

XXVIII International James Joyce Symposium, 'Ulysses 100'

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XXVIII International James Joyce Symposium, ‘*Ulysses* 100’

June 12th–18th, 2022.

Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin.

Laura Gibbs

Centenaries are intended to be acts of remembrance and reflection, causing us to pose important questions about existing conditions, such as: how far have we come, what still needs to be done, and how do we progress from here?

In the literary humanities, centenaries also cause us to reflect on the shifting paradigm of thought, marking the progression of an intellectual community and the ever-changing dynamic between reader, author, and text. The XXVIII International James Joyce Symposium, informally known as ‘*Ulysses* 100’, was no exception to these centennial ruminations. Gathered primarily at Trinity College Dublin from June 12th-18th, with UCD hosting the conference on the final day, the Hibernian metropolis offered a prime location for addressing such questions. Most obviously, because of its role as the central location of *Ulysses*, but also because, as Mark O’Connell addressed in his keynote, as a city, Dublin functions like a palimpsest, shaped and moulded by numerous layers of a rich literary and historical past. It is therefore fitting that a week of Joycean commemoration and celebration should fall within a city that is marked so greatly with Ulyssean geography.

In addition to its centennial significance, this year’s symposium felt important for several reasons. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, ‘*Ulysses* 100’ was the first in-person International James Joyce Symposium since 2018, with the previous symposium taking place virtually in 2021. The large-scale reconvergence of the Joyce community felt exciting and strange: almost *unheimlich* in a world now greatly altered by a collective sense of loss, isolation, and adaptation. Most crucially though, as many attendees were aware it was also the first in person symposium since the open letter that came out in 2018, which addressed the “escalation of harassment, misogyny, inappropriate behaviour, assault, and other abuses of power in Joyce Studies”.¹ Since the symposium’s scale often fosters a strong sense of Joycean collegiality and community, bolstered by the endless coffees, dinners, and events which punctuate the time between and after panels, this occasion felt like a pivotal measure of progress.

While I will return to the topic of the open letter, I am keen to illuminate firstly the abundance of thriving and refreshing scholarship that the week had to offer. The measures of distance naturally posed by the centenary were vividly addressed by Katherine O’Callaghan’s opening keynote on ‘Blue *Ulysses*’. O’Callaghan’s paper offered a beautiful reading of the multiplicity of the colour blue (in response to the famous ‘Greek’ blue of the first edition of *Ulysses*). Navigating the critical impact of depth, hue, tone, and colour, as well as exploring colour as a marker of textual distance, O’Callaghan details how blue is always projected, always from a distance, because ‘blue ceases to be blue when we arrive in it’. Setting a reflective tone for the rest of the conference, O’Callaghan’s talk made way for other crucial reflections regarding our relationship to Joyce’s work. The keynotes that followed throughout the week were equally fascinating and diverse in topic. Mark O’Connell’s aforementioned

¹ “An Open Letter to the James Joyce Community”, *The Modernist Review*,
<https://modernistreviewcoulk.wordpress.com/2019/01/15/an-open-letter-to-the-james-joyce-community>

talk considered Dublin's contradictory relationship with Joyce, positioning it as a dynamic which fluctuates between respect and capitalist exploitation. Eimer McBride illuminated the experience of reading Joyce's work in a talk which revolved around Joyce and joy, and Anne-Marie D'Arcy offered a wonderfully detailed presentation on Joyce's heretics.

While I unfortunately lack the space to cover all the panels that I had the privilege of attending, particularly memorable to me were the papers which challenged the boundaries of Joyce Studies, encouraging further readings of race, globality, disability, queerness, and sex in Joyce's work. Monday's panel on Joycean queerness invited a multifaceted questioning of sexuality and gender in relation to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Iva Dimovska reflected on the transformation of time and identity in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, reframing these transformations as a series of 'queer moments', while Casey Lawrence presented a genetic reading of genderbending and queer revision in the 'Mamalujo' section of *Finnegans Wake*. On Tuesday, the afternoon panel on blindness and authority—consisting of Cleo Hanaway-Oakley, Sophie Corser, Quinn Gruber, and Patrick O'Reilly—collectively offered a rich and fascinating exploration of non-normative eyesight and artistic practice, degeneracy theory, and textual cockles. To draw on a couple of personal highlights, Cleo Hanaway-Oakley expertly questioned how Joyce's non-normative vision may have affected and enhanced the creation of his literary art, while Corser's paper took us on an etymological weaving through the various interpolations of the 'cockle': both as creature, and as a textural 'puckering' of the page or fabric. Forming metaphorical wrinkles in the fabric of the Joycean text, Corser reflected on how we might attribute significance to these misreadings.

The 'Ethical Joyce' panel was also excellent, and the absence of a speaker due to illness made way for a lengthy and engaging dialogue between panellists Katherine Ebury and Julie McCormick Weng, and the audience. Ebury explored the boundaries between literature and law, determining how "Joyce shows us how language can draw us into ethical engagements with the other, and how they can fail". McCormick Weng then presented an excellent (and timely) paper on Joyce and #MeToo. Illuminating how Joyce's picture of the past in *A Portrait* is familiar with patterns of abuse in the present, McCormick Weng detailed how Joyce exposes a "devastating normality of misconduct in Ireland". On Saturday, Zoë Henry, Nels C. Pearson, and Mary Burke presented a seamlessly coordinated panel, titled: 'A Sea of Change: James Joyce, the Black Atlantic, and Maritime Modernity', with Ellen Scheibel as a respondent. Henry's talk particularly stood out to me through her wonderful reading of 'Penelope'. Interrogating Joyce's apositioning in 'Penelope', seen as the episode refutes any singular claims of individuality, Henry traced the "game of the dozens" being played throughout the episode, as Molly performs a series of imagined burns that "never land precisely on their target", resulting in a "blackish centre which refuses to hold". The topic of #MeToo and Joyce was revisited in the "Women's Caucus", chaired by Ebury, Henry, and myself. Situated towards the end of the week, the Caucus provided women with a space to address any safety, inclusivity or accessibility concerns that had arisen and the future place of women's, trans and nonbinary scholarship. What was clear from the ensuing discussions is that although work has been done, we still have a long way to go to make women feel safe and valued within the conference space.

With this in mind, I want to use this space to be honest about the experience of being a young female scholar in the Joyce community, rather than reproduce the culture of denial that has long plagued Joyce Studies. The last few years have exposed an inherent ugliness that lies within unspoken power structures upheld by the Joycean community, one which continues to destabilise and threaten the development of Joycean scholarship. With many highly problematic figures still occupying the conference space, female scholars are being overburdened by their responsibility to keep others safe, making what should be a celebration of scholarship an emotionally fatiguing experience. The joys of socialising and networking are often substituted by an ethical obligation to uphold the whisper network, an informal chain designed to warn potentially vulnerable scholars about how to avoid

negative experiences in the community. The stories shared during these conversations are gut wrenching, including testimonies of rape and sexual assault, plagiarism, and intimidation, a powerful testament to how endemic the problem has become. This conference was sadly no exception.

Reflecting, then, on the questions of progress posed by the centenary, I wonder how Joyce Studies advances if we continue to fail to address the abuses of power which lie at its core? Women are leaving the community at an alarming rate: because for many, these conditions are understandably too horrible to bear, and because they should not have to. I myself will be leaving Joyce Studies, because I can no longer participate in a culture that privileges power over safety. This stifles and disrupts the production of scholarship, by unravelling the threads of collegiality and interest that bind the community together. I think, in light of the centenary, then, it is therefore essential to ask ourselves how far have we *really* come, and how do we progress from here?

—University of Sheffield