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Ex-isles: Joyce and Neruda, a Literary Entanglement

Abstract

The intersection of James Joyce and Pablo Neruda, two exilic writers from vastly different traditions, presents a compelling yet underexplored connection; and yet, the relationship has seldom been investigated, even though Neruda can be numbered among Joyce's translators. Despite their disparate origins, their works reveal intriguing links in terms of themes, literary techniques, and shared explorations of human experience. While direct evidence of interaction is limited, there are a few points of contact showing how their artistic journeys and thematic resonances transcend geographic and cultural divides. This essay also examines how Joyce and Neruda's shared preoccupations with exile, imagination, and creativity illuminate profound similarities in their artistic visions.

Keywords: Joyce, Neruda, Ireland, Chile, Translation, Poetry

Direct intersections between Joyce and Neruda are scant and yet revealing. The "James Joyce Checklist", a comprehensive Joycean bibliography, includes only two articles on Joyce and Neruda, both by the same author (Puccini 1971, 1981).[1] Biographers of Neruda such as Feinstein and Teitelbom, however, underscore some key moments: Neruda's reading of *Ulysses* in Ceylon, his awareness of Joyce, Proust, Kafka and the like, and Joyce's possible influence on the imagery in *Residencia en la Tierra II* (Feinstein 2004, 114-5; Teitelbom 1991, 144, 160, 411). Not too much importance is attached to a very crucial connection: the fact that in 1933 Neruda translated two poems from Joyce's first collection of poetry, *Chamber Music* (Joyce 1963, 7).

1 Puccini (1971) features the two poems by Joyce later discussed in this essay, "All Day I Hear the Noise of Waters" and "I Hear an Army". See also: Joyce 1963.

In Neruda studies Joyce is always mentioned in general terms. Joyce is generally acknowledged among the writers that must have influenced the Chilean poet, but very little is provided to excavate the depths of this possible legacy. Some similarities between the two have been pointed out by critics such as Amado Alonso (1951, 254-6) and Leo Spitzer (1945, 76). More importantly, perhaps, Joyce is mentioned twice by Neruda himself in his autobiography *Confieso que he vivido* (1975, 35, 55). The first occurrence is interesting in Joycean terms, though it does not frankly explain much of their possible relationship. Neruda names him on his trip to Rangoon, when in 1927 he had been appointed consul to Burma. Joyce's name follows a comment on "the most beautiful name of all rivers in the world", the Irrawaddy (Neruda 1975, 34).

Due to a strange kind of coincidence, in the same years Joyce also mentioned the Irrawaddy river. He had been publishing in instalments a book replete with river imagery,[2] which would later become Finnegans Wake (1939), which up until then was known by the name of Work in Progress. It was indeed the talk of the town in many (manly European) literary circles, and we don't know if any of the journal issues containing chapters or episodes from it ever reached Neruda. We cannot rule it out, of course, but as I said, it would not be in any way of much help in tracing some sort of connection between the writers. Instead, it is very possibly just a mere coincidence. However, I wish to start my theory of suggestions from an apparently insignificant crossing to better introduce the quasi-hallucinatory functioning of Joyce's art.

As all Joyce scholars know very well, coincidences are incredibly revealing in dealing with Joycean intertextuality. For better or worse, they suggest common ground between authors of works, and sometimes they prove to be even useful in the attempt to reconstruct aesthetic patterns of analogy. In this case, they might just highlight the fact that both Joyce and Neruda were lovers of rivers, or at least of the multiple of semantic potential of rivers' names.

Joyce was indeed an admirer of rivers and their nomenclature. As an example, we can take the very first word of Finnegans Wake, "riverrun" which

2 "[Joyce] told me that into the prose of the little book in question – *Anna Livia Plurabelle* – he had woven the names of five hundred rivers... He told me, I remember, that he liked to think how some far day, way off in Thibet or Somaliland, some lad or lass in reading that little book would be pleased to come upon the name of his or her own home river" (Eastman 1931, 98-100).

points to many things.[3] Moreover, when he was almost blind in Paris, he used to ask friends to take him down to the banks of the Seine to "hear the voice of the river"; and later, when he was asked by Adolf Hoffmeister in which language Finnegans Wake was actually written he replied that it was written in the language of the river. In the same interview, Joyce speaks of the Irrawaddy, which he places in India rather than in Burma, in these terms:

> Please look at the top of page thirty, sixth row down.
> It reads: It's that irrawaddyng I've stoke in my aars.' And so on. We tried to translate it.
> 'But what is this irrawaddyng?'
> 'Irrawaddyng' is from waddyng (= Watte, vata) with a common use in Ireland.
> Mainly of course Irrawaddy is a river in India. (Hoffmeister 2005)

As will be manifest towards the end of the paper, in the light of Neruda's choice of poems to translate from Joyce's collection, a link between them is a general fascination for what we may name the "water theme", which becomes a literary *trait d'union* linking their imaginaries. In this light, words connected to rivers in Joyce become epiphanic. The first occurrence of the Irrawaddy river in Joyce is quite literal. We find it in a passage of *Work in Progress* that had been published three times between 1925 and 1927, just about when Neruda was moving to Rangoon, and it is the line Joyce mentions to Hoffmeister. Here is the sentence: "It's that Irrawaddying I've stoke in my aars" (Joyce 2013, 214).[4]

It is a very rich and interesting passage indeed, and quite an ironical one. Here we have, first of all, some sort of dying sound produced by the river, a sound that appears to be "stuck" in somebody's ears, but also in his arse: the scatological always goes hand in hand with the spiritual, in the *Wake* a book in which word-making aims at combining opposite dimensions, sometimes just for the sake of fun. However, whenever rivers are concerned, Joyce's ways of being funny are very serious. In the passage we spot the verb "to wade", which, in connection with the action of "dying" and one of the deadly sins (*ira* is

3 It might point to the very name of the Dublin river, the Anna Liffey ("river Anne") or to the Triestine word "riverà" meaning "they will come again", or even to the French word *rêve* for "dream" or *rêverie* for "daydream" (Terrinoni and Pedone 2020, 306).

4 Prior to book publication, the passage appeared also in *Le navir d'argent* (Oct 1925), *Two worlds* (March 1926) and *transition* (Nov 1927).

"wrath" in Italian, one of the languages of the *Wake*) might even remind us of the rivers of Hades or Hell.

However, the Burmese river is also a link back to the troubled history of Ireland: IRA is the Irish Republican Army which had led the fight during the Anglo-Irish war, also known as the war of Independence (1919-1921). Burma being, just as Ireland and India, another colony of Britain, we might easily grasp the secret behind Joyce's puns. He is creating an uncanny connection involving colonialism, sin, violence (of which he was a hater) and scatology. This is the way the *Wake* often works, and one wonders whether Neruda would have found such semantic kaleidoscopes amusing or irritating.

The second instance is even more significant in constructing the colonial parallel and is again in line with Joyce's engagement with the possibilities of saying as many things as possible through his strategies of linguistic transmutations. His is in fact an attempt at semantic condensation: his so-called *portmanteau* words are the linguistic parallel of what in quantum physics we call superposition. If in quantum superposition multiple states coexist until observed or interpreted, in literature superposition can be a textual phenomenon where a single word or expression intentionally encapsulates multiple coexisting meanings, interpretations, or connotations, none of which can be discarded or resolved into a singular, definitive meaning.

However, unlike in quantum physics, in literature the "observation" does not collapse these theoretically coexisting states; rather, it sustains them, enriching the interpretive possibilities. This is very evident in the second occurrence of the Burmese river: "Eriweddyng" (Joyce 2013, 327). Here we have Erin's (Ireland's) very curious deadly wedding, which speaks volumes of the importance of exile in Joyce's mental space, as well as the crucial role of rivers as a way both of leading back home and infusing new life into a dying state of things (the Dublin river's name, *Anna Liffey* is use in the *Wake* as a vitalistic principle (*Liffey* > *life*). In the ability of creating new worlds through new words Joyce is certainly being consistent to his first literary impulses. We should never forget, in fact, that his career began as a poet, and we can safely argue that *Finnegans Wake* is his ultimate book of poetry.

Neruda knew Joyce the poet as well as Joyce the narrator. In his autobiography, he speaks of the influence of Joyce on him and his fellow poets, recalling that "in 1925 I started *Caballo de Bastos* (*Jack of Clubs*). In those days we wrote without punctuation and were discovering Dublin by way of the streets in Joyce" (Neruda 1975, 55).

Adam Feinstein, in his biography of the Chilean poet, cites the words of Diego Muñoz who remembered how many of the poets in Santiago in the early twenties could recite Baudelaire Verlaine and Rimbaud by heart as well as argue about Joyce and Proust. He says that "Pablo read James Joyce with great devotion. It was *Ulysses*" (Feinstein 2004, 54-5). He adds though that they couldn't read his works in translation, as there was no Spanish translation yet, so they had to read them in French. A problem arises here, as the French translation of *Ulysses* appeared in 1929, so it's either Neruda read *Ulysses* in Santiago in English (though it seems pretty unlikely, as the Paris edition of the book then seldom traveled the ocean), or Muñoz is wrong and Pablo read Joyce's *Ulysses* later in Ceylon – either in English or in French.

Others claim Joyce's influence on Neruda but information is very scant and general. Furthermore, the concept of influence is a tricky one, having mainly to do with the immaterial. Therefore, the very idea of any solid evidence proving the mutual influence between poets must be accepted only with the due skepticism.

In fact, the only thing we know for sure is that Neruda translated two of Joyce's poems into Spanish, and those translations were published in the Fall issue of *Poesia* in 1933. The only critic who provides a close analysis of those translations is Dario Puccini, who speaks of several similarities between them, among which the "northern atmosphere" in the use of images of frost and rain in both *Chamber Music* and *Residencia en la tierra*, concluding that "the brief experience in translating Joyce is quite crucial for Neruda writer of *Residencia*" (Puccini 1971, 36, 38).

In cases like these, then, when we know so little of a literary relationship, a lot of room is left to speculation, and this is why I must now kindly ask for some patience and even for some suspension of disbelief in assessing the following analysis. Before that, though, I wish to go back to a strange new compound word in my title: *Ex-isles*. It points to exiles as well as to come from an island. *ex* being "from" in Latin. However, unlike Ireland, Chile is not an island. Moreover, strictly speaking Joyce was not an exile but a self-exile, a voluntary exile. He was never "exiled", unlike Neruda. When Neruda's arrest was ordered in 1948 after his speech in the Senate later published as *Yo acuso*, the poet first went into hiding and traveled in many countries in South America, then he spent three years in exile. In 1952 he even ended up for a few months in an Italian island, Capri – as we all know from the famous novel and film *El cartero de Neruda*.

The months in the island of Capri were lived intensely from a sentimental point of view but also from a political one, as Chile was always in his mind; so, when Neruda was finally allowed to go back to Chile in August 1952, he was returning home but it was as if he had never really left it. This might be the secret behind the strange condition of being an exile: one is closer to one's country than one has ever been.

This is true also for Joyce, of course. The famous anecdote goes that when he was asked late in his life "Mr Joyce, when did you leave Ireland?" he replied with a question: "Have I ever left?". He did leave Ireland, in 1904, only to visit it again three times between 1909 and 1912. From 1912 until his death in 1941 he never set foot in Ireland again. And yet, we can safely agree that *he never left it*. Ireland is there in his books, in *Dubliners, in A Portrait, in Ulysses, in Finnegans Wake*. Perhaps, the one work in which Ireland is not too present is *Chamber Music*, published in 1907, while he was already abroad.

Something seems to strangely suggest that the relationship between Joyce and Neruda might be more substantial than has ever been suggested. When a poet translates another poet, there is always some sort of secret bond between them, for real bonds are seldom visible. So, in the absence of visible evidence, the only reasonable thing to do it to resort to the invisible.

Neruda was born on July 12, 1904, a month and a day before Joyce published his first short story, "The Sisters", which appeared in the *Irish Homestead* on August 13, 1904, a year after the death of his mother (13 August 1903). I have never really made up my mind whether we should consider Joyce lucky or unlucky for this. Why should it be important in the least? First, any Joyce scholar would say, because Joyce was very superstitious. His habit of having some his books published on his birthday clearly shows this. Surprisingly, Neruda was superstitious as well, at least in his youth. In a letter to his Argentinian friend Hector Eandi in 1929, he said that "the poet had a mandate to penetrate life and make it prophetic: the poet must be a superstition, a mythical being" (Feinstein 2004, 425).

Secondly, given that the death-of-the-mother theme is central in Joyce's works right from the start of *Ulysses*, and in the light of the fact that the relationship between Joyce's works and his life is so close, the death of May Joyce on that crucial day is quite significant, for it marked a point of no return in the son's life.

Neruda never met his own mother, as she died on September 14, 1904, when he was two months old. This is also an interesting correspondence, a quasi-co-

incidence, an apparent synchronicity, Jung would say. What happened on that very day to Joyce? It was the last day he spent in the Martello Tower in Sandycove, the initial setting of *Ulysses*. Now, *Ulysses* is set on June 16, 1904. However, it depicts scenes from Joyce's life which occurred on September 15, when he decided not to return to the tower. The book almost begins with Stephen Dedalus announcing in the morning that he will no more sleep there again, and it was on the morning of September 15 that Joyce said to his friend and enemy Oliver Gogarty that he was leaving the place.

A question arises then: was Joyce misleading his readers in letting them believe that his masterpiece was set in June rather than in September, on the very day he first made out with Nora, June 16? As a matter of fact, one of his future loves in Zurich, a girl named Marthe Fleischmann (in *Ulysses* Martha is the name of the pen lover of Henry Flower, aka Mr Bloom) was indeed born on September 15.

Of course, such speculations do not retain any factual value. To believe that these events might in some cosmic way be connected is pure folly. It would take a very superstitious human being to take them seriously. Notably, both Joyce and Neruda exhibited pronounced superstitious tendencies. We can safely imagine, then, that if Neruda had known of such strange coincidences, he might even have found them interesting. However, it is frankly impossible to believe that he knew of them, and we need to let them rest in the obscure space of the myriad impossible possibilities which make up imagination. (And yet, in literature the world of the imaginary and of the invisible is sometimes even more illuminating and revealing than the world of the visible).

The only real connection we can rely upon in assessing the relationship between Joyce and Neruda is that fact that in his late twenties the Chilean poet decided to translate Joyce. He must have found in the Irish writer something that appealed to the undiscovered country of his mind. In this light, it is not surprising that both Joyce and Neruda loved the English visionary poet William Blake. In fact, after translating Joyce, Neruda translated William Blake's "Visions of the Daughters of Albion" and "The Mental Traveler". Blake believed that nothing ever existed that was not dreamt before, and Neruda's poetry, very much like Joyce's, springs out of a desire to be in contact with an invisible world, a latent though powerful universe of sense.

In this, one could consider them both revolutionary writers. Neruda became more and more involved in politics after the Spanish Civil War. Joyce described himself as a socialist artist in his early twenties, and he kept his an-

ti-totalitarian positions all through his life, though it must be admitted that he was not a joiner. He never signed petitions or manifestos, though he asked others to do so for him, as happened when he had to defend himself from pirated editions of his works. For some critics Joyce was not a political writer, though, and the very fact that he moved away from whatever country was at war when he was residing there could be interpreted, on the surface, as a lack of political commitment.

This might not be the case. When Joyce had to fight he choose to do it with the pen, not the gun, and his books, in their radical openness that resists fixed or totalizing interpretations, are among the most antitotalitarian literary works ever. And yet, he fought his fights cryptically, and it indeed takes time, patience and commitment to see through the many veils of his texts in order to discover how politically they really are. As far as the Spanish civil war was concerned, for example, when he was asked to sign a petition in favour of the Republic he turned the offer down. And yet, there is a passage in Finnegans Wake that can be read as a very moving lamentation for freedom and for those who were murderd in Spain to defend it. The passage was written in the first months of 1937, just after the famous battle of the valley of the Jarama river, and it reads: "Be thine the silent hall, O Jarama! A virgin, the one, shall mourn thee" (Joyce 2013, 602). These are words that Neruda the poet would have loved as much as Neruda the political artist.

It is about time to go back, now, to the Chilean poet's decision to translate two poems from *Chamber Music*. How did he accomplish such a task? Let us start by noting that he picked two rather evocative poems, number 35 and 36. They are poems with images of water, though not of river water but of sea water. They are about the voice of the waters, their ability to speak, and remind one of Joyce's love and respect for the poems of the early Yeats, especially the *Lake Isle of Innisfree* with the sound of the waters lapping by the shore.

In 1937, when Neruda tried to organize a Congress of anti-fascist writers in Spain, he invited Yeats who in his youth had been the editor of the works of Blake. Yeats replied with a message of which Neruda was very proud, and in the autobiography, he calls Yeats Ireland's national poet (Neruda 1975, 59).

Neruda translated these two quite Yeatsean poems by Joyce as a poet, recreating them in Spanish and at times adding even more ambiguity to the originals. This aligns with Joyce's later guidance to his Wake translators, when he said to them that his work was "impossible to translate", and yet, in

encouraging them, he added: "It is possible to make it into poetry – poeticize it with the greatest poetic freedom that you can give it" (Hoffmeister 2005). This is what I believe Neruda also does with his work on Joyce. It is evident even from a quick look at the translation of the second one, substantially longer than the original:

I hear an army charging upon the land,
And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their knees:
Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,
Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.

They cry unto the night their battle-name:
I moan in sleep when I hear afar their whirling laughter.
They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,
Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.

They come shaking in triumph their long, green hair:
They come out of the sea and run shouting by the shore.
My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?
My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?

* * *

Escucho un ejército cargar sobre la tierra.
Y el trueno de los caballos precipitarse, con espumas
sobre las rodillas.
Arrogantes, con armaduras negras, de pie detrás de ellos.
desdeñando las riendas
con ondulantes látigos, lo aurigas permanecen.

Gritan en medio de la noche sus nombres de batalla:
yo sollozo durmiendo cuando oigo, lejos,
sus arrolladoras risas.
Ellos parten las tristezas de los sueños, con llama cegadora,
golpeando, golpeando sobre el corazón come sobra una bigornia.

Arriban sacudiendo en triunfo sus largos cabellos verdes:
salen del mar y corren gritando por la playa.
¿Corazón mío has perdido la sabiduría para desesperarte de esto modo?
¿Amor mío, amor mío, amor mío... por qué me abandonaste?

Formally – and even visually – Neruda expands on the text, we notice that Neruda adds a lot to the text. He reproduces the musicality of Joyce's lines in a new rhythm, a verso libre, a free verse in which the sound of marching iambs is lost. He acts freely from a lexical perspectives as well. This can be spotted for example in the "I hear" repetitions in the two poems reproduced twice with the verb "escuchar", and once with the verb "oir", whereas Joyce had willfully used their lexical repetitions.

"To moan", has been translated twice with the verb "sollozar", which is more like "to sob", so adding a stronger touch of southern "sentimentality" to Joyce's "Nordic"poem. Morevover, when Joyce has "foam" Neruda has "espumas" in the plural, adding ambiguity absent in a more literal rendering such as "las espumas" perhaps. Or even, when Joyce has "cleave" Neruda has "parten" which in some sense is even more comprehensive than the original, as it seems to combine "cleave" with "leave", "partir" meaning both in Spanish.

Finally, we have "shore" which becomes "playa" ("beach"), while a more literal translation would have been "la orilla". Again, it' is a change that adds something to the text, making it "sandier" if you like, and therefore more southern perhaps.

The same stylistic and lexical freedom is employed in the translation of the first poem, where two three-line stanzas replace the two six-line ones which alternate longer and shorter verses:

All day I hear the noise of waters
Making moan,
Sad as the sea-bird is when, going
Forth alone,
He hears the winds cry to the water's
Monotone.

The grey winds, the cold winds are blowing
Where I go.
I hear the noise of many waters
Far below.
All day, all night, I hear them flowing
To and fro.

* * *

Todo el día escucho el ruido de las aguas sollozando,
triste como el pájaro de mar cuando al partir solitario
escucha el grito de los vientos a las aguas, desolado.

Los grises vientos, los fríos vientos soplan adonde vaya.
Escucho el ruido de mudas aguas, lejos, abajo.
Todo el día, toda la noche las oigo deslizarse aquí y allá.

The translation leans toward lyrical fluency, adding emotional intensity. At times, this comes at the expense of literal fidelity. The tone of the original is reshaped in ways that push it into more tragic. "Making moan" is far less concrete and explicit than "sollozando", while "Monotone" emphasizes dullness rather than the deslation hinted at by "desolado". Accuracy both in lexical choises and shaped is achieve in "Grey winds, cold winds" which becomes "Los grises vientos, los fríos vientos". Instead, in "deslizarse aquí y allá" for Flowing to and fro" what seems lost is the images of fluidity. Ultimately, Neruda's translations preserve is a sort of continuity in a dreamlike dimension of literature. As both Neruda and Joyce seem to foster the idea that the freedom allowed by dreams is a crucial part of reality, dreams are not detached from what we are. They do not reside in some other world. They live in this world but to do so they make use of our own though distorted words and meanings.

If dreams play a central role in our lives this is because it is in dreams that imagination and the creative faculty, as Blake would also have it, can properly flourish. Joyce's reworking of the concept of the imaginable will lead him to the invention of a beautiful adjective in the Wake, "immarginable" (Joyce 2013, 4), that is, something which does not have margins, a space with no limitations.

One can be quite certain that so far nothing – or anything – can be proven in relationship to the Joyce-Neruda connection. However, one can safely assume that the reason Neruda became interested in Joyce and linked himself to him poetically was the fascination for the limitless power of the imagination, a power of which they, alongside Yeats, were quite aware; as was William Blake who, in a most beautiful letter had written: "this world is a world of imagination and vision" (Blake 1906, 62).

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