

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

13

**WHY READ JOYCE
IN THE 21ST CENTURY?**

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PREFACE

ENRICO TERRINONI

WHY READ JOYCE AT ALL?

Judging by the attendance at Joycean symposia and gatherings around the globe, one would believe that those good crowds of readers are just the tip of the iceberg, and that Joyce is still an important presence in the reading market nowadays. One might even be tempted to suspect that our modern societies are full of crypto-Joyce scholars, who are not joiners and therefore rather prefer to adhere to their own personal forms of Joyceanism, without feeling the need to be part of any of the known sects. In fact, if modern and contemporary literature is quite unimaginable without the many echoes of Joyce's works that surface here and there, at times unexpectedly, in other writers' writings, one wonders whether Joyce still has a real impact on the common reader today. If the early works, *Dubliners* and *A Portrait*, are indeed an important part of our cultural heritage, due also to the fact that they are still read and studied at school, to say that *Ulysses* or even the *Wake* enjoy the same status can be to overstate the actual presence of Joyce in the literary scenario, especially for new generations of readers.

Nowadays, with all our free and shared knowledge, and despite our precious Wikipedia summaries of books, we have to acknowledge the sad truth that while some of Joyce's works are known, almost by heart, by many interpreters and fans around the world, they still remain obscure, or even neglected and forgotten, by an enormous number of readers.

Why read Joyce at all, then? The question comes to one's mind as a sort of reflection on the title of this collection, a title which implies that Joyce was indeed read in the 20th century. Alas, that century is gone. To be sure, that was a century we would not be in a position to interpret without including Joyce in the picture. Joyce helped us make sense of what happened in the short century we left behind, but not only that. Joyce's rethinking of

the world of literature shed light also on past centuries, on our common history, East and West, North and South. Joyce helped us spot the futility of partitions and sectarianisms in his attempt to bring together the culture of mankind by building encyclopedic masterpieces which became in turn almost reference books for many readers.

But what about today? Are Joyce's works still to be considered unavoidable by readers, as Joyce scholars often seem to take for granted? Do we still need those books to understand better not only modern and contemporary literature and culture, but the world that surrounds us, with the many others we meet every day outside our doors, with their untold stories and their unsaid truths?

We need a better excuse to describe his works as fundamental as far as modern culture is concerned than stylistic mastery, literary cunning, or the capacity to map our unconscious. Though Joyce's books help make visible what is thought to be invisible and immaterial in our lives, we need something better than that to "sell" them to younger generations of readers.

In recent times, youths have been exposed to all sorts of complex representations of reality, they know well the potential of fast links and connections through technology, they can retrieve even obscure information through channels that would be a mine of gold for wise researchers. The fear is that Joyce, for all his pre-post-modernism, will not stupefy anymore those young kids who are used to the possibilities afforded them by the Internet—to mention only one of the big changes and challenges of our modern world.

What do new readers need to know that they do not know yet in order to persuade them that to read Joyce, when they are still young, will open their minds? When you have been exposed to the infiniteness of the universe, the utterly complex story of our wonderful world seems but an atom. And, what was the role of Joyce criticism in all that? Did it help find new reasons why Joyce *has* to be (re)read? No doubt, the Joyce industry is one of the most flourishing in the literary scenario, and every day a new approach to Joyce is presented. But how self-enclosed is the community of Joyce experts? How far does the impact of their discoveries go? And, does the humanism of Joyce's message not get lost along the way, in our attempt to dig up the secrets he left for us to discover, in years, decades, and centuries of hard exegetic work? Finally, is the pleasure of reading Joyce really passed on to new readers outside the academic circles through our specialist readings?

Of course, nobody could realistically be nowadays in a position to find comprehensive answers to all the above questions. However, some suggestions may come from the words of another master of the 20th century, Jorge Luis Borges, who in his “Invocation to Joyce” wrote:

what does my lost generation matter,
that dim mirror,
if your books justify us?
I am the others. I am those
who have been rescued by your pains and care.
I am those unknown to you and saved by you. (<2012>)

Is Borges’s confession enough to persuade everybody that Joyce is still there to help us when we need him? Of course not. Let’s look then at the “wisdom” of another Irish writer, who also provided a very personal interpretation of the role of James Joyce in modern culture: a famous communist Irish republican by the name of Brendan Behan. He was an IRA volunteer with little time for linguistic abstrusity. His language is always very direct, and he was never lost for words. When he went to Spain in the fifties he declared to the custom officer there: “I have come to attend the funeral of General Franco,” and when the man answered “But the Generalissimo still lives,” Brendan said, “in that case, I’ll wait.” Like Joyce, he was something of an exile. He spent much of his life away from his country, and from his family too. Ireland, he said, was a nice place to get a card from. He was often away also because he was forcefully kept from home. Being, as he boasted, the “most captured Irish republican in history,” he spent several years in prison. He lived for some time in Paris, and though Joyce was not there when Brendan was haunting bohemian cafés and bars, the Irish master helped him all the same, just as he helped Borges:

Here in the Rue St André des Arts,
Plastered in an Arab Tavern,
I explain you to an eager Frenchman,
Ex-G.I.s and a drunken Russian.
Of all you wrote I explain each part,
Drinking Pernod in France because of your art. (1960, 179)

A good reason to read Joyce today is that he can still save us. One would be wrong, though, if one thought of redemption, of course, or any-

thing to that extent. The type of rescue involved here is a bit more profane, if you like. Joyce can help us see through the surface of what we take to be “discourse”, but which is actually nothing but another masked version of reality. He can help us understand that our existence is, in the end, a material affair, and that even when we deal with immaterial stuff (memory, the soul, psyche), a good way to make sense of the world is to understand that the surface of things is nothing but a shadow.

Men constantly live in the shadow, as Giordano Bruno taught us (see 1997). Joyce was fond of Bruno and perhaps one of the most important teachings he got from the Nolan is that, though always encompassed and constrained by the changing countours of this worldly shadowiness, we can still attempt to grasp what is beyond “our mortal world”, only to know that the outside of our shadows is still “a darkness shining in brightness which brightness could not comprehend” (1992, 28).

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