

## Joyce and the Colonial Commodity

Emer Nolan  
(NUI Maynooth, Ireland)

16 June 2004 was the centenary of Bloomsday, the day on which Joyce's *Ulysses* is set. In Dublin, the anniversary was marked by an enormous conference on James Joyce, involving some eight hundred scholars from all over the world, as well as by public festivities and much discussion in the newspapers and on radio and television of Joyce's life, of his extraordinary literary masterpiece, and of the phenomenon of his international reputation (the latter hitherto regarded with some suspicion in Ireland). Many pubs, restaurants and companies also enthusiastically cashed in on Joyce's habit of referring to real businesses and products in *Ulysses*, by using his image and his words to sell their wares. In one sense, then, it seemed that in 2004 Joyce had finally come home to Dublin; but this was also a moment of unprecedented commercial exploitation of his work. This may not have surprised Joyce, however, given his own profound understanding of capitalist economics and the culture of consumerism in *Ulysses*.

Joyce's insight in this regard is remarkable, given the historical conditions of early

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twentieth-century Ireland that are reflected so well in his early works, particularly *Dubliners*. In these stories, Joyce subtly demonstrates how the stagnation and frustration so evident in the lives of his characters are linked to a history of colonial oppression and trauma. This helps to account for their misery, poverty and occasional violence.<sup>1)</sup> He refuses the idealization of Ireland and the Irish that is a prominent feature of the writings of some of his contemporaries, and portrays Dublin and its citizens in that bleakly naturalistic light cast by his famously lean and scrupulous style. He insists that the Irish people would be better off for taking a good look at themselves in his unflattering mirror. But by 1922, with *Ulysses*, Joyce had broken with naturalism. The multifarious and constantly-evolving styles of this modernist epic text are testimony to Joyce's enormous creative energy. *Ulysses* also suggests the potential of the author's native culture to grow and change. Thus, Dublin remains the colonial capital that it had been in 1904 but, in the new novel, Joyce transcends, rather than records, its limitations by deploying a new mode of narrative that involves an unprecedented rendition of the speech, politics and unconscious fantasies of those who dwell there, including his anti-hero Leopold Bloom.

Ireland has indeed undergone spectacular change since the original Bloomsday; but it could be argued that this came quite late in the twentieth century. Initially in the 1960s, up to the Oil Crisis of 1973, and even more emphatically in the 1990s, from 1993-2001, and again from 2002 to the present, that economic transformations on a par with the political transformations of 1922 were achieved. The creation of the independent Irish Free State (later the Irish Republic) was momentous but Ireland did not participate in the general post-war economic development of

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1) For compelling readings of *Dubliners* in a colonial context, see essays by Seamus Deane, David Lloyd and Luke Gibbons in *Semicolonial Joyce*, eds Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Western Europe and the USA. In addition, the late 1960s saw the renewed outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland, dormant since that statelet's sectarian origins. This violence had its source in the British State's brutal reaction to organized protests against systematic discrimination against the Catholic, nationalist minority in that province. Even Ireland's accession to the Common Market (later the European Union) in 1973 did not bring about many immediate benefits; the economic recession of the 1980s was severe and protracted. But all of this changed in the mid-1990s, with the beginning of the economic boom referred to as the "Celtic Tiger" — the European equivalent of the economic "miracles" experienced by several Asian countries in the post-War period and already known in Germany in the period between the end of the War and the integration of East and West Germany.<sup>2)</sup> In addition, the Good Friday Agreement, ratified by a popular vote in 1998 (although, at the time of writing, not yet fully implemented), promises an eventual resolution of the Northern conflict.

This has not been a history of linear development or slow advances. Ireland has recently experienced a "break" between one phase of development and the next, rather than a process of gradual evolution. And of course any reader of Joyce will appreciate that in places like Ireland, which have long experience of disruption and exploitation, history rarely has the shapely form of a straightforward narrative (see the "Nestor" episode of *Ulysses* for Stephen Dedalus's suspicion of the narratives of official, imperial history). There seems to be a correlation between the disjunctures and traumas of Irish historical experience and the various abrupt interventions and

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2) For an account of this crucial period, see Ray MacSharry and Padraic White, *The Making of the Celtic Tiger: the inside story of Ireland's boom economy* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2000). For a more sceptical account of the social effects of the boom, see Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman eds, *The end of Irish history?: Critical reflections on the Celtic Tiger* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

crosscuts of Joyce's *Ulysses and Finnegans Wake*. But it is also the case that such ruptures are also widely taken to be characteristic of the experience of modernity. Thus it is often claimed that it was Ireland's colonial experience, deeply ingrained over a long period, that made it so precocious in its capacity to represent the experience of modernity, most especially in its shattering of traditional beliefs and attitudes.

It might well strike the visitor to Ireland today that the country has abruptly entered onto the world of advanced capitalism, with all its goods and consumer pleasures, without ever having passed through the economic stages of industrialisation (most of Ireland's current wealth is based on its electronic and pharmaceutical industries; there has never been a well-developed manufacturing base in the southern part of the country). But rather than say that these enormous changes have rendered Joyce's works irrelevant as a commentary on the present, I would argue on the contrary that it is only now that we can point to specific reasons why Joyce is coming into his own as an interpreter of Ireland's twenty-first century culture. For he shows us the appeal and the pleasure of the commodity in a unique way; he understands, too, how his own art is bound up with the modern regime of consumerism and its fetishisation of artifacts. Nor does he fall into a merely uncritical celebration of this modernity, as other writers, born long after him, have done.

In order to understand something of the specific allure of the commodity in colonial conditions, I would like to turn to another great Irish story-teller of Joyce's time, Maurice O'Sullivan of the Blasket Islands. In his memoir of his boyhood on the Blaskets, as a member of a small Irish-speaking community living on a remote island off the Atlantic coast of Ireland, O'Sullivan tells us of a period during which his community experienced totally unexpected and apparently miraculous changes. One morning, the people awoke to find the Bay of Dingle filled with white timber — a very valuable resource on this treeless island. In the months that followed, the

sea brought them all kinds of wonderful things: flour, meat, petrol, wine and even shoes, stockings and clothes. On one occasion, there were enough fine watches for every man, woman and child on the island. All of these goods came from ships wrecked by war; and one day, the islanders discovered the body of a seaman who had been killed in S.S. Lusitania (the sinking of this liner by a German U-boat created a reaction that helped bring the United States into the First World War). But for the Blaskets, the war was a time of luxury and festivity. As one man remarked happily, "if it continues, this will be the Land of the Young" (he refers to the paradise of Celtic legend).<sup>3)</sup> The fantasy world that O'Sullivan describes resembles that depicted in a French song from 1832, quoted by Walter Benjamin in his celebrated study of commodity fetishism in modern Paris:

Rivers will flow with chocolate and tea,  
 Sheep roasted whole will frisk on the plain,  
 And sautéed pike will swim in the Seine.  
 Fricasseed spinach will grow on the ground,  
 Garnished with crushed fried croutons;  
 The trees will bring forth apple compotes,  
 And farmers will harvest boots and coats.  
 It will snow wine, it will rain chickens,  
 And ducks cooked with turnips will fall from the sky.<sup>4)</sup>

These good things to eat and drink are all the sweeter for the fact that no-one or

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3) See Maurice O'Sullivan, *Twenty Years A-growing* [1933](Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2000), Chapters XII and XIII. (First published in the Irish language under the title *Fiche blian ag fáis*).

4) Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 17.

so it seems — has laboured to produce them. It is as if both the manufactured goods and the beautifully prepared foods have come straight from nature.

What can we learn from O'Sullivan's strange and wonderful tale of how the First World War affected an isolated people, who before this time could only dream of such plenty and variety? Although the community had always profited from shipwreck, there had been nothing mildly comparable to the strange and terrible inflow from the war at sea, particularly in 1917-18. The bounty of the sea, O'Sullivan tells us, is shared out among all and enjoyed equally by everyone. There is an atmosphere of festivity and rejoicing in the community; even the children refuse to go to school. This sense of communal celebration is very different from a more familiar image of the consumer as someone who enjoys the pleasures of the modern marketplace in isolation, as a private individual. The war in fact re-awakens the oldest, collective dreams of a Celtic Eden for the islanders, or of a Utopia that they believe they may have actually attained. But the body of the British seaman, and those of the other casualties that are eventually washed up on the Blaskets, remind the islanders that these gifts are bound up with a larger history of violence and atrocity. Nonetheless, we can here grasp Benjamin's point that, in certain conditions, modern commodities evoke memories of a shared collective past and become invested with utopian political desire. Susan Buck-Morss has recently expanded on Benjamin's argument, by pointing out how in the early twentieth-century, in both the United States and the Soviet Union, commodity culture was deeply bound up with the idea of a "mass utopia".<sup>5)</sup> It is only in the late twentieth century, she asserts, that such utopian yearnings were almost entirely eliminated from "advanced" capitalist societies.

In *Ulysses*, Joyce represents a community that had undergone enormous

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5) See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000).

disruption in the half-century before his birth, including the loss of its language, famine and mass emigration. It is not therefore surprising that we can discover in his work an amazed and excited response to the multiplicity and variety of the world of modern commerce. This pleasurable “shock of the modern” may perhaps still be experienced in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger, but some of the more suggestive and progressive implications of Joyce’s stylistic practices are in danger of being overlooked. Yet *Ulysses* can still usefully be read alongside the often less experimental works of contemporary Irish writers.

The most important way in which Joyce succeeds in registering the ambivalence and complexity of the modern is through his depiction of Dublin as an archetypal metropolis (which was hardly the true standing of the city in 1904, whatever about today). It is impossible to be a colonial subject without having already having experienced something of the upheavals of modernization; as Luke Gibbons puts it, “In a culture traumatized by a profound sense of catastrophe, such as Ireland after the Great Famine, is there really any need to await the importation of modernism to blast open the continuum of history?”<sup>6)</sup> In Joyce’s case, it appears that colonisation also lends to the individual a particular insight into space and time as they are experienced in the modern city; the metropolis provides the best image of colonial history. This is in stark contrast to the belief of many Irish nationalists that the true “home” of the Irish people was in the countryside, and that Irish city dwellers lived in a kind of exile from their real nation. Even after independence, it seemed that the Irish were unable imaginatively to reclaim their capital city, disdaining many of its architectural treasures as too closely associated with the colonial regime. Much of the fabric of the city was destroyed during the middle decades of the twentieth century, and only recently is the conservation of the built

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6) Luke Gibbons, “Montage, Modernism and the City”, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 167.

heritage at last being taken seriously. But Joyce consistently depicts even the Irish past in urban terms. One of the most important places in the Dublin of *Ulysses* is the Necropolis of Glasnevin, home to some of the most important characters in the story — May Dedalus, Rudy Bloom, Charles Stewart Parnell. The city of the dead sometimes appears to be more crowded than the Dublin inhabited by the living; these “Famished ghosts”<sup>7)</sup> are a constant reminder of the privations and sufferings of the past.

Joyce frequently uses such phantasmal images of the urban crowd in *Ulysses*, and these crowds are in general associated with intense human need and appetite. When Leopold Bloom is anxious for his lunch in “Lestrygonians”, he meditates mournfully: “Cityful passing away, other cityful coming, passing away too: other coming on, passing away” (*U*, 135). Stephen Dedalus’s image of the starving citizens of medieval Dublin in “Proteus” also parallels Bloom’s horrifying vision of the urban masses. As Bloom passes the stonecutter’s yard on his way to Glasnevin cemetery in the funeral carriage, in “Hades”, he glimpses the religious statues that will eventually grace the graves of dead Dubliners:

Crowded on the spit of land silent shapes appeared, white, sorrowful, holding out calm hands, knelt in grief, pointing. Fragments of shapes, hewn. In white silence: appealing. The best obtainable. Thos. H. Dennany, monumental builder and sculptor.

Passed. (*U*, 82)

These mute, imploring figures represent “the poor dead”, for whom, as Bloom speculates sympathetically, the activities of the living must be as “Smell of grilled beefsteaks to the starving. Gnawing their vitals” (*U*, 89). Interestingly, the dead have

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7) Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed H. W. Gabler (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), 140. Further references in parentheses in the text.

now here themselves been transformed into commodities: they are now for sale from Dennary the stonemason. In such passages, Joyce gives us a vivid sense of the agony of the dead generations and the nightmare of Irish history; elsewhere, however, he is also attracted to portrayals of the Irish past that emphasize its dynamic multiplicity.

In an early essay, Joyce quoted a sixteenth-century travel narrative about Ireland, “in which the writer says that, although he had travelled throughout the world, he had never seen in a single glance what he saw in Galway — a priest elevating the Host, a pack chasing a deer, a ship entering the harbour under full sail, and a salmon being killed with a spear”.<sup>8)</sup> This tableau clearly appeals to his urban sensibility. In general, Joyce is much keener on the city of Galway, as an alternative Irish urban space to Dublin, than on the more sparsely populated areas of the West of Ireland to which so many of his literary contemporaries like Yeats and J.M. Synge were drawn (this western city was also the birthplace of Joyce’s wife, Nora Barnacle). Like the nationalist citizens in Barney Kiernan’s pub in “Cyclops”, Joyce understands Ireland to be a country with a lively, commercial history that had been destroyed by its economic subordination to Britain:

— And our eyes are on Europe, says the citizen. We had our trade with Spain and the French and with the Flemings before those mongrels were pupped, Spanish ale in Galway, the winebark on the winedark waterway ...

— And with the help of the holy mother of God we will again, says the citizen, slapping his thigh. Our harbours that are empty will be full again, Queenstown, Kinsale, Galway, Blacksod Bay, Ventry in the kingdom of Kerry, Killybegs, the third larges harbour in the wide world with a fleet of masts of the Galway Lynches and Cavan O’Reillys and the O’Kennedys of Dublin when

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8) Joyce, *The Critical Writings*, eds Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking, 1959), 230.

the earl of Desmond could make a treaty with the emperor Charles the Fifth himself (*U*, 269).

The citizen is often taken to represent an insular Irish nationalism, yet in his verbal exuberance, and his lists and catalogues, he too reflects the excitement and energy of a distinctly “modern” view of the past, which is also his blueprint for the Irish economic future. Images of a commercial-capitalist paradise combine with suggestions of a mythical-folk land of plenty in several of the interpolations in “Cyclops”. Here Joyce describes the market area of Dublin:

And by that way wend the herds innumerable of bellwethers and flushed ewes and shearling rams and lambs and stubble geese and medium steers and roaring mares and polled calves and longwools and storesheep and Cuffe’s prime springers and culls and sowpigs and baconhogs and the various different varieties of highly distinguished swine and Angus heifers and polly bullocks of immaculate pedigree together with prime premiated milchcows and beeves: and there is ever heard a tramping, cackling, roaring, lowing, bleating, bellowing, rumbling, grunting, champing, chewing, of sheep and pigs and heavyhooved kine from pasturelands of Lusk and Rush and Carrickmines and from the steamy vales of Thomond, from M’Gillicuddy’s reeks the inaccessible and lordly Shannon the unfathomable, and from the gentle declivities of the place of the race of Kiar, their udders distended with superabundance of milk and butts of butter and rennet of cheese and farmer’s firkins and targets of lamb and crannocks of corn and oblong eggs in great hundreds, various in size, the agate and the dun (*U*, 242).

As I have argued elsewhere, it is lamentably inadequate to conclude that Joyce merely satirizes such modernist-nationalist discourses in “Cyclops” or in *Ulysses* as a whole.<sup>9)</sup> Rather his own stylistic dynamism mimics and experiments with the

diverse discourses of modern capitalism. This capitalist world is incipient rather than actual in the Dublin of 1904, but its advent is presaged not just by Joyce's parodies, but also by the conversations and speeches of its citizens.

Thus, multiple versions of Dublin — some historical, some potential — co-exist in *Ulysses*. The book memorializes the drab, provincial backwater of Joyce's youth; but it can also be read as foreshadowing the expanding, confident, attractive capital city of today (which is reflected by Sean Walsh's recent film of *Ulysses, Bloom*(2003), which Margot Norris has analysed; as well as by other directors such as Gerard Stembridge in *About Adam* (2001)). Where Joyce differs from some later Irish artists, however, is in his sensitivity to the processes by which the nightmares of history are converted into the dreamworlds of the modern. He also shows us the interpenetration of the archaic and the modern in the cultural imagination of the people, and finds new literary ways to depict this peculiar overlap. He offers us a less than Utopian image of the modern consumer in Bloom, who carries around Molly's cake of lemon soap all day, and returns home to discover that possession of a jar of Plumtree's Potted Meat has not transformed his house into "An Abode of Bliss". Joyce understands how commodities become fetishes — inanimate objects that people invest with human emotion and meaning. Even Molly, as many feminist readers have suggested, is a kind of sexual fetish in *Ulysses*, her objectified body promising escape from the conflicts and threats of public life in the city. Moreover, the current commodification of Joyce himself was perhaps anticipated by his display of the first copy of *Ulysses* in the window of Shakespeare and Co in Paris, in February 1922, for on-lookers to gaze at and admire. The care Joyce took over the production of the novel, down to the details of the paper to be used and the colour of the dust-jacket, bears out the view that modernist writers often disdained the literary market-place and a mass audience, only to re-enter it at a

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9) See Emer Nolan, *Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995), Chapter 3.

higher level as producers, not merely of books, but of works of art. A similar structure of refusal and complicity in relation to the mass-market is plainly visible in the audience for Joyce's work — as for that of many other modernist writers and, even earlier, decadent writers of the 1890s, such as Wilde, Beardsley, Mallarmé and others. That is to say the artist appeals to a specialized audience of disciples; this circle is the primary audience, investing the text of the master with the complexity that so often accompanies reverence as the work emerges slowly in the approved small-circulation journals or magazines that so fastidiously distinguished themselves from the mass-circulation newspapers and magazines. Once the work had won a scandalously esoteric reputation it often was then opened to the mass market via a court-case, especially in relation to the strict laws of obscenity in the English-speaking world. The early inner-circle audience is soon after replaced by the academy; and the book, the reputation and the very obscurity that had made it so exclusive all become commodified into a kind of celebrity.

Joyce therefore has a complex relationship with the modern commercial marketplace. He embraces the modern; but in the final three chapters of *Ulysses* he complicates this enthusiasm. In "Eumaeus", after the extravagant experiments of the middle chapters of the book, he represents to us the exhaustion of language, in Bloom's remorseless descent into cliché as he, apparently, takes over the narration of the conversation between himself and Stephen in the cab-man's shelter. After "Ithaca" the scientifically-minded Bloom and the catechist who asks so many questions about geometry, geography, astronomy and technology, is finally displaced by the "natural" voice of Molly in "Penelope". Waste and exhaustion are the end-products of all the production and consumption of words, food, drink and bodies in *Ulysses'* Dublin. By comparison with Molly, those satisfactions seem like fleeting delusions.

It is this complex grasp of modernization, its thrilling glamour and its sometimes shallow delights, that one misses in much Irish writing that followed Joyce. In their

concern to critique the Irish Free State, most mainstream Irish writers reverted to naturalistic styles that Joyce had outgrown by 1916. The tradition of Sean O'Faolain, John MacGahern, Edna O'Brien and Patrick Kavanagh has now been displaced by what Joe Cleary has called a "neo- or postnaturalism"<sup>10</sup> — or sometimes by an unthinking euphoria which would have us believe that Irish history has now reached its culmination and fulfillment in the land of the Celtic Tiger, and that there are no more problems to be addressed and no other desires or dreams to be fulfilled. Joyce does not indulge this postmodern complacency; in his work, desire moves between the marketplace, the world of fetish, with its lethal glamour and deformity, and the historical world with its ever-present tragic dimension. Yet, counterpointed against this modernizing process is the language of self-consciousness, of critique and of human aspiration; Joyce's work represents, as no fiction had ever done before, the dialectic between these standardizing forces — even allowing them their emancipatory energy — and the resistance to them — even allowing to it its sometimes paralyzing or reactionary energy. Nor is this an engagement that ends in triumph for one over the other. It is a condition — modernity.

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**ABSTRACT**

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## Joyce and the Colonial Commodity

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Joyce depicts Ireland's underdeveloped, colonial economy in *Ulysses*. But he also shows us how, in certain historical conditions, commodities become invested with political, utopian desire. *Ulysses* demonstrates the power of these utopian fantasies, but also understands their limits. Joyce also appreciates that his own artistic practice is implicated in consumer society, its pleasures and its pitfalls. His great novel *Ulysses* can therefore usefully be re-read in the context of Ireland's twenty-first century "Celtic Tiger" economy.

1) I will begin by discussing a passage *not* from Joyce, but from another great modern Irish storyteller, Maurice O'Sullivan. In his book, *Twenty years a-growing*, a memoir of his childhood in the Blasket Islands off the coast of Co. Kerry in the south west of Ireland, he tells how in the course of the First World War, all kinds of wonderful things were washed up on the shores of his native island. These had all come from ships destroyed in the war at sea, and included luxuries like wine and chocolate and precious items such as gold watches. The older inhabitants of the island thought that

the paradise described in Irish legends had finally arrived for them. However, the islanders also discovered many bodies of those lost at sea on the beaches.

2) This story illustrated some features of the modern in colonial or underdeveloped conditions. To some extent, the very new connects with the archaic as the old legends are remembered. Note the excitement and the holiday feeling of the islanders. But the bodies of the dead also remind them of violence and atrocity. This is the kind of nuanced understanding of modernity, and of capitalism in the context of Ireland, that I believe we need in order to understand Joyce's writing. Ireland did not see any process of steady industrialization in the course of the twentieth-century. Rather the economic boom of the 1990's brought for most Irish people their very first experiences of prosperity and the consumer society. Joyce's writings help us to appreciate some important aspects of this historical experience.

3) Joyce was fond of describing the Irish past in modern images, especially that of the busy, populous metropolis (which Dublin was *not*, in his own time!). In this he tends to abolish the distinction between the traditional and the new. The major conflict in *Ulysses* appears to be that between the metropolitan, modern Leopold Bloom and his fellow citizens who are xenophobic, backward-looking and nationalist. This culminates in the conflicts between Bloom and the citizen in "Cylops". However, both parties to this conflict have been somewhat misrepresented, I believe. The nationalists are also modernizers; the modern man (Bloom) is by no means the happiest of human beings. To some extent, he — like many modern people — seeks compensation in the pleasures of the city and of the commodity for things that are absent in his own life — a sense of purpose or belonging, or even a happy family life.

4) In this way, we can understand Joyce as a superb interpreter of the

culture of modernity. He shows us how modern culture can serve as a phantasmagoric substitute for a real Utopia — an ideal human community. Although he commodified his own art in the pursuit of aesthetic perfection, conferring on *Ulysses* an auratic sense of transcendence and accomplishment, we can also read in his great novel the traces of the impoverished (and still unfinished) history out of which it grows.

