

## Making James Joyce's Life into a Graphic Novel. An Interview with Alfonso Zapico

Carlos Menéndez-Otero  
Universidad de Oviedo, Spain

---

Copyright (c) 2014 by Carlos Menéndez-Otero. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

---

**Abstract.** Alfonso Zapico was born in Blimea, Asturias, Spain, in 1981. He started working as a professional illustrator and cartoonist in 2006 and has since published four graphic novels: *La guerre du professeur Bertenev* (2006), set in the Crimean War; *Café Budapest* (2008), about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; *Dublinés* (2011), a biography of James Joyce, and *La ruta Joyce* (2011), a kind of 'making of' of *Dublinés*. His works have received several prestigious awards and been published in Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, Germany and Ireland, where The O'Brien Press released the English version of *Dublinés, James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*, last May. Just a few days before, the Niemeyer Center in Avilés, Asturias, opened *Pasos encontrados. Un viaje dibujado de Alfonso Zapico*, an exhibition focused on his career and, more particularly, on *Dublinés* and *La ruta Joyce*. He will soon be publishing his fifth graphic novel, *El otro mar*, about Vasco Núñez de Balboa and the expedition that led to the European discovery of the Pacific Ocean in 1513. We interviewed Zapico at the Niemeyer Center on June 29th, 2013.

**Key Words.** Zapico, Joyce, biography, graphic novel, travel sketchbook, *Ulysses*, Asturias, Dublin.

**Resumen.** Alfonso Zapico nació en Blimea (Asturias) en 1981. Comenzó a trabajar como ilustrador y dibujante de cómic en 2006 y, desde entonces, ha publicado cuatro novelas gráficas: *La guerre du professeur Bertenev* (2006), ambientada en la guerra de Crimea; *Café Budapest* (2008), sobre el conflicto palestino; *Dublinés* (2011), una biografía de James Joyce, y *La ruta Joyce* (2011), una especie de "making of" de *Dublinés*. Sus obras han recibido numerosos premios de prestigio y se han publicado en España, Francia, Bélgica, Suiza, Polonia, Alemania e Irlanda, donde O'Brien Press editó la versión inglesa de *Dublinés, James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*, el pasado mayo. Sólo unos días antes, el Centro Niemeyer de Avilés (Asturias) inauguró *Pasos encontrados. Un viaje dibujado de Alfonso Zapico*, una exposición centrada en su carrera artística y, sobre todo, *Dublinés* y *La ruta Joyce*. Zapico publicará pronto su quinta novela gráfica, *El otro mar*, que trata de Vasco Núñez de Balboa y la expedición que condujo al descubrimiento europeo del Océano Pacífico en 1513. Entrevistamos a Alfonso Zapico en el Centro Niemeyer el 29 de junio de 2013.

**Palabras clave.** Zapico, Joyce, biografía, novela gráfica, cuaderno de viaje, *Ulises*, Asturias, Dublín.

**Question:** You began working on *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* about five years ago. Did it ever cross your mind that the book would have such a huge impact?

**Answer:** No, I really had no idea. This feels like a lottery win. When I began the artwork for

*James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*, I wasn't even living in France yet, I was living here in Asturias, in Langreo. I had just done *Café Budapest*, which is about Palestine, but I did it at home — I used the internet and didn't go anywhere. *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* was a step further. In a way, the book started

out as a test to make me get around. It was quite easy to travel to Ireland and across Europe, so I decided to try and see if I was able to create a sort of travel sketchbook, if it was important to have a first-hand experience of the places you want to put in a book. It came out well, but it could have gone very wrong. As an author, every time you create a book, you expect something to happen, you're hopeful, you're eager to reach readers. Sometimes you do and sometimes you don't, you can't really explain why some books do well and others don't. It's the same with awards — I could have well not won the National Comic Award and *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* would still be the same book. However, then it wouldn't have reached so many readers, the Niemeyer Center wouldn't have organized the exhibition, it wouldn't have gotten this far. I don't know, maybe the success of the book is as much a result of chance as of the creative process.

**Q: I would dare say *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* is a bio-comic. How would you describe *La ruta Joyce*? And *Pasos encontrados*?**

**A:** Look, as graphic novels are so popular now, *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* has sometimes been described as a *graphic biography*. They said, "This is not a novel, but a biography, so it must be a *graphic biography*".

*La ruta Joyce* is a hybrid book. It has a bit of a travel sketchbook. Still, it is not a proper travel sketchbook because the drawings were not made *in situ*, but from notes, memories, references... I'd say it's more like a travel guide than a travel sketchbook — a travel guide through four cities from the perspective of James Joyce and the creative process behind *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*.

*Pasos encontrados* works as a little journey in time and in space. In time because the exhibition covers most of my career as an artist, and in space because it takes on *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* and *La ruta Joyce* — that's why we have included these four cities, that's why the exhibition is divided into four sections.

**Q: James Joyce is rather unlikely to come up when one thinks of a contemporary writer**

**whose life seems ready-made for fiction. Why did you choose to do a graphic novel on him? I was wondering if you may have drawn some inspiration from David Zane Mairowitz and Robert Crumb's biography of Franz Kafka, which was first published in France in 2007.**

**A:** No, I didn't. I saw it later. The truth is that *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* wasn't modeled on any biography, at least not in comic book format. I did rely on Ellmann's book,<sup>1</sup> which is a very dense, detailed biography, but also quite peculiar and very human. I laughed a lot reading it; it has so many moments of comic absurdity.

Certainly there are many authors who had a life of adventure, like Ernest Hemingway. I've been told all sorts of things, that I should do a book about Miguel de Unamuno, about this, about that... However, I like James Joyce because he is a free spirit and a paragon of creativity and artistic generosity. As a person he was rather selfish; however, as an artist he was very generous, he devoted practically all his life and energy — even sacrificed his health — to creating for others. Also important are Irish culture, so literary and yet so oral, and the city of Dublin, which provides a fabulous setting for any story, written or drawn. There are so many small reasons, conscious and unconscious, that led me to draw *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*.

**Q: You were already working on *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* when you were selected as artist in residence at *La Maison des Auteurs* in Angoulême, France. Did your stay there have any influence on *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*?**

**A:** Yes, quite a lot. Here I was working on my own. I didn't know other authors in the region; it was a very lonely job, I didn't have the capacity or the possibility of meeting up with other authors to solve doubts and problems. Houses, rooms, computers, internet connections are pretty much the same everywhere; however, at *La Maison des Auteurs* you can leave your

---

1. English edition: Ellmann, Richard. 1982 (1959). *James Joyce*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press; Spanish edition: Ellmann, Richard. 2002. *James Joyce*. Barcelona: Anagrama.

chair, walk into the workshop next door and talk to other authors, tell them a bit about the creative process, what you want to achieve. For instance, the written narrative gave me a lot of trouble. The biography was very detailed, very dense, and I had to take great care in choosing the right words for the balloons and the captions. They were very helpful because they are from different countries and cultures, and have different worldviews and styles. That blend of different people is positive and, in fact, *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* is in many ways a result of my stay at *La Maison des Auteurs*.

**Q: How did you decide what aspects of Joyce's life the book would cover? Did the project ever get out of hand?**

**A:** Yes, it certainly got out of hand! I started off by getting myself a copy of the Spanish edition of Richard Ellmann's book, a hefty tome of about 1,000 pages, and read it over several times. First, I skimmed it through and got the gist of the story. On the second reading, I underlined what I thought would be important to tell in the graphic novel. Once I finished underlining, I realized I had underlined too many things and couldn't put all that into just one book, it'd take like three, four or five. Then, I went back to the passages I had underlined and started crossing out everything that didn't seem all that interesting or essential. I've tried to combine European history with small, real anecdotes from Joyce's life, for example, that in which a tax collector arrives at his apartment in Trieste with orders to seize the property and his belongings, but he doesn't own anything, the apartment and the furniture are rented. Joyce ends up giving him half the money in his wallet and manages to settle the debt. It's a silly anecdote, you wouldn't find it in a biography focused on Joyce's works; still, it tells quite a lot about the character himself and the real life he put into his books. I hope the combination of historical context and small human detail allows the reader to construct a three dimensional portrait of James Joyce, not a flat character of whom I only provide event dates, travel data, information about published works... I want the reader to get to know the small miseries and joys of the character.

**Q: Travel, war, irony, critical observation... They all seem to be constants in your work. Did you find them straight away in Joyce's biography? To put it in a different way, was it difficult to turn Joyce's life into a graphic story, unmistakably Zapico?**

**A:** I think I've adapted my storytelling to Joyce's life and the readers' needs. I can't cram readers with dates, places and characters they are unfamiliar with, so I've tried to put these raw data into the graphic novel format, adapt them into panels and written narrative, season them with moments of comedy and drama to get a kind of cinematographic flavor. Joyce had such an extraordinary, peculiar life, so comic and so dramatic, that I didn't have to exaggerate, make anything up or add any artifice. Everything looks so natural in the book because everything is very real.

**Q: You certainly did some thorough research for *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*. However, you went somehow against the general trend and prioritized visiting the places where the author lived and worked on checking out the vast academic literature on Joyce. You have probably been asked hundreds of times whether this was really necessary for the book or a mere excuse for traveling abroad.**

**A:** Sure. The Polish edition of the book has just come out and we've presented the book in Warsaw. An audience member at a talk there asked me whether *La ruta Joyce* actually was just a pretext to travel and get drunk across different European cities. I explained that it wasn't like that at all. The four cities have changed and I did *La ruta Joyce* precisely because I thought it'd be interesting to show readers how they have changed, how they are different now. A very interesting guy, an Irish professor who lives in Trieste and whom I've included in *La ruta Joyce*, told me that today's Trieste is yesterday's Dublin. What was then a modern, cosmopolitan city is now dated, it has fallen behind. It's interesting to learn that because, in the end, James Joyce wrote about everyday stories of everyday people. He wrote a literary portrait of a city, and I've drawn a kind of micro-portrait of four cities, four

different micro-worlds with their own culture and people.

**Q: What was the oddest work you came across while doing research on James Joyce? I was thinking, for instance, of the somewhat bizarre similarities between Joyce's Ireland and Bilbao that are brought up at the conference in *La ruta Joyce*.<sup>2</sup>**

**A:** As a matter of fact, there are quite a lot of odd works about Joyce and Irish literature in general. Ireland is brutally introspective when it comes to its history, its society, its culture. Bookshops in Dublin are full of books on the Great Famine, the War of Independence, the IRA... Then, on RTÉ you have shows like *Where Was Your Family During the Famine?*, which is a sort of historical *Quién sabe dónde*<sup>3</sup> where they do research into your family tree, track down your ancestors and take you to their burial site. It really amazes me how self-obsessed the Irish are.

As for the conference, it goes without saying that the faces of the characters in the book are slightly different from those of the real people I met there. However, it really was very, very interesting — and quite funny — for me to find out that there were people who could actually see similarities between *Finnegans Wake*, the Basque language and Picasso's *Guernica*, talk about the *ikurriña* (i.e., the Basque national flag) as a parallel of the Union Jack in Joyce's Dublin, relate Dublin and Bilbao because both are on a river... But this is the thing with Joyce, I guess. He is a bottomless well of material. If I want to find something specific, I'll likely be able to dig it out, as I only have to read it my way. Joyce is so open to interpretation, isn't he? I guess he was aware of it and would think it funny that his works are so open to interpretation, so malleable.

**Q: Following on the previous question, what was your relationship with academia like? You have said that you received a lot of**

**encouragement from the academic community; still, was anyone hostile to the project of putting James Joyce's life into a graphic novel?**

**A:** No. I guess they didn't take me seriously at first, they didn't think it'd bear fruit or be much of a success. An artist and a writer in the United States — I think they're American — have taken on the task of adapting *Ulysses* into comic book form. They're drawing every single detail, every single moment of the novel and uploading the artwork to a website.<sup>4</sup> They have begun by adapting the first chapter, set in the Martello Tower, and I believe it will take them ages to finish. Perhaps they thought at first that I was planning to do something crazy like that. However, now that the book has come out I've been contacted by people who were at the Bilbao conference, who are experts on literature in English, and they all like *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*, it really amazes them. In fact, many other people have gotten in touch to show their appreciation of the French and English editions of the book, especially from Ireland. It's mind-boggling. I really had no idea the book would go this far.

**Q: *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* presents a complex, yet realistic and deceitfully simple, portrait of the Irish author. What aspects of his personality attract you most?**

**A:** Above all, he was very human, very changeable. He embodied the best and the worst of us. As I was drawing him, I realized he was both a genius and a pathetic person. He held himself in very high esteem, knew what he was worth, and yet, when one of his books gets a bad review in a newspaper, he gets depressed and spends a week in bed saying everything sucks. Then, he goes back to work, keeps on writing very intensely, even when he's sick. He's a character with so many facets, he embodies the best and the worst of human nature. That's what I always say and that's

2. Alfonso Zapico attended the 20th Annual James Joyce Meeting at the University of Deusto in 2009.

3. Aired between 1992 and 1998 on RTVE, *Quién sabe dónde* was a reality show which aimed to help find missing people across Spain

4. We are quite sure that Zapico actually refers to *Ulysses Seen* by Robert Berry, which can currently be accessed at the webpage of The James Joyce Centre Dublin ([jamesjoyce.ie/ulysses-seen/](http://jamesjoyce.ie/ulysses-seen/)).

what I believe. All in all, he was an extreme person, for good and for bad.

**Q: O'Brien Press have just published the English version of *Dublinés*. How did they get interested in the book? How has it been received in Ireland, a country where, in your own words, “la gente no lee tebeos” (Zapico 2011b: 42)?**

**A:** O'Brien Press met up with Astiberri, the original publisher of *Dublinés*, at the Frankfurt Book Fair and expressed great interest in making the English version of the book, so they got the rights and published it. According to what I've been told, the book is selling well and getting very good reviews — even in newspapers such as *The Irish Independent*, which has actually published a very positive review, despite the standfirst saying it “contains sex scenes because sex sells” or something similar.<sup>5</sup> I've found that very funny. Actually, the sex scenes have nothing to do with the fact that the book is selling well, and neither were they essential to getting the rights sold to other countries.

O'Brien is also selling the book in other English-speaking countries besides Ireland. As a matter of fact, I've been told that the main market for the book is not Ireland, but Australia and the United States. There are more Irish in the United States and Australia than in Ireland. At the moment, I think the shops in Dublin Airport are selling more copies of *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* than any other store. One of the editors at O'Brien has told me that the book has a lot of potential for export.

**Q: The title of the English edition is slightly different from the original. What do you make of it? Did you at any time consider making a cross-reference in the title like the one in the English version?**

**A:** They changed it because they didn't want to use the literal translation of the original Spanish title (i.e., *Dubliner*), which is almost identical to the title of Joyce's short-story collection, and

---

5. He refers to the following review: Spain, John. 2013. “Graphic portrait of Joyce as a young lover”. *The Irish Independent*. May 28th. <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/graphic-portrait-of-joyce-as-a-young-lover-29300472.html>

also felt it wouldn't give a clear idea what the book is about. They wanted a more explicit title because Ireland is a very visual market and the titles of the books published by O'Brien tend to be like *A History of District 'X' in County Whatever during the Great Famine*, so you know exactly the kind of stuff you're going to dig into. They went for *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* precisely for that reason, that is, so the reader knows exactly what to expect. Anyway, I think the title is quite suitable because you know at a glance that the book is a biography of James Joyce and besides, where and when the story is set. It was the same in France, where it is called *James Joyce, l'homme de Dublin*, not *Dublinois*. By the way, *James Joyce, l'homme de Dublin* includes some poems by Joyce, as the writer's grandson, Stephen Joyce, doesn't have the right to control his grandfather's works anymore; they've just passed out of copyright and become public domain.

**Q: In the final pages of *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner* and throughout the first part of *La ruta Joyce*, you go to great lengths to show that Joyce's works live on in contemporary Dublin. I was especially surprised at the relationship you see between Joyce's works and RTE's soap opera *Fair City*. Could you tell more about this?**

**A:** *Ulysses* is full of gossip and chatter about other people's lives and miseries. I'd say the core of *Fair City* is pretty much the same, isn't it? *Fair City* is a third-rate soap opera, but it is essentially about the same things: real life, typical problems, typical characters... Well, I don't know if *Fair City* can be considered real life, as it is kind of very bizarre; still, I was pretty amazed at watching a TV show which doesn't have the status of art or literature, but is culled from the same raw materials Joyce built his books from, real life and ordinary people.

**Q: You have been in Ireland several times over the last few years. How do you think is it coping with the recession? Would you say the current crisis has stirred up the ever-present memory of the Great Famine?**

**A:** I don't know, I don't think it has. We live in a completely different world from that of the

Great Famine... I think Ireland can actually get through the crisis quicker than other countries — it's a very small country, it has great possibilities and the population speaks English, the most universal language in the world today. Greece, for example, doesn't have these advantages and neither does Spain, which is a huge country and has many difficulties.

**Q: In *La ruta Joyce*, you say that you feel quite at home in Ireland, that the wet weather, the red brick houses and the Irish character remind you of Asturias. What character traits do you think the Irish and the Asturian people have most in common?**

**A:** I'd say the Irish, besides being open to foreign visitors, are prone to celebrate life, despite the dramatic past of the island. I wonder if that's related to having so many days of bad weather and so many pubs... Anyway, that is a parallelism with the Asturian character, isn't it?

Another parallelism would be religion, as it relates to some social groups in Asturias and, in fact, in Spain at large, perhaps even more intensely. I'm living in France and whenever I speak about religion, I feel my views are quite different from the French. I guess they're much closer to the Irish. Religion is in the genes of every Irish person, they consider it an essential part of their history.

**Q: However, it strikes me as odd that you make no reference to the fact that both Asturias and Ireland are marked by emigration. In fact, you meet up with people from Asturias in each city in *La ruta Joyce*...**

**A:** It's true; I didn't put that into the book. Migration is the norm in Ireland. I'd say nowadays there are more Asturians going around out there than living in Asturias; we

somehow share that complex identity.

**Q: Finally, why do you think we should read James Joyce in the 21st century?**

**A:** Despite the reputation of *Ulysses* for being inaccessible, James Joyce is quite universal and timeless; his books just speak about common human beings, about real lives. If you go and read *Dubliners*, *Ulysses* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, you'll just find human experience and feelings that remain unchanged throughout the centuries, like religion, nationalism and conflict. Certainly nowadays we aren't experiencing conflicts like the two World Wars he had to live through, although we have to endure other kinds of conflict, other kinds of misery.

Anyway, many people are writing to me saying, "I've read and enjoyed *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*, I'm going to have a go at reading *Ulysses*". And I say, "Don't dive into *Ulysses* just yet, try *Dubliners* first and see if you like it". I think one should read Joyce with the knowledge that he wrote what he wrote at a time when no one was writing like that yet; real life wasn't made into literature like that yet. I think he's very interesting in that sense. Furthermore, I'm always eager to drill down and get to know what's happening under the surface. *Ulysses* is invaluable to me, as it gives me all these minute details: schedules of trains from Dublin, newspaper headlines, how characters talk, what they eat, what they wear... Some things are quite specific to that time and place, whereas others are quite universal and as you read them, it amazes you that they were written in the late 19th and early 20th century. All in all, Joyce's works are still interesting because they reflect the universality of the human condition.

## Works Cited

- Berry, Robert. 2013 (2009). *Ulysses Seen. The James Joyce Centre Dublin*. <http://jamesjoyce.ie/ulysses-seen/> [retrieved: 19/09/2013]
- Ellmann, Richard. 1982 (1959). *James Joyce*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. *James Joyce*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. 2000 (1914). London: Penguin.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ulysses*. 2000 (1922). London: Penguin.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Finnegans Wake*. 2012 (1939). London: Penguin.
- Spain, John. 2013. "Graphic portrait of Joyce as a young lover". *The Irish Independent*. May 28th. <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/graphic-portrait-of-joyce-as-a-young-lover-29300472.html> [retrieved: 20/09/2013]
- Zapico, Alfonso. 2006. *La guerre du professeur Bertenev*. Geneva: Paquet.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *Café Budapest*. Bilbao: Astiberri.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2011a. *Dublinés*. Bilbao: Astiberri.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2011b. *La ruta Joyce*. Bilbao: Astiberri.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. *James Joyce. Portrait of a Dubliner*. Dublin: The O'Brien Press.

Received 25th September 2013    Last version 26th October 2013

**Carlos Menéndez-Otero** es Licenciado en Filología Inglesa, Experto en Periodismo Digital y Doctor por la Universidad de Oviedo, y Licenciado en Comunicación Audiovisual y Especialista en Edición Digital por la UOC. Actualmente es Profesor Ayudante en la Universidad de Oviedo.