Rebecca West vs. James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and William Carlos Williams

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Reading Rebecca West, one understands why Max Beerbohm once sketched a caricature of her as “the Femme Shaw,” and why Shaw himself wrote that West could “handle a pen as brilliantly as I ever could, and much more savagely” (Glendinning 4). Like Shaw, one cannot but admire the flash and thrust of West’s attack, whether she is describing Michael Arlen—“every other inch a gentleman”—or the Jamesian sentence—“a delicate creature swathed in relative clauses as an invalid in shawls” (Glendinning 111, 61).

West boldly defined her role as critic in the premiere issue of the New Republic, in an article that is what its title—“The Duty of Harsh Criticism”—suggests. Writing in 1914 (she was all of twenty-one at the time), West argued that living under the stress of war, “if we want to save our souls, the mind must lead a more athletic life than it has ever done before, and must more passionately than ever practise and rejoice in art” (18). The paragraphs that follow make clear that the athletic life of the mind is to be aerobic and high impact. Prescribing a “new and abusive school of criticism,” West warmed up by flattening a pair of lightweights, A. C. Benson and Mrs. Humphrey Ward, before announcing the main event thus: “But there is a more serious duty than these before us, the duty of listening to our geniuses in a disrespectful manner.” West then proceeded to point out deficiencies in George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, “two great writers of to-day who greatly need correction” (19). In time, Rebecca West came to correct another genius, James Joyce, and—not surprisingly—she did so disrespectfully.

Most Joyceans probably know West’s criticism of Joyce from selections in
Robert Deming’s volumes on Joyce in the Critical Heritage series and from the contributions by Samuel Beckett and William Carlos Williams to Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress. 2 Beckett’s “Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . .” is less than admirable when it pauses to snipe at West along the way. In “The Strange Necessity,” West had tried to relate aesthetic response and the conditioned responses of Pavlov’s experiments; taking the cheap shot, Beckett accuses her of a “continuous process of copious intellectual salivation.” Irked by West’s account of shopping for a dress and hats in Paris while reflecting on Joyce’s work, Beckett goes on to say, “When Miss Rebecca West clears her decks for a sorrowful deprecation of the Narcissistic element in Mr. Joyce by the purchase of 3 hats, one feels that she might very well wear her bib at all her intellectual banquets, or alternatively, assert a more noteworthy control over her salivary glands than is possible for Monsieur Pavlo’s [sic] unfortunate dogs” (13).

One senses here the animus that Susan Brienza describes in “Clods, Whores, and Bitches,” and given Beckett’s clear distress at West’s daring to mention the purchase of millinery and the reading of Joyce’s works in virtually the same breath, one suspects that animus again when, only four sentences further on, Beckett turns to a passage from “Work in Progress” that begins, “Who in his heart doubts either that the facts of feminine clothiering are there all the time or that the feminine fiction, stranger than the facts, is there also at the same time, only a little to the rere?” (13-14; the full passage Beckett quotes appears in a slightly different form as FW 109.30-33).

Unlike Beckett’s essay, which devotes only a half page to her, William Carlos Williams’s contribution to Our Exagmination is focused throughout on West. As Paul Mariani explains in his biography of the poet, when Williams read West’s “The Strange Case of James Joyce” in the September 1928 New York Bookman, he found it “so condescending and reactionary . . . that he wrote at once to the editors demanding an opportunity to answer her ‘High Church’ attack, as he called it in a letter to Marianne Moore” (285). Though the Bookman refused, Williams was still working on his defense of Joyce when a letter arrived fortuitously from Sylvia Beach requesting an essay for Our Exagmination. (In 1927, reacting to a letter from Pound telling him to ignore “Work in Progress” as mere “backwash,” Williams had published a defense, “A Note on the Recent Work of James Joyce,” in transition [McMillan 185].) Williams accepted with alacrity, explaining that he had already drafted twenty-eight typewritten pages of a reply to West’s article. In his letter to Beach, dated 4 November, Williams says, “Rebecca West praises Joyce in such a way that I felt ill over it. I had to answer her but found it extremely difficult so cleverly has she involved her hidden thesis in fine words. I can’t tell you how it infuriated me.” Williams begs Beach to wait for his essay; her project will “spur” him to complete what he terms “important work for me.”

Williams’s contribution to Our Exagmination, “A Point for American Crit-
icism," is a full-scale assault on West, mostly on the dubious grounds expressed in the letter to Marianne Moore, that West is "High Church"—English and insular. "This is the opportunity of America!" Williams yawns, "to see large, larger than England can" (180). Sounding a bit like George Bush, he continues, "This American thing it is that would better fit the Irish of Joyce" (181). "To me," Williams says, "Rebecca West's view seems incompatible with American appreciation, and though her observations appear mainly true, they seem narrow, inadequate, even provincial, certainly scared, protestant female—unsatisfactory" (184).

In a letter to Valery Larbaud, Joyce admits that he stood behind the "twelve Marshals" who contributed to Our Exagmination, "more or less directing them what lines of research to follow" (quoted in JIII 613). The letter leads one to ask to what degree the attacks on West by Beckett and Williams reflect Joyce's own reactions. As we have seen, Williams was already at work on a furious reply to West before Sylvia Beach invited him to contribute to Our Exagmination, but as Suzette Henke speculates, his "indictment of West as a 'scared protestant female,' probably pleased Joyce, despite (or even because of) its misogynist rhetorical ring" (77). And like Beckett, Joyce, too, was distressed by West's hats, so much so that they became, so to speak, bees in his bonnet. Padraic Colum explains an appearance of "forty bonnets" in the Wake (552.29-30) as expressive of Joyce's disdain for West and "the frivolousness of women who go off to buy bonnets after making snap judgments on books of manifold significance" (126). "It is the masculine values that prevail," Virginia Woolf was to lament in A Room of One's Own; "the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes are 'trivial'" (77).

Just what did the DWPF (dead white provincial female) say that excited such reactions and that has led more recent readers to term her criticism of Joyce "malicious" (Reynolds 201) and "vicious" (Cumpiano 54)? Some years before, it was West who had suggested to H. G. Wells that he review A Portrait of the Artist, as he did in an appreciative and widely circulated notice that significantly promoted Joyce's reputation (Ellmann 414), but presumably neither Joyce nor his defenders knew of her good service here; nor, presumably, did they know that West had given a lecture on Exiles, which she had liked "tremendously" (Scott 118); and, surely, they cannot have known, as we will never know, what remarks on "the defects of James Joyce's aesthetic theory" West cut from her lecture "The Spirit and Tendency of the Modern Novel" when she discovered that the Woman's Athletic Club of Chicago, an audience she had imagined a "collection of husky young women in sweaters" was composed instead of wealthy and overweight dowagers (letter, 25 Nov. 1923, quoted in Ray 153-54). We do know, however, that the criticism of Joyce's writing that West published in 1928 produced what Joyce himself would characterize two years later as a "great storm" (Hoffmeister 132).

Williams's hostility to West in Our Exagmination can be explained as being
motivated by more than his habitual pugnacity toward writing in English not in the American vein (somehow the Irish were honorary Americans). The West whom Williams attacks in “A Point for American Criticism” is a critic he charges with putting both Joyce and the United States “in a bad light” through an unnamed article that had appeared in an American publication (173). As we have seen, the article in question—“The Strange Case of James Joyce”—appeared in the New York Bookman for September 1928. The Bookman did not identify it as such, but the article is a reprint of the first thirty-eight pages (13–50) of the title essay of The Strange Necessity, which had been published by Jonathan Cape in late July (the American edition would appear in early November [Hutchinson 3–4]). In other words, when Williams wrote his essay he had read only approximately the first fifth of “The Strange Necessity.”

Although the references to Pavlov in “Dante . . . Bruno. Vico…” make it clear that Beckett knew more of West’s criticism of Joyce than merely the extract published in the Bookman, Joyce as well as Williams may not have known the complete text of “The Strange Necessity.” In a letter dictated on 20 September 1928, during a bout of eye trouble, Joyce wrote to Harriet Weaver of having “about fifty pages” of West’s book read aloud to him. “I cannot judge until I hear the whole essay,” Joyce said. “I think that P.P. [Pomes Penyeach] had in her case the intended effect of blowing up some bogey bogus personality and that she is quite delighted with the explosion” (Ellmann 605; brackets his).

For at least a time, then, Joyce knew about as much of the full essay as Williams did, for “about fifty pages” would have run more or less through part 1 of “The Strange Necessity,” pages 13–58 in the London edition, which must have been the one read to Joyce, given the date of his letter to Weaver. Whether he ever heard or read the entire 186 pages of the essay, however, Joyce did know something more of it than Williams; the first mention in “The Strange Necessity” of purchasing hats (51) appears immediately after the paragraph that concludes the excerpt published in the Bookman.

Joyce’s initially positive reaction to West’s essay is curious. Why, in his letter to Weaver, does Joyce say of Pomes Penyeach, “It is a pity that W.L. [Wyndham Lewis] did not wait for its publication too as it would probably have mollified his attack” (Ellmann 605; brackets his)? One would expect, moreover, that a reader knowing only the opening fifty pages or so of “The Strange Necessity” would believe West’s criticism to be much more negative than it actually is. (Robert Deming’s Critical Heritage anthology offers passages from “The Strange Case” but nothing from the rest of “The Strange Necessity.”)

The opening section of “The Strange Necessity” gives a misleading impression of the whole, because an unwary reader (circa 1920s at least)—even so wary an “unwary” reader as Joyce—might mistake the tone and miss a strategy that the Wife of Bath (circa 1380s) would have understood. West’s asso-
ciative flights often seem, well, flighty; she dismisses with equal peremptoriness such disparate matters as the game of boules and Pomes Penyeach; she shamelessly exposes a frivolous nature (“I had bought a black lace dress” [50]; “I had lunched in a divine house” [51]); and she betrays crassness in confessing that she spent part of her day in Paris with a lawyer discussing an investment.

The lengthy essay that makes up more than half The Strange Necessity and gives the volume its name opens with West’s recollection of browsing through the copy of Pomes Penyeach that had just been sold to her at Shakespeare and Company “as they sell pious whatnots in a cathedral porch.” Strolling along the boulevards of “the best of all cities,” happily tracing the course of a dove overhead in the “clean French light” (13), West finds added pleasure in the discovery that the poem she has just read—“Alone”—closes with “words as blank as the back of a spoon”: “And all my soul is a delight, / A swoon of shame” (14). Barely three pages into her essay, West tartly concludes that Mr. Joyce is “entirely without taste” (15).

West’s adverse judgments on Ulysses are several. Joyce’s most serious weakness is the “sentimentality” revealed in “Alone,” a term West defines by free associating her way to Provence and the detested boules. The sentimental artist is a boule player, “moving certain objects according to certain rules in front of spectators” in order to produce shock after shock as object strikes object (17). In short, Joyce is a writer who sometimes plays to his audience shamelessly, like Dickens. (Had Dickens realized that “the logic of the book’s being suddenly demanded an eleventh-hour recovery,” West writes of Little Nell, “he would have hit the child on the head without the slightest compunction” [19].) Thus, West says, Joyce sets up the “Nausicaa” episode so that he can score with the surprise of Gerty MacDowell’s lameness. The obvious obscenity of the novel is also objectionable as a sentimental effort to produce shock. Moreover, Ulysses is marred because Stephen is so transparently a hero: “his creator has given him eyelashes an inch long” (20). In West’s reading, Stephen is a narcissistic self-portrait who “enjoys the unnatural immunity from interruption that one might encounter not in life but in a typical Freudian wish-fulfillment dream” (22).

West finds “two colossal finger-prints left by literary incompetence on Ulysses.” First, the Homeric parallels that Joyce’s apostles point to with ecstasy are a blunder because Greek unity is incompatible with what she takes to be the Manichaean duality of Ulysses. Second, Joyce misuses literary tradition, especially in the parodies of “Oxen of the Sun” that are so prized by Joyce’s devotees as evidence of profound learning; supposing the parodies to originate in the mind of Stephen Dedalus, “translated . . . into terms of the literature in which he had been saturating himself,” West finds them “noticeably bad” (28–29). Finally (in a passage that seems on the way to anticipating Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures by almost thirty years), West argues that Joyce’s “strings of words” do not accurately represent the stream of consciousness:
There is nothing more certain than that sentences were used by man before words and still come with the readiness of instinct to his lips. They, and not words, are the foundations of all language. . . . Your baby has no words, but it will use sentences for hours together, sentences sometimes pausing for thought and adding a pungent dependent clause, till it builds up a kind of argument-like mass. (32–33)

Given such an indictment and such a list of particulars, one understands why Patrick Parrinder borrowed West's "The Strange Necessity" for the title of the essay he subtitled "James Joyce's Rejection in England (1914–30)." But the issue is not so simple. Bonnets aside, why did Joyce, if Ellmann is correct, line up the apostles of Our Exagimation to refute Rebecca West (along with Sean O'Faolain and Wyndham Lewis) as one of the three "chief critics" of "Work in Progress" at the time (613)? Astonishingly, given the counterattack in Our Exagimation, West's attention to "Work in Progress" in "The Strange Necessity" is limited exclusively to ninety-nine words at the close of a longish paragraph on stream of consciousness in Ulysses, and of those, sixty-one make up a quotation from Joyce. True, West does give summary judgment on the passage she quotes—"it is not true" (36)—but this can hardly be termed a broadside fired at the Wake.

In fact, for all its reservations, "The Strange Necessity" is unequivocal on the question of Joyce's genius and importance. West places "A Painful Case" (which she misnames "A Sad Case" but recalls in accurate detail) and "The Dead" among the "most beautiful short stories that have been written in our time" (24); "these two stories by themselves should explain why we rank James Joyce as a major writer" (28). West may object to what she takes to be lapses of taste in Ulysses, but she praises the beauty of the writing in the beach scene in "Telemachus" and in the "exquisitely pathetic picture of the visions of a sweet and ordered life" that come to Bloom in "Ithaca" (22–23).

Doubtless we judge West wrong (but by no means alone in this at the time) in failing to appreciate the distance that Joyce establishes between himself and Stephen. On the other hand, we may think that she was right to believe that interior monologue is not the objective recording many readers once took it to be, and right as well to think that contemporary enthusiasts made too much of the ingenuity of the Homeric parallels. Right or wrong, however, and whatever the criticism of Pomes Penyeach and—briefly— "Work in Progress," when taken in its entirety, "The Strange Necessity" simply cannot be read as an attack on Joyce. Discussing what she most admires in Ulysses, West is effusive. Molly's soliloquy lies "outside the sphere and beyond the power of any other writer alive or dead" (24); it offers "one of the most tremendous summations of life that have ever been caught in the net of art" (47). West's reading of Bloom as earth-bound jester is not persuasive, but the praise she gives to him is, if anything, more open-handed than that bestowed on Molly: "I do most solemnly maintain that Leopold Bloom is one of
the greatest creations of all time: that in him something true is said about man" (43).

In a letter of 7 November 1958, West wrote to Richard Ellmann that in “The Strange Necessity” she was following a form of discursive personal criticism used by Rémy de Gourmont and other French writers; she might also have mentioned Virginia Woolf, for as Samuel Hynes observes, “The Strange Necessity” opens like an essay by Woolf, “mixing an account of a stroll in a city with thoughts about literature, making it all seem informal and easy, and consciously charming, and very womanly.” But, even overlooking the implication that Woolf fell short in never conquering her “womanly” qualities, one must conclude that Hynes misses the point when he speaks of West “acting out her liberation from the stereotypes of her sex” (xii). The accounts of the “womanly” activities of buying hats and a black lace dress do not function to set up the reader of “The Strange Necessity” for West’s escape to “serious” (“manly”?) matters like Joyce and Pavlov. Rather, West is arguing that Joyce is important because he can compete even with such matters of vital human importance as haute couture, three-star luncheons, and investments prudently laid by for a comfortable old age.

Also linking West and Woolf, but with far greater sensitivity than Hynes, Bonnie Kime Scott says that “The Strange Necessity” “might be described as a less disciplined version of Virginia Woolf’s effort to understand human contexts in A Room of One’s Own” (119). The fine insight is worth expanding on, especially because West seems to have associated attacks on her writing about Joyce with the attacks she anticipated falling on Woolf’s essay. In her Letter from Abroad in the New York Bookman for January 1930, West follows an affectionate sketch of Woolf glimpsed on the street with glowing praise for Woolf’s oeuvre as a whole and for the just-published A Room of One’s Own, which she calls an “uncompromising piece of feminist propaganda . . . the ablest yet written” (553). West emphasizes that Woolf’s new book is “all the more brave and defiant because antifeminism is so strikingly the correct fashion of the day among the intellectuals.” As an example of the fashion, West notes that recently a male writer referred to “intellectualized women” with a “foul epithet” originally applied by Baudelaire to George Sand (554). As we shall see, in her Bookman Letter the following month, West would cite Baudelaire again, this time quoting him directly to protest the misogyny that she feels has been directed at her for being a woman who dares find fault with James Joyce.

Woolf’s essay cannot have influenced “The Strange Necessity,” for the lectures upon which A Room of One’s Own are based were delivered in October 1928, three months after West’s essay appeared. Still, the resemblances between the two works are marked. Woolf creates a novelistic personal fiction of her stroll through the “courts and quadrangles of Oxbridge on a fine October morning” (6), and West takes her stroll along the boulevards and streets
of Paris, musing on Pomes Penyeach and James Joyce on a “sun-gilded autumn day” (184). In a passage that West praised in the Bookman, Woolf digresses from the “serious” matters at hand to devote a page to a mouth-watering description (female salivation again!) of the sole à la crème and roast partridges, the sauces and salads and wines, served to men at an Oxbridge high table, and West strays from meditations on literature and painting to recall her pleasure in the notorious bonnets or in the delectable taste of preserved fraise. Woolf briefly relates the nourishment given women artists to experiments measuring the effect of Grade A and ordinary milk on the bodies of rats, and West trespasses at length into presumably masculine (and Wellsian) territory in order to relate artistic response to Pavlovian experiments with dogs.

Woolf’s brilliant essay suggests how much art and method lie in West’s. More interesting than correspondences in detail is what Scott rightly calls the “lyrical” quality that the two essays share (119), and one notes as well a wicked wit in both that by turns charmingly disarms and uncompromisingly annihilates opposition. Thus West turns on its head the solemn assumption that in contrast to art, female pleasures are trivial and practical matters are low. What might have once seemed to some to be “womanly” digressions into the superficial are in fact intrinsic to West’s argument for the “fundamental unity of all art and all experience” (189). Unapologetically embracing the pleasure principle, she discovers to her surprise that art is “not a luxury, but a necessity” (178); her emotions, “supporting and supported by the intellect,” have urgently warned her that she “must read every word of Ulysses” (179).

“The Strange Necessity” is not an essay on Joyce or on modern letters (though it has a good deal to say about Yeats, Lawrence, George Moore, and Proust); it is, rather, a lengthy meditation on life and art, remarkably broad and eclectic in the range of its references. Anthony West writes that “The Strange Necessity” is “one of those mid-life wagers that the nonacademic literary figure must make in order to achieve recognition as a serious critic. It was intended to convince those who knew her only as a literary journalist and a writer of Saturday Evening Post short stories.” Though characteristically unfair to his mother here, Anthony West at least recognizes that central to the essay are “laudatory considerations of the innovative fictions of Joyce and Proust” (368–69).

H. G. Wells, who offended Rebecca West by telling her that her essay “ought to have music by Stravinski” (Ray 176), gives a clue to what may be either a strength or a weakness of “The Strange Necessity,” depending on the reader. Recalling his constant advice on her writing during the period of their intimacy (“Construct, construct”), Wells says that West “writes like a loom producing her broad rich fabric with hardly a thought of how it will make up a shape, while I write to cover a frame of ideas. . . . She splashed her colours about; she exalted James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence as if in defiance of me—and in despite of Jane [Mrs. Wells] and everything trim, cool, deliberate in the
world” (102). If a frame is the model, “The Strange Necessity” does lack structure. Along its nonlinear and far from cool personal course, West leaves Joyce for long stretches to discuss not only many other authors, past and present, but painting, music, Pavlovian psychology, and a host of other matters.

Had Williams read the whole of “The Strange Necessity,” he would have found Joyce almost disappearing from the essay after the introductory section until the conclusion; after section 1, Joyce is mentioned only three times in the next 117 pages of the London edition, once in a long paragraph (68–70), once in a brief sentence (88), and once in a four-word parenthesis (114). In the summary final eighth of the essay (sections 6 and 7), however, West returns to Joyce and modifies the negative commentary of the first section in significant ways. If earlier she objected to the obscenity of Joyce, for example, now she makes it clear that Joyce should under no circumstances be banned. (“The Strange Case of James Joyce” was one of the documents filed in support of Ulysses in the Woolsey case [Moscato 199]; in 1960, by then a Dame Commander, Order of the British Empire, West would testify on behalf of publication in the Lady Chatterley case [Weldon 12–13].)

More important, as noted above, the summation clarifies the purpose behind what could be taken in the opening pages to be flighty digressions on the pleasures of strolling and shopping and dining in Paris; in her closing pages, West returns to her day in Paris to explain, “There was nothing here that did not delight me, yet all the time I was plucked away by an urgent necessity to think of James Joyce and the tedious schoolboy Stephen Dedalus and the Dublin Jew Leopold Bloom and his trollop... When I looked back on the day, nothing seemed so real as this persistent, nagging preoccupation with Ulysses” (185). Anticipating the kind of attacks women critics were all too likely to receive, especially if they gave themselves away by admitting to delight in the fripperies of fashion houses, West concludes that there was “nothing illogical” in her preoccupation with Ulysses or in the pleasure she took in discovering that Joyce had produced a bad poem, “nothing... inconsistent with my great reverence for him” (191).

In short, “The Strange Necessity” of West’s title refers to the human imperative that we experience life through art, and the form of the essay—associative, digressive, astonishingly allusive (Al Capone makes a brief appearance)—pays warm and knowing tribute to the authority that Ulysses has exercised over her imagination. West may mock the “pilgrims” who come to Shakespeare and Company as if for holy relics, but she unblushingly professes her “great reverence” for Joyce; that reverence, however, does not still her critical faculties or smother her questions.

In 1930, one year after the appearance of Our Exagmination and two after “The Strange Necessity,” West published an essay on “Work in Progress” titled “James Joyce and His Followers.” After first brushing aside as foolishness the charge that Joyce’s “patés de langue gras”—his “paste of words”—is
incomprehensible, she poses three main questions (6). Thus far she has found the entertainment derived from “Work in Progress” worth the effort expended in reading it, but if Joyce ends up devoting twenty to thirty years to the packing of portmanteau words with allusions, can readers be expected to devote half again as many years of their lives to the unpacking?

The remaining two questions undoubtedly reflect the Freudian analysis West began in 1927 (Glendinning 118). If the function of Joyce’s new language is to carry us back into the experience of the race, why must we pass through obsolete words to reach a collective unconscious that Freud and Jung show is already accessible through the images that spring spontaneously from the unconscious? West’s final question assumes that Joyce’s concept of “word paste” derives from Freudian and Jungian analysis of the puns in dreams: “Why is there no sense of clarity, of the gratification that comes from comprehension, such as pervades an analysis that is successful in coping with its subject matter in the same way, and any work of art . . . that has resolved the matter in the terms of its age?” (“Joyce and His Followers” 6). Will a new kind of clarity emerge, West wonders, when “Work in Progress” is complete?

In her closing paragraph, West unequivocally defines the context in which her questions must be read: “I would not myself stake a penny on any of my objections. I state them only because it seems to me of interest to consider what points James Joyce will have to make if he is to quell all resistance in the minds of his age who are looking for the inheritor of art and would like to find it in him. . . . Can one,” West asks, “think of any other writer concerning whose work such interesting considerations arise?” The followers of James Joyce are justified in their faith in him, she approvingly concludes, and “theirs, almost alone today, is a religious attitude to art” (6).

The language of “Joyce and His Followers” is notably respectful and the criticism strongly positive, and perhaps it is worth noting that the article appeared not in an avant-garde publication but in the Books section of the New York Herald Tribune at a time when the New York Times was editorializing that “Work in Progress” was “sleazy, broken, interrupted by surrenders to unintelligibility” (23 August 1929, quoted in Deming 503). West’s article did not satisfy at least one follower, however. Two years after the appearance of “James Joyce and His Followers,” in the Readers and Writers department of the New English Weekly for 21 July 1932, William Carlos Williams responded to a request from Gorham Munson, the American correspondent of the periodical, for an assessment of the current state of English letters. Williams has some good words for Maugham’s Cakes and Ale and expresses appreciation of the crisp prose in English journalism and medical literature (a monograph “on, let us say, measles”); as for current writing in England otherwise, however, he professes indifference and ignorance in equal measure. In a style he must somehow have thought witty, Williams dismisses those few writers whose names he can recall, the likes of Eliot (whose “blindingly” stupid “religistic attitudes” are
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undoubtedly the result of residence in England) or Shaw ("Well, well, well") or "Wolf" ("who, good Lord, seems to me more like some creature from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales than a human being").

The full text of Williams's remarks on West, who receives more attention than anyone else in the brief letter, is as follows: "And Rebecca West, I never should forget her. Once she wrote a simple criticism of Joyce's beginning Anna Livia Pluribella [sic]. I answered her as best I could. When lo and behold a month later she recanted everything she had said in the first article and praised Joyce as the genius he is—using every point I had made against her in my defence of him. That wasn't nice" (331).

The inevitable riposte from West appeared in the Letters columns of the New English Weekly five weeks later. Dismissing "A Point for American Criticism" out of hand, she terms Williams's defense of Wakean language "schoolboy cheers" and condemns his account of her criticism as "sheer moonshine ... anti-English delirium ... an orgy of obtuseness ... crassly fatuous ... amalgam of hysterics and stupidity ... irresponsible impudence." The only effect that Williams's attack on "The Strange Necessity" had on her, she says, was that insofar as possible, she wrote "James Joyce and His Followers" in words of one syllable to avoid any further "gross misapprehension."

More substantively, West insists on what we have seen, that "The Strange Necessity" is focused on Ulysses, not "Work in Progress." Yes, she concedes, she had criticized "sentimentality and lack of critical taste," but her overall estimate had been that Joyce was "a great genius." She had expressed doubts that posterity would adopt Joyce's innovations, West accurately recalls, but she had also expressed in equal measure her confidence that posterity would remember him as "a great creative artist." "James Joyce and His Followers," West insists, was not the recantation of her earlier estimation of Joyce that Williams described in the New English Weekly; it was an expression of a "much greater interest and hope regarding the experiments with a new language" based on a subsequent reading of all the installments of "Work in Progress" (458).

In the 1958 letter to Richard Ellmann cited earlier, West goes beyond his questions to volunteer an account of her exchange with Williams in the New English Weekly. A friend who taught at Columbia, she explains, had sent her a letter from a student raising several questions concerning "The Strange Necessity," which she tried to answer in "James Joyce and His Followers." "Unfortunately," however, "these points were all taken from an article by Carlos Williams published in a volume of "Transition" devoted to Joyce which I had not then seen. . . . Williams was very angry indeed because I had not mentioned him. In the early thirties he wrote about this very bitterly, and I answered him, explaining the situation, in Orage's New Age." Why West recalls the New English Weekly as the New Age is easily explained, for A. R. Orage's New English Weekly, by then under another editor, became the New English Weekly and The New Age in 1939. More difficult to account for is West's
confession to Ellmann that she agrees with Williams’s charge that she had borrowed too freely from “A Point for American Criticism” (which ran in Transition before Our Exagmination, as did Beckett’s “Dante . . . Bruno. Vico. . .”): resemblances between the essays by West and Williams are incidental at most.

One needs a stronger word than “ingenuous” to cover West’s plea to Ellmann that she is “completely innocent” and never “meant to be offensive” in the “most unfortunate incident” with Williams. To the contrary, West’s letter in the New English Weekly is designed to give great offense; far from trying to explain matters, as she claims to Ellmann, West is out for blood. (In another time or place, Jane Marcus admiringly remarks, “West would have been required to register her pen as a deadly weapon” [“A Speaking Sphinx” 153]). “The Strange Necessity” supports West’s claims in the New English Weekly in one crucial respect, however; she had presented Joyce from the start as a “great genius whose extraordinary powers must be recognized” (458).

Patricia Hutchins writes in James Joyce’s World of the way comments like West’s in “The Strange Necessity” apparently got “under Joyce’s skin and worked their way through him like a needle” (182), and she repeats what West told her about Joyce’s reaction to “The Strange Necessity”: “[West] said that it must be taken into account that her essay, though it expressed deep admiration for the genius of Joyce, began with an unfavorable opinion on one of his poems, and that writers are often most sensitive about their lesser works; and that the essay, because of its particular form, perhaps seemed to Joyce too familiar in tone for a writer . . . of his stature.” But there was something more, West added, something inexplicable, “something mythic about the resentment” (247).

Still later in her 1958 letter to Ellmann West attempted to explain once more. Writing “in a personal and almost fictional framework” in “The Strange Necessity,” she had tried “to show the power of James Joyce breaking into a mind unprepared for it.” But her effort was taken literally and brought down many attacks on her, and “Joyce’s resentment of the essay was extreme.” West told Ellmann,

when I heard that Joyce was offended by my essay, I did not dare to do anything that would have made him understand what I felt about him. This was certainly reverence (so far as his prose works were concerned) although I neither think that Ulysses is the only book in the world or believe that the hope for literature lies in the adoption of its form. (He is perhaps the one genius who invented a form and exhausted its possibilities at the same time.) It is simply a work of genius, and that surely is enough.

As we have seen, the essay supports West’s view of her intentions; no wonder that she recalled even later, near the end of her life, in a 1981 interview with Bonnie Kime Scott, that she was bewildered by the “insane hostility” toward her that she found in the Wake and in Joyce’s conversation as reported to her (121).
West’s lasting sense of persecution because of her criticism of Joyce may seem to lack proportion. Anthony West speaks harshly of a streak of “wild paranoia” in his mother (58), and Victoria Glendinning, though far more sympathetic, offers six entries in the index to her Life under the heading “character and personality of RW: paranoia and blaming others” (291). (The Wake, of course, is an ideal gift for a paranoiac.) When she discusses West’s belief that the Wake is full of “spiteful references to her,” Glendinning notes that West was constantly finding herself in other people’s novels and offers an astonishing list of examples ranging from Wyndham Lewis’s The Roaring Queen to Muriel Spark’s Memento Mori and Iris Murdoch’s Sacred and Profane Love Machine (124). West may have been defensive even to the point of paranoia, or—putting it more mildly—the references in the Wake may, as Scott suggests, be less consistently spiteful than West believed (119). Nevertheless, West’s sense that they and the two essays in Our Exagmination and the subsequent writings by Williams were hostile must not be written off simply as a symptom of what Senators Specter and Hatch might term the delusional.

Joyce’s unhappiness with West can be explained in a number of ways. We can decide, as Hutchins does, that Joyce was simply thin-skinned, and we can speculate with Scott that West’s criticism was a “little more individually situated than Joyce would have wished” and that it also “may not have singled Ulysses out sufficiently from other stimuli” (121). We can wonder, furthermore, whether West’s handsome tributes to other writers in “The Strange Necessity”—notably Lawrence, George Moore, and Proust—may not have aroused a twinge of jealousy, or whether, as James Atherton suggests, the efforts by West to locate the influence of Freud and Jung, which William Carlos Williams mocks in Our Exagmination, may have aroused Joyce’s hostility to her (38). And we may ask whether possibly it was galling for Joyce—to whom nomen was omen—to be found wanting by a critic with a nom de plume out of his beloved Ibsen.

Any or all of these explanations seem plausible, and one more, equally plausible, remains. Suzette Henke and Bonnie Kime Scott are justified in suspecting that West’s gender may also have been at issue (Henke 77; Scott 120–21).14 As we have seen, West does hit hard (Scott calls much of “Necessity” “critical, even insulting” [119]), and readers were not always ready to accept a woman who was “unwomanly” enough to confront a man as an equal. In a generally admiring appraisal of West that appeared in 1929, Patrick Braybrooke cautions, “Lately she has written many superficial articles, in which she attacks men, in an extremely cheap kind of way” (141), and Fay Weldon quotes a colleague who protested West’s reviews: “I do not think any female genius has eviscerated the unspeakable male so mercilessly” (33).

West may have been bewildered by the reaction to “Strange Necessity,” but she also believed that her gender contributed to the hostility that set her up as a target in Our Exagmination and sent her bonnets floating into the vast
recirculation of the *Wake*. Her suspicions in this regard are clear in the angry rejoinder to Williams's *Exagmination* essay that she published in her Letter from Abroad in the *New York Bookman* for February 1930, one month after the sweetly reasonable “James Joyce and His Followers” and, as we have seen, one month after she had written of Baudelaire’s “foul epithet” in connection with the sexist reaction she believed *A Room of One’s Own* was certain to elicit. Her profound offense against *Ulysses* in “The Strange Necessity,” West protests in her Letter from Abroad, is that she “read the book, instead of taking it as an occasion for dandyism, a way of eclecticism, a fraternity pin.” By doing so, she demonstrated to Joyce’s champions the truth of Baudelaire’s characterization of woman as a “brute—she has no dandyism—she eats when she is hungry and drinks when she is thirsty!” (664).

One must go to West’s life to appreciate the full force of her reply to Williams. As Victoria Glendinning reports, West was “startlingly dark-skinned when young” and knew of a family legend of an African ancestor on her mother’s side (28–29). Spurred by a recent viewing of the film *Carmen Jones* at which she and her companions were amused by the resemblance they perceived between her and Pearl Bailey, West wrote of the legend in a 1955 letter to Evelyn and Margaret Hutchinson. “I have, as I may have told you,” she writes, “a remote strain of Berber blood.” It seems that one of her eighteenth-century Highland ancestors “went soldiering in North Africa and brought back an African bride . . . —alas, my nearer ancestors were ashamed of this and destroyed all traces.”

To be sure, the passage in the letter is in the spirit of fun, and West obviously enjoys the romance of it all (sometimes, she says, she allows herself to believe that by way of her African ancestor she is related to Saint Augustine). Her feelings about the Berber bride were apparently complex, however, or so one may infer from a striking passage of self-revelation in “James Joyce and His Followers.” Explaining the *Wake*an pun in terms of Freudian free association, West offers the example of a hypothetical analysand, a woman who dreams of someone remarking that her hair, which has grown very long, is dressed in the “criminolation” style. From “criminolation” through Latin *crinis* for “hair” and “crinkly,” to an “ancient rumor of black blood in the family” and thence to the crinoline invented by the Empress Eugenie to conceal her pregnancy, the patient works back to her guilt feelings about sex and the resulting sense that “motherhood seems as ‘incriminating’ as black blood” (6). As noted earlier, West began psychoanalysis in 1927; given West’s child out of wedlock by H. G. Wells and the rumor of the African bride, we may assume that it is West herself who is the hypothetical patient here. (It is entertaining but fruitless to speculate that “crimealine” [*FW* 8.30] might have somehow lodged in West’s subconscious.)

With this background in mind, we feel an added weight of personal offense in West’s reply to Williams in the *Bookman*, a bitter and fantastic expression
of feeling utterly marginalized that marvelously links sexism, racism, and colonialism. West imagines the “Joyceite dandies” crowding round her jungle hut to gaze at the female brute, “watching me in horror while I squat in my lava-lava on the mud floor, flashing my beetle-stained teeth and waggling my nose-ring at them in barbaric good-fellowship that unspeakably revolts their lilyhood, eating my yam, raising to my lips the shell of palm-wine . . . reading a book . . . the book . . . Ulysses” (ellipses in original).

If female brute she is, says West, so be it: “The author, wearing a nose-ring, drops to her knees before the Ulysses of James Joyce.” She demands equality, however, even as she submits: “But James Joyce, so different from his followers, in writing a book so eminently to be read, must wear a nose-ring too. His giving of reality to a world that needed reality shows that he too believes that one should eat when hungry and drink when thirsty. I continue to waggle my nose-ring” (664).

Having begun with West as Femme Shaw, I might note that one of Shaw’s many services to letters was his rejection of bardolatry. So, too, West’s criticism of James Joyce: she reminds us that one may revere an artistic achievement without setting it up as an idol for uncritical worship. Her judgments of Joyce’s work are uneven—flawed, even foolish and rude at times—but they are often perceptive and, taken in their totality, they express enthusiastic admiration far more than reservation or detraction. Furthermore, West’s writing on Joyce reminds us of what it must have been like to encounter Ulysses and Finnegans Wake for the first time, without an elaborate critical framework to guide and support.

The paradox of West’s criticism of Joyce (and of others she greatly admired, such as Lawrence) is that she can be reverent yet never abandon the disrespectful “duty of harsh criticism” to which she dedicated herself at age twenty-one. A clue to the conundrum of her “disrespectful reverence” and to the gleeful pleasure she takes in discovering Joyce’s sentimental weakness through Pomes Penyeach may lie in a book review that she published in the New Freewoman when she was nineteen. In “Spinster and Art,” West discusses the advantages that “non-celibate” writers have over “spinster” writers. Though a follow-up letter to the editor of the Freewoman makes it clear that men (e.g., Walter Pater and A. C. Benson) may be spinsters and that unmarried women (e.g., May Sinclair) may not be, the review treats spinsters as exclusively female. “It is not until one meets a man on the grounds of not duty, but attraction,” West writes, “that his faults strike one with surprise” (47).

The discussion of noncelibate writers links up curiously with a question that West poses in the final paragraph of “The Strange Necessity”: “Is it possible that the intense exaltation which comes to our knowledge of the greatest works of art and the milder pleasure that comes of our more everyday dealings with art, are phases of the same emotion, as passion and gentle affection are phases of love between a man and a woman? Is this exaltation the orgasm,
as it were, of the artistic instinct, stimulated to its height by a work of art?” (196). A few pages earlier West also implies, though less explicitly, that she has experienced and enjoyed Ulysses not as an adoring spinster but as a critical (and “knowing”) noncelibate, and she pays to Ulysses as charming a compliment as any book ever received. Reading Ulysses, West says, “was like standing up to dance the tango after one has not danced it for a very long time, with one who dances it very well” (203).

Given Joyce’s lifelong interest in moo-cows, I might close on a bovine note. When West decided against publishing a letter responding to a man who had objected to the acerbity of her theater criticism in the New Freewoman, she did so, she explained, on the grounds that she was “old-fashioned enough to think that a superior cow ought to refrain from attacking an inferior bull” (Glendinning 50). Clearly, Rebecca West believed that in James Joyce she had encountered a blue-ribbon Irish bull.

NOTES

1. The caricature, drawn from imagination, is reproduced in Jane Marcus, The Young Rebecca, pl. 9, following 148.

2. In welcome contrast to the general run of commentary on West’s criticism of Joyce are Bonnie Kime Scott’s Joyce and Feminism (118–21 et passim) and “The Strange Necessity of Rebecca West.” Rather than cite Scott at length, I would like to recommend her work as a complement to my essay. The best case for West as critic is made by Harold Orel in The Literary Achievement of Rebecca West (31–69).

3. Williams’ unpublished letter is quoted with permission of the Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries. Arguing that Williams did not really understand FW, Marion Cumpiano quotes an interview in which he admitted years after his transition essays that he was still not sure what it was about (55).

4. Padraic Colum analyzes at length the reference to West and her bonnets in FW 552.23–30 (124–26), as does Nathan Halper, who concludes from the passage that Joyce regarded West, like her namesake in Rosmersholm, to be a “petty bourgeois” who “got away with murder” (763). “She sss her nach” (FW 552.29) suggests, as does Williams in Our Exagmination, that part of West’s problem is that she is an Englishwoman (no Sassenach, West was Scots-Irish). Scott sees the references in FW as more than simply mocking (118–19). For more on West in FW, see Tindall 80 and the long note in Benstock 229. If Adaline Glasheen is correct in asserting that “almost any Wells” in FW can refer to H. G. Wells (303), what of all the “wests,” beginning with “well to the west” on the very first page (FW 3.21)?

5. Ellmann says that, when asked to review Portrait, Wells protested he was too busy but, “spurred by Rebecca West, he thought better of his decision” (414). This exaggerates West’s role. On 3 November 1958, Ellmann wrote to West requesting information about the review and other matters relating to Joyce. West’s reply of 7 November acknowledged that, yes, she had recommended Portrait to Wells; “someone
else had sent it to him . . . but he had not read it till I drew his attention to it. But . . . he probably would have read it anyway." Ellmann's letter and West's copy of her reply, both unpublished, are in the Rebecca West Collection at Yale; I am grateful for permission from the Beinecke Library to quote from West's letter here and elsewhere in this essay.

6. Citing what Nathan Halper reported of a conversation with Padraic Colum, Bonnie Kime Scott concludes that Joyce reacted positively to the first fifty pages of West's essay but "after reading further, he was [in Halper's words] 'irritated profoundly'" (118); Scott's inference is certainly plausible, but Halper's article does not support it.

7. Parrinder is persuasive in his overall assessment of the rejection of Joyce in England but he is mistaken about West; for reasons that my essay makes clear, I cannot agree with his contention that Bloomsbury values lead her to conclude in "Strange Necessity" that Joyce "does not need to be taken seriously" (163).

8. In A Room of One's Own, Woolf analyzes the "protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself" of one Z, "the most humane, most modest of men, [who] taking up some book by Rebecca West . . . exclaimed, 'The arrant feminist! She says that men are snobs!'" (35).

9. When on 28 November 1928 H. G. Wells wrote to turn down Joyce's request for support in pushing "Work in Progress" with the public, he explained that for all its faults, "Anrep's dreadful translation of Pavlov's badly written work on Conditioned Reflexes" was "new and illuminating" as Joyce's work was not. Ellmann, who quotes Wells's letter, says that Joyce was "not at all offended" by it (608), but I wonder whether West's discussion of Pavlov may not have unpleasantly recalled Wells's refusal to Joyce.

10. In the New English Weekly for 10 November 1932, Williams defended himself from criticism leveled at him there five weeks earlier by Austin Warren in "Some Periodicals of the American Intelligentsia." Still smarting from her counterattack of the preceding August, Williams cannot resist dragging West into his letter; he asks why she and Warren have been "so violent against me" (91) and after apologizing for going on so long about Warren, tacks on a final paragraph rehashing his earlier complaints in the Weekly about West's criticism of Joyce. This time he is milder, however, closing, "I did not mean, particularly, to offend [her], perhaps it was a fault of the language" (92). More to the point than this apology (if apology it be; the "particularly" falls oddly) is Williams' admission that he still has not read "The Strange Necessity" beyond the extract in the Bookman.

11. The friend at Columbia might have been Carl Van Doren (or his brother Mark), who was married to Irita Van Doren, to whom the American edition of Strange Necessity is dedicated; she was West's friend and editor at the New York Herald Tribune.

12. Hutchins's text reads, "not of his stature," but the not defies the sense of her sentence. Repeating what she earlier told Hutchins (247), West wrote in her letter to Ellmann of 7 November 1958 that matters with Joyce were exacerbated because of Joyce's impression that she and her American publisher, George Doran, had called on him in Paris and behaved rudely, but West insisted to both Hutchins and Ellmann that she was never in Paris with Doran and that she never met Joyce; whether Joyce was under any such misapprehension cannot be determined.

13. In The Court and The Castle, West's brief discussion of Joyce and Lawrence
Briggs (221–23), praises Joyce's "titanic genius" unstintingly (221). Nearing the end of her life, West may have still been trying to mend fences with the Joyceans. In his Publisher's Note to Rebecca West: A Celebration (1977), Marshall Best says that West herself edited the selections that were not complete works or independent portions from works (xix); the extracts mentioning Joyce from "Strange Necessity" (373–77) barely hint at the reservations in the full essay.

14. In support of the view we share that male chauvinism probably contributed to Joyce's reaction to West's criticism, Scott quotes a remark that he once directed at Mary Colum, "I hate women who know anything," which appears in Ellmann (without a citation) as "I hate intellectual women" (529); Karen Lawrence quotes it, correctly, in the opening sentence of her essay "Joyce and Feminism" in The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce (237), and I heard it quoted in Ellmann's incorrect version twice at the 1992 Dublin Symposium. Lest this remark become a locus classicus in Joyce studies, it may be useful to point out that in context this "apparently unequivocal attack," as Richard Brown terms it (91), is far from unequivocal. When Mary Colum protested his exaggerated expressions of indebtedness to Dujardin and his refusal to acknowledge any debt to Freud and Jung, she recalled, Joyce angrily interrupted. "I hate women who know anything," he said. 'No, Joyce, you don't,' I said. 'You like them.' After a few seconds of silent annoyance, a whimsical smile came over his face, and the rest of the afternoon was pleasant..." (Colum 132–33).

15. West's unpublished letter to the Hutchinsons [Feb. 1955] is quoted by permission of the Beinecke Library, Yale University. Is there a connection between the legendary African ancestor and "Panther," Wells's pet name for West during their affair? (Wells, who was "Jaguar," implies that both nicknames were her inventions [111].) One of West's earliest memories, she recalls in Family Memories, was of Indian soldiers from a nearby billet who would admire her on the street with curious intensity. "It is just possible," she muses, "that it was because in my childhood I was very dark—but surely no darker than other children, and not so dark as them [the soldiers]" (200).

WORKS CITED


