

Interview with Juan José Delaney: Irish-Argentine Literature, A Personal Account as a Writer

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Juan José Delaney has been writing short stories since he was fifteen, a genre that, in his case, is historically double bound by an Irish literary tradition led by James Joyce, Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain, and the Argentine writers Benito Lynch, Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar. Prior to that he used to enjoy creating brief sketches for his schoolmates; because of this he believes that his first (hidden) vocation is writing for the stage.

The fact is that, while he was finishing secondary school, *The Southern Cross*, which is the newspaper of the Irish community in Argentina, published his first story: "Los dos sueños". That was the first of many contributions to the paper and paved the way for his first collection of short stories: *La carcajada*, typeset and printed at the printing house of the Irish-Porteño newspaper. The book was eventually published in 1974 and, much to the surprise of the young author, praised by Jorge Luis Borges, his hero, who suggested that Delaney had a duty to continue.¹ In 1978 he published a second collection, *Los pasos del tiempo*, which included a story related to the Irish in Argentina: "Los papeles de Nicholas Coughlan". Fifteen years later, in 1993, while taking part in the International Writing Program of the University of Iowa (USA), he revised a number of sketches and unfinished stories concerning the Irish-Porteños. The result was *Tréboles del sur*, which he completed that year. Back in Buenos Aires he continued teaching Argentine Literature at the Universidad del Salvador, contributing to newspapers and magazines such as *La Prensa*, *Ámbito Financiero*, *Letras de Buenos Aires*, *Proa* and *Todo es Historia*, among others.

Juan José Delaney was invited to the *First Symposium of Irish Studies in South America*, held at the University of São Paulo in September 2006, and delighted his audience with his personal account as a writer always concerned with creative ways of representing the unofficial version of Irish-Argentine historiography seen through contemporary eyes.

LI - *In your articles and presentation you affirm that there is an Irish-Argentine Literature. What kind of characteristics does it present that makes the difference? Is there a specific aesthetics in the Irish Literature of the Diaspora?*

JJD - The question is: what marks the belonging of certain literary works to a given literature? Is it language? I wouldn't say. Samuel Beckett was Irish but he wrote most of his works in French. Still his characters, his humor, in a way his sense of life, are deeply Irish. Is it the setting? Although written in English, William Henry Hudson's principal works are settled in the Province of Buenos Aires and according to some handbooks of English and Argentine literature it seems that his works belong indistinctly to the English and to the Argentine literature. The other topic is: who cares? In relation to your question it is clear that there is a more or less significant *corpus* of literature written by Irish who lived in Argentina and whose work refer to the experience of their people in that country and, in cases, to the struggle with an unknown language. I believe that the most important samples of this phenomenon are: *Tales of the Pampas*, by William Bulfin, *You'll Never Go Back*, by Kathleen Nevin, and, in Spanish, four short stories by Rodolfo "Rudy" Walsh: "Los oficios terrestres", "Irlandeses detrás de un gato", "Un oscuro día de justicia" and "El 37". I consider this Irish-Argentine literature because it has been written by Irish or writers of Irish ancestry for whom migration, language and cultural confrontation appear as a problem. I wouldn't say that these works share a specific aesthetic, but certain pessimism runs through them. We can see the same thing in the tango, that other creation of the European migrants in Argentina.

LI - *Tell us about your experience of being noticed by Jorge Luis Borges who praised the inner force of your stories and encouraged you to continue as a writer.*

JJD - I'll never forget that, as I won't forget when I went to see him to thank him for his comments on my first book. "Delaney? It sounds Irish", he said in perfect English, after which he started recalling Irish authors to finish stating that the most important English writers are Irish. I met him two more times and that was it. He was a great man, rather melancholic. He was a writer who wrote for the writers.

LI - *When did you decide to focus your narratives on the Irish-Argentine community and why?*

JJD - At the beginning of the 1990s, a friend of mine addressed me saying: "Listen, you should write the story of the Irish in Argentina from a fictional point of view. You're the one". Although I had already published one story related to the Irish-porteños, I understood that since I had been immersed in the Irish community all my life, going through all kind of situations concerning that small European community in America, I was in a good condition to do the job. So I decided to start a collection of tales on the topic, given an account of the Irish in Argentina, their struggles and their ups and downs, ignoring the triumphal official version. The result was *Tréboles del sur*, followed by *Moirá Sullivan*, my first novel, and a play, *La viuda de O'Malley*. I just completed *El arpa y el océano*, a new series, and I am planning a second novel. The experience confirmed me that we all have at least one story to tell: our own.

LI - *Tell us about your first novel.*

JJD - *Moirá Sullivan* was published in 1999. It gives an account of an Irish-American fictional scriptwriter for the silent movies, her crack-up when she is silenced forever in 1927 with the coming of the sound into the motion pictures, her marriage to an Irish-American executive who is sent by the Company to Buenos Aires where he dies still a young man, and her end in St. Patrick's Home, in La Plata.

LI - *Moreover, you also went back to your first experience of writing for the stage – a play published in ABEI Journal in 2005 – where you focused on the effects and various transformations of a diasporic subject due to the inner tensions provoked by the encounter of cultures. What kind of play is it?*

JJD - I completed a comedy called *La viuda de O'Malley*, which will be probably presented during the Second Symposium of Irish Studies in South America, in Buenos Aires, next year. The story is settled in a farm in Capitán Sarmiento, Carmen de Areco, flat countryside in the province of Buenos Aires during the 1920's. The family group is composed of the mother and her three children; she has a combative relationship with them because of her strict Victorian principles and authoritarian personality. A Spanish, Catholic priest is also part of this group, who being their spiritual advisor, visits them regularly. Not only does the widow struggle against the ambitions of her eldest son who is planning to fly off to Ireland and against the relationship of her daughter with a Jewish boy, but she also feels that the mental deficiency of her youngest son is a terrible curse. The play gives also an account of how difficult it was for many Irish to become part of a completely different culture.

LI - *You have explored different genres in your writing – short stories, essays, a novel and a play. Which of them do you feel most at ease with?*

JJD - As a reader and as a writer, I feel that the short story is my genre. I always enjoyed telling stories – usually big fat lies – and when I discovered my vocation I decided to write short stories. I started in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, namely tales with a fixed structure (introduction, development and an unexpected ending) in order to provoke an *effect* on the reader. Gradually I moved to a different kind of fiction in which the accent is put not in a strong plot but in a situation, a character or an atmosphere. Anton Chekhov, James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield are the leaders in the field. Most of the stories of the collection I am completing just now fit into this narrative mode that I consider more realistic.

LI - *Could you describe your experience of the creative process of writing? Is there any historical, cultural or family research that triggers your act of writing? What is it that stirs your imagination? Is there any magic at the moment of writing?*

JJD - It is known that the usual sources are: our experience, what happens to others and, since literature also comes from literature, what we read. In fact, a familiar anecdote, a document (an old letter, for example), a situation I witnessed when I was a boy and that after apparently disappearing suddenly reappears with a new meaning or sense, even a photo... might be the beginning of a story. I recently wrote one called "Salguero 550" and the inspiration came from a photo of the Irish Girls' Home. I remember that I went to visit the place, only to discover that the building didn't exist any more. In fact it had been demolished in 1960. Anyway, what I had was enough: I imagined that many (perhaps funny) situations went on within that community of nuns and Irish-porteño girls who lived there while working in Buenos Aires or looking for a position in the city or in life. So the single document and a few interviews to survivors of the Irish Girls' Home were enough for me to write a piece of fiction. And since one thing brings another, now I find that I have material for an extended Salguero 550 series. The process continues when I imagine a situation or a character, an interesting or strange character (life is full of them); then easily comes the beginning and the end of the story. The hard work is to complete the body of the text. When the character that appears in my mind is strong enough, then I consider writing a novel. And to give an answer to the last part of your question, I believe the moment of writing is magical in the sense that it becomes a cathartic experience conveying a certain kind of revelation.

LI - *The way you explored characters in your short stories is different from the way you explored them in your short novel Moira Sullivan. Tell us about the process of writing this novel. In my opinion you succeeded in describing the inner turmoil of a solitary human mind and, even more, in getting into the imagination of an Irish-American woman doubly dislocated and conscious of being always elsewhere, always unsettled, either geographically or psychologically. To what extent does the postmodern fragmentary narrative help you portray a disintegrated mind?*

JJD - *Moira Sullivan* is a consequence of the existence of an old aunt who passed away years ago, and my taste for music and the silent movies. These three components were enough to bring out the idea that there are other intensive and effective ways of communication rather than language. Although I knew that I couldn't give an account of a whole detailed lifetime and that the best thing I could offer was a character in certain revealing situations, I wasn't aware that my novel was matching the so-called postmodern fragmentary narrative. The story is organized as a kind of a collage. This has to do with my experience as a short-story writer; in fact, the invented movies recalled in the novel were originally conceived as short stories. But it was because of the strong character that in the end the project became a novel. After planning the work in a very general way, I started writing unconnected fragments. The hard part was to put them together, giving the sequences a secret, unseen order.

LI - *Your recent book is the biography of Marco Denevi. What difficulties did you face as a biographer if you compare this task with that of being a novelist, playwright or short story writer?*

JJD - I love reading biographies, even of people whose work I don't know. At one moment I thought of writing one for the sake of writing and learning. Considering that Marco Denevi's work was not sufficiently known and praised, I asked him permission to take the job. The main problem was that the author, who at the beginning had a positive attitude and assured he would be willing to help me, was a great liar. Anyway, my intention was to write a literary biography. This means that the accent would be put on the story of Denevi's writings and on the writing process. Because nothing really interesting happened in his life: he hardly traveled, he was never prosecuted... My original intention was to give an account of the inner life of a writer, and in this sense the book helped me to better understand in what way a literary work is a result of different factors: family, education, formation, readings, experiences and so forth. If there is talent, then you have a piece of literature which always is an aesthetic product and an interpretation of life.

Note

1 Cfr.: Gente, Buenos Aires, September 19, 1974, page 33.

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