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**JOYCE'S FICTION  
AND  
THE NEW RISE  
OF  
THE NOVEL**

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*edited by  
Franca Ruggieri*

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JAMES JOYCE'S *ULYSSES* – A MENIPPEAN SATIRE?

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This article is going to argue that James Joyce's *Ulysses* is written in the tradition of Menippean satire, a literary mode which may be considered a predecessor and rival to the well-made novel<sup>1</sup> or even as a kind of anti-novel. Whereas the well-made novel appeared in eighteenth century England and Europe, the Menippean mode emerged in the North-African periphery of the Hellenistic world of antiquity. The Menippean tradition derives its name from its founding father Menippus, a Cynic philosopher who lived in the ancient city of Gadara, in the Lake Kinneret region, and wrote his works in the third century B.C. His first documented follower is Meleagrus who worked in the same city in the first century B.C.

Lucian, whose fantastic and eccentric works were composed in second century A.D. Syria, another North-African stronghold of Hellenistic culture, should not only be acknowledged as one of the most important followers and rewriters of Menippus, but should first of all be considered a key Menippean figure who, via François Rabelais as an early modern mediator, inspired the Irish Menippean tradition of Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, and Flann O'Brien.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Koppenfels 1981: 17 "Die Menippea ist, historisch gesehen, nicht zuletzt eine Vor- und Konkurrenzform des bürgerlichen Romans."

<sup>2</sup> Lanfers 2007: 480-481.

Although Mikhail Bakhtin, Northrop Frye and others<sup>3</sup> wrote about Menippean satire in great detail, the Menippean mode has remained a relatively little known literary phenomenon. As Frye remarked in 1975, before he wrote about Menippean satire in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), “there was not one in a thousand university English Teachers [...] who knew what Menippean satire was: now there must be two or three.” (in Weinbrot 2005: 11).

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To distinguish the Menippean mode from the literary form of the novel, one has to bear in mind that Menippean satire challenges the Western mainstream world-picture that the well-made novel represents: the Aristotelian notion that human life is designed in a teleological manner, which means that our life is structured in a linear fashion with a beginning followed by a series of cause-and-effect-related key incidents which trigger off a logically plausible end.<sup>4</sup> This is exactly the kind of story told in the well-made, coming-of-age novel where a character is born, grows up by encountering identity-forming key events, successfully searches for the meaning of his or her life, finds his or her place in society, marries and ends up as a wise and mature person. The epistemological concept behind this novel-centered approach may be described as the enlightenment belief that the world functions as a clockwork-like system governed by laws of reason, and that this system can be comprehensively understood by way of logical scrutiny.

Menippean satire, by contrast, challenges this novel-centered Aristotelian approach to the world. As I have shown elsewhere,

the Menippean worldview is deeply rooted in the pre-Aristotelian philosophy of Socrates, owing to its claim that the highest wisdom

<sup>3</sup> See, among others, Bakhtin 1984: 109–114, Frye 1957: 308–314, Helm [1906] 1967, Korkowski 1973, Kirk [alias ‘Korkowski’] 1980, Rijkonen 1987, Relihan 1993, Weinbrot 2005, Fuchs 2006, von Koppenfels 1991 & 2007.

<sup>4</sup> See Kristeva 1982.

attainable for man is to acknowledge that all we can know is to know that we know nothing at all – hence the Socratic maxim which summarizes the Menippean approach to human knowledge in a nutshell: ‘I know that I know nothing’. If we address the ultimate questions of our existence – the nature of the Gods, the limits of the universe, the question of life after death, the meaning of life –, we have to admit that there are no convincing final answers despite all our intellectual effort.

(Fuchs 2017: 341-342)<sup>5</sup>

Referring to its roots, the Menippean tradition features Socratic stock figures: Socrates-figures, who acknowledge the limitation of human knowledge and thus turn out to be wiser than their fellow-people, and mock-Socratic would-be philosophers in quest of absolute knowledge, which inevitably results in epistemological disappointment.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the truly insightful Socrates, who ironically claims to be ignorant, turns out to be a wise fool in the best sense of the word, his mock-Socratic counterpart is debunked as a brainless person dressed up in a philosopher’s cloak.<sup>7</sup>

In a Menippean context, the pseudo-Socratic quest for absolute knowledge is not limited to the everyday world featured in the novel. In contrast to the world of the novel represented by way of circumstantial realism and the picaresque landscape of the country road or cityscape, Menippean satire features a quest which not only leads through the world we know, but also through heaven and hell. This is not the Christian heaven and hell we know from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, but the classical Underworld of Hades and the realm of the

<sup>5</sup> See also Bakhtin 1984: 109–114. A more detailed archaeology of Menippean discourse and its Socratic heritage disseminated via the Cynic movement is presented in Fuchs 2006: 7–26.

<sup>6</sup> As far as the epistemological dimension is concerned, see Relihan 1993: 46–47, 110–113 and Rütten 1997: 124.

<sup>7</sup> Frye (1957: 309) calls this Menippean stock figure “philosophus gloriosus.”



Greco-Roman Gods on Mount Olympus as they feature in Lucian's highly fantastic works.

Fusing the empirical here and now with unknown spheres inhabited by Gods, supernatural beings and deceased persons from the past, the Menippean quest for the meaning of life is, topographically speaking, compatible with Homer's *Odyssey*, the archetypal quest story of the western world, whose epic landscape blends everyday realism with the unknown spheres mentioned above. Like the traveling philosophers searching for knowledge in Menippean satire, the Homeric Ulysses not only interacts with humans from the world of the living; he also interacts with Olympian Gods and demigods, and travels the Underworld to hear a prophecy from Tiresias, meet the ghost of his mother and interview the heroes of the past. Hence it is far from coincidental that the Menippean tradition rewrites the *Odyssey* in a playful and parodic manner. As noted by Joel C. Relihan, the pre-novelistic traditions of

romance and Menippean satire have similar origins, and their histories touch at a number of points. The *Odyssey* is for both genres a thematic starting point, whether as the wanderings that precede the reuniting of lovers and families or as the fantastic adventures of a narrator whose most practiced art is that of lying (1993: 179).

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If one reads James Joyce's *Ulysses* from a Menippean vantage point, one realizes that the Joycean text enacts both a Socratic quest for knowledge and an Odyssey through heaven, earth and the underworld. As the entry on the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode in the Linati-Schema<sup>8</sup> makes clear, Leopold Bloom not only functions as a counterpart to Ulysses, but also as a correlative of Socrates and others: "Ulysses: Socrates, Jesus, Shakespeare."

<sup>8</sup>To be more precise, variant Buffalo V.A.1.b. known as "The Beach Schema". Quoted from Ellmann 1972: Appendix.

Leopold Bloom not only thinks like Socrates with his philosophically insightful there is “no known method from the known to the unknown” (*U* 17.1140-1), echoing the Socratic dictum “I know that I know nothing” in the “Ithaca” episode. He is also seen as a modern counterpart of Socrates by way of analogy and a chain of correspondences which, as outlined in the quotation from the Linati-Schema, includes the *persona* of William Shakespeare. Like the “henpecked Socrates” (*U* 15.111) ruled by his shrewish wife Xanthippe, Bloom is referred to as a “[h]enpecked husband” by Zoe Higgins (*U* 15.3706) and Stephen observes that “[w]e have shrewridden Shakespeare and henpecked Socrates” (*U* 15.111). These Socratic links are further intensified when Bloom looks into the mirror and sees “[t]he face of William Shakespeare [...] crowned by the reflection of the reindeer antlered hatrack in the hall” (*U* 15.3821-4). Like Leopold Bloom cuckolded by Molly and like Socrates who is unable to tame his shrewish wife Xanthippe, Shakespeare is depicted as a cuckolded husband ruled by an unruly wife.

Stephen not only claims that “[m]aybe, like Socrates, [Shakespeare] had [...] a shrew to wife” (*U* 9.665), he also calls Shakespeare’s wife an unfaithful “Penelope stay-at-home” (*U* 9.620), a link between Socrates, Shakespeare and Bloom which is extended to the Homeric Ulysses. This tie is reinforced by Stephen’s claim that, like the Homeric Ulysses, Shakespeare left his home for twenty years: “Twenty years he lived in London” [...] “But all those twenty years what do you suppose poor Penelope in Stratford was doing behind the diamond panes?” [...] “Sweet Ann [sic], I take it, was hot in the blood” (*U* 9.648-50, 668-69). Like the unfaithful Molly, Anne Hathaway is depicted as a mock-Penelope.<sup>9</sup>

When Buck Mulligan refers to Bloom as a person who is “Greeker than the Greeks” (*U* 9.614-5 & 1210), Joyce’s *Ulysses* also alludes to Lucian’s Menippean satire, “Dialogues of the Dead”, a series of interviews in the underworld conducted by a character loosely

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this aspect, see Fuchs 2011.

based on the founding father of the Menippean tradition, Menippus of Gadara. With a grain of salt, Lucian's Menippus figure, who dies, crosses the Acheron river and enters Hades, may thus be considered "a portrait of the (Menippean) artist as a dead man." One of the persons interviewed by Menippus is the deceased Socrates. Referring to the circumstance in which he finds the Hades-bound philosopher in the company of men in the Underworld who died young, Menippus alludes to the well-known defamatory rumour that Socrates was a pederast and thus "Greekier than the Greeks":

Menippus: Bravo, Socrates! Still following your own special line here! Still an eye for beauty!

("Dialogues of the Dead": 35)

Stephen's insinuation that Bloom is "Greekier than the Greeks" may thus be considered an intertextual allusion to the underworld encounter of Menippus with Socrates, who is satirized as a dirty old man in pursuit of young boys in Lucian's "Dialogues of the Dead".

Joyce's *Ulysses* also alludes to Lucian's "Necyomantia – Menippus or the descent into Hades", which, like "Dialogues of the Dead", parodies the journey of the Homeric Odysseus into the realm of the dead in Hades as a Menippean stock-motif. In "Necyomantia", Lucian's Menippus figure sneaks into the underworld as a living person and thus parodies Ulysses' descent into the underworld in the Homeric myth. In order not to be identified as an intruder from the world of the living, Lucian's Menippus imitates the dress code of three mythological figures who succeeded in traveling into Hades *and back*: Orpheus, who enters Hades to rescue his wife Eurydice; Heracles, who abducts the infernal watchdog Cerberus; and, finally, the Homeric Ulysses, who descends into Hades to learn about his future from Tiresias.

Like Orpheus, who had been taught to play the lyre by Apollo, the Lucianic Menippus carries a dulcimer. Like Heracles, who killed the Nemean Lion and dressed in its fur, he wears a lion's skin. And, like the Homeric Odysseus, who was famous for wearing a felt cap,

the Lucianic Hades traveler wears a similarly unconventional hat. As the felt cap, or *pilos* (πίλος) as the ancient Greeks called it, was not a Greek but a foreign, and thus barbarian, fashion accessory, this uncommon headgear stresses that the Homeric Odysseus (very much like the Jewish Dubliner, Leopold Bloom, as his Joycean counterpart) is presented as an outsider among his fellow-countrymen. Being widely known as an unfashionable, even comical, hat, the felt cap may be considered a sort of fools-cap. Like the truly wise Socrates, who ironically claims to be ignorant, the Homeric Ulysses is featured as a master ironist who plays the fool as a cunning strategy of deceit. Although he is truly knowledgeable owing to his guidance by Pallas Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, Ulysses assumes the role of a madman in order to avoid being enlisted in the Trojan War.<sup>10</sup>

As the Menippean tradition features parodies of Socrates and Odysseus alike (see Richardson 2000), one may say that this literary mode tends to depict these characters as wise fool figures, an aspect which culminates in the conflation of these Menippean stock-figures in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. As far as Socrates is concerned, his Menippean representation as a wise fool is not only motivated by his ironic acknowledgement that he knows that he knows nothing, but also by the fact that Menippus, as the founding father of the Menippean tradition, was a follower of Diogenes the Cynic, who followed Socrates in such a radical way that Plato called him "[a] Socrates gone mad" (Diogenes Laertius VI; 54). This led Relihan to the conclusion that "if, as Plato is reported as saying, Diogenes the Cynic is a mad Socrates, we may say that Menippus [the Cynic] is a madder Socrates" (Relihan 1989: 59). As both Diogenes and Menippus embrace the Cynic movement as a radicalized form of Socratic philosophy, the conflation of Socrates and Ulysses is also motivated by the fact that Anthistenes, the disciple of Socrates who founded the Cynic movement, considered Ulysses a proto-Cynic (cf. Stanford 1978: 96-100).

<sup>10</sup> Joyce discussed Ulysses playing the madman with his friend Frank Budgen in Zürich (Budgen 1960: 16).

With the sartorial allusions to the three Hades travelers, Orpheus, Heracles and Odysseus in mind, Lucian's Menippean Satire, "Necyomantia – Menippus or the descent into Hades", introduces the comic Odysseus-figure Menippus as follows:

A Friend: Isn't this Menippus the Cynic? [...] Then what is the meaning of that strange costume – a felt cap, a lyre, and a lion's skin? [...] Good day, Menippus; where under the sun have you come from?

Menippus: I come from Dead Men's Lair and Darkness Gate  
Where Hades dwells, remote from other gods.

(*Necyomantia* 73)

Wearing a felt cap and traveling the underworld, Lucian's Menippus is presented as a parody of the Homeric Ulysses, whose Hades-journey is assisted by Circe the sorceress. In the "Circe" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* there are hints that Leopold Bloom is featured not only as a counterpart of the Homeric Ulysses, but also as a correlative of Menippus, whose *persona* encompasses the figures of Orpheus, Heracles and Odysseus in Lucian's "Necyomantia".

When Bloom approaches Dublin's red-light district of Nighttown in the "Circe" chapter, "he walks on towards hellsgates" (*U* 15.577f.), the entrance to the Underworld. Like Heracles, who has to outwit Cerberus to pass the infernal gates, Bloom meets a number of dogs as he enters and leaves the realm of the dead (*U* 15.578, 15.659ff, 4722ff). As a reference to the "Heracleian" dimension of the Lucianic Menippus and his lion-skin, Bloom's first name "Leopold" may be of importance. Of further significance is the fact that he is called "Lionel" (*U* 15.753) and addressed as "the lion of the night" (*U* 15.447).<sup>11</sup> As a parallel to Odysseus, who wears a barbarian hat to

<sup>11</sup> The reading of Bloom *alias* "the lion of the night" (*U* 15.447) as a Heracles figure is further emphasized by the fact that the ancient Greeks attributed the constellation of Leo, which appears in the night sky, to the Nemean Lion killed and skinned by Heracles.

mark his status as an outsider in the ancient Greek world<sup>12</sup>, Bloom and his ancestors are presented as wearing a large number of distinctly foreign, and thus un-Irish, head-coverings throughout the Lucian-inspired “Circe” episode: a “smokingcap” (*U* 15.249), a “brown Alpine hat” (*U* 15.270), a “purple Napoleon hat” (*U* 15.464), a “billycock hat” (*U* 15.539), a “high grade hat” (*U* 15.720/1787), a “red fez” (*U* 15.728), an “apache cap” (*U* 15.1356), an “Egyptian pshent” (*U* 15.2309), a “plumed sombrero” (*U* 15.2480), a “red schoolcap with badge” (*U* 15.3318), a “caliph’s hood” (*U* 15.4324), and so on. In addition, Bloom appears as “Henry Flower” who (an allusion to Orpheus) plays a lyre-like musical instrument:

(From left upper entrance with two gliding steps Henry Flower comes forward to left from centre. ... He carries a silverstringed inlaid dulcimer ...)

Henry (in a low dulcet voice, touching the strings of his guitar)  
There is a flower that bloometh.

(*U* 15.2478-2490)

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As an unacknowledged source for Joyce’s rewriting of the Odysseus myth, Lucian’s Menippean satires on the Hades-traveling Odysseus contribute to a considerable degree to a more comprehensive understanding of *Ulysses*.

In fact, the elitist focus applied in T. S. Eliot’s analysis of Joyce’s “mythical method” tends to obscure our perspective of the tradition of Menippean satire as an anti-elitist parody of the Odysseus myth. When we look at Joyce’s *Ulysses* from a Menippean vantage point, we thus begin to realize that Joyce’s rewriting of the Odysseus

<sup>12</sup> When Joyce fashioned Leopold Bloom as a Hungarian Jew in Ireland, he was inspired by Victor Bérard’s (1902) hypothesis that Greek aristocrats considered Ulysses an outsider owing to the fact that he has a Semitic rather than Hellenic background.

archetype does not only encompass the canonic tradition of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Tennyson, but also its all-but-forgotten, and thus apocryphal, Menippean counterpart.

Although it has become common knowledge that the Menippean satirist Lucian shaped what Mercier has called “the Irish comic tradition” to a considerable degree, it is also the case that scholars have so far turned a blind eye to Lucian and his Irish imitators. A Menippean-informed reading of Joyce’s fiction, heuristically speaking, not only functions as a key to intertextual meanings yet unknown. Keeping in mind that Menippean satire functions both as a predecessor of the well-made novel and an anti-novel, a Menippean reading also helps us to re-conceptualize the generic design of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. According to Max Nänny,

Joyce [...] welded the realistic novel to the Menippean tradition – he no longer used the term ‘novel’ when referring to *Ulysses* after mid-1918 – and thereby advanced the Menippean genre [...]. Critics in their ‘novel-centered’ dealings with *Ulysses* have turned a blind eye on its Menippean predecessors.

(Nänny 1985: 529-30)

Seen from such a point of view, *Ulysses* transcends and decidedly deviates from the form of the well-made novel which emerged in the eighteenth century and whose rise coincides with the rise of enlightenment philosophy based on the Aristotelian concept of the here and now. As a cultural archeologist, Joyce reconstructs the pre-Aristotelian mode of Menippean satire, which Julia Kristeva considers a rebellion “against Aristotelianism” (1980: 85) and a “struggle against Christianity and its representation” (1980: 80). As a part of this anti-Aristotelian tradition, Joyce’s *Ulysses* rewrites the archetypal western quest narrative of the Homeric *Odyssey* and fuses it with the pre-Aristotelian philosophy of Socrates to elucidate the Menippean insight that the search for absolute knowledge must, of necessity, be disappointing.

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