

# Cuchulain as an Epigone of Leopold Bloom? Irish Mythology and Alternative Irelands in Eimar O'Duffy's Cuanduine Trilogy

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**Abstract:** In line with current developments in Irish and modernist studies, the article focuses on Eimar O'Duffy's Cuanduine trilogy (1926–1933) to illuminate some facets of the legacy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in post-revolutionary Ireland and O'Duffy's innovative relationship with the mythology of his nation. In the trilogy, O'Duffy draws heavily on *Ulysses* in terms of intertextuality and form, including the mimicry of different writing styles, but, above all, multifariously “receptionates” Joyce's use of myths in *Ulysses*. Following Joyce's example, O'Duffy blends characters from legend and contemporaneity to satirise whatever heroic pretensions the Free State could still have, since he describes the demi-god Cuanduine and Cuchulain – the mythological hero celebrated by Irish nationalism and the Literary Revival – wander through an impoverished Dublin marred by ethnoreligious sectarianism. Moreover, like Joyce, O'Duffy uses myths not only to ironically juxtapose heroic values with bleak contemporary realities: Ireland's mythical tradition was created by a vital culture, characterised by equality and pluralism, from which contemporary Ireland should take inspiration. Hence, the analysis of the trilogy in light of *Ulysses* points out the innovative use of myth in that it is geared towards the creation of a new kind of community.

**Keywords:** Eimar O'Duffy, Cuanduine trilogy, legacy of *Ulysses*, myth, social transformation

## The legacy of *Ulysses* in its own days

In 1922, James Joyce was deeply engaged in the material production and promotion of his latest novel *Ulysses*. He strove to manage and influence every phase in the early life of the book, wishing to make it a commercial and artistic success, a novel bought by a large readership and reviewed in the magazines and dailies

of the time (McCourt 2022, 1). As is well known, however, the initial reception of *Ulysses* was prejudiced by the international controversy following the publication of some episodes in the *Little Review*, the condemnations for obscenity in the United States, and, when it comes to Ireland, the fact that the 1920s were not a propitious time for the launch of such a complex novel. On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1922, Joyce's birthday and the date of the release of *Ulysses*, the Irish War of Independence had ended, but the country was about to descend into civil war, prompted by the Anglo-Irish Treaty signed a few weeks before. While the Treaty granted a degree of independence to Ireland, the creation of the Free State under dominion status was not accepted unconditionally by all Irish nationalists, who split into the Free State supporters and the Irregulars still committed to establishing an Irish Republic (Palko 2010, 2). When the Free Staters won in May 1923, the days of the high heroic had long been over (Coogan 2003, 142).

Even in such hard times, though, a minority of Irish people read *Ulysses* and took pains to review it, recognizing its value as a work that expressed the complexities of early-twentieth-century Ireland. Their attempts were seldom successful. For instance, Padraic Colum at once extolled the Irishness of Joyce in contributions to US periodicals but failed to persuade his audiences of the soundness of his praises. Eimar O'Duffy, in December 1922, enthusiastically reviewed the novel as the "epic of modern Ireland" Joyce himself advocates for in the episode "Scylla and Charybdis," because he wanted – but failed – to insert Joyce into a national debate about the future of Ireland (O'Duffy 1978, 12; McCourt 2019, 108). The following year, editor A. J. Leventhal founded *The Klaxon*, the first 'little magazine' of the Free State, to eventually print his review of *Ulysses* that another periodical had rejected for publication dreading the consequences (Leavy 2011, 68).

Because of its difficulties and explicit criticism of the State and the Church, *Ulysses* was 'hot' merchandise. The fact that *The Klaxon* did not last beyond the first number and that many commentators of Joyce left Ireland soon afterwards or had already emigrated further proves that the 1920s, if not "a cultural wasteland," were a turbulent decade when writers and editors faced numerous limitations and censorship (Allen 2009, 3).

This begs an obvious question: why, in a fractured country and with the axe of censorship hovering over them, did these writers go to great lengths to discuss and promote a work that had already been dismissed as unreadable "dangerous filth" (McCourt 2022, 13)? To answer it, I will focus on one of the

writers mentioned above, Eimar O'Duffy, and his so-called Cuanduine trilogy, which comprises the novels *King Goshawk and the Birds* (1926), *The Spacious Adventures of the Man in the Street* (1929), and *Asses in Clover* (1933), written between Ireland and England over seven years. This to show that O'Duffy was part of an "enlightened minority" of admirers of *Ulysses*, who, in 1920s Ireland, looked at Joyce as a vital influence in the effort to counteract the rising waves of national isolationism in the early years of the Free State and create a space for a distinctively Irish culture on the world stage (McCourt 2022, 21; cf. Sisson 2011, 39, 54–5). Hence, my article connects times and texts to locate Joyce's experimentalism into the controversies surrounding the Free State after its creation and highlights the reasons why O'Duffy, emblematically, came to value *Ulysses* as a liberating space of the imagination (Allen 2009, 3; McCourt 2019, 103). Analysing the Cuanduine trilogy in the light of *Ulysses*, I argue, best illuminates some lesser-known aspects of the legacy of Joyce's masterpiece in post-revolutionary Ireland, because the trilogy is the expression of a talented dissident voice emerging from within positions of power – O'Duffy was a staunch nationalist dissatisfied with the new order – and clear evidence of how the enlightened minority drew on *Ulysses* to recognise the limits of free Ireland and rethink it in a context of its experience of empire, partition, and withdrawal (Castle and Bixby 2019, 1; Allen 2009, 4, 7).

A close reading of the Cuanduine trilogy reveals O'Duffy's layered interest in *Ulysses*, which he multifariously "receptionated" (FW 370.18) into his three novels, and complicates the first impression one may get of the trilogy that these works bear little resemblance to Joyce's masterpiece. The trilogy is difficult to categorise in terms of genre, as its three volumes accommodate both a vision of utopian progress and the depiction of a future post-global-war world where rapacious capitalists exploit a desperate working class, and breakthrough technologies coexist with widespread hunger. Set in the 1950s, *King Goshawk and the Birds* concerns the attempt of the titular King, a monopolist of wheat production, to buy all the wildflowers and songbirds in Ireland and give them to his wife Guzzelinda, until a Dublin philosopher tries to stop him with the help of Cuchulain, the legendary hero of Gaelic Ireland. The second book is a Swiftian *Odyssey* in which the 'hero' is a workingman from our society, a O'Kennedy whose mind is transported into an alien society in outer space while his body is inhabited by Cuchulain on Earth: through a device typical of *Gulliver's Travels*, the book narrator uses the follies and good sense of the alien society as a foil to criticise the

follies and foibles of our own (Hogan 1972, 58). Finally, *Asses in Clover* involves theories of Social Credit, satirises economists and Modernists Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, and brings the action back to Earth: the protagonist is Cuanduine, the superhuman son of the legendary Cuchulain, who tries to accomplish his father's mission to defeat Goshawk. All of this is told in an entertaining or pun-gently satirical vein that variously recalls the styles of Joyce or Swift, since the main complexity of the trilogy lies in the subtleties of its rich intertextual play made of references to structures and suggestions from other texts.

Intertextual play is not an end in itself and entails an innovative, dialogic relationship with *Ulysses* and the myth, which is here intended in a twofold manner, because the myths of Gaelic civilisation are reworked into the trilogy bearing in mind Joyce's use of Homeric and folktale elements in *Ulysses*, a 'mythological text' in itself according to O'Duffy's cohort. Arguably, O'Duffy was fascinated by Joyce's fruitful use of myths not only as an organisational principle, but as a way to depict the Dublin community of the early twentieth century and imagine alternative Irish communities; in the Cuanduine trilogy, myths are more than a means to juxtapose heroic values with bleak contemporary realities, for, according to O'Duffy, Ireland's mythological tradition was created by a vital culture and society, characterised by equality and pluralism, from which contemporary Ireland should take inspiration. What is more, in a Joycean fashion, humour and literary experimentalism go into the making of O'Duffy's literary vision of a pluralistic Irish society. *Ulysses* highlights the injustices challenging the country and modern society, but tends to do so in such a humorous way – through "laughtears," to borrow the term from *Finnegans Wake* (FW 15.09) – that the Irish look at themselves and their flaws in Joyce's "cracked lookingglass" (*U* 10.11) without being annihilated by what they see. And since much of the fun of *Ulysses* stems from Joyce's play with words and different styles, it seems to me that O'Duffy tried, with mixed results, to reproduce such playful inventiveness in his trilogy upon realising that the experimentalism and linguistic exuberance of *Ulysses* dismantle notions of coherence and undermine models of teleological, progress-oriented narratives (Terrinoni 2015, 93). In this view, the intertextuality and fragmentary narration in *Ulysses* produce a text that ostentatiously departs from the linear and teleological narratives of the Free State, in which the status quo was portrayed as the logical promised end of all the struggles and suffering of the previous decades (O'Brien 2003, 151). Exactly what the dissident, but fond of Ireland, O'Duffy was looking for.

### Great heroes *sub specie temporis nostri*

Between 1914 and 1921, while Joyce was working on *Ulysses*, O'Duffy began a downward spiral that led him to become "an Irish nationalist whose opinions on the subject of revolution were prone to cause social embarrassment" (Flanagan 2015, 50). At the same time, his writings started to betray his nonconformist thoughts. Born into a middle-class family, he was expelled from the paternal home as soon as he refused to join the British Army and became an enthusiastic captain of the Irish Volunteers, a paramilitary coalition of separatists committed to Ireland's full independence. Despite being politically a radical and a soldier, however, he did not participate in the Easter Rising, the 1916 rebellion whose aftermath of blood converted many Irish to the advanced nationalist cause: he withdrew from the nationalist movement and came to see the Rising as a tragic error made by misguided idealists who wrongly believed in the myth of blood sacrifice to keep the National Spirit alive. O'Duffy expressed his – by then – unpopular views in *The Wasted Island*, a 1919 roman à clef that paints post-Rising Ireland in stark colours and features a Patrick Pearse-like character harbouring an "almost masochist desire for martyrdom" (Hogan 1972, 31; Crowley 2019).

A few details on *The Wasted Island* and another work from 1919, the three-act play *Bricriu's Feast*, give insight into the relationship between the Cuanduine trilogy and O'Duffy's previous works and how reading *Ulysses* may have innovated his writing. The Cuanduine trilogy shares with *The Wasted Island* a comparable underlying dissatisfaction with the new order after the Great War, since the choice of conjuring up possible future Irelands in the trilogy can be interpreted as a way of reflecting on the achievements and failures of Irish independence, the progress made and the lost opportunities. In contrast, regarding style and intertextual references, the Cuanduine trilogy is a far cry from *The Wasted Island* and closer to *Bricriu's Feast*. Here, readers find an analogous prosaic and irreverent treatment of the heroic material of Ireland's ancient sagas, fluency with words, and a marked satirical bent (Hogan 1972, 21). Moreover, both feature Cuchulain as a character.

Cuchulain is the boy hero of the Ulster Cycle, whose deeds are recorded, primarily, in manuscripts from the middle ages. His fame was then rekindled at the turn of the twentieth century by the Irish Literary Revivalists and revolutionary leaders like Pearse, who turned Cuchulain into a 'sanitised' hero or a national(ist) icon when summoning the warrior to their side as the Defensor of Ireland (Valente 2011, 140–86). Still, for his portrayal of Cuchulain, O'Duffy did not

follow the example of his predecessors, who tendentially refused to work on episodes from the bardic tales that presented the hero in a negative light (O'Leary 1994, 257); nor did he make Cuchulain a warrior ready to sacrifice himself for the country, because, as we shall see, he believed in notions of heroism and patriotism other than those upheld by Pearse or Lady Gregory. O'Duffy harked back to the Cuchulain of the ancient sagas: like the original hero, O'Duffy's Cuchulain can be silly, subject to particular vulnerabilities and the limitations called "*geasa*," warped in "fiery wrath," and the protagonist of awkward situations (Castle 2016, 20). What is more, the treatment of the heroic, mythological material in the Cuanduine trilogy is deeply redolent of Joyce's reworking of the *Odyssey* and Irish folklore in *Ulysses*. In a letter from 1920, Joyce informs his friend Carlo Linati that he is intensely engaged in transposing "the myth *sub specie temporis nostri*" (Joyce and Ellmann 1966, 146), whereby the splendours of the pagan heroic age are recalled and juxtaposed with our very unheroic age. Joyce knew that the contrasts between the two worlds – the past and the present – "would inevitably be ironic on the level of *fact*, leading only to mock-heroic effects where the disparities in setting and action tend to debase the contemporary experience;" but he also realised that, "on the level of symbol," Bloom would prove a "worthy counterpart" to Homer's Odysseus (Litz 1977, 392).

O'Duffy appears to have understood that, too. From the very incipit, the reader realises that the trilogy resembles *Ulysses* not only for its free-blending of characters from contemporaneity and ancient legend, but also for the fact that myth is continually suggested by contrast and negation, by an incessant movement from top to bottom, from the epic to the comic and grotesque, from the universal to the particular of everyday, working-class life (Ruggieri 1990, 127). For example, the Pillow-Chat of Goshawk and Guzzelinda that opens the novel is a debased version, in a capital-driven world, of the pillow talk between Ailill and Medb narrated at the beginning of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*), the Homeric-inspired central tale of the Ulster Cycle. Similarly, the Second Coming of Cuchulain – the biblical and Yeatsian expression is in the text – is not "worthy" of such a great hero, as it is situated in the most impoverished district of Stoneybatter, where "the girls [...] were sometimes driven to supplement their wages with what they could earn on the street" (O'Duffy 2017, 7; cf. Quintelli 1990, 162).

The character of Cuchulain serves multiple functions, the most prominent of which is that of the "traveller" with his values and beliefs, who brings "an outside point of view to the representation of the particular society being

described" (Fortunati 1992, 22–3). Being an outsider and a wanderer is what O'Duffy's Cuchulain shares with Leopold Bloom of *Ulysses*. Like Joyce's Bloom, Cuchulain is a wanderer, a fantasist of epic proportions, an individual of mixed provenance; he is, like Bloom "quite a scholar," and yet, like Bloom, he remains "a vessel of nonsense," a Joycean "Noman," to the point that the similarities between these paragons of complexity and problematization may reveal commensurate parallels between their respective texts (Charles 2012, 477).

A protagonist in both *Ulysses* and the trilogy, Dublin is a city of walkers where people can connect with their inner strangeness. Hence, Bloom is a wanderer of part-Jewish background, the outsider-insider who takes in as much as possible of the city – its sights, smells, and sounds – and explores its inherent contradictions: in Joyce's Dublin, material poverty coexists with the latest technology and cultural wealth, with the pages of the highly experimental *Ulysses* recording both a gleaming new system of public trams and the sub-life of people in city sewers (Sutherland 2018, 82, 86). Likewise, O'Duffy portrays a Dublin that is at the same time recognizable and uncannily alien in its polarities, as he usually describes it from Cuchulain's point of view and by interweaving references to Celtic mythology with authentic details of post-war Dublin to show its readers what lies ahead if things in *actual* Ireland continue as they are. Whereas Ezra Pound deemed *Ulysses* a broad satire of contemporary society and more generally of the Western world dominated by capital (1922, 627), we can legitimately see O'Duffy's trilogy as a polemical exposure of the effects of life under modern capitalism *primarily* in Ireland.

In *King Goshawk and the Birds*, O'Duffy has Cuchulain assume the body of an abused shopworker, Mr. Aloysius O'Kennedy, who believes that his life is not worth living and thinks of committing suicide (O'Duffy 2017, 28). Disguised in O'Kennedy's small and flabby body, Cuchulain can walk through Dublin without arousing suspicion, but he is like a handicapped hero who has to take care of himself and maintain his integrity while negotiating his way through city life. He is puzzled by the poverty-stricken Dublin he sees, so different from the cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and economically vibrant Áth-a-Cliah he is said to have visited in the bardic tales. On his visit to Áth-a-Cliah, the original nucleus of Dublin evoked in both *Ulysses* and the trilogy (*U* 524.36; O'Duffy 2017, 6), Cuchulain passed windows "in which were exposed mantles and lénas of wool, linen, and silk," and "rolls and leaves of parchment in which men's thoughts were inscribed" providing evidence of high culture (Castle 2016, 24).

O'Duffy builds on such description and, simultaneously drawing on Joyce, offers glimpses of a commercially cosmopolitan Dublin in his works. Bloom's daylong journey through imperial Dublin begins in the chapter Joyce called "The Lotus Eaters," where the reader sees Bloom wander almost at random to distract himself and not dwell on the fact that Boylan will cuckold him in the afternoon; he stares at the shopwindows of the Belfast and Oriental Tea Company and imagines the far-off lands where the exotic teas of Ceylon are produced (U 140.20). Likewise, Cuchulain-O'Kennedy is described looking at shopwindows in the early stages of his journey, but what he sees repels him, for the "lemons from Italy and Spain," the "oranges [...] from Jaffa," or the "teas [...] from China, India, and Ceylon" are out of reach for most Dubliners, including the Mr. O'Kennedy whose undernourished body he has occupied (O'Duffy 2017, 38).

Piling up intertextual references, an unnamed narrator of *King Goshawk and the Birds* describes not a brave new world, but one in which capitalism has run rampant, creating a ghastly wasteland for the many and a millionaire's ghetto of delights for the few (O'Duffy 2017, 83; cf. Hogan 1972, 52). This is what Cuchulain sees as his journey begins:

What a sight was here for eyes accustomed to the splendours of Tír na nÓg. Come, O Muse, whoever you be, that stood by the elbow of immortal Zola, take this pen of mine and pump it full of such foul and fetid ink as shall describe it worthily. To what shall I compare it? A festering corpse, maggot-crawling, under a carrion kissing sun? A loathly figure, yet insufficient: for your maggot thrives on corruption, and grows sleeker with the progression of putridity (O happy maggot, whom the dross of the world trammels not, had you but an immortal soul how surely would it aspire heavenward!). But your lord of creation rots with his environment; so the true symbol of our city is a carrion so pestilent that it corrupts its own maggots. (36)

Images of physical and emotional deprivation recur in the trilogy, as O'Duffy intends to interrogate Irish poverty and the ideological forces which benefit from and sustain it (Dobbins 2020, 140). In this respect, the first two novels of the series may be read also as the exposure, in Joycean fashion, of the complicity of religion with the state in producing "an inverted sense of reality" (Williams 1992, 268). O'Duffy's Cuchulain and the twentieth-century workingman Leopold

Bloom are both heroic modern Odysseus in that they navigate through the city even as they are menaced by its cyclops and monsters. In the case of Cuchulain, the threats come from those who make the Ireland envisioned by O'Duffy devoutly religious, sexually repressed, and socially conservative.

The 'minions' helping build this oppressive society are the *Censores Morum* and Inspectors of Morals, who arrest people for any blasphemous or indecent act: for example, since the costumes of women are all regulated by statute, the Censors are given measuring tapes to test any garment that might excite their suspicions. Needless to say, to preserve the purity of the nation, "the arts had received a full share of the attention of these paternal governments": indeed, "there had been a great holocaust of existing works [...] many years ago" (56). During Cuchulain's walk in Drumcondra, the Censors attempt to jail him for attempting at "the modesty of our Womanhood": he has openly admitted he has no intentions of marrying the girl he is courting, and to escape arrest is forced to break his *geasa* and tie the arresting officers literally in knots (52, 53). "I do not understand you" (53) are the words uttered by Cuchulain to the Censors, which lead readers to reflect on the disorientation that befalls Cuchulain as he wanders through a Dublin that is both familiar and alien to him.

Much food for thought comes from Cuchulain's realization that the Irish community, in the 'contemporary age,' has collapsed and bonds of solidarity no longer tie people together. Both the State and the Church help and support the wealthiest classes, not the most vulnerable (cf. 104). The State is more concerned with its own image abroad than with improving the conditions of the working classes. The Church uses the spectre of Hell to mould faithful servants out of the poor - it is apparent in this paragraph describing Cuchulain's reaction when he first 'puts on' O'Kennedy's body and blurts out:

What fears, what habits, what ordinances, what prohibitions have stamped you slave [...] Then there was in me a fear that had been inspired some time ago by a play I had seen, which made me seem to myself a mean, stupid, and malicious creature [...] I was afraid to confess, for fear of what the druid should think of me: and I was afraid not to confess for fear of the pit of flame [...] Then I began to wonder whether there was really a God or a pit of fire at all but I dared not let myself think of that, lest I should be struck dead and buried in the pit of fire forthwith. (31-32)

Most people sycophantically accept the project, shared between the State and the Church, of moral and social control to construct an image of Ireland as a virtuous and pious nation. The second book in the trilogy, *The Spacious Adventures of the Man in the Street*, deals with O’Kennedy’s inability to recognise a kind of semi-Utopia even when he finds himself in it, so repressed is he and so ingrained are the biases of his society in his mind (cf. O’Duffy 2018, 150–79). Nor are the inhabitants of 1950s Dublin less “sheepish”: there, true “patriot[s]” are those who make “valiant assaults upon any book or play that denied the super-human chastity of the women of Ireland” (O’Duffy 2017, 33, 7).

Several conclusions can be drawn from these passages. First, we can detect a reference to *Ulysses*, in particular to the tenth episode, “Wandering Rocks,” in which it is suggested how the Church and the colonial state can become two oppressive forces that crush and annihilate the free manifestation of the human personality and condition the life and the freedom of the entire city to the point of paralysis. As Trevor Williams observes, in “Wandering Rocks,” “more than anywhere else in *Ulysses*, Joyce lays bare, makes transparent, the source, in British colonialism and in Roman Catholicism, of the oppression his characters everywhere suffer from” (1992, 268). Although *Ulysses* is set in June 1904, Joyce wrote it during and after the Great War, which saw the beginning of the breakup of empires, the fluidities of revolution, but also an illusionary sense of freedom for many European citizens: in the Dublin of “Wandering Rocks,” its citizens wander its streets freely without ever becoming aware of the imprisoning structures mechanically enclosing them (*ibidem*).

According to the Linati Schema, the technique (*tecnica*) of the episode is the labyrinth, as the city streets become a maze impairing the free circulation of people that Joyce deemed a sign of social health (Sutherland 2018, 83). O’Duffy carries this to extremes in the trilogy: the Dublin visited by Cuchulain and Cuanduine is territorialised according to wealth, divided up in inaccessible Millionaires’ ghettos and slums; on Rathé, the planet O’Kennedy explores during his extra-terrestrial adventures, reaching and moving across the Dark Zone is basically impeded by the presence of monstrous insects and the irrational rules imposed by authorities. Just as in Homer gods and monsters are a constant and potentially dangerous presence in the days and ways of mortals, the machines of Church and State here constitute a parallel source of permanent oppression and danger for Irish citizens, which is presented as invisible in *Ulysses*, but blatantly evident in O’Duffy. Considering Raffaella Baccolini’s suggestion

that utopia and, even more, dystopia are “rooted in history” and simultaneously “appear as a critique of history” (2003, 115), I ascribe the ‘visibility’ of the oppressive forces in O’Duffy to the fact that his literary speculations are based *not* on wild flights of fancy, but on his own realities. The trilogy illustrates point by point, with a generous dose of satire and through the adventures of his ‘displaced’ characters, the social evils of a capital-driven world and, more specifically, of contemporary Free State Ireland to explore and discuss the significance of what actually had happened, what was happening and what, presumably, would later happen.

A disillusioned O’Duffy saw the destruction of the Civil War and the rise of the fragile Irish Free State after 1922, which sought self-definition through non-negotiable absolutes of homeland and Catholicism, as Free State governments were inclined to bring state law into line with contemporary Catholic teaching. Free Ireland was going to be Ireland Catholic, although Protestant writers and thinkers had been historically numerous and influential in the formulation of Irish nationalist ideology and the search for an inclusive definition of Irish identity (Ó Tuathaigh 1986, 12). A series of Catholic laws, or laws designed to bolster Catholic attitudes, were thus ratified, such as the Censorship of Film Act in 1923 and the Censorship of Publications Act in 1928. The morality of Irish citizens was further ‘protected’ from the corrupting forces of foreign literature and media by local groups such as the Irish Vigilance Movement, which even set out to burn immoral literature and whatever they judged as blasphemous and obscene. It also became increasingly difficult to get a divorce, as the Catholic viewpoint on it was strictly enforced (Coogan 2003, 170).

Through projects such as the resurrection of the Tailteann Games and the Shannon Hydroelectric Scheme, the Governments of the 1920s–1930s tried to showcase Ireland as a pluralistic and prosperous nation, but the reality was much different (Sutton 2015, 86–107). Suffice it to say that the West of Ireland was hit hard by famine in the years 1924–1925. And, although the 1922 Government adopted special constitutional provisions aimed at religious minorities, Jane Leonard has tellingly mapped the increasing isolation befalling members of the religious minorities and Unionists in the new state (99–114): many emigrated or accepted a condition of vulnerability at home, as O’Duffy alludes to in his portrayal of the silenced Irish Protestants and the “alarm[ed]” Unionists who are given “counsel to reconsider their attitude to the Republic” in *King Goshawk and the Birds* (2017, 128). Then, the tirade on state and religion continues in the

other two novels, where O'Duffy makes fun of the Procrustean Religion and its adepts: his targets, especially in *Asses in Clover*, are those who conform to absurd religious dogmas thinking only about their immediate short-term self-interest and wishfully ignoring the consequences of that on the most vulnerable.

O'Duffy, who had believed in the promise of a brave new world, thus raised his readers' awareness of the many injustices marring their society through the depiction of negative future scenarios. Yet the trilogy is not a depressive read: when the tone gets darker, O'Duffy always swings the pendulum towards a comedic tone by placing Cuchulain, Cuanduine, or O'Kennedy in embarrassing situations. The 'laughtears mode' and the deployment of myth and mythological characters are, on the one hand, artifices to induce readers to drink bitter social medicines – readers who would not be interested in a proclamation or a political pamphlet are suddenly attracted by a fictional humorous reading and end up welcoming O'Duffy critique of 1920s Ireland in a subliminal way (Firpo 1982, 14). On the other, O'Duffy did not want his future visions to produce cynicism and hopelessness by making his readers believe that there were no alternatives to the current dominant model. The next section suggests that, through the prism of Joyce's *Ulysses*, we can discuss O'Duffy's future visions in a more profound way by highlighting how they promote hope and enact a perlocutive plan.

### **Myth, heroism, and the Irish community**

If we interpret the treatment of mythological and folktale elements in O'Duffy's trilogy only as a way of highlighting the greyness of contemporary Ireland, we are left with a very limited understanding of his novels, because O'Duffy draws on Irish mythology to offer a promise of social rejuvenation on cross-cultural, cross-religious lines. Just as Yeats imagined that Cuchulain's society was not marred by political partisanship and religious-linguistic differences, so O'Duffy found in the bardic tales a more pluralistic and equal community, which, he believed, could be restored, not through the intervention of some legendary hero, but thanks to the collective effort of the whole Irish community. The Irish had to rediscover the heroic values of ancient Ireland – some of which are notions of loyalty, justice, and the "Wisdom of Charity" – and the kind of heroism that gives rise to spiritual and social transformation in the tradition of Cuchulain's tribe (O'Duffy 2017, 208; cf. Quintelli 1990, 161). One of the tasks of the trilogy is therefore to show how ordinary people can be agents

of transformation and how the Ireland of the Free State, painted by O'Duffy in gloomy colours through hyperbole and exaggeration, is not the only possible one. The wanderings of Cuanduine and Cuchulain in the first and last novels, and the space odyssey of O'Kennedy in the second, point to the crevices in the great narrative upheld by the Free State, with its uncomplicated view of history as steady progress and the inevitability of the existing order.

From this perspective and bearing the author's goals in mind, we can best discern what O'Duffy appreciated of Joyce's *Ulysses* and how he also exceeded his literary model. In his 1922 review of the novel, O'Duffy points out that Joyce portrayed an "almost forgotten" society, yet a real one made up of flesh-and-blood people. Not only is Mr. Bloom "a very live person," but "in his company we wander about the streets of Dublin seeing the Ireland of 1904, the bleak, shiftless, sordid, soulless Ireland that came to an end catastrophically in 1916" (1978, 13). By setting the novel in 1904, Joyce thematically expunged the 'terrible beauty' of the Easter Rising from *Ulysses*, still his novel can be read as a response to the violence of the rebellion, the Great War, and their aftermath, to which Joyce opposed the empathy of Bloom and other ordinary people. Bloom is often treated as an outsider and with disdain – the episode called "Hades" is emblematic in this regard – but he is the most sympathetic character of the novel. *Ulysses* celebrates the everyday life of ordinary people through the emphasis, devoid of any rhetoric, placed on details that are only apparently trivial and that instead prove capable of arousing a sense of wonder, both real and symbolic (Bendelli 2017, 17). Portraying the life of the common man in its ordinary banality, intensity, and variety is proof of Joyce's "love of country" and the status of *Ulysses* as "the epic of modern Ireland" (O'Duffy 1978, 12, 13). At least, this is what O'Duffy implies in the incipit of the review, where he extols the "common man" as "the backbone of [the] nation" (12).

What of *Ulysses* appealed O'Duffy, despite its many "hideous flaws," was indeed the banal heroism of the common man: in 1922, O'Duffy had already rejected the forms of militant heroism embodied – and valorised by the nation – of "the gunman and the political theorist" (12). He believed that "the tram conductor, the milkman, and the fireman who carry on with their work while the bullets are flying around them" as well as "the man who struggles on in poverty rather than emigrate" are "better patriots than the men who are firing the rifles – and brave men too" (12). To these people, who made Ireland keep going, O'Duffy strove to offer plausible alternatives, following and surpassing Joyce's example.

For O'Duffy, Joyce's love of Ireland transpires, in *Ulysses*, from his attention to ordinary lives, the employment of humour to raise awareness about the faults of modern society, the utopian alternatives Bloom envisions, and the author's attempt to provide an open-ended, non-monological narrative which calls itself into question. Both *Ulysses* and the Cuanduine trilogy provide visions of utopian communities and, above all, dismantle the teleological narratives that put forward 'fixed' images of certain Irelands as the promised lands. "Utopian epiphanies" figure prominently in *Ulysses*, whenever the text offers "redemptive glimpses of a future world which might be made over in terms of those utopian moments" (qtd. in Charles 2012, 483). Analogous modes of idealisation feature in O'Duffy's trilogy when he describes a moon eutopia in *Asses in Clover* or O'Kennedy explores the semi-Utopia committed to the principles of Social credit in *The Spacious Adventures of the Man in the Street*.

Besides the manifestations of utopian ideas, O'Duffy also pondered how Joyce could undermine the single narratives that sustain political or national promises or expose them as 'one of the many' through literary mediation, by making *Ulysses* an open-ended, heteroglossic, polysemic novel, full of textual and narrative disruptions. What readers experience in the first chapters of *Ulysses* is a novel with a story, a narrator, and a plot, but, as they move towards the conclusion, they see Joyce shatter the foundations of the traditional novel, which, he believed, could not represent the fragmentation of contemporary life. Beginning with "Aeolus," with its boldfaced phrases that seem to come out of nowhere, Joyce breaks up with the narrative norm: the figure of the single narrator in control is challenged, replaced by a series of narrators, usually unreliable, who emerge and disappear without being identified. The stability provided by the Homeric correspondences is undermined by their very 'imperfection': some episodes of the *Odyssey* do not feature in *Ulysses* and the order of the adventures is upset (Lawrence 2014, 38, 55). What is more, page after page, Joyce increasingly indulges in playing with words and styles: as he states in the letter to Linati, each adventure conditions and creates its own technique, more and more distinct, so that the text never settles into any one new form or style. According to Sam Slote (2020, 156), *Ulysses*, "like the novel as theorized by Bakhtin, is mixed and mongrel" and this is also "Joyce's conception of Ireland," because it is tempting and not groundless to see "a political cast" to Joyce's multifarious art of style and narrative voices: these exuberance and plurality "indicat[e] an already-latent plurality within Irish

identity" in a way that might have intrigued O'Duffy, who recognised the presence of hidden voices in 1920s Ireland – those of the most vulnerable, the working classes, and the members of the religious minorities.

Like *Ulysses*, the books in the Cuanduine trilogy are instances of "dialogic texts" characterised, albeit in a more embryonic form, by what Bakhtin termed "heteroglossia" and "carnivalization" (1988, 299). A variety of literary and social discourses and a polyphony of voices enter the narrative of O'Duffy's novels to express a diversity of ideas and points of view (Caneda Cabrera 1996, 34). O'Duffy valued how the self-disruptive mechanisms and diversity of *Ulysses* allow alternative voices to dethrone the authority of official narratives (cf. Bakhtin 1988); they make the text ostentatiously depart from a teleologically structured narrative like those of Patrick Pearse and his followers of the Free State, who turned Irish history into a monological story of struggle and resistance that pointed the way to the future and the community's eventual realisation as an independent, Irish-Ireland, and Catholic nation. The Free State was the promised land in this view, which O'Duffy wanted to expose as sustained by a single and, on the narrative and symbolic levels, challengeable narrative. This is probably why, in the Cuanduine trilogy, we can find some of the linguistic exuberance and energy unleashed by Joyce's experimental rupturing of the novel genre. For instance, not all the narrators are identifiable and there is a chapter written as a 'vaudeville' and another one that broadly parodies a contemporary newspaper, as it includes news stories, leading articles, sports reports, gossip about celebrities, and advertisements. The 'excesses' of Joyce's plays on words are made fun of too.

At the same time, the trilogy upholds the social potential of the arts by showing its readers how sterile life is in a materialistic society that despises artistic creativity and the well-being of its citizens: the England of the future described in *King Goshawk and the Birds* has extinguished the vitality of the Arts, now mere tools of propaganda, and even the physiological one of human beings – O'Duffy's Britons worship St. Progressa, who redeemed the world "from the greatest plague that ever threatened it: namely, a plague of babies" (154). This episode may be interpreted as O'Duffy's take on *Ulysses's* "Oxen of the Sun," which celebrates artistic creativity and physiological creation as acts of love by juxtaposing the ontogenetic stages of a foetus with the stages in the development of British literature. A homage to Joyce or not, the episode is nevertheless not simply decorative, but functional to a "perlocutive plan" that wields its power on, and gives it to, the readers (Di Luca 1992, 81). O'Duffy not only imagines alternative Irelands

or symbolically disrupts the teleological narratives legitimising the status quo, but also believes that the retrieval of models and values from the pagan heroic age, through the blending of the modern and the mythological in his works, could be geared towards socially progressive ends, into the creation of a new kind of community (Harte 2020, 15).

Approaching the conclusion of the trilogy, readers have seen O'Duffy satirise whatever glorious pretension the Free State might still possess, provide glimpses of more egalitarian societies, and subliminally suggest that the ancient Gaelic civilisation may rehabilitate our world from the mechanistic influence of global capitalism and sectarian violence if only Irish people embraced its values and took action (cf. Flanagan 2015, 75). Of *Ulysses*, O'Duffy appreciated the presence of multiple truths as well as the intentional play with heteroglossia and diversity as opposed to uniqueness, through which Joyce exercises his freedom as author (Caneda Cabrera 1996, 38, 40). He also drew guidance from *Ulysses* concerning the conjoining of carnivalistic elements: the mingling of the sacred with the profane, the grotesque, and the rise of common people to the status of hero. In the trilogy, O'Duffy neither emphasises heroic individualism nor recounts the extraordinary exploits of a single hero: his superhuman Cuanduine and Cuchulain fail. The latter, sanctified by Pearse, is no longer able to save Ireland on his own. In *Asses in Clover*, Cuanduine defeats Goshawk and opens the cages to free the birds, but they have become so accustomed to imprisonment that they cannot recognize the possibility of freedom and remain confined (O'Duffy 2003, 271). So, Cuanduine renounces humanity and departs from the world just as his father did.

This does not mean that humanity is doomed. One of the narrators – and Cuchulain himself – often repeat that the heroes are just figments of the imagination of ancient bards, whose narration can “move [...] the people to laugh at their follies, but not to renounce them” (2018, 190). The failure of Cuchulain, emblematic icon of the ‘wasted’ Easter Rising (Dobbins 2020, 146), signifies that actual social transformation requires something more impactful than the heroism of the single individual: communal action. As one character puts it, “you must stop talking and Do something” (O'Duffy 2017, 204).

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