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Tea for Two, Scones, and Literature![*] An Interview with Juan José Delaney

María Graciela Eliggi
National University of La Pampa (<mgeliggi@yahoo.com>)

Juan José Delaney is an Irish-Argentine or much better an "Irish-Porteño" as he likes to call himself. His family arrived in Argentina in the nineteenth century and he is part of the fourth generation in our country. Prominent member of the Irish community in Argentina, he has developed a career as writer, professor of Argentine Literature at Universidad del Salvador, Buenos Aires, and headmaster of a school situated in the suburbs of the same city. In his writings, or in most of them, he deals with characters and topics that are representative of his Irish ancestry. Praised in 1974 on occasion of his first collection of short stories by acclaimed Argentine literary figure, Jorge Luis Borges, he published in 2018 a book called *Borges and Irish Writing* on the relationship between Borges and Irish literature and its influence on his writings. He has also written, *Marco Denevi y la sacra ceremonia de la escritura. Una biografía literaria* (2006). This biographical text constitutes an interesting issue, since Denevi, together with Borges and Julio Cortázar is considered one of the three best Argentine short story writers, as María González Rouco (2006), claims in her review of the book. Delaney himself has stated in other interviews (Amador-Moreno, 2018) his preference for that genre, a topic which we will explore later.

As this monographical collection for the 11th issue of *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* is devoted to the amazing relationship between Ireland and Latin America, it is my intention to engage Juan José in a dialogue, over a cup of tea – only that virtually – to reflect upon his life as an Irish-Porteño, on his writings and on literature in general.

[*] This interview was carried out virtually, but it would have been a face-to-face one if the Covid-19 pandemic had not struck, isolated and locked us down in our home and home towns. I'm sure that the best meeting place to talk about Juan José Delaney's life as an Irish-Porteño and about his literary works would have been, as on other occasions, "Los Galgos" coffee shop and bar, which due to being close to his agent's offices and to his university was frequented regularly by the writer.

MGE: *Juan José, we first met for the II Symposium of Irish Studies in South America (at Manzana de las Luces, Buenos Aires) that our friends from ABEI, generously offered to move from São Paulo. It was indeed an extraordinary event, full of energy, with a synergy which generated a positive mood among participants, and I dare say, it was the beginning of Irish Studies as we know them today in Argentina. What are your thoughts about it?*

JJD: I remember that. It was a wonderful Symposium which included presentations of relevant academics and writers like Colm Tóibín who read passages from *Brooklyn* his work in progress. That very high occasion helped to promote Irish Studies in Buenos Aires and, probably, the project of an Irish Studies Program I had presented at Universidad del Salvador in 2006, finally accepted in 2016 thanks to the Irish Embassy in Buenos Aires.

MGE: Certainly, and also in other parts of Argentina as well, through initiatives in several National Universities such as La Pampa (UNLPam), La Plata (UNLP) and Córdoba (UNC). Since we first met in 2007, we talked several times about interviewing members of the Irish community in Argentina, and you once said "That's an interesting idea … I'll pass you on some names for you to contact…". That project never materialized but my first name in the list would have been, and in fact now is "yours". So, my first question for you is related to your childhood as an Irish-Porteño. What was it like to be born in a family with Irish ancestry on both sides: Delaney/Coughlan?

JJD: For special reasons having to do with my mother's health, I spent my childhood with my great aunt and great uncle (Kathy Dunne and James Coughlan) who had no children. They spoke Irish-English, sometimes Irish-Porteño (a variation consisting in a curious combination of Spanish and English), and when they tried Spanish they did it in a very awkward way. They were active members of the Irish Community in Buenos Aires, their friends were all Irish and they used to receive the visit of the Pallottines from St. Patrick's Church in the Villa Urquiza neighbourhood. Villa Urquiza, Belgrano, Villa Devoto, Almagro, in town, and Santos Lugares or Palomar in the suburban area were some of the typical districts where the Irish settled. In the countryside (the "camp", after the Spanish word "campo"), San Antonio de Areco, Capitán Sarmiento, Arrecifes, Junín, General Pinto, Ameghino, Rojas, Salto, Mercedes and Suipacha were, in the Province of Buenos Aires, among the preferred areas for stockbreeding and farming. I remember when the Coughlans took me to St. Patrick's Church on the occasion of the visit of Irish-American Bishop Fulton Sheen to Argentina. When the mass was over, together with the rest of the Assembly they saluted the bishop and asked him to bless me, which he did. They also used to take me to the Holy Cross Church, run by the Passionist Congregation, at that time the Irish Church, and to the bazaars organized by different Irish Argentine societies. They were subscribers to *The Southern Cross*[1];but when they wanted fresh international news they would buy the *Buenos Aires Herald*[2]. My uncle enjoyed reading detective stories and that was the beginning of my devotion to Cornell Wollrich, John Dickson Carr and others. Agatha Christie, Conan Doyle and Chesterton came after. That personal "Paradise" was definitely lost when, years after, my parents sent me to a Salesian boarding school in Ramos Mejía, Buenos Aires, where the present Pope and his brother had spent a boarding year in 1949.

[1] *The Southern Cross*, is an Argentine Roman Catholic English language newspaper founded in 1875. It is still in print to this day on a monthly basis. See <https://thesoutherncross.info/> (03/2021).

[2] The *Buenos Aires Herald* was a daily newspaper in English founded in 1876. It ceased publication in 2017.

MGE: I see a parallel here with Rodolfo Walsh's[3] school life in the convent school in Capilla del Señor and the Fahy Institute in Moreno, which for him also meant another Paradise lost, only that in your case the Salesians, as a congregation, did not have a strong connection with the Irish. Boarding schools in the past were not a rare option for families, was it a hard time or did you enjoy or benefit from that type of schooling?

JJD: Though the Salesians were not hard on us and we were well fed, I didn't like to be there. I wanted to be free. I remember that they controlled our readings, and that Borges was banned. "Borges es destructor", they would say. But I used to disguise *Historia universal de la infamia* (Borges 1935), *El Aleph* (Borges 1949) and books by Cortázar or Sabato with covers torn out from lives of saints or spiritual handbooks... On the other hand, I'm thankful for the education I received: Latin, Literature, Philosophy, Theology and the official subjects. Not to speak of our teachers, most of them brilliant and very well prepared. Sports was also an important activity, but I was terribly awkward. We graduated with an official degree known as "Bachiller Superior en Letras" (it could be similar to a GCSE in Spanish Language and Literature). During the last period at that school, I met an Irish Salesian called John Windsor. We became friends and, as a former student, I regularly visited him at his residence in Colegio Pío IX, in town. He was then nearly eighty and had come from County Wicklow when he was 26. He had never been happy in this country and, in the end, he admitted that he had made a serious mistake becoming a priest. Hidden in his wardrobe there was always a bottle of Irish Mist which he enjoyed sharing with the friends who visited him.

MGE: Do you mean, the liquor? I suppose you counted as one of his friends and enjoyed both his company and a glass of Irish mist, too. His story was not unusual, though, only that back then they just accepted it as their fate, today, perhaps, that would be different. I see that either at home or at school you grew up among elderly people and books and this, seems to me, gave you the chance to "overhear" many stories, anecdotes, and as you say to participate in many celebrations and activities proper of those relatives, friends or teachers who continued in many aspects living according to past traditions. That seems to later on serve as inspiration for several of your short stories and novels and in the creation of characters, can you confirm this?

JJD: No doubt. It still appears to me as an endless source of inspiration, together with what I saw, heard and went through afterwards, since I never stopped being an active member of the Hiberno-Argentine community, mainly in relation to cultural undertakings.

MGE: And that is made evident in your literary production; you not only narrate but also portray Argentina, your native country, in close relation with an Ireland which is also yours through your family history, through your readings and through the links you established with the Irish here in Argentina, those back in Ireland or elsewhere. How do you feel fluctuating between different countries and cultures, when you are Argentine but your "blood" says you are also Irish?

[3] Rodolfo Jorge Walsh (1927-1977) was an Argentine writer, journalist and translator of Irish descent. He is considered the initiator of investigative journalism. He is most famous for his *Open Letter from a Writer to the Military Junta* (<http://www.jus.gob.ar/media/2940455/carta_rw_ingles-espa_ol_web.pdf>, 03/2021) which he was able to post before being kidnapped and disappeared. The letter is a protest pamphlet denouncing the widespread human rights abuses perpetrated by the Junta Militar which had taken power in a coup the previous year.

JJD: I'm really proud of the two cultures I've inherited, and I wouldn't say that I fluctuate from one culture to another. A new, different identity appears to be the natural culmination of the encounter of dissimilar cultures. I'm convinced of this that is why I'm always preaching about the richness of integration and assimilation.

MGE: A synthesis, would you say? I see your story as the story of the majority of the Irish community in our country. So my next related question has to do with your meeting Ireland. When did you first visit the land of your ancestors? How was that first meeting with the "imagined island", with the island of your great-grandparents? Where had they come from, by the way?

JJD: I first visited Ireland in 1997. With the only exception of the country's geography, I wasn't surprised at what I found. More than ever, I understood Borges's statement in the sense that many Argentinians are Europeans in exile. But it was the spoken language of the popular Irish people that really moved me: syntax, tone, inflections, rhythm… On the other hand, within the academic milieu, I met people who, surprised, defined my speech as that of the Irish-English of the 19th century, already gone from Ireland. I was considered a kind of linguistic "Noah's Ark". All my ancestors came from County Westmeath. I still have relatives in Walderstown, Athlone.

MGE: Westmeath was one of the counties from which many Irish emigrants came to Argentina, isn't that so? Were your ancestors involved in rural or urban activities here in Argentina?

JJD: Yes, you're right, most of them came from County Westmeath. My ancestors started trying luck in the "camp", but they all failed. They moved then to the city and taking advantage of their English (or Irish-English) ended working for American or British companies.

MGE: I see, the idea of becoming well-off by working the land was generally the first idea of many immigrants, but then as you say if they were not lucky they moved to the cities. In La viuda de O'Malley *(2005) your play, you describe in detail how life in the "camp" was like, daily routines and tasks, the monthly visits of the community priest, the rules of the house. All this is disrupted after Mr. O'Malley's death. The eldest son, Charlie, wants desperately to move to the city, for instance, and he shows the feeling many descendants of Irish immigrants have to return to a land they never knew as if it were their homeland. Have you ever been seduced by that mythical return? Why, do you think, this feeling that you portray in the character tends to persist in the minds of many immigrant's descendants?*

JJD: To me, Ireland is not a place but a deep feeling, an emotion. I'm in Ireland when I read Flann O'Brien, Walter Macken, Seamus Heaney or John Banville; I'm in Ireland when I listen to songs like "Come back to Erin", or "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling", and in this same sense I can say that I spent great part of my childhood in Ireland during the period I lived in Villa Urquiza with the Coughlans. I know that many Irish-Porteños constructed their own mental Ireland, probably forced by the hard reality they went through in this damn country we all love so much. It's a way of spiritual evasion, I would say.

MGE: Yes, you are right, and that is what the character in your play seems to represent. In that play you present many aspects of the Irish settlement during the nineteenth and early twentieth

century in our country. Reading it allows us to understand Father Fahy's[4] "Irish Settlement Model" developed between 1843 and 1871. He definitely played a central role at the time. What are your thoughts about his work in our land with his fellow countrymen and women?

JJD: Everybody knows the part Father Fahy played within the Irish community in the River Plate till his death in 1871. To the Irish and their descendants, he was a true patriarch. But it can't be denied that as a consequence of "protecting" and "preserving" the Irish, he delayed the integration process to the host country.

MGE: That is also clear in the play, the eldest son would follow that pattern, he definitely does not want to be an Argentine citizen, even though by birth he is one, anyway you also suggest that things would begin to change. The female characters in the play – mother and daughter – show differences which seem to derive from the generation to which each belongs. The mother and widow tends to repress her feelings due to her strong Victorian upbringing but Brenda, her daughter, is not ready to comply with such a strict pattern. She decides will not marry an Irish person for instance and elopes with her Jewish boyfriend. What can you tell us about women's roles, their expected behaviours and marriage patterns within the community at the time in which you set the play?

JJD: Irish women, up to, let us say the 1960's, did their best to preserve "the values of the race", as I heard more than once. Up to my parents' generation they hardly intermarried. "Have nothing to do with the natives", "Never get in with the blacks" were regular and offensive remarks. It is in this context that a society for the youngsters called "The Cross and the Shamrock" was created. Its subliminal aim was to encourage marriages between members, all of them Irish-Porteños.

MGE: That would continue the original plan for the first Irish immigrants in Argentina. But you go against that tradition in the play, even though it is set at an earlier time, Brenda rebels and breaks away from community and family impositions, why?

JJD: At that time it wasn't common, but it happened. You can see it in the "Social Events section" published by *The Southern Cross.* Intermarriage was a scandalous affair and it used to arise a hell of a commotion in the family. My mother told me the story of a friend of hers who married an Italian (a "nap", as they were called). His surname was Lamberti, and thanks to my mother's inventiveness the news in the "Wedding Bells section" of *The Southern Cross* appeared with a slight change, an apparent typing mistake: "Lambert". It wasn't Irish but at least it sounded English…

MGE: That's funny, I mean the way it was solved before society but I suppose it was a real scandal as you say. Then, an absolutely interesting character is Ben, the mentally disabled child of the family. What struck me when I read the play is the fact that Ben is "disabled" under the gaze of the family

[4] Anthony Dominic Fahy (1805-1871), an Irish Dominican priest, missionary and head of the Irish community in Argentina between 1844 and 1871. The "settlement model" which the nineteenth century Irish found on entering Argentina was an established structure based on cooperation so that the wealthy could subsidized the poor and the experienced immigrant helped the ones who arrived, carefully organized by Fr. Fahy who also was in charge of keeping savings from immigrants and giving them reasonable advice later regarding what to do and how to invest their money, mainly buying land and cattle.

and people in general, but he has the ability to perceive life in a much simpler yet comprehensive way, he may be said to encapsulate the encounter of cultures. Can you mention the reason for your choice of tango as the music Ben enjoys listening to instead of typically Irish songs?

JJD: The character is based on the life of one of my sisters with Down syndrome. She was very perceptive and intuitive. I always thought that she was able to perceive and see what appeared to be invisible to others. She loved music, and although she enjoyed Jigs and Reels, tango was her favourite form. She possibly recognized the essence of that blue vernacular music linked to the immigration process in Argentina.

MGE: I see, it is remarkable the way people with different abilities as is the case of the character have this acute perception that allows them to grasp what other "normal" human beings are unable to grasp.

I remember the first time I read a text written by you; it was, as most wonderful experiences occur, introduced by a common and dear friend, Laura P.Z. Izarra. She included your novel Moira Sullivan *(1999) in a course she taught at the National University of La Pampa, in 2006. The novel deals, as its title clearly points out, with the life of a woman, an Irish-American woman. Writing afterwards a critical piece on that novel I found that the main character, Moira, was to a certain extent a diasporic subject, I say to a certain extent because, according to some scholars (Safran 1991; Clifford 1994) it does not fulfil all the characteristics of a diasporic subject. Where did you get the subject matter for the novel? Was it inspired by a real-life character? And would you think of her as a diasporic subject?*

JJD: The subject comes from my love for silent movies, from the songs by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart during the Roaring Twenties in New York, and, certainly, from my wonderment at the power of words. Beckett is probably there, as well. You're right when you say that Moira Sullivan is a diasporic subject "to a certain extent" because, although she is always stuck to her culture (not the American but the Irish one), the essence of her existential case is mainly concerned with solitude, with isolation. Moira's human condition of loneliness is, in the novel, stronger than her links to her people's culture.

MGE: I believe that characterization has been the most important aspect in that novel. Moira is an incredible being, someone who arouses all sorts of feelings on readers and also many doubts. She undergoes displacement processes: it is as if she would constantly need to move away: from her family home to New York, first, then to Buenos Aires, Argentina, always in search of a place of her own where she would not be disturbed, where she could be free. But she never gets what she desires. She is a world traveller caught between patriarchies, ambiguous pasts and uncertain futures. Hers is a very sad life but for a brief span of time where she reaches a state of happiness. Would you say that Moira is someone who could not adapt to new developments and situations and that is why she is not only displaced but also encapsulated?

JJD: The character is based on two old Irish-Porteño sisters I knew when I was a boy. As far as I can remember, their problem was not adaptation but communication. One of them, the basic model for Moira Sullivan, was an old maid whose only serious companion was an old wooden RCA Victor radio.

MGE: Well, a radio is something that accompanies Moira, too. Another striking element and central to the way you build up your character is the use of silence and sounds. Silence is what defines her from beginning to end, together with an impossibility to communicate with others: the unfinished and unposted letters, the telephone calls full of interferences, her reluctance to learn Spanish when she moves to Argentina. These are some distinctive traits you imbue your character with. She uses "silence" as an armour. And this connects with another element present in the novel: music. Can you refer to your choosing − here again − tango, to connect people, as you made it happen in La Viuda de O'Malley.

JJD: When words are not enough, silence seems to be the option. Or music. Sometimes music is able to convey what words cannot. In a way, it polishes or corrects its limitations. Tango or what we know as *tango-canción* (music plus lyrics) is sometimes an effective attempt to combine two means of communication. Moira discovers in tango (in the music not in the words: she wasn't able to understand them) anguish, sadness and desperation which is in the essence of immigrant souls.

MGE: Introducing characters with certain disabilities or different abilities is also present in this novel, for example Lucio, the child with Down syndrome, who works out the miracle of transforming the main character's lonely life into "the four less unhappy *years in the life of Moira Sullivan in Buenos Aires" (Delaney 1999, 145; my own emphasis). Again you choose tango to complement this relationship between Moira and Lucio, as background. And silent movies, without unnecessary words, just images to make both characters meet and share. Different cultures, different ages, different languages united by a common feature: isolation. One was isolated by her own choice, the other − especially in the 1960s − by his syndrome and the lack of knowledge about social integration. What did you want to convey with this connection between both characters?*

JJD: That there are other means of communication rather than language. And sometimes more effective, explicit and absolute: music, love, silence, feelings…

MGE: One other crucial aspect of this novel and of your latest novella Memoria de Theophilus Flynn *(2012b) is your use of point of view. In* Moira Sullivan *you use third person narrator but also the first appearing through Konrad's pieces, again another displaced subject, and in her letters, mostly which show revealing features of her life. In* Memoria de Theophilus Flynn*, however you use both first and third but also the second person, something which I consider a challenge; not easy to maintain. How and when − along the writing process − do you decide the point of view from which you are going to write?*

JJD: While planning *Memoria de Theophilus Flynn* I thought in a third person narrative voice. But when I completed what I considered would be the first chapter, I knew Theophilus so well that I wondered what would be the vision of this character seen by an *alter ego.* Finally, Theophilus writes a letter, completing the story and rounding off a portrait of his curious personality. In brief, the three points of view technique appeared unexpectedly during the writing process. It worked.

MGE: Yes, it did work, really. It must be said that you have an additional ability, that to condense texts, as you do in Moira Sullivan *– a real gem, which I'd be delighted to talk endlessly about − and in the short stories and also in* Memoria de Theophilus Flynn *your last novella. But*

we'll move back to Memoria de Theophilus Flynn *because even though it is short, it is surprising how crowded it is with detail, cultural references, real life people made into characters such as Eibhear Walshe and Dermot Keogh, intertextual references − Walshe's* Cissie's Abattoir *(2009) to give an example − and places which connect the green island with different urban and rural Argentine landscapes. You dedicate it to celebrated Irish writer John Banville who, as you put it, "made me notice that I only talk about the 'Old Ireland'" (Delaney 2012b). In fact, in* Memoria de Theophilus Flynn *you do so but you also talk about effects of Celtic Tiger Ireland and a relatively recent time. So, linking one thing with the other: old and new Ireland and Argentina, why do you make Theophilus long for and be tempted to move to Argentina if now Ireland is a land of opportunities and no longer a country of emigrants?*

JJD: Because what he longs for is Old Ireland which is gone. He discovers that within the Irish community in Buenos Aires, Old Ireland is still alive, and feels that he is facing a curious and unique opportunity to recover his past, his lost Paradise. And in more than a way that is what really happens. Just think of the Irish-English language of the Irish-Porteños I mentioned previously...

MGE: Yes, you are right, and I remember you once said "we speak a fossilized variety of English"… There are two frequent elements which we had not mentioned but which appear regularly in your fiction, one is your subtle humour which pervades your work, even in passages that could be considered tragic. The case of Clancy, the Morgan sisters' dog and how you narrate the events around the adoption of the stray dog, using words which suggest a serious or even grave decision, until the day of its funeral, is absolutely hilarious if you consider the whole situation. I see this use of humour, in many cases combined with irony as something distinctive of your prose. How do you plan (or not) those pieces which are part of longer texts?

JJD: I don't plan what role humour will play in my works. It just happens. In real life, humour, irony and even jokes are an important part of my existence. It seriously helps me to put up with the misfortunes that besiege me in this "valley of tears".

MGE: It is true that irony is part of your real life. I found myself many times wondering whether what you were saying in a given situation was true or ironic! You also have dramatic qualities. Now, going back to your work, the other thing I'd like to suggest refers to the abundant references to real life characters, in Argentina, mostly, but also in Ireland and the U.S. related to music, film, history, literature, philosophy, the business world, together with multiple places, that can be used to identify a given time and place in history, a chronotope. Are these part of conscious decisions when planning your story-lines, or they just emerge while you are writing?

JJD: Some of them are part of a plan (New York during the 1920s, musical comedies, language), others (consciously or unconsciously) emerge as functional to what is going on in the story…Finally there are references and subjects or *leitmotifs* that are part of my interests.

MGE: Getting into the terrain of the short stories, the genre that you had admitted to prefer, who of the great short story writers in Argentina, Ireland or the world do you find closer to your style of writing?

JJD: In Argentina, Borges, Marco Denevi, Rodolfo Walsh, Julio Cortázar and Silvina Ocampo. When I was a teenager and started writing, Horacio Quiroga was one of my models,

together with Edgar Allan Poe. The Irish short story writers I prefer are Joyce, John McGahern, Mary Lavin, Edna O'Brien and a forgotten writer called Walter Macken. There are many other authors I always re-read: classics like Anton Chekhov and Franz Kafka, American writers such as O.Henry, John O'Hara and Francis Scott Fitzgerald… I consider Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose work I discovered a few years ago, an extraordinary master in the art of writing short stories.

MGE: That's an amazing and comprehensive array of writers. And I suppose they have influenced you one way or another. Talking about your stories I want to ask you about "Poema del Mar" included in the collection Papeles del Desierto *(2012a) in which you evoke famous Argentine poet Alfonsina Storni's final moments before committing suicide by drowning in the sea. I found the story as a kind of elegy and it is also charged with lyricism. She had her own view of suicide and you seem to show her and her decision as something natural, even pleasant not tragic as it might be expected. Was it a homage paid to Alfonsina and her way of conceiving life and death?*

JJD: I was always moved by the fact that between 1937 and 1938 three great Argentine writers took their lives: Horacio Quiroga, Alfonsina Storni and Leopoldo Lugones. In her poetry, Alfonsina Storni links the act of sleeping with death. Death, then, has not a negative connotation, it is one more fact in life. I feel the same and as a kind of a homage I wrote "Poema del Mar", which is not exactly a short story but a poem in prose (at least that was my intention when I wrote it).

MGE: And I must say you achieved your goal because the story is imbued with that unusual lyricism and tone proper of poetry that I mentioned before. It's a wonderful text that called my attention because from the start it was different to all other texts I had read written by you.

In the story that gives name to the same collection, Papeles del Desierto I sense a kind of oxymoron. Contrary to what it might be expected we witness the life of an ordinary citizen and office clerk in downtown Buenos Aires "urban jungle". But his life is a solitary one, again we can see a state of isolation and detachment in your characters. And a deep sense of feeling a tiny presence "in an immense desert inhabited by ghosts" (Delaney 2004, 67). Aurelio Napodano begins to live an illusory life to make up for his real life lacks.

JJD: You're right. The story is based on an old porteño tradition which takes place in the heart of the city. The last working day of the year, office clerks get rid of all kind of papers by throwing them through the windows. At the end of the day, streets appear paved with torn commercial papers written by anonymous hands. I imagined a piece of private paper picked up by my character. It is part of a handwriting memorandum. My character creates and writes the missing segment of it, building up a love story with the idea of becoming part of it. Solitude is the topic and, one more time, words appear as a possibility of getting over it, not always successfully.

MGE: Going back to the notion of the encounter of cultures, in the Introduction *you wrote to the 2014 edition of* Tales of the Pampas *by William Bulfin, you refer to the stories in that collection as a "document, a text in which words reveal the power and richness of the encounter of cultures" (Bulfin 2014, 15). Why do you think so, and why do you consider language and literature as the epitome of the history of the Irish in Argentina?*

JJD: In a symbolic sense the linguistic mixture we find in *Tales of the Pampas* resembles the country as a hybrid that revealed a higher dimension which was the adaptation and assimilation of

all kinds of people to the host country. Although the samples are limited in Bulfin's work (English, Irish-English, Irish Gaelic, Spanish and Italian voices) it shows that in a subliminal way something significant was going on in terms of linguistics and society. In the end, the history of our Nation showed that works like this collection of stories (together with other expressions like the *lunfardo* repertoire, *sainetes* and tangos) were also microcosms of our "melting pot". It is because of this slow and revealing linguistic transformation the Irish went through that I stated that the story of the language and literature of the Irish in Argentina is the story of the Irish in Argentina.

MGE: Now that we are talking about the importance of language, I'd like to move from fiction to research. In your doctoral thesis What, Che? Integration, Adaptation and Assimilation of the Irish-Argentine Community Through Its Language and Literature *published in 2017 by Ediciones Universidad del Salvador, you explore the phases underwent by the Irish community in its settlement process in Argentina through the study of the language they used and its evolution into Hiberno-Argentine or Irish-Porteño and also through an analysis of the literature produced and read by the Irish in Argentina. How did you manage to build up the corpus for your work, which in your own words, you consider a work of ethnography or as I would put it an ethno-linguistics endeavour? Because many times people feel reluctant to share personal/family letters, diaries and private documents…*

JJD: It wasn't easy. It took time. First of all I examined what was in my memory: funny expressions, Gaelic words, curses half in Spanish, half in English, statements, opinions, unexpected linguistic reactions… I was lucky to inherit the Coughlan / Dunne papers: letters, photos, clippings, documents… The hard part was my work going through *The Southern Cross* collection: editor's reflections, letters (people happy and people complaining), "Social Events", "Wedding Bells", "Wit and Humour", literature written by Irish porteños (poems, short stories, and essays) … I remember I paid for a small ad asking for letters and documents that could be useful in my investigation. Only three replies I got from the readers of the Irish-Porteño paper. But what became a golden mine were the interviews I recorded at Saint Patrick's Home where I found out that the old people were willing to speak and tell their stories. Long and regular conversations with Irish-Porteños provided me with interesting stories and reflections on the local community. I also remember my chats with Fr Windsor, whom I already mentioned, and Passionists Michael Egan and Fred Richards. Not to speak of my uncle Luis Delaney (a Fahy Boy, now in his nineties) still an important source in relation to the fortunes and misfortunes of the Irish-Porteños in the Great City. It was easier to select the representative literature works of each one of the periods.

MGE: I found your thesis not only original but a good starting point for other researchers to expand the field, especially since mostly what I have seen is the study of Irish diasporic literature from a socio-cultural perspective or applying post-colonial or post-modern approaches; however, the linguistic study that you carried out is not the norm. How do you envision possible new developments or variations on the topic?

JJD: The initial intention of my thesis was a systematization of the different stages of the process which, in real life was, obviously, asynchronous. It would be interesting to examine what happened with language and literature in each period considering social status. An analysis of a different or expanded literary corpus could also offer interesting conclusions. It was Laura Izarra who noted that my section on Rodolfo Walsh embodies a hint at a new kind of identity. I am now working on that.

MGE: I suppose that this new direction that you are taking will lead to thought-provoking results. Finally, it is inevitable not to ask about the year 2020. You are a writer; you are naturally trained to make up "worlds". Have you ever thought that this new life of the Covid-19 pandemic and its subsequent lockdown, isolation, and other side effects would be part of our daily lives?

JJD: No. I never imagined I would live to go through this terrible experience. It happens to me that sometimes, when I get up, I say to myself "this is a nightmare". But unfortunately it is real.

MGE: Unfortunately, it is! How did you cope with it? Was writing a way out?

JJD. This unexpected damnation gave me extra time to complete a pending project, which was a new collection of short stories related to the Irish and their descendants in Argentina. The title of the book is *El arpa y el océano* (The Harp and the Ocean). I shouldn't say it, but I'm happy with the result. It seems to me an effective and sincere combination of feelings and ideas I was able to convey by giving way to a free personal voice.

MGE: I'm glad to hear that you are happy with it and I'd love to be reading it soon, will it come out in 2021?

JJD: Yes, the book is supposed to be released at the end of this year. The cover has been illustrated by Irish artist Nuala Gorman, a cousin of mine who lives in Walderstown, Athlone.

MGE: I like this collaborative work "across the ocean", it will certainly be a plus. Juan José, I'm very pleased that after all these years since 2007, meeting at symposia, conferences, lectures and sharing both the academic and the social parts of those events, we could finally "sit over a cup of tea" to have this conversation about aspects of your life as an Irish-Porteño and of course about your brilliant career as a writer. Thank you very much for your time!

JJD: Thank *you!*

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