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JAMES JOYCE'S INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY IRISH WRITERS

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***Abstract**: Many of the most outstanding contemporary Irish writers have paid homage to James Joyce's figure and work in their fiction. This paper examines the extent of Joyce's influence on a selection of contemporary Irish writers both at a thematic and at an aesthetic level. It is my contention that their humanist reading of the Irish genius has only recently been paralleled by Joycean critics such as Declan Kiberd whose* Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living *(2009) recuperates the humanist writer that authors such as Edna O'Brien, William Trevor, Dermot Bolger or Joseph O'Connor have been vindicating in their works. Therefore, their appreciation of the Irish genius contrasts with mainstream critical focus on the aesthetic and technical virtuoso Joyce, more frequently perceived by Joycean scholars and by writers such as Samuel Beckett or Flann O'Brien.*

My work on the influence of Joyce's work in the literary career of some of the most relevant contemporary Irish writers is also a revision of the general tendency among Joycean critics who have traditionally centered their efforts on tracing the impact of his work on European and English authors (Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Philip Roth, John Barthes, Salman Rushdie, etc.).

Many Irish writers have felt the overwhelming legacy of James Joyce's figure and work. In general terms, we can postulate two different means of reflecting on and reacting to the antecessor. On the one hand, we recall the pose adopted by Roddy Doyle, the Irish "enfant terrible," who has consistently dismissed the impact of Joyce on Irish literature. Doyle has publicly said that he read three pages from Finnegans Wake and that he considered the act a waste of time. He has also discarded the almost inevitable comparisons that are usually established between contemporary Irish writers and James Joyce in the following terms:

> If you're a writer in Dublin and you write a snatch of dialogue, everyone thinks you lifted it from Joyce. The whole idea, that he owns language as it is spoken in Dublin is a nonsense. He didn't invent the Dublin accent. It's as if you're encroaching on this area or it's a given that he's on your shoulder. It gets on my nerves. (Chrisafis 2)

Doyle has gone so far as to consider that Ulysses "could have done with a good editor", and he maintains that Joyce's novel is "undeserving of reverence."

> In contrast, Joseph O'Connor acknowledges the inevitable anxiety of influence he used to feel when, living near the Martello Tower, he woke up every day with the intention of writing a novel:
> It's a very intimidating thing, I can tell you, on a Monday morning, when you get up and say, 'I'm going to write a novel today,' then you throw open the curtains and there's the tower' […] You think, 'There's no point, the novel has been written, no one could ever better it –get a useful job and stop all this nonsense'. (Palmer 1)

Despite this alleged anxiety, O'Connor has been able to write at least two novels that can be claimed as worthy instances of a Joycean legacy: Star of the Sea (2003) and Redemption Falls (2007). These novels, in which O'Connor blends different literary techniques and displays a very Joycean encyclopedic knowledge, may be considered as the latest hits in the genre that is the Irish novel.

Contemporary novelists sometimes refer to the figure and the work of the Irish genius in an almost obsessive way. Take, for example, some of the most recent publications by a few promising Irish novelists. Anne Haverty in her acclaimed novel The Free and the Easy (2006) alludes rather ironically to James Joyce when commenting on the cultural aspirations of the contemporary Irish: "Gibbon hadn't yet got around to reading Joyce but he knew that his man could only gain from a presumption of association with the great modernist" (151). On a more serious note, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, besides criticizing the state of contemporary Ireland in Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow (2007), also mentions Joyce: "The free market economy was doing what the Church had done for centuries: reinforcing the institution Joyce had dubbed 'the Irish marriage': couples who stayed together even though they couldn't stand the sight of one another" (45). The tone adopted by Deirdre Madden in her latest novel, Molly Fox's Birthday (2008), is much more subtle and echoes Gabriel's words in "The Dead": "For me, as a playwright, the creation of a character is like listening to something faint and distant" (7). More recently, Claire Kilroy in All Names Have Been Changed (2009) portrays an Irish writer who cannot avoid the Joyce referent: "Could we not, as a nation, have done better for the man? Wasn't this precisely the class of shabby disregard that drove Joyce and Beckett away in the first place?" (14); "Joyce was the primogeniture of Irish fiction, but Glynn did not regard himself as anyone's baby, despite indulging in behavior that strongly suggested otherwise" (62).

The appraisal of Joyce's work in the fiction of contemporary Irish writers serves multiple purposes and is much deserving of the detailed study that I am presently undertaking in different academic forums.[1] Notwithstanding, in the present article I intend

[1] In relation to this topic I have already published the following chapters and articles: "Contemporary Landscapes from a Literary and Cultural Perspective. An Interview with Joseph O'Connor" in

to summarize three principal purposes: a vindication of the humanism of his literary legacy (it is the case of Dermot Bolger and William Trevor), an imitation of his brilliant literary techniques (exemplified in William Trevor's and in Edna O'Brien's short fiction), and, finally, the propagation of an ironic humorous view of the figure and the work of the Irish genius (conveyed in some stories by William Trevor and by Joseph O'Connor).

An example of the active and necessary vindication of Joyce's humanism[2] is evident, for instance, in Dermot Bolger's literary homage to their antecessor. Dermot Bolger has invoked Joyce's figure and work in his short stories as well as in his plays. A Dublin Bloom, described by its author as "An original free adaptation of James Joyce's Ulysses," is Bolger's dramatic adaptation of Joyce's novel, written on the occasion of the 90th Bloomsday celebrations in Philadelphia. Bolger's play was first performed on June 16th, 1994 at the Zellerbach Theatre (Annenberg Centre of the University of Pennsylvania). The writer judiciously acknowledged that he agreed to writing the play but a warning in the "Playwright's Note" that presides the special edition of 250 copies signed by the author claims that "I am no Joyce expert whatsoever, and my response to the book has always been on a very human level" (3).

Despite the initial reticence that compelled him to reject the project on several occasions ("I genuinely believed it to be an impossible task, and certainly one which I did not feel qualified to undertake"), Bolger was able to identify his own fears and, consequently, he finally submitted and wrote the play:

> What finally persuaded me to attempt such an undertaking was a realization that the fear which held me back from trying to adapt the novel was an extension of the fear which holds so many people back from simply reading it. A fear which I increasingly felt had nothing to do with either the book or the author but with an aura which has grown up around Ulysses. (*Playwright's Note* 3)

A Dublin Bloom, as the title suggests, is focused on one of Joyce's main characters, Leopold Bloom, to the detriment of the other male protagonist of the novel, Stephen Dedalus. The play is structured in two acts. The first act contains eighteen scenes

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Contemporary Literature [The University of Wisconsin Press. Volumen: 46/2 (Summer 2005): 160-176]; "Nubecillas en la obra de James Joyce y de Joseph O'Connor" in "*The Scallop of Saint James. An Old Pilgrim's Hoard": Reading Joyce from the Peripheries.* Eds. M. Susana Domínguez, Margarita Estévez-Saá, et al. [Weston, Florida: Netbiblo, 2007. 233-242]; "La lección de Dermot Bolger: Releer *Ulises* a los 90" in *Estudios Joyceanos en Gran Canaria: Joyce "In His Palms."* Eds. Santiago J. Hernández and Carmen Martín Santana [Madrid: Huerga & Fierro Editores, 2007. 65-76]; and "Women and Affective Relationships in James Joyce's and William Trevor's Work" in *New Perspectives on James Joyce*. Eds. Mª Luz Suárez Castiñeira et al. [Universidad de Deusto, 2009. 127-13].

[2] I use the term "humanism" in its broadest sense as referring to the human values and concerns that clearly predominate in Joyce's work and that writers such as Dermot Bolger want to vindicate in contrast with the attitude of many Joycean scholars who have opted for emphasising Joyce's technical virtuosity, that is the formal quality of his works in detriment of the humanist content conveyed by that form.

and covers the action of Ulysses up to the Cyclops chapter. The second act, divided in seven scenes, begins with Nausicaa and finishes with Penelope. Bloom and Molly become absolute protagonists in Bolger's play. The chapters of Ulysses in which Stephen is the main protagonist are reduced to a minimum (as with Proteus) or even omitted (as is the case of the Scylla and Charybdis episode of Ulysses). However, with regards to Leopold Bloom, Bolger has included all of the aspects that make him the round character "in a sculptor sense" that Joyce claimed him to be. We can therefore learn about his reflections on food and drink, and on his fellow Dubliners; his peculiar manner of theorizing about things unknown to him; his obsession with his son's death, with his daughter's adolescence, and with his wife's unfaithfulness. Bloom's epistolary flirtations and his sexual deviations are also present in the play. In my opinion, Bolger's criteria have not been to remain faithful to Joyce's text, but rather to the figure and the humanity of Leopold Bloom, to whom he pays a brilliant homage in the play.

Furthermore, in a short story entitled "Martha's Streets," included in Oona Frawley's collection New Dubliners (2005), Dermot Bolger tells the story of Martha who, at ninety one and in a geriatric ward, finds solace in her readings of Joyce's Ulysses, a novel that had already impressed her own father who on his deathbed had discovered the work in the company of his daughter:

> Next day she had brought it to the hospital and began to read to him –not from cover to cover because Father would have no time for Stephen Dedalus's priggishness. But, over his protests, she began to read about Leopold Bloom's visit to the newspaper office crammed with hard-drinking Dublin men of the world, and the chapter where Bloom travels with other men to the funeral in Glasnevin. At first Father had been belligerent, demanding to know why she was poisoning his mind. But then human curiosity kicked in. These were his streets, his type of men. He confessed that as young man he had once drank with Joyce's own father, a painful case. There were expressions he recognised. 'By god Joyce got that right,' Father would declare suddenly. Or, 'I know the very man he's talking about'. (110)

The reading of the book had, on that occasion, united father and daughter, offering them a world in common – "the World that Martha had read about and her father had grown up in" (110) – and the opportunity to meet each other in a different way –"The book had helped them to know each other in a new way. But that was the secret of Ulysses" (110-111).

Bolger's homage to Joyce's Ulysses could be considered somewhat naïve, highly idealised or even simplistic. However, the writer has been able to capture the essence and the greatness of Joyce's masterpiece. Therefore, Martha alludes to the brilliant characterization of Joyce's protagonists that enable her father to recognize the Dubliners of his youth. Secondly, Martha alludes to the process of reading Ulysses and the possibilities that the novel offer to the reader. It is a book that does not have to be read from the beginning till the end. In fact, when she opts for reading it to her father at the

hospital, she skips the initial chapters –"Next day she had brought it to the hospital and began to read to him –not from cover to cover because Father would have no time for Stephen Dedalus's priggishness" (110). This decision implies the idea that Ulysses offers us the possibility of finding something in accordance with our human condition, with our circumstances; I would even say with our intellectual abilities. Finally, Martha muses over the readers who can or should enjoy the novel and she is predominantly interested in the average reader:

> With ordinary readers, the ones who became her friends, she could laugh about such encounters. These friends were like her in being able to move between two worlds, perpetually carrying the book in their heads. During business meetings or dutiful family occasions they could escape with Bloom into night-town or walk into eternity with Stephen along Sandymount Strand. (111)

Martha is not impressed by the typical Joycean scholar whom she finds boring – "Occasionally the people who stopped bored her, Joyce experts frothing at a misplaced semi-colon, sucking the vitality from her father's people" (111) – and who divests the novel of its humanism.

William Trevor has been described as a writer who creates "perfectly horrible little stories" (Sansom 32), who has "a winning eye for a loser" (Sansom 33), who is "a moralist whose best work is about the nature of evil, guilt and madness" (Storey 440), and who tends to adopt "an ironic distance nevertheless always balanced by compassion" (del Río-Álvaro 2).

Constanza del Río has expressed the influence of Joyce in Trevor's work —"the most obvious and abiding influence is that of the early James Joyce and his collection of short stories Dubliners" (3)— and she has summarized in the following terms the thematic and aesthetic concomitances that may be detected in the stories written by both authors:

> In terms of lived experience, both writers are Irish but look at Ireland from a physical and emotional distance. Both worry about Ireland's moral condition although they analyse it dispassionately, with no overt intention to preach. Entrapment, paralysis, isolation, loneliness and lack of opportunities are some of their favourite themes. Authorial unobtrusiveness, skilful creation of atmospheres and psychological characterisation constitute a hallmark of Joyce's short stories and of Trevor's work in general. Both use naturalistic and realistic external detail as a tool to illuminate psychological and ethical scenarios. (3)

I have already commented on the relationship between William Trevor's and Joyce's work, in a chapter entitled "Más que ecos joyceanos" ("More than Joycean Echoes"), in which I studied William Tevor's short story "Two More Gallants," which may be considered as a direct allusion to Joyce's "Two Gallants" (Estévez-Saá).My

conclusions at the time were that Trevor had borrowed and refashioned Joyce's title, some characters and topics, and even some narrative techniques, but I also maintained that the paper could very well have been entitled "Less than Joycean Echoes," since Trevor did not capture the essence and the purpose, the seriousness and the brilliancy of the short story written by his predecessor, which was the nude exhibition of a human tragedy. Finally I highlighted the fact that Trevor had gone further in his appreciation of Joyce in other short stories, and I mentioned "A Meeting in Middle Age" and "The Ballroom of Romance." By contrast to the case of "Two More Gallants," Trevor is not directly or overtly evoking his Irish predecessor. However, Joyce's influence is detected in essential aspects of both short stories. Therefore, the adverse circumstances that affect the protagonists, the paralysis that they suffer, the consequent failure in their affective relationships, their difficulties for their satisfactory integration in society, and the commodification of values and institutions (such as marriage, love, family, etc.) are recurrent themes in both Joyce's and Trevor's short stories.

It has been said that Trevor's characters, like Joyce's, often "move towards a revelation or epiphany which is moral, spiritual or social" (Storey 442). My contention, on the contrary, is that William Trevor, like Joyce, has precisely exposed the tragedy of a series of characters, men and women, young and old, who are unable to experience the moment of revelation that would enable them to understand their adverse circumstances and take a new course in their lives. In Joyce's case, the possible exception is Gabriel Conroy in *The Dead.*

Early feminist critics such as Bonnie Kime Scott, denounced the fact that women in Dubliners, unlike some men, were denied the illumination provided by an epiphanic moment (16). The problem is that Joyce explained through Stephen Dedalus what an epiphany was and that it was the task of the man of letters to record those evanescent moments in which characters betrayed themselves, but he did not specify who would experience those revelations.[3]

Robert Hogan has rightfully acknowledged that, in the case of Trevor's fiction, "If the characters do not always realize their plight or its point, the reader certainly does, and the reader's response is frequently powerful and rarely less than disturbing" (183). Certainly, as in most of Joyce's stories, it is the reader who is the repository of illumination.

I have begun this reflection on Joyce's influence on contemporary writers by mentioning the allusions that appear in four novels written by four acclaimed

[3] My contention is that most of Joyce's characters, male and female protagonists, are not allowed to experience the moments of revelation that would enable them to acquire knowledge and to change their adverse circumstances. Therefore, the children in the three first stories of *Dubliners*, Little Chandler in "A Little Cloud," Eveline in the homonymous story, or Maria in "Clay," to give some examples, are not able to fully grasp the real significance and authentic dimension of their situation and, in consequence, cannot change it. It is the reader of the stories the one expected to gain insight after the epiphanic moment and to discern the moral and spiritual paralysis that prevail among the Dubliners.

contemporary Irish women writers, Anne Haverty, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Deirdre Madden and Claire Kilroy. They are testimonies of how Joyce also casts his shadow over Irish women writers. An early and very representative instance of this Joycean influence is the figure and the work of Edna O'Brien. She has publicly proclaimed James Joyce as her literary mentor, she is the author of a very popular biography of the Irish genius, and she has even edited and introduced Joyce's Dubliners for Signet Classics. Their writing careers have been regularly compared since both are highly provocative artists who display an ambiguous relationship with their native isle, and whose works have been censored in Ireland. Notwithstanding, little has been said or written on the formal features and literary techniques that O'Brien may have borrowed from her mentor. I maintain that Joyce's "style of scrupulous meanness" is emulated by his disciple and that notions such as "simony," "gnomon," "paralysis," and "epiphany," that are essential for understanding and interpreting Joyce's short stories, also describe Edna O'Brien's attempt at reproducing her mentor's technical mastery.

If Joyce did not doubt to expose in his "nicely polished looking-glass" the "hemiplegia of the will" that was affecting their contemporary Dubliners, and denounced the stagnation of familial, religious, political and cultural institutions in urban Ireland, Edna O'Brien also condemned patriarchal rural Ireland, deploring sexual constrains, and faithfully exposing the desolation and isolation of the country and its inhabitants with special emphasis on the victimization of Irish women.

In order to briefly illustrate the legacy of the master to be detected in her own literary production, it is suffice to mention a passage from "Oft in the Stilly Night", the first story included in her collection Lantern Slides. Short Stories (1990):

> In another house a nervous priest who has been defrocked sits most of the day. The scandal is so great it can hardly be mentioned. His nerves are cited as the reason, but one who has travelled far has come back with a murky secret, in short, claiming that the priest had an eye for the ladies. Anyhow, he cannot say Mass, does not even serve at High Masses, and is seen on the hospital roads on Sundays walking with his mother. […]
>
> Yes, you would pass houses where there are drunks, where husbands on the day they get their pay packets do not come home till well after midnight, their wives accosting them on the top of the stairs or at the bottom of the stairs or wherever; and there are houses with bachelors whose rooms have never had a woman's hand to them and hence are dusty and somewhat inhospitable. (8-9)

The human landscape of Edna O'Brien's short stories, as we can see, does not differ that much from Joyce's and the style of scrupulous meanness employed by the antecessor is brilliantly emulated by his disciple.

Let us provide a further example of Joyce's impending shadow over the literary production of an Irish writer. Joseph O'Connor has been unanimously acclaimed after the publication of his novel on the Irish Famine, Star of the Sea (2003). The novel's sequel, Redemption Falls (2007) has also received more than its share of appreciative criticism.

Any reader of both novels would undoubtedly recognise the many techniques that O'Connor shares with Joyce, such as the combination of different styles for different chapters of the novels, the holdall impression they produce due to the multiple perspectives employed and the encyclopaedic dimension of the texts. O'Connor's depth of characterisation and psychological insight also make his characters resemble Joycean protagonists. Notwithstanding, the best example of O'Connor's reverence to Joyce was the composition of a short story entitled "Two Little Clouds," an overt response to Joyce's well-known narrative "A Little Cloud", as the author himself acknowledged in an interview, when asked about contemporary Dublin in comparison with the city Joyce portrayed in Dubliners:

Yes, Joyce would barely recognise the Dublin of 2004. You can buy a condom in any corner shop, but you're not allowed smoke a cigarette in a pub any more. (As part of my answer to this question, I will send you an unpublished short story I have recently written, called "Two Little Clouds." It is a response to "A Little Cloud" in Joyce's *Dubliners*.)[4]

"Two Little Clouds" offers us O'Connor's vision of twenty-first century Dublin and its inhabitants. The landscape of the city is depicted as sunnier and, of course, more modern than the one presented by Joyce –Chinese barmen, tourists, immigrants, traffic jams and BMWs crowd the metropolis. However, the meeting of two protagonists (a similar circumstance to the one in "A Little Cloud") offers the reader the chance to realise that Dublin is still a place where, as Joyce used to say, "Everybody has time to hail a friend and start a conversation about a third party" (Budgen, *James Joyce* 60). In "Two Little Clouds" we discover two protagonists, the narrator named Victor Mature and a friend of his Eddie Virago who meet after a long time. Throughout the story both disclose their human miseries, dissatisfactions and frustrations at both an intimate and a professional level, so that by the end, we discover that twenty-first-century Dublin, despite its flamboyant aspect and its fashionable inhabitants, is not all that different from the late-nineteenth-century society that James Joyce had so carefully portrayed.

Many other authors should be added to the list of contemporary Irish writers whose work can be interpreted as thematically or aesthetically influenced by Joyce. Furthermore, in my opinion, it is not a question of merely emulating the great Irish genius for the simple sake of imitating or excelling their ancestor. All the writers mentioned have offered something new, something different in their literary careers but they have also been able to learn from the past, to receive an inheritance, the Joycean literary legacy,

[4] Joseph O'Connor gave me the opportunity to interview him when he was living in Bray. The interview was published under the title "Contemporary Landscapes from a Literary and Cultural Perspective. An Interview with Joseph O'Connor" in *Contemporary Literature* [The University of Wisconsin Press. Volume: 46/2 (Summer 2005): 160-176].
The story "Two Little Clouds" was also sent to me and it was published thanks to the generosity of its author in *The Scallop of Saint James: An Old Pilgrim's Hoard,* edited by Mla. Susana Domínguez, Margarita Estévez-Saá and Anne MacCarthy [Netbiblo: Weston, Florida, 2006. Xiii-xxi]

that they have succeeded in helping to flourish anew. Undoubtedly, in the case of the writers I have mentioned, they would have become renowned literary figures with or without echoing Joyce's figure and work, but their homage adds even further value to their contribution to Irish writing.

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