

Between Tradition and Renewal: The Representation of Identity in the Contemporary Irish Short Story

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Abstract: *This paper introduces a doctoral research study on the representation of Irish identity in the contemporary short story from writers such as Kevin Barry, Gerard Donovan, Colin Barrett, Claire Keegan and William Trevor. In the study, which is currently in progress, the goal is to identify how the political, economic and social transformations through which Ireland went in the recent years helped shaping the national identity – or identities – that make up the country, historically known for a well-established image of Irishness that was, in some way, dictated by art.*

Keywords: *Contemporary short story; national identity; Irishness.*

Ireland is undoubtedly celebrated as the birthplace of great exponents of the World's literature, such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, to name just a few of those responsible for unique productions who helped establish (or, sometimes break with) tradition and have consecrated themselves in the literary canon. This tradition, however, cannot be restricted to the past, since the country proudly cultivates the habit of giving birth and promoting literature, continuing to introduce names such as Colm Tóibín, Roddy Doyle and John Banville into the literary scene, whose writings – and also translations and cinematographic adaptations – attest to the continued popularity and impact of Irish writing.

A doctoral research, currently in progress at PUCRS' Graduate Program in Letters, proposes the analysis of contemporary Irish short story prose as a way to understand how the national literary heritage is renewed in the current written production of the country, which triggers the cultural memory of the nation, and how the most recent literary manifestations convey an idea of identity of the contemporary Irish-man, heir to historically recognized and globally accepted stereotypes but also a result of the multicultural relations that have shaped and still define Ireland. This is due to the large influx of immigrants that currently make up the country's population and lend new facets to identities once considered consolidated, and due to the significant political and economic changes that the country faced in recent years.

The literature of a country can be held responsible for the notion of identity that is widespread, both locally and outside of its borders. The literary text is, purposely or not, a window by which we are allowed to see others in an attempt to unravel them, to understand them or simply to fit them into any given pattern. History has often triggered literature as a tool to legitimize a being or a place, since writing has made it possible to establish, attest, and propagate multiple national types, a characteristic that can be especially true for those who are part of nations which at some point in their histories are under another country's power, such as Brazil and Ireland, which, despite their differences, have in common the fact that they are both "new" democracies that, after their respective independence movements, these had to encourage in their natives new ways of *being*. In Ireland, for instances, literature becomes an important part of the country since, as Fintan O'Toole states about the recent trend in the naming of the bridges of Dublin: "this naming phenomenon means the replacement of religion and smashed politics with literature." (O'Toole in *ABEI Journal* 1999. 100).

When someone speaks about identity, however, there is always the need to remember that he/she refers to a representation, a partial construction that can be highly changeable through time. Stuart Hall, in *A identidade cultural na pós-modernidade* (2015), reflects on the matter of identity related to the nation stating that "people are not just legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the *idea* of the nation as represented in its national culture"² (30. Translated by the author). Culture and identity are, therefore, products that are accepted as legitimate, since they have been affirmed through history and promoted, also, by literature.

Because identity is a historically defined representation, one must understand the motivations and circumstances responsible for producing an image. In the text *A produção social da identidade e da diferença*, published in *Identidade e diferença: a perspectiva dos estudos culturais* (2014), Tomaz Tadeu da Silva states:

It matters little whether the facts thus narrated are "true" or not; what matters is that the founding narrative works to give to the national identity the sentimental and affective bond that guarantees a certain stability and fixation, without which it would not have the same and necessary effectiveness. (85. Translated by the author)³

Identity, stereotyped or not, is a construction based on a historically and geographically predetermined environment. The place to where one belongs definitely establishes a first impression on who one is and how one should act, preserving the social character of identity. The history of a person, however, is a sort of fable accepted by him/ her, for it represents what defines, and at the same time separates, his/her culture and memory from external influence. It is commonly observed that there is the tendency of populations to accept, celebrate and perpetuate their stereotypes by recognizing in them a singularity that distances them from the others. Countries which, at some period of their existence were colonized or subjugated in some way by other nations, resort

to their foundational myths and heroes in response to an adverse situation. The rescue of autonomy on behalf of these countries occurs through the return to their origins, as emphasized by Edward W. Said (2011):

One of the first tasks of the resistance culture was to reclaim, rename and rehabilitated the land. And with it came a whole series of other affirmations, recoveries, and identifications, all of them literally rooted in this poetically designed basis. The search for authenticity, for a more suitable national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a pantheon of heroes and (from time to time) heroines, myths and religions – this was also made possible by the feeling of the land to be re-appropriated by the people. (353. Translated by the author)⁴

History, however, is constantly being rewritten and this rewriting confirms some stereotypes as well as proposes new traits that will result in other national configurations. Added to the foreign customs tradition, there are new ways of living and telling the facts, from phenomena such as *globalization*. This, which is a result of the ideology and capitalist practices that are spread throughout the world, has profoundly altered the paradigms that determine the understanding of the subject, especially in the world today. There is no longer room for a concept of an exclusively individualized country, since globalization represents the internationalization of the capitalist world and the so-called “uniqueness” and “simultaneity” of technical practices across the globe. To conceptualize the globalized world is not, however, to believe in homogenization. Globalization, considered primarily by its economic bias, affects different places and people in different ways, and this distinction guarantees the uniqueness of the process in the several individual experiences. Leaving aside the exclusively economic scope of globalization, it is important to think of this phenomenon as a concept of Cultural Studies because of its tendency to encompass and spread different cultures in one place. Globalization has enabled important sociocultural and economic exchanges, promoting a pluralistic view of the individual and the world, whose borders are already more malleable. This mobility of geographical boundaries, combined with frequent sociocultural exchanges, defines the daily practices of individuals, reinforcing the idea of increasingly mixed and engaged cultures that reach and speak to different types and experiences.

To understand globalization as a permanent phenomenon, where power only tends to grow due to technological developments, opens the way to the concept of *multiculturalism*. As a concept linked to Cultural Studies, multiculturalism proposes to take account of diverse points of view, products of distinct cultural heritage, opposing the cultural “centrism” hitherto worshiped. The idea of a multiculturalist policy seeks to challenge unitary and homogeneous models by proposing actions that enable all individuals to practice different beliefs and traditions. This “non-obligatory” assimilation of models and rules from the so-called dominant groups is seen by many as a naive proposal, due to the great exercise of tolerance that must be practiced in order for

it to prevail. Multiculturalism, whether utopian or not, deals with decentralization, allowing classes considered minority groups to share their experiences, which are, in a multiculturalist perspective, as relevant as those of any other group.

Processes such as globalization intensify the shaping of increasingly multicultural societies. In these societies, in a true exercise of alterity, the literary production of a nation cannot help but to consider the image of the other, of the foreigner, who becomes a relevant part in the conception of the identity of the native people. The acceptance that the individual is not “pure” and cannot be idealized as a product derived exclusively from absolutely homogenous culture and myths, results in the configuration of the contemporary man who is, at the same time, heir to the local tradition and a man of the world. A good example of this can be found in Ireland, a country with a rich historical legacy, which has attracted thousands of immigrants in recent years.

The history of Ireland reveals, from its origin, the impact of the foreigner on the culture. The island, which has been occupied by several peoples over the centuries, celebrates the Celtic tradition brought to the country around 350 BC, and the Christian religion, which was to be instituted in the middle of the fifth century by Saint Patrick, a figure who seemed to understand the importance of preserving tradition while seeking to establish something new. The history of Saint Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, and his actions, which would ultimately shape the religion in the country, deserve prominence within history, for, as Malachy McCourt affirms in his work *Malachy McCourt's History of Ireland* (2004):

Sure, he brought Christianity to Ireland, but once there it evolved into something much different from that centered in Rome. The fact that the country itself had no central authority, but was ruled by tribal kings, worked against the establishment of a central church. And the Filí – the powerful class of bards and poets – kept a strong grip on the culture and learning of the people. Patrick would bring his religion, but the Irish would shape it to their needs. (31)

McCourt's quotation highlights, to some extent, a trend celebrated by Irish culture, which extols the country as a major influencer on those who arrive on there. The identity of Ireland celebrates the transformation of the foreigner into the native, since occupying the country is also to be occupied by it. The story of Patrick's influence in Ireland, whether adorned with legends or not (such as using the shamrock to explain the Holy Trinity, or the legend that Saint Patrick would be responsible for the expulsion of snakes – a pagan symbol – of the whole island), reveals the creation of a Church distinct from that of Rome (which labelled the natives as ignorant) where slavery was denounced, women were considered and divine natural gifts overlapped the sins of the human soul.

The Viking invasions, which helped to shape the country – hitherto composed of several kingdoms, but no cities – as well as the eight centuries of submission to England and the emergence of a new class, the Anglo-Irish, are just a few examples of how the Irish culture is the product of a mixture of different external influences that began to

contribute to the formation of a national identity. Even the battles for the country's independence found resistance from some who questioned the use of symbols such as the Gaelic language to promote resistance to Great Britain while many of the rebels were working for English institutions. To think of Irish identity is then to assume one which, from its origin, is the product of a mixture of external and internal influences that together configure it.

It must be added to the many facets of the country the recent migratory wave resulting from the economic phenomenon called the *Celtic Tiger* which, from the mid-1990s until the mid-2000s, resulted in rapid economic growth in the country, a consequence of many foreign investments, and eventually attracted people from all over the world in search of opportunities. The country, historically accustomed to huge waves of emigration resulting from the great famines, became recognized for its growing multiculturalism, since a large part of its population was made up of people born on foreign soil and these, rather than supplying labour, had a significant impact on local sociocultural arrangements.

The impact that such national configuration achieved in the culture, particularly in Irish literature, is the target to be achieved through the analysis of the contemporary Irish short story prose, wherein it is intended to discern how (and if) the national literary heritage has been updated when it concerns the representation of the national identities portrayed on it. For this, the short story prose was chosen as the object of analysis, based on assumptions such as the ones by Julio Cortázar (1993) who, when comparing the story/ photography with novel/cinema, emphasizes:

a photograph or high-quality short story is done in reverse, that is, the photographer or storyteller feels the need to choose and limit an image or an event that is *meaningful*, not only worthwhile in itself, but also capable to act in the viewer or the reader as a kind of *opening*, a leavening that projects the intelligence and the sensibility towards something that goes well beyond the visual or literary argument contained in the photo or the story. (151. Translated by the author)⁵

Accordingly, due to the notion of a physical limit, the capture of a particular moment would be promoted, a *meaningful* moment that does not only have meaning in itself but can act in the reader, thus favouring the dissemination/acceptance of notions of identities built on the stereotypes that the writer intends to present. The size limitation is also highlighted by James Cooper Lawrence in *The Theory of the Short Story* (2013) in which he quotes Edgar Allan Poe's theory that the good story should be brief and have the necessary coherence, which would give it the effect of wholeness. A tale, therefore, contains in itself all its purposes, and the good storyteller should be able to complete all his intentions until the end of it, leaving no gaps to be filled. Lawrence further emphasizes the power that is given to the author of the short story. By engaging the reader in his brief plot, the author does as he pleases without being interrupted by

external influences. And, having the reader as captive, the opportunity is given to the author to faithfully record reality from his/her point of view. Nádia Battella Gotlib, in her text *Teoria do conto* (2006), looks exactly at this fact:

There are texts that *intend* to register with more fidelity our reality. But the question is not so simple. *Which* of our realities is supposed to be recorded? our everyday life, from day to day? or the one which is fantasised? Or even: the reality *told* literally, precisely because of this, for using *literary* resources according to the intentions of the author... (12. Translated by the author)⁶

If the goal is to establish a certain notion of national identity, it seems safe to say that the short story offers itself as a very appropriate vehicle, due to characteristics such as those presented so far. The selection of the literary corpus to be analysed will include the works such as *Antarctica* and *Walk the blue fields* by Claire Keegan, *Young Skins* by Colin Barrett, *Dark lies the island* and *There are little kingdoms*, by Kevin Barry, *Young Irishmen*, by Gerard Donovan and *Cheating at Canasta and A bit on the side*, by William Trevor, whose short stories present Irish types and which is intended to denote how the construction of identity came to be defined (or not) by the fusion of the national tradition with the new social and economic reality set up recently in Ireland. Some of the stories, such as Claire Keegan's *Men and Women*, Kevin Barry's *Wifey Redux* and Gerard Donovan's *Archeologists*, tackle the question of the woman's role in an ever changing society; others, such as Kevin Barry's *See The Tree, How Big It's Grown*, approach a contemporary view of religion, its rituals, and how these can interfere in someone's identity; while stories as Barry's *Fjord of Killary* pinpoint the relevant question of the immigrant presence, while Colin Barrett's *Calm with horses* offers the reader a glimpse into the fast growing problem of the drugs in Ireland. Because this is a literary analysis proposal heavily based on theories from Cultural Studies, it is considered what Kate Flint discusses in *Livros em viagem: difusão, consumo e romance no século XIX* (2009), in which she states that "Each reading is in itself a complex encounter; and when the consumer or romance, or both, are distant from their context of origin, it creates a particular kind of intercultural exchange." (Flint in Moretti, 2009.663. Translated by the author)⁷.

Notes

- 1 PhD research currently under development at the Postgraduate Program in Letters of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS).
- 2 "as pessoas não são apenas cidadãos legais de uma nação; elas participam da ideia da nação tal qual representada em sua cultura nacional."
- 3 "Pouco importa se os fatos assim narrados são "verdadeiros" ou não; o que importa é que a narrativa fundadora funciona para dar à identidade nacional a liga sentimental e afetiva que lhe garante uma certa estabilidade e fixação, sem as quais ela não teria a mesma e necessária eficácia".

- 4 “Uma das primeiras tarefas da cultura de resistência foi reivindicar, renomear e reabitar a terra. E com isso veio toda uma série de outras afirmações, recuperações e identificações, todas elas literalmente enraizadas nessa base poeticamente projetada. A busca de autenticidade, de uma origem nacional mais adequada do que a fornecida pela história colonial, de um panteão de heróis e (de vez em quando) heroínas, mitos e religiões – isso também foi possibilitado pelo sentimento da terra a ser reapropriada pelo povo.”
- 5 numa fotografia ou num conto de grande qualidade se procede inversamente, isto é, o fotógrafo ou o contista sentem necessidade de escolher e limitar uma imagem ou um acontecimento que sejam *significativos*, que não só valham por si mesmos, mas também sejam capazes de atuar no espectador ou no leitor como uma espécie de *abertura*, de fermento que projete a inteligência e a sensibilidade em direção a algo que vai muito além do argumento visual ou literário contido na foto ou no conto.
- 6 “Há textos que têm *intenção* de registrar com mais fidelidade a realidade nossa. Mas a questão não é tão simples assim. Trata-se de registrar *qual* realidade nossa? a nossa cotidiana, do dia-a-dia? ou a nossa fantasiada? Ou ainda: a realidade *contada* literariamente, justamente por isto, por usar recursos *literários* segundo as intenções do autor...”
- 7 “Toda a leitura é, por si, um encontro complexo e, quando o consumidor ou o romance, ou ambos, estão distantes de seu contexto de origem, ela cria um tipo particular de troca intercultural.

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