

Joyce in Zurich

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JOYCE IN ZURICH

by William Valk



A scenic spot on Lake Zurich (SNT0)

In his recent play, "Travesties", Tom Stoppard deploys an oddly-assorted quartet of characters: Lenin, Tristan Tzara, one Henry Carr (of whom more later), and James Joyce. The connection between them is that all were living in Zurich during the years of the Great War and, whatever else Stoppard is attempting to say, he is certainly drawing attention to the particular cultural vitality of Zurich during this period. Among the refugees who settled there to sit out the war, there were all sorts of political exiles, intellectuals, artists and wanderers. It was natural enough that an atmosphere of intellectual and artistic experimentation should develop in a town not directly disturbed by the war, and, in any

case renowned as a cultural centre. Lenin was dreaming of revolution, Tzara and Hans Arp were plotting the Surrealist and Dadaist Movements; Max Reinhardt's company, among others, made Zurich the foremost theatrical centre in the world at that time. C. J. Jung and his colleagues were doing work whose importance is still only partly appreciated.

Joyce was undoubtedly one of the most important artists working in Zurich during the war years. In terms of the number of works completed and published, this was his most prolific period; he was gaining in fame and influence yearly, and was by now deeply absorbed in the process of standing English prose on its Victorian head. Then

there is "Joyce The Man", as the biographers say. Many people will be familiar with those snap shots of groups of famous authors and intellectuals reclining in deck-chairs in a summer garden, with hats and parasols to protect them from the sun. They look dull: and in a good many cases, we may be sure that they *are* dull. The inner life may be vivid; the outer scarcely warrants detailed record. But this is something that cannot be said of Joyce. He led a turbulent life, and his personality was so flamboyant and eccentric as to form an ideal subject for biography and anecdote.

First relationship with Zurich

His relationship with Zurich began in 1904, when he eloped from Dublin at the age of 22 with a girl called Nora Barnacle. He did not stay, but moved on to Trieste and other Mediterranean towns before being obliged to leave when Italy entered the war in 1915. This time he settled in Zurich and stayed until 1920, by which time he was feeling restless again. The war refugees were leaving, and the cosmopolitan atmosphere on which he thrived was beginning to fade somewhat. The cost of living was too high for him to sustain on his meagre income which was rather sporadically come by, and which he cheerfully squandered on such commodities as Fendant de Sion. Moreover he was developing eye trouble and the Zurich climate did not help. He planned to move back to Trieste, and then Ezra Pound invited him to Paris for a week to meet publishers and have a look around. Joyce liked the city and stayed for two decades. He returned to Zurich now and then, sometimes for eye operations, and chose to settle there again in war-time. He moved back in December 1940, a month before his death, and was buried in the Fluntern cemetery. None of the later visits were at all lengthy; Joyce's life in Zurich concerns essentially the 1915-1920 period, when his vigour of personality was at its height.

He was a tallish, slender man whose careful, deliberate walk was described by a friend as resembling that of a "wading heron". He had a high brow and determined chin. The high colour of his face contrasted with clear blue eyes much magnified by thick spectacles. Photographs suggest a man of peculiar intensity and watchfulness. Stefan Zweig found Joyce testy and inclined to bear grudges. Joyce does not seem to have revealed his high spirits to Zweig, who

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gained the impression of a "compact, sombre force" and sensed the defensive element in him. On first encounter he was courteous but distant and sometimes suspicious; he initially suspected his arch-companion in Zurich, the painter Frank Budgen, of being a spy in the pay of the British Consulate, with whom Joyce was on poor terms. The reason why Joyce changed his mind was equally characteristic. Budgen, he decided, looked like the cricketer Arthur Shrewsbury. It seems this was a good omen, and coincidences and omens weighed heavily in Joyce's decisions. Despite initial reserve, Joyce was highly gregarious and, once he had accepted someone as a friend, that person was included in his circle which met at such places as the Pfauen and Terrasse cafés and the Restaurant Zum Roten Kreuz. Joyce would take up position behind a bottle of Fendant, his favourite wine, which he liked to praise in unrepeatable terms. He would listen to his friends speaking in some half-a-dozen languages, elicit opinions and reactions from them, and allow them to suggest ideas for his work. He once said to Budgen, "When you get an idea, have you ever noticed how much I can make of it?" But Joyce also loved talk for its own sake. Any subject was suitable for conversation, argument and ribaldry. In reply to a friend's use of the word "heart" in a discussion on love, he said, "the seat of the affections lies lower down, I think". This sort of comment did not necessarily reflect his fundamental attitudes: more, perhaps, a taste for blunt repartee and impatience with sentimental clichés.

Love of local life-style

Joyce had a fine tenor voice and was given to exercising it for the entertainment of his friends. He particularly enjoyed singing Celtic folk songs, bel canto arias and the odd smutty piece: in this way, he could easily turn a café into a scene of carnival. He would lead friends in a Pied Piper romp through the streets of Zurich. These processions often led to Amtshäuser, for which August Suter had sculpted six large stone figures. Budgen had posed for one of them, and Joyce derived much amusement from comparing life and art. "Let's go and see Budgen", he would say; the effigy of his friend was then

honoured with a wildly energetic spidery, capering dance of his own devising, for which he wore a special straw hat.

Joyce always steeped himself in local lore, and in Zurich was particularly fond of the Sächselüte processions. He frequently went to plays, concerts and the opera, on which he habitually delivered himself of tart comments. Often, no doubt, the opinions were genuinely held. Joyce was acutely sensitive and brilliantly clever with prodigious erudition to draw upon. However, he did seem loath to admit publicly to admiration for other artists, it was as if his own stature were thereby diminished. An incident at a performance of "Die Walküre" illustrates this susceptibility. Joyce had been writing "The Sirens" section of "Ulysses", in which he was attempting to suggest musical effects in prose. In the first act he complained of the bad taste of Wagner's melodies and said to his companion, "Can you imagine this old German (Siegmund) offering his girl a box of chocolates?" During the interval he asked his friend (who was an ardent Wagnerian): "Don't you find the musical effects of my 'Sirens' better than Wagner's?" His friend replied, "No". Joyce immediately left the opera house.

During the Zurich period, Joyce's writing career began to make real headway. After years of haggling with publishers he had finally succeeded in getting "Dubliners" published in 1914, and he followed this with the publication in New York of the "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" two years later. This success was due to a considerable degree to the untiring efforts of Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats, who acted as Joyce's honorary public-relations officer and fund-raiser. A small, steady income began to trickle in from various institutions, and Joyce spent it with cheerful profligacy. In 1917 he acquired an anonymous patroness, who turned out to be Mrs. Harold McCormick. One of the Rockefellers and thus exceedingly rich, she lived in the Hotel Baur au Lac and dispensed largesse on worthy causes. She was a woman of caprice and in 1919 cut Joyce abruptly off from this welcome supply which, despite all, had eased his circumstances somewhat and enabled him to push ahead with "Ulysses". Joyce, always quick to sense betrayal, looked around for a culprit and picked on no less

than Jung. The two men were sceptical of one another's achievements, and Mrs. McCormick relied on Jung for advice, but there is no evidence to show that Jung suggested this course of action to her.

The labour of artistic creation

Throughout his time in Zurich, Joyce worked on "Ulysses". He wrote mainly in the daytime when the state of his eyes permitted. He would make notes at any time; his irregular life apparently did not prevent him keeping the threads of the book consistently in the forefront of his thoughts. The actual writing was pursued with positively ferocious concentration for hour upon hour regardless of chaotic domestic circumstances. There is a story told by Frank Budgen which exemplifies the painstaking Joyce method.

"I enquired about 'Ulysses'. Was it progressing?"

"I have been working hard on it all day", said Joyce.

"Does that mean you have written a great deal?" I said.

"Two sentences", said Joyce.

It turned out that Joyce "had the words already. What I am seeking is the perfect order of words in the sentence". No wonder he took seven years to complete the book. Besides, there were many interruptions apart from those already mentioned, diversions, friends arriving unexpectedly, haggles with authority, trips hither and thither, and teaching jobs. Meanwhile, good reviews kept coming in of "The Portrait"; and the first episode of "Ulysses", published in a review in Paris, caused a succès de scandale. But his play "Exiles", produced in Germany under the name "Verbannte", was a failure despite the support of Stefan Zweig.

Joyce's principle way of eking out his funds was to give private lessons in English. He had a great reputation in Zurich as a teacher; many of his pupils in Trieste had also moved north, and publicised his skills. He took on all manner of people: businessmen, diplomats, academics, the idle rich. Many became his personal friends — a teacher who writes limericks and sings for his pupils breaks down barriers. They were assimilated into his circle at the Pfauen. Friends were very loyal to Joyce; they would get him concert tickets and make him take long walks up the Zürichberg or Uetliberg, or to Küsnacht along the lake. He did some work as a translator, but turned down reviewing work on the grounds that he was a bad critic. As money began to come in from various sources, the inveterate spender took on fewer pupils and spent more time in the Pfauen. Financial problems cast a continuous shadow over the Joyce family.

Crossing Swords with the British Consulate

This situation was aggravated by his predilection for risky schemes that tended to peter out into debt and

law-suits. In 1918, the British consul-general called for plays staged in English, so the English Players Company was formed. Joyce, of all people, became business-manager. It was hinted that the British Treasury, which had given him a grant, would take it kindly if he made this patriotic gesture. Furthermore, Joyce was under suspicion on account of his decade in Austrian territory, and the Consulate required a gesture from him. Joyce was only too happy to take on this entertaining new hobby – the political aspects interested him not in the slightest. He persuaded actors to join the company on low wages, sold tickets with great aplomb regardless of whether the buyers knew much English, and crossed swords with the consulate staff, who resented his cavalier attitude towards them and his indifference to the war. Nevertheless, the first production, "The Importance of Being Earnest", with Joyce as prompter, off-stage singer and general factotum, was a success. One actor was the consular employee *Henry Carr*, who was annoyed at his low fee and demanded reimbursement of outlay on clothing, particularly a pair of trousers. Joyce accused Carr in turn of handing in money for only 12 tickets out of 20 he had been given to sell. Hard words were spoken. Carr demanded 150 francs for his clothes. But no, the clothes were not bought just for this performance, and Joyce argued disingenuously that Carr had his duty as a British subject to uphold. The upshot was that Joyce sued Carr for money owing on

tickets and for libel; Carr counterclaimed sums to cover an acceptable wage and expenses for costume. Joyce was not blind to the funny side but was disputatious by nature, and pursued with the suits. He won two; the libel case was deferred. Meanwhile, the Consulate washed its hands of Joyce and the English Players who nevertheless were doing well. Nora Joyce was one of their stars. Unfortunately Joyce was by now conducting a personal vendetta against British officialdom in Zurich, and closing in on Carr for the kill. But his libel case was unconvincing; still he refused legal advice to drop it and then rejected orders to pay costs and damages to Carr. By this time he had tried to publicise this "hounding of art by authority" to the extent of writing to Lloyd George! The court decided to proceed by distraint against him. He refused to give up his books and typewriter, and so finally, the judge, ordering him to turn out his wallet, divested him of 50 francs. It was a peevish affair, but Joyce did succeed in discomfiting the Consulate somewhat. Various officials are further mocked in "Ulysses" – the Players, however, started losing money and ceased to exist after a while.

Through his many activities, Joyce kept his family constantly on the move, with relatively long stays in the Universitätstrasse and the Seefeldstrasse. In the latter flat, he used to disturb Philipp Jarnach, the assistant of Ferruccio Busoni with his boisterous singing in the

mornings. Joyce also found time for innumerable friendships, quarrels, and a curious flirtation with a demi-mondaine whose beauty struck him as the embodiment of art. He seems to have contented himself largely with gazing.

Joyce went on to scandalise many with the publication of "Ulysses" in 1922, and to baffle everyone with the serial publication of "Finnegans Wake". In Zurich he was the young "penman" in his swaggering prime. In Paris he was an international figure, and notoriety and ill-health made him reticent and sombre. But all this is outside the geographical ambit of this magazine and so must remain another story.

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