A CRITIC AT LARGE

SILENCE, EXILE, PUNNING

James Joyce’s chance encounters.

BY LOUIS MENAND

JULY 2, 2012
On a day in May, 1922, in Paris, a medical student named Pierre Mérigot de Treigny was asked by his teacher, Dr. Victor Morax, a well-known ophthalmologist, to attend to a patient who had telephoned complaining about pain from iritis, an inflammation of the eye. The student went to the patient’s apartment, in a residential hotel on the Rue de l’Université. Inside, he found a scene of disarray. Clothes were hanging everywhere; toilet articles were scattered around on chairs and the mantelpiece. A man wearing dark glasses and wrapped in a blanket was squatting in front of a pan that contained the remains of a chicken. A woman was sitting across from him. There was a half-empty bottle of wine next to them on the floor. The man was James Joyce. A few months before, on February 2nd, he had published what some people regarded then, and many people regard now, as the greatest work of prose fiction ever written in the English language.

The woman was Nora Barnacle. She and Joyce were unmarried, and had two teen-age children, Giorgio and Lucia, who were living with them in the two-room apartment. The conditions in which the student discovered them were not typical—Joyce lived in luxury whenever he could afford it, and often when he couldn’t—but the scene was emblematic. Joyce was a nomad. He was born in 1882, in Rathgar, a suburb of Dublin, and grew up the oldest of ten surviving children. After he started school, his family changed houses nine times in eleven years, an itinerancy not always undertaken by choice. They sometimes moved, with their shrinking stock of possessions, at night, in order to escape the attention of creditors. They did not leave a forwarding address.

James was the favorite of his charming, cantankerous, and dissolute father, John Stanislaus Joyce, and was adored by his brothers and sisters. They called him Sunny Jim, because he laughed at everything. He was a brilliant student when he chose to excel, a prodigy; and, despite the family’s relentless downward spiral—John Joyce wasted a considerable inheritance—he received a serious education at Jesuit schools. By the time he got his degree, from University College, Dublin, in 1902, the family was living in the northern suburb of Cabra. A friend later described the house: “The banisters were broken, the grass in the
back-yard was all blackened out. There was laundry there and a few chickens, and it was a very very
miserable home.” Joyce’s mother, Mary, died there, of liver cancer, in 1903.

Joyce left Ireland a year later, when he was twenty-two, but he never really left the manner of life he
had known. Like his father, he was a raconteur and a barfly. He had a good tenor voice (as did John
Joyce), and he loved to sing and to dance. When he had no money, he borrowed it; when he had it, he
picked up the tab for whatever company he was in, booked himself and his family into fancy hotels, and
bought fur coats for Nora and Lucia. He was generous in the free-spirited way that only the inveterately
insolvent can be.

For many
years after he
moved to the
Continent, he
scraped a
living as a
language
teacher in
Berlitz
schools, a job
he disliked.
He started out
in Pula,
moved to Trieste, to Rome, then back to Trieste, and, finally, to Zurich. He changed residences regularly
wherever he was, sometimes under a landlord’s gun. In 1920, he moved to Paris, where he was supported
by patrons and—though only toward the end of his life, since “Ulysses” was banned for twelve years in
the United States and for fourteen in Britain—by royalties. During the twenty years he lived in Paris, he
had eighteen different addresses.

“A man of small virtue, inclined to extravagance and alcoholism” is how Joyce described himself to
Carl Jung. He was frail—he avoided contact sports like rugby as a child and barroom pugilism as a
grownup—and he was frequently laid low by nervous attacks and illnesses. His eye troubles forced him
to submit to a series of tricky and painful operations. At times, he was virtually blind. When he wrote,
which he did usually stretched out across a bed, he wore a white jacket, so that light was reflected onto
the paper; as he got older, he used a magnifying glass, in addition to his eyeglasses, to read.

After the Second World War broke out and the Germans occupied Paris, Joyce managed to get to
Switzerland. He died there, in Zurich, of a perforated ulcer, on January 13, 1941. He was fifty-eight, and
a very old man. He had burned the candle all the way down. He had spent eight years on “Ulysses,” and
fifteen years on “Finnegans Wake,” which was published in 1939. “My eyes are tired,” he wrote in a letter to Giorgio, in 1935. “For over half a century, they have gazed into nullity where they have found a lovely nothing.”

Joyce had a lot of bad luck in the literary marketplace. Four publishers turned down his first book, a volume of poems called “Chamber Music.” He spent nine years getting his story collection, “Dubliners,” into print. It was rejected by eight publishers. At least thirteen printers refused to set his first novel, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,” in full. His play, “Exiles,” after being turned down by theatre companies in Ireland and England, opened in Munich, was poorly received, and closed almost immediately. It took Joyce two years to obtain an injunction against a pirated American version of “Ulysses.” And, throughout his career, he had chronic censorship afflictions, even with “Finnegans Wake,” a book that people said was unreadable—which ought to have made the question of obscenity moot. But he was lucky in his biographer.

Richard Ellmann started his biography of Joyce in 1947. He was therefore able to interview people who had known his subject. The medical student who reported on Joyce’s ménage on the Rue de l’Université, for example, was a discovery of Ellmann’s. Ellmann was an energetic researcher, an eloquent writer, and a scholar whose specialty was Irish literature. (His first book was a critical biography of William Butler Yeats.) He understood the man—“this bizarre and wonderful creature who turned literature and language on end,” he called him—and he understood the work. Not every literary biography has all those things going for it.

Ellmann’s “James Joyce” came out in 1959. The English novelist Anthony Burgess, another dedicated Joycean, judged it “the greatest literary biography of the century,” and many people have filed concurrences. Ellmann didn’t start working on the book steadily until 1952. Considering the quantity of information it holds, he wrote it in an amazingly short amount of time, and a reader can feel how fully he was possessed by his project, and how much fun he found the job to be. That, too, is not an impression left by most eight-hundred-page biographies. The book was reprinted twice, with corrections and additions, and a revised edition was published in 1982. (Ellmann suffered from A.L.S.—Lou Gehrig’s disease—but he was able to finish a second major biography, of Oscar Wilde, which appeared in 1987, the year of his death.)

So the first question that a writer contemplating a biography of Joyce has to ask is whether we really need another one. It’s true that more is known about Joyce and his world. Since 1982, biographies of John Joyce (by John Wyse Jackson and Peter Costello), of Nora (by Brenda Maddox), and of Lucia (by Carol Loeb Shloss) have come out, and there has been fresh biographical work on Joyce himself. Gordon Bowker’s “James Joyce: A New Biography” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) is a kind of synthesis of this research—along with some material, now in Ellmann’s papers, that Ellmann elected not to use. Bowker
is a clear and prudent writer, and his labors count as a service to scholarship. But he never indicates
where he thinks earlier accounts got things wrong; his biography is an update, not a revision. It doesn’t
affect our understanding of Joyce or of what Joyce wrote.

“It is enlightening to view the work of a highly autobiographical writer like Joyce in the context of his
life,” Bowker says. Well, yes—that’s exactly what Ellmann demonstrated more than fifty years ago. And
Joyce himself could hardly have been more explicit. The invitation to understand his fiction as fashioned
from the facts of his own experience is one of the few things in Joyce’s work not to be taken ironically.

“As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies, from day to day, their molecules shuttled to
and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image,” Stephen Dedalus explains (a little grandly, but
Stephen is a little grand) to the Dublin literati, in “Ulysses.” “So in the future, the sister of the past, I may
see myself as I sit here now but by reflection from that which then I shall be.” Stephen is imagining
himself, many years later, as Joyce, writing “Ulysses” and imagining himself, many years earlier, as
Stephen.

Bowker’s notion of how life relates to art is more mechanical. He thinks, for example, that “John’s
habit of regular long walks around Dublin and environs . . . foreshadows the wandering narrative line
which snakes through most of his son’s fiction”—an observation that does not do a lot of interpretive
work. As many previous commentators have, he matches up names and events in Joyce’s books with
their likely real-life counterparts, which is an entertaining game but not a challenging one, since Joyce
usually did little or nothing to disguise the originals of his characters. He often gave them their real
names. Joyce’s dramatis personae include a lot of “as himself” parts. It’s one of the reasons he never
returned to Ireland after “Ulysses” came out: many people in Dublin were prepared to sue him for libel.

Joyce didn’t use actual people and places because he was settling scores, or because he was writing
disguised autobiography, or because he lacked invention. The relation between his world and his fiction
is much stranger than that. In November, 1921, he wrote to his aunt Josephine, in Dublin, to ask if she
could tell him whether it was possible “for an ordinary person to climb over the area railings of no 7
Eccles street, either from the path or the steps, lower himself from the lowest part of the railings till his
feet are within 2 feet or 3 of the ground and drop unhurt.” He had seen it done, he told her, but by
someone with an athletic build; he wanted to make sure that an ordinary man could do it. He needed the
information because he was editing the “Ithaca” chapter of “Ulysses,” in which Leopold Bloom, who has
forgotten his latchkey, enters his house, at 7 Eccles Street, by this method. He had made up Bloom. Why
couldn’t he just make up the height of the railings?

Bowker has relatively little critical interest in what Joyce was up to as a writer. And, if you’re not
interested in that, you’re not going to produce a very satisfying biography. The writing is where the
action is. Joyce lived in eventful times, but he did not lead an eventful life. After he moved to Paris, he
socialized mostly with his family and, since he was a suspicious man who suffered from a mild but
persistent persecution complex, with a small circle of trusted associates. He did not reveal himself to strangers. He knew his famous contemporaries—Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway—but his attitude toward them was fairly aloof. He could be self-absorbed far beyond the point of mere incivility. The only things that really mattered to him were his family and his art.

In 1932, two young Americans, Dwight Macdonald and George Morris, recent Yale graduates with an interest in modern literature and art, were in Paris, where they bought a copy of “Ulysses,” still outlawed in the United States, at the English-language bookstore Shakespeare and Company. They got into a conversation with the owner, Sylvia Beach, the woman who had published “Ulysses,” and she arranged for them to meet Joyce. They showed up at Joyce’s apartment and plied him eagerly with questions about his work. He was unresponsive. “It was like trying to open a safe without the combination,” Macdonald later said. Finally, one of them made a remark about people not knowing what to do with their lives. Joyce suddenly perked up. He gestured toward the window. “There are people who go walkin’ up and down the street,” he said, “and they don’t know what they want.”

He knew what he wanted. Bowker reports someone’s remembrance of Joyce as a little boy at parties with neighborhood children: “Sometimes, donning a red cap, he played the Devil, condemning some of them to hell, which he decided was under a wheelbarrow.” The artist was already at work. “Joyce’s court,” as Ellmann put it, “is always in session.” Joyce’s favorite writer was Dante, another exile, who created a verbal universe that he populated with old Florentine comrades and enemies, each caricatured with exquisite precision for all time, and who placed at the center of his imaginary cosmos a woman he had fallen in love with after seeing her on the street, Beatrice Portinari.

Joyce’s Beatrice, of course, was Nora. She came from Galway, and was working as a chambermaid at Finn’s Hotel, in Dublin, when he saw her walking along Nassau Street in a manner suggesting that she was approachable. “Sauntering” is how Joyce later described it. He duly approached, and asked her for a date. She agreed, but stood him up. He sent her a note. “I went home quite dejected,” it said. “I would like to make an appointment but it might not suit you. I hope you will be kind enough to make one with me—if you have not forgotten me!” This time, they did meet. They walked to Ringsend, on the south bank of the Liffey, where (and here we can drop the Dante analogy) she put her hand inside his trousers and masturbated him. It was June 16, 1904, the day on which Joyce set “Ulysses.” When people celebrate Bloomsday, that is what they are celebrating.

Ellmann chose to omit the sexual details in his account of the first date with Nora, although there are several references to the incident in Joyce’s letters. After a date, Joyce took one of Nora’s gloves home with him, and he writes to her to say that he has slept with it: “Your glove lay beside me all night—unbuttoned—but otherwise conducted itself very properly—like Nora.” In August, he tells her that what happened was “a kind of sacrament, and the recollection of it fills me with amazed joy.” Five years later,
on a trip to Dublin, he writes to her in Trieste: “It was not I who first touched you long ago down at Ringsend. It was you who slid your hand down down inside my trousers . . . and frigged me slowly until I came off through your fingers, all the time bending over me and gazing at me out of your quiet saintlike eyes.” On that night, he tells her in another letter, she “made me a man.”

Joyce had known only prostitutes and proper middle-class girls. Nora was something new, an ordinary woman who treated him as an ordinary man. The moral simplicity of what happened between them seems to have stunned him. It was elemental, a gratuitous act of loving that had not involved flattery or deceit, and that was unaccompanied by shame or guilt. That simplicity became the basis of their relationship.

Nothing is purely elemental in the day-to-day, of course; the partnership had its share of tensions, and Joyce and Nora often quarrelled. Intellectually, they were ill matched, to put it mildly. She read very little of his work, which exasperated him, and she sometimes said that she wished he had become a singer. He was jealous of men in her past. The character Michael Furey, who dies after standing all night in the rain outside Gretta’s window, in “The Dead,” is based on one of Nora’s Galway boyfriends, Michael Feeney. (Two of Nora’s boyfriends died when she was dating them; the girls at the convent where she boarded in Galway called her the “man-killer.”)

But he hated to be apart from her. When he was away, and they were still young, he wrote her pornographic letters. (Readers with scholarly curiosity can find these in the “Selected Letters of James Joyce,” edited by Ellmann. Readers with scholarly curiosity and a lot of money might want to know that, in 2004, an unpublished pornographic letter was sold at auction for four hundred and forty-six thousand dollars.) He wrote her love letters, too. “I have enormous belief in the power of a simple honorable soul. You are that, are you not, Nora?” he wrote to her from Ireland, on one of his last visits there, in 1909. “I want you to say to yourself: Jim, the poor fellow I love, is coming back. He is a poor weak impulsive man and he prays to me to defend him and make him strong.” Later, on the same trip: “I thought of one who held me in her hand like a pebble. . . . Everything that is noble and exalted and deep and true and moving in what I write comes, I believe, from you.” They eventually married, in London, in 1931, but only in order to safeguard their children’s inheritance.

The story in “A Portrait of the Artist” of how Stephen Dedalus metamorphoses from an acolyte bound for the priesthood into a man of high aesthetic purpose can give a misleading idea of Joyce’s sense of vocation. Joyce didn’t think that art was a substitute for religion, or that it had spiritual sources or powers. He didn’t believe in miracles. He believed in coincidences. “Chance furnishes me with what I need,” he told a Swiss friend when he was writing “Finnegans Wake.” “I’m like a man who stumbles; my foot strikes something, I look down, and there is exactly what I’m in need of.”

He was a master of rhetoric, as he was a master of mimicry, but his preferred figure of speech was
one of the lowest, the pun. “After all, the Holy Roman Catholic Apostolic Church was built on a pun,” he said to a friend, Frank Budgen. “It ought to be good enough for me.” (Joyce meant the verses in Matthew, where Jesus tells Simon Peter, “Thou art Peter”—an Anglicization of the Greek Petros—“and upon this rock”—petra—“I will build my church.”) A pun is a verbal coincidence: a word that just happens to sound like another word. In this respect, the whole of “Ulysses” (“Oolissays” is how Joyce pronounced it) is a kind of pun. It’s a story about people and events on a day in Dublin that, when told in a certain way, “sounds like” Homer’s Odyssey.

Telling the story in that certain way, assigning the bits he or she has stumbled across in life to their places in a symbolic order—picking out the damned and throwing them under the wheelbarrow—is the artist’s task. This is why the materials of Joyce’s fiction are found objects, “the reality of experience,” as Stephen puts it at the end of “A Portrait of the Artist.” The writer begins with the arbitrary, the accidental, the insignificant (the area railings outside a house on Eccles Street, say), and he transmutes them into an object that has intention, design, and significance (Odysseus, when he at last returns to Ithaca, must enter his own house by a stratagem) but that is purely imaginary. He looks into nullity, and finds there a lovely nothing.

Joyce knew Jung because he sent Lucia, who, as she grew older, began having violent fits, to him for treatment in Zurich. Jung could do nothing for her: she was schizophrenic and, to Joyce’s great distress, was ultimately institutionalized. (Jung thought that Joyce was schizophrenic, too, but that he was functional because he was a genius.) Joyce was contemptuous of psychoanalysis. He called Jung “the Swiss Tweedledum who is not to be confused with the Viennese Tweedledee”—though he was amused, characteristically, that Freud’s name, in English translation, is a near-homophone of Joyce. And Jung, somewhat surprisingly, found “Ulysses” disturbing and perplexing. He had a hard time getting through it, and he wrote an essay, in 1932, in which he tried to sort through his reaction to the book.

“What is so staggering about ‘Ulysses,’ ” he wrote, “is the fact that behind a thousand veils nothing lies hidden; that it turns neither toward the mind nor toward the world, but, as cold as the moon looking on from cosmic space, allows the drama of growth, being, and decay to pursue its course.” This was a remarkable insight into Joyce’s intention. “Not only will the reader know everything and know it in the baldest coldest way,” Joyce had told a friend while he was working on the “Ithaca” section, the chapter he liked best. “But Bloom and Stephen thereby become heavenly bodies, wanderers like the stars at which they gaze.”

Joyce was referring to the moment when, having consummated their meeting late in the night, at 7 Eccles Street, with hot chocolate, Bloom and Stephen leave the house in a manner that is figured as a comic version of the Passover celebration (as the novel opens with a mock celebration of the Catholic Mass performed by a man shaving):
In what order of precedence, with what attendant ceremony was the exodus from the house of bondage to the wilderness of inhabitation effected?

Lighted Candle in Stick borne by
BLOOM

Diaconal Hat on Ashplant borne by
STEPHEN.

With what intonation secreto of what commemorative psalm?

The 113th, modus peregrinus: In exitu Israël de Egypto: domus Jacob de populo barbaro.

What did each do at the door of egress?

Bloom set the candlestick on the floor. Stephen put the hat on his head.

For what creature was the door of egress a door of ingress?

For a cat.

What spectacle confronted them when they, first the host, then the guest, emerged silently, doubly dark, from obscurity by a passage from the rere of the house into the penumbra of the garden?

The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit.

Dante ends all three books of his Comedy with the word stelle—stars. And—this part not in Dante—Stephen and Bloom consecrate the occasion by urinating together in the garden.

From a certain point of view—it would be God’s point of view, except that, as there is no God in Joyce, it’s the artist’s—Bloom and Stephen (or James and Nora) are just some of the stuff of the universe. That they have inner lives, lives filled with highly particular memories and sensations, means, cosmically, nothing. Seen from that enormous distance, they are just doing what their sort of stuff does—coming into consciousness, reproducing, dying.

Joyce was fond of the line in Ovid “Everything changes, nothing is lost.” He thought that, from some vast superhuman distance, the people in “Ulysses” are just like the people in Homer. They are tracing the same patterns, walking through the same roles, struggling to work out the same sets of relations: husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter—who will become, in their time, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers.

“Finnegans Wake” is Joyce’s effort to give imaginative expression to this conception of human life. The entire book is made out of portmanteaus and puns.

But I’m loothing them that’s here and all I lothe. Loonely in me loneness. For all their faults. I am passing out. O bitter ending! I’ll slip away before they’re up. They’ll never see. Nor know. Nor miss me. And it’s old and old it’s sad and old it’s sad and weary I go back to you, my cold father, my cold mad father, my cold mad feary father, till the near sight of the mere size of him, the moyles and moyles of it, moananoaning, makes me seasilt saltsick and I rush, my only, into your arms.
“Finnegans Wake” is not a prose poem, which is probably how many people would like to read it. It’s a work of realist fiction. It’s just that the reality it represents is nighttime reality, the dream life, which Joyce believed required the invention of a new mode of language. Normal syntax is designed for a law-abiding reality, for a reality that is organized temporally, spatially, and causally. In dreams, these laws are suspended, which means that, to represent the dream life, normal syntax has to be suspended, too. And images in dreams can represent two things at once, as when we dream of X and know all the time that it is Y. This is why punning is the language of the night.

“Work in Progress,” as the book was known until its publication, confounded many of Joyce’s admirers. They thought that he was wasting his time, and they let him know it. “Nothing so far as I make out, nothing short of divine vision or a new cure for the clapp can possibly be worth all the circumambient peripherization,” Pound wrote to Joyce. Harriet Shaw Weaver, who had serialized “A Portrait of the Artist” and a portion of “Ulysses” in her little magazine, The Egoist, and who was Joyce’s principal benefactor (her maternal grandfather had made a fortune in the cotton industry), complained that she did not like “your Wholesale Safety Pun Factory.”

Joyce was upset—he was a hypersensitive man—but he persevered. He loved writing the book; Nora used to hear him laughing to himself as he worked. It was an enormous task, and when it was finished one of his loyal assistants, Paul Léon, wrote to Weaver to tell her that Joyce was exhausted. “He has actually consumed almost all of his substance, physical and spiritual, moral and material in the writing of a book likely to be received with derision by his ill-wishers and with pained pleasure by his friends. And in this attitude he has remained true to himself.”

Joyce’s flight to Switzerland during the Second World War was a perilous business. He had refused the offer of an Irish passport, which would have got him safely out of France, and his application for a Swiss entrance visa was held up, apparently because the authorities believed that he was Jewish. (“There’s a remarkable discovery” was his reaction.) But he got out, with Nora and their son and grandson (Lucia remained, in a French asylum), arriving in Geneva on December 14, 1940. Less than a month later, he was dead. Nora’s request to repatriate the body to Ireland was refused by the Irish chargé d’affaires in Paris.

“Ulysses” was never banned in Ireland. People there who hated the book weren’t simply offended by the obscenity. They didn’t like what they saw of themselves in it. George Bernard Shaw called the novel’s language “blackguardly,” and said that his own hand could never have formed the words. But he conceded that the book was a masterpiece. He, too, had been a young man in Dublin, and he recognized the city he had known. “‘Ulysses’ is a document,” he told a friend, “the outcome of a passion for documentation that is as fundamental as the artistic passion. . . . If a man holds up a mirror to your nature and shows you that it needs washing—not whitewashing—it is no use breaking the mirror.” As Joyce
said when he was told that his aunt Josephine had refused to read the book, “If ‘Ulysses’ isn’t fit to read, life isn’t fit to live.”

Henry James, in an essay called “The Art of Fiction,” in 1884, said that in England and America people see more than they think it’s proper to say, and they say more than they think it’s proper to read. More than any other English writer, Joyce destroyed that decorum. He paid a terrible price for it.

Joyce persisted in what he called his “voluntary exile” in order to write the way he wanted to write. This meant that he had to endure continual rejection and critical abuse. His writing was repeatedly censored, and his greatest work had to be published in France, where it was set by French printers, who introduced thousands of typos into the text. The obscenity trial of “Ulysses” in the United States was by no means a pro-forma affair: when the American trial-court judge, John Woolsey, declared “Ulysses” not obscene, in 1933, the Justice Department appealed, and the decision had to be confirmed by the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. But by his persistence Joyce established a principle, which is that the artist must have absolute freedom to work with the world he or she has stumbled across, the world as it is. That most of us now take this for granted is largely because of him.

The price Joyce paid was not only in the coin of professional tribulation. After 1912, he never saw Dublin again, although he never wrote about any other place, and to the end of his life he was desperate for news of the city and its people. He also had to leave behind most of his family. He could not be present for his father’s funeral.

John Joyce was buried by a man named Corny Kelleher—which is the name of the undertaker’s assistant in “Ulysses.” It was New Year’s Day, 1932. Six weeks later, Giorgio and his wife, Helen, had a son, Stephen. Joyce wrote a poem on the occasion, “Ecce Puer,” which ends:

A child is sleeping:
An old man gone.
O, father forsaken,
Forgive your son!

One of the Irishmen who hung around Joyce in Paris was Arthur Power, an aspiring man of letters whose renown rests entirely on a book called “Conversations with James Joyce,” published in 1974. Although these “conversations” were reconstructed by Power more than forty years after they are supposed to have taken place, Bowker (like other biographers) quotes from them verbatim, as though they were reliable records of Joyce’s own words. Still, we can assume that they represent the gist of their exchanges.

One of the last exchanges Power recounts occurred, he says, in 1932. “I have just received very important news,” Joyce told him. “A son has been born to Giorgio and Helen in Paris.” “Is that all?” Power asked. “It is the most important thing there is,” Joyce replied. Power took this to mean that “the
most important thing there is” was that another Joyce had come into the world. He reports that he felt that “egotism has its limit,” and he told Joyce, “I cannot see that it is so important.” A tense silence followed. “Our relationship was never the same again,” he says. No wonder. He had missed completely the idea that Joyce had spent his entire life trying, in the most comical and fantastical way he could imagine, to express. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: DELPHINE LEBOURGEOS

Subscribe now to get more of The New Yorker's signature mix of politics, culture, and the arts.
Silence is ace card of the observant being. Exile is the elixir. Cunning is the necessary evil. These are the three Deathly Hallows (using a Harry Potter reference sorry). James Joyce here provides a brilliant insight into the mind of a cerebral being. I think these words are resonant still today. Silence is golden, if I may be allowed to be stereotypical. One must always observe the world around to derive the path to follow and to decide on the means to use. Silence can open doors even debate cannot.