

Ulysses That's All We Needed . . . Umberto Eco

Ulysses: That's All We Needed . . .

A STRANGE NOVEL (novel?) came out a few years ago, from the pen of Giacomo Joyce, or Ioyce as Guido Piovene calls him, or Joyce. Few have read it, since it is written in English, a little used language. In attempting to describe it (now that the French translation is available for more educated readers), I feel such a confusion, victim of feelings as incoherent as the work that inspires them, that I shall proceed by way of observations here and there, notes for further development, which I propose to number so as not to give the impression that these paragraphs are intended to follow each other in any logical or consistent order.

1. This work, like Joyce's other books, was known in Italy only to a few, and most of them had heard about it from others, since there were rumors about it in artistic gatherings and intellectual salons. A few rare copies of this Ulysses (later translated as Ulisse, since that is the name of Homer's hero in the English language) were thus passed about from hand to hand, loaned reluctantly, desperately sought to be understood, leaving a confused and murky impression of scandal, of monstrous chaos.

2. There again, having already read his previous book, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, we realize that at the end of the book everything falls to pieces, and the writing as well as the ideas explode into damp fragments, like wet gunpowder.

3. Let us say straightaway, after a first, laborious reading and without further ado, that Ulysses is not a work of art.

4. In his approach to the novel, Joyce has brought a kind of psychological and stylistic pointillism that never adds up to anything, which is why not only Joyce but those like him, such as Proust and Svevo, are faddish phenomena destined not to last.

5. It is no surprise that Joyce, a second-rate Irish poet living in Trieste, says it was he who discovered Svevo (another author who writes atrociously). In any event Svevo is perhaps the Italian writer who has come closer than anyone else to that passively analytical literature that reached its culmination in Proust; and it is second-rate art if art is the work of keen and active men, if a painter is worth more than a mirror.

6. Joyce is basically one of those called to perpetuate the bad taste of the worst kind of Italian bourgeoisie. But thank God and Mussolini, Italy is not all bourgeois, in thrall to Europe and Paris.

7. But so be it, seeing that someone on the banks of the Seine has decided to translate this work. And anyone who reaches the last page arrives shocked and nauseated, as if emerging from an interminable tunnel piled full of garbage and inhabited by monsters. Joyce is a shower of ash that suffocates everything. The Romantics made you aspire to being a fallen angel, and now this relentless confessor convinces you that you are an idle animal with erotic tendencies and with some vague ambition toward the most seedy and feral kind of magic. Your very dreams, of which you were rather proud, are none other than realistic nocturnal sabbaths, a delirium of matter seeking to indulge in the orgy of your thoughts. Once again, there is no escape . . . In his works there is certainly an enormous patience, almost insane, almost intelligent, though uninspired,

but Joyce's truth is a secondary, transitory truth, too closely bound up with our empirical existence.

8. It seems that Ungaretti, one of those so-called hermetic poets, has seen a relationship between Joyce and Rabelais. There is certainly a parallel disunity in the well-defined structure of the two worlds (of Rabelais and Joyce); there is the systematic disorder from which gush forth, in one, the classic forces of the imagination, of poetic representation, of myth, and in the other, those forces of modern intelligence, taste, human representation, and psychology. There is, I repeat, the disunity that, in Rabelais, turns an epic subject into a grotesque, absurd, metaphysical film, a subject that is fluid and formless, loose, dissonant, yet concise; and he transforms a flamboyant crowd of characters, who could all be brave heroes of classical poetry, into abnormal, nightmarish, outlandish types. But Joyce, over a simple event, over an almost sentimental, simply psychological situation, which is a man waking up in the morning, produces detailed and infinitesimal effects, divisionistic impressions, dark illusions in reverse, in a fantastic array of calculations directed at the atom, at the cell, at the essentially chemical composition of thought. In short, the former enters a realm of superhuman absurdity, relying upon an architecture of absolute fantasy, the latter a continent of subhuman reverie that can only be penetrated with the scalpel, magnifying glass, and tweezers of dernier cri cleverness.

9. Joyce might perhaps be counted as a writer of the so-called literature of psychoanalysis, but he exhibits qualities that exclude him even from this genre of literature. He embraces man as he is, a rough formation of feelings, a profundity that can also be called shallowness and, as already suggested, a mixture of stupidity, prejudice, vague cultural recollections, shabby sentimentalism, and sexual arrogance. Psychoanalysis offers him, moreover, a method that he would have been better off using far less, without straying in any way from his purpose and from his descriptive results. In this respect his testimony is merely scientific, not literary. And it ought to be clear that in the history of literature he belongs to a well-worn, well-rehearsed tradition, according to which he must certainly resign himself to being a late and slight imitator, beside the honored places of Dostoyevsky, Zola, and, to some degree, Samuel Butler.

10. Some regard Proust or Joyce as leading figures in the historical moment of which they are clearly the product. But we are bound to say that, for us, they do not represent the spirituality of today: their vision of the world, that particular and general Weltanschauung expressed in them is, for us, worthless, precisely because it relates to the mentality of the society that has produced them. But when we call for a "collectivist novel" we are asking to be given, at last, a novel in which human relationships, society, love, and our whole life are seen from that new viewpoint that constitutes for us the new morality and a new way of living. We have already indicated how this new ethic of ours becomes a part, a necessary corollary, of what is taking place, of the social and human phenomenon of the Corporations we so fervently support,<sup>1</sup> as a new approach to our life, and we have already indicated that for this very reason we oppose all forms of decadent individualistic and bourgeois novels (autobiographies, self-referential diaries, psychologisms of self-awareness).

11. The truth is that writers from beyond the Alps, such as Giacomo Joyce, Davide Erberto Lawrence, Tommaso Mann, Giuliano Huxley, and Andrea Gide, have sacrificed their poetic truth and integrity to petty, elegant

acrobatics . . . Each and every one of these so-called European artists have on their faces the devilish smile of someone who, from time to time, holding a paramount truth, starts playing about with it. The truth they hold, and with which they play such dangerous games, is poetic truth, their genuine feelings. They all manhandle this supreme gift by mutual agreement. It seems they intend to erect a tower of intellectual falsehood, each in their own way, but each taking the same liberty. And that is why Joyce's work lacks measure, like a goat forced to give birth to a dog.

12. Joyce has obviously been taken by the devil of allusion and free association, and the idea of composing a page of prose like a page of actual music is a stupidity introduced into literature by the Wagnerian fashion that raged at the end of the nineteenth century. Joyce interweaves leitmotifs rendered unrecognizable by a dense counterpoint of allusions. But what is more, he seeks to match his episodes with color tones: the prevailing color will be red here, green there, and so forth. It is the confusion of the arts that began timidly with Baudelaire and became a commonplace of the decadent movement, after Rimbaud's famous sonnet on the colors of vowels. Colored hearing, verbal orchestrations . . . That path, as we know, brought us to pictures made from bits of newspaper and bottle ends. The language of Joyce is a deliquescent language, and—allow me here to use a Joycean pun—a delinquent language . . . Joyce has allowed himself to be tempted by the demon of Esperanto.

13. The problem is that we must get beyond the communistic novels of Tommaso Mann. Joyce has simply transformed the interior monologue modestly invented by Dujardin into verbal diarrhea, thus tainting the fine, succinct, dynamic, simultaneous parole in libertà boldly invented by our futurists, those true artists of the Regime.

14. The spirit of nationhood must not be abandoned. Joyce, eager for success, very soon adapted to the new artistic internationalism, abandoning the reality of true feeling and formulating in his new works the most wrongful act of rebellion against the national spirit from which he had sprung, mocking the nationhood, language, and religion of his country. From A Portrait of the Artist onward, vilifying his humanity, he reverted to chaos, to confused dreaming, to the subconscious. He died strangled by his own baleful demon, and all that remained were the sterile pedantic audacities of a sort of psychoanalysis that grafts itself onto Freud's method with the violence of his arbiters. A fragmentary spirit, more interested in the transient than the durable, the Irishman's attitude is feminine, not for the open gentleness that must always pervade the Hellenic spirit of an artist, but for the indifferent pose of the pseudo-intellectual with one foot in physiological corruption and the other in the madhouse.

One cannot but declare all of this to be an example of work in decline, worthy at most of a pornographic trader in junk novels. Joyce is a typical exponent of modern decadence, a festering and infectious cell even in our own literature. Why? Because, with his anticlassicism, he stands in opposition to the figures of ancient and modern Latin civilization, against whom he has taken a satirical attitude. He confers an impure and subversive character to his revolt by removing Universal Rome from the altar and replacing it with the gilded idol of Jewish internationalism—an internationalism that for many years has supported too many currents of modern thought. The fact is that Joyce has played court to that organization of Jews, proponent of men and ideas, which has especially held the field in Paris. Joyce is against all that is Latin, whether it be imperial civilization or Catholic civilization. He is anti-

Latin for an ulterior motive. His jibes against Rome and the papacy, made in a clownish and shameful manner, would be less irksome if it were not apparent that concealed in them was a form of enticement toward the children of Israel.

15. But does the contemporary novel really have to descend from the pond to the sewer, and here in Italy of all places, crucible of moral renewal and spiritual restoration? Must Joyce be taken as a model, an author in whom morality, religion, sense of family and society, virtue, duty, beauty, courage, heroism, sacrifice—in other words, Western civilization as well as genuine humanity—are all lost and the Jewish worm destroys everything?

16. This is the truth, and little weight should be given to defenses of Joyce from the pens (sold to whom?) of Corrado Pavolini, Annibale Pastore, or Adelchi Baratono, not to mention Montale, Benco, Linati, Cecchi, or Pannunzio. And it is easy for Pannunzio to say that "the real problem for Italian literature is to become European once and for all, to graft itself onto the powerful trunk of foreign literature and to be truly original in doing so, to have something of its own to say, through observation, love, suffering, in our own reality that we find around us, which is not the usual repetition of the far-from-pitiful tales of Aunt Teresa or Uncle Michele and, worse still, the pseudo-poetical description of fantastic journeys, pointless returns, tram rides in suburbia (how much travel there is in this literature!)."

17. The real attack on the spirit of new Italy is in narrative prose itself, where a whole miserable net has been woven, from Italo Svevo, a Jew thrice over, to Alberto Moravia, a Jew six times over, to fish out from the murky depths of society repugnant figures of men who are not "men" but inert beings, besmirched with base and repugnant sensuality, physically and morally sick . . . And the masters of all these narrators are those pathological lunatics named Marcello Proust and Giacomo Joyce, foreign names and Jews right to the bone, and defeatists to the roots of their hair.<sup>2</sup>

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