



PROJECT MUSE®

James Joyce: Oral and Written Discourse as Mirrored in
Experimental Narrative Art (review)

Jim LeBlanc

James Joyce Quarterly, Volume 44, Number 1, Fall 2006, pp. 186-189
(Review)

Published by The University of Tulsa
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjq.2007.0013>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217429>

JAMES JOYCE: ORAL AND WRITTEN DISCOURSE AS MIRRORED
IN EXPERIMENTAL NARRATIVE ART, by Willi Erzgräber, trans-
lated by Amy Cole. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002. 428 pp.
\$66.95 paperback.

In the introductory lines of his *James Joyce: Oral and Written Discourse as Mirrored in Experimental Narrative Art*, Willi Erzgräber tells us that the theoretical framework for much of the book in hand rests upon an essay by Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher entitled “Language of Immediacy and Language of Distance: Orality and Literacy in the Area of Tension between Linguistic Theory and History of Language.”¹ These titles, both translated here from their original German, as well as the highly structured, scientifically numbered layout of Erzgräber’s book (not to mention my somewhat irrational fear of German philological studies), suggest that the text will require some heavy interpretive lifting through dense, theoretical discursive analysis. This is not the case, however. After briefly remarking on Koch and Oesterreicher’s concepts of oral discourse as “language of immediacy” and written discourse as “language of distance” (11) and presenting a short summary of M. M. Bakhtin’s notion of the “image of a language”²—from which the author derives the mirror metaphor of the book’s subtitle (13)—Erzgräber embarks on a series of close readings of oral and written discourses that Joyce appropriated and transformed for use in his narrative works. In doing so, the critic makes extensive use of recent commentaries on Joyce’s texts, including a number of studies in German, to produce an effective and quite readable synthesis of existing thinking on dozens of discursive instances in Joyce’s *oeuvre*.³

Erzgräber reminds us that in his “continual artistic mirroring of reality” Joyce recalled and incorporated much of what he heard and read into the “complex linguistic reality” of his literary creation (15). These bits of discourse include: conversation and gossip, political speeches, academic disputations, folk songs and tales, the Catholic liturgy, private correspondence, advertisements, newspaper articles, light fiction, sermons, and legal documents. Erzgräber examines them all. Beginning with Joyce’s written epiphanies and their reworking for use in *Stephen Hero* and *Dubliners*, the author goes on to examine the use of oral and written discourse in several of the stories in *Dubliners* and a good many instances in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, before giving us engaging readings of moments in nearly every episode in *Ulysses*, to which he devotes over half the book. He closes, as expected, with exegetical commentary on several passages in *Finnegans Wake*. For some reason, Erzgräber chooses not to deal with *Exiles*—perhaps because the dramatic text is not really narrative *per se*.

Some sampling is in order. In section 1.1.4, "Threats and Their Context," Erzgräber investigates how Joyce's revision and repositioning of his first epiphany (which relates a dialogue between Mrs. Joyce and a neighbor, Mr. Vance, who enters a room carrying a stick and demanding an apology from young Jim⁴) at the opening of *A Portrait* both transforms and enriches the original text. Recontextualizing the conflict outlined in the epiphany completely within the Catholic family that will eventually try fruitlessly to keep Stephen from breaking away from the Church, Joyce infuses the earlier discourse with a "semantic depth and artistic effect by [its] integration into a narrative context which in the final analysis is a Promethean-Luciferlike revolt on Stephen Dedalus' part" (33). Erzgräber reaches this conclusion following the lead of A. Walton Litz in the latter's introduction to the 1991 edition of Joyce's *Poems and Shorter Writings*, in which we read (and Erzgräber cites—33) the following: "Even as an isolated incident this epiphany is an arresting account of a sensitive child's confrontation with authority; but the fragment does not become a 'revelation,' a radiant image, until it reaches its place in *Portrait* as an introduction to the obsessive themes of guilt and submission" (159). This example is typical of Erzgräber's method throughout the study, in which he frequently leverages the work of other critics to compile a compendium of readings on his stated theme: oral and written discourse as mirrored in Joyce's narratives.

One could argue that this method is somewhat derivative, but it is effective nonetheless, especially as the reader progresses through one solid and informative explication after another. In his analysis of the conversation among Martin Cunningham, C. P. M'Coy, Jack Power, and Tom Kernan in "Grace," Erzgräber draws heavily on the commentary of Terence Brown to highlight the factual errors and mistakes in the visitors' casual, but calculated, discourse on the history of the Catholic Church and its doctrines—that chatty gambit which they use to seduce Kernan into accompanying them on a retreat (53-57).⁵ Erzgräber then borrows from both Brown and Fritz Senn to delineate the satirical elements in the narrator's presentation of Father Purdon's welcoming sermon.⁶ Using Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman and Weldon Thornton as secondary sources,⁷ Erzgräber does a thorough job of unpacking the dialectical tension in the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode of *Ulysses*, detailing not only the "contrasting intellectual positions . . . which conditioned the thinking and conduct of the men of letters who moved in Joyce's circle" (163) and who are represented bearing their real names in the novel but also the narrative relationship between Stephen Dedalus's exterior and interior monologues in the episode. In his examination of "Aeolus," Erzgräber reveals how "certain texts which are written to be delivered orally lose their effect when they are detached from the speaker and the situation in which

they are spoken and are printed and quoted by critics who only judge the text from the written form, without taking account of the spoken context and the effect of that context" (230).

His summary of the rhetorical tropes in this episode and their effect on the characters' discourse is interesting and useful, as is his observation regarding Molly Bloom's role as the "siren of the spoken language" and Martha Clifford's contrasting function as the "siren of the written language" in the eleventh episode of *Ulysses* (246). Writing of the note Bloom pens to Clifford in the Ormond Hotel, Erzgräber observes that the distancing function of written discourse (recalling here the theoretical underpinnings derived from Koch and Oesterreicher that support his general thesis) serves as the metaphorical rope that binds Bloom to his ship's mast and protects him, as it did Odysseus, from falling victim to female enticement (249-50).

The sixty-five pages devoted to *Finnegans Wake* are perhaps the least significant in Erzgräber's study. Focusing on the fusion of oral and written discourse in Joyce's final and most complex work, the author's theoretical dichotomies between oral and written, medial and conceptual, immediate and distant necessarily break down. Erzgräber moves bravely through a series of textual explications that include analyses of the "Ballad of Persse O'Reilly" and ALP's letter, but the collapse of the author's well-structured critical framework to support his analysis of the discourse leaves little but the summation of recent commentary, on which Erzgräber relies even more extensively in his concluding chapter.

Willi Erzgräber passed away in 2001, shortly before Amy Cole's translation appeared in Lang's *Neue Studien zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik* series in 2002. During a teaching and research career that spanned nearly a half century, Erzgräber published numerous books and articles on Joyce. In this last book-length study published during his lifetime, he has left both students and more experienced Joyce scholars with a useful and thorough synthesis of the collective work on oral and written discourse, as it appears both verbatim and transformed, behind and within James Joyce's fiction.

Reviewed by Jim LeBlanc
Cornell University

NOTES

¹ Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe, Sprache der Distanz: Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im Spannungsfeld von Sprachtheorie und Sprachgeschichte," *Romanistisches Jahrbuch*, 36 (1985), 12-43.

² M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin, ed.

Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1988), pp. 354, 358, 360.

³ In addition to the secondary literature cited explicitly elsewhere in this review, these sources include Sabine Habermalz, *Nähesprache: Mündliche Strukturen in James Joyces "Ulysses"* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 1999); Katharina Hagen, *Developing Waterways: Das Meer als Sprachbildendes Element im "Ulysses" von James Joyce* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996); and John Paul Riquelme, *Teller and Tale in Joyce's Fiction: Oscillating Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983).

⁴ See James Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings, including "Epiphanies," "Giacomo Joyce," and "A Portrait of the Artist,"* ed. Richard Ellmann, A. Walton Litz, and John Whittier-Ferguson (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 161. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Joyce, *Dubliners*, ed. Terence Brown (Harmondsworth: Penguin Publishers, 1992), pp. 299-302.

⁶ Fritz Senn, "A Rhetorical Account of James Joyce's 'Grace,'" *Moderna Språk*, 74 (1980), 121-28.

⁷ See Don Gifford, with Robert J. Seidman, *"Ulysses" Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's "Ulysses,"* rev. ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), pp. 190-256, and Weldon Thornton, *Allusions in "Ulysses": An Annotated List* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 166-69.