

Ulysses. Hugh Kenner. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980, 182 pages, \$19.50 hard.

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James Joyce's *Ulysses* is the inescapable literary masterpiece of the twentieth century, ineluctably and solidly central: to literature's focal battles, legal and aesthetic; to accounts of censorship and literary piracy; to every theory of the novel formulated since its publication; to basic questions of literary technique and meaning; to studies of creativity; to examinations of the relationship between biography and fiction; to serious inquiry into the kinship of literature and psychology; to explorations of literary use of myth and the collective unconscious; to the chronicles of numerous *isms*, naturalism, realism, symbolism, romanticism, classicism. Even to ignore *Ulysses* is not to escape it but merely to declare one's attitude toward it.

In spite of its acknowledged importance *Ulysses*, even after a half century of abundant critical attention, is one of the least read modern masterpieces because it is a difficult novel to read—especially the first time. Certainly reading *Ulysses* is much less difficult than it once was, and it becomes easier as time passes. Critics and commentators have proved invaluable to first-time readers over the years, and many older commentaries are still helpful: those by Frank Budgen, Harry Levin, Stuart Gilbert, and Edmund Wilson, for example. More recently, Anthony Burgess has done a masterful job of making the novel more accessible, as have Harry Blamires, Richard Ellman, and David Hayman, among others. But the inescapable *Ulysses* critic, the guide for first-time reader and dedicated Joycean alike, is Hugh Kenner, and for the present, the ineluctable commentary is Hugh Kenner's *Ulysses*.

Perhaps for Joyce more than any other writer the ongoing critical cycle of progression and synthesis has been obvious and necessary. New insights, new discoveries, and readjustments of critical vision constantly sharpen and alter one's perceptions of *Ulysses*, and one of the most admirable characteristics of Hugh Kenner's Joyce criticism is that it displays his receptivity: his opinions and insights show continual expansion, reevaluation, and readjustment. In the relatively small world of the inner circle of Joycean scholars, the author of one book on *Ulysses* reviews the book of another: those in agreement engage in public back patting, those in disagreement chortle at one another's "misreadings" and quibble over nuance. This, of course, is usual, unalarming, and in rare instances even helpful. Hugh Kenner, however, exhibits no *hubris* publicly. His is to constantly reason why, not to defend his position to the end, not to attack another's position without quarter. Kenner gracefully makes concessions when a fellow Joycean's views are convincing; he clearly learns from his fellow critics. Consequently, he is the best teacher among them.

Hugh Kenner's *Ulysses* is a part of the Unwin Critical Library Series, each volume of which is "devoted to a single major text . . . addressed to serious students and teachers of literature, and to knowledgeable non-academic readers." This is a devotion devoutly to be wished while too easily left unfulfilled, yet it is performed with grace and skill by Hugh Kenner.

In a very few sentences Kenner captures the incredible stir that the publication of *Ulysses* created: excitement, scandal, perplexity, curiosity, suppression, revulsion,

admiration. He does so economically, even whimsically, examples reverberating with implication. He notes for example, that when F.R. Leavis requested permission to import one copy of *Ulysses* into England, "the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions promptly supplied the Vice-Chancellor [of Cambridge University] with a police report on the percentage of women attending Leavis's lectures. The Director of Public Prosecutions also described *Ulysses* as 'incredibly filthy' and offered the Vice-Chancellor the opportunity to inspect it." And of *Ulysses*'s reception in Joyce's natal country, Kenner slyly judges while refraining from judgement: "Ireland's gratitude has not been marked, though it now permits itself sidelong self-congratulation on having produced James Joyce."

Kenner never condescends; thus, he constantly lifts the novice reader of *Ulysses* toward his own level. Like Bloom, *Ulysses*'s central character, he is invariably considerate: his prose marvelously combines lucidity and style; his critical aid is so pleasant no civilized reader could resent it. His tone reflects a Bloomian curiosity and knowingness (though the quality of his intellect is surely Dedalian), as well as a generous desire to share insights into matters of minute fact and magnificent fancy. His first chapter, "Preliminary," opens with a factual consideration of Bloomsday (June 16, 1904—the date of the novel's action and a day celebrated annually by dedicated Joyceans): "a very long day indeed at 53 degrees North latitude," a day on which the sun rose at 3:33 and did not set until 8:27. The day was longer than the facts of sunrise and sunset indicate for as Kenner notes, "one can still make out newspaper headlines by skylight" two or three hours after sunset on such nights. So Kenner typically begins with fact; he then illuminates that fact with experience. Amplification follows: in his next paragraph, Kenner refers to the Biblical observation that the sun rises and goes down and no new thing appears under it. He thereby raises fact to symbol, to literature. In this way his method often parallels the Joycean method he explicates so well.

In this brief preliminary chapter—barely four pages—Kenner manages to capture the reaction to *Ulysses*'s publication, to discuss the essence of its central character, to abstract important critical reactions to it, to provide considerable insight into the literary and historical reasons making it a "difficult" book, and to comfort the novice reader by suggesting that its "strangeness" and its "difficulty" are perfectly normal as well as easy enough to account for.

Kenner's second chapter begins where any explication of *Ulysses* must, for maximal helpfulness, begin with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and with that novel's protagonist, Stephen Dedalus. Stephen is central to the three opening chapters of *Ulysses*, so an understanding of his peculiar personality is helpful, if not essential, to making initial headway in a first reading of *Ulysses*. As always, Kenner is the teacher, the purveyor of necessary information, the deliverer of insightful nudges. Discussing Stephen's ecstatic vision of beauty at the end of *Portrait*'s fourth chapter, when he stares at the wading, bird-like girl, Kenner reminds the reader of the historical and sociological context: "We should recall that the year is about 1898, and that she is posed like a naughty beauty on a cigarette card of that period; her skirts tucked up and her bare legs on show. Pictorially considered, this apparition is thoroughly conventional *Kitsch*. Socially considered, she is a very cool young woman indeed for those times; there are hints in *Ulysses* that a girl at leisure on the beach may be even of dubious virtue."

Kenner then supplies his readers with a constant flow of information: the woman as symbol, the symbolic role of birds and flight, Joyce's technique of compression, Stephen's appeal from father to father in *Portrait*, the fluidity and "calculated vagueness" of *Portrait*—contrasted with the "documentary prose" of *Dubliners* and

the carefully worked out details underpinning the realism of *Ulysses*. Kenner points to the essential difference between Stephen's walk down Grafton Street in *Portrait* and Bloom's walk along the same route in *Ulysses*. Accompanying Bloom the reader sees the street "thronged with sensuous particulars," and as Kenner implies, it was inevitable that the prudent Bloom dominate a novel whose very structure, and by extension its meaning, depends upon verifiable fact; the solipsistic Stephen could not have carried the burden alone in *Ulysses*.

Kenner repeatedly elucidates *Ulysses's* foundation of verifiable fact. The "logistic details" of Stephen's progress from Dalkey in "Nestor" to Sandymount in "Proteus" can be worked out (and has) with reference to old tram schedules. In fact, a great deal of recent criticism making *Ulysses* more accessible has been explication based upon the verifiable detail. Kenner makes use of Clive Hart, for example, who by walking their routes with stopwatch in hand, clarified and verified the paths of thirty-five characters in the "Wandering Rocks" episode. As Kenner proves, Joyce's attention to detail in *Ulysses* was so careful that the reader can often account for actions off stage from minute factual evidence. A close reading reveals the "real" in the "Circe" episode, for example, in which fantasy and reality seem on first reading to be inextricably mixed. The verifiable fact has become a basic critical aid in reading *Ulysses*, and few critics are as alert to its possibilities as Hugh Kenner.

In "Uses of Homer"—a chapter essential to any introduction to *Ulysses*, introducing as it does the Odyssean framework Joyce employed—Kenner once again compresses a great deal into a very short space: he highlights Joyce's mistrust of explicit motivation, so often a mere and easy means of advancing plot in novels. Kenner observes that only Joyce's minor characters seem obviously motivated: Lenehan is motivated by a desire for drink, and he singlemindedly cadges drinks throughout the novel; Blazes Boylan acts primarily from lust; the narrow-minded Citizen of "Cyclops" becomes absurdly hilarious in his blind patriotism. Joyce's major characters are as complex as real human beings, and herein is one of *Ulysses's* difficulties for a reader: the simple, understandable motivation so essential to the plot of popular novels is agonizingly absent. So, too, is overt auctorial aid. Kenner points out, for example, that at Corny Kelleher's moment of "maximum usefulness to the plot, none of the careful groundwork is recalled and nothing overt reminds us of the man's leverage [with the police]. We must simply watch how everyone behaves and draw on copious memory." The reader of *Ulysses* cannot depend upon a narrator to do work for him or her; in fact, the reader must often work to discover and understand things the narrator has left unsaid or has obfuscated.

Here, then, are two particulars central to the difficulty first-time readers experience approaching *Ulysses*: first, it demands a manner of reading contrary to normal habit and training; second, it makes no concessions to the reader—in fact, the "passive" reader is doomed to misunderstanding if not failure. In the course of *Ulysses*, Joyce managed to subvert most of the accepted conventions of novel writing, from point of view to stylistic continuity. The successful reader of *Ulysses* must actively read, he or she must accept Joyce's literary subversion, then he or she must account for it: why, for example, should a long episode be written as if it were a play, and how does this "Circe" episode function as prose narrative? Or, how can one possibly justify the virtuosic performance of "Oxen of the Sun," which mirrors English literary history?

Hugh Kenner eases the would-be reader of Joyce—as well as many an experienced reader—into these difficulties with his observation that "we collect sense only with the aid of a tradition: this means, helped by a prior experience with a genre, and entails our knowing which genre is applicable." Kenner points to the difficulties readers of Swift initially felt when they encountered *Gulliver's Travels* and "A Modest

Proposal." Confusion of genre signals suggested that the first was a travel book and the second a political pamphlet, though both were satires. The novel was born amidst misleading genre signals: it was fobbed off on the reading public as real memoirs, travel books, adventures, epistles; indeed, *Ulysses* celebrates the novel's historical weaving of fact and fantasy, truth and lie, psychological insight and external reality. Kenner wittily and succinctly summarizes the short history of guides to the *ad hoc* genre that is *Ulysses*, and he does a creditable job of orienting the reader: preparing the reader to assume the special perspective that a reader of *Ulysses* must so often assume.

Kenner makes it quite clear, for example, that, as in *Portrait*, style can function as an appropriate reflection of a fictional character and it can also impress the reader as a style for which that character is somehow responsible. Thus Stephen's "vision" of the bird-like girl is presented as Stephen might have written it: an adept literary exercise, heavy on *chiasmus*, composed by a superior student of Jesuit instructors. Kenner's explanation makes it easier to be comfortable with, say, the "Victorian novelese" of the "Nausicaa" episode or the parodies of heroic myth interspersed throughout "Cyclops." *Ulysses* shifts styles and each style is, at once, symbol and meaning. "Eumaeus" displays tired rhythms appropriate to the late hour and weary characters; it can be appreciated, too, as the episode "written" by Leopold Bloom. Thus style conveys meaning as certainly as do words. Each episode has a characteristic style, and each style is appropriate to many things: time of day, action, location, mental state, correspondence with the original *Odyssey*, and entertainment.

The varied styles are an early and obvious tipoff that the reader must employ a new mode of reading, a special perspective, for as Kenner explains—borrowing from David Hayman—an "arranging presence" (dubbed the Arranger) intrudes in *Ulysses*. This Arranger creates a "fluctuating boundary between character and language" so that some information comes from the narrative voice, and some comes from the character, and often it seems impossible to unravel, to be part of the very soul of the style that has been created.

The Arranger is something new in fiction: he is serious, whimsical, helpful, misleading, humane, and malicious—by turns or simultaneously. His famous intrusions in "Wandering Rocks" are typical. He deposits sentences from one section of the episode into another, and the poor reader is not forewarned. The reader must discover from careful reading and from memory or verifiable fact (or with the aid of a critic) which sentences do not belong in the section he is reading. But *Ulysses* does not stop here; these are literary games, mere tricks played upon a vulnerable reader, only when the reader allows them to be. For once the reader recognizes these shifting sentences, he or she can begin contemplating their meaning. Eventually the reader discovers that many of the shifts do, indeed, extend meaning. For example, when J.J. O'Molloy floats into the one-legged sailor's section, certain parallels are clear: the sailor is overtly begging for handouts; O'Molloy is begging as well, but not overtly. The sailor sings an English patriotic song as he begs; O'Molloy participates in tales of great Irish rebels. The reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions: one possibility is the implied bankruptcy of sentimental patriotism.

Ulysses demands, as Kenner repeatedly points out, that a reader sees many things at once. On the most basic level the reader "sees" the Bloom/*Ulysses* correspondence, the heroic potential in common man. Yet seeing the heroic Bloom, the reader must be aware of the irony generated by the comparison to *Ulysses*. Kenner demonstrates Joyce's awareness of the constant irony (and humor) the Bloom/*Ulysses* parallel automatically created on the factual level, and irony effectively countered on the psychological level where Bloom triumphs, a veritable hero, a modern-day *Ulysses*.

This puts a special burden on the reader; it demands that the reader often suspend

either/or judgements and simultaneously entertain either/or as well as both/and judgements. Kenner makes the analogy of Picasso's paintings, which abrogated normal perspective to a dynamic multiple perspective. *Ulysses* likewise requires its readers to see events as simultaneously real and mythical, funny and tragic, deflating and inspiring, real and imaginary; to see them from the mythological, sociological, psychological, theological, biographical, historical, stylistic, etc., perspective. The more dynamic the reader's vision—the more simultaneous perspectives the reader masters—the fuller the novel becomes. It is by no means an easy task, though critics such as Kenner make it easier. Considering the fact that a recent critical study took 226 pages to locate a single aspect of Joyce's perspective between Freud and Jung, and another study took 228 pages to transfix *Ulysses* as best possible between Freud and Bruno, it is remarkable that Kenner manages his brilliant overview in only 167 pages of actual text.

Kenner does the novice reader a number of good turns. One, especially emphasized in his chapter "The Aesthetic of Delay," is to show what a great number of details are to be comprehended only upon a subsequent re-reading of *Ulysses*. When Bloom thinks "Potato I have," for example, the reference is incomprehensible until hundreds of pages later when it is apt to have been forgotten. Even if the early reference to the potato is recalled and understood, only by re-reading *Ulysses* would one be prepared to catch the mezuzah-potato link on the symbolic level, because the reader must read nearly through *Ulysses* to understand the potato's function as talisman. Then, re-reading, Bloom's touching the potato as he passes through the doorway will assume meaning. This is merely one of the numerous details for which Kenner demonstrates an interconnectedness discoverable only through multiple readings.

As he notes, the universe of *Ulysses* is "Einsteinian, non-simultaneous, internally consistent, but never to be grasped in one act of apprehension." Kenner is truly valuable as he aids readers in apprehending this consistency, but he is far more valuable insofar as he shows the reader how to discover the consistency for him or herself: he strikes the scales from blind eyes and aids the acquisition of a new mode of vision. A last example: as many readers comprehend, the small cloud briefly blocking the sun in "Telemachus" also blocks the sun in "Calypso." The careful reader observes that the blocked sun marks a turn of Stephen's thoughts toward death, and that Bloom's thoughts turn similarly. Such correspondence of incident and thought in episodes many pages apart, though often minor, must be apprehended in reading *Ulysses*. As Kenner demonstrates, Ulyssean vision does not stop here: the reader considers allusion, and the evoked Biblical cloud extends meaning. Further, it is possible to work out the fact that the cloud does not shade the sun simultaneously for Stephen and Bloom, that their locations are seven miles apart and Bloom's moment out of the sun must come later. Another verifiable fact: on Bloomsday, at this moment, the winds were blowing in their usual westerly direction over Ireland; the locations of Bloom and Stephen reveal this.

Thus Kenner shows us how to work out the careful consistency that is *Ulysses*; we can verify that Bloom has actually seen George Russell during the course of the day if we refer to a map of Dublin and match that reference with our knowledge of Russell's arrival at the National Library. The reader can discover that Bloom the wandering and persecuted Jew is not, by Jewish standards, Jewish at all; that Bloom is well off by the standards of the day; that Bloom is taller than his average contemporary; that in all probability Bloom resents assumptions Martin Cunningham makes about his mercenary abilities. Indeed, Kenner teaches how to read *Ulysses* by first what is there to be missed if we read with only our usual desire to discover what happens, then by

demonstrating how to read for what is not there: most of the "critical" events in *Ulysses* take place off stage, as it were, and the reader reconstructs them from careful causal analysis and archaeological evidence.

In his early chapters Kenner provides background helpful to reading *Ulysses*, acquaints the reader with the concept of the Arranger, introduces Joyce's "aesthetic of delay," and demonstrates the multiple-perspective notion, always keyed to the discernible fact so essential to reading *Ulysses* with understanding and appreciation. Kenner first prepares the reader then guides us through each of *Ulysses*'s eighteen episodes. The guided tour is rapid, to be sure, but it nevertheless manages to hit the high points: the experienced Joycean will not feel that anything essential has been neglected. In fact, Kenner skillfully navigates between the tiny, revealing detail and the big picture, a quintessential course, since so much that looms large in *Ulysses* springs from microscopic detail that can escape the closest reading. This ability to illuminate minute crevices of fact without forcing the reader into an abyss of detail, while at the same time calling the reader's attention to the panoramic big picture without overwhelming him or her, is spectacularly absent in most Joyce criticism. Yet Kenner accomplished the feat with such casual grace that it is apt to pass unnoticed.

Kenner, like Joyce, is the master of both/and. He conveys the serious—even tragic—side of *Ulysses* without diminishing the reader's sense that the novel is saturated with fun. It is surely a funny book; its humor ranges from puns and verbal slapstick through sophisticated literary parodies to blasphemous hilarity. Wit, whimsy, droll aside, elaborate jest, obvious satire, caricature, riddle, practical joke: the novel is a veritable compendium of humor. To his credit Kenner manages to convey the atmosphere of humor, never destroying it with serious explication. He points out that in the musically-dominated "Sirens" episode, for example, the reader is "permitted to discern a certain mad literalness procuring the casual presence of musical terms—a tea-tray that is *transposed*, tenors who get women by the *score*, a barmaid who *taps a measure* of whiskey—and much imputation of portent collapses once we spot the governing pun by which these musical virtuosités are confined to the *bar*." And awareness of the correspondence to the *Odyssey* rewards the reader with the laughable domination of Ajax by *Ulysses* when Bloom sits upon "a jakes" early in the book.

To discuss the wonderful insights Kenner illuminates would be to go on interminably, yet it is difficult not to be effusive. Hugh Kenner's *Ulysses* is a masterpiece of style and economy; Kenner says a great deal in a few words, and he says it with wit and assurance that entertains as it inspires confidence in the reader. Kenner has, in fact, written a book displaying many of the virtues it attributes to *Ulysses*. Kenner's book serves as an excellent introduction to Joyce's *Ulysses*, yet it is novel and informative enough for the experienced Joycean as well. It mirrors the intelligence, humanity, and enduring freshness that make *Ulysses* a great book; it does so because Hugh Kenner is a great critic.

Hugh Kenner's *Ulysses* manifests the unusually discriminating and assimilating intelligence of its author; the best Joyceans are invariably those who perceive correspondences among widely separated fields. As Yeats noted, "Talent perceives differences, Genius unity." Kenner is the best of the best because his expertise extends into so many areas and because he can connect these areas, allowing the reader to comprehend them as a unified whole. Ostensibly Kenner's field is twentieth century literature (and that he is a master of the field is shown in such classics of criticism as *The Pound Era*, *The Stoic Comedians*, *A Homemade World*, *Gnomon*, and *Joyce's Voices*); in reality his field, like Buckminster Fuller's or Joseph Campbell's, encompasses

most of human history and most human activity. This is obvious in Kenner's *Bucky: A Guided Tour of Buckminster Fuller*, a book that displays the delightful results of one wide-ranging mind exploring another. And those readers who feel that modern art is an incomprehensible affection born of chaos would do well to read Kenner's *The Counterfeiters*, which not only explains the evolution of modern art but relates its prevailing notions and its experimental breakthroughs to the history of technology as well. Hugh Kenner is at once a superb performer and the best thinker today daring to attempt a whole view, the big picture; any one of his books is worth reading simply to observe him make, as he inevitably does, a grand and unexpected inductive leap as startling as his deductive supporting framework is solid. Kenner entertains, he informs, and as he demonstrates yet again in *Ulysses*, he conveys a genuine sense of the love he feels for learning in general and—in this book—for Joyce in particular.

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