

Drama and (Joyce's) Life

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Even though Joyce has written only one play, his relationship with theatre has been more complex and continuous. I would like to focus the attention especially on Joyce's youth, a time, long before *Exiles*, during which he experienced a deep contact with theatre and which also influenced his next artistic development. Comparing Joyce's early writings such as "Drama and Life," "The Day of Rabblement" and "On Ibsen's New Drama" with the biographical works, we understand how strong the relevance assumed by theatre was for him, both at a biographical and aesthetical level. When still a student (and hence at the maximum of his receptiveness) Joyce tried to approach the theatrical medium in different ways: as an interpreter, in *Cupido's Confidant*, as a playwright, his first artistic attempt being that of writing a play, *A Brilliant Career*, and above all as a critic. Joyce also found one of his great masters in a dramatist, Henrik Ibsen. In Ibsen's works, Joyce recognized for the first time longings that he was nursing but he wasn't still able to express with enough vividness. Ibsen is the one thanks to whom, as Joyce himself wrote, he transformed himself from an Irishman to an European. Influenced by Ibsen and his theatre, in an article such as "Drama and Life," Joyce

made his first aesthetic statement: Ibsen, among his other masters (Nietzsche, Wagner, D'Annunzio), contributed to create and develop Joyce's aesthetic idea of drama. From drama as theatre, the "least dependent of all arts on its material," he expanded his artistic horizon to *drama*, as art "in whatever way unfolded" (*CW* 24); *drama*, according to the young Joyce, is that creation realized by the artist (who then stands there "indifferent, paring his fingernails"—*P* 245) of an independent, plastic universe in which object and subject coincide. And this is exactly what Joyce has always tried to achieve since his early epiphanies right through *Finnegans Wake*.

But back to the theatrical medium itself, theatre played an important role on the young Joyce even at a national level. In Dublin, at the turn of the century, theatre was the most powerful tool being used by the Irish Literary Movement in their high mission of forging the Irish people's nationalistic consciences. The Irish Literary Theatre was created in 1899 and in Yeats's and Lady Gregory's mind it was a great and ambitious project, with its own manifesto and a whole series of original plays inspired by rural life and high celtic tradition. Their noble aim, according to Lady Gregory's words was to "show that Ireland is not the home of buffonery and of easy sentiment, as it has represented, but the home of ancient idealism" (Lady Gregory 22). According to this revivalistic perspective, and Yeats's in particular, the dramatist has to be considered as a special shamanic figure and has to be, at the same time, an insider and an outsider of the society. The dramatist is the chosen one who has the power to bring selfknowledge to the community, establishing a contact between Irish mythical tradition and everyday life. As a result, the Irish stage was flooded by a mix of ancient myths, rural life, high irish history and traditions, in order to redeem and strenghten the Irish spirits.

At the time, Joyce was still not twenty years old. He was part of that generation which has to be shaped and elevated. But Joyce's wellknown strong, eccentric and even provocative personality wouldn't have accepted so passively this imposed cultural path. Still, his reaction is not that of ignoring the activity of the Irish Literary Movement at all. He established, instead, a rather continuous interaction.

His approach has always been quite attentive and critical (and not just during his youth). And we may even argue that, at the beginning, Joyce's feeling towards the national theatre was that of a quite genuine appreciation. He was an anti-revivalist but he was persuaded by the independence of true art and he considered Yeats as one of the greatest contemporary poets. As for Yeats's theatre, he highly appreciated the play *Countess Cathleen* and he defended it when, at that time, it was blamed for being erethical and anti-irish. At the première, Joyce was standing clapping his hands while everyone was booing and he then refused to sign the letter of protest written by his friends (we may consider this episode as Joyce's first *non serviam*, at the age of 17). And as we know even the lyric *Who goes with Fergus* had a special place in Joyce's heart and works as well. The young Joyce also appreciated Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field* which was presented with *Countess Cathleen* at the opening of the Irish Literary Theatre. In this play, according to Ellmann, Joyce recognized some similarities with Ibsen and he also considered it as a precursor of *Exiles* (Ellmann 454). And, as Ellmann suggests, even *A Brilliant Career* had the municipal element taken from Moore's and Martyn's plays (Ellmann 88), and hence not just the Ibsenian elements Stanislaus refers to (Stanislaus Joyce 115). Moreover, even in such an angry article as "The Day Of Rabblement," Joyce still defined the Irish Literary Movement as "the latest movement of protest against the sterility and falsehood of the modern stage" (Joyce *CW* 50). A similar thing, according to Joyce, had happened the last time fifty years before in Norway with Ibsen. And, after all, it's also possible to find a remarkable analogy between Joyce's and Yeats's artistic belief: at that time, Joyce was firmly convinced, as well as Yeats, of the religious power of the true artist. The true artist is the only one who is able (and it's also his duty) to portray truth in order to build a new contemporary mythology. Joyce felt, at this early age, that his mission was exactly this one. And surely always keeping Ibsen's lesson in his mind and considering himself his intellectual heir he wanted to build a vivid reality, made by real, contemporary and ordinary people who then are elevated by the artist to mythological figures. This was Joyce's new kind of realism and his

Dublin was going to be the set for his universal *drama*. “Life we must accept as we see it before our eyes, men and women as we meet them in the real world, not as we apprehend them in the world of faery” (*CW* 28). To the ancient and legendary “world of faery” idealized by the Irish Literary Movement, Joyce preferred the teeming, urban reality with all its absurdities, contradictions and commonplaces. And as Yeats has written in the report of their first meeting, Joyce believed that “his mind was much nearer to God than folklore” (Ellmann 102). But Joyce’s idea of the religious power of the artist was not so different from “that priesthood which will spread his religion everywhere, making their art the art of people” (Yeats, “The Theatre” 22) invoked by Yeats.

At that time, though, Joyce still had a tolerant smile towards this “litterateurs” as they seemed not to exclude the idea of producing both Irish and European plays. And even though he wrote in the *Holy office* “That they may dream their dreamy dreams / I carry off their filthy streams” (Joyce, *Poems and Exiles* 103), there were clear signs of how much the nineteen years old Joyce did want to take an active part into the Irish Literary Theatre activity: he seemed enthusiastic at this perspective that he decided to translate two Hauptmann’s plays (*Before sunrise* and *Michael Kramer*) and to propose them to Yeats (who, anyway, said Joyce’s German wasn’t still good enough); and we also know that Yeats proposed to the young Joyce to write a play for them, which Joyce said he would have written in five years, which then became ten and probably we may assume that play became *Exiles*.

More than the Irish Literary Theatre what really Joyce disdained most was the mediocre crowd of the Gaelic Revivalist Movement: the rabblement, the philistine chorus, as he will call it later. Those people were the same ones ready to criticize a play as *Countess Cathleen*. One of them was Arthur Clery. In 1900, Joyce came upon his article sent at College’s Literary and Historical Society, named “The Theatre, Its Educational Value.” In this article, Clery, reflects on the educational value of theatre and indicated as models of high morality the ancient Greek theatre and the Shakespearean one and, on the other hand, he harshly condemned the

dramatist of Christiania saying that “the effect of Henrik Ibsen is evil” (Clery 123). According to Joyce, Clery is perfectly representative of that revivalist young generation in progress, fed with catholic moralistic hypocrisy and uncritical patriotic feelings. The young scornful Joyce decided to reply to this article and he wrote “On Ibsen’s New Drama” (published the 1st of april 1900 on *The Fortnightly Review*). In this article, after a deep analysis of the play, Joyce defended his great master with this words: “Henrik Ibsen is one of the world’s great men before whom criticism can make but feeble show. Appreciation, hearkening is the only true criticism” (CW 48). Besides, few weeks before he had already written “Drama and Life” in which he has already assumed that greek and shakespearean theatre had done their work and that theatre needed now new contemporary dramatists, as Ibsen and his heirs (Hauptmann, for instance, or maybe Joyce himself).

But in 1901, just as Joyce was still working rather enthusiastically on his translations of Hauptmann’s plays, something happened. The Irish Literary Theatre presented a programme of “offensively Irish” plays. Instead of great, universal, european plays on the Irish stage there was going to be room only for more and more mediocre, according to Joyce, irishness. The Irish Literary Theatre had committed the biggest sin: in having been too much condescending with the “popular devil,” it had become “property of the rabblement of the most belated race in Europe”(CW 50). And according to Joyce, the true artist can’t satisfy *la bestia trionfante*. In order to elevate this servile crowd, the artist has to fly over it as to show it the truth, helping the multitude much more in this way.

This intellectual debate becomes quite relevant even because, as we know, soon Joyce took the very important decision of detaching himself from the Irish multitude in a very radical way: that of self-exile. But even from abroad Joyce’s interest in the domestic cultural life didn’t seem to fade. In his letters to his brother Stanislaus several times he asked about and commented on the last news, showing that he was still very interested and concerned about the activity of the national theatre. He wrote, for instance, to Stanislaus about the riots at the première of Synge’s play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, in 1907 “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 I can't get out and see what the hell is going on" (Joyce, *Letters* II 211-12). And this episode becomes quite meaningful because it has been of inspiration for the story "The Dead." While those years in Trieste, he also spent a lot of time and energy writing about Ireland on the local newspaper *Il Piccolo della Sera*. The self-exiled europeist wrote articles such as: "Ireland, Land of Saints and Scholars," the essay on Mangan, "Fenianism," "Home Rule Comes of Age," and "Ireland at the Bar." As for his theatrical interests, in 1907 when back in Dublin for the Cinema Volta enterprise, he attended Bernard Shaw's play première, *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet* which was performed at the Abbey Theatre for the first time after being banned in England, and he also wrote a review about it on *Il Piccolo Sera*. Then, as a proof that not all the products of the Abbey Theatre were to be condemned, Joyce translated *Riders of the Sea* by Synge into Italian and wanted the play to be performed in Trieste. The translation was published, but it was never produced because of difficulties with Synge's heirs. In 1913 he also proposed to Yeats a translation of *Countess Cathleen* into Italian in order to perform the play in Trieste, a project which was then abandoned because Vidovich, his triestine friend who would have helped him in the translation, didn't want to translate the later version of the play, while Yeats didn't want an Italian translation of the earlier version.

It's only after another couple of years that finally we arrive at the 1915: the year of *Exiles*. Joyce, of course, proposed the play to Yeats but he refused saying that "It is too far from folk drama," and we may probably argue that Joyce, even if surely disappointed, might have taken it as a compliment... But this time Joyce was not discouraged, as with Archer's critical reaction to a *Brilliant Career*, and he tried all that was in his power in order to see the play performed. It happened in Munich after four years in 1919 and, as we know, it was a quite unsuccessful experience. Besides, just in those years in Zurich Joyce experienced another annoying misadventure in the show business: he joined a theatrical company, the English Players which would have performed plays in English in Zurich and their

first production should have been an Irish play, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But they didn't go too far: the story miserably ended with two trials, after many troubles about money with one of the actors, Henry Carr. But ironically, years later, it has been immortalized in a play: Stoppard's *Travesties*. And we definitely may agree with Margot Norris when she suggests,

Joyce was probably not cut to be either a businessman or a producer, nor in the eyes of many critics, a playwright [...]. Yet he clearly brought dramatic and cinematographic experiences and talents to his fiction, and these flowered in *Ulysses*. (Norris 8)

All this reveals how much importance theatre had in Joyce's life. As a magical medium he wanted to explore (following Ibsen's footsteps), as the medium which fed him in his early age at home, but also as an aesthetic principle: the dramatic quality can be found, in different shapes and nuances, in all his works (another example of Joyce's belief that his work "is a whole and it is impossible to divide it into names of books"—Granta 242). The great universal power of Joyce's works seems to find its germinal elements in his first theatrical (and "dramatic") experiences. And I like to think that Archer's pointing out the limits of a *Brilliant Career*, those "canvas too large for the subject" (Ellmann 79) which were practically unstageable, seems to foretell the reasons of success of Joyce's later prose. And it also makes me wonder the fact that two great men of theatre of the second half of the century have been strongly connected to Joyce: Beckett, of course, and Harold Pinter (who directed an extraordinary version of *Exiles* in 1970, giving to the play a second birth).

As for the national theatre, just when Joyce was turning from being a young Irishman into an universal artist, the national cultural panorama (in which theatre was a dominant factor) influenced some crucial choices Joyce made. And maybe the Irish Literary Movement activity, even though in a controversial way, worked on the young man as a stimulus in the development of his awareness of his messianic role as an artist. He chose his way. He chose Europe. But, in his own

very personal way, we may argue that Joyce has been a revivalist too. His merciless portrait of his urban universe seems to be complementary to the mythical rural Ireland idealized in the Irish Literary Theatre. And I would like to conclude with the words of one of the most important contemporary Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, who said:

Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory constructed an imagined place that gave eternal life to Gaelic country people of the west and their Anglo-Irish lords and ladies, while Joyce made a divine comedy out of the urban tumult of Dublin. So, both Joyce and the Revivalists, in their different ways, prepared cultural paths for the political fact of Irish Independence. (Heaney 8)

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Abstract

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The paper explores the connection between Joyce and drama, which strongly influences the young artist, both personally and aesthetically. Joyce grew up in Dublin at the turn of the century when theatre was the most powerful tool being used by the Revivalist movement to forge the Irish people's nationalistic consciences. During his youth Joyce fed off this atmosphere and was utterly fascinated by the theatrical medium. But he soon felt oppressed and disappointed by the politics of the cultural panorama that surrounded him. As "The Day of Rabblement" shows, even the theatrical medium was not spared his scorn: he thought that Revivalist theatre was doing little more than recreate an unconvincing "world of fairies." Joyce thus decided to expand his horizons to the great European theatre and he found in a dramatist, Henrik Ibsen, one of his great masters. Drama (as theatre) played an important role in Joyce's life and he tried to explore the medium from different perspectives (actor, critic, author, producer). Even from abroad, Joyce kept following the activities of the Abbey Theatre and it can be assumed that he also tried (unsuccessfully) to take an active part in it, in order, of course, to change it. *Drama*, by the time, became for Joyce the supreme form of art "in whatever way unfolded" and it is what he always tried to achieve since his early epiphanies right through *Finnegans Wake*. This paper will focus on the influence of *drama* in the development of Joyce's aesthetic identity, first as "theatre" and then in the more extended joycean sense. A close reading of the early *Critical Writings*, with all their youthful and provocative enthusiasm, will help us understand those theatrical elements which Joyce assimilates, includes and eventually surpasses in his later works.

■ **Key words** : Joyce, early writings, drama, theatre, Revivalism, Irish Literary Movement

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