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JAMES JOYCE'S ECHOES IN CAITRIONA LALLY'S PORTRAIT OF DUBLIN CITY

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ABSTRACT: James Stephens and James Joyce have been mentioned as referents for Caitriona Lally's highly acclaimed debut novel, *Eggshells* (2015). The present contribution intends to study this new brilliant rendering of the city of Dublin through the eyes of allegedly 'changeling' Vivian, whose Joycean creative musings on language serve her to portray contemporary Dublin, as well as to imaginatively project portals to other worlds where she can feel more at ease.

KEYWORDS: contemporary Irish literature, *flâneuse*, James Joyce, Caitriona Lally, *Eggshells*, Dublin City

Ecos de James Joyce en el retrato de la ciudad de Dublín de Caitriona Lally

RESUMEN: James Stephens y James Joyce han sido mencionados como referentes de la aclamada ópera prima de Caitriona Lally, *Eggshells* (2015). El presente artículo pretende estudiar esta nueva y brillante plasmación de la ciudad de Dublín a través de los ojos de Vivian (supuestamente cambiada por las hadas al nacer), cuyas cavilaciones creativas joyceanas en torno al lenguaje le sirven para retratar el Dublín contemporáneo, a la vez que proyectar imaginativamente otros mundos en los que se pueda sentir más a gusto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura contemporánea irlandesa, *flâneuse*, James Joyce, Caitriona Lally, *Eggshells*, ciudad de Dublín

Irish women's fiction has certainly surpassed in the twenty first century the alleged "adolescence" that Eve Patten alluded to in "Women and Fiction: 1985-1990", where she asserted that "[i]t often seems as though women's fiction in Ireland is undergoing an abnormally long adolescence" (7). Authors such as Anne Enright, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Deirdre Madden, Emma Donoghue, or Anne Haverty, to name but a few, have been offering since the last decades of the twentieth century brilliant additions to one of the most prolific literatures in the world. Furthermore, these authors have published works that perpetuate the Irish writers' penchant for innovating and experimenting with the genre of the novel inaugurated by Laurence Sterne, and whose most representative exponents have been James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. Only last year, the publication of Anne Enright's *The Green Road*, Edna O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs*, and Sara Baume's *Spill Simmer Falter*



Wither, bears witness to the excellent state of Irish literature by women, since these are recent examples of novels acclaimed for their thematic and formal interest. Caitriona Lally's debut novel, *Eggshells* (2015), should be undoubtedly added to this list.

Lally's novel offers a tour around contemporary Dublin, guided by a protagonist, Vivian, who is presented, or rather presents herself, as an outsider, a misfit, an outcast who wants to find a friend called Penelope and who deploys an endless reflection on and concern with the possibilities and limits of language. This brief description serves any reader familiarized with Irish literature to establish links with James Joyce and the main concerns of novels such as *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*. Not in vain, prestigious Irish literary critic Declan Kiberd has evoked James Joyce and James Stephens in his review of *Eggshells*:

Catriona Lally has written a book which reminds us that the seeming eccentric is often simply a person with a deeper-than-average understanding of normality.

Her central character makes the familiar world of postmodern Dublin seem very strange and the strange world of fairyland seem more familiar. Her voice is as original as her take on things. Her character walks through the streets of Dublin, a thirtysomething latter-day version of Leopold Bloom, who performs a kind of reverse anthropology (as he did) on everything from nosy neighbours to noisy shops. [...]

Lally's successful fusion of fairy-lore with an urban setting reminds me a little of the writing of the great James Stephens – and she combines his kind of fabulism with a radical social analysis. (2015, n.p.)

While Kiberd notices the thematic similitude between Lally's novel and Joyce's masterpiece, Sarah Gilmartin focuses her review of Lally's novel on the concomitant relevance that the formal and linguistic dimensions acquire in both Joyce's and Lally's fiction. Thus, Gilmartin recalls how “[i]n his analysis of the works of James Joyce, the novelist, linguist and literary critic Anthony Burgess maintained that there are two types of novels –those focused on the world at large, with plot and character central, and those concerned with language and form” (1); and although she concedes that *Eggshells* is “an altogether less complex, more reader friendly book” than Joyce's *Ulysses*, Gilmartin concludes that Lally's is certainly a novel “that prizes language over plot” (1).

Any “informed reader”, in Stanley Fish's terms, certainly detects a series of parallels that can be established between Lally's text and Joyce's *Ulysses*, and any comparison could be extended to *Finnegans Wake* without forgetting *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Thus, Lally's novel offers a contemporary map of the city of Dublin that serves the protagonist to provide an updated nicely polished looking-glass of Dublin and its inhabitants. This can only be achieved through the perspective of a distanced protagonist, as James Joyce had done in his fiction through his outsiders (being them children as in some of the stories in *Dubliners*, or the outcasts Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*), since, as Richard Lehan has argued, “The city, once an Enlightenment ideal, was being questioned in romantic, modern, and postmodern thought” when “[a] sense of being at home in the city was replaced by its opposite –the ‘unhomely’, expressed as the uncanny and often embodied by the outsider, the Other, the mysterious stranger, or the lonely man in the crowd” (xv).

Vivian is a jobless young woman who has inherited the house in which she lives from her great aunt, recently dead. Like Stephen Dedalus, she does not care for her hygiene, does not follow social conventions, and is equally a spendthrift. Similarly to Bloom, the

protagonist of *Eggshells* offers a quite distorted and often naïve view of the world that surrounds her, and is prone to project pseudo-scientific theories that, in her view, could better explain contemporary reality.

Like *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, *Eggshells* is a novel in which the plot is reduced to a minimum, where little or nothing happens apart from Vivian's daily and aimless ramblings through the streets of contemporary Dublin. She is, in fact, a contemporary female version of the *flâneurs* Stephen and Leopold.¹ She is the *flâneuse* par excellence who could not exist in nineteenth-century literature, according to Janet Wolff in her well-known study "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity", where Wolff asserts that "[t]here is no question of inventing the *flâneuse*: the essential point is that such character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century" (47).

Now, in the twenty-first century, we can ensure that the figure exists, that it can be seen in the streets of the cities, and that it has been depicted in many novels, some of which have Joycean echoes, as it is the case of Lally's novel. Yet, much has changed since Joyce realistically reproduced the relationship between women and space in his *Ulysses*, where they were mainly restricted to the private sphere of the house—we only have to think about Molly Bloom. Whenever we see them walking through the streets of Dublin, they are not rambling leisurely—like their male counterparts—but on purposeful errands, like the young woman Bloom follows after buying meat, Stephen's sister who is going to sell some books, or Mrs Breen in search of her mentally disturbed husband. Even low class female characters are represented in inner spaces, as it is the case of the barmaids in the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses* or the prostitutes in "Circe".

Besides, Caitriona Lally, who studied English Literature at Trinity College, has manifested in an interview that she feels flattered when reviewers compare her novel to Joyce's, although she has explained that she only read *Ulysses* after the publication of *Eggshells*:

I think the sense of wandering around Dublin is similar, but Joyce is on a more complex level entirely. I had read "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" and "Dubliners", but I read "Ulysses" for the first time this year, during another bout of unemployment (which is probably the best time to tackle "Ulysses"). I'd been too daunted to go near "Ulysses" for years, but when I read it, I absolutely loved it, even though I'm not sure I totally understood it and I probably missed a lot of the references. I was very glad that I hadn't read it when I was writing "Eggshells", or I think I would have been way too intimidated to have my character wander the same streets as Leopold Bloom – it would have felt like too great a standard to live up to. (Moore, 2016, n.p.)

Despite her not having read Joyce's novel, it is more than probable that she had heard about *Ulysses* during her years studying English literature at Trinity; in fact, her protagonist, during one of her ramblings, refers to Joyce and his most difficult work when she discovers the writer's statue: "I cross at the Spire onto North Earl Street, passing the statue of James Joyce with his legs crossed. He looks easy to topple and, if I had to read *Finnegans Wake*, I'd probably try to topple him" (21). On another occasion, she again alludes to a well-known place in Dublin with Joycean connotations:

I leave the museum and walk down Merrion Street, past the bookshop on Lincoln Place that used to be a chemist and that sells lemon soap regardless of what else it sells. Either James

Joyce or Leopold Bloom or Stephen Daedalus (or maybe all three) bought soap there, so it attracts citrus-seeking literary tourists. (60)

Vivian Lawlor is, as we have said, a solitary jobless middle-age woman who spends her days leisurely ambling the streets of contemporary Dublin. We are told that she once had a job that she lost, and her search for a new one is being fruitless: “I used to hunt,’ I say, ‘but I’ve had hundreds of silences from employers, so now I regard my job seeking as more of a hobby, rather than an action that could produce results” (31). Even though it is not clearly explained, she probably lives out of what her great-aunt has left her, since she manages to buy everything she fancies. In fact, her more pressing enterprise is to find a friend, and she is particularly interested in anyone called Penelope, for which purpose she puts an advertisement on the trees she finds in the street:

WANTED: Friend Called Penelope.
Must Enjoy Talking Because I Don’t Have Much to Say.
Good Sense of Humour Not Required Because My Laugh Is A Work in Progress.
Must Answer to Penelope: Pennies Need Not Apply.
Phone Vivian. (15)

The Joycean connotations of the name selected for the friend as well as of Vivian’s expression “work in progress” (the title Joyce used for a long time to refer to *Finnegans Wake*) do not pass unnoticed to readers of Joyce’s works. Notwithstanding, Vivian’s search probes her solitary existence and her need of a friend. We should not forget that solitude and alienation in the cityscape are topics recurrently referred to in relation to the protagonists of Joyce’s *Ulysses* Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom.

Vivian is not completely alone in life, since she has a sister, strangely equally named Vivian, who is married and has two children, but they seldom see each other and her sister’s relationship with her is, according to the protagonist, “one prolonged sigh” (248). These circumstances lead Vivian to spend her time alone, and, as she says, this affects her voice, which becomes unused to speaking aloud: “I need to practice using my voice aloud because sometimes it squeaks and gets pulled back into my throat if it’s being out of use for a while” (27).

To palliate this situation, a woman allegedly called Penelope surprisingly answers Vivian’s advertisement and they establish a friendship. Penelope is, similarly to Vivian, strangled from family life—her problems with her mother are hinted at. She is also obsessed with cats—her main company at home and the only protagonists of her paintings—and, equally to Vivian, disregards personal hygiene, since both women consider it to be overrated.

The reader of *Eggshells* inevitably sympathizes with a protagonist whose point of view we are forced to endorse, since the narrative is filtered through Vivian herself. This narrative choice leads us to discover the woman’s most intimate peculiarities, such as her fear of mirrors, her obsession with chairs (shared with her dead great-aunt), her concern with her body’s smell, her unease with and problems of communication with neighbours and strangers, and, above all, her interest in patterns, her search for symmetries that might help her to understand reality and the world she inhabits, and in which she does not fit.

Vivian has a series of essentialist doubts that inevitably affect her identity. When asked by a man if she is a foreigner, she acknowledges that she is not sure (88), and when someone

asks her where she is from, she again answers that “I’m not quite sure –that’s what I’m trying to find out” (191). The girl certainly lives in uncertainties, what makes her uncomfortable with the people she finds in her ramblings, since, as she declares: “I never know how to respond to people who want small complete sentences with one tidy meaning. I can’t explain myself to people who peer out windows and think they know the world” (16). Vivian’s self-centeredness prevents her from offering an objective view of contemporary Dublin and of the actual circumstances of its inhabitants. The reader of *Eggshells* can occasionally find indirect references to the problems affecting twenty-first-century Dubliners, such as the debate over immigration and the lack of job opportunities: “She speaks whole troughs of words, words about the priest who upped and died in the middle of his sermon [...] and the jobs that aren’t there and the foreigners that are taking the jobs that are there and the social welfare benefits the likes of me and you aren’t getting” (20). Notwithstanding, Vivian’s doubts, insecurities and alienated state make her incapable of participating in any social debate over the circumstances of contemporary Ireland. Her uneasiness leads her to feel that her place is on the edges, claiming for herself a liminal condition that better suits her, as she explains to Penelope:

‘I like edges’, I say.

‘What kind of edges?’

‘Door frames mostly. That’s where I’d stand if the world ended. Cliffs and piers and shelf edges, where the dust gathers. [...] I like the place where one thing meets another –that’s where the magic gets in.’ (65-66)

If Vivian’s quest through the streets of Dublin has a purpose, this is precisely the search for entrances, passageways, portals to what she calls the Otherworld or the Underworld. This search leads her to walk and name most of the streets of Dublin, as well as places such as the Natural History Museum, Dublin Airport, Trinity College, Stephens Green, the Dublin bridges, the National Botanic Gardens or Glasnevin Cemetery, among other places that are minutely recounted. Furthermore, the novel includes the childish sketches that, back home, Vivian draws so as to illustrate the descriptions of her daily routes. These sketches include a “batch loaf” (37), “fishing roads” (46), “a staircase dangling on a fishing road” (76), “a headless armless man” (83), “the ECG of a patient who flatlined briefly, before rallying into a healthy peak” (117), “a squinting side profile of a cat with an upturned collar and a stalk on its head” (165), or “half a teacup” (221).

Vivian certainly offers a peculiar and distanced view of a city that she particularly enjoys: “I like living in a city where I am mostly unknown, and going into small places where I am known” (22). Her detailed and comprehensive description of the city turns it into the co-protagonist of the novel, a status with which James Joyce had also endowed the Irish capital in *Ulysses*. Vivian’s drawings certainly map the Irish city and inevitably echo Joyce’s boisterous statement about *Ulysses*: “I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book” (in Budgen, 1972, 69).

Furthermore, Vivian’s existence is also characterized by her continuous, almost obsessive musings on language and words, and in this sense it is difficult to avoid thinking about Joyce and his linguistic meditations and experiments in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Vivian always carries a notebook in which she compiles endless lists of words and names. Similarly to her enterprise through the streets

of Dublin, she also seems to be looking for an alternative pattern in language, a new arrangement that would better suit her and her peculiar view of the world.

Her reflections on language, its possibilities and limits include trying to find out new word patterns, buying or inventing words, and even fearing linguistic categories and components. Thus, she is uncomfortable with verbs, “they expect too much” (13), and she fears the strength of consonants (252). She enrolls in what she describes as her “Last Words Project, which I would like to abbreviate to LWP”: “My project involves trawling through all my great-aunt’s books, and writing out the last word from each one. When I’m finished, I will examine them to find some kind of pattern. I expect this word-pattern to be a code or a message or a map, leading me to my rightful world” (71).

We can deduce from this passage that, by means of her concern, almost obsession, with words, the protagonist is offering a more profound reflection on the relationship between linguistic conventions and reality, and goes as far as to ponder the possibilities and limits of language to express different, alternative realities. What seems certain is that Vivian is as uncomfortable with language, and words and their pre-established meaning, as Stephen Dedalus was in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where he passed from learning by heart the meaning of words such as “cancer” and “canker” (7), for instance, to actively questioning their meaning—as his conversation with the Dean of studies illustrates: “The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on his lips and on mine! I have not made my words hold them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language” (205). At certain points, as Vivian does, Stephen also intended to gain access to an inner world of his own through an alternative usage of words:

Words. Was it their colours [...] No, it was not their colours: it was the poise and balance of the period itself. Did he then love the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their associations of legend and colour? Or was it that, being as weak of sight as he was shy of mind, he drew pleasure from the reflections of the glowing sensible word through the prism of language manycoloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose? (180-81)

Therefore, it is no wonder that Vivian would like to be able to buy words whenever she needed them (249). She researches the process that would enable her to enter a new word into a dictionary (201), a process that she finds “long and painstaking” (200), but that does not prevent her from putting into practice her compelling need of coining a new term whenever she finds it necessary:

I should vary my lunches more, but I don’t know what else to eat. I used to have soup, but I didn’t know what to do with my jaws, and I didn’t know which verb to use: was I eating or drinking? I could call it ‘dreating’, but that sounds like a weary farmer giving a dose of medicine to a sick sheep. I avoid jelly for the same reason –it’s a semi-solid frustration of verblessness. (223)

This linguistic attitude conveys the protagonist’s rebellion against norms and conventions that also applies to other aspects of her existence, as we have seen, but it is most overtly expressed in her constant musings on language. Vivian does not accept grammatical rules easily. For instance, she demands a free use of capitalization:

We should be allowed to choose when to use lower and upper case letters; having to use a capital letter at the start of a sentence is like saying the firstborn son gets all the money, no matter how vile he is. Some words should be spelt entirely in capital letters: TORRENTIAL, BELLOWS, RIPPED, FLED, GLEEFUL. And if letters have capitals, why don't numbers? I could invent capital numbers, but schoolchildren would hate me for increasing their learning-load and they would throw eggs at my face. (36)

Even though passages like this one sound funny enough and raise the reader's smile, we must take into account that Vivian is a well-read character. Throughout the novel, we find allusions to literary works as well as to Irish legends that are mentioned in appropriate contexts. Her interest in and concern with language denotes a creative potential that should not be underrated. In fact, critics who have vindicated the continuing existence, importance and representation of the *flâneur* in contemporary literature have pointed out the ambiguity inherent in the character in relation to his attitude, whether he is simply a stroller of the city or if this activity includes an artistic purpose (Wilson, 2001, 91). Both Stephen and Bloom, *flâneurs par excellence*, have been analysed as, respectively, the aspiring artist and the frustrated creator (Estévez Saá, 2001). In this sense, Caitriona Lally's *flâneuse* projects, at least, a creative, if not an artistic, purpose, since we are reiteratively told by the protagonist that, in the middle of contemporary chaos, she is in search of symmetries, a pattern that would help her to "solve the world with it" (232).

As a conclusion, we can gather that Caitriona Lally's debut novel is an outstanding instance of the work of a handful Irish women writers who are leading the writing scene in the isle. It must be also acknowledged that, formally speaking, authors such as the previously mentioned O'Brien, Enright, Donoghue, or Baume are offering the more experimental contributions, and that they seem particularly interested in giving voice to those who find it difficult to adjust themselves to the values and the practices of a world in which they do not fit, and are therefore compelled to find portals to alternative realities in which they are not marginalized. With this double purpose in view—formal innovation and attention to the traditionally ostracized in literature—it is understandable that Joyce's work should be considered as an inevitable referent when assessing the contribution of a series of Irish women writers who, more or less consciously, are taking up the torch from their Irish antecessor.

Caitriona Lally offers in *Eggshells* a contemporary female version of Joyce's *flâneurs*. In a certainly Joycean way, she describes an alternatively unique portrait of the city of Dublin, seen from the perspective of a protagonist who finds it difficult to adapt herself to contemporary norms, values and conventions, and deploys a vitally linguistic search for an alternative explanation of and reason for her existence. Vivian Lawlor, as she says, "could be the name of a film star or a businesswoman in a suit or an Olympic gymnast –it could be anyone but me" (19). She figures out that she could be a changeling and that she was mistakenly left in this world when she belongs to a different reality whose portal she cannot devise.² Elizabeth Wilson has mentioned that "at the point at which exclusion becomes a condition of survival, the 'overlooked' woman becomes a *flâneuse*" (2001, 94), and Vivian is certainly the representation of an excluded, overlooked woman. Changeling or not, the protagonist herself is perfectly aware of her unsuitability. As she acknowledges, "My gravestone could read: 'Here lies Vivian Lawlor: She Wasn't Quite the Thing'" (12).

NOTES

- ¹ Walter Benjamin is one of the critics who dealt at large with the figure of the *flâneur* in his study *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.
- ² The novel is presided by a quotation from W. B. Yeats about this fantastic creature, taken from the introduction to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888): “Sometimes the fairies fancy mortals, and carry them away into their own country, leaving instead some sickly fair child... Most commonly they steal children. If you ‘over look a child’, that is look on it with envy, the fairies have it in their power. Many things can be done to find out if a child’s a changeling, but there is one infallible thing –lay it on the fire... Then if it be a changeling it will rush up the chimney with a cry” (2008, 5).

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