

JOYCE'S POLITICS

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Notes on the Text

Abbreviations

- JJ* Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).
- I, II, III The three-volume edition, *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert and Richard Ellmann (London: Faber & Faber, 1957–66).
- CW* *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1959).
- MBK* Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958).
- SF* *Sinn Féin*.
- UI* *United Irishman*.
- JJMU* Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses' and Other Writings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

References

Bracketed page references following quotations from *Ulysses* are to the two standard editions, the one published by Random House, New York (1961) and the other by The Bodley Head, London (1960), cited in that order in *italic*. References in the text to Joyce's other books are to these editions:

- 1 *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Text, Criticism, Notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968) (New York: Viking Press, 1968, in *italic*).
- 2 *Dubliners: Text Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Robert Scholes and A.

Walton Litz (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968) (New York: Viking Press, 1969, in italic).

3 *Stephen Hero*, ed. John J. Slocum and Herbert Cahoon (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969) (New York: New Directions, 1963, in italic).

4 *Exiles* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) (New York: Viking Press, 1961, in italic).

5 *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1969).

6 *Giacomo Joyce* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969).

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Chapter 1

Old Ireland

1 A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Parnellite

I

The tenor of innumerable critical statements about Joyce is that he was indifferent to politics. From the earliest reviews to the more recent ones, we are told of his 'fanatical neutrality' on political matters, and of the divorce of his art from social issues.¹ Such views rest on impressions of Joyce as an apolitical writer conveyed by his friends. Yeats, when he was trying to obtain a grant for him from the Royal Literary Fund, informed Edmund Gosse by letter in 1915 that Joyce 'had never anything to do with Irish politics, extreme or otherwise, and I think disliked politics.'² In Zürich, at the end of the First World War, Frank Budgen marvelled at Joyce's reticence to discuss politics: 'On one subject he was more uncommunicative than any man I know: the subject of politics.'³ In the charged atmosphere of the 1930s, Louis Gillet found Joyce remarkably aloof: 'I do not remember, during all those years, that Joyce ever said anything on current events.'⁴ And when at his last meeting with his brother in Zürich in 1939 Stanislaus Joyce was eager to talk about the Fascist regime in Italy, he was rebuffed, 'For God's sake don't talk politics. I'm not interested in politics. The only thing that interests me is style.'⁵

From such statements it would be possible to construct a picture of Joyce as a writer totally detached from his century. To regard Joyce as a dweller in an ivory tower, however, does not jibe with the attempt to picture totally the situation of man and woman. The portrayal of Bloom and Molly, for instance, can hardly be said to be idealised or sentimentalised. Joyce insisted that we must accept life 'as we see it before our eyes, men and women as we meet them in the

real world, not as we apprehend them in the world of faery'.⁶ The material he worked with is the common, the average, the everyday. To treat actuality in all its aspects in a truthful manner presupposes that art affords a degree of interaction with society, or indeed that it reflects its society. Such an artistic aim, therefore, must necessarily include a concern with politics.

If by politics we mean campaigning for votes, or for particular candidates, Joyce took no part. If by politics we understand attempting to get new laws passed through legislatures, Joyce never participated in such activity either. He did not make himself a champion of causes, however noble. By refusing to do so Joyce did not discountenance political awareness, but rather indicated his conviction that an active role in politics would compromise his position as an artist. To be an artist entailed a sense of civic responsibility greater than that of the ordinary citizen, but not necessarily expressed at ballot boxes or in caucuses.

In the literature of the nineteenth century, in so far as it was political, an artist had only to show compassion towards the lower classes and the oppressed as a sign and measure of a responsible social conscience. Adherence to a political line was not expected, although some novelists, like Disraeli, were obviously partisan. The idea of having to choose between political parties, as far as the novel is concerned, is a problem which has been posed only in this century. Scrutiny of the political orientation of writers has come about only recently, especially since the Russian revolution. Only since the 1930s has the question of whether a writer was fascist or communist, whether he belonged to the right or left wing, been a matter of crucial concern.

Joyce has remained a somewhat enigmatic figure because he does not present a vision of the social order in accordance with a strict ideological line. His reluctance to inculcate a rigid political view can be explained, in part, by his hatred of didacticism. The didacticism used by previous writers was, on the one hand, in the service of a tradition, that of the Church, the State, or of social conventions. Joyce's refusal to commit himself to this tradition was not a sign of political indifference; rather he exercised his right to make a positive choice. His objection to being dictated to was an assertion of personal freedom, an unwillingness to reduce the role of the artist to that of a priest or politician. Other writers, like Tolstoy, on the other hand, had launched their attacks on such institutions violently and openly. Joyce interpreted this didacticism of 'revolution' to be

equally repugnant. He believed that the artist, whether progressive or reactionary, would lose his credibility by browbeating his readers into accepting his point of view. To embrace a dogmatic political outlook would limit the effectiveness of his art, and expose him to the charge of presenting a *parti pris* about society. Joyce's dismissal of didacticism, then, was itself a political act. The political statements he made were often ironical, and cannot always be taken at face value; that is, they were not exhortations but criticisms of helplessness, or of situations that offered no cause for hope. If he was reserved in his principal writings, he was less so in others. Some of his minor works, for instance, deal with political questions with acerbity. In whichever mode he chose to express himself, he demonstrated a constant awareness of Irish politics. For Joyce the great question in literature is not allegiance to any particular party or platform. The writer must marshal the feelings and events of the time, political in their implication, into a possible order, and interpret day-to-day issues in the light of the loftier struggles of ideals, and the puncturing of delusions.

The first work Joyce ever wrote was political. This was the poem (now lost), 'Et Tu, Healy',* which he composed at the age of nine shortly after Parnell's death on 6 October 1891. The poem was a diatribe against Tim Healy, leader of the clericalist faction in opposition to Parnell. In denouncing Healy as a traitor, Joyce was inspired by the invective of his father, an ardent Parnellite, against the 'Bantry gang'. This epithet, by which John Joyce meant Healy and his uncle T. M. Sullivan as well as other relations who hailed from Bantry, is recalled by Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (233) (228): 'His father's jibes at the Bantry gang leaped out of his memory.' John Joyce admired his son's poem and had it printed and distributed among his circle of friends. Parnell's fall from power stamped itself indelibly on Joyce's imagination, and he concentrated mainly on this aspect of the Parnell era when he sat down to reconstruct its events about two decades later in *A Portrait*. Parnell's fall possessed that dramatic quality which other events did not, and produced those polarised attitudes and divisions in Irish society which helped to shape events in the early twentieth century.

Joyce described the Protestant, English-educated Charles Stewart

* Stanislaus Joyce remembered that the poem ended with the dead Parnell, likened to an eagle, looking down on the grovelling mass of Irish politicians. For the few surviving fragments of the poem see *JJ*, p. 33 and fn.

Parnell as 'perhaps the most formidable man that ever led the Irish'.⁷ When he came to prominence in the 1870s, Parnell mounted a fierce campaign for Home Rule which proved to be the touchstone of Irish politics up to the First World War. He did so, as Joyce pointed out, by uniting 'behind him every element of Irish life and began to march, treading on the verge of insurrection'.⁸ These disparate elements were the constitutional nationalists and the Fenians or physical force advocates. On the floor of the British House of Commons Parnell with a handful of his supporters made a concerted effort to block government business by opposing every important English or Scottish bill under parliamentary debate. By initiating the technique of the filibuster the small Irish Party would eventually succeed in holding the balance of power between the two major English parties in 1886. Parnell kept in the forefront of political activity at home too. As President of the Land League founded by Michael Davitt, he pressed for land reform and was instrumental in creating a movement more or less along the lines of passive resistance. For those buying the farms of evicted tenants Parnell advocated the morally coercive but essentially non-violent policy of social ostracism or boycotting. A parliamentary campaign of obstructionism coupled with the land agitation gave the 'Irish question' the predominance in the Commons it had hitherto lacked. Writing almost thirty years later about the second Home Rule Act, Joyce, alluding to this period of ferment in his country's history,* described the Irish as 'a people who, poor in everything else and rich only in political ideas, have perfected the strategy of obstructionism and made the word "boycott" an international war-cry'.⁹

Joyce was aware that Irishmen were also capable of misguided gestures of political extremism. In 1882, his birth year, the British Undersecretary and the new Chief Secretary were assassinated in Dublin's Phoenix Park by the Invincibles secret society. This incident disrupted the non-violent programme of Parnell, and forced Joyce to take a stand against political violence and against the physical force tradition in Irish history. In this attitude Joyce is represented in *Ulysses* by Bloom as well as by Stephen. The cabman's shelter, which they visited in 'Eumaeus', is reputedly owned by Fitzharris, or Skin-the-Goat, the man who allegedly

* In the 'Ithaca' episode of *Ulysses* (716; 843), we are told that Bloom had supported 'the agrarian policy of Michael Davitt' and the 'constitutional agitation of Charles Stewart Parnell'.

drove the getaway cab for the Invincibles. When the discussion veers towards the murders, Bloom, although fascinated by revolutionary activity, registers his disapproval:

He disliked those careers of wrongdoing and crime on principle. Yet, though such criminal propensities had never been an inmate of his bosom in any shape or form, he certainly did feel, and no denying it (while inwardly remaining what he was), a certain kind of admiration for a man who had actually brandished a knife, cold steel, with the courage of his political convictions though, personally, he would never be a party to any such thing. (642; 744)

Joyce indicates that however just a political cause might be, violence can never provide a solution.

Parnell rebounded from the politically dangerous acts of terrorism to gain some measure of support for the concept of independence within the next few years. In 1886 the English Prime Minister, William Gladstone, dramatically introduced the first Home Rule Bill only to have it defeated on second reading by two dissident groups within his own Liberal Party. Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule was taken in good faith by Parnell and by the Irish people, but Joyce suspected the purity of his motives. In *Ulysses* (716; 843) we are told that Bloom at one time supported Gladstone's programme for reform. Joyce, however, denounced Gladstone as a 'self-seeking politician', and classified his brand of liberalism as

an inconstant algebraic symbol whose coefficient was the movement's political pressure and whose index was his personal profit. While he temporised in internal politics, contradicting and justifying himself in turn, he always maintained (as much as he was capable of it) a sincere admiration for liberty in the house of others.¹⁰

Joyce stressed the 'elastic quality' of Gladstone's liberalism in order to highlight the magnitude of Parnell's achievement. A prominent example of this elasticity or duplicity was Gladstone's opposition to Daniel O'Connell's efforts to repeal the Union. Joyce apparently overlooked the fact that it was the Fenian rising of 1867 which had first stirred Gladstone to change his position. If political calculation alone had dictated his final move for Home Rule, Gladstone would have been aware of the split within his own party that the measure would precipitate. Rather, some credit must be given him for recognising that under Parnell Ireland was ready for self-

government. It was Gladstone's role during the future Parnell crisis that coloured Joyce's view of him and explains why he painted Gladstone as a villain.

Joyce continued to be dazzled, moreover, by Parnell's personality. His coldness in the face of outbursts of public approval, for instance, was remarkable. After being vindicated in a devious attempt by the *London Times* to blackmail him, Parnell re-entered the House of Commons and was greeted with a standing ovation from all its members, starting with Gladstone. 'Is it necessary to say', Joyce asked admiringly, 'that Parnell made no response to the ovation with a smile or a bow or a gesture, but merely passed to his place beyond the aisle and sat down?' He added that Gladstone was probably thinking of this incident when he called Parnell an 'intellectual phenomenon'.¹¹

Both parties now courted Parnell. At a meeting in Brighton in 1890, John Morley, who had been Chief Secretary in an earlier Liberal administration, now boldly proposed that Parnell should hold that post in the next Liberal government. 'Parnell not only refused it,' reported Joyce in perhaps overstating the case, 'he ordered all his followers as well to refuse ministerial duties, and forbade the municipalities and public corporations in Ireland to receive officially any member of the royal house until the English government should restore autonomy to Ireland.'¹² Joyce would remember bitterly Parnell's stricture when Queen Victoria and King Edward VII visited Dublin in 1900 and 1903.

Parnell's fall came at the peak of his popularity 'like lightning from a clear sky', as Joyce put it. On Christmas eve in 1889 Captain William O'Shea, a former member of the Irish Party, filed a divorce suit citing Parnell as co-respondent. Parnell had met O'Shea's wife, Katharine, in 1880 and shortly afterwards began living with her. Their affair was an 'open secret' in political circles at least as early as 1886. O'Shea admitted in the court proceedings that he cast suspicion on their relationship at this time, but claimed he had been deceived all along. Since neither Parnell nor Mrs O'Shea defended themselves at the hearing – their one hope was to get married as quickly as possible – O'Shea received his decree of divorce on 15 November 1890. What impressed Joyce was Parnell's indifference to moral convention in Catholic Ireland, and his severe reticence or unwillingness to express any remorse about it.

Gladstone, meanwhile, came under intense pressure from powerful elements within his party to break the alliance with

Parnell. He became increasingly convinced that if Parnell did not step down the Liberals would lose the next election, and Home Rule be indefinitely postponed. The alternatives posed by Gladstone, Home Rule or Parnell, obliged the Irish Party to make an agonising choice. The alliance with the Liberals seemed vital since only Gladstone of all the English leaders had embraced Home Rule in a manner acceptable to most Irishmen. On the other hand, Parnell had gained more success for this measure than any previous Irish politician. To depose him now at the bidding of an English politician when Home Rule was within reach was to court charges of betrayal from those who viewed the man and the cause as inseparable. Originally the members of the party pledged their loyalty to Parnell but a second meeting proved inconclusive with the result that another meeting was scheduled. Parnell, meanwhile, had sized up the growing forces against him and issued a 'Manifesto to the Irish People' in which, as Joyce said, he 'denied the right of a minister to exercise a veto over the political affairs of Ireland.' He also referred unwisely and inaccurately to a meeting he had had with Gladstone in 1889, and accused the Liberals of formulating a policy against Irish interests. The manifesto forced Liberals to part company with Parnell once and for all, and infuriated members of his own party as well as the Irish delegation in the USA. At the same time, it allowed the bishops to enter the fray. The vote in Committee Room 15, therefore, ended with 45 against and 27 for the retention of Parnell's leadership. But Parnell fought the combined forces against him literally to the death. When the dust had settled, Joyce could say with bitterness that Parnell was brought down 'in obedience to Gladstone's orders' and that the 'high and low clergy entered the lists to finish him off.'¹³

To proceed in this manner, however, entails the risk, to the historian's eye, of oversimplifying the intricate aspects of the Parnell crisis. Irish history is still highly controversial. The degree to which Parnell was a genuine leader and the degree to which he forsook his position are difficult to measure. An astute modern historian, F. S. L. Lyons, has argued that to dwell exclusively on the last phase of Parnell's life is to misinterpret and to minimise the part Parnell played in his own downfall.¹⁴ In other words, Parnell betrayed himself as much as he was betrayed by others. He became so distracted by his love affair that after 1886 he absented himself frequently and regrettably from Parliament. Oblivious to adverse political repercussions, he prolonged for nearly ten years his

relationship with Katharine O'Shea. This course of conduct might have been pardonable in an ordinary man; but for Parnell, entrusted with the national interests, it endangered and finally destroyed his capacity to lead.

The interpretation of these events by Joyce, as a very young contemporary, was quite different from this later one. A great deal of what Joyce presents is the attitude of his father and that of his father's friends. Joyce adopted it out of sympathy or family loyalty, and out of shared anticlericalism. If the Church was wrong, then Parnell presumably was right. We now know that the Church itself was divided between admiration for Parnell's leadership and reproach for his liaison. Despite these differences in interpretation, the Christmas dinner scene in *A Portrait*, as will soon appear, crystallises Joyce's political position. If his Parnell is not the whole man, his prominence in Joyce's work exculpates Joyce from the charge of indifference or detachment from the explosive political world in which he had grown up. The Parnell crisis was the pivot from which Joyce viewed the rest of Irish history. The central theme of 'betrayal' in his work takes its origin from *the* political event of his youth.

Beyond Parnell lay seven centuries of Irish struggle for Home Rule. Like his fellow countrymen, Joyce considered this long-sustained English presence in Ireland an occupation. He would have agreed with Robert Dahl's standard definition of 'political', that it treated 'any pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, power, rule, or authority'.¹⁵ In his lecture on 'Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages', delivered in Trieste in 1907, Joyce dealt with the seven centuries of English rule and searched for evidence of the Irish character, and the character of Anglo-Irish relations.¹⁶ Oppression was not an English innovation. 'Anyone who reads the history of the three centuries that precede the coming of the English must have a strong stomach,' he maintained, 'because the internecine strife, and the conflicts with the Danes and the Norwegians, the black foreigners and the white foreigners, as they were called, follow each other so continuously and ferociously that they make this entire era a veritable slaughterhouse.' These nordic invaders, whom the native Irish called the 'Lochlanns', took control of the island and established a kingdom in Dublin. They were finally vanquished in the tenth century by Malach II, King of Meath, and later by Brian Boru at the battle of Clontarf in 1014. In 'Proteus' Stephen stresses his feeling of kinship with these ancestors who