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Thomas, James Joyce's Ulysses: A Book of Many Happy Returns

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BROOK THOMAS. *JAMES JOYCE'S ULYSSES: A BOOK OF MANY HAPPY RETURNS*. BATON ROUGE AND LONDON: LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1982. 187 pp. \$17.50.

Brook Thomas's provocative book may be the decade's most frustrating study of Joyce, promising much but delivering only enough to underscore its problems. Using Fritz Senn's classic essay "Book of Many Turns" as his point of departure, Thomas argues that a full appreciation of *Ulysses* demands recognition of both "the book as book" and "the book as world." Like many other critics who apply recent developments in literary theory to Joyce's canon, Thomas insists on the central importance of "the author's self-conscious awareness of the reflexive nature of language" (p. 3). What distinguishes Thomas's sensibility is his complementary insistence that, rather than serving as an aesthetic or philosophical end in itself, the resulting "play of language" encourages both Joyce and his readers to move beyond solipsism into a recognition of the multiplicity and richness of human experience. As a result, *James Joyce's Ulysses: A Book of Many Happy Returns* initially seems to promise a sane synthetic view, tempering the equilibrium stressed by studies such as C. H. Peake's *James Joyce: The Citizen and the Artist* with the insights provided by structuralist and deconstructionist criticism.

Unfortunately, Thomas fails to realize this promise. The reasons are complex, and no one alone accounts for the failure. Rather than providing another "reading" of *Ulysses*, Thomas concentrates on several crucial scenes and patterns, most notably "Eumaeus" and "Scylla and Charybdis," and most readers will emerge from Thomas's book with an enriched understanding of those episodes. Although Thomas is certainly correct in noting the redundancy of most "new" readings, his choice not to consider the entire book nonetheless seems ill-advised. For what Thomas suggests is a new reading of *Ulysses*, a reading that I believe would be more inclusive than any other currently in print. Unfortunately, the individual reader must construct this reading almost entirely on his/her own. Given Thomas's pluralistic stance, this may be a philosophically consistent demand. If so, however, an essay or monograph would have sufficed to present the basic elements of his sensibility.

In place of the chapter-by-chapter organization of the "reading," Thomas presents three sections focusing respectively on the roles of author, text and reader in *Ulysses*. However appropriate in theory, this structure generates problems. First, since Thomas returns inter

mittently to the previously noted episodes, the book contains inordinate repetition. Reaching the final section, most readers will have long tired of the man in the mackintosh, for example. Second, and more serious, Thomas presents his discussions of critical theory in numerous brief segments. He devotes a few pages to Barthes and Culler in his introduction, a few to Derrida in part two, a few to Gadamer in part three. As a result, no consistent, or coherently eclectic, critical framework emerges, and Thomas's forays into critical theory seem at best telegraphic invocations of controversies the reader may or may not consider vital. At worst, they seem cynical attempts to authenticate his perceptions through fashionable name-dropping.

Despite these shortcomings, *James Joyce's Ulysses: A Book of Many Happy Returns* is worth reading. It provides as many stimulating comments on the way *Ulysses* works as does any other recent study of Joyce. It may well be unmatched as a source of quotations likely to prompt discussions in *Ulysses* seminars. The reader should simply be aware that he/she will be forced to test the validity of the generalizations without much help from Thomas.

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