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JOYSPACE
JAMES JOYCE AND SPACE

Edited by
Roberto Baronti Marchiò

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HOLES, PIERS AND CANYONS:
ABSENCE AS EMANCIPATORY SPACE IN *ULYSSES*

Abstract: In this article, I suggest that James Joyce creates newly active reading practices through his use of textual gaps in *Ulysses*. I propose that instead of presenting readers with difficulties or frustrations these gaps can be seen as emancipatory, asking readers to choose their own path, create their own meanings, and sit with uncertainty. I focus on how textual gaps are created within the ostensibly traditional forms of ‘Circe’ and ‘Ithaca’, represented as a play-script and a catechism respectively. I metaphorically characterise these empty spaces in the text as a hole in rock, a pier, and a canyon to think through the different readerly responses they facilitate and inspire. I argue that whether readers choose to move through the hole in rock, remain contemplative at the end of the pier, or shout across Joyce’s authorial canyon represents a democratic choice, giving us the important space to engage with *Ulysses* on our own terms.

Keywords: *Ulysses*, Gaps, Absence, Reading practices, Space

Reading *Ulysses* can, aptly, be considered a journey; a process which challenges what readers expect from a literary text and from the act of reading itself. Colin MacCabe suggests that James Joyce “displaces reading as a passive consumption” of accepted meaning and “transforms it into an active organisation of signifiers”, thereby creating new meanings by encouraging readers to interact with language in new ways (MacCabe 1978: 11-12). MacCabe suggests that Joyce, thus, “disrupt[s] the normal position assigned to the reader in a text” and articulates that this disruption may cause “difficult[ies] of reading” for those approaching *Ulysses*

(MacCabe 1978: 5, 2)¹. Building from MacCabe's argument, I will be exploring these newly active positions of reading but will challenge the shorthand used by MacCabe that these new methods present readers with difficulties. I will be looking at various gaps created throughout *Ulysses* and suggesting that interaction with these empty spaces can produce emancipatory reading practices: asking readers to choose their own path, create their own meanings, and sit with uncertainty. I have chosen to focus on how different formal gaps are created within the seemingly traditional forms of 'Circe' and 'Ithaca' – represented as a play-script and catechism respectively. I will metaphorically categorise these empty spaces in the text as like a hole in rock, a pier, or a canyon to argue that Joyce's gaps create liberatory methods of reading which, rather than frustrating readers, asks us to engage with *Ulysses* in newly active ways.

MacCabe bases his argument upon the idea that Joyce transforms the process of reading by transforming the relationship between language and the world. He outlines that it is only through an assumption of the "homogeneity of language and a position from which the elements within it can be judged that it is possible" to speak of representation (MacCabe 1978: 4). *Ulysses* can be seen to consistently undermine such a straightforward relationship between the subject and language: showing language to transcend the subject, obscure rather than represent experience, and hold creative potential in isolation of any labelling quality. As MacCabe summarises, *Ulysses* is "concerned not with representing experience through language but with experiencing language through a destruction of representation" (MacCabe 1978: 4). It is in this way that *Ulysses* can be seen to create new readerly experiences, deconstructing accepted ideas of language rather than expecting readers to absorb experiences represented realistically through symbolic language. MacCabe goes on to suggest that "Joyce's texts are concerned with the various *positions* from which meaning becomes possible" (MacCabe 1978: 4, emphasis added), and this argument will form the basis of my exploration

¹ I do not agree that we can presume a homogenous reading position or "normal" reader, so will instead build from MacCabe's nonetheless important arguments about active reading and its difficulties.

of *Ulysses*². I aim to explore what happens to the process of reading when Joyce leaves readers stranded in open gaps or asks them to engage with shaped gaps; what meaning can be found within such empty spaces of readership?

Joyce begins ‘Circe’ by employing the play-script form in a conventional way, using stage directions to explicitly describe the *mise en scene*:

THE Mabbot street entrance of nighttown [...] rows of flimsy houses with gaping doors [...] stunted men and women squabble [...] whistles call and answer. (U 15: 561-2)

Here, the adjectives ‘flimsy’ and ‘gaping’ relate directly to their nouns (‘houses’ and ‘doors’) and evoke images which could, conceivably, be recreated on stage: houses with open doors and unstable structures. The stage directions, thus, appear to serve their traditional purpose, allowing readers to imagine the action, sounds, and scene which would be occurring on stage (even if the play is not designed to be literally staged)³. These stage directions are also clearly differentiated from the dialogue of the script by italics and a paragraph break. The use of characters’ names in capital letters to introduce their speech further distinguishes between action and scene, creating a structured reading experience in which readers are guided by formal markers between different aspects of the text.

However, these formal markers soon begin to challenge meaning as well as structure it. For example, when Cissy Caffrey’s song is introduced, it is preceded by a sentence of stage direction, a full stop, a bracket, and then her full name in capitals with a colon:

([...] Cissy Caffrey’s voice, still young, sings shrill from a lane.)
CISSY CAFFREY:
I gave it to Molly [...] (U 15: 563)

² Although I will touch upon MacCabe’s ideas about the Joycean relationship between language and experience, I will be focusing on Joyce’s formal experimentation to illustrate my points. Unfortunately, I will therefore not have space to engage with MacCabe’s discussions of metalanguage, the relationship between the signifier and the signified, or Joyce’s textual politics.

³ Hugh Kenner similarly explores how *Exiles* is resistant to ‘dramatization’ (Kenner 1978: 23-26).

I suggest that such distance between the signal of the action – ‘sings’ – and the realisation of this action – in the first line of Cissy’s song – keeps readers in suspense, expecting action which appears repeatedly out of reach. The repeated punctuation marks and formal structures which prevent the realisation of action may be seen as difficulties or obstacles, but I suggest that we could just as easily see them as gaps: by inserting distance between Cissy as a subject and her voice, Joyce can be seen to challenge language as direct representation, creating a space in which readers cannot passively consume the text. Neither the punctuation marks, nor the reiteration of Cissy’s name give readers any new information, and, so, we are asked to wait in suspense for meaning to be made clear. It is precisely in this moment of suspense – or “gap” – that I suggest readers are invited to question what it means to be a reader.

Clive Hart can be seen to articulate a similar process for readers in his exploration of *Ulysses*’ use of commas:

That comma [...] is a crack rather than a gap, a break in the texture allowing the reader to insert himself and weigh differing senses of meaning and thrust, while at the same time the break warns that there must be no easy assumptions about what will be found on the other side. (Hart 1993: 429)

Although I believe the “gap” I have identified preceding Cissy’s song operates slightly differently to Hart’s theory of comma cracks (a point I will return to), I wish to engage with Hart’s proposal that such breaks in *Ulysses* may create new methods of reading by allowing readers to ‘insert’ themselves into the text. However, I conversely propose that this new method of reading can be seen as liberatory. Although there are “no easy assumptions” which readers can make whilst within these gaps, I believe this emancipates readers rather than “throw[ing]” them “into doubt”, as Hart suggests (Hart 1993: 429). For example, by asking readers to “read” a gap in the text whilst also holding on to information from the beginning of the gap, Joyce can be seen to create an active and challenging reading style. I believe this active form of reading may constitute the Joycean ‘metamorphosis’ MacCabe describes (MacCabe 1978: 2), not just by transforming linguistic relations, but by transforming our understanding of what it means to be a reader. By creating a gap which readers *can* ‘insert’ themselves into, Joyce creates a choice and, I suggest, it is this choice which allows readers to identify their position as “reader” in the text. In

other words, readers have to choose whether they skim over the empty space, acknowledge it but move around it, or enter into it in an attempt to analyse it. It is this choice of readerly movement that makes the position of “reader” legible in the text, allowing different possibilities of meaning depending on which position readers choose to occupy.

This process of choice may be liberating rather than frustrating because *Ulysses* has guided us towards such active processes of reading. As Hart summarises, interacting with gaps “is a procedure the reader has to get used to all the time in *Ulysses*” (Hart 1993: 429). For example, by employing the conventional literary form of a play-script, Joyce can be seen to lead readers towards the gap between the stage direction and speech; he utilises the script’s markers to create a displacement of meaning which allows readers the freedom to move around in this empty space. However, Hart implies that the cracks he identifies in *Ulysses* present “stumbling blocks, ditches, [and] trip-wires” for readers (Hart 1993: 429). In contrast, I see *Ulysses* much more similarly to Declan Kiberd: it is an intrinsically democratic text as it “was designed to produce readers capable of reading *Ulysses*” (Kiberd 2009: 19). Joyce encourages newly active readership by leading readers towards absences in the text but then allowing them the freedom to interact with these themselves. In this way, I suggest that the gaps in Joyce’s text are levelling as they allow readers to choose the course through *Ulysses* which feels right for them, and, as Hart suggests, “weigh differing senses of meaning” in their own way.

Such readerly interactions with different senses of meaning may be further illuminated by Hart’s theory of comma cracks, exemplified in this scene by the comma between ‘voice’ and ‘still young’: “*Cissy Caffrey’s voice, still young, sings*”. This comma appears to separate Cissy’s ‘voice’ from the action of ‘sings’ and can be seen to create a confusion of meaning: does ‘still young’ relate to Cissy, her voice, or exist as a separate clause? Readers are asked to actively enter into the text to contemplate what meaning can be found within the gap created by this comma. As Hart summarises: “Cracks function then, right from the start, to allow the reader to work at the meaning, [they] are no more than hairline breaks in the surface” (Hart 1993: 430). ‘Cracks’ may represent the best metaphor for the type of gap Hart is discussing, representing “hairline breaks in the surface” of the text which invite the reader to fill them with meaning.

Despite this, I believe the gap I have previously identified between Cissy and her song operates in a slightly different way. I would, thus, like to present the idea of a ‘shaped’ gap: a space in the text that we are led to by formal structures and which holds specific meaning on either side. The gap between ‘sings’ and the first line of Cissy’s song inspires wider questions surrounding language as representation, voice, and the reader’s position within the text, but it does not leave readers stranded without context. Therefore, instead of a smaller ‘crack’ in the surface of the text or a more open gap, I suggest *Ulysses* sometimes offers readers a ‘shaped’ gap like a hole worn into rock. Readers can still choose how they interact with the hole in the rock (move through it, pass around it, or remain inside it) but they are guided towards this specific gap in form or meaning by the surrounding text.

Shaped gaps which allow readers to ‘work at’ meaning increasingly become more frequent in ‘Circe’, notably through Joyce’s penchant for neologisms: “*He passes [...] in the convex mirror grin unstuck the bonham eyes and fatchuck cheekchops*” (*U* 15: 566). Such coined compound words – “fatchuck cheekchops” – seem especially troubling to meaning because they appear in a stage direction, a formal device which has been established in literature, and since the start of the episode to convey literal *mise en scene*. In this way, readers may be left to question how a distorted reflection (in a ‘convex mirror’) of “unstuck” eyes and “fatchuck” cheeks could possibly be interpreted on stage. Thus, the distance between what readers may expect from the form of the episode and what is delivered to them can be seen to create a gap. Readers can then enter into this gap to, as Hart suggests, “weigh differing senses of meaning and thrust”, ruminating on the possible meanings of the neologisms and considering the significance of a possibly un-stageable stage direction. Such linguistic experiment can also be seen to inspire questions of readership: if readers cannot imagine how “fatchuck cheekchops” would appear on stage and receive no guidance from established language or authorial hints, what does this mean for readership? Returning to the metaphor of the shaped hole, readers are invited to consider whether they wish to come up with their own images for these terms (pass through the hole), become comfortable with the absence of defined meaning (remain within the hole), or skim over this gap in the text (choose not to acknowledge the hole in the

rock and keep walking). Indeed, even if readers choose to skim over the gap, perhaps after having encountered similar neologisms throughout *Ulysses*, this choice still represents active readership which has been shaped by the text.

As the episode descends into fantasy, readers are guided towards more ‘open’ gaps in which they are left to contemplate emptiness in the text with much less context than granted by shaped holes. For example, within Stephen’s fantastical encounter with his dead mother, he asks: “Tell me the word, mother, if you know now. The word known to all men”, but she responds with an unrelated question: “Who saved you [...]?” (*U* 15: 682). This lack of direct response may leave readers ‘hanging’: we can never know the word which is supposedly “known to all men”. I suggest that this ‘hanging’ creates a different kind of gap in *Ulysses*, without the shaping context I have discussed previously; there are no obvious markers in this scene which might allow readers to ‘weigh differing senses of meaning’ in relation to Stephen’s question. Indeed, this unanswered question feels more open-ended than a crack or shaped gap which it is possible for readers to insert themselves into. I, therefore, propose that this gap is more similar to a pier: readers are guided towards the end of a pier and left there by the text, surrounded by a sea of uncertainty. Thus, such an open gap is still somewhat structured by the context of the text – in this case, Stephen’s question represents the pier – and still requires active readerly choice. For example, readers could choose to retrace their steps back down the pier, searching for context in this scene and the wider context of *Ulysses* in an attempt to find “the word known to all men”⁴. Readers could also choose to walk back to dry-land and refute Joyce’s attempts to get them to interact with such a pier at all. However, I suggest that choosing to remain at the end of the pier and contemplate what such a position may mean for the concept of readership can also be seen to represent an active and emancipatory form of reading. By sitting with the uncertainty *Ulysses* inspires in leaving Stephen’s request unanswered, readers may be freed to think about wider questions of how it feels to be left without information by a text and whether it is important to know ‘the

⁴ To give only a few examples, critics such as Richard Ellmann (1984), Hugh Kenner (1987) and Thomas Sawyer (1983) have suggested the word may be ‘love’, ‘death’, or ‘synteresis’.

word known to all men', or if they are happy to simply contemplate the sea. The interpretation of such questions is subjective and, therefore, democratic: there is no wrong way to interact with the pier, just like there may be no right answer to the question of 'the word known to all men'.

Ulysses can be seen to lead readers towards similar gaps (both shaped and open) in 'Ithaca' by employing the traditional form of a catechism: a religious question and answer format which aims to communicate spiritual 'truth' through the repetition of memorised responses. By employing a form which is inherently concerned with truth and has specific answers to the questions it poses, Joyce can be seen to establish an expectation of completeness and conclusion in this episode, especially relevant given the episode's penultimate position within the novel. However, as Hart identifies is common in *Ulysses*, Joyce appears to be "preparing us for a sense of conclusion, which [he] nevertheless somewhat surprises" (Hart 1993: 429). For example, Joyce at first establishes the catechism form in a conventional way, with questions which appear concerned with establishing truth, and answers which provide relevant information:

Were their views on some points divergent? [...] Bloom dissented tacitly from Stephen's views on the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature. (*U* 17: 777)

Here, it is established that Bloom and Stephen differ slightly on their understandings of different kinds of truth – including readings of 'literature' – and we are presented with a clear answer to the question posed: *yes* their views on some points *are* divergent.

However, the relation between question and answer becomes less clear throughout 'Ithaca':

Did Bloom accept the invitation to dinner given then by the son and afterwards seconded by the father?

Very gratefully, with grateful appreciation, with sincere appreciative gratitude, in appreciatively grateful sincerity of regret, he declined. (*U* 17: 795)

Through the repetition of affirmative words – 'grateful', 'appreciative' – Joyce can be seen to establish an expectation of reconciliation in readers: it is expected that Bloom *will* have accepted the invitation. However, the

elongated sentence actually ends with Bloom declining, separated by a comma. Thus, readers' expectations are starkly contrasted with the information on the other side of this comma, creating a gap between anticipation and fulfilment and possibly evoking Hart's investigation of comma cracks. However, I believe this disparity may be more similar to the shaped gaps I have discussed in 'Circe': by creating a gap between the question and expected answer, Joyce inspires questions surrounding cohesion and what such a lack of cohesion might mean for processes of readership. Readers are asked to insert themselves into this gap and question what it means to read a misleading text, or to be a reader who is misled. I suggest that this shaped gap may also pose wider questions to readers regarding cohesion and truth: can the response be considered a truthful answer to the question? If so, readers may question the nature of truth which appears to change over the course of a sentence. If not, readers may face a larger gap within the form of the catechism, acknowledging that questions do not always lead to cohesive answers, and, therefore, that such methods may not lead to truth.

Such disparity between the question-and-answer method and truth is explored by Stephen in 'Nestor', in which he challenges the pedagogical system where students are expected to reach the truth of history by reciting facts and figures. Stephen then undermines this traditional method of teaching by encouraging the creative word-association of 'Pyrrhus' and 'pier', proposing that a pier is "a disappointed bridge" (*U* 2: 29). I have previously used the metaphor of the pier to discuss how Joyce may insert gaps into *Ulysses* that lead readers towards an emancipatory position of thought. However, I suggest that 'open' gaps in 'Ithaca' operate in a slightly different way. For example, the episode ends on an unanswered question – "Where?" (*U* 17: 871) – but this seems not so much to lead readers down a path which is then unfulfilled – like "a disappointed bridge" – as to leave them stranded. I suggest that the wide gap between the end of 'Ithaca' and the start of 'Penelope' may function more like a canyon than a pier; the gap still has textual context (in that it is preceded and followed by text) but readers are left to shout across this gap without authorial reply.

I return to MacCabe to further illustrate this idea, focusing on his explanation of how language was revolutionised in methods of psychoanalysis:

The silence of the analyst and his or her refusal to enter into normal inter-subjective relations are what allows the patient in the analytic situation to reorient him or herself in language. The patient constantly hears his or her own discourse return across the silence of the analyst with a message different from that which was first entrusted to it. (MacCabe 1978: 5)

Therefore, readers may communicate with the author in new ways by engaging with and questioning this gap between episodes. The “Yes because he never did a thing” (*U* 18: 871) which begins Molly’s soliloquy in ‘Penelope’ does not appear to respond to the ‘Where?’ which ends ‘Ithaca’, metaphorically forming the two walls of rock in between which readers may project their questions of truth, conclusion, and readership. For example, readers may question what it means to move on from the end of an episode of *Ulysses* without a conclusion. They may also question what this lack of conclusion means for the idea of “truth” in an episode predicated upon a religious form of truth assertion. They may, indeed, feel frustrated by the lack of meaning which concludes ‘Ithaca’ but, in the words of MacCabe, it may well be Joyce’s “silence” which allows such frustrations to “return across” the gap “with a message different from that which was first entrusted” to them. In acknowledging that an aspect of expected readership has not been fulfilled – both in the failure to answer the question and conclude the episode – readers may then be re-presented with the question of why they may have expected readership to be conclusive ‘passive consumption’: we communicate with the silent Joyce our own expectations of reading. I suggest, therefore, that this canyon-like gap is not necessarily a frustration but an emancipatory opportunity for readers to explore their own ideas of literature and readership without being dictated to by authorial authority.

In episodes intimately concerned with representation and truth, *Ulysses* can be seen to explore newly creative ideas of readership and meaning by asking readers to enter into empty spaces in the text. The position of “reader” and the complex relationship between reader, author, and text is made visible by these varied gaps. However, this relationship can be seen as democratic, rather than frustrating as readers are “freed” by absence to choose how they interact with Joyce’s text; creating new meaning dependent on which position they choose to occupy. Whether readers choose to move through the hole in rock or pass by this absence,

whether they choose to retrace their steps back to dry land or remain contemplative at the end of the pier, and what they choose (if anything) to shout across Joyce's authorial canyon represents a readerly choice, giving us the important space to engage with *Ulysses* on our own terms. Therefore, rather than presenting "difficulties" (MacCabe 1978: 2), or "cracks" in its surface (Hart 1993: 429), I see Joyce's writing much more similarly to Hugh Kenner: *Ulysses* is a like "a Henry Moore sculpture" and would be, thus, incomplete without its "holes" (Kenner: 1977, 393). In this paper, I have in no way presented an exhaustive list of such 'holes' in *Ulysses* but have attempted to suggest that different gaps created by Joyce ask us to interact with the text in newly active and 'open' ways. In other words, when we walk through a hole in *Ulysses*' rock or contemplate the sea at the end of Joyce's pier, we are freed to shape how we understand what it means to be a reader by the choices we make when positioned within these textual absences.

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