

## “Books You Were Going to Write with Letters as Titles”: Writing as a Failure in *Ulysses*

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Discussing literature within a literary work is something which is relatively common over the history of literature itself. As a result of this commonplace, it is not surprising that in such a long novel as *Ulysses* one also encounters a good deal of references to literature writing, which is not, obviously, a novelty. However, it seems to be a bit striking to realise that most of those references to the practice of literature result in failure, i.e. the writers and, sometimes, readers in *Ulysses* do not get what they want when they write or even when they read.

In order to prove that literature is a failure, i.e. a nonprofitmaking activity for the characters in *Ulysses*, one should first examine the evidence of the text. To begin with, I should like to say that, like other ordinary activities, writing and reading are also present in *Ulysses*. The characters eat, sing, speak, walk, remember, or buy goods. These actions reflect the normal life of the Dublin middle-low class at the beginning of the twentieth century, as Bernard Benstock demonstrates in one of his last articles.<sup>1</sup> Among so many details, readers are also informed of what some characters are attempting to write.

All writers want to be published and read. Otherwise, they fail. Publishing, obviously, means money and fame, two goods that Stephen Dedalus lacks. As a matter of fact, the clearest instance of a failed writer in *Ulysses* is Stephen Dedalus, who has attempted to achieve fame without getting it. Although in his early years in *A Portrait* he wanted to become a writer, however, walking along the edge of the Irish Sea on Sandymount Strand, he significantly feels frustrated as he has not been able to become a major writer, with the words “were going” emphasizing that frustration:

Books you were going to write with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara.<sup>2</sup> (*U* 3.139-43)

But, as opposed to these ideas, Stephen is not a writer, or, at least, we cannot learn it from the pages of *Ulysses*. He earns his living by means of teaching, as we see in chapter 2. Yet, after having resigned from his job, he does not find another one in the novel, mainly because he is not looking for one. Furthermore, he has published nothing, apart from one article in a periodical, as it is informed later in the "Scylla and Charibdis" episode. Actually, the only paper he published, if we have to believe Buck Mulligan, was something on Lady Gregory, but we do not know the title or publisher: "Longworth is awfully sick, he said, after what you wrote about that old hake Gregory" (*U* 9.1158-59).<sup>3</sup>

Being aware of young Dedalus's ideals and education, the literary group at the National Library on Kildare Street ask him for something to publish, but he wants to make some money: "You ought to make it a dialogue, don't you know, like the Platonic dialogues Wilde wrote" (*U* 9.1069), "You are the only contributor to *Dana* who asks for pieces of silver" (*U* 9.1081), "For a guinea, Stephen said, you can publish this interview" (*U* 9.1085).<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, although Stephen never considers or calls himself a writer in *Ulysses*, possibly because frustration has overcome him, others do. This is the case of the Blooms. Both Bloom and Molly think that he is not only an author but also a professor (*U* 17.2262-3, 17.2270, 18.1300-01), although, in contrast, he has actually failed in his attempt, and Joyceans know how reliable Bloom's words are.

It is true that if a character says or thinks something, this does not necessarily have to be the author's opinion. However, there are a lot of personal data in Joyce's works and, as a consequence, it would be interesting to have a look at his biography.<sup>5</sup>

Almost everybody knows that the action in *Ulysses* takes place on 16 June 1904. So far, Joyce had not published very much at that time and did not make money of writing, so he had to live accepting different jobs.<sup>6</sup> But he had tried several times to get published and his works had been rejected by editors. Thus, in the late summer of 1901, young Joyce had put together a collection of his poems and a year before he had made an attempt with the play *A Brilliant Career*.<sup>7</sup> Closer in time, something similar happened in January 1904 to "A Portrait of the Artist," his essay written in style of D'Annunzio, which was rejected for *Dana* by Eglinton for incomprehensibility or by Ryan for sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

Later, he complained about that situation in a long letter to his brother Stanislaus on July, 7, 1905:

I often think to myself that, in spite of the seeming acuteness of my writing, I may fail in life through being too ingenuous . . . The very degrading and unsatisfactory nature of my exile angers me and I do not see why I should continue to drag it out with a view to returning "some day" with money in my pocket and convincing the men of letters that, after all, I was a person of talent.<sup>9</sup>

Joyce published *Ulysses* as a book in 1922 but had begun writing it in 1914.<sup>10</sup> During the process of composition, his luck did not change much, as only 379 copies of *Dubliners* have sold after six months in the year that he began writing.<sup>11</sup> Prior to that date, he had published some poems and some stories that he would compile afterwards in *Dubliners*, starting in 1904, after the plot of *Ulysses* takes place, with the publication of "The Sisters," "Eveline" and "After the Race" by the *Irish Homestead*. Also in 1904 he had sent *Stephen Hero* both to C. P. Curran—the complete version, and showed some chapters to AE and both rejected it. The success of *Exiles* was not very different. For instance, W. B. Yeats apologetically rejected Joyce's only play for the Abbey Theatre in 1917.<sup>12</sup> In fact, He only got some success after publishing *A Portrait*. Therefore, although Joyce does not offer information on Stephen's attempts to publish in *Ulysses*, he seems to show the despair suffered by a writer when he fails.

There are other writers that also appear as characters in *Ulysses*. Chapter 9 includes Stephen's literary discussion with "the Quaker librarian" Thomas W. Lyster, director of the National Library in 1904; Richard Irvine Best, his assistant; Mr. W. K. Magee, the Irish writer and editor known as "John Eglinton," and George "AE" Russell, who was one of the literary leaders in Dublin in 1904. The case of Eglinton or Russell is a bit different, as, unlike Joyce and Stephen Dedalus, they were close to the Irish Literary Revival.

Although these authors had published some works by 1904, I do believe that it is important to notice that Joyce does not mention the authorship of any of their titles in chapter 9 at the library.<sup>13</sup> The only title of theirs that we can find is Jubainville's (sic) book (*U* 9.93), but Joyce omits that it had been translated by Best. According to those pages, William Shakespeare is the great author whose grandeur they should reach, but Irish writers are not good enough yet, as John Eglinton stated (*U* 9.43-44), and Russell seems to accept it because they are still "schoolboys" (*U* 9.51-54). Yet, they have some hopes because some day the great work will come out: "The most beautiful book that has come out of our country in my time. One thinks of Homer." (*U* 9.1164-65). Only Buck Mulligan appears to believe in the current excellence of the playwrights of the Abbey Theatre (*U* 9.1130-32), but we can detect his usual mockery or simply excessive Irishness, attacking the group's hyperbolic self-praise, even identifying Shakespeare as "[t]he chap that writes like Synge" (*U* 9.510-11).<sup>14</sup>

On balance, Joyce did not show a good portrait of the writers of the Literary Revival, especially if we observe the pejorative adverbs and adjectives referring to them. But despite Joyce's opinion, during the process of composition of *Ulysses*, they had received more appraisal than Joyce, basically due to the themes they dealt with, closer to Irish Nationalism than Joyce. As a consequence, both Russell and Eglinton were included in a handbook on Anglo-Irish Literature in 1916, whereas Joyce was not.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, Joyce did not have a good opinion of the Irish Literary Revival. We should remember that the only work that Stephen had published was an attack on Lady Gregory. In "Scylla and Charibdis," the intellectuals speak about a meeting and they do not invite Stephen, since he is not considered one of them.<sup>16</sup> As a whole, Joyce felt contempt against that literary group.<sup>17</sup> It seems that he had three main reasons to support this rejection. First of all, it was on account of its nationalism, which he parodied in "Cyclops" and did not share. Going back to *Portrait*, Stephen had stated he was not going to serve his home country in a very well-known quotation: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland or my church" (*P* 247). Moreover, we can recall a conversation held between Stephen and Davin in *Portrait* in which the former does not show any interest in Irish independence (*P* 202-03). Even though *Ulysses* is located in Dublin, Joyce, according to Leopold Bloom's words, considered himself a citizen of the world and was distant from any nationalism, either political or literary. Both an Irishman who lived in Dublin, Rome, Trieste and Paris, and an Irishman of Hungarian Jewish ancestors, who married an Irishwoman of Gibraltarian origin, had to find it difficult their integration in a single culture. Secondly, he thought, as "his" Russell and Eglinton, that they were not very good writers.<sup>18</sup> Thirdly, they had not treated him very well, as some of them had prevented him from publishing.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, he seems to be holding a selfish position, he is an author who mainly focuses on being successful, forgetting the social and political problems in which Dublin was involved at that time and which were often present in other writers' works at the time.

It seems clear that Joyce regarded himself as a much better writer than those who were successful at the time in Dublin. So, using the Revival's self-praising words, he might be referring to himself as the literary figure that the Irish were waiting for. If Russell told Stephen that they were just schoolboys, Stephen replies that schoolmasters were schoolboys first, putting the example of Aristotle, who was to him a higher philosopher than Plato, Aristotle's master (*U* 9.56-57). In the same way, we are not told clearly what the "literary surprise" is (*U* 9.289-91), even though Russell is gathering poems from young poets and Joyce-Stephen, of course, was not included.<sup>20</sup> Besides, the words "One thinks of Homer" (*U* 9.1064-65) recalls the title of Joyce's novel. Joyce had always been sure that he would be successful as a writer, and Stephen's words at the library are anticipating his future.<sup>21</sup>

There are also other characters that intend to be writers in *Ulysses*. If not only Stephen, but also the writers of the Revival fail, this is also true of Leopold Bloom. To begin with, he regards himself as a writer simply because he is working for a newspaper (*U* 15.802; 16.1653). As opposed to Stephen, who, in spite of his old intentions, has written, as far as *Ulysses* tells us, not a single literary work at all, he wrote a poem that he sent to a

literary contest when he was just eleven years old, tried some anagrams with his name and sent Molly an acrostic during their courtship (*U* 17.410-16). Was it of any help to seduce his fiancée, who admits she would like to be the muse of a poet (*U* 18.1363-66)? We do not know if this writing helped, but this last exercise might have an additional interest, as Hebraic culture is rich in acrostics.<sup>22</sup> Apart from all these trivia, similarly to Stephen, he is planning a novel that would be entitled “The Mystery Man on the Beach” (*U* 13.1060). But this is just another of his many ideas for the future, and, like young Dedalus, he does not publish a single word of serious literature.

As a whole, both Stephen and Bloom are frustrated writers and this is one of the many features that bring both characters together. In a similar way, Molly Bloom can also be labelled like that, as she thinks of writing the works of Master Poldy (*U* 18.579-80), even though this intention might be just a set phrase. In other words, the three main characters of *Ulysses* are authors who speak about their works before being published, who count their chickens before they are hatched.

If I am right, to be acknowledged as a good living writer on the pages of *Ulysses* is almost impossible. That can be due not only to the fact that Joyce had a difficult economical situation, but also to the problems that Joyce suffered from censorship, as pointed out above. Joyce was not very successful before the 1920s, readers and scholars have considered him a major writer mostly after his death and, it can be taken for granted that he would have made a lot of money from copyright royalties if he had lived longer. That can be the reason why writing literature is basically meaningless in *Ulysses*.

In the same way, we, not only readers but also critics, also fail when we read or write on *Ulysses*. There are a lot of passages and even words that we cannot understand. As far as writing on Joyce is concerned, many of us have started writing PhD dissertations that we are unable to finish. We write articles and papers that are endless or meaningless too and find new meanings after attending symposia and conferences.

Perhaps Joyce was referring to *Ulysses* or the *Wake* as the “literary surprise” that Dubliners and readers were going to have, but it is sure that he is constantly surprising readers from the literary point of view when they re-read his works.

## Notes

1. Although talking about social classes is a topic that has been studied by some critical tendencies, I find Bernard Benstock’s view most useful. It analyzes the decadence of the lower bourgeois class in *Ulysses*. See Bernard Benstock, “Middle-Class Values in *Ulysses* and the Value of the Middle Class,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 31.4 (1994): 439-54.

2. This is clearly an example of self-mockery. Joyce informed his brother Stanislaus that, in a case of untimely death, his works should be sent to all the great libraries but the Vatican (JJII 109).

3. It refers to a real review. Joyce's critical review of Lady Gregory in the *Daily Express* was published on 26 March 1903 (CW 102-05). See Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper: James Joyce's Early Years* (New York: Viking, 1958) 220.

4. Actually, Joyce had received a guinea from Eglinton for a poem published in the fourth issue of *Dana* in 1904. It was poem number VII in *Chamber Music*. "My Love Is in a Light Attire" was finally published and Joyce, unlike the other contributors, got that guinea (JJII 165).

5. After *Portrait* was published in 1916, Joyce's sister May said: "When the *Portrait* was published, it really embarrassed us a lot to see the family details given to the public," qtd. in E. H. Mikhail, ed., *James Joyce: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990) 183.

6. His first publication was his Ibsen article in the *Fortnightly Review* on 4 January 1904 (JJII 74). After some literary reviews for the *Daily Express*, his first published literary work was his "Song" (*Chamber Music* XXIV) in *Saturday Review*, 14 May 1904.

7. JJII 83.

8. See Stanislaus Joyce, *Recollections of James Joyce* (New York: James Joyce Society, 1950) 8 and 22, and Mikhail 34. Eglinton's reasons were rather simple. He said to Joyce: "I can't print what I can't understand" (qtd. in Mikhail 34). Some years later, Joyce stated in a letter that *Dubliners* had been refused by forty publishers and *Portrait* by ten (*Letters II* 398).

9. JJII 202.

10. Peter Costello, *James Joyce: The Years of Growth 1882-1915* (New York: Pantheon, 1992) 313.

11. JJII 400.

12. The reason was not censorship or difficulty, but rather the theme. W. B. Yeats wrote in an unpublished letter now at Cornell: "I do not recommend your play to the Irish Theatre because it is a type of work we have never played well. It is too far from the folk drama" (JJII 401).

13. By 1904 Lyster had published a translation of Dunster's *Life of Goethe* (1883), which he enlarged and annotated. Best had translated *Le cycle mythologique irlandais* by Marie Henri d'Arbois de Joubanville in 1883, but the name of its translator is omitted in *Ulysses*. He was also the editor of a series of volumes entitled *English Poems for Young Students*. John Eglinton had published *Two Essays on the Remnant*, admiring Goethe, Schiller, Wordsworth, and Shelley in 1896. He had contributed as well to Yeats's *Literary Ideals in Ireland*. In 1901 he had published his best-known work, *Pebbles from a Brook: Essays in the Style of Matthew Arnold*. George Russell had written articles in the *Irish Theosophist* on "Priest and Hero" and "The Hero in Man" and also several poems.

14. Mulligan's words were a Dublin literary joke owing to Yeats's hyperbolic assertion on J. M. Synge. See Don Gifford with Robert Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) 225.

15. Ernest A. Boyd's, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance* (1916) includes the chapter "The Dublin Mystics: The Theosophical Movement," in which he praises *Pebbles from a Brook* as one of the few books that Ireland had produced until then.

16. Ellmann reports that Lady Gregory held a literary party and Joyce was not invited (JJII 735). Similarly, George Moore never invited him to his evenings at home, though Gogarty was. Thus, Joyce is again Stephen in this episode.

17. In the 1920s, in an interview to a French journalist, when asked about the national movement, Joyce said: “‘To use an expression of your country, *j’en ai marre* [I’m fed up with it].’ ‘I think you were fed up with it twenty years ago,’ Joyce nodded, ‘You could say forty’” (*JIII* 571).

18. In one of his essays, “The Day of the Rabblement” (1901), Joyce makes allusion to the Abbey Theatre playwrights. In that essay, he accuses them of writing for the masses and claims that “[e]arliest dramatists of the second rank, Sudermann, Björnson, and Giacosa, can write very much better plays than the Irish Literary Theatre has staged” (*CW* 70). Together with this way of thinking, we cannot forget that Joyce admired Ibsen, whose realism was opposed to the poetry of, for instance, Yeats or Synge’s plays.

19. Definitely, Joyce did not like very much these authors. J. J. O’Molloy said in chapter 7 that Stephen must have been teasing Russell (*UI* 7.781-86). This is proved, for instance, in two letters to Stanislaus in 1903: “So damn Russell, damn Yeats, damn Skeffington, damn Darlington, damn editors, damn free-thinkers, damn vegetable verse and double damn vegetable philosophy!”; on 8 February he wrote: “Words cannot measure my contempt for AE at present (I believe he didn’t write to Lady Gregory) and his spiritual friends” (*SL* 14). Best had refused a loan to Joyce in August, 1904 See Ellmann 162. Joyce’s mind had not change much in 1905, when he wrote the poem “The Holy Office,” in which he probably criticized Russell’s opinion of *Stephen Hero*.

20. Russell’s selection had already been published in May 1904 (*JIII* 174). Consequently, Joyce is again omitting information on the book to minimize the group’s success.

21. He was very self-confident about his success, even though he did not seem to be in a hurry. In a letter to her mother of 20 March 1903, he wrote: “My books of songs will be published in the spring of 1907. My first comedy about five years later again. (This must interest you!)” (*LettersII* 57).

22. A lot of examples can be found in Franz Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystic und Magie* (Berlin: Teubner, 1922), or José María Millás Vallicrosa, “La tradición del estrofismo bíblico en las poesías medievales,” *Sefarad* 1 (1941): 49 and 57-58.