

Inked Characters Never Fading

REET SOOL

Abstract

“Inked characters fast fading on the frayed breaking paper,” a sentence by Joyce in the “Hades” episode of *Ulysses* that inspired the title of the present essay, reads more like poetry than prose. This could well be said of Joyce’s entire oeuvre. According to Martin Heidegger, the opposite of the poem is not prose, for what is purely spoken is poetic itself, as is, essentially, all human dwelling upon the earth beneath the sky where mortals may measure themselves against the godhead. It is in this spirit that Joyce’s masterpiece is viewed—as poetry (in prose) that, unlike the immortelles in Dublin churchyard, will never fade.

I have borrowed the title of my essay, a tentative attempt, really, as the etymology of the word suggests, from *Ulysses*, modifying (and thereby inevitably mutilating) a beautifully balanced sentence, “Inked characters fast fading on the frayed breaking paper.”¹ Bluntly put, this is Bloom scanning the deaths in the newspaper. But it is not in this mood that we would like to read this line. Indeed, it reads more like poetry than prose—the lovely alliteration of “fast fading,” “frayed,” and the repeated gliding diphthongs in “fading,” “frayed breaking paper” testify to this. The scene is set in a carriage heading to the cemetery, the site that emphasizes the brevity of human life, the fading and fraying of its bloom (sic) subtly likened to those of the printed letters on the paper as the rain begins to fall:

A raindrop spat on his hat. He drew back and saw an instant of shower spray dots over the grey flags. Apart. Curious. Like through a colander. I thought it would. My boots were creaking I remember now. (*U* 6.129-32)

Internal rhyme, alliteration, inversion, the euphony and musicality of sounds, and above all, the rhythm, together with the careful diction and

subtle imagery, add to the highly poetic quality of Joyce's prose. In this connection, the concluding sentence of Sara Sullam in her scholarly article "Inspiring Dante: The Reasons of Rhyme in *Ulysses*" is most intriguing: "A confirmation, were it needed, that poetry is indeed the stuff of *Ulysses*."² She has, needless to say, presented her case convincingly, and I would like to proceed from where she stopped. Poetry, as I see it, is not only "the stuff of *Ulysses*," *Ulysses* itself *is* poetry. It is, in conventional terms, the art or work of James Joyce the poet who transcends the traditional divisions of literature, whose writing resembles what is generally accepted as poetry in a number of ways, less in form, yet certainly in essence (beauty, harmony, grace, to mention only a few characteristics).

Resemblances aside, it is the essence that concerns us at this point. Martin Heidegger, when dwelling on the nature of language, says: "What is spoken purely is that in which the completion of the speaking that is proper to what is spoken is, in its turn, an original. What is spoken purely is the poem."³ Heidegger returns to the theme later on as follows:

Mortal speech is a calling that names, a bidding which, out of the simple onefold of the difference, bids thing and world to come. What is purely bidden in mortal speech is what is spoken in the poem. Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer.

The opposite of what is purely spoken, the opposite of the poem, is not prose. Pure prose is never "prosaic". It is as poetic and hence as rare as poetry.⁴ (cf. also Emerson's idea of language being "fossil poetry"⁵)

In the light of the above, could we assume that *Ulysses*, too, is "purely spoken," and as such, as rare as poetry, or poetry itself? For this we must touch upon Heidegger's thinking as he presents it in his famous lecture, published under the title ". . . *Poetically Man Dwells* . . .," a phrase taken from a late poem by Hölderlin, "In lieblicher Bläue. . .," translated as "In lovely blueness. . ."⁶ (also as "In lovely blue . . ."⁷). The enveloping phrasing reads as follows: "Full of merit, yet poetically, man / dwells on this earth."⁸ This "dwelling" has to be understood essentially, in terms of human existence, not as "merely one form of human behavior alongside many others,"⁹ and it means "every man and all the time," as Heidegger suggests.¹⁰ Even though our daily dwelling is full of toil and anxiety, "made insecure by the hunt for gain and success, bewitched by the

entertainment and recreation industry,”¹¹ and there seems to be no room for anything else, least of all, the poetic, this does not prove Hölderlin wrong. When understood essentially (and I have simplified grossly), the phrase “poetically man dwells” says that “poetry first causes dwelling to be dwelling. Poetry is what really lets us dwell.”¹² It does so through poetic creation which is a kind of building, making—in Greek, *poiesis*. Man can arrive at the nature of dwelling and poetry through language, but only when he respects language’s own nature. Man, according to Heidegger, is not the master and shaper of language. It is the language that speaks (“die Sprache spricht”¹³), not man. “Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal. . . . But the responding in which man authentically listens to the appeal of language is that which speaks in the element of poetry. The more poetic a poet is—the freer (that is, the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying. . . .”¹⁴ Importantly, man dwells poetically “on this earth,” with poetry not flying and hovering above, but making man belong to the earth, bringing him into dwelling. “Full of merit,”¹⁵ toiling on this earth, man is allowed to look up in the sky toward divinities. “The upward glance spans the between of sky and earth. This between is measured out for the dwelling of man.”¹⁶ Man spans the dimension by measuring himself against the heavenly (“Man measures himself against the godhead,” as Hölderlin says,¹⁷ his dwelling depends on this upward-looking measure-taking of the dimension to which both sky and earth belong. This taking of measure is what is poetic in dwelling. Poetry, as Heidegger interprets Hölderlin, is a measuring, a very special measuring, by which man receives the breadth of his being—as a mortal on this earth beneath the sky that for him is the manifestation of the unknown and unknowable, the godhead. Poetry and dwelling belong together, each calling for the other. As for the woes of contemporary man (the lecture was held in 1951), whose existence does not seem to be poetic at all, Heidegger says the following: “For dwelling can be unpoetic only because it is in essence poetic. For man to be blind, he must remain a being by nature endowed with sight. A piece of wood can never go blind.”¹⁸ Thus, we could think of this all as applicable to life in Dublin as depicted by Joyce in *Ulysses*, as indeed throughout his entire oeuvre. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, entrapped in this technical-technological world of ours, our plight is about the same. So the need persists to be heedful of the poetic since it is only through this that we can understand the essence of our being, even though in the form of an absence, and a very essential one at that. In this sense, then, our condition today is not essentially other than in Joyce’s lifetime.

But the scene is still the route to the cemetery, which foregrounds the sense of man's mortality more than anything else. There is this weird sense of anticipation, created by several repetitions that contribute to the rise of tension. For instance, the verb "to wait" occurs four times at short intervals on the same page, and the recurring nouns "wheels" and "hoofs" serve the same function. The use of words containing the letter "r," as in "wreaths," "front," "nearer," "carriage," "creaking," "craped," "tram-tracks," "rattled rolling," "Tritonville road" and the last part of the final sentence, "the crazy glasses rattling in the doorframes," adds to the effect of nervousness, the "r" sound conveying also a sense of sharpness, impatience:

All waited. Nothing was said. Stowing in the wreaths probably. I am sitting on something hard. Ah, that soap: in my hip pocket. Better shift it out of that. Wait for an opportunity.

All waited. Then wheels were heard from in front, turning: then nearer; then horses' hoofs. A jolt. Their carriage began to move, creaking and swaying. Other hoofs and creaking wheels started behind. The blinds of the avenue passed and number nine with its craped knocker, door ajar. At walking pace.

They waited still, their knees jogging, till they had turned and were passing along the tramtracks. Tritonville road. Quicker. The wheels rattled rolling over the cobbled causeway and the crazy glasses rattling in the doorframes. (*U* 6.21-29)

The various fragmented associations of Bloom, the bits of conversation, not entirely unlike the jolting movement of the carriage, deal with death, the death of the newly-born and the elderly, the indiscriminating reaper. It is death that the men in the carriage journey to, their own as much as that of Paddy Dignam, death, of which only man is capable, as Heidegger puts it:

The mortals are human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death as death. Only man dies. The animal perishes. It has death neither ahead of itself nor behind it. The Death is the shrine of Nothing, that is, of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself. As the shrine of Nothing, death harbors within itself the presencing of Being. As the shrine of Nothing, death is the shelter of Being. We now call mortals mortals—not because their earthly life comes to an end, but because they

are capable of death as death. Mortals are who they are, as mortals, present in the shelter of Being. They are the presencing relation to Being as Being.¹⁹

The characters whose peregrinations we follow during this one day are what might be called simple people toiling upon this earth for their daily bread, mortals who sense the presence of death and their mortality often enough, and especially in the context of the funeral at hand. The theme is handled explicitly—"Thanking her stars she was passed over," "Extraordinary the interest they take in a corpse," "Job seems to suit them," "Then getting it ready. Laying it out" (*U* 6.13-17) as streams of thought flitting through Bloom's mind, turning from the general into the personal, poignant memories of his dead son: "If little Rudy had lived. See him grow up. Hear his voice in the house. Walking beside Molly in an Eaton suit. My son. Me in his eyes" (*U* 6.75-76). Conspicuously, thoughts of death are immediately followed by memories of conception (in the vulgar key) and pregnancy, and thence through sound-association (Molly-Milly) to Bloom's daughter and to the general again: "Yes, yes: a woman too. Life life" (*U* 6.89-90), the "yes" here a faint harbinger of the powerful final one. The dog's home triggers the memories of the suicide note of Bloom's father, and the subsequent death of his dog: "He took it to heart, pined away. Quiet brute. Old men's dogs usually are" (*U* 6.127-28). The dog, Athos, named after a fictional character, has been accordingly presented in terms of having human feelings. At this point, let us remember Heidegger's remark: "Only man dies. The animal perishes. It has death neither ahead of itself nor behind it."²⁰ The various memorials passed on the way to the cemetery remind the characters (and readers) simultaneously of mortality and the Irish past, its losses and resistance. In a cynical spirit, Bloom thinks of Smith O'Brien, the hero of 1848, while driving past his statue: "Someone has laid a bunch of flowers there. Woman. Must be his deathday. For many happy returns" (*U* 6.225-26). The coined compound word "deathday" followed by the conventional birthday greeting foreshadows the unconventional treatment of the physical side of death further on. Here, too, associations of death and birth mingle, concluding in the statement, "Better luck next time" (*U* 6.330), a proper match for the deathday wish, to wind their way to suicide. In this connection, however, one could think of the ancient Celtic doctrine of the immortality of the soul: "When a soul dies in this world, it is reborn in the Otherworld. When a soul dies in the Otherworld, it is reborn in this. Thus birth was greeted with mourning and death with exaltation by the ancient Celts, customs that the Greeks and Latins

remarked on with some surprise.²¹ “From one extreme to the other” (*U* 6.382), to use a remark out of context. And again, a general statement of the “Life life” kind: “Funerals all over the world everywhere every minute. Shovelling them under by the cartload doublequick. Thousands every hour. Too many in the world” (*U* 6.514-16). And a manifest awareness of the dead as death: “Always in front of us” (*U*. 6.583). To quote Heidegger again: “As the shrine of Nothing, death is the shelter of Being.”²² And Joyce: “In the midst of death we are in life. Both ends meet” (*U* 6.759-60). “Only man dies,” says Heidegger.²³ “Only man buries,” writes Joyce (*U* 6.809-10). Images of gravel, ground, clay, soil, earth, mud, and dirt all combine to strengthen the idea of man toiling upon this earth, belonging to it, and finally becoming it, out of which flowers (of sleep) spring up: “Chinese cemeteries with giant poppies growing produce the best opium Mastiansky told me. The Botanic gardens are just over there. It’s the blood sinking in the earth gives new life” (*U* 6.769-71). Note also the musicality produced by the careful orchestration of certain sound combinations, as for example in this passage:

All followed them out of the sidedoors into the mild grey air. Mr Bloom came last folding his paper again into his pocket. He gazed gravely at the ground till the coffincart wheeled off to the left. The metal wheels ground the gravel with a sharp grating cry and the pack of blunt boots followed the trundled barrow along a lane of sepulchers. (*U* 6.634-39)

We might also notice the frequent use of the adverb “gravely”: “He gazed gravely at the ground till the coffincart wheeled off to the left” (*U* 6.637-38), “Mr Bloom nodded gravely . . .” (*U* 6.661), “Martin Cunningham emerged from a sidepath, talking gravely” (*U* 6.1006), originating from the Latin *gravis*, meaning heavy, and phonetically resembling the Germanic word *grave*. Intriguingly, we could see a metaphysical joke on time, a witty pun, in the following sequence: “Bury the dead. Say Robinson Crusoe was true to life. Well then Friday buried him. Every Friday buries a Thursday if you come to look at it” (*U* 6.810-12). The statement “The Irishman’s house is his coffin” (*U* 6.821-22), a modification of the English proverb “An Englishman’s house is his castle,”²⁴ is, however, even more interesting in this relation. Apart from its obvious political innuendo, this could be seen in the light of Heidegger’s view of language as the house of Being: “Language is the precinct (*templum*), that is, the house of Being”²⁵ (echoed in Derrida’s famous dictum “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”²⁶). It follows from

this that the Irishman's house (of Being) is the Irish language, and if this is dead (or on the verge of extinction), his house is indeed his coffin. Or, put differently, the loss of one's language is the death of a people as a people. By way of comparison, Stephen's thoughts in the company of the dean in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

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.²⁷

From this it is a short way to Parnell and the sad observation of his falling into oblivion: "Even Parnell. Ivy day dying out. Then they follow: dropping into a hole, one after the other" (*U* 6.855-56). As the mourners move, so do their thoughts, as Joyce has gracefully put it: "They turned to the right, following their slow thoughts" (*U* 6.921).

It is high time we did the same, following the Heideggerian line of the fourfold structure of mortals, earth, sky, and immortals as present(ed) in this novel that, by measuring the extent of human existence, reminds us that we, too, live poetically in this world, although we need not be aware of this. While toiling as mortal on the earth, man turns his glance to the sky, which is the domain and also manifestation of the divine: "God's appearance through the sky consists in a disclosing that lets us see what conceals itself, but lets us see it not by seeking to wrest what is concealed out of its concealedness, but only by guarding the concealed in its self-concealment. Thus the unknown god appears as the unknown by way of the sky's manifestness."²⁸ Man sees the sights of the sky, thus partaking of the invisible through the visible. But the poet, by naming these, calls them into being. There is the sense of the rain about to fall throughout the "Hades" episode, as the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay tells us:

A raindrop spat on his hat. He drew back and saw an instant of shower spray dots over the grey flags. Apart. Curious. Like through a colander. I thought it would. My boots were creaking I remember now.
—The weather is changing, he said quietly.
—A pity it did not keep up fine, Martin Cunningham said.

INKED CHARACTERS NEVER FADING

—Wanted for the country, Mr Power said. There's the sun again coming out.

Mr Dedalus, peering through his glasses towards the veiled sun, hurled a mute curse at the sky.

—It's as uncertain as a child's bottom, he said.

—We're off again. (*U* 6.129-39)

While the characters are looking up at the sky, there is a difference between how they see it—Bloom sees it with wonder, the “shower spray dots over the grey flags” apart as if they'd fallen “through a colander.” He comments on it “quietly,” while Mr Dedalus does it with a mute curse, using a rude simile. To quote Heidegger writing on Rilke:

The time remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality. Mortals have not yet come into ownership of their own nature. Death withdraws into the enigmatic. The mystery of pain remains veiled. Love has not been learned. But the mortals *are*. They are, in that there is language. Song still lingers over their destitute land. The singer's word still keeps to the trace of the holy.²⁹

We would think then that Bloom is closer to the awareness of his own mortality and the poetic essence of human dwelling than Mr Dedalus is, due to his kindness or love that he has learned (cf. Richard Ellmann's twin observations “If we consider the book as a whole, the theme of love will be seen to pervade it,” and “But allowing for the obliquity necessary to preserve the novel from didacticism or sentimentality, we perceive that the word known to the whole book is love in its various forms, sexual, parental, filial, brotherly, and by extension social”³⁰). Bloom's long streams of consciousness towards the end of the “Hades” episode could rightfully be called both eulogies and elegies in a (Dublin) city churchyard (in this sense, the use of the former word in association with Thomas Gray's poem, instead of the latter, seems quite appropriate), a eulogy being a laudatory speech or written tribute, especially one praising someone who has died, as well as an elegy, lamenting the deceased. While comparing rusty wreaths with live flowers, Bloom resumes: “Still, flowers are more poetical. The other gets rather tiresome, never withering. Expresses nothing. Immortelles” (*U* 6.947-48). Immortelles are any of various plants, such as species of the genera *Helichrysum*, *Xeranthemum*, and *Erythrina*, having flowers that retain their shape and color when dried. One would think that they must fade, eventually. Or

perhaps not? The characters inked by James Joyce, the immortal poet in prose who spoke purely, never will.

Notes

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (New York: Random House, 1986) 6.160; henceforth cited parenthetically as *U* plus page and line number.

² Sara Sullam, "Inspiring Dante: The Reasons of Rhyme in *Ulysses*," *Papers on Joyce* 9 (2003) 66.

³ Martin Heidegger, "Language," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 194.

⁴ Heidegger 208.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979) 1080.

⁶ Heidegger, ". . . *Poetically Man Dwells* . . . ," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 213.

⁷ Friedrich Hölderlin, "In lovely blue . . . ," *Hymns and Fragments*, trans. and intro. Richard Sieburth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 249.

⁸ Heidegger, ". . . *Poetically Man Dwells* . . ." 216.

⁹ Heidegger 214-215.

¹⁰ Heidegger 213.

¹¹ Heidegger 213.

¹² Heidegger 215.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, "Die Sprache," in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985) 30.

¹⁴ Heidegger, ". . . *Poetically Man Dwells* . . ." 216.

¹⁵ Heidegger 216-218.

¹⁶ Heidegger 220.

¹⁷ Heidegger 221.

¹⁸ Heidegger 228.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 178-79.

²⁰ Heidegger 178-79.

²¹ Peter Berresford Ellis, Introduction, in *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (London: Constable 1992) 14-15.

²² Heidegger, "The Thing," 179.

²³ Heidegger 179.

²⁴ See Don Gifford with Robert J. Seidman, "*Ulysses*" *Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's "Ulysses"* (University of California Press, 1989) 121.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 132.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 158.

²⁷ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in *The Essential James Joyce*, intro. Harry Levin (London: HarperCollins, 1991) 373.

²⁸ Heidegger, ". . . *Poetically Man Dwells . . .*" 223.

²⁹ Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" 96.

³⁰ Richard Ellmann, Preface, in James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (New York: Random House, 1986) xiii, xiv.