

## ‘I have met with you, bird, too late, or if not, too worm and early’: The Eternal Circling of Yeats and Joyce\*

John McCourt

### I. Introduction: Yeats Meets Joyce

In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce recasts, several times over, the central affirmation that he is credited with having made to William Butler Yeats during their much mythologised early encounter: “I have met you too late. You are too old.” These words, or a version of them, have framed studies of the Joyce-Yeats relationship which is thereafter construed as endlessly antagonistic, irretrievably oppositional. This essay will seek to challenge those readings which turn a complex relationship into what Alistair Cormack has termed “the Punch and Judy show of Irish modernism” (Cormack 11). What Joyce did actually say only he and Yeats of course knew although both may have well willingly or unwillingly misremembered. But this has not halted their acquaintances, biographers, and critics from crafting their own versions. Yeats himself left a couple of versions of the meeting, one of which is surprisingly long and detailed:

I went out into the street and there a young man came up to me and introduced himself. He told me he had written a book of prose essays or poems, and spoke to me of a common friend. . . . I asked him to come with me to the smoking room of a restaurant in O’Connell Street, and read me a beautiful though immature and eccentric harmony of little prose descriptions and meditations. He had thrown over metrical form, he said, that he might get a form so fluent that it would respond to the motions of the spirit. I praised his work but he said, “I really don’t care whether you like what I am doing or not. It won’t make the least difference to me. Indeed, I don’t know why I am reading to you.” Then putting down his book, he began to explain all his objections to everything I had ever done. Why had I concerned myself with

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politics, with folklore, with the historical setting of events and so on? Above all why had I written about ideas, why had I condescended to make generalizations? These things were all the sign of the cooling of the iron, of the fading out of inspiration. [. . .] I took up the book and pointing to a thought said, “You got that from somebody else who got it from the folk.” I felt exasperated and puzzled and walked up and down explaining the dependence of art on popular tradition. I said, “The artist, when he has lived for a long time in his own mind with the example of other artists as deliberate as himself, gets into a world of ideas pure and simple. He becomes very highly individualized and at last by sheer pursuit of perfection becomes sterile. Folk imagination on the other hand creates endless images of which there are no ideas. . . . The folk life, the country life, is nature with her abundance, but the art life, the town life, is sterile when it is not married to nature. The whole ugliness of the modern world has come from the spread of towns and their ways of thought, and to bring back beauty we must marry spirit and nature again. When the idea which comes from individual life marries the image that is born from the people, one gets great art, the art of Homer, and of Shakespeare, and of Chartres Cathedral.”

I looked at my young man. I thought, “I have conquered him now,” but I was quite wrong. He merely said, “Generalizations aren’t made by poets; they are made by men of letters. They are no use.” Presently he got up to go, and, as he was going out, he said, “I am twenty. How old are you?” I told him, but I am afraid I said I was a year younger than I am. He said with a sigh, “I thought as much. I have met you too late. You are too old.” (Ellmann 1982: 102-03)

In a passage from *Autobiographies* Yeats offers a more cursory and dismissive impression:

A young poet, who wrote excellently but had the worst manners, was to say a few years later, “You do not talk like a poet, you talk like a man of letters” and if all the Rhymers had not been polite, if most of them had not been to Oxford or Cambridge, the greater number would have said the same thing (Ellmann 1982: 101).

There is a more open sense of annoyance here and yet, it is also hard not to believe that Yeats relished being challenged by Joyce who clearly wished to announce his presence in a way his older rival would not forget. At the same time, perhaps seeking to retrospectively mend fences, Joyce later (in conversation and in the Gorman biography) denied that he

had responded to Yeats in this way. In Roy Foster’s view, he did so “at a stage of life when good manners meant more to him than they did in 1902” (Foster 276). Even if that is true it is signal of his ultimate respect for Yeats. For good reason then, Anne Fogarty has described this encounter as “auspicious meeting” as “an original moment, a primal scene of the modernism which both writers were subsequently to play a part in creating” (Fogarty 17).

## II. Irish Literary Revival

Their undoubtedly complex relationship should be seen against the ever widening backdrop of the Irish literary Revival. While it is true, as standard literary histories attest, that the Revival took place in the tumultuous thirty-year period between 1891 and 1922, it is also increasingly seen from a broader perspective as having been a longer and broader event that stretched through time for a century from the time of Mangan and Ferguson before finally and definitively grinding to a halt with the occasionally great but ultimately underachieving tail-enders, Flann O’Brien and Brendan Behan, both of whom, unlike many core Revivalists, were at home or made themselves at home in the Irish as well as in the English language. Increasingly, the Revival is studied through this wider lens and celebrated for its plurality and variety and, indeed, for its lack of uniformity. Collectively the works that makes up the expanding corpus of the Revival do not form a chorus but a vibrant cacophony of voices and texts—literary, economic, political—some of which can be considered as internal and indeed integral to a tight-knit movement, others of which consciously sought to cast themselves beyond its confines) but which with hindsight are seen to lie, perhaps not entirely comfortably, within its reach.

The tension arising from the Romantic pull of the past and the inexorable draw of what we now call Modernism provided much of the energy at the heart of the Revival. These contradictory impulses can be perceived within individual writers as they attempted to mould their inheritance into a literary form for the new century. And Joyce was very much part of this dynamic, part of this almost carnivalesque exchange. It is unhelpful to see Joyce as somehow cut off or simply dismissive of the Revival when he should in fact be perceived as a writer constantly engaged in it, one whose works, in many senses, embodied and completed it in so far as the

novel was concerned. In his “Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages” lecture (originally delivered in Italian in Trieste), Joyce defined the Revival in terms to which Yeats would not have objected, that is, as “the Irish nation’s insistence on developing its own culture” and as “the Irish nation’s desire to create its own civilization [which is] not so much the desire of a young nation wishing to link itself to Europe’s concert, but the desire by an ancient nation to renew in a modern form the glories of a past civilization” (Joyce 2002: 111).

While making a huge contribution to that objective, Joyce the exile also consciously and loudly cast himself beyond the confines of the Revival with the result that he would be seen, for many decades, as being irretrievably beyond its fold. Yet, in the early years of his life abroad, Joyce yearned to be part of the Revival events unfolding in Dublin and was particularly upset at missing the uproar that accompanied performances of *The Playboy of the Western World*. He was exasperated at being, as Frank Shovlin has written, “out of the literary loop” (Shovlin 2012: 108). As he told Stanislaus:

This whole affair has upset me. I feel like a man in a house who hears a row in the street and voices he knows shouting but can’t get out to see what the hell is going on. It has put me off the story I was ‘going to write’—to wit, ‘The Dead.’ (Joyce 1966: 212)

The reality is that Joyce was immersed in the Revival even as he was at the same time setting himself up in opposition to it. The Revival both fascinated and irritated him and he felt the need to both publicly and privately describe his differences with Yeats and, more belligerently, with his followers. A number of entries in Stanislaus Joyce’s unpublished “Triestine Book of Days” reveal Joyce’s disdain for the writers that were in vogue in Dublin. In August, referring to Padraic Colum’s 1905 play “The Land,” Joyce complained:

Ah, the fellow can’t write. You know, these gentlemen want to be inspired, to write without ever having taken the trouble to learn how. And they’ll never do anything. Yeats, who is certainly mentally deficient, wouldn’t have written such very good verse unless all his life he had taken ceaseless trouble . . . to write well. Colum has taken no trouble. I suppose he wrote it in six weeks. The fellow has something in him but he’s spoiled in Dublin by all those imbeciles pottering about him. (*Book of Days*, 13 August 1907)

Joyce had no idea that Yeats nursed doubts about the characters in Colum’s plays or that he felt that “[they] were not the true folk. They are the peasant as he is being transformed by modern life.” Furthermore, for Yeats, the language of Colum’s peasants was a contaminated one, that of people who think in English, and “shows the influence of the newspaper and the national schools” (Yeats 1962: 183). Joyce was aware, however, that Colum was often at odds with Yeats and had told Stanislaus in a letter written in February 1907: “I believe Columb [sic] and the Irish Theatre will beat Y[eats] and L[ady].G[regory]. and Miss H[orniman]: which will please me greatly, as Yeats cannot well hawk his theatre over to London” (L II, 208). Joyce also dismissed George Moore—a “repugnant personality” (*Books of Days*, 25 April 1907)—and his novel, *The Lake*, which was, he said, “full of mistakes and dropped characters and tiresome picturesque writing.” Equally sententious judgment was levelled at “Yeats and his ‘claque’” accused of “trying to make bricks without straw, to make an Irish revival out of a company of young men who have neither character, courage, intellect, perseverance or talent” (*Book of Days*, 6 September 1907).

It is not difficult to perceive a degree of envy in these unguarded, private comments. Feeling shut out of things, Joyce came to see that the Revival was something of a mutual admiration society in which Yeats, Gregory, Synge, and Russell too easily offered validation of one others’ work and of that of their younger followers. Whatever his reservations, and there were many, it is wrong to assert that there is some kind of Manichean division between Joyce and his older colleague. Taking swipes at Yeats was a backhand way of acknowledging his importance and terming Yeats “mentally deficient” was Joyce’s shorthand for referring to the undoubtedly eccentric parts of the older poet’s personality. At the same time, even if Joyce feels that Yeats falls short of the heights reached by Mangan (and, while this judgement may today seem laughable, all he had to go on was a young Yeats, most of whose finest work was still to come), he still places Yeats on a level altogether superior to that of his literary followers and contemporaries (with the exception of Synge) and admits that he has written “such very good verse.” At the same time, Joyce loudly refutes the romantic impulse at the base of Yeats’s writing and of the Revivalist aesthetic more generally and contradicts the Revivalist view that a link was possible with a far-off Golden age. He questions the revivalist assertion of continuity and dismisses the assertion that the echoes of ancient Ireland could still be heard. For Joyce,

the venerable tradition of Irish bardic poetry died with Mangan, whom he championed in opposition to Samuel Ferguson, who was favoured by Yeats. For Joyce, the Revivalists had arrived too late and were seeking to resuscitate an already moribund tradition.

Joyce also rejected the idealization of the Irish peasantry as captured through the tinted lenses from Anglo-Irish big houses like that of Lady Gregory and that was a staple ingredient of Revivalist writing. He later told his Paris-based Irish friend, Arthur Power, that the Irish peasants were a “hard crafty and matter-of-fact lot” (Power 42). At the same time, he suffered at not being able to see *The Playboy* in 1907 and immediately ordered a copy of the play. Soon he was praising Synge’s more critical take on the peasantry to Stanislaus, who noted: “Jim found something in Synge’s mind akin to his own. The heroics and heroic poetry, that the Irish clique delight in, had no more significance for Synge than for him” (*Book of Days*, 5 May 1907). He appreciated Synge’s unrelenting revision of Yeats’s spiritualised peasant and his focus on individual violence and cruelty rather than on idealised heroics. But Joyce would seek to go further. At the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*, he evokes an image of an old Irish peasant from whom Stephen recoils:

14 April: John Alphonsus Mulrennan has just returned from the west of 12 Ireland. (European and Asiatic papers please copy.) He told us he met an old man there in a mountain cabin. Old man had red eyes and short pipe. Old man spoke Irish. Mulrennan spoke Irish. Then old man and Mulrennan spoke English. Mulrennan spoke to him about universe and stars. Old man sat, listened, smoked, spat. Then said: Ah, there must be terrible queer creatures at the latter end of the world. I fear him. I fear his red rimmed horny eyes. It is with him I must struggle all through this night till day come, till he or I lie dead, gripping him by the sinewy throat till . . . Till what? Till he yield to me? No. I mean him no harm. (Joyce 1964: 251)

The passage expresses (among other things) Stephen’s mockery of the attempts by Revivalists to capture a version of authentic peasant speech that they believed was inflected with the rhythms of a primitive past (and of Gaelic). While caution is needed in attributing opinions to Joyce based on the views of Stephen Dedalus, these words spoken by the “old man” in this vignette rhyme with Joyce’s own sardonic attitude towards Yeats’s calls to “listen humbly to the old people telling their stories, and perhaps God will send the primitive excellent imagination into the midst of us again” (Yeats 1970: 288). It also resonates with Joyce’s opinion that “The

Irish peasant of Russell or Yeats or Colum [. . .] is all sheer nonsense” (*Book of Days*, May 1906) and with his critique of Yeats’s belief that the remnants of Celtic culture could be found and heard among the peasants living in the west of Ireland, that those same peasants were receptacles of simple but profound wisdom and that the nurturing of such remnants could lead to a revival of this ancient culture, of its language and folklore.

In his introduction to Lady Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) a version of the *Táin Bo Cuailnge*, Yeats had offered a patently over-the-top endorsement of his great friend’s work (“the best that has come out of Ireland in my time”). Yeats goes so far as to connect the religious primitivism of the church which “taught learned and unlearned to climb, as it were, to the great moral realities through hierarchies of Cherubim and Seraphim” with that of the “story-tellers of Ireland, perhaps of every primitive country”:

They created for learned and unlearned alike, a communion of heroes, a cloud of stalwart witnesses: The fruit of all those stories, unless indeed the finest activities of the mind are but a pastime, is the quick intelligence, the abundant imagination, the courtly manners of the Irish country people. (Yeats/Gregory 1911: x-xi)

Joyce, in his scathing early review of *Poets and Dreamers: Studies and Translations from the Irish* by Lady Gregory, makes no secret of his hostility to such assertions, arguing that what Lady Gregory sees as the Celtic wisdom of the old people should, more accurately be seen as their “senility”:

Lady Gregory has truly set forth the old age of her country. In her new book she has left legends and heroic youth far behind, and has explored a land almost fabulous in its sorrow and senility. Half of her book is an account of old men and old women in the West of Ireland. These old people are full of stories about giants and witches, and dogs and black-handled knives. (Joyce 2002: 74)

Joyce would later replay his harshly negative views in *Ulysses*, where Lady’s Gregory’s work is defined as “drivel” in a passage which includes another swipe at Yeats and recalls the fury of the *Daily Express* editor, Ernest Longworth, at Joyce’s ungrateful and disrespectful review: Longworth is awfully sick, he said, after what you wrote about that old hake Gregory. O you inquisitional drunken jewjesuit! She gets you a job

on the paper and then you go and slate her drivell to Jaysus. Couldn't you do the Yeats touch? (*U* 9. 1157-60).

### III. The Irreconcilables: Yeats and Joyce

All of which might lead us to believe that the Yeats-Joyce twain shall never meet. And indeed they were long seen as having almost entirely separate agendas, visions, and styles, and as irreconcilable antagonists. Both writers contributed, to underlining the differences and gaps rather than the connections between them. In their wake, critics tended to reinforce the divide. This is true of Richard Ellmann, whose canonical biographies of Yeats and of Joyce dominated their respective fields for decades. Ellmann essentially institutionalised the rivalry and distance between the two writers. In a broader sense, even if there are and were necessary distinctions to be drawn between these two giants of Irish literature, keeping them apart was symptomatic of a forced and sometimes false cultural politics that seemed to ensure multiply motivated division rather than connection. Thus they were divided on grounds of class: Yeats was portioned off among the Anglo-Irish while Joyce belonged to the more “authentically native” Dublin Irish; religion: Yeats, the defector from the Irish Anglican Church, contrasted with Joyce, a lapsed Catholic who could not get his religion out of his system; residence: Yeats was connected intermittently with London and with the pure landscape of the Irish West and of Sligo in particular—which he admitted was “the place that has really influenced my life most” (Yeats 1986: 195), later with ThoorBallylee; Joyce was an inveterate exile who berated his country while at the same time celebrating his native “Hibernian Metropolis” of Dublin within his fiction and non-fiction writings. Roy Foster’s typically elegant and synoptic description of the aforementioned 1902 Joyce-Yeats Dublin encounter carries much of the received shorthand about their differences: “More immediately apparent was the mutual suspicion between an established Irish Protestant aesthete and a Jesuit-educated Catholic Dubliner with a preternaturally mordant eye for social pretensions” (Foster 276).

Whatever the sense of a divide, what should not be put in doubt is Joyce’s sincere and profound interest in Yeats’s writing, in Yeats as a late Romantic, a symbolist, a Celtic revivalist poet, a tireless wordsmith, and the undisputed leader of the Revival. There is much truth in Len Platt’s description of Joyce’s response to revivalism, which, “far from being

marginal, is actually fundamental to the quality of Ulysses, to the kind of text that Ulysses is” (Platt 7). But debt is no guarantee of gratitude. In Clare Hutton’s words: “On the one hand Joyce learns craft and technique from writers involved in the Revival (especially Yeats); on the other hand, he parodies and ridicules the whole movement.” Despite this, however, “careful study of Yeats’ evolution enabled him to develop and refine his own aesthetic vision” (Hutton 2009: 197, 203). There is a clear continuum of Yeatsian echoes—some apparent, others more stealthily disguised—in Joyce’s writings from *Chamber Music* right through to *Finnegans Wake*.

Padraic Fallon’s early piece on Joyce as a poet, particularly in *Chamber Music*, provides a somewhat unexpected link between Joyce and the Celtic Twilight. Joyce’s poems “suggest Seumas O’Sullivan, AE, Yeats” and contain “an astounding number” of such echoes “for such a large artist as Joyce—even working in a medium that was not his own by nature.” In Fallon’s view, what was so striking about *Chamber Music* was the extent to which “the author of *Ulysses* was involved in the Celtic Twilight,” so much so that his early poetic efforts are damagingly derivative: “they are as second-hand as bad opera” and no better than “pleasant accomplishment” (Fallon 1962:11). What Fallon casts so negatively—a real link between Joyce’s poetry and that of his Irish counterparts led by Yeats—can be reappraised in a more positive key, especially in that light of J.C.C Mays’ view that *Chamber Music* is “not a false start, but in a profound sense the starting point of everything he subsequently wrote. It represents the beginning he returned to with each fresh venture, rather than a position abandoned” Verse, according to Mays, offered a form that forced Joyce to remain personal, which enabled him to eventually become “a poetic novelist” (Mays 1992: xx).

While it is clear that in *Chamber Music* Joyce drew on Petrarchan, Elizabethan and Symbolist conventions, such as the sonnet, the adoption of nature imagery and the use of a speaker addressing a beloved to dramatize himself, Yeats is also a patently pervasive presence in what is essentially a volume of love poetry (even if Joyce protested “It is not a book of love-verses at all” (Joyce 1966: 219). Joyce’s stanzaic form and metre seem to echo those of Yeats in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), published by Elkin Mathews just two years before he began to compose *Chamber Music* in 1901. Choices of rhythm and even vocabulary also carry clear Yeatsian reverberations.”<sup>1</sup> As Elizabeth Bonapfel shows in a

<sup>1</sup> For positive appraisals of the parallels between Yeats and Joyce in *Chamber Music*, see Jolanta Wawrzycka “‘Ghosting Hour’: Young Joyce Channeling Early

forthcoming essay:

Joyce's stanzas and meter most clearly resemble those of Yeats in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), published by Elkin Mathews just two years before Joyce began to compose *Chamber Music* in 1901. In *Chamber Music*, Joyce uses quatrains (four-line stanzas) in exactly half of his poems and often writes in tetrameter. Both of these forms are highly typical of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, which was certainly in Joyce's brain and ear."<sup>2</sup>

In "The Day of the Rabblement" (1901), Joyce claimed: "In aim and form *The Wind among the Reeds* is poetry of the highest order" (Joyce 2002: 51). From such poetry, Joyce learnt his own quasi-poetic novelistic craft, valuing formal expertise, careful modulation of rhythms, intense concentration on word choice and word placement.

With good reason, then, Edna Longley refers to "the aesthetic intercourse (and mutual admiration) between Yeats and Joyce," and claims that many of the subtleties of that same intercourse were lost in the polarising aftermath of 1916. Longley shortens the distance between the two writers by exploring common ground initially spotted in 1941 by Louis MacNeice who highlighted the importance for both of "the 1890s" and pointed to their shared role as 'spoilt priests' with a fanatical devotion to style," both indebted to Walter Pater (Longley 56-57). She also successfully challenges the antagonistic tilt of so many readings of Joyce's relationship with Yeats, and counters Andrew Gibson's recent assertion which rehashes the antagonistic metaphor: "Stephen finally 'overcomes' Yeats, the nineties, the backward look, and the tone and mood of the forlorn Anglo-Irish endgame" (Gibson 199). In Longley's words "no literary game is zero-sum. Nor is the impulse behind Yeats's poetry ever reducible to forlorn Anglo-Irishness" (71).

For all his throwing-shapes as a young writer-in-the-making, Joyce was far less assured than he would have led Yeats to believe when they met

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Yeats," in *Joyce, Yeats, and the Revival*, ed. John McCourt (Rome: Edizioni Q: 2015), 103-18; Matthew Campbell, "The Unconfortable Joyce: *Chamber Music*," in *The Poetry of James Joyce Reconsidered*, ed. Marc C. Connor (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2012), 51-77. For a more negative reading see WimVan Mierlo (2010), "I have met you too late": James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, and the Making of *Chamber Music*," *South Carolina Review* 43.1: 50-73.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Bonapfel, "Why Not *Chamber Music*?: What Punctuation in Joyce's Poetry Can Tell Us About His Style" in *Shakespearean Joyce / Joycean Shakespeare*, *Joyce Studies in Italy*, New Series, Vol. 6., ed., John McCourt (forthcoming in 2016).

and in the decade that followed. That *Chamber Music* so singularly failed to satisfy him was perhaps because of his awareness of Yeats’s achievement. He voiced all this doubt to Stanislaus:

The reason that I dislike *Chamber Music* as a title is that it is too complacent. I should prefer a title which to a certain extent repudiated the book, without altogether disparaging it. [. . .] I went through the entire book of verses mentally on receipt of Symons’s letter and they nearly all seemed to me poor and trivial: some phrases and lines pleased me and no more. (Joyce 1966: 182)

Yeats, whose words, phrases, rhythms, lines are spectral presences in Joyce’s verse, perhaps inadvertently, contributed to Joyce’s lack of confidence in his collection. As early as 1902, Yeats had encouraged Joyce, telling him in a letter sent from Portman Square in London:

The work which you have actually done is very remarkable for a man of your age who has lived away from the vital intellectual centres. Your technique in verse is very much better than the technique of any young Dublin man I have met during my time. (Yeats 1994: 249-50)

He also, however, signalled what he evidently considered the derivative nature of Joyce’s early work. “It might have been the work of a young man who had lived in an Oxford literary set” (Yeats 1994: 250). This letter has been seen by many critics in a wholly positive key. Foster, for example, sees it as one of a series “of thoughtful letters of advice” that Yeats sent to younger Irish writers (Foster 277). Thus Yeats is cast as the wise and generous father-figure who is spurned and deprecated by the young, ungrateful Joyce who bites the hand that feeds him. It would be well to read Yeats’s “praise” a little more critically. Elsewhere in the letter he advises Joyce against publishing one of his lyrics in the “Academy”:

If I had all your MS I might have picked a little bundle of lyrics, but I think you had really better keep such things for the “Speaker,” which makes rather a practice of publishing quite short scraps of verse. I think that the poem that you have sent me has a charming rhythm in the second stanza, but I think it is not one of the best of your lyrics as a whole. I think that the thought is a little thin. (Yeats 1994: 249)

A lesser writer and a smaller ego than Joyce might well have been challenged if not broken by such ambivalent praise. Given his view of the

Yeats's "claque," Joyce would have felt that the "best technique in Dublin" was not a description that was worth very much. And yet, it was a lot more than Yeats gave other writers. On being asked by AE to endorse a book of verse by Thomas McDonagh, Yeats tersely replied with his "To a Poet, who would have me Praise certain Bad Poets, Imitators of His and Mine":

You say, as I have often given tongue  
 In praise of what another's said or sung,  
 'Twere politic to do the like by these;  
 But was there ever dog that praised his fleas?

That said, Joyce would have sensed the reticence of Yeats's endorsement; the reference to the "Oxford literary set" would have left him unimpressed while the description of "short scraps" that were "a little thin" can hardly have been received with pleasure—later, in a 1915 letter Yeats would find in himself to praise "I Hear an Army Charging" (*Chamber Music*, XXXVI) as "a technical & emotional masterpiece [sic]" (Ellmann 1982: 391). Even if Yeats's lukewarm praise might have made him smart, the reality is that Joyce's attention had already begun to be monopolized by prose, by the early drafts of *Stephen Hero* and the short stories of *Dubliners*. While always appreciating how Yeats wrote "such very good verse" because of his relentless dedication to his craft, Joyce refused to inherit the other side of the Yeats persona as he perceived it—his public, often political role and he had already—before Yeats's letter—chosen the most public means possible to express his distance from Yeats and his group, in his 1901 broadside, "The Day of the Rabblement." This may help explain how Yeats, having underlined the generational gap with Joyce in his 1902 letter, then somewhat patronisingly told him:

However, men have started with as good promise as yours and have failed, and men have started with less and have succeeded. The qualities that make a man succeed do not show in his work, often, for quite a long time. They are much less qualities of talent than qualities of character-faith (of this you have probably enough), patience, adaptability (without this one learns nothing), and a gift for growing by experience, and this is perhaps rarest of all." (Yeats 1994: 250)

This statement assumes more significance if we remember that Yeats's letter may itself have been a response to Joyce's "Rabblement" essay in

which Joyce attacked what he called “Mr. Yeats’s treacherous instinct of adaptability.” In his 1950 *Kenyon Review* piece entitled “Yeats and Joyce,” Ellmann speculates that Joyce’s pamphlet “probably never reached Yeats’s eyes” (621) (although he later reverses this opinion). Even if he never did see the pamphlet, given the tightness of the Dublin literary scene, it seems inconceivable that Yeats would not have been fed snippets of it by his friends and followers and this may well be what lies behind the sometimes sharp, always cautious and reserved tone of his letter which concludes on a rather lukewarm and inconvincing note, as if signalling an intended distance:

I will do anything for you I can, but I am afraid that it will not be a great deal. The chief use I can be, though perhaps you will not believe this, will be by introducing you to some other writers, who are starting like yourself, one always learns one’s business from one’s fellow-workers, especially from those who are near enough one’s own age to understand one’s own difficulties. (Yeats 1994: 250)

#### IV. Mutual Admiration of Yeats · Joyce

Ultimately, however, the distance attempted by both would not entirely hold. Over the years, Yeats’s admiration for Joyce would be manifest in his support of him for a literary pension, in his invitations to him to visit Ireland. Yeats was indeed interested in the Joycean project, telling John Quinn that he thought Joyce “a most remarkable man” (Hassett 102) and L.A.G. Strong that *Ulysses* was “a work perhaps of genius” (Ellmann 1982: 530). He described *Anna Livia Plurabelle* as a work of “heroic sincerity” (Yeats 1968: 405). And the interest was mutual. Joyce’s fascination with Yeats’s poetry endured throughout his life: *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are scattered with allusions to Yeats’s works which Joyce often read with his better language students in Trieste. He even had a hand in the first Italian translation of *The Countess Cathleen* which he worked on with his friend, the multilingual Triestine lawyer, Nicolo Vidacovich—rare evidence, this, of respect. Later, when Joyce was engineering the writing of his first biography, penned by the obliging American, Herbert Gorman, he instructed Gorman to write of his immense admiration for Yeats, one that was based on a life of reading and mining his poetry and, with less interest or appreciation, other works such as *A Vision* which he saw as a colossal but ultimately a theoretical work rather than a fully inte-

grated artistic creation.

Yeats's admiration of Joyce, on the other hand, was largely reputational and second-hand. His copy of *Ulysses* remained largely unread and in 1923, told Olivia Shakespear: "I have asked Joyce to come and stay for a few days. If he comes I shall have to use the utmost ingenuity to hide the fact that I have never finished *Ulysses*" (Yeats 1954: 698-99). Joyce, therefore, had a real basis for believing that Yeats's praise for him was not based on a serious understanding of his work and furthermore he was disappointed that it was issued privately rather than proclaimed publicly. That this rankled can be clearly seen (in so far as anything can be clearly seen) in *Finnegans Wake*, which, among other things, includes much embedded information about the vexed reception—and Yeats's part in it—of *Ulysses*, especially in Ireland. Joyce probably sensed that in the wake of *Ulysses*, Yeats was more interested in co-opting him and his huge, acclaimed novel for his own agenda than he was in actually reading the book.<sup>3</sup>

In late July 1922 Pound forwarded two letters to Joyce—one from Lady Gregory asking if she could include previous correspondence between them in a book; another from Yeats to Pound. Joyce's replies are deeply revealing. He instructs Lady Gregory to omit

all letters of mine and all mention of me. In doing so you will be acting strictly in accordance with the spirit of that movement, inasmuch as since the date of my letter, twenty years ago, no mention of me or of my struggles or of my writings has been made publicly by any person connected with it. (Joyce 1975: 290)

Having furnished such a bitter and ungenerous response, Joyce then asks Gregory to thank Yeats whose opinion he says he values highly, for "several kind expressions concerning my book *Ulysses*" (290). The contradiction here is immediately evident: the Irish literary movement has "ignored" Joyce and so he will boycott Lady Gregory but Yeats, its leading proponent and chief architect, is singled out for second-hand thanks. Joyce here seems duplicitous, to be distancing Yeats from the very Revival over which he presided and which he incarnated. He is driving a gap between Yeats and his "claque." But there is also an implicit complaint that Yeats's kind expressions were not public enough but were

<sup>3</sup> See especially the final two chapters of John Nash, *James Joyce and the Act of Reception Reading, Ireland, Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006).

voiced in private correspondence unlike his praise of Lady Gregory which was consistent and broadcast widely. It is worth quoting Yeats’s letter to Pound (which Pound forwarded to Joyce) in which Yeats praises Lady Gregory’s proposed volume as “The most important history there has been of the movement in Ireland which we all here belong to.” The “*we all here*” would have hit a sore point with Joyce because it would have chimed uncomfortably with the views being expressed by mainstream reviewers of *Ulysses* who often dismissed Joyce on the grounds that he was not resident in the country. To be fair to Yeats, he did make it clear to Pound that he wished to include Joyce for his own ends: “For our own sake mainly I am very anxious to get Joyce well into that record.” Yeats says how he “admires immensely” *Ulysses* a work of “immense importance” although he admits only to having read “a few pages . . . at a time as if he [it] were a poem. Some passages have great beauty, lyric beauty, even in the fashion of my generation” (quoted in Foster 1997: 260). The appropriation of Joyce is important for Yeats. He realises his importance, his difference, his singularity, his reach, and was very much of the opinion that he could help bolster broader-minded opinion within the narrowing confines of the new, intensely Catholic Irish State. And yet—the desire to include Joyce would—and surely Yeats knew this—provoke a strong reaction from conservative forces creating a stir rather than obtaining a substantial result.

Once again, in his letter (to Pound) Yeats both praises Joyce and, at the same time, tempers his praise. This would have infuriated Joyce (but of course anyone even lightly familiar with, for example, Yeats’s elegies, would have seen how his praise is almost always tempered in a summation of checks and balances. Joyce would also have been less than impressed with the later turn in Yeats’ letter: Having announced that he read “a great part” of *Ulysses* (a claim, this, that was untrue), he then says “I gave myself a course of Trollope for a change.”

In November of 1923, Yeats did publicly endorse Joyce in strong terms during a debate at the opening meeting of the Dublin University Philosophical Society at Trinity College. The President of the Society, Mr. W. Beare, expressed the opinion that

Future historians would, perhaps, decide that the most original and influential writer of our day was James Joyce. His “*Ulysses*” seemed to reach the ultimate limit of realism, but the example set by Mr. Joyce would hardly be very widely followed. In spite of all the author’s power, humour, and psy-

chological insight, “Ulysses” was open to the charge of dullness. (*Irish Times*, 9 November 1923, 11)

In reply, W.B. Yeats described Joyce as being “as voluminous as Johnson’s dictionary and as foul as Rabelais” before stating that “he was the only Irishman who had the intensity of the great novelist. The miracle was possibly there: that was all he felt he had a right to say, and, perhaps, the intensity was there for the same reason as the intensity of Tolstoi and Balzac” (*Irish Times*, 9 November 1923, 11). Once again, however, Yeats somewhat undermined the authority of his own remarks by reminding his audience that “the novel was not his forte.”

We might finish with yet another of Joyce’s variations on the 1902 meeting from *Finnegans Wake* mindful of Yeats’ belief that contraries are positive—and that Yeats and Joyce played up their contrariness and contrariness and endlessly circled one another: “Weh is me, yeh is ye! I, the mightif beammaircanny, which bit his mirth too early or met his birth too late!” (*FW* 408.15-17). Joyce may well have met Yeats too late to deeply influence him but it might also be suggested that Yeats met Joyce too early to really be able to substantially help him. And he almost seems to suggest as much in a letter written in July 1918 to John Quinn shortly after settling into his new home in Thoor Ballylee:

I am making a setting for my old age, a place to influence lawless youth, with its severity & antiquity. If I had had this tower of mine when Joyce began to write I dare say I might have been of use to him, have got him to meet those who might have helped him. (Yeats 1954: 651)

Yeats would have been under no illusions about Joyce coming under his wing but from the security of his newly achieved position of cultural prominence, he must now have been well aware that he could indeed have done more, fifteen years earlier, to help hoist Joyce’s own already rising star. But who is to know if Joyce would have allowed such a thing to happen.

Roma Tre University

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### Abstract

In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce recasts, several times over, the central affirmation that he is credited with having made to William Butler Yeats during their much mythologised early encounter: “I have met you too late. You are too old.” These words, or a version of them, have framed studies of the Joyce-Yeats relationship which is thereafter construed as endlessly antagonistic, irretrievably oppositional. This essay will seek to challenge those readings which turn a complex relationship into Irish modernism.

Critics have seen the encounter between Yeats and Joyce as an “auspicious meeting” as “an original moment, a primal scene of the modernism which both writers were subsequently to play a part in creating.” Their complex relationship can be seen against the ever widening backdrop of the Irish Literary Revival which took place in the tumultuous thirty-year period between 1891 and 1922 as well as in the context of the tension arising from the Romantic pull of the past and the inexorable draw of Modernism.

In this context, Yeats and Joyce were seen as having almost entirely separate agendas, visions, and styles, and as irreconcilable antagonists, although both writers contributed, to underlining the differences and gaps rather than the connections between them. Joyce may well have met Yeats too late to deeply influence him but it might also be suggested that Yeats met Joyce too early to really be able to substantially help him.

**Key Words:** Yeats, Joyce, Irish Literary Revival, modernism, Richard Ellmann

**Notes on Contributor:**

**John McCourt** teaches at the Università Roma Tre where he is director of CRISIS (the centre for research into Irish and Scottish literature). He is co-director of the Trieste Joyce School which he fo-founded in 1997 and is the author of many books and articles on James Joyce and on 19th and 20th century Irish literature. In 2009 his edited collection, *James Joyce in Context*, was published by Cambridge University Press. In the same year he published *Questioni Biografiche: Le Tante Vite di Yeats and Joyce* (Bulzoni), followed by *Roll Away the Reel World: James Joyce and Cinema* (Cork UP, 2010). He is a Trustee of the International James Joyce Foundation and a member of the academic board of the Yeats Summer school.

Email: john.mccourt@uniroma3.it



