The Poetry of James Joyce Reconsidered

Marc C. Conner

Considering Joyce as Poet

What would it mean to consider James Joyce seriously as a poet? How do we evaluate Joyce’s actual poetic production? And what relation does his poetry bear to his achievements in narrative? It has been over 100 years since scholarly assessments of Joyce’s poetry began, with Arthur Symons’s 1907 review of Chamber Music in the Nation. Yet the critical commentary on Joyce’s poetry, and on Joyce’s status as a poet, remains remarkably thin. The long-standing view of James Joyce as a poet is well expressed by Harry Levin in his 1941 James Joyce: A Critical Introduction, where he states: “[Joyce at best is a merely competent poet, moving within an extremely limited range. The poetic medium, narrowly conceived, offers him too little resistance. It offers him a series of solfeggio exercises in preparation for his serious work. His real contribution is to bring the fuller resources of poetry to fiction” (27). This view, echoed throughout the canon of Joyce scholarship, carries two implications: that Joyce is essentially a failed, or at best limited, poet and that his poetry served as mere prolegomena to his great fiction, where his poetic gifts allow him to produce a kind of poetic achievement. Certainly Joyce’s reputation rests on his great works in short fiction (Dubliners), novel (A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man), modern epic (Ulysses), and “vastest encyclopedia” (JJII 4) (the Wake). As a result, his formal poetic work—Chamber Music, the thirteen lyrics that make up Pomes Penyeach, and a collection of satiric and personal poems—has received scant scholarly attention, and there has been little effort to examine how this work might relate to Joyce’s longer and more famous achievements.
At the other extreme is A. Walton Litz’s view, pronounced in his 1966 study of Joyce’s life and work: “James Joyce was first and last a poet.” Litz adds further that “poetry was the natural medium for the expression of Joyce’s deepest emotions.” This suggests that in poetry Joyce’s most private, fundamental concerns emerge. But Litz goes on to say that Joyce had to abandon traditional poetry as the vehicle for his ideas and imagination: “Joyce was by nature a sentimentalist, and . . . this sentimentalism was exposed in the revelations of lyric poetry”; unwilling to allow his emotions to surface in what might be thought sentimental indulgence, Joyce concealed those emotions in the elaborate artifice of his fiction. Litz concludes, “in his art Joyce was determined to control his sentimentality, and to accomplish this aim he needed the greater objectivity—the ironic contexts—provided by fiction.” Hence his forms become more “impersonal” as he produces the great works of fiction. And yet, Litz notes, the poetic impulse still “loomed large in Joyce’s life” and informed his ongoing efforts to attain that “balance of sympathy and irony” that defines his work (James Joyce, 35–36).

A yet stronger reading of Joyce as poet, and Joyce as a specifically Irish poet, is offered by Robert Scholes in his 1965 essay, “James Joyce: Irish Poet”:

I think we can safely say that Joyce began and ended his literary career with a desire to be an Irish poet. From Chamber Music to Finnegans Wake his concept of the meaning of “Irish poet” no doubt evolved considerably, beginning with a notion of someone who was born in Ireland and wrote elegant verses, but culminating with the idea of squeezing the universe inside the four walls of a Dublin pub. In just this manner we must expand our own concept of what an Irish poet might be in order that we may encompass and accommodate Joyce’s peculiar genius. (256)

Scholes argues that we err in limiting Joyce’s poems to merely biographical interpretation—long the standard means of reading his lyrics, particularly the Pomes Penyeach sequence, which has received almost no other methodological approach. Joyce’s conception of poetry, Scholes asserts, is more akin to that of the medieval humanists, for whom poetry was allegorical and literary in its scope. Through close examination of two brief poems, “Ecce Puer” and “Tilly,” Scholes demonstrates that Joyce’s aim and scope in even his shortest lyrics “is at once general and specific,” never confinable to one
biographical or historical corollary, and concludes that “Joyce's method as poet [is one of] maker . . . not only of verses but of huge symbolic edifices which move from the crusts of personal experience toward the stars and all the heavens” (267, 269).

Scholes's argument for reassessing Joyce's achievement as a poet has not brought about such a re-estimation in the nearly five decades since his essay; yet his suggestion that we think of Joyce as a specifically Irish poet has indeed been taken up by other scholars. In his recent study of Joyce's use of ancient Irish ritual in Finnegans Wake, George Cinclarl Gibson notes that Joyce's satire in such poems as “The Holy Office” and “Gas from a Burner” bears striking similarity to the Druidic practice of aer or satiric enchantment. Drawing upon Vivien Mercier's argument in The Irish Comic Tradition, Gibson concludes that “much like his Druidic precursors, 'Joyce held the archaic, magical view that words are weapons—and lawful weapons’” (120). Gibson's analysis extends from these early satiric poems to Joyce's final writings; for in Finnegans Wake Joyce shows his belief “that the Wakean words were ‘Words of silent power’ (345.19), and the Wake itself a 'work of magic'”—precisely how the ancient filid conceived of their wordcraft. Gibson concludes that, as F. L. Radford argues in relation to Portrait, “Joyce's self-image as a writer 'is closer to that of the ancient Irish filid than to any other cultural analogue’” (228). Cóilín Owens has made a similar argument about Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait, showing that Joyce's “depiction of Stephen's gifts, training, and accomplishments may be significantly illuminated by comparison with the native Irish definitions of poet as fili.” After enumerating these many elements of the fili that Stephen shares—their long, formal schooling, their possession of mystical sight or knowledge, their association with prophecy, their divination practices—Owens concludes that not only is Stephen an exemplar of the fili, but that “the features that mark Stephen as a fili are true of Joyce as well” (29, 42).

Viewing Joyce as a specifically Irish poet has proven fruitful, and shows how much more work is possible in this area (the essays in this volume by Campbell, Owens, and Holdridge all examine this aspect of Joyce's work). A view that has received far less attention is the conception of Joyce as a distinctively modernist poet, partaking of the massive, complex, and revolutionary movements in western poetry from the 1890s through the 1930s. This has been a particularly difficult conception to hold with Joyce's poetry, for while his prose is so radical and experimental—virtually defining the
modern age as, in Hugh Kenner’s phrase, “the age of Joyce”—his poetry has long been held to reflect an antiquated, even regressive style incompatible with modernist conceptions of art and the artist. Horace Reynolds, in one of the first reviews of Joyce’s *Collected Poems* in 1937, marked the contrast between Joyce the arch-modernist and Joyce the archaic poet: “That a man whose prose is so contrapuntally many-voiced should write lyrics which are simple song, a melody piped on a single pipe; that he who has led the vanguard of the novel should in his verse linger behind in the asphodel fields of Fulke Greville and Sir Philip Sidney—such antitheses pose a pretty critical question” (Deming II, 649). Even Joyce seemed to distance himself from modernist poetry, as when he wrote to Ezra Pound on the occasion of the publication of the first three Cantos in *Poetry*, merely remarking, “I hope you put in one or two sweet lines for my old-fashioned ear” (*JJII* 661). This characterization serves as the emblem of Joyce as anti-modernist in his poetry: contrasting his “old-fashioned ear” with the bold modernist strokes of Pound’s early Cantos.

And yet, Pound himself thought Joyce was a modernist poet-in-the-making. When Pound first wrote to Joyce in late 1913, he stated that he was seeking poetry that was “markedly modern stuff,” and then upon reading “I hear an army,” the final poem in *Chamber Music*, Pound wrote again to ask, “Have you anything more that stands up objective as your ‘I hear an army’?” (*Letters II*, 328). Pound certainly had in mind the sort of poetry he would include, along with Joyce’s, in *Des Imagistes*, what he would explain in his essay in *Poetry* in 1913 as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound, *Literary Essays*, 4).² Pound’s prescriptions for the new modernist poetry—“to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase,” to “use no superfluous word,” to “go in fear of abstractions,” and to attend to the areas of rhythm, symbol, technique, and form (*Literary Essays*, 4–5)—certainly seem to fit with Joyce’s verse in both *Chamber Music* and *Pomes Penyeach*, though with varying degrees depending on the poem. Indeed, when we consider that Joyce’s early poems were written in 1902–4, and that even the later poems collected in *Pomes Penyeach* date to mainly 1913–16, we realize that Joyce was actually far ahead of the tide in modernist poetry. J.C.C. Mays emphasizes that “Ireland anticipated the Modern Movement among English-speaking nations, one consequence of which was that Modernism was a thing of the past in Ireland before it can be said to have begun in America or England” (xl–xli). Seen in this context, Joyce’s poems
should be compared to Frost’s and Eliot’s early work in 1913–14, over which Pound similarly waxed enthusiastic at the time, rather than to, say, Pound’s own *Mauberley* or the Cantos or Eliot’s high modernist expressions of the early 1920s. Indeed, we might speculate that Joyce avoided precisely the excess of influence that Pound exercised over Eliot by turning away from poetry and focusing his creative energies on prose.

Mays rightly suggests that in many ways even *Chamber Music* exhibits modernist tendencies, in Joyce’s ability to mimic poetic styles precisely because he sees them as styles. This allows the Joycean poem to “become a new thing that surpasses its origins and bears a different kind of relation to reality” (xli). Similarly, Joyce’s “method of concentration on isolated words” can be seen as a modernist technique, a version of Pound’s objectivism and imagism as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound, *Literary Essays*, 4). Mays argues that the Joycean poetic method “had a profound influence on Pound, and *Chamber Music* anticipates *Mauberley,*” just as Joyce’s modernist poetics “deconstructed Modernism avant la lettre” in Ireland in particular (xli). The point is not simply that Joyce’s poems are much more modernist than they have here-tofore been seen to be—a claim made in this volume by Garnier, Conner, and Holdridge in particular—but rather that, as Gillespie argues in his essay in this volume, Joyce’s oscillating and multiple perspectives and styles are as evident in the poetry as they are in his prose. We therefore must be cautious in easily categorizing any of his writing as too obviously one thing or another.3

The Growth of the Poet: *Chamber Music* and the Formative Years

Aside from early efforts of childhood, such as the “Et Tu, Healy” poem about Parnell that Joyce wrote when he was nine (JJII 33), Joyce’s first sustained poetic work was a volume of poetry titled *Moods*, described by his brother Stanislaus as “some fifty or sixty original lyric poems, a few of them rather long, and perhaps half a dozen translations from Latin and French” (MBK, 85). Litz characterizes these as Joyce’s “schoolboy poems” and places them in the “mid-1890’s” (*James Joyce*, 4). Joyce followed this with another collection called *Shine and Dark*, which, Stanislaus reports, included the “Villanelle of the Temptress” as well as at least one of the *Chamber Music* poems, “The twilight turns from amethyst” (MBK 85–86). Litz dates