

Identity construction in the Irish diasporic space: an analysis of William Bulfin's *Tales of the Pampas*

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William Bulfin's *Tales of the Pampas* was published for the first time in 1907, but it is the bilingual version of 1997 the one considered for this research work. The writer, of Irish origin, was born in the county of Offaly in central Ireland and immigrated to Argentina together with his eldest brother in 1882, when he was only nineteen years old. Since mid-nineteenth century and due to the well-known devastating Irish famine, a steady stream of adventurous Irishmen went to Argentina looking for better economic perspectives. Thus, many arrived to this country to work the land and sheep farming, whilst others did it in search of political as well as religious freedom. (Wilkinson, 1997).

According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1999: 68-69) the movement of peoples – desired or imposed- from their homelands into new regions constitutes a historical fact of colonization known as Diaspora. Therefore, taking into account the particular situation of Irish people in Argentina, who change their former colonized subject's position to become colonizers of the new country sharing common histories of dispersion and settlement, their literary expressions can be considered diasporic. However, though possessing the same cultural legacy, these writers 'develop different cultural and historical identities, depending on the political and cultural particularities of the hegemonic society' in which they are inserted (1989: 228-29).

In 1991 and in relation to Diasporas Safran (quoted by Clifford in 247) posits that these groups are 'minority communities of expatriates' that far from 'a centre of origin' move to at least two peripheral places keeping a 'memory, vision or myth about their motherland' to which they will eventually return. They believe that the host country does not thoroughly

accept them although their conscience and group solidarity is strongly rooted in it what makes them define their collective identity. A feature of the Diaspora related to the strong attachment between these groups to their motherland is not shared by James Clifford who, in 1994 (246), gives diaspora the meaning of simply connecting several communities of a dispersed population. More recently Avtar Brath (1996), in his analysis about diasporic literature suggests a new term: 'diaspora space', which he defines as the 'intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes' (181). The heart of his argument goes around the idea that this space is inhabited 'not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous' (idem). This 'diaspora space', he adds, is opposed to that of diaspora since the former also shows 'the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of "staying put"'. In sum, this is the space where 'multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, or disavowed [...] where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle' (208).

Having into account these definitions (and specially those by Avtar Brath) the present work proposes the analysis of the structure of the different tales, portraits, sketches and short stories belonging to Bulfin's book, and of the relationship existing among the different characters and the narrator. In addition, the latter's viewpoint is considered with respect to the new land, its inhabitants and their customs, and towards other existing minority-groups and their mental representations, as well as the manner in which the Irish immigrants define themselves in opposition to other minority groups quoted in the book. To elucidate these tensions will allow us to detect the mechanisms generated and used in the creation of the Argentinean Irish community's cultural identity according to the vision of a diasporic¹ Irish subject.

Eight episodes form *Tales of the Pampas*. The first one, 'A bad character', narrates the story of sailor John who goes to Mister Mike Horan's ranch in order to ask for a job. There are two narrators in this tale. The first one is a third person omniscient one who introduces the topic of the opposition between two antagonistic cultures, the Irish and the English, through the characters of Mike and John respectively. Mike is described as a good person, innocent, helpful, and who believes in working hard as a means of achieving redemption. The other is mariner John, who in spite of being endowed with different personality traits none of them possesses positive connotations. We are also told he is a deserter from a crew of a British merchant ship, that he is 'unpopular' and 'dishonest', a drinker, a liar, a fighter, a beggar 'who borrows or plunders', and fundamentally that 'despises the Irish and the Gauchos' (p 19). Once established the opposition between the two characters and having the English² sailor mocked Horan, the narrator gives in the floor to the Irishman so that he may continue with the story in the first person due to his having had an active participation in it. In this tale, the Sailor deceives other characters among whom there are Irishmen and a Spaniard.

Antipathy and spite characterizes the existing relationship between Irishmen and Spaniards, exemplified by the second narrator –Horan- towards other foreigners, as when he refers to Francisco calling him '*Gallego*' (p 30) a term that carries an ample pejorative connotation. Moreover, his prejudicial attitude towards this man is observed when he tells that to see the grin on that crooked ould Gallegos's face, when he bids him good morning, would make Horan feel sick (23). This episode signals how much embedded in the different diasporic discourses power relations are, as well as how it -according to Avtar Brath's definition- problematizes the subject's position in a diasporic space (181).

The second story 'The Enchanted Toad' –told by an omniscient narrator- is about the curious relationship between two Irishmen and a toad. It deals with the numerous times in which one of them tries, unsuccessfully, to get rid of the batrachian, thinking it is enchanted.

The importance of the tale resides in the representation made of this character. As his inabilities and negative features are so exaggerated, he is like a caricature of an Irish immigrant. In a like manner, this coarse character -an anti-establishment and subversive subject- becomes the sarcastic personification of the conception of Irishmen by the English society, with its ethnocentric attitude towards them.

The third episode, 'The Highlife', is the portrayal of Arturo, a Spanish youth belonging to a wealthy family, who has been sent to Argentina by his family because he has been fallen in love with a woman whose occupation -she's an artist- disqualifies her. Therefore, they send him to Buenos Aires, to estancia 'The Bandit', with the purpose of trying to make him change his rebellious attitude in life. Once there, his particular situation of superiority compared with the rest of the shepherds and his own conceited behaviour make him deserve the nickname of 'The Highlife'.

The structure of this biographical sketch is based on the reproduction of two antagonistic worlds: of the European urban man -proud, rich, and boastful- and of the Argentinean '*gaucho*', characterized by being humble, expert in his daily tasks, and controversial whenever he feels attacked by others. The foreigner's hybrid position provides an interesting element in the narration. The Highlife does not belong to the local group; he is not one of them -not a real *gaucho*. Forced to live in another country but his own, he rejects the possibility of assimilation by the new. Ironically, as the men call him 'boy' he proudly defies the local rivals' customs in order to be respected by them; also, to re-affirm his racial superiority, and to recover his self-esteem. However, in his attempt to do so, he loses his life. The narrator's position in this tale differs from the one of former passages. Described neither as a detached observer nor as a committed person, he performs the role of an omniscient narrator who participates of the action, and who seems to take sides with the young man. Nevertheless, at other moments his behaviour is ambiguous, like when he explains that he is going to tell the

story of a hero. His words sound ironic, considering this character does not possess any clearly defined virtues.

The following tale known as “Castro telleth of the Tavalonghi’s horse” is an exercise of power through verbal discourse, and produced on occasion that the Irish narrator is assigned the task of helping Castro, a *gaucho* belonging to Chambergo’s camp, in his search of fifty-five missing cows. During the course of their ride these characters engage themselves in an argument about which animal is wiser, whether a horse or a fox, both exaggerating the animals’ abilities. A tension between the opposing viewpoints of the *gaucho* and of the Irishman generates and then solves when the narrator acknowledges his mistake – at least to himself- positioning in a superior place, depreciating his opponent’s discursive strategy, and realizing that his interlocutor is much more experienced and astute.

An underlying important aspect of this episode is the implicit metaphor in the horse’s behaviour, which longs to come back to his country. This could be equated to the situation lived by an immigrant who longs to go home. As Ashcroft et al (8) assert the topics of place and displacement are inherent features of postcolonial literature. To be concerned with recuperating or developing a genuine relationship with oneself and with the place is what certainly produces an identity crisis.

Next to in the text, the episode ‘The Defeat of Barragan’ continues the theme of the missing or stolen cows, with the addition that foreman Castro participates in a race of horses in which he wins mayor Barragan’s horse. Of this man it is said that he is a ‘cattle-thief and a counter-marker of a strayed stock; and that he constantly abused his official authority as *alcalde* of his cuartel to seize any strayed animals’ (88). Due to this, when Castro’s horse wins he receives the people’s recognition. The horse race –it is shown- is no more than the screen that tries to hide the existing clash between the two men and the well-known dispute about power. As it can be observed, the author, in the different tales, has emphasised power relations

inserted within discourses and practices mobilizing what Avtar Brath calls 'a multi-axial performative conception of power' (181).

In front of this antagonistic situation, the narrator's attitude is to remain distant. Primarily he feels used by the foreman for having hiding his real intentions about his participation in the race (he wants to avenge his father), but afterwards he abandons his stance and is able to respect Castro's behaviour. He says 'Castro was a good winner, that is to say, he did not crow over a victory or rub a defeat into Barragan, had he won, would have delighted in doing' (94). Moreover, he takes side in the conflict calling him his 'friend' who 'knew how to bear his success with something like becoming modesty' (94). Nevertheless, somewhat later he experiences a moral dilemma for having postponed his responsibilities, and feels ashamed not only for what he has done but also for his friend's behaviour. 'We had, it seemed to me, disgraced ourselves, we had wasted an afternoon. Fight or no fight, race or no race, victory or defeat, we were scamps of the deepest dye' (100) he expresses.

However, and from the *gaucho's* viewpoint, the young narrator is a foreigner, and for this reason unable to understand the *gauchos'* customs or at least to see them as he does. The narrator manifests a general ambiguity when he shows difficulty in taking sides either with the *gaucho* or with the immigrant. Hence, we can apply Avtar Brath's conceptual category of 'diaspora space' when he explains it is inhabited by those who have migrated and their descendants; also, by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. According to his idea, home can simultaneously become a place of safety and of terror because the same geographical and psychic space can articulate different 'histories' (180-181).

'Campeando' constitutes the sequel of the preceding episode, and its structure seems that of a biographical sketch of a field worker presented through the narrator's nostalgic and engaging remembrances, who now seems to feel more involved with the experiences of his character. To get back the missing animals here is not as important as the respect that Castro

has gained among his equals. 'He was a hero in their eyes, and I shone with a kind of reflected glory' he posits. Equally interesting are the teller's reflections about those human beings so much surrounded by freedom and heroism and by loneliness, emptiness, and monotony, but also by crime and fatalism of which they cannot escape. Furthermore, he realizes that although the future is in front of them they do not own it, it belongs to others. Then he questions about 'what these people would have done in this world had they not been so long and cruelly neglected' (106). Finally, his empathy towards his fellow Castro becomes evident when, at receiving Horan's reproach –another Irishman like him- who reminds him that he will lose his good name had he continued been stuck with the 'natives behind the barn (110), his words do not have the expected response. At this moment, the narrator seems to be more involved with the native's world and culture than with his compatriot's presumptions.

In 'The Fall of Don José' there is a narration within another narration. Domingo –the cook- tells the narrator the story of another cook –Don José- who works at Don Tomás Mackintosh –a loving Irishman-'s estancia. In this tale the comment the narrator makes about the bookkeeper - that he always insulted them because they call him English, just because he is a foreigner- indicates his strong sense of belonging to the Irish community as well as of his sense of individuality. In opposition, the natives -Argentinean *gauchos*- when referring to other immigrant groups do not make sharp distinctions among these folks. The same narrator posits 'In the camp, any man who speaks English is an Ingles' although he may be English, Scottish or Irishman.' (121).

The first narrator's words turn to be very eloquent when he apologises to the audience owed to his inability to tell the tale in Spanish. He says 'I am sorry for your sake that I cannot give it to you as it fell from him in his graceful Spanish, so full of quaint conceits, word-play, droll humour, and subtle irony' [...] who can hope to emulate it? Who can aspire, above all, to catch even a gleam of it in any other language than Argentine Spanish? Let me therefore ask

you to be indulgent with me...’ (Bulfin: 116). His words denote an acceptance of the language; however, the ascendancy of the cook –Spanish- does not justify his behaviour. Ambiguities – according to Ramra’s words- (1998) are a characteristic of a diasporic subject who is caught in a process of change from one culture to another, and who during the transition may respond in an ambivalent way towards the new culture or dual or antithetic cultures or societies (216).

‘The Course of True Love’ is the last episode of the book and the most successful tale. Basing his love story on a medieval Irish legend (‘The Red Bull Story’), Bulfin produces a presentification of that legend. In the new version, the characters are all Irishmen and there is only one reference to *gauchos* when the girl’s suitors are mentioned and among them, a young ‘buck-toe’³, a derogatory word used to disqualify the native.

The location of this story at the end of the text is also meaningful since the cycle of tales closes with a reference to the Irish cultural tradition. This indicates the gestation of a diasporic cultural identity within a process of acculturation and not of transculturation⁴ since the meaning conferred to the former is that of learning successfully in a different culture, condition observed in the various analysed tales. Contrarily, – if we were to follow Mary Louis Pratt’s words (1992: 228) – we could not agree on the existence of and emphasis put on a ‘reciprocal influence of modes of representation and cultural practices of various kinds in colonies and metropolises’. These contact zones -to which she alludes to in her work¹- are nevertheless social spaces where ‘disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination’, a definition⁴ that certainly reflects the situation of the Irish people in Argentina.

Finally, in the text, the narrative voice, by means of Irish characters’ use of memory, fantasy, narrative and myth, acknowledges and reaffirms itself. These tools of representation show on the one hand, the existence of a history of a communal ascendancy conforming what Stuart Hall describes as the parameter of cultural identity (2000: 21-23); and on the other hand,

¹ Cited in Ashcroft, 1999

the echoes from their cultural past in the presentification of tales and of traditional Irish characters. Nevertheless, these stories are not rooted either in time or in the ancestral home. They project themselves to the future through the different storytellers' voices, out of whose discourses their cultural identity evolves. In sum, Irish identity in Argentina is built, changed, and transformed through the different ways the narrators position themselves in the different narratives at the same time that their own history and culture position them within. This creative space affirms and conveys their subjectivity as well as articulates their sense of the world.

¹ According to Leela Gandhi (1998), the term 'diaspora' is used indistinctly for that of migration and it is generally invoked as a theoretical mechanism of interrogation about ethnic identity and cultural nationalism.

² As it does not clearly upsurge from the text the nationality of the mocking character, and having read Delany's literary criticism, who deduces that the character is of Irish ancestry, I understand that there are left only two opposing options possible. First, the writer uses the character in order to channel his anger against a historical enemy, or second, the character would represent -in an ironic and rebellious way- the stereotype of an Irishman.

² Buck-toe is 'a derogatory nickname given for a *gaucho* by the Irish. As the *gauchos* traditionally gripped the knotted end of the stirrup by the big and second toe, the toes often became deformed, curving inwards' (Bulfin, 163).

⁴ I take this concept from Mary Louis Pratt cited in Ashcroft et al (1999: 228).

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