

JOYCE AND MODERN CRITICAL THEORY

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Ever since March 1918 when *The Little Review* ushered readers into the world of *Ulysses* the Joyce question has been central in discussions of modern literature. According to Marvin Magalaner and Richard M. Kain, "Joyce's influence on creative art was immediate and fruitful. His manner of vision fertilized the imaginations of his contemporaries, not only in literature, but in the arts of painting, music, theater, and dance."¹ To his early admirers, Joyce was above all else a Modern, intoxicatingly so. T.S. Eliot spoke of him in 1922 as the man who had "killed the nineteenth century." Edmund Wilson in 1931 called him "the great poet of a new phase of the human consciousness."² The impact of Joyce's work, though impossible to measure accurately, is probably difficult to overstate. Armin Arnold's statement that "Joyce has had more influence on present world literature than almost any other writer"³ is essentially meaningless since it can't be demonstrated, but it makes a point that is generally granted.

Despite the general acknowledgement of Joyce's pervasive influence, speculation remains as to whether his last two major works mark a dead end in fiction, an eccentric bypath, or a stimulus to further development. Joyce's brother Stanislaus seems to have favored the first of these possibilities. Responding to a comment by one of Joyce's admirers that "Work in Progress" was the last word in modern literature, he wrote to Joyce: "It may be the

last in another sense, the witless wandering of literature before its final extinction."⁴ Armin Arnold likewise suggests that Joyce's achievement was not necessarily for the best: "Joyce was the one who advanced furthest and most boldly toward the abolition of the kind of literature and art which humanity has known since the time of Aristotle. It would be difficult to imagine a work of literature on the other side of *Finnegans Wake*."⁵ David Daiches also believes "*Finnegans Wake* is the end of a chapter and not the beginning. It is the final form assumed by the cunning artist in response to the breakdown of public standards of value and significance."⁶

Ulysses and *Finnegans Wake* may have closed a chapter in the development of fiction, but they became a provocative seedbed of theoretical issues in the development of modern critical theory. Joyce's art raises basic questions about communication, the relation of language and reality, the permissible limits of interpretation, and the determinacy of meaning in literary texts. Such questions have played an important role in the evolution of critical theory in our century and are currently being answered in radical ways, ways that call into question traditional views of the relations between author and reader, text and the world outside the text. We are only beginning to sense the full impact upon literary theory of Joyce's experimental fiction, some of the characteristics of which have, after more than six decades, become the focus of a controversy between traditional humanists and poststructuralists in which, according to spokesmen for contending forces, the very nature of writing and the future of criticism are at issue.

Two recent books on contemporary literary theory, Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself* and Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* provide the useful service of explaining recent

critical theory, an area that has become increasingly subtle, perplexing, and intimidating. One of the most illuminating things about these books is their revelation of an evolutionary continuity in critical theory. Both demonstrate persuasively that, as Graff asserts, "post modernism should not be seen as a break with romantic and modernist assumptions but rather as a logical culmination of the premises of these earlier movements."⁷ Both demonstrate how the New Criticism was a logical outgrowth of literary modernism and how poststructuralism, though purporting to be a reaction to the New Criticism, among other things, has actually carried New Critical premises to their natural – even if extreme – conclusions. When such a continuity is delineated, a natural development becomes apparent between Joyce and recent poststructuralism, and a number of interesting parallels emerge between this master of modernist fiction and contemporary deconstructionists. Graff, without singling out Joyce, speaks of this development as "a logical evolution" that "connects the romantic and postromantic cult of the creative self to the cult of the disintegrated, disseminated, dispersed self and of the decentered, undecidable, indeterminate text."⁸

Eugene Goodheart remarks on this same connection in *The Failure of Criticism* when he says that "The works of Barthes and Derrida are fascinating examples of a powerful tendency in modernism. It is to be found ... in *Finnegans Wake*."⁹ The tendency he has in mind is that of revealing or betraying with a vengeance "the inherent instability of language." He sees it manifest as unchecked in Derrida's *Glas* as in *Finnegans Wake* and identifies it as the "energizing principle" of what now purports to be criticism.¹⁰ "What is remarkable and symptomatic about performances

of the French critics," he says, "is the displacement of this modernist aesthetic tendency to criticism itself. By radically weakening if not destroying the privileged point of view, modern literature has sanctioned for them the demoralization of criticism. Its evaluative function is now seen as an arbitrary exercise of taste. Interpretation has lost whatever certainty it had. Indeed, equivocation has been made virtually its first principle."¹¹

The point I wish to make, then, is that the impact of Joyce's art is still registering itself in recent radical developments in critical theory. Certain qualifications are necessary for my argument. First of all, in focusing on Joyce I am not naively asserting that he exclusively provided the influences I will trace. His major work is simply the most important and representative. Second, my tracing of the continuity between Joyce and poststructuralism is obviously schematic and oversimplified, intended to be suggestive rather than definitive. Anyone having read Lentricchia's book cannot be unaware of the complexity and convolutions in the development of contemporary criticism. Third, I should acknowledge that I find much about poststructuralism that is implausible, perplexing, and downright alarming and am therefore sympathetic to the criticisms made by Graff, Lentricchia, and Goodheart. But my distrust of deconstruction, for example, is really not germane to my main argument. I am more interested here in pointing out the connection between Joyce and deconstruction than in evaluating either.

The current of ideas and attitudes I am concerned with begins in an antimimetic impulse inherent in modernism. Daiches traces this impulse to the breakdown of communal standards and values in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "The modern novelist,"

he says, "is born when [a] publicly shared principle of selection and significance is no longer felt to exist, can no longer be depended upon."¹² The implication he perceives in this is that if a culture can no longer provide a sense of what is significant and valuable in life (and therefore in fiction, which "imitates" life), the artist is forced to replace cultural values in his works with literary or "formal" values. W.J. Harvey comments on the same situation in *Character and the Novel* when he discusses the modernist's declining sense of security in a time of contingency and flux, when "man's relation to his world is no longer given stability by being part of a divinely-ordered cosmos."¹³ According to Harvey, the reaction of the novelist in the early twentieth century was to try to salvage a sense of stability in the work of art itself: "Because the work of art - viewed as a self-sufficient artifact - is a necessary not a contingent thing. It has its own laws and its own firm structure of relationships; it can, like a system of geometry, be held to be absolutely true within its own conventionally established terms."¹⁴

This early twentieth-century situation described by Daiches and Harvey continues, of course, for the contemporary writer. The breakdown of agreed-upon systems of belief has forced upon him the necessity of devising his own myth, or to view his business as one of experimenting with various myths, none of which can ever achieve full authority. The difference is that the postmodernist no longer feels the order imposed by art is true or privileged. Graff points out this difference in the following way: "Whereas modernists turned to art, defined as the imposition of human order upon inhuman chaos - as an antidote for what Eliot called the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary

history' - postmodernists conclude that, under such conceptions of art and history, art provides no more consolation than any other discredited cultural institution."¹⁵ According to Graff, the postmodern temper has taken the skepticism and antimimetic tendency of modernism to an apparently terminal extreme, and even though it looks back condescendingly on the modernist tradition and claims to have got beyond it, it remains unavoidably implicated in it. "The concepts through which modernism is demystified derive from modernism itself."¹⁶

Another factor contributing to the antimimetic impulse within modernism, as Daiches has remarked, was the growth of the more frankly psychological novel in the latter nineteenth century. This movement tended to force the writer outside of, or at least away from, the world he imitated. Daiches sees *Ulysses*, in one of its aspects, as the culmination of this movement.¹⁷ In Daiches' view, Joyce does not appeal to a common ground of experience he shares with the reader. *Ulysses* creates its own system "outside of which the author never once needs to trespass." There is dependence on Homer and other external sources, but it is dependence of a special kind. It does not appeal to what the reader knows about life. In short, Joyce's method in his last two large works "does not involve mimesis at all: it is re-creation, not imitation."¹⁸

Despite his repeated insistence that *Ulysses* is a re-creation rather than an imitation, Daiches acknowledges that mimetic values emerge in spite of the author. The story is "satisfying and moving as a human story - satisfying and moving because of values that emerge in the telling in spite of the author's determination not to commit himself to any values."¹⁹ Graff also notes that modern fiction seldom actually effected "the total subjectivization and

privatization of human experience called for by modernist theories which defined literature as an expression of inward 'consciousness' set over against the rational discourse of the public, objective world." By contrast, however, "postmodern fiction tends to carry the logic of such modernist theories to their limit, so that we have a consciousness so estranged from objective reality that it does not even recognize its estrangement as such."²⁰

Combined with the antimimetic impulse in modernism is a tendency to present experience with an immediacy lacking a conceptual framework of meaning. Ian Watt, in his recent book on Conrad, traces this tendency to the convergence of the symbolist and impressionist traditions, the two parallel movements of the *avant garde* ferment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both symbolists and impressionists, he says, "proscribed any analysis, prejudgment, or conceptual commentary - the images, events, and feelings were to be left so to speak for themselves. ... the writer must render the object with an idiosyncratic immediacy of vision, which is freed from any intellectual prejudgment or explanatory gloss; and the reader must be put in the posture of actively seeking to fill the gaps in a text which has provoked him to experience an absence of connective meanings." We assume there has always been a gap between the signifier and the signified, the verbal sign and its meaning, but this gap, notes Watt, is considerably more obtrusive in the literature of our century, the expressive idiom of which is generally characterized by an insistent separateness between particular items of experience and the reader's need to find meaning in them. According to Watt,

This semantic gap does much to explain

the importance and the difficulty of the modern role of the literary critic. He is faced with the task of explaining to the public in discursive expository prose a literature whose expressive idiom was intended to be inaccessible to exposition in any conceptual terms. He confronts an incompleteness of utterance, an indeterminacy of meaning, a seemingly unconscious or random association of images, which simultaneously demand and defy exegesis.

Watt attributes the "modern critical tendency to decompose literary works into a series of more or less cryptic references to a system of non-literal unifying meanings" to a misguided response to this very real problem in interpreting much modern literature.²¹

The "idiosyncratic immediacy of vision" Watt speaks of is obviously nowhere more clearly manifest than in *Finnegans Wake*, where in Daiches' words, "language, which began as a tool for expression and communication, for differentiating and sorting out by naming, ends as a tool for deliberately re-associating what was originally separated out in order to give meaning and order to experience."²² Joyce is the first major writer to demonstrate an awareness of what has become a profound language revolution in our century: a recognition of the extent to which the world we live in is a linguistic product and the extent to which language is autonomous from "reality." As John Gross points out, "In *Ulysses* language is already beginning to work loose from its hinges; in *Finnegans Wake* it breaks free completely and words take on a capricious life of their own."²³ Daiches believes Joyce would have reached his ideal if he could have coined "one kaleidoscopic word

with an infinite series of meanings, a word saying everything in one instant yet leaving its infinity of meanings reverberating and mingling in the mind."²⁴ This seems an ideal a deconstructionist can readily appreciate.

Space is unavailable here to detail how the issues evoked by Joyce's fiction have provided the substance of debate and theorizing in the New Criticism and after. In brief outline, the stages can be described as follows. Joyce, as representative modernist, found life in the twentieth century too complex and devoid of anchoring and orienting values to treat realistically with traditional methods of expression. He therefore self-consciously over-turned the conventions of bourgeois realism, disrupted the linear flow of narrative, frustrated expectations about the unity and coherence of human character and the cause-and-effect continuity of its development, and called into question through means of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions the moral and philosophical "meaning" of literary action. He shifted the focus of attention from the objective unfolding of events to the subjective experiencing of them, sometimes to the point of enveloping the reader in a solipsistic universe, all the while striving to remain aloof from the work and neutral in attitude. Implicit in his method is the attitude that the modern world cannot be understood but only "ordered" by arranging its various constituents in structural patterns. This left the critic in the uncomfortable position of having to explain and interpret in ordinary discursive logic and within a mimetic framework a literature deliberately created outside such conventional norms. Consequently, critics posited a separation of life and art, of the nonreferential language of poetry from the referential language of science, as a

way of simplifying things a little. The work was considered autonomous and the puzzling intentions of the author were discounted. Finally, the bold, but logical, step was made which acknowledges that a literary text – any text, for that matter – has no determinate meaning, that there is no outside the text and all reading is misreading. The author is declared legally dead, and the object of criticism becomes not to mean but be. The critic assumes a role similar to that of the author of *Finnegans Wake*; his activity becomes aesthetic and linguistic play divorced from the scheme of determinate meaning and a centered universe.

The move beyond the mimetic view of literature ultimately entails a move beyond the mimetic view of criticism. Graff describes the rationale in this way: "Just as literature ought to explode the bourgeois myth of a stable reality independent of human fantasy, so criticism ought to explode the professional academic myths of 'the work in itself,' the 'intention' of the author, and the determinate nature of textual meaning."²⁵

Without ignoring the distinctive differences, it is possible to perceive in poststructuralism many similarities with Joyce. And while it would be reductive and less than accurate to describe Joyce as a proto-deconstructionist, that description is in large measure appropriate and illuminates implications in Joyce's fiction that have not been adequately examined. Although in their linking of poststructuralism with tendencies incipient in modernism Graff and Lentricchia do not single out Joyce, it is obvious from their characterizations of modernism that they often have *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* in mind.

A comparison of Joyce and the deconstructionist reveals numerous parallels. Language is of supreme importance to both and

is seen as fluid and autonomous and most significant in its written form. Both are aware of the problematic status of their own authority to make statements about anything outside the system of language and convention in which they must write. Both are motivated by a breakdown of agreed-upon systems of belief and are essentially skeptical. Joyce rests his claims of honor for the artistic process on the damaging admission that artistic order is not grounded on anything outside itself. The deconstructionist simply carries this further to assert that no linguistic order is grounded outside itself. Both are nonmimetic and avoid normative comment. For both the notion of play or aesthetic hedonism is primary. Joyce re-creates experience; the deconstructionist re-creates the text. Joyce, as author, strives to remain aloof and self-effacing; the deconstructionist puts the author entirely out of consideration as a source of authority for meaning. Freedom is a major concern for both: Joyce seeks it for the author, the deconstructionist for the reader. Both require conventions and norms at the same time they react against them: Joyce's use of language in *Finnegans Wake* depends on the use of language in the ordinary way so that a stable medium remains with reference to which coinages have meaning; likewise, if stable assumptions about meaning in a text did not exist, the deconstructionist would have to invent them in order to have a basis for his activity. The methods of both go against the grain of traditional, common sense expectations concerning literature as communication and are inherently self-destructive. *Finnegans Wake* operates by thwarting the usual function of art; deconstruction operates by thwarting the usual function of criticism.

Such parallels can be multiplied, and, of course, they need

considerable refinement, but I think it is clear that those processes will demonstrate how significant an influence Joyce has been and continues to be in the evolution of modern critical theory. Poststructuralism evidences once again that Joyce must be reckoned as a giant in the literary realm of the twentieth century.

NOTES

- ¹ Joyce: *The Man, the Work, the Reputation* (New York: Colliers, 1962), p. 19.
- ² Eliot and Wilson are quoted by John Gross in *James Joyce* (New York: Viking, 1970), p. 1.
- ³ *James Joyce* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1969), p. 2.
- ⁴ Richard Ellman, ed., *Letters of James Joyce* (New York: Viking, 1966), III, 103.
- ⁵ Arnold, p. 113.
- ⁶ *The Novel and the Modern World*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 134.
- ⁷ *Literature Against Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 32.
- ⁸ Graff, p. 51.
- ⁹ *The Failure of Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 5.
- ¹⁰ Goodheart, p. 3.
- ¹¹ Goodheart, p. 5.

¹²Daiches, p. 5.

¹³*Character and the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965),
p. 43.

¹⁴Harvey, p. 45.

¹⁵Graff, p. 55.

¹⁶Graff, p. 62.

¹⁷Daiches, pp. 94-95.

¹⁸Daiches, pp. 92-93.

¹⁹Daiches, p. 127.

²⁰Graff, p. 208.

²¹*Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of
California Press, 1979), pp. 196-97.

²²Daiches, p. 136.

²³Gross, p. 75.

²⁴Daiches, p. 129.

²⁵Graff, p. 67.