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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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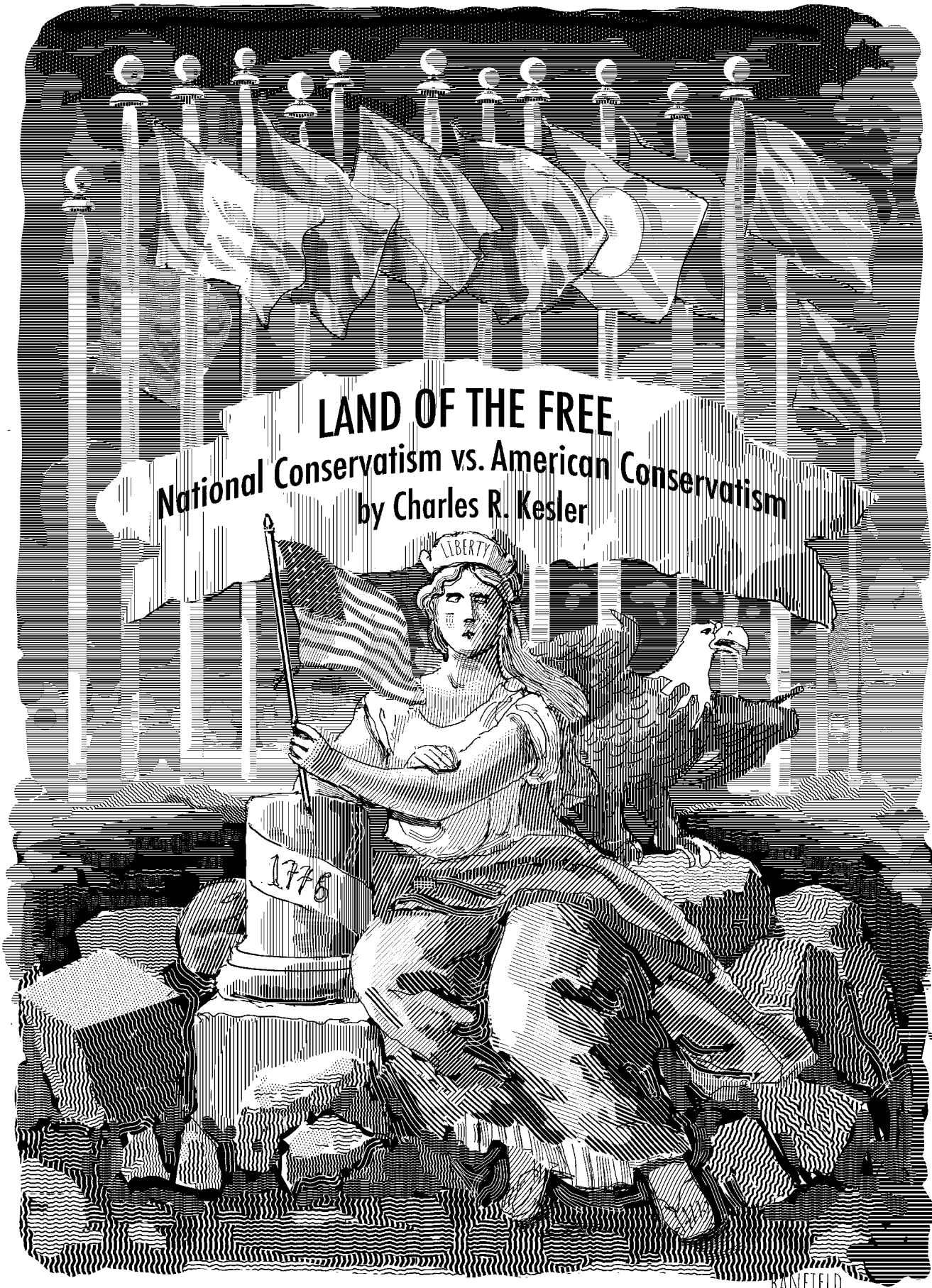
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# JAMES JOYCE AND THE MODERNIST AMBITION

Pprrpffrrppffff.



CELEBRATED NOVELISTS, LIKE OLYMPIC athletes or Hollywood starlets, come and go. The lauded artists of a past generation are old hat to succeeding ones, who cannot begin to understand what all the fuss was about. This kind of deflation has befallen many of the great modernist writers who were supposed in their day to represent the absolute cutting edge of literary excellence. Once-trendy masterpieces by erstwhile *causes célèbres* like Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett have been downgraded to museum pieces or passing footnotes. But there is one modernist whose cachet has not ebbed, at least so far—and he has been around a long time. Well into the first century A.J. (After Joyce), the standard bearer of modernism at its most difficult and demanding continues to fly his flag high. How has he managed to endure where others have fallen by the wayside in droves? Does he deserve the continued adulation? Is he as great as they say he is? And who, by the way, are *they*?

James Joyce (1882–1941) was the most protean of modern literary geniuses, a quick-change artist who assumed and discarded voices, styles, and genres at will. He began his literary career with *Chamber Music* (1907), a collection of love poems as conventionally exquisite as they are consummately vaporous. Next he produced *Dubliners* (1914), a collection of short stories rather in the Chekhovian mode, drawn from his experience growing up in Ireland. Their deadeye mordancy outraged the citizens of his hometown, which he

had fled with the woman he loved at the first chance he got. In 1916 he turned his hand to autobiographical fiction and produced *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a *Bildungsroman* second only to Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* as a depiction of a writer's intellectual and spiritual formation. Joyce then tried writing for the stage, under the influence of his theatrical and ethical hero Henrik Ibsen. The result was *Exiles* (1918), an ingenious and kinky portrait of two married couples testing the limits of love and freedom.

Then at last he arrived: for seven years during and after the First World War, Joyce labored over *Ulysses* (1922), a novel like no other that would soon be widely regarded as the supreme literary work of the 20th century. Some would say he reached the limit of his craft with this magnum opus and then overshoot it by several miles: 17 years after *Ulysses* came *Finnegans Wake* (1939), perhaps the most deliberately obscure book ever written. It has flummoxed most every ordinary reader who has opened it and sent a select tribe of scholars into a fugue state of perpetual interpretive delirium.

The degree of difficulty, for both reader and writer, increased exponentially over the course of Joyce's career. As the end approached, Joyce declared that he was able to do anything he wanted with language. He intended the stylistic audacity of *Ulysses* to render all previous English literature obsolete. This was followed by an attempt in *Finnegans Wake* to transfer onto the page the unique patois of the dream

world with its ceaseless flow of multilingual puns and uncanny symbols. All this did elevate Joyce in the esteem of the cognoscenti, landing him right next to Pablo Picasso as the great modernist innovator of his field. His mature novels have kept scholars so busy that one can't help thinking Joyce wrote specifically for them. The year 2022 marked the centenary of *Ulysses*, and the occasion brought forth an abundance of professorial offerings, most of them aimed at the captive audience of college students with the intention of helping them make some sense of their daunting schoolwork. Academic productions such as these can be surprisingly useful to the general reader as well—assuming that such a creature is still at large and willing to approach Joyce of his own free will.

## The Great Escape

IN A VALUABLE LITTLE BOOK TITLED *James Joyce: A Very Short Introduction*, University of Pittsburgh English professor Colin MacCabe points out that “[i]t is paradoxically true that *Ulysses* can only be reread.” An untutored first reading is certain to be frustrating—likely so much so that you will want to dropkick the damn thing across the room. The sacred text begins to disclose its secrets only after serious interrogation, and initiation into the mysteries by an expert can surely help. Of course there is something repellent about needing a stack of handbooks at your side in order to make your way intel-



ligibly through a novel. Yet if you want a way in, attending to the scholars is the price of admission. The current cultural guardians who have appointed themselves to perform this service must be commended for having largely avoided the usual jargon and the microscopic preoccupations that we have come to expect of the professoriate.

That does not mean the standard-issue political monkeyshines are altogether absent. The crew of contributors to the enormous and impressive *Cambridge Centenary Ulysses* (with its copiously footnoted text and detailed prefaces to each of the novel's 18 episodes) includes several who resort to the ultra-fashionable anti-European invective of post-colonial studies. And yet even cant like this has its redeeming angles—for Joyce himself, though a besotted lover of the English language, understood the damage done to Ireland in body and soul by English rule (or misrule). He might in fact have cosigned some of the scholars' boilerplate animadversions, though he expressed them far more artfully than they do, as some creditably admit.

British imperialism, however, was not Ireland's biggest problem in Joyce's eyes: he found the deadening hand of the Vatican even more sinister than the oppressions meted out from Windsor Castle. Modern artists, wherever they come from, characteristically long to burst the bonds of bourgeois piety. "Anywhere Out of This World," rang Charles Baudelaire's desperate cry in his famous prose poem with that English title in the original. Joyce, for his part, was pleased to be anywhere *in* this world as long as it was out of pestiferous, priest-ridden Ireland. For him, the home truths that sustain normal, patriotic, God-fearing, middle-class people were objects of scorn. He was a hard case: as his mother lay dying of cancer at 44, he defied his uncle's command to kneel and pray. (In *Ulysses*, Joyce's alter ego Stephen Dedalus faces the same dying plea from his mother herself, and suffers terrible guilt for his cold refusal.)

When the time came to make his break, Joyce lit out and did not look back. At 22, having just completed a brilliant student career at University College Dublin, he met the woman he would spend the rest of his life with. Nora Barnacle, a hotel maid from the slums of Galway, miles beneath Joyce socially and intellectually, won him over with her brash candor. She was a world apart from the respectable colleens he was familiar with. As he went walking with Nora on their first date, she reached her hand into his pants and brought him off with expert vigor. He was smitten. The two of them took off for the continent in short order; Joyce kept her companionship secret

from his family. His father, a wastrel of many unused talents and an everlasting thirst who nonetheless prided himself on his aristocratic

like that of his parents, fearful of squelching Nora's native ardor, Joyce pointedly refused to marry her until many years later, when he did so to secure her rightful claim to his estate.

They made for Hapsburg cities on or near the Adriatic, from Pola in Croatia down to Trieste on the Italian coast, where Joyce gave English lessons for the Berlitz Corporation and began to write seriously. During a brief interlude in 1906 he worked in a bank in Rome, hoping against hope to attain the solvency that language teaching did not provide. This made him notably unhappy. "Rome reminds me of a man who lives by exhibiting to travelers his grandmother's corpse," he wrote to his brother. Of course the inescapable papal presence, too much alive for his taste, redoubled his hatred for the Eternal City. Joyce and Nora headed back to hospitable Trieste, where they continued to struggle. They remained there until the outbreak of war compelled them to seek the sanctuary of Zürich in neutral Switzerland. With the war over, Paris beckoned, and they lived there until 1939, when once again Zürich became the wiser alternative. Joyce died there of a perforated duodenal ulcer in 1941.

#### Youthful Ardor

**D**ESPITE THE FINANCIAL AND PHYSICAL hardships—he suffered from awful eye diseases—or maybe thanks in part to the motivation penury provided, Joyce worked indefatigably. His love for Nora charged his poems with whatever emotional voltage they had, but they rarely seemed adequate to his feelings for her. Not that she cared in the least for anything he wrote; she really couldn't understand why one piece of writing was considered better than another.

His contempt for the country he had abandoned breathed more vivid life into *Dubliners*, which he advertised to a prospective English publisher as being instinct with "scrupulous meanness" and "the special odour of corruption which, I hope, floats over my stories." Here Joyce first debuted his celebrated "epiphanies," episodes in which a life's latent significance is suddenly revealed, usually in its fecklessness and sorrow. Devout church ladies lament their parish priest's paralysis and death, maybe from syphilitic paresis—though they would never dare mention such moral horror. An office drudge resents his pinched existence; his fantasy of releasing his latent poetic genius is dashed by his crying child and his angry wife. A self-styled gallant beguiles a servant girl in order to squeeze a handsome gift out of her, which perhaps she has stolen from her employer. Loutishness, buffoonery,

#### Books by James Joyce discussed in this essay:

*Poems*. Penguin Classics,  
192 pages, \$12.70

*Dubliners: A Norton Critical Edition*,  
edited by Margot Norris.  
W.W. Norton & Company,  
412 pages, \$18.50

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Norton Critical Edition*, edited by John Paul Riquelme. W.W. Norton & Company, 560 pages, \$17.50

*Exiles*. Penguin Classics,  
160 pages, \$12.70

*The Cambridge Centenary Ulysses*,  
edited by Catherine Flynn.  
Cambridge University Press,  
988 pages, \$59.95

*Finnegans Wake*, with a critical  
introduction by Sam Slote.  
Alma Classics, 672 pages, \$11.43

#### Also discussed in this essay:

*James Joyce: A Very Short Introduction*,  
by Colin MacCabe.  
Oxford University Press,  
152 pages, \$12.99

*The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses*,  
by Kevin Birmingham.  
Penguin Books, 448 pages, \$19

*The Guide to James Joyce's Ulysses*,  
by Patrick Hastings.  
Johns Hopkins University Press,  
328 pages, \$21.95

*James Joyce*, by Richard Ellman.  
Oxford University Press,  
960 pages, \$37.99

*Ulysses: A Reader's Odyssey*,  
by Daniel Mulhall.  
New Island Books, 324 pages, \$17.38

bearing, was appalled when he finally learned that his son was living in sin, and with whom. Made wary by loveless, long-suffering unions



## Close to the Sun

pretension, rampant mediocrity, and outright incapacity abound in every part of town, while the rest of the world teems with thrilling splendor never to be found in Dublin.

One story stands out for its beauty and force: “The Dead,” the last and by far the longest in the book, set at an annual Christmas-season party for a music-loving group of friends. Gabriel Conroy, a middle-aged literary journalist and something of a touchy, self-regarding gent, notes the dreamy expression on his wife’s face as a local tenor sings “The Lass of Aughrim.” Later in their hotel room, when Gabriel presses Gretta to explain her rapture, she tells him about a boy of 17 back in Galway who used to sing that song. He loved her so fiercely that he died for her, catching his death by standing in despair outside her window in a cold rain on the eve of her departure for the convent school in Dublin. As she chokes with sobs, Gabriel feels himself an intruder upon her most private grief. Though he tastes the bitterness of his own mediocrity in comparison with Gretta’s lost love, he is not downcast for long. Instead, he finds himself unexpectedly elevated as he draws near a spiritual province the living rarely visit: “He imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead.”

That is the story’s penultimate paragraph; the final one, in which Gabriel imagines the snow falling at that moment all over Ireland, is perfect in its gorgeous music. The plaintive conclusion is delivered *sotto voce* yet with penetrating clarity:

It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

This luscious prose, with its peerless dying fall, represents Joyce’s writing at its pinnacle of classical elegance; he wrote it when he was 25. Not only would he never surpass this story in loveliness: he would positively disown the kind of heartfelt sentiment it displays. After many innovations and changes of style, Joyce outright spurned this kind of unabashed beauty as at best archaic and at worst defunct. His prickly genius would make the more earnest passages in his earlier work look like mere juvenilia.

**Y**ET BEFORE HE COULD PERFORM HIS MOST ambitious acts of demolition, he had to reckon with his own coming of age. A *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* shows Joyce becoming Joyce. He is concealed in plain sight behind the persona of Stephen Dedalus, whom we watch proceed from pint-sized bedwetter to bullied schoolboy to sexual reprobate, prospective Jesuit, pontificating aesthete, and fledgling author. Like Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, Stendhal’s Julien Sorel, Balzac’s Lucien Chardon, Flaubert’s Frédéric Moreau, and Tolstoy’s Pierre Bezukhov, Stephen Dedalus believes himself a finished product every time he reinvents himself, when in reality he is just getting underway. Luckily for him, all the wrong turnings point him eventually—inevitably—to his anointed end, as the writer who “shall forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race.”

The adolescent Stephen has a yen for wickedness. The serpentine member of the male body wants what it wants and will not be denied. “Who made it to be like that, a bestial part of the body able to understand bestially and desire bestially?” For a time he is a confirmed mortal sinner, perversely proud of his damnable condition. Then the preacher at a school retreat strikes terror into his blackened soul with an eternal horror show straight out of Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola’s playbook. This masterly evocation of the stench, clamor, and blast furnace fires in Pandemonium scares the devil out of Stephen. “His brain was simmering and bubbling within the cracking tenement of the skull. Flames burst forth from his skull like a corolla, shrieking like voices:—Hell! Hell! Hell! Hell! Hell!” Stephen casts himself upon the rock of chastity, becoming so unimpeachably holy that the Jesuits’ director recruits him for the priesthood. The thought of priestly power tickles his pride, and he is tempted for a while, but in the end he recoils with instinctive and visceral revulsion from a life of unrelenting enforced piety.

His nature is every inch an artist’s and an intellectual’s—a born writer’s. Like Joyce himself, Stephen is a devotee of emancipatory liberalism. He subscribes to the gospel according to Ibsen, rejecting all institutional claims on his soul and determined to chart his own course through life. Whatever may ensue in this world or the next, he will always remain his own man. Such steadfastness can be proof of one’s authenticity, which is of course a much-esteemed modern value. However, it can also be a program for headlong folly, unchecked by the safeguards of sanity that tradi-

tion and group solidarity afford. The ground is littered with the remains of authentic and emancipated would-be heroes who crashed and burned—or like Icarus, the original son of Daedalus, burned and crashed.

Joyce did indeed pay the price for writing in blatant scorn of bourgeois decorum. In his terrific cultural history, *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce’s Ulysses* (2014), the critic Kevin Birmingham observes that with *Dubliners* Joyce had “his first lesson in the way governments controlled words.” They did so more often through the “coercion and intimidation” of publishers, printers, and booksellers (all subject to lawsuits and criminal charges) than by bonfires of persecuted books. For nine years Joyce tried to find a publisher for his collection of stories, through a slew of outright rejections and some tentative acceptances that were killed off by management’s misgivings about offensive details (most of these seem laughably unobjectionable now). Joyce held steady in his indifference to repressive mores: “I have very little intention of prostituting whatever talent I may have to the public,” he told his beleaguered editor, Grant Richards.

These trials prepared Joyce for the struggle to see *Ulysses* into print, and into readers’ hands. The American expatriate bookseller Sylvia Beach published the novel in Paris in 1922, but it was banned in the United Kingdom and the United States almost straightaway. The whole project was shocking by its very nature. Leopold Bloom, Joyce’s protagonist, shuffles through the mundanities and profanities of an ordinary day, while his grubby thoughts are expounded in the kind of elaborate detail befitting the Homeric hero to whom the title refers. Joyce brings epic down to the level of the outhouse, which ranked as a master stroke for modernists and a stumbling block for those conventional moralists whom the book was designed to offend. As Birmingham writes, “For modernist writers, literature was a battle against an obsolete civilization, and nothing illustrated the stakes of modernism’s battle more clearly than the fact that its masterpiece was being burned.” Only with a celebrated court decision in 1933 did *Ulysses* become legal in America.

## The Body Keeps the Score

**D**ISTINGUISHED COLLEAGUES TRUMPeted Joyce’s genius: T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, Samuel Beckett, and F. Scott Fitzgerald all provided adulation and moral or material support throughout the battle over *Ulysses*. Harsh aspersions from other eminent contemporaries were perhaps





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the hardest blows to take—though most of these attackers represented a rear guard threatened by Joyce’s temerity. Edith Wharton decried “a turgid welter of pornography”; the French Catholic poet Paul Claudel reviled Joyce’s “filthiest blasphemies”; D.H. Lawrence, whose own 1928 novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was forbidden in the United Kingdom until 1960, blasted Molly Bloom’s bravura soliloquy in the final chapter as “the dirtiest, most indecent, obscene thing ever written.” And E.M. Forster worked himself up into an uncharacteristic conniption that epitomized the detractors’ reaction: “It is a dogged attempt to cover the universe with mud, it is an inverted Victorianism, an attempt to make crassness and dirt succeed where sweetness and light failed, a simplification of the human character in the interests of Hell.”

Writing in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), Forster was evidently distressed that Joyce’s hero, Leopold Bloom, “tries to explore life through the body,” thus leaving the soul unconscionably out of the picture. Joyce’s novel has been called an epic of the body, each chapter evoking or representing a particular organ or tissue, as Joyce himself detailed in a schema he sent to friends. This blueprint also laid out each chapter’s Homeric antecedent, distinctive color, literary technique, science or art, meaning, and symbols, just in case an inattentive reader might have missed something. (English Professor Patrick Hastings, in his handy *Guide to James Joyce’s Ulysses*, usefully reproduces Joyce’s schema.)

While Joyce was composing his novel in peaceable Zürich, young men were being slaughtered like cattle on the battlefields of the Great War. The soldiers’ frightful memoirs, novels, and poems are rich in descriptions of the ways that bodies can be pierced, choked, broken, crushed, or disintegrated by modern weaponry. Henri Barbusse presents a skull with its crown removed like a soft-boiled egg; Wilfred Owen describes gas-ravaged lungs liquefying to a corrupt froth; Siegfried Sassoon depicts a dying man flapping along the ground like a beached fish. With his own hyper-sensitive instrument, Joyce registers the ghostly presence of these sacrificial victims. As the schoolteacher Stephen Dedalus observes his young students at sport, terrible images of men at more gruesome pursuits steal into his mind. “Again: a goal. I am among them, among their battling bodies in a medley, the joust of life.... Jousts, slush and uproar of battles, the frozen deathspew of the slain, a shout of spearspikes baited with men’s bloodied guts.” From the playing fields of Mr. Deasy’s prep school to the hecatombs of Ypres, the Somme, and Passchendaele, Joyce maps

the grim trajectory of a generation’s fate. The boys playing soccer in 1904 will be just the right age for butchering in 1914-18.

Whether in slaughter or in sport, the body is what all men can agree they have in common—and *Ulysses* is the supreme novel of the common life. According to biographer Richard Ellmann, whose *James Joyce* (1959) remains the definitive treatment of Joyce’s life, “The initial and determining act of judgment in his work is the justification of the commonplace. Other writers had labored tediously to portray it, but no one knew what the commonplace really was until Joyce had written.” The narrative follows the ordinary activities of a day in Bloom’s life on what has come to be known as “Bloomsday”: June 16, 1904, the day Joyce and Nora first went out walking.

Joyce’s hero appears as the somewhat better-than-average sensual man, with more than the usual gusto for the treats he likes to fill his belly with. “Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and

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fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liverslices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencods’ roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to the palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.” Food has its distinctive satisfactions for Bloom both on its way in and on its way out. He enjoys a look at the newspaper as he squats at stool and delivers a nice smooth defecation: “He allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone. Hope it’s not too big bring on piles again. No, just right.” The reader is granted a more intimate vantage on the hero’s comings and goings than any previous novel had ever afforded.

Bloom thinks of himself as a Jew, and everyone else in Catholic Dublin thinks of him as one, which is to say he is a suspect outsider. But, to borrow the actor Jonathan Miller’s line, he’s not really a Jew—just Jew-ish. His father was a Jew but his mother was not; he is uncircumcised; he freely indulges his fondness for

pork kidneys; he was baptized first as a Protestant, like his mother, then as a Catholic, so that he could marry Marion “Molly” Tweedy. He is no regular churchgoer, any more than he is a frequenter of the synagogue. Indeed, Bloom is pretty much a paragon of secular normalcy, at a time and place when that was still not quite normal—though Joyce was determined to change that.

Bathing offers Bloom a feast for the senses, and Joyce subtly introduces the credo of the new secular order he champions. Bloom echoes the liturgical solemnity of Catholic communion, the ritual remembrance of Christ’s prayer at the Last Supper, with its promise that all men might have eternal life. The unsolemn Bloom, however, is aware of his own body purely and deliciously in the here and now:

Enjoy a bath now: clean trough of water, cool enamel, the gentle tepid stream. This is my body.

He foresaw his pale body reclined in it at full, naked, in a womb of warmth, oiled by scented melting soap, softly laved. He saw his trunk and limbs riprippled over and sustained, buoyed lightly upward, lemonyellow: his navel, bud of flesh: and saw the dark tangled curls of his bush floating, floating hair of the stream around the limp father of thousands, a languid floating flower.

No grisly sacrifice on a god’s part is required for men to possess in full the blessings of their birthright. Life might not be eternal but it can be wonderfully agreeable as long as it lasts. Untroubled by divine commands and prohibitions, the lucky denizens of the 20th-century world are free to enjoy an innocence that has been denied mankind since the Biblical Fall.

#### Demons in My View

IN HIS OWN GENTLE, UNASSUMING WAY, Leopold Bloom takes full advantage of modernity’s liberating godlessness. On the beach at twilight, as Roman candles explode overhead, Bloom even masturbates while eyeing the drawers worn by a fetching young woman, who appears to be displaying them for his delectation. A moment’s remorse seizes him, quickly erased by the confidence that his lovely seductress will forgive him and keep his secret: “an infinite store of mercy in those eyes....” The daylight world holds no terrors for Bloom.

The dead of night, however, is a different story. A hellish phantasmagoria engulfs him



as he ventures into Nighttown, Dublin's red light district, where all the brutish specters of the unconscious reside. Bloom is not drunk or drugged or insane; reality just suddenly turns topsy-turvy as Joyce looses the mind's devils, customarily kept at bay by weekday distractions. He rubs Bloom's nose and ours in viciousness and filth, as befits the chapter that evokes Homer's Circe—the sorceress who turns men into swine.

This whole raunchy episode, which is presented as a play and takes up almost a quarter of the 650-page book, lays bare the vestigial and perhaps ineradicable darkness in the heart of even the most apparently commonsensical and emancipated modern man. Clearly Joyce relishes the absurdity of his creature. Perhaps the more-than-ribald humor of these scenes is Joyce's revenge on his favorite character, who seems comfortably at home in the new world as the author himself was not. For that new world was as yet unfinished, so that men felt residual guilt and shame for acting on desires, or even simply for having desires, that most every right-thinking person would see in due time as mere trifles. And these demons of remorse emerged in the night world. Joyce had to acknowledge their baneful presence, but he was determined to exorcise them once and for all, or die trying.

The formal innovations of the Circe chapter—the dramatic framework and the surreal antics—are striking in their novelty. The previous chapter, "Oxen of the Sun," is a showpiece of virtuosity whose purpose is to enthrone its author as the undisputed nonpareil of English literature. Joyce spent a thousand hours writing this chapter, and he contrived a series of 32 parodies of literary style down the ages, from Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry to Arthurian legend and on through the prose of John Milton, Edmund Burke,

Edward Gibbon, Charles Dickens, Cardinal Newman, and semi-literate American slang. The chapter is set at a lying-in hospital, where Bloom is cheering on a friend's delivery, and the development of literature, capped off by the appearance of James Joyce on the scene, recapitulates the development of the fetus in the womb. T.S. Eliot discerned here "the futility of all the [earlier] English styles," which have been superseded forever by Joyce's stratospheric traversal, consumption, and transcendence of every last one.

Eliot's is a more than generous reckoning of Joyce's achievement. One might more justly say of this tour de force, as Samuel Johnson said of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that no one ever wished it longer. And one might say of other virtuoso displays, calculated as they are to bedazzle, that one would wish them a darn sight shorter. The "Sirens" chapter, which took Joyce another five months to write, features a pair of barmaids as the Homeric musical seductresses, opens with an unintelligible jumble of spoken fragments that seems to evoke an orchestra warming up, is said to be composed as a fugue, and culminates in Bloom's exuberant fart, "Pprrpffrrppffff," which says exactly what needs saying, if not exactly as Joyce intended. The "Ithaca" chapter, a demonstratively bloodless scientific catechism presented in question-and-answer format, makes a purposefully ludicrous attempt to render thoughts and feelings about the gravest human matters in the same arid fashion used to describe household appliances. Joyce sets down amazing observations and calculations of astronomical marvels in a technical jargon utterly devoid of wonder. The closing "Penelope" chapter rises at last to Molly Bloom's emphatic and life-affirming "yes I said yes I will Yes," the ecstatic acceptance of absolutely everything—including the husband she had

cuckolded only that afternoon. But the reader has to fight his way to that resounding proclamation through 20,000 unpunctuated words of rambling prelude.

You may agree with Joyce that in fact he could do anything he wanted with language, and yet you may wish he had chosen to do somewhat less with it. The craving to astound with his blazing gift ran away with him. In *Ulysses: A Reader's Odyssey* (2022), Daniel Mulhall—who is not a professional scholar but a career diplomat and most recently the Irish ambassador to the United States—explains Joyce's creative fever better than the pros do. Joyce could have continued in the same vein as *A Portrait of the Artist* "and been a successful, avant-garde novelist, but he wanted to be a true groundbreaker, and so he wrote *Ulysses*." Joyce felt the compulsion not only to "make it new," as his confidant Ezra Pound insisted modernist art must do, but to venture into the utterly unforeseen and absolutely inimitable.

This obsession with unprecedented technical élan and with killing off the competition both dominates and diminishes *Ulysses*, which shows Joyce both at his most impressive and at his most outlandish. By the time he produced *Finnegans Wake*, he had careened so far off the beaten path as to become willfully incomprehensible, which may yet prove to be the final retrospective verdict on his whole career. Literary forms and moral conventions can always stand to be challenged and complicated; Joyce was not the first artist to chafe against them. But he was the first to erase them altogether, revealing in the process why they were there in the first place: without them, nothing makes sense.

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