Joyce among the Cockneys: The East End as Alternative London

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Abstract

Following a renewed interest in Joyce’s writing on the British and Irish archipelago, this essay considers the correspondence between Ireland and a specific part of London: the East End. Tracing the use of cockney dialect, slang, and place-names in *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, and Joyce’s poetry, it finds a nuanced, sometimes ironic portrayal of London which recognises the city’s ramified social and cultural regions. Placed in bathetic opposition to the po-faced moral and political piousness mocked in *Dubliners*, “Cyclops”, and elsewhere, the East End is aligned not with the British crown, but with Ireland and its citizens. Humour and reference are used to stage a relationship between these two sites of cultural resistance: the figure of the vaudeville stage “cockney”, in particular, appears repeatedly in Joyce’s works as a music hall icon set against the conservative image of the colonial centre. The women of East London, too, display the characteristics associated with Molly Bloom and Anna Livia Plurabelle’s transgressive, “messy” voices. Similarly, the East End and Ireland come into contact through the linguistic play of *Finnegans Wake*, with places, songs, and slang intertwined in such a way as to suggest certain cultural correspondences despite geographical distance. This correspondence, I suggest, provides an alternative (and more complex) narrative of the two cities than that of coloniser and colonised, evidencing Joyce’s nuanced understanding of international relationships.

The first time James Joyce went to London, both Richard Ellmann and Gordon Bowker’s biographies recount, was in May 1900 (1177). As well as visiting relatives in the East End of the city with his father, Joyce sampled all the usual delights of the cosmopolitan town. As Bowker puts it, John Joyce “[showed] his son how to enjoy London – visiting music-halls, theatres, pubs and restaurants”. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what entertainment the young Joyce saw on his trip, but in any case, his being enamoured with the halls in particular was

2 Ibid.
clear: upon his return, Joyce would write to his brother Stanislaus proclaiming that “the music hall, not poetry, is a criticism of life” (JIII 77).

With a series of cities already closely associated with the author’s writing – Dublin and the Ulysses-closing “Trieste-Zürich-Paris” (U 993) – London has hitherto been a somewhat neglected locale in Joyce scholarship. Despite the city making repeated appearances in Joyce’s works following his 1900 visit, it is only recently that scholars have been encouraged to look towards London, prompted by a broader spatial turn in the field. While such studies are wellcome, their focus is still relatively narrow in scope. As first metropolis in an empire which included Ireland until 1922, London features most frequently in Joyce criticism as administrative colonial centre. While this interpretation allows significant insight into one facet of the capital, it necessarily fails to account for the intra-city local differentiation to which Joyce was attuned – homogenising, as it must, London as empire’s synecdoche, or at least its symbolic geopolitical centre. The portrait of London in Joyce’s novels and poetry, however, is attentive to the varying characteristics of the city’s districts. Indeed, rather than simply rail against empire’s heart, it is precisely London’s multifaceted nature which Joyce employs to subvert its power as staid colonial centre, using the East End of the city as a disruptive counterpoint to its supposed propriety and authority.

It is, of course, impossible to tell how seriously Joyce intended his line to Stanislaus on music hall to be taken. Yet, whether he meant its elevation above poetry earnestly or ironically, two inferences from Joyce’s statement might productively frame his subsequent engagement with the East End. The first is the concept of the hall as an alternative. Juxtaposed against poetry, Joyce proposes the music hall as an art form distinguished from more established and, we can reasonably assume, more conventional traditions. The second is the music hall as a form able to speak critically of life. Not simply a diversion or play, Joyce here entertains the halls as a space in which culture might be assessed and criticised. In what follows, I will suggest that the vaudeville East End represented in the music hall came to serve this function in Joyce’s writing. Contrary to the versions of the East End which we might expect to find in his works – on which more in a moment – Joyce employs a “Cockneyism” set against more conservative depictions of the city-as-a-whole. A thorough knowledge of the area allowed Joyce to selectively contrast tropes and images of the East End with their orthodox London counterparts, whether it be in placing ribald Cockney women alongside less locally-inflected British ones, using East End humour to make dignified images of London bathetically ludicrous, or aligning the area with other “foreign” spaces. Tracing the use of East End slang, place names, and figures in Dubliners (1914), Ulysses (1922), Finnegans Wake (1939),