

# In the Flesh: Molly Bloom's Political Body

Anne Dennon

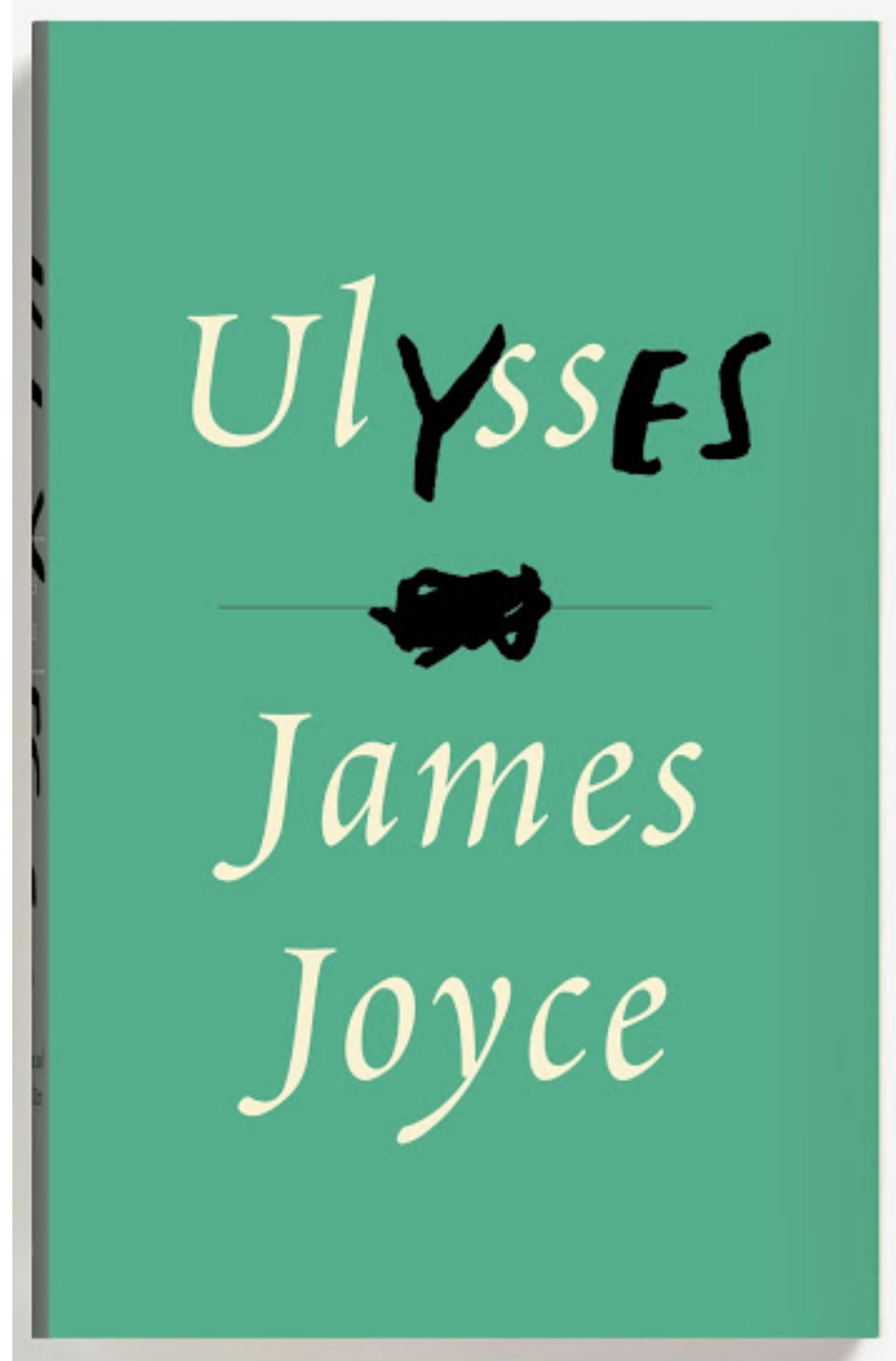
## James Joyce's *Ulysses*

Since its 1922 publication, *Ulysses* has amassed an enormous and growing critical tradition that continues to wrestle with the meanings and messages of the overflowing, encyclopedically referential text. The skeleton of the plot is simple: a single day, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1904. Leopold Bloom, an Irish Jew, ponders his life and the workings of the world as he wanders Dublin. Molly Bloom consummates an affair at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's fictional alter ego from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, returns as Bloom's potential spiritual son. The plebian gestures of the three central figures contain a reverberating, archetypal significance; the eternally reoccurring figures of Father, Son, and woman as Earth Goddess interplay with the temporality and personality of Bloom, Stephen, and Molly. Pursuant to Joyce's constant objective, the singular and personal are revealed to contain the universal and ultimate.

## A Modern Odyssey

Joyce reawakens the oldest and most formative plot of the Western canon: Homer's *Odyssey*. The dynamic harmony found within Joyce's yoking together of the ancient with the modern speaks to his ability to locate humanity's most constant truths. The *Odyssey*'s circular journey is both deeply characteristic of literature as well as the human lifecycle, and this accordance of literature with the motions of human life prompts a necessary understanding of Joyce's work as an attempt to exhume the powerful, prehistoric psychology behind our lived narratives. It also moves in equal steps towards a feminine language, what Hélène Cixous came to call *écriture féminine*. This alternative language, outside the fixed language of androcentrism, is intimately concerned with the cyclicity of female experience. *Ulysses*, like its Homeric predecessor, is a female text because it embraces natural continuations. Both Molly and Penelope's atemporal, woven narratives are delineated by self-reference and multiplicity, which serve to undermine singular masculine experience as well as the authorial voice behind the text.

yes I said yes I  
will Yes.



"Penelope is the clou of the book. The first sentence contains 2500 words. There are eight sentences in the episode. It begins and ends with the female word yes. It turns like the huge earth ball slowly surely and evenly round and round spinning... Though probably more obscene than any preceding episode it seems to me to be perfectly sane full amoral fertilisable untrustworthy engaging shrewd limited prudent indifferent *Weib*. *Ich bin der Fleisch der stets bejaht* [Woman. I am the flesh that always affirms]."

(Letters, 16 August 1921)

## French feminism & *écriture féminine*

The political message extant in Molly's word and body reverses, as did later French feminist theorists, the espousal of masculine values in the vein of Simone de Beauvoir. Molly's pragmatic sensibility and sexual agency subverts de Beauvoir's insistence that women are devalued and objectified by their relationship with the physical. Molly's physicality does not deny her a capacity for reflection and thought; rather the two modes are in constant dialogue. Molly's concluding inner monologue offers a prototype of Cixous' female language, which embraces and writes from female difference, thereby celebrating divergence from Jacques Derrida's concept of phallogocentrism.

## Nora, the Real Molly Bloom

Joyce's status as truth-teller should be shared with Nora Barnacle, both as her husband's muse and as a striking historical figure in her own right. Joyce's fanatic concern for locating the language nearest to truth leads him to confront the limits of symbols, as reality has no written language for those reasons outlined by Saussure. Joyce's fascination with the truth of Nora's female language (as a fluid, unauthorized alternative to fixed masculine language) led him to emulate her style of self-expression. Nora and Molly's genius lies in their ability to regain through unique language the truth obscured by generalized and formulated language. Molly's chanting syntax and corrupted grammar allow the reader to approach closer to a quotidian truth that is wholly inaccessible through linguistically correct, and therefore more symbolic, channels.



The underlying truth known to all (much like the unspoken "word known to all men" in *Ulysses*) can only be defined in a social context through signifiers. The signified truth is thereby distanced even as it is accessed. The female language of Nora and Molly undermines the male authority of the signifier, thereby decreasing the distance between signifier and signified.

What special affinities appeared to him to exist between the moon and woman ?  
Her antiquity in preceding and surviving successive generations, her nocturnal predominance, her satellitic dependence, her luminary reflection, her constancy under all her phases, rising and setting by her appointed times, waxing and waning, the invariability of her aspect, her potency over effluent and refluxus waters, the tranquil inscrutability of her visage, her omens of tempest and of calm, the stimulation of her light, her motion and her presence, the admonition of her craters, her arid seas, her silence : her splendour, when visible, her attraction when invisible.

## Between Freud and Jung

During his writing career Joyce moves from harsh naturalism and observance of the superficial compulsions of society towards an attempt to form a pure language out of the universal mythic fund. Psychoanalysis remains, but it becomes charged with archetypal energy. The contrasting endings of *Ulysses*—the scientific "Ithaca," which completes the Homeric parallel, and the succeeding "Penelope" episode, which marks the actual but illegitimate finish—bring together Joyce's disparate writing methods in their extreme forms. Early naturalism and later psychological experimentalism bookend his life's work and inform the transition from hyperlogical masculinity to intensely procreative femininity. Like Joyce, both Stephen and Bloom search for validation through creation or procreation, but are thwarted by their inability to escape from impotent thought to tangible acts. Molly alone embodies the nourishing duality of the gender binary. Her female passivity is revealed to be female action: the ability to do rather than delay. Her female fluidity is revealed to be female strength: the ability to overcome the death of her child. Through Molly, Joyce points towards womanhood in modernity.