

James Joyce: European, Genius, Enigma

When James Joyce left Ireland in October 1904 accompanied by Nora Barnacle, few people held out much hope that this ill-assorted pair would stay together. Nora Barnacle was the daughter of a Galway man who signed his marriage certificate with an "X." Like his father, he was a baker. The family name was Coyne, which is Irish for Barnacle goose. Nora's grandfather, as a young man, went to sea as Coyne and returned calling himself Barnacle. The name clung.



James Joyce
Culver Pictures

In the end, Joyce clung too. Nora's provincial upbringing and meager education were sometimes problematic, but her naturalness and freedom from affectation contented Joyce. She was necessary to his life. In 1909 when Joyce was visiting Dublin and Nora remained in Trieste, Italy, he wrote to her: "*I want to go back to my love, my life, my star, my little strange-eyed Ireland.*" It was as if Ireland was less Irish than Nora. Many lines that Joyce first heard with amusement from his wife were later put into the mouth of Molly Bloom, his great female character in *Ulysses*.

Joyce's decision to leave Ireland had its ambiguities. After all, he was leaving the country he wished to write about, and he had such mixed feelings about: he knew Ireland to be parochial and repressive, yet he knew it also to be intense and passionate. After three years in continental Europe, Joyce told his brother Stanislaus, "*The Irish are the most intelligent, most spiritual, and most civilized people in Europe.*" At once loving and detesting his count, Joyce never conceived of writing books about anywhere else but the country where, except for three short trips in 1909 and 1912, he would never set foot again.

Joyce remained a nomad in the countries in which he lived, Italy, Switzerland, France. No matter in which city, he sought shelter, he regarded himself not as an expatriate but as a voluntary exile. With a mixture of anguish and anger, he always looked back to Ireland.

This mixture is to be found in his books. *Ulysses* has many complaints to make about Ireland, but Joyce remembers with great affection the line from the Psalms, "*Remembering thee, O Sion...*" *At the end of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Stephen Dedalus leaves Ireland behind and announces that his mission will be to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."* In the rest of Europe, Joyce is never

European, always Irish European. In *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce deals with Shem becoming a "farsoonerite," meaning that he would prefer to muddle through the hash of lentils in Europe than meddle with Ireland's split little pea.

Joyce knew that the accomplishment of his aim required an intimate association not only with the past and present of Ireland, but also with the past and present of Europe. He did not close his mind in 1904 when he left Ireland. Instead, he spent the next twenty years reading European fiction, drama, and poetry.

Joyce recognized two contrasting principles. One was parochial, like Nora Barnacle; the other was sophisticated, seasoned, and knowing. To some extent, he could embody these principles as Ireland and Europe. It was not that he finally chose one or the other; rather, he thought they could be interfused. He saw intensity and scope as fresh water and salt, as island or continent, or wife and husband which he mysteriously blended into an Irish European art.

(Written by Ray Coyne and originally printed in February 2002)

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