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Joyce and Reality: The Empirical Strikes Back (review)

Mary Power

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JOYCE AND REALITY: THE EMPIRICAL STRIKES BACK, by John Gordon. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004. 338 pp. \$45.00.

John Gordon forecasts, in the introduction to *Joyce and Reality*, that readers will see more of Joyce as a man of his day than has previously been known, and he is not exaggerating. The book is full of insights into Joyce's knowledge of the science and pseudo-science of the time and how Joyce applied these theories creatively. On another level, Gordon demonstrates that there are startling parallelisms between episodes like "Sirens" and "Oxen of the Sun" if only we would watch the text more closely. Then he takes readers on a tour of the stars and comets that light up the sky on the night of 16 June 1904.

Gordon plunges into the science of embryology to show that Joyce not only knew about such developments but also applied them beyond the cellular level. For example, as Stephen's mind in *A Portrait* becomes more agile, he isolates, pairs, and foregrounds similarities of thought. The exponential growth of Stephen's intellect is convincingly demonstrated throughout the novel as his mind takes creative turns. This idea is related, not surprisingly, to the concept of the mind as a labyrinth—an idea explored by many modernist writers including Hart Crane, Paul Valery, George Eliot, and T. S. Eliot. Following the evolutionary scientist Herbert Spencer, Joyce took it on himself to show that character and intellectual skills were also subject to this kind of growth. From a slightly different vantage, Gordon decides Stephen's inner workings are seen mainly as liquids and identified with life's processes, a reading that places his villanelle in *A Portrait* in a new and important light. Accordingly, this poem, often dismissed as imitative, "tracks, verse by verse, the course of the loss and then the retrieval of the power that in Stephen's mind is needed to fuse and energize the creative act. That power is essentially the heat-generating gravitational attraction that according to the nebular hypothesis determines the course of growth at all levels" (30). Gordon goes on to show how the rose-like glow of the poem's narrator reflects Stephen reaching back to the height of his experience with the bird girl at the end of chapter 4, and to other fragments of his relationships with women.

Gordon uses the idea of the distilling of character and its liquidity in discussing Little Chandler's potential emergence as a poet in "A Little Cloud." He shows first (35) that Little Chandler can be identified with a cloud, perhaps the one specified by Elijah—a cloud "like a man's hand."¹ The creative process is here likened to a drifting boat

whose progress can be shown or charted by absorption, distillation, and condensation. Like Stephen's villanelle, Little Chandler's poetic spirit shows the curve of an emotion, and Gordon suggests that he glides around Dublin in a lonely, dreamy manner. He walks by the Liffey, goes drinking with Ignatius Gallaher amid lots of smoke, and then goes home to argue with his wife Annie about a forgotten packet of tea. While Annie goes out for the tea, Little Chandler finds he can do nothing to stop his infant son from wailing his heart out, and on another level this may be a manifestation of "the child within" clamoring to make himself heard. Little Chandler sees himself "just at the point of maturity" (D 73), and Gordon treats the reader to a fantastic description of what his poetry may have been like (had he written it).

In discussing the distillation of character, Gordon contributes the remarkable insight that *Ulysses* "is also a book full of heroes" (44). In other words, Joyce reframes Emma Bovary's concerns. It all begins in *Dubliners*, he says, where characters like Eveline Hill, Tom Kernan, and Gretta Conroy supply a bridge between their interior monologues and melodrama. Gordon also considers Farrington and sees him as immature and stuck in a job as copyist that might suit a school child. He analyzes Farrington's forays to the outside world in that light. He concludes that Farrington's angry encounter with his son Tom at the end of the story may be a chance to beat the child within himself.

In the next grouping of essays, Gordon disagrees with the idea held widely and stated best by Karen Lawrence that *Ulysses* breaks down in the middle, as action and theme are subordinated to style, and content becomes less important with "Wandering Rocks."² He emphatically states that the later episodes are harder to comprehend because they are busier and more complicated as the actions of the day pile up but that there are rewards in store for those who read more carefully. In fact, much of the book is devoted to showing the unexpected groupings of parallelisms with variations in episodes such as "Sirens" and "Circe."

Gordon discusses the Orphic dimension of reality that surrounds Bloom, accounting for "occult phenomena put on a scientific basis" (xv), including such unexplained phenomena as Bloom's watch stopping that afternoon just as Molly and Boylan were meeting. Orphism also includes ideas of heightened sensory perception, telepathy, and Mesmeric magnetism, as well as the appearance of some hallucinatory ghosts and fields of magnetic love-play. Orphism, it is interesting to note, also accounts for Bloom's acute hearing in "Sirens," since he can hear through a shell what is going on in the next room of the Ormond Hotel. Gordon, then, foregrounds the importance of the way in which the science and pseudo-science of Joyce's day come together

to reveal waves of human sensation and communication.

A number of chapters in *Joyce and Reality* deal with "Oxen of the Sun." This contribution, along with Andrew Gibson's recent historical work on "Oxen" in *Joyce's Revenge*,³ provides the reader with a much better understanding of such a complex and sometimes baffling episode. Gordon first insists that we pay attention to what the characters are actually doing and talking about—that a level of action needs to be explored before any question of style and parody can be raised. He stresses the ceremonial nature of the episode and contends that Bloom is witness in the Holles Street Hospital to a public ritual centered on the importance of having children. Buck Mulligan's joking about being fertilizer and incubator, along with Mr. Purefoy's siring so many children, sends the message that being fruitful and multiplying is what life is all about.⁴ Bloom is thinking of a fifty-something Theodore Purefoy and seems to decide that he is not too old to sire another child (100). Gordon does not try to account for Mrs. Purefoy's subordinate position here but takes the high road in pointing out Bloom's courtesy and solicitude for her (100).

Gordon comments on the parody of style in the episode as well. By means of an evolutionary process, voices of characters become more distinct across the centuries. In the medieval sequence, for example, writers sound more or less alike, but by the nineteenth century Charles Lamb, Thomas De Quincey, William Hazlitt, Walter Savage Landor, and John Henry Cardinal Newman are distinct. Gordon proceeds in his "Bloom as De Quincey" chapter to show that Bloom goes into a deep trance while staring at the triangular red icon on the bottle of Bass Ale as "'voices blend and fuse'" (108—U 14.1078). He shows that Bloom's thoughts are variations on three conversations going on around him. Gordon dramatically explores the relation of De Quincey to the next narrative style, that based on Landor, which records three conversations directly. The relationship of these two passages changed my mind about Bloom's practicality and down-to-earth personality. Then again, I never thought of Joyce himself as seriously concerned with astronomy and astrology, but he apparently was, as this book reveals. That Bloom could transform what he heard in the three conversations into the travels of the two stars, likened to Molly and Milly, never occurred to me. Gordon sums up Bloom's thoughts by saying, "Molly and Milly appear in all their grace and beauty [and] are eclipsed by a nightmare stampede of the forces of darkness led by the boisterously buffalonian Blazes Boylan, then finally reappear, reborn as the goddess of love ascending into the house of Bloom's birth sign, Taurus, horned but happy" (114).

When Gordon tracks the sun and the moon throughout the novel, he does readers an enormous service. This demonstration shows Joyce's meticulous attention to the progress of the sun during the

day, and the recognition of special stars opens an important new dimension to studies of *Ulysses*. It encourages Joyceans previously content to admire Bloom's star-gazing as shown in "Wandering Rocks" and "Ithaca" to enlist Gordon as a guide to the Bloomsday skies. The methodology of this chapter not only includes accounts of stars contemporary with Joyce and Sir Robert Ball's *The Story of the Heavens*⁵ but also online diagrams of the stars in the night sky for 16 June 1904.

As far as other Joycean puzzles are concerned, Gordon's narrowing of the possibilities for Bloom's birth date before deciding on 12 May are ingenious and his methodology admirable. Among Gordon's clues in the text of *Ulysses* is the reappearance of T. Corona Borealis, called ironically "the Blaze Star" (138-39). Another nice solution is offered to account for Bloom's selection of Martha Clifford. Gordon reasons that Bloom chose her out of forty-four applicants for clerical work because of her Dolphin's Barn address (83). Why Dolphin's Barn? One of Bloom's important first encounters with Molly took place there, and all roads lead to Molly.

I was less impressed by Gordon's attempts to identify M'Intosh with Bloom's father Leopold. The discussion is both learned and entertaining, but it overlooks basic clues in the text that point in another direction. Bloom's father's ghost appears stooped and dressed in rabbinical attire in "Circe," and any attempt to transform this ghost into yet another ghost—the "lankylooking galoot" in "Hades" (*U* 6.805)—seems contradictory.

This is an important essay collection for the serious reader. To break so much new ground in *Ulysses* is a considerable and admirable achievement, and the book shows a tremendous range of knowledge—not only about reality at the beginning of the twentieth century but also about what other Joyceans have accomplished when Gordon was actively reading and listening. While he puts aside questions of literary theory, his book contains a modestly expressed though relentless search for solutions to the many puzzles Joyce poses. Readers will be impressed with the wonders of science and pseudo-science introduced and applied to Joyce but also with Gordon's perceptive readings of the text and his champion code-cracking skills.

Reviewed by Mary Power
University of New Mexico

NOTES

¹ See I Kings 18:44.

² Karen Lawrence, *The Odyssey of Style in "Ulysses"* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981).

³ Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in "Ulysses"* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002).

⁴ See Genesis 1:28.

⁵ Sir Robert Ball, *The Story of the Heavens* (London: Cassell, 1893).

WHO READS "ULYSSES"?: THE RHETORIC OF THE JOYCE WARS AND THE COMMON READER, by Julie Sloan Brannon. New York and London: Routledge Publishers, 2003. 192 pp. \$75.00.

Routledge's "Outstanding Dissertations" series presumably does recent Ph.D.s a favor by publishing their dissertations without revision and, therefore, helping new academics build a publishing profile. There is a difference, however, between a book and a dissertation, and, though I would agree with Routledge that Julie Sloan Brannon's *Who Reads Ulysses?* is an outstanding dissertation, I would have preferred to see the work grow into a book, with the guidance of editors and peer reviewers who might have helped the author develop the promising core of this work into a richer analysis.

In bald outline, *Who Reads Ulysses?* follows the recent publication history of *Ulysses* and the surrounding controversies of each publication as played out in book reviews and journals. What is at stake in doing so, Brannon tells us, is the question of who, in fact, reads *Ulysses* outside of the academy. An interesting question this and one that Brannon only briefly tackles in a short conclusion that analyzes data from a Cambridge, Massachusetts, Public Library reading group that read *Ulysses* in 2000-2001 (never noting the irony of that address for her analysis of the "common reader"). Instead, the question remains implicit as she tracks, literally volley for volley, the public correspondence between Hans Walter Gabler, the editor of the 1984 edition of "*Ulysses*": *A Critical and Synoptic Edition*, John Kidd, a critic of Gabler's edition, and Danis Rose, the editor of "*Ulysses*": *A Reader's Edition*.¹ Readers interested in the history of editing and editorial theory will find the details published here fascinating.

Brannon explores the tension between editorial theories that play out in the publication of different versions of *Ulysses*. After dutifully reporting the original publishing history of the novel, she settles into an in-depth exploration of Gabler's edition, noting that the "combination of German editorial methods" informed by "structuralist theories and the eclectic school of editing in the Greg-Bowers tradition," which Gabler used, "forced Joyce scholars for the first time to confront the fact that *Ulysses* as a unified, stable text does not actually exist" (60). Brannon points out, though, that Gabler's own method was inconsistent, at least theoretically, for, whereas eclectic editors privilege the author's intentions, German structuralists (used syn-