The Use of *Ulysses*

How Joyce's novel made me what I am today

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The year 2011 marks the seventieth anniversary of the death, at the age of fifty-nine, of James Joyce. And 2012 will mark the ninetieth anniversary of his most influential work, *Ulysses*. How is Joyce's lifework holding up in the new century?

Recently, Joyce's legacy has begun to be undermined. James Wood, an influential literary critic, started the assault at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with a review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* that implied that the big, messy, unfocused novels appearing since the middle of the previous century took their unfortunate impetus from modernist works, like *Ulysses*, that attempted to be exhaustive in what Wood sees as a culturally busy but shallow way. Wood's complaints about Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison may be seen as shots at writers who learned from Joyce. More recently, in *Slate*, Ron Rosenbaum opined fatuously that *Ulysses* does have *one* chapter worth reading. After decades as one of the undeniable masterpieces of the twentieth century, *Ulysses* may in our era return to the more dubious status it enjoyed in Joyce's lifetime, as the cause célèbre of a coterie; and perhaps, in the decades ahead, it will join *Finnegans Wake*, long deemed unreadable, as a failed departure from the norms of narrative in favor of hubristic experiment.

I would argue that this new trend, or micro-trend, is simply the flipside of the automatic veneration of *Ulysses* that has existed since the 1960s. For too long *Ulysses* has been proclaimed the centerpiece of modernism, a movement in literature whose effects have mostly died out but for academic study of its many notable writers and unique works, and such highbrow praise made reading *Ulysses* a task that would-be literati had to undergo at the risk of excommunication. This state of affairs is the sort of thing that inspires enterprising writers to rebel, if only to put their own mark on literary matters. Modernism and its successor/antagonist postmodernism dominated

academic talk about fiction from the 1960s through the 1990s; those coming of age in the twenty-first century, schooled after the glut of theory, seem to wish for a return to more straightforward fiction, or even non-fiction. *Ulysses* is the most obvious whipping boy for marking the changed aesthetic climate.

All of which is purely academic, in a sense. Modernist studies, in the academic world, continue apace, and *Ulysses* will continue to be taught because it's a book that repays the attention, a book worth knowing, as a literary accomplishment, the way the *Divine Comedy*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Moby-Dick* are worth knowing. But my own attachment to *Ulysses* derives not simply from its challenge and pleasure—qualities it possesses beyond most other "twentieth-century masterpieces" one could name—but because of what I believe its use value to be, for readers and for writers.

Use value, simply put, has to do with what one "gets out" of an experience. We may speak of the use value of seeing a film, taking a class, engaging in correspondence, reading a book, and so on. If a thing's value in the market, the great arbiter of our sensibilities these days, is its exchange value, then use value is more problematic, hence all those modern works of art making use of found objects, of detritus, of supposedly useless things, if only to point out that art is always putting to use what is valueless, giving it value through what is done with it. If you don't read *Ulysses*, you can have no experience of it and thus can derive no use from it. And if you do read it, despite the claims of its "unreadableness," of what use to you is such an experience?

Because you might be anyone, of any age or gender or ethnicity, any nationality, faith or income, I would not presume to say what the experience might be for you, so I will make a few assumptions about you and address you accordingly: you care about the art of the novel; you care about the craft of writing; you care about what has been accomplished, artistically, with the English language. But caring about the art of the novel implies a number of considerations. Part of what

such concern means, at least, is that you like to learn about fictional persons through a narrator's sleight-of-hand, that you trust novelists to reveal aspects of human life not graspable by other means. But what aspects of life do you want to understand or experience through fiction? That's really up to you, but there has been a long-standing tradition—it is sometimes called a bourgeois tradition—that takes as its subject matter the ordinary life of ordinary people, to see that, as Virginia Woolf said, "it's dangerous to live even one day."

And what about craft? In the novel, that generally refers to the correspondence between the voice or manner of the prose and the actors and events described. In the mimetic view of literature, the style should suit the subject matter. We could say that's the end of it, if we are admirers of the novel as a fictional prose narrative that tells of make-believe events. But we might also want the novel, as writing, to create or promote a relation to events that is unexpected—sometimes this is achieved simply by a first-person narrator who is rather odd or estranged, but it can also be achieved by an aesthetic choice, a way of commanding the writing to be something other than mimetic.

We might even hold prose fiction to another desideratum: that the work impress us as a verbal construct, that its language sing and dance and dazzle and mystify, cause laughter and perhaps deep reflection, as well as convince us that, while reading it, we inhabit a true and coherent world. *Ulysses* does all those things without peer. It gives us ordinary people on an ordinary day, and it estranges us from the mimetic while also maintaining a cinematic fidelity to verisimilitude. And—its main distinction—it makes of language an instrument capable of virtuoso turns, of completely unexpected and original effects. The usefulness of *Ulysses*, the uniqueness of its experience, is that it is one of the few works in which all three of these conditions is met. And it does all that while also maintaining an at least clever, at best profound, relation to literature itself, to *the literary* as the art of

verbal representation. To no longer care about that is no longer to care about an art form, about the claims that reading makes on consciousness, about the very possibility of enacting consciousness in prose.

My first attempt to read *Ulysses* was in high school, eleventh grade. Up to that point, modern prose was whatever I met with in the paperbacks of the day—Ray Bradbury, tales of sci-fi and the fantastic, a bit of Vonnegut—with a more "literary" version provided by Orwell, Huxley, translations of Hesse, but with little sense of the tradition out of which Joyce's prose came: I had read no Flaubert, but knew translated glimpses of Baudelaire and the symbolists, and Wallace Fowlie's Rimbaud. Thankfully, a handful of Ibsen plays, the main tragedies of Shakespeare.

That first time I got as far as the opening of Chapter 14: "Oxen of the Sun." I couldn't have made that statement at the time. I didn't know the Homeric titles, and the chapters were unnumbered in that old Random House edition. I only knew I'd reached the paragraph beginning, "Universally that person's acumen . . . " and could in no wise parse it. Skipping ahead a few pages, nothing cleared up. Was I still in the same book? When comprehension flags, so does attention. Put it aside.

Still, that first foray was instructive. The first three chapters—Stephen Dedalus's—were like nothing I'd ever read. Later, I learned to call this style "modernist," but at the time all I was aware of was a command of modern language more astonishing than I'd found in anything but a few poems of our century, a prose in which rhythmic units were not guided by line breaks, but by as faultless and unmatched an ear for the aural dynamics of language—for the ability to construct sentences—as could be imagined. As new as anything, I thought, but dated too. Stephen Dedalus was not my contemporary—he was young when my grandparents were toddlers—but he had my interests at heart. He was bored by everything anyone told him using the mundane diction of everyday speech, of gossip, of newsprint. He had to find his space in an alienated relation to his mother tongue—

he needed Church Latin, Scholasticism, Elizabethan English, the wit of Swift and Wilde, the lyricism of Shelley and Swinburne.

Raised Catholic, educated in a parochial school for eight years, I was familiar with those churchy rhythms, with the intonation of King James Gospels read aloud, and had already gained a love of Shakespeare through memorization of speeches in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Which is to say that the spell of Dedalus was immediate enough, was—even with that dire and debilitating sense of Dublin's paralysis that weighed on him—oddly relevant to a teenaged dissatisfaction with the middlebrow tastes of a middling suburb in the mid-Atlantic states in the middle of the 1970s. For every *Blood on the Tracks* or *Born to Run* or *Horses*, there was insipid drivel aplenty.

Reading *Ulysses*, I had a glimpse of what my unknown Irish ancestor must have left behind in coming to America, and gained a sense, noticed in more ethnic parishes than the one I belonged to, of the part Catholicism played or could play in identity. Joyce showed me a city, a nation, a time, where priests set the tone. And as an experience of a place and time, of an immediate locale and milieu, nothing I'd encountered in fiction quite compared. Joyce had done away with the typical mannerisms by which setting and character are introduced, the whole boring armature of narratorial explanation. The reader is eavesdropping, not only on conversations but on unspoken thoughts. And there's nothing the Joycean method won't note—even when Dedalus picks his nose, or when Bloom farts.

In that first reading, I was buoyed by so many glimpses of a different way of doing things with words, of presenting experience in a direct and inimitable style: the performative nature of Malachi Mulligan in his relentless jests, so theatrical, trying always to get a rise out of Stephen, opening the book as if aware a camera is on him; the touchingly private moment of Bloom's visit to the outhouse, so simple and endearingly comic in its touches; Father Conmee, so reassuringly banal as he makes his way crosstown; Bloom following women with his roving eye (at last! surreptitious peeking at girls

captured, noted), even the many passages causing blank confusion—who is who in the newspaper chapter, in the cemetery chapter, in the many bar scenes—could be offset by striking moments: Bloom's discomfort with the other men in the funeral cortege; the men spying on the barmaids who flirt with certain men, like the bounder Boylan; Bloom's reflections on the Mass and on the ghoulish nature of burial; the hilarious leaps into descriptive absurdity in "Cyclops," with flourishes worthy of Monty Python (an enthusiasm of mine that will never pass away); the rapid-fire witticisms and over-lapping chatter in the newspaper office—the sort of thing for which Robert Altman's films, *MASH* and *Nashville*, recent at the time of my reading, were praised as groundbreaking.

But nothing did more to impress upon me the idea that I was in the hands of a rare master than the "dancing coins" of sunlight on Mr. Deasy's "wise shoulders" at the end of chapter two, and nothing captured my mind and heart like the love of language, the sheer verve of the discourse of reverie, as in Dedalus alone on the strand in chapter three. For a would-be poet, every walk along the beach is a walk into eternity through a space of creative ferment, and Joyce's rendering of poetic stream-of-consciousness as a constant making and unmaking of thought, a search for constructions to place on reality, is an odyssey in itself, a depiction in miniature of the liberties language can take in its flow over objects, through time and space, arrested only by the odd intuition that words might be as palpable as shells and as scattered as one's attention. It was as language, as a bravura use of poetic effects, as a salad of unique techniques that I valued Joyce's prose. The story, the plot, the point of it all were not elements I was too concerned about. While I might not have been able to explain what, as Polonius asks Hamlet, "the matter was that I read," I was often thrilled and delighted by the "words, words, words."

On my next attempt I got through the whole thing. By then I was almost twenty-one, living in Philadelphia, in a ramshackle apartment usually rented by students at the Pennsylvania Academy

of the Fine Arts. At that time, in my bohemian surroundings, taking part in poetry readings in art galleries, bars, and parks, I read *Ulysses* because I wanted something that would require full mental immersion. It was 1980, and living in a big city for the first time in my life made me want to revisit Joyce's handling of an urban environment because I had plans to write a fiction set in "a city." (Many years later, I would finally visit Dublin and find that it reminded me, very much indeed, of Philadelphia as it was in those days when no building could stand higher than the hat on the statue of Billy Penn on the top of City Hall.) Returning to *Ulysses* that summer brought me—besides renewed admiration of how Joyce handled street scenes, his sensory registers so minute and telling (simply following the Wisdom Helys sandwich men through the prose of the streets was a delight)—greater appreciation for how Joyce handled dialogue. I'd been a year among scribblers and poets and art students and would-be geniuses, had drunk in bars, and now knew first-hand the verbal culture of wags and wits, of flirtatious and boozy loquaciousness. I had followed with my eyes striking and random female strangers on city streets, and was more than ever convinced that Joyce was *the man* when it came to rendering thoughts spurred by the flux of surface phenomena. Entering into the book with our mind's eye, it is possible to see unfold a detailed and deliberate panorama of life.

But the other effect that initial complete reading of the book had on me was more personal. I wasn't in school. I was reading on my own time. I was living with my lover, younger than her by more than a decade, and she was pregnant with our child. Before we'd moved to Philadelphia together, she had been married to an English teacher at the high school I graduated from. In fact, I'd lived for most of a year in a spare room in their house during a tense period that brought about their separation and divorce, after ten years of marriage. In a sense, she and I were helping each other get out of Delaware: me, for whatever creative inspirations I might find in a city; she, out of a way of life she no longer wanted to live.

Reading *Ulysses* that last summer of pre-fatherhood, I encountered a kind of saving fantasy of what my romantic education might mean. When I watched, late in the book, Leopold Bloom, sixteen years the senior of twenty-two year-old Stephen Dedalus, invite the young man to move into a spare room in his home, implying that he might also avail himself, in time, of the charms of his wife Marion, I was given a profound dig in the ribs. Here was a story I had to some extent just lived through, and it made me think that my teacher friend, who had been impressed by my efforts to read *Ulysses* back in high school, was something of a Bloom to my Stephen. My friend was more Jewish than Bloom (who was only Jewish on his father's side), and more intellectual, and I was a Nietzsche-reading Catholic apostate and would-be poet in something of Stephen's manner, though without Jesuit schooling, a B.A., or a sojourn in Paris under my belt. And I couldn't help recognizing, amused, that my lover had a penchant for lengthy excursions with many digressions not unlike the torrent of Molly's words—if I had to render her speech in writing I too might despair of punctuating it. The "Nostos," or last three chapters, of *Ulysses* showed me that Joyce could "hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature." The "sentimental education" that Flaubert and many others had depicted—often involving a young man falling for an older married woman—was unknown to me as a literary trope, but here it was, shifted by Joyce into a frame very close to home indeed. Dissolute, egotistical, and overly dreamy literary type is befriended by a well-meaning Samaritan, and might find life-changing erotic experience with the man's wife. The fact that *Ulysses* flirted with that story seemed a personally relevant message.

But there was more to Joyce's vision: I hadn't read a word of Freud at that point, but I knew my *Hamlet* well. For me, the kind of triangle Joyce was depicting wasn't Oedipal, it was Hamletian—as Stephen makes clear in his library discussion. And I was stunned to see a Hamlet fixation take on the shape Joyce gave it. Of course, Stephen, as Joyce's surrogate, doesn't stay with the Blooms. He

walks away from both husband and wife, both Poldy and Molly. And though I was enthralled by the character of Hamlet, Stephen argues that the emphasis should be on the man behind the character: Shakespeare himself. If I was truly looking for advice in great literature, then, psychologically, I had to learn to become not Stephen, not Bloom, but Joyce. His perspective contained both of them as well as Molly. He understood how to make the novel of adultery (with Flaubert and Tolstoy his main predecessors) become a comedy; how to make the coming-of-age novel (for Stephen is desperately in search of some kind of meaningful erotic relation as well as creative outlet) include the novel of married life; how to make the novel of private and pub(lic) life contain the novel of comically invoked archetypes.

In other words, Stephen became for me, by the end of that reading, too immature as a model, as Joyce intended. He was not the hero of Joyce's universe, even if I still felt myself thoroughly seduced by his prickly and insecure and arrogant and mercurial performance in the library chapter, explaining Shakespeare's relation to Hamlet in terms that also explain Joyce's relation to Bloom and Stephen. *Ulysses* was not only a novel of great effects; it was a novel that seemed to me a profound—because comic—rendition of pride, lust, sloth, and the other sins. Up to that point, the novels that had most stirred me as stories of great characters striving to assert their grand passions and to overcome their tangled weaknesses were by Dostoevsky. But in that transitional period of late teens to early twenties, there was no novel I could have read more apropos than *Ulysses*.

What I did next was read *Ulysses* again, start to finish, but this time in about two or three weeks (as opposed to two or three months), and then I read some essays on *Ulysses* in books from the public library, and Stuart Gilbert's book, the first study of *Ulysses*, published with Joyce's participation; and then I read *Ulysses* again, this time pen in hand, making all kinds of marginal notes, subjecting the book to *my* reading. I felt I'd mastered it, you see. And in March my daughter was born.

But Joyce, once mastered, doesn't stay mastered. Skip ahead a few years, and I was back in Delaware, and the urban, mythic, coming-of-age novel I was writing, "forging in the smithy of my libido the unconsummated goddesses of my youth," bogged down. So, if you can't become Joyce, study him! I enrolled in my home state university, with an idea to major in art history, but access to several library shelves on Joyce and his work proved too much, and I ended with a double major in that field and comparative literature, writing my senior thesis on book three—the Shaun the Post chapters—of *Finnegans Wake*.

Why the *Wake*? In those intervening years, I and a couple friends had spent many hours reading aloud Joyce's last work, *Ulysses*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (a daunting and bizarre book I began reading my senior year of high school and finally finished sometime before getting through *Ulysses* the third time). I'd found that those three books were exceptional in the quality of their prose: reading them aloud went beyond comprehension to something closer to music, to a blend of image, sound, rhythm, and meaning that stretched the mind in all kinds of interesting and ticklish ways, producing an inner cinematic experience. These days, the hero of that kind of mind-stretching fiction, for those younger than my friends and I, is David Foster Wallace, but, while there are passages in *Infinite Jest* I could read aloud for fun, I can't bear the thought of reading the whole thing aloud, as Wallace specializes in tedium and frustration rather than lyricism and expansion. With Joyce, the lyricism was an accepted aspect of the best writing of his time—found in Eliot, Yeats, and whomever you'd care to set beside them. And for Pynchon, the experience of jazz and the Beats and rock'n'roll and movie musicals inspired flights of cartoon prose that simply spoke the lingo of the late sixties/early seventies, the birthplace of my tastes. And the *Wake*, more than any work of prose, demanded an aural component. It had to be heard to be seen, seen to be heard, said as well as read.

Earlier, I mentioned the correspondence between the voice, or manner, of prose and the actors and events described as a key aspect of novel craft. But how far could that correspondence go? In the *Wake*, actors and events are fluid, altering according to the mannerisms of a polyglot prose that involves jokes, puns, allusions, all in various languages and across numerous fields of reference. The practice of converting characters into signs, into correspondences rather than traits, began in *Ulysses*, but, to my mind, in my late twenties, the latter book—simply because it was, after all, still a novel—was too familiar. In those days I was utterly bored by the notion that the best thing prose could do was "tell stories." Literary explication, I'd learned when I attended a conference on Joyce in Philly before I began studies at the U of DE, was now a matter of deconstruction, of undermining firm distinctions, of close attention to the slippages in any statement.

I will spare the reader the very interesting difference between reading on the paradigmatic as opposed to syntagmatic axis, because this is not that kind of essay, but let it suffice to say that Joyce criticism had taken on, by the mid-eighties, a decidedly philosophical slant, no longer quaintly concerned with the author's relation to his work, or with the work's place in literary history, but wholly consumed by the relations of signifier to signified. And no text bedevils that relation to the extent the *Wake* does. Let's leave me there for the next nine years, earning a B.A. at the U of DE, and a Ph.D. in comparative literature at Princeton, producing a dissertation on my old nemeses Joyce and Pynchon, with Proust (that's another story) added to complete the triumvirate, and skip ahead again.

For a few years now, I've been teaching *Ulysses* as a five-week course in Yale's summer session. The class occurred to me, after I'd taught composition a few summers, because five weeks seemed ideal for a concentrated study of *the* Book. By now, Joyce's novel has gained for me the fondness of a place one goes away to, an "elsewhere"

always familiar but never quite the same. That, if nothing else, would be enough justification, in my view, to claim a very special status for *Ulysses*. I simply don't know of any other work I would agree to commit five weeks to reading and discussing year after year. But what is the purpose of such study? What is its use value?

At one time, I might have said: it's for the sake of understanding the Great Works of Literature. I could be heard to say things like, "Every English department should have a Joycean" (better still, every comp lit department, but there aren't enough of those); or, "No student of literature should graduate from college without reading *Ulysses*." These were dicta inspired by a certain perceived need to champion a twentieth-century Great in light of the favoritism to Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton (in English) and to Homer, Dante, Cervantes (in European lit). Yale's course on the epic, which I taught once, sets *Ulysses* in such company, and that's all to the good, yet ...

The "yet" is what made me think about an introductory course on *Ulysses*, as opposed to squeezing the unworkable text into a survey of "The Modern British Novel" (as though *Ulysses* is "British"), or giving it several weeks of a Joyce seminar (for upper-classmen). The point, I thought, though I didn't really articulate it as such to myself, was the uniqueness of *Ulysses*, and so it was necessary to detach the book from the contexts of comparison and contrast so dear to the teacherly mind, and try to take it—as I did in my earliest, personal reading—on its own merits.

Was I seeking a key to that bygone banquet, as Rimbaud might say? Perhaps. But I was also seeking a key to my "take" on the book.

The other teaching experience relevant to that effort has been tutoring for a course at Yale called Daily Themes. The course consists of writing exercises that require students to write about three hundred words a day, five days a week, for twelve weeks. The skills promoted in that course are many, but the main value is inventiveness. Taking a chance. Risking something. Such risk is not so much a question of subject matter, but rather of shedding the comfortable

clichés and mannerisms of writing, both as a form of expression and as a means of encountering the world. To say something about some thing, one must really see, taste, hear, smell, feel that thing and then find the means to convey that to the reader, with as little mediation as possible. As such, we offer what seems a realist dictum: show the thing, get out of the way. No fancy stylistic razzle-dazzle. The passages handed out to students as models tend to favor Hemingway and Joan Didion much more than Joyce and Thomas Pynchon. Excess verbiage is a problem for most students, and it's best to argue for the Poundian virtues of "non-slithery language," telling them to pare down to the essential, telling details.

Ezra Pound, of course, was a great proponent of the Joyce of *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but he started to balk at things he found in *Ulysses*, particularly in the later going, after the interior monologue of both Stephen and Bloom had been abandoned, and he had no patience for the *Wake*. And Pound's viewpoint, largely, is still that of the English teacher's approach to *Ulysses*. Appreciate *Dubliners*, *Portrait* and "the initial style" of *Ulysses*, then stick with Woolf and Faulkner; Joyce just goes too far.

And indeed it's true, for the most part. The passages from *Ulysses* that strike one as exemplars for writers tend to come from the first ten chapters; thereafter things get a bit dicey. Consider a passage like this, from chapter 3:

> Found drowned. High water at Dublin bar. Driving before it a loose drift of rubble, fanshoals of fishes, silly shells. A corpse rising saltwhite from the undertow, bobbing a pace a pace a porpoise landward. There he is. Hook it quick. Pull. Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor. We have him. Easy now.
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> Bag of corpsegas sopping in foul brine. A quiver of minnows, fat of spongy titbit, flash through the slits of his buttoned trouserfly. [...] Hauled stark over the gunwale he breathes upward the stench of his green grave, his leprous nosehole snoring to the sun.

The “scrupulous meanness” that controlled Joyce’s aesthetic choices in *Dubliners* has been developed, through *Portrait*’s attention to how Stephen experiences the world verbally, into a prose equal to any task. We get the visceral thrill of the drowned man’s corpse being found and brought into a boat. But none of this is happening except in Stephen’s mind, and it is that controlling mind, fond of its show-offy post-graduate effects, that quotes Milton (“sunk though he be…”) and plays with words—having found a nice alliteration in “fanshoals of fishes,” he adds “silly shells.” Such touches become more pronounced, even aggressive, as the novel develops. More remarkable are lines like “Bag of corpsegas sopping foul brine” which is, by its recurring sounds, poetry: bag / gas, corpse / sop, and, especially fine, the slide from “ing” to “ine” by way of “oul.” Likewise, “leprous nosehold snoring to the sun.” Both lines demonstrate the progress in Joyce’s prose: from command over detail for its own sake, he has moved to the ability to make delicate poetic effects out of indecorous images, not only to illustrate Stephen’s morbidity but also to give us a pleasantly icky sensation. We see minnows dining on offal and a nasty transformation of the male member into a “spongy titbit”—but we might also say, from the fish’s point of view, a tasty transformation.

In any case, such effects might be said to get in the reader’s way, drawing us into a circle of admiration for the author, but to take it that way is to miss the true scope of Joyce’s achievement. If such things were isolated instances, we might say “cut them and get on with it.” Outside of a context like this, would a scrupulous editor allow “green grave”—isn’t that simply overkill? But that, we *Ulysses* fans say, is the point: if you think that’s overkill, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet! “Overkill,” “excess,” “superfluous padding”—such ideas will themselves seem quaint by the end of this book. Joyce is a writer’s hero because of all he risks, but also because of all he gets away with, all he makes us suffer/admire; but, unlike the mind-numbing explicit doldrums of *Infinite Jest*’s horse latitudes, Joyce has a heart. He’s not a machine and he knows we aren’t either. Consider a passage from chapter 14:

> You move a motion? Steve boy, you're going it some. More bluggy drunkables? Will immensely splendiferous stander permit one stooder of most extreme poverty and one largesize grandacious thirst to terminate one expensive inaugurated libation? Give's a breather. Landlord, landlord, have you good wine, staboo? Hoots, mon, a wee drap to pree. Cut and come again. Right. Boniface! Absinthe the lot. *Nos omnes biberimus viridum toxicum, diabolus capiat posterioria nostria*. Closingtime, gents.

Here we have Stephen ("Steve boy" to his friend Lynch) standing drinks to his impecunious friend ("one stooder of most extreme poverty" where "stooder" stands in relation to "stander" or provider)—the play with "splendiferous" and "grandacious" typical of former students trained in Latin, as is the use of Latin coined on the spot to accompany, as benediction, Stephen's demand of absinthe for all: we will all drink the green poison and the devil take the hindmost. What's clear immediately is that we're on a drinking binge, everyone's drunk, and the language has the texture of voices gesticulating wildly in a bar and waxing—as play with language inevitably does in Joyce—toward idiolects, often with a Shakespearean cast when Stephen's on stage (which is why *Ulysses* is so much fun to read aloud): "bluggy drunkables" for "bloody drinks," "breather" for "pause," "staboo," a reference to a bawdy song sung earlier in the chapter, while "hoots" has the sound of "zounds" in Shakespeare, much as "cut and come again" gives us the feel of fencing. "Right Boniface" mimics "right about-face," a military command, but also a call to the bartender—"Boniface" a slang term for his beneficent countenance.

All this is packed so tight it can make the reader's head spin. And it should, because Joyce wants us to feel the confusion and collide of a range of effects, but, if we've read all the previous chapters, we know the entire passage is marked with the coloration of Stephen's verbal jousting. This is how it feels to be on a bender with our young, word-drunk, and actually drunken hero.

In terms of writerly use value, these passages—one might say virtually any passage in *Ulysses*—are packed with food for thought, to surfeit perhaps, on such important prose techniques as: sound effects; variations in diction for purposes of characterization and surface interest; reference to specific things to create the "reality effect" of a world characters inhabit; shifts in point of view—lightning fast in some chapters of *Ulysses*, but almost always marked by nodal points that help us navigate; enlivening depiction through humor, and by characteristic expressions, and by the kind of textual material that people keep in their heads and reference at will. There's no dumbing down in Joyce, but, at least until the *Wake*, there's an earnest attempt to keep the reader on the page, and that's done by providing pleasures you can't get elsewhere. Joyce staked a big claim, one that can be mined for ages without seeming in the least depleted.

If this were only about the pleasures of the text, then we could say the use of *Ulysses* is the entertainment it provides. Would that be enough? It would, for my money, offset the claims to accomplishment made for any number of novels much less fun to read.

Still, the need for literary significance, or for the power of art, would not be satisfied by such a claim. We want to be convinced, when putting in our time to get what we can out of the book, that it adds something to our minds, maybe even to our souls (if you permit the term), that is worth having. I'm in sympathy with such a view because it's what I felt the first time I got all the way through. I was changed. There was a "before" and an "after" in reading *Ulysses*. That first attempt in high school, I was simply acting precocious, trying to hold my own, as a reader, with the best the century had to offer. But the next time, maybe because I wanted to be a better writer, maybe because I wanted to understand what it meant to be committed to literary art, maybe because I wanted something to be worth more than entertainment or sanctimonious "messages," the

stakes felt very high to me indeed. And Joyce delivered.

What I found in *Ulysses* was an artfully contrived verbal relation to the modern world, to literature, to psycho-sexual make-up, to domestic relations, to political and commercial status, to the very notion of what it means to be free or not inside one's own mind. Joyce, more than any writer whose career began since the dawn of radio and television, even since the start of newsprint, grasps, in the movement of his prose, in his ear for how words, phrases, tunes, brief glimpses, acts of attention and inattention work upon us, the rich potential and the potential poverty of our responses to our environments, our milieux, our gangs and hoods and schools, our folk, our nation, our faith and family—everything that shapes the individual and makes a person one of the crowd.

And that's not all. That pretty much covers only the "initial style." What Joyce does in the more problematic, and wilder, second half of the book is destroy the technique he added to literature. In chapter 14 he leads the reader on a walking tour of English prose styles—rather say "voices," since almost every passage is recognizable as a take-off, what stand-up comedians call "an impression," of a specific era or writer, from before writers had names up to the big guns of the generation previous to Joyce's. He does this after chapters in which he deliberately distorts and extends his own technique of interior monologue and narration (chapter 11), mocks any number of prose styles, from newspaper reporting, in its more flowery form, to scientific debate and religious tract (chapter 12), to a re-enactment of what today is called "chick lit" and was, in his time, much more sentimental than snarky, but with an up-to-date sense of the young female reader as consumer—sort of like a romance novel crossed with *Cosmopolitan*. And then he pulls the book apart, in chapter 15, with the zaniest send-ups imaginable of his own material. The book we've been reading explodes and, in the process, all the darkest fears and deepest shames of our heroes Bloom and Stephen—the kinds of things people used to confess only to priests,

then to psychoanalysts, and lately to anyone with a TV camera and microphone—are dressed in grotesque carnival colors, making them into laughingstocks.

Granted, what is revealed about Joyce's characters may seem quaint in our day. But if men can still lose positions of power and obligation due to the sorts of things "the old Adam" makes them do—often involving a search for sexual thrills beyond whatever line they normally toe, whether involving interns, solicitations in men's rooms, or self-exposure via phones or the internet—then the kinds of things we learn about Bloom, and the whirlwind rise-and-fall fantasy he lives through, still have remarkable relevance. Joyce sussed early on, as we find in his unfinished first attempt at a novel, the hypocrisies of his day where sexual freedom was concerned, and his response was a bit like Lenny Bruce's: he found the means to mock the world of bourgeois mores. But unlike Bruce, he wasn't goaded by the need to be hip or to score with or off some particular social group.

Joyce's art, though entertaining, isn't simply that of an entertainer. As an artist Joyce, like many others of his time, believed the biggest revolution would take place in individual lives in private homes throughout the world, but, for that to happen, the necessary thing was—to paraphrase John Lennon—to free our minds. Stephen, tapping his own brow, says: "It is here I must kill the priest and king." We might add a whole host of others Joyce sought to kill: the censor, the editor, the sponsor, the confessor, the soldier; and those he didn't kill outright—the scholar, the poet, the lover, the novelist—he transformed. The point was to make those who presume to know what we should and shouldn't read, how we should and shouldn't write, or act or dress, or when we should or shouldn't love or fight, or how we should or shouldn't live face up to their own inadequacies before the true richness, randomness, and strangeness of life. In the process, he helped create the notion of The Writer as the answer to everything. The Writer as artist became, for a time, a very self-conscious and at times quite contentious position, founded on the belief that writing enhances and completes life. Arguably, there is

no longer that kind of demand for The Writer, and soon, perhaps, there will no longer even be the wherewithal to appreciate what The Writer of Joyce's era achieved.

These days, with our blogosphere and twitterdom, every fleeting thought, every mundane act, can be transcribed and transmitted. *Ulysses* was there first, and Joyce, I believe, would have loved the verbal oddities and inanities of internet communications—the random quotations, the misspellings and bad grammar, the revealing slippages and usages, what he calls in the *Wake* the "skysign of soft advertisement," or the skein of self-advertisement we find in social networks. But even if you took the postings and tweets of your immediate circle, or of everyone linked-in by certain characteristics, and created an algorithm to assign attributes to characters generated by the data, and had them speak a pidgin derived from the posts and links they post and access, you would still not attain anything very interesting without the controlling vision—the artistic accountability—derived from that Old World discovery, the unique and individual human imagination. Joyce did the mapping and the cross-referencing without benefit of computers, and that in itself is remarkable. What his aesthetic makes graspable is the idiosyncrasy of true originality, and of the shaping power of the imagination when faced with the endless discourse of modern times, with the sheer, mind-numbing stuffness of our thoughts that David Foster Wallace renders so well, and with the altering-as-we-go wikipedias of our personal mythologies and histories.

The use of *Ulysses*, for Joyce, is that it saves everything he knew from being useless knowledge—it all serves its purpose in the work. And if the use for us is laughing at life as we live it, we moderns, or getting even with it, or getting it right, or giving it, to borrow T. S. Eliot's oft-cited phrase, "a shape and a significance," then that use is only achieved—in the most direct "use it or lose it" way—by putting the book to work, by working the text and letting it work your mind. Ron Rosenbaum finds *Ulysses* "overwritten" and "overwrought," its humor "leaden," its symbolism "overstuffed"—a

list of adjectives not exactly exacting—and its erudition "gratingly obvious" (as if he already knows everything the book knows). He further blames *Ulysses* for Pynchon going awry after his first two novels, when it's rather obvious—maybe even gratingly so—that *V.* is the Pynchon novel most directly influenced by *Ulysses* and Joyce's effort to do "take-offs" on other literary styles. But such distinctions don't matter to Rosenbaum, who is more interested in scoring a toss-off than making any statement that might prove him equal to a work that makes demands beyond what he's willing, perhaps able, to concede.

Are such works beyond us, or are we beyond them? It's a question that sends me back to the classroom ultimately: to see the book work upon other minds about the age I was when I first made it through, minds not yet frozen into reaction or convinced they know "how fiction works." Readers willing to jump in and see where it goes, willing to be surprised and delighted and confused by what Joyce's prose does to their expectations of prose, willing to face the pleasures of virtuosity, the challenge in linguistic possibilities that simply beggar anyone you'd care to name. As a reader, you have nothing to lose but your illusions. Humbling enough, perhaps, but a useful loss, if what is gained is a sense of the use value of writing as art.