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## *Exiles, Act I*

Enter James Joyce, a “Poet of Silence and Truth”

It was not through *Ulysses* that James Joyce first came to the attention of a German audience, nor through *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, nor even *Dubliners*. Although *Chamber Music* had been published in English in 1907 and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916, and although chapters of *Ulysses* had started appearing in the *Little Review* as early as March 1918, Joyce’s drama *Exiles* came to be his first work published in German, appearing in a translation by Hannah von Mettal in Zurich in early 1919 (the publication of which Joyce claimed was financed by himself).<sup>1</sup> Was it a sign of things to come that even this simple text (at least by Joycean standards) required a rather conspicuous pink page of corrigenda to be pasted onto the flyleaf of the first German edition? Thus Richard’s comment in the first act about his mother “Sie starb allein, ohne mich zu vergessen”<sup>2</sup> (“She died alone, without forgetting me”) should read, we are informed, “Sie starb allein, ohne mir zu vergeben” (“She died alone, not having forgiven me”), and Robert’s confession to Bertha in the second act about how “unhappy” he was when Richard and Bertha had left Dublin should have read how “happy” he had been.

Despite Joyce’s persistent but frustratingly unsuccessful efforts to have *Exiles* staged in English, it first premiered in German, namely on 7 August 1919 at the Munich Schauspielhaus. Following Joyce’s cue, Richard Ellmann mistakenly names Elisabeth Körner as the leading actress in the role of Bertha (Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 462); however, the reviewers of Joyce’s play unanimously list the young actress Carla Holm in this role, with Ewis Borkmann playing Beatrice, Wilhelm Dieterle playing Richard Rowan, and Franz Scharwenka playing Robert Hand.<sup>3</sup> Joyce later corrects himself, referring to Körner only as the play’s producer, not as one of the actors (*Letters III*, 126).

Ellmann also speculates in his biography that the Austrian writer Stefan

Zweig, who resided in Zurich during the last months of 1918, had helped to mediate the production.<sup>4</sup> But as the independent scholar Andreas Weigel notes, it was more likely the German writer Rudolf Lothar, then residing in Zurich, who set up the connection.<sup>5</sup> It is to Lothar in Hadelaub Street in Zurich that the Schauspielhaus mistakenly directed a telegram, sent on 5 August 1919 and addressed to Joyce, in which Joyce is informed that the visa he needed to travel to Munich is awaiting collection at the German consulate in Zurich.<sup>6</sup> Joyce is probably referring to this in his 6 August letter to his aunt Mrs. William Murray, but it remains unclear why he did not pick up the visa: “My play will be produced tomorrow in Munich with one of the best actresses on the German stage in the leading part,” he writes, and then continues: “I have received a number of telegrams inviting me to be present but nowadays it is difficult to travel anywhere except in a trance” (*Letters II*, 448).

The final comment that “it is difficult to travel anywhere [nowadays] except in a trance” alludes perhaps to the fact that, as one outcome of its defeat in the First World War, Germany was generally in a state of upheaval in late 1918 and throughout 1919. The country had been declared a republic in November 1918 and the German emperor, who was also the king of Prussia, had been deposed and exiled; around the same time, the independent social democratic leader in Bavaria, Kurt Eisner, had declared Bavaria a republican free state and deposed its king, Ludwig III. Following the armistice on 11 November, the German military leadership was dissolved, the country’s political institutions fell into disarray, and the already war-ravaged economy went into a freefall (with the Allied blockade continuing until mid-1919, when the Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28 June 1919). The wartime food shortages continued, as did widespread political unrest, stirred up in particular by the radical left-wing factions of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (abbreviated USDP, and consisting of the ultra-left social democrats and socialists) and by communists, whose agenda was to create a revolutionary soviet state as was happening in the Soviet Union. These factions were increasingly opposed by ultra-right-wing groups like the Stahlhelm, the Thule Society, and the German Workers’ Party, which would later evolve into Hitler’s National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP). Shortly after Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the social democrats, was elected the first German *Reichspräsident* by the German National Assembly in Weimar on 11 February 1919, his Bavarian counterpart, the USPD leader Kurt Eisner, who had just been designated Bavarian minister president, was assassinated by a right-wing monarchist officer on 21 February 1919. The immediate result

was the declaration of a *Räterepublik*, a soviet republic, in Bavaria on 7 April 1919 by socialists and communists. Following bloody battles on the streets of the Bavarian capital and the ensuing White Terror against members of the Red Guards, claiming some one thousand lives in all, the dictatorship of the proletariat that had been declared by the people’s soviets’ leader Eugen Leviné on 13 April 1919 collapsed on 3 May 1919.<sup>7</sup> One of the leaders of the communist uprising, the writer Gustav Landauer, was murdered by soldiers, and Leviné was shot—all of this only months before Joyce’s play premiered in that selfsame city to which the exiled Bavarian government had not yet even returned (the Bavarian diet held its last meeting in Bamberg on 16 August 1919, with the government officially returning on 17 August 1919, ten days after *Exiles* was staged in the Schauspielhaus). In light of the still highly volatile situation in Munich it seems not unreasonable that Joyce might hesitate to travel there. Six years later Joyce was to give Sylvia Beach this terse summary: “Producer: Elizabeth Koerner. Complete fiasco. Row in theatre. Play withdrawn. Author invited but not present. German Foreign Office did not allow his entrance. Thank God” (*Letters III*, 126).

Regardless of whether the “German Foreign Office did not allow his entrance,” as Joyce claims here, or whether he is simply glossing over the fact that he did not pick up his visa (or was too scared to travel to Munich—viz. “Thank God” above), it was perhaps for the better that he did not attend. The play was after all, as Joyce himself admitted not just to Sylvia Beach but also to Nora and his friends Ottocaro Weiss and Arnold Korff after receiving a telegram from Munich on the evening of the premiere following the performance, a “complete fiasco” (Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 462). The next day Joyce obtained a copy of the newspaper *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, which contained a less than favorable review by the critic Elchinger, which opens with the words: “We have never before heard of the Irish author James Joyce in Germany; this play will hardly help to make him better known” (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 68). He goes on to speak of the play’s “substantial soul-kitsch” and its “fundamental emptiness” (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 70). On 26 August 1919 Joyce writes to Harriet Shaw Weaver:

As regards *Verbannte* I cannot find out what has happened. It seems to have been a stormy evening. The play was at once withdrawn. The management of the theatre wrote, saying that it was “a great success” and that “they were very glad to have been the first to produce it.” The *Berliner Tagblatt*, *Vossische Zeitung* and *Neue Freie Presse* had articles about the

performance—one contradicting the other. Now I hear it was withdrawn because the chief actor fell ill—perhaps as a result of my lines—and that it is to go into the autumn bill. (*Letters II*, 450)

It never did go into the autumn bill—Joyce would have taken no small comfort from reading in Nietzsche's *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, a book that he owned and had surely read: "With a stage success a man sinks to such an extent in my esteem as to drop out of sight; failure in this quarter makes me prick my ears, makes me pay attention" (*Nietzsche contra Wagner*, 60).

This first staging of *Exiles* received some twenty reviews, with most reviewers considering the play a failure in both conception and performance. "Boring," "too dull for our times," "non-action" ("Nichtvorgang"), "anaemia," "tedious whimsicality" ("öde Geistreichelei"), "stilted dialogues," "trivial vanity," "three acts of banal action and lack of dramatic verve" ("einen Dreiakter von äußerst dürftiger Handlung und mangelndem dramatischen Furor") are among the criticisms voiced (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 64, 66, 67, 72, 73, 73, 79, and 80). One reviewer declared: "Dozens [in Munich] could produce this kind of 'Joyce' in three acts" (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 68). Another concluded: "This play does not rise above affable average. The characterization of the two [male] protagonists fails to convince; and in his manic disposition to doubt everything the hero borders on the pathological. As a whole this play fails to arouse any sense of value or deeper interest" (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 66–67).

But not all reviewers were so hostile. Some praised Joyce for his "tranquility and veracity" and his "high standard" (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 65, 82). The highly regarded naturalistic writer and critic M. G. Conrad, writing for the Berlin newspaper *Tägliche Rundschau*, calls the first staging ever of *Exiles* a refreshing "premiere—most rare, quiet and wonderfully spiritual" ("Uraufführung feinsten, stillsten und wunderbarer geistiger Art"; Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 85). "h.e.," in the *Münchener Post*, sums up his impression (but not without some ambiguity) as follows: "This delicate play was performed delicately and impressively; it avoided pathetic or sentimental gaffes. . . . Parts of the audience failed disgracefully before this august piece. Occasional unfitting hilarity confirmed that they had expected nothing but the usual bawdy tale. We cannot but deplore once again the low levels to which German social life now stoops" (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 74). Hans Franck, finally, writing in *Das literarische Echo*, praises the "silence" in this play: "the silence that flows through this Irishman's play is too frequently absent in German plays," he writes.

Our German writers have much to learn from the silence and truth of this Irishman. . . . I know nothing about James Joyce. But having seen this play there is one thing I do know . . . : that James Joyce is a poet. A poet of silence and truth. And: that this play (resolutely shortened) would produce a play of intense and lasting effect. (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 65–66)

One of the main problems Joyce faced was the expectation he had raised by using the term “exiles” as the play’s title. The reviewer for the *Bayerische Staatszeitung* thus observes:

If a play is entitled *Exiles* and the author is an Irishman, one can expect to see and hear on stage something that deals with the yearning for freedom . . . of the Irish . . . and the sufferings of an oppressed people. This expectation was roundly disappointed by the play in three acts by James Joyce, which premiered on Thursday in the Schauspielhaus. What we saw was not about the misery of a people but the misery of a marriage. (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 71)

What compounded the problem was that, as an aspiring Irish writer, Joyce was invariably compared with his more politically aggressive compatriot George Bernard Shaw, who had become a prominent presence on German stages by this point in time. (In fact it was maybe more so in Germany than in England, with Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* staged by a visiting Berlin theatre group at the Munich Chamber Theatre in July 1918, seven years before it made its debut on a British stage!) Joyce obviously did not fare well in this comparison. But he was also frequently compared with Ibsen and Hauptmann, Joyce’s own role models, perhaps on account of the promotional note on the first German edition’s dust jacket, probably devised by Joyce himself, which stated: “A drama in three acts that belongs on the shelf beside Ibsen and Hauptmann” (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 63). A symptomatic response to *Exiles*, by the critic “G.” of the Berlin-based *Börsen-Courier*, thus reads:

The great success of Shaw in Germany and the sympathies that Germans have for the Irish people’s struggle for freedom led to other, lesser-known Irish writers getting access to German stages. . . . Anyone who expected this play, set in the suburbs of Dublin in the “Summer of 1912,” to exhibit a political content was disappointed; all Irish specifics are nothing more than a generic background. . . . The modern idea that marriage should not enslave women and bind them once and for all already

excited people in the 1880s and 1890s in the wake of Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*; and many writers followed in his footsteps. At the time, both in life as well as in poetry, the result was at best the insight that such an "open marriage" was more in accord with the ethical attitude of men than befitting the essence of femininity; a woman's deepest instinct for happiness is premised on her dependence, her desire to be bound to her husband. Thus the play by this Irishman, which covers the same ground [as Ibsen's play] and comes to the same conclusion, cannot but strike us as oddly obsolete. (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 77)

Indeed, the majority of reviews of the Munich staging of Joyce's *Exiles* serves to illustrate how much the German critics then responded as we still respond today—preempting what Jean-Michel Rabaté recently and symptomatically observed:

The key issue is whether Bertha remains faithful or not after having followed Robert, a dilemma which has lost much of its pathos given today's permissive morality. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that the play is more interesting for the extensive notes taken by Joyce in 1913 as he was moving from Act I to the rest, than for its languid post-Ibsenian staging of marital dilemmas. (1913, 100)

However, Rabaté's use of the phrase "today's permissive morality" should remind us that Joyce's play was indeed already then, in the second decade of the twentieth century, and not just today, embedded in an environment of "permissive morality," if perhaps more so on the stage than in real life—as illustrated by Frank Wedekind's *Lulu* plays. While there were the exceptional few who thought Joyce's play too risqué ("zu gewagt," as one theatre manager in Zurich is supposed to have said when approached by Joyce [*Letters II*, 105]—although we cannot be sure this was not just an excuse not to stage the play), the general consensus was that Joyce's play was far too trivial and boring, falling far behind other contemporary playwrights in terms of formal experimentation, social engagement, and sexual explicitness, especially as compared with such controversial German playwrights of the time as Wedekind, Carl Sternheim, Georg Kaiser, and Arthur Schnitzler.

Indeed, some of these were Joyce's direct "competitors" on the Munich stage that year. The highlight of the 1919 season was unquestionably the German premiere on 18 June of Wedekind's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora's Box*), a play about love and lesbianism, violence and prostitution. Another Munich premiere was Georg Kaiser's comedy *Der Zentaur* (*The Centaur*),

which started at the Schauspielhaus on 19 July, just three weeks before *Exiles*. This puts into context the reviewer H.H.’s observation that “the Schauspielhaus theatre . . . staged a premiere [of *Exiles*], while at the same time the never-ending scandals surrounding *Die Büchse der Pandora*—instigated by the followers of the [conservative] Zentrum Party—continued to secure a full house for Wedekind” (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 83–84). For the more traditionalist M. G. Conrad, by contrast, the positioning of *Exiles* halfway through the *Pandora’s Box* series put into relief the positive qualities of Joyce’s play; he writes:

In the midst of the Wedekind *Pandora’s Box* series we witnessed a premiere of a refined, quiet, and wonderful kind, one that outshone like a brilliant star the desert of artistic decadence. What the young Irish poet, in the three acts of his play, put before us as a manifest poetical truth was like a revelation of high theatrical culture putting those to shame who smugly accept the decline of [a sense of] decency and tact evident in the appalling sensationalism of the Munich Schauspielhaus. (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 85)

For Georg Hirschfeld, however, and speaking for the majority of reviewers, the contrast between *Exiles* and *Pandora’s Box* had just the opposite effect; he notes:

Here the enormous success of Wedekind’s *Pandora’s Box*, which was not to be suppressed by reactionary intrigue, was interrupted by the premiere of an Irish play. *Exiles* by James Joyce is a polished and clever piece of cool, nebulous passion. It exhibits boldness of theme and intellectual temperament, and yet it comes across as little more than a cliché. (Füger, *Kritisches Erbe*, 86)

That Joyce’s play was seen by most Munich reviewers as clichéd and outdated should have come as no surprise even to Joyce himself. The plays staged in Munich in the two years leading up to the premiere of *Exiles* included various pieces by Strindberg (*The Burned Site*, *Margit*, *Swanwhite*), Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, and Gogol’s *Marriage* for foreign works and, on the German side, Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Biberpelz* (*The Beaver Coat*), Frank Wedekind’s *Simson, Tod und Teufel* (*Death and Devil*), and *Pandora’s Box*, Georg Kaiser’s *Frauenopfer* (*Women’s Sacrifice*), *Die Sorina* (*Sorina*), *Die Bürger von Calais* (*The Citizens of Calais*), and *Claudius*, as well as *Der Sohn* (*The Son*) by Walter Hasenclever—given as a “closed” private