

## Introduction to "Encyclopedia Joyce": on being very big

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**Introduction:  
On Being Very Big**

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**Introduction:**  
**On Being Very Big**

Early in the schooldays of Stephen Dedalus, Joyce introduces him, and us, to the vicissitudes of totalizing thought. Studying his geography book, Stephen reflects on its description of the world and considers how humanity can be classified according to its nesting categories: “They were all in different countries and the countries were in continents and the continents were in the world and the world was in the universe” (P 15). In keeping with this, he has written in the book’s flyleaf “himself, his name and where he was”:

*Stephen Dedalus*  
*Class of Elements*  
*Clongowes Wood College*  
*Sallins*  
*County Kildare*  
*Ireland*  
*Europe*  
*The World*  
*The Universe (P 15)*

Stephen imagines the whole universe knowable and unified in a totalizing schema. It is a sort of encyclopedism: a complete, commensurable scale, consistent and articulable throughout, fixed in a form; the symptom of a system for transmitting knowledge of the world to the world. This special issue takes Joyce’s engagement with such encyclopedic thinking and writing as its topic.

Even this early in *Portrait*, the outlines of a critique of encyclopedism are perceptible. Rereading “himself, his name and where he was,” Stephen finds himself probing the limits of the encyclopedic picture of reality he has been taught:

Then he read the flyleaf from the bottom to the top till he came to his own name. That was he: and he read down the page again. What was after the universe? Nothing. But was there anything round the universe to show where it stopped before the nothing place began? It could not be a wall; but there could be a thin thin line there all round everything. It was very big to think about everything and everywhere. Only God could do that. He tried to think what a big thought that must be; but he could only think of God. (P 16)

Only God is in a position to comprehend the totality of the world. That being so, Stephen must accept the formulation of totality he infers from his textbook and his teachers. In the impious and prideful connotations of the repeated adjective “big” and his related inability to think of anything but God, Joyce figures how Stephen’s youthful curiosity is bounded in its infancy. If it is “very big to think about everything and everywhere,” then Stephen, who feels “small and weak” (*P* 8, 17), must accept the idea of “everything and everywhere” taught to him by God’s representatives on Earth.

This is, of course, one of the kernels for Stephen’s subsequent, and lifelong, rebellion—and here already, Joyce quietly lays bare the incoherence at the heart of what Stephen is taught. Upon deferring to God, he begins thinking about His names in other languages, before concluding

though there were different names for God in all the different languages in the world and God understood what all the people who prayed said in their different languages still God remained always the same God and God’s real name was God. (*P* 16)

In the encyclopedic framework into which Stephen is taught to fit the world, linguistic diversity is subordinated to a language that is more “real” than the others: English.<sup>1</sup> How striking, then, that his friend Fleming has taken his geography book and colored the picture of the Earth on the first page—“a big ball in the middle of clouds” (*P* 15)—making it green and maroon, the colors Dante associates with Parnell and Davitt. Looking “wearily at the green round earth in the middle of the maroon clouds,” Stephen wonders:

which was right, to be for the green or for the maroon, because Dante had ripped the green velvet back off the brush that was for Parnell one day with her scissors and had told him that Parnell was a bad man. He wondered if they were arguing at home about that. That was called politics. There were two sides in it. Dante was on one side and his father and Mr Casey were on the other side but his mother and uncle Charles were on no side. (*P* 16)

The totalized, ideally encyclopedic idea of the world that he is taught—internally consistent and unified, simultaneously knowable, articulable, and unquestionable through God’s indisputable grace—is undermined from its earliest articulation, in his life and in Joyce’s oeuvre. The unitary vision of “himself, his name and where he was” belies a reality riven by its own complexity, in violent competition

for dominance with other articulations of reality. Ominously absent from the address on the flyleaf, between “Ireland” and “Europe,” is “Great Britain.” Stephen’s childish probing of the limits of effable reality inadvertently produces a seditious category error. Stephen is “very big” in ways he has not yet even begun to grasp.

He is again feeling small on the morning of June 16, about fifteen years later, as he remembers encyclopedic aspirations he has abandoned:

Books you were going to write with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies written on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara. Pico della Mirandola like. Ay, very like a whale. When one reads these strange pages of one long gone one feels that one is at one with one who once... (*U* 3.139-46)

Anticipating Louis Zukofsky and Sue Grafton, Stephen has contemplated, or at least daydreamed about, an elliptically extensive literary project, a series of deeply deep books titled *A* through *Z*, that would deliver him to posterity. Long after having become disillusioned with the comprehensive God-ordained order he learned at Clongowes, he remained attracted to the kind of largest-scale form he could use to speak from within or behind or beyond or above a whole written world. Now he is embarrassed to think about it. This is a complicated joke about the novel’s project. Joyce has his much younger alter ego ruefully make fun of *his* younger self for being so overweening he aspired to write something as immense, ultraschematized, and world-historically ambitious as *Ulysses*, the book we might expect Stephen to write someday. Wanting to deposit your work at the Library of Alexandria sixteen centuries after it burned is not much more ridiculous than hoping that it will “keep the professors busy for centuries... insuring [your] immortality” (*JIII* 521). Big forms are, by their nature, too much. They proliferate excesses. Joyce is sometimes exuberant, sometimes ambivalent in his formal extravagance. The special affordances and problems of encyclopedic form preoccupy him and profoundly shape his writing. These are always bound up with the temptation and problems of encyclopedic order.

With *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* on the shelf, Joyce's own bigness—his pride and impiety, as much as the intimidating scale of his *magna opera*—has been taken for granted. A kind of encyclopedism has been one of the least controversial attributes of his fiction and its legacy. As he described *Ulysses* to Carlo Linati as “una specie di encyclopedia” (*SL* 271) and *Finnegans Wake* to Harriet Shaw Weaver as his “universal history” or “history of the world” (*JIII* 544), we can reasonably claim to be following his lead.<sup>2</sup> Yet the relative absence of controversy around the term in Joycean scholarship has allowed our use of it to become glib. As language that illuminates Joyce's work, *encyclopedism* and *the encyclopedic* have not had the cachet or critical productivity of, for example, *epiphany*, *Uncle Charles principle*, *mirror stage*, *hypertextuality*, or *the everyday*. Rather, those terms have mostly been used as neutral vehicles for interpretations that do not make much use of the wealth of meanings, connotations, histories, forms, practices, epistemologies, and bodies of knowledge that have attached to the word *encyclopedia* since antiquity.<sup>3</sup>

When we call Joyce's novels encyclopedic, we ought to mean something more than “very big.” The deep polysemy of *encyclopedia*, rooted in the word's long career and the history of the literary genre it names, makes it a uniquely useful all-including term. In rejecting *encyclopedism*'s usual status as a ten-dollar synonym for bigness, this issue seeks to explore how encyclopedic thought and practice speak to Joyce's work in all their complicated specificity. This may help some readers appreciate Joyce's intellectual and formal sophistication from a new angle. Len Platt observes in his pathbreaking essay on the *Wake* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that “the commonly held view that Joyce was a straight encyclopedic borrower” who shares “the naïve confidence in the popular production of knowledge held by Leopold Bloom” does not allow for there to be anything nuanced or critical about his engagement with the encyclopedia.<sup>4</sup> In showing how Joyce repurposes the eleventh *Britannica* with judicious epistemic skepticism, Platt gives the lie to that view. So does Paul Saint-Amour, whose watershed book *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* draws out deep similarities

between *Ulysses* and the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert in their combination of colossal archival ambition, anti-coherentism, and self-consciousness about the material fragility of literary projects and the limits of knowledge.

The essays in the issue build on Platt and Saint-Amour's interventions; reevaluate and rework earlier treatments of its theme that are less firmly rooted in the specificities of the encyclopedia, such as Edward Mendelson's influential essay "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon"; and introduce new starting points to extend the conversation about Joyce's encyclopedism. Norman Cheadle shows how, in his Joycean novel *Adán Buenosayres*, Leopoldo Marechal echoes the anti-imperial critique of the *Britannica* that Platt describes in the *Wake*. Kiron Ward takes Platt's reading as the foundation for his exploration of Joyce's complex eschewal of the processes of totalization in *Ulysses*. Saint-Amour's characterization of the *Encyclopédie* and *Ulysses* as purposely incoherent wholes serves as a basis for Tamara Radak's account of Joyce's anti-closural strategies and James Blackwell Phelan's analysis of the overdetermination of form in *Ulysses*. Philip Keel Geheber's comparison of *Ulysses* and Emile Zola's novel cycle *Les Rougon-Macquart* adds an important literary-historical coordinate to Saint-Amour's argument that "provision against catastrophe" is a key encyclopedic imperative.<sup>5</sup> Jay Dickson historicizes Mendelson's controversial conflation of encyclopedic literature and epic by drawing out the encyclopedia's origins in classical education. Georgina Nugent-Folan uses Mendelson's claim that gigantism is a definitive encyclopedic preoccupation as a springboard to establishing Gertrude Stein's novel *The Making of Americans*, which grotesquely imagines all of humanity as a barely differentiated "mushy mass,"<sup>6</sup> as a canonical work of encyclopedic modernism as essential as *Ulysses* and the *Wake*. The comparisons at the heart of Cheadle, Geheber, and Nugent-Folan's essays point out new directions for thinking about Joycean encyclopedism. So do readings centered on ideas from Mikhail Bakhtin (Radak on unfinalizability), G.W.F. Hegel (Dickson on the modern understanding of epic), Caroline

Levine (Phelan on the affordances of form), and Walter D. Mignolo (Ward on the locus of enunciation), among others.

Nearly every contributor grapples with the encyclopedia's difference from the novel and, perhaps surprisingly, with how that difference foregrounds the question of failure. We expect novels to be complete and self-contained, take us from beginning to middle to end, and do what they set out to do. Encyclopedias promise totality but are subject to the limitations of textuality; they strain to include more than a book or a shelf of books can hold, and they stretch themselves out of any tidy, wieldy shape in trying and failing to do it. Most earlier criticism on the encyclopedic novel construes it in broadly novelistic terms. (Among critics who emphasize its similarity to epic, such as Mendelson and Franco Moretti, the relevant assumptions are much the same.) Six of seven essays here register Joyce's failure to fully realize his encyclopedically outsized ambitions or write conventionally well-made novels on their way to proposing more suitably encyclopedic ways of understanding *Ulysses* and the *Wake*. Dickson reads the failure of *Ulysses* to supply the full wealth of knowledge it promises as an invitation to an immense cooperative educational project organized by the novel. For Geheber that failure, which shows in gaps that only grow more conspicuous the more the novel enlarges on its subject matter, is a token of the inexhaustibility of the impulse that animates encyclopedic projects. Ward sees the collapse of Bloom's fantasy of a New Bloomusalem in "Circe" as emblematic of a necessary, self-conscious failure to even successfully imagine totality that is definitive of the novel's encyclopedism. Writing about *Ulysses* and the *Wake*, Radak comes to a markedly Bakhtinian version of roughly the same conclusion. "Rather than not being able to 'claim totality,'" she writes, "Joyce's texts deliberately fail in this endeavor as a way of countering totalizing, monologic forms of encyclopedism that do not allow for contradiction, polyphony, and dialogism." For Nugent-Folan, such failure comes down to the intractable limits of representation in language, which define the ambit of encyclopedic modernism for Joyce and Stein alike. Phelan argues that the incompleteness and incoherence of Joyce's world



writing, which look to many like failed encyclopedism, show a sophisticated grasp of the formal strategies that encyclopedists have historically used to make information overload navigable.

This all amounts to a sustained, multi-front challenge to the received thinking about totality as a thing to capture that has dominated critical discourse about modern novels written on the largest scale. In place of that long-prevalent great man theory of encyclopedic literature—the heroic author laboring mightily to cram all of everything into a big book with both hands!—the issue stresses how essential interpretive communities are to the encyclopedic enterprise. We get this most dramatically in the wild porteño salon out of Marechal in which Cheadle sees *Ulysses* reflected and refracted. More intramurally, Radak concludes that by encyclopedically declining to have his novels decisively end, Joyce solicits the conferences and reading groups that sustain his namesake industry. Phelan, focusing on the collective project of annotating Joyce, likewise argues that Joyce’s encyclopedism not only engenders but requires Joycean scholarship. Several essays, then, give the sense that, as Diderot says of the *Encyclopédie*, Joyce’s work constitutes “a living school.”<sup>7</sup> Dickson’s argument about the pedagogical origins of the encyclopedia grounds this in the long history of the genre. Nugent-Folan makes a case that differing encyclopedisms present a particularly strong basis for broadening comparison in modernist studies and bringing modernism’s overall cultural projects into view. Throughout the issue, there is a feeling for how encyclopedic works situate their readers in the larger encyclopedia or quasi-encyclopedia of the culture that produced them. (That may be one reason why, in Cheadle, Geheber, and Nugent-Folan’s essays, we received such a wealth of comparative submissions for a special issue of a single-author journal.) The issue suggests that the encyclopedia is too big in too many ways for a closed circuit between reader and text to be feasible. Encyclopedism invariably spills out into a wider world of other texts and other readers, opens and perpetuates itself.

We hope that this issue will have something like that availability and impetus. It surely demonstrates that a richly informed understanding of the encyclopedic can refresh our reading of

Joyce in myriad ways, even when that reading is not focused on questions related to scale, and reveal new possibilities in seemingly unrelated precincts of Joycean scholarship. (Consider, for example, the originality of Geheber, Nugent-Folan, and Ward's uses of textual genetics.) The issue should give Joyce studies a foothold in the multi- and interdisciplinary strain of scholarship that has lately turned to the encyclopedia in view of the everyday immersion in encyclopedic networks that is doing so much to change how we read, write, and think. And, although the issue as a whole does not advance a unified theory of encyclopedism, or even a consistent definition, it offers a robust, adaptable model for wide-ranging treatment of encyclopedic literature without the usual expectation that it somehow encompass everything, everywhere.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Irish word for God, *dia*, is conspicuously absent from Stephen's thoughts in this moment.

<sup>2</sup> Eloise Knowlton, *Joyce, Joyceans, and the Rhetoric of Citation* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), 77.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the term's etymology, see: Robert L. Fowler, "Encyclopaedias: Definitions and Theoretical Problems," in *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts: Proceedings of the Second COMERS Congress, Groningen, 1-4 July 1996*, ed. Peter Binkley (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Len Platt, "'Unfallable encyclicling': *Finnegans Wake* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*," *James Joyce Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2009): 116.

<sup>5</sup> Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Stein, *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* (Normal; London: Dalkey Archive, 1995), 383.

<sup>7</sup> Denis Diderot qtd. in Wilda Anderson, "Encyclopedic Topologies," *MLN* 101, No. 44 (1986): 913.