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“Caliban’s Mirror”: The 2022 Wilde and Joyce Symposium

May 5th–7th, 2022.

Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin.

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The first day of the inaugural symposium focusing on Oscar Wilde and James Joyce began with a gently building sense of excitement, as scholars of these writers came together. Co-organiser Casey Lawrence began proceedings with a welcome address, which highlighted the fact that, for many delegates, this was the first in-person event since the global pandemic struck. This contributed to the sense of anticipation, as well as the fact that the symposium was the first to directly set Wilde and Joyce alongside each other critically. Lawrence also noted the generosity of the sponsors who had made the symposium possible and indicated her intention to compile an anthology on the two writers in question, again the first of its kind, from a selection of papers given in the coming days. She also noted the importance of the year with a nod to Ulysses100 and respectfully lamented the absence, and recent passing, of Jean-Paul Raquelme.

The first panel was titled “scenes like a landscape from Wildu picturescu” and began with a joint paper given by Joshua Elver and Nina Voigt on “Degeneration and the Bildungsroman”. This was followed by a paper from the chair of the panel, Monica Galindo-Gonzalez. Her excellent talk on “Homosexual Panic in *The Picture. And A Portrait: The Limits of the Artist*” inspired some challenging questions from one particular attendee to which she responded valiantly.

Following the coffee break, an atmosphere of conviviality ensued as “ere he retourneys postexilic”, the second panel, commenced. Adrian Howlett began by giving a paper entitled “Wilde at Heart: Exile and Return”. This was followed by Emma Marns’s paper “Mother Church, Mother Tongue, Motherland: Exile, Loss and Sterility in Motherless Ireland”. Marns gave an interesting comparison between male characters’ experiences of exile that brought together examples from Wilde, Joyce, and Brian Friel. Finally, James Green presented his paper, “Exile and Exodus: Dante, Wilde, Joyce”, which combined the medieval and modernist together in an innovative way.

As the symposium consisted of less than sixty delegates, the lunch break provided many opportunities to get to know each other better. This time seemed particularly important following the pandemic; whilst some people knew each other from previous events, many had never met, and the general feeling was one of relief at being able to attend scholarly events in person again. The afternoon began with a panel called “Through a Glass, Queerly”, in which Christopher Wells’s paper, “It is not very difficult to read between the lines’: Joyce, Wilde and Scandal(less) bisexuality”, stood out.

The first day of the symposium concluded with a keynote speech from Margot Gayle Backus, entitled “James Joyce and Oscar Wilde: Modernism and the Politics of Punitive Child Removal”. Backus began by explaining how she had settled on a subject which so skilfully linked the two authors in question; namely, that a friend of hers had brought her attention to Joyce’s treatment of Wilde’s loss of parental rights. Backus argued that “In “The Poet of Salomé,” Joyce’s characterisation of Wilde’s punishment resonates with Joyce’s own greatest fears, themselves “a product of Joyce’s early life experiences”. In looking at such experiences as Joyce’s mother dying when he was young and the removal of Wilde’s children as a form of punishment, Backus concluded

that, “Both the work and lives of Wilde and Joyce were deeply complicated by the traumatic ruptures the process of anglicization installed into Irish subject formation, especially as these ruptures converged around parent-child bonds, rendering them both socially vulnerable and psychologically unbearable”. After a day full of food for thought, most of the delegates reconvened in The Duke to mull over the day’s papers and decompress.

The second day began with a panel called “quasisimultaneous volitional quasisensations”, featuring three fascinating papers. We heard Enrica Zaninotto on “Afflicted Mirrors: Oscar Wilde and James Joyce through the lens of Disability Studies”, followed by Rosa Novak on “Don’t touch me: Touch and Texture in the Worlds of Dorian Gray and Stephen Dedalus”. Finally, we heard the panel chair Midia Mohammadi’s paper, “Tragic Man’s Cry for Empathy: A Kohutian Reading of Oscar Wilde’s “The Canterville Ghost” and James Joyce’s “The Dead””. Following this was a panel called “Portals of Discovery”. The chair, Talia Abu, gave a particularly interesting paper entitled “The Historical Struggle Against the Typo”, in which she analysed how typos have affected the shaping, development, and reading of classic works such as *Finnegans Wake*.

The afternoon began with a panel entitled “History’s Nightmare: Law and Politics”, in which papers were given on historical legalities, justice, and trademarks, as well as a paper focused on Asian history. The final panel of the day was called “From the Outside, Looking In”. We heard a paper on Wilde and Joyce and how they related to Shakespeare, followed by Mason Patterson’s paper, “The Transatlantic Aesthete: Texans’ Reception of Oscar Wilde’s 1882 American Lecture Tour”. The chair, Adrian Paterson, concluded the afternoon with his paper which focused on the geography and topography of a part of Galway particularly significant to both the Wilde and Joyce families, as well as doubling in William Wilde’s *Lough Corrib*.

The second day ended with a wine reception at The Duke, during which the symposium was addressed by Neil Sammells, representing one of our sponsors, *The Irish Studies Review*. He reflected on how he felt as one of the journal’s founders, celebrating its thirtieth anniversary, and indicated that, in light of this, they would be publishing four special issues throughout the year. He also commented on the number of Joyce-based submissions the journal receives and expressed hopes that the symposium would bring more focus on Wilde, and other Irish writers not often considered alongside Joyce. Despite the organised reception being brief, everyone continued to enjoy a lively night in anticipation of the symposium’s final day.

I arrived at Trinity’s Long Room feeling terrified on the final morning, as I was first to give my paper in a panel called “we are lifted to ourselves as the soulfisher”, for which I was joined by Mary Lawton and Ariana Mashilker. My two fellow panelists gave exceptional papers. Our panel was chaired by co-organiser Graham Price. The second panel, entitled “*Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter”, featured some insightful papers dealing with Wilde and Joyce in relation to music. However, it also included an outstanding paper from Jinan Ashraf called “Gendered Authorities: The Early Modern Fiction of James Joyce and Rashid Jahan”.

On the last afternoon of the symposium, we were treated to a Special Feature, Frank McGuinness in conversation with Graham Price. Listening to the extraordinary playwright’s responses to questions from both Price and the delegates was an unforgettable experience. McGuinness covered a wide range of topics, from Joyce’s women to Wilde’s dramatic lineage. For example, he revealed that Brian Friel disliked *De Profundis* because, “he felt it was linguistically over-elaborated to the point of complete inauthenticity”. Regarding *Ulysses*, McGuinness described being mesmerised by Molly’s soliloquy, particularly its form, or lack thereof, and opined: “An early exposure to Molly Bloom is a good thing for any boy or girl”.

Finally, Graham Price gave a closing address that echoed Casey Lawrence’s opening remarks. He thanked everyone for their participation and for creating such a supportive environment for one another and reiterated the symposium’s gratitude to its sponsors and partners: Modernist Studies

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Ireland, The Little Museum of Dublin, *Irish Studies Review*, William Fry solicitors, The Oscholars, Trinity Long Room Hub, Trinity College Dublin, Maynooth University, and University College Dublin.

A special thank you to Casey Lawrence and Graham Price for organising such a stimulating and enjoyable event.

—*University College Dublin*