

# JOYCE EFFECTS ON LANGUAGE, THEORY, AND HISTORY

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## CHAPTER 6

*Joyce, Jameson, and the text of history*

'History is what hurts': this is one of Fredric Jameson's many artfully phrased aphorisms in his influential study *The Political Unconscious*, a book that introduced a new, and seldom surpassed, sophistication into Marxist studies of literature in 1981 and that has to be taken into account by anyone working on the relation between 'literature' and 'history'. The passage continues, in characteristic Jamesonian vein, 'This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them' (102).

History is 'a nightmare from which I am trying to awake': this is Stephen Dedalus's definition, produced for the benefit of Mr Deasy in 'Nestor', the Ulysses episode for which, according to Joyce's schema for the book, history is the designated art. Stephen's comment is followed by the silent self-interrogation: 'What if that nightmare gave you a back kick?' (*U* 2.377-9).

Both Jameson and Stephen are vividly aware of the double manifestation of history in our lives: on the one hand as that which, operating from outside the human capacity to construct and construe signs, imposes limits upon — and, though this is less often emphasized, opens up possibilities for — thought and action; and on the other hand as that which communities make and remake under the shifting pressures of ideological and material needs. Taken in the former sense, history — which goes by many other names in literary, psychoanalytic, and political theory, including Jameson's 'Necessity', Lacan's 'Real', and Althusser's 'absent cause' — escapes, by definition, any conceptualization; to name it in language is already to textualize, to metaphorize, to narrativize it. (For Jameson it is figured in the sentences I have quoted as a watchful and malevolent being who 'hurts' and who 'will not forget us', for Stephen it becomes, through the revivification of the dead

metaphor in 'nightmare', a vicious horse.) However, it is not difficult to agree with Jameson that our incapacity to name or to discuss history in this absolute sense in no way diminishes its force and effectiveness; it is indeed the ultimate untranscendable horizon within which all our actions, and all our words about those actions, occur.

The other sense of history provides more possibilities for discussion — indeed, the unbounded scope it offers for verbalization constitutes one of the major difficulties in dealing with it, difficulties quite as great as those involved in apprehending the ineffable non-textual history to which we are all subject. History in this sense is semiotically mediated: it is what the world and events in the world *mean*, or are taken to mean, or are made to mean. Its domain is that of ideology, of narrative in its most general sense, of the ceaseless creative activity of the human imagination working with — and upon — the materials of language and other sign systems to present to itself a version of experience with which it can live. The nightmare from which Stephen is trying to awake — in Catholic, British-ruled, Ireland during the first decade of the twentieth century — is a production of history in this sense, not merely a product of it: a narrative of exploitation, exclusion, and domination, of racial, national, gender, and class hegemony tricked out, by both oppressors and victims (categories which are not entirely separable), in the vivid colours of tragedy, epic, and romance. (The interspersed sequences of the 'Cyclops' episode of *Ulysses* present a few of the linguistic modes through which history is produced in a glamorous form, contrasting them with an apparently more neutral anecdotal style which is itself, of course, another potent mode of historical fabrication.) It is worth noting that Deasy's remarks on history occur just after he has given voice to his venomous anti-Semitism and just before he reveals his equally unpleasing anti-sexism.

What is a nightmare to Stephen is, he implies, a comforting dream to many members of the community in which he lives, its function — to adapt Freudian theory along the lines of Jameson's project — being precisely to prevent the dreamer from awakening: if, Joyce seems to suggest, the Irish people as a whole at this time had been brought face to face with the contents of the political unconscious — realities that could be manifested only obliquely in cultural productions — the long sleep would be rudely ended. One is tempted to say that at times the slumber has become uneasy, forcing the dreamer to stir and turn over — dates one might cite are 1916 and 1919-23 — but that for the majority the sleep continues — as perhaps it must to some degree or other in any society,

*Portrait* offers a position outside the histories they relate from which we can judge them as more or less ideologically determined, more or less true to reality; and the concrete evocation of a Dublin day in June 1904 in *Ulysses* is equally a textual achievement, in which the invented character Leopold Bloom is as alive as the historical individual George Russell, and the invented burying of Patrick Dignam in Glasnevin Cemetery as historical an event as Throwaway's documented winning of the Gold Cup. (Any reader of *Ulysses* who has visited the Martello Tower at Sandycove can testify to the way its historical reality appears to be enhanced, not diminished, through its recalling of Buck Mulligan and Stephen Dedalus; the knowledge that James Joyce once lived there for a short period has a much weaker effect on the touristic imagination.)

It might seem, then, that Joyce represents the first of Jameson's pair of unacceptable ideologies, that which denies altogether the existence of the referent or the Real. *Ulysses*, for instance, is sometimes seen as an extended dismantling of all the traditional assumptions of realistic fiction: it begins with the kind of fictional discourse, modelled on historical writing in the narrow sense, that treats the characters, events, and places it handles as if they pre-existed the narrative which in fact brings them into being, and moves on to modes of writing which insist that those existents and occurrences are constituted entirely by the language in which they are presented. Several chapters – 'Cyclops', 'Circe', and 'Ithaca', in particular – are characterized by a principle of endless generation: far from conveying the illusion that their language is tied to a set of events which predetermine their length and structure, it spawns actions, characters, speeches, memories, fantasies, speculations, and hallucinations in potentially limitless profusion – and at the same time problematizes the relationships among such categories. *Finnegans Wake* carries the process to an extreme, seeming to give language and its chance patterns and echoes absolute primacy over non-linguistic reality.

I would argue, however, that this does not constitute any kind of claim about the existence or non-existence, or the true nature of, the Real; what it does do is demonstrate a few facets of the immense power of language (and the systems of cultural signification with which it works) to create an impression of access to that inaccessible Real while at the same time drawing attention to the linguistic and literary processes through which this effect is achieved – the exploitation of narrative and descriptive conventions, the multiplication of allusions and references, the tapping of the obscure sources of sexuality and comedy. This power to fabricate a 'Real', to elicit and direct drives of eroticism,

though Jameson may prefer to believe that a day will dawn, and must dawn, when dreams and nightmares are all dissolved in the brilliance of the postcapitalist era. One does not find that sense in Joyce; there is no likelihood that Stephen will wake from his nightmare (though it is to his credit that it does not subside into an assuaging dream), and dawn at the end of *Finnegans Wake* brings no daylight clarity or lucid and lasting truth.

That disagreement between Jameson (who stands here for the most culturally astute forms of late twentieth-century Marxism) and Joyce, I would argue, springs from a substantial difference in their understanding of the relation between the two senses of history. Some of Jameson's most strenuously rhetorical writing is devoted to the project of steering between two contrasting ideologies which treat these two histories very differently: what he calls the ideology of 'structuralism' – which would deny the existence of the first history or of the referent of any historical, or narrative, text – and the ideology of 'vulgar materialism' – which would reduce the second, textual, history to a mere mechanically determined reflection of the first (*Political Unconscious*, 82). A successful middle course would, for Jameson, not be an instance of ideology, since it would be an acknowledgement both of the real contradictions that constitute History (or Necessity) and of the constitutive function of the texts in which those contradictions are represented (and disguised). Not surprisingly, these prove to be treacherous waters through which to navigate, and if we stay with Jameson on the voyage it is largely because the Scylla and Charybdis he has depicted for us are equally unappealing alternatives.

Joyce's texts, on the other hand, seem to imply that *all* versions of history are made in language and are, by virtue of that fact, ideological constructions, weavings and rewavings of old stories, fusions of stock character types, blendings of different national languages, dialects, and registers.<sup>1</sup> *Finnegans Wake* is the fullest statement in the world's textual archive of this view of history, exploiting the properties of the linguistic signifier to mix and conjoin narratives from a multiplicity of cultures, periods, disciplines, and discourses, at every level from the individual word to the several-hundred-page book. But the process can be seen at work in *Ulysses* and the earlier texts as well. Neither *Dubliners* nor *A*

<sup>1</sup> For a careful discussion of Joyce's awareness and exploitation of the competing varieties of historiography current during his writing career, see Spoo, *James Joyce and the Language of History*. Holtheim, in *Joyce and the Invention of Irish History*, gives a useful account of some of the ways in which Joyce responds to Irish traditions of historical writing; see in particular chapters 3 and 4.

humour, or curiosity, is so strongly evident in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* that one cannot become aware of it without gaining some sense of the degree to which other kinds of narrative or description depend on the same power for the sense of the Real or the True which they convey – including works of history, criticism, and theory, and including what Jameson unashamedly calls ‘the single great collective story’ told by Marxism. Joyce could be said to dramatize and amplify Jameson’s argument that although history is not a text, it is ‘inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization’ (*Political Unconscious*, 35).

Instead of reading Joyce in the light of Jameson, then, it might be fruitful to read Jameson in the light of Joyce. Can we regard Jameson’s text as a web of stories, archetypes, verbal strategies, rhetorical ploys, in which the skilful handling of history as a mode of discourse produces an impression of privileged access to truth or the Real? It might be possible to regard the narrative of the Odyssean intellectual journey between two unacceptable and opposed ideologies of history which I mentioned earlier, and which could be said to provide the rhetorical motor of *The Political Unconscious*, as itself an ideological construct, designed to preserve intact a comfortable but threatened position – a position which succeeds in retaining *both* the reassurance of an ultimately knowable ground outside all textual operations (guaranteed for Jameson by the insights of Marx) *and* the invigorating potential of a powerful creative and constitutive textuality. It might be, like ideology (in one of its many definitions), the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction. Jameson’s balancing act could be related to another ancient rhetorical structure – one that has generated many a philosophical and political narrative – the Aristotelian ‘Golden Mean’. (A somewhat surprising resource for Jameson to use, perhaps, since it is more often to be found in the armoury of the liberal pluralist than the committed radical.) Jameson does not, it is true, disguise the logical impossibility of his position in relation to the two alternatives: he calls it a ‘paradox’, and refers to its two dimensions as ‘inseparable yet incommensurate’ (82); but it would be naive to think that ideology could be exorcised merely by the invocation of the term *paradox* – this was, after all, a favourite device of New Criticism, whose conservative ideological stance is now unmistakable.

Probably the most powerful narrative scheme in *The Political Unconscious* is the progression from point *a* to point *b*, where *b* preserves but

subsumes, and thereby transforms, *a*. It is a familiar plot, where linear movement is accompanied by progressive widening, to produce an onward drive and to provide a conclusion of satisfying finality in which the entire narrative is recuperated yet transcended in a fresh perception of ‘truth’. Jameson acknowledges one source of this structure: the medieval four-level allegorical system whereby the Old Testament was assimilated to the New; the more immediate source is of course the Hegelian and Marxian dialectic, in which the irreversibility of the progression is given particular emphasis. In the tradition of fiction, one obvious example is the *Bildungsroman*, in which errors are transformed into experience and thence into the achievement of adulthood and maturity.

Joyce, of course, uses the same narrative scheme, but, unlike Jameson, does so partly to draw attention to it *as* a storytelling device. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* offers itself as a classical *Bildungsroman*, and has often been read as such; it is possible, however, to read it – especially in the light cast backwards by *Ulysses* – as an undermining of readerly expectations of progress from innocence and naivety to self-knowledge and success. If we take the two novels together, the later one can be said to perform an operation upon the former which is a kind of proleptic parody of Jameson’s subsuming tactic: *Ulysses* certainly subsumes *A Portrait* into a much wider fictional whole, but the effect is to deny the anticipated narrative progression from fledgling poet to great artist, whose errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery. In ‘Ithaca’, Stephen and Bloom part without any fulfilment of the carefully generated expectations of mutual recognition or cross-fertilization, and by refusing this recuperative culmination the novel draws attention to the narrative structure, and the narrative hopes, which it evades. At another level, however, it could be said that *Ulysses* does obey the dictates of this narrative injunction: as Karen Lawrence has shown in detail in *The Odyssey of Style in ‘Ulysses’*, the progression of its styles is itself a narrative journey, and the ‘Ithaca’ episode could be seen as the achievement of a final perspective from which all the earlier styles can be understood as relative – though the ‘Penelope’ episode comes where it does, perhaps, to challenge that claim of finality. It is only in *Finnegans Wake* that Joyce fully resists the linear, progressive, subsuming structure at the level of *discours* as well as at the level of *histoire*: no amount of ingenious analysis can make the language or the content of the later chapters encapsulate, transcend, or dominate that of the earlier ones. The sense of deepening insight, of closer and closer approximation to

*Unconscious* is a superb example of the rewriting of that tradition for a particular time and place – a rewriting which, in its acknowledgement of the textuality of history, is testimony to the historical effectiveness of Joyce's own creative rewriting of history.

the Real, which is such a persuasive feature of a verbal structure like Jameson's, is jettisoned, and the bafflement and disappointment that *Finnegans Wake* so often produces in its readers is no doubt partly the result of this refusal.

What I have suggested, in effect, is that Jameson's text is subject to his own favourite manoeuvre, and that it can be subsumed into the wider notions of textuality, ideology, and history that we find represented in Joyce. In particular, Joyce's writing (and those features of the literary which it exploits) enables us to challenge the separation of the two senses of 'history' implied in Jameson's argument and Stephen's Nestorian reflections. It does this by questioning the division of the world into signs and referents, language and existents; it reminds us that signs are referents and existents too, and history as text or ideology is as real as the unfathomable history that hurts us or gives us a back kick. Insofar as texts – Joyce's or Jameson's – have *effects* on their readers (and both writers seek and achieve effects that are extraordinarily powerful) – they are part of the Real. Novels and theoretical treatises can kick, too. Signs, texts, ideologies, interpretative methods – and the stories we tell about them – not only have histories, but make history. When we comment on the texts of Jameson or Joyce, we comment on the Real just as much as when we comment on the French Revolution or the price of books; equally, comments of either kind remain in the realm of textuality while they work their own effects in and on history.

Rather than an absolute division between the Real and the Text, along which we are obliged to tread a perilous path, rather than an irreversible progression from pure signification to an apprehension of Necessity, we learn from Joyce an appreciation of *difference*, which resists the narrative of progress and the claims of transcendence. And we learn that although the hurtful history to which we are constantly subject cannot be named, it can be changed – thanks to the historically generated power of the texts we write and read. Jameson's version of the Seylla and Charybdis tale is, I submit, based on a false premise: that before we can act politically (and all action is to some degree political) we have to find a narrative which 'convinces' us as true and all-subsuming. I would contend, in the spirit, I believe, of Joyce's writings, that we can, and must, continue to find ways of rewriting ourselves, our history, our future, one another, in a constantly reworded engagement with the non-textual Real and with a constant alertness to the effects we are producing by our textual activity. One rich tradition which has an important part to play in that engagement is Marxism, and *The Political*