

The Reputation of James Joyce in Early Twentieth-Century Irish Writing

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Canonization is a word taken from religion to express the sanctification of outstanding figures. These are thus put in a superior position in the hierarchy within the religious community. Even from this perspective the canon will imply judgements of value and a selection of a superior group according to established criteria. But perhaps because canonization is a word taken from religion we tend to expect that these established criteria will be unchangeable and never subject to the contingencies of the culture which decides on them. But André Lefevere, speaking of the process of canonization, warns us that "institutions enforce or, at least, try to enforce the dominant poetics of a period by using it as the yardstick against which current production is measured." Some works are treated as classics just after their first appearance in print whereas others are "rejected, some to reach the exalted position of a classic later, when the dominant poetics has changed." What Lefevere emphasises is that the process of canonization is dependent on the particular "poetics" of a certain period. It is an arbitrary process, where ideologies play a central role in the establishment of criteria by which one judges a text. Nevertheless, Lefevere identifies a "conservative bias" in the "system itself" because works which have been canonized for centuries remain secure in their position of superiority even though they are interpreted according to the value system of the period in question.¹

In the early to middle years of the twentieth century, Irish literature in English was in the process of creating a canon and of finding criteria by which to create a hierarchy within the literature. The judgements were dependent on the "poetics" of the period in question, the early twentieth century. This can be seen from the Irish commentators' valuations of Joyce at this time. I think it shows us that a writer's fame can be determined by certain cultural factors rather than by aesthetic criteria only. James Joyce's reception in his own country during his lifetime and just after he died was quite negative due to a series of attitudes and prejudices inherent in Irish society and literature, or at least in those with the power and influence to decide on such questions, in other words the writers of anthologies, critics,

writers for the press, clubs, societies, publishing houses, universities and so on. This is what is termed the institution by Itamar Even-Zohar.² I shall explore the possibility that some of these prejudices were the result of the fact that Irish writing was at that time a new literature which was still establishing the criteria on which its canon would be founded. I do not hope to either give a comprehensive or exhaustive account of his reception in his own country. Instead, I shall try to show that certain concepts recur in the accounts I shall examine. This is revelatory especially as these accounts are from very different sources. It seems as if there was a generalized set of ideas on the writer at this period, which reflects the isolationism of the new literature in its insistence on being autonomous and on fixed ideas of what being Irish meant. Joyce did not just go into voluntary exile as it seems as his writings were pushed to the margins in his own country just as he absented himself from it.

To begin with, D. J. O'Donoghue in his early twentieth-century dictionary of Irish poets, *Poets of Ireland*, mentions James Joyce. The publication date of this dictionary is 1912, so predating the first appearance of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. O'Donoghue speaks of Joyce's *Chamber Music* as a "remarkable volume by a young Irish writer of Galway parentage." There are two points I would like to make about O'Donoghue's entry on Joyce in this dictionary of Irish poets. Firstly, when he compiled it, Irish writing in English was still a very new phenomenon. This dictionary was an attempt to put forward a select group of writers for Irish literature. Books such as this, as well as poetic anthologies and literary histories, are important when criteria are being established by which to judge literature. O'Donoghue includes Joyce here along with James Clarence Mangan and Edward Walsh and so considers him worthy to be among those writers who would form part of a future literary tradition. He does so because of *Chamber Music* only. Secondly, as Joyce's reputation was still not established, it seems to me that O'Donoghue was not influenced by factors such as the former's fame abroad. In fact, his criteria are aesthetic, he calls *Chamber Music* "remarkable." This could also be due to the recent memory of Joyce as student in Dublin, as O'Donoghue adds that "he was a brilliant student of University College, Dublin."³ In what O'Donoghue has to say on Joyce, however, we can discern that he is emphasising the fact that he was Irish in the mention of his "Galway parentage." But it seems to have been not as of great importance to O'Donoghue as it was to be to commentators some twenty or thirty years later.

Stephen Gwynn was secretary of the Irish Literary Society in 1904. This society was made up of those who spearheaded the literary revival in Ireland. Gwynn published *Irish Literature and Drama* in 1936 and in it wants to describe the literary revival. The movement's aim was, according to him, to give Ireland a literature of her own "in the language whose use was rapidly superseding that of Gaelic."⁴ His book is another example of those

works which have importance in the establishment of a canon. It is an outline of this new literature in Ireland from the early nineteenth century to the mid twentieth, by someone who was involved in the culturally influential literary revival. This would give the criteria put forward more importance for the Irish world of letters. Gwynn in fact makes this clear when he claims his involvement in the revival is what “will give this book whatever value it possesses” (Gwynn viii).

What he writes on Joyce in this book is certainly given an ethnic slant in his comments on Joyce’s Irish Catholicism. The criteria set up for the selection of the texts are clearly described, as we have just seen. Ireland’s literature is a national literature and so those writers considered worthy as forming part of it should also be “national” writers. Gwynn, as an Irish Protestant, focuses on the fact that Joyce was an Irish Catholic. Speaking of *A Portrait*, he holds that it is a “study of a diseased soul in a diseased country: that is how Joyce saw himself and saw Ireland. Indeed he saw his own disease as a result of the abnormal conditions into which a Catholic Irishman of his generation was liable to be born” (Gwynn 192-93). He later states that “again, for the Irish-born Catholic, his religion was traditionally a sign of his nationality” (Gwynn 195).

Gwynn was writing at a time when Irish literature in English was still suffering from doubts about its identity. This book was published only fourteen years after Ireland became an independent country and the efforts to determine a literary identity were a reflection of an attempt to establish a national identity. Gwynn writes:

When a race finds itself condemned to an inferior status, and distrusted, there is a perpetual tendency towards exaggerating its claim to full right; and exaggeration in the long run breeds a bitter scepticism. To accept one of the current phases which has some intelligible content, Ireland presents a bad case of the inferiority complex. (Gwynn 20)

He adds that Joyce’s “two main books” (he is referring to *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*) are the study of “a diseased mind; and a great part of the disease is the inferiority complex, pride run mad” (Gwynn 206). For this commentator, Joyce’s two novels are the result of the fact that Ireland was a former colony. It is clear that he is to be considered as a writer worthy of inclusion in this book because he is Irish and so suffers from all the ills of his people which come from centuries of colonization. These ethnic criteria are typical of a literature which is establishing its canon. A new literature must find an identity and this is most readily available in one’s nationality. But, as we shall see, it is an attitude that lasted.

Some ten years after Joyce’s death, Brian Nolan praises Joyce’s “superber quality,” his humour and that “with laughs he palliates the sense of doom that is the heritage of the Irish Catholic.”⁵ Nolan is obviously claiming that

what is the best in Joyce is also the most Irish and that this Irishness necessarily reflects the history of this former colony.

But the *Irish Press* went a lot further. On 14 January 1941, there was an account of Joyce's death, reporting Eva Joyce's remark that "he always expressed his love of Dublin and of the Dublin people, and often said that he would love to live here again."⁶ Anyone familiar with Joyce's writing might be slightly dubious about this statement. Nevertheless, this highly conservative newspaper always tended to uphold the essential values of the Irish Free State and later Republic: nationalism, the family and religion. The same article quotes another member of Joyce's family, his sister Eileen, later Mrs. Schaurek, as commenting on the fact that people believed Joyce to be "anti-Catholic" but that he never missed a service during all the "Holy Weeks he spent with me in Trieste" (Nolan 78) Again, while not doubting the truth of this statement, it must seem strange to people familiar with what Joyce wrote on this subject. Indeed, I think we should ask ourselves why such a Catholic, Republican newspaper wished to speak of Joyce to the Irish people in this way. Why did it wish to portray him as a good Irish Catholic who loved his country and never forgot it? These are pertinent questions if we remember that the content of *Ulysses*, for example, would not have been acceptable to the majority of its readership.

The *Irish Press* here reflects the conservative Ireland of De Valera's time. The new Free State of Ireland promoted a rejection of all that was non-Irish and non-Catholic. This is even seen in Irish language literature. Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's *Fiche Bliain ag Fás*, now a classic autobiography in Ireland dealing with the writer's youth on the Blasket islands in the Dingle peninsula, was rejected by the state Irish language publisher, An Gúm, because of the writer's description of under-age drinking, which was considered unsuitable for young people to read. The Censorship of Publications Act, made law in 1929, was a manifestation of the suspicion of all that came from outside Ireland. Samuel Beckett bitterly quotes the Minister of Justice's description of future censorship in the Free State: "There are books which are so blatantly indecent and known to be indecent that it would be unnecessary for the members of the Board to read every line of them. Should the members of the Board, for instance, be compelled to read through every line of *Ulysses*, a book that has been universally condemned?"⁷ The Minister of Justice for the time was of the opinion that it was possible to ban a book without having even read it. It seems that Joyce's literary reputation at home was based on rash judgements on his books rather than on the praise of foreign literary critics.⁸ We have seen that O'Donoghue thought him promising, but this was before he committed the sin of writing what would have been considered as obscene at home. It must be added here that, strangely enough, *Ulysses* was never banned in Ireland.

Brian Moore, the novelist, speaks of Joyce's reputation in Ireland in the

nineteen forties: "Joyce was a major Irish writer whom no one knew. My father, who was a great reader, said to me once, 'James Joyce is a sewer.' He never read him, but that was the attitude. And my father was not a banning person, though he was very religious" (qtd. in Carlson 112). Perhaps this could explain why *Ulysses* was never banned in Ireland, as nobody knew it or Joyce as an artist well enough to consider doing so. Certainly, Joyce was considered as a writer of dirty books and this was a crime doubly to be condemned as he had had all the benefits of a Jesuit education. I think it is significant that he was so deemed without any knowledge of his work. This seems to suggest that when a canon is being established in a new literature, cultural criteria, instead of literary knowledge of the text solely are of great importance when value judgements are being made. However, we should keep in mind that in the new state realism was the literary form favoured by writers of fiction and drama. Terence Brown explains why this was so taking as his watermark the end of the Irish Civil War, in 1923: "Ideals had apparently diminished to a day-to-day pragmatism. The fervour of revolutionary hope had dissipated in the disillusionment that followed the Civil War of 1922-23 . . . the actual facts of Irish sectarian division could no longer be relegated to insignificance in a unifying vision of national culture."⁹ Joyce's work would not have appeared realistic in the traditional sense to the Irish reading public and Irish institution and so we can posit aesthetic reasons too for the lukewarm reception of his work in Ireland. It would be simplifying the issue to claim that his reception was determined solely by cultural factors, although the emphasis in this essay is on the role they played as this, in my opinion, is the aspect of his literary reputation in Ireland which was been overlooked.

Brown comments earlier on the works of Daniel Corkery, "whose powerful if narrowly intense studies of Irish literary and cultural history were considerably influential" and of his books, *The Hidden Ireland* (1925) and *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931). For Brown, these books "gave intellectual sanction to an attitude that in its less refined form often expressed itself as a strident xenophobia or a bigoted social triumphalism" (Brown 3: 90). There is truth in what Brown says about the atmosphere in Irish intellectual life of the mid-twentieth century. Joyce committed some of the great sins of the new Free State, where cultural isolationism and sexual repression were promoted. The explicitness of his works, or at least the rumours of its pornographic content, combined with their supposed intellectualism, were bound to meet with condemnation. However, Brown's views are both overstated and a reworking of ideas still floating around in Irish literary and intellectual circles. First of all, the attitudes in Irish writing we are discussing began to emerge before the revolution and following independence, as we have seen. Secondly, Corkery's views (which shall be discussed in the following) were extreme but necessary at a post-revolutionary moment in Irish history. This is not unique to Ireland but will

most possibly be found in all new literatures. One of the outstanding features of new literatures is that they must try to establish an autonomous identity with regard to other literatures and cultures. Irish writers and commentators in the early twentieth century frequently felt intimidated by their neighbours who also used the English language, especially by the former colonial culture. One of the ways to preserve independence and what was seen as Irishness was to reject all that was foreign. There was an attempt to define Irish literature in terms of nationalism and race, to draw boundaries around it to fortify it, to protect its distinctness, just as boundaries had been defined for the twenty-six counties which made up the new state. The parameters of the sense of identity being sought by the institution were established by reference to the Catholic community of Gaelic origin in the new state, although not all Irish people either in the new state or in the North of Ireland would be of that group.

This fortress mentality can be seen in the work of Daniel Corkery and most especially in chapter 1 of *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*. He holds that a national literature is “written primarily for its own people” so that every new book in it “no matter what its theme, foreign or native—is referable to their life, and its literary traits to the traits already established in the literature. The nation’s own critical opinion of it is the warrant of life or death for it.”¹⁰ This simplistic definition of what a national literature should be excludes all that does not in some way refer to the Irish people. It must be written for them and its worth to be evaluated only by them. This demonstrates to us what is meant by a fortress mentality. The boundaries of the national literature are tightly defined to exclude the non-Irish. It is now perhaps a little clearer why critics tried to emphasize the features in Joyce’s writing attributable to his nationality. There seems to have existed an effort to make him part of a national literature, as it was defined by Corkery, at all costs. And it also seems that if he did not fit in with this narrow definition he was to be considered unworthy of forming part of a literature which, paradoxically, was in need of an autonomous tradition.

The “literary traits” referred to here are later mentioned by Corkery as “the three great forces” in the Irish “national being” which make it different from the English one: firstly, “the Religious Consciousness of the People,” secondly, Irish nationalism and thirdly the land (Corkery 19). We have already seen efforts to identify the first two in Joyce’s writing. But, for Corkery, Joyce could never have formed part of the national literature because he was an expatriate. He claims that it cannot be dependent on expatriates (Corkery 3). A national literature must be written for the Irish people so Corkery excludes expatriates because they do not do this. How can expatriates, he asks, writing for an “alien market, produce national literature?” (Corkery 4-5). Obviously not, according to his own definition. Although the typical Irish expatriate “continues to find his matter in Irish life” due to the absence of a market at home his “choice of it” and his

“treatment” of it are to a “greater or less extent imposed on him by alien considerations” (Corkery 5). Corkery quite sensibly explains why these writers did not stay at home, because a “home market hardly exists for their wares” (Corkery 4). Here he identifies one of the ills of any new literature. As a general rule these do not possess either a reading public or publishing houses which could allow a writer a living.

Corkery’s views are typical of a new writing. Ireland was surrounded by stronger neighbours whose literature was also in English. The natural instinct of Irish writers would be to produce for those foreign markets. Nevertheless, if a new writing has to establish an autonomous identity it cannot do this. It must try to survive by the standards it has set up for itself, as Corkery claims “unless we learn to know ourselves, to stand on our own feet, we shall never achieve self-expression” (Corkery 243). And he continues to establish some canon-forming criteria. He writes that “unless a writer sink himself in the heart of his own people, he will never, let his own gifts be what they may, accomplish work of such a nature as permanently satisfies the human spirit” (Corkery 243). In other words, an Irish writer will never produce superlative literature, great art, unless this comes from his own people.

Joyce has to be rejected as his writing does not reflect one of those three forces which Corkery sees as differentiating the Irish “national being” from the English one. According to Corkery, the “religious consciousness” of the Irish is “so vast, so deep, so dramatic, even so terrible a thing, occasionally creating wreckage in its path, tumbling the weak things over, that when one begins to know it, one wonders if it is possible for a writer to deal with any phase whatever of Irish life without trenching upon it” (Corkery 19-20). Corkery believes that this consciousness of religion is a very important part of the Irish character:

So firm is the texture of that consciousness that one may sometimes think that only about Irish life can a really great sex novel be written in these days: for the subject can have no great attraction for the serious artist except where the moral standards are rigid, and the reactions transcend the lusts and shiverings of the mortal flesh. (Corkery 20)

But, according to Corkery “Mr. James Joyce has gone astray—although the very texture we have spoken of nearly succeeded in holding him fast” (Corkery 20). I think if we read between the lines we can perceive that more than a value judgement based on racial considerations is being made. Joyce does not qualify as a national writer not only because he is an expatriate or not only because he does not reflect the national preoccupation with religious matters. He has “gone astray” because of his treatment of this theme and obviously for Corkery this is due to the fact that he is writing for a foreign audience.

Maurice Goldring writes of the magazine, *The Bell*, which in the nineteen forties “waged a relentless campaign to prove that ‘moral principles’ were nothing but a smokescreen concealing a desire to muzzle intellectual and creative life, stifle all public debate and inhibit the exchange of ideas. Such objectives had nothing to do with the church, morality or Christianity.”¹¹ What seems to be evident about this period is that the conservative values led to such anti-intellectualism. Again, this would be typical of a new literature and also a new state. After the revolutionary period has finished, a literature must try to establish a stable identity, but does so often at the expense of intellectual freedom.

Corkery is establishing criteria based on cultural considerations. But we get the impression that when a critic tried to make aesthetic value judgements on Joyce in the early twentieth century, the conservative atmosphere in the Irish world of letters prevailed. In 1926 Hugh Law attempted a definition of Irish writing in English in his book *Anglo-Irish Literature*. He tries to broaden the definition to include “the races of Ireland.”¹² Unlike Corkery, Law is a Protestant and tries to make a case to include Anglo-Irish writers, in the strict sense of the term, in a national literature. But whereas Corkery excludes Joyce from his definition for not being national enough, Law disapproves of him, we detect, for being too *avant garde*:

No one will deny that Mr. James Joyce is a very distinguished writer, or that he can claim at least that sort of originality which consists in saying what nobody else has thought fit to say. His *Ulysses* has even been acclaimed as the forerunner of the novels of the future—novels concerned exclusively with the meanderings of that subconscious mind which psycho-analysts profess to have discovered. (Law 301)

Law seems to have to accept Joyce as a great writer because he has been thought so by foreign criticism, nevertheless this does not seem to convince him that Joyce has some literary value. He quickly dismisses him by stating that “literary fashions change at least as rapidly as any other fashions, and sooner or later swing back again to classical forms” (Law 301). Law cannot hide the feeling that his writing is just a fashion, something new-fangled which will not change Irish writing in English in the least.

I think that the following conclusions can be drawn from the texts I have analysed. O’Donoghue, Gwynn, Corkery and Law all want to define Irish writing in English and establish certain criteria by which to make value judgements. These criteria are not chosen for aesthetic reasons only. The new literature was trying to establish its identity on non-aesthetic factors, at least if we take the texts analysed here into consideration. The cultural state of affairs in early twentieth-century Ireland influenced the choice of literary criteria. The new literature had to establish its autonomy by

rejecting all that was alien. The fact that this rejection existed, combined with the conservatism obvious in the literary appraisals, is to my mind typical of the post-revolutionary period. All that is foreign is rejected while at the same time there is an attempt to establish a peace-time stability based on unchanging values. The texts I have examined do not seem to be swamped in any way by foreign admiration of James Joyce. On the contrary, in the early twentieth century the fact that he was beginning to be famous abroad did not lead to his widespread acceptance at home. Indeed, it may have hindered it. This is significant if we take into account the fact that it is often believed that a new writing tends to be profoundly influenced by more dominant cultures that have more established literatures. In Ireland in the early twentieth century this does not seem to have been the case.

However, as in all periods of revolution or post-revolution, simple answers are the best. The literary judgements made in the texts under consideration were frequently based on racial factors, the most readily available and malleable when one wants to define a national literature. As Moore suggests, perhaps this is one of the reasons why Joyce was “a major Irish writer whom no one knew.” Gwynn, when speaking of *A Portrait*, tells us that its appearance coincided unfortunately with the troubled times in Ireland:

It was only when this turmoil of feeling began to die away that some readers at least saw the importance of Joyce's autobiographic study; and, in truth, the hurly-burly of political events which lasted in Ireland from 1916 to 1923 prevented it from ever arousing there the partisanship, for or against, which at another time would have been created. (Gwynn 192)

Perhaps it was the hurly-burly of events, both political and literary, which led Joyce to be condemned or worse, ignored by Irish letters. At that time, things were changing constantly and there does not seem to have been time to evaluate someone who did not conform with what was expected of an Irish writer.

Seán O'Faolain wrote prophetically of this period in the forties in *The Bell* magazine. He maintained that Ireland was a “country at the beginning of its creative history, and at the end of its revolutionary history.”¹³ In the later creative phase of the new literature Joyce became assimilated as a model for Irish writers and is accepted in the canon of Irish writing in English today by Irish criticism which often reads his work within the Irish literary tradition as Emer Nolan has recently done in *James Joyce and Nationalism*.¹⁴ Without this reading I believe Joyce criticism worldwide would be limited and, without the rejection by earlier critics in the twentieth century I also feel this particular reading would not be possible. The tradition in Irish writing of asserting its autonomy has given these present-day critics a sense

of what being Irish means and that an Irish literary tradition exists. The absence of the simple and often unsophisticated criteria put forward by early to mid-twentieth-century critics would not have implied a wholesale acceptance of Joyce's writing. What it does mean is a strong sense of identity in Irish writing and an ability to question what being Irish means to a writer as well as a criticism of the opinions discussed in this essay, either rejecting them or coming to terms with them as a part of Irish history and culture.

Notes

1. André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992) 19.
2. Itamar Even-Zohar defines "institution" in "The 'Literary System,'" *Poetics Today* 11.1 (1990): 37, stating that it consists of at least part of the critics, publishing houses, periodicals, clubs, groups of writers, government bodies, schools, universities, mass media and so on.
3. D. J. O'Donoghue, *Poets of Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1912) 219.
4. Stephen Gwynn, *Irish Literature and Drama in the English Language: A Short History* (London: Nelson, 1936) vii; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.
5. Brian Nolan, et al., *James Joyce Essays* (Stanford: Folcroft, 1973) 11; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.
6. Qtd. in "Sisters of James Joyce Mourn for Two Brothers," Nolan 77-78.
7. *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, ed. Julia Carlson (London: Routledge, 1990) 144; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.
8. This statement must be qualified by what we know of the reception of *Ulysses* following its publication. Richard Ellmann writes that it is a mistake to imagine that Joyce could rely on "adulation in any country" in the late twenties and early thirties (JJI 642).
9. Terence Brown, "The Counter Revival: Provincialism and Censorship, 1930-65," *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Seamus Deane, 3 vols. (Derry: Field Day, 1991) 3: 90; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.
10. Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature: A Study* (Cork: Cork UP, 1931) 2; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.
11. Maurice Goldring, *Pleasant the Scholar's Life: Irish Intellectuals and the Construction of the Nation State* (London: Serif, 1993) 156.
12. Hugh Law, *Anglo-Irish Literature* (Dublin: Talbot, 1926) xii; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.
13. Qtd. in Brown 92.
14. Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995); for an Irish novelist's account of Joyce in twentieth-century Ireland see Benedict Kiely, "Joyce's Legacy," *James Joyce: The Artist and the Labyrinth*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Ryan, 1990) 41-61.