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Celebrating Michael Groden: A Public Tribute

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Celebrating Michael Groden: A Public Tribute

Dipanjan Maitra



*Photo from
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“My longest continuous adult relationship has not been with my wife, or a friend, or a cat ... but with a book: James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.” Michael Groden aptly summarized his life in the first line of his final book, *The Necessary Fiction: Life with James Joyce’s Ulysses* (Edward Everett Root, 2019). The Poetry Collection, home to the University at Buffalo’s James Joyce Collection, hosted a moving online tribute, with over two hundred people tuning in from all over the world, to his memory on 25 March 2022, remembering precisely this continuous relationship.

The venue could not be more appropriate. Michael Groden, or “Mike,” as he was affectionately called by numerous fellow Joyceans, friends, colleagues, and family, was born and raised in Buffalo in a Jewish family, and shortly after earning his doctorate from Princeton in 1975, his name would become synonymous with Joyce manuscripts, or the *James Joyce Archive*. The story of *The James Joyce Archive*, the 63-volume facsimile edition of Joyce’s then-extant manuscripts published by Garland between 1977 and 1979, beautifully chronicled in *The Necessary Fiction*, is a modern publishing fairytale. It not only cemented Groden’s reputation as a brilliant star in the firmament of Joyce studies and secured him an early tenure at the University of Western Ontario, but became the very bedrock of “genetic criticism” of

Joyce's texts: a school of textual criticism that studies the genesis of a text without being overdetermined by a teleological horizon. Unsurprisingly, Groden would go on to co-edit the primer on the subject in *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-textes* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), and as time passed, his doctoral thesis, which had turned into *Ulysses in Progress* (Princeton, 1977), would become the standard introduction to anyone interested in Joyce's *Ulysses* manuscripts.

But while Groden's scholarly outputs continue to remain cornerstones of Joyce criticism and critical theory today and one imagines in the days to come, he was much more than just a great scholarly mind. As fellow Joyceans Bill Brockman, Ronan Crowley, Terence Killeen, Sam Slote, and Vicki Mahaffey reminisced and as former colleague at Western Ontario, Manina Jones, and former student Miriam Silver Verga observed, Groden's warmth and generosity transcended the ivory towers of the academe. Groden was that rare breed, the first Joycean one could become friendly with at the Joyce Symposium, the beloved colleague whose extreme modesty could border on shyness but who could also be persuaded to become an enthusiastic collaborator on pathbreaking projects: he was the academic contemporary one could love and respect. An astute textual scholar, Groden was an early enthusiast for hypertextual editions of Joyce's works. He was also an integral part of the editorial team that sought to publish Joyce's unpublished letters. But as the poet and author Molly Peacock reminded us about her husband, Groden was generous to his students, early-career scholars, to a fault. From writing reference letters to promising scholars he had met only once, to having the staunchest faith in their abilities when they doubted themselves, Groden went out of his way to support younger scholars. A great runner, Groden was also a star marathoner, who never shied off a long-distance run.

Indeed, Michael Groden's helping hand reached beyond national boundaries, as this writer can vouchsafe. As a young Joycean writing my M Phil thesis in India in 2012, I remember reaching out to online Joyce forums for research articles I did not have access to in my part of the world. Even though I did not know anyone in that forum, or indeed in the Joyce world, the first person to respond to my call was none other than Michael Groden. Like many before and after me, in the years to follow, I would get to interact, question, and seek advice from him in the Joyce conferences and symposiums he was an intimate part of.

But even for a scholar of his stature and influence, the journey was not without adversities. From being advised to consider the alternate career of a taxi driver by Stephen Joyce (as Fritz Senn recalled) to being in the midst of the "Joyce Wars" of the mid-1980s, Michel Groden carried himself with

remarkable dignity and poise. Molly Peacock (“the first Molly,” according to Groden) recalled an evening when Groden had just discovered that his book contract for a long-cherished project with a well-known publisher had been canceled unaccountably. Peacock recounted how Groden’s fortitude and grace in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds that day endeared him even more to her.

This and more became the highlight of the evening, as an excerpt from Godfrey Jordan’s film on Groden, *The Michael Groden Papers: ReJoyce in Buffalo* was screened. The excerpt, which contained brief but fascinating exchanges between James Maynard (Curator of the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo) and Molly Peacock, showcased Groden’s own meticulously curated Joyce collection, which included not only rough drafts of academic articles, early plans for books, but also Joyce cartoons that he had collected for over forty years. Although Michael Groden, the scholar, the man, will be missed by everyone who was fortunate enough to know him in his lifetime, it is our good fortune that Groden, before his passing, had already decided to donate his papers to the University at Buffalo, where they would now become part of the largest repository of Joyce manuscripts in the world. The Michael Groden Papers, which are at once “portraits of rooms in the mansion of the Mike Groden mind” (as Molly Peacock succinctly put it), will help unravel the genesis of many a genetic project that the manuscript scholar Groden initiated or was an active part of. Michael Groden, who in his memoirs relentlessly scrutinized himself, his past, often modeled himself on Leopold Bloom, that cultured allroundman of mythical proportions. Scholars, curious minds of the future, who never got to know him, will now have the opportunity to have a glimpse of that mind in the best possible way Groden believed one could know an author: by analyzing not only their published materials, but their working papers, their *avant-textes*.

—University at Buffalo