THE RECEPTION OF JAMES JOYCE IN EUROPE

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Joyce's "authorized" readers, critics and academics have provided the common reader a frame of Joyce reception that eventually gapped the distance between Joyce and his audience even more than it had already been. Still, over 100,000 copies of *Ulysses* are sold every year and this is a sign that, despite its fame and framing, Joyce's novel is "popular" enough. Whatever the reasons behind people's book acquisition, what is of interest to Joyce's critics is the number of reactions to his writing, and also the nature of these responses. More than eighty years after the publication of the then outrageous novel, readers of all sorts and qualification maintain an intimidated image of the Irish writer and his literary works. This is partly linked with the assimilation of more than eight decades of criticism that varies both in tone and in content. What they all share is a lionizing reverence towards the author who became a brand and an institution employing readers from all over the world and feeding the publication of secondary writing every year.

The situation of the first two decades of the twentieth century was different from the present one (and it is historically and politically normal that it should be so) in the sense that the positions the readers assumed were less biased by what would become Joyce's later canonization. Thus, Joyce's contemporary reception is either enthusiastically positive or decidedly negative, according to the perspective Joyce was analysed from. His reception has been assessed in two larger spheres, namely the intra and extra-cultural frames. An "extra-cultural critique" takes into account aspects that step outside textual autonomy and that reside in religious, moral or political justifications[i], while the "intra-cultural" ones favor the aesthetic significance of a text[ii]. The partition of these evaluation filters is adequately set for Joyce's early reception. The value-judgements relating to his works are either intra or extra-culturally conditioned. While extra-cultural perspectives slightly tend to reduce the quality and the intrinsic value of the novels, intra-cultural ones present the texts in a positive tone, insisting on those aspects that make up Joyce's innovative style a highly appreciated modernist strategy and vision.

Joyce was, as expected, the first to condemn radically extra-cultural criticism, anticipating unavoidable rejections of the books as overtly immoral and, sometimes, even pornographic.

> Joyce said of all the controversy surrounding the publication of his book, "The pity is the public will demand and find a moral in my book- or worse, they may take it in some more serious way, and on the honor of a gentleman, there is not one single serious line in it." By serious Joyce meant metaphysical, transcendent, moralistic, preachy.[iii]

From the standpoint of writerly responsibility and reception, John McGahern also insists that "Joyce does not judge. His characters live within the human constraints in space and time and within their own city. The quality of the language is more important than system of ethics or aesthetics"[iv]. Both Irish writers are aware of interpretative fallacies and the temptation to pass the text under a critical judgment built on non-aesthetic criteria that set an inadequate horizon of expectation on the text and an uncomfortable pattern of reception. McGahern is right to denounce any attempt at systematizing Joyce, or forcing a pattern upon the texts; he even dismisses the application of an "aesthetic system" that should limit the textual space in any way. If Joyce's declared intention to divorce his work from a "serious" conception and perception is truthfully formulated, then any pattern or system would prove unfit in the evaluation process. It is in this sense that Jeffrey Segall believes that "*Ulysses* resists pressures of cultural appropriation and critical exegesis"[v]. Textual "resistance" does not necessarily imply the rejection of readers' interference within the internal dynamics, but rather a reaction to misappropriation. Modernist texts are, generally, resistant to a type of reception that tries to decompose the textual structure in its most intricate knots. John Banville explains this by the text's undeniable value and status as a work of art:

> To repeat: great art, I am convinced, does not 'reveal' itself to us, does not open outward to our needs; on the contrary, it is great precisely because it is closed against us.[vi]

Closure is symptomatic of an aesthetics that supports the juxtaposition of opposite forces. In Clive Hart's opinion, all Joycean texts "are teasingly open-ended, while at the same time they are carefully concluded"[vii]; textual "in-betweenness" might also account for the different reactions it determined among the contemporaries. Beyond extra or intra-cultural framings, critics have separated into declared supporters and respectively detractors of Joyce, into those

who liked and disliked his texts. Most of the critics that reacted positively did it with an appreciation of his innovative style, for his avant-garde nature and the novelty of his writing, in general. What critics disliked was either his supposedly overt immorality or (even among modernists) his unintelligibility. That Joyce resists categorization is not new; his work has been frequently read as "apolitical", "amoral" or "anti-". In this sense, although "antibourgeois, anticlerical, antiparliamentary, antimilitaristic, antibureaucratic"[viii], Joyce's work is, in Clive Hart's view, "profoundly unreligious and profoundly apolitical"[ix]. The balancing forces of criticism hesitate between placing him in one category or another, and, hence, relocate Joyce in more convenient contexts. Modernism is one of them.

Joyce's critical reception starts with the already canonic names of Valéry Larbaud, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Stuart Gilbert and S. Foster Damon. Their analyses of Joycean texts take into consideration the innovative dimension and "complexity of structure"[x], in other words, the elements that could be promoted on the European literary scene. According to Gibson, it was Sylvia Beach who introduced Joyce to Larbaud, the one who "pronounced himself "raving mad" over *Ulysses*[xi], which was significant enough, taking into consideration that Larbaud was one of the most prominent critical voices of the time in France. Larbaud's contribution to the positive reception of Joyce can be justified by the writer's introduction in a line of tradition that began with Homer, continued with Rabelais and ended with Einstein and Freud[xii]. By this, Joyce was practically introduced in a literary referential system that meant a slow, but certain introduction into the canon:

> But when Larbaud introduced his, the first thoroughgoing critique of Joyce's newest work, his primary goal was to place it in the context of a literary canon.[xiii]

His positive reception was closely linked to the gradual apprehension as a modernist writer around 1916[xiv] (the year of the publication of *A Portrait*), so that the coming years put Joyce in the favorable position of acquiring friends from among European literati, like Herbert Gorman, Stuart Gilbert, Djuna Barnes (during the 1920s) or Sigfried and Carola Giedion-Welker, Maria Jolas or Paul Léon[xv] (during the 1930s). Generally, his acceptance among the artists of the time was facilitated by Joyce's labeling as an avant-garde writer, rather than modernists like Woolf or Lawrence. The significant difference that separated him from the other modernists or from the 1914 group (Pound, Lewis) conveniently resets Joyce on a border aesthetics, that of the avant-garde which justifies transition genres, mixed forms and

unconventional forms, in other words, what developed outside a canon. Some of the French critics' enthusiastic welcoming and acceptance, their more or less programmatic tendency towards canonization, also springs from their taste for "irregular" forms of art that hosts even anti-canonic cultural peculiarities. It is in relation to such an adequacy that critics have elaborated formulations such as "Joyce and Company"[xvi], an intellectual "institution" which kept its members drawn to a shared acceptance and promotion of their contemporary "isms". From the stage when Joyce's work was still under cultural debate and still under uncertain odds to the moment Harry Levin proclaimed him "academically respectable"[xvii], many oppositions arose with regard to the writer's right of belonging to a group, an aesthetics, to an age in the literary history. "Joyce and Company" best sums up the position literary history would later grant the Irish writer when discussing the Irish modernist context in literature and arts.

It might be true that "Joyce's writing may be placed in relation to those traditions of Irish writing that looked to varying readership"[xviii], but it should be also noted that diversifying readership implied enlarging it, and by enlarging it, the literary discourse cannot be preserved inside national labels, such as a typical "Irish writing". If the aim of the writer was to address to a larger readership, his discourse had to be centred around issues covering a wide range of interests and tastes: an "all-embracing" type of writing, as Joyce intended to produce, is sign enough of his concern for approaching readers. As the history of his reception proves, not all attempts at approaching them were successful.

In England, Joyce's reception was biased by the critics' negative response to an unintelligible literature, to a literature they could not put next to that of Woolf or Eliot, to a literature they still associated to the "men of 1914", to a literature of experiment and "threat"[xix]. Even among his fellow writers, among the authors who shared a belief in modernism, Joyce was often disregarded as an inexperienced artist; Virginia Woolf's diary observations include such remarks as Joyce's "underbred" nature, similar to that of a "queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples"[xx]. A paradoxical refusal and acceptance sprang from what critics called his "experimentalism"; while generally hailed in France for his experimentalist virtues, the London intelligentsia rejected his prose on the basis of his "obscenity"[xxi], on extra-cultural premises that would usually be cited against the Irish writer's texts. With the verdict of an "unreadable" writing, Joyce's reception on the continent would shift between a positive and a negative understanding of the separate nature of extra and intra-cultural criteria. Amazingly

enough, most attacks coming from European critics were of a political nature, rather than moralistic one:

> For a long period a great many of the most virulent responses came from the hard-line Marxists, as in the attack by the Russian critic R. Miller-Bunitskaya, for whom "Joyceism" was "a most reactionary philosophy of social pessimism, misanthropy, barrenness and doom, a hopeless negation of all creative, fruitful forces."[xxii]

"Joyce and Company" or "Joyce's Company" was reshaped by his transition to other registers of writing and to various reading targets. His perpetual movement from Ireland to the Continent and inside the Continent practically remoulded both his interests and his vision on the inclusion or exclusion of historical impact and political contexts inside the literary work. With the progression of time and with the territorial "expansion" of his European exploration in self-exile, the "company" surrounding him, which also accounts for the change in the history of his reception, was as different as the distance from *A Portrait* to *Finnegans Wake*. The critical dismissal of Joycean intransitivity in the act of reception is one negative consequence of Joyce's "all-embracing" intentions; the constant reshaping of the narrative along with the reconfiguration of his idea of an audience sometimes led to such affirmations as Leo Bersani's conclusive "*Ulysses* is a text to be deciphered but not read"[xxiii].

H. G. Wells warned Joyce of the possibility of negative reception, when anticipatorily stating in 1928: "you have turned your back on common men, on their elementary needs and their restricted time and intelligence"[xxiv]. Joyce knew that because he had previously written Weaver, complaining of the common readers' lack of interest that was associated to the lack of time such an engaging activity like reading *Ulysses* would have required:

> Joyce had written to Weaver in 1924, 'They [the reading public] cannot manage more than about one such phrase every six months – not for lack of intelligence but because they are in a hurry' (*Letters* III, 83).[xxv]

The "phrase" Joyce talks about is a reference to Larbaud's mention of the "interior monologue" technique; its discovery and exploration by Joyce both enchants and enrages readers or, as Leo Bersani thought, "both provokes and soothes our critical paranoia"[xxvi]. Whatever the reasons for Joyce's negative reception, what remains clear is that the writer fits

in a scheme of a transitory aesthetics, in a type of "border modernism" that includes and excludes its own age at the same time.

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[i] Derek Attridge – *Joyce Effects on Language, Theory and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000 (p. 173)
[ii] Idem (p. 174-175)
[iii] Michael Seidel – *James Joyce – A Short Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, Great Britain, 2002 (p. 80)
[iv] John McGahern in Augustine Martin – Idem (p. 71)
[v] Jeffrey Segall in Morris Beja, David Norris – *Joyce in the Hibernian Metropolis – Essays*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1996 (p. 57)
[vi] John Banville in Augustine Martine – Idem (p. 77)
[vii] Idem (p. 158)
[viii] Robert Scholes in Morris Beja, Shari Benstock – *Coping with Joyce – Essays from the Copehnagen Symposium*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1989 (p. 102)
[ix] Clive Hart in Augustine Martin – *James Joyce – The Artist and the Labyrinth*, Ryan Publishing, Great Britain, 1990 (p. 164)
[x] Andrew Gibson – *James Joyce*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006 (p. 134-135)
[xi] Idem (p. 134)
[xii] "He saw at once the Joyce had claims to being a modern Rabelais" (…) "Larbaud's talk rather linked Joyce with Einstein and Freud. " – Ibidem

[xiii] Stacey Herbert – *Reporting on the Artist as a Modernist – The Press and the Making of James Joyce 1917-1924*, Faculty of the Graduate School of the State University of New Yourk at Buffalo, dissertation, 2002 (p. 159)
[xiv] Idem (p. 22)
[xv] Andrew Gibson – Idem (p. 146)
[xvi] „ Joyce increasingly became Joyce and Company, of which he none the less remained executive director and sole inspiration. This was particularly the case with the *Wake*." - Ibidem

[xvii] „(…) it was Levin's first book on Joyce, *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*, that almost single-handedly ushered Joyce into the academy by making him "academically respectable"; it was "independent of Joyce's personal involvement" and situated Joyce's work "in a general modernist European framework" – Julie Sloan Brannon – *Who Reads Ulysses? The Rhetoric of the Joyce Wars and the Common Reader*, Routledge, New York & London, 2003 (p. 18)
[xviii] Idem (p. 36)
[xix] „During the 1920s the innovations of T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf were, so to speak, digested by the English literary mind. Those of Joyce, Pound and Wyndham Lewis on the whole were not. Joyce in particular seemed not only exotic but also offensive and threatening" – Patrick Parrinder in Colin MacCabe – *James Joyce – New Perspectives*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982 (p. 151)
[xx] Idem (p. 161)
[xxi] Idem (p. 165)
[xxii] Morris Beja in Beja & Norris – *Joyce in the Hibernian Metropolis – Essays* (p. 73)
[xxiii] Leo Bersani in Derek Attridge – *James Joyce's Ulysses – A Casebook*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004 (p. 224)
[xxiv] John Nash - *James Joyce and the Act of Reception* (p. 113)

[xxv] Idem (p. 109)
[xxvi] Leo Bersani in Derek Attridge – *James Joyce's Ulysses – A Casebook* (p. 207)

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