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Agnieszka Graff

This Timecoloured Place

The Time-Space Binarism in the Novels
of James Joyce

EXTRACT



PETER LANG

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Introduction

Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted
by the two contradictions.

Virginia Woolf

Few things obsessed the modernists as much as time and space. In the cultural debates of the 1920s and 1930s these two words acquired a significance verging on the mystical; they became synonyms of two disparate modes of experience, two styles of art, two schools of philosophy, and even two opposed political camps. As May Sinclair put it in 1919, “Time and Space were forms of thought – ways of thinking.”¹ In this binary framework, which served as a reference point for both artists and philosophers, *time* stood for the fluid, the fleeting, the transitory; *space* signified structure, wholeness, and permanence.

The sources of this distinction can be traced back to the philosophy of Henri Bergson, whose popularity in those times approached the status of a cult, and to the scientific theories of Albert Einstein. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that Europe of those years was inhabited by hordes of experts on Bergsonian *durée*, let alone Einsteinian physics. These theories were objects of dazzled appreciation, but also the victims of many basic misunderstandings. Relativity and “pure time” became the topics of daily interest and conversation, Bergson and Einstein serving as sources of loosely applied terminology. Echoes of their ideas can be found in the writing of most major novelists of the 1920s and 1930s. In 1923 D. H. Lawrence announced with enthusiasm: “[e]verybody catches fire at the word Relativity. There must be something in the mere suggestion which we have been waiting for.”² In March 1926, after an exceptionally successful supper party, Virginia Woolf noted in her *Diary*: “I wanted, like a child, to stay and argue. True, the argument was passing my limits – how, if Einstein is true, we shall be able to foretell our own lives.”³

The idea of relativity to which “everybody was catching fire” had little in common with the original discovery of Albert Einstein. The somewhat confused interest in the physics of time and space is better understood as an effect of the technological advances of the era. This argument is made convincingly in Stephen Kern’s *Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, a study of the interface between science, art, and literature in this period. Kern examines time and space in literary texts by Joyce, Stein, Williams, Ibsen but also in works of major thinkers such as Durkheim or Freud, or artists such as Picasso. He argues that a sweeping reorientation took place in this period, one that affected not only art and literature but also everyday life and politics, resulting,

1 May Sinclair, *Mary Oliver: A Life* (London: Virago, 1980), 227.

2 David Herbert Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious and Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (London: Heinemann, 1961), 177.

3 Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 68.

among other things in secularization and an unprecedented leveling of social hierarchies. Central to this new sensibility was a “thickened” sense of the present. “Simultaneity” was an idea with profound impact on the two major artistic experiments of the time: cubism in painting and interior monologue in narrative literature. The reasons for the shift have to do with technology, not philosophy or science. Both the everyday experience and the basic understanding of time and space (as well as direction and form) were profoundly transformed due to technological advances of the time: railroad, automobile, bicycle, telegraph, telephone, x-ray, and cinema. The introduction of Standard Time, Kern argues, set off intellectual resistance, which resulted in the enormous popularity of the concept of “private time,” with Bergson’s philosophy as its intellectual core.⁴

The version of relativity theory adopted by the culture at large amounted to an overwhelming, terrifying, and somehow thrilling sense that, as Lawrence put it, “there is nothing absolute left in the universe”⁵ or, as Max Born wrote introducing Einstein’s *Theory of Relativity* to the general public in 1924, “this space and this time are still entirely embedded in the ego, and (...) the world-picture of natural science becomes more beautiful and grander if these fundamental conceptions are subjected to relativization.”⁶

The present study does not undertake to examine time and space as physical realities described in scientific theories. Nor is it an attempt to reconstruct the times and spaces represented in fictional worlds of art and literature. My subject is the space-time binarism: space and time as categories or signs that surfaced as opposites within the cultural framework of high modernism. I examine the singular way in which these two apparently neutral and complementary terms are set *against* each other, both within the intellectual debates and literary experiments of the period and in the subsequent critical discourse about modernism. The question is also a literary-historical one. I show how “time” and “space” came to stand for opposed impulses of the human mind, how the labels “timist” and “spatialist” – exotic as they may sound to us today – turned into common intellectual currency.

The author of *Ulysses* had a keen interest in this debate. The level of his involvement in the controversy that would eventually be called “the time-space wars” sets him apart from most of his contemporaries. He played the role of an active participant in the debate, enlisted now on one, then on the other side, but he was also an avid observer, chronicler and interpreter of the time-space developments. His descriptions and contributions fuelled the controversy, which, in turn, provided the subject matter for more chronicling. It is the aim of this study to read the space-time controversy through Joyce’s fiction, and to read Joyce – as well as Joyce criticism – through the space-time controversy.

4 Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*. With a new Preface by Stephen Kern (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

5 Lawrence, *Fantasia*, 178.

6 Cited after Gillian Beer, “Physics, Sound and Substance: Later Woolf,” in *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground. Essays by Gillian Beer* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 117.

As Christine von Boheemen-Saaf elaborates, Joyce's experimentalism made his work the inescapable reference point to several generations of critics and philosophers, "a happy houtingground" for structuralism, reception theory, as well as a key inspiration and "test case" for poststructuralism. Studied by key figures of literary and cultural studies such as Wolfgang Iser, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Lacan or Gilles Deleuze, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* were treated with reverence, as something other than texts to which theory may be usefully "applied." Because of its ambivalence and undecidability, the Joycean text again and again "provided material to argue new approaches, to adstruct [these theorists'] views, and to gradually explore the very grounds of literary representation as well as human identity itself." Thus, especially since the 1960s the very name "Joyce" has come to function as a label, "a warrant of seriousness, or avantgarde distinction."⁷ In Chapter Four of this study, I argue that the story of *Ulysses* criticism, though seemingly torn by various revolutions in literary theory, proceeds along grooves pre-determined by two principal metaphors which correspond to two contending visions of modernist literature. One has its origin in Bergsonian flux; the other is rooted in the poetics of spatial form, as anticipated by T. S. Eliot and theorized by Joseph Frank long before structuralists began talking about the spatial nature of language.

This book is not a sustained study of the impact of theory on Joyce studies or the impact of Joyce on literary theory, but it does pay attention to the internal logic of developments within Joyce criticism. I argue that the space-time binarism as it was debated in the 1920s anticipates and underlies much of what was written about his texts in the following decades. Discussed in some detail in Chapter Two, this original debate was a conflict of sensibilities, worldviews and conceptions of aesthetic value, a conflict between proponents of synthesis and enthusiasts of contingency. What was at stake was the essential quality of modern art and modern thought: should it provide order and structure to an increasingly confusing reality, or does it simply emerge out of chance and chaos, celebrating the plurality of experience. Joyce criticism – especially *Ulysses* criticism – is dominated by two competing traditions, a split that echoes the space-time division of the 1920s. On the one side there is the school of reading Joyce marked by trust in structure and order, a belief that Joyce's work is founded on a specifically modernist desire for synthesis. On the other side there are studies that read Joyce's modernism as proto-postmodernism, and focus on his ambiguity, linguistic creativity, joyful playfulness, insisting that his work is fundamentally "open" and "productive."

According to the wholistic readings, *Ulysses* is a perfectly finished book: constructed according to an intricate plan and marked by an organic, spiritual wholeness. Though such interpretations often acknowledge gaps or inconsistencies in Joyce's work, what they are really after is completeness, order, control. These features were famously attributed to *Ulysses* by T. S. Eliot in his 1923 essay "*Ulysses*, Order and Myth," where the book's mythic structure is seen as a means of "giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary his-

7 Christine Van Boheemen-Saaf, "Joyce in Theory/Theory in Joyce," in *James Joyce*, ed. Sean Latham (Dublin and Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 154.

tory.”⁸ Studies that trust Joyce the myth-maker and admire what they see as his profound humanism make up the early canon of Joyce criticism; studies by Richard Ellmann and Hugh Kenner published in the 1950s and 60s are key examples here. By the mid 1970s the so-called “linguistic turn” – the advent of structuralism and post-structuralism – caused a departure from the mimetic and humanistic approach to Joyce’s work and sparked a renewed interest in *Finnegans Wake*.⁹ The “theory phase” has by now itself passed into history, to be replaced in the late 1980s by what von Boheemen-Saaf calls the “ethical phase,” whose central themes include sexual difference, nationalism and colonialism.¹⁰

Such a chronological account would suggest that with the advent of theory, the search for wholeness was superseded in Joyce studies by arguments about linguistic play, an effort to “record the perpetual flight of the Subject [in Joyce] and its ultimate disappearance.”¹¹ This progressive vision, however, is not entirely accurate. Though often treated with reserve by academic reviewers, studies devoted to the wholeness, organic and visionary character of *Ulysses* continue to be written long after the post-structuralist earthquake. A beautifully argued recent study that insists that Joyce’s aesthetic is one of consonance and harmony was written by the Polish Joycean, Piotr Paziński (2005). The author argues that despite its brilliant representation of the plurality (the inherent messiness) of human experience, the book’s final aim – achieved on several levels – is to overcome contradictions and arrive at a luminous unity. Joyce’s clarity of vision, it is argued, is rooted in an aesthetic theory that equates beauty with “*integritas, consonantia, claritas*” – a lesson Stephen learns from Thomas Aquinas. Ignoring most post-structuralist interpretations, Paziński insists that *Ulysses* is grounded on a double logic of unity and harmony: organic and mechanical, symbolized in his work by a tree and a labyrinth respectively.¹²

The search for truth in Joyce – a single and conclusive solution to the “puzzle” of his work – continues. Today it tends to be self-consciously framed as an effort to reclaim *Ulysses* from the clutches of postmodernism. Stephen Sicari’s *Joyce’s Modernist Allegory* (2001) is an interesting and somewhat extreme case in point. *Ulysses* is a Christian text, claims Sicari, a complex, but finally decipherable Christian allegory. The book presents us with a quest for truth which reaches its fulfilment – the reestablishment of stable identity – in “Ithaca,” when Bloom is revealed to us as a Christ figure, the incarnation of Christian love. Sicari privileges Dante over Homer and posi-

8 T. S. Eliot, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth,” *The Dial*, 75 (1923), 480.

9 Margot Norris’s *The Decentered Universe of ‘Finnegans Wake’* (1974), which reads the text consistently through structuralist theory, is arguably the breakthrough work, marking the Joyce community’s departure from New Criticism. It was followed a few years later by two volumes of post-structuralist criticism. One is Colin MacCabe’s *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1979), a book that brings Lacan, Derrida, Althusser into conversation with *Ulysses*. The other is the collection edited by Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer, *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French* (1984).

10 Van Boheemen-Saaf, “Joyce in Theory,” 159-167.

11 Attridge and Ferrer, cited in Van Boheemen-Saaf, “Joyce in Theory,” 159.

12 Piotr Paziński, *Labirynt i drzewo: Studia nad ‘Ulissesem’ Jamesa Joyce’a* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo “Austeria,” 2005); for argument on unity superseding plurality see especially the book’s three final chapters.

tions Joyce as an idealist surrounded by skeptics. Joyce, he claims, tempts us to engage in “freeplay of signifiers,” but to stop there, to view *Ulysses* as a book *about* language, is to miss the point. Bloom reaches his Christian epiphany after falling prey – in episode after episode – to the lure of language. It is up to us, claims Sicari, to follow Joyce to the realization that language is inherently fraudulent, something we must get *through* in order to reach what really matters, that is truth.¹³ The critic is single-minded and intentionally provocative but he is not naïve: he argues that Joyce and high modernism in general both anticipate and override the post-structuralist fascination with language, which Sicari views as “callous, indifferent to sorrow, indifferent to story and human plot.”¹⁴ In the introduction to his study of Joyce’s uses of memory in *Ulysses* titled *Joyce’s Book of Memory* (1999), John Rickard also warns us to be careful not to project the philosophical formulations of our own times onto Joyce’s work. We need to be weary lest “our postmodernist or poststructuralist assumptions about the instability and constructedness of subjectivity” blind us to Joyce’s use of “models of the mind we can no longer take seriously.”¹⁵ He argues that the book is best read as built around “a tension between randomness and meaning as the bases of human experience and destiny, chance and entelechy, as the underlying metaphors of human life.”¹⁶

The central question of this study is this: what is it about the Joycean text that inspires obsessive quests for truth and order on the one hand, and claims about chaos and disorder on the other. I do not offer a comprehensive reading of Joyce, nor do I aspire to speaking the final word on any individual work in the Joyce corpus. My purpose is dialogic and inconclusive: I write with and around Joyce, expound and expand through a broader context on a relatively limited aspect of his work. Like Rickard, I am convinced that *Ulysses* – but also *Portrait* and the *Wake* – enact a conflict between fragmentation and order, and that as readers we are drawn into it.

The space-time complex will be examined theoretically (in Chapter One), historically, as a debate that went on in the 1920s (in Chapter Two), and then followed into in *Portrait*, *Ulysses* and the *Wake* (in Chapters Three, Four, and Five respectively). The short stories of *Dubliners* are not included in my reading because the argument about space and time pertains to the novel, a form that tends towards (or, as in Joyce’s case, resists) a certain historically determined type of completeness. Chapter One provides a theoretical framework for the entire project, delving into philosophy and literary theory (mainly hermeneutics and structuralism) for arguments the link temporality, identity and language. Chapter Two provides the cultural background needed for a historically grounded reading of the space-time binarism. It tells the story of the controversy as it unfolded in the 1920s and 30s – with Giordano Bruno and Gotthold E. Lessing as the early sources, Wyndham Lewis as the key “spatialist” and Joyce’s antagonist, and Henri Bergson as the leader of the time camp. Joyce’s ambivalent contributions to the space-time wars will be carefully re-examined. Chapter Three is a reading

13 Stephen Sicari, *Joyce’s Modernist Allegory: ‘Ulysses’ and the History of the Novel* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South California Press, 2001), 97 and elsewhere.

14 Sicari, *Joyce’s Modernist Allegory*, 107.

15 John S. Rickard, *Joyce’s Book of Memory: The Mnemotechnic of ‘Ulysses’* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 3.

16 Rickard, *Joyce’s Book of Memory*, 6.

of *Portrait* that focuses closely on Stephen's aesthetic theory, especially the ways in which it echoes Lessing and anticipates the space-time controversy. I look at some of the ways Joyce criticism has conceptualized the relationship between Joyce and Stephen, and propose an alternative formulation – one that goes beyond the concept of irony. Chapter Four offers a space-time reading of the critical history of *Ulysses*. My interest, as emphasized above, is not in space and time as dimensions of Joyce's fictional world but as aspects of, and models for, text. More a reading of *Ulysses* criticism than of *Ulysses* itself, this chapter is a meditation on the changing ontological status of textuality in twentieth-century literary theory – a status which *Ulysses* was again and again said to violate. Before examining what happened to Joyce when post-structuralists claimed him as a predecessor, I revisit Joyce's own conflicting comments on the "system" of *Ulysses*, classic early readings such as Wyndham Lewis's attack on Joyce in *Time and Western Man*, and pioneering studies by Levin and Gilbert. I also reach back to now forgotten but once enormously influential pre-structuralist texts such as Edwin Muir's *The Structure of the Novel* (1928) and Joseph Frank's *The Idea of Spatial Form* (1945). Chapter Five leaves the last word on the space-time polarity to Joyce, examining the Shem-Shaun battles of *Finnegans Wake*. I examine (and admire) several spatial models for the *Wake*, but strive to challenge the critical assumptions underlying the non-narrative approaches to the *Wake*. Because of the centrality of Anna Livia Plurabelle, the *Wake* also makes us pause over the gender aspect of the space-time controversy, namely Wyndham Lewis's tendency to associate time with femininity.

In the Conclusion, I suggest a link between the internal logic of Joyce criticism and the broader debate about modernism's relationship to postmodernism. Joyce's work – especially *Ulysses* – is not a mere example in theoretical considerations of the nature of textuality. It has long enjoyed the status of the quintessential modernist text. That its readings have repeatedly oscillated between the idea of unstructured flow and perfect order tells us something important about the ambivalence of twentieth-century aesthetic theory and cultural history.

Despite my respect for the tradition of complete and authoritative readings of Joyce (both the older ones, especially Kenner's, and the recent ones, such as Paziński's and Sicari's), I belong to the camp that valorizes incompleteness over certainty, discontinuity over pattern. I agree with Jacques Derrida's observation that "there can be no Joycean competence, in the certain and strict sense of the concept of competence, with the criteria of evaluation and legitimation that are attached to this (...). Competence implies that a metadiscourse is possible, neutral and univocal with regard to a field of objectivity."¹⁷ The encyclopedic and metafictional character of Joyce's work after *Dubliners* makes these texts their own most powerful metadiscourses. And this precludes any total readings. In a sense, there can be no text about Joyce that has not already been written into the network of his writing. To quote Derrida again, "nothing can be invented *on the subject* of Joyce. Everything we can say about *Ulysses*, for example, has already been anticipated (...) all the gestures (...) are already announced in

17 Jacques Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce," in *The Augmented Ninth: Papers from the Ninth James Joyce Symposium*, ed. B. Benstock (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 49.

an overpotentialized text that will remind you, at a given moment, that you are captive in a language, writing, knowledge, and even *narration* network.”¹⁸

My departure point, then, is the view that no interpretation of Joyce can make claims to completeness or authority; all one can do is provide openings. The aim of the present study is not to end the space-time war by providing some “middle ground” between order and chaos, idealism and scepticism. Though in my final chapter I look at Joyce’s “solution” to the space-time conflict, his collapsing of the difference in *Finnegans Wake*, the purpose of this work is not solution but process. I argue that it is worth our while to examine the logic, context and implications of the binary itself, the way it produces meanings in Joyce’s texts, providing fruitful ground for such varied readings. If Joyce has been a magnet to theorists, a “test case” for various philosophical (or religious) responses to modernity, various theories of language, representation, and selfhood, it is not because he solved the puzzles that haunt them, but because he dramatized them. His writing works so well as a mirror to various obsessions and pre-conceptions because it is built upon and around the question that encompasses and anticipates so many other questions: the time-space controversy. Making sense of Joyce seems to require a clear response on our part: do you side with order or contingency? Critics have continued to take sides, revealing in the process not just what they think of Joyce but how they think of the world. The conflict of space and time, of solid structure and shifting realities, is a foundational debate not just for Joyce studies but for debates about art, literature, and society in the modern world.

18 Derrida, “*Ulysses* Gramophone,” 49.