

I Introduction: Democratic and Cosmopolitan Joyce

James Joyce is one of the most challenging and difficult writers in the English language, highly respected as “the epitome of a high modernist, an artist for and of the cultural elite,” as Brandon Kershner put it.¹ Yet ironically he is also one of the most popular – not only among academics, but also among many common readers. The iconic image to make this point is, of course, the 1955 Eve Arnold photograph of Marilyn Monroe, dressed in a chaste bathing suit in a children’s playground, reading a copy of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. This was not a stunt, we learned from Richard Brown, who interviewed the photographer. Monroe told Arnold that she had been reading the book for a long time. “She said she loved the sound of it and would read it aloud to herself to try to make sense of it – but she found it hard going.”² One can only wish that Monroe could have enjoyed access to one of the many *Ulysses* reading groups that have sprung up not only in the United States but also in many other countries in recent decades. Mary Lowe-Evans writes of this Joyce community of varied readers: “Economists, musicologists, physicians, clergymen and women, literary scholars, linguists, students, and housewives engage in lively debate about Joyce’s work with soldiers, sailors, architects, and attorneys.”³ The curious ability to fascinate both high-brow academics and ordinary readers is an important quality of Joyce’s work – important because it speaks to a major aspect of its value as art with a remarkably democratic impulse. Sylvia Beach is reported to have said that Joyce himself “treated everyone as an equal, whether they were writers, children, waiters, princesses or charladies.”⁴ Joyce resists hierarchical judgments, whether in classifying people according to wealth, status, culture, intelligence, or even virtue, or in selecting thematic and stylistic vehicles for presenting their fictional lives. His strategy was to

2 The Value of James Joyce

pursue forms of diversity in most aspects of his writing in order to balance thematic profundity with banality and stylistic aestheticism with commonalities of speech. This democratic tendency is evident in the multiplicity of his characters, the richness and depth of their exploration by the texts, the political and ethical implications in the historical moments of their settings, the inclusion of both the highest and lowest cultural expressions, and the generic and stylistic proliferation found in the works. These multiplicities suggest Joyce's willingness to exercise a remarkable generosity in his embrace of all that is human.

His international appeal is a fitting response to an author whose own background and life experiences encompass considerable diversity that in turn fueled the democratic impulse found in all aspects of his work. James Joyce's background was initially moneyed and cultured, yet within a few decades the family experienced stunning poverty and deprivation. Joyce received a superb classical education from the Jesuits, but also reveled in music, dance, theater, and – after exposure in Trieste – film. His attempt to establish a movie theater in Dublin exemplifies his support of popular culture even as he was producing works of high modernism and preparing to write difficult and daunting fiction. His cultural horizon was broadened generally by his exilic experience on the Continent for most of his adult life. But his cosmopolitan bent may have been triggered specifically by his early years in the Italian city of Trieste, with its complex political situation under Austrian rule reflecting Dublin's own colonial past, and with its location as a passage between eastern and western Europe. Richard Ellmann talks about people wearing "Greek, Turkish, and Albanian costumes in the streets" and exhibiting a plethora of languages in addition to Italian and German. Trieste even had a special dialect with its own "spellings and verb forms and an infusion of Slovene and other words."⁵ And the city's Jewish population may have provided Joyce with the prototype for Leopold Bloom, identified by Ellmann as his friend Ettore Schmitz, whose grandfather was Hungarian.⁶ All the while, Joyce himself experienced a family life that was both conventional and unconventional, married but without the paperwork, domestic and familial but with pornographic play in

letters and discourse, financially unstable but nonetheless capable of keeping track of money. Later years in Switzerland and Paris broadened his intellectual and cultural scope even further, filling his ears with more languages and dialects. All this life experience funnels itself into the incomparable richness and complexity of his literary production.

At the same time, Joyce's democratic impulses were not sentimentally oblivious to the possibilities and effects of conflict and complication in all areas of life. Ireland's complex political situation in Joyce's time reflected not only its "semi-colonial" relationship with Britain,⁷ but also the internally divisive components we see in moments such as the Christmas dinner quarrel in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The case of Charles Stewart Parnell put the Church at odds with Irish nationalism at times, and collisions of these kinds manifested themselves in Joyce's own conflicted relationship with his native country. Joyce's early work, *Stephen Hero*, depicts the struggles of a young Irishman trying to sort out his relationship to the Catholic Church and to Irish nationalism, and together with *Portrait* traces the process that may lead young Irish artists on the road to exile. The Irish literary revival did not ultimately offer solutions to an Ibsen devotee such as the young Joyce, and the Gaelic League's revival of the Gaelic language created additional problems for him. In November 1906 Joyce wrote to his brother Stanislaus "If the Irish programme did not insist on the Irish language I suppose I could call myself a nationalist. As it is, I am content to recognise myself an exile."⁸ And this is how he ended up – as a determined exile, refusing to visit Ireland after his last trip there in 1912, and yet spending his career writing about Ireland's culture, its politics, its geography, and its people for the rest of his life. Ireland, and its capital city Dublin, were his passion. Yet he saw his native country not only with respect to its endemic culture, but also as a place that even at the turn of the nineteenth century displayed many relationships to a larger cultural horizon. Ireland's complex relationship to England created curious international possibilities for its citizens, which Joyce explored in the figure of Molly Bloom, whose Irish father served in Gibraltar as an officer in the British army, where he fathered a child with a Sephardic Jewish

4 The Value of James Joyce

woman. Leopold Bloom, in turn, is the son of a Hungarian Jewish immigrant to Ireland who married an Irish woman, making Bloom an Irishman with an international cultural heritage. Both members of the couple display smatterings of other languages – Molly with a bit of Spanish from her childhood, Bloom with bits of Yiddish and Hebrew. Their condition as ordinary Irish folks is given a remarkable depth in this way, and this in turn lets Joyce draw Ireland out of a provincial representation and give it status as a surprisingly cosmopolitan place.

This enlargement might run the risk of idealization, however, and Joyce counters this by embracing people of all classes, religions, and characters, to be sure, while by no means ignoring their faults, indecencies, and foibles. Upper class fellows such as Malachi Mulligan and Haines in *Ulysses* can be patronizing and exploitive, but humbler chaps such as the Citizen and the narrating dun of the “Cyclops” episode are equally capable of aggressive prejudice and careless slander.⁹ The life of the body in Joyce’s work may be commonplace in many respects, with characters urinating, defecating, and menstruating, yet sexual behavior and fantasies also have an arguably perverse and culpable edge, as in Bloom’s masochistic appropriations of women for roles in his fantasies or Molly’s designs to coax gifts out of Boylan in return for her sexual favors.¹⁰ Joyce also works hard to enlarge the complexity of the population by introducing dozens of minor characters into his works, especially in *Ulysses*. The old woman who delivers the milk in the first chapter has no name, and yet in less than a page we are given a sense of her deference to the dapper young men, her humility, her ability to compute the bill in her head, and her willingness to abide by Mulligan’s deferred payment. The democratic impulse that gives so much of the writing the spirit of ordinary speech in persons of all classes and educations (“I’m told it’s a grand language by them that knows,” the old woman says, of Gaelic [1.434])¹¹ simultaneously contends with intricacies and multiple meanings and ambiguities that give the prose a complicated character of simultaneous accessibility and frustrating difficulty. This is particularly true in Joyce’s most complex work, *Finnegans Wake*. Early in the first chapter, a hod carrier falls from a ladder, “Phill filt tipping full,” and at the wake that follows we hear the keening cry, “Macool,

Macool, orra whyi deed yi diie? of a trying thirstay mournin?" (6.13).¹² Even a simple allusion to the day of the accident, a Thursday morning, will enfold reference to the thirstiness that caused the drunken hod carrier's death and the mourning that will presumably produce more thirstiness and drinking among the mourners at the wake.

Joyce's democratic impulse inevitably requires attention to the ordinariness of everyday life in his work, even as he exemplified one of the most conspicuous and extensive modern deployments of the "Classics" in his literature.¹³ Declan Kiberd writes that Joyce believed that "by recording the minutiae of a single day, he could release those elements of the marvellous latent in ordinary living, so that the familiar might astonish."¹⁴ His focus on ordinary life exceeds earlier practices common to literary realism in detail, specificity, and even triviality, and yet, as Cheryl Herr has argued, Joyce "did not discriminate in his works between the value of an allusion to the popular and a reference to a work of higher social status."¹⁵ His texts actually remind us that features of the ordinary such as materiality, for example, also have larger social, economic, and political contexts that are inevitably invoked in his stories. Culture, both high and low, has an aesthetic dimension, to be sure, but it is also grounded in the commercial. Stephen Dedalus may be a teacher of Milton to his students, but teachers also need to be paid, and Joyce therefore depicts him collecting his salary from his headmaster. Leopold Bloom is an advertising canvasser who has to negotiate the terms for placing ads in the paper with newspaper editors, think about their wording and visuals, do research, and, of course, notice and think about commercial posters and strategies for advertising products. His wife Molly's upcoming concert tour may be about music – and, coincidentally about adultery as well – but it is organized by Hugh Boylan, an impresario who appears also to have a hand in the posters of the singer and pantomime performer Marie Kendall, as well as other advertisements.¹⁶ Such ordinary moments as the passing of "a procession of whitesmoked sandwichmen" (8.123) advertising Widsom Hely's business with the letters H.E.L.Y.S. on their tall hats invoke the larger picture of men obliged to take on utterly menial jobs, as Bloom notes: "Three bob a day, walking along the gutters, street after street. Just keep skin and

6 The Value of James Joyce

bone together" (8.128). Money is a particularly acute focus of the ordinary in an Ireland still mired in a poverty that leaves many, including older men such as Stephen's father, and younger ones such as Corley and Lenehan, effectively out of work. What work can a blind man do? Piano tuning, we learn, reminded that culture itself – the production of music on a piano, for example – is grounded in the labor of ordinary people going about their business on an ordinary day.

The value of Joyce's work lies in its enormous efforts to enrich our concept of the human – the aim of all art, to be sure, but achieved here in particularly broad and complicated ways. The human is inevitably too large a category to encompass, but the sections of this study will attempt to at least sketch out some aspects of its range. The ensuing chapters will focus on such topics as "The Significance of the Ordinary," "The Complexities of Place," "The Classical and the Popular," and "Moods, Voices, and Language." The prominence of high culture signified by the classical intertexts that inform the name of Dedalus and the title of *Ulysses* is off-set not only by the equally prominent role that popular culture plays in the works, but also by what Declan Kiberd calls "a celebration of the minutiae of any given day."¹⁷ This will be the focus of the first chapter, which will consider the prominence of the ordinary in the stories of *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*.¹⁸ But the human is also situated in place, in surroundings that themselves take on complexity when we consider their appearance as geographical and natural space on the one hand – a matter of landscape and atmosphere – and, on the other, as sites of governance, of nationality and its relationship to other countries, as concepts with political consequences. "Irish Nature, Irish City: The Complexities of Place" will address both of these aspects with consideration of "Natural Place" and "The Politics of Place" – sections that will include brief discussions of Joyce's poetry in "Chamber Music" and his only play *Exiles*, as well as parts of *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*. The chapter "Joyce's Cultures, the Classical, and the Popular" begins by setting *Ulysses* into the larger movement of Classicism that influenced modernist art in the early twentieth century. Odyssean themes play central roles in *Ulysses* not only for the ways they reflect the Homeric epic, but also for the ways they

depart from it. This classical influence is contrasted with the role that music, popular literature, advertising, and even cinema play in various episodes of the work. Comic books, theater and opera, and other aspects of popular culture also appear in such widely disparate stories of *Dubliners* as “Araby” and “The Dead.” The final chapter on “Moods, Voices, and Language” explores how narration, moving inside and outside the minds of characters in Joyce’s later works, is obliged to assume many voices that express many nuances of the spirit. These include the play between high rhetoric and oratory and their opposite, verbal play and punning and joking, in chapters of *Ulysses*, including the “Aeolus” episode, the musical function of voices and language in “Sirens,” and the curious interplay between scientific discourse and the dogma of catechism in “Oxen of the Sun.” Finally, the multiplicitous voices of *Finnegans Wake* will be explored in some detail in the first two books of Joyce’s final epic, finishing with discussion of the famous ending of Book IV. It may be in this domain of style and language that the manifestation of the human achieves its greatest poignancy in Joyce’s work.

2 The Significance of the Ordinary in *Dubliners*, *Portrait*, and *Ulysses*

Richard Ellmann said it best: “Joyce’s discovery, so humanistic that he would have been embarrassed to disclose it out of context, was that the ordinary is the extraordinary.”¹ How so? Is there anything extraordinary about depicting a man going to the outhouse in the morning and defecating, pleased to find “that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone” (4.508)? Surely the act is commonplace enough, but its depiction in a 1904 novel, complete with the quiet thoughts that accompany it, is not. It suggests that even the most insignificant moments of a day can have meaning to human beings, and their representation in literature sharpens its realism to an extraordinary degree. In a 1920 letter to Carlo Linati, Joyce called *Ulysses* “the cycle of the human body as well as a little story of a day (life).”² The representation of the ordinary thereby becomes one of the most important elements of Joyce’s democratic impulse. By giving the figures of *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses* a keen specificity with respect to the banal activities and feelings of their everyday lives, he intensifies the vitality of what it means to be human. The ordinary therefore plays a number of important roles in Joyce’s fiction, notwithstanding its complication by the perspectives produced by narration and the thoughts of its characters. Its most external manifestation can be found in the intimate connection between many of the settings in the works and their prototypes in the historical world of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Dublin.³ This reminds us that Joyce’s work belongs to the realm of Irish literature, with an emphasis on what sets Dublin apart from cities in English literature. Number 7 Eccles Street, the home of the Blooms, remains a historical address in the northern part of the city,

and tourists can still visit the James Joyce House, which is located at 15 Usher's Island, the home of the Morkan sisters in "The Dead." These places now enjoy a special literary significance for tourists and Dubliners alike, but in 1904 they were ordinary addresses, ordinary buildings and homes.⁴ Critics have inevitably followed Joyce's own description of Dublin as "the centre of paralysis" by emphasizing the metaphorical qualities of the place, as when Hugh Kenner writes in *Dublin's Joyce* that the city in its present paralysis "remains a ghost, not a heap of bones."⁵ Yet the endless details of its ordinary materiality and activity in a chapter such as "Wandering Rocks" in *Ulysses* cannot be troped away. As a fiction about a single day, the book's "stylistic odyssey" keeps cycling back "into the conventions of the daily, the quotidian, of journalism," as Vincent Sherry puts it.⁶ A similar argument can be made about characters in Joyce's works. To be sure, the hundreds of minor characters in the fictions are not given equal time and space or equal significance compared to the complicated personalities and lives of the protagonists. But they are rarely flat in the E. M. Forster sense of the term. Boody Dedalus, coming home from school to find shirts boiling on the stove, cries "Crickey, is there nothing for us to eat?" (10.274). She is no *Oliver Twist*, to be sure, in her anger over the scarce rations, and her "Give us it here" when it turns out that there is a pot of pea soup after all, thanks to Sister Mary Patrick's charitable donation, shows less gratitude than hunger. The girls are not orphans, exactly, as we hear when Boody invokes Simon Dedalus as "Our father who art not in heaven" (10.291). Boody Dedalus appears on only one page in *Ulysses*, but her everyday moment rounds out her economic situation, her relationship to family, her temper and disposition, even her gloss on religion. When it comes to the major protagonists we can fairly say that Joyce expands their roundness to transform each one into a human universe. Harold Bloom pays tribute to this feat when he writes that Leopold Bloom is, "as Joyce intended, the most *complete* figure in modern fiction, if not indeed in all of Western fiction."⁷ Bloom becomes more real to readers than many actual living persons of our acquaintance, an effect again achieved through the sharp specificity of detail with respect to the most mundane activities of daily life. We learn what he wears, what he eats, where he goes, whom he encounters,

10 The Value of James Joyce

why he forgot his house-key, how he sleeps in his marital bed at night, and much more. We see everything he reads, from signs, letters, and advertisements to newspapers and books, and we know what he thinks about the things he reads. We learn where he shops, how he cooks breakfast, what he feeds the gulls, how he spends every penny. Bloom has extraordinary and dramatic moments in his day as well, to be sure, and the penetrations into his psyche will touch on extraordinary moments of loving and grieving as well as on daily perceptions. But in the end it is the transformation of his *ordinariness* into *significance* that contributes to making him an utterly rounded and richly vitalized human figure. And so we begin this exploration of the significance of the ordinary in Joyce's work by looking first at *Dubliners*, then at *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and ending with *Ulysses*.

DUBLINERS

In Joyce's *Dubliners* the ordinariness of everyday life so dominates the foreground that one longs for that moment of epiphany to open what it hides, what concealed elements we don't see immediately that will give the stories their significance. Phillip Herring refers to this problem as the result of what he calls "an uncertainty principle" in the stories, and Harry Levin had much earlier cautioned us to "[l]isten for the single word that tells the whole story. Look for the simple gesture that reveals a complex set of relationships."⁸ There are many irresolvable ambiguities in *Dubliners*, and ordinariness often plays an interesting role – for example, in such stories as "The Sisters," "Two Gallants," and "Counterparts." "The Sisters" offers two scenes of a young boy listening to adults discussing the death of an old priest who had been a particular friend of his. In the first, a visitor named Old Cotter is speaking about the priest to the boy's aunt and uncle, sitting at the fire, smoking, as the boy comes down to supper. The boy's disdain for Cotter is immediately made clear, both in his observations of his "little beady black eyes" and in his gestures of puffing and spitting "rudely" into the grate (4).⁹ "Tiresome old fool!" he thinks of Cotter, remembering "his endless stories about the distillery" that