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Deconstructing “Ithaca,”
Or How Joyce Circles the Square in *Ulysses*

In a 1921 letter, James Joyce laid out his intentions for the “Ithaca” chapter of *Ulysses*, the final episode in Leopold Bloom’s story. He insisted that “All events are resolved into their cosmic physical, psychical, etc. equivalents,” thus allowing the reader to “know everything and know it in the baldest coldest way.” In his expressed desire to wholly represent the “epic” quality of Bloom and Dedalus’s meeting, the return to Eccles Street, and the reunion of Bloom with his unfaithful wife, Joyce takes on the early 20th century ideological assumption that only the impartial, empirical mode of logic, science, and mathematics can describe the universe in precise, objectively true terms. However, in the attempt to reveal “everything” to the reader, using the scientific mode putatively suited for depicting concepts as vast as the universe, Joyce’s cannot escape a head-on confrontation with the “crisis of signification,” the very limits of language, knowledge, and truth itself.

It is my contention that Joyce ironically assumes the posture of objectivity, and uses this climactic episode of his “epic” novel to breakdown the very premise of grand, unassailable revelations in any novel consisting of words, written in a world structured by language. To dismiss the 309 questions and answers Joyce uses to build (and un-build) his “Ithaca” as boring or impersonal—coldly mismatched to the human connection that his story has purportedly been moving towards across the previous sixteen episodes—is to miss the, ever more “epic,” teleological purpose tackled by the chapter. What Joyce ultimately implies through imperfect, impossible attempts to get at the truth of Bloom and Dedalus’s meeting is a philosophic view of existence that aligns closely with the tenets of Derridean Deconstructionism.

Joyce demonstrates in “Ithaca” that the more readily one tries to get at meaning, the more elusive it becomes. Instead, the endeavor—rendered in language—cannot escape the slide down endless slopes of signification in a perpetual deferral from the “truth” of the thing itself. Yet, to say that the “Ithaca” episode deconstructs itself is not to say the text is ultimately devoid of value to readers looking for something both sincere and applicable to their own effort to construct a viable existence. What emerges from the span of signification chains that reach infinitely upward to universe and downward to endlessly divisible microcosms is a more sincere—if not ever “true”—trace of meaning that is simultaneously visible and ethereal, rendered plainly but never precisely: meaning that is at once everywhere and nowhere.