

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

20

**JAMES JOYCE
THE JOYS OF EXILE**

*Edited by
Franca Ruggieri*

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JOYCE AS MADAMA BUTTERFLY

“Sola e rinnegata, rinnegata e felice” (“alone and renounced, renounced and happy”): the words Madama Butterfly utters in Act 1 of Puccini’s opera could be a perfect foil to the felicitous and witty title of this conference, *The Joys of Exile*, because there may be, and paradoxically, may not be at all, joy and felicity in exile if exile is the necessary and complex process which the artist must submit to in order to repossess and recreate from afar, in art, what he has voluntarily abandoned and renounced.

One of the best interpreters of Joyce’s exilic art, Italo Svevo, himself an exile in Trieste just as most Triestines were (“they love their country when they are quite sure which country it is” *GJ* 9), in his 1927 lecture at “Il Convegno” in Milan, stressed the fact that Joyce’s art originated from, and relied on, elaborating the project of exile, intended as the building up of an artistically structured echoland in which strong cultural links and connections, simultaneous resonances of words, rhythms and musical harmonies, emerged and combined to allow for a constant “sounding” of his soul, of his intimate “desire”. Only by letting himself be entirely possessed and “carried away” by the “fire” of his imagination, and by the awareness of having touched chords deep down, could Joyce the artist be admitted into the domain of art:

His ear is both the poet's and the musician's. I know that when Joyce has written a page he thinks he has written a parallel one to a musical page that he particularly likes. I do not know whether this sentiment accompanies his inspiration, I only know that he follows it, sounding his desire. As far as music is concerned he is strangely eclectic. He understands German music, Italian ancient music and popular music wherever he can find it.¹

It is in the Dublin letters to Nora of 1909, that the themes of true love, love and marriage in modern times and artistic identity² rooted in the sentiment of exile, coalesce. They are built up and modulated according to rhythmic and musical themes resounding from afar in time and space:

I was singing an hour ago your song *The Lass of Aughrim*. The tears come into my eyes and my voice trembles with emotion when I sing that lovely air. It was worth to come to Ireland to have got it from your poor mother. It is perhaps in art, Nora dearest, that you and I will find a solace for our own love. I would wish you to be surrounded by everything that is fine and beautiful and noble in art (letter of 31 August 1909, *SL* 165).

“It is perhaps in art”: we could say that it is ‘only’ in the artistic, ‘cunningly’ designed and shaped space of exile that Stephen Daedalus, the *artifex*, Joyce’s alter ego, can find the possible “solace” from “longsuffering” and a passport for a “landscape” away from wilderness and into art (“It scenes like a landscape from Wildu Picturescu”, *FW* 53 01-02) that, leading to unknown territories and coming to terms with boundless “immarginable” ones (“in the broadest way immarginable”, *FW* 4.19), testifies to his feeling part of a “grand continuum” (*FW* 472 30) and to his being able to shape himself as a complete and sound work of art, both exilic (‘escaping’) and “postexilic” (‘returning’) (“ere he

¹ Italo Svevo, Conferenza, in *Scritti su Joyce*, ed. G. Mazzacurati, Parma, Pratiche, 1986, 51 (my translation).

² The very themes of his one play, *Exiles*.

retourneys postexilic ... after decades of longsuffering and decennia of brief glory" *FW* 472.34).

The quotation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as the prefaced exergue to *A Portrait*, clearly announces the seminal role of art in the survival strategy of the Irish artist:

Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VIII, 188, P 5).

The entire plan for exile is formulated starting from the scrutiny of the "slow and dark birth" of the Irish soul:

The soul is born ... It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets (*P* 220).

Joyce's project was that of an exile *à deux*, in a sort of hermit-like exclusive artistic community in which the "trembling of souls one beside the other" and the feeling in unison, short-circuiting music and poetry, managed to intensify, to multiply echoes and perspectives through "images of spiritual purity and pity" to summon up the "beauty of the world" and make it appear:

I have felt her soul tremble beside mine, and have spoken her name softly to the night, and have wept to see the beauty of the world passing like a dream behind her eyes (letter of 19th November 1909, no salutation nor signature, *SL* 179).

Often emphasized in the letters, the sacredness of art is closely linked to intimate knowledge of the heart:

If I am to write something fine or noble in the future I shall do so only by listening to the doors of your heart. You are my only love.

You have me completely in your power until we grew to be one being together (letter of 25th October 1909 *SL* 173).

To enter the domain of art the artist needs the courage that could only come from listening to the heart of his bride. The woman should, in turn, feel reassured, encouraged and protected (“Do not fret”, postcard of 20th October 1909; *SL* 172. And again: “Do not fret, darling”, “promise me not to cry”, letter of 25th October, *SL* 173). It is precisely in the letter of 25th October that the long series of references to *Madama Butterfly* first emerges, linked to the theme of ‘giving courage’ and moral help to the artist in his enterprise (which is also the letter-writing itself):

Nora, my little bad-tempered bad mannered splendid little girl, promise me not to cry but to give me courage to go on with my work here. I wish you would go to Madame Butterfly and think of me when you hear the words “Un bel di”. Keep my letters to yourself, dear. They are written for you.

But, from the very start, Joyce finds the themes of *Madama Butterfly* referring to himself, the artist, intertwined with the musical and poetical themes of other operatic works, such as Massenet’s *Werther*:

Do you remember that Sunday evening coming home from *Werther* when the echo of that sad deathlike music was still playing in our memories that, lying on the bed in our room, I tried to say to you those verses I like so much of the *Connacht Love Song* which begins:

‘It is far and it is far

To Connemara where you are’

Do you remember that I could not finish the verses? The immense emotion of tender worship for your image which broke out in my voice as I repeated the lines was too much for me. My love for you is really a kind of adoration (letter of 27th October 1909, *SL* 175).

The sudden irruption of the motif of *Werther* in Italian (“Nel lieto di pensa a me”) – possibly also in combination with *Madama Butterfly*,

Un bel di – is reflected in the modalities by which it is transmitted, wired, in form of greetings, on 24th December 1909:

I have just wired you the beautiful motive from the last act of the opera you like so much *Werther* ‘Nel lieto di pensa a me’ (letter of 24th December 1909, *SL* 194).

In the letter of 1st November, the elaboration of the theme of exile in *Madama Butterfly* as the presentation of the artist in his absolute existential condition, constantly “bent upon himself”, who places his figure right at the centre of his work (‘sounding’ himself as well as his characters and situations), resisting the temptation of a virtuosic and inauthentic art³, reaches its acme. While referring to *Butterfly* three times in the letter, Joyce also manages to scold Nora for not understanding *Madama Butterfly*’s artistic project, for not allowing herself to be possessed and “carried away” by its music, as he was, by its “beautiful delicate music”:

The night we went to *Madama Butterfly* you treated me most rudely. I simply wanted to hear that beautiful delicate music in your company. I wanted to feel your soul swaying with languor and longing as mine did when she sings the romance of her hope in the second act *Un bel di*: ‘One day, one day we shall see a spire of smoke rising from the furthest verge of the sea; and then the ship appears’ I am a little disappointed in you. Then another night I came home to your bed from the café and I began to tell you of all I hoped to do, and to write, in the future and of those boundless ambitions which are really the leading forces in my life. You would not listen to me. But a man whose brain is on fire with hope and trust in himself *must* tell

³ Here again reference must be made to a passage by Svevo in his lecture at *Il Convegno*: “The danger impending on Joyce because of his great virtuosity was thwarted by the felicitous destiny that brought him to tell, at the very beginning of his career, the story of his youth in the *Portrait* ... When an artist remembers, he immediately creates, but one’s inner self remains, nevertheless, the very core of creation ... and virtuosity does not succeed in falsifying it”. In Svevo, *Scritti su Joyce*, 58-9 (my translation).

someone of what he feels. Whom should I tell but you? (*SL* 174, Letter of 27th October 1909).

To follow and adhere to the “romance” of his hope (*Un bel dì*) would have meant for Nora to be able to tune in and be in touch with the “fire” in Joyce’s brain, with his imagination and trust in himself, to understand his “boundless” ambitions in the creation of beauty and of nobleness in beauty.

The total devotion, the endless labour Puccini and Joyce applied to their works was very similar: their multilayered musical and verbal texts implied constant negotiation with other texts and authors (Puccini with his librettists and with other musicians, but also with visual artists⁴, Joyce with the whole world of literature and art). We might indeed feel entitled to adopt Butterfly’s aria *Un bel dì* as a comment on the struggle both authors had to undergo to produce their works, and more or less at the same time (Joyce fighting to have *Dubliners* published; Puccini, since 1904, after the flop at La Scala, Milan, looking for a second chance – “e avrò la rivincita” over public and critics – strenuously working on *Madama Butterfly* to the point of producing innumerable different versions):

one day, one day we shall see a spire of smoke rising from the furthest verge of the sea and then the ship appears (letter of 27th October 1909, *SL* 174, Joyce’s translation).

And the scene of *Un bel dì* is rehearsed, referring to Joyce and Nora (“when I first catch sight of you”), several times in the letters of 1909, even adopting the same cinematographic eye of Puccini, Pinkerton being featured, in Butterfly’s mind, as “a little speck” (“un picciol punto”) in the distance when climbing the hill in order to meet her (“uscito dalla folla cittadina / un uomo, un picciol punto / s’avvia per la collina. / Chi sarà?

⁴ *Per sogni e per chimere. Giacomo Puccini e le arti visive*, Lucca, Edizioni Fondazione Raggiante, 2018.

Chi sarà?) and harping on the theme of constantly “waiting” that does not “weary” Butterfly (“e non mi pesa/ la lunga attesa”):

How strange will it be when I first catch sight of you! To think of you waiting, waiting there for me to come back! (letter of 7th September 1909, *SL* 171).

The various versions of *Madama Butterfly*⁵ all have something to do with putting the focus on Madama Butterfly’s state of exile, trying to achieve the right balance between the acts and adopt the appropriate rhythms in words and in music. Just as with Joyce, rhythms, cadences and tunes are rooted in memory, subtly and obsessively pervading and conditioning the artist (Puccini to Giuseppe Giacosa: “I found myself *caught* (emphasis mine) in a rhythm” and, in the same letter: “I need heptasyllabic, not octosyllabic verses”; and to Illica: “write decasyllabic verses, so that I can write a song in march time”⁶). Times and rhythms were being recreated by knitting together and superimposing cadences (as in the case of the combined national anthems of Japan and America associated with the characters and infiltrating the music), poetical metres and occasionally interweaving sounds and noises or animal cries rendered by musical instruments, to generate unheard of musical timbres.

Severe cuts had to be made by Puccini in order to get rid of minute trivialities connected with Japanese life, ultimately rarefying the atmosphere to make it less frivolous and petit-bourgeois and more stringently tragic, abstract and universal (as the subtitle of *Madama Butterfly*, ‘una tragedia’, suggests).

⁵ July 1905, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden; 1906, Paris, Théâtre National de l’Opéra Comique; 1907, La Fenice, Venice (possibly the version that Joyce heard in Trieste).

⁶ G. Puccini, “Lettere a Illica e Giacosa”, July 1903, quoted in *Madama Butterfly, fonti e documenti della genesi*, eds. A. Groos, V. Bernardoni, G. Biagi Ravenni, D. Schickling, (Lucca, Maria Pacini Fazzi editore: 2005), 388-91.

Apart from the fashionable orientalism in the presentation of Japan at the time in literary works like those by Pierre Loti, *Mme. Chrysanthème* – also a play produced in 1898 – and in music, as in Mascagni's *Iris* – produced at Teatro Costanzi, Rome in 1898 and at Teatro alla Scala, Milan, in 1899,⁷ to quote just a few, the layers of Puccini's dramatic and musical art in composing *Madama Butterfly* were conditioned more specifically by his actual sources: the short story of the American author J. Luther Long (published in the magazine *Century* in 1898 and in Italian in *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La lettura* in February-March 1904) and, more cogently, by the one act play of David Belasco, which Puccini had seen in London, at the Duke of York's Theatre in 1901, enjoying it so much, as legend has it, that he immediately asked for the rights to compose an opera about it. Negotiations started in 1902 over the adaptation of the text on which two different authors, with different literary tastes, were set at work: Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa.

From 17th February 1904, when *Madama Butterfly* had been premièred at La Scala, ending up as a catastrophic flop, Puccini had been incessantly at work on what would be for him, apparently, a never-ending task (as he wrote in his letters), aimed at getting the 'right' balance between acts and rhythms (as was, in fact, eventually achieved in Brescia, three months later, when *Madama Butterfly* enjoyed a great success).

The number of acts was constantly changed (first conceived of as a one act opera, possibly influenced by Belasco's play, then as two acts, sung "in a single breath", "tutto d'un fiato", as Puccini would have liked it, and then as three acts). Puccini constantly tried to match dramatic and musical structures fitting the music to the themes (the "Star Spangled Banner" motif, from the American national anthem, at the time just the anthem of the Navy, and the Japanese anthem, as well as Japanese popular music, in pentatonic scale, interwoven and sounding out at appropriate moments).

⁷ Arturo Toscanini was the conductor; the libretto was written by Luigi Illica.

According to a very strict strategy, corrections and adaptations had to be made to make the personalities of the characters and the presentation of their differing antagonistic worlds, Japan and America, sharper, more abstract and absolute (just like the bipartition Moon, referring to Butterfly and Sun, referring to Pinkerton). Puccini had to abolish the trivial details of the first act, and, at the same time, he had to add arias such as “Addio fiorito asil” (“Farewell flowery refuge”) to make the character of Pinkerton more acceptable on a human level. He even had to see to the adaptation of the characters’ names according to the linguistic conventions of different countries: this was the case with Pinkerton, when he had to be turned into Linkerton, since in German-speaking areas ‘Pinkerton’ apparently had obscene overtones.

The radical exile of Butterfly in her own country had started with her renouncing her native language and name (even producing ludicrous examples of English, in Belasco’s play, with Butterfly naively wanting to reproduce American habits), her nationality, religion, gods and ancestors’ (which Pinkerton calls, derogatorily, “pupazzi”, ‘puppets’), and relatives and friends (which Pinkerton calls “musi”, ‘gooks’). But the ultimate tragic element of her exile is the presence of a fair-haired blue-eyed son, in the libretto known by the name “Dolore”, (‘Trouble’), a speechless mime (even presented as a puppet in some productions) and a “dispossessed son”, utterly deprived of identity, waving an incongruous American flag.

The motif of Love and Death as presented in fin-de-siècle literary works (as we see in d’Annunzio), together with the romantic motif of the ‘seduced and abandoned’ girl (the very theme of “Nora’s” song, *The Lass of Aulgrim*), cast in the mould of the ‘temporary wife’ and the ‘temporary marriage’ motif (the wife being unashamedly bought for 100 yen, in the case of Butterfly, this being perfectly possible, according to Japanese law), was also emphasised in the presentation of the symbolically precarious character of the Japanese house. It is mobile and “frivolous” (“scivola, la casa frivola”: “it slides, the mobile house”), as it changes shape continually, owing to its system of sliding doors (“una casa a soffietto”, a ‘folding’ and “elastic” house). It represents the impossible definition of ‘love’ in modern times (“Amore o

grillo?” “Love or whim?”, “love or possession?”). In Puccini, the character of the “vagabond” American is introduced by the famous aria: “dovunque al mondo” (‘anywhere in the world’), which presents the American “vagabond” as dropping anchor at will and colonizing any country (‘colonial’ being a term which Joyce would ultimately turn into “coglionial”, as in “before his coglionial expancian”, in *Finnegans Wake*, 488.31).

With Butterfly, the theme of honour (Butterfly kills herself with a hara-kiri weapon, sent by the emperor when he imposed suicide on her father, and an ominous prop from the very start) and the noble heart in love are linked to that of an “unfailing faith” (“con sicura fede”) in waiting. We recall the quotation from Joyce’s letter:

If I am to write something fine or noble in the future I shall do so only by listening to the doors of your heart (letter of 25th October 1909, *SL* 173).

With that, the aria *Un bel dì* becomes inextricably linked to the presentation of radical exile, tormented love, literary labour and the creation, through noble sublime art, of the “supreme artist. In these letters Joyce presents himself as a repentant Pinkerton who will bring his son back to Trieste rather than taking him away from Nora-Butterfly, therefore succeeding in becoming one with Nora in love, the project of exile turning into a true artistic construct.

The condition of being separated for some months was seen by both Nora and James as a major test to understand the nature and soundness of their identities in love, involving truth and faithfulness, but also to check on secret desires, tastes, ideals, and religious and political affiliations, which might lead to radical choices such as renouncing one’s own country or adopting a new one (Trieste, “*la nostra bella Trieste*”, letter of 7th September 1909, *SL* 170).

The choice of exile *à deux*, for Joyce no less than for Butterfly, involved isolation, desolation (the Joycean fake etymology of ‘deprivation of sun’ is made literal in Puccini, as Pinkerton is “the Sun” that risks not reappearing), deprivation of mother tongue (to be seen as a

tragicomic example in the ludicrous Japanese-English of Butterfly in the David Belasco play), names (even the naming is Pinkerton's choice: "I nomi che mi dava", 'the names he gave me')⁸, religion (as to Joyce, Catholicism is a Syriac religion and a religion which admitted adulterous priests, and is therefore to be renounced), institutions, law, nationality, ancestors, relatives and friends. All this often necessarily involves rejection, scorn and hate ("the common Dublin people, whom I hate and despise"⁹), generating a sense of disorientation over one's own identity, work and place in the world. Joyce felt he was a "stranger" in his own country and extended this feeling to his own son ("my son ... will always be a foreigner in Ireland, a man speaking another language and bred in a different tradition"¹⁰).

In the situation of self-imposed exile, the arms for survival and ultimately, for success, consisted of, as the *Portrait* has it, "silence, exile and cunning":

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland my church and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or arts freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use silence, exile and cunning (*P*, 233)

Far from agreeing with Sebastian Knowles' statement that "His (Joyce's) only comment about him (Puccini) is contained in a letter of 27th October 1909 shortly after he had taken her to see *Madama Butterfly* which enjoyed a successful première (with the public, if not with the critics)" (Knowles 2014: 51), I would like to emphasize the central role of *Madama Butterfly* in the whole work of Joyce. He not only addressed Nora as "My dear Butterfly" (and, in the same letter: "nearly as warm

⁸ In Joyce: "Nora, Nora mia, Norina, Noretta, Norella, Noruccia ecc. ecc.": letter of 16th December 1909, *SL* 191.

⁹ Letter of 22nd October 1909, *SL* 172.

¹⁰ Letter of 27th October 1909, *SL* 174.

as certain districts of your body, Butterfly”, and again: “Do not fret, little Butterfly”¹¹), but clearly incorporated Butterfly as a set feature in his exilic world and work, applying the same adjectives to her that Puccini attributed to Butterfly, from “strange” (Puccini: “bimba dagli occhi pieni di malia”; Joyce: “strange eyes and the shadow of a strange, strange girl standing silently by the fire”¹²), to “silent” (“My little silent Nora”¹³ for Joyce; “grazietta silenziosa” for Puccini). However, for both Joyce and Puccini, it is the very quality of their voices: “mysterious” (both in Nora and in Butterfly), that both reveals the depth of their souls and the possibilities for art they possess.

A totally disembodied (and artistic) Butterfly is in Puccini just a “mysterious voice”, coalescing with the ‘voice’ of the “humming chorus”, the ethereal voice of ‘immarginable’ spaces, described as the “gran ponte del cielo”¹⁴, mysterious, undefinable, at the same time a lullaby and a threnody, an example of the “deathlike music”, Joyce had found in Massenet’s *Werther*.¹⁵

Featuring two people listening to their own hearts acting in unison (“to tremble of love for you at the sounding of some chord or cadence of music”¹⁶), Joyce’s exile coincides with the shaping of the “supreme artist” (“think of me when you hear the words”¹⁷), since “noble” and “nobleness” are terms and concepts repeated many times in the letters, and in direct relation to the artist’s vocation. The sublime, tragic and epic stance in exile may even amount to the setting up, and planning, in various ways and through many devices, as is the case with Butterfly, of the ceremony of death, which, literally uniting both exile and the return from exile, the post-exile, attributes to the project an absolute symbolic dimension.

¹¹ Letter of 1st November 1909, *SL* 176.

¹² Letter of 19th November 1909, *SL* 179.

¹³ Letter of 7th September 1909 *SL*, 169.

¹⁴ Letter to Emma Cuzzi of 7th December 1915, *SL* 220, in Italian.

¹⁵ Letter of 27th October 1909, *SL* 175.

¹⁶ Letter of 2nd December 1909, *SL* 181.

¹⁷ Letter of 25th October 1909, *SL* 173.

In the passage from the *Portrait*, the term ‘exile’, placed at the centre of the sentence, looks both ways, to ‘silence’ and ‘cunning’, the two terms become in turn meaningful only if they are interpreted in the light of the centrality of ‘exile’. Here again we find Joyce and Puccini acting hand in hand. I shall not speak of Joyce’s silences because each one of us may, (indeed, must) have his own examples. I will speak only of Puccini’s silences as totally representative of Joyce’s silences.

Belasco’s fairly short play contained 14 minutes of silence: an unprecedented feature that apparently shocked the unprepared public. Whether Puccini assumed it (together with the transcription in musical terms of colours and electric light effects) as a sign of modernity to be adopted and shared is for critics of dramatic music to say, but the multimedial use of instruments, voices, noises and cries (present in the orchestra, but also, for separate and improvised use, directly on stage with Japanese tam tams, bells, *viole d’amore*), is a strategy that Puccini and the ‘multinstrumentalist’ Joyce certainly have in common.

Just like Joyce, Puccini had a way of making missing elements seem felt and active presences which not only suggest but actually dictate the visual in the text: it is the definition of *Madama Butterfly* by her mysterious voice and enigmatic silence (“*grazietta silenziosa*”), together with the drawn-out sounds of the wordless Humming Chorus, in which the voices are used as musical instruments (a very rare technique at the time¹⁸), that represents a major example of silence, letting space speak, in order to attribute to exile its absolute, objective dimension. The dramatic presence of *Butterfly*’s nameless child, “*Dolore*”, present as in a mime in the last scene, produces a similar effect.

And what about ‘cunning’? I would say that being a multifaceted term (connecting art and craftsmanship, and what is immaterial and material), ‘cunning’ could well be a concept capable of embodying and expressing the whole complexity of exile, of representing exile itself as

¹⁸ Laura Basini, “Puccini’s Humming Chorus with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle”, 393.404, in eds A. Groos and V. Bernardoni,

Madama Butterfly: l’orientalismo di fine secolo, l’approccio pucciniano, la ricezione, Firenze, L.S. Olschki, 2008.

art, as the invention and the construction of the rarefied, vertiginous, boundless space in which art can be created.

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