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At Fault

What Joyce Can Teach Us about
the Crisis of the Modern University

1. Felix Culpa: Joyce and Error

Except in directions in which we can go too far there is no interest in going at all;
and only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.

(Eliot, preface to Harry Crosby, *Transit of Venus*)

Let us start with the salutary example of teaching out of bounds. On the first fine day in April, it is my usual custom to take students on a walking tour of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. There is a logic to this: the poem is a journey, a music-hall performance, an act of ventriloquism, and a transgression of space. Students who have suffered a long winter gazing out at frozen lakes, as those in Evanston, Illinois, usually have, need to come out of hibernation, to walk and wander, to participate in the comedy of return. Ideally, we would be in London for this purpose, but any campus will do, and Northwestern's beautiful and hallowed spaces work better than most for an act of academic transgression.¹ The point of the exercise, besides the actual exercise, is that *The Waste Land* is a violation of poetic space and of poetic tradition. Like *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land* is a novelty that causes "passers to stop in wonder," an act of kinesis that is congruous with "the velocity of modern life" (*U* 17.1770–73). *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* have in common, then, the act of wandering, of straying gleefully from the norm of their literary inheritance. Their paths are centrifugal.

And so, led by a student in the class who read the traveling sections of the poem while walking backward, we conducted a mock campus tour. I started

things off by reading the opening invocation in Alice Millar Chapel, just before the parson came out to see what the devil was going on. In front of a sign marked “Private Property: No Trespassing” we found roots that clutch, and next to a red rock we watched our shadows rise to meet us in the afternoon sun. Says Virginia Woolf, “I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass [. . .] there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 75–76): we picked up that clarion cry and ran with it, quite literally, across Sheridan Road. (I should hasten to say that we used the little red flags that allow for safe crossing.) We arranged a confrontation with Stetson (“You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!”—*TWL* 136), as a bemused police officer drove away in a state of perfect uncertainty about the legality of our proceedings. Then, of course, we went to the beach, where Cleopatra spoke to us from the top of a lifeguard chair: “The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Glowed on the marble [. . .] / Huge sea-wood fed with copper / Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone, / In which sad light a carved dolphin swam” (*TWL* 137). In this case, the chair was of distressed wood, and the dolphins had to be imagined in the far distance, but as Eliot distresses *Antony and Cleopatra*, turning Shakespeare’s paeon to the Egyptian queen into a misogynist tapestry of forced nature, so we had our moment of narrative subversion by water, the “No Lifeguard on Duty” sign neatly validating the force of our transgression.

Then it was on to the catamarans at the Northwestern Sailing Center, where two students playing Tom and Viv argued about nothing, as a gathering crowd of tourists from the Segal Visitors Center wondered what to make of it all. A music stand and a chair had been cunningly prepared by the instructor for the two performers reading a Cockney woman and the Bartender at the Bienen School of Music, the sailboat on the water through the window behind reminding us of the possibilities of *Damyata* provided by “the hand expert with sail and oar” (*TWL* 146). Ezekiel spoke to us from a withered stump of time, the typist met her young man carbuncular in a barbeque pit, the Rhine Maidens disported themselves in truly Wagnerian fashion, and Phlebas the Phoenician found an appropriate rock from which to declaim the “Death by Water” sequence (*TWL* 137, 141, 142, 143). Above all, it was April, it was just turning spring, and we were amateurs, in love with the text and the newly awakening world. By speaking of the Fisher King where it said “No Fishing” and of the Rhine Maidens where it said “No Swimming,” we had brought a performance piece to rich and risky life, on a day when we were really supposed to be in class.

It is traditional for students at Northwestern to paint mottoes on rocks. Looking at my photographs of the event, I discovered an accidental message on the rock between two speakers in “What the Thunder Said.” (The message is always on the rock in T. S. Eliot.) It read, in blue capital letters with the skyline of Chicago behind, “Never Settle.” This has been the driving impulse behind all my teaching and all my work at every university I have ever taught. After a lifetime in academia, I have become familiar with the patterns of university life. And what I have seen, particularly in eight years as a university administrator, is a willingness for students, faculty, and especially deans and other college officers to settle. Let us agree, as Joyceans, that we are here in the academy to unsettle, to never settle, to always and at all times provoke the mind. This is something all of us must learn to do, from the lowest level of administration (the Provost) all the way up to the student reading poetry illegally from a life-guard chair on a beach: we have to learn to embrace risk. But forces that tie these ambitions in increasingly Gordian and improbably constrictive knots are working powerfully against this necessary end. I hope by the end of this chapter to have provided some concrete examples of this quiescent acceptance of nontransgression. What is happening to American universities is not a gradual settling, as in the erosion of a limestone landscape. This is more like a flash freeze, a quick-setting concrete that has frozen the academy in place almost literally overnight. Think of the empty spaces where the bodies were in the lava of Pompeii. They represent, caught in negative space, screams of pain, howls of anguish, Goyaesque nightmare visions of living human beings incarcerated and calcified by an uncaring and protective layer of uniformity.² We have to rage against this. For the people in today’s hollow tombs are not just professors. They are our students.

Joyceans, by their very nature, are transgressive people. We have conferences in Monaco in honor of Grace Kelly, in tobacco warehouses in Seville that were the inspiration for Bizet’s *Carmen*, even one in Szombathely, Hungary, because Leopold Bloom’s imaginary grandfather was born there. We embrace fictionality, turning Bloomsday into as real a day for the world of Joyce lovers as 221B Baker Street is a real address for the followers of Sherlock Holmes. We are teachers, we are performers, and we are risk-takers: Joyce models all three on our behalf. Stephen teaches us how to read *Ulysses* in “Nestor,” as he guides Sargent through his sums: “Do you understand now? Can you work the second for yourself?” (*U* 2.161). The audience in the Ormond bar encourages Simon Dedalus to perform “M’appari”: “Go on, Simon,” “With it, Simon” (*U* 11.598,

653). Bloom silently urges Gerty MacDowell to risk leaning backward during the fireworks display, which she does, on account of his eyes:

But there was an infinite store of mercy in those eyes, for him too a word of pardon even though he had erred and sinned and wandered.

(*U* 13.748–49)

In this crucial text from “Nausicaa” you will find Joyce’s three main verbs: “erred” and “sinned” and “wandered.” Let’s spend some time with this pivotal scene. Gerty MacDowell is sitting on Sandymount Strand on the evening of 16 June 1904 with her friends Edy and Cissy and the two boys Tommy and Jacky, who are dressed in identical sailor suits. There is a squalling infant also present, but we can ignore the noise from the pram for the moment. Gerty reveals herself to be pinched and strained and eager to please, as anxious as I am to get rid of the squalling baby, who is getting on her nerves, not to mention “the little brats of twins” (*U* 13.405–06). She turns her attentions to the man opposite her on the strand and hopes to be able to convert him: “Even if he was a protestant or methodist” (*U* 13.433–34). Well, he’s Jewish, he’s Leopold Bloom, and all he wants is a vision of knickers to take back home with him to Eccles Street. We do not discover until the second half of the episode that Gerty is lame, that Bloom has been masturbating, and that all this sentimentality is to be punctured by the tyranny of the real, as is the Joycean way. Bloom has sinned throughout the day, of course: he maintains an illicit correspondence with a nearly illiterate typist called Martha Clifford, he misinterprets the letters “I. H. S.” on a priest’s vestment as “I have sinned” or “I have suffered” (*U* 5.373), he fails to tell an anti-Semitic joke properly in a funeral carriage on the way to Glasnevin Cemetery (*U* 6.264–85).³ He has erred and sinned and wandered.

How many of Joyce’s characters are drawn to calamity! The boy in “Araby” realizes only too late that by paying a shilling entrance fee for the bazaar and reserving fourpence for the tram ride back home he has left himself just fourpence to buy something for Mangan’s sister, and his eyes burn “with anguish and anger” (*D* 28). Gabriel Conroy puts his foot in it as he takes off his goloshes (“I suppose we’ll be going to your wedding one of these fine days with your young man, eh?”—*D* 177), receives a sharp answer from Lily (“The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you”), and “coloured as if he felt he had made a mistake” (*D* 178). As if he *felt* he had made a mistake: in Joyce, it’s not necessary to have actually done anything wrong; it’s enough to feel that you have. Gabriel has wandered out of his depth. Later, as he was

wrong about Lily, he will be spectacularly wrong about his wife: “I think I know what is the matter. Do I know?” (*D* 219). Gretta isn’t sexually interested in him at all but is still carrying a torch for a boy who died for her in the snow long years ago. Both Gabriel Conroy and Michael Furey have erred by straying out of bounds. But this does not make them guilty; it only makes them human. First we feel, then we fall.

It is not just the priests and the prefects who dispose a rough and rigid justice on a heart bowed down. In every *Dubliners* story, a character sits in judgment on another and gets it wrong. “Do you think me an utter fool?” (*D* 87), asks Mr. Alleyne, to which Mr. Farrington astonishes himself by saying, “*I don’t think that that’s a fair question to put to me*” (*D* 89). “I’m asking for my rights” (*D* 147), says Mrs. Kearney, for which she is roundly abused by the Committee. In *Ulysses*, the Citizen hears Bloom speak simply and boldly of love (“Love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred”), nationhood (“Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here”), and persecution (“I’m talking about injustice, says Bloom”) and determines that the only possible recourse is immediate crucifixion by biscuitbox: “By Jesus, says he, I’ll brain that bloody jewman for using the holy name. By Jesus, I’ll crucify him so I will. Give us that biscuitbox here” (*U* 12.1485, 1431, 1474, 1811–12). The words of the “Lacrimosa” from the requiem Mass have it exactly right (Britten v):

<i>Lacrimosa dies illa</i>	That day of weeping
<i>Qua resurget ex favilla</i>	When out of the dust arises
<i>Judicandus homo reus.</i>	The guilty to be judged.

The Day of Judgment does not refer to a day when “all humanity is judged,” as some translations saccharinely have it, but to a day of reckoning for the guilty human being. “*Homo reus*”: we are all already guilty.⁴

2. The Croppy Boy

The voice of penance and of grief came slow, embellished, tremulous. Ben’s contrite beard confessed. *In nomine Domini*, in God’s name he knelt. He beat his hand upon his breast, confessing: *mea culpa*.

Latin again. That holds them like birdlime.

(*U* 11.1031–34)

As a way of bringing this together, I want to focus on one character who can stand for all these human beings racked with guilt and asking for forgiveness, all these broken souls who have erred and sinned and wandered, looking as Bloom