

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1 Landmark: the ruined monument

When Wyndham Lewis attacked *Ulysses* in 1927, his appeared to be the most unlikely accusation: an excessive simplicity of mind. Forced underground by censors during its serial publication, smuggled out of France on pages folded into letters and parcels, freighted with those expectations of secret wisdom that attend a forbidden book, this was a cryptoclassic already before it was read, a subversive colossus; it could hardly fall to Lewis's charge that it had no ideas at all. Yet a critical description of *Ulysses* might well bear out Lewis's critique. Here is the story of the average sensual man, Leopold Bloom, whose middling fortunes in middle age remain ostensibly unchanged in the novel, which runs the short course of a single day. Canvasser for newspaper advertisements, he crosses paths with Stephen Dedalus, a 22-year-old who has already outlived his promise as Dublin's scholastic prodigy, whose career as artist remains wholly unrealized. Mr. Bloom rescues Stephen at the end of a day of debauchery, yet the quality and significance of their exchange is at best indeterminate. The older man returns in the end to the bed of his wife, Molly, whose (mostly) mute exchange with him does little to redeem the fact that she has entertained another man there during the day. If narrative generates and sustains the potential for meaning in a novel, if the plot is indeed the load-bearing element in the structure of significance, then it seems that Joyce has used a pennyworth of tale to hang a hundredweight of – well, of details, minutely recorded circumstances, but not those eventualities and changes that define the salient themes and values of a major work.

Does this judgment alter once Joyce's story reveals the logic and momentum of a shadow plot? The events of *Ulysses* run in parallel to

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the adventures in Homer's *Odyssey*, and the correspondences range from circumstantial details to the motives and aims of the protagonists. Leopold Bloom's wanderings through Dublin not only resemble the adventures of Odysseus (*Ulysses*) but also recall the destination and promise of that homeward voyage: the Greek hero's desired reunion with son and wife. The death of Bloom's son eleven years earlier supplies a rationale for his temporary adoption of Stephen, whose disaffection from his own father opens him to the paternalistic offices of Bloom; the husband's longstanding estrangement from Molly, initiated eleven years earlier by the death of their infant, looks for relief, now, through the appearance of the substitute son. The *Odyssey* supplies *Ulysses* with a depth of human content as well as a structural rhythm, but the narrative imagination of the epic provides an energy in which Joyce's characters participate not at all consistently, for the most part not even consciously. That Joyce inscribes the crisis (and resolution) of his novel in the magic language of myth, in a kind of invisible ink, may conform to the general tendency of literary modernism to avoid direct statement. Yet many readers (especially *postmodern* ones) will resist the premise that human experience reveals its meaning through external and typical patterns, and will require the father-son-wife relationship to be apprehended in ways internal and unique to the characters.

The oblique signification of the Odyssean theme in *Ulysses* defines at once its central, ramifying problem and the very problematic terms used to describe the status it enjoys in the history of the novel. A conventional account of the genesis of the novel tells of its emergence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from a fusion of myth (fables, romances, moral allegories) and fact (diaries, journals, "news"). The two sides of the fact-myth equation seem to be exaggerated to equally extensive degrees in *Ulysses*. On one hand it is an encyclopedia of contemporary news, its myriad and timely detail attested by the need of Joyce scholars to consult those chronicles of current events, the several Dublin newspapers of and around 16 June 1904, to identify events and characters in the novel. On the other hand Joyce pushes the romance substructure of the novel into a radical form, recovering its deepest roots in the original epic quest of the *Odyssey*. To ask that these two dimensions meet in perfect cohesion, so that each fact acquires an epic correlation,

is to prescribe an impossible ideal, one which nonetheless describes a main direction of imaginative energy in the genre. That the random matter-of-novel-fact might cleave to the paradigms of ancient archetypes is no obscure object of desire; to this limit of credible need the novel ever verges, if only asymptotally. Yet the manifest experience in reading *Ulysses* is that Joyce manipulates and confounds this conventional expectation. He indulges and multiplies random detail increasingly over the course of the book, straining the sustaining frame of the myth up to and through the breaking point. The ultimate (absolute, final) novel, *Ulysses* enlarges each major feature of its genre to dimensions hitherto unknown, but in doing so voids the possibility of their reconciliation. It fractures the very compact that provides for its conspicuous eminence.

This paradoxical achievement points toward the complexities of Joyce's own moment in literary and cultural history, a situation which, once apprehended, may suggest how his incentives, far from perverse, sustain a rich and varied production in his novel. "We must dislocate the language into meaning": Mallarmé's adage applies to the generic as well as verbal experiments of the modernists. They might revive and extend a dying tradition by putting a reverse spin on its forms; by writing against the grain of generic expectation. *The Waste Land*, last of all pastoral elegies, occurs in a city; *The Cantos*, supposedly the summation of lyric tradition, teems with the anti-matter of chronicle, homily, and demotic talk. This disintegration of generic purity coincides with a reintegration that includes new material, fresh possibilities.

A similar double rhythm compels the main lines of movement in *Ulysses*. Its first six chapters establish the current state of the art, reinforcing conventional expectations by applying methods already well established in a contemporary practice as varied as Henry James's, D. H. Lawrence's, Virginia Woolf's. An apparently detached narrator enjoys linguistic sympathy with Stephen and Bloom, so that the narrative fabric catches up these protagonists as characters-in-voice, weaving the stuff of their inner monologues into the background tapestry of scene and event. No sooner is this careful synthesis perfected, however, than it unravels, in the seventh chapter, which uses its setting in a newspaper office to mimic the language and format of popular journalism. The inclusion of this

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extra-literary manner anticipates the range of styles exercised in the second half of the novel, where Joyce indulges a wild farrago of mannerisms: melodrama, satire, romance (harlequin), scholastic catechism, musical fugue, etc. Not all of these voices are incompatible with the novel as genre, but in their variety and particularity they challenge and dissolve the tenability of a single generic method. In this way Joyce unmakes and remakes the conventional sensibility of the novel, expanding its area of imaginative awareness with these unexpected, fresh perspectives.

While these initiatives align Joyce with the timely enterprises of the modernists, his strategies also respond to a problem endemic to the form of the novel. It is more or less at the mid-point (after the tenth chapter) that he shifts into the high gear of stylistic exercise. In a conventional novel (speaking schematically), the half-way mark locates the moment at which the complications of situation and desire begin to move toward resolution. "Incidents and people that occurred at first for their own sake," E. M. Forster observes in his 1927 treatise *Aspects of the Novel*, "now have to contribute to the denouement." It is at this juncture, Forster complains, that "most novels do fail," for the variability of real characters must give way to the mechanical necessity of cause-and-effect sequence, of a narrative "logic" that "takes over the command from flesh and blood." Here Forster identifies a prime liability in the traditional plot-driven novel, a susceptibility that locates at once a negative incentive for Joyce's stylistic art and a rationale for its positive achievement. Sustaining and expanding his imitations and parodies through the second half of the novel, Joyce avoids the free fall of the narrative denouement; he erases any trace of headlong movement. Each chapter dilates into stylistic performance, shifting its source of energy from the linear continuum of plot or sequential events to language itself.

Forster faults *Ulysses* for its surplus of extra-narrative matter, however, and in that objection he measures the really novel quality of Joyce's experimental challenge to the traditional forms of the genre, which retains some residual commitment to represent the textures of social life. To Forster, Joyce's verbal constructs appear merely as architectures of sound turning in a void. Joyce indulges his deliquescent mastery over language, or so the usual objection ran, in evident defiance of the novel's social ground, where story

mimics history; where plot acquires its historical thickness. Marxist critics in particular have worried over Joyce's avoidance of the clearly defined story line, which marks the intersection, these critics maintain, between the author's imagination and the social reality that constitutes it. In his highly self-conscious medium of language, however, Joyce can be heard restaging the actions on which the stories of fiction conventionally turn. Interaction between people gives way to an exchange of styles; the reciprocating acts of characters reappear as a variorum of verbal mannerisms. This medley comprises the "heteroglossia" that Mikhail Bakhtin heard as the varied verbal stuff of a novel, where the socially and historically conditioned styles of an epoch are organized in a structured system, one which gives tongues to the whole socio-ideological economy of an age. While most novels require an effort to *overhear* a subtly graded modulation of idioms – their dissonance is often not even consciously intended – it is a mark of the generally colossal character of *Ulysses* that it presents its variable styles as oversize characters-in-voice. Gigantism is not a synonym for greatness, nor is the vocal record of a differentiated class structure the sole condition of importance. Yet the orchestration of styles in *Ulysses*, and the linguistic philosophy that attends this art, are the most conspicuous and suggestive facets of its achievement (these practices and attitudes in language provide the subject of chapter 3). One proximate source for this performance lay in Joyce's own earliest experience, for his ear was tuned in a vocal culture as complex and rich as the Irish society of his formative years.

## 2 Ireland and Europe: from the 1890s to the 1920s

W. B. Yeats has written:

The modern literature of Ireland, and indeed all that stir of thought that prepared for the Anglo-Irish war, began when Parnell fell from power in 1891. A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics; an event was conceived, and the race began, as I think, to be troubled by that event's long gestation.

Yeats is surely correct in assigning to the absence of Charles Stewart Parnell an effect as momentous as his presence. An aristocratic

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landholder seeking reforms in the tenant laws, an English activist for Irish Home Rule, Parnell displayed a capacity for paradox that signaled his genuine ability to cross cultural barriers and broker useful alliances. To suggest that the hope stirred by his leadership in practical politics could divert itself after his death into the production of pure poetry, which served in turn to generate nothing less than the Irish Rising of Easter 1916, however, seems both to privilege the artists' distance from history and credit them with too direct a political force and effect. It is a literary conceit, at once wishful and exclusionary, for its longstanding acceptance has served to minimize the importance of actual social conditions in literary writers' involvement in "that event's long gestation." It has also tended to reduce the historical content and political depth of Joyce's own imagination. The novelist's departure from Ireland in 1904 – exactly mid-way between Parnell's death and the 1916 Rising, in the depths of that political quietism that left Yeats's artists dreaming upon the bones of a new body politic – once encouraged commentators to write Joyce out of Irish social history; to deprive his work of its formative and enriching contexts. Yeats's romantic reconstruction needs to be examined, challenged and modified, in order to return Joyce's work to its historical ground, its first circumstances.

It is to the artists of the Celtic Revival that Yeats consigns the imaginative nurturing of Irish independence. Flourishing between 1880 and 1915, the Revivalists sought to recover the use of the Irish language, introducing it into the educational curriculum; they retrieved Irish folklore and songs for study, and established a national theater in Dublin to stage plays of strictly Irish provenance. They premised their efforts on the belief that political consequences would flow from the activity of culture-(re)building. Gaelic antiquity would provide the material source of ethnic identity, the stuff of national self-consciousness. The very terms of this claim – the political agency of literature is oblique – make it difficult to prove or refute. Yet the ongoing work of historical scholarship has shown that membership in the movement hardly constituted a cadre of proto-revolutionaries: suburban, upper middle class, often *Anglo*-Irish, many belonged to the very social order – indeed, the governmental caste – that a revolution would overthrow. Might some of these genteel partisans be pursuing politics by other means – using urgent but vague claims

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of political relevance to validate a romantic antiquarianism, a nostalgic taste for holidays in a past they never knew? The inspired inconsequence of much Revivalist politics can be heard in its characteristic literature, in the very textures of Douglas Hyde's poetry, which infuses the English language with a Gaelic syntax and so establishes *strangeness* as the standard and condition of beauty. It is the art of *l'étranger*, the Norman English writer, who turns the country he is occupying and dominating into the alien land – an imperial exoticism.

Joyce's initial resistance to this movement went to the issue of its (self-proclaimed) insularity, a parochialism that choked his already declared sense of membership in a pan-European literary community. That the political energies of the revivalists were leading them *away* from the society they claimed to be serving, however, was an irony to which he was fully sensible. The contrast between the Celtic delicacies of Hyde's Connaught and the Irish destitution of Joyce's Dublin was the proven truth of his own experience.

The fate of Joyce's family in the 1880s and 1890s gave him a social exposure at once exceptional and totally representative. The declining fortunes of his father led him from modest privilege through well-mannered poverty into near squalor; in little more than a decade he had crossed the social map of Dublin. The lack of industry in the city accounted for the virtual absence of a secure working class and shaped the violently sharp divide between the two poles of his social experience – the affluent suburbs and the often astonishing destitution of its center. Here a surplus population of "general labourers," depending on casual or occasional work, filled the crumbling splendor of Georgian townhouses. Only one-quarter of the nearly 5400 tenement dwellings at the turn of the century was regarded (by the tolerant standards of the day) as structurally sound and fit for habitation; one-half was ever sliding into unfitness; and the remaining quarter had moved beyond the possibility of reclamation. Infant mortality and tuberculosis raised the death rate to 25 per 1000. Over this subworld the characters of a shabby gentility survived shakily. Shopkeepers, clerks, publicans, and their assistants seemed not to belong to a middle class in the English or European sense, rather to exist in a kind of space-between, affecting the manners of superiority, facing the possibility of collapse. Into

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this space John Joyce sank his family, forever harkening back to the patrician grandeur of the near past, constantly raising the specter of absolute ruin in the future. It was, as it were, the psychic crossroads of the Dublin caste system.

Joyce's experience there structures his vision of the city and casts many of the characters the reader meets in *Ulysses*. The conventional working class – gardeners, plumbers, carpenters – has virtually no representatives here. Joyce's people belong almost exclusively to the lower middle class, often affecting a sense of superiority that is only a reflection of their own insecurity. Poised between upper-class aspirations and the possibility of descent through the no-safety-net floor of 1904 society, Joyce's characters inhabit a gap, a site of high anxiety in historical Dublin but, as recast on the pages of *Ulysses*, a stage for high verbal drama. This space-between locates a rich nexus, a kind of vortex point into and through which the various class dialects of the city come rushing. Joyce orchestrates this mixture – “dialogia” is Bakhtin's term for the practice – into his narrative with a skill as complex as the attitudes of a man who has suffered existence there. Being out of (any single) place, the Joyce family gave James a position from which the contemporary ideological constructions of society were opened for interrogation. He could see the dominant political conventions of the time from the vantage of a relative alien, and so reimagine a world he knew all too well to the lineaments of some alternative order, some alternate models of possibility. Two forces – mighty but for the most part irreconcilable – had grown up in opposition to the situation left in Ireland by English colonialism: Irish nationalism, international socialism.

Nationalism and socialism had long stood in conflict on the Continent, but Irish history made their alignment especially difficult. The absence of a broadly based labor movement left the socialists fearing that a new Irish state would change only the flag, not the structure or values, of the existing society. Conversely, the trans-European culture of socialism threatened the ethnic and political identity the Irish nationalists were seeking to retrieve. The Irish Free State that emerged from the rebellion of 1916 and the ensuing conflicts would indeed sustain much of the class-structure and economic culture of the older social order. But attempts to mediate the impasse between nationalism and socialism were not inconsequential: this debate



focused much of the energy in the intellectual culture of Irish politics. Of the writers involved in the debate one of the most interesting is the socialist James Connolly, an intelligence whose development between 1890 and 1916 (he was killed in the Rising) provides both a history-in-miniature of Irish social feeling and a parallel (ultimately a contrast) for the growth of Joyce's own political sensibility.

In "Socialism and Irish Nationalism" (1897), Connolly negotiates a strained settlement between his two claimants. "Even with his false reasoning," Connolly concedes, "the Irish nationalist . . . is an agent for social regeneration," but only insofar as the patriot forces Ireland to separate from "the interests of a feudal [English] aristocracy." Nationalism, in other words, is merely an expedient for the goals of socialism, a catalyst to be consumed in the very process of class-revolt that it helps to stimulate. It is a tinder no less dangerous than it is volatile. "The arguments of the chauvinist nationalist," he worries, address those zones of atavism and barbarism, the alliances of tribe and race, that ever threaten a "national recreancy." At times, however, Connolly attaches his language of egalitarian values to a romantic and nostalgic nationalism, imputing to the "social structure of ancient Erin" a "form of that common property" that is collectivist. To locate a socialist millennium in Celtic antiquity is of course anachronistic, but, in reaching so far back, Connolly's gesture reveals all too clearly an absence in the social and economic past of Ireland, indeed a missing phase in the connective tissue of a socialist's progressive history. Connolly lacks any evidence of a working-class movement in the actual history of Ireland, which, in one dominant model of socialist politics, is the enabling condition of class-revolt and the ultimate egalitarian state.

This absence defines an awareness central to Joyce's own youthful socialism, which grew from his early experience and crested in 1906–7, in Rome, where his short-lived employment as a bank clerk coincided with a meeting of the international socialist congress. Among the rival factions at the congress he prefers the trades-unionists or Syndicalists, who subscribe to an anarchism Joyce justifies in view of the problems particular to Irish social history. His wording forces to a focus the predicaments underlying Connolly's own argument and rhetoric. "The Irish proletariat is yet to be created" (*Letters* II, 187), Joyce knows, and this absence seems to

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warrant an anarchist program of change. A month earlier he has deliberated “the overthrow of the entire present social organisation” to force “the automatic emergence of the proletariat in trades-unions and guilds and the like” (*Letters II*, 174). These socialist goals also lead him, like Connolly, into an opportunistic tolerance of Irish nationalism, which would at least break the English-forged chains of a feudal peasantry (*Letters II*, 187). Yet he also suggests that an English presence would help to erase those most regrettable conditions in Ireland – serfs scratching at the land to which they are tied. For English investment would alleviate the shortage of industrial capital (*Letters II*, 187), a deficit that accounts for the absence of an urban working class, whose forceful organization is essential to (one model of) socialist evolution. Apparently paradoxical, in fact pragmatic, indeed ultra-socialist, Joyce’s openness to the English also invokes the pan-national faith of socialism. It allows him to endorse the hope, expressed at the conference, that the new century will witness the end of international war (*Letters II*, 174).

Seven years later came the crisis of socialist internationalism: the Great War of 1914–18. On its verge Europe stood as a rickety collage of nation-states, adhering in systems of alliance that four centuries of diplomacy had evolved, bartered, and compromised. Four days in August brought the system to acute distress, plunging England and most of the Continent into total war. The swiftness with which social democratic parties capitulated to national war efforts – the Socialist Party in Germany followed its initial opposition to conflict by eagerly voting war credits to its government – may have dismayed socialist intellectuals like Lenin. But these developments forced fresh awarenesses on other Marxist ideologues; Henrik de Man, for example, saw that the claims of race and country operated far more powerfully than those of social class or millenarian cause. These circumstances and recognitions provide context and rationale for the Irish Rising and the development of Connolly’s own revolutionary politics, which changed utterly between 1914 and 1916. Nearly global evidence convinced him that a nationalist and ethnic vocabulary, not words like *proletariat* or *aristocracy*, could define oppositions, force issues, tap political energy. “The time for *Ireland’s* battle is now,” he proclaims in January 1916, “the place for *Ireland’s* battle is here.” A month later the rhetoric is rising