

A Fragment on Joyce

Among the works I have not written and will not write (but which in some way, however mysterious and rudimentary, justify me) is a story eight or ten pages long whose profuse first draft is titled "Funes the Memorious," and which in other, more chastened, versions is called "Ireneo Funes." The protagonist of this doubly chimerical fiction is a typically wretched *compadrito* living in Fray Bentos or Junín around 1884. His mother irons clothes for a living; the problematic father is said to have been a tracker. Certainly the boy has the blood and the silence of an Indian. In childhood, he was expelled from primary school for having slavishly copied out two chapters, along with their illustrations, maps, vignettes, block letters, and even a corrigendum. . . . He dies before the age of twenty. He is incredibly idle: he spends virtually his entire life on a cot, his eyes fixed on the fig tree in the backyard, or on a spiderweb. At his wake, the neighbors remember the humble facts of his history: a visit to the cattleyards, another to a brothel, another to so-and-so's ranch. . . . Someone provides the explanation. The deceased was perhaps the only lucid man on earth. His perceptions and memory were infallible. We, at first glance, perceive three glasses on a table; Funes, every leaf and grape on a vine. He knew the shapes of the southernmost clouds in the sunrise of April 30, 1882, and he could compare them in his memory to the veins in the stiff marbled binding of a book he once held in his hands during his childhood. He could reconstruct every dream, every reverie. He died of pneumonia, and his incommunicable life was the richest in the universe.

My story's magical *compadrito* may be called a precursor of the coming race of supermen, a partial Zarathustra of the outskirts of Buenos Aires; indisputably, he is a monster. I have evoked him because a consecutive, straightforward reading of the four hundred thousand words of *Ulysses* would require similar monsters. (I will not venture to speak of what

Finnegans Wake would demand; for me, its readers are no less inconceivable than C. H. Hinton's fourth dimension or the trinity of Nicaea.) Everyone knows that Joyce's book is indecipherably chaotic to the unprepared reader. Everyone knows that Stuart Gilbert, its official interpreter, has revealed that each of the novel's eighteen chapters corresponds to an hour of the day, a bodily organ, an art, a symbol, a color, a literary technique, and one of the adventures of Ulysses, son of Laertes, of the seed of Zeus. These imperceptible and laborious correspondences had only to be announced for the world to honor the work's severe construction and classic discipline. Among these voluntary tics, the most widely praised has been the most meaningless: James Joyce's contacts with Homer, or (simply) with the Senator from the *département du Jura*, M. Victor Bérard.

Far more admirable, without a doubt, is the multitudinous diversity of styles. Like Shakespeare, like Quevedo, like Goethe, like no other writer, Joyce is less a man of letters than a literature. And, incredibly, he is a literature within the compass of a single volume. His writing is intense, as Goethe's never was; it is delicate, a virtue whose existence Quevedo did not suspect. I (like the rest of the universe) have not read *Ulysses*, but I read and happily reread certain scenes: the dialogue on Shakespeare, the *Walpurgisnacht* in the whorehouse, the questions and answers of the catechism: "They drank in jocoserious silence Epp's massproduct, the creature cocoa." And, on another page: "A dark horse riderless, bolts like a phantom past the winningpost, his name moon-foaming, his eyeballs stars." And on another: "Bridebed, childbed, bed of death, ghostcandle."

Plenitude and indigence coexist in Joyce. Lacking the capacity to construct (which his gods did not bestow on him, and which he was forced to make up for with arduous symmetries and labyrinths), he enjoyed a gift for words, a felicitous verbal omnipotence that can without exaggeration or imprecision be likened to *Hamlet* or the *Urn Burial*. . . . *Ulysses* (as everyone knows) is the story of a single day, within the perimeter of a single city. In this voluntary limitation, it is legitimate to perceive something more than an Aristotelian elegance: it can legitimately be inferred that for Joyce every day was in some secret way the irreparable Day of Judgment; every place, Hell or Purgatory.

[1941]

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The French version is rather unfortunate: "*Lit nuptial, lit de parturition, lit de mort aux spectrales bougies.*" The fault, of course, lies with the language, which is incapable of compound words.