

Undone by *Ulysses*: A Virgin Reading of the Novel

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Imagine that you are an English speaker living in Europe in 1922 when James Joyce's *Ulysses* is published. You have read Joyce's collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, and his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But although some episodes of Joyce's new novel *Ulysses* have been published in various journals, you have not yet read them, and although you've heard some talk that Joyce based his new work on Homer's *Odyssey*, you have not heard any specific discussion of its plot or its writing. You now buy a copy of *Ulysses*, and begin to read it.

What would such an experience have been like? What would it be like to begin reading the novel without knowing that its action will take place over the course of just one day, without knowing that Bloom is Jewish, and without knowing that Molly Bloom will begin an adulterous affair with her impresario before it ends? We can hardly imagine a first-time reader with this degree of innocence in the

twentieth-first century, when the plot and characters of *Ulysses* are so well known in advance. But we could construct such an imaginary figure, a simulated *virgin reader*, as we might call a novice who approaches the novel without prior knowledge or experience. What could we learn if we were to try to read *Ulysses* through such imaginary virgin eyes? I would like to explore this possibility by taking one of the richest and most prominent themes in Joyce's *Ulysses*—the theme of adultery— and track how a virgin reader, a hypothetical first-time reader, might encounter and follow its development in the novel. Let's assume that my imaginary virgin reader knows that Joyce based *Ulysses* on Homer's *Odyssey*, and knows that Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, remains faithful to her wandering husband even though she is beset by suitors pressuring her to marry them. Armed with this assumption, my novice reader might expect that Bloom's fretting about Molly's letter from Blazes Boylan is groundless suspicion, and expect the novel to end by having Boylan— like Molly's other imagined suitors in “Ithaca”— dissolve into thin air as a phantom of his jealous imagination.

What would such an exercise—tracking the adultery plot in *Ulysses* through a hypothetical virgin reader's perception—accomplish? I hope to show that it would allow us to explore the relationship between narration and ethics by focusing our attention on two dimensions of the reading process: logic and judgment. “Literary texts demand judgment from their interpreters,” (10) Adam Zachary Newton writes in *Narrative Ethics*, and J. Hillis Miller, writing in *The Ethics of Reading*, concurs. He writes, “An understanding of ethics as a region of philosophical or conceptual investigation depends, perhaps surprisingly, on mastery of the ability to interpret written stories, that is, on a kind of mastery usually thought to be the province of the literary critic” (3). The metaphor I have chosen for a hypothetical first time or novice reader as a *virgin* reader is intended precisely to point to the double experience of a reading process that requires both the processing of information and a response of judgment. A virgin reading is marked not only by the absence of prior knowledge, the condition of the *tabula rasa*, but also by innocence with respect to the significance of the knowledge to be acquired. In *Ulysses*, I will argue,

virgin readers will be continually placed in precarious situations where information is withheld and deferred with the result that they are obliged to draw risky inferences about such highly charged matters as transgressive sexual behavior, infidelity and betrayal. The judgments produced in the course of the reading process are ethical judgments, and if we consider the history of the nineteenth century adultery novel we can see their plots guiding these judgments in specific directions.

The sympathy offered to the adulterous heroines of the traditional adultery novel is punished by forcing readers to witness their sad fates: Anna Karenina throwing herself under the wheels of a moving train and Emma Bovary poisoning herself at the end of Flaubert's novel. But *Ulysses* poses an entirely different challenge because there is no certainty that adultery has even occurred until the last chapter—a point that veteran readings continually obscure. Hugh Kenner, for example, makes a highly problematic statement when he describes a scene missing from the novel as “the scene in which Bloom takes leave of Molly for the day, in the knowledge that when he sees her again she will have cuckolded him” (385). But how can Bloom possibly *know* this in the morning when not even Molly and Boylan could have known that their planned adultery *will* in fact occur? Boylan might have been diverted and failed to keep his appointment or been sickened by the oysters he ate that morning. Or he might have kept the appointment but found Bloom's wife finally unwilling to jeopardize her marriage. The only evidence Bloom has—in the morning and for the rest of the day—is highly circumstantial in a judicial sense: an opened letter tucked under a pillow. Kenner's problematic shifting of his own assumption onto Leopold Bloom illustrates the pressure that the veteran or retrospective reading experience exerts on interpretation.

In turning to questions of ethics in relation to Joyce, I am joining a number of critics who have addressed this subject in the last decade or two. The most recent of these, Marian Eide's 2002 *Ethical Joyce* offers a sophisticated exploration of Joyce's ethical philosophy, but without making either *Ulysses* or narrative a significant focus. Both James McMichael's 1991 *'Ulysses' and Justice* and Joseph Valente's 1995 *James Joyce and the Problem of Justice* do concern themselves with

Ulysses, but neither foregrounds narratological issues of the kind I hope to delineate here. For the focus on reading and ethics that emerges from constructing a virgin reading of *Ulysses* illuminates not just the *what* of ethical judgment but also the *how*. In narratological terms one might say that the virgin reader encounters a peculiar relationship between the story of the Blooms as it unfolds and the discourse that tells the story of a day that increasingly points to a crisis in their marriage. In tracking this relationship, I will from time to time refer to the work of such contemporary theorists as Mieke Bal, Paul Grice, Marie-Laure Ryan, and James Phelan to illuminate the narratological features of the virgin reading process. My plan is to look at specific moments of narration in sections of *Ulysses* occurring at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end that test and manipulate the virgin reader by obliging the drawing of risky inferences, offering seductive styles, or presenting seemingly authoritative advice. As we have learned from Karen Lawrence's *The Odyssey of Style in 'Ulysses'*, "[t]he book becomes an encyclopedia of possibilities of plot as well as style, deliberately breaking the conventions of selectivity and relevance upon which most novels are based" (10). The shifting modes of narration particularly manipulate and complicate virgin readers' judgments in ways that ultimately lead to their undoing and rob them of their innocence. In the early episodes of the novel, such as "Calypso" and "Lotus-Eaters," the virgin reader will be far more troubled by Bloom's sexual secrets and the proclivities they gradually reveal than by his worries over an impending adultery. But as the focalized narration Lawrence calls the "narrative norm" (38-54) breaks away from Bloom and takes up other perspectives, the virgin reader is seduced into drawing inferences about the unfolding plot from a style that becomes more manipulative and loaded even as it appears to become more objective and reliable. In "Wandering Rocks" and "Sirens" the virgin reader increasingly adopts Bloom's vision of Boylan and judges Molly guilty by association even before the evidence of adultery is conclusive and before its consummation is confirmed. This is why the virgin reader's honor is impaired, and the virgin reader is ultimately undone by *Ulysses*: because even though "Penelope" validates Bloom's suspicions and the

narrative logic that has allied the virgin reader with them, the prior judgments *as judgments* were nonetheless prejudicial and corrupt. The early chapters in which the Blooms are introduced already demonstrate the connection between narratological and ethical issues. The first of these, “Calypso,” confronts the reader with characters who behave suspiciously, who have secrets from each other, presented by a narrator who keeps these secrets from the reader. For example, as Bloom leaves the house to go to the butcher’s for his breakfast kidney, we are told “He peeped quickly inside the leather headband. White slip of paper. Quite safe” (*U* 4.70). We do not learn in this chapter what is on the white slip of paper or why Bloom keeps it in his hatband. We here encounter an example of what philosopher Paul Grice calls “implicature” (24-40)—a form of discourse that appears to say or mean something other or something more than what is literally said, by referring to an unspoken context. When Bloom thinks “Quite safe,” what are his thoughts implying? Why must the slip of paper be kept hidden and safe and from whom? The novice reader here confronts a mystery whose solution is deferred until the next chapter when Bloom uses the card to request a letter from the post office addressed to the pseudonymous Henry Flower. Before the adultery theme is even introduced, virgin readers have already been nudged to suspect Bloom of possible unsavory secrets—suspicions that will be confirmed when his problematic correspondence with Martha Clifford becomes known in the next chapter. In contrast, Molly’s surreptitious gesture, of putting an opened letter under her pillow, arouses suspicion in Bloom, but not necessarily in the reader. Her response to his question, “Who was the letter from?” receives an immediate, uncomplicated, and plausible answer. “—O, Boylan, she said. He’s bringing the programme.—What are you singing?—*Láci darem* with J.C. Doyle, she said, and *Love’s Old Sweet Song*” (*U* 4.310-314). There is nothing inherently suspicious about Molly’s impresario bringing the music for the upcoming concert program to the house in the afternoon. The suspicion aroused by the “Bold hand. Marion” (*U* 4.311) is purely subjective, itself the product of implicature, of Bloom’s potentially paranoid wondering what a handwriting and a form of address are implying.

Bloom, as it happens, has no ethical scruples when it comes to judging his rival, Blazes Boylan. "Worst man in Dublin" he calls him (*U* 6.202), and early in "Calypso" the virgin reader is indeed prompted to worry about the dangers the mysterious Boylan might pose to the Bloom household. In her letter to her father, young Milly Bloom makes a rather pert reference to "Boylan's (I was on the pop of writing Blazes Boylan's) song about those seaside girls. Tell him silly Milly sends my best respects" (*U* 4.408). The first-time reader is left to wonder what the fifteen-year-old girl is implying about her relationship to her mother's impresario. Bloom confuses the matter further when he subsequently thinks of Milly, Boylan's song, the torn envelope, Milly's maturation, and "Mrs Marion," in a sequence that seems to link anxieties about daughter and wife to the mysterious Boylan. "Will happen, yes. Prevent. Useless: can't move. Girl's sweet light lips. Will happen too. He felt the flowing qualm spread over him. Useless to move now. Lips kissed, kissing, kissed. Full gluey woman's lips" (*U* 4.447). The interior monologue implies that Bloom may fear that Boylan—"Friend of the family" (*U* 4.440) will seduce both daughter and wife. But so far this is all in Bloom's mind, and the virgin reader does not actually encounter Hugh Boylan (as he insists on being called) until later, in "Hades," "Wandering Rocks" and "Sirens." It is important here to make a distinction of the kind offered by theorists of *fictionality*, who separate actual and possible worlds in the narrative text into different domains. Marie-Laure Ryan, for example, opposes the concept of a factual domain in fiction, what she calls an "actual world," to alternative worlds: "[the actual world] is made up of what exists absolutely in the semantic universe of the text, as opposed to what exists in the minds of the characters" (112). Until the virgin reader actually gets a glimpse of Boylan in "Hades"—"From the door of the Red Bank the white disc of a straw hat flashed reply: spruce figure: passed" (*U* 6.198)—Boylan has had existence only in the private world of Bloom's mind. But unfortunately once Boylan appears in the actual world of the novel, the style of the narration will unaccountably collude with Bloom's imaginary image of him and frustrate the virgin reader's need to get an objective look at the man. Instead, we are given a language that pressures the virgin

reader to concur with Bloom's judgment that Boylan is indeed the worst man in Dublin. The Boylan described in "Wandering Rocks" is glimpsed behind Bloom's back, as it were, buying a gift basket in Thornton's shop while Bloom is scanning books under Merchant's arch. But as Boylan is presented, the narrator of the scene eroticizes the shop and its products, the "fat pears" and "ripe shamefaced peaches" "bedded" in a wicker basket "head by tail," like the Blooms in bed as we will see them at the end of the novel. Boylan himself is animalized as he walks around the shop picking up fruit, "sniffing smells," and as he looks into the cut of the young woman's blouse, we are given our only glimpse, I believe, of Boylan's thought in the novel. It invokes an animal trope to describe the shopgirl as "A young pullet" (*U* 10.299-336). Here style has become implicature. As we read the description of Boylan in Thornton's shop, we may well ask what the narrative language is implying? The virgin reader has entered a fruit shop rhetorically transformed into a kind of comestible brothel by the narration.

The next time the virgin reader encounters Boylan, he enters the Ormond Bar in "Sirens" at about the same time Bloom himself enters. Bloom is aware of Boylan, while Boylan appears not to see Bloom, and the virgin reader is now obliged to simultaneously track the development of the adultery plot and to adjudicate the relative character of the two rivals. The challenge has critical consequences for the novice reader's innocence because the plot will defeat—unjustly, I will argue—the last remnants of hope that the impending adultery might be averted. This conviction, in turn, produces an unjustified shift in readerly sympathy. For many more chapters Bloom's own sexual infidelities, many with a mildly swinish character even before his transmogrification in "Circe," will continue to unfold. We see him, after all, use real women—possibly lonely and vulnerable women—as sexual props for himself, in the case of both Martha Clifford and Gerty MacDowell. But the novice reader's ethical attention will increasingly be diverted to Boylan and suborned by the style of his narrative presentation. James Phelan's discussion of novelistic plot offers us a narratological distinction between "instabilities" in the narrative situation, and "tensions" in narrative discourse. For

Phelan, narrative plots are powered by “instabilities between characters, created by situations, and complicated and resolved through actions.” Tensions, on the other hand, are “created by the discourse, instabilities—of value, belief, opinion, knowledge, expectation—between authors and/or narrators, on the one hand, and the authorial audience on the other” (15). Phelan's shift of emphasis to the discourse as a source of uncertainty and tension points us to the effects we have seen in Boylan's description in Thornton's gift shop, where the discourse overwhelms the actual world with something like a testosterone fantasy inspired by Bloom's paranoid projections. Primed by the caricature of Boylan presented in “Wandering Rocks,” the virgin reader is vulnerable to being rhetorically overwhelmed—and arguably ethically ravished—in “Sirens.” This seduction is accomplished by a coordinated collation of seemingly factual evidence found in the actual world events of the chapter with a sensory and aesthetic bombardment of culturally coded poetic language that serves as a musical analogue. In the actual world, Boylan is shown to flirt and ogle—“Boylan eyed, eyed. Tossed to fat lips his chalice, drank off his chalice tiny, sucking the last fat violet syrupy drops. His spellbound eyes went after, after her gliding head as it went down the bar by mirrors”(U 11.419). But as in the fruit shop, the narrative language eroticizes even his drinking of the sloe gin by turning it into the sucking of fat drops by fat lips.

In the Ormond bar, the reader also sees how Boylan may produce his own reputation as a roué. He buys Lenehan a drink and entertains him with veiled hints of his amours in the midst of their discussion of the Gold Cup. “—I plunged a bit, said Boylan winking and drinking. Not on my own, you know. Fancy of a friend of mine” (U 11.375). This bit of implicature gives us an insight into why some of the Dubliners may suspect something is going on between Boylan and Molly, even though presumably neither Bloom nor Molly have spoken with anyone, including each other, about the affair. Some people have seemingly heard that Boylan is organizing Molly's concert, and Boylan's veiled allusion to a mysterious friend invites them to put two and two together. But it is a fact of timing that seems to clinch the adultery for the virgin reader. Bloom now reveals that he learned from

Molly the time of Boylan's appointment as four o'clock. Shortly after four Boylan is off, in that jingling car, "jogjaunty jingled Blazes Boylan, bachelor, in sun in heat, mare's glossy rump atrot, with flick of whip, on bounding tyres: sprawled, warmseated, Boylan impatience, ardentbold" (*U* 11.524). The musical modality, accompanying Boylan with a merry tinkling jingling percussion, and Bloom with lugubrious reed instruments ("Blew. Blue bloom . . ." [11.6], "Bloowho" [11.86] "Bloowhose") [*U* 11.149]) codes the two men as temperamental opposites in caricatures that the narrator indirectly reinforces in Bloom's favor. As the narration follows Boylan's jingling journey in the direction of Eccles Street where it ends with a "Cockcarracarra" knock at the door (*U* 11.1048), the virgin reader is no longer troubled by Bloom simultaneously writing and sending money to his epistolary prostitute, Martha Clifford. A little later Bloom sees the frowsy whore wearing the black straw sailor hat and remembers his occasional brushes with real prostitutes. But even so, the virgin reader's sympathy has been firmly captured on the side of Bloom against the jingling betrayer Blazes Boylan. And yet—if the jingling and heated narrative rhetoric of the episode is discounted—all that has taken place in the actual world is that Boylan proceeds to keep an appointment to bring Molly the programme at four.

If we summarize events in the actual world of the novel up to this point, little has happened with respect to the adultery theme. Molly Bloom has received a letter from her impresario, and read it and tucked it under her pillow while her husband was out of the room. When he asks, she tells him that Boylan is bringing the concert program to the house that afternoon. The reader is later allowed to infer from references to an unreported conversation that the appointment is for four o'clock. Before four, Boylan orders a fruit basket, ostensibly for an invalid; learns from his secretary that Lenehan hopes to meet him at the Ormond bar at four; meets Lenehan; and takes a carriage to his appointment at Eccles Street to meet Molly as planned. The reader does see Boylan flirt and allude to a mysterious friend with a wink. But the fact that Boylan is a flirt does not make Molly Bloom an easy woman—as the *Odyssey* reminds us with respect to Penelope and her

suitors. There has been no evidence presented that Molly Bloom will respond to Boylan's flirtation and will commence a sexual affair with him, even if he arrives at the house with the intention of bedding her. Bloom does remember Molly's interest in Boylan after dancing with him, "Is that Boylan well off? He has money. Why? I noticed he had a good rich smell off his breath dancing" (*U* 4.528). But Bloom's ostensible memory of Boylan and Molly touching as the three of them walked along the Tolka one night presumably tells us what he imagined rather than what he observed, given the dark. "She was humming. The young May moon she's beaming, love. He other side of her. Elbow, arm. He. Glowworm's la-amp is gleaming, love. Touch. Fingers. Asking. Answer. Yes" (*U* 8.589). And although we have encountered a number of men remembering Molly's opulent charms and speaking warmly of her, such comments have status only as textual implicature. So far, the adultery theme has been fueled entirely by discourse, by Bloom's fears and repressed anxieties and memories and judgments, by the narration's erotically charged rhetoric in "Wandering Rocks" and "Sirens" and by what we are prodded to take as occasional innuendo. The virgin reader thus encounters what Adam Newton describes as a textual resistance in his *Narrative Ethics*, when he says, "One of the things that artworks do, then, is to send us away from them: they permit us access, but at the price of resistance—not ours, but theirs to us" (66). He goes on to propose that "a certain resistance to texts should itself be deferred in acknowledgment, as it were, to epistemology's limits" (66). In the case of *Ulysses*, I argue, this ethical contestation between the text and the virgin reader takes place on a narrative terrain where excessive access to telling, and insufficient access to showing, defeats the readerly resistance that limited information and knowledge demand.

In the eyes of the virgin reader, Molly Bloom should be seen as remaining entirely innocent as far as the adultery is concerned, until the last chapter, even as Bloom's small perversities and minor infidelities have become more and more pronounced and explicit as the narrative progresses. In the actual world, Bloom has read and written an amorous letter to another woman whom he pays to write him

mildly pornographic prose. He has ogled, or admitted to ogling a number of women, and he has presumably masturbated in “Nausicaa” while ogling Gerty MacDowell. The virgin reader, needing to adjudicate the justice of characters’ dealings with each other, is obliged to concede that Bloom’s blocked yet urgently straining libido has caused him to commit something arguably worse than adultery in his heart. Although goodness knows, he intends them no harm, Bloom uses and exploits women either without their knowledge or with subtle manipulation of their vulnerabilities, including their economic vulnerabilities in the case of Martha Clifford and the servant Mary Driscoll. And yet, the virgin reader has been pressured by the discourse to increasingly exonerate Bloom of sexual misbehavior while impugning the superficial and flirtatious Boylan—and by association, the as yet innocent Molly Bloom. This pressure, and the ethical tension it produces, is screwed to an almost intolerable pitch as the virgin reader accompanies Bloom into the netherworld of his libido in “Circe” and suffers a dark night of the soul along with him. Only by imagining a virgin encounter with Bloom’s extravagant masochism in Nighttown can the shock and repulsion that caused *Ulysses* to be labeled obscene and to be banned be fully appreciated in the twenty-first century. The theatrical threats of the high-born women, the sadistic hypocrisies and mean cruelties of the transgendered Bello, the cringing humiliation of Bloom, suddenly confront an unprepared and perhaps unwilling reader with the conventions and discourses of pornography. Like Bloom himself, the virgin reader may lose track of the boundary between the actual world of the brothel and the wild Fantasy world (one of Ryan’s possible worlds) that Bloom stages there. Presumably the only actual sex in Bella Cohen’s house of prostitution occurs off-stage, between Bella Cohen and the veterinarian who reputedly gives her tips on the racing horses. The rest is merely titillating banter and verbal play. But Bloom’s fantasy produces an orgy of sexual stimulation that recycles all the women he encountered or pondered in the course of the day, and plays out more explicitly the feared adultery. A voluptuous Molly in Moorish costume appears early in his fantasy as Marion—“Mrs Marion from this out, my dear man, when you speak to me” (*U* 15.307)—and he later

explicitly plays a cuckolded lackey to a masterful Boylan who tells him, "Show me in. I have a little private business with your wife, you understand?" (*U* 15.3763). The fantasy ends with Bloom at the keyhole, cheering Boylan on with wildly dilated eyes, shouting, "Show! Hide! Show! Plough her! More! Shoot!" (*U* 15.3814). Does the reader see Bloom confronting the suspected adultery in this scene, in all its conjugal implications for himself and his wife? Or does he merely appropriate the adultery as a prop for the masochism that appears to be a predominant stimulus of his sexual life? For both the virgin and the veteran reader this judgment is probably undecidable. But one thing is perfectly clear. No matter how vividly they are presented to the reader, the voluptuous Mrs Marion in her harem costume and the masterful Boylan addressing Bloom as his servant are purely figures of Bloom's fantasy with no existence or status in the actual world of the novel.

What is a virgin reader likely to expect will happen after Bloom and Stephen leave Nighttown and begin their return to Eccles Street? After all that has transpired, the suspense felt at the novel's beginning is as acute as ever, because we have been continually presented with questions that have not yet been answered, to cite Mieke Bal's definition of suspense (160). If a first-time reader has no inkling that he or she might be offered access to Molly Bloom herself, then the troubling possibility remains open that neither the instability in the plot of the marriage, nor the tension created by the subjective and manipulative narration, will ever be resolved. The possibility then remains that Bloom's suspicions of his wife, if not of Boylan's intentions, have been completely groundless and that he has tormented himself all day for no reason. Without "Penelope," neither Bloom nor the reader would receive any proof or evidence as to what happened at 7 Eccles Street that afternoon. Approaching the end of a truncated *Ulysses*, the virgin reader would confront a novel whose events have become stuck for all time in a kind of narrative impicature, in a plot where adultery was implied but never confirmed. An indeterminate outcome would also leave the virgin reader forever implicated in an ethical quandary, of having been obliged to judge Bloom, Boylan, and Molly

without the proper epistemological wherewithal. Throughout “Eumaeus,” then, suspense is maintained and even heightened as the question of the verification of the adultery remains suspended. In “Ithaca” it is resurrected but only circumstantially and hypothetically, with as much possibility for manipulation as before. One of the shelves in Bloom’s kitchen contains an empty wicker basked “bedded with fibre” and a bottle of “white invalid port, half disrobed of its swathe of coralpink tissue paper” (*U* 17.305)—remains, we are led to infer, of the gift basket Boylan asked to have sent to an invalid in Thornton’s shop. In spite of the recrudescence of the erotic tropes, the “bedded” and the “disrobed,” these articles confirm a gift but not necessarily an adultery. Later, as Bloom gets into bed, the narration reports him encountering “additional odours,” “the imprint of a human form, male, not his” and “some crumbs, some flakes of potted meat, recooked, which he removed” (*U* 17.2124)—evidence that seems at last to place Boylan, and the contents of his gift basket, in Molly’s bed. Yet the evidence remains suspect. Molly could have eaten the potted meat in bed alone. And how does one detect an absent male form in bed except as a dreaded ghost or phantom—the figment of a jealous imagination? The long, intimate rumination on Bloom’s feelings about his present and past rivals that follows is introduced by a pure hypothetical speculation—“If he had smiled why would he have smiled” (*U* 17.2126)—that proves nothing more than a narrative voice willing to explore purely theoretical possibilities.

Ulysses, as I have suggested, could have ended at the end of “Ithaca,” with Bloom asleep after his exhausting spiritual voyage, the dot at the close of the chapter representing the period that ends the book. Nothing, absolutely nothing, I would argue, has prepared the virgin reader for the possibility that there could be an absolute shift in focalization to a narration commencing outside of the sleeping Bloom’s consciousness, that will address the events of the day from a different, and differently gendered, perspective. The novel has previously encountered female subjectivity only fleetingly, in such moments as the letters of Martha Clifford and Milly Bloom, the thoughts of Miss Dunne, and the narration of Gerty MacDowell’s Wish-World, as Marie-Laure Ryan might call it. From the perspective of a linear

virgin reading of the novel, “Penelope” is both a total surprise and a total gratification, a kind of narratological consummation. Molly’s monologue answers most, if not all, of the questions aroused by the earlier narrations, and it thereby relieves the uncomfortable suspense created by them throughout the novel. It also relieves the narrative tension that the rhetorical and stylistic manipulations of the discourse has ratcheted up, and resolved what James Phelan has called the instabilities of “value, belief, opinion, knowledge, expectation” that afflict the audience as well as the narrators (15). But it is precisely on this point that the end of the virgin reader’s ethical odyssey comes to a problematic end. For Molly’s adultery defeats all of the narrative possibilities of the adultery plot that might in turn have defeated the prejudice and seductive pressure of the subjective narration all along. Up until “Penelope” it was still possible that Boylan and Molly might have done nothing more than to discuss and rehearse the program. Boylan might have accosted Molly and she might have fended him off, unwilling in the end to betray her husband or jeopardize her marriage. Boylan, for all of the virility imputed to him by Bloom and the narrative styles of “Wandering Rocks” and “Sirens” might have performed poorly in bed, or incapacitated by the sloe gin and the port, not performed at all. But instead, Molly’s monologue vindicates not only Bloom’s suspicions and paranoia, but also all of the narrative innuendo and leering narrative descriptions of Boylan. What had earlier been mere clues and circumstantial evidence are now transformed into signposts of truth and solid logic that showed the way to a legitimate conclusion. Both logically and ethically the virgin reader has been undone, stripped not only of narratological innocence but also of honor, incapable of defending the position that readers can and must resist narrative seduction. But, thankfully, every fall carries with it possibilities of future redemption, and at the end of *Ulysses* the virgin reader too can reemerge from the experience with greater humility, with knowledge that the reading process is itself fallible and mortal. In this way the virgin reader can close the book of *Ulysses* with an enriched and enlightened humanity.

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Abstract

Undone by *Ulysses*: A Virgin Reading of the Novel.

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What would it be like to begin reading the novel without knowing that its action will take place over the course of just one day, without knowing that Bloom is Jewish, and without knowing that Molly Bloom will begin an adulterous affair with her impresario before it ends? Such an exercise, which might be called a “virgin reading,” illuminates some important features of the way the narrative strategies of the novel guide the reading process into problematic ethical directions. Reference to current narratological theory helps to illuminate some of these strategies, such as the use of “implicature” by which deferred contexts, and even suggestive styles, create prejudicial innuendo about characters in the novel.

Since the adultery of Molly Bloom is not confirmed until “Penelope,” the virgin reader's tracking of the adultery theme offers a particularly telling instance of how narrative in *Ulysses* is neither objective nor innocent. In addition, the narrative strategies of the novel rob virgin readers of innocence by obliging them to draw risky inferences and unsound conclusions from circumstantial and flimsy evidence.

■ **Key words:** A Virgin Reader, *Ulysses*, narrative strategies, narratological consummation, stylistic manipulations, narratological innocence