"Ulysses,' Order and Myth"

From Modernism Lab Essays

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Published in The Dial in November of 1923, T.S. Eliot’s essay “‘Ulysses,’ Order, and Myth” is a rare opportunity to see one of modernism’s giants grappling with one of modernism’s greatest works. Having met Joyce for the first time while delivering a pair of old shoes on behalf of Ezra Pound on August 15, 1915, Eliot received each new episode from Joyce’s work as it became available. Eliot previously had commented on the necessary “crudity and egoism” of Joyce’s writings in the Athenaeum of July 4, 1919 and had praised the “Oxen of the Sun” episode as an exposure of “the futility of all English styles” following the book’s publication in 1922. His review in The Dial, however, was his most sustained and considered commentary on Joyce’s work, his method, and its broader implications for modern fiction and the novel form itself.

In his review, Eliot claims Ulysses to be “the most important expression which this present age has found,” a “book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape.” From the very beginning, Eliot indicates the significance of the novel to its specific time, to the particular conditions and communities of the modern age. The most important innovation of Joyce’s technique, Eliot claims, and the one that makes it such a seminal work for the modern writer, is “the parallel [of the work] to the Odyssey, and the use of appropriate styles and symbols to each division.” Eliot praises this “method,” as he calls it, as not merely “an amusing dodge, or scaffolding erected by the author for the purpose of disposing his realistic tale,” but instead “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” (177). Again, we see the value of Joyce’s form precisely in its relevance to the present age, to the man defined by the vertiginous experience of modernity and urban life.

Eliot’s description of Joyce’s mythic parallelism as a “method” hints at his view of this device as scientific in nature. As Eliot writes later, this technique “has the importance of a scientific discovery” (177); Joyce’s followers “will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations.” This metaphoric use of science to explain art hearkens back to Eliot’s earlier essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in which he describes the depersonalized creation of art as “the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.” Science in both essays is a means of ordering centrifugal forces, a way to marshal the chaos of the mind and modernity into the hardened form of art. In The Waste Land, after quoting isolated lines from Dante, an anonymous Latin poet, Tennyson, and Gerard de Nerval, Eliot writes, “These fragments I have shored against my ruin” (lines 427-430). In his
essay on Ulysses, Eliot seems to be suggesting that Joyce has accomplished a similar act of reclamation and even artistic salvation in his use of Homeric parallels.

One must wonder, however, how much Eliot’s description of the mythic method in Joyce is a projection of his own aesthetic preoccupations. After all, Eliot himself points to the ways in which the mythic method has given his epic poem an ordered form: “Psychology…ethnology, and The Golden Bough have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago” (178). In writing on the mythic method in The Waste Land, Franco Moretti writes that the different styles and allusions of the poem are not discrete, “concrete and meaningful way[s] of interpreting experience”; rather, he claims that “if we wish to understand them, we must mentally bracket off the historical specificity of the various styles, and think instead about the mythical substratum uniting them all: drop the different ‘hows,’ and stick to the ‘whats.’”[5] For Eliot, myths – the Fisher King, the hanged man, Tireisias – all connect to form a base, a foundation, losing their individuality but gaining solidity. As Moretti later writes, myth in The Waste Land has a very specific function: “to tame polyphony. To give it a form and meaning” (227).

Is it truly Joyce’s project, however, to tame polyphony in such a way? Writing in the Dial a little more than a year earlier in June of 1922, another key figure of modernism, Ezra Pound, seemed to disagree. Pound emphasized the endless proliferation of voices, the bewildering panoply of discourses and modes of thinking created in Ulysses: “Joyce’s characters not only speak their own language, but they think their own language”; “Joyce speaks if not with the tongue of men and angels, at least with a many-tongued and multiple language, of small boys, street preachers, of genteel and ungenteel, of bowers and undertakers, of Gertie McDowell and Mr Deasey.”[6] Eliot’s review seems in many ways a direct response to Pound’s essay: after Pound writes that the “correspondences are part of Joyce’s medievalism and are chiefly his own affair, a scaffold, a means of construction, justified by the result, and justifiable by it only” (70), Eliot talks of Joyce’s use of myth as a foundational method and not as mere “scaffolding”; where Pound emphatically declares Ulysses “as unrepeatable as Tristram Shandy” (70), a work that “you cannot duplicate or take as “a model,” Eliot describes the mythic method as a model “which others must pursue after him” (177). Pound’s emphases – Ulysses’ polyvocality, its refusal to conform to generic or formal conventions – are precisely those features subsumed in Eliot’s description of the novel’s unity and organization.

There seems to be a fundamental disconnect between Eliot and Joyce’s use of myth and, just as importantly, their method of artistic production. Eliot’s poem was a result of concision, of creating parallels between myths and allusions that enabled brevity and concentration. Joyce, on the other hand, was a master of accretion. Looking at his manuscripts, one can see each episode expanding with each revision. His method is additive: new motifs are inserted, further parallels are built in, complexity and polyphony are constantly created anew. This process of accretion, of course, works on a thematic level within the text as well: a seemingly insignificant “throwaway”
pamphlet unites different character throughout the “Wandering Rocks” episode, leads to an inadvertent tip regarding the Golden Cup race, transfers the ill will born by the Citizen against Bloom into a physical altercation, and establishes a connection between Bloom and Elijah that will be recapitulated and elaborated throughout the novel. Moretti is again a useful critic: “And indeed, for Joyce, ‘to work’ at Ulysses basically means to extend Ulysses, until the day when the printer loses patience” (152). Speaking of his paratactic prose, Moretti writes, “Parataxis offers a reliable, mechanical grid, where each present is at once followed by another – different, but no more important” (153).

Taking Moretti as a guide, we may be able to reconcile Eliot with Pound: Joyce’s mythical parallelism, like his paratactic form, does indeed provide a grid, but one that brings about endless proliferation rather than “a way of controlling, of ordering”; it does not create a form so much as generate a means to balance form with formlessness. While his essay has been challenged on critical grounds by future generations, Eliot’s review is a fascinating look at how one modernist views another, how poets as intricately involved as Eliot and Pound can disagree so forcefully on formal issues, and finally how modernism depends upon the tension between elaboration and concision, polyphony and unity, chaos and form.

3. ↑ T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," in Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 175. All subsequent references will be made in the body of the text.
5. ↑ Franco Moretti, Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez (London: Verso, 1997), 224 and 225. All subsequent references will be made in the body of the text.
6. ↑ Ezra Pound, Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 70. All subsequent references will be made in the body of the text.