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'See ourselves as others see us': A study of Gerty MacDowell

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Gerty MacDowell is, as Suzette Henke has described her, the 'second most prominent female in *Ulysses*'.[1] However, hers is the first feminine mind unfolded to us at any length. Her role within *Ulysses*, and within the 'Nausicaa' episode most specifically, thus offers a significant representation of femininity and female sexuality in Joyce's Ireland. Since *Ulysses* is a novel that grants little interiority to women, the fact that the first half of 'Nausicaa' is presented from Gerty's perspective is significant, and indeed its femininity foreshadows Molly Bloom's final monologue in 'Penelope'. However, Jeri Johnson influentially argues that Gerty, as Bloom's fantasy and not the fantasist, can only ever be the object of the discourse; whilst Bloom is granted the first-person subjectivity of internal monologue, Gerty is evinced through third-person free indirect discourse and thus, 'has no voice of her own'.[2] Her 'perspective' emerges through the disorientating haze of Bloom's male point of view; she sees herself as an 'other' sees her. Yet subjectivity can be elicited through a different medium: the gaze. Bloom holds that we know ourselves only when we 'see ourselves as others see us' (358), through the defining look of an 'other'.[3] Kimberly Devlin has alluded to this notion, drawing attention to a concern that 'preoccupied Joyce' throughout his literary career: 'the self-conscious subject, the subject intensely aware of and sensitive to an other's eye'.[4] 'Nausicaa', a chapter of glances and gazes, depicts precisely this phenomenon. This essay aims to expose Gerty's explicit narcissism as a trait that implicitly invites Bloom's voyeuristic gaze: she is not only Bloom's object of desire, but Devlin's 'self-conscious subject', reducing Bloom to the role of spectator in her performance of femininity. Moreover, in a remarkable inversion of the patriarchal paradigm of subjectivity, Gerty takes her own voyeuristic pleasure in Bloom's voyeuristic masturbation, and thus the conventional distinctions between spectator and spectacle, male subject and female object, begin to dissolve.

Gerty is first introduced as 'in very truth as fair a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood as one could wish *to see*' (emphasis mine; 333). She is precisely such a 'specimen', a term that connotes both something selected to examine or look at, as Bloom 'looks at' her, and something typical of its class, as she is typical of femininity. She is at once, 'the girlwoman', 'a womanly woman' and 'his ownest girlie' (342): she is Joyce's everywoman and is thus fittingly identified with popular icons of femininity. That she keeps her 'child of Mary badge' in the same drawer as her 'eyebrowline' (347) identifies her as a votary both of Mariolatry and of the fashions. Gerty, a contemporary Mary, dresses in the Virgin's colour because it is *à la mode*: she wears, 'a neat blouse of electric blue […] (because it was expected in the *Lady's Pictorial* that electric blue would be worn)' (335). Through her costume, then, Gerty

[1] Suzette Henke, 'Gerty MacDowell: Joyce's Sentimental Heroine' in *Women in Joyce* ed. Suzette Henke and Elaine Unkless (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982) p. 132
[2] Jeri Johnson, 'Explanatory Notes' in *Ulysses*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 899
[3] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
[4] Kimberly J. Devlin, ' "See ourselves as others see us": Joyce's Look at the Eye of the Other' (PMLA104.5 (1989): 882–93) p.882

is performing virginity. She is 'a radiant little vision' (344), reflecting the 'pure radiance' of Mary, star of the sea (331). Gerty embodies, superficially at least, the archetypal 'Virgin' in the Virgin-Mothers-Whore sequence ('Nausicaa'-'Oxen'-'Circe') of the Gilbert Schema. The Linati Schema dictates that the episode's Sense is 'The Projected Mirage', and indeed spirituality is ironically 'projected' onto the erotic fantasy: whilst the priests in the church are 'looking up at the Blessed sacrament' (344), Bloom is 'looking up so intently' at Gerty's legs from his vantage point on the shore (342); he is 'literally worshipping at her shrine' (346). The most shocking aspect of this episode is arguably not the act of masturbation *per se* but the blasphemous suggestion of masturbation over the image of the Virgin Mary. On a secondary level, Bloom's first-person consciousness is also 'projected' onto Gerty's third-person narrative; her discourse, emerging as a genuine code of femininity, is perceived through the gaze of the masculine observer. It seems incongruous, for instance, that although she pardons Bloom, 'even though he had erred and sinned and wandered', and although she is 'just like a second mother' in her household (339), she is unable to forgive 'the young heathen', Baby Boardman, or the exasperating 'little brats of twins' (341). Joyce thus satirically highlights the disjunction between Gerty's romantic fantasy of, and Bloom's physical response to, the scene.

A source that has as yet received no critical attention, but that arguably informed Joyce's depiction of Gerty MacDowell comes from an article in *The Evening Telegraph*, in which girls in possession of, 'a bewitching pair of eyes, a fascinating manner, or the mere allurement of deliberate coquetry' are said to entice vulnerable young men.[5] Gerty's 'eyes of witchery' and coquettish ability to render Bloom, 'fascinated by a loveliness that made him gaze' (334, 345) conform to this notion. The amalgamation of spirituality and feminine coyness is significant: she is paradoxically the virginal temptress, differentiated from 'the rest of mortals' (333), and feared as 'devilish' by Bloom for menstruating, a power beyond male control and comprehension (352). Gerty, unlike mortals, thus epitomises traits of the Nymph as identified by David Cotter:

> In the Joycean world, the nymph's power is dependent upon her ability to make herself desirable to males, to become for them an object of desire. The clever nymph realises that her desirability rests, at least in part, upon her ability to convey the message that she is untouchable […] She bestrews herself with fetishes, with signifiers of the feminine, to tease and entice.[6]

Gerty is 'untouchable', physically removed from Bloom; her 'Cupid's bow' of a mouth evokes sexuality and she knows how to manipulate it into a seductive signifier of the feminine: 'the pretty lips pouted' (333, 334). Philip Sicker applies such notions to contemporary Dublin: 'The combination of purity and licentiousness is a potent aphrodisiac in turn-of-the century Dublin, and Gerty knows how to make men see the vixen lurking under the cover of girlish modesty'.[7] Her clothes, another 'signifier of the feminine', paradoxically serve to heighten her sexuality, as strategically positioned slits and openings at once modestly conceal, and sexually reveal, her body to Bloom: her 'neat' blue blouse serves as a tribute to Mariolatry and to *Lady's Pictorial*, yet the 'smart vee opening down to the division' offers a glimpse of cleavage; her skirt is 'threequarter' length, but 'cut to the strideshowed off her slim graceful figure to perfection'; her hat is of Mariolatry 'eggblue' and a token of Catholic modesty, but is 'coquettish' (335). Gerty is aware of this attraction of concealment, her mere

[5] 'When the Children Marry', *The Evening Telegraph*, 16 June 1904 p.2
[6] David Cotter, *James Joyce & the Perverse Ideal* (London: Routledge, 2003) p.80
[7] Philip Sicker, 'Unveiling Desire: Pleasure, Power and Masquerade in Joyce's 'Nausicaa' Episode' (*Joyce Studies Annual*, Vol. 14, 2003) p.104

choice of clothing marking her out as a shrewd temptress: she knows that 'he couldn't resist the sight of the wondrous revealment half offered' (350). She panders to Freud's notion that clothing can express and intensify a woman's sensual appeal by tactically covering the body and thereby exciting curiosity and promoting desire to remove them 'to reach the source of the erotic attraction'.[8] Such calculated costuming, intended to arouse through concealment, may be seen as an active response to patriarchal restriction; she exerts power through her enticing choice of dress, and a subsequent denial of her whole body to the male eye. That Bloom recognises the truism that women are 'dressed up to the nines for somebody. Fashion part of their charm' (352), but still falls victim to Gerty's 'charm' serves merely to heighten this sartorial power that is so exclusively feminine.

Gerty, as a 'specimen' of femininity, is, as Bloom highlights it, 'on show' (351). The narrative parodies Gerty's view of herself by highlighting her acute awareness of how 'on show' she is: everything she does or thinks self-consciously mimics a stereotypical cliché, pose, condition or ideal of femininity: she takes after the 'Giltraps', her mother's side of the family; she takes products aimed at women such as 'iron jelloids' and 'female pills'; her 'Greekly perfect' facial features and 'finely veined alabaster' hands correspond to cultural ideals of beauty derived from the classical world and 'the mythological entity of the perfect body' (333).[9] By cataloguing Gerty in this egotistical manner, the narrative lays bare not only the complex social and cultural constructions of femaleness in the early twentieth century, but also unsympathetically pokes at Gerty's internalisation of them. Indeed 'Nausicaa' insists on the reality of the *imperfect* body; Gerty is lame and prone to blushing, both traits that she is unable to control. By exposing the practices and regimens of constructing and maintaining femininity, the narrative questions the very notion of the 'natural' or authentic woman. Just as Gerty can 'perform' virginity, the kind of 'womanliness' that she stands for is a performable masquerade: it can be 'assumed and worn like a mask' as Joan Riviere has suggested.[10] As Katherine Mullin argues, Gerty is 'in full control of her performance, allowing Bloom to look but not to touch, promoting yet containing desire, keeping him guessing'.[11] Her 'half smiled' performance mirrors her 'half offered' clothing (351, 350); she plays a game of concealment and exposure, offering Bloom a titillating striptease that certainly does 'keep him guessing'. Bloom silently confirms, 'Darling, I saw your. I saw all.' (335) Yet his inability to identify precisely what he 'saw' suggests a simultaneous act of seeing and not seeing. Gerty's performance is calculated: she displays 'just the proper amount and no more' of her legs (335), and lifts her skirt 'a little but just enough' to kick the ball (340). Her 'transparent' stockings and 'nainsook nickers' veil the anatomical evidence of her womanhood (349, 350).

It is Mullin's suggestion that Gerty allows Bloom 'to look but not to touch' that is most pertinent as it underlines a fundamental of Bloom and Gerty's relationship: it is a purely visual, and therefore a *partial*, relationship. As such, it parallels his purely verbal relationship with Martha Clifford and his sexless relationship with Molly. Harry Blamires comments upon Bloom's epistolary relationship with Martha, suggesting that, 'it is safer to love at a distance'.[12] Yet Vladimir Nabokov clinically diagnoses Bloom with something more physiologically damaging in his relationship with Gerty: 'You understand the physiological situation – love at a distance: (*Bloomism*)'[13]. Bloom and Gerty, both suffering from rejection from Molly and Reggy respectively, are pathetically isolated from consummated physical

[8] Ibid., p.107
[9] Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in* Ulysses, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.135
[10] Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade." *Formations of Fantasy*. Ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan. (New York: Metheun, 1986) p. 38
[11] Katherine Mullin, 'Making a spectacle of herself: Gerty MacDowell through the mutoscope' (Katherine Mullin, *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.170
[12] Harry Blamires, *The New Bloomsday Book: A guide through* Ulysses (Oxon: Routledge, 1996) p.32
[13] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980) p.348

love. Indeed it is the very distance that is so intrinsic to Gerty's power over Bloom, as, like her curiously concealing clothes, it invites Bloom's curiosity: 'But who was Gerty?' (333) Although Blamires brings together the names Martha and Mary 'names of our Lord's two admirers', he neglects to equate Gerty with this admiring 'Mary' figure.[14] Bloom's verbal and visual admirers are literally lumped together ('Mary, Martha' (352)) in 'Nausicaa' after a casual reference to clothing pins that both recalls the pin that he receives and symbolically discards in his previous letter from Martha (75), and hints at 'the seven dolours which transpierced [the Virgin Mary's] heart' (342). On the following page, and in fact, in the mirror image position on the page, is Bloom's reference to 'Mrs Marion' (353). Mary, Marion and Martha, Bloom's threefold 'loves at a distance', recall the unholy trinity of femininity: Virgin-Mother-Whore.

Gerty is, undeniably, a narcissist, and therefore her own object of desire. She takes pleasure in her own appearance, 'smiling at the lovely reflection which the mirror gave back to her' (335). She chooses to sit by 'the little pool by the rock' (340), which Bloom later terms a 'dark mirror' (364). Pondering Molly's infidelity that afternoon Bloom is mollified by the thought that a woman's longing is ultimately narcissistic and that she is drawn only to replications of herself mirrored in the eyes of others: 'What do they love? Another themselves?' (362) He considers that women instinctively identify with mass produced images of other women: 'best place for an ad to catch a woman's eye on a mirror' (355); a notion probably elicited from the fusion of vanity and commodity fetishism that he finds in Gerty, who panders to 'Madame Vera Verity' and similar 'leaders of fashion' (334). Gerty watches her own performance in the mirror: 'she knew how to cry nicely before the mirror. You are lovely, Gerty, it said' (336). She is thus both viewer and viewed, her narcissism inextricable from her desirability. Yet Henke offers a sympathetic view of this narcissism: 'What initially appears to be narcissism may also be interpreted as a bold defiance of isolation. Once we learn of Gerty's lameness, we have to admire the bravado of her self-assertion in the competitive sexual market of 1904.'[15] In this way, although her romantic fantasies may seem to be both vain and *in* vain, it seems that she is deliberately trying to like her own projected and fantastical image in order to eschew the reality of her disabled self: 'You are lovely, Gerty', is thus transmuted from an egoistical phrase into an effort to achieve positive self-affirmation in spite of her 'one shortcoming' (348). Gerty's relationship to the mirror thus suggests her self-division, and it remains difficult to separate her 'image' from her 'self', blurred as the division is by Bloom's consciousness.

That Gerty is obsessed with mirrors, and her appearance in mirrors, tells as much about her personality as it does about the way in which she is constructed. Indeed, as some such as Fritz Senn have influentially argued, the whole 'Nausicaa' episode mirrors Stephen's voyeuristic sight of the birdgirl in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.[16] Yet what is more significant is her affiliation to Bloom himself: both have thoughts of menstrual periods, pornographic pictures, the fetishist appeal of lingerie and general feminine apparel and the woman's first kiss, for example. Bloom's internalisation of Gerty's thoughts is a step in the direction of him becoming a womanly man. Reflections perforate Gerty's narrative linguistically: 'Over and over had she told herself that' (338); 'often and often she thought and thought' (343); 'old love was waiting, waiting' (348). Similar repetition is most ostensible, and most concentrated, in the passage leading up to the climactic moment of orgasm: 'they all saw it and shouted to look, look […] up, up […] higher and higher […] more and more […] high, high […] and he kept on looking, looking […] and O! […] O! O!

[14] Blamires, *The New Bloomsday Book*, p.32
[15] Henke, 'Joyce's Sentimental Heroine', p.134
[16] Fritz Senn, 'Nausicaa' (*James Joyce's* Ulysses, ed. Clive Hart and David Hayman, London: University of California Press, 1977) p.285

[…] O so lovely! O so soft' (350). It is significant that this set of verbal replications comes at the apex of Bloom's masturbatory reverie: he is sexually 'high', both phallically and in spirits, from 'looking' at Gerty. Narcissism is central to Gerty's sexualised image, reflected in this linguistic doubling. Indeed it is precisely because Gerty is a narcissist that she treats herself as an object of desire, and thus tacitly offers permission for Bloom's voyeuristic gaze. Gerty 'just took off her hat' to draw attention to her alluring 'head of nutbrown tresses', but almost immediately 'put on her hat' in order to peep at Bloom 'from underneath the brim' (344). She thus wields her hat primarily to lure Bloom's gaze, but also to conceal her own voyeurism. She is watching him watch her, and she enjoys this: 'she let him and she saw that he saw' (350). It is this manipulation that becomes the key to her own salacious enjoyment, as she is aroused by her ability to arouse him. When she reappears in Bloom's consciousness in the 'Circe' episode with a 'bloodied clout', implying loss of virginity, she delights in her erotic victory: 'You did that […] When you saw all the secrets of my bottom drawer […] I love you for doing that to me.' (420) Thus, whilst Bloom is unequivocally the spectator in this visual relationship, Gerty is both controlling spectacle *and* avid spectator. She is fully consolidated as Devlin's aforementioned 'self-conscious subject, the subject intensely aware of and sensitive to an other's eye'.

Gerty, then, is simultaneously a narcissist and an exhibitionist, object of desire both for herself and for Bloom. Such a notion conjures the image of the woman who was without doubt the most famous woman of the twentieth century, and a sex symbol without parallel: Marilyn Monroe. Although Joyce's depiction of Gerty was, of course, by no means informed by Monroe's image, the uncanny similarities between the two women's highly sexualised performances, to an observer as well as to herself, are not to be missed. Commenting on an iconic photograph of Monroe positioned in front of a mirror, Sarah Churchwell highlights, 'she is on display, being watched, being desired – and she likes it that way […] She is not performing sexiness to gratify an audience, but to gratify herself. Narcissism (and exhibitionism) make the performance of sexuality natural – to her.' [17] Similarly, Bloom sees Gerty's titillating performance of sexuality as a 'natural' sexual desire inherent in womankind: 'they want it themselves. Their natural craving' (351). Gerty, like Monroe, is acutely aware that she is 'being watched': 'Gerty could see without looking that he never took his eyes off her' (344). She takes delight in figuring the image of herself, as reflected in Bloom's gaze, as an erotic object: the scopophilic gaze is not necessarily masculine. As Mullin argues, 'there are (at least) two kinds of 'glance' in play, Bloom's open and desirous 'looking' and her own subversive, secretive 'seeing''.[18] Although Gerty is introduced as a passive 'specimen' for Bloom's observation, and although she holds a pose 'lost in thought, gazing far away into the distance' (333), there is a dormant power in her 'gaze': in an inversion of what Mullin terms, 'the gendered role of the passively surveyed female', Gerty not only reciprocates Bloom's voyeurism, watching him watch her, but also reciprocates, his gaze, and thereby questions precisely such 'gendered roles'.[19] Through her returned look (Gerty 'looked at him a moment, meeting his glance' (349)), she tries to usurp the masculine prerogative of viewing the female as intrinsically an object. Indeed there follows an apparent gender role reversal: Bloom 'coloured like a girl' and is 'leaning back' (350), previous trademarks of Gerty's performance of femininity.

However, Gerty's transgressive behaviour must operate within a punishing patriarchal framework. That her perspective operates through a distancing free indirect discourse serves to highlight the mental and physical distance between Gerty and Bloom. The myriad reflections, or double writing, signify a between-ness: Both Bloom and Gerty are caught

[17] Sarah Churchwell, *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* (London: Granta Books, 2004) p.43
[18] Mullin, 'Gerty MacDowell through the mutoscope', p.159
[19] Ibid.

somewhere between reality and fantasy. That the episode is set in twilight is significant, a transitional twin light of the sun and moon, the male and the female: a nebular 'optical illusion. Mirage' (359). Gerty sees herself as she would like to be seen, as a woman from the *Lady's Pictorial*, and is indistinguishable from the forces that determine her: she is the object of the discourse, constructed by it, not vice versa. Gerty is a purely visual phenomenon: 'See her as she is spoil all. Must have the stage setting, the rouge, costume, position, music. The name too.' (353) The stage of 'Nausicaa' *is* set with all these things: the blush, the half-revealing costume and positions, and the music of the Liturgy all contribute to Bloom's misogynistic fantasy. In 'Ithaca', Bloom 'omitted to mention […] the exhibitionism of Gertrude (Gerty), surname unknown.' (687) If Gerty's surname is 'unknown', then we should wonder about the origins of 'MacDowell'; indeed nowhere in *Ulysses* does Bloom actually hear her surname, although it appears in his internal monologue in 'Wandering Rocks' (242). Bloom superimposes his fantasies onto the real 'Gerty', resulting in the imagined persona of '*Gerty MacDowell'*. Joyce claimed 'nothing happened' between Gerty and Bloom: 'It all took place in Bloom's imagination'.[20] Gerty, then, is the ultimate 'Projected Mirage' of the 'Nausicaa' episode; her image is reflected, or 'projected', in the mirror of Bloom's gaze that she returns with surprising acuity. Gerty MacDowell, a mere figment of Bloom's imagination, is at least a potent one.

[20] Power, 32, cited in 'Explanatory Notes', *Ulysses*, p.899

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