Ithaca: A Joycean Heat Equation

The mathematical catechism in which "Ithaca" is written could be described in any number of ways: rote, cold, distant. Warm is not one of them. "Ithaca" is exhaustive and exhausting to read, attentive to physical details in painful detail while depriving readers of emotional substance. This is certainly a departure from the murky but emotionally gratifying depths of interiority seen in past episodes. The question is, why has Joyce chosen to write our beloved hero's homecoming in such a way? The patient reader has long awaited Bloom's triumphant return; they have fantasized about, almost heard, those distant trumpets, that orchestral serenade. *"Welcome home."* But there will be no ceremonious welcome. On arrival, the reader is dunked in cold sterility. The reader, along with the bundle of hope they have carried with them all the way to Ithaca, is shoved into an unpleasant colloid of semantically useless scientific jargon. It would be well and fine to accept this subversion of expectation as yet another Joycean prank, but even that is not given to the reader. In fact, upon experiencing "Ithaca" in full, there is, despite the chapter's crude form and style, an irresistible, undeniable warmth. "Ithaca" *does* feel like home, with all the warmth that entails, but the heat has no visible source. It is unnerving, like standing in a lit room unable to find the light source. To borrow from the mathematics Joyce so smugly employs in the chapter, this is Joyce's heat equation. Finding the solution to this equation—that is, identifying how warmth distributes through the home—is an exercise left to the reader. I will argue that this method, leaving work to the reader's poetic imagination, is how sentimental feeling arises in "Ithaca," which would otherwise be devoid of warmth. Joyce describes the house as an object, and the reader draws from imagination to furnish the images with warmth, memory, and ultimately, the "home" element of inhabited space.

Joyce's first task in "Ithaca" is to write the house, which is the body through which heat travels. The house, as Gaston Bachelard writes in *Poetics of Space*, "constitutes a body of images that give mankind proof or illusions of stability" (17). Accordingly, the chapter opens by presenting to the reader a self-described "discrete succession of images" (Joyce 547). As Stephen looks in on Bloom through the window of the house, the catechism prompts: "What discrete succession of images did Stephen meanwhile perceive?" (Joyce 547). The answer: "a man regulating a gasflame of 14 CP, a man lighting a candle of 1 CP, a man removing in turn each of his two boots, a man leaving the kitchen holding a candle" (Joyce 547). The language here is noticeably impersonal; Bloom is identified so distantly that he is hardly identified at all—he is merely a "man." Despite previous chapters' obvious construction of Bloom and Stephen as some paternal-approximate thing, no relationship is implicated here between the observer and the observed. This continues to be the case throughout "Ithaca." Joyce takes care not to insert such abstract concepts as affect or emotion, maintaining steady focus on images of the physical space and its contents. Thus, for the reader of the house, emotional reaction is generated purely in the imagination, not in any element of the text that instructs on how to feel. How, then, should a reader process these sequences when the author gives such scarce emotional guidance?

Bachelard offers a promising theory on the operation of reading a room: "…at the very first word, at the first poetic overture, the reader who is 'reading a room' leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past… The values of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room, he sees his own again" (Bachelard 14). This is to say, the author who writes a room need only provide the cues, and the reader will inevitably reach into their own cloud of imagination to derive those elusive, warmth-giving abstractions upon home. Joyce's work here is proof: the discrete sequence of images very deliberately eschews emotional

content, but summons emotion, nonetheless. In this instance, the emotion is that singularly powerful relief of returning to a space where one belongs. Where but home can a man so automatically light a candle, shed his boots, and feel finally at ease?

This technique of providing only the barest structure to prompt the reader's imagination is limited—after all, this cannot work for *all* settings. Indeed, it is unique to the home. According to Bachelard, "a house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (Bachelard 47). In other words, something about a space is fundamentally different after having been inhabited, such that the space is no longer just architecture. The space, by being lived in, obtains some "concrete essence" of home, which goes beyond easy categories of shelter and familiarity, and rather serves as a "justification of the uncommon value of all our images of protected intimacy" (Bachelard 3). The essence of a home is an important concept to the functioning of "Ithaca"; without this grounding principle, the episode would be just as it appears: detached, disembodied lists.

This concrete essence owes in part to some near-universal features of homes: a front door, for example, or a kitchen. These are two rooms expressed in "Ithaca": as Stephen enters the home, the catechism traces his movements: he follows Bloom's back along the hallway, past a lighted crevice, and down a turning staircase more than five steps into the kitchen of Bloom's house. This tracking requires a mental simulation on the reader's part; though Joyce confers some guidance as far as pointing out a hallway, a staircase, a turn, this is not very descriptive. But the geography of a home is unique—just the hint of a particular space is enough to send a reader backward into some foundational memory. This is easily demonstrated through a small mental exercise. Picture yourself walking from the entrance of your childhood home to the kitchen. What do you see? Those memories, that feeling when you cross the barrier between

inside and outside, how the door might swing shut behind you, or how you might have to pull it shut with one hand, perhaps an air-conditioned chill against a dry outdoor heat—these are irreplaceable memories in the space of one's mind. Most people seldom have occasion to recall these feelings, but when prompted, they are there. This simulation is somewhat like what Joyce has asked the reader to do early in "Ithaca." Many details of what Stephen sees as he follows Bloom deeper into the house are omitted; only broad strokes of the architecture are outlined. But the image is no less rich in the mind's eye—one might picture wood floors, or carpet—and what colors? Olive, yellow, white. Ornate moldings, a French door? More importantly, there is that particular sensation of trailing behind the host in their home, entering a space that belongs to someone, and to where that person belongs. These are feelings that can be summoned by extremely skeletal prompts, and Joyce takes this to extreme, seeming to ask, how little can I give while still eliciting the desired amount of nostalgia?

Bloom's next sequence of motions, lighting the fireplace, is written as follows: He "kindled it at three projecting points of paper with one ignited lucifer match, thereby releasing the potential energy contained in the fuel by allowing its carbon and hydrogen elements to enter into free union with the oxygen of the air" (Joyce 547).

As the section dissolves into jargon, it bears worth remembering that it is not possible to know exactly how to picture atoms of carbon and hydrogen—clearly, what is said cannot be all that is meant. Indeed, Joyce demonstrates via Stephen the process he anticipates that readers will take. Upon watching Bloom light the fire, Stephen is lost in memories. He recalls similar scenes of people lighting fires: Brother Michael at Clongowes, his father Simon in their first home, his godmother, Aunt Sara, his mother, his sister. Stephen is reading the room, just as we are. Presented with a core image, Stephen is transported from this cue to an amalgamation of one

common sentiment stemming from warm hearth. This is an explicit recognition of the absorptive property of intimacy. It may be surprising to see how strongly Stephen reacts, if indeed what he witnesses is just the collision of some atoms, and this surprise is similar to the surprise a reader might feel upon discovering how truly hot the written fire feels when in fact the chemical reaction described on the page does it little justice. Yes, it is surprising to align the imagery that emerges in the mind's eye with the scarcity of actual description. But perhaps this language that makes the chapter seem so cold and stifled is precisely what creates the conditions to draw out feelings of sincere and authentic warmth—by giving nothing in the way of sentiment, a reader will find something to fill in the emotional space. As Bachelard would write it, Joyce "approach[es] the house images with care not to break up the solidarity of memory and imagination," so as to "make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth" (Bachelard 6). The idea of psychological elasticity, here understood as the ability to extend the mind into space, to imagine and fill the space by few cues, is something that Joyce seems to rely on in "Ithaca." By employing the scientific jargon that he does, Joyce puts the text at risk of being cold and un-home-like, but the choice seems to be made with a smirk—there are few moments when it feels like there is actually danger of descending into sterility.

The danger instead exists in the other direction—Joyce does well to avoid being overly sentimental. The setting, Bloom's house, is enough to draw out the desired level of feeling. The previous moments set the scene for the Quaintest of images—two men drinking hot cocoa. But given the precarity of the relationship between Stephen and Bloom, one could imagine that an indelicate handling of this overtly warm scene could be disastrous: to be overly sentimental would only contrive their relationship.

Thus, the sharing of hot cocoa looks something more like this: “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” (Joyce 548). The choice to take his time describing the kettle is deliberate. Joyce does not let his writing get excited about the two men’s impending bonding, which would invade the precarity of the forming relationship between Stephen and Bloom, but describes a kettle, which is an unavoidably domestic object. Few settings outside the home could claim to share such distinctive images and sensations as the filling of a kettle in one’s own kitchen sink. Further, the choice in kettle as the object being described, with its ubiquity in domestic life, allows the scene to remain richly textured as the bare bones are inevitably filled by experiential imagination: the grating of metal on metal as the saucepans slides over, the rush of water from a sink, the dip of the kettle as it fills and becomes heavy. Joyce keeps level voice and pace throughout the hot cocoa scene, plodding along rather mechanically: “He poured into two teacups two level spoonfuls, four in all, of Epps’s soluble cocoa and proceeded according to the directions for use printed on the label…” (Joyce 553). Joyce’s handling of this momentous scene in the novel is, to use his own word, jocoserious, and appropriately so. Assigning too much weight to these pleasantries might render them inauthentic and unfamiliar—after all, the interaction is nothing special; it is not extraordinary to offer a guest cocoa. But the casualness of the ordinary is what makes the scene something quite warm and sentimental. This moment is a significant one: Stephen has been invited inside.

Dispersed within these more obvious images of hospitality are these seemingly endless lists of the contents of Bloom’s dressers, drawers, and cupboards. Why should we care about what Bloom keeps in his drawers? It seems at first that this information is unsolicited and unnecessary, but it is indeed solicited (by the catechism), and, I now argue, exceedingly

necessary. As Bachelard writes, the compartment serves an important function: “Wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life” (Bachelard 78). Indeed, chests and wardrobes are models of intimate space—their opening and closing represent the exposure and obscuring of a secret interior. That interior, the wardrobe’s inner space, is “also intimate space, space that is not open to just anybody” (Bachelard 78).

We see and subsequently experience this intimacy: the catechism prompts, “What lay under exposure on the lower, middle and upper shelves of the kitchen dresser, opened by Bloom?” (Joyce 551). The text makes sure to note that Bloom is the one who opens the drawer. Via the action of opening, Bloom takes the initiative to expose something typically hidden from the outside—it is a tacit invitation further inside his home. The actual contents of the drawer is vast and fascinatingly curated—an assortment containing enumerated dishes (breakfast plates - 5, breakfast saucers - 6, mustachecup - 1), followed by food supplies in various stages of completion: a chipped eggcup of pepper, an empty pot of Plumtree’s potted meat, four “conglomerated black olives in oleaginous paper” (Joyce 551-552). By the mismatch and disarray seen in this drawer—just a singular mustachecup, and not a set? Four conglomerated black olives? —it is obvious that a new level of privacy has been broached. A distant guest is not invited to such intimate places that expose imperfection, incompletion, and something potentially gross. The half-consumed necessities are not often revealed to guests, making them privileged information. Bachelard assigns special significance to these compartments within the home: compartments such as chests, drawers, and wardrobes that can be opened are what a philosopher mathematician would call “the first differential of discovery” (Bachelard 85). (Given that both Joyce and Bachelard have now chosen mathematics to explain the home, the metaphor is worth

unpacking.) Taking the derivative is comparable to the action of opening a chest; just as the derivative reveals something substantial about a mathematical function, so too does opening the chest.

Another drawer is introduced later which contains far more intimately personal documentation. This drawer is clearly more private to Bloom, given the added attention of locked security paid to them. By virtue of distinguishing two compartments from each other, there is established some order in the house—what is placed in *this* drawer that is not in *that* drawer? Bachelard writes of order— "In the wardrobe there exists a center of order that protects the entire house against uncurbed disorder. Here order reigns, or rather, this is the reign of order. Order is not merely geometrical, it can also remember the family history" (Bachelard 79). Extending upon Bachelard's idea, one could consider that the distinctions between drawers and also the placement of items within the drawers provides a history, which, when noticed, gains the reader admission to one layer's deeper intimacy. Given how close past episodes in *Ulysses* have taken us into Bloom's mind, it is tempting to view "Ithaca" as neglecting his interiority. However, "Ithaca" gives us a look at a near proxy to the mind, the home. The unlocking and opening of Bloom's drawers is rather even more intimate-feeling than the opening of his mind. It is less transient than his states of mind, proofed through time, a catalogue of lived experience. As objects collect inside, the drawer represents accumulated moments in which a mind decided a scattered object would be stored and become part of the home. In the case of his locked drawers, the grouping and ordering literally remember the family history—they are family documents. But in the world of Bloom's mind, we should also take note that they are a family of documents, they are categorized via a schema individual to him. And this foray into the mind using objects

of the home as proxy is somehow even more warm and intimate than those harsh immersions in consciousness.

To complete my discussion, I will focus on what it is that so definitively separates the sensation of being inside a home from that of being outside. At a most basic level, walls have a protective function. This leaves two questions: protection from what? Protection for what?

The first question is easier to answer. Throughout the day, Bloom faces numerous hostilities, all of which seem to tell him that he is not at home in Dublin, nor is he allowed to be. Bloom is ethnically disqualified from the political sense of belonging, and beyond that, he is bullied for it. The second question of what the walls protect is more difficult, complicated mainly by Bloom's tense relationship to his wife, Molly. Returning to the start of the episode, recall that Bloom and Stephen have been locked out—when Bloom reaches for a key, access, he finds none. The text takes its time describing the arduous process by which Bloom rolls himself over the gate, essentially breaking into his own house, when his wife is already inside, with all the power in the world to open the door for him. The fact that Bloom is unwilling to confront Molly for a task as simple as opening the front door suggests that Bloom perceives in her some force of hostility, and this hostility is fundamentally different from what he has faced all day—it resides inside the home, the protected space. Why, then, does Bloom's attitude seem to change once he has made it inside the house, and even further, when he enters the bed with Molly? In one of the most memorable moments of the book, Bloom enters the bed and kisses "the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump" (604). The question is unavoidable: what changed between inside and outside the home. The bed?

Bachelard suggests that the answer may in fact be quite simple: in winter, "we feel warm *because* it is cold out of doors" (Bachelard 39). Home in winter (home against outside hostility,

for our purposes), is what Charles Baudelaire has called an “artificial paradise.” Its warmth and comforts are defined in contrast to what is outside its walls, and the colder it is outside, the more intensely warm one feels about the inside. “Does not an attractive home render winter more poetic, and does not winter augment the poetry of the home?” (Baudelaire 113). Furthermore, the fact of being inside has the secondary effect of muting the outside world—"in the outside world, snow covers all tracks, blurs the road, muffles every sound, conceals all colors…. The dreamer of houses knows and senses this, and because of the diminished entity of the outside world, experiences all the qualities of intimacy with increased intensity” (Bachelard 40). “Ithaca” relies on the harsh winter of hostilities accumulated in prior episodes to amplify its own quiet warmth, such that once Bloom finally returns home, this familiar hearth is doubly warm, and looking out from the windows is like an expansive field of snow, where the hostility is rendered blurry, concealed, and distant. When Bloom finally reaches Molly and kisses her rump as Odysseus did the Ithacan dirt on his triumphant return, it is as if she is the heat source whose heat is remembered, felt, amplified only within the home, where the hostile world is blinding, unremarkable white.

For the reader as well, this warmth is well received. The couple’s marital troubles are not solved, certainly, but in a moment as cathartic as this, such that even the metronomic click of catechism has paused to allow the narration to swell over this final kiss, we are blind also to the mean winter. The heat is immediate and hopeful.

In inviting the reader into Bloom’s home, Joyce has brought us in front of the hearth, and gifted the experience of true intimacy, one that not even exposure to Bloom’s stream of consciousness could provide. All that is asked of the reader in return is a suspension of disbelief to allow the catechism to begin its work of drawing on the home that resides within a reader’s

poetic imagination. This is the work that makes *Ulysses* “one of the most humane novels ever written,” as Anthony Burgess deemed it in *Re Joyce* (180). The catechism is machine-like, definitionally inhuman, but its work appeals to that poetic memory that home inevitably pulls out from each and every person.

Works Cited

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