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## It's a Fine Line Between Influence and Collaboration: A Case of James Joyce Reading Dante

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*This essay explores the idea that some authors engage with their predecessors in such a way that the expression of that influence in their subsequent work cannot be considered as mere 'influence' but rather as a sort of collaboration. In order to explain this distinction, it is important to understand the meaning and connotations of the term 'influence', and to acknowledge how it shapes the interaction between artists and their predecessors and how, in turn, it shapes our own reading of these relationships and interactions. In order to support this idea and give an example of this distinction, this essay presents the case of James Joyce's collaborative interaction with Dante. It sketches how this relationship has been interpreted from early biographical works to more contemporary critical writing and supports that in a sense Dante is more of a collaborator than an influence on Joyce.*

I believe I will not raise too many eyebrows when I write that the notion that artists are influenced by other artists and that traces of that influence can be discerned in their subsequent works is a widely accepted one. Indeed, it is a notion that seems to follow and hold to the logic of the old adage: “we are the sum of our influences.” Yet, defining the parameters and extent of the influence of an artist on another is a curiously complicated enterprise. It requires us to ask the question: where does original contribution end – and here I mean original<sup>1</sup> in both senses of the word – and the transmission of a recognisable influence start? There is also the added complexity of observing and judging whether they meet or even bleed into one another. Moreover, influence is a nuanced concept around which many connotations gravitate. Perhaps the most problematic of these connotations for our purposes is that the term implies a sort of hierarchy, if you will, where influence is understood as being passed down or passed onwards from the one that is admired and revered. The word itself recalls “[t]he action or fact of flowing in” (*OED* “influence”) from one point to another. In this spatial arrangement, the artist looks

<sup>1</sup> ‘Original’ as coming from the ‘self’, from the ‘origin’, and in the sense of a ‘new’ and ‘innovative’ contribution.

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‘up’ to the other they hold in high esteem for inspiration and guidance, and it is in that sense that the relationship is unequal. Also, this spatial arrangement implies a respect for the other that inevitably transpires in the practice of signposting this influence. Often, writers advertise or display their influences with the use of allusions or references such that they adorn the surface of their work. What is respectful in this practice is that these allusions and references appear wholly intact and unchanged as though they had been applied or deposited as an aesthetic afterthought divorced from the process of composition. More often than not, these signposts declare one’s intent and trace one’s heritage instead of contributing productively or fundamentally to the work in which they are placed. Yet, is it possible that there are instances when this so-called ‘influence’ is so deep, so personal, and so *irreverent* that it cannot be described or qualified as ‘influence’ so to speak? Is it possible that the quality of one artist’s engagement with the works of their predecessor reconfigures the spatial arrangement of influence as we know it and thereby modulates it into a sort of collaboration? That is, a collaboration insofar as the two appear on the same level in an act of “[u]nited labour, co-operation” (*OED* ‘collaboration’) and where the modus operandi of the predecessor effectively becomes that of the budding artist rather than a mere layer of polish or lacquer. Moreover, how does considering this possibility affect our understanding, interpretation, and reading of this relationship as it appears in their work?

I believe that such a reconfiguration occurs between James Joyce and Dante as a result of the quality of Joyce’s engagement with the Italian poet and his works, and that their resulting literary relationship exemplifies both the parameters by which we can come to understand influence as a collaboration and the ways of reading this dynamic. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that this reconfiguration demonstrates that the onus shifts from the beneficiary being indebted and looking *up* to the other artist to a position where they are looking *with* them, thinking *with* them, writing *with* them and, in the end, creating together.

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It should come as no surprise to those familiar with James Joyce's body of work and the criticism that has grown out of it that a lot of ink has been spilled over his relationship with Dante. Indeed, it is a relationship that has a long and detailed history. However, before Dante there was Henrik Ibsen but, as Constantine Curran relates in *James Joyce Remembered*, the Italian poet quickly "joined Ibsen as one of [Joyce's] gods" (7). Dante ascended to this position by the time Joyce was just seventeen, despite the fact that the Italian poet's works "lay a couple of years ahead in the curriculum" (7). This is no small praise given that the young Joyce went so far as to teach himself Dano-Norwegian in order to write a letter to the Scandinavian playwright only two years later (Ellmann 85). Constantine Curran is not the only one to have underlined Joyce's affinity for Dante<sup>2</sup>. Richard Ellmann, as early as 1959 in the first edition of his seminal literary biography *James Joyce*, writes that "Dante was perhaps Joyce's favourite author," surpassing the Norwegian playwright as Joyce's own youthful enthusiasm matured, and maintains that Joyce studied him outside of school to the extent that Oliver St. John Gogarty, a close friend at the time, dubbed him the "Dante of Dublin" (4, 78). This interest in the Italian poet persisted throughout Joyce's life. Indeed, when Joyce no longer pretended to pursue his medical studies in Paris, he opted instead to spend his days at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* where he devoted his time to reading and "copying out passages from Dante's *Inferno* in a meticulous hand as if dwelling on and digesting them as he wrote" (Bowker 406). In 1922, Francini Bruni delivered a public address in Trieste which was comically titled "Joyce stripped naked in the piazza" ("Joyce intimo spogliato in piazza," *my translation*) and in which he

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<sup>2</sup> See: Herbert Gorman's *James Joyce: A Definitive Biography*; Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce*; Peter Costello *James Joyce*; Constantine Curran's *James Joyce Remembered*; Francini Bruni's *Joyce intimo spogliato in piazza*; Gordon Bowker's *James Joyce: A Biography*; Stanislaus Joyce's *My Brother's Keeper*; Frank Budgen's *The Making of Ulysses and Other Writings*; Mary T. Reynolds' *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination*; James Robinson's *Joyce's Dante: Exile, Memory, and Community*; Lucia Boldrini's *Joyce, Dante, and the Poetics of Literary Relations: Language and Meaning in Finnegans Wake*.

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shared some of the observations he had made about Joyce whilst they were colleagues, flatmates, and friends. In one of these anecdotes, he related that while Joyce was teaching English in Trieste he would often bring up so-called ‘maxims’ during his lessons for students to discuss. One of these ‘maxims’ allegedly went as follows: “Italian literature begins with Dante and finishes with Dante. That's more than a little. In Dante dwells the whole spirit of the Renaissance. I love Dante almost as much as the Bible. He is my spiritual food, the rest is ballast” (218).

From these biographical accounts, it is easy to paint a coy and reverent picture of Joyce vis-à-vis Dante. These, however, inadvertently define and, by the same token, limit our understanding of Joyce’s engagement with the Italian and our subsequent reading of his presence in Joyce’s work. Indeed, it is the nature and language of these works that sketch, almost too neatly, straightforwardly, and respectfully, the relationship between Joyce and Dante that define these boundaries and establish these limitations. Though Joyce’s metaphorical consumption of Dante’s writing becomes somewhat of a trope in these biographical accounts, the metaphor seems incidental, and simply symptomatic of Joyce’s voracious and prodigious reading rather than a quality of his engagement with the Italian poet. Certainly, it could be argued that Joyce’s own words –especially those used in his ‘maxims’ – give that impression, but we must take these with a grain of salt. The classroom was after all an environment where Joyce felt he could be flamboyant and hyperbolic for effect (Ellmann 216, 472). One should also be critical of the fact that Bruni’s *Joyce intimo spogliato in piazza*, the source for these maxims, was subtitled “a frenzied caricature of the Irish writer” (“un’indivolata caricatura dello scrittore irlandese,” *my translation*), which prefigures, in a sense, that Bruni’s anecdotes are hyperbolic and supposed to be comic too. These details, however, are not the basis of my concerns. My main protestation with these early biographical works rests primarily on the language they use and the fact that they cast Joyce as standing in awe of Dante. Their accounts give the sense that

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Joyce admired and revered the Italian poet. In turn, if we pay attention to their etymology, these words evoke a feeling of stasis and render Dante, so to speak, untouchable<sup>3</sup>. As a result, they limit our understanding and readings of Joyce's engagement with Dante's works and deny the possibility that Joyce could have defaced works such as *Divina commedia* in his efforts to assimilate, integrate, and dissolve Dante's oeuvres in his own working methods. Moreover, from these accounts it is difficult to think of Joyce as engaging in a dialogue or of interacting with Dante since the Italian poet is placed on a pedestal and Joyce is rendered reverential. Yet, when we pay closer attention to the texts, we can see for ourselves that Dante's presence in Joyce's work is more fundamental than a surface allusion or a reference aimed at saluting the Italian poet in passing. There is instead "the presence of medieval patterns in [Joyce's] mental economy" and, as Umberto Eco suggested, the sense that Joyce was by all accounts a "medieval thinker" (7). In other words, that Joyce's mental economy is a space that is shared with Dante. Luckily, there are scholars<sup>4</sup> that have explored the modalities of this relationship, pushed the analogy of Joyce consuming Dante further, and, to a certain extent, have reshaped the way we think about this relationship. In the light of their work, we can begin to draw a more nuanced *literary* relationship and a relatively equal or stable correspondence between the two artists and

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, 'reverence' means that one has "[d]eep respect, veneration, or admiration for someone or something, esp. a person or thing regarded as sacred or holy" and inspires "feelings of *awe* or veneration" (*OED* 'reverence', italics mine). Reverend Walter W. Skeat's entry for 'reverence' in his *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* corroborates this effect: "to revere, to stand in *awe* of" (Skeats 507, italics mine). I have italicized the word 'awe', the common denominator in these definitions, because its implications should not be lost upon us: it means, in the same vein, "[d]read mingled with veneration, reverential or respectful fear; the attitude of a mind subdued to profound reverence in the presence of supreme authority, moral greatness or sublimity, or mysterious sacredness" (*OED* 'awe'). Similarly, the word 'admiration' is "[t]he action or an act of wondering or marvelling; wonder, *astonishment*, surprise" (*OED* 'admiration', my italics). I want to stress, here, 'astonishment' because it exemplifies and encapsulates my concerns with the language of these biographers quite succinctly since to astonish is "[t]o deprive of sensation, as by a blow; to stun, paralyse, deaden, stupefy" (*OED* 'astonish'). To return to Skeat, we can observe that there are two ways to be astonished: for one, it implies being turned to stone and, secondly, if we go back far enough, to be struck by thunder (Skeat 39). The language used to characterise Joyce's engagement with Dante, then, already casts this relationship as unequal – as though Joyce could not drag Dante into the mud with him.

<sup>4</sup> These include, most notably, Mary T. Reynold's wonderful and aptly titled *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination*, as well as Lucia Boldrini's *Joyce, Dante, and the Poetics of Literary Relations: Language and Meaning in Finnegans Wake* and James Robinson's *Joyce's Dante: Exile, Memory, and Community*.

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thinkers. We can think of Joyce and Dante, to recall Eco, as inhabiting a similar – if not the same – mental economy. It must be noted that perhaps the early biographers’ and commentators’ reluctance to put forward readings of Dante’s presence in Joyce comes from the sheer difficulty of making sense of it. After all, as Reynolds’ puts it: “[i]t is easy enough to find traces of Dante in Joyce’s work; the difficulty comes when one tries to fit them into a pattern” (3). In an effort to remedy the situation, Reynolds proposes to show, in *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination*, that Joyce “achieved a reasoned critical view of Dante’s art, which he embodied in his fiction and did not otherwise express” (3). In this statement, and indeed even in the title of Reynolds’ study, we can begin to see the shift in the thinking about the issue. Though she deals with Joyce’s life in some parts of her work, Reynolds focuses primarily on his texts. Indeed, she puts forward the idea that Joyce assimilated Dante’s “poetic effects in his own fictions,” which allowed him to imitate Dante (12). This is an idea that echoes Bowker’s anecdote of Joyce digesting Dante in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* but which takes the metaphor seriously and subsequently further. As it were, it shows that the metaphor is not only exemplary of Joyce’s reading habits, but that it is an appropriate image and model to describe Joyce’s engagement with Dante. It demonstrates that Joyce consumed and processed Dante’s work in order to put it to use and convert it into his own creative fiction rather than paying homage to the Italian poet or a marking his indebtedness to his literary predecessor. Reynolds formulates this process as ‘Joyce imitating Dante’ but adds: “Joyce’s imitation of Dante is, of course, too protean to be pinned down in neat categories” (13). Perhaps Joyce’s imitation of Dante is too protean because it is not an imitation *per se*. Indeed, this is the point where the idea of a collaboration becomes enlightening because a collaboration prioritises the end product over clearly and precisely assigning each piece of the edifice to its rightful contributor. It allows for a lateral movement between the two artists, blurring the lines between them to the point where they become one entity working in a joint effort and cause.

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In order to perform this kind of collaborative reading, as I have previously suggest, we must recalibrate our thinking about Joyce's engagement with Dante. Biographical sketches of Joyce's reading and study of Dante, for various reasons, can only take us so far and, at times, impose certain regulations on the understanding we can articulate about the qualities and extent of this engagement. Moreover, Joyce's 'appropriation' of Dantean elements for his own fiction is far from reverential. Instead, he uses them for his own idiosyncrasies and projects, as though they were part of his *modus operandi*, and as though Dante were there writing with him.

James Robinson, in *Joyce's Dante*, puts forward what is perhaps the clearest expression of why Joyce's reading and literary dialogue with Dante should be defined as something other than 'influence'. He writes:

We're more used to seeing Dante as undifferentiated, a monolithic and overwhelmingly canonical presence; a medieval monument at the heart of Western literature, so much part of the scenery that it can be difficult to remember that he was ever built in the first place, let alone to trace the cultural processes of his construction. (2)

In this passage, Robinson reminds us that Joyce read a fundamentally nineteenth-century version of Dante. This means that Dante was a figure which was subject to unusually intense political, religious and literary discourses during the time which Joyce read his works, and these discourses, in turn, characterised his reading. Understanding this subtle difference –that Joyce's Dante is not by any stretch of the imagination *our* contemporary Dante – changes the permutations available for our own investigations. Indeed, “[i]n resisting the urge to monumentalise, we can instead conceive of Joyce's engagement with Dante not as the meeting of medieval and modernist masters (or even 'modern' medieval or 'medieval' modernist), but as a historically complex and contextually determined interaction” (4). To recall Umberto Eco's description of Joyce's mind, resisting the urge to monumentalise means that we can essentially see both writers as occupying and joining in a medieval mental economy on equal footing.



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More importantly, it then becomes clear that “Joyce’s Dante was not a monument to align with, or an authority to invoke, but rather a partner and ‘collaborator’ in a creative project” (4). Therefore, Joyce moved towards Dante because he identified something in his writing and thinking which appealed to him artistically and personally.

If Dante was not the monument that he is today, this means that we can read and recognise Joyce as inscribing “Dante’s literary theories and techniques into his text, appropriating (thieving) and transforming (metamorphosing) them for his own purposes” rather than invoking him for prestige or pomp (Boldrini 2). I want to stress Boldrini’s use of words such as ‘inscribing’, ‘thieving’, and ‘transforming’, because they are emblematic of the ways in which we can think of Dante as a collaborator rather than an influence: it would be unimaginable to disfigure the works of someone we admire or revere in this fashion. Indeed, as a result of this process of inscription, Joyce either brought Dante down to his own level or raised himself to the level of Dante. Regardless of the direction of this movement, Dante, then, appears in Joyce’s work in the way he creates narrative patterns and sequences “modelled on one of Dante’s situations or narrative sequences” (Reynolds 13). In effect, Dante becomes part of the narrative fabric.

We can observe this tendency from some of Joyce’s earliest work. Where Joyce wrote: “There was no hope for him this time” (*Dubliners* 9) in the opening line of “The Sisters,” the first story of *Dubliners*, the inscription over the gateway to Hell in Dante’s Canto III of *Inferno* reads: “Abandon all hope, you who enter here” (“Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate”; *my translation*) (*Inf.* 3: 9). Though this might seem like an allusion, we should not be so quick to characterise it as such for this opening is rather a way of setting up the mode and model in which Joyce will carry out his work. In a way, it is an affirmation that the Dantean model and method are the appropriate measures with which to carry out *Dubliners* and, here, Joyce is effectively and immediately immersing his work in a Dantean project. The lines that follow the

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opening of “The Sisters” reinforce this ambition. As it were, Joyce portrays the young boy as confused and unable to make sense of the words that are spoken or related to him, staging our entrance into the world of *Dubliners* like Dante enters Hell:

He had often said to me: *I am not long for this world*, and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work. (9)

Indeed, this passage follows closely Dante’s confusion when reading the inscription above the gateway to Hell: “These words of obscure colour / I saw written above a door; / and said: ‘Master, their sense is difficult for me’” (*Inf.* 3: 10-12) (“Queste parole di colore oscuro / vid’io scritte al sommo d’una porta; / per ch’io: “Maestro, il senso lor m’è duro”; *my translation*). In these respective but shared instances, both the boy and Dante are entering a world that is unknown and undecipherable to them, and which they will come to make sense of in time. This posture of ignorance, however, is a rhetorical ploy that allows the work to unfold in an unassumingly critical and didactic way. This is a stance which suited Joyce as he desired to give “Irish people... one good look at themselves in [his] nicely polished looking-glass” (Gilbert 64). Indeed, in *Dubliners*, he wished to “betray the soul of hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (55). Where Dante was stern and critical of Florentines through the figure of Brunetto in Canto XV of *Inferno*, Joyce depicts the people of Dublin so that they can become their harshest critics.

The shared atmosphere and project between Joyce and Dante, however, is sustained on several levels, even in this early passage. For one, Father Flynn’s death echoes Hell insofar as Hell is the world of “eternal spiritual death, peopled by sinners and evil” (*Sisters* 454). The

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sinful and evil aspects of Hell are evoked with the use of words such as ‘maleficent’, ‘sinful’, and ‘simony’ (454). In a similar trend, the use of words which belong to “the semantic spheres of darkness, illness, sin, evil, and death” such as ‘stroke’, ‘night’, ‘dead’, ‘darkened blind’ (which echoes Dante’s “blind world” (“cieco mondo”; *my translation*), ‘paralysis’, ‘simony’, ‘maleficent and sinful’, ‘fear’, and ‘deadly’ (454) further integrate Dante into *Dubliners*. Moreover, though the comparison may be ironical, there is an implicit comparison between Father Flynn and Virgil and the echoes of this comparison resound and reverberate nonetheless (455). It is in this way that Joyce steeps his work and thinking in an intimately Dantean project. The result is that Joyce then begins to see through Dante’s eyes.

Though I have only scratched the surface of the collaboration between Joyce and Dante by examining the first paragraph –and for the most part the very first line of *Dubliners*’ opening story – I believe that I have at least brought attention to the distinction. Moreover, I believe it is particularly telling that paying attention only to this short segment can tell us so much about this relationship. Indeed, the very first line of Joyce’s first published work of prose announces itself as a fundamentally and intimately Dantean project. In other words, it begs for us to perform this kind of reading. Admittedly, more elaborate research on the subject has been written by other scholars and on Joyce’s other works. As Robinson assures us, “Boldrini not only convincingly shows Dante’s importance to the *Wake* but also offers intertextual readings with substantial implications for Joyce’s other texts, particularly *Ulysses*” (Robinson 5). Before Boldrini, Richard Ellmann also suggests something similar. He writes that “[t]he story ‘Grace’ employed the tripartite division of the *Divine Comedy*, beginning with the Inferno of a Dublin bar, proceeding to the Purgatorio of a drunkard’s convalescence, and ending in the Paradiso of a highly secularized Dublin church” (239). In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as well: The intertextual resonance between James Joyce’s ‘bird- girl’ and the dancing figure of Matelda, whom the protagonist of the *Commedia* meets in the Earthly Paradise on the banks of

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the river Lethe, is one testament to Joyce's lifelong engagement with Dante. And in the imagery of religious life, liberation, secularism and Romantic poetry that surrounds the encounter, we find some of the contextual terms of competing orthodoxy, narrative trajectory and literary mediation that would characterise this relationship. (Robinson 2)

Let it suffice, however, that the implicit should be made explicit. There is indeed a fine line between what we would consider 'influence' and 'collaboration' and the case of James Joyce's engagement with Dante on literary and personal levels teeters on that fine line. Undoubtedly, some would disagree with this distinction which seemingly rests on pedantic etymological differences. However, this slight semantic shift casts our understanding of this relationship in an entirely new light and opens interpretive possibilities that mere 'influence' simply does not allow for. Indeed, the exercise is now less about identifying Dantean filaments in Joyce's oeuvre and more about interpreting Dante's presence in Joyce's texts: determining to which extent Dante writes Joyce and Joyce writes Dante. This presence, as Robinson stresses, stretches past the texts and also touches Joyce's way of thinking about art, religion, and language. Moreover, it means that Dante is not transported into Joyce's work untouched but becomes part of the creation process. Something which perhaps cannot be said about other Modernist writers. As it were, "[f]or other modernist writers, Dante was certainly the monument man. To T.S. Eliot he was 'the most universal of poets in the modern languages', the bedrock on which European literature rested" (Robinson 2). Similarly, "Ezra Pound's reaction to Dante was rooted in veneration" (3). Thus, this distinction comes to explain, in some sense, why it has "long been acknowledged that Joyce's engagement with Dante differed significantly from these other modernists" (3). Indeed, this shift provides the conceptual framework "for seeing Dante's texts as operating as structuring devices within Joyce's works" (5) and, more importantly, it offers an example for us to apply elsewhere and to other artists. In asking the question here and unpacking the ways in which terms such as 'influence' and 'collaboration'

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define the vantage point from which we view this type of interaction in the text, perhaps we can go forth and apply the same diligence to other artists and find equally rich and revealing modalities.

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### **Author Biography**

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Dominic Richard is a Canadian scholar interested in Modern and contemporary world literatures. His research focuses more specifically on the role of music as a literary practice and device, but he is also interested in languages, philology, and the debate concerning the competing definitions of Modern/Modernist literature. He is currently an English professor at Zhejiang University of Science and Technology in Hangzhou, China.