"Everything Speaks in its Own Way"

In a conversation in Paris during August of 1930 with the Czech writer Adolf Hoffmeister, Joyce described the arc of his career: “My work, from Dubliners on, goes in a straight line of development. It is almost indivisible, only the scale of expressiveness and writing technique rises somewhat steeply.” He continues

Each of my books is a book about Dublin. Dublin is a city of scarcely three hundred thousand population, but it has become the universal city of my work. Dubliners was my last look at that city. Then I looked at the people around me. Portrait was the picture of my spiritual self. Ulysses transformed individual impressions and emotions to give them general significance. “Work in Progress” [Joyce superstitiously refused to reveal the title of Finnegans Wake before he completed the book] has significance completely above reality; transcending humans, things, sense, and entering the realm of complete abstraction. (Portraits of the Artist in Exile, pp. 131–2)

My aim is to follow Joyce along the accessible arc of his career, adding commentary on his play Exiles and drawing from Finnegans Wake only as it throws light on Joyce’s narrative enterprise as a whole. Joyce tells one long story, a story about the kinds of experiences the artist needs and gains in order to begin all over again to create in imaginative fullness the specific world that produced him in the first place. Joyce writes of the strains of family life in Catholic Ireland, the formation of artistic consciousness, the separation anxieties from
local and familiar places, the nature of marital love, and the mythic patterns of experience recorded in world literature and re-expressed in turn-of-the-century Dublin. Characters in Joyce’s works tend to migrate from one of his books to the next. That is the way he creates the feeling of a total Dublin landscape.

Joyce writes in one of the *Dubliners* stories, “The Boarding House”: “Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else’s business” (61). Everyone else’s business becomes the stuff of Joyce’s narratives – stories his father told about friends, family, and colleagues, stories local Dubliners tell about each other, whether of the tailor trying to fit a hump-backed naval captain with a new suit of clothes, or of the Irish soldier in the Crimean War who had a Russian general trained in his sights but who held fire until the general finished relieving himself on the battlefield. “Another insult to Ireland,” Joyce’s friend Samuel Beckett said when he heard that one.

Joyce thought of himself as a comic writer. He was the last person in the world to find his books forbidding or puzzling, and he labored under the conviction that his powers as an artist and storyteller were accessible, humane, and joyfully inspired. He never tried as a matter of course to be difficult. Rather, he had some goals in mind for what he felt narrative should and could do. A sculptor friend of Joyce’s in Zurich, August Suter, asked him what of most importance had he learned from his early Jesuit schooling. Joyce’s answer should encourage his readers: “to arrange things so that they can be grasped and judged” (*Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, p. 64). His arrangements ultimately required readers to readjust reading habits and techniques, but never unreasonably so. Joyce is a rational writer, and he rewards the patient and attentive reader ready to make rational sense of his works.

Of *Ulysses* Joyce said in conversation with Hoffmeister: “I don’t think that the difficulties in reading it are so insurmountable. Certainly any intelligent reader can read and understand it, if he returns to the text again and again. He is setting out on an adventure with words” (*Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, p. 131). Stephen Dedalus echoes that adventure in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learned them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world about him” (64). Joyce’s readers undergo the same experience and, with energy and good will, realize the same goals.
Introducing Joyce

It is easy enough to say, as Joyce did, that all his work is about Dublin, but it is about Dublin in a way no other writer’s works are. What sustains Joyce is the inventive power of his narrative language. His infatuation began early and extended into his Zurich and Paris years where friends noted how he used to sit at outdoor cafés and listen to fragments of conversation among those passing by in the streets. An American friend, Robert McAlmon, recalls speaking with Joyce.

He was constantly leaping upon phrases and bits of slang which came naturally from my American lips, and one night, when he was slightly spiffed, he wept a bit while explaining his love or infatuation for words, mere words. Long before this explanation I had recognized that malady in him, as probably every writer has had that disease at some time or other, generally in his younger years. Joyce never recovered. (James Joyce: Interviews and Recollections, p. 104)

In his unfinished and abandoned autobiographical narrative, Stephen Hero, Joyce described himself poring over etymological dictionaries and wandering Dublin streets for unusual or rewarding words: “It was not only in Skeat that he found words for his treasure-house, he found them also at haphazard in the shops, on advertisements, in the mouths of the plodding public. He kept repeating them to himself till they lost all instantaneous meaning for him and became wonderful vocables” (30). Anything that might accrue from these wonderful vocables – from the most resonant themes in Joyce’s work to the largest claims he makes about the nature of the human condition – takes second place to the pleasure and craft of formulating and reformulating words. Joyce’s pacifism, his socialism, his classicism, his eurocentrism, his comic gift, his musical sensibility, his gossip-mongering, his obsession with sexuality (even deviant sexuality), his paranoia are not insignificant elements in his work; they are just secondary to the crafting, designing, manipulating, and arranging of phrases and sentences. Joyce tells Hoffmeister that by the time of Finnegans Wake “Each word has the charm of a living thing and each living thing is plastic” (Portraits of the Artist in Exile, p. 131).

Otto Luening, a young American musician and fellow student with Philip Jarnach, Joyce’s duplex neighbor in Zurich during the later years of World War I, recalls Joyce in the famous Zurich cafés that at the time harbored expatriate artists, endangered politicians, and
introducing Joyce

intellectuals of all stripes, including Lenin, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, and Ferruccio Busoni. Writers and musicians thought of themselves as craftsmen, intent on the language and media of their art. They reveled in quotation from memory or quasi-performance. A writer’s or a composer’s work would enter the conversation and Luening recalls how the talk would turn to reciting lines from memory or humming sections of scores and arias. On one occasion Joyce hummed the flute solo from Gluck’s *Orfeo* and was so absorbed by the music that he went into a kind of trance in the middle of his rendering. The raw emotion of a phrase or a sound captivated Joyce, and he could call up in the very sound of things the range of thoughts and feelings a human being could experience.

When Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* visits the offices of the newspaper where he works, the *Freeman’s Journal*, to canvas an ad, he notices the sounds of the printing press.

Joyce creates the sound of the press, ‘Sllt’, and then listens as Bloom substitutes the sound the press makes for the verb ‘speaks’. No writer before Joyce in prose fiction placed such priority on the structure, texture, sound, and shape of words on the page. Joyce listens to everything. In the *Dubliners* story “Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” he punctuates the pompous drivel of sentimental politicians reciting an excruciatingly bad poem on Parnell with the sound of a cork popping out of a Guinness bottle: “*Pok!*” (132). Every syllable a critic. In the story “Grace,” a slick-talking Irishman tumbles down a flight of barroom stairs and bites off the tip of his tongue. We see on the page what we need to know by not seeing half the words we have to imagine: “I’ an’t, ‘an, he answered, ‘y ’onge is hurt” (152).

In *Ulysses* a horse in Dublin’s red light district cannot believe Leopold Bloom’s phony excuse about heading home way past midnight from a neighborhood in which he has no business. Joyce gives us a horse’s whinny fit for a homing epic – his version of a load of hay: “Hohohohohohoh! Hohohohome!” (15: 4879). Language and
Introducing Joyce

its systems are everywhere in Joyce, evoked even in toddler time early in *Portrait of the Artist* when the child tries to form the words for the song, “*O, the wild rose blossoms / On the little green place.*” The best he can do is: “*O, the green wothe botheth*” (3). When the young boy goes off to school he recalls the song and his rendition, “But you could not have a green rose. But perhaps somewhere in the world you could” (9). Joyce is perfectly aware that his reader reads the printed words, “green rose,” exactly at the moment the lad wonders where in the world you could find one. Joyce’s language creates the reality he represents.

Early in the day of *Ulysses*, Bloom is about to put his hat on his head. He notices that the inside band of the hat has the manufacturer’s name but that the last letter is worn off. The text produces the result and a hatband speaks what Bloom sees: “Plasto’s high grade ha” (4: 69). The physical look of the label produces a laugh at the silliness of it all. If the reader steps back for a moment, “high grade ha” is an even cleverer commentary on the status of Joyce’s narrative as a high-grade parody (ha!) of the Homeric *Odyssey*.

Joyce’s narrative at times hears before it comprehends. In the “Hades” episode of *Ulysses* the funeral carriage wheels by Farrell’s statue in central Dublin. The reader experiences street sounds in the same way a figure in the carriage would – at first indistinctly and then fully formed.

Oot: a dullgarbed old man from the curbstone tended his wares, his mouth opening: oot.
—Four bootlaces for a penny. (6: 229–31)

In the next chapter, “Aeolus,” Joyce has Bloom watch his boss, William Brayden, editor of the *Freeman’s Journal*, climb the office staircase. Bloom recalls a remark that all Brayden’s brains are in the nape of his neck, then looks at the ascending hulking back as Joyce’s prose images the neck in the words Bloom thinks: “Welts of flesh behind on him. Fat folds of neck, fat, neck, fat, neck” (7: 48). In “Lestrygonians,” when Bloom crumples up a religious circular and flings it into the Liffey river he thinks about the law of falling bodies. Joyce has to truncate Bloom’s words before gravity takes over and the circular hits the water: “thirty two feet per sec is com” (8: 57–8). A few moments later Bloom sees a woman stepping up into a
tramcar and he hopes he might catch a glimpse of stocking under raised skirt: “Up with her on the car: wishwish” (8: 347–8). One compound word – “wishwish” – embodies both the sound of a swirling skirt and the nature of Bloom’s desire to see under it. Later in the same chapter, Bloom steps into Davy Byrne’s moral pub and Joyce produces a word for the proprietor’s composite reaction:

Davy Byrne smiledyawnednodded all in one:
—liiiichaaaaaaach! (8: 969–70)

Language is a fungible medium for Joyce and even its building blocks, the vowels, are a dominant currency in narrative exchange. Stephen Dedalus in Ulysses borrows a pound to spend on a prostitute from the prominent Irish revivalist poet and spiritualist, George Russell, known as A. E. He has no plans to pay it back immediately, if ever.

A.E.I.O.U. (9: 213–13)

The vowels announcing the debt may be the closest A. E. comes to getting his money back. Joyce cannot stop laughing even into Finnegans Wake where the vowels transmute to a chuckle: “Ha he hi ho hu” (259), or a Shakespearean “Acomedy of Letters” (425).

“Dear, Dirty Dublin”

Joyce holds in his imagination two programs for Ireland: one, to make it a full member of the European family of nations, and two, to write its image into the literary imagination of the West. He would not trade his Irish consciousness for any other because he believed that his land had the most vital relation to language of any culture since the time of the Greeks. Yet he felt the Irish at the beginning of the twentieth century were frustrated politically by British rule, incapacitated by extremes of violence and sentiment, betrayed by internecine rivalries, and plagued by what Joyce in Finnegans Wake calls his countrymen’s “theobibbous” allegiances to the Catholic Church and the Guinness Brewing Company. Joyce encapsulated some of his more pronounced views on Ire-
land for the English lessons he used to prepare for his students at
the Berlitz language school in Trieste. One vignette recorded by his
pupil Alessandro Francini Bruni described the average Dubliner.

Strictly speaking, Dubliners are my countrymen. But I don’t like talking
about my ‘dear, dirty Dublin.’ The Dubliner belongs to the race of
the most vapid and inconsistent charlatans I have ever met in the
island or on the continent. That’s why the English Parliament has
many of the biggest loud-mouths in the world.

The Dubliner spends his time ceaselessly babbling in bars, pubs,
andwhoreshouses, never tiring of the concoction which he is served
and which always is made up of the same ingredients: whiskey and
Home Rule. And in the evenings when he can’t stand it any longer,
swollen with poison like a toad, he feels his way out the door, and
guided by an instinct for stability seeks out the sides of buildings, then
makes his way home, rubbing his behind along all the walls and cor-
ners. He goes ‘arsing along,’ as we say in English. There you have the
Dubliner. (Portraits of the Artist in Exile, p. 28)

In the midst of his struggle to publish the *Dubliners* stories, which
he worked on during his early days in Trieste, Joyce needed to sup-
port himself and his family. He contributed articles to Italian news-
papers and even tried his hand at a public lecture at the Università
Populare in Trieste called “Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages.” The
lecture is crucial for understanding both Joyce’s frustrations and his
hopes in regard to Ireland.

. . . when the Irishman is found outside of Ireland in another envi-
ronment, he very often becomes a respected man. The economic and
intellectual conditions that prevail in his own country do not permit
the development of individuality. The soul of the country is weak-
ened by centuries of useless struggle and broken treaties, and indi-
vidual initiative is paralysed by the influence and admonitions of the
church, while its body is manacled by the police, the tax office, and
the garrison. No one who has any self-respect stays in Ireland, but
flees afar as though from a country that has undergone the visitation
of an angered Jove. (CW, 171)

Irish politics provide Joyce with a theme he elaborates through-
out his works: betrayal. Joyce even described to his brother Stanislaus
the ritual of the mass in a nation obsessed by Catholicism as a story
of betrayal, “the drama of a man who has a perilous mission to fulfill, which he must fulfill even though he knows beforehand that those nearest to his heart will betray him.” In his squib “Gas from a Burner,” on the destruction of the sheets of *Dubliners* by a local printer upset by a few off-color words, Joyce sees himself as one of Ireland’s betrayed.

But I owe a duty to Ireland:  
I hold her honour in my hand,  
This lovely land that always sent  
Her writers and artists to banishment  
And in a spirit of Irish fun  
Betrayed her own leaders, one by one.  

(*CW*, 243)

Stephen Dedalus speaks Joyce’s sentiments in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

—No honourable and sincere man, said Stephen, has given up to you his life and his youth and his affections from the days of Tone to those of Parnell but you sold him to the enemy or failed him in need or reviled him and left him for another. And you invite me to be one of you. I’d see you damned first. (220)

Joyce’s historical prototype for Irish politics is Charles Stewart Parnell, brought down at the height of his career by the public scrutiny surrounding his adulterous affair with Kitty O’Shea, wife of a British army officer. In an essay, “The Shade of Parnell,” written for a Trieste newspaper, Joyce describes Parnell as “an intellectual phenomenon,” a man of “sovereign bearing, mild and proud, silent and disconsolate” (*CW*, 226): “The melancholy which invaded his mind was perhaps the profound conviction that, in his hour of need, one of the disciples who dipped his hand in the bowl with him would betray him” (*CW*, 228). Joyce’s ringing words make the point as clearly as it can be made.

In his final desperate appeal to his countrymen, he begged them not to throw him as a sop to the English wolves howling around them. It redounds to their honour that they did not fail this appeal. They did not throw him to the English wolves; they tore him to pieces themselves. (*CW*, 228)
Joyce reprises Parnell for the *Dubliners* story that records his celebratory day in Ireland, “Ivy Day in the Committee Room.” The setting is like some dark underworld zone, mediated by cold fire, where the city’s deadbeats, skinflints, spoiled priests, and lost souls arrive to barter the few scraps left of local Parnell mythography. Ireland’s “uncrowned king” appears again in the famous Christmas dinner sequence from *Portrait of the Artist*, one of the most evocative in all Joyce’s work. The action takes place in front of a young boy, who watches and says virtually nothing as the civil strife of the nation plays out in equal doses of viciousness and crippling sentimentality: “—O, he’ll remember all this when he grows up” (33), says the ardent Catholic spinster Dante Riordan, and indeed Joyce did. We read it word for word. It is hard to forget the fury of Irish self-betrayal when Dante screams at the defenders of Parnell, “—Devil out of hell! We won! We crushed him to death! Fiend!” (39). And a few lines later the demoralizing and self-pitying response of the sobbing Nationalist, Mr. Casey, “—Poor Parnell! he cried loudly. My dead king!” (39). For Stephen, as for Joyce, rank betrayal and helpless sentiment are the pit and the pendulum of Irish politics.

Another Berlitz language school vignette offers Joyce’s wider perspective on Ireland.

Ireland is a great country. They call it the Emerald Isle. The Metropolitan Government, after so many centuries of holding it by the throat, has reduced it to a specter. Now it is a briar patch. They sowed it with famine, syphilis, superstition, and alcoholism. Up sprouted Puritans, Jesuits, and bigots. (*Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, p. 27)

The potato famine of the middle decades of the nineteenth century and political manhandling by the English during the subsequent decades assured that Ireland was the only major nation in Europe to lose population during the Industrial Revolution. Joyce believed, as did most of those who pondered such matters, that a robust and expanding population was the wealth of a nation, and he bemoaned the emigration of Ireland’s wild geese, her expatriates, to America, New Zealand, and Australia. He writes in “Island of Saints and Sages”: “even today, the flight of the wild geese continues. Every year, Ireland, decimated as she already is, loses 60,000 of her sons. From 1850 to the present day, more than 5,000,000
emigrants have left for America, and every post brings to Ireland their inviting letters to friends and relatives at home” (CW, 172).

Joyce sees Ireland under triple bondage to England, to the Catholic Church, and to its own deeply factional and disastrous internal politics. He considers British rule a complex and troubled colonial relation.

Ireland is poor because English laws ruined the country’s industries, especially the wool industry, because the neglect of the English government in the years of the potato famine allowed the best of the population to die from hunger, and because under the present administration, while Ireland is losing its population and crimes are almost non-existent, the judges receive the salary of a king, and governing officials and those in public service receive huge sums for doing little or nothing. (CW, 167)

Joyce cannot imagine a thriving Ireland without home rule, but he was steadfastly opposed to a politics of armed rebellion and divisive confrontation. His views were identical to those expressed by Leopold Bloom in the “Eumaeus” chapter of Ulysses: “I resent violence and intolerance in any shape or form. It never reaches anything or stops anything” (16: 1099–1101). Joyce explained himself in a letter to his brother in terms of the policies of Arthur Griffith, the founder of the non-violent version of the Sinn Fein (“Ourselves Alone”) movement. He approved of Griffith’s approach because it favored commercial and diplomatic independence for Ireland, but he just as clearly resisted Griffith’s appeal to overtly racial or nationalist hatred.

. . . so far as my knowledge of Irish affairs goes, he [Griffith] was the first person in Ireland to revive the separatist idea on modern lines nine years ago. He wants the creation of an Irish consular service abroad, and of an Irish bank at home . . . A great deal of his programme perhaps is absurd but at least it tries to inaugurate some commercial life for Ireland and to tell you the truth once or twice in Trieste I felt myself humiliated when I heard the little Galatti girl sneering at my impoverished country. You may remember that on my arrival in Trieste I actually ‘took some steps’ to secure an agency for Foxford tweeds there. What I object to most of all in his paper is that it is educating the people of Ireland on the old pap of racial hatred whereas
anyone can see that if the Irish question exists, it exists for the Irish proletariat chiefly. (Letters, II: 167)

In _Ulysses_ the narrator of the “Cyclops” episode makes fun of Bloom’s politics, recalling a friend “saying it was Bloom gave the ideas for Sinn Fein to Griffith to put in his paper all kinds of jerrymandering, packed juries and swindling the taxes off of the government and appointing consuls all over the world to walk about selling Irish industries. Robbing Peter to pay Paul” (12: 1574–7). Such measures – including even a little chicanery aimed at the English – were favored ideas of Joyce’s as well. Like Bloom, he preferred political, legal, and economic solutions to Ireland’s problems, solutions that served national interests without encouraging national violence.

The problem for Joyce is that the nationalist ideology is an inevitably ‘pigotted’ (FW, 133) one. And the national Church is no better. Beyond its elegant rituals and ornate ceremonies, Catholicism not only placed Ireland in a subservient position to Rome but also annihilated the independent vigor of the human soul. Joyce wrote in “Island of Saints and Sages” of the possibility of Irish liberation: “But in anticipation of such a revival, I confess that I do not see what good it does to fulminate against the English tyranny while the Roman tyranny occupies the palace of the soul” (CW, 173). Joyce had another objection to Catholicism; he thought it the institutional enemy of modern Irish prosperity. He has Bloom make the point in _Ulysses_: “But in the economic, not touching religion, domain the priest spells poverty” (16: 1127).

Joyce could attack Catholicism with a vengeance in his works or he could be extraordinarily funny on the subject. In the _Dubliners_ story “Grace” he slaps the Church into submission by letting the self-help Catholic reformers in the story tie themselves into absurd knots over the doctrine of papal infallibility. Martin Cunningham assumes that because the pope declares infallibility at the Vatican Council of 1870, all previous popes, _ex post facto_, are retrospectively exempt from error. There are as many holes in Cunningham’s argument as there are ellipses in the way Joyce presents it.

—O, of course, there were some bad lots . . . But the astonishing thing is this. Not one of them, not the biggest drunkard, nor the most . . .
out-and-out ruffian, not one of them ever preached *ex cathedra* a word of false doctrine. Now isn’t that an astonishing thing? (168)

Joyce relished mocking Church dicta, and very little struck him as funnier than papal infallibility. When working on “Grace,” he wrote his brother Stanislaus about the 1870 Vatican Council, mimicking the voice of the pope.

I was today in the *Biblioteca Vittorio Emanuele*, looking up the account of the Vatican Council of 1870 which declared the infallibility of the Pope. Had not time to finish. Before the final proclamation many of the clerics left Rome as a protest. At the proclamation when the dogma was read out the Pope said ‘Is that all right, gents?’ All the gents said ‘Placet’ but two said ‘Non placet’. But the Pope ‘You be damned! Kissmearse! I’m infallible!’ (*Letters*, II: 192)

If Joyce had a visceral distrust of radical Irish nationalists and a spiritual distrust of the Catholic Church, he had an intellectual distrust of the Irish Revivalist movement led by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and the poet A. E. (George Russell). The recapturing of the Irish mythic past by the Gaelic language movement or the revival literature of Moore and Yeats was for Joyce an impediment to cultural achievements rather than a vehicle for them. “Irish is not my language” (189), Joyce has Gabriel Conroy say in “The Dead,” echoing his own views. Joyce wrote his brother: “If the Irish programme did not insist on the Irish language I suppose I could call myself a nationalist. As it is, I am content to recognize myself an exile: and, prophetically, a repudiated one” (*Letters*, II: 187).

Joyce’s satiric squib “The Holy Office,” set in print at his own expense but not published until he left Dublin in 1904, lists his many quarrels with the Irish Revivalist scene and his woebegone position within it. “The Holy Office” assumes Joyce will suffer inquisitional review, but he directs most of his animus against the Irish Revival writers, who are not only absurd but also driven by greed. The circle consisting of Yeats, Lady Gregory, and A. E. are “Mammon’s countless servitors, / Nor can they ever be exempt / From his taxation of contempt” (*CW*, 152).

Money is at the heart of the one *Dubliners* story that presses hardest on Irish Revival politics, “A Mother.” The story’s action betrays any nurturing satisfaction we might expect from its title. On the one
Introducing Joyce

side are Mrs. Kearney and her daughter, agent and artiste performing for money, on the other, the Irish Revivalists, the something for nothing crowd. It is a bad mix. Mrs. Kearney imitates the flat accent of Mr. Fitzpatrick’s appeal to the committee for authority to pay her daughter for the Revival concert: “—And who is the Cometty, pray?” (139). For the most part Joyce rarely provides the actual sounds of the Anglo-Irish lilt in his prose, though he does provide the locutions and rhythms. That he takes pains to do so in “A Mother” merely increases the tension that already exists in relation to what the participants think and to how they speak. Money is not the only item in dispute; so are class, culture, and language in Irish Revival politics, themes to which Joyce will return in Portrait and Ulysses.

The story depicts an investment in egos, individual and national, and its climax is a paean to mean-spiritedness, devolving into a confusion of causes and contracts, the hardening of lines over politics and finances. Joyce muddles the issue by having the young singer, Kathleen Kearney, withdraw from a performance at her mother’s behest after only getting paid less than half her contracted wages. Two sentences hard upon each other embody the matter. One suggests “Mrs Kearney might have taken the artistes into consideration” and the other offers a stipulation of intent and value: “Pay her nothing” (146). At the end no one is right— and everyone is, if not wrong, at least discredited. The story concludes with a series of equivocal positions in parallel expressions. “I never thought you would treat us this way,” says the head of the Gaelic Society, Mr. Holohan. “—And what way did you treat me?” Mrs. Kearney replies (147). “I’m not done with you,” she says. “But I’m done with you,” Mr. Holohan concludes (148). Joyce is done with both of them.

If Joyce is worried over the course of his career that Ireland had turned from “an intellectual force in Europe” (CW, 161) to a laughingstock, he still claimed in one of his Berlitz vignettes that Ireland, however, is still the brain of the United Kingdom. The foresighted and ponderous English provide humanity’s swollen belly with the perfect instrument of comfort: the Water Closet. The Irish, doomed to express themselves in a language that is not their own, have stamped it with their genius and compete for glory with other civilized countries. This is called ‘English Literature.’ (Portraits of the Artist in Exile, p. 28)
Joyce concludes his Trieste lecture, “Island of Saints and Sages,” by imagining a revival he could support, an Irish revival not unlike the one his country experienced in the latter half of the twentieth century as a republic.

It would be interesting, but beyond the scope I have set myself tonight, to see what might be the effects on our civilization of a revival of this race. The economic effects of the appearance of a rival island near England, a bilingual, a republican, self-centred, and enterprising island with its own commercial fleet, and its own consuls in every port of the world. And the moral effects of the appearance in old Europe of the Irish artist and thinker – those strange spirits, frigid enthusiastic, sexually and artistically untaught, full of idealism and unable to yield to it, childish spirits, ingenuous and satirical, ‘the loveless Irishmen’, as they are called. (CW. 173)

Joyce’s “Altar’s Ego”

Among the topics that weave their way through all of Joyce’s writing few are more prominent than the vocational choice Joyce makes to reject the Catholic priesthood and forge a career as an artist. In Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Stephen Dedalus frames the moment.

All through his boyhood he had mused upon that which he had so often thought to be his destiny and when the moment had come for him to obey the call he had turned aside, obeying a wayward instinct. Now time lay between: the oils of ordination would never anoint his body. He had refused. Why? (179)

The idea of the priesthood seems to have entered Joyce’s mind early, if the boy in the early Dubliners story “The Sisters” can in any way be said to experience the world in ways similar to the way Joyce might have experienced it. The dying spoiled priest, Father Flynn, had a wish for the boy. At the center of “The Sisters” – at its crucial center – is the transmission of mystery. The priest engages the process in the only way he knows how, through those moments in the texts of his religion that he feels will speak magic to the boy, not necessarily religious magic, but the magic of accumulated knowledge, lore, tradition, ritual, mystery, and mastery. Father Flynn
had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest. Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections. His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts. The duties of the priest towards the Eucharist and towards the secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave to me that I wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them; and I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper. (5)

The priest’s words here are of course written by a mature artist who would eventually weave the contents of *Thom’s* (Dublin’s address directory) into *Ulysses*, while making room in the “Aeolus” and “Cyclops” episodes for sequences of raucous newspaper notices as well. But at the time the lad listens to the priest’s words he is genuine in his enthusiasm for Church doctrine and Church ritual. Yet there is something of mockery in the story. At night the priest closes himself in his confessional and “what do you think but there he was, sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself” (10). The lad finally senses a certain liberation in his death: “I felt even annoyed at discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death” (4).

Freed from what? Or Joyce might rephrase the question, freed for what? These really are the driving questions in all Joyce’s work. Can the immense resources of tradition be brought to the fore for something besides the repetitious and smothering business of the Catholic Church in Ireland? Is there transference of some sort between the religious and the artistic vocations? Stephen Dedalus wrestles with these matters through much of Joyce’s early autobiographical narrative, *Stephen Hero*, and well into the revised effort, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce assumed that priests and artists stand in something of the same mediating relation to experience. The priest officiates at the ritual that imbues material things with spiritual value. The artist originates the process that imbues material circumstance with aesthetic value.
Joyce made the point in a conversation with his brother: “Don’t you think there is a certain resemblance between the mystery of the Mass and what I am trying to do? I mean that I am trying to give people some kind of intellectual pleasure or spiritual enjoyment by converting the bread of everyday life into something that has a permanent artistic life of its own for their mental, moral, and spiritual uplift.” In *Stephen Hero*, the young artist boasts, “I am a product of Catholicism; I was sold to Rome before my birth. Now I have broken my slavery but I cannot in a moment destroy every feeling in my nature” (139). Before he produces much of anything that can be called art, Stephen claims that the artist remains at the forefront of Catholicism: “The Church is made by me and my like – her services, legends, practices, paintings, music, traditions. These her artists gave her” (143). Stephen’s “entire theory, in accordance with which his entire artistic life was shaped, arose most conveniently for his purpose out of the mass of Catholic theology” (205).

At a time in his life when he was confused about his vocation, Joyce was compelled by the ritual of the mass. He had no subject yet as a writer, and the mass combined form and content: “In vague sacrificial or sacramental acts alone his will seemed drawn to go forth to encounter reality: and it was partly the absence of an appointed rite which had always constrained him to inaction” (P, 172). But as soon as the artist seeks and finds a subject in his own life the priestly ritual loses its animating force. In *Portrait*, Stephen Dedalus takes an interest in a girl who he thinks has too intimate a friendship with a young priest: “To him she would unveil her soul’s shy nakedness, to one who was but schooled in the discharging of a formal rite rather than to him, a priest of eternal imagination” (240). Even earlier, Stephen realized that ritual repetition was not art: “This was the call of life to his soul not the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair, not the inhuman voice that had called him to the pale service of the altar” (184). Joyce fabricates a wonderful phrase in *Finnegans Wake* for the career he did not choose but that rivaled the one he did: his artist’s career satisfies his “altar’s ego” (463).

Beginning anew each time is what counts for Joyce. Artistic creation produces an object with its own structural and formal properties, allowing the artist the scope to experiment and expand, and, in Joyce’s case, to generate from his Dublin settings the various ways language connects experience to a fuller consciousness of the race,
the human race as well as the Irish race, with all its stories and myths. The artist does everything the priest does and more, reveling in confessions, not all of them benign, what *Finnegans Wake* calls those ‘intimologies’ (101) that make up the stuff of narrative interest. Joyce’s young artist in *Stephen Hero* grasps early that “his verse allowed him to continue the offices of penitent and confessor” (32). Better yet Joyce combines the roles of the praying priest and the prying confessor in his call to artistic action in *Finnegans Wake*: “Let us pry” (188).

It is possible to trace a pattern of vocational and spiritual service in Joyce keyed to the idea of worth and obligation. Stephen has a conversation in *Stephen Hero* with a friend.

—You want to sell your verses, don’t you, said Lynch abruptly, and to a public you say you despise?
—I do not want to sell my poetical mind to the public. I expect reward from the public for my verses because I believe my verses are to be numbered among the spiritual assets of the State. (202)

The artist undertakes a mission that undoes the damage done by the Irish priesthood – he “examines the entire community in action and reconstructs the spectacle of redemption” (*SH*, 186). Upon completing his *Dubliners* volume, Joyce insisted to his publisher, who was having cold feet about backing the stories, that “in composing my chapter of moral history in exactly the way I have composed it I have taken the first step towards the spiritual liberation of my country” (*Letters*, I: 62–3). Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses* alludes to himself and Stephen as *übermenschen* – “Toothless Kinch and I, the supermen” (1: 708–9), and Joyce may have sought support for his modernist enterprise in the great priest-baiter and moral aesthetcian, Friedrich Nietzsche.

But some time, in a stronger age than this moldy, self-doubting present, he will have to come to us, the redeeming man of great love and contempt, the creative spirit who is pushed out of any position ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’ by his surging strength again and again, whose solitude will be misunderstood by the people as though it were flight from reality – whereas it is just his way of being absorbed, buried and immersed in reality so that from it, when he emerges into the light again, he can return with the redemption of this reality.⁵
Redemptive allegory is only part of the story for Joyce or for his characters. He prefers the first phase of the mass story, the one detailing the plight of the put-upon earnest hero who returns in the latter day to avenge those who betrayed him. That hero in *Finnegans Wake* is the artist himself, “joysis crisis” (395). To see Joyce at his best and most exuberant is to watch him take the mass story through a stylistic odyssey, first in unadulterated form in Father Arnall’s description of Christ’s execution during the hell-fire sermon of *Portrait of the Artist*.

He was seized and bound like a common criminal, mocked at as a fool, set aside to give place to a public robber, scourged with five thousand lashes crowned with a crown of thorns, hustled through the streets by the Jewish rabble and the Roman soldiery, stripped of His garments and hanged upon a gibbet and His side was pierced with a lance and from the wounded body of Our Lord water and blood issued continually. (128)

The same story – close to the Apostles’ creed – appears in an entirely different way when Stephen sees his quondam friends walk into the library in the “Scylla and Charybdis” chapter of *Ulysses*, and imagines them as a brood of mockers. He recalls the martyred Christ and plans to take artistic revenge.

He Who Himself begot middler the Holy Ghost and Himself sent Himself, Agenbuyer, between Himself and others, Who, put upon by His fiends, stripped and whipped, was nailed like bat to barndoor, starved on crosstree, Who let Him bury, stood up, harrowed hell, fared into heaven and there these nineteen hundred years sitteth on the right hand of His Own Self but yet shall come in the latter day to doom the quick and dead when all the quick shall be dead already. (9: 493–9)

Joyce remembers Stephen’s parody in the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses*, and applies the story yet again, but this time as a send up of the British imperial navy.

They believe in rod, the scourger almighty, creator of hell upon earth, and in Jacky Tar, the son of a gun, who was conceived of unholy boast, born of the fighting navy, suffered under rump and dozen, was scarified, flayed and curried, yelled like bloody hell, the third day he arose again from the bed, steered into haven, sitteth on his beamend
till further orders whence he shall come to drudge for a living and be paid. (12: 1354–9)

Joyce takes extraordinary pleasure in variations on the mass story, and the malleability and comic fullness of language releases him to tell it differently each time, unlike the priest, who, as Joyce puts it in *Stephen Hero*, “must hypnotise himself every morning before the tabernacle” (139).

“Landescape”

In the spring of 1904, Joyce met and began seeing on a regular basis an eighteen-year-old young woman from Galway, then working at Finn’s Hotel, Nora Barnacle. His fevered life at that time, punctuated by heavy drinking, dreadful hygienics – he rarely bathed – and bouts of despondency turned to dreams of leaving the country with Nora. This was not an easy thing to do, putting both their families on edge at the time and for years after. Many of the stories in *Dubliners* focus on the trauma of escape from Ireland and from Irish constraints upon writers. Joyce presents his first image of a bereft Irish writer in *Dubliners* when Little Chandler appears powerless and talentless: “There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin” (68). There are three local writers in the *Dubliners* stories, and each of them is paralyzed: Farrington, the professional scribe with writer’s block; James Duffy, whose best effort was a manuscript translation of the play *Michael Kramer*, with a “headline of an advertisement for *Bile Beans*” (103) pasted on its first sheet; and Gabriel Conroy, a nearly anonymous reviewer for the conservative *Daily Express* given to think of himself as an “utter failure” (179).

Joyce’s letter to Nora a few months before the two of them bolted to Europe, still unmarried, as they would remain officially until 1931, is telling.

I cannot enter the social order except as a vagabond. I started to study medicine three times, law once, music once. A week ago I was arranging to go away as a travelling actor. I could put no energy into the plan because you kept pulling me by the elbow. The actual difficulties of my life are incredible but I despise them. (*Letters*, II: 48)
Stephen says to his brother Maurice in *Stephen Hero*, “Isolation is the first principle of artistic economy” (33). *Finnegans Wake* calls the process ‘Artalone’ (418), combining in ‘art’ the verb and the noun. Displacement is tactical – it is time biding as the artist readies for what Joyce calls in *Finnegans Wake* “retourneys postexilic” (472). The young artist in *Portrait* uttered the mantra for those souls stifled and stymied by the culture from which they wish to draw inspiration: “silence, exile, and cunning” (269). Joyce seems to vary the mantra with the initials of his main character, HCE, in *Finnegans Wake*: “Hush, Caution, Echoland” (13). Exile for Joyce is a kind of echo land, having less to do with remove than with duplication. The artist sounds better when sounding from afar. Dedalus in *Portrait* wonders how the Irish writer will ever make something of his inchoate, violent, and sentimental land and concludes he can only manage it by taking the packet boat to Europe: “the shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead” (273).

Whatever Joyce’s negative concerns about his homeland, though, he never abandons Ireland as an absorbing concern and as a sustaining artistic resource. He needs his land, its people, its families, its institutions, its speech rhythms, its music, its sentiments, its wit, and its memories to write. It is one of the more powerful paradoxes in Joyce’s work that he sometimes says things more clearly in *Finnegans Wake* than he does elsewhere because he can get away with saying almost anything in *Finnegans Wake*. But if we listen carefully to the broken and reassembled words of that text, we can get a fairly full commentary on Joyce’s habits as a writer and on his mission, even if he constantly undercuts his efforts with irony. When he says of his Europeanized writer Shem that “Shim shallave shome” (225) he means Shem shall leave home; he shall love home; and, in the end, he shall have some of whatever it is he feels he wants from home. Stephen Dedalus has a plan for artistic escape in *Portrait of the Artist*.

—The soul is born, he said vaguely, first in those moments I told you of. It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets. (220)
Introducing Joyce

Bearing the name of the most famous escape artist of myth and literature, Dedalus desires to ‘fly by the nets’ of his homeland. But by is one of those sneaky prepositions that carry antithetical meanings: past and with. Stephen means the former; Joyce invariably means both. The exilic artist, if successful, flies beyond his home but always carries it with him as an image, what Joyce, in a marvelous phrase from *Finnegans Wake*, calls “landescape” (53), the picture of the land embodied in the very action of leaving it. When Shem as penman in *Finnegans Wake* exiles himself to write in Europe he worries, comically, that he deserts his homeland. But he consistently recreates it even by trying to ignore it: “He even ran away with hunself and became a farsoonerite, saying he would far sooner muddle through the hash of lentils in Europe than meddle with Irrland’s split little pea” (171). In the vernacular, the exilic artist can be said to have split the scene. And indeed, Ireland in Joyce’s works is split in two, the one he remembers and the one he imagines.

In Joyce’s one play, *Exiles*, the plot for a variety of reasons turns on a feature in the morning newspaper about a writer who left Ireland years before: “There is an economic and there is a spiritual exile. There are those who left her to seek the bread by which men live and there are others, nay, her most favoured children, who left her to seek in other lands that food of the spirit by which a nation of human beings is sustained in life” (99). Joyce always argued that in leaving Ireland he enabled himself to repossess it in his books. Stephen Dedalus must grasp something like this when he tells Leopold Bloom in a desultory conversation late in the day of *Ulysses* that “Ireland must be important because it belongs to me” (16: 1164–5). Bloom has no idea what Stephen is talking about, but by the time of *Finnegans Wake* Joyce converts the name of his city and the title of his own first volume of stories, *Dubliners*, into another version of belonging: “So This is Dyoublong?” (13). An artist capable of making syllables into a place belongs whether he stays at home or writes from abroad, “the faubourg Saint Patrice called Ireland for short” (*U*, 16: 1161–2).

Joyce’s friend Philippe Soupault noted of Joyce that “each day, and each hour of the day, he thought of Ireland; he lived and relived his memories; thousands of times he mentally traversed the streets and squares of the city.” Soupault asked why Joyce refused to return and his “elongated hand stirred, like a blind man, the pages
he was writing at that time” (Portraits of the Artist in Exile, p. 116). Joyce makes an early stab at defining the artistic process in Stephen Hero and he comes very close to defining the necessary exilic process as well, the doubling that ensues from recreating a remembered place. Stephen imagines the artist

standing in the position of mediator between the world of his experience and the world of his dreams – a mediator, consequently gifted with twin faculties, a selective faculty and a reproductive faculty. To equate these faculties was the secret of artistic success: the artist who could disentangle the subtle soul of the image from its mesh of defining circumstances and most exactly re-embody it in artistic circumstances chosen as the most exact for it in its new office, he was the supreme artist. (77–8)

For Joyce, who effectively left Ireland for good in 1904, returning only for three brief visits, the supreme artist lives on in local time abroad, and “beats” time only the way a musician might at the podium.

*Your genus its worldwide, your spaces sublime!
But, Holy Saltmartin, why can’t you beat time?*

*(FW, 419)*