What Does Literature Do for Us?

Ulysses, shared realities, and subjectivity

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James Joyce’s Ulysses is notorious for being a book no one actually reads for fun. Ulysses is also characterized by the fact that the narrative is primarily propelled by the thoughts of the characters rather than descriptions from an ambiguous observer. While one might be drawn into the text through this kind of access to the minds of Joyce’s characters, the sort of which we typically only get to our own, the opposite seems to happen. In fact, unlike popular novels, which manage to entertain readers by facilitating readers’ self-identification with the characters, many readers find Ulysses simply unintelligible. Why is this the case, and what does it say about the way we conceive of ourselves?

Ulysses distances its readers even as its style tries to do away with this distance entirely. I will argue that this distance remains because the novel confines us to the purely subjective sphere of a given character’s experience, and in so doing, its portrayal of lived experience runs counter to how we unknowingly make sense of our own lives. In contrast, narrative conventions help create “life scripts” that contextualize and shape our existence, thus establishing a shared reality that lends an objective grounding to our subjective experiences. In breaking with these conventions, Ulysses exposes these functions and our own philosophical assumptions in turn. The

1. Joyce often relies on these kinds of outside descriptions as well, especially in the initial chapters, and other chapters (“Eumaeus,” “Ithaca”) explicitly parody conventional narratives. The purest form of the stream-of-consciousness style I discuss here can be found in the “Penelope” chapter, but elements of it occur throughout.
way we respond to a text like Ulysses can show us something that may otherwise go overlooked in how we conceive of ourselves and our relations with others.

1. DISTANCE

Ulysses chronicles a day in the life of Leopold Bloom, an advertising agent in Dublin, whose encounters parallel those of Homer’s Odysseus. Molly, his wife, has been dissatisfied in their marriage since enduring the trauma of losing their infant son. As a result, she has been engaging in an affair, which she is planning to consummate on this particular day. As Bloom moves around Dublin, he anxiously anticipates the meeting of Molly and her lover and watches over Stephen Dedalus, who corresponds to Telemachus (and to Joyce himself). Throughout the work, the lives of these three interweave in a narrative presented through each of their perspectives. Although the work nears a thousand pages in length, arguably nothing much happens; Joyce aims more at portraying a certain kind of experience rather than relaying a compelling plot.

Ulysses depicts lived experience in a way that contrasts deeply with conventional literature. The stream-of-consciousness technique used throughout the text attempts to verbalize the ineffable of our internal chatter. For instance, Joyce represents the first-person experience of looking out the window of a carriage on the way to a funeral as: “An old woman peeping. Nose whiteflattened against the pane... Extraordinary the interest they take in a corpse. Glad to see us go we give them such trouble coming. Job seems to suit them. Huggermugger in corners...” (72). This is not a literal description of an old woman peering into the window; instead, we get the disjointed impressions of perception as it unfolds in real time, punctuated by...

2. “The sentences of free indirect style are ‘unspeakable’ because they cannot be derived from either a report of direct speech, or from an indirect speech construction which makes the role of a reporter in them redundant... They are ‘unspeakably’ anchored in the character’s subjectivity” (Sotirova 132-133).
opinions otherwise unrelated to the experience being depicted (e.g., “we give them such trouble coming”).

Modernist literary choices like this are presumed to more accurately depict the reality of first-hand lived experience, motivated by the idea that we don’t actually experience a scene as it is traditionally represented (in which case the last scene might read: “he looked out the window and into the eyes of an old woman peering in”). While conventional narrative is mediated from a distance by an omniscient narrator or the first-person recounting of past events, Joyce offers a new possibility for literary representation, and, in turn, a new theoretical insight. Underpinning Joyce’s style is the conviction that a key feature of human finitude involves being inexorably confined within one’s own mind. Even as we relate to others, goes the thought, we inevitably assume an external stance on their experiences—and it is this standpoint that is reflected in conventional narrative. Ulysses’s innovation lies in its potential to give us unprecedented access to the internal worlds of its characters.

However, this innovation reignites the age-old philosophical tension between appearance and reality, or “the contrast between the world as it appears to us and the world as it really is in itself” (Dillon 9). This tension is linked to longstanding skepticism: Paraphrasing Cartesian doubt, Dillon writes: “How do we know that what appears to be the case really is the case? Sometimes we err: how do we know that we are not always in error?” (9). Yet while Dillon accuses Descartes of driving an “ontological wedge” between what one subjectively perceives and what is objectively the case, narrative conventions elide this tension since appearance and reality are normally the same in literature (19). We are typically granted one perspective on developing action which, by way of its omniscience, encompasses both internal (hidden) thoughts and feelings (the unfolding action’s appearance to the subject) and external events as viewed by some omniscient, objective spectator (its reality). This conflation allows traditional literary worlds to minimize the distortions and ambiguities inherent in our own. But Ulysses rejects this presentation, restricting the reader’s access to moment-to-moment, unfiltered, first-hand experience. Joyce trades the primacy of objectivity for the primacy of subjective experience—Ulysses is,
in many chapters, almost entirely constituted by pure appearance, which is why reading it is so disorienting.

2. Selfhood

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this new perspective conflicts with most received conceptions of what it means to be a person—broadly defined as a discrete entity that delineates the boundary between reality as it appears to the subject (subjective) and reality itself (objective). In literature, the subjective realm is the subject’s thought-content, demarcated clearly in texts by characterizations like “she thought,” “she felt,” italics, and even grammatical constructions that posit a “she” in the first place. The objective realm is characterized by descriptions of events unfolding around her and the actions she undertakes in response. By distinguishing between the two via these kinds of clarifying constructions, the reader tracks the behavior of the self against its backdrop. But in Bloom’s case, we live in his head, not in the external world: As readers, his head is the literary world we inhabit, and there can be no meaningful contrast to mark out the boundaries of Bloom’s experience as distinct from external events. Consequently, Joyce prevents us from driving the “wedge” between subjective and objective experience that would be necessary to fully identify with his characters. And intriguingly, it looks like identity is predicated on the interplay between the two: We can’t think of ourselves as selves if we can’t implicitly view ourselves from some objective standpoint, and if we’re forced to assume the inner reality of someone else, we can’t really view that person as a self either.

3. Another element that should be taken into consideration is the role played by the unconscious, a theme that arises in *Ulysses*. The unconscious realm is also a component of internal experience, but unlike what I describe as subjective ("what the subject has primary access to"), the subject is unaware of this element of internal life. To the extent that one endorses the existence of the unconscious, this does not refute my characterization; we have primary access to what occurs in our own minds, but this does not entail total access. What’s relevant here is that unconscious phenomena can nevertheless be portrayed from an external standpoint ("she would not admit to herself the gravity of what she had just done"). Joyce, on the other hand, portrays unconscious influences as (arguably) the way they might actually be experienced phenomenologically—as an element that colors a subject’s immediate perception of reality without her knowing it. I comment more on the unconscious as it relates to subjectivity below.
The significance of this “ontological wedge” emerges in the characterization Galen Strawson proposes for a “mental self”:

The mental self is ordinarily conceived or experienced as:
1. a thing, in some robust sense; 2. a mental thing, in some sense; 3, 4. a single thing that is single both synchronically considered and diachronically considered; 5. ontically distinct from all other things; 6. a subject of experience, a conscious feeler and thinker; 7. an agent; 8. a thing that has a certain character or personality. (3)

Pride and Prejudice is one example that substantiates Strawson’s account of conventional subjectivity. Consider the following passage:

Elizabeth did not know what to make of it. Had she not seen him in Derbyshire, she might have supposed him capable of coming there with no other view than what was acknowledged... “Yet it is hard,” she sometimes thought, “that this poor man cannot come to a house which he has legally hired, without raising all this speculation! I will leave him to himself.” (201)

Elizabeth Bennet is a self distinct from all other things in the world; she is not just a momentaneous existence, but remains cohesive in time and space (“had she not seen him in Derbyshire...”); she is a subject of experience who feels (she “did not know what to make of it”); she is mental, she thinks—and even her thoughts are well-structured (“‘Yet it is hard,’ she sometimes thought...”); she is agentive—she has intentions which structure her actions (“I will leave him to himself”); and over the course of the narrative we get a sense of Elizabeth’s personality as distinct from the other characters’ personalities. Pride and Prejudice is one text among many that bolsters a conventional subject-characterization predicated on a distinction between an outer and an inner reality.
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(While one could think of other examples and genres located somewhere on the spectrum between *Ulysses* and *Pride and Prejudice*, I’d suggest that the latter portrayal of subjectivity has had a more lasting influence on the way we actually think of ourselves and make sense of our realities than the former.)

In the case of *Ulysses*, this is not so clear: It doesn’t look like Bloom can be posited as a cohesive entity, or arguably as anything more than a momentaneous existence. Joycean personalities materialize as themes that give a loose structure to the novel’s otherwise unstructured thought. For instance, Bloom’s mental whirrings—on death, childbirth, sex, or digestion—are often structured by mental calculations, ideas for new inventions, and practical concerns in general. When Bloom thinks of Mina Purefoy still confined to her bed after days enmired in an agonizing labor, his thought process is by now so distinctive that we can immediately recognize its origin:

> They ought to invent something to stop that... They could easily have big establishments whole thing quite painless out of all the taxes give every child born five quid at compound interest up to twentyone five per cent is a hundred shillings and five tiresome pounds multiply by twenty decimal system... want to work it out on paper come to a tidy sum more than you think. (132)

From thinking of childbirth, Bloom’s mind jumps almost immediately to problem-solving schemes and financial considerations. Moreover, the reflections of each main character are, like Bloom’s, presented in a recognizable individual style: Molly’s thoughts, in the “Penelope” episode, are sentence fragments, while Stephen’s thoughts do not constitute sentences at all. On the other hand, his thoughts are punctuated and evince a broad, cultured vocabulary.

While personal themes and style provide some overarching structure to thought and help constitute personalities of sorts, the thoughts themselves are often indistinct from perceptions or outside events—listening to music, we read: “a duodene of birdnotes chirruped bright treble answer under sensitive hands” (217). Additionally, thoughts are otherwise unstructured, drifting from
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topic to topic and from mood to mood:

O wasnt I the born fool to believe all his blather about home rule and the land league sending me that long stroll of a song out of the Huguenots to sing in French to be more classy O beau pays de la Touraine that I never even sang once explaining and rigmaroling about religion and persecution... (634)

Although thoughts do seem to follow a rational string, elements of one thought matching elements in the one succeeding it (“blather about home rule” recalls singing in French which recalls the refrain O beau pays...), they do not seem to originate from a clearly-demarcated subject that can be easily pinpointed. Here, Molly’s thoughts are uncontained: What’s going on outside the subject freely intermingles and fuses with her inner reality. After all, we can only access objective reality via Molly’s internal reports—that is, Molly’s inner experience dominates the entire literary world.

This portrayal of consciousness contrasts starkly with the liberalistic conception of a rational self constituted by the doing of actions which follow logically from internally perceived intentions: “In order to make sense of ‘I do P with a view to Q’, we must see how the future state of affairs Q is supposed to be a possible later stage in proceedings of which the action P is an earlier stage” (Anscombe 36). Intentionality is discernible in Ulysses insofar as characters exert control over external objects to achieve given ends, but intentional actions don’t surface as thoughts. Without direct descriptions of characters’ actions, as readers we have to intuit their occurrence through the transcriptions of the substrate of thought that underlies them. For instance, when Molly gets out of bed to attend to her period in “Penelope,” we only know of her reactions to the actions she undertakes: “O patience above its pouring out of me like the sea... I dont want to ruin the clean sheets I just put on... this damned old bed too jingling like the dickens” (633). On the level of purely internal thought, there is barely any agency at work; the agency associated with the individual is somehow externalized and not internally conceived. The self portrayed here is more along the lines of a “locus of consciousness” than an distinct, coherent entity (Strawson 13).
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In fact, it could be argued that the underlying mechanism linking disparate thoughts in *Ulysses* is an unconscious realm of experience, a reading bolstered by an episode like “Circe,” which riffs on psychoanalytic themes. A dismissal of Bloom, Molly, and Stephen as rational agents would be further strengthened if this is the case. Additionally, the unconscious can be constituted in part by internalized normative (and thus objective, or at least intersubjective) compulsions, which further dissolves the subjective/objective dichotomy. If normative judgments can somehow be assimilated into my own subjective viewpoint without me even noticing it, my view of myself as coherent and rational is undermined even further.

3. Subjectivity and Objectivity

We’ve seen how the subject-positions of the characters of *Ulysses* are ambiguous, which certainly contributes to the book’s alienating effect. However, the elements of *Ulysses* that are most off-putting, like its subject-ambiguity, serve a specific purpose. For instance, the real relevance of this ambiguity has to do with the role that narratives play in providing models for structuring our existences in general.

In *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that we construct identities by fitting the events of our life into a narrative structure:

>To live our lives as agents requires that we see our actions and experiences as belonging to something like a story... We should acknowledge how much our personal histories, the stories we tell of where we have been and where we are going, are constructed, like novels and movies, short stories and folktales, within narrative conventions. (22)

This process occurs both in the rationalization of past events and in the way we make decisions about the future. To some extent, these narratives are culturally
provided (Appiah goes so far as to call them “scripts”), but there is also negotiation between culture and individual. The individual often exercises some measure of choice in determining which script to utilize in structuring his life. Providing options to choose from, then, is one of the roles of media: “Indeed, one of the things that popular narratives (whether filmed or televised, spoken or written) do for us is to provide models for telling our lives” (22). Narratives, and by extension the media, are fundamental to the way we understand our lives.

Whether individual or collective, narratives lend our lives coherence by providing a model for reflecting on our past, present, and future experience, thereby aiding us in constructing an image of the self. The self-reflection required by this process necessitates a distanced, omniscient perspective, which is in turn predicated on an ontology of strict differentiation between the subjective and objective spheres. Thus, a narrative can only make individual selves and lives intelligible in assuming this conventional ontology. Ulysses can’t play the same prescriptive role as traditional narratives because the link between narrative and subject-constitution is compromised. Joyce subverts both conventional narrative techniques and coherent subject-constructs. Hence, his magnum opus ultimately alienates his readers.

But why is life’s coherence so strongly connected to this ontology? The reason is related to the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity that Joyce experiments with in Ulysses. Our subjective “internal whirrings” only make sense if they are validated by others, which entails their translation into a common language. Phenomenologist Lisa Guenther writes in an article arguing against the ethicality of solitary confinement:

Think about it: Every time I hear a sound and see another person look toward the origin of that sound, I receive an implicit confirmation that what I heard was something real, that it was not just my imagination playing tricks...
on me. Every time someone walks around the table rather than through it, I receive an unspoken, usually unremarkable, confirmation that the table exists, and that my own way of relating to tables is shared by others... This multiplicity of perspectives is like an invisible net that supports the coherence of my own experience, even (or especially) when others challenge my interpretation of “the facts.” These facts are up for discussion in the first place because we inhabit a shared world with others who agree, at the very least, that there is something to disagree about. (Guenther 2012)

This, then, is the real function of objectivity, to the extent that it is possible. We need confirmation that our version of reality makes sense. When we interact with others, we recount our realities according to an unspoken procedure in which we position ourselves as observers to our own experience and describe the discrete actions as if they were viewed externally, tacitly comparing realities. The real damage wrought by solitary confinement is that it deprives inmates of partaking in this “shared world” which, in a sense, characterizes being human. Subjective reality needs objective validation, which can only occur if the subjective experiences which constitute these inner realities are capable of being considered by others who arrive at them from different perspectives and thus contribute to a shared world. We experience life as so shared that our moment-to-moment streams of thought are secondary to their filtration into the language of objective experience—and so an episode like “Penelope,” in which an inner reality comprises an entire literary world, is alien to us. We can glean from Ulysses that no experience is entirely subjective: Even in the moment of perceiving something, to some extent we are always already divorcing ourselves from its immediacy.

Stories help us to contextualize our lives by depicting other experiences with which our own can be implicitly compared. When we read a story, we incorporate fictional life-segments into our own view of reality that we simultaneously recognize as external to us. A conventionally successful narrative gives the illusion of subjective givenness by relating thoughts and feelings that would be private in real life. Simultaneously, through the use of the past tense, the
third-person, or even just complete sentences, this kind of narrative creates the distance necessary to imbue the story with apparent objectivity. Thus, storytelling usually involves a delicate balancing-act between the subjective and the objective, the intimately personal and the universal. Ulysses disrupts this balance by breaking the rules of how stories are told.

Merleau-Ponty describes a similar self-making process at work when children encounter their specular images: “The mirror image itself makes possible a contemplation of self... Thereupon I leave the reality of my lived me in order to refer myself constantly to the ideal, fictitious, or imaginary me” (165). Reflection, according to Merleau-Ponty, becomes possible only when we can begin to view ourselves as others see us: from a distance. Narratives, like mirrors, grant us this possibility.

Ulysses, in breaking with literary convention, exposes both the artifice and necessity of narrative structures. By depicting experience that is at once both subjective and objective and hence providing common ground for shared reality, literature triggers a series of chain reactions that may in fact be indistinguishable from each other: Literature inextricably interweaves itself into our own life structures, facilitates identification with others, and continuously reaffirms the grounds of possibility for self-reflection.

Works Cited


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4. Merleau-Ponty indicates that it may in fact be a dialectical relation of sorts: Mirrors make contemplation possible, which begets fictitious selves, which give rise to literature, which allows for more reflection and self-constitution.
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