# Reading The Encyclopedia Dementica: James Joyce and the Critics

**by David Solway (December 2022)**

*The Ambassadors,* Hans Holbein the Younger, 1533

**The encyclopedic technique in fiction** when deployed with the consummate scope and art of James Joyce has as its inevitable

corollary the vast, scholastic profession of source-and-allusion hunting. The impulse which drives this profession is theoretically boundless since the Creation and not the text has become the ultimate object of the quest. The headlong pursuit of meaning and context, however, in the absence of controlling principles will often lead to the production of esoterica. Scholars tend to treat Joyce's text as a *carte blanche* so that the hermeneutic project comes to resemble the legendary excesses of rabbinical *pilpul* or to approach the futile erudition of Trivial Pursuit.[1]

But one cannot blame the Joyce-bedazzled or befuddled scholar entirely. Every scintilla in a book like *Ulysses*, now generally regarded as one of the greatest literary achievements of the 20th Century, must be remorselessly explicated. The novel, "this chaffering all including most farraginous chronicle," as Joyce calls it in his subsequent *Finnegans Wake*, not only invites us to range beyond its fictional limits and visit the domain of the world outside the text, it positively compels us to book our tickets. As R. M. Adams makes abundantly clear in his fastidious study of Joycean detail *Surface and Symbol* (seconded by the more pedestrian labours of compilers of dictionaries of allusions like Don Gifford and Weldon Thornton), much of *Ulysses* (let alone *Finnegans Wake*) remains hidden in impenetrable obscurity if the factual, scholarly and biographical ephemerae with which it swarms are not tracked down and duly elucidated by his reverent scholiasts.

Two cases in point from a myriad which Adams discusses: the cabdriver reading the Irish *Evening Telegraph* of June 16 chances on an article actually printed in the London *Times* of June 17. Joyce's point, apparently, is that the cabman "sees more than his eyes see, and is wiser than his mind knows." It seems he can even penetrate the future. The literal reader, however, is confined to mere exiguous event. According to the Joyceans, the reader who refuses to dig scrupulously into the

mass of buried, mycelial fact on which the novel is erected remains severely limited, deprived of the conic mirror which Joseph Campbell in *Creative Mythology*, discussing the theory of anamorphosis, posits as necessary to resolve the fragmentary images and allusions with which the book is so generously sharded, as it is to resolve the meaning of Hans Holbein the Younger's famous painting, *The Ambassadors*.[2] One must study the conic mirror to see what is really going on. In other words, one needs to read Joyce elliptically.

Again: Saverio Mercadante the composer (1795-1870), to whom Leopold Bloom, the novel's protagonist, attributes musical compositions by Rossini and Mayerbeer, was not as stated a Jew. He was the illegitimate son of Guissepe Mercadante and a servant girl, Rosa Bia. Is Joyce, Adams wonders, trying to establish the correlation of: bastard-Jew-Redeemer? An ingenious reader might continue the guessing game. Is the author merely providing us with one more example of Bloom's characteristic fuzzy-mindedness, or perhaps testing the reader's dedication to the text by presenting him with another in an indefinite series of daedalian conundrums, or running the god "Mercury" and the poet "Dante" into the same onomastic portmanteau, "Mercadante"? For that's precisely the kind of thing Joyce does. Get used to it.

At any rate, if so much of the novel's intrinsic design is made to depend on such subliminal connections and recognitions, which even the educated reader cannot be expected to manage for himself or herself, one may feel justified in putting the entire project into question. So indiscriminate a levy upon the field of the "historical" and the imaginary tends to produce not increased significance but obscurity and distraction, except in the case of the ideal reader suffering an ideal insomnia who, moreover, enjoys ideal access to an ideally complete documentation.

Typical of this endless catechising is *Reading Joyce's Ulysses* by Daniel R. Schwarz, which glosses, among a proliferation of

such minutiae, the "sand-blind upupa" in Bloom's revery in the Oxen of the Sun chapter as suggesting *papa*, "the identity that Bloom seeks to redeem his wasteland," and *pupa*, the insectal transformation stage, that "calls attention to the…possible metamorphosis of Bloom into a suitable father…"[3] Well, maybe.

How useful this sort of exegesis is or the extent to which it illuminates the common reader's experience of *Ulysses* remains an open question. It may be more to the point to recall that the upupa, as Albertus Magnus tells us in *The Book of Secrets*, is really the Lapwing or Hoopoe bird (or Black Plover), a bird associated in both the earlier *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* with Joyce's alter-ego Stephen Dedalus; a bird, moreover, whose eyes have the magical property of pacifying a man's enemies and whose head immunizes a man against deceit. [4]

It is also connected, says Albertus, with the Quiritia stone found in its nest, whose property of ferreting truth from a sleeping man may or may not apply to either Bloom or Stephen (or *Finnegans Wake*'s narcoleptic central character HCE, for that matter), depending on how we agree to define "truth" in this context. One can continue the hunt, as the upupa comes increasingly to approximate Lewis Carroll's vanishing snark, by consulting T. H. White's *The Bestiary* in which the bird's uncleanliness is mentioned. A reference to Bloom's new, hydrophobic heir, the novel's other major character Stephen Dedelus? Perhaps the "sandblind upupa" is the scholiast himself for whom each word in the text is a kind of Quiritia stone to tease the truth from the dreamlike structure of the novel. Interpretation is almost Gödelian.

Admittedly, the larger patterns of relationship between the chief characters remain more or less observable, as do the mythic and archetypal paradigms, but the teeming field of private association, "historical" incident and empirical and scholarly reference through which the reader must stumble

constitutes a serious obstacle in the way of understanding and appreciation. It certainly tries readerly patience. Multiply such nano-details exponentially and we have in effect one of the sovereign techniques of *Ulysses*, the interplay, in Adams' words, "of reality and illusion so subtle as to be almost impenetrably private." This technique derives from an attitude to the world and the reader which renders both subordinate to the text: knowledge of the contents of London and Dublin newspapers for June 16/17, 1904, or of the biography of a little-known composer, are essential if these portions of the text are to be even potentially intelligible.

Such aphidian moments have become part of the texture of the novel, as necessary to the total schema of *Ulysses* as they are historically undiscernible to all but a handful of privileged scholars who receive Guggenheims to discriminate them. Empirical fact and subtending factors have been incorporated into the substance of the novel and the reader transmogrified into a Joycean archivist: both have become servants of the text. As L.A.G. Strong, a favourable reader, asserts in *The Sacred River*, "To assess Joyce's work fully, the critics must know as much as Joyce did." He might have added: and *exactly* what Joyce knew as well. Anthony Burgess in *Joysprick* makes a similar point, perhaps a shade more temperately, when he says, "there has to be curious learning … encyclopedic rather than mere lexicographical knowledge …"

But the function of Joycean detail must always remain to some extent enigmatic. Marilyn French in *The Book as World* regards the mass of such detail as an attempt to ground the novel in the reader's sense of felt reality, that is, to check the diffusions of subjective parallax. "That is why small factual details were so essential in the composition of *Ulysses*. [They] … provide the reader with a firm concrete base, a sense that there is a reality similar to one's sense of one's own world." She does not see the book as simply a reflection or construal of human experience, but contends that Joyce

"literally set out to create a replica of the world … not a metaphor for it, but a copy of it …" That the details which form the "concrete base" of the novel are often obscure, elusive, private or bafflingly recondite corresponds to its central intention of "reproducing all the coincidences, mysteries and incertitude that pervade actual life." Possibly.

On the other hand, Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader* views the issue from a different "parallactic" standpoint. He argues that the essential *Ulysses* can never be satisfactorily grasped. The patterns of event, allusion and archetype which committed readers continue to disinter are not determinate or representative, but are merely "transitory units" which enable us to experience the book in one way or another. No single reading is definitive, "and the mass of details presents itself to the reader to organize in accordance with his own acts of comprehension." The details exist to serve as material which the "implied reader" orders and manipulates to satisfy his quest for coherence. They are the iron filings without which the magnetic field cannot appear to the observer. Only, the number as well as the potential forms of such fields are theoretically inexhaustible. The empirical data which Joyce so painstakingly accumulates thus function, according to Iser, not to anchor the novel (as French believes), but to cut it loose. Possibly.

Is this databank pervasiveness another instance of Joyce's impish joke on the reader, like the various schemata which he released for the edification of his friends interested in producing studies of the novel, leaving the way open for scholars like Richard Ellmann in *Ulysses on The Liffey* to devise yet others even more comprehensive? There are times when I think of Joyce as the ultimate gingerbread man, fleet and mischievous, running away from those who wish to possess his meaning (and who may be refracted in the character of Sebastian Dangerfield in fellow Irishman J.P. Donleavy's hilarious novel *The Gingerbread Man*)—or like Hamlet, perhaps,

rebuking a world of Rosencrantzes and Guildensterns who would pluck out the heart of his mystery. But perhaps there is no mystery. Joyce is simply the gingerbread man who turns and devours the fox, only to be devoured in turn by the story he writes to record the event. Or, say, we follow the itinerary of a hypothetical Hamlet who, counterfeiting his death, brings his adversaries to ruin and retires into the depths of the great textual pyramid, his subterranean motives a source of perpetual controversy.

There may be many readers who resist or resent Joyce's Text because they suspect that it is omnivorous and feral: that in order to read it with the maximum of understanding and sympathy, one has to become as much like Joyce as possible. This is because Joyce has only one ideal reader: Joyce himself. *Finnegans Wake* may represent a more extreme proposition: as Umberto Eco proposes in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, the *Wake* is the sort of text "which foresees, demands, and requires a model reader endowed with an infinite encyclopedic competence, *superior* to that of the empirical author James Joyce."

This is because Joyce's writing attempts to circumscribe the alpha and omega of the entire Created world, so much so that Eco speculates, in his *On Literature*, that the "first dialogue between God and Adam may well have taken place in *finneganian*"—and so will the last, assuming, of course, that Joyce will have succeeded in his project of repatriating the real world into the imaginary world of the text. In *Ulysses*, however, Joyce himself remains the asymptotic target no reader is empirically capable of reaching. Even chosen annotators like Frank Budgen or Stuart Gilbert, duly primed, cultivated and anointed by the master, leave much to be desired, the former too naively apostolic to bring much in the way of analytic perspicacity to the text, the latter too stiffly learned and tidy to appreciate the real poetic beauty of the rhythm and language of *Ulysses*.

*Ulysses* or Joyce can be approached in this manner only at the peril of the cannibal's pot. In reading Mann or Conrad, for example, one can bring one's personality to bear without fear of incorporation. Joyce's text, however, reaches out for the reader, who tends insensibly to become a kind of meta-Dubliner moving sluggishly along the coils of the author's Lestrygonian accomplishment. Pertinent here is the excerpt from the letter of an Irish friend with which Hugh Kenner begins the first chapter of *Dublin's Joyce*: "Willy-nilly we are all living inside Joyce's head … There is a sort of nightmare quality about not being able to get out of literature however hard we try." T.S. Eliot may initially have felt more or less the same way. In a letter to Lytton Strachey reporting upon a conversation with Joyce, he admitted that, for his own sake, he rather wished that he had not read *Ulysses*.

In *The Sacred River* Strong informs us that the "priest-like austerity with which Joyce cut short his intake of material at the crucial day in June 1904 was rewarded by the preservation, intact and pristine, of those early impressions of Dublin." The second part of this statement hardly offsets the sacrificial enormity implied in the first part. In a similar vein, A. Walton Litz in *The Art of James Joyce* deposes that Joyce "ceased during his later years to assimilate significant new experiences into his artistic imagination … new techniques rather than new experience being the source of vitality."

Systematic technique has always been one of the chief artistic means of confronting and managing the chaotic welter of raw experience (formal exclusion is another), but from the perspective adopted here technique is also understood as an artistic reflex to near-limitless engorgement. It is the bureaucracy of the imagination that continues to function when the economy of life has grown static and bearish, the mind devouring its own substance in the absence of further nourishment and stimulus, like Modern Monetary Theory indefinitely printing fiat currency. One is reminded of

Jonathan Swift's spider in the *Battle of The Books*, "drawing and spinning out all from [it]self"—an involuted dialectic in which technique becomes its own ultimate datum or in which, as Kenner comments approvingly in *Dublin's Joyce* [5] "the subject is 'style,' and what style implies."

Jacques Derrida in "Two Words for Joyce," from the Cambridge compendium *Post- Structuralist Joyce*, confesses to the same sort of ambivalent feeling toward Joyce which informs this "lèse-majestical" essay. "One can admire the power of a work and have … a bad relationship with its signatory … I'm not sure I like Joyce." The sense of uneasiness which ruffles Derrida's suave critical composure is partially explained by an "act of writing by which whoever writes pretends to efface himself, leaving us caught in his archive as in a spider's web" —the Swiftian metaphor again.

Derrida's reference is to the gigantic, arachnoid memory which Joyce commands—Strong and Litz, we recall, consider it a substitute for fresh experience—which he calls "hypermnesia" and which provokes resentment because it "inscribes you in the book you are reading." And this ingestion, he claims, can only be pardoned "if one remembers too that Joyce himself must have endured this situation." (I don't know if the ethical valence suggested by a term like "pardon" is entirely appropriate in the development of a critical argument, though a psychological inflection in Joyce's case seems hardly to be avoided).

The attempt to enclose the world culminates in a double form of self-inscription. The writer, *as a part of the world being encircled*, finds himself encysted within his own sufficient text from which he is no longer capable of detaching himself—there is no way out of the encompassing labyrinth; at the same time and by the same token, he has no choice but to continue writing the world into the text by preying on himself as memory gradually replaces the field of experience. Theseus finds only himself at the centre of the labyrinth, waiting for

himself in the shape of the minotaur he has inexorably become, both source and victim of the peculiar mnemophagy of his art.

Moreover, memory supplants experience in the same way as technique replaces substance, word supersedes narrative, schema banishes development. The result may be as wonderfully intricate and symmetrical as the wheels within wheels of Ezekiel's vision or Anaximander's philosophy (or Bloom's "wheels within wheels" in his reflections on change and coincidence in the Lestrygonians chapter), but it fails to convince adequately on the human plane. One can always hear the quiet pineal hum of the primal cyborg deriving its power from a cerebral generator, not from insight into the mysterious depths of the heart and the will.

That is why Joyce's characters remain artificial constructs, their thoughts and motives—they cannot properly be said to have *feelings*—assembled and locked into place like bits of Lego according to the dictates of a complicated blueprint. [6] Occasionally pieces are carefully interchanged, as when Bloom in the Sirens episode thinks Stephen's earlier thoughts about Shakespeare ("In Gerard's rosery of Fetter lane…" etc.)—one scarcely notices the substitution at first reading. The difficulty is to know how to engage a text which resists both the domestic and cultivated practice of reading. To say "I am reading Joyce," Derrida testifies, "produces a merely comical effect." The Joycean desideratum of a lifelong reader is more than the amusing exaggeration many have taken it for. Joyce is not simply a writer, even a great writer; he is a *fate*. What the student discovers in time is that he does not read a Joycean text. He is written into it.

For, as we have seen by now, the book is specifically designed to incorporate the world of which it forms a small, if significant, part, thereby reversing the traditional—and I think proper—relation between literature and reality. This amounts to nothing less than a form of expropriation, a

literary takeover prompted by a revanchist impulse against the domination of the reality principle. Further, reality is assigned a new and ancillary status as a textual appendix, an informative glossary or at best as the invisible section of the novel which formal and aesthetic considerations have excluded, as the Apocrypha were excluded from the Authorized Version of the Bible. Reality is nothing other than *the deleted portion of the draft*, the phantom text which the "graduate reader" must consult if he wishes to master the novel's enormous and presumably rewarding complexities. The "revolution of the word," to quote F.R. Leavis' *The Great Tradition*, has succeeded: fact has been turned into an integral aspect of fiction and the world absorbed and digested into the ever-expanding system of the book itself—the entire book, that is, both printed text and original manuscript. One might even consider the scholarly apparatus that has attached itself to the process of introjection as one of its chapters. [7]

Thus, what we call reality is by implication no longer merely to be *lived*—loved, celebrated, cursed, opposed, studied, approximately understood—but *annexed* as the vast, provincial supplement whose function is to be taxed and exploited for the maintenance of the governing fiction, the factual granary of the imaginative empire, Rome's Egypt. Experience is the enemy, barbarous and threatening; as such it must be rigorously controlled, subdued, and finally assimilated, so to speak, into the latifundian expanse of the imperial fiction. What this project envisions, then, is a form of intellectual colonialism in which, once the war of pacification is over, the conquered territory is accorded a perfunctory, second-class status. It may constitute the greater portion of the new configuration; it may be necessary for the survival and prosperity of the putative victor; yet it is manifestly inferior and subservient now that the subject *of* the fiction has been rendered subject *to* it.

Joyce's congenial practice is perhaps most succinctly epitomized by the protagonist of Jorge Luis Borges' enigmatic short story, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*. Pierre Menard has set himself the impossible task of writing *Don Quixote* word for word—not rewriting it but composing it for the first time, as it were. It is true he carries a dim recollection of the book from having read it in his youth, but this serves merely as the indispensable catalyst of his enterprise, its genetic condition. Joyce has gone even further. He proposes, as I have suggested, not to write or rewrite the *Odyssey* but to write the entire Creation, beginning with the thoughts and movements of a determinate number of characters on a certain day in a given city. Inscription inevitably becomes transcription as ever larger chunks of reality are intromitted into the novel's sinuous and meandering ramifications. The project is theoretically endless and is cut short only by the accident of mortality. I suspect there is no inadvertence in the fact that Borges concludes his story with a reference to Joyce as the potential author of the *Imitatio Christi*.

Despite their misgivings and in all fairness, few readers can deny that *Ulysses* is a splendid book, technically the supreme *literary* achievement of the 20th century. It is precisely for this reason that it remains so problematic and disquieting. It bears striking witness to a conviction of the senseless profusion of the world and that responds by mounting a flanking operation of truly startling dimensions. [8] Joyce, writes Iris Murdoch in her *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, "tries to change life into literature and give it the cohesion of a myth"—but the myth is recursively Procrustean, stretching the text as it absorbs, and so paradoxically truncates, the scope of worldly experience. *Ulysses* attempts to defeat the world by surrounding and transforming it into a subtext or a speculatively infinite referential network. In writing the world into his book, Joyce has provided us with the cardinal

example—perhaps the only example—of an unfamiliar literary genre: the Revenge Comedy.[9]

But the world always has the last word in the politics of textual exploitation as the law of diminishing returns swings into action: when the field of experience which the text ensepulchers grows too intricate, detailed and private, too coiled in personal space and time, it becomes progressively inaccessible, with the inevitable result that the book in which it is embodied becomes like a mystical experience to any but the specialists. As David Gervais suggests in an essay entitled "The Persistence of Myth," with respect to *Ulysses*, "In theory, if he or she works hard enough, the reader should end up knowing everything about everything. This seems a rather arid outcome to look forward to."

If a book is to survive without relying on prosthetic artifice it must rest upon the principle of economy. The particulars of everyday life give flavour, resonance and authority—up to a certain critical point, beyond which the text begins to recede into the maze of the subjective and the minuscule. Joyce is busy pursuing his own private vision of theurgic immanence, paying off personal scores, and finally bogging down in the terminal eccentricity of a *parti pris*.

Still, a literary text need not degenerate into something like the verbal icon or closed construct so beloved of the New Critics in order to establish its own independent mode of existence, related in commensal harmony to the world which it addresses but without either rejecting or admitting it. The work of art remains a heterocosm, a second creation founded on the triple rule of elegance, consistency and meaning, yet depends for its prosperity on a reciprocal agreement with experience which enriches, as it is enriched by, it. If the relation is not right, the consequence is always a greater or lesser degree of unintelligibility.

Derrida was gravely mistaken when he proposed that "*Il n'y a*

*pas de hors-texte*," piquant as the formulation may be; it is, on the contrary, the relation to what is outside the text, that is, *the world of the reader*, that justifies and valorizes what is in the text. The writer who seeks to establish his autonomy by cleansing his work of all demotic impurities concludes in mannered sterility; the writer who tries to turn the tables upon the clamorous world by opening his borders and absorbing it will eventually subside under the inundation of sheer data: personal, historical, mythological, linguistic. The price in the first case is reader boredom and neglect, in the second, bewilderment only partially atoned by delight.

It would seem, then, that the Joycean strategy of textual subversion may finally be self-defeating. "*Ulysses*," T.S. Eliot told Virginia Woolf, "destroyed the whole of the nineteenth century. It left Joyce himself with nothing to write another book on. It showed up the futility of all the English styles." The point may be a bit exaggerated, but it has merit. For Joyce's chief protagonist is ultimately language itself and its infinite possibilities. It takes a special reader to enjoy Joyce's verbal and stylistic permutations.

Joseph Prescott in *James Joyce: The Man and His Works* assumes that the incomplete term of the progression *Ulysses-Finnegans Wake* would be a book called *Tabula Rasa*, for the propagation of inconsequent details, philological hybrids and subjective communings leads not only to the multiplication of meanings but to a featureless amalgam of constituent distinctions: what we might refer to as a condition of textual leucography. It may have been a blank page. In any case, Joyce (whom Harry Levin in *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* calls "a one-man Sinn Fein movement"), for all his indisputable genius, would not find many readers among the diminishing population of the literate had he not become a thriving scholarly multinational.

Mario Vargas Llosa in *Making Waves* rightly praises Joyce for "the supreme ability of a writer, through use of detailed

memories of the small world of his birth and through his extraordinary linguistic facility, to create a world of his own." But he does not recognize that this "world of his own" can, as we have noted, inflate almost illimitably and swallow its creator whole, along with the legions of devoted acolytes who retrace Leopold Bloom's steps every 16 June in a largely fictional Dublin. The only hope for self-retrieval is furnished, perhaps, by the anonymous correspondent who sent me an email offering a "Dimensional Warp Generator #52 4350a wrist watch, an XK memo replica or similar technology" to help counteract the "nanoprobe tracers and mind-transducers" used by unspecified aliens to take over one's life.

But one's life is in danger of being taken over nonetheless. One calls to mind, in this connection, Usher Caplan's remark in his study of the great Canadian poet and Joycean euhermerist A. M. Klein, *Like One That Dreamed*, to the effect that "Klein's wanderings into the labyrinth of *Ulysses* could have contributed to his breakdown." Klein suffered a mental collapse in the early 1950s, while mapping out the symbolic territory of the novel, and never wrote a word thereafter.

For all too many of his exegetes and disciples, Joyce was indeed a psychological hazard and lifelong compulsion. Entering the Joycean monad comes with its attendant risks. But it should be noted that he could also be a loyal friend and an engaging personality. Stanley Price's wonderful book *James Joyce and Italo Svevo: The Story of a Friendship*, treating of the loving and symbiotic relationship between Joyce and the great Italian/Triestine writer, the author of the classic *The Confessions of Zeno*, shows Joyce in the most appealing light. Price's book is well worth reading for the lover of fiction and biography.

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To summarize. Joyce was highly eccentric, an inveterate punster, impractical in the ways of the world, often

impecunious, largely unappreciated as a writer until near the end of his life, and clingingly dependent on his long-suffering common-law wife Nora Barnacle—on learning her name, Joyce's father said "She'll stick to you then." (James and Nora married in 1931.) He was also all-too-fond of his flights of white wine and would occasionally have to be led home late at night from the throes of a streetside stupor.

One can be ambivalent about Joyce, as I am, but one must also recognize that his accomplishment was as admirable as it was unique. For he was a literary nonpareil, the most intricate and demanding novelist in the language. His book of short stories *Dubliners*, for example, contains a Latin and Sanskrit subtext. Regarding the former, a word like "disappointed" also means "appointed by the Devil," since "Dis" is the Latin/Italian word for Hades or Satan, as in Dante's City of Dis in the Sixth to Ninth Circles of the *Inferno*. Such lexical hijinks abound in the text. And since I also taught *Dubliners* in my courses on Joyce, it was necessary to consult W.W. Skeat's *Fourth Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, which dwelt on Sanskrit roots (among others). This was the volume that Joyce apparently kept under his pillow (reminding me of Miami Dolphin star quarterback Tua Tagovailoa, who would sleep hugging a football). Stephen Whittaker argues that the edition in question was not the fourth but one of the earlier three—such is the picayune nature of much Joyce scholarship.

Joyce was apparently considering a follow-up to *Finnegans Wake* to be called *The Sea*. What that book would have been like is anybody's—or rather, nobody's—guess. But one can't help speculating. Would it have been a single, vast, tidal word flowing in for the first half of the book and ebbing in reverse, like the Hebrew alphabetical code *Temurah*, for the remaining half? Prescott's aforementioned *Tabula Rasa* suggestion, while unlikely, is by no means preposterous, in that the book he envisions would probably have been no more

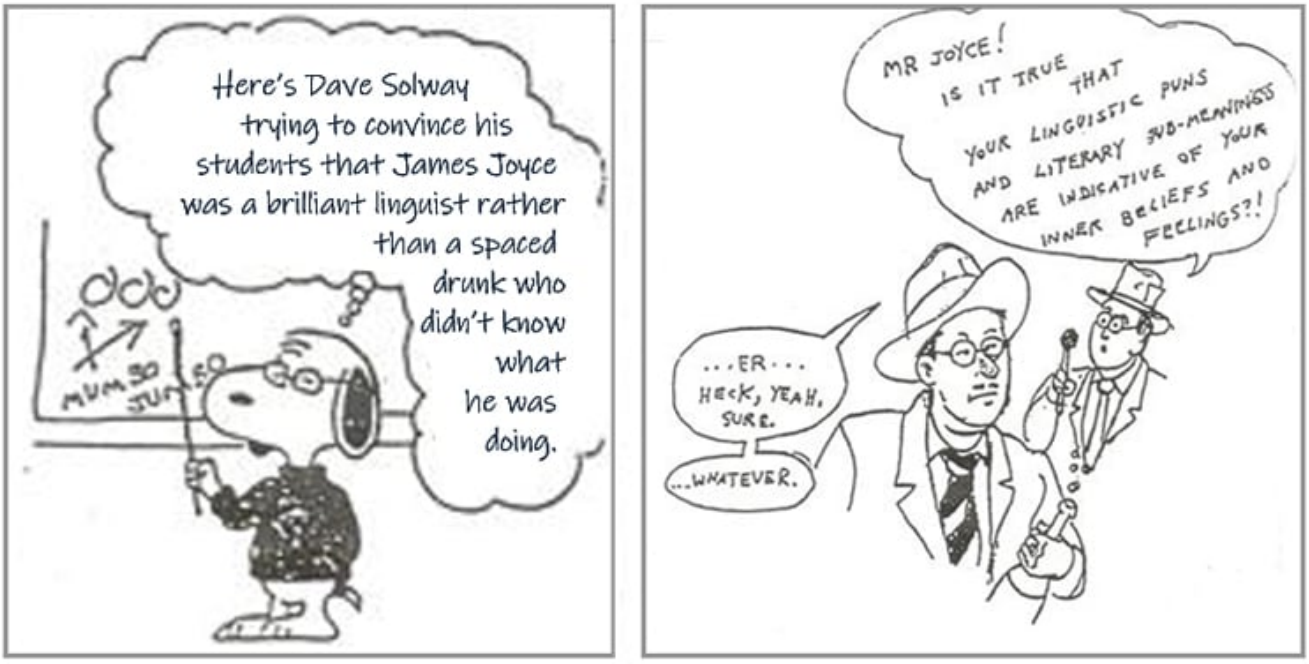
indecipherable than the one I have imagined. Or might Joyce in his jocoserious way have taken the literary world by surprise and produced a straightforward, 19th century-like, readily-accessible volume complete with a transparent third-person narrative, authorial intervention, consistent characters, and dialogue set off in what he once called “perverted commas”? Joyce was certainly no less unpredictable or implausible than his fictional namesake in Flann O’Brien’s *The Dalkey Archive*, who professes ignorance of both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* and claims to have written *Dubliners* in collaboration with the Irish humourist Oliver Gogarty.

The question remains: why read Joyce? It’s a task that routinely defeats the common reader, who has neither the time nor the patience for the struggle. And yet, even though he or she will miss much of what is actually happening in a novel like *Ulysses* (*Finnegans Wake* is caviar for the epicure), and despite the rebarbative architecture and Joyce’s strategy of containment, the outlines of the plot are discernible, the play of language is magnificent, and the mix of humour and sadness is profoundly human. Anyone interested in literature, a shrinking minority these days, should seek to acquire at least a passing acquaintance with so extraordinary a writer. Joyce is not only a cult figure. He has a growing community of acolytes and admirers.

On a personal note, though it might seem odd to some, Joyce can be a lot of fun. His philological munificence is tailor made for gaming. My friend, the poet Eric Ormsby, and I would occasionally engage in after-dinner sport with the *Wake*, locating passages that might yield surplus developments, a sort of higher Scrabble for word wonks. (O foenix culprit!) I have to say, too, that my classes on Joyce were well-attended, his complexity offset by his antic sense of mischief, his love of the joke and his puzzle-like wordplay. Joyce appealed particularly to the aspiring young Sheldons among the students. One of the more puckish called him “funky.” Another

presented me with two humorous sketches representing the bibulous author and the zealous pedagogue, which I took as a sign of didactic success:

Joyce did not fare well among the literati in his lifetime and certainly not in his native Ireland. One thinks of his own fulminating "gigant," in the *Wake*, "smelling de bloodz odz an Iridzman." Things have changed. Bloomsday, June 16, named after his character Leopold Bloom and commemorating the day on which the story of *Ulysses* take place, is observed annually in Dublin and many other cities around the world. Rather late, but fitting.

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[1] Or as Joyce would have put it, "quadrivial" pursuit.
[2] The idea is also taken up by Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, with particular reference to Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* in which the distorted skull at center bottom can be properly seen only from an oblique viewing angle. "To enter this non-place is to alter everything in the painting and render impossible a simple return to normal vision." Greenblatt then applies this technique of "anamorphic virtuosity" to Thomas More's *Utopia*

to determine the way an official perspective on the text's grapple with reality may be unsettled, placing the traditional "methods of ordering and measuring the world" in a new and unexpected light. Similarly, Campbell, taking his cue from a formulation of Schopenhauer's, argues that the reader must approach *Ulysses* from the side, as it were, bringing a "conic mirror" to bear and reading anamorphically from a Joycean vantage point to resolve the novel's enigmas and complexities. [3] It is interesting to note that Schwarz, in his semi-deconstructionist study of Joycean metaphoricity (or "metaferocity"), blithely approves of the text's evident amoebic qualities. "Does not such a linear series where one event signifies the subsequent one become a structural endorsement of the contiguous metaphoricity by which characters, events, and words signify and are signified by one another until the book becomes coterminous with recorded history and spatially (sic) equivalent to the whole world?" [4] It is not so easy to determine how the symbol of the lapwing is to be understood and applied. As the bird whose cries lure attackers away from the nest, it may suggest Stephen's flight to the continent to protect his fledgling artist's soul from Irish indifference or animosity. It is, appropriately, also the symbol of callow impetuosity, as in Horatio's comment on Osric in *Hamlet*: "This lapwing runs away with the shell on his head," a reading which ironically qualifies the former acceptation. In Oliver Goldsmith's long poem *The Deserted Village* it represents social and economic desolation: "Amidst thy desert walks the lapwing flies." William Blake's notebook lyric gives us a somewhat different picture again, presenting the lapwing as potential victim:

> O lapwing, thy fliest around the heath,
> Nor seest the net that is spread beneath.
> Why dost thou not fly away among the cornfields?
> They cannot spread nets where a harvest yields.

Which links up nicely with Stephen's image of the three nets

of language, religion and nationality that he must fly by. In Albertus it is the talismanic properties of the bird which are emphasized, and this may correspond as well to Bloom's apotropaic soap and potato. (cf. William Schutte in *Joyce and Shakespeare* for the *Hamlet* and Blake references).

[5] Kenner's main argument in *Dublin's Joyce*, surely one of the most brilliant and wrongheaded books on Joyce ever written, assumes that Joyce's intention in *Ulysses* is largely parodic: that Stephen represents an aesthetic cul-de-sac which Joyce anatomizes and repudiates and that Bloom is a "low-powered variant" of "the insane mechanical meticulousness of that mode of consciousness…proper to industrial man." Joyce, he contends, does not stand behind *Ulysses* paring his mandarin fingernails, but somewhere above the industrial (and cybernetic, as we would say now) wasteland which the book is designed to reflect and condemn. This would mean that Joyce's relation to his characters in particular and to his book in general is chiefly antiphrastic, that it is written in what W.B. Yeats called "the spirit of accusation" and not in "the spirit of forgiveness." Such an assumption does violence not only to Joyce's own recorded sentiment of Bloom as essentially "a good man" (cf. Budgen), but to the profound conviction on the part of many readers that Stephen (despite the irony of his presentation) is very much as Joyce was in his youth and that Bloom's Molly has about as much of Joyce's wife Nora in her as she does *das ewig Weibliche*.

What Kenner has done is to mount an impressive salvage operation; having recognized *Ulysses* as a kind of "huge and intricate machine clanking and whirring for eighteen hours," he proceeds to regard it as a deliberate parody-reflection of a nightmare society or, say, an ironic critique in the form of a Trismegistian inversion: as below, so above. This redemptive view turns the novel into pure satire which, though it may contain elements of satire and considerable irony, it assuredly is not. Clearly a work cannot be justified by reproducing the very quality it is presumably denouncing, as

Walter Scott understood when he remarked that Jane Austen ran the risk of boring her readers by a faithful rendering of dull characters. (See S.L. Goldberg's *The Classical Temper*, Ch. IV, for an extensive commentary on Kenner's reclamation project).

[6] The philosopher Albert Cook is a markedly unfriendly witness. In *The Dark Voyage and The Golden Mean* he writes: "But one searches any of [Joyce's] books in vain for a deep probing of the individual, any character who is more than a type…Bloom, despite the elaborate documentation of his personal history, is merely a type, like HCE…A brief comparison of Joyce's entire repertoire of characters with those in Dostoevsky…will show to all but the most ardent enthusiast the comparative poverty of Joyce. He was a rationalist writer of satire and comedy, with an average imagination and an immense memory." There is, I believe, a certain amount of truth in Cook's disclaimer, but it leaves too much out of consideration: the complex humour, the undeniably great writing, and the most impressive architectonic in all of modern literature. Moreover, it is surely misleading (and possibly a function of animus) to dismiss Joyce as the bearer of an "average imagination," despite Joyce's own self-suspicion on this count. But to focus on the rationalist and memorial aspect of Joyce's writing is to strike at the Achilles heel of the entire Joycean project, namely, at the way in which it resembles a *campaign*, conscious, patient and systematic, against an adversary too inexhaustible to be decisively defeated. "Another victory like that and we are done for."

[7] Wyndham Lewis felt that Joyce's method set "the reader in a circumscribed psychological space, into which several encyclopedias have been emptied," and went on to smear *Ulysses* as "a monument like a record diarrhoea." Lewis' animus against Joyce and against the stream-of-consciousness technique is too well known to require renewed documentation, and in any case tends to come across more as a personal vendetta than a lucid and balanced critique. Joyce was aware of the *ad hominem* element in Lewis' attack and considered it at best as

amounting to no more “than ten per cent of the truth.” But it seems to me that Lewis for all his unhelpful belligerence and unmannerly vehemence had his moments of shrewd insight, as for example in *Time and Western Man* when he characterized the experience of reading *Ulysses* as a kind of bathyspheric plunge: “It is *you* who descend into the flux of *Ulysses*, and it is the author who absorbs you momentarily into himself for that experience.” I would cavil, however, with the “momentarily.”

[8] It is as if, psychologically, Icarus precedes Daedelus. Having plummeted from the sky, he reacts by constructing a labyrinth which encroaches upon the universe. What he possesses can no longer dispossess him. To change the metaphor, he has come to inhabit what Joyce calls in *Finnegans Wake* a “Tiberiast duplex” from whose central podium he can proceed to lambast the understandings of all us “lattlebrattons” and “muddlecrass pupils.”

[9] The revenge theory figures prominently in Armin Arnold’s *James Joyce*. Arnold contends, for example, that *Ulysses* “can be interpreted as Joyce’s revenge on Ireland, the Church, and everybody and everything that had contributed to making his life such as it was.” As for *Finnegans Wake*, it “could then be interpreted as the ultimate expression of Joyce’s innermost resentments against the language he had to use, the civilization in which he had to live, and the universe in general.” Such evaluations are not only unkind, they are manifestly useless and smack of some form of personal (to use Frederick Rolfe’s, aka Baron Corvo’s, word from *Hadrian the Seventh*) *liblabbery*. As for the Revenge Comedy, one thinks of J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* as another Irish candidate for this hypothetical classification of literary intent.

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**David Solway's** latest book is *Notes from a Derelict Culture*, Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, *Partial to Cain*, appeared in 2019.

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