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Reading Joyce

I

Far more people read Joyce than are aware of it. Such was the impact of his literary revolution that few later novelists of importance in any of the world's languages have escaped its aftershock, even when they attempt to avoid Joycean paradigms and procedures. We are indirectly reading Joyce, therefore, in many of our engagements with the past half century's serious fiction – and the same is true of some not-so-serious fiction, too. Even those who read very few novels encounter the effects of Joyce's revolution every week, if not every day, in television and video, film, popular music, and advertising, all of which are marked as modern genres by the use of Joycean techniques of parody and pastiche, self-referentiality, fragmentation of word and image, open-ended narrative, and multiple point of view. And the unprecedented explicitness with which Joyce introduced the trivial details of ordinary life into the realm of art opened up a rich new territory for writers, painters, and film-makers, while at the same time it revealed the fruitful contradictions at the heart of the realist enterprise itself.

Of course, this momentous cultural shift, which can be said to have altered the way we understand and deploy systems of representation, was not achieved single-handedly and at a stroke by James Joyce. His changing understanding of the way language relates to the world, the work of art to its cultural situation, the commonplace and repetitive in life to the remarkable and the unique, was symptomatic of a wider mutation of thought which had begun before he started writing at the very end of the nineteenth century, and had its complicated roots in the social, economic, and political transformations that occurred before and during his lifetime.[1] But in the field of prose literature, this much broader set of movements found its most potent representative in Joyce, and his own contribution helped to determine the particular form it took in this field.

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There is a sense, therefore, in which we can *never* read Joyce 'for the first time'. Because of the ubiquity of his influence, anyone who now picks up a book of Joyce's already has at least some familiarity with the modes of his writing; and in addition the name 'Joyce' – and probably the name of the particular book – are likely to possess in advance a certain aura. This puts today's readers both at an advantage and at a disadvantage compared with Joyce's first readers. We are less likely to be baffled, dismayed, irritated, or intimidated by the strangeness of his writing (unless we have been led to expect something fearsomely difficult). On the other hand, we may miss some of its challenges to our own settled ways of thinking and making sense of the world because we muffle its unique voice: we can all too easily smother the text with our preconceptions about what it does and how it works, failing to perceive the things in it which are resistant to those preconceptions. If we do miss these challenges, we also miss some of the exhilaration, the humour, the pleasurable amazement that Joyce's work has to offer.[2]

I emphasize the pleasures of reading Joyce, because this is where any introduction to his work must begin; an account that loses sight of this fundamental point is in danger of forgetting why we read, or write about, Joyce at all. It is because his work has brought lasting enjoyment to so many people, even through translation into languages other than English or media other than print, that it has played such an important role in the world's cultural history. If we ever succeeded in fully explaining those pleasures, we would no doubt annul them, for they rely on qualities of inexplicability, unpredictability, inexhaustibility. But this is a danger we need not worry about: Joyce's texts are now so woven into the other texts of our culture that they constantly remake themselves as history moves inexorably on, and all our projects of explanation and interpretation get caught up in turn in this changing web, producing yet more transmutations in the very texts which they are trying to pin down.

If we can never read Joyce's works for the first time (though our pleasure may be enhanced if we always do our best to approach them with open minds), we can also never come to the end of our reading of them. We can never say, for example, '*A Portrait* has yielded up all it has to offer me; I can put it down with a satisfying feeling of completion and finality.' As I have suggested, Joyce's texts change as our own cultural surroundings change, which is one reason for their inexhaustibility; another (obviously related) reason is that they are unusually rich texts – and that includes the apparently pared-to-the-bone stories of *Dubliners* – which any single individual, even with the help of a whole library of Joyce criticism, would be unlikely to squeeze dry. Doubtless this inexhaustibility is to some degree characteristic of all the texts we call 'literary', but Joyce's work in particular seems to have a

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built-in principle of openness to further investigation, further interpretation, further enjoyment. One aspect of this capacity for infinite self-refashioning in Joyce's writing is the way it exposes and plays with the very processes of sense-making that underlie all experiences of fiction, so that the world in which we are invited to participate and find pleasure when we read Joyce includes the world of our acts of reading and comprehension. We cannot help making the attempt to come to the end of a reading, to reach a stable point where it all makes coherent sense, and we should never stop trying to achieve this moment; but it is perfectly possible at the same time to enjoy the prospect of an endlessly repeated failure to do so. Any critical text which claims to tell you (at last) what a work of Joyce's is 'about', or what its structure, or its moral position, or its symbolic force, 'is', has to be mistrusted, therefore; not because it will not be useful to you in a reading of the work in question, adding to your pleasure as you move toward that impossible goal of total understanding, but because it is making a claim that, taken literally, would exclude all other ways of reading the work, now and in the unpredictable future.

II

Reading Joyce is an activity which extends from the small-scale pleasures of appreciating the skilful organization and complex suggestiveness of a single sentence or phrase to the large-scale project of constructing a model that will impart unity (provisionally, at least) to an entire book or the entire *œuvre*, or even the entire *œuvre* together with the history, personal and public, of which it is part. Reading a text of Joyce's can be compared to playing a piece of music – it can be done rapidly, skipping over opaque or repetitious passages to gain a sense of the longer-range patterns and developments, or slowly, savouring the words, puzzling over the conundrums, following up the cross-references. (These two poles move further and further apart in Joyce's work, until in *Finnegans Wake* the ability to jump over a page of apparent gibberish is as important as the ability to spend half-an-hour on a single word.) Other contributors to this book demonstrate ways of reading at many points on this continuum; here I want to exemplify some of the rewards of a reading that focuses on detail, and to touch on a few of the larger issues that arise from such a reading. In order to do this, I have chosen, more or less at random, two passages from the extremities of Joyce's writing career; there is not space to examine any examples in between, but much of the discussion holds good for the rest of Joyce's writing.

The first passage comes from one of Joyce's earliest stories, 'Eveline', written in 1904 for a Dublin magazine, the *Irish Homestead*, and published

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under the pseudonym 'Stephen Daedalus'. Joyce placed it, in a revised form, as the fourth story in *Dubliners*, and it is from this version that I am quoting. Most of the story is taken up with the twilight thoughts of a young woman who has consented to an elopement in order to escape her impoverished and stultifying life in Dublin. The following passage occurs at the story's halfway point:

> She was about to explore another life with Frank. Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Ayres where he had a home waiting for her. How well she remembered the first time she had seen him; he was lodging in a house on the main road where she used to visit. It seemed a few weeks ago. He was standing at the gate, his peaked cap pushed back on his head and his hair tumbled forward over a face of bronze. Then they had come to know each other. He used to meet her outside the Stores every evening and see her home. He took her to see *The Bohemian Girl* and she felt elated as she sat in an unaccustomed part of the theatre with him. He was awfully fond of music and sang a little. People knew that they were courting and, when he sang about the lass that loves a sailor, she always felt pleasantly confused. (*D* 26–7)

At first sight, what is most remarkable about this writing is its unremarkableness; it hardly seems to be 'literary' language at all. But that does not mean that it is a mode of writing which is completely transparent, a truth-telling style whose sole aim is to convey as convincingly as possible the actuality of a specific, though presumably imagined, personal experience. There is no obvious reason why we should take pleasure in being exposed to the experience itself; it reveals no glories of the human spirit, and its view of the history and sociology of Dublin is fairly commonplace. Rather, the content (which we are accustomed to thinking of as the *raison d'être* of fiction) serves as a vehicle for the manner of the telling, the slow release of information, the hints and presuppositions that we are invited to elaborate on, the rhythm of mental deliberation that propels the narrative forward, and – our present concern – the controlled language that through its very spareness possesses a hair-trigger suggestiveness. This is not to say that Joyce has reversed the relationship between content and form as it exists in every other story, but rather that he has revealed, by going to an extreme, how unstable that relationship is; and if many readers remain convinced that their pleasure comes from being presented with the actual events of the story, for which the particular mode of writing is merely a skilfully contrived channel, this is probably because our activities as readers are usually more complex than the terms in which we represent those activities to ourselves. (We are

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less likely to misrepresent to ourselves the way we read, or attempt to read, *Finnegans Wake*, where, as we shall see, 'content' does not offer itself up for immediate apprehension.)

We have no difficulty as readers in identifying the close relationship between the sentences of this passage and the thoughts of the main character. The story's opening sentence has, in fact, introduced us to a narrator with an identifiable style: 'She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue.' The lack of any introductory story-teller's formula, the unspecific 'she', the simple past tense of 'sat', the use of a distinctive poetic register signalled by the metaphorical 'invade', the patterned sounds ('evening', 'invade', 'avenue') – all these announce the heightened realism of the dominant tradition of late nineteenth-century fiction, and the economical exposition of the conventional short story. But the style of the passage we are examining is markedly different, its rhythms graceless, its metaphors dead, its diction commonplace. We recognize a familiar novelistic device: the narrator's style has given way to one that mimics the speech and thought patterns of the character.[3] Much of the third-person past tense narrative can therefore be translated into first-person present tense with no difficulty. The third sentence, for instance, easily becomes: 'I am to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Ayres where he has a home waiting for me.' Eveline is rehearsing future events she can scarcely believe in – and the unreality of this future as she recounts it to herself, the strangeness of that name 'Buenos Ayres' surrounded by the ordinariness, to her, of Dublin names, is among the hints that she may find it a future that, when it comes to the moment of decision, is impossible to realize.

But this translation, like all translations, changes the text; to read the sentence as it actually occurs, in the third person and past tense, is to hover between hearing someone think aloud and hearing someone tell a story about a person's thoughts. If a clearly-identified narrator commenting on Frank were to state that Buenos Ayres is 'where he had a home waiting for her', and we had no reason to think of the narrator as a liar, we would take this as a fact, a given of the story; if a character *thinks* it, however, it has only as much validity as we feel we can ascribe to that thought. Has Eveline found a rescuer, or just another Dublin betrayer? How accurate is her assessment of him – for which the story gives no objective evidence – as 'kind, manly, open-hearted'? There is no way we can give final answers to these questions, and although part of the reading process is trying to reach some tentative conclusion by studying the evidence of the text, of Joyce's writing more widely, and perhaps of the social history of Ireland in this

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period, the inconclusiveness is something from which we can never escape, because it is built into the story. If a careful reading produces uncertainty, we cannot pluck certainty out of it; Joyce was not so hamfisted a writer as to be unable to make it clear, if he wanted to do so, that Eveline's hopes of a new life are either entirely valid or entirely baseless.[4]

Not all of this passage is equally amenable to translation into first-person thought, however, and we have to pick our way through continually shifting perspectives, relying as best we can on our sensitivity to individual words and turns of phrase. 'He was awfully fond of music': that 'awfully' could only be Eveline. The phrase '*see* her home' followed immediately by 'He took her to *see* . . .' would be clumsy writing in novelistic prose but a natural repetition in thought or speech. And an orthodox narrator would not write 'when he sang about the lass that loves a sailor' but 'when he sang "The Lass that Loves a Sailor"'; for Eveline, however, what is important is not whether this phrase is the title of the song, but what it states and signifies for her relationship with Frank. The reader's enjoyment lies in identifying this language as language normally excluded from literature, but functioning here just as efficiently as the most elaborate of styles to suggest with immense precision a mind, a social milieu, a series of emotions. The pleasure is in the precision, rather than what it is precise about.

There are even more subtle ways in which the illusion of intimacy with the character's own thoughts is created. Look at the repetition of 'Frank' at the beginning of the passage, for example. A narrator would be bound by the rules of English usage to substitute 'he' for the second 'Frank', but the dwelling on the name, the almost ritual quality of the mental statement 'Frank is very kind, manly, open-hearted', which is not a discovery but a moment of self-reassurance, belong to the blend of pride, excitement, and anxiety that comprises Eveline's complicated mental state. After that repeated proper name, notice the refrain of *she*'s and *he*'s as subjects of verbs: where a polished writer would introduce some variation, Joyce hovers just this side of a banality which would destroy the reader's pleasure altogether.

But reading this text is not entirely a matter of responding to immediately categorizable verbal details. What do we make of 'his hair tumbled forward over a face of bronze'? This is no longer the way Eveline might speak, though its clichés are not characteristic of the narrator either. Perhaps we can read it as the faint echo of a story Eveline has read, and this too might set alarm bells ringing – is she interpreting her experience according to the norms of romantic fiction? What about 'unaccustomed' in 'she felt elated as she sat in an unaccustomed part of the theatre with him'? A slightly posh word

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going through Eveline's mind to match the rather posh seat? Or a comment from the outside by the narrator, whose voice we might have detected already in the word 'elated'? Then there is 'pleasantly confused'. Our readerly enjoyment here includes some appreciation of the elegant and economical way in which the phrase sums up a complex and contradictory experience – not the kind of enjoyment that Eveline's own style usually offers us. Or is this interpretation just the kind of smug superiority which Eveline finds all too common in her Dublin environment? Joyce's writing – if we read it with sufficient alertness – here raises questions about our own processes of interpretation and judgement.

As readers, we are made hungry for information while traversing this sparse verbal terrain, and we seize on anything concrete, such as proper names – 'Buenos Ayres', '*The Bohemian Girl*'. We may not recognize the latter name, but its symbolic force is evident: a bohemian girl is exactly what Eveline is not, and the visit to the theatre with Frank obviously stands as a kind of rehearsal of the life she is imagining with him, at once a challenge to conventional mores and – if we take the force of the 'unaccustomed part of the theatre' – an introduction to a new position of affluence and respect. Of course the symbolism of the title may be entirely the author's: Eveline probably reminds herself of the exact name because of its fashionable resonance rather than because of its appropriateness to her situation. But there is nothing unusual, in a literary text, about language that emanates simultaneously from two sources, 'unrealistic' though this may be. Another example is the name 'Frank': within the fictional world and in Eveline's mind it is just a given, but as a word in a literary text it raises a question – is it an appropriate name (as it might have been in an older literary work), or is it ironically inappropriate?

Joyce is engaged in the double task which faces all realistic writers: on the one hand, he is working to produce the convincing effect of a certain kind of mind in a particular emotional state and, on the other, to contrive a narrative progression which gives the reader an active role in piecing together clues and wrestling with uncertainties and puzzles. The demands of naturalism are for a degree of incoherence, a completely nonliterary style, and a minimum of information (since the character has no need to verbalize to herself things she already knows); the demands of the narrative are for clarity, an original and forceful style, and the gradual provision of judiciously organized nuggets of information that will create an onward drive toward revelation and resolution. At a moment like this, Eveline would normally think 'he', not 'Frank'; so Joyce gives us the emphatically repeated 'Frank' both to suggest the character's conscious dwelling on the talismanic word

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and to furnish the readers with a necessary fact. Eveline has no need to go over the chain of events whereby she and Frank became acquainted, but we are prepared to accept her rehearsal of them as a deliberate basking in the memory of an experience she still cannot quite believe in, as well as part of the mental stock-taking appropriate for a critical moment such as this. At the same time, however, Joyce heightens our awareness of the techniques he so skilfully deploys by raising questions about our strategies of interpretation. And to be aware of how much is going on in this apparently simple style – this is part of Joyce's revolution – is not to puncture the illusion of reality but to enjoy the many-sidedness of language and story-telling, and to relish the readerly activity one is called upon to perform.

If we decide to pursue our craft as readers further than the text itself, we have many contexts to turn to, all of which have the capacity to enrich our experience. The story is part of a collection, and its setting in a specific time and place becomes more important when it is read in this context. Eveline's predicament is understood as a version of a more general problem afflicting Dubliners of a certain class, and this may reduce any tendency to pass judgement on her as an individual. Interconnections between this story and others become evident; for instance, the narrative technique of 'Clay' is a more complicated development of that used here, and Maria, the central figure of that story, might offer a glimpse of what awaits Eveline when she finds, at the end of the story, that she cannot leave Dublin. (Maria, as it happens, sings a song from *The Bohemian Girl*.) Read as part of Joyce's entire *œuvre*, 'Eveline' takes on further resonances. The 'Nausicaa' episode of *Ulysses* presents in Gerty MacDowell an elaboration of Eveline, building fantasies around a stranger whom she interprets in the terms of the romantic world she has read about, while the theme of the mariner whose words need to be treated with caution is comically expanded in the 'Eumaeus' episode. And in *Finnegans Wake* the visiting sailor who offers marriage becomes a Norwegian Captain paying court to a tailor's daughter in a hilariously elaborated anecdote (311.5–332.9).

Other contexts beyond Joyce's *œuvre* beckon as well. There is the social, political, and cultural history of Ireland; further information about *The Bohemian Girl*, for instance, reveals that it is highly relevant to Eveline's romantic hopes. Written by an Irishman, it nevertheless concerns Austrian gypsies, Polish nobility, and a family-romance plot of secret high birth and love triumphant over (apparent) social disadvantage – the very antithesis of what Joyce believed Irish art should be concerned with. And there is the close connection between 'Eveline' and important events and projects in Joyce's life: his intense courtship of a young working woman in Dublin, and his elopement with her to the Continent (less than a month after the

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publication of 'Eveline'); his fiercely-felt rejection of the narrowness and sterility of Ireland's political, religious, and cultural life; his struggle to forge a progressive European cultural outlook in opposition to the ideological fantasies and fabrications that were to contribute in his lifetime to two world wars. Admittedly, the blandishments of a wooing sailor with stories of a better life on the other side of the globe are a very long way from chauvinist and militarist propaganda, but what can be learned, so pleasurably, from Joyce's critical explorations of the potency of fiction and rhetoric within specific social and economic contexts may help to sharpen the linguistic and conceptual vigilance needed to combat the totalizing and totalitarian manipulations of language and thought still powerful today.

III

Unlike the language of *Dubliners*, that of *Finnegans Wake* casts no spell of realistic illusion. The following is part of a sentence that occurs in II.3:

> . . . our allies winged by duskfoil from Mooreparque, swift sanctuary seeking, after Sunsink gang (Oiboe! Hitherzither! Almost dotty! I must dash!) to pour their peace in partial (floflo floreflorence), sweetishsad lightandgayle, twittwin twosingwoolow. (359.35–360.3)

Here we are not inclined to ignore the medium whereby the content is transmitted; this is language at its least transparent – and this sentence is, for *Finnegans Wake*, relatively free from obscurity. Indeed, it is difficult to talk of a 'content' that is somehow behind these words, pre-existing and predetermining them, as Eveline's mental state might be thought to lie behind the words in the earlier passage: the meanings we discover in a passage like this are clearly the result of an interaction between the text and whatever expectations and knowledge the reader brings to them. This is what happens when we read *Dubliners* too, but there the process is masked by the discreetness and submissiveness of the style.

The newcomer to *Finnegans Wake* may not respond to this unashamed linguistic productivity with delight, however. And if he or she turns to a book about *Finnegans Wake* for help, the result is all too likely to be a sense of intimidation: to make any progress at all, the *Wake* reader, it might appear, needs to be at home in several languages and cultures, to have absorbed huge tracts of esoteric lore and historical fact, and to possess the verbal dexterity of a crossword-puzzle composer as well as the patience of a saint. But there is another way of looking at the *Wake*'s notorious complexity, density, and length: far from demanding exhaustive knowledge, it can be seen as offering every reader, from every background, *some* familiar ground to

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walk on, precisely because it incorporates so much of the world's linguistic, cultural, and historical knowledge. A wider range of expertise is something the reader can aspire to, if the initial encounter with the book is positive; and then the large number of secondary texts hold out the promise of further pleasures. But the richness of *Finnegans Wake* may be thought of as a comfort, not a threat, to the beginner, since Joyce's work is quite unlike those 'difficult' books which can be understood only if the reader is familiar with a particular body of knowledge. In order to appreciate the *Wake*'s reader-friendliness, however, one has to abandon two assumptions about the act of reading which frequently exist side-by-side (though they are, on the surface at least, contradictory). One is that reading is an act of mastery whereby the text is made to yield up all its secrets and allowed to hold nothing back; the other is that reading is a passive experience whereby the reader receives meanings unambiguously communicated by the text. The *Wake* will never be mastered, never dominated or exhausted by interpretation, nor will it ever offer itself up unproblematically as a single set of meanings; and if a sense of control and singleness of meaning is crucial to a reader's enjoyment, frustration will be the only result. More than this, however: the *Wake* teaches us, in a most delightful way, that *no* text can be mastered, that meaning is not something solid and unchanging beneath the words, attainable once and for all. All reading, the *Wake* insists, is an endless interchange: the reader is affected by the text at the same time as the text is affected by the reader, and neither retains a secure identity upon which the other can depend.

Another Wakean lesson is that different readers find different things in a text, making it impossible to hypothesize a 'typical' reader; and probably more than any other book in existence *Finnegans Wake* responds superbly to group readings. Each member of the group contributes his or her particular insights, which in turn trigger others, in a process which creates a growing network of meanings and patterns. Often a suggestion advanced tentatively by one member ('This seems ridiculous, but I can't help hearing . . .') bears instant fruit as other members offer related perceptions of their own. What I wish to do is to imagine a group of new readers from different backgrounds tackling the book, armed with a minimum of prior knowledge but having available, for use as the discussion progresses, a good dictionary and a good encyclopaedia.

There is no need to begin *Finnegans Wake* at the beginning; let us imagine that our group of readers decides to start with a passage which seems less crammed with multiple meanings than most (I have already quoted part of it), and that one member volunteers to read it aloud:

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