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Ulysses

James Joyce

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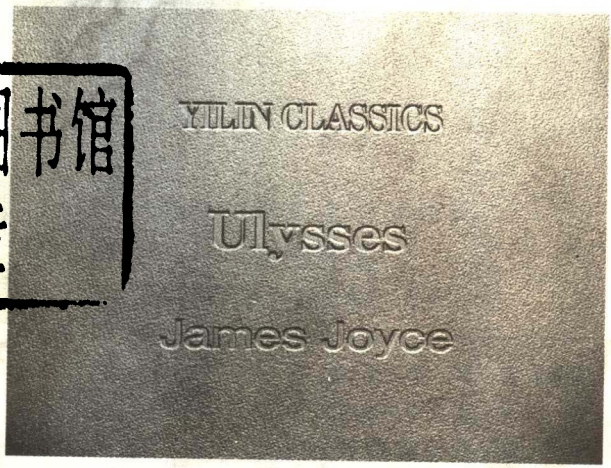

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INTRODUCTION

THE BOOK

It is no accident that the last lines of *Ulysses* read 'Trieste–Zürich–Paris, 1914–1921'. Joyce had to scurry with his family from city to city, in his attempt to avoid the dangers of World War I, as he created a beautiful book in a Europe bent on self-destruction. He seems from the outset to have anticipated Tom Stoppard's brilliant joke in *Travesties*:

> 'What did you do in the Great War, Mr Joyce?'
> 'I wrote *Ulysses*. What did you do?'

Joyce affected an unconcern for its battles, but it is clear that the war touched him to the quick. The heroic abstractions for which soldiers died seemed to have an increasingly hollow sound. Like Stephen Dedalus, Joyce feared 'the big words which make us so unhappy'. If history was a nightmare, it was an heroic deception from which all Europe – and not just Ireland – was trying to awake. As he teaches Roman history in the second chapter, Stephen contemplates the futility of war with a mind which reflects the costs of victory to the ancient Pyrrhus but also Joyce's awareness of the bombardment of buildings in 1917. His vision of 'toppling masonry' and 'the ruin of all space' is at once a version of the Last Day and of contemporary Europe. It is, equally, Joyce's protest against both.

Men had killed and maimed one another's bodies in the name of abstract virtues, so Joyce resolved to write a materialist 'epic of the body', with a minute account

of its functions and frustrations. Soldiers were dying in defence of the outmoded epic codes which permeate *The Odyssey*, so Joyce set out to remind readers that if Odysseus – also known as Ulysses – was a god, he was most certainly a god with a limp. In this book, the very ordinariness of the modern Ulysses, Mr Leopold Bloom, becomes a standing reproach to the myth of ancient military heroism. Man's littleness is seen, finally, to be the inevitable condition of his greatness. What one man does in a single day is infinitesimal, but it is nonetheless infinitely important that he do it. By developing Bloom's analogies with Odysseus, Joyce suggests that the Greeks were human and flawed like everybody else. He had said so in a letter to his brother Stanislaus as early as 1905:

> Do you not think the search for heroics damn vulgar? ... I am sure however that the whole structure of heroism is, and always was, a damned lie and that there cannot be any substitute for individual passion as the motive power of everything.

Ulysses is one outcome of that letter and its sentiments. It is a protest against the squalid codes of chivalric militarism and against the sad machismo of sexual conquest.

Leopold and Molly Bloom may disagree, like all spouses, on many things, but they share a principled aversion to war, violence and licensed coercion. Molly laments 'the war killing all the fine young men'. Leopold cautions against 'equipping soldiers with firearms or sidearms of any description, liable to go off at any time, which was tantamount to inciting them against civilians should by any chance they fall out

over anything'. That passage was probably prompted in Joyce's mind by an account of how British soldiers, this time in Dublin, had fired on and killed civilians on Bachelors' Walk in July 1914. The book is studded with Leopold Bloom's pacific musings: 'How can people aim guns at each other? Sometimes they go off. Poor kids.' Such warnings were painfully real to Joyce, whose university classmate and fellow-pamphleteer, Francis Sheehy Skeffington, was murdered by a British officer during the Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin. Skeffington, a pacifist and a champion of women's rights, had tried to stop the looting of city shops, which was bringing discredit on the nationalist cause. Joyce was appalled at the news of his friend, whose qualities of civic-mindedness were re-created in the development of Bloom's character.

In those early decades of the twentieth century, Joyce was reacting against the cult of Cúchulainn, which was purveyed in poems, plays and prose by writers such as Patrick Pearse, W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory. As a student of twenty-one, he had written a pamphlet attacking the Irish Literary Theatre for its surrender to vulgar nationalism. (Skeffington's co-publication had argued for the rights of Irish women to attend the national university.) Remarking that the natives of the island had never got beyond a miracle play, Joyce concluded that 'the Irish Literary Theatre must now be the property of the most belated race in Europe'. When this swaggering failed to provoke a response, the young man made his celebrated and misunderstood visit to Yeats, which he terminated with the observation that the national poet (still in his thirties) was too old to be helped.

Behind the mockery and the pride, Joyce was making

a telling point – that the two men came from different ages and different worlds. Yeats, though only seventeen years older than Joyce, believed in ancient heroism and wished only to make it live again in Ireland. Joyce was more modern. He contended that the ordinary was the proper domain of the artist, arguing that sensationalism and heroics could safely be left to journalists. He therefore side-stepped the story of Cúchulainn, the epic fighter who defended the gap of the north of Ireland against all-comers, even unto death. A central theme of such tales was the skill of Cúchulainn in glamorized combat and his capacity to make violence seem redemptive. Joyce was convinced that these narratives did not project the true character of the Irish people. When Wyndham Lewis spoke of the fighting Irish in a conversation, Joyce countered thoughtfully: 'That's not been my experience . . . a very gentle race.' Though abused by occupying armies since 1169, the Irish had been too shrewd or too pacific to place a disciplined nationwide army in the field of battle, and they had never fully rallied behind the intermittent risings led by idealistic minority groupings. Even the rebels of 1916 enjoyed scant support during Easter Week. It was only a widespread aversion to subsequent British violence, in the protracted execution of rebel leaders, which galvanized support later in the year. The victory of Sinn Féin in the 1918 election was due largely to its policy of strenuously opposing the conscription of Irish males to fight in World War I. In so far as nationalists became implicated in deeds of violence in the following years of struggle, they suffered regular reductions in popular support.

So the Cúchulainn cult was objectionable to Joyce

because it helped to perpetuate the libel of the pugnacious Irish overseas, while gratifying the vanity of a minority of self-heroicizing nationalists at home. At St Enda's School, founded by Patrick Pearse in 1908 to educate the sons of nationalist families, Cúchulainn was described as 'an important, if invisible, member of the staff'; and the boys were urged to adopt his motto: 'I care not if I live but a day and a night, so long as my deeds live after me.' The fabled death of Cúchulainn, strapped to a rock, provided an image of Christ-like suffering to redeem a people; and, in truth, many former pupils of St Enda's became rebels in the 1916 rising. To Joyce, however, Cúchulainn's combination of aggression and pain must have seemed but an ill-disguised version of the 'muscular Christianity' preached in British public schools. The heroic past allowed to the subject people by the colonizer turned out, on inspection, to be a concealed version of the British imperial present. This explains why Joyce heaped such repeated mockery on the 'Irish Revival', exposing the extent to which its nationalism was an imitation of the original English model, rather than a radical renovation of the consciousness of the Irish race. He did not fail to note in Pearse a hatred of those English whom he was, all unconsciously, so keen to imitate; and he abandoned Pearse's Gaelic League classes on discovering that his teacher (who would later cure this fault) could not praise Irish without denigrating the English language.

Joyce believed that a writer's first duty might be to insult rather than to flatter national vanity. He wished to shock his compatriots into a deeper awareness of their self-deceptions. He had written *Dubliners* as 'a chapter of the moral history of my country' and had

ended *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with the promise to forge the 'uncreated conscience of my race'. Such solemn words suggest that Joyce saw himself as a national rather than a nationalist patriot, with something more valuable than the Cúchulainoid codes of Pearse and Yeats to teach his fellow-citizens. Joyce exploded the myth of the fighting Irish and, especially through his protagonist Bloom, depicted them as a quiescent, long-suffering but astute people, very similar in mentality to the Jews. This had, indeed, been a theme song of many Gaelic poets in earlier centuries. Writing of the enforced exile to Connacht during the Cromwellian plantations of the mid-seventeenth century, Feardorcha Ó Mealláin had seen in the fate of another 'chosen people' a version of his own:

> Urscéal air sin tuigtear libh:
> Clann Iosraeil a bhain le Dia
> faoin Éigipt cé bhí a mbroid
> furtacht go grod a fuair siad.
>
> A story on that theme will explain your plight:
> The children of Israel who stood by God
> Although they were in captivity in Egypt
> Were quickly given help.

By making its central character an Irish Jew, Joyce placed *Ulysses* squarely in this native literary tradition. He was honest enough to concede, however, that wise passiveness – at least in the case of the Irish – could sometimes shade into downright masochism or mere laziness. So he revised the myth of the bellicose Paddy with his repeated suggestion that the national disease was not pugnacity but paralysis, a denial of possibilities well captured in the 'freeze-frames' which constitute the tenth chapter of the book.

In considerations such as these may be found the answer to the question asked so often by readers of *Ulysses*: if Joyce wished to base his narrative on an ancient legend, why did he turn to Greek rather than Gaelic tales? Cúchulainn had already been appropriated by the militant nationalists of Dublin, whose politics were uncongenial to the pacific and internationalist Joyce. Ever since boyhood, he had been more attracted by the warm humanity of Odysseus. The ancient protagonist did not want to go to Troy, Joyce recalled, because he shrewdly sensed that the war was just a pretext employed by Greek merchants as they sought new markets. The analogy with a contemporary Europe plunged into carnage to provide profits for the barons of the steel industry would not have been lost on the man who called himself a 'socialistic artist'. His central character was a nonentity who had absolutely no hankering to become a somebody, a quiet family-man, an 'all-round man'. Neither a Faust nor a Jesus, Bloom was to eschew the sexual conquests of the former and the self-conquering celibacy of the latter. Despite his respect for the gentleness of Jesus, Joyce found him incomplete. He confided to Frank Budgen: 'Jesus was a bachelor and never lived with a woman. Surely living with a woman is one of the most difficult things a man has to do, and he never did it.'

By rendering Bloom in such idiosyncratic detail, Joyce may have unwittingly created the impression that his character was complicated, even weird. 'The thought of *Ulysses* is very simple,' he insisted, 'it is only the method which is difficult.' The method – concentrating on the most seemingly insignificant minutiae – made possible one of the fullest accounts ever given by a novelist of everyday life. Many of the great

modernist writers, from Conrad to Sartre, saw theirs as a literature of 'extreme situations', but Joyce was exceptional among them in cleaving to the quotidian, the great middle range of experience between exaltation and terror. Most of his bohemian contemporaries would have endorsed André Gide's declaration of war on family life ('Familles, je vous haïs . . .'). Joyce embraced its banal routine as the friend of his art. Bohemia was never *his* native country. As he sat to have his portrait painted by Patrick Tuohy, Joyce was dismayed by the artist's high-faluting talk of the soul: 'Never mind my soul, Tuohy. Just make sure you get my tie right.' This method he applied in his own art, chronicling with minute precision the contents of Bloom's pockets, the nature of his food, the number of occasions on which he broke wind. He described his character pissing and shitting in order to show that here was a man thoroughly free of abstract pretension or bodily self-hatred. Joyce saw, earlier than most, that the modern cult of the body had been made possible only by a century of coy evasion; and his close analysis of Bloom's daily actions exposed the laughable inadequacy of both attitudes. Like Lawrence, Joyce wanted to afford the body a recognition equal to that given the mind, but to a post-Victorian generation which had lost this just balance, both men *appeared* to elevate the body above all else. Devotees of Lawrence, for their part, have sometimes argued that the anatomization of the body on which the ground-plan of *Ulysses* is based – an organ per chapter – represents the ultimate abstraction of the human form. This might be felt to be true of the *plan*, but not of the actual reading of any chapter of *Ulysses*, where the interest invariably centres on the ways in which the characters experience their own bodies.

Such relentless democratization of literature proved too much for the two great revolutionary societies of the modern world. The authorities in the United States banned the book; and Karl Radek told the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934: '*Ulysses* is a spider's web of allegories and mythological reminiscences ... it is a dung-heap swarming with worms, photographed by a movie-camera through a microscope.' Radek might have been on firmer ground if he had outlawed the book on the grounds that few of its characters do a full day's work. His response usefully summarizes a widespread bafflement at Joyce's experimental methods, so clearly at odds with the Girl-Meets-Tractor dogmas of socialist realism propounded by 1930s Marxists. *Ulysses*' reputation for obscenity was, among certain radical groups, compounded by the charge of 'élitist' obscurity.

The Irish responded with sarcasm and invective, but they never banned the book. Perhaps no outraged citizen felt qualified to file the necessary critique with the censorship board, which was set up only some years after publication. By then the panel may have judged it beyond the intellectual scope of corruptible readers. The former Provost of the then pro-English Trinity College, J. P. Mahaffy, seized the occasion to attack the rival University College Dublin: *Ulysses* proved 'it was a mistake to establish a separate university for the aborigines of this island, for the corner-boys who spit into the Liffey'. The pro-Catholic *Dublin Review* spoke for nationalist Ireland in avowing that 'the Irish literary movement is not going to find its stifling climax in a French sink', and it paused only to lament that 'a great Jesuit-trained intellect has gone over malignantly and mockingly to the powers of evil'.

If all such readers were ashamed, of whom or what were they reminded? Once again, a great book had shown that not all people could cope with an image of their own condition. They thought that they were reading *Ulysses*, whereas the book had been 'reading' them, exposing their blind spots and their sensitive areas.

In due time, the United States rescinded its ban and the Soviet writers' unions began to translate *Ulysses* into their own languages. In Dublin today, statues of Joyce abound. It was, and still is, in England that Joyce found it hardest to secure a hearing. Even before the book saw the printing presses, an official of the British Embassy in Paris burnt part of the manuscript on discovering it being typed by his wife. D. H. Lawrence complained of the 'journalistic dirty-mindedness' of its author, who had degraded the novel into a crude instrument for measuring twinges in the toes of unremarkable men. Arnold Bennett, though impressed by the Nighttown sequence and by Molly Bloom's monologue, voiced a common English suspicion that anyone could have written of 'the dailiest day possible', given 'sufficient time, paper, childish caprice and obstinacy'. He contended that the author had failed to extend to the public the common courtesies of literature, as a result of which one finished it 'with the sensation of a general who has just put down an insurrection'. He thus linked it, at least subliminally, with the recent uprisings in Ireland. So did Virginia Woolf, who explained it as the work of a frustrated man who feels that, in order to breathe, he must break all the windows. Perhaps sensing that Joyce might have surpassed her own portrayals of quotidian consciousness, she denounced *Ulysses* as the work of 'a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples'.

In retrospect, it is clear that Leopold Bloom – intended by his creator to speak as an ordinary man outraged by the injustice of the world – had outraged the world by his very ordinariness. Even fifty years after publication, Joyce's foremost biographer and critic, Richard Ellmann, could take up a professorship at Oxford with the still-to-be-achieved aim of bringing *Ulysses* to the English. Many English universities excluded the book from undergraduate courses; and those who did most to promote Joyce were often foreign scholars like Clive Hart or English writers like Anthony Burgess who found it easier to live and work overseas.

In all likelihood, the stay-at-home English had cannily sensed that Joyce, despite his castigations of Irish nationalism, was even more scathing of the 'brutish empire' which emerges from the book as a compendium of 'beer, beef, business, bibles, bulldogs, battleships, buggery and bishops'. It is even more probable that, in their zeal to defend the great novelistic tradition of Austen, Dickens and Eliot, they were as baffled as many other readers by a 'plotless' book which had become synonymous with modern chaos and disorder.

In fact, if *Ulysses* has a single flaw, it is that it may sometimes seem *over-plotted* and that its ordering mechanisms can appear more real than the characters on whom they are imposed. Yet such mechanisms have been found essential by writers, as a way of containing the anarchic forces of modern life. It will be seen that Joyce's highly *conscious* recuperation of the story of Odysseus makes possible an auto-critical method, which is itself central to the book's critique of authoritarian systems. But, to appreciate this more fully, it is worth considering *Ulysses* as the triumphant solution to a technical problem which, for over a

century before its publication, had exercised the modern European writer.

THE STRUCTURE

In the year 1800, the German critic Friedrich Schlegel contended that modern literature lacked a centre, 'such as mythology was for the ancients'. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century had taught men to contemplate the real world, stripped of all mythic explanations. 'I must create my own system,' said the poet William Blake, 'or be enslaved by another man's.' It is notorious, however, that the painting and poems which embody that system still present ferocious difficulties to the deciphering reader. Over a hundred years later, W. B. Yeats, deprived of a Christian mythology by evolutionary science and the higher criticism, felt equally compelled to create his own system in *A Vision*, a book more often cited than read, and more often read than understood. The human need to make myths is very deep-rooted, since myths are symbolic projections of the cultural and moral values of a society, figurings of its psychic state. The French Revolution, which purported to put an end to all myth-making, instituted *the* myth of modernity, the notion of perpetual renewal which animated spirits as diverse as those of Ezra Pound ('make it new') and Leon Trotsky ('permanent revolution').

Standing on the verge of modernity in 1800, Schlegel proved himself a prophet, in the sense of one who saw so deeply into the artistic conditions of his own time that the shape of future texts became discernible. He foretold the emergence of a new mythology, which would be less a radical act of creation than a 'collabora-

tion' between old and new. Ancient myths embodied people's immediate response to their physical experience and were not seen as fictive by their adherents; but the new mythology would be abstract and aware of its own fictive status. 'It must be the most artificial of all works of art, for it is to encompass all others,' he declared; 'it is to be a new course or vessel for the ancient, eternal fountainhead of poetry and itself the everlasting poem which contains within itself the seeds of all other poems.'

Schlegel's pronouncements were an astonishingly accurate prediction of the self-critical recuperation of Homeric mythology in *Ulysses*. They foretold the self-destructive way in which Joyce, by making an inventory of previous literary styles, appeared to exhaust the possibilities of literature in the book to end all books. 'Why should not what has already been emerge anew?' asked Schlegel, 'and why not in a finer, greater manner?' He foresaw the pervasive strategy of modernism: the liberation of a modern sensibility by an ancient myth and the resuscitation of an ancient myth by a modern sensibility. This strategy would produce, in time, the fusion of Grail legend and modern religious doubt in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, as well as the brutal juxtaposition of medieval apocalypse and aerial bombardment in Picasso's *Guernica*. It issued, too, in the art of Joyce, who could not create his own system without first enslaving himself to another man's.

From earliest childhood, Joyce had been obsessed with making lists and devising systems. At the age of seven, already away at Clongowes Wood boarding college, he wrote letters home to his parents with minute accounts of his requirements which, according to his Jesuit supervisors, read like grocer's lists. Enchanted

by designs, he evoked from his father the wisecrack that 'if that fellow was dropped in the middle of the Sahara, he'd sit, be God, and make a map of it'. Over twenty-five years later, as he negotiated the quicksands of *Ulysses*, he decided that it was high time to draw such a map. The result was the famous diagram, published by Stuart Gilbert with the collaboration of the author in *James Joyce's Ulysses* (1930). This charts the eighteen episodes, allocating to each its appropriate art, colour, symbol, technique and organ of the body. At the head of each chapter is a title drawn from an episode or character of Homer's *Odyssey* (see p. xxiii).

For all the apparent rigour of this plan, most first-time readers of *Ulysses* remain only dimly aware of the Homeric analogies and do not find them greatly colouring their experience. To many of its earliest students, Gilbert's diagram came as something of a shock. Most contended that the Homeric tale was of more value to the writer than it could ever be to the reader caught up in the immediacies of an episode. Harry Levin suggested that, as a structuring device, it had the same usefulness to the writer as scaffolding does for a builder, but that in the end the frame must fall away to reveal the true magnificence of the edifice beneath. It was for such a reason that Joyce (after some hesitation) removed the Homeric titles from his chapters, while continuing to employ them in private discussions. Having done this, however, he felt a sharp disappointment when few of the book's first readers seemed able to elaborate the detailed analogies. So, after eight years of fruitless waiting, his patience broke and he authorized Stuart Gilbert's book.

This may have been ill-advised. For a long time, criticism of *Ulysses* became little more than a detective