Discoveries, Voiceovers, and Greek Poetry: the Colonization of Lands, Languages, and Literatures in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*

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On the back of the dust jacket of *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1998), one reads: “poet Anne Carson reinvents a genre in *Autobiography of Red,*” given that her work transcends boundaries between literary forms and simultaneously attempts to create a connection between lyric Greek poetry and contemporary North American culture. This claim immediately brings to mind the Irish modernist James Joyce, who is said to have reinvented the novel with *Ulysses* (1922); the work was credited by T.S. Eliot as having “the importance of a scientific discovery” (*Myth* 177). *Ulysses,* which famously introduces the stream-of-consciousness technique—as well as many other stylistic innovations—transforms Homer’s *Odyssey* into a man’s journey through colonial Dublin on a single day. Although Joyce and Carson—a celebrated and inveterate Canadian—write in different parts of the world and in opposite ends of the twentieth century, their works share important concerns, which are connected in a single concept, namely, colonialism.

The present article compares James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* by examining three different kinds of colonialism. First, as a means of creating a basis for my analysis, I discuss the novels’ treatment of colonialism in its most commonly used sense: the invasion of a foreign country and of its people by the power of empire. Second, I analyze linguistic colonialism: the subordination of a native language to the language of the oppressors. Finally, I introduce literary colonialism, a term with multiple meanings which I apply, somewhat unconventionally, to the use of Greek literature by these two twentieth century writers, raising the question of whether Joyce and Carson may condemn colonialism while simultaneously endorsing it on a different level.
I. Their Own Countries?

_Ulysses_ and _Autobiography of Red_ each portray colonialism as violent and destructive, and reveal the underlying psychological forces at work within the colonized subject. In _Ulysses_, Joyce not only critiques British colonialism but also Irish nationalism (Booker 86; Castle 4-5). The “Parable of the Plums,” which Stephen Dedalus tells, may provide an image for this dual condemnation of both the Irish and the British: the widows cannot look down on Dublin because “it makes them giddy,” and they cannot look “up at the statue of the one-handed adulterer,” Nelson1, because “[i]t gives them a crick in their necks” (U. 7. 1004-27). Colonialism has brought much pain to Ireland; however, according to Joyce, a nationalism that is excluding can be equally problematic. The Cyclops section of _Ulysses_ shows how, as a Jewish character in Ireland, Bloom falls victim to a “blind” nationalism, which “allow[s] certain citizens, but not others, to feel at home” (Woodruff 83). The citizen laments that _The Irish Independent_ includes too many English names in the “births and deaths” and “the marriages” (U. 12. 222-23). While the citizen condemns all “Sassenachs”2 (U. 12. 1191), Bloom has an inclusive understanding of nation as “the same people living in the same place” (U. 12. 1422-23). When Bloom, a Jew of Hungarian descent, claims Irish nationality: “Ireland . . . I was born here. Ireland” (U. 12. 1431), the citizen is muted with disgust (U. 12. 1432), and the narrator later mocks: “God save Ireland from the likes of that bloody mouseabout” (U. 12. 1579).

The narrowness of Irish-Ireland nationalism can be boiled down to ideas of a racial superiority of the Irish3, and “the Jews [in the Ireland of the early twentieth century] were preeminently scapegoats in a country of scapegoats” (Reizbaum 113). Thus, the worst insult Bloom can deal to the nationalists is to compare his situation to theirs: “I belong to a race too . . . that is hated and persecuted. Also now” (U. 12. 1467-68). The

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1This is a reference to Nelson’s Pillar, erected by the British to commemorate Horatio Nelson, symbolizing the British Empire.

2This word is derived from a Gaelic term meaning “Englishman.”

3Insistence on “racial purity,” as advertised by Irish nationalists, is ridiculous in itself, as Joyce points out in his essay “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages” where he exposes Charles Stewart Parnell, “Erin’s uncrowned king in the flesh” (U. 16. 1496), as completely non-Irish: he “was perhaps the most formidable man that ever led the Irish, but in [his] veins there was not even a drop of Celtic blood” (Critical Writings 162).