Andrew Goodspeed
South East European University

"Memento homo upon my bum": Humor and Self-Satire in Joyce's "Gas from a Burner"

James Joyce's poetry is meritorious and—despite Wyndham Lewis's jibe that it "would hardly even have set the Liffey on fire for five minutes" (Lewis, 75)—possesses numerous excellences. Joyce's poetry is intimate; it is controlled; it is idiosyncratically but compellingly antiquarian; and it is technically excellent. There is a consistency throughout his poems that may be understood as a balanced congruity among tone, theme, and word selection. The poems are also highly musical, as is evident in the varied musical settings they have attracted. This musicality was praised in an early review by Ezra Pound, who noted that "in nearly every poem the motif is so slight that the poem scarcely exists until one thinks of it as set to music; and the workmanship is so delicate that out of twenty readers scarce one will notice its fineness." (Pound, 413)

But Joyce's published poetry is not funny: or, one may hope to assert with greater precision, the poetry that Joyce published in his lifetime is not humorous. It is curious to note that the author of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*—one of the most innovatively humorous writers of the twentieth century—published almost exclusively formal, serious, and often brooding verses. This tonal gravity is particularly evident in full collections of his poems, which incorporate his private verses, culled primarily from personal correspondence. These epistolary verses are frequently playful, comic, light-hearted, and satirical of both his colleagues and himself, or at least of his difficulties and obstacles. It is a striking distinction. Joyce's public verses are evocative, traditional, measured, and often melancholic; his private poems are spirited, mischievous, and funny. Anthony Burgess greatly admired Joyce's work, and expressed a preference for Joyce's humorous verse to the serious: "Joyce the versifier is best in lampoons and in the occasional parodies and private satires he wrote for his friends." (Burgess, 70)

There are, of course, two notable exceptions to the general humorlessness of his published poetry: "The Holy Office" and "Gas from a Burner." These exceptional verses are two satirical broadsides, lampooning and attacking the literary community in Dublin ("The Holy Office," 1904) and the culturally parochial, artistically timid publishing world of Ireland ("Gas from a Burner," 1912). These sardonic, satirical blasts did not appear in either of his published poetry collections (*Chamber Music*, 1907; *Pomes Penyeach*, 1927), but he had sufficient commitment to them to have them published for his own

distribution. As such, they represent the most precise evidence we possess of Joyce's use of humor in poetry written for public readership.

This present essay seeks briefly, therefore, to investigate and to analyze Joyce's use of humor in the poem "Gas from a Burner." It does this not only because the poem is one of the least studied works in Joyce's oeuvre; it also postulates that Joyce's use of humor in the poem is consistent with three of his major concerns as a prose artist. It suggests that Joyce's poem should be understood as satirizing 1) Ireland, 2) his publisher and printer (as representatives of their trades); and 3) Joyce himself or, more defensibly, the generally vulnerable position of the Irish artist.

The compositional history of the poem is significant to its appreciation. For reasons of spatial economy, these convoluted circumstances will be related here only in the somewhat generalized detail necessary for the comprehension of a reader who may not be familiar with the events; interested readers are referred to the more extensive retelling in Richard Ellmann's biography (Ellmann, 290-337). Briefly, however, the circumstances were these: Joyce had difficulties interesting any publisher in his short story collection *Dubliners*. Eventually he submitted the manuscript to George Roberts of the firm Maunsel and Company. A contract was agreed and signed, but the book did not appear. After what Joyce considered an inexplicable delay he began to press for answers, and was aghast to learn that his publisher now expressed concerns about the text with a shifting variety of objections. Joyce was variously informed that slighting references to the royal family were problematic, that the story "An Encounter" might be misunderstood as prurient or obscene, and eventually that identifiable individuals and businesses would have grounds for legal action against the publisher for having been included in the text. Joyce made noncommittal gestures of accommodation, but generally resisted being compelled to alter his stories for reasons extraneous to artistic improvement. As this maddening fiasco metastasized—this is, remember, one of the greatest short fiction collections of the century at stake—Joyce was newly informed that the printer, a man named Falconer, now also objected to the text, would not release the sheets he had printed, and finally that he had burned all the proofs except for one set in Joyce's possession.

Joyce was furious, indignant, and crushed, but resolute to repay. As Gordon Bowker has observed, "angry and homicidal as he felt, having his book burned was a fitting martyrdom to suffer for the high art of literature. *Dubliners* had not just been rejected; it was condemned to the stake. Few writers could boast such an honour; he would not let the world forget it." (Bowker, 203) Thus angered and disappointed, Joyce repaid his adversaries by writing "Gas from a Burner" on the return journey from Dublin to Trieste, via Flushing and Salzburg. The resultant poem is a 98-line soliloquy expressed by a narrator whose identity either combines Roberts and Falconer in one voice, or at least fluctuates between them. It is a poem structured to ridicule and to amuse, but the "burner" is always behind the text: this is the monologue of someone who burns books

(or, at least, the printing sheets) and any self-justification or self-exculpation is therefore just so much "gas" from a book-burner.

Ireland

As has been noted above, this paper intends to examine three elements of Joyce's humor in "Gas from a Burner," the first of which is Joyce's caustically comic treatment of Ireland. In "Gas from a Burner," Ireland is a nation distinguished by two characteristics: treachery and philistinism. Joyce has his narrator patriotically intone:

> I owe a duty to Ireland:
> I hold her honour in my hand,
> This lovely land that always sent
> Her writers and artists to banishment
> And in a spirit of Irish fun
> Betrayed her own leaders, one by one.
> 'Twas Irish humour, wet and dry,
> Flung quicklime into Parnell's eye;
> 'Tis Irish brains that save from doom
> The leaky barge of the Bishop of Rome
> For everyone knows the Pope can't belch
> Without the consent of Billy Walsh.
> O Ireland my first and only love
> Where Christ and Caesar are hand and glove!
> O lovely land where the shamrock grows!
> (Allow me, ladies, to blow my nose) [Lines 13-28] (Joyce, 103)

This is humorously phrased but is not comedic; it is more akin to the *saeva indignatio* of Swift. Joyce here presents betrayal and parochialism as typically Irish reactions to his own challenging art, but also as being similar manifestations to the treatment accorded Parnell, or indeed to any in Ireland who set themselves as being outside a reflexive Catholicity. In terms of purely comic touches, here only the parenthetical nose-blowing is humorous, and that is so only in the context of the indelicate proximity of "Christ and Caesar."

The passage above also exemplifies the curious incongruity seen throughout this narrator's proclamation. This poem's very Joycean perspective of artists being betrayed is voiced by a narrator (Roberts/Falconer) who asserts that the need of suppressing Joyce's book lies in ostensibly patriotic and social objections. Throughout "Gas from a Burner" the narrator makes such logical slips by which he unwittingly acknowledges that his attempts to defend Ireland are, in fact, the same obstructions that lead to the "banishment" of distinguished Irishmen and to their eventually being "betrayed" by the nation needlessly being protected from them. Joyce saw this in Irish politics: the low

betray the consequential who might lead them ("Parnell's ruination represented to Joyce the most recent act of treachery in a long series of such acts darkening Irish history. He placed his own perceived betrayal within this tradition") (Fairhall, 42). In artistic terms, this defensiveness appears most clearly in the influence of unreflective nationalism on publishing decisions:

> No, ladies, my press shall have no share in
> So gross a libel on Stepmother Erin [Lines 63-64] (Joyce, 104)

Such protectiveness of Irish dignity is portrayed as not merely cowardly and hypocritical, but also as being misplaced. The Ireland of "Gas from a Burner" is a nation from which artists are expelled and in which leaders are betrayed; it is also a nation being literally bewhored by the English:

> In the porch of my printing institute
> The poor and deserving prostitute
> Plays every night at catch-as-catch-can
> With her tight-breeched British artilleryman
> And the foreigner learns the gift of the gab
> From the drunken draggletail Dublin drab. [Lines 79-84] (Joyce, 105)

The poem thus lightly but extensively implies a pointed question: is this the nation morally imperiled by the stories of James Joyce? The "drab" here is in greater ethical danger "in the porch of my printing institute" than she would ever be were she to go off quietly and read *Dubliners*. The hypocrisy and ineffectuality of such nationalism is, therefore, functionally complete: a work of art that might bring distinction to Ireland must be suppressed in order to safeguard the purity of a people whose daughters are already selling themselves on the streets of Dublin.

The Narrator

As has been observed previously, the narrator of "Gas from a Burner" is not clearly Roberts or Falconer—publisher and printer, respectively—as individuals, but is instead a conflation of both. By combining them, Joyce distances his critique from being merely an act of retribution against two specific individuals, and transforms them into representative figures of a broad publishing industry too parochial and timid to be culturally effective.

As the poem develops the narrator emerges as patriotic, self-righteous, loudly Catholic, and performatively moral. He proclaims that "I owe a duty to Ireland: I hold her honour in my hand," yet in terms of practical actions that might potentially influence public culture, he cannot even correctly name the writers he publishes:

I printed poets, sad, silly and solemn:
I printed Patrick What-do-you-Colm:
I printed the great John Milicent Synge
Who soars above on an angel's wing
In the playboy shift that he pinched as swag
From Maunsel's manager's travelling-bag. [Lines 43-48] (Joyce, 104)

Even as he boasts of publishing these poets, he botches their names: both Padraic Colum and John Millington Synge were writers of high achievement, and here the humor of Joyce's presentation depends entirely upon the reader's knowledge of their correct names. Synge, dead only three years at this point, is praised as "soaring on an angel's wing" but does so, ludicrously, in a female "shift." This detail apparently recollects Roberts's former employment as a seller of "ladies' underwear" (Ellmann, 336), which was a detail presumably commonly known to the Dublin literati of the time. More pointedly, however, it also evokes the "Playboy" riots, another occasion in which Irish artistic excellence was met by—from Joyce's perspective—an uproar of bumpkins stirred into protest against a perceived slight to national dignity. Yet behind the humor of this presentation there lies a coldly serious point: if writers of merit are unknown (or at least their names are unclear even to their publishers), and if the primary cultural impact of a play as solid as *The Playboy of the Western World* is a scandal based around naming on a stage the undergarments women wear when sleeping, then Irish literary culture has tumbled to a truly deplorable nadir. That this plummet into unsophistication should be impelled by putative patriots is a galling irony.

The narrator also represents an individualized embodiment of the Irish publishing world. He is, by turns, both pusillanimous and proud:

Shite and onions! Do you think I'll print
The name of the Wellington Monument,
Sydney Parade and the Sandymount tram,
Downe's cakeshop and Williams's jam?
I'm damned if I do—I'm damned to blazes!
Talk about Irish Names of Places!
It's a wonder to me, upon my soul,
He forgot to mention Curly's Hole. [Lines 55-62] (Joyce, 104)

Joyce here mocks the timorousness of publishers who are so frightened of court actions for libel that they will not even print the names of well-known public places, things, or products—household words, but unpublishable in Dublin. Joyce had just experienced precisely the same objection to identifiable references in *Dubliners*. In "Gas from a Burner," however, Joyce has at least the sly satisfaction of printing identifiable references without incurring legal action from "Downe's cakeshop" or "Williams's jam."

The narrator is also portrayed as ostentatiously Catholic. He is engaged in penance that, in its contrition for being entangled with such dubious characters as Joyce and Synge, also travesties the solemn observances of Ash Wednesday. In "Gas from a Burner" the narrator distorts the placing of an ashen cross on the forehead by replacing it with an indecorous crossing of burnt Bible ashes on the buttocks:

> Who was it said: Resist not evil?
> I'll burn that book, so help me devil.
> I'll sing a psalm as I watch it burn
> And the ashes I'll keep in a one-handled urn.
> I'll penance do with farts and groans
> Kneeling upon my marrowbones.
> The very next lent I will unbare
> My penitent buttocks to the air
> And sobbing beside my printing press
> My awful sin I will confess.
> My Irish foreman from Bannockburn
> Shall dip his right hand in the urn
> And sign crisscross with reverent thumb
> *Memento homo* upon my bum. [Lines 85-98] (Joyce, 105)

Several points of satire are notable in the passage above. First, the narrator may assert his fidelity, but in practical terms, he possesses an utter ignorance of the faith ("Who was it said: Resist not evil?"). Secondly, his assertion that he would like to "burn that book"—the Bible—simultaneously exposes his shallow religiosity, aligns him with the censorial burners of books in the past, and exacts a personal retribution for Joyce, whose own burnt book stands now with the Bible as a target for incineration by the self-satisfied, uncultured, and ignorant. Finally, Joyce clearly relishes parodying the religious solemnity of the publicly pious by here asserting the simply ludicrous—"reverent thumb"? "penitent buttocks"?—in order to travesty a serious religious ceremony.

Joyce (the self as character)

James Joyce is unnamed in "Gas from a Burner," but he is the impelling cause of the narrator's complaint, and the resultant ironical self-depiction is both amusing and complex. By placing the criticisms of Joyce in the mouth of the protesting narrator, he both inserts himself satirically into his own poem whilst simultaneously distancing himself from the publisher's attack: the grievances are, narratively, a complaint about Joyce, despite being in a poem by Joyce.

That something is unusual is immediately clear from the first lines. Joyce commonly begins a poem as an intimate conversation, or as a reverie or memory when alone, but here the poem is an open appeal to a general audience. This shows us that the narrator's

automatic appeal is to the mob for support, and it implies what in 1912 was a disputable point: that Joyce's publication troubles would be of interest or consequence to the general public. The narrator thus pleads his case against Joyce directly to the broad masses:

> Ladies and gents, you are here assembled
> To hear why earth and heaven trembled
> Because of the black and sinister arts
> Of an Irish writer in foreign parts.
> He sent me a book ten years ago.
> I read it a hundred times or so,
> Backwards and forwards, down and up,
> Through both the ends of a telescope.
> I printed it all to the very last word
> But by the mercy of the Lord
> The darkness of my mind was rent
> And I saw the writer's foul intent. [Lines 1-12] (Joyce, 103)

Let us note that this is a wonderful beginning for satire: it humorously states the narrator's argument against Joyce while simultaneously demonstrating both the narrator's overwrought morality ("earth and heaven" tend not to tremble because of works of literature) and his inability to understand what Joyce is doing as an artist ("I read it a hundred times or so...through both the ends of a telescope"). Joyce also derides the smug provincialism that sees something dubious in living abroad. This structural tactic aligns his problems with the broader pressures on other Irish writers, particularly those who have expatriated themselves, such as George Moore:

> And a play on the Word and Holy Paul
> And some woman's legs that I can't recall
> Written by Moore, a genuine gent
> That lives on his property's ten per cent [Lines 33-36] (Joyce, 104)

Although Joyce is apparently the narrator's main target, his complaint incorporates other Irish writers of significance who had also been published by Maunsel and Company and had faced criticism, most notable among whom are John Synge, George Moore, Lady Gregory, and Padraic Colum. This is sly, and slightly presumptuous: it implies a parity of renown and public interest. Joyce is now the most famous of them all, but in 1912 he had little to show that would justify a comparison between himself and Synge, or himself and Moore, or even himself and Lady Gregory. But his point is that Irish writers as a group must constantly brave the buffets of hypocrisy and the scorn of public patriots in order to attain the creative freedom necessary for art.

Joyce also charmingly anticipates his later reputation for obscurity:

He sent me a book ten years ago.
I read it a hundred times or so,
Backwards and forwards, down and up,
Through both the ends of a telescope.

Joyce's reputation for being incomprehensible, impenetrable, and unreadable still intimidates potential readers. But even here, in 1912, before he had written anything approximating the challenge of his later works, he already caricatures those who attempt to read him "backwards and forwards, down and up/ Through both the ends of a telescope." He thus offers us not just an amusing image of his baffled reader, but also makes a strong indictment: if one tries to read a collection of short stories via these ineffectual contortions, one simply does not know how to read. That such an approach to understanding literature predominates amongst publishers and printers, who may be presumed to know better, is a condemnation of the lamentable state of Irish publishing.

The narrator's arraignment of Joyce continues:

But I draw the line at that bloody fellow,
That was over here dressed in Austrian yellow,
Spouting Italian by the hour
To O'Leary Curtis and John Wyse Power
And writing of Dublin, dirty and dear,
In a manner no blackamoor printer could bear. [Lines 49-54] (Joyce, 104)

There are five points worthy of attention here. First, although comic, this over-reaction is not excessively exaggerated; Ellmann notes that when Joyce's own father saw this poem he cried out that his son was "an out and out ruffian without the spark of a gentleman." (Ellmann, 337) Joyce met incomprehension even at home. Secondly, Joyce again mocks the Dublin provincialism that regards wearing continental clothes, or speaking a European language, as something dubious. Third, the tattered, comfortable concept of "dear, dirty" Dublin is one that rather hypocritically emphasizes the "dear" element, but reacts truculently when a writer focuses on the "dirty" element of Dublin, or of Dubliners. Fourth, the narrator casually refers to Joyce as "that bloody fellow," using a word that was common enough, but which then as now carried a suggestion of the uncouth. Joyce's critics attack him even as they employ vulgar language to do it: we recall that, six lines later, the narrator cries out "shite and onions!," a somewhat uncommon expostulation. Finally, Joyce positions himself as being—for the publishers, and for this narrator—the worst of the lot of Irish writers, the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. He had not really done enough yet to justify this priority among his fellow writers, but we may permit ourselves the suspicion that in a sly, Joycean way, it was a declaration of intent.

This brings us to the most cunningly structured element of Joyce's self-portrayal and self-satire in "Gas from a Burner." Joyce clearly jeers at and exaggerates the threat his writing poses to the reader, or to society: "Black and sinister arts" in service of "the writer's foul intent" that made "earth and heaven tremble." The humor of the poem will be lost on anyone who does not perceive this as ludicrous hyperbole. Yet what is so clever about this poem is that, by putting these words and criticisms in the mouths of his critics and censors, Joyce produces a genuinely bawdy, vulgar, and blasphemous poem. Consider: 1) The poem includes direct blasphemy in the mock ash crossing on the bottom; 2) the publisher asserts that he'll burn the Bible, and seems by the end to have done so, as it has been reduced to ashes; 3) the poem includes direct references to the topics of "farts and groans," "prostitutes," "buttocks," and "bum"; and 4) the poem uses other words commonly regarded as vulgar, such as "bloody," "bastard," "bugger," "whore," "arse," "shite," and of course the contentious "shift."

This last point is the core of the matter. On a highly sophisticated level, Joyce manipulates his critics, through their depiction in "Gas from a Burner," into allowing him to write the kind of blasphemous, vulgar, obscene poetry he is being criticized for producing. He does this by putting the most coarse vulgarities and most transgressive blasphemies into the mouths of his critic—the narrator—who claims to stand for decency, Catholicity, and patriotism. In other words, Joyce's utilization of the narrator's voice *allows* Joyce to include the vulgarities and unmentionable topics that the narrator considers too shocking and obscene to include in literary work. The point may be quantified: "Gas from a Burner" is the *only* one of Joyce's poems published in his lifetime to feature the words "bastard," "blackamoor," "bloody," "bugger," "bum," "buttocks," "damned," "farts," "prostitute," "shift," "shite," and "whore." It is also the only such poem to include the word "arse," although "The Holy Office" contains the plural "arses." (Doyle, 16 *et passim*). Except in these two satirical poems, Joyce was a modest, almost conservative poet, revealing a temperamental reserve that his friend Italo Svevo noticed and recollected: "I remember that when Joyce was so annoyed about the burning of his book *Dubliners* he said to me: 'What is certain is that I am more virtuous that all that lot—I, who am a real monogamist and have never loved but once in my life.'" (Svevo, 5)

In this reading, Joyce's satirical self-presentation is not mere humorous effusion or a mockery of timid and provincial publishers. It is both of these things, but it is additionally something unusually sophisticated in humorous verse. By placing the unprintable words and unmentionable topics in the mouths of his critics, Joyce enables himself to include the irreverent, profane words he is accused of employing. "Gas from a Burner" is therefore full of blasphemies and immoralities, but they are all uttered by Joyce's publisher/printer, the narrator. Thus what appears to be a light piece of poetical vengeance emerges as being a more complex manipulation of narration and complaint. By articulating the grievances against himself in the voice of his outraged narrator, Joyce not only includes all of the objectionable words and topics attributed to him, but also has the additional satisfaction of forcing his antagonist to express them.

Conclusion

Despite the relatively small number of his poems, no reasonable understanding of Joyce as an artist is possible without them. Joyce was a determined poet, whether composing for broad publication, or for private correspondence. It is a point of significance that his youthful companions later remembered him primarily as a poet: "even as he sat beside me in the library he would write and rewrite and retouch, it might almost seem interminably, a bit of verse containing perhaps a dozen or a score of lines" (Byrne, 63-64); "it is not Joyce as the young man who separated himself from the rest of us, nor Joyce as the son of a Dublin personage, that I remember from that fortunate evening; rather it is Joyce as the maker of beautifully wrought poems" (Colum, 22); "'Have you read it, Mr. Joyce?' A voice behind me replied indifferently: 'Yes.' I looked round and saw my first poet.'" (Curran, 4); "I like to think of Joyce when I knew him as a carefree student who had written *Chamber Music* before his nineteenth year and recited his poems to me in a garden in Glasnevin" (Gogarty, 69). We are justified in believing that Joyce regarded his efforts as a poet with serious attention, and he maintained a lasting interest in poetry. Even late in life he commemorated two highly significant personal events—the chronologically proximate death of his father and the birth of his grandson—by writing perhaps his greatest poem, "Ecce Puer."

Even so, "Gas from a Burner" is an oddity amongst his verses, bearing clear similarity only to "The Holy Office," and it is inevitably ancillary to Joyce's major prose works. It bears no useful comparison with the four major achievements of *Dubliners*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*. It does, nonetheless, have some claims on our attention: it deserves better than Stan Gabler Davies's dismissal of it as a "doggerel broadside." (Davies, 187). If nothing else, it is unusual; much of Joyce's private poetry is humorous in nature, but almost nothing of his published poetry was: "Gas from a Burner" is one of the few exceptions. It provides some insight into how he viewed Irish literary and publishing culture in that period of his life, as well as his own position in it. In the reading advocated in this essay, it features a judo-like reversal of his antagonists' momentum. As suggested by this interpretation, Joyce cleverly embraces the charges against him (of vulgarity, of blasphemy) and gives his readers a vulgar, blasphemous poem in which the worst excesses are expressed through the mouths or actions of his most unsophisticated critics themselves. Thus, Joyce's self-satire is multi-layered: he wants to expose the hyperbolic self-righteousness of his critics, and to expose the frivolity and provincialism of their resistance to his work. To do so, he employs all of the shocking themes and obscene vocabulary of which he is accused, thereby making the accusation itself the means of including those controversial blasphemies and profanities. It is, for something written in anger on trains and in railway station waiting-rooms, a highly sophisticated, intricately-structured *tour de force* of satire.

References:

Bowker, G. (2011) *James Joyce*. Phoenix.
Burgess, A. (1965) *Here Comes Everybody*. Faber & Faber.
Byrne, J.F. (1953) *Silent Years*. Farrar, Straus & Young.
Colum, M. and P. (1958) *Our Friend James Joyce*. Doubleday.
Curran, C. (1968) *James Joyce Remembered*. Oxford University Press.
Davies, S. G. (1975) *James Joyce—A Portrait of the Artist.* Stein & Day.
Doyle, P. A. (1966) *A Concordance to the Collected Poems of James Joyce*. The Scarecrow Press, 1966.
Ellmann, R. (1982) *James Joyce*. Oxford University Press.
Fairhall, J. (1993) *James Joyce and the Question of History*. Cambridge University Press.
Gogarty, O. St. J. (1950) *Intimations*. Abelard Press.
Joyce, J. (1991) *Poems and Shorter Writings*. (R. Ellmann, A. Walton Litz, & J. Wittier-Ferguson, Eds,) Faber & Faber.
Lewis, W. (1957) *Time and Western Man*. Beacon Press.
Pound, E. (1954) *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. (T.S.Eliot, Ed.) New Directions.
Svevo, I. (1969) *James Joyce*. (S. Joyce, Trans.) New Directions.