



**'You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.'**

**Consider how James Joyce contrives to 'fly by' one or more of these 'nets' in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and/or *Ulysses*.**

**Elliot Murphy**

*Ideas, classifications, political terminologies leave me indifferent; they are things one has passed beyond. Intellectual anarchy, materialism, rationalism — as if they could get a spider out of his web!*

Joyce to Allesandro Francini<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting James Joyce's own linguistic proficiency, the development of Stephen Dedalus from a reverential catholic schoolboy into an autonomous, intensely detached intellectual is mediated through a variety of literary styles. In his childhood Joyce had 'believed in [the world ideas] wholeheartedly', but in maturity 'the minute life of earth claimed him', and he wielded his considerable literary and philosophical knowledge as weapons against the tyranny of 'those big words ... which make us so unhappy' (similar to 'The signs that mock me as I go' in his poem 'Bahnhofstrasse') in defence of the honest lives of working-class Dubliners.<sup>2</sup> Joyce's suspicion of 'big words' appears to reflect his opinion as a student that the term 'poetic justice' is 'unmeaning jargon'.<sup>3</sup> As Fritz Senn understood, instead of blind submission to authority (textual, religious, political), *Ulysses* adopts and teaches a level of scepticism and 'Bloomian reserve' about itself.<sup>4</sup> With a key Joycean technique being the 'fragmentation of word and image' for Derek Attridge, Lenehan's ironic comments in the novel simultaneously raise and dash the reader's expectations: 'Expecting every moment will be his next'; 'And with a great future behind him'.<sup>5</sup> They portentously construct themselves into significance but deliver inconsequentiality. One might even argue with Hugh Kenner that Joyce's core philosophy of language is embodied in this technique of humane 'irony, relentless irony' — hence his self-mocking postscript to Pound in June 1920 that his 'poetical epistle ... should be read in the evening when the lakewater is lapping and very rhythmically'.<sup>6</sup>

The governing argument of this essay will be that by undermining certain 'big words,' Joyce — like Chomsky — correspondingly flies by the ideological nets of church and state:

<sup>1</sup> Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 486

<sup>2</sup> Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), pp. 53-54; James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 31; A. Norman Jeffares and Brendan Kennelly (eds.), *Joycechoyce: The Poems in Verse and Prose of James Joyce* (London: Kyle Cathie Limited, 1992), p. 38

<sup>3</sup> Ellmann, p. 60

<sup>4</sup> Fritz Senn, 'Book of Many Turns,' in Thomas Staley (ed.), *'Ulysses': Fifty Years* (Indiana University Press, 1974), p. 44

<sup>5</sup> Derek Attridge, 'Reading Joyce,' *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce [CCJ]*, ed. Derek Attridge (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 1; Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp. 323, 137

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Kenner, *Ulysses* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 62; Ellmann, p. 493

forces of coercion and domination which Joyce subtly associates with mindless rote learning when Stephen Dedalus is taught about Irish politics, '[lending] an avid ear. Words which he did not understand he said over to himself till he had learned them by heart,' since 'nobody made fun' of 'the great men in the history'.<sup>7</sup> Stephen begins his life gripped by an 'iconic,' referential theory of language, not swayed by metaphor or abstraction ('What's in a name? That is what we ask ourselves in childhood').<sup>8</sup> Protestant children, Dante sagely tells him, ridiculed the '*Tower of Ivory*' and '*House of Gold*'. But 'how could a woman be a tower of ivory or a house of gold?' The imagery of the playground is used as a microcosm for further exploration of penitence and transgression, with Stephen soon realising that love is the only thing worthy of such religious, figurative language. Eileen's forbidden hands are consequently pronounced 'white and thin and cold', the image of 'ivory: a cold white thing. That was the meaning of *Tower of Ivory*'.<sup>9</sup> With similar compassion, his Aunt had earlier warned him that 'eagles will put out his eye' if he is insubordinate, leading him to eventually combat this fierce and authoritarian flight imagery with his own aesthetics-based one, promising as he does to 'fly by' the nets of 'nationality, language, religion' (though he does this through mixing his flight and defence metaphors, perhaps revealing his intellectual growing pains, as Rabaté points out).<sup>10</sup> One might even conclude with Johnson that by limiting itself to its character's conscious thoughts, 'the narrative slyly asserts that what is most "real" is perhaps also most elusive' — and that the high, spiritual diction of Catholicism is not only repressive, but metaphysically absurd.<sup>11</sup> Such academic obfuscations fail to impress Joyce, who has Mulligan parody Nietzsche's idiosyncratic master/slave conceptions to reveal how traditional, Cartesian common sense easily suffices to grasp how class exploitation has been carried out throughout Irish history.<sup>12</sup> Joyce consequently 'put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries busy for centuries arguing over what I meant'.<sup>13</sup> Bloom additionally resents the nationalistic conformism found in the 'royal Dublin fusiliers' ('Half baked they look: hypnotised like. Eyes front'), whose irrational jingoism seems reminiscent of 'the boy's blank face[s]' in Stephen's classroom.<sup>14</sup> Stephen is also conscious in 'Circe' that he is regarded as anti-colonial (a 'Green rag to a bull'), but adopts a similar tactic of epic calm and detachment towards the antagonising soldier, who 'provokes my intelligence'.<sup>15</sup> These episodes intersect through portraying the underdog of Irish intellectual culture as being persistently crushed, like Wilde, by the dominant imperial patriarchy. 'Circe' also 'confounds and confuses cultural and national identities,' as Emer Nolan puts it in a careful and illuminating study: While the citizen denounces imperialism, 'Circe' rejects consumerism (with its confrontational citations of urban Irish culture and popular British songs), which *Ulysses* more generally identifies with Britishness.<sup>16</sup> One of Bloom's transmogrifications in the episode also deplores this state/corporate-dominated conception of nationhood, preferring an anarchist reading:

I stand for the reform of municipal morals ... General amnesty, weekly carnival with masked licence, bonuses for all, esperanto the universal language with universal

<sup>7</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 31; James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man [Portrait]* (London: Granada, 1977), pp. 58, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 201

<sup>9</sup> Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 33

<sup>10</sup> Joyce, *Portrait*, pp. 8, 184; Jean-Michel Rabaté, *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 36

<sup>11</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 769

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Jacques Benoist-Méchin, 1956, cited in Ellmann, p. 535

<sup>14</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp. 70, 24

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 550

<sup>16</sup> Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 134

brotherhood. No more patriotism of barspongers and dropsical imposters. Free money, free love and a free lay church in a free lay state.<sup>17</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that Joyce was happiest most under the lax rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Trieste.<sup>18</sup> As his literary career progressed, art for Joyce gradually became a mode to challenge the authority of ‘my home, my fatherland [and] my church,’ echoing what he wrote in high school: ‘The garb of royalty or of democracy are but a shadow that a “man” leaves behind him’.<sup>19</sup> These conceptual spectres are in *Ulysses* exposed as convenient tools for imperial power. Inspired by his discussions with Weiss and his reading of the anarchist Benjamin Tucker and the philosopher Ernest Renan (for whom ‘Jesus, in some respects, was an anarchist, for he had no idea of civil government. That government seems to him purely and simply an abuse’), Joyce has Bloom discuss the notion of a state, deconstructing the ‘big’ conception of homeland and society into a mere spatial abstraction.<sup>20</sup> His protagonist concludes that ‘A nation is the same people living in the same place’.<sup>21</sup> Joyce’s version of ‘Mr. Dooley’ bears a similar anti-statist theme, while one of his most successful essays concludes that nationality is ‘a useful fiction’ for the powerful.<sup>22</sup>

Such political awareness comes more gradually to the young Stephen, who ‘wanted to cry quietly ... for the words’ of a song his young friend Brigid introduces him to, ‘so beautiful and sad, like music’.<sup>23</sup> To borrow Joyce’s description of James Clarence Mangan, if Stephen is ‘reserved with men, he is shy with women, and he is too self-conscious, too critical, knows too little of the soft parts of conversation, for a gallant’.<sup>24</sup> But this metalinguistic awareness soon evolves into a fear, provoked by Catholic rhetoric, of ‘those big words which make us so unhappy’. He ‘quietly’ confesses to Cranly, for instance, that he ‘fear[s]’ the doctrine of transubstantiation.<sup>25</sup> After Arnall’s sermon on Lucifer’s pride Stephen is offered a chance to ‘join the order’, being informed of the ‘awful power’ he could wield. It is consequently of some significance that ‘a flame began to flutter ... as he heard in this proud address an echo of his own proud musings’.<sup>26</sup> The authority of the church accordingly comes for Joyce from the very ‘sin’ it condemns Lucifer for committing. Stephen would likely sympathise with Wajcman’s view that ‘We are animals sick with language. And how sometimes we long for a cure’, since he believes language to be the origin of human suffering, equating as he does ‘Father, Word and Holy Breath’ not simply with the crucified Christ, but with ‘the Logos who suffers in us at every moment’.<sup>27</sup> His mistrust of the body over the mind leads his thoughts on language to become at times Nietzschean, protecting himself from brute corporeality through, as Johnson puts it, ‘his repeated assertion of the artist’s authority to control the unruly material world through the distancing transformation power of language’.<sup>28</sup> In *Ulysses* the language even reflects the time of day: In the later episodes ‘the English language is as worn-out as the day and can produce only clichés’, helping to illustrate Stephen’s belief that an individual — through ‘silence, exile, and cunning’ — can ultimately control their language, however polluted, and in turn the world it constructs.<sup>29</sup> Joyce consequently believed, as John Gray has also argued, that ‘big words’

<sup>17</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Colum, *Life and the Dream* (New York: Doubleday, 1947), p. 383

<sup>19</sup> Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 222; ‘Trust Not Appearances’, cited in Ellmann, p. 36

<sup>20</sup> Ellmann, pp. 476-77; Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (London: Trübner & Co., 1864), p. 112

<sup>21</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 317

<sup>22</sup> ‘Ireland: Island of Saints and Sinners’, in James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, ed. Kevin Barry (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 118

<sup>23</sup> Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 22

<sup>24</sup> ‘James Clarence Mangan (1902)’, in Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, p. 56

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143

<sup>27</sup> Gérard Wajcman, ‘The Animals that Treat Us Badly,’ *Lacanian Ink*, no. 33: 131; Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 178

<sup>28</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 827

<sup>29</sup> Ellmann, p. 151; Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 222

'You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.'  
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encourage the domination of certain abstractions which destroy humanity's peace with nature by convincing us we do not belong to it.<sup>30</sup>

Joyce explores similar entrenched anxieties to condemn the virtually unshakeable grip of religious rituals on the mind of reverential Dubliners. At Dignam's funeral, Bloom observes how the priest is under the thrall of yet more distancing vagaries. He shakes the 'stick with a knob at the end' over the coffin purely because 'It's all written down: he has to do it'.<sup>31</sup> Like the economist Joseph Stiglitz, Bloom compares religious ritualism with the advertising industry in 'Nausicaa' (imagery which later collaborates with the 'corking fine business proposition' the entrepreneurial "Almighty God" has 'in his backpocket'), while the subversive wit of the famous 'Lazarus ... came fifth' joke serves a congruent purpose of ironic agitation, as do Father Conmee's comic thoughts on Reverend Greene and the parodic musings in 'Oxen of the Sun' over 'transubstantiality *oder* consubstantiality but in no case subsubstantiality' (puns which are nearly as hilarious as McCabe's 'poststructuralist' reading of *Finnegans Wake* from an allegedly Chomskyan perspective).<sup>32</sup> 'Oxen' in particular undermines religious language by situating it within an evolutionary process alongside all over literary forms (with the opening paragraphs representing 'the chaos which precedes creation') stripping it of its otherworldly veneer. 'Nature has other ends than we', after all.<sup>33</sup> The priesthood is later associated with cognitive deformity, with the blind stripling's 'Bloodless pious face like a fellow going to be a priest' having a 'Queer idea of Dublin'.<sup>34</sup> The demeaning nature of religious conceptions of love are also later juxtaposed with the complexities of human intimacy. After an extended debate on the various manifestations of love and hatred throughout history, Bloom thinks meekly: 'this person loves that other person because everybody loves somebody but God loves everybody'.<sup>35</sup> The cautious immaturity of this diction is similar to that found in Joyce's essay 'Subjugation': 'Long ago in Eden responsible Adam had a good time'.<sup>36</sup>

Steeped in the medievalist and Aristotelian philosophy Bloom lacks, Stephen engages in what John Cowper Powys called an 'insanely intense and incorruptible concentration on the mystery of words'.<sup>37</sup> He admires the 'rhythmic rise and fall of words' which allows him to see through the superficial 'reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of language manycoloured' (primarily scriptural abstractions, like 'the Vague Something behind Everything' as Joyce wrote to his brother, or 'the indivisible oneness of the trinity' as Michael Palin put it) to the 'inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose'.<sup>38</sup> This religious and metaphysical terminology is as absurd as the 'silly voices' in the playground of Stephen's school, while his Irish heritage also alienates him from the English language (merely a form of 'acquired speech'), making his mind more sensitive to its Orwellian and imperialistic nuances.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Buck Mulligan, perhaps speaking for the mature Joyce (who regarded his character as Wilde's 'Irish imitator'), tells Haines 'We have grown out of Wilde and paradoxes', with *Ulysses*' instead celebrating the minutiae of colloquial speech.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, it simultaneously cultivates a belief in the

<sup>30</sup> John Gray, *The Silence of Animals* (London: Allen Lane, 2013)

<sup>31</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 100

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, *Freefall: America, Free Markets, and the Sinking of the World Economy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010); Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp. 360, 407, 102, 212, 374; Colin McCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Barnes & Noble, 1979)

<sup>33</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 372

<sup>34</sup> Harry Blamires, *The Bloomsday Book* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 153; Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 173

<sup>35</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 319

<sup>36</sup> 'Subjugation,' in Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, p. 5

<sup>37</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Porius*, eds. Judith Bond and Morine Krisdóttir (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), p. 697

<sup>38</sup> Joyce, *Portrait*, pp. 151-2; Letter of Autumn 1905, Ellmann p. 208; *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, dir. Terry Jones (Universal Pictures, 1983)

<sup>39</sup> Joyce, *Portrait*, pp. 60, 172

<sup>40</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 18

imperial corruption of the Irish language (Greek is also ‘the language of the mind,’ for MacHugh, unlike the grandiose Latin language), a view which influences Joyce’s unaggressive nationalism and Bloom’s opinion that republicanism is ‘the best form of government’, since it privileges ‘the language question’ over ‘the economic question’.<sup>41</sup>

The pastiche of newspaper headlines in ‘Aeolus’ also serves to undermine a separate, though perhaps more pernicious form of rhetoric, what Johnson characterizes as the ‘mechanized material production of words’ (‘Sllt ... Sllt ... Sllt’).<sup>42</sup> The misleading headlines of the episode (inserted by Kenner’s infamous Arranger) reflect in part the deceptive nature of the corporate media’s sensationalism, since ‘It’s the ads and side features sell a weekly not the stale news in the official gazette’.<sup>43</sup> But MacHugh cautions against such melodrama, advising his friends not to be ‘led away by words, by sounds of words’, with the superficial grandiloquence of ‘imperial, imperious, imperative’ being more than a swift departure from their ‘vile’ real-world denotations (indeed, *Ulysses* is hostile to colonialism simply ‘by dint of its realism’ and its vivid portrayal of the grim, debt-driven lives of Dubliners).<sup>44</sup> It is in a similar connection that ‘Sirens’ attempts to unify language with natural sounds (hence the abundance of onomatopoeia), confronting ‘the problem of how words might perform like the tonal sounds of nature’ by transferring the centre of semantic focus from unambiguous denotation to pure phonetic cadence.<sup>45</sup> Mathematics and language are reduced to their phonological features (‘All music when you come to think’), a move which urges the reader to be — like Stephen — suspicious of Platonic talk of ‘ideal forms’ and so forth (‘And you think you’re listening to the etherial’, chides Bloom), reminding us that, as Donald Davidson used to put it, we live in one world at most.<sup>46</sup> Considering how the sound of the sea can be stirred with the aid of a seashell, Bloom reflects on the ultimately individual, mind-internal nature of language (where the sea represents the ‘social’ conception of the ‘English language’ and the seashell the internal grammars and ‘Musomathematics’ of individual minds) though rejects the feelings of isolation this Joycean epiphany could potentially lead to, embracing those thoughts Stephen’s mind turns into philosophical quandaries: ‘Wonderful really. So distinct’ (their thoughts on vision lead to similar comparisons).<sup>47</sup> Unlike Stephen, Bloom appears to embrace music over language, affirming as it does the existence of joy: ‘Mere fact of music shows you are’.<sup>48</sup> He also employs music to parody the ‘big words’ of Miss Douce, rendering her phrase ‘impertinent insolence’ into ‘Imperthnthn thnthnthn’.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, he later blends his flatulence with the rhetoric of Robert Emmett’s last words for more than comic effect (similar motives lie behind his poem ‘Gas from a Burner’).<sup>50</sup> But try as it might to make matter and form indistinguishable — as Pater had hoped — the phonetically elaborate and ultimately meaningful words (‘Words? Music? No: it’s what’s behind’) of the episode fly by the ‘pure, long and throbbing’ Sirens’ song and ‘necessarily refuse the decomposition into pure sound required in music’.<sup>51</sup>

The ‘I’ of the ‘Cyclops’ episode — seamlessly morphing from philosophical to academic to medical diction — adds a related caricature of legal and corporate-speak to subvert the dry and desiccated nature of capitalist social relations (‘the said non-perishable goods shall not be pawned or pledged or sold or otherwise alienated by the said purchaser’,

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128, 156

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 809, 117

<sup>43</sup> Kenner, ch. 7; Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 114

<sup>44</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 126; Nolan, p. 56

<sup>45</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 875

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267; Donald Davidson, ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973-1974): 5-20

<sup>47</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 270

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279; Jeffares and Kennelly, pp. 44-47

<sup>51</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp. 263, 245, 876

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with the 'vendor' disposing of the property 'at his good will and pleasure').<sup>52</sup> This 'I' may lack an individual historical sense, but his multifaceted discourses 'embody Joyce's wicked challenge to the historical imagination of Others,' defying the authority of metanarratives.<sup>53</sup> Joyce's short but pertinent parody of parliamentary 'discussion' also reminds the reader of the thoughtless savagery behind settler colonialism. 'Have similar orders been issued for the slaughter of human animals who dare to play Irish games in the Phoenix park?' asks Mr O'Reilly with a straight face.<sup>54</sup> In the equally parodical 'Oxen,' writes Levine, Joyce is 'playing with writing' in a dizzying, amusing fashion, 'doing and being Shakespeare, Milton, Pepys'.<sup>55</sup> Contrary to Eliot's view that *Ulysses* exposes the 'futility of all English styles', I detect in it the affirmation of the evolving spirit of English literature, not least because 'Fertility for Joyce came in recirculation and recycling, not purifying and sterilizing'.<sup>56</sup> With their piercing wit and striking intelligence, both of Joyce's masterpieces achieve this and much more. Their deeply personal narratives of kinship and revolt go a long way in exposing the ultimately fragile grip illegitimate and corrupting forms of authority have on the human heart.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 281

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Gibson, 'History, All That: Sirens, Cyclops,' *Joyce's Revenge* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 126

<sup>54</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp. 302-303

<sup>55</sup> Jennifer Levine, 'Ulysses,' *CCJ*, p. 149

<sup>56</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 907

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