

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

21

**LANGUAGE
AND LANGUAGES
IN JOYCE'S FICTION**

Edited by
Serenella Zanotti

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JOYCE'S "PINOCCHIOISM":
THE LANGUAGE OF LIES IN JOYCE'S ART

In this age of fake news, misinformation, fake reality and post truth, lies, lying and deceit have grown so central as to have become in recent years the object of numberless inquiries, reflections and investigations for psychologists, philosophers, sociologists, scholars, scientists and even, very recently, the Pope.¹ Of course lying and deceit have always received a great deal of attention in western culture, from Plato and Aristotle onwards, but it is notable how the language of lies has become such a central cultural preoccupation in our time. In such a climate, the literary critic (and even more so the critic who investigates Joyce's texts) is inspired to turn a scrutinising eye to the literary cosmos, in search of lies, untruths, deceits, dissemblers, liars and fibbers in order to verify their presence, examine their function and explore their meaning in texts, plots, narrations, and even interpretations.

The task is indeed insidious. Like any enquiry wrestling with universal issues and behaviors such as lying – Jean Michel Rabaté tells us, in his *The Ethics of the Lie*, that we lie very often, “at least three times a day” (p. 1) – the first problem one inevitably faces is theoretical, a problem which in our case is intensified by the fact that the topic at stake is connected to concepts such as truth and reality, and to ethical and hermeneutical intricacies such as awareness, honesty, veracity and – conversely – dishonesty, falsity, untruthfulness. Indeed, what is a lie? When is it that, among the many types of deceit, negation of reality/truth, dissimulation, falsehood, fabrication, we can really talk of lying?

¹ <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2018/01/24/0062/00120.html#en>

To start with an observation, a basic yet generally neglected aspect of lying is that lies are a language, or rather a type of language. The very rich and articulate entry on “Lie” that one finds in Wikipedia defines them as a “linguistic universal”,² a very appropriate definition indeed. Lies are signs and they are so deeply involved with issues of language, communication, and semiotics that Umberto Eco famously resorted to them when he gave his own, paradoxical definition of semiotics: “Thus *semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie*. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used ‘to tell’ at all” (Eco 1976: 7, emphasis in the original). Alasdair MacIntyre, too, in his celebrated essay “Truthfulness, Lies and Moral Philosophers”, unequivocally connects lying with language when he explains that the rule prescribing truth-telling is a rule “that we all learned to follow by learning to speak our native language, whatever it is. That rule governs speech-acts of assertion. To assert is always and inescapably to assert as true, and learning that truth is required from us in assertions is therefore inseparable from learning what it is to assert”; he then continues by quoting Johansen and Stenius, two philosophers of language, who suggested that “the utterance of a falsehood is really a breach of semantic rule” (MacIntyre 1994: 311-2).

Lying is a linguistic phenomenon because the vast majority of lies are utterances directed to a listener, which operate according to specific laws and which share a common logic. It is also a highly performative type of language because it has the power to conjure an alternative, false reality in substitution, or even in opposition to the true one.³ Furthermore, lie-telling is connected to language also from the point of view of rhetoric: according to neuroscientists and psychologists, in spite of themselves, liars are forced, by the emotional toll that lying takes, to use certain peculiar linguistic patterns and narrative strategies which may even give them

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lie>

³ Since lies are mostly made of words and with words, it is indicative that the verb that is often associated with the term “lie” is in many languages a linguistic verb: just as in English you tell a lie, you do not “do” a lie, or “make” a lie, so in French the term is “dire une mensogne”, in Italian “dire una bugia, raccontar balle”, in Spanish “cuentar bolas”, and in German “Lügen erzählen”.

away if spotted by observers, so much so that one of the approaches to studying and analysing lie-telling is linguistic text analysis⁴.

The debate of moral philosophers on lies and lying is limitless and fascinating, and the sheer size of it emphasises how intricate and unpredictably complex the act of lying (and the type of lies within which humans can operate with) actually is. Disputes and positions within the moral tradition are so numerous, different from one another and so culturally denoted that even the boundaries between ethically ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ lies – between acts of lying for permissible (or even just) reasons and condemnable forms of deceit – are unstable and controversial.

In my very compressed attempt to define the unsteady features of lie-telling, I will refer to two philosophical texts – Jacques Derrida’s *Histoire du Mensonge* (2005) and Maria Bettetini’s *Breve Storia della Bugia* (2001) – which, from a philosophical point of view, explore the notion of lying and outline its cultural history. The “classical and dominant” (Derrida 2005: 33) concept of the lie is first of all that of an intentional act: lying depends less than one might think on the truthfulness of what is being said than it does on the intention of the speaker. One lies only if she/he knows that she/he is lying. Here is Derrida’s lucid definition:

To lie would be to address oneself to another (for one lies only to the other; one cannot lie to oneself, unless it is to oneself as another), in order to direct his way a statement or more than one statement, a series of statements (constative or performative) that the liar knows, consciously, in explicit, thematic, current consciousness, form assertions that are totally or partially false. This knowledge, science, and consciousness [conscience] are indispensable to the act of lying, and the presence-to-itself of this knowledge must concern not only the content of what is said but the content of what is owed to the other, in such a way that the lying appears fully to the liar as a betrayal, a wrong, a falling short in a debt or a duty. The liar must know what he is doing and means to do by lying; otherwise he does not lie. [...] These intentional acts are destined to the other, another or others, with the aim of de-

⁴ For some ideas on this, see Noah Zandan, *The Language of Lying* (<https://singjupost.com/the-language-of-lying-noah-zandan-full-transcript/>), Patrick Schultz, *The Language of Lying* (<https://www.dwrl.utexas.edu/2016/10/27/the-language-of-lying/>), and David Simpson, “Lying, Liars and Language” (1992).

ceiving them, harming them, misleading them, before any other consequence, by the simple fact of making them believe what the liar knows to be false. This dimension of making believe, of belief, credit, faith, is irreducible, even if it remains obscure. (34)

Maria Bettetini, too, claims that lying requires an act of the will of a free subject. A lie is the outcome of a decision which is characterized by *voluntas fallendi*, the determination to deceive. This also means that, in order to lie, the liar must be in the position to know the truth. Interestingly, Bettetini also specifies that to be *morally unacceptable* the lie must be connoted by *voluntas nocendi*, that is by the intention of harming or damaging the person, or persons, who are being lied to.

Another important and very useful distinction (especially when it comes to Joyce) drawn by scholars, philosophers and psychologists is between *simulatio* (or *fabrication by commission*), which works by addition and indicates the practice of presenting a state of things which *does not exist* in reality, and *dissimulatio* (or *fabrication by omission*), which works by subtraction and refers to a process whereby one hides a state of things which *does exist* in reality.

Every time we lie, even with the most insignificant of lies, we become implicated in this intricate linguistic, ontological and ethical labyrinth.

But what about lies and literature? How does that big lie which literature is – the world of fiction – deal with the practice of untruth and deceit? Even a very quick glance is enough to appreciate the omnipresence in literary texts of lies and deceit, of liars and dissimulators, which appear in all the forms, shapes and shades they have in the world of human life. Drawing up a list of literary liars would be an endless and, in the end, futile enterprise, but I would like to name a few of the most famous ones just to give an idea of how extensive their presence is, beginning – obviously – with Homer's Odysseus, to continue with Plautus's Miles Gloriosus, Dante's Falsifiers in Canto XXX of Inferno, Ser Cepparello in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Moliere's Tartuffe, Corneille's *Le menteur* (1643), Carlo Goldoni's *Il bugiardo* (1750) – the latter two inspired by a Spanish text published in 1634 by Juan Ruiz Alarcón, *La Verdad Sospechosa*. Some of the most famous liars belong to so-

called children's literature, such as Baron Münchhausen and – most famously – Pinocchio. Shakespeare's plays are packed with lies, fibbers and dissemblers, and a close reading of his plots shows rather quickly that – surprising as it may sound, given that lies are morally unacceptable and are generally associated with wrongdoing – most of the happy endings of his comedies could not exist without some type of deceit or fraud to help them come into being. Of course, the quantity and quality as well as the importance and intensity of lying and liars vary from text to text, but canonical works such as *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre* or *Great Expectations*, *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and more recently *Atonement* (McEwan's ruthless investigation of the tragic consequences of one single, devastating lie told at the beginning of the novel by Briony, the narrator herself) would not have been possible without the lies that prop up their storylines. The ubiquitous nature of lie-telling in literature tells us in the first place that, from a structural and narrative point of view, the "utterance of falsehood" is indispensable for the construction of plots. In other words, without lie-telling and its manifold and mysterious guises and shapes, a considerable number of literary texts simply could not exist. Highly successful genres such as thrillers, detective stories, and crime fiction ontologically need the presence of some form of deception or lie simply in order to exist.

But what about Joyce and the language of lies? How does the composite universe of lying and untruths operate in the crowded Joycean universe of Dublin city and environs? Who lies, how, and why? Are untruths as common in his texts as they are in human life, and are they undetected, as lies tend and need to be? How are we, Joycean readers and critics, positioned by the author, or by the text, in the complex net of awareness, innocence and responsibility which lying always creates? When is it that the reader is informed, by text or narrator, that one or more characters are lying and when is it that instead readers suspect – even collectively – that a character is lying although there is no explicit evidence to that? And if this is the case, what textual trick is at work to produce such an effect on us?

Although lying and lies may seem thematically peripheral in Joyce's art, it is indeed surprising to realize how relevant they are and

what an important part they play in his texts. While a thorough investigation of this theme, to my knowledge so far little explored, might well be worth attempting,⁵ this article, which does not aim to be all-inclusive, will focus on some of the short stories in *Dubliners* in an attempt to prove the “hidden” centrality of untruth.

Lies, both as *simulatio* and *dissimulatio*, are pivots of the narrative structure of many of the stories which make up the collection. A great number of characters lie or seem to be lying to other characters (and in some cases to the reader as well) for different reasons and purposes, some of which are clear, while others are more obscure.

The opening story – “The Sisters” – which is constructed on the rhetoric of omission and silence,⁶ has as its only attested liar the narrator himself, or rather the nameless boy who at some point in his future (fictional) life, possibly as an adult, takes upon himself the role of narrator. If his silence has been analyzed by many critics,⁷ the same may not be said for the only four words he utters in the story:

He began to puff at his pipe without giving me his theory. My uncle saw me staring and said to me:

- Well, your old friend is gone, you’ll be sorry to hear.
- Who? Said I.
- Father Flynn.
- Is he dead?
- Mr Cotter here has just told us. He was passing by the house— (*D* 10)

⁵ At the 2011 Trieste Joyce School, I delivered a paper entitled *Joyce’s Pinocchioism*, where I first tried to tackle the issue of lying in Joyce’s works. The paper, in turn, inspired Fritz Senn, who decided that this would be the topic for the 2012 James Joyce Zurich Foundation workshop. “Putting truth and untruth together” was, indeed, the 2012 workshop title.

⁶ For a thorough examination of silence in Joyce’s art, see *James Joyce’s Silences* (Wawrzycka and Zanotti eds. 2018).

⁷ A classic example of this critical attitude is Joseph Chadwick’s excellent “Silence in The Sisters” (1984), an essay which begins by quoting the four words spoken by the character and reflects on the prevailing silence of this, as of many of Joyce’s early characters, but does not consider the nature of the words nor, more importantly, their purpose.

The boy's words are the very first case of dissimulation in the entire collection (and in Joyce's art) and they are pronounced in order to deceive the aunt, the uncle and Mr Cotter ("I knew I was under observation so I continued eating as if the news had not interested me", *D* 10) to lead them to believe that the narrator feels indifference for Father Flynn and his death. The phrasing points the reader in the right direction since the "as if" indicates that the boy is hiding something (*dissimulatio*); moreover, it is the text itself from its very beginning which makes it clear that not only is the boy interested, but he is actually haunted by the ghost of the priest, as well as disturbingly fascinated by the event of his death. Of course, the fact that his only words are said in order to dissemble turns him into a possibly untrustworthy narrator, adding to the uncertain, ambiguous and disturbing atmosphere of the text. On the other hand, the fact that *as narrator* he does reveal to the reader that *as a boy* he was lying to the adults may lead us to believe that he is indeed a reliable narrative function.⁸ And yet, if it is so, why is it that the nature of the relationship between the priest and the boy remains so utterly ambiguous and that *as a narrator*, while willing to disclose his own duplicity as a boy, he remains so elusive and opaque as to the crucial details concerning the priest and himself? Thus the linguistic universal of the lie has already complicated the structure of the text at a hermeneutical level and made the story richer, denser and much more hauntingly complex.

"An Encounter" is, from this perspective, an even more interesting case study. The plot would simply have been impossible, from a narrative point of view, without the practice of lying and deceit. The nameless protagonist, who plans a day of "miching" (truancy) with his friends Leo Dillon and Mahony, comes across as the main organizer of the adventure and is therefore responsible for getting the other two boys involved in his deceit. Miching school is *per se* a pretty universal form of cheating, but what is interesting is that, while we are told that "Mahony's big sister was to write an excuse for him and Leo was to tell his brother to say he was sick" (*D* 21), by which we understand that the circle of young liars is

⁸ Therese Fischer (1971: 87) has reflected on the reliability of the boy, but without distinguishing the narrating voice from the boy as protagonist of the story and this is, in my view, a limiting perspective.

widening, we are also carefully kept uninformed as to what sort of lie the protagonist himself will use in order to cover for his absence. Of course, while his school-mates seem to have the possibility of relying on family members for complicity, the nameless protagonist does not have brothers nor sisters to recruit; yet this does not exonerate him from the necessity of being excused from school by one lie or another.

Leo Dillon does not turn up in the end, so it is from the very beginning that the adventure promises to be a flop, and yet, though not in line with their expectations, an adventure will indeed take place and the boys will come face to face with a monster, “the monster they never anticipated” (Benstock 1994: 16). Benstock identifies the old jossler as a far better “magician-storyteller” than the boy himself, and many commentators have remarked on the enchanting power of his voice, even though this seems to affect the speaker himself rather than the boys.⁹

And yet a careful reading of the conversation which takes place between the boys and the stranger reveals that this is almost entirely composed of lies, to the point of being almost a competition in untruthfulness, a sequence of false assertions which are made for no clear reason. It is not the adult who first to openly lies, but the narrator himself:

He asked us whether we had read the poetry of Thomas Moore or the works of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Lytton. I pretended that I had read every book he mentioned so that in the end he said:

– Ah I can see you are a bookworm like myself. [...]

He said he had all Sir Walter Scott’s works and all Lord Lytton’s works at home and never tired of reading them. Of course, he said, there were some of Lord Lytton’s works which boys couldn’t read. (*D* 25)

⁹ “He gave the impression that he was repeating something he had learned by heart or that, magnetized by some words of his own speech, his mind was slowly circling round and round in the same orbit” (*D* 26); “He repeated his phrases over and over again, varying them and surrounding them with his monotonous voice” (ibid.); “His mind, as if magnetized by his speech, seemed to circle slowly round and round its new centre” (*D* 27).

The text does not specify why the narrator lies to the stranger about the books he has not read,¹⁰ even though the most likely possibility is a desire to impress the listener, whose opinion for some reason seems to matter to him, at least at this point in the story. It is now the old jossler's turn to lie, as indeed he does, mimicking the boy's *simulatio* ("He said he had all Sir Walter Scott's works and all Lord Lytton's works at home and never tired of reading them") and inflating his literary competence. So the correspondence between the boy and the old man is not based on bookishness and bibliophilia, as it has been claimed by critics,¹¹ but rather on lie-telling and on the fact that both characters decide to lie to each other on the same topic. Again, while the narrator is unequivocal about his own dishonesty, the text does not make explicit the untruthfulness of the old jossler's assertions; the impression, however, is that they are incongruous not only with his shabby appearance, but also with the bulk of reading which he mentions, since both Lytton and Scott were extremely prolific writers and "all Sir Walter Scott's works and all Lord Lytton's work" would have amounted to hundreds of volumes.

It is then Mahony's turn to lie, this time about sweethearts.

Then he asked us which of us had the most sweethearts. Mahony mentioned lightly that he had three totties. The man asked how many had I. I answered that I had none. He did not believe me and said he was sure I must have one. I was silent. (*D* 25)

It is with the emergence of the feminine sphere – and the adjacent territory of eros, desire, illicit sexual drives and fear – that the subject-matter of lie-telling explicitly emerges. Yet it is interesting to observe that it is when the boy is more likely to be telling the truth ("The man asked how many had I. I answered that I had none") that he is accused of lying, while Mahony's highly unbelievable assertion ("Mahony mentioned lightly that he had three totties") goes unnoticed and unremarked upon. It is also now that the "old man's pornographic discourse" (Norris

¹⁰ Margot Norris, in her *Suspicious Readings of Joyce's Dubliners*, finds the boy's reaction "curious and troubling in his deviousness" (2003: 37) but fails to see in the practice of lying the first connecting element between the boy and the old jossler.

¹¹ See John Wyse Jackson and Bernard McGinley in *James Joyce's Dubliners. An Annotated Edition* (1993: 20).

2003: 43) begins. Margot Norris's suspicious reading of the story pivots around her fascinating "speculative demonization of the narrator" (33), who is essentially seen as a double of the old josser himself in terms of illicit homosocial desire, also because the boy and the man follow very similar narrative strategies. Yet at this point all characters are compromised and united by the fact that they all lied: the unnamed narrator and Mahony lied in their playing truant, then the first (admittedly) about books and the second (presumably) about girls, while the old man may be lying about both books and sweethearts.

However, a closer examination of the protagonist's lying strategy and the man's "discourse" might instead alert us to the impossibility of identification between the two. After the josser's masturbation – which represents the story's ethical turning point – the boy decides to come up with yet another lie. The different nature of this lie, in comparison with the kind of deceit he has been practising so far, is important for our reading of the story.

"I say! Look what he's doing!"

As I neither answered nor raised my eyes Mahony exclaimed again:

"I say... He's a queer old josser!"

"In case he asks us for our names," I said, "let you be Murphy and I'll be Smith."

It is after intuiting the danger that the old man may represent that the lying strategy of the narrator changes from one of self-aggrandizement to one of self-preservation: perfectly in line with Odysseus's technique of name-changing, the protagonist devises a survival strategy based on mimicry. It is a clumsy defensive lie that he comes up with, given that he chooses the commonest Irish and English surnames to deceive the old josser, yet in this he gets as close as possible to Odysseus's own fake name for Polyphemus the Cyclops. The protagonist's lie-telling now takes on an utterly different tone, since it is meant in the first place not to deceive but to protect both the boy *and* his comrade.

This transformation in the language of lie-telling also shows how the text is carefully constructed around a crescendo of violence, a violence which is not physically performed by anybody but is powerfully evoked when the old man begins to repeatedly mention and perversely

insist on ideas of corporal punishment, whipping, pandy-batting and the pleasure he would get from that type of action. It is now that the issue of lying ominously re-emerges in the pervert's words: "And if a boy had a girl for a sweetheart and told lies about it then he would give him such a whipping as no boy ever got in this world" (*D* 27). This is exactly what the stranger had accused the narrator to be lying about earlier on, when instead the boy was very probably telling the truth. The ending of the story, with the intensification of suspense, is characterized once again by dissimulation, with the boy's attempt to pretend not to feel the fear which he is clearly experiencing:

Lest I should betray my agitation I delayed a few moments pretending to fix my shoe properly and then, saying that I was obliged to go, I bade him good-day. I went up the slope calmly but my heart was beating quickly with fear that he would seize me by the ankles. When I reached the top of the slope I turned around and, without looking at him, called loudly across the field:

– Murphy

My voice had an accent of forced bravery in it and I was ashamed of my paltry stratagem. (*D* 27-28)

"Eveline" is another text which presents a story-line based on secrecy and lying. The eponymous protagonist must hide her relationship with Frank from her father ("One day he had quarreled with Frank and after that she had to meet her lover secretly", *D* 39) and therefore is forced to lie by omission in order to keep her lovestory going. The story opens with the heroine sitting at the window and looking out onto the street, with two letters lying on her lap, one for her brother Harry, the other for her father. Though the text does not show their content, it is reasonable to presume that they are farewell messages which inevitably will also reveal her decision to escape and consequently expose her (many?) lies. Knowing the truth about reality, or letting others know it, may turn out to be a very messy business with dire consequences (as Gabriel Conroy will experience later on in "the Dead"); in this light, if the reader imagines Eveline's fate if she got back home after her father's reading of her letter addressed to him, the scene would presumably be one of frightening cruelty, verbal abuse and, very likely, physical violence. In this

sense the passage concerning Eveline's fear of her father's savagery – "Even now, though over nineteen, she sometimes felt herself in danger of her father's violence" (*D* 37-38) – is deeply ominous.

If Eveline, like most female liars in Joyce's texts, lies by omission, even more crucial for an interpretation of the story is the issue of Frank's possible dishonesty and of his lie-telling by "commission", or *simulatio* (as most male liars in Joyce tend to do). Frank is a highly ambiguous character, so hard to see clearly that Joyceans have divided over the years into two schools of thought: on the one hand are the revisionists, beginning with Hugh Kenner's by now famous sentence against Frank in 1972, and continued by Brendan Kershner, Katy Mullin and Laura Barberan Reinares, who consider Frank as a liar and a seducer animated by bad intents; on the other the traditionalists, represented by Bernard Benstock, Feshbach and Margot Norris (and of course many others) insisting on Frank's honesty and seeing in him Eveline's only hope for a better future. Given Frank's Othello-like, Odysseus-like rhetoric of seduction constructed around "tales of distant places", and considering that the reputation that "Buenos Ayres" had achieved in Joyce's day was that of "the worst of all centres of immoral commerce in women", his courtship to Eveline may very well be that "of the villain in white slaves tracts" (Mullin 2003: 70). This is a threat Joyce alludes to by way of mentioning the plot of Balfe's popular opera, *The Bohemian Girl*, to which Eveline remembers being brought by Frank. Although *The Bohemian Girl* ends happily, the tale of a little girl who is taken away from her widowed father's house by a man who has travelled in foreign lands might partly trigger hidden fears in Eveline's mind, fears which will then materialize on the North Wall and which are, textually speaking, justified. It is of course up to each individual reader to decide whether Frank – whose name is not accidentally chosen by Joyce – is actually frank and honest, or a liar as disloyal to his name as he is to his Evvy; a decision which is complicated by the fact that the text registers Frank's tales through Eveline's memory and not directly through dialogue from him. Whatever our choice will be, it is undeniable that most of the artistic power of the text resides in the fact that, as some critics have suggested (Luft, and Wiczorek), the reader's dilemma concerning Frank's credibility remains unresolved and unresolvable.

In many of Joyce's narrative moments, the complex, disturbing and intricate universe of lie-telling – and the threats it poses to our interpretation of reality, and of literary texts – is not only an important function of the plots, but a crucial part of Joyce's hermeneutical density and complexity. One needs only think about *Ulysses* and its masterful representation of marital *simulationes* and *dissimulationes* in the Blooms' marriage (an issue which becomes particularly interesting in "Ithaca") or about the endless net of gossiping, false (or true?) accusations, slander, defamation, rumor and symmetrical neverending attempts at arriving at the "true truth" (96.27) in *Finnegans Wake* to understand it. As a structural and generative principle, narrative framework, hermeneutical teaser, ethical riddle and a lot more, Joyce's "Pinocchioism" is indeed a fascinating territory which still needs to be properly explored.

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