

James Joyce

A Short Introduction

Michael Seidel

Blackwell Publishers

James Joyce

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**for
Eileen**

“Sure he thinks the sun shines out of your face”
(*Exiles*, Third Act)

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Abbreviations

Joyce's Works

<i>CW</i>	<i>Critical Writings</i> , eds. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
<i>D</i>	<i>Dubliners</i> , with an introduction and notes by Terence Brown (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).
<i>E</i>	<i>Exiles</i> , introduction by Padraic Colum (New York: Viking Press, 1951).
<i>FW</i>	<i>Finnegans Wake</i> (New York: Viking Press, 1959).
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of James Joyce</i> , eds. Stuart Gilbert and Richard Ellmann (3 vols. New York: Viking Press, 1957–66).
<i>P</i>	<i>Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Seamus Deane (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).
<i>Selected Letters</i>	<i>Selected Joyce Letters</i> , ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1975).
<i>SH</i>	<i>Stephen Hero</i> , revised edn., eds. Theodore Spencer, John J. Slocum, and Herbert Cahoon (New York: New Directions, 1963).
<i>U*</i>	<i>Ulysses</i> , ed. Hans Gabler (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

* References to individual chapters in *Ulysses* follow Joyce's lead in employing Homeric names. Chapter and line numbers are keyed to the Gabler edition.

Secondary References

- Making of Ulysses* Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, 2nd edn. (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1960).
- Interviews and Recollections* E. H. Mikhail, ed., *James Joyce: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).
- Portraits of the Artist in Exile* Willard Potts, ed., *Portraits of the Artist in Exile: Recollections of James Joyce by Europeans* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1979).

1

Introducing Joyce

“Everything Speaks in its Own Way”

In a conversation in Paris during August of 1930 with the Czech writer Adolf Hoffmeister, Joyce described the arc of his career: “My work, from *Dubliners* on, goes in a straight line of development. It is almost indivisible, only the scale of expressiveness and writing technique rises somewhat steeply.” He continues

Each of my books is a book about Dublin. Dublin is a city of scarcely three hundred thousand population, but it has become the universal city of my work. *Dubliners* was my last look at that city. Then I looked at the people around me. *Portrait* was the picture of my spiritual self. *Ulysses* transformed individual impressions and emotions to give them general significance. “Work in Progress” [Joyce superstitiously refused to reveal the title of *Finnegans Wake* before he completed the book] has significance completely above reality; transcending humans, things, sense, and entering the realm of complete abstraction. (*Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, pp. 131–2)

My aim is to follow Joyce along the accessible arc of his career, adding commentary on his play *Exiles* and drawing from *Finnegans Wake* only as it throws light on Joyce’s narrative enterprise as a whole. Joyce tells one long story, a story about the kinds of experiences the artist needs and gains in order to begin all over again to create in imaginative fullness the specific world that produced him in the first place. Joyce writes of the strains of family life in Catholic Ireland, the formation of artistic consciousness, the separation anxieties from

local and familiar places, the nature of marital love, and the mythic patterns of experience recorded in world literature and re-expressed in turn-of-the-century Dublin. Characters in Joyce's works tend to migrate from one of his books to the next. That is the way he creates the feeling of a total Dublin landscape.

Joyce writes in one of the *Dubliners* stories, "The Boarding House": "Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else's business" (61). Everyone else's business becomes the stuff of Joyce's narratives – stories his father told about friends, family, and colleagues, stories local Dubliners tell about each other, whether of the tailor trying to fit a hump-backed naval captain with a new suit of clothes, or of the Irish soldier in the Crimean War who had a Russian general trained in his sights but who held fire until the general finished relieving himself on the battlefield. "Another insult to Ireland," Joyce's friend Samuel Beckett said when he heard that one.

Joyce thought of himself as a comic writer. He was the last person in the world to find his books forbidding or puzzling, and he labored under the conviction that his powers as an artist and storyteller were accessible, humane, and joyfully inspired. He never tried as a matter of course to be difficult. Rather, he had some goals in mind for what he felt narrative should and could do. A sculptor friend of Joyce's in Zurich, August Suter, asked him what of most importance had he learned from his early Jesuit schooling. Joyce's answer should encourage his readers: "to arrange things so that they can be grasped and judged" (*Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, p. 64). His arrangements ultimately required readers to readjust reading habits and techniques, but never unreasonably so. Joyce is a rational writer, and he rewards the patient and attentive reader ready to make rational sense of his works.

Of *Ulysses* Joyce said in conversation with Hoffmeister: "I don't think that the difficulties in reading it are so insurmountable. Certainly any intelligent reader can read and understand it, if he returns to the text again and again. He is setting out on an adventure with words" (*Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, p. 131). Stephen Dedalus echoes that adventure in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learned them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world about him" (64). Joyce's readers undergo the same experience and, with energy and good will, realize the same goals.

It is easy enough to say, as Joyce did, that all his work is about Dublin, but it is *about* Dublin in a way no other writer's works are. What sustains Joyce is the inventive power of his narrative language. His infatuation began early and extended into his Zurich and Paris years where friends noted how he used to sit at outdoor cafés and listen to fragments of conversation among those passing by in the streets. An American friend, Robert McAlmon, recalls speaking with Joyce.

He was constantly leaping upon phrases and bits of slang which came naturally from my American lips, and one night, when he was slightly spiffed, he wept a bit while explaining his love or infatuation for words, mere words. Long before this explanation I had recognized that malady in him, as probably every writer has had that disease at some time or other, generally in his younger years. Joyce never recovered. (*James Joyce: Interviews and Recollections*, p. 104)

In his unfinished and abandoned autobiographical narrative, *Stephen Hero*, Joyce described himself poring over etymological dictionaries and wandering Dublin streets for unusual or rewarding words: "It was not only in Skeat that he found words for his treasure-house, he found them also at haphazard in the shops, on advertisements, in the mouths of the plodding public. He kept repeating them to himself till they lost all instantaneous meaning for him and became wonderful vocables" (30). Anything that might accrue from these wonderful vocables – from the most resonant themes in Joyce's work to the largest claims he makes about the nature of the human condition – takes second place to the pleasure and craft of formulating and reformulating words. Joyce's pacifism, his socialism, his classicism, his eurocentrism, his comic gift, his musical sensibility, his gossip-mongering, his obsession with sexuality (even deviant sexuality), his paranoia are not insignificant elements in his work; they are just secondary to the crafting, designing, manipulating, and arranging of phrases and sentences. Joyce tells Hoffmeister that by the time of *Finnegans Wake* "Each word has the charm of a living thing and each living thing is plastic" (*Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, p. 131).

Otto Luening, a young American musician and fellow student with Philip Jarnach, Joyce's duplex neighbor in Zurich during the later years of World War I, recalls Joyce in the famous Zurich cafés that at the time harbored expatriate artists, endangered politicians, and

intellectuals of all stripes, including Lenin, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, and Ferruccio Busoni. Writers and musicians thought of themselves as craftsmen, intent on the language and media of their art. They reveled in quotation from memory or quasi-performance. A writer's or a composer's work would enter the conversation and Luening recalls how the talk would turn to reciting lines from memory or humming sections of scores and arias. On one occasion Joyce hummed the flute solo from Gluck's *Orfeo* and was so absorbed by the music that he went into a kind of trance in the middle of his rendering.¹ The raw emotion of a phrase or a sound captivated Joyce, and he could call up in the very sound of things the range of thoughts and feelings a human being could experience.

When Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* visits the offices of the newspaper where he works, the *Freeman's Journal*, to canvas an ad, he notices the sounds of the printing press.

Sllt. The nethermost deck of the first machine jogged forward its flyboard with sllt the first batch of quirefolded papers. Sllt. Almost human the way it sllt to call attention. Doing its level best to speak. That door too sllt creaking, asking to be shut. Everything speaks in its own way. Sllt. (7: 174–7)

Joyce creates the sound of the press, 'Sllt', and then listens as Bloom substitutes the sound the press makes for the verb 'speaks'. No writer before Joyce in prose fiction placed such priority on the structure, texture, sound, and shape of words on the page. Joyce listens to everything. In the *Dubliners* story "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," he punctuates the pompous drivel of sentimental politicians reciting an excruciatingly bad poem on Parnell with the sound of a cork popping out of a Guinness bottle: "Pok!" (132). Every syllable a critic. In the story "Grace," a slick-talking Irishman tumbles down a flight of barroom stairs and bites off the tip of his tongue. We see on the page what we need to know by not seeing half the words we have to imagine: "Y' an't, 'an, he answered, 'y 'ongue is hurt" (152).

In *Ulysses* a horse in Dublin's red light district cannot believe Leopold Bloom's phony excuse about heading home way past midnight from a neighborhood in which he has no business. Joyce gives us a horse's whinny fit for a homing epic – his version of a load of hay: "Hohohohohohoh! Hohohohome!" (15: 4879). Language and

its systems are everywhere in Joyce, evoked even in toddler time early in *Portrait of the Artist* when the child tries to form the words for the song, “*O, the wild rose blossoms / On the little green place.*” The best he can do is: “*O, the green wothe botheth*” (3). When the young boy goes off to school he recalls the song and his rendition, “But you could not have a green rose. But perhaps somewhere in the world you could” (9). Joyce is perfectly aware that his reader reads the printed words, “green rose,” exactly at the moment the lad wonders where in the world you could find one. Joyce’s language creates the reality he represents.

Early in the day of *Ulysses*, Bloom is about to put his hat on his head. He notices that the inside band of the hat has the manufacturer’s name but that the last letter is worn off. The text produces the result and a hatband speaks what Bloom sees: “Plasto’s high grade ha” (4: 69). The physical look of the label produces a laugh at the silliness of it all. If the reader steps back for a moment, “high grade ha” is an even cleverer commentary on the status of Joyce’s narrative as a high-grade parody (ha!) of the Homeric *Odyssey*.

Joyce’s narrative at times hears before it comprehends. In the “Hades” episode of *Ulysses* the funeral carriage wheels by Farrell’s statue in central Dublin. The reader experiences street sounds in the same way a figure in the carriage would – at first indistinctly and then fully formed.

Oot: a dullgarbed old man from the curbstone tended his wares, his mouth opening: oot.

—Four bootlaces for a penny. (6: 229–31)

In the next chapter, “Aeolus,” Joyce has Bloom watch his boss, William Brayden, editor of the *Freeman’s Journal*, climb the office staircase. Bloom recalls a remark that all Brayden’s brains are in the nape of his neck, then looks at the ascending hulking back as Joyce’s prose images the neck in the words Bloom thinks: “Welts of flesh behind on him. Fat folds of neck, fat, neck, fat, neck” (7: 48). In “Lestrygonians,” when Bloom crumples up a religious circular and flings it into the Liffey river he thinks about the law of falling bodies. Joyce has to truncate Bloom’s words before gravity takes over and the circular hits the water: “thirty two feet per sec is com” (8: 57–8). A few moments later Bloom sees a woman stepping up into a