“Life we must accept as we see it” – A critical Reading of Joyce’s “Drama and Life”

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Abstract: James Joyce’s fictional works have been vastly analyzed and discussed ever since the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, only recently there has been a consistent growth of the critical attention given to Joyce’s essayistic production. One of the most emblematic essays written by Joyce is “Drama and Life” (1900). In this essay, Joyce introduces and develops concepts – such as his concept of drama – that would eventually turn out to be of paramount importance to the unfolding and the understanding of his work as a whole. This article aims to critically analyze “Drama and Life” and provide enough evidence to support the hypotheses that Joyce’s conceptualization of drama is based upon essentialist premises, which have foundational importance for the development of Joyce’s fictional work. The ideas on Joyce’s essayistic output, as well as on “Drama and Life” itself, posited by Caetano Galindo, Richard Ellmann, Sérgio Medeiros, and Andrew Gibson are used as theoretical basis for the development of the article.

Keywords: Drama; Essentialism; James Joyce.

Brazilian scholar and translator of most of Joyce’s works in Portuguese, Caetano W. Galindo argues that a continuous reading of James Joyce’s fictional works allows us to identify a ‘project’ (301). According to Galindo, such ‘project’ is identifiable both in the formal development of Joyce’s work and in an ongoing re-investigation of themes, ideas, and notions (303). Galindo also argues that if, on the one hand, Joyce’s essays may be understood as brief deviations from the path of formal investigation, on the other hand, when it comes to the themes, ideas, and notions, the essays may be seen as a relevant constituent part of Joyce’s work as any other of his texts (304).

As Kevin Barry remarks in his introduction to Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing, a collection of Joyce’s non-fictional writings, the materials collected in the abovementioned volume covered, “albeit unequally, forty years of Joyce’s life” (ix). Taking into consideration that when Joyce died when he was 58 years old, it is possible to argue that Joyce wrote non-fictional texts throughout his life.

Joyce’s essayistic output had in fact a very early beginning. For instance, in 1899, when Joyce was but a 17-year-old student at University College, in Dublin, he wrote an essay on the Hungarian painter Michael Munkacsy’s Ecce Homo. In this text – “Royal Hibernian Academy ‘Ecce Homo’” – Joyce presents his concept of drama for the first time, a concept of great importance for those interested in understanding Joyce’s ideas about art in general and, more particularly, about his own work as a whole. Writing about Munkacsy’s work, Joyce asserts that “the picture is primarily dramatic” (17) and explains that: “By drama I understand the interplay of passion; drama is strife, evolution, movement, in whatever way unfolded” (17). By asserting
that, Joyce develops a notion of drama that becomes fundamental to his work from this point on.

It is not by chance that the title of the next essay Joyce wrote was “Drama and Life”. This text, written to be delivered at a meeting of the University College’s Literary and Historical Society on 20 January 1900, is properly defined by Joycean scholar and translator Sérgio Medeiros as one of the most important manifestations of Joyce’s artistic convictions (qtd. in Joyce 39). In addition, Literary critic Andrew Gibson sees it as “an account of the relationship between art, specifically drama, and the self-assertion of a race entering into the fullness of its power” (44). In fact, Gibson argues that Joyce’s critical texts, including “Drama and Life”, “repeatedly turn out to be about Ireland, its history and prospects, its politics and culture, its relation to the Church and the colonial power and, perhaps above all, the place of art in the Ireland Joyce knew” (42).

Joyce’s most acclaimed biographer Richard Ellmann sees “Drama and Life” as “Joyce’s strongest early statement of method and intention” (73). Ellmann argues that, from the conception of drama conveyed in and by “Drama and Life”, Joyce “kept to his principle by making all his novels dramatic” (73). That is, Ellmann acknowledges that the notion of drama introduced and developed by Joyce in “Drama and Life” had a great influence on his fictional works.

When one reads “Drama and Life”, it is actually possible to agree with Medeiros, Gibson, and Ellmann, for it is precisely in and with this essay that Joyce fully develops his seminal conception of drama, firstly introduced in “Royal Hibernian Academy ‘Ecce Homo’”. In fact, the connection between these two essays is so evident that it is even possible to find passages from the 1899 text reproduced in “Drama and Life”.

In “Drama and Life”, before presenting a brief historical overview of the history of drama, Joyce defends that “Although the relations between drama and life are, and must be of the most vital character, in the history of drama itself these do not seem to have been at all times, consistently in view” (23). With that, right at the very beginning of his essay, Joyce establishes an inextricable relation between drama and life, and asserts that such relation had not always been taken seriously into consideration throughout the history of drama. Joyce makes it clear that he believes in the existence of an unavoidable relation between life and drama, while he criticizes the way this relation had been historically dealt with. Joyce develops and elaborates on this assumption throughout the essay.

Thereupon, addressing ancient Greek drama, Joyce argues that the “conditions of the Attic stage suggested a syllabus of greenroom proprieties and cautions to authors, which in after ages were foolishly set up as the canons of dramatic art, in all lands” (23). Moreover, Joyce argues that “the Greeks handed down a code of laws which their descendants with purblind wisdom forthwith advanced to the dignity of inspired pronouncements” (23). Joyce seems to disapprove of such understandings, as the following passage illustrates: “For good or for bad it [ancient Greek drama] has done its work” (23). From Joyce’s perspective, Greek drama had already been overcome by Shakespeare’s, for “it was the power of the Shakespearean clique that dealt the death blow to the already dying drama” (23). After this somewhat brief historical overview of drama, Joyce sets himself to, in his own words, “draw a line of demarcation between literature and drama” (23).

Joyce makes an assertion of paramount importance for his conception of drama and, consequently, of art: “Human society is the embodiment of changeless laws which the whimsicalities and circumstances of men and women involve and overwrap” (23). This assertion has a series of implications for Joyce’s thought and work.
To begin with, it seems relevant to call attention to the belief exposed by Joyce’s assertion, that is the conviction that ‘changeless laws’ do exist, that they would be embodied by human society and that they would also be ‘overwrapped’ in the various circumstances of men’s and women’s lives. In other words, independently of the historical, economic, and/or social conditions in which men and women may be living, they would embody these laws and, thus, compose human society. This line of thought, that is clearly an essentialist one, is from this point on intrinsically related to Joyce’s concept of drama and consequently to all the theorization he develops around it.

The thought expressed by Joyce’s assertion may be easily related to his major novels *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), for there are constitutional associations between their main characters and mythological figures, as if the characters (re)lived certain situations and were indeed interchangeable with their mythological counterparts. By asserting that ‘Human society is the embodiment of changeless laws’, Joyce conveys the idea that independently of the historical period in which one lives, any human being will embody such laws: be it the mythological Dedalus or the young Stephen Dedalus; be it the epic Ulysses or the ordinary Leopold Bloom; be it the numberless avatars of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker. All of them, all of us embody the same ‘changeless laws’.

Moving forward into “Drama and Life”, we come to know that from Joyce’s viewpoint literature “is the realm of these accidental manners and humors – a spacious realm” (23), whereas drama “has to do with the underlying laws first, in all their nakedness and divine severity, and only secondarily with the motley agents who bear them out” (24). Therefore, Joyce understands that it would be up to literature to deal with circumstances of men’s and women’s lives, with these accidental manners and humors. Conversely, drama ‘has to do with the underlying laws first’.

Joyce, thus, establishes different valuations for the two art forms. Drama is placed on a higher position because it deals directly with the ‘changeless laws’, while literature, because it is about the lives of men and women, is defined in the following way: “literature is a comparatively low form of art” (25). As Ellmann remarks, later, Joyce would change his perceptions on literature and on drama: “The exaltation of drama above all other forms was to be reformulated later in his esthetic system” (73).

Joyce corroborates his essentialist understanding of drama when he claims that it deals with the aforementioned ‘changeless laws’ “in all their nakedness and divine severity” (23). By relating ‘divine severity’ to an art form, Joyce makes it clear that his idea of drama goes beyond mere aesthetic speculations and delves into the metaphysical realm, into an essentialist realm. This line of thought is reinforced throughout the essay.

Confirming what he had already put forward in “Royal Hibernian Academy ‘Ecce Homo’”, Joyce restates that by drama he understands “the interplay of passions to portray truth; drama is strife, evolution, movement in whatever way unfolded” (24). Joyce goes further and posits the following ideas:

However subdued the tone of passion may be, however ordered the action or commonplace the diction, if a play or a work of music or a picture presents the everlasting hopes, desires and hates of us, or deals with a symbolic presentment of our widely related nature, albeit a phase of that nature, then it is drama (25).

In this passage, Joyce adds “the everlasting hopes, desires and hates of us all” to the “changeless laws”, “divine severity”, and “truth”. In other words, Joyce reinforces the
essentialist quality of his concept of drama not only by affirming all these elements do exist but also by asserting that such elements may be searched and (re)presented. Actually, according to Joyce, it is in the (re)presentation of such elements that drama is brought into being.

Nonetheless, the abovementioned passage also points to a different and important direction. By supporting this idea of drama, Joyce clears the way for drama to relate itself to virtually any tone of passion, any order of action and/or any type of diction. That is, from Joyce’s point of view, drama is not supposed to be connected only to appropriate, noble, right, high passions, actions and/or dictions. The ignoble passions, the wrong actions, and the inappropriate dictions also fit into drama, as long as they (re)present “truth”, “the everlasting hopes, desires and hates of us”, as long as they search “our widely related nature”, as long as they deal with the “changeless laws” in their “divine severity”. Despite developing an undoubtedly essentialist concept of drama and, in fact, exactly because it is an essentialist concept, Joyce seems to intend to distance it from moralism.

As “Drama and Life” continues, Joyce asserts: “First, clear our minds of cant and alter the falsehoods to which we have lent our support. Let us criticise in the manner of free people, as a free race, recking little of ferula and formula” (25). It is possible to associate the sanctimonious ‘cant’ and ‘the falsehoods to which we have lent our support’ to the dramatic tradition passed on by the Greek. However, if we take into consideration that when Joyce wrote “Drama and Life”, that is in 1900, his faith was irreversibly shaken – according to Ellmann, around 1897 Joyce’s “faith in Catholicism tottered” (50) –, it is also possible to relate the “cant” and “falsehoods” to the catholic precepts, that are inescapably attached to moral values. It is still possible to relate them to the artificiality of the classical and/or neo-classical theater in its non-acceptance of “however subdued the tone of passion […] however ordered the action or commonplace the diction”.

Exactly because Joyce sees drama through an essentially metaphysical glass, relating it to the divine, he places it, as Nietzsche formulated it, “beyond good and evil” (7). A place that “cant” and all “the falsehoods to which we have lent our support” cannot reach precisely because they are related to circumstances of men’s and women’s lives, and not with the “changeless law”. Joyce, thus, makes room for an understanding of drama that is free from traditional rules, free from moral judgment. Which is clear in his urging his readers/audience to “criticise in the manner of free people, as a free race, recking little of ferula and formula”.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the notion of drama posited by Joyce presupposes “free people”, “a free race”. One may easily link such presupposition to the Irish people’s longing for freedom from the British. Such assumption also corroborates what Gibson argues in relation to Joyce’s critical texts, that they “repeatedly turn out to be about Ireland, its history and prospects, its politics and culture, its relation to the Church and the colonial power and, perhaps above all, the place of art in the Ireland Joyce knew” (42).

Furthermore, the freedom Joyce refers to may also be associated to at least two other elements: traditional and/or classical aesthetics, and the catholic religion. The former had propagated the models, patterns and dramatic “formulas” since Ancient Greece; the latter had contributed to the propagation of a moralizing concept of art.

The relation between Joyce’s artistic notions and his shaken religious beliefs may also be noticed in the following passage from “Drama and Life”: “the artist forgoes his very self and stands a mediator in awful truth before the veiled face of God” (26). It should come as no surprise that Joyce put forth such understanding of the artist. It is exactly because the artist is human but at the same time has access to the “changeless laws”, that he becomes a kind of a filter between the “veiled face of God” and dramatic art. The artist actually (re)presents the
“changeless laws” in and through his art.

There is still much that may be said about the abovementioned passage. Let us try and explore a little bit more of its aspects. Firstly, it is unambiguously essentialist: by writing about “very self” and “the veiled face of God”, Joyce makes it clear that his conceptualization of drama is based on undoubtedly metaphysical assumptions and that the artist presented by Joyce is different from ordinary people. If “Human society is the embodiment of changeless laws which the whimsicalities and circumstances of men and women involve and overwrap” (23), how could the artist (re)present them if not via a particular access to such laws? Furthermore, the artist, consciously or unconsciously, “forgoes his very self”, that is the artist knows his “very self”, acknowledges it, and he necessarily forgoes it exactly because he is an artist. Whereas it is up to the ordinary human being to (unconsciously) incarnate the ‘changeless laws’, it is up to the artist to play the role of mediator between the laws and their (re)presentations through and in dramatic art, between the divine and the artistic.

Another relevant aspect of this particular conceptualization presented by Joyce had great influence on his art. If, in dramatic art, the artist “forgoes his very self”, he becomes automatically incapable of producing genuine lyrical art, that is an art form that genuinely expresses his inner feelings and thoughts, for his ‘very self’, and everything that is related to it, is abandoned once dramatic art starts to come into being. This conception of drama as an inherently non-lyrical art form was later further developed by Joyce and is traceable, for example, in the aesthetic theories presented by Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

Further on in “Drama and Life”, we see Joyce battling against the moralizing tendencies of traditional drama. Joyce argues that many people believe that drama should “instruct, elevate, and amuse” (26) which he sees as “yet another gyre that the jailers have bestowed” (26-27). It is highly probable that these are the same “jailers” that prevent the Irish from criticizing drama and art as “free people, as a free race”.

Joyce persists asserting that a “yet more insidious claim is the claim for beauty. [...] chiefly because beauty is to men an arbitrary quality and often lies no deeper than form, to pin drama to dealing with it, would be hazardous” (27). He goes on arguing that “Art is marred by such mistaken insistence on its religious, its moral, its beautiful, its idealizing tendencies” (27). By enumerating these four tendencies, Joyce puts on the spotlight those who could be seen as the ‘jailers’ he writes about. It is not by chance that the religious and moral tendencies are the first and the second tendencies respectively on his list.

When dealing with the arbitrariness of a concept such as ‘beauty’, Joyce presents a viewpoint that contrasts with the essentialist understanding he had already put forward in “Drama and Life”. It is exactly this understanding that resurfaces when Joyce asserts that “Art is true to itself when it deals with truth” (27). If, on the one hand, Joyce questions the arbitrariness of beauty, on the other hand he posits an idea of a supposedly existent truth that could/would allow art to be ‘true to itself’. Such ideas are strictly related to the following passage: “art cannot be governed by the insincerity of the compact majority but rather by those eternal conditions [...] which have governed it from the first” (27). The “truth” that allows art to be “true to itself” seems to be placed within the same metaphysical framework as the “eternal conditions [...] which governed it from the first”, the “changeless laws”, “divine severity”, “the everlasting hopes, desires and hates of us”, and “the veiled face of God”. In other words, although Joyce questions the assumptions in which a concept such as beauty is understood, he relies on metaphysical and arbitrary concepts himself to develop his personal conceptions of drama, art, and the artist.
Near the end of “Drama and Life”, Joyce tackles a central point of his theory of the dramatic art: the idea that it is possible to find drama in the lives of ordinary people. According to Joyce, “out of the dreary sameness of existence, a measure of dramatic life may be drawn. Even the most commonplace, the dearest among the living, may play a part in a great drama” (28). If we think about Joyce’s major novels, we may easily realize that all of them depict ordinary people in ordinary situations.

Joyce continues with his argument on the following passage:

It is a sinful foolishness to sigh back for the good old times, to feed the hunger of us with the cold Stones they afford. Life we must accept as we see it before our eyes, men and women as we meet them in the real world, not as we apprehend them in the world of faery. The great human comedy in which each has a share, gives limitless scope to the true artist, today as yesterday and as in years gone. The forms of things, as the earth’s crust, are changed (28).

From Joyce’s perspective, accepting life as it is and accepting people as they are means neither to idealize them nor to ignore their supposedly negative aspects. Everything dramatic arts needs is in the lives of ordinary men and women, because it is precisely the circumstances of their lives that overwrap what the “true artist” can to see and unveil: drama.

Concluding his essay, Joyce, in an assertion that seems to echo throughout his work, still argues that “the deathless passions, the human verities [...] are indeed deathless, in the heroic cycle, or in the scientific age” (28). Joyce believes that such passions and verities attest the existence of “a world drama” (28) “of universal import” (29).

If taken into consideration what Joseph Campbell argues about Joyce’s last major work, Finnegans Wake: that it “might be the keystone of the creative arch that Joyce had been constructing carefully since youth” (xxi), and if we also consider that, according to Campbell, Finnegans Wake allows us to realize that Joyce “never tires of telling us, ‘The same returns’” (xxiii), it is possible to appreciate Ellmann’s following words on “Drama and Life” through a renewed perspective: Joyce’s “defense of contemporary materials, [...] his aversion to conventions, and his insistence that the laws of life are the same always and everywhere, show him to be ready to fuse real people with mythical ones, and so find all ages to be one” (73).

As Galindo accurately points out, Joyce’s essays may indeed be seen as a relevant constituent part of Joyce’s work as any other of his texts (301). Because it shows Joyce to be ready to put into practice one of the most distinctive marks of his fictional works, because it shows Joyce to “be ready to fuse real people with mythical ones, and so find all ages to be one”, “Drama and Life” is certain to figure among the most relevant Joycean texts, fictional or non-fictional. Therefore, having a better understanding of “Drama and Life” and of other essays written by Joyce may help us to better grasp not only the Joycean ‘project’ Galindo writes about but also all the masterpieces it brought about.

According to Terry Eagleton, “It was through his art that Joyce was finally able to reconcile two of the strongest impulses he inherited from Ireland: his delight in its popular life and language, and his rejection of its major institutions” (307). “Drama and Life”, with its focus on accepting life “as we see it” and its refusal to perpetuate traditional artistic conceptions, may be understood and one of Joyce’s first attempts to articulate the two impulses Eagleton writes about.

Joyce’s major works may have expanded some of the notions presented in “Drama and Life” to unforeseeable developments and directions. Nonetheless, as Ellmann
precisely asserts, Joyce “kept to his principle by making all his novels dramatic” (73). That is one more reason why “Drama and Life” as well as all of Joyce’s essayistic output seems to invite continuous reassessment.

Works Cited
