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Unknown Quantity: Joyce’s Words

Joseph Brooker

> A word is enough to set me off.
>
> James Joyce[1]

On 16 June 1954, Myles na gCopaleen marked the fiftieth Bloomsday by devoting his column in the *Irish Times* to James Joyce. Although Myles’s creator Brian O’Nolan was that day participating in a ‘pilgrimace’ through the locations of *Ulysses*, the column was notably negative. ‘Every foreign-language quotation in any of his works known to me are wrong’, Myles stormed: ‘His few sallies at Greek are wrong, and his few attempts at a Gaelic phrase are absolutely monstrous’.[2] The charge is harsh even by the resentful Myles’s standards. But one speck of truth in it is that, while Joyce’s pages are sprinkled with multilingual erudition, their most vital encounters with linguistic foreignness are to be found, not in ‘foreign languages’ but in English itself. Joyce said as much in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), during Stephen Dedalus’s encounter with an English Jesuit:

> - The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.[3]

The cultural and political point is that English is a foreign imposition on the tongue of an Irish speaker: the background is the decline of the Irish language after 300 years of anglicization. But if the political point is clear, the empirical claim is odd. For a Dubliner around 1900, English was less foreign a language than Irish. The Gaelic League, bidding to revive the national language, had only begun work in 1893. James Joyce himself did not long remain a student of Irish, chafing under Patrick Pearse’s tutelage. Brian O’Nolan was aware of this, but could be more generous about it than he was in 1954. In a 1942 letter to Sean O’Casey, he reflected that the Irish language, while abused by the *Gaeligores* and bureaucrats of the Free State, nonetheless ‘supplies that unknown quantity in us that enables us to transform the English language and this seems to hold for people who have little or no Irish, like Joyce. It seems to be an inbred thing’.[4]

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[1] Quoted in Frank Budgen, ‘Further Recollections of James Joyce’, in *James Joyce and the Making of ‘Ulysses’* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1934]), p.365.
[2] See Peter Costello and Peter van de Kamp, *Flann O’Brien: An Illustrated Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p.16.
[3] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* ed. Seamus Deane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992 [1916]), p.205.
[4] See Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), p.131.

The 'unknown quantity' for O'Nolan is Irish, whose legacy allows a writer to inhabit English yet stand askew to it, a resident alien whose ambiguous relation to the tongue echoes the ambiguity of Ireland's historic relations with the British state. O'Nolan's claim humbly offers an insoluble mystery: that even a writer without Irish is profoundly guided by it. But one answer to the mystery is a plain fact: the Irish had indeed transformed English, into that hybrid tongue we know as Hiberno-English. Ireland's English was already different from England's; and English readers can now obtain a full-fledged Hiberno-English Dictionary to guide us through the inventions, conjunctions, conversions and mistranslations that contribute to its rich vocabulary.[5] For explanation and evidence, the dictionary's editor Terence Dolan cites literary examples: many of them from Joyce. And a glance through *Ulysses* will swiftly confirm the importance of Dublin dialect to the book's flavour.

Joyce's dialogue was of central interest to his Irish readers during his lifetime. That was partly because it was often spoken by characters based on people they knew, or even people they happened to be. Reputedly the first question people asked in Dublin in 1922, of anyone who could get hold of a copy, was 'Am I in it?'.[6] One man mentioned in an anecdote in the book sued the BBC for libel when they adapted it for radio; another character, captured as a young man in the novel, spent the rest of his life insisting 'I am not a character in fiction, I am a living being'.[7] Dialogue was one place in the book where Dublin voices spoke, however far Joyce was from Dublin when he wrote it: the woman asked how her husband is, replying

> - O, don't be talking!... He's a caution to rattlesnakes. He's in there now with his lawbooks finding out the law of libel. He has me heartscalded. Wait till I show you[8],

the drinker who exclaims of his 'alemates'

> - Lord love a duck… Look at what I'm standing drinks to! Cold water and gingerpop! Two fellows that would suck whisky off a sore leg (146).

One of the many linguistic acts of the book is a remembrance of tones past, a fond archiving of the fund of wit, dialectal idiosyncrasy and, sometimes, verbal malice that Joyce had left behind – as much the speech of his father's generation as of his own.[9] Sometimes tiny touches were central to the book's verbal fidelity. 'Eh, mister! Your fly is open, mister!' (280), a woman shouts in chapter 12: in that second 'mister' Brian O'Nolan detected vernacular virtuosity.[10] For all the manic resentment of the later O'Nolan, he would always assert that Joyce had possessed the acutest ear of any writer for Dublin speech. Coming from the creator of The Brother, that was quite a compliment.

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[5] Terence Patrick Dolan (ed), *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998).

[6] Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, second edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.530.

[7] See Ellmann, *James Joyce*, pp.363-4, and Flann O'Brien, *Stories and Plays* (London: Paladin, 1991), p.173.

[8] James Joyce, *Ulysses*, corrected text ed. Hans Walter Gabler (London: Bodley Head, 1986), p.129. Subsequent references given in parentheses.

[9] On the centrality of that generation to Joyce's imagination, see John Wyse Jackson with Peter Costello, *John Stanislaus Joyce* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997).

[10] See John Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood: Bohemian Dublin at the Mid-Century* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975), p.128.

Dialogue in *Ulysses*, though, is framed by other uses of language: notably, third person narration, which moves characters around, describes objects and events. This element of the book is functional, but it is also a highly-wrought idiom, an instrument of rare precision. Take this description of Leopold Bloom's cat:

> Clean to see: the gloss of her sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes (45).

Colons habitually make Joyce's prose itself clean to see, possessed of a neatness, an aura of exactitude, of the weighing and balancing activity that this punctuation mark implies. Striking is the tidiness, the cleanliness even, of the sentence, which contains 22 words of which only three have more than one syllable. We are almost in a world of pure syllables, words as brief autonomous sounds like the notes of a piano. They may be worth reciting in a different order –

> eyes, gloss, hide, of, white, her, the, see, sleek, clean, the, to, butt, her, of, tail, the, green

– just to bring out something of what words seem to have possessed for Joyce: a kind of autonomy from each other, a portability around the sentence and across the page. As we advance into the book, we will find words, and syllabic parts of words, more and more acquiring and flaunting such autonomy.

The Joycean signature here is not the one that the world often thinks it recognizes, extravagant and overflowing, whether that be Molly Bloom's river of reverie, yes I said yes I will Yes (644), or the ingenious inventions of *Finnegans Wake*, 'the hoarder hidden propaguting his plutorpopular progeniem of pots and pans and pokers and puns from biddenland to boughtenland, the spearway fore the spoorway'[11] – but something much simpler and starker. And in contrasting it with those snatches of dialogue, we see another salient feature: it is not obviously Irish. A careful distance is maintained between the local colour of Joyce's dialogue and the delocalized detachment of the descriptive discourse that frames it. Joyce wrote in a period of both political and cultural nationalism, in which the recovery or reinvention of indigenous Irish creative forms was encouraged. In the decade before he wrote *Ulysses*, John Millington Synge had staged his great sequence of plays, from *Riders to the Sea* to *The Playboy of the Western World*, all of them animated by a new dramatic idiom: a Hiberno-English hybrid, drawn from the dialects spoken in the West of the country and set dancing to Synge's sprightly, semi-poetic rhythms. That was a creative achievement, but it is not one that Joyce's narrative prose follows. In describing his first collection of stories, *Dubliners* (1914), Joyce had proposed the phrase 'scrupulous meanness'.[12] The language of *Ulysses* is not mean, but it is scrupulous, still more so than that of his previous books: and in its canny, painstaking restraint it shows an Irishman writing English without needing to prove his Irish credentials at the level of style. As Myles na gCopaleen, impatient with anxious displays of Irishness, would one day ask his Dublin readers: 'If, after all, you are not Irish, who is?'.[13] If Hiberno-English was a semi-foreign relation of Standard English, then to Joyce it was also the language of home: and that homely language is not the

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[11] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber, 1975 [1939]), p.78.

[12] See James Joyce, *Selected Letters* ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber, 1975), p.83.

[13] Flann O'Brien, *At War: Myles na gCopaleen 1940-1945* ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Duckworth, 1999), p.145.

dominant idiom of his book. Samuel Beckett would flee to French to escape the tongue's over-ready offerings: less dramatically, Joyce's narration also keeps its distance from the indigenous speech he lovingly records.

Nor is Joyce's prose like that produced in London. Arguably no-one writing English prose before Joyce would have written that sentence about the cat quite as he did. Or these:

> She blinked up out of her avid shameclosing eyes, mewing plaintively and long, showing him her milkwhite teeth (45)

- where one key element in Joyce's writing, the unhyphenated compound word, makes two appearances, as again in the butcher's shop down the road:

> The ferreteyed porkbutcher folded the sausages he had snipped off with blotchy fingers, sausagepink (48).

Here is what happens to coins tendered at the counter:

> They lay, were read quickly and quickly slid, disc by disc, into the till (49).

One of the simplest acts imaginable, habitual and unthinking, is broken down to its temporal stages, recited one by one, with quiet rhyme – 'quickly slid, disc by disc, into the till': the vowel sound repeated six times in eight words – and that central chiasmatic repetition, 'read quickly and quickly slid', which is the giveaway that something just slightly odd is going on with style, that some trace of the poetic inheres in this prose, whose odd patterns, unlike the act of payment, are not habitual.

What Joyce describes in such passages is deeply ordinary: looking at a cat; watching a butcher wrap sausages; buying a kidney. Joyce was not the first to write about this mundane matter: that is one of the great vocations of realist fiction, a vocation Joyce does not disdain. But he renders it in a distinctive idiom, which seems both to cleave to the act described and to pull away from its predictability: to be remarkably faithful to everyday actions, while at the same time somehow estranging them. 'Clean to see' indeed describes Joyce in this mode: the phrase is after all one way of expressing what Victor Shklovsky had recently said literature ought to do with seeing.[14]

Repeatedly as this style unfurls through the first eight chapters or so, we may remark small, telling signature moments. Leopold Bloom tears up an envelope:

> The shreds fluttered away, sank in the dank air: a white flutter, then all sank (65).

Someone tosses away a match:

> At their feet its red speck died: and mouldy air closed round them (189).

Bloom looks in to a restaurant:

[14] See Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3-24.

> Hot mockturtle vapour and steam of newbaked jampuffs rolypoly poured out from Harrison's. The heavy noonreek tickled the top of Mr Bloom's gullet (129).

'Newbaked' and 'noonreek' are felicitous conjoinings, but this writing is as distinguished as much by its dedication to economy as by extravagance. Joyce is loading compact units of prose with what might take a looser writer twice as many words. One result is a challenging strangeness of syntax, unusual sequences of words, as in Bloom's experience at a shop window:

> Perfume of embraces all him assailed. With hungered flesh obscurely, he mutely craved to adore (138).

These are the two sentences whose ordering Joyce claimed had cost him a day's labour.[15] In such a remark Joyce was cultivating an image as – what Wyndham Lewis later called him – the craftsman[16]: but he was generating the sentences to justify it.

All these lines show cunning – which, along with John Cagey silence, we recall was one of the values that Stephen Dedalus promised to use at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. One of Joyce's most substantial but more undervalued contributions to writing in English has been a certain minimalism, quite oddly at odds with the overflow that we know we'll find elsewhere in his work; and with other writers who were likewise aiming for fidelity to the real. Henry James, for instance: I open almost at random *The Golden Bowl*, a book published the year *Ulysses* is set, and find this:

> It may be mentioned also that he always figured other persons – such was the law of his nature – as a numerous array, and that, though conscious of but a single near tie, one affection, one duty deepest-rooted in his life, it had never for many minutes together been his portion not to feel himself surrounded and committed, never quite been his refreshment to make out where the many-coloured human appeal, represented by gradations of tint, diminishing concentric zones of intensity, of importunity, really faded to the impersonal whiteness for which his vision sometimes ached.[17]

A sentence like those 94 words is literally unthinkable in *Ulysses*, save as parody: indeed there are parodies near the end of the book that look a little like it.[18] Both James and Joyce are seeking to describe, to give some object or experience its due in English prose, but in these masterpieces those impulses pull them in utterly opposite directions. For James, at this stage, the bid to nail something in writing asks continually for more words, one more clause, one more qualifying explanation which would offer the last note of clarification: so the sentence runs on as long as such new qualifications arise. For Joyce in the first half of *Ulysses*, concision is a sign of fidelity: the snapshot of Bloomsday 1904 is achieved less by adding more and more words than by subtracting them and moving them around until they form the sudden

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[15] See Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses'*, p.20.

[16] See Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993 [1927]), p.88.

[17] Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1904]), pp.129-130.

[18] Fredric Jameson has opined that chapter 16, 'Eumaeus', may be a vast parody of James: see his '*Ulysses* in History', in *James Joyce and Modern Literature* ed. W.J. McCormack and Alastair Stead (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p.138.

striking order they do on the pages we have. For all that the book looks big and teeming, it is driven for a long time by the opposite: a quietness, an economy, even an ecology of language in which words are not to be wasted. And for all the exuberance of the book's second half, it may be those descriptions of cats and sausages that have cleared the most space for writers in the last 80 years.

But we might not fully recognize their novelty without the greater novelties that follow them and made Joyce's status as a re-inventor of language less easy to miss. Chapter ten is known as 'Sirens', the episode of music: here those elements of prose which have been so carefully arranged for 200 pages are set waltzing. 'Sirens' shows continuities from the language that we've come to know, yet also something strangely different. Here are two barmaids, idling and awaiting custom:

> She poured in a teacup tea, then back in the teapot tea. They cowered under their reef of counter, waiting on footstools, crates upturned, waiting for their teas to draw. They pawed their blouses, both of black satin, two and nine a yard, waiting for their teas to draw, and two and seven (212).

No word here is inherently difficult, recondite or invented by the author: all are everyday. But the paragraph develops its own strangeness. That first sentence, with its disconcerting work of description, is divided in two by a comma: on either side six words, only the fifth of each set over one syllable. Similar to the one about the cat: but odd, too, the symmetry of this sentence – as though its form is taking over from its meaning, or assuming an equal right in its formation. Through the rest of the paragraph we can see, or rather hear, auditory factors shaping the words: 'cowered' half-rhyming with 'counter', 'draw' with 'pawed'. And what a queer final sentence:

> They pawed their blouses, both of black satin, two and nine a yard, waiting for their teas to draw, and two and seven.

Queer for two reasons. One, its pedantry: do we need to know the exact costs of the blouses? A similar effect is achieved later when Joyce solemnly recites one of the barmaid's addresses (221): information we are disconcerted to receive, that feels excessive in a work of fiction. Two, the way that this already peculiar sentence is broken by that phrase 'waiting for their teas to draw', which is a hangover from the end of the previous line. Perhaps it's mimetic: the repetition says that they're still waiting, and thus, as Beckett will do thirty years later, voices the monotony of waiting. At the same time it's a repetition of a motif, a reiterated sound: it's thus part of the auditory bias of 'Sirens', which sets out to be founded on sound. Sound, for these 30 pages or so, bids to be the dominant motivation of language, the prime mover, taking precedence over sense but also taking sense with it, in a dance where meaning follows music's lead.

> Shrill, with deep laughter, after, gold after bronze, they urged each other to peal after peal, ringing in changes, bronzegold, goldbronze, shrilldeep, to laughter after laughter. And then laughed more (214).

From here, there are many more styles. But perhaps one factor unites the idioms that follow: insincerity. Style after style is piled on the pile, essayed, enlarged, exaggerated, exhausted and discarded, ironized by their proximity. Take just one

sentence from the chapter, late in the book, where Joyce collects clichés and lines them up like seashells:

> It was a subject of regret and absurd as well on the face of it and no small blame to our vaunted society that the man on the street, when the system really needed toning up, for the matter of a couple of paltry pounds was debarred from seeing more of the world they lived in instead of being always and ever cooped up since my old stick-in-the-mud took me for a wife (513).

When T.S. Eliot said that Joyce had shown up 'the futility of all the English styles'[19], he was pointing to this radical relativization, of English styles indeed by an Irishman in Europe; and it becomes clearer how much that stylistic whirligig encodes political as well as purely formal mockery.[20]

Joyce's achievement in *Ulysses* was thus to bring language to a perfect pitch, and veer off-key; to carve sentences like gems, then dig for fool's gold; to write English prose better than anyone had before, then show that if he wanted to he could write it worse than anyone had before, and make us reflect that the two abilities were intimately connected, in an extended exhibition of virtuosity and travesty. If Joyce left later writers one overriding bequest, it may be an attitude to language: a state of estrangement, in which the word, let alone the sentence, is a piece of matter to be surveyed from different angles, taken apart and reconstructed, letter by letter if necessary. The writer as technician; the sentence as unique machine, or as a foreign field of force in which each colon's location becomes a matter of life and dead calm. The image of the aesthete thus becomes not languorous but rigorous.

If Synge and O'Casey made from their 'unknown quantity' a flagrantly Irish idiom, Joyce's took him in a different direction, towards this brand of foreignness: the gaze of the stranger, cannily cautious around words and their risky freights of meaning. That version of the stylist was not only Joyce's: the vision seems to enter English prose by the view of Flaubert propagated by Pound and others[21], and to that extent is a cross-cultural, Franco-Anglo-Irish-American translation in itself. But Joyce offers its most intense twentieth-century embodiment, and his pages may be attended as a school for stylists, whose playground rings with unleashed voices. If his work has stood as a unique challenge to translators, it has also represented their own customary and exemplary condition, alternately or simultaneously immersed in a language and productively, quizzically stranded outside it.

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[19] Quoted in Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Grafton, 1978), p.75.

[20] The most convincing statement of this to date is Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in 'Ulysses'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[21] See Ezra Pound, *Pound/Joyce* ed. Forrest Read (New York: New Directions, 1967), *passim*, and Joseph Brooker, *Joyce's Critics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp.10-14. For a recent restatement of Flaubert's importance for modern style, see James Wood, *The Broken Estate* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), pp.48-55.