

Polyphony in *Ulysses*

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The rationale of the apparently superfluous quality of James Joyce's *Ulysses* might be said to lie in the generality derived from its encyclopaedic method. The encyclopaedic method, in addition to its emphasis on an objective point of view induced by the highlighted materiality of listed objects, creates the sense of generality by functioning as a semiotic information system through the technique of the inventory, an indiscriminate accommodation of all data available. In so doing, it turns the ostensibly disorderly element of random accumulation of details into an orderly factor that contributes towards the durable vitality of the text by providing new systemic codes for the reader to select and organise from the superfluous data.

This mode of a repeated process of creating newly coded systems involves another conspicuous structural feature of *Ulysses* in connection with the “art of surfeit”: *polyphony*. In its virtually perpetual process of renewal necessitating an inexhaustible exploitation of the specific potential of each constituent, the

encyclopaedic method is a recognition of singularity. Apparently opposed qualities, generality and singularity are in fact two different facets of the same pluralistic Joycean world view. "Pluralism" in *Ulysses* is Janus-faced. Though deriving from the same principle, generality and singularity function differently on a structural level. While one relates to the problem of disproportion, the other involves heterogeneity. If one can be accused of redundancy and extravagance, the other can be suspected of discrepancy and incoherence. In view of the latter point, pluralism can be said to be a celebration of individuality and diversity.

Pluralism is the inevitable epistemological perspective for Joyce in comprehending and representing the chaotic world where the almighty Supreme Being is dead, or at least absent. On an auditory level, his vision of chaos is incorporated in the image of "noise." Noise, with its redundant and incongruous overtone, represents the auditory side of the disorderly image of "clutter," which can also denote the visual side of disorder. As enacted in the conversation between Stephen Dedalus and Mr Deasy, God is for the sceptic "a shout in the street" in contrast to the orthodox's "one great goal." The "Oxen of the Sun" chapter is an illustration *par excellence*, in both theme and form, of the discourse between the "Word" and "noise." As Odysseus' crew desecrated the sun-god Helios by slaughtering his cattle, the fertility symbol, the ribald students violate the Maternity Hospital by making riotous noises arguing for contraception, a sacrilege against "son," a fertility motif like "sun." The labour to restrain them is lost by Bloom, who himself is sonless. Thus "a strife of tongues" turns the hospital into a Tower of Babel "too propitious for the display of that discursiveness which seemed the only bond of union among tempers so divergent" (*U* 14.952-55).

It is not the hospital only that is turned into an arena for "a strife of tongues." The chapter itself is a linguistic version of the hospital which "never beheld an assembly so representative and so varied nor . . . ever listened to a language so encyclopaedic" (*U* 14. 1201-203). The chapter is, as it were, an image of a street that produces a diversity of discursive noises. The prevalence of the sacrilegious drift on the linguistic level is such that it turns even the name of God into

confusing noises: as the absolute, omnipotent being, “Almighty God” (line 166), “holy Ghost, Very God” (226), “Believe-on-Me” (444), “the Supreme Being” (879), “old Glory Allelujorum” (888); as the benefactor, “God His bounty” (176), “Giver of Life” (227), “Giver of good things” (752), “Beneficent Disseminator of blessings” (766); as the punisher, “God the Wrecker” (83), “an old nobodaddy” (419); as the creative author, “the Author of my days” (763), “the Holy Writer” (872); even as Islamic God, “Allah the Excellent One” (1563). All these may mean for religious devotees the omnipotence of God. For the God-bereaved students, however, they are nothing but verbal manifestations of the “Word” reduced to “noises” barely different from the chaotic gibberish of the delirious revellers at the end of the chapter. Expressing through such a variety of “gods” the multiplicity and contrariety of attitudes, the chapter, as Robert Bell puts it, “is not a monolithic argument but, like *Ulysses* itself, a collage of competing perspectives without dogmatic authority” (150). Thus, it is an incarnation of clutter, on the level of language as well as epistemology.

The series of different prose styles in the “Oxen of the Sun” chapter, on the larger level, incarnates the quality of noise *en masse*. As the different names of God imply different possibilities of conceptualising Him, the stylistic sequence is a gesture of simulating the multi-faceted character of reality that involves different modes of experience in it and manifold points of view from which to see it. Here, one might note that one version of God’s name in the chapter was “the author of my days.” Given the dissipation of God’s “Word” into “noises” in the street, the author with authoritative omniscience might be supposed to have disappeared only to haunt the scenes of this world in the form of a ghost, each of whose multiple voices pretends to the lost authority of univocality. In this view, the chapter’s different styles represent, in a narrow context, different points of view on the current issue and situation of the action of the novel. In a wide context, however, each style might symbolise the *Zeitgeist* of each stage of “history repeating itself with a difference.” The noisy hospital is an image of this world where, in God’s silence, an infinitely increasing number of its residents continue their life after the

pattern of cyclic return: “The voices blend and fuse in clouded silence: silence that is the infinite of space: and swiftly, silently the soul is wafted over regions of cycles of generations that have lived” (*U* 14.1078-80). The mode of “proliferent continuance” (*U* 14.15) of the discursive noises in the chapter is analogous to the principle of the information system whose multi-dimensional structure, as is demonstrated in contemporary cultural or scientific theory, is characterised by “self-organization viewed as a noise-induced disorganization followed by reorganization” entailing “interplays between different levels” (Atlan 118). Noise in the information system corresponds to the structural factor of apparent redundancy and irrelevance, which in fact serves as the creative source of new possibilities in art.

An essential prerequisite for a self-organised information system that demands unrelenting efforts to make the most of its potentiality is the distinctive uniqueness of its constituents’ qualities. An acceptance of the coexistence of multiple constituents entails a valuation of their unique differences. A collective unconscious about the death of God leads to the surrealist techniques of surprise and disruption. The image of pluralism as “noise” can be paraphrased into such terms as polyphony, heteroglossia, or polytrope, which implies heterogeneity germane to multiplicity in sound, language, or style respectively.

Ulysses is a virtuoso incorporation of Joyce’s artistic idea that “[i]n writing one must create an endlessly changing surface” (Power 95). Much of *Ulysses*’ heterogeneity pertains to baroque art. The baroque style is characterised not only by its multiplicity such as “inclusiveness, its taste for richness over purity, polyphony over monophony”; more specifically, it is motivated by a factor of disruption, “the appetite for surprise and shock” (Wellek and Warren 203). The disruptive impulse operates in *Ulysses* as the structural principle informing the mode of heterogeneity on varied levels. Perhaps the most salient structural features resulting from the relentless proclivity toward heterogeneity of *Ulysses*’ encyclopaedism are *digression* and *proliferation*.

II

Digression, in its mode of abrupt shifts of points of view and issues, disconcerts expected narrative chronology and relevance. Its defamiliarising function ceaselessly induces the reader to view the text from an ever-renewed perspective and to elicit new significance from it. In this sense, it is, in Laurence Sterne's words, "the life, the soul of reading" that produces variety and maintains interest. Digression, on the other hand, is a disorderly factor of discontinuity and incongruity in its confusingly tangential mode, which is precipitated by the apparently paratactic propensity to skip the border lines of textualities. In the "Cyclops" sequence, for example, the text functions as a montage of disparate discourses. An overemphasis of the surface disparity, in connection with the novel's digressive aspects, results in an oversight of factors concerning structural association and order in it. In this view of its text as a series of contradictory counter-texts devoid of contextual features, *Ulysses* is an uncontrolled riot of language, the consequence of which is, to one critic, "the lack of a standard by which we can judge the correspondence of these discourses to an exterior reality and the consequent experience of incoherence" (MacCabe 90).

One might note, however, the double-edged function of association, which works, beyond its on-scene role of discrete differentiation, towards discreet integration off the scene. Many of the seemingly discrete lists in "Cyclops," contain diverse kinds of systemic codes germane to the theme and structure of the whole novel.¹⁾ Digression, in short, is a factor of tension between order and disorder. In this regard, Hayman cogently observes

that the disparity between the continuous and the discontinuous elements in the chapter is both real and only apparent, that incoherence and irreverence are in complex ways yoked to reverence and a respect for forms and even for human

1) According to David Hayman, "If most of the asides are irreverently intrusive, taking off from, rather than clarifying the action, over a third of them (eleven in all), contain specifics relevant, if not essential, to the plot" (266).

values. This is also true of the obvious satirical content, since satire always implies respect for some sort of reason and a positive if implicit order. (267)

Derek Attridge in *Peculiar Language* also acknowledges that digression functions as a support for the text's unity "contributing significantly to the novel's cohesion, its readability, its status as a model for an ordered, teleological, interpretable world" in so far as "it is firmly kept in a subordinate position" (223). For him, however, it is the deconstructive reading in its allowance for heterogeneity and its acceptance of sampling and skipping that is "probably a more accurate description of what happens in the encounter with a text than are idealised versions of total interpretation and hermeneutic rigor" (227). According to him, what happens in the deconstructive reading is:

a split between two oppositions that are normally conflated, the progressive/digressive opposition and the dominant/subordinate opposition, and a reversal of the homology between them, so it becomes possible to read the digressive sections as dominant and the progressive ones as subordinate. (228)

Attridge's idea is quite suggestive in its recognition of digression, which is usually denigrated as subordinate or redundant. Much of it pertains, it is true, to *Ulysses*, in which the action so often seems to be abandoned, broken, or even distorted by the narrator's excursions into dalliyings with a superfluity of materials and techniques. On closer examination, however, the digressions never fail to allude to the fictional theme and embody the author's epistemological vision. In terms of order and disorder, digressions are formal equivalents of the factors of difference, change, and disorder in Joyce's basic view of the world to the opposite factors of sameness, return, and order. Ultimately in this regard, digression in *Ulysses* should be considered less as sheerly disruptive, deconstructive factors than as that part of organic unity which contributes through both sundering and reconciliation to the overall coherence and reconstruction.

III

Another conspicuous feature of heterogeneity in *Ulysses* is *proliferation*; “*It grew bigger and bigger and bigger*” (*U* 8.783). Proliferation connotes diverse structural features of the novel: incongruity in its apparently gratuitous extension of digression, extravagance in its elongated lists, and disproportion in the largely increasing lengths of the chapters. Though embedded in the whole text, it surfaces strikingly in the later chapters in particular, where digression from the narrative action appears markedly dominant.²⁾ Proliferation, in essence an incidental phenomenon to encyclopaedism and digression, goes against classical standards of artistic decorum such as balance, symmetry, and restraint. But, far from an inadvertent error, it springs from Joyce’s intention to “express the multiple variations which make up the social life of a city” by drawing upon the medieval with its emotional fecundity as opposed to “the classical, with its rigid structure and its emotional limitations” (Power 95).

It does not mean, however, that Joyce did not embed ordering factors within the proliferating surface. Admitting that his methods of expansion and elaboration were carried out far beyond his original intentions, as Groden states, “[h]is notesheets, drafts, and revisions on the typescripts and proofs reveal a man always searching for a well-defined controlling order” (52). The progress of the novel, as far as its proliferent aspect is concerned, is irreversible. But, paradoxically, irreversibility is closely connected with communication, which “is at the base of what probably is the most irreversible process accessible to the human mind, the progressive increase of knowledge” (Prigogine and Stengers 295). Proliferation, entailing repetitions of *leitmotiv* and cross-references, reinforces the integrating effect of the general schematic, if somewhat rigid, correspondences. The external frames and the internal order are complementary in amplifying the effect of allusion. Thus, as Umberto Eco puts it, “the general picture allows this proliferation

2) According to Groden, “Cyclops” is the turning point of Joyce’s search for “new goals of expansion and encycloaedism” in the later revision stage of the novel (158).

of elements, and these proliferating elements reconfirm the picture and help it to emerge with greater visibility” (*The Aesthetics of Chaosmos* 51).

In this light, proliferation in *Ulysses* should not be looked upon as a purely meaningless, redundant expansion of entirely disparate ingredients of an incoherent conglomerate. Rather, it should be seen as a “proliferent continuance” (*U* 14.15) of a living thing that will “[i]ncrease and multiply” (*U* 8.33). It is, so to speak, an “evolution increasingly vaster” (*U* 17.1042). The proliferent modality of *Ulysses*’ encyclopaedism resembles, to make a scientific analogy, the increase of entropy, which expresses the irreversible increase of probability, and, consequently, of disorder. The novel’s structure, in its mosaic conglomeration of apparently discrete elements and its proliferent proclivity, follows the evolutionary paradigm, which includes two systems: “isolated systems that evolve to disorder” and “open systems that evolve to higher and higher forms of complexity” (Prigogine and Stengers 298). This irreversibility in the evolutionary process, however, is not doomed to utter disorder; rather, it is a sign of new unity emerging. Irreversibility is in fact a mechanism that operates on all levels of evolution to bring order out of disorder. In *Ulysses*, the multiplication of narrative details is accompanied by an increase of controlling devices employed by the author. A symbolic depiction of this aspect can be found in the execution aside in “Cyclops”: “A posse of Dublin Metropolitan police superintended by the Chief Commissioner in person maintained order in the vast throng” (*U* 12.534-36).

IV

It has been one of the most prevalent tendencies of recent Joyce criticism to put the element of polytropic play in language and technique before the realistic element of the narrative, or even to value or see only the former. Its corollary is to give priority to heterogeneity over homogeneity, and, consequently, to disorder over order. This judgment is probably apt for *Finnegans Wake*, which unremittingly

indulges wild, or even rampant, verbal excursions, but not for *Ulysses*. In *Ulysses*, I would argue, thematic unity and continuity are never irrecoverably smothered with stylistic exuberance. Joyce's linguistic and technical experimentalism, an excursive and extravagant play on the one hand, functions on the other to illuminate the narrative material with detached and multi-contextual light. Joycean way is always to "combine business with pleasure" (*U* 5.504-05). In fact, the two, often imbued with references to each other, interact in an indistinguishable and complementary way to make up one organised work, whose content and form are informed by the same structuring principles. *Ulysses* has both thematic unity and textual coherence. Besides, a divergent element, however dominant it may appear in its proliferant aspect, seldom escapes from a convergent influence of the inner order, which, on the larger level, integrates it into an organic whole. It is only with this reservation that one can lay a convincing emphasis on the disordering, decentralising, and deconstructive function of digression and proliferation in the novel.

The surface surfeit of *Ulysses*, with the concomitant phenomena of heterogeneity, digression, and proliferation, leads to a tendency to conclude the world of the book to be *open*, not *closed*. Its structure is often seen as an incessant series of supplementary and disruptive play. And the novel's flow tends to be considered digressive rather than progressive and its movement linear rather than circular. From this standpoint, the text, far from being a representative picture, is likely to be seen as only a labyrinthine montage. To Colin MacCabe for example, "Cyclops" suffers from or rejoices in "the lack of a moment of closure in which the various discourses of the text are ordered in terms of the narrative's dominance" (100). But it should be remarked that the interpolations of the chapter, in spite of their seeming disparity, carry ingredients allusive to the novel's narrative, theme, and general structure.

Ulysses, while indulging in verbal play and technical explorations, never forgets to return to its main streams of narrative plot and theme. In reality, the same frame of reference that governs one informs the other. The entirety of the novel—form and content—originates from and embodies Joyce's world view that accommodates

the contradictory structural principle: disorder in order, or order with disorder. Within this fundamental frame are allowed the novel's reflexive structures, the use of which achieves the integrity of the closed system. Patterns such as circularity, chiasmus, and symmetry are strategic devices for fostering the movement of cyclic return. In *Ulysses*, the return is not for good, nor does it mean a permanent death. As its digression is deviously headed for the ultimate return, so its return prepares a new, different journey. If a return is a death in that it marks the end of a life span, it also is a death for resurrection.

In this sense, the novel's form is a *closure*. But the closure is not perfect; it admits of some interpretative open-endedness, which is characteristic of a closed, but semiosically self-perpetuating, system.³⁾ A closed system, as Clive Hart indicates, "does not . . . have to limit meaning. Closed systems can include—often do include—infinities" (432). *Ulysses* is, according to Eco, such a closed universe encouraging an infinitive series of interpretative choices, an open message (*The Aesthetics of Chaosmos* 54). The seemingly superfluous elements and incongruous aspects of the novel's encyclopaedic method induce a virtually unlimited number of constructive and interpretative possibilities. We can find in "Ithaca" happy analogies to this structural irony implicative of the paradoxical pattern of cyclic return with a change of the novel as an information system: the catechiser's astronomical description of "the proper motion of the earth through everchanging tracks of neverchanging space" (*U* 17.2308-10).

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3) Eco elucidates a process of unlimited semiosis: "From a sign which is taken as type, it is possible to penetrate, from the center to the farthest periphery, the whole universe of cultural units, each of which can in turn become the center and create infinite peripheries" (*The Limits of Interpretation* 144). This notion of unlimited semiosis is consistent with Joyce's aesthetic of the midway. And this notion of self-organisation is analogous to the notion of, in computer language, "autopoiesis": an organisation computing its own organisation through systems which are "thermodynamically open, but organizationally closed" (Foerster 187).

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Abstract**Polyphony in *Ulysses***

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Heterogeneity, one of the most remarkable characteristics of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, tends to lead critics to put too much emphasis on the element of its polytropic play in language and technique compared to the realistic element of its narrative. This tendency might be reconsidered by investigating two salient structural features resulting from the novel's proclivity toward heterogeneity: digression and proliferation. Digression is a disorderly factor of discontinuity and incongruity in its confusing tangential mode, but, in *Ulysses* it functions as an important support for the text's unity by alluding to the fictional theme and embodying the author's epistemological vision. By the same token, proliferation, though apparently going against classical standards of artistic decorum such as balance, symmetry, and restraint, in reality contributes to reinforce the integrating effect of the general correspondences by entailing organising devices like *leitmotif* and cross-references. In this way *Ulysses*, while indulging in verbal play and technical explorations, never forgets to return to its main streams of narrative plot and theme.

■ **Key words** : James Joyce, *Ulysses*, heterogeneity, digression, proliferation

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