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A Tale of Two Novels

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In the “culture wars,” a major battle erupted recently on the literary front. At issue: What is the best English-language novel of the century? The two opposing camps picked two opposite novels. Here is a representative passage from each.

Novel A:

He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump, on each plump melonous hemisphere, in their mellow yellow furrow, with obscure prolonged provocative melonsmellonous osculation.

The visible signs of postsatisfaction?

A silent contemplation: a tentative velation: a gradual abasement: a solicitous aversion: a proximate erection.

Novel B:

She sat listening to the music. It was a symphony of triumph. The notes flowed up, they spoke of rising and they were the rising itself, they were the essence and the form of upward motion, they seemed to embody every human act and thought that had ascent as its motive. It was a sunburst of sound, breaking out of hiding and spreading open. It had the freedom of release and the tension of purpose. It swept space clean, and left nothing but the joy of an unobstructed effort. Only a faint echo within the sounds spoke of that from which the music had escaped, but spoke in laughing astonishment at the discovery that there was no ugliness or pain, and there never had had to be. It was the song of an immense deliverance.

Clearly, one of these novels is a stylistic masterpiece, and the other is trash. The fighting is over which is which.

Novel A is James Joyce's *Ulysses*, named best by a panel of “experts” at the Modern Library division of Random House.

Novel B is Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* named best by the “unenlightened masses” who voted online in an Internet poll also conducted by Modern Library.

The culture wars, correctly conceived, actually reflect the clash between the intellectual establishment and the American people.

It has been said that everyone, in terms of his own philosophy, is either a Platonist or an Aristotelian. In broadest terms, the intellectuals are Platonists but the American people are Aristotelians.

Plato held that there are two realities—a higher realm of perfect, timeless abstractions and the degraded, illusory world we think we perceive by our senses. For Platonists, “higher truths” are revealed to the intellectual elite and cannot be communicated or explained to the masses, who stubbornly cling to “common sense”—i.e., reason and logic.

Aristotle, the father of logic, held that there is only one reality, the world we perceive by our senses. For Aristotelians, all knowledge is derived from sensory observation by a process of abstraction and conceptualization. Aristotle rejected Plato’s mystical, elitist tendencies and held that by adherence to logic we can and must make rational sense of everything. Joyce and his coterie of academic admirers are Platonists, Rand and her fans are Aristotelians.

Joyce’s style alternates between gibbering wordplay (“mellow yellow smellow”) and ponderous, woozy abstractions (“tentative velation”), the style conforming to Plato’s dichotomy between perceptual concretes and ineffable abstractions. *Ulysses*’ alleged meaning can be “intuited” only by a special circle of Joycean scholars. Rand’s style, as in the third sentence, takes us by Aristotelian abstraction from the concrete (notes flowing up) to the more abstract (“the essence and form of upward motion”), to the still more abstract (“every human thought and effort that had ascent as its motive”), making the meaning vividly clear to any rational mind.

Platonists view man as a metaphysical misfit, caught in a conflict between the spiritual realm and this debased world. Man’s earthly concerns, such as sex, drag him down to a smarmy, animalistic level, making him appear infantile and ridiculous.

Aristotelians, as the passage from Rand expresses, view man as a noble, potentially heroic being, whose highest moral purpose is to achieve his own happiness on this earth (“the joy of unobstructed effort”).

A poll conducted by the Library of Congress and the Book of the Month Club asked what book has most affected reader’s personal lives. *Atlas Shrugged* placed second only to the Bible. Many report that reading the novel was a profoundly emotional experience, as well as an intellectual one. Readers of *Atlas Shrugged* talk about the book changing their lives, and that change is due not only to the explicit, philosophical content of the book, but also to its exalted vision of what life, and man, can be.

It is not really fair to ask if *Ulysses* holds similar meaning for the Platonists, because the book is practically impossible to read—which is the reason for its snob appeal. *Ulysses* recalls the saying, “They muddy the waters to make them appear deep.”

Until a generation of Aristotelian philosophers converts the pseudo-intellectuals to reason and reality, the deeper culture wars will rage on.