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**PROSE AND DRAMA:
INHERITANCES, EXCHANGES**

JAMES JOYCE AND THE GREEKS¹

FRAN O'ROURKE

The literary achievement of James Joyce is inconceivable apart from its many and varied elements of Greek origin. Joyce was profoundly influenced by Greek literature, language, mythology and philosophy. He enthused about all things Greek, classical and contemporary, and owed many of his deepest inspirations to Hellenic influences. Homer was Joyce's favourite storyteller, providing the motif, model and structure for *Ulysses* in which Leopold Bloom, the new-age Odysseus, reenacts his epic journey through the modern cityscape of Dublin. Joyce regarded Aristotle as 'the greatest thinker of all times', and studied his writings assiduously. The Greek philosopher was one of the principal sources for Joyce's aesthetic; he provided, moreover, the categories with which Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's largely autobiographic character, interpreted everyday life and experience. In the foreign cities where he lived, Joyce sought out the company of Greeks, believing them to be the natural inheritors of an ancient legacy. In this paper I will refer summarily to the importance for Joyce of Homer and Aristotle, to Joyce's dealings with modern Greeks, and finally to his knowledge of modern Greek.²

The name given by Joyce to his literary *alter ego*, in both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*—'Stephen Dedalus'—is itself a conscious claim by the author to his ancient Hellenic legacy. The composite name refers both to the first Christian martyr, and to the creator of the labyrinth—Joyce was familiar with Arthur Evans' excavations at the time.³ Joyce's first reference to Greece occurs in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where Stephen's first holy communion is described: 'When the rector had stooped down to give him the holy communion he had smelt a faint winy smell off the rector's breath after the wine of the mass. The word was beautiful: wine. It made you think of dark purple because the grapes were dark purple that grew in Greece outside houses like white temples.'⁴ This took place on Easter Sunday, 21 April 1889, when the author was only seven years of age. It is probably a case of reconstructed memory; while with Joyce one must accept the unexpected, it is doubtful that Greece would have entered the child's imagination at such an early age.

What certainly entered Joyce's consciousness very early on, taking deep root in his schoolboy imagination, was the epic world of Homeric myth. For the curriculum of the Intermediate Examination in English, Joyce was required to study Charles Lamb's *The Adventures of Ulysses*; examination questions of the time indicate that a very detailed knowledge was required.⁵ Presented with the topic 'My Favourite Hero' for an English essay, he chose Ulysses as his subject.⁶ On another occasion, when permitted to select his own topic, he wrote on Pope's translation of the *Odyssey*.⁷ Joyce later recalled: 'I was twelve years old when we dealt with the Trojan War at school; only the *Odyssey* stuck in my memory. I want to be candid: at twelve I liked the mysticism in Ulysses.'⁸

Joyce was impressed above all by the completeness of the character of Odysseus. Most revealing is a conversation with the sculptor Frank Budgen, who posed the question from the perspective of his own artistic technique. 'What do you mean by a complete man? For example, if a sculptor makes a figure of a man then that man is all-round, three-dimensional, but not necessarily complete in the sense of being ideal. All human bodies are imperfect, limited in some way, human beings too.' To which Joyce replied: '[Ulysses] is both. I see him from all sides, and therefore he is all-round in the sense of your sculptor's figure. But he is a complete man as well—a good man.'⁹ Joyce asked Budgen if he knew of any complete all-round character in literature, and pointed out lacunae in the personalities suggested, such as Faust or Hamlet. Joyce did not even consider Christ a perfect man: 'He was a bachelor, and never lived with a woman. Surely living with a woman is one of the most difficult things a man can do, and he never did it.'¹⁰ Ulysses meets all of the requirements: 'Ulysses is son to Laertes, but he is father to Telemachus, husband to Penelope, lover of Calypso, companion in arms of the Greek warriors around Troy, and King of Ithaca. He was subjected to many trials, but with wisdom and courage came through them all.'¹¹

Joyce declared that the most beautiful, all-embracing, theme was that of the *Odyssey*, and that the subject of Odysseus was the most human in world literature. He offered the following profile of Odysseus' personality and psychology to his friend George Borach:

Odysseus didn't want to go off to Troy; he knew that the official reason for the war, the dissemination of the culture of Hellas, was only a pretext for the Greek merchants, who were seeking new markets. When the recruiting officers arrived, he happened to be plowing. He pretended to be mad. Thereupon they place his little two-year-old son in the furrow. In front of the child he halts the plow. Observe the beauty of the motifs: the only man in Hellas who is against the war, and the father. Before Troy the heroes shed

their lifeblood in vain. They wish to raise the siege. Odysseus opposes the idea. The stratagem of the wooden horse. After Troy there is no further talk of Achilles, Menelaus, Agamemnon. Only one man is not done with; his heroic career has hardly begun: Odysseus. Then the motif of wandering. Scylla and Charybdis—what a splendid parable! Odysseus is also a great musician; he wishes to and must listen; he has himself tied to the mast. The motif of the artist, who will lay down his life rather than renounce his interest. [...] And the return, how profoundly human! Don't forget the trait of generosity at the interview with Ajax in the nether world, and many other beautiful touches. I am almost afraid to treat such a theme; it's overwhelming.¹²

Joyce was equal to the overwhelming challenge and set his ambitions high; his aim was to embrace through art the full amplitude of human existence. As his biographer Herbert Gorman noted: '*Ulysses* is the revelation of all life in a single day.'¹³ Joyce aimed to transpose the universal humanity personified by Odysseus to the Dublin of his day. The strategy adopted for this purpose was ingenious: the daily events of the modern citizen would resonate with the echoes of the greatest character from world literature. *Ulysses* follows loosely the structure of Homer's *Odyssey*, not slavishly, but in cavalier fashion. As T. S. Eliot comments, Joyce's use of myth, 'in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity [...] is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'.¹⁴ At times the parallel is tenuous and inventive; nonetheless Joyce himself regarded it as crucial. He wrote to his aunt Josephine: 'If you want to read *Ulysses* you had better first get or borrow from a library a translation in prose of the *Odyssey* of Homer.'¹⁵

The story of *Ulysses* is simple. It is the account of a single day in the life of an ordinary citizen as he goes about his business in the capital city. Leopold Bloom cooks breakfast, attends a funeral, eats lunch, visits a maternity hospital, meets the younger Stephen Dedalus, and goes to a brothel before returning home, accompanied by Stephen. The latter's activities are also described: he starts the day in a seaside tower which he shares with two friends, teaches a history class, and has an animated discussion about Shakespeare with acquaintances at a library, where he encounters Leopold Bloom. Central to the narrative is the relationship between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, reflecting that of Odysseus and Telemachus. Leopold is the wanderer seeking his son; Stephen seeks a father figure. The modern Ulysses reenacts Homeric episodes as he wanders through Dublin. According to Ezra Pound, 'the parallels with the *Odyssey* are mere mechanics, any blockhead can go back and trace them'.¹⁶ I will refer to a sample few: the ragged milkwoman recalls the goddess Athena,

the barmaids reincarnate the Sirens, the Cyclops becomes the crude nationalist, Bloom's cigar evokes the spear which blinds him. Circe appears as the madam of the brothel; even the Trojan horse has its counterpart in the dark horse tipped by Bloom in the races.¹⁷

The Greek connotations of *Ulysses* are evident from the first scene. Set in the Martello tower at Sandycove (one of the coastal defences erected by England during the Napoleonic wars), there are three characters: Stephen Dedalus, Buck Mulligan and an English friend called Haines. Mulligan's gold fillings elicit the name '*Chrysostomos*'. He in turn refers to Stephen's name: 'Your absurd name, an ancient Greek. ... My name is absurd too [...] but it has a Hellenic ring, hasn't it? ... We must go to Athens. Will you come if I can get the aunt to fork out twenty quid?'¹⁸ The Greek theme is sustained in his admiration of the sea: '*Epi oinopa ponton*. Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks. I must teach you. You must read them in the original. *Thalatta! Thalatta!* She is our great sweet mother.'¹⁹ He suggests to the Englishman: 'God, Kinch, if you and I could only work together we might do something for the island. Hellenise it.'²⁰

Joyce's admiration of the Greek language is also evident from the speech of Professor MacHugh, who in rhetorical flight, contrasts the Irish and Greeks, pioneers of spirituality, with materialist empire-builders of past and present:

'I speak the tongue of a race the acme of whose mentality is the maxim: time is money. Material domination. Domine! Lord! Where is the spirituality? Lord Jesus? Lord Salisbury? A sofa in a westend club. But the Greek! KYRIE ELEISON! A smile of light brightened his darkrimmed eyes, lengthened his long lips. The Greek! he said again. *Kyrios!* Shining word! The vowels the Semite and the Saxon know not. *Kyrie!* The radiance of the intellect. I ought to profess Greek, the language of the mind. *Kyrie eleison!* The closetmaker and the cloacemaker will never be lords of our spirit. We are liege subjects of the catholic chivalry of Europe that foundered at Trafalgar and of the empire of the spirit, not an imperium, that went under with the Athenian fleets at Aegospotami. Yes, yes. They went under. Pyrrhus, misled by an oracle, made a last attempt to retrieve the fortunes of Greece. Loyal to a lost cause.'²¹

Joyce even applied the Greek character of *Ulysses* to its externals, insisting that the cover be printed in the colours of the Greek flag: 'The colours of the binding (chosen by me) will be white letters on a blue field—the Greek flag though really of Bavarian origin and imported with the dynasty. Yet in a special way they symbolize the myth well—the white islands scattered over the sea.'²² On the wall of his apartment in Paris hung

a Greek flag, brought from Trieste.²³ Joyce noticed a visitor's surprise at a vase on the piano containing several Greek flags:

There are a lot of them, aren't there? *Ulysses* has a Greek theme; therefore they are Greek flags. Each new edition of *Ulysses* is a new flag in the vase. At present there are nine. Likewise my room is blue, and I have requested that wherever *Ulysses* is published it have a blue cover.²⁴

Let us move on to Aristotle. It is arguable that, after Homer, Aristotle was Joyce's greatest literary master. Without Homer, Joyce could never have conceived *Ulysses*; however, had he never written *Ulysses*, whatever he wrote would have been profoundly marked by the philosopher from Stagira. He regarded Aristotle as the greatest thinker of all time. In conversation with Georges Borach, he declared: 'In the last two hundred years we haven't had a great thinker. My judgment is bold, since Kant is included. All the great thinkers of recent centuries from Kant to Benedetto Croce have only cultivated the garden. The greatest thinker of all times, in my opinion, is Aristotle. Everything, in his work, is defined with wonderful clarity and simplicity. Later, volumes were written to define the same things.'²⁵

Joyce may have read Aristotle's *Rhetoric* while at secondary school; at university he became familiar with the fundamentals of Aristotle's philosophy. Aristotle was central to his attempts to formulate a personal aesthetic. There is ample evidence for Joyce's commitment to Aristotle. Stanislaus, his younger brother, wrote in his diary: 'He upholds Aristotle against his friends, and boasts himself an Aristotelian.' This was pursued more systematically during his time in Paris; on 8 February 1903 Joyce wrote to Stanislaus: 'I am feeling very intellectual these times and up to my eyes in Aristotle's *Psychology*.'²⁶ The following month he wrote to his mother: 'I read every day in the Bibliotheque Nationale and every night in the Bibliotheque Sainte Genevieve... I am at present up to my neck in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and read only him and Ben Jonson.'²⁷ This experience would be recalled in *Ulysses*, in Stephen's classroom reflections on the meaning of history: 'It must be a movement then, an actuality of the possible as possible. Aristotle's phrase formed itself within the gabbled verses and floated out into the studious silence of the library of Sainte Genevieve where he had read, sheltered from the sin of Paris, night by night.'²⁸

Due to a happy series of events the notebook used by Joyce during those months in Paris was acquired by the National Library of Ireland in 2002. It contains thirty-one quotations from Aristotle, from *De Anima* and the *Metaphysics*. Joyce drew upon these quotations during subsequent decades.

The quotations from Aristotle in Joyce's Paris Notebooks from 1903–1904 are a valuable insight into what Joyce found significant in the writings of Aristotle, and into the way Joyce's understanding of the world was being formed. The choice of passages from Aristotle made by Joyce, confirmed by the effort to copy them down, attests to a tacit sympathy of mind and outlook upon the world.²⁹

Shortly before he left Dublin in 1904 Joyce wrote a lengthy satirical poem entitled *The Holy Office*, in which he lampoons Yeats and other leading figures of the Irish literary revival; he criticizes in particular their false, ethereal, Celtic mysticism. Following the example of Aristotle, Joyce, in a literal interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of catharsis, wants to cleanse literary Ireland, appealing to the authority of Aristotle, even in most inauspicious surroundings:

Myself unto myself will give
This name, Katharsis-Purgative.
I, who dishevelled ways forsook
To hold the poets' grammar-book,
Bringing to tavern and to brothel
The mind of witty Aristotle,
Lest bards in the attempt should err
Must here be my interpreter:
Wherefore receive now from my lip
Peripatetic scholarship.

What makes Joyce unique in his Aristotelianism is that he made it reflectively his own, and applied it to his own art—either as material of his content, or as principle of organisation. Aristotelian metaphysics and psychology provide Stephen Dedalus with the vocabulary and categories he needs to understand himself and to interpret the world. Aristotle inspires his reflections upon a series of enigmas presented to his consciousness throughout the course of the day. We are privy to his thoughts on the meaning of history (in the classroom), the nature of perception and knowledge (Sandymount strand), and the identity of the self (National Library).

It is often presumed that Joyce was competent in Ancient Greek; to his great regret this was not so.³⁰ He wrote to Harriet Weaver in 1921:

I don't even know Greek, though I am spoken of as erudite. My father wanted me to take Greek as third language my mother German and my friends Irish. Result, I took Italian. I speak or used to speak modern Greek not too badly... and have spent a great deal of time with Greeks of all kinds

from noblemen down to onionsellers, chiefly the latter. I am superstitious about them. They bring me luck.³¹

This he repeated to Padraic Colum in 1923: ‘The Greeks have always brought me good luck.’ According to Colum, Joyce began to learn the Greek vernacular in the Mediterranean seaport of Trieste.³² However on arrival in Zurich in 1915 and making the acquaintance of Pavlos Phokas, an emigré from Cephalonia, he took up the study of Modern Greek seriously. He also conversed in Greek with Paul Ruggiero, an Italian who had spent several years in Greece.³³

The notebooks used by Joyce while learning Greek are preserved in the library of the University of New York, Buffalo, and provide interesting insights into his learning methods.³⁴ They show remarkable progression from his awkward lettering of the alphabet, declensions of nouns and conjugations of verbs, to elaborate vocabulary lists and practice passages written in stylish flowing script. As well as the usual vocabulary and grammatical exercises that one might expect, the notebooks contain a miscellany of materials which also reveal something of Joyce’s character and interests. To mention a sample few, they contain a children’s lullaby, the first verse of the Greek national anthem, sample letters in commercial Greek, a Greek song of Independence, two couplets from Homer’s *Odyssey*, and an extract from a newspaper article on war manoeuvres in Greece.

Of curious interest are two facing pages which are emblematic of Joyce’s contrasting fascinations with the eschatological and scatological. Opposite the page which contains his autograph of the Πάτερ ημών ο εν τοις ουρανοίς, we read some choice examples of vulgarity: Συγγόμην, πρέπει να πηγαίνω εις το αποχωρητήριον / Οι χίροι τρώγουν σκατά / Εάν δεν το αγαπάτε, να (Σε) χέσω τα μούτρα σας. These phrases are followed by the genteel gesture: Πέρνετε ένα συγαρέτο, κυρία.³⁵ The word-list which follows provides a more extensive vocabulary of the same genre. (Joyce, as is well known, was fascinated by the workings of the human body—at one time he intended to study medicine—and had an almost prurient fascination with the workings of all bodily functions. His interest, it should be stressed, was not crude or vulgar; while he enjoyed robust humour in male company, he did not tolerate indelicate conversation in the company of women.)

Joyce believed that modern Greeks provided the best access to the spirit of ancient Hellas.³⁶ He associated with Greeks in the belief that they all had a streak of Ulysses in them.³⁷ Joyce was fascinated by his Greek acquaintances in wartime Zurich: Nikola Santos, although illiterate, could recite much of the *Odyssey*. Pavlos Phokas, a commercial clerk, bore the name of a Byzantine emperor. Antonio Chalas had written a book arguing that the centre of gravity of the earth passed through Athens—he sent a copy

to President Wilson, with a plea that the great powers should guarantee the perpetual immunity of Greece.³⁸

When Frank Budgen recommended a good, cheap, restaurant to Joyce, frequented by Swiss workmen and Czech businessmen, he invited along a group of Greek friends, who would become regular guests. Budgen feared the worst:

‘[T]he Czechs discussing business and the Zurich working men holding an inquest on each hand of cards never made half the noise of the table full of Greeks. The Augustinerhof was also the rendezvous of a society of deaf mutes. “Have they turned up yet?” asked Joyce, “What do you think of them?” “Not much,” I said. A line of *Hellas* occurred to me when I looked at them: “Kill. Burn. Let not a Greek escape.” “That’s *Kriegspsychose*,” said Joyce. “Seriously, they are very nice people, and they have been very helpful to me.”’³⁹

To the end of his life Joyce retained an interest in Greek affairs. He followed closely the activities of the resistance movement during the war. He learned Greek songs from Paul Ruggiero. Describing the celebration of his birthday (which he called his ‘birthnight’), Joyce noted: ‘The evening was sure to close with a rendering of the Greek National Anthem—Χαίρε, χαίρε, Ελευθεριά (Hail Hail oh! Liberty!).’⁴⁰ Shortly before his death, strolling through Zurich, he bought three books of Greek mythology for his grandson Stephen.⁴¹ A final detail of emblematic significance: of the two books on his desk when he died, one was a Greek lexicon.⁴²

Notes

¹ This essay was first published in vol. 3 of *The Greek World Between the Age of Enlightenment and the Twentieth Century: Proceedings of the 3rd European Congress of Modern Greek Studies, Organised by the European Society of Modern Greek Studies – Bucharest 2–4 June 2006*, ed. Konstantinos A. Dimadis (Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 2007), 419–28. With thanks to the original publisher, it is reprinted here with some minor adjustments.

² I wish to thank Patrick Sammon for many valuable suggestions with this paper.

³ Peter Costello, *James Joyce: The Years of Growth 1882–1915. A Biography*, (London: Kyle Cathie), 219.

⁴ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Chester G. Anderson, (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 46f.

⁵ Bruce Bradley S.J., *James Joyce’s Schooldays* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982), 109.

⁶ Herbert Gorman, *James Joyce* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939), 45. Gorman reports that ‘the youth’s praise of the Greek wanderer rather irritated the instructor

who considered such enthusiasm for the wily husband of Penelope as not quite orthodox, at least from the point of view of the Society of Jesus’.

⁷ See William G. Fallon, in *The Joyce We Knew*, ed. Ulick O’Connor (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 42. Joyce doubtless read the opening sentence of Pope’s Preface to the *Iliad*: ‘Homer is universally allowed to have had the greatest invention of any writer whatever.’ See *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Alexander Pope (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1883), ix.

⁸ See George Borach, ‘Conversations with James Joyce’ in *James Joyce. Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, ed. Willard Potts (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1979), 69f.

⁹ Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of ‘Ulysses’ and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 17f.

¹⁰ Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of ‘Ulysses’*, 19.

¹¹ Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of ‘Ulysses’*, 16.

¹² See Borach, ‘Conversations with James Joyce’, 69f.

¹³ Gorman, *James Joyce*, 116.

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’, *Two Decades of Criticism*, ed. Seon Givens (New York: Vanguard Press, 1948), 201. The article was published originally in *The Dial*, November 1923.

¹⁵ *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 286.

¹⁶ *Pound / Joyce. The Letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce*, ed. Forest Read (New York: New Directions, 1970), 250. Pound agrees with Eliot on the role of Homeric myth in the novel: ‘Joyce had to have a shape on which to order his chaos’ (ibid.).

¹⁷ See Richard Ellman, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 360.

¹⁸ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (London: The Bodley Head, 2001), 1. 34–43 (References are to episode and line).

¹⁹ *Ulysses* 1. 78–80.

²⁰ *Ulysses* 1. 157–58.

²¹ *Ulysses* 7. 555–70.

²² Letter to Alessandro Francini Bruni, 7 June 1921, in *Letters of James Joyce III*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 45: ‘I colori della legatura (scelti da me) saranno lettere bianche in campo azzurro—la bandiera greca quantunque realmente d’origine bavarese ed importata colla dinastia. Eppure in certo qual modo simboleggiano bene il mito—le isole bianche sparse nel mare.’ Translation, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

²³ Padraic Colum, in Ulick O’Connor, *The Joyce We Knew* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 79.

²⁴ Adolf Hoffmeister, ‘James Joyce’, in *James Joyce. Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, ed. Willard Potts, 126.

²⁵ Borach, ‘Conversations with James Joyce’, 71.

²⁶ *Letters of James Joyce II*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 28.

²⁷ *Letters II*, 38.

²⁸ *Ulysses* 2. 68–70.

²⁹ For a complete discussion of these quotations see Fran O'Rourke, *Allwisest Stagyrite. Joyce's Quotations from Aristotle* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 2005).

³⁰ According to Eileen MacCarvill (MS, Zurich James Joyce Foundation, 155), Joyce joined a beginners' class in Greek given by the Rector Father Henry. Books used: Ritchie's *First Steps in Greek*, St. John Parry's *Elementary Greek Grammar* and Smith's *Smaller History of Greece*. See *Critical Writings*, 29: '[T]he writer acknowledges humbly his ignorance of Greek.' Brendan O Hehir and John M. Dillon suggest that Joyce 'must have done a good deal of brute dictionary-browsing in both Latin and Greek', but conclude that 'in effect he knew little or no classical Greek'. See *A Classical Lexicon for Finnegans Wake* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), xii–xiii.

³¹ *Selected Letters*, 284.

³² See *The Joyce We Knew*, 79.

³³ Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 408

³⁴ These are reproduced in *The James Joyce Archive*. See James Joyce, *Notes, Criticism, Translations & Miscellaneous Writings. A Facsimile of Manuscripts & Typescripts*, Vol. II, ed., Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Garland, 1979), 288–352.

³⁵ See Joyce, *Notes, Criticism, Translations & Miscellaneous Writings*, 348f.

³⁶ Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses'*, 174.

³⁷ Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses'*, 358f.

³⁸ Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses'*, 174.

³⁹ Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses'*, 173f.

⁴⁰ Clive Hart, 'Introduction' in Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses' and Other Writings*, xvi.

⁴¹ Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 740.

⁴² Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 742.