ABSTRACT

CONOR THOMAS SMALL. Integral Parts of the Human Whole: Science and Myth in the “Ithaca” Chapter of James Joyce’s Ulysses. (Under the direction of Professor Michael Grimwood.)

In his great modernist work Ulysses, James Joyce incorporated both contemporary sciences and a vast array of cultural mythologies, thereby transforming one day of (his protagonist) Leopold Bloom’s life into an “epistemic quest” for knowledge of how to make his existence more meaningful. This “epistemic quest” climaxes in “Ithaca,” the penultimate chapter of the book, which Joyce wrote as, in his words, a “mathematical catechism” employing the technical rhetoric and epistemological skepticism of scientific investigation. “Ithaca”’s question-and-answer sequence probes the material nature of reality as defined by science, pursuing the enquiry ad absurdum as a parody of scientific texts’ rational mode.

“Ithaca” also includes a shift from a scientific mode of writing to a mythic one, in which the fastidious, technical style gives way to an illustrative, poetic one. In doing so, “Ithaca” articulates the roles of both science and myth in Bloom’s “epistemic quest”: on one hand, science provides a means for understanding reality through materiality—, as conversions of matter and energy. On the other hand, myth serves as a conceptual tool through which Bloom can examine his life as a product of his spirituality. In order to make his existence more meaningful, Bloom must utilize mythology (an expression of spirituality) to guide his actions, thereby illuminating his sense of morality and his place in the modern era.