

Anthropological Joyce: Dubliners, Van Gennep and Liminality

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Abstract: *This article considers, in a first part, the epistemological congruence between Joyce's writing and the practices of the major anthropologists of his time. In a second part, it explores more specifically the twin concepts of "liminality" and "rites of passage", as elaborated by Arnold Van Gennep at the beginning of the 20th century, arguing that they are embodied in similar ways in Dubliners and, in particular, in "An Encounter". This comparison sheds light on the role of "magic circles" and "special languages" (Van Gennep) that, together with moments of sacred exposure, interstitial trespassing, linguistic decentering and other forms of liminal experience, are central to Dubliners as well as to Joyce's later work.*

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According to Maria Jolas, Joyce once met James Frazer, the author of *The Golden Bough*, at the British Institute in Paris. The renowned anthropologist asked Joyce his name:

'Joyce, James Joyce', was the reply.

'And what do you do?' Sir James asked politely.

'I write', said Joyce.¹

This rather curt reply might be taken as symbolic of the gap often posited between literary and anthropological discourses. It brings to mind Roland Barthes's distinction between the "author" and the "writer". For an author, Barthes argues, "to write" is an *intransitive* verb and the object of writing is the production of a text. As opposed to this, "For a writer, to write is a transitive verb – he writes *something*." Barthes's distinction is recalled at the outset of Clifford Geertz's study *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, in which Geertz shows that problems of style and authorship have beset twentieth-century anthropology in no small way.² The power of great anthropologists such as Malinowski or Lévi-Strauss, as he argues in this study, has largely been linked to their capacity of "signing their texts" and of building what he calls "theaters of language" in which their followers have placed their own work (Geertz 18-20). Lévi-Strauss's

entry into the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 2008, on his 100th birthday, might be taken as a formal, if belated, recognition of this literary dimension. And as anthropology, we now realize, becomes increasingly defined as a literary practice, so Joycean *écriture* is, I would like to argue, increasingly recognized as largely anthropological.

What marks it as such is, in the first place, the peculiar nature of Joyce's project. The anthropologist, at least in his twentieth-century incarnations, tends to view society as an organized whole, where individuals exist in connection with one another, where they are, in fact, constructed out of the roles which they endorse within a social totality. This idea of totality is particularly important. In the preface to his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, a work which holds in the field of anthropology a place similar to Joyce's *Ulysses* in twentieth-century fiction (and was published the same year, 1922), Malinowski (who was Joyce's almost exact contemporary) writes that:

One of the first conditions of acceptable Ethnographic work certainly is that it should deal with the totality of all social, cultural and psychological aspects of the community, for they are so interwoven that not one can be understood without taking into consideration all the others.³

This social totality is perceived both from inside, since the anthropologist must put himself in the place of the "natives" he observes, and from outside, since he must gather his data and infer from them the laws of which they are themselves unconscious. Quoting Malinowski, again:

The natives obey the commands of the tribal code, but they do not comprehend them; exactly as they obey their instincts and their impulses, but could not lay down a single law of psychology.⁴

This is anthropology in 1922, when you could be blunt about such things, but though a good deal of cognitive doubt and postcolonial guilt has burdened the anthropologist's conscience since then, his epistemological situation may be defined in roughly the same terms today. The discipline is still characterized, in Geertz's words, by "the gap between engaging others where they are and representing them where they aren't" – a gap which also conditions the anthropologist's life, which Geertz sums up as "a few years, now and again, scuffling about with cattle herders and yam gardeners, a lifetime lecturing to classes and arguing with colleagues." (Geertz 130)

The separation between the scene of investigation and that of reception also marks Joyce's literary output. His writing posture, as has often been noted, was largely created by his self-inflicted exile from Ireland, which enabled him to be both "in" and "out": part of the island, but also of "the world", a world defined largely by its being outside Ireland, and to which, as he wrote in 1904 in an oft-quoted letter to his brother Stanislaus, he wanted to "give" Dublin.⁵ This project chimes, in a sense, with Malinowski's, who,

upon meeting the Trobriand islanders in 1914, wrote in his diary: “Eureka! [...] Feeling of ownership: It is I who will describe them. [I who will] create them.”⁶

Though Eastern New Guinea is geographically and culturally more distant from London or Paris than Dublin, Joyce’s literary production is also marked by a dichotomy between the “here” of writing (and/or reception) and the “there” of observation. The “here” is constituted by European cosmopolitan culture, a historical theatre which is memorably recalled on the book’s two thresholds: in the title which, like Malinowski’s *Argonauts*, translates insular reality into the continental cultural language of Greek myth. And on the bottom of the last page: “Trieste-Zurich-Paris 1914-1921”.

These years, 1914-1921, contrast heavily with the panoramic picture of the Bloomsday scene, emphasizing the temporal distinction between the time of writing, which is consubstantial with war-torn “world” history, and the time written about, which appears by contrast as an enclave immune to historical pressure.⁷ Again, Malinowski comes to mind because, though he conducted the field research for *Argonauts* and other works between the years 1914 and 1918, he evacuated all topical reference to these years from his work, freezing the society under investigation into non-historical timelessness. Like other great anthropologists of his generation⁸, he did not conceive the inevitable evolution of the societies he observed, and their acculturation through Western contact, except as a tragic kind of decay that would damage their crystal purity and endanger their very existence. This was, for him, something in the nature of a scientific postulate, since to recognize that enclave cultures are subject to hybridization would have created a breach in the social system he set out to describe, whose perfect closure, and closed perfection, was embodied in the ritualized trade in shell necklaces known as the Kula ring.

Joyce’s Dublin, like Malinowski’s Trobriand society, is thus defined less by the historical forces which remodel it than by its insularity and by the circularity of its indigenous practices, ceremonies, rituals and other forms of interaction within a cultural totality. Which may in part explain the interesting juxtaposition of Greek myths in Malinowski’s and Joyce’s classical titles of 1922: like the *Odyssey*, the *Argonauts*’ sea voyage suggests circularity, Bloom’s peregrinations in Dublin answering the Kula ring which Malinowski studied.

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Having thus outlined my general hypothesis, that of a loose discursive synchronization between Joyce’s practices and the evolving framework of anthropological discourse in his time, I will now, as an illustration, narrow my focus and examine the emergence of a specific concept in social anthropology, that of liminality, comparing its scientific elaboration by anthropologists with what I propose to read as its simultaneous literary elaboration by Joyce in *Dubliners*. Leaving aside 1922, *Ulysses* and the *Argonauts*, I will come back to pre-war years, before world strife divided European countries from one another, rendering increasingly problematic the cosmopolitan affiliations on which the modernist generation was nurtured.

The notion of liminality is central to the concept of rites of passage, a concept that was first formulated one hundred years ago by Arnold Van Gennep in his book *Les Rites de passage*, and later elaborated by British anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Edmund Leach. Van Gennep defined rites of passage as the symbolic acts or ceremonies which accompany an individual's change "from one age to another and from one occupation to another".⁹ These rites, he said, involve three stages: the preliminal stage of separation from a former state or group, the liminal (or threshold) stage of transition, and the post-liminal stage of incorporation into a new state or group (Van Gennep 21).

Van Gennep's cosmopolitan life – a life spent crossing physical, intellectual and linguistic borders – may help to understand the nature of his system. Born Arnold Kurr-Van Gennep at Ludwisburg, in Württemberg, in 1873, of a father of French origin and a Dutch mother, he moved to France in his childhood and, in the course of a varied career, was trained in Egyptology and Arabic, taught in Poland and Switzerland, became a specialist in Slavic languages, worked for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, just before the war, in June 1914, organized at the University of Neuchâtel, where he was then employed, an international congress of ethnology and ethnography. Like Malinowski, the wandering Pole, like the trilingual Eugene Jolas and Yvan Goll, like the German-born Franz Boas or the Lithuanian-born Edward Sapir, Van Gennep was one of the prototypical "men of Babel", who came to cultural prominence in a pre-War period when social and national boundaries seemed to dematerialize under Western eyes (only to be later recreated with a vengeance, alas). Any page of Van Gennep's book testifies to his dizzying linguistic and cultural facility, with footnotes referring to scholarship in German, Dutch, English, French, Italian or Russian, all cited in the original, materializing the cosmopolitan *epistémè* he was writing out of and writing himself into (Van Gennep 16-17).

Van Gennep's work must be placed both within a context of international academic affiliations and within a period when scientific positivism and secularization seemed to invade every compartment of European public life. Like the work of Renan or Marcel Mauss, his focus on magic rites of passage in what he called "semicivilized" societies provides us with an inverted image of the lifting of boundaries and evaporation of sacredness which, according to him, affected every area of European public life at the time. He clearly presented this double opposition at the beginning of his book:

As we move downward on the scale of civilizations (taking the term "civilization" in the broadest sense), we cannot fail to note an ever-increasing domination of the secular by the sacred. We see that in the least advanced cultures the holy enters nearly every phase of a man's life. (Van Gennep 2)

Except in the few countries where a passport is still in use, a person in these days may pass freely from one civilized region to another. The frontier, an imaginary line connecting milestones or stakes, is visible – in an exaggerated fashion – only on maps. (Van Gennep 15)

Van Gennep's project can thus be seen as a negative image of his own society projected into anthropological discourse. Because modern history dissolved boundary lines in "civilized" society (a process which defined it as civilized and, by contrast, defines ours as not), so Western anthropology would emphasize the epistemological exoticism of more traditional groups tied up by intricate hierarchies, surrounded by invisible borders, for whom no displacement (territorial, temporal, social) was possible without venturing into dangerous interstitial spaces and performing a complex series of magic rites and ceremonies. In a similar way, the Chicago school of urban anthropology would also discover and investigate, at the beginning of the 20th century, the dangerous interstices of the city, for example in Frederic Thrasher's classic studies of Chicago gangs.¹⁰

This is also the feeling that obtains in Joyce's collection. The kind of human experience he describes embodies a strong sense of liminality, suggested for example by the various stages of life which articulate the structure of *Dubliners* or the ritual occasions which lie in the background (or in the foreground) of several stories, from Samhain in "Clay" to the annual dinner in "The Dead". It also comes out in the several magic journeys which take individual characters past invisible signposts, leading to moments of disorientation that are both climactic (because they come at the end of the journey) and anticlimactic (because they are disorienting): thus in "An Encounter" (to which I will return shortly), "Araby", and "Clay". And, again, in "The Dead", when Gabriel, in what is both a liminal moment and a liminal situation, enters into communication with the world of shadows inhabited by Michael Furey:

The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined that he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead.¹¹

Moments of sacred exposure, trespassing, entering forbidden regions are, to my mind, the central moments in the collection, though they are sometimes so subdued or ironically-displaced as to be almost invisible. The unexpected and sudden emergence of a liminal realm into which the protagonist seems to stumble by accident results in a powerful effect of ambiguity and disorientation. This is particularly visible in a story like "An Encounter", where the two boys' journey is marked by a succession of landmarks and crossings, suggesting that what is taking place is a preliminal phase of separation from familiar territory and the group: "School and home seemed to recede from us and their influences upon us seemed to wane." (*D* 15). This signals an entry into dangerous grounds where familiar protections are no longer active, and prepares the scene for the disquieting apparition of the liminal "queer old jossler" as an ambiguous master of ceremonies, an initiator into the mysteries of sexuality. This character, whose very name is suggestive of a world of pagan ritual – "jossler" is glossed by Don Gifford as pidgin English for the worshiper of a joss (a god)¹² –, is marked by the ambivalent traits which

define the anthropological notion of sacredness, in which the idea of supernatural power is indistinguishable from that of impurity.¹³

We thus have, in this story, an anthropological experience whereby the two boys, in particular the narrator, become liminal personae, creatures of the threshold. They conform to Victor Turner's definition of such persons who, he says, "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space." Turner further describes the experience of "liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites," in terms recalling Joyce's story: "Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint."¹⁴ Sexual license and ritual punishment, which feature prominently in initiation rituals, are to be found in the pervert's offstage gratification (the liminal nature of which is metaphorized by its being elided from the narrative) and in his verbal focus on whipping. Once the initiation is over, the boy returns to the fold, feeling "penitent" (*D* 20). This last sentence can be seen as a moment of reincorporation into the fold, as he leaves the peripheral pagan world and reenters the orbit of christianity and mundane relationships.¹⁵

Thus the story articulates the three phases of a rite of passage: separation, transition and reaggregation. It mirrors in a fully-developed form the story of Joe Dillon which also goes, in an accelerated way, through the same three stages: a preliminal phase of separation (the introduction of the "Wild West" in school life), a liminal one of transition (when he acts as Indian chief) and a postliminal reaggregation to the fold, when he is discovered to have "a vocation for the priesthood" (*D* 11).

3. This brief discussion of liminality in *Dubliners* cannot be complete without taking into account the linguistic dimension of the experience. Thus, Joe Dillon, at the height of his career as an Indian chief, utters his war cry: "Ya! yaka, yaka, yaka!" (*D* 11), the only words of his to be directly represented in the story. Thus, Eveline's dying mother utters a strange cry, "Derevaun Seraun!" (*D* 33), which are also the only words of hers represented in the story. Such linguistic decentering, which affects mostly women and children at critical moments, is consistent with Van Gennep's theory, which also posits that language is an essential marker of social dissociation. Transitional moments and/or peripheral social groups are, he argues, characterized by the emergence of what he called "special languages":

During most of the ceremonies which have been discussed and especially during the transition periods, a special language is employed which in some cases includes an entire vocabulary unknown or unusual in society as a whole, and in others consists simply of a prohibition against using certain words in the common tongue. There are languages for women, for initiates, for blacksmiths, for priests (liturgical language), etc. This phenomenon should be considered of the same order as the change of dress, mutilations, and special foods (dietary taboos), i.e., as a perfectly normal differentiating procedure. (Van Gennep 169)

Language's power to differentiate people from one another is particularly important in the opening stories of *Dubliners*. To continue with the text of "An Encounter", we may note that the children's language, as illustrated for example by Mahony's expressions, first appears to the reader as something of a distant and private code. As the narrator tells us, "Mahony used slang freely, and spoke of Father Butler as Bunsen Burner." (*D* 14) But as the story moves on, the tables are turned on the reader and it is the "queer old josser"'s expression that will predominantly come to be perceived as strange. The narrator now underlines the "queerness" of his linguistic performance, suggesting that, though the words used are commonsensical enough, they are the object of a perverse reappropriation: "In my heart I thought that what he said about boys and sweethearts was reasonable. But I disliked the words in his mouth [...]." (*D* 17-18) The sense of linguistic defamiliarization grows as the initiatory aspect of the man's discourse is underlined: "sometimes he lowered his voice and spoke mysteriously as if he were telling us something secret which he did not want others to overhear. He repeated his phrases over and over again [...]." (*D* 18).

The reader therefore undergoes a shift in linguistic perspective, first perceiving the boys' slangy language as peripheral, then adopting the boys' perspective and viewing the pervert's discourse as eccentric and sacred. The different characters' liminal positions with respect to one another and to mainstream society are thus not only marked, but created, by linguistic difference. What we have here is an experience of switching linguistic coordinates corresponding to what Van Gennep calls "the pivoting of sacredness":

Sacredness as an attribute is not absolute; it is brought into play by the nature of particular situations. A man at home, in his tribe, lives in a secular realm; he moves into the realm of the sacred when he goes on a journey. A Brahman belongs to the sacred world by birth; but within that world there is a hierarchy of Brahman families some of whom are sacred in relation to others. [...] Thus the "magic circles" pivot, shifting as a person moves from one place in society to another. The categories and concepts which embody them operate in such a way that whoever passes through the various positions of a lifetime one day sees the sacred where before he has seen the profane, or vice versa. (Van Gennep 12-13)

This is the kind of experience which, I think, lies at the bottom of *Dubliners*, a work which set Joyce on a lifelong exploration of such shifting "magic circles". These would, in later works, continue to grow and change positions, but without losing their anthropological character of liminality, as experienced by special groups or subjects within a social totality.

The effect of such devices is not – or not only – to suggest that Dublin is a society beset by superstition or with a repressed folkloric unconscious, but rather that it is a society criss-crossed by all sorts of invisible borders which only become apparent

when they are encroached upon. Joycean man, like Malinowskian man¹⁶, indulges in evasions tangential to the social order of which he is a component and, in so doing, reveals the social organization of the whole, its complex and unwritten pattern of rules and prohibitions.

There is no doubt, however, that the “pull” of the society is regressive and centripetal, so that the experience of growing up becomes equated with the recognition of the invisible frontiers and red lines which turn the Dublin world into a prison. This, in “An Encounter”, is also marked by a subtle shift in cultural backgrounds: the first half focuses strongly on the realm of mass market romance (*Pluck*, *The Halfpenny Marvel* and “American stories”) which is characterized as modern media, erupting (in the first sentence of the story) into the hitherto-innocent (of the wild West, at least) lives of the schoolboys, disrupting the humdrum routine of the Catholic School and soon censored (and censored) out of the classroom by Father Butler. By trying to reproduce, at least to some extent, the supposed “real adventures” evoked in such publications, the two boys unwittingly turn their backs on modernity and embark on a journey “abroad” (*D* 12) which is also one of cultural retrogression, whereby they leave not only the world of the school and city life, but also modern mass culture to stumble upon an eerie resurgence of a folk environment. The initiation of the boys is thus, ironically, very much an initiation back into a repressed and morbid cultural realm, the impulse to go “abroad” being ironically translated into an experience of the buried cultural customs of the group.

This may perhaps explain why the Dubliners of the volume, who all seem so peripheral to the group (in the sense that their common dream seems to be to escape from Dublin), are also profoundly symbolic of it, since their behaviour – and particularly, as we have seen, their linguistic behaviour – makes visible the collective order which invisibly governs their lives. And that, too, is the object of anthropology.

Notes

- 1 Maria Jolas, “‘I Write’, Said Joyce”, in M. Jolas and Jacques Aubert, ed., *Joyce and Paris 1902... 1920-1940...1975* (Paris: Université de Lille III/CNRS, 1979): 9.
- 2 See Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. 18-20. Hereafter abbreviated as *G*.
- 3 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). New York: Dutton, 1953. xvi. The anthropological desire to grasp a society’s functioning as a complete system was developed simultaneously by Marcel Mauss in his *Essai sur le don [The Gift]* (1923-1924), which revolves around the notion of the “fait social total”. For a discussion of this notion, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Introduction” in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (1950) Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, coll. «Quadrige», 1993. XXIV ff.
- 4 *Ibid* 11.
- 5 Joyce, letter to Stanislaus Joyce, 19 November 1904, *Letters* vol. 2, ed. Richard Ellmann. London: Faber, 1966. 111.

- 6 Quoted in Geertz, *Works and Lives* (133). The verb “create” and the demiurgic posture recall Stephen’s claim at the end of *Portrait*: “I go [...] to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race”. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man* (1914-1915) London: Penguin, 1993.
- 7 See the way in which Malinowski vividly contrasts the scene he writes from and that which he writes *about*: the former characterized by historical strife between nations, the latter representing the last examples of isolated and complete social systems (*Argonauts* 518).
- 8 Such as W.H.R. Rivers, the editor of *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia* (1922), which so influenced T. S. Eliot; Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, whose great work, *The Andaman Islanders*, also appeared in 1922; or again Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes tropiques* (1955).
- 9 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1909), translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960. 3. Hereafter abbreviated as RP.
- 10 “Probably the most significant concept of the study is the term *interstitial* – that is, pertaining to spaces that intervene between one thing and another. In nature foreign matter tends to collect and cake in every crack, crevice and cranny – interstices. There are also fissures and breaks in the structure of social organization. The gang may be regarded as an interstitial element in the framework of society, and gangland as an interstitial region in the layout of the city.” Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (1927); Chicago, Chicago UP, 1936. 22-23.
- 11 James Joyce, *Dubliners*, ed. Terence Brown. London: Penguin 1992. 224. Hereafter abbreviated as *D*.
- 12 Don Gifford, *Joyce Annotated: Notes to Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 2nd edition. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1982. 40.
- 13 See Arnold Van Gennep, “Linguistique et anthropologie, II: Essai d’une théorie des langues spéciales”, *Revue des études ethnographiques et sociologiques*, juin-juillet 1908. 329.
- 14 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969. 95.
- 15 As Van Gennep writes: “the penitent was considered a Christian who had lost his initiation and was striving to recover it” (RP 96).
- 16 Thus Malinowski writes of the “savage” that “his observance of the rules of law under normal conditions, when it is followed and not defied, is at best partial, conditional, and subject to evasions; [...] it is not enforced by any wholesale motive like fear of punishment, or a general submission to all tradition, but by very complex psychological and social inducements”. *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*. London: Kegan Paul Trench, Trubner and Co, 1926. 15.