

Hugh Kenner

Joyce's Voices

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 76-3887
ISBN 0-520-03206-3

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

University of California Press
Berkeley • Los Angeles • London

2. *The Uncle Charles Principle*

The first sentence of "The Dead" has also a leaden ring, very perceptible to a translingual ear. (Joyce's household language was Italian, his public language during the *Ulysses* period successively Triestino, Schweizerdeutsch, and French. He was normally poised between some other language and English.)

Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet.

Translate that into any alien tongue you like. "Literally?" To wonder what "literally" may mean is the fear of the Word and the beginning of reading. Whatever Lily was literally (Lily?) she was not literally run off her feet. She was (surely?) *figuratively* run off her feet, but according to a banal figure. And the figure is hers, the idiom: "literally" reflects not what the narrator would say (who is he?) but what Lily would say: "I am literally run off my feet." And sure enough, the paragraph goes on to designate the shabby crew who attend that party as the ladies and the gentlemen, which would be Lily's idiom likewise. Joyce is at his subtle game of specifying what pretensions to elegance are afoot on this occasion, and he does so with great economy by presenting a caretaker's daughter (Americans say 'the janitor's girl') cast for this evening as hall maid, and coping amid inconvenient facilities with too many simultaneous arrivals. "Hardly had she brought

one gentleman into the little pantry behind the office on the ground floor and helped him off with his overcoat than the wheezy hall-door bell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest. It was well for her she had not to attend to the ladies also."

So that first sentence was written, as it were, from Lily's point of view, and though it looks like "objective" narration it is tinged with her idiom. It is Lily, not the austere author, whose habit it is to say "literally" when "figuratively" is meant, and the author is less recounting the front-hall doings than paraphrasing a recounting of hers.

This is a small instance of a general truth about Joyce's method, that his fictions tend not to have a detached narrator, though they seem to have. His words are in such delicate equilibrium, like the components of a sensitive piece of apparatus, that they detect the gravitational field of the nearest person. One reason the quiet little stories in *Dubliners* continue to fascinate is that the narrative point of view unobtrusively fluctuates. The illusion of dispassionate portrayal seems attended by an iridescence difficult to account for until we notice one person's sense of things inconspicuously giving place to another's. The grammar of twelve of the stories is that of third-person narrative, imparting a deceptive look of impersonal truth. The diction frequently tells a different tale.

Scanning *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* fifty years ago, the eye of Wyndham Lewis was caught by what seemed an inadvertency of diction in a book not quite, as he thought, completely "sweet and tidied":

Every morning, therefore, Uncle Charles repaired to his outhouse but not before he had greased and brushed

scrupulously his back hair and brushed and put on his tall hat.

Lewis thought that in catching Joyce writing "repaired" he had caught him off guard. "People," he said, "repair to places in works of fiction of the humblest order." He was characterizing Joyce as a humble scrivener who kept himself from dropping into cliché by not wholly incessant vigilance. But the normal Joycean vigilance has not faltered here. Like the "literally" of the perhaps illiterate Lily, "repaired" wears invisible quotation marks. It would be Uncle Charles's own word should he chance to say what he was doing. Uncle Charles has notions of semantic elegance, akin to his ritual brushing of his hat; we hear him employing the word "salubrious," also the word "mollifying." If Uncle Charles spoke at all of his excursions to what he calls the outhouse,* he would speak of "repairing" there.

Not that he does so speak, in our hearing. Rather, a speck of his characterizing vocabulary attends our sense of him. A word he need not even utter is there like a gnat in the air beside him, for us to perceive in the same field of attention in which we note how "scrupulously" he brushes his hat. This is apparently something new in fiction, the normally neutral narrative vocabulary pervaded by a little cloud of idioms which a character might use if he were managing the narrative. In Joyce's various extensions of this device we have one clue to the manifold styles of *Ulysses*; what is the first half of "Nausicaa," for instance, but Gerty Macdowell's very self and voice, caught up into the narrative machinery? "Mayhap it was this, the love that might have been, that lent to her softly featured face at whiles a look, tense with suppressed meaning,

that imparted a strange yearning tendency to the beautiful eyes a charm few could resist" [348/346]. † Those are her words though she speaks no such sentence. Uncle Charles, puffing away at his pipe in the outhouse he calls "his arbour" is a Namer, and deserves to have something named after him. So let us designate the Uncle Charles Principle: *the narrative idiom need not be the narrator's*.

The Uncle Charles Principle may extend from diction to syntax. Syntax maps a set of judgments about relatedness, and such judgments help define the people who make them. So Joycean syntax may mirror the priorities of a character we needn't think of as framing the sentence. The conjunction at the hinge of a sentence about Gerty MacDowell's face—

The waxen pallor of her face was almost spiritual in its ivory-like purity though her rosebud mouth was a genuine Cupid's bow, Greekly perfect. [348/346]

—is neither an "and," assembling effects out of pallor and rosebud, nor a "but," disjoining their allegations (saint's complexion but sinner's lips); it is "though," and it wobbles like Gerty's half-formed notion that the ivory and the rose, the Spiritual and the Cupidinous, though conventionally incompatible may thanks after all to good taste—*this* sentence cannot be finished.

The next sentence of Joyce's text illustrates a different use for "though":

Her hands were of finely veined alabaster with tapering fingers and as white as lemon juice and queen of ointments

†Page references to *Ulysses* appear as a double number in the form [425/429]. The first refers to what has become by default the international standard edition, the reset Random House of 1961; the second to the British Penguin edition of 1969.

could make them though it was not true that she used to wear kid gloves in bed or take a milk footbath either. [348/346]

This is a "though" to fend off malicious rumors, affirming, not without petulance (note the finely placed "either"), that much of her beauty is God-given. Later an "and" is eagerly affirmative, daring all, daring utter confusion even:

She had cut it that very morning on account of the new moon and it nestled about her pretty head in a profusion of luxuriant clusters and pared her nails too, Thursday for wealth. [349/347]

So eager is the second "and" to join "pared" with "cut"—Gerty has performed the due rituals, has observed the moon and the Thursday—that it crumples syntax (was it hair that pared?) in flushed impetuosity.

A *chef d'oeuvre* of expressive disarray is discoverable a few pages on, when Gerty meditates on the fortune that might have been hers (rolling in her carriage, second to none) had her father but avoided the clutches of the demon drink:

Over and over had she told herself that as she mused by the dying embers in a brown study without the lamp because she hated two lights or oftentimes gazing out of the window dreamily by the hour at the rain falling on the rusty bucket, thinking. [354/352]

Resolutely suppressing the suspicion that Gerty may think a brown study is a dun-colored Irish back room, we lend ear to that terminal cadence: "the rain falling . . . , thinking." The participles insist on chiming in parallel. Is it possible that "thinking" can go with "rain"? Does its sound mime the *think tink* of rain in a

bucket? Perhaps. More certainly, expressive in its valiant displacement, it closes the sentence where the sentence opened, not with rain and bucket but with Gerry deep in thought. And thought. And thought.

Though our spectrum of examples is incomplete even for "Nausicaa"—it omits for instance the shifting antecedents of Gerty's he's and him's, a pronominal promiscuity she shares with Molly Bloom—still it isn't misleadingly brief. Joyce's repertory of syntactic devices is not extensive. He is not, like Beckett, an Eiffel nor a Calder of the sentence. The single word—"repaired"; "salubrious"—is his normal means to his characteristic effects. His sentences, on the whole, suffice to get the words together, and when he is unsure of himself, in an early draft for instance or a bread-and-butter letter, entangled priorities will entangle his constructions as gracelessly as Gerty's though less entertainingly. The paragraph in *Stephen Hero* (Chapter XIX) in which Mr. Dedalus Sr. investigates Ibsen is as ill-written a draft as a major author has left; for instance,

A metaphor is a vice that attracts the dull mind by reason of its aptness and repels the too serious mind by reason of its falsity and danger so that, after all, there is something to be said, nothing voluminous perhaps, but at least a word of concession for that class of society which in literature as in everything else goes always with its four feet on the ground.

Dreiser was never worse. Joyce was simply unsure how much fun he wanted to poke at his father.

The letter to Bennet Cerf reprinted in the Random House *Ulysses* contains quite as much awkwardness:

This brave woman risked what professional publishers did not wish to, she took the manuscript and handed it to the

The Uncle Charles Principle

This brings us the book in its extravagance to cohere. This brings us back to the Uncle Charles Principle, which despite appearances is not abandoned. The Uncle Charles Principle, we remember, entails applying the character's sort of wording to the character. In one of the late episodes of *Ulysses* we find Bloom written about as he would choose. The result is a contrived stylistic disaster.

Still, Bloom deserved the courtesy of the experiment. It comes at his finest moment, at the one time in his long day when, snubbed, thwarted, cuckolded, ignored, jeered at, slandered, put upon, he is finally entitled to feel like a hero. For he has taken initiative after initiative, has stood up to a drunken soldier, has contrived the deliverance of Stephen Dedalus from multiple enemies, has assumed responsibility for his safety, and is now about to go home with a genuine Poet-philosopher in tow. At last he feels like the hero of a novel, which for Joyce in fiction after fiction is the apotheosis to which fictional beings aspire. And he has his reward. He is treated to an episode written as he would have written it. The language is solemn, decorated, fulsome, periphrastic. The episode is the one called "Eumaeus."

It commences "Preparatory to anything else," a Bloomish trumpet-flourish of a beginning.

Preparatory to anything else Mr Bloom brushed off the greater bulk of the shavings and handed Stephen the hat and ashplant and bucked him up generally in orthodox Samaritan fashion, which he very badly needed. [612-13/533]

There, as the book's third part opens, are "brush" and "shaving" and "Buck," three words that on the very first page of the book served to define a wholly differ-

ent scene. Brushing aside (so to speak) a hallucinatory Mulligan with a shaving-brush, we query "orthodox Samaritan fashion." There's English for you! But may one put "orthodox" beside "Samaritan"? No, one had better not, because "orthodox" conjures up "Jew," which is antithetic to "Samaritan." But the word "Jew" is not here? Ah, but (quite apart from the race of Mr. Bloom's father) the word "Samaritan" helps bring it here. So words do battle with the ghosts of absent words.

Next we learn of the hope that they "might hit upon some drinkables in the shape of a milk and soda or a mineral" [613/533], and there rises within each reader a ghostly schoolmaster to protest that drinkables are not for hitting, and liquids proverbially have no shape; moreover by what appeal to absent idiom does "a mineral" become the shape of a drinkable?

Soon a cab is sighted, and we observe "Mr Bloom, who was anything but a professional whistler" endeavoring "to hail it by emitting a kind of a whistle" [613/533]. Penumbrally these words conjure up some "professional whistler" (to be distinguished from an amateur whistler), and "a kind of a whistle" which presumably is not a mainstream whistle.

Wonder crowds upon wonder. In a "quandary" (a word Bloom would enjoy using) the two next "put a good face on the matter and foot it" [613/533-34] (how pliable is the anatomy of "the matter"!): Immediately thereafter Mr. Bloom, patient Laocoon, is said to be "handicapped" by a "circumstance," which if we are to credit etymology stands around him hand in cap, before it is suddenly equated with the absence of a button. But he enters "thoroughly into the spirit of the thing" [613-14/534] (as we fumble round for that in-

spirited "thing") and "heroically" (being after all Ulysses) "makes light" of the mischance (*Fiat lux*). Next they "dandered along past by where the empty vehicle was waiting without a fare or a jarvey" [614/534]; we do not know whether to marvel more at the reduplicated emptiness or at the concatenated "along past by where," a procession of phantom constructions.

It is in "Eumaeus," more than anywhere else in *Ulysses* that we find the principles of *Finnegans Wake* on display, congesting foreground and middle distance with verbal phantoms. And if we open *Finnegans Wake* at random it is "Eumaeus"-like syntax that we are apt to find. No episode in *Ulysses* would pose more insuperable obstacles for a translator. "Dandered along past by where . . .!"—what might a committee of Frenchmen hope to do with that?

And it is so much Bloom's episode he even daydreams of writing it: "Suppose he were to pen something out of the common groove (as he fully intended doing) at the rate of one guinea per column, *My Experiences*, let us say, *in a Cabman's Shelter*" [647/567]. He would write it, we may feel sure, the way it is written, obeying a principle T. S. Eliot discerned in the diction of Byron:

Just as an artisan who can talk English beautifully while about his work or in a public bar, may compose a letter painfully written in a dead language bearing some resemblance to a newspaper leader, and decorated with words like "maelstrom" and "pandemonium": so does Byron write a dead or dying language.

When Bloom is represented as speaking in this episode—and only in this episode—what he says is apt

to be continuous with its narrative texture; he says, "Analogous scenes are occasionally, if not often, met with" [636/556] and "It has been explained by competent men as the convolutions of the grey matter" [633/554]. Everyone else talks realistically; Stephen says things like "All too Irish" [623/543] and "Count me out" [644/565]; the garrulous sailor says "There was lice in that bunk in Bridgewater sure as nuts" [631/551]. Only Bloom uses polysyllables: as though for these fifty pages he held the pen, and could reserve the most stylish lines for himself.

"Eumaeus" has been called cliché-ridden, therefore tired. Tired it is not. There is no one—no, not at Harvard—who could write three consecutive sentences of it, fatigued or alert. It is open to wonder whether any episode cost Joyce such pains, plumbing depths of expressive infelicity most of us have not the talent even to conceive. And we are meant to suppose that Bloom might be executing it, had he the time and the freedom from distraction. Copious in its fecund awfulness, it is Joyce's return to the tonic of his method: the Uncle Charles Principle *in excelsis*, a stylistic homage in Bloom's style to Bloom, and in some ways the book's most profound tribute to its hero, Ulysses, first among Homer's word-men.

3. Myth and Pyrrhonism

There were few things that could hold James Joyce's attention like the spectacle of a man speaking in public. The preacher, the barrister, the after-dinner speaker, performs a paradigmatic communal act, offering to make sense, coherent sense, of what he and his listeners confront together. So, toward the end of that bewildering dinner-party "in the dark, gaunt house on Usher's Island," we find Gabriel Conroy leaning his ten trembling fingers on the tablecloth and smiling nervously before he utters the ritual words "Ladies and Gentlemen" and staggers from cliché to cliché into exegetical disaster. It is his private belief that his aunts are ignorant old women and that he is orating to vulgarians. Accordingly he is shamelessly formulaic. He says "my poor powers," he says "take the will for the deed," he even says "last but not least." Soaring higher, he offers to explicate the evening by myth, the way Joyce later taught us to perform an explication. He identifies his aunts and their niece as the Three Graces of the Dublin Musical World. (What did he say? asks Aunt Julia. "He says we are the Three Graces, Aunt Julia," said Mary Jane.") He then entangles himself in a wholly unnoticed confusion between the Three Graces and the three goddesses in the story of the Judgment of Paris, and leads the company in song while "Freddy Malins beat time with his pudding-