

Reinventing Femininity in the Modernist Novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce

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How far has the femininity of Molly Bloom become 'freer' and dialogized from the masculinity of the author?

My idea is that every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force ... to thrust back all that resists its extension. - Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 1968:p. 340

This paper reassesses Molly's thought patterns which resist the traditional norms of society. Throughout Molly's language, I will explore how the masculine James Joyce 'offers an alternative vision of subjectivity' (O'Brien, 2000: 8), to navigate 'the polarities between feminists and conservatives' (ibid.), how her female free mental energy is reflected in her monologue, creating a kind of internal dialogue with herself. Attridge (1989) referred to it as to 'imply an extension of the sentence beyond its normal limits' (p. 546). In this paper, therefore, aspects of transcending the normal limits of one day: 16th June 1904, will be discussed in Molly's interior monologue, discovering the relationship with the grace and the harmony of *Ulysses* as a whole. Through the lenses of Julia Kristeva's theory of semiotics, I will trace the correlation between the signification of Molly's language and the

materiality of the feminine body, exploring the nature of such an association in relation to the author's voice: how far has the femininity of Molly Bloom become 'freer' from the masculinity of the author?

Keywords: traditional norms, Femininity, harmony, Reinventing, conservatives.

A brief representation of the nature of women's paralysed situation in Ireland under the Catholic rule will be provided. I will not go into further detail of this aspect as this will appear a more historical analysis of women's history. Instead, I will provide the reader with an appropriate historical background to absorb the roots of Molly's sexual and social extremist opinions. Drawing on Butler's suggestion that the performative acts are considered as the focal point in which 'gender is in no way a stable identity' (Butler 1988, 519), I will examine how Molly presents a new understanding of the feminine psyche through subverting the passive figure of the female. In order to sound this analysis from a theoretical narratology perspective, it seems useful to employ the functions of Julia Kristeva's semiotics which state a relation between Joyce's uses of signs in

Molly's narrative and his thematic purposes.

My discussion will then argue the significant moments in Molly's monologue which illuminate my concern. That is, to read 'Penelope' as questioning the female writing does not mean only transcending the patriarchal structures of the dominant Western culture in the nineteenth century. Instead, I would argue that the matter is the rigid boundaries between the two sexes as 'fixed' genders which eventually lead to the urgency of overflowing such 'unproductive' boundaries. Thereby, I will analyse how Joyce transfers the reader, through the process of signifiers and signified, into the materiality of Molly's world with all its particular ideological references.

An Overview of Women's Paralysis in Ireland

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Ireland was subjected to the rule of two forces: the Roman Catholic Church and England. The declaration of equality had been misconstrued by conventional Catholicism by the distinction that God purposely made two sexes, male and female. In effect, an entrenched misogyny had been developed by the Church. They believed that women were not to be 'priests'. This perspective had ascended from dogmatic support within the Bible and knowledge from Jesus, God, St. Paul, and the tradition of the Church. An example of such a verse from the Bible highlights this argument:

'Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted to them to speak: but they are

commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. 35 And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church' (Corinthians, 34-35).

In one of his letters to a publisher, Joyce confessed that Dublin, the capital city of Ireland, 'seemed [to him] the centre of paralysis' (Joyce in Friedrich, 1965:421). Paradoxically, Jacqueline de Vries in her article 'More Than Paradoxes to Offer: Feminism, History, and Religious Cultures' explores the spiritual influence of Christianity as 'a starting point for feminist activism' (2010, 188). Hence, a glimpse of reformation began to shine with the appearance of the feminist movement. In his introduction of the third edition of his book, *The Body and Society* (2008), Bryan Turner insisted on an important point in understanding the feminine body, which I believe illuminates the core of my argument. That is, the body is a 'constitutive of our being-in-the-world' and not only a 'rich source of metaphor' (p.16). Judith Butler (1988) argues that the radical use of such 'constitutive acts' (p. 519) results in taking the individual in a society as an 'object rather than the subject' (ibid.). In Butler's term, these 'constitutive acts', including all the facets of the social reality- language, bodily gestures, movements and enactments- refer to the 'performative acts' which in turn dominate the 'illusion of an abiding gendered self' (ibid.). Hence, if gender is understood as 'instituted through acts', then it will be

accepted as a 'constructed identity' (p. 520). In this sense, I would suppose that the final chapter in *Ulysses* provides an example of such a meaning, specifically the female identity. That is, in response to the assumption of naturalising women's social existence and sexuality, Butler identifies that the body 'is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality', but rather it is a 'materiality that bears meaning' (p. 521). Thus, Molly's monologue, in contrast to the previous chapters, illuminates an aspect of her paralysis. As I have been arguing, this feminine voice could be explained as a reimbursement of the productive male actions before, as well as a hint, though indirectly, of her inability to speak aloud. James Joyce unquestionably intensifies the complications of the "modern" female trapped in a patriarchal masculine class system. For instance, we are not surprised at such a paralysed situation as Joyce deliberately mentioned that earlier in 'The Wondering Rocks' episode, making Father Conmee, who is the representative of the British Empire, emphasised 'how Ireland is caught in the frame or vice of its two masters [England and the Catholic Church]' (Schwartz, 1987: p.155). As a part of Joyce's metaphor city which will be discussed later in this essay, Molly is regarded as a 'hope for Ireland' (p. 263), who 'completes for the reader the epic for the body' (ibid.). She embodies the feminine desire of purchasing the authority of subjectivity through representing both her internal voice and her body. Furthermore, I would suggest that Molly signifies the spiritual soul, energised by her unlimited imagination that 'surpasses and

transcends and informs changing things like blood and the human word' (Joyce, 1907: NP). As Marilyn French suggested, Molly 'disregards the built world where contradictions are rooted' (1982, p. 244). Building on that knowledge, a clear understanding of how these notions have been rendered through their semiotics within the novel's context must be developed.

Kristeva's Semiotic Theory

In order to support my argument from a theoretical approach, it is necessary to incorporate the main premise of semiotics in literary contexts from Julia Kristeva's viewpoint. In Kristeva's term, the semiotic activity is considered as a 'mark of the workings of drives' (1980, p. 136). Kristeva's account of semiotics aims to call into question the essential role of both the representation of the discharged bodily drives and the signification in the materiality of the body to trace the association between meaning and form. According to Kristeva, such drives are recognized as an axis between biology and representation which thereby set the difference between 'semiotic' and 'symbolic'. The semiotic 'cannot be solely interpreted' (p.137) regarding its 'preoccupation with... the 'signifier'' (ibid.) without an association with the 'body as self' (ibid.). Thus, an association between 'literature and breaking up social concord' (ibid.) has been established. Following such a discourse from 'top to bottom' (ibid.), adopting this 'analytic 'competency'' (ibid.), there will be legends such as *Ulysses*. It is a novel through which we can relate between culture and language,

words and reality, as the domains of speaking presences, specifically when considering 'women' primarily as speaking beings. This will be clarified in my argument about Molly's monologue later in this essay. In this sense, we contemplate Kristeva as one of the pioneering in reviewing the initial improvement of subjectivity. Noting that there is a kind of mobilisation between nature and culture in the maternal body, an attempt to neutralize the archetypal labels which diminish maternity to nature in Kristeva's theory has been explored, affirming instead that the 'self' is a 'subject-in-process' (p. 136). Therefore, I believe that adopting such a principle would enable the women to have a sufficient communicative language which 'simultaneously prevents...the mother from becoming an object like any other-forbidden' (ibid.). Hence, there will be a sense of liberation, preparing the feminist as a speaker for 'entrance into meaning and signification' (ibid.), as well as 'questioning process of subject and history' (p. 137). In short, narrative for Kristeva is 'doubled'. Marilyn French (1982) articulates this appropriately as follows: 'narrative technique is dependent upon two sets of attitudes and their connection - the relation between reality and language' (p. 239). For French, Molly is considered a complement, though libidinous, to the prior sensibility of Leopold Bloom and intellectually of Stephen Daedalus. Like Bloom in the 'Lestrygonians' episode, Molly has found life 'always flowing in a stream, never the same' (*Ulysses*, p. 146). We are always astonished at Molly's ability to keep

her enormous memories harmonised through her 'flow'.

Redefining Femininity in 'Penelope'

As Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* struggles for personal freedom, Molly in *Ulysses*, adopts a more mature search. In Molly's monologue, words state a condition which produces a vision beyond the conventional realms of everyday life. It is true that *Ulysses* was written in a way in which 'language and reality are one' (French, 1982: p. 240). However, Joyce did not present the language as an expressible of reality from one perspective, but rather he constructed a web of plausible views which he called 'parallax' (Schwarz, 1987: 58). Therefore, Joyce selected for Molly this kind of unique feminine fluid style which comes in consistent with Joyce's thematic content, deviating from the conventional narrative, establishing a transpersonal parallels between Stephen, Bloom and Molly, as will be detailed later in this essay. Having this 'fluid' language, I believe, would liberate her femininity from the "'correct' methods of organization, rationalization rules of logic' (Tyson, 1999: 92). In Kristeva's terms, this is the validity of 'the speaking subject-support within object language' (1980, p. 124). On this account, I believe that she, through her 'flow' narrative, will be able to reject the patriarchal thinking of objectifying her maternal body. Instead, she will 'increase our understanding of women's experience, both in the past and present' (pp. 100-101), appreciating women's value in the world. Therefore, this would be postmodern as the text would destroy the position of speech

and point of view, producing not a subject/object or subject/predicate logic, but a comic play of surfaces.

From the first scene in 'Penelope', we can get a sense of Molly's attempt to intertwine the discrete parts of the body with the outside world consistently. While lying in bed, Molly regains the associative chain of her memories, one memory generating another. In contrast to Stephens's metaphorical scheme of regaining his memories by the similarity of past incidents (one incident proposes another by correspondence), and in Bloom's metonymical scheme (one incident creates another by cause and effect association), Molly's is merely literal: one breakfast in bed reminds her of another, as one man in her life reminds her of another. This relates to my argument on the point that Molly adds to her literal consciousness a specific liberated feminine perspective. If we recall Stephen in 'Telemachus', in which he compares the 'green sea' to his 'mother's death', we will transfer to a colouring image of the sea in the 'Penelope' episode. That is when Molly alters the sea to a more positive image, in which she remembers her passionate enactment with Bloom. Hence, on the ground of gender, far from transcending the rigid restrictions that have constantly aided women's repression, such as variance in interpreting a natural image, I would argue such images reinforce the oppositional stereotypes themselves.

Nevertheless, there would be a parallel on the large scale between the two sexes, concerning the repressed thought of the characters who said 'Yes' in *Ulysses*. For example, in the 'Calypso' episode,

Bloom's superficial association of his 'yes' and 'life' leads to him thinking of his daughter's sexual maturity: 'Yes, yes: a woman too. Life, life' (*Ulysses*, p. 86). Similarly, from the first phrase in the 'Penelope' episode: 'Yes because' (*Ulysses*, p. 690), we can get a sense of Molly's character as a faithless woman in Bloom's bedroom, trying to justify her adultery with Blazes Boylan, keeping 'some incriminating connections unspoken' (Attridge, 1989: 519). This implies that 'yes' is used in both cases with a hidden sexual reference. Although Molly did not appear in a definite position from the beginning, as Diana Henderson (1989) argued in her interpretation, that 'she is not meant to realize her contradictions and fallacies' (p. 517), a sense of 'childish taunting' (ibid.) will be illuminated in this stage of the feminine voice in *Ulysses*, which thereby adds a different dimension to Joyce's redefining process of femininity.

Although the bias of many critical studies of the 'Penelope' episode tends to consider Molly as a representation of the '*écriture féminine*', others such as Derek Attridge articulate in Molly the equality between 'Flow and fixity, nature and culture, female and male, speech and writing, material and system' (1989: p.561). This drives us to an important question about the nature of ideological meditations which this text celebrates, and whether it comes in consensus with Joyce's ideological perspective. In this sense, I would quote Joyce in his book 'Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing' (2000), where he states clearly that: 'There is nothing so deceptive and for 'all' that so

alluring as a good surface' (p. 3). Concerning the subject matter of women, it is clearly noticed that Joyce had always a double vision. Looking at one of his love letters to his wife, Nora, he confessed that although he 'dream[ing] of you [Nora] in filthy poses sometimes', he preferred not to show this until he realised 'how you write yourself' (Joyce's Dirty Love Letters, 1909). Hence, Joyce is represented in a situation which he may mock Molly's lovers for. Although bearing the male gaze towards Nora, he is aware of her subjectivity, refusing to express his sexual emotions until he finds the acceptance. This comes in accordance with Molly's refusal of all of her suitors, preferring Bloom who though appeared as androgynous. For Bloom, it seems that she completes the epic of the body in *Ulysses*. As a part of the body organs, represented in 'Ithaca' as 'skeleton', Molly represents the 'flesh' in the 'Penelope'. However, Joyce's technique of presenting Molly weaves her intellectual abilities together with her emotions. In the 'Penelope' episode, there are abbreviations which highlight Molly as a text. For instance, '4d, 2/6 per doz, 1/4 after 3, a_e', these codes and others which are frequently used by Molly throughout her monologue are part of what Kristeva called 'unrecognized possibility of envisioning language as a free play' (1980: p. 128). Therefore, Molly's flow does not appear as a 'pure' flow. Instead, language suggests a link between intellectual and sensual discovery.

In her essay 'Coda: The Earth', Marilyn French draws the attention to this kind of contradiction in Molly's

characterisation as 'psychological' if we deal with her as an 'actual character' (1982: p. 251). I would argue that Joyce represents his libidinous Molly in accordance with what Judith Butler states in her essay 'Performative acts', that 'The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning' (1988: p.521). Moreover, I believe it is the double function of language which serves these contradicted aspects of Molly's character. When Molly thought of Bloom trying to perceive herself not only a whore by imagining him as the 'German Emperor' (*Ulysses*, p. 692), but also to 'feel him' (*ibid.*), she considered this as a 'ruination for any woman and no satisfaction in it' (*ibid.*). This line creates a sense of ambiguity about the truth of Molly's adultery, as such whores do not think in this way. Hence, it solicits the reader's opinion about Molly's role which has been assigned in the text. It is interesting to note here the 'marginal' position of women, on the symbolic order, in the society. According to Toril Moi (1991), the undoing presence of women imposes the 'positionality' which keeps women 'neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown' (p. 213). This explains Molly's previous thought about the pleasures of seduction with the young boys. She never feels productive and 'doing'. In this case, I would suggest as Katie Wales noted in her review on *Ulysses*, that Joyce's language seems 'to be inherently duplicitous, always turning on itself' (1992: p. 2). For instance, Molly's polymorphous sexuality serves as a 'vehicle [sic] for ideologies' (Simpson, 2004: p. 78), which Joyce aimed to reconfigure generally in

Ulysses, and specifically in the Penelope episode. Crucial to Joyce's representation of Molly is her metaphor city of Stephen's quest for mature sexuality to complete him. In contrast to the old milk-woman who becomes for Dedalus a representation of 'a wondering crone' (*U.* p. 14) who symbolises the paralysis situation in Ireland, Molly's love of flowers provides an extension form of the beautiful female body fantasy. This example which combines the natural truth with her sexual pleasures implies Molly's fidelity, based on the unity of language, which would allow for her self-absorption: a spectacle of a woman caressing herself, enjoying herself in the rich flow of her nostalgia.

In spite of her libidinous memories, Molly seems unsatisfied and wants more celebration of her femininity. She wants to 'have a long talk with an intelligent well educated person' (*Ulysses*, p. 729), wearing a 'nice pair of red slippers... and a nice semitransparent morning gown' (*ibid.*). Despite of all the pleasure she can gain through the admiration of her body, despite all the pragmatic value of her natural charms, Molly seems as an emasculated female body. According to Judith Butler, such a body suffers from the 'univocal signifiers' (1988: p. 528), which shackle it in the world as a 'model of truth' that is 'stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable' (*ibid.*). Hence, I would agree and argue that Molly's disorderly figure appears as if she wants to evade such truths, rebelling against 'the univocity of the sign' (*ibid.*). In her complaint, Molly states that clearly: 'I never in all my life felt anyone had one the size of that to make you feel up

the must...making us like that with a big hole in the middle of us' (*Ulysses*, p. 694). With all of her sense of self-sufficiency, there is a sense of void which forces Molly to adopt such a disorderly figure. In effect, I believe Molly's soliloquy, with all the pleasure of its release from inhibition and moral censorship linguistically and thoughtfully, closes Joyce's epic with equating genders, males and females 'beyond the patriarchal structures of our world' (Attridge, 1989: p.562).

Among all the attitudes which Joyce interrogates in *Ulysses*, I believe that Joyce devoted the last chapter not just to releasing the female politically and socially, but also to give a new meaning for femininity. A meaning which would have the power to which Butler once referred, that is 'relinquished for expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds' (1988, p. 531). Thus, we conclude with an adjustment of the masculine and the feminine perspectives in this text as the masculine Joyce was supported by his 'self-conscious anatomy of feminine as well as masculine roles' (Devries, 2010: p. 175) to 'identify and celebrate a property of language denied by the hegemonic linguistic ideologies of our time- ideologies that are fully complicit with sexism' (Attridge, 1989: p.560). James Joyce linguistically presents the female in a critical manner, specifically the Penelope episode with no clear sentences or quotations, but almost as pieces of memories dropped onto the page. Precisely, it is clear that Joyce uses the space of the page, the literal text to display the gender ideology from the female's point of view: if

the female is represented as other than the male subject, then it can be repeated to gesture to what lies beyond sense and subjectivity. Molly's extraordinary flow, concerning her multiple sexual adventures, is a parallax, which cannot be accepted only as a perversion, but also as an affirmative step towards a new meaning of femininity: one which can be produced as an authenticity not only through the materiality of her body, but also through the independent verifiable intellectual presence of her spirit, presenting the female Molly as a woman in process.

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