

Rethinking the Definition of a Classic: A Milestone Approach to James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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Abstract This essay critically re-examines the “test-of-time” definition of a classic, which is, at best, a method, not a criterion. Taking James Joyce’s high-modernist work *Ulysses* as a test-case, it argues that a work needs to be considered significant or insignificant not because it passes or does not pass the test of time, which logically makes it unamenable to any evaluation during its author’s lifetime, but because it engages, at least at a meta-level, substantial political, cultural, social, philosophical, and aesthetic questions. *Ulysses* has been a milestone in Western cultural history, reflecting or triggering the evolution of the Occidental world view. Arguably, it also occupies a key place in humanity’s larger endeavours to understand itself, as attested by several twentieth/twenty-first-century thinkers, across a wide spectrum of disciplines — political theory, ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, psychology, historiography, and cultural studies, to name a representative few — citing Joyce to illustrate their ideas. Probably, this has to do with Joyce’s unapologetically meticulous engagement of quotidian lived life, even to extremes of triviality, which is the subject of what I propose to call delicate *épistèmes*. Within literary studies, *Ulysses* is considered a paradigmatic text for many approaches, which makes it a ‘critical classic’ as well.

Key words polymorphous capacity; milestone approach; delicate *épistèmes*; paradigmatic; Joyce buzz

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My experience in a South African English department was probably very similar to that of many others at institutions of higher learning throughout the English-speaking world in the early sixties. The powerful Lawrentian/Leavisian model, premised on a moral earnestness and an attachment to organicism that left little room for playful ingenuity or the foregrounding of linguistic and literary conventions, for effects of the Joycean kind, fostered in students an appreciation of strenuous verbal engagements with perennial human dilemmas but did so at the cost of rendering them impervious to the pleasures and insights of a large body of literary writing. . . . In small quantities, Joyce's writing could be used to demonstrate the local felicities produced by the skilful deployment of literary language, but the larger-scale enterprises demanded too much 'surface' decipherment for too little yield of imaginative, psychological, and moral 'depth.' And, of course, Joyce demonstrated his commitment to false gods quite clearly by increasing the surface-to-depth ratio with each work that he wrote. — Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History*

Etymologically, the English word “classic” is derived from Latin *classicus*, which means “belonging to a certain class,” and historically came to mean “of the highest class.” For centuries, a literary classic has been defined as a work which passes the test of time. It has been understood as a work of “timeless quality,” typified by Ben Jonson’s posthumous and belated paean to Shakespeare: “He was not for an age, but for all time.” Though Jonson, by the way, also said of Shakespeare “on this side idolatry [sic]” “*Sufflaminandus erat*” (he should have been clogged, or he needed restraint), he seems to have set the critical ball rolling, at least for modern literature, in this direction of defining a classic when he made the oft-quoted former statement. The temporal definition of a classic has two underlying assumptions. The first is that as time passes, readers will have thrown out a work of poor quality into the dustbin of literary history. This definition assumes time to be the matrix within which reflections occur on which works pass the test of quality, and which do not. Though the criteria for a classic may change through centuries — Is there a classic under each genre? Can its delineation alter between “high” and “low” literary art? — these reflections need not involve a meta-level engagement of the criteria themselves. The second dimension is a more experiential one: every generation of readers is able to discover new significances in the work under question. Though the provenance of this rather traditional idea is different from that of deconstruction, the two share a striking similarity between them. As deconstruction has it, the text will renew itself across spaces and ages due to its “textuality.” Many “worlds” (even futuristic ones) are implicit in language, which are invoked when the reader meets the signifiers on the page. “Iterability,” Jacques Derrida’s polyglottal portmanteau term, describes the capacity of signs and texts to be repeated in new situations and to produce new meanings. The term encapsulates Sanskrit *itera* (other) and Latin *iterare* (to repeat).

If the criterion of literary merit is test of time, we shall obviously miss the worth, if any, of contemporary works, which will be abandoned till a retrospective reevaluation recovers them for the canon. Strictly speaking, the so called test-of-time criterion is not a criterion at all. It does not provide us the standards by which we can distinguish a classic from a work which is not one. It is rather a method, that too an indirect one, and hence the imperative to look for criteria elsewhere. Critical history has witnessed many other methods and tests, which are equally elusive with regard to the criteria of literary excellence, Matthew Arnold’s comparative “Touchstone Method” being one. The pervasive elusiveness is understandable given the fact that a consensus on “literary value” is difficult to obtain. Ideological criticism of the literary canon, and of any professed criteria, is philosophically

premised on the near-impossibility of consensus. For instance, Terry Eagleton's historicizing narrative of the rise of literary studies as a discipline foregrounds the class- and racial basis of the apparently neutral definitions of literature [in the honorific sense]: "The criteria of what counted as literature . . . were frankly ideological: writing which embodied the values and 'tastes' of a particular social class qualified as literature, whereas a street ballad, a popular romance and perhaps even the drama did not" (15).

The lack of consensus, in turn, is also understandable since, as we know experientially if not logically, apprehension of artistic value is a delicate process. As M.H. Abrams puts it, "the ultimate standards of valid critical judgments are not sharp-focus but soft-focus standards which we signify by terms such as *sensibility, good sense, sagacity, tact, insight*" (85; italics as in the source). Harold Bloom concurs when he says: "Pragmatically, aesthetic value can be recognized or experienced, but it cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions. To quarrel on its behalf is always a blunder" (17). The subtle aesthetic elitism of the statement notwithstanding, Bloom is well within his rights to object to the exclusively political definition of literature — which is the context of the assertion — coming from what he calls the "School of Resentment": "The cardinal principle of the current School of Resentment: what is called aesthetic values emanates from class struggle" (23). According to him, the argument that "literary works join the Canon because of successful advertising and propaganda campaigns" is a case of "academic radicalism" (20). He is categorical that "[t]he deepest anxieties of literature are literary." More importantly, Bloom does provide a criterion for the canonicity of a work — "strangeness": "When you read a canonical work for a [sic] first time, you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfillment of expectation" (3).

It might seem too late in the day to argue for or against an essentialist definition of literature or literary value. Contemporary criticism has more or less recognized that it is contexts, institutions, and discourses which decide it. Further, literary values are pluralistic; there are many kinds of excellence. It is a contemporary critical commonplace that an unconscious system of values lies (no pun intended) behind our evaluations of literature, and that this varies from culture to culture and from person to person. Apropos the subjective side, indeed the apprehension of literary value is partly a matter of the subject-object symmetry. If this is the case, value (I refuse to categorize it as exclusively "aesthetic" because there are more aspects to value than pure aesthetic) is located neither exclusively in the reader nor in the text, but at the precise point of encounter between them.

But the subject is not an autonomous Cartesian one but is constituted in the collective, historically specific discourses. As such, the system of values consists of culturally acquired elements, and may be entangled in the networks of power and ideology. For a Marxist critic such as Eagleton, this system of values is related to class structure and the intellectual hegemony of the dominant class. For a postcolonial critic, the texts which were considered prestigious and were prescribed for academic study were so, because they were ideological tools of, and in turn received impetus from, the politico-cultural project of imperialism.

The politico-cultural contexts and personal bases of the criteria notwithstanding, we cannot be held hostage either to relativism or to subjectivism. For that would render any discourse on the subject logically impossible. How can one evaluate a work without at least a vague understanding of the implied values or a reflection concerning our assumptions in this regard, particularly when even interpretations are conditioned by unconscious evaluations? Taking James Joyce's high-modernist magnum opus *Ulysses* (1922) as a test-case, I propose a re-examination of the criteria by which a work can be assessed as significant or otherwise. My endeavour will be to clarify criteria which we are intuitively aware of, but have hesitated to articulate.

“Keep the Professors Busy for Centuries”

Ninety-three years have passed since *Ulysses* was published as a book by Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company (post its serialization in *The Little Review* and *The Egoist*), but it cannot be ascertained if a sufficient span of time has lapsed to apply the test-of-time method as could be and was done to its epic template, Homer's *Odyssey*. However, certain of its innate characteristics make it a highly probable winner if this is the method of testing. In his characteristic joco-serious style, Joyce told the French translator of *Ulysses*, Jacques Benoît-Méchin: “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” (Ellmann 521). That Joyce's insurance policy is still valid is clear enough, but the reasons thereof need some clarification. *Ulysses* is written at the micro-level and structured at the macro-level in a way that makes it capable of generating meanings at various levels, most of them beyond any assumed authorial intention. The book is an elaborate contrivance, an overstretched network of correspondences, motifs, and symbols — a network capable of infinite expansion. As a result of this “polymorphous capacity” (an allusion to Freud's term “polymorphous perversity”; in *Finnegans Wake*, it will become a “polyglottal perversity”), at least four

generations of readers have found in it new meanings, ideas, and significances. All the *Ulysses*-criticism we have had in the last nine decades is a fragment of the book's hermeneutic infinity. The text itself self-reflexively illustrates the possibility of creating meaning through making connections between its apparently unrelated parts. When Martha Clifford, Leopold Bloom's epistolary love-interest, makes a typographical error in her anonymous letter to him, he pursues its possibilities to affirm the plenitude of the human world around in contrast to the poverty of the other world. She writes: "I called you naughty boy because *I do not like that other world* [instead of "word"; emphasis added]. Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word? [sic]" (*Ulysses* 5.244-6).¹ Bloom responds to the error several pages later in the Prospect cemetery, ironically also conveying Joyce's "this-worldly" religious attitudes: "There is another world after death named hell. I do not like that other world she wrote. No more do I. Plenty to see and hear and feel yet. Feel live warm beings near you. Let them sleep in their maggoty beds. They are not going to get me this innings. Warm beds: warm fullblooded life" (*Ulysses* 6.1001-5). Similarly, when Bloom's cat mews "Mrkrgrnao," it is not a meaningless sound or a random combination of letters. The Italian translator of *Ulysses* has seen in "Mrkrgrnao" a covert version of "Mrkr," the Greek spelling of Mercury, and thus a signal to the Homeric Hermes, the messenger from the gods (Levine 139).

In "Ulysses Gramophone" Derrida shows how the book's elements can coalesce in non-linear ways to create meaning: Molly Bloom's life-affirming "yes" in the interior monologue of the "Penelope" episode, the coda of the book, is a belated response to her husband's telephone call to Alexander Keyes in "Aeolus." In a linear narrative, the elements follow one after the other (*nacheinander*). But the reader needs to keep them mentally one next to the other (*nebeneinander*).² The *Ulysses*-text is like an array of dots which can be joined in multiple ways to create endless patterns of meaning. The most lauded of "Joyce effects" consists in the change he ushered in our conception of language — particularly, his role in foregrounding the "plurisignificatory" character of the word. Perhaps, in a lighter vein, we can say: Had there been no Joyce, there would have been no Derrida — a mystical apostolic succession!

The relatability of *Ulysses* as a text is apparently (only apparently) compromised by the self-professed hermetic tendency of avant-garde modernism. In the same vein, its unapologetic subject matter — the ordinary and the commonplace — finds itself, paradoxically, at odds with this tendency. The self-reflexive difficulty of modernist texts has been discussed for almost a century. The difficulty of Joyce's later texts, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, seems to stem

from two textual characteristics. First, their reading requires a fairly large cultural repertoire (linguistic as well, in the case of the *Wake*) and mythico-historical memory, which is ordinarily not possible for the reader to achieve. *Ulysses* self-reflexively alludes to the challenges posed by its telegraphic allusiveness when it has Malachi Mulligan wittily mention, in a veiled reference to Yeats and the texts of the Celtic revival, the “[f]ive lines of text and ten pages of notes about the folk and fish gods of Dundrum” (1.365-7). Second, it is the question of why certain elements are there in the textual space, after all. Why should seven pages of the book be spent on Bloom’s defecation, which happens in full view of the reader? Across generations Joyce’s insistence on the undistinguished aspects of life has exhilarated many readers, and baffled or disappointed many others. While the shared character of the quotidian activities invited many to a vicarious participation, the apparent absence of a narrative rationale behind them guided the irritation of many early readers. Carl Gustav Jung was disappointed that “nothing happen[ed]” in the 735 pages of the book: “Every sentence raises an expectation which is not fulfilled; finally, out of sheer resignation, you come to expect nothing any longer” (584-5).

The discussion pertaining to the status of *Ulysses* as a classic needs to factor in the complex, and the seemingly convoluted, relationship modernism has with *profanum vulgus*. Indeed the “difficult” art of the modernists, including Joyce, places itself beyond the reach of the common reader, an attitude expressed by Eugene Jolas in his pronouncement in the Paris-based journal *Transition*, “[t]he plain reader be damned” (Ellmann 588n). According to Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, modernist art represents “a hoarding of the artistic powers against the populace” (28). But this distancing has an objective, and is to be seen in the context of the avant-garde’s negative engagement with reality. As Theodor Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory*, it is precisely by a critical distancing from the masses and the existing reality that modernism is able to critique both and conceive a new reality. That is why Adorno claims that modernist art respects masses by showing them what they can be “rather than adapting to their dehumanized condition” (*Aesthetic Theory* 341). Adorno defends modernist art’s tendency of cordoning itself off from the populace. According to him, art that is truly emancipatory does not reflect on and communicate with society. Rather, it resists society: “Art is the negative knowledge of the actual world” (“Reconciliation under Duress” 160). Realist art that caters to the masses faces the danger of integration into the dynamics of the system. Art as social protest faces the threat of degenerating into an affirmation of the status quo. Society is willing to incorporate protests and assert its own totalizing power. Adorno sees this totalizing power in the

“culture industry.” Culture industry is the manner in which contemporary capitalist society accommodates artistic practices, even those which were once radical, into its own processes of commercialism and commoditization. To Adorno, the ideal art is a hermetic one. The irony, however, is that the very character of Joyce’s avant-garde art as an esoteric system makes it a commodity of a different order — a collector’s item, with a heightened market value.³

Just as the book’s esoteric potential for meaning-generation enhances its value when tested by the temporal method, the reverse can also be true with regard to the passage of time. The expansion of the canon has rendered the erstwhile distinction between “high” and “low” literature invalid. As we know, contemporary academic research devotes an unprecedented degree of attention to popular culture. Folk tales and folk arts, street theatre, advertisements, travel books, and graphic novels are legitimate critical concerns. Technological changes have ushered in research on cinema, cyber punk, print and television media, social media, and e-novels. Do old definitions of canons and classics still hold water? Despite its early characterization as ‘high art’ and its reputation as an esoteric work, *Ulysses*, like the rest of Joyce’s oeuvre, being replete with pantomimes, folk songs, music-hall numbers, street and barroom ballads, bits of popular fiction, advertisement jingles, nursery rhymes, and, above all, bawdy Irish jokes, has a strong basis in popular culture.⁴ Understandably, Joyce has somehow managed to transcend the high-low distinction and the related cultural transitions. In fact, contemporary popular culture has a Joyce buzz. Joyce is the subject of a lot of popular intertextuality, Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson)’s “non serviam” quote and young Colin’s immediate identification of the source in Martin Scorsese’s *The Departed* (2006), and the Joycean associations of the Soviet code-name Ulysses/Stas Siyanko (Oleg Stefan) in Robert De Niro’s *The Good Shepherd* (2006) being examples. Ironic as it might seem of a work which critiques mass marketing and commodity capitalism from the inside (Bloom is an advertising canvasser), as Emer Nolan points out, “in Ireland, quotations from Joyce’s texts have been used to sell all kinds of commodities, from lemon soap [Bloom buys it from a Dublin chemist] to sausages” (153). *Ulysses* has something for everybody. I am reminded of an observation made by a student the last time I taught the book: “Reading *Ulysses* is like being in a supermarket. You don’t know what to take and what to leave.” As for myself, when I see the flag of European Union fluttering over the chateau of William the Conqueror in Caen, I wonder what Joyce, with his humorous critique of parochial Irish nationalism, would have thought. Nevertheless, there are dimensions of a text in respect of which *Ulysses* might have lost its sheen in course of time. For example, it is doubtful whether an

allusive text such as this may have as much impact in the age of the internet (the eleventh muse!) as high modernist ones had had. Technology changes the text-reader symmetry!

A Milestone Approach

Though difficulty stimulates exegetical research, it cannot be the sole reason for perpetuation of interest. I contend that a work needs to be considered significant or insignificant not because it passes or does not pass the test of time, but because it engages substantial political, cultural, social, philosophical, and aesthetic questions. The claim of *Ulysses* to the status of a classic rests not on its passing the temporal test but on its ability to engage such questions. Perhaps, it may pass the former because it fulfils the latter requirement or expectation. Many projects, both aesthetic and socio-political, are at work in Joyce's texts, and, not surprisingly, they have been at the centre of many perennial concerns, quests, re-examinations, dilemmas, and agonies.

During the early decades of Joyce criticism, the mundane events that Joyce consciously chose to depict in *Ulysses* at the expense of conventional narrative expectations were read in conjunction with the catastrophe of the Great War as symptomatic of the absurdity of contemporary life, a mild prelude to the Beckettian Absurd. In the Literature of the Absurd, human action is represented as fundamentally pointless in a universe deprived of its metaphysical moorings. Beckettian absurd is, of course, not the reappearance of the ordinary as the ordinary. Here the ordinary is short-circuited back into negative metaphysical significances. Coming as they did in the wake of the first war fought on a global scale, and the fragmentation and alienation in daily life wrought by a dehumanizing capitalist production, they were bound to receive such pessimistic but significant appraisals. To T. S. Eliot, who otherwise commended *Ulysses*, the life in the book pointed to "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which [was] contemporary history." He believed that in order to give "a shape and a significance" (270) to this deplorable state of affairs, Joyce and many writers who would follow him were obliged to pursue the mythical method. Similarly, Jean Paris saw the triviality of Joyce's content as a sign of degeneration from the ideals of the past, and atrophy of the times when *Ulysses* was written.⁵ Erich Auerbach also saw the phenomenon in a pessimistic light, as "a mirror of the decline of our world" (551). To him the book presents an "atmosphere of universal doom," "confusion and helplessness," and a "blatant and painful cynicism" (551). In fact, that the book reflected the spirit of its time (*Zeitgeist*) was so taken for granted that when the belief was belied it resulted

in sharp responses. For instance, Marxist critic Karl Radek complained about Joyce's neglect of momentous historical developments. He found Joyce's "method" at the most suitable "for describing petty, insignificant, trivial people, their actions, thoughts and feelings." It would prove "utterly worthless if the author were to approach . . . the great events of the class struggle, the titanic clashes of the modern world" (625).

Joyce has been cited by almost every major thinker and critic of the last one hundred years for one purpose or the other. For instance, Charles Taylor, perhaps the greatest philosopher alive, exploring the making of the modern identity in *Sources of the Self*, employs Joyce's concept of epiphany, in relation to affirmation of ordinary life. Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher who can be called a public intellectual, in her book *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, considers Bloom, the tolerant cuckold, a political model for our times. Bloom's conscious decision to abstain himself from home during the rendezvous between Molly and Boylan illustrates a philosophy of the other: a You-relation, which recognizes the subjectivity of the other as another I, in contradistinction to an It-relation, which merely objectifies and uses the other (a distinction made by Martin Buber). Declan Kiberd's book *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Life in Joyce's Masterpiece* argues that contrary to its reputation as an obscure text, *Ulysses* makes available to common man the wisdom and art of ordinary life. Similarly, in a case of analogous reasoning, Fredric Jameson claims in *Marxism and Form* that *Ulysses* is structured in a way that replicates the totalizing dynamics of capitalism (apparently, very little is left outside his schemata for the book). M. Keith Booker's *Ulysses, Capitalism, and Colonialism: Reading Joyce after the Cold War* is another example which shows the book's ability proleptically to engage phenomena beyond the period of its origin. The point is that writing on Joyce is not mere literary criticism. The conclusion I draw from the proliferating examples of the above-mentioned kind across disciplinary boundaries is that Joyce is not merely a creative writer who extended the frontiers of fiction with his experimental writings but one who is an indispensable part of humanity's long endeavour to understand itself. I am aware that terms such as 'humanity' and 'human nature' are suspect in the contemporary critical climate. But in order to understand a phenomenon one has to suspend for a while the uncompromising conceptual scepticism, which is often considered synonymous with critical intelligence, and the assumed naiveté which accompanies this scepticism. In any case, Joyce's works have been milestones in Western cultural history, both reflecting and triggering the evolution of the Occidental world view in the twentieth century.

In an essay entitled “Joyce à la Braudel: The Long-Temporality of *Ulysses*,” I have argued that Joyce espouses alternative historical trajectories neglected by traditional historiographic paradigms, which largely deal with great personages and momentous events. The essay draws a parallel between the quotidian material life depicted in *Ulysses* and the concept of “structural history” proposed by the French micro-historian Fernand Braudel.⁶ In *Ulysses*, Joyce foregrounds the historicity of the quotidian and holds out the down-to-earth praxis, the immediate challenges, and possible fulfilment in the daily life of ordinary men and women as an experiential contrast to a “grand history” of conspicuous (and cataclysmic) events. If one historicizes the everyday Joyce, this contrastive grand history may be seen to have comprised of not only the Great War, but also the seven-century-long English imperial rule in Ireland, the climactic years of the violent Irish struggle for independence, the civil war that followed, and various kinds of religious and sectarian bigotry, including anti-Semitism, both in Ireland and on the Continent, where Joyce was in voluntary exile. Paradoxically, it is the historiographically privileged phenomena of the greater world — wars, civil wars, colonial domination, violent nationalism, and anti-Semitism — that constitute the content of the “nightmare from which” Stephen is “trying to awake” (*Ulysses* 2.377).

Indeed Joyce’s greatest contribution to “life” (sometimes dismissed as a humanist abstraction) has been in the understanding of everyday life, its unconcealed subtleties, and unarticulated intricacies. No doubt the quotidian in *Ulysses* is historically specific, set at the beginning of the twentieth century in urban Dublin. It is not even an Irish quotidian. Joyce knew very little about the Irish countryside. Further, within Dublin, it is only the lower middle class that finds space in the book. Except for indirect references, the urban working class represented in Seán O’Casey’s plays, and the rural folk in Synge’s works are conspicuous by absence in *Ulysses*. The life-experiences of a specific group of people at a specific moment in time cannot claim universal significance. Having said this, it would be equally naive to consider a cosmopolitan writer’s representation as only locally or nationally relevant. One of Joyce’s attempts as he moved from *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake* was to impart a transnational and transtemporal significance to his works. The *Wake* presents the cosmic dream of an archetypal man HCE (Here Comes Everybody). In *Ulysses* Joyce makes Bloom’s day so representative that many of its aspects will have implications that transcend time and place. He told Arthur Power, “I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal” (Ellmann 505). Acknowledging Joyce’s

ability to capture the universal in the particular, Herman Broch, one of the first Jews who received Joyce's help during the *Anschluss* to escape from German territory, refers to 16 June 1904 as the 'Welt-Alltag der Epoche' [universal quotidian]" (64). Virtually every aspect of the spectrum of existence — education, work, leisure, shopping, sleep, family, birth, sex, death, social camaraderie, religion, politics, and art — finds a place in the encyclopaedic novel. Its representative inclusiveness makes *Bloom's Day* a microcosmic specimen where the workings of human life are instantiated.

Joyce's Delicate *Épistèmes*

That Joyce raises the ordinary and the commonplace to the sanctity of religion and ritual is vouchsafed by his use of the term "epiphany" to describe its trivia. The "vulgarity of speech or of gesture" or "a memorable phase of the mind" is capable of achieving "a sudden spiritual manifestation." The "soul" of the commonest object, "its whatness leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance" (*Stephen Hero* 216). Stephen's epiphanies include a colloquy overheard in Eccles Street (where Joyce was to house Bloom and Molly later in *Ulysses*) between a young lady and a gentleman, and the string of three mundane scenes in *A Portrait*, each beginning with the clause "[h]e was sitting" (67-8). During an epiphany commonplace phenomena receive the attention and emphasis which they are denied under the workaday perspective. Stephen considers these moments "evanescent" because the sensitive state of mind which apprehends the "triviality" may be lacking later: "He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments" (*Stephen Hero* 218).

A Portrait, a revised version of the partially extant *Stephen Hero*, opens with Stephen's vivid recollection of the story about the "moocow," which his father told him. He remembers the physical sensations of infancy with immediacy — the smell of his parents, and the change from warmth to cold when he wets the bed (*Portrait* 7). He is attentive to the sound "suck" produced by dirty water going down through the hole in the basin (11). In *Ulysses* the odour of the pickings of his toe nail, nauseating though it may seem to the reader, takes Bloom back in time to childhood (17.1488-96). The tender sense that Joyce's detailed portrait of Leopold Bloom leaves is that of a little, finite life: Here was a man, uncounted and isolated, who passes unnoticed, through or alongside the otherwise convivial Dublin gatherings. Here was a man with a mole on his nose. And one day he ceased to be. That Rudolf Bloom, the father, had purchased "a new boater straw hat"

(17.629-32) before his suicide speaks volumes about his inner life, which contrasts with the matter-of-fact manner in which Joyce makes Bloom recollect the scene of the inquest. The lamb wool corselet that Molly knitted for infant Rudy, and with which she buried him (14.269) and the bowl of china into which Stephen's mother vomited the bile in her deathbed (1.108-10) are experiential tokens of a life that is unknown, of an unaccounted history. Small things of ordinary human life matter because they are framed by mortality. The finitude of life imparts an existential momentousness and an emotional gravity to non-events. When people are gone, these small things attain an unprecedented significance by "retrospective arrangement," a repeated phrase in *Ulysses*. The strength of literature lies in its ability — a sensitive audacity — to deal with such delicate reality. From an epistemological point of view, a delicate reality is something which we are often compelled to be apologetic about in the face of logical fastidiousness. It is not easily amenable to rational demonstration or empirical verification. It is vulnerable to the charge of stating the obvious. In order to apprehend it we need what André Gide calls *disponibilité* — a conscious openness to all kinds of experience.⁷ To a world of instant generalizations and quick dismissals, where words have failed to signify, where habitual skepticism is mistaken for critical intelligence, Joyce seems to be suggesting that all knowledge is a matter of delicate *épistèmes*.⁸ The imperative for a callous world is to be sensitively open and imaginatively perceptive to unarticulated, subtle, and diverse realities of human experience. Virginia Woolf, another writer of interior monologues, praised Joyce as a "spiritual" writer for his ability to understand the interiority of being (190). Joyce's own interior monologues lay bare before the reader the subtle realities of his characters' inner life — even semi-formed and half-articulated thoughts, dubious perceptions, overwhelming feelings, and unconventional opinions. To this end Joyce fragmented narratives, recast English, perverted its syntax, broke down its vocabulary, peeped into its semantic possibilities, and in the process, rendered the Oxford English Dictionary irreversibly obsolete.

At another level, the self-conscious representation of trivia in *Ulysses* is also meta-art. Therefore, it is possible to detect in it a meta-level significance as well. One may account for the presence of elements such as Bloom's defecation by arguing that by incorporating inconspicuous occurrences, the author is raising a meta-literary question: "What will count as literature?" The Joycean trivia may be seen as part of the transgressive avant-garde response to the arbitrariness of defining and delimiting art.⁹ Joyce's fiction does reveal the arbitrariness of unwritten literary norms through their breach. In the "Calypso" episode Bloom defecates and wipes

himself with a copy of *Titbits*, where the prize story of “Matcham’s Masterstroke” by Philip Beaufoy has appeared. Material that is conventionally unacceptable as art and frowned upon is self-reflexively brought in contact with the printed word.

A Classic to Literary Criticism — *Ulysses* as a Paradigmatic Text

In this final section I explore the significance of *Ulysses* to literary theory, criticism, and research. My contention is that while the book outwits formulaic critical propensities, it is also a paradigmatic text for many schools of criticism. I claim this in the context of certain tendencies in contemporary literary research. Today if one reads a cross-section of secondary materials on any author, three-fourths of them are likely to claim one of the following, or versions thereof: i) Meaning is undecidable (the theoretical insight of deconstruction); ii) Literary texts are not neutral or transcendent entities but inevitably entangled in discourses of race, class, and gender (from schools of ideological criticism); and iii) Some concept or the other is a cultural construct (from constructivism). In a version of deductive reasoning, more often than not, literary research begins with certain *a priori* assumptions, and the final product becomes a mere application of the theoretical assumptions to a few more texts. Though books have been written on *Ulysses* from such theoretical perspectives, its fecund complexity resists critical pigeonholing and facile theorization. Joyce’s writings have been a slap in many faces. But above all, they are a slap in the face of those who prepare procrustean critical beds for his texts to rest.

In a very limited sense, I call Joyce’s writing “aphilosophical.” Here everything is valid; nothing has absolute authority. The texts are a play of competing discourses, world views, and lifestyles, even the most aberrant ones. Of course, some are singled out for parody — ecclesiastical tyranny and parochial nationalism, for instance. But one cannot with cognitive ease hierarchize the various discourses and enlist the author as the ideologue of a cause or the mouthpiece of an idea. This makes Joyce, paradoxically, the highpriest of mismatches and contaminations. Let me illustrate the rift between the rhetorical efficacy of criticism and what “the case” is. Drawing upon Hayden White’s postmodern philosophy of history,¹⁰ Richard Poirier explains self-parody in Joyce and Nabokov saying that it stems from the awareness that literature is no longer the primary source of fictions. History itself is a fictional construct, and all narratives, historical and fictional, are tentative constructs. Self-parody results from this loss of primacy. But those who know the *Lebenswelt* (reality as actually organized and experienced by an individual subject; literally, life-world) out of which Joyce’s texts emerged — he punned on his own

name to be “shame’s voice” and “germ’s choice” — recognize their self-parody to be a complex imaginative output of several ingredients — his degenerate home, his difficult relationship with Ireland and Catholicism, his position as a colonial subject, the strategies of the subaltern, his messianic fantasies, the comic literary pedigree of the Western literary world, particularly Rabelais, the Irish bull, and his own joco-serious *Weltanschauung*.

Ulysses not only transcends theoretical lure, but is also a paradigmatic trigger-text in itself for quite a few approaches to literature: Genetic Criticism, Geocriticism, and the New Economic Criticism, to name a few. As the essays collected in *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant Textes*, edited by Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden, demonstrate, Genetic Criticism does not content itself with one particular state of the text (the final published version), as most approaches in literary studies do, but focuses on the chronological process by which the text came to be. Geneticists are interested in what Jean Bellemin-Noël calls the “avant-texte”: a critical gathering of the writer’s notes, sketches, drafts, manuscripts, typescripts, proofs, and correspondence. In practice, the Genetic approach is a combination of biographical studies of writers, including the dynamic cognitive processes involved in writing; textual criticism; and intertextual studies (what were called “influences” under the now-obsolete “source-studies” as well as the “hypertexts” of the structuralist studies à la Gérard Genette). It looks at the successive states of a book — alterations, exclusions, interpolations, and approximations. It is a unique approach to literature in that it aims to restore a temporal dimension to texts.

Ulysses, whose composition is a history in itself, was an inevitable stimulant for this critical paradigm-shift from textual “being” to avant-textual “becoming” — a shift which has profound ontological implications for literary studies. *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses* (1934), a memoir written by Frank Budgen, English painter and Joyce’s friend, is probably the first “genetic” record of the compositional process of the magnum opus. Budgen tells us about the author’s search for the most appropriate syntax, “an order [of words] in every way appropriate,” which would add the seduction motive from the “Lestrygonians” episode in the *Odyssey* to the scene where Bloom goes to lunch. The resultant sentences are: “Perfume of embraces all him assailed. With hungered flesh obscurely, he mutely craved to adore” (Budgen 20; *Ulysses* 8.638-9). An understanding of the compositional process makes explicit the capacity of textual elements to coalesce and cross-validate, for example, the significance of the apparently erroneous use of the word “crosstree” in the “Proteus” episode of

Ulysses (3.504):

“You know, Joyce” [Budgen] said, “When Stephen sees that three-mastered schooner’s sails brailed up to her crosstrees”

“Yes,” he said. “What about it?”

“Only this. I sailed on schooners of that sort once and the only word we ever used for the spars to which the sails are bent was ‘yards.’ ‘Crosstrees’ were the lighter spars fixed near the lower masthead. Their function was to give purchase to the topmast standing rigging”

“Thank you for pointing it out,” [Joyce] said. “There’s no sort of criticism I more value than that. But the word ‘crosstrees’ is essential. It comes in later on and I can’t change it. After all, a yard is also a crosstree for the onlooking landlubber.” (Budgen 57)

And crosstree does recur in the pattern of “Scylla and Charybdis” episode, where Stephen propounds his Shakespeare theory: “Who put upon by His fiends, stripped and whipped, was nailed like bat to barndoor, starved on crosstree” (*Ulysses* 9.494-6). The passage is a parody of the Apostle Creed, and the erroneous usage is essential to the Christ-symbolism of the book, and to the theme of the Passion of the artist (both Shakespeare and Joyce). As is recognized today at least in some quarters, as the crosstree episode demonstrates, genetic research has potentially tremendous repercussions for meaning and interpretation.¹

Geocriticism is a contemporary critical approach which aims to study real and fictional geographical spaces, its chief practitioners being Bertrand Westphal and Robert Tally. Perhaps, the single source of origin for modern Geocriticism is spatial studies of Joyce’s Dublin. When Joyce told Budgen that he “want [ed] to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of [his] book” (Budgen 69), he was setting new standards of spatial correctness in fiction. Budgen adds: “Joyce wrote the ‘Wandering Rocks’ episode with a map of Dublin before him on which were traced in red ink the paths of the Earl of Dudley and Father Conmee whose journeys frame the occurrences of the episode. He calculated to a minute the time necessary for his characters to cover a given distance of the city” (124). Similarly, the school known as the New Economic Criticism explores “parallels and analogies between linguistic and economic systems,” “between language and money” (Woodmansee and Osteen 14-5). Mark Osteen’s economic analysis of *Ulysses* views Joyce’s signifiatory practice itself as characterized by an economy of thrift and extravagance (*Economy*

of *Ulysses* 200).

One of the trends in Joyce Criticism in the last forty odd years has been a political radicalization of his writings, *Ulysses* in particular (e.g. Enda Duffy's *Subaltern Ulysses*). Such an approach enables us to assess the extent and meaning of the subtle 'commitment' of a writer who *was* widely believed to have cultivated the image of a detached aesthete, primarily interested in form and technique. As Joyce's position on Irish nationalism demonstrates, lack of ideological commitment does not necessarily mean lack of interest. We have seen in the course of this essay that he is vitally interested in everything under the sun but engages in a way that suits his art. Only we have to decipher the nature of this engagement in the book's maze of fragmentary references, its jarring aesthetic, serio-comic play, undermining parody, and ubiquitous irony. A tenacious exercise on these lines can hopefully illustrate what a classic actually means.

Notes

1. In keeping with the tradition of using the Gabler edition of *Ulysses*, episode, and line numbers are cited instead of page numbers.
2. *Nacheinander* and *nebeneinander* are terms which feature in Stephen's interior monologue in the "Proteus" episode, and are a reference to the German aesthetician Gottfried Ephraim Lessing's work *Laocoön*.
3. For a further discussion of the economic logic of the modernist masterpiece, see Lawrence Rainey, "The Cultural Economy of Modernism," *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, pp. 33-69.
4. See Richard Brandon Kershner, *Joyce and Popular Culture* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1996).
5. Paris says: "*Wenn die »Odyssee« hier in entarteter Form auflebt, so nur, weil unsere Welt nicht mehr die Kraft besitzt, eine zweite zu schaffen, weil ihre Kultur bereits dazu verurteilt ist, sich an Abfällen zu sättigen* [If the *Odyssey* revives here in degenerated form, and only thus, it is because our world no more possesses the strength to create a second one, because her culture is already condemned to feed itself on rubbish]" (qtd. in Lobsien 20).
6. The cataclysmic historical events which precipitated the crisis-ridden world view of avant-garde modernism also led to innovative historical inquiries. One call for historical rethinking came from Fernand Braudel, who belonged to what has become known as the Annales School of historians. Having lived through the two world wars and the political upheavals in France, Braudel believed that beneath the ruptures and discontinuities of grand history, a day-to-day life of relative stability and inertia could be discovered. At this micro-level of history, human life is determined not by short-term factors such as the whims and fancies of political leadership but

long-term ones such as geography, climate, and demography.

Braudel demonstrated the operation of such a micro-history in his work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949). He reconstructs the apparently ephemeral lives of slaves, serfs, peasants, and the urban poor in terms of their food, clothing, social customs and mentalities, and suggests that these people are the real makers of civilization. For Braudel, history operates at various levels and is subject to various temporalities. He calls the first temporal level the *longue durée* (longer duration) (*On History* 208). This is geographical time, in which man interacts with his environment for survival (*histoire structurale*). Changes in geographical time happen in the course of centuries, and, hence, are almost imperceptible. The second level of time comprises social and cultural history, with social groupings, empires, and civilizations. Change at this level (*histoire conjoncturale*) is much more rapid than in the first. The third level of time is *histoire événementielle*. This is the history of personalities, politics, and exceptional events. Traditional history mostly takes into account only this third level. The history of events is conditioned by the two other levels underlying it. Braudel includes under material civilization – the story of man’s contact with the inanimate – food, clothing, housing, towns, civic amenities, money, prices, incomes, and technology.

7. The character Michel in Gide’s novel *L’Immoraliste* (*The Immoralist*) embodies this quality.
8. *Épistème* is Michel Foucault’s term for historically specific norms of discourse which determine what can be accepted as valid knowledge.
9. We would do well to remember that the Dadaists had hoped, by destruction of canons of taste and of logic, to show their contempt for bourgeois society. They had made Zürich their home like Joyce, and he was aware of their programme. Of course, Tom Stoppard presents a fictional meeting between Joyce and the Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara in his comedy *Travesties* (1974).
10. White in his *Metahistory* sets out to demonstrate that historical narratives are neither simple representations of a sequence of events nor the revelation of a design inherent in them. Instead, he analyzes historical narratives as shaped by the imposition on events of cultural patterns similar to narratological concepts such as plot and character-type.
11. For a recent example of the genetic approach to Joyce, see Daniel Ferrer and Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Paragraphs in Expansion (James Joyce),” *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes*, pp. 132-51.

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