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Perfume of Texts, Subversive Embraces¹ A personal retrospect involving “formalist” readings of *Ulysses*

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In this talk presented at the Bloomsday 100 International Joyce symposium in Dublin in June 2004, Sonja Bašić offered a personal retrospect of her involvement in Joyce studies. While fully aware of the need to broaden the field of Joycean theory and criticism, she advocates the use of a formalist approach resting on the pioneering work of the Russian formalists but expanding into kindred fields such as narratology (Genette, Cohn, Barthes), reader-oriented criticism (Iser), etc. She argues that Joyce’s greatest innovation was his sudden and frame-breaking juxtaposition of stylistic and narrative registers informed by a supreme awareness of the forms of language. This is why, she concludes, —being the most deliberately formalist of the modernist writers—Joyce will always need the services of formalist critics.

I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end...

Nabokov, *Lolita* (Book One, Ch. 4)

The grand and by now legendary James Joyce Symposium celebrating the Bloomsday Centenary in Dublin less than a year ago, in June 2004, for me was a pretext to follow the dusky path of reminiscence and survey at a leisurely and personal pace (even if this happened at the expense of depth and precision), the four decades of my involvement with literary study and contemplate the extent to which it was shaped by the Blooms.

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Following my retrospective mood I gave way to the fond belief that I may for once allow myself the luxury of rambling with the midges (like Humbert Humbert) in the dusk of my past meanderings through the text of *Ulysses*, and the even more bewildering labyrinths of Joyce-inspired literary theory and Joycean criticism “forking and reforking without end” ... Exercising the “retrospective imagination” could help me – or so I hoped – to reconstruct and justify my view of Joycean innovation, especially as it is presented in *Ulysses* and exemplified by its ways of playing hide and seek with the power of literature to represent, by mercilessly and mostly subversively juxtaposing rhetorical, stylistic and narrative strategies and thus confounding the critic’s efforts to (re)position it on the modernist/postmodernist continuum.

I am an Americanist who established a strong Joycean connection by geographic coincidence: the first Joyce conference I attended was the celebration of another Joyce centenary in my own country at the Inter University Centre in Dubrovnik in 1982. Co-directed by Ivo Vidan and Morton Levitt, it brought together numerous distinguished Joyceans, among them Franz Stanzel, Fritz Senn, Uli Schneider and Bernard and Shari Benstock, Richard Brown, Pieter Bekker, Monika Fludernik, Carla Marengo Vaglio, Jacques Aubert... This was my first exposure to an intense work session with some of the best Joycean scholars of the time – and the experience marked my professional life for good. After Dubrovnik I participated at half a dozen Joyce Symposia – Venice, Copenhagen, Dublin, Monaco, London, Trieste, then again Dublin – all of them absolutely unique undertakings, manifestations of fervent admiration and love for this great writer producing most of the finest thinking and scholarship in this field. I would not continue attending these symposia if I did not cherish them, but I think we should also be aware of some of the dangers – pointed out recently so poignantly by Derek Attridge in his book *Joyce Effects*. Our symposia have been turning more and more into a huge theatre of operations centering around one single man and his work. We have made Joyce into a god, regularly feasting on the flesh of his texts at festivals ritually repeated every other year. In addition, owing not only to the magnitude of his work, but even more to the NATURE of his genius, Joyce’s work has been used as the testing ground for every single theory formulated and developed in this theoretical century. Culture and Politics capitalized, including gender, race, ethnicity, ideology, popular culture,

imperialism/nationalism, colonial/postcolonial, Marxist economics, a return to ethics. Although my table is equally set, and I joyfully invite and salute them all, I wonder whether there is not something sacrilegious/scarilegious about this abundance. Do we presume too much? Shouldn't there be a literological alert? Measures taken to preserve the work – as in the case of the Sistine or Scrovegni chapel? Aren't the tremours of theoretical footsteps eroding *Ulysses* just as the feet of real tourists are threatening to bring down the Parthenon or Machu Picchu? Do we dare disturb the universe?

In *Joyce Effects* Attridge has wittily drawn up scenarios of a return to the edenic stage of 1922, when one could imagine reading *Ulysses* in its pristine state, starting from scratch, unencumbered by the sediments of Joyceana accumulated since. Feebly echoing Attridge's effort, I tried to look back through the vista of years to my almost edenic Joycean initiation in Dubrovnik twenty years ago, and its impact on my career as a (semi)Joycean latecomer. At the same time I also retrospectively imagined being on a ship in a gale (most of my ancestors were seamen), forced to throw parts of my precious cargo overboard, deciding what will go last, what is most precious? If the cargo were Joyce's work, I would most certainly cling most firmly to Joyce the innovator and especially to the formal (stylistic and narrative) innovations of *Ulysses*. The need to explain this led me to formulate the following personal centenary question: "What after all these years remains for me the single trait or cluster of traits which make Joyce and *Ulysses* in particular so uniquely innovative - and which critical approach, or set of critical approaches can best express my view of this momentous innovation?"

A little personal anecdote may well serve as a preamble to my answer. When my grandchildren were small the older child, a girl, was very jealous of her younger brother. One day when the three of us were alone together – she was four and her brother still a toddler, she said: "Sonja, why don't we give him to the postman? Then the postman can put him in his bag and he will become paper." I laughed at this proposition, retold it to friends and family, then forgot it for a while. Thinking about the question I have formulated above, Nuša's proposition suddenly swam into my ken again and I realized that here, from the mouth of babes, was a direct prompt for what was from the beginning my most tantalizing but equally fascinating crux of innovative twentieth century writing,

and that of James Joyce and of *Ulysses* in particular: namely, the status it accords to writing. The child could be compared to a naive common reader who believed that literature can have an immediate practical effect. For her, turning her little brother into paper was an imagined practical manoeuvre, in this particular case a possibility to get rid of him and his irritating materiality. My little Nuša could cope with at least one side of the notion of "representation" because for her - as long as he was represented **on paper**, her little brother could not eat her Belgian truffles **in reality**. For her this was enough. For the literary scholar aware of the pitfalls of representability the question is much more complex. Speaking of paper, brought to my mind Joyce's own word "paperspace",² fished out from the word flow of *Finnegans Wake* and highlighted e.g. by Patrick McGee in his book *Paperspace: Style as Ideology in Joyce's 'Ulysses'*. To me the term seems to be particularly appropriate, indeed iconic in denoting my fascination with the unique formal innovations of Joyce's writing. This fascination was uppermost in my first serious encounter with Joyce twenty years ago, and led to my lasting interest in the language of *Ulysses*, involving a long wrestling contest with the Angel of Formalism, which has remained undecided, although I have changed in the process and so (in my view at least) has the Angel, through the tasks I have assigned to him after careful consideration of some later theoretical developments which I consider to be compatible with formalism.

Obviously, and probably for good reasons, "the formal method" is not a hot item in contemporary critical theory. However, I believe that

² Paperspace is mentioned in *Finnegans Wake* Book I, p 115, line 6 (Finnegans Web www.trentu.ca/jjoyce): "The teatimestained terminal (...) is a cosy little brown study all to oneself and, whether it be thumbprint, mademark or just a poor trait of the artless, its importance in establishing the identities in the writer complexus (for if the hand was one, the minds of active and agitated were more than so) will be best appreciated by never forgetting that both before and after the battle of the Boyne it was a habit not to sign letters always. Tip. And it is surely a lesser ignorance to write a word with every consonant too few than to add all too many. The end? Say it with missiles then and thus arabesque the page. You have your cup of scalding Souchong, your taper's waxen drop, your cat's paw, the clove or coffinnail you chewed or champed as you worded it, your lark in clear air. So why, pray, sign anything as long as every word, letter, penstroke, paperspace is a perfect signature of its own?" (p.114 -115).

centenaries are occasions which do allow us to indulge in retrospective musings, early loves and even cautionary tales, especially if one was first exposed to a brainstorming by the international Joycean elite during a week in June 1982 in Dubrovnik, when every thing, including one's volume of *Ulysses* was immersed in the fragrance of the shrubs flowering there in early summer, thus adding to the intense and dangerous perfumes of Joyce's text and its equally thrilling subversive embraces...

My cautionary tale involves the dangers lurking in the shadow for those who, entranced by the boundless new critical alternatives, forget the importance of the things Joyce does with words, words written on the page (in "paperspace"?), some of them absolutely unique in every way. *Rere regardant*, I have namely come to the conclusion that in the matter of *Ulysses* we simply cannot afford to throw overboard certain protocols of formalist analysis, especially if one goes on finding them incorporated into several compatible subsequent critical schools which have enriched it (Genette and Iser are great and good examples), turning it into a more catholic, suppler and by no means reductive or ahistorical instrument, equally applicable to modernism and the parodic Ulysean stream within postmodernism. Therefore, if conceived broadly and generously, formalism can usefully continue operating as a composite and flexible method of studying the form and function of language, of writing – including problems of textuality, representation, forms of narrative rhetoric, strategies of sense-(un)making, related to the developing critical awareness of subversion through discrepant stylistic juxtaposition, parody, or the metatextual sense of critical difference. Such an approach is an absolute must in the case of *Ulysses* in particular, because *Ulysses* is unique in its display of stunningly informed and deliberate (and often subversive) uses of the formal elements of language arranged in profuse and boundless parodic alternatives and transformations "forking and re-forking" without end.

From Shklovsky as far back as 1917 to Medvedev/Bakhtin, the Russian formalists used the term *ostranenie* to denote the need of "making new" by "making strange", in English today known as defamiliarization, heightening the effect, but at the same time strengthening the distancing function of the literary text, which obstructs our access to a story or idea. The Czech Mukařovský – whose term *aktualizacé* is known in English as foregrounding, claimed that this obstruction of access was the prime

contribution of modernism to literature. The Russian and Czech line was continued by Tzvetan Todorov's formalist-structuralist elaboration of the transparent-opaque dichotomy, and by Roland Barthes' distinction *lisible-scriptible*, the readerly and writerly in literature. Although the Russian formalists were primarily interested in ways of heightening the artistic effect by using new language combinations, the very root of the term *ostranenie* certainly had a subversive potential. They were also interested in the problem of representation as related to language and style. Mitchell claims, for example, that the "Formalist or 'abstract' theories of art have provided the most fundamental challenges to representational models in the modern era." (16). In his early formalist phase of *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) Roland Barthes – in Barbara Johnson's words – also noted a growing sense of "a breakdown in the representational capacities of language" in the canonized precursors of modernism Flaubert and Mallarmé (40).

Speaking of Joyce's modernity, in his *Implied Reader* (1972) Wolfgang Iser stresses his distanciation from the realistic novel, in the process of which his language assumes "an extraordinary opaqueness" turning style itself into a mediating narrative technique. In his remarkable essay on "Joyce's *Ulysses* und die Wirkungsästhetik" (1984) Iser's central argument is the existence in the novel of a similar disruptive force which, in spite of Joyce's offering us innumerable details from life, also flouts the reader's expectations of sense and order. Iser believes that by doing this Joyce came to the very brink of the breakdown of representation, *das Zerfallen von Repraesentazion*, which for him remains one of *Ulysses'* most notable, but also most disturbing traits. I interpret this "disruptive force" as a synonym of subversion, which can be related to the history of formalism in respect of *Ulysses*, because in this novel the subversion is so often achieved through formal moves – the ludic or distancing juxtaposition of discordant words, styles, narrative modes, as well as wordplay etc, destabilizing referentiality and verisimilitude.

Joyce's occasional use of almost sublime but also materially and sensually rich representations which he confronts with the massive subversive counterthrust of his games with almost all the formal elements and conventional arrangements of language, requires a formal reading informed by a reader's high awareness of formal (critical) difference. Perhaps it has never been sufficiently stressed in criticism that along with "styles", Joyce has also played with elementary grammar, starting from its humblest categories such as active and passive voice, word order or

punctuation, e.g. in *To.Martha.I.Must. Write.* – where the use of the full stops is both trivial and bottomless, seemingly arbitrary, but perhaps also a way of subverting the supposedly “natural” flow of stream of consciousness. Joyce is also particularly involved with rhetoric. Another feature strangely neglected by Joycean criticism is the deliberate virtuosity of his handling of narrative modes. Narratologists who grew out of formalist studies, e.g. Stanzel, Genette, McHale, Dorrit Cohn, Roland Barthes and others - gained invaluable insights into the modalities of narrative transmission spread on a continuum ranging from “omniscience” to limited point of view to interior monologue. I will pause here to dwell for a while on the importance Joyce gave to the sophisticated interplay of an almost inexhaustible and incredibly inventive variety of narrative modes arranged along this continuum, finding equally sophisticated ways of subverting them parodically. No one has surpassed Joyce in deliberately demanding from the reader to master the difficult art of hearing and discriminating between the subtlest nuances of free indirect style and interior monologue. I am giving such prominence to this particular Joycean achievement not only because I believe it is outstandingly innovative, but also because I am sure it can never be properly appreciated without a formalist/structuralist approach (and a very good ear).

As the format of this text does not allow for extensive or in-depth analysis, I will support my claim by showing the amusing and bottomless ambiguities of Joyce’s use of free indirect style on just one short sentence from “Eumaeus”, an episode never much related to this mode. The sentence shows Leopold Bloom admiring Stephen’s wit and worrying because he finds him underfed.

The queer suddenly things he popped out with attracted the elder man who was several years the other’s senior or like his father but something substantial he certainly ought to eat even were it only an eggflip made on unadulterated maternal nutriment or, failing that, the homely Humpty Dumpty boiled.(U 536)

The sentence begins in the third person, but is mostly focalized through Bloom and is, therefore, clearly FIS-related. To discuss its narrative vagaries I have bolded the entire sentence, then divided it into four parts, of which only part two is clearly authorial, interpolating my commentaries between them:

1. The queer suddenly things he popped out with - Bloom's untagged thoughts about Stephen are conveyed in the third person, with sequence of tenses and a very colloquial "popped out with" pointing to the FIS mode which, however, is subverted by the grammatically incorrect placing of "suddenly".

2. attracted the elder man who was several years the other's senior or like his father - here Bloom is seen as "an elder man" in a clearly authorial, unfocalized clause, which is written in a mock-formal manner with clichés and redundancies departing from speech/thought verisimilitude and creating a "critical" sense of difference. No FIS.

3. but something substantial he certainly ought to eat were it only an eggflip - which now quite surprisingly is almost perfectly straight "standard" English and "reasonable" thinking, in character with Bloom's practical and humane nature and present train of thought (he has just asked Stephen when he had last eaten and received a disturbing answer). These two staple requirements of free indirect style make us see this as vintage FIS - unless we start worrying about the ambiguity arising from the fact that neither in 3 nor 4 do we have a true past tense (*were* is a subjunctive), which brings them dangerously close to interior monologue!

4. made on unadulterated maternal nutriment or, failing that, the homely Humpty Dumpty boiled - here the colloquial "normality" of segment 3 is in turn hilariously subverted. Thematically 3 & 4 are completely coherent and logical - but the verisimilitude of FIS has been compromised by the grotesque three-part latinized version standing for "whole milk", and the irresistibly funny parodic "literary" reference to a boiled egg as "the homely Humpty Dumpty boiled".

In very similar fashion the entire very long episode of "Eumaeus" moves from beginning to end between caricatured authorial narration and equally caricatured free indirect style, the latter however often retaining a sufficient quantity of FIS markers (colloquialism, psychological consistency, deictic words, sequence of tenses, exclamations, questions) enabling the critic to trace the fleeting presence of free indirect style throughout the entire text. The formalist critic could thus perhaps be justified in claiming that the "technic" of this sentence but also of "Eumaeus" as a whole is formally a sustained parody of narrative modes. This would be a concrete example of Joyce (like some leading modernists and postmodernists) was elevating parody to the status of a major

literary genre, "forking and re-forking without end" - from imitations of authors, styles, even genres, to grammar and syntax - in fact almost all the properties of literary language organization essential for our understanding of Joyce's textuality.

This treatment of parody (which is a formal category) can thus be seen as a major literary strategy, often synonymous with more recently developed broad notions of metatextuality and hypertextuality, as exemplified for example in the works of Patricia Waugh (who begins her book with a discussion of Joyce) and Linda Hutcheon, or in Gérard Genette's *Palimpsestes*. When all these formal elements of language and literature are juxtaposed and placed in plain sight as they are in *Ulysses*, we get texts which are playful, writerly and subversive of formal literary traditions and conventions characterized variously by critics: Tony Tanner for example speaking of "lexical playfields", Hugh Kenner about "screens of language", Jean-François Lyotard of writing *au trop de livre* (in excess of the book). Such texts built on discrepancies arising from stylistic juxtaposition, parody, pastiche etc.- create a pre-eminently innovative strategy also distinguished by a highly profiled sense of "critical difference" (cf Hutcheon p. 37).

These are some of the reasons why I believe that Joyce's own stunningly massive and deliberate use of formalist/critical materials and strategies must not be completely set aside, but met by a matching (non-restrictive, ever more inclusive) formalist critical and theoretical apparatus. Paraphrasing Frost one might say that regardless of his/her theoretical framework, a Joycean should be aware "of the need to be versed" in formal things before moving on to broader cultural and historical approaches.

In my studies of modernist works I had long concluded that my main interest lay in watching their immensely varied sometimes bottomless maneuvering between "worldspace" and "paperspace". There is particular fascination in the subversive, parodic, and/or metatextual turn which generated the modernist legacy of parodic literariness enabling us to read Joyce's *Ulysses*, Beckett's *Molloy*, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet*, Nabokov's *Lolita* and Borges' *Labyrinths* as hybrids of modernism and postmodernism particularly strongly marked by formal manoeuvres - which in no way preclude their political ideological or historical study. (Although the *Wake* is usually put forward as the foremost example of Joyce's link with postmodernism, in my view *Ulysses* must

- by its parodic/metaphorical turn - also be considered as an important although quite different precursor/creator of postmodernism.) Therefore, the concept of "paperspace" - inside or outside the postman's bag - can be seen as the specific *locus* shared by some important modernists and postmodernists, linking Joyce to the following generations. In view of all this - *Ulysses* could be singled out as the most outstanding literary formalist fictional experiment which, however fractious, may still be related to the conventions of representational fiction - while *Finnegans Wake* perhaps cannot.

In his inspiring opening speech at the Bloomsday 100 Dublin symposium, the most eminent living Irish poet Sheamus Heaney seemed to invoke the spirit of Shklovsky by praising Joyce for his capacity to "defamiliarize the experience of hearing and reading", highlighting Joyce's deliberate foregrounding strategies, which certainly give him a unique place among his contemporaries. In my view defamiliarization as seen by the early formalists already held the seed not only of heightening, but also of the discrepant and subversive moves seen as master keys to the textuality of *Ulysses*. Reading *Ulysses*, one must always **also** read it for its subversive *literariness* enhancing the reader's sense of *critical difference*.

To conclude this personal retrospect: my boundless fascination with Joyce's *Ulysses* rests on the belief that its innovative force derives from Joyce's ways of doing things with language, and more precisely, of doing them deliberately and systematically in subversive ways which no one had used before with such virtuosity and genius and on such a massive scale. I also believe that it is through his parodic empowerment of language (and its codified structures) that *Ulysses* becomes the greatest, paradigmatic example of that tendency in modernist fiction which, with its various formal strategies of undermining (but never losing touch with) the processes of sense-making, empathy, unity of effect, closure, recuperation of symbolic meaning etc., already foreshadows and encapsulates the better half of postmodernism.

In my vision of the palimpsest called *Ulysses*, Joyce the formalist language player comes first (and goes last) because I believe him to be the most glaringly innovative of all the other Ulysean Joyces. Of course, Joyce's work will **always** need the services of criticism and theory working on all the "other" Joyces, revealing forever new and infinite varieties of literary study. It is my belief, however, that owing to the nature of Joyce's

writing in *Ulysses* this novel will also always need the services of a few (revisionist?) "formalists", acolytes carefully tying loose ends, correcting old mistakes, filling in gaps, and in this way (ecologically?) preserving the formalist tenor of the most deliberately formalist text produced by the most formalist of all the modern greats.

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MIOMIRIS TEKSTA, SUBVERZIVNI ZAGRLJAJI: OSOBNI POGLED NA FORMALISTIČKA ČITANJA ULIKSA

U ovom članku, koji je verzija izlaganja na *Bloomsday 100 International Joyce Symposium* u Dublinu u lipnju 2004. godine, autorica nudi osobni pogled unatrag na više od dva desetljeća svog proučavanja Joycea. Premda pozdravlja velik i raznolik razvoj joyceovske teorije i kritike, ona upozorava da upravo u slučaju *Uliksa* kritičar ne smije zaboraviti na njegov formalizam. Ona drži da su ideje i pristupi zasnovani na pionirskim radovima ruskih formalista još uvijek vrlo važni upravo u slučaju Joycea, a posebno njegova *Uliksa*. Također vjeruje da su elementi ranog formalizma s vremenom postali dio nekih kasnijih teorijskih strujanja, npr. naratologije (Genette, Cohn, Barthes) i teorije recepcije (Iser). Posebno naglašava da termin *ostranenie* već sadrži svijest o parodijskoj subverziji koju ona drži najvećom inovacijom *Uliksa*, zato što mu ona daje posebno mjesto među modernistima i ujedno vodi do praga postmoderne hipertekstualnosti. Upravo zbog toga u Joyceovoj bi sviti uvijek morao biti i poneki novi (revizionistički?) formalistički kritičar.

Key words: James Joyce, Ulysses, modernism, postmodernism, formalism, *paperspace*, juxtaposition of stylistic and narrative registers.

Ključne riječi: James Joyce, *Uliks*, modernizam, postmodernizam, formalizam, *paperspace* ("prostor papira"), jukstapozicija stilova i narativnih modusa.

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