James Joyce's Ulysses - Whither

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Unable to find the freedom of spirit which of needs must cohabit with the mind of a genius, finding the parochialism and the wide gap between myth and reality in his native land paradoxically too constricting, James Joyce at an early age, left Ireland and made the world his home. Residing in Trieste, Paris, Zurich and Vienna, he taught language and attempted to fill his insatiable thirst for symbols of thought by imprinting on his mind the words of all men. The juxtaposition of sounds and their meanings were the vehicles of his genius. Experimenting with the words and letters of many languages, he created his own language, one born of complex word play, of alliteration and assonance, a cadence of many tongues."

Cover Page Footnote
Appeared in the issue: Volume 4, Spring, 1959.

This prose is available in The Angle: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1959/iss1/13
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With Joyce, his language and his “stream of consciousness” style were limited exclusively to fiction and the novel. Joyce had, it is true, written for the stage, but not in his own singular language and style. Nor has his prose work, where his style and language reached the intended chaotic apex, ever been taken out of context and adapted to other art forms. That is, not until recently.

On June 5, 1958, Ulysses ascended to the boards. Immediately, Ulysses in Nighttown (the Circe episode of the novel) was faced with several problems. On the one hand, was the problem of censorship. The novel had been banned in the United States from its writing until 1933, on the rather naive charge of obscenity. Secondly, the seemingly insurmountible problem of staging Joyce was present. Still, there was a problem in communication. The same communication problems (situations, language, meaning and effect) inherent in the novel were present in the play.

The Circe episode was the logical choice for dramatization. Written as a play, it had a special coherence of its own. Again, it seemed to epitomize the theme of the novel. Its rewriting for theatrical purpose resulted in an excellent script which retained the essence of Joyce and, which is important in view of the problem of communication mentioned above contained much needed explanation. Where necessary, fill-in material was provided from other section of Ulysses and also from Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Still additional explanation and background was provided by a narrator.

Stage directions in Ulysses in Nighttown provided for exotic personifications and, often, dual characterization. Through the dance, these directions are more easily conveyed and made acceptable. In spite of this, the prevalent criticism of Ulysses in Nighttown has been that the technique of the play was one of dramatic
reading; that the play was, perhaps (to draw upon a dichotomy delineated by T. S. Eliot in his discussion of another dramatist), poetic rather than theatrical drama. It would seem however, to be more than this. It would seem to necessitate more than Joyce's own words, more than his playlingual puns. The action of the play cannot help but be aided by the other expressive and visual arts—stage sets and props, acting (gesture, movement, etc.) and, most important, the dance.

_Ulysses in Nighttown's_ parallel, the palace of Circe, provides a hoard of references and they are all in the play, from the wand which Circe used to change the wanderers into swine to the metamorphase, the orgy, which, by way of the dance, has kept all its grotesqueness and its meaning. It is obvious that such a Walpurgisnacht could present gargantuan problems in staging. Countless devices were used, extensive lighting, the use of two translucent screens behind which occurred flashbacks and manifestations of the thoughts of Leopold Bloom were two. Superb acting and direction was required for the constant atmosphere of hallucination depended much on the expressiveness of the actors. Still, the _Circe_ episode required a tremendous cast.

Upon viewing the _pièce de théâtre_, it seemed to this writer that these difficulties, inherent in Joyce's work, were successfully surmounted by the theatrical company which undertook it. The acting, direction and production were indeed superb. The question remains, however, as to whether or not the novel should have been tampered with at all. Would it have been better to leave Joyce in the original milieu of the novel, suspended as the original writing seemed to be in a spaceless, timeless vacuum which only the printed word, however imperfectly, can come close to? This dramatization of Joyce was an obvious theatrical success. Television and movie rights have been acquired and public success has been won. But this seems to be more an accolade to the superb treatment of an essentially bizarre and exotic entertainment rather than an acclamation to the success of treating Joyce in drama. But what seemed to be most apparent to this writer (handicapped as he perhaps was by a first-level interpretation of the play) was that the Joycean idea reached a new fulfillment on the stage. This was accomplished through the use of other art forms, particularly the dance, as delineated and explained above. The drama remains Joycean, but as _Ulysses_ and _Finnegans Wake_ were literary experiments, so also is _Ulysses in Nighttown_. The only definitive thing that might be said about the transferal of media is that it is a challenging prose experiment, grafted into a drama, but so radically composed that it is difficult to say whether it belongs to either realm.