Joyce's "O": A Different "Brand" of Heroism and the "Fulfillment" of an Odyssey

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JOYCE'S "O": A DIFFERENT "BRAND" OF HEROISM AND THE "FULFILLMENT" OF AN ODYSSEY

BY PATRICK J. MURPHY '00

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A pervasive symbol, Joyce's "O" honeycombs and so makes hollow the text of Ulysses. Acting as a symbol of vacuity and meaninglessness, it represents a range of empty actions from a sarcastic invocation on the lips of the mocker Mulligan to the embodiment of Bloom's comically inflated onanistic act: "and everyone cried O! O! in raptures..." (366-367). As such a versatile symbol, the "O" acts much like an Egyptian hieroglyphic, in that it can be "read" both phonetically and ideographically. In its pictorial sense, the "O" suggests both an empty hollowness and a cyclical journey, a wandering. In a more phonetic reading, the "O" can read as a pun on the French word for water, "eau." Such a reading suggests both the pain and guilt of Stephen's relationship with his mother, who is linked in Stephen's mind with the ocean, "the grey sweet mother," and the waters over which Bloom as Ulysses must make his circular odyssey homeward.

We also find another pun that is perhaps an answer to that emptiness and an end to that odyssey: "O" becomes "owe." A sense of obligation, then, becomes the "solution" to the problem of separation which is embodied in the exiles of both Stephen and Bloom. Bloom's journey through Dublin is made heroic by his never-resting mind, which is as eager to acquire knowledge as it is to empathize with the sufferings of others. The real distance, however, over which Bloom must travel, is the space which separates him from Molly, a "scrotumtightening" gulf of pain which has caused a larger sense of separation in their relationship, one that isn't merely sexual disjunction. The fulfillment of this journey (strikingly illustrated by the final "answer" of the Ithaca section) comes when Bloom returns, not to reclaim Molly sexually, but to reestablish their relationship as a whole with an "osculation" that emphasizes what they "owe" to each other and to their past. In this movement from separation and emptiness to meaningfulness and reunion, Joyce's "O" flips its significance many times. It begins as a symbol of emptiness, of distance (the "eau" of the Ocean), it becomes the struggle against that void, and it finally comes to rest as a solution to the odysseys of both Bloom and Stephen.

To begin with, then, let's catalogue some of the ways in which Joyce has used the "O" in Ulysses. Pictorially, it resembles Bloom's odyssey as a cartographical representation of his cyclical wandering: one uppercase loop through Dublin and back. It recalls the single eye of the Cyclops/citizen, representing the emptiness of a one-dimensional viewpoint. It is an empty circle, a zero, a void, a tiny flatulence: "Oo" (291). When second-string Irish Nationalists get together to sing their songs of heroism, the "O" is their muse-evoking vocative: "O, O the boys of Kilkenny..." (44). Its use as a phatic and pointless verbal tick by Dubliners highlights this aspect of Joyce's "O." Consider, for example, the case of Father Conmee encountering a group of boys on his way to offer succor to Paddy Dignam's orphaned children. He questions them: "Aha. And were they good boys at school? O." The reply is as vacuous and empty as the question. Father Conmee continues to coo: "His name was Brunny Lynam. O, that was a very nice name to have." When Father Conmee engages them in some further uninspired banter, the boys know how to respond: "O, sir" (220).

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Joyce’s “O”

The “O” acts in all of these cases much in the same way as has the mock heroic throughout the bulk of the novel. For example, the O’s position as a key genealogical indicator in such surnames as “O’Malley” or “O’Rourke,” while being of course naturally present in any Irish novel, might nevertheless be said to function as a subtle undercutting to the emphasis placed upon heroic lineage by both the ancient Greeks and modern Dubliners, who are forever hearkening back to a “Grand Old Erin” which in the idealized form envisioned by the Citizen/Cyclops never really existed. Joyce, of course, applies more ostentatious jabs elsewhere, especially in the “Cyclops” chapter with its over-the-top mock-heroic catalogues of “Irish Heroes,” most of whose appellations are blantly fictitious, or, worse yet, the names of famous Englishmen. Some names are Frankensteinian constructions, built by bricolage out of Irish and English names alike, as a subtle undercutting to the emphasis scatologically bizarre masochistic urges, his placing the deity and at the same time as insignificant as more subtle, will be won in the plays and films of the Dubliners, not just Bloom. relates its over-the-top mock-heroic catalogues of “Irish Heroes,” most of whose appellations are blantly fictitious, or, worse yet, the names of famous Englishmen. Some names are Frankensteinian constructions, built by bricolage out of Irish and English names alike, as a subtle undercutting to the emphasis scatologically bizarre masochistic urges, an ironic contrast to the banality of Bloom’s sensibilities.

The very atmosphere of Dublin, though seems to stack the deck against the occurrence of a heroic struggle, and it seems to make sense that Joyce’s allusions to Homeric wanderings and his elevated style should be taken as an ironic contrast to the banality of Bloom’s day. On one level this is certainly the case with overblown accounts of Bloom’s humdrum existence sometimes making for highly comic effect. On another level, however, the novel can be said to be setting up an environment uniquely suited for a different sort of heroism. In the “Eumaeus” section of the novel, a sailor relates the “queer sights” he’s seen in his travels to exotic locations: “And I seen manaters in Peru that eats corpses and the livers of horses” (625). “All focused their attention” on this sailor’s account, fascinated by such marvels. Yet one could easily argue that these manating oddities aren’t exactly so flung as an ironic contrast to the banality of Bloom’s day. On one level this is certainly the case with overblown accounts of Bloom’s humdrum existence sometimes making for highly comic effect. On another level, however, the novel can be said to be setting up an environment uniquely suited for a different sort of heroism.

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Mrs. Purefoy’s complicated delivery: “Stark ruth of man his errand that he bore till that house” (385). Although he often proves ineffective, Bloom is nevertheless consistently willing to help mollify the sufferings of others, even to the point of absurdity. For example, he offers “calming words” to Stephen, advertising how it was no other thing but a hubbub noise that he heard, the discharge of fluid from the thunderhead, look you, having taken place, and all of the order of a natural phenomenon” (395). This is vintage Bloom: A ridiculous scientific-sounding explanation offered to soothe the feelings of Stephen, a young man suffering more from guilt and “a spike named Bitterness” than a superstition of fear of lightening. Bloom fails miserably in his endeavor to help Stephen, just as he always seems to fall in all of his many “skeeing” misadventures, to “spill the hash altogether as on the night he misguidedly brought home a dog (breed unknown)” whose presence offended Molly (One can imagine Bloom’s vexation at not being able to identify the breed!) (657). His inability to solve a problem, for knowledge, is never resting and almost wholly impractical. It appears, in fact, that the very uselessness of his empathy makes him heroic. Insofar as he never seems to cease in his role as synecdochal character which like the willing scapegoat, the Christ-figure who “takes on” the sufferings of others. This concern for others seems to be his most consistent trait, and the one least capable of being suppressed. Perhaps the closest Bloom comes to being most “ruthful” and paradoxically heroic moments comes when he has most reason to fear for his own safety. Encountering a “figure of middle in which he tends to avoid closeness by means of emptiness, distance, and meaninglessness, it also seems to point us towards an answer to this problem of human disconnection. In the "Scylla and Charybdis" section, Stephen is reminded of another highly significant instance where Stephen has attempted to deny his obligations to the past: His refusal to kneel down before his mother’s deathbed and pray. Indeed, if we take a look at the other “I” which Stephen mentions, the one which Bloom’s Homeric double seems to translate directly into his own appellation: BICOm. Eyes widen, pupils dilate, Roman candles explode and then BICOm is Bloom again, stretched out dangling on a jagged rock. But the act of love has been both unreal and forced argument based upon the modality of Bloom’s arousal translated directly into his own appellation: BICOm. Eyes widen, pupils dilate, Roman candles explode and then BICOm is Bloom again, stretched out dangling on a jagged rock. 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One has ever been truly "alone." He is being told the promised utterance of an Englishman, Stephen's thoughts name Mr Deasy as "The sea's" ruler. His seacoal eyes looked on the empty bay (30). Stephen has attempted to make this boast himself, but has come to realize its futility. He does have obligations, he owes many people, and denying these debts has been entirely futile: his mother's death haunts him, as does his reputation for being a "fearful Jesuit" (5). He cannot escape these obligations to the past; they rise up again to haunt him like his vision of "the empty bay."

Stephen muses in the "Proteus" section on the link between the generations via each "O" symbol. "The umbilical cords of humanity stretch back over time all the way to Eve: "The cords of all link back, strandentwining green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting."

The symbol of the coins returns again at the end of the chapter, immediately following Mr Deasy's delayed finale, an empty anti-Semitic joke: "On [Deasy's] wise shoulders through the checkework of leaves the sun flung spangles, dancing coins" (36). The spangles and coins here remind us of our empty "O," an illusion of wisdom, the play of light through leaves. Significantly, at the very moment when he is being told the promised utterance of an Englishman, Stephen's thoughts name Mr Deasy as "The sea's" ruler. His seacoal eyes looked on the empty bay (30). Stephen has attempted to make this boast himself, but has come to realize its futility. He does have obligations, he owes many people, and denying these debts has been entirely futile: his mother's death haunts him, as does his reputation for being a "fearful Jesuit" (5). He cannot escape these obligations to the past; they rise up again to haunt him like his vision of "the empty bay."
on the first full page of text, with Malachi Mulligan making a mockery of the Catholic mass: “For this, O dearly beloved, is the genuine Christine: body and soul and blood and ours. Slow music please. Shut your eyes, gents. One moment. A little trouble about those white coruscates. Silence, all” (3). The final “O” occurs on the last page of the novel, with Molly recalling the scene of her betrothal to Bloom: “and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes…” (783).

The image of “the sea the sea” reminds us of Mulligan’s speech, which we have already quoted earlier in this paper: “Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks. I must teach you. You must read them in the original. Thalatta! Thalatta!” (5). Mulligan’s pretentiousness is contrasted by Molly’s genuine feeling, the “deepdown torrent” which she felt on the occasion of Bloom’s proposal. Mulligan’s mocking “O” addresses the “dearly beloved,” while Molly’s “O” affirms the significance of the moment when she pledged her love to Bloom.

Earlier in the same section, Molly mentions Defoe’s Moll Flanders: “I don’t like books with a Moll in them like that one he brought me about the one from Flanders a whore always shoplifting…” (756). Without investigating the irony of this statement, it might be useful here to quote a passage from another novel by Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe. Here, Crusoe learns of Friday’s conception of his deity:

He could describe nothing of this great Person but that he was very old; much older, he said, than the Sea or the Land, than the Moon or the Stars. I asked him then, if this old Person had made all Things, why did not all Things worship him. He looked very grave, and with a perfect Look of Innocence, said, “All Things do say ‘O’ to him” (156).

This seems to be the way “O” is being used by Molly in the final pages of the novel. As Molly’s mind races over the landscape of her original union with Bloom, the text is punctuated with the word “yes,” an affirmation of the surrounding landscape, the entire world, not merely Bloom’s proposal. Joyce’s “O” has flipped itself, like one of Mr Deasy’s coins, from a symbol of meaninglessness to one of meaning, from a symbol of separation and distance to one of affirmation and obligation.

The “O” can be seen as symbolic of all three stages of this progression. It begins as an empty void, a zero, a flatulence. It then takes on the sense of the very struggle against this void: the circular loop of Bloom’s journey through Dublin. Finally, it comes to be taken as symbolic of the force which ultimately allows Bloom to overcome the great “empty bay” over which he has made his odyssey. That is, he has affirmed the significance behind human relationships, the importance of our obligations, the idea that we “owe” each other something for our past and that this tie cannot easily be broken. And therefore it represents Bloom’s eventual return (after all, an O isn’t a U) and the fulfillment of his heroic task. Consider the final question asked in the “Ithaca” section. A few lines up we take our last look at Bloom, as he falls asleep beside Molly: “He rests. He has travelled” (737). The final question asks, simply, “where?” And the answer to this question? Even more simple, a large black dot: “O” The Odyssey has been fulfilled, the empty “O” has been made meaningful.

Of course this doesn’t explain how Stephen’s Odyssey has been fulfilled within the pages of Ulysses. His parting from Bloom indicates he’ll continue to wander, haunted by his mother’s ghost and unable to find his way home. Are we able to decide, then, how or if he is ever able to overcome his feelings of guilt and emptiness? I would argue that Stephen’s final return isn’t, in fact, contained within Ulysses. I would argue that it is Odyssey. In the “Proteus” section, we had Stephen’s bitter, self-mocking remembrance of youthful plans to write books “with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria?” (40). It must be clear by now what I mean to argue his bitterness and his hollow memories, and, by weaving them all together into a rich tapestry which fills every corner of a sprawling text, he has fulfilled his own Odyssey and embodied “the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man” (666).

Works Cited

