

Sebastian Joyce?

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Abstract

Condensing decades of reflection into brief textual space, this paper asks why Joyce devoted his entire creative life after *Ulysses* to the elaboration of *Finnegans Wake*. A correlate question asked is why, over the course of his work, Joyce placed ever more impenetrable obstacles in the way of his readers. The paper finds provisional answers in the archetype of St. Sebastian, in the interrelated complexities of self-torment, paranoia, and eloquent invective, and in the delights of a method sustained by the pain and difficulty of composition.

After his discharge from Reading Jail, Oscar Wilde retreated to Europe where he traveled under the name Sebastian Melmoth. For certain homosexuals St. Sebastian, the beautiful victim, was an emblem of their condition; but for Wilde, he was perhaps more: the beautiful victim who delights in and invites torment. In short, he could have been taking on yet another role. I will go further and say that the Sebastian role reflects an essentially masochistic personality and that masochism and its anti-type sadism are both potential manifestations of paranoia. My shorthand for that condition is the couple Mars/Sebastian. It would take more space and time that I have at my disposal to flesh all of this out. I'll ask you to take some of it on faith.

Let's turn instead to Joyce as self-cast victim, Joyce the author of books that systematically resist reading and in a sense attack the reader, Joyce the writer who refused "success," Joyce the writer in self-generated torment, Joyce the writer who drew pleasure from the creative pain exacted by his methods. I suggest that the energy derived from that condition or mentality could help explain the creative path he followed.

For years I have tried to understand why Joyce spent seventeen years writing a book that few if any could read. The corollary question is, why did each succeeding book take more time to write and put bigger obstacles up to understanding? It seems obvious that he could have

stopped at any point in his creative trajectory and produced other less challenging work. He might even have made a living for himself. He could also have produced much more than he did, had he not repeatedly challenged himself to reach further and higher. His readership would have been much greater.

Clearly, his procedures were not in either his financial or even “professional” interests. I am leaving aside the aesthetic concerns; but even those could be in play. Were his aesthetic interests really served by his battles with the early publishers? Etc. There is doubtless no single reason for the combination of self-defeating dedication and stubbornness this implies; but perhaps one reason is something very close to his tendency toward Sebastianism, a trait he shared with a number of our greatest writers. (Think Kafka or Beckett.)

It is no secret that Joyce, like his Leopold, had masochistic tendencies. Early on, in *Exiles* and even in his notes for that play, he seems to have recognized this when he cast himself in the role of Richard, who abetted his own betrayal by Robert and Bertha. In *Portrait* Joyce had excoriated that same tendency in the Irish, who he saw repeatedly working against their best interests by nourishing their betrayers. But his creative behavior is a radical example of self-betrayal, of setting himself up for failure.

While he was writing *Ulysses*, he gave clear evidence that he knew that what he was doing could be dangerous, that he courted risk. This is implied by the analysis he made in 1918 of one of Nora’s dreams:

At a performance in the theatre
A newly discovered play by Shakespeare
Shakespeare is present
There are two ghosts in the play.
Fear that Lucia may be frightened.

Interpretation: I am perhaps behind this dream. The “new discovery” is related to my theory of the ghost of Hamlet and the public sensation is related to the possible publication of that theory or of my own play. The figure of Shakespeare present in Elizabethan dress is a suggestion of fame, his certainly (it is the tercentenary of his death) mine not so certainly. The fear for Lucia (herself a little) is fear that either subsequent honours or the future development of my mind or art or its extravagant excursions into forbidden territory may bring unrest into her life. (*JIII* 436-37)

Could he have been projecting his own concerns on her or is this pure egoism? For our purposes it doesn't much matter whether or which. The portraits painted in both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* reinforce this mind set, as do the portraits of his antagonists, Mulligan and Shaun. More importantly, his alter egos persist (as Stephen does in both *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait* when he uses Heron, Cranly and Lynch as wet stones) in cultivating those who offend or betray. The same perverse tendency to take pleasure from being attacked is probably behind the store he put in the poisonously negative reviews garnered by *Ulysses*.

Without claiming to have exhausted the evidence for Joyce's Sebastian-like tendencies. I should mention perhaps his Mars behavior, which tends as does that of most Sebastians to be curiously inflected. If his juvenile "Et tu Healy" and his treatment of Dubliners and publishers in the satirical "Gas from a Burner" are openly hostile, we note a much more nuanced hostility in his portraits of Dubliners and ex-friends in *Portrait* and *Ulysses*. *Finnegans Wake* contains thinly veiled attacks on friends like Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and Dr Collins, to say nothing of his brother Stanislaus. Cosgrave (renamed Lynch), the friend who misled Joyce about Nora's sexual behavior, and Oliver Gogarty, whose friendship he had reason to suspect, are both given less than honorable roles, but the attacks, though wounding, are less than direct. Indeed, Mulligan has some of the funniest lines in the book. The attacks in *Finnegans Wake* may have touched their targets, but they are so fully interwoven in the book's fabric that their target had nothing to fear. I suspect that all of these darts served Joyce as emotional salve while screening him from counterattacks. My point is that though we can point to Joyce's Mars qualities, they are hardly dominant, being those of a shy and sly aggressor. I suggest that the central paradox here is not that the masochist attacks his perceived (and welcomed) aggressor in the text but that the writer writes in a manner that can be perceived on the one hand as a mode of protection against reading (deliberate obscurity and indeed in Joyce's case accelerating difficulty running from the relatively accessible though not undemanding stories in *Dubliners* to the seeming impenetrability of the *Wake*). On the other hand it is a deliberate affront to the reader expecting ready pleasure and relative accessibility, expecting perhaps through the reading of previous texts access to succeeding books.

There is a further dimension worth mentioning because it reverses our field, turning the reader into a willing participant in the sado-masochistic activity. That is, the reader is turned by the text first into the victim of an attack on his or her intelligence and then into proud collaborator: "Look! I have been initiated, have crossed over to the side of the author, have joined an exclusive club, and having gained at least

author, have joined an exclusive club, and having gained at least partial access can now become a hierophant.” Or something similar.

Perhaps this is what Joyce and the authors of other challenging texts have in mind when they spin their webs. I rather doubt it; but there has to be some aesthetic motivation beyond the admittedly hypothetical psychoanalytic ones.

This leads us back to our initial question: Why did Joyce donate so many years of his creative life exclusively to the writing, revising and rerevising of his final behemoth? He had proven by 1922 that he had great things to contribute to the literary universe. He had also and repeatedly set himself higher goals. One could find logical explanations for the development from a portrait of a city to the portrait of an individual to the portrait of a day to the portrait of a night or any such arrangement. One can also justify Joyce’s last project as the embodiment of the universal experience, a tall order requiring the reforming of language itself, the generation of situations susceptible of infinite or quasi-infinite expansion, and the consequent fleshing out and balancing of language, action and information over the years.

That process is clear enough from the manuscript development enhanced by the accompanying notebooks. It is all quite admirable, an enormous effort calling for great abnegation, strenuous and painful accumulation of creations, orts and offal, eyestrain, patience, obstinacy, etc. Still, after years of attention both to the book and to the procedures, and despite my admiration and the pleasure I continue to derive from them, I can’t find an aesthetic rationale for Joyce’s single-minded devotion to the production of a master work destined for a tiny readership, at the expense of all of the other work he might have produced, the successes he could have had from equally satisfying work. Even if we maintain, as I have to myself and my students over the years, that Joyce was writing a LIFE-BOOK, a lived summation in the grand tradition of Goethe’s *Faust*, Flaubert’s unfinished *Bovard et Pécuchet*, Mallarmé’s impossible “Livre” of which the splendidly daunting “Un Coup de Dè” is but a sample, Joyce’s magnum opus is out of scale and perhaps even too expensive.

Even if we admit that a work with ambitions so large merits any amount of time and effort, could Joyce have been deluded into thinking that the efforts would quickly or even gradually find universal recognition? In that case there is a “tragic” ring to the fact that it finally saw daylight at the instant that the lights went out in 1939. What pathos! What a melodrama! What a cause for despair! Had he been less oppressed by fate, Joyce could have seen it through the ironic lens that led him to name the first version of his self portrait “Stephen Hero.”

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It should be clear that, though I may feel for Joyce, I think there are other factors at play, many factors. And that one very significant factor is psychological, related to the psyche of the weaver engaged in weaving his version of Penelope's shroud. There is no reason to doubt that Joyce suffered for his art, as did Flaubert and Beckett inter alia. Evidence of both misery and joy is even clearer on the manuscript pages for the *Wake* with their almost innumerable revisions.