

Words and the Man: The Art of James Joyce

Literary scholars have enshrined James Joyce as the most influential voice in 20th-century fiction, and this winter they are celebrating the centennial of his birth. Despite his monumental reputation—or perhaps because of it—many Americans have shied away from his work, particularly the last two novels, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Surveying Joyce's career, critic Frank McConnell here argues that the works of the Irish genius should not be considered daunting or inaccessible. Read Joyce, McConnell urges us, to see how the human spirit triumphs even in a time of troubles.

by Frank D. McConnell

James Joyce has become a name for his century. This is a simple statement of fact, beyond argument, beyond considerations of genius or talent or influence. With all the arrogance of greatness, Othello could say to the night watch, "Not to know me argues thyself unknown." And Joyce—or the shade of Joyce—could revel in the same sort of pride. We have not begun to understand ourselves or our age until we have begun to understand him and his work.

But what an unlikely candidate for such eminence! Stravinsky and Picasso, who shared Joyce's century, were profligate. Work followed work, style followed style, and it seemed, at the height of either man's career,

that there was no end to their gifts. Joyce, on the other hand, published little: less, perhaps, than any writer who has ever earned the title "great."

There were, during this life, two volumes of relatively forgettable poetry; there were numerous reviews, fugitive essays, and a play. None of them matter, except to specialists.

There were also, however, four pieces of fiction: *Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Notice the dates: two books published within two years, eight years till the next book, and 17 years till the last. Not an overwhelm-

ing production over nearly a quarter of a century—except that these four books, as much as any published in our century, changed the world. They changed the way we think about ourselves, about one another, and about the cities in which we live. Perhaps most crucially, these books changed the ways we tell stories about ourselves.

Yet Joyce never thought of himself as the “founder” of a school or “leader” of a movement. He never had the intention of altering, forever, the way stories could be told in his culture. He seems only to have in-

tended to work out the problems, personal and aesthetic, that were his private obsessions. And yet it is safe to say that the best who write after Joyce are, by and large, those most aware of his achievement.

The same, of course, can be said of music after Stravinsky and painting after Picasso. But Stravinsky and Picasso are more promising candidates for this kind of immortality than is Joyce. They are, after all, cosmopolitans. However deeply rooted in their creators’ histories and psyches, works such as *The Rite of Spring* and *Guernica* transcend national, histor-



*A portrait
of James Joyce
by Pavel Tchelitchev.*

Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland.

ical, even cultural boundaries: They are words in a universal language, a language beyond the languages spoken by men.

And can we say the same of Joyce? Can we make the claim "cosmopolitan" for a writer who, during almost 30 years of a career, chose to write about one pedestrian, provincial, partisan city, his "dear dirty Dublin"? Should we venerate a writer whose progress seems to be from the comprehensible but limited to the cosmic but unreadable; a writer who said that since he himself spent 17 years writing his last great work, he expected the reader to spend at least as much time deciphering it?

A Self-Made Orphan

One of the saddest anecdotes I know concerns Joyce after the publication of *Finnegans Wake* in 1939. He had just completed the greatest novel of the 21st century and was living—as he always had—in near poverty. He was residing, furthermore, in France, on the eve of the Second World War. His eyesight, never good, had by now failed altogether. His daughter was in a madhouse. And then, while the world exploded around him, while the Germans marched into Paris, Joyce sat—his great work completed—listening to a shortwave radio broadcast from Dublin of Irish tenors singing the plaintive lamentations of the 1920s.

Is this the figure of a heroic artist? Well, in the oddest way, it is. Exile, either real or imagined, is the badge of the 20th-century artist. How many of our modern poets and novelists

have *not* thought of themselves as refugees, either from a homeland or from a system of inherited beliefs in which they can no longer *feel* at home? Joyce may be so important an artist precisely because he was such a perfect, if self-made, orphan.

Joyce was born February 2, 1882, in a Dublin suburb. His father, a relatively comfortable and successful minor politician during James's early youth, experienced a steady economic and personal decline during precisely those years when James, like any young man or woman, most needed a strong, authoritative parental figure. It is pointless, though, to psychoanalyze Joyce and his work in terms of a "weak father-image," partly because such analysis does not begin to account for the brilliance of his work, and partly because the work itself is so manifestly concerned with the theme of the quest for a father.

Singing for Medals

In 1904, Joyce wrote a short sketch called "A Portrait of the Artist"; it was rejected by the journal he submitted it to. He was teaching that year at a school in Dalkey—a suburb of Dublin—where the students were much richer than he or his family could hope to be. Also in 1904, he contended in the locally important Feis Ceoil singing contest and won the bronze medal. And in 1904, he met, and fell in love with, a baker's daughter, Nora Barnacle, the semi-literate and entirely admirable woman who was to be his lover, wife, and confidante for the rest of his life.

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It was, on the whole, an auspicious year for young James Joyce. And with predictable, and perhaps pardonable, egotism, he tried to make it the indispensable year of his age. *Ulysses*, arguably the greatest novel of the 20th century, is the story of the events of a single day: June 16, 1904.

Jimmy's Sentences

Joyce's world—the Irish-Catholic world of the early 20th century—was littered with dead fathers. At the philosophical level, the intricate structure of Thomistic logic was beginning to be questioned, even in Catholic circles. At the political level, all Ireland remained violently divided over the death of its great, unsuccessful champion of national independence, Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–91).

Joyce took to heart, and never forgot, the image of Parnell as the archetypal Irish leader, betrayed and exiled by his own people. Indeed, he probably came to think of himself as a literary Parnell, just as a century earlier the poet Lord Byron had come to think of himself as a literary Napoleon.

At the personal level, Joyce's family—and his plans—had disintegrated. He had gone to Paris in 1902 to study medicine, returned to Dublin the following year as his mother was dying, and stayed to witness the pathetic decline of his family's once bright prospects.

He left Ireland in October 1904—*fled* is probably a better word—with Nora in tow, to teach English in the Berlitz School in Pola, Italy. The two would be married formally only in 1931 (their son and daughter attended the wedding), and Nora would never quite understand why her Jimmy loved so to make sentences.

Before Joyce left Dublin, he had

virtually completed a series of stunningly original stories: *Dubliners*. As a young man under the spell of the French "realists," particularly Flaubert and Zola, he had taken to wandering about his city, copying in a notebook chance phrases, random impressions that seemed to open up, in their very specificity, worlds of implication about life as it is led. "Epiphanies," he called such moments; *Dubliners* is built up of them, though its final effect goes far beyond mere "slice-of-life" realism.

Dubliners is both a summary of and a farewell to the possibilities of naturalism. Each tale catches its characters in self-enforced imprisonment, each is the snapshot of a stunted soul. But these pictures of failure are redeemed by the writer's delight in the revelatory power of language. "There was no hope for him this time," begins the youthful narrator of "The Sisters," the first story in *Dubliners*; an old, half-mad priest is dying:

He had often said to me: *I am not long for this world*, and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.

Even in this most precise, realistic set of stories, it is *words*—the sound of them, their texture, and their evocative power—that fascinate the writer most.

A distinguished Joyce scholar, Donald Torchiana, has recently demonstrated that *Dubliners* is more deeply embedded than anyone had

suspected in the political and social history of the time—politics being a favored Irish sport, and the more Byzantine the better. And yet it is not just Joyce's sense of the intricacies of politics (particularly as depicted in the story "Ivy Day in the Committee Room"), or just his sense of the magic of words, that makes *Dubliners*, more than a half-century later, still arresting and startling. It is the wedding of those two vital interests. Like certain 17th-century Dutch paintings, each tale in *Dubliners* has a surface so absolutely "realistic" that a kind of eeriness adheres to the faithfulness of representation.

Prig and Hero

Joyce had great difficulty publishing *Dubliners*; in 1912, a printer destroyed the type because he judged the volume "obscene." That anonymous printer may have been, in his way, as perceptive a reader as any Joyce has had. He understood, at least, the radical quality of the prose he was reading. More academic readers have missed that essential point.

Dublin was, according to Joyce's book, a city of the living dead: The word *paralysis* was both an epigraph and an epitaph for its spiritual moribundity. Never again would Joyce articulate so precisely what he hated about the city he could not help loving.

Before he had finished the sketches of *Dubliners*, though, he had begun an expansion of his early sketch, "A Portrait of the Artist." It began as a longish, realistic, autobiographical narrative called *Stephen Hero* (which he never published) and grew into the complex book called *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, initially serialized in 1914, the year of *Dubliners*, and published in its final form two years later. *A Portrait* begins in

baby talk:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo.

And it ends in prose-poetry:

Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. . . . Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.

It is the autobiographical narrative of the author's discovery of his vocation. Only Joyce could be vain enough, and masterful enough, to turn his dedication to art into the *matter* of art. The wonder is that he made *that* theme seem so important for so much of his century.

A Portrait is the story of Stephen Dedalus, a poor Dublin intellectual who comes to dedicate himself to the life of art after exploring, and rejecting, other possible "fathers": family, country, and church. Named for the first of Christian martyrs, St. Stephen, and for the legendary artisan of the classical world, Daedalus, the constructor of the labyrinth, he is the perfect image of Joyce's self-estimation, but he is also the perfect image of Joyce's self-hatred.

It is virtually impossible to read *A Portrait* with a consistent attitude toward its protagonist. Stephen emerges as both a hero of artistic struggle and an impossible prig: precisely the figure Joyce strove to create.

This was the book that attracted the attention of the best minds of Europe. Yet its author continued to wander about the Continent, teaching English, trying with little success

to support his growing family. Joyce became a shameless sponge, particularly in dealings with Stanislaus, his younger brother. Over the next decade, he would receive money from a number of admirers, including Ezra Pound and the generous bookseller and publisher Sylvia Beach.

Had he written no fiction besides *Dubliners* and *A Portrait*, Joyce would still be remembered. They represent, between them, the perfect transition from 19th-century realism to 20th-century impressionism.

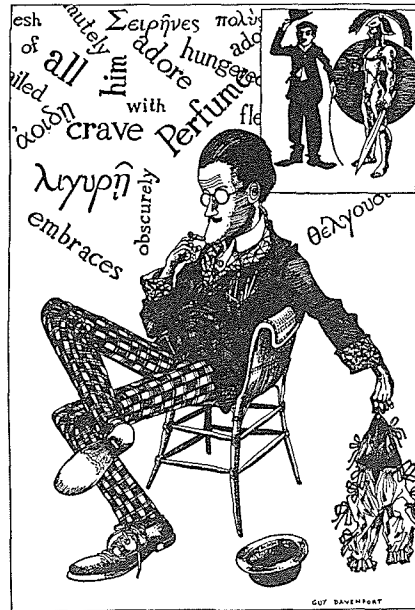
Bloomsday

But there was another story to tell.

He had planned, as one of the stories in *Dubliners*, a short tale about a Jewish-Irish advertising canvasser wandering about the city during a single day. From the earliest plans for the story, he seems to have thought of his central figure as a kind of tragic-comic clown, modeled perhaps after the greatest of clowns, Charlie Chaplin.

For some reason, it never got written. Instead, in 1914, the year in which *Dubliners* appeared and in which the first, fragmentary version of *A Portrait* was serialized, Joyce began expanding his original idea into a long, revolutionary novel. Titled *Ulysses*, it appeared in 1922.

Ulysses retains the bare skeleton of the original, short-story conception: the events of one day (what has come to be known as "Bloomsday") in the lives of three major characters. There is Stephen Dedalus, a few years after the time of *A Portrait*, a failed poet and bitter intellectual still looking, rather hopelessly, for a father. There is Molly Bloom, the promiscuous wife of the novel's hero, who seems to spend the whole day in bed, either betraying her husband or dreaming, at the end, about their



Guy Davenport. From *The Stoic Comedians* by Hugh Kenner.

Joyce read five languages, and knew a few more well enough to pluck from.

early, passionate love. And there is Leopold Bloom, above all, Leopold—cuckold, fool, philosopher, exile, and archetype.

Bloom is the most common of men; Bloom is the most extraordinary of men. A walking compendium of the half-understood truths of his culture, he is also an active and thoughtful participant in the communal life of that culture. A paradox, of course, but as such, he is the perfect incarnation of Joyce's own idea of himself as artist, and of the artist in general: simultaneously vulgarian and high priest.

Bloom is the "Ulysses" of the novel's title: the great wanderer who finally finds his way back to home and wife and kingdom. Molly is his



Poetry/Rare Book Collection, State University of New York, Buffalo.

The first line from Homer's *Odyssey*, "Tell me, Muse, of the man of many devices, over many ways," accompanies this sketch by Joyce of Leopold Bloom.

adulterous Penelope, and Stephen his Telemachus, his lost son searching for him. Each of the episodes in Bloom's day parallels one of the major episodes of Homer's *Odyssey*, so that we are kept constantly aware of the pressure of ancient myth upon these apparently random events.

Ulysses' encounter with the Cave of the Winds, for example, becomes Bloom's visit to the newspaper office for which he works. And Ulysses' imprisonment on the isle of the seductress-witch, Circe, is translated into Bloom's visit to Nighttown, Dublin's red-light district.*

Of course, this is not itself an original technique. Satirists from Juvenal to Alexander Pope to Woody Allen

*An immensely useful guide to the novel's mythic parallels is Robert Martin Adams's *James Joyce: Common Sense and Beyond* (1966).

have used the form called "mock-heroic," contrasting the tawdry realities of the present day to the stature and nobility of the olden days, precisely to call us back to the knowledge of how far we have fallen from majesty. T. S. Eliot used the myth of the past in just this way in *The Waste Land*—published in 1922, the same year as *Ulysses*—and in doing so wrote the anthem of the "lost generation."

Ulysses could be read the same way, and usually was in the years just after its appearance. "Obscene," "blasphemous," and "disgusting" were among the terms applied to it, perhaps with some justification: It begins with a parody of the Latin Mass, and one of the earliest scenes carefully details Bloom's morning defecation. Virginia Woolf, a great

novelist and a great snob, described it in her diary as an "underbred" book (although her own masterpiece of 1925, *Mrs. Dalloway*, could probably not have been written without the influence of it). And it could not legally be purchased in the United States until 1933.

But is it, after all, this and nothing else: Satire of the most corrosive sort? A Swiftian howl against the degeneracy of the times? Had *Ulysses* been written by Stephen Dedalus, the answer would probably be yes. But Stephen Dedalus did not write it; probably could not have written it; and that is one point of the novel.

Finding Energy

The artist as a *young* man suffering from a sense of isolation and rejection solaced himself by contemplating the stupidity and crassness of the world. But *Ulysses* was published on Joyce's 40th birthday. And it brims with life: with the sights, smells, and sounds of Dublin and with the energies of all its major and minor characters.

Ulysses's rapid shifts of style, its dizzying cuts from scene to scene and character to character, have often been called "cinematic." The book is more than that, of course: It is a celebration of the richness of experience. *Ulysses* is *mock* mock-heroic—for what it finally insists is that contemporary life, for all its cheapness and vulgarity, can still be imagined as a re-enactment—an authentic re-enactment—of the great rhythms of mythology.

Stephen Dedalus, in *A Portrait*, had walked through Dublin looking at the advertising placards, shop legends, and newspaper hoardings of his middle-class culture and thought of them as "heaps of dead language." But *Ulysses* is virtually the resurrec-

tion of that "dead language," the discovery that it lives with an energy that revalidates the potential of the human spirit (a community sing, as scholar Alfred Appel described the novel).

To be sure, this aspect of the book has only recently found academic endorsement. Some critics like to make a distinction between "high" and "popular" culture, insisting that the latter can only be the humus out of which "real" culture grows. But artists have always known better. And writers as greatly gifted, as widely different, and as equally influenced by Joyce as Saul Bellow and Thomas Pynchon have shown us, brilliantly, how much the heritage of *Ulysses* is the task of finding within the apparently dehumanizing paraphernalia of the everyday precisely those elements and energies that make us, and have always made us, most fully human.

A Heroic Marriage

There is a paradox built into this quest, as there was a deep paradox built into Joyce's imagination and spirit. As his books became more fully celebrations of the common life of the 20th century, they also became more complex, more self-conscious, more difficult—and less accessible. If Stephen Dedalus could never have written *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom could never have gotten through it.

The wedding of popular culture and high imagination is not an easy marriage to arrange; no really worthwhile marriages are. But our central artists have always known that, without such a wedding, both the culture of the people and the art of the elite are disastrously impoverished. *Ulysses* is, above all else, a heroic attempt at such a wedding.

But it was not the most heroic at-

tempt Joyce was to make. In 1923, the year after *Ulysses* appeared, he began another book. It would be published, finally, in 1939 as *Finnegans Wake*. But during the 16 intervening years, while sections of it appeared in various literary magazines in Europe and in the United States, it was known under the simple, and tantalizing, title, "Work in Progress."

"Work in Progress" appeared incoherent, formless, radically subversive as it was coming out in fragments. And *Finnegans Wake*, when it finally was published in one piece, seemed to most people hardly less so. Indeed, a number of distinguished Joyce scholars stop at *Ulysses*, assuming that Their Man, after some splendid and epoch-making innings, went mad (or at least went unapproachably private, wasting his genius on multilingual puns and recrudite allusions).

Finnegans Wake is a daunting book, and probably no one has opened it without a sense of blank desertion, even panic. "riverrun," it begins:

riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.

There is not even a capital letter to mark the beginning of the sentence. But, of course, it isn't a sentence: It is the end of the sentence that is also the ending of the book:

The keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the

So the book begins as it ends, and ends as it begins, closing in on itself, like a serpent eating its tail or like the cycles of universal history. It is a history of mankind, a history of the

great cycle of fall, death, and resurrection found in all human myths. And at the same time, it is a history of the cycles of loss and recovery implicit in the life story of any one, isolated human being.

In *Ulysses*, Joyce had shown—or discovered—how all history might be imagined in the events of a single, randomly selected day. In *Finnegans Wake*, he would show how all human consciousness might be compressed into the fantasies of a single, archetypal night.

Coffins and Whiskey

Perhaps, though, it is only a dream. Perhaps the whole narrative of *Finnegans Wake* is simply the dream of the Dublin pubkeeper, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, as he reflects on his wife, his two sons, and his daughter: an undetermined night, an undetermined date, and an undetermined cast of characters for a drama with no clear conclusion.*

But there are other ways of reading the book; nearly as many ways, indeed, as there are potential readers of *Finnegans Wake*. For the book is *about* reading. In a serious sense, the real plot of *Finnegans Wake* is how the reader—any reader—learns to decipher it.

There is an old Irish song called "Finnegan's Wake": Tim Finnegan, a drunken Dublin hod carrier, falls from his ladder one day and dies. Laid in his coffin, he is waked by his friends in typical Irish fashion, with plenty of drink for all, but when one mourner accidentally tips a bottle of whiskey on the corpse's head, Finnegan magically revives, to the great delight of those around him.

*Such is the premise of Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson's valuable guide, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (1961).

*Detail from
The Book of Kells.
(ca. ninth century).
Joyce admired the
intricacy, wit, and artistry
of the Irish illuminated
manuscripts. His use of
Egyptian myths in Finne-
gans Wake was partly in-
spired by Egyptian Coptic
elements in the Kells.
Fond of puns, he referred
to his Ulysses as the
"usylesly unreadable
Blue Book of Eccles."*

Courtesy Bibliotheque Municipale, Amiens.



On this slight, even silly song, Joyce poses all the complexity and intricacy of his final novel. For, in its humble way, it is the quintessential story of mankind's hopes and dreams, the resurrection tale at the heart of all the religions, the mythologies, and the languages men have devised. Finnegan is Jesus is Krishna is Adonis is Moses . . . is you and me. Joyce insists upon the equivalence and insists that we have not begun to read successfully until we have read—not just his book, but all books—this way.

"Somewhere, parently, in the gin-and-go gap between antediluvian and annadominant the copyist must have fled with his scroll," says the speaker of the *Wake* early in the book, and the whole book is, in a way, an attempt to recreate the original history of the fall, which has been fragmented and garbled through all

ages of mankind.

The plot of the book is simple—as simple as one, two, three, four—and is repeated on virtually every page. HCE, a Dublin pubkeeper, is married to a woman named ALP, and they have two sons, Shem and Shaun, and one daughter, Izzy. HCE (whose name means "Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker" or "Here Comes Everybody" or the "Hubbub Caused in Edenborough") has committed a crime in the park, a primal and embarrassing sin perpetrated upon two young girls (doubles of his own daughter), witnessed by three soldiers, and judged by four old men. As he dreams his night away, he recapitulates the crime—which is the archetypal "crime in the park," the first sin of Adam in Eden—and recapitulates also his defense by his loving wife, ALP (Anna Livia Plurabelle).

One, two, three, four: one crime,

two women, three witnesses, four judges; one king, two heirs, three suitors, four adjudicators; the age of kings, the age of knights, the age of policemen, the age of satirists. The cycle can go on forever, producing new names but the same relationships at every turn. Yet the point is clear. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce thinks himself all the way back to a "monomyth," the central, crucial myth behind all later stories, and he relocates it within the context of the everyday.

In fact, the famous "difficulty" of *Finnegans Wake* is largely an illusion. No one, of course, can read it with a total comprehension of what the author meant by every single word, but can this claim really be made for any but the silliest books published in the history of printing? Learning to read the *Wake*, I said, is learning what it is like to read; and part of that learning is the realization that all stories, as the "author's original intention," are irrevocably closed to us; and that all stories, as a creative *interchange* between author and reader, are infinitely suggestive.

No Penalties

When "a part so ptee does duty for the holos we soon grow to use of an allforabit," he says early on in the book. You don't have to recognize the puns on the French *petit* ("little") or Greek *holos* ("whole") to realize that the author is telling you, here as everywhere, just how to use his book. The "allforabit"/alphabet of *Finnegans Wake* is a language composed of all the languages of the world, just as the central story of death-fall-resurrection is composed of all the mythologies of the world.

The "difficulty" of reading the *Wake* stems not from its being written in an impossibly private lan-

guage, but rather from its being written in perhaps the most outrageously universal language ever devised for a single piece of fiction. The book *is* an "all for a bit," an alphabet of the human imagination.

Of course, the book is a failure, at least in the terms people use to "rate" masterpieces. It has become virtually a byword for incomprehensibility. And that is a great pity. For the *Wake* is *not* a book to read—it is a book to read from. You sample it the way orthodox Muslims are told to recite the Koran: "as much as may be easy for you." And there is, of course, no penalty attached to reading a paragraph a month as opposed to reading five hundred pages a day.

Inventing a New Sin

Joyce died in Zurich in 1941, two years after *Finnegans Wake* was published, exhausted, ill, and still daydreaming of the Dublin he had left in rage nearly 40 years before. During most of the composition of the *Wake*, he had been too nearly blind to write and had dictated much of it to a young Irishman with literary ambitions, whom he had adopted as a protégé and secretary; his name was Samuel Beckett.

It used to be a commonplace to observe that, with the *Wake*, Joyce had taken the art of the novel to an unsurpassable limit; that this work represented both the culmination and death of the novel. While this observation may be precipitous, it is fair to say that after Joyce the novel will never be the same. He was too idiosyncratic a genius to leave visible heirs or specific influences behind him. But as the English critic Frank Kermode once said of John Milton, he made possible a whole new way of writing badly as well as brilliantly. (This is tantamount in originality to

inventing a new sin and should be recognized as a major accomplishment.)

Joyce's progress from the hyper-realism of *Dubliners* to the dream-vision of *Finnegans Wake* is a kind of map for the possibilities of recent European and American fiction. For that fiction has alternated—and will probably continue to alternate for some time—between photograph and dream, between an obsessive reconstruction of the world as it is and a hallucinatory presentation of the world as it feels. Joyce may well have been the last writer—at least for a while—to give us both visions of the novel at once.

Storytelling is one of the oldest professions, and Joyce understood—as almost no writer had understood before him—that it is the idea of *story*, and not later, partial formulations such as “novel” or “fairy tale,” that really matters. In a lifetime of trying to write stories, he found himself driven more and more back to the beginnings of story, which are also the beginnings of language. He forced upon us the knowledge that “modernist” fiction could go in only one direction—back: back to the roots of mythmaking; back to the origins of story in the primal inter-

change of human consciousness and external reality, dream and waking.

Like all artists, great or ordinary, he told us nothing new. “Poetry makes nothing happen,” wrote W. H. Auden in 1939, in what is probably the shortest and smartest thing anyone ever said about the usefulness of literature. *Finnegans Wake*, unlike the general theory of relativity, tells us absolutely nothing about the world we could not have guessed before. But it *reminds* us of things we may have forgotten, and things we apparently have to keep reminding ourselves of—else why continue to tell stories at all?

More than anything else, *Finnegans Wake*, and Joyce's whole work, reminds us of the immense value of life and of the degree to which any human experience implies worlds and words of meaning, of mythic memory. Joyce is no wasteland artist: If he has become a name for his century, it is because he understood and, against all odds, loved his century so much. In the midst of the wasteland, he found life, and life abundantly. That inheritance may well be the distinctive vocation of the modern novelist: to locate, in the heart of a terrible and potentially suicidal century, causes for rejoicing.



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