Joyce’s Exilic Self-Conception

From 8 October 1904 to 13 January 1941—that is to say, for most of his years as an adult—James Joyce made his home outside Ireland. Ostensibly his departure from his native country, as chronicled by Richard Ellmann and others, was of his own volition. Nonetheless, as the evidence that one finds in his letters and biographies and the memoirs of family members and friends makes abundantly clear, Joyce felt, with absolutely no hesitation, that irremediable social, cultural, and creative conditions compelled him to leave.¹

The brief visits that he made back to Ireland in 1909 and again in 1912 only solidified these views, and he never again set foot on Irish soil. In 1922 he declined to accompany Nora and their two children on a visit there, and in fact actively discouraged their trip. In 1932 he felt it would be out of the question to return for his father’s funeral.

The decision not to return did not come from any lack of opportunity. In his early years abroad he always managed to find ways to travel if it suited him, and in the two final decades of his life he traveled widely across Europe. Despite all this, he had no interest in returning to Ireland. Even after the outbreak of World War II, when the German occupation made it intolerable to live in France, Joyce chose in December 1940, just a month before his death, to go back to Switzerland rather than make his way to neutral Ireland.

At the same time, as his letters and the recollections of those close to him make very clear, he never lost touch with his family in Ireland, he welcomed visits from relatives and friends who came to the Continent, and he never lost his intense interest in the most ordinary rhythms of Irish life.² Over the course of his time abroad, Joyce amply demonstrated the ambivalence—oscillating between rancor and nostalgia—felt by many
exiles, balancing criticisms with outbursts of sentimental longing and national pride.³

Though Joyce’s decision to become an exile may seem straightforward and simple, his motivations were diverse and complex. Joyce made no secret of his broad resentment for the restrictive authority by which religious ardor, nationalist fervor, and colonial oppression shaped Irish life. Leaving Ireland was the only way he could see to escape the influence of the multiple cultural, social, and political institutions that had been curtailing a great deal of what he tried to do to establish an identity and that would circumscribe all that he hoped to achieve as an artist.

Time and again the customs, values, and practices of Irish life had thwarted his desires for making his way in the world. He resented the minute control of the most mundane of circumstances exercised by Catholic beliefs and traditions. He did not wish to submit to a marriage ceremony, religious or civil, yet at the same time he knew he could never have lived openly with Nora Barnacle in Ireland. (In fact, when they did marry in 1931, it was only to protect the inheritance rights of their children.) He chafed at the circumscription of Irish public life by the English colonial administration. And he could not help but wish to escape the implicit burden of the dysfunctional family that his father had allowed to sink into poverty and malnutrition. In these respects and in a dozen others in which his views challenged prevailing social attitudes in Ireland, he would have been fighting his whole life long against the parochial discipline then imposed on Irish society by the Catholic Church, the legal system, and dominant community values and customs.⁴

To understand this disposition toward self-imposed exile, let me elaborate on allusions made in the previous chapter to the attitudes dominating the Irish artistic environment as Joyce grew to adulthood. At the turn of the last century, for Joyce or any other young writer living in Ireland, a prerequisite for success would have been a willingness to adhere to the agenda of the Irish Literary Revival. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, George Russell (AE), Edward Martyn, Katharine Tynan, William Kirkpatrick Magee (John Eglinton), and others with unshakable commitments to the tenets of the Revival had a strong influence on what was published and performed in Ireland.⁵ John Millington Synge, Padraic Colum, James Stephens and numerous others followed their prescriptions with varying degrees of success.⁶
Joyce resisted the autocracy of the Revivalists and went so far, in the Scylla and Charybdis episode of *Ulysses*, as to satirize the system of flattery and habits of deference that he saw stifling Irish writing as many ambitious young Irish writers bowed to the system. Buck Mulligan, in a tone that mixes pragmatism and cynicism and does much to reveal his own willingness to accommodate, chides Stephen Dedalus, who has written a harsh review of a Lady Gregory book, for ignoring the opportunity to ingratiate himself and instead showing disdain for those who do.

Longworth is awfully sick, he [Mulligan] said, after what you wrote about that old hake Gregory. O you inquisitional drunkenjewjesuit! She gets you a job on the paper and then you go and slate her drivel to Jaysus. Couldn’t you do the Yeats touch? (U 9.1158–61)

As his brother Stanislaus attests in two memoirs of life at that time, Joyce’s actual experiences with the Dublin literati were not far removed from this fictional representation, and they gave him ample reason for a rancorous recollection of his native land.7

At the same time, Joyce’s views of Ireland and Irish life were not universally hostile but manifested themselves in a complex and diverse tone that characterized his view of his native land throughout his life.8 The same evidence that shows his resentment over the specific circumstances that compelled him to leave also reveals Joyce’s at times nostalgic fascination with the world of lower-middle-class Catholic Dublin that informed his consciousness from infancy through his maturation to young adulthood. Like the fictional Kevin Egan, the Irish nationalist forced by English displeasure over his political activities to flee his homeland, who appears briefly in Stephen Dedalus’s recollections of Paris in the Proteus chapter of *Ulysses* (U 3.209–64), Joyce never forgot his native country, but the scene does more than show that Ireland was prominent in his mind while he live abroad. A tone of melancholic fondness for a range of features of Irish life permeates Joyce’s representation of Egan’s life in Paris, and it suggests, at the very least, the author’s keen familiarity with such sentiments.9

Recognizing these feelings helps demonstrate why, despite his living abroad for more than thirty-six years, the ethos of Dublin at the turn of the last century remained keenly impressed upon his consciousness, and evoking it became a feature central to his artistic process. His brother Stanislaus sums up this attitude very nicely, saying, “The dearest of all
things in Ireland is the memory of the past.” Stanislaus goes on to talk about Joyce’s particular fascination with Dublin:

[My brother] always held that he was lucky to have been born in a city that is old and historic enough to be considered a representative European capital, and small enough to be viewed as a whole; and he believed that circumstances of birth, talent, and character had made him its interpreter.10

Stanislaus’s close relationship with his brother produced unique insights into crucial features of Joyce’s creative methods, but the full significance of this observation becomes clearer when one considers that Joyce’s writing emerged from feelings shaped by the complex attitudes of the exilic experience. Joyce did not simply write about Dublin. Rather his fiction described a Dublin frozen in his imagination at the moment he left in October 1904. In his correspondence with friends and family members, Joyce would often ask for artifacts and recollections, collecting numerous mementoes and recording countless anecdotes that captured unique aspects of the period when he grew from a child to a young man and brought that time in Dublin back to the center of his recollections.11

Over the course of his artistic career, Joyce always showed a keen determination to maintain a connection with that time he spent as a boy and young man in Ireland. This became particularly apparent when he encountered any of his countrymen who were visiting Paris. The Irish actor Jack MacGowran, speaking of meeting Joyce there sometime in the 1930s, recalled the kind of interrogation that must have been quite common. “Although Joyce never came back to Dublin, anyone who came from Dublin Joyce was eager to know. Was such and such a shop still there? Was So and so still alive? Did Mrs. So and so still walk her dog at such an hour of night?”12 Unlike émigré authors who chose to employ their craft to demonstrate and facilitate their own cultural assimilation, Joyce’s art did not embrace the ethos of the world he entered, nor did he write his fiction in the language of the countries he inhabited. Like Dante, another displaced artist whose vernacular accounts were shaped by recollections of his past life in Florence, although he did not choose to evoke it directly, Joyce sustained an otherness in exile by writing accounts of his homeland in its vernacular.

As the MacGowran quotation illustrates, Joyce endeavored not simply
to evoke but to sustain and then to reproduce the world that he left behind. One sees this impulse recurring in countless letters that he wrote to his aunt Josephine, to his brother Stanislaus, and to other relatives and friends who were still living in Ireland. In every instance he pressed them into service to illuminate, confirm, or correct, as precisely as possible, a variety of mundane details about daily life, events in the lives of friends and neighbors, and topographical features in Dublin at the turn of the last century. The consequent encyclopedic quality of allusions embedded in his narratives—from the *Dubliners* stories onward—attests to the effectiveness of this research and at the same time calls out for a key that would provide an understanding of this aspect of his writing. One cannot fail to note the strong and varied emotions that color these descriptions, suggesting that Joyce’s own sense of place and of people exerts a profound influence on his process of composition and on our acts of interpretation. Once one has made that connection, understanding the impact of the exilic experience becomes an essential concept for grasping Joyce’s creative process.

Managing interpretive responses to this referentiality becomes easier when the reader recognizes the fundamental tendency on Joyce’s part to ground his work in the emotional duality that comes directly out of his sense of displacement. One sees the transformations thrust upon his sensibilities as a writer by the exilic condition correlating with the writing he produced. Joyce’s role as chronicler of contemporary Irish-Catholic bourgeois existence was uniquely defined by the life he came to live. He had assumed both the role of an intimate and that of an outcast, which created multiple perspectives and fostered complex emotional attachments to the past. Thus a reader’s engagement with that life is a crucial first step toward understanding the works.

Such an approach demands we see Joyce not only as separate and free from the Irish society he had left but also as always engaging and engaged by it. From that perspective the contradictions defined by Joyce’s relationships with Ireland serve to clarify rather than obscure his creative impulses. The everyday world he inhabited reminded him of his marginality. He continued to experience Ireland, if at all, from a distance and secondhand. At the same time, the ethos of Pola, Trieste, Rome, Zurich, and Paris brought to bear insistent pressures on his ways of seeing the world that he occupied.