

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

“This Chaffering Allincluding Most Farraginous Chronicle”:

Language and the Reproduction of History in *Ulysses*

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The specter that haunts James Joyce's *Ulysses* is history. As T. S. Eliot writes, *Ulysses* is "the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape" (175). The present age is situated in the past, an entity that is inescapable because history is always being made. History operates as a construction of the events that have passed and live on through their linguistic representation. The repetition of language reveals that each new utterance recontextualizes language and therefore changes the meaning. Mikhail Bakhtin writes, "The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever new *ways to mean*" (*Dialogic* 346). Linguistic discourse works in tandem with history, revealing the teleological organizing through language. Hegel defines history by how it "unites the objective with the subjective side," therefore "it comprehends not less what has *happened*, than the *narration* of what has happened" (60). The narration of history is given shape through the purposing of intention. Words construct worlds, as Martha Clifford writing to Bloom, "I do not like that other world," asks instead for "the real meaning of that word" (5.244-45). The notion of teleologically organizing history through language is further postulated by Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic: "These external markers, linguistically observable and fixable, cannot in themselves be understood or studied without understanding the specific conceptualization they have been given by an intention" (*Dialogic* 292). The deconstruction of the history through language reveals their intertwined relationship and varied discourse.

"Nestor" begins in medias res with Stephen attempting to teach a lesson on classical history to his ineffectual and shiftless students. Lecturing on Pyrrhus and his costly victories, Stephen's thoughts are decidedly more focused on the "actuality of the possible as possible" (2.67). Stephen mentally invokes William Blake: "Fabled by the daughters of memory. And it

was in some way if not as memory fabled it . . . I hear the ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry, and time one livid final flame. What's left us then?" (2.7-10). Stephen is pondering on "whether the figures, activities and utterances of historical agents must have had a measure of reality since they have given rise to the fables of memory" (Sidorsky 315). To Stephen, history is not just "a tale like any other too often heard," it is a force in which he feels trapped. History is, in this sense, subject to how it is recorded or rather fabled by memory. Stephen is concerned with how history is made: "Some minimal belief in the signifieds [sic] of historiographic discourse, in the 'real' content of history, must be preserved" (Spoo 93). James Fairhill quotes Seamus Dean's assertion that Stephen is "hostile to . . . the restriction which the past has placed upon possibility," for "history is a betrayal of possibility" (33). In its linguistic representation, history is thus fabled by memory, the event itself at the mercy of historians.

Stephen's personal relationship with history is expressed by declaring, "History . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (2.377). The nightmare of history to Stephen is a "history of domination," both "religious and political" (Kumar 148). Stephen muses on Aristotelian metaphysics and the plurality of the possible: "But can those have been possible seeing that they never were? Or was that only possible which came to pass? Weave, weaver of the wind" (2.52-53). Stephen advocates for many possibilities rather than a linear progression of history by dialectical means. This is in contrast to Deasy's assertion of a God governed and goal orientated teleology: "The ways of the Creator are not our ways . . . All human history moves towards one great goal, the manifestation of God" (2.380-81). With this musings on possibility, Stephen is presenting a more nuanced view of human history than what he is assigned to teach at the school, factoring in the intertextuality of history as a whole. Stephen is arguing that history is now rather than a tepid interpretation of the past.

History understood through Stephen's Aristotelian model incorporates the idea of the movement from possibility to actuality. Karl Marx suffered from the same nightmare of Stephen: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstance chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (595). The "free thought" of Stephen is inherently at odds with the pedagogy of Deasy and his school. Stephen is teaching classical history to Irish students and they are discussing Pyrrhus. Cochrane cites Pyrrhus, "*Another victory like that and we are done for,*" which then ignites the interest of Stephen (2.14). He muses, "The phrase the world had remembered. A dull ease of the mind. From a hill above a corpsestrewn plain a general speaking to his officers" (2.15-16). The "bloodstained" record of "man's inhumanity to man" is reflected in the history book itself being seen by Stephen as "gorescared" (O'Brien 83). The concept of a Pyrrhic victory resonates with the notion of the inevitable rise of power and in the case of Irish history, empire. Stephen, while clearly exhibiting a comprehensive understanding of history is relegated to the role of inept teacher while the misogynist and anti-Semitic Deasy runs the school; Deasy also uses Stephen's literary abilities to ensure he does not mince words with his letter regarding foot and mouth disease. The role of Stephen is once again a "jester at the court of his master, indulged and disesteemed, winning a clement master's praise" (2.44-45). Stephen's silence is a result of Deasy's power over his wage. Stephen and the Irish "have no choice but to play, interminably and without variation, a part assigned to them by the colonial history of Ireland" (Spoo 103). The pedagogy exhibited by the school cements this tradition through the reproduction and repetition of a certain history. Rather than create their own history, they view it through the lens of others.

The notion of a “mechanical reproduction of history” is echoed within the school (Spoo 93). Cochrane’s “blank face” asking the “blank window” is only able to recite Pyrrhus’s lamentation on the losses of his victory (2.6). Talbot’s recitation of Milton’s “Lycidas” is done with “odd glances at the text” (2.62-63). The feeble Sargent is only able to copy data in “long shaky strokes” rather than fully understand the process behind it (2.164). Armstrong is more concerned with his appetite for figrolls and punning on Pyrrhus: “Pyrrhus sir? Pyrrhus, a pier” (2.36). When Stephen swiftly references Kingstown pier and Ireland as a “disappointed bridge,” the students are puzzled and unsure how to respond. Patrick McGee argues Stephen’s pupils are confused by Stephen’s jest because they are unsure how to repeat it: “The troubled gaze of Stephen’s students after hearing the joke is a symptom of the their traditional education” (19).<sup>1</sup> They fail to recognize the failed connection between Ireland and the British Empire through Stephen’s metaphor. The pedagogy encouraged by the school emphasizes rote memorization, as Deane argues, “At it’s most powerful, colonialism is a process of radical dispossession. A colonized people is without a specific history and . . . without a language” (10). Stephen as a pedagogue “finds the rote memorization of history an arid affair, a humiliating routine that shrinks the ethical dimension of the past to a muster of punctual events . . . and interpreted actualizations” (Spoo 93). Similar to the trite clichés uttered by Deasy, history is relegated to rote memorization and repetition. This version of history can be seen as static and in the words of Nietzsche, “The historian looks backwards; in the end he even *believes* backwards” (*Twilight* 7).

Stephen’s fear of “those big words . . . which make us so unhappy” occupy his mind as he saunters through Sandymount strand. “Proteus” acts as a response to the apocalyptic and deterministic views of history contemplated in “Nestor.” The reader is privy to Stephen’s process

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<sup>1</sup> Vico argued that language “arises out of and reflects human history; it is the vehicle by which the spirit of a nation enters the soul of the person who learns it” (Fairhill 61). The comprehension of history is facilitated through the use of language.

of perception: “Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot” (3.1-3). Stephen then shuts his eyes to “see,” attempting to place himself in an objective perspective. Stephen equates language and history to “natural deposits, gradual layering that offer their signatures to the decoding of the historiographic artist” (Spoo 108). The ineluctable modality of language is what Stephen is trying to decipher. Stephen muses, “These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here . . . Sands and stones. Heavy of the past” (3.288-91). For Stephen, language is something that has been continually built upon by the actualization of the possible. History, in being represented through language, is thus disposed to the influence of language. The metaphysical conception of philology exhibited in “Proteus” denotes the “interpretation of nature [as] an act of reading; the ‘signs’ or ‘signatures’ are there, plain to see, if we open our eyes and read them” (Gilbert 122). The remains of history, the “ruin of all space, shattered glass, and toppling masonry” is in language. Despite language being “always in a flux of becoming,” by examining the signs of language one may “diagnose the processes of change operating in the world . . . for written signs remain” (Gilbert 130). Bakhtin determines a similar notion, positing language “at any given moment of its historical existence . . . is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past” (*Dialogic* 291).

Historical heteroglossia is seen Stephen ponders the nature of his birth in relation to others: “Creation from nothing . . . The cords of all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh . . . Gaze in your *omphalos*” (3.35-38). The use of “*omphalos*” evinces the perpetual nature of transformation, a “link in a chain . . . that extends in both directions into the eternal, absolute and

infinite . . . wherein all things move and evolve in a sequence of transformations” (Gilbert 62). Language works in a similar fashion, evolving out of a singular discourse. His relationship to history is then explored through blood inheritance: “Then from the starving cagework city a horde of jerkined dwarfs, my people . . . Famine, plague and slaughters. Their blood is in me, their lusts in my waves” (3.305-07). The “quasi-materially” association established by Stephen attempts to place his involvement in historical development, particularly how “things might yield up their stories to him, if it were not for the fact of their decay and loss of definition through time” (Nolan 74). Bakhtin notes how “there are no ‘neutral’ words and forms and forms that can belong to ‘no one’” (*Dialogic* 293). Stephen is musing on the origin of not only humankind, but of a history associated with it. Language has continually changed and evolved along with the generations of humanity and is subject to the same decay.

Nietzsche postulates on the “antiquarian sensibility of a human being,” exploring how such an approach to history obfuscates one’s perspective (“On the Utility” 137). He writes that “antiquarian history understands only how to *preserve* life, not how to create it,” and therefore it “revolves with self-satisfied egotism around its own axis” (137). This lens of history presents “an extremely limited field of vision: most things it does not perceive at all, and the few things it does see, it views too closely and in isolation” (137). The notion of a “limited field of vision” is aptly explored in “Cyclops” through not only the Nameless One and the Citizen, but the variety of discourses featured in the interpolations. Lawrence describes the use of language to be a “glossy print” of Ireland, as Joyce “parodies Ireland’s mythic self-image, incorporated in a language that inflates its glories and suppresses its faults” (104). “Cyclops” is consciously aware of the mote in one’s eye from the linguistic framing of history. The transposing of ancient myths to narrate the present evokes linguistic inadequacy. These epic parodies are “an attempted *revival*

of an archaic literary form (Lawrence 105). Deane explores the characteristics of a colonial nation: “[I]nsurgent nationalisms attempt to create a version of history for themselves in which their intrinsic essence has always manifested itself, thereby producing readings of the past that are as monolithic as that which they are trying to supplant” (9).<sup>2</sup> Parodying the fervent nostalgia present in certain nationalist circles, Joyce is mocking the rhetoric of “giganticism” inherent in this discourse. In Bakhtin’s terms, parody “destroy[s] the homogenizing power of myth over language” (*Dialogic* 60). The appropriation of a mythic past is used to further advance the present Irish identity. The notion of tradition changes, as “it no longer implies museum of nostalgias but a reopened future,” so the past is “honored, albeit subordinated” (Kiberd 292). History is thus used as a utility in the obfuscation of reality, perceiving what needs to be and subordinating the rest. It is with this Nietzsche writes “the past itself suffers as long as history serves life and is governed by the impulses of life” (“On the Utility” 137).

Bakhtin details the features present in the epic: “The world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of ‘beginnings’ and ‘peak times’ in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of ‘firsts’ and ‘bests’ . . . The formally constitutive feature of the epic as a genre is rather the transferral [sic] of a represented world into the past, and the degree to which this world participates in the past” (*Dialogic* 13). The Nameless One narrates the journey to Barney Kiernan’s with expected banality: “So we went around by the Linenhall barracks and the back of the courthouse talking of one thing or another” (12.64-65). What follows this is an interpolation embodied in the style mythic Irish epics: “In Inisfail the fair there lies a land, the land of holy Michan. There rises a watchtower beheld of men afar. There sleep the mighty dead as in life they slept, warriors and princes of high renown” (12.68-70). As

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche writes, “Thanks to the constantly effective miracle assumed by myth, the waking day of a people who are stimulated by myth, as the ancient Greeks were, does indeed resemble a dream more than it does the day of a thinker whose mind has been sobered by science” (“On Truth” 151).

Lawrence argues, “The Dublin area is seen through the rosy-colored glasses of epic and romance” (105). The streets of Dublin in this linguistic discourse are characterized as a “pleasant land” decorated by “the sooth of murmuring waters” and numerous “ornaments of the arboreal world with which that region is thoroughly well supplied.” The landscape of a modern and industrializing Dublin is portrayed with a deceptive emphasis on the romantic elements. The “giganticism” of this linguistic mode places focus on the ostensibly important elements to Irish myth: “Lovely maidens sit in close proximity to the roots of the lovely trees singing the most lovely songs while they play with all kinds of lovely objects” (12.78-80). MacCabe writes, “[W]hat is important . . . is not the truth or falsity of what is being said but how the same event articulated in two different discourses produces different representations (different truths)” (92). The simple act of walking to a pub is enflamed with superfluity to an absurd degree, creating a distinctive lens in which to view reality.

Kiberd notes “the tendency of nationalists to embalm themselves alive: they fetishize and manipulate the past to the point where they irretrievably lose it” (292). The first introduction to the Citizen is given through an interpolation continuing the attempted revival of Irish myths. Described as being “seated on a large boulder at the foot of a round tower,” wearing a “row of seastones . . . graven with rude yet striking art of tribal images of many Irish heroes and heroines of antiquity” (12.151-76). An exhaustive list follows containing figures such as “Napoleon Bonaparte,” “Julius Caesar,” and “Benjamin Franklin.” The “ostensible rationality” and “principle of ordering” that is present in the beginning of the catalogue “explode[s] the bonds of the category they establish,” which soon “becomes a vehicle of illogic” (Lawrence 109). Walter Benjamin postulates the “past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (255). With this notion, Benjamin argues that

the articulation of “the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way that it was’,” thus “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy” or rather the influence of the historian (255).

The purposing or the teleological organizing of history allows for old meanings to be repurposed into new contexts, historical figures in particular. Kiberd explains the transformation of history into “a form of science fiction” for Irish nationalists: “[T]he exponents of revolution had to present their intentions under the guise of a return to the idealized patterns of the past . . . Each man put on the mask of a historical actor to bring something new into being” (293).

“Cyclops” features other forms of “myth making” outside of the epic. Following the Nameless One’s recollection to Joe about a particularly unsavory Jewish merchant, an interpolation based around monetary value begins: “For nonperishable goods bought of Moses Herzog of 13 Saint Kevin’s parade in the city of Dublin, Wood quay ward, merchant, hereinafter called the vendor, and sold and delivered to Michael E. Geraghty, esquire, of 29 Arbour hill in the city of Dublin, Arran quay ward, gentleman, hereinafter called the purchaser” (12.33-37).<sup>3</sup> In this monetary based discourse, the economical aspects of the interaction are highlighted as other details of personal exchange are left unwritten. The words used in language, as postulated by Bakhtin, “[H]ave the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency . . . Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived and its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions” (*Dialogic* 293). As Bloom explains to pub-goers the “natural phenomena” that occurred after a hanging, he is named as the “distinguished scientist Herr Luitpold Blumendruft” and begins to recount it in medical jargon (12.468). This discourse emphasizes the empirical and biological aspects of the hanging rather than the ethical; it promotes the language of “the best approved tradition of medical science” (12.471). Journalistic rhetoric is rife with sensationalism in the depiction of an execution: “The last farewell was

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<sup>3</sup> Gifford identifies the style of this as “that of a legal document in a civil suit for nonpayment of debts” (316).

affecting in the extreme. From the belfries far and near the funeral deathbell tolled unceasingly while all around the gloomy precincts rolled the ominous warning of a hundred muffled drums punctuated by the hollow booming pieces of ordnance” (12.525-28). The hackneyed style culminates in absurdity as Samuel Beckett writes, “Here form *is* content, content *is* form,” for each discourse is embodied with its own intentions (503).

W. Taylor Steven states that history being “the study of what man has made, is therefore, first of all, the study of language” (47). The language of history is explored in “Oxen of the Sun” as Joyce meticulously details the development of the English language. Joyce’s letter to Frank Budgen outlines the symbolic intent of the episode: “[T]he idea being the crime committed against fecundity by sterilizing the act of coition. Technique: a nineparted episode without divisions . . . This progression is also linked back at each part . . . with the natural stages of development in the embryo and the periods of faunal evolution in general” (*Selected Letters* 251-52). The episode opens with a ritual calling for fertility: “Deshil Holles Eamus . . . Send us a bright one, light one, Horhorn, quickening and wombfruit” (14.1-2). As the “various styles contain their own system of values,” they are “altered by the style chosen” and therefore carry “with it a system of values (Lawrence 136). The opening passages emphasize fecundity while also expressing nationalistic sentiments: “. . . by no exterior splendor is the prosperity of a nation more efficaciously asserted than by the measure of how far forward may have progressed the tribute of its solicitude for that proliferent continuance” (14.12-14). In the Bakhtinian sense, each style exhibits “the specific flavor of a given genre: they knit together with specific points of view, specific approaches, forms of thinking, nuances, and accents characteristic of the given genre” (*Dialogic* 289). This language imbedded with the teleology of nationalism, promoting the “proliferent continuance” of a nation for the sake of “prosperity.” The concept of canned

sardines is rendered as “a vat of silver that was moved by craft to open in which lay strange fishes withouten heads” that “lie in an oily water brought there from Portugal land” (14.149-53). The rendering of the past through the present reveals the irony of anachronism. With its modern setting in a hospital, it is described in terms of older styles while new life is brought. The styles change and thus new meanings are born.<sup>4</sup> MacCabe identifies that with “each change of discourse, the figures reform us like elements in a kaleidoscope . . . our position too is alterable: subject and object are both mere effects of the anatomy of this discourse” (126).

The scope of stylization extends to the presentation of interior monologue. Bloom, “chewing the cud of reminiscence,” looks back upon his childhood in the style of Charles Lamb: “No longer is Leopold . . . that staid agent of publicity and holder of a modest substance in the funds. A score of years are blown away. He is young Leopold. There, as in a retrospective arrangement, a mirror within a mirror (hey, presto!) he beholdeth himself. That young figure of then is seen, precociously manly, walking on a nipping morning from the old house” (14.1041-46).<sup>5</sup> Bloom’s childhood memories, characterized by Lamb’s “gentle pathos and nostalgia” (Gifford 432), are thus recalled in a style that existed before his birth, acting as a “mirror within a mirror.” Reflecting a reflection of the past, Joyce challenges traditional conceptions of history. The generation of history and language is self-reflective, as each act to recontextualizes the other. Language is the mirror of history as history is the mirror of language. Bakhtin details the evolution of style as “no simple act of reproduction,” it is rather a “further creative development of another’s . . . discourse in a new context and under new conditions” (*Dialogic* 349). Historical figures such as “the late ingenious” Charles Darwin are depicted in prose styles of past

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<sup>4</sup> Eliot remarks, “No poet, no artist of any art, has complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciating of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (38).

<sup>5</sup> Gifford characterizes the style of Lamb to be “gentle pathos and nostalgia,” something that is quite fitting for Bloom’s demeanor (432).

generations, leaving a “missing link of creation’s chain desiderated” (14.858-59). As Spoo argues, Joyce “satirizes the notion of history as an organic process” (147). The anachronisms presented subvert the notions of progress development. Blooms scientific proclivities are explored in the style of evolutionary theorist Thomas Henry Huxley, “[W]e are all born in the same way but we all die in different ways” (14.1241-42). Unlike “Cyclops,” the styles exhibited are mostly “devoid of satiric intention” and rather have the effect of “pastiche than of travesty” (Gilbert 290). The satirical nature lies within how they styles are used represent the present.<sup>6</sup> In detailing a history of English prose, Joyce echoes Bakhtin’s notion that “the important thing is not only forms for transmitting another’s discourse, but the fact that in such forms there can always be found in the embryonic beginnings of what is required for an artistic representation of another’s discourse” (*Dialogic* 347). While the text subverts the notion of linearity, it is also still a historical retrospective of style. “Oxen” thus rewrites literary history as “repetition rather than origin” (Spoo 146).

The apotheosis of “Oxen” is what Joyce describes as “a frightful jumble of Pidigin English, nigger English, Cockney, Irish, Bowery slang, and broken doggerel” (*Collected Letters* 252). The teleological development established in the episode culminates with what Bakhtin would classify as the “carnavalesque”: “A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (*Rabelais* 4). As Bakhtin explains, “[C]arnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions . . . It was hostile to all that was immortalized and

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Burgess writes that Joyce sees literary history “as a series of concentric circles, himself the outer ring” as opposed to it being linear (156).

completed” (*Rabelais* 10).<sup>7</sup> In this style, all dialogue overlaps and exhibits the same drunken exuberance: “’Tis, sure. What say? In the speakeasy. Tight. I shee you, shir. Bantam, two days teetee. Bowsing nowt but claretwine. Garn! Have a glint, do. Gum, I’m jiggered. And been to the barber he have. Too full for words” (14.1507-09). The subversion of the teleological development of English acts to level the language of history. The carnivalesque works to combat what Bakhtin identified as “the official feasts,” for medieval culture “looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present” (*Rabelais* 9). The grand vision of language evoked in the beginning of the episode ends with the same incoherence, “a shout in the street” in the words of Stephen. Beckett’s observations on *Finnegans Wake* are applicable: “Mr. Joyce has desophisticated language. And it is worth while remarking that no language is so sophisticated as English” (503).<sup>8</sup>

History is perhaps a word known by all men. It acts to construct identities and to determine the present and the continued conceptualization brings new meaning. Discourse, in Bakhtin’s terms, thus “lives . . . beyond itself, in a living impulse towards the object” (*Dialogic* 292). The discourse of language in *Ulysses* works to recontextualize and teleologically organize history. History is in this sense valued by its meaning and its linguistically represented signs. In the reproduction of history, it is narrativized and subject to the discourse of language. History is then not merely a nightmare, but a metaphysical abstraction made available through language. Through the representation the past, a dialogue is created between the historical and the linguistic, acting as disappointed bridge, as they both attempt to signify each other.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ulysses* as a whole can be seen as carnivalesque. In particular, Bloom embodies Bakhtin’s notion of “grotesque realism” in which “the bodily element . . . is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all people” (*Rabelais* 19).

<sup>8</sup> Joyce himself comments, “Writing in English is the most ingenious torture ever devised for sins committed in previous lives. The English reading public explains the reason why” (*Selected Letters* 230).

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