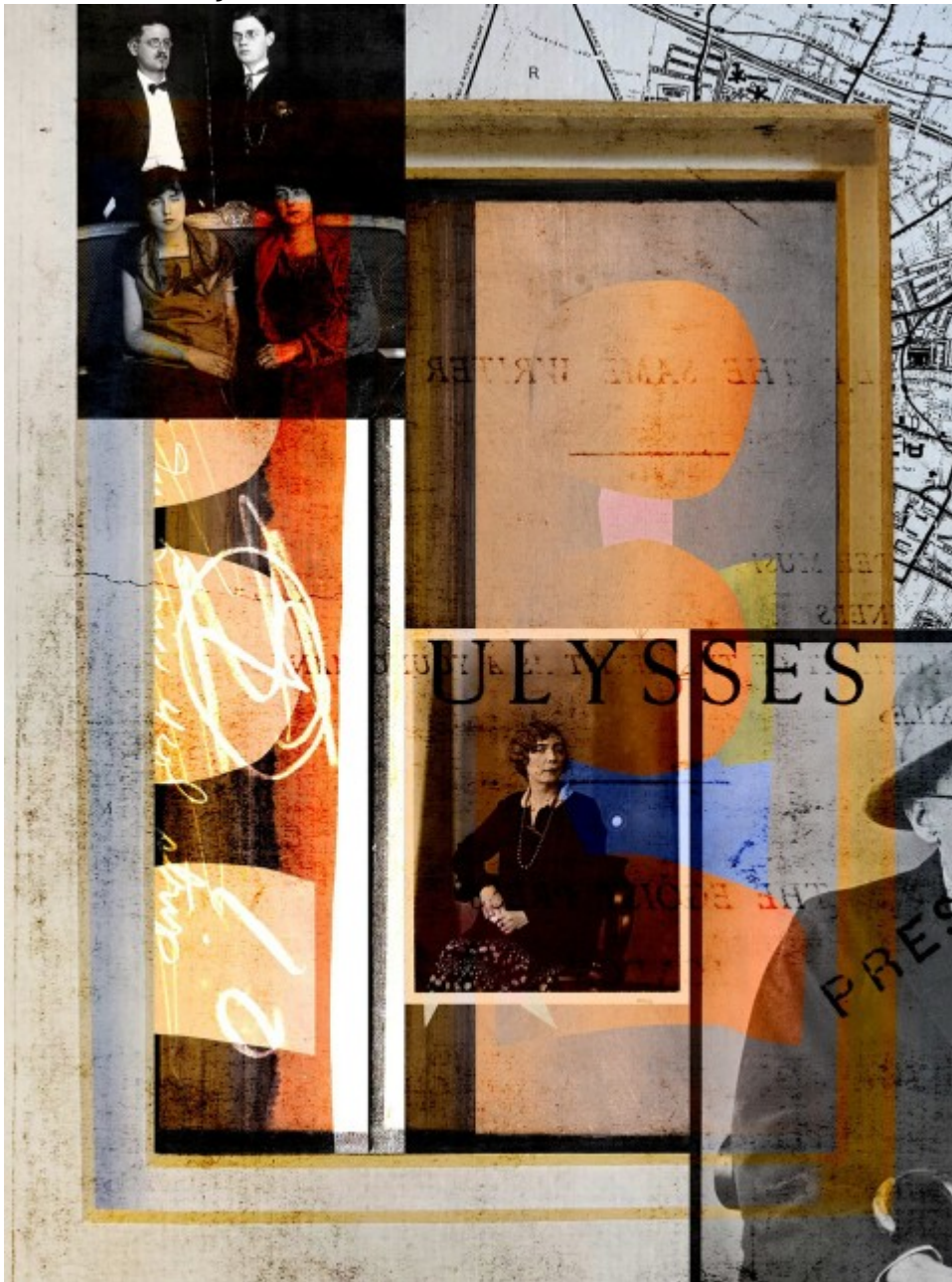


The post-Catholic Joyce

Filtered through my deconstructed Catholic faith, *Ulysses* holds up surprisingly well.

by [Rebecca Bratten Weiss](#) in the [June 2024](#) issue

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“History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,” Stephen Dedalus says, early in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Twenty-five years ago, when I was starting my dissertation research on this groundbreaking novel from 1922, I spent some time analyzing the significance of this statement in the context of Irish history and Joyce’s artistic theory. Now, I don’t have to analyze it. I just get it. I am watching an epoch of history unfold, and I don’t like where it seems to be going.

In the last few years I’ve watched dangerous forces coalesce into a rising fascist movement in the United States and seen many former associates and acquaintances assent to conspiracy theories and revisionist history. I have frequently thought this is what it might have felt like in Europe in the 1930s.

Large portions of my life, work, and identity were formed in a pocket of ultraconservative Catholicism that has lent its considerable political influence to backing some of the most dangerous movements in US culture today. My experience of religious deconstruction has not included disaffiliation from the Catholic Church, but it’s still been a shake-up. I find myself constantly pausing to reevaluate beliefs I once held, trying to determine what still has value and what should be discarded.

Part of this has entailed revisiting some of the literary works that formed my understanding of myself and the world. Sometimes, these works were even my refuge *from* that world. It’s disappointing to return to them and find that many don’t hold up in the light of my new, post-deconstruction perspectives. Yes, I could, in theory, skip over some polite racism in the novels of Evelyn Waugh or ignore the threads of homophobia in the stories of C. S. Lewis—because those bigotries don’t directly affect me. But they affect others, and ultimately they affect our collective hope for the future.

To my surprise, I have found that *Ulysses* holds up pretty well 100 years later—especially in comparison to many of the works of the author’s contemporaries and friends. While T. S. Eliot was fretting about the fragmentation of Christendom and Ezra Pound was weaving antisemitic screeds into his *Cantos* prior to coming out full-throttle for Mussolini, Joyce was creating a sometimes ribald, sometimes esoteric, but ultimately life-affirming experimental novel in which gender is fluid, family transcends biological connections, the hero is Jewish, and the monsters he confronts are bigotry, nationalism, and violence. *Ulysses* is a novel that I appreciate more, not less, following my Catholic deconstruction—perhaps because the author

grapples with many of the same personal and moral questions I am working through now.

Ulysses is a modern retelling of the *Odyssey*, one in which the hero's journey takes place on a single day, June 16, 1904, in Dublin. The day was important to Joyce because it was when he had his first date, and probably his first sexual encounter, with Nora Barnacle, the woman who would eventually become his wife. Joyce's letters to Nora, written a few years later while she was in Zurich and he in Dublin, have become famous for their eloquent raunchiness. While *Ulysses* is comparatively tame, it was still banned in both the United States and Britain, even before it was published, on grounds of obscenity.

Joyce fans refer to June 16 as Bloomsday, and every year groups gather in Dublin to celebrate by reading from *Ulysses* and touring the different sites referred to in the novel. (The novel's hero—Joyce's Odysseus figure—is Leopold Bloom, a middle-aged, middle-class Jewish man who works in advertising.) The first of such celebrations, organized in 1954 by Irish writer Brian O'Nolan and critic John Ryan, was cut short in the city's red-light district because the participants were too inebriated to continue.

Before I ever read Joyce, I had heard from conservative scholars that he was bad news, and not just because of his monumental vulgarity. They spoke of him like they spoke of Nietzsche, as though he were a cynical nihilist or dangerous subversive out to destroy an ancient and hallowed tradition, puncturing the ideals of heroism, mocking the values of chastity and fidelity.

But when I read *Ulysses*, I found its author to be the opposite of nihilistic; his subversion is not for its own sake but rather in the service of humane values. Joyce is not attacking the idea of heroism; he's remaking it—so that it's less about the isolated and tormented individual and more about ordinary human wisdom and resilience in the face of humiliation and heartbreak.

When I decided to write my dissertation on *Ulysses* at the University of Dallas, the novel's association with scandalous behavior was a factor. The contrarian in me couldn't resist the impulse to poke the conservative hornet's nest. But my whole intellectual background had been leading me to Joyce. He too was raised in a deeply conservative religious culture. At his Jesuit and Christian Brothers schools, he was trained to approach the world from the standpoint of Catholic traditions, categories, and definitions. Later, at University College, he studied Thomas Aquinas. Though he

ultimately left the church—an experience he chronicles in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—his mind and imagination remained indelibly marked by his Catholic education.

Reading some of the most revered secular critics of *Ulysses*, I realized that for most of them, Joyce's Catholic thought was viewed as a curiosity or a problem to be solved. But it's difficult to get one's critical teeth into *Ulysses* without a deep familiarity with Catholic thought. In order to get at what he is doing when he applies principles of Thomistic thought to his own aesthetic theories, they would have to dive into Aquinas. But I had already done the diving. I was adrift in that vast sea we call the "Catholic intellectual tradition," and Joyce was there swimming ahead of me.

For instance, Joyce draws on the doctrine of transubstantiation, the attempt to explain how the eucharistic bread becomes the body of Christ, for his development of his aesthetics. Just as the ordinary stuff of bread is transformed into the flesh of God, so the artist, as Joyce writes in *A Portrait*, transmutes "the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life."

In *Ulysses*, Joyce puts this aesthetic theory into practice, transforming the realistic events of that single Dublin day into myth and legend, inviting his readers to believe in a world in which we need not be defined by rigid circumstances of birth or history—where change, transformation, and metamorphosis are possible. For the reader who is going through a process of religious deconstruction, wondering whether anything good or beautiful can come out of the mess one has made of one's life, this can be reassuring.

Bloom's wanderings through the city parallel the wanderings of Odysseus, and each episode of the novel is based on an encounter or adventure in the original epic. Bloom's wife, Molly, is the Penelope character, but unlike the long-suffering heroine of the Homeric epic, she is waiting at home not for her husband but for her lover. The character who correlates with Odysseus's son Telemachus is the morbid young intellectual Stephen Dedalus, whom readers met earlier in *A Portrait*. Though Dedalus is not Bloom's biological son, by the novel's end they have established a father-son relationship connected with the healing and transformation each of these three characters will experience.

Bloom's Jewishness is significant to his status as hero. While many of Joyce's contemporaries, such as G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, perceived Jewish

identity as a threat to nationalist assimilation and homogeneity, in Joyce's story Bloom as a Jewish man has a sense of connection with a broader world beyond the boundaries of Catholic Ireland. And this awareness of a global community fosters greater tolerance, a more lively curiosity. Like other Irish writers of his day, Joyce was attentive to the injustices meted out on his people by the British Empire as well as by the Roman Catholic Church, but he also believed that fixation on national grievance and a romantic obsession with an imaginary past had a negative effect on Irish culture and society. Bloom's capacity to transcend this augments his resilience.

But as a Jewish man, Bloom is repeatedly subjected to antisemitic harassment. This happens most notably in the Cyclops episode, in which a belligerent Irish nationalist called "the citizen" bullies Bloom at a pub. Bloom's attempts to defuse an increasingly tense and unsafe social situation will be familiar to anyone who has experienced racist or sexist harassment in a hostile environment. At the end of the chapter, when the citizen attempts to physically attack him, Bloom finally loses his temper and shouts a litany of names of famous Jewish philosophers, ending with the taunt, "Your God was a Jew. Christ was a Jew like me."

The citizen, enraged, shouts, "I'll brain that bloody Jewman for using the holy name. By Jesus, I'll crucify him so I will," and throws a biscuit tin at Bloom, who ducks and escapes. The narrator describes the scene in biblical and even apocalyptic imagery, mixed with the colloquialisms of a Dublin pub: "And they beheld Him even Him, ben Bloom Elijah, amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of the brightness at an angle of fortyfive degrees over Donohoe's in Little Green Street like a shot off a shovel."

Throughout the novel Joyce experiments with different narrative or rhetorical styles in this way, sometimes mixing them up for a kaleidoscopic effect, in order to capture reality from different angles and perspectives. While in his earlier, overtly realist writings, especially in *Dubliners*, Joyce uses his art as a "nicely polished mirror" (his metaphor) to show people to themselves, his preferred metaphor for his technique in *Ulysses* is that of parallax, the optical phenomenon whereby an object's position appears to change as the observer's position changes. What emerges from this use of language is not a reflection of reality but something new and different, reality transformed. By the novel's end, the characters have been changed by this magic, this metamorphosis. Bloom, Stephen, and Molly emerge as figures of heroic epic, but at the same time authentically themselves.

Before Bloom's transformation can be complete, however, he must undergo a kind of catharsis. Just as Odysseus has to descend to the underworld and confront his own ghosts, Bloom must face the specters that haunt him. Embracing his own Jewish identity is part of this. But not until the Circe episode, when Bloom and Stephen visit a brothel and experience a carnivalesque sort of Walpurgisnacht, does Bloom fully confront his own subconscious fears and desires, especially his dread that in "allowing" his wife to liaise with her lover, he is somehow less of a man.

In a lengthy phantasmagoric sequence, Bloom is declared to be an "example of the new womanly man" and promptly gives birth to eight children. But Joyce doesn't depict Bloom's intersex or hermaphroditic nature as something negative or horrifying. The scene is surreal comedy, yes, but the effect is to affirm the legitimacy of the feminine aspects of Bloom's nature. Though his change into a woman is not permanent, it is essential to his metamorphosis.

In representing femininity as an aspect of the heroic and not something to be ashamed of, Joyce challenges the views on gender that were widespread at his time and remain dominant in many conservative spaces. Similarly, his choice to depict his Penelope character as cheating on her husband does not undermine the value of fidelity as such. As a woman who freely chooses where and how to give her love, Molly's choice of Bloom, reaffirmed with her famous yes at the end of the novel, is more meaningful because it is freely given. Unlike the Homeric original, in which Odysseus's prolonged journey home is punctuated by flings with women mortal and divine while chaste Penelope waits at home, in *Ulysses* both Bloom and Molly have agency. Joyce does not weigh them by a gendered double standard.

Joyce's view of family in general was complex, perhaps partially due to his own experiences, on which he models Stephen's. Stephen's father, like Joyce's, is a drunkard and a "praiser of his own past," as Joyce describes him in *A Portrait*. His mother is dead, and Stephen's many siblings are living in poverty. In *Ulysses*, as Stephen wanders the city, a Hamlet-like figure dressed all in black, he is haunted by the loss of his mother and by his own refusal to pray with her by her deathbed. Even though he refused on principle, he can't shake the guilt he feels at having disappointed her in her final moments. And he has his own underworld encounter in the Circe episode, when the ghost of his dead mother confronts him.

Throughout the novel, Stephen is fixated on re-creating a coherent vision of life to take the place of his lost faith. His meeting with Bloom is significant for his own

transformation as an artist. It is also a detail that may resonate with readers who have had to set boundaries or cut ties with toxic friends or family members and who look for community and creative support in found family.

This doesn't mean everything is neatly wrapped up and fixed for Joyce's three central characters. No matter what magic Joyce works with his art, life still has to be lived, often painfully. Yes, Joyce offers a new vision of heroism and shows us that we need not be defined by the nightmares of our history. But the nightmares still loom. Homer's epic heroes may have experienced some catharsis or resolution in their stories, but Achilles still died young, and Odysseus still had to leave home again in order to expiate Poseidon's curse. Similarly, Stephen will probably go on being plagued by Catholic guilt. Bloom will still be harassed by his antisemitic peers. Molly may even cheat again. Joyce doesn't try to tell us otherwise, and this honesty, too, is a relief. There is only so much we can escape from.

"Every life is many days, day after day," Stephen muses. "We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves."