounding awkward in Spanish, MacGowan's words sound perfectly at ease in Carlos Pranger's translation, with an effective use of colloquial Spanish.

"The First Singles Bar" by Malachy McCourt (Frank McCourt's brother) is also an entertaining autobiographical account, dealing in this case with the opening of the legendary *Malachy's Bar* in New York in 1958. The volume also offers interesting pieces taken from Irish classics: "La historia de Christy Mahon" (translated by Jaime Blasco Castineyra) is a fragment from J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and there are two curious stories from 19<sup>th</sup> century authors: William Carleton and Robert J. Martin. *Beber para contarla*, in short, is a book that deserves to be read and kept in one's library. It contains everything around the topic of drink and it is equally hilarious and sad, perhaps like drink itself.

**Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan. 2009. *Dickon el diablo y otros relatos extraordinarios*. Madrid: Valdemar. ISBN: 978-84-7702-641-9.**

*In a Glass Darkly* (1872) is the most famous collection of stories by J. S. Le Fanu, including horror classics like "Green Tea" or "Carmilla", the first female woman vampire in literary history. Le Fanu's favourite theme of having a character falling into the abyss of self-destruction is expressed here at its best. However, he had written many ghost stories before, and in *Dickon el diablo* Spanish readers can enjoy a selection of pieces from the beginning of his career, when Le Fanu was perfecting his art. Some of the eight stories in this collection were published in the late 1830s in the *Dublin University Magazine*, a journal which he edited and eventually owned. Others appeared in *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery* (1851). The present volume has been translated by Rafael Lassaletta.

Horror stories in general have developed so much since *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole, that to read narratives like the story which gives its name to the whole collection, "Dickon el Diablo" (simple, effective, neat) makes contemporary horror fiction overelaborated by comparison. The sense of being in the presence of a kind of "natural" storytelling is reinforced by Le Fanu's personal style: half-hearted, slightly ironic, as if sometimes he did not completely believe what is taking place or, at least, as if he did not demand absolute earnestness on the part of the reader. It is common for Le Fanu to begin his stories nonchalantly, recalling the interlocutor who once told him the tale, usually an old woman shortly before dying. In many ways Le Fanu conforms to the type of Victorian writer, who did not put much value on the short story as a genre ("burlettas", as W. M. Thackeray called his short pieces). It was the novel, of course, which took all the attention and devotion. That is why the genre of short story grew in such an attractive manner, being free from constraints and imposing demands.

The almost anecdotal character of the form can be seen in "Historias de fantasmas de Chapelizod" ("Ghost Stories of Chapelizod"),

the first section in *Dickon el diablo*, really consisting of a series of sketches told by the narrator to “a kind reader” in a casual way. In the present circumstances it is an appropriate piece to warm up before some serious hair-raising. “La visión de Tom Chuff” (“The Vision of Tom Chuff”) is a fine example of a Le Fanu ghost story, with the main character unbearably laden with the responsibility of being honest and kind to his family while his nature forces him downwards to the depths of evil. No redemption is possible for those already doomed to fail.

Apart from the attraction of a fateful destiny, what really enhances tension in the stories is the description of a threatening atmosphere, so sinister that in some of the stories it is the element that holds the structure of the narrative. The classic elements of horror can be found here in a pristine form: a solitary moon shining through the winter trees of the graveyard, a decrepit house, strange creatures relentlessly pursuing terrified sinners.

Le Fanu is interesting by himself and also for what came after him. In the story “La prima asesinada” (“The Murdered Cousin”), the third in the collection, Le Fanu seemed to be working on the theme that he would fully develop in his celebrated novel *Uncle Silas* (1864): the story of an innocently young heiress who is sent to live with her devious uncle after her father’s death. Her uncle’s plans to murder her will have unexpected consequences. What the critic James Kilroy wrote about the novel can be safely applied to stories like this one: “The narrators are so well developed, and their confusion and sense of vulnerability so evocative, that the novels sustain a mood of terror.”

Another story included in *Dickon el Diablo*, “Un capítulo en la historia de una familia de Tyrone” (“A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family”) is important because it is frequently cited as a possible influence on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, with the gripping account of a violent attack by an insane woman. “El huésped misterioso” (“The mysterious Lodger”) is probably the most disturbing story in the whole volume, producing an effect that goes beyond the strange pleasures of horror fiction; it deals with the impossibility of escaping once misfortune, in the form of an utterly fiendish lodger, has chosen

its victim. It raises complicated questions about chance and disgrace. You do not want to read it.

**Palacios, Manuela and Laura Lojo, eds. 2009. *Writing Bonds. Irish and Galician Contemporary Women Poets*. Bern: Peter Lang. ISBN: 978-3-03911-834-2.**

After the splendid *Palabras extremas* (2008), Manuela Palacios, this time with Laura Lojo, both senior lecturers in English at the University of Santiago de Compostela, has published another volume of articles on the literary relationships between Galicia and Ireland, proving that it is a field that is far from exhausted and, once more, showing their expertise and leading position in the critical discussion on Galician and Irish women writers. Their introduction to the present volume, for instance, “Poetry, Gender and Transnational Bonds” should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in the subject matter because of the unique combination of historical events that connect both peoples and the survey of thematic similarities and social conditions that bond together Galician and Irish women poets: politics, religion, language and land.

Galicia’s penchant for Irish culture has a long history and the serious work done by the editors in this book means bridging the gap a bit further, this time with the explicit support of personalities in Irish criticism, like Irene Gilsenan Nordin, the director of DUCIS (Dalarna University Centre for Irish Studies, Sweden), who has written the preface of the book, and Irish writers Anne Le Marquand Hartigan (interviewed by Laura Lojo) and Mary O’Donnell who contributes with a paper. The aim of the volume, as was the case with *Palabras extremas*, is to put together issues concerning Galician women poets in parallel with similar topics dealt with their Irish counterparts: “Ideas about the social and cultural context,” write the editors in the introduction “as well as about the literary themes and forms of poetry travel smoothly between both communities, as long as one respects their historical specificities” (24). The articles that were not originally written in English have been translated by Minia Bongiorno-García and David

Clark.

In the first part of the book, which deals with critical perspectives, some articles address specific aspects of contemporary Galician literature, like “Primitive Alchemy: Alienness in Olga Novo”, by Manuel Fernández-Rodríguez, or “Dolls, Princesses and Cinderellas: New Feminine Representations in Contemporary Galician Women’s Poetry” by María Xesús Nogueira. Others focus mainly on Irish women poets, like the piece written by María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia and Cristina Fernández-Méndez “‘Longer and Longer Sentences Prove Me Wholly Female’: Medbh McGuckian and Feminism(s)” or “The Poetics of Motherhood in Contemporary Irish Women’s Verse”, written by Laura Lojo. Manuela Palacios is the author of an article in which she observes contemporary constructions of nature from an ecocritic perspective in both Irish and Galician women poets: “The Course of Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Contemporary Irish and Galician Women Poets”.

All the articles in the first section bear the stamp of professional, first-class academic criticism, dealing efficiently with intellectually complex issues. The second section has the advantage of revealing “the inside story”, as it were, looking inside the psychology of writing itself and an even more problematic matter, getting published in a highly competitive market which veers dangerously towards assigning the label of Chick-lit to literature produced by women. The article written by Mary O’Donnell in this second part of the book, “Irish Women and Writing: An Overview of the Journey from Imagination into Print, 1980-2008”, is extremely revealing of the difficulties encountered by many women in order to publish their work in the male-dominated Irish literary scene. Carmen Blanco, a lecturer of Galician Literature from the University of Santiago and a creative writer herself, writes in “Alicia in Galicia: Sex and Place” about creative myths in her writing, powerfully embedded in a Galician context but with a universal projection. A short story of hers, “Alicia in Galicia”, included in her 2004 volume *Vermella con lobos*, and which is reproduced here in English, serves as her starting point. Luz

Luz Pichel, author of several collections of poetry, writes an introspective chapter, “Pieces of Letters from My Bedroom”, about her creative process. Pichel not only considers ideological aspects (“Writing is born when freedom is at its deepest, not before”, 177), but she also deals with practical conditions (“I like to write listening to the rain falling on the roof and knowing I am alone at home”, 180), producing a testimony that is both intimate and dignified. *Writing bonds* ends with the aforementioned interview with Irish poet Anne Hartigan by Laura Lojo, “‘Making Sense of Wilderness’ through the Written Word” and with an interview with Galician poet Luz Pozo-Garza, “Most Faithful Stories”, by María Xesús Nogueira. Hartigan and Pozo-Garza speak in a spirited way about their careers, the influences on their writing by other authors and the social and cultural background surrounding their work.

The joining together of critical perspectives and personal insights make of this collection a highly recommended book for scholars and students of Irish and Galician literature alike.

**Wilde, Oscar. 2008. *Teatro completo*. Madrid: Valdemar. ISBN: 978-84-7702-603-7.**

**Constán, Sergio. 2009. *Wilde en España. La presencia de Oscar Wilde en la literatura española (1882-1936)*. Astorga: Akrón, 2009. ISBN: 978-84-936984-9-2.**

Literary critic and translator Mauro Armiño has edited the complete plays of Oscar Wilde. The Irish writer’s dramatic works are of course well known in Spain and there are several editions of his plays on the market, but so far nobody had edited all his plays in an unabridged single volume in Spanish. Mauro Armiño has to his credit previous experience translating Wilde; his are the recently published *El retrato de Dorian Gray* (Austral Espasa, 2000) and *Cuentos completos* (Valdemar, 2007). Armiño was also responsible for a celebrated version of *Salomé*, which was brought to the stage by the famous director Miguel Narros in 2005 and starring María Adán, published by Valdemar in 2006.

The relevance of the present volume is that it has the benefits of a critical edition while at the

same time offering Wilde's plays in an accessible text. It begins with a well-informed introduction, a chronology of Wilde's life and a bibliographical list, although this one is perhaps too basic.

All the plays that constitute Wilde's canon have been translated by Armiño: his two initial tragedies, tentative approaches into the world of drama: *Vera, or the Nihilists* and *The Duchesse of Padua*; his four comedies, prodigies of verbal orchestration: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*; and two unfinished plays: *La Sainte Courtisane* and *A Florentine Tragedy*. The volume also offers Armiño's version of *Salomé*, that "miracle of impudence" as an English censor dubbed it. Each play is accompanied by erudite notes at the end of the book.

The prologue to *Teatro completo* is really remarkable, a complete lesson on Wilde the dramatist in more than 50 pages. Armiño begins his introduction by rightly asserting that young Wilde created a mask with all the elements of dandyism that he aspired to, and he spent the rest of his life trying to live up to those expectations. Wilde became firstly attracted to the theatre because of the glittering glamour of the stage and the fashionable world of actors, only to later discover it as his true vocation. Once installed in the world of theatre, he moved effortlessly in it, establishing friendships with the great artists of the day, like Lillie Langtry or Sarah Bernhardt.

Although his vast accomplishments were part and parcel of his writing, Wilde conscientiously chose to produce commercial theatre for the upper classes of Victorian London: he was a social event himself and he revelled in the world of high society appearances which he unveiled with his paradoxes. Armiño insists on Wilde's not being completely original in the plots for his theatre, having the classics, Shakespeare, Restoration Comedy and contemporary French and English authors as his immediate sources. What was revolutionary in Wilde was his use of language, as words were not condiments to season and spice the action, but the full protagonists of the plays.

Armiño carefully proceeds to explain the origin of Wilde's relatively small number of plays, the theatrical history of each of them and his evolution as a playwright, from the modest premiere of *Vera* in New York in August 1883, to the great success of *Earnest* in London in February 1895, a few months before being arrested and taken to prison. Wilde's fall into the hell of ignominy and public rejection is duly told by the editor. Not surprisingly, *Salomé* takes up extensive coverage in the prologue, no doubt reflecting Armiño's fascination with Wilde's amoral one-act piece. With the description of this play he even enters into the territory covered by the second book recently published on Wilde, Sergio Constan's *Wilde en España*.

Researchers who work in reception studies face a particularly demanding job, as they have to trawl through scattered archives in order to discover the traces left by their authors' presence in a wide range of places: in the periodical press, in literary journals, in memoirs, etc. It falls within their responsibility to study the influence that their admired figure left in the writings of other authors too. Once the book is published there is always the gripping fear that one has left an important connection unveiled. Given the breadth of scope and the attention to detail put into *Wilde en España*, it seems safe to say that Sergio Constan has succeeded in his ambitious enterprise. His aim in the present book has been to explore Oscar Wilde's presence in Spanish literature in the more than 50 years that span the period when he was first mentioned by an author writing in Spanish, until the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, which deeply altered the cultural landscape of the country. The difficulty of Constan's research must have been doubled by the distance that separates us from those early years when the influence of Wilde was beginning to take shape.

Wilde's flamboyant attitude and attire were first noticed not by a Spaniard, but by a Cuban, and not just any poet, but José Martí, one of the fathers of Cuban independence and national hero. Martí wrote a newspaper article about Wilde in January 1882, after attending one of his talks in New York. This is the first of the highly

interesting details about Wilde and Hispanic culture that is revealed in the four chapters of the book. The initial section reviews Wilde's reception in Spain, with frequent references to South American authors, and the fact that Wilde was mentioned by Martí when the young Irish aesthete had published hardly anything is an indication of the curiosity that he provoked in those who were in contact with him, however indirectly, and there could hardly be two more disparate personalities than Martí and Wilde.

Some Spanish writers actually made the acquaintance of the Irishman in their visits to Paris in the early 1890s. Wilde sometimes stayed for long periods in the French capital, and there the arch-bohemian Alejandro Sawa met him, a contact which greatly enhanced the credentials of modernity for the Sevillian writer among his peers on his return to Spain. Other writers who met Wilde were Antonio and Manuel Machado, Pío Baroja and Benito Pérez Galdós, but these were mostly punctual encounters. Wilde, however, was very much in the critical writings of other intellectuals of the day, like Leopoldo Alas "Clarín", or Emilia Pardo Bazán. Decadentism was viewed with suspicion in Spain in the final decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Wilde's tendency to produce extravagant views was normally criticized, although there was little doubt about his enormous talent.

Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, an exponent of Hispanic Modernism, was one of the first writers who defended Wilde against his critics. It was common to assign a perverted, insane mentality to decadent authors, and for many these opinions were confirmed when Wilde fell into disgrace. It was Darío who first wrote an obituary about Wilde in the Spanish language, unashamedly defending his work when almost everyone repudiated him.

In *Wilde en España* Constán presents the evidence of long lost editions of books, forgotten literary journals and innumerable prologues of his works in which Wilde is mentioned and discussed. Only on a few occasions does he venture to imagine what perhaps happened in a particular situation, as in Wilde's funeral with the possible presence of some Spanish writers

(p. 61). The overall tone of the study is of a consistent academic preciseness. His research becomes especially relevant for literary scholarship in his account of Wilde's writings translated into Spanish, the first being, not surprisingly, *Salomé*, in 1902. The scandal that surrounded the author was still an ominous presence in the decade after his death, but this did not prevent the efforts of some intellectuals in the promotion of his work.

Ricardo Baeza must occupy a predominant place among the enthusiastic admirers of Wilde in his capacity as a translator, critic, editor and theatrical entrepreneur. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he would translate all of Wilde's works and his name became permanently associated with the Irish author. As it happened in many other countries, Wilde's talent attracted the attention of the champions of heterodoxy in each national culture, and that role was fully played in Spain by Ramón Gómez de la Serna, who paid Wilde constant attention in his writings (Ramón's brother, Julio, was another early translator of his work).

The second chapter tackles the influence of Wilde on Spanish prose writers. Indeed, many important essayists wrote about him: Rafael Cansinos Assens, Ramiro de Maeztu, Ramón Pérez de Ayala or Eugenio d'Ors, among others. Cansinos Assens was one of the many who used the term "wildiano" despectively about other writers with homosexual tendencies. But Wilde's influence was unstoppable, and Constán convincingly defends the presence of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Miguel de Unamuno's *Abel Sánchez* (1917) and in Azorín's *Doña Inés* (1925). The third chapter focuses on the connections between Wilde's plays and the Spanish theatre of the day. Quite surprisingly, the weight of the Irish dramatist's work on Nobel-Prize winner Jacinto Benavente is not as heavy as has been normally considered. There was no real influence of Wilde on Benavente, Constán claims, despite the personal and literary affinities between both authors. It is more a question of sharing similar stylistic strategies and of belonging to the same cultural environment. The imprint of Wilde's plays on the other

important playwright of the period, Enrique Jardiel Poncela, however, was outstanding.

The book is complemented with a short final chapter on Wilde and the Spanish poets. Although Wilde does not appear among the literary mentors of Juan Ramón Jiménez, one of the greatest Spanish poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Andalusian poet did know the Irish writer's work well, and mentioned him to his students at San Juan University, Puerto Rico, where he taught in the early 1950s. The valuable and complete reference list, at the end of *Wilde en España*, is an appropriate conclusion for an excellent piece of research.

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