

## ULYSSES IN TRINDADE: ONE TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

ARNOLD GORDENSTEIN\*

In March, 1977, I began directing Mestrado course LLE 3127 at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, a course entitled "Topico Especial: James Joyce's *Ulysses*." Even by itself this event marks no mean triumph of diplomacy and cajolery over sensible and well-founded fear. Since we were to study in detail James Joyce's *Ulysses* I had had to coax the students in by assuring them that the book was readable even to people reading it in a second language, that the awesome devices of the book which had kept them a respectful distance even from the Houaiss translation for all their adult lives were soluble with help, and that, once solved, the book was accessible, overwhelmingly engrossing, a literary education between two covers and, best of all — an unexpected gift — raucously funny as well. I write that I directed the course rather than taught it because, anticipating the group-study habits of my Brazilian students, the course was conceived as a group effort, a workshop. And so it was: it was the special knowledge that some of the students brought to the course, knowledge especially of Greek mythology, of Catholic ritual and of English slang, that made it work. Enrolled in the course were six students with varying degrees of experience in reading literature.

One was a former seminarian, a success in business with some scanty literary background and a no-nonsense bulldog style.

A second was also a former seminarian, an English teacher from a town in Minas, with little literary background but some knowledge of Greek mythology and a quiet disciplined way.

One was a university English teacher with some literary background, bright, quixotic and manic.

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\*Arnold Gordenstein, Professor of Literature at UFSC, is co-editor of this Joyce issue of *Ilha do Desterro*.

One was a priest from the interior with little literary background but, obviously, with an intimacy with church ritual and with Latin.

One was British, with wide, erratic reading, with some dramatic skills and an incomplete college training but not in literature.

One, an auditor, was an American with some spotty reading and no college degree.

Two were Catarinenses, one of them from Florianópolis. Four were Roman Catholics, two were raised as Protestants, I am a Jew, which would prove useful in discussing Bloom, who was born a Jew.

As for me, I normally spent my days and nights with American literature though I had an interest in Joyce that went back to my undergraduate years when the Shakespearean scholar Cesar Barber delivered *Ulysses* to me. Later, in graduate school, I would hear the great Harry Levin expound on Joyce and another Dubliner, John V. Kelleher, with a fine lilting tenor and a red face would sing Joyce's songs to me in his cloistered office beneath the stacks of Widener Library. In later years I climbed the Martello Tower and when I read that Joyce described *Ulysses* as "the epic of two races (Israel-Ireland)... as well as a little story of a day (life)"<sup>1</sup>, Ireland became the second or perhaps third or perhaps fourth home of my heart.

However, I had never taught *Ulysses* until now, and the circumstances were unlikely. The library lacked the mandatory *James Joyce Quarterly* and there were few other helps available. Kain's *Fabulous Voyager* was there, along with Budgen's *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses'*, Ellmann's definitive biography and his *Ulysses on the Liffey*, the best critical book. I owned the indispensable *Notes for Joyce* and Stuart Gilbert, though Gilbert no longer rang with authority. But I could use my class as resources, especially on matters having to do with Catholic ritual and Greek mythology, which several of the students knew more thoroughly than I did.

Our approach would be simple, at first. We would all read the few informational books, especially Ellmann's biography and Budgen's book, passing them from hand to hand. Then we would read *Ulysses*, chapter by chapter, along with Homer, with the *Notes for Joyce* always nearby. After the informational problems of the book were overcome (thanks to *Notes*), after the prose-meanings and ambiguities were sorted out (thanks to ourselves), after characterizations and symbolic actions and structure were discussed, we would compare the Joyce book to the Homeric one, chapter by chapter. Our specialists in mythology were especially helpful but in an unexpected way; we soon found that the Homeric parallels were often inexact. In fact, Bloom's experiences sometimes reversed the meanings of Odysseus. Odysseus's wife, for instance, was a paragon of fidelity; Bloom's accomplishes a liaison with possibly her twenty-fifth lover on the day of the book. Furthermore, in the first chapter, named "Calypso", we learn that Bloom no longer pleases his nymph sexually while in the *Odyssey* it is Calypso who has stopped pleasing Odysseus. This sort of discrepancy abounded. Had Joyce been careless? Or were we? Quickly we were in a crisis. We had to reevaluate our approach. We did this by trying the other parallel that Joyce frequently used, namely the one of the Catholic ritual.

Now, Joyce's attitudes to the Catholic Church were well known to any reader of his letters. While courting Nora Barnacle he had written her "Six years ago I left the Catholic Church, hating it most fervently... I made secret war upon it when I was a student... Now I make open war upon it by what I write and say and do."<sup>2</sup> Along with the English colonial government he hated it most and lost no opportunity to ridicule it. Our group had already seen how the dancing master Almidano Artifoni saluted the two institutions in the "Wandering Rocks" chapter with a ringing fart that nearly breached his pants. If we could see clearly how Joyce handled the frequent parallels to religious ritual perhaps we would have a clue to the way he handled the primary parallel to the *Odyssey*. Our priest and our former seminarians were most valuable now. They pointed out that the

lustful Molly Bloom shared a birth date with the Virgin Mary. We went to the very first sentence of the book where "Stately plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed... He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

"— *Introibo ad altare Dei...*

He faced about and blessed gravely thrice the tower, the surrounding country and the awaking mountains. Then, catching sight of Stephen Dedalus, he bent towards him and made rapid crosses in the air, gurgling in his throat and shaking his head..."<sup>3</sup>.

A Mass is being performed in the framing opening paragraphs of the book, only with the opposite of religious intent. Similarly in the "Circe" chapter, a Mass is enacted in a brothel as Bloom endures debasement in the hands of Madame Bella Cohen. (At this point we remembered that the Cohen tribe of Israel was the tribe of the priests.) Clearly the Mass was not receiving its customary reverence. Could it be that Joyce normally used parallels only to reject them and that this was the true pattern of the book? Once our eyes were free to see we saw at once. We easily found a hundred parallels which were not parallels at all but reversals of parallels, alongside the mere dozens of exact parallels which had been noted by Gilbert and the first generation of *Ulysses* readers. Did this mean that Bloom was not Odysseus and that *Ulysses* was not written in praise of heroic Leopold Bloom? Was this gentle man the unknowing victim of a savage satire? In our lack of bibliographical resources we may have been agreeing or disagreeing with whole armies of other students but we couldn't know that. So be it, we had to trust ourselves and so, with a blend of malarky and chutzpah, the broth of inexperience, we pushed boldly on.

The quiet disciplined student from Minas who first noted the reverses at one of the group study sessions that had become nearly regularized as part of the course now had the initiative. He had a hunch about Vico. In the little criticism that we had, little had been made of Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). Ellmann's

biography had pointed out that Joyce learned about Vico through the great Croce when he was living in Trieste, and in *Ulysses on the Liffey* he had demonstrated Vico's early influence not only on *Finnegan's Wake* — the common interpretation — but on *Ulysses* as well. But little was made of it. Joyce's debts to Bruno (the Nolan), to Dujardin and preeminently to Aristotle and to the fat monk "whose gorebellied works [Stephen Dedalus enjoyed] reading in the original"<sup>4</sup> (Aquinas) were well known. But the Vico influence began to gain in importance once we read Budgen.

Although that semi-educated man had some qualities that Semitophile Joyce could not have approved of (Budgen blamed the presumed snell of the Jew for keeping Stephen and Bloom from coming together definitively in the "Ithaca" chapter), he had the quick instinctive perception you might expect from a plastic artist and he was a sounding board for Joyce in Zurich. It was in conversation with Budgen that Joyce drew his fullest pictures of Bloom, the common man, the democratic hero. And this sent us back to Vico, who one our ex-seminarians remembered as having a theory about the stages of human history. Someone found Vico's *Scienza Nuova* and precised it for the class. As Ellmann put it, Vico believed that all human history passed through three stages: "Theocratic, aristocratic and democratic, concluding in a *ricorso* and another cycle."<sup>5</sup> Joyce meant to perceive of Bloom as the culmination of all western history, the democratic hero, the divine average, the man of most experience and most humanity, the wandering Jew-Greek-Irishman nearing home at last. But even if he had succeeded, would this account for the reversals? Each of us was assigned chapters in which to see if, in light of our new point of view, they produced an effect that was satiric or if satire was transcended. In each case the non-reporting members of the class tried to confound the new reading but it consistently explained much more than it left unexplained. Bloom was more of a hero than Odysseus, not less. Bloom did everything Odysseus did and more and his heroism was greater. Therefore the reversals: he was living in a different, Vichian, age, responding to a different ethos.

When we finished this process we had made the book coherent for ourselves on a very respectable level but we had far from exhausted the book. Beneath the puzzles we'd solved we often stumbled into other puzzles, but they could be our concerns on our next excursions. Hadn't Joyce himself said "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality."<sup>6</sup>

In the process we had all changed: the worldly businessman finished the course but not the M. A., dropping out to become a full-time realtor before writing the promising thesis he'd conceived during the course; the American had dropped out midway; the Briton completed the course very commendably but not the degree; the bright quixotic university teacher wrote a thesis on Joyce that was brilliant and silly by turns and never successfully defended it; the priest wasted himself defending the church that Joyce despised and did not finish the degree; the quiet disciplined Mineiro toiled away with system and style and produced the best thesis I've read at this university.\* I had learned that it would have been useful if we had known more about Irish history, especially literary history. Unsurprisingly the "Oxen of the Sun" chapter, which recapitulates the styles of most English literary periods since the tenth century writer Aelfric was our worst failure. We might have profited — who would not? — from stricter notions of the more than 100 rhetorical devices employed in the "Aeolus" chapter or of scientific logic in the "Ithaca" chapter. We might have all known the work of Guimaraes Rosa and Oswald de Andrade to see how other more proximate writers reflected Joyce's influence.

It was an outcome as ambiguous and complex as Joyce might have written. The understanding of the book that we arrived at may not have been the latest word in Joyce interpretation; I hadn't been near a presentable Joyce collection for five years and hadn't read diligently in one for more than ten. But it was

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\*A chapter of this thesis is in this *Ilha*, entitled "Awakening From the Nightmare."

a veritable literary education for my intrepid group. Never again would they be daunted by an intimidating book. They had confronted one of the most intimidating of all and some — not all — of them had broken through its code to find its humanity, its elegance, its humor and some of its grandeur.

Postscript: I have since offered the course again and although it attracted excellent students, there were only two of them.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.187.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Ellmann, (Editor), *Selected Letters of James Joyce* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), pp.25-26.

<sup>3</sup>James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1961), pp. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p.205.

<sup>5</sup>*Ulysses on the Liffey*, *op. cit.*, p.52.

<sup>6</sup>Don Gifford with Robert J. Seidman, *Notes for Joyce* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974), p.1.