

## THE IDEA OF WRITING

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Good evening. Good to see you, please come in. I'm glad you stopped by. Let me turn down the stereo, I was listening to some Bill Evans, do you know him? No? Try *Waltz for Debby* it's one of his best. I have just poured myself a drink, what can I get you?

I was rummaging around my bookshelves and came across two books inscribed by two old friends Paddy O'Hara and Sarah Heaney. I don't know if you ever knew them. Fine people. Paddy gave me a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Sara Plato's *Republic*. I don't quite know how these two books caught my attention tonight, probably because of their inscriptions. Still I don't know why they seem related to me, to each other I mean, and I guess related to me, for that matter.

Care to hear about them? Good, I'd be delighted.

Let's look at Plato's *Republic* first; here's the book.

That's right, Sarah's inscription is in Italian, medieval Italian to be exact.

Nel Mezzo del cumin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself  
In dark woods, the right road lost.<sup>1</sup>

Recognize the opening? Yes, it is from Dante's *Inferno*.

Sarah's was the perfect gift. I found Dante's *Inferno*, or it found me, just about my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, probably a little passed the midpoint but it came at the right time. I had started back reading the classics and Robert Pinsky had just published a good new translation of *The Inferno* so I gave it a go. But on to *The Republic*. We may see Dante again.

There is something of an Italian connection here. Although Greek, Plato made at least three trips to Syracuse, Italy. The trips were undertaken at the behest of a nephew of Dionysus I, a not so noble dictator with intellectual pretensions. Nephew hoped to educate uncle. Uncle, it seems was uneducable and had Plato imprisoned twice as it happened. Not one to give up, Plato tried again with Dionysus II and almost lost his life. Apparently the old boy took his philosophy too much to heart thinking he could make

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Pinsky (trans.), *The Inferno of Dante* 3 (1994).

either Dionysus I or Dionysus II a Philosopher-King. The trips to Syracuse were disastrous and Plato was lucky to escape with his life and find his freedom again.

Although *The Republic* features Socrates and his famous dialogic exercises, this is a remarkable book – Plato’s book really. Princeton philosopher Alexander Nehamas says simply of *The Republic*: “It is in fact the first work of philosophy ever written.”<sup>2</sup> The book is fascinating and quite readable and rereadable, it is considered Plato’s theory of the City and the Soul.

The more I read it, the more convinced I am that *The Republic* is less about city than soul; it is less a blueprint for government than a way of living the philosophical life. *The Republic*’s critics argue, however, that the book is exactly a blueprint, a blueprint for fascism or totalitarianism favoring censorship as it does and disfavoring private property. These critics have the book exactly wrong. *The Republic* is not about the best way to organize a city-state, it’s a book about deep human happiness, the happiness that balance brings to the soul. But I am way ahead of myself.

Let me tell you how the book begins. I have a collection of essays around here somewhere by a classicist named Seth Bernadette from NYU whose expertise is Greek poetry and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> A fundamental notion of his is that the reader must understand a book’s setting, context, and action in order to understand its idea. Another way of putting the point is to say that poetry as well as philosophy are lived ideas, not disembodied concepts. That’s quite a Platonic mouthful by the way as I hope we’ll see.

*The Republic*<sup>4</sup> opens with Socrates telling us that he was in Athens visiting the Piraeus, the harbor, with Glaucon to offer a prayer to a new goddess, Bendis. There are two interesting things here. First, Glaucon is Plato’s half brother so Plato gives us his *bona fides* with this bit of information. Second, the very idea of Socrates’ praying is rich. We all remember that he was sentenced to drink the hemlock, but do you remember why? For two reasons actually. One was that he was corrupting the young for which he should have pled guilty as charged. After all, he taught them to question everything which was quite threatening even to democratic Athenians. The second reason was that he failed to honor the City’s gods. Apparently, Socrates picked and chose which gods he would honor. Socrates is nothing if not ironic, he was impiously pious. Socrates and friend quite enjoyed the festival and were on their way back to town when they were stopped by Polemarchus together with Adeimantus, (Glaucon’s brother, another half brother to Plato), Niceratus and a few others, when they exchanged words. Polemarchus starts the exchange:

“It looks as if you’re all on your way back to the city, Socrates.  
You’re not staying then?”

‘That’s a pretty good guess,’ I replied. [Socrates could be a wiseguy.]

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* 317 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Seth Bernardette, *The Argument of the Action* (2000).

<sup>4</sup> I am using for this story Plato, *The Republic* (G.R.F. Ferrari, ed.; Tom Griffith, trans. 2001).

‘Do you see how many of us there are?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ [Socrates replied uncharacteristically, not a man of few words.]

‘Well, then,’ he (Polemarchus) said, ‘you must either get the better of all of these people, or else stay here.’

An odd challenge. A student once commented that the exchange was a joke, but I'm not so sure. It certainly was not an idle joke.

We should take a short break before concluding the dialogue. Athens was having troubles of its own at the time. Athens and Sparta were well at it, and Plato was in the thick of things as was Socrates and other characters in the book. The action of the book occurred during the Peloponnesian War and during a period of Athenian "democracy," [please know that there are quotation marks around the word "democracy"] and the action occurred before the incident of The Thirty Tyrants. Each of these events is significant. The Peloponnesian War led to the collapse of the Athenian empire. By the time the book was published many of the characters had fateful endings. Socrates, of course, was condemned on political charges. Polemarchus and Niceratus were murdered for their money by members of The Thirty Tyrants to finance the overthrow of Athens. The Thirty were led by relatives of Plato who, as their name implies, were opposed to the democracy. This group ruled Athens for a short time before being deposed themselves.

As philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes the conversation of *The Republic*: "So we see people who will soon be murdered having some peaceful academic chit-chat with people who will soon be accomplices to their murders."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, philosophy is a dangerous occupation not to be undertaken by the weak at heart. These background events set up the conclusion of the dialogue and the rest of the book.

Picking up where we left off, Polemarchus has just threatened to subdue Socrates to get him to stay in town, actually he wanted Socrates to come to the house of Cephalus, more about whom shortly. Tragedy abounds as it was Polemarchus who later was "subdued" by the Tyrants.

To Polemarchus' threat Socrates responds:

'There is another possibility,' I said, 'We might persuade you that you should let us go.'

And it is right here that the issues are joined. It would seem that between power and persuasion or between might and reason that we have enough of a book, but the dialogue continues with Polemarchus:

'And do you really think you could persuade us,' he said, 'if we refused to listen?'

Here we might pause to ask: how can democracy work if people do not listen. Indeed, how can philosophy, certainly Socratic philosophy, be undertaken in such circumstances? But let's hear a little more of the dialogue.

'Of course not,' said Glaucon.

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<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Plato's Republic: The Good Society and the Deformation of Desire* (1998)

‘In that case, make your decision on the assumption that we are not going to listen.’

Thus, at once, Polemarchus is letting Socrates and Glaucon decide and he is acting the stubborn beast. What is persuasion without dialogue other than an exercise of power. But then one of Polemarchus crowd chimes in:

‘Haven’t you heard about the torch race?’ Adiemantus added. ‘This evening, on horseback, in honor of the goddess?’

‘On horseback?’ I (Socrates speaking) said. ‘That’s something new. Do you mean a relay race. . .’

From this point Adiemantus tells Socrates that the torch race will be at night and Socrates decides to stay. Apparently nighttime torch races on horseback are irresistible. Now, isn’t that quite a turn of events? Polemarchus and Adiemantus “persuade” Socrates to stay and do so with additional conversation rather than use the threatened power of outnumbering them when, in fact, it was Socrates’ suggestion that persuasion was preferable to raw power. Right from the beginning that old gadfly Socrates is up to his irony-laden tricks. Socrates suggests persuasion rather than power and is himself persuaded to stay. Socrates couldn’t let a free meal go by easily.

Socrates and Glaucon go with Polemarchus and Adiemantus and others off to Cephalus’ house for an evening of drinking, eating and a conversation that “justly” belongs to the ages. For the topic of the conversation is best captured with the Greek phrase *ti esti* or “what is it?” The *ti esti* question of the evening properly posed is: What is justice? Before the wine, the dinner, and the fun begins, however, Socrates (or Plato, my bet would be Plato) serve us a tantalizing little treat. Socrates engages their host Cephalus, who we are told was “very old”<sup>6</sup> about how he views this stage in his life. Cephalus, quoting Sophocles, replies that he is happy to be rid of a “frenzied and savage master.” Now not to put too fine a point on it, Cephalus meant sex. He was happy to be rid of sexual temptation.

This exchange at first is strikingly odd, yet Plat was not one to waste words and this short exchange establishes another main theme of *The Republic* – the tension between passion and reason. Guess which one wins?!

If we are to engage seriously the *ti esti* question: “What is Justice?” we must, according to Socrates/Plato be ready, willing, and able to do so through the power of reason, not through the persuasion of our passions. Power/Persuasion; Reason/Passion, all tensions in the City and in the Soul. Here in its opening, Plato establishes context and theme for the foundational book in the Western Philosophical Tradition: Is Justice the will of the stronger or the result of reasoned discussion? Do we know the answer to that question yet?

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<sup>6</sup> *The Republic* supra at ¶ 328e.

It is tempting to dismiss the question about defining justice as not only ancient but unanswerable. Should we bother reasoning and talking about *The Republic* if we continue to debate and debate vigorously today questions of justice? Shouldn't more modern texts speak to us with more relevance? Shouldn't more modern texts speak to us with more relevance? Shortly speaking. Yes and No. "Yes," we should continue reading and talking about *The Republic* and "No," modern texts do not add much more than modern details and examples. Recalling Alfred North Whitehead "all philosophy is a footnote to Plato." Later some wag added "until Wittgenstein."<sup>7</sup> Yet, Whitehead is not alone in according pride of place to Plato. Classicist Bernadette also writes that "What philosophy is seems to be inseparable from the question of how to read Plato."<sup>8</sup>

I have just covered a page or two of *The Republic*. Isn't that quite an opening for a book devoted to the timeless question of justice and I daresay must be among the most widely read books in history. Don't you think?

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<sup>7</sup> David Edmonds & John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker* 11 (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Bernadette supra at ix.

Well, that's enough for ancient Greece, let's refill our drinks and we can talk about *Ulysses*, the modern version that is.

Oh you've never read Joyce? I am sure you're not alone. Remember at the turn of the millennium people were compiling all sorts of lists and *Ulysses* headed one as the most important novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I always assumed it was also the most unread. I was terribly afraid to tackle it until some very sound advice from a friend, a brethren in fact, Robert Smith said "Oh just read a few pages at a time." He also recommended Richard Ellman's unsurpassed biography.<sup>9</sup> Ellman is a trustworthy Virgil for Joyce readers. So let me say that when encountering *Ulysses* please remember:

Dr. Smith's prescription  
doesn't apply to all fiction.  
Rather his advice is about Joyce  
whose prose is most choice  
for all of its rhythms and diction.

Forgive me the lowly limerick.  
For abilities are limited  
and my literary sensitivities are inhibited . . .

OK, OK, enough! Stop me before I kill another verse form. It's just that Robert's advice was dead on. To paraphrase what has become a popular political slogan "It's the language, stupid!" Edna O'Brien, Irish novelist and recent, brief biographer of Joyce writes of *Ulysses*: "Language is the hero and heroine. Language in constant fluxion and with a dazzling virtuosity."<sup>10</sup> And the focus on language is quite the point of what places Joyce, and *Ulysses*, at the center of modernism. The book is interior, self-conscious, grand, epic, and heroic,<sup>11</sup> while it is ordinary, experimental, playful, and serious.

Care to hear a little about the book? Good. First here's Paddy's inscription:

"*Incipit Vita Nova.*" "Here beginneth new life."<sup>12</sup>

Dante again and I like the full first line from which that Latin is drawn: "In that part of the book of my memory before which is little that can be read, there is a rubric, saying, "*Incipit Vita Nova.*" This book, *Vita Nuovo*, is Dante's great love poem to Bice Polinari –his very Beatrice in which he writes about his plans for his *Commedia*. It seems that reading the classics always beginneth a new life.

Isn't Dante a perfect bridge between Plato and Joyce? A bridge between classicism and modernism; between philosophy and literature? Harold Bloom, certainly

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Ellman, *James Joyce* (1983 ed.).

<sup>10</sup> Edna O'Brien, *James Joyce* (1999).

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Peter Childs, *Modernism* 18-19 (2000).

<sup>12</sup> Dante, *The New Life* 3 (Dante Gabriel Rossetti trans. 2002 ed.).

a man not without Joycean ambition of his own, writes: “James Joyce, who rarely lacked audacity, conceived of Shakespeare as Virgil to himself as Dante.”<sup>2</sup>

I’ll get back to Shakespeare, but the Dante reference is apt. Joyce’s *Ulysses* is as much an excursion through the Inferno that was modern Dublin as it is a mythic metaphor for *The Odyssey*. Let’s look at *Ulysses* then.

The opening words of *Ulysses*, if not the full first sentence should sound familiar:

“Stately, plum Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed.”

On first reading, nothing very remarkable there. But let’s look again. “Plump,” “Buck,” “Mulligan,” and “Buck,” “bearing,” “bowl,” and “stately,” “came,” “razor,” “lay”; and “stair,” “bear,” “mirror”; already the assonance and consonance touch poetry.

And who is this Buck Mulligan? Is he Irish Catholic (Mulligan)? Or, English Protestant (Buck)? Shortly, Mulligan holds up the bowl and “intones”: “*Introibo ad altare Dei.*” “As I enter the altar of God.” The bowl becomes the chalice, the mirror and razor the cross, and Mulligan’s dressing gown the surplice. With that, Joyce opens his first salvo at a favorite topic, the Irish Catholic Church. Needless to say, Joyce isn’t done yet as he baits one of the characters Kinch for being a “fearful Jesuit,” while Mulligan “blesses” Martello Tower, the countryside, and his companions including Stephen Dedalus who has appeared before in Joyce. Dedalus, of course, is a central figure whose quite complex name concentrates a theme of the book combining as it does Stephen, the first Christian martyr with the Greek pagan Daedalus the builder of labyrinths.<sup>3</sup>

Already Joyce presents the ancient and the modern, the Christian and the pagan, Greece and Ireland, and the ever present church as Mulligan continues his mock mass offered to “the genuine Christine: body and soul and blood and ‘ouns.” Red, white, body, blood, soul, wounds, homage and mockery, the ritual and the sacral, saints and sinners, martyrs and cronies. It is quite a performance but we’ve only just begun.

*Ulysses* is not idly titled. In fact, the book is read as a rough retelling of Homer’s epic with the first chapter being the story of Ulysses’ son Telemachus who was left home with his mother Penelope while dad was off having 20 years of adventures. Penelope’s suitors pretty much took over the old homestead, thus running the boy off in search of his father. In Joyce’s hands Leopold Bloom, whom we have yet to meet, travels through Dublin town as Ulysses to Dedalus’ Telemachus. There’s yet another correspondence as Mulligan, finishing his “mass” wiping his razorblade with the “altar cloth” that he calls “The bard’s noserag. A new art colour for our Irish poets: snotgreen.” Not all *Ulysses* language is poetry pretty.

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* 384 (1994)

<sup>3</sup> Ellman *supra* at 148.

In a matter of words, Joyce has brought Shakespeare, more particularly Hamlet (Dedalus) and Hamlet's father (Bloom) to the table. Joyce was intrepid, but it seems one thing to modernize a Greek epic; another to try an open field tackle on Shakespeare.

Joyce certainly did not hesitate to rip off Homer and take on Shakespeare so why be shy about Plato? Plato and Socrates make their appearance in *Ulysses*. Let's not make too much of Joyce's references because everything and everyone makes an appearance in Joyce. Still, Joyce the great does cite Plato the Greek. I suppose it would be a bit much to expect even the great Plato to reference Joyce. What is most remarkable is that the Plato reference makes exactly the right point. Joyce writes: "The deepest poetry of Shelley, the words of Hamlet bring our mind into contact with the eternal wisdom, Plato's world of ideas." Bingo! There it is almost hidden in a mock gesture toward Shelley and Shakespeare but this phrase gives away the game.<sup>4</sup> Joyce, the modernist, Joyce the man of letters, Joyce the writer of language, of languages, wrote about writing in *Ulysses* more than he wrote to tell a story. Indeed, the Plato reference made the point that there is an Idea of Writing, a perfect Form, as our Club president bid us two weeks ago, and Joyce wrote to show the world that he could attain that Form better than anyone before or after. Better than Homer, better than Dante, better even than the sacred Shakespeare.

Shy Joyce wasn't and *Ulysses* is an exercise, if not the paradigmatic example, of the Idea of Writing.

Remember Smith's direction: "Just read a few pages at a time." You can read a few pages and the language gets you. Even the names get you: Nosey Flynn, Crazy Kelleher, Mecurial Malachi, Bantam Lyons, Blazes Boylan. And the phrases: "a chemistry of stars"; "a horde of heresies"; "The void awaits surely all of them that weave the wind"; "the brood of mockers"; "a disarming and a worsting from those embattled angels of the church." All of those phrases fall from one page chosen virtually at random.<sup>5</sup>

Now I suppose that even in lesser hands a writer could generate clever even referential names. I also suppose that such a writer could generate the sweet phrase. But each could such writing be sustained for eight or nine hundred pages with each chapter written in a distinctive style? Many have tried, but all have frozen. Edna O'Brien says that you can read *Ulysses* as 18 novels between two covers.<sup>6</sup>

Although Joyce didn't invent the stream-of-consciousness, he certainly took it to its limit with Molly Bloom's soliloquy. Budding lawyers could learn a thing or two about depositions in the "Ithaca" chapter and reporters could learn to write journalistically from Jimmy Joyce. *Ulysses* contains examples from scholastic debate, reporting and headlines, romance magazine stories, parody, a play within a novel, etc.,

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<sup>4</sup> Joyce supra at 185.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce supra at 21.

<sup>6</sup> O'Brien supra at 97.

etc. Needless to say these were conscious devices, which Joyce called “technics” which he said included, and I quote: “monologue (male), catechism, dialectic, dialogue, prayer, soliloquy, oratory, narration, prose and monologue (female).”<sup>7</sup>

He was not writing to show the world modernism. Modernism didn’t exist before Joyce and Pound and Eliot. Modernism was the label given by the literary critics at the time and since then. In this, his writing, Joyce was a pure Platonist. He was a classicist not a modernist even though that is how we come to understand him and even though we declaim him a founder of the movement. For Joyce, writing had a perfect form, perfectly expressed by himself.

Not only could he write a good line and spin a good tale; not only could he sprinkle references and allusions around like so much sugar or salt with witty erudition to spare; he defined the “modern mind”<sup>8</sup> by his Idea of Writing. The obvious and usual meaning of modern mind is that we are talking about someone with contemporary sensibilities. But modernism is something different, deeper. In the same way that Freud defined the modern mind, Joyce did. The psychology of *Ulysses*, perhaps more than the bawdy scenes, shocked readers’ “sensibilities.”

Joyce wrote to expose our inner mind, our thoughts. He wrote to bring to the surface that which we keep below; maybe that which we suppress, consciously, unconsciously, semi-consciously. After all, do we consciously mean what we say? Consciously say what we mean? Aren’t all of the many meanings of our thoughts and words simply too much to recognize or absorb? Aren’t we content to ignore the interstitial, the unintended, the multiple, the unconscious meanings of our words, of our thoughts? Word play runs through our minds continuously, yet don’t we do our best to avoid all of it? Joyce didn’t. Punningly and otherwise, he brought all of that to the fore and in doing so, not at all ironically I think, he out-Freuded Freud.

Is there a deep relationship between *The Republic* and *Ulysses* you ask?

I don’t think that there is a consistent, deep connection between the two. (Although I reserve a bit of opinion about the depth of the connections for the moment.) There are, however, interesting maybe even quaint coincidences between the two books.

Both, of course, have Greek roots, and Italian ones for that matter. Plato visited Italy, Sicily more precisely, as I told you earlier. Joyce’s Greek connection is obvious. Also Joyce’s early writing and some of *Ulysses* was done in Trieste and the Italian city is referred to in the book.

Both books take place during a very specific period of time while also encompassing the journey of man. *Ulysses* takes place in the course of one day, June 16, 1904 to be exact – the date of Joyce’s first tryst with his wife Nora and the conversation

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<sup>7</sup> Childs supra at 206.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g., Peter Watson, *The Modern Mind: An Intellectual History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (2001).

in *The Republic* takes place over the course of one dinner. Much like the Annual Dinner at the Club as I am sure you recognize.

Both books are about the journey of man. Leopold Bloom is the ordinary seen, if not as heroic, then certainly as an object of serious attention; and Socrates and his ordinary dinner companions are men in heroic conversation as they encounter the penetrating questions about justice.

Going a bit deeper into the connections, I was attracted to compare these two books because of what each author does on the very first page or so. Through simple devices, conversations in each instance, Plato and Joyce set their respective stages for the rest of their work. Plato lets us know right off that the search for justice is a contest between power and persuasion; reason and passion; philosophy and poetry. And, Joyce tells us straight away that there is a conflict between tradition and modernity that will be told through the play of language that may well sweep away religion and past masters in the telling of the tale. That a book whose theme can be presented early and briefly and whose development occurs in layers and levels struck me as a sign of a classic. In the case of Plato, time has borne this out. He's kept readers coming back for 2,500 years. We'll see about Joyce. It may very well be the case that the introduction of a theme in a single page, like a great symphony whose opening theme occurs in the first few measures, then recurs and develops, may not be quite enough to signal a classic but it is a place to start thinking about how to define one.

Do you have other ways to identify a classic?

Oh, very good, and I agree. A classic is a book that invites us to take part in the Great Conversations with the great writers and philosophers. Indeed, as we read, don't we engage the texts, excuse me I mean books, I don't want to get pulled into the realm of what today passes as literary criticism, more frequently called cultural studies. Let's read books, not texts; let's read stories, not narratives. Don't we read books and relate to authors as if we are engaged in a dialogue with one person?! Yes, I think that you are on to something. Reading and talking about the classics creates a dialogue with one person! I like that idea very much and may steal it someday.

There's something else, I think. Isn't it the case that we are taken by the classics? Taken in a classically erotic way. That is we fall in love with some books, with some stories, with some authors. We remember them. We reread them, revisit them, absorb them into our language, into our vocabulary. Maybe even into our lives.

Is that all of it? You ask if those are all of the connections between two books separated by 2,500 years?

Just about. There is another connection that strikes me. Remember in *The Republic* Socrates went to the Piraeus to see the city's new god Bendis. However, over his life, according to the good citizens of Athens, he was insufficiently respectful and was sentenced to death for his impiety. Or was he really sentenced to death because of his

reasoning? (Something that law students might feel was justifiable.) Socratic reasoning cannot help but bring its practitioners into conflict with the deities. Remember Cephalus was content with the passing of his sexual urges. His waning passion allowed him to reason more clearly. (I reserve judgment on that point.) Isn't it the same with reliance on the gods? Allegiance to the gods, certainly according to Plato the gods as presented by the poets, freed one from the obligation to reason. Indeed, reason cannot help but challenge the gods. And that great champion of reasoning paid dearly for it.

Joyce quickly runs into the same trouble. There is no question that his tolerance for the Holy Church is low. Yet there is also no question that the Church holds Joyce in its thrall. Much of *Ulysses*'s leitmotif is exactly that of the conflict of faith and reason and not so deeply hidden is the conflict, again, between reason and passion.

What is the tension between God (or the gods) and man? What is it for Socrates to question the ancient Greek gods? Indeed what is it for him to break away when his reason puts him on a collision course with the city fathers? What is it for Joyce to mock the Church, to bait it, indeed to desecrate its tenets because of his "modernism"? I doubt that Joyce ever actually breaks with the Church using it only to play out the string of his fascination.

Is it a function of a writer to reject rite and dogma for the sake of art? Is it a function of a philosopher to reject the mouthed pieties of the "citizens" for the sake of reason? It seems impossible to deny that God (or the gods) occupy the central question for philosophers, or at least for metaphysicians. So too literature. Roberto Calasso writes: "The gods are the fugitive guests of literature."<sup>9</sup> And, he writes, "that it is [ ] language we feel" in their absence.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Calasso concludes: "Literature is never the product of a single subject. There are always at least three actors: the hand that writes, the voice that speaks, the god who watches over and compels."<sup>11</sup> If Calasso is right and it's hard to deny he's on to something, then Plato and Joyce are Calasso's exhibits A and B for both challenge the gods and man's relationship to them.

I know what you are going to say. These books are not connected. After all *Ulysses* is literature and *The Republic* philosophy.

I don't disagree – completely. Philosophy and literature are different if not necessarily discrete. Of course, writers can strive for the philosophical and philosophers for the literary. Indeed, there is more than one Platonic dialogue with literary merit. And Joyce was certainly not fearful of philosophy, the jejune Jesuits hardly knocked that out of him. Is Dame Iris, philosopher or literateur? Umberto Eco? Jorge Luis Borges? Is Nietzsche unilliterate? Paul Auster unphilosophical? We can go on and on with this game of identifying an author as writer or as philosopher or as both, but I am too much of a traditionalist to conflate the two. Maybe at some point all categories, all disciplines, all knowledge rises to a point when they must converge (stealing a title from Flannery

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<sup>9</sup> Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods* 3 (2001).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* At 120.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 192.

O'Connor) but isn't such a point of disciplinary convergence a point of silent awe? Such may be a point of understanding, but most likely not a point of expression.

Yes you are right yes philosophy and literature both speak to our human impulses yes they speak to our desires yes good books touch our hearts yes they touch our minds yes the Great Books attempt to answer questions about our very humanity yes they must help us understand how to live our lives yes they make our hearts beat like mad yes philosophy appeals to the rational yes literature to the emotional and yes I said yes I will agree Yes.<sup>12</sup> Oh, sorry, I got carried away.

Yes, yet – philosophy and literature don't do it in the same way. Philosophy helps us understand why there is something rather than nothing; what existed before time; how we differ from the other; whether there is a world; whether body is separate from mind; whether god exists; whether god; whether. . .

Literature helps us feel the pain of life, of death, of separation. Helps us cope with the loss of innocence, the confusion of another's motives; of our own motive. Literature explains that we can never really express ourselves exactly, precisely, perfectly, intelligibly. Literature expresses our human experience; literature expresses our human; literature expresses . . .

No, all philosophy is not literature, nor literature philosophy. Although I must admit that their topic is exactly the same.

What's that you ask?

Why they're both about the soul of course – the need for harmony in the presence of chaos, but that's another story.

Let's freshen our drinks.

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<sup>12</sup> Joyce supra at 783.