

“The Other Side of the Street”:
Reinhard Jirgl’s *Abschied von den Feinden*
Read through *Ulysses*
and Italo Svevo’s “L’Avvenire dei Ricordi”

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[I]s literature alone to remain behind in the old lazy ways that have so long ago been abandoned by music and painting? . . . Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved like for example the sound surface, torn by enormous pauses of Beethoven’s seventh Symphony, so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence.

Samuel Beckett, letter to Axel Kaun,
9 July 1937, trans. from German by Martin Esslin

The theme being *Ulysses*, it is no wonder that such a universal novel should have attracted writers like Reinhard Jirgl who spent most of his life shut off from the Western scene in East Germany. Read through *Ulysses* and Italo Svevo’s “The Future of One’s Memories” (“L’avvenire dei ricordi”) his experimental novel *A Farewell to Enemies* (*Abschied von den Feinden*) proves to be close to, and distant from, the ways of approaching visual reality adopted by his elder colleagues.

I

The pictures and drawings which James Joyce could have looked at in Zürich during the First World War and in Paris during the inter-war period, might well have been works by illustrious artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso or Georges Braque.

Apparently, mutual contacts were limited to sessions Joyce granted some of his contemporaries as, for instance, Constantin Brancusi, or intimate relations with Frank Budgen, a lesser known painter who, however, helped Joyce in his writing of *Ulysses*. César Abin did his caricature of Joyce for the

latter's fiftieth birthday in 1932, and in 1935 an edition of *Ulysses* was published in America, illustrated and signed by Henry Matisse.

So there were no personal confrontations about diverging or converging artistic conceptions, such as one would talk about today. And yet it is again and again visual impressions such as paintings, maps and postcards, photographs, hoardings, city maps, and advertisements in newspapers which Joyce through mere words re-calls to life before our mind's eye and which, though themselves outside the realm of literature, require his work to be taken seriously as a literary monument to popular culture.

All the same, the printed page of *Ulysses* at first glance gives the impression of a maze in words. A closer look, however, shows this to be delusive, since each chapter is written in a specific style which requires a specific form in print so that it is much easier to find one's way in *Ulysses* than, say, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Moreover, Joyce tried, as far as possible, to exert his influence on the typography of *Ulysses*. Hence whoever owns a copy of the first edition issued on 2 February 1922, one of its identical reprints, or the facsimile edited with explanatory notes by Jeri Johnson and published as an Oxford paperback in 1993, can easily see how Joyce, the creator of language, designed a book of his own making.

Hence the physical character of a book, in most cases appreciated by bibliophiles rather than by critics, let alone book producers, was not just a predilection shared by Dadaist or Expressionist artists. Joyce, who successfully resisted any attempts to reclaim him for one of the "isms," also refused to submit to a publisher's house style.

In Germany, Arno Schmidt (1914-1979) after the Second World War became a champion of the physical quality of the word in his critical and creative writings. He turned language into an event to be grasped by all the senses—when postmodernist theories were a long way off. Despite all efforts by friendly critics, printing conventions as introduced or inspired by Schmidt never fail to shock reviewers into writing off any text as hopelessly high-brow that might deter the common reader—who must never overexert him—or herself. With more than a century gone since, following Konrad Duden (1829-1911), German rules affecting orthography, punctuation, and capitalisation were regularised, it is quite difficult to introduce new, slightly changed rules or something as radical as required by a translation of Joyce into German (and contractually guaranteed to Hans Wollschläger, second translator of *Ulysses* in 1975) or by authors like Arno Schmidt.

Reinhard Jirgl, born in Berlin in 1953, electrician, then electronics engineer and, while for a long time working as a theatre engineer compiling manuscripts in secret before he was first published in 1990 after the Berlin Wall had come down, caused quite a stir in spring 1995 when his novel *A Farewell to Enemies* first appeared. (The title in English is a reminder of Ernest Hemingway's almost eponymous novel, *A Farewell to Arms* [1929], set in Northern Italy at the end of the First World War. I doubt the allusion

was intended since the German title was chosen at a representatives' meeting for commercial rather than for literary reasons and, above all, Hemingway's novel is written in a deceptively simple style against the grain of memorial literature such as the three texts analysed in this essay.) And as with Schmidt—to whom many of his detractors *and* champions unceasingly compare Jirgl—critics only had words of derision for the form of his novel and, more specifically, his punctuation that seemed so arbitrarily abundant or, at other times, as arbitrarily missing altogether. Moreover, Jirgl, unlike Joyce, who allowed his well-known schemes of *Ulysses* to circle officiously in private letters, did us the favour to explain his procedure in an appendix. In response, the critics wrote that whatever literature was about it should not provide a commentary. This, however, is a misunderstanding since Jirgl, like a composer of serious modern music such as John Cage or Luciano Berio (who share an affinity for James Joyce), gives us only the notation. Interpretation is still up to the reader him- or herself.

In this context it may be pertinent to ask why Arno Schmidt and Reinhard Jirgl (who share a great mastery of the German language) need to upset or disrupt any conventional limits imposed by their native tongue. With Joyce's works as a starting-point, it is the discrepancy between their various mother tongues which comes to mind. On the one hand, English lends itself more easily to puns and other games which Joyce pursued relentlessly in *Finnegans Wake*. On the other hand, thinking in terms of abstract concepts seems to be a forte in German, especially since even a cursory reading of a German text as opposed to one in contemporary English allows one to spot the substance: in the forms of capitalised nouns. Hence original German texts or translations, on a primary level, always need to conform to the strictly regularised pattern of written German before, on a secondary level, neologisms can be invented or portmanteau words which operate on several semantic levels or, as it were, musically. Translators with a view to be creative in German thus have to follow subversive methods. Similarly, Reinhard Jirgl apparently seeks to free the German language from ossified conventions by inventing his own rules.

In this, like Joyce, he takes advantage of the ways his language offers to musicalise semantic images. Language becomes a new *Gesamtkunstwerk* which, above all, transcends the feasible to which a composer like Richard Wagner was always subjected given his intent to have his musical dramas successfully performed. Joyce and Jirgl create virtual linguistic worlds seeking to impress visual effects on the readers' senses. This may best be shown in incidents of everyday life which, in both novels, illustrate the grotesque absurdity of the real and factual as opposed to the logical transparency of the possible and fictional—traditionally considered the only realm of literature.

II

In *Ulysses* we perceive Leopold Bloom in his everyday life on 16 June 1904, wandering aimlessly, it seems, through Dublin. He flees the reality of the tryst arranged for that afternoon between his wife Molly and her manager Blazes Boylan. In *A Farewell to Enemies*, time has come to a stop like the fast train in East Germany, which allows one of the first-person narrators to arrange his own and his brother's lives on the heated seats of the compartment. The third-person narrator, who sometimes patronises Leopold Bloom, is no longer extant in Jirgl's novel, instead it is modern everyman who, between stations and not exactly of his own free will, composes the mosaic of his own life. Yet doubtless both novels live on their interest in narrative images rendered in palpable prose. Let's first listen to and look at Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century:

Mr. Bloom gazed across the road at the outsider drawn up before the door of the Grosvenor. The porter hoisted the valise up on the well. She stood still, waiting, while the man, husband, brother, like her, searched his pockets for change. Stylish kind of coat with that roll collar, warm for a day like this, looks like blanketcloth. Careless stand of her with her hands in those patch pockets. Like that haughty creature at the polo match. Women all for caste till you touch the spot. Handsome is and handsome does. Reserved about to yield. The honourable Mrs. and Brutus is an honourable man. Possess her once take the starch out of her. (*U* 5.98-106)

Bloom's thoughts lead a life of their own, and the reader follows the proceedings in front of one of the best hotels in Dublin with his own eyes, with Bloom adding the odd comparative memory when, similar to an advertisement on TV stopping the film, the dialogue between Bloom and M'Coy, so far come to a halt, is resumed:

—I was with Bob Doran, he's on one of his periodical bends, and what do you call him Bantam Lyons. Just down there in Conway's we were. (*U* 5.107-08)

Talk of the town, as it is, fails to interest Bloom, for, instead of answering and exchanging gossip about the very Bob Doran who, in "The Boarding House," had stumbled in the marital entanglements cunningly weaved by Polly Mooney's mother, he turns to the muted play on the other side of the street:

Doran Lyons in Conway's. She raised a gloved hand to her hair. In came Hoppy. Having a wee. Drawing back his head and gazing far from beneath his veiled eyelids he saw the bright fawn skin shine in the glare, the braided drums. Clearly I can see today. Moisture about gives long sight perhaps. Talking of one thing or another. Lady's hand. Which side will she get up? (*U* 5.109-13)

Alternating between proximity to the subject of these observations and Bloom's distance from the object of his perceptions, the reader forms an image of the conversation with M'Coy which, in such intensity, can only be expressed through language. What creates excitement here is the alternation between foreground dialogue and background proceedings which latter, with Bloom, the quiet connoisseur of unmentionables, persistently come to the fore as if something unspeakable will happen fairly soon:

—And he said: *Sad thing about our poor friend Paddy! What Paddy?* I said. *Poor little Paddy Dignam*, he said.

Off to the country: Broadstone probably. High brown boots with laces dangling. Wellturned foot. What is he foostering over that change for? Sees me looking. Eye out for other fellow always. Good fallback. Two strings to her bow.

—*Why?* I said. *What's wrong with him?* I said.

Proud: rich: silk stockings. (U 5.115-22)

Any suspicions on the reader's part that Mr. Bloom might be interested in the body of the inaccessible lady, which, like the late Paddy Dignam, is out of his reach altogether, are now being confirmed. As an aside (which to him is the main story) M'Coy recounts an episode from pub life. With hindsight, it is clear that Bloom had deemed to have glimpsed the lady's corset when he thought of "the braided drums." What is it, however, that he really wants to see, for he still behaves as if under a spell?

—Yes, Mr. Bloom said.

He moved a little to the side of M'Coy's talking head. Getting up in a minute.

—*What's wrong with him?* he said. *He's dead*, he said. And, faith, he filled up. *Is it Paddy Dignam?* I said. I couldn't believe it when I heard it. I was with him no later than Friday last or Thursday was it in the Arch. *Yes*, he said. *He's gone. He died on Monday, poor fellow.*

Watch! Watch! Silk flash rich stockings white. Watch!

A heavy tramcar honking its gong slewed between.

Lost it. Curse your noisy pugnose. Feels locked out of it. Paradise and the peri. Always happening like that. The very moment. Girl in Eustace street hallway Monday was it settling her garter. Her friend covering the display of. *Esprit de corps*. Well, what are you gaping at?

—Yes, yes, Mr. Bloom said after a dull sigh. Another gone.

—One of the best, M'Coy said.

The tram passed. They drove off towards the Loop Line bridge, her rich gloved hand on the steel grip. Flicker, flicker: the laceflare of her hat in the sun: flicker, flick. (U 5.123-40)

Voyeuristic Leopold Bloom who, having missed one opportunity and recalling one more recent incident, only hours later, will be offered the

opportunity to have a fully unimpeded look when he sits facing Gerty MacDowell on Sandymount Strand, is entranced by the then fashionable and half-hidden accessories such as lace, gloves, and garters. Then his hopes are thwarted by city life as it is, just as he was looking forward to the lady dramatically getting up the outsider when she would have had to gather up her skirts and at last allow him a glimpse of her stockings. Yet the image he had hoped for fails to come. Again, the wish had been father to the thought, and the printed page gave rise to the most vivid expectations. Consequently, Bloom continues to look ahead although he cannot but see death as personified by Paddy Dignam throughout his dialogue with M'Coy. His untiring imagination perhaps is a means to suppress his own thoughts of death - or one to keep his visual memory busy.

III

Joyce in *Ulysses* and Jirgl in *A Farewell to Enemies* are close to one another in their reconstructions of the past which increasingly eclipse the immediate present experienced by their various narrators and also relocate it to the fictitious, thus creating the tension and challenge which allow for multiple re-readings of universal works of literature. This applies in a passage corresponding to the "Lotus Eaters" chapter:

Since the waiter's clumsy movement had further mixed up the pile of photographs—which, owing to a fall was in disarray anyway—and had swept the photograph of that church—standing on its head and turned about 180 degrees—to the ground whereby other hitherto buried pictures had come to the fore, I also allow him another view of this 1 picture. . . .¹

Reality, we read here, crucially determines *how* we perceive it. It is at the root of *what* it is, just as a story once it gets going increasingly leads a life of its own: telling itself as it were:

The woman having hastened through her lonely years in 1-1-liness as a fugitive from the last war; the face of the old woman, here now as if resting, framed in 1 picture which brilliantly showed as 1 memento from the kaleidoscope—:1 snapshot, taken many years ago (we, my brother and me, were still children) at a family gathering—an the sudden re-encounter in this compartment of a fast train? stopping for how long with the face of this woman now dead whose grave he had travelled to visit that day; the re-encounter enlightened all the imaginings, the imperceptible re-workings, the silent changes of one's own memory and threw time as it were petrified back into the liveliness of apprehension which, in its magnetic flow, showed up the depth of a chasm wherein, shining brightly, were the chimeras originating from one's own life's time.²

While it is palpable objects as perceived by Bloom in *Ulysses* which overwhelm him, so that the whole passage is brimming with sensuousness, Jirgl's words create an image of memory as yet time- and spaceless. He employs nouns rather than names, so that his language becomes philosophical and as such is almost diametrically opposed to Bloom's reflections which, centring on the concrete, are filled with vibrant expectation. Centring on the general, Jirgl's sentences in this passage also contrast with what Joyce's Triestine contemporary, Italo Svevo (1861-1928), put in personal and autobiographical terms in his tale "The Future of One's Memories":

Kufstein! A long wait, on a station with many platforms, out in the open air, with the baggage placed on the ground. It is cold, although it is already June. God knows what time of day it is. Needless to try and find out why the distant memory refuses to know such precision. Sunrise or sunset or, perhaps, twelve noon on a fully penumbrous day. Who knows? Perhaps, after all that time, that day's sun had faded.

Curious! Albeit unforgotten, that stay on the platform was devoid of any word, any memorable event. But maybe Roberto had felt now he had crossed the Alps and found himself beyond the wall enclosing his native land. He also knew in which direction the journey would lead him: towards that vast, interminable plain on which he saw the summits of some very regular hills as in an artless picture that had perhaps also been simplified by the imperfect memory which had allowed the details to lapse: the mountain range, the woods, the streets and houses. The landscape was bound to be still unchanged. The old man proposed himself to revisit this place once his convalescence was accomplished. Curious to have felt such a wish for the first time. How dedication made one's memory go to work! It is an active force and does not yield much if you leave it alone.

Würzburg! A clean city, distinguished, sparsely populated. Students with blue berets. The little family visited an enormous palace with pictures by Italian painters. Roberto remembered a room with an echo multiplying any sound that had triggered it. If you tore apart a piece of paper the sound was like that of trumpet.³

Such an image of memory (and memory image) is indebted to the concept that reality can be fully perceived—or, as in *Ulysses*, (re-)imagined as it were palpably. But Svevo, the manuscript of whose unfinished story (published posthumously) bears the date of 1 May 1925, did not stop there:

Men cannot see everything; to certain things they turn a blind eye. It must be the future which teaches you a lesson. Naturally the future of one's memories! He must learn that the work of one's memory can move in time as do the events themselves. This must be an important experience even if not the most important within the delicious work he was engaged in. He was properly experiencing things and persons once again.⁴

This is like a poetic theory to explain the function of memory in literature and is literature all the same. While Svevo uses laconic language, exclamation and questions marks and the flow of words addressed to the self foreground his writing from the life and to the moment—as one might expect from one of Joyce’s literary friends. Seventy years on, Jirgl’s narrator contrasts this personal wisdom with his own wisdom which, triggered by a photograph that gave rise to feats of memory, moves towards the technical and general:

And the photograph offered, subsequent to that incident, also a view of the same room in the flat on the top floor of the goods office—the same slanting walls, the same old furniture as on the picture taken on Xmas. Eve: just in a different light and at a different time, separated by? how many calendar months. So that I give him the impression of a muddle; that haunting situation which comes to pass while looking at the other side of the street, 1 woman there, 1 unknown female person—a vehicle, perhaps a lorry o a tram cutting across the view, covering the other side for 1 2 seconds only—: Yet the vehicle having driven past quickly enough the foreigner, the unknown woman is also gone on the other side of the street. . . .⁵

As in *Ulysses* it is a moving object which for a short time obstructs the observer’s view. Here, however, it is a metaphor used by the narrator for a sequence of memory as it were cut across, the necessity for which resulting from a memory as yet unidentified of the two brothers’ mother, rather than Leopold Bloom’s (voyeuristic) anticipation of one of the sensuous delights left to him. Even if Bloom is denied the view of the lady and thus the climax of his pleasure of looking at her, he still enjoys the moment. And here he differs radically from Jirgl’s narrator who only remembers the (formal) configuration of a confrontation with his mother—begun and as yet unfinished. Such moments are full of tensions unaccounted for which, years and years later, may still explode. Just think of Franz Biberkopf, murderer and former prisoner in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) by Alfred Döblin (1878-1957), in comparison to Leopold Bloom’s robust sensuousness.

IV

At the beginning was the word. It is on this basis that Joyce and Jirgl erect highly different literary structures. Even the love they share for the physical quality of language locates them at opposite poles (or facing sides of the street) in the literary universe, as the quotations from Italo Svevo—who occupies the centre (or tarmac) through his affinity for both Joyce’s and Jirgl’s view—may have shown.

Jirgl, like Joyce, seeks to foreground the concreteness of reality by

highlighting its traces in language without being trapped by the lack of humour hampering many contemporary German writers. And yet, at the end of the twentieth century, he creates a portrait of man fragmented by the extremes of science and perception, and whose search for identity is also hindered by the vastness of language, German, that is, which has become a stranger to itself. If in German the rubble of one hundred years of academic scientism shows up in Jirgl's almost *verb-* not wordless text as in a city like Berlin, Cologne, Dresden, Hamburg, or Münster just after the Second World War, it is Joyce's extremely bastardised English which, written before 1939, visually and acoustically flows as if history had never been a nightmare before he started writing *Ulysses*.

Jirgl did not stop writing novels after *A Farewell to Enemies*, and this (his own?) adieu allowed him to make a new start which, unsurprisingly, led him towards more personal and less technically rigid narratives although whenever he puts finger to keyboard he cannot but link failure and success and thus continues to tread his own path in Joyce's steps.

Notes

1. "Seitdem die ungeschickte Bewegung des Kellners den ohnehin wirren, schon einmal durch einen Sturz zustande gekommenen Stapel Fotografien seinerseits durcheinander gebracht, & die auf dem Kopf stehende, um 180 Grad gedrehte Fotografie von jener Kirche zu Boden gefegt hatte und dadurch andere, vordem verschüttete Bilder zum Vorschein gekommen waren, lasse ich ihn auch dieses 1 Bild wiedersehen" (Reinhard Jirgl, *Abschied von den Feinden*, my trans. [München: Hanser Verlag, 1995] 176-77).

2. "Die Frau, die durch die einsamen Jahre in Isamkeit als Flüchtling aus dem letzten Krieg hindurchgehasstet war; das Gesicht der alten Frau, hier nun in 1 Bild der Ruhe gefaßt, das als 1 Memento aus dem Kaleidoskop herausleuchtete.—:1 Aufnahme, gemacht vor etlichen Jahren (wir, mein Bruder & ich, waren Kinder noch) anläßlich einer Familienfeier—u die plötzliche Wiederbegegnung in diesem Zugabteil eines seit? wielange stillstehenden Fernzuges mit dem Gesicht dieser nun verstorbenen Frau, deren Grab seine Reise an diesem Tag gegolten hat; die Wiederbegegnung erhellte all die Vorstellungen, die unmerklichen Bearbeitungen, die leisen Veränderungen der eigenen Erinnerung & warf die erstarrte Zeit in eine Lebendigkeit des Wahrnehmens, die in ihrem magnetischen Strom die Tiefe eines Abgrundes bewirkte, darin hell aufleuchtend die Schimären aus eigener, durchlebter Zeit" (Jirgl 177).

3. "Kufstein! Una lunga sosta su una stazione di molte piattaforme all'aperto accanto ai bagagli depositi a terra. Fa freddo ad onta che si sia in Giugno. Dio sa che ora della giornata sia. È inutile cercarlo perché il ricordo lontano non conosce tanta esattezza. Alba o tramonta o forse mezzodí di un giorno tutto penombra. Chissà? Forse quella giornata aveva il sole sbiadito dalla lontananza nel tempo.

Curioso! Non fu obliato quel soggiorno su quella piattaforma non riempito da nessuna parola, nessun avvenimento memorando. Ma può essere che Roberto avesse sentito di aver varcato le Alpi e di trovarsi al di là della muraglia che

chiudeva la sua patria. Egli sapeva anche in quale direzione sarebbe continuato il viaggio, verso quella vasta interminabile pianura su cui vedeva sorgere qualche collina molto regolare come in un disegno ingenuo forse anche questo semplificato dalla memoria imperfetta che aveva lasciato crollare i dettagli, la montagna complessa, i boschi, le strade e le case. Il paesaggio doveva ancora esistere immutato. Il vecchio si propose di andar a rivedere quel luogo a convalescenza finita. Curiosa ch'era la prima volta ch'egli avesse sentito tale desiderio. Come dedicandovisi la memoria lavora! È una forza attiva e non dà molto quando viene lasciata inerte.

Würzburg! Una città pulita, fine, poco popolosa. Degli studenti in berretto azzurro. La famigliuola visitò un palazzo enorme contenente dipinti di autori italiani. Roberto ricordava una stanza dall'eco che ridava moltiplicato il suono che la provocava. Stracciando un pezzo di carta si otteneva il suono di una tromba." (Italo Svevo, "L'Avvenire dei ricordi," *Racconti-Saggi: Pagine sparse*, ed. Bruno Maier, my trans. [Milano: dall'Oglio, 1968] 297-304, here 298.

4. "Gli uomini non sanno vedere tutto; per certe cose hanno gli occhi chiusi. Doveva essere l'avvenire che l'avrebbe informato meglio. Naturalmente l'avvenire dei ricordi! Egli doveva apprendere che il lavoro della memoria può muoversi nel tempo come gli avvenimenti stessi. Questa doveva essere un'esperienza importante sebbene non la più importante di quel delizioso lavoro ch'egli stava facendo. Riviveva proprio le cose e le persone." (Svevo 302). This sounds as if taken verbatim from Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927): "Je venais d'apercevoir, dans ma mémoire, penché sur ma fatigue, le visage tendre, préoccupé et déçu de ma grand'mère, telle qu'elle avait été ce premier soir d'arrivée; le visage de ma grand'mère, non pas de celle que je m'étais étonné et reproché de si peu regretter et qui n'avait d'elle que le nom, mais de ma grand'mère véritable dont, pour la première fois depuis les Champs-Élysées où elle avait eu son attaque, je retrouvais dans un souvenir involontaire et complet la réalité vivante" (Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu: V. Sodome et Gomorrhe* [Paris: Gallimard, 1972] 179-80).

5. "Und die Fotografie bot, jenem Zufall folgend, ebenfalls eine Ansicht desselben Zimmers in der Wohnung unterm Dach der Güterabfertigung—dieselben schrägen Wände, dieselben alten Möbel wie auf dem Bild vom Weihnachtsabend: nur in anderem Licht & zu einer anderen Zeit, durch ?wieviele Kalenderabschnitte getrennt. So daß ich ihm den Eindruck einer Irritation gebe; jene gespenstische Situation, die sich einstellt beim Schauen auf die gegenüberliegende Straßenseite, dort 1 Frau, 1 Unbekannte—ein Fahrzeug, vielleicht ein Lastwagen od ein Straßenbahnzug zerschneidet den Anblick, verdeckt nur für 1 2 Sekunden die andere Seite—: Doch, nachdem das Fahrzeug in rascher Fahrt vorüber, ist auch die Fremde, die unbekannte Frau auf der anderen Straßenseite verschwunden. . ." (Jirgl 177).