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Scholars Off the Page

1. Declan Kiberd reads from

Ulysses and Us:
The Art of Everyday Living
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Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living

Declan Kiberd

CONCLUSION: THE LONG DAY FADES

Joyce was upset to hear that his favourite aunt, Josephine Murray, who had helped him in so many ways in his life and in his art, disapproved of *Ulysses*. She put it away in a press and, later, had it removed from her house. "If *Ulysses* isn't fit to read", its author responded, "life isn't fit to live". In saying as much, he was thinking of it not just as an honest imitation of life but as a celebration of the minutiae of any given day. Yet by offering different schemas to men like Carlo Linati and Stuart Gilbert, he may unwittingly have impoverished future interpretations of his book. It became "a text to be deciphered, not read". Henceforth, scholars would work, scoffed Leo Bersani, with "a kind of affectless busyness" within those rigid grids which the author had laid down. They would elucidate textual references rather than face the more challenging question of what Joyce was actually saying. But the very works with which Joyce asked for his to be compared all dealt with the same question: How to live? He knew that, in order to be original in his answers, he would have to go right back to the origins of world culture.

In *The Odyssey* Homer presented the hero's voyage as the journey of a soul in the process of discovering itself. In the New Testament Jesus said that such a person-in-formation would have to leave father, mother, and family in the act of individuation, knowing the sadness of exile before the joy of a renewed community. In *The Divine Comedy* Dante demonstrated the path back from depression to serenity. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare showed how a special providence shaped human ends, despite the accidents which frustrate us. These are all works of wisdom literature and Joyce placed his own work in this series of texts which taught people how to live. In Elizabethan times, joked Stephen, Shakespeares were as common as Murphies. It is the ordinariness of life, the everyday quality of its lived wisdom, which attracted Joyce to such classic works and made him want to add one of his own. Some previous writers like Dickens had escaped the ordinary by resorting to melodrama. Others like Flaubert had heaped scorn on the dullness of everyday life, treated ordinary people as similar to the buffoons of old-fashioned comedy. Joyce, on the contrary, wished only to capture the poetry of everyday life.

He was also aware that the ancient classics contained much of the old-world lore now lost to most modern people, but which he hoped to restore. That lore was buried in the human psyche, as fragments of those thoughts which had been rejected in the dogmatic forms taken by most religions, but it could still be reactivated as wisdom. At their first meeting, Joyce said to Yeats that he "owed nothing to anything but his own

mind which was much nearer to God than folklore". That over-stated his independence of Gaelic lore and of the classics just mentioned, but it was not wholly wrong.

At the start of *Ulysses*, Stephen suffers from a self-inflicted wound. He is lonely, depressed, and melancholy, mainly because, like so many intellectuals formed in the 1890s, he has chosen art over life. He has done this in the conviction that in an industrial mass-society, what 'life' there is survives only in the most elite types of art. His inwardness is brave, even audacious, but it leaves him disconnected from the everyday. Over-developed in intellect, he is under-developed in the life of the emotions. His learning. which has intimidated too many readers of *Ulysses*, is probably his greatest liability, for it constantly comes between him and the life he might live. At various moments of the day, but especially in 'Circe', he will have to confront many unclaimed experiences and unlived truths, which he has repressed for far too long. He must grasp life through the flow of actual experience rather than through academic concepts. It is not the reader of *Ulysses* who needs to be more educated to understand all of Stephen's references, but Stephen who needs to be *less* learned. Culture sometimes consists not in acquiring opinions but in getting rid of them.

The way out of Hell, as Dante observed, lies at its dead centre. Stephen wishes to escape his pain, as any sensible person would, but first he must fully live through his own desolation in all its raw immediacy. He gets drunk in search of an elation which might allow him to forget, if not escape, his depression. But he needs to go right through the depressed state, if he is to remove all its poisons. Only when he sees that his problems are linked to those of all humanity will his pain begin to lose some of its sting. The dreams and nightmares which trouble his unquiet sleep are those repressed parts of himself, especially his relationship with his mother. They erupt again in the night world of 'Circe', asking to be lived out and redeemed. Like Joyce, Stephen is intrepid and brave enough to dive down into the hell of his Unconscious, to bring into awareness all that has been lost or denied. Genius, as Yeats said, is a crisis which joins our buried self to our everyday mind. That is why Stephen is so obsessed with the Catholic ritual of Holy Saturday: the Paschal Candle lit in the darkened church is an image of lost consciousness finally coming back into everyday recognition. The resurrection of Jesus form the tomb on Easter Sunday is scarcely more miraculous than the fact that every morning the sleeper who has abandoned himself to darkness awakens to a new world.

Stephen's interest in the early fathers of the Christian church and in the occult lore of Neo-Platonic tradition resonates with his sense that a new self can be born for him, if he has the courage to accept psychic change. Much will be left behind, so that that new person can be born. The need is not to fixate on either the unhappy past or uncertain future, but simply to let things happen. His problems are, nonetheless, acute: life has been reduced to a sense of *nacheinander*, one thing after another, without order or design. Meaningful experience has been displaced by random sensation. The interior monologue is the perfect medium for registering this impasse, for it is really a study of the passive nervous system, the sensitive soul in pain registering constant shocks. Its focus is even more on personal response than on the actions and events which are responded to.

Joyce shows Stephen's 'overload' in the third episode, before proceeding to depict in Bloom an older man who copes rather better with the problem of an unhappy consciousness. But even Bloom feels besieged, and so *Ulysses*, in due course, moves from a study of the frustrations of Stephen and Bloom to a consideration of those social forces which block their full self-expression. That will also involve probing the languages of professional discourse, the subconscious, and the information overloads of modern life.

Joyce's project was indeed to rejoin the sacred to the everyday. Whenever he heard intellectuals using pretentious phrases, he said: "Don't you wish they'd talk about turnips?" The official churches had made the same terrible error as the writers of modern literature: they had removed their special activities from the practice of everyday life. Only mystics and Gnostics still believed in such a reconciliation at the level of religious practice. Along with the surrealists, Joyce was one of the few major figures committed to it in art. The wisdom at the origin of human culture in such figures as Homer, rather than fixating upon mankind, saw the person as part of the continuum of life, between gods and spirits on one side, and animals and plants on the other. Rejecting the idea of a text, the devotees of mystical knowledge preferred voices, which "encouraged subjects to see themselves outside their historical moment"—for instance, to make Odysseus walk again in contemporary Dublin' streets. They sought to fill the gaps in knowledge, left by the creedal dogmas of the major religious traditions.

In his abjection Stephen has to pass through a fallen world of sin and error. What Joyce found in the art and life of Oscar Wilde was the same truth recorded by William Blake: people are educated by their sins, and they must learn first how to go wrong in order later to go right. Only in that way could the actual everyday be reenchanted. The mistake made by the generation of 1914 was the same one made by the follower of fin-de-siècle art: their pursuit of extreme situations was too knowing. Not only did it devalue the middle range of experience, but it was too programmatic. Better to be overtaken by experience, to learn how to watch and to wait.

Stephen tries to live as if life itself could be a work of art, but Bloom offers a humbler sort of art that captures the wisdom of life. Stephen's over-intense programme leads to a terrified recoil from the body, so different from Bloom's acceptance of the flawed human form. Many readers recoiled similarly from the frankness of *Ulysses*, which Joyce jokingly linked to the Bible as two books which no proper Catholic could ever be allowed to read.

As Walter Benjamin noted, a conviction emerged after World War One that experience was no longer communicable in stories of good counsel. People now had mere sensations and as one vibration replaced another none was worked through to a conclusion. The art of High Modernism, with its search for extreme moments of joy or abasement, proved no more meaningful a resolution than the trench warfare of 1914-18. But *Ulysses* offered an answer by reconnecting elite art and everyday living. It arose from the pressure of felt experience. Modern living had been devalued by gloomy intellectuals who failed to appreciate just how intelligent, cheerful, and resourceful people were in their daily lives. Yet Bloom shows himself skilled in both the conceptual and the selling techniques of advertising, devising the logo of crossed keys, and outlining its underlying psychology. A practical stroller, he also illustrates

how people can use the city's newspapers, hoardings, and handbills as a way of negotiating the urban maze. The blend of theory and practice which he calls upon to instruct Stephen is based on a firm conviction that experience and intellect are not opposites; that everybody thinks about the meaning of what happens to them some of the time and that nobody can afford to think about it all of the time.

Bloom constantly compares life to a stream, a flow of things. That stream can never be fully grasped, just experienced, for to analyse it fully, it would be necessary first of all to stop the flow. Happiness can be felt but never really described, though it can sometimes be prolonged by a deferral of gratification. In sexual love, only the couple themselves—Odysseus and Penelope, Leopold and Molly—can *feel* such contentment, while the only paradise people can actually know in an analytic way is the one they have already lost. Nevertheless, Joyce insists that the life of the individual is far more important than major political events in the world. Even revolutions are generated by new thoughts dreamed up by peasants on some remote hillside. So also the radical new forms of art are created on the edge of things. It is the insights of marginal people that bring grace.

The sharing of a bad cup of coffee and a stale breadroll may be a real moment of blessedness. For Bloom, food is sacramental. Unlike other events, eating can be controlled without immodest strain. While the other Dubliners rush their meals, guzzle their meat, or talk with their mouths full, he takes care over every culinary detail. At his lunch, he cuts his cheese sandwich into slender strips, and he follows that action with a whole page of personal thoughts before eating it. *Ulysses* proceeds by the same almost tantric sense of delayed gratification.

The lost knowledge of the Gnostics was to be gleaned from those signatures of all things which Stephen wished to read on the landscape of Sandymount Strand. That knowledge which he rather portentously sought in rocks, sand and sea is discovered by Bloom t be secreted in objects—in waste, soap, paper, even piss or shit. Some of the magic of the ancient world expelled from the human mind can now be found in things. Life's meaning is in the flow of making such discoveries, and in the ability of persons to remember past lives, past flows, by connecting with a wisdom that was always buried deep in the self. Hence Joyce's use of Homer, the Bible, Dante and Shakespeare; but also Bloom's ideas on metempsychosis, by which people may remember past lives lived not just as a person but maybe as a bird or a tree.

Bloom exemplifies rather than teaches most of these ideas. He embodies far more than he explains. For all his literary pretensions, his written work is brief and dire. Like Stephen with his brilliant theory of Shakespeare, he cannot set his wisdom down in the constrained forms of writing. "Neither Christ no Socrates nor Buddha wrote a book", said Yeats, "for to do that is to exchange life for a logical process". The flow of life is captured in oral energies—old saws, proverbs, witty quotations—which stand in marked contrast to the rather stilted forms of the catechism. 'Ithaca' is Joyce's parody of a world in which storytelling has been replaced by information. Other episodes mock the ways in which abstract systems have too often become more real for modern people that the selves on which they are imposed.

Joyce shared the common fear that the pace of social change had become so fast that it left the generations no common ground on which to meet. Instead, horizontal

bonding within each generation was the new reality. As Scott Fitzgerald said, an artist writes for the youth of today, the critics of tomorrow, and the schoolmasters of ever afterward. "Who will attempt to deal with young people", asked Walter Benjamin, "by giving them the benefit of their experience?" Bloom's overture to Stephen breaches all the new protocols, by drawing the young man into the process of transmission. When he was young, Joyce had tried the reverse trick on a thirty-eight-year-old W.B. Yeats, only to conclude that the poet was to old to be helped. But at least he made the attempt to reach across generations.

In the oral transmission of wisdom, errors are an intrinsic and even useful part if the process. Needing correction and rebuttal, they help to draw others into the debate about where truth may be found. Amidst the comings and goings of men in the National Library, Stephen's own attempt at playing the guru misfires: but the one-to-one exchange set up by Bloom in 'Eumaeus' works far better. Bloom as an adept seeks not to impress a crowd but to locate just one special person to whom to pass his ideas. The fact that Stephen feels that he must leave is also within this spiritual tradition. Zarathustra said that the individual can experience himself only at the end of his wanderings, as Bloom is now, but Stephen must first of all go away and get to know the world and find his own identity before he can return.

Having rescued Stephen from his depression, Bloom also manages to transform his domestic situation. He lets the affair between his wife and her concert manager go ahead, because he feels guilty about his own marital shortcomings for which he needs her forgiveness. Yet Molly's soliloquy shows that Bloom's mention of Stephen as a possible new vocal partner has worked in exactly the way he hoped. Compared to Stephen's cultured sensitivity, Boylan is an ignoramus "that doesnt know poetry from cabbage" (924). Molly herself decides to get Turkish clothes, the very sort that animated Bloom's fantasies of a manly wife—and these facts are interpreted astrologically in 'Ithaca' as portending a change in the dynamic of their relationship. Their shared memory of their Howth tryst gives grounds for hope of a revival in their marriage. From Socrates to Shakespeare, great teachers have had trouble with their wives and sought out the company of young men, whom they might more easily impress with their wisdom. But this one, at least, returns happily enough to home and to hearth.

Bloom's responsiveness to the needs of a confused young man is one way through which he can express his attachment to his city and to his community. The labyrinth through which they move might be the maze through which so many have struggled to find wisdom at the centre. The free movement of bodies through city streets reflects the circulation of blood through the human body: and that steady circulation is what keeps a body healthy. Joyce wished to show that people had nothing to fear from the masses who passed through streets every day. Each member of the crowd, far from being a barbarian, was like Bloom a person in search of stimulation—but not too much. Bloom is akin to the man in the macintosh at Paddy Dignam's funeral, for either could be the thirteenth mourner; but when he is asked to name the stranger, Bloom cannot do so. Part of his great charm is that he cannot recognise himself, even when he meets himself in others, whether in Odysseus or in the macintosh man. But meet others he does, and all day long. It is in part because he has a troubled sense of himself that he is prompted to reach out and address the pain of his fellow-citizens.

But it is also because he enjoys and relishes accidental, unscheduled encounters, as the very basis of civic life.

The aim of art is not to depict a set of incidents, for that would be no more than information. It is rather to relate each event to the life of a storyteller, so that it can be conveyed as lived experience. *Ulysses* is the work of a storyteller, not a novelist. It is a narrative which uses the streets as a guide to the received wisdom of an entire community. A life so lived finally reveals an order hidden from those caught up in the day-to-day accidents of its unfolding. What seemed like random incidents are revealed in the end to be part of some fore-ordained plan. There is a providence in the fall of a sparrow, the hairs on our heads are numbered, and the man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are the portals of discovery.