

**JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY**

**20**

**JAMES JOYCE  
THE JOYS OF EXILE**

*Edited by  
Franca Ruggieri*

**ea**  
ANICIA

*Volume pubblicato con il contributo  
di The James Joyce Italian Foundation*

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Direttore responsabile: Franca Ruggieri  
Registrazione Num. R.G. 1885/2016, Tribunale Ordinario di Cassino

**ISSN 2281 – 373X**

© 2018, Editoriale Anicia s.r.l. - Roma  
<http://www.edizionianicia.it/store/>  
[info@edizionianicia.it](mailto:info@edizionianicia.it)

Single copy price: €18.00  
Subscription rates (one issue annually):  
Personal: €18.00  
Institutional: €30.00

The journal will be published on the following website:  
**<https://thejamesjoyceitalianfoundation.wordpress.com/>**  
Purchases can be made by directly contacting the publisher and then completing a bank transfer covering the price of the book and postage costs (this is € 5.00 within Italy, but varies according to the country of destination).

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SEARCHING FOR THE WOMEN IN *EXILES*

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*Exiles* has always held a puzzling place in Joyce's canon. Yeats dug into his stock of polite, meaningless words when he praised it as 'sincere and interesting,' rejecting it for the Abbey Theatre as being 'too far from the folk drama.'<sup>1</sup> Pound dismissed it as 'a side-step, necessary katharsis, clearance of mind from continental contemporary thought.'<sup>2</sup> Much subsequent criticism has agreed with Pound that *Exiles* marks a side-step on the journey to *Ulysses*. But there is one element of the play that is inescapable, and that is the important question for Joyce of the concept of exile. As Robert Hand's article about Richard Rowan affirms in Act III, 'There is an economic and a spiritual exile,'<sup>3</sup> which is a strange assertion, because there is also the more terrible fate of compulsory governmental expulsion, neither economic nor spiritual. For Joyce, of course, spiritual exile was the important category. It appears that, for Joyce, exile was not to be understood in legal terms as nationally mandated banishment from one's country or culture, but was instead an

<sup>1</sup> James Joyce. (Ed. Richard Ellmann). *The Letters of James Joyce*. New York: Viking. 1966. Vol. 2, p.305.

<sup>2</sup> Ezra Pound. (Ed. T. S. Eliot). *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions. 1954. pp. 415-416.

<sup>3</sup> James Joyce. *Exiles*. New York: B. W. Huebsch. 1924. p. 134.

attitude with which one regarded expatriation made unavoidable by a culturally oppressive homeland. Joyce was remarkably consistent in his view, from youth to age, although it exposed him to the allegation of affecting a pose:

Pause on that word ‘exile,’ a favorite one with Joyce. Why was it necessary for him to conjure up the grandiose image of his rejection by his countrymen? Ireland, though famous for flights of Wild Geese, banishes nobody, and Dublin had no quarrel with her Dante...still, a sensitive artist, reduced to impecunious despair as Joyce was at this period, might feel, in the very obscurity in which he was suffered to steal away from Dublin, a sentence of banishment no less stern in its indifference than Florence’s fiery sentence on her Dante.<sup>4</sup>

That deduction makes an intriguing hypothesis: Eglinton, if I read his meaning correctly, believed that part of the attraction of exile to Joyce was precisely the fact that Ireland took so little notice of his departure that he did not even merit expulsion. In other words, he wasn’t kicked out; nobody had noticed that he was gone. No one feels more rejected than the person who isn’t missed at all. This would, perhaps, also apply to Richard Rowan, whose extraction from Dublin with a young woman to pursue a literary ambition seems generally consistent with Joyce’s basic experience. Yet it should be noted that exile is, for most who undergo it, not a choice, but a condemnation; not a tool for making art, but an enforced vulnerability; not a cultural attitude, but a position of dependency and dislocation. And in that sense, this paper proposes a simple proposition: that if we apply basic considerations of what it means to be an exile, it is the women of the play who best fit that description, most notably Bertha. It is they who are subject to the choices made by others; they who move from location to location at the decisions of

<sup>4</sup> John Eglinton. *Irish Literary Portraits*. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press. 1967. p.140-141.

others; they whose choices are almost entirely circumscribed by the dominant men around them and they who are defined by relations with men that they do not control. If Richard has selected ‘spiritual exile,’ Bertha has accepted the full exile that is entailed by undesired loss of homeland.

Let us consider at first the very basic notion of physical location as being normative for any conception of exile. The play begins in what Joyce describes as ‘the drawingroom in Richard Rowan’s house at Mer-rion, a suburb of Dublin.’<sup>5</sup> Although one does not wish to place too much emphasis on what is, after all, a stage setting direction, it is none-theless revealing that even the home is described as ‘Richard Rowan’s house,’ not ‘the Rowans’ house’ or ‘the Rowan house.’ The play is physically located entirely on male property—both Acts 1 and 3 are specified as being in ‘Richard Rowan’s house,’ and Act 2 takes place in ‘Robert Hand’s cottage in Ranelagh.’ As we shall see throughout the play, the women are in somewhat unsettled circumstances, even in terms of simple physical location. The women are unfixed: it is unclear where Beatrice actually resides. She has just returned from a vacation period away, in which she apparently contemplated the revelation that Richard had been writing a series of literary sketches about her; it is a kind of appropriation to which she has not clearly given any consent and, indeed, she states early on that she has not seen the sketches, despite wanting to see them ‘very much.’<sup>6</sup> Beatrice is also an unexpected arrival; almost all of her interlocutors comment on the fact that she was thought to be in Youghal, and surprised them by arriving back in Mer-rion. Indeed, she goes to Youghal to see her father—another location belonging to a man—yet Robert suggests that there is a penitential element to her traveling there: ‘She goes there on retreat, when the protestant strain in her prevails—gloom, seriousness, righteousness.’<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p. 24.



Retreat from what? This is the flippancy of Robert, yet we also have reason to believe that part of Beatrice's withdrawal from Dublin relates to her unclear relations as an unsolicited muse to Richard.

Bertha too has an uncertain physical locality. Although the play begins and ends in what should be considered her home, she is not in when the play begins; indeed, her husband hosts an attractive woman in her absence. When she is left alone with Robert, he protests that she should persuade Richard to accept the post at Trinity College Dublin but, revealingly, he notes of Bertha that 'you are unhappy so far away.' She has followed Richard to Italy where, if Robert is correct (and we shall see that he is), she is distressed. She has accepted his choice of exile, despite that choice making her miserable. The exchange by which Robert and Richard discuss this point is revelatory:

Robert: [Also leans forward, quietly] Richard, have you been quite fair to her? It was her own free choice, you will say. But was she really free to choose? She was a mere girl. She accepted all that you proposed.

Richard: [Smiles] That is your way of saying that she proposed what I would not accept.

Robert: [Nods] I remember. And she went away with you. But was it of her own free choice? Answer me frankly.

Richard: [Turns to him, calmly] I played for her against all that you say or can say; and I won.<sup>8</sup>

There is nothing in the play that suggests Robert seriously feels concern about the lack of volition in Bertha's choice to accompany Richard. Yet more intriguing is the way in which Richard understands the question. He never answers the specific question of whether or not it was Bertha's choice to accompany him freely. Her intentions, or her choice, are essentially irrelevant, except in the sense that they indicate his victory—she is something to be won, in a sense, like a chess piece in some strange

<sup>8</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p.41.

confrontation between Richard and Robert. It is odd that, in discussing his wife's choice of a partner, he makes reference to Robert's opinion, not Bertha's own—'I played for her against all that you say or can say...'

This strange triangular relationship unnaturally intrudes into the discussion, even as Richard begins to discern Robert's plan for the assignation with Bertha. She raises the question that Robert had already raised, that of choice:

Bertha: [...] Because you take advantage of my simplicity as you did—the first time.

Richard: [Violently] And you have the courage to say that to me?

Bertha: [Facing him] Yes, I have! Both then and now. Because I am simple you think you can do what you like with me. [Gesticulating] Follow him now. Call him names. Make him be humble before you and make him despise me. Follow him!

Richard: [Controlling himself] You forget that I have allowed you complete liberty—and allow you it still.

Bertha: [Scornfully] Liberty!

Richard: Yes, complete. But he must know that I know.<sup>9</sup>

There are several points of interest in this exchange. First, we learn that it has long been her contention that she was led because of her simplicity, a point she describes as 'take advantage', which is something that she has stated 'both then and now.' This is one of the only reconstructable past discussions of the Rowans, and it does not seem to be as volitional a choice as Richard would like to assure himself that it was. Secondly, it is clear in this exchange who is the primary agent of choice: it is Richard who makes all the controlling decisions. Third, we notice again the weird preoccupation Richard has with using his wife to prove his superiority—or at least his romantic and sexual primacy—over Robert; when he affirms that he gives his wife 'complete liberty,' his next

<sup>9</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p.61.

comment is to vow that Robert ‘must know that I know.’ Finally, it is worth mentioning that one does not allow another liberty. That is the charity of a superior to an inferior. Richard’s repeated protestations that he ‘allows’ liberty and will not give Bertha instructions are cleverly wrapped up when she gives him the choice ‘tell me not to go and I will not,’ to which he must reply—as he does—that she is free to choose as she wishes. She has understood that his assertions that he gives her liberty are as much about his self-conception of his spirit than they are about her freedom of choice. But that he has been given the opportunity to forbid her is suggestive in itself of the true limits of her volition and freedom to choose.

Yet it is in Act Two, when Richard confronts Robert in the place of his intended assignation with Bertha, that we perceive the genuine lack of concern both men have for Bertha’s interests or desires. As they discuss her, it is remarkable that neither man mentions what she might want. Robert refers to her as ‘yours, your work.’ Richard replies that he would ‘Go away,’ and that ‘you, and not I, would be necessary to her’<sup>10</sup>—but this renunciation of his wife is to be based entirely upon Robert’s conviction that he is certain to be the better match for Bertha; what she feels or may not feel is not mentioned. Her husband explicitly states that he would ‘go away’ if another man was certain of his passion for her.

Rather oddly, Richard confesses his own infidelities to Robert, and notes that Bertha was in their home at the time he returned to confess; at least she, when she is tempted by Robert, leaves the house to pursue an assignation. It is at this moment that Richard observes that he may have killed ‘the virginity of her soul,’ and Robert remarks that Richard had a reputation for living wildly in Rome. Robert notes, uncontradicted, that ‘You know there were rumors here of your life

<sup>10</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p. 79.

abroad—a wild life. Some persons who knew you or met you or heard of you in Rome...Even I at times thought of her as a victim.’<sup>11</sup> Indeed, he then rather bafflingly articulates the idea that his seduction of Bertha be considered in the manner of a contest against falsity, ‘All life is a conquest, the victory of human passion over the commandments of cowardice.’<sup>12</sup> In the conversation, it is sometimes difficult to recollect that they are speaking about a human being, who may have desires and opinions of her own, and who might resist, or resent, being the object a strange sexual bartering that is intended to resolve the contradictions of their own disagreements.

In the context of exile, it is worth noting that, as Bertha arrives for the uncertain assignation with Robert, Richard greets her with the words, ‘Welcome back to old Ireland.’ The reference has an uncomfortable salience for Bertha in the play: her husband is referred to later in Robert’s article as ‘A Distinguished Irishman,’ but in this context Ireland represents betrayal, infidelity, and her recognition that even if she accepts Robert, the whole disgraceful scenario has been the construction of Richard, who expressed—to Robert—his longing to be betrayed: ‘in the very core of my ignoble heart I longed to be betrayed by you and by her—in the dark, in the night—secretly, meanly, craftily.’<sup>13</sup> She understands what the implications of this situation are, and she states them explicitly to Richard: ‘I am simply a tool for you. You have no respect for me.’

The association of Ireland with infidelity is also raised by the Act III discussion between Bertha and Beatrice, when Bertha observes ‘It looks as if it was you, Miss Justice, who brought my husband back to Ireland.’ In one of the more moving passages of the play, Bertha confesses that she has almost no clear connection to her husband: ‘I do not understand anything that he writes, when I cannot help him in any way,

<sup>11</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p. 88.

when I don't even understand half of what he says to me sometimes!' Although Beatrice is asserted to have a closer intellectual connection with Richard—something we don't really witness in the play itself—Bertha notes that 'I gave up everything for him, religion, family, my own peace,' but adds 'I am only a thing he got entangled with and my son is—the nice name they give those children. Do you think I am a stone?'<sup>14</sup> This is a telling comparison, because it is precisely a stone to which Robert rather unfeelingly compares Bertha: 'This stone, for instance. It is so cool, so polished, so delicate, like a woman's temple. It is silent, it suffers our passion; and it is beautiful. And so I kiss it because it is beautiful. And what is a woman? A work of nature, too, like a stone or a flower or a bird.'<sup>15</sup> Robert could easily have been discussing Bertha's basic function in this peculiar struggle between Robert and Richard: silent, suffering male passion, and beautiful.

In a sense, *Exiles* is a play about women's subordination to the men in their lives, whether or not that was Joyce's intention. None of the women in the play seems to have personal control or agency over her own reality. Bertha is batted like a ball back and forth between Richard and Robert. Although she has clearly allied her fortunes with Richard, she also cries out at him, 'how I wish I had never met you! How I curse that day!' and 'You do not understand anything in me—not one thing in my heart or soul. A stranger! I am living with a stranger!'<sup>16</sup> Beatrice apparently has feelings for Richard, although she cannot act upon them, and seems to have a financial need to give piano lessons. Brigid is a simple servant, but one who seems to have once been attached to Richard's home before he married Bertha, suggesting that she is also dependent upon Richard (at least the implication is that she worked previously for Richard's family prior to Bertha: 'Do you know that he used to tell me all about you and nothing to his mother, God rest

<sup>14</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p. 135.

<sup>15</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. p.141.

her soul?'). Even the Fishwoman, whose strange presence disrupts the last discussion between Robert and Richard, at least suggests a woman for whom financial necessity has driven to sell herring as an itinerant fishmonger.

What is perhaps strangest in *Exiles* is the fact that so little attention is given to the concept of exile as an actual condition. The implication is that the main exiles being considered are the Rowans who, we infer, have left Ireland and lived in Rome for nine years, during which time Richard conducted affairs, became the subject of Dublin rumors, and wrote. We may also infer that Robert remained in Ireland, thus perhaps barbing the remark in his later article about Richard, having left Ireland 'in her hour of need.' Beatrice is also in Ireland, dividing her time between a cousin with whom she has uncertain relations, and her father in Youghal. But the main problem explored in the play is not exile, but homecoming; it is a play firmly rooted in the past of the characters, and what we observe in the three acts is the conclusion of a drama begun nine years previously. It is the perfect fantasy of the expatriate: everything has frozen, or fossilized, in exactly the same unresolved tensions that one left behind. Richard has progressed—he has become an author—but a stasis seems to have befallen all the other characters.

In Joyce's notes for *Exiles*, published later by Padraic Colum, Joyce offered two conceptions of the title *Exiles*. His first is:

Why the title *Exiles*? A nation exacts a penance from those who dared to leave her payable on their return. The elder brother in the fable of the Prodigal Son is Robert Hand. The father took the side of the prodigal. This is probably not the way of the world—certainly not in Ireland: but Jesus' Kingdom was not of this world nor was or is his wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> James Joyce. *Exiles*. New York: Viking Press. 1951. p.114.

The second is:

Exiles—also because at the end either Robert or Richard must go into exile. Perhaps the new Ireland cannot contain both. Robert will go. But her thoughts will they follow him into exile as those of her sister-in-love Isolde follow Tristan?<sup>18</sup>

Yet it is this fact that is perhaps worthy of notice, because the life of the Rowans abroad, although shared and not solitary, seems to have been purely Richard's choice, and one that brought unhappiness to Bertha. Richard refers to her as 'my bride in exile,' but there is little romance in her recollections. Her description is of a woman in a foreign country, left alone by her husband—perhaps during his assignations with other women—waiting with their son, and dreaming of her homeland:

Bertha: Yes, dear. I waited for you. Heavens, what I suffered then—when we lived in Rome! Do you remember the terrace of our house?

Richard: Yes.

Bertha: I used to sit there, waiting, with the poor child with his toys, waiting till he got sleepy. I could see all the roofs of the city and the river, the Tevere. What is its name?

Richard: The Tiber.

Bertha: [Caressing her cheek with his hand] It was lovely, Dick, only I was so sad. I was alone, Dick, forgotten by you and by all. I felt my life was ended.

Richard: It had not begun.

Bertha: And I used to look at the sky, so beautiful, without a cloud and the city you said was so old: and then I used to think of Ireland and about ourselves.<sup>19</sup>

It is a powerful image of exile, if only because it seems not to have been the intended focus of the play. The main thrust of the drama is the

<sup>18</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1951.p. 123.

<sup>19</sup> Joyce. *Exiles*. 1924. pp. 152-153.

contest between Richard and Robert, with Bertha's involvement as being indicative of which contender has ascendancy in her affections. But the background of the play is really the story of Bertha: a woman sufficiently simple that she calls herself thus, who runs away with a young man whose friends think her a passing enthusiasm (and who refers to herself as 'a thing he got entangled with'), and who dreams of her homeland while waiting with their child for her man to come home. That, indeed, is the true exile of the play: the one image of the person who has lost her own ability to choose where she lives, or with whom, and in what conditions, and spends her time alone, forgotten 'by you and by all,' thinking of her native land.

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