Bloom the Critic

When Odysseus finally reaches Ithaca at the end of *The Odyssey*, he reclaims his home from the usurping suitors by deceiving them, massacring them, and slaughtering any servant who has served them. When Leopold Bloom finally returns home in "Ithaca," he crawls into bed, kisses his unfaithful wife's bottom, and falls asleep.

Allowing Bloom's journey to end with such a thud, Joyce relies on the reader's horror towards the violence and ruthlessness that cap *The Odyssey* to make Bloom's reconciliatory conclusion seem preferable, if comparatively uneventful. The carnage of Odysseus' return provokes an excitement and disgust of a far more climactic nature than the sentimental satisfaction of Bloom's commitment to Molly and dedication to the damaged marriage, but at least Bloom creates no corpses. Though the conclusion of *Ulysses* generally affirms Bloom, Molly, and their marriage, one of the sacrifices that this affirmation entails is that the reader must also embrace routine and dullness. Bloom serves not as epic strategist, but rather as epic critic: his strength lies not in his ability to defeat his enemies with cunning and deceit, but to interpret and reinterpret his situation in order to come to terms with it. As a result, he acts with equanimity rather than wrath; with generosity rather than hatred—and while the book positions us to celebrate Bloom for these traits, it also forces us to confront the humdrum status quo that these traits buttress and encourage.

As both the day and *Ulysses* slouch towards completion in the last few pages of "Ithaca," Bloom proceeds through four "antagonistic sentiments"—envy, jealousy, abnegation, and equanimity—before he can climb into bed next to Molly and fall asleep

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(602). He endures this task at least in part because of his ability to see Molly's adultery in the broader framework of more serious crimes:

> As less reprehensible than theft, highway robbery, cruelty to children and animals, obtaining money under false pretences, forgery, embezzlement, misappropriation of public money, betrayal of public trust, malingering, mayhem, corruption of minors, criminal libel, blackmail, contempt of court, arson, treason, felony, mutiny on the high seas, trespass, burglary, jailbreaking, practice of unnatural vice, desertion from armed forces in the field, perjury, poaching, usury, intelligence with the king's enemies, impersonation, criminal assault, manslaughter, wilful and premeditated murder (603).

In the most immediate sense, this list of crimes is the site where Bloom begins to enable himself to stay with Molly, and it therefore prepares him for the reconciliation that serves as the climax of the novel. After spending the day wandering the streets to avoid having to confront the pain of his wife's infidelity, Bloom makes considerable progress here by coming to terms with the state of his marriage and realizing that Molly's act is not so heinous.

But while the list functions at one level simply to contextualize Molly's deed, it also perpetuates itself for nine lines of text such that, in all of its excess, it mocks contextualization by illustrating the tedium of the process. Bloom has no need to actually compare adultery to every crime from poaching to mutiny on the high seas—the idea that Molly sleeping with Boylan is not so bad becomes evident after only a few examples. But by iterating the list in all its flabbiness, the book demonstrates both the potential dullness of considering alternatives and also the manner in which Bloom's contextualization stymies action. Simply due to its volume, the list serves in part as a grand punctuation mark: it prevents the narrative from progressing as it requires the reader to take note of crime after crime after crime. So while the list is necessary to the

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narrative in terms of its role in allowing Bloom to return to bed, it also contributes to the depiction of Bloom's requisite dullness through both its redundancy and its length.

The list of crimes and the sections that proceed from it also provide an opportunity to investigate Bloom's role as critic: for Bloom does not react to Molly's adultery so much as he reinterprets it. In order to reach a state of equanimity, Bloom must come to the realization that the deed is "As more than inevitable, irreparable" (603); whether he murder Boylan, divorce Molly, or simply leave in the middle of the night, Molly's adultery is already in the past. The act itself is now inalterable, which is a fact that presides over Bloom's consideration of retribution: "Assassination, never, as two wrongs did not make one right. Duel by combat, no. Divorce, not now. Exposure by mechanical artifice (automatic be) or individual testimony (concealed ocular witnesses), not yet" (603). As Bloom considers his options for vengeance, his first deterrent is the futility of violence; "two wrongs did not make one right" not only expresses Bloom's moral convictions but also evinces his forward-looking mentality. Whereas Odysseus enacts his vengeance upon the suitors for usurping his house in his absence and finds himself with a mound of corpses, Bloom dismisses such an opportunity after a momentary reflection on its immorality and uselessness.

As Bloom's mind proceeds through possible reactions to Molly's infidelity, he begins to found his justifications for inaction less upon ethics than upon laziness. By the time he considers "duel by combat," he does not even offer the type of simplistic moral cliche that he uses to reject assassination; he responds only with a swift no. Bloom's answers to possible forms of retribution continue in like form and start to suggest a blunt unwillingness to act at the moment as he says, "not now" and "not yet." Once again,

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Bloom does not live up to his exciting predecessor Odysseus as he languorously chooses to delay his reaction. The reader sympathizes with Bloom for being listless after spending the day walking all over Dublin, but at a certain point, Bloom seems willing to climb into bed with Molly simply because he is tired and wants to go to sleep. Although succumbing to sleepiness humanizes Bloom, it also serves as a relatively unremarkable climax for Joyce's modern epic. Joyce provides significant reasons for Bloom to get into bed with Molly, but he forces us to acknowledge some unsatisfying ones as well. The end of the novel does not see the marriage completely fixed, and though we are glad that the marriage begins to look hopeful, we have to temper those hopes with the knowledge that the book only lasts one day and that Bloom and Molly have work left to do.

Bloom accepts that he cannot prevent or avoid Molly's adultery, but he also understands that he can change the way that he perceives her infidelity with his knack for interpretation. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein provides a model that helps conceptualize Bloom's ability to transform his relationship to Molly. As he explores the relationship between interpretation and perception, Wittgenstein writes:

This triangle

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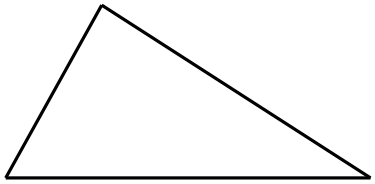

> can be seen as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing; as standing on its base, as hanging from its apex; as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object which is meant to stand on the shorter side of the right angle, as a half parallelogram, and as various other things (200).

By adding so many examples where one or two would suffice, Wittgenstein demonstrates the illimitable potential of interpretation to alter not the triangle itself but what the triangle 'can be seen as.' The same basic tenets hold true for Bloom: though he cannot prevent Molly from sleeping with Boylan, he can mentally transform the event by surrounding it with different narratives and explanations.

Bloom displays his ability to enact such transformations as he "justifies to himself his sentiments" (Joyce 604). Early in this justification, Bloom reflects upon "the incongruity and disproportion between the selfprolonging tension of the thing proposed to be done and the selfabbreviating relaxation of the thing done" (604). Beyond reluctantly accepting that Molly's adultery is 'irreparable,' Bloom recognizes that he actually benefits from this fact because he no longer has to bear the tense anticipation of four o'clock. The type of reversal that Bloom achieves here—that he ought to appreciate that Molly has slept with Boylan—demonstrates the extent of his power to reshape his perception of the original occurrence. Though he remains helpless to change what happened, the significance of that helplessness diminishes as Bloom proves himself capable of the more important task of altering the future by reinterpreting the past.

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As the justification continues, Bloom actively takes his efforts to a linguistic level such that Wittgenstein's comments—originating upon a discussion of language—become increasingly pertinent:

> the natural grammatical transition by inversion involving no alteration of sense of an aorist preterite proposition (parsed as masculine subject, monosyllabic onomatopoeic transitive verb with direct feminine object) from the active voice into its correlative aorist preterite proposition (parsed as feminine subject, auxiliary verb and quasimonosyllabic onomatopoeic past participle with complementary masculine agent) in the passive voice (604).

Hidden beneath the jargon suited to the faux scientific voice of the chapter lies a language game in which Bloom toys with grammar to better cope with the idea of Boylan and Molly having sex. At stake in Bloom's meddling is his perception of Molly's agency in the act of adultery: switching Molly's grammatical position in the bedroom into the passive voice allows Bloom to entertain the idea that she may have been compliant rather than active. She may even be a victim.

But though the substance of Bloom's reflection may have little or nothing to do with onomatopoeia or aorist preterite situations, the book brings issues of language to the forefront with its technical diction. In one sense, Bloom literally surrounds Molly's adultery with two explanations just like those that Wittgenstein surrounds his triangle with: presumably, "he f*cked her" and "she was f*cked by him." By generating these explications, Bloom enables himself to temper his insecurities about the extent of Molly's faithlessness. To use the language of Wittgenstein, we might say that Bloom can see the infidelity as both an active and a passive act just as we could see the triangle as both a mountain and a wedge. And while the literal reinterpretation of Molly as passive agent in the affair directly helps Bloom, the freedom that these mental movements allow help him

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indirectly. For while Odysseus utilizes the type of linear thinking of honor and possession that leads to revenge and massacre, Bloom saves himself from such restrictive perspectives and violent actions by finding multiple ways to interpret Molly's sexual encounter with Boylan.

Bloom's final few reflections further clarify his rejection of the Odysseus response: "the futility of triumph or protest or vindication: the inanity of extolled virtue: the lethargy of nescient matter: the apathy of the stars" (604). In the first two reflections, Bloom openly recognizes the uselessness of the 'triumph' and 'virtue' that justify Odysseus' violence at the conclusion of Homer's epic. These notions are too simple for Bloom, who dismisses them to think instead about Molly's infidelity at a theoretical, scientific level. In a show of interpretive creativity beyond the scope of Odysseus, Bloom thinks about how the "nescient matter" of which Molly and Boylan's bodies are composed does not care what happened between them. Finally, Bloom concludes by expanding the sphere of his consideration from the body of his wife to "the apathy of the stars." The realization that at a grand, cosmic level his wife's infidelity does not signify anything helps Bloom come to terms with the act, but even Bloom's willingness to think on such a broad scale proves that his mind does not imprison itself within the trauma it confronts.

So while the corpses of slaughtered suitors and unfaithful attendants mark the conclusion of Odysseus' journey to reclaim his home, Bloom completes his epic journey through Dublin by kissing his unfaithful wife on the behind and falling asleep. This relatively unremarkable ending results in part from the different roles that the characters play throughout their respective epics: Odysseus the epic strategist and Bloom the epic

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critic. But even though the prospect of admiring Bloom's effort to reconcile with Molly necessitates a certain willingness to tolerate and even embrace dullness, dullness is much to be preferred to slaughter. The ability to interpret functions in the late scenes of "Ithaca" as a potentially unifying force—a force that prevents the violence of *The Odyssey*. And in the years between 1914 and 1921 when Joyce writes *Ulysses* and Europe simultaneously tears itself apart in the gruesome First World War, Bloom's equanimity provides a new and appreciable trait for the modern hero.

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