

EXPLOITS

BY CONSTANCE ADLER

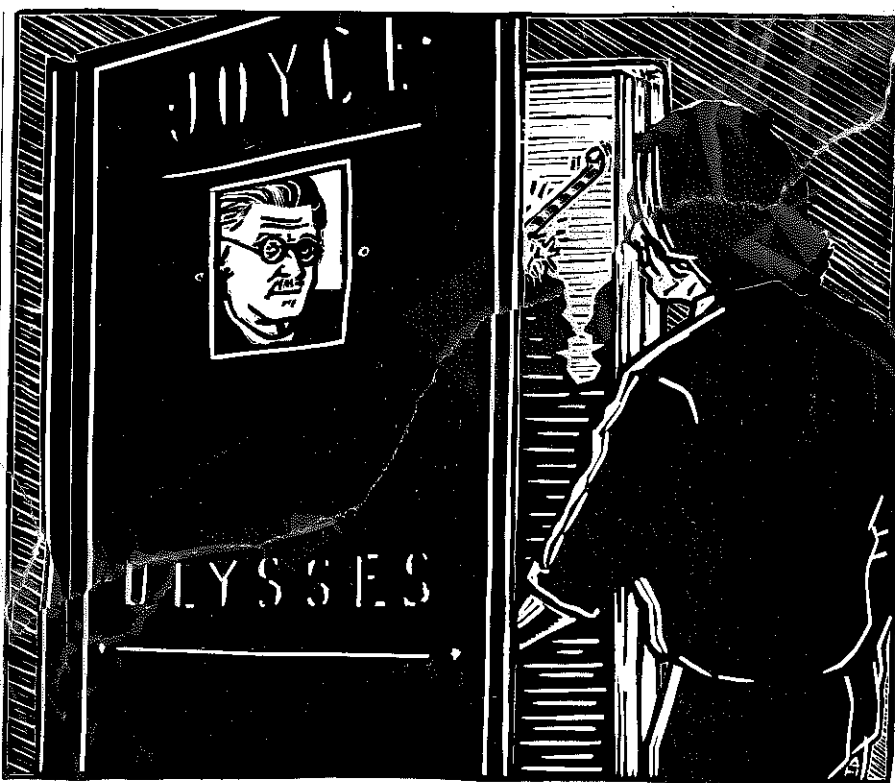
THE JAMES GANG RIDES AGAIN

The annual conference of James Joyce fans is always an eccentric affair, and this year's gathering in Philadelphia was no different.

Downstairs at the Irish Pub, in the Garden Room, which doesn't look like a garden, there's a noisy party going on. They've insisted on rearranging the tables so they can all sit together banquet-style, making it very difficult for the waitress to get around. Laden with mugs of beer, she works her way through the maze of tables, struggling to remain composed as the revelers clamor for more dinner salads. They have changed orders on her three times already, and more of them arrive all the time. Meanwhile, some are leaving to make room for the newcomers, and it's impossible to keep track of who has paid. It is suspected that some have skipped out on their checks. This realization elicits great indignation on the part of those still at the table, and a strained smile from the waitress. It's going to get worse.

Every year in the middle of June, somewhere in the world, hundreds of people get together for the sake of their favorite writer, James Joyce. This year the Joyceans descended on Philadelphia for the purpose of celebrating the life and work of the 20th century's most important author. They did this mostly because they love to talk about his books, but also because talk of things Joycean, although endlessly fascinating and endlessly controversial, is mainly just endless.

Despised by his native Ireland for supposed obscenity, James Joyce has been more or less adopted by this loosely organized but passionate group of people, united by their commitment to a writer who died virtually unappreciated. It is a large international group, composed primarily of academics who make their living studying and writing about Joyce. But there are always plenty of amateur enthusiasts; this devotion among lay people is attributed to the author's own unabashed love of popular culture and sensual experience.



Unlike other literary gatherings, James Joyce conferences are notoriously infected with the same chaotic lust that infects Joyce's works, and as a result they are a lot more fun. (Even D.H. Lawrence conferences are reported to be dreadfully dull affairs.)

More than 300 lovers of Joyce came to Philadelphia for this conference, which consisted of academic panel discussions during the day, a concert, a play and the culminating Bloomsday Banquet. This final extravaganza is traditionally held on June 16th because that is the day Joyce's characters, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, made their epic sojourn through Dublin in *Ulysses*.

This year, the five-day conference began with a pilgrimage to the third floor of

the Rosenbach Museum and Library on Delancey Street, where the original manuscript of *Ulysses* is reverently displayed in glass cases and subdued light. (The museum acquired the original handwritten draft for \$1,975 in 1923.) The devout Joyceans elbowed past each other to view the delicate yellowed pages, observed a moment of silence and then headed downstairs to the bar, where they launched into their two favorite activities: drinking and arguing.

A frazzled, red-haired Dubliner figured prominently at the center of one fracas.

"Yes, Mayor Goode was supposed to be here, but I've heard, from a very reliable source mind you, that they got a phone call and someone said something like, 'If that mother-effer shows up, we'll

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blow the place.' Or some such nonsense," she said, fiddling with the pearl-edged brooch at her neck. (This was not long after the MOVE debacle.) "So he's not coming now, I hear. But it's just as well, what with the manuscript upstairs. It really wouldn't do to endanger the Rosenbach, now would it?"

Happily, the conference opened without mishap, and the festivities continued in the museum garden where various fuzzy, speckled Joyceans milled about, gesticulating wildly, spilling their drinks, getting cracker crumbs all over their lapels and debating fine points of Joyciana. The conversations revolved around such topics as the exact weight of *Ulysses* character Molly Bloom, and whether or not Joyce was really afraid of thunderstorms. All agreed he hated dogs. Everybody talked about Joyce and his characters as though they were particularly intriguing next-door neighbors. The tone was unrelievedly gossipy.

The most riveting fixture at the conference was a severely attenuated man, sporting a magnificent leonine head of gray hair. He had been stealthily circling the Rosenbach garden party with a camera slung around his neck and then fell to scuttling about in the shrubbery. Occasionally he would step out to snap a shot of one of the Joyceans and then retreat back into the bushes, where he whipped out a small black book in which he scribbled frenzied notes. He seemed a most unorthodox professional photographer until he was introduced to me as The Foremost Authority on James Joyce and the director of an institute of Joyce studies in Zurich.

We shook hands solemnly as he peered into my face, blinking like an aged hawk. "Have you signed my book?"

No, I replied.

"Well, you haven't even been legitimized yet," he said, and reached into the left breast pocket of the grubbierest jean jacket I had ever seen and removed the slim volume. I considered it for a moment and then signed the name of an 18th-century novelist. He returned the book to its pocket and from the other produced a black plastic comb with which he tidied the wayward gray locks. This done, he disappeared smoothly into the crowd.

Meanwhile, much in the reunion spirit of the conference, warm reminiscences had welled up between a slender, freckled woman dressed in radical undergraduate chic and a tall, fair-haired fellow whose name tag identified him simply as CLAUD FROM U. OF MUNICH.

"Frankfurt was lovely, just lovely. They had a Frank-for-all for us which was a real blast."

"Were you in Dublin for the Centenary?"

"Yes, but *that* was awful. They had

Bloomsday in this huge hall and the acoustics were terrible, so you couldn't hear a thing. And you heard Borges showed up? No one knew he was coming. The really funny thing was that when he stood up to speak, this band in the next room began to play, so you couldn't hear a word he said. But he kept on talking through all the noise. I mean, here he was, Borges, this institution, you know. And we couldn't hear a word he said."

"Incredible."

"Apparently he said some very moving things about his debt to Joyce and all that."

"Did you see the toilets in Dublin Castle? I'd heard they were *really* awful. . . ."

Claus was on the famed Gabler team, based at the University of Munich and led by Professor Hans Walter Gabler. The team had spent seven years putting together the latest critical edition of *Ulysses* from all extant manuscripts available to scholars the world over. This means simply that they went through the old version of the novel and corrected 5,000 errors introduced in 1922 by the French typesetters, who had (among other oversights) excised chunks of the manuscript that began and ended with the letter W. The Gabler Team also took it upon itself to correct the typos that the half-blind Joyce had missed.

"He was a lousy proofreader, to put it bluntly," put Claus, bluntly.

The Gabler edition was a topic of lively interest at some of the afternoon panel discussions, which really did little more than provide the academics with an opportunity to read aloud from their most cherished writings on James Joyce. Those who elected to brave the spring drizzle for the joy of "Joyce After Deconstructionism"—and were able to keep their eyes open—were treated to a stirring harangue on the "campaign against onanism and Joyce's virulent criticism of the aestheticization of women into high art and pornography in the Penelope Chapter wherein Gertie is the object of the gaze."

At that point, one listener, to whom the deconstructionism connection was not immediately apparent, turned to his companion:

"Excuse me, did he just say she was the object of the gaze?"

"No, no, no. The object of the gaze."

"Oh, I see. Well, that's very different."

Thus enlightened, we recessed in dire need of refreshment. The cocktail hour was upon us, and a Peter Lorre look-alike from Frankfurt decided it was time to organize a party. Busily securing participants with the violence that unflinchingly accompanies friendly German enthusiasm, this little homunculus heroically led the parade to the Irish Pub on Walnut near 20th, where he demanded many rounds of

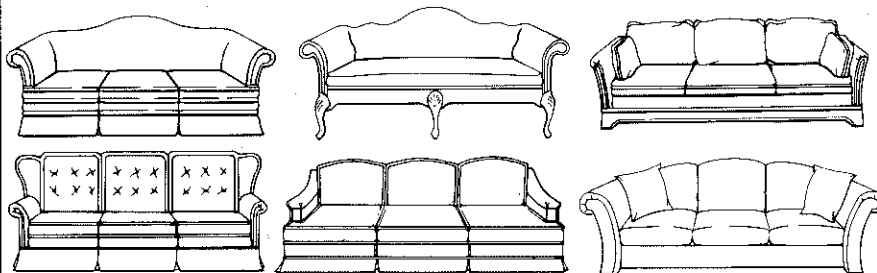
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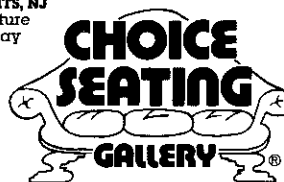
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Rolling Rocks. ("You Americans have such *interesting* beers.") The waitress quickly ushered us downstairs, where the merrymaking would take place safely out of sight of the regular patrons.

The group at the Pub was a motley assortment even as Joyceans go. The talk was free-flowing and bitchy. Obscure allusions flew back and forth, but it was hard, even for an outsider, to miss the resounding clunk of names being dropped and then ground to a powder under heel.

The principles at the table were the Foremost Authority, two of his youngest disciples, a handful of academic groupies and the Young Lion from Vancouver, who had been much whispered about as a real comer on the Joyce circuit. Regrettably, this poor fellow couldn't seem to speak without clawing at his own nose hairs and shrugging convulsively to punctuate each point.

When the Foremost Authority began to speak very sagely, we all knew we were in for a treat and leaned in clubbily to the center of the table. He did not disappoint.

"One of the biggest bores in all of Joyce studies is sitting at the table behind us," he said sotto voce to a disciple at the far end of the table. "You must ask him to tell you about his *dot theory*."

"Oh, really. What will he say?"

"Well," the F.A. said, first checking with much neck action to see that no one could overhear, "he will tell you that Joyce sometimes made three dots in the margins of *Ulysses* during the final drafts. And that when you connect the dots, sometimes they may form a triangle."

"Except of course, when the dots are in a perfectly straight line," the Young Lion from Vancouver cut in.

The disciple responded dutifully, "What does that mean?"

"Well," he said, trying not to laugh now, "If you ask him that, he will say, 'That is a good question.'" All assembled cracked up.

Amid the ensuing gales of laughter, the Young Lion from Vancouver mused aloud, "Yeah, but the great thing about that is that it's not limited to Joyce. It's really a universal truth."

As this revelation sank in, the gaiety gradually subsided, and we all fell to contemplating our Rolling Rocks, and dots in the margins of *Ulysses*. A few attempts at conversation started up and died down, but it soon became clear that there was nothing left to say.

Someone suggested we pay our bar bill, which we did with some ceremony and confusion of funds. Then, after a succession of goodbyes and promises to meet again—in Copenhagen, next spring—the Joyceans dispersed unsteadily into the wet night.