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"...and Poldy not Irish enough...": Nationalism and Ideology in James Joyce's Ulysses

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Recommended Citation

Reinares, Laura Barberan, "'...and Poldy not Irish enough...': Nationalism and Ideology in James Joyce's Ulysses" (2008). *Graduate English Association New Voices Conference 2008*. Paper 1.

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2008 New Voices Conference September 25-27
Graduate English Association
English Department, Georgia State University
Atlanta, Georgia

“ . . . and Poldy not Irish enough . . . ” :

Nationalism and Ideology in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*

. . .

*as going very bare
of learning, as wild hares,
as anatomies of death:
"What ish my nation?"*

*And sensibly, though so much
later, the wandering Bloom
replied, "Ireland," said Bloom,
"I was born here. Ireland."*

Seamus Heaney, “Traditions”

One of the many lures of *Ulysses* (1922) centers around the character of Leopold Bloom. He personifies, arguably, the heart of Joyce’s epic: an advertisement canvasser wandering along the streets of Dublin on June 16, 1904, as he would on any given day. But Bloom is Jewish, moderate in his political views, works, and does not drink or gamble; in short, his depiction stands out as a far cry from the stereotypical Irish man of Joyce’s earlier *Dubliners* (1914), where the salesman was initially meant to belong. In crafting this character, Joyce highlighted Bloom’s “otherness,” yet the context of *Ulysses*--overflowing with intertextual references to Joyce’s collection of short stories and his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)--suggests that this “gentleman” has more to offer to his people than many of his “true” Irish compatriots, i.e., Roman Catholic nationalists, who spend their days (and nights) in bars,

gossiping about almost everything under the Irish sun. Even though Bloom's actions/thoughts reveal nothing conspicuously out of the ordinary, when we situate this character against the other men in the novel his presence becomes provocative. Through these male representations, then, Joyce subverts the conventional hierarchies, where, for example, Catholic is synonymous with Irish, and therefore "good," while Jewish stands for foreign and, by default, "evil." Much as he did with Stephen Dedalus, who in *A Portrait* expresses his need to detach himself from a sterile society that dwells in division and guilt, with Bloom Joyce draws attention to the prevalent ideological discourses through an empathetic Quixote who does not fit any fixed Irish type (the Catholic, the nationalist, the drinker, the singer, the garrulous story-teller, etc.). In so doing, Joyce defies Manichean dichotomies that ultimately entrap the other male characters and perpetuate their drowning in the empire-infected ideology dominating Ireland in the early 1900s.

Following Louis Althusser's and Slavoj Žižek's analyses of ideology, then, I want to explore the representations of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom in terms of their response to the hegemonic discourses espoused by Catholicism and Nationalism (both linked to Empire). With this intention, I will concentrate on Episode Ten, "The Wandering Rocks," since from the characters' actions and conversations as they intersect in the streets of Dublin we can extrapolate the ideological narratives in which Ireland was immersed at the time. I suggest that the personal struggle for ideological liberation Joyce initiated with Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait* necessarily led to the development of Leopold Bloom because, by the beginning of *Ulysses*, it is apparent that Stephen is still too susceptible to the Roman Catholic ideology of his formative years. Even though the young Dedalus fights to overcome his limitations, precisely because of his upbringing he cannot rise above the principles inculcated by his family and his Jesuit education. Stephen thus becomes too partial a figure for Joyce's project, so a character like the Jewish salesman

emerges as the main protagonist of this odyssey. Bloom's "multiplicity" visibly sets him apart from the "real" Irish men in *Ulysses*. At the same time, because of his plurality, Bloom manages to free himself from the artificial binary-pattern mentality that fixes the other male characters inside an ideology that can only perpetuate imperial exploitation.

In this essay, I will rely on the Marxist definition of "ideology," which seems the most suitable because imperialism is grounded in capitalism: leaving aside the old hypocrisy of the "white man's burden," colonization has sought economic profit pure and simple. From a clearly Marxist perspective, philosopher Louis Althusser argues in his seminal "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970) that the main function of ideology is to reproduce a society's existing relations of production, and he explains that ideology works through "Ideological State Apparatuses," for example, the school, the church, the law, the family, the political system, culture, and so on (1489). For Althusser, ideology has a material existence in that it manifests itself through concrete practices; it interpellates people as subjects and places them in false positions of self-knowledge, therefore influencing their behavior. According to Althusser, one becomes a "subject" by responding to the "interpellation" or "hail" of ideology through the enactment of tangible rituals, for instance, attending a religious service, joining a political party, endorsing a ceremony, etc (1504). Thus ideology conditions the way in which we perceive reality, making us assume that what we see is "natural," when in fact it is a product of our culture; in other words, ideology presents as natural what is artificially constructed.

Within the context of Joyce's novel, "The Wandering Rocks" begins with "[t]he superior, the very reverend John Conmee S. J.," and concludes with "William Humble, earl of Dudley," both imperial representatives acting as a synecdoche for the physical presence of Rome and England in Ireland (Joyce 180, 207). In between, Joyce gives readers glimpses of the people's

attitudes towards the dominant powers of pope and king these deputies symbolize. To Father Conmee, communicants bow “most respectfully”; to the royal cavalcade, citizens wave “most cordially”; despite the different addressees, both responses imply submission (181, 207). It is hardly coincidental that Joyce starts and ends the episode with these authorities. As Frantz Fanon claims in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), during the period of imperial occupation, Church and Empire become two sides of the same coin: “The Church in the colonies is [. . .] a foreigners’ Church. [It] does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of [. . .] the master, the ways of the oppressor” (7). Joyce himself confessed his disgust with the servility to the British Empire ecclesiastics instilled in their followers, the betrayal of Parnell epitomizing this phenomenon.¹ Opening the episode with the former Jesuit rector of Clongowes Wood College also connects *Ulysses* with *A Portrait* and establishes an intertextual relation that allows readers to understand Stephen’s present conflicts. Thus, in *A Portrait*, Joyce provides enough background for readers to recognize why Stephen cannot fully depart from those deeply ingrained ideological constructions. The beginning of *Ulysses* presents a continuation of his struggles, which, in spite of Stephen’s obvious potential, do not resolve themselves by the end of Joyce’s polyphonic novel.

If we therefore think of Stephen Dedalus in terms of Althusserian ideology, it becomes clear that this young Irish boy has been “interpellated” as a Roman Catholic Irish subject by being born into a Catholic family, attending a Jesuit school, growing up in Catholic neighborhoods, etc. Even though Stephen openly rejects the nationalistic movement many of his Catholic friends espouse, the ideology he has absorbed cripples him because he feels subject to it. Mark A. Wollaeger, in “Reading *Ulysses*: Agency, Ideology, and the Novel,” remarks that

¹ Religious authorities played a crucial role in the downfall of Parnell because many agree that they manipulated people’s opinions against the political leader. Parnell was accused of immorality at a convenient time for England, in 1890, when Ireland was getting close to achieving Home Rule.

Stephen “wishes to undo the internalization of authority that renders him [. . .] the political subject of ‘the imperial British state’ and the religious subject of ‘the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church’ (*U* 1.643-44)” (129). He certainly tries, but without success.

In fact, when in “The Wandering Rocks” readers “overhear” Buck Mulligan and Haines talking at the Dublin Bakery Company’s restaurant about Stephen’s “*idée fixe*,” Mulligan blames his friend’s truncated creativity on his Jesuit education: “They drove his wits astray [. . .] by visions of hell,” an obvious reference to Farther Arnall’s sermon in *A Portrait*, while Mulligan’s verdict: “That is his tragedy. He can never be a poet,” reinforces the paralyzing consequences of Stephen’s early infatuation with Catholicism (Joyce, *U* 204). Haines—another of the many surrogates of the British Empire in *Ulysses*--retorts that a scholar he has been reading “can find no trace of hell in ancient Irish myth,” so it seems “rather strange [Stephen] should have just that fixed idea” (205). Through Haines’s comment, Joyce draws attention to the actual foreignness of the Roman Catholic faith in Ireland, which most nationalist citizens seem to take for granted when this religion is as alien to the native Irish culture as the English empire that oppresses them politically. In this respect, Joyce could have felt that crafting Stephen as his Ulysses would have undercut his freedom to detach the hero of his masterpiece from fixed ideological discourses; as he once told to Frank Budgen: “Stephen no longer interests me [; h]e has a shape that cannot be changed” (qtd. in Kenner, “The Portrait in Perspective” 416). The author resorted instead to Leopold Bloom, a more impartial character not tainted by the prevalent ideological narratives of Catholicism (closely tied to Irish nationalism) and British imperialism (strongly opposed to Irish nationalism). Unlike Stephen, Leopold Bloom comfortably moves among ideologies without fully responding to the hailing of any. In the words of Wollaeger: “Born to a Catholic mother, later raised as a Jew by his father, then baptized as a Protestant before converting to Catholicism,

Bloom the mature atheist bears traces of these subject positions without ever becoming bound to any in particular” (144).

But to understand Leopold Bloom’s depiction better in ideological terms, I want to refer to Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), where the author contextualizes the pervasiveness of ideological narratives. Žižek’s illustration becomes particularly relevant when exploring how most of the male characters in Joyce’s novel relate to Bloom. In a worth-citing excerpt, Žižek explains:

Let us [. . .] take a typical individual in Germany in the late 1930s. He is bombarded by anti-Semitic propaganda depicting a Jew as a monstrous incarnation of Evil, the great-wire-puller, and so on. But when he returns home he encounters Mr. Stern [Mr Bloom?], his neighbor: a good man to chat with in the evenings, whose children play with his. Does this everyday experience offer an irreducible resistance to the ideological construction?

The answer is, of course, no. If everyday experience offers such a resistance, then the anti-Semitic ideology has not yet really grasped us. An ideology is really ‘holding us’ only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality – that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself. How then would our poor German [or Irish man, for this matter] react to this gap between the ideological figure of the Jew [...] and the common everyday experience of his good neighbor Mr. Stern? His answer would be to turn this gap, this discrepancy itself, into an argument for anti-Semitism: ‘You see how dangerous they really are? It is difficult to recognize their real nature. They hide it behind a mask of everyday appearance – and it is

exactly this hiding of one's real nature, this duplicity, that is a basic feature of the Jewish nature.' An ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favour. (49)

Although Nazism, admittedly, sounds like an extreme position, from Žižek's account we can extrapolate the ideological atmosphere of Ireland in 1904, while the episode under analysis illustrates the pervasiveness of such hegemonic mythologies. Still under tight British grip, and deeply influenced by the Roman Catholic Church, the Irish were trapped in a vicious cycle of defiance of imperial politics and submission to imperial authorities so powerfully described by Joyce in *Dubliners* and *A Portrait*. Culturally speaking, Dublin's life "was dominated by an Anglo-Irish intelligentsia whose chief figures included the novelist George Moore, the theosophist George Russell (pseudonym AE), Lady Augusta Gregory [. . .], and the eminent poet W. B. Yeats," all leading cultural nationalist figures whom Joyce alludes to in *Ulysses* (Norris 5). At the same time, nationalist movements such as the Gaelic League and the Land League were actively instigating and seducing the citizens into embracing an idealized Irish/Gaelic past in search for a "true" Irish identity they could oppose to that of the "Sassenach," even if such purity had never really existed.² In retrospect, many scholars agree that these nationalist undertakings caused more division than union. As Marjorie Howes and Derek Attridge explain in the introduction to *Semicolonial Joyce* (2000), it has become a "now well-established argument that nationalism is derivative of imperialism, and that its intellectual structures simply invert and mirror those of imperialism" (9).³ G. J. Watson, on his part, claims in *Irish Identity and the*

² Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland* (1996), explains that "an identity was proposed for the natives, which cast them as foils to the occupiers, thereby creating the impression that those who composed it had always been sure of their own national character" (9).

³ Jean-Paul Sartre writes in the introduction to Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* that, in fact, "[c]olonialism creates the patriotism of the colonized" (xxviii).

Literary Revival (1994) that “[t]he great enemy of pluralism has been nationalism” (2).⁴ Joyce himself found the “claims of an Irish cultural nationalism--especially the recovery of the Gaelic language, occultism, and folklore—parochial and backward looking” (Norris 4). The questionable representations of Irish nationalist men in *Ulysses* speak for themselves.

In Episode Ten, we first encounter Bloom trying to find a book for his wife Molly. He browses through some titles—the suggestive *Fair Tyrants* among them—but opts for the erotic *Sweets of Sins* (194). While this is happening, Joyce shares vignettes of some of the other men’s deeds between 3:00 and 4:00 pm--none of them particularly flattering. Readers thus learn that Lenehan, the shameless opportunist of “Two Gallants,” is talking behind Leopold’s back with M’Coy, one of Tom Kernan’s dubious saviors in “Grace” (Joyce, *D* 39, 134). After M’Coy remarks that Bloom is “dead nuts on sales,” Lenehan proceeds to share his “damn good” piece about the annual Glencree Dinner where he took advantage of Molly on their drive back from the party: “[e]very jolt the bloody car gave I had her bumping up against me. Hell’s delights! She has a fine pair, God bless her. [. . .] I was tucking the rug under her and settling her boa all the time. Know what I mean?” (192-3). Having recently heard the results of the horse race, and that “a bloody horse someone gave [Bantam Lyons] hasn’t an earthly,” Lenehan immediately assumes that Leopold misled everyone on purpose (something that actually Lenehan, based on what readers know about his past, would be more inclined to try) (192). In another part of town, walking from “the sundial towards James’s gate,” Tom Kernan, the drunkard, pseudo-convert of “Grace,” laments having missed “His Excellency” and the whole vice regal cavalcade “by a hair” (*U* 196, *D* 128, *U* 198). “Damn it! What a pity!” he grumbles in frustration (198). Nearby, Corny

⁴ Albert Memmi has argued in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965) that the colonized “will be nationalistic, but not, of course, internationalistic. Naturally, by so doing, he runs the risk of falling into exclusionism and chauvinism, of sticking to the most narrow principles, and of setting national solidarity against human solidarity—and even ethnic solidarity against national solidarity” (135).

Kelleher meets with Constable 57 C, who confirms that he has “seen that particular party last evening” –and hence confirms Bloom’s suspicions to the readers that Kelleher acts as an informer for the British (185). At Thornton’s, Blazes Boylan arranges the details of his impending adulterous encounter with Bloom’s wife. While he buys a fruit basket for Molly, nonetheless, he plunges his eyes “into the cut of [the shop assistant’s] blouse” twice, the second time even “with more favour” (187). Not far from there, Father Cowley finds himself “barricaded up, [. . .] with two men prowling around the house trying to effect an entrance” because he owes money to Reuben J. Dodd (200). Luckily for him, his landlord, Reverend Love, has already “distraigned for rent,” so Dodd’s claim “is not worth the paper it’s printed on” (201-2). Based on their behaviors, none of these men should feel entitled to throw the first stone at the “wandering Jew,” and yet they do (179).

Readers also learn that, after Dignam’s funeral, Martin Cunningham is trying to collect funds for the widow and her five young children. Despite what they hear from the pulpits on Sundays, many “true” Irish Catholics conveniently look the other way when it comes to parting with money to help the family in need. But not Bloom:

--Look here, Martin, John Wyse Nolan said, [. . .] I see Bloom put his name down for five shillings.

--Quite right, Martin Cunningham said [. . .]. And put down the five shillings too.

--Without a second word either, Mr Power said.

--Strange but true, Martin Cunningham added.

John Wyse Nolan opened wide eyes.

--I’ll say there is much kindness in the jew, he quoted, elegantly. (202)

That Bloom's generosity looks "strange" to these men suggests, as Žižek would argue, that ideology completely "holds" them, blinding them to the real circumstances of their experience. Not many of these men could have witnessed Bloom's earlier gesture when helping a blind man (present once again in "The Wandering Rocks"), but they now have palpable proof of Bloom's noble intentions in his selfless contribution to the Dignam Fund, which the "real" Irish Jimmy Henry and Fanning, for instance, deftly manage to elude (205, 203). Instead, most of the men Leopold encounters today presume that "the Jew" is keeping a secret about the supposed money he won on the Gold Cup (thus committing the mortal sin of refusing to buy a round of drinks later at Barney Kiernan's pub). In spite of their mistrust, no one confronts Bloom because "[t]he gap which they feel between themselves and the Jewish ad canvasser," Declan Kiberd notices, "prevents a formal complaint" (Introduction, *U* xxxix). Vincent Cheng explains that "[t]he hegemonic power of a dominant ideology is such that it imbues the entire culture with [. . .] an Orientalized discourse of otherness" (175); in this respect, Bloom remains throughout too alien a figure for any of these men to attempt genuine communication--as Kiberd wittily puts it, "[i]t goes without saying that they go without saying what is truly on their minds" (xxxix). Indeed, if not for the workings of ideology, how can one explain such distrust and rejection of the Jewish salesman, when his actions repeatedly prove that he is in fact a good person?

Thus Joyce's looking-glass here unsettles the power discourses that many nationalist characters unquestionably assume as "normal" but that hide behind them an artificially constructed hegemony devised to preserve the imperial status quo. The presence of the royal cavalcade in the streets of Dublin and the constables' surveillance of the citizens, for example,

reveal that Ireland is, of course, a usurped territory (207, 185).⁵ In this respect, Wollaeger observes that the Althusserian idea of “interpellation remains important as a step towards theorizing how ideological messages do or do not become anchored in the individual” (135). While the majority of the men depicted in *Ulysses* blindly subscribe to the hegemonic authority of Nationalism and Empire (either by consent or by rejection), Bloom does not embrace any particular ideology, maintaining an open and often skeptical attitude. He therefore remains a stranger throughout, target of those who, ironically, have responded to the hailing of Irish Nationalism (connected in the novel to the Catholic Church) and consequently have become intolerant of those excluded from their privileged position.

In such context, then, if “Poldy [is] not Irish enough,” is only because performing “true Irishness” in Joyce’s world meant adhering to an ideological discourse the author himself tried to escape (616). Wyndham Lewis “saw in Bloom simply the author disguised as a stage Jew,” but I argue that Joyce has more Stephen than Bloom in him (qtd. in Kenner, *Joyce’s Voices* 23). The Jewish salesman projects instead Joyce’s desire to break away from the ideological nets that “held” the author, as much as they seize Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*. The fact that Joyce kept questioning in his work the religious formation he received in his home country speaks of the degree to which he has evidently absorbed it. Bloom then becomes a liberating channel, a cathartic purging of Joyce’s own ideological demons. In turn, Kiberd explains, Joyce’s novel “proclaimed itself a central text of national liberation. Against either/or antithesis of British imperial psychology, it demonstrated the superior validity of [the] both/and philosophy,” found at the heart of Leopold Bloom (Introduction, *U* lxiv). The Jewish canvasser, unlike many Irish citizens here represented, does not bind himself to any one-sided subject

⁵ Wollaeger observes that “Joyce’s Dublin [. . .] was the most heavily policed city in the United Kingdom, and both the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) and the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), which patrolled the rest of Ireland, were administered from the central site of Dublin Castle” (132).

position and maintains a distance that allows him to escape from the bigotry and narrowness holding his compatriots. Bloom's own ambiguous attitudes towards Irish nationalism and imperialism in effect manifest the complexity of his psyche and, by extension, that of the colonial subject par excellence.⁶ It is therefore difficult to imagine that Bloom would feel exempt from the contradictions inherent in imperialism. After all, he lives in a British colony. Yet what strikes one is Bloom's ability to often remain neutral in an environment ideologically dominated by imperial narratives, as demonstrated by the other male characters in *Ulysses*. Thus through Leopold Bloom, Joyce proves that despite the impossibility of completely uprooting prevailing ideologies, we still have the power to undermine them (130).

⁶ Aime Cesaire analyzes in *Discourse on Colonialism* the psychological damages imperialism generates because the colonized hate and, at the same time, admire the colonizer after being ideologically subjected. Cesaire explains: "I am talking about the millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, to kneel, despair, and behave like flunkies" (22).

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