The Greatness of Ulysses

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In recent years I have several times been invited to give talks on James Joyce or specifically on *Ulysses*. On most of these occasions, my audience has consisted not of academicians, but of members of a community cultural group—people of intellectual curiosity who have read some of Joyce’s work and are aware of his very high reputation in the universities, and of the fact that *Ulysses* has been judged the greatest novel of the twentieth century, but who nonetheless remain somewhat skeptical. They want to hear from someone who has presumably found it worthwhile, even rewarding, to spend many years of his life in studying Joyce and his works. I do of course take these opportunities seriously, but I will admit that in speaking to these audiences I feel some defensiveness, some need to justify to them and to myself my having devoted so much of my life to Joyce and his works, and to convince them that we scholars have not abandoned our common sense in venerating Joyce, and in regarding *Ulysses* so highly.

My talk for the Southern Regional American Conference for Irish Studies should seem easy by comparison: my topic—the greatness of *Ulysses*—proclaims something that everyone in the audience presumably takes for granted—or would not admit it if he did not. But that my topic runs the risk of extreme blandness was brought home to me in a phone conversation with Dick Bizot a few weeks ago: when I told him I would be discussing the greatness of *Ulysses*, he said “Well, that shouldn’t take us very long”—a comment that served for me as a kind of wake-up call about the potential fatuousness of this presentation.

But in fact I find this topic for this audience to be challenging and even somewhat daunting, because, in addition to discussing some recognized aspects of *Ulysses*’ greatness, I want to go further and take issue with some of the received ideas about the nature of the book’s achievement. And since I am speaking to true believers, I want even to acknowledge some of my own doubts about Joyce’s book, doubts that I might be reluctant to reveal under more defensive circumstances. *Entre nous*, I can admit that for all my admiration for the book, I do have some misgivings and regrets about it, when I think of it in comparison with other great novels in our tradition.
I cannot of course do justice to all of the fine qualities of *Ulysses*, all of the sources of its greatness, but I do want to specify and explore some of the most important ones. So let me begin by enumerating certain great qualities of this novel.

First and foremost, for me, the basis of much of the greatness of this novel lies in Joyce's audaciously choosing so ordinary and imperfect and marginalized a figure as Leopold Bloom as his central character. Throughout several hundred pages, Joyce recounts the quotidian acts and thoughts of Bloom, revealing in the process a number of foibles and faults, including the serious and disturbing one of his not having had full sexual relations with his wife for more than a decade and consequently, conniving in her adultery on this day of the novel. In addition, Joyce subjects Leopold Bloom to exposure in the acts of masturbation and defecation, which no other hero, epic or ordinary, has had to endure. But throughout and in spite of all this, Joyce presents his protagonist with respect and even with loving care, and Bloom is shown to have some very admirable human qualities: he is a sensitive and considerate man, a man of wide-ranging interests and inveterate curiosity, of sympathy and charity—a good man. Throughout the day, Bloom's mind plays actively over everything he comes in touch with, examining, probing, reflecting, engaging events and people with a curiosity and a sympathy—sometimes even a compassion—that is admirable and endearing. We see this most overtly in his helping the blind stripling find his way, and in his following Stephen Dedalus into Nighttown, and taking him to his home and inviting him to stay the night. But Bloom's human concern and charity are manifested as well in dozens of smaller ways, such as his concealing his revulsion with the scene in the Burton restaurant by pretending to be looking for someone whom he cannot find.

With further audacity, Joyce chose to depict a protagonist who is in many ways separated, indeed alienated, from his fellows in Dublin. Marginalized primarily by his being a Jew, Bloom is also set apart from his cronies by his refusing to indulge in the irony and repartee and put-downs that are the staples of so much of their conversation, and by his amazing naivete in speaking out in a pub for the value of Christian love.

Though Joyce has no wish to make of him a tragic figure, Bloom seems to me to qualify wonderfully for the protagonist that Aristotle describes in his *Poetics*—a good but not perfect man, and, most important of all, one that we can identify and empathize with. If one of the effects of great literature is to expand our human sensibilities and sympathies, Joyce achieves much of that purpose in this book through having chosen this character who is virtually beneath the
notice of his fellow Dubliners as his protagonist. After coming to know and value Leopold Bloom through *Ulysses*, we find ourselves subtly influenced by Joyce’s valuing of him, and it becomes harder for us simply to categorize and dismiss anyone we meet, in fiction or in life, no matter how “ordinary” they may appear to be, for we cannot help but wonder whether their interior world might not be colored and illuminated by similar problems and similar virtues, if we but had an opportunity to spend a day looking at the world through their perspective. With every rereading of this book, Joyce’s sympathetic presentation of Leopold Bloom emerges more and more clearly for me as one of its greatest virtues.

A second great achievement of this novel is its detailed and rich evocation of the city of Dublin. It presents that city—its streets, buildings, sounds, sights, and its inhabitants and their distinctive language—in wonderful detail and specificity. In strong contrast to the *The Waste Land*’s view of the city that was being proffered by more orthodox modernists, Joyce’s view is that of someone who knows and values what the city can be. It has not, I think, been sufficiently appreciated how far Joyce and *Ulysses* depart from that negative view of the city, which was so large a part of literary modernism. In my recent book on *Ulysses*, I argue that while the narrator of the Wandering Rocks episode undoubtedly does have a naturalistic, *Waste Land* agenda, evident in the techniques by which he fragments and mechanically intersects the events and persons of the city, the more fundamental aspects of Joyce’s depiction of Dublin, both in this episode and throughout *Ulysses*, do not conform to this superficial view. For one thing, as several commentators have noted, the episode contains a number of acts of concern and charity, including even Tom Rochford’s brave and life-risking rescue of someone from a manhole filled with deadly gas fumes.1

One of the most appealing aspects of Joyce’s depiction of the city is his evocation of the living dialogue and idiom of the characters. Nobody has ever written more authentic or more engaging local dialogue than we find in this novel. To hear it read by someone who can do justice to the Dublin accents is to be admitted into a fully realized world that could easily have been totally lost to us, had not Joyce taken pains to record it. When I think about what *Ulysses* has done for Dublin in this regard, I cannot help but wish that we had something comparable for the conversation and idiom of hundreds of the world’s most distinctive locales.

A third achievement of *Ulysses* is that it has done more than any other book to expand our view of what “culture” involves—to make us realize that culture

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The Greatness of Ulysses

consists not just of those things traditionally regarded as high art, but of the hundreds of objects, songs, anecdotes, that we are surrounded by and immersed in. Joyce’s setting his novel among the shops and pubs and churches of Dublin city, as well as his incorporation of popular songs, advertising slogans, Christmas pantomimes, and the like, helps us to realize how we constantly structure and enrich our lives through the narratives and images that we unconsciously assimilate from our culture. From Ulysses we understand that culture is not a set of objects in a museum, but an atmosphere in which we are immersed. Among the scores of books that have been written about Ulysses, several have been devoted entirely to the popular culture of the Dublin milieu, thus elevating even the most ordinary details of Dublin life into objects worthy of our attention and value.

A fourth aspect of this novel’s greatness, and one that has been especially influential on subsequent writers is suggested by its title—Ulysses. The entire book, of course, is confined to events in Dublin on June 16, 1904—to quite ordinary acts carried out by quite ordinary people. And yet through titling the book Ulysses, Joyce challengingly invokes comparisons with a figure and a narrative from classical antiquity. Joyce’s novel involves, that is, what T. S. Eliot in his famous review of Ulysses in 1922 called the “mythical method”—that is, the invocation of parallels between the present and the past, between these ordinary Dubliners of 1904, and various mythic, archetypal figures, such as Ulysses, Telemachus, Penelope, or Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, and Don Giovanni. These and scores of other mythic parallels lurk within and behind the characters and events of Ulysses, giving them a timeless dimension.

It was Joyce’s hope that our recognizing these mythical analogues in his novel would help us deracinated moderns to realize how much we structure our lives through the narratives that come down to us through our culture, and how much of our experience is a repetition with variation of roles that many others have played before our ever coming onto the stage. Our realization of the existence and importance of these cultural schemata, Joyce hopes, will help to save us from the “atomic individualism” that is one of the most precious and most costly achievements of modern Western culture. What this mythical method involves and implies has been so well stated by another of its great twentieth-century practitioners, Thomas Mann that I cannot resist quoting from him: Mann says

... [W]hile in the life of the human race the mythical is an early and primitive stage, in the life of the individual it is a late and mature one. . . . What is gained

[as the individual develops] is a . . . knowledge of the schema in which and according to which the supposed individual lives, unaware, in his naive belief in himself as unique . . . of the extent to which his life is but formula and repetition and his path marked out for him by those who trod it before him. . . . Actually, if [a person's] existence consisted merely in the unique and the present, he would not know how to conduct himself at all: he would be confused, helpless, unstable in his own self-regard. . . . His dignity and security lie all unconsciously in the fact that with him something timeless has once more emerged into the light and become present; it is a mythical value added to the otherwise poor and valueless single character; it is native worth, because its origin lies in the unconscious.  

This idea that our lives are in some respects reenactments of immemorial patterns inherited from earlier centuries and embodied in the received narratives and myths of our culture is one that has truly come into its own in the twentieth century. Scores of stories and novels in twentieth century literature have made use of this mythical method, and many of these works owe a debt directly to Ulysses.

A fifth aspect of Ulysses that deserves specification is its stylistic exuberance and its brilliance in the use of the English language. When it comes to sheer linguistic genius and virtuosity, Joyce unquestionably invites comparison with the very best in our tradition—Spenser, Milton, even Shakespeare. This brilliance is apparent not only in the range and precision of his vocabulary, but in his capacity to achieve almost any verbal effect, replicate or parody virtually any style. It manifests itself both in the wonderfully subtle mode of stream of consciousness that is the baseline of the opening episodes, and in the almost overwhelming stylistic variety of the later chapters. Anyone who values, enjoys, loves the English language will always find pleasure and joy in this book, just as we do in rereading Shakespeare's sonnets and plays. This is one of the surest bases of the book's lasting appeal.

Sixth, I want to focus on one brilliant and influential aspect of the style of Ulysses—the unique mode of the stream-of-consciousness technique by which Joyce presents the novel's characters and their world. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as interest grew in the notion of an “inner world” of the mind, writers began to search for techniques by which they might suggest the flow of thought or feeling in the character’s mind. Joyce was among the pioneers in this new mode, beginning with his A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man (1916, but serialized in The Egoist, 1914–1915), and continuing spectacularly in Ulysses (serialized in The Little Review, 1918–1920). Because of his brilliance in

forging this new technique, Joyce’s experiments stream of consciousness writing have influenced a large number of writers. Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel*, John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy, Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, Joyce Cary’s *The Horse’s Mouth*—these and scores of other works that use some mode of stream of consciousness to simulate psychic processes are what they are because of the example of *Ulysses*. And surely if *Ulysses* has any claim to being the most important novel of the century, one reason is that its influence on other writers is more pervasive than that of any other book.

But I want to make a further point about this style in the opening episodes of *Ulysses*, one that I develop in some detail in *Voices and Values in Joyce’s Ulysses*.\(^4\) The closer I have looked at this technique and at how much it differs from that used by any of these other writers, the more I have realized two things. First, Joyce’s mode is not just distinctive but unique and inimitable, involving far more than the skillful presentation of a character’s “inner world.” Second, I have realized how effectively this style embodies Joyce’s underlying intention in *Ulysses* to subvert Descartes’ dualisms and dichotomies. If by “stream of consciousness,” we mean only a style that simulates the inner world of the character, Joyce’s mode is far more than that, because it also simultaneously evokes the circumambient cultural milieu, achieved by its seamless blending of first-person and authorial perspectives, of inner and outer, of self and world.

One way to appreciate the distinctiveness of Joyce’s mode of stream of consciousness is to consider an astute criticism of this technique that was made by C. S. Lewis. Lewis was, of course, keenly aware of the baneful effects of Descartes’ dualisms within our culture, and he specifically criticized the stream of conscious technique for creating the impression that the individual exists within a self-contained sphere, totally cut off from the larger public world. In other words, according to Lewis, the technique inherently accepts and even exacerbates the inner-outer, self-world dichotomy.\(^5\) But while Lewis’s criticism is valid in regard to many versions of the technique, it certainly does not apply to Joyce’s. On the contrary, as I have shown in *Voices and Values*, Joyce’s mode takes great pains and uses special devices to constantly and subtly interweave the public and the private, body and mind—to show them as ultimately inextricable. He does this mainly by a carefully effaced, third-person omniscient authorial voice that simulates the public world, which underlies and blends with the “individual” stream of consciousness of the character. As careful attention to any typical passage from the opening episodes of *Ulysses* will show, Joyce devel-

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The Greatness of Ulysses

ops a technique that inextricably blends character and world, and that thus subverts rather than sanctions the Cartesian dichotomies. I regard this style as one of the truly great achievements of Ulysses, and I argue that its uniqueness and its superb fulfillment of his underlying thematic aims in Ulysses have not yet been fully understood or appreciated.

I want to make one seventh and last point about the greatness of Joyce and Ulysses, but this one involves my disagreement with what has always been regarded as one of the hallmarks of this greatness—namely the idea that both Joyce and his novel are paradigms of the high modernist mode. Ever since its publication in 1922, Ulysses has been held up as supreme examples of high modernist art, by which the critics mean that his novel epitomizes an austere devotion to technique and to art for art’s sake—which involves the idea that good art is antididactic and self-referential, rather than moral and mimetic—and that Ulysses epitomizes the stylistic and ethical relativism that are presumed to be crucial to modernist art.

The claim that Joyce exemplifies stylistic relativism involves two closely linked ideas that remain virtually unchallenged in Ulysses criticism: first, that there is no style within Ulysses that can be regarded as Joyce’s own style, or the normative style of Ulysses; and, second, that Joyce has included the array of styles in the later episodes of the book in order to show that all styles are equally incapable of capturing reality, or as Karen Lawrence puts it in her influential study The Odyssey of Style in Ulysses, to show that “all language is . . . inherently stupid, that all styles are arbitrary.”

The claim of Joyce’s moral or ethical relativism is that he totally eschews any didactic aim, and aspires to achieve the state described by Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait—namely that of “The artist [who], like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails,” and who aspires to an art that is static rather than kinetic, since kinetic art is, as Stephen explains, improper, because it is didactic or pornographic. But in direct challenge to the claim of Joyce’s stylistic relativism, I argue in Voices and Values that the unique style of the opening episodes—what Joyce himself called “the initial style”—is in fact Joyce’s own style in Ulysses, and is in a meaningful sense, the “normative” style of the novel. Furthermore, the various styles in the later episodes of Ulysses exist so that Joyce can reveal their limitations and distortions and warn us away from their pernicious effects on us.

So, rather than viewing Joyce as a moral or ethical relativist, I see him as a profoundly moral writer, as having aimed in every one of his books, from *Dubliners* through *Ulysses* and even into *Finnegans Wake*—to achieve something that will help his readers to fulfill their potential, and to elude the many snares and stumbling blocks by which our culture would prevent them from becoming what they are capable of becoming. That this is true of the *Dubliners* stories is evident from the monitory nature of the stories themselves, each of which warns his readers against some way in which Dublin would intimidate and paralyze them. This moral aim is explicit in Joyce’s correspondence with his prospective publisher Grant Richards, to whom he says that, in writing these stories, he has “taken the first step towards the spiritual liberation of [his] country,” and that failure to publish his stories would “retard the course of civilisation in Ireland.”

In their need to redeem Joyce from any charge of didacticism, several modernist critics have said that these comments I just quoted reflect a naive view of art held by Joyce as a young man, but that he obviously grew out of any such ideas before creating his monumental and austere *Ulysses*. Of course, I disagree, for in my view not only is *Ulysses* predicated on an underlying intention to free us from Cartesian dualism, it specifically extols such human values as the charity and humility and openness to experience embodied in Leopold Bloom and the intellectual integrity of Stephen Dedalus, and takes a stand against the cynicism and materialism represented by Buck Mulligan and the purblind chauvinism of The Citizen in the Cyclops episode.

In short, I hope that, over time, we will realize that the greatness of Joyce and of his *Ulysses* resides not in sophisticated modernist relativism, but in his willingness to take a stand on an array of linguistic and human issues, just as the great writers he emulated—Virgil, Dante, Milton—have always done.

Turning now to my own misgivings and regrets about *Ulysses*, there are three that I wish to acknowledge. The first is quite simple, quite specific. If future centuries do not continue to regard *Ulysses* as one of our greatest novels, I fear it will in large part be because of its deficiency in narrative, its lack of a compelling story line that we can give ourselves. While I would not go so far as to apply to the novel Aristotle’s dictum in the *Poetics* that plot must have primacy among all the elements of the drama, I do agree with E. M. Forster’s judgment that “the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect.”

in a novel, the narrative line, the *mythos*, is an indispensable part of how a novel achieves its purposes, and that in denying himself the full benefit of this element, Joyce has deprived his readers of one of our most important means of engaging his book.

This neglect of the narrative line in *Ulysses* is of course quite intentional on Joyce’s part: his choice to privilege his stylistic purposes over his narrative ones is a concomitant of his decision to set the entire novel in one day and to provide a virtually microscopic examination of the texture of that day. Yet, even within that diurnal frame Joyce could have given much more prominence to the story of Stephen’s and Bloom’s peregrinations and their coming together, in part simply by presenting the story in some medium other than the opaque or distorting styles through which so much of their journey is described. When I read Joyce’s “The Dead,” and see what powerful effects he achieves in the closing scene of that story, involving as it does the culmination of the narrative of Gretta and Gabriel, I can only regret that *Ulysses* has nothing comparable. There are in *Ulysses* some wonderful scenes of feeling, of pathos. I think of Stephen’s realizing how he has cut himself off from his sisters, or of Bloom’s reflection on how he and Molly have let their lives, their love, slip through their fingers, or of Bloom’s poignant reflections on the son he never saw grow up. But such scenes are too discrete, too individual, to achieve the power they could have if they were integral parts of a fuller narrative. For whatever reasons—and I may not fully understand them—Joyce simply does not value narrative enough to protect it over against his other interests and agendas in *Ulysses*.

My second objection is to some extent the complement of the point I have just made. I have regrets about the excesses, the hypertrophy, of Joyce’s stylistic excursions in the novel—his self-indulgence and lack of restraint when it comes to displaying his prodigious stylistic capacities. These stylistic excesses, as I see them, do more than any other feature of the book to deter and even alienate many who set out to read the novel. Let me be clear that I have no objection to the large number and variety of styles per se; quite the contrary, I have already said that they have an important and serious purpose in the novel and are not just stylistic *jeu d’esprit*. But I believe Joyce’s purpose of illustrating the weaknesses and liabilities of certain styles could have been served equally well by much briefer passages. In the Eumaeus or cabman’s shelter episode, for example, it should not take Joyce seventy pages to demonstrate for us the vacuity of the enervated, clichéd, circumlocutory style of that episode, especially when the events that are presented through that style. Bloom’s taking Stephen under his wing and inviting him to his house could be presented so as to increase our affective engagement with the characters and the *mythos* of the novel. In short, what my first two objections come down to is that Joyce could not restrain his
artistic hubris so as to maintain a proper balance between his technical achievements and the profoundly human aspects of *Ulysses*.

Finally, I want to call attention to certain aspects of Joyce’s personality that I think are the underlying sources of the two problems I have just described. I hope it will not seem gratuitous or hypercritical for me to delve into the personal sources of these things. I do so simply because trying to understand Joyce necessarily leads us beyond his individual works and involves the larger questions and issues that run through his whole canon, and through his whole life. I believe that Joyce suffered all his life from excessive concern for his reputation, his image in the eyes of posterity, his artistic immortality, and I think he suffered as well from a need to maintain conscious intellectual control over his own creative processes, and over everything that he put into his works. Let me briefly elaborate these two points.

As to his concern with reputation and immortality, we know that from early on, as a teenager, Joyce began to compare himself with the greatest writers of our tradition—Virgil, Dante, Spenser, Milton—and that he began from that time to prepare himself, both intellectually and technically, to write what would be the great epic of the twentieth century, comparable to epics of earlier times. He aspired to write a work that would be monumental, both in the sense that it would be comprehensive or paradigmatic, and that it would stand the test of time.

This concern for his reputation and his immortality is reflected in various comments that Richard Ellmann records in his biography of Joyce. For example, Joyce once said, “The demand I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works,” and, elsewhere, “I have put in [Ulysses] 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 ensuring one’s immortality.”10 I wish I could regard these statements simply as witticisms or ironies on Joyce’s part, but I do not really believe that to be the case.

As to Joyce’s need for conscious control over his own inner processes and the content of his works, this is something that I believe he himself recognized as a problem and wrestled valiantly with, but could not fully exorcise. As a matter of fact, what first put this idea about Joyce in my head is my seeing it dramatized in Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait*. Gradually I came to see how much Stephen suffers from and is inhibited by, concern for rational control of his self, and how distrustful he is about his own subconscious mental processes. In *The Antimodernism of Joyce’s Portrait*, I examine a number of passages in which Stephen reveals his fearfulness of his own subconscious mental processes, and I discuss

his penchant for developing elaborate intellectual theories about art and beauty, in lieu of venturing to write a work of art.\(^{11}\) I believe that in presenting this aspect of Stephen’s character, Joyce was attempting to exorcise one of his own traits that he needed to come to terms with. But in spite of his trying valiantly to write these problems out through his protagonist, I do not think he succeeded.

My realization of these qualities in Joyce’s mind and works has also been catalyzed, I think, by the striking contrasts between Joyce’s attitudes in these matters, and those of the other writer who has meant most to me over these past several decades—D. H. Lawrence. I am sure that you are aware not only of how very different these two writers are, you probably know as well that the devotees of these two are mutually exclusive: with few exceptions, readers and critics inhabit one camp or the other; there is no fraternization.

But I value and need both of these writers, for Joyce challenges my mind, while Lawrence sustains my spirit. Lawrence is the finest example I know of artistic courage and risk-taking, who put something of himself on the line in everything that he wrote and never had time to waste worrying about his reputation or his immortality. I find it indicative of these differences between the two that my students react so differently to these two writers. In virtually all instances, students admire James Joyce, stand in awe of him; but by contrast they either like or dislike Lawrence, and often these feelings, pro or con, are quite intense.

We have a letter that Lawrence wrote in January of 1925 that is relevant to this point. It is a letter to Carlo Linati, whom you probably know as one of the earliest defenders of *Ulysses*, and the recipient of one version of the outline or schema that Joyce constructed for *Ulysses*. In addition to his championing *Ulysses*, Linati also had translated two of Lawrence’s novelettes and had recently published an essay on Lawrence, titled perceptively “An Explorer of Men,” presenting him as a writer whose imaginative intensity exceeds his capacity for control and judging him to be “sincere to the point of incoherence.”\(^{12}\) By 1925, Lawrence had published some eight or nine novels, including *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, and *Women in Love*. Apparently Linati sent Lawrence a copy of this essay, and Lawrence responded in a letter that reads in part,

> Myself, I don’t care a button for neat works of art. . . . But really, Signor Linati, do you think that books should be sort of toys, nicely built up of observations

\(^{11}\) See Weldon Thornton, *The Antimodernism of Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

The Greatness of Ulysses

and sensations, all finished and complete? I don’t. . . . I can’t bear art that you can walk around and admire. A book should be either a bandit or a rebel or a man in a crowd. People should either run for their lives, or come under the colors, or say how do you do? . . . An author should be in among the crowd, kicking their shins or cheering them on to some mischief or merriment. . . . [W]hoever reads me will be in the thick of the scrimmage, and if he doesn’t like. . . . let him read somebody else.”13

The letter is of course quintessential D. H. Lawrence—energetic, overstated, and quite indifferent to the image that it projects—just like the other 5,000 letters that Lawrence wrote in his relatively short career, and, for the most part, totally unlike Joyce’s correspondence. But my point is that Lawrence had a healthy disregard for his reputation and a willingness to venture exploratorily in his works beyond what he was confident that he understood, qualities that Joyce seems to me to have totally lacked.

I hope it does not seem mean-spirited of me to use one of my favorite authors to help point up what I regard as blemishes in my other favorite author. And I must admit that I am very glad that, in practice, I do not have to choose between them, but can move back and forth between them, as the maggot bites.

I want to conclude with a judgment about Joyce by another great and difficult writer of the twentieth century, and one who doubtless owed a great deal to him—a judgment that reflects an ambivalence similar to my own. When he was writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia, William Faulkner was asked about whether a writer like Joyce or Eliot has the right to create his own language. Faulkner responded, “He has the right to do that provided he don’t insist on anyone understanding it,” and then Faulkner elaborated,

Well, [the writer,] actually, that’s an obligation that he [the writer] assumes with his vocation, that he’s going to write it in a way that people can understand it. He doesn’t have to write it in the way that every idiot can understand it—every imbecile in the third grade can understand it, but he’s got to use a language which is accepted and in which words have specific meanings that everybody agrees on. I think that Finnegans Wake and Ulysses were justified, but then its hard to say on what terms they were justified. That [Joyce] was a case of a genius who was electrocuted by the divine fire.14