

Review

María Isabel Porcel García. *Interrelaciones de los personajes en “Ulises” de James Joyce*. Sevilla: Editorial Kronos, 2003, 195 pp.

While most of the dusty “Joycean industry” is devoted today to the supposed inventions of new critical jargons and futile explorations, projected in narcissistic pieces of writing that reflect themselves upon the empty mirror of their own vacuity, read and consumed only by a thankfully scarce and limited circle of scholars, the humble purpose of addressing a stylistically clear and thought-provoking book to general enthusiasts and students of Joyce’s *Ulysses*—whether at the first phase or in a more advanced stage of their learning—cannot convey anything but good news to the unprejudiced reader. In her intelligent and stimulating book, María Isabel Porcel’s main intention is to examine carefully the interrelations of the characters in *Ulysses*, considering her work as an incipient reading guide both for beginners and connoisseurs of Joyce’s complex novel. And the author carries out her purpose with a rare combination of diligence and sensitiveness, amalgamating practical erudition and insightful appreciations, and never avoiding personal nuances when required, this last feature being in my opinion one of the most valuable qualities of her research.

Throughout her study, Porcel attempts to demystify the fallacy of the ultimate illegibility of *Ulysses*, persuading the reader of the immense richness that Joyce’s narrative language contains and reveals, pointing to infinite combinations and interpretations. The eventual finality would be that of helping the reader to achieve the possibility of re-writing or re-creating their own *Ulysses*, a task that can be applied to any literary work, but that becomes especially rewarding with this climactic example of *opera aperta*.

The Protean attributes of Joyce’s characters in the development of the plot of his conspicuous epic and the ideas of ambiguity and transformation are the primordial instruments upon which Porcel bases her theory, assisted by a healthy and appropriate utilization of Joycean bibliography, an exhaustive list that, on the whole, is pertinently and carefully used throughout her well-documented enquiry. Paradoxically enough, it is an uncommon peculiarity in the academic sphere to find scholars who quote from texts when it is truly necessary and relevant.

Quite on the contrary, Porcel exhibits the infrequent ability of citing adequately from theoretical works. She has read *Ulysses* attentively, perceptively and passionately, and the illustration of her arguments through exemplification, taken both from *Ulysses* and the secondary sources (first-rate critical books, with few exceptions), is almost always significant and fluent. Porcel's erudition—for there is clever erudition in her book—is not vacant but constructive and unobstructed.

Porcel's implicit point of departure is that *Ulysses* is an organic whole where everything is interrelated. Many people may defend the same idea from an intellectual perspective, but the important thing about her in this respect is that she puts the idea into textual practice, demonstrating that it is essentially accurate with regard to characters: both primary and secondary *dramatis personae* in Joyce's epic are all inexorably interconnected. Furthermore, "Characters are to the novel what corporal fluids are to the body" (19; my translation). The sense of continuity in Joyce's fiction is a fact that Porcel takes into consideration throughout her analysis, presenting in the introduction a brief history and a useful evaluation of preceding studies of characterization in *Ulysses* and other Joycean works.

In the first chapter, "Characters in *Ulysses*", the Spanish scholar tackles her subject in a broad perspective, emphasizing the importance of language—the authentic protagonist—in the narrative and the fact that, as in *Dubliners*, characters operate within two levels of action: private life and the social environment of the Irish city and her history. Thus, Porcel studies the relations among characters that are brought about by necessity, cohabitation and dependence, and social obligation. She also analyses the interrelations of characters by taking their common features into account and stresses for the first time in her text the importance of the transformations in *Ulysses*. Porcel could recite the lines at the beginning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora*—for transformation is to be one of the relevant *leitmotifs* of her investigation and one of her most significant contributions. On the other hand, the assertion that *Ulysses* could be seen as a forerunner of the so called "magical realism" (42), interesting though it is, seems to be somewhat hyperbolic and would deserve further examination.

Also in this first chapter, Porcel—who alludes conveniently to other Joycean works apart from *Ulysses*—continues to study the interrelations of characters through their encounters with acquaintances, friends and relatives, and underlines the interesting thought that characters in the novel usurp the language of other authors, together with

their ideas. Consequently, Joyce would be warning us about the difficulty that resides in the originality of Art (*sic*). A more specific section deals with the interrelations between Leopold Bloom (the urban antihero) and the secondary characters, insisting on the metaphorical importance of the dead and of images of darkness, death, hallucinations, lethargy and drowsiness, all connected with the act of dreaming itself. This is an ancient and attractive concept: Cicero said that nothing is more similar to death than dreaming (*Nolite tam simile mortuum quam somnum*), and although modern psychology has utterly rejected this viewpoint, it is true that the Joycean microcosm seems to be imbued by it up to a certain extent.

Porcel also detects the narcissistic aspects derived of the fact that the characters in *Ulysses*—like people in what we call “real life”—reflect themselves on others, eager to look for their blurred identity. Porcel distinguishes here the essential greatness of the method of characterization applied by Joyce in his novel, which consists in the capacity of creating characters that possess features of combination that lead to the infinite, perhaps a way of showing the heterogeneous diversity of human nature. Other appealing ideas contained in the same section concern the ambiguity generated by falseness and deceit as a common element in the symbolic associations among characters in *Ulysses*, a fact that contributes to the uncertainty that permeates the text. Linked to this aspect, Porcel describes the interrelations of the characters through some of the different topics in the book, emphasizing those of treason, usurpation and adultery. Porcel also looks at the themes of voice, feet, ghosts, and death by drowning as they appear in *Ulysses*.

Chapter 2 of Porcel’s discerning study explores in more detail the encounters between the main characters in Joyce’s epic, especially those concerning Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom. To introduce the subject, she deals first with the process of elaboration of both protagonists, later going into the explicit encounter of these figures in “Oxen of the Sun” and “Eumaeus”. Porcel underlines here the dramatic nature of the text and the masks used by the characters in order to hide their identities (*Totus mundus agit histrionem*). Some linguists, not devoid of confident pride, still sustain that language is the most important means of communication between human beings, but we, as well as Joyce, are aware of the fact that it is on exceptional occasions that we reach that blissful and unusual experience. Therefore, Porcel accentuates the role played by silence, phatic utterances and torrents of non-meaningful words in *Ulysses*.

Of course, language is the mask that veils our precarious selves, and words are the barriers that thwart authentic communication between people and, by extension, literary characters. Accordingly, Bloom, that epitome of mankind, is a linguistic sign immersed in ambiguity and uncertainty. For instance, he is given a good number of different names throughout the narrative. Characters in *Ulysses* are heterogeneous, open to a multiple variety of interpretations, although all of them are united by the fact that they are ultimately human, with all the greatness and misery that this entails. In "Ithaca", an episode that signals the end of the encounter between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, the irony that pervades the whole text regarding the link between the characters becomes even more recurrent . . . and more painful.

On the other hand, Porcel also investigates the triangle composed by Bloom, Stephen, and Molly. This latter female character fascinates the Spanish scholar, and of course she is not to be blamed for that. She considers Molly the point of balance in the triad of protagonists, just as Anna Livia in *Finnegans Wake*. In the last chapter of her book (significantly entitled "Who Writes 'Penelope'?"), Porcel pays particular attention to Molly's significance as the culminating character in *Ulysses*. Ever present in her husband's mind, this female ghost permeates the whole text of the novel. In the end, she is the one that closes the narrative with her silenced voice (we should not forget that her stream of consciousness is the product of a mental, non-verbal process). However, here Porcel—after having briefly reviewed the most canonical interpretations of the character on the part of literary critics— theorizes about the possibility of Molly being a construction on the part of Bloom.

According to Porcel, the ambiguous woman from Gibraltar would indeed be the product of Bloom's fantasy: "The character becomes the narrator and 'writes' the text, imitating the female voice of Molly, appropriating himself of the feminine, both in form and content, for he wishes to be a mother-creator" (179; my translation). And later: "'Penelope' could be the written representation of Bloom quoting what he considers to be a piece of female discourse, like a ventriloquist of what, following the common stereotype, constitutes the female voice, a style that, according to this interpretation, Joyce would be parodying" (181; my translation). Eventually, Porcel argues, the male author would be nothing but an imitator of the feminine, a thought that the Spanish scholar connects with fantasies of androgyny and transvestism, exemplifying the matter with the interchanging of sexual roles in David Cronenberg's film *M. Butterfly*. In my opinion, Elizabethan and Jacobean plays would undoubtedly have provided a more illustrative case in point

in this context. In the end, Porcel's is undoubtedly a risky but intriguing hypothesis, the boldest idea in a book full of motivating and sensible proposals for analysis. In any case, her attempt at reading *Ulysses* with the text as the main foundation of her arguments is everywhere praiseworthy.

Flaws? Some could be referred to. Although written in fluent Spanish, the text contains what I would consider some minor mistakes, mostly related to punctuation and repetitions. Some ideas are reiterated once and again (perhaps the students to whom Porcel addresses her book would be grateful for what I perceive as a slight defect in it). On the other hand, the intellectually bright analysis lacks some humour, and it is my personal impression that a book concerning Joyce's works should always display this feature. I do not conceive of a study of the great Dubliner's writings—above all when the expected reading public is composed of students—without a recurrent deployment of irony and wordplay on the part of the writer. Sometimes we professors and literary critics compel ourselves to be too serious and solemn, afraid of the effect that our words are going to produce in the academic community. I have the personal intuition that, now and then, Porcel restrains her impulses in this respect. But of course this is just an instinctive appreciation that would be very difficult to prove without the author's own consent and estimation about the matter.

To sum up, the important thing about Porcel's book is that it is fundamentally honest: she does not aim at being "original" but rather coherent. Moreover, her study of the relations established between and among characters in *Ulysses* contains many additional open paths for the reader to explore by him/herself. In general terms, it could be stated that in this book there is the solid foundation of a very helpful guide for the interpretation of *Ulysses*: the parts imply the whole and vice versa. The volume will undeniably represent an important contribution to the more and more ample field of Joycean studies in Spain. Particularly, many young readers will be grateful to Porcel for her effort at putting things for them as clearly as possible, and this is, I think, the best thing I can say in praise of the author's straightforward critical attempt. After reading Porcel's study of the characters in *Ulysses*, we are more aware of who they are when they are at home . . . or, for that matter, in the streets of that dreamlike Dublin that haunts our imagination.

Antonio Ballesteros González