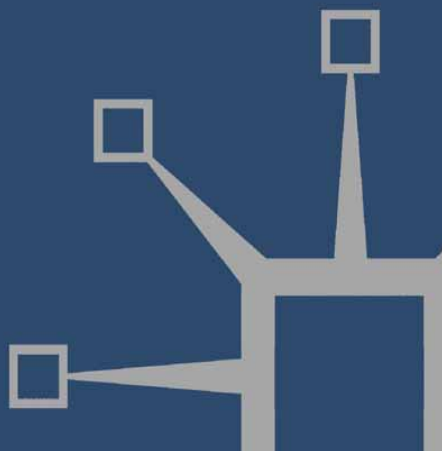


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Joyce and the G-Men

J. Edgar Hoover's
Manipulation of Modernism

Claire A. Culleton



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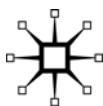
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JOYCE AND THE G-MEN

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*For Chris
my best bro
who could always make the alphabet sound great*

INTRODUCTION

Joyce and the G-Men

Several years ago, following a hunch that seemed ridiculous even to me, I wrote to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and asked whether they had kept a classified dossier on the Irish writer James Joyce (1882-1941). After three years of back-and-forth correspondence, a slim, 20-page dossier marked “James Joyce” arrived from bureau headquarters in Washington, D.C. It was almost entirely blacked out. Since then, I have turned my attention to researching and investigating the mysterious and complex relationship between James Joyce and the FBI, trying to imagine what it was that Joyce might have represented to J. Edgar Hoover and the bureau. In this book, I trace Hoover’s career and reveal his doggedly persistent intervention in one of the most important critical constructs of his time: literary modernism, a movement rife with diverse, inconsistent, even over-determined approaches, practices, and responses to early twentieth-century cultural, aesthetic, and political events and attitudes. That his reach extended to American, British, German, Irish and other writers participating in the literary movement is particularly important today at a time when the cultural foundations of modernism are undergoing sharp academic and critical reevaluation.¹

Nobody ever believes me when I tell them how this all got started, but my friend Beav was there, and Rocco, too, and I know they can back me up. People always say, “be careful what you wish for.” In 1992, I thought I was on to something when I requested James Joyce’s FBI file from bureau headquarters under provisions of the Freedom of Information-Privacy Acts (FOIPA; also referred to as FOIA). I hoped to find something to write about in those papers, if they existed. I got what I wished for all right, and since then, my research into the topic has not let up.

This all began in a small club in Cleveland when Beav and I went to see a show up in The Flats district. At the door we were given cards to fill out for one of the singers’ fan lists and were promised we’d get something in return by mail if we sent the cards in. I figured there’d be a free cd in it, so why not? We each filled out cards, and in about a year’s time received what amounted to little more than a press packet featuring the singer David Baerwald. The packet contained lots of copied newspaper clippings on the artist, some copied photographs and lyrics, a few reviews, and Baerwald’s tirade against political corruption and subterfuge. Included in the tirade was his warning about the FBI: “They’re watching you,” he said. You need to know how much, when, and why, he added, and said that everyone should write to the bureau to request a copy of his or her FBI file under the Freedom of Information Act. Conveniently, two FOIA forms were included in the packet.

I remember stopping for a while and thinking about this. Hadn’t I gone through the trouble of getting Secret Service clearance back in college when the president met in a press conference with college newspaper editors in New York City? And didn’t I march every Saturday morning, it seemed, in the 1980s outside the British Consulate on Manhattan’s East Side to protest Margaret Thatcher’s monstrous treatment of Irish political prisoners, her unyielding response to the H-Block situation, to hungerstriking men and

women, and prisoners who refused to wear British prison uniforms and went “on the blanket” instead? I recalled those days and remembered that off to the sides, at each end of the demonstration circles, there were always two men—Feds, we assumed—taking photographs of all the demonstrators as they marched by. It occurred to me then that yes, I just might have an FBI file, so I proceeded to fill out the form.

When making a FOIA request, you are asked to supply a wealth of personal information about the subject whose file you’re requesting on these forms: the subject’s date and place of birth, the jobs the subject has held, the cities the subject has worked in, his or her old and present addresses, her maiden name (if applicable), and anything else that may help FOIA to locate materials and records on the subject if any exist. I filled the form out as fully as I could and when I got to the bottom of the sheet, I remember that there was space to describe your relationship to the subject whose file you were requesting. It was then that I realized, almost as if it were a “V-8 moment,” or an epiphany, that I could get an FBI file on just about anyone. Since I had an extra FOIA request form, I thought it would be fun to ask for someone else’s file, too. I toyed with the idea of requesting JFK’s file but since Oliver Stone’s movie had recently come out, I thought that my request would wind up buried in a pile with hundreds of others like it. Who else did I know such intimate information about? I wondered. The answer came quicker than I expected: James Joyce.

I have been a James Joyce scholar for decades, and have been fascinated with him since my first introduction to *Ulysses* in John Nagle’s classes at Manhattan College in the Bronx. I went on to write my master’s thesis as well as my doctoral dissertation on Joyce, and at the time I made the FOIA request, I was in the throes of finishing my first book on the Irish writer. If I knew anyone’s life backwards and forwards, it was his. So with considerable aplomb I filled out the sheet from memory, knowing exactly where Joyce was born, several

of his addresses, a variety of jobs he held to make ends meet, his wife's first name, maiden name, shoe size, etc. I remember that at the time I didn't think for one minute that there would actually *be* a file on Joyce. If nothing else, I thought it would cost me 29 cents (the price of a stamp back then) to get a letter back from the bureau saying "there's no file on James Joyce." I'd get a good laugh at my own expense, hang the letter on my office wall, and amuse myself now and again with my fearlessness and tireless penchant for mild self-humiliation.

But that was before the file actually arrived in December 1994, some three years after I initially requested it.

After I sent in the two FOIA forms, I instantly got a letter back saying that bureau records contained no information on Claire Culleton. Fair enough, I thought; but what about Joyce? More than three years later, I got a letter saying that FOIPA requests are handled on a first-come, first-serve basis and that my request for Joyce's materials is assigned a number reaching beyond 11,300. By the time any one of the more than 200 FBI employees assigned to handle FOIPA requests gets around to handling mine, the letter continued, assessors will have reviewed an estimated 4.8 million pages. They'd get back to me, the letter assured me, but it may take more than a year, it warned (May 5, 1994).² I could hardly believe it. Earlier that year, on March 17th (it was Saint Patrick's Day, I'll never forget) I had been in the English office of Kent State University and one of the secretaries said, "Professor Culleton, it's for you. It's the FBI." I froze. The voice on the other end said she was calling from the FOIA headquarters about my James Joyce request and wanted to ask me would I please send proof that James Joyce was dead. I remember being so flabbergasted that I could only respond something like, "For God's sake, turn on your television. It's Saint Patrick's Day. He's probably all over the news being quoted by *somebody!*" Nonetheless, I dug up his obituary (surprised to learn that his death didn't make

front-page news) and sent it in. By the end of the year, but not before another letter from the FBI informed me that they had lost the file with my request in it (Aug. 18, 1994), a slim dossier arrived at my Kent, Ohio apartment wrapped in a brown envelope, just a week before Christmas and hours before I was ready to leave for home. The timing was perfect. I would take the file with me to New York City and try to get in to speak with someone in the bureau at 26 Federal Plaza to help me go over the papers. Little did I know that I was living a pipe dream if I thought I could ever get into the FBI.

What I received from the FBI numbered only 20 pages and was a collection of cross-referenced pages taken from the files of others: his daughter-in-law Helen Joyce's brother Robert Kastor, Ezra Pound, Whittaker Chambers, and others. Most of the 20 pages I received were almost entirely blacked out with the exception of words like "Irish" or "Finnegan's [*sic*] Wake" or some other set of words that were little help to my project. I remember thinking that Yossarian Yossarian of *Catch-22* must be the bureau censor, since only inconsequential words were left for review. (Bureau censorship was taken to the extreme, I think, in Lincoln Steffens's file, which I received a few years ago. One page is entirely blacked out line by line except for the phrase "further advised Agent, that." Another page is fully blacked out with nothing readable on it except for the FOIA exemption notations scribbled in the margins.) I remember wondering at the time just how "free" is the "freedom" of information when it takes so long to arrive, and when it arrives so heavily redacted?

Looking over Joyce's file, however, I laughed to read the lone uncensored bit from a page out of the file of "Dr. Ezra Pound": "he has also done a similar thing with notes he has made on 'Finnegan's [*sic*] Wake.' It is my understanding that 'Finnegan's [*sic*] Wake' is a book written by J. Joyce, the author of 'Ulysses.' This book has created quite a controversy, inasmuch as, many books have been written by other individuals trying to explain what it means."

Once I got to New York City, I called my friend Rocco, told him about the bare-bones Joyce file I had received, and asked if he wanted to accompany me to Federal Plaza to try to meet with some FBI people to get more information. He was up for it, and the trip downtown that followed was nothing short of hilarious.

For reasons I couldn't actually put my finger on, I had become paranoid that the bureau would want to take the papers away from me, even though I had waited three years to get them. So I wanted to Xerox them before "going in," but the only copy machine Rocco and I could find around Chambers Street was in a small news-and-cigarette shop that wanted 25 cents per page and, well, I was just too cheap to pay that. Rocco laughed anyhow at my paranoia and convinced me that the FBI wasn't going to want to take back the papers. He was right, I thought, and felt foolish for being so possessed. Two native New Yorkers, we then set our attention to finding 26 Federal Plaza. We had both been down in that section of New York dozens of times for jury duty, to do something at the DMV, to eat in Chinatown, or what have you. But I'll be damned if either of us could find 26 Federal Plaza. We found Federal Plaza itself, and other addresses on Federal Plaza, but we couldn't find 26 Federal Plaza without circling the area several times. I remember us laughing to each other saying that it was part of the big conspiracy that no one can even FIND the FBI. We even were approached by a young Russian couple who asked us whether *we* knew where 26 Federal Plaza was. We said we didn't, and from that point on, Rocco and I adopted fake Russian accents and started talking to each other as if we were Boris and Natasha from the Bullwinkle cartoons.

Long story short, we finally found the building, made it through the metal detectors, and headed toward the clearly marked FBI Offices elevator bank. A security guard stopped us and pointed us in the direction of a very old man, old like the character in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, doddering around in a huge booth made of plexiglass in the lobby. No, I didn't have an appointment, I explained

as best I could through the small talk hole. I was hoping to get upstairs to talk with an agent about a file I'd received on James Joyce. I had questions about the file, I explained. I wasn't sure how to read or interpret it. Couldn't I just go up and speak with someone who could help me read and interpret the file? I asked. The old man in the plexiglass booth looked at me funny, asked Rocco what *he* was there for, and then made a series of muffled telephone calls upstairs, turning frequently to look at Rocco and me in order to describe us to voices on the other end. After the phone calls were over, the man stooped over to the talk box and said to me, "They said they want you to leave all of the papers you have and they'll get back to you." He pushed out a noisy, deep drawer into which he expected me to put the papers. This fed right into my paranoia, and though I don't want to put too dramatic a spin on things, Rocco and I hightailed it out of that building like nobody's business, looking back only to see if any suits were following us.

By the time I had gotten back uptown to my mother's apartment, she'd already gone to her night job but left a phone message for me that was one of those "while-you-were-outs" that you never think you're going to get. "Claire," it read. "The FBI called. They want you to call them back."

I called them back, eventually, but got nowhere, which is why I started writing this book. What *was* it, I wondered, that could be so provocative about James Joyce's FBI file? I mean, I knew even when I filled out the original FOIA request that Joyce had never stepped foot in the United States; that he had refused to sign his name to political manifestoes or petitions; that he successfully stayed apart from the politics of his day so much so that his friend André Gide responded to the question "Maître, when we have communism in France, whatever will we do with Joyce?" by saying, "We'll leave him be" (Ellman, 695). Why all this bizarre behavior over such a small file, then, especially one so cryptically censored by FOIA workers? It was a little too bizarre, I thought. When I got back to Ohio, I met

with Beav's dad, a retired FBI agent, and he helped me to understand the codes, the notations, and the shorthand in Joyce's file.

So, was Joyce a political threat? Did the bureau see in him any risk to national security? What I have figured out since my experiences in the early 1990s is that all of this craziness and insanity has very little to do with James Joyce but everything to do with the FBI—most pointedly, with its director, who for more than 50 years manipulated the relationship between state power and modern literature during his tenure in the bureau. While the file pages disclose information that relates to Joyce and his family's life, they betray, as well, a history of the FBI and its special watchdog division that targeted twentieth-century writers, artists, and intellectuals.

Though I received only what are called cross-referenced pages, I do not know whether there exists a separate or main file on Joyce. Such information is impossible to obtain in the wake of Ronald Reagan's 1986 order giving agencies the authority to refuse to supply information about the existence or nonexistence of main files.³ In fact, I have come to distrust the words "file" and "main file" altogether, having received letters from the FBI that state while "no main file records responsive to your request were located," we have identified some material that "might possibly be responsive. . . . [S]hould it be responsive . . . it will be processed pursuant to the FOIA and you will be advised of the results." I got a letter to this effect after requesting a file on Samuel Roth, the man who pirated Joyce's *Ulysses*. I was surprised to learn in the letter that "no main file records" existed on Roth. However, a few months later, I received more than 300 pages of Roth's main file, replete with memoranda from Hoover that discussed the bureau's continuing investigation of Roth and his wife Pauline. I would call that a file, wouldn't you?

Does it matter that it winds up that Joyce in fact *was* quite political but that his critics failed to look into his political past, if for no other reason than they assumed he didn't have one? Joyce certainly made his allegiance to the nineteenth-century Irish political hero

Charles Stewart Parnell public knowledge. Trevor Williams and John McCourt raise such points in their recent work on the writer, focusing especially on Joyce's political activity during his years in Trieste and his involvement with socialists there and with Italian irredentists who hoped to recover the city for Italy from Austria. Joyce referred to himself as a "socialistic artist" in a May 1905 letter to his brother Stanislaus, who wrote in *My Brother's Keeper* that during the years Joyce was writing *Dubliners*, "At Trieste, [Joyce] still called himself a socialist" (170). Joyce expressed his political views in columns that he wrote for the Italian newspaper *Il Piccolo della Sera*, and was stirred by the irredentist movement that was gaining ground in Italy. John McCourt reports that Joyce found the Triestine situation so compellingly similar to the Irish push for nationalism that he attended socialist meetings and lectures there, and regularly read Trieste's socialist newspaper, *Il Lavoratore*. It seems then that Joyce was not so apolitical as his early biographer Richard Ellmann, for whatever reasons, painted him. Uncovering Joyce's political past has been one of the remarkable and exciting additions to new biographies and critical works about the writer over the past decade. In new work on Joyce and censorship, for example, Katherine Mullin argues that a "still entrenched view of Joyce the apolitical writer [working] in splendid isolation, preoccupied with style rather than the substance of ideology and history is . . . insidious, since it deflects attention from the 'manifestly political content'" of Joyce's works, directing attention, instead, to his unarguably important stylistic innovations (210). In Joyce, the "threat or expectation of censorship is not incidental but integral to [his] aesthetic," she adds.

Just because critics failed to look at Joyce as a political figure doesn't mean the bureau had to follow suit. In fact, pages in Joyce's file are marked "Internal Security-C" ("C" meaning Communist) and, like the files of other writers, it contains information (often incorrect) about his works and his life, though most is blacked out and thereby unintelligible as a cultural document and artifact.

Because of these unrecoverable redactions, and because of the ultimate unavailability of the true scope of the FBI's interest in James Joyce, I learned early on that if I were going to turn this into something bigger than an article about Joyce's cryptic file, then I would need to widen the scope of the project. I began to request the files of some of Joyce's friends and acquaintances, and then the files of his publishers and editors, and then the files of his contemporaries, and so forth, until I had amassed piles and piles and bookshelves and closets full of FOIA documents. From these, an alarming pattern began to emerge, which led me to reconceive the project and to organize it around a different critical argument, that J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI grew to contain and thereby structure expressions of literary modernists. What follows is the result of more than a decade of investigative research and critical inquiry inspired by that single and startling assumption.

"It is no easy task to narrate the story of a cultural movement engaging hundreds of writers and influencing thousands more, over several decades," Alan Wald is correct to point out in *Exiles from a Future Time* (4). His work signals a continuing scholarly effort to discover, examine, and theorize elements of a hardly coherent yet identifiable tradition. *Joyce and the G-Men: J. Edgar Hoover's Manipulation of Modernism* extends such remarkable efforts.

I have organized this book into chapters that contextualize and examine specific episodes of J. Edgar Hoover's interaction with literary modernism. Chapter 1 is a discussion of Hoover's rise to fame, his ideology for the bureau, and his effort to pursue and harangue modern writers in an attempt to challenge and limit the dissemination of their art. Chapter 2 focuses on modern literature and Hoover's anxiety, his fears that the nation was being corrupted right before his eyes, that its moral fabric had thinned, and that "loyalty" had become its most pressing issue, anxieties fueled by his antiradical hysteria and by his intense paranoia that Bolsheviks and

“Reds” had infiltrated America and that their numbers were growing.

American playwright Clifford Odets, whose literary attention to class and labor issues earned him a 30-page FBI file, bemoaned that, in the course of his reign as director of the bureau, Hoover had cultivated a generation of Americans “processed by democracy” (Odets FBI file). Drawing from that comment, I use Chapter 3 to discuss Hoover’s processing of Americans, especially his use of technological apparatuses as he tried to manipulate and control the masses through regular radio broadcasts, pop culture novels, comic books, special appearances, pamphlets, articles, and so forth. An early media manipulator as savvy as FDR would grow to become when he tried to hide the physical manifestations of his polio through his radio talks, Hoover made sure that Americans not only tuned in regularly to his shows but that they believed America needed his protection more than ever. America’s most famous “top cop,” Hoover had the public and the media eating out of the palm of his proverbial hand.

Chapter 4 focuses on the American labor movement in the early part of the twentieth century, and identifies Hoover’s assaults against “insurgent” and “radical” writers and other key figures involved in the movement. Since many had come over to America from Europe or elsewhere to galvanize sentiment for a proletarian work force, Hoover deemed their work anti-American, and worked to capture and deport them, often literally by the boatload. Many modern writers were engaged with labor issues and supported striking workers who were involved in labor disputes across America. They traveled to and reported on their experiences at contested work sites such as Harlan County, Kentucky, where Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and others traveled to show their support of striking miners. Other writers went to Lawrence, Massachusetts, or to Paterson, New Jersey to galvanize the spirit of abused and striking textile and silk workers, as John Reed, Mary Heaton Vorse,