

New Criterion, May 2017

Review: *The Real People of Joyce's Ulysses*

Dominic Green

The relation of *Ulysses* to literary realism is one question, its relation to reality another. By the “realness” of *Ulysses*, we usually mean Joyce’s representation of the inner lives of Leopold Bloom, Molly Bloom, and Stephen Dedalus, from the micturant scent of grilled kidneys in the morning to the affirmations with which Molly ends Bloom’s day. No writer in English since Sterne had unpicked the layers of language and consciousness so carefully; perhaps only Henry James had woven them together with as sharp an eye for detail. Yet our focus on Joyce’s method reflects more than his self-conscious technique and sophistication. It also reflects the distances between the novel’s conception and its composition, and between its composition and its reception.

Joyce wrote *Ulysses* between 1914 and 1921, in self-exile from Ireland. Sylvia Beach of Shakespeare & Co. published *Ulysses* in Paris on February 2, 1922, Joyce’s fortieth birthday. Notoriously, the subsequent journey of *Ulysses* to acceptance in the English-speaking world took longer than the original *Ulysses*’s return from Troy. Censorship controversies on both sides of the Atlantic turned *Ulysses* into one of those smutty books whose function is to register the tidemarks of artistic license. Meanwhile, the cultural distance between Dublin and the literary metropolises of Paris, London, and New York grew.

In the 1890s, Yeats had roamed in the gloaming of Irish myth like a cosmopolitan. The paths of his wanderings had been local, but his points of departure and destination had differed little from those of other Romantic nationalists. The relations of Britain and Ireland were changed utterly by the Easter Rising of 1916, the civil war that followed, and the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. Dublin was no longer a major city in the British Empire, or an intellectual suburb of London, but the capital of a small, culturally introverted state on the fringe of Europe. And when the nationalists burnt the grand homes of the Ascendancy, they also destroyed the class that, as in *Lady Gregory’s day*, had sustained Ireland’s link to cosmopolitan high culture.

In time, these factors combined to reduce the book’s Irishness to a scenic background, and its specific location to incomprehensibility. Those of us who read *Ulysses* before we went to Dublin read it for its language, just as we had read the Authorized Version without going to Jerusalem. This was not what Joyce wanted. He had signed *Ulysses* with an itinerary from the side of a steamer trunk—“Trieste-Zurich-Paris,” but he had written it to record a “vanished world.” He derived the events of Bloomsday from Thom’s Directory 1904 as another novelist might use a diary. The “scissors and paste man” even joked that if Dublin were to disappear, it could be reconstructed from *Ulysses*.

In *The Real People of Joyce’s Ulysses*, the Dubliner and Joyce scholar Vivien Igoe proves the case for *Ulysses* as a novel possessed by Dublin, rather than the novel that is the world’s possession.¹ In the novel, Joyce foregrounds the inner lives of only a few characters. Around them, his shifting chorus of minor characters reflects the city’s streams of consciousness, while an outer layer of names and historical references holds the drama in space and time like the embankment of the Liffey River. Dr. Igoe lingers with every minor character and tracks down almost every allusion. *The Real People of Joyce’s Ulysses* is, for want of a better word,

Joycean—joyous in its fondling of language and place, as rich and complex in flavor as the “feety savour of green cheese” in the Gorgonzola sandwich that Leopold Bloom eats at the bar of Davy Byrne’s pub.

The deeper into the real Dublin Igoe goes, the further we enter the novel. Leopold and Molly Bloom’s “lumpy old jingly bed” always reminds Molly of one “old Cohen.” Leopold believes that her father “bought it from Lord Napier” at “the governor’s auction.” Joyce explains neither of these references. Igoe explains both.

Robert, Lord Napier of Magdala (1810–1890) was born in Calcutta. He served in the Anglo-Sikh Wars and the Indian Mutiny, was raised to the peerage after fighting at Magdala in Abyssinia in 1868, and then governed Gibraltar from 1876 to 1883. He left the Rock in 1883 with the rank of field marshal, but without his bed. That ended up with a merchant named David Abraham Cohen (1861–1932), who ran a shop at 22 Engineer Lane, Gibraltar. Cohen “stocked the best English, French, and Spanish boots and shoes, and also made shoes to order.”

Igoe’s quotidian linking of boots and beds reveals the imaginative core of the novel. The foot is one of Leopold Bloom’s many fetishes. In “Circe,” the fifteenth chapter of *Ulysses*, Bloom fantasizes about abasing himself before the madam Bella Cohen: “To be a shoefitter in Mansfield’s was my love’s young dream, the darling joys of sweet button hooking, to lace up to kneelength the dressy kid footwear satinlined, so incredibly impossibly small, of Clyde Road ladies.”

In “Penelope,” the last chapter of *Ulysses*, Leopold removes Molly’s boot, picks a bit of toenail and sniffs “the odour of the quick.” As they make love, Molly remembers the poderastic lusts of her lover, Hugh “Blazes” Boylan: “Boylan talking about the shape of my foot he noticed at once even before he was introduced . . . I was wagging my foot we both ordered 2 teas and plain bread and butter.” Finally, Leopold sleeps with his head at Molly’s feet, dreaming amid the feety savor.

Igoe tells us that Bella Cohen was the English-born prostitute Ellen Cohen (1850/51–1905/06). “Blazes” Boylan is a composite—mostly the philandering tenor Augustus Boylan (1872–1963), with elements of the horse dealers James Daly and Ted Keogh. More important, however, is that Igoe confirms the novel’s imaginative association between an old Cohen, whether David or Bella, with sex and feet. In turn, where Igoe goes, we go, for the feet lead us back to Joyce’s biography. In *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), Wyndham Lewis describes how T. S. Eliot, visiting Paris in 1920, had delivered to Joyce a gift from Ezra Pound—some clothes and “a fairly presentable pair of old brown shoes.”

Another obscure Gibraltarian, “Pisimbo,” is tracked down to 8, Parody’s Passage, Gibraltar, home of the boatman Manuel Eulogio Pisimbo. In Igoe’s encyclopedia, Pisimbo is wedged between Joyce’s literary agent J. B. Pinker who, as the founder of the magazine *Black and White*, had edited Henry James, Bram Stoker, and H. G. Wells; and Pitt the Younger, who represented Britain against Napoleon, and under whose leadership Ireland was formally incorporated into the United Kingdom. Thus Pisimbo’s passage is a parody of Ireland’s historical predicament.

And what of “Mr. Denis J. Maginni?” This “professor of dancing & c.” is sighted briefly in the mid-afternoon interlude of the tenth chapter, “The Wandering Rocks,” wearing “silk hat,

slate frockcoat with silk facings, white kerchief tie, tight lavender trousers, canary gloves and pointed painted boots.” From Igoe, we learn that the inventor of Maginni was Maginn himself. Born in Dublin in 1846, Denis J. Maginn worked as a lawyer’s clerk, and then in his father-in-law’s tailor’s workshop. He renamed himself Signor Maginni because an Italian name was “more appropriate for a teacher of dancing,” and he awarded himself the rank of “professor dancing.”

Denis Maginn died on April 12, 1915, and is buried with his wife and daughter in Glasnevin Cemetery, Finglas Road, Dublin. His light-footed alter ego dances forever in Ulysses. Igoe supplies a photograph of Maginn as Maginni, from the neck up. The professor wears his silk top hat and white kerchief tie. From the expression on his face, he is wearing tight lavender trousers too. Were it not for Ulysses, we would not be looking at his face. Were it not for Denis Maginn’s determination to fictionalize himself, Joyce would not have looked at him.

If Joyce’s Dublin were reconstructed from Ulysses, quite a few people would be surprised by their new place of residence. Moses Dlugacz, cast in Ulysses as a Dublin pork butcher, turns out to have been one of Joyce’s pupils in Trieste. Almidano Artifoni, immortalized as Stephen Daedalus’s singing teacher, gets his name from the head of the Berlitz Language School in Trieste, who died in 1950 without having seen Dublin. While the character’s name was surely suggested by a pun on “antiphony,” his professional profile is that of Benedetto Palmieri of Naples, a singing teacher at the Royal Irish Academy of Music.

Private Compton, who tangles with Dedalus among the brothels of Nighttown, is Joyce’s revenge upon “a British consular official in Zurich named Compton, with whom Joyce had a row in 1918.” Compton should not be confused with another consular official, Henry Carr. As Tom Stoppard recounts in *Travesties* (1974), Carr and Joyce fell out after an amateur production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in which Carr played Algy Moncrieff. Joyce sued Carr, unsuccessfully, and punished a third consular official who took Carr’s side: “I hanged Joe Gann in Bootle jail on the 12 of February 1900.”

“Marcella the Midget Queen” was, however, a real person. In the 1890s, an English immigrant named Charles Augustus James opened a four-story department store in Henry Street, named the World’s Fair Stores. The premises included the World’s Fair Waxwork Exhibition. His adopted daughter Elizabeth Paddock (1878–1955) performed there from 1893 onwards as Marcella the Midget Queen. “She was small in stature with a beautiful light mezzo-soprano voice,” Igoe reports. “Marcella also helped out in the shop.”

After an hour or two with this magical, maddening reconstruction of Joyce’s idea of Dublin, reality is as freakish as fiction. The most prosaic of devices, an alphabetical catalogue, gives us a synoptic view of the two realms, layered together. The effect is dizzying, like examining a palimpsest in three dimensions at once.

“Zinfandel’s the favorite, lord Howard de Walden’s, won at Epsom,” says Nosey Flynn as Bloom eats his Gorgonzola sandwich. “Morny Cannon is riding him.” Herbert Mornington “Morny” Cannon (1873–1962) was the son of a jockey. He acquired his middle name and nickname from the colt named Mornington that his father had ridden to victory on the day of his birth.

Later in the day of June 16, 1904, “Morny” Cannon will ride Zinfandel, that “rare bit of horseflesh,” to second place in the Ascot Gold Cup. In 1905, “Morny” and Zinfandel will win

the Gold Cup. It will be rumored that as Zinfandel crosses the line, Lord Howard de Walden will be “seated under a tree in the paddock, perusing the score of an opera.” In 1953, Lester Piggott, an even greater jockey than “Morny” Cannon, will appear in the Wodehouse novel *Ring for Jeeves* (1953). Piggott is “Morny” Cannon’s great-nephew.

Suddenly, Joyce and Wodehouse, two vastly different dreamers, are strangely close. The names of the Dubliners who elude Igoe’s detection could be a roll call from Wodehouse: Cuck Cohen, “Bags” Comisky, Fr. Bernard Corrigan, Warden Daly, Miss Lydia Douce (barmaid at the Ormond Hotel), Pat Farrel (newsboy with the Telegraph), Esther Osvalt, Lance Corporal Oliphant, and Bertha Supple (a friend of Edy Boardman and Gerty MacDowell). *Ulysses* leads us to real people, but *The Real People of Ulysses* leads us back to the books. You couldn’t make it up, because Joyce already has.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 35 Number 9, on page 30
Copyright © 2017 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/The-tragic-sensibility-8679>