

JOYCE EFFECTS  
ON LANGUAGE, THEORY,  
AND HISTORY

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## Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page ix
<i>References and abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction On being a Joycean	I
Mainly autobiographical	I
Mainly theoretical	13
1 Deconstructive criticism of Joyce	22
2 Popular Joyce?	30
3 Touching ‘Clay’: reference and reality in <i>Dubliners</i>	35
A soft wet substance	35
A woman of no importance	39
On referring	45
Maria victrix	49
4 Joyce and the ideology of character	52
5 ‘Suck was a queer word’: language, sex, and the remainder in <i>A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i>	59
Sex and the schoolboy	60
The remainder of language and the power of literature	65
The artist as a youngish man	74
6 Joyce, Jameson, and the text of history	78
7 Wakean history: not yet	86
8 Molly’s flow: the writing of ‘Penelope’ and the question of women’s language	93
Stopping the flow	93
A female language?	106
Overflow	111

9	The postmodernity of Joyce: chance, coincidence, and the reader	117
10	Countlessness of livestories: narrativity in <i>Finnegans Wake</i>	126
11	Finnegans awake, or the dream of interpretation	133
	First proposition	134
	Second proposition	141
	Third proposition	148
12	The <i>Wake's</i> confounded language	156
13	Envoi: judging Joyce	163
	A commitment to Joyce	163
	An industry without limits	168
	A Joyce come to judgement	171
	An excess of technique	174
	A future for <i>Ulysses</i> ?	179
	<i>Works cited</i>	189
	<i>Index</i>	201

*Deconstructive criticism of Joyce*

This talk was given at the 1984 James Joyce Symposium in Frankfurt, as part of a panel following Jacques Derrida's address, 'Ulysses Gramophone'. The paper was originally entitled 'Of', but I have here appropriated the title of the whole panel. The references to that occasion are integral to the talk and have not been removed.

'*Amor matris*: subjective and objective genitive', thinks Stephen Dedalus in the role of part-time teacher in the 'Nestor' episode of *Ulysses*, contemplating his graceless pupil Cyril Sargent as the boy wrestles with his arithmetic problems and wondering at the mutual bond summed up in the ambiguity (which survives translation) of the phrase 'the love of a mother' (*U* 2.165–6). Later in the day, during his rhapsodic lecture on Shakespeare to a select audience in the National Library, the whole phrase surfaces again in Stephen's mind (*U* 9.842–3).

Thanks to the same ambiguity of 'of', the title *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, instead of designating a young man as he appears in a painting that is the work of his older self, might just refer to a painting *by* a youthful artist (a possibility not without critical consequences).

The title of Joyce's last book has, among its many meanings, a genitive that also works in two ways: the wake, or waking, of Finnegan may be that which he does as (reviving) subject or that which is done to him as (dead) object.

'The whole of this essay', writes Jacques Derrida in a footnote to his long essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', is 'itself nothing but a reading of *Finnegans Wake*' (*Dissemination*, 88 n20; translation slightly modified); and in 'Two Words for Joyce' he comments on this earlier footnote: 'This double genitive ["reading of *Finnegans Wake*"] implied that this modest essay was read in advance by *Finnegans Wake*, in its wake or its lineage, at the very moment that "Plato's Pharmacy" was itself presenting itself as a

reading-head or principle of decipherment . . . for a possible understanding of *Finnegans Wake* (150).

How, then, are we to read the genitive in my title – ‘Deconstructive Criticism of Joyce’ – if both Joyce and Derrida warn us of its duplicity? Do Joyce’s texts allow us to read the phrase as referring simply to a set of procedures performed on, or over, a body of writing? Equally, does the practice of deconstruction (as we encounter it in Derrida’s writing) allow us to read it in such a way, implying the application of a critical technique which remains unaffected by the object to which it is applied? What if the body at the wake, splashed by some hermeneutic whiskey, should wake, to the embarrassment of the mourners? What if the critical text should find itself addressed by the writing on which it comments, perhaps even given life and sustained by it, as the ‘squashed boneless snail’ of a schoolboy is by a mother’s love?

As we move into the 1980s, British and North American Joyce criticism is, as one might put it, waking up to deconstruction and post-structuralism, as movements, or tremors, in the critical space around it. Better late than never, some might say, but perhaps better never than in the shape of a new set of rituals to perform around the coffin, with not a drop of whiskey going astray. It is worth pausing, therefore, to ask what ‘deconstructive criticism of Joyce’ must mean if it is to do justice to what is distinctive both in deconstruction and in Joyce, and in their possible relationship. It will have become evident that ‘of’ must be a double genitive: deconstructive criticism of Joyce would have to be that which Joyce practises upon us as much as that which we practise upon Joyce. Derrida draws attention to the two-way relationship in a discussion of the problem posed for the critic by the scope and power of Joyce’s writing, using the ambivalent genitive once more: ‘You have only one way out: *being in memory of him* . . . : not necessarily to remember him, no, but to be in his memory, to inhabit his memory’ (‘Two Words for Joyce’, 147). Joyce remembers us as we remember him.

Most criticism offers itself to be read in a manner that can be called *epitaphic*, keeping the literary work alive in memory while reasserting and ensuring its death as text; a deconstructive criticism, on the other hand, would be a critical practice acknowledging that *its* life is dependent on the continued life of the text it helps to keep alive, and which attempts to work through, or at least with, that enigma. In a different sense, all criticism comes into existence as the wake of the text it reads, marking the eddies thrown up by its powerful surge through the cultural matrix, yet all criticism tries to escape this condition of secondariness and

belatedness that points ineluctably towards death. This usually entails an assumption that it is the *work* that is dead, and in need of being both waked and woken (but only into a life foreseen and constrained by the critic); but a deconstructive criticism would advertise its secondariness, its existence as the text's wake, waked and woken by it, while at the same time demonstrating that that which is 'secondary' may predetermine or generate that which is 'primary'. Deconstruction also functions as the wake of *criticism*, at once thrown up by it, celebrating its death, and arousing its deconstructive potential as mode of attentive reading that attempts to do justice to the text with which it engages.

The criticism of Joyce with which we are most familiar – objective genitive, unidirectional, and epitaphic – operates according to the model of testable hypotheses (offered to the community of scholars for its verdict) and the accumulation of ever more precise and detailed knowledge: the model, that is, of science.<sup>1</sup> So we scan each new essay or book on Joyce for its contribution to the growing body of increasingly accurate information, coming ever closer to the truth as errors are corrected and new insights added. Just as knowledge of the facts of Joyce's life grows until a 'definitive biography' can be produced, and knowledge of the words Joyce wrote culminates in a 'definitive edition', so knowledge of the meanings of Joyce's writing moves towards a 'definitive interpretation'. Of course, we are prepared to acknowledge that these goals are fictions, and may even be willing to admit that there is no 'life' as such, only stories that create one, no 'text' as such, only editions that legitimate one, no 'meaning' as such, only interpretations that generate one; but every time we claim to add to or correct the existing biographies, texts, or interpretations of Joyce, or make a judgement on someone else's addition or correction, we confirm the belief in an accessible truth independent of our commentary, which it is our goal to approximate as closely and fully as possible.<sup>2</sup> Literary theory is constituted according to the same assumptions: it takes Joyce's writing

<sup>1</sup> My argument in what follows owes a great deal to Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard discusses the distinction between 'scientific knowledge' and 'narrative knowledge', which use completely different criteria; the former judges the latter as 'primitive' and composed of 'opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology', but depends upon it to legitimize its truths in the public domain (see especially pages 18–31). We may recognize Shem and Shaun in yet another guise.

<sup>2</sup> These three enterprises do not work in isolation, of course. For instance, a new fact in the biography, or a new word in the text, is adduced as 'evidence' for a 'correction' to the current interpretation, or confirmation of a previously disputed one.

as a sample or example, and operates upon it in order to add to or correct the body of knowledge relating to literature, determined again by the ultimate goal of a definitive and final account. The procedures of literary history or stylistics or the sociology of literature are no different.

I do not wish to suggest that we could do without these assumptions and practices, or that there is a position from which one could simply challenge or overturn them if one wanted to. Their internal inconsistencies – like the fact that the actual histories of criticism, biography, editing, and theory belie the assumptions that enable them to operate – do not render them meaningless or useless, except, perhaps, from the perspective of their own fictions of self-consistency, testability, and productivity. Since literary commentary of any kind is constituted by and within institutions and societies, and their discourses and power systems, and since we live at a time and in a society in which the scientific model is deeply ingrained and politically effective, its dislodgement – supposing this were deemed desirable – would not be a straightforward or localized matter. The ease with which deconstruction – or something bearing its name – has been pressed into service in the academic sphere to provide ‘improved’ readings or theories in accordance with the scientific model is testimony to the power of the dominant discourse and its politico-institutional underpinning. (One could expatiate here on the structures of competition and ‘objective’ evaluation in the academic profession, the economic and ideological forces at work in the publishing industry, the glamorization of technology as an aesthetic category, the role of gender in the science/arts division, the educational practices of post-industrial society, and so on, but the analysis of such factors would not in itself loosen the hold of the discourse upon the academy – indeed, it might strengthen it, if the analysis itself were undertaken according to ‘scientific’ principles.)

Let us try to imagine, instead, how a ‘deconstructive criticism’ might operate within this context, accepting that the word *deconstruction* has taken on a wider meaning than that sanctioned by Derrida’s first use of it, but still understanding it to refer to Derrida’s practice as a reader of texts.<sup>3</sup> Where and how could it take effect? What would it be able to achieve? What would be the importance of deconstructive criticism of Joyce?

First, we have to imagine it seeding itself within the crannies and

<sup>3</sup> This brief discussion has been supplemented by longer considerations of deconstruction and criticism in my essay ‘Singularities, Responsibilities’ and in my introduction to Derrida’s *Acts of Literature*.



along the fault lines of institutionalized criticism (including, perhaps, much of what is today called ‘deconstruction’), and functioning only within an initial moment, before the inevitable appropriation by the institution made necessary a new locale and a new strategy. Deconstructive criticism would weave itself through the text being read, and weave that text through itself, and thread other texts through both, in a patient and careful movement of displacement and dissemination, at once exposing and destabilizing, however momentarily, the boundaries and hierarchies that have enabled the text to be pinned into (and to serve as a reinforcement of) an ideology or a metaphysic that denies it its specificity, its inexhaustibility, its unrecuperable otherness. It would in the process yield useful material for the literary critic, theorist, and historian (perhaps even the biographer and textual editor), the value of which is not to be underestimated, but which would not be among its effects as *deconstructive* criticism. (And to the extent that it did *not* furnish such material, it would be accused – from the point of view of scientific knowledge – of being useless or frivolous, of contributing nothing to our understanding of the text or our understanding of literature; as if the interest of, and justification for, a careful reading, deconstructive or otherwise, lay solely in the nugget of truth it added to the pile.)

A deconstructive criticism, or the deconstructive as it might be read in *any* criticism (for there are no generic or historical boundaries to be observed here, and no doubt there could never be such a thing as ‘pure’ deconstructive criticism), would offer no insights, conclusions, or detachable propositions, but would instead have the character of an *event* (and it must be remembered that there is nothing immediate or self-sufficient about the structure of events: they are constituted, like texts, by a changing and unsaturable context).<sup>4</sup> It would not contribute a brick to the growing edifice of knowledge, nor even mark a step on the road to the Last Deconstruction, but, in place of teleology or eschatology, would offer a unique conjunction or coincidence (I shall come back to this word)<sup>5</sup> of cultural traces, existing only by virtue of, and in anticipation of, an answering event, destined to repeat it and to change it with every occurrence: its reading.

This is why ‘deconstructive criticism of Joyce’ must be understood as *Joyce’s* deconstruction of the critic’s text as much as the critic’s decon-

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Derrida’s essay ‘Signature Event Context’ (*Margins of Philosophy*, 309–30). The event plays an important part in Lyotard’s thinking, too, as is well brought out by both Bennington, *Lyotard*, and Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*. For a discussion of the importance of the event in Foucault, see Young, *White Mythologies*, 81–5. <sup>5</sup> And see also chapter 9 below.

struction of Joyce's text: the critical text would have been made possible by Joyce's text, by the specificity, the uniqueness, of Joyce's writing, as an event calling forth, and being called forth by, another event, equally specific, equally unique. In neither case is the specificity in question ordinary or self-determined, the transcendent uniqueness of a 'free subject' mastering the culture and the language; it is the specificity of a particular knot in the cultural, linguistic, political, ideological fabric of a place and a time. To read Joyce's text is to read a vast number of texts, radiating out as a network through Western culture and beyond, to read them through it and it through them, texts which the reader knows and doesn't know. (But what is it to 'know' or 'not know' a text? It is not the same as having 'read' or 'not read' a text, which is itself not a straightforward distinction.) Any criticism of Joyce's text will itself be already situated in that network, deriving terms, positions, modes of argument from it (more or less silently and compliantly, according to the degree of its deconstructive self-scrutiny), and will therefore offer itself to be read by the Joycean text, which constitutes a far more comprehensive and tightly bunched gathering of cultural threads than any foreseeable criticism.

To gain a sense of the network in which every text and every reading (and reader) is situated, as in a large telephone system, is also to appreciate the role of *coincidence* in culture, in history, in language. The more complex the network, and the more overdetermined every node within it, the more likely is it that 'coincidences' will occur – and the less they will conform to the character of what we usually understand by that word, since they will be not purely random convergences but the necessary products of a system of certain complexity, the outcome of a law which links, by a longer or shorter route, everything with everything else. And here we can take up the question that has been hovering in the background since the beginning of this essay: what has Joyce, *specifically*, to do with deconstruction?<sup>6</sup> Could this name, as it has occurred in this discussion, be replaced by that of *any* writer of literary texts? To a certain extent, the answer must be 'yes': the literary (which is not confined to literature) is that which refuses and resists the scientific model of knowledge, that which makes deconstruction possible (and necessary) by being itself an event and not an argument or truth-claim. To that extent,

<sup>6</sup> One could, of course, give a purely historical answer, pointing to Derrida's long familiarity with Joyce and his recurrent appeals to Joyce's work (a history which he himself has begun to document in 'Two Words for Joyce'), and to the importance of Joyce's texts to the new ground broken in Parisian journals in the 1960s, but this would still leave the question, why *Joyce*?

Joyce's texts are paradigmatic. But the particularity of Joyce (and I am using the name to stand for the group of texts bearing that signature), the place of Joyce within cultural, philosophical, and political history, and the conditions under which Joyce is read today, cannot be generalized to other writers in any simple way. Derrida's reading of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* point up – by detailed involvement with the text and its interrelations with other texts he has commented on – the peculiar aptness of Joyce's writing for anyone embarked upon a deconstructive engagement with the governing ideological system of our time (and its political, institutional, and cultural manifestations). In particular, Joyce's simulacrum, or parody, of the scientific model of cumulative knowledge – the encyclopedic inflation of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, the concern with precise factual information, the interconnecting networks that run through each text, and that reach from text to text, and from text to history and biography (Joyce's, our own), to produce an endless series of coincidental effects that are not at all random (or whose randomness is programmed in advance by the laws of the text) – produces an unparalleled field in which the ruling principles of scientific knowledge can be tested against themselves, can be made to reveal their dependence on the aleatory, the excluded, the counter-rational, and the contingent, and, perhaps most important of all, and most specific to Joyce, can be exposed to a laughter which overruns all enclosures, penetrates all boundaries, and travesties all laws – not the irreverent laughter of the carnival (although that is a part of it), but the laughter that pre-exists, and presupposes, all the efforts of the scientific or analytic tradition to erect laws that protect the territory of the 'serious'.

This work – this play – of deconstruction within the writing of Joyce (and bequeathed by Joyce to us, if we will accept the gift) operates first at the level of the literary establishment, since the preordained consequence of Joyce's encyclopedic, overdetermined, texts (and I do not mean to exclude the earlier works), coinciding, but not coincidentally, with the growth of literary criticism as an academic subject, was the institution of a massive enterprise of exegesis and explication on the scientific model, the model of the international computerized data bank, ever more comprehensive and accurate. But we may regard the Joyce industry itself as nothing more than a vast extension of the Joycean text, equally a simulacrum or parody, producing its own irruptive laughter, testing and travestyng the scientific model of knowledge at work in society at large, where the issues are of greater scope and significance. Joyce, and the 'Joyce industry', are important today not just because

they parody the dominant post-Renaissance model of knowledge, but because of their relation to its more recent, and more totalitarian, complement: the drive towards (and hence the discourse of) technological efficiency and the maximization of profit (as wealth, knowledge, and power).<sup>7</sup> What is urgently needed is a criticism which is able to turn this discourse against itself, to tease out the wastefulness and internal differences of its own premises and procedures, in a gesture – a unique event that cannot be appropriated or pinned down – of parody, of laughter, of excess; not a criticism made in defiance of, or in retreat from, the discourse of efficient production and technological gain, but a criticism which finds itself already inhabiting the structures and practices of the postmodern machine. The deconstructive criticism of Joyce, perhaps.

<sup>7</sup> See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 44–7. This drive is even more evident in 1999 than it was in 1984.