IX

"Penelope": A Coda

"The Ithaca episode . . . is in reality the end as Penelope has no beginning, middle or end," Joyce wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver.¹ The only chapter not assigned a specific hour in the time scheme of the book, "Penelope" seems like a coda to the main progression of the book's styles and plot. And yet, we are faced with something of a paradox in the relationship between the final two chapters. "Ithaca," with its seemingly closed form of question and answer, actually fades out into a dream language of inexhaustible possibilities. The inventory of events has no necessary final entry. "Penelope," with its seamless web of past and present and its apparent formlessness, is, nevertheless, much more self-contained and, in its own way, conclusive. Joyce wrote to Frank Budgen: "The last word (human all-too-human) is left to Penelope."² It is worth pondering the difference between the "real ending" in "Ithaca," the parody of closure, and the formless, flowing monologue that provides the "last word" of the book.

The "increasingly more laconic narration" in "Ithaca" prepares the way for the meandering prose of "Penelope." Bloom, answering Molly's questions about the day, drifts off to sleep and the dialogue gives way to Molly's monologue. In writing on the "autonomous monologue," of which "Penelope" is her paradigm, Dorrit Cohn points to the "anti-

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narrative" nature of the chapter. The voice of Molly "totally obliterates the authorial narrative voice throughout an entire chapter."3 "Penelope" is first-person narration that does shut out a third-person narrative voice. But some narrative presence transcribes the sound of the train whistle (pp. 754, 762, 763) and, if it performs this act of transcription, it is also scribe for Molly's monologue as well. Even in "Penelope," Joyce never totally lets us forget the narrative context of the book.

Upon first encounter, "Penelope" seems very unconventional: the absence of third-person narration, the unpunctuated, unbroken "sentences," and the representation of thought as if it were continuous speech distinguish it from the earlier chapters of interior monologue. But however radical the monologue first appears on the page, its underlying conventionality becomes apparent. First, in reforging the link between character and style in "Penelope," Joyce returned to one of the stylistic conceptions that dominates the early chapters of the book. And, second, once we learn how to read the continuous rhythms of the prose, the style seems much less radical than it first appears—linguistic play such as we find in "Sirens," for example, is almost non-existent. As A. Walton Litz says, "Penelope" "does not contribute to the sequence of styles which is one of our chief interests in *Ulysses.*"4

The technical reversion contributes to our sense of return and closure: even though we have never heard this voice before, we return to the sound of one mind thinking, a type of sound we heard throughout the first part of the book. Despite the fact that Joyce saw the chapter as a kind of nonending for the book—a chapter with no beginning, middle, or end—and despite its existence outside the main progression of styles, "Penelope" does give the reader a sense

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of closure, different from the kind of "ending" we found in "Ithaca." This sense of coming home is sanctioned by symbol, technique, and structure. We have reached the nostos of our Homeric journey: Odysseus comes home to Penelope, the male to the female, and the wanderings of the narrative to a point of origin, a single consciousness, a single voice. After the stark abstractions and cold "precision" of "Ithaca," the breakdown of grammatical and syntactic categories into lush, emotional rhythms provides a release of tension in the narrative, soothing to the beleaguered reader.

The chapter's strategic location at the end of the book and the dominance of one voice over our attention seem to give "Penelope" a privileged position. After the succession of styles, this single voice rising up out of the narrative brings with it a special authority. As Kenner says, it is as if we finally hear the solitary voice of the Muse.  

5 Joyce's resolution to end the monologue with "the female word Yes" further enhances this authority—Molly does indeed have "the last word." Again, one finds a paradoxical relationship between the chapter as privileged "last word" and the nonending Joyce projected.  

The meaning of Molly's climactic assent at the end of the chapter has been much debated. Most critics have seen in it an affirmation of life; others insist that this indiscriminate acceptance of life renders life meaningless.  

But despite the disagreement, critics have looked to "Penelope" to provide

7 In *Transparent Mind*, Dorrit Cohn says: "If the introductory moment of an autonomous monologue appears most natural when it is least introductory, its concluding moment appears most natural when it is least conclusive" (p. 243). "Penelope" does begin in medias res but ends climactically (in at least two senses). Cohn goes on to say that the least conclusive ending of an autonomous monologue would be to have the characters drift off to sleep. Interestingly, then, it is "Ithaca" that best fulfills Cohn's requirements for the ending of an autonomous monologue.
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a message or truth. James Maddox says that “Ulysses, an extensive critique of false sentiment, ends on a moment of true sentiment: Molly is reviving those dear dead days not yet beyond recall precisely in order to reenact them tomorrow.”9 And in an interesting essay, “Ulysses: The Exhaustion of Literature and the Literature of Exhaustion,” Seamus Deane calls the “Penelope” chapter a “new resolution.” According to Deane: “By parody, the novel exhausts its own possibility of resolution. Then, amazingly, out of that exhaustion, it creates a new resolution—Molly’s monologue—which gains a new access of energy for the whole work by its specifically non-literary character.”10 Even those interpretations that see in Molly’s amoral, undiscriminating view of life the epitome or emblem of potentiality itself, still regard the thematic content of the chapter as providing the key to the book.

I would like to suggest that regardless of the specifics of these interpretations, the idea of a natural resolution is precisely what is undermined in the book as a whole. Because my own reading of the book depends upon the notion that Ulysses presents possibilities instead of conclusions, the “Penelope” chapter seems to me to be regressive, to present something denied by the rest of the book. If Molly’s monologue contains the truth or resolution, hasn’t the book implicitly suggested that we cannot trust messages or any version of the truth? All along it has played with and subverted its own momentary climaxes and seeming resolutions. As a result, it has sharpened our suspicion of any “last word.” “Penelope” does seem to give us a symbol of the life force, but the rest of the book has shown us that same protean life force in its varied manifestations and dramatic

possibilities. Finally, *Ulysses* represents the complexity in addition to the wealth of life that defies summation: Molly's chapter symbolizes the wealth but not the complexity; it ignores the distinctions and discriminations formed and reformed in the book.

Perhaps it makes sense to say that in "Penelope" Joyce provides a powerful ending for one "story" in *Ulysses* and not another: he completes the archetypal plot of the *Odyssey* by giving us Penelope, and he fleshes out the naturalistic plot as well by showing us the very human Molly Bloom, whom we have waited to see throughout the day. Joyce called "Penelope" the "indispensable countersign to Bloom's passport to eternity"—he felt the chapter was necessary to provide thematic and structural balance. But the other "story" in *Ulysses* that I have traced, the story of the writing of a novel, is somehow falsified by this kind of final chapter. "Penelope" does exist outside the sequence of styles, but it has the whole weight of that sequence behind it. The whole book has cautioned us not to trust any one version of things more than another, even one so apparently formless or "natural" as this one.

Instead, it is in the type of myth and language found at the end of "Ithaca," rather than in the symbolism and style of "Penelope," that Joyce found a way to end his novel without creating a sense of the necessity of closure. It took another book, *Finnegans Wake*, for him to explore the direction he had taken at the end of "Ithaca." It is not the single voice and "nonliterariness" of "Penelope" that provided Joyce's fiction with a new direction; it is, instead, the artifice and the curious blend of dream, culture, myth, and nursery rhyme at the end of "Ithaca" that was to be the most open-ended for Joyce—both in terms of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. However beautifully and powerfully Joyce presented the return to a single voice in "Penelope," he

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gives us a kind of closure that the rest of the book seems to subvert.

*Ulysses* is a set of fictions that reveals the inconclusiveness of all “fictions,” a compendium of schemes of order that implies that there is no absolute way to order experience, either in life or in literature. The elaborate schematization in *Ulysses* does not represent, as many critics have contended, an absolute and closed symbolic order. One gets a sense of spillage in the text: despite the many aesthetic patterns offered in the book (rhetorical, allegorical, symbolic), there is always something left over, something that transcends order and criticism. The excess of details and styles makes us pare away what we cannot assimilate to our critical statements about the book, but the surplus remains to remind us of what cannot be incorporated in one scheme or interpretation. To describe the kind of book *Ulysses* represents one must account for the compulsive ordering and the ongoing experimentation in the work, for the tidiness of its forms and the sprawling richness of detail.

In abandoning the norm with which the book begins and substituting instead a succession of stylistic experiments, Joyce reveals how style is always an interpretation of reality, a choice among many possibilities. In the direction of the style, from the breakdown of narrative, to the borrowing of styles, to the new mode beyond parody that he created in “Ithaca,” Joyce signaled the end and the reconstitution of the form of the novel. The exercises of style are not extrinsic to a central meaning; rather, they create the meanings in the book.

The provisional nature of the styles and the structure of anticlimax they create reflects something about Joyce’s view of life as well as literature. Unlike most modernists, Joyce did not believe in crisis as the model of the age. The characters survive tense moments; it is as if the moments we saw in *Dubliners* were lived beyond. The reader, too, passes from a dramatic version of an event to a less intense, often defla-
tionary version. If *Ulysses* contains certain moments when pace quickens and meaning is shaped into aesthetic pattern, it also shows us how provisional and evanescent these moments are. When direct statements of meaning or belief are made by the characters, they are likely to be parodied; when direct expression of feeling or belief is given in the narrative, the text is apt to print some kind of retraction. "A heavy-entree" is likely to vanish in a double take and become "the apathy of the stars." The story of the characters and the story of the writing unfold and there is energy in both processes. Joyce's skepticism about language and things such as resolution, change, and crisis in life does not lead to a sense of a dead end.

Instead, Joyce's skepticism about the "drama" of life leads to a picture of a survivor and an appreciation of the stamina it takes to get through the excesses of even one day's experience. And if *Ulysses* reflects Joyce's skepticism about any one mode of order and about the limitations of language, it nevertheless reflects his enormous confidence in what a writer can do with the resources available. It gives us a sense of the possibilities both in literature and in life.