LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGES IN JOYCE'S FICTION

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LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGES IN JOYCE'S FICTION: AN INTRODUCTION

The theme for this volume takes its cue from Giorgio Melchiori's illuminating and groundbreaking essay "The Languages of Joyce" (1992), in which he put forward the argument that "the whole of Joyce's work, from *Epiphanies* to *Finnegans Wake*, is a great feast of languages of which we are asked to partake" (14). In what follows, I offer a brief overview of studies on the topic of Joyce and language, engaging with Melchiori's work as a way of paying tribute to his scholarship. My attempt is to explore the pervasiveness of the language theme throughout Joyce's oeuvre.

In his approach to Joyce, Giorgio Melchiori was always alert to the question of language and to the inherently political dimension of Joyce's relationship to language (Melchiori 1995). The revolutionary nature of Joyce's linguistic experimentation was emphasized by early critical assessments of *Finnegans Wake*, starting with Eugene Jolas's article "The Revolution of Language and James Joyce" (1928) or Samuel Beckett's 1929 essay "Dante... Bruno. Vico… Joyce", in which he identified the uniqueness of Joyce's method in terms of his approach to language: "His writing is not about something; it is that something itself" (Beckett 1961: 14). As Colin MacCabe pointed out in his *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1978), from the earliest stages of his career, Joyce was extremely concerned with language, the relation between word and world, and "the material effects of language" (2). Following Beckett's line of thought, MacCabe argued that "Joyce's texts do not attempt to produce a meaning but to investigate the process of production of meaning" (1978: 1).

According to Melchiori (1992, 1980), Joyce's relationship with the English language cannot be separated from his politics, as also suggested by MacCabe (1978) and, more recently, by Kiberd (1992) and Milesi

(2003), who have highlighted the political implications of Joyce's linguistic poetics. Language as a site of symbolic power and domination is indeed a major theme in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Kiberd 1992: 4), as we see Stephen becoming increasingly aware of his "un-English English" (Kenner 1971: 98):

> The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (*P* 205)

The convergence of language and politics in Joyce was addressed by Melchiori in several essays dedicated to "Joyce's politics of language" (1980 and 1992). In Melchiori's own words, "Being an artist in the field of language, Joyce's politics are the politics of language" (1995: 113). As an Irish writer, he viewed English as "a power among other powers in a continual struggle to affirm its right of aesthetic communication" (1995: 113). In *Ulysses*, the language used is English but, as Melchiori argues, it is "English with a difference" (1992: 12). This view of the English language culminates and finds its full expression in *Finnegans Wakes*, a book whose language is, once again, English, though stretched to its utmost limits, for Joyce's last work is "at the same time a questioning in depth and a rediscovery of the very principles of language and speech, in order to give a new statute to that language itself" (Melchiori 1992: 12).

Language is an object of investigation and concern for Joyce's characters. A triad of strange words (*paralysis, gnomon, symony*) troubles the young boy in "The Sisters" (Senn 1998), while the protagonist of *Stephen Hero* picks up words "in the shops, on the advertisements, in the mouths of the plodding public", and keeps repeating them, in the "house of silence", until they lose "all instantaneous meaning" and become "wonderful vocables" (*SH* 29). As Melchiori insightfully suggested, this eucharistic process prefigures the method at work in *Finnegans Wake*:

> The language of *Finnegans Wake* is a constant epiphanisation of the current, familiar, obvious everyday language, by a process of translation that

intensifies to the utmost its semantic values, so that the banal becomes memorable, the common word becomes a wonderful vocable. *Finnegans Wake* is a single, gigantic epiphany: the epiphany of the human language. Rather, the epiphany of languages. (1992: 4)[1]

Although Joyce's relationship to and use of language has been a prominent theme in Joyce scholarship, detailed and systematic studies are still lacking (Conley 2009). An early attempt to grasp the complexity of Joyce's language in *Ulysses* is Anthony Burgess's *Joysprick: An Introduction to the Language of James Joyce* (1973), an insightful work that, as MacCabe (2003: 30) noted, was "produced outside any academic framework". Two decades later, Katie Wales offered a comprehensive treatment of language and stylistic variation in all of Joyce's works in her monograph *The Language of James Joyce* (1992), where she also addressed the question of Irish English in Joyce's work (see also Dolan 1990, 1991).[2] The Irish dimension of Joyce's language, which remained relatively inderexplored for many years, has been emphasized by Seamus Deane, who argues that

> Like the other Irish writers of the turn of the century, Joyce learned the advantages of incorporating into his writing the various dialects or versions of English spoken in Ireland. This was not simply a matter of enlivening a pallid literary language with colloquialisms. He went much further than that. He incorporated into his writing several modes of language and, in doing so, exploited the complex linguistic situation in Ireland to serve his goal (Deane 1990: 38).[3]

A significant contribution to our understanding of the workings of Joyce's language has been made by Fritz Senn, whose approach to Joyce insists on close reading. According to Senn (1965: 66), "even in his earliest published prose Joyce wrote in a most complex, heavily allusive style,

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[1] See also Franca Ruggieri's *Introduzione a Joyce* (1990: 167).

[2] The number of publications on the language of Joyce is so vast that only a very small selection can be mentioned in the context of an introduction such as this. In addition to the studies detailed here, I must at least mention Knowels 2001, Rice 2008, Spurr 2011. On the polyglot atmosphere of Trieste see McCourt 2000.

[3] See Terrinoni 2012 for a discussion of the impact of the Irish context on Joyce's approach to language.

different from its later convoluted intricacies in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* in degree only". Senn discusses the problem of reading that Joyce poses throughout his work, most notably in terms of "reading as translation". As Senn points out in "Foreign Readings" (1984: 39-56), native and non-native English speakers' readings of Joyce's work share important similarities, as Joyce constantly evokes the experience of the foreign in his writing. According to Senn (1984: 39), "everything Joyce wrote has to do with translation, is transferential" and hence transforms "all of us into foreign readers" (54). A key term in Senn's analysis of Joyce's works is "dislocution", which, as he writes, is "a spatial metaphor for all manner of metamorphoses, switches, transfers, displacements, but also acknowledges the overall significance of speech and writing, and insinuates that the use of language can be less than orthodox" (1984: 202). In a more recent essay, Senn (2018: 137) introduced the term "lexile" to illustrate the function of the "foreign", the "alien", the "unexpected" in the linguistic fabric of *Ulysses*. As Senn argues, in "concentrating on the lexical aspect", the notion of "lexile" provides us with a useful tool to investigate "any kind of displacement or foreignness or salient oddity within a given context" (ibid.). In this essay, Senn further explores Joyce's technique of disappointing readers' expectations, by resorting to lexical "intruders, foreign by origin, and therefore disturbing, haunting" (141), "deviant terms" that cause unrest in characters and readers alike, independently of their being native or non-native speakers.

The issues of language continues to generate interest among Joyce scholars. Thanks to advances in the digital humanities and the development of computer-assisted stylistic analyses, studies such as those by Michael Stubbs (2001) and Kieran O'Halloran (2007) have shown the insights that can be derived from the application of corpus methods to Joyce's texts, particularly in reference to the construction of implicit meaning in "Eveline". In her *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language* (2015), Megan Quigley explores the functions of vagueness in Joyce's works. She notes that, if Bloom's inability to use language in "culturally established social situations" often causes misunderstandings and puts him at risk (128), "the reader of *Ulysses* needs to surmount seemingly overwhelming obstacles to play the language games at work in the novel". Other scholars have concentrated on the material

aspects of language, including typography (Donovan 2003, Van Hulle 2016) and punctuation (Bonapfel and Conley eds. 2014), while others have investigated the representation of other varieties of English (e.g. cockney, as in Boland 2016) in Joyce's works.

Joyce's handling of the "wonderful vocables" of the English language has also been explored from a lexicographic angle. According to Hugh Kenner, "Joyce belonged to the first generation of young authors who could study their own language as historic process" (1971: 99-100) by reading such works as Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary*, as does Stephen. Indeed, in his early writings, Joyce attributed a significant role to etymology, as discussed by Sylvain Belluc (2018), who investigates the cognitive value of etymology in Joyce's fiction, "as a prism through which the reader's sensibility gets refracted, illuminating the text with a myriad hues and shades" (100). Interesting perspectives have recently been opened up by studies focusing on Joyce and lexicography (Crowley 2010), and on Joyce and the *OED* in particular, both in terms of the way he used lexicographic sources as part of his working method and the way the *OED* has handled Joyce's language over the course of its three editions (Chenier 2014, Simpson 2016). As Patrick Hanks (2013) points out, *Finnegans Wake* poses a challenge to lexicography: "what is a lexicographer to make of a work of literature consisting of 608 pages of close-packed text with dozens of nonce words on every page?" (275). How are "words never used before and specially invented for the occasion" (e.g. *riverrun*) to be handled in a dictionary such as the *OED*?

Often dubbed as "the problem of language" in Joyce's work (Sicari 2001), Joyce's relationship to language has been extensively investigated by Joyce scholars (see Kenner 1971, Heath 1982, Manganiello 1987, Marengo Vaglio 1987, Attridge 2000, 2004, Pierce 2006, Conley 2009 among others), alongside his interest in contemporary linguistic theories (Kenner 1974, Van Hulle ed. 2002, Tadié 2003, Milesi 2004). In *Ulysses*, as Declan Kiberd notes, the focus of Joyce's concern gradually shifts from characters to style, "with even major figures like Stephen and Bloom appearing increasingly as pretexts for a series of meditations on the notions of *language* and *style*" (1992: 4). The centrality of the language theme has been emphasized by Laurent Milesi (2003: 1), who maintains that "Joyce's oeuvre is best seen as constantly trying to inform

an evolutive linguistic poetics" – as also pointed out by Lucia Boldrini (2001), who investigates in detail Joyce's indebtedness to Dante's linguistic poetics as elaborated in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, showing how *Finnegans Wake* "situates itself at the intersection between a radically modern narrative technique and a mediaeval poet's linguistic theory" (99).

While he was composing the *Wake*, Joyce famously stated: "I cannot express myself in English without enclosing myself in a tradition" (*JJII* 397). As Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli (2001) notes, the experience of being a "stranger in language" deeply informed Joyce's writing method and is a condition that many of his characters (and readers) face as "Joyce texts slip across the borders of the English language" (404). The experience of the exile that Joyce voluntarily embraced had made him aware of the limits of monolingualism and the aesthetic possibilities of multilingualism (Taylor-Batty 2013, Kager 2016a and 2016b), as shown by recent work on Joyce's translingual experience (Zanotti 2013) and the functions of non-translation in his writing (Baron 2019, Nash 2019). A distinct, though related dimension is explored in the volume *Joyce's Silences* (Wawrzycka and Zanotti eds. 2018), which investigates and problematizes language as a vehicle of silence.

In this volume, the question of language in Joyce's opus is explored from various viewpoints – in terms of linguistic interconnections and intertextual relations (Brown), or translational refractions (Senn et al.). The pioneering work of Fritz Senn on writing as translation (1984) and on translation as a lens for textual analysis (1972, 1995) remains a *locus classicus* for studies on Joyce and/in translation, an area of investigation that is amply illustrated in the present volume by a range of papers dealing with anarchist translation (Binelli), the translation of musicality (Autieri), and intersemiotic translation (Torresi). Other studies offer detailed analyses of Joyce's language drawing on different approaches, from sociolinguistics (Culligan) to corpus stylistics (Sciarrino), to cognitive theories (Tondello). Laura Pelaschiar's contribution investigates the language of lies in *Dubliners*, while Ilaria Natali scrutinises Joyce's early notes on Dante. The interaction of writing with other semiotic codes in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* is explored in the contributions by Alan Shockley and Ennio Ravasio. Both offer new critical perspectives on

Joyce and music. The interplay beween fictional and non-fictional language is the focus of Annalisa Federici's investigation, while the use of carnivalesque language in *Ulysses* is analyzed by Fedya Daas.

As noted above, recent critical work on Joyce seems to be underpinned by an enduring interest in the issue of language. The studies presented in this edited collection would seem to confirm this, providing insightful and diverse perspectives on Joyce and language(s). As Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli (2001) notes, the experience of being a "stranger in language" deeply informed Joyce's writing method, which resulted in her definition of Joyce as "a writer who slips across the borders of the English language" (395). That "nothing linguistic was foreign to Joyce"[4] is a widely shared notion and, as I hope to have demonstrated, it remains a central preoccupation among Joyce scholars.

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[4] Fritz Senn, "The Eighteen International James Joyce Symposium", University of Trieste, 16-22 June 2002 (qtd. in Ames 2005: 47). A similar formulation is found in Harry Levin's "Joyce's Sentimental Journey through France and Italy": "Nothing linguistic was completely alien to him" (1957: 133).

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