

Thinking about Brazil and Bloomsday

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Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. All over the world there will be celebrations. A secular feast where people of almost all languages and certainly all literatures will be linked together to commemorate a day. But what does the day commemorate? Not the death of a god, nor the delivery of a people from an avenging angel, nor even the establishment of the rule of the just. I think it is generally agreed by Joyce scholars that this marks James Joyce's first date with Nora Barnacle. It was not the date on which they met, not the moment when Dante saw Beatrice. Nor is it the date on which they consummated their love after fleeing to Europe, a date which Joyce ungentlemanly marked with a postcard to his brother. But it is the date of their first kiss. Or so we have good reason to think. In settling on a polymorphously perverse kiss rather than a more conventional moment of masculine triumph, Joyce undermines, as he does throughout his text, notions of masculine heroism.(1)

There are large number of cultures which have produced heroic epics, accounts, often written down in the passage from orality to literacy, of worlds in which the basic economic unit is the clan or household gathered round an individual warrior. In European history much the most important of these epics have been Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It is impossible to think that Joyce, growing up in the Dublin of the Gaelic revival did not consider the Gaelic epics which Yeats and Lady Gregory had done so much to promote - and in particular the story of Cuchulain greatest of the Red Branch Knights. It is fashionable to pretend that the cultural heritage of Europe is part of political processes of domination which render it suspect and that its hit parade is at best the product of the chance of battle, at worst a deadly weapon in a longer war. But anyone who has dipped into the various epic traditions can easily recognise that the Greek stories have a power, of both description and narration, which easily explains their greater prestige. One need look no further than the opening chapter of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* to find a justification of the Homeric world of intense plastic description. But if Joyce is just as intent on conveying the sensuous reality of Dublin on that June day of 1904, his methods are not Homeric but are drawn from the full resources of the nineteenth century European novel.

T. S. Eliot in a famous review published in *The Dial* in 1923 hailed *Ulysses* as the greatest of modern texts and likened Joyce to Einstein as the discoverer of a revolutionary method. For Eliot, Joyce's use of the Homeric text was a way of organising contemporary experience according to a pattern which guaranteed order and meaning.

It is just such a pattern that the Grail myth gives to *The Waste Land* - the inchoate material of which Eliot had been turning over in his mind for six years but which only found form as he read *Ulysses*. But it is interesting that Eliot's poem really does use the structure of the Grail myth and that it ends with a conventional moment of masculine domination:

The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands

Thus the *Waste Land* draws to its conclusion but it is doubtful if Molly Bloom can be counted as one who waited for an invitation still less beat obedient to controlling hands. When Joyce met Nora he had already chosen his great model in Ibsen and Ibsen's great theme of the changed relations between the sexes. Dramatic theory became domestic practice as Nora accepted Joyce's belief that relations between the sexes should not be ruled by institutions and then proved her own belief that she should not be ruled by Joyce. Their relationship came to its most productive crisis when Joyce was staying at 7, Eccles Street in August 1909 and was convinced that he had been cuckolded five summers earlier. He reacted in the conventional forms of the European male but in the process gave up the last of his attachments to conventional ideals of masculinity.

There is no doubt that Joyce was all the more ready to refuse these dominant forms because of his position as a colonial subject. Eliot might still wish to identify with the heroes, both martial and artistic, of his culture. For Joyce, it was not his culture. And if Pearse and Yeats could only offer him Cuchulain, the disadvantage was that Cuchulain, as almost all epic heroes, is more or less exhausted by his martial abilities. The *Odyssey* becomes the tutor text for Joyce not because of the vividness of the descriptions, still less because of the order or significance of the episodes but because, as Joyce had recognised very early, his exploits were not simply those of a warrior. Indeed even his most famous military coup, the wooden horse at Troy, was not an epic feat of arms but an example of low cunning. Joyce emphasised this by making his hero Ulysses, Virgil's schemer, rather than Homer's much more heroic Odysseus.

It is too often forgotten, at least by me, that Joyce's text was written in the period 1915-22. It is not a text of 1904, of that last moment of European and English supremacy but of the Great War that destroyed Europe and the Easter Rising and its aftermath which drove the English from most of Ireland. If the text is devoted to one thing it is devoted to the deconstruction of the hero in all his forms from the narrative to the sexual. This is nowhere more evident than in the refusal of all forms of violence which for the text are equivalent.

The Citizen's nationalism and Privates Carr and Compton's patriotism are two sides of the same unappealing coin. Of course the *Odyssey* itself is not a text which

eschews violence. Odysseus is king of Ithaca because of his martial prowess and the text is punctuated by his feats of strength and ends with his bending of the bow and his slaughter of the suitors. But Joyce found these the most difficult pieces of the *Odyssey* to translate into Ulysses. He told Budgen that he had been unable to see where the slaughter of the suitors went until he finally realised that it went in Penelope where Molly dismisses all those with phallic pretensions in favour of a kiss with her husband, the kiss which we have every reason to think both Bloom and his wife remember in the course of their day.

When I first started studying Joyce in 1971, it was at the service of a revolutionary creed which saw in his texts the key with which to unlock bourgeois ideology and all its repressions. When I came to Brazil for the first time in January 1982 on the occasion of the centenary of Joyce's birth, I had abandoned much of that creed. But it was in Brazil and with Brazilians, I remember particularly Nora Thielen, that I understood that any notion of a key was linked to those fatal forms of European thought which have linked knowledge to mastery. It was in Brazil that I felt that vitality of spirit and the instinctive recognition of the human which European society had all but buried by 1914. Ulysses is nothing less than the effort by a European, who could identify with European culture only in the Dark Ages, to unwrite that equation between knowledge and mastery, an equation written in the symbols of masculine dominance and economic inequality. And that unwriting is never finished, the keys are given but every reader has to remake them for their own locks. From Kosovo to Iraq, the First World War comes back now to haunt us. If my understanding of *Ulysses* has changed in thirty years of teaching, it is because Joyce's "blue book of Eccles" as he called it in *Finnegans Wake* now seems ever more relevant in a world where the renunciation of violence seems both more difficult and more necessary than in 1922.

Note

- 1 The most reputable Joyce scholars of my acquaintance are of the opinion that the 16th of June also marks Joyce's first orgasm with Nora, almost certainly procured by her hand. When he writes to her in August 1909 to accuse her of infidelity – it is the hand that he mentions: "At the time when I used to meet you at the corner of Merrion Square and walk out with you and feel your hand touch me in the dark and hear your voice." (Letter of 6 August 1909) The kiss in its perfect mixture of activity and passivity, in its bisexual equality, serves Joyce's purposes much more effectively than a hand job.

