Introduction: writing reception

‘I’ll take this one,’ Bloom says to the shopman. His choice of Sweets of Sin to fulfill his errand for Molly, at the heart of both city and novel, signals first a moment of transportation in which Bloom, as reader, nearly loses the run of himself, and then a fleeting masculine decisiveness, a ‘mastering’ of his ‘troubled’ breath (U 10.638-9). This act will place both Bloom and Molly within a series about which the narrator of ‘Ithaca’ might well have asked a question: who else has read this book? Fictionally, at least, the shopman has, but also, no one has, since Sweets of Sin does not exist beyond the pages of Joyce’s novel. Then again, it might be as well to say that anyone who has read Ulysses has therefore also read Sweets of Sin. The invited confusion between character-as-reader and ‘actual’ reader renders the question ‘Who has read this book?’ more difficult than it might appear. In fact, the question is asked a few pages later by Stephen Dedalus, about an unnamed text at a different bookcart. ‘Thumbed pages: read and read. Who has passed here before me?’ (U 10.545-6). The identification of a readership is one of the classic problems in studies of reception, and one that is further exacerbated when the books in question overtly address this very issue.

When a question similar to Stephen’s (‘Who has passed here before me?’) is put in ‘Ithaca’ – ‘What preceding series?’ – the ‘text’ is Molly’s body and the ‘readers’ are her supposed lovers. The narrator’s answer is instructive less of Molly’s sexual relations than of such questions in general: ‘Assuming Mulvey to be the first term of the series . . . and so on to no last term’ (U 17.2132-42). As the narrator implies, such lists have an arbitrary starting point and no determinate conclusion. Like the lover, the reader ‘is neither first nor last nor only nor alone in a series originating in and repeated to infinity’ (U 17.2130-1). One list runs into another, forming an intertextual log of all readers. Moreover, like the Blooms’ bed, such a list bears ‘the imprint of a human form’ (U 17.2125) since it is a catalogue of the compiler’s own anxieties, prejudices and concerns. When
Dedalus asks ‘Who has passed here before me?’ he thus opens another ‘book’, the unwritten list of those readers in that ‘preceding series’; his interest in the history of that reading is indicative of the particular significance of allusions to readers in Joyce’s work in general. By recalling his earlier question on Sandymount Strand, ‘Who ever anywhere will read these written words?’ (U 3.414-15), Stephen has set up both anticipatory and reflective histories of reading: in the first case, by looking ahead to his own reception by the would-be readers of his poem; and later, at the bookcart, by placing himself as the latest in a series of readers. On this second occasion, Stephen notices the volume’s ‘Thumbed pages: read and read.’ The words ‘read and read’ are suitably (and undecidably) both past and present tense, one a reflection and the other an imperative to a future reading, thus capturing both the sense of previous readers having read and at the same time the reading that is yet to come. This example again suggests a necessary qualification to any catalogue of readers: such a list is unending and is lent an almost fictional quality, which undermines a reliance solely upon the historical. The fictional can in itself provide an indication, and even suggest an implicit theory, of reception. An account of Joyce’s reception should not, then, be restricted to the attempted compilation of an actual readership (and not merely a critical readership) but must also be responsible to the peculiarities of the text in question. The identification of a readership is thus not only a historical question but also a theoretical, and even textual, one.

The purpose of the present study is not, then, to offer a ‘critical history’ of Joyce but instead to show how – and this is the particular topic of this book – Joyce’s work rewrites the responses of several actual readers and, in doing so, engages with the specific conditions of reception, notably in Ireland. These actual readers to whom Joyce in turn responded ranged from family and friends to critics, writers and ‘men of letters’. Of course, this became more pronounced as his career developed. On many occasions, Joyce incorporated into his writing versions of their particular responses which had been made either to his earlier work or to earlier versions of that writing. Joyce’s writing of reception is thus a fiction, but a fiction that is responsible to the historical pressures of reading. Reception might well be called an act (as in the title of this book): not only for its connotations of the fictional and performative, but also for its suggestion of the social, somatic and even legal. The term might be taken to imply a stronger historical engagement than it does in Wolfgang Iser’s The Act of Reading, a seminal work of reader-response criticism (discussed below). At the same time as implying that reading is itself a performance, the analyses
that follow seek to place that action within particular contexts. This book shows that Joyce’s engagement with the conditions of reception – such as his tactic of incorporating within his writing variations of previous, actual responses to his work – is a matter of wider cultural significance since such issues carried particular social and political weight in Joyce’s Ireland.

The question of reception is particularly germane to a reading of Joyce because his books not only have attracted countless volumes of criticism and a formidable reputation but are also in part about reception. Here the term ‘reception’ is more apt than ‘reading’, since it implies an institutional social discourse that envelops reading – one of publication, reviewing and cultural attitudes. Within the particular Irish contexts which it insistently invokes, Joyce’s writing displays an acute recognition of its untimeliness, of being out of step with others and with expectations, of there not being an audience or ‘a people’ waiting for it. In this sense, it may be called modern: Joyce’s work signifies its modernity in its self-conscious concern for reception. The absence of a ‘public’ was a condition for the writing; the responses of readers the material to show this. If this is a typically modern disjunction – signalling the estrangement of a writer from possible readers – it is also one that plays out in Joyce’s reception (or possible reception) in Ireland. Moreover, Joyce records and transforms that process: his is a writing of reception. Joyce’s work shows a strong emphasis on the material and societal aspects of reading as well as on the inevitable ‘failures’ of reading. As such, it situates literary reception within particular contexts, from revivalist theatre and Catholic education to the formation of the Free State; and his rewriting of specific readers’ responses (from a Trieste pupil to his mother to John Eglinton [W. K. Magee] and W. B. Yeats) exemplifies also the textual deformations that the process of reading produces.

Joyce’s writing of the act of reception renders without nostalgia those lost historical moments – moments, it might be said, when reading itself was lost – as fictional indices of a cultural and aesthetic problem: the identification of a reader and the constitution of an audience. The following chapters situate those moments within broader discourses that helped shape the expectations of readers: the idea of a ‘national audience’ in revivalist theatre; the effect of the provision of Catholic educational institutions on strategies for reading; the institutionalisation of an ‘ordinary reader’; the attempt (by Yeats in particular) to shape the cultural struggles of the Free State. Joyce thus links the personal act of reading (especially reading of his own work) to wider political forces, particularly those in Ireland. I argue that Joyce’s work, in its concern with its own
reception, sets out the conditions of impossibility for a determinable audience in general and for an Irish national audience in particular; at the same time, his writing exposes the various imperial and religious constraints that both enabled and closed off reading. This is the political tension of his texts: for Joyce, there can be no model of an audience, but there must of necessity be readers. The distinction – between an imagined (or actual) body of like-minded recipients and the inevitable fact of partial reading – is important; the collective audience suggests a ‘readiness’ that the individual reader may not have. This very distinction, it might be said, is implicit in the ending of ‘The Dead’ (as chapter 1 argues). So Joyce’s account of the conditions of reception in Ireland, and of his own readers in particular, is not merely ‘personal revenge’ or ‘modernist self-reflexivity’ but an important cultural commentary on the social and political ramifications of reading, which continues to resonate for contemporary criticism.

Joyce’s display of the disjunction between the writer and his possible readers signals in the first place the impossibility of a national audience as, for instance, ambitiously envisaged in the early days of the Revival. However, at the same time, by recording this disjunction, Joyce’s writing seeks to displace the cultural practices that shaped the possibilities of reception in his Ireland. His account of the failures of his reception – the stumbling and limited responses met with by his own work – shows his commitment to reading as an inevitably partial act (that is, both incomplete and biased) and as a material, socially embedded one. In doing so, he indicates that reading was both performative (or inventive) and historical (an act undertaken in particular conditions). As with so much in Joyce, his examples were close to home: the reception of his own writing could illuminate a broad contextual terrain. It could be said that Joyce’s work is addressed to the possibility of its reception in Ireland: that is to say, it recognises that a form of reading or accommodation necessarily occurs (even when not reading). The inevitability of this ‘reading’ in Ireland remained a lasting fascination within his writing. Yet this reception must remain at one level unachieved for Joyce; it stays at the status of the possible: the formation of an achieved reception would itself signal a cultural state that never came into being. It might be said, then, that by showing the ways in which reception was possible – by frequently alluding to his own reception, and by rewriting that reception – Joyce shows how a certain impossibility resides within the act of reading. Such an apparent ‘impossibility’, this book maintains, had particular political circumstances.
In general, readers of Joyce know two things about his reception, although little critical effort has been made to connect them. In the first place, like that of many modernist writers, Joyce’s writing is thought to imply a future audience that would be sufficiently cultured to read it: Joyce remains ‘ahead’ of his readers. Second, it is often recognised that, in his own way, Joyce sought to extend his readership by actively promoting his work (having copies delivered to particular critics and acquaintances, thanking all for their reviews despite also exacting some comeuppance on a few). These points are exemplified by Richard Ellmann’s hugely influential biography. The very first line states that ‘We are still learning to be James Joyce’s contemporaries’, suggesting that his implied – and somehow ‘best’ – audience is a later, ‘more educated’ one than his own generation of readers. Ellmann’s final page declares that ‘the ingenuity with which he [Joyce] wrote his books was the same with which he forced the world to read them’, and so acknowledges the author’s role as a sort of ad-canvasser in his own right: he took seriously the promotion and reviewing of his work, even writing jingles for Faber’s publication of two books from ‘Work in Progress’. Ellmann’s Joyce was a revised version of the model of the aloof ‘high modernist’ which some earlier critics had championed: ‘His [Joyce’s] audience was the least of his concerns’, claimed Herbert Gorman. In overcoming this view of modernism, more recent critics, building on Ellmann and others, have sought to delineate the specific kinds of interaction between modernist writers and their marketplace. Lawrence Rainey argues that innovative sales methods – and *Ulysses* is typical of this – helped create a new and elite audience of reader-collectors. Others have focused on the role of patrons: Joyce Piell Wexler claims that ‘Joyce circumvented the need to build an audience because he attracted patrons’; specifically, she states that he ‘sacrificed the Irish public he had once sought’. As this book shows, Joyce’s work remains an interrogation of what ‘the Irish public’ might be precisely because it refuses an address to such a public. While these analyses have often provided illuminating accounts of the role of authors within modernist publishing, they have also tended to ignore two important aspects: Joyce’s writing itself (which, as I show, does address reception, including his own), and the particular circumstances of literary reception in Ireland.

Ellmann’s observations suggest the importance of the issue of reception to an understanding of Joyce’s work and its cultural placement. Yet, pinned at either end of his biography, they do little more than sketch...
an outline of the topic, hinting at Joyce’s deep concern for his own reception and gesturing towards a number of questions raised by the work. What relationship exists between those contemporary readers and us later ones? Is there an appropriate audience for Joyce? Or, as Derrida would put it twenty-five years later, ‘What exactly do you mean by “read Joyce”? Who can pride himself [or herself] on having “read” Joyce?’

The idea that Joyce’s readers are somehow lagging behind him has been a lasting one. Ellmann’s famous opening line itself echoes Evelyn Scott’s 1920 article in *The Dial* which bore the heading ‘Contemporary of the Future’. More recently, Christine Froula has declared that ‘we are still catching up with some of his [Joyce’s] most radical aspects.’

Standing at either end of his monumental volume, Ellmann’s remarks (and Derrida’s casual echo) are symptomatic of a more general critical reluctance to connect these issues – Joyce’s particular relationships with practices of reading, and his texts’ apparent ability to remain ahead of readers – in analyses of the historical and textual significance of reception as his work encounters, and rewrites, it.

Modernism has also often been understood to imply a later and ‘better’ audience, whose shortcomings can be highlighted and corrected, one which would in time learn to read the canonical artefact. Colin MacCabe, for instance, has suggested that ‘Modernism can be read as attempts to make up for the inadequacies of audiences in the present by postulating ideal audiences in the future.’ By contrast, the following chapters suggest that Joyce consistently grounds reading in material circumstances, which is nowhere more evident than in his depictions of actual readers and historical scenes of reading, particularly those pertaining to readings of his own work or conditions in which his work might be read. While Joyce may note the ‘inadequacies’ of his contemporary readership, he does so by situating it within particular circumstances. Nowhere in Joyce’s work is there a model of an ‘ideal reader’. This may suggest that such frustrations typify reading in general, yet this is no bland universalism but rather an insistence on the historicity of understanding and the social character of reading experiences. Joyce does not postulate a model future audience: indeed – as chapter 1 shows – his response to Revivalism in *Dubliners* in part hinges on a rejection of this notion. For Joyce, an ideal future audience would be at odds with the cultural situations and generic forms within which he worked: overt political divisions, as well as the inevitable disjunctions of textuality, did not lead Joyce to imagine a ‘future ideal audience’, or to reclaim one from history, but to interrogate the forms of reception in his present. In this sense, as in others, Joyce might be seen as
distinct from some of his European modernist and Irish revivalist contemporaries. Indeed, his refusal to embrace a future or ideal audience, while rewriting his contemporary readers, could be thought of as a component of his rejection of any idealised or postulated political elite while at the same time denying the legitimacy of the status quo. Joyce’s refusal of an audience is thus quite different from, for instance, that of the editors of Criterion, who kept the circulation deliberately low, for theirs is the cultivation of an elite, like-minded audience. He also differs from Yeats, who at various points imagines an audience either by postulating a subservient public or by idealising specific historical figures (as discussed in chapter 1). Unlike these, Joyce’s refusal of an audience is an examination of literary reception. It might be said that Joyce’s writing is addressed to the very question of an audience or a public, especially as constituted in Ireland in the period of his work.

It is understandable that Joyce has sometimes been criticised for not addressing a particular audience. In the 1970s, this was seen as a political failing by MacCabe when he argued that ‘Joyce’s texts are politically ineffective because they lack any definite notion of an audience to which they are addressed.’ MacCabe’s solution to this failing was to fall back on a standard supposition of early Wake criticism which had held that the book could be addressed only to ‘Joyce himself’. Yet the problem was more serious, as MacCabe saw it, since having deconstructed the liberal subject, Joyce then reinscribed this immutable individuality into the text as its addressee (i.e. himself). This could only lead to the pessimistic conclusion that Joyce’s radical linguistic, political and sexual strategies were ultimately lost for want of an appropriate audience elsewhere.

More recently, Seamus Deane has partly concurred with MacCabe’s analysis of modernism, and Joyce’s political inefficacy, arguing that ‘our incompetence is itself already incorporated into modernism’s diagnosis of “modernity”. We ratify these texts by being helpless before them and then are taught the full range of our incompetence.’ Thus obscurity is canonised. In this view, Joyce belittles his readers, either boring them to sleep or bullying them into research. Elsewhere, Deane suggests that Joyce’s famous lyrical endings signal a disengagement from social critique and that this is directly related to his reception, having become a ‘semisubsidized bohemian for whom . . . anything other than a select audience was an embarrassment’.

There is a surprising echo of Deane’s argument in John Carey’s conventionally liberalist reading of modernism, which, he contends, can be defined as a deliberate elitism that willfully excluded ordinary readers.
This is not uncommon as a rejection of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. ‘Bloom would never and could never read a book like *Ulysses*,’ Carey says, since its complexity, technique and obscurity ‘rigorously exclude people like Bloom from its readership’. A reader’s ‘sympathetic . . . solidarity’ with Bloom is an ‘illusion’ that operates in conjunction with an irony that ‘preserves the reader’s – and the author’s – superiority’. Carey thus accuses Joyce of ‘duplicity’.16 The implication of both Deane and Carey (despite their obvious differences) is that ‘the mass audience’ has been left behind and is no longer up to the task of reading: for Deane and MacCabe this signals an abandoned opportunity for a critique of imperial and class oppressions; to Carey it signals a repressive, undemocratic politics that devalues the ordinary decent individual. In each case, the presumption is that to read modernism (and Joyce in particular) requires a later, competent audience.

Carey’s argument seems to presume that ‘culture’ and learning form a line of progress, an encoded tradition that is there simply in order to be decoded by later generations. However, such a notion as the ‘competent reader’ is antithetical to Joyce’s texts which self-consciously open onto various linguistic and cultural forms, leading to their readers’ own, necessarily partial, constructions and performances. While this is particularly the case in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, the books about which Carey and Deane are explicitly writing, it is also true of his other texts. For Joyce’s work to be an ‘institutionalizing of the modern reader as a cultureless recipient’ can only be the case from the point of view of that very tradition (which opposes ‘possession of culture’ to being cultureless) that Deane also, rightly, shows to have been exploded by Joyce.17 A comparison might be made with the narrator of Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, who typically suggests ‘plus tard, j’ai compris’, implying that a fuller understanding would surely follow – even though it often does not.18

Many readers of Joyce have noted the paradox of a difficult text that apparently requires patient study and guidance but yet also seems to undermine all readings, thereby defeating the very idea of guidance. Myles na gCopaleen (Brian O’Nolan) hinted at this conundrum in his own fashion, suggesting that such commitment could never be successful:

Joyce has been reported as saying that he asked of his readers nothing but that they should devote their lives to reading his works. Such a method of spending a
lifetime is likely to endow the party concerned with quite a unique psychic apparatus of his own. I cannot recommend it.\textsuperscript{19}

The dilemma facing ‘the party concerned’ was described in slightly different terms by Jacques Derrida in perhaps the single most concerted reflection on the notion of reception as it pertains to Joyce’s work (his address to the 1984 International Joyce Symposium in Paris). For Derrida, this dilemma was a tension between the competence necessarily sanctioned by the Joycean community and the undermining of this competence by the ‘performativity’ of Joyce’s writing. In these terms, Joyce’s work has ‘invented’ its own audience by instituting courses, conferences and an academic discourse, and yet, at the same time, that same work questions any reader’s ability to read it. ‘No truth can come from outside the Joycean community,’ argues Derrida, but then ‘there is no model for Joycean competence.’\textsuperscript{20} Faced with this apparently irreconcilable problem, Derrida suggests that an immanent deconstruction of competence inheres already in Joyce’s work.\textsuperscript{21} The reader who is ‘invented’ by Joyce is thus one whose legitimacy comes from that community, but the competence thereby bestowed upon the reader is itself shaky, a performance or creative rereading. Derrida’s remarks point to two significant and contradictory, but enduring, features of Joyce’s critical reputation: that his work defies accommodation, remaining in an important way ‘unreadable’; and that a powerful body of explication has developed containing the implicit assumption that Joyce’s ‘suitable’, learned audience can be generated.

The trouble with the presumption of a later and better audience is, as Derrida would have it, that the competence it presumes is not possible to measure; notwithstanding all the works of exegesis that surround Joyce, his writing undermines the very idea of competence through its resistance to explication. So Derrida’s interpretation of Joyce can be seen as a powerful riposte to the notion that modernism belittles its readers in order to instruct ‘better’ ones in the future. His analysis is valuable as a reminder of part of the significance of Joyce’s ‘unreadability’, of the radical challenges that reading his work presents: ‘everything we can say . . . has already been anticipated’.\textsuperscript{22} The chronological inversion implied here means that the tense of one’s reading is uncertain: it would be impossible for Derrida to say that Joyce ‘has been read’, as this would put the reader somehow ahead of the text. As he explains, ‘I have the feeling that I haven’t yet begun to read Joyce’ – still, one might say, learning to be his contemporary.\textsuperscript{23} Derrida’s analysis thus differs from Ellmann’s, despite echoing the American critic, since it highlights the extent to which reception is
already written, and this is also one of the key features of Joyce’s engagement with the issue. However, Derrida’s emphasis on Joyce’s ‘anticipation’ of later readers might be said to have already been overturned in Joyce’s writing: by inscribing versions of specific actual readers and responses into his texts, Joyce detours those later readers back through the byways of earlier ones. This does not necessarily anticipate a later reader’s reactions but it does situate those reactions in relation to a previous reader. The historicity of critical understanding is thus insisted upon even as its fictionalisation frustrates the ambitions of historical analysis. The implication is that by inscribing his faltering contemporary reception, Joyce establishes that all reading is based on previous reading. Even as we run up against the comical deflation of critical will that Joyce’s writing performs, this is not a merely textual or epistemological manoeuvre, for his writing of reception points always to the local and the contextual. The ‘unreadable Joyce’ of deconstruction might then be complemented by a Joyce whose unreadability spoke to its own conditions of reception.

Crucially, it is impossible to ignore the fact that scholarship continually makes itself more informed and better equipped: libraries of historical, textual and biographical sources are available; new notebooks and manuscripts have been acquired by libraries ‘hoping to ye public’ (FW 313.02); relatively recent technology is capable of abetting – and changing – reading practices. There is, though, an unavoidable tension between the genuine sense of progress that exegetical and historical scholarship creates and the continuing frustrations of interpretation – which, it should be said, are sometimes only exacerbated by the expansion of critical and textual knowledge. Moreover, as the shape of the Joyce archive itself changes (the mammoth James Joyce Archive is now rather outdated) with the unearthing of previously hidden notebooks, so, too, the object of enquiry also changes. In this way, scholarly ‘progress’ often also shifts the goalposts, maintaining a sense of continual interpretive dilemmas: ‘genetic’ Joyce locates the sources of much of Finnegans Wake but it must do so in the service of interpretation.24 On the one hand, by ‘recovering’ some of Joyce’s contemporary readers as they echo within his texts, we elucidate our competence; and yet the ‘archives’ (both the fiction and the historical records) refuse to yield definitive resolutions and arguably begin to doubt the very notion of competence as it might pertain to Joyce. In its emphasis on its own reception, then, Joyce’s work plays out the double bind (of authority and performativity) that Derrida identified in 1984. (In the Afterword, I will suggest that Joyce’s writing of reception in fact differs in an important way from Derrida’s analysis.)