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Under the patronage of honorary members Umberto Eco and Giorgio Melchiori, the James Joyce Italian Foundation was founded in 2006 (<http://host.uniroma3.it/Associazioni/jjif>). The work of the Foundation, and the issues of the Piccola Biblioteca Joyciana series, are intended to promote and further the work undertaken by “Joyce Studies in Italy” (website: <http://joycestudiesinitaly.netsons.org/index.php/>).

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20

**JAMES JOYCE
THE JOYS OF EXILE**

*Edited by
Franca Ruggieri*

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Frank McGuinness, *The Woodcutter and His Family*.
(Dublin: Brandon / The O'Brien Press – 2018, pp. 223, €12.99)

In *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), Flann O'Brien depicted Joyce as a fictional character insisting that he had never written a book like *Ulysses* and forging his obituary to escape the consequent ill-reputed and shameful fame of his *romanzaccione*. Frank McGuinness's *The Woodcutter and His Family* is rather different: he also presents Joyce – and his family – as fictional characters, but he imagines and offers us their quasi-realistic thoughts in the final days leading up to Joyce's death.

The Woodcutter and His Family is divided into four chapters, each named after a character from Joyce's only play, *Exiles*. Each name is preceded by the character's respective familial role, and each represents one of the members of Joyce's family, namely: "Son, Archie" (Giorgio), "Wife, Bertha" (Nora), "Daughter, Beatrice" (Lucia) and "Father, Himself" (the writer: James Joyce). McGuinness has structured these chapters as four interior monologues set in the very last days of Joyce's life, followed by a conclusion, an imagined short story – or to be more precise, a folk-tale – that Joyce supposedly wrote for Nora and offered to her as his last homage on the very night he died. Himself says that this is the only thing he can now give: "What have I to offer? Too late for the ring, too late to shell out for whatever the band of gold sets a man back. So what else instead? / For your hand would you take a story? Will you settle for that? / If so, here's mine –" (201). McGuinness's book borrows its title from the title of this folk tale.

If it is true that the Irish literary genius is incapable of creating real novels, but always reproduces "the leap in the story [...] the deliberate gap in the narrative [...], the story within the story"⁵ this book is no exception. As a set of four interior monologues it proceeds following the associations of ideas of the four characters and presents a series of stories and images that are sometimes tenuously linked to each other. These are the constructs of the characters' minds who, retracing their remembrances of their life experiences with such a cumbersome father/husband presence, provide the reader with glimpses into their different personalities regarding their

⁵ R.F. Foster (2002). *The Irish Story*. London: Penguin.

familial roles; they dig down into all the consequent psychologically complex – sometimes even obsessive – refractions of their status in the family. It goes without saying that a traditional plot does not exist.

An acclaimed man of the theatre, McGuinness knows perfectly how to vary the tone and to depict and reproduce different voices vividly. In the four chapters, he plays with a series of coincidences of themes, and in so doing he distinguishes the different perspectives of his fictional/non-fictional characters. He thus presents the writer trying to justify his daughter's behaviour, and Nora/Bertha blaming James/Himself for his attempts to present Lucia/Beatrice as an artist rather than understanding the real nature of a disturbed personality.⁶ This means that not only do the characters present themselves through their different voices, but they are also reflected in the images the other characters provide of their family members. Thus, Giorgio remembers how his mother reproached James/Himself for “having made a fine fist of an atheist out of him [Giorgio/Archie]” (26), and Beatrice/Lucia, in one of her sadly frequent tantrums, attacks her mother depicting her as “Mama, a cannibal from Connemara, where Father says they eat their young out of starvation and where you say you picked up the habit of disembowelling” (135).

“Gravediggers in Hamlet”, says Leopold Bloom in “Hades”, reminding us of the infinite complexities of life, made up of amenities and happiness, but also of sorrowful and painful moments with the constant idea of our inevitable decay and death. This also applies to the tone of McGuinness's book. At times it is ironic and humorous, as in the passages depicting stories from the childhood/adolescence of husband and wife. In one of the numerous anecdotes Joyce ironically substitutes Cardinal Henry Newman, the founder of The Catholic University of Ireland, with a nun, Sister Henrietta Goodman. But even more hilarious is a reference to the Irish Theatre and to the depiction of rural Ireland,⁷ when Himself talks about a woman who fell from a window in the Abbey Theatre: she was “so overcome with revulsion at the poetry of a play that she raced with such

⁶ As Joyce also did when talking to C.G. Jung saying that Lucia's poems, far from proving she was schizophrenic, were evidence of her literary genius.

⁷ And with this, a likely allusion to W.B. Yeats's theatre, as seen by Joyce himself.

speed out of the auditorium and into a piece of stained glass she mistook for a painting by Jack B. Yeats of a bog in Sligo” (158).

Yet, the recurrent idea of the imminent death of the protagonist casts a dramatic sombre shadow over the whole narrative. Life is also made up of controversies and lack of understanding: Bertha does not accept her son’s choice to marry a woman that she considers “invisible” (67). At the same time she asks her husband: “what was it I was called – by your mother or by your aunt – was it a painted hussy? [...] or was I just country cute, as they termed me?” (187).⁸ Again, it must be noted that these two episodes regarding Nora Barnacle are reported in the chapters devoted to Archie and to Himself, thus further complicating the intricate interrelations between the characters’ different perspectives.

In the end, all these thoughts, memories – sometimes often imbued with a sense of guilt, regret and shame – and the bitter recognition of an ineluctable present converge into the final tale about an imaginary extravagant woodcutter, and, significantly, his family. These are the two main points around which the novel revolves: the idea of a familial order (or disorder) – which brings up the legacy of the past that is inevitably linked to family tradition – and the chance to pass on the torch through the accounts of stories lived, told, and heard, and here repeated in the flow of thoughts of the different characters.

As for the parental relationship, it is omnipresent. Himself thinks back to his father and, after everything, he realizes that his father would have tried to soothe his son’s troubles had he heard his cries (Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me), thus fulfilling his parental duty: “And now I start to weep for my father. Even on this, my bed of death, I see him as young, a fine figure man, raising his hand not to harm me but to caress, and if he could within his power remove this agony that consumes me, he would do so [...]” (179). Bertha’s monologue begins with a reference to her mother: “Am I not the black pity of a woman? How often did I hear my own mother chant that refrain?” (55). Archie, with his sense of inadequacy says: “[...] It was one of the many failures which he [Himself] forgave me. Indeed, he forgave us all without complaint, no

⁸ This reference, evidently, also alludes to the passage in “The Dead” where Gabriel Conroy remembers that his mother defined Gretta as ‘country cute’.

matter how many times we had let him down – in thought, in word, and in deed. The most benevolent of famous men, Papa” (10). Beatrice has a special relationship with her father who has difficulty admitting she is insane, while she herself competes with her mother and her brother. Alluding to “She Weeps over Ragoon”, Beatrice remembers her mother recounting stories from her past life in the West: “And as I break my fast, she tells me the names of Galway, the Claddagh, and Taylor’s Hill, Nun’s Island and Eyre Square, towns with lovely sounds like Spiddal and Oughterard, Moycullen and Ragoon, which is when she always stops, repeating Ragoon, Ragoon, and some days she cries” (132-3).

As for the stories told and heard, they all anticipate the final fairy tale. Among these, there are also half-truths, such as those referencing Marcel Proust – alluded to in the chapter named after the unnamed author⁹ – and to Samuel Beckett, obviously found in the chapter devoted to Lucia/Beatrice. These stories bear witness to a dual reading of reality and fiction, often mixing personal and possibly distorted truths with narratives invented for the sake of narration. The anecdote invented by Suzie, Bertha’s friend, when they were young for the sailor they once met near the port, is only one of many instances. Shall the reader take these stories as an underlying hint of creative imagination and literary production? Bertha partly answers this question when she says, about Himself: “I believed every word he told me, so I had the power to turn his lies, most beautiful lies, to truth” (106). Finally, the story of the woodcutter must be the answer to all this. It is as if Joyce had finally decided to give in to the world of fairies, to Yeats and the Celtic revival and create a story alluding to the complications and vicissitudes of family life, with its bitter and happy memories that inevitably come to the fore in the final moments of our lives.

Fabio Luppi