

# Something to Read\*

Arthur N. Prior

## I. – “Ulysses”

James Joyce died at the beginning of this year. Even his death was made the occasion of newspaper silliness – the aggressive low-browism that passes for mental toughness in Nazi Germany and here. His main works are a collection of short sketches called “Dubliners”; “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”; “Ulysses”; and “Finnegan’s Wake.” More than one critic of importance has said that his best work is contained in “Dubliners”; I cannot see this myself, but I pass the opinion on as deserving respect. “Finnegan’s Wake,” which is all written in a weird “jumble” English of Joyce’s own invention, intended to convey the half-formed thoughts of a man asleep, has a definitely limited appeal. There is a very sensible review of it in “Life and letters To-day” for July 1939, by Dorothy Richardson; and there is a section on it (when it was in the making and called “Work in Progress”) in Frank Budgen’s *James Joyce and the Making of “Ulysses”* (Grayson).

But it is “Ulysses” – an account of a Dublin day in 1904 – that I want to talk about. In contrast to “Finnegan’s Wake,” this seems to me definitely a book with “something for everybody.” Literary fans and experts like it, but I’m not one of those. I very seldom read good novels, preferring to spend my time with books on theology, politics and the like. But I read “Ulysses” again and again – and it’s not a particularly “theological” novel, or even a particularly “political” one. There’s theology in it, of course, and all over the place at that. Dublin is the capital of Catholic Ireland, and the impact of the Church on its inhabitants is portrayed as faithfully as everything else. The second of the two main characters, Stephen Dedalus, is a former student of theology, and his mind is steeped in St. Thomas Aquinas.

The common blasphemies of men are in it, too. One scene is in a pub, the conversation in it being described alternately in a style that is digni-

\* Or. in *The Student*, March 1941: 3-4.

fied to the point of being high-falutin' and in the language of one of its more vulgar frequenters. Among the drinkers is a fanatical Irish nationalist styled "the citizen," who scorns the Englishman's talk of freedom when flogging goes on in his navy.

"That's the great empire they boast about of drudges and whipped serfs... And the tragedy of it is, they believe it. The unfortunate yahoos believe it."

This remark leads the "high-falutin'" writer to chip in with a remarkable parody of the Apostles' Creed:

"They believe in rod, the scourger," etc.

The passage indicates that there is politics in "Ulysses," too, and all over the place. (In an earlier chapter the Ulsterman has his say.) But, of course, this no more means that it is a political novel than the fact that there's sex in it, and all over it, makes it a "sexy" novel. All these factors appear naturally in Joyce's attempt to portray accurately the thoughts and half-thoughts and casual impressions of his characters. It is perhaps this very thing that gives it its value and appeal for those who are strongly interested in theology, or politics, or, indeed, anything else. It shows each of us our pet hobby-horse rooted in a context of everyday human life, entering into that life, influencing it and being influenced by it. The nineteenth-century Christian Socialist, F.D. Maurice (whose works, by the way, are always worth snapping up in a secondhand shop – he's coming into his own these days) says in "The Friendship of Books," that we may learn more about the English Reformation by reading Shakespeare's "Henry VIII" than by reading many a "religious" history by either side. Similarly Charles Smyth, in a joint review of Constant's "The Reformation in England" and Kenneth Pickthorn's "Early Tudor Government" in the "Criterion" a few years ago, says that "The religious history, which is the exclusive subject of Professor Constant's work, emerges far more clearly from Pickthorn's pages, where it is studied in its full contemporary setting." In his contribution on "Church History" to the recent Anglican volume on "The Priest as Student," Smyth goes so far as to say that there is really no such subject as Church History, only ordinary history, in bits of which we may be specially interested. Whatever we think of that, "Ulysses" provides a "full contemporary setting" for most of our special interests.

The genius for parody shown in the above quotation is one of the great joys of "Ulysses." There seems to be no variety of English style of which Joyce is not a rare master. The chapter following the pub scene, for example, is written in the sloppy, hackneyed style of a sentimental

women's paper. But it is not just disorderly succession of wittily-drawn pictures, taking us from the beginning of the day to its end. It has a very real unity. The broad outlines of its "scheme" are given in the book by Budgen already mentioned. Budgen is an artist who was with Joyce most of the time when he wrote the book; without his "companion volume" I think "Ulysses" would be in many ways hard going (its connections – sometimes between words, sometimes between incidents – are often subtle and hard to trace), but with it, the going is easy enough for it to be wholly enjoyable. It is also helpful to get to know the character Stephen Dedalus by reading the earlier "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man."

But the real and obvious unity of "Ulysses" does not lie in any "scheme" but in the character of Leopold Bloom. Joyce told Budgen frankly that his main aim was to give a really complete picture of a man; and he has done it. After we have read "Ulysses" I think we *understand* Bloom better than we have ever understood a fictional character before – or, for that matter, a real person; or ourselves. And, of course, understanding Bloom helps us to understand other people and ourselves. And somehow he is not made any the less human for us by all this dissection. Joyce is not simply a cold monster showing up the follies and indecencies that men would like to hide. After his penetrating X-ray has enabled us to see right through Leopold Bloom, we do not find him hallow and empty, but admire and like him. "Kindly, prudent, level-tempered, submissive, tragically isolated, shrewd, sceptical, simple, uncensorious, with an outward seemingly soft and pliant but with a hard inner core of self-sufficiency," as Budgen sums him up, he is well worth having got to know.

He is particularly worth getting to know just now, as he is a Jew. The psychological subtleties of the relations between Jews and Gentiles in an English-speaking country are exposed by Joyce with the utmost skill. A group of French literary men a few years ago produced a little volume entitled "Les Juifs," asking an ordinary man of affairs to be one of the contributors. In his essay he draws attention to the way in which Jews never *quite* succeed in assimilating the subtleties in manners, customary feelings and reactions, etc., of the country in which they settle. It is this sort of thing, and its effects, which Joyce portrays so accurately.

Until recently, the main difficulty in obtaining copies of "Ulysses" lay in the fact that the book was banned. That absurdity is now ended, it is to be hoped for good. But the fortunes of war make it advisable for people intending to buy books to get in early. If anyone is laying aside three or four pounds to buy books *now*, "Ulysses" and "James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses'" ought to be among their first purchases. The books

I am going to recommend in later articles are Hermann Rauschning's "Hitler Speaks," Peter Drucker's "The End of Economic Man," Freud's "Moses and Monotheism," John Dickie's "Organism of Christian Truth," and some articles by Peter Drucker, especially one on "War Against the Middle Classes" in the "Saturday Evening Post," for August 10, 1940.

# The Theology of James Joyce\*

Arthur N. Prior

There was a time when it was fashionable to quote Thomas Carlyle from the pulpit, despite the somewhat heterodox views of the sage of Ecclefechan. It is not easy to imagine a time when James Joyce will be similarly used, and in any case it is doubtful whether such a consummation is one which he himself would have wished. However, Joyce in his youth was trained in theology, his extensive acquaintance with theological lore of all kinds is reflected in all his works, and some of his uses of it throw back light upon the original which it would be a pity for Christian readers, and even clerical readers, to miss. It was a common doctrine of early Calvinism that even the reprobate may, unintentionally and by the Providence of God, enlighten the elect and serve the end of their salvation; perhaps the theological usefulness of Joyce may be accounted for on some such theory!

## *Joyce and the Jews*

Pascal cited the Jews who have not embraced Christianity but have done such things as preserving the text of the Bible for us, as the sovereign example of this service of the reprobate to the elect. Joyce's obsession with Roman Catholicism has often been noted; his obsession with the Jews, and with things Jewish, not so often. The hero of "Ulysses" is a Jew, Leopold Bloom, and Joyce portrays very minutely and subtly that social awkwardness, and apparent inability to do things in *quite* what is considered the right way by their Gentile neighbours,

\* Or. in *The Presbyterian*, January 1943 [Along with the following information]: Arthur N. Prior, M.A., is a New Zealand graduate, now in the army. His writings have appeared in "Theology," "The International Review of Missions," and other journals.

which is often remarked upon in Jews. Like the classical Ulysses, the “wandering Jew” is never completely at home anywhere. It may, indeed, be questioned whether this trait is confined to the Jews-Christians too are supposed to be “pilgrims and strangers” in this world; and there are probably few of them who do not sometimes have a disquieting half-formed thought that they are not, doing things in quite the right way, and are being noticed as odd by our fellows. Perhaps some Jews irritate their Gentile neighbours more by a self-assured unconsciousness of being awkward, than by the awkwardness itself – as Freud suggests that what the early Christians held against the Jews was not that they “murdered God,” that being a crime in which all men had a part, but that they would not admit to having done so.

In any case Joyce’s portrayal of Bloom’s awkwardness is fundamentally sympathetic, and in no sense an apology for anti-semitism. And in his last book “Finnegan’s Wake,” Joyce even identifies himself and Jewry. The character who represents himself, “Shem the Penman,” is not only named after the Biblical father of the Semitic peoples, but has all the characteristics which Gentiles are apt to criticise in Jews. For example, he lives not by physical prowess but by cunning, like Jacob. “Shem is short for Shemus as Jem is joky for Jacob.” His opposite number, the strong and handsome – and stupid – Shaun, is just as plainly the “Nordic,” Gentile type. The contrast between Shem and Shaun also echoes that between James and John – “James” being not only the author’s own real name but that of the most Jewish of the apostles.

### *The Unity of the Human Race*

These contrasts are not allowed to break the unity of the human race. If Joyce identifies himself in “Finnegan’s Wake” with Shem, in “Ulysses” he is the Gentile Dedalus. This unity is, however, conceived Jewishly as the unity of a common ancestry. Shem and Shaun are brothers, sons of the same father, who appears variously as Finnegan, Earwicker, O’Reilly, “old Flynn the Flinter” and Adam, it being remarked “what a pentschanjeuchy chap he was.” Wilhelm Vischer, Barth’s Old Testament colleague at Basle, referring to the dispute among critics as to whether the leading characters in the Pentateuch were real persons or mythical symbols of tribes and races, says that for the Hebrew mind this contrast cannot arise, the unity of the individual with his “roots” in his family being so strongly emphasised. This unity is certainly strongly emphasised in

“Finnegan’s Wake,” where the characters have no clear identity, but are composite figures built out of several generations, though “under the closed eyes of the inspectors the traits featuring the *chiaroscuro* coalesce, their contrarities eliminated, in one stable somebody similarly as by the providential warring of heartshaker with housebreaker and of dram-drinker against freethinker our social something bowls along bumpily, experiencing a jolting series of prearranged disappointments, down the long lane of (it’s as semper as exhouse-bumper!) generations, more generations and still more generations.”

At the beginning of “Ulysses” the same idea of the unity of mankind is brought out by the conceit of Dedalus ringing up Adam and Eve through a telephone system made of the umbilical cords connecting the generations in between. The idea is not new. “Rabbi” Duncan, the 19th century Scottish missionary to the Jews, said quite solemnly in a conversation on the unity of mankind published in his “Colloquia Peripatetica” by his “Boswell” William Knight, “The umbilicus is a wonderful thing!”

### *The Wisdom of Death*

Joyce also held the Jewish belief that if the race is eternal, or near it, the individual is not. The subject of death is handled with unusual pathos at the end of “Finnegan’s Wake,” where the death of Anna, the mother of the Finnegan or Earwicker family, is described under the symbol of a river flowing out to sea – ending powerfully reminiscent of the 12th chapter of Ecclesiastes. Anna has “gone to her long home.” As Ecclesiastes saw, mankind are united by their common fate as well as by their common ancestry. “All is vanity and vexation of spirit,” or “a striving after wind,” and one end comes to all men. Says Joyce, in a less pathetic mood than in his last pages, “What’s my muffinstuffinaches for these times? To weat: Breath and bother and whatarcurss. Then breath, more bother and more whatarcurss. Then no breath, no bother, but worraworrawurms. And Shim shallave shome.”

The Barthians have contended strongly for the right of Ecclesiastes to a place in the Biblical canon, arguing that many of its essential attitudes are carried over into the New Testament – in contrast to the view frequently expressed from pulpits that the book merely tells us how hopeless things were before Christ came. Bultmann, in “Jesus and the Word,” sees the spirit of books like Ecclesiastes even in the saying, “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” There is

no reference here, he says, to man's fate in an eternal world; "soul" merely means "life," and the saying draws attention to the futility of "gaining the whole world" when we must die in the end. Barth's own liking for Ecclesiastes may be connected with his view that the Christian dispensation is a period of "marking time" between Christ's ascension and His return in glory – a period devoid of special revelations in itself and having to live on those of the past and those to come, like the period of "famine of the word" in which Ecclesiastes wrote.

Be that as it may, the New Testament does seem to share with Ecclesiastes an emphasis on the particular feature of the unity of mankind that might be called "the unity of the righteous and the unrighteous" ("the wheat and the tares must grow together till the harvest"), and that not only in their common subjection to death, but in their common subjection to it as *sinner*s, the 'righteous' never being so free from sin as we are prone to imagine. This feature of the world, or at least of "this present age" of the world, was certainly constantly present to Joyce's mind. He has, for example, an amusing application of the "mote and the beam" saying in the Sermon on the Mount, when he notes how "an Anglican ordinal... may ever behold the brand of scarlet on her of Babylon and feel not the pink one in his own damned cheek." Joyce's break with Catholicism did not blind him, to the failings of its critics – and, we may add, not only its Anglican ones. His pin-pricking satire spared no one, not even himself, and in that reflected an insight he had learned from Ecclesiastes and the New Testament.



# *Finnegans' Wake: An Interpretation*

Arthur N. Prior

Unpublished paper.

Transcription and introduction by Sara L. Uckelman\*

## *Editor's introduction*

The division between philosophical analysis and literary criticism, and indeed the division between philosophy and literature, can often be blurred in interesting ways. In this short, but fascinating, little piece, Arthur N. Prior follows in the philosophical-literary footsteps of Lewis Carroll and applies his philosophical acumen to one of the most difficult pieces of literature, James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

This is a transcript of a three page typescript found in Box 6 of the Prior Archives held in the Bodleian Library<sup>1</sup>. The date of this typescript is not known, other than that it is early. In preparing this transcription, I have corrected formatting and punctuation to modern type-setting standards, and marked the start of each new page of the typescript. I have left the orthography untouched.

## *Finnegan's Wake: An Interpretation*

[1] Though James Joyce's last long work, *Finnegan's Wake*, is puzzling learned literary men all the world over, it has often been compared with children's books, in particular with *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, in which the poem "Jabberwocky" introduces jumbled words of the kind in which the whole of Joyce's book is written. For a change, I would suggest a comparison with Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*.

*The Blue Bird*, like the *Alice* books, and like *Finnegan's Wake*, is the story of a dream. The dreaming children visit all sorts of unearthly places and have the strangest companions but when they wake up in the morn-

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of the contents of this box, prepared by Peter Øhrstrøm and Per Hasle, see <http://www.prior.aau.dk/Boxes/Box+1+-+11/Box+6/>

ing and rub their eyes these creatures shrink back to familiar people and animals and objects in their home village. So also in *The Wizard of Oz*. The spell is broken; but at the same time the children know that the dream was not just an illusion but really revealed something about these people and things that they hadn't been aware of before.

In *Finnegan's Wake*, what is set before the reader is the sort of hazy scene one sees in dreams or in a half-asleep doze or daze. Everything is blurred and jumbled, and in this blur vast beings seem to move about—giants and gods and goddesses (“Oystrygods gaggin Fishygods”), men who are like mountains and women who are like clouds and rivers; and everything is elusive and changes disconcertingly into something else— even words change into other words before you have reached the end of them. Everything is out of focus, and one sees things at several different “levels” all at once, but nothing clearly. The book remains entirely in the dream world— what you see when you wake up is not described. However, you can do that for yourself, and as you rub your eyes and generally pull yourself together, the vague monsters shrink, and what you see before you is a hearty Irish publican and his family, regarded through the eyes of one of his sons, who appears in the book as “Shem the Penman” (also referred to as “Shun the Punman”!).

The “moral” of all this is in the first place an anti-religious one. “God” is not a real person; or rather He is a very real person indeed, but not the being He purports to be. He is an obscure vision, as in a dream, of one or both of the quite ordinary people we once looked up to “when we were yung and easily freudened”) as the authors of our being— our parents. (A parody of the Lord's Prayer is addressed to “Anna the All-maziful, bringer of plurabilities,” or Anna Livia Plurabelle, who is the river Liffey in Dublin, and also Shem the Penman's mother). Scepticism about the supernatural is implicit in this book, which is among other things an attempt— though probably not a deliberate one, Joyce being no propaganda novelist— to [2] arouse similar scepticism in the reader by showing him his religious beliefs as part of a dream, and a dream so completely remembered that the subconscious sources of religion are also seen.

As with *The Blue Bird*, however, the dream is not sheer illusion, but really teaches us something which we would not have known without it about the ordinary people who pass through it so mysteriously transformed. Joyce's earlier work *Ulysses* was essentially a picture of a man, Leopold Bloom, seen from all sides, and also right through the middle in several cross-sections. *Finnegan's Wake*, on the other hand, is essentially

a picture of a family; and what the dream brings out is that apparently solid and clearly defined individuals like Bloom in *Ulysses* and the group of Irish folk we see when we wake up from *Finnegan's Wake* are only superficial and fleeting beings how, underneath, are lost as individuals in the family – first of all in their own family, and then in the whole human family, and ultimately in the whole universe.

Joyce is not moralising here. He is not saying that we ought to lose ourselves in our family, in the race, or in the universe. On the contrary, he depicts himself, “Shem the Penman,” as a thoroughly anti-social character, an unspeakably “low” fellow, a shirker, with no bonds of loyalty either to Irish nationalism or British imperialism, the Catholic Church or the communist revolution, or to anyone but himself. And while he takes on pride in this, and perhaps even does not wholly assent to this supposed outsider's view of himself, he takes an obvious mischievous delight in this apparent “lowness.”

What he implicitly claims to be asserting is not a duty but a simple fact – that every man is the product of constant interaction with other men, and indirectly of endless ages of such interaction, and ultimately even of interaction between mountains and clouds and rivers and seas. Throughout the book this interaction is brought out in countless ways – e.g., by toying with the associations of words and phrases, or by the building up of composite personalities out of a particular individual and his own near and remote ancestors.

From this morally colourless fact something that might be called a “moral” does emerge. The moral is, simply, how exceedingly difficult it is, if not impossible, really to destroy anything. Every event in history has left its mark somewhere, be it only in the twist of some colloquial phrase, and attempts to wipe out the past are doomed to failure from the outset – something small and unnoticed by the would-be destroyer will always bring it all back again. In the turmoil of the present time Joyce appears to have had a strong and quiet confidence about mankind's power to recover from shocks and to rebuild what has been cast down.

[3] Survival comes about, however, through constant transformation. The works of men remain, in one form or another, (“There'll always be a Dublin!”), but the men themselves do not; and their death, by which the unity of the individual with the universe is consummated in the waking world, remains a saddening thing, though one can achieve a certain resignation about it. The end of the book, when the grandiose dream is beginning to give place to humdrum waking reality, appears to be about the death of the author's mother, symbolised by the flowing of the river

Liffey into the sea. Almost every possible human emotion in the face of death – a forlorn and hopeless consciousness of being unnoticed and forgotten, sheer terror, a crazy desire to lose one's personal identity in death as in love, a cold dull calm – are crammed into the last page, which demonstrates that Joyce's jumble language may be used for other things beside fun and fooling, and that there is more than fun and fooling in that "grand funferall," *Finnegan's Wake*.