Damned Irishman: John William Cooke

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Abstract

This article focuses on the life of the Peronist radical John William Cooke (1919-1968). Born into a family with Irish roots, Cooke has been a key figure in the history of the Peronist movement. His legacy is an alternative Peronist political ideology and the symbolic social imaginary related to revolutionary activism. This article includes an analysis of J. W. Cooke as a character in José Pablo Feinmann's novel La astucia de la razón (1990). Working from a gender perspective, the goal is to deconstruct the configurations defining the parameters of masculinity and virility that were popular among the political activists of 1970s Argentina, and that contributed to establishing a defined image for the revolutionary.

> *... since I think an Irishman - he said - is a person with a passionate heart for justice and he knows, I think, that only the armed struggle will soothe and appease that passion...*
>
> José Pablo Feinmann, *La astucia de la razón*

Cooke in the Flesh

Given the fantastic and adventurous appeal of John William Cooke it is surprising that until now his revolutionary Peronist character has not been included in fictional literature. However, there is an exception that is worth exploring - a section of José Pablo Feinmann's novel *La astucia de la razón* (1990). Peronism - the political movement initiated by Juan Domingo Perón (1895-1974) - has inspired numerous fictional works in literature. The starring roles have been traditionally reserved for Eva (*Evita*) and Juan D. Perón. Evita in particular enjoys enormous popularity in literary works, and Juan Perón is the protagonist in the well-known *La novela de Perón* by Tomás Eloy Martínez (1985). Recent historical research is more balanced as to the relevance of Juan and Eva Perón compared to other figures of Peronism. But literary fiction has followed suit, even if there is a growing interest in the secondary characters of the movement. Feinmann's book is noteworthy because of its focus on J. W. Cooke as an inconvenient character. (2) Cooke played an interesting role in Peronist history, but in the 1980s it was neglected by more recent generations. In the 1990s, the decision to include Cooke in a fictional text is significant. During this period, fundamental changes were wrought on Peronist ideological discourse. As explained below, this decision was taken within the context of the revisionist history of the role played by the 1970s Peronist youth and their generation of activists, as well as of the tragic history experienced by Argentine society in that period.

As an important political figure, John William Cooke's fate was to puzzle his audiences. Christened with an English name and born to a family with an Irish background, (3) John William Cooke was born in La Plata, the capital city of Buenos Aires province, the eldest child of Jorge Isaac Cooke and María Elvira Lenci. His grandfather Jenaro William Cooke was born in Panama, the son of an Irish merchant seaman and his Panamanian wife. Jorge Isaac Cooke was a lawyer and wrote regularly on current affairs. During his son's formative years, he witnessed his father's intense political activity. The family had strong links with the Radical Party and followed the *caudillo* Hipólito

Yrigoyen (1852-1933). However liberal and pro-British they were, when the Peronist movement was launched they adhered enthusiastically. Elected at twenty-six to the congress during the first Peronist period (1946-1952), John William Cooke was the youngest Member of Parliament. His father was appointed minister of foreign affairs, but both careers had their ups and downs during the first Peronist period. (4) The young Cooke established himself as a sound intellectual with dazzling public speaking abilities. However, he lost official support due to his ideological radicalisation.

From 1952, Cooke left his post in congress and taught at the university. He also directed *De Frente*, a publication often critical of the bureaucratisation in the Peronist Justicialist Party. After the fall of Perón in 1955, Cooke became a fugitive and was detained and confined to prison in Río Gallegos with other high-ranking Peronist officers. However, two years later he managed to flee, together with Jorge Antonio, Héctor Cámpora, Patricio Guillermo Kelly and the trade unionist leaders Espejo and Gomis. From that moment on, the myth about Cooke started to take shape. In exile, John William Cooke contacted Perón and set off the opposition which resulted in the most significant attempt to organise a Peronist guerrilla, by the Uturuncos. Juan Perón appointed Cooke as his envoy and personal representative. In 1955-1960 Cooke became the liaison between Perón and his followers in Argentina. He negotiated a deal with Arturo Frondizi (1908-1995) that allowed the latter politician to become President in 1958. Attracted by Fidel Castro's revolution, John William Cooke went to Cuba and established a productive ideological relationship with Ernesto "Che" Guevara. In 1964, Cooke founded the Peronist Revolutionary Action, one of the movements that sought to spread the Cuban model throughout Latin America. This was at the origin of the rift between Cooke and Perón. In his later years, Cooke tried to convince the former Argentine president to adopt more radical positions, but this was a difficult task in a complex political milieu. On 19 September 1968 John William Cooke died of lung cancer in Buenos Aires.

Cooke in Ink

José Pablo Feinmann's novel *La astucia de la razón* is a story about the young revolutionaries of the late 1960s, who later became active politicians. (5) The historical background of the book is the process by which middle-class university students well-acquainted with Marxist theory adhered to the Peronist movement. The main character is Pablo Epstein, who is also the narrator (though a fragmented narrator with a limited point of view).

One of the narrative sequences in the novel occurs in the summer of 1965 at the seaside resort of Mar del Plata. In the evening Pablo and three friends, philosophy students like him, are enjoying a philosophical barbecue (*asado filosófico*) on the beach beneath the stars. In their intellectual conversation they try to find an answer to the crucial question of how to define the essence of philosophy. The four agree with Marx's proposition that philosophy must transform the world. (6) Each adheres to a different philosophical school. Pablo is a fervent follower of Hegel. Ismael coins his own statement, inspired by Maurice Merleu-Ponty. Pedro is a loyal disciple of Marx but focuses on the earlier period of the German philosopher. Finally, Hugo Hernández provokes a certain tension in the plot when he repeatedly breaks the logical discourse. Furthermore, he introduces the historical character, John William Cooke. Hugo argues that there is a 'discursive position', (7) from which he can elucidate a historical contemporary period and a geopolitical context that is the Argentine and Latin American world. Pablo, who knows his friend's ideas, uses irony when he refers to Hugo's 'Latin American Theorem'. To define philosophy, Hugo uses a statement by J. W. Cooke: 'Peronism is a doomed occurrence in a bourgeois country'. (8)

Citing a revolutionary thinker instead of a philosopher Hugo introduces the first discursive gap. Instead of being framed in the intellectual context of philosophy, Cooke

belongs to the muddy world of politics. In that summer evening of 1965 Hugo tries to convince his friends that the Marxist-inspired revolution that they wish to achieve in Argentina will only be possible through Peronism. However, it is a leftist revolutionary Peronism that Cooke advocated. The four friends are well acquainted with Marxist theory, and are aware that the condition for revolutionary action is that substance and subject must converge. That is, that theory must meet reality through its true interpreters, the proletarians. Hugo argues fervently in support of Cooke's principles. The first step is the evaluation of the state of social awareness among the masses. Since the vast majority of the proletarian class in Argentina follows Perón, the revolutionary process cannot neglect Peronism, which is the proper approach. But this process does not necessarily include Perón.

In the historical context, the discussion can be viewed from the optic of Perón's exile and the banning of Peronism in the electoral arena, as well as the internal feuds and factions that wanted to take the control of the movement. In addition, there is the background of the Cuban revolution which spread throughout the Latin American region. By that time, Cooke and Perón were not as close as before.

Two stories embedded in the novel are narrated by Hugo and are used as discursive resources. On the one hand, there is an imaginary dialogue between Karl Marx and the federal *caudillo* Felipe Varela (1821-1870). The goal is to support the first step of Hugo's case, that is, the idea that revolutions in Latin America must respect the historical, political and social context and should avoid transferring foreign (European) approaches to the region. This is an implicit criticism of communism, but also of nineteenth-century ideas and of the Age of Enlightenment. On the other hand, the other story supports Hugo's line of reasoning and focuses on the national circumstances in Argentina. Hugo met with John William Cooke on the evening of 4 December 1964.

The narrative takes place one year after the meeting, which Hugo considers to have been a milestone in his life. He recounts his trip to the Argentine province of Córdoba to participate in a political meeting organised by the association of university students. The meeting was a lecture by Cooke, but was banned by the provincial government from taking place in the main lecture hall, and transferred to the premises of the University Foundation of Córdoba. In the beginning Cooke earnestly addressed the students, workers and trade unionists and won them over with his ideas about Peronism, inciting their revolutionary enthusiasm. These ideas are briefly exposed here: to achieve Perón's return from exile so that he could join again with the masses; that the Peronism / Anti-Peronism opposition represented the class struggle in Argentina; that within Peronism there are potential revolutionaries and a bureaucratic class of traitors who preclude the revolutionary process.

The second story embedded in the narrative occurs in a more intimate and exclusive space that is the quarters of the mechanical workers' trade union, a "mysterious and mythological place" (146). (9) Cooke is introduced to the union leader René Rufino Salamanca. Hugo is invited by the student Antonio Miramón, who is the chief intellectual in the union. The conference itself has an air of conspiracy and secrecy. Cooke and Salamanca, two colossal men, confront each other in the room. Hugo, the narrator, tells his friends on the beach that the meeting of the two leaders was the embodiment of History (with a capital H). During a couple of hours Cooke and Salamanca talked about Peronism while they had *empanadas* (pies) and red wine.

This passage opens with an introduction to Cooke's biography and, in particular, adds a mythical effect to the historical narrative. Cooke tries to convince Salamanca and he achieves his goal. He also wins over Antonio Miramón, who is introduced as Salamanca's 'intellectual'. Miramón is the 'soul' whilst Salamanca is the 'body', an analogy that suggests Marx's alliance between the intellectual avant-garde and the proletariat. The dialogue is not included by the narrator so one can only guess the exact words used by Cooke that

evening. But his proposals had been explained at the conference before the meeting. What is interesting about this story is that, beyond the ideas, the atmosphere and tone are plausible in that period. Time is measured by the wine disappearing from the demijohn, a fact that gives the reader an idea of vanishing time, and also of the lack of moderation at the meeting. The last glass of wine is emptied by Cooke, who exclaims '*Me cago en Perón*' (fuck Perón) - a riposte to Salamanca's previous statement that the workers are Peronist but the Peronist movement is not focused on the workers. After that, Cooke gives details of his plan to create political progress for Perón but avoiding any avant-gardism. He insists on the need to work from within Peronism since it is the state of awareness of the masses. At the end of the meeting, Cooke has been able to convince the union leader, the intellectual, and the young student. The latter completes his account with a cry, '*viva Perón, carajo!*' (long live Perón, god damn it!).

The third and final setting is even more intimate and private, and occurs in the street when Cooke and Hugo are walking back from the trade union quarters to Hotel Mitre (they happen to stay in the same hotel). Hugo asks Cooke if he may come with him. The relationship between the two men is that of a teacher and his disciple, and it is represented in a brief dialogue. However, the narrator (Hugo) also takes on a filial position when he suggests a scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hugo states that he followed Cooke like Hamlet followed his father's shadow. (10) They continue talking while they walk, even if Cooke is now lost in thought. Two statements by Cooke make a lasting impression in the student's mind. Hugo was seeking certainties, and he finds them in that dialogue. Cooke affirms that all possible convictions are a journey with one point of arrival, and explains that there are just three beliefs: God, revolution, and suicide.

Hugo is moved by the earnestness of the moment. Before he was an excited witness, but now there is an uneven exchange between a teacher who is supposed to provide brilliant solutions and a disciple who is still a prisoner of unoriginal statements. Cooke speaks about Borges, God and suicide, and Hugo is taken aback. Just then, Cooke allows himself to behave as a man instead of as the public figure in the previous scenes. But when they arrive in the hotel, Cooke again plays his role of revolutionary activist of the Peronist left. 'Cooke went back to being Cooke', says the narrator. (11) It is time to take their leave of each other and to conclude the discussion. Cooke gives Hugo the secret to becoming a good revolutionary, which is the certainty that Hugo was looking for. A revolutionary is a good translator, says Cooke. To conclude, he uses the same statement that a year later Hugo will use to define philosophy. This axiom represents a cultural definition of Peronism. The whole narrative focuses on this proposition, which works in the novel's discourse like a setting on a precious stone.

The account of the meeting covers thirty pages (135-165). It is included in, and subsidiary to, the main plot, and emphasised with suspense and also by rupture. To present his ideas, Hugo selects discursive genres that are not adjusted to the expectations of his friends. He has recourse to fiction and personal anecdote. Finally, the statement he uses is taken from a different discursive field than that of philosophy. The semantic nucleus is 'irruption', which from the beginnings of Peronism has been one of its most established interpretations (Avellaneda 1983: 13-54). According to this interpretation, as Cooke said, the essence of Peronism has been to irrupt in the conventional landscape and generate a fracture. The general structure of the text suggests the image of Chinese boxes, in which some parts include others. The narrative also represents the dynamic of concentric circles. The story of the meeting with Cooke shares that dynamic that moves from the public to the private in a triple movement of the three scenes, leading to intensity.

The effect of this passage in the total structure of the novel is significant, since it includes in a reduced scale what later will be generalised among the four friends. This expansionist movement gives sense to the main plot of *La*

astucia de la razón, which is the tragedy of a generation represented by the main character Pablo Epstein. The point of departure is the evening of 1964 when Hugo is converted by Cooke, a move that will be performed again in 1965 when Pablo and his friends are converted by Hugo. It is a tragedy because the point of view of the story is that of Pablo narrated in the present tense, though it occurs in the late seventies or the early eighties and in different circumstances, that is, the persecution and repression by the last military dictatorship. Nevertheless, the novel confronts the tragic present with a cheerful past, when these young men were convinced that they could change the world.

Clash of Titans

With regard to the figure of Cooke the image that arises from the text is at all times positive and vital. This explains the character's enormous seductive power, power that is not limited to the intellectual dimension. The descriptions of the historical Cooke always focus on a central physical aspect of the man, namely his great bulk. One of his nicknames, not surprisingly, was 'Fats'. This is the core of the author's philosophical and ethical portrait of Cooke. To some extent the fact of his fatness makes Cooke an unlikely revolutionary. With respect to the physical, a figure such as Che Guevara offers a much more suitable role model for a hero. Yet on the other hand, obesity has been considered in other times and places as a mark of vitality, of exuberance and of material wealth. These emerge as key elements throughout the biography of Cooke.

In the first place, the fact that his was not a classically attractive body according to the Grecian model may have instigated his career as a great orator (although he was said to be a fine dancer). In addition, the choice of the intellectual sphere as the one in which to excel relates to the subordination of the body to the spirit within the binary system typical of Western culture. According to certain stereotypes, the alternative for the man who is less than attractive physically is to achieve eminence in oratory or intellectual pursuits (the *labia*). These are some of the traits that Feinmann uses to construct the character of Cooke. The same polarity is posited for the hero, Pablo Epstein. Through him the author develops themes such as virility, sexuality and the body. In the portrait of Cooke, mediated though it is through the eyes of Hugo, fatness is in no way an obstacle to the work of a revolutionary. On the contrary, it 'symbolised all that was exuberant and overflowing in him. His ideas made him fat, as did his deepest convictions and his passions' (149). Another element that forms part of Cooke's overflowing character is his speech. It not only comes forth in torrents, but is striking for its clarity: 'Cooke's voice was clear, brilliant, potent, in short, the brilliant voice of a brilliant man' (141). Strangely, there is no mention in this depiction of another of Cooke's excesses, namely his smoking, which would later kill him.

According to the text, the external elements express the inner man, in such a way as to establish a parallel between the inner and the outer. Several techniques are used to this purpose. These men appear as Titans, their outsize figures dominating the entire scene. Their gestures are exaggerated, their bodies vigorous. If Cooke's vitality is stressed - Hugo states: 'I remember that then I thought I had never seen a man more <u>alive</u> than he' (149, underlined in the original) - his gigantic size makes us think of such things as statues and monuments. Cooke's large stomach serves also to liken him to a figure who appears in Hugo's other story - Karl Marx. Marx is repeatedly described as the 'bearded giant'. And Cooke, who in real life did not have a beard, (12) is described by Hugo: 'Cooke was like that, he was fat and had a beard, and beyond that, his language was sharp, full of ideas, but at the same time dramatic and even epic' (141). In constructing his characters the author uses various resources: juxtaposition, repetition, amplification. The result is an impressive cast of characters, which makes the contrast with a present that is focused on the four young men all the stronger: 'Cooke stood up like a giant and bellowed *Perón or Death*' (145).

The other aspect that should be borne in mind is the stress on the maleness of the event. Besides the fact that there are no women present, there are evident references to virility. It is expressed in signs, in language and in the way that the characters interconnect, as in the following phrase: 'Lifting his hand, his fingers fat, vigorous not soft, but rather massive and strong, Cooke silenced the party members' (144). This is especially visible in the scene where Cooke and Salamanca debate, accompanied by wine and *empanadas*. All this contributes to portraying the confrontation as a clash of titans, from which Cooke emerges as victor. These men do not struggle with arms, but with arguments. But that does not mean it is not a combat, punctuated by loud laughs or pounding on the table and by a tension which only lifts at the end. The silence is, we are told, so tense you could cut it with a knife. The equation between masculinity and activism is explicit. They are all hard men, restrained and careful in their movements and gestures, because they know that these things reveal even more than what they say.

When he withdraws, the embrace that Cooke gives Salamanca is emotional, but also 'manly and militant' (157). The same happens in the third scene when Cooke takes his leave of Hugo, doing so with a clap on the back that is 'strong, sonorous and virile' (165). All the men in the story act as men are supposed to do, at least in the sense of seeing themselves as compelled to observe certain kinds of conduct in order to be respected by their peers. This is made even more obvious in the third scene, which shows a Cooke who is exhausted from alcohol, from sumptuous dining and passionate arguments. Hugo catches him in a moment of weakness in which among other things Cooke confesses his admiration for the writings of Borges, 'that gorilla genius'. (13) But his weakness does not last for long. He sees that he must renew the role of master, and things return to normal: 'And Cooke was once again Cooke, that is to say that he was no longer tired of being Cooke; his eyes regained their habitual life and his speech again shot forth, flowing, abundant, brilliant' (163).

Perón's Boys

The figure of Cooke appears again within a complex text, one in which Pablo Epstein speaks of fragmentation and neurosis. The contrast between a bright past in which they 'still had all their life before them', as Pablo stresses, and their tortured present, highlights these images, full of life and force. The character who tells the story of Hugo attempts to represent a political alternative, namely that of left-wing Peronism. It might be said that the vitality so often stressed in the book refers also to the vitality of an ideology. This is, as we have pointed out, from the point of view of the Peronism of the 1990s, which had taken the opposite direction and represented the failure of the political line put forward by Cooke. Thus the novel is a commentary on the generation of the sixties, their successes and failures, one that is a precursor to much of the theoretical work later to appear on the period.

With regard to the construction of masculinities, there is an element present which Omar Acha alludes to in an article about football, homoerotism and Peronist culture (Acha 2004: 123-169). It is a fact that Peronism sought to establish an equivalency between virility and the masses, just as it tried to associate ideas of femininity with the opposition. In a sense, Feinmann's text uses one of the elements in this binary opposition, in which the need to develop a space for consensus and conviviality among party members is inferred. In the story that involves Cooke, the manly qualities of the encounter are stressed even to excess, and associated with their popular characteristics: the copiously flowing wine, the *empanadas*, the tough language and the almost caricatured male gesture system (embraces, pounding on tables, etc.). All serve to define this territory as of the nation and of the people, that is to say, as Peronist. It is impossible not to notice a strong homoerotic element throughout the story, a theme suggested though not developed in the novel. (14) In short, we are dealing with a solely male community, in which the banners of liberty, equality and fraternity can fly freely. Class differences have no importance, as Hugo

happily finds out. Workers and intellectuals are seated at the same table, achieving Marx's alliance of substance and subject. At the banquet, hierarchies are diluted, trade unionists and students alike being privileged to attend, all in the company of the comfortably middle-class Cooke.

On the basis of this equality they can also find a space to go beyond the political limitations of the moment, namely the banning of Peronism. Yet no female characters appear in the group, nor among the students who a year later sit down to discuss philosophy. (15) The author evokes a party membership where differences do not exist and which excludes any element that might question group unity. In fact, the emblematic 'new man' inspired by that conception springs from a vision of humanity that is quite phalocentric. This had a number of consequences as to the form that militancy took, especially in the acceptance of violence as a means of achieving revolution. The full text of *La astucia de la razón*, aside from analysing the theories which inspired the militants of the 1960s, brings to life a Cooke who cannot be divorced from those ideas. Though he may not reach the stature of symbol of his time, he is restored to a place from which he had been sidelined. The elaboration of his character, however, serves to reinforce an imaginary cultural world in which the author establishes a number of the characteristics of party members. He certainly does not shrink from the stereotype that considers revolution to be a man's affair.

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Notes

1 María José Punte graduated from the Universidad Católica Argentina and the University of Vienna. Her current research at the Universidad Nacional de La Plata is on the intersection between literature and Peronism. Her publications are included in the website: www.punte.org.

2 *Personaje inconveniente* is the expression used in Richard Gillespie's biography of J. W. Cooke, which was published when access to primary sources was limited (Gillespie 1989: 15).

3 At his time of birth, Cooke's given names in English are an exception since the Argentine civil records office did not allow the use of the translation of Spanish-language names into other languages.

4 For a time, under Evita's influence, Cooke father and son fell out of Perón's favour (Linder 2006: 35-60).

5 An in-depth analysis of this text is included in a chapter of Punte 2002: 101-23.

6 Feuerbach's eleventh thesis is often used by Feinman as a *leitmotif*: 'Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it' (Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerback*, 1845 in: *Marxists Internet Archive*).

7 *Lugar de enunciación.*

8 *El peronismo es el hecho maldito del país burgués.*

9 *Lugar misterioso, mitológico.*

10 The Shakespearian reference suggests an interpretation by José Pablo Feinmann of the 1970s revolutionary activity, its failures and achievements, which are openly depicted in his later *La sangre derramada* (1998).

11 *Cooke volvió a ser Cooke.*

12 He wore a beard during his time in Cuba where he was a militiaman.

13 *Gorila*, epithet used in general to refer to the reactionary middle-class bourgeoisie in Argentina and to the opposition to the Peronist movement in particular.

14 The relationship between Pablo and Hugo is heavily connoted by an explicit sexual ambiguity. Pablo portrays himself with feminine characteristics, and at the same time he admires and envies his friend's masculinity. At least in what is read between the lines in Pablo's discourse, the body has a significant presence in the manner in which both characters interact. Pablo's attraction to Hugo is subtly more than intellectual. This is supported by the fact that he had a marriage of convenience with a woman whom he considers cold 'as a canvas shoe in winter'.

15 In fact, the main character's fear of women and the banning of the feminine perspective from the sphere of reasoning is one of the topics about which the novel makes a series of variations from Kant's ideas of nature and Ludwig Wittgenstein's axiom about the ineffable.

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