Joyce and Ideas of Militarism

His [the printer’s] idea of gallantry has grown up in him (probably) during the reading of the novels of the elder Dumas and during the performance of romantic plays which presented to him cavaliers and ladies in full dress. But I am sure he is willing to modify his fantastic views. I would strongly recommend to him the chapters wherein Ferrero examines the moral code of the soldier and (incidentally) of the gallant. But it would be useless for I am sure that in his heart of hearts he is a militarist.

James Joyce to Grant Richards, 5 May 1906

In the spring of 1906, James Joyce and Nora Barnacle, a year and a half out of Ireland, were adapting to their new life as exiles in Trieste. Their son Giorgetto was born the previous summer, so to help make ends meet on Joyce’s modest salary—he earned £80 per year teaching English at the Scuola Berlitz—since January they had shared a house with Alessandro Francini Bruni and his family on the edge of the city at 1 via Giovanni Boccaccio. Despite the auspicious street name, Joyce’s literary progress had encountered a serious setback. *Dubliners* had for several months been under contract with the London publisher Grant Richards, but in the last week of April, publication was halted by a cautious printer who noticed a number of potentially controversial items that Richards and his reader had not. Well versed in British obscenity law, which held printers as well as publishers subject to legal action, the printer had objected specifically to numerous words and passages in the collection, but also, inexplicably, refused to print one story altogether. The returned manuscript bore pencil marks next to passages in several stories but none beside “Two Gallants,” even though a letter from Richards singled out that story as the major stumbling block. The shady tale of nightlife on the streets of the Irish capital, concluding in a potentially suspect monetary exchange, had clearly rattled the printer’s moral sensibility. Richards warned that the book could not go to press without significant changes to “Two Gallants” and “Counterparts,” leading Joyce to ask whether it was
“the small gold coin in the former story or the code of honour which the two gallants live by which shocks him” (L 2:132–33). When no reply came, Joyce constructed one of his own; it focused not on the potential immorality of the stories but on that of their disapproving early reader.

In dismissing Richards’s unnamed printer as “in his heart of hearts . . . a militarist” (L 2:133), Joyce deployed a strategic and revealing insult. The remark shows the sort of frustrated hostility Joyce frequently directed, rightly or wrongly, at those he perceived as obstacles to his success. Writing of the dispute decades later, biographer Herbert Gorman did not hesitate to demonize the “Moral British Printer” as an impediment not only to Joyce’s career but to civilization itself (148–50).1 In 1906 Joyce, eager to see his first book in print, could not afford to be so self-aggrandizing. Nevertheless, he tenaciously held his ground throughout the spring and summer, refusing to make the requested changes and ultimately causing Richards to withdraw the contract later that year. Joyce could not have known then he was at the start of a dispute that would delay publication of *Dubliners* for eight long years.

Yet Joyce’s chilly diatribe against the printer suggests much more than the fervent ambition of a young writer seeking publication. As poignant counter to the printer’s critique and censorship, it asserts a way of reading, so that, as Vincent Cheng in *Joyce, Race, and Empire* suggests, “the story is itself an attack on . . . a militaristic mentality” (113). To make such a mentality apparent to his publisher—and, indeed, to make the story available at all—Joyce mounts a defense for the story’s inclusion and for the existence of *Dubliners* as the whole collection he imagined, by constructing a critical framework that explicitly demands moral recalibration of a (mostly) imagined reader who has apparently misinterpreted or otherwise overlooked this significant layer of the fiction. In this way, Joyce sets “Two Gallants,” and his ripening fictional project overall, amid fundamental tensions and questions of martial ideology.

Beyond ad hominem attack or frustrated name-calling, his disparaging remarks about the printer essentially argue a place for *Dubliners* by elaborating a critical nexus of perceived readers, canonical texts, and literary correctives. Doing so, Joyce reveals his purpose of producing a literature that would transform its readers. The assumption that the printer—or, for that matter, any other resisting reader—must be “willing to modify his fantastic views” (L 2:133) in order to glean the proper meaning of the story implies a
reformist, if not revolutionary, aim. In essence, anticipating Stephen Dedalus’s remark, *Dubliners* will change the country by changing its subjects.

Joyce did not acquiesce to the major manuscript revisions or exclusions Richards requested; instead, he countered by asking printer and publisher to widen their notions of what constitutes legally publishable literature. He actively challenged their editorial resistance by redefining the criteria of the moral debate, replacing the issue of sexual indecency or linguistic vulgarity in the text with that of alleged bellicosity in its readers. In this way, Joyce’s rhetoric deftly shifts the focus of controversy from the content of the stories to the moral makeup of their audience.

Joyce’s rejoinder to Grant Richards and his printer is based, then, on the premise that literature shapes the values of its readers. Accordingly, the literature Joyce gives as example would seem to form a significant part of his argument. There has been much useful critical discussion as to which of Alexander Dumas’s works Joyce had in mind as cause of the printer’s myopic morality, but the specific identities of those texts are less important than the rhetorical offensive Joyce launches on behalf of his own. It is the vague, blanketing pluralism of the authorial references that lends them a general strength. Joyce names no particular writings, only states that the novels of Dumas and a similar type of chivalric drama provide the source of a gallantry that, as R. B. Kershner notes, had carried both military and amatory connotations for centuries (*Joyce, Bakhtin* 79). Joyce emphasizes the martial half of this equation when he suggests the incidental connection from gallantry to the moral code of soldiering, but to pinpoint, say, *The Count of Monte Cristo* or *The Three Musketeers* would only dilute his claim that such values pervade those writings as much as they do any others of Dumas. One need not single out a particular book, play, or scene, when virtually all are shaped by militaristic values that in turn shape their readers. It is precisely the nonspecific, multigeneric nature of the statement that grants it the broader force of an ideological assessment or conclusion.

To be sure, Joyce’s critical position rests upon a bold assumption concerning the printer’s literary tastes and political values. Not knowing the man or his actual response to “Two Gallants,” Joyce constructs him as a self-appointed critic and resisting first reader who, through his resistance, embodies the fundamental power of literature to influence both those who produce and those who consume it. Along these lines, Joyce proclaims that the apparent key to a story like “Two Gallants” lies as much in the text as in
its readers’ awareness of and ability to counteract the militaristic beliefs instilled by prior literary experiences (such as the novels of Dumas or cavalier drama). Conditioned by the ideology of such potent pre-texts, how could Richards’s printer or any other early reader of *Dubliners* respond but with the resistance Joyce seems to expect, perhaps even wish to provoke in them? Indeed, it seems the very readers who would object to *Dubliners*’ publication are precisely the ones Joyce most wants the book to reach.

This paradox of reader receptiveness extends from the London printer to the Irish readers that, as Joseph Kelly argues, were Joyce’s actual “target audience” (16). Their firsthand experience of poverty, repression, English occupation, and Catholic ideology made the stories most resonant with those who lived daily amid such forces. At the same time, these cultural factors could also make the most poignant observations of the collection difficult for many readers in Ireland to accept. Later in the 5 May letter to Richards, Joyce appears to acknowledge this potential problem, imagining the printer among various types of Irish readers who would object to particular stories in the collection. These include a Dubliner, a “more subtle inquisitor,” and Irish priests and boardinghouse keepers, who he suspects would “denounce,” respectively, “Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” “An Encounter,” “The Sisters,” and “The Boarding House.” With such a range of potential readers in mind, Joyce concludes, “Do not let the printer imagine, for goodness’ sake, that he is going to have all the barking to himself” (*L*: 2:134). The hypothetical readers Joyce imagines alongside the printer present the various kinds of ideological opposition he expected *Dubliners* might and must encounter were it to fulfill its intended function of social reflection and reform. Thus the barking printer—at least according to the identity Joyce constructs for him—becomes one of several resisting readers Joyce anticipates for his work. His prior conditioning by the militarized values of popular literature prepares him to be reshaped by *Dubliners*.

If not his ideal printer, Joyce proceeds to refashion him as his ideal reader. In Joyce’s view, the printer would make ideal editorial choices had he experienced as well quite another sort of pre-text for *Dubliners*, “the chapters wherein Ferrero examines the moral code of the soldier and (incidentally) of the gallant” (*L*: 2:133). There has been some debate as to which chapters—and, for that matter, which of the three books Ferrero had published by 1906—Joyce might have meant, since as Susan Humphreys notes, “All
three deal with war and militarism; not one has a chapter concerned exclusively with soldiers’ morals” (240). Presumably any number of Ferrero chapters could serve as corrective for the militaristic virtues absorbed from the stylized violence of nineteenth-century popular literature. The most likely ones would have come from *Militarism*, the only one of Ferrero’s books translated into English by 1906. Published in Italian as *Il Militarismo* in 1898, it offered a systematic and comparative historical study of how military thinking and policies were taking over civic, social, and cultural life in a number of European countries. The book achieved strong acclaim and a wide following in both academic and popular circles; it was translated into numerous languages, making its author something of a celebrity even beyond the Italian-speaking world. As this chapter will discuss, Joyce had great intellectual admiration for Ferrero’s work and, in highlighting the growing presence of militarism in diverse realms of social and cultural experience, would proceed to convey through modernist literature what Ferrero was arguing through the budding field of sociology.

Situating *Dubliners* between his renunciation of Dumas and endorsement of Ferrero, Joyce effectively positioned his new fictional project between not just two particular writers and genres but two distinct ideological systems. Yet it is finally the precision of the insult that connects a simple publishing dispute to an urgent and contemporary political reality. “Militarist” was just one of several derogatory labels Joyce applied to Richards’s uncooperative printer. (Others included “one-eyed printer” and “plain blunt man” (*L* 2:133).) But it was easily the most provocative and disparaging. More than just another personal jibe, it was a nod to the most pressing concern of contemporary European life. To call someone a militarist in 1906 was to invoke the most volatile global debate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In London, where Richards would have read Joyce’s letter, the epithet had special resonance, since Fleet Street journalists commonly fashioned imperial Germany as the dark specter of militarism during a decade of political tension that most saw as buildup to inevitable war. In their use of the term, many British newspapers reflected and activated the collective national consciousness by ironically co-opting a term of civil dissent that had originated in imperial Germany a generation earlier. The nightmarish results of galvanizing such patriotic fervor of course became painfully clear
only after the Great War. George Orwell recalls the increasingly divisive sense of the word toward the close of the war, much of it along generational lines: “By 1918 everyone under forty was in a bad temper with his elders, and the mood of anti-militarism which followed naturally upon the fighting was extended into a general revolt against orthodoxy and authority. At that time there was, among the young, a curious cult of the hatred of ‘old men’” (170).

A decade earlier, the emerging sense of “militarist” as a pejorative term for an outmoded worldview seems at once careful and presumptuous, clairvoyant and ironic, offering as it does a portal into the emerging social and historical background of Joyce’s fiction. In sending the word quite literally back across the Channel, Joyce did not just argue with his publisher and insult his printer; he set the terms for critical reception of his work in the parameters of an international discourse that would continue to shape his fiction as it would shape his world for the next three decades.

Unfortunately, Joyce’s response did not yield an immediate or positive resolution to the dispute. We can only speculate whether the unnamed printer ever heard or heeded Joyce’s literary recommendation. Judging by the outcome, he probably did not. The negotiation over Dubliners lingered on, with Joyce grudgingly agreeing to changes in other stories so that he could keep “Two Gallants” intact. But on June 14 Richards insisted the story be left out of the book, leaving Joyce distressed at the prospect of excluding what he considered one of the collection’s most important stories. Not mincing words, he told Richards he regarded the “omission as an almost mortal mutilation” of the book (L 2:142). He questioned once more the rationale and fairness of a system that for all intents and purposes made pressmen into penmen. While commiserating with Joyce’s frustration about the legal power of printer over writer, Richards was firm in his decision. This kept the two at loggerheads through the summer, when Joyce and his family moved to Rome. By October, when Joyce at last agreed to suppress “Two Gallants” and “A Little Cloud,” it was too late. Richards had already decided to pass on the entire project. The manuscript was returned, and Dubliners went into an eight-year limbo until Richards finally consented to publish it in 1914.

This snapshot of a tumultuous publication history shows Joyce’s penchant for creative control, self-promotion, even personal grudge. But more important, the moment shows Joyce elucidating a place for Dubliners amid a