

David Ben-Merre, “What Points of Contact Existed Between these Languages?": James Joyce, Albert Einstein, and Interdisciplinary Study.” *James Joyce Quarterly* 47.1 (2009): 25-49

David Ben-Merre's useful article offers three things: a careful appraisal of the value of interdisciplinary endeavours; a summary of recent work on science in the work of James Joyce; and finally an original close reading, which he feels will escape the problems that he raises in the earlier sections. The first section on the attractions and pitfalls of work that crosses disciplinary boundaries will probably be most interesting to a general (non-Joycean) audience; in particular, he has a great deal to say about the problems of language and terminology which occur when two disciplines are brought together. As he points out, scientists criticise the way that in literary criticism “scientific concepts are often misunderstood and intentionally or unintentionally misapplied” (30), giving the example of ‘nonlinearity’ as a term which is not always used correctly but which Ben-Merre feels can still do valuable work. Such examples highlight Ben-Merre's sense of the impossibility of a perfect marriage of disciplines which he calls an ideal “happy ending where both disciplines come together as one” (33).

Ben-Merre's opening discussion is also highly attuned to the difficulties thrown up by the ‘Two Cultures’ debate for work addressing both literature and science, suggesting that as a result of this, “it seems impossible to define the humanities without setting up science as their opposites” (30). (He describes the infamous ‘Sokal Hoax’ as a manifestation of the continuing difficulties of disciplinary rapprochements). He worries that our critical interest in bringing literature and science together (which, as he points out, is not shared by scientists) may reflect an anxiety that the humanities may not be serious enough. If this is true we might wonder whether a greater turn towards interdisciplinary work will be our compensation for the pressure that the arts and humanities are currently under in the UK. Despite the problems of interdisciplinary study which Ben-Merre identifies, he still makes a strong case for the appeal of such work.

He then assesses recent forays into interdisciplinary study by Joyce critics which demonstrate the various ways in which the philosophical implications of physics correspond to literary aspects of Joyce, including work by Thomas Jackson Rice, Philip Kuberski, Peter Francis Mackey and Michael Patrick Gillespie. He suggests that such studies, however enlightening, also sometimes “serve as examples of how interdisciplinary studies can delightfully err” (28) in certain crucial ways, through misappropriation, internal inconsistency or an excessively humanistic focus. He also implies that the critical choice to apply later science such as chaos theory to Joyce's works (as if scientists, to paraphrase Ellmann, were still learning to be Joyce's contemporaries), instead of the science of Joyce's day, such as relativity and early quantum theory, leaves much valuable work unattempted. As he puts it, “Einstein might offer a [literary] model even more radical than chaos theory” (33). However, surprisingly, given Ben-Merre's sense of the need for a fresh perspective, his article does not refer to more recent Joyce criticism such as that of Andrzej Duszenko on Joyce and the new physics or Jeff Drouin's genetic work on relativity and modernist

print culture. Such work does in fact address the status of Einstein in Joyce and arguably evades some of the problems that he identifies in this essay.

To demonstrate Einstein's radical potential Ben-Merre then turns to the 'Ithaca' chapter of *Ulysses* and makes his own attempt to surmount some of the difficulties of interdisciplinary study. He uses what he calls a "metaphorical method" (36) using Einstein's famous formula $E = mc^2$ as a way of breaking the chapter down into discussions of Joyce's representation of energy, mass and the speed of light, thereby explaining 'Ithaca' and relativity simultaneously. This approach works particularly well with 'Ithaca', a naturally interdisciplinary chapter, where Joyce parodies the rhetorical style of scientists, subsuming more human concerns in the deliberately dry form of 'mathematical catechism'.

This essay is both an elegant and worthwhile discussion of the nature and role of interdisciplinary work and a valuable piece of criticism on *Ulysses*. As Ben-Merre sums up his article, "The focus in my metaphoric excursion has been on peripatetic-thematic wandering, meta-critical wandering, and interdisciplinary wandering" (43) – and his journey is well worth following.

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