

Aristotle's Masterpiece: A Possible Source Book for the "Ithaca" Episode of Ulysses

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This paper attempts to suggest that *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, which is mentioned three times in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, is the original for the catechistical method employed in the "Ithaca" episode. A quarter of a century ago, R. A. Copland and G. W. Turner proposed in their joint essay that the question-and-answer form of "Ithaca" is directly indebted to Richmal Mangnall's *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions for the Use of Young People, with a Selection of British and General Biography, &c., &c.*, a textbook of elementary factual knowledge which went through over a hundred editions during the nineteenth century and was still in use in Joyce's times.¹ From then on, many critics appear to have accepted Mangnall's book as a primary source for Joyce's "Ithaca" in *Ulysses*.² Since I do not agree with them, however, I propose that Joyce probably used *Aristotle's Masterpiece* as a model for parody in his composition of "Ithaca" because of the mutual resemblances between *Aristotle's Masterpiece* and Joyce's "Ithaca."

Nothing is more convincing as evidence that Joyce was quite familiar with *Aristotle's Masterpiece* than his own three oblique references in *Ulysses*: (1) "Mr. Bloom turned over idly pages . . . of *Aristotle's Masterpiece*. Crooked botched print. Plates; infants cuddled in a ball in bloodred wombs like livers of slaughtered cows . . . All butting with their skulls to get out of it . . ."³; (2) ". . . the recorded instances of multiseiminal, twikindled and monstrous births conceived during the catamenic period or of consanguineous parents—in a word all the cases of human nativity which Aristotle has classified in his masterpiece with chromolithographic illustrations" (*U* 14.973-77); and (3) ". . . you then tucked up in bed like those babies in the Aristocrats Masterpiece he brought me another time . . . old Aristocrat or whatever his name is disgusting you more with those rotten pictures children with two heads and no legs. . ." (*U* 18.1237-41). As is indicated in these quotes, Joyce not only refers to the title of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* but also uses its contents for the writing of *Ulysses*.⁴ The fact that "Aristotle's masterpiece" is jotted down in Joyce's *Ulysses Notesheets in the British Museum* is more evidence that Joyce used this book as a source in the composition of his highly intertextual novel.⁵

In Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*—one of the mentor works for *Ulysses*—*Aristotle's Masterpiece* is mentioned as follows:

It is said in *Aristotle's Master-Piece*, "That when a man doth think of any thing which is past—he looketh down upon the ground—but that when he thinketh of something which is to come, he looketh up towards the heaven."⁶

According to the editor's note,⁷ the quoted parts are answers to the questions in "Aristotle's Book of Problems, with Other Astronomers,

Astrologers, and Physicians, Concerning the State of Man's Body," which is the third part of *Aristotle's Masterpiece*: "Why doth a man lift up his Head towards the Heavens, when he doth imagine?" and "Why doth a man when he museth, or thinketh on things past, look down towards the earth?" Through the editor's remarks we are easily able to notice that a part of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* is written in the interrogative method. Joyce, who values Sterne highly as his literary precursor, had no reason to abandon Sterne's use of *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, and was surely inspired to write "Ithaca," his favourite episode,⁸ in the way that a part of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* is written.

Aristotle's Masterpiece, first appearing in England in 1684, went through over twenty editions in the 18th century and far more in the 19th century both in Great Britain and America. No matter how many editions had been in print, "there is no single text of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* reprinted verbatim down the ages." Accordingly, the book "should not be seen as a single text that evolved or was adapted over time but as several different books with a single title."⁹ The version of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* which I am using as a text is similar to that version of the book which Sterne mentioned in terms of its format. This version, which was printed not separately but with other pseudo-Aristotelian writings, contains four or five parts; part 3 of this edition, as mentioned earlier, is "Aristotle's Book of Problems, with Other Astronomers, Astrologers, and Physicians, Concerning the State of Man's Body," the sole part in which the question-and-answer style is used. The first two items of part 3 in *Aristotle's Masterpiece* are:

Q. Among all living creatures, why hath man/only his countenance lifted up towards heaven?

A. 1. From the will of the Creator. But al/though this answer be true, yet it seemeth not/to be of force, because that so all questions/might be easily resolved. Therefore, 2. I an/swer, that, for the most part, every workman/doth make his first work worse, and then his second better; so God creating all other ani/mals before man gave them their face looking/down to the earth; and then secondly, he cre/ated man, unto whom he gave an upright shape,/lifted unto heaven, because it is drawn from/divinity, and is derived from the goodness of God,/who maketh all his works both perfect and good./3. Man only among all living creatures, is ordained to the kingdom of heaven and there/fore hath his face elevated and lifted up to/heaven, because that, despising earthly and/worldly things, he ought often to contemplate on/heavenly things . . . 6. Naturally there is unto every thing and every/work that form and figure given which is fit and/proper for its motion; as unto the heavens round/ness, to the fire a pyramidal form, that is, broad/beneath and sharp towards the top, which/form is most apt to ascend; and so man has his face/towards heaven, to behold the wonders of God's/works.

Q. Why are the heads of men hairy? A. The/hair is the ornament of the head, and the brain/is purged of gross humours by the growing of the/hair, from the highest to the lowest, which pass/through the pores of the exterior flesh, become/dry, and converted into hair. This appears to be/the case from the circumstance that in all man's/body there is nothing drier than the hair, for it/is drier than the bones; and it is well known that/some beasts are nourished with bones, as dogs/but they cannot digest feathers or hair, but void/them undigested, being too hot for nourishment. . . .¹⁰

Part 3 of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* comprises 344 such questions and answers where the unknown compiler (or compilers) conveys his/her information in direct, didactic prose. The length of each item is far from being regular: the longest one is over 38 lines while the shortest one is only two.¹¹ Inspired by the "acidities" deriving from the peculiar method of part 3, Joyce, who was

struggling to find a new technique for each episode of *Ulysses*, might have resolved to adopt "Technique: Catechism (impersonal)" for his "Ithaca."¹²

Let us briefly examine the format of Mangnall's *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions for the Use of Young People*, a book which has been regarded as "the original for Joyce's parody" in "Ithaca."¹³ This book is composed of four main parts in terms of its contents: "Questions on History," "The Elements of Astronomy," "Questions on Common Subjects," and "Questions on History of the Old Testament." All of these parts are written in the question-and-answer method, although limited parts of the "Abstract" are written in a simple, direct prose, frequently omitting verbs. In a word, the whole book is written throughout in the interrogative style. The question-and-answers on the first page of the book are as follows:

What monarchies were first founded after the/Deluge? The Chaldean monarchy, founded by/Nimrod 2221 years before the nativity of our Sa/viour. The Chinese, founded by Fohi, B.C. 2188./The Ancient Assyrian, founded by Ashur, the se/cond son of Shem, B.C. 2059. What were the/first cities built after the flood? Babylon, Memphis, Nineveh, Sidon and Sicyon. What nation/first established regular government? Most pro/bably the Egyptian; for, long before Joseph was carried into Egypt, Menes, or Misraim, had/founded that kingdom. . . .¹⁴

As is manifested by the above citations, distinctions between the questions and the answers and between each unit as well are far from being visually clear. And the total number of question-and-answer pairs is boundless.

By a formal comparison of part 3 of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* with Mangnall's *Questions*, it is apparent that Joyce's "Ithaca" resembles the former in format rather than the latter. As each catechetical unit of part 3 is visually distinctive, so is the "Ithaca" of *Ulysses*. What is more important than this clarity in the two sections is their approximation of item numbers: "Ithaca" contains 309 items and part 3 of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* contains 344. What is most noteworthy of all is their locations in the texts. Both of them are not only parts of the whole books, but are placed in the latter half of each book. Although part 3 in my text of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* is the third chapter from the last, in the Zurich James Joyce Foundation version of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* it is the penultimate chapter of the book just as "Ithaca" is. Taking into consideration all these formal similarities it is evident that Joyce is directly indebted to part 3 of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* for his composition of the "Ithaca" episode.

Another element I wish to point out is that "Ithaca" of *Ulysses* resembles part 3 of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* in tone. It is well known that the dominant atmosphere of "Ithaca" is its comic quality. Since Frank Budgen first pointed out the comic sentiment prevailing in "Ithaca,"¹⁵ most critics have tended to agree. Hugh Kenner, who sees "Ithaca" as "the funniest episode of all," summarizes the tone of the episode by saying that the "periphrastic absurdities" revealed in the questions and answers are "sometimes pathetic," "sometimes solemnly funny," and "sometimes wildly absurd."¹⁶ This sort of comic nature also seems to derive from the humorous contents of part 3 of *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, which abounds in nonsensical questions and answers. A few of them are:

Q. Why is not the head fleshy, like other/parts of the body? A. Because the head would/be too heavy, and would not stand./Also, a head loaded with flesh betokens an evil/complexion (*Aristotle's Masterpiece* 209).

Q. Why have you one nose and two eyes?/A. Because light is more necessary for us than/smelling; and therefore it doth proceed from/the goodness of Nature, that if we receive any/hurt or loss of one eye, the other may remain (*Aristotle's Masterpiece* 210).

Q. Why are paps below the breasts in/beasts, and above the breasts in woman? A./Because woman goes upright, and has two legs/only: and therefore if her paps were below her/breasts, they would hinder her going; but beasts/having four feet prevents that inconveniency (*Aristotle's Masterpiece* 229).

Q. Why did the ancients say it was better to/fall into the hands of a raven than a flatterer? A. Because ravens do not eat us till we are dead,/but flatterers devour us alive (*Aristotle's Masterpiece* 269).

Silly answers to solemn questions make us laugh, because the comic effect generally arises from the incongruity between fact and pretense. The main reason why *Aristotle's Masterpiece* has received little scholarly attention in spite of its vast circulation and staying power from the end of the seventeenth to the present century is, according to Roy Porter, that "it contains a great deal of nonsense."¹⁷ D'Arcy Power condemns it as a "hoary old debauchee acknowledged by no-one" and Otho Beall, Jr. labels it a scrapbook of "preobjective" and "occult" sexual "folklore," a "medical anachronism."¹⁸ The criticisms which *Aristotle's Masterpiece* received appear to be mainly caused by the contents of part 3 of the book.

Joyce was not concerned with its imprecision or the ineffectiveness of its advice but was attracted by its nonsensical and funny sentiments. Accordingly, he seems to borrow its comic tone from "Ithaca," the "ugly duckling" of *Ulysses*.¹⁹ But it is hard for any reader to find a funny quality in Mangnall's book. Even if some of the information in it looks absurd to the modern adult reader, the intention of Mangnall, an English schoolmistress, was undoubtedly serious, because she was writing a school-book text.

As a keen-eyed reader may already have noticed, "a mathematico-astronomico-physico-mechanico-geometrico-chemico sublimation of Bloom and Stephen" (*Letters I* 164) which Joyce himself called the "Ithaca" chapter, surely echoes the title of part 3 of *Aristotle's Masterpiece*: "Aristotle's Book of Problems, with Other Astronomers, Astrologers, and Physicians, Concerning the State of Man's Body." Can there now be any doubt that the former is a parody of the latter? Certainly not.²⁰

Notes

1. R. A. Copland and G. W. Turner, "The Nature of James Joyce's Parody in 'Ithaca,'" *Modern Language Review* 64 (1969): 759-63.

2. Among them is A. Walton Litz, who claims that "[t]here can be no doubt that Mangnall's *Questions* was a primary source for Joyce's 'Ithaca.'" See his "Ithaca," *James Joyce's Ulysses: Critical Essays*, ed. Clive Hart and David Hayman (Berkeley: U of California P, 1977) 394. For a discussion of the Christian catechism as the source of the form of "Ithaca" rather than secular catechisms, see Harry C. Staley, "Joyce's Catechism," *James Joyce Quarterly* 6 (1968): 137-53.

3. James Joyce, *Ulysses: Student's Edition*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler, et al. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 10.585-89; hereafter cited in the text as *U* with episode and line numbers.

4. See my unpublished paper, "Aristotle's Masterpieces: Nora's Source Book," which was presented at the 12th International James Joyce Symposium held in Monaco, June 11-17, 1990. This paper was accepted for publication in *Images of Joyce*, ed. George Sandulescu (Colin Smythe, forthcoming). I explored in this paper how Joyce

used *Aristotle's Masterpiece* in order to depict the above quotes by demonstrating "coloured plates" and "pictures" taken from it. Furthermore, I showed that the following issues are direct borrowings from *Aristotle's Masterpiece*: Joyce's delineation of Leopold Bloom's sufferings from piles, Joe Higgins' reading of Stephen Dedalus' forehead and palm, and Higgins' mentioning of physiognomy in the "Circe" episode. The present paper is, accordingly, a sequel to the previous one, in that I continue to be concerned with Joyce's use of *Aristotle's Masterpieces* as a source book for *Ulysses*.

5. James Joyce, *Joyce's Ulysses: Notesheets in the British Museum*, ed. Philip F. Herring (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1972) 221.

6. Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James Aiken Work (Indianapolis: Odyssey, 1981) 102.

7. Sterne 102.

8. See Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses and Other Writings* (London: Oxford UP, 1972) 264.

9. Roy Porter, "'The Secrets of Generation Display'd': *Aristotle's Masterpiece* in Eighteenth-Century England," *Eighteenth Century Life* 9 (1985): 3.

10. *Aristotle's Materpiece: Coloured Plates* (London: The Booksellers, n.d.) 202-203.

11. A few examples for the shortest items I chose at random are: "Q. Why hath a man shoulders and arms?/A. To lift and carry burdens. Q. Why are the arms round? A. For the/swifter and speedier work" (*Aristotle's Masterpiece* 227); "Why are sheep and pigeons mild? A. They/want gall, the cause of anger" (*Aristotle's Masterpiece* 248); "Q. Why does hair burn quickly? A. Be/cause it is dry and cold" (*Aristotle's Masterpiece* 274).

12. Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973) 187.

13. Copland and Turner 761.

14. Richmal Mangnall, *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions for the Use of Young People, with a Selection of British and General Biography, &c. &c.* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1842) 1.

15. See Budgen 264.

16. Hugh Kenner, *Dublin's Joyce* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1955) 261.

17. Porter 2.

18. Qtd. in Porter 2.

19. Budgen 264.

20. This paper was presented at the 14th International James Joyce Symposium held at Seville, Spain, June 12-18, 1994.