

IRISH STUDIES IN SPAIN: 2015 – March 2016

Constanza del Río-Álvarez (ed.)

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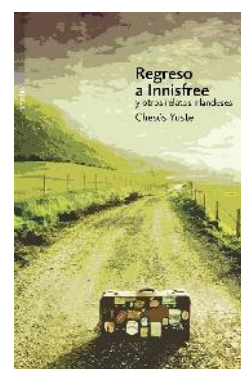
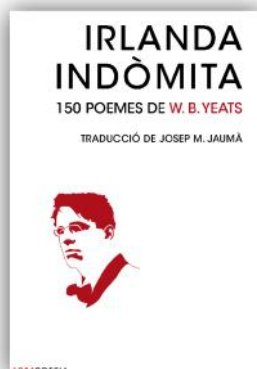
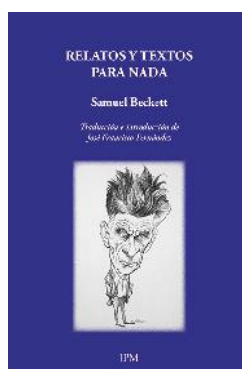
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Introduction

Constanza del Río-Álvaro

In October 2015 the Irish fashion retailer chain Primark opened its second world-wide biggest premises in Madrid. Low-cost fashion, low-cost travel, low-cost food ... low-cost life? What about quality? Fortunately, Irish-Spanish relationships cannot be reduced to economic endeavours or to the Kinahan mafia clan criminal forays into the Spanish “Costa del Sol” (Málaga).

Even if the period covered by this review has not been particularly fruitful in terms of publications by Spanish or Spanish affiliated scholars, it has been rich in cultural events, both academic and informative, with assorted commemorations and celebrations of Irish culture, particularly music, cinema and literature. I will start here by first commenting on Spanish translations of both fictional and non-fictional works by Irish authors.

Following an already established tendency, the Spanish publishing industry offers translations of the most international / transnational Irish writers, such as John Banville / Benjamin Black, Emma Donoghue, Colum McCann or Colm Tóibín. Such has been the case of Tóibín’s last novel, *Nora Webster* (2014), translated with the same title by Antonia Martín Martín (Barcelona: Lumen, 2016). The novel, set in the Irish town of Enniscorthy at the end of the 1960s, tells the story of Nora, a recently widowed mother of four, and her efforts to survive her husband’s bereavement and the small town’s oppressive environment. Narrated from an emotional distance and in a subdued style, this elliptical narrative took Tóibín many years to write because of the personal, autobiographical, elements in it. Journalist Shane Hegarty, weekly columnist with the *Irish Times*, has started writing a young-adult fantasy series whose first issue is titled *Darkmouth* (2015). Translated into

Spanish by Rita da Costa as *La primera aventura de Finn Bocanegra* (Barcelona: Salamandra, 2016), the novel, much as in John Connolly’s children’s literature, combines horror with humour and presents an awkward, ineffectual protagonist. Still within the field of translation of fictional works, José Francisco Fernández’s introduction and translation of Samuel Beckett’s *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (1955) as *Relatos y textos para nada* (Valencia: JPM Ediciones, 2015) will be reviewed more extensively at the end of this section by María J. López.

With a two-year delay, I will refer now to the first Spanish translation of the, by now, classic of Irish history *A History of the Irish Working Class* (Peter Berresford Ellis, 1972). Translated by Iker Heredia de Elu as *Historia de la clase obrera irlandesa* (Hondarribia: Argitaletxe Hiru, 2013), the Spanish edition is prefaced by Ellis, who claims that the book’s original intention was to “dilucidar el desarrollo y la participación de la clase obrera irlandesa en la lucha por la liberación nacional y social. Mi intención era ampliar la obra clásica de James Connolly *Labour in Irish History* (*El trabajo en la historia de Irlanda*, 1910)”.

Several films either set or produced in Ireland were released in 2015 and the first months of 2016. Produced in Britain and directed by the French-Argelian Yann Demange, *'71*, Demange’s debut feature, was generally acclaimed by Spanish film critics. A political thriller bordering on the horror movie and centred on the Northern Irish Troubles, always a tricky subject, the film narrates a British soldier’s attempts to survive in a tremendously hostile territory: a Belfast Catholic neighbourhood at the height of the conflict. Shot with a frenzied camera and a visceral visual style, the film offers no easy political compromise and rather transforms the unexperienced soldier’s plight into a journey to

hell. *Calvary*, an Irish production directed by John Michael McDonagh, stars Brendan Gleeson, an actor that usually renders magnificent and powerful performances. Set in an Irish small-town, it tells the story of Father James (Brendan Gleeson), a good-natured priest who has to face both his parishioners' demons and a death-sentence for a crime he did not commit. The film is a low budget dark comedy with excellent dialogues. Carlos Boyero, film critic in *El País*, finished his review of *Calvary* with the following words: "La han calificado condescendentemente de película pequeña e interesante. ¿Qué querrá decir pequeña? ¿Que se rodó en 28 días y con presupuesto escaso? Para mí es grande. Me deja tocado, algo que no me suele ocurrir últimamente (*El País*, 6 de marzo de 2015)". The proverbial Irish ability for story-telling has been confirmed by the successful screen adaptation of two novels by Irish writers: *Brooklyn* (Colm Tóibín, 2009) and *Room* (Emma Donoghue, 2010). Both films – which had several Oscar nominations, *Room* finally winning the Oscar for best actress (Brie Larson) – have been recently released in Spain.

Agustí de Villaronga's stage production of Colm Tóibín's novel *The Testament of Mary* (2012) premièred in Madrid in November 2014 and then toured Spain in 2015. In his debut as stage director Villaronga was helped by Blanca Portillo – an experienced, daring and passionate actress – as Mary, a pagan woman who, as mother, cannot come to terms with and does not understand her son's life and violent death and is ridden by guilt at having abandoned him in his last moments, terrified at such a brutal spectacle. The play's *mise-en-scène* (Frederic Amat) reproduces what looks like an altarpiece or memory room from which Mary extracts different objects that make her move backwards and relive past moments while she delivers Tóibín's lyrical and fervent dramatic monologue. In relation to the play, Portillo has said that it is "mucho más que un monólogo, es un espectáculo, un puro juego teatral, en el que están casi presentes los personajes con los que María convive ... Es una función con mucha acción, con conflictos, distintos y permanentes" (*El País Babelia*, 11 de noviembre de 2014).

On the side of informative and academic events / shows / recitals commemorating Irish creators or celebrating Irish culture, I would like first to mention some of the activities in commemoration of Yeats's 150th birth anniversary. Retired scholar Josep M Jaumà, translator of the poets Philip Larkin, Robert Graves and Robert Frost into Catalan, has published *Irlanda Indòmita* (Barcelona: Edicions de 1984, 2015), a fine bilingual English-Catalan anthology containing 150 poems drawn from all the volumes published by Yeats over a fifty-year period – from *Crossways* (1889) to *Last Poems* (1938-9). Over the month of June the Yeats Society Madrid, in collaboration with the Embassy of Ireland, organised the exhibition "Of this Place", featuring 26 paintings and sculptures by eight contemporary Irish visual artists who have drawn inspiration from the landscapes that helped shape Yeats' poetry. In a feature article in *El País* (30 December, 2015) David Revelles moved over important Irish locations in the poet's life: Sligo, Ben Bulbin, Lissadell House, Innisfree, etc. As usual, and with the exception of "Under Ben Bulbin", it is Yeats's earlier, Celtic poetry that is particularly mentioned. A different, more inclusive perspective on the poet was offered in El Teatro de las esquinas (Zaragoza) on 13 November by a group of musicians and singers (*Celtic Aírs*) and other collaborators coming from the world of education, I have to confess, myself included. The intention was to approach the poet to the general public through a journey across his life and career, from its beginning to its end. Together with the performance of well-known songs based on Yeats's poems ("Down by the Salley Gardens", "The Stolen Child", "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", etc.) different poems were also recited, including "A Coat", "September 1913", "Easter 1916", "The Second Coming" or "Sailing to Byzantium", while an actor (Jorge Sanz) posed as Yeats and explained his life to the audience. In Zaragoza (19 February-18 March 2016) we are now in the midst of Las Jornadas de Cultura Irlandesa 2016. Fortunately, St. Patrick's festivity is no longer just an opportunity to run wild and get drunk, but also an occasion to present the best of Irish cinema,

music and literature. Apart from a good number of musical performances, mainly Irish and Gaelic folk music, I would mention two special events. The first is the Irish film season (*Tree Keeper*, Patrick O'Shea; *Korea*, Cathal Black; *Saviours*, Ross Whitaker & Liam Nolan; *Silence*, Pat Collins; *Dreamtime Revisited*, Dónal Ó Céilleachair & Julius Ziz; and *Kisses*, Lance Daly). The second event was a literary-musical recital by *Celtic Airs* and collaborators (4 March, Teatro de las esquinas), "Un paseo por Irlanda", in which the performers took the audience to different Irish locations through Irish music and literature (Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, Heaney and Banville).

On a more academic note, the XIV International AEDEI Conference held in Granada last May (28-30 May), organised by Pilar Villar-Argáiz, was undoubtedly something to remember. Centred on "Discourses of Inclusion and Marginalisation: Minority, Dissident and Mainstream Irish identities", this gathering of Irish scholars and scholars in Irish Studies did not only provide excellent academic instruction but the beauty of its venue as well. I think I will never forget those magical moments, before the Gala dinner, listening to the guitar, watching flamenco dancing while down below La Alhambra shone magnetically. Pilar Villar-Argáiz also organised the Primeras Jornadas de Estudios Irlandeses (15-18 December 2015) at the University of Granada, this year in honour of Professor Manuel Villar Raso. The programme included talks on Irish literature and society, as well as readings of both prose and poetry. More recently (7 March 2016), the Irish performance artist Amanda Coogan visited the University of Oviedo to deliver a lecture-colloquium: "An Illustrated Introduction to Performance Art/ Body Art: The Practitioner's Perspective" within the University's Master and PhD programme on Gender and Diversity.

In the field of editions, the volume *Pragmatic Markers in Irish English* (Amsterdam / Philadelphia:

John Benjamins, 2015) has been edited by our colleague Carolina Amador Moreno, Kevin McCafferty and Elaine Vaughan. The book offers 18 studies from the perspective of variational pragmatics by established and younger scholars interested in the English spoken in Ireland. Jason King and Pilar Villar-Argáiz have edited a special issue of the journal *Irish Studies Review*, entitled *Multiculturalism in Crisis*. The issue includes contributions by AEDEI members Pilar Villar-Argáiz and Asier Altuna-García de Salazar, together with those of renowned scholars on this field, such as Bryan Fanning, Chris Gilligan and Sinéad Moynihan. Hovering in between literary and sociological studies, M^a Jesús Lorenzo-Modia (Universidade da Coruña) has edited *Ex-sistere: Women's Mobility in Contemporary Irish, Welsh and Galician Literatures* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016). The essays in the collection centre on women writers from Ireland, Wales and Galicia, and how they deal with the issues of mobility and migration in their literary work. The volume has a foreword written by Declan Kiberd and in the section devoted to Ireland includes contributions by María Jesús Lorenzo, José Francisco Fernández and Manuela Palacios, among others.

I cannot finish without referring to Aragonese writer Chesús Yuste's collection of short stories *Regreso a Innisfree y otros relatos irlandeses* (Zaragoza: Xordica, 2015). The author knows and loves Ireland, a love that transpires from his ten short-stories. In his review Daniel Monserrat said that the book is "un ejercicio de acercamiento o de recreación de Irlanda, el país verde que destaca por las diferentes tonalidades de ese mismo color, pero, sobre todo, por una historia apasionante salpicada de elementos culturales, mitológicos y, por qué no, alcohólicos que Yuste reviste de diferentes capas a las que aplica un toque de humor seductor" (*El Periódico de Aragón*, 21 de marzo, 2015).

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Relatos y textos para nada de Samuel Beckett
Traducción e introducción de José Francisco Fernández
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Reviewer: **María J. López**

Stories and Texts for Nothing (1967) has its origin in an exceptional moment in literary history, one that has provided us with some of the major texts of 20th century literature: Samuel Beckett's 'siege in the room', the period of frenetic writing activity that he spent when he returned to Paris in 1946. It was at this stage of his literary career that Beckett took the crucial decision of abandoning the English language in favour of French, and that he wrote the story "Premier Amour" (1970), the novel *Mercier et Camier* (1970), the plays *En attendant Godot* (1952) and *Eleuthéria* (1995), and the three novels that make up his famous *Trilogy*: *Molloy* (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951) and *L'Innommable* (1953). He also wrote the texts included in the collection under review here: the stories "La fin" (1946), "L'expulsé" (1947), and "Le calmant" (1955), and *Textes pour rien* (1955), thirteen numbered short prose pieces.

Beckett's adoption of French implied a radical transformation of his writing style, with the erudition, exuberance and stylistic virtuosity of his first texts giving place to an austere, restrained and minimalist linguistic expression. It is probably in this sense that we should understand Beckett's famous assertion that "in French it's easier to write without style" (Perloff 1990: 162). Beckett's association of French with "weakness" and "asceticism", as opposed to "the temptation to rhetoric and virtuosity" that he found in the English language (Cronin 1996: 360), certainly permeates his post-1946 French texts, as well as the translations into English of those texts that he himself carried out, and on which José Francisco Fernández has based the present translation. Hence, the main strength of

this translation – the indispensable condition without which it would have been a failure, and which turns it into an undeniable success instead – is the way it preserves the simplicity and precision in the use of the language that Beckett no doubt saw as an essential dimension of *Stories and Texts for Nothing*.

As regards the composition and publication process of these literary works, the stories "La fin" and "L'expulsé" came to light in different journals in 1946 and 1947 respectively. Together with "Le calmant", their revised versions were included in *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* (Minuit, 1955). The English translations – carried out by Beckett himself, with the collaboration of Richard Seaver in the first two –, with the titles "The End", "The Calmative" and "The Expelled", were subsequently published in 1954, 1962 and 1967. In 1967, the three stories came to light in America within *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (Grove) and in England within *No's Knife: Collected Shorter Prose, 1945-1966* (Calder).¹ These two collections included the first English translation of *Textes pour rien*, which had been written in French between 1950 and 1951. As for the reception of these texts in Spain, most of Beckett's works were translated from French into Spanish towards the end of the 60's

1. *Four Novellas* (Calder 1977) included a fourth story, "First Love" – "Premier Amour" –, written, like the others, in 1946, but not published in French until 1970 and in English until 1973. There is a tendency to publish and study these four stories together, given their coincidence in dates of composition and their strong thematic and formal affinities.

by Álvaro del Amo for Tusquets, whereas Ana María Moix translated *Textes pour rien* also for Tusquets, in 1971. Both of them have had subsequent editions. Surprisingly enough, this is the first time that these texts are translated from their English version into the Spanish language.

The late arrival of this much wanted translation must be partly due to the neglect that, as Gontarski has pointed out, Beckett's short fiction has tended to suffer from (1995: xi), both in terms of Beckett's canon and of the short story tradition in general. Beckett's stories, however, will provide the reader with an excellent introduction into the new kind of narrative that the Irish writer produced after his turn to French. Together with the stylistic qualities discussed above, the three stories, as Kenner explains, are the first texts by Beckett to incorporate the dimension that was going to become central in his later narrative: "the uncertainties of the first person" (1973: 116). Certainly, the use of the monologue as technique of narrative representation entailed that "the narrator's inability to describe and account for himself" became "the central dilemma" in Beckett's writing (Pattie 2000: 63). The stories also meant the definite consolidation of the vagrant figure as the protagonist of Beckett's texts. Thus, in "The Expelled" – "El expulsado" – an unnamed character is thrown out of his house and undertakes the search for new lodgings. "The Calmative" – "El calmante" – begins with the famous line "I don't know when I died", and from that post-mortem point tells the story of a voyage through countryside and town. The protagonist of "The End" – "El fin" – is also expelled from what looks like a charitable institution and, after meeting a variety of characters and situations, seems to resign himself to ebb life away.

In his translation, Fernández perfectly conveys the impression of stylistic simplicity, realistic atmosphere and narrative straightforwardness that Beckett permeated these stories with, as we see in the following passage from "El fin":

Avancé a trompicones cegado por la luz. Un autobús me llevó al campo. Me senté en un prado al sol. Pero me parece que eso fue mucho más tarde. Me metí hojas en el sombrero, por todo el

borde, para que hicieran de sombrilla. Por la noche caía el relente. Durante horas deambulé por los campos. Al final encontré un montón de estiércol. Al día siguiente emprendí el camino de vuelta a la ciudad. Me hicieron bajar de tres autobuses. Me senté al borde de la carretera y sequé la ropa al sol. Disfruté haciéndolo (2015: 61).

The sentence in which the narrator wonders about the temporality of those events, thus putting the reliability of his account into question, is an example of the many self-doubts, contradictions and speculations which pervade these stories, and whose semantic undecidability Fernández is faithful to. In this way, the apparent realism gives way to a dreamlike world that is ultimately unknowable and inscrutable, full of events that remain unexplained. This goes together with a failure to construct a fully coherent identity, and an inability to establish a meaningful relation with the world, manifested in a radical mismatch between story and life, as we see at the end of "El expulsado" – "No sé por qué he contado esta historia. Bien podría haber contado otra cualquiera. Quizá algún día pueda contar otra. Ya veréis, criaturas, lo mucho que se parecen" (2015: 33) – or in the final lines of "El fin": "Me vino una memoria borrosa y fría de la historia que podía haber contado, una historia a semejanza de mi vida, quiero decir, sin el coraje de acabar ni la fuerza de seguir" (2015: 75).

Nonetheless, in spite of its narrative and representative uncertainties, the 'I' of the stories "remains more or less ... psychologically and narratologically whole" and "something like representable external reality still exists," even if it is "inseparable from the consciousness perceiving it" (Gontarski 1995: xxiv-xxv). This partial psychological wholeness and this notion of a representable external reality completely disappear in *Texts for Nothing*. What has taken place between them? *The Trilogy*. After finishing *The Unnamable*, Beckett found himself in a creative impasse that he tried to overcome through the writing of *Texts for Nothing*. As he explained in 1956, "the very last thing I wrote – '*Textes pour rien*' – was an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration, but it failed" (Shenker 1999: 148). Disintegration, then, understood in multiple ways – psychological,

existential, narrative, linguistic – is the key feature of *Texts for Nothing*, which are a major leap beyond the *Stories* and which continue the trend begun in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. As Gontarski points out, in *The Trilogy*, Beckett replaces external reality and literary characters by “something like naked consciousness” and “a plethora of voices”, elements that are kept in *Texts for Nothing*, which should not be seen as “‘completed’ stories but shards, aperçus of a continuous unfolding narrative, glimpses at a never to be complete being (narrative)” (1995: xxv).

But in a way, the *Texts for Nothing* – *Textos para nada* – go even beyond the *Trilogy*. Whereas in the three novels, there is at least the sense of “progressive disembodiment”, thus conforming to “the oldest pattern of story-telling, the voyage or quest” (Abbott 1994: 106), linear continuity is totally absent in *Texts for Nothing*, pervaded by an overwhelming sense of narrative inertia and paralysis, provoked by incessant aporia and paradox:

diré todo eso mañana, sí, mañana por la noche, alguna otra noche, esta noche no, esta noche es demasiado tarde, demasiado tarde para arreglar las cosas, me iré a dormir, de forma que pueda decir, que me oiga decir, un poco más tarde, he dormido, se ha dormido, pero no habrá dormido, o bien está durmiendo ahora, no habrá hecho nada, nada salvo seguir, haciendo qué, haciendo lo que hace, es decir, no sé, rendirme, eso es, habré seguido rindiéndome, sin haber tenido nada, sin haber estado allí (2015: 123).

The translation of a text that does not offer any of the conventional formal and thematic handles is never easy. Fernández, however, is fully successful, as he replicates Beckett’s paratactic and irregular syntax in order to convey the

the meditative mood of a narrator unable to present itself as a stable or unified subject; thrown into a meaningless void with no ontological supports; unable to go silent, but also to tell a coherent story:

todo lo que digo será falso y para empezar no lo habré dicho yo, aquí soy la simple marioneta de un ventrílocuo, no siento nada, no digo nada, él me tiene en sus brazos y me mueve los labios con una cuerda, con un anzuelo, no, no hacen falta labios, todo está oscuro, no hay nadie ... (2015: 115).

As critics have pointed out, Beckett’s post-1946 narrative was deeply affected by his experiences during the war in France. In this collection, the reader will encounter texts that have been largely neglected, but which are essential in order to get a sense of the way in which the terror and pain of existence were translated into the linguistic texture of Beckett’s later narrative. Besides, the reader will find useful orientation in Fernández’s brief but informed introduction, which gives the main clues needed to contextualise and understand these baffling and singular texts.

With the translation of this collection, and after having published *Sueño con mujeres que ni fu ni fa* (Tusquets, 2011, with Miguel Martínez-Lage) and *Mercier y Camier* (Confluencias, 2013), Fernández, one of the most important Spanish Beckettian scholars, consolidates himself as an expert translator of Beckett’s work. His contributions, furthermore, are being vital in covering important gaps in the reception of Beckett’s texts in Spain. One can only hope, then, that he will soon surprise us with another Beckettian story, a “farrago of silence and words, of silence that is not silence and barely murmured words”.

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