

**JOYCE**

**UNCOVERS**

**AND USES**

**GOSSIP AND RUMOR**

## JOYCE UNCOVERS AND USES GOSSIP AND RUMOR

Now, the daily news usually gets high respect; literature is sometimes accorded "gospel status"; Mythology is revered, can even be believed sacred with myths of origin. History is considered trustworthy and with monuments is literally "carved in stone". All of these are based upon stories and we tend to take it all as it is recorded with no thought of what was biased, inaccurate or omitted.

But gossip and rumor, though useful sometimes and widely practiced in every culture since Day One, has a bad name and is acknowledged very little. It is not considered factual nor to be relied upon - often slander, as Jorn Bergman tells us. But it is in fact a vital part of the story of mankind and often goes undetected in communication and writings.

In primitive times at some point with the increase of language, early tribes had legendary stories of their ancestry which created their identity as a people. Around a campfire stories were and still are, told, and current happenings always remind someone of an earlier one. "Remember when..." This is largely on the level of gossip and rumor because stories get revised as they are repeated and later written down to become literature or history. There was also "small talk" in conversation at the village well, or in the town square, and today in any public place, including idle talk and hearsay, especially about the affairs of others with whispers of caution "Just between you and me..."

Joyce's opening into gossip and rumor was through his preference for the commonplace. This started with his lowly beginnings in the Joyce household, where sheets of paper were used on the other side, recycled from business letters, school exercises, etc. Margot Norris talks about this in *Joyce's Web*. We also see it in the biographies. Joyce's family went downhill financially. Some of his fiction reflects this, like pawning textbooks and siblings begging nuns for soup.

Joyce learned the value of hearsay or untruth early on, using it himself. At Clongowes, says Ellman, he bragged that his father (really a barroom conversationalist at this time) was a gentleman, one uncle a judge & another a general in the army. Not true. Even later on when Joyce kept company with literary contemporaries, to him commonplace people and things mattered more than the authoritative and powerful bourgeois. The anti-

academic is sprinkled throughout his writings and to de-value authority was one of his aims. He preferred pub language and street language rather than the "King's English". "Showing forth of beauty & truth in the squalid & commonplace was James Joyce's vocation", says Anthony Burgess. His catalogs of junk and bits of conversations shows the significance of trivial things. His pockets bulged with old theater notices, used tram tickets, newspaper clippings, etc. and in use of the ordinary he did not avoid the blemishes or vulgar terms.

Joyce let common people speak for themselves, when they thought their existence had little meaning compared to that of "higher-ups". He watched and listened to people closely, says Richard Ellman. Slips of tongue delighted him and stories his father told like The Norwegian captain which he used in *Finnegans Wake* (hereafter *FW*). He delighted in absurdities. Did a Viking's wife really sit naked on the alter of a church? Joyce was amused and included it in *FW*.

Whenever people get together there has always been gossip and rumor. We say we hate a "gossip", but do not like to miss a good story and it is difficult to keep a secret. Idle talk degenerates into gossip and slander, "I heard he..." "Some say she..." Getting the lowdown, sometimes with statements like "everybody knows", or an oath. "I swear to God", makes it more believable. One writer or scholar gossips about another, including Joyce scholars who criticize one another's interpretations of Joyce's writing.

Jorn Barger tells about gossip among Joyce's contemporaries in *Dublin Literary Gossip 1898-1904*; about William B. Yeats and his Order of the Golden Dawn. Also that Queen Victoria visits Dublin but in protest Yeats & Maud Gonne rolled up the red carpet put out for her visit; that Oliver Gogarty was banned from bicycle-racing in Dublin.

There is gossip-like fabrication and speculation in correspondence, diaries, and biographies. Things seem to be so because one says so. Thus gossip spreads and takes on an authoritative tone.

"All ears did wag" we read in *FW* and *HCE* (Here Comes Everybody) cleans his ear with a pencil so as to hear the gossip better. The cad tells the wife, she tells the priest and it spreads despite the priest's saying that it "would go no further than his Jesuit's cloth."

Of course those in service professions learn secrets of people and sometimes engage in hearsay and gossip. Landlords, maids and cooks, beauty parlors and barber shops, for instance. It can be the "dirty linen" that tells the real story, as Joyce shows. In *FW* the washerwomen's gossip resembles a scandal sheet as they see secrets even in people's intimate apparel: "O tell me all about", and "You'll die when you hear".

Frank McAndrew points out that gossip *can be good*; it can help bond groups and kinfolk - can even help a person to adjust to a new place or job, as he or she listens to the informal talk. But gossip and rumor can also be destructive, when people jump to conclusions; accentuate some things and omit others; use generalizations; or there is simply unintentional miscommunication. Joyce uncovered and exposed all of this and with humor. In *Ulysses* (hereafter referred to as *U*), Bloom says "I was just going to throw it away" (the daily paper) and Lyons thinks it's a tip on a horse called Throwingaway in the Gold Cup Race. He gossips about it later. In the "Cyclops" chapter at the pub the "Citizen" "has the gift of gab", and knows no good of anybody. The narrator describes Denis Breen and his wife thus: "O, as true as I'm telling you... Denis in bathslippers with 2 bloody big books tucked under his oxter and the wife hotfoot after him, unfortunate wretched woman trotting like a poodle. I thought Alf would split." In the "Circe" chapter Bloom, for onlookers, addresses Stephen as a professor, then states that he is a "gentleman and a poet" to impress the soldiers.

In "The Boarding House" story there is scandal-mongering. Quote: "All the lodgers knew something of the affair, details had been invented by some." In "The Dead", the main character Gabriel with his idle talk, empty rhetoric, believes he is orating to vulgar people and ignorant old women. Girls in the "Nausicaa" chapter "to have a cosy chat & discuss matters feminine", says Frank Budgen in *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*..

William Y. Tindall in *Readers Guide to James Joyce* notes that mutual support among close relations has always been true. Robin Dunbar quotes an Arabian proverb: "Me and my brother against my cousin; me and my brother and my cousin against (whoever)." The Irish Brehon Law for instance - for them kinship is crucial even today and can cause slander about others. Stephen Pinker tells that there is also the *language* of kinship to reinforce group identity for co-religionists. or to rouse people in defense of a cause.

Margot Norris points out the paramilitary overtones of many school sports as shown in *A Portrait of The Artist As A Young Man* (hereafter POR) and codes of male honor. "all for one, one for all." There are ALSO biased statements and rumors against others. If someone is not included in gossip, not trusted by the group, he or she may be the butt of a joke, with implied insults; In *U*, Bloom experiences this as an outsider.

"Rumor" suggests a broader connotation than gossip; a popular report that affects a large number of people, with no known author for the truth of it; bad news about a world leaders perhaps. It can easily involve *misinformation* or scandal. Someone claims to have gotten the news from the "inside". Whatever seems the most favored version is believed. With fear and anxiety, rumor can cause a riot. There are always stories about a person whose power the masses are afraid of. Stephen Pinker tells us that the point of view is important: Was he a "terrorist" or was he a "freedom fighter"? There are always stories about a person the people are afraid of. Also someone can become a scapegoat.

With nasty rumors, someone's reputation can be destroyed. Oscar Wilde tried to achieve nobility, but ended in dishonored exile. At the news of his condemnation, crowds danced in the street.

Joyce with Henrik Ibsen believed that truth is subjective and that the majority are usually wrong. His essay on Ibsen is in his *Critical Writings*.

Many written records and stories started as rumors and have come to us through the generations. Mother Goose rhymes had their origin as street rags which often disguised talk of royalty. Joyce used Mother Goose rhymes, street games and in all of his writing.

Newspapers and other news media like to use the term "informed opinion" if no real basis for news; too often told out of context, based on gossip and rumor, "mudslinging". Witnesses to an event give opinions and biases along with their story. We see this throughout *FW*.

"Scandal sheets" are regularly sued for misinformation. Joyce parodies this in *U* and in *FW*, and makes us aware of it. Leopold Bloom in *U* reflects on the ways of journalists: "One story is good till you hear the next".

There was a rumor in Joyce's time spread by the media, that "Skin-the-Goat" who drove the car for the Invincibles in the Phoenix Park Murders, kept a cabman's shelter. This is brought out in *U* in the "Eumaeus" chapter.

James Fairhill says that newspaper accounts and word of mouth made Charles Parnell a living legend, but distorts some facts. Bigotry and parochialism effected rumors that ruined Parnell's career, and Joyce belied the fact. The full truth about these and many other stories is not known to this day.

Sometimes a government will start rumors for political reasons, uses propoganda, to try to make people conform to certain social standards; or to further their cause. There is also evasive parlimentary answers and language the state hides behind when aware of corruption.

In Joyce's time women were seduced by emigration propoganda. But Nationalists tried to stem tide of emigrants with frightening warnings. Frank in Joyce's story "Eveline", quotes from this flowery literature. On the other hand, there is her father's warnings against it.

Ads are definitely not to be trusted. "What is home without Plumtree's Potted Meat?" we read in *U* in one of the passages showing advertising in Dublin then. Also Bloom, who sells ads himself, sees a leaflet from across the water that makes lofty promises, trying to sell land there. An ad for a hot-gospeller in *U*, advertising salvation in language like Billy Sunday, makes us wonder if all preachers are "ad men".

**Classes** in society can mean bigotry and prejudice, thus nasty slander, false statements and rumor. Northrup Frye says The "good" is what we are accustomed to and sanctioned by the community. But whatever is different can seem threatening and "evil". Fredric Jameson adds that there was from way back, middle-class moralizing about lower classes and fear of them; propoganda about the slums. Desire to rise above one's class was discouraged. "Stay in your place!"

The English tried to force their culture and beliefs on the "inferior" Irish with magazines, newspapers etc. and teaching in schools and libraries. News reports and literature in any form is based upon stories. When these stories claim to be true and when they set standards, this is not right.

The publication "Punch" had cartoons which ridiculed the Irish and called Irish peasantry "lower Irish". In their consumer literature the girls' "Quality" magazines, had news of fashions of higher classes and the virtue of motherhood. This influence was brought to people's attention in *U*, for instance with Gerty MacDowell who read such magazines.

Dublin in Joyce's day, in part due to colonialism, was stuck in stories of the past which of course would include gossip and rumor. To Joyce this was a form of paralysis. But there was also rebellion. Every open rebellion like Sinn Fein begins with communication - secret meetings are held. Reports are given, perhaps in part propaganda. Terms like "Betrayal", or "usurper", were used by Joyce in *U* in interaction with the English Haines for instance.

John Gordon and others point out that there was also Anti-Semitism in Ireland at this time. the term "Dirty Jew" & rumor that Jews swindled the poor of Ireland, and even of Jewish ritual sacrifice of Christian children. The term "Shylock" stresses Jewishness. Joyce brings anti-Semitism to light in *U* with Leopold Bloom and his Jewish inheritance.

Joyce shows the reality of poverty, when it was often covered up. He satirizes discourses about the poor like the passage in *FW* on a caseworker's report about a tenement house, using the word "respectable" in a very ironic way, pointing out the fallacy of the report amid the squalor of tenements. In the "Oxen" chapter of *U*, the medical students divide society into "high" and "low" orders and denigrate "lay folk" or "the lewd, the low" which brings this discrimination to our attention. Joyce shows the ignorance and bigotry in the terms "Injuns". "coons", etc.

An oft-quoted remark: A priest said "Bruno was a terrible heretic", and Joyce replied "He was terribly burned". The truth is that a great philosopher was burned at the stake because of erroneous beliefs.

In folklore-rich Ireland, a professional story-teller, ollav or minstrel recited historic tales, at public events. But, as Joyce recognized, they were also improvised and some historical contradictions were overlooked.

Alan Friedman tells of the Irish custom of welcoming travelers, including passing beggars. A guest would repay hospitality with storytelling, music or news from abroad, including gossip.

Clive Hart and David Hayman in *James Joyce's Ulysses* describe story tellers in any Irish pub, with wit and melodrama, models for Joyce. There is the "so-he-says, so-then I say" story of which he or she is the star, with all of the pub arguing about what is most real. Political argument was included. The humble beginning of literature including legends, myths and history is simply stories and there are different versions of many. Some say the

serpent slain by Cuchulainn was really an eel. There are versions of the myth of Lia Fail, the stone that supposedly spoke when an Irish King stood on it. Yeats' folk tales that he collected as he travelled to small towns and villages in Ireland is an example. The Irish in Joyce's day pictured a return of Finn, their hero, and a return of the "good old days" or "Golden Age". Joyce spoofs hero worship with humor and gigantism and a mocking of bardic hist. His parody of description of an Irish hero "...A broadshouldered deepchested stronglimbed frankeyed redhaired freelyfreckled shaggybearded widemouthed largenosed longheaded deepvoiced barekneed brawnyhanded hairylegged ruddyfaced sinewyarmed hero. From shoulder to shoulder he measured several ells."

The line between history and myth is blurred; when kings were gods, the king was history, the god was myth. Finn MacCool is both history and myth for instance. But for Joyce the historical includes the non-heroic, dirty, trivial, and obscene. His laughter helped to counter revivalist attempts based on notions of racial and linguistic purity.

Although myths and legends are often based upon some true event, they are changed and embellished. "Buckley and the Russian General" is a good example of a story handed down that becomes legend and history, and is used by Joyce in *FW*.

Sacred writing gets corrected & reshaped, with new interpretation, by a new generation. The Bible is history or legend depending on your point of view. For Joyce, gossip & history are aspects of the same thing, interrelated. Writing does not really make history permanent. Deasy's words in the "Nestor" chapter of *U* is an example of trivial aspects and non-essentials of history and of dogmatism.

In court two eye witnesses to the same event tell it differently and both swear to what they saw. "So help me God and kiss the book", or "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." But people's court testimony is refuted all the time. Joyce's humor on this shows in the "Circe" chapter of *U*: "The accused will now make a bogus statement". Bloom, on trial for improper advances to females, and there is Miss Dunn's testimony about his "Unspeakable message telephoned to hear" The evidence here is *U* is questionable. It is even moreso in *FW*. HCE/Earwicker calls the whole universe to witness that his wares are straight & true, have been since the

beginning of time. "I am a gentleman of the manor born." But..."Its all being taken down for the morning papers...Streamer headlines...Look to your reputat..you're in for it now! And here's witnesses! You'll have loss of fame..." Finally everyone in Dublin knows. Quote: "Bring us this day our maily bag! All the news & scandals."

Bernard Benstock in *Joyce-Again's Wake* says: "*FW* is one long gossip tale told at a hurried pace in a hushed tone behind the back of one's hand." It tells us "But first of all, worst of all."

Here is not proper English but even that of humble washerwomen. The commonplace includes the nmidden heap of world literature mixed in with gossip and rumor. It shows that there is no fixity in history really. Also we see that the belief that monuments and museums absolutely embody history is refuted. In the "museyroom", where the guide is Kate the Janitress. Joyce pokes fun at monuments as Earwicker points to the Wellington monument to prove his claim of innocence, even as the passage hints of shady business. Anna Livia Plurabelle runs loftily refuting the slanderous news about her husband as people contradict one another. The driver of a jaunting car tells passengers. There is gossip on the radio in the pub as well. In *FW* nothing can be taken at face value. It also shows up some history that has been repressed. As Bernard Benstock points out, Mutt and Jute "mishear" each other because of predisposition.

There are, quote: "3 score & 10 possible readings" of *FW* and as Philip Kitcher reminds us, of a life. All we have is fragments; we do not need to decide on one version, they coexist, as Joyce shows.

Thus the humble and sometimes despised underbelly of communication, gossip and rumor, is uncovered by Joyce in every age and all walks of life, and records, and is used to make the commonplace heard and to point the fallacies, pretensions and bias in statements of both the commonplace and those with labels of officialdom or sacredness, of authority and respectability.

Elaine Mingus  
June 2009

## QUOTES FROM *FINNEGANS WAKE* ON GOSSIP AND RUMOR

"By the beard of the Prophet"

"Hard to identifine" 5.15 or 51.06

"They tell the story...how one happygogusty ides-of-April morning..." 35.1/2

"Or whatever it was they threed to make out he thried to do..." 196.10

"Walls have ears."

HCE and "fibfib fabrications".

"Come here...till I tell you a wig in your ear. It's secret! I had it from lamppost shawe, who had it from Mullah who took it from a Bluecoat scholar."

"Blusterbuss blowharding about all he didn't do." 273.23/24

"My wife and I thinks..." 336.26

"Written in smoke and blurred by mist and signed of solitude." 337.13-14

"Rehearsal of old scandal."

"Cupped his years to catch the me's to you..." 321.22

"GIDDYGADDY, GRANNYMA, GOSSIPACEOUS ANNA LIVIA". I.7

Messages "from tubb to buttom all falsetissues."

"Tell me all. Tell me now. You'll die when you hear." 196.05

"Call a spate a spate." 198.19

"Tell me every tiny teign" 201.21

"O its too screaming! I can't go on!" 206.15

"O but you must, you must really tell me more!" She wore..." 206.16

"Lordy, Lordy, did she so? Well, of all the ones ever I heard!" 200.29

"Are you sarthin suir?"... 203.19

"What had she on, the little old oddity?" 207.26

"I lovat a gabber. I could listen to moure and moravar again." 213.08

"Well you know or don't you kennet or havn't I told you every telling has a taling and that's the he and the she of it." 213.11-12

"O TELL ME MORE!" "Had she at all? I can't rightly tell you that, some say."  
I.08

"Mutther gossip!" 623.03

"Tellmetale" 8 references

"First and last only true account" 107.01

"One more unlookedfor conclusion leaped at." 108.29

"All these events they are probably as like those which may have taken place as any others which never took person at all." 110.20

"UNTITLED MAMAFESTA MEMORIALIS" . 104.04

"Oldworld epistola of their weatherings and their marryings and their burying." 117.28

"Scandalknivery...would that be a talltale too?" 510.27

"I will tell you all sorts of makeup things, strangerous." 625.05

"pillow talk" and "chithouse chat." I.3

Rules for patrons of pub "pubchat", "smutty talk in bar strictly prohib." II.3

"Story of one that spied upo two, was caught by7 three and set the whole town talking."

They had heard or had heard said or had heard said written." 369.16

**THERE ARE DOZENS MORE, THESE ARE JUST MY FAVORITES  
ALONG WITH THE ONES INCLUDED IN THE PAPER.**

## SOURCES FOR THIS PAPER

NOTE: For "secondary sources" familiar to most readers of Joyce, I have simply named authors referred to within the paper.

These include: James Atherton, Bernard Benstock, Frank Budgen, Anthony Burgess, Richard Ellman, Don Gifford, Stuart Gilbert, John Gordon, Clive Hart, Hugh Kenner, Philip Kitcher, Roland McHugh, Margot Norris, William York Tindall.

### OTHER SOURCES:

Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory*,

Bergman, Jorn: *Discreet Indiscretions*, Walter de Gruyter, Inc., NY, 1993.

Dunbar, Robin, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*,

Howard Univ. Press, Cambridge Miss., 1996.

Fairhill, James: *James Joyce and the Question of History*,

Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993.

Friedman, Alan: *Party Pieces*, Syracuse Univ. Press, Syracuse NY, 2007.

Frye, Northrup, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton Univ. Press,

Princeton NJ, 2000.

Gibson, Andrew, *Joyce's Revenge*, Oxford Univ. Press, NY 2002

Jameson, Fredric, *The Political Unconscious*, Cornell Univ. Press, 1981

McAndrews, Frank T. "The Science of Gossip", *Scientific American Mind*,

New York, NY, Oct./Nov. 2008.

Pinker, Steven, *The Stuff of Thought*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 1998.

Rosnow, Ralph & Fine, Gary: *Rumor and Gossip*, Elsevir Sc. Publishing Co., Inc.,

NY, 1976.