

Another Look at Joyceans: Evelyn Conlon's Rewrite of "Two Gallants"

Izabela Curyłło-Klag
Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Abstract: The subject of the article is the satirical portrayal of Joyce scholarship in Evelyn Conlon's short story "Two Gallants", offered for the tribute volume of *Dubliners 100*, a writerly joint venture edited by Thomas Morris in 2014. The analysis acknowledges the intertextual richness of Conlon's creation, as she engages not only with the master text, but with other writers' responses to Joyce's work. Questions related to repetition, referencing and repurposing of the words of others prove central to the story's plot, in which a female scholar has to guard her research against an ungallant tandem of plagiarist colleagues. The motif of feminist revenge looms large in the narrative which ties the fate of a cheated servant maid with that of her modern granddaughter, lashing out against unfair academic practice.

Keywords: *Dubliners*, Joyce industry, intellectual theft, gender imbalance in academia, (un)creative writing

James Joyce once remarked about *Ulysses*: "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries" (Ellmann 1982, 521). This wry but prescient comment envisaged the continuous growth of critical commentary, produced by a community of academics deriving benefits from Joyce's achievement. Invited to write a contribution for a centennial tribute collection *Dubliners 100*, Evelyn Conlon decided to focus her attention on the absurdities of the so-called Joyce industry, and on the gender dynamics in scholarly circles. Her remake of "Two Gallants" is also a playful exploration of the issue of plagiarism in its less and more acceptable forms (e.g. adaptation, parody, uncreative writing), as well as a rumination on the obstacles encountered by disadvantaged writers, both in the literary world and academia. The theme of parasitical relations between scholars (and between texts) is presented in a story that does not function too well as a standalone; instead, it feeds off Joyce's host narrative and subsequent reactions to it and to the whole "revolution of the word" that his

writing has caused. What is more, Conlon's offering engages with the long tradition of academic fiction, often compromised by the problem of representation itself, and by the repetitiveness of its own conventions. The motifs of faculty scheming and revenge, pranks played on senior scholars, promiscuity in university circles, fraud as a career choice etc. are quite familiar to the enthusiasts of the genre, as is the tendency to satirise the people and practices of academia through the use of what Kenneth Womack terms "pejorative poetics" (Womack 2002, 1). With her experience as an adjunct professor in creative writing and that of a frequent writer-in-residence, Conlon is well aware of both academic and critical tricks of the trade. She piles one intertextual reference upon another, delighting, Joyce-style, in pastiche and retelling, and expecting the readers to remain busy as they are trying to follow her story to its suspenseful conclusion. In accordance with Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, the remake of "Two Gallants" provides us with all the pleasures of derivative writing, stemming "from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon 2013, 4).

The narrative begins with a rather kind-hearted depiction of academic criticism as a way of "mak[ing] sense of things through looking at writers and what they might have meant, and how the dead ones stood up or didn't"; we also learn that this occupation is "as good a way of making sense of the world as say business is, or prayer" (Conlon 2014, 60). Very soon, however, the picture is marred by a disclosure of petty rivalries, careerism and duplicity. Conlon sets out to show how navigating the treacherous seas of a scholarly gathering poses a particular challenge for women academics who have to be on guard against predatory male colleagues, shamelessly appropriating their ideas and words.

The story's main protagonist, Ruth, attends a conference at Trinity College, to speak about a servant girl in "Two Gallants", whose prototype, as she has discovered, was her own grandmother. The revelation is to be shared with fellow Joyceans, most of whom Ruth knows or recognises from previous scholarly events. Unimaginatively titled "Another Look at Joyce", the conference has attracted a predictable set of participants. Despite the fact that the community of Joyceans stretches worldwide, the same types tend to turn up on this as on other occasions. A seasoned female conference attendee can distinguish between the safe male companions, whom one can fraternize and even sleep with "without fear, if so minded" (Conlon 2014, 64), and the exploitative, patronising males who would not stop short of plagiarising the women they are

also casually attempting to seduce. Ruth knows the ropes; having honed her defensive skills through countless encounters:

she'd had to fight for every inch of intelligent space as most people around her did their very best to dirty her brain with small talk and small views of herself. She'd looked at conversations that she was being forced into and she'd seen them metamorphose into mouths that were chewing and spitting out her dreams. (Conlon 2014, 60)

It can be assumed that other women present at the conference feel similarly circumscribed. They are in a minority and tend to stick together, disregarded by self-important male academics. Even the exchange of salutes reveals the pecking order: "The delegates entered the hall, gave some mild greetings to colleagues, Ruth to Peggy and that Italian woman, Toby to Joseph and to him from Princeton" (Conlon 2014, 60). Female researchers from outside the Anglo-Saxon context are stereotyped and treated with condescension. When Rosa Maria from Italy reveals "in an olive voice" (Conlon 2014, 61) that she will also be speaking on "Two Gallants", she faces a surprised reaction:

'What,' the tall man bellowed, looking down at Rosa Maria, 'I would have thought you'd hate them.'
'Why?' Rosa Maria asked, looking up at him with one eyebrow higher than the other. Her hair was black, her face illumined with enjoyment.
'Well... ' There was a trap somewhere, but he couldn't find it.
'Ah, but I like the way they were imagined. I could hate them but I don't,' she said, her eyes crinkling at the corners, letting him off, saving his fall.
'I see,' Toby said, from the left hand side of the circle, not seeing at all. A woman pushed a teacart on the outskirts and started collecting cups. (Conlon 2014, 62)

The women at the conference seem to humour the male delegates, out of politeness and so as not to hurt their pride. The men assume that they know how and what women think. Given the story's finale, Rosa Maria's merciful backtracking from the confrontation may be seen as equivalent to the servant girl's

first lending of money to Corley in the original “Two Gallants”. Patriarchy in 21st century Dublin is almost as strong as a hundred years before, in Joyce’s time, with females cast in auxiliary, nourishing roles (the impression is subtly reinforced by the figure in the background, serving refreshments during coffee breaks, and cleaning up afterwards). Yet, as the story develops, a possibility of feminist revenge looms on the horizon, both with regard to Corley and Lenehan for their deception of the servant girl in Joyce’s original, and with regard to the characters of Lachey and Toby Doyle, two academics scheming to steal their colleague’s writing. Additionally, Conlon’s remake of “Two Gallants” enters into intertextual play with “Two More Gallants” (1986) by William Trevor, which is also a response to the story from *Dubliners*, and features a revenge plot involving a Joyce scholar.⁶ The result is a multi-layered narrative, emphasising the recurrence of betrayal and theft, as well as the frustrations accompanying the attempt to write something new on Joyce, and after Joyce.

Like Conlon herself, the characters of her story struggle with the anxiety of influence. Within the space of the past century, Joyce has acquired such an elevated, canonical status that it is difficult to add anything original to the nonetheless ever-expanding commentary on his work. One of the conference’s early speakers, a young attractive male, dismisses the premise of the whole gathering by quoting from Patrick Kavanagh’s famous ditty directed against the Joyce industry, “Who killed James Joyce?”⁷ He then disappears, never to come back. Of course, the delegates do not take this rebellious (if, admittedly, derivative) gesture seriously; the man is taken for a “smartarse” who tries to disguise the fact that he has got nothing prepared. There are no Kenneth Goldsmith⁸ enthusiasts in the audience to admire his brilliant recontextualisation of another writer’s work, even though Joyce himself would have probably endorsed such aesthetics and linguistics.

6 Trevor’s story is about the humiliation of an elderly scholar, Professor Flacks, during an international academic conference. He is duped into thinking that he has discovered the model for the ill-used servant maid in Joyce’s “Two Gallants”. The intrigue is prepared by Flacks’s ex-student, who pays an old miserly kitchen help 1 pound for lying to the professor.

7 It is worth remembering that Kavanagh’s poem is itself a derivation, a parody of the nursery rhyme “Who Killed Cock Robin?”.

8 Kenneth Goldsmith undermines conventional notions of creativity in his poetic and academic practice, declaring: “The world is full of texts, more or less interesting, I do not wish to add any more” (Goldsmith 2004). Students attending his course on Uncreative Writing at the University of Pennsylvania are asked to produce essays by combining sentences lifted from other texts. See: K. Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in a Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

The main villain of Conlon's narrative, Professor Doyle, has a different method of coping with the demand for originality. He assumes a priestly stance and luxuriates in his high position within Joyce studies, even though his contribution happens to be the ultimate fraud:

He was pleased with himself. You see he had it figured out. It required a lot of work to do a paper on Joyce. You couldn't just talk about yourself and him, and the effect he'd had on you, or at least the effect you thought he ought to have had on you. All that had been done before, hundreds of times, by people with higher opinions of their own thoughts. But he had it nailed. [...] He had paid Lachey to trawl the most obscure papers given in the most obscure places and he had rearranged them to fit into his own experience. (Conlon 2014, 65)

Doyle and his accomplice, who conducts the dubious research in return for promotion in academia, conspire to steal Ruth's work so as to use it for the closing talk. Even though the pompous professor disapproves of women in Joyce studies, he finds it easy to plagiarise them without getting caught. He instructs Lachey about the practicalities of his unfair game: "remember that if you stole from a man chances are someone might have heard it before, but a girl, it's unlikely" (Conlon 2014, 66). Additionally, the lower visibility of female academics makes it easier for men to deny intellectual theft:

Once [Toby Doyle] had a bit of a scare. Some mad woman claimed that he had taken her essay on the shades of *Yonnonidio* in *The Grapes of Wrath* and used the entire premise of it. He laughed it off, of course, snorting; who on earth could think that he'd have even heard of the publication, whatever the name of it was. Everyone believed him of course. (He'd found the obscure review in the sitting room of a woman he'd slept with, he was nearly sure.) (Conlon 2014, 66)

The mention of Tillie Olsen's *Yonnonidio* (1934) being echoed in Steinbeck's work suggests that the practice of appropriating women's ideas may also be detected in literature, or that female creative genius often passes unnoticed among

the more assertive men. Olsen defined herself as a feminist writer, and in her late book *Silences* (1987) she lashed against the obstacles talented artists may face because of their gender, class or race. By invoking her, Conlon draws attention to silencing forces in patriarchy, with the objective of foregrounding the aspects of female experience left out. Like her protagonist Ruth, she cares “what happened to the girl in the basement” (Conlon 2014, 64) in Joyce’s story. Her version of “Two Gallants” is an exercise in hauntology, with its focus on the unsaid, and on the spectral manifestations of unresolved problems.

What is more, ghosts literally make their way into Conlon’s narrative in a very Joycean,⁹ high modernist fashion. There is a metaphysically charged scene at the beginning of the conference when a mysterious spectre interferes with Ruth and Doyle when they ascend the stairs of Trinity College:

As he hurried to get closer to her, a shadow from the past walked straight at him, never ducked, straight at him, aiming to go through him. It blacked out the scrap of sun that was trying to blossom. Shivering, he steadied himself, so as not to become mesmerised by the brief bit of dark cast on the stone. At the same moment Ruth felt an invisible breath kiss her face. She touched her cheek. (Conlon 2014, 60)

Conlon does not make clear whose shadow momentarily plunges Toby Doyle into darkness. Is it Joyce himself, symbolically removing the spotlight from the fraudulent scholar? Or perhaps it is the ghost of the cheated servant maid, reconnecting with her academic granddaughter in order to support her in the struggle against gender imbalance.

A kiss bestowed on Ruth’s cheek is like a blessing, or a welcome, as she proceeds to room number 1904. It brings associations with the year of Bloomsday,

9 “Death is the highest form of life” (Joyce 1992, 622), reads one of the paradoxical statements in *Ulysses*. It comes from the *Circe* episode, where the protagonists are confronted by various ghosts from the past: Stephen Dedalus’ mother, Bloom’s son Rudy, Bloom’s parents, Paddy Dingham, Irish national heroes. The idea of absences which are the highest form of presence also informs various stories in *Dubliners*. Eveline does not escape with Frank to Buenos Aires because of a deathbed promise to her mother, to take care of the family home. In “A Painful Case”, Mr Duffy is tormented by the memory of Mrs. Sinico whose death he might have indirectly caused. In “The Dead”, Gretta Conroy reminisces about her erstwhile lover Michael Furey, which makes her husband ponder upon the role of the countless dead in the living people’s lives.

when Joyce first met Nora Barnacle,¹⁰ a chambermaid with whom he eloped to Trieste, to begin a very productive period of his life. At this time he commenced his work on *Dubliners* and thought up the ill-fated "date" between Corley and the servant girl. For the duration of the conference, Ruth travels in her thoughts between past and present, reconstructing Joyce's creative process in a stream of consciousness which runs parallel to the academic shenanigans.¹¹ She imagines the writer sitting in the Triestine sun when suddenly the pair of deceitful companions, Corley and Lenehan, suggest themselves, demanding that he gives them a fictional existence: "Go on, write about us, describe us if you can" (Conlon 2014, 62).

The southern-European context is important for Conlon's story, as it is one which Rosa Maria is native to. She is another conference participant worthy of receiving Joyce's blessing/welcome kiss, and there is a physical resemblance between her and the character of Molly Bloom, or Galway people of Spanish descent, whom Joyce described with admiration in his article for the Italian journal *Piccolo*, referring to the popular belief that "the inhabitants of Galway are descendants of Spanish stock and that you can't go four steps without meeting the true Spanish type, with olive complexion and raven hair" (Joyce 1959, 229ff).

Both Rosa Maria and Ruth arrive at Trinity College to reclaim Joyce studies from patronising, complacent men like Doyle. Gillian Moore emphasises this point in a recent article, remarking on how the authors in the *Dubliners 100* collection make a concerted effort to challenge elitist perceptions of Joyce; hence "the voices that resonate in Conlon's story are multiple, primarily female, and tend to hold emotive, rather than analytical, power" (2019, 128). Partly thanks to a lucky coincidence (a letter handed in by a librarian), and partly thanks to her feminist-oriented, historically focused research, Ruth discovers her personal connection to Joyce's writing, and has something genuinely new to offer to the scholars gathered for the conference. The revelation she has to share cannot really be stolen from her: not only is she immune to plagiarist scheming, but she can also teach Doyle and Lachey a lesson.

10 16th June 1904 (Bloomsday) is the day on which the action of *Ulysses* takes place. In this way, Joyce commemorated his first date with Nora, a woman of humble origin, but of utmost importance to him - his lifelong partner and the mother of his children.

11 Additionally, this part of the narrative seems to be a riff on some strategies of academic fiction; e.g. attempts at interweaving "authentic" period writing with the contemporary storyline, as it is done, for instance, in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. The stream of consciousness provides a modernist "feel" to the text; it is a mark of Joyce's ghostly presence.

The motive of revenge is further enhanced by the content of Ruth's grandmother's letter. It undermines the image of the servant maid in "Two Gallants" as a gullible girl who can be easily exploited. Conlon's revision of the character defies class and gender stereotypes: "*I pass the mistress with no sadness in my eyes. They assume that because I'm a maid I was born to be a maid. And that I think like a maid. They love knowing that, although they don't know what a maid thinks like*" (2014, 68). Contrary to everyone's expectations, the servant manages to determine Corley's true identity and, having learnt about his real intentions, vows to punish him and his accomplice at some opportune moment:

I would bide my time like an owl, waiting for the night. And when theirs came I would watch them eating their words like they were sand, trying to spit them and I would not help them, maybe pass them a bit of water, but not much. They were blocking my light with gibberish and they would eventually have to pay. (Conlon 2014, 68-69)

Following the example of her grandmother, Ruth also bides her time before seeing Professor Doyle's reputation destroyed. She knows enough about his *modus operandi* to set a trap and dupe him into a public unmasking of his corruption. Before that happens, she successfully presents her own talk, attracting a large audience and earning a vivid applause, among which she can detect "the wing of the dead writer breath[ing] past her again" (Conlon 2014, 69). The climax of the conference comes too soon: another look at Joyce has been provided and Doyle's self-styled guru manner rendered irrelevant already as he takes the privilege of uttering the last word, which, as a matter of fact, likewise belongs to Ruth. A verdict on his unethical behaviour proves hard to swallow; even a glass of water available at the podium does not alleviate the humiliation of "drink[ing] some darkness from the night" (Conlon 2014, 70).

When Joyce's publisher, Grant Richards refused to bring out *Dubliners*, the writer responded: "I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass" (Joyce 1957, 64). Evelyn Conlon has flashed a somewhat distorting mirror at the Joyce industry (and generally, at academia), and it has reflected a clear change of paradigm. Her story registers an exhaustion with the male bias in both the high modernist canon and scholarship. She seems to advocate a rediscovery of a flip-side to cerebral Joyce – a more

visceral, joyful, anarchic streak in his writing that once proved offensive to middle class sensibilities. Additionally, her tongue-in-cheek portrayal of scholarly circles, ready to split hairs over a "real dilemma" (Conlon 2014, 61) which panel to choose at a conference, and fervently believing in "the teaching of literature as a way to understand science, commerce, politics, war and love" (Conlon 2014, 69), carries a warning against megalomania. A deflation of the heroic was a solution Joyce prescribed to fellow Dubliners a hundred years ago; it appears that the guardians of his literary heritage might benefit from it even now.

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