Simulation, Pluralism, and the Politics
of Everyday Life

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Mortal! You found me in evil company

—Bloom's Nymph

The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its
being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. [. . .] An ancient statue
of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context
with the Greeks who made it an object of veneration, than with
the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous
idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its
uniqueness, that is, its aura.

—Benjamin, "The Work of Art in
the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

In June of 1860, while browsing through the contents of an
antiquarian street-stall in Florence, Robert Browning came across the
quarto transcript of a seventeenth-century murder trial. The book,
which Browning describes as "pure crude fact / Secreted from man's
life," was to become the basis for his verse novel, The Ring and the
Book. What is of particular interest for us, in the context of Joyce,
is Browning's description of the book's discovery, for it would appear
to be a model of the discovery of history in the rhythms of the
quotidian. At the beginning of the poem, Browning describes finding
the book:

'Mongst odds and ends of ravage, picture-frames
White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces chipped,
Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests,
(Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade)
Modern chalk drawings, studies from the nude,
Samples of stone, jet, breccia, porphyry
Polished and rough, sundry amazing busts
In baked earth, (broken, Providence be praised!)
A wreck of tapestry [. . .]
A pile of brown-etched prints, two crazie each,
Stopped by a conch atop from fluttering forth [. . .]

I picked the book from. (Vol. 1, bk. 1, 35-36, 53-57)
Browning describes the discovery of the volume as a "restorative" event, and obviously he intends this in more than one sense. As he describes it, the "pure crude fact" of a Roman murder case, having originally been forged into history through its recording and transmission, and subsequently disappearing in the quotidian concreteness of a street-vendor's wares, has now been revivified before his very eyes. History steps forth from amongst odds and ends, to assert itself as an intensely personal fact, ostensibly eluding the tendential logic which has reduced it and its companion relics to objects of exchange in a street-vendor's booth. At the same time, this resurrection of history rescues Browning from the quotidian routine of his own life—the book's restoration is his as well.

The metamorphosis of the quotidian into the historic is one of the great themes of *Ulysses*, and though examples abound, one passage bears an intriguing, if parodic, resemblance to Browning's discovery of his restorative book. This analogous moment occurs when the Greek nymph represented in the erotic art-poster above Bloom's and Molly's bed steps forth on the stage of Nighttown to address Bloom:

\[
[\ldots] \text{Out of her oakframe a nymph with hair unbound, lightly clad in teabrown artcolours, descends from her grotto and passing under interlacing yews stands over Bloom.}\]

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Mortal! You found me in evil company, highkickers, coster picnic makers, pugilists, popular generals, immoral panto boys in flesh-tights and the nifty shimmy dancers, La Aurora and Karini, musical act, the hit of the century. I was hidden in cheap pink paper that smelt of rock oil. I was surrounded by the stale smut of clubmen, stories to disturb callow youth, ads for transparencies, truedup dice and bustpads, proprietary articles and why wear a truss with testimonial from ruptured gentleman. Useful hints to the married. (444-45)

Though Bloom interrupts momentarily here, the Nymph goes on compulsively to catalogue the commercial menagerie from which Bloom eventually "bore [her] away" and "framed [her] in oak and tinsel" (445). Though she has a sense of her own context, she is aware of no personal history prior to her magazine existence. This is entirely in keeping with the ethos of the "Circe" chapter which, as Franco Moretti has remarked, is the "unsurpassed literary representation of commodity fetishism" (*Signs Taken for Wonders* 185).
Like Browning, Bloom rescues a subject from amongst quotidian odds and ends, and frames it for his own purposes. The difference, of course, is that Bloom's nymph is only a parody of history and culture. Whereas Browning's found art needs only to be polished, or at best, catalyzed, to restore its historical and cultural resonances, Bloom's found art is truly the stuff of quotidian or everyday life—both reproducible and disposable. Despite the oak frame which Bloom provides for his "photo girl" from Photo Bits, he is fully convinced that her picture is not "art." Later in Ulysses he elaborates on the difference between "original" Greek statues and photographic reproductions:

He dwelt, being a bit of an artist in his spare time, on the female form in general developmentally because, as it so happened, no later than that afternoon he had seen those Grecian statues, perfectly developed as works of art, in the National Museum. Marble could give the original, shoulders, back, all the symmetry, all the rest. Yes, puritanisme, it does though Saint Joseph's sovereign thievery alors (Bandez!) Figne toi trop. Whereas no photo could because it simply wasn't art in a word. (533, my emphasis)

Bloom here reproduces the traditional nineteenth-century assessment of the relationship between art and photography. Nevertheless, his assumptions about aesthetic value are undermined by the larger tendency of Ulysses to juxtapose the mythic and the mechanical, and to evoke a "culture" of everyday life. The same logic which leads J. J. O'Molloy to pronounce "a postcard" as "publication" (264) is also at work in Ulysses preparing for photography to become "art," and for everyday life to achieve the status of an historical and aesthetic object.

The history and the culture of everyday life: are these parodic oxymorons, or modernist ideologies par excellence? And if it is possible to write the history and the culture of everyday life, is Joyce's work an authentic—or even, perhaps, a unique—contribution to that project? In order to approach these questions we might first note that Henri Lefebvre begins his ground-breaking study, Everyday Life in the Modern World, by designating June 16th, 1904, as the "momentous eruption of everyday life into literature" (2). Ulysses, writes Lefebvre, "rescues...each facet of the quotidian from anonymity." However, Lefebvre goes on to point out that Ulysses represents everyday life in a specifically modernist mode: as an exploration of subjectivity.
Ulysses is dominated by those details of subjective quotidian experience which now appear to us as modernist clichés: for instance, ordinary and private language, stream of consciousness, and the slips of tongue and mind mythologized by Freud in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life.² By contrast, argues Lefebvre, if one were to set out to write a novel about everyday life in the 1960s, under the shadow of postmodernism, one would begin with objects rather than with subjects (one thinks here of the novels of Robbe-Grillet).

Lefebvre's distinction between the modernist regime of the subject and the postmodernist regime of the object, is by now a familiar one, perhaps even a cliché of its own. Nevertheless, to speak of a politics of narrative at this juncture in history without taking into account the notions of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and late capitalism which have intervened between us and Joyce, would be to deny our own positionality. In order properly to appreciate Joyce's revolutionary creation of a formal narrative from cultural bric-à-brac, it is necessary to emphasize how differently that bric-à-brac functioned in his time than in our own. Joyce assumes the inevitable structural presence of history and myth in everyday life—even in the patterns of commodity production. For Joyce, the fetishized commodities of everyday life hold and unsettle the consumer's gaze precisely because of the parodic dissonance between the cultural scenarios they gesture towards and the social situations in which they are actually exchanged. There is a dissonance too between commodities and their representation in advertising, a dissonance that advertising counts on, paradoxically, both to "arrest" and to assist the "velocity of modern life." We can see this tension at work in two of Bloom's fantasies about the ultimate advertisement:

What also stimulated him in his cogitations?

[... ] the infinite possibilities hitherto unexploited of the modern art of advertisement if condensed in trilateral monoidal symbols, vertically of maximum visibility (divined), horizontally of maximum legibility (deciphered) and of magnetising efficacy to arrest involuntary attention, to interest, to convince, to decide. (559, my emphasis)

What were habitually his final meditations?

Of some one sole unique advertisement to cause passers to stop in wonder, a poster novelty, with all extraneous accretions excluded, reduced to its simplest and most efficient terms not
exceeding the span of casual vision and congruous with the velocity of modern life. (592, my emphasis)

However, ours is no longer an era of commodity production, and the objects of commercial culture no longer arrest us as the nymph does Leopold Bloom. Whereas at the beginning of this century, advertising images were still novel enough to be recognized as (pleasant or threatening) distortions both of everyday life and of history, now advertising presents a self-generating simulation of reality, without any historical dissonance or uncanniness. We like to think that if we scratched beneath the surface of contemporary everyday life, we would find the earliness and uncanniness of Bloom’s everyday life. But is this so?

In a critique of Western political economy not unrelated to Lefebvre’s, Jean Baudrillard has described the shift from a traditional capitalist economy organized around the commodity to a late-capitalist economy organized around the simulacrum (Simulations 1–13, 26–30; The Mirror of Production 121–51). The commodity, though an exchange value, is not infinitely exchangeable. It is intended to be measured against something else, and therefore, in a sense, always has a residue of inadequacy, a value to be consummated later. The commodity is intended to be used as well as exchanged. Even if it is never actually used, the scenarios of its concrete use haunt it like a dream; its exchange only defers—without replacing—its essential use value. (In this sense, the traditional commodity follows traditional art; Benjamin remarks that “One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later” [237]). In the world of Ulysses commodities are rarely consumed instantaneously, or once and for all, but rather decay through a series of use values, as if possessed of a radioactive half-life: “huge webs of paper. Clank it. Clank it. Miles of it unreeled. What becomes of it after? O, wrap up meat, parcels: various uses, thousand and one things” (99).

The simulacrum, on the other hand, has no such uncanniness or sense of deferral about it; it exists to be experienced and used up at the same time, like a computer graphic, a television image, or a media event:

No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensivity: rather, genetic miniaturisation is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and
command models—and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational.

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real. . . . Never again will the real have to be produced. (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 3–4)

The simulacrum does not imitate or dissimulate a future use value; it conjures up a reality with which it is then satisfyingly isomorphic. The simulacrum is the fundamental unit of the information network, the information revolution, and the information industry. It is purged of both the history and the labor that creates it, and thus points to a universe of objects without subjects.

The abolition of the subject and of the referent, which have become the distinguishing and notorious features of both literary and economic postmodernism, pose a challenge to our attempt to recover the specific mode of representing everyday life which *Ulysses* itself represents. In Browning’s time, the increasing commodification of everyday life was simply a stage for the contrastive and restorative emergence of historical and mythical consciousness—thus Browning discovered the material for his greatest artistic achievement in the middle of an everyday life. Even if the possibility of an escape from quotidian, commercial culture was really already a fiction, late Victorian literature attested nonetheless to a very real and important nostalgia for such transcendence in the form of myth and history. For Joyce, everyday life—even if saturated in and by commercial culture—was nevertheless the repository of history, meaning, and myth. There was no need to extract the latter categories from the former. To read the productions of popular and commercial culture was simultaneously to read the mythic history of mankind. This was, of course, the only way for him to resolve the inherited nineteenth-century contradiction between a “false” quotidian consciousness and a “genuine” historical one.

But the apparent simultaneity, in Joyce’s work, of the mythic and the quotidian, of historicity and contemporaneity, is perhaps the greatest obstacle to our historical—and thus our political—
understanding of *Ulysses*. Joyce seems to preempt the question of whether we read literature for historical or for contemporary ("relevant") experiences, precisely by demonstrating the inevitable structural presence of history and myth in everyday life. Thanks to Joyce, and to other early modernist thinkers, the very notion of "everyday life" now has a history, a psychological theory, and an unprecedented aesthetic evocation. Yet whose everyday life does Joyce represent? Everyday lives have changed so radically even in the short time between Joyce's life and our own that we are already in danger of misunderstanding what is meant for Joyce to have transformed the materials of everyday life into art. What if everyday life in the postmodern world in fact functions not merely to produce or reproduce its own history (for history is in a sense always "produced," "narrated," "constructed," etc.), but rather in doing so to discourage historical thinking?

Let me try to elaborate on this. If we were going to characterize Joyce's achievement, we would say that he exaggerates everyday life by making it denser and more complex than it "really" appears to the average consciousness. Thus it is his representation of subjectivity rather than of the physical world that we recognize as constituting his distinctive aesthetic deflection. Despite Ortega y Gasset's perceptive comments about Joycean infrarealism (*The Dehumanization of Art* 35–36), it does not seem to us that Joyce distorted, or falsely represented the concrete objects of the quotidian world—he depicted them, after all, in all their obstinate and autonomous glory. What he did was to de-center the perceiving mind. But the objects of the quotidian world are not quite so obstinate or resistant to consciousness today, in a society of controlled simulations, as they were at the beginning of the century in an awkward, transitional phase of consumer culture. If the quotidian bristles in *Ulysses*, that is not something we can recapture for our own culture simply by looking to Joyce for *new and fresh ways of seeing the world*.

It is precisely because we think of everyday life as an unproblematic notion—on a par with such concepts as the normal, the literal, and the ordinary—that we think of *Ulysses* as being every bit as democratic in its accessibility as it is radical in its inaccessibility. This myth of democratic accessibility ("all interpretations are valid") explains perhaps why critical pluralism (whose very mention generates endless lame controversies elsewhere in our profession) has never had to pay for, or fight for, its admission into Joycean circles. Elsewhere
in literary academia, the concept and the representation of everyday life are uncritically rejected as popular culture; within Joyce circles we are perhaps too uncritically receptive to the representations of everyday life.

Why draw this connection between pluralism and everyday life? Because what pluralism seems to deny, or at least to challenge, is the very notion of a determining intentionality. And ever since Freud, at least, we have considered the quotidian to be the realm of the unintentional. The quotidian is the unintentional. Freudian everyday life is defined precisely as that realm of experience in which our actions and expressions are so habitual and un-thought-out at the conscious level that their disruption by unconscious intentions is all the more likely to be noticed. Joyce’s grand mythification of the quotidian reveals this “double life” of the everyday life, and has become, simultaneously, the greatest evocation of intentionality and of unintentionality in our language. The everyday life of Ulysses, then, seems both to confirm and to challenge critical pluralism. But in order to read politically, do we have to choose between a conciliatory (and contemporizing) pluralism and a rigid (historicizing) determinism?

I would like to say that our task is not to choose between pluralism and its discontents, between Joyce, the chronicler of everyday life and Joyce, the mythmaker and esotericist, but rather to see how this very choice arises out of an historically specific conception of everyday life which Ulysses itself represents, and which contemporary criticism represents to us as still our own. Seen in this light, what Ulysses has to contribute to a politics of narrative is precisely its hold on the fundamental tension between the intentional and the unintentional, played out on the terrain of an increasingly anachronistic everyday life, whose image is still familiar enough to us to represent a powerful nostalgia. Cultivating this nostalgia cannot protect us against the increasingly simulated nature of contemporary existence and the disappearance of its historicity. But if we can learn to treat Ulysses neither as a unified text nor as a pluralistic one, but rather as a self-contradictory, overdetermined, and heterogeneous one, we may be able to turn our nostalgia into a resistance to the simulations of everyday life in our own world, simulations which cannot endlessly fend off the massive social dislocations on our horizon.
NOTES

1. On the debate concerning photography and "art," see Benjamin (18–27).
2. On ordinary and private language, see Wittgenstein (Philosophical Investigations, especially paragraphs 97–133, 242–75).

3. Franco Moretti points to these two passages as evidence of the way in which Joyce conceives advertising as the new unconscious of the culture, "a form of persuasion based on unawareness" paralleling the "randomness, rapidity, discontinuity, uncontrollability and depth of the stream of consciousness" (Signs Taken For Wonders 196–97). However, Moretti's emphasis is less on discontinuities and disjunctions than on the fluid, subliminal effects of advertising, and this risks missing the difference between a modernist culture of commodities and the postmodernist culture of simulacra (which I shall discuss below). In Joyce's and Bloom's conception, advertising must somehow "arrest" and "stop" the consumer, even as it fits more or less "casually" into the flow of experience. The advertising image has not yet blended entirely with the fabric of everyday life, nor collapsed into an identity with the commodity which it represents.

4. See Jameson (Marxism and Form). In the early twentieth century, according to Jameson,

Advertising, in the dimensions so familiar to us, is scarcely developed at all; indeed, the very ads themselves, whether affiche, the sandwich man of Ulysses, or that crude painting on a vacant wall which was Gertrude Stein's first introduction to the secret prestige of oil paints, can still be apprehended as objects of fascination in their own right. (104)

5. Jameson ("Postmodernism") points to the erasure of use value in the simulacrum: "Appropriately enough, the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange-value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced" (66).

6. Franco Moretti, like Adorno and Brecht in earlier debates with Lukács, defends Joyce against the charge of mystifying social experience by fetishizing its "mythic" aspects. In Joyce's work, according to Moretti,

myth and history are complementary: they presuppose and neutralize each other, and it is impossible to establish a formal or ideological hierarchy between the two. In Joyce, myth is not identified with the aesthetic form (as in Eliot), and therefore cannot be the starting point for a new cultural hegemony. (192)

See also Lukács ("Realism in the Balance"), Brecht and Adorno ("Reconciliation Under Duress"), all in Bloch et al., Aesthetics and Politics.

7. Cf. Jameson (Marxism and Form):

Think of the precariousness of the synthesis of Joyce, in which matter once again seems momentarily reconciled with spirit, all the objects and detritus of the city luminous and as though informed by subjectivity—except that the seams show [...].


Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly; they now strike us, on the whole, as rather "realistic"; and this is the result of a canonization
and an academic institutionalization of the modern movement generally, which can be traced to the late 1950s. (56)

To take an attitude of partisanship towards key struggles of the recent past does not mean either choosing sides, or seeking to harmonize irreconcilable differences. [...] The fundamental contradiction is between history itself and the conceptual apparatus which, seeking to grasp its realities, only succeeds in reproducing their discord within itself in the form of an enigma for thought, an aporia. It is to this aporia that we must hold, which contains within its structure the crux of a history beyond which we have not yet passed. (213)

10. On the Marxist notions of ideological contradiction and overdetermination, see especially Althusser ("Contradiction and Overdetermination" 87–128) and Jean-Paul Sartre (Search for a Method 100–111, 140–66); on heterogeneity, see Derrida ("White Mythology," especially 214–15, 253–54; Of Grammatology 19–21).

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