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James Joyce's Modernist Dublin: Leopold Bloom and the Critical Eye of *Ulysses*' Outsider

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This paper analyses the ways in which Leopold Bloom critiques Dublin city life from his position as the excluded outsider figure of James Joyce's Ulysses. Consideration will be given to Bloom's engagement with Dublin and its transformation into a cosmopolitan city, its effect on Irish identity and consciousness, and its relationship with the Catholic Church. Finally, an attempt will be made to situate the ruminations of Ulysses' hero within a wider context of a distinct Irish modernist movement that, as Ronan McDonald suggests, offered an "outright hostile response to essentialist ideas of [...] Ireland or Irishness" as was previously "advanced by the Irish revival at the fin-de-siècle" (178). The prevailing question at hand, then, is this: how does Bloom's critique of a modernising Dublin, from the position of the cultural outsider, coincide with the wider concerns of an Irish modernist movement that was responding to ideas laid out by their nationalist forebearers?

In an attempt to define the modernist city, Malcolm Bradbury writes: "cities were more than just accidental meeting places and crossing points. [...] They were often novel environments, carrying within themselves the complexities of modern metropolitan life, which so deeply underlies modern consciousness and modern writing" (96). The modernist city, he states further, offers writers the ability to document a "generative frontier of growth and change" by engaging with the "technological, commercial, and industrial" transformation within it" (97). Of course, James Joyce's presentation of Dublin in *Ulysses* is certainly no exception. On the morning of 16th June 1904, Leopold Bloom wanders the streets of Dublin, observing a city lethargically, waking from a slumberous sleep. Stopping on streets to talk to passers-by, entering public buildings, and reading a letter from his promiscuous pen pal Martha Clifford, Bloom's morning stroll offers an extended critical reflection upon Dublin and its tender transition from a pre-industrial space to a cosmopolitan, consumerist second city of the British Empire.

The study of Bloom as a critic of the city is no closely guarded secret amongst Joyce scholars. For decades, critics have mused over Joyce's attempt to, using his own words, "create a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city were to suddenly disappear from the earth it

could be constructed” from *Ulysses* alone (Budgen 69). However, one critical lens that keeps Joyce scholars busy today is that of New Modernist Criticism. As Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz have noted, recent transformations in modernist literary scholarship have caused an “expansion”, even “delimitation”, of “temporal, spatial, and vertical” understandings of modernism (737). The “fresh eyes and ears” of postcolonial scholars from “other quarters of the globe” have aided greatly in the rethinking of how modernism is viewed as a literary period, how different cities grew during this era, and how canons can be reformed to address the disparity between “low” (by which Mao and Walkowitz mean ‘popular culture’) and “high” art (737–38). In light of such research, Susan Stanford Friedman has argued contemporary modernist research focuses upon multicentered ‘modernities’ as opposed to one uniform and planet-wide ‘modernity’ (474). As she states further, the plurality of ‘modernities’ has, as a result, “spawned a plurality of modernisms and circulations among them” (474). Accepting this multiplicity, that cities and cultures have each modernised in different ways and (often) to different stimuli, enables New Modernist Critics to engage with the specificities laid out by a writer in a text: their response to their own city’s modernisation, their response to prior literary conventions, and their response to nationality and nationhood.

Superimposing the postcolonial lens of New Modernist Studies may help greatly develop an understanding of Bloom’s morning meander around the Irish capital in ‘Lotus Eaters’. This paper analyses the ways in which Bloom critiques Dublin city life from his position as the outsider figure of *Ulysses* in terms of his race, religion, and social standing. Consideration will be given to Bloom’s engagement with Dublin and its transformation into a cosmopolitan city, its effect on Irish identity and consciousness, and its relationship with the Catholic Church. Finally, an attempt will be made to situate the ruminations of *Ulysses*’ hero within a wider context of a distinct Irish modernist movement that, as Ronan McDonald suggests, offered an “outright hostile response to essentialist ideas of [...] Ireland or Irishness” as was previously “advanced by the Irish revival at the fin de siècle” (178). The prevailing question at hand, then, is this: how does Bloom’s critique of a modernising Dublin, from the position of the cultural outsider, coincide with the wider concerns of an Irish modernist movement that was responding to ideas laid out by their nationalist forebearers?

If there were a phrase that epitomised the Irish Revivalist emphasis on the importance of race, religion, and bloodline, it would be hard to look beyond this couplet in W.B. Yeats’ “To Ireland in the Coming Times”: “of her [Ireland], whose history began / Before God made the angelic clan” (94). Linking his people together through divine bloodline and inhabitation of an

Edenic landscape, Yeats characterises the Irish as cohesive, linked to place, and related to one another through space, heritage, and consciousness. It is, perhaps, sentiment like this, shared by the regulars of Barney Kiernan's pub, that consolidates Leopold Bloom as a racial and social outsider in *Ulysses*. "Ireland [...] I was born here", Bloom exclaims to no avail after he is mocked for saying "a nation is the same people living in the same place" (317). As the mixed-race son of a Hungarian-Jewish father and Irish-Catholic mother, Bloom's cloudy bloodline, as Margot Norris believes, "may be responsible for the increasing social marginalisation he suffers over the course of the day" (74). When comparing Bloom's heritage to the standards of racial purity expressed by The Citizen, John Wyse, and Ned Lambert, it is clear he will forever be viewed as *Ulysses*' racial and social outside. Whilst this position causes Bloom to defend himself from anti-Semitic confrontations in the 'Sirens' episode, it is also his outsider status that enables him to critically distance himself from his male counterparts, not only critiquing their way of life but their appearance(s) as well.

Whilst it is certainly fair to assume that Bloom is part of the same lower-middle-class as the men he meets in 'Lotus Eaters', the coldness and indifference he conveys towards them (sentiments that are reciprocated later on in *Ulysses* through anti-Semitic remarks) aids in critiquing the emerging bourgeois middle class formed out of Dublin's modernisation at the turn of the twentieth century. As Enda Duffy outlines, Dublin "had nurtured a small, thoroughly insecure middle class" with "little or no work for its members", resulting in an "aimless quality" and an "endless time for talk" (85). Such sentiments are recorded by Bloom in his conversation with M'Coy, a small-time conman operating on the streets of Dublin, about the death of Paddy Dignam and the men they have already met on their morning strolls. "Just keeping alive" and going "nowhere in particular", both men's days convey an overwhelming sense of purposelessness (71). Such attitudes even spread from speech to physical expression. When Bloom lets off a "dull sigh", he demonstrates how the existential angst of Dublin's lower-middle-class men is physically manifested within the body (71). They are deeply concerned with their status as loosely employed workers wandering the city's streets and affected by life in the present moment.

When looking at Bloom's contemplations of his conversation with M'Coy, it is clear he is not overly enamoured with the lives led by Dublin's meandering middle-class males, and they are a social group he deliberately wishes to exclude himself from. Reflecting on his conversation, Bloom states he "Wish[ed]" he had "never met that M'Coy fellow"; a sentiment shared by Bloom's continuous attempt to nullify and end the conversation (73). In response to

the numerous questions asked by M'Coy ("Eleven is it? I only heard it last night. Who was telling me? Holohan. You know Hoppy?"), Bloom repeatedly responds with one-word answers such as "I know", "yes", and "eleven" (70–71). As the conversation unfolds, it becomes clear that the aimless chatter prevents Bloom from quickly performing his morning tasks. Even during the conversation, Bloom's mind is transfixed by the "silk stockings" of a "rich" woman outside the Grosvenor Hotel and continually draws his mind away from the topic of the existing conversation (71). In Bloom's mind, Dublin's middle-class males and their endless time for chat prevent and distract each other from performing meaningful work and carrying out their morning errands even quicker.

If Bloom's prior feelings towards the aimless chatter of Dubliners had not already been thoroughly expressed through his conversation with M'Coy, then his later exchange with Bantam Lyons (the fellow Bloom inadvertently provides a betting tip to) only consolidates this. Throughout *Ulysses*, Bernard Benstock has noted how "Bloom edges carefully in and out of the bourgeois code" maintained by Dublin's middle classes (444). In this instance, Bloom subverts the city's code of polite *tête-à-tête* by "leav[ing]" Lyons "the paper" to "get shut of him" on grounds of poor personal hygiene (82). Focusing upon Lyons' "yellow blacknailed fingers", the "dandruff on his shoulders", and his "dry scalp", Bloom's derisive observations of his acquaintance's unkempt and dishevelled appearance draw upon Dublin's twentieth-century status as, to quote Benstock further, "one of the unhealthiest cities in the world" (82). Lyons' poor appearance is even beginning to show signs of ill-health; he "leer[s] weakly" and is "los[ing] his hair" despite, it being learnt, that he is younger than Bloom (82). By drawing upon the deteriorating appearance of Bantam Lyons, Bloom's observations highlight the signs of poverty and ill-health behind Dublin's mask of bourgeois prosperity.

Despite Bloom drawing attention to the ill-health of Dublin's citizens, that is not to say he is entirely sympathetic. As Richard Ellmann has noted, the misunderstanding between the two over the racing tip draws attention to the fact that "Bloom has offered nothing" to Lyons, he believes his acquaintance is "deluded", and "doesn't approve of gambling" (42–43). As Bloom's internal monologue interrupts the image of Bloom repackaging his soap, he draws upon the "Silly lips of that chap. Betting" (82). Whilst Enda Duffy suggests that "colonial Dublin offered the prospect of conventional bourgeois prosperity then withheld it", Bloom's disapproval of Lyons' betting habits suggests the major factor holding Dubliners from such prosperity is, in fact, themselves (84). Rather than focus on his own cleanliness, like Bloom, Lyons prioritises a perpetual life of betting and drinking that will never result in economic

prosperity. Bloom's suggestion, then, is that the Dubliners stand in the way of their own prosperity and self-bettering.

Whilst Duffy states that "*Ulysses* [...] is a document from a specifically bourgeois point of view", that is not to say Bloom does not reflect upon the lives of other social classes in 'Lotus Eaters' (85). Working with Michael Pierson's assumption that the Irish Revivalists mapped the experiences of the working classes to "empower those struggling for social change", it is interesting to note how Bloom's depiction of the working classes counteracts such notions (68). Bloom's observations and reflections upon working-class city life outline the outright inflexibility of colonial Dublin's class system (68). Walking down Lime Street, an impoverished road behind the quayside, Bloom first observes a "loll'd" boy with a "bucket of offal", "smoking a chewed fagbutt", who is being closely watched by a "girl with scars of eczema [...] listlessly holding her caskhoop" (68). Showing signs of skin disease, malnourishment, and the effects of smoking, Bloom is drawn to how poverty has manifested itself within the youths' bodies. The scrounging of leftovers from butchers and the holding of toys salvaged from refuse had clearly taken its toll. When it comes to physical movement, however, the children are lethargic and weary. They "loll", hold items "listlessly", and simply stare at one another (68). Beyond the growth of illness and disease in their bodies, the lack of physical movement suggests the children will be eternally bound to a stagnant and fixed life of poverty.

However, Gary Hagberg has noted how Joyce has attempted to not only present a character's "scene of consciousness" through "the focus of a man's mind" but in his "residue of past impressions" and "previous life experiences" (94). In other words, Bloom's sober reflections upon the children of Dublin's quayside slums, via his internal monologue, are formed out of comparison to his own middle-class upbringing and economic situation. Bloom wishes the young girl would break her listless gaze to tell the young boy "if he smokes he won't grow" (68). If the boy changes his ways, Bloom first believes, he may minimise the effects of stunted growth and slowly begin to make something of his life. Bloom's later thoughts, however, are intertwined with a nihilistic attitude that quickly matches the image he is seeing: "O let him! His life isn't such a bed of roses!" (68). Bloom resigns himself to believe that the boy's cigarette offers a rare respite from the impoverished situation he finds himself in; for the young boy, life in the present moment, Bloom believes, is more important than thinking about the future. However, Bloom's acquiescence to the working-class situation, nods to a much wider concern of Irish modernism: Colonial Ireland's place in the British Empire. As Bernard

Benstock has noted, Britain had “dictated that almost no industry of any significance existed to provide the healthy economy needed” to feed and nurture “Dublin’s overcrowded slums” (439). Unable to fix the slum situation, Bloom must simply return, passively, to his own separate life of lower-middle-class.

Conversely, Joyce counteracts such depictions of squalor with visible signs of wealth and aristocratic money in Bloom’s observations of a man and wife leaving The Grosvenor Hotel on Westland Row, a hotel well-known for hosting wealthy guests and a short distance from Broadstone station. Instead of remarks on the internal, bodily effects of class, Bloom focuses on outwardly impressions of class, such as clothing. Outlining how the woman’s clothes are out of touch with her surroundings—“stylish coat with that roll collar, warm for a day like this”—Bloom outlines the estrangement of Dublin’s upper-middle classes from the squalor of the urban city environment (70). Further inspection enables Bloom to focus on the woman’s “wellturned foot” and “high brown boots”, leading him to assume that they are “off to the country” on a leisure retreat, via Broadstone station (70). Pitched to a broadening upper-middle-class, popular country retreats and getaways were made possible by new technological advancements and commodification of Ireland’s public transport. To those who could afford it, public transport enabled a new respite and a break from the harsh reality of Dublin city life. It may well be these transforming forces of commodification and technological advancement that separate Bloom from this upper-middle class.

Dublin’s emerging public transport system stops Bloom’s thoughts about the affluent woman in their tracks. Cast in a discourse in which he is well versed, Bloom’s characterisation of the woman is performed through the lens of his lace fetish and objectification of women: “proud : rich : silk : stockings” and “Watch! Watch! Silk flash rich stockings white. Watch!” (71). His sexist attempt to give a full account of the woman’s social status, however, is halted after “a heavy tramcar” is “slewed between” them (71). As a character who predominantly walks around Dublin, taking only one trip by horse and carriage in ‘Hades’, it is Dublin’s commodified transport that the woman can afford (and Bloom cannot) that prevents *Ulysses*’ smutty hero from achieving his full depiction of the woman. “Lost it. Curse your noisy pugnose”, he thinks, before suggesting he “feels locked out of it” (71). It is Bloom’s financial shortcomings that exclude him from the higher classes. Dublin’s upper-middle classes are characterised by their ability to separate themselves from city life via a commodity culture of consumerist capitalism: expensive clothes, leisure retreats, and the use of cutting-edge transport, which Bloom can scarcely afford himself.

As Bloom reaches All Hallows' Church on Westland Row, the topic of his analytical gaze shifts from social class to religion and dogma. As Mark Wollaeger has noted, many of the same forces governing Bloom's position as the outsider—his heritage, social status, and lived experience—still govern his critique of religious ideology; it is his mixed religious and racial heritage, alongside a sensory fascination that he has developed over his life, that has nurtured his position as a "mature atheist" who is not "bound to any [religious ideology] in particular" (144). Supporting Bloom's position as the mature atheist is his apparent materialist outlook on life. It is learnt early in the day that he does not believe in forces beyond the body. When Molly asks Bloom about the meaning of metempsychosis in 'Calypso', he replies, "they [The Greeks] used to believe that you could be changed into an animal or a tree' by the 'transmigration of souls'" (62–63). With the collective pronoun 'they' separating Bloom's own view from the Greeks', it is clear a symbolic metaphysics does not drive him but a determinable physics that records the sensory experience of a concrete reality: "be a warm day I fancy. Specially in these black clothes feel it more. Black conducts, reflects (refracts is it?) the heat" (55). Indeed, it is how Bloom deconstructs the physical world around him, negating the symbolic importance of elements in the church, that places him as the outsider and enables a critique of religion from the philosophical perspective of materialism to take place.

Michael Begnal's assumption that the "urban spaces" of "the city" have a clear effect on the "spaces of the mind" is certainly reinforced by Bloom's depiction of the church's effect on its people (15). Indeed, Bloom demonstrates how the church's physical environment and structure sedate its congregation's members. As he enters "softly by the rere", the sensory recording of "the smell of cold sacred stone" and the feel of the "worn steps" draw attention to the age of the church; it is a vessel that shows physical signs of ageing, erosion, and deterioration (77). Such sentiments then become present in Bloom's picture of transubstantiation. Bloom's usually fine-tuned sensory experience erodes into a low-resolution description of "murmuring" and "holding [of] things in hands" (77). Signs of ageing and decline are also then captured in Bloom's observation of an "old fellow asleep next to the confession box" (78). Thinking about the man's "snores", Bloom's internal monologue rather sarcastically deems the man will "wake this time next year" as he is "safe in the arms of kingdom come" (79). Whilst the church protects the man in his slumber, it is also an environment that keeps him sedated and asleep. As such, Bloom's depictions suggest the church to be an archaic institution that has deteriorated over time. At the same time, it is a

powerful vessel that controls its congregation by stimulating low-resolution and anaesthetised thinking over lively critical engagement.

Of course, it is the very fact that Bloom is able to present a rich sensory experience through consciousness that enables him to critique Catholic epistemology. As Louise Bentley has noticed, “Catholicism strives to offer a world view based on cohesion, totality and denial of the complexity of experience”, which is completely exposed by Bloom in ‘Lotus Eaters’ (160). In the service itself, Bloom highlights how the mass “goes like clockwork”, with each member of the congregation depersonalised and having their participation recorded in a series of mechanised movements. Anaphora of phrases such as “the priest bent down and put it into her mouth”, “the next one”, and “shut your eyes and open your mouth” emphasises religious worship as an automated process, negating the mass’s metaphysical and symbolic importance (77). After this, the interruption of Bloom’s internal monologue—“good idea the Latin. Stupefies them first”—extends the notion of robotic worship by suggesting the congregation is dumbfounded by the service’s operation in a foreign language (77). Bloom’s suggestion of religion, then, is one that also rejects the “blind faith” one must put in Catholic dogma; an issue with which his critical and scientific mind can hardly accept (77).

As ‘Lotus Eaters’ draws to a close, Bloom’s observations on the anaesthetising effects of urban space transition from the realm of religion to consumerism. As Jennifer Wicker attests, an explanation of this was Joyce’s attempt to capture the “new modern world of mass culture [...] in all its energies, its splendours and its miseries” (235). Building on this idea, Gary Leonard has noted how commodities in *Ulysses* “may be analysed to show how they embody the value assigned or imputed to them” (575). In the case of ‘Lotus Eaters’, Bloom’s focus on the chemist’s potions emphasises the “lethargy” and anaesthetising effect of consumer culture (81). Thinking about “chloroform”, “laudanum”, and “poppysyrup”, Bloom highlights how such drugs “gradually change your character” (81). Such changes then affect Bloom while recalling items he has previously purchased. He is entranced by the effects of “sweet almond oil”, “orangeflower water”, “sponges and loofas” on his wife’s skin: “it certainly did make her skin so delicate white like wax” (81). Such commodities then send Bloom into a state of daze and daydream, associating those products with positive memories of Molly “looking at [him], the sheet up to her eyes, Spanish, smelling herself, when [he] was fixing the links in [his] cuffs” (81). When put together, Bloom’s fascinations with commodities draw attention to the consumer mindset in Dublin. Commodity culture, as he believes and even experiences, entices buyers into buying through the invocation of positive memories.

The postcolonial lens of New Modernist Studies aids greatly in providing a new light to read Bloom's critique of Dublin life at the turn of the twentieth century. Using his position as *Ulysses'* social, racial, and atheistic outsider, Bloom engages with three areas that work together to govern a specifically Irish consciousness: the relationship between nationhood and identity, the role of the Catholic church, and Dublin's troubled modernisation into a city of consumerism and commodity culture. Drawing specifically upon these effects of city life upon its people, Bloom uncovers the inherent aimlessness and automated manner with which Joyce's Dubliners are forced to live their lives.

In a broader sense, Bloom's observations also counteract, and perhaps even respond, to the strong essentialist sentiments aired by the Irish Revivalists. The sample Joyce provides of Dublin in 'Lotus Eaters' deliberately subverts the nationalistic narrative(s) exalted by the Irish Revivalists. In place of a romanticised Celtic landscape that bears a people with their own idiosyncratic identity, Joyce presents Dublin as one of many urban modernist cities at the turn of the twentieth century. The only features distinguishing Dublin as different from other modernist cities, however, are its people and religion: two entities that comprise and compound the squalor and suffering of the city. The Ireland Joyce presents, then, is not one of a romanticised landscape and people but an undesirable modernist metropolis fraught with problems from people and religion.

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