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JOYCE'S "O": A DIFFERENT "BRAND" OF HEROISM AND THE "FULFILLMENT" OF AN ODYSSEY

BY PATRICK J. MURPHY '00

WINNER OF THE 2000 ROBERT T. WILSON AWARD FOR SCHOLARLY WRITING

A pervasive symbol, Joyce's "O" honeycombs and so makes hollow the text of *Ulysses*. Acting as a symbol of vacuity and meaninglessness, it represents a range of empty actions from a sarcastic invocation on the lips of the mocker Mulligan to the embodiment of Bloom's comically inflated onanistic act: "and everyone cried O! O! in raptures..." (366-367). As such a versatile symbol, the "O" acts much like an Egyptian hieroglyphic, in that it can be "read" both phonetically and ideographically. In its pictorial sense, the "O" suggests both an empty hollowness and a cyclical journey, a wandering. In a more phonetic reading, the "O" can read as a pun on the French word for water, "eau." Such a reading suggests both the pain and guilt of Stephen's relationship with his mother, who is linked in Stephen's mind with the ocean, "the grey sweet mother," and the waters over which Bloom as Ulysses must make his circular odyssey homeward.

We also find another pun that is perhaps an answer to that emptiness and an end to that odyssey: "O" becomes "owe." A sense of obligation, then, becomes the "solution" to the problem of separation which is embodied in the exiles of both Stephen and Bloom. Bloom's journey through Dublin is made heroic by his never-resting mind, which is as eager to acquire knowledge as it is to empathize with the sufferings of others. The real distance, however, over which Bloom must travel, is the space which separates him from Molly, a "scrotumtightening" gulf of pain which has caused a larger sense of separation in their relationship, one that isn't merely sexual disjunction. The fulfillment of this journey (strikingly illustrated by the final "answer" of the Ithaca

section) comes when Bloom returns, not to reclaim Molly sexually, but to reestablish their relationship as a whole with an "osculation" that emphasizes what they "owe" to each other and to their past. In this movement from separation and emptiness to meaningfulness and reunion, Joyce's "O" flips its significance many times. It begins as a symbol of emptiness, of distance (the "eau" of the Ocean), it becomes the struggle against that void, and it finally comes to rest as a solution to the odysseys of both Bloom and Stephen.

To begin with, then, let's catalogue some of the ways in which Joyce has used the "O" in *Ulysses*. Pictorially, it resembles Bloom's odyssey as a cartographical representation of his cyclical wandering: one uppercase loop through Dublin and back. It recalls the single eye of the Cyclops/citizen, representing the emptiness of a one-dimensional viewpoint. It is an empty circle, a zero, a void, a tiny flatulence: "Oo" (291). When second-string Irish Nationalists get together to sing their songs of heroism, the "O" is their muse-evoking vocative: "O, O the boys of Kilkenny..." (44). Its use as a phatic and pointless verbal tick by Dubliners highlights this aspect of Joyce's "O." Consider, for example, the case of Father Conmee encountering a group of boys on his way to offer succor to Paddy Dignam's orphaned children. He questions them: "Aha. And were they good boys at school? O." The reply is as vacuous and empty as the question. Father Conmee continues to coo: "His name was Brunny Lynam. O, that was a very nice name to have." When Father Conmee engages them in some further uninspired banter, the boys know how to respond: "O, sir" (220).

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The "O" acts in all of these cases much in the same way as has the mock heroic throughout the bulk of the novel. For example, the O's position as a key genealogical indicator in such surnames as "O'Malley" or "O'Rourke," while being of course naturally present in any Irish novel, might nevertheless be said to function as a subtle undercutting to the emphasis placed upon heroic lineage by both the ancient Greeks and modern Dubliners, who are forever harkening back to a "Grand Old Erin" which in the idealized form envisioned by the Citizen/Cyclops never really existed. Joyce, of course, applies more ostentatious jabs elsewhere, especially in the "Cyclops" chapter with its over-the-top mock-heroic catalogues of "Irish Heroes," most of whose appellations are blatantly fictitious, or, worse yet, the names of famous Englishmen. Some names are Frankensteinian constructions, built by bricolage out of Irish and English names alike, further exploding the strict dichotomy between the two nations. In response to John Wyse's asking, "why can't a Jew love his country like the next fellow?" J.J. answers, "Why not?" but adds, "when he's quite sure which country it is" (337). This uncertainty, of course, holds for all the Dubliners, not just Bloom. These catalogues, then, not only point out the absurdity of ancestor-worship, but also the blurred lines between nations and even races. When Bloom states that God's "uncle was a Jew," he is making the point that everyone, including the citizen, is "half and half," or even "A pishogue, if you know what that is" (342, 321).

Bloom himself doesn't escape Joyce's mocking. The "Cyclops" section ends with Bloom being whisked away from the rage of the insulted citizen: "And they beheld Him even Him, ben Bloom Elijah, amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of the brightness at an angle of fortyfive degrees over Donohoe's in Little Green Street like a shot off a shovel" (345). The sentence serves to both ridicule and make heroic Bloom, rendering him at once a deity and at the same time as insignificant as a "shot off a shovel." Indeed, Joyce was fond of a false etymology for Odysseus's name, oc-

asionally making the claim that it came from a combination of "outis" (Greek for "nobody") with "Zeus," the Greek conception of the almighty. Deified and yet mocked, it's hard to know exactly how to take Bloom. Certainly it's easy to appreciate the comic nature of Bloom's personality: his social awkwardness, his scatologically bizarre masochistic urges, his tireless devotion to pondering the mechanisms behind "phenomena." With Bloom, however, these things which make him the most capable of being mocked are also the traits which paradoxically make him a hero in modern-day Dublin.

The very atmosphere of Dublin, though, seems to stack the deck against the occurrence of a heroic struggle, and it seems to make more sense that Joyce's allusions to Homeric wanderings and his elevated style should be taken as an ironic contrast to the banality of Bloom's day. On one level this is certainly the case with overblown accounts of Bloom's humdrum existence sometimes making for highly comic effect. On another level, however, the text can be said to be setting up an environment uniquely suited for a different sort of heroism. In the "Eumaeus" section of the novel, a sailor relates the "queer sights" he's seen in his travels to exotic locations: "And I seen maneaters in Peru that eats corpses and the livers of horses" (625). "All focused their attention" on this sailor's account, fascinated by such marvels. Yet one could easily argue that these maneating oddities aren't exactly far-flung from the situation at hand. Bloom, we know, will readily consume the livers of both "beasts and fowls" and he furthermore doesn't hesitate to use his own wife as a source of premium dairy: "...he said it was sweeter and thicker than cows then he wanted to milk me into the tea..." (55, 754). Stephen, too, is a "maneater" of sorts. Brooding in his guilt over his mother's death, he becomes a "ghoul" and a "chewer of corpses" (10). Stephen's psychological cannibalism points us towards the inner battlefields on which glory, or something more subtle, will be won in *Ulysses*. When Bloom loses a button off his trousers, he "heroically made light of the mischance" (614). A

thousand such acts during the course of one day might lead up to a brand of heroism not easily mocked.

Bloom's exceedingly active mind is never-resting in its speculation on the causes and meanings of "phenomena." The many details of daily life are ample fodder for his inner wheels, which are more likely to spin off their axels investigating the output of breweries as they are to be moved by an abstract discussion of morality. He is fascinated by the spectacle of tiny events around him and is eager to use these subjects as a point of connection between his fellow Dubliners, who, unfortunately for Bloom, are rather inclined to be put off by his trivial and pseudoscientific inquiries: "O Rocks" is their frustrated reply to the trifles which consistently dog Bloom's consciousness.

Such obsessive fixation on the esoteric details of Dublin is a fine target for Joyce's mock-heroic narration. To return to the closing paragraph of the "Cyclops" section, we recall that Bloom rose "to the glory of the brightness at an angle of fortyfive degrees..." (345). The angle of ascent is exactly what Bloom himself would appreciate, and certainly, this detail is humorous in light of Bloom's penchant for trivial details. But if we take this detail as merely the mocking deflation of Bloom's status as hero, we miss the significance of Bloom's obsession. Joyce once wrote that if the entire world was destroyed, he wanted a reader of *Ulysses* to be able to reconstruct Dublin in every minute detail. This is indeed one of the many goals of classical epic: To be all-encompassing, to relate the plenitude of the universe by dint of heroic cataloging and range of coverage. When Bloom inquires into, say, the phenomenon of the human circulatory system, he is in effect acting in the role of heroic cataloguer and fulfilling the epic encyclopedic ideal.

Nevertheless, this trait of Bloom's tends to add to his status as outsider, to cast him even further away from social acceptance. The citizen describes his annoyance with Bloom's tendency to prattle over inconsequential matters:

Then he starts all confused mucking it up about the mortgagor under the act like the lord chancellor giving it out on the bench and for the benefit of the wife and that a trust is created but on the other hand that Dignam owed Bridgeman the money and if now the wife or the widow contested the mortgagee's right till he near had the head of me addled with his mortgagor under the act (313).

As a Jew, Bloom cannot expect to be ever fully accepted in a city where anti-Semitism is as widespread as the establishment of pubs, and his annoying habits only serve to further aggravate his position as an outcast. Yet within the context of the dull and viciously disingenuous atmosphere of Joyce's Dublin, as epitomized by Father Conmee's soft-brained schmoozing, Bloom's social awkwardness appears rather heroic. Consider, for example, the way in which Conmee coos at a church member's wife: "Father Conmee was wonderfully well indeed. He would go to Buxton probably for the waters. And her boys, were they getting on well at Belvedere? Was that so? Father Conmee was very glad to hear that" (219). Of course, this goes over "wonderfully well" in the social atmosphere of Dublin, though Conmee's speech seems to betray a deep disinterest in the lives of his congregation, as long as the surface of their existence appears to remain "a very great success" (219). Conmee's concern for the whiteness of his teeth on his way to relieve orphans highlights this fundamental unconcern as does his reflection on "the millions of black and brown and yellow souls that had not received the baptism of water when their last hour came like a thief in the night" (223). We learn that, "It seemed to Father Conmee a pity that they should all be lost, a waste, if one might say" (223). This attitude sets off in opposition the deeply personal way in which the sufferings of others affect Bloom, whose very bowels are "ruthful" (385).

It has often been noted that Bloom's capacity for empathy is supremely illustrated by his concern for the suffering occasioned by

Mrs. Purefoy's complicated delivery: "Stark ruth of man his errand that him lone led till that house" (385). Although he often proves ineffective, Bloom is nevertheless consistently willing to help mollify the sufferings of others, even to the point of absurdity. For example, he offers "calming words" to Stephen, "advertising how it was no other thing but a hubbub noise that he heard, the discharge of fluid from the thunderhead, look you, having taken place, and all of the order of a natural phenomenon" (395). This is vintage Bloom: A ridiculous scientific-sounding explanation offered to soothe the feelings of Stephen, a young man suffering more from guilt and "a spike named Bitterness" than a superstitious fear of lightening. Bloom fails miserably in his endeavor to help Stephen, just as he always seems to fail in all of his many "skeesing" misadventures, to "spoil the hash altogether as on the night he misguidedly brought home a dog (breed unknown)" whose presence offended Molly (One can imagine Bloom's vexation at not being unable to identify the breed!) (657). His pity, then, like his appetite for knowledge, is never-resting and almost wholly impractical. It appears, in fact, that the very uselessness of his empathy makes him heroic. Insofar as he never seems to cease in his role as sympathizer, he functions much like the willing scapegoat, the Christ-figure who "takes on" the sufferings of others. This concern for others seems to be his most consistent trait, and the one least capable of being suppressed.

Perhaps one of Bloom's most "ruthful" and paradoxically heroic moments comes when he has most reason to fear for his own safety. Encountering a "figure of middle height on the prow" Bloom unheroically abandons Stephen to face the stranger alone "actuated by motives of inherent delicacy" (616). Bloom feels no little trepidation at this encounter, reflecting on how common it is to run across "marauders" who are "ready to decamp with whatever boodle they could in one fell swoop at a moment's notice" (616). Here we have Bloom acting in a very unheroic manner, and yet the situation is more complicated. A look at Bloom's thoughts as he

makes his escape reveals a different kind of heroism, one centered around his capacity for sympathy: "Although unusual in the Dublin area, he knew that it was not by any means unknown for desperadoes who had next to nothing to live on to be about waylaying and generally terrorizing peaceable pedestrians..." (616). What is so significant about this passage is Bloom's continuing concern and sympathy for others, even when feeling most threatened. He is able to recognize the situation of the "desperadoes" and to understand the motivations behind their actions. Bloom is afraid, yet perceives that his attackers "had next to nothing to live on." This is certainly a startling piece of heroism for a man in Bloom's position.

If Bloom's ability to feel empathy makes him a kind of modern hero, his epic task can be seen as the struggle to push that empathy farther, to somehow find a way to relate to others, to fulfill a kind of meeting of minds. This was partly the quest of Odysseus as well, and indeed Bloom's Homeric double seems to have been equal to the task "Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds" (*Homer's Odyssey* 77). Yet for Bloom, and for all of Dublin for that matter, this task proves ultimately unachievable, Bloom's failure inevitably resembling that of the "disappointed bridge" of Stephen's witticism. Odysseus was hounded by Poseidon, and the sea here becomes symbolic of the great gulf which lies between each isolated mind, the impassable barrier which occludes true interpersonal understanding.

Bloom's inability to overcome this barrier is most evident in his sexual relationships, in which he tends to avoid closeness by means of fictionalized, fetishistic desires which focus on masochistic fantasies rather than any truly intimate experience between himself and another. As Bloom dreams of having his face sat upon, he cries "O! O! Monsters! Cruel one!" and each "O" becomes a bare cheek of Bello's squatting haunches. His soft-porn pen-pal relationship with Martha serves as another good example of this, Bloom writing under the pseudonym "Henry Flower" and indulging with his correspondent in Sadomasochistic

fantasies: "So now you know what I will do to you, you naughty boy, if you do not write" (78). The escapism of this fiction is highlighted by Martha's accidental misspelling of "word": "I called you naughty boy because I do not like that other world" (77). That "other world" is one in which Bloom is not "naughty boy," an idealized sexual object, but rather a naughty boy, an individual who must be dealt with as a person, not simply as the fictionalized scapegoat of Martha's sexuality. Neither can Bloom seem to overcome the great ocean of pain, born out of Rudy's miscarriage, that bars him from full sexual union.

It's significant, then, that the sexual "climax" of *Ulysses* occurs on the seashore along with a rapid volley of exclamatory O's: "And then a rocket sprang and bang shot blind and O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures...O so lively! O so soft, sweet soft" (366-367). One can picture the significantly double-eyed and double-O'd Bloom's arousal translated directly into his own appellation: BLOOM. Eyes widen, pupils dilate, Roman candles explode and then BLOOM is Bloom again, stretched out dangling on a jagged rock. But the act of love has been both unreal and distanced. Bloom's vision fades to reveal the reality of the object of his voyeurism: A poor crippled girl, no beauty, no goddess. His orgasm has been a product of an elaborate fantasy. Furthermore, his love-act has been masturbatory, an act of self-love. Coming on the heels of Bloom's declaration in the Cyclops chapter that love is "that that is really life," this isolated Onanistic act appears dead and empty.

However, while the "O" conveys a sense of emptiness, distance, and meaninglessness, it also seems to point us towards an answer to this problem of human disconnection. In the "Scylla and Charybdis" section, Stephen is thinking to himself about the money he has borrowed from the poet, "A.E.":

Do you intend to pay it back?

O, yes.

When? Now?

Well...no.

Well, then?

I paid my way. I paid my way (189).

Stephen's "O, yes" can be taken two ways: Either he intends to pay A.E. back, or he intends to pay him back nothing: the "O" becoming a zero as the modality of Stephen's mind continues in usual ineluctable fashion. Stephen attempts to disown this debt with a forced argument based upon the modality of his own molecules: "Wait. Five months. Molecules all change. I am other I now. Other I got pound" (189). Stephen cannot long countenance his own justification, and turns to self-mocking: "Buzz. Buzz" (189). Yet Stephen continues to meditate on this plurality of self:

I that sinned and prayed and fasted.

A child Conmee saved from pandies.

I, I and I. I.

A.E.I.O.U.

Here, Stephen's reflection on his many past "I's" leads him to recall the four "I's" of formal logic: A.E.I.O. Stephen adds a "U" and we suddenly have the plurality and distancing of obligations re-fused to form the admittance: A.E., I owe you. The "I" is singular again, and the obligation undeniable. Furthermore, this "re-fusion" of self appears actually to multiply the obligations which he is under: He now owes Conmee for saving him from a bout with the paddle. Indeed, if we take a look at the other "I" which Stephen mentions, the one who "sinned and prayed and fasted," we are reminded of another highly significant instance where Stephen has attempted to deny his obligations to the past: His refusal to kneel down before his mother's deathbed and pray. With this action, Stephen's denial of his obligation to the church leads him to deny what he owes his mother, an action which has haunted him ever since.

These passages also point us back to the "Nestor" section in which Stephen's "mentor," Mr Deasy, relates what he claims to be the "proudest boast" which "you will ever hear from an Englishman's mouth": "I paid my way. I never borrowed a shilling in my life. Can you feel that? I owe nothing. Can you?" (30). Stephen of course cannot, and Mr Deasy is delighted, "putting back his savingsbox" (31).

The symbol of the coins returns again at the end of the chapter, immediately following Mr Deasy's delayed finale, an empty anti-Semitic joke: "On [Deasy's] wise shoulders through the checkerwork of leaves the sun flung spangles, dancing coins" (36). The spangles and coins here remind us of our empty "O," an illusion of wisdom, the play of light through leaves. Significantly, at the very moment when he is being told the proudest utterance of an Englishman, Stephen's thoughts name Mr Deasy as "The seas' ruler. His seacold eyes looked on the empty bay" (30). Stephen has attempted to make this boast himself, but has come to realize its futility. He does have obligations, he owes many people, and denying these debts has been entirely futile: His mother's death haunts him, as does his reputation for being a "fearful Jesuit" (3). He cannot escape these obligations to the past; they rise up again to haunt him like his vision of "the empty bay."

Stephen muses in the "Proteus" section on the link between the generations via each "Omphalos." The umbilical cords of humanity stretch back over time all the way to Eve: "The cords of all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh...Hello. Kinch here. Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought, one" (38). The "nought, nought, one" represents clearly the original act of creation, the making of meaning out of the void. Similarly, the "strandentwining" connection between "all flesh" emphasizes the human need for union and recalls once again Stephen's unbreakable tie to his mother. It stands in stark contrast to Bloom's later distanced and fictionalized sexual experience with Gerty MacDowell, and his other distanced sexual experiences. A few pages later Stephen is longing for sexual communion of a more intimate nature: "O, touch me soon, now...I am quiet here alone" (49).

Stephen, who claims to be "quiet here alone," is in fact quite *unquiet*, boiling over with thoughts and emotions; this is partly what makes the section so difficult to read. Nor has he ever been truly "alone" since he denied his mother her last wish. His mother haunts him. Once again, we note Stephen's proxim-

ity to the sea in this section of the novel, and how it has become symbolic of his mother's death: "...I could not save her. Waters: bitter death: lost" (46). The conclusion of the section has Stephen picking his nose and laying "the dry snot picked from his nostril on a ledge of rock, carefully" (51). This mucous episode reminds us of Buck Mulligan's brief monologue on the sea, which contains his adjective, "snotgreen":

Isn't the sea what Algy calls it: a grey sweet mother? The snotgreen sea. The scrotumtightening 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. (5)

Further on in the same page, we find another linkage between these images of death and the sea:

Across the threadbare cuffed edge he saw the sea hailed as a great sweet mother by the wellfed voice beside him. The ring of bay and skyline held a dull green mass of liquid. A bowl of white china had stood beside her deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting. (5)

One is tempted to seize on the detail of the "rotting liver" and relate this to Bloom's taste for the inner organs of animals and his characteristic desire to "swallow" the pain of others. And indeed Bloom *does* at least try to alleviate the pain of Stephen, even if he seems to fail in the attempt. The "Ithaca" section can be seen as Bloom's triumphal return in other ways, as well. Bloom's tendency to catalogue completely overwhelms the format of the penultimate section of the novel, with the narration assuming the form of a catechism which endeavors to list all the many answers to such questions as "Of what did the duumvirate deliberate during their itinerary?" (666). Perhaps this cataloging odyssey is finally completed when the answer is given to the question: "What in water did Bloom, waterlover, drawer of water, watercarrier returning to the range, admire?" (671). The response, a gloriously in-

clusive passage which almost seems to "plumb" the "profundity" of this topic, takes up nearly a page and a half. The quest to catalogue is fulfilled. We have "covered" the "distance" of the ocean. But though we can argue that Bloom's empathy and his pursuit of trivia make him heroic, there is more, obviously, which he must accomplish before his return can be considered complete.

As I have indicated earlier, Bloom's real journey in the novel is to overcome the distance which has separated him from Molly ever since the death of Rudy. As this separation is largely a result of Bloom's inability to become sexually close (he deals with this inability, as we have seen, by making use of distanced sexual experiences: pen pals, fetishes, and acts of onanism) we expect for Bloom and Molly to enjoy a sexual reunion at the conclusion of the novel. It makes sense, really. Bloom's inability to become sexually intimate has led to a growing division between them on all other levels of their relationship. Bloom must therefore reclaim Molly sexually in order to reclaim their larger relationship. And yet this never happens. Instead, Bloom crawls into bed and kisses the "melons of her rump" in an act which only arouses him to the point of "a proximate erection" (734-735). This is hardly the sexual reunion we would expect. But we must remember that sexual dysfunction is not Bloom's real challenge. It may have been the immediate cause of their estrangement, but the task for Bloom is not to reunite their sexual ties, but rather to bridge the distances between them which the sexual disjunction has caused. Bloom's kiss, then, is symbolic of this larger reunion. It is resolution of Bloom's "antagonistic sentiments" over Molly's affair with Boylan, the fulfillment of his circular journey, and the "filling up" of the empty "O."

We are inevitably reminded by Bloom's kiss of its most famous osculatorial/posterior precursor: Absalon's kiss of Alison's arse in Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*. Absalon's response to this prank, of course, is to apply a hot poker to the next pair of cheeks that pop out the window. The "branded cattle" in the "Hades" sec-

tion have significantly "clotted bony croups" (97). And in the "Penelope" section, Molly is annoyed with Boylan for slapping her backside, "...Im not a horse or an ass am I...," and sympathizes with "those poor horses" slaughtered at a bull fight she once attended (741, 755). We are also reminded of the common Homeric epithet for beautiful women: "Ox-eyed." All of this should serve as support for the notion that Bloom's kiss on Molly's rear end is an act of symbolically branding her, of reasserting a sense of ownership over her.

However, Bloom's soft "melonsmellous" kiss is much less harsh than the heat of a branding iron, and we can easily imagine the fiery lips of Blazes Boylan to be much more searing. This seems to indicate that Bloom isn't attempting to establish some kind of proprietary control over Molly. In fact, he seems unlikely ever to do anything about her extramarital affairs (733-734). So Bloom here isn't seeking to own Molly, it is in fact some other brand of relationship he is trying to emblazon onto Molly's croup. It might help here to recall a passage from the "Hades" section where Bloom is thinking about his father's suicide note: "No more pain. Wake no more. Nobody owns" (97). Further down the same page we get a fragment of a song which is repeated in the "Eumaeus" section: "He's as bad as old Antonio. He left me on my ownio" (97, 632). The words "Nobody owns" and "ownio" emphasize Bloom's feelings of abandonment and solitude at his father's suicide, while at the same time directing us towards a possible solution to this sense of isolation: "He left me on my own [and yet,] io": *I owe*. What Bloom's kiss seems to assert, then, are the obligations Molly and Poldy continue to hold towards each other, no matter who is sleeping with Blazes Boylan. It is indeed an "obscure...osculation," but nevertheless it serves to affirm the importance of their relationship: Bloom *owes* Molly, and Molly *owes* Bloom (735).

If we take a look at the way the "O" metaphor has developed in the course of the novel, we notice a movement from mockery to meaning. The first use of the "O" in *Ulysses* occurs

on the first full page of text, with Malachi Mulligan making a mockery of the Catholic mass: "For this, O dearly beloved, is the genuine Christine: body and soul and blood and ouns. Slow music please. Shut your eyes, gents. One moment. A little trouble about those white corpuscles. Silence, all" (3). The final "O" occurs on the last page of the novel, with Molly recalling the scene of her betrothal to Bloom: "and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes..." (783). The image of "the sea the sea" reminds us of Mulligan's speech, which we have already quoted earlier in this paper: "Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks. I must teach you. You must read them in the original. *Thalatta! Thalatta!*" (5). Mulligan's pretentiousness is contrasted by Molly's genuine feeling, the "deepdown torrent" which she felt on the occasion of Bloom's proposal. Mulligan's mocking "O" addresses the "dearly beloved," while Molly's "O" affirms the significance of the moment when she pledged her love to Bloom.

Earlier in the same section, Molly mentions Defoe's *Moll Flanders*: "I don't like books with a Molly in them like that one he brought me about the one from Flanders a whore always shoplifting..." (756). Without investigating the irony of this statement, it might be useful here to quote a passage from another novel by Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*. Here, Crusoe learns of Friday's conception of his deity:

He could describe nothing of this great Person but that he was very old; much older, he said, than the Sea or the Land, than the Moon or the Stars. I asked him then, if this old Person had made all Things, why did not all Things worship him. He looked very grave, and with a perfect Look of Innocence, said, "All Things do say 'O!' to him (156).

This seems to be the way "O" is being used by Molly in the final pages of the novel. As Molly's mind races over the landscape of her original union with Bloom, the text is punctuated with the word "yes," an affirmation of the surrounding landscape, the entire world,

not merely Bloom's proposal. Joyce's "O" has flipped itself, like one of Mr Deasy's coins, from a symbol of meaninglessness to one of meaning, from a symbol of separation and distance to one of affirmation and obligation.

The "O" can be seen as symbolic of all three stages of this progression. It begins as an empty void, a zero, a flatulence. It then takes on the sense of the very struggle against this void: the circular loop of Bloom's journey through Dublin. Finally, it comes to be taken as symbolic of the force which ultimately allows Bloom to overcome the great "empty bay" over which he has made his odyssey. That is, he has affirmed the significance behind human relationships, the importance of our obligations, the idea that we "owe" each other something for our past and that this tie cannot easily be broken. And therefore it represents Bloom's eventual return (after all, an O isn't a U!) and the fulfillment of his heroic task. Consider the final question asked in the "Ithaca" section. A few lines up we take our last look at Bloom, as he falls asleep beside Molly: "He rests. He has travelled" (737). The final question asks, simply, "where?" And the answer to this question? Even more simple, a large black dot: "●" The Odyssey has been fulfilled, the empty "O" has been made meaningful.

Of course this doesn't explain how Stephen's Odyssey has been fulfilled within the pages of *Ulysses*. His parting from Bloom indicates he'll continue to wander, haunted by his mother's ghost and unable to find his way home. Are we able to decide, then, how or if he is ever able to overcome his feelings of guilt and emptiness? I would argue that Stephen's final return isn't, in fact, contained within *Ulysses*. I would argue that *it is Ulysses*. In the "Proteus" section, we had Stephen's bitter, self-mocking remembrance of youthful plans to write books "with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria?" (40). It must be clear by now what I mean to argue

about this passage. It is this: That Stephen has indeed written a book with a letter for a title, and that the title is O. Joyce, having crossed the sea and lived in exile from Ireland for roughly ten years, now makes his return to his fatherland, to exercise the ghost of his mother and make sense out of his past. He has taken

his bitterness and his hollow memories, and, by weaving them all together into a rich tapestry which fills every corner of a sprawling text, he has fulfilled his own Odyssey and embodied "the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man" (666).

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