***Ulysses, part 2***

***Athenaeum February 2014***

We last left Bloom at Barney Kiernan’s at 5PM disputing with the citizen and his friends. From here we next see him through the eyes of a romantic young woman on the Sandymount Strand (and as usual he seems transported there in a blink). This is the same place visited by Stephen in the Proteous episode earlier in the day. Bloom captures the notice of Gerty, a passionate, impressionable young woman playing the roll of Naussica. The episode is beautifully written, culminating in an “orgasmic” fireworks display. From here it is on to the hospital to visit Mrs. Purefoy who is in the throws of labor. Of note, this episode, Oxen of the Sun (involving birth/hospital) is the 5th chapter from the end forming a rough chiasm with Hades (involving death/cemetery), which is the 6th chapter from the beginning. This is another of many structural touches Joyce has constructed into the novel. At the hospital Bloom finally meets Stephen, and the pair will remain together until near the end of Ithaca. The prose follows what Joyce calls an “embryonic” techinic, in which writing moves through an increasingly modern idiom. Marking the transition points is a challenge for the careful reader. After leaving the hospital they go to (another) bar where the young men get tight, capped off by a round of Absinth before heading to the brothel.

Circe is Ulysses’ longest chapter, and certainly the most bizarre. As Odyssian Circe employs magic to capture and transform Odysseus’ crew, Joyce’s technic here is also “magic”, which manifests as a long stream of hallucinations on the part of Stephen and Bloom. While there are fascinating new characters in this chapter (like the whores Zoe, Florry, and Kitty and their “massive whoremistress”, Bella), much of the imagery consists in an endless stream of vaudeville-like visions in which appear most of the people already encountered throughout the day. The party breaks up when Stephen smashes the gas lamp and heads outside leaving Bloom to square up with Bella. There he runs into some trouble of his own when he has an altercation with a soldier who accuses Stephen of insulting both girlfriend and King. When the soldier decks Stephen we have reached the dramatic and stylistic climax of the book. From here the technical changes of succeeding chapters never employ the same panache. Circe comes to a close with a fatherly Bloom once again tending to Stephen. While trying to get him back on his feet, Blooms sees the final vision of the evening – his dead son Rudy. This singular vision stands in contrast to the bizarre, macabre parade of preceding hallucinations. It’s like drifting into a gentle sleep after hours of nightmare. And given that it takes place while Bloom is caring for the unconscious Stephen, the scene is loaded with meaning. Leopold and Stephen are travelers. Their souls are on the move – each experiencing their own private metempsychosis. For Bloom, this transmigration pivots around the death of Rudy, with Stephen serving as the medium through which his odyssey unfolds.

Once Stephen is on his feet, they head for home stopping at the cabman’s shelter. This episode, Emmaus, begins the repeat of styles employed in the first three chapters of the book, but in the spirit of metempsychosis, the repeat is more like renewal because the technics are modified from their original presentation. Emmaus is told in the old narrative technic (contrasting Telemachus’ young narrative technique), Ithaca in “impersonal catechism” (contrasting Nestor’s “young catechism”), and finally Penelope in monolog, female (contrasting Proteus in monolog , male). At the end of Emmaus, Stephen and Bloom head for 79 Eccels St. As the penultimate chapter begins our journeymen return to Bloom’s home (thus the title, Ithaca), where the story is laid out in plain, stark Q&A. It’s like reading the Westminster Catechism, but very interesting, and one of my favorite chapters in the book. Stephen eventually declines an offer to stay, Bloom wraps up the affairs of his long day, and drifts off the sleep. The book ends in the mind of Molly Bloom. Her chapter is impossible, her thoughts utterly veiled in unreadable prose devoid of any punctuation. Joyce has strayed too far from orthodox in the final chapter. It’s curious, for all the systematic elements in the book why the last 3 chapters are devoted to Molly (again a contrast the to the first 3 which focus on Stephen), and why he chose the most impenetrable style to present he thoughts. For me Ithaca is the true end of the novel.

In closing let me offer congratulations! For those of you who read from Telemachus to Penelope, a literary milestone has been reached. Many good judges have proclaimed --and it turns out with good reason – that Ulysses revolves alone in the highest orbit of modern literature. To penetrate any one of its many layers is an accomplishment that well read individuals might not universally claim, and even the shallowest understanding yields a bounty of riches. This is a novel to which the reader can return time and time again – even if only a single episode in a sitting – and never fail to learn something new or come away with a deeper appreciation. Finishing Ulysses is not merely a feather in one’s cap, but a set of wings, whole and complete, with which to convey the reader to bluer literary skies.