

1) Outline the emergence of 'folklore' as an object of intellectual inquiry.

The folklore tales are a patrimony of all the cultures and, in most of the cases, precede the written registration.

By their oral nature, they suppose a narrator who transmits them to an audience that receives them and from which, arrived the moment, there will go out the future narrators who will contribute to the diffusion of those same tales in the presence of new audiences. Thus, the story travels with facility from a place to another, which, mostly, explains the reasons for which the same history, sometimes with minimal modifications, can be found in places removed both in the time and in the space.

The written collection of folk materials goes back to the origins themselves of the literature. To justify this affirmation, it is necessary to indicate that both the Homeric poems and the Bible include stories and previous tales, to which the investigators grant popular nature.

Not very far away in time, the Irish peasants enjoyed so much the art of narrating stories. Before radio and television it was the favorite pastime for the poor people, especially in the regions placed in the west of the country, where the Gaelic language and the culture had better remained. While in the rest of the western Europe the narration of stories, when these began to be systematically collected, was especially a minor form of entertainment, orientated almost always to children and to young people, in Ireland, until the beginning of this century, the reading of histories and legends continued being an activity that the adults liked also very much. This was forcing the narrators to strain very much in their task and to demonstrate a few artistic abilities beyond the common.

The survival up to entered this century of a verbal art so developed can be attribute, partly, to the authority that the English men exercised on Ireland since the first years of the XVIIth century until the beginning of this century. The peasants were in a pitiful educational and economic state that favored the conservation of a popular tradition that had always been very rich and complex. Tradition inherited from the former aristocratic culture of Celtic origin that had bloomed in the island from very remote times, and only disappeared with the definitive defeat of the last Irish lords. In fact, the roots of the modern Irish *seanchaí* are in the *fili* or professional poet of the former Gaelic aristocracy. They were occupying a very important role in the Irish traditional society. According to the *Book of Lienster*, a manuscript of the XIIth century, they should have in their repertoire three hundred and fifty stories. Many of the stories that were forming a part of the repertoire of the medieval *filid* have come to us in manuscripts of different antiquity although the experts say that these written versions are not more than a pale reflection of the recitals on which they were based.

The former Irish society was conservative and, in spite of the terrible commotion that the vikings incursions represented for the island initiated in the VIIIth century and the later English-Norman conquest, while there was an Irish aristocracy capable of maintain the old institutions, the *filid* continued existing. Nevertheless, in the XVIIth century the disaster happened unexpectedly. After the Battle of Kinsale (1601), the Irish resistance was definitively squashed by the British invader, provoking the exile of the Gaelic nobility. But their art did not disappear.

In the modern Ireland, the *seanchaithe* were simple peasants, fishermen or vagabonds who, bewildered by the readings of their predecessors, were cultivating the art of narrate and in very different occasions: long night readings close to the home fire, in the long funerals of the rural Ireland or during a break in the field labors. In the golden epoch, when the oral tradition have not lost an apex of their vitality, the passion of the people about the tales was extraordinary. The folklorist Sean O'Sullivan tells that, when his father were barely eight years, he and other children of his age were spending the hours, night after night, listening to an old story-teller woman.

For centuries, the *seanchaithe* cultivated the art of the oral story. For all those people, narrators and audience, the stories were representing something more than a form of entertainment. They were a non renounceable part of their spiritual patrimony, of their own personality as people. But nowadays the oral tradition has almost disappeared in Ireland, caused by the advance of the mass media, the obligatory education and the emigration, and also by the gradual extinction of the Irish language.

In Ireland, and in fact in all the British Islands, the recollection of popular stories was initiated with Thomas Crofton Croker (1798–1854), who published a book titled *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* in 1825. The following year appeared a German translation by the famous brothers Grimm, whose famous collection of popular stories had stimulated to a legion of perpetuators in Europe, including Croker.

The work of Croker had its perpetuators, as Samuel Lover with its *Legends and Stories of Ireland* (1831–1834), or William Carleton, author of the work *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1830–1833). Nevertheless, the most important was Patrick Kennedy, whose main contribution to the early folklore appeared in 1866 with the title *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*. This book represents more faithfully what the Irish literature can offer, it includes not only fairytales, but also marvelous stories, legends of saints and narrations of the 'fenian cycle'.

Croker, as many of the folklorists who continued its example and began to reveal the dazzling treasure of the Irish tradition, was member of the protestant minority of Ireland, and he saw the stories and legends of the oppressed catholic peasants as a scholarly theme of study. As Croker, all these authors rewrite the stories according to the esthetic criterion of the epoch, and present a minimized and distorted image of the Irish peasantry. That means that, in all of these first contributions, in spite of the valour that still conserve some of them, the romantic nationalism that, in other countries, as Germany or Norway, impregnates the work of the first folklorists, it can not be found.

An out-standing figure was Lady Wilde, who took advantage of the writings of her husband, Sir William Wilde, to publish two books of folklore: *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887) that offers legends to the reader not only on fairies, but also recipes of popular medicine, incantations and erudite reflections on the Celtic antiquity, and *Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland* (1890). The collection of Lady Wilde presents two important innovations respect to the work of her predecessors: the literary quality of the texts and the fact that the author was linking folklore with nationalism. Thus, the stories were stopping being the fantasies of a picturesque peasantry to turn into the reflex of the most intimate essence of a people that, by then, began already to re-arise culturally after centuries of oppression.

The following significant figure in the field of the collection and study of the Irish folklore comes from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, from the numerous Irish colony that had crossed the ocean in search of better conditions of life. Jeremiah Curtin was a son of emigrants who had come to North America in the first half of the XIXth century. The reading of the Irish material published up to the date and his conversations with emigrants newly come from Ireland, led him to suspect that the tradition of this country was richer than it was thought till then. In 1887 he travelled for the first time to Ireland and he verified that the Irish narrators had much more to offer than what it had been published up to the date. Curtin published his first results in 1890, in a book titled *Myths and Folklore of Ireland*. Later visits to Ireland allowed him to publish two books more: *Hero-tales of Ireland* and *Tales of the Fairies and of the Ghost World*. Certainly, Curtin's interest for the Irish stories was purely scientific, but that does not reduce importance. With him it begins to do act of presence the rigorous folklorism, which offers us in all their brilliance, the art of the popular narrators.

Douglas Hyde, as folklorist, playwright and poet, is one of the most distinguished figures from the Literary Irish Renaissance. In 1888 he collaborated with Yeats, contributing English translations of Gaelic stories for the first anthology of folklore assembled by the poet, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. Hyde commented in a conference in those days the difficulties that the rigorous folklorist had to confront at the moment of gathering the stories. He spoke about the forms of encouraging the narrator and how to take note

of the stories.

Yeats convinced him to publish a collection of stories in English, fact that materialized in 1890 with the title *Beside the fire: To Collection of Irish Gaelic Folk Stories*, fundamental work in the history of the Irish folklore. Hyde gathers the stories in the same way they were recited by the narrators and he tells the readers about who relates each of the stories, where and when. In 1915 Hyde published a new book of translations, *Legends of Saints and Sinners*, in which he offers a wide sample of the religious folklore of his country. Yeats lived through great part of his childhood in Sligo Co., a particularly rich place in traditions on the fairies. During all his career like poet and playwright he was kept faithful to the oral and literary Irish tradition, in which his poetry and his theatre found an inexhaustible source of material.

It is of well known Lady Gregory's collaboration with Yeats, which gave rise to the recreation by her of the big cycles of the mythological medieval Irish literature in books as *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: the Story of the Men of the Net Branch of Ulster* (1902) and *God's and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha of Danaan and the Fianna of Ireland* (1904). But the real treasure was in the oral tradition, in the living literature of the people, which the poet and Lady Gregory exploited together speaking with peasants and fishermen. Fruit of this labor is *The Celtic Twilight* (1902) and *Poets and Dreamers*, collection of essays on the oral Irish tradition. It gathers remnants of those episodes of the history that the people of the village retains in the collective memory, including traditions that go from the heroes of the 'Fenian cycle' to anecdotes on Oliver Cromwell or Daniel O'Connell.

Lady Gregory's great contribution to the field of the folklore does not appear until 1920, with the publication of the book *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*. We have here neither stories nor legends, but what the modern folklorists call *memorats*, that is to say, testimonies in which the narrator explains without any type of artistic production his personal meetings with the supernatural thing. A great work to get in the details of the Irish tradition and in the mentality of the people that has forged it.

It is necessary to stress that, from Douglas Hyde, the movement for the collection and publication of folklore acquires a few ideological and aesthetic connotations of supreme transcendency. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Hyde himself and other authors, especially the playwright John Millington Synge, drank from the inexhaustible source of folklore because they were fully conscious that the old stories, transmitted from generation to generation by a politic and culturally oppressed peasantry, constituted an essential element of the Irish identity. The reoverdraft bequeathed of the oral narrators interweaves in a literature again mold, written in the language now assimilated and enriched of the oppressor. The old tradition of the *filid* is transmuted into dramas, poems and stories and comes this way to an urban public for whom the old tradition was relegated to the oblivion. This, together with many other factors, helps to form the state of opinion that, at the beginning of this century, leads to the birth of a free Ireland, at least partly, from the British authority.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DONNELLY & MILLER, J. S. Jr. & K. A. *Irish Popular Culture, 1650–1850*. Dublin, 1998.

DORSON, R. M. 'Foreword' to Sean O'Sullivan, *Folktales of Ireland*. London, 1966.

DORSON, R. M. *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. London, 1972.

FONDERBRIDER, J. & GAMBOLINI, G. *Cuentos Celtas, Cuentos Folklóricos*. Buenos Aires, 2000.

GLASSIE, H. *Irish Folktales Introduction*. Harmondsworth, 1987.

O'SULLIVAN, S. *The Folklore of Ireland*. London, 1974.

OSBORNE-McKNIGHT, J. *Una leyenda celta, Historia de san Patricio de Irlanda.* Barcelona, 2000.