June 1992

The Satirizing Superpowers Stephen Dedalus and Zarathustra

David Major

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 28, no.2, June 1992, p.115-122

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
The Satirizing Superpowers Stephen Dedalus and Zarathustra

By DAVID MAJOR

When Buck Mulligan compares Stephen Dedalus and himself to the Nietzschean Superman in “Telemachus,” he begins a series of allusions which crop up occasionally during the course of Ulysses. Stephen’s thoughts and the events of the day comment on his own desire to be Super often enough to call attention to how he follows Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and how he falls short. Though the concept of the Superman is by no means a dominant shaper of Stephen’s personality (compared to the Church or Blake), the parallels are clear and significant, and persistent enough to sully the good name of Superman. Joyce establishes the comparison as satiric from the start—putting the words in the mouth of the constantly burlesquing Buck and placing them in an episode which reveals two of Stephen’s (relatively) minor weaknesses, his poor dental health and his fear of water. The satire cuts Stephen’s idea of the artist’s greatness in more ways than one; Zarathustra’s lessons on poets are not supportive, Stephen’s failures as a Superman are pointedly ridiculous, and his successes lie in areas which the context of Ulysses turns against him.

Few articles have been written tracing the Nietzschean elements in Ulysses, but a recent one, Joseph Valente’s “Beyond Truth and Freedom: The New Faith of Joyce and Nietzsche,” looks particularly closely at Joyce’s use of ideas from Nietzsche for his characters’ thought as well as his narrator’s. The article’s weakness is Valente’s view of Stephen as a figure representing Joyce’s views

1. Though Buck claims the Superman label more freely than Stephen, it is simply another subject in his free-floating store of burlesques (or, as Joseph Valente puts it, “series of . . . impoverished viewpoints” [95]). Buck, who appears in “Circe” in “particoloured jester’s dress of puce and yellow and clown’s cap with curling bell” (473), says in “Telemachus,” “My twelfth rib is gone . . . I’m the Übermensch” (19). While Buck might seem to fit Zarathustra’s common dictate to be joyful (much better than Stephen, anyway), Zarathustra describes the qualities of “present-day men” in his discourse on “The Land of Culture,” and two of those present-day qualities are seeming to be in motley and marveling that “‘Amazing is the poverty of my ribs!’” (142, 144). A direct connection between this amazement and Buck’s “alarm” at his missing rib is doubtful. Nonetheless, Buck is no serious candidate for Superman. His value lies in the sharpness of his satirical lancet, which may not be backed up with any substantial philosophy but can reduce almost any subject—in this case, the similarity between Stephen and Zarathustra—to its most absurd level.

2. Joyce’s satire against Stephen’s and Buck’s Superhood reflects his attitude toward his and Oliver Gogarty’s early use of Nietzsche as a “principal prophet” (Ellmann, JJ 172) for “a neo-paganism that glorified selfishness, licentiousness, and pitilessness, and denounced gratitude and other ‘domestic virtues’” (Ellmann, JJ 142). This “neo-paganism” flagrantly misreads Nietzsche’s comparison of the barbaric spirit to nineteenth-century middle-class mores. By 1909 the two were distanced from each other and from their 1904 selves—Gogarty busy with his surgeon’s practice, Joyce with his art. Ulick O’Connor’s biography of Gogarty presents the final meeting of the former friends from the point of view of each. Gogarty’s version shows Joyce as cold and rudely eccentric; Joyce describes himself as reserved in the face of Gogarty’s flustered sentimentality and climaxes the scene with the statement “You and I of six years ago are both dead” (O’Connor 84). The Joyce that died was the Joyce who signed letters Stephen Dedalus and James Overman, letters begging for clothing or a pound (Ellmann, Letters 20-21, 23).
directly rather than ironically. Closely examined, two major points of *Ulysses* that happen to be in part Nietzschean—affirmation and creative power—do not fit Stephen very well at all.

More than just Buck’s gibes legitimate the comparison between Stephen and Zarathustra. Just as, in the “Telemachiad,” Stephen comes down from Martello tower to go teach and say that God is a shout in the street, in “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” Zarathustra comes down from his mountains to teach about the Superman and pronounce God dead. But already a trace of the comic scale-down has affected the parallel. And even more strongly discrediting is Stephen’s symbol of Irish art as a cracked mirror (given first in “Telemachus”[6]) in light of Zarathustra’s own use of the mirror: speaking to false higher men, he says, “Moreover, ye are not sufficiently beautiful and well-born for me. I require pure, smooth mirrors for my doctrines; on your surface even mine own likeness is distorted” (346).

As a poet, Stephen consistently falls short of Zarathustra. Though Zarathustra has little regard for poets—who “lie too much,” for instance by creating similes for God (100)—he can claim to be a poet himself because he knows the strengths and weaknesses of a poet and can manipulate them to some extent (151-55). It is a case of the Superman being forced to make the best of the poor medium available to him: “I may speak in parables and halt and stammer like the poets: and verily I am ashamed that I have still to be a poet!”(240-41). On the other hand, Stephen, who is one of the unsuccessful Irish poets mentioned in passing during the discussion at the library in “Scylla and Charybdis,” revels in the artistry of his Shakespeare theory, and, when asked if he believes the theory, “—No, Stephen said promptly”(175). Valente notes the great importance of the “exuberant ‘yes’” for both Joyce and Nietzsche (89), but he overlooks Stephen’s portentous “No.” In the novel’s theme of “yes” and “no,” this is a prominent example of Stephen’s preference for “no.” In Zarathustra’s value system, being proud of the lie is not a good sign. Language receives some of the sacredness left over by the supersession of God by the Superman: “Of all that is written, I love only what a person hath written with his blood” (43), and “here [in Zarathustra’s mountains] all being wanteth to become words, here all becoming wanteth to learn of me how to talk. Down there [the city, “amongst the drunken ones” (244)], however—all talking is in vain!”(225). Talking in vain is a method of Stephen’s art.

Zarathustra often encounters people who pretend to Superman status but who fall more or less short. Zarathustra’s reaction to one extreme caricature who is called his ape makes a useful standard to judge Stephen against. The imitator comes to Zarathustra to warn him against coming into a great city, denouncing it and its inhabitants until Zarathustra silences him and says, “I despise thy

---

3. Richard Ellmann and Jeffrey Perl also address Joyce’s use of Nietzsche, but both note criticism in Joyce’s attitude. Perl is closer to Valente’s view in seeing some potential in Stephen’s artistry, though he does not praise Stephen nearly as much. Perl definitely regards Joyce and Nietzsche as taking opposite standpoints on society’s obsolescence and its need to be surpassed (see Chapter One, especially pp. 32-33, and Chapter Six, especially pp. 185-87). But positive evaluations of Stephen are difficult to put down.
contempt; and when thou warnedst me—why didst thou not warn thyself? . . . But thy fools’-word injureth *me*, even when thou art right! . . . thou wouldst ever—*do* wrong with my word*” (213-17). Stephen never rants to anyone as extremely as the ape does, but Zarathustra’s reproaches about not taking warnings and doing something about them apply to Stephen. His silent “Usurper” comment about Buck (19) and the sharp comments he keeps to himself in “Lestrygonians” show his willingness to harbor contempt but not to act upon it: “Hateful . . . is he who will never defend himself, he who swalloweth down poisonous spittle” (232). Stephen may not be one of “Those teachers of submission! . . . [who] creep like lice; and only my disgust preventeth me from cracking them” (207), but he certainly practices submission.

Stephen and Zarathustra are equally strong in their convictions about women, and they agree more than they disagree. For both, women are relatively inconsequential. Only one of Zarathustra’s discourses is devoted entirely to women—“Old and Young Women,” which is about virtuous wives: “A play­thing let woman be, pure and fine like the precious stone, illumined with the virtues of a world not yet come” (75). Placing the “pure and fine” woman alongside the “lustful woman” (61) and the “bad girls dancing naked” (370), which Zarathustra refers to in other discourses, gives a clear precursor to Stephen’s (more frequent) thoughts of women as virgins or whores. And Zarathustra’s woman being a “plaything” implies the ease with which she may become a “bad girl.” Though the man who plays the most female roles in *Ulysses,* Bloom, cannot be interpreted beyond all doubt as a positive model, it is fair to say that Joyce criticizes misogyny more than androgyny. What is feminine in the novel comes off strong; Molly gets the last say, finding faults in all varieties of men, yet affirming both body and spirit. So it is safe to say that the similarity between Stephen’s and Zarathustra’s views on women does not reflect well on them.

For Zarathustra, “Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything in woman hath one solution—it is called pregnancy” (75). So it is appropriate that the highest moment of satire on Stephen as a would-be Superman takes place in a maternity hospital. Since this episode is in “Oxen of the Sun,” the growing embryo episode, could it be the time when Stephen grows to Zarathustra’s level? Probably not. Of the episode’s two variations on the “Thus spake Zarathustra” formula of the discourses, the second appears in the unattributed racket near the end of the episode, though it seems to be in a context of Buck-like effusion—“How saith Zarathustra? . . . Drink, man, an udderful!” (346). The situation of the first reference to Zarathustra, besides being clearly spoken by Stephen, contains more elements charged with Superman significance, mingled with all the other allusions of the passage and overdetermined with many of them. The allusion

4 As a Superman, Stephen’s greatest shortcoming concerning women is his trip to the whorehouse in nighttown in the “Circe” episode. Zarathustra says, “Is it not better to fall into the hands of a murderer, than into the dreams of a lustful woman?” (61). The whores are paid to be lustful. “Circe” is dreamlike, and, to top things off, Stephen is nearly murdered by the privates.

5 The following references in this paragraph are from *Ulysses* 322-23, unless otherwise noted.
to the land of milk and honey, which Stephen calls “milk and money,” is definitely established as an allusion rather than coincidence by Joyce’s second reference to Zarathustra in the episode: “Deine Kuh Trübsal melkest Du. Nun trinkst Du die süsse Milch des Euters” [You milk your cow Trouble. Now you drink the sweet milk of her udders] (346). As silly as it sounds, this comes from Zarathustra’s discourse “Joys and Passions,” which uses it as a metaphor for regarding what is bitterness to others as virtue to a Superman (39). Yet Stephen whines, “But thou hast suckled me with a bitter milk: my moon and my sun thou hast quenched for ever. And thou hast left me alone for ever in the dark ways of my bitterness.” In his discourse “The Night Song,” Zarathustra sings to the unenlightened ones, “Oh, ye only is it, ye dark, nightly ones, that extract warmth from the shining ones! Oh, ye only drink milk and refreshment from the light’s udders!” (126). Stephen, on the other hand, sings of the malt stored in the house that Jack built. His drunkenness itself is not enough to discredit him as a Superman; Zarathustra has a long discourse titled “The Drunken Song” about the transition of the present-day man to the Superman and eternity; Stephen’s triviality, however, is not a good sign. Up to the point of his drunken song, Stephen has been a joke Superman. At the crack of lightning that silences him, he completely disgraces himself, Zarathustra says, “What is good? ... To be brave is good” (52), and Stephen is terrified of lightning.

Fear of lightning as lightning is bad enough, but Zarathustra takes lightning and storms as one of his primary symbols for the Superman. It is a strong assertion of Stephen’s unreadiness to be a Superman when

(he that had erst challenged to be so doughty waxed wan as they might all mark and shrank together and his pitch that was before so aught uplift was now of a sudden quite plucked down and his heart shook within the cage of his breast as he tasted the rumour of that storm. (323)

He has heard the Superman and been afraid. And still more, he has chosen the particular interpretation of the lightning that takes him farther from Zarathustra the godless. Stephen believes his own poet’s lie of a metaphor for God when “A black crack of noise in the street here, aiah, bawled back” (323; my emphasis). He pictures an angry God, like Thor, and mocks him as Blake’s Nobodaddy, trying to overcome “his desperation as cowed he crouched” (323). However Stephen reads the lightning, Joyce seems to have been aware of Zarathustra’s metaphor, and we may safely understand Stephen to be equally fearful of the Superman.

Concerning “These mediators and mixers ... those half-and-half ones [like Stephen, caught between the calm and the godly], that have neither learned to bless nor to curse from the heart” (323), Zarathustra has often “longed to pin them fast with the jagged gold-wires of lightning, that I might, like the thunder, beat the drum upon their kettle-bellies ... . For rather will I have noise and thunders and tempest-blasts” (188-200). The value of lightning as symbol for the Super-

6. Honey, which Stephen drops in favor of money, is Zarathustra’s sacrifice and bait for luring men to follow him (288-89).
7. The “thou” may refer to Ireland (Erin), or to his mother’s ghost (who has the kiss of ashes), or to both.
man is not limited to destruction of the weak; it is more than just violence: it is a "wild, good, free spirit of the storm, which danceth upon fens and afflictions, as upon meadows! . . . the laughing storm, which bloweth dust into the eyes of all the melanopic and melancholic!" (362). (And what is Stephen but a melanopic and melancholic myope?) He who can withstand the lightning of the Superman becomes a Superman:

—Thus only groweth man aloft to the height where the lightning striketh and shattereth him: high enough for the lightning! . . .

It is not enough for me that the lightning no longer doeth harm [to him who can withstand it]. I do not wish to conduct it away; it shall learn—to work for me.—

My wisdom hath accumulated long like a cloud, it becometh stiffer and darker. So doeth all wisdom which shall one day bear lightnings.—

Unto these men of to-day will I not be light, nor be called light. Them—will I blind: lightning of my wisdom! put out their eyes! (354)

Stephen is not "Ready for lightning . . . for the redeeming flash of light, charged with lightnings which say Yea! which laugh Yea! [remember Stephen's "No"] ready for divining flashes of lightning" (T.S.Z. 280), nor is he ready to ask "weighty questions of . . . the storm" (343). Stephen is cowering in a hospital being patted on the back by Bloom.

Stephen is scared because he does not know about "that other land which is called Believe-on-Me, that is the land of promise which . . . shall be for ever where there is no death and no birth neither wiving nor mothering at which all shall come as many as believe on it" (324). Zarathustra has a discourse devoted to "Voluntary Death," and Stephen is afraid to die. Whereas Zarathustra teaches "That your dying may not be a reproach to man and the earth, my friends: that do I solicit from the honey of your soul" (85), Stephen is more like one of the Preachers of Death in the discourse of that title:

They are the spiritually consumptive ones: hardly are they born when they begin to die, and long for doctrines of lassitude and renunciation . . .

They meet an invalid, or an old man, or a corpse [remember Stephen's visions of his mother]—and immediately they say: "Life is refuted!" . . .

"Giving birth is troublesome,"—say others—"why still give birth? One beareth only the unfortunate!" (49-50)

Stephen dwells on death all day, beginning with his dream of the prayer for the dead and his mother breathing "a faint odor of wetted ashes" (9), continuing through his ramblings (right before the lightning strikes) about being left "with a kiss of ashes" (322), and on later into the night after the Superman's lightning puts him in fear of his own life. Stephen is not ready to stand up to death, to brave the lightning, to speak the joyous "Yea."

But what if Stephen is still growing to his full height? After all, he is only twenty-two years old, and Zarathustra was thirty when he went into solitude in his mountains (3). When Stephen leaves 7 Eccles St., he is going into solitude. But is this a Zarathustrian solitude or just more satire on the Superman and on Stephen? Between the end of "Oxen of the Sun" and the moment in "Ithaca" when Stephen marches off to solitude, Zoe the palmreading whore sees courage
in Stephen's forehead, and Lynch comments (ironically), "Sheet lightning courage. The youth who could not shiver and shake" (457). Zarathustra says courage destroys dejection, pain, fear at abysses, fellow-suffering, and even death (189). Responding to the prayers of his dead mother, Stephen turns his ashplant into a Wagnerian sword and destroys the chandelier (475). This is a promising sign for Stephen—not only courage, but ungodly courage in the face of death. Only a small detail nags at the Superness of Stephen's action near the end of "Circe"; Zarathustra loves a swordsman, but only as long as he knows what to use his sword on (255). If Stephen has shattered glass and toppled masonry, he may be on his way to becoming Superman; but if he has crumpled a mauve paper lampshade, then he is still only a figure satirizing and being satirized by the Superman. Perhaps the options show the parallax of subjectivity in the hallucination of "Circe," and Stephen may see within himself the potential for moving toward the Superman.

Certainly the last time we see Stephen is very Zarathustrian. Several times Zarathustra leaves the company of present-day men to go to his mountains and his solitude. Stephen cannot go back to his Martello tower mountain, but he had no solitude there anyway; and, following Stephen from the whorehouse, Bloom comments that he needs mountain air (478), a passing remark which may bode well for Stephen when he leaves Bloom. In the discourse "The Flies in the Market-Place," Zarathustra repeatedly commands those who would follow his teaching to flee into solitude and escape the buzzing, stinging present-day men (57-61). He later qualifies his command, adding that only the man who is already close to becoming the Superman should go into solitude because men with some but not enough greatness lessen themselves by isolation; but he who is sufficiently worthy survives being alone and becomes a creator (70-74). The situation of one of Zarathustra's returns to the mountains is somewhat similar to Stephen's parting from Bloom; with his friends offering to console him, Zarathustra leaves them to go into the night alone (179). And one of the signs which Zarathustra names as identifying the man who is ready to become a Superman is "When ye despise pleasant things, and the effeminate couch, and cannot couch far enough from the effeminate: there is the origin of your virtue" (88). When Stephen leaves 7 Eccles St., he is turning down a bed in "an extemporised cubicle in the apartment ... immediately adjacent to the sleeping apartment of his host and hostess" (570). He is leaving to couch, presumably, very far from his hostess and his effeminate host.

Stephen's choice to leave seems a clear step towards the Superman. But, as noted before, Bloom and Molly's effeminacy may be the quality Joyce thinks Stephen needs most, and the misogyny Stephen and Zarathustra have in common is a definite problem. So the rest of the context of Stephen's flight into solitude must speak for his chances of becoming a Superman and for whether that eventuality should be taken as a positive or negative move.

First, Zarathustra often holds the stars as models for the heights they move in

8. Haines's black panther might answer for Zarathustra's serpent and eagle, however.
and their eternalness; and, before Stephen leaves, he and Bloom spend quite a bit of conversation on the stars (573-78). But that is hardly enough to raise Stephen to Superman (nor to give unqualified praise to the philosophy Nietzsche projects through Zarathustra.) Second, and more to his detriment, Stephen’s thought on Christ’s circumcision (577)—however blasphemous they may be—betray a preoccupation with the Godly which is inconsistent with turning his eyes to the ungodly Superman. Third, last, and completely counter to his Super aspirations, when Stephen hears bells right before he wanders into solitude, he does not hear Zarathustra’s “Come! Come! Come! Let us now wander! It is now the hour: let us wander into the night!” (391). Instead, Stephen hears:

Liliata rutilantium. Turma circumdet.
Iubilantium te virginum. Chorus excipiat. (578)

Stephen’s ashplant swordsmanship has not exorcised his mother. He still associates with the dead and the prayer for the dead, hearing it in the bells that would tell Zarathustra that the Superman must overcome the grave and set the dead free (393). Having contemplated the Superman all day after Buck’s Übermensch comment of that morning, Stephen has no more shaken off his fear of death than he had when he was recalling and brooding over the dream of his mother’s ghost (8-9). Zarathustra wants “goblins about me, for I am courageous. The courage which scareth away ghosts, createth for itself goblins—it wanteth to laugh” (44). Stephen has not yet mustered enough of that courage to scare away his mother’s ghost, much less to create a goblin and laugh at it.

In terms of Stephen’s growth as a Superman, the high point of the story must come in “Oxen of the Sun” when the lightning strikes—when Stephen is closest to Zarathustra and most afraid of him. The coming of the storm is a turning point which changes nothing. What should be a flash of light—an epiphany—is a “black crack” (323). Since Ulysses is a novel of avoidance, either Stephen has avoided the Superman or maybe the Superman has avoided him. The satire, however, has cut both ways and left Zarathustra more than a little marked up himself, for the Superman has not avoided repeated connections to Stephen’s weaknesses. Perhaps Stephen’s failure to become Superior is an inconclusive comment or even a positive move. Ultimately, Stephen’s disappearance into the night leaves his future indeterminate. But looking at the direction he has taken, looking at his shortcomings as Superman—or even as normal-man—marks him as little more than eccentric. He is afraid of lightning. He shatters and topples lampshades. He is obsessed with thoughts of death. He is no Superman.

Works Cited

Nietzsche, Friedrich. Thus Spake Zarathustra. Trans. Thomas Common. Vol XI of

