The Critical Heritage series collects together a large body of criticism on major figures in literature. Each volume presents the contemporary responses to a particular writer, enabling the student to follow the formation of critical attitudes to the writer’s work and its place within a literary tradition.

The carefully selected sources range from landmark essays in the history of criticism to fragments of contemporary opinion and little published documentary material, such as letters and diaries.

Significant pieces of criticism from later periods are also included in order to demonstrate fluctuations in reputation following the writer’s death.
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October 1928

176. Early reaction from Stanislaus Joyce
1924


An extract from a long letter concerning *Ulysses* and *Work in Progress*.

...I have received one instalment of your yet unnamed novel in the *Transatlantic Review*. I don’t know whether the drivelling rigmarole about half a tall hat [*Finnegans Wake*, p. 387] and ladies’ modern toilet chambers [*Finnegans Wake*, p. 395] (practically the only things I understand in this nightmare production) is written with the deliberate intention of pulling the reader’s leg or not. You began this fooling in the Holles Street episode [the ‘Oxen of the Sun’ episode] in *Ulysses* and I see that Wyndham Lewis...imitates it with heavy-hoofed capering in the columns of the *Daily Mail*. Or perhaps—a sadder supposition—it is the beginning of softening of the brain. The first instalment faintly suggests the *Book of the Four Masters* and a kind of Biddy in Blunderland and a satire on the supposed matriarchal system. It has certain characteristics of a beginning of something, is nebulous, chaotic but contains certain elements. That is absolutely all I can make of it. But! It is unspeakably wearisome. Gorman’s book on you [*James Joyce, The First Forty Years*] practically proclaims your work as the last word in modern literature. It may be the last in another sense, the witless wandering of literature before its final extinction...I for one would not read more than a paragraph of it, if I did not know you.

What I say does not matter. I have no doubt that you have your plan, probably a big one again as in *Ulysses*. No doubt, too, many
more competent people around you speak to you in quite a different
tone … Why are you still intelligible and sincere in verse? If literature
is to develop along the lines of your latest work it will certainly
become, as Shakespeare hinted centuries ago, much ado about
nothing. Ford in an article you sent me suggests that the whole thing
is to be taken as a nonsense rhythm and that the reader should
abandon himself to the sway of it. I am sure, though the article
seems to have your approval, that he is talking through his half a
tall hat. In any case I refuse to allow myself to be whirled round in
the mad dance by a literary dervish….

177. Padraic Colum, ‘Preface’ for
Anna Livia Plurabelle
1928

Extract from ‘River Episode from James Joyce’s Uncompleted
Work’, Dial, lxxxiv (April 1928), 318–22; also appeared as
the ‘Preface’ to Joyce’s Anna Livia Plurabelle (1928), pp. vii–
xix and in Our Friend James Joyce (1958) by Mary and Padraic
Colum, pp. 139–43.

Anna Livia Plurabelle is concerned with the flowing of a River. There
have gone into it the things that make a people’s inheritance:
landscape, myth, and history; there have gone into it, too, what is
characteristic of a people: jests and fables. It is epical in its largeness
of meaning and its multiplicity of interest. And, to my mind, James
Joyce’s inventions and discoveries as an innovator in literary form
are more beautifully shown in it than in any other part of his work.

But although it is epical it is an episode, a part and not a whole.
It makes the conclusion of the first part of a work that has not yet
been completed….
And so, like a river, it has gone on, and expanded, and gathered volume.... It is the same River that Stephen Dedalus of *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* looked upon....

[quotes from *A Portrait*, ch. IV, p. 167, and from p. 216]

So the later prose begins, and at once we are in the water as it bubbles and hurries at its source. The first passage gives us the sight of the River, the second gives us the River as it is seen and heard and felt. The whole of the episode gives us something besides the sight and sound and feeling of water....

...It is this range we get in this episode: over and above the sight and sound and feeling of water there is in *Anna Livia Plurabelle* that range of images and thoughts, those free combinations of words and ideas, that might arise in us, if with a mind inordinately full and on a day singularly happy we watched a river and thought upon a river and travelled along a river from its source to its mouth.

But in this episode the mind’s range has its boundary: the range is never beyond the river banks nor away from the city towards which the river is making its slow-moving, sometimes hurrying way. Dublin, the city once seventh in Christendom, Dublin that was founded by sea-rovers, Dublin with its worthies, its sojourners, its odd characters, not as they are known to the readers of history-books, but as they live in the minds of some dwellers by the Liffey, is in this episode; Dublin, the Ford of Hurdles, the entrance into the plain of Ireland, the city so easily taken, so uneasily held. And the River itself, less in magnitude than the tributary of a tributary of one of the important rivers, becomes enlarged until it includes hundreds of the world’s rivers. How many rivers have their names woven into the tale of *Anna Livia Plurabelle*? More than five hundred, I believe....

[quotes from p. 202]

There will be many interpretations of *Anna Livia Plurabelle*—as many as the ideas that might come to one who watched the flowing of the actual river...

[the critic adds his own recollections]

...I feel in this tale of *Anna Livia Plurabelle* the mystery of beginnings as it is felt through, as it combines with, a hundred stray, significant, trifling things.

Its author, the most daring of innovators, has decided to be as
local as a hedge-poet. James Joyce writes as if it might be taken for granted that his readers know, not only the city he writes about, but its little shops and its little shows, the nick-names that have been given to its near-great, the cant-phrases that have been used on its side-streets. This localness belongs to James Joyce’s innovations: all his innovations are towards giving us what he writes about in its own atmosphere and with its own proper motion. And only those things which have been encountered day after day in some definite place can be given with their own atmosphere, their own motion.

Much should be said, and some time much will have to be said, about the de-formations and the re-formations of words in James Joyce’s later work. Some of these de-formations and re-formations will not be questioned by readers who have an understanding of language: they will know that they succeed clearly in giving what the writer wants to give us.…

[quotes from pp. 215–16]

Everything that belongs to the dusk and the gathering of the clouds of evening is in this passage: the de-formations and the re-formations of the words give us the murk of the evening. There are other innovations in the language that are really difficult to explain. Or, rather, that would require the exposition of a theory to be properly explanatory. Let us say that words are always taking on new meanings, that they take on new meanings more quickly than we realize, and that, in the case of English, as the language becomes more and more wide-spread, the change is being accelerated.… James Joyce treats words as having shifting meanings: he lets us read a score of meanings into the words he sets down in his later work.…

Anna Livia Plurabelle, ALP