

SEASIDE
'SELF-EXPLORA-
TION'
IN ***ULYSSES***

When the reader arrives at Sandymount Strand in "Nausicaa" for the second time in *Ulysses*, they are not greeted by the warm voice of Leopold Bloom, but the almost cloyingly sweet voice of the young Gerty McDowell. In a flowery feminine language, the episode slowly unfolds into the impassioned account of a voyeuristic and exhibitionistic sex act between a crippled girl and a middle aged man on the shore at sunset. As Richard Brown explains in his book *James Joyce and Sexuality*, "Bloom's masturbation has often been a puzzle to critics, both those who find it unequivocally exceptionable and proof of either Joyce's or Bloom's moral bankruptcy and those who find it rather poignant and sad."¹ Both of these interpretations – that "Nausicaa" is either obscene or pitiful – seem understandable at first; it is easy to feel Bloom is taking advantage of a vulnerable subject who is naïve and narcissistic. But this kind of interpretation undermines the episode and the work in general. Works like this episode, which have both such a lucid and direct account and a real emotional openness to connection, are far too rare; it is best to be delicate with it and not to dismiss it only on account of how this episode appears at first, especially when it was crafted by Joyce to upset the normal subject-object formula. While there is nothing obscene or brutal about this episode, there is certainly a tension between some very profound elements of the psyche that make the chapter emotionally ambiguous; this may account for some of the negative interpretations. In order to expose these ambiguities and to uncover the delicacy of *Ulysses* where it accused of obscenity, one must first understand Gerty and Bloom's, and ultimately, Stephen's, profound subjectivities and how they change over the course of the work. By examining how each character functions as a subject, how each interacts with objects through desire, and finally how each finally reshapes themselves through this interaction, it is possible to understand some of the problems of subjectivity, of objectification, and of idealizing – or of not being able to idealize at all.

The unsaid sexual *relationship* between Gerty and Bloom – for it is very much a mutual sexual relationship, reciprocal in every respect, and in no way coercive – generates a very unconventional model relationship: empowering yet complex, completely unspoken yet still understood. As Brown says, "we do not need to think of [Bloom's masturbation in 'Nausicaa'] as sadly or traumatically isolated from any form of human contact [...]. [T]his act is pointedly performed with another person."² In order to understand how a relationship between two people, who never exchange words and who have never met before, is possible, one must suspend the impulse to judge based on appearances and instead examine what the characters are feeling.

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Gerty and Bloom's interaction takes place in the space between two individuals: it is not the merging of two into one, as might be the case with a sex act with a reproductive purpose. Brown calls this 'onanisme à deux':

...once we recognize that, in the modern sense, almost all sexuality is to be understood as onanistic inasmuch as its goal is gratificatory not reproductive, then there seems to be an important similarity between the act preformed by Bloom and Gerty and that preformed simultaneously by Molly and Boylan at 7 Eccles street.³

Both sexual encounters are for the purpose of *gratification* and take place between two individuals who explore themselves and each other through their sexual contact.

Perhaps it is through this encounter that Gerty and Leopold are able to discover parts of themselves; they are able to *recognize* themselves through the other, and thus achieve a more profound *self-consciousness*. It should be noted that these are Hegelian terms, and they are taken from the *Phenomenology of Mind*. The interpretation here is a bastardized one; but perhaps it is still suitable. We may take from Hegel that when two consciousnesses meet, they interact in a manner in which *desire* and a conflict for power is present, since each consciousness desires to see the other as an extension of themselves. And when this fails, since it is impossible (they are not able to control the other), each consciousness has to reform itself. In reforming itself, a new, profounder consciousness is generated. The consciousness' constant, impossible drive to affirm that the world itself is simply an extension of its own subjectivity is known as desire. But since there are other subjectivities, the consciousness can only change itself, and not the other. Keeping this framework in mind, encountering Gerty is an occasion for profound introspection on the part of Bloom. It is clear that he is not fully capable of recognizing her subjectivity, much like the basic consciousness above. He would rather possess her through desire, animating her through his fantasy by keeping her at a distance.

In order for Bloom to avoid recognizing Gerty—because he is initially averse to this—he must first render himself as invisible as possible. According to Philip Sicker, in his article "Alone in the Hiding Twilight: Bloom's Cinematic Gaze in '*Nausicaa*'". Bloom imagines himself as a spectator in a cinema. He sees himself in a "zone of fantasy with 'highly anonymous clientele'... Bloom imagines himself, as Gerty puts it, 'alone in the hiding twilight.'" As Sicker points out, Bloom can only enjoy Gerty

as an *object* from afar when she does not return his gaze. Bloom can only sustain his fantasy by "suppressing this knowledge"⁵ – the possibility of Gerty as a spectator as well. He must control the spectacle, but in order to do so, he must exist only in a disembodied, objectless *gaze*. By creating a visual distance, Bloom's "pleasure is animated by a tension between filling and perpetuating the sense of lack [of *desire*]... he has no real intention of bridging the gulf between himself and Gerty."⁶ He wants only to watch her, and create a fantasy for himself, ignoring as much as possible the actual person he is watching.

Bloom asserts his power over her through his gaze: "the power of the male resides in its capacity to envision the female object as something other than itself."⁷ Thus, Bloom must fashion Gerty into something she is not, according to Sicker, into a female object that is "infinitely desirable but utterly inaccessible."⁸ She oscillates, in Bloom's recollection, between "O sweet little," "little wench," "girlwhite," and "Devil;" he moves fluidly between two characterizations of her, between innocent and erotic, until they find themselves impossibly in the same object.⁹ Bloom is driven to suppress Gerty's subjectivity in order to create a fantasy for himself. He would rather objectify her and use her for his own purposes than accept her responsive looks, and contemplate her feelings in any depth. A tension exists between his desire to alter her into his ideal and his desire to let her remain herself.

It is interesting that he treats her as a supernatural force. His invocation of the imagery of a "hot little devil" elevates a part of her, which is threatening to him, into a supernatural fantasy.¹⁰ This elevation is probably due to Gerty's transgressive behaviour during the encounter, looking at him and regarding him as embodied object threatens him. Her agency must be made unreal, into something unbelievable.

But reality (through the narrator) finally intrudes on Bloom, cutting him off from his fantasy: "she walked with a certain quiet dignity characteristic of her but with care and very slowly because, because Gerty MacDowell was... – Tight boots? No, she's lame! O!"¹¹ The intercession between Gerty's narration and that of the objective narrator comes the words "because, because."¹² Gerty asserts herself-her true self and her dignity as a subject-through the act of walking away from Bloom. By showing herself to be something else than the impossible ideal that he has created of her, Gerty is able to reclaim her selfhood from Bloom's gaze and shift the burden of self-analysis on to him.

After this point, almost the entire chapter is spent with Bloom, who is reeling from the clash between reality and fantasy. Whether he fully embraces Gerty's subjectivity is ambiguous, but he does make half an

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effort, in the end, to communicate with her. But, perhaps, this effort to put into words his feelings or his motivations: "I AM A" is the most consciously violent act of the chapter.¹³ This act, though, is tempered by the fact that he does not fully carry it out. Writing her a message is a way of taking revenge for her (unintentional) breaking of his fantasy. By asserting himself as *something*, he can no longer function as a canvas for her desires to be projected. By determining himself, her fantasy would be broken. That he leaves his message open-ended, unfinished (and finally erased) is a reflection of his compassion for her.

That the whole chapter is almost without direct communication between these two characters, Gerty and Bloom, allows their respective fantasy spaces to remain separate. They can indulge in fantasy by remaining silent. Bloom does admit that "there is a kind of language between [himself and Gerty]." ¹⁴ He reflects, "when she leaned back, felt an ache at the butt of my tongue." ¹⁵ He must keep down his voice, suppress it, in order for a communication on a non-vocal level to continue, for vocalizing his pleasure would involve words-it would determine his desire and do violence to fantasy that cannot be contained in words. Yet Bloom still feels that there is a communication between them, acknowledging Gerty as capable of a response. He admits to himself that she knew he was watching her. This also makes him wonder what she saw in him. So, despite all of his crudeness and self-absorbed fantasy, Bloom resists the urge to break Gerty's fantasy by asserting his patriarchal power with his voice, and he tries cautiously to see himself in her eyes. Vocalization would break the atmosphere of mutual knowledge tempered with the possibility of ignorance on the part of the other, in which this act can be sustained. If Bloom were to acknowledge explicitly, to himself and to Gerty, that he was participating in this act of transgression (demonstrating that he himself was conscious of it), instead of just being unable "to resist the sight," by saying something, anything, his desire would become explicitly masturbatory, pertaining only to himself, instead of being motivated only by Gerty's power. ¹⁶ Through silence, he is complicit, to a degree, with her control over the situation. Philip Sicker points out that "Gerty is unable to find the authorized language to express her sexual cravings... she associates patriarchal authority with what Dykstra terms 'the realm of the word.'" ¹⁷ Bloom's silence allows him to withhold his authority and thus permits the act to continue.

It is clear that Gerty, during her 'performance', is masturbating along with Bloom; she vigorously swings her thighs and openly describes her climax. His desire drives her desire and vice versa. This bears little

resemblance to the text that "Nausicaa" is undoubtedly parodying, Have-lock Ellis' 1897 *Autoeroticism*. Much of the criticism about this episode falls in to the same pitfalls that Ellis had:

Unaware of the novelist's radical subversion of a text that figures women as sexually passive and unself-conscious, recent critics have typically regarded Gerty much as Ellis regarded his young female [who Ellis watched pleasuring herself in a train station]: as culturally circumscribed, impervious and self-deceiving. Denying Gerty both lucid subjectivity and agency, Thomas Richards and Garry Leonard view her as a purely social construction and stress her role as a scripted performer within the confined ideological space of popular culture.¹⁸

That Joyce, according to Sicker, was specifically parodying Ellis' work renders any critique that adheres to a reading that resembles Ellis' text unsatisfactory. These critiques tend to revolve around the idea that Bloom is a knowing viewer of a woman who is a helpless narcissistic object. Thus, we end up with compelling but ultimately inadequate readings of the episode: such as, "beauty renders [Gerty] incapable of constructing or imagining herself, except as an object with a patriarchal system of exchange."¹⁹ Readings like these fail to comprehend that Joyce was undermining a tradition of thinking about women in exactly this way.

Gerty's actual subjectivity is much more complex. Her masturbation is not merely the physical act of a 'lust filled' yet utterly naïve girl, who is unable to control herself; such an interpretation gives her little agency at all. In order to understand Gerty in all her depth, one must first concede that she wants a very real connection with another, and she is not 'onanistically' trying to satisfy a basic urge. Rather, she is masturbating on the beach with Bloom because it is the most transgressive form of pleasure available to her. Sicker's evaluation of her agency through

twin modes of active and controlling subjectivity [those of exhibitionistic agency and visual pleasure], operating together with bodily friction, produce a sexual climax that bears only outward resemblance to the one Ellis described and to the formula present in conceptions of object shaping male gaze and power.²⁰

By both exhibiting herself to Bloom and by taking pleasure in his observation, Gerty is able to derive a complete erotic satisfaction from the act.

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She is actively in control of what happens on the beach between herself and Bloom. Thus, Gerty is in a position of power, one that goes far to usurp patriarchal authority around her.

That she has a gaze of her own is very clear throughout the chapter. She is constantly thinking about Bloom and watching him, trying to understand him and constructing him in her mind's eye. Thus, she gets the erotic satisfaction that arises in "looking at another person as an object."²¹ Her gaze helps her achieve something resembling her "ultimate desire," which is

to transcend the 'subject/object dichotomy' through an open exchange of looks that would recognize the desiring subjectivity of both parties. She longs for a man who will 'gaze... deep down into her eyes' (13.242) in a moment of reciprocal ardor, and she seeks to crown her encounter with Bloom with looks of mutual recognition.²²

Gerty wants to show that she too has a gaze, and that there is a fundamental equality in this recognition. Gerty wants to be recognized in the most basic sense: "yes, it was her he was looking at and there was meaning in his look. His eyes burned into her as though they would search her through and through, read her very soul."²³ And through this recognition she desires, in a very Hegelian way to become *one* with another.

Gerty wants to craft Bloom into an object that recognizes her, one that has the subjectivity capable of seeing her for who she is. Bloom, on the other hand, wants only to use Gerty as an object of desire, both impossibly unattainable and infinitely alluring. Although he is aware of Gerty's gaze, he must disavow it in order to reflect pleasurably on the situation. Gerty, though, can derive pleasure from being watched and knowing about it; she can enjoy being both the subject and the object of a gaze.

How each character finds, as Richard Ellmann observes, "a way of joining ideal and real" also reflects what they take away from the act on the beach.²⁴ As Sicker more than adequately shows, Gerty is the one in control of the situation. Her motivations, her consent, and her narrativizing, make the act between her and Bloom possible; it is her openness and her ability to justify the act that sustains it.

Gerty needs a reaction from Bloom that figures her as its cause. Eventually, "the identification and knowledge of another's desire confers a power essential for the individual's construction of erotic pleasure."²⁵ For all intents and purposes, she might as well be having sex with

Bloom; she gives herself to him openly. Her pleasure does not rely on visual separation as Bloom's does.

Gerty's narrative is a reflection of her agency. Her narrative is feminine: active, yet reliant on another. "Just as male sexual prowess is often substantiated by fantasies breaking down feminine resistance, so too Gerty's sense of herself as a seductive female is intensified by dreams of overcoming Bloom's mature and solitary reserve."²⁶ Bloom, for Gerty, is a lot of things that do not particularly reflect the character of Bloom as portrayed throughout the rest of the book. Still, her narrativizing allows Bloom and herself to engage in a 'conversation' of sorts. While she badly misreads some crucial information about him (she believes he is a widower and possibly a movie star), at least she tries to deal with him, for the most part, as a person. The question, of who he is, is not as essential to the fantasy as to the fact that he recognizes her; this is the all-important part. For Bloom, to keep Gerty at a distance is the only way to sustain his desires. For Gerty, it is to know him, or as much as she can perceive him for who he is and how he relates to her that drives her desire. That they come together in some sort of uncontrollable passion is the catalyst for Gerty's climax: "and she let him and she saw that he saw [...] and she wasn't ashamed and he wasn't either to look in that immodest way like that because he couldn't resist the sight of the wondrous revelation [...] and he kept on looking, looking."²⁷ Gerty needs him to recognize her (and in particular, her power over him), rather than have him conform to any one particular fantasy.

In Hegelian terms, Gerty's desire for recognition from Bloom means she is striving for something more than a subject-object relationship. Thus, she is self-conscious, realizing that the object, Bloom, will not satisfy her unless he responds by desiring her in return. Only by accepting mutual desire will something new, something perhaps generative, be introduced.

Having examined both Gerty and Bloom in detail and having derived various answers about their motivations and relationship, it is possible to examine Stephen's moment on the same beach earlier in the day. In the chapter "Proteus," a visually impaired Stephen walks along the same strand. He wanders and wonders, without very much to draw his attention, eventually composing a fragment of gothic poetry. He examines himself in detail, from his most adolescent lies and affectations, to his most grandiose thoughts about the world. Yet Stephen has no fixed place to start, he cannot detach himself *from himself*. In her master's thesis, *His Cheeks Were Aflame*, Sylvie Hill explains the origin of this particular limitation: "Stephen forgets his audience, so his creations remain esoteric and narcissistic."²⁸ Invoking the question of audience obviously resembles

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what has so far been said. According to Hill, Stephen, like Gerty and Bloom, is self-pleasuring while on the beach. While this interpretation is not substantiated enough to be convincing, Hill's premise, nonetheless, helps put Stephen into a similar context to that of Bloom and Gerty. This allows one to understand Stephen on the same terms as have been previously discussed.

One of Stephen's many preoccupations in this chapter is his existence, as both subject and object-ideas that have, so far, been central to the relationship between Gerty and Bloom. In considering the "ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes."²⁹ It is possible that Stephen is contemplating himself as subject. Exploring his own gaze, he tells himself to "shut your eyes and see."³⁰ He is, throughout the chapter, trying to reveal to himself what or who he is. He disappoints himself when he opens his eyes again: "See now. There all the time with out you: and ever shall be, world without end."³¹ Much like Hegel's consciousness, Stephen wants to demonstrate to himself that the world is somehow dependent on him, and that he is independent, free from particularity (and objectivity). After reminding himself that this is impossible, Stephen sets out on alternate path to proving himself, independent of the world. He wants to be self-creating, and through various behaviours, wishes to change himself into something else. He slowly goes through some of the ways he has tried to create himself in the past. He wanted to be a Parisian: "Just say in the most natural tone: when I was in Paris"; he wanted to have uncles in the army and the judiciary: "You told the Clongowes gentry you had an uncle a judge and an uncle a general"; he wanted to become one with the authors of the past: "When one reads the strange pages of long gone one feels that one is at one with those who once..."³² Stephen is constantly striving, in this episode, to become something other than himself. His problem though, it seems, is that he does not himself know who he is. David Hayman, as referenced in Hill's thesis, explains Stephen's composition of a poem on the beach thus: "Stephen is trying to connect with the world through his art."³³ Since proving his independence is impossible, Stephen wants dominion over the world through desire, and poetry is only his latest method.

Perhaps this failed connection is not due to an extreme detachment from the world, but rather, happens because Stephen is too close to the world in all its hideousness. Reality is terrifying for Stephen, since he sees death and decay everywhere, and he is unable to fantasize anything into an ideal, something worthy of desire. He can only produce outward fantasy by lying to other people, trying to change how they perceive

him. This is ineffective, the way that he perceives himself remains the same. His problem is that he cannot lie to himself enough to create a fantasy; he cannot idealize. In not knowing himself, he cannot even know what he is supposed to desire. Since, by desiring, the subject, empty in itself, can discover itself in objects. Stephen is stuck in a place where he cannot even interact with a fantasy, onanistically or otherwise.

His attempt to connect with the world, by writing on the beach a Romantic poem, of which we receive either only a fragment or is in fact only a fragment, demonstrates his paralyzed capacity for desire. Hill writes that "[Stephen] composes a poem that reads: 'He comes, pale vampire, through storm his eyes, his bat sails bloodying the sea, mouth to her mouth's kiss'(3.397-98)."³⁴ She goes on to argue that "[Stephen is] giving life, to an inanimate or imaginary object of desire."³⁵ Hill ties this to a masturbatory act which, as discussed, is unsubstantiated, but still gives insight into Stephen's art. Suzette Henke, whom Hill references, explains that "art alone promises to provide a refuge from reality."³⁶ It is only through writing that Stephen can generate desire, but since he is unable to finish the poem, he is unable to, in fact, beget desire.

He can create an imaginative narrative but, since it pertains to nothing, it becomes meaningless. The fragment only refers to a physical embrace; it lacks emotion. As readers of his work, we do not know what to feel: is it an embrace of passion or of violence? Whether Stephen himself knows is unclear. He is stuck in reality, in contemplation of the physical and the mortal. His most fantastical and erotic moment is also weighed down by reality: "Touch me. Soft soft soft soft hand. I am lonely here. O, touch me soon, now. What is that word known to all men? I am quiet here alone. Sad too. Touch, touch me."³⁷ His desire for physical connection is as far as he can go: there is no narrative or object he is referring to. He cannot construct an abstract or ideal concept, nor can he find anyone who will embody his ideals, his fantasies. He is isolated, a subject without even an object to desire, let alone another subject who will reveal him to himself.

The interplay between fantasy and reality, ideal and real is a strong undercurrent in the chapters on the strand. The characters' negotiations of their fantasies and realities are the anchors for much of their behaviours and thoughts; how they approach these ideas defines the emotional engagement they can have with one another and eventually themselves. Bloom is ruled by the desire to desire; thus, he defines reality according to his fantasies. These fantasies that are too abstract for the situation and are doomed to fail. By creating these impossible fantasies, he does not acknowledge the subjectivity of Gerty and must subdue her to sustain

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his fantasy. He leaves with a guilty conscience because he realizes what he has done to her. Despite his attempts to subjugate her into his ideal, Gerty transcends him. She ultimately remains in control of the situation. By creating a narrative that justifies her transgressive acts against patriarchal mores, Gerty is able to go beyond the subject-object relationship by believing that Bloom *recognizes* her. As object of his gaze, she can interpret it in any manner she chooses; she decides, in her inner narrative, that his gaze is the product of passionate love. Gerty is able to enjoy the situation and gain an empowered sense of self because she realizes recognition means accepting the power one has over another and giving power over oneself to them in turn. This can only happen if one accepts the other as a subject. Reality and fantasy line up; while she gets some details wrong, the fact that they are locked together in passion remains true. Stephen, lastly, cannot create a meaningful fantasy. He is stuck in the real and cannot ignore it: he is distraught by its meaninglessness. Only by encountering another subject can he be cured of his malaise. In "Proteus," his failed narrativizing only demonstrates his incapacity to generate an ideal with emotional meaning.

As subjects, the characters in *Ulysses* have to negotiate each other by first positing each other as objects. Unable to initially see other as *real*, they construct fantasies about others. These fantasies bridge the space between the characters; their subjective gazes serve as instruments for their desire. As the book seems to demonstrate, only by being able to create a proper narrative can the characters incorporate the other into themselves and become self-conscious. The situations of the characters must be met with an art that balances the self and the other, as well as reality and ideal.

Endnotes

- ¹ Richard Brown, *Joyce and Sexuality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 60.
- ² *Ibid.*, 61.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 62
- ⁴ Philip Sicker, "Alone in the Hiding Twilight: Blooms Cinematic Gaze in 'Nausicaa'." *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 36 no. 4 (Summer, 1999): 830.
- ⁵ Sicker, "Alone in the Hiding Twilight," 830.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 833.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 835.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 834.
- ⁹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 359; *Ibid.*, 364; *Ibid.*, 352.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 351.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 364.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 355.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 350.
- ¹⁷ Sicker, "Alone in the Hiding Twilight," 114.
- ¹⁸ Philip Sicker, "Unveiling Desire: Pleasure Power and Masquerade in Joyce's 'Nausicaa,'" *Joyce Studies Annual*, Vol. 14 (Summer 2003): 96.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 116.
- ²³ Joyce, *Ulysses*, 342.
- ²⁴ Brown, *Joyce and Sexuality*, 60.
- ²⁵ Sicker, "Unveiling Desire," 103.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Joyce, *Ulysses*, 350.
- ²⁸ Sylvie Hill, *His Cheeks were Aflame: Masturbation, Sexual Frustration and Artistic Failure in Joyce's Portrait of Stephen Dedalus*, (Masters Thesis. Carlton University, Ottawa).
- ²⁹ Joyce, *Ulysses*, 37.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 40-41.
- ³³ Hill, *His Cheeks were Aflame*, 1.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ³⁷ Joyce, *Ulysses*, 48.

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