

Exile Writer, Intellectualized Aesthetics and Obscure Art: Interpreting James Joyce and His Artistic Aspiration

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I. The Artist as an Exile Intellectual

Banishment or exile is one of the major themes through James Joyce's works. In Chapter 9 of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus summarizes Shakespeare's theme as "The note of banishment, banishment from the heart, banishment from home, sounds uninterruptedly from *The Two Gentlemen in Verona* till Prospero breaks his staff, buries it certain fathoms in the earth and drowns his book ..." (*U* 9.999-1002). By this he means that this theme runs through the earliest of Shakespeare's works until the last. As for the reason, Stephen says, "Because the theme of the false or the usurping or the adulterous brother or all three in one is to Shakespeare, ... always with him" (*U* 9.997-99).

That is actually a summary of Joyce's own theme via his interpretation of Shakespeare. But in Joyce, the theme of exile concerns both the nation he narrates

all through his works and his own relationship with his nation. So far as the nation is concerned, it was banished from its home and became a diaspora or exile on its own land in its colonial history. The reason was also betrayal and usurping. In Joyce's mind, the betrayer is the Roman Catholic Church and the usurper is England. The complicity of the two as early as the 12th century started the "nightmare" of history (*U* 2.377) of Ireland, a colonial history that lasted until the 20th century. It was a complicity in that when Adrain IV was the Pope, the first and the only Englishman who was ever chosen to be the Pope in the history of the Catholic Church, he issued a Papal Bull,¹⁾ the so called *Laudabiliter*, by which he granted the overlordship of Ireland to Henry II, the King of England then, who was, at that time just trying to find an excuse to control Ireland. Adrain provided the excuse by confirming that during his popedom he constantly received complaint about moral corruption and irreligion in Ireland, so he needed Henry II's help to reform the nation. On receiving this expected mission, Henry II expressed his determination to "extirpate those vices which had taken root" (Gifford 424). But actually he was determined to get the papal permission for invasion. Anyway, the Pope approved his "laudable" determination and gave him the permission to control Ireland. As a token of the permission, the Pope gave him an emerald set in a gold ring. This is indication that Henry II was given overlordship of Ireland, because Ireland used to be called the "Emerald isles" or as it was called in *Ulysses* "Erin, Green Gem of the Silver Sea" (*U* 7.236).²⁾ Although the supposed bull proclaiming this has never been documented (no one can authenticate it) and many think it was the English King Henry II who used the supreme pontiff to attain his own goals. No matter what, in Joyce's mind, they were accomplices. What is most painfully humiliating and unjust to Joyce in this incident is the betrayal, because, according to Joyce, Ireland had always been the "most faithful daughter of the Catholic Church" (*CW* 169), yet, as Joyce says sarcastically, "well, the Holy See repaid this fidelity in its own way" (*CW* 170) by giving it away to its conquerors.

1) In Chapter 14 of *Ulysses*, Stephen played on the word "Bull" to express his indignation.

2) All these are parodied and ridiculed in Chapter 14 of *Ulysses*.

Ever since then, the Irish with its population being mostly of Catholics were reduced to underdogs whose sufferings had been just what the historian Robert Kee in his *The Most Distressful Country* describes, “a folk trauma comparable in human experience perhaps only to that of the Jew” (Kee 8) (namely, suffering from banishment from the heart, banishment from home). Some became wild geese (exiles), some tamed, subjugated, suffering even more humiliation and oppression from a spiritual, psychological as well as economic banishment on their own land. That is also why the theme of *Ulysses* is declared by Joyce to be an epic of two races (Israel-Ireland) (*SL* 271). Bearing this historical background in mind, we will realize that throughout Joyce’s works the effort to represent this theme of exile, the nightmare of history and its aftermath account for the most intense level of Joyce’s artistry, because it is an art of trauma that has to be a writing against the grain or the Benjaminian brushing history against the grain, resulting in all his artistic complexity and obscurity, including the “scrupulous meanness” (*SL* 83) in depicting the spiritual inertia of Dubliners as a result of this colonial history, and especially the carnivalesque combination of parody, irony, grotesque and pastiche in his representation of historical memories in *Ulysses*, until his subversion and rewriting of Irish history in *Finnegans Wake*. In this way, his works constitute a unified whole narrating his nation in exile and also its effort for a “voyage in.”

As said above, the theme of exile also concerns Joyce, the artist. This, running through all his works, side by side and in connection with his representation of his nation, is the theme of exile of the artist in the post-colonial Ireland when the nation finally began its “voyage in” and started a political and especially cultural reconstruction. At that time when there was no strict division of labor and especially when political and cultural struggles were not separable from each other, so an artist was also a public intellectual and therefore an exile artist was also an exile intellectual. But why did Ireland spiritually and symbolically banished its most articulate spokesman James Joyce (Or why did Joyce choose to be banished)? The reason is not that Joyce was indifferent to the cultural ferment then. Actually Joyce was just as enthusiastic to create the uncreated conscience of his race as Yeats and

other revivalists of his time. The problem is that Joyce was a heteroglossia, and ultimately a nay-sayer to the main stream of cultural ideas guiding this reconstruction project led by Yeats' Abbey Theatre and the Gaelic League inspired by Douglas Hyde. He regarded their obsession with the rural, primitive and superstitious Ireland as backwardness and parochialism. Not that Joyce did not love his own national tradition (actually he loved Thomas Moore's songs dearly, which can be proved by his excessive use of them in his works, especially in *Finnegans Wake*.), rather, he thought what was urgent for Ireland was to be out of their stereotyped national image, out of the position of being the "afterthought of Europe" (*SH* 53) and be equal to or even superior to other European nations. That constituted real emancipation and decolonization for Joyce.

But that was what the revivalist project failed to fulfill. By their catering to the mass's nostalgic obsession with the primitive and legendary past, their sentimental memory of resistant struggles and sacrifices, their romantic patriotism, their love of empty rhetoric and their stubborn persistence in narrow-mindedness, they made their project "the property of the rabblement of the most belated race in Europe" (*CW* 70). Joyce regarded this to be harmful and tried to prescribe some antidotes. This intention was the main content of his early critical writings and had been the guiding line ever since in all his works. So against flattering, sublimation and beautification, he satirized, told terrible truths and revealed ugliness, from the spiritual and moral paralysis and simony revealed by the "polished looking glass" of *Dubliners* to the bigotry and power pathology of a fanatic "citizen" vivisected by the lancet of his art in *Ulysses* until finally the ontologized constructiveness of history deconstructed by his subversion of the English language and the narrative of history itself in *Finnegans Wake*.

These antidotes can be said to be his literary version of Adorno's Negative Dialectics, and of Benjamin's brushing history against the grain. But these were difficult for his countryman to swallow at the time, for which he was even called a renegade. He became a stranger to his own folks. But in that sense he is essentially a spiritual exile, or a "metaphysical exile" (*Said* 50) in Edward Said's

sense. His exile is voluntary and determined to act out his intellectual motto “non serviam,” as his alter ego Stephen Dedalus declares in *A Portrait*: “I will not serve. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use —silence, exile and cunning” (*P* 191). This attitude makes Joyce the pure intellectual in Julien Benda’s sense. For such an intellectual, spiritual exile from the reified reality is his strategy to transcend and to disentangle himself from the nets flung on him, and to gain the freedom so fundamental for representing truth.

For Joyce, this truth is understood as the “terrible truth” the great master Ibsen was so brave to reveal, that is, follies and backwardness of his nation to be unveiled by his candid criticism. To Joyce, this is the first step taken to promote the spiritual liberation of his race. In this Joyce echoes Benjamin in his motto “construction presupposes destruction” (Benjamin x). And also like Benjamin, Joyce does not want to harvest ruins from this demolition but to find a way leading through the rubbles. As Stephen tells Davin in *A Portrait*: “The shortest way to Tara is via Holyhead” (*P* 194). That is, to regain the glory of the nation, he must first go into exile in the sense that he must not cooperate but distance, criticize and eventually cure. So all his works, while narrating his nation, also constitute “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Exile Intellectual-Writer” in Jean-Paul Sartre’s sense.

II. His Aesthetics as His Intellectual Manifesto

Corresponding to his spirit as an exile intellectual-writer is his Intellectual Manifesto which takes the form of aesthetic and artistic speculations represented in his 1903-04 aesthetic notes, his writings in his university days, his elaboration in *Stephen Hero*, parts of his lectures abroad, his formulation in *A Portrait* and, to

some extent, in connection and complementation, in his elaboration in Chapter 9 of *Ulysses* on the artist's relationship with his subject matter via an interpretation of Shakespeare.

In my understanding, the above together actually constitute not only his aesthetics but his Intellectual-writer's Manifesto for three reasons. First, because the emphasis of his aesthetic thinking and speculation is on the function of human reason. But "Reason" here is not meant to differ from "imagination," instead, it is to be understood in the French intellectual-writer Julien Benda's sense, and also in Edward Said's sense, that is, reason represents the very conscience of an intellectual-writer. It is characterized by stasis, transcendence, independence, sober-mindedness, pursuit of hard and naked truth in resistance against any kinds of mystification, blind passion or romanticism, be it partisan, racial or national.

Secondly, this aesthetic theory is meant to be polemical and against the grain and thus combatant. It argues blatantly against the moral prejudices of the Catholic Church and the political propaganda of Irish nationalism and patriotism of his time. Therefore, it represents his bold gesture of non-confirmation, or "non-serviam." Though this gesture costs him the price of being excluded (or exiled in that sense)³⁾ and being condemned as a renegade, immoral, irresponsible yet it gains him the freedom of both expressing himself and narrating his nation candidly and thus clearing a space for cultural and spiritual reconstruction. In that sense, he calls his art and artistic advocacy "catharsis-purgative" (*CW* 149).

Thirdly, for a man who abhors physical violence but sees it urgent to start a literary revolution and war which was of great political and cultural importance against the Irish historical background then, this is his dynamite to create the explosive effect to shock his fellow citizens out of inertia and reified or even deified mode of thinking. From his aesthetic perspective, he later on actually produced his literary bombs *Ulysses* and especially *Finnegans Wake* to shock the

3) This can be seen in Chapter 9 of *Ulysses* in which it is mentioned that Stephen's poetry is not included in the collection edited by Russel (AE) and despite all his ambition, he is not regarded as one to write his national epic (*U* 9.289-309).

whole world. From then on, our understanding of history and narrative has radically been changed. Our way of reading can never be the same automatic “rapid skimming and absorption of the scant cream of sense” (Beckett 13) as we used to do in reading realistic stories. Instead, we are confronted with “contortions of the mind, acrobatics of spirit that intrigue and debate with us” (Said 74) just as Said describes Swift’s style. All this can be said to have been prepared in his aesthetics which serves as his guide.

Just because his aesthetics is his intellectual-artist manifesto, so in his *A Portrait*, that autobiographical novel depicting the birth and growth of an exile intellectual-artist, his aesthetic elaboration constitutes the climax and is put in an important position, that is, in between his critical reflections of his race, his church, his fatherland and his final determination, decision and declaration of being both a physical and spiritual exile intellectual-artist to pursue freedom, candour, truth so as to be able to create the uncreated conscience of his race. In *A Portrait*, although many details elaborated in his critical writings and early aesthetic-artistic fragments are omitted, yet they form a subtext.

So considering them as a whole and by using his aesthetic formulation in *A Portrait* as a focus, I have summarized the intellectual and critical characteristics of his aesthetics in two parts. They are: The standard of good art (and good artist). The relationship of art and artist with their subject matter. The two parts are connected by the emphasis on the importance of art to represent truth.

First, the standard of good art is that which should be able to bring the reader to a stasis in opposition to kinesis. By kinesis, Joyce refers not only to the effect brought about by pornographic writings but especially by didactic and propagandist writings that use provocative and empathetic techniques to capture the readers, making them into either spiritual paralytic or rabblement, which means they are made either dumb, moribund or hilarious, mad, but in both cases unable to think and reflect. In contrast to this, static art enables the reader to transcend any ideological or moral territorializing and engages them to contemplate, analyze, criticize and eventually come to a spiritual or philosophical awakening to (or

realization of) truth (realistic, universal or metaphysical). Stephen calls this kind of art “beautiful” and regards good art’s major function is nothing but to reveal and present this kind of beauty. This beauty pleases the eye because it is “the splendor of truth” (*P* 160; *CW* 83). Here his idea of beauty has an aura of the Platonic idea, so beauty and truth are akin. By this he emphasizes the *beauty of truth*. Mere beauty to him “is the swergera (kingdom) of the aesthete; but truth has a more ascertainable and more real dominion” (*CW* 43). To him, “art is true to itself when it deals with truth. Should such an untoward event as a universal reformation take place on earth, truth would be the very threshold of the house beautiful” (*CW* 43-44). Here Stephen’s idea is not only “Applied Aquinas” but also “Applied Plato”. But Stephen is disciple of none of them since he would make no one his idol (He might have models but no idols). He just uses them as “lamps” to go into his spiritual, artistic and intellectual world. In his “James Clarence Mangan”, he calls this combination of truth and beauty “a gracious presence” and “the spirit which proceeds out of truth and beauty is the holy spirit of joy” (*CW* 83).

This is a joy enjoyed by so many great intellectuals, not only by Aquinas in his discovery of God in creation, Plato in his abstraction of ideas from things, but also by Pythagoras when he feels close to divinity in his pursuit of truth, Wittgenstein in his feeling of truth being a hygiene against a corrupt and chaotic world, and even Derrida in his destruction of all reified or ontologized paradigms and setting truth as a specter, always on its way of coming and thus a promise, hope, opening the way to future and justice. I list these great masters to say that in advocating the function of art to represent truth, Joyce belongs to the community of those great thinkers and intellectuals as well as to great writers like Tolstoy, Flaubert, Ibsen and all other writers Joyce admires.

In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen calls the kind of art to represent truth *classical*. But his idea of what is classical is just like Benjamin’s idea of “Origin,” has nothing to do with time, just as Stephen says, “classicism is not the manner of any fixed age or of any fixed country: it is a constant state of the artistic mind. It is a temper of security and satisfaction and patience” (*SH* 78). Art that has not acquired/attained

these qualities is named as Romantic. As he distinguishes them in “James Clarence Mangan,” “classical temper is the romantic temper grown older” (*CW* 74), that is, classical art is more mature, more improved and thus is perfect art. Artist with a classical temper is supreme artist. Also in his aesthetic fragments and in *Stephen Hero*, he further defines this kind of art as Poetry in Aristotelian sense, but he differentiates it not from history but from the inferior form of art which he calls Literature. The difference lies in that poetry deals with the underlying laws of reality and history while literature just describes the simulacra of phenomenon. Poetry is “against actuality and considers many of the idols of the market place unimportant” (*CW* 185) while literature depicts manners and conventions to become popular with the mass. The difference shows that poetry in its effort to represent truth must try to achieve independence from and transcendence over the *status quo*.

So true poet (or a good artist) must be able to disentangle himself from clichéd prejudiced and stereotyped mode of thinking, and become a free thinker and a pursuer of pure truth. (This is also clearly stated in the first sentence of “The Day of Rabblement” as “No man can be a lover of the true or the good unless he abhors the multitude” (*CW* 69) and in *Stephen Hero* as “Isolation is the first principle of artistic economy” (*SH* 33)). Without the capacity and courage to be free and independent, even a genius like James Clarence Mangan, despite of all his skills, could produce only verse but not poetry, just because in all his life, he could never free himself from tradition and especially from the hysterical nationalism.

Later in his “Drama and Life” and “Ibsen’s New Drama,” the word “drama” is used interchangeably with the word “poetry.” Just as his concept of “classicism” has nothing to do with time, so “drama” has nothing to do with form, any art can be said to be dramatic so long as it can represent truth.

It must be pointed out that Truth is understood in Ibsenian sense. It is awful, unpleasant, offending,⁴⁾ difficult to swallow, typical of the writings or representations of an intellectual-writer as Said describes in his *The Representations*

4) In his letter to Grant Richards 5 May 1906, Joyce said, “I can not write without offending people” (*SL* 83).

of *Intellectuals*. Joyce in his “Ibsen’s New Drama” calls art that represents this kind of truth “naked drama” (*CW* 63). And in Joyce’s mind, Ibsen is the great master of this kind of drama and for this he is far above Rousseau, Emerson, Carlyle.

In the light of this standard, we may interpret Stephen-Joyce or Joyce-Stephen’s appropriation of Victor Hugo’s classification of literature into lyrical, epical and dramatic as his gradation of the merits of art rather than a genre classification. This is also his understanding of the stages of development and gradual maturation of an artist. In this sense, Romantic art in the sense of being still an expression of something personal is lyrical. What is epical refers to those which he calls literature, namely, realistic writings that call a spade a spade and thus could have reduced genius to a cracked looking glass, as Oscar Wilde condemns the demand for artist to write in this way. Only perfect art achieves the quality of being dramatic. It deals with objective, unchangeable laws which the readers have to apprehend by using their own intellect and imagination in static contemplation. An artist who can produce this kind of drama seems to have disentangled himself from his work like God, refined out of existence. He will not instruct, influence, preach, but indifferent, pairing his fingernails, for the naked drama is there for the reader to apprehend all by himself. Just as Joyce said of himself as such an artist, that he will not try to conquer his readers but the other way round, let the readers conquer him by analyzing, criticizing and understanding his implications. In Joyce’s mind the greatest poet and dramatist as such is Ibsen. And he believes that he himself is the old master’s heir.

Second, Joyce elaborates on how the artist should adjust his relationship with his subject matter, that is, life, history and the world, in order to create good art. In his opinion, for the artist to apprehend the world in order to represent it in art, he needs a collaboration between his intellect and his imagination. But ultimately this is an intellectual exploration and contemplation, culminating in “epiphany,” that is, a realization of truth which alone can guarantee his production of good art defined above. Here again Joyce – Stephen appropriates Aquinas by using his three conditions of beauty as the three stages the artist must undergo to achieve an

epiphany: wholeness, harmony, radiance. Thus the focus of Stephen's elaboration is not on automatic beauty itself but the process of how to discover beauty or truth by a spiritual experience.

In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen summarizes the process of artistic creation into two parts, selection and production. If the creation of art belongs to the latter, then these three stages belong to the former, thus they form a gradual process of disentangling the thing from its surroundings. This also represents his spirit of vivisection which Benjamin would call "mortification," that is, not to be overwhelmed and blinded by things as they are, but be able to dismantle them in order to rescue the soul of things. So the first step is to choose the aesthetic object, and then through an intense analysis of his object, he can draw out the inherent relationship of the object, which he calls rhythm or harmony. This is actually the stage of philosophizing, of forming a Benjaminian constellation. Once this is formed, the artist will come to a sudden realization [epiphany], "seeing the soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance" (*SH* 212). The outcome of the whole process will be a naked drama presented to the readers.

III. Conclusion: Obscure Art

If I may borrow a comparison by Benjamin between the role of a commentator and that of a critic, I must say that the artist's role in life is like the latter's, for according to Benjamin, a commentator is like a chemist whose attention is focused on the logs, the actual things, the material, while a critic is like an alchemist whose attention is focused on "the flame that preserves the enigma – the truth – whose living flame continues to burn over heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what have been experienced" (Benjamin 298). An artist like this will not adopt a matter-of-the-fact way in representing reality as it is, but the paradox is, he presents metaphysical truth through contortions of phenomenal reality, for his contortion is to work reality into throes to finally reveal its true nature. Judging

from the style, some may dub Joyce's works as fantastic, not realistic, but in my opinion, by adapting Lukács's definition of a authentic Marxist as "you may refute every idea of Marx, you are still a Marxist, so long as you insist on the dialectic method," namely, Marxism's essence, I may say, you may vivisect reality anyway, you are still a realist, so long as you can grab the truth. Joyce is ultimately a realist writer in the Ibsenian sense by revealing awful truths.

As such, he will surely write obscure art, art against the grain. As early as in *A Portrait*, he already set this as his mission. The line from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes" ("And he sets his mind to work upon unknown arts"), as a motto in *A Portrait* is an indication of his artistic aspiration in all his works in which he has turned ontology into Derridan hauntology, involving readers in intellectual reflections and polemics. So unknown art is also obscure art, for it subverts our automatic reading habit, making it impossible for a "rapid skimming and absorption of the scant cream of sense" (Beckett 13). As readers, we are confronted with intellectual feats, both fascinating and provocative.

But Joyce is not a stylist writing something obscure for the sake of appearing avant-garde or modernist or even post-modernist. In matters of style, he is more like Adorno who said that it would be barbaric to write lyrical poetry after Auschwitz. So for Joyce, it would be irresponsible, immoral as well as barbaric after the nightmare of history and the tears and blood of the national struggle for independence to write with ease a readable story with a moral or wisdom like those in the Victorian age. So like his countryman Swift, he teaches no wisdom or moral, but gives insight and vision to involve his readers to participate in order to enlighten themselves.

Joyce's artistic pursuit is already realized in his *Dubliners* which is not only the end of meta-language but also nearly the end of story, for those stories are either truncated biographies or something between story and parable to stimulate epiphanies. Then in *A Portrait*, there are no stories but fragments by which Joyce does not give wisdom as development novels used to do but provides hints of how to become a supreme intellectual artist by going to exile physically and spiritually.

And finally in his *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, he subverts the way history and narrative have been written and shocks us into an awakening to reflect on history, life and the world. As such, Joyce's works have not only artistic values but pedagogical and especially intellectual significance in that they can train the readers to be rational beings and conscious subjects.

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*Abstract*Exile Writer, Intellectualized Aesthetics and Obscure Art:
Interpreting James Joyce and His Artistic Aspiration

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Throughout his life, James Joyce is a self-exile both physically and spiritually. But that is not a mark of his escapism, isolationism or egoism. Instead, it is his strategy to transcend reification and to de-territorialize Ireland from its parochialism in his narration of his nation. This makes him a “nay-sayer” to the dominant national, cultural and religious discourses and a “heteroglossia” in representing his nation in literature among his contemporary compatriot writers. In doing so, his intention is to enlighten his countrymen and get his nation on its way towards spiritual liberation. In this sense, his works represent the very conscience of an intellectual-writer.

Corresponding to his exile spirit is his intellectualized aesthetics in which “intellect” is not meant to differ from “imagination,” but is to be understood in Julien Banda’s sense to indicate stasis, transcendence, reason, pursuit of naked truth and justice in resistance against all kinds of blind passion and romanticism, partisan, racial or national.

Based on his aesthetic principles, his artistic aspiration in all his works is to involve readers in intellectual reflections and polemics by subverting the conventional story writing techniques and by changing the readers’ automatic reading habit. The result is the creating of his obscure art, making it impossible for a “rapid skimming and absorption of the scant cream of sense” (in Beckett’s words) but confronting readers with the task of penetrating, analyzing, synthesizing and reconstruction. Thus, all his works have not only a unique artistic value but pedagogical significance in that they can train the readers to be rational beings and

critical readers.

■ **Key words** : James Joyce, self-exile, intellectual-writer, intellectualized aesthetics, obscure art

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