

James Joyce: The Exile as “Woman-killer”

KONDO Masaki

Though *Exiles*, James Joyce's only play which deals with the obscure relationships between two men and two women is rarely performed with success, it is a biographically interesting work as it is a halfway marker both in his personal and creative development, coming between *Portrait* and *Ulysses*.

When I was transcribing Joyce's 'Alphabetical Notebook' at the Cornell University Library in 1977, I came across a puzzling term, "Woman-killer." It lay buried at the back of my mind, until the same word struck me again when uttered on stage by a Japanese actress at the preview of the play on the occasion of the Joyce Centenary in Japan in 1982. The true meaning of the term suddenly became clear to me, prompting reflection on its significance in Joyce's development as an artist. Joyce gradually begins to disappear as an artist and metamorphose into the language of art, and the language seeks finally to be embodied in an androgynous texture.

Here I am to argue on the symbolic meaning of the womb in Joyce's literature as the primordial place to form the embryo of words. After Joyce expatriated himself from the womb, he needed to "kill" Woman to be independent as a novelist, but there are other women attached to him as a wife or a lover. The artist=protagonist of *The Exiles* gropes for the way to become invisible and resurrect in literature.

In Joyce, artistic creativity implies a fusion with the female body, the womb, an androgynous passivity which is the condition of birth of the Word-Made-Flesh. But on his way to this creative freedom the Joycean protagonist acts as a woman-killer, shaking off the hold of the imprisoning womb and shattering the image of female innocence.

KONDO Masaki is professor of English at School of Science and Technology Meiji University and author of *Eizo to Gengo (Image and Language)*, *Mirukoto to Katarukoto (Seeing and Talking)* and *Eizo, Nikutai, Kotoba (The Image, Body and Word)*.

I The Womb

An epiphany Joyce wrote down while studying medicine in Paris in 1902 takes the form of a dream about his mother.

She comes at night when the city is still, invisible, inaudible, all unsummoned. She comes from her ancient seat to visit the least of her children, mother most venerable, as though he had never been alien to her. She knows the inmost heart; therefore she is gentle, nothing exacting; saying, I am susceptible of change, an imaginative influence in the hearts of my children. Who has pity for you when you are sad among the strangers? Years and years I loved you when you lay in my womb (1).

The mother in this passage seems to be both the natural mother (“when you lay in my womb”) and the symbolic mothers: mother Ireland and mother Church (“years and years I loved you”) associated with the Virgin Mary who is called “Mother Mary” (“She comes from her ancient seat . . . mother most venerable”). Exile, for Joyce, then means both maturity (leaving the womb) and abnegation of loyalty (to mother and to Church). In this passage the mother, with a spiritual gentleness reminiscent of the Blessed Virgin, lays a guilt trip on “the least of her children.” Thus escaping from the womb means both growth and sin.

The only reference to the womb in *Portrait* is found after Stephen’s aesthetic discussion with Lynch. Towards dawn Stephen awakes lying still, as if his soul lay in cool water like a foetus in the amniotic fluid. Then he experiences the ‘instant of inspiration in which the angel announces to the Virgin that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her making holy the first of their womb.

O! In the virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh. Gabriel the seraph had come to the virgin’s chamber (217).

Stephen identifies with the Virgin Mary, giving birth to the Word-Made-Flesh as he composes seven or eight stanzas of a villanelle, and writes them out on a cigarette packet with a pencil. He lies as an androgynous creator in the virgin’s chamber, metamorphosing into a woman’s body in which a man’s word takes flesh. These are two crucial elements of Joyce’s art, which is born of a radical “womanly passivity” combined with willed mastering of the word.

In “Circe” episode “the mother” represents the epiphany above.

The Mother

Who saved you the night you jumped into the train at Dalkey with Paddy Lee? Who had pity for you when you were sad among the strangers? Prayer is allpowerful. Prayer for the suffering souls in the Ursuline manual and forty days' indulgence. Repent, Stephen.

Stephen

The ghoul! Hyena!

The Mother

I pray for you in my other world. Get Dilly to make you that boiled rice every night after your brainwork. Years and years I loved you, O, my son, my firstborn, when you lay in my womb. (U15-4194-4204).

In one of the lustful letters which Joyce sent to Nora in Trieste during his stay in Dublin in 1909, where he made a trip with his son, Georgie, and experienced the horrible betrayal on the part of his old friend, Vincent Cosgrave, he wrote;

Guide me, my saint, my angel. Lead me forward. *Everything* that is noble and exalted and deep and true and moving in what I write comes, I believe, from you. O take me into your soul of souls and then I will become indeed the poet of my race. I feel this, Nora, as I write it. My body soon will penetrate into yours, O that my soul could too! O that I could nestle in your blood, sleep in the warm secret gloom of your body (2)!

The source of inspiration here is sexual passion for Nora rather than the ethereal realm of Stephen's waking fantasy. But the psychological dynamics are the same; by merging with the female body, with the womb, Joyce's creative word is released and can take flesh. Joyce is yearning for Nora as the womb from which his inspired words are born. Towards the end of *Portrait* Stephen says to Cranly, "He [Jesus] is more like a son of God than a son of Mary (P243)." Joyce in this letter wants to be the Son of Nora, thus being relieved from being the Son of the Father or of the Virgin Mary. Nora's motherhood liberates the artist, who had been cramped under the patriarchy-matriarchy of home and church.

As Stephen Dedalus walks on Sandymount strand in "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses*, he sees a midwife carrying a bag. His thought floats from Eve's womb to his mother's womb.

Wombed in sin darkness I was too, made not begotten. By them, the man

with my voice and my eyes and a ghost-woman with ashes on her breath. They clasped and sundered, did the coupler's will. From before the ages He will me and now may not will me away or ever. A *lex eterna* stays about him. Is that then the divine substance wherein Father and Son are consubstantial (U3-45-50)?

Stephen feels his father is consubstantial with himself, while his mother is insubstantial. He imagines their couple was arranged by God, and that he was not begotten by them but by the will of the divine Father in accordance with an eternal law. So Stephen is the figure of Jesus Christ: the Word-Made-Flesh which is also the creativity of the poet. Stephen the Poet breathes the formless substance of the word into the void of the chaotic universe of air and sea, the tide of which is under the influence of the moon rather than "the sun's flaming sword (U3-391)."

His lips lipped and mouthed fleshless lips of air: mouth to her womb. Oomb, all wombing tomb. His mouth moulded issuing breath, unspeehed: ooeehah: roar of cataractic planets, globed, blazing, roaring wayawayawayawayaway (U3-401-404).

As the void of the universe is both the womb and the tomb: "bridebed, childbed, bed of death (U3-396)" for a moon drawn tide, so is a piece of blank paper for a poet. The words scribbled on it are finally to be given flesh as *Ulysses*, that is a planet rotating on its own axis as Joyce expected his work to be in "Ithaca" episode. The repetitions of "lip" sound like ripples of a sea of words flowing directly into the womb, while the moon always present behind Stephen's vision replaces the Lord at the Annunciation: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord (*Luke I: 38*)" is varied into "Behold the handmaid of the moon (U3-395)."

The words which Stephen speaks to the air and scribbles on a torn piece of paper bewilder us.

He comes, pale vampire, through storm his eyes, his bat sails bloodying the sea, mouth to her mouth's kiss (U3-397-398)

Here comes a vampire instead of a dove, the Holy Spirit, descending from God's mouth to the Virgin Mary's womb. This sinister figure may reveal the mythological identity of the novelist hidden in the protagonist. The vigilant consciousness of the writer hovers invisible, fancying the sea as a tide of female blood, seeking the place to sow the literary language and expecting it to be given flesh in the sea = womb of the Moon = Wom-

an. However the words which failed to be given flesh causes menstruation, that is the death of literature.

The genesis of Joyce's works, as seen in the first parts of *Ulysses*, is the bio-literary process of invisible words groping for the clue to the embodiment in the Eternal Feminine.

II Woman-killer

"Exile" has an old meaning of pilgrimage or an ascetic journey for study derived from medieval times. It has a peculiar meaning in Ireland, where there is a keen sense of the separation between home and the outer world. Exile was the condition of Joyce's becoming independent of his home, his fatherland, and his church. However it also had a more creative connotation for Joyce. Padraic Colum recollects Joyce as an "unmitigated exile" in his memoir. He quotes Italo Svevo;

In retrospect—and I love to make this boast—his sojourn at Trieste is for Joyce a very sweet memory. At times there was regret. Perhaps such regret was the origin of his well-known drama *Exiles*. <Exiled?> I asked him when I was present at the performance of the play by the Stage Society in London. <Exiled? People who return to their home country!> <But don't you remember,> said Joyce to me, <how the prodigal son was received by his brother in his father's house. It is dangerous to leave one's country, but still more dangerous to go back to it, for then your fellow-countrymen, if they can, will drive a knife into your heart> (3).

Colum continues; "It is from the time of this departure from Dublin in 1912 that the word 'exile' in the sense of 'banishment,' 'Proscription,' comes to be used by Joyce as something that evokes all one's spiritual powers and by doing so leads to creativeness (4)."

As Colum understands, *Exiles* deals with the awakening artist's spirit at the transitional stage of Joyce's personal and creative life. He used as material the real experience of being deceived by his Irish friend, Vincent Cosgrave, and by George Roberts, the managing director of a publishing firm. Joyce was standing on a shifting point in consciousness from the narrow-minded mother island to the more universal continent.

The 'Alphabetical Notebook' (1904-1914) which Joyce started to fill with comments about familiar persons and subjects in Trieste contains a number of significant sentences which reappear in several of his works (5).

Nora [Underlined with a blue pencil.]
 “Wherever thou art shall be Erin to me”
 She said to me: Woman-killer!
 That’s what you are!
 She speaks as often of her innocence as I do of my guilt.
 She wears limber stays

We find the enigmatic phrase, “Woman-killer,” not only in the entry above but in the entry about Nora in Joyce’s Notes to *Exiles*.

Bodkin died. Kearns died. In the convent they called her the man-killer: (woman-killer was one of her names for me). I live in soul and body (*E* 167).

The meaning of the word, however, first becomes plain in the relation between Richard Rowan and his mother in *Exiles*. In the drama his mother sent for him before she died, but he did not come. She also wrote a letter of warning and bade him to break with the past and remember her last words to him. He says that while she lived she turned aside from him, from his wife, Bertha and from their child.

She drove me away. On account of her I lived years in exile and poverty too, or near it. I never accepted the doles she sent me through the bank. I waited, too, not for her death but for some understanding of me, her own son, her own flesh and blood; that never came (*E* 27).

Reading this dialogue we feel that the image of Richard’s mother is subtly overlapped with that of Ireland, and that there is a fatal breach between mother and son.

Not long after he first saw her on Nassau Street, Joyce wrote to Nora Barnacle;

(. . .) How could I like the idea of home? My home was simply a middle-class affair ruined by spendthrift habits which I inherited. My mother was slowly killed, I think, by my father’s ill-treatment, by years of trouble, and by my cynical frankness of conduct. When I looked on her face as she lay in her coffin—a face grey and wasted with cancer—I understood that I was looking on the face of a victim and I cursed the system which had made her a victim. We were seventeen in family (6).

A similar scene reappears in a nightmarish tone towards the end of “Circe” episode of *Ulysses*.

Buck Mulligan

(Shakes his curling capbell.) The mockery of it! Kinch killed her dogsbody bitchbody. She kicked the bucket. (Tears of molten butter fall from his eyes into the scone.) Our great sweet mother! *Epi oinopa ponton*.

The mother

(Comes nearer, breathing upon him softly her breath of wetted ashes.) All must go through it, Stephen. More women than men in the world. You too. Time will come.

Stephen

(Choking with fright, remorse and horror.) They said I killed you, mother. He offended your memory. Cancer did it, not I. Destiny.

The mother

(A green rill of bile trickling from a side of her mouth.)
You sang that song to me. *Love's bitter mystery*.

Stephen

(Eagerly.) Tell me the word, mother, if you know now. The word known to all men (*U15-4178-4193*).

James Prescott points out the similarity of the stage direction for the mother to a passage in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, describing Emma Bovary's corpse (7). It is curious that in his depiction of his mother Joyce, although intensely lyrical too, inevitably recurs to a subdued, rhythmical, cruelly objective Flaubertian style. The opening scene of *Ulysses*, which is based on the epiphany and the 'Alphabetical Notebook' I quoted above is a perfect example of this.

Silently, in a dream she had come to him after her death, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of wetted ashes. Across the threadbare cuffedge he saw the sea hailed as a great sweet mother by the wellfed voice beside him. The ring of bay and skyline held a dull green mass of liquid. A bowl of white china had stood beside her deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting (*U1-100-110*).

It is as if the liquid is actually torn from Stephen's pained heart rather than from his mother's liver, and is in turn being spewed forth from

Joyce's mouth on to the paper. In a letter to Stanislaus in 1906, Joyce wrote about love;

A woman's love is always maternal [misprinted as 'material' in Ellmann's *James Joyce*] and egoistic. A man, on the contrary, side by side with his extraordinary cerebral sexualism and bodily fervour (from which women are normally free) possesses a fund of genuine affection for the 'beloved' or 'once beloved' object (8).

He sounds critical of maternal love which wants to retain the son of the woman in her aged womb. Richard's mother, Bertha and Beatrice all suffer Woman-killing.

A second connotation of "Woman-killer" is brought to light when Richard in Act II confesses to Robert his betrayal of Bertha. After his first carnal betrayal, Richard came home at night, wakened Bertha and told her everything, crying beside her bed and "piercing her heart."

RICHARD

[Lost in thought.] And I was feeding the flame of her innocence with my guilt.

ROBERT

[Brusquely.] O, don't talk of guilt and innocence. You have made her all that she is. A strange and wonderful personality—in my eyes, at least.

RICHARD

[Darkly.] Or I have killed her.

ROBERT

Killed her?

RICHARD

The virginity of her soul (*E*93–94).

The talk of innocence and guilt here as well as the following speech of Richard recalls a line of 'Alphabetical Notebook.' It also resonates with the tone of the letters Joyce wrote in Dublin to Nora in Trieste in 1909.

RICHARD

[*With calm.*] She has spoken always of her innocence, as I have spoken always of my guilt, humbling me (*E*98).

“Woman-killer” is used with reference to Richard’s lover too, when Bertha says, “I think you have made her [Beatrice] unhappy as you have made me and as you made your dead mother unhappy and killed her. Womankiller! That is your name” (E148). Three women central to his life have been “killed” by Richard.

At the end of the drama, Bertha’s eyes close before the curtain falls. Richard is crippled with a wound of doubt from which his soul can never recover. He gazes long into Bertha’s eyes, but she is abstracted like someone absent. Bertha calls to Richard, “O, my strange wild lover” as if to a person in a dream. A sense of alienation prevails on the stage because of an irrevocable separation between innocence and aloofness: the eternal exile. Owing to their lack of Richard’s mother’s spirit, both Richard and Bertha remain inert and hypnotic. Richard is wondering how to hold himself aloof from the other characters to secure his neutral standpoint as a novelist. He is not yet sure to compose a work of androgynous organism as a self-contained entity like *Ulysses*. Bertha remains uncertain of her innocence while hesitating to shake off her fancy of innocent virginity. The both of them are poised between the end of the play and the entrance of the major novel.

Richard manipulates Bertha through his old rival in love for her, Robert who seems to have a homosexual feeling for Richard. His imaginative manipulation of people around him resembles the novelist’s method of composition. The novelist wears a mask and plays the part of both sexes in his or her novel, while each character in a play tends to insist on his or her identity with the actor or actress’ speech in the playwright’s imagination. Richard speculates the relationship of the characters including him both in reality and fiction, himself becoming sadomasochistic hermaphrodite.

Richard appears more father in the extant fragments of dialogue of *Exiles*; “Robert: You [Richard] are so young and yet you seem to be her [Bertha’s] father and mine (9).” He weakens the father’s image in the final text, but still takes the role of protector. Joyce writes in the Notes to the drama that “His [Richard’s] defence of her [Bertha’s] soul and body is an invisible and imponderable sword (E163).” He “effaces” himself and gives Robert and Bertha their freedom. Compared with the realistic dialogue of the characters in the ‘Fragments of Dialogue’ and the collection of emotional words and phrases about Nora, the dialogue of *Exiles* is more sober and aloof.

There are some hints of homosexuality in Richard allowing Robert to seduce Bertha and in her embracing Beartice shyly. There are even more

in the Notes to the drama when Joyce talk of the carnal contact of the two men;

Bertha wishes for the spiritual union of Richard and Robert and *believes(?)* that union will be affected only through her body, and perpetuated thereby.

The bodily possession of Bertha by Robert, repeated often, would certainly bring into almost carnal contact the two men. Do they desire this? To be united, that is carnally through the person and body of Bertha as they cannot, without dissatisfaction and degradation—be united cernally man to man as man to woman (*E* 172)?

This triangular relationship, the spiritual union of two men through an intermediate woman which is also a formula of jealousy, is the most creative arrangement to compose a character from both “within” and “beyond” himself or herself. A woman longed for by the two men, the protagonist and his rival, is rendered true to her ambivalent mind. This way of approaching a character from plural viewpoints is a novelist’s gift, enabling him to weave the texture of style to fit all the psychological folds and recesses of the character and capture its many facets in a cubistic play of perspectives.

III The Linguistic Intercourse

As Stephen-Joyce had lain in the womb of Mother for years, the womb became the dead end of the naturalistic words. Joyce first had to tear himself from Mother’s womb to breathe the outer air and mould his own language out of pervading sounds in the world from antiquity to modernity. The result was the deterioration of the naturalistic style into the more physical language.

Cubistic multiviewpoint allows truer representation of the mental reality of the characters, especially when functioned with male activity and female passivity, sometimes with sadism and masochism. It functions as a medium of love between the author and the characters. The process of composing characters is like a linguistic intercourse between the author and them. The most typical and accomplished text would be “Penelope” episode of *Ulysses*: Joyce’s imagination-womb where his stream of words is finally incarnated in Molly’s flesh. Molly endlessly spins the feminine internal monologue, while Joyce metamorphoses into Molly’s words and lies beside her as the golden rain of Zeus falls between Danae’s legs. The overlapped monologue of Molly-Joyce continues to bubble up in the

voluptuous foam of Molly's body in the sea of words both from inside and outside: Molly's sensuality and Joyce's creativity, because woman's words ooze out of her body while man's words are ejaculated from his mind. It is that Joyce continues to deliver the seeds of his words into Molly's conceptual womb, supplying the substance of her internal monologue and fulfilling his desire of creation in the form of the Eternal Feminine.

frseeeeeeeffronnnng train somewhere whistling the strength those engines have in them like big giants and the water rolling all over and out of them all sides like the end of Loves (U739)

This stream of words sounds like a fairy tale, but watching the glossy big engines all wet, we know Joyce is forcing his red-hot coal of language into Molly's dreaming monologue, while all the male characters including Bloom and Boylan are warming up to reach for her.

A simpler example of this process is seen in the letter of Martha [Bloom's pen friend], addressed to Henry Flower [Bloom]. He reads it twice pretending to read a newspaper walking slowly along Cumberland street, tearing a yellow flower from its pinhole on the letter paper, and superimposing flower language on the letter. He is metaphorically touching Martha's body with the flower of his body.

Angry tulips with you darling manflower punish your cactus if you don't please poor forgetmenot how I long violets to dear roses when we soon anemone meet all naughty nightstalk wife Martha's perfume (U5-264-266).

The letter containing no flavour at all begins to emit the scent of a bisexually alluring perfume. So the revised letter, which is jointly composed by a woman sender and a man receiver, appears to be a reciprocal conveyer of feelings on both sides. This fragment of bisexual text serves as a simple model of a literary texture which can mediate between characters and author as well as between language and its reader. Here is an imaginative physical communication between them by means of paper and words.

The linguistic intercourse between characters and author is figuratively dramatized in *Exiles*, and skillfully illustrated in 'Fragments of Dialogue.'

RICHARD

(. . .) You say I am like her father. Do you know what I feel then when I look at her?

ROBERT

What?

RICHARD

I feel as if I had carried her within my own body, in my womb.

ROBERT

Can a man feel like that?

RICHARD

Her books, her music, the fire of thought stolen from on high out of whose flames all ease and culture have come, the grace with which she tends the body we desire—whose work is that? I feel that it is mine. It is my work and the work of others like me now or in other times. It is we who have conceived her and brought her forth. Our minds flowing together are the womb in which we have borne her (10).

Here is a curiously self-inflected composition of a man or two men with a womb looking into it. Androgynous Richard clearly represent a writer-creator conceiving a character. But the two men combined, with one and the same womb, look as homogeneous as Siamese twin. Their minds are already in spiritual union without Bertha's mediation. This too simple figure of androgyny and homosexuality is not brought into the final text.

When some medium such as God, dictatorship or ideology unites a group of men or women, homosexual bonding deepens between them. The medium is something that transcends ordinary life and is the cause of spiritual energy. An incomparable understanding and mental interpenetration between them, which is stronger and more lasting than their physical union, will be thereby attained. This will also be the ideal communion between a work of art and its audience. If a work of art is androgynous, an audience of both sexes will be more invited to have a spiritual union with it, substantiated by the imaginative physical union.

In *Exiles* Joyce pursues the homosexual creativity between the novelist and his old friend through the medium of his woman, which would be extended to the relationship between Joyce, Stephen and Bloom mediated by Molly in *Ulysses*. After young Stephen left his mother's "womb", the adult protagonist, Bloom deems of attaining Molly's "womb" as the goal of his being, which is the cradle of the Word-Made-Flesh of Joyce.

Richard is unresolved between the homosexual literary creativity and

the heterosexual innocent love. Bloom is another suspended character between Boylan the profane lover and Molly the profane muse. Bloom has been physically and diagonally separated from Molly on the same bed, which is the literary condition for the agent of the novelist to practise the linguistic intercourse with Molly=literary work. He dreams a dream of language which is allowed to enter Molly's womb, while Molly is spinning her full image of Woman in the endlessly propagating words.

NOTES

The capital letter and numeral in a parenthesis indicate the title of Joyce's work and its pagination or its episode and line number.

P: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books).

E: *Exiles*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952).

U: *Ulysses*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1984).

FW: *Finnegans Wake*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1939).

- 1 *The Workshop of Daedalus: James Joyce and the Materials for "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,"* ed. Robert Scholes and Richard M. Kain (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1965). 44. Cf., Mark Shechner, "The Song of the Wandering Aengus: James Joyce and his Mother," in *James Joyce Quarterly* Vol. 10, No. 1 (Tulsa: The University of Tulsa, 1972).
- 2 *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1957, 1975). 169, dated 5 September 1909.
- 3 Italo Svevo, *James Joyce*, trans. Stanislaus Joyce (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1969). 4.
- 4 Mary and Padraic Colum, *Our Friend James Joyce* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1968). 68.
- 5 *The Cornell Joyce Collection: A Catalogue*, comp. Robert E. Scholes (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1961). 12. Published in *The Workshop of Daedalus*. Cf., n. 1.
- 6 *Letters of James Joyce II*. 48, dated 29 August 1904.
- 7 Cf., Joseph Prescott, *Exploring James Joyce*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1964).
- 8 *Letters of James Joyce II*. 192. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford UP, 1959). 247.
- 9 John MacNicholas, *James Joyce's EXILES: A Textual Companion* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1979). 247.
- 10 *Ibid.* 167-168.

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