Hostile Responses to Joyce

~ ~ ~
Approaching Joyce with an Attitude

Morris Beja

The essays in this section came out of a session on "hostile responses to Joyce." It may seem odd to have arranged such a session during an International James Joyce Symposium, but in my role as coordinator of the program I came fairly soon to feel that it would be salutary to counter the danger of hagiography that such a conference might otherwise generate. In the context of a week during which his city and his nation, to say nothing of numerous people from many other cities and many other nations, came together at least in large part out of a fascination—even obsession—with his work, it seemed useful to recall how controversial James Joyce has been and can remain, to realize how negative reactions to his work can be (and not merely among readers who have difficulty getting through the longer entries in the weekly TV listings).

As Hans Robert Jauss has put it, in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, "the way in which a literary work, at the historical moment of its appearance, satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or refutes the expectations of its first audience obviously provides a criterion for the determination of its aesthetic value" (25). Often when we think of Joyce's early readers we tend to recall those to whom in the twenties and thirties he was a major hero: we retain images of William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe as young writers visiting France and lurking in the background as they observe the Great Man, too diffident even to approach him; or of F. Scott Fitzgerald offering to jump out of a window to prove his devotion and admiration.

But an essential element of Joyce's heroism to such younger contemporaries was the way in which he triumphed over his rejection by the philistines. It is sobering to recognize that frequently the most vehement of the philistines were members of the literati—like the one who wrote in the review of A
Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man in the Irish Book Lover that "no clean-minded person could possibly allow it to remain within reach of his wife, his sons or daughters," and who ended that review with the question, "Above all, is it Art?"—and replied, "We doubt it."

The philistines are easily dismissed, while it is much more interesting to consider the genuine and thoughtful but quite negative reactions to Joyce in sensitive, often brilliant readers and writers who could not finally or truly admire his work—or worse, could not stomach it. In varying degrees we see such reactions in some of the major literary figures of his day, like Virginia Woolf, or Wyndham Lewis, or the writers discussed in the following two essays, D. H. Lawrence and Rebecca West. None of those four examples are after all lightweights in twentieth-century literary history.

Even when important literary figures were receptive, they frequently had major reservations, as in H. G. Wells’s famous comment about Joyce’s "cloacal obsession." Other figures who have honorable roles in literary history because of their ability to recognize and champion the value of the new in other writers often could not go so far as to accept the worth of Joyce’s art: readers, for example, like Edward Garnett, who rejected the Portrait for the firm of Duckworth yet wrote enthusiastic reports on Sons and Lovers and The Voyage Out.

In some ways it is especially fascinating to examine the negative attitudes toward Joyce in the realms and cultures to which he—especially the artist as a young man—was and felt closest, however hostile and ambivalent his relationship might have been in countless ways: Ireland and England.

The fierce early Irish reaction to Joyce clearly came out of special needs—political, nationalistic, aesthetic, cultural, religious, even psychological—that made it difficult for his work to be widely admired in his homeland for many years. At his death the magazines of both his former schools—the Clongounian and the Belvederian—completely ignored the event (although fascinatingly the Belvederian did carry a notice of the death around the same time of Joyce’s younger brother Charles). The later Irish author Benedict Kiely has reported the way in which the youth of Ireland reacted when a Dublin newspaper did them a favor "by failing to carry even a news report of the death of Joyce, and thus helping to identify and delineate the enemy."

Meanwhile, the England of Bloomsbury was notorious in its antipathy to what Joyce was doing—to what seemed to E. M. Forster a "dogged attempt to cover the universe with mud." Other elements of the British literary establishment of the time were even more vociferous in opposition to "Modernism"—although in fact nowadays most critics and scholars tend toward definitions of Modernism that embrace the work of a number of writers who would probably have resented being classified that way or being put together in a category with James Joyce.

Unfortunately, an unpleasant degree of classism was occasionally involved in the irritation with Joyce, as in Virginia Woolf’s infamous comment about
Joyce's achievement as "underbred," that of a self-taught working man, while to Rebecca West he seemed "a great man who is entirely without taste." Ethnocentrism also figured in West's uneasiness, as suggested by her description of Joyce's mind as "furnished like a room in a Westland Row tenement": there is no Westland Row in London, although there is one in Dublin.

The British critical establishment was even less friendly, as personified in the enormously influential work of F. R. Leavis, who began a book on D. H. Lawrence with the claim that Joyce and Lawrence seem to be "the crucial authors" in determining one's attitudes toward modern literature, asserting that if you regard Joyce as a major writer, then you can have "no use for Lawrence," while if you regard Lawrence as a great novelist, "then you could hardly take a sustained interest in Joyce." I would maintain that the healthiest reaction to such a statement—or, in any case, to its apparent assumptions about the departmentalization of literary taste—is denial. Yet for decades there was and perhaps still is a tendency in some critical corners to feel that such a "choice" is inevitable.

Moreover, insofar as such a comparison has been made, it has been assumed in many quarters that it would be Lawrence who would emerge victorious. Joyce was granted certain advantages, such as technical mastery and a willingness to experiment, but aside from such matters it would have seemed to many readers during the decades from the twenties through the fifties and even into the sixties that posterity would belong to Lawrence. He was the prophet, the person to whom more and more people would turn for inspiration and wisdom, while Joyce represented a dead end, or worse. In Henry Miller's notebooks on Joyce and Lawrence, written during the thirties (but not published until the Joyce Studies Annual 1992), Miller contrasted Joyce "the doubter" with Lawrence "the apostle of a new order"; Joyce provided only a "cul-de-sac."

Among literary critics, one encountered that attitude not only in books by people like Leavis—that is, in Lawrentians writing books about Lawrence—but also in Joyceans writing books about Joyce: books like S. L. Goldberg's The Classical Temper, which in the early sixties claimed that, compared to Lawrence, Joyce's grasp of the nightmare of history "is not particularly impressive." A similar dichotomy appeared in Darcy O'Brien's The Conscience of James Joyce.

If Lawrence was seen as prophetic, Joyce was often regarded as a reactionary figure, an elitist whom it was best to ignore. The attacks on him on the Continent were frequently, in fact, political. For a long period a great many of the most virulent responses came from 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." Within the last couple of decades, however, scholarship and criticism have made myopic assertions about Joyce's reactionary politics, or about his political irrelevance, increasingly difficult to take seriously.
On the Continent the Joyce who aroused such negative responses could also be wildly and widely lionized—sometimes by the same people after what in some cases turned out to be little less than conversion experiences, as in the case of Louis Gillet, who went from writing an attack on Joyce in the *Revue des deux mondes* in 1925 to becoming a major champion of Joyce’s work and a close friend.

In the United States, too, many of the attacks were basically political. The early acceptance of Joyce in the States by relatively large numbers of writers, critics, and academics was so notable that we tend to forget or be ignorant of the fierce rejection of his work by some extremely influential critics—like Paul Elmer More, who abhorred “the moral slough of *Ulysses*” and wrote (in an essay on Joyce) that he “should hate to believe that three thousand years have brought to mankind only weariness and ugliness from which no escape is possible save in a weary and ugly art” (70, 78): the art, that is, that he saw in *Ulysses*.

Later American critics have been more sophisticated in their critiques, but the attacks have not stopped, despite or perhaps because of the fact that Joyce has become the single most clearly canonical figure in twentieth-century literature and far and away the one about whom the most is written each year. Those on any side of the currently intense “canon wars” can hardly look to a more dramatic revolution in status than that achieved by the Joyce who was once banned or dismissed or both. In particular, the role of the academic world in changing general views toward his work can hardly be exaggerated. Even before his work became legal in the United States, for example, it was at times assigned in university courses or would in any case be available in university libraries. For admirers of Joyce’s art, such a reversal has not been without its price, as we see new readers come to his work lacking a full realization of how subversive it can be. On the other hand, Joyce’s standing has forced critics who rebel against his status to explore or explain their reactions in more sophisticated terms than were once deemed necessary.

But while more subtle, the negative responses have frequently retained a moral dimension, as in Wayne Booth’s discomfort in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* over the ways in which “Joyce was always a bit uncertain about his attitude toward Stephen” (330). (Since Deconstruction and the vogue of indeterminacy, such an objection may seem a virtue, but it would also have seemed no problem to the New Critics, who would have recognized the profound possibilities for powerful literary effects within ambiguity—or irony, for that matter.)

In *No Man’s Land*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar attack Joyce through his portrayal of women and the “parrot-like blankness with which Joyce’s women respond to abstract concepts” (232). They argue for example that in the “Nausicaa” chapter of *Ulysses* “the commercial crap” of Gerty MacDowell’s “genteel Victorian diction is at least in part associated with the reaction-formation of intensified misogyny with which male writers greeted the entrance of women into the literary marketplace” (233). (It should be mentioned that
anyone familiar with the feminist criticism of Joyce during the last decade or so—arguably the single most powerful realm of Joyce studies during that time and ours—will realize that most feminist critics would go beyond that interpretation of Joyce's achievement. For many readers, including many feminist ones, Joyce has come to seem a liberating force: not a liberated man, necessarily—or at all—but a liberating force, the author that is of liberating work.)

A different moral urge seems to underlie Leo Bersani's 1990 essay "Against Ulysses" in his The Culture of Redemption. For him, Ulysses is "a model of interpretive nihilism," a "text to be deciphered but not read." There is an element of Leavisite high seriousness in Bersani's approach, so it is not surprising that once again Joyce is contrasted unfavorably with Lawrence, with Bersani asserting that "the experimentalism of Ulysses is far from the genuine avant-gardism of Women in Love" (174-75). But Bersani's attack is more informed and complex, and less dogmatic, than Leavis's, and his reaction is expressed with a tinge of regret, as when he says in his final sentence that "even in writing 'against Ulysses,' we can only feel a great sadness in leaving it—to stop working on Ulysses is like a fall from grace" (178).

I have not attempted in this short account to counter the attacks I have reported, except occasionally in brief comments I could not resist. Rather I have wanted to remind us of the sobering reality of the deep doubts many readers have had about the achievement of James Joyce. Such doubts will remind us that it is conceivable that the same writer who went from unpublishability to vilification to canonization within less than half a century could quite possibly be de-canonized in even less time.

Even those of us who regard that prospect as unlikely can learn by confronting and examining the hostility or relative hostility toward Joyce's work by people who are not easily dismissible. Above all, I would argue, we can attain a renewed and intensified awareness of Joyce as other: as disturbing, perplexing, dangerous and threatening: a writer—and a force—to conjure with.

WORKS CITED


