



Impish Joyce on the Not-So-“Great” War



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Research Paper :

On 11 November 1918 (at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month) Germany signed an armistice agreement which concluded the first war in human history fought on a global scale. A century after the beginning of the First World War, as it came to be called later, retrospective reflections have been camouflaged by a more catastrophic world war (1939-45), which also coincided with the massacre of six million Jews, about a million Gypsies (the Roma and Sinti), and various other groups, not to mention the conflicts and genocides of our own time. These centennial reflections involved substantial cultural and philosophical questions, and had to factor in the

relationship between history and literature. This essay explores the response of James Joyce, the high-modernist writer who extended the frontiers of fiction with his experimental writings, to the Great War, as it was called. The argument is confined to the 'atypical' aspect of Joyce's response. At least during his lifetime, Joyce was widely believed to have cultivated the image of a detached aesthete, though this critical perspective appears to have changed with the recent political radicalization of the author. The initial political impression conveyed by his apparently esoteric oeuvre is a desire to transcend rather than engage conflict. When his former pupil Oscar Schwarz met him after the War, he asked him: "And how have you spent the war years, professor?" Joyce replied nonchalantly, "Oh yes, I was told that there was a war going on in Europe" (Ellmann 472). Nevertheless, in Joyce's case, lack of partisan commitment or explicit political opinion does not mean lack of interest. In fact, he hinted that the artist was constrained to make broader historical statements only in an oblique manner through the scenes and characters of his poor art (*Letters* I 118). He told Frank Budgen, English painter and close friend, who has left us a 'genetic' record of the compositional process of the magnum opus *Ulysses*: "I want the reader to understand always through suggestion rather than direct statement" (Budgen 21).

The composition of *Ulysses*, a detailed record of quotidian life set on 16 June 1904 in Dublin, but within the mythical framework of Homer's *Odyssey*, coincided with the years of World War I. Though written during 1915-22, being set in 1904, *Ulysses* could have no direct reference to the Great War. But the writing time intrudes on the time written about, and consequently, the book is full of allusions to its cataclysm.¹ More importantly, Joyce's avant-garde ingenuity was such that he craftily smuggled into the text his response to war, violence, and history itself, often linking it with the physical force nationalism in Ireland which he detested. Though he was physically away from Ireland, the period during which he wrote *Ulysses* coincided with the climactic years of the

¹ For coded references to the War, see Robert Spoo, "'Nestor' and the Nightmare: The Presence of the Great War in *Ulysses*"; and the chapter "*Ulysses and the Great War*" [italics as in the source] in James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History* 161-213.

seven-century long English colonial rule in Ireland and the anti-colonial guerrilla war that finally gained the country its independence, and the civil war that followed. In the "Circe" episode of the book, which dramatizes the unconscious, the apparition of Old Gummy Granny, the symbol of Ireland, hands Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's autobiographical protagonist, a dagger to fight the British soldiers and prays for him to be killed (*Ulysses* 15.4737-9).² But Stephen refuses, thus decisively rejecting the cult of enchanting violence and death-mystique associated with physical-force nationalism in Ireland, which Joyce also witnessed in the build-up to the War. He tells Private Carr: "Personally, I detest action" (15.4414). Against the life-denying values of sacrificial patriotism, Stephen professes alternative values of life-affirmation: "Let my country die for me. Up to the present it has done so. I didn't want it to die. Damn death. Long live life!" (15.4473-4). Leopold Bloom, the modern-day Ulysses, also categorically expresses his distaste for the destructive impulse: "I resent violence and intolerance in any shape or form. It never reaches anything or stops anything" (16.1099-101).

In an essay entitled "Joyce à la Braudel: The Long-Temporality of *Ulysses*," using the Great War as the analytical focus, I have argued that Joyce espouses alternative historical trajectories neglected by traditional historiographic paradigms, which largely deal with great personages and momentous events, such as wars and revolutions. The essay draws a parallel between the quotidian material life depicted in *Ulysses* and the concept of "structural history" proposed by the French micro-historian Fernand Braudel.³ In *Ulysses*, Joyce

² In keeping with the tradition of using the Gabler edition of *Ulysses*, episode and line numbers are cited instead of page numbers.

³ The cataclysmic historical events which precipitated the crisis-ridden world view of avant-garde modernism also led to innovative historical inquiries. One call for historical rethinking came from Fernand Braudel, who belonged to what has become known as the Annales School of historians. Having lived through the two world wars and the political upheavals in France, Braudel believed that beneath the ruptures and discontinuities of grand history, a day-to-day life of relative stability and inertia could be discovered. At this micro-level of history, human life is determined not by short-term factors such as the whims and fancies of political leadership but long-term ones such as geography, climate, and demography. Braudel demonstrated the operation of such a micro-history in his work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949). He reconstructs the apparently ephemeral lives of slaves, serfs, peasants, and the urban poor in terms of their food, clothing, social customs and mentalities, and suggests that these people are the real makers of civilization. For Braudel, history operates at various levels and is subject to various temporalities. He calls the first temporal level the *longue durée* (longer duration) (*On History* 208). This is geographical time, in which man interacts with his environment for survival

foregrounds the historicity of his unapologetic subject matter – the quotidian – and holds out the down-to-earth praxis, the immediate challenges, and possible fulfilment in the daily life of ordinary men and women as an experiential contrast to a ‘grand history’ of conspicuous (and cataclysmic) events. If one historicizes the everyday Joyce, this contrastive grand history may be seen to have comprised of wars, civil wars, colonial domination, violent nationalism, and various kinds of religious and sectarian bigotry, including anti-Semitism. But, among other things, *Ulysses* is also a comic novel.⁴ This essay is an endeavour to reconcile the joco-serious character of Joyce’s fictional discourse with the unprecedented catastrophe of the War.

War and the Interiority of Being

Going by the popular historical definition, modernism is largely considered a cultural response to the Great War. In his famous essay “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” T. S. Eliot, fellow modernist and poet who wrote about the wasteland of Europe, lamented “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which [was] contemporary history” (270). He believed that in order to give “a shape and a significance” (270) to the chaotic state of affairs, writers were obliged to pursue the mythical method, illustrated by Joyce’s use of the Homeric template. Whole books have been written on the inter-connection, Trudi Tate’s *Modernism, History and First World War* (1998) and Vincent Sherry’s *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (2007) being probably the most recent. Among the subtle but direct literary consequences of the War was the “inward turn” (Erich Kahler’s phrase) of modernism. This ‘inward turn’ is represented by Septimus Warren Smith, the First World War veteran in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), who suffers from deferred traumatic stress (the term “Post-Traumatic

(histoire structurale). Changes in geographical time happen in the course of centuries, and, hence, are almost imperceptible. The second level of time comprises social and cultural history, with social groupings, empires, and civilizations. Change at this level (*histoire conjoncturale*) is much more rapid than in the first. The third level of time is *histoire événementielle*. This is the history of personalities, politics, and exceptional events. Traditional history mostly takes into account only this third level. The history of events is conditioned by the two other levels underlying it. Braudel includes under material civilization – the story of man’s contact with the inanimate – food, clothing, housing, towns, civic amenities, money, prices, incomes, and technology.

⁴ For an elaborate treatment of this aspect, see Zack Bowen, *Ulysses as a Comic Novel*.

Stress Disorder” came into vogue only after the Vietnam War), and eventually commits suicide. As opposed to larger political and historical dimensions, Woolf approaches war as an immediate experience for the individual, whose traumatic interiority of being is incomprehensible to the external observer, including his wife, Lucrezia, and the two physicians who treat him – Dr Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw. Typical of patients with the disorder, Smith suffers from nightmares, hallucinations, survivor guilt (He repeatedly remembers his dead friend, Evans), irritability, and heightened arousal. He demonstrates the tragedy of living in a world where there is no recognition of what happens inside a man’s head (or a woman’s head). Smith’s fictional life acquires a new significance when seen in retrospect against the bombing of Bloomsbury and Woolf’s own psychiatric problems. His suicide affirms that the inner world is more important than the empirical world outside. Indeed the returned war veterans who had nothing externally wrong with them but were ‘ill within’ were a reason for the popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis – “the talking cure.”

It would have been anachronistic for *Ulysses* to show a war veteran’s inner suffering. But Joyce recognized the unaccounted interiority of being through his interior monologues (narratologically, a sub-type of the stream-of-consciousness technique) even at the expense of conventional narrative expectations. It is this violation of received expectations that renders Joyce’s narrative aesthetic jarring, as may be expected of an avant-garde literary artist, and comic on the surface (Bloom repeatedly ponders whether he had pulled the chain in the toilet!). Joyce lays bare before the reader everything that goes on inside a man’s and a woman’s head – even semi-formed and half-articulated thoughts, dubious perceptions, overwhelming feelings, and unconventional opinions. To this end Joyce fragmented narratives, recast English, perverted its syntax, broke down its vocabulary, peeped into its semantic possibilities, and in the process, rendered the Oxford English Dictionary irreversibly obsolete. For instance, the eight sentences of Molly Bloom’s interior monologue in the “Penelope” episode of *Ulysses* spread themselves across about forty pages. Not surprisingly, Woolf praised Joyce as a “spiritual” writer for his ability to understand the interiority of

being ("Modern Fiction" 190). It is this understanding of the interiority and specificity of another's inner experience, that enabled Joyce to appreciate a gift of clairvoyance in his mentally ill daughter, Lucia (*Letters I* 350).

In the *Odyssey* Penelope regretfully tells Odysseus that the architects of the Trojan War denied them "life together" in their "prime and flowering years" (*Odyssey* 436, Book XXIII, lines 211-2). Her modern-day counterpart, Molly Bloom, whose interior monologue marks the coda of the book, has very personal reasons to detest war. She lost her lover Lieutenant Stanley Gardner, who contracted enteric fever during the Battle of Bloemfontein. She wishes in vain that the parties "could have made their peace in the beginning or old oom Paul [Paul Kruger, the Boer President] and the rest of the other old Krugers go and fight it out between them instead of dragging on for years killing any finelooking men . . ." (18.394-5). She grew up as the daughter of a soldier – a 'drummajor' – in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, posted at the British outpost of Gibraltar, who also claimed to have fought in the Russo-Turkish War (1877-8) and the Zulu War (1879). What Molly's interior monologue illustrates is the possibility of subversive perspectives, made possible by Joyce's impish, joco-serious world view. She sees conflictual history through sensual eyes. Her view of history is one of erotic comprehension; the soldiers who fight, kill, and get killed for nations are relevant to her only as lovers. Paul O'Hanrahan has suggested that "Molly's audacious love-making function[s] . . . as an alternative to war" (194). Her erotic utopia is a melting pot of pleasure where, under the spell of the body, national and racial barriers, and contradictions and hostilities are dissolved. She represents a mode of existence where force, antagonistic values, and power-games are rendered redundant. Sexual enchantment overcomes ideology and power. To put it in partly-erotic and partly-scientific terms, *Ulysses* wakes up from the nightmare of Great War history, and in the interior monologue of the final episode, goes to REM (or Rapid-Eye-Movement) sleep again in the wet dream of Penelope.

Joyce's representation of interiority deviates substantially from Woolf's and provides a space for comic, deviant, subversive, and politically-incorrect views.

His characters' ruminations represent an interiorized version of the carnival square, which Mikhail Bakhtin theorized in *Rabelais and his World*. They are a sanctuary from scrutiny and restriction, where uncensored reflections, down-to-earth interpretations, and random associations are possible. In other words, they can present what Bakhtin calls an "unofficial view of the world" (*Rabelais and his World* 188). For instance, in the "Hades" episode of *Ulysses*, Joyce conflates meditations upon death with erotic thoughts in a carnivalesque manner. Here Bloom uses the cemetery for erotic fantasies, ponders the possibility of lovemaking in the cemetery, and wonders about the experience of the woman who is married to an undertaker. He considers death in terms of soil culture – corpse as manure (*Ulysses* 6.783). A corpse is merely 'potted meat.' While the rest of the patriotic world was busy counting casualties of the War and commemorating their dead, Joyce impishly de-romanticized death with Bloom's thoroughly unorthodox and demystifying views and a deliberate contrapuntal interplay.

Joco-Serious Dooley

On 28th June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to the Austrian throne, and his wife, Sophie, were assassinated in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia, by a Serbian Irredentist, Gavrilo Princip, who belonged to an organization called Black Hand. Exactly a month later, that is, on 28 July, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. James Joyce was then teaching at a commercial teaching institution named Berlitz School and was also giving private lessons, in Trieste in Italy. Novelist Ettore Schmitz, who is better known by his pseudonym Italo Svevo, the famous author of *Confessions of Zeno*, was one of Joyce's students in Trieste. He was also the model for Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of *Ulysses*. Trieste is a sea port 105 miles from Venice. It was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in fact its fourth largest city after Vienna, Budapest, and Prague. Joyce had some sympathy for the Triestine Irredentists, who advocated incorporation of the region into Italy (Eventually, the city of Trieste was annexed by Italy after the First World War). On 23 May Italy joined the War on the side of the Allies against Austria-Hungary. On 9 January 1915 Joyce's brother Stanislaus

was sent to an Austrian internment camp in Katzenau, where he was to remain for the rest of the War period. Joyce and the rest of his family remained in Trieste till 21 June 1915, when he was permitted to leave for Zürich on the condition that he would remain neutral. Till October 1919, Joyce lived in the Swiss city, literally as a *telemache* (far from battle), in the polyglottal perversity of *Finnegans Wake*, “kuskykorked . . . tight in his inkbattle house” “hemiparalysed by the tong warfare and all the shemozzle’ (*Finnegans Wake* 177; 176). Apart from writing *Ulysses*, he did translation work for the neutralist *International Review*. To him neutral Switzerland symbolized a bright spot of optimism, a refuge from the cataclysm of war. A fortnight after reaching Zürich, he wrote in *The International Review*: “In the midst of deviation and destruction lies the Beauty of Switzerland, undeviating and undestroyed. Here a secure harmonious home of peace unites that which beyond the boundaries is cleft by hate. Here the desire to love first uttered its deed-word: Help. Here more than in places which the war profanes, we hope to find courage for our commencing” (qtd. in Manganiello, *Joyce’s Politics* 148).

Joyce spoke very little about the War. Understandably, he was indifferent to its outcome. He was a pacifist, and his pacifism is clear from a limerick called “Dooleysprudence,” which he wrote in 1916. Albeit in a light-hearted fashion, “Dooleysprudence” sums up Joyce’s philosophy of war. Let me cite a few lines from the limerick:

‘Who is the man when all the gallant nations run to war
Goes home to have his dinner by the very first cablecar
And as he eats his cantelope contorts himself in mirth
To read the blatant bulletins of the rulers of the earth? [Don’t miss the pun
on ‘bulletins’]

It’s Mr Dooley,

Mr Dooley,

The coolest chap our country ever knew

. . . . Who is the meek philosopher who doesn’t care a damn

About the yellow peril or problem of Siam

And disbelieves that British Tar is water from life's fount

And will not gulp the gospel of the German on the Mount [for Sermon on the Mount]?

. . . . Who is the tranquil gentleman who won't salute the State

Or serve Nebuchadnezzar or proletariat

But thinks that every son of man has quite enough to do

To paddle down the stream of life his personal canoe? (*Critical Writings* 246-8)

Dooley turns his back upon the state, the leading figures of history, and all political ideologies, left-wing and right-wing. As history's Everyman, Dooley foregrounds the divergence between notions of national glory posited by the ruling classes and the experience of common people. Although in a jocular tone, he articulates a claim on behalf of the ordinary man for a place within a history of cataclysms. He "thinks that every son of man has quite enough to do / To paddle down the stream of life his personal canoe."

Like Mr Dooley, his author saw the World War as an invasion of the sphere of individual activity. But he felt confident of the ability to carry on despite catastrophic history, a confidence which makes Frank Budgen say that "if asked what he did during the Great War, [Joyce] could reply: 'I wrote *Ulysses*'" (191). Apparently a position of glorious unconcern, or absence of commitment! Joyce's ludic approach to the War is a version of modernist art's hermeticism, its tendency of cordoning itself off from reality, a tendency defended by many including the Frankfurt School critic, Theodor Adorno. According to Adorno, art that is truly emancipatory does not reflect on and communicate with reality. Rather, it resists reality: "Art is the negative knowledge of the actual world" ("Reconciliation under Duress" 160). Art as protest faces the threat of degenerating into an affirmation of the status quo, of integration into the dynamics of the system. Therefore, the ideal art is a hermetic one. If Woolf's Septimus Warren Smith is a micro-specimen of what violent history does to the

inner man, Joyce's pacific dissociation is a symbolic negation of the systems and processes which had brought the misery of the first global war to the world.

The Body of War

In an essay entitled "Body Words," Richard Brown discusses the disastrous effect the new technologies of the First World War had for the body, and the influence of the phenomenon on modernist writers such as Joyce and D. H. Lawrence (111). Budgen grounds Stephen's apathy to sacrificial politics of nationalism, both Irish and Continental, upon his attitude to "*la patrie* [that] asks . . . for our bodies in war time" (149). Joyce draws a surrogate picture of the destruction of the Great War in the "corpsestrewn plain" (*Ulysses* 2.16) that Stephen anachronistically visualizes in "Nestor." This is the closest approximation of the battlefields of the Somme and Flanders which the reader can expect in *Ulysses*. But the book is laced with images of historical violence to the human body. Besides the British soldiers' attack on Stephen in the "Circe" episode, these include the "corpses of papishes" hung in the Orange lodges remembered by him (2.274); the brutal corporal punishments in the British navy (12.1330-2); the begging sailor whose legs are shot off by cannon balls; the brutal practice of blowing sepoy's from the canon mouth, remindful of the Indian mutiny (1857) (12.671-2); and the Belgian atrocities in the Congo. The distortion and disfigurement that history enacts on the body is given its morbid and concentrated presentation in the bizarre execution drama interpolated in the "Cyclops" episode. If one historicizes Joyce, the inventory of history's violence may include the body's experience and annihilation in the mechanical warfare of the First World War; firing squads; the imprisonments and executions in the Kilmainham prison; the Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald, full of living skeletons and heaps of corpses of Bloom's co-religionists (Bloom is a Jew converted to Catholicism); and the gas chambers filled with Zyklon B.

One day during the War, a German poem by the Viennese poet Felix Beran, called "Des Weibes Klage" was sung at a friends' gathering at Joyce's residence in Zürich. The poem goes like this:

Und nun ist kommen der Krieg der Krieg
Nun sind sie alle Soldaten
Soldaten müssen Sterben
Wer wird nun küssen Meinen weissen Leib

And now comes the war of the war
Now they are all soldiers
Soldiers must die
Who will kiss my white body.

Budgen records that the word *Leib* (meaning body) in the poem enthused Joyce (13). Later he told Budgen: "Among other things . . . my book [*Ulysses*] is the epic of the human body. . . . In my book the body lives in and moves through space and is the home of a full human personality" (21). According to Joyce's schema for the book, every episode or chapter has a corresponding body organ. Nowhere else has Joyce's quixotic artistic practices more assaulted Western notions of propriety and 'taste' than in the corporeal realm. His scatology and candid depictions of sex invited scandal and censure. *Ulysses* is best-reviled for its candid descriptions of day-to-day bodily functions. I contend that Joyce celebrates the pacifist and pleasurable everyday use of the body as an alternative to the violent abuses of it at the hands of history, in contrast to the murderous and elegiac dynamics of the body in history. Bloom visualizes his body reclined in the great bowl of the bath "oiled by scented melting soap, softly laved," and repeats to himself Christ's words at the Last Supper: "This is my body" (Matt. 26. 26-8). He looks at his penis – "the limp father of thousands" (*Ulysses* 5.567-70). The re-contextualisation is significant in that it asserts claims of the body against the discourse of martyrdom (especially the religious underpinnings of political martyrdom in Ireland). The scene also contrastingly asserts pride and pleasure in the body, genuine care of it, and the promise of continuation through offspring, against mutilation and mortification. We have already seen how Molly eroticizes violent history. All this is Joyce's response to a history that says "*Soldaten müssen sterben.*" On several occasions

Bloom feels his body – the cheek, the hair, the forehead, the belly, and the pelvic region – with his hands, and smells its odours. The odour of the pickings of his toe nail takes him back in time to childhood (17.1488-96). Joyce seems to be suggesting that it is the loss of this immediacy with one's own embodied self that makes people lose any possible affinity with others, inflict torture and pain on them, and makes gas chambers and torture cells possible.

Written during a time when Europe was engulfed by jingoistic slogans, *Ulysses* blends the rhetoric of shout-and-swagger nationalism with bodily phenomena, flatulence being the most common. When Bloom farts in the middle of a patriotic ballad ("The Croppy Boy") or while reading Robert Emmet's last words (11.1284-95),⁵ the body makes itself 'heard' in history. Here is a case of the carnivalesque breaking in of the lower bodily stratum into the realm of the grand and the heroic! Such instances puncture grand history by bringing it into what Bakhtin calls a "zone of . . . crude contact" (*Dialogic Imagination* 23). Stanislaus Joyce, the author's brother, articulates the implications of Joyce's scatological attitude to the violence of history:

Here we have in germ the weariness of the immeasurable stupidity of violence of an author who was to speak of the 'bluddle filth' of Waterloo. . . . When a sufficient number of men and women have attained his attitude of calm, supreme contempt for violence, even when violence is doing its damndest, there will be no more fear on earth that civilization may be wiped out by A-bombs or H-bombs or some other alphabetical, scientific monstrosity. Men can begin to cultivate that attitude in peacetime by quietly breaking wind from behind, as Mr. Bloom does, when they listen to patriotic speeches, when flags are waved, military bands, led by band-masters . . .convert themselves into funny, goose-stepping, uniformed robots. . . . (218)

⁵ Emmet is one in a long series of martyrs in Irish history. The list includes Ross MacMahon, Lord Thomas FitzGerald ("Silken Thomas"), Lord Edward FitzGerald, Theobald Wolfe Tone, and the heroes of the Easter Rising of 1916.

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