

An Analysis of Fredric Jameson's Reading of the 'Ithaca' Episode in *Ulysses*

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In this essay I would like to try to analyze Fredric Jameson's reading of *Ulysses* in his essay, "Ulysses' in History" (1982). Jameson called the 'Eumaeus' and 'Ithaca' episodes "the two most boring chapters" of *Ulysses*. He then asked a fundamental question: "why do we need narrative?" Focusing especially on the 'Ithaca' section of the novel, he found what he called of the "materiality" in its textual structure, a kind of "mathematical catechism" which lists "reified" objects, like a catalogue. Such a style breaks the narrative flow of thought. Jameson emphasized that this process of "reification" occurred in the newly developing capitalist society. He analyzed this in his book, *Political Unconscious* (1981). In addition, by seeing these fragmented objects in *Ulysses*, not only as materials, but also as events or people, the reader can experience what Jameson called, a "great movement of dereification." Consequently, it seems that we can discover Jameson's idea about the recognition of history by examining Joyce's unique style, by which he maps Dublin as a peculiarly colonized city in the early twentieth century.

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The critic, Brian Cosgrove states that the "'Ithaca' has been the focus of an increasing critical attention, ... in some cases because it has been taken to be representative of *Ulysses* as a whole" (Cosgrove 147). If the most characteristic and well-known aspect of *Ulysses* is its experimental narration techniques, certainly the style of 'Ithaca' — Joyce's "mathematical catechism!" — could be representative of other episodes in the novel. However, this is not because 'Ithaca' has a unique structure (the 'Aeolus,' 'Sirens,' 'Nausicaa,' and 'Circe' sections also have unique structures), but because this episode located before the 'Penelope' section, the last episode focusing on Molly Bloom, can be regarded as the climax of the relationship between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus. In Walton Litz's opinion, "[Ithaca] provides the capstone to our total experience of *Ulysses*" (Litz 404). At first glance, this capstone may look the same as the

other stones under it. Although it has a unique shape and texture, it does not provide any conclusive enlightenment to our understanding of the novel. Like other critics, Jameson also underscored the importance of this penultimate episode of the novel by focusing on its textual structure. He wrote, “the format — question and answer — is not really, I think, a return to the experimentation — better still, the textualisation — of the earlier chapters.” He explicitly called the ‘Eumaeus’ and ‘Ithaca’ episodes “the two most boring chapters” of *Ulysses*. His word “boring” surprises us because it seems to take a negative view of those episodes, but in fact, his criticism is basically positive. He emphasized the fact that “[w]hat we have been calling boredom is not Joyce’s failure, then, but rather his success” (Jameson 1982: 139). In the beginning of his essay, he used the word ‘boredom’ in two ways. The former is a far less positive use of it. First of all, Jameson criticized the three traditional ways of interpreting as setting “limits” against the elusive proliferation of meaning in these two episodes. The traditional and “boring” interpretations of *Ulysses* are the Odyssey parallel, the father-son relationship (which is not only the psychoanalytic and Oedipal interpretation but also a sub-set of the Odyssey parallel), and a possible happy ending for “Mr Bloom’s position in the home and relationship to his wife.” Actually, to check whether Bloom (symbolically or literally) slaughters the suitors surrounding his wife or not, recuperates a good relationship with Stephen as his son or not, and retrieves a key of his house (of course as a metonymy of his authority) or not can never be interesting. This text never provide us any productive conclusion, but a rather disappointing consequence: after all Stephen departs and Bloom’s daily life seemingly continues. Therefore, Jameson asserted that “the establishment of the parallel is scarcely a matter of interpretation.” Then, what is to be interpreted? According to Jameson, it is the textual structure of ‘Ithaca’ or, to be more exact, “the historical necessity for this very peculiar and complex textual structure” (Jameson 1982: 128).

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In his letter to Claud Sykes who liked ‘Circe’ and ‘Eumaeus’ episodes but struggled with the “acidities” of ‘Ithaca,’ Joyce himself called the style of this episode “a mathematico-astronomico-physico-mechanico-geometrico-chemico sublimation of Bloom and Stephen” (Joyce 1957: 164). This unnecessarily long and explanatory adjective itself seems to demonstrate the style of this episode. For example, when Bloom put a kettle on the range to boil water in the kitchen, the situation is presented like this:

What concomitant phenomenon took place in the vessel of liquid by the agency of fire?

The phenomenon of ebullition. Fanned by a constant updraught of ventilation between the kitchen and the chimneyflue, ignition was communicated from the faggots of precombustible fuel to polyhedral masses of bituminous coal, containing in compressed mineral form the foliated fossilised decidua of primeval forests which had in turn derived their vegetative existence from the sun, primal source of heat (radiant), transmitted through omnipresent luminiferous diathermanous ether. Heat (convected), a mode of motion developed by such combustion, was constantly and increasingly conveyed from the source of calorification to the liquid contained in the vessel, being radiated through the uneven unpolished dark surface of the metal iron, in part reflected, in part absorbed, in part transmitted, gradually raising the temperature of the water from normal to boiling point, a rise in temperature expressible as the result of an expenditure of 72 thermal units needed to raise 1 pound of water from 50° to 212° Fahrenheit. (Joyce 1922: 550)

Despite our previous experience through the experimental transformations of narrative style from 'Sirens' episode (e.g. parody of newspaper, women's fiction and acting script), we cannot help feeling astonished seeing this flow of "pseudo-scientific jargon" (Litz 393). As Litz suggests, "in the contrast between the apparent coldness of the episode's form and its actual human effects, we are confronted with a paradox to be solved." We have to confront the paradox because we feel a huge distance between the style of narrative and its object, what is narrated. It seems paradoxical for the reader that the human events are presented in such a cold form and with a heap of insignificant materials. Cosgrove calls it "a language of mock scientific precision," saying, "the more facts we accumulate, and the more precise and pedantic our language, the less we actually engage with the object of our knowledge *in any intimate or meaningful way*" (Cosgrove 148).

As we saw previously, Joyce called his peculiar form, "a mathematical catechism," where "[a]ll events are resolved into their cosmic, physical, psychical etc. equivalents" (Joyce 1957: 159), Budgen sees this as "the coldest episode in an unemotional book. Everything is conveyed in the same tone and tempo as if of equal importance. It is for the reader to assign the human values" (Budgen 263). There is no hierarchy of significance among the objects presented in the episode. Budgen continues: "[the] toneless, unhuman voice invites us to contemplate tragic and comic happenings and happenings of no importance" (Budgen 264). In other words, what the objects of the episode mean completely depends on the reader, unless there are mythological parallels. At the same time, the coldness of the style and its objectivity always distracts our attention. While we contemplate the meanings of the episode, the style continuously points out the objects' 'meaninglessness.'

Jameson also focused on the form of 'Ithaca,' but he did not intend to take it as a parody of

scientific discourse, but to emphasize its “materiality.” Hugh Kenner expresses the idea that “[t]he last episode through which Bloom moves awake is a huge inventory of inventories” (Kenner 63). For Jameson, *Ulysses* is a book that makes us confront “the emergent foregrounding of the medium in its materiality” (Jameson 1982: 136), and “the book begins to elaborate its own text, under its own momentum, with no further need of characters, point of view, author or perhaps even reader” (Jameson 1982: 138). As a result of this, the book starts making a list of things in the earlier episodes. As we read *Ulysses* like a catalogue of objects, backwards and forwards by turning its pages, ultimately we begin to notice the fact that we are reading a bound set of printed papers with page numbers.

Jameson called the ‘Eumaeus’ episode, “the subjective or point-of-view chapter,” and the ‘Ithaca’ episode, “the objective chapter.” The former has a traditional narrative “point of view” in the style of indirect discourse, narrated by the third person; but the latter is “radically objective”: “the construction of a form of discourse from which the subject — sender or receiver — is radically excluded” (Jameson 1982: 139). He characterized this opposition between the two episodes as a developing process called “reification,” which took place under capitalism. Unlike the centered subject narrating in ‘Eumaeus,’ the “reified” object presented in ‘Ithaca’ through the style of materiality is highly fragmented: “experience, and storytelling, all of which are inexorably atomized and broken down into their most minimal unities.” Jameson explains what he means:

... the fragmentation, finally, of the older hierarchical communities, neighbourhoods, and organic groups themselves, which, with the penetration of the money and market system, are systematically dissolved into relations of equivalent individuals, ‘free but equal’ monads, isolated subjects equally free to sell their labour power ... (Jameson 1982: 130-1)

The equally juxtaposed objects are the smallest components of capitalist society. Like mass-industrialized productions, not only materials but also people and events are minimalized and equally put on show in the market system. In this sense, the subject and its closed ‘point of view’ in ‘Eumaeus’ can be also regarded as one of the monads. As well as this “monadisation” (Jameson 1982: 139) in modern times, Jameson also described the relations of the equivalents as “a dissociation between meaning and existence.” When we choose what we eat, drink, wear, inhabit, etc. we no longer have any reason for justifying our choices. Jameson called such an experience the “contingency” of modern commodity culture (Jameson 1982: 128).

Now we must come back to the problem of the word ‘boring,’ because ‘Ithaca’ “completes an infinite subdivision of the objective contents of narrative, breaking ‘events’ into their smallest material components and asking whether, in that form, they still have any interest whatsoever”

(Jameson 1982: 140). Jameson analyzed one of the most boring components in 'Ithaca' — Bloom's act of boiling water — and gives three reasons for the 'boredom' of the passage:

The elaborate anatomy of the process of boiling water is boring in three senses of the word: (1) it is essentially non-narrative; (2) it is inauthentic, in the sense in which these mass-produced material instruments (unlike Homer's spears and shields) cannot be said to be organic parts of their users' destinies; finally, (3) these objects are contingent and meaningless in their instrumental form, they are recuperable for literature only at the price of being transformed into symbols. (Jameson 1982: 140)

First, the 'non-narrative' aspect of *Ulysses* seems to be agreed by Kenner expressing that the book "has broken with narrative, though it may go through certain forms of storytelling." It no longer has a continuing effect as a 700-page book, but "[i]t is an art that unfolds its effects in time, like music" (Kenner 34). Kenner compared the effect to 'music' or "the spell of a voice." Jameson agrees such a "linguistic" aspect of *Ulysses* in "Modernism and Imperialism" (1988): "Joyce's palpable linguistic games and experiments are rather to be seen as impersonal sentence combinations and variations beyond all point of view" (Jameson 1988: 61-2). Here, for example, are several more sentences from 'Ithaca':

Womb? Weary?

He rests. He has travelled.

With?

Sinbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer and Whinbad the Whaler and Ninbad the Nailer and Finbad the Failer and Binbad the Bailer and Pinbad the Pailer and Minbad the Mailer ... (Joyce 1922: 606-7)

Such English gives the impression that Joyce is playing linguistic games from a transcendental point of view. This attitude seems to be reinforced in the later part of 'Ithaca.'

Secondly, it is quite easy for us to find "inauthentic" components in 'Ithaca.' For example, the kitchen dresser in Bloom's home is filled with "these mass-produced material instruments":

What lay under exposure on the lower, middle and upper shelves of the kitchen dresser, opened by Bloom?

On the lower shelf five vertical breakfast plates, six horizontal breakfast saucers on which

rested inverted breakfast cups, a moustachecup, uninverted, and saucer of Crown Derby, four white goldrimmed eggcups, an open shammy purse displaying coins, mostly copper, and a phial of aromatic (violet) comfits. On the middle shelf a chipped eggcup containing pepper, a drum of table salt, four conglomerated black olives in oleaginous paper, an empty pot of Plumtree's potted meat, an oval wicker basket bedded with fibre and containing one Jersey pear, a halfemptly bottle of William Gilbey and Co's white invalid port, half disrobed of its swathe of coralpink tissue paper, a packet of Epp's soluble cocoa, ... (Joyce 1922: 552)

Because of the numerous anecdotes about these materials in the previous episodes, the reader can be led to the associations with them. For example, 'Plumtree's Potted Meat,' 'the moustache cup of imitation Crown Derby,' and 'Epps's soluble cocoa' are symbols of 'Molly's infidelity,' of 'Bloom's relationship with his daughter,' and of 'the long-awaited moment of conversation between the two heroes.' However, despite their significant roles in the narrative, these mass-produced materials can be easily replaced by other things, simply because there is nothing to justify the choices of these specific items. Fundamentally, as Jameson suggested, they are "contingent and meaningless" without any organic reasons for their existence.

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After his analysis of the word 'boredom,' Jameson asks the following questions at the end of "Ulysses' in History":

- 1 Why do we need narrative anyway? What are stories and what is our existential relation to them? Is a non-narrative relationship to the world and to Being possible?
- 2 What kind of lives are we leading and what kind of world are we living them in, if the objects that surround us are all somehow external, extrinsic, alienated from us? (It is a question about the simulacra of industrial society, essentially a question about the city, but in this form at least as old as the interrogation of the 'wholeness' of Greek culture by German romanticism.)
- 3 ... How can the products of human labour have come to be felt as meaningless or contingent? (Jameson 1982: 140)

Some of these questions seem to be rhetorical. Also, Jameson has already offered some answers to them in his essay. As for the other questions, it seems that the answers may be in other books by him. To the first and the most essential question concerning 'narrative,' it seems that we have

a clue in his book, *The Political Unconscious* (1981), where he refers to the relationship between our recognition of history and narrative. He writes:

... history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but ... is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and ... our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious (Jameson 1981: 20).

For our approach to history (or in Lacanian perspective, to the Real) inevitably passes through its textualization and narrativization, a non-narrative relationship to history is impossible. Derek Attridge, expressing Joyce's texts in his essay, "Joyce, Jameson, and the text of history," (2000) puts it another way:

Joyce's texts ... seem to imply that all versions of history are made in language and are, by virtue of that fact, ideological constructions, weavings and reweavings of old stories, fusions of stock character types, blendings of different national languages, dialects, and registers.

(Attridge 80)

We can experience the situation through the style of 'Ithaca,' "the textualisation" of the earlier episodes (Jameson 1982: 139). Through the objective catalogue given in this episode, we have access to the "old stories" in *Ulysses*. In other words, if the reader makes cross-references to previous episodes, the reified and alienated objects in 'Ithaca' can be located and related in the reader's frame of reference.

The second question relates to our recognition of "space," especially the concept of "city." In "Modernism and Imperialism" (1988) as well as "'Ulysses' in History," Jameson finds parallels in the development of the city with the narrative tradition. A classical city, for example, an ancient Greek city, centered around a nodal point "at which all those pathways and trajectories" met. But a modern and industrial city no longer plays such a role because people can move freely by transportation networks and by private cars. Likewise, the structure of modernist literature shows this situation: "the older traditional narrative unities have disappeared, [and have] been destroyed in the process of universal fragmentation" (Jameson 1982: 131). However, as one of "the classical texts of high modernism or even postmodernism," *Ulysses* does more than just show the reified and alienated objects in capitalist society (Jameson 1982: 126). Jameson analyzed Joyce's representation of the Irish metropolis under imperialism as follows:

Dublin is a classical city in which they are not merely normal but expected. This is to say that a concept of the urban is present in *Ulysses* which contains and motivates those very encounters and intersections crucial to the modern, but lends them a different resonance. But Dublin, as we have said, remains classical because it is also a colonial city: and this “peculiarity” of Joyce’s narrative content now determines a certain number of other formal results. (Jameson 1988: 62)

Because the early twentieth century Dublin is not merely a modern capital with the industrial development imported by its foreign masters, but also a classical city not yet completely yielded, we can find the movement of ‘dereification’ in Joyce’s style. More about the city, in *Postmodernism* (1991) Jameson commented referring to a work by Kevin Lynch:

In a classic work, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch taught us that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves: grids such as those of Jersey City ... are the most obvious examples. Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories. (Jameson 1991: 51)

According to this, on the one hand as an alienated city, the early twentieth century Dublin was a space occupied with extrinsic objects without totality, but as a traditional city, or a “great village” — this is Jameson’s term, it was ‘remapped’ again and again in daily lives of Dubliners (Jameson 1982: 134). In “‘Ulysses’ in History,” Jameson stated that the movement of ‘dereification’ comes with people’s “gossip,” “a kind of speech which is neither uniquely private nor forbiddingly standardised in an impersonal public form” (Jameson 1982: 133). Joyce put a type of discourse called “gossip” over a heap of the objects in the under-developed city. For example, the file of sandwichmen and the viceregal procession in Dublin are referred several times as external and extrinsic objects in Joyce’s Dublin. But as we read *Ulysses* till ‘Ithaca,’ this embodiment of market system and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland are gradually dereified or disalienated by gossips of Dubliners. In the other words, the reified components are brought back into narrative in our minds when they are “equally swept away into a flux of anecdotes” (Jameson 1982: 135). Because “gossip” is privately spoken by the colonized citizens as an oratorical storytelling in public, we may call it a kind of resistance to the imposed culture. Indeed, Jameson regarded “this essential linguisticity of *Ulysses*” as “a result of imperialism, which condemns Ireland to an older rhetorical

past and to the survivals of oratory ... and which freezes Dublin into an underdeveloped village in which gossip and rumor still reign supreme" (Jameson 1988: 63).

By reading Joyce through the eyes of Jameson, we have already an answer to the third question: how can human production (originally created from Nature for genuine purpose or meaning by human labour) be felt as contingent and meaningless? Joyce's style of the 'mathematical catechism' — the mock-scientific, inhuman, and cold form — foregrounds its materiality to show that the process of 'reification' occurred in "the whole dead grid of the object world of greater Dublin" (Jameson 1982: 140). But at the very end of "Ulysses' in History," Jameson pointed a "great movement of dereification" not only in 'gossip,' but also in this part of 'Ithaca':

What did Bloom do at the range?

He removed the saucepan to the left hob, rose and carried the iron kettle to the sink in order to tap the current by turning the faucet to let it flow.

Did it flow?

Yes. From Roundwood reservoir in county Wicklow of a cubic capacity of 2400 million gallons, percolating through a subterranean aqueduct of filter mains of single and double pipeage constructed at an initial plant cost of £ 5 per linear yard ... (Joyce 1922: 548)

Jameson closes his essay with this citation as a movement of 'dereification' in the object world and 'disalienation' "less to its origins in Nature, than to the transformation of Nature by human and collective praxis deconcealed." Although we can hardly find out who traces back these subterranean detours of water and the constructive history of the pipeage, we can certainly feel the contingent act of Bloom dissolved into an alternative map of Dublin. This map spreads underground, hidden from public view, and is never spoken by Dubliners as gossip, but actually it appears in the narration and we can see it. Who narrates it to us? According to Jameson, it is a moment that "commodities are dreaming about themselves through us" (Jameson 1982: 139). Through our reading of the objective catalogue of the materials in 'Ithaca,' the reified objects are 'dereified' in our mind.

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As is well known today, in the prologue of *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson showed us two paths of "the historicizing operation":

... the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things. (Jameson 1983: ix)

Jameson chose to follow the second path in his book, even though he admitted that these two paths “ultimately meet in the same place” (Jameson 1983: ix). Actually, we never approach the former history without interpretations of the latter historicity in our minds, because we cannot access history except through its ‘textualization’ and ‘narrativization.’ But by reading Joyce’s unique combination of the experimental styles of the ‘Eumaeus’ and ‘Ithaca’ episodes of *Ulysses* — ‘the subjective’ and ‘the objective’ episodes — we can virtually experience the two paths.

Note

¹ In his letter to Budgen in February 1921, Joyce wrote, “I am writing *Ithaca* in the form of a mathematical catechism” (Joyce 1957: 159).

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