

## The Aesthetics of the Inventory in *Ulysses*

Jongil Yi

The inventory constitutes one of the most remarkable formal elements that contribute towards the chaotic impression of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. But this apparently gratuitous element is far from just a formal flaw; rather, it derives from, and represents, Joyce's important artistic philosophy: encyclopaedism. It seems to be indeed James Joyce's ambition to create in *Ulysses* a simulacrum of the universal world. Lyster the librarian's comment on Shakespeare's comprehensive art—"All sides of life should be represented" (*U* 9.505)—exactly pertains to Joyce's. Considering the unavoidable inadequacy of an individual author to cover the whole range of reality, it would be a presumptuous dream to claim "a God's-eye view of the cosmos" (Gilbert 365). Still, Joyce attempts in *Ulysses* to assign himself, to quote from "Ithaca," "the difficulties of the selection of appropriate music and humorous allusion from Everybody's Book of Jokes" (*U* 17.440-42). It is his design to make the novel a "chaffering allincluding most farraginous chronicle" (*U* 14.1412). Thus, the alternative to make *Ulysses* inclusive and multifarious to the utmost within his reach is to make it "a kind of encyclopaedia" (*SL* 271).

Encyclopaedism is in fact a characteristic feature of the Baroque novel. To

*Ulysses* one can attribute features of the Baroque novel such as the unification of a great diversity of inserted genres and the encyclopaedic collection of all types of literary language, knowledge, and even information of the epoch (Bakhtin 396). *Ulysses* can be credited with two kinds of generality characteristic of Baroque encyclopaedism: a plethora of material details and an unmatched diversity of narrative methods. Indeed, the novel covers an immense range of life and a multitude of techniques used to support and handle it. The book bristles with details of life on the level of subject matter, and makes radical shifts of narrative methods on the level of technique. If superfluity and digressiveness of details give rise to problems of structural disproportion and thematic incongruity, the polytropic turns of narrative methods yield the confusing senses of discontinuity and discrepancy. What strategic design, then, occasioned Joyce to take such tactical licence of excessive inclusiveness?

Umberto Eco, in *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos*, counts “the technique of the inventory” as one of the most remarkable modes of medieval encyclopaedism which gave Joyce an inspiration for his fictional technique (6-11). For the medieval thinker, the encyclopaedic approach is the key to the reality of the universe which, comprising numerous objects and events, forms an unlimited chain of relations under the universal rules of cosmic order. It is “the techniques of the Inventory, the List, the Catalogue or, in classical rhetorical terms, the *Enumeratio*” which the encyclopaedic approach adopts in order to discover and catalogue the immense details (8). The logic of the inventory involves, for one, the procedure of “the seemingly casual accumulation of relics and art objects...without clear distinctions between the beautiful work and the teratological curiosity” (9). Another typical procedure in the technique of the inventory is the listing of the artefacts of a past civilisation “according to a taxonomy that builds coherent wholes through the technique of bricolage” to inquire into the possibility of reconstructing an analogue of the world from a new combination of pieces (9). This was the project to be taken over later by Joyce, who, in destroying the form of the world, “examines the immense repertory of the universe reduced to language, in order to catch glimpses

of new and infinite possibilities of combination” (10). This essay aims at investigating the way in which Joyce in *Ulysses* presents diverse kinds of inventories and the purpose for which he uses them in relation to his world view.

The technique of the inventory in its broad sense is, indeed, one of the most important of Joyce’s encyclopaedic methods. It appears in diverse modes in *Ulysses*. There are numberless individual passages which, dispersed throughout the whole text, list names, facts, events, information, and so on. In addition, each chapter, in the latter half in particular, is a unique set of classified catalogues: “Aeolus” the newsworld with a variety of topics and rhetorical tropes; “Sirens” the hall for musical plays of language; “Cyclops” the arena for ostentatious hyperbolism; “Oxen of the Sun” the anthology of prose literature of diverse styles; “Circe” the stage for expressive presentations of the unconscious world; “Eumaeus” the dictionary of clichéd idioms; and “Ithaca” the classroom for catechism about scientific knowledge and information. *Ulysses* is indeed a huge complex of rich collections built by the collector’s catholic vision. Thematically, each of these chapters as a large inventory centres on a motif that contributes to form a unique atmosphere and tone on the basis of the Homeric correspondence. Epistemologically, each chapter, as a large inventory comprising a multitude of small inventories, aims at building the ethos of universality, a superior value to mental insularity or casuistry.

In *Ulysses*, this ethos is achieved on the surface level through a formal feature pertaining to the technique of the inventory: materiality. The technique of the inventory consists in the mere act of listing a mass of things with little, if any, interpretative qualification added by the author. From a negative point of view, this method of prolific accumulation, as such, seems a compromising, even forced, alternative for Joyce, who was torn between his passion for accommodating the whole universe and the inevitable limitation of literary representation of life, the wealth of which far exceeds it. To some readers, the overwhelming mass of data of no thematic relevance is a symbol of the inapprehensibility and uncontrollability of the modern world. On the textual level, it is implied by the reader’s alienation

from the main stream of the action. The human drama, on the face of it, is interrupted and delayed by random lumps of irrelevant detail. The effect of such an awesome materiality tends to be seen as:

that of a world in such a state of flux and movement that human meaning is not only slighted but indistinguishable. *Ulysses* is the post-Newtonian mechanical world turned into a nightmare: one in which the mechanism plays itself out beyond the reach not only of the reader who would try to contain it but also of the author who would try to restrain it for the sake of aesthetic decorum. (Perlis 195)

From an affirmative point of view, however, the technique of the inventory is a positive tactic on the author's part. By creating a sense of lusty amplitude of objects, which is reinforced by their apparent irrelevance to the plot, Joyce in fact foregrounds their objective thingness. It is a strategic device for inducing the reader to experience reality immediately by eliminating the possibility of misleading the reader so that he might become misinformed or prejudiced by any particular subjective perspective. In this light, the inventory is a form of expression as meaning in the sense that:

when the material of experience assails us without our possessing its interpretive framework—when we notice that the codes of interpretation can be different, more open, flexible, and full of possibilities, and yet we still don't have the key for using them—then experience must show itself directly in the word. ...to judge by mere 'ostension' is not perhaps the best solution, but it keeps the material free from ideological schemas and preserves it as immediate and brutal evidence. (Eco, *The Testhetics* 37)

Such an appeal of a tough-minded materiality is equivalent to the whatness of things. But, ultimately, it induces objectivity and generality in interpretation.

At a deeper, more complex level, however, generality in *Ulysses* with regard to the technique of the inventory, is achieved through its semiotic mechanism.

Ironically, it derives from what is often denigrated as a structural flaw detracting from the economy, balance, or coherence of the novel as an organic whole. The encyclopaedic method, represented by the technique of the inventory, is notorious for the disproportionate bulk of the lists. This quantitative problem is allied with a qualitative problem: the randomness or arbitrariness with which insignificant or irrelevant items are collected and arranged. These problems are, in the surface structure, unwieldy obstacles to the progress of the action and unseemly excrescences by the standard of structural neatness. In the deep structure, however, they reveal some redeeming features which, based on Joyce's universalism, contribute to increase and renew the vitality of the work.

In this regard, the progress of *Ulysses* entailing the encyclopaedic method resembles the evolutionary progress, the dimension of which, to cite a duo of scientists, "can be achieved by making the 'carrying capacity' of a system a function of the way it is exploited instead of taking it as given" (Prigogine and Stengers 196). The inventories, whether of facts, objects, data, knowledge, events, or names, are separate elements dealing with different issues and, in many cases, having different forms. But each of them, separately, forms a coherent unit dealing with an issue in a unique style and form. Moreover, as a whole, they constitute a large set of information systems that provide clues to a fuller understanding of the text as a whole.

In "Cyclops," for example, the interpolations contain formal designs that serve to check the verbal exuberance. As David Hayman indicates, each interpolation enjoys its own particular mode of mockery, its own inner consistency and predictability, a closed structure, and "a completed action, a statement, or simply a self-contained rhetorical unit" (269). More importantly, some interpolations are directly concerned with, or even develop, the action, while others appear idle excursions into disparate subjects. In any case, no matter how redundant or irrelevant some of their components may appear, the data, far from being wholly devoid of thematic relevance, constitute units of varied levels of significance. It is illustrated in the interpolation in the style of a gossip article on the attendance *en*

*masse* of “the fashionable international world” at the wedding of Jean Wyse de Neaulan and Miss Conifer. It looks like an almost totally irrelevant inventory consisting mainly of redundant tree names. Even this apparently excursive list, however, includes some relevant points. Its tree theme takes over the topic among the gatherings about reafforestation; hence the wedding of a tree and Nolan who suggested reafforestation of the Irish land. Mrs Barbara Lovebitch might be a namesake, of no great significance, of the writer of *Fair Tyrants* (*U* 10.601). But a part of the interpolation is of self-referential significance:

The maids of honour, Miss Larch Conifer and Miss Spruce Conifer, sisters of the bride, wore very becoming costumes in the same tone, a dainty *motif* of plume rose being worked into the pleats in a pinstripe and repeated capriciously in the jade-green toques in the form of heron feathers of pale-tinted coral. Senhor Enrique Flor presided at the organ with his well-known ability and, in addition to the prescribed numbers of the nuptial mass, played a new and striking arrangement of *Woodman, spare that tree* at the conclusion of the service. (*U* 12.1284-91)

The piece of “*Woodman, spare that tree*” played by Senhor Enrique Flor (Mr Henry Flower) represents the humanism of Leopold Bloom, the protagonist who defies the belligerent atmosphere pervading the relevant chapter. But what was played is “a new and striking arrangement” of an original number. It is a musical counterpart to the pictorial “motif...repeated capriciously” of the bride’s costume. If the bride’s sisters are her consubstantial persons, Senhor Enrique Flor’s “new and striking arrangement” of the original number exemplifies the metempsychotic variation of an original motif. Furthermore, its thematising of the love for a single life stands for the flexible applicability of the principle of philanthropy. In this light, the interpolation is a self-referential piece of information deeply suggestive of the novel’s most fundamental informing principles: the structural pattern of similar differences in relation to cyclic return and the ethical idea of common humanity.<sup>1)</sup>

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1) For a more detailed analysis of this interpolation from the structuralist perspective, see

In fact, each of the interpolations is a highly coded and organised picture that offers a formal matrix allowing the infinite reproduction of a pattern. “This virtual multiplicity,” to cite a critic, “points both towards the infinity of repertory and paradigm and towards the infinity of products, versions and variations of the same matrix” (Topia 122).

“Ithaca” is another synecdochic chapter of *Ulysses* that provides an extraordinary archive of detailed information. It comprises “a series of information systems through which the reader voyages in search of some further (though decreasingly conclusive) knowledge or truth” (Brown 91). For example, the catechism on the qualities of water providing a detailed list of literally encyclopaedic information is thematically relevant. The listing of the natures of water—“universality,” “restlessness,” “secrecy,” “metempsychosis,” “ubiquit,” and so on—refers not only to Bloom’s character but also to the structural modality of the text. In the light of such traits of an “information system,” the technique of the inventory proves much more operative than it appears.

From a broad perspective, *Ulysses* itself in its entirety is a large information system which contains a number of smaller ones. By virtue of the information systems, which involve intricate systems of allusion, *Ulysses* becomes a highly impregnated text, as Bernard Benstock observes:

It confronts a great deal more than it contains; it gives birth to far more characters than it can possibly give life to; it suggests events that never take place within the text, nor could possibly take place even if the text were expanded many times over. None the less, many pieces of ‘information’ find their way into the elaborate structure more than once, reprised, reconstituted, reactivated, resulting in a format that often turns back upon itself and reopens new possibilities with old specifics. (127)

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Scholes 126-27. Scholes aptly concludes, “even what appears to be a purely paradigmatic excursion in *Ulysses* proves to have a system of its own and beyond that to exhibit connections of the syntagmatic sort with other events and episodes” (127).

In spite of its acknowledgement of the functional mode of the novel as an information system, however, Benstock's discourse highlights that limited respect of information systems in which the more relevant and significant elements count while the less important ones are left aside as meaningless. Such a systemic idea is inadequate for explaining *Ulysses* either in relation to the surface surfeit in material and method or to the apparent randomness with which they are arranged. Reading *Ulysses* without such a flexible principle as allows for formal anomaly and encourages plural points of view is, in a critic's words, "like moving a magnet through a vast heap of iron filings; fragments will cluster in an apparently ordered pattern but heaps will inevitably remain overlooked" (Bell 108). Can we postulate for *Ulysses* a suitable notion of an information system that is capable of greater catholicity for the apparent superfluity and irrelevance of surface details as well as the arbitrariness of their composition?

Karen Lawrence in *The Odyssey of Style in Ulysses* also notes the potentiality of the encyclopaedic method. She considers excess as a necessary mode of writing when it is no longer possible to find a narrative norm for representing the rich and complex aspects of reality. Aware of this incapacity of literature, according to Lawrence, Joyce creates "a sense of spillage," a sense that "there is always something left over, something that transcends order and criticism" (208). Thus the inclusion of excesses and irrelevances is Joyce's deliberate strategy to demonstrate the arbitrariness of the closed system of order (79, 208). Lawrence's theory of "a sense of spillage," however, finds the functional significance of the excess and randomness of detail and style only in its implication of the wealth of life, leaving more positive roles of the less conspicuous components still to be explained. Perhaps this limitation derives from her failure to find in *Ulysses* a truly flexible and catholic kind of closed order that is capable, beyond the mechanical schematisation,<sup>2)</sup> of crystalising the wealth of life.

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2) In this regard, Vincent Sherry's notion of the principle of gratuity fails to go further than Lawrence. In spite of his note of the art of verbal largesse which serves to "interest the reader in the possibilities ousted by any particular linear movement or plot," Sherry



In comparison, Eco proposes quite a convincing theory. In *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos* he sees the structure of *Ulysses* as a closed universe, where potentialities of every constituent are fully realised. It is in a way a capacious field of disarray in which all the stupid acts of daily life are fully accepted as narrative material, and what happens is “an assortment of little things, without order, in an incoherent flow” (39). Its disorderly modality of “the indiscriminate use of all the events, the renouncing of choice, the leveling of the insignificant fact next to the fact that counts” (40) draws on Joyce’s realistic *Weltanschauung*. *Ulysses*, whose fundamental structural principle is to Eco the superimposition of classical order on to the world of disorder, forms a closed universe. In the closed system, almost unlimited possibilities of textuality and meaning are rearranged by means of ordering devices such as phonic analogies, associations of motifs, and symbolic correspondences.

The atmosphere of universality in *Ulysses* comes not only from the immense amount or variety of its information. It also springs from the democratic policy of indiscriminate treatment of all constituents contained in each inventory. The sense of universality created in these ways is again increased by virtue of the closed structure which, through the pattern of cyclic return with a change, induces an almost endless process of renewing the interaction among all the constituents of the system and encourages a full play of their potentialities.<sup>3)</sup>

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decides that the “mechanical contraptions do not allow Joyce to simulate the extensive totality of significance that is the right and property of epic” (72-74).

- 3) This universalising modality of closed encyclopaedia is similar to Eco’s concept of semiotic encyclopaedia which he adopts in *The Limits of Interpretation* in elucidating the structure of *Finnegans Wake*. The game of multidimensional associations in *Finnegans Wake* is, according to Eco, that of the “co-text” in the sense that “every text, however ‘open’ it is, is constituted, not as the place of all possibilities, but rather as a field of oriented possibilities” (142). The encyclopaedic model is a sort of polydimensional network based on a process of unlimited semiosis of the undiscriminated constituents, but it is also a model of an organised semantic universe whose semiotic passages are controlled by rules of connection. For “How to prove that a given interpretive conjecture is, if not the only right one, at least an acceptable one? The only way is to check it upon

This method of encyclopaedia as an information system is illustrated in “Ithaca” in the “catalogue” of Bloom’s books (U 17.1361-407). Apparently, the catalogue appears to have no significance in terms of the plot or the theme of the novel. But on closer examination, the seemingly irrelevant books reveal more or less relevance in varied ways. Some books have titles that can be self-referentially suggestive: Bloom’s taste and the novel’s cosmic vision (*A Handbook of Astronomy*), the novel as the secret side of Bloom’s life (*The Hidden Life of Christ*), the theme of consubstantiality (*In the Track of the Sun*), the partial namesake (*Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland*), and Bloom’s consciousness of his rival (*Strength and How to Obtain it*). Some books are suggestive in other ways: the author’s name with the theme of wanderer—Viator—(*Voyages in China*) and the basic pattern of structure—“trefoil design”—(*Lawrence Bloomfield in Ireland*). Some titles have earlier been recalled by Bloom during the day: *In the Tracks of the Sun* (U 4.99-100) and *Voyages in China* (U 6.983). *History of the Russo-Turkish War*, quite an innocent title at a glance, contains in its second volume the name of Plevna which is associated in Bloom’s “mnemotechnic” with Molly’s father Tweedy (U 4.63, 17.1417-25). It is not necessarily that every list or every detail of it is of positive relevance. It is rather that in this way the reader, having eventually become obsessed with the anxiety that he might overlook any other hidden clues with which the list is insidiously impregnated, is induced to reread the novel with a fresh inquiring attitude. This is significantly implied by the theme of creative reconstruction necessitated by deconstruction. The state of “several inverted volumes improperly arranged and not in the order of their common letters” (U 17.1358-59), like the change of the furniture, is quite probably the “aftereffect” of Blazes Boylan’s visit. Thus the “process of reversion of the inverted volumes” by Bloom who feels “The necessity of order, a place for everything and everything in

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the text as a coherent whole: any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed, and must be rejected if it is challenged, by another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drift of the reader” (148-49). Seen this way, *Finnegans Wake* is “an example of a categorical index put into practice,” or “an encyclopedia in action” (147).

its place” (*U* 17.1408-10) might be the righter’s gesture of reordering the time out of joint. On the reader’s part, the “process of reversion” can mean the process of “re-version” of the disarrayed text which, with disarrayed information within its closed system, demands reordering.

The separate patches of interpolations in “Cyclops” are in complementary relations to the main flow of the action. They are, as it were, little narratives constituting “the other” of the grand narrative. Marginalised, they continually strive to assert themselves in order to check the one-eyed tyranny of the dominant and thereby awaken it to two-eyed objectivity. Furthermore, in terms of the structural rhythm of the organic whole, they also escape from insularity and objectify themselves by carrying codes of structural principle like thematic variation or universality as we have seen in the case of the tree wedding. This mode of objectifying all constituents, dominant or marginal, in the context of the whole structure functions to parody the one-eyedness of the jingoists, whose lack of relative sense drives them to the selfsame dogmatism which they attribute to their adversary and, consequently, to insular self-centredness.

Such a concept of encyclopaedic model functioning in the context of general structure draws attention to Stephen Dedalus’ discourse on the relationship between actualities and possibilities. The sense of universality effected by the encyclopaedic method is a celebration of the marginalised and the dismissed. The encyclopaedic method of the inventory, not only as an encouragement of digression from the main plot but also as an indiscriminate employment of redundant items, is a structural reification of the philosophical idea of experiencing historical possibilities that have been ousted or are yet to be chosen. It accords with Bloomian philanthropy: “*Woodman, spare that tree.*” In this light, those elements in the inventories which some readers might deprecate as incongruous or insignificant are, in fact, “lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities they have ousted” (*U* 2.50-51). To put it metaphorically, they are like goods in stock waiting to be picked up at any moment for display, or reserve personnel on the alert to be summoned for the next mission. In this sense, many of the lists in *Ulysses* are, so to speak, “waiting lists.” In

*Ulysses*, each rereading of which is substantially a fresh reading, “the art of surfeit” is an essential strategy which serves the purpose of capacitating the superfluous possibilities ousted at the first reading to enjoy sufficient room while waiting for the next reading.

The art of encyclopaedia as presented in the form of the inventory as a system of information, in which the disorderly element of randomness is controlled by the organising principles of a closed universe, ultimately represents the structural modality of nature: the overall generative order accommodating substructural disorders. The overall generative order of the whole stream of life in nature is a catholic principle that commonly affects all things, living and inanimate. It is a capacious field containing within it “room for new kinds of ‘pools of information’ from which life could be generated” (Bohm and Peat 201). To put it in an analogising way, as the whole stream of life necessitates the existence of inanimate matter as well as of living things for the ongoing process of metabolism, so superfluous elements of the inventory are necessary for the universality and durability of the novel. Far from constituting “a dense mass of dead stuff,” they serve the vitality of the novel.

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**Abstract****The Aesthetics of the Inventory in *Ulysses***

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James Joyce referred to his novel *Ulysses* as “a kind of encyclopaedia” which attempts to represent all sides of life. The novel is planted with a plethora of material details entailing an unmatched diversity of narrative methods. Joyce adopted ‘the technique of the inventory,’ which lists names, facts, events, information, and so on, as one of the most noteworthy encyclopaedic approaches intended to build the ethos of universality. The ethos of universality is achieved in *Ulysses* through two formal features pertaining to the technique of the inventory: materiality and unlimited semiosis.

On the one hand, the technique of the inventory, listing a mass of things with little interpretative qualification added by the author, foregrounds the materiality of things and thereby induces the objectivity and generality in interpretation. On the other, each of the inventories, separately, forms a coherent unit dealing with an issue in a unique style and form, but the inventories as a whole constitute a large set of information systems that provide clues to a fuller understanding of the entire text. In what might be called a closed universe, where potentialities of every constituent are fully realised, almost unlimited possibilities of textuality and meaning are rearranged by means of ordering devices such as phonic analogies, associations of motifs, and symbolic correspondences. In such a semiotic system, even the apparent randomness and redundancy deriving from the superfluity of the lists can serve as the potential source of information that helps to enrich the reservoir of the text and continually iterate its self-organising process. In so doing, the possibilities of interpretation ousted at the first reading are capacitated and the novel is given durability and vitality.

■ Key words : *Ulysses*, inventory, encyclopaedism, materiality, unlimited semiosis, stream of life

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