

COMMENTARY

Ulysses (1922)



James Joyce (Irish)

(1882-1941)

“I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape... Appreciate the significance of the method employed--the parallel to the *Odyssey*, and the use of appropriate styles and symbols to each division.... Mr. Joyce’s parallel use of the *Odyssey* has a great importance. It has the importance of a scientific discovery. No one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before.... In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious.

It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible only a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art....

In re-reading [January 1964] for the first time in many years... To say that the novel ended with Flaubert and James was possibly an echo of Ezra Pound and is certainly absurd. To say that other writers must follow the procedure of *Ulysses* is equally absurd....”

T. S. Eliot
“*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*”
The Dial LXXV (1923) 480-83

“Joyce was a very great writer and he would only explain what he was doing to jerks... The influence of his work was what changed everything, and made it possible for us to break away from restrictions.”

Ernest Hemingway

“I knew of Joyce, and I would go to some effort to go to the cafe that he inhabited to look at him [in Paris, 1925]. You should approach Joyce’s *Ulysses* as the illiterate Baptist preacher approaches the Old Testament: with faith.... I have read *Ulysses* once. It is interesting, but I probably did not like it, for I never went back to it.... James Joyce was one of the great men of my time.... He, Thomas Mann, were the great writers of my time. He was probably—might have been the greatest.”

William Faulkner

“It has been said by T. S. Eliot that Joyce is the greatest master of language in English since Milton.... James Joyce’s *Ulysses* was an attempt to present directly the thoughts and feelings of a group of Dubliners through the whole course of a summer day. *Finnegans Wake* is a complementary attempt to render the dream fantasies and the half-conscious sensations experienced by a single person in the course of a night’s sleep. This presents a more difficult problem to the reader as well as to the writer. In *Ulysses*, the reader was allowed to perceive the real objective world, so that its distortions or liquefactions under the stress of special psychological states still usually remained intelligible. But in *Finnegans Wake* we are not supplied with any objective data until the next to the last chapter....

Joyce has always been rather deficient in dramatic and narrative sense. *Ulysses* already dragged; one got lost in it. The moments of critical importance were so run in with the rest that one was likely to miss them on first reading. One had to think about the book, read chapters of it over, in order to see the pattern and to realize how deep the insight went. And *Finnegans Wake* is much worse in this respect.... I believe that the miscarriage of *Finnegans Wake*, in so far as it does miscarry, is due primarily to two tendencies of Joyce’s which were already in evidence in *Ulysses*: the impulse, in the absence of dramatic power, to work up an epic impressiveness by multiplying and complicating detail, by filling in abstract diagrams and laying on intellectual conceits, till the organic effort at which he aims has been spoiled by too much that is synthetic; and a curious shrinking solicitude to conceal from the reader his real subjects. These subjects are always awkward and distressing; they have to do with the kind of feelings which people themselves conceal and which it takes courage in the artist to handle. And the more daring Joyce’s subjects become, the more he tends to swathe them about with the fancywork of his literary virtuosity. It is as if it were not merely Earwicker who was frightened by the state of his emotions but as if Joyce were embarrassed too.”

Edmund Wilson

“The Dream of H. C. Earwicker”

The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature
(1939; Oxford/Galaxy 1965) 198, 207, 214, 217

“James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) represents the most complete reaction against the main tendencies of the well-made novel [epitomized by Henry James]. Indeed, it represents the most complete break, in our time, with the entire historical tradition of the novel. If it were not for the widespread influence it has had on other books which are obviously novels, we might leave it out of our account as being a freak of nature.... In *Ulysses* there is no...plot, but simply a series of everyday occurrences serving as a framework on which to hang the psychical fabric whose texture it is our pleasure to study.... He has vastly influenced the technique and the substance of the novel....

Stephen Dedalus, Irish poet and school-teacher, has a talk with his friends in the tower where he is living; conducts a class at his school; visits a newspaper office with an article on the foot-and-mouth disease written by his master, Mr. Deasy; discusses Shakespeare with his friends in the library; takes part in a conversation with medical students in a maternity hospital; gets rather drunk and visits a bawdy house, goes home with Leopold Bloom and takes a cup of cocoa before saying good night.

Leopold Bloom, Jewish canvasser for advertisements and amateur scientist, gets breakfast for his wife, Marion; visits the post-office, where he finds a letter from a girl-friend; goes to a funeral; visits the newspaper office in connection with an ad; writes a letter to his girlfriend in the bar of a hotel; is kicked out of a saloon by a violent anti-Semite; sits on a bench and has a mute flirtation with a sentimental young girl; goes with Stephen Dedalus to Nighttown and takes him home for a cup of cocoa; goes to bed with his wife and puts himself to sleep with pleasant thoughts.

Marion Bloom indulges in a long reverie in which she reviews her own emotional history and all her relations with her husband, ending up with a vivid recall of the first time that she said yes to him. In connection with all these occurrences we are introduced to many persons important in one way or another to the principals. The whole record has the most amazing air of reality, and, except for one thing, gives as strong an impression of life as any novel in the English language. The one thing lacking is passionate motivation of action.... The passion or sentiment of love is almost nowhere represented, in spite of certain protoplasmic phenomena of a sexual character....

Ulysses is nothing more nor less than a symphonic poem, characterized by a rigorous and insistent development of themes. Underneath the apparently freakish play of the surface runs the continuous rhythm of recurring motifs. First of all, there is the close correspondence of each of the eighteen sections to one of the episodes of the *Odyssey*. This correspondence is not merely a matter of the general outline of the episode. It is carried out in a thousand obscure allusions scattered through the narrative and lodged like ore in the most secret rifts and veins of rhetoric and reverie....

If there is a theme, it is perhaps the 'uncreated conscience' of Stephen's race. The ultimate effect is a vivid and rather desolating impression of Dublin, of the Irish people, and, through that, of the race of man in its present state of jovial futility. It is such a picture of the state of man, without grace, as might have been offered by Paul or Augustine if they had concerned themselves with literary art. Some such undertaking has been carried out in earlier times by Tolstoy, by Victor Hugo, Balzac, and Zola; but always with them the composite picture of mankind, of human nature, has been ranged lengthwise along the line of a plot, and almost invariably whatever was introduced into the picture was made to bear upon a specific dramatic issue, something to be resolved.

For the most part, in *Ulysses*, everything is given some relation to one of the three major characters, Stephen, Leopold, and Marion. In all but one of the seventeen sections one or more of these persons is present virtually throughout. But as if to signalize his more comprehensive intention, the author inserts a section in the midst of the book in which some hundred people are shown, in a succession of fleeting glimpses, each one occupied in a characteristic way during the middle of the afternoon. And while Bloom and Stephen do come in along with their fellow Dubliners, their appearance is so casual, their stay so short, that they seem of no more importance than any one else; they are lost in the crowd.... Thus Joyce undertakes to defy the tyranny of time. His breadthwise cutting of the slice [of life] extends across the present moment..."

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth-Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 403-04, 419, 424, 426, 428

"James Joyce (1882-1941) is reported to have declared that to understand him the reader must devote his life to the study of his books. The readjustment of values that is sure to come will spare future lovers of literature this self-immolation, and meanwhile the commentators supply short cuts. Already it is apparent that startling innovations in technique are not in themselves evidence of artistic success, and even among Joyce's admirers there are those who admit that one of his two massive books is but partially successful and the other a failure. Joyce's contemporary renown was in part due to factors extraneous to literary excellence. These are so notorious as to call for no comment here. Of his mastery of language—indeed, his tyranny over it—there can be no question, nor of the beauty, profundity, strength, and significance of parts of his achievement. But the separation of the author from any considerable body of readers, already apparent in his early books, became a chasm only to be bridged by the erudite in *Ulysses* and a great gulf of incommunicability in *Finnegan's Wake*....

Ulysses (1922), published in Paris, was suppressed in England and the United States. The blasphemy and obscenity which gained it immediate notoriety insured its success as a commercial venture but were of little moment to those who recognized the book's significance as an ambitious experiment in creative literature along new lines. The correspondence between the experiences of Leopold Bloom on a single day in Dublin and the adventures of Ulysses is not, as some critics have declared, a mere scholarly jest or *tour de force* but is fundamental to the design. Joyce held that Ulysses, far more than Hamlet or Faust, was the

‘complete’ or representative man—son, husband, father; wise, courageous, shrewd; subject to many trials. Each episode in *Ulysses* has its parallel in the *Odyssey*, as when Dedalus finds himself between the Scylla of Aristotelian realism and the Charybdis of Platonic mysticism. For the detection of many of these parallels the reader needs the guidance of the commentators. The episodes are, moreover, associated each with an hour of the day and an organ of the body, and each may be connected with one of the arts and may have its peculiar color and symbol and ‘technique.’ There are innumerable reticulations and decussations of recurrent motives, many of them so tenuous as to be discernible only after the closest scrutiny. Not every reader finds the effort always rewarding.

Joyce had an astonishing command of the resources of the English language, and when conventional vocabulary and syntax failed to meet his requirements he had recourse to neologisms, truncated and telescoped words, and a sort of counterpoint derived from his knowledge of music. In one chapter the development of the embryo from conception to birth is symbolized by a chronological succession of English prose styles imitated with dazzling virtuosity. The technical expertness often overreaches itself, for though there are passages of lucid beauty more often there is an orgiastic tumult of vocables. Joyce plumbed the depths of the subconscious to draw thence half-formed thoughts and unspeakable desires. These are interlaced with description, narrative, and dialogue.

The *monologue interieur* is carried beyond the limit of candor and length in the famous reverie of Molly Bloom with which *Ulysses* concludes. Though the end is a magnificent glorification of the ‘life-urge,’ the prevailing tone of the book is of a desolating irony; and though there is abundant humor it is a mistake to describe it as Rabelaisian... The book succeeds best where it communicates most, as when we follow Bloom’s thoughts in the cemetery or when Dedalus develops his theory of *Hamlet* in the library. When it fails, the failure is in communication; contact between author and reader can be established, if at all, only through the mediation of the commentators. The fundamental objection to *Ulysses* applies *a fortiori* to *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939).”

Samuel C. Chew
A Literary History of England
ed. Albert C. Baugh
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1948) 1561-62

“The compiling of works of exegesis of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* has become a major academic industry, especially in the United States.... The action of *Ulysses* covers one specific day—rather less than the whole twenty-four hours—in Dublin in 1904. The Ulysses of the title is the Jewish advertisement space salesman Leopold Bloom; the Telemachus is Stephen Dedalus, a young poet whom we may take as Joyce himself as a young man—he has already appeared as the central character of Joyce’s autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916); Penelope is Bloom’s wife, Marion.

Nothing extraordinary happens. Bloom and Dedalus wander about the city, their paths cross, towards the end of the novel they come together in a brothel, and Bloom takes Dedalus home with him. During the course of the day Bloom goes to the butcher’s to buy a kidney for breakfast, visits a newspaper office, calls in at the National Library, attends a funeral, has an erotic daydream about a young girl, drops in at the students’ common room of a maternity hospital. During the day, too, his wife is unfaithful to him. Dedalus quarrels with the young men he lives with, teaches in a school, propounds his theory of *Hamlet* at the National Library, goes to the brothel, and is rescued by Bloom.

Each episode in the novel is made to correspond with an episode in the *Odyssey*, and one can see the virtue of this for Joyce, however strained the parallels may sometimes appear. The separate episodes in Homer’s story were, so to speak, the coordinates by which Joyce could plot his own vision of life during one Dublin day. Incidentally, he produced a parody of Homer which could also be taken as a criticism of twentieth-century life, a representation of what the heroic shrinks to in an age of [triviality]. But by basing his story in Homer, Joyce does something more than that. He expresses the universal in the particular; Bloom, Dedalus, and Marion Bloom become modern versions of archetypal figures, and we are to feel the presence of the archetypes behind them.... Dedalus, having spurned his mother and renounced his father, is in search of a father figure, a spiritual father. Bloom, whose only son has died in infancy, is looking for a son; and in a shadowy way Dedalus and Bloom find what they want in each other....

That at least is the theory. Whether it works I am not sure. *Ulysses* does not seem to me to throw any light on Homer's epic, and I doubt if, apart from the matter of structure, the *Odyssey* notably illuminates Joyce's novel.... But all this merely touches the fringe of *Ulysses*. What Joyce is out to show is nothing less than all life, all history, contained in a single day in Dublin in 1904."

Walter Allen
The English Novel
(Dutton 1954) 424-26

"*Ulysses* is the story of a day in Dublin, from early in the morning of June 16, 1904, until about 2:30 the following morning. Originally planned as a short story for inclusion in *Dubliners*, it grew on Joyce's hands to become a 767-page modern 'epic.' The actual events of the story are simple enough: Stephen Dedalus (the artist of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) has returned to Dublin from his studies in Paris, to be at the deathbed of his mother. He is haunted by a sense of guilt; his revolt against Catholicism has been so strong that he refused to kneel down and grant his mother's dying wish that he pray for her.

The first three episodes show Stephen having breakfast in the Martello tower where he lives, giving a history lesson at Mr. Deasy's school, and walking along the beach at Sandymount. The next twelve episodes relate the day of Leopold Bloom, the 'Ulysses' of the book, his breakfast in his Eccles Street home, the funeral at Glasnevin cemetery, the newspaper office, Davy Byrne's pub, the library, the streets of the city and the viceregal cavalcade, the music at Ormond Hotel, the clash with the citizen at Barney Kiernan's, the flirtation with Gerty MacDowell on the beach, the maternity hospital where Bloom finally meets Dedalus (who is the 'Telemachus' of the book), and finally their adventures at Bella Cohen's brothel.

The third section has three parts to balance the first three—Bloom and Dedalus at the cabman's shelter, the return to Eccles Street, and finally the bedroom and Molly Bloom's erotic reveries. In the first section we are largely in the mind of Stephen. In the middle section we move in and out of the stream of consciousness of Leopold Bloom, who is preoccupied with his wife's infidelities, and in the very last chapter we are wholly in the mind of Mrs. Bloom.

The chapters parallel the *Odyssey*. Thus Bloom, who is an advertising solicitor, visiting the newspaper, is acting out a parallel to the Aeolus episode, that of the Palace of the Winds. Past and present thus merge. Stephen, as Telemachus, searches for his wandering father. His meeting with Bloom symbolizes the reunion of father and son. Mrs. Bloom is an unfaithful Penelope. Stuart Gilbert, in his *James Joyce's 'Ulysses'* (1930), outlined in detail the manner in which the novelist placed his modern epic on the frame of the ancient work.

The difficulties of *Ulysses* reside not so much in the book's structure as in its style. To create his Homeric picture of Dublin Joyce indulged in constant and sometimes seemingly arbitrary displays of technique, and once these are grasped much of the book's narrative becomes clear. Some of the virtuoso displays are designed the better to render the minds of the characters. Others are simply the exercises of the greatest literary craftsman of our time. In the hospital scene, Joyce parodies the great writers in English literature. He uses a cinematic technique to give the reader a panoramic sense of Dublin, writing a series of short scenes as if his pen were a roving camera in the Irish capital. He writes an entire chapter as if it were a catechism, parodies sentimental novels in the Gerty MacDowell episode, and uses both dramatic and cinematic effects to render the drunken night-town scene at Bella Cohen's.

In the entire book Joyce seems to be saying that life and time are continuous and the heroic wanderings of Ulysses in Homeric times are re-enacted in the unheroic wanderings of men upon the face of the earth in our times, that life is made up of recurring cycles, that birth, life and death are surrounded by legends that grow out of the life-and-death process, past and present as well as future, and that these cycles occur in the vastness of eternity."

The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Literature
ed. Lillian Herlands Hornstein
(Dryden/New American Library/Mentor 1956) 463-65

“Well, the writer, actually, that’s an obligation that he assumes with his vocation, that he’s going to write it in a way that people can understand it. He doesn’t have to write it in the way that every idiot can understand it—every imbecile in the third grade can understand it, but he’s got to use a language which is accepted and in which the words have specific meanings that everybody agrees on. I think that *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses* were justified, but then it’s hard to say on what terms they were justified. That was a case of a genius who was electrocuted by the divine fire.”

William Faulkner
Faulkner in the University:
Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-58
eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner
(Random House/Vintage 1965) 52-53

“Through the polymathic richness of allusion—the ‘enigmas and puzzles that...will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant’—we gaze into a strange simplicity... Vladimir Nabokov, once volunteering on television to list in order the ‘greatest masterpieces of twentieth-century prose,’ placed Andrei Bely’s novel *Petersburg* third, behind Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’...”

John Updike
Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism
(Random House/Vintage 1984) 138, 497

Michael Hollister (2014)