Beyond Impulse: The Pleasurable Death of Certainty in *Ulysses*

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Language is contextual. Even when shielded painstakingly from the real, it is anchored in the speaker's unconscious. In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus has a theory of Shakespeare's artistry that corresponds with Stephen's own desires for artistic creativity. When narrating his theory to a group of Ireland's scholars in "Scylla and Charybdis," his narration offers the opportunity for the reader to deduce his unconscious desires underlying his words.\(^1\)

The relationship between Ann Hathaway and Shakespeare is the ostensible focus of Stephen's concerns with the latter's artistry. Analysis of Stephen's portrayal of their relationship reveals that Stephen fetishizes the vagina: he treats it disproportionately as the factor that determines Shakespeare's artistic development. Stephen's fetishism is symptomatic of his own inability to develop his artistic creativity. In other words, Stephen experiences artistic stasis. When he alludes to *Hamlet* through mental commentary on his narrative, his language reveals that his artistic stasis is grounded in a cycle of self-murder. Yet the loss of self that Stephen experiences is not that of *jouissance*. Rather than exceeding the symbolic order, he strives to remain within it. Shakespeare's relationship with Ann, as analogous to that of Stephen with his dead mother, reveals how Stephen can escape his cycle of self-murder and achieve the potential for entering the realm of *jouissance*. In the way that Shakespeare leaves Ann and pursues sexual relationships with other women, Stephen must extricate himself from semiotic motility and subsequently reengage the semiotic *chora*. Yet his artistic stasis prevents the semiotic *chora* from transgressing the symbolic. In his idyllic vision of artistry, Stephen conceives of the artist as existing as a trace. But again, his artistic stasis hampers his ability to exist as such. Stasis is the phallocentric impulse and the primary reason why other male characters in *Ulysses* objectify female characters.

\(^1\) Throughout the essay, when I make assertions about characters in Stephen's narrative, it is implied that the content is from Stephen's perspective.
Throughout the text, Molly Bloom appears frequently as an object of phallocentric discourse.\(^2\) In “Wandering Rocks” Lenehan narrates an anecdote in which he fetishizes Molly’s body and reduces her to a trope. He adheres to the phallocentric impulse. Yet Stephen and Lenehan have vastly different reasons for doing so. The former strives for artistic creativity while the latter strives to impress other men who he believes are firmly phallocentric. Their unconscious desires overlap inasmuch as their discourses share certain characteristics that indicate the phallocentric impulse. In “Penelope” Molly undoes this impulse through the use of linguistic freeplay. In so doing, she experiences *jouissance*, establishes her fluid existence as subject and object, and demonstrates her existence as a trace. Ultimately, she offers the potential for liberation that satisfies Stephen’s idyllic visions of artistry.

Stephen focuses his desire for artistic creativity on Shakespeare’s sexual relationships. Regarding the “dark lady” and the earl of Pembroke, Stephen explains why Shakespeare, “a lord of language,” would send “a lordling to woo for him” (9. 453-454). He identifies Ann Hathaway as the cause of what he believes is Shakespeare’s loss of self-belief:

Belief in himself has been untimely killed. He was overborne in a cornfield first (a ryefield, I should say) and he will never be a victor in his own eyes after nor play victoriously the game of laugh and lie down. Assumed dongiovannism will not save him.

(9. 455-459)

With the word, “ryefield,” Stephen recalls the page’s song in *As You Like It*: “Between the acres of the rye, / With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino, / These pretty country folks would lie” (v. iii. 20-22). Lying in the ryefield is euphemism for fornication. In saying that Shakespeare was “overborne” in a cornfield—“a ryefield, I [Stephen] should say”—Stephen assumes that Ann Hathaway took Shakespeare’s virginity. Stephen’s use of “ryefield” indicates that Shakespeare’s

\(^2\) I opt for the term *phallocentric* because it connotes a fundamental aspect of Stephen’s unconscious—denial of contradiction.
overbearing is sexual and that the loss of his virginity represents a loss in masculine sexual agency. Yet trying to recover this agency in a sexual relationship with the “dark lady” only emasculates him further: “A like fate awaits him and the two rages commingling in a whirlpool” (9. 464). The emasculating effects of sex with the female combine and engulf the unsuspecting male in an inescapable vortex: Shakespeare cannot assert his masculinity through “assumed dongiovonnism.” Once emasculated, he can only be dragged down further with each succeeding sexual experience. Stephen thus depicts a world in which sexual relations with women—particularly dominant women like Ann—determine the male artist’s identity. Yet despite Shakespeare’s emasculation, Stephen yearns to follow his course. He contends during the scholarly discourse, “[Shakespeare] was chosen...By cock, she was to blame” (9. 256-257). He then thinks, “And my turn? When? Come!” (9. 261-262). Stephen, the striving artist, desires his own Ann Hathaway to “conquer” him so that he might “gain the world of men” and achieve artistic mastery (9. 259, 255).

Stephen identifies the vagina as the cause of Shakespeare’s emasculation when he says, “No later undoing will undo the first undoing. If the shrew is worsted yet there remains to her woman’s invisible weapon” (9. 460-461). “Woman’s invisible weapon” is euphemism for the vagina, as it is this part of the female’s body that the male engages in sex. The adjective invisible recalls Stephen’s earlier thoughts in “Proteus” concerning the “ineluctable modality of the visible” (3. 1). The phrase indicates that Stephen conceives of visual perception as heterogeneous. It is based on his understanding of Aristotle, who believed that an object’s visual characteristics are distinct from the object itself. On this basis, invisibility indicates the subject’s inability to perceive an object’s visual characteristics, even though the object is present.

3 Although he has slept with Georgina Johnson, she was a prostitute and so could not overbear him (9. 460-461). Their fornication represents a form of masculine expression—of sexuality in commodity exchange.

4 I am indebted to Gifford’s Ulysses: Annotated for my ability to develop this point and others throughout this essay.
The vagina—invisible—represents an absence in Stephen’s field of vision. Like Sigmund Freud, who conceived of the vagina as the site of castration, Stephen specularizes the female body and engages in the phallocentric discourse of the Same. Yet an object’s invisibility also entails a reversal of the power hierarchy between subject and object: the invisible object is a blind spot that the subject cannot contain. As such, the vagina—the “invisible weapon”—poses a threat to masculine subjectivity. Stephen organizes his conception of artistic creativity—as embodied in his narrative of Shakespeare—around this threat. In this manner, he grants the source of the threat disproportionate influence on his conception of artistic development: Stephen fetishizes the vagina. According to Julia Kristeva, fetishism is “a stasis that acts as a thesis” (Portable, 51). In fetishizing the vagina, Stephen causes its stasis. But because Stephen bases his conception of artistic creativity on the vagina as a threat, he engenders his own artistic stasis. However, the relationship between Stephen’s fetishism and artistic stasis is not causative. Rather, they correlate as symptoms of Stephen’s unconscious desires.

These begin to become apparent when Stephen thinks a phrase that refers obviously to Hamlet: “They list. And in the porches of their ears I pour” (9. 465). With the word, “list,” Stephen assumes the role of King Hamlet’s ghost, who reveals to Hamlet the true circumstances of his death. Stephen articulates a common criticism of the ghost that reinforces the parallel between the former and the latter: “But those who are done in death cannot know the manner of their quell unless their Creator endow their souls with that knowledge in the life to come” (9. 467-469). As the ghost cannot know the circumstances of his death unless apprised by his

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5 Stephen separates the individual “shrew” from her vagina by attributing it to the general “woman”: “woman’s invisible weapon” still poses a threat, even if the shrew is “worsted.” In doing so, Stephen denies the female possession—bodily and psychic—over her sexual and reproductive capacities. He localizes the female threat to a single entity, her vagina that is not hers, and through this disintegration she loses the vital space between the biological and the social—her psyche (Portable, xxiv).

6 In Act I, scene v the ghost says to Hamlet, “List, list, O list!/If thou didst ever hear thy dear father love—/Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole, /With juice of cursed hebona in a vial, /And in the porches of my ear did pour” (22-23, 62-63).
Creator, so Stephen cannot know those of his own creative impulses. Yet Stephen also plays the part of King Claudius, whom the ghost accuses of pouring poison in the “porches” of his ear. As the ghost and King Claudius, Stephen plays the roles of both murdered and murderer. But according to Hamlet’s chronology, Stephen can only say “list”—or play the ghost—after pouring poison in the “porches of their ears”—or play Claudius as he kills King Hamlet, who then becomes the ghost. Because one mental utterance of the former phrase preceding the latter cannot satisfy the play’s chronology, Stephen must articulate the latter before the former and in doing so repeat the entire thought indefinitely. He is thus trapped in a cycle of self murdering self. However, the effects of his death are not contained to his thoughts. His death engenders narrative devoid of Stephen’s unconscious presence. Yet his words are the poison that he pours into “their [the scholars’] ears.” Thus, in articulating his narrative, Stephen murders the parts of it that stem from his unconscious and prevents his artistic development.

Ann Hathaway’s relationship with Shakespeare reveals how Stephen can allow himself to activate his artistic development. Stephen establishes Ann Hathaway and his dead mother as parallel figures when he says, “She saw him into and out of the world,” and then thinks, “Mother’s deathbed...Who brought me into this world lies there” (9. 217-218, 221-222). Ann Hathaway and Stephen’s mother bring Shakespeare and Stephen into the world, respectively. Stephen identifies the world into which Ann brings Shakespeare when he says, “he [Shakespeare] left her [Ann] and gained the world of men” (9. 254). Paradoxically, it is through Shakespeare’s departure from Ann that he enters into the world. Their relationship is analogous to that of the mother and infant: through their physical engagement, Shakespeare is emasculated. The experience parallels that of the child in pre-Oedipal, semiotic motility, which precedes the symbolic order and the development of one’s masculine identity. Because “the pre-oedipal
mother-child relationship — although structurally necessary, is an ultimately stifling and unproductive relation,” Shakespeare’s departure is necessary for him to exist freely and productively as an artist in the symbolic order (Grosz, 46-47). Yet he does not remain exclusively in the symbolic. With every subsequent emasculating sexual encounter, Shakespeare periodically reengages the semiotic *chora*. His artistic creation arises from the semiotic *chora*’s transgression of the symbolic. Stephen unknowingly identifies the results of this transgression when he asserts Shakespeare’s plural existence in his texts as “Hamlet *pere* and Hamlet *fils*” (9. 1034). Shakespeare could not exist multiply in his art if he did not allow the semiotic *chora* to transgress the symbolic. Thus, in order for Stephen to attain the artistic mastery that he sees in Shakespeare, he cannot bar his unconscious from the symbolic. He must extricate himself from his mother and subsequently reengage the maternal *chora*.

Yet Stephen cannot extricate himself from his mother. Buck Mulligan recalls Stephen’s struggle for extrication during the latter’s last moments before her death:

> You could have knelt down, damn it, Kinch, when your dying mother asked you, Buck Mulligan said. I’m hyperborean as much as you. But to think of your mother begging you with her last breath to kneel down and pray for her. And you refused. (1. 91-94)

Mulligan recalls Stephen’s refusal to pray for his mother while she lay on her deathbed, an act that would have fulfilled “her last wish in death” (1. 212). Through his refusal, Stephen denies his mother’s religious exigencies and believes he asserts his independence through rarefied existence as a hyperborean. Does his refusal not guarantee his extrication from his mother and entrance into the symbolic “world of men?” Yet his thoughts return him to her:

> Pain, that was not yet the pain of love, fretted his heart. Silently, in a dream she had come to him after her death, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and

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7 Kristeva contends that semiotic rhythms, known as “musicalization,” pluralize meaning (Portable, 52)
rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a
faint odour of wetted ashes...he saw the sea hailed as a great sweet
mother by the wellfed voice beside him. The ring of bay and
skyline held a dull green mass of liquid. A bowl of white china had
stood beside her deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which
she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning
vomiting. (1. 102-105)

The stark physicality of his dream—his mother’s “wasted body...giving off an odour of wax and
rosewood” and sounds of “loud groaning vomiting”—juxtaposes ironically the hyperborean
conversation that contains it. It intrudes the discourse between Stephen and Mulligan in the way
that the semiotic *chora* intrudes the symbolic. Stephen’s thoughts of his mother, with their
coarse immediacy, transgress the consciously regulated symbolic and return Stephen to pre-
Oedipal semiotic motility. 8 Stephen expresses his desire to extricate himself from the semiotic
motility when he thinks, “No, mother! Let me be and let me live” (1. 279). He perceives his
mother as a source of oppression that prevents him from pursuing freely a life of artistry.

Stephen’s demand for release from her responds to a dream of her that reprises the passage in
which he experiences “pain, that was not yet the pain of love”: “In a dream, silently, she had
come to him, her wasted body within its loose graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and
rosewood, her breath, bent over him with mute secret words, a faint odour of wetted ashes” (1.
270-272). The differences between the two passages are subtle: while the syntaxes are
dissimilar, the content is largely the same. The latter passage echoes the former. That the
relationship between the two is not one of repetition indicates the adaptive quality of semiotic
motility. Stephen’s thoughts of his mother are not static relics that he can master; they change
and with every intrusion pose a different threat. Thus, nestling in the symbolic cannot prevent
Stephen’s return to the pre-Oedipal semiotic.

8 Evidence of Stephen’s conscious regulation of discourse arises when the narrator reports: “Stephen, shielding the
gaping wounds which the words had left in his heart, said very coldly...” (1. 216-217). This statement makes it clear
that Stephen speaks to convey a certain persona—in this case one unwounded by Mulligan’s words, “beastly dead.”
Stephen attempts to allow the semiotic chora to transgress the symbolic when he denies belief in his own narrative. John Eglinton asks, “Do you believe your own theory?” (9. 1065-1066). “No, Stephen said promptly” (9. 1067). With “No,” he both masquerades and ironizes his participation in the discussion. As masquerader, he does not display knowledge of the theory that influences him; as the ironist he denies the theory and exposes it with disbelief. In the self-effacing duality of his response, Stephen seems to expose intellectual inferiority. Yet he speaks “promptly,” without time for reflection, and betrays no sign of uncertainty. Stephen responds as if his apparent inferiority is part of a more astute and subversive performance. His thoughts earlier in the discussion sustain this possibility: “Local colour. Work in all you know. Make them accomplices” (9. 158). Through convincing the others of his theory’s rightness and exposing it with, “No,” Stephen leaves them guilty of false belief while he demonstrates intellectual superiority. By denying belief in his theory of Shakespeare, Stephen asserts his belief in a greater theory in which his denial is necessary. “No” thus functions as affirmation. As such, Stephen articulates contradiction; he allows the semiotic chora to transgress the symbolic. Yet despite this instance of contradiction, Stephen is still in the cycle of self-murder. In denying his theory of Shakespeare, Stephen denies his component unconscious desires. Thus, Stephen cannot experience semiotic motility as chora, but only as a return to semiotic motility.9

According to Kristeva, the thetic phase entails “transfer[ing] semiotic motility onto the symbolic order...[it] posits the gap between the signifier and the signified as an opening up toward every desire but also every act, including the very jouissance that exceeds them” (Portable, 42). Thus, through his self-abnegation, Stephen disallows interactions between the semiotic and the symbolic and quashes his potential for jouissance.

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9 While Shakespeare and Stephen both return periodically to the semiotic motility, the former achieves artistic creativity in doing so while the latter does not. The difference is due to Stephen’s artistic stasis.
Nevertheless, Stephen articulates a vision of artistry that combats the stasis that results from fetishism and allows semiotic motility to function as semiotic *chora*. His vision bridges his phallocentric separation between the semiotic and symbolic:

As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies, Stephen said, from day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image. And as the mole on my right breast is where it was when I was born, though all my body has been woven of new stuff time after time, so through the ghost of the unquiet father the image of the unliving son looks forth. In the intense instant of imagination, when the mind, Shelly says, is a fading coal, that which I was is that which I am and that which in possibility I may come to be. So in the future, the sister of the past, I may see myself as I sit here now but by reflection from that which then I shall be. (9. 376-385)

Stephen’s endorsement of the “intense instant of imagination” undermines his segregation of the semiotic and symbolic. In perceiving the self, there is necessarily disjunction between the self and the self-perceived: a look in the mirror is a look at one’s past self. But because in the “intense instant of imagination” the subject is the simultaneous past, present, and future self, there is no disjunction between the subject that perceives and the subject perceived. In his ideal conception of the artist, Stephen thus allows for interactions between the semiotic and symbolic. Woven and unwoven, the artist is indeterminate and exists as a trace. The trace indicates the subject’s indeterminacy. Like the mole, it is a mark of presence that, like the body that hosts the mole, is indeterminate. Yet Stephen does not discuss the “intense instant of imagination” freely; he does so within the confines of his narrative. Though Stephen idealizes and attributes to Shakespeare a vision of artistry that requires interactions between the semiotic and the symbolic, his phallocentric discourse prevents him from attaining that vision.

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10 Any mirror reflection of the self embodies this notion, as any look in the mirror is always a look at one’s past self, since it takes time for light to travel between the mirror and the eye. Self-reflection also adheres to this notion on a smaller time scale, as it take time for the brain’s biology to operate and produce thought.
The totality of these symptoms renders Stephen as a character that desires artistic creativity but is fixed in artistic stasis that prevents him from satisfying his desires. He cannot embrace the space of contradiction between the two that allows for poetic language. The source of his inability is his fetishism, which causes him to perceive his relationship with his mother, and thus semiotic motility, as a stifling presence. For Stephen, the chora does not generate pulsions that allow for non-symbolic elements in language; rather, it is intrusive and demarcated. Because he perceives semiotic motility and the symbolic as dichotomous, he cannot experience jouissance. This inability indicates Stephen’s unconscious fear of self-loss, which he believes is aligned with emasculation. As I have demonstrated, Stephen’s artistic vision of the self as a trace is ineffectual: it merely plays on the surface of his absolutist and dichotomous groundwork. So long as Stephen fetishizes the (feminine) other, he will prevent his existence as a trace. The phallocentric impulse that sustains Stephen’s narrative and produces these symptoms can be found throughout Ulysses in men’s anecdotes concerning Molly.

In “Wandering Rocks” Lenehan narrates a sexual anecdote about Molly in a manner analogous to that of Stephen’s narration of Shakespeare. Trying to impress M’Coy, Lenehan recounts a night when he made clandestine sexual advances with Molly while Bloom and Chris Callinan sat on the other side of the car:

He held his caved hands a cubit from him, frowning: I was tucking the rug under her and settling her boa all the time. Know what I mean? His hands moulded ample curves of air. He shut his eyes tight in delight, his body shrinking, and blew a sweet chirp from his lips. The lad stood to attention anyhow, he said with a sigh. She’s a gamey mare and no mistake. (10. 561-567)

Without denoting Molly’s erogenic zones, Lenehan conveys the sexual implications of his narrative: he employs the phrases, “tucking her rug,” and, “settling her boa.” Although his

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11 According to Kelly Oliver, poetic language “reactivates the contradiction between the semiotic and symbolic” (Portable, 24).
euphemisms might arise from direct association with a distinct body part—such as the boa that drapes over women’s breasts—Lenehan uses them to evoke the pleasure received from the sexualized female. They function metonymically. As Stephen fetishizes the vagina with the phrase, “woman’s invisible weapon,” so too does Lenehan fetishize Molly’s body through the use of metonymy. Because Lenehan freezes the significance of his metonymic signs as pleasure received from the female body, they are each “a stasis that acts as a thesis” (Portable, 51). In addition to fetishism, Lenehan reduces Molly to a trope: he identifies her as a “gamey mare”—a sexual and inferior animal. Through both of these devices, Lenehan articulates a narrative that strives to situate the female subject in the symbolic as an object. Yet Lenehan’s narrative is largely ineffectual. Following the latter’s lavish introduction, he tantalizes M’Coy with the promise, “But wait till I tell you” (10. 552). He sings, emphasizes the magnificence of Molly’s “fine pair” with evocative pantomimes, and concludes with the comedic punch line, “By God, he wasn’t far wide off the mark” (10. 559, 573-574). But while Lenehan laughs, M’Coy’s face grows grave (10. 578). Noticing the latter’s response, Lenehan then talks seriously about Bloom’s merits (10. 581). His performance depends on how he believes he is perceived; his narrative is constrained by the other’s gaze. Once Lenehan perceives disapproval, he loses subjective freedom. First embracing and then allowing the other to smother this freedom, he vacillates between self-acceptance and self-abnegation. He represses the space of contradiction between the two poles and so disallows jouissance. Lenehan’s narrative thus indicates that he adheres to the phallocentric impulse.

In “Penelope” Molly deconstructs this impulse by demonstrating her ability to function analogously to Stephen’s ideal artistic Creator. This process entails her subverting the phallocentric aspects of language and embracing modes of existence that exceed the
phallocentric male’s capacity. Molly renders Stephen’s and Lenehan’s fetishism impotent by demonstrating her plurality. In doing so, she creates a space of contradiction in which semiotic motility and the symbolic interact. This space allows her to engage in linguistic freeplay, which results in contradiction, ambiguity, interjection, and overlapping. Through freeplay, Molly enters into the realm of jouissance. Based on her ability to experience jouissance, Molly can exist dually as subject and object. But her duality is not constrained to her own subjectivity and objectivity; it allows her to experience herself as an object from the other’s subjective gaze. Molly’s fluidity between subjectivity and objectivity of herself and the other ultimately reveals her existence as a trace—an existence that Stephen idealizes in his vision of artistry. But Molly moves beyond Stephen’s vision. Through a complex process embodied in the word Yes, she ultimately achieves a form of indeterminate liberation that is significant for all subjects, including the reader and critic.

Molly diffuses the fetishistic power of phallocentric discourse by grounding sexuality in real context. Molly considers her sexual relations with Boylan practically when she thinks, “I made him pull out and do it on me considering how big it is...in case any of it wasn’t washed out properly,” and, “better for him to put it into me from behind” (18. 154-156, 18. 417). While her thoughts might arouse male sexual fantasy, they simultaneously extinguish the possibility by emphasizing aspects of sex that are less sexually charged. While her considerations of the size of Boylan’s penis have the potential to be sexually arousing, her concerns about washing his semen out of her vagina recast these considerations as primarily practical, rather than sexual fantasy. Similarly, when Molly recalls performing a sexual act that typically connotes women’s objectivity—putting it in from behind—she uses language that dispels sexual charge. With “better,” she adopts a more detached perspective of one surveying a situation for its faults and
merits, not of a passionate lover. In emphasizing the non-sexual aspects of her sexual relations, Molly demonstrates her mastery over situations in which the woman is often presumed to function as a sexual object. Furthermore, she portrays her sexuality, not as the monolithic intangible, but as contingent on real, heterogeneous concerns. In demonstrating that she can be a passionate as well as practical lover, Molly asserts her plurality. As such, she unfreezes her sexuality from the stasis that results from the fetishism of the preceding chapters, including Stephen’s phrase, “woman’s invisible weapon,” and Lenehan’s euphemisms.

Molly furthers her diffusion of the fetishistic power contained in phallocentric discourse by asserting her existence as more than sexual: she identifies herself as both a sexual and maternal subject. While Stephen and Lenehan are aware of woman’s duality—whether that of Ann Hathaway, Stephen’s mother, or Molly—they do not recognize female subjects as simultaneously sexual and maternal. Recall how Stephen reduces the female sexual subject to a “shrew” and Lenehan reduces Molly to a “gamey mare.” Molly acknowledges men’s inability to reconcile their visions of the maternal and sexual woman when she thinks, “they dont know what it is to be a woman and a mother” (18. 1440). She asserts her ability to be both by thinking sexually and maternally about Stephen. First she fantasizes about a passionate love affair with him: “I can teach him the other part Ill make him feel all over him till he half faints under me then hell write about me lover and mistress” (18. 1363-1365). Then she adopts what she believes is the maternal perspective of Stephen’s mother in evaluating his actions: “his poor mother wouldnt like that if she was alive ruining himself for life perhaps” (18. 1454-1455). As Stephen’s sexual, maternal mother, Molly collapses the dichotomy between the pre-Oedipal, non-sexual maternal and the Oedipal. In doing so, she creates a space for interactions between semiotic motility and the symbolic. These interactions allow for contradictory language.
Paradoxically, Molly contradicts the conditions that allow for the space where semiotic motility and the symbolic interact: she engages in linguistic freeplay. Despite diffusing men’s fetishism of the female body, Molly strives to satisfy male fetishism: “theyre coming into fashion again I bought it simply to please him” (18. 515). Molly is aware that her “old rubbishy dress” gives Bloom sexual, fetishistic pleasure (18. 514). In an act of freeplay, she accepts the very process that she undoes as the sexual, maternal mother. Her thoughts interrupt and blend into one another in another instance of freeplay:

Id like to meet a man like that God...why arent all men like that thered be some consolation for a woman like that lovely little statue...theres real beauty and poetry for you I often felt I wanted to kiss him all over his lovely young cock...even if some of it went down. (18. 1344-1355)

Molly thinks persistently of a man “like that” whom she would like to meet and know sexually. The thought anchors those that directly precede and succeed it and thus suggests equivalency between them. Yet within these potential equivalencies, there is striking difference: Stephen, the subject who most strongly grounds Molly’s train of thought in this passage, is and is not the statue with the “lovely young cock.” His association with the statue is not metaphorical: “him” is ambiguous. This ambiguity indicates that Molly’s thoughts blend significance. For example, it is unclear whether Stephen, the statue, or both ejaculate into Molly’s mouth. Yet her thoughts also generate significance from difference. The phrase, “thered be some consolation,” seems to divide the statement, “Why arent all men like that...lovely little statue,” but it is just as plausible that there is no divide and only continuance of thought. In the latter case, the phrase, “why arent all men like that,” might be an isolated inquiry, causing the “woman” to be “like that lovely little statue,” in a syntactically logical way, or the phrase regarding the statue to arise through exclamation—“like that lovely little statue!” Of course, it is plausible for both readings to exist
simultaneously. These instances of freeplay indicate that Molly's thoughts are not linear: they overlap, interject one another, and require rereading. Formally, they transgress the rules that conventionally govern written language. Because linguistic freeplay requires a space of contradiction between semiotic motility and the symbolic, Molly's thoughts exceed the boundaries of the latter.

As such, Molly fosters a tension for which the symbolic alone cannot provide. In heightening this tension through various forms of freeplay, Molly experiences the intense excitation and self-release—the potential loss of subjectivity—that characterize jouissance. Molly longs for the feeling: she thinks, "so nice all over you you cant help yourself...theres nothing like a kiss long and hot down to your soul almost paralyzes you," and, "I am dying still if he wrote it...it fills up your whole day and life" (18. 105-106, 737-738). She desires an incapacitating, all-consuming pleasure from which she cannot extricate herself. It reaches "down to [her] soul"—beyond the linguistic and the bodily—and suspends her in a moment that is neither life nor death. She is at once powerless and omnipotent because it is powerlessness that she desires. What is the soulful (im)material that captivates her? What does she enjoy (jouir)?

As the soul both precedes and is located beyond the realm of language, so too does semiotic motility precede and exceed the symbolic. In her jouissance, Molly is captivated by the semiotic as it threatens to subsume the symbolic. Her loss of subjectivity compares to temporary devolution into psychosis, in which the subject is completely outside the symbolic: she approaches her unconscious desires.

Based on her ability to simultaneously release and vitalize herself through jouissance, Molly can exist dually as subject and object. She demonstrates this duality when appropriating the language used to objectify women:
It's all his own fault if I am an adulteress... I suppose that's what a woman is supposed to be there for or He wouldn't have made us the way He did so attractive to men then if he wants to kiss my bottom I'll drag open my drawers and bulge it right out in his face as large as life he can stick his tongue 7 miles up my hole... then I'll tell him I want £1 or perhaps 30/-... then I'll wipe him off me just like a business his omission. (18. 1523-1538)

Molly presumes that God made women attractive so they could function as communal sex objects. Yet through her presumed sexual objectification she exercises power over Bloom, whom she blames for making her an adulteress. She fantasizes about satisfying his desires to unpleasant excess—bulging her bottom forcefully into his face and having him stick his tongue impossibly far up her hole. In this way, Molly asserts subjective dominance. Following the act she demands payment. But her role as a prostitute bolsters, rather than negates, her subjectivity. It establishes equivalency between her and a doctor she has visited. The phrase, "just like a business his omission," recalls Molly's previous thoughts about a visit to a gynecologist due to a vaginal infection: "how much is that doctor one guinea please and asking me had I frequent omissions" (18. 1169-170). By referring to her sexual act as a business and using the same nullifying orthographical error—omission for emission—Molly assumes the respected and omnipotent role of the doctor who charges to treat his patients' sexual organs. While Stephen conceives of male sexuality as a matter of tortured and partially negated agency, Molly conceives of it as one of sickness. But she does not simply undermine male sexuality: the force of her subjectivity depends largely on her knowledge of her objectivity, as a patient with illness. Even while Molly asserts her subjectivity, she is aware of her complementary objectivity, and vice versa. She thus exists dually as a subject and object.

Furthermore, Molly's orthographical error reveals her belief in male (phallocentric) impotence; she nullifies the impressiveness of their emissions, or semen.
While maintaining this duality, Molly demonstrates her ability to adopt an other’s subjectivity. Recalling her afternoon with Boylan, she assumes his perspective of her body: “I bet he never saw a better pair of thighs than that...the smoothest place is right there between this bit here how soft like a peach easy God I wouldn’t mind being a man and get up on a lovely woman” (18. 1145-1147). Although Molly commonly entertains autoerotic thoughts, in this instance it is Boylan’s gaze that arouses her admiration of her body. She moves towards herself from a subject that is outside her while maintaining the latter’s sexual desires—those that inform his values of what is “better.” His desires blend into hers. When she touches herself in “the smoothest place” she longs for male subjectivity to experience herself as a sexual object. Satisfying this longing allows her to know herself in a way that she cannot when confined to her female subjectivity. Knowing herself in this way is beyond her subject/object duality, through which her self-as-subject knows her self-as-object. Rather, in assuming an other’s subjectivity, her self-as-other and self-as-subject know her self-as-object. Molly achieves this knowledge by partially dissociating from herself and, as an object still conscious of her subjectivity, assuming the position of the other. She appropriates and appreciates an other’s gaze. In doing so, she perceives herself as an object and enjoys (jouir) it.

Beyond demonstrating fluidity as subject and object, Molly exists as a trace. She exhibits the indeterminacy characteristic of her existence as such by performing a variety of roles throughout “Penelope.” Joseph Allen Boone, among other critics, argues convincingly that Molly’s theatricality undermines the notion of stable identity (Libidinal). Through her performances, Molly exposes all identity as social construction and undermines those—particularly masculine ones—that strive to oppress her own. Recall how she assumes the role of a prostitute with Bloom. Using the word “omissions,” she equates the role to that of the
gynecologist and thus undermines his presumed identity as a superior subject and his ability to objectify patients. In addition to undermining others’ identities, Molly’s performances ensure her plurality. In this way, the phallocentric other cannot objectify her through fetishism or other means. For Molly, existence is perpetual becoming, not being. She is the body and image weaving and unweaving. Molly functions as a linguistic sign—the trace that Stephen desires to become. As a trace, she does not experience the symbolic as functioning determinately. Rather, for her it is a film on which unconscious desires take form and engage in bodily, psychic, and linguistic freeplay. The only discourses she need adhere to are those that approach satisfaction of her insatiable desire for jouissance. Through these discourses, she embraces the space of contradiction that allows for poetic language. Molly’s thoughts thus undo the absolutist, dichotomous groundwork that sustains the phallocentric impulse in discourse. Furthermore, they offer the potential for liberation that is analogous to Stephen’s achievement of his idyllic visions of artistry.

Molly’s thoughts satisfy this potential through their indeterminacy. Molly’s final, “Yes,” epitomizes the function of indeterminacy in “Penelope” (18. 1609). Yes is ostensibly Molly’s response to Bloom’s marriage proposal on Howth Hill. But between his asking and her response, Molly recalls nearly a lifetime of experiences of which Bloom is ignorant: “I wouldn’t answer first...I was thinking of so many things he didn’t know of” (18. 1581-1582). When Molly responds, “Yes,” it is impossible for Bloom to know all the meaning contained in her response. He cannot know completely she who affirms. As such, Molly’s Yes cannot truly affirm: she can

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13 Maud Ellman writes, “Similarly Molly Bloom unweaves her flesh to weave new portraits of herself in words” (Ellman, 99). This statement evidences how Molly functions as a trace. Her subject is equivalent to the mole, while her flesh is equivalent to the body—with regards to Stephen’s vision of artistry.
only affirm what Bloom knows, which is less than her Yes contains. Molly’s indeterminacy causes Yes to function indeterminately. There is inevitably miscommunication between the one who asks and the one who says Yes.

Nevertheless, Molly’s thoughts reveal the possibility of solidifying, at least in a moment that is already gone, this uncertainty. Bloom proposes marriage to Molly twice on Howth Hill. The first time she does not answer, but the second time she “asked him with [her] eyes to ask again” (18. 1605). She needed to ask him to ask her in order to be able to respond, “Yes.” She had to do so with her eyes, subtly, so as not to diminish the power of Yes as affirmation, rather than as demand. Bloom thus functions as the observer who probes an indeterminate system. At the moment the observer measures the system it provides a definite response—Yes—even though it contains an infinitude of unreadable unknowns. Whereas Stephen’s “No”—in response to the question whether he believes his own theory—denies the unknowable self, Molly’s Yes is a self-conscious trace: it affirms the subject’s apparent existence, the uncertainty of the subject’s non-apparent existence, and the subject’s knowledge of the former and the latter. As affirmation, Yes can only be a response. It comes into existence once the subject who says Yes is probed by another subject. Able to adopt an other’s subjectivity, Molly can probe herself for a response. Thus, she can define for a fleeting instant all that is indeterminate, including all that is other, within her.

Because the other forms a part of her subjectivity, Molly’s indeterminacy encompasses that other. Even as her final “Yes” affirms Bloom’s marriage proposal, it simultaneously

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14 I am indebted to Jacques Derrida, particularly his essay *Ulysses Gramophone*, for the basis of this and other readings of Yes.
15 There is miscommunication in all discourse, but inherently in Yes because it is an affirmation of being, which is inevitably uncertain.
16 For a scientific explanation of this phenomenon, see Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and such quantum physical experiments as single electron diffraction through two slits.
undermines his claim by affirming the numerous claims of other men on her. She conflates Bloom with her other suitors when she thinks, “I thought well as well him as another” (18. 1604-1605). Although this thought immediately precedes her memories of her final “Yes” that is ostensibly in response to Bloom, it immediately succeeds her memory of Mulvey kissing her under the Moorish wall. It is thus uncertain whether “him” refers to Bloom or Mulvey. But this ambiguity extends to all men she has known: any other man is just as well as “him.” Molly simultaneously weaves and unweaves the other. In doing so, she conceives of the other based on her subjective perception of him. She thus functions as the Creator, like Shakespeare, who exists pluralistically—as “Hamlet pere and Hamlet fils”—in his art. Molly continually creates and recreates herself and is aware of this process; she embodies Stephen’s conception of the artist. It seems, then, that Stephen’s liberation from the phallocentric impulse and the development of his artistry depend on his ability to say, Yes.

Yet Molly exceeds Stephen’s vision of the artist; she embraces uncertainty in a way that simply having a vision denies. Molly’s Yes is not contained to an instant. It envelops her entire episode of thoughts—which begins with Yes and ends with Yes—and extends across whatever indeterminate amount of time the episode occupies in her mind. There is no context in “Penelope” outside of her thoughts: they initiate and respond to themselves. In every particle of her thought there is indeterminacy—a subject unknowable in the past, present, and future—affirmed by Yes. As Molly weaves and unweaves her body and image, so too does she weave and unweave her existence: she is not simply becoming, but is also having been, never was, will be, almost is, might be, etc. Although Molly exists indeterminately over an indeterminate period of time, Yes allows for a relative, if transient, measure of time.17 When Molly probes herself and

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17 The measure is transient because while an individual Yes can theoretically be accounted for, it is practically impossible to isolate Yes—as it is a linguistic trace.
responds Yes, an instant, no matter how infinitesimal, passes between her probing and response. During this instant Molly changes and her knowledge as prober cannot reflect exactly that of her as respondent.

Molly’s thoughts evidence her knowledge of these effects when she thinks, “I was a flower of the mountain...I was a flower of the mountain” (18. 1575-1602). In the ellipse of this thought, Molly recalls the near lifetime of experience about which Bloom was ignorant on Howth Hill. The phrase is an echo, not repetition. Molly is not the same “flower of the mountain” in both iterations, for the space between them is thick with memories. Considering the space between her thought and its repetition as a measure of some indeterminate amount of time and presuming that Molly is aware of her echo, she understands that she is infinitely uncertain and yet changes from moment to moment. The subject who questions and then responds, Yes, has an ironic and less aware self. Because Molly’s Yes spreads across an indeterminate amount of time, her irony is distended. In her awareness of her changing and limitless uncertainty, Molly understands that her nearly simultaneous ironic self and less aware self are infinitely different and uncertain. She can only ever be an other to herself. Thus, Molly’s Yes states implicitly, I do not know. In releasing herself in this immensely pleasurable result of subjective freeplay, Molly experiences jouissance.

I, the author, must satisfy a certain impulse analogous to Stephen’s phallocentric impulse—the critical impulse. I must know. My presence is critical. Paul de Man has argued well that there is no meta-language, but judging from the function of the critical text—which is to explicate, analyze, and conclude, according to rational principles—I can only deduce that the critical impulse is one for meta-language, or the pure symbolic. This impulse prevents the critic and the criticism from adopting the subjective freeplay and creativity that characterizes Molly.

18 Her irony is not, as Paul de Man contends in The Rhetoric of Temporality, contained to a moment (Rhetoric).
The impulse enforces the text’s objectification and its fetishism; it strives to make the text static. There is not a little irony that this criticism focuses on a text that harnesses the unconscious and indeterminate to such a degree as to render all criticisms of it read and deconstructed. How does one contain the critical impulse?

Molly serves not only as a model for Stephen in his artistic development, but also as a model for the reader of *Ulysses*. “Penelope” is situated at the limit of textual indeterminacy. Molly’s thoughts do not adhere to time, nor grammar, nor to her immediate physical surrounding. The episode itself is excessive. Regarding its composition, Joyce completed “Penelope” well before “Ithaca” and indicated that the latter was the novel’s true conclusion. Boon supports the notion that “Penelope” is extraneous when he contends that the episode is autonomous (Libidinal). It exceeds the novel in the way that Molly’s *jouissance* exceeds the symbolic. In reading the episode, the reader cannot but restrain its excess. She necessarily imposes a framework of interpretation on it. However, the text need not be read as such. If the reader positions herself as the one who asks, rather than imposes, she allows the text to respond, *Yes*. In asking, she also provides her particular context, unconscious desires, and subjectivity. When the text responds, the reader must accept her ignorance of its uncertainty. Through this process, the reader collapses the text’s illimitable uncertainty into a passing instant. In this instant, the text exposes a sign—the equivalent of *Yes*. If the reader then assumes the text’s subjectivity, in the way that Molly does Bloom, she becomes both the prober and respondent. Then the *jouissance* that results from *Yes* is the reader’s own. She releases herself to the text and ensures that it will not become static. The reader thus liberates the text in the way that Molly

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19 Although it is well known that Joyce composed “Penelope” according to usual syntax and grammar and later removed the punctuation, the trace of grammar still allows the reader to perceive indeterminacy.
liberates the reader. This process is the antidote for all constructed impulses, including that of the critic.
Bibliography


