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INTRODUCTION

On being a Joycean

MAINLY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

I was taught not to like Joyce. The semicolonial experience I shared with him did not count for anything in the literary education I received during the 1950s at an all-white English-medium South African high school, which – in spite of being in the state education system – modelled itself on a certain idea of the Victorian public school. I remember being taught Shakespeare and Shaw, George Eliot and the Georgian poets, but little that could be called 'modernist'. (However, I used school prize money to buy anthologies of recent poetry, and discovered in the work of a writer named Dylan Thomas a linguistic exuberance that at once baffled and excited me.) The English department at the university to which I proceeded in the early 1960s, also in South Africa, broadened my horizons considerably, but still within strict bounds. As was the case with many colonial English departments, its guiding spirit was the English critic F. R. Leavis, and the curriculum was based, for poetry, on the winnowed canon he presented in *Revaluation* and *New Bearings*, for fiction, on the equally circumscribed list of writers celebrated in *The Great Tradition*, and, for methodology, on 'close reading' or 'practical criticism' (for behind Leavis was the influential figure of I. A. Richards). (Not that this methodology was ever offered *as* a methodology; it was just what we did when we did English.) D. H. Lawrence was the presiding genius of twentieth-century literature and cultural criticism, followed at some distance by T. S. Eliot; Conrad and James were their most illustrious forebears. (However, I picked up e. e. cummings's *Eimi* in a book sale, and went through it with a mixture of relish and consternation.)

I don't remember any extended engagement with Joyce, and no doubt many of my teachers shared Lawrence's hostile reaction to his fellow-writer. The following characteristic Lawrentian comments presumably had a strong effect, the first, from 1923, on *Ulysses* (and Dorothy

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Richardson's *Pilgrimage*), the second, from 1928, on *Work in Progress*, as it was appearing in the Paris-based magazine *transition* before publication as *Finnegans Wake*:

Through thousands and thousands of pages Mr Joyce and Miss Richardson tear themselves to pieces, strip their smallest emotions to the finest threads, till you feel you are sewed inside a wool mattress that is being slowly shaken up, and you are turning to wool along with the rest of the woolliness. (*Selected Literary Criticism*, 115)

James Joyce bores me stiff – too terribly would-be and done-on-purpose, utterly without spontaneity or real life. (*Selected Literary Criticism*, 149)

Leavis, in his notoriously dismissive review of *Work in Progress*, 'James Joyce and the "Revolution of the Word"', quoted the best known of Lawrence's fulminations against Joyce: 'Nothing but old fags and cabbage-stumps of quotations from the Bible and the rest, stewed in the juice of deliberate, journalistic dirty-mindedness' (Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*, 148).[1] It was a view with which Leavis clearly had much sympathy. Although he felt some admiration for *Ulysses*, he detected in it 'a certain vicious bent manifested . . . in the inorganic elaborations and pedantries', and the chapters of *Finnegans Wake* appearing in *transition* he found to be pervaded by 'spuriousness' and 'mechanical manipulation' ('James Joyce and the "Revolution of the Word"', 107, 198). That Joyce did not loom large in my English classes is hardly to be wondered at.

My experience in a South African English department was probably very similar to that of many others at institutions of higher learning throughout the English-speaking world in the early sixties.[2] The powerful Lawrentian/Leavisian model, premised on a moral earnestness and an attachment to organicism that left little room for playful ingenuity or the foregrounding of linguistic and literary conventions, for effects of the Joycean kind, fostered in students an appreciation of strenuous verbal engagements with perennial human dilemmas but did so at the cost of rendering them impervious to the pleasures and insights of a large body of literary writing. This was not just a matter of being taught to prefer one type of writing to another; the enjoyment of the favoured authors

[1] Joyce was almost as unflattering about Lawrence: 'That man really writes very badly', he advised Nino Frank, and he wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: 'I read the first 2 pages of the usual sloppy English and [Stuart Gilbert] read me a lyrical bit about nudism in a wood and the end which is a piece of propaganda in favour of something which, outside of D. H. L.'s country at any rate, makes all the propaganda for itself' (*JJ* 615n).

[2] South African universities were not, at that time, distinguished from British universities by a special interest in South African or African literature; as students we were led to believe that not very much of value had been written close to home.

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depended upon the rejection, as wanting in maturity, of the disesteemed writers such as Joyce or Auden. And one of the prime functions of the literature that was deemed valuable (and of the teaching which promoted it) was to forge in students a sensitivity that would react to such work with the appropriate repugnance. In small quantities, Joyce's writing could be used to demonstrate the local felicities produced by the skilful deployment of literary language,[3] but the larger-scale enterprises demanded too much 'surface' decipherment for too little yield of imaginative, psychological, and moral 'depth'. And, of course, Joyce demonstrated his commitment to false gods quite clearly by increasing the surface-to-depth ratio with each work that he wrote.

There were those, of course, who did their best to save Joyce for the Great Tradition, stressing the humanity and precision of his portrayals of human life and minimizing his games with the medium of representation – which usually meant dismissing *Finnegans Wake* and giving short shrift to *Ulysses* from 'Sirens' on.[4] Richard Ellmann's comprehensive biography (published in 1959) gave some support to this enterprise, investing the known outline of Joyce's life and personality with meticulously and elegantly presented detail, and overthrowing the cartoon-character versions that had made condemnation an easy matter. The massive labour to which the weighty volume testified, coupled with the evident seriousness and decency of Ellmann's own approach, had a considerable impact, quite apart from the picture of Joyce he painted. And the picture itself, of the artist who sacrifices all for his art, who battles like a new Milton with his own blindness and like a new Blake with incomprehension all around, and whose work may be read as the faithful representation (give or take some artistic licence) of his own experience – Ellmann's essay on 'The Dead' is the classic instance[5] – this picture no doubt made it possible for many who had thought of Joyce as an insubstantial trickster to recategorize him as a weighty author. The later chapters of *Ulysses* and all of *Finnegans Wake*, even when held to be

[3] One of my teachers used the description in 'Proteus' of Stephen's progress across Sandymount Strand – 'His boots trod again a damp crackling mast, razorshells, squeaking pebbles' (*U* 3.147 *et seq.*) – for an exercise in 'practical criticism'. Only later did I discover that Leavis had singled out this passage in his review of *Work in Progress*: 'There is prose in *Ulysses*, the description, for instance, of Stephen Dedalus walking over the beach, of a Shakespearian concreteness; the rich complexity it offers to analysis derives from the intensely imagined experience realized in the words' ('James Joyce and the "Revolution of the Word"', 194).

[4] See, for instance, S. L. Goldberg's *The Classical Temper* and *Joyce*; and John Gross's *Joyce*. Fritz Senn has called Goldberg's earlier book, with a characteristic mixture of praise and blame, 'the best book ever written against *Ulysses*' (*Joyce's Dislocutions*, 159).

[5] This essay, 'Backgrounds of "The Dead"', became a chapter of Ellmann's biography (*JJ*, ch. 15).

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regrettable in comparison with what Joyce might have done, could be accorded some value in the light of the familiar narrative of artistic innovation in an unappreciative world.

It might be thought, then, that when I started reading Joyce for myself, and finding the experience hugely enjoyable, my Leavisian training would have led me to value the early work most, and to feel some discomfort in engaging with the writing after 'Wandering Rocks'. But the pleasure I took in Joyce's works (like my earlier pleasure in Dylan Thomas and e. e. cummings) stemmed in large part from their *resistance* to the model of literary appreciation I had been schooled in. It was precisely Joyce's refusal to treat literature as a moral tonic, his comic scepticism about the novel's claims to faithful representation, his exorbitance and excessiveness, his predilection for extravagant effects, that appealed to me. The result was, of course, that I was drawn most strongly to Joyce's later writing, and that I tended to interpret the earlier work in the light of what came after. How I first came to Joyce I cannot now remember, but I do recall reading *Ulysses* – the plump green Bodley Head edition, which of all the editions still gives me most pleasure as a printed text to hold in the hand – on the *Windsor Castle* in 1966 as we steamed towards Southampton and my new life as a student at Cambridge. I tackled *Finnegans Wake* a few years later, armed with whatever guides and reference books I could get hold of in the Cambridge University Library, and, although in due course I was to discover that the best way to read Joyce's last book is as part of a group, the experience of reading – or rather 'reading' – from cover to cover was absorbing and exhilarating. I was at the time writing a Ph.D. thesis on Elizabethan attempts to create quantitative verse in English, and no doubt my fascination with those strange deformations of the language was related to my fascination with the linguistic extravagances of the *Wake*.

The criticism of Joyce which I found most helpful, therefore, was not criticism which tried to save Joyce for the 'English' tradition of moral healthiness and organic wholeness, but criticism which put a high value on his preoccupation with verbal craft, his encyclopedic ambitions, and his tendency to puncture the illusion of immediate representation. These features, after all, were exactly what made his work so energizing and enjoyable for me. The critics I valued were for the most part Americans – among them William York Tindall, Harry Levin, Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, Adaline Glasheen, Louis O. Mink, and Hugh Kenner – who had a certain no-nonsense briskness

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about their engagement with Joyce's difficulties, often characterized by an unashamedly 'technical' approach which was a great relief after a style of reading governed by the need to identify subtle enactments of human values and to pronounce judgement accordingly. At the same time, no doubt as another component of my reaction against the way I had been taught, I was turning to linguistics as a useful tool in analyzing literary texts, and drawing on various intellectual movements of the time that gave linguistics a central role, whether as a set of techniques, a body of knowledge, or a model: stylistics, semiotics, and structuralism. Linked with this was an interest in aesthetic theory, both as a historical and as a philosophical issue, which had always lurked around the questions I asked of literary texts.

During my first years of teaching at Oxford and Southampton Universities in the mid-1970s, Joyce remained no more than a hobby, while I concentrated on periods before the twentieth century, and on poetry, in my classes and in my writing. I first began to appreciate the pleasures and rewards of working on Joyce in a more committed fashion while on an exchange in the USA in 1979, where I participated at the University of Illinois in a *Finnegans Wake* reading group run by Berni Benstock, one of the originators and presiding spirits of the James Joyce Foundation.[6] But it was a more far-reaching change in my thinking that precipitated a professional interest in Joyce: in the early 1980s, thanks largely to the commitment and patience of younger colleagues at Southampton, I began to understand the importance of the various intellectual developments, especially in France, that in English-speaking countries were being called 'post-structuralism' or just 'theory'. My reading of this work fed into and complicated my existing interests in literary language and in philosophical aesthetics, and at the same time I found Joyce becoming more central to my thinking. I didn't realize at the time just how important Joyce's work had been to the leading figures in the French movements I was becoming interested in, but there was clearly an affinity between them, and I felt that to teach a course on *Finnegans Wake* – a year-long seminar with a small group of senior undergraduates – would be a way of developing my own, and encouraging my students', interest in the intellectual opportunities offered by the new modes of thought.

I was right: the *Wake* turned out to be the perfect instrument by means of which to shake inherited assumptions about literature and

[6] I reflected on the importance of this reading group in 'Remembering Berni Benstock' and 'The Postmodernity of Joyce', 10–11.

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criticism. Because the Leavisian model was also highly influential upon the teaching of literature in English secondary schools, most of my students had come to university with broadly the same assumptions that I had acquired in South Africa, and the great virtue of the *Wake* was that it simply did not respond to them. Our work in the classroom was not a matter of 'applying' theories derived from philosophers or psychoanalysts, however; it was a process of trying to develop ways of reading that seemed to do justice to Joyce's writing, and thus to enhance our pleasure in it. It was certainly helpful to be reading Derrida, Kristeva, and Barthes at the same time; but *this* reading also required the breaking of old habits, and the *Wake* in turn proved helpful in making headway with the peculiar difficulties of the French writers with whom we were grappling.

Teaching Joyce soon led me to the discovery that there was a body of continental writing on Joyce that was very different from the bulk of what I had read in the English language. What I had valued most up to now was explication: the meticulous, ingenious, and sometimes inspired deciphering of parallels, allusions, deformations, and parodies. What I found now were ways of thinking of Joyce's texts not as extremely complicated puzzles with no final answers (for I had always found myself resisting conclusions) but as stagings of some of the most fascinating and important properties of language, culture, and the psyche. Hélène Cixous in Paris, Jacques Aubert in Lyon, and Fritz Senn in Zürich were among the more senior members of this group, and although their approaches to Joyce were very different, they each represented a way of responding to the extremity and excess of the Joycean text that offered something different from what I have elsewhere termed the 'transcendentalist' and 'empiricist' approaches dominant in Anglophone criticism.[7] Younger critics working in the same vein whose work I came to know included Jean-Michel Rabaté, Daniel Ferrer, and André Topia; and two influential English voices with strong connections to Paris whom I had already encountered were Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe. Around this time I also read some trail-blazing North Americans who were swimming against the prevailing currents in Joyce criticism, notably Jennifer Levine, Margot Norris, and David Hayman.

Aided by two Southampton colleagues with strong French connections – Robert Young and Maud Ellmann – I found myself becoming involved personally in the scene I had hitherto encountered only in books and journals. In 1982 I was persuaded to join a group of young

[7] Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer, 'Introduction: Highly Continental Evenements', *Post-structuralist Joyce*, 5.

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critics who were preparing for a session at the Centenary Joyce Symposium in Dublin, and as a preliminary venture to give a paper – a first version of the symposium paper – at a Joyce colloquium in Paris some months prior. There I met several of the people who were to become collaborators and friends in the years ahead, including Rabaté, Ferrer, Topia, Aubert, and Senn. Fritz Senn, in particular, responded warmly to my talk – my first attempt to speak publicly about Joyce, or about any twentieth-century topic, for that matter – and gave me the kind of encouragement that counts for a great deal at the uncertain beginning of a new project. (Not that I had any inkling how large a project it was to become; it seemed at the time like a brief digression from my main scholarly interests, which at this time were focused on the forms of English poetry.) If there was a moment at which I became a Joycean, perhaps it was then, in response to the generosity and openness of what I began to think of as the 'Joyce community', a foretaste of which I'd experienced a few years earlier at the Benstocks' house. 'Joycean' is not a term I very willingly acknowledge, with its connotations of single-minded and uncritical adulation, but it has become hard to deny its applicability to me, given the repeated returns to Joyce which I have made since 1982, of which this book gives some evidence. I have written elsewhere that – in the sense in which I am willing to accept it – the word betokens 'not an academic interest in the writing and life of James Joyce, but a certain attitude to literature and to experience, a certain capacity to relish, without feeling threatened or becoming defensive, the imperfect world in all its multiplicity and messiness' ('Remembering Berni Benstock'). I would add that it involves not just an intellectual or an institutional commitment, but an oddly personal commitment to a vast, in many places absurd, in a few places highly impressive, assembly of individuals and their endeavours and productions, all in some way energized and stimulated by the writings of James Joyce.

If Paris was my baptism, the other pre-eminent Joycean city, Dublin, was my first communion. The 1982 symposium (one of the international symposia held every two years in a different European city) seemed huge after the intimate Paris affair, and our session just a drop in its teeming ocean. There were eight of us on the panel, four from France and four from Britain, so our papers had to be extremely brief.[8] Our intention was far from programmatic: this was not to be an exposition of a body of

[8] The other participants were Michael Beausang, Maud Ellmann, Robert Young, Colin MacCabe, Jean-Michel Rabaté, André Topia, and Daniel Ferrer. Six of the papers read were published in the conference volume (Beja *et al.*, *James Joyce: The Centennial Symposium*, 57–92). I later expanded my contribution, 'Lipspeech', for my 1988 book *Peculiar Language*.

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'theory' and a demonstration of its 'relevance' to Joyce (a genre of critical discourse that has unfortunately become common in Joyce studies as it has elsewhere), but an engagement with a single chapter of *Ulysses* from our individual perspectives, enriched as they had been by our reading of new theoretical work. Literature, for us, was not the merely passive object of theorizing, but a discourse preempting and exceeding all theories. The title, 'Sirens Without Music', was a signal that we would start with no preconceptions about the interpretation of *Ulysses* of the kind installed by Stuart Gilbert's pioneering and 'authorized' – and still highly influential – account of the book (Gilbert, *James Joyce's 'Ulysses'*).

In retrospect, the panel does seem to mark something of a turning point: a thin wedge of 'French theory' in the Joycean critical discourse that by the time of the next International James Joyce Symposium, held two years later in Frankfurt, had apparently become the dominant approach to Joyce's writing.[9] (Although the 1975 Paris symposium had included a good deal of French theoretical discussion – Jacques Lacan gave a major address, and other contributors included Philippe Sollers, Jacques Aubert, and Hélène Cixous – one gets the impression that it left the divide between Francophone and Anglophone approaches as great as ever, or perhaps even greater.[10]) What I didn't realize at the time was that this panel would turn out to be a turning-point in my own career as well, and that I would go on to attend one International Joyce Symposium after another, finding that, whatever else I was working on at that moment, I had something to say on a Joycean topic. It was not so much that the task of understanding and explicating Joyce proved endless – though this was certainly the case – but that I repeatedly found my reading of Joyce puncturing any settled complacency about theoretical issues, provoking questions about the way we read and employ literature, and throwing fresh light on many of the areas I was interested in, including literary language, issues of interpretation, and the relation of text and history. I also found that each time I was getting to grips with a new theoretical discourse, Joyce's work provided an apt testing ground and whetstone.

[9] See Bernard Benstock, ed., *James Joyce: The Augmented Ninth*. It must be said that the conference programme itself was less markedly influenced by 'theory' than the volume of proceedings published four years later; though this is in itself of some historical and sociological significance.
[10] See the collection of papers from the conference, *Joyce & Paris*, edited by Jacques Aubert and Maria Jolas. In a tangible reflection of the dichotomized conference, the proceedings are presented in two volumes, one featuring the contributions from French speakers, the other the contributions from English speakers.

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Most of my writing about Joyce for the following fifteen years benefited from the stimulus and provocation of French post-structuralism, and more particularly the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida gave a memorable lecture at the 1984 Frankfurt symposium (memorable, among other things, for its brilliance, its humour, its extreme length, and for the fact that a large part of the audience could not follow it, since it was in French with only brief English summaries interpolated by a heroic translator), and it was during the same symposium that he and I had the conversation which began what was to be a long and rewarding collaboration.[11] The earliest of the essays in this volume were written for that symposium: the essay I here call 'Deconstructive Criticism of Joyce' (which was actually the title of the panel, organized by Ellen Carol Jones, in which I spoke), and chapter 4, 'Joyce and the Ideology of Character' (given as part of a panel on 'Character and Contemporary Theory', organized by Bonnie Kime Scott). These essays, published in the conference volume (see note 9 above), clearly reflect my early enthusiasm for the work of Derrida, as well as that of Jean-François Lyotard and Hélène Cixous. The year 1984 also saw the publication of the collection which Daniel Ferrer and I co-edited with the aim of bringing French writing on Joyce to the attention of the English-speaking world, called, at the publisher's urging, *Post-structuralist Joyce* ('un peu "marketing"' was the wry comment from Derrida, whose first essay on Joyce, 'Two Words for Joyce', we were glad to include).

Although the early 1980s can be seen as the watershed (or in some mythologies, the Deluge) after which Joyce criticism – and literary studies more generally – would never be the same, new critical trends did not cease to arise, sometimes in competition with one another, sometimes complementing one another. In the mid 1980s, the text-based criticism that predominated in post-structuralist approaches to literature was being enriched by an increasing concern with historical contexts and changes. One reflection of this critical mutation was a panel organized by Morris Beja for the 1986 International James Joyce Symposium in Copenhagen on the topic 'James Joyce and the Concept of History', to which I contributed 'History is to Blame' – revised here as chapter 7, 'Wakean History: Not Yet'. This talk was not a consideration of historical detail (the panel was not on history, but the concept of history); rather, it addressed the ways in which Joyce – particularly in

[11] See, in particular, *Acts of Literature*, the selection of essays by Derrida on literary topics which I edited. I was pleased to be able to include a revised translation of the Frankfurt lecture, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce'.

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Finnegans Wake – 'undoes history'. I also wrote 'The *Wake*'s Confounded Language', included here as the final chapter, for a panel on '*Finnegans Wake* and the Language of Babel' at the same symposium, chaired by Berni Benstock. In both these pieces, the second of which was published in the conference volume, the influence of deconstruction is again strong, but the main source of the 'theoretical' thinking in these pieces is Joyce's own writings, and *Finnegans Wake* in particular.

History continued to be a pressing question for anyone interested in literature and theory, and it was again the topic I chose to focus on for an MLA panel at the end of 1986 on 'The Ideology of Form in the Works of James Joyce', in a paper entitled 'Joyce, Jameson, and the Text of History', first published in *Scribble* and also included here, as chapter 6. The new interest in historical contextualization was once more evident at a 1987 conference on '*Finnegans Wake*: Contexts' held at the University of Leeds; my contribution, 'Finnegans Awake: The Dream of Interpretation', published in a special issue of the *James Joyce Quarterly* featuring European critics (ironically enough, as I had just moved to the USA), and reprinted as chapter 11, is an attempt to historicize the major critical trope used in the reading of the *Wake*.[12] At the same time I was finishing a book, published in 1988 under the title *Peculiar Language*, whose purpose was to trace discussions and literary manifestations of the vexed relation between literary and non-literary language from George Puttenham in the sixteenth century to Joyce in the twentieth, and which included revised versions of some of my earliest writings on Joyce.

Along with the influence of historical approaches on Joyce studies during the eighties, and the continuing importance of deconstruction and psychoanalysis, the influence of feminism increased.[13] One of the feminist panels at the 1988 symposium in Venice, 'Textual Mater: Women, Language, Joyce', was organized by Shari Benstock and Ellen Carol Jones, and it was for this panel that I wrote a short paper called 'Molly's Flow', expanded for a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on feminist readings of Joyce and included here in a rewritten version as

[12] A historical impetus has continued to motivate much Joyce criticism, and the mid-1990s have witnessed a real flowering; see, for instance, James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History*; Robert Spoo, *James Joyce and the Language of History: Dedalus's Nightmare*; Thomas C. Hofheinz, *Joyce and the Invention of Irish History*; and Mark Wollaeger, Victor Luftig, and Robert Spoo, eds., *Joyce and the Subject of History*.

[13] See, for example, Bonnie Kime Scott, *Joyce and Feminism*, and Christine van Boheemen, *The Novel as Family Romance*. Feminist criticism remains one of the strongest areas of Joyce studies, often in combination with other approaches: among the notable books of the 1990s have been Kimberly Devlin, *Wandering and Return in 'Finnegans Wake'*; Margot Norris, *Joyce's Web*; and Christine Froula, *Modernism's Body*. The considerable influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on Joyce criticism has most often been exerted in conjunction with feminist approaches.

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