O Jamesy Let Me Up Out of This: Narrative and Feminism in “Penelope”

[The] instinctive need of the reader to work out a plot, even if narrative (i.e. diegetic) elements are missing or scarce in a given text, makes the reader the one mediating instance (or consciousness of mediation) in those kinds of fiction not easily ascribable to either the mediation of personal narrators or the consciousness of one (or more) of its characters. In this way “Ithaca,” although non-narrative in form as well as content, could be regarded as a narrative (i.e. epic) text. (Fludernik 102-3)

As Monika Fludernik begins her essay “Ithaca”—An Essay in Non-Narrativity with a quote by C.H. Peake, I choose to begin my argument with a quote from Fludernik’s work. In addition to being a stylistic choice I would like my use of the quote to denote my desire to follow a similar approach to Fludernik’s. Namely, as she does with Peake’s work, I would like to use Fludernik’s analysis on the non-narrativity of the “Ithaca” portion of Ulysses to get at what Joyce is doing with (and to) narrative in the work. Moreover, like the relationship between Peake’s work and Fludernik’s, I would like to further several points that were implicit or otherwise ignored in Fludernik’s essay. In particular, I am in agreement that “Ithaca” is an important site of narrative experimentation in Ulysses for its ability to avoid narrativity in both form and
content while still effecting a narrative situation in the reader. I find the concept of making the reader the “consciousness of mediation” useful in terms of narrative theory. However, it appears that Fludernik’s thoughts on “Ithaca” eclipsed the importance of the “Penelope”. It is my contention that rather than simply acting as a “coda without narrative content” for *Ulysses*, as Fludernik argues, “Penelope” brings home Joyce’s narrative theory by dissolving all modes of narrative knowledge in the work (103). The progression from “Ithaca” to “Penelope” represents the apotheosis of Joyce’s concept of narrative metempsychosis and grounds his macrocosmic theory in the recursive syntax of the sentences themselves. This final movement (from “Ithaca” to “Penelope) not only brings aesthetic totality, but represents an urgent political perspective on the state of women, the colonized state, and the inextricably of narrative (or certain narrative patterns) from language. Because “Penelope” so staunchly rejects narrativity, it can be seen as a text that not only radically rejects hegemonic narratives, but refigures the way readers apprehend texts in order to find narrativity. In this way, despite containing what could be considered conservative viewpoints on marriage, “Penelope” offers a feminist technique of reading narrative that pushes beyond traditional modernism and suggests a call for real-world action.

As Fludernik points out, “Ithaca” is a notable section of *Ulysses* because it subverts typical diegetic (i.e. narrative) mediation in both its form and its content. A staggering 30.8% of the episode concerns “non-realistic material,” or the detritus of daily life brought about through the scientific inquiry characteristic of the episode (e.g. the description of the water system which connects to Bloom’s tap) (Fludernik 94). Though Fludernik is careful to point out that it isn’t this 30.8% of material unnecessary to the narrative which makes the episode *non-narrative*, nor is the low percentage of typically diegetic (i.e. narrative) statements made by the text the root of
its non-narrativity. *Ulysses* as a whole contains a surprisingly low number of *narrative* lines, “Ithaca” is close to the average percentage of narrative statements (22%) at 16.6% (Fludernik 99). Fludernik instead cites the logic (or lack thereof) in the choice of questions and answers given in “Ithaca” as the source of its formal non-narrativity. As far as its content, she claims that the plot is “not ‘narrated’ but taken for granted and analyzed” so that the reader is able to “reconstruct what may have happened from the consequent interpretations based on these events” (96). Fludernik proves her assertions by transforming the question and answer format into “uniform statements” which present the question and its answer as its own, unified assertion (93). Because many sentences in the episode are unable to be transformed into uniform (and narrative) statements without construction on the reader’s part, they are decidedly non-diegetic. For example Fludernik cites the instance when the water boils on the kettle as a moment whose narrativity is supplied entirely by the reader.

At the end of her essay, Fludernik states that “Ithaca” is the last chapter of *Ulysses* “to constitute narrativity” (103). Though earlier she addresses that there is the moment of narration on the chamber pot, as a whole Fludernik rejects narrativity in “Penelope.” It is not my contention that there is *no* narrative content in the episode, as Fludernik claims, but I am in agreement that it constitutes the most radical experimentation of narrative in the work. That being said, it is not my goal to compare the episodes of *Ulysses* on narrative experimentation. The episodes all constitute a single work and thus create their own macrostructural *nostos* narrative. But my claim is that the reader is urged to participate in “Penelope” the same way that Fludernik describes her participating in “Ithaca”. There is a moment in “Penelope” when Molly seems close to touching upon this idea when she muses on her garters and lotion:
The thin ones are not so much the fashion now garters that much I have the violet pair I wore today thats all he bought me out of the cheque he got on the first O no there was the face lotion I finished that last of yesterday that made my skin like new I told him over and over again get that made up in the same place and dont forget it God only knows whether he did after all I said to him (Joyce 618)

The choice of subject matter in this passage resembles Gerty’s musings in “Nausicaa” denoting that the consciousness of mediation shifts to a feminine perspective. However, that phrase “God only knows” seems like a moment when the author figure is acknowledging that he and the reader are in on some inside joke. Fludernik herself asserts that as the episodes go by an “authorial (narrative) presence makes itself felt” (100). By “Sirens” and “Oxen of the Sun” the story is almost inscrutable behind all the gaudy stylistic tricks that the jocoserious author figure performs. By “Circe” and “Ithaca” “plot is transmitted through non-narrative forms” (102). Finally, with “Penelope” the author figure falls away and only reveals himself implicitly through small textual games such as the “God” quote, or through his ignorance of the thoughts of women. But because “Penelope” is placed after “Ithaca” the reader’s mind is already stretched, so to speak, to accommodate the burden of constructing the narrative herself. Moments such as the “God” quote above or the titular quote of this piece (O Jamesy) point to this multiplicity of authors, with the reader as the one mediating consciousness who must decode the text. But simply put, at this point there’s no going back; the reader has already glimpsed the frailty of the narrative situation and “Penelope” appears to burst at the seems. The reader is revealed to be the only actor in the process of literary narration.
In modern discourse it seems easy to write “Penelope” off as an offensive ventriloquizing of oversexualized and marginalized women in a colonized space. Moreover, it is all too tempting to downplay the episode’s experimental value or use of novel technique. “Penelope” returns to the narrative method used early in *Ulysses*, what F.K. Stanzel refers to as the “figural narrative situation” (Fludernik 98). This type of situation shifts the mediating force of the narrative to the consciousness of a character rather than the utterance of a narrative itself. As Fludernik notes, *Ulysses* moves the mediating consciousness to the reader. The reader-centric locus of consciousness is most visible in “Ithaca” but “Penelope” returns to the narrative techniques used earlier. But I contend that this chapter constitutes the most politically radical experimentation of narrative in the work; how can this be? In the final chapter of Margaret McBride’s work *Ulysses and the Metamorphosis of Stephen Dedalus* she suggests that in “Penelope” “Molly furnishes Stephen’s story with an ending that is not an ending, as her monologue foregrounds the fiction’s looping structure” (172). Moreover, McBride’s thesis throughout the work in general is essentially that *Ulysses* is the text that Stephen will write, ironically forecast by Mulligan’s “ten years” remark in “Wandering Rocks” (Joyce 205). This recursive relationship between a character in the work and the work itself figures the narrative of *Ulysses* as necessarily more experimental than a conventional reading would. Though rather than implying that Molly simply serves as a construction of Stephen’s (and Joyce’s) virtual-recursive world, McBride posits that in Molly’s weaving and unweaving of the artist, as it were, “she reveals that Stephen like Bloom (and Molly herself), is a pattern of words on a page” (172). It would be too simple to write this choice off as the need for a nostos to conclude the work. Similarly, it would be retrogressive to deny *Ulysses* as a valuable feminist text due to the
misogyny practiced in early 20th century Dublin or by Joyce himself. If Joyce were concerned with maintaining or returning to the status quo, he did a terrible job doing so. Rather, I contend that this finale does not constitute a mere nostos or “coda” to Ulysses, but represents a feminist perspective on narrative that questions all methods of apprehending narrative.

As an example of Molly’s questioning the way we understand narrative, I would like to look at a moment early in the episode when Molly reveals her knowledge of Bloom’s correspondence with another woman:

If they only knew him as well as I do yes because the day before yesterday he was scribbling something a letter when I came into the front room to show him Dignams death in the paper as if something told me and he covered it up with the blotting paper pretending to be thinking about business (609)

Presumably, the referent of “they” is the other women whom Molly suspects. But the passage also tells the reader something she couldn’t have known: Molly is aware (or at least wary) of Bloom’s infidelity. This is a revelation whose importance isn’t immediately obvious. Considering the recurring theme of treacherous or promiscuous women and the relatively close proximity of the narrative to Bloom’s perspective throughout, Molly’s perspective changes the entire narrative preceding. By “Ithaca” the reader has (likely) fallen into a misogynist reading without fully realizing she has done so and it requires Molly’s center of consciousness to erode that reading.

Knowability and control of narrative is important for Molly. In addition to revealing that she has knowledge of a narrative previously thought to be known only to Bloom and the reader, Molly erodes Bloom’s concept of reliable narrative. When she is musing over an intimate
encounter with Bartell d’Arcy her thoughts turn to Bloom’s ignorance of the encounter, “Ill tell him about that some day not now and surprise him ay and Ill take him there and show him the very place too we did it so now there you are like it or lump it he thinks nothing can happen without him knowing” (Joyce 614). Though Bloom isn’t the prototypical misogynist figure of the time (if I were to pick one who is such a figure in Ulysses I’d have to go with Lenehan) Molly’s section proves the microcosmic pattern of colonization: that even the oppressed can oppress. The majority of the novel is spent empathizing with Bloom, and the final shift to Molly represents what Fredric Jameson considers the “meaning-loss” particular to the “colonial system” where “a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere… in colonies over the water whose own life experience and life world… remains unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power, whatever social class they may belong to” (157). Though Bloom is not British, his place as a man in early 20th century Dublin in part places him in the position of imperial power relative to Irish women. Again, because the reader is narratively urged to empathize with Bloom throughout one builds a sort of misogynist reading based on the narrative focus. But rather than acting as a problem for the work, the placement of “Penelope” at the finale figures the relegated and unnarrated status of women as a problem in the work. Molly is placed in a position where she is best able to formally subvert imperial (colonial) as well as misogynist narratives. Moreover, by taking on both concepts of narrative, gender and colonial, a line of comparison is drawn between the two suggesting that both are part of some grander narrative of oppression.

On the level of content, by situating into Molly’s consciousness, the reader is grounded into the reality of the time and place being represented. Molly’s experience indexes the specific
social dynamics of Dublin in the early 20th century. A cursory glance at the block quote above concerning garters and lotion shows the reification of Molly’s inferior social status and her limited economic options in that status. By claiming that the purple garters were “all he bought” her she circumscribes her dependence on Bloom’s “cheque” (618). Molly has, of course, worked before selling secondhand clothes and indeed she seems to have a successful enough singing career. But still she considers herself dependent on Bloom for capital. Moreover, she has internalized the value of beauty products. She takes on these same attributes as Gerty in “Nausicaa” and Miss Dunne in “Wandering Rocks”. Crucially, these three instances of feminine subjectivity are structured and informed by ‘sentimental’ and ‘feminine’ novels. Molly receives “The Sweets of Sin” from Bloom, Miss Dunne hides The Woman in White in her desk, and Gerty’s portion of “Nausicaa” is narrated in that characteristically sentimental fashion after such novels as The Lamplighter. McBride’s theory that “Penelope” reveals Ulysses as a construction of words on a page elucidates the importance of such sentimental novels in Joyce’s representations of women. Texts are important mediators of worldview. As Fredric Jameson argues, “the essential linguisticality of Ulysses… is itself a result of imperialism which condemns Ireland to an older rhetorical past and to the survivals of oratory” (166). But in Molly’s case her textual space is relegated to (according to the Gilbert Schema) a timeless internal monologue in bed. This groundedness in the local time, place, and relative social conditions is echoed by Molly’s bodily functions throughout, which are unable to be separated from her experience. Though Fludernik writes off these moments on the chamber pot as non-narrative, Molly’s experience of menstruation and kneeling over the chamber pot figure her in a larger historical narrative of gender dynamics.
When she complains about Bloom’s wordiness concerning ‘metempsychosis’ Molly claims that “he never can explain a thing simply the way a body can understand” (Joyce 620). By situating her tools of understanding in the corporeal, Molly is making a direct connection between one’s bodily status and how one apprehends (or is allowed to apprehend) the world. As a woman in colonial Dublin, Molly is able to understand that it is in part her physicality that delimits which narratives she is allowed to understand and which narratives she can manipulate. References to her physicality and bodily functions recur throughout Molly’s inner monologue, tacking her to her gendered social position. When she (internally) complains “O this blanket is too heavy on me” there is a clear symbolic relationship between the smothering nature of the blanket and the social position of women (Joyce 622). This isn’t simply an arbitrary symbol, she literally blames Bloom “and his fooling” for her discomfort (Joyce 622). Though it is easy to empathize with Bloom throughout Ulysses, in “Penelope” Molly finally reveals herself to be oppressed by the sexuality that has been attributed to her throughout. But when Molly begins to menstruate and must use the chamber pot, an interesting narrative nod occurs. After describing the ease of faking one’s virginity, Molly exclaims “O Jamesy let me up out of this” (633). Of course, “this” most literally means the bed itself which she must climb from to use the chamber pot. But the use of the name “Jamesy” suggests something more narratively interesting. As described above, moments such as this and Molly’s reference to “God” being the only one who knows hint at the presence of the author figure. Molly’s direct address to “Jamesy” is particularly experimental in a work whose every page is more experimental than the last. The technique used to accomplish Molly’s direct address to Joyce is known as metalepsis, a concept “first identified by Genette… a paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and
the world of the told” (Pier). The metaleptic connection between the “Jamesy” figure and Joyce himself is strengthened by a letter written to Joyce by a student (and love interest) of his named “Amalia Popper” wherein she tells him “[e]asy now, Jamesy! Did you never walk the streets of Dublin at night sobbing another name?” (O’Brien 87). When this relationship fell apart before it even began Joyce urged himself to write of his experience. It is also worth noting that this Amalia Popper “was the daughter of a Jewish merchant named Leopoldo” (O’Brien 85-6). So another reading of “this” in the Jamesy quote above is very likely the oppressive situation of Dublin itself, a place where men demand virginity from women to the point that women must fake it with “a daub of red ink” (Joyce 633). More in line with Margaret McBride’s work mentioned above, however, I suggest that by addressing the author directly Molly is asking to be let out of the narrative itself. If she figures herself, Stephen, and Bloom as “a pattern of words on a page” this metaleptic moment of direct address between a character and an author figure implies that texts can serve subversive functions where the role of narrator and character are blurred, with the reader as the primary consciousness of mediation. Reading the text as a colony itself, Molly is using narrative means to subvert the power and authority of the imperial power of the work (i.e. the author). But the structure of Molly’s radical feminist stance goes much deeper.

It is well known that Joyce derived the rambling style of “Penelope” from the letter writing styles of both his wife Nora as well as his mother. (I’ll leave analysis of this particularity to psychologists.) The drawn out writing technique of “Penelope” too grounds the experiences of women characters in the historical realities of the time, in this case the educational disparities between the genders. “Nausikaa” reflects this lack of educational opportunity by being one of the more accessible chapters in *Ulysses* compared to, say, Stephen’s cognition during “Proteus”.
More radically, however, “Penelope” subverts gender dynamics on the structure of the sentence itself as well as its content. I will refer to this technique of writing huge sentences as “recursive” in the tradition of Noam Chomsky’s theories on natural grammar. Closer to Joyce’s time, however, Wilhelm Von Humboldt effectively described the recursive function of language:

[T]he procedure of language is not simply one whereby a single phenomenon comes about; it must simultaneously open up the possibility of producing an indefinable host of such phenomena, and under all the conditions that thought prescribes. For language is quite peculiarly confronted by an unending and truly boundless domain, the essence of all that can be thought. It must therefore make infinite employment of finite means, and is able to do so through the power which produces identity of language and thought. (91)

Joyce effects this kind of infinity in Molly’s episode by ignoring the normal rules of punctuation and producing sentences of over a thousand words. Returning to Jameson’s essay, he believes that modernism itself is concerned with the “infinity… this grey placelessness” which “bears another familiar name… imperialism” (162). As “Oxen of the Sun” portrayed in its stylistic movement, the English language itself contains a sort of imperial narrative of “the styles of the imperial occupying armies” (166). By rupturing the grammatical form which structures that imperial narrative within the English language, “Penelope” uses the word of the conqueror to prove its own plasticity and unreliability. Of course, there can’t be anything actually infinite about the work. As a complete text it is necessarily made finite by its nature as a concrete totality. Molly is then burdened with, in Humboldt’s words, the task of approaching “infinite
employment of finite means” in order to extricate herself from the oppressive situation of pure narrative itself.

In a particularly historical look at the relationship between women’s rights and Joyce’s work, *Female Suffrage in Ireland: James Joyce’s Realization of Unrealized Potential*, Michael Wainright too mentions the recursive nature of “Penelope” in the form of a question:

does the recursiveness of "Penelope," indicative of the insistent repetition that successive waves of feminism brought to the political landscape of the United Kingdom, betray an unresolved tension? Mathematical recursion denotes a powerful, self-contained procedure that cycles infinitely unless a concluding value is determined, and Molly's words indubitably bespeak a certain type of modernity to some critics.

That is, is there something retrogressive or unproductive in the pure infinity of both language and modernity? To this question I am inclined to respond with Molly’s affirmation. It is my contention that Joyce concludes *Ulysses* with the “ending that is not an ending” (to quote McBride) in order to construct a new method of reading narrative skeptically that ultimately favors action. The narrative does not naturally *end* because the whole rest of *Ulysses* has shifted with the reader’s knowledge of the final episode and the cycle, a la McBride, must start again. For example, reading “Lotus-Eaters” is a much different experience with the knowledge that Molly in some way knows about Bloom’s correspondence with Martha. The way Bloom covertly “open[s] the letter within the newspaper” takes on an ironically comic tone because Bloom is doing a terrible job of hiding the correspondence from both Molly and the reader. This cycle of narrative recursion cannot logically end without some sort of intervening action. I contend that this action is political in nature and feminist in theory.
In addition to the problem of imperial/colonial narratives hidden in the deep structures of language, “Penelope” suggests that recounting events in order to produce a narrative is not the way that the world has to be, or should be, understood. As Galen Strawson writes, “it is widely held that human beings typically experience or conceive of their lives as a narrative or story of some sort” (775). Furthermore, the common argument for why one should conceive of her life as a narrative is that “a richly Narrative outlook on one’s life is essential to living well, to true or full personhood” (775). In other words, it is a widely held belief that narrative is necessary to living one’s life ethically. Strawson goes on to differentiate between living one’s life in a diachronic or non-diachronic fashion as it relates to the self:

If one is non-diachronic one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (more or less) distant past and will be there in the (more or less distant) future. One has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (more or less distant) past and will be there in the future, although one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity considered as a whole human being. (776)

Strawson makes the case that lives are not explicitly meant to be lived narratively, and ethical values aren’t necessarily the result of narrative. It is the non-diachronic life that I believe Joyce is urging the reader to consider. Molly’s lack of temporality in the Gilbert schema, in tandem with her ability to change the way one reads the entire preceding narrative suggests that she lives life in a decidedly non-diachronic manner. The temporal movement within the work is testament to this non-diachronicity because, although it unfolds in generally epic (i.e. narrative, diegetic) form, it unfolds over the course of a single day which could be figured as one long present moment. By juxtaposing the epic form with the banality of the modern day, Joyce is
deconstructing our use of narrative to objectively understand the world at all. Being part of the
culture composed of “the last great talkers” Joyce is not suggesting that one should not hear or
speak such narratives, instead he is introducing an element of irony and skepticism in the act of
narration itself that disarms the possibility of harmful or covert narratives controlling one’s life
(Damrosch 38). Joyce rightly intuited the primary target of such toxic narratives as colonized
and sexualized women. Furthermore, by ending *Ulysses* with a non-diachronic outlook, agency
and action are preferred to narrativity, stagnation, paralysis.

I was fascinated by Fludernik’s findings on the way that “Ithaca” transmits narrative. In
light of the work of more recent narrative theorists, however, I’ve been interested in how this
idea of narrative can prove oppressive or smothering. Fludernik not only created the concept of
*natural narratology* but her work inspired other theorists, Brian Richardson being the most
notable, to come up with a theory of *unnatural narratology*. Rather than contradicting
Fludernik’s work outright, *unnatural narratology* used the linguistic basis of *natural narratology*
in order to study texts that were deemed “antimimetic” or non-realist in some narrative capacity.
Robyn Warhol, a prominent feminist narrative theorist denies the fact that unnatural narratives
are always non-realist.

For realist novelists… who earnestly wish to change the world, the metaliptic
effect can bring the implied reader back to an awareness of the “really real,” the
extradiegetic world where the novelists writes and where actions like those being
represented in the fiction cry out for real-world action. (214)

*Ulysses* appears to do just what Warhol describes. As Jameson notes, *Ulysses* is particularly
successful because “history itself… is here [in Dublin] already part of the urban fabric” so Joyce
doesn’t necessarily have to construct a situation antimimetically in order to delineate a symbolic or political message. But Joyce chooses to draw attention to this blurred space between the constructed world and our own in order to propose a method of writing and reading narrative that can incite political action.

Joyce is using the mode of literary realism to uncover our manner of reading narrative and to suggest its ultimate impotency on its own. By gradually leaving the shore of stylistic, narrative, and formal normalcy he experiments with how far a narrative can be stretched. Moreover, he analyses the structures of narrative that exist out of sight, on either the microcosmic or macrocosmic level, the level of language and the level of politics. By the end of *Ulysses*, even Molly herself is ready to be “out of this”. The fact that by this point “Ithaca” has laid the consciousness of mediation upon the reader implicates that very reader in upholding such oppressive narratives. Molly’s affirmations are not the affirmations of the narrative, but affirmations of life itself. With this “unnatural” reading, those affirmations serve just as well as cries “for real-world action”. As Jameson suggests, “Joyce leaps over the stage of the modern into full post-modernism” and, as always, narrative studies are just now catching up (166).


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