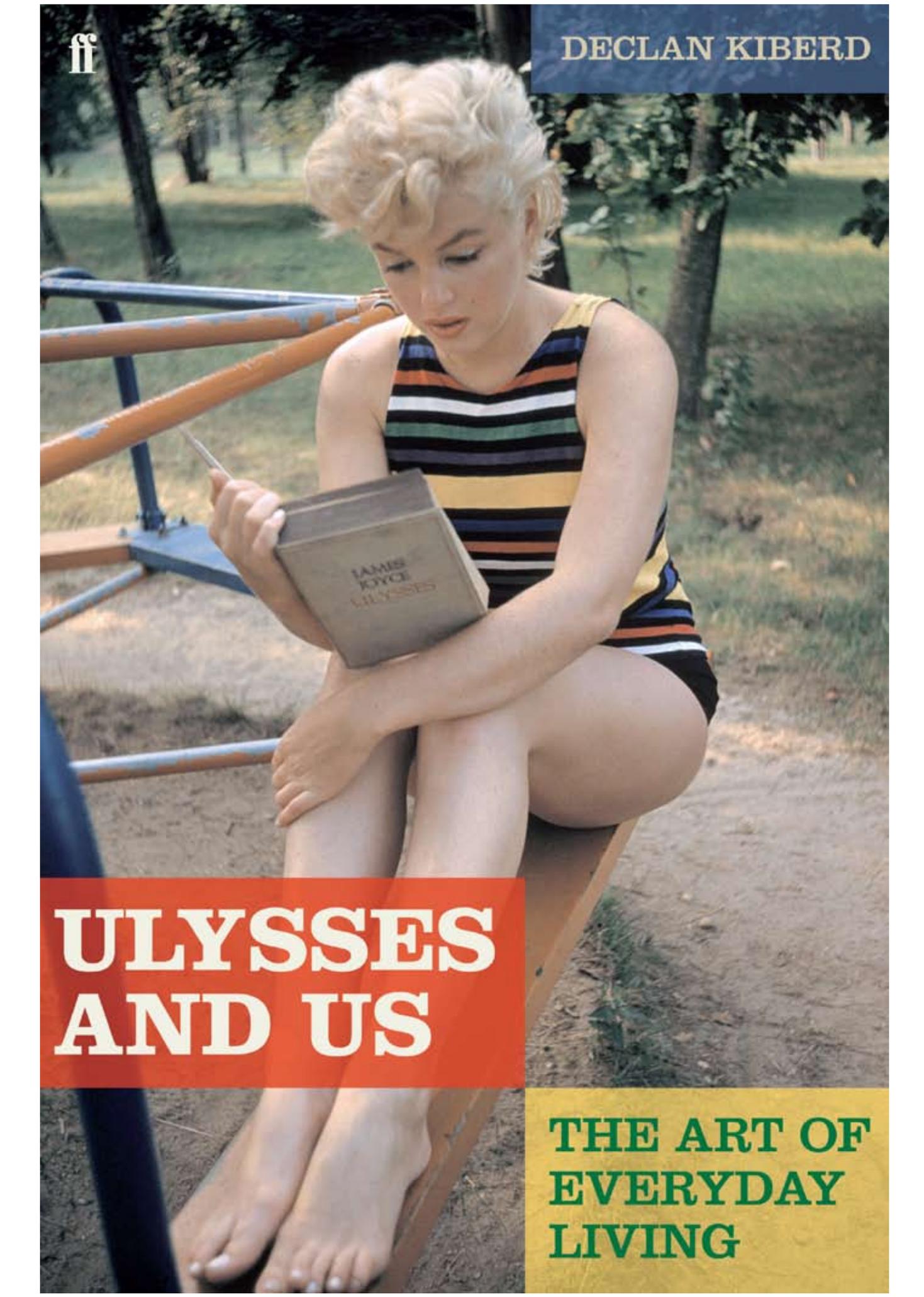


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DECLAN KIBERD



**ULYSSES
AND US**

**THE ART OF
EVERYDAY
LIVING**

Ulysses and Us

The Art of Everyday Living

DECLAN KIBERD

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In memory of John McGahern

‘Níl ann ach lá dár saol’

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ULYSSES AND US

How *Ulysses* Didn't Change Our Lives

When a painter visited James Joyce in his Parisian apartment, the famous author pointed out of the window to the son of the concierge playing on the steps. 'One day,' he said, 'that boy will be a reader of *Ulysses*.' Already the book had a reputation for obscurity as well as obscenity, but Joyce remained confident that it would reach and move many ordinary readers. On its publication in 1922, he gave a copy as a present to François Quinton, his favourite waiter at Fouquet's. In those years, he preferred not to discuss literature with experts or writers, but 'loved to carry on a dialogue about Dickens with some unknown attendant at the post-office window or to discuss the meaning and structure of Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* with the person at the box office'. Sylvia Beach, whose bookshop published Joyce's masterpiece when nobody else would, noted how he treated everyone as an equal, whether they were writers, children, waiters, princesses or charladies. He confided in her that *everybody* interested him and that he had never met a bore.

Ulysses is one of the masterpieces of modernism, accorded the same exalted status as Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* or Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, yet it has become a defining element in the life of the city where it is set. Like the prelates of the Catholic

Church, Joyce was perhaps cunning in setting aside a single day of the year on which to celebrate a feast. When Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus sit down together at the book's climax over coffee and a bun, neither man says 'do this in memory of me', yet every year the cult grows. Like all such cults, it has its routes of pilgrimage, special foods, ritual observances and priestly decoders of the sacred text. Many of the surrealists who lived near Joyce in Paris had also grown up as Catholics – but their displaced religion was filled with edicts, dogmas and ex-communications, while he, by contrast, appropriated the more celebratory rituals of Catholicism. As is the case with all emergent religions, the cult of James Joyce – known jocularly as the Feast of Saint Jam Juice in Dublin – has spawned its own loyal opposition. On 16 June 2004, when 10,000 Bloomsday breakfasts were served on Dublin streets to mark the great centenary, a spray-painter went to work and wrote 'Bloom is a cod' on a building-site wall. There were no inverted (or even perverted) commas around the quotation.

Every year, hundreds of Dubliners dress as characters from the book – Stephen with his cane, Leopold with his bowler hat, Molly in her petticoats, Blazes Boylan under a straw boater – as if to assert their willingness to become one with the text. They re-enact scenes in Eccles Street, Ormond Quay and Sandycove's Martello tower. It is quite impossible to imagine any other masterpiece of modernism having quite such an effect on the life of a city.

And yet, one has to ask the obvious question – how many of those celebrants have actually read the book through? Ernest Hemingway worshipped Joyce as the leader of intellectual Paris in the 1920s, yet his copy of

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Ulysses lies in the John F. Kennedy library with all but the early and final pages uncut. Many of the early editions put on sale by art auctioneers seem not to have known the first reader's knife. It is as if Joyce's work has been co-opted by that very art market which he despised. *Ulysses* set out to change the world and to liberate its readers, but now often seems more famous for the prices at which first editions change hands. In his Parisian years, Joyce often complained about the commodification of modernist painting: 'Picasso gets 20,000 to 30,000 francs for a few hours' work', he moaned, while he who laboured 10,000 hours writing each section of *Ulysses* was 'not worth a penny a line'. The man who once told a college classmate on the steps of the National Library of Ireland that his stomach muscles were tight from hunger might have been even more amazed to discover that the same library would one day acquire the papers that he left to Paul Leon for millions of euro. While he would doubtless have enjoyed the drinks and japes of Bloomsday, he might also have sadly noted in them an attempt by Dubliners to reassert a lost sense of community, a poignant assertion of ownership of streets through which on other days of the year they hurry from one private experience to another. The celebration of Bloomsday may in fact be a lament for a lost city, for an earlier time when Dublin was still felt to be civic, knowable, viable.

My father loved *Ulysses* as the fullest account ever given of the city in which he lived. There were parts that baffled or bored him, and these he skipped, much as today we fast-forward over the duller tracks on beloved music albums. But there were entire passages which he knew almost by heart. In 1982, the centenary of Joyce's

birth, I enticed him to attend a Joyce symposium at Trinity College, but as we walked through the hallway, a passer-by said, 'I think I'll go into "The Consciousness of Stephen",' at which the old man balked and bolted for the nearest door.

It was the peculiar curse and blessing of *Ulysses* to have appeared just as the curricular study of English literature in universities really took off. The book which set out to restore the dignity of the middle range of human experience against the false heroics of World War I was soon lost to the common reader. Yet *Ulysses* was arguably one of the major artworks to register the effects of that conflict on ordinary people. Bloom's uncertain sexual potency, though an element of a book set in 1904, seemed to prefigure the impotent or damaged protagonists of Hemingway, Eliot and Lawrence, while his emphasis on the need for a tolerant and peaceful response to the experience of betrayal held many lessons for a world coming out of war.

Many of those who enlisted for military service in 1914-18 diced with death in order to heighten their sense of being alive. Joyce understood from the start that this cult of death arose out of a disillusion with everyday life. He intuited a link between a more democratic politics and a belief in the significance of people's quotidian practices. In making the central character of *Ulysses* an ordinary Jewish citizen, he may have foreseen that the Jews could easily become victims of the general disenchantment with the complications of modernity. If you make the rejection of everyday life, of work, of happiness a mass phenomenon rather than just a response of baffled individuals, writes Henri Lefebvre, 'you end up with the Hitler Mystique'.

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A book which set out to celebrate the common man and woman endured the sad fate of never being read by most of them. Was this a case of bad faith or bohemian hypocrisy in a work which idealised just the sort of simple souls who could never hope to read it? It was first lost to those readers even as it triumphed in bohemia and then in the academy; but today it is lost also to most students, lecturers and intellectuals. Many of the people who read Joyce now are called 'Joyceans' and appointed as specialists in university departments, most of whose other members would never dream of attempting *Ulysses*. There are, of course, plenty of amateur readers and determined autodidacts out there in society, who study it as a sort of furtive activity to which they would never own up for fear of seeming pretentious. Then, also, there are dozens of Dublin taxi drivers who 'know the main characters but haven't got too far into it yet'. Most people who study it closely tend, like reforming alcoholics, to join groups in which to share and discuss the challenges. It is almost as if *Ulysses* anticipated not only the growth of the university seminar but also the rise of the suburban book club, both of which offer an antidote to the loneliness of the long-distance reader.

The development of modular systems of education, offering wide choices of subjects to students across many disciplines, could have been the saving of *Ulysses*. A class containing individuals who had already studied, say, Homer, romantic music or Irish history could have really hummed, but this has not often happened. What has been lost in these systems is a sense of chronology, an understanding of the evolution of English literature on which so much of the meaning of the text depends. Even before that

defeat, however, *Ulysses* was wrenched out of the hands of the common reader. Why? Because of the rise of specialists prepared to devote years to the study of its secret codes – *parallax*, *indeterminacy*, *consciousness-time* being among the buzz words. Such specialists often tend to work in teams. Many of them reject the notion of a national culture, assuming that to be cultured nowadays is to be international, even global, in consciousness. In doing this, they have often removed Joyce from the Irish context which gave his work so much of its meaning and value.

The middle decades of the twentieth century were the years in which the idea of a common culture was abandoned – yet *Ulysses* depends on that very notion. Joyce himself was *not* forbiddingly learned. He cut more classes at University College Dublin than he attended, averaging less than 50 per cent in many of his exams. His classmate Con Curran noted that he made the little he learned there go a very long way. When he left secondary school at eighteen, Joyce knew most of the basic things you need for reading (or writing) *Ulysses* – the Mass in Latin, the life and themes of Shakespeare, how electricity works, how water gets from a reservoir to the domestic tap, Charles Lamb’s version of the adventures of Ulysses. In his youth he described himself as a socialist artist and a believer in participatory democracy – that everyone, whether wealthy enough to have a higher education or not, should have equal access to this common culture. He would have agreed with R. H. Tawney’s contention that ‘opportunities to rise are no substitute for a general diffusion of the means of civilisation’, something that was needful for all, both rich and poor. To his brother Stanislaus he wrote from Austria in May 1905:

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It is a mistake for you to imagine that my political opinions are those of a universal lover: but they are those of a socialistic artist. I cannot tell you how strange I sometimes feel in my attempt to live a more civilised life than my contemporaries.

Ulysses took shape in a world which had known for the first time the possibilities of mass literacy and the emergence of working men's reading libraries. Virginia Woolf, perhaps unintentionally, captured that element when she sneered at it as the book 'of a self-taught Dublin working man'. Its succession of disparate and discordant styles seemed to her an embarrassing example of an autodidact conducting his own education in public. (The same complaint would be made about the very different styles in which Picasso painted each of the figures in *Les Femmes d'Alger*.) These were the years in which H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* sold over two million copies; and books by Ruskin, William Morris and Macaulay sold in tens of thousands. As Richard Hoggart observed, 'The reading of working men was likely to be wide, solid and inspiring.' The later years of World War I and the years just after witnessed a decline in deference to church and state authority and an assertion that the working man, landless labourer and voteless woman were persons of dignity in their own right. This was the era when democracy meant that *anyone* could enjoy Shakespeare. When a group of travelling players asked a porter in Limerick railway station whether they had reached their destination, the man raised his cap in mock-salute and said, 'Why, sirs, this is Illyria.'

Nobody then spoke of *Hamlet* as an example of elite art

being imposed on the helpless children of labourers, for in those years a radical populism meant training readers in the art of self-reliance. These were the conditions in which Joyce made free play with texts like the *Odyssey* or *Hamlet*, not as specialist knowledge but as the property of all who shared in a common culture. One of his favourite party pieces in his student years was to dress up as Queen Gertrude and keen the death of Ophelia in the accents of inner Dublin, while his friend Willie Fallon, dressed as the tragic heroine, strewed cauliflowers across the drawing-room floor.

After the mid-twentieth century, that common culture was replaced by the creation of specialist elites. Democracy was no longer seen as the sharing in a common fund of textual knowledge, but as providing access to this or that super-educated grouping. No longer was the prevailing idea that anyone bright enough could read and understand *Hamlet* or *Ulysses*, but that anyone sufficiently clever could aspire to become one of the paid specialists who did such things. Today's social movements aim at the inclusion of gifted souls in the dominant structure rather than at the revolutionary transformation of social relations. Hence the pseudo-radical interpretations of Joyce produced over the past two decades of 'critical theory' have challenged neither the growing corporate stranglehold over universities nor the specialist stranglehold over Joyce. They have in fact strengthened both forces. And that is because 'theory' is rarely concerned with linking analysis to real action in the world.

Ulysses was written to celebrate the reality of ordinary people's daily rounds. From Baudelaire to Flaubert, much of the most powerful writing of the previous century con-

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tained corrosive critiques of everyday life, motivated by their authors' rebellion against the repetitive character of city routines reduced to mere banality. Most persons who are bored to numbness cannot even perceive this malady, but Baudelaire and Flaubert set out to bring them to a consciousness of it. 'Boredom is the everyday become manifest,' observes Maurice Blanchot, 'and consequently, the everyday after it has lost its essential, constitutive trait of being unperceived.' But Joyce took a very different line. He believed that by recording the minutiae of a single day, he could release those elements of the marvellous latent in ordinary living, so that the familiar might astonish. The 'everyday' need not be average, but a process recorded as it is lived – with spontaneity and openness to chance. For all their radical newness, Joyce's methods were a return to the aims of the romantic poets in the aftermath of the French revolution: as Coleridge said of Wordsworth, the hope was to awaken the mind from the lethargy of custom to deal with persons from common walks of life and 'to give the charm of novelty to the things of every day'.

It is time to reconnect *Ulysses* to the everyday lives of real people. The more snobbish modernists resorted to difficult techniques in order to protect their ideas against appropriation by the newly literate masses; but Joyce foresaw that the real need would be to defend his book and those masses against the newly illiterate specialists and technocratic elites. Whereas other modernists feared the hydra-headed mob, Joyce used interior monologue to show how lovable, complex and affirmative was the mind of the ordinary citizen. *Ulysses* gives such persons the sort of ceremonial treatment once reserved for aristocrats. While other writers followed Nietzsche in attacking mass

culture ('the rabble spit forth their bile once a day and call the results a newspaper'), Joyce offered *Ulysses* as a counter-newspaper, which would capture even more acutely the events of a single day. As others voiced their fear of the passivity and tractability of the mob, he tried to democratise intelligence and to produce a more active, creative kind of reader. The more frightening the world became, the more abstract the arts seemed to become, but Joyce tried to keep everything concrete.

Although *Ulysses* is a book of privacies and subjectivities, an astounding number of its scenes are set in public space – libraries, museums, bars, cemeteries, and most of all the streets. Its characters enjoy the possibilities afforded by those streets for random, unexpected meetings. And it is this very openness to serendipity which allows Joyce to renew his styles and themes with each succeeding episode. Far from seeing 'street people' as a problem, he treats them as the very basis of a civilisation – the civic bourgeoisie.

Ulysses is an epic of the bourgeoisie. Modern epics, however, far from being confident statements from the heart of a successful civilisation, are more often laments for its fragile greatness and imminent decline – Milton on the English Revolution, Walt Whitman on the promise of American democracy. Joyce in 1922 published a celebration of the bourgeois Bloom, but he sensed that the man's versatility and openness of mind were already in jeopardy.

The bourgeois saw that even a modest income carried social obligations – to one's neighbours, fellow citizens, even to one's nation. Accordingly, Bloom doesn't just help a blind stripling to cross the street or give beyond his

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means to the fund for the bereaved Dignam family. He also frets about how to improve transport systems in Dublin and how to combat cruelty to animals. It's even suggested that he may have given the idea for Sinn Féin to Arthur Griffith. Insofar as he identifies with the Jewish people, it is less with their suffering sense of victimhood and more with their achievements, those of Mendelssohn in music and Marx in social thought.

One of the most attractive features of Bloom is his blend of imagination and practicality, of theory and practice. He sees no contradiction whatever between bohemian and bourgeois. That is the meaning of his climactic meeting with Stephen Dedalus near the close of the book, a book which may be unique in the history of modernism because it suggests concord rather than eternal enmity between poet and citizen.

Joyce remained always steadfast in his belief. In his youth he had tried to establish a daily newspaper in Dublin called *The Goblin*, to be published like certain continental papers each afternoon. 'Its establishment', commented a friend, 'would cost a sum that in the Dublin of that day was fabulous.' Later, he would open the city's first movie house, the Volta, as a going concern in 1909, with financial backers from overseas. Unlike their European counterparts who had learned to detach themselves from the hated bourgeoisie, Irish intellectuals were still bedazzled by the idea of business success. Wilde and Shaw wrote their plays avowedly for money; Yeats ran the Abbey Theatre without government subsidy as a business; Joyce even tried to sell Irish tweed in Trieste. He had little truck with bohemians, preferring to stress the practical value of art for a full life. As his college classmate Mary

Colum said, he lacked ‘any of what are called Bohemian qualities’. The Irish painter Arthur Power recalled how ‘he hated Bohemian cafes and anything to do with them. His life was very regulated and it was bourgeois in all its aspects. He was a great family man.’

He recreated these qualities in Bloom who, for instance, had a belief that the works of Shakespeare were important for the practical wisdom they conveyed. In the ‘Ithaca’ episode Bloom is described as using Shakespeare to help solve ‘difficult problems in imaginary or real life’ (791) but with imperfect results. That view of Shakespeare is not much in fashion today, when expert commentators treat his plays more as technical performances than as guides to a fulfilled life. Yet even the intellectual Stephen had in the world of 1904 tried to put *Hamlet* to such a use, hoping it might help him to sort out his troubled relationship with his father. Through Stephen, Joyce voiced his objection to the cult of the Shakespeare specialist when he mocked Edward Dowden’s dominance of that field. Perhaps sensing that a Joyce industry might one day curtail his expressive possibilities as Dowden had those of Shakespeare and Company, he had Stephen deride the Trinity College Dublin professor’s patent on the Shakespeare industry: ‘Apply E. Dowden, Highfield House’ (262).

Joyce knew that national epics give people their ideas of what sort of persons they should be. The *Odyssey* even gave the Greeks their notions of what gods they could make their own. Joyce set his book alongside Homer, the Bible, Dante and Shakespeare precisely because he believed that it could project ideas of virtue. Only when it is read and taught as if it *says* something will it gain the

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influence over youth of which he dreamed. Any teacher knows that many students today sprinkle their essays with quotations from the lyrics of rock music and from popular films. This suggests that they still yearn for instruction from artists on how to live. It may well be that rock artists provide the only common culture which most of those students know. The need now is for readers who will challenge the bloodless, technocratic explication of texts: amateur readers who will come up with what may appear to be naïve, even innocent, interpretations. Today's students have been prevented by a knowing, sophisticated criticism from seeking such wisdom in modern literature. In it they seek mainly tricks of style, rhetorical devices, formal experiment, historical insight, but seldom if ever lived wisdom. The contemporary gulf between technique and feeling cries out to be bridged in the classroom, through the work of teaching and learning.