

The Short Story Narrative Form According to John Banville
A Forma Narrativa do Conto de Acordo com John Banville

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I met John Banville for the first time in Dublin, on February 2008, thanks to our mutual friend the historian Dermot Keogh. My hidden intention was an interview which would be published in Buenos Aires, in *La Nación* newspaper. “You’re asking too much: John doesn’t like interviews, but go and see what happens”, was Dermot’s reaction.

Following John’s advice, the appointment took place at Dunne & Crescenzi, an Italian restaurant near TCD where the writer is still a regular.

Literature, Irish literature, crime novels and language were the principal topics we talked about. I was impressed by his statement on the English variation spoken by the Irish. The Irish language, he said, is oblique: “... you don’t express yourself directly, it is more a form of evasion rather than of communication. We write in English in a unique way.” He rounded off the idea by claiming that, although the Irish lost their original language, there is a kind of deep grammar in their brains: The Irish speak and write English on the basis of the Irish language.

At the end of the meeting I hinted at the chance of an interview. To my surprise he answered positively because, he said, my accent resembled his mother’s.

The dialogue – published a few months later in BA¹ – took place the day after, at the same cafeteria.

Two questions developed in the conversation concern this article: the account of his beginning as a fiction author and a self definition related to his work as prose writer: “I am, he explained, a poet working in prose.”

During his days as a beginner, young writers used to start writing short stories in the hope of getting published in the small magazines. They knew that publishers wouldn’t accept short stories because they wouldn’t be able to sell them. Their model was *Dubliners*, the classic collection by James Joyce, published in 1914. Banville finally gave up that first experience because the form didn’t really interest him, he wanted to be a novelist.

Long Lankin, Banville’s only collection of short stories, was published in 1970 by Secker & Warburg, the British publishing house. At the time of our meeting, the book was out of print.

Last year I had lunch with John, Janet and writer Billy O’Callaghan at the Terra Madre Italian restaurant, in Dublin. At a certain stage of the conversation I asked where could I get a copy of *Long Lankin*. John shook his head disdainfully, meaning that I wouldn’t find it or that it wasn’t worth while looking for it. He changed the subject by referring to one of his literary heroes, Yeats, who wrote “I have no language, only images, analogies, symbols”, and recommending me *Becoming Georgie*, a biography of W. B. Yeats’s wife, by Ann Saddlemyer. I failed trying to get this book, but two months later, back in Buenos Aires, I received from Billy, a brand new copy of *Long Lankin*, an extra one he had found in his library.

In “Trying to Catch Long Lankin by His Arm: The Evolution of John Banville’s *Long Lankin*” Kersti Tarien (2001) goes through the writing and rewriting process of the stories, from the magazine versions to the 1984 second (probably definite) edition, and quotes the reply of David Farrer, Secker and Warburg’s Literary Editor, to a cable dated May 5, 1969, sent by Roger W. Straus, Jr., from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, the American Book Publishers, asking information about a collection of short stories by John Banville that had been also submitted to them:

We are definitely going to publish his collection of short stories, which incidentally we are billing simply as ‘a work of fiction’. I think myself there is a real talent at work here. I have had two long talks with Banville, who is a young Irishman about 23 years old. He is more than half way through a novel. He strikes me as a young man deeply committed to become a novelist and very much aware of what this takes. In fact, I am extremely impressed with him and, though I don’t anticipate making money over *Long Lankin*, I do feel fairly confident of making money out of him in the future. I’d be delighted to hear that you have taken him on. I don’t think you’d go wrong. (386)

Note that the book would be billed as “a work of fiction” and not a series of short stories.

Eventually released in 1970, *Long Lankin* was to be reissued by an Irish publishing house, Gallery Books, in 1984. This significant revised edition, subsequently republished, is the text I am exploring in this article.

In a brief note placed at the end of his work the author explains:

Eight of these nine stories were published, under the title *Long Lankin*, by Secker & Warburg, London, in 1970. Another story, “Persona”, and a longer tale, or novella, called “The Possessed,” I have decided not to republish. For the present edition, slight revisions to the 1970 text have been made, mainly in punctuation. The final story here, “De Rerum Natura”, was first published in the *Transatlantic Review*. (2013. 101)

The title of the collection alludes to a legend from Northumbria: a stonemason or a robber or even a leper, *Long Lankin*, was an obscure and gothic character who also inspired an old English folk song from where the narrator quotes as an epigraph to the collection:

*My lady came down she was thinking no harm
Long Lankin stood ready to catch her in his arm*

None of the events are directly referred to Long Lankin, but the phantasmal presence of the character and his actions are functional to the obscure, chaotic, violent and irrational atmosphere that pervades the stories.

The inclusion of “De Rerum Natura”, the last text of the second edition, adds a definitive unifying component. By deliberately repeating pessimist poet Titus Lucretius Carus’ title, the Irish writer provides a key to the philosophy that clearly governs the whole book. In his long poem, the Latin poet offers a poetical interpretation of reality based on Epicurus’ philosophy, it is a poetic elucidation of life seen as a harmonic and fatal process of composition and decomposition of things and individuals as part of a whole. This poetical

approach to a mutable universe in which the human condition integrates and disintegrates, and in which art and philosophy are valid options to face pleasantly such a terrible experience, is in the essence of the *Long Lankin* pages. About the old man in “De Rerum Natura”, the narrator pertinently states that “He looked more than anything like a baby, the bald dome and bandy legs, the eyes, the gums, an ancient mischievous baby.” (93)

When the book was released, critics were not generous.

Kersti Tarien Powell writes:

Banville and Farrer paid great attention to the reviews that *Long Lankin* received. Banville’s letters to Farrer show he was disappointed that his critics misunderstood *Long Lankin*’s structure. (...) The article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, however, filled Banville with joy –he had finally found a reader who actually understood what he had set out to do: “The man actually read the book, and thought about it, and got all the points I would wish my ideal reader to get”, he wrote to Farrer jubilantly. (...) Both Ronald Hayman in *The Sunday Telegraph* and Stanley Reynolds in *The New Statesman* also admired the thematic unity of the book and the precise poetic language of the stories. (...). (397)

Perhaps contrasting this first book with the resounding and powerful production that came after, young generations hardly see the deep, subtle spirit of the collection. They find it “underdeveloped”, “fragmentary”, “depressing” and “confusing”, although “wonderfully written” in an “intriguing and engaging prose”.

What is the problem with this “extraneous stuff” as Banville himself defined *Long Lankin*?

In my understanding the answer is simple.

Among the different kinds of short stories, the classic and the modernist are probably the ones mostly performed by contemporary authors. Edgar Allan Poe is considered (inaccurately) the creator of the classic short story: a fixed structure [Exposition, Development (rising action) and Resolution (usually an unexpected culmination)] and the aim of producing an emotional effect in the reader. In “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” we find this technique. In its way, Banville’s “Wild Wood” fits into this model. We won’t find a fixed structure in a modernist short story. A modernist short story tries to convey reality as it appears in real life: chaotic, senseless, mysterious, unfinished, versatile and changeable... Anton Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield and James Joyce, among others, created effective and credible pages in this line, passages in which situations (significant and intense moments), atmosphere, tone, inscrutable characters and symbols are the elements that really count. The elaboration of a strong plot is not relevant; in fact, these stories are regarded as “plotless”. In an entry of Katherine Mansfield’s journal, dated January 1916 she writes: “The plots of my stories leave me perfectly cold”, a statement shared by our Irish writer who assured: “I’m far more interested in shapes and forms than the story.” (Greacen 8)

Most of the texts in *Long Lankin* are nearer to this last conception of the short story: echoes of Joyce, for instance, can clearly be found in “Lovers”; in the last paragraph of “Sanctuary”, we read: “Helen took Julie’s face in her hands, and covered her ears with her palms, and in this new silence Julie seemed to hear vaguely someone screaming, *a ghost voice familiar yet distant, as though it were coming from beyond the frontiers of sleep.*”(55, my emphasis). The

title of this text sets the tone of it and, as it happens in Chekhov, the unsubstantial plot is displaced by a dense and mysterious atmosphere. Joyce's "The Dead" in "Nightwind" is noticeable: "—No. I'm sorry for them —for us. Look at it. The new Ireland. Sitting around at the end of a party wondering why we're not happy. Trying to find what it is we've lost" (60). The lack of communication in Chekhov's characters affects these texts as well. In "Summer voices" the narrator states that "The voice hung poised a moment in the upper airs, a single liquid note, then slowly faded back into the fields, and died away, leaving the silence deeper than before" (71) and "For a moment he was still, listening. No sounds. Then he went and stood before the mirror and gazed into it at his face for a long time." (81)

By stressing language, its possibilities and impossibilities, Banville tenses and widens the modernist short story capacities; his narrators write not for the sake of sharing events, interpretations or ideas but to understand what they are trying to say. The result is not a short story because, even when there is a plot, it is clear that it is there mainly with a poetical purpose. Nearer to poetry than to the narrative genre, the transgressive texts included in *Long Lankin* are a celebration of words in their aesthetical and philosophical potentials. This explains certain perplexity in people willing to read conventional stories. What they find is different. Disguised in the form of classic or modernist tales, texts included in *Long Lankin* are conspicuous poems in prose, poetic prose.

In this first book we discover the seeds of Banville's future works in which language is an opportunity and a problem as well. Verbal music, rhythm, precise and freak or unusual adjectives, symbols, metaphors, and the primitive, ancestral praise of the magical sound of words are central in Banville's poetics.

An original and strange fulfilment, *Long Lankin* governed a significant and suggestive output.

Notes

1 See *adn Cultura / La Nación*, Buenos Aires, Julio 19, 2008, pp. 24-28.

Works Cited

Banville, John. *Long Lankin*, New York: Vintage Books, 2013.

Greacen, Lavinia. "A Serious Writer", *The Irish Times*, 24 March 1981.

Powell, Kersti Tarien. "Trying to Catch Long Lankin by His Arm: The Evolution of John Banville's *Long Lankin*." *Irish University Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2001): 386-403.