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22

JOYSPACE
JAMES JOYCE AND SPACE

Edited by
Roberto Baronti Marchiò

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THE MARITIME SPATIAL LANGUAGE OF JAMES JOYCE

Abstract: This essay offers an original look at Joyce’s writing by placing his use of maritime language at the forefront of study. Combining detailed textual analysis and theoretically informed study, the essay explores how Joyce’s experiments with maritime language and terminology repeatedly challenges our ways of reading the sea, and of how Joyce presented his exploration of geopolitics, and ancient and modern interconnectedness. Drawing on current debates in Joyce scholarship, literary studies and critical theory, this essay comprehensively examines the diversity of Joyce’s use of maritime language.

Keywords: Language, Modernism, Maritime, The sea, Interconnectedness, Geopolitics

Work on Joyce’s use of language in his work has tended to concentrate upon what Laurent Milesi called “narrative and linguistic recyclings” (Milesi, 2003: 1), or the “technical difficulties” (Schlauch, 1939: 482) in understanding Joyce’s experiments with portmanteau words and phrases. While some authors such as John Brannigan have explored Joyce’s maritime position, academic interrogation of Joyce’s maritime language appears to have eluded scholars thus far. The significance of maritime language is such that it can convey the sense of freedom and openness that the ocean presents in the physical plane, suggesting an unlimited horizon. This concept can exist metaphorically as well as idealistically and though it may seem simplistic upon first viewing, maritime language allowed Joyce to explore his complicated geopolitical position.

Joyce’s ability to connect the sea with the geography and topography of language roots sensory understanding in the sand and shingle of the shoreline. The sound of the sea, its voice as it were, features heavily in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and this is reflected in how Joyce emphasises that Stephen’s emotions ebb and flow like waves. Early in the

novel, a coal fire's flames are synonymous with waves upon the sea: Stephen hears as

They were talking. It was the noise of the waves. Or the waves were talking among themselves as they rose and fell. He saw the sea of waves, long dark waves rising and falling, dark under the moonless night. A tiny light twinkled at the pierhead where the ship was entering; and he saw a multitude of people gathered by the waters' edge to see the ship that was entering their harbour. A tall man stood on the deck, looking out towards the flat dark land. (*P* 25)

When Stephen wades in the shallows at Dollymount beach, on a "day of dappled seaborne clouds", he hears a voice that he perceives as "a voice from beyond the world", which is shown ultimately to be his friends splashing in the sea. (*P* 180-182). The comparison between the voice he hears and the clouds above him mark the distinction between a domestic and familiar voice and those less well-known, further east. The clouds are described as "voyaging high over Ireland, westward bound. The Europe they had come from lay out there beyond the Irish Sea, Europe of strange tongues and valleyed and woodbegirt and citadelled and of entrenched and marshalled races" (*P* 181). Significantly, Stephen's encounter with 'strange tongues' and voices from beyond the world happens at Dollymount strand, creating a symbolic coming together of domestic and foreign voices in the 'mouth' of the Liffey as it converges with the Irish Sea.

When Stephen first sees the girl upon Dollymount strand, she appears at first as a "strange and beautiful seabird" but then seems to possess the characteristics of a mermaid, alluring, at the edge of the sea in which Stephen dare not swim. (*P* 185). The sea and the girl appear to combine under Stephen's gaze, with the water taking on the girl's characteristics, creating a sound that is "low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep; hither and thither, hither and thither" (*P* 186). It is this whispering voice of the ebbing and flowing sea with which Stephen connects, as it

enfolded him like a shining cloud, enfolded him like water with a liquid life; and like a cloud of vapour or like waters circumfluent in space the liquid letters of speech, symbols of the element of mystery, flowed forth over his brain. (*P* 242)

In this situation, language, speech and letters become yet another fluid element, dissolving and combining as part of the world of transformation that Stephen envisages and longs for.

There is a specific emphasis on the shore-bound Stephen Dedalus being an intrigued watcher of the tide. Stephen has become a figure that stays behind on dry land, a change in character from the young man who once paddled and waded at the edge of the Irish Sea. Stephen's act of wading becomes vital to an understanding of Joyce's fluid maritime writing as it symbolizes the passage from land to sea, a ritual movement through the liminal space of the beach. That Stephen opts not to bathe by the time we see him in *Ulysses* is explained as him being symbolically fearful of drowning. Stephen becomes another of those who, in the words of Robert Adams Day, "will not leave his self-enclosed identity or enter the lives of others for more than a moment. He is of the company of Joycean figures that hover at the verge of the water, safely dry, but who will not float, perhaps drown, in any case be changed" (Adams Day 1996: 13). Despite writers addressing the polysemic motif of the sea in critical writings, most do not address the maritime language of Joyce's work, the philological basis for any appreciation of his work in the marine setting.

It is precisely the littoral terminology that Joyce utilises which makes his work so engaging in the context of maritime language. Joyce makes a metanarrative comment in *Ulysses* when he suggests that "These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here" and it is here, by the "lacefringe of the tide", that the reader encounters much of his florid and fluid wordplay. Joyce creates and combines words and archaic terms to allow the "wavenoise" of his imagination to be heard. When Stephen (or Joyce) asks "Do you see the tide flowing quickly in on all sides, sheeting the lows of sand quickly, shellcocoacoloured?" (*U* 3.326-7) the reader is admitted to a marine world in which drowned men inhabit the sea alongside "turlehide whales", Norse invaders and "herds of seamorse" (*U* 3.339). The 'seamorse' are walruses, perhaps alluding to Lewis Carroll's 'The Walrus and The Carpenter' poem in *Through the Looking Glass*, which foreshadows Joyce and other Modernist writers' fragmentary work about the sea:

"The time has come", the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:

Referring to his writing of *Ulysses*, Joyce stated to his Italian friend Carlo Linati “ed anche un storiella di una giornata (vita) [...] È una specie di enciclopedia anche” (“as well as a little story of a day (life) [...] It is also a sort of encyclopaedia”) (Hodgart 1978:69). Nowhere is this better exemplified than in Joyce’s encyclopaedic reference to Bloom’s love of water in the Ithaca section of *Ulysses*. Leaving aside the comments that could not be attributed directly to the sea, the passage still contains over two hundred words referencing the ocean in its myriad forms, permutations and chemical states, beginning with water’s “constancy to its nature in seeking its own level: its vastness in the ocean of Mercator’s projection” (*U* 17.185-6). The passage continues with some inaccurate entries¹ about ocean depths and scientific terminology derived from the real-life “Encyclopaedia Britannica or some similar source” (Herring 1972: 429). It is in the latter part of the entry that the reader is able to see the convergence of the marine language and the wordplay of Joyce himself. By placing portmanteau or neological words among real encyclopaedic words, Joyce creates his own marine mythology of terms that are indistinguishable from real oceanographic or littoral words. Joycean creations such as “downwardtending”, “lakecontained”, “oceanflowing” and “waterpartings” convey as much meaning as real-life phrases like “gulfstream”, “seaquakes, waterspouts” and “cloudbursts”. Alternately, it is possible to see that these words are as evocative, in a poetic sense, as any of Joyce’s combinations. These words and phrases, used to such incredible narrative effect in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, lead the way to an understanding of Joyce’s efforts to amplify what John Brannigan calls “the sound coming over the waves” (Brannigan 2015: 99). Joyce’s ability to form linguistic microstructures that resemble both sea-waves and sound-waves within his sentences are particularly prevalent in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. In *Ulysses*, for example, the rhythm of Joyce’s phrasing together with his use of sibilance and alliteration offers a semblance of the

¹ The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* records that above the *Sunda* trench “the German surveying-ship ‘Planet’ obtained a sounding of 3828 fathoms in 1906” – ‘Ocean and Oceanography’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edn, vol.19 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911) p. 973. The Sunda trench is in the Indian Ocean, rather than the Pacific.

ebb and flow of the tide, even when describing the recovery of a submerged corpse:

Bag of corpsegas sopping in foul brine. A quiver of minnows, fat of a spongy titbit, flash through the slits of his buttoned trouserfly. God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain. Dead breaths I living breathe, tread dead dust, devour a urinous offal from all dead. Hauled stark over the gunwale he breathes upward the stench of his green grave, his leprous nosehole snoring to the sun. A seachange this, brown eyes saltblue. Seadeath, mildest of all deaths known to man. Old Father Ocean. (*U* 3.476-83)

Joyce manages to conflate pre-existing words to invent words anew in this passage, from the grotesque ‘corpsegas’, which the reader can almost hear wheezing and gasping from the bloated cadaver, to the ‘seachange’, an idiomatic phrase which suggests a substantial shift in perspective and which complements Joyce’s nautical allusion to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in the preceding paragraph which opens with a line from Ariel’s song from that play, “Full fathom five thy father lies” (Shakespeare 1998: 1173). Furthermore, Joyce’s description of the life/death circle creates a poetic rhythm in itself, albeit through an earthy approximation of the circle of life. The rhythm of many of the word structures form patterns in single sounds, words and sentences, evoking the sensibility of WB Yeats, who suggested “and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination” (Yeats 1961: 163).

In order to explore the nautical themes within Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, it is important to examine the maritime language and topography concealed within, in what Joyce refers to as “this timecoloured place where we live in our paroqial firmament one tide on another, with a bumrush in the hull of a wherry” (*FW* 29). It is perhaps here that John Brannigan’s work is at its most incisive and analytical, offering the greatest reward as he makes a close analysis of Joyce’s work and identifying Joyce’s use of French, Breton and Norwegian (amongst others) as being vital to an understanding of *Finnegans Wake*. While often seen and read as a ‘river-book’, the principal narrative of *Finnegans Wake*, if it can be said to have one at all, is contained within the tidal flow between the river’s banks and its journey out into Dublin Bay. Joyce suggests the ability of the sea to act as an agent for connectedness at the outset: “Sir Tristram, violer d’amores,

fr'over the short sea, had passencore rearrived from North Armorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight his penisolate war" (*FW* 3). The sentence contains polysemous allusions to geography and history, 'North Armorica' giving a sense of looking westwards towards North America. However, Joyce keeps his allusions closer to home, Armorica being the ancient name for Brittany in France, the name itself deriving from the Breton for 'by the sea.' Joyce's sense of place is important here, as at the book's very beginning he alludes to a place that was "part of the Atlantic coastal network along which trade goods and cultural ideas flowed from the Mediterranean and coastal Spain to Armorica and onto Britain and Ireland" (Waldman and Walsh 2006: 75). This placement suggests a setting out of Joyce's ambition, a proto-mission statement in terms of *Finnegans Wake*'s global positioning. Sir Tristram is a legendary figure who fell in love with Iseult, betrothed to his uncle Mark, King of Cornwall. Tristram had the responsibility of escorting Iseult from Ireland, but the pair fall in love and he eventually dies in Brittany, the instrument (viola) and violator of love. Joyce also here references the story's operatic adaptation by Wagner, in his work *Tristan und Isolde*, itself referenced directly by T.S. Eliot in 'The Burial of the Dead' segment of *The Waste Land*:

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu,
Mein Irisch Kind
Wo weilest du? (Eliot 2005: 1345)

Eliot's use of four lines from the sailor's song would have resonated with Joyce as the passage translates as 'Fresh blows the wind/Towards home/My Irish child,/Where are you waiting?', a resonance that Joyce would surely have enjoyed in its classical referencing and Yeats-like phrasing and one that Joyce resolved to intertextualise in his own work. Tristram is described in joke style as having re-arrived 'passencore' from over the short sea, which carries meaning as both an adaptation of 'passenger' and the French *pas encore*, meaning 'not yet'. In this way, Joyce defines Dublin by its ebbs and flows and its proximity and relationship with coastal societies.

It can be seen that the connection formed in *Finnegans Wake* lies principally in the audible geography of language, figuring the Irish Sea in

terms of audibility rather than visibility, a connectedness that lies in the “irised sea” towards the “atalantic’s breastwells” (*FW* 318; 336). In viewing the sea as an audible construction, the sea becomes “that figure of globality which is also the material space in and through which peoples, languages, produce, and artefacts transact with one another” (Brannigan 2015:100). When Joyce writes about the “piantunar beyant the bayondes in Combria sleepytalking to the Wiltsh muntons”, he imagines what lies just across the sea, beyond the beyond (*FW* 327). The voice of language travels from country to country, its voice travelling more loudly and quickly across the sea than it ever could over land. Roland McHugh, in his *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*, notes that “‘bayondes’ is a conflation of ‘bay’ and ‘waves’, *onde* being the French word for waves” (McHugh 2006: 6). Thus, the reader is invited to imagine the musical sounds coming across from Combria (a joining together of Cumbria and Cambria, i.e. Wales). This sense of audibility is amplified by the suggestion that “you could hear them swearing threaties on the Cymylaya Mountains”, Joyce proposing that from shore to shore, places may be out of sight but instead are connected via an audible geography (*FW* 329).

The language presented in *Finnegans Wake* is not restricted to national languages, however. Joyce manages to blend the technical maritime, a world of boats and ships existing together, “one tide on another”, with a wider, more allusive set of references in this section, offering the reader a schooner “with a wicklowpattern waxenwench at her prow for a figurehead”, Arabian dhows and a wherry. Each are ocean-going vessels of varying sizes and represent a melding of global viewpoints and geographic position, particularly allied with “the deadsea dugong updipdripping from his depths” (*FW* 29). Joyce incorrectly places the dugong in the Dead Sea, a misappropriation perhaps created for the alliterative nature of the phrase. Dugongs, however, do live in the Red Sea, and it is in this place, among other warm water sanctuaries, that these sirenians have flourished. Joyce’s choice to use the dugong rather than, for example, the manatee (a similar-looking but biologically different animal) may not just be for its ability to fit in an alliterative sentence. The term dugong comes from “the Tagalog word *du-gong* which means ‘Lady of the Sea’” (Reeves 2002: 478). This forms an etymological companion to one of *Finnegans Wake*’s central characters, namely Anna Livia Plurabelle, the

dream river-woman whose name is derived from an anglicisation of *Abhainn na Life*, the Irish phrase that translates into English as ‘River Liffey.’ Although only a passing reference, Joyce is able to allude to the lady of the sea, the natural continuation of the river-woman, suggesting a broader, deeper awareness of the river and what it may become. This posits the idea contained within *Finnegans Wake* that it is impossible to regard one place without becoming aware of its connectedness to others, and it is the sea, through “oceans of kissing” that facilitates this (*FW* 384).

Joyce’s incorporation and development of maritime language throughout his work demonstrated the depths to which Joyce would go in order to understand his position in the global setting. His use of maritime terminology, both ancient and modern, facilitated a link to his distant heritage, but equally, anticipated the globally interconnected geopolitics of the future.

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