At the age of seventeen Joyce tried his hand at an exercise never to be repeated: he wrote an essay about a painting he saw at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin. His juvenile impulse to critically examine Mihály Munkácsy’s painting “Ecce Homo” stands in an ironic contrast with his remark to his brother Stanislaus seven years later that painting was a subject “of which I know nothing” (Letters II 157). Morton Levitt concurs with Joyce’s off-hand observation when he suggests that “Joyce was hopeless when it came to painting, and not just because of his eyes. His appreciation of the visual arts appears to have been limited to the family portraits that he carried with him from one continental residence to another”. Furthermore, Levitt remarks that he “would be very surprised indeed if we were ever to find a painter who influenced Joyce or one whom Joyce saw as an analogue to his own work, or about whom he commented with any concern or intelligence. Painting was definitely not Joyce’s art”.¹

Even if one can agree that painting was not Joyce’s art in as conspicuous a way as, for instance music was, Levitt’s remark still seems somewhat overhasty. Several critics, by contrast, have argued that Joyce was inspired by contemporary visual arts, especially Cubism, and in the 1930s he compared his own method in Finnegans Wake to the method of Jack Yeats’s paintings.² Here, I would like to

concentrate on the unique exception to the last component of Levitt’s proposition: Joyce did comment with some concern and intelligence about one painting, “Ecce Homo” by the Hungarian Mihály Munkácsy (1844-1900), who, along with his friend, the composer and pianist Ferenc (Franz) Liszt (1811-1886), was the most celebrated Hungarian artist worldwide in the nineteenth century, and who is still the most well-known Hungarian painter in Hungary today. Indeed, Joyce’s juvenile commentary was intelligent enough to become an indispensable part of the extensive Munkácsy criticism in Hungary. Since 1961, when the Hungarian translation of the essay came out, no Munkácsy critic assessing the painting has failed to refer to the central argument of Joyce’s essay that Munkácsy’s picture is “primarily dramatic” (CW 32). Joyce’s conception of “Ecce Homo” in terms of drama fell in line with several other contemporary commentators who assessed diverse aspects of Munkácsy’s trilogy of paintings dealing with Christ’s Passion as dramatic. Nonetheless, the intelligent central argument of the essay reveals at least as much about Joyce’s aesthetic concerns at the time of seeing the picture as about Munkácsy’s painting itself. As Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann noted long ago, Joyce’s critical writings form a “dramatized autobiography”, they may reveal more about Joyce than about the subjects or fellow artists he treats (CW 10).

Here, I will examine Joyce’s commentary against the backdrop of the vast field of (mostly Hungarian) criticism on Munkácsy’s trilogy of paintings dealing with Christ’s Passion: “Christ before Pilate” (1881), “Golgotha” or “Christ on Calvary” (1884) and “Ecce Homo” (1896). Joyce also mentions the other two pieces of the trilogy in his essay, even though he had the chance to see only the last one. My approach evidently bears the touch of local patriotism, since I am a Hungarian living in the city of Debrecen, where all three pictures are exhibited together in a big glass-roofed hall of the Déri Museum, specifically built in the 1920s to accommodate “Ecce Homo”. More