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13

WHY READ JOYCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

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CONTENTS

Enrico Terrinoni
Preface. Why read Joyce at all? .... p. 13

Spurgeon Thompson
*Returning to political interpretation:
a communist* Finnegans Wake .... » 17

Claire Culleton
Strick's Ulysses *and war: why we read Joyce in the 21st Century* .... » 37

Paul Fagan
"a mixer and wordpainter": Finnegans Wake
in the age of remix culture .... » 49

Jonathan McCreedy
The Death of a Joyce Scholar *and* The Further Adventures
of James Joyce: *the crossroads of two reading publics* .... » 69

Erika Mihálycsa
Horsey women and arse-temises: wake-ing Ulysses *in translation* .... » 79

Benjamin Boysen
*Joyce's "politicoecomedy": on James Joyce's humorous deconstruction
of ideology in* Finnegans Wake .... » 93

Ilaria Natali
*Joyce's "corpo straniero": the European dimension of Irishness
in four border crossings* .... » 105

Maria Vaccarella
A medical humanistic exploration of James Joyce ....» 121

Emanuela Zirzotti
Have you ever "seen" Joyce? The role of the Internet
in the popularization of the man and his work ....» 131

Patricia Pericic
The limits to literature in Ulysses *in the 21st Century*..........................» 145

Ivu I-chu Chang
Ulysses *backed against the sea: Taiwan's alternative modernity*
in Wang Wen-hsing's Backed Against the Sea......................................» 155

Thierry Robin
Joyce's "ghosts"…, Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett and John Banville.....» 169

Maria Grazia Tonetto
The body of finitude..» 185

Federico Sabatini
Contemporary Joyce: Joycean themes and stylistic techniques
in William Trevor's writings ....» 193

Andrea Binelli
Joyce and what is to become of English...» 209

Andrea Binelli

JOYCE AND WHAT IS TO BECOME OF ENGLISH

The fact that the title of this book is a question arguably exempts the contributors from explaining the reasons why one should read Joyce in the 21st century, as it would have actually been the case if there had been no question mark in the same title. In the latter case, contributors should have not avoided providing an answer to the question under scrutiny. In fact, a book, an essay, any research revolving around an interrogative can legitimately tackle it by exploring data and ideas, facts and hypotheses that better illustrate the rationale, context, and circumstances of such interrogation, without daring to answer it in the first place. It is presumably in this understanding that not few articles within this collection and much writing in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences are not so likely to answer queries and to solve issues as to posit further questions. And to be sure, a note of pride can easily be distinguished whenever a novel, thought-provoking question is intriguingly formulated. Accordingly, the number of hopefully constructive doubts and unanswered questions increases as a scholarly tradition of genuine and healthy skepticism is confirmed in its essential respects.

Nobody should deny that such a critical approach has historically ushered in innovative perspectives and sensibilities, ground-breaking debates and methodological developments, thus shaping a theoretical awareness to which the progress of human thought and knowledge owes much. And to acknowledge this obviously does not mean to argue that answers are never welcome. As a matter of fact, when I first thought about how I could contribute to this collection, I was initially taking into consideration matters and viewpoints that would have done pretty much the same job described above: I was starting from a question to end with another. To simplify and possibly cheapen it, I was going to recapitulate and examine several scholars' ideas about how and why a literary author like Joyce is and will be appreciated on account of linguistic and semiotic factors we are still at pains to define. And yet, at some stage I realized what I was doing and I reckoned

that, for a change, I could have taken that sentence, "Why should one read Joyce in the 21st century?" for what it really was: a question.

Much of what I had already written and several notes were thus thrown, as I eventually grasped that, as far as my experience as a reader of Joyce was concerned, the title of this book was actually not so difficult a question. And this was not so because it enabled several possible answers. Actually, even though one answer only had been allowed, i.e., if I had had to point out the main reason why I keep on taking *Dubliners*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake* down from the shelf, the question would have not turned into a troublesome one. Then, why? Because of the expressive means in which the characters' perception and experience of place, time, events and people around them are couched in those books. In other terms, it is my contention that Joyce's literary works, and his mature production in particular, could and should be read before going to bed and during the weekends of the years to come on account of their language. Again, the reasons for this answer are diverse and all worth considering in their own right. Moreover, they are answers, not questions. So, the present essay is no more than a quick-and-dirty attempt at listing these reasons.

A good reason to read Joyce today and to take pleasure and benefit from his language is that during the last three decades a wealth of studies has been published which investigated Irish English and brought our knowledge of it to unprecedented levels. The advancement was made possible by the rejection of ideological biases and hazy methods of linguistic analysis which had quite often jeopardized the objectivity of the previous research. As Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh argued in "Language, Ideology and National Identity", "[l]anguage has operated as a vehicle for debates concerned with cultural identity and political legitimacy in Ireland", thus proving a key factor of "cultural discrimination" and identity formation (Ó Tuathaigh 2005, 42). Likewise, Tony Crowley began his *Wars of Words. Politics of Language in Ireland 1537-2004* by warning that the history of language in Ireland is concerned with "proprietorship, sovereignty, cultural struggle, progress, purity, racial identity, authenticity", and, as a consequence, it has too often turned into a story of these 'causes': "the history" he asserted, "has suffered greatly in the past from simplification" (Crowley 2005, 1).

As regards linguistics, ideological problems were therefore likely to arise, for instance, when it came to interpreting the sources of the features of the Irish variety of English. Scholars tended to split up when they had

to decide whether these features derived from language contact, primarily between local vernaculars and Lowland Scottish, West/North Midland and South/west regional varieties of English (superstratum hypothesis), or from the retention of inherited Irish vernacular input, which was recorded to prevail in substratumist interpretations (Hickey 2005, 19-23). In this respect, one should not forget that for decades, not even the name of the language spoken in Ireland was a peaceful matter. Anglo-Irish (derived from literary studies), Hiberno-English (erudite and obscure), Brogue (a derogatory term for the accent to be heard in certain rural areas of the Republic of Ireland), and Irish English (more neutral) are just some of the many labels alternatively used according to the speaker/writer's beliefs regarding certain political and social issues (Kallen 1997, vii). Moreover, this area of research has been gaining much from the potentialities of machine-readable corpora and electronic resources in general. The works by Raymond Hickey, Marku Filppula, John M. Kirk and Jeffrey L. Kallen and are good cases in point.

What is of interest here is that drawing from these fruitful works it is increasingly possible to investigate and weigh the contribution of Irish English to Joyce's language. The awareness as to the peculiarities of Irish English can help us gain a better understanding of which stylemes may be regarded as distinguishing traits of an individual *écriture* and which of them are rather the outcome of "the most neglected major element of James Joyce's style: his use of the Anglo-Irish dialect of English", as Richard Wall had to observe only twenty-six years ago (Wall 1986, 9). In fact, Irish English has often been pointed out as a potential source of estrangement in Joyce's writing. Initially it is employed as a narrative device of characterization. For instance, in "The Dead" Greta's western speech is particularly marked when she tells her husband about Michael Fury and this is presumably meant to differentiate her from the Dublin context with which her husband can be identified and to deepen the distance between them. Subsequently, the influence of the Gaelic lexicon, syntactical patterns and dominant rhetorical figures actually grew into a powerful semiotic means, especially in his last masterworks. More specifically, according to Katie Wales, the influence of Irish on Joyce's style becomes evident in his inclination to alliterations, figures of sound repetition, distinctive rhythms, hyperbolic statements and ironical understatements, the frequency of topicalisations and noun-centred constructions, idiomatic expressions and lexical items (Wales 1992, 7-25), some of which can hardly be understood by British and American readers with no background in Irish English.

Those who are familiar with Joyce's biography and 'character' may well argue that the likelihood of misunderstandings of this kind was probably not a side effect of his choice, nor something he was not expecting. Among many others, C. George Watson concentrated on the thematisation of such a problematic relationship with English—so foreign and so familiar—in the P*ortrait* and on the many references to it in Joyce's letters, and concluded that he was "obsessed with the sense of a gapped and fractured culture, arising from the dispossession of a language" (Watson 1979, 152). According to Seamus Deane, in response to the lack of a native language that could articulate his attachment to his own culture, Joyce eventually opted for a style which seems to bring a rhetoric of familiarity and a rhetoric of estrangement together and "eloquently represents aphasia" (Deane 1999, 96). Like Stephen Dedalus, who tried to shape an identity of his own by refusing most of the material forces he experienced in life (England, Ireland, church and mother), Joyce escaped a national character by consistently mediating his narration "through a recourse to the phantasmal", because, in Deane's words again, "the real subject and the real country are, in Irish conditions, representable only as the unreal" (*Ibid.*, 97).

Phantasms and mental images are crucial to Joyce's style. In this respect, literary critics and scholars from several areas including Sociology and Geography, Semiotics and Sociolinguistics, Cultural Studies and Media Theory, have focused on the importance of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* for what can be broadly defined the verbal representation of the cognitive processes which are part of the human experience of the Real. Their interest seems to be stirred by Joyce's ability to update a medium which had grown distant from the modern and urbanized world of perception and, as Stephen Kern pointed out, to tune it to a revolutionized phenomenological landscape. This revolution arguably accounted for Joyce's elaboration of a "new mode of textuality" (Rabaté 2001, 196). Reformulated within the framework of literary studies, this means to say that Joyce's achievements were made possible by and sometimes coincided with an aggressively modernist experimentation of narrative techniques and modes of representation.

This process of formal renewal was in fact to exert a crucial influence over our understanding of literature as well as over the writing of generations of authors. Small wonder that, as soon as *Ulysses* was published, it was its very literariness that was immediately questioned: "It was not at all clear what kind of book it was," Hugh Kenner had to recall, "*Ulysses* seemed […]

as featureless as a telephone directory" (Kenner 1987, 2). Any time the literary canon is stimulated, and maybe defied, by the appearance of a captivating, socially relevant, and yet apparently amorphous work, a new idea of literature becomes necessary to make sense of the more or less radical formal changes that the new work entails. Declan Kiberd may have acknowledge this very state of affairs when he went so far as to argue that "Joyce may have exploded the novel, much as Cervantes did the epic and romance [...] and it is very likely that *Ulysses* is cast in a form for which, even yet, there is no name" (Kiberd 1992, LXXX).

A most appealing perspective on the history of literature can in fact be enjoyed if we look at it as the history of literary forms, of genres and styles. In a similar vein, Franco Moretti's geographical approach to literature holds that literary forms, conceived as abstracts of social relationships and tensions, are subject to evolutionary dynamics whereby only those forms that transform so as to suit the always changing epistemologies can survive. The others are deemed to perish. Heteroglossia and the stream of consciousness—of which Joyce was a master—have not only survived, they have increasingly become effective communicative tools and expressive means in the twentieth century novel.

Joyce mastered them to give a voice to torn identities and fragmented spirits, to express the rupture of space and time, and to find correspondences between a character's mind and the rain of stimuli assailing him/her in a European metropolis. According to Philip Fisher, Joyce inaugurated a post-Romantic poetics suitable to represent the shift from narration to tabulation, from memory to information, from the psychological experience of 'looking at' to that of 'looking around'. The need to account for "a multiple, distracted, interrupted spatial experience" (Fisher 2006, 668), one which "encourages a scanning and leveling of reality" (*Ibid.,* 669) brought him to inaugurate a defamiliarized language of distraction. So familiar and so foreign, one is tempted to say again. It is not by chance that *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* feature many more occurrences of Irish English expressions than Joyce's earlier works. Arguably, the necessity to locate the chaotic fragmentation in the characters' mental life accounted for superficial, transitory and disconnected communicative forms that seem to anticipate Twitter messages. The following quotation reproduces Stephen's train of thoughts and it could easily be disguised as a collection of short, sprawling, and incisive tweets he may be posting, one after the other, while walking on Sandymount strand:

> Reading two pages apiece of seven books every night, eh? I was young. You bowed to yourself in the mirror, stepping forward to applause earnestly, striking face. Hurray for the Goddamned idiot! Hray! No-one saw: tell no-one. Books you were going to write with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara. Pico della Mirandola like. Ay, very like a whale. (2000, 123)

And the same applies to Bloom while he is eating at Davy Byrne's:

> Touched his sense moistened remembered. Hidden under wild ferns on Howth. Below us bay sleeping sky. No sound. The sky. The bay purple by the Lion's head. Green by Drumleck. Yellowgreen towards Sutton. […] Joy: I ate it: joy. Young life, her lips that gave me pouting. Soft, warm, sticky gumjelly lips. Flowers her eyes were, take me, willing eyes. Pebbles fell. She lay still. A goat. No-one. High on Ben Howth rhododendrons a nannygoat walking surefooted, dropping currants. Screened under ferns she laughed warmfolded. (2000, 283)

Wittgenstein believed that the limits of language match those of our world. In *Ulysses*, and even more in *Finnegans Wake*, a similar fascination with language turns into a challenge to expand the dimensions of our world. Rather than complaining about the impossibility of communication, Joyce won that very challenge by developing new communicative possibilities and creating beforehand expressive means that were to characterize Twenty-First century media services. My final contention—and my answer to the question of the title—is therefore that Joyce's books should be read because in them there is still much to be found about what is to happen to English in future.

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