

# James Joyce

Joyce belongs to that small group of writers, in English consisting principally of Chaucer Shakespeare and Dickens, who practise an art rooted in popular culture but extend it beyond anything anyone did before. They use commonplace means to produce marvellous effects, they invent sophisticated devices to raise laughs. Conventional values seem to be in abeyance: everywhere extremes meet. While the pre-eminence of these writers is never in doubt opinion about the merits of particular works often varies.

Joyce the writer combines priest with singer, the vocation he rejected with the career he abandoned. His fictions tend to converge on a crux exposing a mystery and his characters are rather given to oracular pronouncements. He wrote by ear of course. Sensitive from childhood to the smallest variations of usage he developed for their discrimination a faculty comparable to the sense of absolute pitch. Growing up in a time when literary sensibility in general was entering a period of rapid decay he saw the life about him through different degradations of language.

Whereas Proust used a smaller gift to analyze the life of his time and Kraus exploited a still smaller one to castigate it, Joyce remained true to the aesthetic ideal, converting his perceptions into the very fabric of his work. In *Dubliners* style manifests

character, in *Ulysses* it spreads from character to determine the tonality of each episode, in *Finnegans Wake* key continuously modulated constitutes aspects of subject. Each of the earlier books also progresses towards the next.

It is all in *Dubliners*, both the excellence and the particular qualities, everything except the uproarious comedy. Of the fifteen stories only two or perhaps three are at all weak in conception or mistaken in technique. Others show an exquisite sense of proportion. By cunning management of the various resources of narrative they dispose round their mysterious or horrifying centres perspectives of insight into a small real world. The execution is all but flawless.

Yet in each of the stories Joyce set himself a different and a difficult technical task. The first one, 'The Sisters', prefigures the idea of *Finnegans Wake*. The opening sentence is unassigned and the story proceeds by daydream, intent listening and verbal association, states where words are more potent than things and meanings remain inexplicit. 'Araby' is a study of preadolescence in a style derived from the 'cloistral silverveined' prose of Newman. 'Two Gallants' is an Horatian satire traced out on Dublin's streets. 'The Boarding House' presents event and motivation through three reveries, reminiscent or deliberative.

'Ivy Day in the Committee Room' is an opera buffa in one scene: half a dozen voices differing in timbre and idiom twine and untwine, drop out and re-enter, till one detaches itself to recite solo a poem in memory of Parnell. The others fall silent, even a bottle of Guinness set by the fire holds its cork till the

poem is completed and the applause has died down: a typical anticlimax, like the fart that ends the fugue in *Ulysses*, only here pathetic. In contrast the strongest of the stories, 'A Painful Case', is narrated with a cold intellectuality shattered by two short bursts of speech. 'The Dead', larger in design and richer in orchestration, falls in comparison into Flaubertian setpieces pointing towards the formalisation of *Ulysses*.

*Dubliners* presents in addition examples of a method Joyce made his own. Criticism has no name for it. Literary in origin it is a kind of parody or imitation but one of such accuracy it cannot be considered either tribute or caricature. It is a copy that might be an actual example of the sort of thing it copies, were it not more the sort of thing it copies than any example is. What distinguishes it from its originals seems chiefly a matter of placing and spacing. The characteristic particulars of the originals are thereby enabled to disengage themselves slightly and without looking any different appear more clear. This is sufficient to imbue them with a certain irony, establishing a secondary tone at variance with the tone of the original but so gently it rather flatters than mocks.

Such are the sermon in 'Grace', the newspaper report in 'A Painful Case', the elegy on Parnell in 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room'. They use the hackneyed and contemptible devices of the genres they imitate to produce results which in the fiction are solemn and moving but in the reader induce a state where the conflict of contempt humour emotion and admiration resolves at the end into unmoved wonder. In these examples of the

theory he propounded in the *Portrait* Joyce first reached the peaks of his art. In some episodes of *Ulysses* and more of *Finnegans Wake* he extended it to modalities of writing conventionally less definite.

Other characteristics of *Dubliners* Joyce did not develop, for example sensitivity to atmosphere and the different qualities of silence. 'The Boarding House' is psychologically more acute and 'A Painful Case' emotionally more powerful than anything in the later work.

The Jesuits were his blacking factory. They formed him but made him unable to do anything without a model. He turned the disability into a source of strength so copious it might almost seem to contain the whole art. *Ulysses* is a suite of rhetorical exercises, several of them masterpieces.

*Finnegans Wake*, constructed on a scheme devised by Joyce to serve him as a substitute for the void, is not at all like a dream really. It uses some of the devices of dream, like multiple personality and tiers of meaning, but its procedures are hyper-conscious. Of necessity verbal it is built on the rhythms of Irish speech and popular song and on the traditional forms of European syntax; only the upper tier of the vocabulary is to any extent polyglot. The state of mind it generally represents is more like that (not always due to alcohol) where remote references can be made with ease but simple messages get garbled, trivialities assume enormous proportions and everything appears at once inexpressibly significant and unaccountably comic.

One of the few to have possessed the secret of melodious English Joyce is of all writers the most Mozartian. He made the life that originally filled him with horror appear in verbal recollection lovely and such fun. The difficulty with his writing is simply the limit set by human nature to the accumulation of aesthetic pleasure.

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