

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

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JOYCE IN/AND ITALY

edited by

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EDIZIONI 
ROMA 2013

*Volume pubblicato con il contributo
dell'Università degli Studi Roma Tre*

TUTTI I DIRITTI RISERVATI

È vietata la traduzione, la memorizzazione elettronica,
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compresa la fotocopia, anche ad uso interno o didattico.
L'illecito sarà penalmente perseguibile a norma dell'art. 171
della legge n. 633 del 22/04/1941

ISSN 2281-373X

© 2013, Edizioni Q – Roma

www.edizioniq.it

e-mail: info@edizioniq.it

Single copy Price € 18

Subscription Rates (one issue annually):

Personal: € 18

Institutional: € 30

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Ruggieri, Franca. 2012.
James Joyce, la vita, le opera
Milan: Franco Angeli

Professor Franca Ruggieri has long been one of Italy's leading Joyceans, a stalwart organizer of international Joyce conferences (including the sixteenth International James Joyce Symposium held in Rome in 1998 and of successive stagings of the James Joyce Birthday conference). Founder and president of the Italian James Joyce Foundation she is also the long-serving and energetic editor of both the occasional journal, *Joyce Studies in Italy*, and the book series entitled *La Piccola Biblioteca Joyceana* which has now published more than ten volumes.

Ruggieri has also published widely and consistently on Joyce and this publication of a revised edition of her *James Joyce, La Vita le Lettere* is indeed timely. Published by Francoangeli it is a revisitation of her earlier *Introduzione a James Joyce* published in 1990 by LaTerza, a standard work for Italian students of the great Irish author. One cannot or should not judge a book by its covers but it is worth stressing that at a time when academic publishing in the humanities in Italy has increasingly to take refuge with pay-as-you-go (and sometimes fly-by-night) small publishers, Ruggieri found both in 1990 and in 2013 two very serious and mainstream Italian publishers for her volume (She also edited *James Joyce, Poesie e Prose* for Mondadori's prestigious Meridiani series in 1992).

It is also true that Joyce studies is crowded with introductions to the author and his works, often written by younger scholars who do not always have the experience of a life reading Joyce necessary to manage to distil the complexities of his writings into a compact, approachable form as Ruggieri has done. What also singles her work out is the constant making of connections between life, works, and letters. Ruggieri's work is an elegantly written, subtly-argued interpretation of Joyce, his works, his life, and of the delicate and complex relations between the life, the letters, and the creative works.

The volume leads the reader through Joyce's early formative years at home in Dublin and through his four decades of often difficult and never dull exile lived in Trieste, Rome, Zurich, Paris. The principal font of information is Joyce's own letters. Through them, Ruggieri traces the gradual and often painstaking assembly of his great literary works which are inevi-

tably interconnected with the biographical facts of his own existence. With Joyce as perhaps with no other author, there is no getting away from the chronological facts of his own life, there can be no easy marginalisation or wholesale dismissal of the biography.

This work is a valuable introduction both for those coming to Joyce for the first time but also for seasoned Joyce readers. Nothing is taken for granted, no reading is banal. Space here will allow me only to focus on a few particular “moments” in this volume which stresses what was for Joyce the necessity of art and contrasts how, in Joyce’s view, one could learn to write but would could not learn to be an artist. The professional writer who knows how to work the market is not necessarily an artist. The artist aims higher than mere commercial or public recognition and seeks to ask greater questions. Not that Joyce believed in “uncontrolled inspiration”; no art was born only from the hard work of writing but moments of inspiration must be earned through steady slog. As Ruggieri points out, Joyce would have believed in the saying “la poesia si fa, non nasce” which we might translate as “poetry is made, not born”.

Ruggieri is careful to distinguish between Joyce’s real life and the life or lives of Stephen Dedalus pointing to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a novel of formation which owes much to Joyce’s own real life but at the same time treats that “real life” with great irony. She underlines the differences between Joyce and Stephen: “Stephen non è mai solo James, anche se da James ha origine: lo distanzia fino a vederlo come altro da sé, lo assorbe, lo supera, lo interpreta, lo ridimensiona, lo espone, lo difende, lo ridicolizza, lo esalta. Così Stephen che scrive la propria vita è sempre diverso da James che vive e pensa la propria via e la propria” (16). Or to put it in English: Stephen is never only James, even if he originates in James: he distances himself from him to the point that he sees him as something different to himself, he absorbs, surpasses and interprets him, he cuts him down to size, he exposes him, he defends him, he makes fun of him, he exhorts him”. Stephen writes Stephen’s life – a life that is always different to that of Joyce himself.

Another useful aspect of this volume is the quantity and quality of its commentary on Joyce’s (mostly early) critical writings, many of them penned in Italian and dating back to his long sojourn in Trieste. An example of this is the section on Joyce’s early Dublin piece, “The Study of Languages” where the author sees the study of words as suggesting the history of men. From a very early age, Joyce is shown to have understood the importance of language study as a means to sharpen one’s knowledge of one’s own lan-

guage, of one's own style. In many ways Joyce's entire literary career is seen as an unceasing journey in and through language. After the historical literary enterprise that was *Ulysses*, a work which is, as Ruggieri reminds us, citing Fielding, 'a comic epic poem in prose', a vast analysis of the human condition told through its trinity of protagonists, Joyce does not rest on his laurels but departs once more:

Ma ora, con *Work in Progress*, è come se, dopo il ritorno a Itaca, Ulisse-Joyce partisse di nuovo, come nella sequenza mitologica, alla scoperta di nuove terre inesplorate, "oltre I confini di quell'universo umano del quale il grande romanzo joyciano aveva fornito una mappa tanto dettagliata e accurata", oltre I confini dell'umano e del reale, oltre, appunto, quelle Colonne d'Ercole, che segnavano la fine della fabula mitologica dell'eroe omeico, oltre Gibilterra, spazio conosciuto e privilegiato della memoria e del sogno di Molly nel passto-present del monologo finale (141-2).

Here Ruggieri cites the ancient name for the two promontories at the eastern end of the Strait of Gibraltar and the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. They are usually identified as Gibraltar in Europe and Jebel Musa in North Africa, two columns that signal that end of the mythological fable of Homer's hero.

The author offers a revealing reflection on *Finnegans Wake* or *Work in Progress* as it for so long was, as 'il racconto del labirinto della storia, ovvero "meandertale" – meander = meandro e tale = racconto – e "meandertalistoria", the telling of the labyrinth of history, the real meandertale at the centre of which is the sense of story telling itself with its 'serpeggiante e infinito' qualities, its habit of twisting serpent-like into infinity. Ruggieri also describes Joyce's taste for the calembour, for wordplay and punning, for numeration, for lists – those of rivers, of geographical names, among many more - that sound similar to the religious recitations he heard echoing through his youth. She contrasts the corporeal materials of *Ulysses* – signposted immediately through "Stately", "plump" Buck Mulligan with the liquid non-corporeal metamorphosing fluidity of the riverrun of the *Wake*, this 'opera aperta', this 'open work' to use Umberto Eco's famous term, this work that can be read, performed, mined, interpreted, but never exhausted and which is the perfect gift for Joyce's ideal reader who is also ideally, as Joyce put it, an insomniac.

Ruggieri's work suggests a rich continuity in Joyce's entire opus, from the early essays through to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and con-

cluding with the *Wake*. She also suggests the richness of this body of work, this 'human comedy', too often, in her opinion, hijacked by self-referential academics, but which is an inexhaustible source of meaning and should be open to all. Joyce she sees writing "a human comedy" following the tradition of Dante and later of Sterne, privileging a mental journey, imagining literature as a necessary affirmation of the freedom of the individual.

Finally, while amply allowing the very human side of Joyce to emerge, Ruggieri's study crucially makes us want to go back to the Joycean text and, in doing so, reveals itself to be an exemplary work of criticism.

John McCourt