

Introduction

At one time it was hardly doubted that sexual matters in Joyce's fiction should be the object of critical attention. Many of the early reviewers based their reaction to Joyce on this aspect of his work, though they did not by any means approve of it and they rarely had a clear distinction in their minds between Joyce's treatment of sexuality and what they considered to be his exaggerated interest in all the workings of the body. The review of *Ulysses* from *The Sporting Times* of 1922 is the best known of these early reactions with its philistine condemnation of Joyce's 'literature of the latrine' and his 'stupid glorification of mere filth'.¹ Many of the more reflective reviewers also felt the need to discuss what they saw as a rather indiscriminate kind of realism. To many of them, including Shaw, Virginia Woolf, Arnold Bennett, Wells and Rebecca West, his work seemed to dwell on subjects that were unliterary or else literary only in a way which they found it difficult to approve.²

Joyce's defenders must also have recognized this quality of his work but, rather than attempt to argue that the treatment of sexuality was of the utmost importance to Joyce's creativity and at the heart of what his fiction might be trying to investigate, they chose to change the focus of the debate to questions of literary form and to analogies with past literary greatness. Stuart Gilbert claimed that readers had taken an interest in sexual matters 'disproportionate, as it appears to me, to their real importance'. He offered the familiar but rather insubstantial defence that 'these passages are, in fact, cathartic and calculated to allay rather than to excite the sexual instincts'.³ What Gilbert said on the subject is, perhaps, not so interesting as the evident desire he had to say as little as possible and to turn his attention, just as T.S. Eliot had done in his famous 'Ulysses, Order and Myth' essay of 1923, away from subject-matter and towards what seemed to be comparatively unexceptionable correspondences between *Ulysses* and *The Odyssey*.⁴

2 Introduction

It was a significant part of contemporary aesthetic discussions, of Eliot's thoughts about the role of 'tradition', that such an emphasis on literary correspondences should have developed. But we may remember that both Eliot's essay, and the first edition of Gilbert's book, were produced in highly unusual circumstances, whilst *Ulysses* itself was legally unavailable in England and America. It was arguably a prudent as well as a critically sensitive course to attend to legitimizing literary connections rather than to potentially subversive or offensive characteristics of the book. There is almost an anticipation of the argument of the defending lawyers at the 1933 trial which made *Ulysses* available to a wider public, stressing that Joyce was an 'austere Olympian' and that issues like sex were 'relegated to a position of relative unimportance' in his work.⁵

The treatment of sexuality in Joyce's work was obscured and it has never been fully investigated, though there is such a strong *prima facie* case for such an investigation, though it offers a means of dealing with Joyce's whole oeuvre from *Chamber Music* to *Finnegans Wake* in the same frame of reference and though the vast body of secondary work on Joyce might lead one to suppose that every aspect of his work has been investigated in full.

Whilst the initial reluctance to give too much attention to these matters may be in part explained as a prudent defensive strategy, their continued neglect is more attributable to perennial characteristics of Joycean criticism. William Schutte, in his book on *Joyce and Shakespeare*, made a highly cogent attack on the 'bad start' made by critics of Joyce's work, and things have not necessarily improved. Wayne Booth is among the most telling critics of a situation where readers of Joyce seem to find mutually exclusive ideas and attitudes in his work. Joyce criticism has suffered from isolation, developing a partly autonomous language and field of reference dominated by certain almost talismanic 'Joycean' terms like 'epiphany' and 'exile' and relying on its best-known product, Richard Ellmann's monumental biography, to the extent that it has seemed easier to account for items in Joyce's texts through an investigation of their similarity to events in his life, than to ask questions about the relevance of such items to contemporary issues and to a contemporary reading public.⁶

The stress on the more eccentric parts of Joyce's personality

and attitudes, the hurried accumulation of detailed explicatory glosses and the attention to Joyce's developments in literary form that have characterized the criticism, have reinforced the impression that Joyce was a recluse from contemporary historical and intellectual pressures. The broad issues have been left out of account, and it is only recently that a study like Dominic Manganiello's *Joyce's Politics* has begun to piece together the implication of Joyce's fictions in the ideas of their time.⁷

Such attempts as there have been to discuss Joycean sexuality have been partial and inconclusive. Book-length studies, like Mark Shechner's *Joyce in Nighttown*, have attempted pseudo-psychoanalytic investigations or, like Margaret Solomon's *Eternal Geometer: The Sexual Universe of 'Finnegans Wake'*, have identified the prominence of sexuality in Joyce's texts without relating the ideas to a contemporary context.⁸

Feminists, who might have been expected to produce some critique of Joyce, have been, until quite recently, silent. Even a well-known feminist like Marilyn French wrote a book on Joyce which (though referring to the 'sexual theme' of *Ulysses* and suggesting that Joyce's approach to sexuality 'was primarily one of exposure') suggested that other questions were more important.⁹

Molly Bloom used to be discussed either as an affirming life-force and symbolic Gea-Tellus figure or else as wanton and immoral, but the debate about her soon became more a matter of discerning the 'facts' about her famously uncertain list of 25 lovers in 'Ithaca' than an interest in the contentious presentation of sexuality.¹⁰ Leopold Bloom aroused some concern because of his lack of self-assertiveness. This, and his so-called perversions, presented a considerable problem for critics who wished to work out the morality of *Ulysses* and to use Bloom as their hero. Clive Hart effectively closed this issue several years ago when he announced that Bloom was neither hero nor villain and that '*Ulysses* contains no active moral paradigm, . . . it depicts a morally static universe in which moral development is neither possible nor necessary, nor even perhaps desirable'.¹¹

This is a familiar position in Joyce criticism and no doubt it was at one time necessary to stress that *Ulysses* was not straightforward in its intentions nor didactic in a conventional way.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-36852-0 - James Joyce and Sexuality
Richard Brown
Excerpt
[More information](#)

4 Introduction

But a book as universally significant as *Ulysses* can never be abandoned to the idea that it is 'static' in its morality. If by morality we mean a system of values, or outlook on the world, then it is hard to see how even Joyce's oeuvre, with its characteristically modern reticence, may be entirely free from morality. Joyce's portrayal of sexuality has its place in the array of possible contemporary positions alongside the discussion of modern morality in Ibsen and Shaw, the portrayal of a tension between middle-class customs and disruptive sexual passions in the novels of E.M. Forster or Ford Madox Ford, the enthusiastic investigation of erotic self-fulfilment in D.H. Lawrence, and alongside the detached ironic depiction of the hollow sexual modernity of 'Bright Young People' in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* or in the seduction scene of Eliot's 'The Waste Land'.

The years in the first part of this century when Joyce was writing are recognized as a time of much questioning of conceptions about sexuality and as a time of considerable visible change in the institution of marriage, in legal control over the position of women in society and in attitudes to sexual perversity. They are most familiarly represented as years of transition from 'Victorian' sexual repression and ignorance to 'modern' enlightenment and toleration, though Michel Foucault has argued that this distinction may be an illusion of our modern perspective and that it would be more appropriate to speak of an enormous growth in both discussion and control of sexuality since the seventeenth century.¹² Leaving aside, for the moment, the questions of intellectual history raised by Foucault's critique, Joyce's fiction, I argue, would have less stature, less of a sense of centrality to the intellectual life of our century, less 'modernity' in our estimation, did it not respond to this felt importance of sexuality and sexual change. Some interest in sexuality is clearly present throughout the fiction yet no characteristic Joycean attitude has been identified, or still less been accepted in the way that aspects of the attitudes of Ibsen, Shaw and Lawrence have been taken up by subsequent generations. It would hardly be appropriate for such a thing to happen. Joyce was not this kind of author and the interest for a reader consists not so much in the application of a Joycean scheme of morality as in gradually sensing the implication of his fiction in such a context. We need a means of establishing the relevant context of contemporary ideas, perhaps even a way of discussing Joyce that

Introduction 5

is partly independent of the dominant practices of Joyce criticism, whose tendency has been to play down exactly these issues which we wish to confront. To this end, the knowledge we have of Joyce's reading provides a real opportunity for investigation. The information derives from a number of sources. In the first place there is the discussion of books in his letters. During his residence in Trieste and Rome between 1904 and 1907, for instance, when he was separated from his brother Stanislaus, he kept in touch by reading the *Daily Mail* notices of new books, and he discussed his reading at some length. In later years he offered Harriet Shaw Weaver suggestions for reading that might help her in tackling passages from his 'Work in Progress'. We know the books that Joyce reviewed in the first decade or so of the century for the Dublin *Daily Express* and for the Trieste paper *Il Piccolo della Sera*. The reviews survive to give us an indication of the attitudes he took.¹³ These reviews and the lectures Joyce gave at the Università Popolare in Trieste on Blake and Defoe have been little discussed by Joyce critics, yet they constitute an important body of ideas on literature and contemporary issues which can play their part in refining our attitudes to the major work.

Equally useful are the records of Joyce's personal libraries. These begin with brief records of books Joyce had in Dublin, listed by C.P. Curran and by Slocum and Cahoon in their Joyce bibliography.¹⁴ For the Trieste years (1905–15 and 1919–20) a much larger collection of books has survived and has been catalogued by Richard Ellmann in *The Consciousness of Joyce*. The collection consists of books Joyce left with Stanislaus in Trieste when he departed for Paris in 1920. It includes books bought in Trieste before 1915 which are most relevant to his completion of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; books which, on the evidence of date and booksellers' marks, Joyce bought in Zurich where he lived during the First World War; and books which he bought during his last stay in Trieste from October 1919 to June 1920, some of which suggest the 'Nausicaa' and 'Oxen of the Sun' episodes of *Ulysses* on which he was working at the time.¹⁵ Ellmann added to these books several other titles from a partial inventory which Joyce made of his library around 1920 and from the surviving bill of a Trieste bookseller dating from 1913–14. We may also add titles listed on two other book bills sent by shops in London and Leipzig

6 Introduction

from 1920. This Trieste collection represents some 45 per cent of the books that Joyce owned during these years.¹⁶

A third collection of Joyce's books has been available for many years in the Buffalo Joyce collection in New York State and has been catalogued by Thomas E. Connolly.¹⁷ The collection represents books that Joyce left in his Paris flat on his hurried departure to Zurich at the beginning of the Second World War. It contains less than 800 items, including some presentation and association items, which contrasts strongly with the 'ten cases of books and manuscripts', and 'three sacks of newspapers'¹⁸ mentioned to Harriet Shaw Weaver in 1923, or the room 'full of books and old newspapers' which Arthur Power remembered.¹⁹ As James Atherton long ago remarked, they can only represent a part of his working library, and yet it is remarkable that, despite the supposed eccentricity, diffusion or sheer encyclopaedism of Joyce's reading at this time,²⁰ titles, including *The Arabian Nights*, Chaucer, FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat*, Hauptmann, *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Ibsen plays, Keats, Rabelais, Scott and Synge, recur from collection to collection and provide a common core.

The collections are not complete but they can give us a coherent sense of Joyce's reading and of the intellectual context in which he wrote. We may note (though Joyce took pains to include unfamiliar languages in *Finnegans Wake* and the Joyce family often spoke Triestine Italian at home) that English clearly predominates in his reading. The surviving book bills from H. Glover of London and Simmel & Co. of Leipzig show that Joyce was prepared to go to some lengths to get books in English and the occurrence of some 49 Tauchnitz reprints in the Trieste list (Tauchnitz reprints were the most easily available English books 'for residents and travellers on the continent of Europe'²¹) helps give a sense of the collection.

The libraries can be used to provide a reliable indication of what kinds of information and what kinds of intellectual stance interested Joyce. We must, of course, be wary of introducing into a study of his reading a frame of reference which will pre-judge its usefulness. One Joyce critic, discussing 'the influence of Joyce's reading', says that 'Joyce seems to have been impressed mainly, both as impersonal artist and supreme egotist, by analogies to his own life and to the books he himself was planning'.²² Such an approach does not allow the extent to

which Joyce must have been conditioned by his reading, or, at any rate, bound up in the same kinds of dilemmas. Sometimes the need to annotate has reduced the world of Joyce's reading to a mere collection of reference books. Even in Richard Ellmann's introduction to Joyce's library we can see the problem. 'Most of the subjects that come up in *Ulysses* are documented here,' he writes. 'Writing about masturbation he had a book entitled *Onanisme seul et à deux*. Magrini's *Manuale di Musica* was helpful for the 'Sirens' episode. His interest in micturition led him to obtain a book on *Uric Acid*.' Ellmann seems to imply that these books were no more than neutral packages of information in their respective fields but, as I shall show, a rediscovered sense of the debates in which such books participated can be of the utmost importance for our understanding of what motivated Joyce.²³

The final source of information on Joyce's reading and on the attitudes he adopted in relation to contentious issues is the works themselves and they are the point to which all other information must be referred and by which its usefulness may be judged. Joyce's works are a rich source of information since they are full of quotation, allusion and reference, as works like Weldon Thornton's *Allusions in 'Ulysses'*²⁴ and Gifford and Seidman's *Notes for Joyce*²⁵ have made clear. It would be short-sighted to extend our understanding of the intellectual context of Joyce's fictions from inventories of his reading without noticing the part that such inventories play in the fictions themselves: inventories like Bloom's bookshelf spelled out in 'Ithaca' (*U* 832–3); Mr Duffy's fondness for Wordsworth, the *Maynooth Catechism*, Hauptmann and Nietzsche in 'A Painful Case'; the childhood bookishness of 'An Encounter' (*D* 18), 'Araby' (*D* 29), and the early chapters of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and even the list of titles for ALP's 'mamafesta' in *Finnegans Wake*.

Books crowd into Joyce's writings on many levels. In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen's father, his teachers and his schoolfellows are defined by the literary critical views they hold, such as Mr Daedalus' notion that '*A Doll's House* would be a triviality in the manner of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*' or that *Ghosts* 'would probably be some uninteresting story about a haunted house' (*SH* 93). In *A Portrait*, the action builds to a climax that may be said to be a climax of literary theory and, as well as the books quoted or

8 Introduction

alluded to in the course of narrative and dialogue, passages of hell-fire sermon, or of the language of childhood take over or colour the narrative for long periods. In *Ulysses*, bookish themes and techniques are still further developed. Parts of the day's activities take place in a newspaper office, at a bookstand by the River Liffey and in literary-critical discussion at the National Library. Stephen's achievement of the day may also be said to be in literary criticism: this time it is a theory of Shakespeare he constructs. Bloom's own daily activity, the canvassing for newspaper advertisements, though not conventionally 'literary', is from an economic and practical point of view an occupation which supports more serious writing in the most direct and substantial way. The tendency towards parody seen in *Dubliners* and *A Portrait* is fully developed in *Ulysses*, where the first part of 'Nausicaa' famously exploits the language of popular romance, and in 'Cyclops' passages of evident parody punctuate a narrative which in its self-centred aggressive manner is itself a parody of a certain way of seeing the world.

Comments and references in Joyce's letters, his literary critical writings and the knowledge we have of his personal libraries, may provide reliable sources for the intellectual historian, but the works themselves are a more treacherous source since their allusions, references or parodic dependencies are introduced for aesthetic purposes. Here we need not only the wariness of the historian in avoiding misconceptions about the material under our gaze but also the sensitivity of the critic to the variety of means by which such material may be introduced into a work and the variety of purposes which it might serve. The dangers of using such material to produce a contextual reading of Joyce are many but there are corresponding rewards, since it is by charting the use of, and attitude to, other books in Joyce's works that we stand to learn most about his literary achievement.

The importance of quotation, allusiveness and parody has often been felt by Joyce critics. Ulrich Schneider in an account of allusiveness in *Ulysses*²⁶ reached similar conclusions to those of James Atherton in his better-known study, *The Books at the Wake*.²⁷ Both felt that allusions have larger 'structural' importance in the works, which extends beyond the local importance of the allusive trifle. Criticism of Joyce has seized on the issue of correspondence, charting, as I have said, the connections

between *Ulysses* and *The Odyssey*, between *A Portrait* and the Daedalus story in Ovid, between Joyce's works and a host of Biblical, liturgical and classic literary texts, as the familiar titles of critical books testify: *Joyce and Ibsen*, *Joyce and Aquinas*, *Joyce and Shakespeare*, *Joyce and the Bible*, *Joyce and Dante* and, more ingeniously, *Joyce between Freud and Jung* or *Byron and Joyce through Homer*.

To distinguish between the local and the 'structural' allusion or to chart mythic correspondence as a way of finding significance in Joyce is to reinforce the understanding provided by Eliot of a 'continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity', whose purpose is an 'ordering' or 'controlling' one. But that is only one aspect of what is becoming more widely understood as one of the most significant aspects of a literary work: its relation to other works. The problem is one that has always been recognized in relation to modernist works. Edmund Wilson talks of Eliot and Pound as having 'founded a school of poetry which depends upon literary quotation and reference to an unprecedented degree'.²⁸ It was the energetically and heterogeneously allusive and parodic characteristics of Pound that led Ivor Winters to condemn him as 'a barbarian on the loose in a museum'.²⁹ Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is, of course, a poem which comes with its own notes, which, if they are often inadequate to explain the poem's meaning, at least identify it as a poem in which allusions and quotations are substantial parts.

Some of the most ambitious of recent literary theoreticians have taken the relationship between literary texts as their theme, including Harold Bloom whose theory of poetry invokes the notion that poetry is a 'misprision' or intentional misreading of earlier work, and Roland Barthes, who sees literary meaning as a bottomless play of 'intertextual' connections in which the reader's own knowledge and background as well as that of the author plays its part.³⁰ The narrative theorist Gérard Genette has most recently produced an account of literary fictions as '*palimpsestes*', as modes of rewriting earlier themes or texts for a variety of aesthetic purposes.³¹ Critics of the novel have become so intensely aware of allusiveness that Hugh Kenner, in his recent study of *Ulysses*, found it necessary to include Mulligan's opening quotation from the Latin mass not just in one but in six sets of quotation marks.³²

10 Introduction

It is, of course, not only modernist works that rely on allusion. Eliot in his two controversial essays on Milton, we might remember, compared Milton to Joyce's 'Work in Progress' in certain respects.³³ But it is in relation to modernist works that allusiveness becomes an especially significant issue. In modernist works to an unprecedented degree there is a semantic and aesthetic dependence on earlier texts. This can easily be demonstrated in Joyce by a glance at the titles of the works which in the case of *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake* and *Stephen Hero* make a deliberate gesture not just to the work that they name but to earlier works: *The Odyssey* and the ballads 'Finnegan's Wake' and 'Turpin Hero'. The titles of *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Chamber Music* similarly advert to the familiar genre titles of other works of art. The significance and the appeal of these titles derives from this doubleness of reference and it is an appeal which Joyce exploits throughout his writings. We need to look no further than the opening of *A Portrait*, whose 'once upon a time ...' is a typically bold dependence on the most familiar of narrative openings, one further taken up in *Finnegans Wake*, where the memory both of that phrase and of *A Portrait* come into play at the start of the 'Mookse and the Gripes' story in 'Eins within a space ...' (*FW* 152.18) or later in 'once upon a drunk and a fairly good drunk it was ...' (*FW* 453.20).

If semantics and aesthetics in Joyce's work are importantly bound up with this allusive dependence on earlier writing, it is the purpose of this study to show how Joyce's polemicism, the attitudes adopted by his fiction, may also express themselves by these means. It is not for explicit statements that we look in Joyce's fiction but, it seems to me, a more or less consistent outlook can be divined by attending to the contentious significance of a parody, or by following the trace of a contentious issue in an allusion.

In what follows I shall argue for a renewed sense of the importance of subject-matter in Joyce's fiction. His works seem importantly connected to attitudes to marriage, to the scientific interest in sexuality, to non-reproductive priorities in sex and to women, that we characterize as modern. The need to write about such subjects was a strong determining force in his fiction and writing about sexuality represented for him a kind of modernity that is present in relatively neglected works like