

"DON'T CRY FOR ME IRELAND – IRISH WOMEN'S VOICES FROM ARGENTINA"¹

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Abstract:

In the South American diaspora space, language and culture are the constituent elements of the process of defamiliarization. Critical issues of gender and a politics of nostalgia are interrelated with the identity politics generated by the tension of *being/becoming* and *belonging*. Avtar Brah affirms that the concept of diaspora "places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension". Moreover, if this problematic is integral to the diasporic condition (Brah 1996. 192-193) I will demonstrate that nineteenth-century Irish women migration to Argentina provides paradoxical writings that disclose the swinging movement of the pendulum between opacity, complexity and equivocal positions in the formation of a diasporic identity. Thus, three different kinds of narratives by Irish women immigrants will be analysed in a comparative way: Marion Mulhall's travel writing *Between the Amazon and Andes* (1881), the memories of Barbara Peart in *Tia Barbarita* (1932), and an autobiographical novel by Kathleen Nevin, *You'll never go back* (1946). Following some theoretical issues raised by Breda Gray in *Women and the Irish Diaspora* (2004) and by Eric Landowski in *Presenças do Outro* (2002) I will deconstruct the rhetoric of the quotidian to highlight discursive elements that would prove

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 59	p. 133-146	jul./dez. 2010
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how and why these women achieved the paradoxical status of “controlled independence” (Gray 2004) or were positioned as either “other” or “going native”.

Keywords: Irish women diaspora, nineteenth-century women diasporic writings, memoirs.

In his introduction to *Irish Women and Irish Migration*, Patrick O’Sullivan (1995) states that women in history have traditionally been identified with those at rest but never with working-class women or with those playing an active role in society. They are generally portrayed as Madonnas or Magdalens, spouses, abandoned women, prostitutes or witches, always revealing a world defined by men. Recent studies have subverted these reductive categorizations, and women’s migration, particularly here in this essay Irish women’s migration, is now understood to be a metaphor of change. But what kind of change is it?

For example, if numbers are considered, Ide O’Carroll (1990) has proved that, in the period from 1881 to 1900, the migration of women to the United States surpassed that of men.² Moreover, In *Outsiders Inside* (2001), Bronwen Walter gives the information that in the nineteenth century four million women emigrated from Ireland to the United States, and their descendents are therefore part of the forty million people who claim Irish ascendancy. Setting these numbers in context, the historian Kerby Miller states that one of the motives for women’s emigration was that they wished to recover Irish Victorian status in America through respectable marriages, or jobs in factories or as domestic servants. Such roles could give them independence from a patriarchal family policy and enable them to send economic help back to their families in Ireland.

Katherine Tynan’s short story “Molly’s Migration”, published on July 1, 1904, and Alice Milligan’s article “The Emigration Question and Employment for Women”, published on August 28, 1903 in *The Southern Cross* (the latter in the section of the Gaelic League), confirm Kerby Miller’s thesis. In the former story, Molly decides to emigrate to America because her boyfriend is going to get married to another woman, and, according to her mother, he is “selling himself for that

woman's money". Molly consoles her with the promise that she would be able to send her money to leave Ireland and be reunited with her abroad, a typical cliché of the period:

"Sure, I'll be sending for you fine and soon"

"I'm misdoubtin'. I'd be too old to change. 'Tis yourself will be coming back to me."

"I'll never come back", said the girl passionately. (*TSC* 1 July, 1904: 20)

A similar assertion would later be the theme of Kathleen Nevin's novel *You'll never come back* (1946). However, as she is about to take ship, Molly, like the protagonist in Joyce's "Eveline", gives up the idea of leaving Ireland and returns home, promising her mother in a melodramatic scene that she will stay with her for ever.

If people in Ireland were struggling for a certain position in society at the turn of the century, it follows that they emigrated when "they failed to earn what will keep them in that station of life which will satisfy their ambition and that of their families". This is illustrated in Milligan's article:

Across the Atlantic they may not succeed in being placed as teacher and clerk; but they can turn, without disgracing their families, to domestic service and return after a few years of good pay and hard honest work to pay a visit to Ireland displaying purses full of money and trunks full of fine clothes to dazzle the eyes of their girl friends and lure them away from Ireland. (*TSC* 28 August, 1903: 2)

Milligan concludes with the strong complaint that, if it is found that Irish-speaking girls of refined manners and fair education "absolutely revolt from being called nurses or nursemaids and prefer emigration, let the Gaelic Leaguers invent some high sounding Irish titles that will be more attractive," rather than see them leaving the

country. Texts like Tynan's story, published in *The Irish Homestead* between 1900 and 1904, were contested by Katherine Mullin in her essay, "Don't cry for me Argentina: 'Eveline' and the seductions of emigration propaganda" (2000). I must add too that the didactic nationalist emigration discourse that "emigration was not a road to self-fulfilment, adventure or even Eveline Hill's 'escape'" was also contested by subversive intertexts written mainly by Irish women in South America.

There has been a recent increase in research into the diaspora of Irish women. However, as far as I know, there have been no literary studies concerned with the emigration of women to South America in the field of Irish Studies. This paper therefore marks a beginning, an attempt to draw a map of the various forms of literary representation produced by Irish immigrant women in Latin America. I will focus on the Argentinean diaspora space at the turn of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century. Letters, travel narratives, sketches and memoirs were the main forms used by women migrants to portray the effects of the new geographical, historical and political landscape on their psyche and on the social roles they performed in a non-English speaking country. The question that immediately arises is this: do these women retain strong links with their place of origin or do they dispel the myth of return of the diasporic subject, thus creating a new imaginative space, a new culture of survival?

Three different kinds of narrative produced by Irish women writers living in Argentina together construct a new understanding of women's migration as a metaphor of change at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century: Marion Mulhall's travel writing *Between the Amazon and Andes* (1881), the memories of Barbara Peart in *Tía Barbarita* (1932), and an autobiographical novel by Kathleen Nevin, *You'll never go back* (1946). Though they represent different diasporic experiences in the host country, all three writers come from the same historical and social context and place the old discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' – of the familiar and the unknown – in creative tension. If this tension is integral to the diasporic condition (Brah 1996. 192-193) these three diasporic narratives controversially

disclose the female adventurer, setting loneliness against willing challenges in the new land, and poverty against prosperity, thus creating specific strategies of a culture of survival in which nostalgia and the myth of return no longer play the main role. A culture of survival (Bhabha 1995) is transnational because it is tightly linked to the geographical movements of people and to the various economic and political transactions operating between the country of origin and the host country. In 1884, the newspaper of the diasporic community *The Southern Cross* expressed its aim in its headline motto, "Organ of Irish and Catholic interests in the River Plate". In these transactions, the Irish immigrants come into contact with the native and other ethnic cultures and are in a continuous process of translation in order to retain their cultural heritage and survive as a minority in the new land.

It is not my intention to analyse these texts in their entirety, I shall therefore limit myself to stressing just three different perspectives that I believe are useful in the study of women's diasporic narratives:

The first perspective is that multiple *effects of meanings* (Landowski 2002) are generated by immanent elements present in the grammar of the text. The enunciating subjects produce their narratives constructing the outside world in its *significance*. In 1881, Marion Mulhall, wife of Michael Mulhall who founded the Irish-Argentine newspaper *The Standard*, wrote diaries of their journeys in the countries between the Amazon and the Andes, which were published in the form of letters in their newspaper. Thus she registered their impressions of the places they visited and the economic progress of the country. In the preface, she describes herself as the first 'English' woman³ to "penetrate the heart of South America",

. . . travelling for thousands of miles through untrodden forests, seeing the Indian tribes in their own hunting-grounds, visiting the ruined shrines of the Jesuit Missions, and ultimately reaching that point whence I beheld the waters flowing down in opposite directions to the Amazon and the La Plata.

This kind of narrative follows the discourse of nineteenth-century male novels and represents the courageous woman facing the wilderness of the unknown country. She recognises that her narratives have no literary merit as they are simply “sketches of her travels and adventures in the countries between the Amazon and the Andes,” written in the hope that they may attract the attention of more learned travellers to a quarter of the world that “so well repays the trouble of exploring”. Thus, the pastoral landscapes of Rio Grande do Sul and of Rio de Janeiro are contrasted with the exotic land of Mato Grosso, which is full of adventure. Her descriptions emphasise the natural beauty of the landscape and, despite the difficulties of the trip – for the greater part of the voyage is through swamps and forest, destitute of human habitation – , “the interest of exploring this terra incognita would not allow (her) to think of turning back”. (192)

The meeting with the Indians reminds the reader of the paintings by João Maurício Rugendas, who always depicted such meetings as pacific, free from any friction provoked by contact with wild nature itself, or with the unknown, let alone that resulting from the cultural differences between Europeans and local natives. Marion Mulhall has a mythical ahistorical vision of a country where there is no conflict. The imperial, anthropological present tense of her writing erases all tension resulting from the asymmetries of power in the encounter of cultures. She describes the natives, their customs and habits and her pseudo-interactive relationship with them, creating an image of a pure uncorrupted state of Nature. Writing in the third person plural, the unique truth of what is narrated emerges from immanent elements of the text through an imperial, anthropological point of view. The “other” carries the prejudice of the white man:

This tribe is very numerous, fearfully addicted to drunkenness, and beyond hope of civilisation. At several places we passed deserted huts, the inhabitants of which were killed by these savages. (198)

The second perspective assumes that narratives give expression to the external world or the *real state of the things*, as facts, giving them an explicative power. The immanent principles are thus counterbalanced by the 'realist' methodology that interrelates discourses with contextual *situations of communication*, which determine the content of the discursive manifestations as well as the forms of expression (Landowski 2002). In the autobiographical novel, *Tía Barbarita. The Memories of Barbara Peart*, a new home is being constructed, conveying the euphoria of an Irish woman who has attained freedom or emancipation.

The memoirs of *Tía Barbarita* are divided into four parts, beginning with childhood in Ireland and a reluctant bride who understands that marriage is the only way to "escape" from Irish patriarchalism. She asserts her selfness and independence at an early age in Ireland by having many boyfriends and conceiving of her future marriage thus: "Horse-riding she had bargained for when she married and came out to the Argentine, but not for love". Three months after her wedding she moves with her husband and his two brothers to his Campo Florida in Argentina and she describes their financial rise and fall due to economic conditions in the country and to her husband's bad administration. After many vicissitudes (giving birth to her children alone, suffering a miscarriage and unknown diseases, being assaulted by bandits, etc.), she decides to go back 'homeland' with her three boys to put them into school and in order to explain to her husband's family the full details of the loss of the ranch. However, they emigrate once again, firstly to Texas, then to Mexico City and finally to Monterey. What is curious in this narrative is that it is written in the third person since the writer asserts in her Foreword that she had found she could be "much more revealing under the faint disguise of the third personal pronoun". She was around eighty years old and "the year of her birth may therefore be put at 1855." (16)

The protagonist's doubly distant imperial eye using the third person singular deludes the reader with a narrative that represents social realism through details of an experience of life that attempts to

depict a fictional integration with the new society through the incorporation of native words. However the narrative in the past tense echoes the imperial present, erasing the historical past of the natives. Only the present stands for an organized society, while the future is seen as progress despite the family's failure with the loss of the ranch.

However, a combination of both perspectives in a single narrative – on the one hand analysing immanent elements and on the other explaining the 'real' state of things – occurs in Kathleen Nevin's autobiographical novel *You'll never Come Back*, in which the reader discovers both what was not said and what was said.

In her preface, Kathleen Nevin says, "Between one story and another I have wondered what my life might have been like if I had stayed at home and never heard of such a place as South America." Though it seems at first to be a celebratory discourse subject to destiny ("Was it laid out for me before I was born?"), it turns out to be simply factual ("or did everything spring from that talk with Maria Brady?"). A land of wonder and positive expectations turns out to be merely a nightmare: "She [Maria Brady] gave us an astonishing account of Buenos Aires, a place we had never heard of and never expected to see. (And God forgive Maria, when we did see it, it wasn't at all what she had led us to expect)." (10). The last parenthetical statement reverses the utopian dream of "making America".

The same financial expectations as those held by male emigrants are significant for women, and contemporary narratives confirm that women took jobs they wouldn't have taken in their own homeland:

She had been governess to a wealthy South American family, and, though she never expressly said so, everybody in Granard believed that she had made quite a fortune. (10)

This quotation remits us to the preamble to this paper, in which causes of change are related to class and economic status. It also explains the title *You'll never go back*. The narrative is in the first person and it struggles for genuine autonomy as if it were an ethnographic study of

the host society or culture. Personal and national identities are intertwined. The narrator is a first person representative not only of the private sphere but also of the public correlation with the identity formation of a community. Transformation occurs: from a marginal position the narrator becomes a community representative.

Moreover, homesickness arises together with prejudice towards the natives and their language: "Life in this country has many snares and pitfalls; and the native, my dear, is not to be trusted. My first and last word to you must ever be: Beware of the native!" (23) "The people around me were strangers, shouting and laughing at each other. The people outside the window bars, going up and down the streets of this mad town, were singing and yelling in a language I did not know." (49) If language is a potential cause of exclusion and distrust, how does the process of inclusion of the Irish diasporic subject operate in the new society?

Tensions between immigrants, natives and other ethnic groups are a constant during the establishment of the new home. These tensions become evident when the words "home" and "locality" are signified by different, contrapuntal contexts. According to the South Asian critic Avtar Brah (1996), "home" has the implied connotation of political and personal struggles with the social mechanisms involved in "belonging" to a place (as may be seen in the texts mentioned above), while "locality" represents the processes of inclusion and exclusion that occur in certain circumstances in specific geographical spaces, as Kathleen Nevin concludes in *You'll Never Go Back*:

And the country accepted us and was generous to us; and we gave it our children; and here I am, an old woman telling myself stories to while away the time until my bones are taken to be laid beside John's, and the Past and the Present are one. (226)

In the historiography of the Irish-Argentine community, the struggle between political and social forces in relation to locality is also represented by Camila O'Gorman's love affair with the priest Uladislaio

Gutiérrez. Camila's grandparents arrived in Buenos Aires in 1797, and her father's uncle was the first doctor in the city, who founded the proto-medical school. Camila belonged to a respected aristocratic family, but her behaviour defied the moral and social values of the Victorian period, whereby women were expected to remain at home within the bounds of a respectable marriage. In addition, her lover, a native priest from Tucumán, broke the holy law of the Church. Consequently, despite Camila's high social status and pregnancy, the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas sentenced them both to death. Following their execution, in Santos Lugares prison in August 1848, narratives of various types (historical, fictional and cinematic) have approached this tragic affair as a means of representing a personal struggle against the religious, social, moral and political forces present in a locality in specific historical circumstances.

In the diaspora, the writing of letters, autobiographies and memoirs is a personal strategy aimed at maintaining a close connection with the land of origin and evaluating the experience of life in the adopted land. The text becomes a space of intersubjective encounter, of a reciprocal "presentification" (*mise en présence*) (Landowski 167). The author becomes present in the absence of the Other and, for the reader, the process is reversed. The act of writing down one's feelings, impressions and experiences in an unknown place far away from home, makes distances diminish metaphorically, although, paradoxically, they are also enlarged when the past is seen with nostalgia. The centripetal force of the immigrants' desire of belonging congregates them into communities that struggle to reproduce the structure of their country of origin in the host land despite the disillusion that may have led them to emigrate in the first place. Using Paul Gilroy's terminology, the politics of realisation of the Irish diasporic community, represented by the utopian desire of finding a land of freedom offering opportunities that had been denied at home (like the possession of land and cattle), becomes a politics of transfiguration, in which it is sought to transform the new geographical space into what the historian Oliver Marshall refers to as "a New Ireland" in South America⁴ (Marshall 2005. 44-61).⁵

The three women's narratives discussed above represent diverse experiences of life. Marion Mulhall is the inquisitive traveller, adventurer and ethnographer who explores new fields and sees them with a descriptive, imperial eye, with no intention of modifying the physical or human landscape. Although she is in transit there is the desire of being admitted and of communicating the richness of her experience through her narrative in order to attract more travellers. Barbara Peart's memories register the vicissitudes of a diasporic woman whose relationship with the host land has been to take possession of it as if she were a conquistador. The space that initially represents freedom and emancipation later becomes inhospitable and a threat to her family. Kathleen Nevin's autobiography is the narrative of a settler seeking to register the *presence* of things, feelings, places. Country and city are linked and they are represented as being constitutive of the diasporic community. The narrator's intuitive perception reveals the process of assimilation and the acknowledgement of identity through her record of the immigrant's interaction with the natives and other ethnic groups.

Thus, these narratives of the private lives of three women who settled in a non-English speaking country may be seen as metaphors of change within local struggles of inclusion. Their attitudes in the new diasporic space, whether in the country or in the city, are representative of a culture of survival that is linked with Ireland in an emancipating way. The voices of these Irishwomen in Argentina were not crying for Ireland. They achieved the paradoxical status of a "controlled independence" (Gray 2004), positioning themselves either as "other" or as "going native".

Notes

1. A short version of this essay was first presented at the IASIL International Conference in 2007, in the round-table entitled "States of Change: Narratives of Place, Migration and Memory" organised by Dr. Tina O'Toole (University of Limerick). I thank Peter James Harris for the revision of this text.

2. See also Maureen Murphy (2005) who confirms in her introduction to Annie O'Donnell's letters that, in 1898, Irish women's emigration surpassed men's emigration by 20%.
3. The Mulhalls were Unionists, that is, defenders of Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, in opposition to the Irish nationalist movement.
4. Oliver Marshall takes the term from the title of a lengthy unsigned article in *Universal News* (15 February 1868) that announces the departure of the first 300 of an envisaged 6,000 to 8,000 Irish people, who would soon be leaving for Brazil, the "new country to be Irishised".
5. A web of "New Irelands" began to be constructed through linked migrations, or diasporic diaspora, such as those Irish Americans who migrated to Brazil and Argentina (fictionally recreated by the Irish-Argentine writer Juan José Delaney in a number of short stories and in his novel *Moirá Sullivan* [1999], which was written in the form of a memoir); or the Irish in Brazil who emigrated to Argentina (as in the story written by Jorge Luis Borges, "La Forma de la Espada"); or the Irish in Argentina who emigrated to Australia (as exemplified in the letters of Sally Moore, Fanny Murphy and Kate Murphy to their cousin John James Pettit [1864-1975]). These letters were published by Edmundo Murray in 2004 in *Devenir Irlandés*, republished in English in 2006 *Becoming Irlandés*. See also my own articles in the bibliography.

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