***Ulysses*: One Hundred Years On**

In 1999, an editorial board of the Modern Library brought out a list of the 100 best novels written in the twentieth century, and, with a confident degree of unanimity, the board declared James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as Number One. Given its encyclopedic sweep and narrative experimentalism, the book, along with T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* also published in 1922, ushered in the modernist movement in literature. Writing in hindsight toward the end of the century, Hugh Kenner said, “It is now as impossible to imagine a twentieth-century literature without *Ulysses* as to imagine a twentieth-century physics without relativity.” Thus, at the end of the 20th century *Ulysses* was very much at the center of whatever one might call a literary canon. And even though the existence and the assumptions of such a concept as a literary canon have been under scrutiny—make that aggressive interrogation—in more recent years, the book has not only survived such scrutiny but in many ways supported such interrogation. At one point, Jacques Derrida suggested that many of his ideas concerning deconstruction were already mapped out in *Ulysses*. More recently, postcolonial criticism has found *Ulysses*, set in the 1904 world of Dublin under the imperial rule of Great Britain, to be a rich repository of insight and analysis concerning the distortions and diminishments of life under colonial rule. Allowing for some specific adjustments in Joyce’s approach to the subject, the editors of an anthology of essays devoted to this critical approach, borrowing a pun from *Finnegan’s Wake*, called their collection, not Postcolonial but *Semicolonial Joyce*. And this year, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the book’s publication, Oxford University Press has just published an expanded collection of annotations to *Ulysses*, one that is twice the length of the book itself. Cambridge University Press, aiming at classroom or seminar presentations of the novel, has this past June published a new facsimile edition of the 1922 edition, accompanied by essays by eighteen contemporary Joyce scholars, one to introduce each of the book’s eighteen episodes. In addition, integrating this now classical text into the age of the internet, the Cambridge editor, Catherine Flynn, has uploaded a set of eighteen podcasts, again one for each of the episodes, based on the scholarly essays and discussions from the Ulysses seminar she conducted at UC Berkeley. The Joyce industry is alive and well—and thriving.

This celebration and accessibility, however, has not always been the case with the book. In fact, notoriety and inaccessibility might be better terms to describe its initial appearance and subsequent reception. It was first published in installments in *The Little Review* in the United States starting in March 1918 and subsequently in *The Egoist* in Great Britain. But in 1920 the installment, later to be known as “Nausicca” featured Leopold Bloom, the Ulyssean protagonist, masturbating on a beach while gazing at the underwear of Gerty McDowell, a 21-year-old who seems very much aware of Bloom’s gaze. The installment came to the attention of a New York lawyer who in turn referred the book to the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. A court trial followed in which the book was declared obscene, the American editors fined, and the book’s publication banned in the United States, and subsequently in the U.K. The book was only published as a complete novel in Paris in 1922 by Sylvia Beach, the American owner of the bookshop Shakespeare and Company. Since the American and English publishing ban lasted over a decade until the landmark decision by Judge John Woolsey in 1933 declaring the book not obscene, *Ulysses* was not generally available to American and British readers but had to be purchased in France and surreptitiously transported abroad.

That said, for those who managed to obtain one of the subscription copies, the immediate critical reaction to the book was deeply split. Sisley Huddleson, writing in *The Observer* in 1922 says concerning the final episode:

There is one chapter devoted to the reverie of a woman, and her monologue interieur is, I imagine – and am bound in all honesty to say – the vilest, according to ordinary standards, in all literature. And yet its very obscenity is somehow beautiful and wrings the soul to pity.

Arnold Bennett, while calling the work “sometimes dazzlingly original,” acknowledges the obscenity issue cautiously, saying that *Ulysses* is not pornographic; still “it is more indecent, obscene, scatological, and licentious than the majority of professedly pornographical books.” For Arnold, he thought the inclusion of obscenity was justified, although he allowed a general reader might differ.

That general reader soon appeared in the shape of James Douglas, the editor of *The Sunday Express* in London, and his contempt for the book is unrestrained:

I say deliberately that it is the most infamously obscene book in ancient or modern literature … All the secret sewers of vice are canalized in its flood of unimaginable thoughts, images and pornographic words. And its unclean lunacies are larded with appalling and revolting blasphemies directed against the Christian religion and against the name of Christ — blasphemies hitherto associated with the most degraded orgies of Satanism and the Black Mass.

Surprisingly enough, even D. H. Lawrence, speaking to his wife of *Ulysses,* seemed to agree, “The last part of it is the dirtiest, most indecent, obscene thing ever written. Yes, it is, Frida…It is filthy.” Ironically enough, several years later Lawrence’s own *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* would be banned on the grounds of obscenity.

Other British writers also panned the book and its author, but as much on the grounds of social class as on its literary deficiency. Wyndham Lewis said Joyce was “The poet of the shabby-genteel, impoverished, intellectualism of Dublin. His world is the small middle-class world.” Virginia Woolf, after reading 200 pages of the book, wrote in her diary, “an illiterate, underbred book it seems to me: the book of a self-taught working man.” Despite her snobbish objections, Woolf incorporated many of Joyce’s revolutionary narrative strategies into her own *Mrs. Dalloway*, which she was in the midst of writing.

From a contemporary perspective, it may seem strange that there were such strenuous and outraged responses to the contents of a novel (although our own recent resurrection of book banning and purgation of “woke” ideas in elementary schools may have the past prove prologue). But as Kevin Birmingham, author of *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce’s Ulysses,* puts it:

To understand how thoroughly Joyce broke conventions, it helps to remember how stringent they were. Molly Bloom lies awake at night and thinks about getting “fucked yes and well fucked too up to my neck nearly” by Blazes Boylan. Ten years earlier, Joyce couldn’t publish “Dubliners” in part because he used the word bloody.

For all the sensation about the obscenity of the book from British critics and authors, there were reviews from Americans that focused on its innovative accomplishments and did so in superlatives. Edmund Wilson, in his July 1922 review in *The New Republic*, suggests that Joyce may have surpassed Flaubert and Henry James. “In Joyce,” he says, “you have not only life from the outside described with Flaubertian virtuosity but also the consciousness of each of the characters and of each of the character’s moods made to speak in the idiom proper to it, the language it uses to itself.” More pointedly, he says, “It is, in short, the most faithful X-ray ever taken of the ordinary human consciousness.” Wilson expresses some reservation about Joyce’s mixing parody and burlesques in the midst of a realistic novel but finishes on an extremely high note. Responding to a rumor that Joyce may never write another book after *Ulysses*, he says, “If he has really laid down his pen never to take it up again, he must know that the hand which laid it down upon the great affirmative of Mrs. Bloom, though it never write another word, is already the hand of a master.”

But perhaps the most enduring and most influential review of *Ulysses* came over a year and a half after its publication. T.S. Eliot, writing in the November 1923 issue of *The Dial*, takes aim at an earlier review by Richard Aldington which had accused Joyce of being a “prophet of chaos.” But Eliot also broadly includes in his retrospective appraisal the many reviews which had appeared up to that date. His essay, “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” lays out its superlative acclamation in the opening paragraph: “I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape.” What earlier reviewers had missed—or at least did not appreciate the significance of—was the method Joyce employed to structure his book, specifically the “parallel to the *Odyssey*, and the use of appropriate styles and symbols to each division.” Other reviewers had thought of the Homeric parallel as a dodge or as a mere scaffolding for laying out the realistic tale, but essentially of no interest to the completed work. But for Eliot this method was paramount. As he says, “In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method that others after him must follow…. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.”

Subsequent critics have pointed out that Eliot was in fact saying more about “The Waste Land” than about *Ulysses*, and it’s clear that Eliot had drawn some elements of his landmark poem from the installments of *Ulysses* being published in *The Egoist* while he was writing the poem. In some ways, the parallel between the Homeric epic and the realistic tale of an ordinary day in the life of three ordinary Dubliners might have easily eluded most readers since the only indication of the parallel, at least initially, was the title Joyce gave to the work. There were no Homeric titles for the various episodes as they were serially published, nor were there any for the eighteen episodes as they appeared in the completed 1922 publication.

Joyce, aware of the charges of obscurity and disorganization which the later installments had generated, composed several schemata in which he mapped out in detail the book’s composite elements and its complex structure, starting with a Homeric title, the physical scene, the hour of the day, the organ of the body, an artform, and a narrative style for each of the eighteen separate episodes. He also included specific correspondences between the characters in the contemporary episodes and their analogous characters in the *Odyssey*. Joyce gave a schema to Carlo Linati in 1920, and one to Valary Larbaud for a pre-publication talk the next year. He gave a slightly altered one to Stuart Gilbert who printed it in his book-length explication of the novel which Joyce helped write and which was published in 1931.

In the schema Joyce provided, the young poet Stephen Dedalus is parallel to Telemachus, who sets off at the opening of the *Odyssey* in search of his father who has been absent for twenty years fighting the Trojan War. The first three episodes, all focused on Stephen and his frustration as an aspiring artist, constitute the Telemachiad. The next twelve episodes, dubbed the Odyssey, focus on Leopold Bloom, an ad canvasser for a Dublin newspaper, who wanders across Dublin throughout the day and night, attempting—not at all successfully—to avoid thinking about his wife Molly’s impending sexual tryst with Blazes Boylan, an impresario who will be taking his wife on a musical tour. During the day Stephen and Bloom almost meet at the newspaper office and at the National Library but finally join at a maternity hospital, a meeting which culminates with Bloom subsequently rescuing Stephan in the aftermath of a scene set in the brothel district of Dublin. The final three episodes, the Nostos, follow Bloom and Stephen from a cab shelter where they have a coffee and bun back to Bloom’s house. They have cocoa and some conversation, take a piss together in the back garden looking up at Molly’s window, and Stephen walks off into the night and out of the book. Bloom returns to his house and, now sure of—and apparently reconciled to--his wife’s infidelity, finally reunites with Molly. The book then concludes with an extended interior monologue in which Molly, now parallel with Penelope, reviews her day—confirming explicitly her adultery with Blazes Boylan—and more broadly her life and circumstances since her childhood on the island of Gibraltar.

At first, the contrast between the heroic actions and characters in the Homeric epic and the narrative of these commonplace characters and events over a single day in 1904 Dublin might suggest a mock-heroic intent, with the Homeric epic providing an elevated standard with which to diminish the distinctly unheroic

nature of these ordinary Dubliners. For Eliot, though, the “continuous parallel between antiquity and contemporaneity” which he praises in his review is not a one-way street in terms of influence. As he points out in his seminal essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it…. The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” The implication is not only that *Ulysses* should be read and understood through a screen of the *Odyssey* but also that the *Odyssey* should now be understood through a screen of *Ulysses*. Joyce, in a note of thanks to Eliot for the review, urged him to employ a phrase such as “two-plane,” one which Eliot had used in an earlier conversation, to illuminate the centrality of this narrative strategy.

Eliot did not take up Joyce’s suggestion, but Hugh Kenner did and, in doing so, elaborated what he calls an “aesthetics of delay” to clarify both the challenge and the richness of Joyce’s experimentation, not only in terms of its parallel to the Odyssey but also in the manner Joyce develops his narrative and characters. Kenner calls attention to the use of the word “parallax,” a word which appears seven times in the book, an astronomical term which refers to the way an object can appear differently to an observer depending on the angle of perception with which the object is viewed. In the novel, Bloom as he is walking across Dublin notes the different times that are registered on the Dublin Ballast clock and time ball. At one o’clock each day, a time ball would drop to register both Greenwich Mean time and Dunsink time, that is, the present time in Dublin. Kenner explains the technical implications:

*The Ballast Office clock presents parallactic readings, two readings simultaneously: Greenwich time by the ball for mariners, Dunsink time for pedestrians. And Greenwich time and Dunsink time differ by twenty-five minutes because astronomers in those two places observe the sun from stations separated by 6 ¼ ̊ of longitude; this is technically and precisely parallax.*

While Bloom doesn’t quite understand the intricacies of the different observations and their consequences, he does get the right time, reaching his correct conclusion with faulty premises, a good example of a “Bloomism” in the book. But a more familiar example of parallax is human eyesight: since we observe the world from the perspectives of two different eyes, we have the perception of depth in our field of vision. As Kenner sums up, “Parallax makes possible stereoscopic vision.”

In terms of the narrative progression of the novel, the parallax accretion of one perspective followed by another results in a dramatic method which allows Joyce to present—and to complicate—the elements of plot and character without the explicit commentary which traditional realistic or naturalistic fiction assumed. As Kenner says, “Two different versions at least, that is Joyce’s normal way; and the uncanny sense of reality that grows in readers of *Ulysses* is fostered by the neatness with which versions of the same event, versions different in wording and often in constituent facts—separated, moreover by tens or hundreds of pages—reliably render one another substantial” (Kenner, 75).

To illustrate both the detail and the intricacy of this method in the book, Kenner traces the potato Bloom oddly carries with him throughout the day. From its first puzzling mention (“potato I have”) as Bloom checks his pockets as he leaves the house (why does Bloom have a potato in his pocket?) to its twice being alluded to through the day to its reappearance in several forms in the hallucinatory Circe episode, the potato seems gratuitously enigmatic. However, when Bloom alludes to it as “poor mama’s panacea” and it appears in the Litany of the Daughters of Erin as “Potato Preservative Against Plague and Pestilence, pray for us,” the reader may, if blessed with a photographic memory to recall the earlier allusions, infer that Bloom is carrying the potato as a good-luck charm because his mother told him long ago that it would absorb disease from the air. And the potato appearance and reappearance is simply one of hundreds and hundreds of details and pertinent interconnections which recur throughout the book, so multitudinous that Kenner concludes, “Joyce’s strange book has no stranger aspect than this, that no one comprehensive reading is thinkable” (Kenner, 76)

Still, even if a comprehensive or complete reading of the book is impossible after a single reading, this two plane/two version/ parallactic narrative strategy may be helpful in clarifying Joyce’s experimentation with the central characters in the book. For openers, a crucial element of this strategy is to follow the narrative of the book *as it unfolds*. A problem with a good deal of commentary on the book is the temptation, in order to illuminate or clarify a puzzling or difficult initial entry, to leap ahead to facts or revelations which occur later in the book. For example, we are introduced to Stephen Dedalus in the first three episodes, first with his interactions with Buck Mulligan and Haines at Martello Tower, then at the school with his students and Mr. Deasy, and finally during his solitary meditations as he walks on Sandymount Strand. The narrative movement in the three episodes is primarily from exterior interaction to interior reflection, with Stephen pondering “the ineluctable modality of the visible” or how we perceive the world through our senses. We will later see Stephen at the newspaper office and the National Library and finally encountering Bloom at the Maternity Hospital. But it is only during the Circe episode in the Nighttown brothel area (some 400 pages after the walk on Sandymount Strand) we learn that Stephen, who is near-sighted, broke his glasses the day before and has gone through the day visually impaired, adding via the aesthetics of delay an element of irony to his earlier philosophical speculations on perception.

A similar, but more extended irony, is at play with the presentation of Leopold Bloom. We meet him as he is preparing breakfast in bed for his wife Molly and, in stepping out to buy a pork kidney for his own breakfast, his interaction with the porkbutcher Dlugacz introduces the first oblique allusion to Bloom’s Jewishness, even as one notes he is preparing a non-kosher breakfast for himself. But in Bloom’s subsequent interactions with other male Dubliners at Paddy Dignam’s funeral and the Freeman Journal’s newspaper office, it becomes clear that Bloom, who is snubbed, disregarded or ignored, is very much an outsider in terms of Dublin’s clannish xenophobia and anti-Semitism. It will all come to a head with Bloom’s confrontation with the one-eyed Citizen in the Cyclops episode. In response to the Citizen’s overt anti-Semitic attack (he mistakenly believes Bloom has won big on the Gold Cup horse race and is refusing to stand a round of drinks), Bloom has what seems his most assertive and ennobling moment in the book as he defends Jewishness: “Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Mercadante and Spinoza. And the Savior was a jew. Your God.” When the Citizen challenges him with “Whose God?” and Cunningham points out that Jesus didn’t have a father, Bloom goes further and self-identifies as a Jew: “Well, his uncle was a jew, says he. Your God was a jew. Christ was a jew like me.” The episode ends with Bloom’s retreat in a jaunting cart being described as a chariot taking Elijah into the heavens. But in the next episode, we see Bloom very much brought back to earth as he masturbates while staring at Gerty McDowell’s exposed drawers, after which the reader discovers Bloom is not circumcised. Further, we see in the Circe episode that Bloom’s Irish mother Ellen Higgins Bloom had an Irish mother Fanny Hegarty, and, since Jewish affiliation is traced through the mother, one might argue that Bloom, technically speaking, isn’t a Jew at all. Rounding out the irony of Bloom’s ostracism as a Jew in 1904 Irish Catholic Dublin, we discover in the next-to-last Ithaca episode that Bloom was baptized twice, once as a Protestant as a result of his father’s conversation in marriage to Fanny Hegarty, and again as a Catholic before Bloom’s marriage to Marion Tweedy. Interestingly, the same priest who baptized Bloom also baptized Stephen Daedalus. The parallactic ambiguity of Bloom’s identity as a Jew comes to a head in the Ithaca episode, as Stephen and Bloom’s thoughts about each other are laid out in the supposedly objective question-and-answer format of that episode:

What, reduced to their simplest reciprocal form, were Bloom’s thoughts about Stephen’s thoughts about Bloom and about Stephen’s thoughts about Bloom’s thoughts about Stephen?

He thought that he thought that he was a jew whereas he knew that he knew that he knew that he was not. (XVII, 527-532)

Translation: Bloom thought that Stephen thought that he was Jew whereas Stephen knew that Bloom knew that Stephen knew he was not. That is, they are both wrong about each other.

But surely the most intriguing and developed character in the book is Molly Bloom, even though this development does not occur until the final episode, in which she has a 22,000-word interior monologue without narratorial interruption. Molly, however, does appear along with Bloom in the Calypso episode, as she reads the Paul de Kock porn novel in bed as Bloom prepares her breakfast. The fact that she half-hides Blazes Boylan’s letter under her pillow implies that she, like Calypso, is a concealer, and the fact that Bloom, on his way back from the porkbutcher, stirs himself out of his depressing thoughts by thinking of Molly’s “ample bed-warmed flesh” implies that he, like his Odyssean counterpart, may be under a form of enchantment. Molly will not reappear until we briefly see her (or more accurately, her arm) toss a coin to a one-legged sailor in the Wandering Rocks episode, and at the end of the Ithaca episode when she awakes in response to Bloom’s sexual provocations and questions him about his day’s activities.

Molly, though, has been on Bloom’s mind the entire day and night, and at different points we hear about Molly from other male Dubliners, usually with salacious implications. At Paddy Dignam’s funeral, we hear John Henry Menton recall, “I danced with her, wait, fifteen seventeen golden years ago, at Mat Dillon’s in Roundtree. And a good armful she was” (VI, 696-98). Amazed that she married someone like Bloom, he adds, “She had plenty of game in her then.” (VI, 705-6). In one of the Wandering Rocks vignettes, Lenehan tells M'Coy of a time he surreptitiously groped Molly’s breasts on one side of a carriage while Bloom explained the stars to Callahan on the other: “--The lad stood to attention anyhow, he said with a sigh. She’s a gamey mare and no mistake.” (X, 562-567)

Simon Dedalus in the Sirens episode will have fun referring to Molly’s side business of renting secondhand fashionable clothing (--Ay, ay, Mr Dedalus nodded. Mrs. Marion Bloom has left off clothes of all descriptions [XI,496-7]), and the cynical nameless narrator of the Cyclops episode, when the subject of Molly’s concert in Belfast organized by Blazes Boylan comes up, immediately interjects his assumption of a sexual liaison (Hoho begob says I to myself says I…. Blazes doing the tootle on the flute. Concert tour….That’s the bucko that’ll organize her, take my tip. [XII, 996-1002]).

In addition to this array of slurs and innuendos, just as the Ithaca episode ends, the reader receives a revelation concerning Molly’s extensive past infidelities. Bloom, as he approaches the bed finally to reunite with Molly, notices the traces of Boylan’s earlier presence and, in a desperate attempt to rationalize his reunion with Molly in the face of such evidence, imagines that he is some way better off than Boylan because he, unlike Boylan, realizes that he is only one of a preceding series of Molly’s lovers and gives a list of the 24 lovers that Molly had before Boylan, with the assumption that this list will continue to expand in the future.

Joyce, in writing this episode, took particular care to render all the information and events with an extreme objectivity. In a letter to Frank Budgen, he explains, “I am writing Ithaca in the form of a mathematical catechism. All events are resolved into their cosmic physical, psychical, etc. equivalent….so that …the reader know everything and know it in the baldest coldest way.” Given the catechism question-and- answer format of the episode, along with its extensive use of abstract and scientific description throughout the episode, the list, which includes Menton, Lenehan, and Simon Dedalus, seems to establish Molly definitively as a hardened adulteress, so much so that a number of critics have seen Molly and her entire monologue in a wholly negative light. For T. Mitchell Morse, Molly is irredeemable: “She is a dirty joke. No one [in the book] regards her as anything but a whore.” Even further, “Molly's soliloquy is the bitterest and deadliest thing Joyce ever wrote. Without exhorting or haranguing his readers, observing strictly his own canon of reticence, he let Molly damn herself as the very center of paralysis” (Morse, 126, 129).

The problem with the list of lovers, however, is its accuracy and objectivity. It took almost 40 years for other critics to challenge the authenticity and objectivity of the list, which also contains, almost comically, two priests, an Italian organgrinder, and a shoeshine boy. What seems more likely, following a close study of the incompatibility of each member of the list, is that we have a detailed spectrum of   
Bloom’s jealous suspicions, a product of his overwrought imagination. In addition, when we turn to the monologue itself, we note that Molly will have negative or qualified comments about 18 of the 25 candidates, leading some critics to suggest, adjusting the Homeric parallel, it is Penelope rather than Odysseus who slays the suitors at the homecoming.

What I wish to suggest in this talk is that this final episode as a whole provides a parallactic rereading of the narrative presented in the first seventeen episodes. As Joyce said in a letter to Frank Budgen, “Penelope is the *clou* to the book,” with the French word meaning the point of chief interest or attention or the star performer in an entertainment. Of course, given Joyce’s penchant for polygot punning, Penelope may also be providing (in English) a clue as to understanding or appreciating this complex work. But Joyce also in the same letter indicates that this *clou* is an intricate one: “Though probably more obscene than any preceding episode it seems to me to be perfectly sane full amoral fertilisable untrustworthy engaging shrewd limited prudent indifferent *Weib*,” with Weib meaning woman, but usually one older and more experienced.

Not surprisingly, this complexity is hard to pin down. For one thing, while Molly has strong judgments concerning just about everything and everyone in her life, much of what she says is contradictory. At one point, she says that women should rule the world (“you wouldn’t see women going and killing one another and slaughtering when do you ever see women rolling around drunk like they do or gambling every penny they have and losing it on horses” (XVIII, 1435-38). Moments later, considering female treachery, she about-faces: “I hate that in women no wonder they treat us the way they do we are a dreadful lot of bitches” (XVIII, 1458-59). Men, too, are uniformly awful (“Id rather die 20 times over than marry another of their sex,” XVIII, 231-32), but again moments later, “they’re all so different.” At times the reversal can be ironically comic, as when Molly remembers discovering Bloom’s flirtation with the servant Mary Driscoll: “I wouldn’t lower myself to spy on them the garters I found in her room the Friday she was out was enough for me” XVIII, 68-69.

Molly’s attitude toward Blazes Boylan is equally ambivalent. On the one hand, she seems completely overwhelmed by the sexual experience earlier that day (“he must have come 3 or 4 times with that tremendous big red brute of a thing he has” XVIII, 143-44) and looks forward both to their next tryst on Monday and to the planned concert tour in Belfast the next week. Even if Bloom’s list of Molly’s previous lovers is imaginary, there is no question that Molly eagerly committed adultery that afternoon. On the other hand, she notes how course and crude Boylan is (“no manners nor no refinement nor nothing in his nature slapping us behind like that on my bottom,” an “ignoramus that doesn’t know poetry from a cabbage” XVIII, 1368-70). In addition to the sexual attraction and social disdain, Molly also sizes Boylan up in crude transactional terms (“he has plenty of money and hes not a marrying man so somebody better get it out of him” XVIII, 411-12).

Molly’s thoughts about Bloom and their relation after 16 years of marriage are more wide-ranging and nuanced than merely contradictory, but it’s clear that Molly has a deeper and more accurate understanding of Bloom than Bloom has of her. A crucial element of their relationship finally spelled out in detail in the previous Ithaca episode is that, since the death of their son Rudy, at age 11 days, in 1894, the two have not had complete sexual intercourse, that is, intercourse that could, and presumably would, lead to the possibility of another pregnancy. As early as the Hades episode, we have seen the traumatic effect the death of Rudy (named after Bloom’s father Rudolph) had and continues to have on Bloom. In the subsequent Lestrygonians episode, Bloom hints at this change in sexual attitude (“When we left Lombard street something was changed. Could never like it again after Rudy” XIII, 609-10). Molly, noting that Bloom did not ejaculate as part of his “usual kissing” (XVIII, 53) of her bottom, assumes the story of his day’s activities is false and that “he came somewhere” (XVIII,34) with another woman. Despite her insistence that she doesn’t care who he does it with now or before their marriage, as with her disavowal of spying, it’s evident that Molly is susceptible to jealousy, especially concerning Josie Breen whom Bloom had included in the people he met that day. In addition to this susceptibility, Molly is also sensitive about her age and attractiveness, unconsciously subtracting a year from her age of 33 as she approaches 35, Molly’s terminal age for the beauty and desirability of youth.

Molly finds their alternate sex life which at one point she calls “slobbering” (XVIII, 904) sexually frustrating (“no satisfaction in it pretending to like it until he comes and then finish it off myself” (XVIII, 99-100), and rationalizes her youth to fault the marriage. As she says, “I cant help it if I’m young still it’s a wonder Im not an old shrivelled hag before my time living with him so cold never embracing me except sometimes when hes asleep the wrong end of me (XVIII, 1398-1401).”

In contrast to her criticism of their present intimacy, Molly remembers fondly and romantically their initial courtship. The first night they met, almost as a love-at-first-sight scene, they stared at each other for ten minutes, and Molly was struck by his good looks (“he was very handsome at that time trying to look like Lord Byron.”). More importantly for Molly, Bloom writes her erotic letters that arouse her (“he had me at myself 4 and 5 times a day sometimes” (XVIII, 1179). When Molly thinks back to her adolescence in Gibraltar and her first sexual experience with Lt. Mulvey, the fact that he wrote her a love note (“Mulveys was the first” XVIII, 748) seems as crucially memorable as the experience itself. In addition, when Molly finds herself alone and isolated after Mulvey’s departure, she mails bits of blank paper to herself fabricate the illusion of a correspondence.

For all Molly’s reservations about Bloom and their current intimacy (or lack thereof), Bloom seems to shine when placed next to the other males of Dublin. When Boylan brings in the paper with the announcement of Paddy Dignam’s funeral and all those who attended, Molly, after tallying the shortcomings of the attendees, has a caustic takedown of Irish male comaraderie and its clannish exclusion of Bloom: “well they’re not going to get my husband again into their clutches if I can help it making fun of him then behind his back I know well when he goes on with his idiotics because he has sense enough not to squander every penny he earns down their gullets and looks after his wife and family” (XVIII, 1275-1279). Molly’s protectiveness of Bloom implies a bond which is reinforced when Molly, thinking about Stephen’s mother and her concern for her son, reveals her own reaction to the death of the infant Rudy: “I suppose I oughtn’t to have buried him in that little wooly jacket I knitted crying as I was but give it to some poor child but I knew well Id never have another our 1st death too it was we were never the same since.” (XVIII, 1448-1450). For all of Molly’s engaging shrewd limited prudent indifference, it turns out, at least at this moment in the monologue, she is, and has been, as vulnerable to and affected by grief as Bloom. Even more poignantly, as Molly considers their life together in Dublin since the death of their child, she realizes their co-dependent isolation: “They have friends they can talk to weve none” (XVIII, 1456-57).

What we have in Molly’s monologue, then, is a deftly woven tapestry of irony and empathy, with the parallactic strands of Molly’s shrewd but at times repugnant assertions and sympathetic but at times self-deceptive vulnerabilities weaving a dense and detailed portrait of a commonplace yet remarkable woman. While it would be tempting—and it has tempted many critics—to extrapolate selectively from these strands as to the eventual outcome of the Bloom marriage or the Boylan affair, I’d like to suggest that Joyce was more interested in the portrait than the outcome.

Back in the scene at the National Library where Stephen expounds his theory of Shakespeare, critics have noticed parallels between Stephen’s description of Ann Hathaway’s sexual wounding and cuckolding of Shakespeare and the circumstances of Bloom’s (and, for that matter, Joyce’s) life. But before Stephen begins his thoughts on the matter, John Eglinton asserts that the world believes Shakespeare made a mistake in choosing Ann Hathaway and tried to free himself of her by moving from Stratford to London to write his plays. Stephen famously replies, “A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery” (IX, 228-29). At one other point in the book, as Stephen and Bloom have their free-ranging conversation walking back from the cabman’s shelter to Bloom’s house, we learn that Stephen has another belief concerning imaginative works, that is, “the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature” (XVII, 30).

By making Molly the *clou* of this encyclopedic work, Joyce discovers a way to reimagine and redefine the elevated hero of the Homeric world as a human, or at he says, all too human hero of the here and now. What’s crucial in this reimagining, though, are Molly’s flaws, along with the full range of her responses to the circumstances of her life, which both allow and qualify her to voice Stephen’s vision of affirmation.

Joyce, in a letter to Frank Budgen, said concerning the final episode of Ulysses, “The last word (human, all too human) is left to Penelope. This is the indispensable countersign to Bloom’s passport to eternity.” I’d like to follow Joyce’s example and leave the last word—actually the last three minutes—of this talk, to Molly. I’ll be happy to take any questions or comments you have afterward.

[Recording of Siobhan McKenna’s reading of the conclusion of Penelope]

*the sun shines for you he said the day we were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head in the grey tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now yes 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on till he asked me to say yes and I wouldnt answer first only looked out over the sea and the sky I was thinking of so many things he didnt know of Mulvey and Mr Stanhope and Hester and father and old captain Groves and the sailors playing all birds fly and I say stoop and washing up dishes they called it on the pier and the sentry in front of the governors house with the thing round his white helmet poor devil half roasted and the Spanish girls laughing in their shawls and their tall combs and the auctions in the morning the Greeks and the jews and the Arabs and the devil knows who else from all the ends of Europe and Duke street and the fowl market all clucking outside Larby Sharons and the poor donkeys slipping half asleep and the vague fellows in the cloaks asleep in the shade on the steps and the big wheels of the carts of the bulls and the old castle thousands of years old yes and those handsome Moors all in white and turbans like kings asking you to sit down in their little bit of a shop and Ronda with the old windows of the posadas glancing eyes a lattice hid for her lover to kiss the iron and the wineshops half open at night and the castanets and the night we missed the boat at Algeciras the watchman going about serene with his lamp and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and pink and blue and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.*

If that’s paralysis, then like the woman says in the deli in the movie When Harry Meets Sally, I’ll have what she’s having. Thank you.