

2024

How Grand We Are This Morning

Adam Parkes
University of Georgia

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

Parkes, Adam (2024) "How Grand We Are This Morning," *James Joyce Literary Supplement*. Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls/vol37/iss1/10>

How Grand We Are This Morning

KEVIN RULO, *Satiric Modernism*.

Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2021.

\$150.00 hardcover; \$150.00 ebook.

Adam Parkes

Modernity's culture of self-critique has been essential to its renewing vigor, to its ability to transform itself, to develop, and to progress," Kevin Rulo writes at the end of his stimulating book, *Satiric Modernism*. "Antimodern satire has offered a powerful contribution to that culture, one which can often challenge us even today and one which can sometimes anger us, but one which never allows us to be complacent or self-satisfied" (216). Thus Rulo sums up his argument that a strain of anti-modern satire intrinsic to modernism itself has sponsored not only modernism's self-reflexively "ludic" aesthetics but also its extensions into the work of later artists and critics. One of the singular strengths of Rulo's book derives from its convincingly argued claim that modernists are often their own best critics—the toughest and sometimes the harshest. Modernist satire, he observes, "does not spare itself" (23). One of the important outcomes of this claim is that later critiques may be seen as restaging what modernism had already performed earlier in the twentieth century. In this way, Rulo reminds twenty-first-century readers of how modernism continues to reveal ourselves to ourselves.

Satiric Modernism combines scholarly rigor and sharp organization with close attention to a wide array of modern—and anti-modern—satirists. Not surprisingly, Wyndham Lewis looms large as Rulo considers each of the key stages of his career, from his early blasting through the big thirties novels to later retrospective work. But through four substantial chapters flanked by a detailed introduction and a brief envoi on the French author Philippe Muray, Rulo ranges widely across the terrain of modern literature and culture, from Lewis, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Ellison to the mid-century fiction of Sam Selvon and the contemporary arts, represented by the poetry of John Agard, the drama of Sarah Kane, and the filmmaking of Paolo Sorrentino.

In Chapter 1, titled "Artist and Society: 'a war without truce,'" Rulo offers an intriguing and original account of how Ezra Pound was influenced by the "cold" satirical fiction of the forgotten nineties aesthete G.S. Street, a reading that produces fresh insight into Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). Chapter 2 ("'all art is in fact satire today': High Modernism Revisited") includes a similarly enlightening discussion of Eliot's early quatrain poems in combination with Herbert Read and the Sitwells. By focusing on how these poets depict the hollow man and other modern types, Rulo brings under one roof authors who are usually placed on very different parts of the literary map. Indeed, the hollow man in his various guises is a recurrent figure here, with a skillfully historicized account of the young man carbuncular as the widely-despised modern figure of the house agent illustrating the anti-modern ends to which Eliot and other writers put such material.

Another highlight is the coupling of *The Waste Land* (1922) with Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) in Chapter 4 ("Satire and the Ends of Modernism"). The connections Rulo draws between Eliot's poem and the "satirical techniques of travesty and mock epic" deployed in Selvon's novel are compelling and convincing (184). Remarking how Selvon depicts the plight of his characters as a Black immigrant variation on the "familiar modernist condition of the hollow man," Rulo explains why the Trinidadian novelist's "lonely London remains surprisingly, even doggedly, modernist in

aesthetic terms” (185). In a chapter that begins by demonstrating via readings of Woolf and Ellison how late modernist satire “acknowledges and seeks to react to the satirical *that is already constitutively present within early and high modernism*” (166, original italics), Rulo makes two telling points about Selvon’s significance. One is that “excavating Selvon’s creolization of satiric modernism” enriches our appreciation of the connections between different literary and cultural traditions without submitting to “merely diffusionist readings of modernism” (188). The second point is that reading Selvon as a modernist makes it possible to “conceive of the high modernists as global creolizers, drawing from usable pasts and traditions to fashion new aesthetics, new languages, and new artistic identities” (188). Thus Selvon joins Rulo’s canon of modernist satirists who “make new the satiric tradition” (188).

What is the satiric tradition? Another distinguishing feature of Rulo’s book is its engagement with the longer literary history of satire, together with its longer literary-critical history, as well as recent critical interventions on satire in the twentieth and eighteenth centuries. In the Introduction, which responds in detail to recent work in modernist studies, Rulo underplays this literary-historical dimension, yet it frequently makes itself felt in the pages that follow. It is illuminating to read there about how Eliot negotiated the competing influences of Dryden (whose satire “enhances”) and Pope (who “belittles”), as well as the now more familiar influence of Dickens (93). Equally informative are Rulo’s accounts of how Byron influenced Pound and of how Eliot and Lewis embraced Ben Jonson’s “satiric machinery” (111). Combined with its attention to the literary-critical histories of both satire and the major authors under discussion, Rulo’s approach offers the sort of broad historical perspective that the topic requires.

The result is a flexible, heuristic model of satire that allows for the complexity that it obtains in a period when every genre seems to want to be a mode. Rulo rightly traces this constitutive flexibility back to satire’s classical origins by noting that the various formal strategies long employed to satirical ends have roots in the Latin term *satira*: “the loose plots, structures of melange, and tropo-logics familiar to works of satire” (18). In satirical practice, moreover, none of these strategies has been “limited to genre” but has instead “encompass[ed] satiric aesthetic orientations expressed as organizational techniques” (18). Hence the frequent overlaps between satire, comedy, and irony. Rulo prioritizes satire over comedy because he considers the former to be “closer to the general mood of modernism: with its pessimism, its crisis rhetoric, its mechanisms of irresolution and lack of closure” (18). Not everyone will necessarily agree with this assessment; Christopher Isherwood, for instance, thought that the key to modern literature was the comic note struck by E.M. Forster, and it is hard not to feel that evocations of mood—or “disposition,” “tendency,” and “posture”—fog up the literary-critical lens (18). But Rulo quickly gets himself back onto firmer ground by charting various ways in which modern writers deploy what he describes as “the more frequent elements of satiric modernism’s aesthetic repertoire [...]: anti-humanist classicism; travesty; caricature; invective; typing, and the ‘ludic’” (18).

For readers of Eliot, Lewis, Pound, Selvon, and others, Rulo’s approach pays rich dividends. There is much to interest Joyceans as well. Rulo follows Scott W. Klein in pairing Joyce with Lewis, whose antagonism toward his Irish contemporary is well-known. Accordingly, just as *Tarr* has been read (as Pound read it) as an antidote to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Rulo offers an intriguing interpretation of Lewis’s “Joint” – the obscure unpublished manuscript from which *The Apes of God* emerged – as an “anti-*Ulysses*” (122). Noting the obvious differences between Eliot’s and Pound’s “satirical laments,” marked by “the deepest seriousness and anxiety,” and Joyce’s “gentler satirical light-heartedness,” he argues with some subtlety that Lewis combines the two modes even in his most rabidly anti-humanist works (131). And when Rulo turns to Joyce directly, in the second part of the long third chapter, he is insightful on the “unique mode of the antimodern satirical” that in *Ulysses* “mak[es] itself felt on the levels of form, setting, and background, and [...]

also in its protagonist” (142). Further, Joyce’s satire is “less on the characters than on the modernity that produces them” (143). In the “Hades” episode, Rulo discovers a signal instance of modernism’s unsparing “self-reflexive kind of satire,” which satirizes the “burial rites” at the center of the action but also satirizes the satire and the satirist, in this case, Leopold Bloom.

Rulo reads Bloom persuasively as both a “modernist copy of Homer’s ancient Greek hero” and a “remix of modernism’s satiric copy of hollowness” (148), arguing that by “playfully mixing sympathy and censure,” Joyce’s novel “stretch[es] the boundaries of the satirical altogether” (145). I wonder, though, if Rulo doesn’t underestimate that playfulness. Take, again, the “Hades” episode. In Rulo’s account, Bloom, “a Jewish outsider at an Irish Catholic burial,” is a “detached observer” whose view of proceedings assumes the “satirical irony of understatement” (152, 155). Detecting in Bloom’s musings evidence of a “rational technocratic mentality,” Rulo judges Bloom’s satirical posture to be a “failure” (154-55), the implication being that in this masterpiece of comic-free indirect writing, the ironic distance between character and author is considerable. Briefly, of course, the narrative wanders away from Bloom entirely, anticipating the more radical departures from Joyce’s early style on view in the later episodes. But the author’s distance from his hero appears to diminish when Bloom muses satirically on the rites and rituals of Catholic burial:

Mr Bloom walked unheeded along his grove by saddened angels, crosses, broken pillars, family vaults, stone hopes praying with upcast eyes, old Ireland’s hearts and hands. More sensible to spend the money on some charity for the living. Pray for the repose of the soul of. Does anybody really? Plant him and have done with him. Like down a coalshoot. Then lump them together to save time. All souls’ day. Twentyseventh I’ll be at his grave. Ten shillings for the gardener. He keeps it free of weeds. Old man himself. Bent down double with his shears clipping. Near death’s door. Who passed away. Who departed this life. As if they did it of their own accord. Got the shove, all of them. Who kicked the bucket. (Joyce 113)

And so on. To gloss three sentences from this passage as evidence of Bloom’s “Weberesque bureaucratic rationality” (154), a reader must be fairly confident that the character is not party to the playfulness with which the author is writing.

What really counts here is the linguistic play, the seriocomic virtuosity with which Joyce lets Bloom’s mind drift sacrilegiously among disparate verbal contexts and registers. As one commonplace yields to another (“Bent down double ... Near death’s door ... Who departed this life ... Got the shove ... Who kicked the bucket ...”), it sounds as if someone is beating the dead horse of cliché to see if it can be brought back to life. Rulo acknowledges an “element of gleeful frolic” in *Ulysses* (143). Still, the wordplay rises here to raucousness, making audible the loud, riotous laughter that Elizabeth Bowen, for one, heard in Joyce’s writing. Far from gentle, this is a form of play in which the author perhaps merges with his character to pronounce a biting judgment on male lower-middle-class society in modern Dublin with which “Hades” closes: “How grand we are this morning!”

Even so, while some readers may want to pay more attention to nuances of language and narrative point of view from time to time, Rulo has written an impressive and wide-ranging book that reanimates a significant topic often neglected in modernist studies. Satiric Modernism has scope, clarity, generosity, and insight. Anyone who reads it will learn from it.

— University of Georgia

Works Cited

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. 1922. Vintage Paperback, 1990.