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## Reading and Misreading *Ulysses*

Masaki Shibata

### I

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the nature of the language of *Ulysses*. It is needless to say that many Joycean scholars have tried various approaches to this most controversial topic in the study of the novel. So it is my duty to clarify my viewpoint from which the language of *Ulysses* will be analyzed in this paper. And the best way of beginning this, I suppose, is to show a few interesting phenomena in the novel. The first example is about Leopold Bloom.

In chapter four where Bloom appears for the first time, we encounter a rare verb.

... as he moved about the kitchen softly, *righting* her breakfast things on the humpy tray. [italics not in the original]<sup>1</sup>

A few lines under this, we find him use the same word in succession though in a different meaning.

Another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right. She didn't like her plate full. Right. (I, 107)

It is notable that he says "right" with unusual emphasis: "Quite right. Perfectly right that is" (I, 165). The relation between Bloom and "right" is an interesting problem. He always tries to calculate accurately and corrects a grammatical error in a ditty. When he runs into a ragman he shouts "keep to the right, right, right" (II, 943). It is proved in chapter seventeen that "he loved rectitude from his earlist youth" (III, 1581). In short, some characteristics of Bloom correspond with the meanings of "right," such as "justice," "accuracy," "correct," "rectitude" and so on.

Strangely enough, this "right" is connected with "write." As Brook Thomas points out, another characteristic of Bloom is the act of writing.<sup>2)</sup> As he is an advertising solicitor, he often thinks about making or revising

catchphrases. According to Molly, when he was courting her he wrote "every morning a letter sometimes twice a day" (III, 1653). "Writing, in particular," says Fritz Senn, "is a matter of arranging, adjusting, getting words right, revising."<sup>3)</sup> As is expected from the fact that he corrects a grammatical mistake in a song, Bloom also "rights" words. He is the metaphor of writing.

Lastly, "rite" must be added as a key word that shapes his character. His activities of one day are compared to Jewish rites in chapter seventeen, which reveals a new phase of Bloom as an existence that performs ceremonies.

We can say the important part of Bloom's character are regulated by the meanings of "right-write-rite." Reading *Ulysses*, we feel him like a being with flesh and blood, and it is well-known that he is modeled after a real Dubliner. Judging from our impression and Joyce's habit of attaching much importance to fact, we naïvely take it for granted that it is reality that forms Bloom's character. What really makes up Bloom, however, is words, and they are linked by pun, a phenomenon peculiar to the world of language. Bloom seems to be ruled by reality at first sight, but gradually he reveals himself as a being regulated by the world of words.

The same thing can be said about the construction of chapters. Chapter seven is filled with the words beginning with "par-" or "para-." The tramways run *parallel*, Stephen tells a *parable* and Bloom solicits for a *par*. "Par-" is also connected with the French word "parler." The idea of the advertisement is given by the old name of the *parliament* of the Isle of Man.

The meanings of the words produced from "par-" play an important role in constructing the chapter. One of the motifs in this episode is speaking. Bloom says, "Everything speaks in its own way" (I, 251). The speeches of eloquent orators are recited. It is famous that Joyce uses a great number of rhetorical figures here. And the chapter is written in the form of paragraphs.

Chapter twelve is entitled "Cyclops," a one-eyed monster. What is conspicuous in the episode is the number of an [ai] sound. The first sentence begins with "I" and ends with "eye." It is natural that there are a

lot of "I," since this chapter is told by the first person narrator. There are many expressions with "eye" in them, too. Moreover, people answer "ay" in this episode as: "— Ay, says I" (I, 631).

According to Stuart Gilbert, Cyclopa where Cyclopes live means "the land of the eyes," and "eyes" is a figurative expression of the volcanic craters of the region. "The Cyclops himself," says Gilbert, "is an obvious personification of a volcano in eruption one-eyed, vomiting rocks and lava with hideous clamour."<sup>4</sup> "The citizen," who corresponds with Cyclops, is also "persistently clamorous and fulminant: the more liquid he absorbs, the greater his eruptive violence."<sup>5</sup> This is only one example, but the meanings that derive from [ai] such as "a crater" seem to form various aspects of this episode.

*Ulysses* gives us a strong sense of reality, but isn't it regulated by some laws of language? Let me discuss *Ulysses* from the point of the relation between language and reality and illuminate the nature of its language.

## II

The diversity of the language and styles of *Ulysses* is surprising. But observing it from our viewpoint, we realize, first of all, the mimetic power of its language. Mimetic language which abounds in the first half of the novel is the one that produces the sense of reality as vividly as possible. Figuratively saying, it simulates reality by exploiting sounds, syntax, punctuation, and changing word forms if necessary.

The bunghole sprang open and a huge dull flood leaked out, flowing together, winding through mudflats all over the level land, a lazy pooling swirl of liquor bearing along wideleaved flowers of its froth. (I, 159)

The quality of water is suggested by [l] and [r] sounds. As the sentence develops in a temporal sequence, it can be rewritten like this: "... a huge dull flood leaked out and flowed together and wound through mudflats ..." This construction gives the sense of ever stretching. The sentence itself replicates the state of an extending stream.

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 rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of wetted ashes. (I, 9)

This is the image of the dead mother which haunts and troubles Stephen's mind all the day. The sentence consists of a principal clause and two subordinate clauses that modify it: "her wasted body ... an odour of wax and rosewood" and "her breath ... a faint odour of wetted ashes." Moreover, "her wasted body" and "her breath" are clung to by rather long modifiers: "within its loose brown graveclothes" and "that had bent upon him." This sentence construction gives the impression of something dangling about, which conforms to the fact that the memory of Stephen's mother clings to his mind and never goes away from it. To put it brief, Joyce intends to reduce the distance between language and reality as much as possible by his exquisite technique.

But a word and its referents are gradually dissociated in the second half of the novel. In some cases, the distance becomes almost infinite and we can find no relationship between them. Language no longer evokes the vision of reality. And it is this directivity of language that *Ulysses* directs our attention to. *Ulysses* is, in a sense, educational, since the readers are gradually made to be accustomed to this type of language.

The state that language loses the ability to call forth the sense of the real means that the signifier and the signified are separated from each other. At the funeral scene, a man in macintosh is accidentally named "M'Intosh" and registered as a member of attendants of the funeral in the newspaper. But there is no such person. At least, the name of the man in macintosh is not "M'Intosh." There is discrepancy between the name and the person. The signifier and the signified are disconnected.

But this separation conversely means that the words are freed from the restraint of reality. There are frequent occasions in *Ulysses* when this relation is loose, if not completely severed. In a parody of chapter twelve where "the citizen" is depicted as a giant is a list of eighty-six names of Irish heroes whose images are drawn on a row of seastones hung from his girdle. There are Cuchulin, Art MacMurragh and so on, who are surely Irish heroes. What bewilders us is that Napoleon and Shakespeare are in the list,

too. In fact, the names of people who had nothing to do with Ireland far outnumber those of Irish heroes. When we hear names as Cuchulin and Shakespeare, we normally connect these names with their lives and achievements. These names drag, so to speak, weights called historical facts. If the author could feel the weight he would not have included Shakespeare among Irish heroes. But he didn't feel it at least while writing these parodies. The name is separated from whatever things about the person who owns it.

The change of names takes place also in chapter fourteen in which a single scene is described in a wide variety of styles. In each parody, Bloom's name is changed. He is called "the traveller Leopold" (II, 831) in the parody of *The Wanderer*, "Calmer" (II, 851) in the parody of *Pilgrim's Progress*, "Mr. Canvasser Bloom" (II, 883) in the parody of Gibbon's style. The other characters' names are changed according to various contexts. As a matter of course, the names of all the other things change as in chapter twelve, so that the scene of a room in a hospital takes on different looks as the styles change. Sometimes the atmosphere of a medieval fantasy is felt about the room, sometimes there is the atmosphere of a horror story. It is impossible to imagine that the hospital changes momentarily. If the author wants to give an adequate idea of the scene, he won't write "a board upheld by dwarfmen" (II, 833) or "the secret panel" (II, 887). The reality of Dublin on 16 June 1904 forbids such choice of words. But the language is exempt from the restraint of reality here.

There is another type of the separation between the signifier and the signified in chapter fifteen written in the form of a drama. We cannot understand dialogue without heeding to the situation in which it is held, since there is an organic relation between the words spoken and the situation. Only when we put them together, we can understand what the words refer to. But dialogue in chapter fifteen is disconnected from its normal context. Then the words lose their objects and lie on pages just like things. In chapter five, Bloom enters into the drugstore.

— Yes, sir, the chemist said. That was two and nine.

Have you brought a bottle?

— No, Mr. Bloom said. Make it up, please. I'll call later in the day and

I'll take one of these soaps. How much are they?

— Fourpence, sir.

Mr. Bloom raised a cake to his nostrils. Sweet lemony wax.

— I'll take this one, he said. That makes three and a penny. (I, 171)

This is one of the scenes repeated as in a dream in chapter fifteen.

### BLOOM

I was just going back for that lotion whitewax, orange-flower water. Shop closes early on Thursday. But the first thing in the morning. (he pats divers pockets) This moving kidney. Ah!

*(He points to the south, then to the east. A cake of new clean lemon soap arises, diffusing light and perfume.)*

### THE SOAP

We're a capital couple are Bloom and I.

He brightens the earth. I polish the sky.

*(The freckled face of Sweny, the druggist, appears in the disc of the soapsum.)*

### SWENY

Three and a penny, please.

### BLOOM

Yes. For my wife. Mrs. Marion. Special recipe. (II, 951–953)

The words of Sweny and Bloom have referential power and work organically in the scene of the actual exchange of money and articles. But here they are just words and there is neither situation nor objects they refer to. Sweny's and Bloom's lines are, without due consideration to the context, cut off from chapter five like stuffs of patchwork and pasted up on these pages. This impression is strengthened by the fact that what Bloom says in chapter five is transferred to Sweny's line.

What is notable in this episode is that people do not move spontaneously. Their behaviors lack flexibility which is indispensable to life. Tom and Sam Bohee "leap out" (II, 959), Myles Crawford "strides out jerkily" (II,

991). They act suddenly, mechanically and spasmodically. Human beings as well as words become inorganic.

There is one more means to disconnect language from reality. It is to make the words ambiguous. We find innumerable puns and the possibilities of double reading are hidden in every part of *Ulysses*. They seem to be mere jokes intended for fun, but the language of *Ulysses* begins to assert its own existence as language from these points.

In chapter eleven, words, phrases and sentences that appear in the previous chapters reappear in truncated forms. "What kind of perfum does your wife use?" (I, 157) becomes "what perfume does your wife" (I, 591). "Best value in Dublin" becomes "best value in Dub." (I, 587). These clipped forms are mimetic in the sense that they indicate Bloom's disjointed meditation. But, at the same time, they produce ambiguity. For example, how should we interpret "language of flow" (I, 567) in such circumstances of language? Should we take "flow" for "stream" or the clipped form of "flower"? Either interpretation is possible here.<sup>6)</sup>

Joyce makes us face with the possibility of mistakes by making words ambiguous. Looking at the face of printed words, the readers have to think over how they should be interpreted. The words are no longer the existence that disappear as soon as they evoke the vision of reality in our minds.

### III

To evade the restriction of reality and assert itself as language: this is what the language of *Ulysses* is doing and there lies the originality of the text of *Ulysses*. The words of *Ulysses* make us note their "materiality," as Colin MacCabe says.<sup>7)</sup>

A procession of whitesmocked sandwichmen marched slowly towards him along the gutter, scarlet sashes across their boards. Bargains .... He [Bloom] read the scarlet letters on their five tall white hats: H. E. L. Y. S. Wisdom Hely's. Y lagging behind drew a chunk of bread from under his forehead, crammed it into his mouth and munched as he walked. (I, 325)



This passage gives us a strange impression. It is because we are made to realize that words are made up of abc. Some people might feel a sense of danger, since language which is thought to be a mere instrument of communication goes into its own activities. But this is what *Ulysses* presents to us, that is, the language that exposes its materiality and is no longer an instrument of communication. Multivocal words and words without their referents are nothing but the means to distract the readers' consciousness from the world of reality to the world of words. We are made to realize the vision of reality in *Ulysses* is after all constructed by words or abc, just as Bloom is regulated by a set of words.

To regard the word not as a representation of reality or idea but as a composition of abc leads us to the possibility of manipulation of words, which means the possibility of division and unification of the words and the transposition of the letters that constitute the word. You can divide "flower" into "flow" and "er." You can get "world" by combining "word" and "1." This is one of the principles of the word games. Doublet, a word game invented by Lewis Carroll, is also based on this possibility.

The sounds, too, are the elements that can be manipulated. If you put [s] sound in place of [f] sound in "fine," you can make "sign." There is always these possibilities of moulding in the language of *Ulysses*. The words that are connected with reality and ideas are disconnected from them and reduced to constituent elements such as letters and sound. These elements change themselves into different words by being manipulated, and add the possibility of new meanings to the original words. The language of *Ulysses* is thus kinetic.

So when the story says Bloom, the metaphor of writing, likes to eat "liver," we must infer the French word "livre" from it. The title of the book itself has diverse possibilities of reading.<sup>8)</sup> It can be read as not only the name of a hero but also an anagram of "useless" which is a word often used to imply Bloom's loneliness and resignation. The title shows the cynical contrast between the mighty hero of ancient Greek and a helpless citizen of the modern time. Or does Joyce ask us not to read the book, since it is useless? *Ulysses* is called in *Finnegans Wake* "usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles."<sup>9)</sup> Three examples I showed at the

beginning of this paper suggest that words proliferated thus function, to some extent, as the principle of the construction of *Ulysses*.

By what I termed manipulation, we can make chains of words such as "I-eye-ay," "world-word" and "liver-livre." If we grasp all the words made up of alphabet as a system complicatedly constructed by an infinite number of chains, the text of *Ulysses* can be said to positively diffuse itself into the system. Manipulation is, in another word, misreading. Jacques Derrida claims the written language has been regarded as inferior to the spoken language by the philosophers because of its possibility of being misread.<sup>10</sup> Joyce, however, positively sets up in the text innumerable devices for misreading and makes full use of them.

#### IV

Joyce created an unusual text. It is certain that he did not expect us to read *Ulysses* as other novels. Reading *Ulysses*, we are confused, embarrassed and frustrated by its language. We must assume that there is a change in the relation between the text and the readers. Then, how should we read *Ulysses*? Or, to put it another way, how does the text of *Ulysses* urge us to read itself? I am going to take up the problem in conclusion, and, for arguing about it, I must begin with Bloom's wife, Molly.

The most eminent characteristic of Molly is, as Brook Thomas says, the act of reading. Generally speaking, the women in *Ulysses* have the habit of reading books. Dilly buys a French grammar book, Miss Dunne reads *The Woman in White* and Gerty is an enthusiastic reader of fashionable magazines for women.

What distinguishes Molly from other women is that she misreads and is never afraid of doing so. She interprets "I. N. R. I." Which stands for Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,<sup>12</sup> as "Iron nails ran in" (I, 163), and "metempsychosis" as "met him pike hoses." The habit of misreading is listed as an instance of her deficient mental development in chapter seventeen. If Bloom is the metaphor of writing, Molly is the metaphor of misreading.

Strangely enough, we find in the relation between Bloom and Molly the relation between the readers and *Ulysses*. Perhaps the relation between the

misreading readers and the text that invites misreading is reflected on the relation of Mr. and Mrs. Bloom who do not live a normal matrimonial life long since their only son died. But this does not mean the relation between the readers and *Ulysses* is sterile after all. *Ulysses* gives us a quite contrary impression.

In the last chapter of Molly's soliloquy, there is a running fire of "III" which covers last four pages. It begins with "Ill get up early in the morning" (III, 1721) and ends with "yes I said yes I will Yes" (III, 1727), an affirmative opinion to Bloom. We cannot say the relation between Bloom and Molly will be normalized in the future simply because Molly's judgement to Bloom at the end of the novel is affirmative. She dashingly rejects his request for bringing breakfast in the bedroom, saying, "Ill throw him up his eggs and tea in the moustachecup" (III, 1721), and we can expect nothing but the same life as before from these words: "Ill let him know if thats what he wanted that his wife is fucked" (III, 1721). The important thing is, however, the fact that she never shrinks back from such a life. She does not think the present relation to Bloom is desirable, yet she never despairs of it. We sense from the succession of "III" that she is heading for the future intuitively. This part shows clearly Molly's vigorous will and audacity to survive in crooked circumstances.

What is tangible in *Ulysses* is the vigorous will to survive under the circumstances of fallacy, which is what the readers have to have in common with Molly. Namely, we must be willing to misread *Ulysses*. It is deniable that Joyce himself energetically lived in the world of language as a system of fallacy when you read *Ulysses* or *Fennegans Wake*. Living such circumstances is the very thing Joyce must have thought of as the literary activities. And we must read these works with the will for misreading.

#### NOTES

- 1) James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984), vol. I, p.107. All subsequent references in this paper are to this edition and will be cited in the text.
- 2) Brook Thomas, *James Joyce's Ulysses* (London: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1982), p.147.

- 3) Fritz Senn "Righting *Ulysses*," *James Joyce: New Perspectives*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982), p.11. Fritz Senn also points out "right," "write" and "rite" are key words of Bloom's character.
- 4) Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p.269.
- 5) Loc. cit.
- 6) Brook Thomas, *James Joyce's Ulysses* (London: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1982), pp.157-158.
- 7) Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), pp.69-132.
- 8) Saiichi Maruya says the title can be read as "you recede," a warning to the readers who are going to read this difficult book in *Columbus's Egg* (Tokyo: Chikuma-shobo, 1977), p.295.
- 9) James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), p.179.
- 10) See Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), pp.89-110.
- 11) Brook Thomas, *James Joyce's Ulysses* (London: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1982), p.162.
- 12) Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman, *Notes for Joyce* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974), p.72.