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The Interface between Literature and Politics: James Joyce's Ulysses and Frank McGuiness' Observing the Sons of Ulster as a Case Study

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to explore the interface between literature and politics by analyzing works by two Irish writers: *Ulysses* by James Joyce and *Observing the Sons of Ulster* by Frank McGuiness.

The study attempts to show that although Joyce like many modernists declared his full indifference towards politics and refused to accept the Irish Revival, his novel reveals his strong concern by both WWI and Irish nationalism.

Unlike Joyce Frank McGuiness is deeply involved in the history of Ireland. His works have a continual subtext of broad political concern. In *Observing the Sons of Ulster marching towards Somme* McGuiness explores through the consciousness of a war veteran how both the battle of Somme and the battle of Boyne have come to have a significant place in Northern Ireland unionist consciousness.

A comparative study of these two works clearly shows the impact of political issues on both of them. However, the difference in the author's position is apparent in the manner these issues are rendered: Joyce tends to be ironic whereas McGuiness gives a more personal outlook which awakens some empathy towards his characters.

Keywords: Joyce, McGuiness, Ireland, Nationalism, WWI

Introduction

The question whether political events influence art and whether it is possible to evade "the nightmare of History'' (U7.76)[1] and lead a secluded life of ideas in the Ivory Tower in artistic and intellectual pursuit of pure Beauty has always intrigued mankind. The question becomes particularly important in the periods characterized by great political changes, when the society on the whole becomes highly politicized. Whether a writer is responsible to reproduce in his works political events, social and political problems, and while doing so whether he/she should say neutral as an objective observer, or whether he/she should distinctly express his/her position.

The present paper gives an analysis of *Ulysses* by James Joyce and *Observing the Sons of Ulster marching towards Somme* by Frank McGuiness. These two Irish writers who worked in different epochs and had different aesthetic positions, share one thing in common: a strong concern with Irish history and Irish problems which is clearly apparent in their works. despite Joyce's declared indifference to politics

The importance of political issues and its role in shaping modern and post-modern Irish Literature has been studied in a number of works (Gibson, 1991; Gula, 2002; Kiberd, 2005; Watson, 1987). These studies touch upon various themes. In most cases they focus on how this or that particular writer treats political problems such as nationalism, the Irish Revival, WWI in his/her works. Nevertheless, as these studies are centred mostly on Joyce, they fail to show what changes the attitude to political issues undergoes from a modernist writer to a post-modernist. Besides, most of these studies seem to be more concerned with how accurately political issues are depicted in the text than with the literary text itself. What makes the present paper interesting is that it shows the dichotomy of Irish Nationalism in Joyce and McGuiness. The paper aims at displaying how the writer's personal experiences and background define their attitudes, which are reflected and incorporated in their literary creations afterwards.

The paper is divided into two parts: the first one dealing with *Ulysses* and the second showing how McGuiness makes use of political issues in his famous play. The results of the study are outlined in the conclusion. The methodology used during the research is close-reading of the literary text itself. The paper does not go at great strength to give the definitions of those terms used within the paper, such as: nationalism, xenophobic, anti-feminist, as they are used by their general meaning and there are no additions to the term. Thus, the paper is based on the textual analysis and the existing critical literature in the field.

[1] Ulysses (Gabler edition) should be cited by episode and line number

Nationalism and WWI in Ulysses

In Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties* James Joyce who appears as a fictional character declared that "As an artist, naturally I attach no importance to the swings and roundabout of political history" (Stoppard, 1975, p.5). Indeed, James Joyce as majority of modernists believed in the importance of an individual over the society and saw the self-expression in an innovative form as the aim of art. As his alter ego Stephen Dedalus put it in *The Portrait* "I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use - silence, exile, and cunning."

Nevertheless, Joyce could not detach himself either from Irish Nationalism or the World War. The fictional character of *The Citizen* encountered by Leopold Bloom in Barney Kiernan's Pub *(Cyclopes),* is used by Joyce to satirize Irish nationalists in General**.** "We'll put force against force, says the citizen. We have our greater Ireland beyond the sea" (Ulysses, 1986).

The importance of Irish Nationalism and its incorporation in Literature can be traced in David Lloyd's book *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism,* where Lloyd writes "Where the German nationalist's identity is guaranteed by his language, [. . .] the Irish nationalist revitalises a relation to history that might have represented only death and division, finding in it both the lesson and promise of unity. [….] Charles Gavan Duffy summed the case up retrospectively: "The true lesson they [the national annals] taught was that Irishmen were enslaved because they were divided" (Lloyd, 1987, p. 70**).** Lloyd's observations seem relevant in the sense that throughout *Ulysses* one has the perpetual sense of Irish division and the problems caused by it.

This issue is well-apparent in the Nestor episode in *Ulysses,* where we encounter Garrett Deasy, the headmaster of the boys' school where Stephen teaches. Mr Deasy proves to be a Unionist from the north, pro-British as well as anti-Semitic. Mistakenly considering Stephen a Fenian, he delivers a talk about the importance of serving a bigger nation that "has paid its way" (U 2.251). Deasy also mentions the rallying cry for the Protestant Unionists in the North who wished to defeat the movement over Home Rule that stretched from the 1870s to the early 90s, when declaring "I am a struggler now at the end of my days. But I will fight for the right till the end.

For Ulster will fight
And Ulster will be right."[2]

[2] It is worth mentioning that the term "Ulster" itself is quite ambiguous. Lord Randolph Henry Spencer-Churchill (1849-95), a British aristocrat and Conservative parliamentarian with no particular connection to Ireland, but a fierce opposer of Gladstone's Home Rule policy used this phrase to appeal to the reactionary Protestants in cities like Belfast and Londonderry, and the northern part of Ireland that has remained in the UK

It is after Deasy's speech that Stephen draws parallels between him and Haines, because just as Haines uses history to clear himself of blame in Episode One ("It seems history is to blame"), so Deasy uses history to blame others, most notably Jews and women. Deasy's xenophobic and anti-feminist idea can be generalized and he becomes a mouthpiece for many others of the period, who had the same attitude.

Apart from division within the country, there is a strong sense of hatred towards "otherness", as if again there are the ones to be blamed. In the *Cyclops* episode Bloom is going to Barney Kiernan's to meet Martin Cunningham and discuss the affairs of the Dignam family. The unnamed narrator (a debt collector) chats with Joe Hynes, and they meet the Citizen, a fierce nationalist with a dog called Garryowen.

The Citizen starts to speak about the unwanted presence of "strangers" in Ireland, a remark clearly aimed at Bloom. After the Citizen's speech about Irish history, Bloom tries to define a nation, implying that he is Irish because he was born in Ireland. As an Irish Jew, however, his position in this debate is unstable, and his advocacy of "love" in the face of "Force, hatred, history, all that" makes things worse.

The Cyclops episode gives a somewhat master narrative of Irish Nationalism. Both Andrew Gibson in *'History, All That': Revival Historiography and Literary Strategy in the 'Cyclops' Episode in Ulysses* (1987) and G.J. Watson in *The Politics of Ulysses* (1987) depict the discourse of Revivalist historiography and show that Ulysses "presents a powerful critique of this unholy alliance of romanticism, nationalism, and aestheticised history" (Watson, 1987, p. 52) and manifests "the monocular vision of the sacred march of Irish history endemic in the nationalist imagination" (Watson, 1987, p. 55). Both Andrew Gibson and G.J. Watson argue about the importance of politics in Joyce's masterpiece and how politics plays a crucial role in its formation.

Ireland's lost glories become more aggressive in the speech of the so-called Citizen, the belligerent and xenophobic Irish Patriot, who manages to overshadow Deasy' xenophobic narrative in *Nestor*. Joyce's description of him is ironic, even cynical as he is shown as "broadshouldered deepchested stronglimbed frankeyed redhaired freelyfreckled shaggybearded widemouthed largenosed longheaded deepvoiced barekneed brawnyhanded hairylegged ruddyfaced sinewyarmed hero" with "rocklike mountainous knees" and whose "heart thundered rumblingly causing the ground, the summit of the lofty tower and the still loftier walls of the cave to vibrate and tremble" (U12.151-67).

The speeches delivered by the Citizen are also used by Joyce satirize the conditions in which the Irish have fallen, but are unable to find a way out: "- And our eyes are on Europe, says the citizen. We had our trade with Spain and the French and with the Flemings before those mongrels were pupped. Spanish ale in Galway, the winebark on the winedark

since independence in 1922 is now often called Ulster. Ulster itself is larger than Northern Ireland and is one of the four ancient provinces of Ireland. Three of its nine counties elected to join the Republic at independence.

waterway. - And will again, says Joe. - And with the help of the holy mother of God we will again, says the citizen, clapping his thigh. Our harbours that are empty will be full again, Kinsale, Galway, ... And will again, says he, when the first Irish battleship is seen breasting the waves with our own flag to the fore, none of your Henry Tudor harps, no, the oldest flag afloat, the flag of the province of Desmond and Thomond, three crowns on a blue field, the three sons of Milesius" (U12.1302-10). Of course, the ways to "filling up the empty harbours" is unclear, and it seems that the way Citizen views the future is to "put force against force, says the citizen. We have our greater Ireland beyond the sea…. And they will come again, and with a vengeance, no cravens, the sons of Granuaile, the champions of Kathleen ni Houlihan" (U12.1372-5). The citizens unrealistic hope for the future and liberation from "those mongrels" i.e., the English, equals to the glorious future of the Irish.

Anither topic for Joyce's mockery is Irish Nationalists' attitude to Irish games (Gaelic football, hurling, etc.), which were banned by the British who introduced English games like rugby and cricket. The Citizen, who views a revival of Gaelic sports as part of the Irish independence. himself was a champion shot-putter. Joyce stresses that for him s sport field ia a battle field at the same time.

Besides Irish Nationalism, another important event which Joyce could not escape was the Great War. Although, when the war broke out, Joyce moved his family from Trieste, Italy to a neutral country Switzerland (1915) and what is more important he placed his novel in 1904; nevertheless, he was unable to run away from the political roundabouts of the period.

When put under scrutiny, the *Nestor* episode shows remarkable clues of the historical context in which it was written. The nightmare of the war is inserted within the proclaimed neutrality of the 1904 narrative, and the events of the Great resonate strangely, almost allegorically, in the imaginary time frame. Even as early as the *Nestor* episode in *Ulysses*, we can trace the "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'' (Eliot, 1921, p. 177).

The clashing sticks of the hockey game and the shouts of the boys become "Jousts, slush and uproar of battles, the frozen deathspew of the slain, a shout of spearspikes baited with men's bloodied guts" (U2.314).

Many of the games are stylized substitutes for battle, and even as early as *Stephen Hero,* Stephen opposes field sports as they resemble "mimic warfare" (Joyce, 1944). While writing *Nestor* in 1917 Joyce had one specific struggle to think about: the Great War which had been destroying Europe's youth since 1914 and along with it the hope of a better future. Stephen at that moment struggles many battles: one going on inside him and the other – external – bearing the talks of Mr. Deasy, interrupted from time to time by the cheerful cries from the outside, which do not seem happy to Stephen at all and for him resemble the war cry, and remind him of the "Glorious, pious and immortal memory", about William of Orange, who defeated the Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

In an interesting article, *"Nestor and the Nightmare: The Presence of the Great War in Ulysses"*, Robert E. Spoo observed that Stephen's statement that history is "a nightmare" uses an image that was applied to World War I by Henry James, W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and others. Spoo argues that not only the hockey game but the entire episode dwells on questions of war. Pyrrhus' pointless battle can be generalized to denote all battles: "any general to any officers". The physically decrepit but boisterously jingoistic Mr. Deasy becomes an antiquated Homeric general, at a time in European history when countless voices were complaining about the confident "old men" who were sending millions of young men off to die horrible deaths.

Nestor episode focuses on history and how memory is connected to history. While Stephen's history class relies on the memory of learned historical facts, Mr. Deasy is governed by his own personal memories of historical events. While Deasy uses history to absolve himself of responsibility, and "controls" it, for Stephen it takes the shape of a "nightmare" because there are things beyond his control. During the lesson, while speaking about Pyrrhus, Stephen thinks to himself about the infinite possibilities they have ousted. But can those have been possible seeing that they never were? Or was that only possible which came to pass? (Joyce, 1986). Stephen comes up with a new approach of associating intellectual potential to realities that are intractable and a new model for comprehending history. Coming into existence, according to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, is the transition from a state of potentiality (dynamism) to a state of actuality (energeia). Stephen interprets this argument fairly loosely, taking it to mean that there are always "infinite possibilities" that could come to pass. The other possibilities are "ousted" when only one of them comes to pass. The irony and cynicism used by Mr. Deasy about Ireland, being the only country never persecuting the Jews, because she never let them in (Joyce, 1986), finds an outburst later on in *Cyclops*, when Bloom says "Persecution [. . .] all the history of the world is full of it. Perpetuating national hatred among nations [. . .]. Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred" (U12.1417, 1481-82).

From *Ulysses* towards *Observing the Sons of Ulster marching towards Somme*

The idea of a greater Ireland underlined by Joyce, is also used in *Observing the Sons of Ulster marching towards Somme* by Frank McGuiness, one of the prominent contemporary Irish playwrights born in Buncrana, Co Donegal in 1953. Like Joyce, Frank McGuiness did not physically experience either the great war or the direct effects of Irish Nationalism, but McGuiness calls his birthplace "a place of contradiction, a place of ambiguities'' (Roche & McGuiness, 2010, p.18) and which he regards has "contributed to making me into a writer" (Roche & McGuiness, 2010, p.18). Thus, the aftermath of all the events indirectly, but still had an impact on creating him as a writer.

In an interview, when Frank McGuiness was asked about Donegal, the place where he was born and raised, he replied the following: "As you say, it's a place of contradiction, a place of ambiguities. It's an isolated place, as well. I think all of those factors contributed to making me into a writer. I am a man who doesn't really know where he stands a lot of the time. These various plays are an attempt to decipher the location of where my head's at. I never found a sense of place an easy thing to grasp and I certainly never found it an easy thing to celebrate. I'm not at ease anywhere. But I have no doubt where I absolutely belong and where I come from, and that is Donegal. And I've no doubt where I will go to, and that is Donegal. It has continued to have a very powerful hold on my imagination and it will always be so, I'm certain of that. I find that there's no escaping it, but then I don't think there's any desire to escape from it. That said, I don't think I could live in it, certainly not at this stage in my life" (Roche & McGuiness, 2010, p.18).

Thus, the influence of Donegal can be traced in numerous plays, but as it is with any great writer these problems that his characters face are universal and can be generalized.

The play *Observing the Sons of Ulster marching towards Somme* written in 1986 is McGuiness' second play that brought him several awards and accolades. It centres on the experiences of eight unionist Ulsterman, who volunteer to serve in the 36th Ulster Division at the beginning of the First World War.

The battle of Somme of course, is a milestone in the history of Ulster loyalism. Over six thousand members of the Ulster Division were killed in a single day of fighting. Entire streets of Belfast and small villages of Antrim were left without young men, because the authorities had made a point of bonding new recruits and thus units which were going into battle had nobody above the rank of captain leading them. In *Ulysses* while Deasy is talking to Stephen, with the pupils playing hockey outside, Stephen has the perpetual sense, that the playground is a battlefield, and those pupils are left on their own and thus doomed to death. 'In the end, we were not led, we led ourselves' Kenneth Pyper, the main character, an unmarried old man, the only surviving soldier of the division, who retells the whole of the history from his own perspective, says at the beginning of the play. One of the crucial issues is the anniversary of the glorious battle of Boyne, a date cherished by the Irish, as William of Orange won a crushing victory, which secured the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland for generations. But the very date of the Battle of Boyne, July 1st is also the day on which the Battle of Somme

happened resulting in heavy casualties, and nothing the Irish can be proud of. Thus, the play explores the importance of those two battles and their significance on the unionist consciousness. Moreover, McGuiness also touches the issue of homosexuality, which was a daring issue to touch.

In another interview on *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, McGuinness mentions his "personal obsession," that is, "the warring relationship between England and Ireland." McGuinness continues, "It's like a desperately unhappy marriage which is either going to go on being desperately unhappy or something is going to happen and heal it" (Sato, 1996, p. 82).

As Craig, a protestant and comrade of Pyper tells him: "You're trying too hard, Pyper. It's too late to tell us what we're fighting for. We know where we are. We know what we've to do. And we *know where we're doing it for. We knew before we enlisted. We joined up willingly for that reason. Every one of us, except you. You've learned it at long last. But you can't teach us what we already know. You won't save us, you won't save yourself, imagining things. There's nothing imaginary about this, Kenneth. This is the last battle. We're going out to die" (McGuiness, 1986, p. 74)

Frank McGuinness' play shows how the fear that Irish identity would disappear in the trenches of the Great War, resulted into something totally different, and how in the muddy fields of the Somme, a young generation achieved a form of self-definition.

Conclusion

The works of James Joyce and Frank McGuinness clearly show that although their attitude towards politics in literature differs greatly (Joyce thinking that literature should be above politics) both writers are concerned with the political issues of the time: particularly with the Irish Nationalism and World War I.

However, belonging to different epochs and having different literary styles Joyce and McGuinness treat political issues in a very different way. While Joyce tends to be ironic in his accounts of Irish nationalism and World War I, McGuiness gives a more personal outlook at the problem, particularly when depicting problems that are troubling Ireland. By conveying the inner thoughts of Ulster Nationalists, he creates a dialogue with the Battle of Boyne (1690), which gives the play a postmodernist touch.

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