Samuel R. Delany on getting an education

November 21, 2016 - Writer Samuel Delany is known for his innovations in a number of genres and styles as well as his honest and frank discussions of sexuality and culture. His vast output of written work includes science fiction, literary and cultural criticism, and memoir (including a graphic novel about he and his longtime partner, Dennis). His 900-page 1975 novel, *Dahlgren*, is both a postmodern and sci-fi classic.

Delany, who's won four Nebula awards and two Hugo awards, was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2002. He taught creative writing and literature at a number of universities until his retirement in 2010, and the Science Fiction Writers of America named him their 30th SFWA Grand Master in 2013. An updated, corrected, and expanded version of his 2007 novel, *Dark Reflections*, was reprinted by Dover Editions in 2016. Any number of his books seemingly come back into print constantly.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3240 words.

Tags: Writing, Culture, Beginnings, Identity, Process.

You've always written across genre, and were never hemmed in by one style. Since the dawn of the internet, a lot of younger writers have followed in your footsteps and now people seem less afraid to try new things or to write both "serious" and "genre" work. What's been your guiding philosophy regarding writing different kinds of books—science fiction, autobiography, cultural and literary criticism, erotica, a graphic novel, etc.

I was just as hemmed in as everyone else. I simply happened to be sitting at an interesting place of intersecting landscapes, so I was hemmed in by several, rather than one. I was lucky enough to learn how to make an inclusive model, one in which to find things to aspire to, rather than a model limited only to an overlap.

I grew up in black Harlem in the '40s; I went to a largely white private school just off Park Avenue. I was a gay teenager, and I was exposed to black gay street talk; and from 17 and 18 I read the Marquis de Sade and Henry Miller (my cousin Barbara brought them back from Europe for me because I'd asked and she thought I should be allowed to read anything I wanted, while my family wasn't so sure) and Proust's *Cities of the Planes* (in the old Scott Moncrieff translation) given to me as a birthday present by my Aunt Virginia, and Gore Vidal's *City and the Pillar* and Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. Along with translations of Genet, I was given the hardcover of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (there was no paperback of it yet) when I was 16 by a poet friend, Marie Ponsot. Thus I had Dr. Matthew-Mighty-Grain-of-Sand-O'Connor's surreal monologues on the Night as another model for gay speech. I read Rechy's *City of Night* and "The Wedding of Miss Destiny," as a teenager for another and loved them.

This is not to mention the wit of Wilde: I saw the *Omnibus* TV show production of *Salome* on live TV, starring Eartha Kitt when I was 12 or 13 (a part Wilde wrote for Sarah Bernhardt to play; I can't imagine she could have done it any better than Kitt), and it's one of two or three live TV dramas from which I have never recovered. Another was "Terror in a Temporary Town" starring Lloyd Bridges, where he got so into his part he shouted "God damn it!" It was the first time the words went out over the air waves and startled a nation—and the last time for many years. And I heard Auden read his gay love poem, "Lay Your Sleeping Head my Love," at the same age, on CBS's educational program *Camera Three*.

I knew Shakespeare was reputed to have been queer, or at any rate he followed of a profession dominated by young cross-dressers, for whom he wrote one superb part after another, often playing flagrantly with the audience's awareness that the women were boys dressed in women's clothing. This is what we did with technology—live television—before we were told that we had to learn touch typing in school if we wanted to have any chance at all of keeping up with the modern world. That was a transition I missed in school by only one or two years.

In music, I was exposed to the folk tradition early—I loved that music like a later generation would come to love the Beatles. (When I was older, I *did* love the Beatles, and wrote about that in *The Einstein Intersection*.) But I wanted to be a folk-singer as much as, and sometimes more than, I wanted to be a writer. Thus, what criticism, erotica, and autobiography do you think I would end up writing?

Musicians like Pete Seeger and the Weavers took me back to the music of the people, white and black, African and Israeli, and made me love it all. Bellafonte, Miriam Makeba, Oddetta, Buffy Sainte-Marie—the one genre that managed to slip through the cracks was my father's first love, traditional jazz. That's doubtless because I had a rough relationship with my dad, and something had to suffer, and that was what did.

The first things I wrote were in the languages I was given—*Conan the Conqueror* pastiches re-envisioned through the on-scene Harlem street talk (in the sense of on-stage as opposed to ob-scene) that I heard up and down Seventh Avenue outside of my dad's funeral parlor between 132nd Street and 133rd. My mother discovered my own adolescent sex writings, peppered with racial slurs of the sort I heard around me on the street, written in a black loose leaf folder, and hidden in my chest of drawers, down beneath my underwear. She showed it to a psychotherapist I was seeing at the time for my dyslexia (though no one yet used the word), for my ADD (ditto), and saw everything social in it except the sex. Dr. Kenneth Clark, who personally never met me, published some of it in an article in *Harpers*, and then in a book called *Prejudice and Your Child*. To this day, I don't know if my mother ever told my father about it, or what his take on it was.

Despite what it says in Peplow and Bravard's error-filled biographical introduction in their 1980 Primary and Secondary Bibliography of my work (1962-1979), this—the piece today in Kenneth Clark's book and in some aging issue of *Harpers*—was my first nationally published work. (He told my mother who told me that the editors had wanted him to use more of my work in the article than he had. Certainly it was hard not to read that as some sort of success.) Even though it was "anonymous," it created quite a bit more stir (on my mother's side of the family) than my subsequent writings, which were seen as eccentric by the rest of the world.

Some of my later writings had indeed won contests and been published in acceptable venues such as *National Scholastic Magazine* and New York University's *Good Themes* (when I was still a junior in High School). But my family's excitement around the Clark material was something to aspire to. (To this day, I have no idea whether mom ever told my father about it, and he simply decided he could not speak of it—or whether she kept it from him. I certainly was far too terrified or too numb to consider bringing it up in front of him.) Perhaps it was something to surpass, by correcting and clarifying the errors and inaccuracies. If so, it's what I've been doing ever since.

You're largely self-taught. How did this influence your approach to writing and thinking? Do you think people are too professionalized these days? People seem to have clearer career paths at earlier ages, and work specifically to achieve those goals. I feel like there's less wandering about at this point.

When I started teaching full time in 1988, at the University of Massachusetts, I decided to be an amateur teacher and a full-time professional writer. Maybe it was a mistake. But that's how I got by.

Now that I'm retired, I realize that—for a host of reasons, many financial—I must go back to being a professional writer, of the sort I was before the age of 47, when finances finally drove me to accept a teaching job, if I want to survive. Is this what everyone is doing? I don't know. You call me self taught…?

Likely I had no more years of schooling than Shakespeare. Famously he had "little Latin and less Greek." I had one year of Greek and one term of Latin. I also had a year of French in the 7th grade in elementary school—and four totally wasted years of Spanish in high school, that I took because I thought I would do better with it in a world where more and more Puerto Ricans and Spanish speakers were coming into my city—New York—every year. And by the time I did start my single full year of college, I couldn't do much better than pick my way word-by-word though a simple Spanish newspaper article. (I could still do better than that in French.) And I entered college with advanced placement in math, English, and biology. I started my Greek, Latin, and English to make up for what I thought was a hopelessly squandered education, and every music elective and extracurricular activity I could manage.

Somewhere in that squandered education, I'd also had a superb course in my junior year of high school on set theory, group theory, and mathematical logic at the Bronx High School of Science—followed by a horrendously bad one on "modern" physics that was simply chaos. (It was suppose to be "wave mechanics" for high school students, designed by educators at MIT, and our teacher, who'd taught the set theory course, couldn't understand it any better than we did.) It almost deflected me from a love of mathematics, calculus, and analytic geometry, which I had studied on my own in the third floor library in my elementary school. It is what allowed me to move on with the anglo-english tradition of philosophy—in such a way that I wasn't completely disoriented by the advent of the Frankfort School, the Structuralists and Post-structuralists and Semioticians, as well as Russell, Quine, and Wittgenstein as well as Foucault, Derrida, Braudel, Bourdieu, and Benjamin, who, as did most American's before 1975, if they read them at all, read them on their own.

It was the interest prior to 1975 that got me my first tenured professorship at U Mass, Amherst, in 1988. It was an unusual path, I suppose. All I can say, though, is that it didn't look that unusual to me because it was the one I was on and had been on it all my life. The most telling facts to me are the things I didn't know or didn't learn, and which are the ignorances that are always catching up to me, and have been tripping me up regularly, ever since.

Rather than the things I don't know about sciences, these are the things that I never managed to master about the technology, what buttons to push on the laptop. I knew I would be a fool to smoke and drink heavily. My father died of lung cancer, a four pack a day smoker when I was 18 years old. (Only yesterday, during a computer tutorial, I learned that what several people had told me was likely to be a major failing in my computer program, resulted from the fact that my desktop icons were a little too big and the space between them was a little too wide, so that they were stacking up wrong all across my desktop! It's easy to understand, once you see it, but still hard to find in terms of a set of keyboard-driven commands.) It's not the things I don't know about medicine and linguistics, but rather the things I never learned to master about the health insurance system, or the foreign languages I never really learned to speak.

The United States is not producing more and more polylingual people, even with the excellent online programs for learning languages. Rather it gathers them already knowing them from smaller countries. To learn another language you have to be driven by necessity or something you can mistake for it. Without it, it doesn't happen. I know that, because in several situations, it started to—and when the pressure let up, it melted away.

Samuel R. Delany recommends:

The 13-volume *Collected Stories* of Theodore Sturgeon, along with Sturgeon's memoir *Argyll* and—hell—his novels, *The Dreaming Jewels*, *More Than Human*, *Some of Your Blood*, and *Venus Plus X*.

The Collected Stories of Roger Zelazny in six volumes, along with Christopher Kovacs' A Pictorial Bibliography of Roger Zelazny, *The Ides of October* (the first six are available in hardcover, the last is only in paperback).

Nightwood by Djuna Barnes.

A small book of mine, *Hart Crane*, which will appear sometime in the next couple of years, with a small selection of the poet's poems ("the Bridge," "Voyages," half a dozen others), along with my notes on them and some of my critical writing about them.

And, "Three Brief Anthropological Texts:"

1) "La Geste des Asdiwal," by Claude Levi-Strauss, which is Levi-Strauss's "grammatical" restructuring of the elements in a complex Timshian Indian myth from South American so that the seemingly random narrative events begin to mark out a certain orderly world, the first and most elegant application of the "bricolage" method he uses in the grand tetralogy that begins with *The Raw and the Cooked*, goes onto *From Honey to Ashes*, *The Origin of Tables Manners*, and *The Naked Man* (the four-volume *Mythologiques*)

2) "Derrida," by Christopher Johnson (An Analytical Summery of Derrida's reading of "A Writing Lesson" in Claude Levi-Strauss's*Tristes Tropiques*, which demonstrates and highlights Derrida's basic argumentative move, and finally (along with the 4 page Chapter 28 from the book itself) Chapter 7, "A Sunset." (I include that one simply because I like it.)

3) "Shakespeare in the Bush," by Laura Bohannan, is a tribal African interpretation from the West African Tivv of the "story" of *Hamlet*.

Someday, I hope, someone will put them all together. Brought together, with their supporting texts, the three would make a wonderful little book of no more than 175 pages, at most (Presumably you don't need to reprint *Hamlet*.)

The internet, I think, has also exposed people to a lot more at an earlier age. People, in general, seem less shocked by things. If your pornographic novel *Hogg* was published in 2016, do you think it would still create a stir?

Your question reminds me that there's a great deal I want in my life. But I don't just want it, I want it on a regular basis. By making so much available, the internet makes it less and less possible to have anything except representations. I want live music in my life—and I want it regularly. I want sex with older guys, and there are sexual groups that actually cater to that sort of thing, among older men, which is what I've had and what I'm looking for. They're fairly easy to find. But there is so much more pornography of all kinds available in minute to 20-minute clips and recordings—on YouTube and pornographic sites—of concerts and performances, that the spectacle moves to displace the reality, which you have to fight harder for than you do to get the online simulations of art, life, and sex. You talk about it differently, you experience it differently.

How *Hogg* would be taken if published today, I can't even guess. I have no clear idea how it's been taken, if at all. Writers who have been in the midst of minor controversies—and I assume that's the most you can say *Hogg* generated—are the last people you can ask to evaluate them, much less speculate about them.

Representation of any sort—the written down version of stories, for example—facilitates the study of the thing represented and the study of the representation qua meme. The representation of the representation—in the case of the internet, because there are numberless more of them as objects available to so many more individuals—changes the nature of the object in society. The representation of the representation becomes a new kind of social object—and thus commands a different kind of understanding of its new position in each social space: an entirely new matrix of power-relations that it now both creates and inhabits.

The representations start out with the promise of making you, say, love life, love music even more, love narrative more. But the reduction in effort you now need to put out in order to appreciate it turns it into an entirely different thing. Then, when those representations go online, for free or for pay, they require an

entirely new interface with the world and the other representations in the world.

Even if I can find a group in another city, or one that will be passing through my own, and meet with them, the same is true of the disorientation of facility of sexual encounters. Or even the fact that you have to make the same physical motions in the world—typing with the hands to call up music, buy clothing, or contact and contract with sexual partners has its own manner of disorientation.

People also spend more time online and less time in public spaces. This makes me think of your thoughts in *Times Square Red/Times Square Blue* regarding networking and contact. How do you see the internet influencing the sort of contact you talk about in that book?

Current technology seems, in a phrase, working to obliterate it. It turns all experience into a kind of low-level labor, in which paying one's taxes is the same order of confusion as submitting and publishing a book. With me, today, they are all something I have trouble doing and so really need a first-level, live assistant.

Which of your books is your favorite?

Up until a decade or so ago, I could answer that question—which has been regularly asked of me all my life—the one on which I'm currently working on. But somehow even that is no longer the answer. It's more like: I have no favorite.

All of them have simply become the burden of their own inadequacies. And that's depressing. Maybe if I can get that assistant for some of the other online chores that I have to do and from which I can't seem to differentiate the writing itself from buying underwear, ordering dinner from Grubhub, or a new volume of poetry from Powell's or Amazon, or getting confused when I have to set up tickets for a trip I need to take. Lots of people can do that easily, so many that travel agencies as we once knew them have largely disappeared.

Well, I can't. Nor can I explain to why, other than to say I have a bad case of regularly worsening Adult Attention Deficit Disorder.

You're 74. How has writing shifted for you as you've gotten older? Do you write for the same reasons you do now that you did when you were younger?

Well, it's a far more despairing process—if only because it seems so much more uncertain whether I will finish anything I start—if I finish it—will I be able to keep it, send it out, get it to people who want to read it. I can imagine that this is equally likely to be the descent into a great silence of the sort that Pound finished off his life, after having produced nothing so interesting as he had. Or it might be prolonging a rebirth that I could hope is as comparable to Yeats' so that even if it is all illusion it might give me some pleasure. But for either to occur, I know something has to change in the world that I live in, day to day, between me and my screen itself, not behind it, me and my keyboard itself, not in front of it.

Name
Samuel Delany

Vocation
Author, Literary Critic, Iconic Science Fiction Writer, Teacher

Fact

Writer Samuel Delany is known for his innovations in a number of genres and styles as well as his honest and frank discussions of sexuality and culture. His vast output of written work includes science fiction, literary and cultural criticism, and memoir (including a graphic novel about he and his longtime partner, Dennis). His 900-page 1975 novel, *Dahlgren*, is both a postmodern and sci-fi classic.

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