

News:

The Spanish James Joyce Society Annual Conference, Vigo, 11 and 12 April 2008

When Jules Verne's Captain Nemo made his fictional visit to Vigo Bay in the 1870 novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Vigo was a small fishing village with a population of fewer than 12,000 inhabitants. Tucked away in the northwest corner of Spain, just a few short miles from the Portuguese border, the Bay had been the scene of a naval battle in 1703 when Spanish vessels bearing gold from the Americas were forced to scuttle after the relentless pursuit of the combined British and Dutch fleets. The gold found there was to provide Nemo with the financial resources necessary for the adventures undertaken in his vessel, the Nautilus. When Hemingway, blustering and blythe, spent four hours in the town in 1921 with his then wife Hadley Richardson, he described it as "a pasteboard looking village, cobble-streeted, white and orange plastered, set up on one side of a big almost landlocked harbor that is large enough to hold the entire British navy."¹ The "village" had, at the time of Hemingway's brief stop-off, a population of some 53,000 souls. Vigo was to grow at a spectacular rate throughout the twentieth century. Today it is a bustling, modern industrial city of some 300,000 inhabitants and the industrial and maritime engine from which Galicia is powered. If Corunna, as I have claimed elsewhere, is Galicia's Edinburgh, Vigo is, without doubt her Glasgow.

Joyce, annoyingly, perhaps, never visited Vigo. Never visited Galicia, never visited Spain. If he had come to Vigo, however, it is fanciful to think that he might have found a town with some of the qualities of his adopted home, Trieste, but whose residents were more similar to the Dubliners whose lives he

portrayed in his writings. Joyce never made it to Vigo, but in his name and honour, fifty-something members of the Spanish James Joyce Society disembarked in this port for their annual Conference in April 2008. One of the proud claims of the Society are that its Conferences are held in some of the most beautiful and evocative cities in the country –Seville, Granada, Jaén, Huelva, Almería, Alicante, Alcalá, Corunna, Salamanca, Almagro, Santiago de Compostela and Tarragona could easily represent the perfect route for the cultural tourist to Spain– and Vigo quite frankly was no exception. True, Hemingway might have been exaggerating when he described Vigo Bay (in late December!) as being “as blue as a chromo of the bay of Naples” but Vigo does have its own beauty and charm. For the members of the SJS, Vigo was to provide the perfect backdrop for their annual encounter.

The papers and activities were wide and varied, and the only complaint was that the two days which were allotted for the Conference were insufficient for the usual heated debate and socialising which are regular features of the annual meetings. Founding Father and President of the Association, Francisco Garcia Tortosa gave the opening talk which, with the title of “Vico and Vigo: Confluences and Ramifications” made use of his habitual linguistic dexterity to set the tone for the Conference. A wide variety of themes were developed in the papers offered by members. *Dubliners*, *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake* and *Pomes Penyeach* were all afforded individual treatment this year, with specialists discussing specific aspects of these works.

Dubliners was represented with papers presented by Susana Pérez Pico, Eduardo Barros Grela and José Manuel Estévez-Sáa. The first dealt with the paradoxes which can be found in the film version of “The Dead” which, she argued, moved towards a paradoxical return to realism which went against the overt modernism of Joyce’s original story. The second looked at the confrontation of different aspects of spatiality which, Barros Grela argued, is a crucial factor for determining the extent and nature of the much-vaunted state of paralysis present in the volume in general and in the story he uses as an example, “The Sisters,” in particular. Estévez-Saá compared Joyce’s “The Two Gallants” with William Trevor’s “Two More Gallants.”

Ulysses, normally the work which provides the impulse for the largest number of papers, was uncharacteristically out shadowed

in sheer numerical terms in this Conference. Two excellent papers were delivered, however, with Benigno Del Río Molina proposing a novel interpretation of the “Nausicaa” episode in which he used Homeric keys in an attempt to explain the occultation of the identity of Leopold Bloom in this episode. Rafael García León, in his habitual inimitable style gave a humorous interpretation of Joyce’s rhetoric as revealed in the novel. Finally, the undersigned attempted to relate certain features of the novel to the work of American bluesman Robert Johnson.

Finnegans Wake supplied the motivation behind three papers. Carmelo Medina set forth the challenge for Spanish scholars by outlining a plan for a proposed study on the presence of Spanish genetics in the work. Ricardo Navarrete Franco, a specialist on Joyce’s last novel, spoke on Quinet’s paragraph in *Finnegans Wake*, while Fanny Llantada Díaz presented an interesting paper on Dorothy Richardson’s reading of the novel. Margarita Estévez Saá used a quotation from the book itself – “[T]he voice of Shaun, voice of the Irish, voice from afar” – as a title for her talk in which she dealt with William Carleton’s and Dion Bouccicault’s influence in the process of Joyce’s characterisation of Shaun.

José Ruiz Mas gave a paper centred on the figure of Carlos E. Zavaleta, the Peruvian poet responsible for a translation of *Pomes Penyeach* into Spanish. The international aspect of Joyce was, in fact, considered by a number of the participants. Olga Fernández Vicente talked about the fin de siècle and its influence on both Joyce and the Basque writer Pío Baroja. Another Basque writer, the contemporary essayist, poet and novelist Jon Juarista (a modern convert to Judaism) was the subject of the paper delivered by Marisol Morales Ladrón, in which she discussed possible echoes of Joyce in Juarista’s novel *La caza salvaje* (*The Savage Hunt*). Teresa Caneda Cabrera compared Joyce’s fictional depiction of Dublin to the visual description of Berlin as used by the German film director Walter Ruttmann.

Comparative papers were also presented which invited comparisons between Joyce and other Irish writers. Thus Anne MacCarthy evoked the figure of the great nineteenth century poet James Clarence Mangan in her paper, while Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez spoke on the relationship with their native country maintained by Joyce and Maria Edgeworth. Contemporary Irish writers were represented by Carlos Seco González who

discussed Joyce's "silence, exile and cunning" in the context of Joseph O'Connor's 2002 novel *Star of the Sea*. Vanessa Silva Fernández also assessed the influence of Joyce on a number of contemporary Irish woman poets.

Other talks on the works of Joyce in general were given by Miguel Alonso Giráldez, Gabriel Pérez Durán and Jefferey Simons. Alonso Giráldez spoke on the obsession with language in the works of Joyce, comparing this to a similar obsession in the works of certain contemporary Irish poets, most notable Bernard O'Donoghue. Pérez Durán, a specialist in the field of translation, gave a paper analysing the works of Joyce and Irish music under the prism of the concept of *paratranslation* and the *paratext*. Jefferey Simons, whose works on the poetic aspects of Joyce's oeuvre always surprise and delight, presented a paper with the entrancing title "The Modernist J (continued)."

As has been the case at our annual meetings over the past few years, papers were also read on other aspects of Irish culture. Amongst the topics were papers on such diverse figures as Molly Keane, Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Mary O'Donnell, Paula Meehan, Yeats, Heaney, Roddy Doyle and, in an interesting novelty, the plastic artist Amanda Coogan. More general papers on Celtic mythology were also given.

The organisation, by Teresa Caneda and Martín Urdiales, was exemplary, and the members of the Society enjoyed an active social programme largely centred around the marvellous shellfish and crisp young white wine which are typical of Vigo and its surroundings. The Society General Meeting saw the appointment of a new Secretary, Margarita Estévez Saá, and the consensus that the 2009 Conference would be held in the august arena of Deusto University in Bilbao, a cultural hotspot and one of the friendliest and most welcoming cities in the world. It will also be the first time the annual Conference is to be held in the Basque Country: a long overdue event, one might add, given the strong historical and cultural links between Eire and Euskadi. Joyce, I think, would have approved.

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Notes

¹ From the article “Tuna Fishing in Spain”, published in *The Toronto Star Weekly* on 18 February 1922.