



Recension d'un ouvrage critique : Catherine Flynn, "James Joyce and the Matter of Paris"

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**Recension de l'ouvrage de Catherine Flynn,
James Joyce and the Matter of Paris (Cambridge UP, 2019)
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It is amusing to think that when Joyce set out for Paris in July 1920 at Ezra Pound's invitation, he intended to stay there for only three months, but that he ended up spending two fertile decades in the French capital, where he wrote the last four episodes of *Ulysses* and the whole of *Finnegans Wake*. The influence Paris had on him was of course crucial, not least because he found an audience there which was particularly well-disposed toward his formal revolution; indeed, *Ulysses* was famously published by the bookshop Shakespeare and Company, located in the Latin Quarter and owned by the American Sylvia Beach, after several British and American houses had all turned down Joyce's application. Through the help of some of the capital's key literary movers and shakers, who did much to usher him into its artistic circles, Joyce quickly became a prominent figure on the Parisian scene. The relationship between the French capital and him was thus a two-way street, and it is only natural that this relationship has always formed a staple of Joyce studies over the years. Catherine Flynn's book therefore sets out to explore well-trodden ground, and it is not the least of its merits that, by tracing out new connections and revisiting some older and – or at least so we thought – better-known ones, it enables its reader to look with fresh eyes at the figure Jean-Michel Rabaté has aptly called "Joyce the Parisian".

Interestingly, Catherine Flynn traces the source of the influence Paris had on Joyce not to the two decades he spent there, but to his first and brief stay in the capital. Joyce went to Paris in December 1902 to study medicine – or so, at least, did he assure his Dublin relatives – but ended up spending most of his days and nights reading books in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, returning to Dublin four months later at the news that his mother was dying. This episode of his life is well-known, thanks in part to the references found to it in the "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses*, but Catherine Flynn argues that just as crucial as the time spent by Joyce poring over Aristotle's works were the hours during which he loitered around the city's streets, as they enabled him to encounter full-face the harsh reality and most unpalatable aspects of what was then the capital of modernity, especially its atmosphere of consumption. This brief but intense encounter, combined with Joyce's earlier reading of French poetry was, according to Flynn, life-changing for Joyce, and led him to take up Charles Baudelaire's challenge as set out in the preface to *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), in which the latter confesses to harbouring the dream, born out of his wanderings in a huge city and of the perception of its innumerable interactions, of a poetic prose able to espouse the movements of the soul. Flynn claims that Joyce, as a result of his first Parisian experience, "develop[ed] a new kind of thinking [...] in which the centered subject and the normative structures of writing and thinking fall away in new modes of writing that reject the fundamental categories of art" (p. 2). This "new kind of thinking," conveyed through increasingly innovative narrative forms, she further describes as "a sentient thinking," that is to say, "a reflection that does not separate itself from sensation but rather takes place through it, proceeding by incorporation and material relation" (p. 12).

Such a claim leads Flynn to offer a new interpretation of Joyce's early aesthetic musings as they appear first in his Paris notebooks and later in the shape of Stephen Dedalus's discourse in *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. She starts by discussing Epiphany 33, which describes women seated at a café table or walking in the street clad in beautiful clothes and wearing perfume. Flynn makes much of that last detail and of the "warm humid smell" which emanates from their bodies. Because of the sheer profusion of goods available on the streets of Paris and of the commercial attitude such abundance fed, the emphasis on smell acquires special significance inasmuch as it offers a way out of the transactional frame of mind encouraged by consumption: it leads to the undoing of the clear dividing-line between subject and object, and thus "dissolves the fiction of the separate individual through which economic transactions operate" (p. 66).

Such sensual dissolution inspired by Verlaine's poetry but endowed with a fresh political edge through its opposition to Paris's commercial environment is reworked in the scene from *A Portrait* in which Stephen and Emma cross paths in the colonnade of the museum library. Flynn sees in the substitution of the word "Darkness" for "Brightness" in the verse from Thomas Nash which comes to Stephen's mind as a reaction to the impromptu meeting a reference to Rimbaud's celebrated 1871 sonnet "Voyelles," in which letters are understood as basic vocalizations associated with colours. She argues that this resort to Rimbaud's synaesthetic theory produces an aesthetic of the body's emissions which, associated with the smell Stephen ascribes to Emma's body, engages the two characters in a physical interrelation which is a proper "bilateral aesthetic exchange" (p. 85) in a scene, Flynn writes, which is "kinetic with desire" (p. 81). The originality of Flynn's reading lies in the diametrical opposition she posits between Stephen's aesthetic theory and his aesthetic practice, since he departs from his Thomistic wish for a cognitive mastery aimed at perceiving the essence of sensible objects to embrace an apprehension of the world in which "discernment of part to the whole is replaced by an unconscious experience of connection" (p. 87).

This "embodied thinking" is given fuller scope in Leopold Bloom's rambling thoughts in the "Lestrygonians" episode of *Ulysses*, to which the following chapter is devoted. Of crucial importance, in that respect, is Joyce's development of the stream-of-consciousness technique pioneered by Édouard Dujardin in *Les Lauriers sont coupés* (1887). In accordance with the recent enactive turn in cognitive criticism, which is unfortunately left unmentioned in the book, Catherine Flynn sees the mind as portrayed through Leopold Bloom's stream-of-consciousness not as closed in upon itself and isolated, the product of a synthetic method of rendering the workings of consciousness, but as porous, permeable, and thus an open-ended register of the character's reactions to the myriad of sensory signals with which he is beset while walking the city's streets. Seen in this light, the Joycean stream-of-consciousness results in the undoing of the mode of sovereign individuality through which consumption operates, and offers an antidote to the pervasive distortion of social relations by commodity capitalism. The body thus becomes a site of resistance and the source of an inter-personal aesthetic practice at odds with the canons of classical beauty expounded by Friedrich Schiller and Johann Winckelmann in the eighteenth century, with which Bloom's interrogations on the anatomy of Greek statues form a comical contrast. Flynn has some fascinating pages on the famous scene in which Molly shares a partially chewed seedcake with Bloom during a picnic at Howth, an episode remembered with fondness by both characters at different points in the novel. She writes: "Molly and Bloom's eating kiss recovers a primary relationality obscured by transactional relations. [...] [It] comes with the softening of borders, specifically the borders that define the body, language, and

ownership as Molly and Bloom become more than one body and less than two bodies” (p. 114-115).

Flynn then moves on to discuss the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses*, and as she explores further some of the avenues of inquiry already traced out, the Marxist slant of her reading becomes more marked. She starts by showing how the transformation of the Christ-sun at the end of Flaubert’s *La tentation de saint Antoine* into Bloom’s comical vision of the face of Sweny the chemist in a sun made of soap sets the tone of the entire episode, as it reveals the shaping influence of economic powers upon the mind and the distortion of desire it results in. “Circe” would thus dramatize the ensnaring of human productive powers in structures of profit and possession. Simultaneously, it is said to counter that phenomenon through the staging of a “farcical” body (an adjective which Flynn prefers to “carnavalesque,” probably because of the latter’s loaded history) that defies its own borders and which, in so doing, offers an alternative model of human relations that trumps the norms of profitable exchange and social propriety. Instrumental in helping Joyce to sketch out that model were some works from nineteenth-century Parisian visionary literature, especially Nerval’s *Aurélia*, in which the new commercial environment of the French capital is presented in hallucinatory form, and *Les nuits obscures*, which gives shape to a philosophy of unreason whose influence on some key scenes from “Circe” Flynn analyses in detail. Another tangible influence on the episode was Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer*, especially “Nuit de l’enfer,” whose bombastic narrator provided Joyce with a source of inspiration on which to draw for the famous scene in which Bloom grandiosely imagines himself as a revered mayor of Dublin, but which ultimately tips into ridicule. “Circe”, however, contains its own antidote against such possessive individualism and self-interested manipulation of the other in the shape of what Flynn calls “an art of material co-being” (p. 168), a concept that finds a beautiful illustration in Bloom’s thoughts about the warmth of Molly’s bottom (“It overpowers me. The warm impress of her warm form. Even to sit where a woman has sat [...]. So womanly, full. It fills me full” [*U* 15:3424-27]). Flynn illuminatingly comments: “Bloom experiences curves in the negative, as impress rather than form, and as a sensation that is material but necessarily ephemeral. [...] Bloom’s sensual art is a desublimation that does not merely reject the ideal and embrace the realities of the body but that consecrates an intimate, shared experience that is disallowed by the exchanges of Nighttown” (pp. 164-5).

Another such sensual and shared experience is provided by collective readings of *Finnegans Wake*, which, according to Flynn, takes the sentient thinking first adumbrated in the Paris Epiphany to a whole new metatextual plane. Joyce’s last major work is so dense with all manners of references that it is claimed to constitute a new kind of collaborative art which necessitates an ideal sociality to decipher it. Although the claim itself isn’t that groundbreaking, Flynn’s articulation of it with her previous analysis of Joyce’s development of a sentient thinking gives it a new theoretical and aesthetic edge. Additionally, Flynn highlights the powerful potential for political subversion with which the *Wake*’s avant-garde aesthetics is invested by unveiling the debt incurred by Joyce to Alfred Jarry’s material disruption of language in the service of an obscene attack on social structures. This parallel enables Flynn to show that the deviant scatology and distorted aural experience which are such central elements of the *Wake* are mobilized for anti-authoritarian ends and, as such, constitute powerful means of social critique. Extending the connection earlier sketched out in her commentary of “Lestrygonians” between the assemblage of textual materials and digestion, Flynn boldly compares the text to “a digestive tract from which characters cannot be extricated and in which readers themselves become activated” (p. 222).

There is no denying the originality of Flynn's arguments and the sheer amount of research that has gone into them. *James Joyce and the Matter of Paris* teems with original and stimulating claims grounded on intimate knowledge of French nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, and it provides a fascinating insight into the unique experience that living in Paris in Joyce's time must have been. As a result, the book constitutes a treasure trove of newly identified intertextual connections and cultural parallels (that posited between the apparition of Rudy at the end of "Circe" and the automata in Paris's shop windows being a particularly intriguing one) which provides fertile ground for further research. Not all of them, of course, are equally convincing, just as Flynn's Marxist leanings lead her to claim for Joyce's somatic aesthetics a political potential in the world of consumer capitalism we all inhabit which cannot fail to strike one as excessively ambitious, but such flaws are to be expected in a work of such scope, and are therefore hardly flaws at all.

Much more problematic, however, is the inordinate number of misprints and misspellings with which the book is peppered. From doublets to misplaced accents to confused grammatical genders, the number of mistakes, especially in the passages quoted in French, is simply staggering, and all the more shocking for appearing in a work published by so prestigious a house as Cambridge University Press. In spite of the very peculiar status enjoyed by errors, famously described as "portals of discovery" by Stephen in *Ulysses*, in Joyce's works, no amount of theorizing can excuse, let alone justify, such a proliferation. It is all the more regrettable as *James Joyce and the Matter of Paris* testifies throughout to genuine love for the French capital and to a welcome wish to till with renewed vigour an ancient and slightly neglected field of Joycean study.