Assessing James Joyce

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Introduction

James Joyce (1882 - 1941) is arguably one of the most prominent Western authors of the 20th century. This essay will explore how we are to account for Joyce’s legacy and for his impact on writing and reading, an impact that can be assessed primarily in the form of interpretive practice. Joyce’s contributions to literature and to interpretive practice coalesce along the lines of three trajectories: 1) the narrator’s point of view, 2) the role of language in meaning making, and 3) the role of the feminine in language. Understanding how Joyce developed these trajectories throughout his literary career is a key component to understanding not only Joyce’s works as a whole, but to an understanding of his contributions to literature as well. It is through the concerns of interpretive practice that many critics find Joyce’s greatest contributions, particularly post-structuralists. In Joyce’s ability to liberate lines of force from the polarity of the binary (and the hegemony of the “objective,” monovocal or single point of view) into the equivocity of the many (Joyce’s mâmâfesta) he appeals to feminist theorists as well. This essay will examine a range of Joyce’s works as meditations on the role of the narrator, the use of language, and the role of the feminine in languange, as these concerns are all intimately involved in foregrounding one’s expectations with regard to what language does (and does not) do. The texts of *Dubliners* (’14), (such as “Evelyn,” “Clay,” “Two Gallants” and the “The Dead”), *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (’16), *Ulysses* (’22), and *Finnegans Wake* (’39) all partake in this foregrounding of the role of truth (who makes it and how truth is made) in language.

Idiolect and Plurivocity

Harry Levin pointed out early on (’41) that Joyce’s works as a whole are part of an entire gestalt that animates all of his writing from every direction. It wasn’t until Richard Ellmann (’59) published his biography on Joyce that the public began to take into account the complexities of Joyce’s writing and to take another look at his early works.
Dubliners was eventually published in 1914, though Joyce began writing the 15 “case histories” as early as 1907 when “The Sisters” appeared. “The Dead,” the last story in the collection, was written while Joyce was in Rome, and was to be the beginning of Ulysses (’22) but Joyce decided to render “The Dead” as the culmination of this series of stories. Dubliners has most often been assessed by critics as charting stages of maturation in an individual; from childhood to adolescence to adulthood and to public life (with “The Dead” standing on its own).

Idiolect, or “The Uncle Charles Principle” [see Anthony Burgess (’73) and Hugh Kenner (’78)] specifies a writing technique where syntax becomes subverted from representing the narrator’s point of view and becomes the function of character. “The Uncle Charles Principle” (Kenner’s term) addresses the same technique and refers specifically to a scene in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man wherein Uncle Charles “repaired” to his outhouse – a stylistic turn of phrase which would have been uttered by Uncle Charles himself. Both The Uncle Charles Principle and idiolect, wherein the domain of an interior monologue becomes external, are narrative methods wherein “the narrative idiom need not be the narrator’s” (Kenner 18). This technique is also present in the often quoted reference made in “The Dead” to Lily (the maid) where the text reports that she was “literally” run off her feet—something Lily would have said herself, and which the reader understands is not the utterance of the omniscient narrator (the very notion which Joyce is playing with).

Joyce’s affection for idiolect and for the plurality of perspectives the technique engenders, is embryonic in Dubliners as well as Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man but goes on to become a stylistic tour de force in both Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. Joyce’s psychosexual approach to language results in the impression that the language of his characters often reveal more about themselves than the narrator. This questioning of the degree to which we, as readers, control language (meaning making), and to what degree the narrator controls her use of language, become the very fabric of the text in Joyce’s latter works.
Joyce and Interpretive Practice

In “Evelyn” (Dubliners) we have the story of a young woman (Evelyn) and a young man (Frank). The story develops along a traditional pattern of the heterosexual diad; the handsome prince who “rescues” the damsel and they live happily ever after. These are the expectations with which Joyce toys with in two senses. In the first place, the paradigmatic plot is thwarted, and Evelyn never does leave with Frank. Much of the energy of the story derives its “pull” from the readers mounting suspense and anticipation that Evelyn will actually get on the boat with Frank. On another level, however, Joyce is asking the reader to investigate the potential for language to tell the “truth” in the figure of “Frank” (as in frank, honest). The reader is led down the prim rose path (and are we as readers “prim” in expecting the text to always tell us the truth?) to believe that this unknown man named Frank, who has just appeared in Dublin by boat and who (we are told) has settled in Argentina, is really the man whom he pretends to be. Is Frank being frank? And are we – like Evelyn, drawn into a series of expectations that “in truth” do not exist?

That language is polysemous and that we – as readers - are not so much in control of meaning as we think – is developed also in “Clay.” Though this reader has read the story more than once, the last time I “read” the story (I actually listened to it on tape) I was sure that the word referred to a person, as, at the time I was dwelling on the memory of my late brother whose name was Clay. The “truth” of that story is based on an absence (something we cannot see), and in this story Maria (the protagonist) is blindfolded. She is asked to guess what stuff has been placed before her. She is asked to name the substance and to make it “real” by bringing it (the unknown) into the realm of language (similar to the naming of the beasts of nature in the text of the Bible). Yet Maria never names the unknown substance, and the absence of that name, with Joyce, becomes the name of the story. This presence of an absence is just what Joyce is asking us to recognize when we make meaning with language and recognize that meaning is often made in what we do not know. Desire is in this absence - in the elusion of language via the dynamic of puns, (jabberwocky is what Burgess calls it) and paronomasia (word play).
Joyce’s brilliance lies in his use of absence as a tool and his foregrounding of the horizontal pressure of language to always spill beyond what we can “truly” know. This strangeness of language, of the other as always already there, is again foregrounded in a scene in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* between Stephan and a school official. Stephen is ridiculed by the “proper” authorities because he calls a funnel a tundish. Language here, in Joyce’s hands, is foregrounded both in its strangeness (its ability to morph) and its embeddedness in the politics of representation. “Tundish” speaks Stephan. As an Irishman, Stephen speaks more of himself in his use of words than one might say about him. It is the English (and the access to power and privilege that position entails) who use the word funnel. Language can betray those who rely on it to tell truth; but that, in Joyce’s hands, is what makes the whole truth telling process such a romp.

In *Ulysses*, and in the opening chapter, “Telemachus,” Joyce calls attention to the subject position of human beings in language when he refers to Buck Mulligan as ‘Chrysostomos’ or ‘golden mouthed’ (see Fritz Senn). The text of the *Odyssey*, which provides Joyce with the scaffolding for his *Ulysses* text, opens with a reference to Odysseus as polytropic – as a man ‘of many turns.’ For Joyce, the text of *Ulysses* involves the ‘many turning’ self in the multiple subject positions with which the reader is presented in the work. The reader, as voyager, is confronted with language in a dizzying variety of forms; in the “Aeolus” chapter when the language of the text takes on the language of graphics and of the newsroom (foregrounding the notion of ‘truth’ in a whole new frame). In the “Nausicca” chapter of *Ulysses* language is a pastiche from the genre of penny romances (true enough for those who read them: and a dynamic of expectations of “truth” explored in “Evelyn”). In the ‘language of gestation’ of the “Oxen in the Sun” chapter, Joyce imbricates the whole history of language into the sonic organization of the chapter, thereby foregrounding language as medium in its very plasticity.

Finally, Joyce runs full bore into a meditation on the letter in the hen chapter of *Finnegans Wake* (Chapter IV of Book I). Here Joyce has pared down his explorations of language into their absolute barest form (something he also did with his poetry), using the emblem of a hen and a rubbish heap. In scratching the earth the hen creates signs. At this juncture Joyce introduces his sigla (The Doodles Family) and inaugurates a whole
system of correspondences which put *Finnegans Wake* in league with the *I Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*. Now we are deeply involved in reading our world – just as the 3000 year old Chinese text proposes to read the past, present and future. As sigla Joyce thought he was using these symbols (Walter Benjamin would say hieroglyphs) to represent characters (people), then later realized he was representing principles, in similar fashion to the hexagrams of the *I Ching*. With *Finnegans Wake* the reader is clearly no longer involved in a linear progression of language, and truth is no longer found through the transparent language of empirical data representing what happens ‘out there’ through the dynamic of mimesis. Joyce has situated himself in the rupture – in the gap between the concept of meaning and the meaning on the page. It is here that he is joined by Derrida (Roughly ’99) because Joyce’s texts lend themselves to post-structural inquiries into interpretive practice and into the dynamics of how meaning is made.

**Mapping the Gestalt**

The three passages quoted below help demonstrate the development of Joyce’s contribution to language. The following passage, taken from “The Two Gallants” (*Dubliners*) is useful for our purposes because the text narrates the single point of view that Joyce will question so relentlessly.

> Whenever any job was vacant a friend was always ready to give him the hard word. He was often to be seen walking with policeman in plain clothes, talking earnestly. He knew the inner side of all affairs and was fond of delivering final judgments. He spoke without listening to the speech of his companions. His conversation was mainly about himself: what he has said to such and such a person and what such and such a person had said to him and what he had said to settle the matter. When he reported these dialogues he aspirated the first letter of his name after the manner of the Florentines.

The character described often engages with authority (read: the hegemony of objectivity) in the figure of a policeman, while at the same time, he “spoke without listening to the speech of his companions.” Like the Citizen in the “Cyclops” chapter,
this character is an ‘enthusiast’ for a subject position in language which guarantees that he speaks “the truth” and brings him the (powerful) benefits of that relation. “His conversation is mainly about himself” and the conversations always “settle” in favor of the subject who “speaks.” Joyce then remarks on the nature of this (honest/reported) rhetoric as a subjective style when he points out the way in which the character lends an affectation to the “reported” dialogue by aspirating ”the first letter of his name after the manner of the Florentines.” In pointing out the stylistic qualities of the rhetoric of the single point of view, Joyce has signaled the terms for his forays into the nature of language.

In the passage below, taken from “The Dead,” Joyce moves further into the free fall of language and its polysemous play when he notes that “the time had come for him to set out on his journey westward,” a journey which will take him light years beyond the rhetoric of the “Two Gallants” and into the (sleepy) night language which he will continue to develop in *Ulysses* and bring to apothesis in *Finnegans Wake*.

He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time has come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves.

In the passage above Joyce writes that “the newspapers were right” (were they ever wrong?) and in this way obliquely (like the snow) makes his way into the consciousness of Gabriel, who, with characteristic bourgeois flourish, will always read the paper to get what is “right” and prepare for his Dublin day. The syntax here is telling us not the truth per se, but is telling us something about Gabriel’s character—something which Gabriel himself might not be able to articulate. That the Shannon waves are “mutinous” is a nascent example of metastatic dynamism (see Senn), wherein there is a dislocation, a space wherein two planes intersect. What is it about the waves that is
mutinous? Something to do with Irish history? Or is it in the oceanic depths of semiotic rhythm which has drawn Julia Kristeva so resolutely to Joyce’s later texts? Mutinous, perhaps, is the transignified nature of emotive language; a language which Joyce will develop in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* and which is in the nature of music, zoosemiotics (animal talk), and body language. This mutinous language is found in an experience of loss, an experience which is not signified in the phallus, but is realized in the feminine attitude of a gramma’s grammar (Burgess). That the snow is “falling” (Gabriel’s point of view) “falling softly,” “softly falling” (arguably both are from the narrator’s point of view) captures the rhythm of the semiotic as well as the presentation of multiple viewpoints.

In the passage below, taken from the “Calypso” chapter of *Ulysses*, there simply isn’t any univocity, and we have traveled across the breadth of Joyce’s endeavors in language from the hegemony of the single point of view to the plurivocity of multiple points of view presented simultaneously. The reader initially wants to understand that the point of view is that of the narrator, but then the point of view is emanating from another, and then we are in the mind of Molly as she experiences the “loose grass quoits.” The reader is involved, not merely in reading, but as a reader of signs and in the “truth-making” of the passage. What is “truth” and who is telling it?

No. She didn’t want anything. He heard then a warm heavy sigh, softer, as she turned over and the loose grass quoits of the bedstead jingled. Must get those settled really. Pity. All the way from Gibraltar. Forgotten any little Spanish she knew. Wonder what her father gave for it. Old style. Ah yes! Of course. Bought it at the governor’s auction. Got a short knock. Hard as nails at a bargain, old Tweedy. Yes, sir. At Plevna that was. I rose form the ranks, sir, and I’m proud of it.

Joyce pulls us deeply into the intimacy of Molly’s ruminations, and thereby deeply into an understanding of her character. This passage exemplifies Joyce’s mamafesta, a rhetorical practice which encompasses both the narrator, Molly, and her husband as well,
in a narrative drawn from a very different array of representational strategies than those exhibited in “Two Gallants” wherein the character “earnestly” (man)ifests his subject position before the proper (interpretive) authorities. In this passage are the marks of Joyces’s contributions to the history of letters, and to the labialilingual abilities of the pudendascope, the jottings of a mother hen, and the dream of the human race, always the same and always retold at the mother’s breast. Certainly Gabriel is sleepy. Dream language is the province of us all. What Gabriel began to hear through his drowsy rupture between sign and signification was the mutinous (nighttime) language of the maternal substrate, repressed but then liberated in Joyce’s texts, as he redraws manifestations of male psycho-history with his own maaifestions as realized through the deployment of language.

Joyce and Post-structural Feminist Theory

In the ‘90s, Margot Norris, in her chapter “Who Killed Julia Morkan?: The Gender Politics of Art in ‘The Dead,’” called attention to the ways in which Joyce explored how art is embedded in bourgeois representations of women, a thematic structure which also partakes in the gestalt of Joyce’s work as a whole. Joyce continues his line of inquiry into the feminine and representations of culture in Finnegans Wake when he dichotomizes between Shem and his brother, Shaun wherein Shem is (most often) the embodiment of a bohemian and Shaun is a member of the bourgeois. Joyce’s use of correspondences (and the visual) is apparent in one scene of “The Dead” when Gabriel likens Greta to a portrait (the figure of woman as art is also at play when Julia sings for the diners assembled) and in Ulysses wherein a portrait of Calypso (nymph) hangs above the Blooms’ bed (and the chapter is so named as well). The potency of the female, of feminine language, and of the feminine in art, is developed in the figure of ALP (Anna Livia Plurabelle) and in the whole prosaporia (my word) of the river in Finnegans Wake.

Burgess (’73), Kenner (’78), Colin MacCabe (’79), Senn (’84) and Michael H. Bengal in his chapter in Zack Bowen and James Carens (’84) have all said something about language and Joyce that bears on the passage below taken from Chapter 18 of Finnegans Wake.
If you are abcedminded, to this claybook, what curios of signs (please stoop), in this allaphbed? Can you rede (since We and Thou had it out already) its world? It is the same told of all. Many. Miscegenations on miscegentations. Tieckle. They lived und laughed ant loved and left. Forsin.

Thy thingdome is given to the Meades and Porsons.

The first word, “(Stoop)” calls attention to the role of the body in reading; a key theme in Joyce’s language which critics have dealt with at some length. MacCabe, in particular, along with Kristeva (French Feminism) and Helene Cixous (Ph.D. dissertation on James Joyce) feel this body is feminine. MacCabe goes as far as to tell us that Joyce (and Finnegans Wake in particular) demands a feminine attitude toward language and to the presence of desire, a desire which operates between binary oppositions, but which, in Joyce, is then proliferated from the univocity of the objective, hegemonic, one point of view (brought to a distinct level of proficiency in Henry James) to a plurivocity wherein no one point of view is dominant.

Joyce reiterates the call to “stoop” yet again, when he refers to his writing as a “curio of signs.” In calling attention to the polysemousness of language and to its opacity, Joyce challenges our notions of what it means to be a reader. No longer (in Joyce) are letters and words transparent indicators of meaning. Joyce is working with the opacity of language and the materiality of the medium itself. He calls attention to this positioning of the subject in the text when he describes the reader as “abceminded,” yet, at the same time, as having to see (abceminded) the “claybook” of the text. He commands the reader to stoop to the “allaphbed.” Desire is here – as we stoop to the bed in order to “rede” the lines of force of the world of the body as we encounter our own (seeing/hearing/feeling/thinking/embodied) selves – othered in the text.

These moments of embodied reading in Joyce’s texts occur when the reader feels intimately involved in the body/mind of the writer, as, for example, in this passage when we read “miscegenations on miscegentations.” Here Joyce is demanding the reader to rede (not “read” in the old “abceminded” fashion) as a reader of signs, and to see the visual aspects of the letters on the page of the “claybook.” Scanning the three words, one
quickly notices that there is an additional ‘t’ in the third word and that a “t” (absence/presence) is the only difference between the two. As the eye continues to travel across the page we read “tieckle,” and indeed, (I, for one) am tickled (pink) to feel that Joyce and I both share an embodied experience of meaning in the text. The phonetics of “tieckle” are such that (for those of us who hear what we read) one is forced to pronounce “ti” (tieckle) in such a way that we involuntarily voice the “t,” a voicing which establishes the only difference between the two words: “miscegenations” and “miscegentations.” The pronunciation of “t” would have been lost in the word ‘tickle’ (correctly pronounced.) Moments like these are what make reading Joyce so enjoyable, and so intimate. The experience is one wherein one’s entire being is involved in the reading process and wherein syntax and diction are used playfully to push readers’ expectations of what the act of reading entails.
Works Cited


