

## **Drago Jančar: Joyce's Pupil**

*Another of Joyce's pupils was a young man of twenty, named Boris Furlan...  
Richard Ellman: James Joyce, OUP, 1982, p. 341.*

1.

This story will end with a mob dragging an old man with a weak heart--a retired professor and former Law School Dean--out of his house and loading him on a wheelbarrow as they cry out in anger and derision. He will be pushed through the winding streets of the old town towards the river, to be dumped into its rushing, freezing current.

The final lines of the story will be cried out in Slovenian, in its upland, alpine dialect; mocking cries will resound on the street along which the wheelbarrow, with the bouncing helpless body on it, will rattle. A rain of imprecations, a beating shower of curses, a torrential flood of laughter, and a hail of furious abuse will fall upon the professor's head, the inside of which will suddenly go completely blank, as if swallowed by a black hole.

2.

The first lines are spoken many years earlier, in English, in the quiet of a Trieste apartment. It is evening. On the table one can see a warm circle of light, which radiates from a beautifully fashioned oil lamp. The thirty-year-old English teacher and his twenty-year-old pupil are bent over books and papers. A strong north wind is blowing outside, searching for a route through the streets to the sea. Shutters bang and the sea foams against the shore; the swirling winds only accentuate the tranquility and safety of the room. The pupil reads English sentences aloud, and the teacher patiently corrects his pronunciation. When the lesson is over the teacher walks to the window and looks out onto the street where a piece of paper blows and eddies in the wind. Perhaps he speaks in his Irish accent about the language, perhaps about Thomas Aquinas. After each lesson pupil and teacher generally discuss philosophy. The pupil, like so many youths of the day, is much taken with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The teacher attempts to quell this enthusiasm; for him, the only philosopher is Aquinas, whose thought, in the teacher's opinion, is as sharp as a sword blade. The teacher reads a page of his work in Latin every day.

Then the teacher sits back down and asks the pupil to describe the oil lamp in English. The pupil gets hopelessly tangled in technical expressions, and the teacher takes over from him, describing the oil lamp in exhaustive detail. He goes on for a full half hour, indulging a habit that many years later the student will call descriptive passion.

Professor Zois, the student cries out, I will never learn English. Professor Zois chuckles, in part out of satisfaction at his description, in part at the way the pupil mangles his name. That is how the Italians say it because they can't pronounce Joyce properly.

3.

After these conversations by the light of the oil lamp, Joyce's pupil, a young Slovenian law student from Trieste, suddenly felt a certain blankness in his head. A moment before he had been speaking freely with his teacher about Schopenhauer and

Aquinas, about problems of morality and courage, but when he was confronted with the puzzle of the oil lamp, the fuel well, the glass chimney, the wick, and all the rest of the parts that made up that insignificant object, he felt a gigantic hole opening up inside his head, a hole that swallowed up every thought, a kind of empty space in which nothing could be heard but the howl of the wind through the Trieste streets on the way to the sea. The wind was growing stronger and beginning to roar to the sound of the voluptuously ornamented albeit somewhat monotonous, speech of Professor Zois which emanated from the depths of his descriptive passion. And the gathering storm was also accompanied by the roars, howls, and clamor of a gigantic crowd.

4.

Joyce and his Triestine student met for the last time on a hot July day in the summer of 1914. One could feel tension in the air throughout the city. Mobilized men were mustering near the barracks, while crowds shouting bellicose slogans milled on the streets and piazzas. The teacher, upset and worried, rapped on his young friend's apartment door. Then they looked through the windows of the pupil's room at the building of the Italian consulate, which was surrounded by an angry crowd. Encouraged by loud shouts, several of them tried to tear down the Italian flag. Stones were thrown at the facade, some panes of glass shattered, there was yelling. Joyce was clearly perturbed, and he worriedly asked his young friend what was going to happen. Professor Zois, he said with a laugh, there will be war. This scared his teacher. Joyce said that he would depart. When the shouts of the crowd grew louder he shut his eyes, then he turned around, and while his pupil was still speaking he ran out of the apartment and the building without saying a word. The pupil laughed; history was being made outside. He understood that some people can derive ineffable joy from describing an oil lamp, but he was interested in other things. The roar of the crowd heralded the arrival of momentous times. He was drawn outside, into the whirlwind.

5.

In the years that followed, the pupil developed into a determined and contented man. He succeeded at everything he started. His mind, which had been unable to comprehend his teacher's passion for description, inclined to analytic passions; Kant, Croce, and Masaryk were stacked on his desk. He received his law degree from the University of Bologna. And he was attracted ever more strongly to the nervous agitation of European events, which whirled across the piazzas of Trieste like an Adriatic storm. Four years after his teacher, frightened by the tumult of the crowd, had run from his apartment (and, soon after, from Trieste and his pupil's life), he was eyewitness to a new historical twist. On a gray November afternoon Italian troops disembarked in the port of Trieste. And not too long after this a new set of specters appeared on the streets. Young men from Italian suburbs and small towns marched about in black uniforms singing of youth and springtime; they beat their political opponents, and set fire to a large building in the center of town--the Slovenian National Hall. When firefighters came to fight the blaze, they cut their hoses to the sounds of bellicose slogans. The young lawyer tried to settle down in the midst of the blind tumult of history. He opened a law practice, continued to read in philosophy and science, but he could not evade the angry times so

characteristic of beaten Europe, the passionate crowds that gathered beneath the balconies, or the pursuit of the secret police. He found himself among those educated Slovenians of Trieste who organized anti-fascist resistance. In 1930 he was warned that his arrest was imminent. He escaped over the border into Yugoslavia, and in a single day found himself in a new city among new people. In the thick fog that curled through the streets of Ljubljana that fall, his inner vision searched for the far-off and now lost shining disk of Trieste's sun, and his inner ear listened to the howling of an Adriatic storm. With a beating heart he read newspaper accounts of the convictions of his fellow Slovenes, whom the fascist courts sent to distant Sicilian prisons or to local villages under armed guard. There was something about this agitated time, this agitated atmosphere that his analytic mind could not understand. He told his friends that when reading accounts of these political trials he sometimes felt a kind of emptiness in his head, something like what used to happen when he had to describe the details of a lamp for his teacher Joyce.

6.

It was to the light of a completely different lamp, a modern and electric one in the quiet reading room of the University library, that, in the middle of January, 1941, he was leafing through the English newspapers which regularly carried accounts of the latest trials in Trieste. His glance was suddenly halted and numbed by a story from which he learned that James Joyce had died in Zurich. He was surprised to discover from this article that his former English teacher, the interesting and to his lawyerly mind somewhat eccentric professor Zois had become a rather well-known writer in the intervening years. He resolved to read his books and wondered where he would get a hold of them, since the author was practically unknown here. He did not know that he would soon find them where they were quite popular--in England.

But now was not a time for reading; events followed one after another, history thickened. There was great agitation among immigrants from Trieste, for all of them knew what awaited them if Slovenia was taken by Italian troops.

As in November 1918 in the spring of 1941 he again observed the arrival of their forces. This time the army did not disembark. Now they rolled in, and through the dusty streets of Ljubljana came motorized divisions, infantry, and horses dragging artillery pieces, the barrels of which never fired a shot during the campaign of conquest. For the army of the country they rolled through had disintegrated all by itself.

By the time officers of the Italian secret police knocked at his apartment door, he was in Switzerland, taking a tram along the narrow and peaceful Zurich street up the hill to the cemetery. While his Ljubljana apartment was being turned upside down, he was standing at the grave of his former English teacher. Professor Zois, he said, and he could hear his laugh, and see him as he stepped to the window and looked out at the sea. There was no sea here, but far below was Lake Zurich, and it seemed to him that he could also hear that howling of the storm outside his window, winds that carried up to him the roar of the crowds in the harbor. But down below no troops were disembarking; tourists were getting off boats onto the wooden pier.

When, several days later, he got onto the train in Zurich that was to take him to Paris, an Italian court was convening in Ljubljana. In a session that took less time than did his trip to the French border, he was sentenced to death in absentia.

7.

In May of that same year he was dropped off at his hotel by a Serb, a representative of the Yugoslav government in exile in London. Sirens were wailing on that warm and peaceful evening. His driver jumped into the car and drove off quickly together with his suitcase. People were running on the street, and a man with a band on his sleeve pushed him into a bomb shelter. In the basement he heard the echoes of explosions, and through the basement window he saw a piece of glowing sky. Incendiary bombs were falling on the city beneath the vault of an evening May sky. Somewhere close by, the piece of glowing sky that he saw was marked by the bright lines of anti-aircraft fire. Then it turned out that the man who was standing next to him and calmly smoking a cigarette was the receptionist at the hotel he was supposed to stay in. The receptionist said that once again there would be no electricity, and that they would again be using kerosene or oil lamps. In that London basement, in the midst of an air raid, Joyce's pupil rocked with irrepressible laughter. He asked the receptionist to tell him how a lamp like that worked. The man was not surprised at the question, for his job was such that he had heard everything. So he lit another cigarette and began to explain. And thus he spent his first London evening, until the attack had ended, with that receptionist yielding to the descriptive passion, hearing about the workings of oil lamps, which turned out to be a bit different in London from Trieste.

He fell asleep in his small hotel room towards morning, fully clothed on his bed. While he slept, he dreamed that he was diving into the ocean near Trieste.

8.

His voice became famous in Slovenia. It was the voice of Radio London. His words were clear and determined, a call for resistance. He spoke of the German defeats in Africa and in Russia. He announced the landing in Sicily, narrated the battle for Monte Cassino, and with triumphant satisfaction proclaimed the capitulation of Italy. His voice, emanating from radio speakers, was listened to after curfew behind shuttered windows in city apartments, while the muffled steps of German night watchmen echoed through the streets. The partisans in liberated territories listened to him; their adversaries could hear him as well. His speech entitled "Plain Speaking from London" was printed as a pamphlet and dropped from Allied planes over Slovenia in 1944. Here he called on the Slovenian homeguards to join the partisan resistance. In the Slovenian press which appeared with the approval of the occupation authorities he was called the Bawler from London.

By now he had been completely swallowed up by the whirlwind of history. One evening when, exhausted, he was shuffling papers in the London studio by the light of a desk lamp, he told a colleague that he would return. He would join the partisans. His colleague warned him that everything there had been taken over by the communists, but the bawler from London rebutted him sharply. On that very evening the colleague wrote in his wartime diary: He is an honorable and sincere person, I think, but hopelessly naive.

By February 1945 he was on territory liberated by the partisans, and a few months later he was back in Ljubljana. When new people took power he was named Dean of the law school. Two years later he was arrested.

9.

With a little bit of imagination, the interrogator said, one could say that it was that James guy (or whatever you call him) who got you into this whole mess. Joyce's pupil was sitting at a table, a glowing shaft of pale light poured into his wide-open eyes. A lamp was on the table, its powerful electric light illuminated his whole face. The red end of a lit cigarette circled behind him, and it moved in rhythm with the laughing lips, which emanated puffs of white smoke. He taught you English, the investigator laughed, and had you not known English you would not have become a British spy. I am not a spy, said Joyce's pupil. You are a spy, said the voice out of a cloud of smoke. He told him this every evening and every night. And they spent many nights in that dark room, in the blinding circle of light through which the white traces of cigarette smoke could be seen. You frequented the English consulate, he said. The light was white and sharp, and circles burned in his eyes. Joyce's pupil recalled the oil lamp, and its circle of warm, yellowish light. We're finished, said the interrogator. Now you can go back to your cell. Tomorrow you'll go to be shaved, and then to trial. I am not a spy, said Joyce's pupil. You are a spy, came the voice from behind the circle of light, you are a traitor. And you will be sentenced to death. Joyce's pupil went pale. It seemed to him that he could hear the roar of the sea whipped up by an Adriatic storm. I was sentenced to death once, he said quietly. That was in absentia, laughed the interrogator, this time you will be present.

10.

That was on a hot July evening in 1947. They led him through a labyrinth of corridors and doors, each of which closed behind him. Back to his cell, as narrow as a closet--six paces long, two wide. All night long a light burned high on the ceiling; its red light danced in his eyes through his rough blanket, preventing him from sleeping. Behind that brightness, in his inner vision which was hidden from the light, deep in his head, in deep where time and space could be conquered he saw a series of agitated images of Trieste piers, foggy Ljubljana streets and even foggier London streets.

Towards morning, towards the bright July morning that somehow managed to penetrate through his somnambulist state, he heard footsteps and loud voices from the street outside. The city streets were just beyond the walls of the Ljubljana prison, and people were heading to work. He got up just as he heard keys rattling. The barber was at the cell door. The boom of footsteps and voices multiplied outside, growing ever louder, a murmuring multitude of humanity. Around the court building a crowd of righteous people was gathering to express their solidarity with the prosecutors who, in the name of the people were about to begin the trial of the traitors, turncoats, spies, and enemies.

From the waiting room he looked out onto a sea of heads which were being moved back and forth by an invisible force, some kind of invisible and inaudible wind. For an instant he saw himself and his teacher, that was the last image before they led him into the hall: they were standing by the window of his Trieste apartment, he was twenty years old and a crowd outside was yelling and hurling rocks at the Italian consulate. His teacher no longer had any kind of descriptive passion, and he was afraid--he wanted to run away, and he ran away. The pupil had laughed. Now it was July 1947 and he was not laughing. Now he was afraid--he too would have run away. But there was nowhere to go.

There was only one way, and it led through a labyrinth of corridors and doors into the law court.

11.

All of the accused looked like shadows. They were worn out, they hadn't slept and they were worried. The hall was filled with people who greeted them with an ominous murmur. They were seated on the front bench, and arrayed behind them and along the walls were uniformed guards. The stenographers waited with their hands on their knees. Sharpened pencils lay on the desks, motionless as loaded guns.

The trial lasted for two weeks, from morning until night with a break for lunch. The sharp speeches of the prosecutors and the stammering of the accused were broadcast out onto the square in front of the courthouse and into other squares and streets throughout Ljubljana. All over the country working people gathered around radio speakers and listened to the thunder of the prosecutor's speeches: Some part of the Slovenian intelligentsia has always been in foreign service. They have always sold themselves and been hopelessly fascinated by things foreign, especially foreign money. Full-page articles in the newspapers described the trial: Nothing has brought so much unhappiness, blood, martyrdom and suffering to the people as has this small reactionary clique. Naked treason in the pay of foreigners is in the dock. They are being tried not merely by working people, but by all men, by all humanity, wrote the Slovenian Courier.

On the sixth or seventh day the prosecutor deposed Joyce's pupil. He spoke of the book "Animal Farm" that the accused had received from England. According to the prosecutor, he had made vile use of his knowledge of English, acquired in Trieste, to translate excerpts from this loathsome pamphlet, and he had lent the book to his fellow conspirators. A hush fell when he asked the accused to describe the contents of this book. The hush radiated out through the microphones to the crowd in front of the law court. His silence gaped through the radio speakers, and the next day a newspaper described it as the poor and tortured silence of an impenitent man. At last the accused spoke. Describe it..., he moaned, I can't describe it. In my head, he said... In your head? Shouted the prosecutor. After a long pause the accused added: in my head there is a kind of emptiness. As he himself asserts, there is emptiness in his head, the prosecutor said calmly and triumphantly. And the people in the hall stirred, laughter coursed through the square in front of the court, the entire crowd began to applaud the prosecutor's words, as the daily news reported in big headlines the next day.

Beneath a lamppost to which a microphone was attached an old man leaned over to his wife. If he hadn't been moaning so, I'd say that his voice was familiar, he said. Isn't that the Bawler from London?

12.

On August 12 the chief justice announced the verdict. The three accused were sentenced to death by firing squad, with confiscation of all their property and permanent loss of political and civil rights. The hall applauded. From the face of one of the judges it could be seen that he was sickened by the applause. He lifted his hand to quiet the people, but when the hall calmed down, one could hear applause like an echo from the outside

and then loud approval from the gigantic square which had been occupied from early morning by a crowd of people that had gathered to hear the announcement of the verdict.

13.

When they brought him to his cell a piece of paper awaited him. They told him that he could write home or to whomever he wished. He lay down on his bed and looked up at the ceiling. That evening they turned out the light, for the first time in many months. Guards looked into his cell at intervals.

14.

He lived for the next two years in solitary confinement, although he was allowed to read there. Sometimes, late at night, his former interrogator came to sit by his bunk. One night he asked whether he thought that from a strictly juridical point of view his punishment had been just. He did not answer, just turned to the wall. Another time his nocturnal visitor wanted to know what had happened during the trial. Why had he not described the contents of the book, where had the sudden emptiness in his head come from? It is all because I do not possess the descriptive passion, said the former law school dean. The interrogator gave him a strange look, worriedly shaking his head.

Toward the end of the next year he was told that he had been amnestied. Instead of the death penalty he had been sentenced to twenty years in prison. Four years later he was paroled because of heart trouble. He settled down in a small upland city. All night a light burned in his window. In the mornings he looked up at the shining white alpine peaks. He spoke rarely, and his movements were slow and unnatural.

15.

One evening in late autumn 1953 he heard footsteps and commotion in front of his house. He turned off the desk lamp, walked to the window, lifted up the curtain, and at that instant he felt an icy shudder course through his entire body. A dark clump of people was outside, and they were preparing to do something. Someone called out his name. Someone shouted: he wants to sell Trieste to the Italians! He and his English friends. Blows rang out against the door, grumbling male voices were in the foyer, and a moment later they were in his room, which was immediately filled with bodies, with the smell of sweat and alcoholic fumes.

Powerful hands grabbed him and pulled him out of the house and onto the street. They loaded him on a wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow bounced on the pavement on its way down to the river.

The procession was accompanied by bursts of laughter and shouts: speak Eengleesh, speak Eengleesh! The iron wheel of the wheelbarrow bounced on the pavement, the helpless body flew up like a sack, and the professor felt that his weak heart was going to stop. With shaking hands he tried to shield his eyes from the faces that leaned over him, from the mocking and the senseless hail of curses; you old fool, old fool. Judas, traitor. Whenever the wheelbarrow stopped to allow the man pushing it to spit into his palms before beginning again, lips spewing alcoholic vapors bent down to him: where are your English friends now? And the question was answered by the yodeling laughter of women, and the grumbling guffaws of men: speak Eengleesh, speak Eengleesh.

16.

Before the iron wheel of the wheelbarrow set off down the street again, before the ecstatic procession could start up, the old man lifted his arms and fluttered his hands, trying to tell them something. As if he himself had finally understood something. The shaking after this fluttering produced even more humorous smirks.

And even before they reached the riverbank, their cheers, snarls, and guffawing laughter had turned into a distant roar. That roars resounded in the same emptiness that took over his head like a black hole, like the impossibility of further description. Now it seemed to the professor that with his juridical brain and his analytic passion he had finally come to understand the meaning of the emptiness that appeared in the face of the impossibility of description. That is why his helpless body no longer felt the rain of mockery that was falling on him, did not take in the hail of curses which beat on him, did not react to the flood of laughter that broke over him, and did not hear the stream of furious insults. That is to say, the monotonous and distant roar took place outside of his head and its emptiness, its hollow space. It was, in fact, no longer the meaningless roar of ever new crowds which wailed and howled like an Adriatic storm through the streets of Trieste to the sea. It was an approaching roar. And in the distance, in some endless space, it grew out of a single word, a word neither Slovenian nor English that had never been written down in any language, a word that had never been spoken or used to describe anything, a word that could say everything although neither teacher nor pupil could utter it, a word comprehensible in its incomprehensibility but one that neither teacher nor pupil would ever be able to use. This was what he would have wanted to tell his former teacher, for he had come to understand that there is a word at the beginning and the end, and that that word has nothing to do with the language in which it is spoken or written.

That is why he fluttered his hands, and why the uplanders laughed even more joyfully and shouted even more loudly: speak Eengleesh, speak Eengleesh.

He no longer heard them, only the distant roar, and he didn't know by now whether it was the booming of the sea, or of the crowd, or whether it was the storm itself outside his windows amidst whose gusts could be heard Professor Zois's monotonous voice describing an oil lamp.

Translated by Andrew Wachtel