

Louis Armand, PhD
OPPONENTS'S REPORT:

re "'THE DEAD' – A Critical Compilation of Existing Interpretations" by Lukáš Fíl
(BA dissertation, 2012)

Some observations and questions:

For a very short work such as a BA thesis there is no justification for the excess of categorising represented by Mr Fíl's 'Table of Contents.' In addition, it is incorrectly described in the 'Abstract' as an 'essay': as the title suggests, it is not an essay, but an compilation of 'pointers' ('[x] points out' being the recurrent phrasing throughout). Terms like 'subjective interpretation,' usually meaningless in most literary criticism, remains undefined.

Mr Fíl's 'Introduction' begins with an unguarded assertion, which is also untrue. This sets an unfortunate tone for what follows, and which often takes its own premises rather too much at face value, or descends into glib disclaimers that appear calculated to remove the threat of scrutiny (p. 54, *e.g.*). In addition, Mr Fíl makes too frequent use of extravagant adjectives, such as 'brilliant,' which place his critical 'objectivity' in question in any case.

Mr Fíl's discussion about 'The Dead' as 'an individual piece of writing' and as 'an integral part of the collection [*Dubliners*]' suggests a misdirected discussion of contextuality. The history of Joyce's various intentions with regard to 'The Dead' and its eventual publication *in the form Joyce chose to publish it* ought to warn Mr Fíl against erecting interpretive dualisms around the degrees of contingency of the story's provenance.

Like many before him, Mr Fíl attributes to a term which appears in 'The Sisters' the status of a paradigm around which an interpretation of *Dubliners* as a whole can be structured. Not only is Mr Fíl unoriginal in following this tendency, but he does nothing to question its efficacy, or indeed its legitimacy. In a similar vein Mr Fíl reuses the term 'epiphany,' imported from *Stephen Hero*, without asking what in fact this term means for Joyce and what therefore would really constitute an 'epiphanic moment' – the assumption being that certain critics who have come before him are automatically correct, which is not universally the case.

Mr Fíl speaks about 'the story's message' – without defining what 'message' could mean in this context. Mr Fíl appears unable to grasp a writing that does not function merely as a 'vehicle' for 'concepts.' On which point, could the Mr Fíl please define precisely what a 'concept of paralysis' is? How might he envisage Joyce would regard such a construction?

To the extent this thesis relies on historiography, it is often off-key. Speculation about whether or not *Ulysses* was a determining factor in drawing critical attention to *Dubliners*, e.g., is extraneous: the record is quite clear about it. What Mr Fíl might've asked was whether or not *Ulysses* facilitated the predominance of figures such as T.S. Eliot and Pound, around whom so much of the myth of English Modernism circulates, and consequently attributes to their pronouncements about one another's work (and Joyce's) the authority of judgement. A similar type of question might be asked about Ellmann, who by associating himself closely with the name 'Joyce' early on, permitted a great many of his pronouncements to be accepted on face value, when in reality (as we have subsequently discovered) Ellmann was often rather creative with his facts. The quotation Mr Fíl uses with regard to Joyce's writing practice (p. 11) provides a good example of the methodological issues that also dog Ellmann's work. Mr Fíl might've asked some questions here: e.g. Is it creditable to draw an analogy between the writing processes ascribable to Joyce during the period of *Dubliners's* composition and 'the method of composition of T.S. Eliot'? By the time of Eliot's first publications, Joyce was already working on *Ulysses*, during the early stages of which his compositional methods—based on the evidence of the notebooks—rapidly evolves into something entirely unlike what we see in the drafts of *The Waste Land*—which Pound, in effect, 'Joyces.' If this can be demonstrated, what good is it quoting Ellmann in such a way? I doubt Mr Fíl can merely claim unfamiliarity with the history of Joycean genetic criticism, especially considering an associated project spanning eighteen years has been going on in our department—of which there is no evidence, other than *Joyce Against Theory* in the bibliography).

Much of this thesis is characterized by uncritical quotation, often from sources that have not presented substantive arguments for their assertions—Daniel Schwartz being a particularly good example. There is no basis whatsoever for making an assertion that 'in 'The Dead'' [Joyce created] metaphors of himself.' As for whether Dante or Ibsen provided Joyce's 'inspiration'—Mr Fíl again simply repeats assertions without any actual recourse to the texts in question *as they are treated by Joyce in the notebooks*; or any effort to step beyond the mere collection of allusions with which the likes of Tom Rice construct their arguments. Once again, Mr Fíl's argument suffers from a lack of engagement with real philological research.

The conclusion, it ought to be noted, ought to have been rewritten with *conclusions*, rather than the collection of ad hoc and vague observations we're given. Mr Fíl should explain in precise language what exactly he means here: 'The multitude of diversity of critical responses to the story form a field of contact, where these responses interact, mutually influence each other, agree at some places, offer incompatible perspectives at others, or fight for their position...' (p. 53).

In light of which I recommend the awarding a of a grade of good.

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