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Impish Joyce on the Not-So-“Great” War



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Abstract :

This essay explores the 'joco-serious' dimension of James Joyce's high-modernist response to the First World War. It argues that while Joyce's apparent nonchalance gives the reader the impression of being a detached aesthete, an image he is believed to have cultivated, the subtleties of his fiction reveal a deep sense of engagement. The essay is divided into three sections. The first section argues that Joyce presents the interiority of being, as evident in the interior monologues of his magnum opus *Ulysses*, as a response to the inscrutable violence war does to the human mind. Emerging from a

realm of thought which escapes scrutiny, the monologues also enable him to present subversive, unorthodox perspectives on war and history. The second section primarily deals with Joyce's limerick "Dooleysprudence," which, albeit jocosely, summarizes his philosophy of war, history, and politics. The third takes up the question of how Joyce responds to the violence inflicted on the human body. My argument is that his fiction endorses, in uncanny ways, pacific and pleasurable use of the body in contradistinction to its violent annihilation at the hands of history, be it in the War or the physical-force nationalism he witnessed in Ireland. The body is also the focus of a scatological view of history, whereby solemn and 'grave' discourses are grotesquely brought down to the level of lower bodily stratum in carnivalesque mockery.

Key words :

joco-serious, avant-garde, interiority, carnivalesque, scatological