

James A. W. Heffernan

TRACKING A READER: WHAT DID VIRGINIA WOOLF REALLY THINK OF *ULYSSES*?

More than twenty years ago, Suzette Henke challenged what was then the reigning view of Virginia Woolf's response to Joyce's *Ulysses*. To judge this response by Woolf's most damning comments on the book and its author, Henke argued, is to overlook what she said about it in her reading notes on *Ulysses*, which—together with her final comment on Joyce at the time of his death—show that “she had always regarded [him] as a kind of artistic ‘double,’ a male ally in the modernist battle for psychological realism.”¹ But some convictions—or prejudices—die hard. Though Henke's transcription of Woolf's reading notes was published in 1990 (Woolf, MNJ), and though she and several other scholars have marshaled extensive evidence for the influence of *Ulysses* on the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Henke herself has recently reported that in conference presentations at least, scholars still cite Woolf's letters and diaries “to prove her animosity toward Joyce.”² Students of modern British fiction clearly owe a debt to Henke for publicizing Woolf's reading notes as well as for her untiring efforts to correct a widespread misunderstanding of Woolf's views about Joyce. But in spite of her efforts, no one—to my knowledge—has yet attempted to tell the full story of Woolf's response to Joyce and his book. That is what I propose to do here.

¹ “Virginia Woolf Reads James Joyce: The *Ulysses* Notebook” in *James Joyce: The Centennial Symposium*. Ed. Morris Beja et al. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 41—hereafter cited as Henke, VWRJJ.

² “Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and ‘The Prime Minister’: Amnesias and Genealogies.” *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 68 (2006): 5—hereafter cited as Henke, VWJJ. For Woolf's reading notes see “Modern Novels (Joyce),” Woolf's Reading Notes on *Ulysses* in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, transcribed by Suzette Henke, in Bonnie Scott Kime Scott, Ed. *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1990) 642-45—hereafter cited as Woolf, “MNJ.”

Let us start *in medias res*. In early October 1922, more than four years after her first exposure to *Ulysses*, Woolf wrote the following to the art critic and philosopher Roger Fry:

My great adventure is really Proust. Well— what remains to be written after that? I'm only in the first volume, and there are, I suppose, faults to be found, but I am in a state of amazement; as if a miracle were being done before my eyes. How, at last, has someone solidified what has always escaped—and made it too into this beautiful and perfectly enduring substance? One has to put the book down and gasp. The pleasure becomes physical—like sun and wine and grapes and perfect serenity and intense vitality combined. Far otherwise is it with *Ulysses*; to which I bind myself like a martyr to a stake, and have thank God, now finished— My martyrdom is over. I hope to sell it for £4.10 (*L* 2.566).

This passage clearly suggests that Woolf not only read all of *Ulysses* but loathed it quite as much as she adored *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. But the truth is much more complicated— and just about as fascinating as any episode of literary history can be. Setting aside *À La Recherche*, which unequivocally captivated her, the long trail of references that Woolf made to Joyce and his novel in her letters, diaries, essays, and reading notes—up to 1922 and beyond— leave no doubt that the thought of his novel stalked her for years and made her feel acutely ambivalent. She was probably urged to read it by T.S. Eliot, who admired it as soon as its opening chapters began to appear in the *Little Review* in March 1918 and who by the following November had told her that Joyce was a great genius.³

Well before then, on April 14, 1918, Harriet Weaver brought her and Leonard the first four chapters of *Ulysses* in the hopes that their Hogarth Press might publish it.⁴ But shortly after Miss Weaver gave them the chapters, Woolf balked. It was not only far too long for their small press to manage—an “insuperable difficulty” for them, as she told Miss Weaver (*L* 2: 243); it was also—

³ *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols., ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975-1980), 2: 296, hereafter cited as *L*. Later on, Woolf noted that Eliot called *Ulysses* “extremely brilliant” (20 September 1920) and “prodigious” (5 June 1921): *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols., ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1977-1984), 2: 68, 125, hereafter cited as *D*. She also wrote that he called it “the greatest work of the age” (17 October 1921, *L* 2: 485).

⁴ She did so at the suggestion of Roger Fry. See Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*. Rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982), p. 443.

as she told others—indecent and boring. After reading the chapters in about ten days, she told Lytton Strachey, “First there’s a dog that p’s—then there’s man that forths, and one can be monotonous even on that subject” (*L* 2: 234). The next day she sounded just a little less damning in a letter to Roger Fry. “Its interesting as an experiment,” she writes; “he leaves out the narrative, and tries to give the thoughts, but I don’t know that he’s got anything very interesting to say, and after all the p-ing of a dog isn’t very different from the p-ing of a man. Three hundred pages of it might be boring” (*L* 2: 234).

To say the least, this is a startling reaction to the first four chapters of *Ulysses*, where Joyce makes the dog pee in precisely eight words buried deep in chapter three (“lifting again his hindleg, pissed against [a rock]” [U 3: 358-59]), and where—in chapter four—he narrates Bloom’s defecation (if that is what Woolf means by “a man that forths”) without using a single indecent word, representing an act that is perfectly decent and private as well as quintessentially quotidian: reading a newspaper as his bowels move in his own outhouse. It is particularly startling to compare Woolf’s sole comment on chapter three with what Margaret Anderson wrote about its opening words when the chapter was submitted to her for publication in the *Little Review*: “This is the most beautiful thing we’ll ever have. We’ll print it if it’s the last effort of our lives” (qtd. Ellmann 421). Was Woolf simply blind to such passages? In the magnificent garden of Joyce’s prose, could she see no more than a few noxious weeds?

To be fair, the answer is no. Even in writing to Fry she admits that Joyce is making an “interesting” experiment by replacing narrative with a stream of thoughts. About a year later, when she made notes on the first seven chapters of *Ulysses* in preparation for an essay on “Modern Novels” that appeared in *TLS* (April 10, 1919), she wrote much more about the value of Joyce’s work in progress, some of which she was re-reading.⁵ Re-reading chapter one, for instance, she notes

the undoubted occasional beauty of his phrases. It is an attempt to get thinking into literature—hence the jumble. Told in episodes. The repetition of words like rosewood and wetted ashes. (Woolf, MNJ 642).

⁵ By April 1918, when Harriet Weaver brought Woolf the first four chapters of *Ulysses*, Joyce had completed no more than five. By the following April the *Little Review* had published the first eight (Ellmann, 441-42). Since she comments on each of the first seven chapters, she must have re-read chapters 1-4.

She is beginning to hear the music of Joyce's phrasing, to feel the power of his artful repetitions (the words "rosewood" and "wetted ashes" repeatedly evoke the ghost of Stephen's mother), and to see that he is trying to re-create the unpredictable fluidity of a mind in the act of thinking. She has now much more to say about the virtues of *Ulysses*. Joyce, she sees, is "attempting to do away with the machinery"—the deadening conventions of what she will call in her essay "materialist" fiction housed in a "first-class railway carriage"—and "extract the marrow."⁶ Like Sterne, he is trying "to be more psychological—get more things into fiction" (MNJ 643). The "Hades" chapter seemed to her "perhaps the best thing" (MNJ 643), but she was also struck by Joyce's manipulation of sight, sound, and sense in "Aeolus." Comparing the chapter to a slow-motion film of a jumping horse, she says that "all pictures were a little made up before," and also that "here is thought made phonetic—taken to bits" (MNJ 643), possibly referring to the passage in which Bloom translates the "sllt" of the printing press and the creaking of a door: "Almost human the way it sllt to call attention, asking to be shut. Doing its level best to speak. That door too is creaking, asking to be shut. Everything speaks in its own way" (*U* 7. 177-79).⁷

In re-reading Joyce, Woolf is re-thinking her own first reaction to him, but hardly repudiating it.⁸ Caught between dawning admiration and stubborn aversion to his "indecenty," which she notes repeatedly, she does not know just what to make of him. "For all I know," she says, "every great book has been an act of revolution" (MNJ 644). But the brashness of Joyce's revolution vexes her. His "need of dwelling so much on indecenty" reveals an egotistical "indifference to public opinion" and "desire to shock" (MNJ 643). At the same time, when she starts to sketch out her essay and to prescribe the kind of "life" that she thinks modern fiction needs—"Something not necessarily leading to a plot. . . .

⁶ MNJ 642-43; *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3. 1919-192, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988): 32—hereafter cited as *E* 3. In the notes she says that Joyce is "at least out of the first-class carriage line" (MNJ 642), a figure she develops in the essay.

⁷ In the printed version of Henke's transcription of Woolf's reading notes, she refers to the film of a "hare," but Henke now says she believes the word is "horse" (VWJJ 4-5).

⁸ According to Suzette Henke, Woolf's reading notes on *Ulysses* show that she "felt tremendous admiration for Joyce's experimental style and that *Ulysses* proved inspirational in the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway*" (VWJJ 4). This seems to me a little overstated. Though I fully agree with the second point, Woolf's reading notes on *Ulysses*—like everything else she wrote about it—show that her admiration was distinctly qualified.

Something perhaps not dramatic nor humorous, not tragic: just the quality of the day”—she seems to suspect, or fear, that Joyce is already filling the prescription. “Here we come to Joyce,” she writes. “And here we must make our position clear as bewildered, befogged. We don’t pretend to say what he’s trying to do” (MNJ 644).

Like nearly all beginning readers of *Ulysses*, Woolf is befogged. She thinks that Bloom is the “editor of a paper” (MNJ 645) rather than an advertising canvasser repeatedly insulted by the editor,⁹ and she is still so revolted by Joyce’s indecency—especially by what she takes to be his implied claim that “indecency is more real than anything else”—that she asks herself, “Why not in fact leave out bodies?” (MNJ 644). But she dimly perceives that what she calls indecency is precisely where the road of complete psychological realism leads. “So much seems to depend,” she writes, “on the *emotional* fibre of the mind it may be true that the subconscious mind dwells on indecency” (MNJ 643).¹⁰ She also asks just the right question about two of Joyce’s three main characters: “what is the connection between Bloom and [Stephen] Dedalus?” (MNJ 645).¹¹ Finally, though she thinks it “unfair to approach Joyce by way of his ‘method,’” which she

⁹ Henke notes this point also (VWRJJ 40). But Woolf comes nowhere near the gaffe made by one reviewer of *Ulysses*, who completely confused Stephen with Bloom. See Shane Leslie’s account of the novel in the *Dublin Review* (September 1922) in Robert H. Deming, ed. *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970): 1. 201.

¹⁰ Though she did not read Freud extensively until many years later, in the late thirties, it is hardly surprising to find that she “was at once extremely interested in his idea of conscience as censor.” Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996): 722. In 1924 the Hogarth Press became Freud’s authorized publisher in England, and in January 1939 Woolf met the dying Freud himself (Lee 725).

¹¹ Harvena Richter observes: “It would appear that Woolf’s puzzlement over the separate stories of Bloom and Dedalus would spur her to design [in *Mrs. Dalloway*] a series of connecting links between her own characters that would make her feel she had outdistanced Joyce. . . .” [“The *Ulysses* Connection: Clarissa Dalloway’s Bloomsday.” *Studies in the Novel* 21.3 (1989): 308]. But this makes sense only if we assume that instead of simply trying to figure out the connection after reading less than a third of the book, Woolf is faulting Joyce for his failure to make the connection clear. For much of *Mrs. Dalloway*, first time readers must likewise wonder about the connection between Clarissa and Septimus Smith, who—unlike Stephen and Bloom—never meet at all.

calls “on the surface startling,” she thinks he is quite right to focus on the “big things” that must “perpetually” be seen and felt again: “love, death, jealousy and so on” (MNJ 645).

To compare Woolf’s reading notes on *Ulysses* with her account of it in “Modern Novels” (*TLS* 10 April 1919) is to see her still struggling with her ambivalence—but doing so more artfully. After deploring the “materialist” bent of Wells, Galsworthy, and especially of Arnold Bennett, whose characters live too comfortably “in some first-class railway carriage” and whose plots chug far too mechanically from one emotional station to the next, she asks:

Is it not possible that the accent falls a little differently, that the moment of importance came before or after, that, if one were free and could set down what one chose, there would be no plot, little probability, and a vague general confusion in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical were dissolved beyond the possibility of separate recognition? The mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not perhaps the chief task of the novelist to convey this incessantly varying spirit with whatever stress or sudden deviation it may display, and as little admixture of the alien and external as possible? (*E* 3: 33)

In the revised version of “Modern Novels” that appeared as “Modern Fiction” in *The Common Reader* (1925), Woolf defines Joyce’s project more precisely. “Examine for a moment,” she writes, “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” to see how the myriad impressions that fall upon it “shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday” with “no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style.”¹² But years before writing these words, when *Ulysses* was still a work in progress, Woolf had already divined its essence. Joyce’s new novel, she says (in the original “Modern Novels” of April 1919), discards “most of the conventions which are commonly observed by other novelists. Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not

¹² *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 4, 1925-1928, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2008): 160—hereafter cited as *E* 4.

take it for granted that life exists more in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small” (*E* 3: 33-34).

In this light, we should also beware of taking for granted that Woolf’s turn to stream of consciousness in her fiction was chiefly prompted by her reading of Dorothy Richardson, whose novel *Pointed Roofs. Pilgrimage* (1915) introduced to English fiction what was first called “stream of consciousness.”¹³ In reviewing Richardson’s *The Tunnel* (1919), Woolf herself noted that it cuts away all the traditional architecture of narration to reveal “the consciousness of Miriam Henderson . . . which endlessly reflects and distorts the variegated process. . . .” (*E* 3: 10-11). But while admitting that Miriam’s “senses of touch, sight and hearing are excessively acute,” Woolf finds little beneath them. “Sensations, impressions, ideas and emotions glance off her, unrelated and unquestioned, without shedding quite as much light as we had hoped into the hidden depths” (*E* 3: 11-12). This critique of Richardson’s novel appeared in the *TLS* on February 13, 1919. Less than two months later, again in the pages of *TLS*, Woolf’s salute to Joyce’s way of tracking consciousness shows that she had already found in his work precisely what she missed in Richardson’s—as well as in that of the materialists. Unlike the materialists, she writes, “Joyce is spiritual”—by which she evidently means a realist of human psychology rather than of the material world. “At all costs,” she says,

he aims to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its myriad messages through the brain, he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious, though it be probability or coherence or any other of the handrails to which we cling for support when we set our imaginations free. Faced, as in the Cemetery scene, by so much that, in its restless scintillations, in its irrelevance, in flashes of deep significance succeeded by incoherent inanities, seems to be life itself, we have to fumble rather awkwardly if want to say what else we wish; and for what reason a work of such originality yet fails to compare . . . with [Conrad’s] ‘Youth’ or [Hardy’s] *Jude the Obscure*. It fails, one might say, because of the comparative poverty of the writer’s mind. (*E* 3: 34).

¹³ May Sinclair used the phrase in reviewing Richardson’s novel in 1918; see Anne Fernihough, “Consciousness as a Stream,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, ed. Morag Shiach (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007): 68-69.

What she missed in the work of Richardson—searching light on Miriam’s “hidden depths”—is precisely what she finds in the work of Joyce, who “aims to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its myriad messages through the brain” and who offers us “flashes of deep significance.”¹⁴ In the “Modern Fiction” version of this passage, Woolf amplifies her praise for what she calls the “brilliancy” of the “Hades” chapter: “on a first reading at any rate,” she says, “it is difficult not to acclaim it a masterpiece. If we want life itself, here surely we have it” (*E* 4: 161). But—and there is always a but—Woolf never praises Joyce without faulting him at the same time, even if she has to “fumble awkwardly” to do so. In the original version of her essay, her high praise for “Hades” makes a very strange prelude to what follows. In claiming to find “comparative” poverty in the mind of Joyce, Woolf invites the suspicion that she is awkwardly straining to rationalize an aversion that she cannot justify by logical means. All she can do is return to her *bête noir*—indecenty—by way of Joyce’s would-be solipsism. Perhaps, she writes, our sense of being “strictly confined” in reading *Ulysses* is due to a method that makes us feel “centered in a self which in spite of its tremor of susceptibility never reaches out or embraces or comprehends what is outside and beyond?” (*E* 3:34). If we wonder how such a statement could be made about a novel that deeply plumbs the inner lives of two distinctly different characters who are each exceptionally observant of the world around them, the answer lies again with indecenty. “Does the emphasis laid perhaps didactically upon indecenty,” Woolf asks, “contribute to this effect of the angular and isolated?” (*E* 3: 34). Here we can only guess what Woolf means: that Joyce is teaching other novelists to be at once indecent and solipsistic, leading them into an outhouse of

¹⁴ She might also have noted what Anne Fernihough has lately observed: that in *Ulysses* Joyce democratizes the stream of consciousness, which in Richardson’s novel, as in his own *Portrait*, “had been confined to a single consciousness.” *Ulysses*, writes Fernihough, “seems indeed to offer a rare example of a democratically motivated stream-of-consciousness novel,” and “Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness writing, like *Ulysses*, is dispersed among a range of consciousnesses, though her claims to being democratic are more open to question” (Fernihough 77). But it remains difficult to say just how much Woolf’s way of representing consciousness owes to the example set by *Ulysses*. According to Fernihough, she might well have been influenced by what she read about consciousness in William James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and especially in the work of Henri Bergson, whose “notion of *durée* (‘duration’) was a major influence on the cultural climate from which the stream-of-consciousness novel emerged” (Fernihough 68).

navel-gazing? At best, Woolf's comment tells us far more about herself than about Joyce.

But she cannot stop thinking or writing about him. Starting to draft *Jacob's Room* in late January 1920, she tells her diary that she must strive to avoid the danger of "the damned egotistical self, which ruins Joyce. . . ." (*D* 2:14). The following September, just after recording that Eliot called *Ulysses* "extremely brilliant" and also that "Ulysses, according to Joyce, is the greatest character in history," she gratuitously adds: "Joyce himself is an insignificant man, wearing very thick eyeglasses, a little like Shaw to look at, dull, self-centered, & perfectly self-assured" (*D* 2: 68). This dismissive caricature sounds as if it sprang from Woolf's own observation. But she knew nothing of him personally, so it can only be her version—possibly distorted—of what she was told about Joyce by Eliot. And she could not even trust her own version of him for long. In February of 1922, just after *Ulysses* appeared, she wrote to her sister Vanessa, who was then in Paris: "for Gods sake make friends with Joyce. I particularly want to know what he's like."¹⁵

The startling diversity of Woolf's comments on Joyce make one thing clear. None of them—not even the relatively complex assessment in "Modern Novels"—tells the whole truth about her response to his work. But a major clue can be found in her diary for September 26, 1920, where she writes again of the visit paid by T.S. Eliot a week before. Coming just after she had run aground in the middle of the party chapter about halfway through *Jacob's Room* (on which she had been working for two months without a break), his visit—she writes— "made [her] listless" and "cast shade" upon her. Since she has already noted that Eliot praised the brilliance of *Ulysses* for its rendering of "internals," of the inner lives of its characters (*D* 2: 68), we might well guess the reason for her listlessness. She herself recalls: "He said nothing—but I reflected how *what I'm doing is probably being better done by Mr. Joyce*" (*D* 2: 68-69, emphasis added). This strikes me as a revelation. By "he said nothing," she presumably means that he said nothing about her own work in progress to accompany his extraordinary praise of *Ulysses*. What then could she conclude? That her own efforts to liberate the novel from the material solidity of the railway carriage and to focus its energies on the irrepressible life of the mind were probably being surpassed by Joyce, who was

¹⁵ *L* 2: 507. Vanessa's husband Clive had met Joyce in the fall of 1921, and—according to Joyce's letter to Harriet Weaver of November 6, 1921—did not like him (*L* 1: 176).

almost her exact contemporary?¹⁶ Praise him or damn him, she knew only too well that she had to reckon with him. The following April, when a “thin-shredded” cabinet minister asked her over lunch “who are our promising litterateurs?” she answered simply, “Joyce” (*D* 2: 113-14).

So it is not surprising to learn that by mid-April of 1922, ten weeks after the publication of *Ulysses* in Paris, she had bought her own blue-bound copy for the (then) hefty sum of £4 even while working on a long story—“Mrs. Dalloway on Bond Street”—that would eventually become part of her next novel.¹⁷ Her writing plans thus intersect with her reading agenda. On April 14, in the same letter to Eliot that reports the purchase of *Ulysses*, she tells him that she hopes to finish her story in three to six weeks, that she wants him to edit it mercilessly when it is done, that Leonard has started reading *Ulysses*, and that as soon as she herself does likewise, “your critical reputation will be at stake” (*L* 2: 521). With all its archness, this statement has telling implications. While eager to trust Eliot’s judgment of her own work, she will now test his judgment of *Ulysses*. Furthermore, though she had already read its first four chapters twice and its next four chapters once and briefly assessed all eight of them in print, she sounds like someone plunging into *Ulysses* for the first time. At some level, one suspects, she seems to be asking Eliot to stop rhapsodizing about Joyce and start paying more attention to her. But in any case, her statement about Eliot’s “critical reputation” plainly reveals the mindset that she now brings to the novel as a whole. She is predisposed to find it undeserving of Eliot’s praise. On the same day of her letter to Eliot about it, she writes more candidly to her brother-in-law Clive Bell: “Leonard is already 30 pages deep. I look, and sip, and shudder” (*L* 2: 522)

Later in this same April, *Ulysses* was reviewed by two literary figures whom Woolf knew well: John Middleton Murry and Arnold Bennett. Whether or not she saw these reviews, each judged the novel an amalgam of lead and gold.¹⁸ Murry

¹⁶ Born February 2, 1882, Joyce was precisely eight days younger than she. Two days after his death on January 13, 1941, she herself noted in her diary that he was “about a fortnight younger” (*D* 5: 352-53), and she outlived him by just a little over ten weeks.

¹⁷ She had finished *Jacob’s Room* in the previous November (*D* 2: 141), and the Hogarth Press published it in October 1922.

¹⁸ Interestingly, both of them question the claims for *Ulysses* made by Valery Larbaud, who—in the first public lecture on it (at a pre-publication book launch in Paris on December 7, 1921)—had called it a “masterpiece” (qtd. Bennett in Deming 1: 219). Given the history of French support for Ireland’s long struggle to gain its independence, I suspect that English critics (though not Woolf) were predisposed to reject or at best disparage French praise of any book written by an Irishman.

thought Joyce's intention "completely anarchic" but also hailed "the intensity of life" to be found in the book and Joyce's "very great achievement" in rendering "all the thoughts" of his characters with the comic force of "transcendental buffoonery" (Deming 1: 196-97). Bennett found the novel pervasively dull and "more indecent . . . than the majority of professedly pornographic books" but also "dazzlingly original," and for all its indecency, Molly's monologue struck him as "immortal" and "magical" in its "utterly convincing realism" (Deming 1: 220-21). Meanwhile, Woolf saw Joyce as nothing but an irksome distraction from her reading of Proust. On June 5, having started reading the second volume of *À La Recherche*, she chafes at the thought of *Ulysses*: "Oh what a bore about Joyce!" she writes, "just as I was devoting myself to Proust—Now I must put aside Proust—and what I suspect is that Joyce is one of those undelivered geniuses, whom one can't neglect, or silence their groans, but must help them out, at considerable pains to oneself" (*L* 2: 533).

The task of reading *Ulysses* has now become an obstetrical ordeal, with Woolf herself as midwife for a book that—she seems to think—cannot be born without her help. Perhaps she is thinking of what she has already written about its early chapters in "Modern Novels." But for now, the only further help she can offer is simply to read the book. "Thank God," she tells her diary in late August, "I need not write about it" (*D* 2: 195-96). But shortly before, on August 16, when she was "laboriously dredging [her] mind" for her story about Mrs. Dalloway, she confided to her diary her own withering assessment of the two hundred pages she had read so far:

I . . . have been amused, stimulated, charmed interested by the first 2 or 3 chapters—to the end of the Cemetery scene; & then puzzled, bored, irritated, & disillusioned as by a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples. And Tom, great Tom, thinks this on a par with War & Peace! An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me: the book of a self-taught working man, & we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking, & ultimately nauseating. When one can have cooked flesh, why have the raw? But I think if you are anaemic, as Tom is, there is glory in blood. Being fairly normal myself I am soon ready for the classics again. I may revise this later. I do not compromise my critical sagacity. I plant a stick in the ground to mark page 200. (*D* 2: 188-89)

Thus the critic plants her stick. Since page 200 of the first edition of *Ulysses* ends a few pages short of the end of Chapter 9 (precisely at line 906 in Gabler's edition), not even Stephen's impassioned vivisection of *Hamlet* led her to

read further, much less to Chapter 13 and the wooden stick with which a glum Leopold Bloom starts to write in the sand a message about himself for Gerty McDowell; when he stops after “I AM A” and throws the stick away, it falls in the sand, “stuck” (U 13.1270), a grim sign of the psychic paralysis that threatens him as he thinks: “Better not stick here all night like a limpet” (U 13. 1211). Woolf is no Bloom, but her late-August letters show that she herself remained stuck at page 200 until at least the 26th (ten days after writing the above), when she told Lytton Strachey what she thought of “the first 200 pages”:

Never did I read such tosh. As for the first 2 chapters we will let them pass, but the 3rd 4th 5th 6th—merely the scratching of pimples on the body of the bootboy at Claridges. Of course genius may blaze out on page 652 but I have my doubts. And this is what Eliot worships . . . (L 2: 551)

Ten days stuck on page 200 of *Ulysses* have sharpened not her critical sagacity but her animus against its author. Having snobbishly fabricated a picture of Joyce (who held a university degree in modern languages) as a raw, egotistical, self-taught, underbred workingman, she now sees him as a pimply-faced bootboy oozing tosh. Forgetting or discarding her public praise of *Ulysses* and particularly of Chapter 6, she treats it with nothing but scorn—or at best pity. A few days before writing the above, she had told Lady Ottoline Morrell that “the poor young man” (precisely eight days younger than she, as already noted) “has only got the dregs of a mind compared with George Meredith” and that beside Henry James he is an intellectual featherweight. “They say,” she went on, “it gets a little heavier. It is true that I prepared myself, owing to Tom [Eliot], for a gigantic effort; and behold, the bucket is almost empty” (L 2: 548).

She had already used this trope of her own work. A few days earlier, she had told her diary that in her “laborious dredging . . . for Mrs Dalloway” [her story, that is] she was “bringing up light buckets” (D 2: 189). Having begun to suspect—as noted above—that Joyce was probably beating her at her own game, how could she avoid measuring herself against him or, more precisely, wanting to find his buckets just as light as hers? And could she finish her story or turn it into another novel of her own so long as this strange new giant of literature cast his shadow before her? The answer, I think, is no. To go on writing, she had to stop reading *Ulysses*. I believe that she stopped at page 200 and then did all she could to drive it from her mind. On August 26 she tells her diary: “I dislike *Ulysses* more & more—that is think it more & more unimportant; & dont even trouble conscientiously to make out its meanings. Thank God, I need not write about it” (D 2: 195-96). By this she clearly meant that she would write no more about it for publication, since she did indeed have a few more things to say in private. On

September 3, eight days after last reporting that she had read just 200 pages, she tells her diary, “I should be reading the last immortal chapter of *Ulysses*: but I’m hot with Badmington [sic] in the orchard . . . we dine in 35 minutes; & I must change” (*D* 2: 197).¹⁹ And three days later she tells her diary, “I finished *Ulysses*” (*D* 2: 199).

Just what does this mean? I believe it can only mean that she had finished *with* it—not that she had read it all, let alone tried “conscientiously to make out its meanings.” In the more than four months from mid-April to August 24, she had read just two hundred pages of *Ulysses* even though she had already read many of them once or twice before. Could she have read the remaining 532 pages in the eleven days from August 26 to September 6, when she claims to have finished the novel? The answer is both yes and no. On one hand, she could have read those pages in one long day, for the whole of *Ulysses* has been many times read aloud—typically by a team of readers—in twenty-four hours. On the other hand, given the rate at which she had been reading *Ulysses*, she could not possibly have read it all by September 6—especially since she was already overloaded with other tasks.

Consider her diary for Monday, August 28. There she notes that she must finish writing “Mrs Dalloway” (still a story) by the following Saturday and (for *The Common Reader*) “start [the] chapter on Chaucer” by Friday September 8. Then she asks herself, “Shall I write the next chapter of Mrs. D.”—thus nudging it toward a novel—“& shall it be *The Prime Minister*?” (*D* 2: 196).²⁰ Besides these writing projects, she sets herself a daunting syllabus of reading for the next few weeks, including Homer, Plato, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Marlowe, Racine, and Ibsen. But Joyce appears neither here nor in her next diary entry of September 3, where she reports that company is coming, that she is “fretful with people,” that “every day will now be occupied [with visitors] till Tuesday week,” that she “cant

¹⁹ Since she speaks of the last chapter as “immortal,” she may be echoing what Bennett wrote of it in his review of the previous April (see above, p. 12).

²⁰ The story called “Mrs. Dalloway on Bond Street” appeared in *Dial* in July 1923, and can be found in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick, 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1989): 146-63. But on October 6, 1922, long before the story was published, she outlined a book to be called “At Home: or The Party,” with the Dalloway story as its first chapter (*CSF* 295). On October 14, she noted that “Mrs Dalloway has branched into a book” for which she was soon planning to finish the second chapter, to be called “the *Prime Minister*” (*D* 2: 207-08). Though she never wrote more than a fragment of this episode, she used sections of the fragment in the opening scenes of the novel, and it can be found as an appendix in *CSF* 317-23.

endure interruptions,” that she’s “always in a fizz & a stew, either to get my views on Chaucer clear, or on the *Odyssey*, or to sketch my next chapter” (*D 2*: 197-98). Where on earth could she find two minutes for Joyce? On Wednesday, September 6, the day she claims to have “finished *Ulysses*,” she reports that she has just seen off three sets of visitors, who “leave one in tatters,” and also that proofs of *Jacob’s Room* have been coming “every other day” (*D 2*: 198-99). Even if she had not dreaded reading *Ulysses*, she could hardly have found the time to skim—let alone read—532 pages of it by September 6.

So she thrusts it aside. Pressed with far too many other obligations and feeling depressed about the thinness of *Jacob’s Room* (*D 2*: 199), she can no longer bear to think about *Ulysses*, and in the face of all the claims that have been made for it, even by herself, she does what she can to justify her dismissal of it:

I finished *Ulysses*, & think it is a mis-fire. Genius it has I think; but of the inferior water. The book is diffuse. It is brackish. It is pretentious. It is underbred, not only in the obvious sense, but in the literary sense. A first rate writer, I mean, respects writing too much to be tricky; startling; doing stunts. I’m reminded all the time of some callow board [sic] schoolboy, say like Henry Lamb, full of wits & powers, but so self-conscious and egotistical that he loses his head, becomes extravagant, mannered, uproarious, ill at ease, makes kindly people feel sorry for him, & stern ones merely annoyed; & one hopes he’ll grow out of it; but as Joyce is 40 this scarcely seems likely. I have not read it carefully; & only once; & it is very obscure; so no doubt I have scamped the virtue of it more than is fair. I feel that myriads of tiny bullets pepper one & spatter one; but one does not get one deadly wound straight in the face—as from Tolstoy, for instance; but it is entirely absurd to compare him with Tolstoy. (*D 2*: 199-200)

This summing up of her impressions is more generous, more candid, more apt, and distinctly less *ad hominem* than some of her previous comments. Recognizing the “genius” of *Ulysses*, she admits that she has not read it carefully (an understatement, to be sure) and may have “scamped the virtue of it.” Also, in regretting its “extravagant” tricks, she unwittingly echoes a plausible if also highly debatable complaint made two months earlier by Edmund Wilson: that Joyce “cannot be a realistic novelist . . . and write burlesques at the same time,” that his “method” is incompatible with either “superabundance or extravagant fancy” (*New Republic* 5 July, 1922; Deming 1: 229). Overall, however, her tone is dismissive, impressionistic, and personal. She finds the book diffuse, brackish, pretentious, and underbred, and she finds author callow, dwarfed by Tolstoy—no giant at all.

Yet this was far from her last word on *Ulysses*. The very day after she thus “finished” with it, Leonard showed her the most specific, detailed, and perceptive of all the verdicts it received: Gilbert Seldes’ review in the August 30 issue of the *Nation*.²¹ Calling it “a monstrous and magnificent travesty,” Seldes wrote that “it burlesques the structure of [*The Odyssey*] as a satyr-play burlesqued the tragic cycle to which it was appended,” but in doing so it becomes “a masterpiece.” Noting also its psychological penetration, its re-creation of “the stream of consciousness” in the minds of its three unmistakably distinct major characters, he went on to explain several of the episodes, to justify the parodies of Chapter 14, and to construe “Circe” as something “not equalled in literature,” a nightmarish revelation of “the implacable terrors in the subconscious minds of Stephen and Bloom” (Deming 2: 235-37). None of this would be news to any modern reader of Joyce, but on September 7, 1922, it was definitely news to Virginia Woolf. “For the first time,” she wrote, this review

analyses the meanings; & certainly makes it very much more impressive than I judged. Still I think there is virtue & some lasting truth in first impressions; so I don’t cancell mine. I must read some of the chapters again. Probably the final beauty of writing is never felt by contemporaries; but they ought, I think, to be bowled over; and this I was not. Then again, I had my back up on purpose; then again I was over stimulated by Tom’s praises. (*D* 2: 200).

Once more Woolf is generous. Re-opening her mind to this new case for *Ulysses*, she tells herself that she must re-read some of its chapters. But the review does not change her mind. Even while admitting that “the final beauty of writing is never felt by contemporaries,” she insists on the “lasting truth” of her own first impressions, which were mainly negative: she was *not* “bowled over.”²² But then

²¹ Reviewing *Ulysses* in *The Dial* in November of 1923, T.S. Eliot brilliantly answered those who had found it chaotic or “anarchic,” as did J. M. Murry in his review of April 22, 1922 (Deming 1: 196-97). Eliot argued that “in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity,” Joyce’s use of Homeric myth was “simply a way of controlling, of ordering, or giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Deming 1: 270). But Seldes’ explanation of what Joyce actually does in the novel is far more specific than Eliot’s generalized brief for it.

²² Yet note again what she writes of her first response to the “Hades” chapter in “Modern Fiction”: “on a first reading at any rate, it is difficult not to acclaim it a

again, as she says, she had her “back up on purpose.” By this I take it she means that was predisposed to resist the book, to find that Eliot had over-rated it or “over stimulated” her expectations.

Whenever she saw Eliot, however, the subject of *Ulysses* came up again. On September 23, about two weeks after she read Seldes’ review, they spoke of it again at some length:

Tom said, “He is a purely literary writer. He is founded upon Walter Pater with a dash of Newman.” I said he was virile—a he-goat; but didn’t expect Tom to agree. Tom did tho’; & said he left out many things that were important. The book would be a landmark, because it destroyed the whole of the 19th Century. It left Joyce himself with nothing to write another book on. It showed up the futility of all the English styles. He thought some of the writing beautiful. But there was no ‘great conception’: that was not Joyce’s intention. He thought Joyce did completely what he meant to do. But he did not think that he gave a new insight into human nature—said nothing new like Tolstoi. Bloom told one nothing. Indeed, he said, this new method of giving the psychology proves to my mind that it doesn’t work. It doesn’t tell as much as some casual glance from outside often tells. I said I had found [Thackeray’s] Pendennis more illuminating in this way. (*D* 2: 202-203)

With two brief exceptions, this is Woolf’s account of what Eliot has told her about *Ulysses*, and it is far from unstintingly positive. But Woolf writes from memory three days after their conversation, and whatever Eliot may have said about *Ulysses* to her, his own published words the following year plainly express his considered opinion of it:

I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, *and from which none of us can escape.*²³

masterpiece. If we want life itself, here surely we have it” (*E* 4: 000). If first impressions have some “lasting truth” that cannot be cancelled by later ones, why does she not still think “Hades” a masterpiece?

²³ *Dial*, November 1923 (Deming 1: 268), emphasis mine. In the review that so much impressed Woolf when she read it over a year before, Gilbert Seldes had already made this point: “I have called Joyce formidable because it is already clear that the innovations in method and the developments in structure which he has used with a skill approaching perfection are going to have an incalculable effect

Eliot's words surely apply to Virginia Woolf, who—no matter how hard she tried to escape *Ulysses*—could never stop thinking about it. Barely a week after the conversation with Eliot, she told Roger Fry (as already noted) that she had bound herself to *Ulysses* “like a martyr to a stake, and have thank God, now finished— My martyrdom is over. I hope to sell it for £4.10” (*Letters* 2.566). The stick of resistance has become the stake of martyrdom, but Woolf leaves both behind as she slowly gives birth to *Mrs. Dalloway*, which begins with a sentence that unwittingly evokes the final chapter of *Ulysses*: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.”²⁴ By sheer coincidence (since I don't believe that Woolf ever read the final chapter of *Ulysses*), the sexually frigid heroine of Woolf's novel echoes what the sexually overheated Molly says near the end of her monologue: “Ill go to Lambes there beside Findlaters and get them to send us some flowers to put about the place” (*U* 18. 1548-50).

Far more telling than this little echo, however, is the coincidence in focus and setting between the two novels. Just as *Ulysses* chiefly recounts the thoughts, feelings, and memories of two men wandering separately (for the most part) through Dublin on a single day in the middle of June 1904, *Mrs. Dalloway* chiefly recounts the thoughts, feelings, and memories of three people separately making their way around London on a single day “in the middle of June” (MD 6).²⁵ What Woolf wrote in her planning notes for the novel (on November 9, 1922) could have just as well forecast the composition of *Ulysses*: “All inner feelings to be lit up” (qtd. Richter 308). To say so much is hardly to say that Woolf apes Joyce, any more than Joyce apes Homer.²⁶ The many minds plumbed in *Ulysses* nowhere

upon the writers of the future. . . . I cannot see how any novelist be able (not why he should altogether want) entirely to escape his influence” (Deming 1: 238).

²³ *Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. Morris Beja (Oxford: Blackwell/ Shakespeare Head, 1996): 3. In the first line of the short story that led to the novel, “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the gloves herself” (*CSF* 146).

²⁴ *Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. Morris Beja (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): 3. In the first line of the short story that led to the novel, “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the *gloves* herself” (*CSF* 146, emphasis mine).

²⁵ For an extensive analysis of parallels, see Richter. And I have already noted Fernihough's observation that Woolf, like Joyce, democratizes the stream of consciousness (Fernihough 77).

²⁶ Even after enumerating all of the borrowings and parallels between *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, Richter rightly declares, “they cannot be called imitation. Rather, it

include the mind of a schizophrenic (the harmless lunatics Breen and Farrell don't count) or of a hostess, which if anything evokes the world of Proust; and not even Proust unveils the inner life and deep past of a hostess as Woolf does in *Mrs. Dalloway*. So this can hardly be called a derivative book. Nevertheless, the similarity between *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway* strongly implies that no matter what Woolf said or thought about Joyce, she could never escape his influence. As Suzette Henke observes, Joyce was her "artistic 'double,' a male ally in the modernist battle for psychological realism."

But did Woolf ever declare this alliance? Though Henke says that Woolf "always regarded" Joyce in this way, she came near to admitting it only once—when she told her diary (not the public) that what she was doing in her fiction was "probably being better done by Mr. Joyce." Except for that one comment, almost everything she writes about Joyce reveals at least in part her irremediable distaste for his work. She cannot give him any sort of credit without faulting him as well, or even flailing him. "I rather agree that Joyce is underrated," she writes to Gerald Brenan in December 1923, "but never did any book so bore me" (*L* 3: 80).

Given this resentment of Joyce—it seems to me just the word for her annoyance at all the trouble he has caused her—it is fascinating to see the part he plays in the final version of her landmark essay best known as "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." In the first version, published in the *Literary Review* of the *New York Evening Post* on November 17, 1923, she makes no mention of Joyce. In the expanded version, which was based on a lecture given at Cambridge on May 18, 1924 and which appeared the following July in *Criterion* under the title "Character in Fiction," she places Joyce with those who are challenging the conventions of Edwardian fiction.²⁷

She is thus returning to the theme of "Modern Novels" (1919), where she had already faulted Wells, Galsworthy, and especially Bennett for their materialism, for over-stressing the external world and ignoring the inner life of Mrs. Brown, who embodies "human nature" but who sits unnoticed in the corner of the railway carriage from which they view the world. Almost four years after "Modern Novels" appeared, Bennett produced an essay of his own ("Is the Novel Decaying?" *Cassell's Weekly*, March 28, 1923) stating that "the foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else" and also—in Woolf's paraphrase—that "we have no young novelists of first-rate importance at the

is a question of transformation, of Woolf taking ideas from Joyce and adapting them to the particular needs of her novel" (Richter 316)

²⁷ In October 1924, "Character in Fiction" was reprinted by the Hogarth Press with minor revisions as a pamphlet titled *Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*. For convenience I quote from "Character" (*E* 3: 420-36).

present moment, because they are unable to create characters that are real, true, and convincing” (quoted and paraphrased in Woolf, *E* 3: 421). Taking this charge against “young novelists”—including of course herself—as the bit between her teeth, Woolf renews her attack on the “tools and established conventions” of Bennett and his fellow Edwardians, such as “the convention of using a house to define a character” (*E* 3: 432). “For us,” she writes, “those conventions are ruin, those tools are death” (*E* 3: 430).²⁸

By “us” she means what she calls the “Georgian novelists,” who came of age not only as George V assumed the throne in but also just as human character—she thought—changed. “About the year 1910,” she claims, “all human relations shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children” (*E* 3: 422).²⁹ Given her loathing of Edwardian literary conventions and her conviction that human character had fundamentally changed, might we not well expect her to take up arms on behalf of her own generation of Georgians, including Forster, Lawrence, and Joyce? But she does nothing of the kind. On the contrary, after faulting Forster and Lawrence for “spoil[ing] their early work” by trying to use the old tools, she contends that literature now—in 1924—suffers from having “no code of manners which writers and readers accept. . . .” (*E* 3: 434). “Signs of this are everywhere apparent” in the breakdown of grammar and syntax, in the collapse of literary etiquette (these writers “do not know which to use, their fork or their fingers”), and the prime offender is Joyce—for his indecency. Yet again she returns to her *bête noir*, but this time she sees hardly anything else. In “Modern Novels” she mentions indecency only by way of qualifying her praise for Joyce’s originality in tracking consciousness. Now she makes it the essence of his work, which is window crashing. “Mr Joyce’s indecency in *Ulysses*,” she declares,

seems to me the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows. At moments, when the window is broken, he is magnificent. But what a waste of energy! And, after all, how dull indecency is, when it is not the overflowing of a

²⁸ Yet she seems to have overlooked the irony that in *Jacob’s Room*, she uses a series of *rooms* to mark the growth of her title character.

²⁹ Since Woolf also says more specifically that human character changed “about December 1910” (*E* 3: 421), Deming notes that the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition opened at the Grafton Galleries on November of that year (*E* 3: 437n4). But Woolf herself offers little to support her generalization, which cannot easily be reconciled with her own claim that her paradigm of “human nature”—Mrs. Brown—is “eternal” and “changes only on the surface” (*E* 3: 430).

superabundant energy or savagery, but the determined and public-spirited act of a man who needs fresh air! (*E* 3: 434)

Woolf's attack on window-crashing is not whole-hearted. Having already deplored the Edwardian convention of defining a character by the house that he or she occupies, she can hardly reject without mercy Joyce's need for fresh air or ignore its sometimes "magnificent" vibrancy.³⁰ As a result, her response to the literary revolution wrought by Joyce (and to a lesser extent by his fellow "Georgians") is almost self-contradictory. On one hand, she contends that Joyce is indecent, desperate, violent, and (somehow) dull. In the face of his indecency and of Eliot's obscurity, Woolf cries out—she "confess[es]"—"for the old decorums" of literature (*E* 3: 335). But she confesses this yearning as if it were a sin against her own mission to revitalize English fiction, and in the raw text of the Cambridge lecture on which this essays is based, she admits that Joyce smashes literary conventions precisely in order to

keep absolutely close to my idea of Mrs Brown ----Mrs Bloom, I mean. Thus it is that we hear all around us <in poems & novels & biographies & even in newspapers in essays>, the sound of breaking and falling and destruction. It is the prevailing sound of the Georgian age.— rather a melancholy one, if you think what melodious days there have been in the past — if you think of Shakespeare and Milton or even of Dickens and Thackeray. (*E* 3: 515)³¹

"My idea of Mrs. Brown——Mrs Bloom, I mean."³² Though this line did not make the published essay, nowhere else does Woolf come closer to recognizing

³⁰ Strangely enough, however, Woolf says that indecency is "dull" when it is the "public-spirited" expression of a need for fresh air. I have no idea what she means by "dull" here.

³¹ Whether intentionally or not, her metaphors of destruction evoke Stephen's thoughts about war in the morning classroom scene of *Ulysses*: "I hear the ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry, and time one livid final flame" (*U* 2. 9-10).

³² This is just one example of the way Woolf's names overlap with those chosen by Joyce. It is sheer coincidence, of course, that Virginia and Leonard Woolf lived in the London district of Bloomsbury, and that Virginia's maiden name was Stephen. But is it coincidence that in early manuscript versions of Woolf's novel, Septimus Smith is *Stephen* Smith and Sally Seton is called *Molly*? See Richter 306, 317 notes 8 and 9.

that she and Joyce were allies in the struggle to re-create the inner life and consciousness of a hitherto overlooked character, especially since Bloom—like Mrs. Brown—is so often overlooked or underestimated by those around him. So what does the “melancholy” mean here? In view of what Joyce has done, can Woolf feel wholly depressed by the sound of breaking and falling and destruction when they smash the very conventions that meant ruin and death (as she said) to the novelists of her own generation? The answer is clearly no. Near the end of her essay, just after observing that the truth so destructively told by Joyce and the other Georgians “is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition,” Woolf writes, “And it is the sound of their axes we hear—a vigorous and stimulating sound in my ears—unless you wish to sleep, when in the bounty of his concern, Providence has provided a host of writers anxious and able to satisfy your needs” (*E* 3: 435). For all her discomfort with Joyce’s indecency, Woolf can hardly embrace or endorse soporific decorum. If she must choose between that and the sound of axes, she’ll take the latter. In her final public statement about Joyce, then, she salutes him almost in spite of herself—as a revolutionary bent, like her, on breaking and re-making the house of fiction.

Thereafter, except for a single brief laudatory reference in a letter to Quentin Bell,³³ she wrote nothing about Joyce until January 15, 1941, when she put this in her diary:

Then Joyce is dead—Joyce about a fortnight younger than I am. I remember Miss Weaver, in wool gloves, bringing *Ulysses* in type script to our tea table at Hogarth House. Roger [Fry] I think sent her. Would we devote our lives to printing it? The indecent pages looked so incongruous: she was spinsterly, buttoned up. And the pages reeled with indecency. I put it in the drawer of the inlaid cabinet. One day Katherine Mansfield came, & I had it out. She began to read, ridiculing: then suddenly said, But theres some thing in this: a scene that should figure I suppose in the history of literature. He was about the place, but I never saw him. Then I remember Tom in Ottoline’s room at Garsington saying—it was published then—how could anyone write again after achieving the immense prodigy of the last chapter? He was for the first time in my knowledge, rapt, enthusiastic. I bought the blue paper book, & *read it here one summer I think with spasms of wonder, of discovery, & then again with*

³³ On July 26, 1933 she wrote to Quentin, “I’m sending you a book of short stories; one—by Joyce—seems to me very good” (*L* 5: 207).

long lapses of immense boredom This goes back to a pre-historic world. (*D* 5: 352-53, emphasis mine).

As well as anything else she ever wrote about Joyce, this final comment encapsulates the complexity of her response to *Ulysses*. Learning only now (apparently) that Joyce was almost her exact contemporary,³⁴ she first recalls Harriet Weaver's delivery of the manuscript and the "indecenty" that made her put it away. Then she remembers the praise it won from a skeptical Katherine Mansfield and Eliot's raptures over its final chapter. Finally she recalls her own profoundly split response to the book while reading it in a "pre-historic" time some twenty years previous: wonder and boredom. A little of the first can be found in her reading notes on *Ulysses*, as we have seen, but she has evidently forgotten how much she chafed at it in the summer of 1922, when she said nothing of wonder or discovery but much of boredom and distaste—especially when she "finished" reading this "mis-fire."

Summing up Woolf's response to Joyce and *Ulysses*, therefore, is no easy matter. To tread the long trail of her comments on them in her letters, diaries, reading notes, lectures, and essays is to find bits of evidence for two conflicting inferences: on one hand, she disdained both the book and its author; on the other hand, she saw Joyce—in Henke's words—as her "male ally in the modernist battle for psychological realism." But the whole truth of her response to Joyce lies, I think, not so much between these extremes as beneath them. While her "spasms of wonder and discovery" suggest that reading Joyce gave her something like an orgasmic thrill, she never mentions these spasms *while* reading him; they are masked by her stubborn aversion to his indecenty, which she can never forget. Together, this aversion and her sense of boredom—or the boring effect of his indecenty—furnish a bulwark against his intimidating success in the portrayal of consciousness: doing the very thing that she is trying to do, only better. She could not *acknowledge* him as her ally in the battle for psychological realism without giving up her place in its front ranks. To do her own work, and especially to write *Mrs. Dalloway*, she had to pretend to forget what Joyce had done—even as she absorbed all she could of his influence.

Dartmouth College

³⁴ Since she speaks of him as 40 in a letter of September 6, 1922 (see above, p. 10), she already knew that they were born in the same year, but until reading his obituary she may not have known that they were born just days apart.