Of Snow and Dust: The Presence of James Joyce in Ernest Gaines's A Lesson Before Dying

MATTHEW SPANGLER

Since the publication of Ulysses in 1922, James Joyce’s shadow has loomed over twentieth-century fiction, poetry, music, and visual arts. His influence can be traced through a wide range of authors from Irish playwright and prose writer Samuel Beckett, to American novelist Ernest Hemingway, to French author and scholar Hélène Cixous, to American musical poet John Cage, and Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos. It can certainly be argued that no twentieth-century writer, and perhaps no writer since Shakespeare, has had as significant an influence on such a diverse range of fellow artists.

One area, however, in which Joyce’s influence remains relatively unexplored is African American fiction, although traces of his style are apparent in Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940) and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1947). Perhaps this lack of exploration should come as no surprise. Joyce’s work is often viewed as the epitome of canonical modernism and the social and cultural forces against which writers such as Wright, Ellison, Amiri Baraka, and Etheridge Knight have sought to define themselves in opposition. As Knight puts it in his call for a “black aesthetic,”

Unless the Black Artist establishes a ‘black aesthetic’ he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The Black Artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black Authorities, he must create
a new history, new symbols, myths and legends. ("A Survey: Black Writers’ views on Literary Lions and Values” 38)

It might be easy to view Joyce’s work as firmly entrenched in a “white aesthetic,” after all he was Irish Catholic and spent most of his creative life in Italy, France, and Switzerland. But when we consider the cultural context in which Joyce grew up and about which he wrote, this label, and indeed the entire notion of black and white aesthetics, becomes slippery and difficult to define. Raised a middle-class Catholic in British-ruled and Protestant-dominated Ireland, Joyce would have experienced a colonial history that bears some notable similarities with that of African Americans on this side of the Atlantic. Both the Irish and African Americans experienced brutal oppression from foreigners; both had the language of their colonizers thrust upon them and learned to speak it with great eloquence; and both used artistic creation as subversive forms of protest and cultural cohesion in what were often hostile environments. As historical experiences in many cases transcend race and nationality, notions of black or white aesthetics are protean, difficult to define as fixed, universal entities, and are largely contingent upon specific contexts. Thus, in many cases, it is impossible to identify or create pure and untainted strands of cultural, racial, or national identity. As Joyce himself wrote, “Our civilization is a vast fabric, in which the most diverse elements are mingled. . . . In such a fabric, it is useless to look for a thread that may have remained pure and virgin without having undergone the influence of a neighbouring thread” (Critical Writings 165–66).

Which brings us to Ernest Gaines. His best prose works, such as Of Love and Dust (1967), The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), A Gathering of Old Men (1983), and A Lesson Before Dying (1993) richly depict specific African American locales and explore racial tension largely, but not exclusively, from an African American point of view. Yet, in interviews and public comments regarding his prose style, Gaines repeatedly distances himself from a tradition of black literature, citing James Joyce and other white
writers as having the greatest influence on his work. Initially, this might seem like a fundamental contradiction. Here is an African American writer, who has written some of the most powerfully sympathetic and highly detailed descriptions of a specific African American locale—the twentieth-century, post-slavery Louisiana plantation quarter—citing canonical white writers as his most significant influences. But when we look closely, we can identify specific points of stylistic and thematic correspondence between Gaines's work and that of Joyce, particularly in Joyce's early writing. Gaines not only imitates aspects of Joyce's style, but in an action akin to re-writing, he appropriates certain stylistic elements in the service of depicting a specifically African American context. This performance of imitation and appropriation is particularly effective in Gaines's most recent and celebrated novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Joyce is not the only writer Gaines credits as having a major influence on the shape of his prose style; he also lists Hemingway, Faulkner, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Flaubert, Twain, and Shakespeare (Simpson 63, 102; Gaudet 8, 16, 44; and Lowe 64). That Gaines should cite these canonical white writers rather than African American ones may well be the result of his education. The oldest of seven children, Gaines was born on River Lake Plantation in Pointe Coupée Parish near Oscar, Louisiana, in 1933. His parents were sharecroppers who worked on the same plantation where their parents had been slaves. Gaines attended elementary school at a plantation church, much like the one in which Grant Wiggins teaches in *A Lesson Before Dying*, and at St. Augustine, a black Catholic high school, he began writing and directing plays that were performed at the plantation church. In 1947, his parents moved to Vallejo, California, north of San Francisco, and in 1948, Gaines joined them. He said of leaving Louisiana, "Had I left five years earlier, I would not have had enough experiences. Had I stayed five years longer, I would have been broken—in prison, dead, insane" (Lowe 279). He attended Vallejo Junior College, and upon graduation in 1953 went into the army. After two years of service, and with the help of the G.I. bill, he completed
his bachelor's degree at San Francisco State College, and then devoted himself to writing. One of his early breakthroughs as a writer came when he won a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Award from Stanford University, which gave him, as he put it, the "money and time to work" (Lowe 52). When he began writing he had read very few black writers, a point he made in a 1986 interview: "No black writer had influence on me. . . . When I went to college I studied white writers. . . . You were not reading the black writers then as you would be ten years later" (Gaudet 33). Although Gaines admires some black writers very much, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer—he calls Toomer's *Cane* "The Black American novel" (Simpson 105)—he deliberately distances himself from a tradition of black writing:

As I said about the story "A Long Day in November," I had to get it from Faulkner and from Joyce, but not from Richard Wright, or Ellison, or Baldwin, or anybody like that. They showed me how to get it much better than the black writers had done because so many of them really dealt with style, whereas I think the black writers are much more interested in content—you know, putting it down like it is—and the style is sort of secondary. (FitzGerald and Marchant 335)

Gaines specifically criticizes Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* for privileging content at the expense of form, and he concludes that there is "too much thinking" in the novel and not enough distance between author and protagonist (Gaudet 13). When authorial distance is lost, a critique Gaines levels against much African American writing, the author becomes a mere "puppeteer" using the novel's characters and narrative events to make rhetorical points, much like a politician would do (Gaudet 30). Gaines states that one of his biggest challenges in writing *A Lesson Before Dying* was to achieve authorial separation from the novel's first-person narrator and protagonist Grant Wiggins:
If I get a character too close to me, I can’t work with him. I’m having to deal with a character in this book I’m working on now [A Lesson Before Dying]. He’s too damned close to me, and I’m having all kinds of problems. He’s one of the reasons I’m not working as fast. He’s too much like me. (Gaudet 12–13)

Joyce, too, struggled with authorial distance in his fiction, particularly the semi-autobiographical novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), the infant version of which, Stephen Hero, suffers, among other things, from its lack of distance between author and protagonist. Both authors confront a similar challenge in that they depict very specific places in their fiction, places from which they come, through the eyes of semi-autobiographical protagonists. This proximity between author and artistic content presents certain inherent challenges regarding authorial distance, and both writers use similar formal strategies to negotiate these challenges.

Early in A Lesson Before Dying Gaines directly evokes the presence of Joyce’s fiction when Grant recalls having read in college Joyce’s short story “Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” the twelfth story in Dubliners (1914):

[W]e were all gathered in the auditorium—and there stood this little white man with the thick accent, talking to us about Irish literature. He spoke of Yeats, O’Casey, Joyce—names I had never heard before. I sat here listening, listening, trying to remember everything he said. And a name he repeated over and over was Parnell. And he told us how some Irishmen would weep this day at the mention of the name Parnell. Parnell. Parnell. Then he spoke of James Joyce. He told about Joyce’s family, his religion, his education, his writing. He spoke of a book called Dubliners and a story in the book titled “Ivy Day in the Committee Room.” Regardless of race, regardless of class, that story was universal, he said. (A Lesson Before Dying 89)
Grant is unable to find *Dubliners* in the college library or in the local bookstores. After several days of searching, he convinces his literature teacher, Mr. Anderson, to borrow an anthology of short fiction that contains “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” from a professor at a white university. Grant reads and rereads the story, although initially he is unable to discover the universality that the Irishman had talked about:

All I saw in the story was some Irishmen meeting in a room and talking politics. What had that to do with America, especially with my people? It was not until years later that I saw what he meant. I had gone to bars, to barbershops; I had stood on street corners, and I had gone to many suppers there in the quarter. But I had never really listened to what was being said. Then I began to listen, to listen closely to how they talked about their heroes, how they talked about the dead and about how great the dead had once been. I heard it everywhere. (L 90)

“*Ivy Day in the Committee Room,*” Joyce’s favorite of the *Dubliners* stories (*Letters I 62*), takes place on a bleak and rainy Ivy Day, the anniversary of the death of the nineteenth-century Irish patriot and “uncrowned king” Charles Stewart Parnell. The story centers on several campaign workers, who at the end of the day have gathered in the office of the Royal Exchange Ward to drink, express cynical opinions about the current municipal elections, and lament Parnell’s absence. At the end of the story, Joe Hynes reads aloud an overly sentimental poem titled “The Death of Parnell.” His performance is greeted by the group with applause and praise, that in its enthusiasm, belies their distorted idealization of the political past. In the context of the other fourteen stories in *Dubliners, “Ivy Day in the Committee Room*” repeats a common theme—that of the spiritually paralyzed Dublin community oppressed by its ties to history and unable to move forward in a productive and meaningful way. The story deeply affects Grant because he sees aspects of the plantation quarter mirrored
in Joyce’s Dublin, particularly death, decay, the desperate search for a hero, and an inability to break with the past. This particular citation of “Ivy Day” also offers important evidence regarding Gaines’s own capacity to learn from non-black writers and to recognize literature’s ability to cross the boundaries of race and nationality.

Gaines repeatedly borrows from Joyce, harnessing specific elements of Joyce’s style in the service of depicting African American situations. In an interview conducted in the mid-1980s, Gaines alluded to the parallels between Joyce’s Dublin and the plantation quarter stating that “All men dream about certain things. All men have hopes, and all men brutalize other things near them, at home, when they cannot fulfill those hopes. I read Joyce’s Dublin stories, and I see the same sort of thing” (Gaudet 44). In A Lesson Before Dying this brutality at home is registered in a pervasive atmosphere of decay, paralysis, and unfulfilled aspirations that closely resembles the ways in which Joyce presents Dublin. For much of the novel, Grant Wiggins depicts the Louisiana plantation quarter as a passive victim of racial and economic oppression, a community laboring under the suffocating weight of moral paralysis and a blind acceptance of conventionality. The novel’s narrative point of view reflects Grant’s deep-seated contempt for the quarter and his desire to escape a community he considers devoid of hope and trapped in a lifeless circle of its own perpetuation. Echoing Stephen Dedalus’s desire for unfettered freedom and passionate life, Grant tells his girlfriend Vivian Baptiste, “I need to go someplace where I can feel I’m living . . . I don’t want to spend the rest of my life teaching school in a plantation church. . . . I don’t feel alive here. I’m not living here” (L 29). In large part, Grant’s view of the plantation quarter as a cradle of ignorance and spiritual atrophy is shaped by his early teacher Matthew Antoine, who years before encouraged him to leave: “You have to go away to know about life. There’s no life here. There’s nothing but ignorance here” (L 65). In Grant’s narrative, death and ignorance are associated with the quarter, while life is perpetually beyond its borders. Fittingly then, his descriptions of the quarter’s physical appearance are domi-
nated by smoke and the color gray, which come to symbolize this sense of paralysis, death, and entrapment.

Beyond the flag I could see smoke rising from the chimneys in the quarter, and beyond the houses and chimneys I could hear the tractors harvesting sugarcane in the fields. The sky was ashy gray, and the air chilly enough for a sweater. (L 33)

Other than that, all there was to see were old gray weather-beaten houses, with smoke rising out of the chimneys and drifting across the corrugated tin roofs. (L 37)

You could see gray-blue smoke rising from the big chimneys in the fronts of the houses and from the smaller chimneys in the backs. And because the wind always came into the quarter from the river this time of year, you could see the smoke drifting from the quarter back across the field toward the cemetery and the swamp. (L 142)

Grant rarely provides a description of the quarter in terms other than these. In the physical world around him, he sees only gray smoke, gray sky, and rows of nameless, indistinguishable chimneys, which ultimately produce in his narrative a sense of loneliness, entrapment, paralysis, and death.

Similarly, Joyce’s Dublin, what he called the “centre of paralysis” (Letters II 132), labors under a ubiquitous cloud of dust and smoke, and many of his descriptions of the city, such as the following from “A Little Cloud,” prefigure Grant’s descriptions of the plantation quarter:

There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin. As he crossed Grattan Bridge he looked down the river towards the lower quays and pitied the poor stunted
houses. They seemed to him a band of tramps, huddled together along the river-banks, their old coats covered with dust and soot, stupefied by the panorama of sunset and waiting for the first chill of night to bid them arise, shake themselves and begone. ("A Little Cloud," Dubliners 73)4

From the soot that covers the houses in "A Little Cloud," to the "odour of dusty cretonne" on the window curtains in "Eveline" (D 36), to the snow—a form of frozen dust—that blankets the streets in "The Dead," images of dust in various forms pervade Joyce's short fiction. In "The Dead," however, the final story in the collection, Joyce's choice of metaphor signals a difference between the two writers, for the snow here is intentionally ambiguous, balanced delicately between a symbol of cleansing and rebirth, on one hand, and a symbol of paralysis and death, on the other. In its capacity to blanket its surroundings with a pervasive, frozen veneer, the snow suggests paralysis, but it also points toward a possible redemptive cleansing, in which the snow itself, as a form of water, is the agent of redemption. In this, Joyce's metaphor has distinctly Catholic undertones, whereas Gaines's use of dust is more secular. This difference may well stem from the communities that they were writing about and toward: Catholic, turn of the century Dublin on one hand, and late-twentieth-century America on the other. In the opening paragraph of Of Love and Dust, for instance, Gaines's use of dust draws upon American cultural narratives of the wild, rural, pre-settled nation, particularly those associated with the American West and South:

From my gallery I could see that dust coming down the quarter, coming fast, and I thought to myself, "Who in the world would be driving like that?" I got up to go inside until the dust had all settled. But I had just stepped inside the room when I heard the truck stopping before the gate. I didn’t turn around then because I knew the dust was flying all over the place. A minute or so later, when I figured it had settled, I went back. The
The dusty road in this passage evokes images of the dry Western town made famous in numerous films and novels. It also recalls the dust that pervades the work of certain Southern writers, such as Faulkner, who uses dust for a particularly chilling and famous effect in “A Rose for Emily.” As such, Gaines’s use of pervasive dust as a symbol for paralysis and entrapment is not only more secular than Joyce’s snow, but it is also a particularly American symbol.

These seemingly objective descriptions of place, however, do not stand as unchallenged, mimetic truth. In the work of both writers, these descriptions are located in such close temporal proximity to the mental attitudes of certain characters that they are largely shaped by the specific points of view and proclivities of those characters. That is, they are closer to reflecting a character’s unique subjectivity than they are to painting a picture of objective, mimetic truth. Grant’s descriptions of the plantation quarter, for instance, indicate not so much that the quarter is a gray, smoky place, but that his attitude toward it is one of disdain and contempt. As such, his descriptions tell us more about his character than they do about the true physical appearance of his surroundings. These narrative passages are the product of fusing Grant’s point of view with his material environment, and what we read in the novel’s narration then are descriptions of the physical world filtered through, shaped by, and laced with Grant’s attitude toward his surroundings. Famously, Joyce made an art of fused narration: from Little Chandler’s description of Dublin from Grattan Bridge (cited earlier) to Gerty MacDowell’s musing of “matters feminine” on Sandymount Strand (Ulysses 346), passages of seemingly objective description are subtly blended with a character’s idiosyncratic point of view. Much like Grant, Little Chandler feels trapped in a brutal and ignorant community from which he desires escape. And like Grant’s descriptions of the plantation quarter—the “gray
weather-beaten houses” with smoke drifting across “corrugated tin roofs” (L 37)—the narrative description of the Dublin houses as a “band of tramps” covered with “dust and soot” provides the reader with more information about Little Chandler’s character and his attitude toward Dublin than it does about the physical appearance of the city.

For their protagonists, then, the result of this pervasive paralysis and decay is an impassioned desire to escape from the community—a theme that runs powerfully throughout the fiction of both writers. From Eveline, to Little Chandler, to James Duffy, and Stephen Dedalus, who leaves Dublin at the end of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, but returns by the opening of Ulysses, Joyce’s characters view escape from the homeland as salvation. Dublin is positioned as the center of paralysis and death, while life is not only beyond the border of the city, but the border of the nation. Joyce’s characters desire escape, but their desires are continually frustrated by a suffocating combination of social forces and their own specific predilections. Eveline’s duty to her father prevents her from leaving with her lover Frank; Little Chandler and Bob Doran feel trapped in unhappy and unwanted marriages; and while James Duffy, who “wished to live as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen” (“A Painful Case,” D 107), manages to escape Dublin for the suburb Chapelizod, his life there is the most lonely and emotionally desolate of all the Dubliners. Whereas the paralysis of Joyce’s characters seems to stem from internal forces related to their own predilections and fears, Gaines’s characters are held in place through societal structures of racism and economic disparity. In Of Love and Dust, Marcus is bonded out of jail, but then forced to work on the Hebert plantation as a sort of modern day slave, and none of the inhabitants of the plantation quarter in A Lesson Before Dying has the economic capital to leave their community (except, of course, for Grant, who chooses to return). For Joyce and Gaines this desire for escape is more than simply a narrative device; rather, it reflects specific historical conditions. In Ireland between 1840 and 1900, approximately four million of the country’s eight million inhabitants either emigrated...
or died as a result of the potato famine; in the American South, between 1910 and 1970, six and a half million black Americans moved to the North, many seeking to avoid situations like that of Marcus. That these authors address notions of escape indicates a response to respective great migrations. Here again, we see Gaines not merely imitating Joyce, but appropriating and re-writing aspects of the Irishman’s style to reflect an African American context.

As notions of place and escape figure so prominently in the work of these writers, a predictably tense relationship develops between their protagonists and certain communally accepted rituals, particularly those associated with organized religion. Through the lens of their semi-autobiographical protagonists—Grant Wiggins and Stephen Dedalus—Gaines and Joyce explore the often antagonistic relationship between individual autonomy and the religious rites and expectations of a community. Both characters view religion as at least somewhat responsible for the pervasive paralysis in their communities, for preventing the desired escape, and thwarting individual ambitions. Although his Aunt Lou raised him to go to church, when Grant returns to the quarter from the university he refuses to attend church any more. Grant’s rejection of the performances associated with religious belief is a source of pain and disappointment for his aunt, and although he recognizes the pain he causes her, Grant steadfastly refuses to make a pretense of belief. When Reverend Ambrose pleads with Grant to persuade Jefferson to kneel before his execution, “Tell him to fall down on his knees ’fore he walk to that chair. Tell him to fall down on his knees ’fore her. You the only one he’ll listen to,” Grant responds “I won’t tell him to kneel. I’ll tell him to listen to you—but I won’t tell him to kneel. I will try to help him stand” (L 216). For the Reverend Ambrose, whether Jefferson believes or not is less important than his performance of belief, his kneeling before God, because it is through such a performance that Jefferson can mitigate the pain of the community, and particularly that of his godmother, Miss Emma. For Grant, merely to perform belief would be a manifestation of the collective ignorance and paralysis
he feels he struggles against. In this posture of independence that Grant stubbornly maintains, he shares a deep kinship with Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus—a kinship underscored by the verbal echo between Grant’s “I will not believe” (L 251) and Stephen’s “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe” (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 246–47). Like Grant, Stephen casts off the chains of his religious beliefs, and by the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen sees Catholicism as a source of paralysis and hypocrisy, confining its followers to a life of blind servitude. As a result of his posture of independence, Stephen, like Grant, struggles against the demand that he perform acts of piety. In the opening chapter of *Ulysses*, we learn that Stephen refused to pray for his mother on her deathbed even after she begged him to kneel. The guilt and pain he caused his mother becomes for Stephen a brooding psychological nightmare that hovers over the novel until it explodes with vicious force in the “Circe” episode with a powerful hallucination of his mother crawling back from the grave, commanding him to repent, “her face worn and noseless, green with grave mould” (U 579). Whereas Grant’s guilt never arrives at this level of intense, nightmarish climax, his fundamental situation and attitude toward it are strikingly similarly to Stephen’s.

The struggle between individual autonomy and communal expectations has figured prominently in Gaines’s work since the very beginning. Jackson Bradley, the protagonist of Gaines’s first novel, *Catherine Carmier* (1964), suffers because he, too, wounds the aunt who raised him by refusing to follow her religion. After a ten-year absence, in which Jackson lived in California and attended college there, he returns to the Louisiana plantation quarter where he was raised by his Great Aunt Charlotte. Like Grant Wiggins, Jackson is, by virtue of his education, an outsider within his own community, and also like Grant, he is frustrated by the pervasive sense of paralysis manifested in what he perceives to be a blind fealty to the status quo. Jackson struggles to find a way to tell his aunt that he does not plan to remain on the plantation while she hopes that he will not only stay but return to the church. Gaines’s repeated use of this motif in *A Lesson Before Dying* suggests how much he
responded to Joyce's portrayal of Stephen's struggle with his mother and religion.

Although Gaines and Joyce dramatize similar effects of guilt upon individuals who refuse to participate in the performances of religious piety embraced by their communities, they arrive at different conclusions regarding faith and belief. Grant ultimately achieves a greater level of reconciliation with religion and his community than Stephen does. This reconciliation is reflected, in part, through the subtle transformation of Reverend Ambrose's character, who gradually becomes more sympathetic as the novel progresses. Initially, the Reverend is merely an antagonist to Grant, positioned not only as a representative of the Church but as the embodiment of the forces of conventionality that paralyze the community. In the dramatic confrontation between the two characters, the Reverend accuses Grant of being self-centered, challenges his depth of feeling for the community, and impresses upon him the idea that faith and belief will mitigate the community's pain (L.212–18). Although Grant is not converted by the Reverend's rhetoric, the tone of the narrative becomes much kinder toward him after this scene. Because everything in the novel is narrated from Grant's point of view, and every narrative tone is therefore rooted in his character, this transformation does not indicate a change in Reverend Ambrose so much as it reveals Grant's shifting attitude toward the Reverend and religious belief more generally. Clearly, the Reverend's words have a significant impact upon Grant. And eventually, Grant sees the need for belief and faith in something even as he acknowledges that he does not have it.

Don't tell me to believe. Don't tell me to believe in the same God or laws that men believe in who commit these murders. Don't tell me to believe that God can bless this country and that men are judged by their peers. . . . I will not believe.

Yet they must believe. They must believe, if only to free the mind, if not the body. Only when the mind is free has the body a chance to be free. Yes, they must
believe, they must believe. Because I know what it means to be a slave. I am a slave. (L 251)

By the end of the novel, what is important to Grant is not that he believe—he still refuses to—but that “they,” the other members of the plantation quarter believe, because as Grant comes to see it, belief is integral to freedom, if not freedom of the body then freedom of the mind. But belief in what? In a Christian God? In some firm, stable consistency? In the inevitable goodness of the human spirit? In the notion that the wrongs in the world will eventually right themselves? The reader is not sure, and Grant may not be either. And while he states the necessity for belief, he recognizes that he is “a slave” to his own cynicism. In this sense, he resembles the rebellious young man in “The Sky is Gray” (1963) who says,

I hope they aren’t all like me. . . . Unfortunately, I was born too late to believe in your God. Let’s hope that the ones who come after will have your faith—if not in your God, then in something else, something definitely that they can lean on. I haven’t anything. For me, the wind is pink, the grass is black. (BL 102)

The need for faith and belief drives the characters in A Lesson Before Dying and Of Love and Dust: as Grant eventually looks toward Jefferson for spiritual sustenance that will enable him to endure the brutalities of the world in which he lives, Jim Kelly looks toward Marcus. Jefferson and Marcus, thus, become icons of hope, strength, and faith within their respective communities. In death, they transcend the injustice that had victimized them in life, and they acquire a heroic status to inspire freedom and to empower others. But Gaines's heroes do not offer a complete release from injustice and brutality, instead what Grant Wiggins and Jim Kelly move toward is a sort of double-consciousness, what F. Scott Fitzgerald called in “The Crack Up” (1931), the ability “to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise” (Fitzgerald 69). At the end of the novel, Grant is in no way
blind to injustice and brutality; indeed, he sees them even more poignantly with Jefferson’s execution, but Jefferson’s strength in the face of overwhelming humiliation and pain gives Grant new hope.

Heroism is an important theme for Joyce as well, but, significantly different from Gaines’s heroism, Joyce’s heroes are often satirical versions of ideal images. Joyce’s work, especially *Dubliners*, is much more skeptical, often bitterly skeptical, toward notions of heroism. Little Chandler, for instance, constructs a hero of his friend Ignatius Gallaher, viewing him as a savior, a successful London journalist who will rescue him from the paralysis and oppression of Dublin. In Chandler’s mind, it is as if he is a dry desert and Gallaher a cloud on the horizon promising rain. But Gallaher turns out to be more like a puff of hot, dirty air than a cloud that could provide the rain of spiritual salvation. *Dubliners* is full of these perverted, ironic heroes, such as the foreigners in “After the Race,” who offer to show Jimmy Doyle a good time, but in fact rob him in a game of cards; Corley in “Two Gallants,” who is not gallant at all; and the ghost of Parnell in “Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” who, rather than galvanizing the men for genuine revolution, inspires distorted memories and a celebration of mediocre poetry. If there is a sincere hero in Joyce’s fiction, it is Leopold Bloom, the hero of *Ulysses*. Compared to Gaines’s heroes, however, Bloom’s influence is smaller and more modest in what it promises. Whereas Gaines’s heroes are the products of moments of transgression and transformation, Joyce’s hero is the product of the everyday and the seemingly mundane. Whereas Gaines’s heroes inspire the novels’ protagonists to greater levels of hope and renewal, Bloom’s effect upon Stephen is ambiguous at best. And whereas Gaines’s heroes die violent, meaningful deaths, thrusting their feet in the doors of plantation masters, Bloom falls quietly asleep in his bed lying next to his adulterous wife. The depiction of the hero signals another difference between Gaines and Joyce that stems from their respective reading communities. Gaines draws on a more American tradition of the hero defying the odds and dying with some measure of blazing greatness, on the other
hand, Joyce presents a more muted and ambiguous hero. Ultimately, however, what unites both writers is that they depict oppressed communities in desperate need of heroic icons and heroic action.

In addition to these structural and thematic affinities, both Joyce and Gaines are extraordinarily sensitive to literary, textual representations of speech and dialect. Gaines, for instance, builds his characters through the creation of highly defined voices—a stylistic technique that stems from the process of translating folk narratives and other oral modes of communication into written literary ones (Gaudet 13). In a 1969 interview, Gaines articulated this desire to translate the oral word to the written page: “I like to listen to the way people talk. I like to listen to their stories. Then when I get into a little room someplace I try to write them down” (Fitz Gerald and Merchant 333); and again in 1974:

I come from a long line of storytellers. I come from a plantation where people told stories by the fireplace at night. People told stories on the ditch bank. . . . People sat around telling stories. I think in my immediate family there were tremendous storytellers or liars or whatever you want to call them. They would talk and talk and talk, and I’d listen to them. (Laney 3)

“That Louisiana dialect—that combination of English, Creole, Cajun, black” (Southern University Speech, 1971, qtd. in Simpson 121), the “talk talk talk” that Gaines listened to as a child pervades the speech of his narrators and characters. In this attempt to use written words to capture the oral voice, Gaines’s work shows a strong correspondence to that of Joyce—another correspondence that Gaines acknowledges.

I think Joyce does it [records oral storytelling in the written medium]. I think he does in it *Finnegans Wake*, and nobody can understand what the hell is going on there. I think he also did it in other stories. I think a good example would be “Ivy Day in the Committee
South Atlantic Review

121

Room.” It’s the old tradition of these old guys telling the story about the great fighter—the Irish patriot, Parnell—and Joyce can put his in literature because Joyce had such a great literary background. (Gaudet 8)

Using similar formal techniques to bring the voices of their characters to the written page, Gaines and Joyce construct the idiolect of their characters more through strategic syntax and diction than phonetic misspellings of words. In Of Love and Dust, for instance, Jim Kelly says, “I tried to vision what it would be like to bounce between those little skinny thighs” (OLD 49, emphasis mine); referring to his mother, the boy narrator of “The Sky is Gray” tells the reader, “She’s thinking if they got enough wood” (BL 83, emphasis mine) and describing the girl on the bus who sticks out her tongue, he says, “she jug her tongue out at me” (BL 92, emphasis mine); and Grant’s aunt in A Lesson Before Dying tells him, “You going with us up the quarter” (L 14, emphasis mine). In each of these verbal representations, syntax and diction, rather than phonetic misspellings, are manipulated to convey a sense of the spoken word. When Gaines does use misspellings, it is usually in the relatively mild form of omitting /ed/ and /ing/ endings as he does in “The Sky is Gray.” The section of A Lesson Before Dying that most foregrounds its style is Jefferson’s diary entries, which are riddled with phonetic misspellings. Although this section might initially appear to represent spoken dialect, it is in fact a mimetic reflection of Jefferson’s writing not his speech. In this, Gaines more closely follows the lead of Joyce than black writers, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and other pioneers of literary representations of African American dialect, as he rarely uses misspellings to represent the spoken word.

In his early work, Joyce too avoided phonetic misspellings to convey an Irish dialect. Resisting popular textual modes for representing Irish speech, such as Samuel Lover’s rampant misspellings, Joyce instead manipulated diction and syntax. In Dubliners, for instance, dialect is conveyed with phrases such as: “So one night he was wanted for to go on a call” (“The Sisters,” D 17, emphasis mine); “I was married last May twelve months” (“A Little Cloud,”
D 79); and “Nosey Flynn was sitting up in his usual corner of Davy Byrne’s and, when he heard the story, he stood Farrington a half-one, saying it was as smart a thing as ever be heard” (“Counterparts,” D 93, emphasis mine). Each of these phrases uses strategic syntax and diction, rather than phonetic misspellings to represent the spoken word. Even Ulysses, for all of its stylistic innovation, primarily uses syntax and diction, as in the opening of the “Cyclops” episode:

I was just passing the time of day with old troy of the D.M.P. at the corner of Arbour hill there and be damned but a bloody sweep came along and he near drove his gear into my eye. I turned around to let him have the weight of my tongue when who should I see dodging along Stony Batter only Joe Hynes. “Lo, Joe,” says I. “How are you blowing?” (U 292)

The my’s in this passage could easily be written as me’s, but here again Joyce refuses to use misspellings to represent the Irish speech. It is not until his final novel, Finnegans Wake (1938), that Joyce relies heavily on phonetic misspellings, but here, through extensive puns and elaborate rhythms, they serve a broader and more complex purpose than simply to convey dialect and speech patterns.12

In the work of both writers, speech is a primary signifier of a character’s identity and position within the narrative. Joyce, for instance, often assigns Northern Irish dialects to undesirable characters, such as Farrington’s boss Mr. Alleyne, who speaks with a “piercing North of Ireland accent” (“Counterparts,” D 86), and the student who speaks with a harsh Ulster accent in class offending Stephen in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (PA 193). The social significance of speech is a recurring theme in Portrait, illustrated in scenes such as Stephen’s famous musing on how the words “home, Christ, ale, master” are different on his English tutor’s lips than on his own (PA 189) and the connotations he assigns to the accents of his fellow students (PA 195). In Gaines’s work, too, accent and speech carry powerful connotations. Grant’s speech in
A Lesson Before Dying is significantly different from the novel’s other black characters in that Grant does not speak with Gaines’s Louisiana dialect. This discursive difference marks Grant as an outsider within his own community, and Grant is constantly aware of how his speech shapes perceptions of him. When he meets with Sheriff Guidry and explains that Jefferson’s godmother is too old to visit the jail, he says, “‘She’s old,’ I said. ‘She doesn’t feel that she has the strength to come up there all the time.’” The sheriff responds, “‘She doesn’t huh?’” emphasizing the “doesn’t.” Grant explains to the reader: “I was supposed to have said ‘don’t.’ I was being too smart” (L 48). Within the context of the novel’s verbal landscape, Grant’s style of speech characterizes his narrative voice and reflects his unique status with regard to the plantation community—he is a well-educated black man, an outsider to the community’s white and black populations.

In light of the affinities discussed so far, a final point of correspondence between Joyce and Gaines, the strategic repetition of key words, acquires particular significance in the creation and presentation of character, narrative point of view, and place. This linguistic repetition, what Frank O’Connor calls “mechanical prose” (O’Connor 296), serves to foreground the idiosyncratic speech and thought patterns of characters and narrators. D. H. Lawrence, in the last paragraph of his forward to Women in Love (1920), describes this prose technique as a “continual, slightly modified repetition. . . . [E]very natural crisis in emotion or passion or understanding comes from this pulsing, frictional to-and-fro which works up to culmination.” “Mechanical Prose,” this “pulsing, frictional to-and-fro,” appears so frequently in Joyce’s early works that we might consider this linguistic pattern stylistically representative of them. It occurs in passages such as the last paragraph of “The Dead,” where the words snow, faintly, and falling are powerfully repeated to dramatic effect; the last paragraph of “A Painful Case” where James Duffy’s listening and the perfect silence of the night are similarly repeated; and in the following passage from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.
He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and willful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the seaharvest of shells and tangle and veiled gray sunlight and grayclad lightclad figures, of children and girls and voices childish and girlish in the air. (PA 171, emphasis mine)

The primary effects of this strategic repetition, or "mechanical prose," are two-fold: it creates a highly self-conscious prose rhythm that draws the reader's attention to the language itself and it reflects the mental ebb and flow of a narrator or character. In the opening paragraph of Of Love and Dust, Gaines, too, uses "mechanical prose" to achieve these dual effects.

From my gallery I could see that dust coming down the quarter, coming fast, and I thought to myself, "Who in the world would be driving like that?" I got up to go inside until the dust had all settled. But I had just stepped inside the room when I heard the truck stopping before the gate. I didn't turn around then because I knew the dust was flying all over the place. A minute or so later, when I figured it had settled, I went back. The dust was still flying across the yard, but it wasn't nearly as thick now. I looked toward the road and I saw somebody coming in the gate. It was too dark to tell if he was white or colored. (OLD 3, emphasis mine)

On one hand, the rhythmic repetition of dust, flying, and settled functions mimetically to assert the presence of pervasive dust. The discursive juxtaposition between the flying and settling dust also creates a tension between motion and stasis, between change and status quo—a tension that prefigures the major dramatic conflict for the narrator Jim Kelly: whether to embrace Marcus as the leader of brave and necessary change, or to condemn him for threatening the community's peaceful stability. In "The Sky is Gray," Gaines uses repetition to underscore James's hunger and cold: "I ain't just
hungry, but I'm cold, too. I'm so hungry and cold I want to cry. And look like I'm getting colder and colder” (BL 106, emphasis mine). In A Lesson Before Dying, he uses it to highlight Grant’s depiction of the plantation quarter as unchanging and as paralyzed as Joyce’s Dublin:

I had heard the same carols all my life, seen the same little play, with the same mistakes in grammar. The minister had offered the same prayer as always Christmas or Sunday. The same people wore the same old clothes and sat in the same places. Next year it would be the same, and the year after that, the same again. (L 151, emphasis mine)

And in “The Sky is Gray,” James’s description of Bayonne repeats the word same for a similar effect:

We go, we go, we go. We walk clean out of Bayonne. Then we cross the street and we come back. Same thing I seen when I got off the bus this morning. Same old trees, same old walk, same old weeds, same old cracked pave—same old everything. (BL 104, emphasis mine)

These moments of mechanical prose foreground in third-person narration the characters’ emotional responses to their environments as they search for hope, faith, and life in worlds seemingly devoid of these qualities.

Mechanical prose is one of several stylistic techniques that Gaines borrows from Joyce’s depictions of Dublin in order to represent a specific African American situation. From Eveline, who sits at the window and inhales the “odour of dusty cretonne” (“Eveline,” D 36) to the snow that blankets the streets and houses in “The Dead,” Joyce’s characters are trapped in a world of dust in its myriad forms, as are Gaines’s characters from the flying/settling dust in the opening paragraph of Of Love and Dust to the ever-present, ashy smoke that looms over the plantation quarter in A Lesson Before Dying. Whereas Joyce’s characters are often frus-
trated in their search for salvation and happiness, Gaines offers his characters hope—not the hope of escape, nor the hope of tearing down existing social structures and rebuilding utopian ones, but through a deep sympathy for the bruised humanity of all his characters, whether black or white, Gaines offers the hope that even in extreme suffering we may find beauty. Perhaps the ideal symbol for Gaines’s hope is the yellow butterfly that appears to Grant at the moment of Jefferson’s execution.

I watched it closely, the way it opened its wings and closed them, the way it opened its wings again, fluttered, closed its wings for a second or two, then opened them again and flew away. I watched it fly over the ditch and down into the quarter, I watched it until I could not see it anymore. Yes, I told myself. It is finally over. (L 252)

Flying into the dusty, smoky quarter, the butterfly brings the possibility of hope and life to an otherwise brutal world. Joyce’s Eveline, Little Chandler, James Duffy, the men in “Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” Gabriel Conroy, and even Stephen Dedalus await the arrival of something—a little cloud or a yellow butterfly—that will lift the pervasive dust and snow. And in this we see Gaines not merely imitating Joyce, but appropriating and in a sense re-writing Joyce in the service of depicting an African American context.

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

NOTES

1 From 1905 until 1915, Joyce lived in Trieste, which is now located on the Italian side of the border with Slovenia but was part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire when Joyce lived there.

2 Ireland was part of the United Kingdom from 1800 until 1922 when it achieved Free State status. It became an independent Republic in 1949.


9 “A Little Cloud” takes its ironic title from the Bible (I Kings XVIII. 44) where “a little cloud” is the first sign to Elijah of welcome rain.


11 In the initial drafts of “Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” however, Joyce made frequent use of phonetic misspellings in characters’ direct discourse to represent an Irish dialect. We read words and phrases such as the following: “dhrunken,” “dhrink,” “olwl” (old), “p’r’aps” (perhaps), “d’yew know what he tow’l me?” This was very unusual for Joyce since phonetic misspellings do not appear in any of the other stories in *Dubliners*, nor do they appear in the initial publication of the story in 1914.

12 Typical of the representations of speech in *Finnegans Wake*, Ireland is spelled “Ireland” (171). While this phonetic misspelling reflects the character’s voice—Shaun the Postman’s—and a type of Irish accent, it also connotes ire, and in this context, the land of anger, referring to the division between Ireland’s Nationalists and Unionists.

John Garvin in his essay “The Anglo-Irish Idiom in the Works of Major Irish Writers” notes some of the specific ways in which *Finnegans Wake* registers “the music and the rhythm” (113) of the Anglo-Irish idiom.

---

**WORKS CITED**


Matthew Spangler


