Introduction

A. Nicholas Fargnoli and Michael Patrick Gillespie

As the one-hundredth anniversary of the composition of *Exiles* approaches, it provides a timely retrospection of James Joyce’s only extant play. We thought a fitting tribute to Joyce’s work and a useful addition to existing scholarship would be to produce a critical edition, with a text of the play prepared by John MacNicholas, who has spent his academic career writing about *Exiles*. This critical edition also contains a selection of some of the most insightful writing that has appeared on the play and an interview with Richard Nash, one of the more recent directors of the play.

The idea of an extended study of *Exiles* may strike some Joyceans as a daunting enterprise. Both its form and its content have created many interpretive issues for readers and theater audiences seeking something like the deep pleasure that one derives from Joyce’s major works—*Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*. Lines from the play quoted in isolation seem to have melodramatic tendencies and claustrophobic constructions when set in contrast to passages from any of these works, and that overall effect threatens to overwhelm any sense of the play’s value.

Sampling passages in such a disconnected fashion, however, only distorts a true sense of the work. Taken separately, they minimize the interpretive challenges that one expects to enliven Joyce’s canon. That in turn contributes to an unwarranted bias that springs from the very fact that *Exiles* is drama and not another fictional work.

The edition we present here confronts these assumptions, misprisions, and prejudices, and presents evidence of a greater complexity in the play that many will welcome. We begin the revaluation in our introduction with a close look at the creative and domestic forces in Joyce’s life that set
up the imaginative ethos from which the play emerged. We then turn to a newly edited version of the play followed by an extended presentation of critical responses published over the intervening decades and an interview with a director who also acted the part of Richard in *Exiles*. Taken together they offer a fuller sense of the immediate power of the play and of the interpretive complexity found in it.

**The Play in the Context of Joyce's Canon**

Implicitly or explicitly, most responses to *Exiles* begin with comparisons to the rest of Joyce's canon, in no small part because that leads most of us to the play in the first place. *Exiles* is not something that one generally comes to before reading his short stories and novels, and almost everyone who encounters the play does so after reading one or more of his works of fiction. Inherent differences between the play and the rest of Joyce's canon provoke many to ask why he would devote time and energy to writing a drama that seemingly comes nowhere near the quality of the fiction he had already produced.

Such a question, while understandable, remains beside the point. Indeed, given Joyce's imaginative prowess, one might accept the justification that he wrote *Exiles* simply because he chose to do so and endowed it with the same artistic sophistication with which he imbued his other works. That explanation will hardly satisfy most serious students of Joyce's canon. However, a dismissive response to any of his writing simply because it is not fiction fails to do it justice. Recent studies of Joyce's poetry, for example, have explored both the challenges and the pleasures one can derive from it. With just a minimal amount of work, one can find equal proof of the merits of Joyce's play.

**Finding the Creative Context of the Play**

The canon as a whole does not provide a clear path to the understanding of Joyce's play. Though many of his other works were written, and in some cases published, around the same time as the composition of *Exiles*, the play's literary form and creative themes differ considerably from them, and in ways that go well beyond the inherent distinctions between the genres. *Exiles* compels us to adjust approaches that have grown out of reading his fiction, but this adjustment does not mean that the play
escapes completely from the dramatic influences of its antecedents. To say that in structure *Exiles* resembles in many significant ways the Ibsen plays that Joyce had so admired as a young man in Dublin is both a compliment and a criticism. *Exiles* has the unrelenting and proselytizing naturalism that runs through Ibsen’s works, and at the same time *Exiles* also takes a highly personal look at the domestic complications that even the most successful artist must endure.

Certainly, an astute reader can find echoes of Ibsen in the plot and dialogue of *Exiles*, but one might equally find the influence of nineteenth-century Russian novelists in Joyce’s contemporaneous fiction. Neither analogy exhausts the possibilities for critical responses. What is needed is a broader range of hermeneutic perspectives. The point is not that Joyce was not influenced by Ibsen, for certainly he was. Rather, one comes to a stronger sense of the play by tracing ways in which he deviated from the paradigm laid down by this and other literary antecedents.

Some of the elements on which Joyce grounds his drama, of course, evoke ideas that run throughout his canon, yet each instance of their representation creates a unique experience. To cite the most obvious example, the complex exploration of the condition of exile stands out as a theme familiar to Joyceans, recurring in numerous embodiments in his works. From *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake*, the consequences of spiritual and emotional exile dog the central characters. In his Italian lecture “Irelanda, Isola dei Santi e dei Savi” (“Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages”), he overtly touches upon the effects of emigration on those who leave as well as on those who must remain at home. Nowhere, however, is the topic presented more overtly than in this play. Such conjunctions with other works are useful in contextualizing and assessing the play. While *Exiles* has not garnered the accolades accorded his fiction, time and again the work attests to Joyce’s full power as a writer.

**Background to the Composition Process**

To recall that *Exiles* was not Joyce’s first attempt to write drama affords an important perspective on the play. According to his biographer Richard Ellmann, Joyce completed two previous works when he was a young man in Dublin. One was a prose play, *A Brilliant Career* (1900), and the other, *Dream Stuff* (ca. 1900), was written in verse. Though they are no longer extant, one can glean some sense of the form of *A Brilliant Career* from
a correspondence Joyce had with William Archer, a prominent drama critic and English translator of Ibsen’s plays. Joyce apparently sent that play to Archer, whose responses to Joyce, particularly in a 15 September 1900 letter, were extremely considerate. One cannot fail to see the care and kindness that this established critic took in his gentle deflation of the work of a precocious nineteen-year-old. After a decade of living abroad and of practicing the craft of writing, Joyce again turned his efforts to playwriting and wrote as a more mature and far more technically skilled artist than he was when he produced those earlier works. At the same time, tracing the motives behind what he has done presents challenges not evident in examinations of his fiction.

Reluctant publishers compelled Joyce to make an impassioned justification of the composition of *Dubliners*. He says, for example, to Grant Richards in a 23 June 1906 letter in which he defends the tone of his short story collection:

> It is not my fault that the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal hangs round my stories. I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilization in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass. ([Letters](#), 1: 63–64)

His fiction that followed was published after his reputation as an author had begun to grow. This fact perhaps made him more willing to explain to friends and admirers some of the creative forces that shaped the construction of these works of fiction. In contrast, Joyce made no clear declaration regarding why he felt the need to produce a drama. At the same time, one needs to show care in assigning significance to that. Certainly, as an artist, he wrote as he felt the need to write. Significantly, however, the title of his work may give some sense of the emotional forces behind its composition. Before discussing the work itself, then, we should look at the circumstances leading up to its composition.

**The Time of Composition**

The time of its composition, in the midst of one of Joyce’s most creative periods, supports the view that *Exiles* contains as much of Joyce’s genius as any of his better-known works. Although the chronology remains a bit vague as to when Joyce began writing *Exiles*, critics generally believe that
he spent about two years composing the play. One of the foremost textual scholars of Joyce’s work, A. Walton Litz, has argued that the writer began drafting notes for the play as early as November 1913. Joyce’s correspondence fills in the time frame more particularly, though not always with the consistency one would wish. In an 8 November 1916 letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, Joyce elaborates on the composition process: “I wrote [Exiles] in Trieste, 1914–1915.” And in a letter of 10 July 1917 to John Quinn, lawyer, patron, and collector, Joyce gives a bit more specific information, though it remains approximate: “I began to write Exiles in the spring of 1914 on notes, and began to draft it in August 1914. I brought the MS with me here [to Zurich] from Austria in July 1915 and finished the play here in September 1915” (Letters, 1: 104–5). Even allowing for a degree of imprecision in Joyce’s recollections, one immediately notices that writing took place at a pivotal point in Joyce’s artistic career, between the completion of the early fiction that established his reputation as a force in modernism and the initiation of his most experimental efforts that set him apart from contemporaries and antecedents.

The play is set in the summer of 1912, a disappointing period in Joyce’s life as an exile. While he was in Ireland during that summer, he failed in his attempt to have Dubliners published, and he left, never to return again. Similarities between Exiles and Joyce’s life—death of a mother, return of an exiled writer with a common-law wife and their child, literary success—support the assumption that he incorporated personal experience and perhaps even personal ambitions into the play. We cannot say with certainty whether the autobiographical elements found in Exiles purged him of any thoughts of returning to Ireland, but once he had completed Exiles he was ready to start Ulysses, his most innovative work until Finnegans Wake. In either case, the play neatly suggests issues—identity, fidelity, and commitment between men and between men and women—on Joyce’s mind as he prepared to begin his monumental work of modernist fiction, Ulysses. True enough, Exiles presents an overview of the issues that Ulysses explores in detail and at the same time offers a useful exercise for applying them to Irish life.

A great deal of other creative work took place during this time. It was, in fact, one of the most productive periods in Joyce’s artistic career. After several frustrating false starts, Grant Richards published Dubliners in June of 1914. In the meantime, the English little magazine Egoist was serializing A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Joyce composed a number of
the poems that would later be collected in *Pomes Penyeach* and finished a private journal that was posthumously published under the title, chosen by the editor Richard Ellmann, *Giacomo Joyce*. Notes that Joyce would use in the composition of *Ulysses*, which he had begun contemplating in 1906, were well under way.¹¹

**Production and Publication**

Once he completed *Exiles*, Joyce turned his energy to having the play performed, though his initial efforts to find a company willing to undertake a production proved unsuccessful. The dramatic mode plays a prominent and effective role in Joyce's aesthetics, yet, ironically, his sole dramatic piece was not received with the same enthusiasm as his fiction. Perhaps because of theatrical challenges the play imposes upon itself, *Exiles* was met with unanticipated indifference at best and not with the recognition Joyce had envisioned. In his September 1915 letter to Joyce, Ezra Pound frankly declares that the play is “interesting” and “exciting” but that it “won’t do for the stage” and that “even [to] read it takes very close concentration of attention. I don’t believe an audience could follow it or take it in” (*Letters*, 2: 365). Suspecting that the Abbey Theatre would not perform *Exiles*, Pound suggested sending the play to the Stage Society in London. A year later, in a 14 September 1916 letter to W. B. Yeats, Joyce acknowledges that the play was “rejected in Zurich, Berne, Turin and by the Stage Society in London.”¹² Pound's misgivings about the suitability of *Exiles* for the Abbey (*Letters*, 2: 365) were borne out in August 1917 when Yeats turned it down, explaining that “it is a type of work we have never played well” and “is too far from . . . folk drama” (*Letters*, 2: 405). The first stage production of *Exiles* was not in English but in German, in Munich. Under the title *Verbannte*, it was performed at the Münchener Theater on 7 August 1919, though the results were very disappointing, for the play was withdrawn after a single performance.¹³ Joyce also made a concerted effort to have *Exiles* published, and after a number of delays, Grant Richards published it in May of 1918 (*Letters*, 2: 418n2).¹⁴

In February 1925 the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City staged the first English-language production. With forty-one performances, this production was the longest-ever run for the play. Almost ten years after Joyce's initial request, the Stage Society produced *Exiles* at London's Regent Theatre in February 1926. In April 1926 the Boston Stage Society
sponsored the second American production of the play, at The Barn in Boston. In 1930 *Exiles* was again produced in German, at the Deutsches Volkstheater in Berlin, and it premiered in Italian at the Convegno Theater in Milan. In September 1945 a second London production of *Exiles* was at the Torch Theatre. The Equity Library Theatre at the Hudson Park Branch of the New York Public Library produced the play in January 1947. *Exiles* was not performed in Dublin until the Gaiety Theatre presented it on 18 January 1948, seven years after Joyce’s death. In May 1950 a third London production was performed at the Q Theatre, and yet two others in 1970 and 1971 when the British playwright Harold Pinter staged *Exiles* at the Mermaid Theatre and at the Aldwych, respectively. As of the date of this publication, *Exiles* has not been performed at the Abbey, although the company participated in a joint television production that aired on Telefis Eireann on 2 October 1974 and proposed to stage it in 2004 until the James Joyce Estate raised objections. Other productions, many for one or two performances only, have been staged occasionally in Europe and the United States. More recent productions have been at the Calo Theatre in Chicago in 1991 and in New York City by the Ontological-Hysteric Theater in 1995 and by the Daedalus Theatre Company in 1997.15

Despite successes like the 1970 and 1971 London productions directed by Pinter,16 *Exiles* is rarely performed. It is also infrequently read and studied. Nonetheless, *Exiles* is important for anyone interested in the evolution of Joyce’s canon and in the development of his art. As a dramatic work, it embodies, albeit imperfectly, a vital principle in Joyce’s aesthetics, one that he formulated years earlier in his *Paris Notebook* (6 March 1903). In Aristotelian style, Joyce characterized the differences among the lyrical, the epical, and the dramatic forms of art, the dramatic being the least personal and thus the purest: “that art is dramatic whereby the artist sets forth the image in immediate relation to others.” Particular concern for the dramatic mode can be found in Joyce’s early essays as well as in the thoughts of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

**Place in the Canon**

Whatever the motivations, *Exiles* undeniably marks an important moment in Joyce’s literary life. Bernard Benstock considers it “a transitional work” and not merely an “interlude” between *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*.17 During the time that Joyce was writing his