

## JOYSIS CRISIS

## ENTRE LE VISIBLE ET L'INVISIBLE

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Baudouin Decharneux  
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1. Baudouin Decharneux & Jaime Derenne (éds), dir., *Chemins Philosophiques. Recherches autour du Visible et de l'Invisible* (2017)
2. Joseph S. O'Leary, *Reality Itself: Philosophical Challenges of Indian Mahāyāna* (2019)
3. Matthew C. Kruger, *The Gospel and Nothingness* (2019)
4. Furuya Yasuo, *Storia della teologia giapponese*, trad. a cura di Tiziano Tosolini (2020)
5. Joseph S. O'Leary, *Joyce's Crisis: Rereading James Joyce, Theomasochistically* (2021)

# JOYSIS CRISIS

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*Rereading James Joyce,  
Theomasochistically*

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JOSEPH S. O'LEARY



CHISOKUDŌ

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*To Bobby and Maria Buckley,  
in memory of our teacher  
Fr Peter R. Connolly (1927–1987)*



# Foreword

Mark Patrick Hederman

Dear reader, I stand outside the doorway of this enormously daunting volume begging you to take your courage in your hands and step inside. Like a waiter outside a restaurant, on a street full of them, I am here to persuade you to try this one instead of the many many others. Why this outsized commentary instead of the other sometimes more slender and manageable ones? Because at last, my dear reader, after a hundred years of anticipation, Joyce has found “that ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia,” who has “nuzzled over a full trillion times forever and a night till his noddle sink or swim” and whose “aural eyness” provides “the keys to dreamland.”<sup>1</sup>

Have a look at the menu posted outside this restaurant. The cover of this book represents an illustrated guide, an *amuse-gueule*, mimicking the methodology of the chef.

Ten objects act as epiphanies on a dark wooden background as pieces of a chess set. Each might well have been a normal geegaw in the familiar surroundings of Joyce’s world. But for the purposes of this photograph, they have been cobbled together by the author and an artist friend, Sergio Calatroni, to bamboozle the curious passer-by. Each item had to be retrieved, as obsolete memorabilia, from museums and junk shops of our throw-away twenty-first century. The dummy

1. *Finnegans Wake* 120.12–14; 623.18; 615.26.

Spanish clock saying “Post, 1854. One ounce,” along with the erratic globe, fashioned for some obscure educational purpose, yield wonky emblems of space and time. Cheap images of the Sacred Heart, one a plaster statue, the other adorning the cover of a tiny dressing-table box, cheekily dare us to laugh or to cry. They also illustrate one dimension of the Italian words chalked on the miniscule blackboard in the author’s own illegible hand: *Al cuore del nostro mondo* (at the heart of our world). A nail, pieces of chalk, a postcard, obsolescent in a world of Ikea, Moodle Whiteboards, text and tweet, make up this concocted world of haphazard flimsy. To the forefront of the composition are schoolmasterly spectacles such as Joyce, with his critically wretched eyesight, might have worn. These must be donned by the investigator surveying the long-vanished everyday and everynight world displayed in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

Any work of art resembles a camera which orders reality by freezing an image. Artists do violence to the inevitable transience of reality. They disrupt the unstoppable passage of time. Writing is an attempt to fasten with thumb-tacks the quicksilver flowing through our hands.

The evocative collection of objects on the cover of this book is an imposter: it pretends familiarity and invites collusion; it teases rather than informs about the impenetrable remoteness of historical reality. We can never get back to Dublin in 1904. All the enticing advertisements from travel agents are illusions. We imagine we are “at home” here, but the comforting familiarity is a mirage. So it is with Joyce’s writing: the more we are seduced into presumptuousness and proximity, the greater will be the eventual rebuff.

Some honest readers tell you that they can’t make head nor tail of *Finnegans Wake* but they adore the short stories and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Well, here’s news for you from Joseph Stephen O’Leary. Even “The Dead” which most claim to adore through the lens of John Huston’s 1987 film of the same name, returns to you from its journey through the O’Leary wringer like a favorite pullover eaten to shreds by devouring moths. Every crack in the wallpaper, every stink



in the sink-hole become enlarged and magnified. Each turns into a suction pump to the grave-yard. You put your foot on the stairs of the “beautiful” house where the “lovely” party of the “endearing” aunts is taking place for its annual fling; every creak on the stairs is the sound of a pall-bearer carrying your coffin to *Das Sein zum Tode*.

When these Dubliners resurface in *Ulysses*, tossed and buffeted by the terrific machinery of style that shifts from episode to episode, their mortal existence is even more penetratingly sounded. I am always overcome with disbelief when I read statistics showing *Ulysses* as one of the most popular books of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Who is actually reading it in their millions every day? I have always found it demanding, testing, and difficult to read, even if rewarding in the end. So, why do I read Joyce myself?

Because I agree with Jung who was one of the first to call Joyce a prophet:

There are major and minor prophets, and history will decide to which of them Joyce belongs. Like every true prophet, the artist is the unwitting mouth-piece of the psychic secrets of his time, and is often as unconscious as a sleep-walker. He supposes that it is he who speaks, but the spirit of the age is his prompter, and whatever this spirit says is proved true by its effects.<sup>2</sup>

Like Jesus Christ, prophet of Nazareth, healer of Capernaum, Joyce undertook to describe and to cure, if possible, the paralysis which he detected everywhere in his home town, Dublin of the last century. That is why a large portion of my own life has been devoted to the attempt to understand what Joyce was trying to say. “We are still learning to be James Joyce’s contemporaries, to understand our interpreter” as the opening line of Richard Ellmann’s exemplary biography puts it. One hundred years after the publication of *Ulysses* is probably

2. C. G. Jung, “*Ulysses: a Monologue*,” *The Collected Works* (New York: Bollingen, 1966), 15: 122–3.

as good a time as any to start. And this book is probably the best way to begin achieving this purpose.

Struggle with Joyce at any level is no easy matter. We are dealing here with a monster that has become, over the years, a behemoth. Our possibility of understanding the meaning of his life's work is by now immersed in a jungle of published material, a whole library of commentaries, each one proposing to unlock the secret. How do we begin to face the avalanche of theory and erudition that surrounds every word that the master wrote?

For those who are ready, willing and able to take the plunge, this book is possibly the best possible introduction or induction, although, dear reader, be warned from the outset: you are in for a rough ride. My reason for writing this preface is to assure you that, however daunting or difficult, the journey will be so worthwhile.

Joseph Stephen O'Leary has been for much of his life in pursuit of Stephen Dedalus, a lion he was predestined and proud to hunt. This safari required not only the wherewithal to examine the works of a literary genius, but also the capacity to square up to "a thinker in dialogue with major currents of nineteenth and early twentieth century European thought, because Joyce advances an original vision of life and of art, to be set alongside those of other philosophically inclined writers such as Thomas Mann, Rilke, Musil, Proust, Valéry, Yeats, Conrad, Eliot" (196).

O'Leary is familiar with all this immense background of creative thought and writing. As we journey through his book we rub shoulders, on first name terms with (and I give a purely random selection of the cast, taking one representative for each letter of the alphabet): Augustine, Beethoven, Cervantes, Dante, Eliot (both George and T. S.), Feuerbach, Goethe, Hauptmann, Ibsen, Henry James, Kafka, Leo XIII, Thomas Mann, J. H. Newman, Frank O'Connor, Proust, Quiller-Couch, Rilke, Schopenhauer, Thérèse of Lisieux, Roderick Usher, Valéry, Wagner, Xenophon, Yeats, and Zarathustra (both the original and Nietzsche's).

Interpretation of Joyce has become a full-blown industry. Keeping up with the Joyceans a million theses marathon. As well as being an up-to-date personal reading of the oeuvre, this book provides a compendium of all the insights which have been offered by philosophers and literary critics for a century and a half. I footnote a random alphabet of authorities to give a flavor of the palimpsest involved.<sup>3</sup>

Once you sign up to the two propositions undergirding the edifice of this book, namely: that the degree and kind of a person's sexuality reach to the ultimate pinnacle of their spirit (Nietzsche); and that Joyce's sexuality was profoundly masochistic; then you can enter the cable car which will take you on a mind-boggling ride over the heights of human deliberation (philosophical, psychoanalytical, theological, literary) which culminates in Joyce's theomasochistic *mappa mundi*.

Despite his encyclopedic erudition, O'Leary's style is highly cultivated, fluent, and polished; it carries you like a well-trained thoroughbred over fences you never thought you could approach. Once up inside the rarefied atmosphere of this high-rise cable-car, you may even develop a sense of humor which allows you the odd light-hearted giggle, with the author, at the mind-boggling intricacy and self-important fatuousness laid out panoramically before you. And even when he tells you that *A Portrait* is a deconstructive gnomonic *Bildungsroman*, don't be disheartened, relax and google the gobstoppers; they will melt in your mouth like nutritious marzipan.

O'Leary shows that *Portrait* reenacts an intimate struggle between God and the soul, modeled on the autobiographies of Joyce's namesake Augustine and his university's patron Newman. A third saint may hover, for Joyce must also have known *The Story of a Soul* (l'Histoire d'une Âme) the autobiography of Thérèse of Lisieux, published on September 30, 1898, a year to the day after her death from tuberculosis

3. Adorno, Brivic, Cixous, Derrida, Ellmann, Foster, Gilbert, Hart, Ingersoll, Jolas, Kenner, Lacan, MacCabe, Norris, O'Faolain, Power, Reik, Senn, Torchiana, Utell, Valéry, Woolf, Yeats, Žižek.

at the age of twenty-four. To add spice, O'Leary discovers the ravaging presence of another god in the novel, a Dionysus imported from *Death in Venice*, then a sensation in Trieste.

Conscious that “those of us who dissect it in literary analysis may have trouble recovering its emotional impact” (169), O'Leary makes the *Portrait* glow again, using his close readings to bring out its dramatic intensity. “The central concern of the novel is with existential authenticity, awakening to one's true vocation, shedding a dead and false self in order to step forward boldly to a new life” (170). In this regard, romanticism is the great enemy of reality. We all try to impose on the reality we experience a golden aura. We mint significance into a world of random callousness in the constant guerrilla warfare against chaos. Our constant effort is to transform present messiness into an artwork with purpose and design. Ireland has a genius for making “a little bit of heaven” out of “the last ditch in Europe” (Beckett). Whereas O'Leary joins other commentators in decrying the pathetic glorification of Irish history and potentiality, he still insists that readers today retrieve the soul-stirring impact of the Joycean oeuvre “as a larger-than-life struggle for freedom and independence, a spiritual insurrection to set alongside the political one launched on Easter Monday in the year of the publication of *Portrait*” (149).

Here we have an alternative O'Leary taking on the chief undertaker of romantic Ireland, bearing his blows with fortitude, but landing a few of his own. He provides a fresh meaning to existence which cannot be called “romanticism” in the weatherbeaten sense, although it carries with it much of the positive allure of the word. We might describe this liberating study in the words of W. B. Yeats but with a positive rather than a negative undertone, encouraging us to reJoyce all the more because: “Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave.”

*Glenstal Abbey*  
15 October 2021

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