James Joyce's *Ulysses* at 120 – 102 – 40
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Hans Walter Gabler

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The following interview with Hans Walter Gabler was conducted by Larissa Beham. The interview questions are direct translations from her original German. The interview answers in German were Hans Walter Gabler's impromptu responses. They were transposed into English by automatic translation followed by Gabler's own careful re-authentication.

It was 120 years ago on 16 June in 1904 that James Joyce and Nora Barnacle for the first time went out together. Composing his novel *Ulysses* around Leopold Bloom and Molly Bloom as James Joyce's and Nora Barnacle's fictional counterparts, Joyce eternalized the day and date. *Ulysses* was first published on 16 June 1922, Joyce's fortieth birthday. The novel's readers through the generations since dub the day Bloomsday. On Bloomsday 1984 a critical and synoptic edition saw publication in Munich. This year 2024, hence, we celebrate its fortieth anniversary. Its concept of combining the genesis and the published text of a literary work in one edition was new. Sensationally both celebrated and denigrated at first, the edition is secure today in its accomplishment.

James Joyce himself once called his masterpiece *Ulysses* a gossipy, all-encompassing chronicle. Do you find Joyce garrulous?

No. I perceive Joyce as an author who creates his entire world through text. He is not garrulous in the sense of the word; on the contrary, he becomes increasingly complex in his thinking and does everything he can to represent this complexity in language. For him, this results in eloquent precision, not loquaciousness.

Didn't Joyce once say that he made *Ulysses* so ambiguous and sprawling in order to keep professors busy for centuries to come?

That is something else. That means a concentration and complexity in the possibilities of understanding. I mean, it's only been a hundred years since *Ulysses* was published. So we still have a lot of time to realize everything that went into the complex of his world of thought and feeling. What is significant about his greatest experiment, *Finnegans Wake*, is that he developed this kind of linguistic multiplicity even further, to the point

where he bends word forms and grammatical conventions to associate in several directions of reference.

This is why Joyce's writing is now regarded as a forerunner of digital text structures. It is said of *Ulysses* that there are no loose ends in the web or mycelium of meanings.

That's roughly true, yes. My approach to reading *Ulysses* and understanding Joyce is, of course, strongly influenced by editorial scholarship and textual genetics. Text-genetic means that a work consists of several layers and versions of text that can be analysed in conjunction. The path of Joyce's writings has been preserved in an astonishingly differentiated way over many phases. You can see from his manuscripts, from the different versions of the typescripts, or from his working materials and notes, where he changed something. That, of course, is something that enriches the text as a whole. Even something deleted and overwritten by the author doesn't erase the acts of writing as such. For the reader and critic it remains an element of the text spectrum. Reading a text in its genetic sequence means perceiving it in its deep layers.

You put the added value of the text-genetic view of literature straight under the magnifying glass.

At least since the invention of printing, we have equated text with the end product, the book. What is recorded there, however, marks the end of a process. Moreover, since around the time of the Enlightenment, authorship has been attributed exclusively to the authorial figure, the original genius. This is basically a substitute figure for the Holy Spirit or whoever else is felt to have sent the biblical texts into the world. This went so far that printers still in the 16th and 17th centuries could be severely punished for errors made in their setting of texts coming ultimately—that is, originally—from God himself. Later, the author became the central originator. In truth, however, the author has a decidedly dialogical relationship to what he or she writes. From the moment when what is creatively conceived is materialized into writing, it becomes (also) the author's object, perceived and (re-)conceived in reading. The author's double relationship as both writer-author and reader of the text-in-progress is significant. It is in its own way also to be accounted for in appreciating the text's relationship eventually to its (say, post-publication?) recipient readers—and their relationship to the text in its stages of origin and change through the author/to text/to reader progression. This transition in the understanding of text in relation to the author and subsequently also to the recipient is very important.

So the readers, for their part, have been too "passive" so far?

A text only really comes to life when it is rethought and linked with associations of which the author could never have had the slightest idea. Listening and rethinking, empathizing and linking back to one's own experiences is a very important part of a text.

There are authors for whom there is little secondary literature and others for whom there are whole walls of shelves. Like Joyce. Does that mean he and his readers talk to each other more?

You can focus the imbalance directly on the so-called secondary literature. Behind it lies the idea of interpretation and the idea that something comes first, that an author has written it, and whatever shelves-filling plethora from others is simply secondary material. On the one hand, yes, but this categorization perhaps doesn't adequately acknowledge the way we think, feel and empathize with literature. In his latest book, *Knife*, Salman Rushdie speaks of literary texts as "stories within which people want to live."

How did your new approach to editing come about?

The editor before you comes from a school of editing that didn't take much of what I've just outlined into consideration. I have made a point of saying that the edition of *Ulysses* that I realized with my colleagues is an attempt to represent what Joyce wrote. Joyce's text was contemporary literature for thirty years, forty years. After his death, the process of canonization began. It's a turning point in perception when an author is considered so important. In the historical tradition safeguarding what has been handed down that goes back thousands of years, it is at this point of canonization that the edition begins. In our instance, the material it compares are manuscripts written by Joyce himself or by others, printed and reprinted texts. A lot of Joyce's own writings have been preserved. To the largest part, we can claim that we are now producing or restoring what he wrote. In contrast to what we couldn't read properly before or what has disappeared. In this respect, our edition was able to achieve a great deal. In some places it was necessary for the editor to use his critical mind and interpret, so to speak, what should be there against what the pre-editing transmission offers. Anglo-American editorial scholarship has focussed on realizing the author's intention. This is a strange idea, because positing the author's intention when you think that it is not fulfilled in the text means, roughly speaking, inventing something. Whereas Germanist editing is more of a historical discipline. While it does not—not yet used to—think of editions in terms of process, it

did and does differentiate between versions. Within the respective material transmission, the Germanist edition distinguishes and editorially offers distinct versions. Within these, it adopts for and in the edition what transmission materially hands down. Within versions, it only corrects clear errors.

And you have brought together the Anglo-American and Germanist approaches?

Basically, yes. I realized early on that I could only do justice to Joyce and the Joyce tradition by combining the Anglo-American and the Germanist editorial approaches. On such a combination of editorial terms and concepts, I wanted to present what Joyce wrote as well as the process through which he realized his achievement. At the very basis — to begin with — this meant establishing in the novel as printed at around 5000 instances that what was published as Joyce's text from 1922 to 1984 was not what he wrote, what he had written. In this way, editing begins, both factually and critically. Factually, whenever the transmission attests what Joyce wrote. Critically, whenever the editor needs to establish a reading due to a gap in the transmission. The changes made by the editor to the surviving printed text are in such instances critically established by the editor. Shortly after the publication of our edition, it was sometimes claimed that this was now the definitive text. But critical editing and a definitive edition do not go together. They are mutually exclusive.

How did you actually come to Joyce? And how did the idea for the Gabler Edition come about?

After completing my doctorate in Munich, I spent some time in Oxford and did some preliminary text-genetic research on verse and prose from Shakespeare's time. By chance, I came across an annotated copy of a Joyce text, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The annotations were used by Joyce's publisher Harriet Shaw Weaver to prepare a second trade edition. Scholarly editions of *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* were produced fairly early on. But *Ulysses* — ah yes, that was somehow the north face of the Eiger. Nobody dared to tackle it. There was one attempt, but that edition foundered. I took up the challenge to edit *Ulysses*. The study of verse and prose in the transmission of texts from the time of Shakespeare's contemporaries never saw the light of day.

Who helped you with this?

I got a scholarship and was able to work with a team from 1978. Although that Gabler

was just an assistant at the time, not yet a fully-fledged academic. I assembled a team. Wolfhard Steppe, a colleague from English and German studies, incredibly well-read and classically educated, joined it. Claus Melchior joined, at the time still a student. The two eventually became the co-editors of the edition. Walter Hettche, a student during the *Ulysses* years, later edited *A Portrait* and *Dubliners* together with me. Dr Charity Scott Stokes was an English language lector in our English department and a native speaker. The team, thus largely students, somewhat shifted over the six years the project lasted. Friendships formed for life.

What are you able to read from Joyce's handwriting that others cannot?

When I work from Joyce's original against something transcribed, I sometimes read what I see differently from what the person before me transcribed. By no means do I claim to be a singular reader of Joyce's handwriting. Danis Rose in Ireland, for example, is an outstanding partner. But I can often get more out of his handwriting. It is also about recognizing the dynamics of the movement of writing. After years of singing with the Munich Bach Choir, I once had the facsimile manuscript of Bach's "St Matthew Passion" on my lap during a rehearsal. I listened and read and suddenly realized how the emotional development of the composition was reflected in the manuscript itself, depending on how dense or how flowing the handwriting was, or how large the spaces between the characters. From Franz Kafka, incidentally, we know that when he came to the end of a page, that apparently put him under such pressure to avoid a fresh blank page that everything crowded together and became illegible. Deciphering through listening to what is written furthers the ability to transcribe written text in preparation for editing.

What does a Joyce manuscript look like?

On the right-hand pages of his notebooks, the basic inscription largely progresses as text. The left-hand pages are initially left blank. And then Joyce kept filling them with distinct islands after islands of writing, all revisions as additions to be integrated into subsequent copying—that is: re-writing—of the composition in progress.

***Ulysses* was once said to be "a novel to end all novels." Is that the case?**

The assessment presupposes that you know what a "novel" is. In terms of the genre's conventions, *Ulysses* is not a novel, in the first place, but rather a collection of 18 episodes, each of which demands a resetting of the reading approach. Which is why many people stop reading after the third episode at the latest. They don't get the hang

of the shifts of style and setting anymore. In this respect, the classic novel ends before *Ulysses*. Or you accept it as a novel, which means that the like is no longer writeable.

So why has the Gabler edition attracted so much attention. . .

...like hardly any other scholarly edition? Of course, this has to do with the fact that there was someone who was so opposed to it.

You mean the so-called "Joyce Wars," sparked by the so-called "vagabond scholar" John Kidd?

John Kidd coined the term "Joyce Wars." It is not mine. Basically, this was a shitstorm (somewhat before the currency of the term). From the profile neurosis of a competitor. It was actually a great pity that John Kidd went up in arms against the critical and synoptic edition of *Ulysses*. He had done his doctorate but didn't gain an appointment. Vagabonding, he also passed through Munich for two or three weeks. We cordially (that is, harmlessly) invited him to rummage through our papers. From his point of view, he found enough ammunition to attack us. What made the whole thing so paradoxical was with how much intelligence and passionate Joyce enthusiasm he pursued his debunking, regardless of his complete ignorance of academic editing. He tried to read up what editors do, what they should do, how editions were traditionally made. So there was so much in this Gabler edition that had to be wrong, wasn't there?

Wasn't he cautioned?

No. Kidd worked through much material, gathered reams and reams of details. So much of what he spotted didn't match up with what he thought others were saying about how an edition should be. In America, this was compounded by the fact that during the first ten years in which the *Ulysses* edition existed, there was a great lack of understanding, especially among scholars, as to what was actually the critical and scholarly achievement. Until then, no editions presented a synopsis of the development of the text. As a result, John Kidd received an astonishing range of support from people who didn't like this new *Ulysses* at all. I noticed this myself from colleagues whom (regardless) I held in high esteem. They knew their *Ulysses* so well, and now it was different — this made them seriously uncomfortable at first. And then there was a magazine in New York which copy-edited and the published the reams of material Kidd delivered to them unpublished. They turned it into a sensational coup. Nor in the "Joyce Wars" was lacking, alas, a subliminal: "Gabler is a German, what command has he of a text in English?"

And did you let the accusations get to you?

No. The problem that arose in America, though unrecognized at first, was that Kidd's attacks on Gabler rooted in the circumstance that American-English editing and the Germanist approach were so fundamentally distinct. Almost exactly ten years later, in 1995, there was a conference in New York at which Englishmen, Americans, and editors of the *James Joyce Quarterly* talked and put forward excellent arguments. In the meantime, George Bornstein and I had also published a volume on the theoretical foundations of editing from a Germanist perspective. And that, taken together, then took hold. Since then, there has been something like a real understanding of what our edition has achieved. I began to discern at the time that our edition held out for a full response from the next generation of readers and users. Which has meanwhile come about. The Gabler edition (not so dubbed by me) is now standard at universities worldwide.

The most important thing our edition can teach us is that texts are to be understood both as a process and as a result. Whereby the one-volume edition basically represents the result, the full scholarly three-volume edition the way there. In the full three-volume edition, the left-hand pages show the layers of text and the right-hand pages the resulting text. It is true, though, that the ten years of attacks on the edition have seriously held back the perception of what was innovative in the process. It remains to be seen how long it will yet take for an understanding generally to prevail recognizing the processual nature of texts.

The Gabler edition makes multidirectionality transparent on both levels in Joyce's texts, on the level of meaning and on that of text genesis. Could the latter actually be visualized in three dimensions?

Digital three-dimensionality may be generated from our digital recording of all the material. The computerized base is secure. The essential initial stages towards a Digital Critical and Synoptic Edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses* on these foundations have been taken by Ronan Crowley and Joshua Schäuble. <https://ulysses.online/index.html>.

It was the first time that computer-aided editing was used, which is why you are considered a father of "digital humanities." Did it all take place in Munich?

I was just here. But the first and only computer with a data processing program for literary scholars that could be used to compare — to collate — text versions was in Tübingen. The computer center in Munich did only later acquire intelligent terminals.

These we were allowed to use in the evenings. If someone had to go to the loo and then put their wet fingers on the keys, this would often enough cause short circuits. What had been saved over two or three hours collapsed. It had to and could be repeated. But back then, in the early days of data processing in the humanities, we probably lost about a year's work on such mishaps.

Would you have been a good editor for Joyce during his lifetime?

Richard Ellmann opens his biography of Joyce with the sentence: "We are still learning to be Joyce's contemporaries." If I had actually been in Zurich or Trieste or Paris in Joyce's days, I don't think I would have been able to understand myself as Joyce's contemporary in Ellmann's sense. I believe that I would have had to develop an improbable ability to arrive where he had long been.

Would you have gone for a drink with him? Or to a Bach concert?

Off the top of my head, I'd say we wouldn't have really got talking without a good drink. We might have got on well in the world of music. Joyce always translates, so to speak, his language into music. I imagine that without his lifelong eye condition, which made it impossible for him to sight-read music, James Joyce might have become a singer by profession.

Would you have been able to teach Joyce anything?

Hardly. With luck, I could have learnt from him. He knew all the tricks already.