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Measuring Times and Selves in Homer and Joyce

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THE HALLMARK EXAMPLE of cinematic blunders—one is tempted, in this context, to call it a “classic”—is the shot of a Roman charioteer or gladiator wearing a wristwatch. Such an instance of what is known in filmmaking as a “continuity error” also underscores the complexities of the term “anachronism.” The image may well prompt us to wonder what use a gladiator might have for a Rolex. Conversely, among the “improvements” that Leopold Bloom pictures for his imaginary cottage near the end of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a sundial: an archaic means of telling the time as part of a very modern and middle-class fantasy, signifying a very different relation to time from the one the gladiator has to worry about. Such strikingly displaced objects and irregularities in measuring moments and lifetimes indicate how perplexingly one sense or representation of time’s passing differs from another, across centuries, between individuals, and even for any one person from one point in life to the next.

In *Time and Identity in Ulysses and the Odyssey*, Stephanie Nelson compares how narrative conceptions of time both shape characters and suggest notions of selfhood in Homer’s poem and Joyce’s novel. It is worth noting from the outset that a great many selves have spent a lot of time writing and publishing a great many comparisons of these two texts, but Nelson’s book is among the most insightful and affable in recent years. The writing is always clear and the judgements fair-minded. Moreover, Nelson’s familiarity with not just

Stephanie Nelson, *Time and Identity in Ulysses and the Odyssey*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2022. xiii + 282 pages, \$85.00, hardcover, ISBN 9780813069357.

the critical debates around these authors but also the most troublesome details of these texts is in evidence throughout.

A specious attempt to shrug off any problematizations of time between Homer and Joyce might have it that the one deals in “mythic” time and the other in “ordinary” time, but as Nelson points out, both texts are suffused with both kinds of time: they move in and out of each, which in turn makes the phenomenon of selfhood more than a little puzzling. Odysseus may seem the man of “then,” but the whole purpose of his voyage to Ithaca is to return to “now.” As Nelson puts it, his “task, in many ways, will be precisely to breach the distinction between mythic and ordinary time” (10), and the sly use of the future tense dramatizes the point very well. Leopold Bloom, for his part, succinctly thinks, “Me. And me now” (*U* 8.918), which has to be the most concise possible summary of the novel. Both protagonists demonstrate how we are in pursuit of the present, how we seek to affirm that we *are*. Richard Ellmann’s famous remark about how we are learning to become Joyce’s contemporaries points to the epic nature of Bloom’s and Odysseus’s own becoming.

Many subjects are taken up in the course of Nelson’s comparison (sons and fathers, violence, storytelling) and so it may not be surprising that some of her best insights arise in an almost by-the-way fashion. For instance, Nelson remarks on how Bloom is “unique in *Ulysses* as a man who actually speaks to a woman (Josie Breen) neither related to him nor in a service role” (95) before reflecting on how Odysseus is so much defined by his relationships with women and how he talks to them. Molly Bloom may be sure of always being able to “get around” her husband, but Bloom must strive to be the “rounded” man so that this can happen: a man of many turns, you might say. Thus negotiation and fluctuation emerge as persistent themes in Nelson’s book. In a brief discussion of memory—which, she reminds us, Circe “threatened to obliterate”—Nelson observes how both the marriages of Odysseus and Penelope and of Leopold and Molly “negotiate between fixity and indeterminacy,”

bound together “in the openness that is ordinary time” and yet “irrevocably divided within a radically fragmented world” (147).

Over the course of reading, I found Nelson’s use of the word “self” making me wonder—and this is probably too complex and consuming a problem in itself for her time-focussed study—what tangible difference there might be between selfhood and identity. After all, it’s not obvious that they are indistinguishable or even synonymous. Odysseus (and in a more farcical way, Bloom) conceals his identity even as (by so doing) he reveals his self. Bruno Snell proposed that the ancient Greeks understood the body “not as a unit but as an aggregate” (this from *The Discovery of the Mind*) and had no sense of “self.” Nelson nods to Snell’s argument because it “reminds us that if Homer does have a sense of the self, it is not necessarily the same as our own” (176). She scrutinizes the Homeric use of *psuche* and how that notion of the body as aggregate may have as logical corollary a sense of the soul as composite.

Nelson sees this blending of selves in the way that the gods interact with, influence, and even possess mortals: “seeing the gods as forces that are really inside the person, but portrayed as coming from outside, presupposes ‘internal’ and ‘external’ as the critical categories” (177). This more fluid and dialectical understanding of the relationship between humans and the gods reflects (though Nelson does not say as much) recent thinking in ecocritical studies, whereby “inside” and “outside” are neither absolute nor *a priori* states of being. “Penelope,” the last chapter of *Ulysses*, demands such fluid thinking, and the reader who refuses to surrender hard-and-fast separations will find this unpunctuated waterslide a plunge into some blend of incomprehension and terror. “‘Either/or,’” Nelson neatly remarks, “is not in [Molly’s] vocabulary” (128). To say that Molly internalizes the infinity that in Homer is the exclusive province of the gods would be a misguided attempt to sweep under the carpet discrepancies and inconsistencies of character, memory, and chronology. For Molly, Nelson rightly puts it, there is no “need to identify which of a multiplicity of selves is the ‘real’

one" (128). Or as Molly herself thinks: "small blame to me if I am a harumscarum I know I am a bit."

One of the most intriguing discussions in the book is encompassed in a term new to me but which I've already taken a shine to: "polyrealism." Nelson connects the difference between mortal time and "the timeless backdrop [of the gods] against which humans seek identity" with the "multiple levels of reality" (155) found in *The Odyssey*. She turns to Athena's ascension to Olympus ("where the gods dwell firm and unmoving forever, as they say") in Book 6, lines that might easily be passed over because they are of no consequence to the plot but, Nelson argues, reveal the way in which the gods are not "responsible," but rather "complicit" in the doings of mortals that they observe from an atemporal vantage point (155). It's a very nice point: to be responsible, I must exist in time (live in determinable causality), but perhaps even the timeless cannot escape complicity (a word literally meaning "folded together"). Polyrealism, of necessity, yields different but co-existent systems of ethics.

The book's conclusion dwells on the comic, for Nelson sees this business of being in and out of time as comic—"exactly because it is so human . . . Just as Homer can portray Athena competing for Odysseus's attention, we can place ourselves on the level of the gods—and then catch ourselves doing just that" (186). This wonderful phrase "catch ourselves" points to how we as readers discover ourselves in the shifting temporalities of reading. Here you are before reading Homer. Here you are, another you, looking up from reading Homer. Here you are, another you, reading Joyce (and as Derrida chuckles that we can never say we "have read" Joyce, we can ask the same about Homer). Here you are, now, another you, reading this. We should be grateful to Stephanie Nelson for reminding us of how we become who we are by smiling at our own instances of identification, however transitory, with these time travellers.