Bloom & Martha: Are You Not Happy in Your Home?

Dear Henry,

I got your last letter to me and thank you very much for it. I am sorry you did not like my last letter. Why did you enclose the stamps? I am awfully angry with you. I do wish I could punish you for that. I called you naughty boy because I do not like that other world. Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word? Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy? I do wish I could do something for you. Please tell me what you think of poor me. I often think of the beautiful name you have. Dear Henry, when will we meet? I think of you so often you have no idea. I have never felt myself so much drawn to a man as you. I feel so bad about. Please write me a long letter and tell me more. Remember if you do not I will punish you. So now you know what I will do to you, you naughty boy, if you do not wrote. O how I long to meet you. Henry dear, do not deny my request before my patience are exhausted. Then I will tell you all. Goodbye now, naughty darling, I have such a bad headache. today. and write by return to your longing

Martha

P.S. Do tell me what kind of perfume does your wife use. I want to know.

xxxx[1]

The reader, after trudging through the strange stream-of-consciousness and reference-heavy prose introducing her to Stephen and Bloom, finally encounters Martha's straightforward letter in "Lotus-Eaters." The letter, at first, comes as a welcome change—as the reader easily digests the simple prose, free of difficult allusion. Martha's letter, still early in the narrative, proves a lotus-like escape for the reader, just as s/he assumes that this affair must provide some kind of escape for Bloom from his faulty marriage to Molly.

Only after reading on in the novel does the reader learn the duplicitous nature of this letter's straightforward prose—that whenever Joyce offers her something easy to digest, it surely can't be so. Just as Father Conmee's simple and repetitive prose betrays

[1] James Joyce. Ulysses. (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 63-64. Hereafter cited in the text.

his self-obsessed and delusional nature and Gerty MacDowell's cliché-ridden section demonstrates the influence and control advertising and popular culture hold over her identity, the reader should not approach Martha's letter as a narcotic escape from the difficulty of the text. Similarly, while Bloom and Martha's epistolary affair might at first seem an exciting escape from his faulty marriage, both Bloom's immediate treatment of the letter and the reoccurrences of Martha's words throughout the text imply that the affair works no better as an escape for Bloom than for the reader—it actually confronts him with his actions in light of the his struggling marriage to Molly.

On first reading, the letter's unadorned prose proves refreshing, but many of Martha's syntactical and grammatical errors betray her awkward bravado. Martha's trip-up, "I do not like that other world," (substituting 'world' for 'word') for example, could, with a Freudian slip, refer to the real world—outside of the couple's fantasy relationship. And even if Martha's slip up holds no significance for her own situation, it certainly holds plenty for Bloom's, whose "other world" crumbles throughout the day. Additionally, the letter seems made up of sentiments alternately sad and longing, and tawdry and flirty—making the flirtation appear difficult and somewhat pitiful. Martha's "are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy?" exhibits this perfectly. The question "are you not happy in your home?" feels poignant and especially pertinent for the day, but Martha's calling Bloom a "poor little naughty boy" reminds the reader how much this letter operates as a performance. Thus, the flirtation complicates the question—seemingly asking, "is that why we're doing this? Because you aren't happy in your home?" Additionally, several of Martha's truncated sentences seem to omit words that might truthfully speak to how difficult her situation, and Bloom's marital situation

have actually become. When she writes, "I feel so bad about," she could potentially refer to her relationship with Bloom, or perhaps, how this affair reminds the two of them of "that other world," and how their lives have pushed them into an affair with no substance beyond little black marks on paper. And later, when Martha tells that "I have such a bad headache. today," the setting aside of today, if not speaking to Martha's struggle with grammar or her *own* day, reminds the reader how much more poorly June 16th is going for Bloom than just a simple migraine could indicate. Though the simple prose of the letter proves refreshing, many of Martha's words and errors still complicate it for the reader—within the context of Bloom and Martha's relationship—when s/he takes a closer look.

Though Bloom's covertness in picking up and disposing of Martha's letter suggests its importance—he feels the letter far too steamy and private to risk any discovery—his emotional reaction to the letter renders the affair more inert and benign. The supposed affair only takes place on paper—and that likely will never change. Bloom seems somewhat happy with the message, but only "*weak* joy opened his lips," not a more pressing or intense emotion (emphasis added). And just following, Bloom pokes fun at Martha's poor grammar, as he "wonder[s] did she wrote it herself" (64). He obviously thinks of himself as intellectually superior to his correspondent, thus assuaging any of the reader's suspicion that he and Martha share a deep cerebral bond. On that account, it appears as though Bloom intends to keep the affair innocuous; as he remembers Martha's offer to "meet one Sunday after the rosary," he thinks, "thank you: not having any. Usual love scrimmage" (64). He would rather keep the relationship in the realm of the imagined. Bloom treats the letter with "weak joy," gentle mockery, and

vague disinterest upon first reading it, indicating the innocuous nature of his affair. At this point in the narrative Bloom's still might view the affair as, like a good cigar, "narcotic. Go further next time…try it anyhow" (64). However, as Martha's words resurface again and again, the reader sees how many more complicated ways they can work in, and also how Bloom's affair with Martha keeps him from escaping thoughts of his marriage, but rather encourages his return to them—just as he will eventually return home.

In Lestrygonians, the language from Martha's letter resurfaces in Bloom's thoughts, further complicating the content of her letter for the reader and demonstrating how for Bloom, the affair works terribly as an escape. When Bloom remembers his younger love with Molly in "Lestrygonians," and how "when we left Lombard street west something changed. Could never like it again after Rudy," he wonders, "would you go back to then? Just beginning then. Would you? Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy?" (137). The resurfacing of his letter from Martha jars the reader. It reminds her that Bloom, while pining for his past with the cuckolding Molly, has explored—to a far lesser extent—a certain degree of infidelity himself. At the same time, though, the language helps Bloom to ask this question of himself, and even in its asking, answers itself: *of course not*. This reminder of the tawdriness of Bloom's affair seems to clarify for the reader Bloom's longing for a real relationship and connection with Molly, his wife.

Bloom comes back to the letter more frequently in "Sirens," and understandably so; the clock moves closer to four, Boylan comes into the bar, and Bloom's thoughts circle around infidelity as he decides to write Martha back. As Boylan walks into the bar,

and Bloom mentally tries to put the man down, thinking "he can't sing for tall hats," and imagines Molly being "perfumed for him," again Martha's words come back to him: "what perfume does your wife? I want to know" (225). If Bloom thinks about Martha's letter in an effort to distract himself from thinking about Boylan and Molly, the effort fails. His thoughts return to his wife's affair: "Jing. Stop. Knock. Last look at mirror always before she answers the door" (225).

Later on in "Sirens," when Lionel sings *Martha*, Bloom recalls his own Martha's words again: "can't write. Accept my little pres. Play on her heartstrings pursestrings too. She's a. I called you a naughty boy" (226). Here the prose moves in a truncated fashion, and Martha's words form the only full sentence in the paragraph, excluding Bloom's "*Martha* it is," and his exclamation at the end, "how strange!" Again, the closer and closer it gets to four, the more Bloom can't concentrate on anything but his wife's pending affair with Boylan, to the extent that he "can't write" (226). Additionally, though, the truncated style of prose reminds the reader how *Ulysses* constantly complicates, churns around, and repeats its own material. Martha's originally simple letter now finds itself wrapped up into the percussive prose of "Sirens"—refusing a simpler first reading. The sentences shortness might also come because as Bloom tries to write Martha back, he obviously struggles with the act—and with trying to mouth one thing and write another. Just as the affair proves no escape for Bloom, Bloom's thoughts and the complex and shifting prose of *Ulysses* complicates the reader's encounter with the affair as well. In articulating this struggle, the book won't release full sentences or words: "my patience are exhaust. To keep it up. You must believe" (230).

However, Bloom's admitting to his struggle to write Martha back—if even in this thoughts—seems to display how his epistolary relationship with Martha has the ability to extract some truthfulness from him. At the end of the letter, he even manages to write, "I feel so sad today" (230). Though he obviously still performs this sentiment, and second-guesses himself moments later, Bloom's admission to Martha serves as one of the most honest communications Bloom has all morning. The relationship, a failed escape, brings Bloom face to face with the true difficulty of his situation and his day.

If the reader sympathizes significantly with Bloom in "Sirens," s/he likely does less so in "Nausicaa," when Bloom's infidelity becomes more active and tangible as he masturbates to Gerty MacDowell. Bloom again recalls Martha's words, as he writes a message in the sand: "I," he writes, then thinks "what is the meaning of that other world. I called you a naughty boy because I do not like. AM. A" (312). Bloom, of course, never finishes his sentence. Just as he almost defines himself by scrawling a declaration in the sand, his thoughts again trace back to Martha's letter. This time, though, his recent encounter with Gerty complicates the memory. Now he truly *has* done something "naughty," which likely contributes to his struggle to define himself. Bloom drops his writing tool in the sand, "no room. Let it go" and the narrative winds on. Again, the complicated nature of *Ulysses*—which could never release in direct, simple language *what* Bloom actually is—regurgitates Martha's words, using this piece of her letter to remind the reader how far the text can travel.

Bloom, more directly associates his encounters with Gerty, Martha, and his wife when, after Gerty has "drained all the manhood out of [him]," he remembers writing Martha "care of P.O. Dolphin's Barn. Are you not happy in your? Naughty darling"

(308-309). Coming immediately after this recollection, Bloom's thoughts again turn to his wife. He thinks of: "Dolphin's barn charades in Luke Doyle's house," the occasion when, as the reader learns from Molly in "Penelope," "he kissed my heart at Dolphins barn I couldnt describe it simply it makes you feel like nothing on earth" (615). In this passage the reader encounters the complicated ways that Martha's letter resurfaces, as s/he cannot actually understand the full significance of Bloom's Dolphin's Barn ponderings until the final chapter in the book. Though Bloom's thoughts hint towards the Dolphin's Barn encounter earlier on in the text in "Calypso" (52) and "Lestrygonians" (130), the reader never fully comprehends the encounter, if they even ever make the connection, until Molly describes it in "Penelope." Thus Molly's assertion regarding her kiss with Bloom, "I couldnt describe it simply," could work as a synecdoche both for how Martha's letter—and the book as well—work: Joyce lets nothing, not Martha's letter, not Bloom and Molly's relationship, stay simple, or stagnant throughout the text. Martha's letter resurfaces in complex and unpredictable ways. Here, it challenges the reader to bring together two seemingly inconsequential details; Bloom's relationship with the two women hinges on this Dolphin's Barn Lane location.

Every time Bloom writes to Martha, or receives a letter from her care of the Dolphin's Barn Lane post office, he likely remembers this heart-kiss with his wife. Just as masturbating to Gerty MacDowell fails to provide an escape for Bloom, each letter to Martha care of Dolphin's Barn Lane must necessarily remind him that his relationship with Molly no longer makes him, or her, feel like "nothing on earth." And Bloom seems to realize this a few moments after he remembers that night of charades in "Nausicaa," when he ponders how "[you] think you're escaping and run into yourself" (309). Both

his epistolary affair with Martha and his masturbation to Gerty remind him of the complicated and imperfect state of his marriage. And this line could just as well apply to the reader—who first encounters Martha's letter with relief, feeling it an escape—but later reads the resurfacing of the words with more confusion and difficulty, running into herself, as s/he learns that nothing in *Ulysses* stays as simple as it first seems.

In parallel to the way Bloom wanders Dublin, at first avoiding and then returning to his home, Martha's letter at first seems to provide escape, but eventually returns him to thoughts of his marriage. The reader of *Ulysses,* too, must constantly establish and reestablish a 'home,' or place of comfort within the text. Driven away from the kind of reading s/he is accustomed to, the reader must find new ways of approaching the repetition, truncated prose, and references that demand ongoing reinterpretation of Martha's letter's place in the text—among other thoughts and events. Failing to explore many of *Ulysses'* complexities might leave the reader feeling like a tourist—seeing the sights but never fully understanding them. But to encounter the book as an object both shifting and static, and to explore the narrative both as familiar—with a plot line, characters, and a setting—and foreign—in which the relationship of the reader to the text constantly cycles and shifts—creates a home like Bloom's: a challenge to get to, but rewarding upon arrival.