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## **“Im-marginable Langscape”**

### **Re-creation and De-creation in Joyce and Beckett**

This paper explores the subtle union (and dis-union) between *space* and *place* and their relationship to human consciousness. It begins by delineating some crucial epistemological views which poignantly elucidate the essence of the topic (Aristotle, Bruno) and relates these closely to Joyce and Beckett. Spatial re-creation in early Joyce is analyzed next, in order to enlighten, in the style of *Dubliners* and *A Portrait*, the ability to render the materiality and volume of places (as argued in Hamon’s theory of dynamic description) and the simultaneous a-material character of imagined or transcended space (such as the European Continent in Gabriel Conroy’s imagination). Particular emphasis is put on the suspended states of *spacelessness* during which consciousness absorbs the surrounding physical world in a timeless feeling de-materializing space (as illustrated by Bachelard). Beckett’s own depiction, in contrast, is defined as *placelessness*, a devaluation which shows a more de-material aspect than a-material spacelessness. Beckett’s de-creation of real inhabitable places echoes/mirrors the absolute reduction of his language, whereas Joyce, by furthering his experimentation, accentuates the hypertrophic re-creation of places within an “im-marginable” space, in which places melt into language, so as to enlarge a landscape and turn it into a personal, and yet universal, “langscape.”

Deriving from the fourth book of *Finnegans Wake*, the notion of “langscape” in my title combines the words *language* and *landscape* and suggests a new kind of landscape which is made possible through words and, at the same time, it evokes a kind of language (the one enacted in *Finnegans Wake*) which is itself to be conceived as a landscape. It is worth noticing that in such a long and linguistically complex book as *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce never uses the word *landscape* alone. It only appears as part of the aforementioned pun and in one more passage which also reflects upon Joyce’s literary method itself:

It *scenes* like a *landescape* from *Wildu Picturescu* or some seem on some dimb Arras, dumb as Mum's mutyness, this *mimage* of the seventyseventh kusun of. . . (FW 53.1–2)<sup>1</sup>

Here, the author underlines the escapist character of his scene-making process by evoking a landscape which escapes from mere representation and from mimesis. And mimesis, in its Joycean version, contains the word *image* itself, which is to be referred to a mind's image, original and unique, rather than to a mere representation/imitation of a pre-existing one.

Starting from this very powerful Joycean standpoint, this essay aims at suggesting one of the possible interpretations of the concept of space in Joyce's production, or, more precisely, the relationship between space and place and their mutual, and interchangeable, negative counterparts: *spacelessness* and *placelessness*. This only apparent dichotomy in Joyce's own philosophy reflects, and at the same time draws on, his philosophical background, and activates an enlightening and stimulating link to the work of his friend Samuel Beckett, a subtle union and *dis-union* which, in my opinion, is able to offer a fruitful perspective on the two authors' poetics, by underlining the differences and the similarities of their literary methods when confronted with the de-creation and simultaneous re-creation of space and place within their literary discourses.

The difference between space and place informs the epistemological investigation since time immemorial and may be presented, to various and variable degrees, as a dichotomy between those philosophers who tend to privilege the concept of a more restricted, confining and containing relative place (most notably Aristotle with his theories on place as a vessel which surrounds beings within the finite space of the universe) and those who, on the contrary, tend to focus on the more generalized concept of absolute space, being it finite or infinite, in which human beings are situated since their appearance on earth and which is a pre-existing entity second to void alone (from which, in fact, matter has arisen). Given this extremely sketchy introduction on such a complex and infinitely open-to-discussion subject, it is important to note that the ambivalent attitude of James Joyce toward the subject starts from the very beginning of his prose, especially with *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Here, the notions of an infinite absolute space and a relative, often claustrophobic place, always go together in his stylistic re-creation, as well as in the characters' perceptions and, finally, in the reader's mental re-creation. The places

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1. All parenthesized references to *Finnegans Wake* (FW) are to this edition: James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975).

which surround or confine the Dubliners are not described by an omnipresent narrator but readers perceive them in the same way as the characters do. As argued by Hamon and Genette in their theories on “narrative description”<sup>2</sup> (according to which temporal narration and spatial description always overlap), in Joyce, readers are made able to follow the characters both in the development of the plot and in their wanderings, their visual trajectories, as being on a constant and almost conditioning spatial, and temporal, threshold. This is metaphorically represented as the doorstep of houses, the entrance to the library for Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait* (which will be then re-actualized in *Ulysses*), the margin between the mundane space of the college, the holy place of the chapel and so forth. The threshold is often to be seen as the boundary between *places* (abodes and prisons at the same time), and a universalized, though personal, *space*. More precisely, we ought to talk about a constant longing for a “spacious” space, a bitterly missed possibility to achieve it physically or to recreate and fix it in the characters’ imagination or reveries. Evelyn,<sup>3</sup> for instance, is only able to dream about such a space, and her condition remains the (Beckettian) awaiting one of being torn between the sheltered but confining place of her home and the empty space of the vast unknown ocean which will free her from the dusty routine of her life. Gabriel Conroy, in “The Dead,” continuously daydreams about the Continent and finds himself almost trapped in his streams of consciousness, which do not only enlarge his temporal and spatial being (according to the concept of the epiphany as theorised in *Stephen Hero*) but also make him realise his life’s limitations and that centripetal force which prevents him from those mental spaces described by Gaston Bachelard as “intimate immensity,”<sup>4</sup> a personal condition which, thanks to poetic reverie, is able to make one feel and live (as well as recreate linguistically as, for Bachelard, every reverie is a linguistic process) that immensity which the phenomenological world in which we are living often denies. The house of the Morkan sisters in “The Dead” is a chief example here, as it is always presented according to an opposition between its inside and its outside, which, on its turn, mirrors the contrast between the intimate, daydreamt-as-immense world inside Gabriel’s mind and the external physical space around him, which can be reduced to a receptacle of tinier and tinier places. This kind of ecstatic state which absorbs all physical space and makes spacious an otherwise narrow place is also able to convert

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2. Gerard Genette, *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969); Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'Analyse du Descriptif* (Paris: Hachette, 1981).

3. James Joyce, “Evelyn,” *Dubliners* (London: Penguin, 1992), 37–43.

4. Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), Chapter VIII, 183–210.

time from a linear and horizontal succession into a vertical suspension that expands a moment and bestows it greater spaciousness. As critic Alexandra Anyfanti states about *Ulysses*, “Joyce retains the temporal and spatial frameworks of his book only to dissolve them, while the development is progressively relocated from external reality to the internal psychic states that this reality creates.”<sup>5</sup> In this respect, while time becomes atemporal and timeless together, physical space turns into mental *spacelessness*, into the possibility to remove all elements of matter and achieve a state of a-materiality, in which the nucleus of one’s consciousness can be reached. This opportunity, almost always denied to the characters in *Dubliners* (except for the more ambivalent case of Gabriel Conroy, as extensively argued by John Paul Riquelme<sup>6</sup>), is then made achievable by Stephen in *A Portrait*, even though only in some ephemeral phases of his psychological and artistic growth. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that the *space–spacelessness* process only culminates in the physical and yet mental and meditative peregrinations of Leopold Bloom-Ulysses. As for the spatial structure of this novel, Ian Gunn and Mark Wright have recently described Joyce’s method very accurately:

Throughout the book the narrative moves from place to place and character to character. The narrative focus is sometimes close-up with interior monologue or at others godlike over and above the action. Characters appear in the spotlight for a while and then drift off-stage into the shadows only to return later in another location.<sup>7</sup>

Place is more and more relative in *Ulysses* and often seems to serve the purpose of creating a whole amalgam with the characters’ own mental image of it. The mental image of an infinite space, however, is always linked to its divisibility into smaller and smaller places, loci of the vibrant city and loci of the vibrant minds and memories, as we read in several passages from the “Ithaca” episode. Some of these strongly illustrate a definite connection to Samuel Beckett’s work, in the light of Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno, who influenced both Irish writers. When Stephen and

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5. Alexandra Anyfanti, “Time, Space and Consciousness in *Ulysses*,” *Hypermedia Joyce Studies* 4.2 (2003/4), August 10, 2007 <<http://hjs.ff.cuni.cz/archives/v3/anyfanti.html>>.

6. John Paul Riquelme, “For Whom the Snow Taps: Style and Repetition in ‘The Dead,’” in *The Dead*, ed. Daniel Schwarz (Boston & New York: St. Martins Press, 1994), 219–233; “Styles of Realism and Fantasy,” in *James Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 103–130.

7. Ian Mc Gunn and Mark Wright, “Visualizing Joyce,” *Hypermedia Joyce Studies* 7.1 (2006/7), August 10, 2007 <<http://hjs.ff.cuni.cz/archives/v7/main/essays.php?essay=gunn>>.

Bloom are observing the stars at the end of their (meta)physical journey, the reader witnesses a very significant meditation on the simultaneity of centripetal and centrifugal spatial forces, a concurrence which shapes the physical world as well as our perceptions of it:

Of the eons of geological periods recorded in the stratifications of the earth: of the myriad minute entomological organic existences concealed in cavities of the earth, beneath removable stones, in hives and mounds, of microbes, germs, bacteria, bacilli, spermatozoa: of the *incalculable* trillions of billions of millions of imperceptible molecules contained by cohesion of molecular affinity in a single pinhead: of the universe of human serum constellated with red and white bodies, themselves universes of void space constellated with other bodies, each, in continuity, its universe of divisible component bodies of which each was again divisible in divisions of redivisible component bodies, dividends and divisors ever diminishing without actual division till, if the progress were carried far enough, nought nowhere was never reached.<sup>8</sup>

Here the concept of involution diverges from the immediately previous “Ithaca” passage about evolution,<sup>9</sup> and with the previously described centrifugal force of the poetic reverie which takes the character out of his narrow physical world and introduces him to the spaceless dimension which his imagination can conceive. A chief example of this kind can also be found in the earlier famous passage of *A Portrait*, in which Dedalus writes his name and address on his book and, from Dublin and Ireland, makes himself reach to the continent, the world and, eventually, the universe:

He turned to the flyleaf of the geography and read what he had written there: himself his name and where he was.

*Stephen Dedalus*  
*Class of Elements*

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8. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 699, my italics.

9. “With what meditations did Bloom accompany his demonstration to his companion of various constellations? Meditations of evolution increasingly vaster: of the moon invisible in incipient lunation, approaching perigee of the infinite lattiginous scintillating uncondensed milky way, discernible by daylight by an observer placed at the lower end of a cylindrical vertical shaft 5000 ft deep sunk from the surface towards the centre of the earth . . . of the parallax or the parallactic drift of socalled fixed stars, in reality evermoving from immeasurably remote eons to infinitely remote futures in comparison with which the years, threescore and ten, of allotted human life formed a parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity” (James Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 698, my emphasis).

*Clongowes Wood College*  
*Sallins*  
*County Kildare*  
*Ireland*  
*Europe*  
*The World*  
*The Universe.*<sup>10</sup>

As Joyce aims at recreating in his writing, centripetal and centrifugal forces simultaneously influence human consciousness and place it in front of what he calls “an obsolescent unhinged door” which “reveals an aperture for free egress and free ingress.”<sup>11</sup> The role of imagination is extremely significant in such a spatial investigation because it is through it and through fantastic re-creation that the artist is able to shape a spatial and temporal world by reshaping and eventually transcending Euclidean geometry (so as to relate closely with non-Euclidean round ones) and scientific time. The adjective *incalculable* in the aforementioned passage from *Ulysses* shows indeed the impossibility of a scientific and paradigmatic measurement for such an inner and consciousness-belonging conception of space.

This brief background illustrates the progressive awareness which takes Joyce to the creation of the notion of the *immarginable* (*FW* 4.19)<sup>12</sup> in the very first book of *Finnegans Wake*. This infinitely readable concept vibrantly illustrates the *langscape* which the author has now managed to re-create. The *immarginable langscape* in the title of this essay refers to a space of language in which *place*, *space* and *placelessness* are finally subsumed into *language* itself, which is then able to enact and re-create a constantly *renewed and renewable* space. Most significantly, this happens both with the author’s act of recreation and with the readers themselves, who recreate this multiply hypertrophic dimension in their minds, through the sensory data which language evokes.

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10. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 12.

11. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 701.

12. The concept of the *immarginable*, present in the first book of *Finnegans Wake*, draws on the philosophical and cosmological investigation by Giordano Bruno, according to which we live in an infinite universe made up of countless finite worlds, and our spatial perception of it constantly changes according to our position in space, thus enlarging indefinitely. Joyce, who also wrote on the philosopher in 1903, synthesizes here notions of margin, figuration, infinite, marginality and imagination.

Both in Joyce's and in Beckett's productions, the reader is obliged to re-create his own space in the inner universe of the text, to participate in a sort of intransitive discourse, "one that bears no fixed meaning in relation to external reality which tends, in fact, to destroy referentiality and with it, the readers' sense of balance."<sup>13</sup> They both mix innovative techniques into their literary discourses, they both highlight artifice and, as argued by David Hayman, they both affirm the "flux" as an essential component of our experience. But while Joyce deliberately "squidcreens his very language," Beckett chooses to write impoverished and primitive prose. It has been often observed, and it is readily applicable to this spatial investigation, that while Joyce was re-creating such an "immarginable langscape" evolving from an associative flux ("bildung supra bildung," *FW* 4.27 and "one world burrowing on another," *FW* 275.5), Beckett, on the contrary, was dismantling and de-creating a world, he was shaping that void which Joyce was filling *ad infinitum*. The two authors, however share two common traits which don't really suggest too strictly divergent outputs: in fact they both combine auto-destruction of experience and language with self-generation of them, even though one chooses the way of presence and the other the way of absence. Joyce's hypertrophic re-creation and Beckett's hypotrophic de-creation, however, are not necessarily to be conceived in an antithetic relationship, but in an alternate and reversible ambivalence which synthesizes the two opposite concepts. Each word, each sentence, each sign in their worlds, as a matter of fact conceals amplification even when they choose different stylistic directions. From a thematic point of view, it can be easily argued that Beckett, more than an *atemporal spacelessness*, deals with a sense of *placelessness* as conceived by Leonard Lutwak,<sup>14</sup> namely the alienation of human beings when dealing with abodes that are no more able to contain them as inhabitants. As for this thematic aspect, Beckett's characters align themselves with Kafka's ones, always waiting and searching for homes to inhabit. *All Strange Away*, for instance, begins with the sentence: "A place, that again . . . a place, then someone in it. . . No way in, none out. . ." <sup>15</sup> while in *From an Abandoned Work* we read: "I simply will not go out of my way, though I have never in my life been on my way anywhere, but simply on my way."<sup>16</sup> These "places," too many to mention them all, are all deprived of their basic peculiarities, reduced to a zero de-

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13. David Hayman, "Joyce – Beckett – Joyce," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 7 (Spring 1982) 19–47, p. 32.

14. Leonard Lutwak, *The Role of Place in Literature* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984).

15. Samuel Beckett, *All Strange Away* (Milan: SE, 2003), p. 10.

16. Samuel Beckett, *From an Abandoned Work* (Milan: SE, 1999), p. 12.

gree which is however an oxymoric synonym for infinity, both spatially and temporally. A crucial example of this kind is given by the title itself of the work *Lessness* (a translation of the French *sans*), which evokes a progressive and continuous process of reduction, and clearly shows a never-ending, as well as an ever-changing, character. Similarly, in one of the texts from “Texts for Nothing,” the paradoxical “reductive growth” is metaphorically associated to a “feeble sand” which grows less and less until it becomes extremely small (but never really disappears), so as to be conceived and perceived only by an imaginative eye:

Without what hope, haven't I just said, of seeing me alive, not merely inside an *imaginary head*, but a *feeble sand* to be, under a restless sky, restless on its shore, faint stirs day and night, as if *to grow less* could help, *ever less and less and never quite be gone*.<sup>17</sup>

Beckett's works, both dramatic and narrative, show how the characters are destined to stay there, repeat the same actions, create slightly different dialogues and wait for something to happen during this kind of endless process, something which could change the state of things. Joyce also gives several interpretations of waiting in *Finnegans Wake*, and most notably in “Anna Livia Plurabelle,” “a little lady waiting” (FW 102.22), or in the famous passage about *continuarration* which contains the expression “*amstel waiting*,”<sup>18</sup> where the water stream of the Dutch river Amstel, together with the phono-symbolism of “I am still,” suggests a watery everlasting waiting condition.

In a more generalized way their works deal with the same eternal condition, even though one seems to reveal presence and the other to reveal absence. In the light of this analysis, the two outputs more than contrasting each other, set the two authors in a kind of chiasmus relationship between presence and absence, as well as between the two double categories of space/spacelessness and place/placelessness. If Joyce's style is *hypertrophically* affirming presence, Beckett's can be seen as *hypotrophically* affirming absence. Nevertheless, they both call for expansion and infinite amplification, and in Beckett's we can find countless examples of this tension, even in the recreation of the most reductive and confining condition. In *Murphy*, for instance, the narrative voice states that “neither elements nor states but

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17. Samuel Beckett, “Text for Nothing VIII,” in *No's Knife (Collected Shorter Prose 1945–1966)* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1975), p. 108, my italics.

18. “Never stop! Continuarration! You're not there yet I amstel waiting. Garonne, garonne!” (FW 205.14–15).



forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, and echoing the structure of *Finnegans Wake*, in *The Unnamable*, Beckett declares that “all that is needed is to wander and let wander, be this *slow boundless whirlwind* and every particle of its dust.”<sup>20</sup> The tension is one between generation and dissolution, between materiality and abstraction, which is enacted in a very similar way in the structure of meaning in *Finnegans Wake*. Concerning the treatment of space and place, we notice in both authors that the greatest containment is “at once an unbounded exteriority,”<sup>21</sup> and such a peculiarity confirms the direct influence of Giordano Bruno on both writers, especially on the Joycean notion of *immarginable*, which is thus readily applicable to Beckett’s prose style as well.

Although he postulates the minimum, Bruno’s universe is infinite and opposed to the Aristotelian bounded one. Being the minimum everywhere, like a ubiquitous centre, the philosopher asserts that his universe is more spherical than a finite sphere, because every point is at the centre and equidistant from the circumference, which is always an infinity away, so that man, from his own perspective, is always at the very centre of the cosmos. Therefore, placial minimum (the relative position) coincides with spatial maximum (the universal immensity) and becomes the same as the immensity of all being.

The expression “The broadest way immarginable” combines margin, marginable, imagination and at the same time evokes the notion of the *thinkable* and of the *unthinkable*: this clearly establishes Joyce’s debt to Giordano Bruno, the one who is to be considered, in Joyce’s own words, “the father of what is called modern philosophy . . . more than Bacon or Descartes.”<sup>22</sup> Jean Michel Rabaté, in *Joyce upon the Void*, convincingly defines the oxymoric aspect in Bruno’s philosophy as the core of Joyce’s interpretation. In his essay on Bruno, Joyce writes: “Every power in nature or in spirit must evolve an opposite as the sole condition and means of its manifestation; and every opposition is therefore a tendency to reunion”<sup>23</sup>. Joyce speaks of the “identity of the infinitely small, the point and the infinitely great, the broad, deep

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19. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Routledge, 1957), p. 69.

20. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (London: Grove Press, 1978), p. 102.

21. Michael Guest, “Beckett and Brunonian Minimalism,” *Reports of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Shizuoka University* 30.1 (1994) 32–47, p. 45.

22. James Joyce, “The Bruno Philosophy,” in *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93–94, p. 93.

23. Jean Michel Rabaté, *Joyce upon the Void: The Genesis of Doubt* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 12.

immeasurable universe”<sup>24</sup> as the first simultaneous ambivalence which Bruno’s theory comprehends. Similarly, Beckett, both in his plays and in his novels, states the impossibility of such a separation, providing the characters and the readers with a series of threshold places in which all contraries merge and become interchangeable signifiers. Joyce writes that “by the coincidence of their contraries *reamalgamerge* in that identity” (*FW* 49.35–36), synthesising the word “amalgam” with “merge,” “emerge” and the very Beckettian “game.” Beckett echoes such a sentence in the *Lost Ones*, by writing about the range of light which is “shaken by a vertiginous tremolo between *contiguous contraries*.”<sup>25</sup> In his works, in fact, absolute light is absolute darkness and so an infinite perception corresponds to a kind of blindness. This non-distinction would bring the analysis forth to the relationship between the authors’ simultaneous de-creations and re-creations, with the *void*. This is presented in a very dynamic way by the two Irish authors and it is very close to the examination conducted by Jean Starobinsky in his essay “Void and Creation.” Here, he affirms the necessity of the void, for any kind of creation, be it a linguistic one or a spatial mental recreation of a place, as “there won’t be any form if not in constant relationship with the void,”<sup>26</sup> and similarly, it could be argued that there won’t be any kind of space, or place, if not incessantly related to the void. Once we realise this, as Joyce and Beckett did, the perception of the void, to its extreme extent, will be corresponding to the extreme perception of being, or of an “expanded being,”<sup>27</sup> as Bachelard put it. Both Beckett and Joyce had to empty their language and the space in which it was to be actualised, in order to pave the way to their creation, recreation or, more precisely, to what Joyce called “*concreation*” (*FW* 581.28), a kind of perceptive and artistic creation in which all forces, human and natural, must “reamalgamerge.”

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24. Rabaté, p 13.

25. Quoted by Guest, p. 45.

26. Jean Starobinsky, “Vide and Création,” *Magazine Littéraire* 280 (September 1990) 41–42, p. 42; my translation.

27. Cf. Bachelard, Chapter VIII.