

Jean-Michel Rabaté

James Joyce, Authorized Reader

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. Pp. 256. \$28.95

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Joyce Upon the Void: The Genesis of Doubt

New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. Pp. 165. \$35.00

Reviewed by Michael Groden

Jean-Michel Rabaté has been one of the leading French poststructuralist critics of James Joyce for some time, especially since the portion of his doctoral dissertation that dealt with Joyce was published in French in 1984. An English translation of one of his essays was included in *Post-Structuralist Joyce: Essays From the French* (ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer, 1984), and his essays have appeared in several other journals and essay collections. He has even experienced the fate of John Eglinton, Richard Best, and other historical 1904 Dubliners whom Joyce included in *Ulysses* when he became a character of sorts in Jacques Derrida's "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce" (in Derrida's *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, 1992). Now two English-language books have appeared almost simultaneously: Rabaté's own translation of the 1984 book and a second collection that includes several post-1984 writings. The two books are essential reading for anyone wishing to understand some of the major directions taken by Joyce criticism in the 1980s and early 1990s, for they offer the best available extended examples of poststructuralist thinking in relation to Joyce's texts.

Rabaté's intimate familiarity with the thinking of Hélène Cixous (who supervised his doctoral thesis), Roland Barthes, Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and many other contemporary French thinkers is evident throughout his criticism. His work is indebted especially to Derrida and Lacan in a way that suggests a deep immersion in poststructuralist thinking. More recently he has worked in the area of *critique génétique*, a type of criticism that, according to Hans Walter Gabler (in the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, 1993), "engages with notes, sketches, drafts, proofs—the *avant-texte*" to produce "a scholarly approach to texts in their states of writing" and to unlock "the heuristic potential of the *avant-texte* for linguistics, literary theory, and literary criticism." If *Joyce Upon the Void* moves beyond *Authorized Reader*, it is in Rabaté's increased attention to the *avant-texte*, especially that of *Finnegans Wake*.

Neither book "applies" Derrida or Lacan to Joyce's texts, and only small parts of either book discuss thinkers overtly, but the two men are omnipresent, even if in absence. Rabaté calls *Authorized Reader* "a philosophical reading of psychoanalytical issues" (xii), and he describes his "theoretical locus" in *Joyce Upon the Void* as "the radical questioning brought about by Derrida's philosophic 'deconstruction'" (xiii). His analyses revolve around absence, void, silence, division, contradictions, doubt, indifference, and perversity; for example, "authority" in *Authorized Reader* "conjoins two meanings generally felt to be antinomous: a maximum of uncertainty, of absence, a lack of 'ground' . . . and a maximum of power" (166). Also, Rabaté argues throughout that philosophical, psychological,

or social themes in Joyce have a linguistic basis, as in statements like "if a subject wants to create durable art that helps him awake from the nightmare of history, he has to pursue the circle of his writing, returning not to his father, but to a displaced origin . . . that lies in language" (*Authorized* 55) or "close as [Joyce] was to fetishism, voyeurism or masochism, what really mattered was the subversion of the common values linked with normal referential language use" (*Void* 165).

James Joyce, Authorized Reader (the English translation of *James Joyce: Portrait de l'auteur en autre lecteur*) ponders the kinds of authority that Joyce's texts provide for their readers' interpretations. In one chapter on *Dubliners*, five on *Ulysses*, and two on *Finnegans Wake*, Rabaté offers analyses in two interrelated strands. One links authority with otherness and with paternity, the latter a pervasive theme throughout Joyce's fiction. Rabaté argues that a father in Joyce is not so much an individual as a "function" or "a nexus of unresolved enigmas" who is "defined by his absence" (58). For Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*, "paternity points to the void, the unconscience of origins, the unconscious hoarding of signs or letters, and yet it remains the model of any creative gesture" (171). The absence of the father is echoed by the absence of the author, if the author as conceived by Stephen is "an essential absence which nevertheless ensures its transcendence in immanence" (159). Thus, for Rabaté, Stephen "is not so much looking for a 'father' as for an 'authority' that will enable him to authorize himself" (164). In *Finnegans Wake*, however, it is not a character but the reader who is being authorized. Rabaté suggests that the *Wake* "puts an end to the dichotomy between reader and author" (191) and "provides an experience of reading which then radically alters any subsequent reading" (183).

The second strand involves perversity. Using Edgar Allan Poe's "Imp of the Perverse," which Rabaté calls "a paradigm of literary perverseness" (16), he discusses perversity as "the ineluctable return of the other in the self" (18) and sets out to read "Joyce's perverse strategies" (19). Among these are Joyce's creation of an "autonomous language, a sort of idiolect of the family" (130) in *Finnegans Wake* and his refusal to suggest a clear unity between speech and writing in parts of *Ulysses* and in the *Wake*. *Authorized Reader* argues that Joyce's texts instruct their readers, including Joyce himself as their first reader, in their strategies, so that the analyses offered here stem from a "constant rereading of Joyce's works by his later texts" (47), especially by *Finnegans Wake*. In "A Portrait of the Reader as a Young Dubliner," for example (a chapter well known from its earlier publication under the title "Silence in *Dubliners*"), Rabaté asks how *Dubliners*, a book full of various perversities and perversions, provides "a theory of its own interpretation, of its reading, of possible metadiscourses about its textuality" (21). He finds this theory in the text's silences and gaps, silences that "may function like the silence of the analyst or the silence of the priest at confession, since it lets the symptoms speak of themselves" (20).

The central concepts in *Joyce Upon the Void* are the void, doubt, skepticism, and relativity. Joyce himself "authorized" the use of the void when he said that "life is suspended in doubt like the world in the void" (quoted xiv). Rabaté is less interested in the thematic possibilities of the void and doubt than in what he calls the "workings of doubt in textuality" (xii), the ways in which Joyce's notes and drafts, especially for *Finnegans Wake*, show what Rabaté's subtitle calls "the gen-

esis of doubt." Again, Rabaté evokes Poe, here the story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and the essay "The Philosophy of Composition," in his discussion of *critique génétique*. Rabaté cleverly compares the genetic critic to a detective like Poe's Dupin, since "any text is what remains of a double murder, a murder of the original biographical experience (the encounter with 'Life' which initiated the creative impulse), and a murder of the *modus operandi* which gave it its final shape" (75). Rabaté is also interested in elements in Joyce's texts that resist doubt, whether they be mimetic elements such as love or, more generally, Life (xviii-xxiv, 220-23) or Joyce's creation of certain characters who resist doubt and skepticism. More than in *Authorized Reader*, the emphasis in *Joyce Upon the Void* is on *Finnegans Wake*: after three opening chapters—on Joyce's relativity, on *Exiles*, and on *Ulysses*—the last six deal with Joyce's final text.

What sets Rabaté's work apart from some other poststructuralist or deconstructive studies of Joyce is his refusal to settle for a demonstration that shows simply that Joyce anticipated the insights of deconstruction. He resists this in many ways, one of the most intriguing being his analyses of Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* and Issy in *Finnegans Wake* as characters who resist the patterns he has revealed for the male characters. Molly's "indifference" (*Void* 52) and her often-noted "whirl of contradictions" (55) remove her from the doubt and relativity that Rabaté finds elsewhere in *Ulysses*. "Molly does not doubt, she contradicts herself" (67), and in so doing she becomes the "indispensable countersign" to the rest of the book that Joyce called her in a letter. Issy is also very important for Rabaté, since, fragmented and radically incomplete, she is beyond any Lacanian conception of a divided or split subject that might be applied to Joyce's other characters. "With the unification of a character" such as Gerty MacDowell or Molly in *Ulysses*, "there disappears the fiction of a real person speaking behind the scenes, and this is why Joyce's treatment of Issy is so daring and modern" (104).

A short review unfortunately has to ignore much of interest and value. I want to at least mention the several examples of genetic criticism that Rabaté offers in *Joyce Upon the Void*; some of the specific topics that he discusses, such as the various author-reader relationships, J.L. Austin's concept of the performative as a critical tool for analyzing Joyce's texts, and relationships between food and clothes in *Finnegans Wake*; Rabaté's use of the philosophical tradition—especially Bruno, Vico, and Hegel—to situate Joyce's thinking; and his sly humor that surfaces repeatedly. *James Joyce, Authorized Reader* and *Joyce Upon the Void* are not easy or introductory reading, but they are far from daunting either, and they will richly reward anyone who works through their careful, reasonable, and very impressive analyses.