

The Harp and the Eagle: Teaching Irish Poetry in Mexico

A harpa e a águia: Ensino de poesia irlandesa no México

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Abstract: *Ireland and Mexico share a long tradition of intercultural relationships. The Latin American nation has received significant influence from the mind-frames and oeuvre of Irish or Irish-descended thinkers, and authors. In the field of literature, the presence of Irish writers in Mexico has been equally relevant. A number of them are constantly referenced in middle- to higher-education institutions as paradigmatic examples of the Anglophone belles lettres. Nevertheless, and with the possible exception of Yeats, limited academic and pedagogic attention has been paid to Irish poetry, almost exclusively in English, until comparatively recent times. As of the mid-2000s, the School of Philosophy and Literature (FFyL) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) has witnessed a surge in academic efforts to promote the verse production of Anglo-Irish poets in the country. With the publication in 2003 of the anthology *Una lengua injertada [A Grafted Tongue]* and, more recently, with the establishment of the Contemporary Anglo-Irish Literature Research Project, FFyL-UNAM have inaugurated a new era for the study of (Anglo-) Irish verse in Mexico and Spanish-speaking America. This article will explore the critical and pedagogical approaches with which FFyL-UNAM have tackled the teaching of (Anglo) Irish poetry over at least one decade.*

Keywords: *Anthology; Spanish-speaking America; Irish Poetry; Literature; Pedagogy.*

Resumo: *A Irlanda e o México partilham uma longa tradição de relações interculturais. A nação latino-americana tem recebido uma influência significativa da estrutura mental da mente e da obra de pensadores e autores irlandeses ou de ascendência irlandesa. No âmbito da literatura, a presença de escritores irlandeses no México tem sido igualmente relevante. Alguns deles são constantemente referenciados em instituições de ensino médio e superior como exemplos paradigmáticos das belles lettres anglófonas. No entanto, e com a possível*

*exceção de Yeats, a atenção acadêmica e pedagógica prestada à poesia irlandesa, quase exclusivamente em inglês, foi limitada até tempos relativamente recentes. A partir de meados da década de 2000, a Faculdade de Filosofia e Letras (FFyL) da Universidade Nacional Autónoma do México (UNAM) assistiu a um aumento dos esforços acadêmicos para promover a produção de versos de poetas anglo-irlandeses no país. Com a publicação, em 2003, da antologia *Una lengua injertada [Uma língua enxertada]* e, mais recentemente, com a criação do Projeto de Investigação de Literatura Anglo-Irlandesa Contemporânea, a FFyL-UNAM inaugurou uma nova era para o estudo do verso (anglo-) irlandês no México e na América de língua espanhola. Este artigo explorará as abordagens críticas e pedagógicas com que a FFyL-UNAM tem abordado o ensino da poesia (anglo)irlandesa durante pelo menos uma década.*

Palavras-chave: *Antologia; América de língua espanhola; Poesia irlandesa; Literatura; Pedagogia.*

Ireland in Mexico?

Mexico, as it turns out, was once about to have an Irish king. At least that is what the Mexican author, military leader, and politician Vicente Riva Palacio (1832–96) would have his readers imagine from his lengthy 1872 novel *Memorias de un impostor. D. Guillen de Lampart, rey de México* (*Memoirs of an Impostor. Mr Guillén de Lampart, King of Mexico*). In a little over 500 pages, Riva Palacio fictionalizes the existence of a certain Guillén De Lampart, an individual who, to this day, remains the object of much biographical and political debate among those who are even aware of his life and deeds in the North American territories of the Spanish Empire during the seventeenth century. In the “Author’s Preface” to his historical novel, Riva Palacio claims that “many years before the priest Hidalgo had proclaimed the Independence of Mexico, a man, of Irish nationality, had intended to become King of Anahuac, thus freeing Mexico from Spanish domination; but the conspiracy had been discovered, and the Irishman was executed by the law” (v).¹ That “Irishman” is none other than De Lampart, the Hispanicized name of William Lamport (1611–59), a very adventurous and highly educated native of Wexford (*Loch Garman*) who became a pirate in Spain and ended up in Mexico as part of the entourage of the incoming Viceroy of New Spain, the Marquis of Villena, in the early days of 1640. By means of his fictional

narrative, Riva Palacio romanticizes Lamport (incidentally, also a poet) as a fiercely heroic independentist and polymath who merges the stories of two nations inextricably united by a complex historical past and the yearning for independence from two great colonial powers: England and the Spanish Empire.² The fact is that historically – and Riva Palacio never loses sight of this in his long narrative endeavor – Lamport represents the first link in a long chain of Irish personalities who have exerted a considerable degree of influence upon Mexican art, history, and politics for a little more than 400 years.³

Needless to say, De Lampart/Lamport never ascended the throne of the Hispano-American nation. What he did do, as both a historical and literary figure – at least in the minds of several members of the Mexican intelligentsia ever since the nineteenth century –, was to place Ireland in a segment of Mexico's imagination as a sibling nation whose achievements and struggles over the course of history appear, more often than not, in the cultural and literary panoramas of the country. It can be stated, rather safely, that Ireland and Mexico share a long-standing tradition of intercultural relationships. From the figure of Lamport and the political influence of New Spain's Viceroy Juan de O'Donojú (or actually *O'Donoghue*) y O'Ryan (1762–1821) to the artistic and literary legacies of brothers Edmundo and Juan O'Gorman (1906–95/1905–82) and public intellectual Guillermo Sheridan (1950), the Latin American nation has received significant influence from the mind-frames and oeuvre of Irish or Irish-descended statesmen, thinkers, and writers. In the field of literature, the presence of Irish authors in Mexico has been equally relevant – the works of James Joyce, Jonathan Swift, and Oscar Wilde, to name but only three of the most celebrated, are constantly referenced in middle- to higher-education institutions as paradigmatic examples of the Anglophone *belles lettres*. Nevertheless, and with the possible exception of W. B. Yeats, limited academic and pedagogic attention has been paid specifically to Irish poetry, and exclusively in English, until comparatively recent times. In this chapter, I will refer to the experience and the implications of the dissemination and teaching of Irish poetry in the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras (School of Philosophy and Literature) of Mexico's National University, or UNAM, where the study of Anglophone and Anglo-Irish literature and poetry spans over nine decades of increasingly robust academic research and didactic activities.⁴

Irish Literature and Poetry, and their Presence in Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture: A Quick Overlook

Ever since the early decades of the twentieth century, some of the most influential poets of Mexico have traced the character of Irish poetry, originally written in English, in their own craft as verse writers and as poetical-theatrical translators. A few examples, perhaps some of the most obvious ones, will suffice to begin exploring these artistic interrelationships. In 1932, the opening season of Mexico City's seminal *Teatro de Orientación* (Theatre of Orientation), began with the staging of John Millington Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding*, or *La boda del calderero*, as the influential Mexican poet, playwright, and public intellectual Salvador Novo (1904-74) translated it. Novo would go on to translate and stage Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1955 for the opening of the *Teatro la Capilla* (Chapel Theater), in Mexico City's borough of Coyoacán. Translations and stagings of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* and George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* would ensue in 1958 and 1961, respectively. This is, of course, dramatic rather than lyrical poetry, but poetry, nonetheless.

In turn, a seminal anthology of classic Mexican poetry, commissioned by UNESCO and compiled by Nobel-prize winner Octavio Paz, was translated into English by none other than Samuel Beckett, just out of Trinity College, in 1950. Even though Beckett considered it "his worst literary experience," nineteen out of the 103 poems that he had translated were included in the 2014 edition of *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*. The pieces were long considered to be "the single most neglected work in the Beckett canon" (Carrera, p. 159). Beckett's lyric poetry would be translated, in Mexico, only as late as 2004, when the accomplished Mexican filmmaker and author Pablo Sigg turned his attention to Beckettian verse rather than to the drama, as had most often been the case in the previous century. Curiously enough, in his *Antología Poética* (Poetical Anthology) – published by the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) – Sigg only presents, rather than translates, Beckett's virtually unintelligible "Whoroscope," a long poem that, according to Sigg himself, "stubbornly resists being translated into another language" (9).

As the previous instances indicate, and for quite a long time now, Spanish-language renderings of dramatic works and, even more significantly, anthologies of lyric poetry have proved to be key for the dissemination and teaching in Mexico of the literature originating in the Anglo-Irish tradition, particularly the most "canonical" of its poets. However, and apart from the usual suspects – i.e. Beckett, Shaw, Wilde, Yeats –, it was not until 2003 that other

virtually unexplored Irish poets started being mapped in the Mexican academic and literary scene by means of the art of translation. That year, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) published *Una lengua injertada*, or *A Grafted Tongue*, a title which editor Eva Cruz Yáñez borrowed from the famous poem by John Montague. This is an unprecedented bilingual anthology conceived by the Seminar of Literary Translation at the National University's School of Philosophy and Literature. Co-ordinated by the late José Juan Dávila, the collection includes pieces by thirty-six Irish poets, from Patrick Kavanagh and Louis MacNeice to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Moya Cannon. The pieces were carefully and skilfully versioned by a group of eminent authors, scholars, and translators, among whom can be named the poet Mónica Mansour, the narrator Federico Patán, and the renowned literary academic Flora Botton. In his brief "Prologue" to *The Grafted Tongue*, professor José Juan Dávila Sota, a specialist in British poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, states the following:

The struggle for the land [in Ireland] turned the land itself, as well as the landscape, into important topics – the rural landscape and even the urban one are present in much of the poetry of the twentieth century. Similarly, tropes retrieved from the distant past by several authors of the 19th century have mutated into the nostalgia and sadness expressed in an iconography that, in some cases, is still current. ... But most of all, the problems of identity, the atrocious consequences of war, and an intense imagination are fertile territories where poetry blossoms in everyday experience and delights us with its intensity. It is thus that contemporary Irish poetry has become one of the most vital and arresting experiences of our time.⁵ (14)

Some of the key terms in this reflection are "landscape," "iconography," "identity," and "territory." These conceptions form part of one of the most significant leitmotifs of recent Irish verse: a poetical notion of being-in-the-world. Dávila Sota's choice of words is undoubtedly grounded upon the representational possibilities inherent in the poetry of a number of modern and contemporary Irish and Mexican poets. Such realizations articulate a chart of the imagination that, in turn, expresses itself in terms of cartographic imagery. The poets locate themselves, their assumed identities indeed their Irelands and their Mexicos – in the measures of their lines. They present their poems as verbal and imagistic maps where being and world coexist, find, define, and point to each other: "I want to go back to it – // my nation displaced / into old dactyls," says Eavan Boland's poetic voice in "Mise Éire," translated by Eva Cruz for

Una lengua injertada (248–49).⁶ This sense of poetic representation of, and identification with, the (mother)land has traditionally constituted the thematic starting point of most pedagogic and translational efforts relating to Irish verse in Mexico.

With this in mind, it is impossible not to suspect that *Una lengua injertada* is, in the specific territory of Irish poetry, a correction and an improvement on a previous anthology by the same group of translators: *De Hardy a Heaney. Poesía inglesa del siglo XX* (From Hardy to Heaney. English Poetry of the 20th Century), also edited by Cruz Yáñez.⁷ As can be noted from the title, the volume still retains a tendency to include “canonical Anglo-Irish poetry” in the broad category of “poetry produced in the British Isles,” or even more misleadingly, under the label of “English poetry.” The anthology includes Yeats, Louis MacNeice, and Seamus Heaney – here worthy representatives of “English” verse –, and intends to “fill a gap in the understanding of this important poetical tradition, which, unlike US-American literature, has not been properly disseminated in our country” (“Presentation”).⁸ The comment may be a generalizing one but, if we consider that, in Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries, the British, Irish, and US-American literary traditions are more often than not conflated under the umbrella term “literature in English,” it comes as no surprise that the editors should make such an explanation, even if it implies that fusion of British and Irish verse for the purpose of localized circulation. The editors and translators of the volume, being also literary scholars and professors of Anglophone literature at Mexico’s National University, did know better than to leave the matter at that, and the later launch of *Una lengua injertada* was definitive proof of their awareness in this regard. The much-needed correction, no doubt, owed a great deal to a gradual-yet-stalwart change of critical perspective towards Irish poetry, as the “EngLit” syllabi of undergraduate courses in the UNAM’s School of Philosophy and Literature continue to evolve in terms of their theoretical approaches to the culture and letters of Ireland.⁹ In order to arrive at this stage of Irish studies, however, Mexico’s National University has had to go a long, winding pedagogical path.

Irish Poetry among Mexican Undergrads

Ever since a limited series of undergraduate courses on English and Anglo-American Literature were first offered at the *Escuela Nacional de Altos Estudios* (National School of Superior Studies) in 1913, the reading and teaching of Irish authors like Laurence Sterne and Jonathan

Swift became a pedagogical commonplace in the Humanities Department of Mexico's National University.¹⁰ It was until 1975, however, when the complete syllabus for the *Letras Inglesas* (English Literature) courses in the *Colegio de Letras Modernas* (Faculty of Modern Literature) was approved, that Irish poetry appeared as a separate category on the students' lists of readings. While the study of authors like Beckett, Joyce, Shaw, Sterne, Swift, or Wilde was limited to either their prose or their drama, poets like MacNeice, but above all Yeats, received heightened analytical and pedagogical attention in the twentieth-century *Historia Literaria* (Literary History) courses of the *Departamento de Letras Inglesas* (Department of English Literature). Even though English-literature students could resort to different printed materials to conduct their readings in English, the faculty's text of choice was *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, where both MacNeice and Yeats are still listed under the heading "Modern British Literature" in volume II (xxvi). The approach to these poets' pieces was essentially based on historicist close readings of famous poems like "Bagpipe Music," by MacNeice, or "Easter 1916" and "The Second Coming," by Yeats, with special emphasis on the latter poet's affinities with English Modernism, as well as on his achievements and influence within the *British* literary tradition.

It was only by 2010, and with the increasing influence on literary studies from currents of thought and criticism like Cultural Studies, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, and Poststructuralism, that the syllabus was modified in such a way that the "Literary Histories" of the past would give way to language-based classifications of inter-cultural literary phenomena. Thus, in the subjects corresponding to "Literature in English," Anglo-Irish literature – and especially poetry – became the focus of renewed enquiry and research. With the publication of translated anthologies like the ones edited by professor Cruz Yáñez, the study of (mostly modern and contemporary) Anglophone Irish poetry expanded its scope to include women poets as well as poets of the Irish diaspora and of Irish descent. Furthermore, the use of updated textual sources, like the *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, has allowed the faculty of UNAM's Department of English Literature to diversify the didactic possibilities of literary analysis and intercultural translation in the teaching of Irish verse. Given that some of the most prominent translators of Irish poetry in Mexico are also members of the University's faculty, the nuances of allusion, cultural reference, phrasing, and prosody in the work of poets such as Eavan Boland, Moya Cannon, Ciaran Carson, Alice Fulton, Seamus Heaney, and

Paul Muldoon, among many others, are turning into cultural and poetic reference points for students at UNAM's School of Philosophy and Literature.

With a view to “training professionals who are capable of excelling in interpreting and comprehending the reality of the globalized world we are living in from a cultural and literary viewpoint” (*Facultad de Filosofía y Letras*), the general syllabuses of the undergraduate courses in *Letras Inglesas* at UNAM were re-revised and updated in 2020.¹¹ One of the most noticeable results of the adjustments was an increased emphasis on the presentation, analysis, and (re) contextualization of (Anglophone) Irish literature, and especially of Ireland's vibrant poetical tradition, in the milieu of world literature and intercultural exchange. A clear example of this is the academic and professional background required now of any professor teaching a subject like “Literatura en Lengua Inglesa VI,” or “English-Language Literature VI.” According to the *Proyecto de Modificación del Plan de Estudios de la Licenciatura en Lengua y Literaturas Modernas* (Project for the Modification of the Syllabi of Undergraduate Courses in Modern Language and Literatures), professors must specialize in “literature from the United Kingdom and Ireland” (480, my italics). Similarly, by the end of the course students are to “formulate critical opinions on artistic currents pertaining to diverse literary genres in Anglophone literature, particularly from the United Kingdom and Ireland, in the twentieth century” (477).¹² The current emphasis on Ireland and its literary tradition as being independent from – yet still culturally and historically linked to – that of the UK was conspicuously absent in syllabi from previous stages in the development of similar programs for undergraduate studies. In the context of Mexico's higher education system, these stances can be deemed academic responses to the fact that “Irish poetry [and indeed Irish writing] is *in* and of the world” and has become “an important influence in shaping other poetries far beyond the island's borders,” as critic Omaar Hena has rightly put it (339).

Coda. Irish Poetry in Mexico—Present and Future

The year 2021 witnessed the creation of UNAM's *Cátedra Extraordinaria Eavan Boland – Anne Enright de Estudios Irlandeses* (The Eavan Boland – Anne Enright Chair of Irish Studies). As can be perceived from its title, the *Cátedra* intends to foster the exploration, analysis, and promotion in Mexico, and the rest of Spanish-speaking America, of Ireland's cultural expressions, and especially of its literature and poetry. With support from the government

of the Republic of Ireland, the *Cátedra* has already produced *La hoja verde de la lengua. Poesía angloirlandesa contemporánea* (*The Green Leaf of Language. Contemporary Anglo-Irish Poetry*), a collection of essays featuring critical and poetical pieces by authors, poets, and scholars from Canada, Ireland, the UK, Mexico, and Spain. Basically intended for, but not restricted to, undergraduate and postgraduate students of the public university system, the volume is the first of its kind in the context of Hispano-American and Mexican literary studies and “offers, from varied critical and theoretical viewpoints, approaches to the work of Irish poets writing in English and pertaining to a contemporariness that began in the promising post-WW2 years” (Murgia 11).

Clearly, much remains to be done in Mexico and its National University with regard to the reading and studying of Irish poetry. The centuries-old tradition of Ireland’s verse requires further exploration, not only in Mexico, but in the rest of the Spanish-speaking world. Poets writing in the vernacular language of the Irish still need to be recognized, in the Hispanosphere, for their contributions, not only to the culture of Ireland, but also to Western and World literature. They ought to be translated, more frequently, to the variant(s) of Spanish used in Mexico, the country with the largest number of Hispanophone inhabitants in the world. But in spite of these and other shortcomings, the teaching of Irish poetry within the context of Mexico’s higher education has begun to bear academic and, hopefully, literary fruit, with Irish authors and verse makers steadily turning into household names, even if, for the time being, only in intellectual and scholarly circles. But the (poetical) art of the Irish harp has surely attracted the attention of the Mexican eagle. William Lamport, for one, would not be disappointed.

Notes

- ¹ Original Spanish: “... muchos años antes de que el cura Hidalgo hubiera proclamado la independencia de México, un hombre, de nacion irlandés, habia pretendido alzarse como rey de Anáhuac, libertando á México de la dominacion española; pero la conspiracion habia sido descubierta, y el irlandés habia muerto á manos de la justicia.” All English translations are mine unless otherwise noted. The original orthography is preserved. Riva Palacio refers here to the Catholic priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1753–1811), one of the leaders of the Mexican War of Independence, which raged from 1810 to 1821). “Anáhuac” is the Hispanicized *Nabuatl*, or Aztec, name to refer to the Basin of Mexico.
- ² It has been claimed that Lamport’s life in the Americas is at least a semi-factual inspiration for the famous character “El Zorro,” created by American author Johnston McCulley. See, for example, Gerard Ronan’s *The Irish Zorro: The Extraordinary Adventures of William Lamport* (1615–1659).
- ³ Unbeknownst to many, a great deal has been written on the presence of Ireland and the Irish in Spain

and the Spanish-speaking Americas. See Edmundo Murray's "The Irish in Latin America and Iberia: An Annotated Bibliography," which includes a sizeable section on Mexico and Hispanic North-America.

⁴ Founded in 1910 in its modern form, the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (or National Autonomous University of Mexico) is the largest and most prestigious higher-education institution in the country. UNAM is a public research university.

⁵ Original Spanish: "*La lucha por la tierra hizo que la tierra y el paisaje se volvieran importantes y el paisaje del campo o incluso urbano aparece en gran parte de la poesía del siglo XX. De la misma manera, los motivos rescatados del pasado lejano por algunos escritores del siglo XIX se convierten en nostalgia y tristeza expresada en una iconografía que, en algunos casos, aún está vigente. [...] Pero sobre todo los problemas de identidad, las atroces consecuencias de la guerra y la intensa imaginación son territorios propicios para que la poesía viva en lo cotidiano y nos deleite con su intensidad. De esta manera, la poesía irlandesa contemporánea se ha vuelto una de las experiencias más vitales e interesantes de nuestros días.*"

⁶ Cruz's close translation of the lines avers: "No volveré a todo eso: // mi nación desplazada / en dácilos antiguos."

⁷ Even though this volume is also dated 2003, in a conversation with the author of the present chapter, editor Cruz Yáñez stated that the translational work on the poems included there pre-dates the translation of the pieces in *Una lengua injertada*.

⁸ Original Spanish: "... cubre un hueco en el conocimiento de esta importante tradición poética que, a diferencia de la literatura norteamericana, no ha sido muy difundida en nuestro país." Incidentally, while Heaney and MacNeice were later re-included in *Una lengua injertada*, Yeats was not.

⁹ It should be noted that UNAM is, to this day, the only university in Mexico that offers full undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Anglophone literature.

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¹¹ Original Spanish: "... formar profesionales capaces de interpretar y comprender, de manera sobresaliente, la realidad del mundo globalizado en el que vivimos desde el punto de vista de la cultura y la literatura."

¹² Original Spanish: "... formular opiniones críticas sobre tendencias artísticas, pertenecientes a diversos géneros literarios, de la literatura en lengua inglesa, especialmente del Reino Unido e Irlanda, del periodo correspondiente al siglo XX."

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