

2023

Tribute to R. J. ("Joe") Schork

Emily A. McDermott

University of Massachusetts Boston

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Tribute is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in James Joyce Literary Supplement by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

McDermott, Emily A. (2023) "Tribute to R. J. ("Joe") Schork," *James Joyce Literary Supplement*. Vol. 36: Iss. 1, Article 37.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls/vol36/iss1/37>

Tribute to R. J. (“Joe”) Schork

Emily A. McDermott



*Photo courtesy of
Emily McDermott*

I first met Joe Schork when I was a not-quite-finished PhD student in Classics at Yale, and he was Professor of Classics at the University of Minnesota. I was introduced to him by a fellow graduate student (a former undergraduate student of his) at the annual American Philological Association convention, where my friend and I were dipping our toes (unsuccessfully, it would turn out) into the daunting waters of interviewing for academic positions. I liked him immediately. He had the knack of putting two nervous neophytes at ease, striking a felicitous balance between reassuring us that we “had this” and projecting just enough irreverence that, if we didn’t, we wouldn’t feel so bad.

The second time I saw Joe was at an on-campus interview for a job I *would* be offered, at a university where he by chance was visiting that year. He came with most of the department faculty to the lunch after my job talk, where the question uppermost in my mind, I confess, was whether it would be appropriate for me to order a beer with lunch. The waiter came to me third, after two of my hosts had ordered iced tea, so I prudently asked for a Diet Coke. When the waiter got to Joe, though, *he* ordered a Heineken’s, and the person after him ordered a martini, and the one after that got a gin and tonic. I didn’t have the nerve to go back and change my order, so all I could

do was fume at the stroke of luck that had put Joe to my right instead of my left. This became one of Joe's favorite stories; in fact, he regaled his attending physician with it, just weeks before he died.

The third time I saw Joe was when I was ensconced as a second-year assistant professor in Classics at UMass Boston (where we were in the market for an external department chair). Joe ended up winning and accepting that job, and it was at that point that our friendship of forty-plus years began in earnest.

Personally, we joked that he was my middle brother—in between, in age, my much older and slightly older brothers. He became close to my parents. To my kids he was Uncle Joe, sleeping out in tents with them in our backyard, thrilling them with stories like “Who's got my golden arm?,” and doing his best to infect them with his prejudices *for* the classics and *against* sociology.

Professionally, Joe was a model mentor back when Mentor was still more a character in the *Odyssey* than an obligatory role assigned by lot to senior faculty. He handed out gruff advice like, “If a manuscript comes back to you rejected, immediately stick it in an envelope and send it out to someone else. *Never* put it in a drawer to think about later.” This was psychologically sage (if somewhat overstated) advice. He dutifully read and commented on serial versions of all my manuscripts—always patient, trenchant when called for. Early on, he encouraged me to broaden my scholarly horizons, interleaving straight classical *Wissenschaft* with studies of the classical tradition in European and American literature. I will be ever grateful for that liberating advice. In the early eighties, he even “gifted” me a British short story (Kipling's “Regulus”) to write about. It took me thirty years to feel I understood the contexts of the story well enough to write that article, but write it I eventually did.

Another of Joe's major contributions as a mentor was his modeling of institutional service of the utmost professionalism and probity. When a dean offered him additional compensation to take on a major committee chairmanship, he accepted the role but scoffed at the financial offer: “It's my *job*.” In his twenty years at UMass Boston, he was entrusted by faculty, deans, upper administration, and trustees with a plethora of critical roles in academic shared governance. He served as moderator of the university-wide faculty governance body and chaired or served on multiple important academic review, resource allocation, and personnel committees, including search committees for two deans, a provost, a chancellor, and a president. In all these roles, he focused on exerting the highest possible academic and collegial standards. He was both respected and (a little) feared on campus for not suffering

fools lightly. At times his satirical bent could be turned to skewering effect on a smug, malevolent, or pretentious colleague. For me as a very junior colleague, though, he presented a paradigm of exemplary university citizenship that I would emulate through my career.

Joe was also committed to the Herodotean principle that the best intellectual inquiry results from immersing oneself in the culture under study and modeled that commitment for both students and colleagues through his own travels. As Ken Rothwell, longtime chair of the UMass Boston Classics and Religious Studies Department, has noted: “All of Joe’s qualities—the wit, the learning and the generosity that so inspired students—intersected on cruise ships throughout the Mediterranean and beyond, where he had a post-retirement gig lecturing on and conducting tours of archaeological and other historical sites. He was a sensation. A great regret of my life is that I was never able to join those.”

* * * * *

Joe graduated *summa cum laude* from the College of the Holy Cross in 1955, with a major in Greek and Roman classics. Upon graduation, he took up a Fulbright Scholarship to the University of Oxford, where a scant two years later he was awarded a D.Phil. degree (1957), as a member of Exeter College and under the direction of Professors C. A. Trypanis and Paul Maas.

His academic career began at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio, and encompassed tenured appointments at Georgetown University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Massachusetts Boston, from which he retired in 1995 as Professor Emeritus.

He was an exciting and imaginative teacher, with students regularly applauding his dynamism and likening him to their most inspirational sports coaches. When he took my classes for two weeks at the end of one spring semester, after I gave birth to my first child, one student wrote that having Joe at the end of the semester was like having “a wonderful dessert after a good meal.” I have felt obliquely insulted ever since (I wanted to be dessert!). A colleague from the UMass Boston English Department (and fellow Joycean), Thomas O’Grady, calls Joe “a kind and generous colleague, always happy to visit my Joyce class and share his wit and wisdom—for example, on one visit he delivered a tour-de-force exegesis of the hagiography at work in Joyce’s short story “The Sisters.” On another visit he ended the class by unveiling one of his **two** signed first editions of *Finnegans Wake*: “Just look, don’t touch!” Another colleague from English, John Tobin, reports:

Joe's friends in the English department convinced him shortly before his retirement to team-teach a graduate seminar titled "The Epic from Virgil to Joyce." Joe's competitive nature, pervasive knowledge of English literature, and natural high energy made him, only on the surface, a slightly imperfect team player (think Boswell's comment on Dr. Johnson's saying that he had indeed had a lovely time at a dinner party: "Yes, sir, you tossed and gored several people")—an Oxford D.Phil. and educated Bully Bottom who would play all the roles, to the cost of any of his lesser mechanicals around the seminar table.

Although Joe's dissertation (revised many years later and published as a book) centered on the Byzantine author, Romanos the Melodist, he was at heart a classical generalist, teaching and publishing scholarship in the areas of both Greek and Latin language and literature. An interest in the classical tradition in modern literature further engendered studies of post-classical authors as varied as Shakespeare, Milton, Thomas Mann, Stendhal, and Oscar Wilde. Most notably, though, his mid-career fascination for tracing the cleverly-encoded, humorously-distorted classical, hagiographical, and liturgical allusions in James Joyce's letters, notes, notebooks, and novels turned Joe into (minus any pejorative connotations) a "meinherr from Almany," groping "for deephid meanings in the depth of [Joyce's] buckbasket" (*Ulysses*, Modern Library ed. [1961], 205). These gropings inspired numerous articles, multiple international conference presentations, and three books on Joyce: *Latin and Roman Culture in Joyce (LRCJ)*, *Greek and Hellenic Culture in Joyce (GHCJ)*, and *Joyce and Hagiography: Saints Above! (JHSA)*—all University Press of Florida, 1997, 1998, 2000, respectively. Tracking back and forth in exemplary genetic criticism between texts and the archival material behind them, he paints a picture of Joyce as a "prize student" of Latin and Greek texts, exacting a "Parser's Revenge" on his readers through his ability to "turn grammar exercises or morally edifying passages topsy-turvy" (*LRCJ*, xi).

Joe shared with Joyce years of demanding and meticulous Jesuit education (Joyce's at Clongowe's Wood College, then Belvedere College in Dublin; Joe's at Campion Jesuit High School in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, and the College of the Holy Cross—where, perhaps apocryphally, he claimed that, on a gray day, as part of the admissions process, with the spires of the college rising in the mists, Joe and his father encountered a Jesuit priest who greeted them: "I hear you are interested in the passive periphrastic. I think you would be very happy here"). Beyond their respective educations, Joe and Joyce shared deeply ingrained personality traits, some innate, some nurtured epigenetically by their immersion in Catholic liturgy and the *Ratio Studio-*

rum. Uppermost among these were wit, irony, humor, and what Joe himself styled “conscientious irreverence” (*LRCJ*, 7). With his own parser’s inclinations and skills, Joe fell deeply in love with what he saw as Joyce’s “medium of subterfuge, burlesque and adroit vocabulary, or structural legerdemain” (*LRCJ*, 3) and poured his scholarly energies for decades into playing the game between scholar and author:

...the evidence I have found in his texts leads me to conclude that Joyce’s skill in the classics ... was a major component of his sense of humor. It will surprise no one that his displays of Latin skill are often designedly hard to identify. That difficulty is part of the fun. In short, the satisfaction of having created a perennial literary challenge, in no small way due to its radical lexical and intertextual pedantry, is, *prima facie*, not merely the parser’s vocation, it is also his ultimate reward. (*LRCJ* 3)

Joe’s second book, *Greek and Hellenic Culture in Joyce* (*GHCJ*), joined with *LRCJ* to create what Zack Bowen, the series editor, called “the most complete reference guide to Greek and Hellenic culture in Joyce ever attempted” (*GHCJ*, ix). In it, using similar methods to those in *LRCJ*, he illuminated Joyce’s knowledge of and allusive recall of all the Greek genres: history, gods and mythology, tragedy, comedy, epic, even modern Greek, from the broad brush to the minute Greek-based, neologistic wordplays so characteristic of *Finnegans Wake*, like “polyfizzyboisterous seas” (*FW* 547.24-25), Joyce’s rendition of the epic adjective *polyphloisbos* (loud-roaring); “adipose rex” (*FW* 499.16); and “hairyoddities” (*FW* 275.N5), a distortion of the name of the historian Herodotus designed, as Joe notes, to gloss “the Greek writer’s penchant for recording unfamiliar customs and exotic rituals” (*GHCJ* 73, 202, and 21, respectively). Joe’s last book rounded out a scholarly triad, providing “an indispensable tool to any reader interested in the hundreds of allusions to the saints (and would-be saints) and the way their own stories are all woven into the comic fabric of Joyce’s work” (Bowen again, in the foreword to *JHSA*, ix).

No one who knew Joe would list diplomatic skills among his top-ten character traits; his brusque, on-point, at times acerbic style would seem to belie such a possibility. But Joe’s longtime companion, Betsy Boehne, has recounted the tale of a heated exchange among Stephen Joyce (James’s grandson) and some senior Joyceans. At that moment, it was Joe who reached out to the notoriously temperamental Stephen in an effort to mediate the dis-

pute. Joe felt good about the outcome of those conversations, and apparently Stephen did too, capping them with a request to Joe to send Stephen and his wife a recipe for New England clam chowder. A marvel of propitiation, as fellow Joyceans will surely appreciate.

Another friend of Joe's, Ted Ahern (longtime Classics Department chair at Boston College), has aptly and colorfully described Joe's scholarly approaches and nature:

Joe once described himself to me, modestly, as a squirrel in his scholarship. I thought I understood what he meant. He did not compose book length studies of ancient authors (well, he did have one), preferring instead to explicate the meaning or context of more narrowly focused passages within them: a joke, an allusion, an acrostic, occasionally a full poem. Only years later, for me at least, did the real extent of that practice disclose itself, when in a remarkably productive retirement he published three books in rapid succession on Joyce's incorporation of Greek and Roman and of hagiographic and liturgical material in his writings, largely to comic effect. There, subsets of Joe's acorn stash, accumulated over years, were revealed. Behind them, however, lay something equally remarkable, which was Joe's practice as a reader. Lots of scholars read a lot. What characterized Joe's reading was his scurrying through the woods, joyfully, jumping from one tree branch to another, happy to land at what to me would be obscure destinations. He gave away many books after finishing with them. One that I have inherited is Bowersock's *Throne of Adulis*, about a sixth century CE conflict between Ethiopian Christians and Jewish Arabs, serving as proxies for the Byzantine and Sassanid empires and contributing, over decades, to the formation of a matrix for the emergence of Islam. Far out of my usual interests, but Joe thought I would enjoy (or I *should* enjoy) learning about it. Thanks, old friend.

Scurrying joyfully through the woods of language and learning was, I submit, yet another temperamental link that bound Joe the parser with Joyce the wordsmith.

* * * * *

Joe's partner, Betsy, joins all his professional colleagues who regret that we have not been able to have a formal memorial service for Joe. Her frustra-

tion is focused in large part, she reports, on her resulting inability to fulfill his fondest wish concerning any such memorial event: that the emcee, in closing the ceremony, would spread both arms wide, pointing to both sides of the room, and solemnly intone: “Ladies and Gentlemen, the bars are open!”

—*University of Massachusetts Boston*

WORKS CITED

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Modern Library, 1961.

Schork, R. J. *Greek and Hellenic Culture in Joyce*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998.

. *Latin and Roman Culture in Joyce*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997.