

Irish Mexican, Latino Irlandés Fountains of Literary Invention

By David Vela *

Irish authors in the twentieth century have had an invaluable, though less recognised, influence on Latin American authors. Their works have helped to change the language used to describe culture, history, politics and writing itself. Jonathan Swift and William Butler Yeats were writers who changed the idioms of prose, poetry, and the essay. There were those who blended the genres, Samuel Beckett, Brian O'Nuallain (Flann O'Brien), and the master James Joyce, have had a profound and a lasting influence on Latin American writers in the twentieth century. Those Latin American authors most affected by reading Irish authors in English, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, and Carlos Fuentes, are the catalysts for what is known as the 'Boom' in Latin American letters this past century. [1]



Carlos Fuentes (b. 1928)
(Gustavo Benítez 2002)

Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, Pablo Neruda of Chile, and Carlos Fuentes of Mexico read Joyce early in their intellectual and authorial development, and it is those two who should be credited with the great explosion of change in the Spanish language in twentieth-century Latin American and Spanish language writing. The influence James Joyce has had on these two authors is far too weakly noted, overshadowed by scholarship on American authors Edgar Allen Poe, Walt Whitman, William Faulkner, and John Dos Passos's influences. This is not to say that the American or the British authors are insignificant; rather, it is remarkable how much the Irish have been neglected, if not completely overlooked. [2]

Latin American novelists and poets who brought to the Spanish language a modernist sensibility, [3] had been reading Irish authors since the turn of the century, and at least one of them was reading Joyce in English before the rest of the English-speaking world could, because of the obscenity charge against his book: Jorge Luis Borges, in cosmopolitan Buenos Aires, received from France the original text of *Ulysses*, and by 1925 had written his now famous essay 'El Ulises de Joyce'. [4] Borges also translated the last page of Molly Bloom's soliloquy into Spanish. [5]

Neruda's chief debt to Irish author James Joyce lies in the construction of an epic poem that changed both poetry and prose sensibilities in Latin America. All of the 'Boom' authors read Neruda, and one is hard-pressed to think of a 'Boom' author who did not have some significant encounter with him. Neruda's early encounter with Joyce's poetry in *Ulysses* was while he was in

Yangon (Rangoon), Burma. According to Professor Roberto González Echevarría, Neruda 'communicated mostly in English while in the Orient,' and while writing his 'first major book of poems, *Residencia en la tierra*.' [6] González Echevarría, a poet himself, writes: "The poems, akin in their torrent of images to the surrealist poetry being written in Europe, show that Neruda had been reading Proust, Joyce, and other European "novelties", including perhaps the surrealists, while in the Orient.' [7]

Mexican writers Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes were both heavily influenced by English language poets, [8] most notably Modernists, but it is Joyce's influence that took on a special significance for the novel and for the epic in Mexico and the rest of Latin America in the 1950s. Paz's epic poem *Sunstone* [9] and Fuentes's *Where the Air is Clear* [10] derive from what T.S. Eliot called in his essay '*Ulysses*, Order and Myth' [11] the 'mythical method'. Much of what they were writing in Spanish at this juncture in Hispanic American *belles lettres* derives, as Eliot writes in his encomium, from 'a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape' (175). The Latin American authors were not so much escaping *Ulysses* as they were adopting and adapting it to their own epic stories, with the epic poem first (Neruda), then with the novel (Fuentes) as genres through which to tell their stories of nation formation, and of individuality as distinct cultures. That is their gracious and graceful indebtedness to Joyce.

Borges is significant because he wrote no novels. Instead, his influence derives from his tight and terse short stories, essays, and poetry. (He also blended and confused genres delightfully, just as Irish authors have done since they first took up pens. Hugh Kenner puts it best: 'For nearly three centuries Ireland has mocked the book.' [12] Think of the scribes in early Ireland, and of Swift, Sterne, Joyce and Beckett. Even William Butler Yeats elides and fudges genres from the sonnets to plays blazing the trail for Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges to do this later in prose.) [13]

After Jorge Luis Borges paved the way towards Joyce (and Swift and Sterne), Latin American authors began to write the novel along various models, changing the Spanish language, and developing innovative styles. Reading these protean authors, particularly Joyce, would change the way Spanish would be written and read.

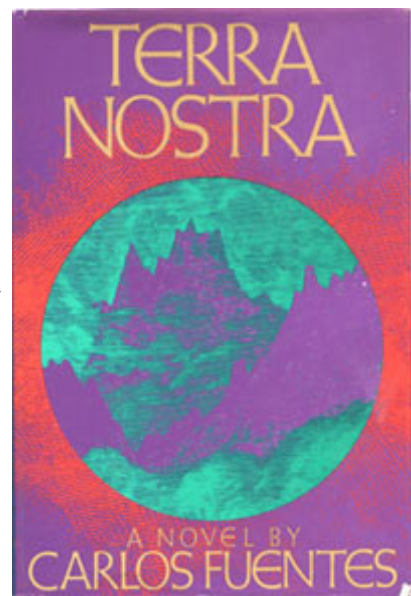
James Joyce, in bringing the novel back to its epic status, in challenging and in changing language, left a permanent mark on modern Latin American writers. There is no doubt that each author of the generation known as 'el Boom,' Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, Chilean José Donoso, Argentine Julio Cortázar, Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, and Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, voraciously read Joyce's works, and those writers still living, continue to draw from James Joyce's novels and short stories as guides to inventing and innovating in their own language, for their own works. [14] The five Latin American authors responsible for over nearly one hundred novels collectively have improved the Spanish language, and, one may soundly argue, the novel itself. These authors have read Joyce in order to see how they can change language and still be faithful to developing the 'uncreated consciences' of their 'races'. [15]

The person who had the greatest influence on the Boom writers in Spanish, Jorge Luis Borges, read Joyce extensively, mimicked him, and would be writing in the wake of his works for the rest of his literary career. Pablo Neruda was not far behind, and Carlos Fuentes followed, reading Borges in Spanish and Joyce in English: Borges and Joyce were models of innovation, of playfulness, and of genius. Neruda's model was one of linguistic elasticity.

Carlos Fuentes's novels of epic lengths and depths *Terra Nostra*, [16] *Where the Air is Clear*, *Change of Skin* and *Christopher Unborn* [17] bear the indelible imprint of Joyce's larger and longer works of the city, and of stream-of-consciousness technique. Fuentes takes Joyce's methods and model of altering language, his use of the interior monologue, simultaneity, language as the protagonist and stream of consciousness. Fuentes, after Joyce, rewrites history, politics and literature through the medium of the novel - an incredible feat that his fellow Boom writers also took part in.

Ulysses and *Finnegan's Wake* are works that Fuentes has read over and over, helping to formulate the theory - and to put that theory into practice - that Cervantes's novel (*Don Quixote*) is the open novel of multivocal reading, and Joyce's novels are the open, multivocal novels of language and of writing. For Fuentes, Cervantes and Joyce wrote the Alpha and Omega of the novel. [18]

Fuentes's novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz* in language, style and in structure borrows from Joyce's innovations in prose, and the Vicoesque, circular sense of history, and deriving from this, from Joyce's study of Vico. [19] Joyce's shorter works, the fiction he wrote with astonishing grace and technical precision, *Dubliners*, exerted an influence on Carlos Fuentes's novel *Distant Relations*, and his short stories from the text *Burnt Water*. A number of critics have noted that Fuentes's short stories are his achievement, not the novels, yet Joyce's influence on both is apparent in Fuentes's attempts to capture the essence of Mexico City in shorter works. Like Joyce, Fuentes experiments with language, time and voice, and with the employ of differing points of view in one text. [20]



James Joyce's use of language, his playfulness with English, has been mimicked by Carlos Fuentes in Spanish. From his first novel *Where the Air is Clear* to his last epic novel *The Years with Laura Díaz*, Fuentes uses *calembours* and portmanteau words, (*palabras compuestas*) engaging the reader - as he does throughout *Christopher Unborn* - in word association games, embedding historical events in sentences pages long, capturing and describing continuous thought, while also working in vivid descriptions, ideas that congeal into a plot, and interior monologues that play out entire personal histories (see especially *The Death of Artemio Cruz*).

What Joyce biographer Richard Ellmann describes of Joyce in his monumental biography is apt to Fuentes: 'Joyce was as local and as scrupulous in vision as Dante but he put aside Dante's heaven and hell, sin and punishment, preferring like Balzac to keep his comedy human, and he relished secular, disorderly lives which Dante would have punished or ignored' (4, *James Joyce*). [21] Argentine author Julio Cortázar, another author who is very heavily influenced by Joyce, so much so that he was criticised as being afflicted with 'Ulyssomania', wrote that Fuentes's first novel was a 'comedia humana', magical and metaphysical, achieving with language what *Ulysses* achieved. However, Cortázar ascribes to the Irish writer 'más fines literarios'. Fuentes's book, for Latin America, in contrast, is a beginning. Cortázar continues: 'Joyce puts the accent on technique with the intention of rupturing traditional models or moulds of writing the novel.' [22]



Life-size bronze of James Joyce in Zurich's Fluntern Friedhof (Milton Hebbel, 1966)

Fuentes's novels run a range from the comical to the tragic, but they are notable for the choice of depicting commonplace and middle-class Mexico. In many instances, the figures he depicts are images raised in artistic relief against the foundation myths of Mexican culture. Fuentes also criticises Mexico, its economic and social disparities, its reliance on the United States for so many essential things, its failure to acknowledge positive influences that other cultures have brought to education, law, language - even cuisine. [23]



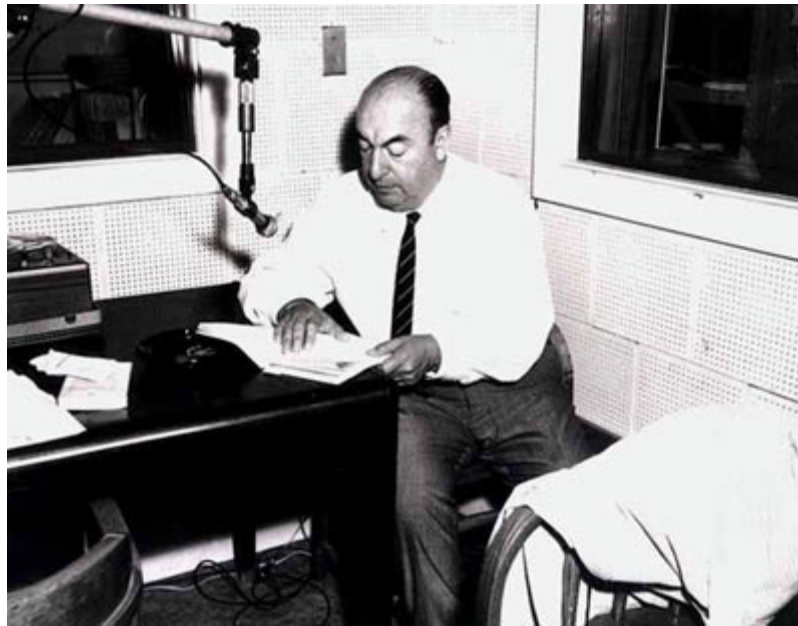
Argentine Two Pesos coin in memoriam of Jorge Luis Borges

Both Joyce and Fuentes offer an artistic portrayal, imagined visions of Dublin and of Mexico City. While Fuentes's works also illustrate an opinion pointedly critical of the upper classes and their yearning for North American values, Joyce's works examine the emerging identity of Irish people in the modern world. If Joyce's works can be compared to the modernist style of painting, Cubism, which Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque so creatively and vigorously pioneered in drawing, painting, and in sculpture, then Fuentes's early works are aptly compared to the new style of painting of the Mexican student of Picasso's cubist works, muralist Diego Rivera. Pablo Neruda, James Joyce, and Carlos Fuentes share this blurring of artistic visions and artistic merging of styles,

genres and fora for expressing the inexpressible. [24]

Fuentes's first novel, *La Región Más Transparente* (*Where the Air is Clear*) confirms the impressions Joyce's works had already made on the young Fuentes, and on Fuentes's use and manipulation of language. It is as if Fuentes has declared 'I can do anything with the Spanish language.' In his novels, Fuentes uses poetic chiasmic structures, anaphora, and long prose-poem descriptions to introduce chapters. Fuentes, borrowing from Joyce's Hiberno-English marks the greatest literary borrowing that changed the novel and literature in Spanish; notably, this borrowing occurs between two (self-imposed) exiles.

Another of Fuentes's massive and comprehensive works, *Terra Nostra* is placed by critic Gerald Martin among the seminal *Ulyssean* works. If Fuentes's first novel, *Where the Air is Clear*, speaks with Joycean language, then *Terra Nostra* continues to grapple, after *The Death of Artemio Cruz* and *A Change of Skin*, with the linguistic challenges Fuentes faced in creating a Ulyssean novel. Martin states that the novel *Terra Nostra* was a 'monumental attempt to review the whole psychological and political history of Spain and Spanish America [and that] its relative failure ... marks the impossibility after the late 1960s to write Ulyssean novels based on coherent historical cycles, epiphanic insights and optimistic conclusions.' [25] So, as with all protean authors, Fuentes changed the shape of the Latin American novel and wrote *Cristóbal Nonato* (1987), a *Finnegan's Wake*-influenced novel that, along with Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977) and Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers* (1967) (Cuban, another bilingual who read Joyce in English), celebrate laughter in the Latin American novel.



Pablo Neruda recording poems at the U.S. Library of Congress, 20 June 1966
(Library of Congress, Hispanic and Portuguese Collections)

For Fuentes, Borges, and Neruda the English language, like French for T.S. Eliot and for Beckett, was a beacon, a way to change Spanish. Joyce's two monumental novels, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, provide the poetic prose model that the writers from the Americas would use for their own literary projects. Even writers who did not know English as well as the bilinguals, and writers who did not know English at all, chose *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* - and fewer, but still some, *Finnegans Wake* - as examples to mimic and from which to borrow, and to learn how to modernise the Spanish language. [26]

In their poetry, essays, short stories, and novels, throughout the twentieth century in Spanish, and sometimes in English, Latin American authors have found in Joyce's works complements, guides and literary signals to their own inventions. The Boom writers and those poets who were beacons in changing the language looked to James Joyce when carrying out their own projects, sometimes in silence, many in exile and most with cunning. [27]

When asked if there is a shared attitude Latin American authors have toward the Spanish language, Fuentes's reply is instructive about Joyce's influence in their forming a critical attitude toward that language: 'We [the Boom writers] had the sensation that we had to invent the language, that we had to fight with the canons of the language, that it is false to believe that an established Spanish language exists ... Joyce had the same attitude toward English.' [28]

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Notes

[1] Gerald Martin in his work *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1989), writes that 'it is arguable that [Fuentes] is the vertebral figure within the entire "boom" of the Latin American novel' (260).

[2] Part of the problem being that Irish authors were for so long subsumed under the rubric of British authors.

[3] Modernism and modernist are tricky terms to begin with, but Modernismo in Spanish literature, particularly poetry, is associated with Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867-1916) who ushers in formal, French Parnassian and Symbolist rhythms and images in Spanish language poetry. Modernism in the European sense as defined by Ricardo Quinones, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane pertains to the Boom writers and even Jorge Luis Borges' earlier poetry, and certainly his short stories. See Quinones's *Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), and *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature: 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1976, 1991); and

finally Gerald Martin's work *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1989), where he deftly handles the term in relation to Latin American poetry and prose).

[4] See the text 'Joyce's Influence on Borges: Fiction, *Ficciones*' (unpublished, David Vela).

[5] It is interesting that Samuel Beckett translated with Alfred Perón the *Anna Livia Plurabelle* section from *Finnegans Wake* in 1931. Borges and Beckett share literary influences, including Joyce, and as with Fuentes, are polyglots who could write in more than one language. (See Pascale Casanova's pellucid work *Beckett l'abstracteur: Anatomie d'une révolution littéraire*, (Paris: Editions Seuil, 1997), p. 58.)

[6] 'Introduction. Neruda's *Canto General*, The Poetics of Betrayal.' *Canto General*. Trans. Jack Schmitt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Professor González Echevarría's work has been immensely helpful to me over the years. While I did not study with him at Yale (I was there from 1986-1990), his work helped immensely in my own studies of Latin American authors, which was independent, for I was an English major, and aided by him and by people such as Master Robin Winks of Berkeley College - an Irish philosopher's inspired colleague and friend of the Americas, Bishop George Berkeley.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] T.S. Eliot is audible in both authors diverse works. Paz refined ideas in Spanish and related to French symbolist and surreal poets, influencing Spanish language poetry in the process. Chilean poet Pablo Neruda also read the American poet and borrowed a great deal during the 1930s from Eliot's poetry. Paz is the Mexican heir to Eliot in Spanish, for he was the quintessential philosopher, poet and essayist in Mexico for many years. Carlos Fuentes, novelist, sometimes playwright, short story writer, journalist and political commentator, would 'give all of his books for one line of Eliot, Yeats or Pound' (204, 'La Comedia Mexicana de Carlos Fuentes'. *La Historia Cuenta Mexico*, D.F.: Tusquets Editores, 1998. pp. 187-219). Why go to another language for influence? In T.S. Eliot's essay 'Yeats' he states: 'A very young man, who is himself stirred to write, is not primarily critical or even widely appreciative. He is looking for masters who will elicit his consciousness of what he wants to say himself, of the kind of poetry that is in him to write. ... The kind of poetry that I needed, to teach me the use of my own voice, did not exist in English at all; it was only to be found in French' (248, 'Yeats' *The Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. and introduced by Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975). The same holds true for Borges, Fuentes, and for Neruda: the kind of poetry and prose they needed to teach them their own voices was not in Spanish, but in English - and the writers who share the greater degree of influence on them are Irish. Samuel Beckett is the writer who embodies this borrowing most explicitly by *writing in French itself*.

[9] *Piedra de sol*. Mexico: Tezontle, 1957.

[10] *La región más transparente del aire*. Mexico: Letras Mexicanas, 1958.

[11] First published in *The Dial*, 1923. Taken from *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* ed. and introduction by Frank Kermode. New York: (HBJ) Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1975. 175-178.

[12] *Flaubert, Joyce and Becket: The Stoic Comedians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 48. Kenner, who is the finest Beckett scholar, composed these essays originally as lectures. Illuminating, humorous and dead-on, they bear reading if one is interested in literature in general, and Joyce, Beckett and Flaubert, specifically.

[13] The elided and slightly imperfect sonnet, 'Leda and the Swan' is just one example. I have compared the imagery of this poem with Neruda's 'El cóndor.' For plays, see Yeats *Purgatory* as an example.

[14] The term 'el Boom' was coined by Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Uruguayan, and professor of literature at Yale during the 1970s and early 1980s. Rodríguez Monegal noted that an extraordinary number of highly original works in prose were being produced in the 1960s and 1970s by a handful of Latin American novelists and short story writers, all literary descendants of Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), the Argentine short story writer, essayist and poet. The principal Boom writers are Carlos Fuentes (b.1928), Gabriel García Márquez (b.1928), Mario Vargas Llosa (b.1936), Julio Cortázar (1914-1984), José Donoso (1924-1996), and Alejo Carpentier (1904-1979). Notably they hail from Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Argentina, Chile and Cuba.

[15] Two of the five, Julio Cortázar and José Donoso, are dead.



[16] *Terra Nostra*, originally published in 1975, (Mexico: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, S.A. Grupo Editorial Planeta,) translated by Margaret Sayers Peden and published in 1976 (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux) with a sterling afterword by Fuentes's dear *amigo* Milan Kundera, undeniably borrows from Joyce's genius in a Latin guise. Fuentes adopts a medieval voice, demanding from his reader an intense scrutiny and attention span, for sentences sometimes run for pages. Though Fuentes in this novel takes a more historical approach - a sort of linear approach - his ultimate structure is eternal return, elliptical time, Vico and Joyce. He later utilises the Mexican indigenous sense of time in his novels, overlaying the European Spanish and French cultural influences on Mexico with his earlier ideas about time and humanity in works such as *Aura* and short stories such as '*Chac Mool*' and the surreal or magical realist 'Por boca de los dioses'. One of Fuentes's more intensely syncretic stories, illustrates, as James Joyce does, the supremacy of elliptical time over a falsely 'modern' linear time: 'Tlactocatzine, del Jardín de Flandes' from the collection *Burnt Water - Agua quemada* is noteworthy.

[17] *Cristóbal Nonato* Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, D.F., 1987. *Where the Air is Clear*, published originally as *La Región Más Transparente*, Mexico: Letras Mexicanas, 1958; trans. Sam Hileman, New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1960; *Cambio de Piel*. Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, S.A., 1967; trans. Sam Hileman. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968.

[18] Seer Carlos Fuentes's short piece on narrative and the novel *Cervantes, o la crítica le la lectura*, Mexico City, Joaquín Mortiz, 1976.

[19] See also Fuentes's historical study of Spain and the Americas *The Buried Mirror (El Espejo Enterrado)* New York, Houghton 1992 (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992). Fuentes writes of his interest in both Vico and Joyce, and as Joyce did, read Giambattista Vico's work in Italian. See also *Cervantes, o la crítica de la lectura*.

[20] Mario Vargas Llosa is the master of this, and Fuentes has praised the younger author for his technical brilliance.

[21] Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce*. 1959 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), revised edition.

[22] Page 527 of the fiftieth anniversary edition of *La región más transparente* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1998). The letters at the end of the text between Fuentes and Cortázar are illuminating. My translation.

[23] Fuentes acknowledges explicitly and implicitly in his literature and essays the *positive* influences of Spain and France. Here I am acknowledging the rich and literary influences of Ireland. The connections between Spain, Ireland and France are complex, but resulted in many brilliant things, including literary and cultural creations.

[24] See Roberto González Echevarría's 'The Politics of Betrayal'. 1991. (Introduction to *Canto General*, Trans. Jack Schmidt, Berkeley, UC Press, 1993).

[25] Gerald Martin, one of the first to recognise James Joyce's monumental influence on Latin American authors. From his book *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London, Verso, 1989), p. 260.

[26] Mario Vargas Llosa fits into this category. See his review in the fine work *La Verdad de las Mentiras*, (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2002) - *The Truth of the Lies* - in which he reviews twentieth century authors, and where Vargas Llosa surprisingly chooses to review *Dubliners* over Joyce's other works. I have neglected a few of the Caribbean writers, namely the Cubans, but only for lack of space. Notably, the Brazilian authors are especially attuned to calembours and Joyce's work, but for the sake of space and economy here I cannot address so delightful a group of authors. I shall address Ireland and Cuba in a subsequent text. Guillermo Cabrera Infante (novelist), Heberto Padilla (poet) and the essayist, critic and novelist Alejo Carpentier bear noting. See p. 432, Emanuel Carballo: *19 Protagonistas de la literatura Mexicana del siglo XX*, Mexico: Empresas Editoriales, S.A., 1965. (*Nineteen Protagonists of Twentieth-Century Mexican literature*). Vargas Llosa sits on the board that oversees the 'purity' of the Spanish language; in fact more Latin American than Spanish authors do. E. Anderson Imbert's two volumes, *Historia de la Literatura Hispanoamericana* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1954; reprinted 1970, and 1974 as Volumes I and II, respectively) grant hints of the Irish influences on a number of Latin American authors.

[27] Neruda was exiled during the 1950s to the Island of Capri; Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa live in London (self-exile, like James Joyce and Samuel Beckett), and Julio Cortázar lived most of his life in Paris. He, like Samuel Beckett, is buried in the Cimetière Montparnasse.

[28] *Carlos Fuentes: Territorios del Tiempo: Antología de entrevistas*. (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), p. 79. My translation.