

2024

Parallel Readings: From Mythic Time to Our Time Too

Alison Armstrong

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in James Joyce Literary Supplement by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Alison (2024) "Parallel Readings: From Mythic Time to Our Time Too," *James Joyce Literary Supplement*. Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls/vol37/iss1/1>

Parallel Readings: From Mythic Time to Our Time Too

STEPHANIE NELSON, *Time and Identity in Ulysses and the Odyssey*.

Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2022.

\$85.00 hardcover.

Alison Armstrong

“Man is a time-bonding animal.”— Alan Watts

At last, we have a comparative discussion that may finally fill in the too apparent lacunae in Joyce’s well known “Linati schema.” Stephanie Nelson provides us a set of relations for dual “realities”—not absolute imitations or parallels—between the uses of time in Homer and in Joyce, and how idiosyncratic identities arise. Nelson compares not subject matters and details of the events in episodes so much as contrasting techniques in the uses of space, the “one next to the other” or *nebeneinander*, and of time, the “one after the other” or *nacheinander*, the same topics Stephen Dedalus briefly ponders as he walks along Sandymount Strand on his way to town. The typical modernist/post-modern adaptations of the classical that we also find in T.S. Eliot are in the techniques of Joyce’s reworking of the classical.

Chronological time in Joyce (and especially of Stephen’s experience) progresses through the hours of the day using linear movement in contrast to the plotted sophistication of Homer’s time in *Finnegans Wake*’s “pregross”. We also encounter the objective and subjective experiences of time in the actions and thoughts of Joyce’s characters. Homer’s are mainly people of action. An exception occurs late in the hero’s journey, when Odysseus is swimming toward the shore of what he, and we, will discover to be Nausicaa’s island of the Phaeacians. The once-mortal Ino appears in the form of a bird alighting on his disintegrating raft and instructs him to divest himself of his clothes and let go of his raft, giving him her veil, telling him to swim for land. Notably, Odysseus debates with his indomitable spirit only when he has lost everything material and, tortured by his nemesis Poseidon, is in a quandary as to whether he should obey the instructions of “Ino of the Slim Ankles” (77) (as she is styled in Rieu’s prose version of the *Odyssey*) or follow his own inclinations. Three times Odysseus’s doubt and introspection are shattered literally by a gigantic wave from Poseidon until he is ashore, when next he debates with himself the pros and cons of where to sleep more safely, exposed on the beach or in the dry leaves beneath the double olive tree which of course reminds us (if not him) of his marital bed, built around a living olive tree and hints that he is nearly home. Previous moments of subjectivity have made him seem irresponsible, as when he fell asleep, first at the rudder after failing to tell his men what was in Aeolus’s bag, and again while praying on the Sun God’s island; in both cases, neglect of his men led to their self-interested actions and devastating consequences.

On first looking into Nelson’s Homer, I realized how informative and well considered her insights and persuasive arguments are. Her clarity of thought is evident throughout this book that foregrounds the two worlds, ancient bronze age (the time of the tale of Odysseus’s wanderings, approximately 1500 BC) and ancient classical age (the time of Homer’s writing in perhaps seventh century BC), the modernist era of Joyce’s writing life (approximately AD 1900-1922), and that of his tale of Bloom’s wanderings (a single day in AD 1904). They do not mirror one another but rather contradict in that the contrasting length of time (ten years versus twenty-four hours) seem like

parallel perspectives from which to view two virtual realities, the mythic and the mundane, the plotted and the linear. Nelson is certainly a more learned scholar of Homer in Greek than was Joyce, whose initial exposure to the story was a children's version of the *Odyssey* by Charles Lamb.

One objection, perhaps minor for many readers these days, is the use of a verb as a noun, e.g., “disconnect” instead of disconnection (9). Her every observation, nevertheless, rings true to this reader. For example, she sees the fall of Troy as a break in historical time and between mythic time and realistic or ordinary present time. Nelson so perfectly states her observations that it is difficult to criticize the book, or even find a breathing space in which to condense her observations. She exhibits deep understanding of the drama among characters, for example the unique interactions of Athena and Odysseus, Odysseus and Penelope, Athena and Penelope, as well as those between Bloom and Molly, Bloom and Stephen, and Molly and Stephen, or the variant and characteristic attitudes of the parents to their children (135).

While Homer's epic is plotted, Joyce's “novel” moves in chronological time (albeit with memories and anticipations embedded as in ordinary narrative interior monologue). Rieu comments, in tune with Nelson's, on the temporal sequence in the introduction to his own translation of the *Odyssey*, under the rubric Structure, Content, and Character (xii). Without the plotting of Homer, he states the events would simply be “one damn thing after another,” and this “rich interaction of past and present is one of the great glories of the *Odyssey* and an important component of the narrative's power and pathos” (xii-xix).

Being a reader with little Latin (only four years) and less Greek (five minutes), like many of my contemporary Joycean readers—with the significant exception of Sebastian Knowles who reveals his skill in an erudite Introduction to Nelson's book—I am approaching this review not as a classicist but as a comparatist with a strong interest in Homer's epic in translation(s) and in Joyce “in his own write” as a modernist comic responder. Nelson's scholarship as Professor of Classical Studies at Boston University is the foundation for her analyses of both authors, a foundation further augmented with annual involvements in Fritz Senn's August Workshops in Zurich at the JJ Stiftung. Her references to Henri Bergson's *durée* and to Erle Bradford, the philosopher of metaphysics and the sailor-scholar, respectively, reveal the scope of her interests in interpretive readings beyond literary commentaries.

Each chapter has a clear topic. The following samples of the essence of each chapter can hardly do justice to the depth and complexity of her observations. I leave it to future readers—who really must acquire this book—to enjoy the fulness of her skills.

Chapter 1 - Time in Joyce and Homer

Once Upon a Time or mythic time transports us readers into a virtual world of events and identities that nevertheless seem real, as Aristotle remarked of the power of the process of *mimesis* upon the audience who see/understand/feel how “this is that” in their own lives too. In the virtual realities of literature, we acquire an emotionalized intellect (superseding Mr. Duffy's), the truth of human experiences as portrayed for us in recognizable modes, and, as much as we are able to, identify with characters *as formed by* their situations and resulting actions even though not identical with our lives. The structure of the plot of tragedy and of the epic, with its slippages of temporal and spatial events held in place in our imaginations by flashbacks and prophecy, gives realism to the mythic way of telling a story. And the inclusion of implicit free will adds to our anticipations and cathartic reactions: for example, Odysseus is fated to return home, but after much delay and suffering caused mainly by his nemesis Poseidon. His fate is repeated by several identifiable characters: the Cyclops Polyphemus, by Circe, by the shade of Tiresias. If he does X then Y will result; or if he or his men fail to do A then B will result. Yet he *will* return.

In this first chapter Nelson introduces the notions of dual time, the inner and outer, and how each work in Bloom and in Stephen: that is, a “Clock time” versus subjective inner time. “The uniformity of clock time in *Ulysses* often brings out the isolation of characters rather than bringing them together” (Nelson 21-22). Bloom’s isolation is emphasized by the number of people (men, mostly) around him, while Stephen moves into himself away from other people (23).

Odysseus is almost never alone, although he is sometimes lonely. Athena frequently watches and helps, his men are devoted if unruly, he is sailing alone for 17 1/2 days after leaving Calypso, Poseidon is at his heels, Ino awaits the return of her veil but abandons him to a solitary three-day swim. As he grows older, Odysseus, like Bloom, becomes more introspective. Nelson concludes: “Joyce insisted on seeing the mythic world in completely human terms ... how a young man finds a way to his future self and how an older one deal with losing his youth. In this way his point of view was not that different from Homer’s” (43).

Chapter 2 - Stephen and Telemachus: The Case of the Displaced Son

The relations between sons and their mothers are explored in this chapter, among other issues such as property and reputation. The betrayal of the mother occurs in both. Early on in the first book of the *Odyssey*, we see contrasts between ordinary little Ithaka and the elegant cities of kingly survivors of Troy visited, as per Athena's scheme, by Telemachus, such as “sandy Pylos,” palatial home of the long-winded elder statesman and soldier Nestor. Then there is Sparta, with the mischievous queen Helen, now restored to her husband King Menelaus and to her loom. (We may recall that Sparta is the hometown of Telemachus’s mother, Penelope.) In both cities, he is offered exquisite gifts, such as the horses that he must decline since Ithaka is too stony to accommodate them.

Nelson observes that “a chord whether consonant or dissonant exists only through *difference*” (44). The techniques of Homer reveal the first half of the *Odyssey* as watery, implying loss or ambiguity of identity, while the second half is rocky, solid ground for reestablishing identity (25). In Joyce, contrarily, Stephen rejects water, refuses to swim with Mulligan and Haines, the important liquid aspect of his life being alcohol.

The important device of the hero’s descent into the Underworld occurs in both: Circe advises Odysseus to seek guidance from the shade of the father figure Tiresias who reenforces the prophecy that he is fated to return to Ithaka and with the application of free will within specified limits. Thus, Odysseus is reassured, a situation parodied in the “Nighttown” episode in which the imagined shade of Mrs. Dedalus haunts and reenforces guilt in Stephen. Both incidents function as a step in the growth of identity before necessary movement forward is possible.

Chapter 3 - Odysseus and Bloom: Names and Stories

“Stories and names anchor meaning,” writes Nelson (70). Narrative can establish *kleos* (fame), thus the normal changes of life are made permanent, imperishable. Yet, “[t]o have a name is to be a target” (73). The effect of time on identity seems akin to Aristotle’s definition of character as “habitual action”: and “character is destiny.” Given a strong (one might say narcissistic) character (an Oedipus or Creon) in a specific situation, only certain choices and consequences may inevitably result. And bad timing is built into tragic plots. But we are not reading tragedy here. Nelson has already discussed fluid and fixed identities (23); Joyce and Homer both explore being the same person despite sometimes protean changes they experience over time.

Chapter 4 - Odysseus and Bloom: Ambiguity and Doing the Deed

Under the rubric of “The Passive Hero,” Nelson points out that Bloom and Odysseus are sailors

clinging to metaphoric rafts in the midst of storm, “faced in the ever-changing flux that is time, with the challenge of preserving identity but now becoming trapped within it” (93). Both characters use cunning, a passive form of action. And yet they kill the suitors and reestablish their dominion in home and marriage. Odysseus will burst into bloody action that has been well planned in advance with Telemachus and Eumaeus. And “whether Bloom actively furthers Molly’s affair or passively accepts it, his approach is very much in contrast to Odysseus’s ... Bloom regards Molly’s affair with ‘more abnegation than jealousy, less envy than equanimity’ (17.2195). He eliminates not the doer, but the offense” (108). He slays his wife’s suitors “with the bow of reason” (109).

Chapter 5 - Molly and Penelope, Weavers of the Wind

The otherness of the women is nevertheless the important anchor for their men and their roles are “deeply culturally conditioned” (120). The central female characters perform the critical function of holding past, present, and future together. Weaving and unweaving is an image of art in time. Major female characters of high estate in ancient Greece were literally weavers. Circe and Calypso sing as they weave; Penelope is a skilled storyteller as is Stephen the young writer in the National Library with his friends: “—As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies ... their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image” (9.376). And Joyce once noted his patroness Harriet Weaver’s fortuitous name.

The warp and woof of Molly Tweedy Bloom’s sleepy monologue are not so much a combination of linear past, present, future anticipations, but more a tangled skein of virtual yarns of a protean mind, interlinked episodes freely associated by momentary similarities of association. That she literally knitted at least once (the little woolly jacket Rudy was buried in) we know, but her blending of emotional associations is not a queenly fabric from a loom with yarn spun on golden spindles.

Chapter 6 - The Gods and Narrative Styles

Joyce’s (David Hayman’s) novelistic “Arranger” and Homer’s gods disrupt and rearrange interactions in time, perhaps like Mr. Deasy for teleological ends. In each, with what Nelson calls “polyrealism,” there is a kind of progression through time and in the development of character, yet in accordance with the experience of lived events. As Joyce put it, “If my book is unreadable, then life is unlivable.” We begin to recognize pattern, the repetition of motifs, at intervals in time as we read and as we live. Thus, Ellmann was right when he wrote, “we are still learning to be Joyce’s contemporaries.” *Ulysses* cannot be read; it can only be *re*-read. In Homer, there are repetitions of descriptive phrases, epithets, in certain translations such as Rieu or Fagles (less so in Emily Wilson): “rosy-fingered dawn,” “wine-dark sea.” And there are variations on the prophecy of Odysseus’s fate. Some say these are memory devices for recitation in an oral tradition. But they also echo the repetitions of life’s processes.

One of the many parallelisms (and eventually parallax) that Nelson brings into alignment includes contrasting types of men: Odysseus is heroic in that he is a physical fighter whereas Mr. Bloom considers a body-building course; all his battles are emotional and rational. If two parallel lines meet in infinity, as Albert Einstein observed, then the effect of Nelson’s book is that our experiences of ancient and modern time (and identities) can converge in the afterglow, so to speak, of her observations on polyrealism, duality, unity, clocktime, and *durée*.

Conclusion: The Comic and the Human

The “comic” aspects of the epic align with “comedy” in Aristotle’s broad sense that ends happily with reunited and redeemed major characters, notwithstanding the brutal ironies that befall the shortsighted followers of Odysseus. As for Joyce, he claimed that there was not a serious word in his book and was heard laughing as he wrote. But humor as we know it, hilarity, is not identical with the more sober ironies of the epic, nor the high-jinks of individual characters, nor the playful brutalities of Circe in turning Odysseus’ men into swine—mirroring the Ithakan swine overseen by Odysseus’s distressed foster brother Eumaeus the Swineherd bemoaning the suitors’ decimation of the animals in his care and the earlier situation in which Odysseus’s own men brought about their own fated destruction by choosing to devour the forbidden immortal cattle of the Sun God. Breaking of rules, whether divinely stated or according to customs of hospitality, leads to terrible deaths. As for Molly’s suitors, they are all (but one) imaginary and can do no harm even in the mind of her husband who seems to have a benign attitude toward the knowledge that she will be going to Belfast with the suitor who that afternoon for the first but not last time invaded their bed, not a solid one built around a living olive tree but a secondhand jangling brass bed that cannot keep quiet. The pillow talk of man and wife ends each book. Odysseus reassures Penelope that he *will* restore his depleted fortunes by raiding. Molly *may* satisfy her husband’s demand for a breakfast with eggs and restore her larder by visiting the market in the morning. The comedy is open-ended, and so it is to be human only.

Appendix: The Episodes of *Ulysses*

The three major sections of *Ulysses* are connected to the characters prominently realized in each, as well as in “Wandering Rocks” at 3am in the dead of night when Dubliners in general are the inhabitants.

The sources of the mythical stories of Homer are supported by archaeology and anthropology to have been based in actual historical events and geographical places. Since 1922, the realism of Joyce’s writing, set as it is in the actual geographical city of the Dublin of 1904 and with its characters drawn upon actual people in history, has acquired mythic proportions.

—*New York City*

Works Cited

- Aristotle’s Poetics*. Translated by S. H. Butcher, Introduction by Francis Fergusson. New York: Hill & Wang, 1981.
- Bradford, Ernle. *Ulysses Found*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Introduction and Notes by Bernard Knox. New York: Viking, 1996.
- Rieu, E.V. *Homer: The Odyssey*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1946.
- Senn, Fritz. “Remodelling Homer.” *Inductive Scrutinies: Focus on Joyce*, Ed. Christine O’Neill. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 111-132.