

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

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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](http://www.edizioniq.it)

e-mail: [info@edizioniq.it](mailto:info@edizioniq.it)

Single copy Price € 18

Subscription Rates (one issue annually):

Personal: € 18

Institutional: € 30

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Rome: Bulzoni

Tonetto, Maria Grazia. 2012.  
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The Italian series *Piccola Biblioteca Joyciana* (general editor: Franca Ruggieri) was inaugurated some years ago with one of the last critical contributions of Giorgio Melchiori. Over time, it has proved to be a promising forum for emerging and established Joyce scholars. It now includes several contributions from the likes of Fritz Senn, Timothy Martin, John McCourt, and many other renowned experts. The three most recent additions to the series—the books by Cavecchi, Baronti Marchiò and Tonetto—all investigate in their own ways themes that have surprisingly not always received the attention they deserve in full-length studies. These broad subjects (figurative memory, dramatic monologues and the beauty of the corporeal), though quite distinct from each other, seem to be covertly underwritten by subterranean connections and echoes.

Maria Cristina Cavecchi's book revolves around the fascinating hypothesis that the role played by images of circles in *Ulysses* can be seen as a reference to the pictorial universe of Futurism, Dadaism and Cubism. This helps to build bridges between literature as representation and the attempt to put forward ideas in an imagist way. This is perhaps why the book opens with a pointed reference to Brancusi, whose use of geometry appears to the author to be quite similar to what Joyce makes of this "art" in *Ulysses*—though he does so perhaps in a more esoteric way. All the circle images in Joyce's novel seem to entertain what can be labeled a "locomotory function", opposed to the "locomotor ataxy" which many have seen as one of the keys to *Ulysses*, it being the *signatura* of the Dublin paralysis we encounter early on in works by Joyce. Such images take the shape of tyres and wheels as in bicycles and carriages, and clearly point to the eternal return typical of the peculiar futurism of *Finnegans Wake*.

Circularity, which is the very soul of the *Wake*, is portrayed in *Ulysses*, in narrative terms, in Bloom's return home at night, the same home he has left in the morning vaguely hoping not to be cuckolded in the afternoon. Cavecchi takes circularity to be atmospheric too, and goes as far as suggesting that the cloud seen at the end of the novel might be the same cloud seen by Stephen and Bloom at the beginning of their day, so sealing the circle of the text in an imaginary communion of heaven and earth (as above, so below, Hermes Trismegistus would say).

The discussion of the many forms of circularity symbolized by the various bicycles in *Ulysses* is of particular interest. The author considers them allusions to the avant-garde movements in the figurative arts, especially the art of Duchamps. Perhaps, such images also point at another direction, unknown to Joyce to be sure, but quite revealing in terms of his Irishness: they might stand for a possible link to the presence of bicycles in another Irish writer who owes a lot to Joyce, Flann O'Brien. O'Brien in *The Third Policeman* portrays almost human bicycles that through an exchange of molecules and atoms become as one with their proprietors, and at times even end up groping the girls that stand by.

Through a discussion at length of the role of bicycles in *Ulysses*, Cavecchi interestingly contends that circles are also tools that help multiply the possibility of movement, just as writing in Joyce amplifies the semantic potential of language. From the technological implications of wheel-shaped objects in *Ulysses*, the author moves on to hint at the circle-centered iconography in occult sciences, alchemy and specifically Bruno's art of memory, in a fascinating blend of aesthetics and esotericism very typical of Joyce. This finally leads to reflections on circular cosmologies and the classic world, where images of circles and wheels are at the same time a metaphor for movement, and tools that help form a new and revolutionary interpretation of the world, so that another "fictional" universe becomes possible.

In typical Joycean vein, the debate on the cosmological value of circles leads ultimately back to the human and the carnal, in Bloom's contemplation of the rotundities of Molly's body. In this way, the scenario and the world inhabited by the characters of *Ulysses* becomes anthropomorphized, so to speak, with images of curves and globes that again remind us of the circular beginning of the *Wake*, with all its swerves of shores and bends of bay.

The book ends with a description of time, and again its circular mode, a chasing of minutes, hours, days, which keeps providing us with a new version of the same events over and over again. This is aptly symbolized by

the many clocks featured in *Ulysses* which manage to stop the time while recording the inexorable chain of past, present and future—probably the most powerful message of Joyce's art.

*A Thought-Tormented Music. Browning and Joyce* by Roberto Baronti Marchiò is an intense study of a very delicate topic, the relation between two very different writers, and yet quite similar in many ways. The work convincingly argues that rather than any direct influence of Browning on Joyce, quite difficult to prove beyond single textual instances, one should look for affinities in the literary intentions lying beneath the composition of their works. This can indeed be done by resorting to the resources of intertextuality.

The fact that Browning is rarely directly quoted in Joyce's writings and letters makes the subject all the more tricky. This book is divided into three sections, which allow the reader to be gently led from the general to the specific. The first part is devoted to the heritage of Browning, his reputation as an obscure poet in the Victorian age but also a symbol of the poetic sensibility of the time. Browning could in fact be portrayed as the indefatigable perpetrator of the poetic values of a late Romanticism. In this, it is revealing to highlight, as this book does quite well, the tension between the objective and the subjective poet in Browning, the rejection of his poetry by many modernists, but also the legacy of his works and the use that modernist poets and artists (Ezra Pound foremost among them) make of the poetics of this great Victorian poet.

Knowing Joyce, one would suspect that he would have used Browning just to turn such a legacy upside down in his writings, to mock him, to make him the target of his literary scorn. In fact, the many differences in temper and artistic achievements are far too many to be dismissed. The good thing is, Baronti Marchiò does not dismiss them. He is very keen in stressing the distance between the two writers. At the same time, he makes use of such a distance to demonstrate that Browning is more present in Joyce's books than one might imagine.

First, we read about the ways in which the message of Browning is filtered, in Joyce, by his interest in Shelley, but also by Yeats's theory of the mask. Yeats's mask poems are presented somehow as another version of Browning's dramatic monologues. From here the author suggests a number of striking affinities between Browning's idea of dramatic poetry and Joyce's early conception of drama, art, poetry and life. This is all discussed in detail in the second part of the book, which functions in a way as the antithesis

to the first part. By the end of the second part, the reader feels that Joyce and Browning are now no longer so distant. And this is where the general merges into the specific.

After a number of remarks on Rome, the eternal city so central to both Joyce and Browning, the third part is a close reading of "The Dead", in the light of the many echoes of Browning in the short story. They include the direct quotation in Gabriel's speech to the thought-tormented music of the title, which is in fact an oblique reference to Browning via Samuel Daniel, the many disguises of the surname Browning in the story, and the famous distant music which happens to be another reminiscence of Browning's "A toccata of Galuppi's". Following scholar John Feely, the central part of "The dead", and particularly Gabriel's speech, is presented as a reworking of Browning's "Epilogue", the poem which concludes *Asolando*.

This book certainly helps the reader to see the many affinities between Joyce's and Browning's techniques also in the light of their attention to psychology, always in balance between the subjective and the objective. It also points to very similar approaches to the representation of the plurality of the world, as well as the epiphanic potential of trivial details. Baronti Marchiò's book will help us make sense of the Browning in Joyce; and, rewriting Wilde's famous adage, it will lead to the discovery that Joyce is a prose Browning, and so is Browning.

Maria Grazia Tonetto's book has also a very fascinating title, *The Beauty of Mortal Conditions*. This bilingual study is about a very central topic in Joyce, the relation between body and soul, and specifically the way in which Joyce deals with both the Christian and Platonic metaphysical tradition. This considered the body as somewhat detached from the soul, of which it was taken to be just the container, and at the same time its mortal prison. Starting from Joyce's early ideas in the *Critical Writings*, the epiphanies and the early draft of his novel *Stephen Hero*, up to *Ulysses*, Tonetto's book gives a fair catalogue of the passages in which the soul-body relationship is excavated, used, manipulated, and continuously rewritten to show how Joyce manages to invert the traditional metaphysics in order to adopt a neo-Aristotelian position: the soul and the body are one thing.

Joyce's rereading of Aristotle, Aquinas and Bruno, as Tonetto contends, seems to suggest that the soul is the ultimate signature of individuality and of one's presence in the world. Of particular interest in this scenario is the beautiful chapter on "Circe", where the author makes us recognize how representations of the body and its functions move right from the uncanny, to



then shape the internal structure of Joyce's comic realism. Such transfiguration becomes the essence of the glorification of the new man hailed by the narrative of *Ulysses*.

The glorious body of *Ulysses* is, of course, most of the time the body of Molly, a corporeal entity but also a spiritual one in her own peculiar materiality. Tonetto reminds us that Joyce was no materialist, but rather someone who, in the beauty of mortal conditions, found the dialectic solution to the body-soul dichotomy. Molly is therefore also an anti-narcissistic character in the sense that she inverts the classical equation between purity and beauty, being too concerned with the attempt to hide bodily matters in order to show that beauty and splendor often coincide with the obscene. This seems to be not only Joyce's provocative aesthetic lesson in much of *Ulysses*, but also the start of a new physical metaphysics, a new metaphysics of the body which puts together Bruno's understanding of Aristotle and a refined rejection of the sin-stained body of which St Augustine speaks.

Finally, in this finely written book, we encounter an ultimate transfiguration in the incarnation of language, the body becoming language, and consequently language being changed into the body. This final equation is better left to the words of the author: "*Ulysses* points that the body is situated at the limits of language, dangerously near to the point where the structure of signification breaks, since every act of writing is born from the writer's body to become the body of the text. Writing is the Eucharistic process whereby, from the absence of the body, the body is incarnated. As in "Proteus" Stephen's creative art is sealed by urination, and the kidneys are the first organ Joyce bestows to his man-book, writing is a natural process that shows, typographically transubstantiated, the absent body of the author. In an alchemic word, which has to be read as the trace of an absence, Joyce erects, eternally, his presence: James Augustine Aloysius Joyce turned himself into a book".

*Enrico Terrinoni*